

Emergence and Diffusion of «Roma issues» in the political web arena

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As part of the European project MigRom, with social network analysis (SNA) instruments, we are studying the emergence and diffusion of «Roma issues» in the political web arena during local electoral campaigns. Our aim is to analyse the flow of political discourses within the political and media websites through a systematic press review of articles about "Roma" on Google News. Our hypothesis is that, beyond the well established representations of politicians, a new autonomous arena is emerging from the campaigns, a political arena made up of a combination of controversies that is well present on the web and where we find Roma.

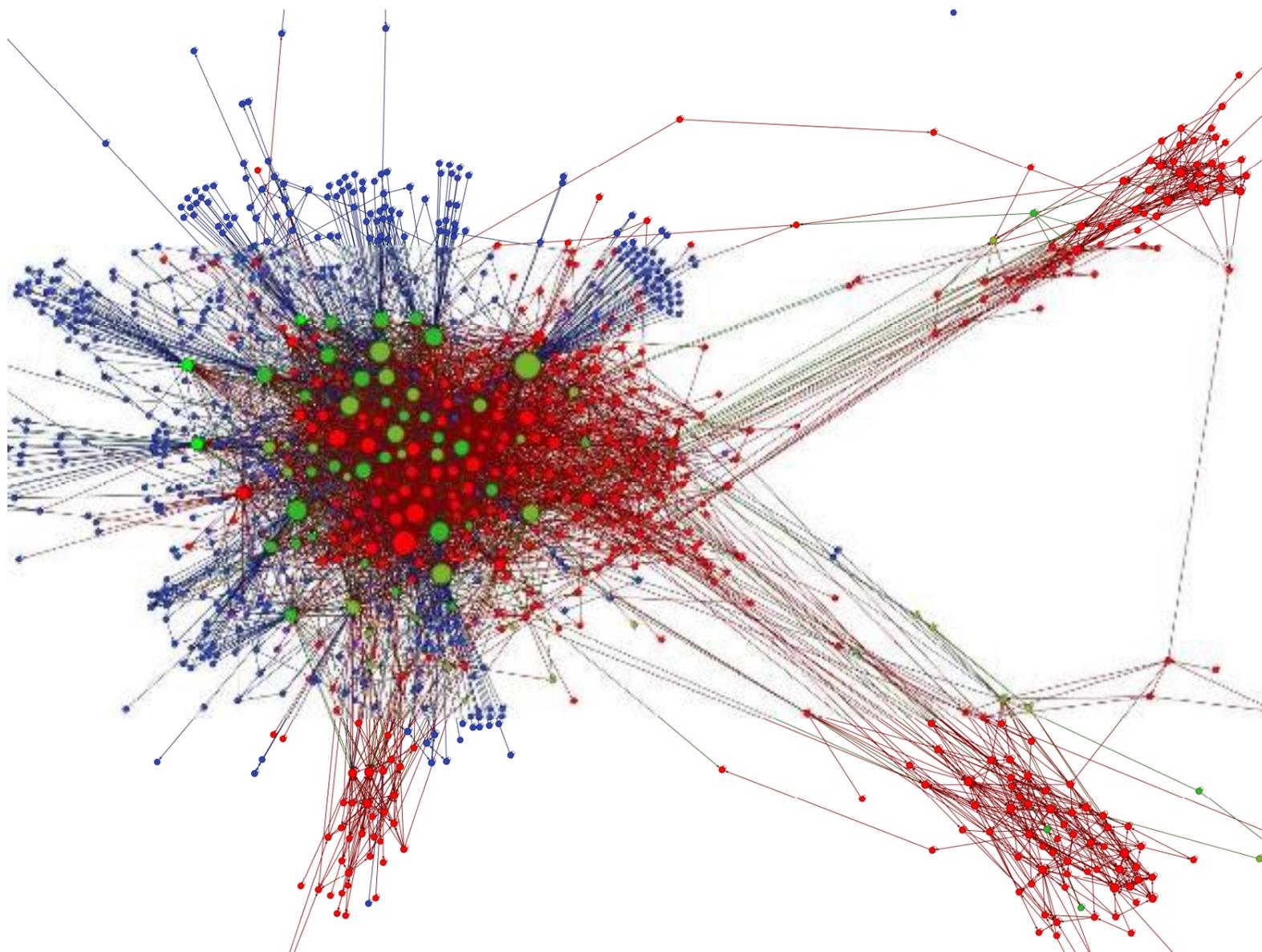
As the first step of our study, we created two complex databases using Hyphe software, one for France and one for Italy, including press articles together with political, institutional and information media websites. The databases were produced during the electoral municipal campaigns (November - Avril 2014 for the city agglomeration of La Plaine commune (North of Paris), and April- May 2014 for the town of Bari - Southern Italy).

