Sanctions, Energy, and the War in Ukraine:

The Digital Public Sphere Debate in Italy Ahead of the 2022 Elections

Strategic Intelligence Report:
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Period of Analysis:
August 27th to September 25th, 2022

Language:
Italian

Geographies:
Italy

Constella

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Overview & General Metrics

Constella Intelligence conducted a digital public sphere analysis of activity related to the digital public sociopolitical conversation in Italy, capturing and analyzing **5,010,919** total public comments on digital media produced by **235,428 unique** digital identities between August 27th and September 25th, 2022.

Our research indexed a wide variety of public digital media, including blogs, forums, social media, news sites, alternative media, and other digital communities and sources in order to understand the vulnerabilities presented by the weaponization of the digital media ecosystem and the materialization of Hybrid Threats, Information Operations (IO), and malign influence across online conversations in times of crisis and ahead of events of primary social, political, or economic importance, such as elections.

In addition to examining the role of abnormal, inorganic activity shaping predominant narratives in the debate, this analysis will also aim to provide evidence to respond to the following questions:
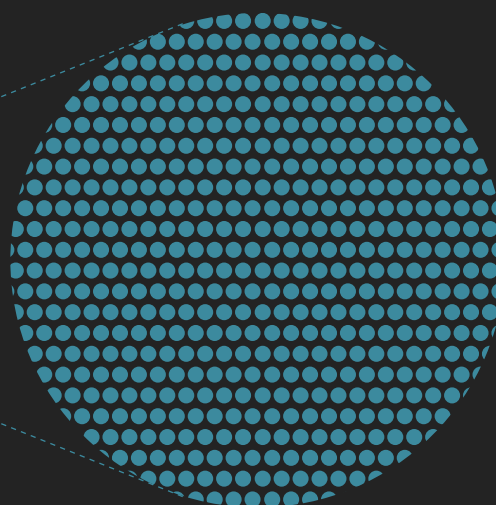
1. What is the role and sentiment of narratives related to migration, the EU, anti-vax positions, sanctions, and energy, particularly by populist actors and parties within the debate?

2. Narratives linked to migration and opposition against the EU are two examples of themes that have monopolized the agenda of far-right parties in Italy for years. To what degree have predominantly false narratives been shaped by conversations around Russia and Russia's invasion of Ukraine?

3. What is the influence of abnormal, inorganic activity, including coordinated inauthentic behavior (CIB) in the overall debate?

→

5,010,919 total public comments on digital media produced by 235,428 unique digital identities between August 27th and September 25th, 2022.

