

Political Communication on Telegram

Emotional Framing and Strategic Messaging in Europe

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In a technological age, many political actors provide orientations on digital platforms, especially during periods of crisis. This research aims to explore political messaging and the perceptions of public opinion in Europe within the period of the 2022 energy crisis that resulted from the war in Ukraine. First, the evolution of the perception of the citizenry is described, analysing trust in public institutions through a secondary analysis on data from the Eurobarometer. Then, Telegram messages posted over a trimester in 2022 (n = 929) by some of the governing parties and the main populist opposition parties in the four most populous EU countries (Germany, France, Italy, and Spain) were subjected to content analysis. Results show how trust in national institutions has been eroded compared to the EU. The communication on Telegram was quite emotional, applying both positive and negative feelings, but the agenda of populists was much more fragmented than those parties in government.

Keywords: political communication, public opinion, populism, emotions, Europe, Telegram

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Article received on 6 November 2025. Article accepted on 20 March 2026.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Funding: The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

Introduction

Crises are moments of strong transformation that imply a change in social priorities. In the summer of 2022, the energy-related crisis that resulted from the war in Ukraine caused European countries to adopt complex saving measures. In times of massive use of social media for political purposes (Stier et al., 2018), political actors tend to explain their positions on social media or mobile instant messaging services such as Telegram (Alonso-Muñoz et al., 2022). As part of digital political communication, mobile instant messaging services represent a new opportunity to connect political actors with citizens. Specifically, these digital platforms are a channel to spread messages more directly (Newman et al., 2019).

Political leaders and organisations try to provide media orientations (Jacobs & Wonneberger, 2019). These actors have adapted their communication practices to the digital media logic (Bimber, 2014), incorporating elements of negative campaigns that are commonplace on platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram (Tirado-García, 2023). Emotional messages linked to criticism achieve more impact, but they also generate disaffection (Patterson, 1993), particularly in moments of political polarisation shaped by social media (Tucker et al., 2018).

Moreover, the rise of polarisation overlaps with the consolidation of populist rhetoric and a loss of trust in public institutions (Jungherr et al., 2019). According to a recent study (Verboord et al., 2025), trust is an essential foundation for democracies that is negatively associated with social media use. With regard to the war in Ukraine, its effects have especially touched Europe, and the European Union (EU) has been targeted as the objective of populist movements (Caiani & Guerra, 2017). Although the EU has traditionally been an issue in European politics, right-wing populists have developed social media strategies widely to give prominence to their Eurosceptic claims (Carral et al., 2023).

In light of the above, the objective of this research is to examine the political messages on Telegram and the perceptions of public opinion during a crisis that affected the economy and well-being. Indeed, its impact on the European Public Sphere (EPS) makes shedding light on how Telegram is used for political purposes in different EU countries relevant. Previous literature has analysed the communication style of populist and non-populist candidates, highlighting the negativity of the first (Nai, 2021), but there is scant research on the emotional nature of political parties (Widmann, 2021). As mobile instant messaging services enable direct communication, we aim to understand the messages posted from these organisations, ranging from parties in government to populist opposition groups.

Theoretical framework

The political use of emotions on social media

Social media have become essential tools for political actors in order to share messages without filters or limitations (Bossetta, 2018; Dimitrova & Matthes, 2018). This dynamic is not only relevant during periods of the electoral campaigns, but also in times of conflict. The outcomes of communication on social networks are highly recognised, generating echo

chambers that reinforce existing beliefs. However, the media environment and political interest of the population influence the effects of these eco chambers (Dubois & Blank, 2018).

In an age of digital capitalism, social media platforms are an essential part of society (Fuchs, 2017), one shaping a new relationship between politicians and the public. Besides that, people are incidentally exposed to news on these platforms, especially the youth (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018). This also explains why social media are a tool for political power (Shirky, 2011) that tends toward personalisation (McAllister, 2007), understood as the prominence of leaders. The massive use of television made the personality of leaders a central element in the assessment of their performance, triggering the so-called 'pop politics' (Mazzoleni & Sfaridini, 2009) that is now reinforced by digital platforms.

In this context, social media allow messages to be adapted to the needs of the audience in terms of interests or demographics (Kreiss et al., 2018). Mostly, it is electoral goals that are pursued; which is why previous studies have focused on electoral campaigns (Stier et al., 2018). Despite the relevance of social media for all political actors, there seems to be a strong connection between these platforms and populism. According to Gerbaudo (2018), they provide a massive channel for the development of the typical strategies of populism, such as claiming to be the voice of the people.

Likewise, populist parties on social media address ideologically thematic issues that provoke controversy, impacting on the agenda of news media organisations, including fact-checkers (Rivas-de-Roca et al., 2024). These digital tools serve to create a populist communication style based on criticism of the establishment to the point of antagonising the elite. Its rhetoric seeks to build a collective identity by applying a strategic use of colloquial language and a rebellious narrative (Block & Negrine, 2017).

