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"In front of you": public figures and personal images in the digital arena. The visual storytelling of politics and its effects*

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Politicians have started to inhabit social media platforms to build their public images and contribute towards directing political debates in peer-to-peer contexts. We argue that their growing social media presences potentially contaminate both the language of politics and more dynamic, less-structured and unconventional voices, typical of the platforms. Social media can act as a stage for the presentation of everything from great ideological themes to personal contents without losing rhetorical and propaganda power. In this paper we investigate practices of political storytelling by sharing images in order to focus our readers' attention on the deliberate construction of relationships between politicians and their voters. We propose a qualitative content analysis of visual contents shared on Instagram by four European prime ministers. We compare their communication styles, tones of voice, and strategic use of the pictures on the platform.

Keywords: politics, representation, images, gender studies, Instagram.

Social media and politics

The last decades are partly characterised by an epochal transformation of languages, contexts, and contents in politics at every level, from the local to the international (Owen, 2019). The main engine of these changes might be the shift of the debate from traditional public contexts to digital arenas, recently mostly represented by social media platforms (Hermida, 2015; Papacharissi, 2010). The enlargement of the public sphere linked to the new media ecosystem reinforces the voices of a connected public (Bentivegna, 2015; Riva, 2021) even if the public's political participation on digital media using "pop entertainment

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logics [sic]" (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2019, p. 127) remains the same as in face-to-face settings. We agree, as Blumler and Coleman (2009) stated, that these new public arenas for politics can be used to improve a general sense of democracy.

In this framework, in politics public figures have begun to carve out visible spaces within new socio-technological contexts (Boccia Artieri, 2012) adapting more or less consciously languages, topics, and strategies to the new media environment. Technicisms and specific political codes have been gradually abandoned in public conversations shared inside several media formats. This has led to a process of assimilating languages and strategies commonly adopted by the networked public even in political discourses, especially in digital contexts (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2019; Riva, 2021; Sorice, 2020). Inspiration currently comes from everyday digital communications. The principals behind mundane forms of social media communication—from selfies to memes, intertextual references through animated GIFs, and checking-in to particular locations—can also be used to address political themes both directly and tangentially (Highfield, 2017). Leveraging the syntax and shape of social media messaging, formats, political messages can also be adapted into quick, simple and informal blurbs, far from the traditional political languaging of parties from times past (Dell'Anna, 2010; Effing et al., 2011; Vergeer et al., 2011).

Many scholars point out the benefits to strategic use of social media by politicians. They can not only intercept and monitor the public opinion, but with social media politicians can also reach a wider audience than before and activate and manage campaigns by mobilising a base of active supporters. They can build relationships with voters, bypass traditional mechanisms of news-making, and influence media agendas (Klinger, 2013; Kreiss, 2012; Larsson & Kalsnes, 2014; Mazzoleni, 2012). In some cases, politicians use social media to strengthen their political base, too (Messing & Weisel, 2017). In consequence, one can see that digital spaces are increasingly constituting the place in which to build a direct and less institutionalised relationship with voters (Sorice, 2014). Doing politics (Bennett, 2012) becomes a private fact both for the networked public and for politicians. On the one hand, "Social fragmentation and the decline of group loyalties have given rise to an era of personalized politics in which individually expressive personal action frames displace collective action frames in many protests' causes" (p. 11). On the other hand, politicians have recently tended to abandon their party's old communication styles in favour of using personal political branding strategies focused on the self and their personal images (Stanyer, 2013).

From a strictly political point of view, focusing on the self helps the process of leading communication around a single figurehead on which to build consensus. In fact, according to Rahat and Sheafer (2007), the main consequence of this shift involves a process of intimisation of communication more and more based on contents that are far from great ideology and more linked to personal positions and a private glance to the *res publica* (Van Aelst et al., 2011). We argue that social media, with their specific languages, constitute an important new scene for politicians who present not only their own political proposals but also their own interpretations of the world, their own models of behaviour, and their selves. Politicians become public figures and manage their personal images using strategies inspired by stars and celebrities (Marsh et al., 2010). Indeed, when politicians enter the

sphere of celebrity, they are "coming to terms with the media age and consumer culture, attempting to personalize or brand their leadership, and [they] are constantly adapting their political communication strategy to communicate through evolving media" (p. 325). The so-called "celebritization" of politics takes place when "politicians act and interact across the increasingly blurring boundaries of the professional and the private and where symbolic connections between politicians and citizens are staged through new mediatised performances (Ekman & Widhom, 2017, p. 16).

Images play a pivotal role in digital communication, and it is evident also when the focus is on political issues, as studies on visual political communication highlight. Some scholars complain, however, that thematisation of images is not an independent communicative element but rather merely illustrative of textual content (Farkas & Bene, 2021).

Instead, according to Grabe and Bucy (2009), political messaging has relied on visuality for a long time since images often play a more important role than words (Schill, 2012). In fact, as Veneti et al. (2019) pointed out—introducing a collective aspect to the topic—images are typically trusted by their audience, and the possibility of a strategic and perhaps manipulatory use of them is generally not on their radar. So, the power images can have is strongly relevant from both social and political perspectives, and this is even more valid in digital realms (Highfield & Leaver, 2016).

