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The release of #SilviaRomano: a case of **mediated** polarized intersectionality

Abstract

We analyze the case of Silvia Aisha Romano to contribute to ongoing reflections on the ways in which women, their bodies and choices are included and constructed in the current hybrid media system. In this context, mediated representations of women result from the continuous entwinement and overlapping of a variety of voices, and at the intersection of often stereotyped visions of gender, class, race, religion, and age. The joint analysis of Twitter semantic networks and algorithmically identified topics reveals a variety of intersectional mediated (mis)representations of Silvia Aisha Romano whose forms, substance and use varied along partisan lines.

1. Introduction

When Silvia Romano, an Italian aid-worker kidnapped in Kenya eighteen month earlier, landed at the Rome Ciampino airport on May 10, 2020, she was welcomed by a small crowd. Standing on the edge of the airstrip, her family members **were flanked by** the back then Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Luigi di Maio, **and a frantic group of journalists**. As she stepped off the airplane, Romano walked quickly: her face protected by a FFP2 mask, her body and head covered by a green jilbab. She hugged tightly her **family**, tapped elbows with the representatives of the institutions, turned to the journalists, pulled down her face mask and smiled.

Romano's jilbab stroke media and public attention. Initial assumptions spoke of a legacy of her captivity, **but she clarified** she was **intentionally** wearing that garment as she had converted to Islam. She also declared her current name to be Aisha, after Muhammad's favorite wife. Doubts were raised on the spontaneity of **her conversion**, and a massive online flow of insults and threats ensnared Romano for days. Counteracting such a violent reception, enthusiasm for her release and **support statements** circulated **via social media and** offline.

In this article, we analyze the release of Silvia Aisha Romano to contribute to ongoing reflections on the political nature and implications of women mediated representations for how they are collectively shaped in the current hybrid media system (Chadwick 2013) and at the intersection of often stereotyped visions of gender, class, race, religion, and age (Molina Guzmán and Cacho 2013). More in particular, we consider this case as a useful entry point to reflect on dynamics of mediated polarized intersectionality – that is, on how mediated intersectional (mis)representations of women entwine with political polarization dynamics thus reinforcing both social and cultural inequalities, and political antagonism.

Romano's release indeed occurred in a context marked by a strong parallelism between political forces and media (Mancini 2012; 2013) but also by the prominence of populist parties fueling polarization (Bordignon 2020; Tronconi and Valbruzzi 2020) **also on the ground of gendered socio-political norms (Pavan 2020). It thus triggered a strongly oppositional**

discussion in which conflicting narrations about Romano were tailored across the whole ideological spectrum with the precise aim of antagonizing different political enemies.

Through the in-depth analysis of the Twitter conversation pivoting around Romano's release, we aim at unveiling how her figure and experience were discursively rendered at the crossroads of intersecting stereotypes particularly of gender, age, and religion, and within a highly polarized media and political system. While we posit that dynamics of mediated polarized intersectionality are shaped by a variety of institutional and non-institutional actors, we cue on recent accounts on the role of media actors and political elites within political polarization processes (Baldassarri and Gelman 2008; Robison and Mullinix 2016) and thus pay specific attention to their contributions.

The paper is organized as follows. In Section 2 we ground our plea to focus more neatly on the role that (mis)representations of women play with respect to political polarization processes building a bridge between intersectional media studies, reflections on instrumental political uses of gender, and recent development in the study of political polarization. We then sketch in Section 3 the contours of the Italian case as a useful entry point to study dynamics of mediated polarized intersectionality. In Section 4 we illustrate the main steps of our data collection and analysis. We summarize our results in Section 5 and discuss them in detail in Section 6.

2. Between gender (mis)representations and political antagonism: mediated polarized intersectionality

Leveraging on the concept of intersectionality, research is trying to uncover the different and entwined dimensions of oppression that are discursively rendered and, thus, made real by media representations of genders. Rooted within feminist movement practices and in the critique to feminism and critical race scholarships for ignoring gender and race (Crenshaw 1989), intersectionality points to interlocked axes of power and domination based on race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, physical ability, and age, that jointly shape complex systems and experiences of discrimination (Hill Collins 2015).

As suggested by Molina-Guzmán and Cacho (2013, 75), intersectional media studies differ from «single-axes» analyses of gender and media as they set their focus on how gendered representations in the media intersect other discrimination axes and thus contribute to (re)produce and reinforce social, political, and cultural inequalities. Consistently, they stress the absence of minority women both in media contents and production (Rigoni 2012), the overall disattention for black and minority women as interpreters and audiences (Molina-Guzmán and Cacho 2013) but also the reproduction and recontextualization of colonial stereotypes within media narratives (Carter 2012).

Looking particularly at intersections between gender and religion, observers highlight that media representations of Muslim women make them easy targets of Islamophobia (Allen 2015). As Olufemi (2020, 100) notes, Muslim women are always «spoken for» and invariably depicted as «dominated, oppressed, discussed; almost never treated like a human being endowed with autonomy and whose freedom deserves to be understood». Key to this (mis)representation is the element of the veil which, stripped of any material connotation (Allen 2015; Bruno 2016), becomes an «embodied sign of difference» between, on one hand, righteous women and, on the other, believers of a «fanatical, terrorist religion» (Frisina and Hawthorne 2018, 6). Hence, the veil «brand the wearer not only as a Muslim woman, but as a woman who is symbolic of all that [the western lens perceives as] problematic with Muslim and Islam» (Allen 2015, 290).

In her examination of the release of western women hostages, Cere (2008) provides further evidence of the intersectional short-circuit created by age and gender stereotypes. Comparing

the liberation of Simona Pari and Simona Torretta, two twenty-nine years old international aid-workers kidnapped in Iraq in 2004, and Giuliana Sgrena and Florence Aubenas, two older journalists taken hostage in Iraq in 2005, the author eloquently shows how the media discourse spectacularizes younger bodies while mortifying older ones. Importantly, Cere intersects the sexualization of younger bodies with the element of religion. As media insisted extensively on the moment in which the two aid-workers took off the burqa they were wearing, Cere argues, they instrumentally reinforced «the difference between Western and Muslim women [and reiterate] Western fixation with the veil that has a long history, going back to colonial domination» (2008, p. 242).

The persistence as much as the diffusion of these biased narrations is often connected to the increasing political prominence of far-right radicalism and liberal feminism, which co-opt the frame of «women's liberation» to sponsor a general war against terrorism that ends up making of Muslim women's body «a terrain of conflict» (Olufemi 2020, 105). As noted by Fiig, indeed, intersectional (mis)representations of women tend to «reflect hegemonic discourses of identity politics that (...) are often used to construct inclusionary/exclusionary boundaries that differentiate between self and other» (2010, 47).

