

A quiet convergence: The 2022 full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine and Italian Parties' positions on the European Union

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Abstract

We investigate the impact of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine on domestic party competition over the European Union (EU) in its immediate aftermath, with a focus on the case of Italy. Drawing on a discursive neo-functional framework, we perform OLS regression analysis on a dataset of more than 10,000 Facebook posts retrieved via CrowdTangle. Our findings show that Italian parties converged towards supportive EU positions following the full-scale Russian invasion due to a decrease in anti-EU claims. Furthermore, the degree of convergence of individual parties varied depending on their ideological orientation. While extreme left-wing and green parties significantly decreased their discursive opposition to the EU, anti-Europeanism did not abate in radical right parties, which remained consistent in their Eurosceptic stances throughout the analysed timeframe. Compared to COVID-19, the different surrounding international context and policy fields involved in this crisis are associated with different party reactions vis-à-vis the EU.

1 | THE FULL-SCALE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE EU THROUGH DOMESTIC POLITICS

On February 24, 2022, the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine precipitated months of rising tension into an ongoing international crisis. Such military aggression follows on from the 2014 illegal annexation of Crimea, through which Moscow first substantiated its long-standing territorial claims over Ukraine. At that time, the EU responded through several packages of restrictive measures, including visa bans and asset freezes (European Council, 2014). However, the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine represents a radical exacerbation of that crisis and was immediately framed by EU leaders as the 'gravest threat to Euro-Atlantic security in decades' (European Council, 2023). This despite the fact that the conflict did not directly involve the EU or any of its member states.

In February 2022, the European Union (EU) found itself at a critical moment, facing an unprecedented challenge to peace and stability in the region. European government leaders soon urged a joint response at the EU level rather than differentiated national countermeasures. Immediately, the European Council condemned Russia's 'unprovoked and unjustified military aggression' and agreed on a massive package of restrictive measures. This time, however, the EU's response was not confined to sanctions and extended to the provision of large-scale military support to Kiev (including lethal weapons) through the European Peace Facility, the generalised welcoming of Ukrainian refugees into the Union's territory through the activation of dedicated temporary protection schemes, as well as the prospective enlargement to Ukraine through the start of accession negotiations (Bosse, 2024; Capati, 2024a). Government representatives reiterated the EU's 'unwavering support for the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine', stressing 'the

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European Council will remain seized of the matter' (European Council, 2022a, 2022b). This latest event thus adds up to the 'polycrisis' the EU has experienced over the last several years (Zeitlin et al., 2019), while retaining its distinctiveness in terms of nature (exogenous and unprovoked), policy area (common security and defence) and implications (increased EU military spending).

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has aroused significant scholarly attention in the field of EU studies. So far, research has mostly concerned the implications of the war for European integration dynamics, especially in the field of security, defence and enlargement (Anghel & Dzankić, 2023; Genschel et al., 2023). Academic work has also focused on more specific aspects of EU governance and policies, such as the increasing role of the European Commission as a geopolitical actor and the evolution of policymaking in the adoption of restrictive measures (Håkansson, 2023; Meissner & Graziani, 2023). While there is a flourishing literature on national party positions towards the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine (Fagerholm, 2024; Guerra, 2024), no systematic analysis has so far been carried out on national party attitudes towards the EU's own response, including dynamics of political contestation along the EU issue dimension.¹ This research gap is all the more relevant as, ultimately, it may highlight a potential for further EU integration or disintegration to be pursued as part of national governments' policy agenda. Indeed, parties in Western democracies are fundamental actors within the functional model of party government (e.g. Katz, 1987; Mair, 2008). Here, in mediating and representing societal preferences, parties compete for power in elections by presenting distinct and alternative programmatic platforms, which they are then expected to translate into policy once in power (and for which they are held accountable in subsequent elections). Of course, this also applies to the increasingly politicised issue of EU integration (e.g. Hutter et al., 2016).

As the EU issue has been shown to become even more salient in domestic politics when large-scale crises occur (e.g. Braun et al., 2019), the immediate aftermath of such critical events constitutes ideal fertile ground to gauge the positional reaction of parties along this dimension. Showing that parties do change their EU positions in the wake of large-scale crises and how—that is, differently depending on the specific type of crisis (for instance, compared to the COVID-19 pandemic, see e.g. Capati et al., 2024)—may help to predict the different opportunities or risks for the EU project through the political representation of increasingly pro-European or Eurosceptic positions in the future and the consequent domestic policy agendas pursued by the Member States—were further large-scale, economic, health, security and sociopolitical crises to occur. Therefore, this may ultimately carry

Policy Implications

- Strengthening EU security and defence policy: The EU should address the functional mismatch between policy requirements and the current institutional framework in security and defence highlighted by the Russian-Ukrainian war. Increased integration of defence capabilities among EU member states and the supranationalisation of decision-making procedures are essential to enhance collective security and response mechanisms.
- Promoting pro-European narratives: Support for European integration can be bolstered by political leaders framing crises as opportunities for strengthening the EU, as seen in the convergence of Italian parties towards less anti-EU stances. Developing strategic communication campaigns to promote the benefits of EU membership and integration can mitigate Eurosceptic sentiments, especially during crises.
- Understanding and addressing RRP dynamics: Given the consistent Euroscepticism of Radical Right Parties (RRPs), research and policy efforts should focus on understanding the roots of their opposition and addressing the underlying grievances. Engagement strategies should be designed to integrate RRP into broader EU discussions, potentially reducing their oppositional stance by addressing their concerns within a cooperative framework.

important implications for the long-term dynamics of European integration or disintegration (Vollaard, 2014). The paper thus raises the following research question: How did the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine affect Italian parties' positions on the EU in its immediate aftermath?

Italy is an interesting case in this respect. On the one hand, it has a longstanding partnership with Russia based on close diplomatic, trade and energy relations. Italian policymakers typically hold the view that a secure European framework can only be established through the involvement of Russia and, as a result, Rome has consistently advocated for engaging in strategic dialogue with Moscow within both the EU and NATO (Siddi, 2019). On the other hand, especially since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, Italy has struggled to balance its Euro-Atlantic outlook with the desire to keep Russia 'hooked' into Western cooperation structures. That was made even more difficult after

full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, following which two successive Italian governments fully participated in the enactment of sanctions towards Russia along with all other EU member states. Those sanctions disrupted bilateral trade, especially in the energy domain, thereby raising pressures in Italy to lift restrictive measures against Moscow, especially from domestic manufacturing sectors that have been most affected by them. This precarious equilibrium leaves room for variation in Italian political parties' positioning along the pro-/anti-EU axis after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Drawing on a discursive neo-functional framework (Capati, 2024b; Schmidt, 2024), we hypothesise that Italian political parties converged towards supportive positions in their discourse about the EU in the immediate aftermath of Russia's 2022 invasion. The argument that an external military threat brings about collective governance and community-building is among the most prominent in both international relations, with structuralist theories of alliance formation (Morgenthau, 1948; Waltz, 1979) and comparative politics scholarship, where it finds its most comprehensive elaboration in bellicist theories of state-building (Kelemen & McNamara, 2022; Tilly, 1990). To this effect, the security challenge posed by the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine urges immediate collective action by the countries (i.e. EU member states) that feel threatened by it, thus fostering increased support by domestic social and political actors towards the polity centre (i.e. the EU). In turn, the need for collective action in the face of an external security threat reinvigorates mutual understanding and favours the emergence of solidarity sentiments among the threatened states (Hooghe et al., 2024), thereby enhancing trust and cooperation.

