# Building Political Identity
# through Visual Affective Polarisation
# on Instagram

## A Comparison
## of Six European Far-Right Parties

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Rocío Zamora-Medina,*⬤ Remzie Shahini-Hoxhaj,**⬤ Dren Gërguri***⬤

\*   University of Murcia, Spain
     E-mail: rzamoramedina[at]um.es
\*\*  University of Prishtina "Hasan Prishtina", Kosovo
     E-mail: remzie.shahinihoxhaj[at]uni-pr.edu
\*\*\* University of Prishtina "Hasan Prishtina", Kosovo
     E-mail: dren.gerguri[at]uni-pr.edu

This article compares the power of visual affective polarisation on Instagram among six European far-right political parties with the aim of enhancing academic knowledge about the manner in which these parties construct their political identity through visual symbols, rhetoric, and imagery to appeal to their target audiences and convey their ideologies. Through quantitative content analysis of Instagram visuals posted on Instagram by the six main European far-right parties during a two-month period, we focused on content-related and format-related variables, as well as technical features, to analyse those visuals as denotative, connotative and ideological systems from the visual framing model perspective. Findings revealed significant differences in the visual framing strategies among these European far-right political parties, pointing to the complexity in identifying

a common pattern in their strategic visual communication regarding affective polarisation. This study contributes to the existing literature on visual communication and affective polarisation strategies in politics.

**Keywords:** visual framing, affective polarisation, far-right parties, Instagram, political identity

# Introduction

Researchers argue that political polarisation is increasing globally, particularly in the United States and those European countries where populist and far-right parties are more prevalent on the political stage. These scholars claim that polarisation stems from the merging of partisan, racial, religious, geographic, ideological, and cultural identities over the past fifty years, causing significant political breakdown and the tearing apart of national bonds (Klein, 2020; Wilson et al., 2020; Wazzan & Aldamen, 2023). The increasing polarisation of politics online presents a significant challenge for democracies globally. The rise of recent research on political polarisation is attributed to the fragmentation of news media and the spread of misinformation on social media (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021). Researchers distinguish between issue polarisation, or attitudes toward specific political issues and *affective polarisation,* and people's negative feelings and attitudes toward their own party (Iyengar et al., 2019, 2012). In that sense, affective political polarisation is about the deep emotional and psychological divisions between political groups characterised by strong feelings of personal loyalty to a party and animosity towards the opposing party. This emotional divide is a central aspect of what scholars describe as *partisan hostility* (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Knudsen, 2021).

The story of polarisation is older than social media, which arrived into an already polarised world. The change of design in social media and the addition of the like and share buttons created a supernormal stimulus, adding fuel to the fire of social media (Adamek, 2011, p. 21). Social media platforms, however, are fuelling polarisation and profiting from online anger. Inflammatory language is used to attack political opponents grabbing audience attention and giving everyone the ability to attack, criticise and share. In the context of a social media environment characterised by multiple platforms, some studies have shown how different social media platforms may shape distinct polarisation dynamics over time (Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2020), indicating that political polarisation on social media cannot be conceptualised as a unified phenomenon since there are significant cross-platform differences (Yarchi et al., 2021). While scholars have addressed this issue to some extent, there is a need to conduct further research on affective political polarisation in digital contexts, measuring the emotions and attitudes expressed, not only in the political discourse but more specifically in the visuals used to attract and mobilise supporters that present a bold and alternative image compared to established political parties.

In the context of a more pictorial political environment, political actors have become aware of visual political communication (Veneti et al. 2019; Lilleker & Veneti, 2023) and have increasingly exploited visual-centric social media platforms, such as Instagram

(Lalancette & Raynauld, 2017; Mendonça & Caetano, 2021; Muñoz & Towner, 2017) or even *image-based* ones (Dimitrova & Matthes, 2018) focusing on images and video clips.

Consequently, there has been growing scholarly attention on exploring Instagram as a visual communication tool in politics. Compared to other social media, Instagram is a visual platform that enhances visual messages over text-based messages (Filimonov et al., 2016). Even when text is added, visuals still dominate the posts; in this way, Instagram has created a solidly *visual-oriented culture* (Kanaouti, 2018). Besides this, Instagram has been valuable in trust and reputation strategies for politicians, as the platform allows them to control the image of their candidate by uploading polished content at scheduled times (Bosetta, 2018). Compared to other social media, Instagram's unique features and the ways users interact on the platform significantly contribute to affective polarisation. First, they show users content that aligns with their interests and beliefs through algorithmic curation, thus providing them with selective exposure that can intensify in-group favouritism and out-group hostility (Lee & Wei, 2022). Second, Hawdon et al. (2020) argue that the emotionally charged visual content of this platform, as well as its interactive features that allow people to comment, like, and share posts for rapid dissemination of political content, may contribute to heightening feelings of support for an individual's own group and animosity towards groups perceived as opposition. The negative consequence of this is that such networks become battlegrounds for polarised political debate that simply reinforces hostile attitudes between opposing groups.

The main intention of this article is to explore the relationship between the strategic use of visual social platforms, Instagram in particular, from a comparative perspective to better understand how far-right political actors construct polarised political images. A comparative quantitative content analysis of 260 Instagram visuals posted by the six main European far-right political parties on Instagram over two months (from 12 January to 12 March 2023) is presented. In this way the research compares the strength of the visual affective polarisation on Instagram among European far-right parties. The initial assumption of this analysis is that strategic visual communication among far-right political parties in Europe differs, and that each party responds to its characteristics of the state in which it operates. Despite Instagram's wide usage, there is a significant absence in similar studies in the context of far-right parties in Europe, a gap in the literature that this paper will attempt to fill to provide researchers with valuable insights regarding Instagram. The research contributes to the field of visual political communication in several ways, offering theoretical insights into how visual social media are used by main European far-right political parties as a part of their strategic communication in building their political image.

