

The “Lazy” and the “Frugal”

The Images of Italy and the Netherlands in the Social Media Discourse of the Covid Crisis

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This paper focuses on the role of the social media in the creation of national images. More specifically, it seeks to analyze how these images can affect the relations among European countries. The case study presented here concerns the debate on the creation of Eurobonds during the Covid crisis when two opposing factions emerged: the ‘virtuous and frugal’ North and the ‘lazy and idle’ South. The main premise of this study is that the Covid-19 pandemic created a fertile ground for the resurfacing of old stereotypes (Ross & Gentile 2020b). A case in point is the reaction of European countries to the Italian and the Spanish lockdowns in March 2020. Italian and Spanish politicians were labelled ‘exaggerated’ (Odell 2020) and the closure of businesses, schools, universities, restaurants, and shops was seen as ‘an excuse to take a long siesta’ (Harrison 2020). The deeply ingrained stereotype of the ‘lazy’ southerners also came up in the political discussion about the Corona Recovery Fund, when Dutch politicians—and especially the populist leaders—emphasized the fact that the Italians were unreliable. To which the Italian press described the Dutch as ‘ruthless, narrow-minded and selfish money-grabbers’ (Leijendekker 2020). At a time when we are increasingly confronted with the dangerous consequences of stereotypes in politics, the analysis of how they are created and disseminated is of urgent and topical relevance (Barkhoff & Leerssen

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2021). Drawing on imagology (van Doorslaer, 2012), the branch of comparative literature that studies the creation and historical evolution of national images, I will investigate the ‘North’/‘South’ dichotomy in the discourse of Italian and Dutch social media. By taking into account a small corpus of tweets in Italian and Dutch, I will explore the effect that these images had during the Covid pandemic, as well as their impact on the diplomatic relations between these two countries. More specifically, this contribution contains the analysis of 157 tweets by Italian and Dutch moderate and populist politicians.

The Imagological Use of Stereotypes in the North-South Divide

Before proceeding with the results and the analysis of the data, two aspects will be investigated: the first is a theoretical reflection on the key concepts of imagology, which is regarded as a lens for analyzing how images are used to fuel political debates. The second concerns the circumstances in which the stereotypes commonly associated with Northern and Southern Europe came to light during the Covid crisis.

The Key Aspects of Imagology

Imagology is the sub-discipline of comparative literature that analyses how a particular culture or nation is perceived by the ‘Other’ (Chew 2006). It emerged in the 1950s and 1960s in the field of comparative literature, but has increasingly taken on an interdisciplinary scope by becoming a topic of study in politics, media (Küsters & Garrido 2020) and translation (van Doorslaer, Flynn & Leerssen 2016). According to Leerssen, imagology “analyses the discursive articulations of national characterizations; it studies them as a cross-national dynamic and from a transnational point of view” (ibid: 14). Imagology is often confused with the study of national identity. More correctly, it is the analysis of the discursive practices in which national stereotypes manifest themselves; hence, not the way a country is, but the way it represents itself or is represented by others. Stereotypical depictions of national character, the subject of imagological study, are referred to as ‘ethnotypes’. They are regarded by Beller and Leerssen (2007) as pertaining primarily to the realm of rhetoric and discourse and, therefore, do not directly

represent empirical reality. Ethnotypes originate from what Leerssen (2016) calls the *effet de typique*, i.e., the fact that certain characteristics are considered representative of a nation because they distinguish it from others. They are based on a dichotomy between ‘I’ and ‘the other’ and tend to emphasize differences rather than similarities (Barkhoff & Leerssen 2021: 3). According to Leerssen (2016), the image of a nation is formed by the stratification of “images and counter-images” (ibid: 18) and the set of all the different images ascribed to a particular people constitute what he calls the *imageme*. The *imageme* contains both positive and negative images and is based on the bipolarity of national stereotypes (Ross & Gentile 2020b: 7). Southern European countries are a case in point: on the one hand, they can be characterized as having a high quality of life, a mild climate, and a generous and welcoming population, while on the other hand they are often plagued by corruption scandals and a criminal underworld. In times of crisis, it is exactly these negative images that emerge most powerfully:

[C]risis discourses were in many ways informed and structured by recourse to historically influential, deeply ingrained patterns of national and transnational ethnotyping and othering. Mostly in the service of an antagonistic identity politics of us versus them and demarcation and exclusion, politicians and opinion makers across Europe have revived, reactivated, and instrumentalised divisive auto- and hetero-images of European nations and people, as well as narratives of cultural conflict that go back many centuries (Barkhoff & Leerssen 2021: 1).

