Taking Europe home: how political agents stand out in their approach to Europe on social media.

Levar a Europa para casa: como os agentes políticos se destacam na sua abordagem à Europa nas redes sociais.

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Abstract

Recents studies suggest the existence of a European Public Sphere, especially in the face of events of significant importance. In the scope of the Covid-19 crisis, this paper aims to study the platformization of the discussion on European topics by political agents such as politicians and political parties. Focusing on four Southern European countries – Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain – that have a common past history in their relationships with Europe (PIGS), we analyze political agents' posts with the highest reach. The study was conducted on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube over a period of three months, between September and November 2021.
Regarding the platformization and the success of communication strategies, overall right-wing politicians tend to be more effective in capturing the attention and mobilising the participation of social media users on Facebook and Twitter. Different political groups stand out in the discussion of different European issues on different platforms. However, for most countries, the Economy, related to Europe, was the main subject with the highest reach addressed by the political actors, thus reinforcing the idea of Structural Europeanization. However, with most posts having a national scope, this does not contribute to strengthening the construction of a European Identity (Normative Europeanization). These findings are aligned with previous literature regarding European issues being first and foremost used as leverage for national political struggles, especially due to national and populist movements.

Keywords: Social media; politics, Europeanization; platformization.

Resumo

Estudos recentes sugerem a existência de uma Esfera Pública Europeia, em especial perante acontecimentos de importância significativa. No âmbito da crise da pandemia de Covid-19, este artigo pretende estudar a plataformização da discussão sobre temas europeus por parte dos agentes políticos, tais como políticos ou partidos. Tendo como foco quatro países mediterrânicos que têm em comum uma história recente na sua relação com a Europa (PIGS) – Grécia, Itália, Portugal e Espanha –, analisamos as publicações com maior alcance publicadas por agentes políticos sobre a Europa. O estudo foi conduzido no Facebook, Twitter e YouTube durante um período de três meses, entre setembro e novembro de 2021.
No que respeita à plataformização e ao sucesso das estratégias de comunicação, concluímos que os políticos de direita tendem a ser mais efetivos na captura da atenção e na mobilização da participação dos utilizadores das redes sociais Facebook e Twitter. Diferentes grupos políticos destacam-se na discussão de vários tópicos

europeus em diversas plataformas. No entanto, para a maioria dos países, os temas de Economia relacionados com a Europa são o principal assunto abordado pelos atores políticos com mais alcance, o que reforça a ideia de uma Europeização Estrutural, mas, considerando que a maioria das publicações têm um âmbito nacional, isso não reforça a construção de uma Identidade Europeia (Europeização Normativa). Estes resultados estão em linha com a literatura existente que apresenta as questões europeias como sendo, primeiro que tudo, uma alavanca para as lutas políticas internas, em especial devido aos movimentos nacionalistas e populistas.

Palavras-chave: Redes sociais, política, europeização, plataformização.

Introduction

This paper analyzes political agents' publications on social media platforms on European topics with the highest reach, between September and November 2021 (during the Covid-19 crisis), in four Southern European countries, namely Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain. The research goal was to analyze the social media posts on Europe of these political agents in those four countries, focusing on who these agents were, where they posted, and how they contributed to Europeanization and/or the formation of a European Public Sphere. In particular, we wanted to understand on which platforms the political agents' publications about Europe were more relevant, which types of political agents had the most engaging publications on Europe and the main subjects addressed in those publications.

This research stems from the European research project EUMEPLAT and uses both the methodological framework and part of the project data. For this specific research, we chose to focus on political agents and to restrict our analysis to Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain. The choice of these countries is justified by geographic and cultural similarities but also the shared economic hardships following the 2008 financial crisis which led them to being grouped under the acronym PIGS, standing for Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain (Capucha *et al.*, 2014). However, this common past event centring on the economy may have triggered different reactions: Portugal has a very positive view of the European Union (EU), clearly above average; Italy and Spain display an average view of the EU; and Greece sits below average in the positive view of the EU (European Commission, 2023). We wanted to assess differences and similarities between these countries in the way political agents address Europe and European issues on the basis of both these past hardships, as well as health and economic decisions taken by EU agents during the period under analysis. During this period, the four countries had just received green light to use the EU recovery and resilience funds to boost their economies and recover from the Covid-19 fallout (European Council, 2022).

In the "Platform Society" (van Dijck et al., 2018) context, part of the political agents' discourse and communication strategies regarding Europe will be played out on social media platforms. The disintermediation process (Robles-Morales and Córdoba-Hernández, 2019) allows political actors to connect directly to their audiences (Cardoso, 2023; Parisi & Rega, 2011), and to voice their own points of view about the EU, even when not fully aligned with their party (Castanho Silva and Proksch, 2022). Moreover, it is in this "network of networks" (Castells, 2009b) that new Public Spheres, like the European Public Sphere can grow. This discussion can also refer us to findings on the Europeanization process, namely regarding Normative and Structural Europeanization (Sicakkan & Heiberger, 2022), and the content and timing of the political agents' publications.

Regarding the European topics under analysis, all social media publications collected for the dataset corresponded to four different dimensions of analysis: those that addressed issues related to Europe and those that included issues related to Europe as well as Climate, Health and Economy. These three subsidiary dimensions were selected following those which were the most pressing concerns of European citizens at the time (European Commission, 2020), as it was expected that political agents would be more focused on these. Therefore, the data for this research addresses four

dimensions – Europe; Europe and Climate; Europe and Health; and Europe and Economy – in four different countries, namely Portugal, Spain, Italy and Greece, on the Facebook, Twitter and Youtube social media platforms.

Political communication in the context of platformization

This analysis of how political agents use social media to discuss European issues must be contextualized within previous literature about the use of social media platforms in general and for purposes of political communication specifically. Castells (2009a) and van Dijk (2006) provided two overarching global theorizations about the new information and communication landscape after the generalization of the internet. From the "mass self-communication" (Castells, 2009a) concept – in which individuals or organizations are able to autonomously select what they consume, produce or distribute in the information network – to the constraints and potential of the technology in the new social landscape, these approaches have led to the characterization of the current media and social media landscape as a new information and communication paradigm (Cardoso, 2006).

More recently, van Dijck and colleagues (2018) have theorized about the evolution of the Network Society into a Platform Society. The Platform Society evolves from the Network Society, as theorized by Castells (2009a) and van Dijck (2016), but reorganizes into digital communication platforms that connect social actors of all types with each other and information producers with their audiences. In this "Platform Society" context, algorithms have been said to play a central role in the management of information flows and, therefore, in the visibility of information producers and their contents (Gillespie et al., 2014), to the point of being called an "Algorithmic Society" (Peeters & Schuilenburg, 2020). However, there has also been criticism regarding this approach, due to resonating with technological determinism (Bruns, 2019). As we will analyze the political actors' posts that are among the most relevant publications about European issues, it is important to understand the role that algorithms may play in the dissemination of those contents and their relevance.

In *Communication Power*, Castells (2009b) theorizes about the programming and reprogramming of digital communication networks as instances of power struggles. Some political actors seem more apt than others in using the communication tools and channels available to maximize attention and interactions. Each social media platform has its own algorithmic mechanisms and rules for filtering and sorting content (Gillespie, 2010). Therefore, the political actors that better adapt their message to those algorithmic rules tend to be more successful in spreading their message on social media. As mentioned by Castells (2009b), they are acting in a "network of networks" (p.73), overlaid and enmeshed with one another, including the social media platforms that act as mediators (van Dijck et al., 2018).

In this context, the concept of domestication introduced by Silverstone and Haddon (1996) can be regarded as a way to frame the appropriation of social media technologies by political actors who are interested in advancing their political ideas where audiences are increasingly present i.e. social media platforms. It is in the "network of networks" theorized by Castells (2009b) that political agents can connect with other political agents of diverse political leanings, their audiences, both supporters and non-supporters, and the sources of information, namely news media. Robles-Morales and Córdoba-Hernández (2019) called this a disintermediation process that allows political agents to connect directly to their audiences (Cardoso, 2023; Parisi & Rega, 2011). News media is also a player in those networks, not as an intermediary but as a content creator (Cardoso, 2023).

Chadwick (2017) characterized this as a hybrid media system that both empowers and disempowers, depending on the ability of the agents in the network to take advantage of its modes of operation to advance their interests. This

was originally theorized by Castells as the operation of the programmers and switchers of the network (Castells, 2009b), and is now combined with the knowledge we have of the role and functioning of algorithms (Gillespie, 2014) in enabling or disabling the visibility of contents on social media platforms (Nielsen & Ganter, 2022).

The politicians that learn how to use the virality of algorithmic social media platforms to their benefit, and who enjoy intermediation by those platforms (and their algorithms), can reach and appeal to a larger audience according to what Cardoso (2023) terms communicational populism, which differs from political populism. Schrape (2021) also describes this new political communication landscape as multi-layered, conditioned by social media platforms, and formed by the interplay of three levels of change: platformization; pluralization; and synthesis.

