

SOCIAL STRATEGIC STUDIES

**UNCERTAINTY AND INFORMATION SUPREMACY:
THE ITALIAN SOCIAL ECOSYSTEM
VIS-A-VIS THE PANDEMIC**

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DIGITAL MEDIA

Introduction

The global pandemic caused by the novel Covid-19 has seen Italy as one of the worst-affected nations worldwide. The measures adopted by the government in response to the health emergency had a profound impact on the country's political, social and economic scenario. This situation has grafted onto an international arena which, regardless of the quantitative difference from country to country, has been deeply affected, both from an economic and a political point of view. This global crisis has left societies bare, witnessed the United States withdrawing from its 50 years of global leadership, and questioned the political and economic pillars which have been defining globalization for decades.

However, as a global phenomenon, the pandemic has involved the whole international community, which, after confronting the containment phase and its widespread effects, is wondering about the future direction of the global political balance.

From this perspective, the Italian case has been distinguishing itself by the increasing mobilization of humanitarian tools in tandem with traditional diplomatic instruments typically enacted by those who aim at shaping future global power structures. In particular, the most dynamic personalities in this new "geopolitics of aid" have been Russia and China, which, in parallel with the noble intentions of supporting our country, pursue far wider foreign policy objectives, establishing the premises of the post-Covid era.

A privileged yardstick for assessing the effectiveness of the Russian and Chinese aid policy is analysing the perception of the Italian public, and within it, those active in the ecosystem of online conversations.

The aim of this work is, precisely, to analyze how Italian users have reacted to the actions of Russia and China and, consequently, to assess whether humanitarian aid has managed, at least in terms of popular response, to obtain a positive response in line with their foreign policy objectives.

Pandemic, infodemic and information supremacy

The global pandemic caused by the spread of Covid-19 represents a historic event whose social, economic and political impacts have just started to show. The lockdown measures, adopted differently by the affected countries, have resulted in immediate effects in terms of economic contraction, psychological stress (individual and collective) and polarization of the public debate. The world's present and future uncertainty which represents the condition imposed with which national institutional actors and major global powers must deal with while redefining the relation between state and citizens and repositioning themselves in the international arena. In this sense, a domestic and international

political condition of uncertainty, concern and instability represents the pivotal time in the competition between those who want to protect the pre-pandemic status quo and – on the other hand – those who want to build a new power order in the post-pandemic one. In addition to this, uncertainty tends to question contingent principles and structure, making public opinion potentially more vulnerable to the most disparate solicitations.

In this context, strategic communication activities, whether “pacific” or more authentically of info-warfare, have a fundamental role in the achievement of objectives by national institutions or third-party actors. The volume and content of online conversations represent an effective barometer on local sentiments, whose findings can be used later to act in the virtual agorà in defense of their own interests.

The quantity and quality of content published online in connection with the global epidemic of COVID-19 is unprecedented. The World Health Organization (WHO) has used the term ‘**infodemic**’ to describe the dynamics triggered by the uncontrolled succession of updates, unverified news, official declarations and exchanges of information between citizens (WHO COVID-19 Situation Report 13 - [TECHNICAL FOCUS: Risk communication and community engagement](#)). The rapid production of online content and the complexity of the communication dynamics impose ‘**fast times**’ on decision makers and analysts, dictated by the digital information domain thereby avoiding worst consequences of the contagion between **the online and offline ecosystem**. The pandemic has suddenly placed Italy at the center of the international arena, as only few times before, due to multiple factors: the extent of the contagion and its economic and social impacts, the polarization of the public debate around the measures of lockdown and shutdown imposed on the industrial and commercial sectors, the implications of the ‘international aid’ match, also played by some non-Euro-Atlantic bloc countries (such as Russia and China) and lastly, the tense diatribe between Rome and the European Union on support measures.

It follows that the events occurring in Rome are a subject of discussion, criticisms and appreciation by the communities of citizens, as well as possible attacks and **attempts to manipulate** or influence **the assessment of the government’s actions** and the **integrity of the Country System** by foreign actors. The information ecosystem turns into the battleground in which **disinformation** and official information confront each other.