At the same time, at a lower level of analysis, support for collective action at a supranational level by domestic agents, most notably political parties, in response to a common external security challenge has been shown to be contingent on their ideological connotation (Otjes et al., 2022). Therefore, while we expect an overall convergence of Italian political parties in support of the EU following the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, we build on cleavage theory and expect the degree of convergence of individual political parties towards more pro-EU (or less anti-EU) positions to vary depending on their ideological orientation. In particular, we argue that, because of their comprehensive and unconditional Euroscepticism (see Section 2 below for a difference with radical left parties), radical right parties (RRPs) are less likely than other parties to display such a convergence following the beginning of the war (on this point, see Hooghe et al., 2024). We test our hypotheses by means of OLS regression analysis on a dataset of Facebook posts retrieved through the Meta-owned CrowdTangle platform. We show that the Italian party system converged in terms of EU positions in the immediate aftermath of Russia's full-scale

invasion of Ukraine. Such a convergence is driven by a decrease in anti-EU claims rather than an increase in pro-EU ones; it is, to this effect, a 'quiet convergence'. Furthermore, our analysis also confirms that contrary to the overall trend, RRP's retained the same degree of Euroscepticism before and after the war started, hence not converging towards a more Eurosupportive (i.e. less Eurosceptic) stance.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 illustrates the paper's theoretical framework and research hypotheses. Section 3 discusses research design. Section 4 presents the results of our empirical analysis. Finally, Section 5 discusses the paper's main findings and concludes.

2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

This paper builds an analytical framework based on a combination of neo-functionalism (Schimmelfennig, 2018; Schmitter, 1970) and discursive institutionalism (Schmidt, 2008). On the one hand, neo-functionalism focuses on the role of crises in driving forward European integration by exposing the mismatch between the EU's policy requirements (function) and its current institutional architecture (form). On the other hand, discursive institutionalism investigates how such a mismatch emerges through discourse, with political actors raising discursive claims about the inconsistency between efficient policymaking and the current form of European institutions.

We thus adopt a discursive neo-functional framework (DNF) to examine how, following large-scale critical events, the functional mismatch pushing the integration process is 'constructed' by means of ideas and discourse (Wendler & Hurrelmann, 2022). Consistently with neo-functionalism, the paper identifies the mismatch between the current institutional form of the EU and its governance features on the one hand—that is, the exclusively intergovernmental mode of governance of the EU's common foreign and security policy and the decentralised control of resources in the field of defence (including the absence of an EU-wide defence system)—and the functional requirements raised by the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine on the other—that is, the need for more supranational modes of governance which do not rely any longer on unanimity rules and veto powers, as well as the centralisation of military resources at the EU level—as a trigger for pressures towards further European integration and supranationalisation of its governance modes. It thus highlights the role of national actors, such as political parties, in the dynamics of support and political contestation vis-à-vis the EU.

In drawing discursive institutionalist insights into our theoretical model, we look at the ideas put forward

by political parties on social media, taking the form of statements/claims in the context of 'communicative discourse' (i.e. discourse by political leaders to the mass public) as opposed to 'coordinative discourse' (discourse among political leaders in the context of policymaking) (Schmidt, 2008). As the literature suggests, while of itself party positioning on specific policy issues follows internal deliberations and ideational confrontation between party leaders and rank-and-file members, parties strategically communicate their positions externally (De Sio et al., 2017). This requires 'the expansion of debates from closed elite-dominated policy arenas to wider publics, and here the mass media plays an important role by placing political actors in front of a public' (Statham & Trenz, 2013, p. 3).

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine constitutes a compelling contextual condition to gauge discursive neo-functional expectations. In his seminal work on federalism, Riker argued that 'the aggregation of resources for war is the primary [...] motive for federation' (Riker, 1996, p. 12). Building on that, in their recent research, Kelemen and McNamara (2022) stressed the EU's uneven political development, characterised by substantial regulatory authority and little military capacity. They argue that such a 'dysfunctional path' can be explained by the protracted absence of war pressures or external military threats throughout the European integration process, which was mainly driven by economic, market-building dynamics. In this vein, while market integration was the institutional result of transnational functional demands and supranational entrepreneurship, integration in the defence sector never took place due to weak security concerns (as well as the United States' commitment to the protection of Europe through NATO). Consequently, to date, the EU's security and defence architecture still relies on decentralised, state-based resources and intergovernmental decision-making.

Hence, the Russian military aggression on Ukraine potentially provides a 'window of opportunity' for EU military capacity-building and supranationalisation. First, the war highlights the functional mismatch between a large-scale policy challenge and the current EU's institutional framework. To compensate for such a mismatch, national political actors such as government leaders and political parties are expected to support delegation of powers in specific policy areas to the EU level, as they prioritise collective survival over the protection of fully-fledged national sovereignty. The prospect of war can thus foster EU defence integration because a 'bigger government' is presumed to be more effective in fending off an external military threat (Genschel et al., 2023). The EU structurally holds a comparative advantage vis-à-vis individual member states in the mobilisation of common resources to address a common security concern thanks to the realisation of economies of scale (Moravcsik, 1998). Thus,

war creates a 'functional demand of war-fighting' that should lead to power centralisation at the EU level (Kelemen & McNamara, 2022, p. 968), which we expect to be reflected in political parties' discursive strategies at the national level.

Second, as an immediate military threat, we expect that the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine may have at first forged a sense of belonging to the same 'community of destiny' in the member states, fostering an alignment of interests and identities across the EU (Genschel et al., 2023). The fear of suffering material and ideational costs associated with war is expected to have produced a 'rally round the flag' effect in defence of collective identities and institutions (Mueller, 1970). Mechanism-wise, as both national governments and citizens start perceiving their survival in terms of 'collective war-fighting imperatives' (Kelemen & McNamara, 2022, p. 973), domestic party support for EU centralisation of security and defence powers should increase. Contrary to post-functional theorising, this contributes to a shift from 'constraining dissensus'—a condition whereby, following the establishment of the 1992 Maastricht Treaty and the European integration of 'core state powers' (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2014), the nature and scope of EU decision-making processes becomes a matter of domestic political debate beyond a restricted circle of government officials, hence involving national parliaments, parties and the mass public—back to 'permissive consensus'—characterised by depoliticisation and elite-driven inter-state agreements—which is the neo-functional precondition for successful advances in European integration (Hooghe & Marks, 2009).