At the beginning we decided to investigate the following issues:

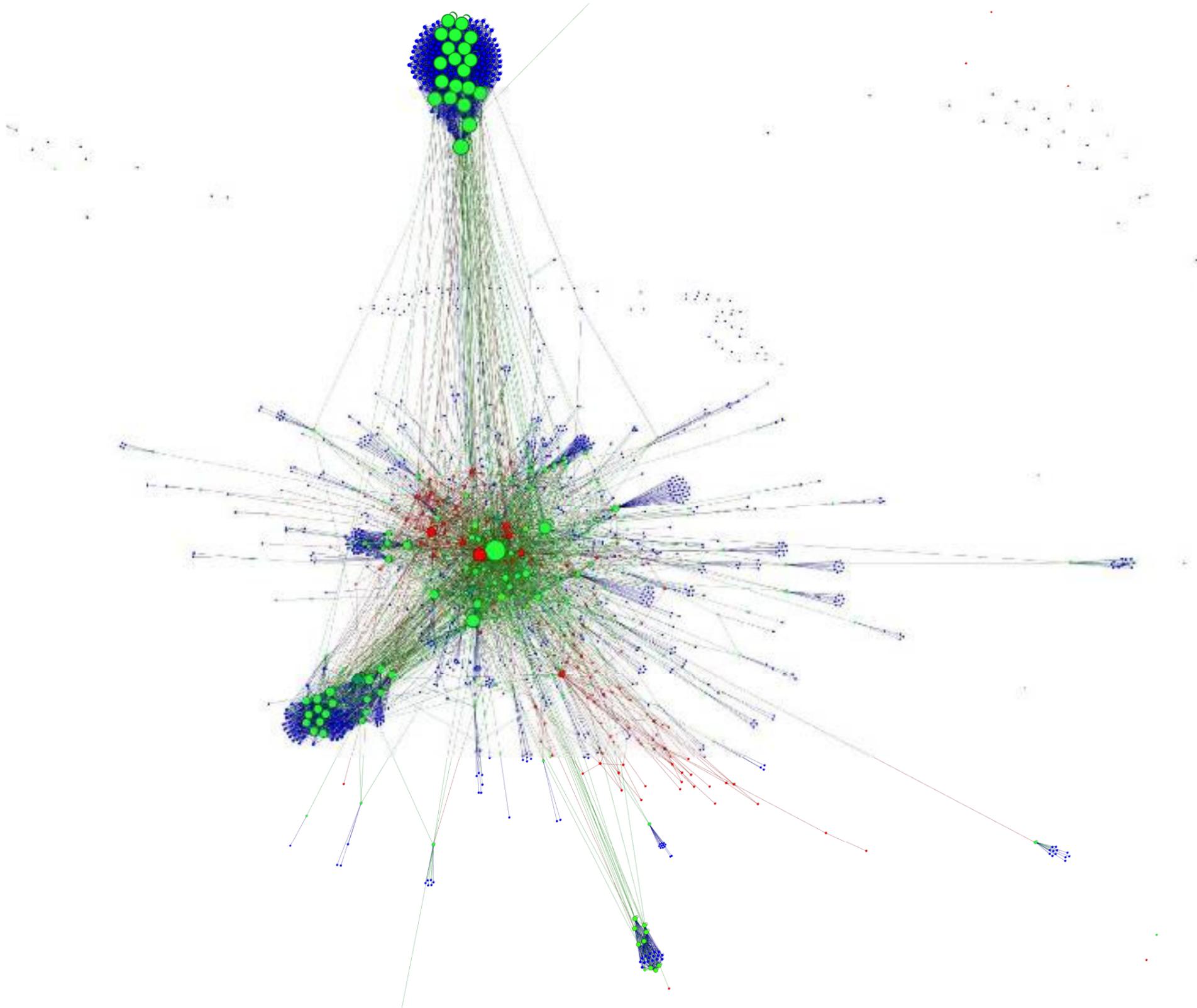
- who, among the political players, was especially interested in Roma? That is, how were discourses about Roma distributed in the political sphere during the local electoral campaigns?
- who, among the press and information media, was especially interested in Roma? That is, how were discourses about Roma distributed in the information sphere during the local electoral campaigns?
- which was the correlation, if there was any, between the media and the political discourses about Roma?
- which were the main topics of the media and political debates on the web? Which was the correlation, if there was any, between the media's and the politicians' topics?