Methodologically, this study presents the *visual framing* model from Rodriguez and Dimitrova (2011) with its definitions of denotative, connotative, stylistic–semiotic and ideological levels, and the addition of specific key variables to measure the degree of affective political polarisation on visuals, which may be useful for future studies. Overall, by analysing the visual symbols, rhetoric, and imagery used by these parties to convey their ideologies and appeal to their target audiences, this work expands the existing literature on visual communication in politics and enhances our understanding of social media and polarisation strategies. Framing theory suggests that people's decisions about how to absorb information are influenced by the way it is presented to them. Frames are theoretical

concepts and perspectives within framing theory that organise experiences and guide individuals or arrange the meaning of messages (Goffman, 1974), which may cause the distortion of the truth by showing only one side of a given story. Compared to Goffman's analysis, which primarily focuses on framing of public life and textual messages, Messaris and Abraham (2001) look at framing from a visual perspective, arguing that viewers might be less aware of the framing process when it occurs visually than in written and oral text. That is why framing, because it creates a gap between the truth and public awareness, can be viewed as a new form of media ultimately offering a distinct perspective separate from them.

In the context of public speaking, visual framing is another aspect that encompasses the way in which what an audience sees is framed, as well as how the surrounding visual environment is adapted to the posture and gestures of the speaker (Lucas & Stob, 2023, p. 356). Authors like Rodriguez and Dimitrova (2011) have defined the concept of visual framing through a four-tiered model, characterising visuals as 1. *denotative systems;* 2. *stylistic–semiotic systems;* 3. *connotative systems;* and 4. *ideological representations.* In the first level, the authors describe visual elements as essential features related to the main meaning. This level corresponds with the initial level of interpretation when examining visual messages in which images are analysed for their literal, fundamental substance (i.e. for what they truly portray). Put in different terms, this encompasses the recognition and counting of distinct visual aspects like people, locations, and items. Without exploring the implications or interpretations of these aspects, the analysis concentrates on the observable components. The stylistic and semiotic elements of images are analysed in the second level in which the meanings of various design components (e.g. colour, form and composition) are examined. Understanding the signs and symbols contained in the images and how they communicate in ways other than their literal portrayal is necessary for semiotic analysis. The third level is where the emphasis moves to connotative meanings or the emotional and cultural connections that images arouse. This level looks at how viewers' experiences and cultural circumstances might affect the way in which images communicate more abstract concepts, values or feelings. It investigates the ways pictures hint at meanings separate from their denotative content. The final, most advanced stage of this model studies how images symbolise worldviews or ideological stances, and how they are used to support or contradict social standards, political beliefs and power systems. The methods by which images shape attitudes and perceptions of social and political issues are primarily studied at this level.

The fact that there is much disagreement about how visual frames are intended to be detected in the first place is one of the primary reasons why there is comparatively little research using visual framing compared to textual framing. In a similar fashion to text, images may serve as framing devices which encompass the integration of rhetorical methods – such as metaphors to come to the same page, illustrations created through emotions and relationships and symbols or concepts – to visually convey the core of a topic or events through abstract concepts. These levels of visual framing are linked to *credibility* (determined mainly by competence and character), which can be seen as the degree to which the audience believes a speaker is qualified to discuss a particular subject, *reasoning* as the process of making decisions based on available data and *emotional appeal* as a more engaging aspect that tends to make messages more compelling (Lucas & Stob, 2023, pp. 314–331).

# Social media
# use among far-right parties

Social media is an essential tool for political communication in the current hybrid media system. The opportunity structure of social media seems particularly adapted to the dissemination of populist messaging from far-right parties (Ernst et al., 2019; Krzyżanowski, 2018; Gerbaudo, 2018; Shahini-Hoxhaj, 2018).

This paper focuses on political parties that promote extreme or radical right-wing views, often termed as *far-right* or *radical-right* parties. The extreme-right parties entered the fourth stage of growth during the last decade (Mudde, 2007; Mudde, 2019), which included mainstreaming and normalisation in domestic political systems. As a result, far-right parties have governed or have been part of governments in several European countries, including Hungary, Austria, Spain, Italy and elsewhere. Some of them are still governing.

These parties usually support authoritarian, nationalistic, anti-immigrant and socially conservative agendas (Tillman, 2021). Targeted messaging is a crucial tactic used by far-right parties on social media. These parties tend to target demographics with their material and messages by using data analytics and micro-targeting strategies, which makes it more likely that their messages will be seen by those who will be sympathetic to their cause. Their accuracy enables them to establish echo chambers, reinforcing pre-existing beliefs and polarising public discourse. Various studies have concluded that social media algorithms will often give higher visibility to the topics and messages of far-right parties, such as immigration, for example during the 2016 U.S. Presidential election cycle (Faris et al., 2017); and in Germany, when the radical right party, *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) [Alternative for Germany] achieved higher interactivity than any other party between September 2015 and April 2016 (Dittrich, 2017). Their messages were also shown to the users that did not actively seek that kind of information and, according to earlier studies, exposure to such messages might strengthen sentiments that are populist or exclusionary, as well as support for populist far-right parties (Hameleers et al., 2018; Müller et al., 2017).

Political parties that have been in opposition have generally adjusted to social media more quickly (Gërguri, 2019). This was the case for some of the far-right parties in Europe. These parties have even backed violent action to accomplish their aims (Norris, 2005). In most cases around Europe, the populism of those parties is constructed on the idea of the existence of two distinct forces: *the people* and *the elites* (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Besides the governing position and ideological line, studies have highlighted another factor: the *structure* of social media networks, which makes platforms available for populist parties to communicate their ideas (Engesser et al., 2017a). Moreover, social media has made it possible for populist parties to disseminate unfiltered messages. The Instagram networks of the six parties included in this study are quite different. VOX has more followers (643,000) than the five other parties combined (see Table 1 for the number of followers for each party). This Spanish party has achieved this by becoming active on social media less than one month after its creation in December 2013.

## Visual framing on Instagram
## among far–right political parties

When comparing candidates, political parties seem to campaign differently on Instagram. As some studies have shown, candidates have preferred *pure* image posts in connection with the platform's *image first* logic (Ekman & Widholm, 2017, p. 18), while political parties have tended to use text-integrated images, thus trying to convey hard-to-visualise campaigns or complex political messages to voters (Muñoz & Towner, 2017; Haßler et al., 2023).