Similar considerations are being made that tie the instrumentalization of gender, sexuality, race, class, age, and religion with the strengthening of political projects against social justice and de-democratization trends in Europe and elsewhere (Verloo 2018). However, only seldom these analyses move beyond a concern for right-wing populist parties and explore how gender is exploited to advance diverse political agendas across the ideological spectrum.

An invitation to move past this state of the art follows directly from recent developments in the study of political polarization. On the one hand, some observers propose to conceive of polarization as a continuum along which different bi- and multi-party systems distribute (Urman 2020) depending on how actors position with respect to different cleavages besides the ideological left-right one (Bodrunova et al. 2019; Yardi and boyd 2010). As it has been shown, indeed, individuals have become more partisan not only on moral issues, but also on economics and civil rights (Baldassarri and Gelmann, 2008).

On the other hand, extant research increasingly grounds polarization in the ways in which politicians, parties, and media frame issues. Adversarial framing dynamics perform two main functions. First, they mark the progressive distancing of political and media elites, which in turn fosters ideological polarization among citizens (Baldassarri and Gelman 2008; Robison and Mullinix 2016). Second, they facilitate processes of «affective polarization» – i.e., the adoption of hostile attitudes towards individuals and organizations that do not share similar opinions (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012). In this context, politics provide the main reference point for people when thinking to others (Druckman and Levendusky 2019) but also for media (especially partisan ones), which frame strategically political elites (Robison and Mullinix 2016) or negatively depict political opponents fostering hostility and disdain (Garrett, Long, and Jeong 2019).

Within this framework, not only it is relevant to continue exploring how transformations of the «traditional gender order» stimulate intersectional alliances between parties and movements that increase polarization levels (Ferree 2021). It also becomes crucial to focus on how mediated intersectional (mis)representations entwine with oppositional dynamics between irreconcilable political poles. Indeed, in the current «deeply mediatized context» (Hepp 2020), the mediated component of political polarization is exacerbated, and antagonism is placed squarely at the level of the media discourse for how it is shaped in the current hybrid media system (Chadwick 2013) at the crossroads between old and new media, and by a variety of voices.

In this framework, (mis)representing women becomes a key confrontational tactic with symbolic and practical functions. Symbolically, gendered (mis)representations bear testimony

to the existence of multiple visions of the social order which stand at the core of political identities and mark their distinctiveness. Practically, they work as powerful weapons to be directed against political adversaries in the attempt of defeating the gender social order they endorse and, by extension, dismantling from the roots their entire political project. Ultimately, the strategic tailoring of women's (mis)representations further dynamics of *mediated polarized intersectionality*, wherein normative understandings of gender, sexuality, class, race, age, and religion cross in peculiar and strategic ways, and are circulated pervasively through the media discourse to attack and delegitimize political enemies.

3. Italy as a case of mediated polarized intersectionality

Italy offers a fruitful case study to begin investigating dynamics of mediated polarized intersectionality. Results of the 2020 edition of the *Global Media Monitoring Project*, the longest and most extensive research on gender in the news media show the persistent under- and misrepresentation of women in the Italian news both online and offline (GMMP 2020, 45). Notably, data also show that, over time, news geared to challenge gender stereotypes have harshly diminished both online and offline and women's expertise has been highly invisibilized especially in the pandemic crisis (ibid.). These considerations pair analyses that underline how, in spite of increased representation of women within national institutions, cultural barriers and biased media representations continue to stifle women's political participation and the genuine gendering of politics (Belluati et al. 2020).

Moreover, Italy represents a very interesting case of «dramatized polarization» (Mancini 2013). Due to historical and economic reasons, the Italian public sphere has been characterized by a strong «political parallelism» between media and politics that generates «cultural, ideological and political biases in the selection and treatment of news content» (Mancini 2012, 266). These biases ultimately separate newspaper readers and television audiences according to political and ideological cleavages (Mancini 2012; 2013).

Two main political factors contribute to worsen this scenario. First, the presence of «highly divisive leaders» (from Silvio Berlusconi to Matteo Salvini) who foster voters' alignment on their figures (Bordignon 2020), together with the prominence of populist parties and their typical rhetoric construction «us vs. them» contribute to amplify old and new cleavages thus affecting the entire political system (Tronconi and Valbruzzi 2020).

Second, the revamping of the conflict around women and LGBTQI rights, which were harshly attacked particularly through two political initiatives by the League. On the one side, the parliamentary discussion over the legislative proposal n. 735 – the so called Pillon bill (after the name of the Lega senator Simone Pillon) – which formally aimed at reforming family law but, in fact, severely limited the right to divorce (Donà 2021). On the other, the convening in Verona at the end of March 2019 of the World Congress of Family, an international event organized by the hyper-conservative International Organization of Families with the support of the back then Italian Ministry of Family Lorenzo Fontana (League) and that served as a shield for strengthening the anti-gender movement and bring to prominence a conservative and essentialists vision of the social order (Pavan 2020).

4. Data and Methods

Against this background, we studied the case of Silvia Aisha Romano leaning on Twitter and starting from a semantic network composed of retweeted statuses published over the period from May 8, 2020 (the day in which her release was announced) to May 18, 2020. Our choice to lean on Twitter follows from the widespread recognition of this platform as a highly

polarized environment in which specific practices, particularly retweets, seem to foster the formation of echo-chambers while others seem to tap effects of affective polarization (Conover et al. 2011, Tucker et al., 2018). In Italy, Twitter hosts a variety of intra-elite dynamics (Bracciale and Cepernich 2018) and this grants it a «privileged position in the media ecosystem» insofar as users' voices have higher chances of affecting mainstream media narrations (Bracciale, Martella, and Visentin 2018, 368). Moreover, recent analyses of Italian Twitter conversations show that Italian parties are followed by non-overlapping audiences (except for right-wing parties, see Urman 2020), which also appear to polarize along partisan lines when discussing divisive topics such as migration (Vilella et al. 2020).