The extremization of ethnotypes is a typical element of the rhetoric of nationalist, Eurosceptic and populist movements that are currently spreading throughout Europe. While it is beyond the scope of this contribution to give a definition of populism or to describe its main characteristics, several scholars (Wodak 2021; Balthazar 2021) have empirically demonstrated that populist parties resort to stereotypical images of their opponents to create an ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ divide. The Covid pandemic lent a new urgency to imagology because “the different ways in which nations and their governments have reacted to the crisis may alter or confirm existing national auto- and hetero-images” (Edtstadler, Folie & Zocco 2022). In this paper I intend to investigate the contrast between Northern and Southern Europe and their associated stereotypical characterizations.

The Covid Crisis in the European Union

In 2020, with the outbreak of the pandemic, the world suddenly faced a new challenge. At European level, there was the need to find a shared solution by jointly addressing the consequences of this unknown virus. The common response was the Next Generation EU plan, generally referred to in Italy as the Recovery Fund. After months of negotiations, causing quite a few disagreements among European states, a deal was reached in July 2020. Economists de la Porte and Jensen (2021) put forward three main aspects in this debate: the fiscal dimension, i.e., the choice of fiscal policy to be adopted; the rule-of-law, which was regarded as a precondition for receiving the funds; the policy conditionality, i.e., the choice of policies to invest in, such as the ecological transition. The fiscal policy was the most complex issue. It led to the creation of alliances of EU member states into four clear-cut groups: the frugal countries, the Southern European countries, the Franco-German alliance, and the Central and Eastern European countries, in particular Poland and Hungary (de la Porte and Jensen 2021; Brunazzo 2022). For reasons of space, this contribution will focus exclusively on the contrast between the ‘frugal’ countries of Northern Europe and the ‘lazy and spendthrift’ Southern countries.

The North-South Dichotomy: The ‘Frugal’ North and the ‘Lazy’ South

The states that staunchly opposed the increase of the EU budget were the so-called ‘frugal countries’: the Netherlands, Austria, Denmark, and Sweden (joined only at a later stage by Finland). They resisted “any form of debt financialization, such as the emission of Eurobonds” (Martinelli 2021: 202), demanding the exclusive use of loans and the imposition of very restrictive conditions in order to access funds (Brunazzo 2022). The coalition opposing the ‘frugal four’ was made up of the ‘PIGS’ States (Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain); of these, Spain and Italy were the most important advocates. These latter requested a combination of grants and loans with minimal conditions. However, the stance taken by the frugal countries on fiscal matters was very clear: they agreed that “adherence to Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights and protect spending from fraud” was a prerequisite for accessing the funds (Non-paper EU support for efficient and sustainable COVID-19 recovery 2020: 2). They

were also willing to support the green transition. For this reason, the frugal countries were portrayed, in the media—with particular emphasis to Southern Europe—as rigorous and unsupportive. During the most delicate phase of the negotiations, some declarations by the then Dutch Minister of Finance Wopke Hoekstra were reported with indignation in the (social) media of the Mediterranean countries. Specifically, the Dutch minister called for Brussels to investigate why some countries did not have enough financial room for manoeuvre to weather the economic impact of the crisis (von der Burchard 2020). In addition to Hoekstra's statements, those made by the Dutch and Austrian Prime Ministers, Mark Rutte and Sebastian Kurz were also based on the same stereotypical assumption. Rutte said that Italy “must learn to stand on its own two feet” (Valentino 2020) and the Austrian Chancellor, Sebastian Kurz spoke of “states having broken systems” (Der Standard 2020). Also in the press there were plenty of references to certain stereotypes that are typically associated with Southern European countries. A case in point is the cover page of the Dutch weekly *Elsevier Weekblad*, showing a man drinking wine and a woman in a bikini, alongside two blonde-haired Dutch people in suits moving the financial machinery of the European Union (Wiersma 2022). Even the Italian media did not spare any criticism: on the cover page of the weekly magazine of *Il Corriere della Sera*, Rutte is referred to as ‘*Dr Strarigore*’, with clear references to Kubrick's film *Dr Strangelove*. It combines the prefix *stra*, expressing something superlative and the word *rigore* (rigor), thereby indicating the excessive strictness imposed by the frugal countries (see paragraph 4). In addition, the Netherlands was criticized by influential Dutch personalities such as the writer Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer, who spoke of his country's ‘repugnant sense of superiority’ (Pfeijffer 2020).