Emotions are also distinguished from populist communication. The persuasiveness of populist messages is largely fuelled by the emotionalised attribution of blame to elites (Hameleers et al., 2016). They portray a society that does not work well, and ask for political change in order to prevent social collapse. These assignments based on negative emotions have a stronger effect on citizens (Tirado-García, 2023), which overlaps with the rise in political polarisation.

Beyond traditional social media, the consolidation of mobile instant messaging apps is also altering political communication. These services allow users to send messages and reach mobile devices directly without opening the application or searching for a specific account. Thus, there is a tighter environment where people may feel more confident about sharing and discussing political content (Valenzuela et al., 2021). Prior scholarship has described how these apps facilitate political conversations in closed environments (Vermeer et al., 2021) as messages reach the devices of each user through private chats without others accessing them.

Telegram as a political tool

In recent years, Telegram is one of the platforms that has grown the most. According to Marcos-García et al. (2023), there are two reasons for its increased importance in the political sphere: 1. the possibility of establishing a more emotional connection with citizens

in contrast to classic social media; and 2. the need for political actors to seek alternatives to private communication in the face of public overexposure.

Literature has shed light on the prominence of Telegram within disintermediated communication. Many people discuss politics on this platform, which is shaping a new form of political discussion (Valeriani & Vaccari, 2018). In this sense, it is mainly elections that have been studied, evidencing the way in which Telegram is used as mobilisation tool that enables closeness to candidates and parties (Sierra et al., 2022). Electoral information is delivered while taking advantage of the private environment on Telegram to develop a personal agenda and criticise opponents. Particularly, this app works well for radical mobilisation as it has direct message retransmission, which is useful in the sharing of populist appeals (Jost & Dogruel, 2023).

The rise of Telegram should be considered within the framework of platformisation, which is a concept that refers to how digital platforms (Google, Meta, X, Telegram, TikTok, etc.) are becoming essential in understanding how people communicate. The penetration of digital platforms into daily life brings a huge transformation in cultural practices (Poell et al., 2019). This change affects access to information, but with significant country differences (Nielsen & Fletcher, 2023), necessitating comparative studies. Furthermore, information disorders have been magnified by the proliferation of these mobile instant messaging services, where disinformation circulates in an inconspicuous way.

This kind of platform emotions are conceptualised as a central mediating mechanism between populist rhetoric and institutional trust in periods of crisis. Building on the literature concerning the emotionalisation of politics and affective publics (Papacharissi, 2016), emotions are understood not as secondary reactions but as constitutive forces in political meaning-making. At the same time, emotionalised populist communication is not platform-neutral but deeply conditioned by the affordances of digital infrastructures. Drawing on affordance theory (Ronzhyn et al., 2023), we argue that platforms also shape the forms of interaction through which emotions are reinforced or normalised, in addition to the visibility and circulation of emotional content.

Telegram's affordances – such as its large broadcast channels, limited content moderation and semi-private communication spaces – facilitate the sustained dissemination of emotionally charged narratives with minimal contestation (Rogers, 2020). Unlike algorithmically curated platforms such as Facebook or X, where emotional content competes for attention within heterogeneous networks, Telegram enables the consolidation of affective publics characterised by ideological homogeneity and high emotional resonance. This social media ecology amplifies populist frames and fosters affective alignment between communicators and audiences (Kiess, 2025).

Within this conceptual framework, Telegram emerges as a distinctive communicative infrastructure for crisis communication and populist mobilisation. Its affordances support a mode of emotional governance in which institutional trust is eroded not primarily through factual counterclaims but through repeated emotional cues that reframe crises as the moral and political failures of institutions. By enabling persistent, emotionally synchronised communication between populist actors and their audiences, Telegram blurs the boundary between information, mobilisation and affective bonding. This capacity to stabilise

emotionalised distrust over time reshapes how crises are interpreted and how institutional authority is evaluated.

Bearing these facts in mind, this research aims to explore the political messages on Telegram and the perceptions of public opinion during the 2022 energy-related crisis, a period (triggered by the war) that impacted on the economy and well-being. As Europe is probably the place most affected by the saving measures against the economic crisis, our study focuses on the four most populous countries in the EU: Germany, France, Italy and Spain. In accordance with what is presented, the following research questions were posed:

RQ1: How has trust in public institutions at the EU level evolved during the period of the energy crisis?

RQ2: What communicative purposes (functions) and thematic priorities characterise political messages that shape the agenda on Telegram?

RQ3: What emotions prevail in party-political Telegram messages?