Tweets were collected via Streaming API if they contained any of the two anchor hashtags #*SilviaRomano* or #*Aisha*, which we chose as they appeared in Trending Topics¹ and explicitly refer to Silvia Aisha Romano without otherwise characterizing either her or her experience. We downloaded 217,952 retweets referring to 15,097 original tweets that we arranged in a two-mode network joining together users and any tweet they retweeted. We then performed a naïve projection on the tweets' layer thus obtaining a unimodal semantic weighted network where tweets are connected whenever retweeted by the same users.² Thus, the resulting semantic network represents that portion of digital discourse about Romano's release that reached at least minimal levels of public recognition.³

We then applied a community-finding algorithm which isolates groups of densely connected nodes (Clauset, Newman, and Moore 2004). We consider these communities of tweets as proxies for the narratives that structure the discussion about Romano's release. Furthermore, we estimated overall levels of polarization based on a group density study - that evaluates levels of cohesion within and between groups of nodes in a network (Borgatti, Everett, and Johnson 2013).

Finally, we analyzed the tweets in each of the three network communities separately through Structural Topic Modeling (STM, Roberts, Stewart, and Tingley 2019). Following Yarchi et al. (2020), we estimated the optimal number of topics for each community based on held-out, residuals, semantic coherence, and exclusivity indicators followed by a manual validation. After classifying tweets' authors as belonging to political elites,⁴ media outlets,⁵ and other users, we employed the three account types as covariates to estimate variation of vocabularies and understand whether political elites, media actors and other users intervened in different ways. We then proceeded to manually classify all topics in higher order thematic categories starting from a qualitative content analysis of words that are most frequently associated with each topic and single categories' vocabularies. To reach a perfect agreement on topic labels and thematic categories, the team held several independent coding sessions and regular comparison meetings (Neuendorf 2019).

5. Results

5.1 Communities of tweets and their elites

¹ <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/sui-social-tre-ondate-pro-e-contro-silvia-aisha-romano-ADxDrSP>

² Consistently, edge weights in our semantic network mirror the number of users retweeting the same two tweets.

³ The semantic network based on retweets covers 85% of the corpus.

⁴ Accounts belonging to all Italian national and European parliamentarians, all Presidents of Italian regions, Institutions and Governmental roles (Ministers, Vice-ministers, etc.), and their parties. Moreover, we added the accounts of all parties and leaders who ran in the 2018 election (i.e. Possibile, Forza Nuova, etc.).

⁵ We identified media accounts using lists of actors derived from FIEG (<http://www.fieg.it/>) and Audiweb (<http://www.audiweb.it/>) data.

The semantic network about the release of Silvia Aisha Romano is composed by 15,097 nodes and 1,277,817 undirected edges. On the network main component, which contains 91% of all nodes (figure 1a), the community finding algorithm identified 90 communities (figure 1b). Amongst these, three gather approximately 94.5% of all nodes and almost the totality of tweets authored by political parties and leaders (figure 1c). Results of the group density study (figure 1d) confirm that only densities within each group are higher than overall density levels. This element suggests that the three communities of tweets shape three internally consistent but separate narratives on Romano's release.

insert figure 1 about here

The three narratives also appear to have a partisan nature (table 1). As we marked down tweets authored by national parties **and their members**, we noticed a rather clear-cut concentration of tweets ascribable to center-right and right-wing political subjects in community #1 – for example, the totality of tweets from *Fratelli d'Italia* (FdI), *Forza Nuova* (FN), and almost all tweets by *Forza Italia* (FI) and the *Lega* (League). Similarly, community #2 hosts the totality of tweets from the *Partito Democratico* (PD), *Liberi e Uguali* (LEU). Finally, community #3 hosts **mostly** tweets from (members of) the *Movimento Cinque Stelle* (M5S), which emerged as a third ideological pole in Italy which mixes left and right positions (Bordignon 2020).

insert table 1 about here

Confirming the parallelism highlighted in literature (Mancini 2013), the partisan nature of the three narratives is further reinforced by the presence of tweets from media accounts in the three communities. As shown in table 2, media typically classified as endorsing a right-wing ideology (like the newspaper «Liberò») contributed almost exclusively to the narrative of the first community, whereas tweets by outlets with a more remarked left-wing leaning – such as «La Repubblica» or the newscast «TG3» – belong to the second community. Finally, tweets from outlets like «Il Fatto Quotidiano» or «Mediaset TgCom», relevant sources for M5S voters (Roncarolo and Mancini 2018), are clustered in the third community.

Overall, the three disconnected narratives can be thought as part of a polarized system of meanings, wherein Romano's release is framed so to reflect and, at the same time, contribute to the construction of specific and divergent political and ideological constituencies.

insert table 2 about here

5.2 Communities of tweets and their topics

The **STM** procedure performed on the three groups of tweets allowed to identify a set of topics which represent the main aspects discussed by users. The qualitative classification of these topics led us to identify six thematic categories that constitute the broader thematic axes along which the three partisan narratives are organized: *The Release* focuses on Romano's liberation; *The Jilbab* and *The Conversion* pivot around Romano's veil and religious choice; *The Ransom* concentrates on the amount of money (allegedly) paid to the kidnappers; whereas *The Rescuer* centers on the Italian government and its role in the negotiations. Finally, *The Reception* pertains to Romano's return home and, particularly, the hatred reactions it triggered.

Looking at figures 2-4, we notice that the sole narrative including the *Jilbab* axis is that of community #1, hence the one leaning more neatly towards the right of the ideological spectrum. Conversely, all other thematic axes provide a common semantic structure for framing Romano and her release. Given the polarized and partisan nature of the overall semantic system, we

compared across communities the topics that fall under each thematic axes and, following DiMaggio et al. (2013), we interpret these contributions as the perspectives and frames conveyed through a specific narrative.⁶

insert figures 2-4 about here

5.2.1 The release

All narratives feature prominently the news of Romano's liberation (see topics C1.14, C2.16 and C3.12). However, actual frames conveyed on the event are rather divergent. The narrative generated by community #2 appears to be the most enthusiastic. The release is here portrayed as something relieving, a beautiful and joyful news (*finalmente, bella, notizia, gioia* in topic C2.16). Relevantly, the element of enthusiasm is accompanied by a celebration of Romano's experience through the systematic retweeting of her first words «I was strong, I resisted» (C2.15) which echoed particularly in media and politics vocabularies.

On the opposite side, also the narrative of community #1 characterizes the release as «good news» but ascribes the positivity of the event to the professionalism of Italian secret services (topics C1.4 and C1.7 for all account types). Moreover, a request is made for further details about what lays behind Romano's liberation (C1.4, especially in media vocabulary) as several doubts are raised by a statement ascribed to Romano and harshly commented by her uncle⁷ according to which she would be ready to return to Africa (C1.27, all account types). Thus, users wonder why she was even rescued if she means to go back to where she was kidnapped (*allora, tornare, Africa*).