Based on the above, we specifically turn to the Italian case and raise the following hypothesis at the party-system level:

H1. Italian parties discursively converged towards supportive positions on the EU in the immediate aftermath of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine.

While we expect this hypothesis to hold at the party-system level, the degree of convergence of individual parties towards supportive discursive claims about the EU likely varies depending on their ideology. The literature has extensively shown how party positions towards the EU are profoundly impacted by political parties' cleavage origins and consequent deep-rooted ideologies on both traditional and newer conflicts—such as capital versus labour or the cultural/ethnic divide between centre and peripheries on the one hand, and 'new politics' issues such as the environment and civil rights on the other (Inglehart, 1984; Lipset & Rokkan, 1967; Marks et al., 2002). These ideological orientations hence reflect long-standing commitments on key domestic issues, with European integration being assimilated into them. As a consequence, works

informed by cleavage theory have hypothesised that Western European political formations classified as belonging to the same party family will share similar positions towards the EU (Marks & Wilson, 2000).

Moreover, existing works have further resorted to the analytical differentiation between mainstream and radical parties in investigating what determines party positions in the EU. Mainstream parties—including most Social Democratic, Christian Democratic, Liberal and Conservative parties—are generally much more supportive of European integration than radical parties on both the ideological left and right, which tend to share Euroscepticism as a common trait. Historically, mainstream parties are mostly government parties, having promoted and contributed to advancements in European integration for a long time, whereas radical left and right parties have found an additional dimension on which to build their political opposition to the mainstream in anti-Europeanism. Thus, the relation between a party's positioning along the left–right continuum and its attitude towards European integration can be visualised as an inverted U-shaped curve, whereby support for the EU tends to be lower in the peripheries of the political spectrum (in correspondence with far-left and -right parties) and higher at its centre (in correspondence of mainstream parties) (Hooghe et al., 2002; König et al., 2022).

Yet, the nature of far-left and far-right parties' Euroscepticism should be further qualified. Indeed, while radical left parties' opposition to the EU is largely and historically economic in nature, targeting the idea of a neoliberal Europe and the advancement of European integration along free-market lines, RRP's are against the very idea of EU integration, which is perceived as a form of supranational delegation undermining national identity and sovereignty (e.g. Marks et al., 2002; Taggart, 1998).² As a result, far-left parties tend to mobilise voters against the EU based on economic insecurity considerations, such as the negative effects of integration on domestic welfare systems. On the contrary, far-right parties tap into more general feelings of cultural insecurity in defence of the domestic community and against continued supranational deterioration of national sovereignty (De Vries & Edwards, 2009). This form of unconditional Euroscepticism has been integrated into the longstanding ideological apparatus of RRP's, which have traditionally been concerned with the protection of national sovereignty and independence vis-à-vis external or supra-national entities, especially in the realm of 'core state powers' such as security and defence (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2014). In addition to aligning well with their ideological profile, RRP leaders have also started mobilising Eurosceptic claims strategically, in order to attract disaffected voters of mainstream parties (Carrieri, 2023). Over time, Euroscepticism has eventually become one of the most salient issues for RRP's and their voters and has been

increasingly emphasised and owned by these formations (e.g. Fabbrini & Zgaga, 2023; Gómez-Reino & Llamazares, 2013).

This relationship between parties' ideological orientation and EU positions has been shown to specifically hold in Italy as well. For instance, the COVID-19 outbreak was followed by both increased opposition to (e.g. RRP's) and support for the EU (e.g. centre-left, liberal and centre-right parties) (e.g. Capati et al., 2024). To that effect, not even an unprecedented health and socioeconomic crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic was enough to produce a 'rally round the flag' effect for RRP's, which remained vocal in their opposition to the EU all along.

Based on the above, we hence raise a second research hypothesis as follows:

H2. RRP's are less likely than other parties to discursively converge towards supportive positions on the EU in the immediate aftermath of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine.

3 | RESEARCH DESIGN

In line with our research goal of gauging the effect of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine on Italian parties' EU positions in its immediate aftermath, we develop an original research design that has the advantages of (a) being able to measure the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine (through temporal proxies); and (b) being able to measure party positions on the EU in a continued timeframe before and after the crisis (through social media data), which allows us to overcome the limitations deriving from the more infrequent measurement of party positions in traditional data sources (such as party manifestos or expert surveys). In terms of temporal framework, the watershed moment in order to investigate the immediate impact of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine on domestic political contestation over the EU is Thursday 24 February 2022. This day marked the beginning of the fully fledged military conflict between the Russian and Ukrainian militaries, both factually and symbolically introduced by Russian President Vladimir Putin's televised address in the early hours of the morning. The timeframe of our analysis was thus centred around this key date. More specifically, to allow for both the potential effects of this crisis on domestic political contestation over the EU to unfold and an assessment of their evolution over time, we collected post-crisis data for a three-month period after the beginning of the conflict, that is between 24 February and 25 May 2022. Further, as this period of time can only provide us with information as to political parties' positions on the EU in times of crisis, we also extended our timeframe to before the full-scale

Russian invasion of Ukraine by collecting data related to 1 month before it, that is between 23 January and 23 February 2022. The inclusion of this pre-crisis period will provide the necessary baseline for the assessment of parties' EU positions in the wake of the conflict, reflecting the changed international context and policy situation—in this case, in the field of common security and defence—in which Italian parties' stances on the EU are measured (i.e. pre- and post-full scale invasion). Of course, this design choice comes with some limitations, as the positions of Italian parties on the conflict may change over a longer time period. Yet, the shorter-term temporal focus on the first 3 months following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine allows us to gauge parties' immediate and, hence, 'genuine' reaction to this critical event, net of other potentially intervening factors that may influence it in the longer term (e.g. the development of voter preferences on the war, the strategic positioning of international alliances and the EU's own response to the conflict itself).

Spatially, we focussed on the Italian party system: a substantively relevant case, because of both long-term and contingent reasons. Indeed, in addition to the context-specific implications of the Russian-induced conflict highlighted above, political contestation and specifically party competition over the EU has become more and more relevant in recent years, with increasing politicisation of and polarisation over the European issue in Italy. Indeed, Euroscepticism has become much more common both amongst Italian voters and parties, especially during the economic, political, and migration crises of the 2010s (e.g. Conti et al., 2020). By the same token, the Eurosupportive camp has also expanded over time, even with the emergence of parties specifically devoted to the mobilisation of the pro-EU side of this divide (e.g. Più Europa). Therefore, this context is ideal for gauging how political contestation and, more precisely, party positions concerning the EU changed in the aforementioned peculiar times of crisis.