Not all social media platforms are the same nor are they performing similar roles in different countries. For example, although Twitter (renamed X)[1] is often considered a political and media "bubble" (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021), only catering to a "Twitter Elite" (Ruoho & Kuusiplao, 2019), other research (Cardoso et al., 2023) suggests that it is on Facebook that political actors register more interactions: "(...) the most popular platform is also the most populist platform" (Cardoso et al., 2023, p.34). Cardoso also underlines this difference between Facebook and Twitter, identifying the former as the vehicle to reach a mass audience and the latter as the channel to interact with a politically engaged audience.

Social media and political landscape.

The analysis of the social media and political landscape in each of the four countries included in this study is of the utmost importance to understand the way political agents express opinions about European issues online. The Digital News Report 2022 (Newman et al., 2022) supplies important data on the subject and allows for a direct comparison among those four countries. As we can see in Table 1, there are no significant differences in the use of most social media platforms, like Facebook (64% to 76%), YouTube (65% to 76%) and Instagram (50% to 56%), but Twitter is the exception (with Portugal (15%) having less than half of the percentage of Spain (32%)).

Table 1. Main source of news and uses of social media in Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain

	Greece	**Italy**	**Portugal**	**Spain**
Main source of news	Online (90%)	Online (75%) Closely followed by TV (70%)	Online (79%), Closely followed by TV (74%)	Online (79%)
Use of social media	Facebook (76%) Youtube (76%) Instagram (52%) Twitter (25%)	Facebook (71%) Youtube (65%) Instagram (50%) Twitter (17%)	Facebook (76%) Youtube (68%) Instagram (53%) Twitter (15%)	Facebook (64%) Youtube (67%) Instagram (56%) Twitter (32%)

Data Source: Digital News Report 2022

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[1] In July 2023, after data collection and analysis, Twitter was renamed X.

Regarding the political landscape in the four countries analyzed during the months of data collection, between September and November 2021 (Table 2), Portugal and Spain had relatively durable governments, headed by center-left prime-ministers in power for some time (since 2015 in Portugal and since 2018 in Spain). Greece was led, at the time, by a center-right majority and Italy formed an independent government from a coalition of several political parties and movements. All the governments in power in these countries during data collection were clearly pro-European. Although in different degrees, research also shows similar growth of the far-right populist parties in these countries (Barberà et al., 2021; Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2022).

Table 2 - Political context and views on Europe in Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain between September and November 2021

	Greece	**Italy**	**Portugal**	**Spain**
Prime-Minister	Kyriakos Mitsotakis, since July 2019	Mario Draghi, since February 2021	António Costa, since November 2015	Pedro Sánchez, since June 2018
Party in Government	New Democracy, a liberal-conservative party (center-right)	Independent	Socialist Party, centre-left.	PSOE, centre-left. Supported by UP
Views on Europe	Pro-Europe	Pro-Europe	Pro-Europe	Pro-Europe

Source: Data compiled by the authors

Europeanization, European public sphere and the political discussion on European topics

Besides the theoretical review of the communication context and the analysis of the social and political landscape, it is important to understand the implications of this context on the European project. Considering that the publications are from political agents in four EU countries, the European Union is both the context and the subject of the research performed. Carpentier (2021) describes Europeanization as "(…) a related discourse that articulates European identity and Europeanity with a temporal dimension and a process of intensification" (p.234). It is a "discourse of becoming" something more than the national identities. This process can be more minimalist, with the "creation" and "establishment" of a European identity, but can also have a maximalist version, that is the "hegemonization" of a European identity.

Europeanization has indeed been defined in multiple ways (Sicakkan & Heiberger, 2022). Risse (2003, 2010) conceptualized it by merging different approaches with three indicators: 1) similar levels of attention to the same themes at the same time, 2) similar frames of reference, meaning structures and patterns of interpretation and 3) public sphere participants' mutual recognition as legitimate speakers.

Sicakkan and Heiberger (2022) restructured this three-way definition into two that are not mutually exclusive: the Normative Europeanization and the Structural Europeanization. The idea of Normative Europeanization draws closer to the definition of a European Identity (European Community, 1973) that has a legal and cultural dimension. The notion

of Structural Europeanization is related to the synchronized timing of news reporting, consumption and framing. Carpentier (2021) also made a distinction between "(..) both the circulation of European identity and Europeanity discourses ('being European') and the process of Europeanization ('becoming European')." (Carpentier, 2021, p.235). Sicakkan and Heiberger (2022) reflect that "[b]oth notions of Europeanization emphasize interconnectedness through similarities" (p.234).

This "interconnectedness through similarities" benefits from the development of a European Public Sphere. The latter results from the "Europeanization of national public spheres" (Habermas, 2009) and although there have been other definitions, Trenz's definition of Public Sphere, quoted by Bärenreuter and colleagues. (2009, p.9), defines it as "(...) an intersubjectively shared, communicatively constructed system of mutual observance without a concrete social order or membership and therefore applicable to contingent situations." Taking into consideration the "communicatively constructed system", it is natural that, in the context of the "Network Society" (Castells, 2009a; van Dijk, 2006), there was a boost in research on the European Public Sphere, both in the mid-1990's (Bärenreuter et al., 2009) and in the context of Web 2.0, with the development of social media platforms. The latter allowed political agents to take up a key role as "initiators of debates on Europe" (Bärenreuter et al., 2009, p.9), not only reducing the need for intermediaries, but also surpassing the physical and economical challenges that a space as large as the UE could present in previous methods of communication.

An empirical study about Greece's 2015 bailout negotiations on Twitter corroborates the idea of a European Public Sphere online (Hänska & Bauchowitz, 2019). The study showcases "pan-European online activism" because the online conversation about the Greece bailout was cross-national, gathering the attention of anti-austerity protesters across Europe. More recently, the Covid-19 crisis gave researchers a new opportunity to study the development of the European Public Sphere through different social media platforms. Schünemannand and colleagues (2022) found that the share of transnational links on the Twitter conversation grew during the pandemic, "indicating effects of adaptation and learning", despite discussion on national political measures counter-balancing this effect. The studies of Hänska and Bauchowitz (2019) and Schünemann and colleagues (2022) are in line with the idea of Structural Europeanization in which there is a synchronized discussion about a common topic.

However, there are also studies that don't support the idea of a growing European Identity and a European Public Sphere. Sicakkan and Heiberger (2022), for example, mention that "[t]he political crises of extremism, autocracy and populism that the latest financial crisis triggered in Europe, reveal a strong presence of national public spheres and national publics (...)." (p.231). This conclusion presents the period of analysis – with the Economic relief funds during Covid-19 and growing attention to the populist and nationalist parties – as a perfect opportunity to study the European Public Sphere and assess whether or not the political agents' communication strategies online work towards reinforcing Normative or Structural Europeanization, or both at once.

A study comparing the Spanish, Italian, French and UK populist parties' positions on the European Union during the 2019 European elections (Alonso-Muñoz et al., 2020) concluded that Spanish party Podemos and Italian 5 Star Movement were considered exceptions in identifying which were the EU main issues. Both parties considered that the main issue was the imposition of economic austerity policies, which was also an issue relevant for the Greek people and their relationship with Europe: "The Greek people have grown very skeptical towards the EU and European institutions, following the harsh austerity measures and provoking rhetoric" (Papathanassopoulos et al., 2023, p.2).

Alonso-Muñoz's and colleagues' (2020) analysis focused on social media posts about Europe by political parties, but one could argue that not all politicians in a political party share the same vision regarding Europe. A study by Castanho

Silva and Proksch (2022) concluded that the MPs used Twitter as an outlet to express their feelings regarding Europe, and even MPs whose vision didn't align with that of the party and were not as vocal in Parliament about their views on Europe, didn't feel the need to self-censor their opinions on Twitter.

Based on the literature review, we ultimately aim to find out which political agents, in the four European countries analyzed, published about Europe on social media platforms, where they published and how they did so, and, whether or not they contributed, in the process, to Europeanization and/or the formation of a European Public Sphere.

Method

Countries researched, dimensions of analysis and time frame

According to the main goals of the study, data was collected from the four researched countries, namely Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain. As stated in the introduction, the reason for focusing the research on these four countries is based on the fact that they are historically regarded as sharing certain economic traits in the context of European and international institutions.

To establish the dimensions of analysis, indicators from the official polling instrument used by the European Parliament, the Eurobarometer 2020 (European Commission, 2020), were taken into account. According to that survey, topics related to Health, Climate, and Economy are those that most concerned European citizens at the time of data collection, leading to the choice of those issues as dimensions of analysis. However, considering that the aim was to focus on Europe, a fourth dimension - Europe - was also included.

