Next year’s European Parliamentary elections will be the moment of truth in the fight between those in favour of austerity, globalisation and mass immigration and those who – in Marine Le Pen’s words – want to “give power back to the people”. Speaking at a joint press conference in Rome, on October 8, the French National Rally leader Marine Le Pen and Italian deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini unveiled their common plans for the European Union in the run-up to the European Parliament elections of May 2019. Sitting alongside Le Pen, Salvini said that the EU as we know it is built on “the negation of nations”, and called the European administration “enemies of the happiness of Europeans”. Salvini and Le Pen envisioned an upcoming era of “common sense”, in which the “real Europe will be saved” by the joint effort of all nationalist parties across the continent. The first step of the project would be a new European political group – the “Freedom Front” – driven by the French National Rally and the Italian League. “There will not be single list”, but they will work, where possible, on identifying “common candidates” for the most important roles.

It is not entirely clear whether the “Freedom Front” will ever see the light. The elections are many months away, and a lot can happen between now and then. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, for example, is likely to be backing Manfred Weber, European People’s Party lead candidate.

The Twitter debate

Nevertheless, the meeting between the two far-right leaders was widely covered by the media and also commented by political actors at the EU level and analysts interested in the developments of the electoral campaign for the EP election.

To understand whether and to what extent this event and its implications have been picked up by the general public in the EU, we analysed how the European Twitter-sphere reacted. For ten days, we collected all Twitter conversation about the meeting, starting from the 3 October (when Le Pen announced the event), for a total amount of 28,209 tweets.

For the announcement of a potential EU-wide far-right front, the size of the online discussion generated by the event does not strike as astonishing, when compared to other Twitter datasets collected by EuVisions in comparable conditions.

As Twitter allows users to interact, we can also check the extent to which users from across
Europe are connected. We were interested in how such interactions were constrained by national borders – and hence were limited to Italian and French users – or they generated cross-border flows of tweets.

We built a network visualization of the interactions between European Twitter users, considering as interactions all the mentions and retweets.

![Network Analysis](image.png)

*Figure 1: a network analysis of the users, based on mentions and retweets*

Each node in the graph represents a user, while each edge (line) represents a relationship between users. A direct link is created each time a user mentions or retweets another user. The more frequent the interaction, the stronger the link; the bigger the node and the label, the more the more influential the user is in the debate. The different colours of the edges refer to the EU countries from which the reaction originated.

The purple and the light-blue edges show the interactions coming from France and Italy, which respectively represent the 24% and 16% of the mentions and retweets sent from Europe. The remaining 60% came from other EU countries: the green coloured edges.
represent reactions coming from Spain (22%), while the yellow, orange and red edges show retweets and mentions from respectively the UK (14%), Belgium (8%) and Germany (7%).

Looking at the actors involved in these interactions, Salvini (matteosalvinimi) and Le Pen (mlp_officiel) obtained the most part of their mentions and retweets from French and Italian users, but they both fell short of being the most influential actors of the dataset. The account of the conservative news outlet Voice of Europe (v_of_europe) is the most mentioned user, receiving interactions especially from UK and Germany. It is followed by Cristian Escribano (escribano_r), a Catalan local politician, who commented the event comparing Salvini and Le Pen’s political projects to the ‘totalitarian and racist’ stances of Catalan President Quim Torra. Critics to the two far-right leaders came also from the French Interior Minister Christophe Castaner (ccastaner), emerged as the most influential node in France-based conversations, and from the former Greek Minister of Finance Yanis Varoufakis (yanisvaroufakis), who accused Salvini and Le Pen of favouring the “establishment’s failed policies”.

The analysis so far highlighted the presence of cross-border interactions, and showed that to some extent there has been a pan-European interest in the meeting between Salvini and Le Pen that passed over Italian and French national boundaries.

**How did Europe react?**

At this point, we wanted to look deeper into the online reactions generated outside Italy and France, and we did so by analysing the content of the tweets that were sent in English.

As a first step, we programmed a Natural Language Processing algorithm to separate attitudinal tweets from not-attitudinal tweets: the first category includes messages expressing an opinion towards the meeting, while the second one includes tweets that did not reveal any stances but mostly reported news or neutral messages. The result was almost a half-and-half distribution.

We used a second algorithm to identify, among the attitudinal tweets, the positive and the negative ones: in the former, there are messages expressing appreciation for the meeting and for the launch of the Freedom Front, while the latter category contains tweets criticizing the event and the two leaders’ views. The result was a vast majority of positive tweets (68%) against a minority of negative messages (32%).
Figure 2: Attitude Tweets and Sentiment towards the event

As the graph above shows, a clear majority of tweets commenting on the event (in English) featured a positive reaction to the message of the two far-right leaders.

If the analysis of the network structure of the debate seems to indicate awareness and attention throughout EU countries to events that might shape the election to come, the nature of the messages can as well shed some light on possible patterns in the election campaign.

We dug deeper into the content of the tweets in order to detail the reasons and the content of the support for the ‘nationalist front’. We identified, by means of topic modelling, the most distinctive words used in the subset of positive reactions to the meeting (when compared to ‘negative’ tweets). We plotted these distinctive words in Figure 3, to show in a nutshell what could be the core priorities and issues of nationalist forces in the run-up to the EP election.
The first thing to notice is that *europe* is used more frequently than *eu*. In line with the idea promoted by Salvini and Le Pen, *there is a Europe that must be saved* from the EU establishment and from *illegal refugees*. Moreover, it emerges from these messages that *fighting against the invaders* does not make Salvini and Le Pen *racists* or *fascists*, because they are fighting to protect the European citizens and to “make Europe great again”.

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