The search for **information supremacy** by various actors becomes, therefore, a priority to intercept users’ feelings and evaluate the receptivity and perception of the Italian public with respect to a wide range of actions, from domestic policies to international aid.

Black Plague and Spanish influence: the most queried terms by Italians

The COVID-19 pandemic has represented an unknown threat to the Italian citizens. The immediate effect has been a growing demand for information, stimulated by the lockdown measures which increased the time available for users to surf and inquire on the internet.

Table 1 lists the first 20 pages of Wikipedia Italy by number of views during March 2020. Significantly, the first position does not see the Italian current situation (in third place) but rather the **Spanish influence**. Among the first 20 entries we also find the **Black plague**, Alessandro Manzoni, Giacomo Leopardi. The ranking could be read as the expression of at least four different information needs expressed by users:

1. **Give a meaning to uncertainty** (Spanish influence, black plague, Alessandro Manzoni, Giacomo Leopardi, plague 21°, Indulgence 44°, Decameron 78°, Third secret of Fatima 79°),
2. **Keep up to date with the current situation** (pandemic and all pages related to the covid-19, virus, flock immunity 34°)
3. Cope with the **quarantine** imposed by the state institutions (Rai, Élite and various other TV series),
4. Manage the **present situation** and the following phase of **resumption of production activities** (Giuseppe Conte, redundancy fund 24°, European Stability Mechanism 27°, Guido Bertolaso 28°, Angelo Borrelli 66°, European Union 69°, Ministerial Decree 76°, Mario Draghi 93°).

Posizione	Pagina	Modifiche	Editori	Visualizzazioni
1	Influenza spagnola	100	60	1.319.958
2	Pandemia	173	87	1.226.497
3	Pandemia di covid-19 del 2020 in Italia	895	146	920.748
4	Rai	17	15	874.826
5	Giuseppe Conte	101	56	835.006
6	Pandemia di covid-19 del 2019-2020	380	86	740.593
7	Coronavirus	77	39	737.749
8	Covid-19	460	134	716.093
9	Peste nera	75	51	576.900
10	Élite (serie televisiva)	97	43	570.137
11	Italia	11	11	497.267
12	Pandemia di covid-19 del 2019-2020 nel mondo	157	79	495.606
13	Sars-cov-2	149	70	495.087
14	Alessandro Manzoni	5	3	495.066
15	La Casa di Carta (serie televisiva)	16	4	491.472
16	Epidemia di covid-19 del 2019-2020	1	1	481.163
17	Epidemia di covid-19 del 2020 in Italia	3	3	465.963
18	Giacomo leopardi	45	2	453.310
19	Virus (biologia)	44	32	447.877
20	Riverdale (serie televisiva)	28	21	444.609

Tab.1 Tab.1 Ranking of the 20 most visited Wikipedia pages in Italy during March 2020

Sending aid to Italy: Russia and China

During the course of March, the Italian information environment described so far was disrupted by the entrance of two foreign players: China and Russia (respectively 44th and 177th position, among the most viewed pages). Their arrival on the scene derives directly from the aid provided to our country in the face of the health emergency. China has provided Italy with masks, respirators, ventilators and other medical equipment, as well as a team of doctors specialized in epidemics who already faced the virus in Wuhan. For its part, Russia also sent masks, ventilators, disinfection equipment and a mobile lab for clinical analysis, as well as about 120 military units belonging to the Radiological, Chemical and Biological Defence Unit (RChBD).