Once the two databases had been compiled, we used Gephi software to create two maps representing the network of relations linking all the elements included in the databases (maps 1 and 2).

Map 1.



Map 2.



Legend of Maps 1 & 2

Green= information sites

Red=political sites

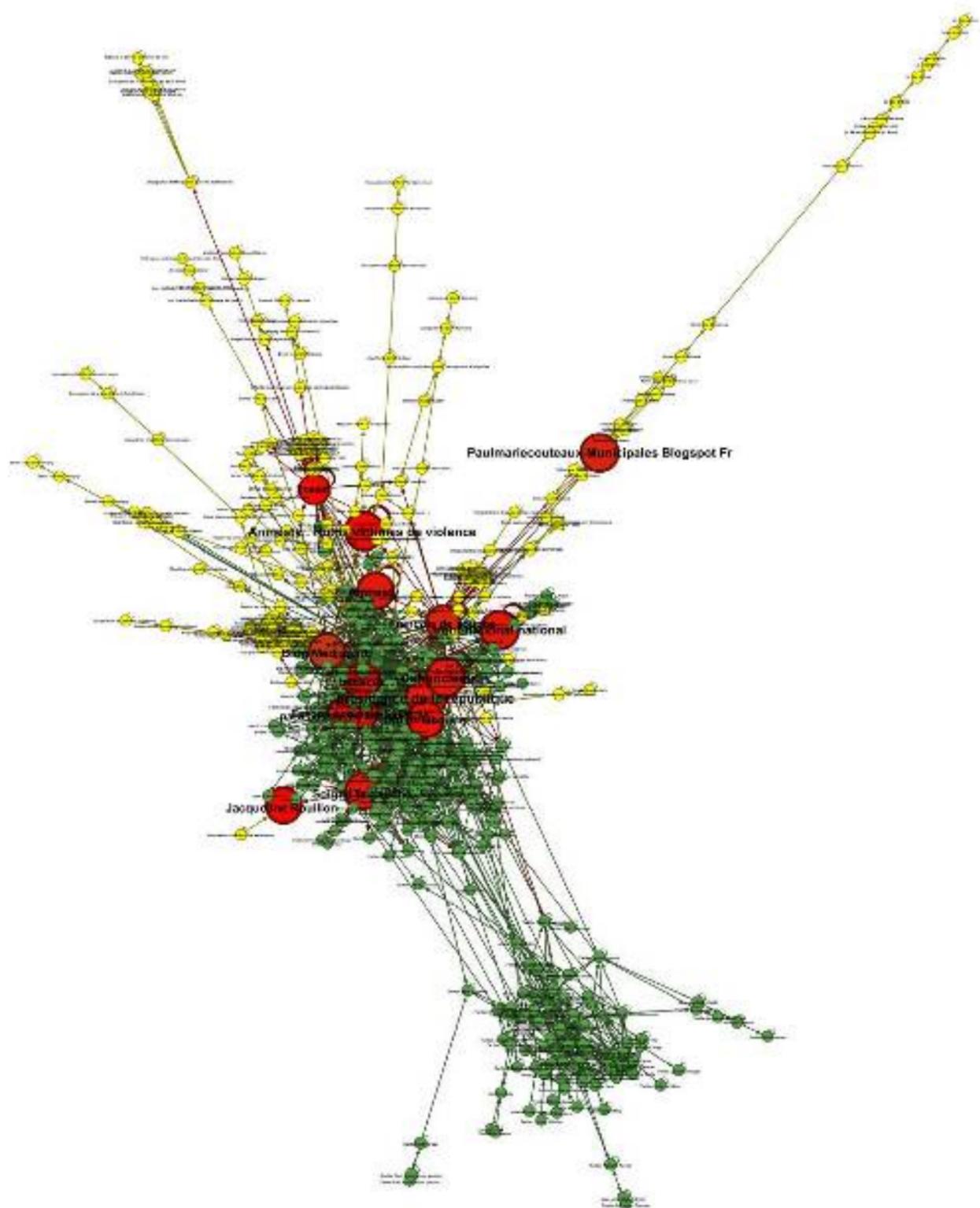
Blue= articles

Starting from these complete and very complex maps, we filtered some elements so that only a few relation networks were plotted on new maps. Firstly, we created maps that only showed networks between political websites and articles concerning Roma so that we could identify those political players who were especially interested in Roma during the local electoral campaigns (maps 3-4-5-6).

Before reading these maps, we should point out that the analysis of our data is first of all cartographic: these maps can show how the "Roma" topic is constructed on the web by the players selected to create our databases: politicians, associations, information media, institutional sites. They can show this mainly through the morphological features of the network represented. The usual tools for this kind of morphological analysis are as follows:

- modularity: how the players group together creating clusters of relations
- centrality: how some players are in the centre of other players' relations, and therefore crucial for our analysis
- degree: the number of relations between the players.

Map 3: French Corpus : Politics vs articles



Legend :

Green and red=political websites

Yellow=articles linked with the political network

Red=political websites directly linked with articles

The French map (3) shows the political websites that created direct links with articles concerning Roma.