It is, therefore, clear that the Covid crisis exacerbated cultural differences among European Member States, deepening the gap (already present in ideological terms) between Northern and Southern Europe. According to Arndt (2007: 387) the perception of a nation or region as southern or northern plays a key role in defining how it is represented. The opposition between “a cool, cerebral north and a hot, passionate south” is, according to Barkhoff and Leerssen (2021: 3), one of the invariable stereotypical contrasts of how people and social groups are differentiated. Moreover, it is a dichotomy of great

importance at European level. This has always persisted throughout the history of the old continent and had a certain relevance even before the pandemic. The debate on the economic measures to adopt put the question of solidarity at the center of the policy making, since solidarity, in the form of increased joint coordination, has often been identified as the key to legitimizing the very existence of the Union. Already in the Greek crisis of 2008, the bailout politics of the European Union and the International Monetary Fund was interpreted as “the imposition of a protestant work and frugality ethic by Northern countries, led by a pastor’s daughter from the Prussian hinterland, on an undisciplined, self-indulgent or even lazy Catholic South” (Barkhoff & Leerssen 2021: vi). Also, then, solidarity was the most widespread buzzword of the European discourse, as shown in the results obtained by Korres et al. (2017) in their media coverage analysis of the 2008 crisis. The persistence of these stereotypes in the EU has been abundantly discussed in the press: “self- and other- stereotypes also play very well to domestic audiences, providing an easy set of representations on which to draw when arguing for the national position both vis-a-vis Brussels or other EU member states” (Bialasiewicz 2020). These images have been reproduced especially in social media, the fastest and most immediate communication tool existing today. In the two countries covered by this analysis—the Netherlands and Italy—two opposing trends emerge: the tweets posted by the prime ministers Giuseppe Conte and Mark Rutte and those published by populists such as Matteo Salvini, Geert Wilders and Thierry Baudet, whose rhetoric has already been the object of a previous analysis (Gentile & Ross 2020a).

Methodology

In this paper, we will analyze the tweets of some Dutch and Italian political leaders regarding the debate on the economic measures taken by the European Union during the Covid-19 emergency. As stated above, imagology is a method that originated in the research field of comparative literature but has recently been adopted for the analysis of media discourse. Translation scholar Luc van Doorslaer underlines the importance of imagology for the study of news media in the contribution entitled “Stereotyping by Default in Media Transfer” (2021). In this

paper, he analyses the processes of rewriting and recontextualizing by journalists and media experts: “in modern media societies journalistic discourse is highly influential in producing and distributing national and cultural stereotyping. Under certain circumstances stereotyping is likely to function by default in journalism, the so called ‘automaticity of stereotyping’” (ibid: 205). Although this contribution focuses more on social media, the same methodology will be used in the corpus analysis presented here.

By comparing populist and more moderate leaders, the aim is to test whether the former use the stereotypes portraying the South as irresponsible and lazy and the North as frugal and hard-working. Twitter was deemed the most suitable platform to conduct this research, given its essential role as a source for many media outlets and also because, as Bartlett (2014) puts it, it is the social medium of choice for most politicians. The tweets were selected as follows:

Italy

- Giuseppe Conte, Italian Prime Minister in 2020.
- Matteo Salvini, secretary of the Lega, a right-wing populist party.

The Netherlands

- Mark Rutte, Minister-President of the Netherlands, leader of the People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (in Dutch: Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie).
- Geert Wilders, founder and leader of the Party for Freedom (in Dutch: Partij voor de Vrijheid), right-wing populist party.
- Thierry Baudet, leader of Forum for Democracy (in Dutch: Forum voor Democratie), right-wing populist party.