To do so, we look at parties' communication on social media by leveraging data on Facebook posts gathered through Meta's platform for academic research, Crowdtangle.³ Facebook serves this purpose effectively as political parties utilise it for communication with the broader public that is continuous in nature, as opposed to electoral manifestos. Facebook posts also have the advantage of being unmediated, providing us with insights into the claims parties intend to advance, rather than what the news media deem interesting to report (Horn & Jensen, 2023). Furthermore, compared to political formations in other European countries, Italian parties are especially active on Facebook: a social media that lends itself particularly well—for example, compared to Twitter—to discourse and engagement around topics potentially mobilised from a populist perspective (e.g. Ernst et al., 2019), such as EU integration.⁴ Lastly, previous research has shown that Italian parties tended

to avoid placing significant emphasis on the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in their 2022 electoral manifestos as they did not want to commit themselves to potentially controversial positions in the run-up to the general election (Trastulli & Mastroianni, 2024). They thus relied on their social media platforms to discuss the response to the Ukrainian crisis, thereby increasing the salience of the EU in their Facebook posting.

For our data to be as representative as possible of the variety of Italian party positions on the EU, we gathered posts from all formations that were both present and active on Facebook during our timeframe. This resulted in the selection of the following 19 parties, well-representative of the diverse ideological configurations in the Italian party system: Articolo Uno, Azione, Coraggio Italia, Europa Verde, Fiamma Tricolore, Forza Italia, Fratelli d'Italia, Italia Viva, Italia al Centro, Lega, Movimento 5 Stelle, Noi con l'Italia, Partito Comunista, Partito Democratico, Partito Socialista Italiano (PSI), Più Europa, Potere al Popolo, Radicali, and Sinistra Italiana.⁵ As a result, our dataset comprises a total of 10,641 posts, of which 2731 in the month before the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine and 7910 in the three subsequent months.

Methodologically, our work was informed by two relevant approaches: the press-release assumption (e.g. De Sio et al., 2017; Kreiss, 2016), whereby social media is employed as a strategic tool by parties for their political communication towards the general public; and saliency theory (e.g. Budge, 2015; Budge & Farlie, 1983), according to which parties define their political positions by placing a different amount of emphasis on different issues. These methodological premises constitute the basis for the empirical analysis of Italian parties' EU positions through Facebook posts, which occurred in multiple steps. To start with, two independent coders performed a claims analysis (Koopmans & Statham, 1999) of Italian parties' Facebook posts in order to identify the content of their discursive claims on this social media. We coded the claim in the Facebook post according to a pre-defined codebook (see Table A1 in the Appendix) and thus established whether the claim is or is not on the EU and, in the former case, whether it supports, opposes or is unclear with respect to it.⁶ Incidentally, pro-EU posts included calls for institutional reforms pointing to deeper policy integration or the supranationalisation of decision-making procedures—including in the field of common security and defence—as well as the respect for EU values and principles, whilst anti-EU posts comprised demands for the renationalisation of policy competences from the EU and the preservation of national sovereignty. To fully leverage this granular data, collected at the post level over time and across multiple parties, we subsequently constructed a time-series cross-section (TSCS) dataset, where the unit of analysis is represented by each party for each day.

Consequently, this allowed us to build synthetic measures of Italian parties' posts on the EU issue and their related position, that is the proportion of posts on the EU—equating to the salience of the EU issue—and, more specifically, pro-EU, anti-EU, or positionally unclear posts for each party-day combination.

On this basis, we operationalised the variables of interest for our statistical analyses, performed by means of OLS regression models with panel-corrected standard errors (PCSE) (e.g. Beck & Katz, 1995) and lagged dependent variables.⁷ In terms of dependent variables, we relied on party-day proportion indexes concerning *Anti-EU posts* and *Pro-EU posts*. Our focal variable, instead, relates to the temporal dimension concerning before and after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It follows that this *War* variable is most readily operationalised through a dichotomous indicator, taking value (0) before February 24, 2022, and value (1) during and after this date. Further, to ensure the robustness of our findings and a complete assessment of how such a temporal dynamic unfolded, we also provide two additional operationalisations: an ordinal *Months* variable, dividing the timeframe into homogeneous, approximately 4-week periods (January 23 to February 24, February 25 to March 27, March 28 to April 27 and April 28 to May 25), and a continuous *Date* variable.

Of course, several other factors may influence parties' EU positions, of which some are at the party level—for example, party size, positions along the economic left–right and sociocultural dimensions, and being a populist formation (e.g. Hooghe et al., 2002; Hooghe & Marks, 2009; Kriesi et al., 2012; Mair, 2013; Prosser, 2015; Spoon & Williams, 2017)—and others are at the party-system level—for example, party system fractionalisation and polarisation (e.g. Arnold et al., 2012). While the latter do not vary within our spatial–temporal framework, the former all remain constant for each analysed party and, in the test of H1, are hence controlled for with the inclusion of party-fixed effects.

Lastly, to specifically test H2, we interact our focal predictor with a *Party family* categorical variable, which classifies formations as extreme left-wing/communist, democratic socialist, centre-left/social democratic, centrist, centre-right/Christian democratic, RRP, extreme right-wing/neofascist, green, and other. This alternative specification also controls for the *Government status* of individual formations, as this constitutes both an important predictor of parties' EU positions in light of the Euros supportive 'responsibility' considerations that apply to governing parties (e.g. Mair, 2013; Marks et al., 2002; Spoon & Williams, 2017), and an interesting source of variation within the analysed party families. We hence distinguish between parties being in the opposition of, providing external support to, or partaking in Mario Draghi's government during our selected timeframe.⁸

4 | RESULTS

We now move to our empirics. Before delving into the results of our analysis, our Crowdtangle data on Facebook posts provides us with interesting descriptive insights into Italian parties' approach to this social media platform in terms of their presence and strategic use.

In this regard, as summarised in Table 1, Lega appears as the most frequent user of Facebook for its political communication by far, accounting for almost three out of every 10 posts in our dataset (3124 posts). In conjunction with another leader-centred party, Matteo Renzi's Italia Viva (1709 posts), these two formations post almost half of all Facebook output by Italian parties in the analysed timeframe. The only other party getting closer to posting 1000 times on Facebook is Movimento 5 Stelle, historically and traditionally connected to the use of the internet and social media as part of its identity. Further, party size seems to be positively associated with Facebook usage (i.e. the larger the party—in electoral terms—the higher the number of posts), although not without notable exceptions such as the relatively low number of posts by Partito Democratico.

Table 1 also zooms in on Italian parties' Facebook posts concerning the EU.⁹ Salience-wise, on average, just under 1 out of every 10 posts in our dataset are thematically connected to the EU. This amount of salience is not only relevant of itself given the increasing multidimensionality of political contestation in Western Europe (e.g. Bakker et al., 2018; Steenbergen et al., 2007) but also points to a continued increase in relevance over time of the European issue within the Italian party system in recent years.¹⁰ As per Table 1, this trend seems to be mainly driven by the strategic approach of pro-European mainstream formations from the centre-left, centre, and centre-right 'striking back' (e.g. Carrieri, 2021) and emerging amongst the top relative emphasisers of the European issue, alongside a few other formations.