Among all the different functions of social media content that can be considered in political contexts (Russmann et al., 2019), Instagram use among political parties has evolved from broadcasting information to the stakeholders of parties to establishing itself as a tool for mobilising intention (Gamir-Ríos et al., 2022). Furthermore, the increasing use of Instagram for mobilisation has been connected to the use of negative emotional appeals detected in previous studies (Quevedo-Redondo & Portalés-Oliva, 2017; López-Rabadán & Doménech-Fabregat, 2021) indicating that the Instagram platform is not completely unrelated to populist style and polarisation, whose messages are characterised by simplification, emotionality and negativity (Engesser et al., 2017b). An exceptional discursive strategy employed by far-right parties in their Instagram communication involves the use of contrast and association (Bernardez-Rodal et al., 2022). Euphoric terms, signifying strong positivity and widespread social acceptance, are linked with the party's political positions. Conversely, dysphoric terms, carrying negative charges and inciting hatred, are associated with common arguments such as classic gender nationalism, anti-Muslim gender nationalism, de-legitimisation and ridicule of feminism, among others.

Given the electoral success of right-wing populist parties in Europe, understanding their communication strategies is crucial for political communication research. Visuals play a significant role in shaping the political image of parties, potentially contributing to the success of right-wing populism. Despite this, there is a dearth of cross-national studies on populist communication. Examining the Instagram profiles of European leaders from right-wing populist parties, Bast (2021b) conducted one of the few comparative studies on political communication incorporating image management theory, right-wing populism and visual communication. The study revealed the importance for these political leaders of projecting a professional image and demonstrating proximity to citizens. Interestingly, only a few categories relevant to right-wing populist communication were identified.

One of the key research questions that has been analysed on the use of Instagram among political actors is the extent to which personalised content succeeds in gaining traction among online followers. Results indicate that party leaders emerge as more successful than parties in gaining attention through likes and comments, and that they offer personalised content to a greater degree than the parties they represent (Larsson, 2019). Similarly, although the review of the use of Instagram among political parties (Bast, 2021a) showed that the personalisation hypothesis based on individualisation (Adam & Maier, 2010) is confirmed by their top candidate being emphasised as statesmanlike, or their professional image dominating in terms of privatisation, a recurring strategy seems to be the combination of political information with private aspects (Rodina & Dligach,

2019). It is relevant to underline here that members of center-right or far-right parties posted more non-political content than others, including images of their families (Ekman & Widholm, 2017; O'Connell, 2018). In other studies, variations were found in the emphasised messages among leaders from right-wing populist parties, with two distinct types of politicians: those who present a statesmanlike demeanour through gestures like handshakes, commemorations and speeches, and those who share both personal and more radical content, such as anti-Islamic images (Bast, 2021b).

Given the aforementioned, we try to fill those research gaps and systematically comparatively analyse the way in which the main European far-right political parties use Instagram to visually frame their particular identity. The study adopts the visual framing model proposed by Rodriguez and Dimitrova (2011) by considering visuals as a powerful framing tool because they mirror reality and evoke strong emotional reactions. As mentioned above, these scholars propose a four-level visual framing analysis: 1. visuals as denotative systems, where frames are analysed by identifying the objects and elements present in the image; 2. visuals as stylistic systems, where attention is given to the artistic and technical aspects of representation; 3. visuals as connotative systems, where frames are identified by examining the presence of symbols within the visual context; and 4. the ideological level of analysis, where there is an attempt to offer an explanation of the underlying reasons behind the analysed representations.

In our study, we provide measures of these levels to compare the power of the visual affective polarisation on Instagram for European far-right parties. However, the connotative and the ideological levels seem to be more relevant in explaining the extent to which there is some coincidence in how far-right political parties in Europe build their own visual political communication strategy.

> **RQ1:** To what extent is there a common affective polarisation strategy in relation to how European far-right parties frame their visuals on Instagram, based on Rodriguez and Dimitrova's (2011) model?
>
> **H1:** Based on previous literature on image management and visual communication among far-right European parties from a comparative perspective (Bast, 2021b), our study assumes that there is no common pattern in their strategic visual communication. On the contrary, the strategic visual communication among far-right political parties in Europe will be different according to the situation for each party in the state in which it operates. Thus, significant differences will be found in their visual framing strategies depending on whether the party in question is in government or opposition.

## Affective political polarisation from a visual perspective

Affective polarisation refers to emotions, such as fear and revulsion, which have increasingly undermined the principles of political communication. It is a process that creates outputs that have driven the two opposing camps of conservatives and liberals further

apart from each other and is fuelling a vicious circle. Political communication scholars generally tend to agree that affective political polarisation is partisan hostility. Druckman and Levendusky (2019, pp. 114–115) define it as the tendency "to dislike, distrust, and avoid interaction with *'those from another [political] party'"*. Other scholars have noted that affective political polarisation is tied more closely to social identity than ideological stances and that it serves to divide citizens into distinct *in-groups* and *out-groups* (see e.g. Knudsen, 2021). Perhaps more alarmingly, scholars have also argued that affective political polarisation works to undermine support for democratic norms and found that affective political polarisation politicises democratic norms, pushing partisans to support restricting the rights of those perceived as part of the out-group when their own chosen party is in power (Kingzette et al., 2021).

While scholars may agree on a general definition of affective political polarisation, few have specifically attempted to understand the relationship between the global rise in affective political polarisation and the use of social media. One study across the media in Poland found three general categories for the populist strategies of right-wing parties. These categories included *the people, the elite* and *others.* According to the Rodriguez and Dimitrova (2011) model, *the people* can be defined by content related aspects such as voters, nation and citizenship. *The elite* can be presented through the stylistic visual frame, which includes individual politicians serving as symbols. The others can be depicted through connotative visual framing as out-groups devoid of good character or ability to make good decisions, and as being worthy of hatred (Stępińska et al., 2020, pp. 120–125).

Yarchi et al. (2021) conducted one of the most ambitious recent studies to investigate political polarisation across three online platforms: Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp. In analysing previous research on political polarisation, they identified three aspects that contribute to increased or decreased polarisation in online interactions: 1. *homophilic* vs. *heterophilic* interactions (how similar were those interacting with regard to age, race/ ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status, etc.); 2. positional polarisation (i.e. intensity of views expressed); and 3. affective polarisation (i.e. intensity of emotions and attitudes expressed). The researchers conclude that political polarisation on social media is not a *unified phenomenon* in that their findings differed across the various platforms.

While the study of Yarchi et al. (2021) offers some indication of the state of research on affective political polarisation and social media, it is based on one case study in one country: Israel. As Knudsen (2021) notes, this is a fairly standard practice in the field. In fact, most of the research has been U.S.-based. Knudsen additionally points out, affective political polarisation within a two-party system is "more straightforward" – a definite us vs. them. Whereas in multiparty systems, the *them* may refer to several others with varying degrees of intensity.