Methodology

This study develops a triangulation between research techniques, mixing secondary data analysis and quantitative content analysis. The goal was to understand the way emotions work in the messages of political parties (RQ2 and RQ3) and the evolution of public opinion during the energy crisis (RQ1). To answer RQ1, the evolution of the citizens' perception was described, analysing trust in public institutions. On this matter, a secondary analysis of data was applied to four waves of the Eurobarometer (EB 96, 97, 98 and 99), specifically:

1. The Standard Eurobarometer 96 (winter 2021–2022). This survey was conducted between 18 January and 14 February 2022. The final sample of responses was 26,696 people from 27 countries, using a multi-stage, random and stratified sample to analyse 1,001 variables. The Standard Eurobarometer was also carried out in 12 other countries or territories such as the Balkans or the United Kingdom, but they were not included in our study as we consider the EU a space especially touched by the consequences of the war in Ukraine.
2. The Standard Eurobarometer 97 (summer 2022). This study was conducted between 17 June and 17 July 2022. In some countries, face-to-face interviewing was mixed with online interviews. The sample reached 26,468 individuals from EU27, applying a stratified system. This wave was the first Eurobarometer survey since the invasion of the Ukraine.
3. The Standard Eurobarometer 98 (winter 2022–2023). This survey was conducted between 12 January and 6 February 2023. Interviews included 26,468 people (in person or virtually) from all 27 Member States, based on a stratified sample.
4. The Standard Eurobarometer 99 (spring 2023). This survey was carried out between 31 May and 25 June 2023. A total of 26,425 interviews were conducted across the whole of the EU.

The Eurobarometer waves had a sample error of $\pm 1.4\%$ for a 95% confidence level, targeting citizens from the age of 15 years. These surveys are held by Kantar Public; meanwhile, the European Commission's Directorate-General for Communication (DG COMM), through the Strategy, Corporate Communication Actions and Eurobarometer Unit, is responsible for its design. For our study, two variables were extracted:

- Trust in public institutions. Three categories, referring to trust in the European Union, the national government, or the national parliament.
- Opinion regarding the future of the EU. Three categories were included by the survey: optimism, pessimism and do not know (DN).

The comparison of Eurobarometer variables with data retrieved from other methods has been already applied with a qualitative approach (Rivas-de-Roca & García-Gordillo, 2022), but here we used a quantitative content analysis. This method (Krippendorff, 2004) allows the content of messages on social networks to be examined in a systematic way. Our research design addressed Telegram as a rising mobile instant messaging service, analysing the content for three months (15 July – 15 October 2022). This period was selected because it was the moment at which energy saving measures began to be adopted.

The sample was composed of all the messages published by some of the parties in government and the main populist opposition parties at that moment, located in the four most populous EU countries: Germany, France, Italy and Spain. Parties in government (ruling) are here defined as political parties that, at the time of analysis in 2022, held executive power either by leading the government or by participating formally in the governing coalition at the national level. These parties bear direct responsibility for policymaking and implementation, and their communication could therefore be shaped by institutional accountability and governance constraints. Opposition parties, by contrast, are those represented in parliament but not participating in the executive. They usually position themselves as critics of the incumbent government's decisions.

Populism is conceptualised as a transversal political characteristic rather than a fixed party type. It refers to an ideological frame that constructs politics as a moral struggle between a virtuous 'people' and a corrupt 'elite', following an anti-establishment rhetoric (Boulianne et al., 2020). Social media boosts this dichotomous boundary where the leader is part of the in-group (Bracciale et al., 2021). Populism is also defined as a particular communication style for political purposes (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007); hence, it can be articulated by both governing and opposition parties, depending on context and strategy. However, in the specific period analysed in this study, populist discourse was predominantly observed among the selected opposition parties.

Data were collected from the official Telegram channels of selected political parties over the trimester in question. Four trained researchers systematically monitored these channels and manually retrieved all messages published during the observation window. To ensure consistency and completeness, researchers followed a shared protocol, recording message content and documenting metadata such as date and time of publication. All collected messages were subsequently translated into English to enable standardised analysis across researchers. Translations were reviewed for accuracy to preserve the original meaning and the tone of the messages.

The accounts collected included the following eight Telegram media profiles:

- Germany: Bündnis 90/Die Grünen (ruling party, part of the government coalition), AfD – Alternative für Deutschland (opposition party).
- France: Renaissance (ruling party), RN-Rassemblement National (opposition party).
- Italy: PD – Partito Democratico (ruling party), Fratelli d'Italia (opposition party, later in government since October 2022).
- Spain: PSOE – Partido Socialista Obrero Español (ruling party), Vox (opposition party).

The dataset consists of content drawn from the official Telegram profiles of these political parties. Specifically, the data were extracted manually by accessing each party's official Telegram channel and copying the complete posts, including text and multimedia contents. To address linguistic diversity, profile texts published in languages other than English were translated into English using DeepL. This tool was selected due to its strong performance in translating political and institutional language. Following automated translation, all texts were manually reviewed to verify semantic accuracy and to ensure consistency across the sample.

Based on a comparative approach between nations that may be helpful in illustrating different reasons for the political use of Telegram (Valeriani & Vaccari, 2018), our study analyses the social messages posted by the above parties at the interstate level in the context of the European Union. To answer RQ2 and 3, we first created a list of 15 exclusive categories to delve into the distribution of the thematic agenda. Beyond that, the digital message functions of political parties were studied through the analysis protocol defined by López-Meri et al. (2017), adapting the strategies identified to the logic of Telegram.