The tweets were collected by using the ‘Advanced Search’ function, which identifies the messages shared by a given account using time filters, keywords, and other elements. In this case, only a temporal filter was applied, over a period of approximately 6 months, from 01/03/2020 to 31/08/2020, from the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020 to the month following the approval of the Recovery Fund in Brussels on 21 July 2020. No keywords or hashtags were used in the search phase, but the collected tweets, for each account, were analyzed manually to identify those pertaining to the European Coronabond debate. The number of tweets from each account is presented in the following table:

ITALY	@GiuseppeConteIT	@matteosalvinimi		Total
	20	78		98
THE NETHERLANDS	@MinPres (Rutte)	@geertwilderspvv	@thierrybaudet	Total
	8	34	17	59

As can be seen from this table, the number of tweets per country and per account is not uniform. This is due to the varying frequency with which politicians use this platform and the media resonance that the debate on European funds had in the countries under consideration. The tweets were first divided by language and then collected in a .doc file. In addition, hyperlinks, images, and videos were removed. Some of the tweets were generated using the ‘Quote tweet’ function that allows the user to retweet what has been shared by another account by adding their own personal comment before or after. To ensure consistency, the analysis will begin with the tweets of the heads of government, Giuseppe Conte and Mark Rutte, followed by those of the populists Salvini, Wilders, and Baudet.

Results

The main common feature of the Twitter language used by Conte and Rutte is mediation. There is a general tendency to write tweets of an institutional and informative nature, many of which illustrate the status of the negotiations in Brussels and the bilateral meetings held with other European heads of government, even those who took an opposing position in the negotiations. Both Giuseppe Conte and Mark Rutte tweeted about the meeting between the two on 10 July 2020, only a week before the final negotiations for the approval of the Recovery Fund. The tweets spoke of “fruitful discussion” and Rutte said that “in preparation for #EUCO it is always good to talk with other heads of government,” who were referred to as “colleagues”:¹

¹ Translation of Conte’s tweet: we had a fruitful discussion tonight with Mark Rutte in The Hague. We talked about #NextGenerationEU and the EU budget. We are determined to quickly achieve a result that is up to the challenges for Europe at the next #EUCO. Translation of Rutte’s tweet: in preparation to the #EUCO it is always good to speak to my European colleagues-heads of state. Tonight, I welcomed the Italian Prime Minister #GiuseppeConteIT in The Hague to speak about the new European multi-annual budget and the Recovery Fund. Links to the tweets: <https://twitter.com/GiuseppeConteIT/status/1281713175583494144?lang=it> (Giuseppe Conte) and <https://twitter.com/MinPres/status/1281700607494164480> (Mark Rutte).

In these two tweets, a relaxed ambience emerges in which the two leaders discuss the future of Europe. Even the photographs show smiles and friendliness, which communicates the willingness to cooperate. In none of the tweets contained in the corpus written by Conte and Rutte, do they mention the countries with which they are at odds. In one post, Giuseppe Conte refers only once to “a few, so-called ‘frugal’ countries” without explicitly mentioning the Netherlands:²

The then Austrian Prime Minister Sebastian Kurz replied with a similar Tweet showing the ‘frugal’ leaders sitting at the negotiating table.³ However, the tone used in this post is much more neutral than that used by Conte, who instead emphasizes the fact that Italy, France, Germany, and Spain are defending the future of Europe, thus implying that the ‘frugal’ opponents are failing to do so.

One interesting aspect emerges in the tweets posted by Giuseppe Conte. He often refers to national pride by stating that Italians should be proud of themselves after the conclusion of the negotiations for the Recovery Fund: “It has been a very intense few days, but this result should make us proud. Proud to be Italian” (21 July 2020).⁴ The tweet was accompanied by a video in which Conte makes a speech about the achievements of the Italian delegation in Brussels. He thanks the colleagues and the ministers who supported him and concludes by saying “I am proud of this result, I am proud of being Italian”. Conte’s focus on national pride aims to create a sense of unity and a confident self-image of Italy. Not only does he not attack his political opponents, Conte thanks all the prime ministers of the other member states for their understanding and support. His attitude is clearly constructive and conciliatory.

The same approach was adopted by the Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, whose tweets never mention, even indirectly, other states, which

² Translation of Conte’s tweet: the negotiation is moving forward. On the one hand the vast majority of countries - including the biggest Germany, France, Spain and Italy - that defend the European institutions and the European project, and on the other hand a few so-called ‘frugal’ countries #EUCO. Link to the tweet: <https://twitter.com/GiuseppeConteIT/status/1284808665116155906>.