Moscow and Beijing, although relying on ancient and consolidated relationships with Rome, do not belong to the pantheon of traditional Italian allies of the Euro-Atlantic bloc and, on a not negligible number of international dossiers, have assumed conflicting positions with it. Furthermore, although aid represents an undoubted example of solidarity, it must not be forgotten that it belongs to the range of foreign policy instruments that a country uses to protect its interests. In the case of China, the aid is functional to relaunching an international image under attack (especially from the United States) because of the alleged responsibilities related to the management of the initial phase of the epidemic. In addition, Beijing has an interest in the world overcoming the pandemic in the shortest time possible so that it can resume its commercial machine and its leading role in industrial production. Italy is also part of this aspiration, especially by virtue of its strategic position for the Belt and Road Initiative (think of Chinese investments in the port industries) and its centrality in the 5G dossier. An aspiration shared by Rome, which sees a privileged customer in the growing Chinese middle class, especially for Italian excellence in food, textile, technological and design exports. Moscow has to rebuild its international image too. The annexation of Crimea and the Donbas war, the ongoing war in Syria, Russiagate and other electoral interference activities against Europe and the United States are stains that Russia needs to clean. In addition, the Kremlin needs the support of European partners in the thorny dossier of sanctions, hoping to obtain a relief or their elimination in the shortest time possible. This is basically about countries with clusters of different interests and different international (and communication) strategies.

Their presence and their behavior in the Italian social ecosystem further certifies their diversity, notwithstanding their shared intention to capitalize on social, political and psychological uncertainty, acting as credible partners in the game of balances and international influences. Inevitably, the response to the pandemic represents a test for the definition of the so-called world order, within which, for the first time since the second post-war period, there is a real questioning of the role of the United States, especially given Washington's initial decision not to place itself at the head of a global response to the crisis, but

rather to fall back on the Trump Administration's "America First" policies. In an attempt to fill these gaps, supporting Italy is not just a message to Rome, but to the entire international community in search of reference points.

The study of the Italian digital information environment was conducted from **two different and complementary perspectives**: indices of Google searches and the trend of quotes' volumes **on Social and Digital Media**. The analysis represented in the graphs (Fig. 2 and 3) give a coherent picture. In the Italian infosphere, Chinese and Russian aid have undergone different treatment and specific trends. Both graphs show moments of greater concentration in relation to the **arrival of aid** in Italy: March 13 for Chinese aid (materials and doctors landed on the night of March 12 at Fiumicino airport) and March 22 for Russian aid (the first group of equipment and specialists arrived in the evening of March 22 at the Pratica di Mare airport). The indexes of Google search volumes have also been accompanied by those relating to US aid and related to European Union interventions: the comparison is merciless with extremely low search volumes. This could derive both from the greater media echo reserved for Russia and China seen as "novelties" in the Italian context as well as from the widespread criticism of part of the Italian public towards the United States and the European Union, which, despite its efforts, probably paid the high expectations of Italian citizens. It is also worth mentioning that, in the case of Brussels, the debate has been magnetized by issues such as Eurobonds and the ESM rather than by the flow of 'materials' to Italy. Actions such as the famous ECB "bazooka" also did not arouse enthusiasm, probably because of the potential difficulties of interpretation to the general public.