The process of digitalisation has caused important transformations from the point of view of political communication. On a primary level, traditional tools such as posters and television advertisements have increasingly given way to different digital media tools (Novelli, 2019), especially in social media. Even if the study of engagement effects of politicians' communication styles becomes more prominent in research on social media and politics (Heiss et al., 2019), scholars have still paid less attention to the role of images in digital environments specifically (Russmann et al., 2019).

We know that an important aspect of the transformation of visual political communication is related to the fact that social media platforms allow politicians to merge personal and professional realms through specific modes of addressing audiences (van Zoonen et al., 2010), but how do visual contents work in this process? What kind of images do politicians build into their social media communications? And what are the implications of the images used?

Special attention could be directed towards the adoption of platforms like Instagram, as some political leaders in the world already successfully do. Instagram's peculiarity is its narrative-tied-to-images format, and two-thirds of its users are 34 years old and younger (Leaver et al., 2020). Politicians that use it should pay special attention to the visual self-presentation aspects of their messaging to try to gain respect among young citizens (Steffan, 2020) with the consequent possibility of broadening the range of subjects involved, although indirectly, in the political life of a country.

Visual political communication in an environment dominated by digital media has been highlighted by scholars as characterised also by a democracy concerning the audience and new kinds of collective participation (Novelli, 2019). From a general sense, the topic of a more democratic participation related to the new digital media landscape has been questioned through issues like the prominent presence of large corporations and algorithm-

based working. We have Google and Facebook, which possibly undermine the potential for real symmetry regarding popularity between, for example, the narratives produced by big political actors that are linked in some way to corporate media and narratives produced by citizens and activists (Medrado et al., 2019). A relevant issue here is the targeting and segmentation of content with filters that favour the formation of ideological discussion and hinder what is fundamental for a democracy versus learning different positions than one's own and recognizing their legitimacy (Riva, 2021). Although these issues are of primary importance and need to be addressed by social research, here our goal is to investigate to what degree the visuals used by politicians on a platform like Instagram can be an opportunity for strengthening democracy precisely through resizing spaces of the backstage (Goffman, 1956), especially at the institutional level of politics.

In the remainder of this paper we stress the relation between images and the construction of public consensus, with a specific focus on Instagram. Particular attention will be paid to those aspects directly linked to the representation of the politician's self, which can lead to a greater closeness to citizens. We also closely consider elements of visual material culture (Pauwels, 2011), that is, those artifacts, objects, and larger visible structures that can help articulate scenes and show to users aspects of institutional political life and beyond. Then, we will present the main results of our empirical effort based on the social media communications of four European first ministers to understand if and how the strategic construction of a public image can both affect the sense of participation by the public and articulate new conditions of democracy.

Goals, Method, and Research Sample

We began our empirical research with the specific aim to reduce the research gap between the textual aspects of digital communication and the role of images. In detail, we carried out a study on the use of social media by politicians at an international level in order to highlight their visual-ability—a label we used to identify each person's ability to use visual contents effectively. Specifically, our research aimed at answering the following operative questions: What is the role of visual contents shared on Instagram in constructing the politician's social image? Which visual strategies are used most often to engage voters? How do shared images contribute to amplifying a sense of democracy and participation in political life?

Overall, we sought to determine how the European leaders in our sample used Instagram more or less strategically by leveraging the options offered on the platform. We wanted to verify if and how digital image use on social media is linked to the possibility of constructing a sense of close proximity with potential voters. To what degree did images play a role in helping to construct a more personalised and intimate relationship?

Our sample included all the images published on the official Instagram profiles by the four European first ministers Giuseppe Conte (Italy), Alex De Croo (Belgium), Kaja Kallas (Estonia), and Angela Merkel (Germany)[1] between certain dates. We selected the sample according to three criteria: the institutional role (i.e., first minister); specific Instagram

aspects - the date of the profile's creation, number of posts per week, and number of followers; and a gender balance criterion (i.e., we chose two male and two female subjects)[2]. Beside our three main criteria, we chose to consider the geographical colocation of the ministers' countries in order to juxtapose both western and eastern cultures and their political traditions, hypothesising that they would impact the leaders' communication styles. However, in the early stages we did not consider our subjects' political affiliations. Even if this aspect could be linked to the way in which leaders represent themselves, we decided to avoid this issue in our study because of its additional complexity.