235,428
authors

5,010,919
results

Message Propagation: Community Network Analysis

Constella's data scientists applied clustering algorithms to determine the different digital communities and visually represent the resulting network of interactions. Constella's non-biased, unassisted algorithms identified eight key communities producing conversations related to the sociopolitical debate in Italy. Further details regarding the activity produced in these eight communities of interest are highlighted below:
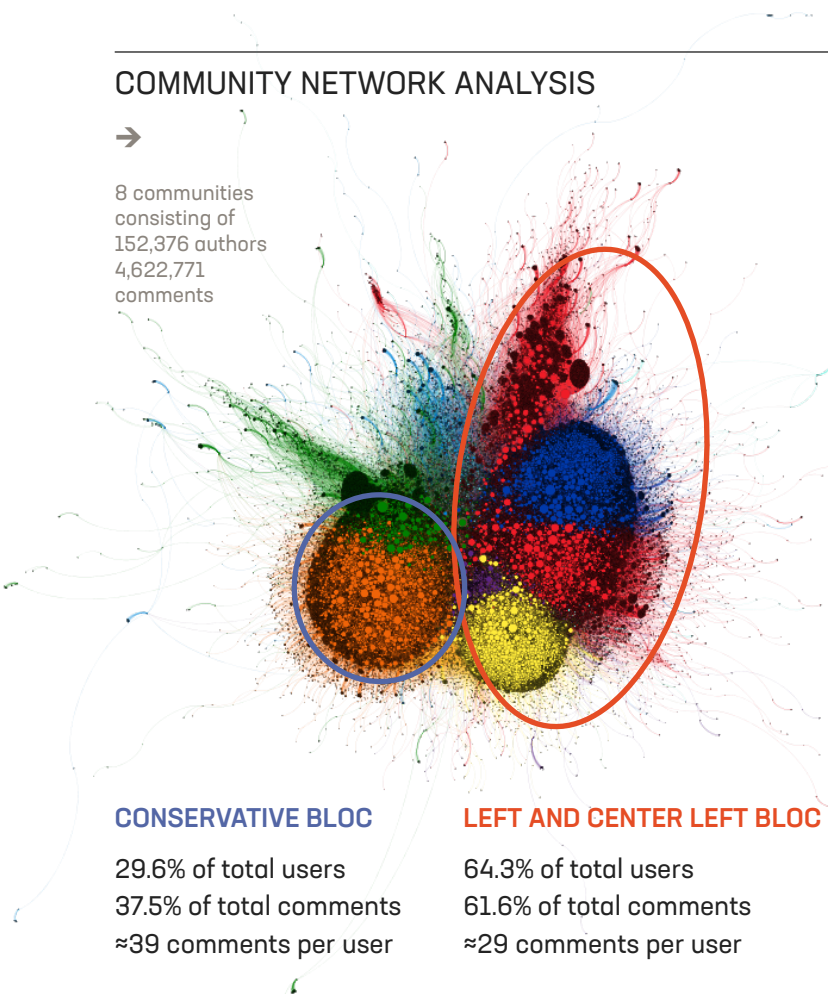
- The largest number of mentions of the Democratic Party comes from the Conservative populism community and the Brothers of Italy, Lega, and Forza Italia community. Regarding Brothers of Italy, mentions come mainly from the criticisms of conservatives and DP, Action and Italia Viva, and the 5 Star Movement community.

The debate is heavily polarized, producing two opposing blocks with a high degree of engagement between them:

COMMUNITY NETWORK ANALYSIS

8 communities consisting of 152,376 authors 4,622,771 comments

● #1 Democratic Party and Criticisms of Conservatives	Authors	40.4%
	Activity	18.0%
● #2 Conservative Populism	Authors	16.0%
	Activity	26.7%
● #3 Brothers of Italy, Lega, and Forza Italia	Authors	13.6%
	Activity	10.8%
● #4 Action and Italia Viva	Authors	13.5%
	Activity	20.7%
● #5 5 Star Movement	Authors	7.1%
	Activity	20.1%
● #6 Popular Union Movement	Authors	3.3%
	Activity	2.9%
● #7 Support for Berlusconi	Authors	1.8%
	Activity	0.3%
● #8 Debate on Energy Crisis	Authors	0.7%
	Activity	0.2%

CONSERVATIVE BLOC

29.6% of total users
37.5% of total comments
≈39 comments per user

LEFT AND CENTER LEFT BLOC

64.3% of total users
61.6% of total comments
≈29 comments per user

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LEFT AND CENTER LEFT BLOC

- This bloc includes various communities expressing a left/center-left ideology accounts for 64.3% of users and 61.6% of total activity in the network, with an average of 29 comments per user across the bloc.

- These communities are led by profiles with affinity to the Democratic Party, Action and Italia Viva, the 5 Star Movement and the Popular Union Movement – in addition to profiles critical of conservatives.

- High activity was detected in the 5 Star Movement community, with 85.4 comments per user, nearly the same activity per user as that of the other communities in the bloc combined.

CONSERVATIVE BLOC

- This bloc includes various communities (Conservative Populism, Brothers of Italy, Lega and Forza Italia) expressing a conservative ideology and accounts for 29.6% of users producing 37.5% of total activity.