Moreover, few researchers have explored the relationship between visual images and escalation or de-escalation of affective political polarisation.

Far-right parties commonly use specific visual elements to evoke strong emotions, foster a sense of identity and create a visual distinction from other political groups. These elements include colour schemes such as black, red and white, as well as nationalist and historical symbols associated with ideologies like nationalism, ethno-nationalism and anti-immigration sentiments. Flags, national emblems and other symbols are often utilised to

convey these messages (Svraka, 2023). The use of these visual cues is intended to appeal to the emotions of the target audience and create a sense of belonging and unity among their supporters (Rivas-de-Roca et al., 2022). These strategies are part of the communication practices of far-right populist parties in Europe, which frequently rely on simple and non-mediated messages on social media to promote distrust in public institutions (Bonikowski et al., 2022).

Given this review of previous research is related to online political communication in general and affective political polarisation specifically, we argue that there is a need for further studies that address differences in political communication, particularly regarding escalating or de-escalating affective political polarisation. Further, investigation of visual images may prove fruitful in furthering our understanding of affective political polarisation. This study is a step toward that understanding. As such, we offer the following further research questions:

**RQ2a:** What specific features of the visuals that define affective polarisation are more relevant to far-right European parties?

**RQ2b:** Are there significant differences in the features of affective polarisation between political parties?

**H2:** Based on previous literature on the affective political polarisation from a visual perspective, we assume that, by comparing visuals on Instagram from European far-right parties in different countries, there would be a common pattern in containing some of the more relevant visual features that scholars empirically used to measure affective polarisation (Bonikowski et al., 2022; Svraka, 2023; Yarchi et al., 2021).

## Method

### *Data collection and sampling*

To gather information for this study, we selected the Instagram official accounts of far-right political parties in six different European countries:@rassemblementnational_fr *(Rassemblement National France);*@afd.bund *(Alternative für Deutschland);*@fideszhu *(Fidesz – Magyar Polgári Szövetség* [*Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Alliance*]);@fratelliditalia *(Fratelli d'Italia);*@pisorgpl *(Prawo i Sprawiedliwość);*@vox_es (*VOX* in Spain). These political parties were well known far-right parties in Europe and active on Instagram. In Germany, Spain and France, they are in the opposition but have significant parliamentary representation, whereas in Hungary, Italy and Poland they are either fully or partially part of the government. We decided to focus on these certain political parties, because it enables us to examine these parties' Instagram message, strategy and engagement approaches in greater detail. Researchers can examine the ways in which political parties that have substantial parliamentary representation or government engagement use social media to spread their ideology, rally followers and convey their policy goals. Furthermore, examining parties from different European countries sheds light on possible differences in social media usage in various political and cultural circumstances. The decision to focus

*Table 1:*
*Sample distribution of Instagram posts*
*by European far-right political parties (N = 260 post)*

| Country | Political party | Instagram Profile | Instagram Followers | Number of Images N = 260 |
|---------|-----------------|-------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|
| France | Rassemblement National (RN) | @rassemblementnational_fr | 48,500 | 35 |
| Germany | Alternative für Deutschland (AFD) | @afd.bund | 139,000 | 20 |
| Hungary | Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Alliance (Fidesz) | @fideszhu | 15,600 | 9 |
| Italy | Fratelli d'Italia (FdI) | @fratelliditalia | 286,000 | 164 |
| Poland | Prawo i Sprawied-liwość (PiS) | @pisorgpl | 33,100 | 17 |
| Spain | VOX | @vox_es | 643,000 | 15 |

*Source:* Compiled by the authors.

on specific parties was also influenced by factors such as their prominence, electoral success or being one of the main political actors in their country. Our sample of parties also includes some of the largest and most impactful parties on the far-right political spectrum in Europe, increasing their importance to this research.

As studies are usually focused on election campaigns, we wanted to analyse political parties beyond the intense environment of an election cycle, which allows for a deeper understanding of their policy priorities and long-term strategies. We collected all the Instagram feeds during a two-month period: from 12 January to 12 March 2023. Thereafter, we filtered out Instagram stories. Only pictures were included in the data set; videos were not included because they would have required a different coding process. Almost all the images analysed had accompanying captions that shed light on the coding process, as needed. Instagram posts that contained multiple pictures for viewers to swipe through were coded using only the first image. This process yielded 260 images, as shown in Table 1, which provides an overview of the sample, including the accounts of political parties, with the number of analysed images for all countries. In the total sample, the most active political party on Instagram was *Fratelli d'Italia* (FdI) with 310 posts, followed by *Rassemblement National* (RN), with 43 units.

## Coding process

All the 260 images were coded, with the unit of analysis being a single image. For this content analysis, with respect to quantitative and qualitative variables, a detailed set of

categories was developed based on previous literature. The coding was based on the following sets of variables:

- The first group were descriptive variables that included the *date* of the post or the Instagram profile from which the post was taken. We also added the *engagement* metric information of each post. Following previous studies (Larsson, 2021), we created an engagement level variable based on the number of likes and also of comments for each post.

- The second group of variables focused on content-related variables that gave us the chance to measure visuals as a denotative system on the Rodriguez and Dimitrova (2011) visual framing model; our aim was to identify the objects and elements present on the visual. In that sense, we included the *main actor* on the image, to see the extent to which the party leader alone or with other company was the main figure in the visuals, and the *activity* that the main candidate was engaged in. We also measured the *context* of the image, which could be an institutional, public, private or media scenario; and the *type of content* that defined the visual, to discriminate between political or non-political content.

- We also considered format-related variables related to technical features to measure the visual as stylistic systems (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011), so attention was given to the artistic and technical aspects of representation. In this sense, we used Fahmy (2004) criteria to analyse each unit based on the production techniques: a) *type of image,* b) *image with text,* c) *type of camera shot,* d) *image focus,* e) *use of movement,* f) *type of camera angle,* g) *degree of eye contact* and h) *use of colour.* We assume that by understanding these technical aspects, content creators can either exacerbate or mitigate affective polarisation among the audience. For example, text included in images, such as captions or quotes, can frame the image's meaning and influence viewer interpretation. As another key technical point, close-up shots which focus on individual faces or emotions can create a sense of intimacy or confrontation, intensifying emotional reactions and polarisation, while wide shots provide more context and can dilute the emotional impact, potentially reducing polarisation. Similarly, high-angle shots can make subjects appear vulnerable or subordinate, while low-angle shots can make them seem powerful or threatening. Images where subjects make direct eye contact with the camera can create a sense of personal connection or confrontation. Finally, the inclusion of a movement is also important, since static images provide a fixed point of view, often leading viewers to focus on the content more intensely, while the dynamic elements, such as GIFs or short videos, introduce movement that can either heighten emotional responses (through action).