At the aggregate level, the Italian party system emerges as much more pro- (6.38%) than anti-European (1.62%). At the individual level, this is not only driven by expected centre-left (Partito Democratico and PSI), centre (e.g. Più Europa), and centre-right (e.g. Forza Italia) formations, but is also evident by the almost complete lack of parties not even once expressing pro-EU positions (barring a communist and a neofascist formation). Conversely, individual-level degrees of Euroscepticism are much lower and about half of Italian parties never posted anti-EU messages in the analysed timeframe. Amongst the party families most prominently expressing anti-EU positions are those to the left of mainstream centre-left parties, notably the Partito Comunista; RRP (such as Fratelli d'Italia and Lega); and neofascist parties.

TABLE 1 Information on Italian parties' Facebook posts in the analysed timeframe.

Party	Number of posts (as % of N posts)	% of party posts on EU	% of party anti-EU posts	% of party pro-EU posts
Articolo Uno	328 (3.09%)	4.57%	0.30%	2.74%
Azione	414 (3.90%)	8.94%	0	7.73%
Coraggio Italia	178 (1.68%)	5.62%	0	4.49%
Europa Verde	431 (4.06%)	18.79%	3.02%	12.3%
Fiamma Tricolore	206 (1.94%)	3.40%	3.40%	0
Forza Italia	449 (4.23%)	17.59%	0.45%	15.14%
Fratelli d'Italia	513 (4.84%)	3.31%	1.36%	0.39%
Italia Viva	1709 (16.11%)	12.58%	0	11.23%
Italia al Centro	113 (1.07%)	3.54%	0	2.65%
Lega	3124 (29.46%)	4.58%	2.43%	1.18%
Movimento 5 Stelle	879 (8.29%)	10.81%	0.46%	8.65%
Noi con l'Italia	114 (1.36%)	4.17%	0	4.17%
Partito Comunista	370 (3.49%)	11.62%	10.54%	0.27%
Partito Democratico	235 (2.22%)	22.13%	0	22.13%
Partito Socialista Italiano (PSI)	108 (1.02%)	19.44%	0	19.44%
Più Europa	389 (3.67%)	20.57%	0	20.05%
Potere al Popolo	375 (3.56%)	4.23%	3.97%	0
Radicali	352 (3.32%)	10.80%	0	9.66%
Sinistra Italiana	286 (2.70%)	9.09%	2.80%	1.75%
	Total: 10641	Average: 9.29%	Average: 1.62%	Average: 6.38%

This descriptive snapshot illustrates a mostly pro-European Italian party system in a context of increased EU salience. How did the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine impact this configuration? We probe this question empirically through our TSCS data. An initial hunch is provided by the t-tests reported in Table A4 in the Appendix, comparing whether the mean values of both the salience of the EU issue and our dependent variables on *Anti-EU posts* and *Pro-EU posts* are significantly different between the analysed pre- and post-war periods. As evident, the only statistically significant difference in the mean values of the dependent variables is the reduction in systemic Euroscepticism, which is more than halved (from 2.7% to 1.2%) in the post-war period compared with the pre-war one. No statistically significant difference between the two periods, instead, can be detected for the overall salience of the EU or for pro-European Facebook posts. Though only preliminary, such tests seem to point to an interesting scenario that speaks to our H1, to be further gauged in more fully-fledged statistical tests. That is, while the Russian-Ukrainian war does not seem to be associated with a further politicisation of the EU issue, Italian parties appear to have converged towards pro-European positions after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, more specifically through a moderation of anti-European claims.

This picture is confirmed by our regression models. Indeed, in the context of constant salience of political contestation over the EU pre- and post-war (see Table A5 in the Appendix), the Russian full-scale

invasion of Ukraine does exert a statistically significant effect on Italian parties' EU positions. More exactly, as per Table 2, the war is associated with a statistically significant (at $p < 0.001$) reduction in *Anti-EU posts* by 1.5%,¹¹ while as anticipated there is no effect on the overall amount of *Pro-EU posts*.¹²

Furthermore, the alternative operationalisation of our focal variable (*Date* and *Months*) allows us not only to gauge the robustness of our findings but also to better understand exactly how the temporal dynamics concerning the reduction of *Anti-EU posts* after the beginning of the war unfolds. Indeed, by dividing our timeframe into two large periods, the focal variable we have so far employed may wash away a significant amount of detail concerning the temporal evolution of Italian parties' EU positions after the war. Such longitudinal dynamics are hence better clarified by our additional tests, reported in Table A6 in the Appendix. On the one hand, the replication employing *Date* as our focal variable shows how there is a steady decrease of *Anti-EU posts* over the entirety of our analysed timeframe, on a daily basis, while again no significant effect is found for *Pro-EU posts*. Yet, it must be noticed how the size of this daily reduction in Euroscepticism is very small (0.02%). The main models in Table 2 help us complement this picture: by distinguishing between before and after the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, this decline in anti-EU sentiment occurs after it and is, indeed, much larger in size. But how and when, exactly, did this post-war decrease in *Anti-EU posts* come about?

TABLE 2 War and anti-/pro-EU Italian parties' Facebook posts. Full models.

	Anti-EU posts		Pro-EU posts	
War=Pre-full-scale invasion (reference)				
War=Post-full-scale invasion	-1.529***	(0.399)	1.066	(0.882)
Party-fixed effects	✓		✓	
Lagged dependent variable	19.24***	-5.609	10.29**	-3.498
Constant	1.305***	(0.359)	1.378	-1.110
<i>N</i>	1860		1860	
<i>R</i> ²	0.173		0.175	

Note: Panel-corrected standard errors (PCSE) regressions with lagged dependent variable and party-fixed effects. PCSEs in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Our understanding of such temporal dynamics is further clarified by the replication employing *Months* as the focal variable. That is, Italian parties did not react instantaneously to this critical event in terms of their EU stances in this early timeframe, but rather needed some time to gradually adjust their positions. Indeed, the results reported in Table A6 show how the statistically significant and negative effects on *Anti-EU posts* are only found in the second and third months after February 24, 2022, with both the statistical significance and size of such decrease in Eurosceptic positions increasing with each month passing.

So far, these results could lead us to speculate about a potential scenario in which, in the context of a largely Eurosupportive party system, those parties that were already pro-EU stayed the course, whereas those formations that were more hostile towards the EU temporarily 'buried the hatchet', perhaps because of the gravity of the perceived common security threat to the EU bloc. Yet, the test of H2 allows us to add nuance by verifying whether, as posited theoretically, some formations from specific and more ideologically extreme party families are more constrained in the moderation of their anti-EU stances than others.