Three data collections were carried out: one in September, another in October and another in November 2021. In each of those months, social media publications addressing the four dimensions of analysis were collected. These three collections were justified by the fact that, in following months, the goal was to carry out a synchronic analysis not to portray the evolution of the debate over those issues during a given timeframe, but rather to establish the current state of the debate on those four dimensions in social media.

These data collection moments were chosen so that none of the countries involved would be in a period of national or European elections, as these events could have conditioned results. However, the time of data collection coincided, in all countries, with the spread of a new variant of the Covid-19, and with the green light for the EU recovery and resilience funds (European Council, 2022).

Selection of social media platforms

With the aim of analyzing similarities or dissimilarities in the way social media was used to debate Europe and European issues that most concern Europeans (Health, Climate and Economy) the study focused on three main social media platforms: Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. These three platforms are consistently on the list of most used social media platforms in the analyzed countries (Newman et al., 2021). A post (Facebook), a tweet (Twitter), and a video (YouTube), and all their data and metadata, were considered the object of analysis. Note that comments were not retrieved as the focus of this study did not consist in comments but in publications.

Data collection and organization

Three tools were used for data collection: CrowdTangle[2] (for Facebook), Brandwatch[3] (for Twitter) and YouTube Data Tools[4] (for YouTube). All three tools operate on the authorized API (Application Programming Interface). This means that the data points available are only the ones that are publicly accessible through those APIs. Such tools also comply with GDPR and provide access only to public data.

For data collection, social media platforms were queried following query design strategy recommendations (Rogers, 2017). According to the language of each country, a set of keywords was established regarding the dimensions under analysis: health, climate, economy and Europe. Since the analysis intended to focus on issues within the scope of Europe, it was therefore determined, as an inclusion criterion, that either an object of analysis had to be directly related to Europe, or cover Europe and Health, Europe and Climate or Europe and the Economy.

Each data collection originated 7 datasets, encompassing all users, media and groups for Facebook and Twitter, and all users per country, dimension and timeframe for YouTube. Each dataset containing objects of data and metadata analysis was manually organized according to research goals. Since we were looking for impact in discussing the dimensions of analysis on social media, the analysis focused on the Top 10 publications with the highest engagement, reach and relevance for country, platform and dimension over each of the three months covered. On Facebook, the publications selected for analysis were ordered by the total number of interactions (the sum of reactions, comments and shares). On Twitter, the publications selected for analysis were ordered by reach. Lastly, on YouTube, the publications for analysis were ordered by relevance, corresponding to those that the algorithm delivers for the input search query. In each case, the Top 10 publications of each country/platform/dimension over each of the specified three months were selected for analysis. The methodological procedure was approved by the university ethics committee.

Data Analysis

Coding social media objects

To proceed with the coding of each object of analysis a codebook was created. At a first stage, categories were established in accordance with literature on social media, Europeanization and data from each collection, identifying the most relevant categories that could potentially answer the research questions. The goal was to identify patterns and create categories following a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

At a second stage, extensive discussions took place about various aspects of the codebook and coding procedures in order to establish an overall agreement, in pursuit of the research goals. Through an iterative process approach, categories were refined, improved, merged or eliminated, ensuring that the coding reflected the content to be coded. The codebook featured category descriptions with illustrative examples, coding instructions, operational definitions and guidance on rules for resolving ambiguities. An intermediary step involved sorting each object of analysis as "on topic"

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[2] https://www.crowdtangle.com/

[3] https://www.brandwatch.com/

[4] https://tools.digitalmethods.net/netvizz/youtube/

or"off topic" as an inclusion criterion ensuring that those objects of analysis would be, directly or indirectly, related to the dimensions of analysis. If not, they were discarded and the coding procedure followed on to the next post. The final codebook for the study consisted in six main themes and can be consulted, in a summarised version, in Table 1 of the annex section of this article.

After developing the codebook and in order to establish a measure of coding reliability, two coders manually coded 20% of the first month's sample of publications from each country and intercoder reliability was calculated. On Table 2 of the annex section, it is possible to observe Cohen's Kappa value per theme and country. According to established standards in the literature (Cohen, 1960), agreement ranged from substantial agreement to almost perfect.

Sample

Considering the research questions and the research goals established for this article, we focused primarily on contents posted by political agents. Such contents are discussed, in the following section, in relation with the other codebook variables, according to the four dimensions (Europe; Europe and Health; Europe and Climate; and Europe and the Economy) and from the four countries under analysis. The final sample consisted in 306 objects of analysis – publications by political agents – distributed as shown in Table 5.

Table 3: Sample distribution according to country and social media platform.

Publications by Political agents	Greece	Italy	Portugal	Spain	Total
On Facebook	68	65	6	24	163
On Twitter	43	40	24	18	125
On YouTube	10	1	5	2	18
Total	121	106	35	44	306

Source: Data compiled by the authors

Results and discussion

We divide the discussion of the results in three parts, each of which responds to particular research questions. In the first part, we address and compare the platforms on which political actors were more active; in the second part we discuss which types of political agents are more relevant; and, in the third part, we discuss the topics mainly addressed by those political agents. In all three parts we will also be comparing the results by country.

RQ1: In which platforms are political agents' publications about Europe more relevant?
As our analysis is focused on a subsample of a larger sample with publications by other agents, we have to take into account that the publications by political agents are differently present in the data on each platform and on each dimension. In total, 306 of the 1179 total publications collected, on all platforms and all dimensions, were posted by political agents, corresponding to 26%. But that percentage is much greater in Greece (40%) and Italy (31%) than in

Spain (19%) or Portugal (11%). According to this data, we can conclude that publications by political agents about Europe were more relevant in Greece and Italy than in Spain or Portugal.

Regarding platforms in all four countries, political agents are more relevant in this sample when considering Facebook (39% of the total) and Twitter (30%) than YouTube (only 5% of the total). And there are also significant differences when crossing platform and country: more than half of the publications collected as relevant on Facebook in Greece and Italy (59% and 56% respectively) are by political agents. In this platform, Portugal is a particular outlier: only 6 of the 111 Facebook publications considered more relevant (5%) are by political agents.

The prevalence of political agents in posts collected on Europe in each platform and each country can be seen in Figure 1. Political agents are significantly more prevalent in Greece and Italy, both in Facebook and Twitter, than Portuguese or Spanish political agents. YouTube is a platform where, according to our data, political agents are not prevalent in any of the four countries studied.

Figure 1 - Publications posted by political agents sorted by country and platform
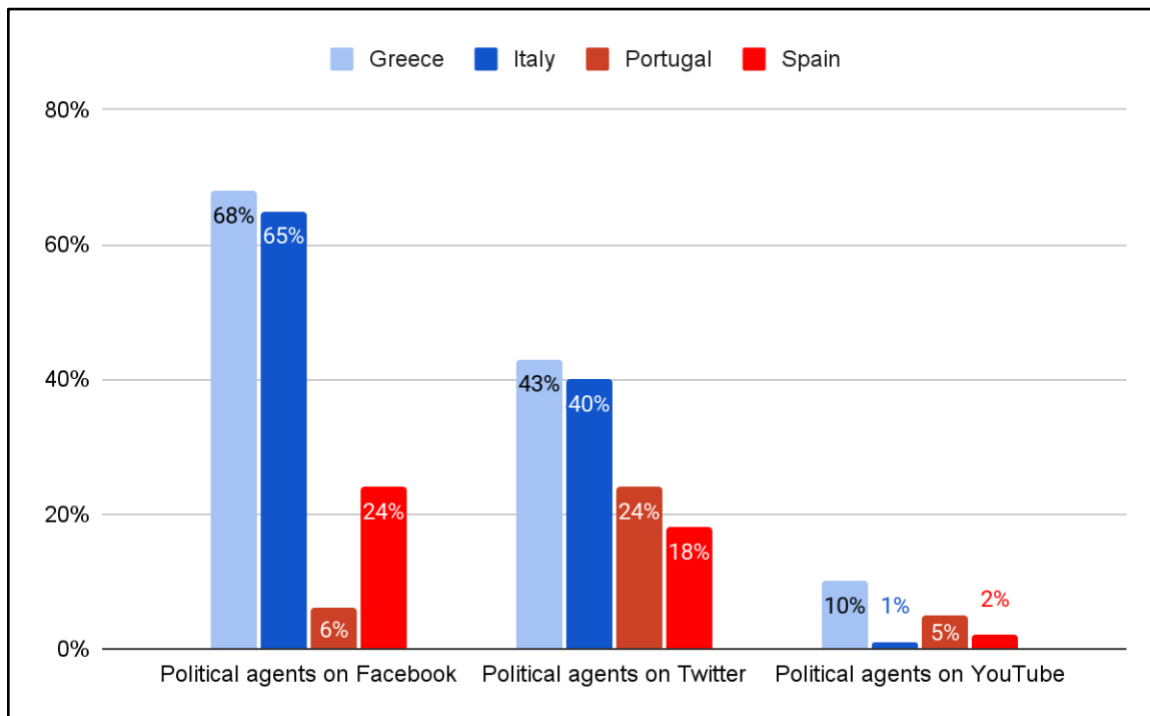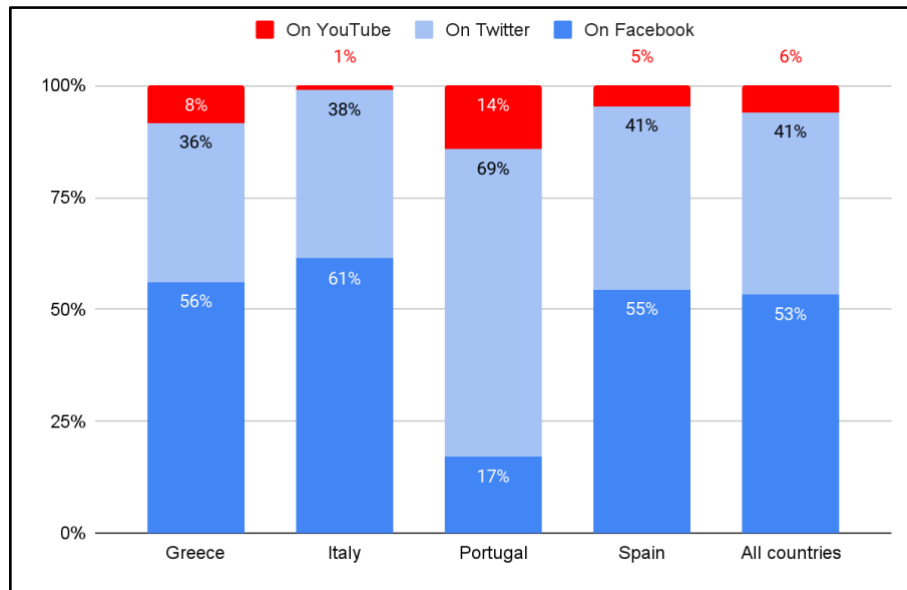