Regarding emotions, we combined the basic psychological emotions identified by the literature (Palmero Cantero et al., 2002) with other emotions that show the positive and negative feelings towards political actors (López-López et al., 2020). Since previous studies had found that the emotional charge of digital discourses correlates not only to the level engagement (Rivera Otero et al., 2021) but also to the electoral result, we developed a specific analysis list on emotions (Table 1), arguing that this concept refers to feelings triggered by actions or circumstances.

A manual content analysis was applied to the messages on Telegram during the aforementioned trimester ($n = 929$), whereas the data were processed with IBM SPSS Statistics, Version 28. The message functions and the thematic agenda were coded by a single researcher as they are nominal categories and have little interpretation. Both the collection of the sample and the coding of emotions were carried out manually by a team of four coders, during which time a pre-test was conducted on 10% of the sample (93 units).

The intercoder agreement reached high levels. The coefficients per category ranged between 0.88 and 0.97, all remaining above the recommended threshold of 0.80 according to Krippendorff's alpha values (Neuendorf, 2002). The detailed Krippendorff alphas for each individual variable are fear ($\alpha = 0.95$), joy ($\alpha = 0.91$), anger ($\alpha = 0.93$), sadness ($\alpha = 0.97$), disgust ($\alpha = 0.88$), blame ($\alpha = 0.94$), shame ($\alpha = 0.90$), pride ($\alpha = 0.96$), empathy ($\alpha = 0.92$), gratitude ($\alpha = 0.94$), hope ($\alpha = 0.93$) and other ($\alpha = 0.89$).

Table 1:
Categories of emotions on Telegram

Items (emotions)	Description
Fear	Messages that share a strong concern for any scenario from the past, present or future.
Joy	Messages that contain emotions that spark joy.
Anger	Contents based on disapproval or annoyance at political behaviour or a specific event.
Sadness	Messages related to a strong disappointment.
Disgust	Contents that disseminate rejection (contempt) towards specific attitudes or political facts.
Blame	Aggressive messages seeking responsibility for certain events.
Shame	Contents contrary to pride as they express the will to escape from a political situation.
Pride	Messages that acknowledge the importance of the achievement of a political actor.
Empathy	Contents that show understanding in the face of specific situations or events.
Gratitude	It occurs when messages share the feeling of gratitude for a specific event or person.
Hope	Contents on trust in the political future.
Other	Unclassifiable in the previous categories.

Source: Compiled by the authors.

In this sense, emotions were coded by assigning each message to one of the 15 mutually exclusive categories predefined in the codebook, based on the dominant emotional cue expressed in the text. These categories derived from established literature were previously used by the research group, which might explain the results for intercoder agreement. The items aim to examine how emotional framing contributes to the distribution of the thematic agenda.

Our analysis adapts to digital logic by dealing with many variables during the time frame in question. It should be noted that the number of posts on Telegram differs by country (125 in Germany, 90 in France, 405 in Italy and 309 in Spain), but the results are sometimes presented as aggregated data here to make comparisons. To avoid the problem of cherry-picking, and also considering that the field of emotions on Telegram is little explored, two independent scholars were invited to monitor the research and discuss its findings.

Results

Support for public institutions

At the beginning of this energy-related crisis, the data shows that the EU was the main source of trust (Table 2), which status remained almost unchanged between 2021 and 2023 according to the Eurobarometer. Conversely, trust in national institutions (government and parliament) decreased by 3%. These authorities were responsible for managing some of the economic measures brought in to deal with the crisis, possibly weakening their support in the waves analysed (from EB 96 to EB 99). However, other major events or factors could also have determined changes in the level of trust. What can be stated on the basis of empirical evidence is that the EU did not experience any decline in public support during the years of the energy crisis.

*Table 2:
Trust in public institutions (%)*

	EB 96 (2021–2022)	EB 97 (2022)	EB 98 (2022–2023)	EB 99 (2023)	Change after war
European Union	47	49	47	47	0
National government	35	34	32	32	-3
National parliament	36	34	33	33	-3

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Following the above, the Eurobarometer also indicates a little growth in optimism about the future for the EU (Table 3). The variation was greater when the war in Ukraine started (EB 97, 2022), with a 3% rise in optimistic views accompanied by a similar decrease in pessimism. This change later stabilised at 1% (EB 99, 2023); thus, opinion on the EU was not apparently negatively affected, especially at the end of 2022, and in 2023 when the problem became chronic.