- The fourth group of variables were linked to persuasion, which could give information about the framing of the visuals at the connotative level (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011). For that purpose, by considering the caption to the visuals, we identified the *predominant visual rhetorical strategy* (Zamora-Medina et al., 2023) in each image: a) *credibility,* focusing on the politician's figure as a leader and the construction of their leadership; b) *reasoning,* focusing on knowledge,

facts and objective data and c) *emotional appeal,* which refers to the emphasis placed on the emotional side of the stories.

– Finally, the last group of variables consisted of *affective polarisation indicators,* which were used to measure the affective polarisation of the images, covering the ideological level of the visual framing analysis (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011). This was done to explain the underlying reasons behind the analysed representations. Based on a thorough literature review of previous studies that tried to empirically measure affective polarisation (Bonikowski et al., 2022; Svraka, 2023; Yarchi et al., 2021), images were coded based on the presence of specific features: the *presence of a defiant attitude towards institutions* (e.g. European Union institutions, courts of justice, etc.); the *representation of military, religious, revolutionary, or patriotic symbols;* the *representation of stereotypes (e.g. use of the national flag in Spain, the cross as religious symbol in Poland);* the *inclusion or mention of violence/struggle (inflammatory signs);* the *inclusion of the party's ideological symbols* (i.e. logo, slogan, etc.); the *use of divisive visual language* (us vs. them, our people, our homeland, nativism, referencing homeland inhabitants, referencing nationality); the *predominant use of emotions (e.g. anger, fear)* the *identification of non-political enemy* (e.g. media, NGOs, etc.); the *inclusion of a call to social or political mobilisation*; and the *inclusion of negative references made to other opposition groups or political leaders,* which may include political groups from other countries as well.

Two coders independently completed the coding of the 260 Instagram images. To assess intercoder reliability, a randomly selected subsample of 10% of the entire sample was coded (N = 26 Instagram images). By using Scott's Pi (Scott, 1955) for calculating intercoder reliability, we found a satisfactory rate of agreement for all variables with a coding reliability set at Scott's Pi = 0.891.


## Results and discussion


Our data sample consists of the six European far-right political parties mentioned in the analysis. Most of the observations from the data belong to *Fratelli d'Italia* (164 observations), whilst the *Fidesz – Magyar Polgári Szövetség* has the smallest representation in the sample with only 9 observations (see Table 2). All the observations in the data sample are valid. The descriptive statistics indicate the number of likes and comments for the sample of Instagram content we have gathered for each party. Differences in the number of followers among all these parties can obviously suppose different metrics in terms of number of likes and comments, in the sense that those parties with higher number of followers were also the ones with the highest engagement: *VOX,* which is one of the least represented parties in the sample (15 observations) but which has the highest rate of followers, had the highest average number of likes per post (17,042.47), while *Alternative für Deutschland* (20 observations), which came third in the number of followers, had the highest average of comments per post (611.4). *Fratelli d'Italia,* was the second party in its

*Table 2:*
*Descriptive statistics of the images posted by political parties (N = 260)*

|  |  | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Alternative für Deutschland | No. of likes | 20 | 2,651 | 9,074 | 5,833.50 | 2,034.97 |
|  | No. of comments | 20 | 199 | 1,487 | 611.40 | 283.03 |
| VOX | No. of likes | 15 | 4,503 | 52,643 | 17,042.47 | 13,983.34 |
|  | No. of comments | 15 | 66 | 1,701 | 466.20 | 510.41 |
| Rassemblement National | No. of likes | 35 | 489 | 4,525 | 1,321.71 | 848.71 |
|  | No. of comments | 35 | 3 | 80 | 26.49 | 20.95 |
| Fidesz – Magyar Polgári Szövetség | No. of likes | 9 | 412 | 805 | 553.33 | 123.59 |
|  | No. of comments | 9 | 1 | 23 | 9.78 | 6.24 |
| Fratelli d'Italia | No. of likes | 164 | 1252 | 39,811 | 5,021.61 | 3,589.57 |
|  | No. of comments | 164 | 40 | 5,248 | 353.04 | 439.00 |
| Prawo i Sprawiedliwość | No. of likes | 17 | 216 | 665 | 405.35 | 132.31 |
|  | No. of comments | 17 | 19 | 161 | 75.47 | 41.76 |
| *Total* | No. of likes | 260 | 216 | 52,643 | 4,823.01 | 5,603.65 |
|  | No. of comments | 260 | 1 | 5,248 | 305.45 | 410.61 |

*Source:* Compiled by the authors.

number of followers, and also ranked second on its average number of likes, and third on the average number of comments. Despite these differences in the numbers of followers and the consequences this fact may have on the engagement level, we must clarify that they do not affect the research questions that form the basis of this work since the engagement variable is only mentioned for descriptive purposes.

**RQ1:** Do far-right parties from different European countries significantly differ in their visual framing strategy on Instagram using the Rodriguez and Dimitrova (2011) model?

From a denotative point of view, when visual frames are analysed by identifying the objects and elements presented, our findings suggest that European far-right parties differ in some aspects, such as in the content they post, as well as the main actor and the manner in which they appear in the content. Concretely, *Alternative für Deutschland* (30%), *Rassemblement National* (14.3%), and *VOX* (26.7%) tend to include citizens in the majority of their posts. On the other hand, *Fratelli d'Italia* (45.1%), *Fidesz – Magyar Polgári Szövetség* (66.6%), and *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (47%) preferred to include their party leader either alone or with a large or small group of people (see Table 3). To test the variability with respect to each of the questions, we used Chi-Square tests. At a 1% level of significance (Chi-Square value = 92.15), our results indicated that there are indeed significant differences between far-right political parties in Europe with regard to image appearance. In addition, our findings show that the images of their respective leaders are mostly portrayed in a political/institutional space and that parties have significant