- High activity is detected in the Conservative Populism community, with 50.8 comments per user, more than double the activity per user of the community led by Brothers of Italy, Lega and Forza Italia.

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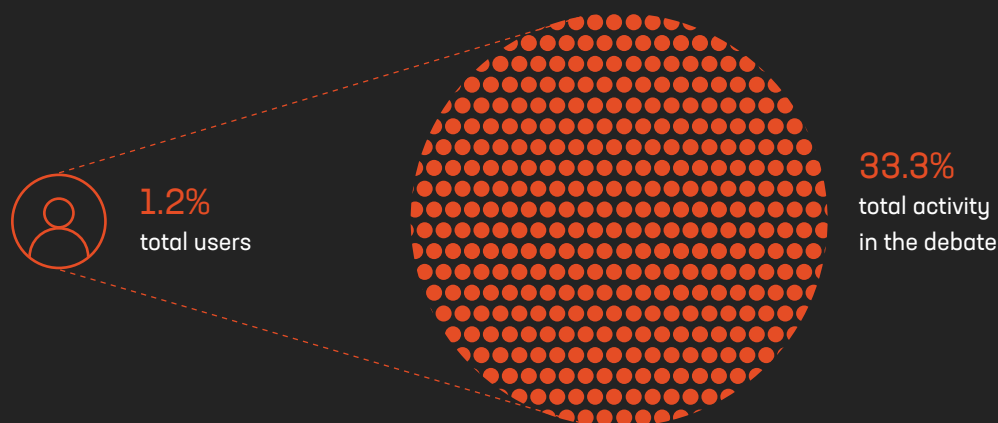Italian

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The Impact of Inorganic, Abnormal Activity Shaping the Italian Digital Public Sphere Conversation
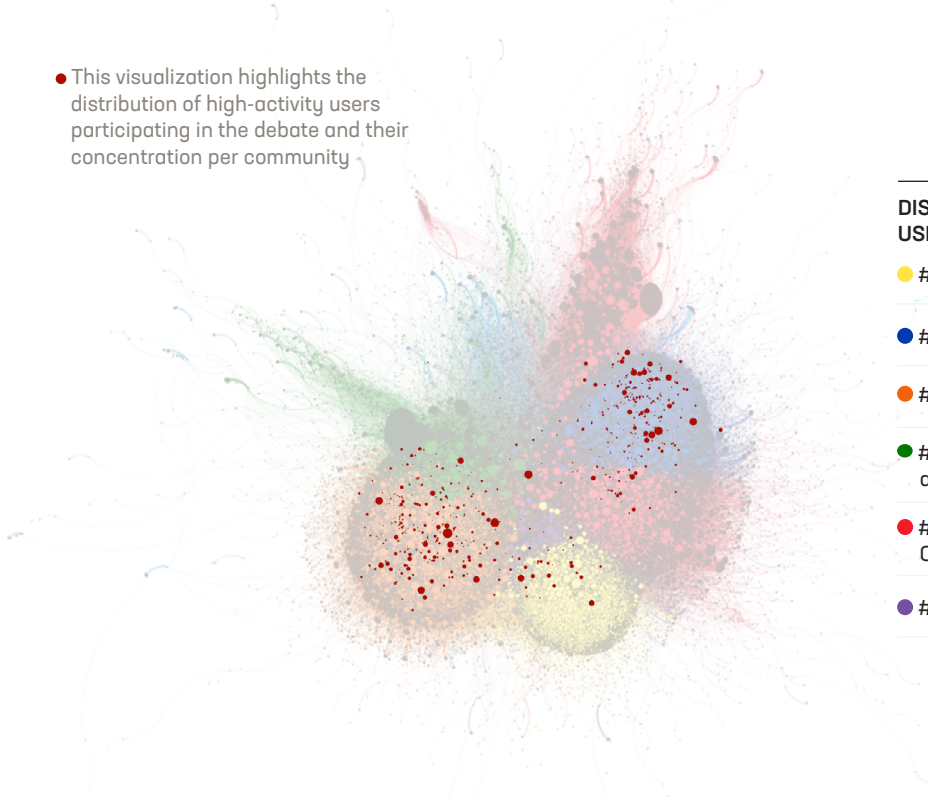
1,763 profiles with extremely high activity were detected engaging in the Italian digital public conversation. These abnormal high activity profiles generated 1,538,919 posts over the period of analysis, accounting for 33.3% of total activity analyzed across the Italian digital public debate. Key insights include:

→ Regarding the date of creation of the accounts, a high concentration of account creation dates is observed between the months of July and August, especially among users of the Conservative Populism and 5 Star Movement communities where together, over 50% of all abnormal high activity users were detected.

→ Of these 1,763 authors, 28% belong to the 5 Star Movement community. Overall, these users only represented 4.5% of their community's users but they generated 55.2% of their community's total activity. These users are characterized by their strong support for Giuseppe Conte's candidacy and their opposition to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, as can be seen in the hashtags and domains they share most often.

→ 24.1% of these 1,763 authors belong to the Conservative Populism community, representing 1.7% of their community users and generating over a quarter (25.4%) of their community's total activity. These users are characterized by expressions of nationalist sentiment, dissemination of pseudoscientific theories, and strong opposition to the European Union, NATO, and the US. The hashtags and domains most shared by these users refer to gas prices, the anti-vaxxer movement, and opposition to sanctions on Russia.

ABNORMAL HIGH-ACTIVITY USERS

1.2%
total users

33.3%
total activity
in the debate

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● This visualization highlights the distribution of high-activity users participating in the debate and their concentration per community

DISTRIBUTION OF HIGH-ACTIVITY USERS BY COMMUNITY

● #5 5 Star Movement	**28.0%****	
● #4 Action and Italia Viva	24.3%	
● #2 Conservative Populism	**24.1%**	
● #3 Brothers of Italy, Lega, and Forza Italia	11.1%	
● #1 Democratic Party and Criticisms of Conservatives	9.8%	
● #6 Popular Union Movement	2.7%	

• Regarding the distribution of account creation dates of abnormal high-activity profiles, the months of July and August 2022 account for over one-third (36.3%) of the profiles created during 2022.

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Key Narratives & Implications: Principal Narratives Characterizing the Public Digital Debate in Italy

Among the six selected themes of interest of interest analyzed, Energy and the Ukraine War represent more than 67% of the total comments associated with these narratives. Almost 7 out of 10 comments related to Vaccination and a quarter of comments related to Energy and the Ukraine War come from users belonging to the Conservative Populism community.

→ Specific communities dominate the overall digital conversation on issues of public interest, frequently diffusing misinforming and polarizing messages and content.

In this regard, the Conservative Populism community stands out, where positions in support of Russia, against the European Union, and against vaccines are widely disseminated. It is important to note the volume of users and activity belonging to this community, underscoring their ability to shape the digital public debate around specific narratives. The Conservative Populism community produces at least 1 out of every 3 comments on all topics except Immigration (in which this community produced nearly a quarter of all activity) and over two-thirds of all activity on vaccines.

→ The war in Ukraine has provoked a shift in the types of contested narratives penetrating the public digital debate.

Owed to its geographic location and recent, highly publicized political and humanitarian challenges surrounding immigration, in Italy, migration-related narratives have consistently been highly contested. Over this period of analysis, narratives focused on immigration have lost relevance, with no single community or ideology outright dominating the Italian digital debate on this topic.

Likewise, politically conservative conservative communities characterized by staunch anti-immigration positions generate nearly 38% of total activity on immigration-related conversations. Despite the presence of disinformation narratives and content linked to immigration produced by these communities, they have less relevance on this narrative in terms of their engagement.