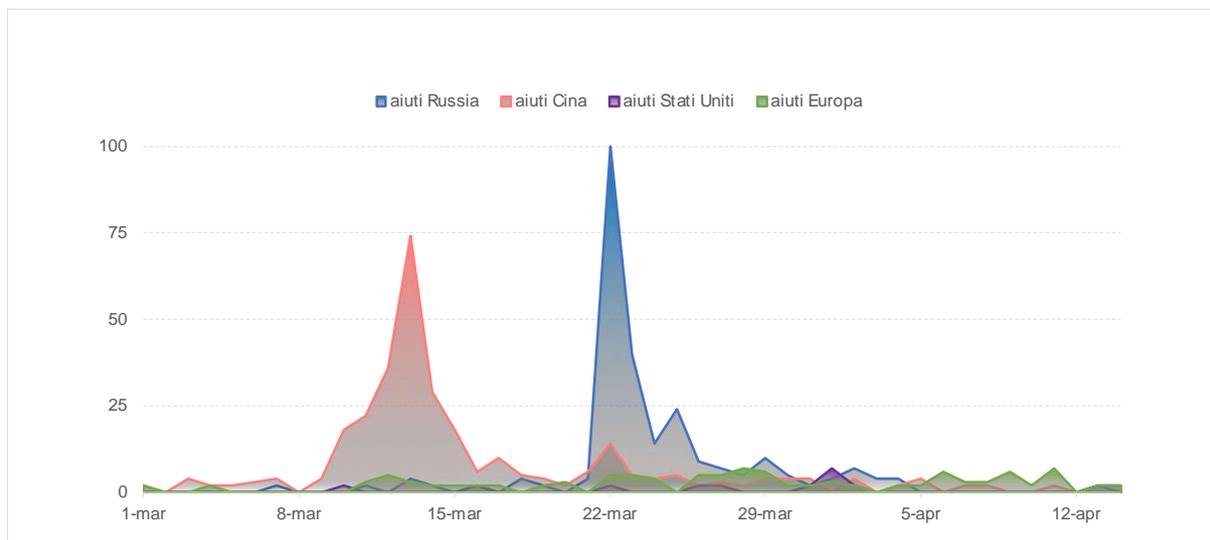


Fig.2 Trend index of Google search volumes – Italy

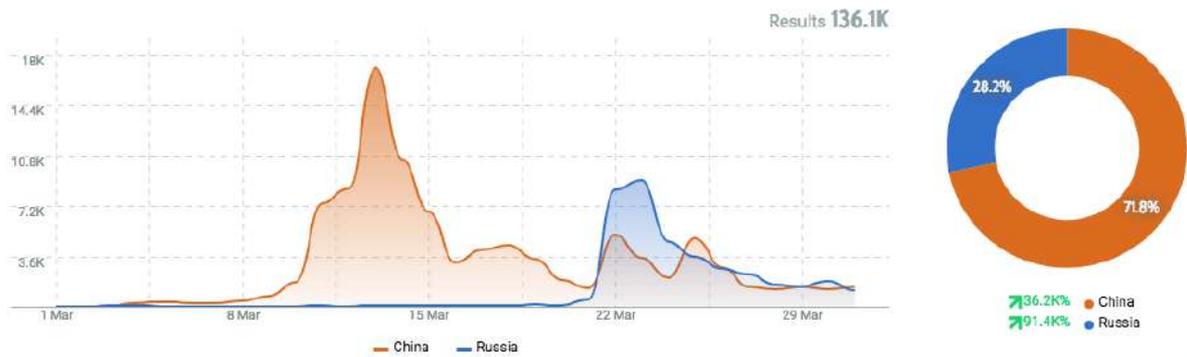


Fig.3 Trend in Social and Digital Media volumes Chinese Aid vs Russian Aid

The trends of the two curves relating to Chinese and Russian aid, however, are radically different. The **growth** concerning conversations related to the former in the following days is **slow and sustained**. On the contrary, both in terms of volumes of Google searches and in volumes of online citations for Social Media, sites and blogs, forums or online newspapers, the **volume produced online by Russian aid was concentrated in the days immediately following their arrival in Italy** and consequently shrank rapidly.

Chinese aid to Italy: about timing and soft power

The arrival of aid from China coincided with one of the most critical phases of the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy. This allowed the Chinese Dragon to obtain maximum visibility and build a positive framing around the Chinese presence in Rome, namely the presence of specialists with strong experience about the disease and equipped with valuable technical-medical material. As we can see, these two macro-themes perfectly respond to at least two of the drives recognized in the demand for information expressed by Italian users, notably the need to control the **uncertainty of an unknown disease** and concrete crisis management supported by medical equipment. This situation is well described by the **Sentiment Analysis** of the contents found: over 97.7k citations for Chinese aid between March 1 and March 31 (fig. 4). **Positive sentiment exceeds negative sentiment** (respectively 27% vs 19.8%): the trend in volumes over time clearly shows how the arrival of aid is immediately described and welcomed with **great positivity** (peaks March 13-15). An example is given by the coverage of Chinese team arrival. For example, [Fanpage](#) headlines its Facebook video: "The Chinese medical heroes arrive in Italy" (1,208,781 views, 49k reactions, 3.2k comments, 24k shares).

The critical issues emerge only a few days later (e.g. March 15) and concentrate mainly after the arrival of Russian aid (March 25).