³ Tweet by Sebastian Kurz: coordinating our position with my colleagues from #Denmark, #Finland, the #Netherlands and #Sweden on the outstanding issues in the negotiations on the #MFF and #RecoveryInstrument. Link to the tweet: <https://twitter.com/sebastiankurz/status/1284994215949340683>.

⁴ Link to the tweet: <https://twitter.com/GiuseppeConteIT/status/1285547057802027009>.

is confirmed by his use of a generic ‘we’. In his tweets Rutte shows a very positive attitude towards the Italian Prime Minister Conte and says he admires him for his work:

Spoke with Prime Minister @GiuseppeConteIT yesterday afternoon. About recovery and the Italian reform plans after the devastating #COVID19 pandemic. For a strong EU we need strong Member States. I therefore welcome the confidence-inspiring step taken by Prime Minister Conte (27 May 2020).

It is also interesting to note that this Tweet was published just the day before the publication of the notorious issue of Elsevier (Wiersma 2020). However, Mark Rutte, in the few tweets he published about the Recovery Fund and the European negotiations, never refers to the frugal coalition of which he is the most prominent figure. It is also interesting to note that, at that time, Rutte posted few tweets about the Recovery Fund, which can mean that his political line was even more discreet than that used by Conte or that he preferred other (social) media to communicate his positions. However, in an interview with 7, the weekly magazine of *Corriere della Sera*, Mark Rutte expressed a very clear opinion about Italy:

A loan system is much more logical. Loans are also a form of aid. And from the Commission’s analyses, we know that the debt sustainability of Italy and Spain will not be diminished by new loans. That is why our position is that aid must be loans, not contributions (Valentino 2020).

Although he did not express himself clearly in the tweets, in the interview he made clear his opposition to the Recovery Fund, but in a neutral and formal manner.

The Italian and Dutch populists adopted a completely different attitude. At an early stage of the European debate, after the lockdown had started, Salvini strongly opposed Italy’s use of the ESM (European Stability Mechanism), by calling it a “perverse instrument,” “a rip-off” and “a mortgage on Italy’s future”. Another aspect of the ESM⁵ that

⁵ The Italian centre-right strongly opposes the use of the ESM in Italy for fear of excessive EU surveillance and interference in the country’s domestic economic policies. In particular, Salvini feared that new austerity economic reforms will be imposed on Italy as a condition for loans, just as happened in other countries that had used the ESM in the past (Celotto 2020).

was strongly criticized by Matteo Salvini were the limiting conditions imposed by the EU:

Some countries (Germany and the Netherlands) are saying “You must use the ESM money...,” which means they will then come and ask our children for money with a nice property tax. Beware, government forewarned, half saved. ESM equals mortgaging Italians’ future (2 April 2020).

The contrast between Northern and Southern Europe clearly emerges in his other tweets, where Salvini lashes out against the frugal countries.

We find ourselves in a dictatorship in the name of the virus. We will file a motion of no confidence in Minister Gualtieri. P.S. If the Dutch government is celebrating, that means it will be a new Caporetto defeat. (9 April 2020).

In this Tweet Salvini makes an historical reference to the battle of Caporetto (now Kobarid), which was fought during the First World War between Italy and the Austro-Hungarian forces. Italy’s defeat was so heavy that the word ‘Caporetto’ has since become synonymous with debacle in the Italian language. It is also no coincidence that this historical reference is used to refer to frugal countries, since Austria is included among them. In another tweet Salvini makes a comment about the cover page of the Elsevier magazine:

A Dutch newspaper portrays the Italians as idle holidaymakers who should not be given a penny. Yet when it comes to taking back illegal immigrants from Dutch NGO ships, they are perfectly fine with it and don’t move a finger (in the picture: stop giving money to Italians, they are always on holiday! But when we collect the immigrants on Dutch NGO ships that they reject, they are fine with us). (30 May 2020).⁶

Salvini’s narrative revolves around one of the main workhorses of his rhetoric: immigration. In this respect, he leverages on the Netherlands’ lack of solidarity in welcoming immigrants who land in Italy. Again, the lack of solidarity shown by Northern Europe is a point to which he draws the attention of his voters. The second leitmotiv of Salvini’s tweets concerns the relationship between Italy and the European institutions. The word Berlin appears 14 times in the Lega leader’s tweets, which is often juxtaposed with the word Brussels, as to refer to the European

⁶ Link to the tweet: <https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1266682795151237120>.