Source: Data compiled by the authors

One hypothesis for these results is that these social media platforms are more politicized in Greece and Italy. This hypothesis could explain why political agents in those two countries were better at seizing the attention of audiences on those platforms regarding European subjects.

In order to better understand which platforms are more politicized – and in which platforms political agents were more prevalent in the relevant posts about Europe –, we analyzed the prevalence of the political agents' publications in each platform in the four countries. Figure 2, below, shows that, of all publications by political agents in Portugal, the vast majority (69%) is on Twitter, whereas in Italy and Greece it is on Facebook (in Italy at the expense of an absence of political agents relevant on YouTube). Spain is the country most in line with the total of the four countries: Facebook

is the platform where political agents are more relevant (53%), followed by Twitter (41%) and YouTube (only 6%). The relevance of Portuguese political actors on Twitter can be due to the fact that Portugal has the least percentage of Twitter users (Table 1 - Main source of news), giving more salience to the political actors that post content there.

Figure 2 - Prevalence of the publications by political agents on each platform, by country

Source: Data compiled by the authors

This data suggests that political actors in each country select the social media platforms they most invest in (and can be more prevalent in the top posts), following an assessment of the advantages and limitations of their affordances and the potential that they can have on reaching intended audiences. Following Mansell and Silverstone (1996), we could say that political actors "appropriate" the tools provided by social media platforms in the way that most favors them. This is also in line with our observation that Facebook tends to be the social media platform that seems to most attract populist politicians (Cardoso et al., 2023), and Twitter takes form as a political microcosm, less popular but more inhabited by political actors and political content (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021).

If we take into consideration not only the number of publications by political agents, but also the interaction rate for those publications on each platform, our data shows that YouTube generates the higher interaction rate, followed by Facebook and Twitter. Overall, political agents get higher interaction rates than non-political agents on the same platform. Finally, we can conclude that Twitter is a relevant microcosm for political actors, especially in Portugal, but also that Facebook is the main "powerhouse" for the dissemination of political speech on social media.

The fact that the interaction rate of political agents' publications tends to be better than that of other users is indicative that political agents – especially politicians – are good at taking advantage of the affordances of the platforms to reach their audiences. This is also a reminder that a significant part of the political content that circulates on social media platforms is a creation of political actors, in the context of their political struggles.

To answer the research question concerning the platforms in which political agents' publications about Europe are more relevant, we can thus conclude that Facebook is more relevant for Greece, Italy, and Spain, and Twitter for Portugal. Furthermore, in Greece and Italy posts about Europe from political agents are overall more relevant than in

Spain and Portugal, suggesting that in these countries social media platforms are more politicized, with higher engagement with political agents on social media, at least as concerns Europe. Moreover, publications by political agents had, overall, a higher-than-average interaction rate on all social media platforms, which can indicate that, even in cases where the sample of relevant publications has few posts by political agents, the latter were more "viral".

RQ2: Which types of political agents have more engaging publications about Europe?

When we dive into the categorization of the types of political agents – political party, politician, EU Group – included in our sample of most relevant publications on social media (Figures 3 and 4), we see that politicians, rather than political parties, are dominant, constituting 90% of overall publications, ranging from 67% on YouTube to 92% on Facebook. In fact, political parties have some relevance only on YouTube (33%, although with much less occurrences). However, there are differences between countries. Politicians are more prevalent on Facebook in Greece (99%) and Italy (94%) than they are in Portugal and Spain (83%), even considering that only six political agents' publications are included in the Portuguese sample for Facebook. On Twitter, politicians are also more prevalent than political parties, ranging from 78% in Spain to 98% in Greece. EU groups are never significantly relevant on any social media platform in these four countries.

The prevalence of politicians on these three platforms in comparison to political parties, according to our data, reflects, in our view, the kind of personal connections with audiences that social media suggests and fosters. This is important because it plays into literature suggesting that individual political agents tend to be more performative – and more to be so more successfully – on social media than institutional political actors, like political parties (Klingnon & Svensson, 2015; Zanker et al., 2019). These results are aligned with theoretical and empirical studies regarding the personalisation of politics, which can be described as the "(…) process of growing centrality of the individual together with a decrease in the power of political groupings such as political parties, parliaments and cabinets (…)" (Balmas et al., 2012) that has increased significantly with the use of web 2.0 and social media platforms for political communication (Capati, 2019; Ekman & Widholm, 2017; Santana Pereira, 2016).

These results are also relevant in the light of the study by Castanho Silva and Proksch (2022), mentioned in our literature review, which concluded that MPs used Twitter as an outlet to express their feelings regarding Europe, even in the case of MPs whose vision was not aligned with that of the party. This means that politicians' publications about Europe can provide their own point of view on European topics and discussions and even surpass the political party agenda.

Figure 3 - Types of political agents per country
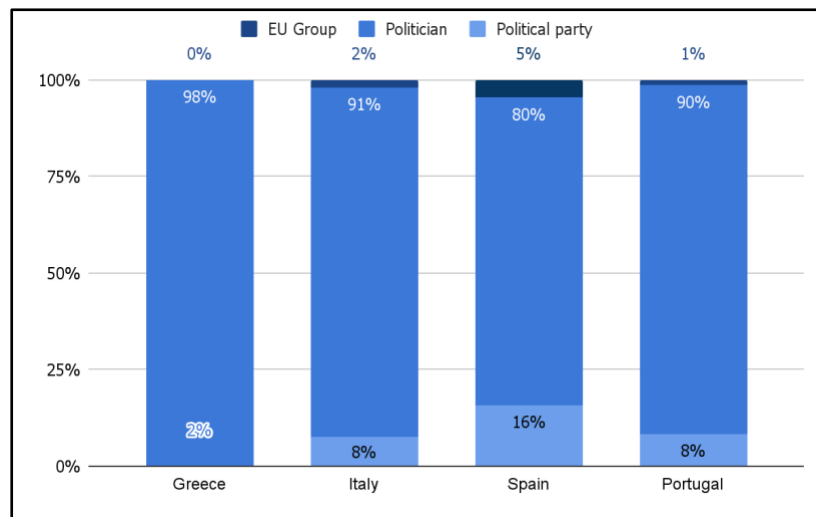
Source: Data compiled by the authors