*Table 3:*
*Distribution of main actors on the images by political parties (N = 260)*

| | Alternative für Deutschland (%) | VOX (%) | Rassemblement National (%) | Fidesz – Magyar Polgári Szövetség (%) | Fratelli d'Italia (%) | Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (%) | Total (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Candidate/leader alone | 15 | 6.7 | 2.9 | 22.2 | 32.3 | 23.5 | 24.6 |
| Candidate/leader with a small group | 10 | 0.0 | 5.7 | 44.4 | 11.0 | 23.5 | 11.5 |
| Candidate/leader with large crowds | 0 | 13.3 | 5.7 | 0.0 | 1.8 | 0.0 | 2.7 |
| Party members | 5 | 26.7 | 8.6 | 22.2 | 15.9 | 11.8 | 14.6 |
| Citizens | 30 | 26.7 | 14.3 | 0.0 | 22.0 | 5.9 | 20.0 |
| Environment | 20 | 13.3 | 14.3 | 0.0 | 6.1 | 0.0 | 8.1 |
| Other politicians | 10 | 0.0 | 5.7 | 0.0 | 4.9 | 17.6 | 5.8 |
| N/A | 10 | 13.3 | 42.9 | 11.1 | 6.1 | 17.6 | 12.7 |
| *Total* | 100 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

*Source:* Compiled by the authors.

differences in the types of image they use for their content. In the majority of their posts, *Alternative für Deutschland* (55%), *Fratelli d'Italia* (66.5%), and *VOX* (40%) have posted simple standard photographs, compared to *Fidesz – Magyar Polgári Szövetség* (55.6%) and *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (52.9%) which post carousels (that is, multiple dependent images). Most of *Rassemblement National*'s (54.3%) content belonged to another category, which included memes, brochures, flyers, etc.

When we analysed the artistic and technical aspects of representation included as the stylistic system, political parties certainly differed in how they portrayed their content. This level of visual framing encompasses elements such as text inclusion, colour palette, and the dynamic appearance of photos and videos. The statistical test results show significant differences at 1% level of significance (Chi-Square value = 65.28) in the type of camera shots used. For instance, *Alternative für Deutschland* (in 60% of their posts), *Fratelli d'Italia* (75.6%), *Fidesz – Magyar Polgári Szövetség* (88.9%), and *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (64.7%) have mainly used either close or medium camera shots (see Table 4).

*Table 4:*
*Distribution of camera shot styles by political parties (N = 260)*

|  | Alter-native für Deutschland (%) | VOX (%) | Rassem-blement National (%) | Fidesz – Magyar Polgári Szövetség (%) | Fratelli d'Italia (%) | Prawo i Sprawied-liwość (%) | Total (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Close-up (cropping subject[s] at head or shoulders) | 25 | 6.7 | 11.4 | 22.2 | 31.1 | 5.9 | 24.6 |
| Medium shot (cropping subject[s] at waist or knees) | 35 | 20.0 | 8.6 | 66.7 | 44.5 | 58.8 | 39.2 |
| Full shot (showing complete figure of subject[s]) | 10 | 40.0 | 20.0 | 0.0 | 6.1 | 17.6 | 10.8 |
| Not applicable | 30 | 33.3 | 60.0 | 11.1 | 18.3 | 17.6 | 25.4 |
| *Total* | 100 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

*Source:* Compiled by the authors.

Lastly, observed from a connotative visual framing perspective where frames are identified by examining the presence of symbols within the visual context, our findings in Table 5 underlined the fact that far-right European political parties employed different rhetorical strategies to capture their audience's attention and appeal to the masses. *Alternative für Deutschland* and *VOX,* who have similarities between them in other aspects as well, mainly used *'emotional appeal'. Fratelli d'Italia, Fidesz – Magyar Polgári Szövetség*, and *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* generally preferred to use a combination of *'credibility'* and *'emotional appeal',* while *Rassemblement National* were usually associated with posts more linked to the aspect of *'reasoning'.* The results of the statistical tests indicate that these differences are indeed significant at a 1% level (Chi-Square value = 58.34).

Based on previous literature on image management and visual communication among far-right European parties from a comparative perspective (Bast, 2021b), H1 predicted there would be no common pattern in their visual communication strategies. The findings of our analysis support this claim. They showed a complex landscape with simultaneous interaction between political messaging and visual framing. Despite their being part of a shared political spectrum, our findings lead us to conclude that far-right political parties in Europe employ distinct visual framing methods. Furthermore,

*Table 5:*
*Distribution of predominant rhetorical strategy*
*on the images by political parties (N = 260)*

|  | Alter-native für Deutschland (%) | VOX (%) | Rassem-blement National (%) | Fidesz – Magyar Polgári Szövetség (%) | Fratelli d'Italia (%) | Prawo i Sprawied-liwość (%) | Total (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Credibility | 20 | 20.0 | 11.4 | 55.6 | 41.5 | 47.1 | 35.4 |
| Reasoning | 10 | 6.7 | 57.1 | 0.0 | 28.0 | 23.5 | 28.1 |
| Emotional appeal | 70 | 73.3 | 31.4 | 44.4 | 30.5 | 23.5 | 36.2 |
| Not applicable | 0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 5.9 | 0.4 |
| *Total* | 100 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

*Source:* Compiled by the authors.

we concluded that the situation each far-right European political party finds itself in could have an impact on their strategic visual communication. In other words, significant differences in their visual framing strategies will depend on whether parties are in government or in opposition.

>   **RQ2a:** What specific features of visuals defining affective polarisation are more relevant to far-right European parties?
>   **RQ2b:** Are there significant differences in affective polarisation features among political parties?

To answer these questions, different cross tabs were conducted to measure the frequency of each affective polarisation indicator in each political party that were included in our sample. We found significant differences by using the statistic Chi-square in practically all the variables. As Table 6 shows, in the general sample, the relevancy of those indicators was quite discrete. Only the presence of the party's ideological symbols as an affective polarisation resource was more relevant, being present in 71.2% of the visuals. As example of the use of ideological symbols, we mention the case of@vox_es, showing a traditional balcony with a Spanish flag and the message: "Protect your own things. The homeland starts at the neighbours" (www.instagram.com/p/CoZJZw3tFi4/). Another example comes from a @rassemblementnational_fr picture showing a delegation of RN deputies with the French flag band around their chests, supporting angry farmers who were subject to both continual additions in standards and unfair competition from products that did not respect those same standards (www.instagram.com/p/CoZuVGkMV4P/).