Somewhere in between, the narrative of community #3 predominantly conveys a positive interpretation of the release but especially accounts in the «other users» category push forward some doubts about the ransom and Romano's conversion (C3.6). This latter element passes through the use particularly by media accounts of the hashtag #DomenicoQuirico which refers to an Italian journalist who was also kidnapped and did comment skeptically on her conversion.⁸

5.2.2 The Jilbab

The narrative of community #1 is the sole including a specific discussion on the jilbab, alternatively called «dress» or «veil». Here the jilbab is framed in a threefold way. First, it is seen as a sign of Romano's radicalization (C1.1), which emerges particularly from tweets of the media that not only portray Romano as «radicalized» (*radicalizzata*) but also quote the position of Souad Sbai, a Moroccan-Italian writer and former center-right politician, who sees the jilbab as a jihadist uniform and not as a Somali garment. At the same time, the widespread amplification of the words of some key women figures contributes to ridicule Romano's alleged radicalization. First, Myriam Ismail, a Somali anthropology professor, defined Romano's jilbab as a «green tent» (*verde* in C1.1) during a talk show. Second, the Italian writer Silvana De Mari, renown for her conservative positions, accused Romano to be an

⁶ Throughout the paper, we report each topic with the numeric codes illustrated in figures 2-4 and quote words that ground our interpretation directly in Italian to avoid any translation-induced bias. Full lists of topics and associated words can be found in Appendix. Also, to preserve the privacy of lay users, we publish only tweets and names of public figures.

⁷ https://twitter.com/Libero_official/status/1260099570727518210

⁸ <https://twitter.com/LaStampa/status/1259771980666077185>

«incompetent skank» who should have stayed at home (*casa*) instead of going to Africa to «take selfies with children».⁹

Second, the jilbab is framed **by all actor types** as a symbol of women's submission (C1.12). More specifically, the jilbab is here seen as a shameful oppression imposed on Somali women as opposed to the freedom granted to Italian ones (*donne, libertà, Somalia, vergogna*). Thirdly, the jilbab is seen as the sign of a lost «cultural battle» against the Islamic culture, as Matteo Salvini put it,¹⁰ or as something completely unintelligible, as declared by Alessandro Sallusti, the former editor in chief of the right-wing newspaper «Il Giornale».¹¹

5.2.3 The Conversion

The theme of conversion emerges as highly problematic in the narrative of community #1. Here, Romano **is othered as a Muslim** woman named Aisha (*silvia, romano, islam, convertita, aisha*, C1.11). However, words like *free, choice, chains, converted* signal that the conversion is framed as the result of a plagiarism (C1.10)¹² to which Romano would have been subjected during her imprisonment and not, as she stated, as a free choice (C1.16). The frame of plagiarism is strengthened by the stereotypical representation of Islam as a religion that oppresses women as it happened for «the real» Aisha - Mohammed's child bride (C1.16). **Interestingly, across these topics the vocabularies of the three actor categories are very similar – and this points to the presence of a strongly shared and consistent narration of Romano conversion. However,** the problematic nature of the conversion emerges particularly in media and political elites' tweets who insist on the blessing *Aisha* sends to her Islamic (not simply Muslim) «brothers» in response to a video message of solidarity (*allah, benedica, ringrazia, fratelli, islamici*, C1.17).

The theme of conversion is **less central** in the narratives of communities #2 and #3. In both, Romano's conversion interlocks with the happiness triggered by her return precisely on Mother's Day (*mamma, festadellamamma*, C2.10, **especially for «other users»**) which in turn pushes the frame of the «converted» daughter welcomed back by her mother's hug (*convertita, islam, abbraccio, figlia, madre*, C3.1). In parallel, especially political elites in the second **and the third narratives**, demand to cease the harsh attacks launched against Romano recalling the post of Nico Basso (**League**), a councilman from Treviso, who claimed on Facebook that Romano «should be hanged» (*consigliere, comunale, leghista, terrificante, foto, impiccatela*, C2.10; *tacere*, C3.1). The narrative of community #3 **casts some doubts on Romano's conversion by labeling it a puzzle¹³ and a mystery¹⁴ but also discusses her** release as somewhat due given her Italian citizenship (C3.10).

5.2.4 The Ransom

Tweets in community #1 address the element of the ransom from multiple perspectives. Throughout the discussion, the figure of Romano appears only as a «term of comparison», often negative, to measure the costs of her release. First, **all actor types claim** that this cost **is** higher than that of other human (Italian) lives,¹⁵ which are **instead** completely ignored by the government which is in turn invited to resign (C1.3). Consistently, the ransom money is framed

⁹ The original video is no longer available due to the ban of Silvana De Mari former YouTube account, but it is still retrievable online.

¹⁰ <https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1259972962503012355>

¹¹ https://twitter.com/Libero_official/status/1259485480036507649

¹² <https://twitter.com/DSantanche/status/1262309216238387200>

¹³ <https://twitter.com/fattoquotidiano/status/1259735609641504768>

¹⁴ <https://twitter.com/repubblica/status/1260090351915687937>

¹⁵ <https://twitter.com/filippomaturi/status/1259854457917095937>

either as a distraction from other priorities (*distrazione, massa*, C1.26) and as shamefully taken from Italians (*italiani, così, tanto, schifo*, C1.15). Particularly for political elites, the ransom and the release are distractions from other economic measures which are the real «cancer» affecting millions of people and future generations (*cancro, gente, generazioni, milioni, spesi*, C1.15).

Second, the ransom payment is framed as a waste. Immediately after the release, a set of photos of Romano began to circulate especially through retweets made by media accounts with the aim of «revealing» to the public some crucial details (*foto, svela, dettaglio*, C1.20): her alleged pregnancy,¹⁶ her enjoying time in Africa,¹⁷ her wearing a bulletproof vest with the Turkish army symbol (this latter probably a fake).¹⁸ Pivoting around these images, the question «why did we pay for her» started to spin again thus delegitimizing the worthiness of the rescue. Piling up with this, and considering Romano's conversion, the ransom also becomes a means for jihad terrorists to buy weapons (*soldi, alshabaab, terroristi, riscatto, jihad*, C1.9) and, especially for media accounts, the rescue is recounted as a giant «commercial» for Islamic terrorists¹⁹ (*terroristi, islamici, spot, fatto, operazione*, C1.24).

Narratives of communities #2 and #3 consistently support the decision to pay, although particularly tweets from [media](#) accounts in the latter dwell on the contested nature of the whole release operation (C3.7).²⁰ Interestingly, also these two narratives continue to frame Romano as a «term of comparison» (see particularly, *costata, meno* in C2.5 and C3.7) [again through tweets of media](#)²¹ [and political actors](#).²² Particularly in the narrative of community #3, «[other users](#)» [compare](#) the cost of the ransom to that entailed by the frauds committed by the League (*costata, molto, meno, milioni, matteosalvini, lega*, C.3.7).

