

Over the past few weeks a rift has emerged and deepened between the Italian government, led by Matteo Renzi, and European institutions, most notably the Commission. Disagreements between the two sides span many areas, including immigration, energy policy and banking. The latest chapter in the saga is being played out in the budgetary field, in which Italy claims the right to more flexibility (and a higher deficit) than the Commission is willing to concede.

The clash between Italy and the Commission is as communicative as it is political. From the start, the ways in which both sides have addressed one another have been as important as the substance of their respective grievances. In an unusually sharp exchange, for instance, Renzi recently reminded the Commission that the times in which Italy would be “[remote-controlled](#)” from Brussels are over. As a reply, the Commission let it be known that it actually struggles to find any institutional [interlocutor](#) in Rome.

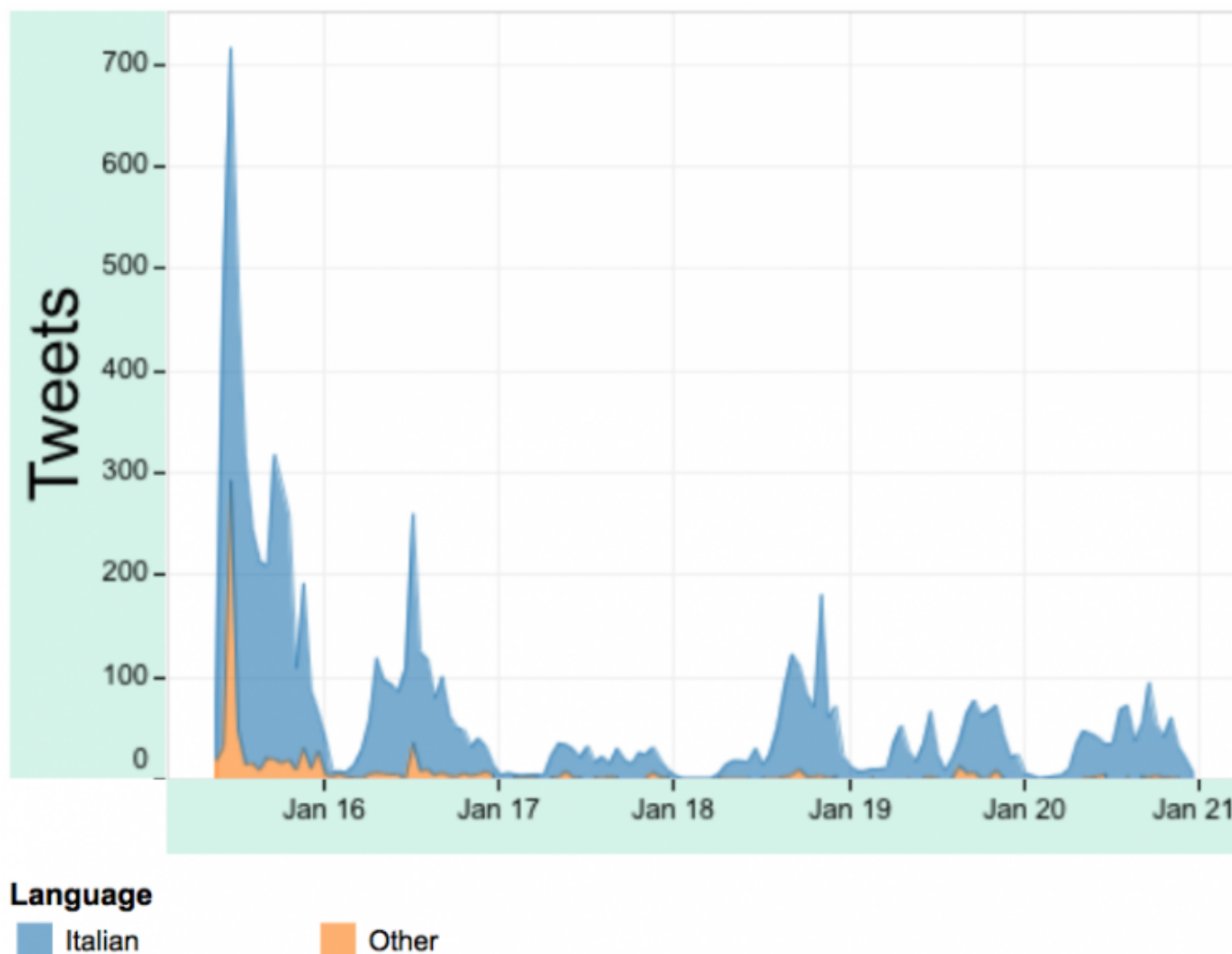
The lack of a foreign reaction to the Renzi-Juncker clash is consistent with the view, held by many (in the first place in Brussels), that Renzi’s motives and objectives in the quarrel are largely domestic in nature

As any communicative battle, much of the row between Italy and the Commission is taking place in and through the media, including social ones. Here we want to analyse the effects and resonance of this clash in the Twitter sphere. In particular, we focus on the recent war of words between Renzi and Jean-Claude Juncker, triggered by the latter’s critical remarks towards Italy during the Commission’s [new year’s press conference](#). The Renzi-Juncker quarrel is the latest, and certainly one of the most visible episodes in what some have called a [new fault line](#) in European politics.

An all-Italian affair

Given the highly personalized nature of the incident, our research strategy was to collect all tweets mentioning both Renzi and Juncker, on January 15 (the day of Juncker’s press conference) and for the following five days. Over the monitored period, a total of 8,724 such

tweets were written across languages. The figure below shows their temporal flow.



As the chart shows, after a very brief moment, on January 15, in which the numbers of tweets in Italian and other languages were close, the Renzi-Juncker Twitter conversation became an almost exclusively Italian affair. Overall, of the tweets collected, 7,839 (89.9 per cent of the total) are in Italian, 574 (6.6 per cent) in English, 90 (1 per cent) in Spanish, 57 (0.7 per cent) in French and 9 (0.1 per cent) in German. That German users ignored the Renzi-Juncker exchanges is particularly remarkable given that in this sort of debates their country is often accused of the Commission's favourite—if not its puppet master.

The lack of a foreign reaction to the Renzi-Juncker clash is consistent with the view, held by many (in the first place in Brussels), that Renzi's motives and objectives in the quarrel are

largely domestic in nature. Weakened by Italy's still underwhelming economic performance and some scandals involving his government, the argument goes, Renzi is for one thing trying to divert attention towards a "foreign enemy" and rally support around himself in time for next spring's local elections. For another, he is preparing for a possible infringement procedure against Italy by pre-emptively shifting the blame on the Commission.

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That the quarrel was followed only in Italy is, in a sense, an advantage for Renzi as it insulated the debate from those audiences, first of all the German one, that might not be too sympathetic to Italy's complaints. Granted, it also insulated it from (potentially) more benevolent audiences, such as the Spanish or the French one.

A gamble that backfired?

Generating a domestic debate might be a good strategy if one's objective is simply to distract voters from other topics. It can, however, backfire if the debate ends up being dominated by negative sentiments. Following a method outlined in a previous article, we have tried to answer this question by separating, in the subset of Italian tweets, those expressing criticism of Renzi from the neutral or positive ones. Overall, 4,759 (60.7 per cent) tweets belong to the former camp, while 3,080 (39.3 per cent) are in the latter. For a politician well versed in the use of Twitter like Renzi, this was not a very good performance.

Renzi vs Juncker: A social media analysis
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