Figure 4 - Types of political agents per platform
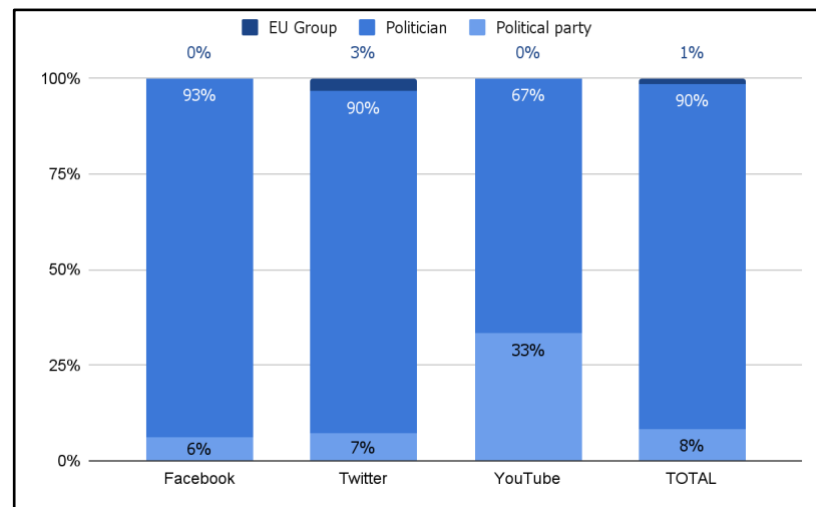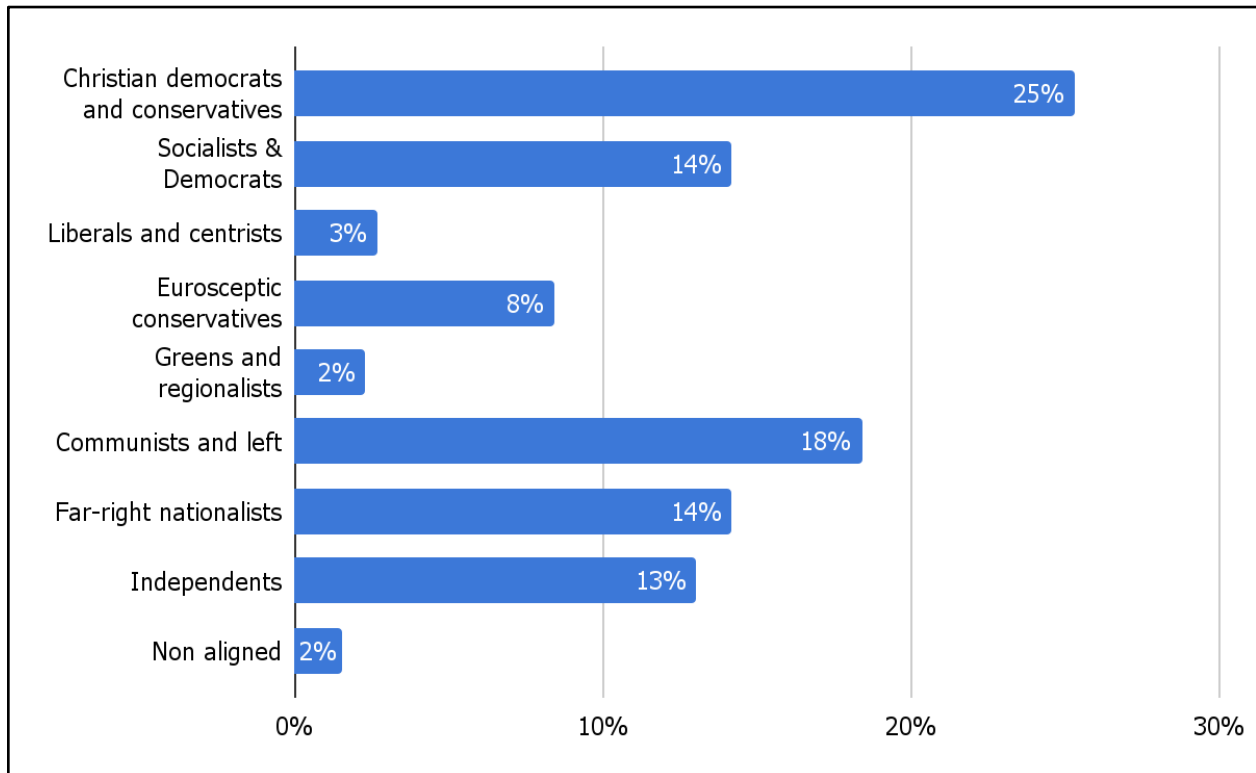

Source: Data compiled by the authors

One of the coding procedures performed was to attribute to each political agent a political position in the spectrum of political groups in the EU parliament. To that end, nine political positions were categorized, according to the political groups of the European Parliament[5] and then all political agents included in our sample were allocated to one of those political positions. The aim was to analyze which political positions in Europe are more prevalent on each platform and each country.

From that categorization (Figure 5), we can conclude that Christian-Democrats (25%), Communists and the Left (22%) and Independents (18%) dominate our sample for Facebook, whereas Christian-Democrats (27%), Socialists (19%) and Far-Right Nationalists (18%) prevail on Twitter. YouTube data does not register enough political agents in the

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[5] https://www.europarl.europa.eu/about-parliament/en/organization-and-rules/organization/political-groups

sample to suggest a relevant distribution according to political position. Considering the aggregate of all three platforms, Christian Democrats and Conservatives are the most populous EU group in our sample (25%), followed by Communists and the Left (18%). Socialists and Democrats, Far-Right Nationalists and Independents all ranging between 13% and 14%.

Figure 5 - Publications by political agents, by their political position

Source: Data compiled by the authors

Looking at the average metrics for followers and interactions of the accounts in our sample that are politically aligned with each of the EU groups, we can conclude that political agents within the Far-Right Nationalists and the Independents have more followers and more interactions on Facebook (2 million followers and 461 thousand interactions per publication, on average), but Independents display the better interaction rate (2,91%, dividing the average number of interactions by the average number of followers). This level of engagement with Far-Right Nationalists publications on Facebook is consistent with previous research using the same data and suggests that the most popular platform – Facebook – is also the most relevant for populist politicians to interact with their publics (Cardoso *et al.,* 2023).

On Twitter, on the other hand, the accounts in our sample aligned with the Socialists and Democrats have more followers – 1,1 million, on average –, but accounts aligned with the Eurosceptic Conservatives dominate interactions, with an average of 2600 per publication. However, in this social media platform Far-Right Nationalists also obtain the largest sum of interactions in our sample (26 thousand in total, significantly above the second EU group, standing at 8 thousand). This confirms that populist political agents are also intensely engaging with their audiences on Twitter.

These specifications of each social media platform are aligned with Carpentier's (2021) view of Europeanization on social media platforms: "(...) these platforms have their specificities that can allow and disallow for discourses to reach particular groups" (p.235). The specific political actors that are most relevant in each country seem to differ by platform. In general, most Twitter accounts that are followed in Spain and Greece have slightly more followers than the most followed pages on Facebook, but in Italy, on the contrary, most followed political agents on Facebook have much more followers than the most followed accounts on Twitter. Also, the most significant political agents on one dimension – Europe, for instance – tend to also be present as relevant on the other dimensions. This is mostly true as regards the dimensions of Europe and Health as well as Europe and the Economy, but less so in the case of Europe and Climate. We can thus conclude that the political agents that are more popular in their discussion of European topics online dominate most of the discussion, except for Climate-related topics in which other specific (and maybe specialized) political agents gain more attention.

RQ3: What are the main subjects addressed by political agents in their most relevant publications on Europe?

To respond to the third research question, we analyzed the main subjects addressed by political agents in these four countries in their publications about Europe. We first looked at the way that political agents' publications about Europe, in our sample, addressed the dimensions included in our research: Europe; Europe and Climate; Europe and Health; and Europe and the Economy.

Looking at the data (Figure 6), we see that Europe is by far the topic in which political agents in Greece have more publications, with 75% of the most relevant publications originating from Greek political agents focusing on that topic. Health is a distant second (34%). In all other three countries, Europe and Europe and the Economy are the most important dimensions in which publications by political agents in those countries are relevant, with a small advantage for Europe in Italy and also a slight tilt towards the Economy in Portugal and Spain.