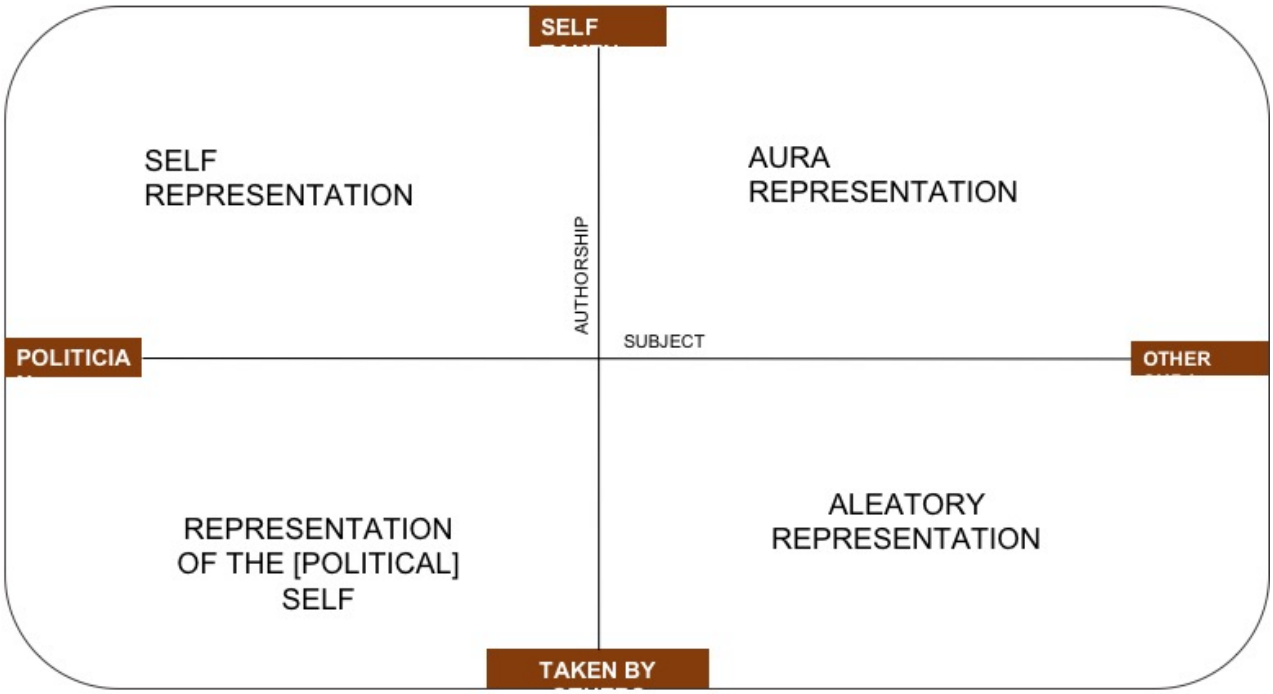
The corpus we drew from included images posted between January 1 and February 28 2021 on the four Instagram accounts of our sample. These months saw the long tail of the second Covid-19 wave and the attempt to contain the third wave of the pandemic. We analysed 150 pictures in total, a total which represents the entire content published during the period of our fieldwork.

The visual qualitative content analysis technique employed was inspired by the Social Media Politics Images model (SMePi; Micalizzi & Piccioni, 2021), based on two main drivers: the authorship and the subject of the image. We consider the "authorship" as who took the picture or created the image in the cases of the so-called web visual cards (Novelli, 2019), memes, etcetera. We separated the images produced by the politician (e.g., self-taken) from those taken by others.

The second driver identifies the main subject of the snapshots. We can consider the subject as playing a "grammatic role" in the sense that it is part of the image; it coincides with the protagonist of the image, even if other figures, objects, or elements are in the photo. In this case we distinguished again two alternatives: either the pictures focused on the politician or the ones with a focus on other objects, like people, symbolic objects, environment, infographics, etcetera.

Crossing the drivers, we obtained four squares. Each square describes a specific kind of representation of the politician (see Figure 1). We assigned each image from the corpus to one of the squares to identify each message's style from our four politicians, our subjects.
Figure 1 is meant to synthetically differentiate four representations: self representation (images self-taken/created by the politician), aura representation (images taken etc. by the politician of another subject), aleatorian representation (images taken etc. by someone else), and representation of the (political) self, those images taken or created by either someone else or the politician.

Figure 1. *Social Media Politics Image Model*



Self representations include images that have as a main character the politician, and they are self-taken: The prime example is a "selfie." They are different from representations of self, where the political figure remains the protagonist, but the shot is taken by someone else. Typically, these images deal with official situations and are characterised by institutional postures with a cultural meaning (e.g., handshaking between leaders). Sometimes politicians share images that are self-taken but that have a different subject, like other people, a scenario, objects, etcetera. We considered those snapshots "aura representations" since they are used to communicate "extended" parts of the self, such as personal interests, actions, or pieces of their every-day life as private citizens or as politicians. Finally, we defined some of the images as aleatorian representations, which are above all images that can be interpreted only via a socio-cultural frame. They are shared by politicians but come from other sources, and they have a symbolic meaning. The most common examples are the memes, but web visual cards, posters, advertising, and more fell into this category.

The qualitative content analysis of the images (cf. Elo & Kingras, 2008; Pawels & Mannay, 2020; Shreier, 2012) was carried out by applying the model, in the first place, in order to obtain an initial sorting of the corpus of data. Then, we went in depth and paid attention to specific elements in the images - the objects of "the scene" in Goffman's words (1979) - the captions, and the micro-ecologies in the shots.

Next, we will present the main results from our qualitative analysis, starting with a presentation of each style of communication and carrying on with a comparison of our four first ministers' visual styles. Finally, we will make some recommendations on strategic mise

en discourse around Covid-19 topics, unexpectedly only partially touched on in the Instagram posts by our sample.

Visual and qualitative analysis: the main results

The qualitative content analysis of our selected images showed how our four politicians' styles had both peculiar points and had some elements in common. For this reason, we will drill down into each of our subjects' profiles first. Then we offer a combined analysis in order to highlight the transversal aspects.