*Table 3:
Opinion on the future of the EU (%)*

	EB 96 (2021–2022)	EB 97 (2022)	EB 98 (2022–2023)	EB 99 (2023)	Change after war
Optimistic	62	65	62	63	+1
Pessimistic	35	32	35	34	-1
Do not know	3	3	3	3	0

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Also noteworthy is the fact that trust in public institutions is the variable with the highest degree of change on the Eurobarometer. This is relevant because the level of trust could influence the commitment of the public to the saving measures implemented. Nevertheless, the combination of these categories reveals that citizens’ perceptions of the political institutions in Europe, including the EU, have improved little during the energy crisis. These exploratory findings serve to contextualise the content analysis on the political communication on Telegram.

Strategies and thematic agenda on Telegram

The existing literature presents message functions as political management strategies (López-Meri et al., 2017). Our results show that the use of message functions on Telegram varies significantly among European parties (Table 4), but the organisation of political events was a key mission for both the ruling (50% in Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, 40% Renaissance) and populist opposition political parties (23.3% in RN, 23.5% in Vox) during the crisis.

Table 4:
Message functions by political party (%)

	DGrün (DE)	AfD (DE)	Renaissance (FR)	RN (FR)	PD (IT)	Fratelli d'Italia (IT)	PSOE (ES)	Vox (ES)	Total
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	
Organisation of political events	50.0 BEFG	2.8	40.0 BEGF	23.3 BEF	7.8	3.3	4.4	23.5 BEF	13.8
Electoral programme / promises	22.2	12.1	13.3	8.3	26.6 GH	13.0	2.2	10.2	15.6
Criticism of the opponent	–	33.6	–	21.7	24.5	18.7	40.0	23.5	23.8
Ideology (values)	5.6	2.8	10.0	–	6.0	8.9	4.4	4.2	5.2
Political achievements	–	5.6	20.0 H	8.3	6.0	8.1	37.8 BDEFH	4.5	7.9
Reference to media	–	6.5 E	–	–	0.4	10.6 E	–	4.5 E	3.6
Appeal to mobilisation	16.7	6.5	6.7	13.3 E	3.5	22.0 BEH	–	4.5	7.4
Forwarding other messages	–	22.4 D	6.7	1.7	–	–	11.1	20.5 D	9.3
Others	5.9	7.5	3.3	23.3 H	25.2 BH	15.4 H	–	4.5	13.6

Note: Data with a significance level of .05 (in bold), based on two-tailed tests for the column proportion (Bonferroni correction).

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Criticism of opponents was also quite apparent throughout the sample (23.8% as average level), with only the Bündnis 90/Die Grünen and Renaissance parties not employing it as a strategy.

Moreover, political achievements are relevant for ruling parties (20% in Renaissance and 37.8% in PSOE); meanwhile, populist parties resort to appeals to mobilise (13.3% in RN and 22% in Fratelli d'Italia) and forwarding other messages (22.4% in AfD and 20.5% in Vox) as the main strategies. Therefore, populists seek not only to mobilise the public, but also to sharing with it other relevant messages. These messages include contents spread through meetings or legacy media.

With regard to thematic agendas, interesting empirical evidence is provided (Table 5). First, there is some relatively fragmented agenda in most populist parties (AfD, Fratelli d'Italia, Vox), dealing with many different topics compared to thematic concentration in ruling organisations (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, Renaissance, PSOE).

*Table 5:
Thematic agenda by political party (%)*

	DGrün (DE)	AfD (DE)	Renaissance (FR)	RN (FR)	PD (IT)	Fratelli d'Italia (IT)	PSOE (ES)	Vox (ES)	Total
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	
Elections and campaign	44.4 GH	14.0	10.0	25.0 H	20.9 H	34.1 BGH	4.4	7.2	17.5
Economy/ industry	5.6	29.9 DEFH	10.0	8.3	14.9	11.4	15.6	8.3	13.6
SMEs	–	0.9	–	–	–	–	–	0.8	0.3
Immigration	–	6.5 E	–	1.7	0.7	5.7 E	–	3.8	2.9
Covid-19 and healthcare	5.6	1.9	–	–	2.5	–	–	0.4	1.2
Social policy	11.1	11.2	16.7	8.3	13.1	10.6	35.6 BDEFH	8.7	12.2
National security	5.6	0.9	6.7	11.7 BEFH	1.4	0.8	–	2.7	2.5
Foreign relations	–	2.8	–	3.3	5.7 H	0.8	2.2	0.4	2.6
Facilities	–	2.8	–	–	4.6	0.8	–	1.1	2.2
Environment	16.7 F	11.2 F	–	–	5.7	1.6	–	15.5 EF	8.0
Science and technology	–	0.9	–	–	1.1	–	–	–	0.4
Personal issues	11.1	2.8	36.7 BEGH	26.7 BEGH	1.8	5.7	6.6	8.7 E	7.5
Political competition	–	3.7	6.7 E	10.0 E	0.4	2.4	24.4 BEFH	7.2 E	5.0
Relation with the media	–	9.3	3.3	–	–	–	–	5.7	2.8
Others	–	0.9	10.0	5.0	27.3 BD	26.0 BD	11.1	29.5 BD	21.4

Note: Data with a significance level of .05 (in bold), based on two-tailed tests for the column proportion (Bonferroni correction).