The answer is provided in our regression models in Table 3, where we interact our focal variable *War* with the *Party family* of the analysed Italian formations.¹³ As evident by this interaction, the post-war decrease in *Anti-EU posts* is chiefly driven by Communist parties¹⁴ (alongside the Greens¹⁵ and, to a lesser extent, centre-right formations¹⁶). Instead, there is no significant interaction effect in the case of RRP (or, for that matter, neofascist parties), meaning that—differently from extreme left-wing parties—their degree of anti-Europeanism does not decrease after the 2022 Russian invasion.¹⁷ We argue that this, in line with our confirmed H2, is because of the different nature of these parties' opposition to European integration as such, more thorough, ideational and structural rather than related to specific policy areas (e.g. social and economic policy in the case of far-left parties). Lastly, it must be noted how the interaction between *War* and *Party family* bears no statistically significant result for *Pro-EU posts*: neither the Eurosupportive nor the Eurosceptic parties change

their pre-existing approach regarding posts in favour of the EU after the war. Therefore, in the aggregate, these results point to a 'quiet convergence' in the Italian party system towards pro-EU positions after the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, specifically driven by a moderation of anti-EU discourse on the part of some—but not all (e.g. RRP)—traditionally Eurosceptic formations.

5 | CONCLUSION

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine broke out exactly when the EU started to see the first signs of recovery from the economic and social disruption caused by COVID-19, creating a new large-scale and supranational challenge. While being the latest in a series of crises faced by the EU in recent years, this conflict stands out due to its unique characteristics as an external and unprovoked shock in the realm of security and defence policy, potentially carrying existential implications for the Union and its citizens and hence changing the international context surrounding the related policy dilemmas at the national and supranational levels. This significant crisis drew scholarly attention to changes in European integration at large, as well as on specific EU governance mechanisms and policy areas.

Yet, the academic literature has thus far overlooked the impact of the Russian aggression on Ukraine on domestic politics and party-political contestation along the EU issue dimension, which is fundamental to steer individual member states policy course on EU integration and may hence carry significant political implications. With both broader (e.g. the Italy's international collocation, including vis-à-vis the EU's role in this crisis) and more specific (e.g. sending weapons to Ukraine) issues promptly made very salient by the conflict, in this paper we investigated how EU party positions shifted in Italy in the immediate aftermath of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Overall, our findings indicate an immediate convergence of Italian political parties towards supportive stances on European integration in the wake of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, driven by a reduction in anti-EU discursive claims at the party-system level.

TABLE 3 Interaction between War and Party Family and anti-/pro-EU Italian parties' Facebook posts. Full models.

	Anti-EU posts		Pro-EU posts	
War=Pre-full-scale invasion (reference)				
War=Post-full-scale invasion	-0.00131	(0.00334)	1.721	-2.144
Party family=Extreme left-wing/communist	11.47***	-2.418	-12.02***	-2.181
Party family=Democratic socialist	0.704	-1.086	-10.84***	-2.611
Party family=Centre-left/Social democratic	-0.00944	(0.00884)	8.321	-5.829
Party family=Centrist (reference)				
Party family=Centre-right/Christian democratic	0.338*	(0.146)	-5.128	-2.811
Party family=RRPs	1.984**	(0.721)	-11.43***	-2.102
Party family=Extreme right-wing/Neofascist	0.765	-1.795	-12.02***	-2.170
Party family=Greens	5.769**	-1.835	2.379	-4.099
Party family=Other (Movimento 5 Stelle)	1.519*	(0.700)	-7.785**	-2.929
Post-full-scale invasion# Extreme left-wing/communist	-7.271**	-2.635	-1.597	-2.158
Post-full-scale invasion# Democratic socialist	0.298	-1.322	-0.649	-2.852
Post-full-scale invasion# Centre-left/Social democratic	-0.00639	(0.00778)	-2.724	-6.814
Post-full-scale invasion# Centrist (reference)				
Post-full-scale invasion# Centre-right/Christian democratic	-0.343*	(0.170)	1.772	-3.274
Post-full-scale invasion# RRP	-1.047	(0.781)	-1.871	-2.181
Post-full-scale invasion# Extreme right-wing/Neofascist	0.114	-1.951	-1.721	-2.144
Post-full-scale invasion# Greens	-5.370**	-1.970	-5.371	-4.602
Post-full-scale invasion# Other (Movimento 5 Stelle)	-1.485	(0.801)	1.485	-3.250
Government status=In opposition (reference)				
Government status=External support	-0.523	(0.628)	-5.696***	-1.667
Government status=In government	-0.463	(0.626)	0.365	(0.721)
Lagged dependent variable	20.77***	-5.556	12.75***	-3.445
Constant	0.492	(0.627)	12.02***	-2.170
<i>N</i>	1860		1860	
<i>R</i> ²	0.169		0.158	

Note: Panel-corrected standard errors (PCSE) regressions with lagged dependent variable and party-fixed effects. PCSEs in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

At the level of party families, mainstream parties maintained similar degrees of pro-Europeanism before and after the conflict, while extreme left-wing and green parties significantly decreased their discursive opposition to the EU. Interestingly, anti-Europeanism did not abate in RRP, which remained consistent in their Eurosceptic claims throughout the analysed timeframe. We argue that, ultimately, this may be down to the different nature of Euroscepticism of far-left and far-right parties. As the external threat of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine directly pertains to the policy domain of common security and defence policy, a moderation of anti-EU sentiment turned out to be easier for far-left parties, which are traditionally against EU economic and social policy approaches, rather than for RRP, which are instead wary of any further supranational integration of military powers that the war functionally demands. Further, Italian RRP either openly displayed sympathies to Russia (e.g. FdI) or reportedly had close ties with Russia (e.g. Lega) (e.g. Biancalana, 2023), which contributes to accounting for the overall lack of moderation in their Euroscepticism as Russia invaded Ukraine.

Of course, our interest in the early party-political reaction to this critical event vis-à-vis the EU is centred around short-term response dynamics, which are more contingent—perhaps even ‘emotional’—and hence unaffected by the subsequent moderation that governing responsibility concerns have later brought upon even RRP such as Lega within the Draghi government or Fratelli d'Italia within the current Meloni government (but in opposition during our timeframe). Yet, our research interest was gauging exactly this ‘genuine’ reaction of parties, net of other subsequent intervening factors that may influence it in the longer term (e.g. to mention but one, the very responsibility concerns that even RRP face once they are in government).

Italian parties reacted differently to different large-scale crises vis-à-vis the EU: whilst they became more polarised in the face of the health crisis and widespread social and economic disruption of COVID-19 (e.g. Capati et al., 2024), they generally converged towards deepened EU integration in the face of the common security threat represented by the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. We argue that, ultimately, these different reactions may

reflect both, on the one hand, the different policy realms affected by different crises and the related responses at the EU level expected by parties based on the ideological roots of their pro-Europeanism or Euroscepticism. On the other, they may also reflect the different international contexts and climate elicited by different crises (i.e. greater solidarity during the COVID-19 pandemic, greater fear during the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine) and against which domestic parties' positional change vis-à-vis the EU is gauged. At any rate, in turn, these different positional reactions signal the potential for further EU integration or disintegration to be pursued within the domestic policy agendas of national governments as a result of political representation in a party government model—especially if further large-scale crises were to occur in the future.