When we studied the published posts of Giuseppe Conte in the period of our monitoring we found that his images fell into only two categories in our model: the representation of the (political) self and the aleatorian representation. The former was characterised by the presence of the first minister in a central position, while everything else (rarely other people) remains in the background. Generally, he was pictured in action wearing a face that does not face the camera. Images like these might be said to deliberately impart a sense of spontaneity and dynamism; at least they lend a general flavour of spontaneity. When we compared his image with the rest of the objects in the scene (cf. Goffman, 1979), almost all photographs appeared shot in institutional contexts but with a distinction between the public ones, such as in parliament, from the private ones, such as in his personal room at Chigi Palace. In most cases, posted images were of indoors environments as opposed to a portion of the last picture that accompanied his Instagram post about his resignation. This one was a snapshot outside the palace, further reinforcing his exit from the institution.

If we focus our attention on the relationship between images and textual messages, we can see that the choice of public or private institutional setting has a primary meaning. When the image was a photo taken inside a private space, the message seemed to reinforce his image as a political man with values, goals, and practical actions in everyday work of central significance. When the picture involved a public institutional context, the message concerned public engagements and commitments that bisect his image as a public figure. In both cases he used visual narratives aimed at constructing a "superleader" profile, using the words of Mazzoni and Mincigrucci (2020). In any case, the pictures appeared to try to introduce citizens to institutional places less familiar to most, thereby creating a sense of active and peer-to-peer participation with the first minister's political work (see Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 2. *Conte in His Office Contemplating an Internal Political Crisis and Covid-19*

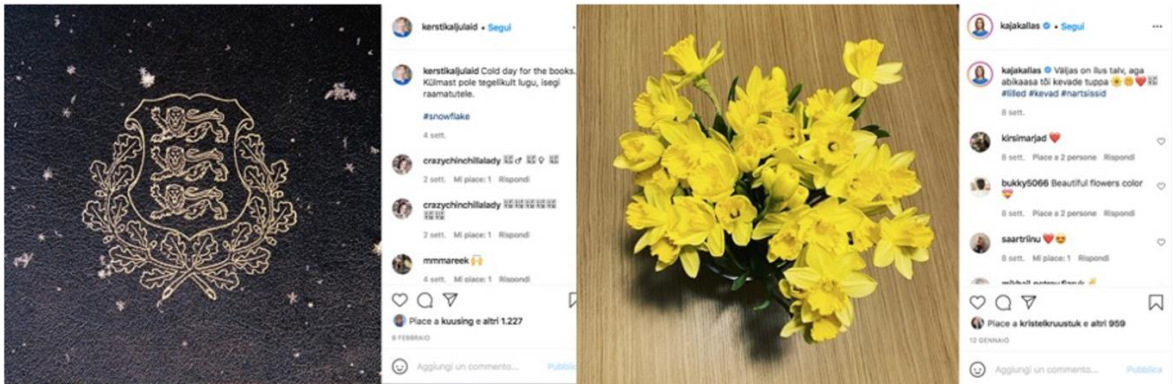
It was also interesting to notice that the first post after his resignation was a video of an informal press conference held at Chigi Palace, again to signal the crossroads between institutional places and political roles often forgotten in the public debate and probably against the process of privatisation of the political discourses both on and off line (Bennett, 2012; Van Aelst et al., 2011).

Only a few images in our sample were aleatorian representations. They were linked with driving topics of that period, such as vaccination campaigns, international political topics, and the election of the 46th U.S. President. Given their rare appearance they seemed to hold less meaning and had lower utility in his communicative style on Instagram.

Figure 3. *Conte at Parliament for the Trust Vote*

In Estonia, during the period of our observation, there was the election of the new first minister. Kersti Kaljulaid left the seat to Kaja Kallas, both women. We considered their Instagram profiles side-by-side to identify common features in their communication styles. Their profiles featured predominant aura representations and the representation of political selves. The first category used snapshots of objects that belonged to the first minister or were meaningful to her, like a book's cover, a calendar image, a favourite chair, etcetera (see Figure 4). In these cases, the object was the real protagonist, and it was dense with symbolic or cultural meaning. In our opinion, it was a significant difference with the Italian first minister's Instagram messaging where the posts were dominated by images of his personal figure.

Figure 4. *A Comparison Between Two Aura Representations (Kaljulaid's post is on the left; Kallas's is on the right)*



The quality of the images might lead one to think these snapshots were taken by the first ministers of Estonia. While the Instagram profile was probably managed in collaboration with an expert, a sense of the politician's authorship and direct supervision still remained. In the case of Kallas's profile, her direct Instagram involvement was confirmed by the posting of some amatorial selfies (see Figure 5, an example of self representation). These seemingly extemporaneous snapshots implied a spontaneous publication without an underlying strategy.

Figure 5. *Kallas's Selfie, A Video Message of Thanks*

Another common element in the two Estonian politicians' postings was the overlap between their respective public and private lives, their public and private considerations. The images of flowers in Figure 4, for example, were of their husbands' presents to the politicians. Even if the textual messaging contained a specific political idea, the way in which it was presented showed a marked sense of familiarity. This style was evident also in the seeming-maternal attitude used in prefacing political topics by Kallas. In her aura representations (e.g., Figure 6) she sometimes added text with a pedagogical aim in introducing citizens to specific aspects of political life, in remembering part of Estonian history, and in explaining Estonia's role in international politics.