Source: Compiled by the authors.

The thematic concentration is greater among the parties in government. Thus, 44.4% of Bündnis 90/Die Grünen messages published on Telegram were about elections and campaign, being its most popular issue, followed by the environment (16.7%), personal issues (11%) and social policy (11%). The preponderance of personal issues in terms of the cabinet of ministers is also detected with Renaissance (Figure 1), which devotes 36.7% of its messages



Figure 1:
Example of a message
on personal issues (Renaissance, FR), applying pride as an emotion
Source: Renaissance party Telegram channel (t.me/PartiRenaissance).

to personal issues, compared against social policy (16.7%), elections and campaign (10%) or economy/industry (10%). For its part, PSOE addresses social policy (35.6%) and political competition (24.4%) as significant categories.

Likewise, huge differences are found in the issue preference, but the importance of elections and campaigns in several countries (17.5% of the sample) is noteworthy. Besides that, many topics work as priorities for only specific parties such as economy/industry (29.9% in AfD), social policy (35.6% in PSOE), national security (11.7% in RN), personal issues (36.7% in Renaissance with Macron, 26.7% in RN with Le Pen) or political competition (24.4% in PSOE).

Nevertheless, some political messages on Telegram allude to more than one topic, which was coded properly; for instance, the right-wing populist AfD links economy/industry to migration (Figure 2), adding a feeling of anger that is now examined in the analysis of emotions.



Figure 2:

Example of message concerning the issues of economy/industry and migration (AfD, DE), accompanied by anger as emotion
 Source: AfD party Telegram channel in the Bundestag (t.me/afdfraktionimbundestag).

Appeal to emotions in the political discourse on Telegram

Once again, categories are much more concentrated for ruling parties (Figure 3), ‘pride’ standing out for Renaissance (60%). Although emotions represent a classic element of the rhetoric of populist political actors, appeals to emotions are massively present for all the parties selected. This finding is aligned with previous literature on leaders (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2023), but the way our study illustrates this beyond populism is remarkable since only 21.3% of the analysed messages on Telegram do not use emotions.

Positive and negative feelings are mixed as shown by Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, which focuses on sadness (22.2%), happiness (22.2%) and fear (11.1%). The latter is also common for the German populist party analysed (15% in AfD). For its part, happiness is important for many different parties (22.2% in Die Grünen, 16.8% in AfD, 16.7% in Renaissance, 20% in RN, 21.3% in PD, and 27.6% in Fratelli d’Italia), but at the same time some of those populist organisations use anger (22.4% in AfD, 23.3% in RN).

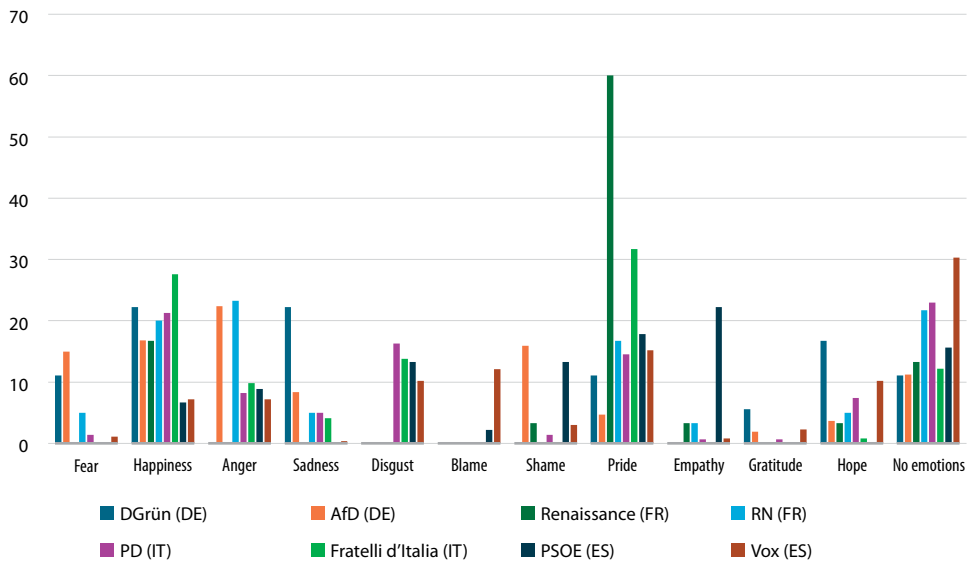


Figure 3:
Emotions on Telegram (%)
Source: Compiled by the authors.

With regard to positive feelings, pride and empathy are also found. Pride is the most frequent emotion (17.5%), reaching high levels for political organisations across Europe such as Renaissance (60%), Fratelli d'Italia (31.7%), PSOE (17.8%), RN (16.7%), Vox (15.2%) and PD (14.5%). The use of pride is significant for Renaissance and Fratelli d'Italia. Conversely, empathy is only detected for PSOE (22.2%), connecting this emotion to topics such as social policy.