5.2.5 The Rescuer

With the presence of the Prime Minister and the Minister of Foreign affairs at the Ciampino airport, Romano's release inevitably became an institutional matter. The involvement of the government as the official «rescuer» is framed in a way that is completely detached from Romano even when tones are positive. Tweets in both communities #2 and #3 recall and share the announcement of the release issued by the Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, emphasize his presence at the airport, and thank secret service²³ for their intervention (C2.8 and C3.3). However, [particularly media accounts of community #2](#) give prominence also to declarations of other institutions, especially President Sergio Mattarella (C2.6), while the narrative of community #3 features more extensively statements by the Minister of Foreign Affairs Di Maio and his responses to political attacks.²⁴

Conversely, tweets in community #1 push forward several interpretations of how Italian institutions handled the release. First, the presence of *Giuseppe Conte* and *Luigi Di Maio* at *Ciampino* airport is framed ([particularly by Salvini but also by the media](#)) as a *showcase* and a *suicide* from a communication point of view as they made themselves look like fools for having released *Aisha* – hence, a woman converted to Islam (in C1.8 *figura, merda, fatta, nazione, aisha* in C1.19). Moreover, on the escort of a fake but hardly questioned interview circulated

¹⁶ https://twitter.com/Libero_official/status/1259529015494393856

¹⁷ https://twitter.com/Libero_official/status/1262225374043348998

¹⁸ https://twitter.com/Libero_official/status/1259953729421348866

¹⁹ https://twitter.com/Libero_official/status/1261131733543591938

²⁰ <https://twitter.com/TgLa7/status/1259919822911156225>

²¹ <https://twitter.com/giornalettismo/status/1259354360791863296>

²² <https://twitter.com/NFratojanni/status/1259867856809984001>

²³ https://twitter.com/fam_cristiana/status/1259146891410972673

²⁴ <https://twitter.com/luigidimaio/status/1259421522793500673>

by the newspaper «La Repubblica», **both politics and the media in this community** frame the government «shameful» and sarcastically thank it for having sponsored financially the Jihad (C1.5).

The narrative generated by tweets in community #1 reinforces in three further ways this overall frame of a reckless government. First, the government did not intervene to disperse the gatherings underneath Romano's house in Milan as much as it did in other occasions (C1.2 and C1.14). Second, particularly for media and political elite accounts, the government is made of «amateurs» who took over a responsibility that should instead be of NGOs (as the League governor of Veneto Luca Zaia puts it, see C1.2).²⁵ Finally, referring to a fake picture of Romano wearing a bulletproof vest with a Turkish logo on it, the government is accused **mainly by media and politics** of having collaborated with Turkey, Qatar and, to a less extent, with Libya to obtain the release of the aid-worker (C1.21 and C1.6).

5.2.6 The Reception

This theme is the most articulated within narratives of communities #2 and #3. Both frame Romano's return home in extremely positive terms, welcoming her back, stressing her smile when she landed at Ciampino but also the joy in her neighborhood in Milan where church bells celebrated her return (*bentornata, sorriso, campane* in C2.7 and C3.5).

However, the largest part of both narratives contains mainly a reaction to expressions of hate and threats from the opposite political front and thus a defense of Romano from a second process of victimization that, particularly according to political elites' tweets, started the moment she showed herself wearing the jilbab and fed by continuous fake news (*odio, soprattutto, abito, fake* in C2.11).²⁶ As Romano was attacked both online and offline, narratives in communities #2 and #3 condemn hateful comments and insults targeting her religion (C2.1 and C3.8) but also a physical attack occurred at her house in Milan when someone threw a bottle against her window (*sotto, casa, finestra, vetro, appartamento* in C2.11 and *bottiglia, lanciata, finestra* in C3.8). To some extent, narratives in the two communities mention the gendered nature of such violence (see particularly the insistence on *donne* – women – in the vocabulary of «other users» in C2.11, C3.11, and C3.9) or, especially because of media retweets, to a widespread misogynist culture in Italy (*misoginia, cultura*, C2.2).²⁷

More often, however, the frame that is conveyed in these two narratives is that of indignation – towards right-wingers, their declarations, and, particularly, the already mentioned Nico Basso and Simone Angelosante, the League Mayor of Ovindoli, who questioned Romano's status of victim as «none has ever heard of a Jew who has escaped from concentration camp wearing Nazi uniforms» (*ebreo, converted, nanism, campo, divisa, mai, sentito* in the vocabulary of media accounts in C3.5). Similarly, a transversal attack is raised in both narratives against Alessandro Pagano, a League deputy, who defined Romano as a «neo-terrorist» (C2.4 and C3.2). As the discussion became more and more antagonistic, Romano intervened directly declaring «The worst is over, please, do not get angry to defend me» **and her words were reported by all actor types in narrative #2** (C2.14).

Differently from the other two communities, the narrative of community #1 attempts to dismantle allegations of a «right-wing hate» against Romano that build on several explanations: that left-wingers hate as well; that Christians²⁸ are victimized in several countries; and, more notably within political elites' tweets, that comments on Romano amount to free expressions

²⁵ <https://twitter.com/Gazzettino/status/1260209456715096067>

²⁶ <https://twitter.com/MichelaRostan/status/1259755775746084865>

²⁷ <https://twitter.com/Linkiesta/status/1261387123220860928>

²⁸ <https://twitter.com/giorgiomule/status/1259933793428877312>

of public opinion and that any investigation in this respect would constitute a violation of personal freedom (C1.23 and C1.18).²⁹

5. Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, we started from a plea to focus more neatly on mediated polarized intersectionality dynamics – that is, the ways in which mediated (mis)representations of women are strategically tailored at the crossroads of normative and stereotyped visions of gender, race, class, age, and religion, and are treated as weapons against political enemies. We analysed along these lines the case of the release of Silvia Aisha Romano, an international aid-worker kidnapped in Kenya and who returned home converted to Islam. Leaning on a multi-method approach, we unveiled how divergent and conflicting narrations of Romano and her experience emerged in the Italian polarised scenario to advance specific agendas and, most relevantly, to delegitimize political opponents.