Figure 6 - Publications by political agents in each dimension, on all 3 platforms, per country
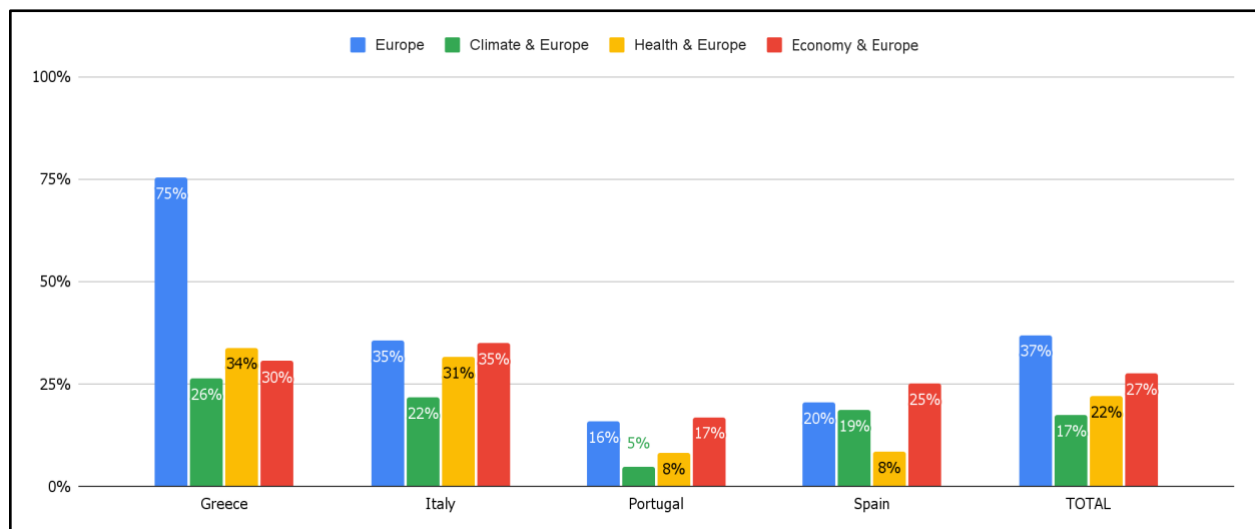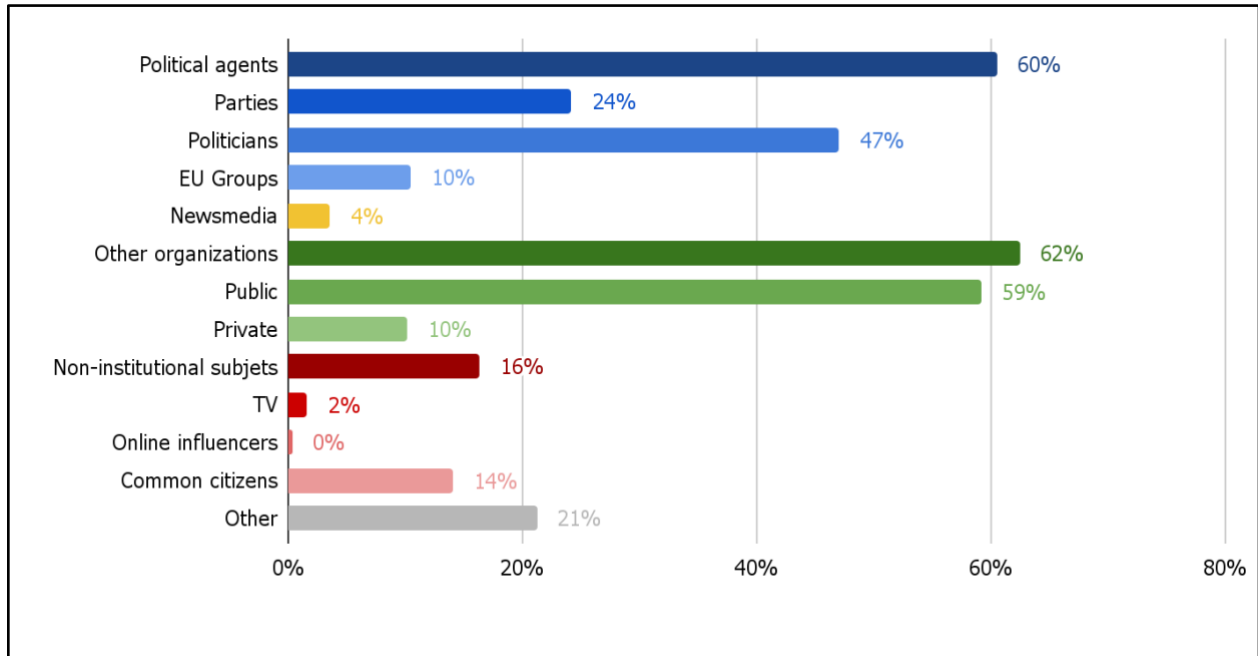

Source: Data compiled by the authors

When considering the subject of the publications that were published by political agents in all four countries and all three platforms (Figure 7), attention was divided between other political agents (60%) and other organizations (62%). We can conclude that the publications of political agents on social media with the most reach about Europe are related

to other politicians individually (47%), but also significantly to political parties (24%). Regarding organizations, publications mostly concern public organizations (59%, versus 10% private organizations), which means posting about the government, governmental bodies, and other public institutions.

Figure 7 - Subject of political agents' publications on all 3 platforms (multiple answer)
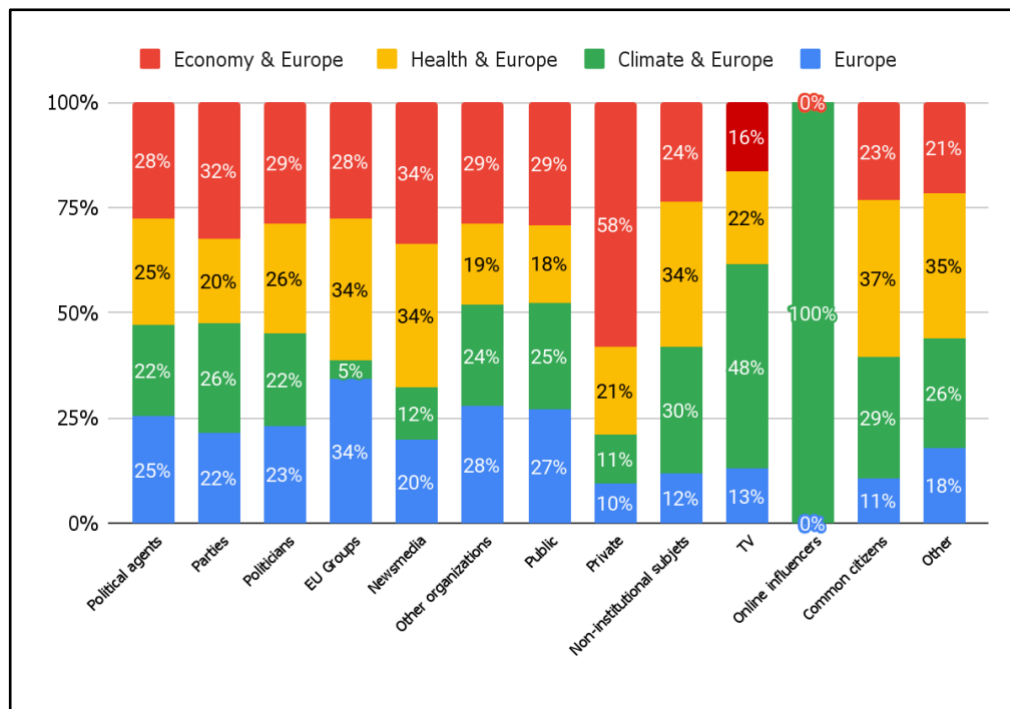

Source: Data compiled by the authors

This reinforces other research which suggests that the disintermediation of traditional mediators in the use of social media platforms provides a novel terrain for the traditional political struggle, where politicians address mostly other politicians. In a way, we can say that politicians tend to reproduce on social media the kind of political microcosm that they traditionally enacted – and to an extent still enact – on traditional media (Kruikemeier et al, 2018).

When we look at the data relative to the subject of the publication by political agents and cross it with our four dimensions of analysis (Europe; Europe and Climate; Europe and Health; Europe and the Economy), we also detect some interesting observations (Figure 8). Our data suggests that political agents and office-holders in public organizations (like governments and public institutions), who together constitute the main part of the political microcosm, have a more institutional (Europe) and economical (Europe and the Economy) approach to European issues. On the other hand, issues related to Climate and Health are, to a larger extent, directed to subjects outside that microcosm, like common citizens, online influencers or TV presenters and hosts.