Union as a whole. If the reference to Brussels could easily be explained by the importance of this city for the European institutions, Germany is presented as a member state capable of influencing and directing negotiations and, consequently, as Italy's main 'enemy':

#NoMes. A few minutes to look to the future. We work to help Italians to heal, to pay rent and bills, not to lose their jobs and hope. But in Berlin and Brussels they only talk about ESM... I won't give up, together we will make it! (6 April 2020).

The ESM has been approved, a dramatic mortgage on the future of Italy and our children. Everything else, such as the Recovery Fund, will only be discussed later, but a perennial dependence on Berlin and Brussels is already emerging (23 April 2020).

As for the tweets in Dutch, it is possible to confirm how the rhetoric of us/them is used very often. Indeed, first person plural pronouns such as *wij* (we) and the possessive adjectives *onze* and *eigen* (our/ours) have a high occurrence.

We should not start throwing money abroad for countries that have made a financial mess of it themselves. That is not solidarity but stupidity. We should pump billions into our own healthcare and economy and implement #Nexit very quickly! (Wilders, 17 June 2020).

The neologism *Nexit* is also frequently mentioned in Wilders' tweets. Wilders is convinced that the Netherlands is devoting its resources to Europe and that membership to the EU is no longer beneficial. This hashtag was also shared by some right-wing Dutch politicians. In their tweets, both Thierry Baudet and Geert Wilders repeatedly state that the Netherlands will be forced to pour billions of euros into the pockets of Italy and other southern European countries, which are regarded as the main antagonists of the Dutch people. Italy is mentioned several times in the corpus as the main beneficiary of the funds allocated by the EU. Geert Wilders even writes "Geen cent naar Italië!" (Not one cent to Italy):

Our economy is in ruins, unemployment doubles and Rutte's Europhile cronies want to give €750 billion in gifts and loans to countries like Italy and Spain. Madness. We need to help our own people!!! #Nexit (16 June 2020).

Italian Prime Minister Conte @GiuseppeConteIT just arrived at Rutte's for dinner to ask lots of money. Our money. I stood there. Holding

a sign: not one cent to Italy!!! We should spend those billions here at home on our own people! #Wilders #Conte #Rutte (10 July 2020).

Finally, the occurrence of *giften* (gifts), a term that both right-wing leaders use to refer to European funds which they consider not as loans or economic aid, but as ‘gifts’, is interesting to note. The approval of the Recovery Fund was seen by Wilders as a defeat. In his tweet, Wilders states: “We still gave €390 billion donations for southern Europe! EU budget + Recovery Fund = €1800 billion. NL is on the hook for 6 % as well as a guarantor. That’s €108 billion! MADNESS!!! Billions that we should have spent in our own country! (In the picture) Take him or leave him!”.⁷ In the populist perspective, the money that Europe and especially the frugal countries, including the Netherlands, will pay to Southern European countries will never be paid back:

Rutte: “No money to southern Europe!” (May 2020). Today: 390 billion donations to southern Europe. Deal with all the lies of #Rutte and #votePVV on 17 March next year! #Wilders #PV (21 July 2020).

Another theme used in the tweets of the Dutch populists Wilders and Baudet is that of corruption. They argue that Northern European countries are not actually richer than Southern Member States. For example, Baudet published a report by the European Central Bank on the net household income of the EU states, which is lower in the Netherlands than in Italy. Wilders, on the other hand, wrote that the private sector in Italy is three times richer than that of the Netherlands:

Look at this map showing the distribution of wealth in Europe by household. What does it show? The “rich” north is poorer than the “pathetic” south. And we just keep paying through “support funds”. Rutte really squandered the interests of the Netherlands at the European summit last week! #FVD (30 July 2020).

Why should we help Italy? Italy’s private sector is three times richer than ours in the Netherlands! Help the Netherlands instead of Italy! But Rutte will capitulate again. He seeks compromise with the devil. #Wilders #PVV #RubbishRutte (17 June 2020).