Since its inception, the Twitter discussion triggered by Romano's release has been nurtured by a **strong emotional charge** which, ultimately, made of Romano herself a moral polarizing issue. Our results show that political antagonism was not played out only in relation to her gender but, more poignantly, at the intersection of her gender, religion, and age. Across the whole ideological spectrum, media, political elites, and other users tailored ad-hoc representations of Romano as a converted-young-Muslim-woman **that encapsulated partisan visions of the social order** and, at the same time, were used tactically against political adversaries.

Especially **the narrative stemming from tweets authored by users leaning towards the right** (community #1) made of Romano a **symbol** of a lost cultural battle. Converted to Islam and willingly wearing a jilbab, she is framed particularly by media and political elites (**through very similar vocabularies**) as deviant, underserving, and even dangerous as she no longer affiliates with Italian natives but, rather, with her «Islamic brothers». **The hostile framing of her veil and conversion enacted particularly by media and political actors' accounts in this community becomes the preferred device to serve an identarian political project** (Fiig 2010, Verloo 2018) that pivots on Islamophobia and nationalism (Allen 2015, Donà 2021) and ultimately reiterates the typical populist distinction between «us and them» that is often used to stigmatise migrants and other minorities (Bracciale, Andretta, and Martella 2021). Dominated by the instrumental and racist representation of Islam, Romano's (mis)representation in community #1 becomes a weapon to delegitimize the release and, by extension, the government, which is responsible for it.

Furthermore, in narrative #1, persistent doubts on the spontaneity of her conversion, never raised for converted men hostages (Cere 2008) **and somewhat present also in the media inputs to narratives #2 and #3**, enhance the overall hostile and very transversal characterization of Islam as an enemy which not only oppresses «its» women (Allen 2015; Olufemi 2020) but also plagiarizes young western ones (as it happened to Aisha). **This framing is nourished by a diminishing and mortifying representation of Romano. Like** Pari and Torretta (Cere 2008), the twenty-five years old aid-worker is depicted as «incapable» in several respects. First, because of her age, she is deemed incapable of understanding the «real» nature of her conversion (a plagiarism, not her choice) and of the symbolic value of her jilbab (a mark of radicalization, not just a garment). Second, because of her being a woman-aid-worker, she is deemed

²⁹ <https://twitter.com/VittorioSgarbi/status/1260318476213854208>

«professionally incapable»: a narcissistic babysitter for African children. Crucially, the widespread circulation of this «incapacity» frame resulted particularly from the [contribution of media accounts in community #1, which worked according to a hybrid media logic \(Chadwick 2013\)](#) so as to [collect from different sources \(political talk shows, YouTube videos\) and re-broadcast](#) the voices of older (therefore, wiser) women, some of which were also born in Africa and, therefore, are legitimized to contrast their personal experience (which is assumed to be more genuine) with that of Romano.

Criticisms against the payment of a ransom in the first narrative become just another version of polarized arguments on public money spending (Baldassarri and Gelman 2008) which echoes that of US Conservatives in their attempt to restore the «brotherhood-breadwinner system of gendered and racialised nationalism they call traditional» (Ferree 2021, 2). Indeed, the choice of the government to pay for releasing Romano acquires in this first narrative a moral connotation which is supported by an instrumental use of Romano's body. An alleged pregnancy, her physical proximity to a boy in Africa, her (fake) bulletproof vest, her alleged declarations on a possible return to Africa are all recounted as [evidence](#) of a colossal waste of money made by an irresponsible government at the expenses of Italians.

[Media accounts in community #1 were fundamental for reporting these «evidence» but also for framing the government as a «traitor» for pursuing its interests at the expense of those of the nation \(Robison and Mullinix 2016\).](#) This confirms the key role played by partisan media within polarization dynamics (Garrett, Long, and Jeong 2019) but also sheds new light on how this role is strengthened by the active production of intersectional misrepresentations. Entangled with the «spectacle» of Romano's body and choices (Cere 2008), polarising media reports set off a severe attack against the government which held at its core a portrayal of Romano as an undeserving, naïve, young girl.

Intersectional representations of Romano emerging from narratives of communities #2 and #3, [respectively connected to the centre left-wing and the M5S parties](#), fail to tackle (let alone to dismantle) these misogynists, Islamophobic and ageist characterizations. These narratives commonly frame Romano's release as the return of a «daughter» who is hugged by her mother and, therefore, should be «embraced» by anyone else. [On the one hand, this framing strategy constitutes an attempt, particularly in narrative #3, to «normalise» Romano's new «problematic» identity \(Fiig 2010\) – an attempt that is reinforced by the insistence on the role of the context in determining her choice to convert and on her Italian citizenship \(as opposed to her religion\) as the justification for her rescue.](#) On the other hand, though, it also provides a means to undermine the rhetoric on the «bad diversity», which extant reflection have already associated to the Italian right (Frisina and Hawthorne 2018).

Similarly, narratives of communities #2 and #3 defend the legitimacy of the release but do so in a way that further instrumentalizes Romano. Particularly by «other users» in narrative #3, she is treated as a political «term of comparison» to reiterate the fraudulent behaviour of the League. Moreover, the twofold attack against the aid-worker and the government launched by all actor types in community #1 certainly triggered the reaction particularly of political actors and «other users» in communities #2 and #3. However, while tweets in these two communities jointly contribute to frame Romano as «newly victimized», they also channel a moral judgement particularly [against](#) members of the League and their followers, who put on the same levels Romano's religious conversion and her adhesion to terrorism, her clothes to Nazi uniforms. In this sense, the disdain conveyed by these two narratives constitutes a partisan reaction that is typical of affective polarization processes (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012) and

which can do little, if not anything at all, to dismantle the Islamophobic stereotype attached to Romano's veil (Allen 2015) or to reclaim her right to self-determination.

Caught in between a tactical intersectional misrepresentation from all political sides, Silvia Aisha Romano intervenes through her social media accounts trying to stop this spiral of hate. Crucially, her plea «not to get angry» in her defence features only in the second narrative and represents one of the few instances in which her voice is one of those included in the conversation. Confirming older and newer analyses on the invisibilisation of women in the public sphere, particularly Muslim ones (Olufemi 2020), Silvia Aisha Romano is often «spoken on behalf of» for the largest part of the discussion and across ideological divisions.

Overall, the application of an intersectional lens to study the release of Silvia Aisha Romano on Twitter enabled us to extend to the Italian context current reflections on the intersectional nature of polarization dynamics which are emerging in the US (Ferree 2021) while, at the same, shedding more light on how mediated stereotypes unfold in a multipolar system and beyond the far right/populists forces (Donà 2021). Leaning on different repertoires of stereotypes – more misogynist and Islamophobic on the right, more centered around an idea of a “good woman and daughter” on the left and for the M5S – the three main political poles in the Italian scenario instrumentally exploited and, ultimately, vilified Silvia Aisha Romano and her experience. Overlaps between politics and media due to political parallelism (Mancini 2012; 2013) did translate differently depending on topics and thematic areas, with community #1 political actors and media more consistently aligned than elsewhere and driving more neatly the weaponization of Romano against their opponents. In the urge of contrasting and containing the discourse of hate coming from the right, the narratives pivoting around other parties constructed a positive but no less stereotyped version of Romano which was then thrown especially against the League and its members.