Figure 6. *Kallas's Aura Representations With Pedagogical Meaning (from left to right: the statue of an historical character; the seat of the Prime Minister)*

Kallas's representations of the (political) self were pictures in which she is apparently engaging political activities. When compared with Kaljulaid's style, Kallas favoured frozen postures; even when she emulates an action, such as answering the phone or speaking

with someone, she appeared in static postures, as if posing. Considering her relationship with objects in the scene, her Instagram posts always depicted her in public or private institutional contexts, and, if there were other figures present, they were deliberately overshadowed except for pictures involving international politicians.

Based on the posts in our sample, European politics were clearly important in Kallas's vison for Estonia. In fact, the topic appeared to be more or less analysed in her Instagram posts. Pedagogical and personal tones of voice are also prominent in her representations of the (political) self images, too. In one post:

> *I admit I was a little nervous before the video call with Angela Merkel, because she is still one of the world's leaders. But my anxiety was in vain, because as a person she is very warm and we had an exceptionally good and meaningful conversation on digital issues, but also on Russia, China and European cooperation. She also invited me to visit Germany in June, when the virus situation will allow us to travel again (February 11, 2021).*

Considering the aforementioned distinction between political figure and political man marked in Conte's communication, we argue that in the case of Kallas they are totally intermingled thanks to the use of diverse contents and tones of voice that seem to mix public and private domains in a harmonious way. Moreover, showing the personal (i.e., emotional) side of being a politician evokes a feeling that she is closer to an ordinary-woman-that-does-her-job than a unique person that does special work. For this reason, we argue that a style like Kallas's brings viewers into closer proximity with its communicator. With her Instagram posts, Kallas was saying, in effect, that she is just an ordinary leader (Mazzoni & Mincigrucci, 2020).

Conversely, on Angela Merkel's Instagram page we almost never saw an overlap between public and private domains. Before moving into a detailed analysis, we premise that the posted images were in most cases constituted by the still image of a video. They were generally videos in which the Chancellor photographed in the foreground stands on a podium, has a microphone in front of her, and addresses an implied audience of which we are invited to feel a part of.

In this way, her profile held plenty of pictures showing Merkel as a politician, in terms of our model's representations of the (political) self, in her case mostly posing in a didactic fashion. See Figure 7 below. We received an impression of extreme control in how the image felt strategically merged with her other Instagram contents. The textual components reinforced and confirmed the accompanying images. In fact, Merkel's narratives used third person in confirmation for us that the profile was probably not directly manipulated by the Chancellor. We argue that this style—her digital Instagram persona—implies she is not interested in talking to the users. She remains outside the possibility of direct and personal relations with her viewers. As a consequence, the advantage that social media communication has over traditional political communication media is lost. What disappears is the possibility to bypass traditional news gatekeepers and have direct communication with citizens (Peng, 2020). There was a total absence of self representation.

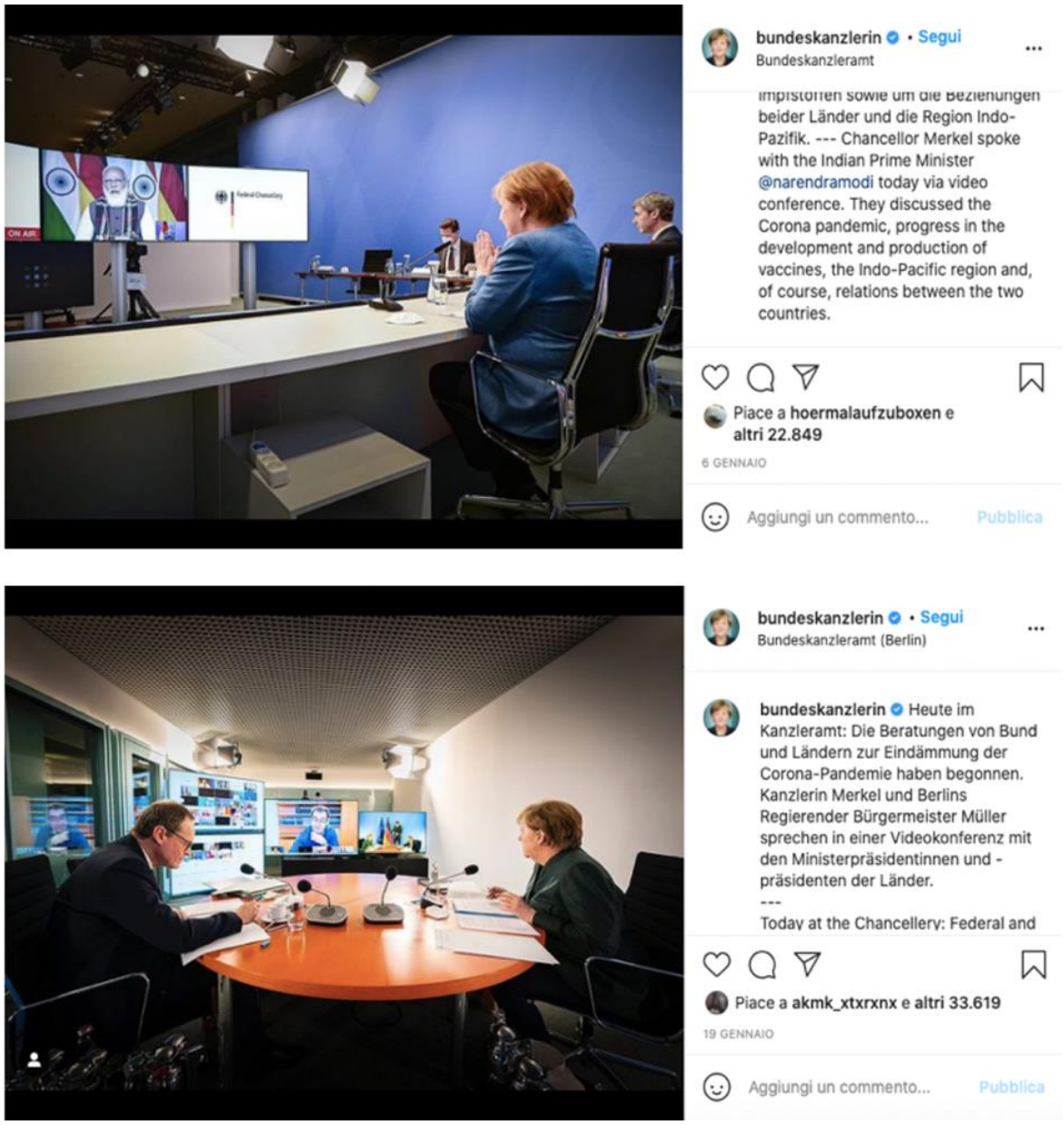
Figure 7. *Angela Merkel's Representation of Self in Instagram Video Posts*