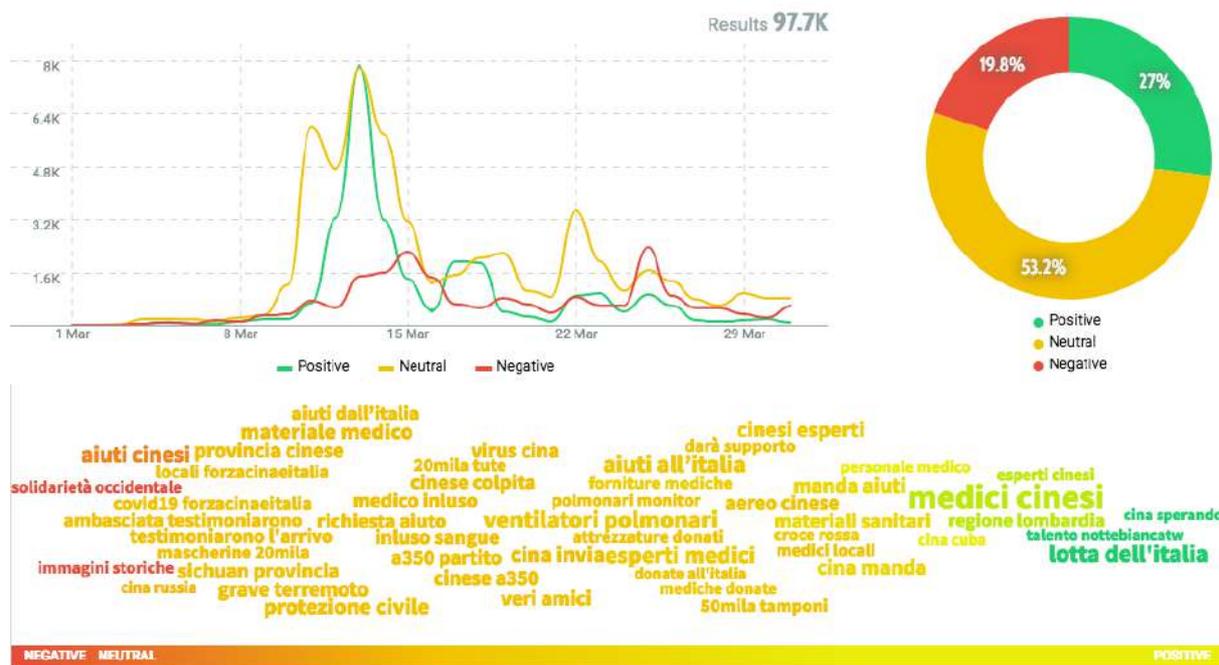


Fig.4 Sentiment Analysis – Chines Aid in Italy

In fig. 4 the **semantic analysis** of the words most frequently associated with Sentiment Analysis shows significant examples of the contents analyzed: the negative sentiment is connected above all to the domestic political debate, to relations with the European Union and NATO (see tag cloud "western solidarity") and only a few are direct accusations against China (especially about poor transparency in the crisis management or about hidden purposes in the "Chinese aid") to which there are added messages associating Chinese aid with the Russian convoys of March 24 ("historical images"). This affirms how Beijing capitalized on the favorable context of the moment and how it was perceived with greater benevolence than the United States and the EU. So, based on the strategic assumptions of its action, it can be said that China has carried out effective public diplomacy.

The construction of **positive sentiment** and **consensus** around the Chinese operation, therefore, is linked to **timing, media coverage** and **active action of Beijing's official social channels**. On **Twitter**, for example, it passes through the official account of the **Embassy of the People's Republic of China** in Italy: the most influential account during the month of March for number of interactions and for the ability to aggregate a viral movement around the hashtag **#forzacinaeitalia** . This affirms an institutional action aimed at balancing the damaged image caused by the spread of the pandemic. In addition, the social protagonist aims of the Embassy are manifested as a direct and transparent assumption of international responsibility, in an attempt to combat speculation about a saturation of conversations through trolls and the like.