There were two other resources that were detected in at least one third of the sample: the mentions of inclusive visual language, which was included in 38.5% of the units and the mention of violent struggle in the content, presented in 32.4% of the posts. One good example of the use of divisive visual language is the picture derived from@afd.bund showing the back of a scholar wearing hijab in front of a school blackboard with the text:

"Education shows brain. No veil at school!" (www.instagram.com/p/CoRfo-UtJaI/). As well, the case of @fideszhu showing a picture of the president with the text "We Hungarians will protect what is ours. Why do we fight? Why do we suffer? Why do we work?" (www.instagram.com/p/CnhHiYJp74V/). For the use of violent struggle in the content, we mention the example of @fratelliditalia that used a picture of a border patrol to add the text "In Europe the wind has changed. Now it has become fashionable to control external borders. The idea has spread in the Union that it is necessary to protect land and sea borders, including walls and patrols." (www.instagram.com/p/CohQiDMs8_2/) Also, the case of @afd.bund where some immigrants were shown inside a plane with the text: "Instead of EU lip service, secure the borders, start the deportation offensive!" (www.instagram.com/p/Coexj2aNBIC/).

When we focused on the differences between the political parties included in our sample, as Table 6 indicates, some specific results were found. In that sense, *Alternative für Deutschland* was the party with the highest score in the affective polarisation indicators, not just in relation to the use of the party's ideological symbols (100%) in their visuals, but also including mentions with inclusive visual language (85%) and to an identified non-political enemy (60%). Followed by the Spanish *VOX,* which got some relevant scores on three polarisation indicators: the use of the party's ideological symbols (66.7%), the representation of military, religious, revolutionary or patriotic symbols (60%) and the mentions of inclusive visual language (60%). The third party with higher scores in affective polarisation was *Fidesz – Magyar Polgári Szövetség,* which in more than half of their visuals included some kind of representation of military, religious, revolutionary or patriotic symbols (55.6%) or mentioned inclusive visual language (55.6%). In the case of *Rassemblement National,* the only indicator they displayed on their visuals was the use of the party's ideological symbols (94.3%). Neither the party *Fratelli d'Italia* nor *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* showed any significant presence of any affective polarisation indicator included in our list.

Finally, we created an index with the scores from all the affective polarisation indicators and conducted a one factor ANOVA to compare the means among the different political parties. The variance homogeneity test was significant $p < .001$ (F value = 8,000) indicating that there is a significant difference between the variances, and Ho is refused. A post hoc analysis (using Tamhane's T2 test) to identify where there were significant differences among the political parties was conducted, which showed that *Alternative für Deutschland* was the specific party that mostly differed from the other parties with a mean in the affective polarisation index that scored quite high on average (4.2) compared to *VOX* (2.8), *Fratelli d'Italia* (2.6), *Rassemblement National* (2.3), *Fidesz – Magyar Polgári Szövetség* (1.7) and *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (1.7). These findings partially refused H2, that assumed – by comparing visuals on Instagram from European far-right parties from different countries – that there would be a common pattern containing some of the more relevant visual features that scholars empirically used to measure affective polarisation (Bonikowski et al., 2022; Svraka, 2023; Yarchi et al., 2021). On the contrary, our results showed that, although those affective polarisation indicators were strongly detected among some political parties (*Alternative für Deutschland* being the most relevant example), in general the relevancy of those indicators was quite discrete among other parties, so we

*Table 6:*
*Presence of affective polarisation indicators*
*among different parties (N = 260)*

| | | Alter-native für Deutsch-land (%) | VOX (%) | Rassem-blement National (%) | Fidesz – Magyar Polgári Szövetség (%) | Fratelli d'Italia (%) | Prawo i Sprawied-liwość (%) | Total (%) | p-value |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Defiant attitude towards institutions | No | 75 | 100.0 | 91.4 | 100.0 | 95.1 | 100.0 | 93.8 | .007** |
| | Yes | 25 | 0.0 | 8.6 | 0.0 | 4.9 | 0.0 | 6.2 | |
| Representation of military/religious/ revolutionary/ patriotic symbols | No | 60 | 40.0 | 91.4 | 44.4 | 70.7 | 70.6 | 70.0 | .003** |
| | Yes | 40 | 60.0 | 8.6 | 55.6 | 29.3 | 29.4 | 30.0 | |
| Representation of stereotypes | No | 75 | 100.0 | 97.1 | 100.0 | 99.4 | 100.0 | 97.7 | .001** |
| | Yes | 25 | 0.0 | 2.9 | 0.0 | 0.6 | 0.0 | 2.3 | |
| Inclusion or men-tion of violence/ struggle | No | 60 | 93.3 | 91.4 | 77.8 | 59.8 | 70.6 | 67.3 | .002** |
| | Yes | 40 | 6.7 | 8.6 | 22.2 | 40.2 | 29.4 | 32.4 | |
| Inclusion of the party's ideological symbols | No | 0 | 33.3 | 5.7 | 100.0 | 27.4 | 82.4 | 28.8 | .001** |
| | Yes | 100 | 66.7 | 94.3 | 0.0 | 45.8 | 1.2 | 71.2 | |
| Mentions divisive visual language | No | 15 | 40.0 | 60.0 | 44.4 | 66.5 | 100.0 | 61.5 | .001** |
| | Yes | 85 | 60.0 | 40.0 | 55.6 | 33.5 | 0.0 | 38.5 | |
| Predominant use of emotions | No | 85 | 80.0 | 97.1 | 55.6 | 76.8 | 82.4 | 80.0 | .048* |
| | Yes | 15 | 20.0 | 2.9 | 44.4 | 23.2 | 17.6 | 20.0 | |
| Identification of non-political enemy/enemies | No | 40 | 93.3 | 85.7 | 100.0 | 60.4 | 82.4 | 66.9 | .001** |
| | Yes | 60 | 6.7 | 14.3 | 0.0 | 39.6 | 17.6 | 33.1 | |
| Call to social or political mobilisation | No | 95 | 60.0 | 85.7 | 100.0 | 98.8 | 100.0 | 94.6 | .001** |
| | Yes | 5 | 40.0 | 14.3 | 0.0 | 1.2 | 0.0 | 5.4 | |
| Negatively refers to other opposi-tion groups or political leaders | No | 65 | 73.3 | 65.7 | 100.0 | 81.1 | 64.7 | 76.9 | .077 |
| | Yes | 35 | 26.7 | 34.3 | 0.0 | 18.9 | 35.3 | 23.1 | |

*Note:* Symbols indicate the following p-values: *p < 0.1, **p < 0.05, ***p < 0.01

cannot identify a common pattern of visuals featured as affective polarisers among the European far-right parties included in our sample.