In these tweets, an attempt is made to reverse the image of Southern Europe as supposedly ‘poor’. In fact, the counter-image is precisely that Northern European households are on average poorer than those in

⁷ Link to the tweet: <https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/1285433774998790144>.

the South. One of the reasons given by the Dutch populists is that in Southern Europe there is a lot of tax evasion:

The Italian prime minister @GiuseppeConteIT is very pleased. He gets 82 billion in donations - from our money - while Italians are three times richer than the Dutch. Because they hardly pay any taxes there. Now we are going to pay for them. (Wilders, 21 July 2020).

However, it is not only the Netherlands that accuses Italy of corruption. An Italian politician accusing the Dutch of corruption is Giorgia Meloni, leader of the populist party Fratelli d'Italia, who was a member of the opposition in 2020. Against the narrative of the Italians as 'fake poor', she contrasts the narrative of the Netherlands as a tax haven. In her tweet, Meloni states: "we want sanctions against #fiscalparadises in the EU, starting with the Netherlands. No more parasites feeding off our wealth and labor".⁸ Although Giorgia Meloni's tweets were not collected for the corpus to have a roughly equal number of tweets from Italian and Dutch politicians, her rhetoric is much more oriented towards showing that corruption is not just a prerogative of Southern Europe.

From the analysis conducted on the tweets collected in this research, it can be inferred that the use of national stereotypes and the North/South Europe dichotomy is a tool used extensively by the leaders of populist parties, which characterizes their language on Twitter. It is probably used with the aim of fueling dissent towards the European Union, viewed with skepticism by these parties. On the contrary, because of their pro-European stance and the institutional role, the heads of government do not make use of these stereotypes and do not exacerbate internal conflicts within the EU by referring to the contrast between frugal and southern Europe.

Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to analyze how national stereotypes are propagated through social media. Drawing on the approach used by van Doorslaer (2021), imagology in the media discourse was used as a methodological approach to identify these images. Indeed, one of

⁸ Link to the tweet: <https://twitter.com/giorgiameloni/status/1248619786344398850>.

the theoretical premises of imagology states that, in times of crisis, stereotypes that had seemed dormant re-emerge. By examining a context of high political tensions, such as those experienced during the Covid crisis, it has been seen that the discourse of Dutch populist leaders revived stereotypes commonly associated with Southern European countries. During the negotiations for the approval of the Recovery Fund, the Netherlands, one of the four so-called ‘frugal’ countries, were often against helping Italy, one of the PIGS states, by appealing to the stereotype of ‘lazy and corrupt’ Italians. In Italy too, many negative stereotypes emerged about the Netherlands in that period: in addition to being accused of being ‘stingy’ and ‘looters’, the Netherlands was also accused of being a tax haven that lectures others while acquiring capital from European countries, including Italy. Another discourse proposed in Italian tweets was that Italy only enjoys the esteem of the Dutch when it accepts illegal immigrants on its territory. The contrast between the tones used by the politicians surveyed becomes even more apparent when comparing the tweets of the populists with those of the Italian and Dutch prime ministers. The latter use moderate and calm tones, which counterbalance the aggressive and stereotypical language used by the populists. What emerges from the analysis of the language of the tweets is that the image of the North is often associated with an idea of excessive moralism, which is a legacy of Protestant ethics. According to Petmesidou and Guillén, “The dominant political rhetoric in the European north and the EU institutions has been one of moral tales [...]” (2020). One could speculate that, while the image of corruption and idleness of Southern Europe does not seem to have changed over time (at least in the media discourse), that of Northern European countries has slightly shifted: from being a bastion of progress and work ethic, the Northerners have been depicted as selfish states that use double standards. Future studies could further investigate the stereotypes that emerged in the political language during the Covid crisis, possibly focusing on other forms of communication, e.g., the speeches or press conferences of other prominent political leaders on the European scene. Furthermore, it would be worth expanding the reference corpus to conduct a larger-scale study with more comparisons between populist and moderate politicians and with more tweets from the other ‘frugal countries’. Investigating why certain divisive

stereotypes cyclically resurface may be crucial to be able to prove their fallacy and to overcome national contrasts in Europe, especially in the face of the major challenges it is facing today.

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