Furthermore, cases of aura and aleatorian representation were also almost entirely lacking on Merkel's page. In addition, in order not to publish those situations which are not public per se or institutional, in over half the images we analysed whoever manages the profile seemed to avoid visual contents that did not involve Merkel.

Also, when Merkel was not pictured alone, she was with one or more journalists in a television studio or with people on screens in a videoconference, for example see Figure 8.

Concerning the other elements that made up her scenes, in addition to the podium, there was often a microphone and a neutral background that always suggested an indoor location. We saw a typical television news desk and related technological devices. In some cases, there were multiple screens mediating interactions between participants in an online meeting.

Figure 8. *Angela Merkel's Representation of the Self in Pictures Where She is Not Alone*



Depictions of non-work situations on Merkel's Instagram were practically absent, and only in some cases the environment suggested that the Chancellor was in the privacy of her office. If we then consider that only 3 posts are visually related to the pandemic and that instead they are 20 the captions related to that topic, we can say that the images do not configure an autonomous communication in the profile. This was contradicted only by those cases in which the form of visual communication called a *web visual card* was used; of a particular type is the statement card, which is generally based on an emphatically written phrase or declaration along with the politician's photo (Novelli, 2019), like in Figure 9.

Figure 9. *Statement Cards as Special Kind of Representations of Self*

In a discussion of what politicians may gain or lose through their participation in the new media universe, risks such as that of seeming fake and insincere (Messaris, 2019) have been addressed, and we must note in fairness that Merkel's Instagram posts do not fail the sincerity test. However, because she did not adapt her strategy to leverage the unique benefits of Instagram, it was her own account that ended up running the risk of looking false, and her participation in the social media universe might have seemed half-hearted to some.

Could one even define Merkel's Instagram communication style as adapted to online environments at all? Did her Instagram page have an actual web presence? According to us, the choice to be represented on Instagram but not the explicit author of her representation suggests an underestimation of the Instagram medium as a useful interpersonal forum for direct and less- institutional, important relations with citizens. It was as if her Instagram profile was considered secondary and totally accessory. Perhaps by coincidence, whoever managed the web presence of this first minister used the typical strategies of fake profile authors. The representation that resulted from Merkel's visual online contents was equidistant from both the superleader and the ordinary person-as-politician figures. Rather, we concluded that Merkel's profile looked like an example of a distant leader or even a non-leader that was precisely attempting to construct a public figure persona online, but we did not come away with the idea that Merkel's images were the images of a political woman, per se.

Tools like web cards, which create a further moderating effect and negate those direct narrative methods typical of social media, were completely absent from the communication strategies of the Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo. His narratives were in first-person, and he used content different from Merkel's but with some elements that the Estonian leaders used. The only thing that De Croo's profile had in common with Merkel's was the bilingualism of text posts, although in Belgium one has three national cultural groups to cater to. Instead, for the German Chancellor her bilingualism was a sort of opening to the international dimension, since her texts were often both in German and in English. De Croo's visual discourse was much more complex, although also in his profile we observed only a few cases of aura and aleatorian representation, and the vast majority of images were representations of the self, taken by others, although he was almost never posing; he was mostly represented in motion, even if only with his arms and hands, perhaps while he was speaking. But the really interesting point of De Croo's use of Instagram was that, even in the

representation of the self and in the rare selfies, the scene was generously populated with other people or objects, and even when various elements relating not only to interiors, but also to outdoor situations only constituted a marginal or inevitable presence, they also obviously participated in the communication process. The represented situations were in fact for the most part meetings with other public figures, and in the case of those images of work situations, they appeared often live, but also online. More generally, we observed that the figure of the politician alone rarely occupied the entire image. See Figure 10.