Figure 8 - Subject of political agents' publications on all 3 platforms, per dimension (multiple answer)
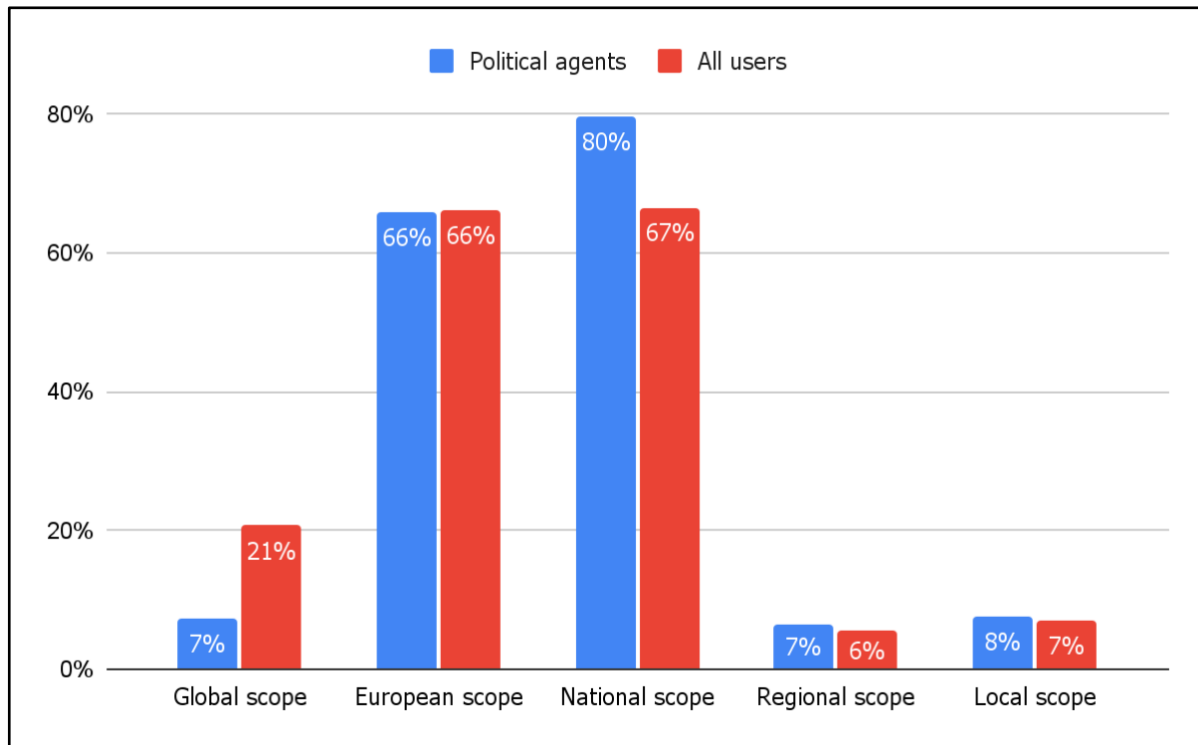

Source: Data compiled by the authors

Although the Economy, Health and Climate are all topics of national interest that can have a European scope (European Commission, 2020), we can say that the economic focus of the politicians, the political agents with more posts in our sample, is aligned with the idea that politicians with more reach on social media use European topics to discuss nationally relevant issues – for instance, comparing national economic growth to the EU average, or the support of EU funds to the national economy.

This conclusion is reinforced with the analysis of the territorial scope of the publications. Regarding the scope of the subject of the publication by political agents (Figure 9), the focus is predominantly national and European (few publications are global, regional or local in scope), but political agents tend to publish more with a national scope (80%) than all other agents on social media platforms (67%). We can say that even when posting about European topics, the political agents tend to pivot those into their national and internal political struggles.

Figure 9 - Scope of the publications by political agents on all 3 platforms (multiple answer)

Source: Data compiled by the authors

To further address the issue of Europeanization, we departed from a semantic map drawn for that specific purpose (Carpentier et al., 2023), from which we coded 19 categories of Europeanization that were cumulative. As we can see in Figure 10, the Political (28%), the Economic (37%), Law and Order (27%) and Institutions (25%), in that order, are the categories of Europeanization most times addressed by the political agents in our sample. In comparison with the entirety of our sample, political agents' publications are more prone to address these categories of Europeanization (along with European Values). New Social Movements and European (Media) Content are categories almost absent from the publications by political agents.

Figure 10 - Dimensions of Europe addressed in political agents' publications on all 3 platforms (multiple answer)
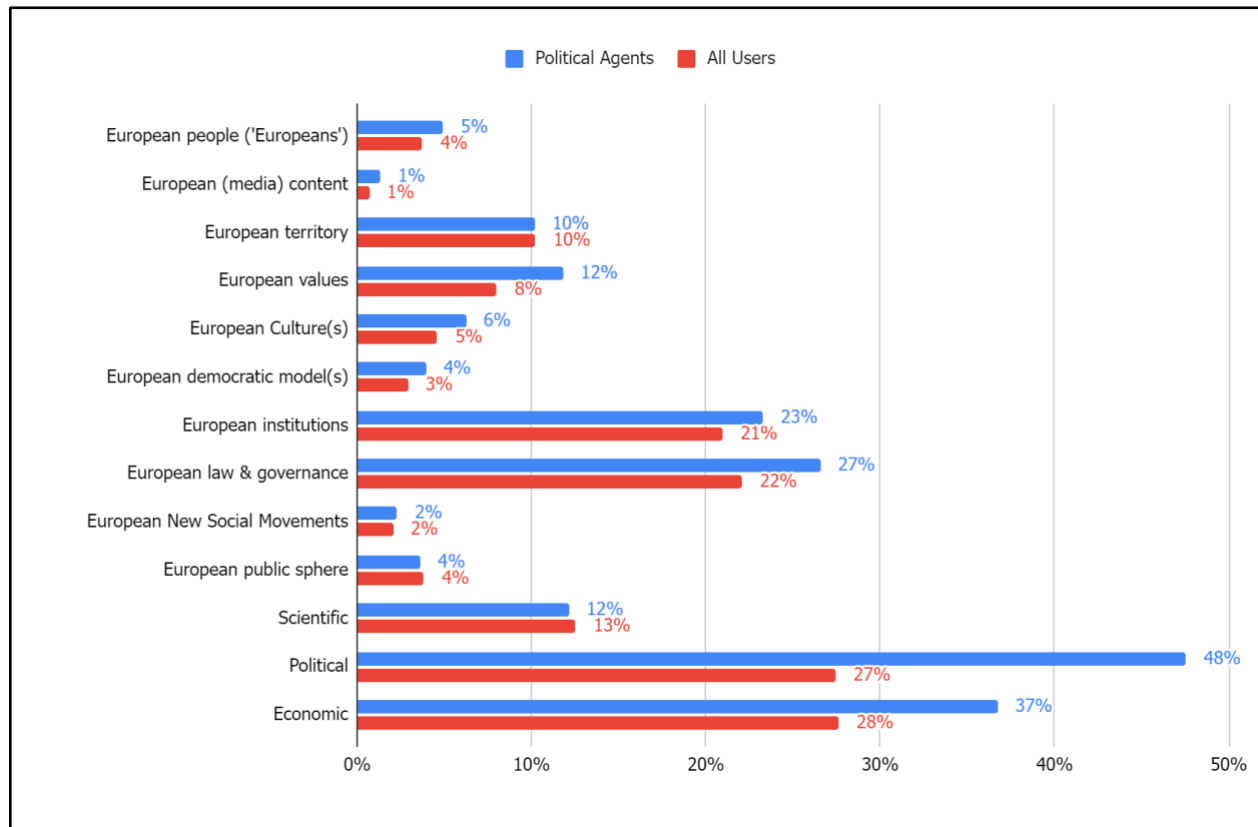
Source: Data compiled by the authors

To try to reach an even deeper understanding of the way political agents in these four countries address issues about Europe and Europeanization, we looked at the way each EU group with different each political positions addressed those issues. As we can see in Figure 11, the seven main issues addressed by political agents in our sample are differently addressed according to their political position. For example, Eurosceptic Conservatives address subjects related to the Economy much more than any other EU groups, whereas Far-Right Nationalists, on the contrary, address it less. Also, as regards Law and Governance, political agents that are Independents and Far-Right Nationalists are more active than political agents in the other EU groups. Within the Political and European Institutions categories of European issues, the differences between political EU groups are less significant.