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The release of #SilviaRomano: a case of mediated polarized intersectionality
Tables and Figures

Tables

Table 1. Political parties' tweets distribution in semantic communities

Party	Comm 1	Comm 2	Comm 3	Total
Fratelli d'Italia (FdI)	22	0	0	22
Popolo della Famiglia (PdF)	6	0	0	6
Forza Nuova (FN)	3	0	0	3
Lega (League)	56	0	1	57
Forza Italia (FI)	28	3	0	32
Independents	2	1	0	3
Vox	2	0	0	3
Cambiamo! – Alternativa Popolare	1	1	0	2
Partito Democratico (PD)	0	89	0	89
Liberi e Uguali (LEU)	0	24	0	24
Verdi (Verdi)	0	3	0	3
Institutions	0	2	0	2
Partito Rifondazione Comunista (PRC)	0	2	0	2
Fare!	0	1	0	1
Italia Viva – Partito Socialista Italiano (IV-PSI)	0	27	0	28
Possibile	0	33	0	36
Più Europa-Azione	0	10	1	12
Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S)	0	11	31	42

Table 2. Media's tweets distribution in semantic areas

Media	Comm 1	Comm 2	Comm 3	Total
Libero_official	105	2	1	110
Adnkronos	42	33	32	110
tempoweb	23	1	1	25
tg2rai	9	0	1	10
MediasetTgcom24	6	2	14	22
Agenzia_Ansa	5	20	8	33
TgLa7	5	12	2	19
Agenzia_Italia	3	5	8	16
giornalettismo	2	32	3	37
LaStampa	2	7	4	13
fanpage	1	22	5	28
RaiNews	1	14	1	16
fam_cristiana	1	14	0	15
askanews_ita	1	4	0	8
globalistIT	0	15	1	16
SkyTG24	0	9	1	10
Linkiesta	0	7	1	9
repubblica	0	7	1	8
Tg3web	0	6	0	6
Agenzia_Dire	0	3	5	8
fattoquotidiano	0	1	7	8
cmdotcom	0	0	7	8

Note: To improve the readability of the table, media accounts are displayed when tweeting more than average. Mean tweet number for media account=5. Mean value has been calculated without outliers (Libero_Official and Adnkronos)