The war in Ukraine has contributed to a resurgence of public positions against the EU, dominated by populist messages and speeches shared by conservative supporters holding the EU accountable for inflation, high prices, and high energy costs. Correspondingly, the EU is blamed for its stance on the conflict, sanctions, and provisions of aid and financial support to Ukraine. The leaders of Lega and Italexit achieved high engagement across the digital conversation with comments related to these narratives.

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KEY NARRATIVES

Energy Sector
- Piombiono regasification plan
- Energy prices. The most representative hashtags are #carobollette and #caroenergia.

Ukraine War and Sanctions against Russia
- Concern over renewal of agreement between Lega and United Russia.
- Change in the discourse of certain parties on sanctions against Russia and arms shipments to Ukraine.
- Concern over alleged Russian interference in the media and through embassies.
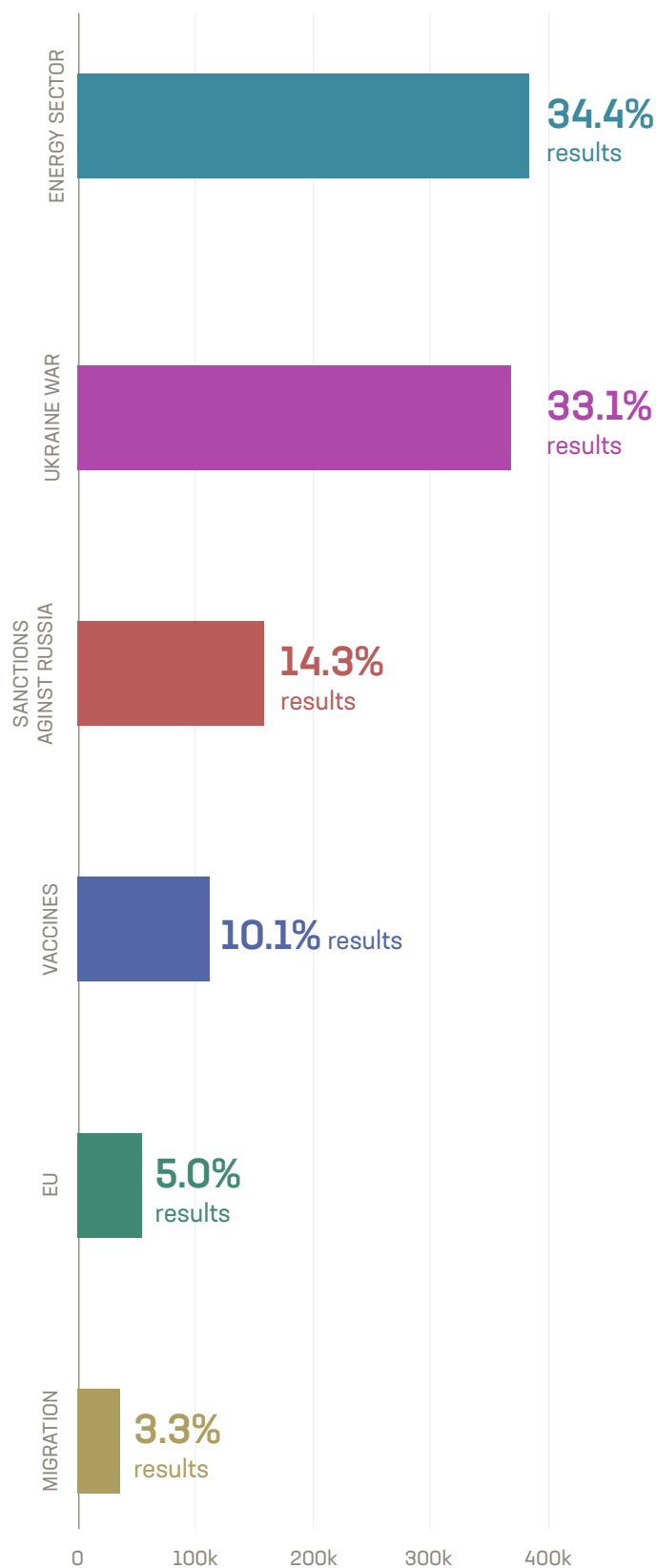
Vaccines
- Comments mostly in favor of maintaining vaccination, although with cross accusations about the management of the pandemic in each region.
- Meloni is criticized for her intention to open an investigation into the previous government's management of the pandemic.