The relationship between emotions and message functions reveals the purpose for which the appeal to emotions is used (Table 6). Indeed, an absence of emotions is essential for the organisation of political events (43%), references to media (36.4%), forwarding other messages (24.4%) and others (51.6%). Thus, some political issues are communicatively shaped on Telegram without emotions.

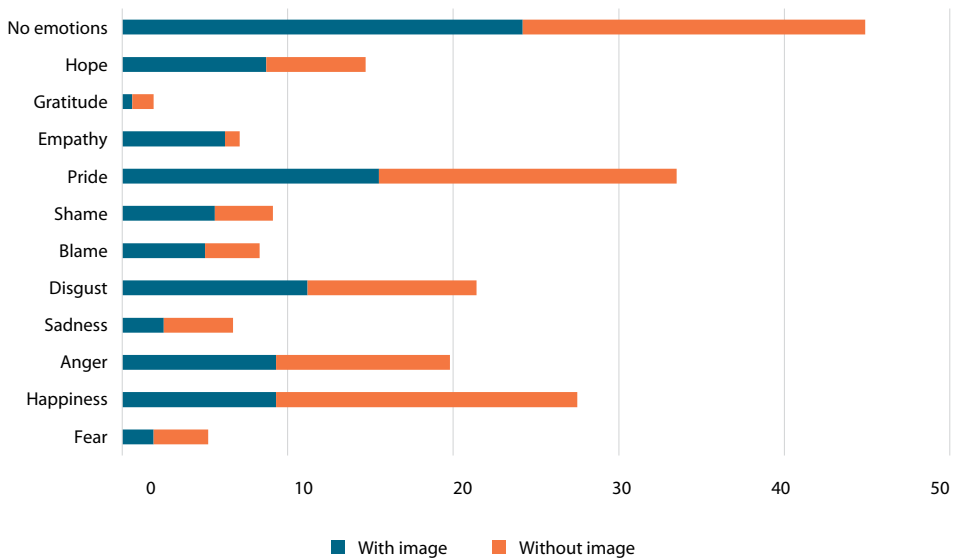
Despite the above, most emotions connect with message functions. Happiness is linked to electoral programme/promises (27.6%), disgust to criticism of an opponent (36.2%), and pride to ideology (52.1%), political achievements (54.8%) and appeals to mobilise (33.3%). The feeling of pride serves a diversity of objectives that range as functions employed by both ruling and populist parties.

As for the extent to which the variable of 'other' message functions do not convey emotions (51.6%), future research is needed to reflect upon why additional functions are less likely to convey feelings. On this matter, a classic element in conveying emotions is the employment of images. According to the results (Figure 4), images are not as important as might have been expected. Only messages involving disgust (11.2%), blame (5%), shame (5.6%), empathy (6.2%), and hope (8.7%) tended to have images.

*Table 6:
Emotions by message functions (%)*

	Organise political events	Electoral programme / promises	Criticism of the opponent	Ideology (values)	Political achievements	Reference to media	Appeal to mobilisation	Forwarding other messages	Other
Fear	3.9	0.7	4.5	–	–	3.0	2.9	3.5	4.8
Happiness	27.3	27.6	0.5	18.8	23.3	27.3	21.7	15.1	12.7
Anger	0.8	3.4	25.8	10.4	–	9.1	8.7	11.6	7.1
Sadness	1.6	2.1	3.2	4.2	1.4	3.0	2.9	2.3	12.7
Disgust	0.8	2.1	36.2	2.1	–	18.2	–	3.5	1.6
Blame	–	–	13.1	2.1	–	–	–	2.3	0.8
Shame	–	1.4	10.0	4.2	–	–	–	11.6	–
Pride	15.6	26.2	0.9	52.1	54.8	–	33.3	10.5	4.8
Empathy	0.8	0.7	–	–	13.7	–	1.4	2.3	1.6
Gratitude	–	2.1	–	2.1	–	–	1.4	5.8	0.8
Hope	6.3	22.1	–	–	2.7	3.0	13.0	7.0	1.6
No emotions	43.0	11.7	5.9	4.2	4.1	36.4	14.5	24.4	51.6

Source: Compiled by the authors.



*Figure 4:
Emotions by type of message (%)*
Source: Compiled by the authors.

PSOE

NUEVO PAQUETE DE MEDIDAS DEL GOBIERNO

<https://cadenaser.com/nacional/2022/10/13/guia-practica-para-entender-como-afectara-el-nuevo-plan-de-ahorro-energetico-cadena-ser/>

cadena SER

Guía práctica para entender cómo afectará el nuevo plan de ahorro energético

El presidente del Gobierno, Pedro Sánchez, ha anunciado un nuevo paquete de medidas de ahorro energético que se aproba...