The analysis shows that governmental parties (i.e. *Fidesz – Magyar Polgári Szövetség* and *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*) used different visual framing techniques compared to non-governmental parties. With *Fidesz* in power in Hungary, their images strongly displayed markers of emotional polarisation, such as the widespread usage of party ideological symbols (100%) and representations of military/religious/patriotic symbols (55.6%). Similarly, *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* in Poland included symbols related to the military, religion and nationalism (55.6%) but not showing as strong an indication of emotional polarisation.

On the other hand, far-right groups that are not in power have embraced more polarising visual communication techniques. *Alternative für Deutschland* showed the highest results on a number of factors with mentions of inclusive visual language (85%) and the usage of party ideological symbols (100%) being highlighted. Similar results of emotional polarisation were also shown by *VOX* and *Rassemblement National,* especially when it came to the depiction of military, religious and patriotic symbols and references to inclusive visual language. As seen in their aggressive use of emotional polarisation indicators to resonate with their followers and impact public discourse, these opposition parties may rely on confrontational methods to challenge the incumbent parties and rally their voters.

## Conclusions

Our study explored the use of visual framing strategies for political purposes on Instagram. Specifically, we examined the differences between six European far-right political parties in how they used the opportunities provided by this platform to build their political identity based on affective polarisation communication resources. The visual framing analysis of 260 images posted on the official Instagram profiles of the sampled European far-right political parties supports previous literature regarding the use of visual affective polarisation on Instagram to build political identity in online contexts. By analysing the use of visual symbols, rhetoric and imagery used by these parties to convey their ideologies and appeal to their target audiences, this work expands the existing literature on visual communication in politics and enhances our understanding of social media and polarisation strategies.

The aim of this paper was to offer a comparative analysis of the impact of visual affective polarisation on Instagram and explore the differences in the visual framing methods utilised by these far-right political parties in Europe. We studied the use of visual symbols and imagery in detail, and analysed the differences with respect to three visual polarisation concepts, that is, denotative, stylistic and connotative. When scrutinised in these three contexts, we concluded that far-right European parties in our sample differ from each other to some extent. Our results showed that the sampled parties use different strategies to create their content, and style the way it is portrayed, as well as to shape the rhetoric they use to spread their message. Thus, despite being in a shared political spectrum, our findings lead us to conclude that these political parties employ distinct visual framing

methods. The analysis contributes to the scarce knowledge regarding the intricate and complex relationship between visual framing and political discourse.

This study also focused on the visual features for measuring affective polarisation used by scholars (Bonikowski et al., 2022; Svraka, 2023; Yarchi et al., 2021). The results from our empirical analysis rejected the idea of a pattern of common indicators. They suggested that despite the strong presence of affective polarisation features among certain political parties – *Alternative für Deutschland* being the most pertinent example – their relevance was generally distinct between them. Therefore, we were unable to find a pattern of visuals among the six sampled European far-right parties. Perhaps, the most important difference that we found is related to *Alternative für Deutschland,* which differed most from the other parties in the sample. This party also scored highest in the affective polarisation index, as well as in terms of average number of likes and comments, thus being one of the most engaged on Instagram.

There are several potential causes for the empirical findings of this study. As noted by Knudsen (2021), polarisation is presumed to be more significant and present in the political landscape of the United States compared to that of European countries, primarily because of the differences in the potential of greater polarisation between bipartisan and multiparty systems. Despite this assumption, Gidron et al. (2019) provide evidence demonstrating that the level of affective polarization in the US is average compared to that in other democracies. Interestingly, Switzerland, which is perceived as one of the most stable democracies in the world, scores highest amongst the study's sample of countries. The authors argue that party size is a great determinant of affective polarization in a country, as the perception of voters is more likely to be polarized with respect to a larger opposing political group. Gidron et al. (2019) and Wagner (2020) use different approaches to measure the degree of affective polarization that are based on like-dislike discrepancies for certain political groups, arguing that this helps in capturing party preferences and polarization among voters of different political groups. Both papers stress the importance of party size and account for it by adding a weight index. In addition, cross-country studies (e.g. Gidron et al., 2019) imply the complexity of studying affective polarisation, not just in the context of multiparty systems but also across different countries. These findings show that relative party size in each respective country (i.e. some far-right parties in our sample are significantly larger and more impactful than others) and country-specific factors should be accounted for, as they may cause differences in the level of affective polarisation, and thus differences in the strategies followed.

In conclusion, this study represents one of the first attempts to explore the strategic use of Instagram for affective polarisation among far-right parties from a visual communication comparative perspective. Furthermore, it also provides an addition to the relatively scarce literature concerning affective polarisation in European multiparty political systems, given the relative abundance of papers focusing on the bipartisan one in the United States. Future research can build on the findings of this study, as well as address its limitations. This study represents only six specific countries, thus, for a comparative and more global perspective, it would be interesting to expand this work using international data from other political contexts in which cultural aspects could be a key factor in explaining the construction of political identity. Another problem relates to potential *simultaneity* and/

or *reverse causality* biases between social media usage and affective polarisation. While there is consensus about the fact that these two concepts are correlated, evidence is mixed regarding any causal direction between them – that is, whether social media usage causes affective polarisation, or vice-versa, or whether they cause each other simultaneously. Nordbrandt (2023) challenges the idea of the former by employing econometric models to test the direction of causality and provides sufficient evidence to conclude that affective polarisation causes changes in social media usage, implying reverse causality in the face of the common assumption that social media impacts affective polarisation. Perhaps, the authors' most important arguments are the paper's limitations, which posit that to study and expose the true relationship between these concepts, exogenous variation is required to overcome such biases.

The authors are also aware of the limitations in the choice of methods for framing analysis, namely the most common focus on still images. A further extension to our analysis would be to use an approach that scrutinises framing through moving imagery. Nonetheless, since the main goal of this article was focused on content rather than technical aspects, we consider that limitation does not affect the validity of the findings. Finally, it should be noted that the study focused on the Instagram accounts of political parties, while the political leaders of those far-right parties were not included in this study. Further research could also extend the sample to explore the use of affective polarisation in other countries and in connection with personalisation strategies at the individual level.

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