Figures

Figure 1. Semantic network main component, communities, and their features

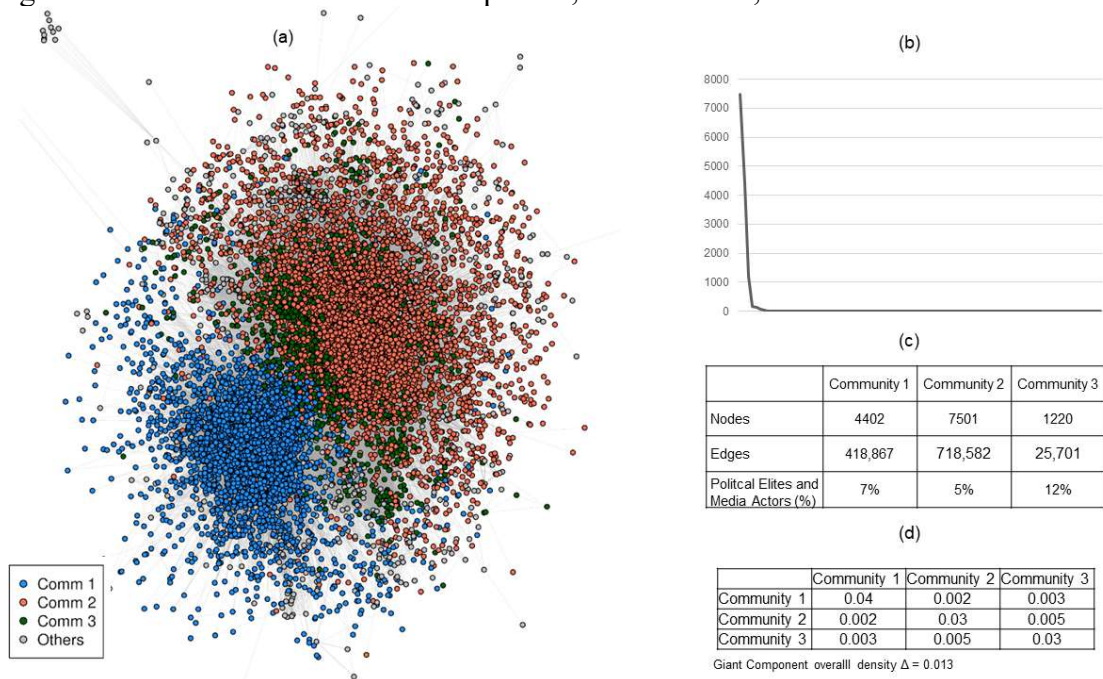


Figure 2. Community 1 themes and topics

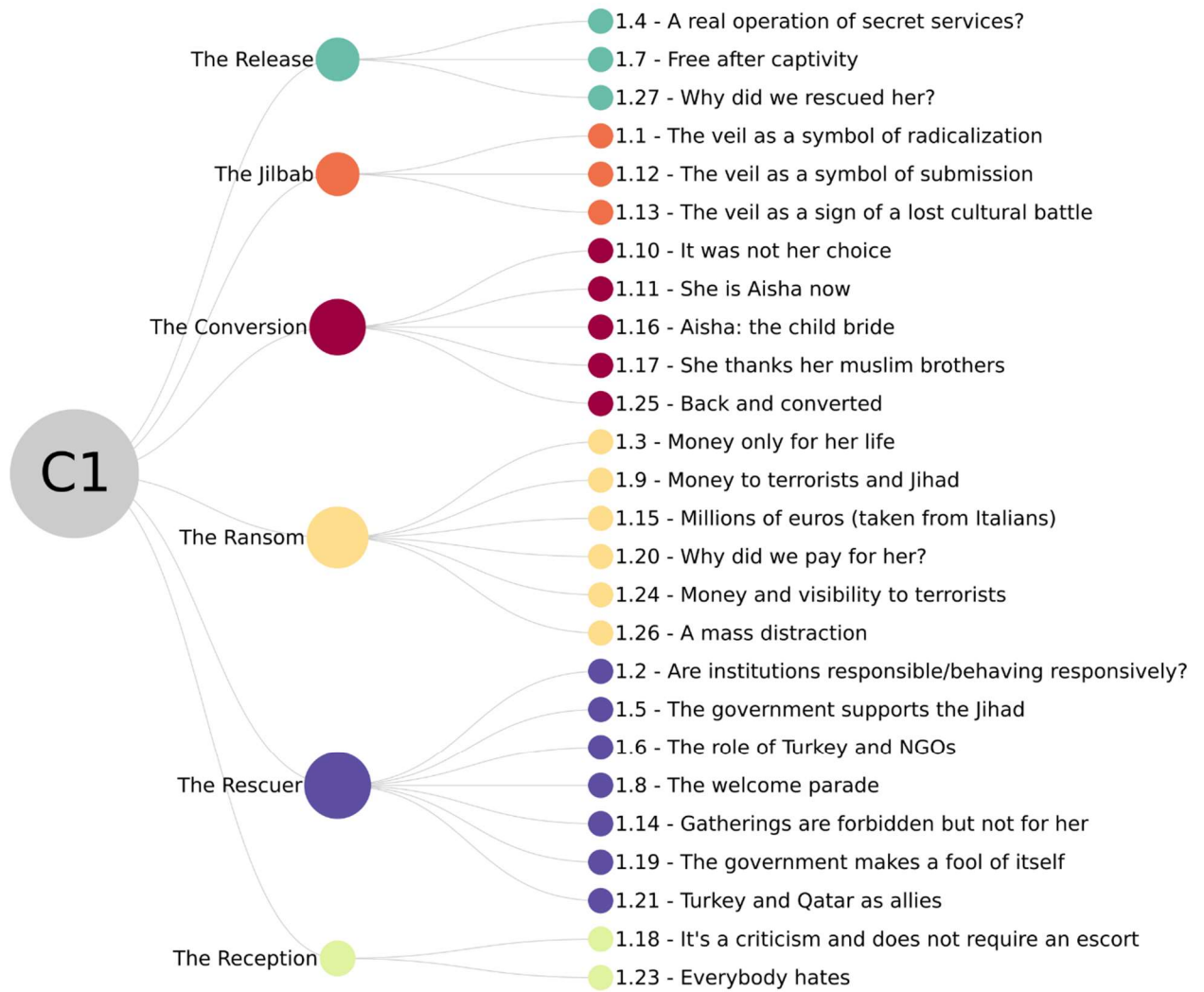


Figure 3. Community 2 themes and topics

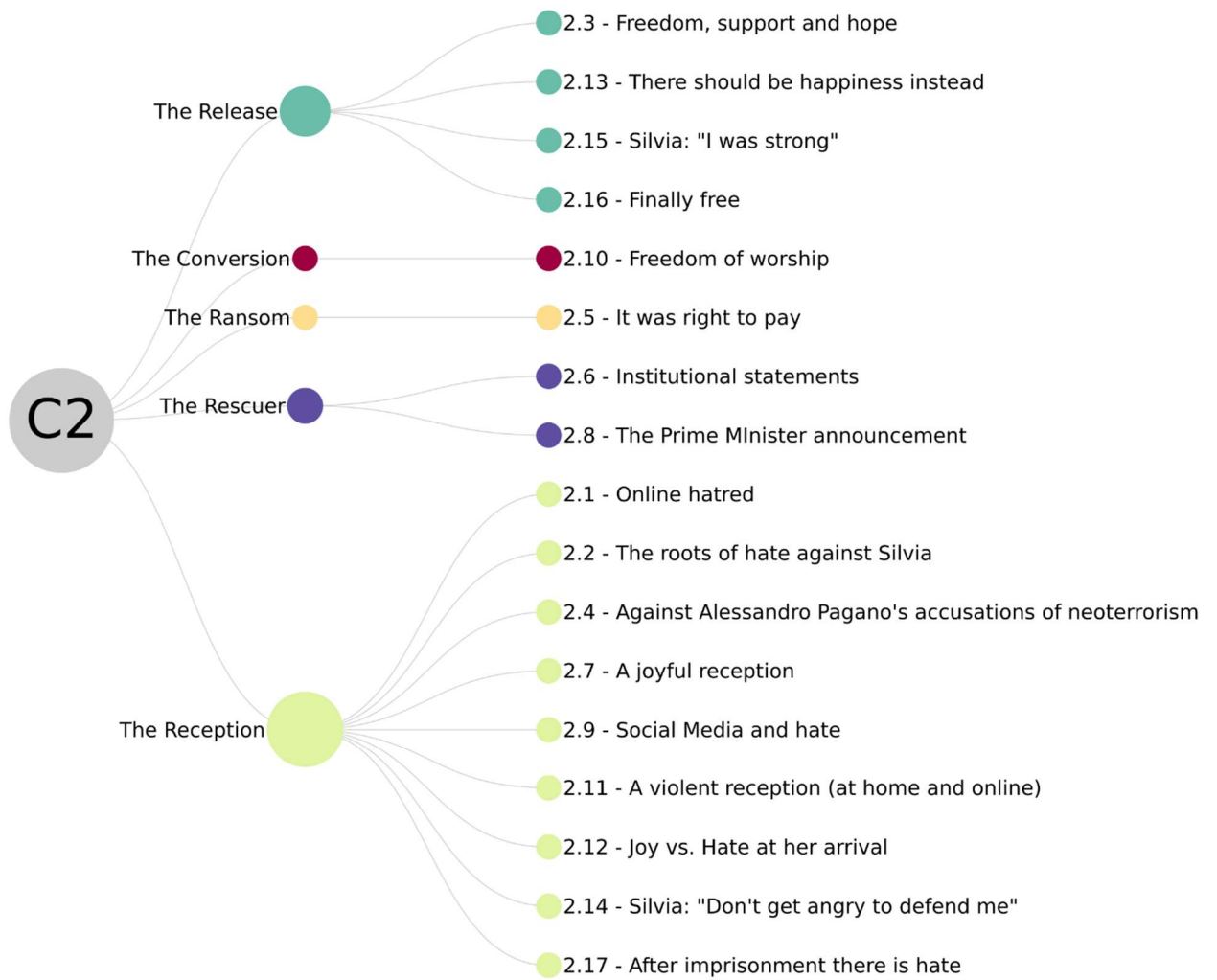


Figure 4. Community 3 themes and topics