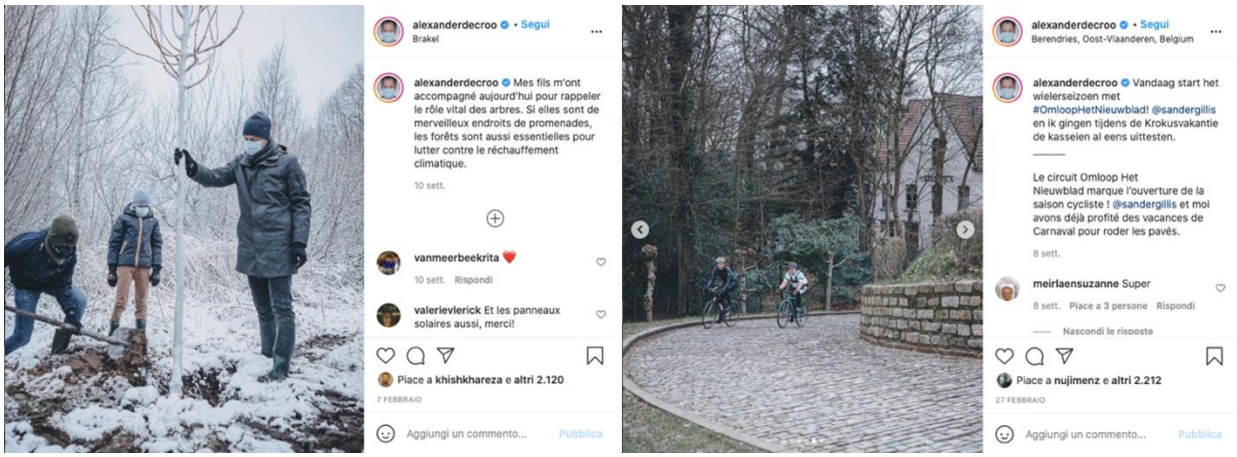
Figure 10. *Alexander De Croo's Representation of the Self With Other Figures*

Prestigious architectural elements, such as in Figure 11, street furniture, a tree, a bicycle, work devices typical of the Covid-19 pandemic time—like a screen or a web camera—were important players on the stage of De Croo's Instagram profile.

Figure 11. *Representation of the Self on Instagram Where Elements of Material Culture Appear*

Above all, De Croo's images seemed designed to help bring citizens into dimensions of political action. The spaces of the palaces of power, both official and unofficial, were often shown. On separate occasions we observed a conference room, an internal staircase, a door seen from outside, and his personal office. But even aspects of his private life were shown that did not seem to clash with his public role as a politician. On the contrary, his private life in these images seemed to reappropriate as a space where the public is built. Take for instance images of a bike ride with a friend to promote the beginning of the Belgian cycling season, his son with a puppy in his arms to recall the love and care of nature, and De Croo in the woods with his children to inspire environmental awareness, and so on. See Figure 12.

Figure 12. *Alexander De Croo's Representation of Self in Private Situations*



Although the visual communication strategy of De Croo appeared to meet the typical expectations that social networkers get closer to the common people, his strategy did not

appear to devolve into a kind of self-degradation that can happen during radical redefinitions of the aesthetics of leadership (cf. Novelli, 2019). His use of Instagram seemed to be a compromise between what the medium offers and the needs of a specific communication strategy linked to his institutional political role. His style appeared strategic and experienced in how it leveraged Instagram's rules, tones, and characteristics. Like the Estonian leaders', De Croo's posts seemed to represent a harmonious integration of his public and private activities, and we left our analysis with the impression that De Croo is an ordinary leader (Mazzoni & Mincigrucci, 2020).

Conclusion

In this paper we shared a qualitative visual analysis of four European leaders' profiles on Instagram with the intent to understand the role that images published on institutional profiles can have in constructing the social representation of politicians. We also wanted to specify if and how Instagram communication strategies or choices, whether obviously strategic or not, could induce a sense of close proximity between high-level politicians and potential voters. Finally, we tried to determine how each communication style might impact a general sense of democracy and political participation.

Our application of the SMePI model (Micalizzi & Piccioni, 2020; Micalizzi & Piccioni, 2021) showed how all the profiles were dominated by representations of the political self, even when there were significant differences between communication styles. With Conte and Merkel, an institutional tone prevailed suggesting a representation that was strategically constructed and totally focused on the public domain, whereas the posts on the Belgium and Estonian leaders' pages appeared more genuine and direct. They showed not only the political side of their lives but also everyday moments. Some of Kallas's posts even reflected significant emotional involvement.