Russian aid to Italy: an impressive deployment of off and online forces

Conversations related to **Russian aid are limited compared to the Chinese ones**; 38.4k quotes between March 1 and March 30. The social media coverage of Russian vehicles arriving is very different from that of China. Sending troops from the Radiological, Chemical and Biological Defence Unit reflects the Kremlin's desire to provide Italy with the best that Russia can offer in terms of health crisis management so that the world may see. However, the choice to send men in uniforms and military vehicles, beyond tactical reasons, could have had a boomerang effect against Moscow's objectives. If the population of Lombardy, where the Russian contingents went to operate, welcomed the action of the Russians with sympathy and gratitude, the rest of the virtual world reacted more coldly, perhaps suspicious of Russian media fanfare or simply annoyed by the presence of military personnel on national territory. Therefore, from a communicative point of view, the choice to send the military **penalizes the perception of Russian aid** and complicates its acceptance in the Italian domestic debate. The situation is well represented in the Sentiment Analysis of the conversations detected (fig. 5).

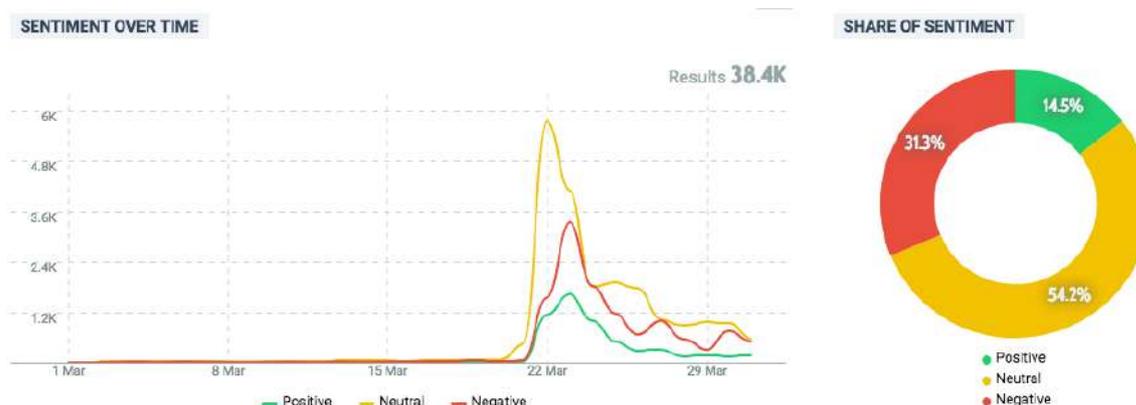


Fig.5 Sentiment Analysis – Russian Aid

Over 31% of the contents detected are negative, with a peak already recorded on the day following the arrival of the first military vehicles at the Pratica di Mare airport. This meant **an uphill mission** from a communicative point of view. The analysis of new types of digital media and the most frequently shared content brings out the links published by the pro-government outlet Sputnik, first in a top 10 of the **most frequently shared domains on Social media** (+390 times) and **first** for the performance of the article: «Coronavirus, 9 planes with aid for Italy from Moscow» ([link](#), over 616,042 interactions only on Facebook, with 464,795 reactions, 64,789 comments, 86,458 shares). As shown in the graph in fig. 6, the dissemination of the article takes place according to a multi-channel logic, however, the building of consent remains limited to the perimeter

of users who already sympathized with Russia before the aid was sent and for other political, cultural and ideological reasons.