Figure 11 - Main dimensions of Europe addressed in political agents' publications on all 3 platforms, per main political positions (multiple answer)
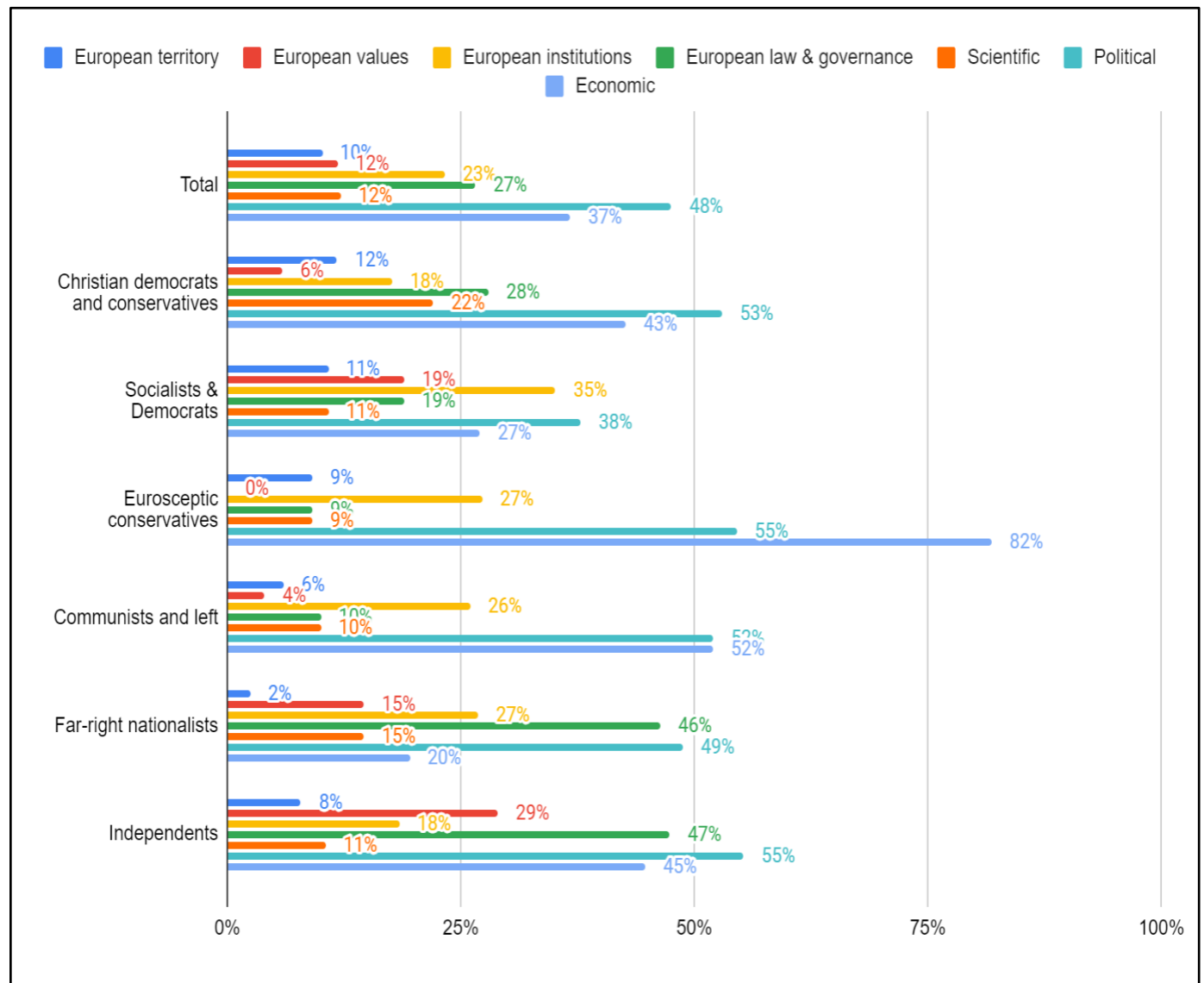
Source: Data compiled by the authors

These results also tend to support the idea that publications that translate European topics into national political agendas are, among political agents, the most successful (in terms of reach). For instance, the discussion of Law and Governance topics has a clear national relevance for Far-right nationalist actors who may use immigration laws, or issues from other countries at European level to reinforce their national positions on the topic.

Conclusion

The goal of this research was to analyze who were the political agents in the four countries publishing about Europe on social media platforms, where they published (i.e. in which platforms), and how they did so (i.e. if, by so doing, they contributed to Europeanization and/or the formation of a European Public Sphere). Several ideas can be drawn from this analysis.

First of all, the publications by political agents in our sample indicate a continuation of the usual political struggle on traditional media, but now enacted on a novel terrain: the online terrain of social media platforms. Political agents' publications have a significant prevalence within the publications with most reach on European issues in social media, especially publications by politicians on Twitter and Facebook in Italy and Greece. The prevalence of political actors in the posts with more reach feeds into the idea of political personalization on social media platforms.

Different political agents have diverse levels of reach and relevance on different platforms in publications about European issues. In general, political agents – especially politicians – are better at taking advantage of the affordances of the platforms to reach their audiences than non-political agents. However, in Portugal, unlike the other countries, it is on Twitter that there are more political agents with the most relevant publications about European issues and not, as in other countries in our study, on Facebook.

Furthermore, different political groups have different platforms in which they are more prevalent in the most relevant publications. However, in general, political agents who are most popular in their discussion of European topics online dominate all the dimensions analyzed. The exceptions are Climate-related topics in which specific (and maybe more specialised) political agents gain more attention. Overall, we can say that the success of the posts by each political agent seems to be less a function of the platform itself or the subjects of the publication, but more of the "expertise" of those political agents in appropriating the affordances and potentialities of the platform. For instance, populist politicians tend to better explore the most popular platforms, Facebook and Twitter, in a sort of symbiotic relation that should be highlighted.

Regarding the different European dimensions analyzed, that of the Economy related to Europe – other than the dimension of Europe as a whole –, was the main topic addressed by the political agents in most countries, thus reinforcing the idea of Structural Europeanization and the synchronization of news reporting, consumption and framing within the European space. This conclusion is also in line with studies that suggest the reinforcement of the European Public Sphere in the face of events of significant importance, such as that which appears in our analysis under the form of securing the green light for the Economic recovery and relief funds by the EU.

Finally, this study suggests that, although there are publications about Europe by political agents that have significant reach, those do not seem to be building upon a Normative Europeanization, as their contribution is mostly used as a leverage to use European topics for internal and national political struggles. This conclusion is aligned with previous studies like that of Schünemann and colleagues (2022) which found that, although there was an increasing transnational discussion during the Covid-19 pandemic, the national discussion counter-balanced this effect, as well as that of Sicakkan and Heiberger (2022) which refers to increasing presence of national public spheres due to political extremism and populism. We can conclude that although political agents' focus when posting about Europe is not that of contributing to European Identity (Normative Europeanization), they do strengthen Structural Europeanization and the European Public Sphere in their online communication practices.

Limitations

We have to bear in mind that the data in this study was collected using a particular methodology, which influences the analysis performed. First, the data collected is solely that whose collection is authorized by social media platforms and through the use of tools allowed by these platforms. This means that researchers did not have direct access to the data and thus needed to rely on available tools to extract that data. Furthermore, we also relied on those tools to identify the "most relevant" posts, using the metrics available for each social media platform. Second, the social media pieces of content here analyzed are but a small part of all the content circulating on social media platforms, not only due to our choice of analyzing only the most relevant posts in each platform, but also because only data relevant to Europe, Climate, Health and the Economy was collected. Finally, as we used data from a project dataset, we were constrained by the limitations of that data, for instance, the use of only two months of data from the Spanish publications, instead of three months as performed in the other countries.

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Annex

Table 1: Codebook for content themes and sub-themes

Theme (Description)	Sub-Theme
1. Agent (mutually exclusive) The agent who posted the content.	1.1 Political agent
	1.2 News media
	1.3 Any other organization
	1.4 Non-organization
2. Kind of political agent (mutually exclusive)	2.1 Political party

Theme (Description)	Sub-Theme
The type of political agent that posted the content	2.2 Politician
	2.3 EU groups in the EU Parliament
3. Political position (mutually exclusive) Position of the political agent that posted the content according to European Parliament's classification	3.1 Christian Democrats and Conservatives
	3.2 Socialists and Democrats
	3.3 Liberals and Centrists
	3.4 Eurosceptic Conservatives
	3.5 Greens and Regionalists
	3.6 Communists and the Left
	3.7 Far-right Nationalists
	3.8 Independents, NI
4. Subject (cumulative) The person or thing being discussed or addressed in the social media publication.	4.1 Political agent
	4.2 News media
	4.3 Any other organization
	4.5 Non-organizational agents
	4.6 Other subjects
5. Scope of the subject (cumulative) The scope is related with the spatial dimension of the posts (i.e if they refer to global, European, national, regional or local issues)	5.1 Global
	5.2 European
	5.3 National
	5.4 Regional
	5.5 Local

Theme (Description)	Sub-Theme
6. Europeanization (cumulative) Variables based on the semantic map drawn up by Carpentier et al. (2023)	6.1 European people ('Europeans')
	6.2 European (media) content
	6.3 European territory
	6.4 European values (linked to European civilization and European modernity)
	6.5 European culture(s)
	6.6 European democratic model(s)
	6.7 European institutions
	6.8 European law and governance
	6.9 European New Social Movements
	6.10 European Public Sphere
	6.11 Scientific
	6.12 Political
	6.13 Economic

Source: Adapted from EUMEPLAT

Table 2: Cohen's Kappa results.

	Agent	Kind of Political Agent	Political Position	Subject	Scope	Europeanization	Average per country
Greece	0,9313	0,9630	0,9630	0,6414	0,8632	0,6707	0,8388
Italy	0,9291	0,8752	0,8752	0,8418	0,9357	0,8269	0,8807
Portugal	0,9619	1,0000	1,0000	0,6444	0,7211	0,6459	0,8289
Spain	0,9896	0,9727	0,9727	0,9832	0,9934	1,0000	0,9853
Average per theme	0,9408	0,9461	0,9461	0,7092	0,84	0,7145	0,8494

Source: Data compiled by the authors