Our paper makes both a theoretical and an empirical contribution. Theoretically, we show the consistency of a DNF framework—based on the combination of discursive institutionalism and neo-functionalism—in explaining party competition on the EU following an existential shock of a military nature. Following neo-functional theorising, our analysis highlights how the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, immediately framed as an EU crisis by political leaders in the European Council, has the potential to push forward European integration by disclosing the need for collective action in the face of a common external threat, in turn promoting community-building and solidarity sentiments within EU member states. By subsequently integrating discursive institutionalist insights, we show how such pro-integration attitudes emerge through Italian parties' narratives on European integration, specifically in the form of claims or statements about the EU in the context of communicative discourse between those parties and the mass public. What we called the 'quiet convergence' of national parties around the EU issue is arguably a contributing factor behind both the Union's cohesive response to the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine—including several restrictive measures on Moscow, the opening of accession negotiations with Kiev, and the solidaristic welcoming of Ukrainian refugees into the EU's territory—and steps taken by supranational institutions and member state governments alike to advance European integration in the security and energy fields, including through the establishment of the European Peace Facility and the REPowerEU programme. In this light, our findings largely confirm Jean Monnet's prediction that 'Europe will be forged in crisis' and show how that is reflected in parties' social media communication strategies at the national level. Empirically, our regression analysis of Italian parties' Facebook posts, aimed at uncovering their positions through social media discourse, sheds light on how EU issues feed back into national politics, with the capacity to either change or reinforce pre-existing ideological orientations on European integration. As the EU grapples with the aftermath of this

crisis, the Italian case serves as a noteworthy example of how external shocks can reshape the dynamics of domestic competition and revamp a founding member's relationship with the European integration project.

Our paper opens several avenues for scholarly work. First, as our exclusive focus on the single Italian case constitutes a limitation of our analysis, future research should extend the investigation concerning the effects of the Ukrainian crisis on domestic politics to political contexts with different cleavage structures, levels of party system fragmentation and polarisation, and democratic features. This would allow for gauging whether our findings hold elsewhere, contributing to the explanation of under which institutional and political conditions, crisis-driven party convergence in support of the EU is likely to emerge.

Second, similar comparative analyses can further assess our findings on the consequences of the Russian aggression for domestic politics and party competition against the effects of other, more or less recent exogenous shocks. This is particularly interesting as, based on recent research, the immediate aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine conflict seemed to be pulling domestic party competition over the EU issue in different directions. Indeed, the former was associated with further politicisation and polarisation along this issue dimension (e.g. Capati et al., 2024), while the latter with a convergence towards pro-EU stances in the face of unchanged salience. Why is it that these two major crises are related to different patterns of domestic party competition over the EU issue? Is this, as we suppose, ultimately due to the different nature of the two crises and, hence, the different positional responses demanded of parties vis-à-vis the EU? Future research should further delve into this puzzle.

Along these lines, future work should also explore more contemporary developments concerning the impact of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine on Italian party competition vis-à-vis the EU. As the full-scale conflict has now entered its third year, did this crisis bring about a persistent change in how Italian parties relate to the EU, or did their reactions during the immediate aftermath give way to more traditional stances later on? Because our paper highlights the political potential of crises on domestic contestation about the EU and, ultimately, national policy orientations on EU integration, longer-term analyses are needed to understand whether security and defence crises can lead to structural effects on parties' EU positions, with important implications for understanding how the EU project may evolve.

Finally, RRP have been gaining popular support over the past few years and currently either hold government positions in countries such as Italy, the Netherlands, Slovakia and Hungary, or prominent opposition standing in the likes of Germany. This is a consequential trend because, as has been argued in a vast and consolidated literature, Eurosceptic

dissatisfaction decreases loyalty to the EU in national constituencies, with the potential to set in motion dynamics of open contestation of the European project and, thus, of European disintegration (e.g., Hooghe & Marks, 2009). Hence, in light of our findings, the more generalised nature of RRP's opposition to the EU and their apparent inability to display any degree of convergence towards conciliatory positions on European integration should be further explored in both 'ordinary' and crisis times.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare none.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Raw data were generated at CrowdTangle. The employed dataset and software syntax are available on request.

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ENDNOTES

¹ With the notable exception of Hooghe et al., 2024, which however mainly focus on populist and Eurosceptic parties.

² Of course, far-left parties that also call into question European integration from a more 'sovereignist' perspective have emerged over time—for example, minor Italian party Patria e Costituzione.

³ As we are interested in party competition, and in order not to meaninglessly inflate our observations with inappropriate units of analysis, we solely focus on political parties' official Facebook pages—not their leaders'. Parties are a more complex entity than individual leaders and their positions are often the results of collective decision-making and internal compromise. Hence, individual leaders' positions cannot be assumed to always and necessarily correspond to parties' positions on each and every matter. Incidentally, our data shows that whenever an individual leaders' position is endorsed by a political formation, the parties' official page shares the post from the leader's page.

⁴ This comparability in social media usage by Italian parties between Facebook and its more direct competitor Twitter (now X) comes particularly in handy, given the latter's recent restrictions on API access.

⁵ Due to the low numerosity of their posts, we did not include Centro Democratico and Patria e Costituzione.

⁶ As recommended by the methodological literature (e.g. Lombard et al., 2010), a prior intercoder reliability test was performed on a random sample of posts constituting 10% of the entire dataset, which led to satisfactory results (e.g. Cohen's $\kappa = 0.893$; see Table A2 in the Appendix).

⁷ This choice of method appears most appropriate due to the presence of issues traditionally associated with TSCS data, namely panel heteroskedasticity and autocorrelation, as highlighted by our diagnostic tests.

⁸ The values of *Party family* and *Government status* for each party are reported in Table A3 in the Appendix.

⁹ Note that all information about posts concerning the EU is net of the 35 uncoded posts in our dataset, as in these cases no textual information could be retrieved by Crowdtangle and, hence, thematically coded. Such posts usually consist of videos or other content posted by parties without any accompanying text information.

¹⁰ For instance, previous research showed that about 6% of Italian parties' Facebook posts were about the EU around the outbreak of the pandemic (Capati et al., 2024). Notwithstanding the different data sources and analysed parties, this level of salience at the party-system level was already higher than the one measured through MARPOR data on party manifestos for the 2018 general election, just below 3%.

¹¹ We have rescaled all dependent variables by multiplying them by 100, so as to allow for more directly intelligible interpretation in percentage terms.

¹² Note that, as a robustness test, we have replicated our main models by means of panel-data fractional regressions estimated through a multilevel generalised linear model. As per Table A7 in the Appendix, these replications confirm our results.

¹³ The reference category of *Party family* in this interaction is constituted by the ideologically central family of centrist parties.

¹⁴ While the Communist Party remains largely Eurosceptic, and in principle against the EU's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in terms of adopting sanctions against Russia and providing weapons to Ukraine (e.g. 'While the Draghi government keeps on pushing for military escalation and sending new and more powerful weapons to Ukraine, the skyrocketing of military expenditures and the suicidal politics of [EU] sanctions, the situation is rapidly worsening for our industries and workers [...]'; see <https://www.facebook.com/100050557896513/posts/529603945401531>), it also becomes much less vocal in its opposition to the EU following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

¹⁵ The Greens have supported the EU's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in terms of sanctioning Moscow (e.g. 'I can only be satisfied for the largely shared adoption by the European Parliament of an amendment on EU sanctions against Russia that I have signed [...]'; see <https://www.facebook.com/100064455649461/posts/351045150387337>) but have opposed it when it came to sending weapons to Kiev (e.g. 'I find the bellecist drift that our country is headed for absurd, so much so that they are proposing to cut VAT for weapons' producers [...]'; see <https://www.facebook.com/100064455649461/posts/350466113778574>).