EU
- Brothers of Italy and Lega's anti-EU positions on Hungary's condemnation for human rights violations.
- Opposition to the EU, which they hold responsible for the high energy costs, both for sanctions and for financing Ukraine.

Migration
- Apparent consensus on ending illegal immigration and illegal routes.
- Users on the left advocate integration of immigrants in Italy, while those on the right advocate deportation to countries of origin.

ENERGY SECTOR — 34.4% results

UKRAINE WAR — 33.1% results

SANCTIONS AGINST RUSSIA — 14.3% results

VACCINES — 10.1% results

EU — 5.0% results

MIGRATION — 3.3% results

0   100k   200k   300k   400k

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DISTRIBUTION OF KEY NARRATIVES BY COMMUNITY

	Democratic Party and Criticisms of Conservatives	Conservative Populism	Brothers of Italy, Lega, and Forza Italia	Action and Italia Viva	5 Star Movement	Popular Union Movement	Support for Berlusconi	Debate on Energy crisis
ENERGY SECTOR	11.6%	39.2%	8.9%	19.0%	10.0%	2.8%	0.1%	1.0%
UKRAINE WAR	15.1%	36.9%	6.8%	24.4%	7.7%	2.1%	0.1%	0.1%
SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA	12.3%	41.8%	7.6%	23.7%	6.7%	2.0%	0.1%	0.1%
VACCINES	7.4%	68.5%	6.8%	4.8%	3.0%	0.5%	0.1%	0.0%
EU	17.2%	35.7%	9.2%	18.5%	10.3%	2.1%	0.1%	0.1%
MIGRATION	26.2%	23.8%	14.1%	13.5%	11.4%	2.3%	0.1%	0.1%

DISTRIBUTION BY COMMUNITY

For more details on the principal narratives in the Italian digital debate related to the war in Ukraine, see the following Constella Intelligence Briefing.

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About Constella Intelligence

Constella Intelligence is a global leader in Digital Risk Protection that works in partnership with some of the world's largest organizations to safeguard what matters most and defeat digital risk. Our solutions are a unique combination of proprietary data, technology, and human expertise to anticipate, identify, and remediate targeted threats to your people, your brand, and your assets at scale—powered by the most extensive breach and social data collection from the surface, deep and dark web on the planet, with over 124B breach records and 180B curated identity attributes spanning 125 countries and 53 languages. This richness and breadth enables detection of diverse threats and risks emerging from breach data, surface web and open source threats, social engineering, botnets, phishing data, data brokers, and more to uncover and protect against the diverse tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) employed by threat actors.

Our recent work has been featured in major mainstream media like Reuters, the World Economic Forum, and Forbes, in addition to other notable media.

Reach out to us for a demo to learn more about Constella's 360-degree approach to proactively anticipating, identifying, and remediating targeted threats to your people, your assets, and your brand.

WHY CONSTELLA

OUR TEAM
We're a diverse multinational team committed to becoming the most trusted global partner for defeating digital risk. Constella integrates interdisciplinary intelligence community analysts, infosec pioneers, military veterans, and tech entrepreneurs with advanced analysis of surface, deep, and dark web to protect what matters most.

OUR INSIGHTS
Our diverse team of expert multidisciplinary cyber intelligence analysts delivers real-time, actionable insights to identify threats and reduce risks emerging from social media, the surface, deep, and dark web.

OUR DIFFERENCE
Our unique technology empowers advanced analysis across the entire risk surface for superior anticipation, protecting organizations, their employees, and their critical assets. Because, the best way to overcome future digital threats is by facing them today.