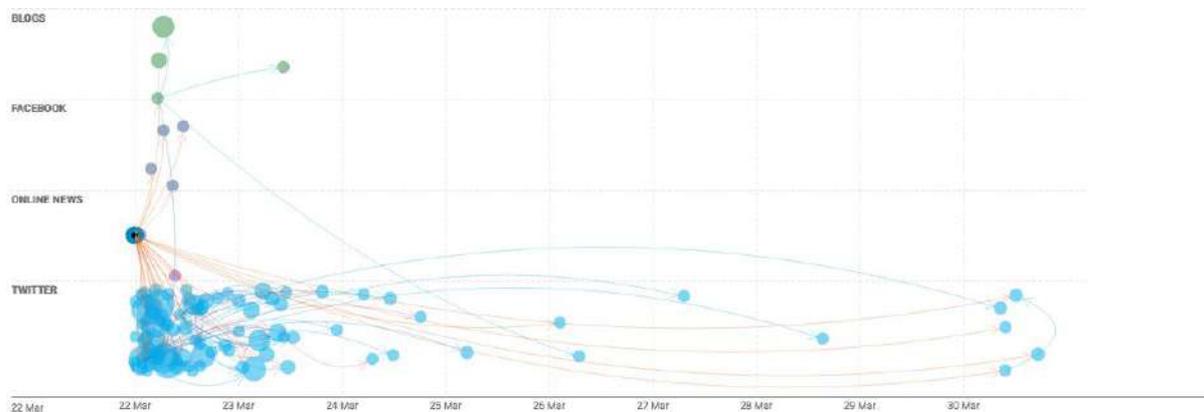


Fig.6 Diffusion scheme

The mission of Russian specialists in Italy has been unable to create **generalized empathy** in the public sphere of Italian users. The analysis of the dissemination and sharing of the mentioned article on social networks reveals the presence of **over one hundred Facebook pages**, all of them within the pro-Russian (Italian or foreign) echo chamber.

The study of the most relevant accounts for the volumes analyzed confirms this trend. **Sputnik** is in first position with over **45 articles** over thirty days, and more than **one million interactions** on social media. However, La Stampa and Il Giorno rank second and third respectively. The former with less than half of the articles published and a fifth of social interactions (21, + 191k social interactions) and the latter with 9 articles and 112k interactions. While Sputnik vigorously supported the Russian mission to Italy, highlighting its benefits, La Stampa and Il Giorno took a more critical approach. They tried to highlight the circumstances of the Italian-Russian agreement, attempting to verify the quality and actual usefulness of aid and investigating the alleged presence of military intelligence agents in the military personnel. In summary, while the sharing of Sputnik's contents was linked to a positive sentiment, that of the articles in La Stampa and Il Giorno was close to a more neutral or negative sentiment.

On the whole, most of the Russian outreach activity in Italy is mainly built around the actions of para-state information outlets and groups strongly characterized from an ideological point of view (eg. «Italian and Russian people respect each other: photos and curiosities about Russia" or "We are with Putin's Russia"). The inability of the Russian communication strategy to speak to an unreliable public and the criticism of the methods and types of aid have meant that, from a communicative point of view, the mission has not achieved an expansion of its pool of supporters. The march of the structures from Pratica di Mare to Bergamo galvanizes the actual supporters, but in the Italian information environment, it cannot win the hearts of new users. Consequently, Moscow cannot be satisfied with its investment based on its perception by the Italian public.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis of social conversations and sentiment draws a fairly clear picture of the perception of Russian and Chinese aid by the Italian public and, consequently, of how much (or little) the actions of Beijing and Moscow have achieved public diplomacy objectives.

Beijing undoubtedly attracted the attention of the Italian public with a communication that aimed at empathy and the construction of a collaborative message. The sending of "doctors - heroes" previously stationed in Wuhan and equipment was also welcomed thanks to the support of an institutional communication activity that aimed to spread a message of closeness. The impact of the initiative benefited from an unexpected media rebound, also deriving from the criticism of the Italian public towards the alleged lack of activism of traditional partners along the two sides of the Atlantic.

Conversely, the public response to the Russian humanitarian campaign has been decidedly colder. "From Russia with love" has not warmed the hearts of many Italians and has only set fire to the hearts of already convinced pro-Russians. The decision to send military personnel - the symbol of Russia's hard power - is likely to please more the domestic audience than the Italian public opinion. In fact, the presence of troopers belonging to the main adversary of NATO raised concern rather than admiration and gratitude. Consequently, within the Italian online debate, the Russian presence in Italy has quickly lost its humanitarian guise in favor of a more geopolitical connotation.

This is a clear example of how, in the context of an international crisis, political interactions are no more limited to official diplomatic channels, even in the case of countries belonging to the G7 and G20. Therefore, the multi-level nature of contemporary international relations forces the actors to take into account the reaction of their partners' public opinions. Even without deepening the topic of information warfare, it is necessary to acknowledge the importance of specific communication strategies to expand soft power. While these strategies have historically been associated with the cinema and cultural industries, today, the emergence of new media has enlarged the area of potential intervention. Social media, therefore, have increasingly become a crucial instrument in projecting soft power.