¹⁶ Both Forza Italia and Italia al Centro have supported the EU's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, including the most controversial issue of providing military assistance to Kiev (e.g. 'Nobody is happy to send weapons, but we must help the Ukrainian people to help themselves [...]'; <https://www.facebook.com/100044498376758/posts/511460120347263>).

¹⁷ This persistent Euroscepticism is also validated externally by several public statements of party leaders such as Giorgia Meloni (e.g. 'The EU integration process has betrayed its original spirit because it put to the forefront financial markets and not people, seeking to level off people's identities instead of valuing them [...] This Europe does not unite, rather it divides. And we Italians, who have paid for the EU's choices more than others, should be united in denouncing the EU's mistakes', interview to *Il Foglio* on 13 April 2022, <https://www.ilfoglio.it/politica/2022/04/13/news/l-europa-secondo-meloni-3904915/>) and Matteo Salvini ('Italy is able to govern itself on its own. The EU should rather think about peace and jobs, not handing out grades', interview to *Huffington Post* on 22 May 2022, https://www.huffingtonpost.it/politica/2022/05/22/news/salvini_-9440599/) during this period.

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APPENDIX

TABLE A1 Codebook for claims analysis of Facebook posts.

Coding category	Description
<i>Anti-EU posts</i>	Posts expressing a desire for less European integration, posts against the EU, explicit attacks against the EU and related keywords, criticisms of the EU, posts on the idea of 'the EU is not doing enough' on a specific subject, posts against European measures or deeming them insufficient, posts on 'defending Italy in Europe', posts on the idea of national sovereignty as opposed to European integration.
<i>Pro-EU posts</i>	Posts expressing a desire for more European integration and related reforms, posts in favour of European ideas and values, posts on the EU as a source of authority and positively evaluating its approval, Europe as a benchmark for reforms, critical posts towards eurosceptics, posts in favour of an expansion of the EU's policy remit, posts in favour of the measures adopted by the EU.
<i>Positionally unclear posts on the EU</i>	Posts on the EU as merely as a topic and without any clear positional stance, neither supportive nor critical of it.
<i>Other posts</i>	Posts on different topics than the EU.
<i>Missing</i>	If no textual information is present in the CrowdTangle dataset.

TABLE A2 Intercoder reliability tests.

Per cent Agreement	96,98%
Scott's Pi	0.89279596467829
Cohen's Kappa	0.89286774599044
Krippendorff's Alpha	0.89284653261948
Number of Agreements	1028
Number of Disagreements	32
Number of Cases	1060
Number of Decisions	2120

TABLE A3 Values of Party family and Government status per party.

Party	Party family	Government status
Articolo Uno	Democratic socialist	Government
Azione	Centrist	External support
Coraggio Italia	Centre-right/Christian democratic	External support
Europa Verde	Green	Opposition
Fiamma Tricolore	Extreme right-wing/Neofascist	Opposition
Forza Italia	Centre-right/Christian democratic	Government
Fratelli d'Italia	RRP	Opposition
Italia Viva	Centrist	Government
Italia al Centro	Centre-right/Christian democratic	External support
Lega	RRP	Government
Movimento 5 Stelle	Other	Government
Noi con l'Italia	Centre-right/Christian democratic	Government
Partito Comunista	Extreme left-wing/Communist	Opposition
Partito Democratico	Centre-left	Government
Partito Socialista Italiano (PSI)	Centre-left	External support
Più Europa	Centrist	Government
Potere al Popolo	Extreme left-wing/Communist	Opposition
Radicali	Centrist	External support
Sinistra Italiana	Democratic socialist	Opposition

TABLE A4 T-tests on pre- and post-outbreak of the war mean values of posts on the EU, *Anti-EU Posts*, and *Pro-EU Posts*.

Variable	Pre-outbreak of the war mean (percentage of daily posts by party)	Post-outbreak of the war mean (percentage of daily posts by party)	Statistical significance
Posts on the EU	10.78%	10.09%	Not statistically significant (Pr(T > t) = 0.5)
Anti-EU posts	2.7%	1.2%	$p < 0.001$
Pro-EU posts	6.9%	7.7%	Not statistically significant (Pr(T > t) = 0.37)

TABLE A5 War and EU salience in Italian parties' Facebook posts. Full model.

	Posts on the EU	
War = Pre-outbreak (reference)		
War = Post-outbreak	-0.631	-1.008
Party-fixed effects	✓	
Lagged-dependent variable	13.88***	-2.961
Constant	4.693**	-1.662
<i>N</i>	1860	
<i>R</i> ²	0.128	

Note: Panel-corrected standard errors (PCSE) regressions with lagged dependent variable and party-fixed effects. PCSEs in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

TABLE A6 Date/Months and anti-/pro-EU Italian parties' Facebook posts. Full models.

	Anti-EU posts		Pro-EU posts		Anti-EU posts		Pro-EU posts	
Date	-0.0237***	(0.00491)	-0.0173	(0.0108)				
Month = Pre-outbreak of the war (reference)								
Month = First post-outbreak of the war					-0.671	(0.481)	1.289	-1.073
Month = Second post-outbreak of the war					-1.357**	(0.494)	0.849	-1.054
Month = Third post-outbreak of the war					-2.174***	(0.486)	-0.641	-1.081
Party-fixed effects	✓		✓		✓		✓	
Lagged-dependent variable	18.69***	-5.600	10.19**	-3.494	18.80***	-5.598	10.06**	-3.499
Constant	1057.7***	(219.4)	775.2	(480.0)	1.152**	(0.353)	1.751	-1.098
<i>N</i>	1860		1860		1860		1860	
<i>R</i> ²	0.177		0.175		0.176		0.176	

Note: Panel-corrected standard errors (PCSE) regressions with lagged dependent variable and party-fixed effects. PCSEs in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

TABLE A7 War and anti-/pro-EU Italian parties' Facebook posts: Robustness test. Full models.

	Anti-EU posts		Pro-EU posts	
War = Pre-outbreak (reference)				
War = Post-outbreak	-1.099***	(0.220)	0.219	(0.147)
Lagged dependent variable	1.919*	(0.750)	0.718*	(0.300)
Party-fixed effects	✓		✓	
Constant	-3.853***	-1.014	-2.468***	(0.369)
var(_cons[Party])	9.17e-35	(1.66e-18)	3.39e-35	(6.14e-19)
<i>N</i>	1098		1667	

Note: Panel-data fractional regressions estimated through multilevel generalised linear model. Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

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