Studying Salvini's online storytelling on social media, Mazzoni e Mincigrucci (2020) pointed out that with his specific strategy the so-called paradox of democratic leadership is overtaken: Salvini and his style especially on Instagram is able to put together the ordinary aspect of everyday life with the image of a superleader. However, in our sample it is more common to see the mise-en-scene of one of these two visuo-narrative storytelling. Most often creating a superleader impression, Conte appeared to remain attached to the public discourse in order to construct his image as both public figure and political man. On the other hand, De Croo portrayed a dynamism and overall interpersonal style that told viewers not only about him but about his political missions, his interests, his family, etcetera. Which factors contributed to communicate this representation most? His use of spontaneous self-images, photos showing spaces typically reserved for personal moments, frequent snapshots not necessarily centred on the Prime Minister's figure, and the use of aura representations were common.

The approaches of our female Prime Ministers were different. Merkel seemed to ignore the main rules of Instagram and had a presence there but was not directly involved in the communication process. She used the third person, did not post contents not strictly linked

with public topics, and shared images of screenshots of videos, etcetera. We associated this way of communicating with fake profiles, not profiles of high-level institutional figureheads. The Estonian leaders, even with their different styles, used a more spontaneous and possibly more ingenious approach to maintaining an effective visual presence on Instagram. Creating a natural effect, the Estonians posted images representing women just doing their jobs.

It is important to emphasise that De Croo and Kallas seemed to achieve similar relationship results but with a different sense of awareness about their use of Instagram. Kallas took a more genuine and ingénue approach than De Croo in her Instagram networking. Leaders of relatively small countries might start off with greater proximity to their voters, and this aspect gets mirrored on digital platforms.

If we compare these results with previous studies that used the SMePI model for investigating visual communications of territorial representative figures (Micalizzi, Piccioni & Coppo, 2022), we conclude that the unique sense of physical proximity afforded by Instagram can be an opportunity to enhance a sense of democracy, but it is not always used. Italian mayors experienced with social media confirm that the platforms can be used to test the quality of their own work, to give direct answers in real time, to show institutional and political initiative, and to provide transparency. Social media representations can positively impact the public images of politicians when used to disintermediate the relationship between majors and citizens (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2019; Parisi & Rega, 2010).

Finally, per the pandemic, our analysis showed how Covid-19 and the consequent international vaccination policies appeared veiled on Instagram. Although the people in posts hardly stood close to each other, only in Merkel's profile were there signs of interpersonal distancing, which might have served as metacommunication. A quarter of the corpus included photos where anti-virus masks or similar implements suggested a context of sanitisation. These posts seemed to be an attempt to create an immediate idea of symmetry between the everyday lives of citizens and those of politicians at the top of institutions. Moreover, a third of textual posts addressed the pandemic in some way. Overall, references to the peculiar health and economic situations that the pandemic created in countries were more frequent in Merkel's and Conte's profiles. This could be understood as a sign of them saying that they share a destiny with citizens, but we argue it was their only obvious gestures towards supporting democratic movements via their visual communication actions on Instagram.

Does digital proximity represent an opportunity or a great risk of simplifying important issues that can lead to reduced critical thinking (Russmann et al., 2019)? Our analysis shows that the potential offered by social media to enhance the visibility of the backstages of politics to citizens can play a fundamental role.

In line with Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor (1979), we argue that politicians that publicise more aspects of their everyday working life where political activities take place and where decisions come to fruition make politics a less abstract universe to everyday people and closer to everyone's life. Although it has been argued often that visual communication by itself does not really improve the world - it does not tell a story by itself; it simply captures attention and provides emotional stimuli (Lilleker, 2019) - we argue that visual

communication on a platform like Instagram can generate a higher level of citizen engagement in politics.

Biographical note

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Tiziana Piccioni insegna Sociologia del marketing presso l'Istituto Universitario Salesiano di Venezia. Collabora con diversi gruppi di ricerca, seguendo il suo interesse per lo studio dei processi di innovazione sia nell'ambito dei media e della comunicazione, sia in quello più generale dei consumi. I suoi lavori più recenti concernono l'uso dei social media visuali nella comunicazione politica e il ruolo delle piattaforme digitali nella relazione tra docente e studente.

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Note

[1] Note that, for different reasons, in Italy and Estonia there was a change of the first minister during the period of our observation. We opted to choose the newly elected one while keeping the previous as points of comparison. However, in Italy we chose to maintain the focus on Giuseppe Conte because the new first minister, Mario Draghi, had no real institutional profile on Instagram at the time of this writing.

[2] Associate professor of Criminal Law, Conte's entry in politics occurred directly with the role of first minister since the first June of 2018, with a government supported by M5S and Lega (right party) and for only two years and half. After this experience he became the leader of the movement. Angela Merkel served Germany for 16 years with the role of Chancellor of the Country, after a long politic career started in the 1989. She had a pivotal role in choices and decisions of the European Union, driving the continent toward a new political and geographical image. Alex De Croo (Belgium) is the first minister of Belgium since the 2020. He is the son of an important national politician, Herman De Croo, and his experiences in the political world are relatively recent, starting in 2009. He has a past as entrepreneur and commercial engineer in some important companies of the Country. Kaja Kallas (Estonia) is the first minister of Estonia since 2021 and the secretary of her party (Estonian Reformers Party) since 2018. She served her Country as Minister and previously as European Committee Member. Her visible vocation for the European policy is already present in her academic and professional career as layer specialized in European law and rights.