Figure 5:

Example of social policy with image (PSOE, ES), applying empathy as emotion

Source: PSOE party Telegram channel (t.me/canalPSOE)

For their part, images seem to be avoided for fear (3.3%), happiness (18.2%), anger (10.5%), sadness (4.2%), pride (18%) and gratitude (1.3%). It should be noted that pride or happiness were some of the most frequent categories. They have been widely employed throughout to disseminate sympathy currents about leaders and parties (López-López et al., 2020).

Also, in considering positive feelings, empathy is one in which images are preferred (Figure 5). This was particularly detected for the social democratic party PSOE in Spain. However, political parties do not usually employ images to support appeals to emotions. By contrast, have a higher percentage of images appear in messages without emotions (24.2%), which reveals that there is no clear relationship between both variables on Telegram.

Discussion and conclusions

This article aimed to examine the political messages on Telegram and some of the perceptions of public opinion during the energy crisis in Europe. Telegram has been mostly studied to evaluate mobilisation strategies (Jost & Dogruel, 2023). However, scant attention has been paid to the employment of emotion. Accordingly, our study provides three inter-related contributions on European political communication on Telegram for that period.

First, we illustrate how trust in national institutions has been eroded compared to the EU, which was the main source of trust during the period of the energy crisis. Nevertheless, this setback was slight and opinions on the future of Europe were not affected (RQ1).

Besides that, the evolution could have been impacted by additional factors. Overall, changes over time were modest and did not indicate any major shift in public attitudes. This relative stability suggests a degree of resilience in citizens' perceptions despite the challenging context.

With regard to RQ2, we offer insightful findings on the distribution of message functions and thematic agenda. Political actors mostly use Telegram for the organisation of events and criticism of their opponents, which are classic functions of political action. The results on agendas are different as this is relatively fragmented for most populist parties; meanwhile, organisations in government address fewer topics. Elections/programme as a topic is a common finding within the sample, but ruling parties are more likely to focus on political achievements, and populist parties do it when appealing for mobilisation and forwarding other messages.

Furthermore, many topics are priorities for only specific parties, revealing strong differences between parties and ideologies. For instance, the thematic focus of Telegram messages varies noticeably across parties and national contexts. In France, communication by Renaissance under Macron is more strongly oriented toward personal issues, whereas the RN led by Le Pen places comparatively less emphasis on this dimension. In Spain, by contrast, messages from the PSOE are more frequently centred on political competition. At the same time, several Telegram posts address multiple topics simultaneously and were coded accordingly. A clear example can be found in the communication of German right-wing populist AfD, which often connects economic and industrial concerns with migration, while simultaneously introducing an explicit tone of anger that is further examined in the analysis of emotions.

Our third contribution furthers our understanding of the working of emotions. The presence of emotions can be clearly and explicitly observed throughout the sample (RQ3), but they are not always accompanied by images. The parties in government tend to use less variety in appeals to this type of feeling. Sadness, happiness and fear are key emotions, together with pride, which means combining positive and negative emotions. These categories overlap with message functions, depending on the objective pursued. For instance, happiness is linked to electoral programme/promises or disgust to criticism of the opponent.

Our findings show an emotional narrative in the parties, but with relevant differences. The results are in line with prior scholarship that has extensively described how positive and negative emotions are conducted together to reach the same objective (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2023). On this matter, the accounts from some countries (Germany and France) have minimal activity, whereas others produce a large number of messages, linked to political events.

Beyond that, trust in public institutions has diminished a little. Nevertheless, it should be taken into account that some authors consider Eurobarometer to be propagandistic and barely reliable (Höpner & Jurczyk, 2015). Parties in government have responded to this national distrust by focusing on political achievements, together with emotions such as pride. Likewise, negative emotions are more present in the fragmented agenda of populist parties, using appeals to mobilisation and forwarding other messages as the main message functions.

Finally, we acknowledge some limitations in this study. The most prolific political parties on Telegram are overrepresented, especially Partito Democratico in Italy and Vox in Spain. Future research could expand the scope of this work by applying more extended time

frames on larger samples, including additional parties, and also dealing with the potential conversation between politicians and citizens through these mobile instant messaging services. Scholars face the challenge of providing empirical findings on the role of mobile services such as Telegram in political polarisation (Tucker et al., 2018), considering incidental exposure to these messages on social media (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018).

In conclusion, the analysis of messages on Telegram contributes to budding literature on the use of mobile instant messaging services for political activities. Social media was traditionally applied as a tool of opposition by populists, blaming the elite (van Kessel & Castelein, 2016). Populist communication strategically mobilises emotions such as anger by constructing antagonistic narratives that contrast a morally pure 'people' against corrupt or unresponsive elites.

Although our article also shows a greater negativity in populism, we found out how positive and negative emotions were combined to mitigate the effects of a crisis. Emotions thus function as a discursive hinge linking populist rhetoric to broader dynamics of institutional trust. The agenda of populists in opposition showed greater plurality than the parties in government, but all of them use emotions widely to share their proposals, which may have implications in the shaping of public debate.

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