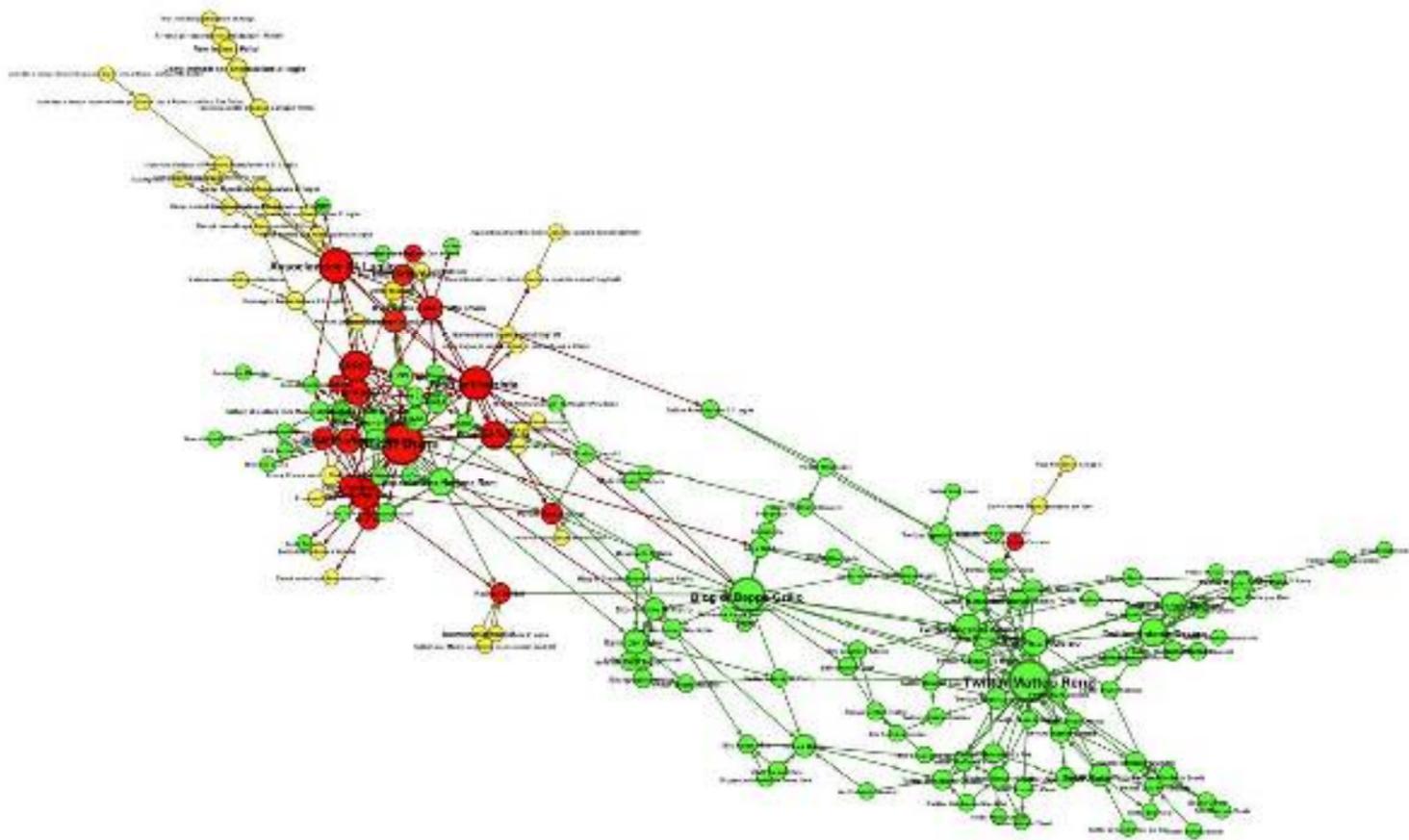
We highlighted in red all the sites which quote or are quoted by an article about Roma. If we get out the Republic Presidency (quoted many times in an article), we can read different kinds of relations on the map.

The **Fnasat** (a federation of pro-Roma associations) quotes many articles, acting as a **hub** (that is, in terms of social network analysis, a site quoting many other sites) for the political sphere of associations. This site is connected with the **Médiapart** blog (extreme left wing) and with **Alain Bertho's** blog, an academic greatly involved in the local pro-Roma struggle in Saint-Denis. **François Desouche's** site has the same centrality as those already mentioned and also functions as a hub making a point of reviewing all the articles about Roma and also showing the importance of Roma topics for the French extreme right wing. To confirm this hypothesis, we can also notice that the only French political party directly linked with an article

concerning Roma is that of the **National Front** (quoting the trial of Jean-Marie Le Pen). Another extreme right hub, **Defrancisation**, quotes an article concerning Roma occupation of the Saint-Ouen gas power station. This relates to a local topic with considerable centrality on the map since it is quoted by **Soigne ta gauche**, another blog directly linked with the site of the town's Mayor. Another emerging local topic concerns the enrolment of Roma in the Saint-Denis electoral registry, quoted both by **Didier Labaume's** site, a candidate for mayor of Saint-Denis, and the aforementioned blog by Alain Bertho. We will be offering some reflections on these emerging topics later, but, by now, we can observe that, in France, the general topic of "Roma" clearly brings two big groups of national and local political players into opposition: on one hand the extreme right wing and on the other a coalition of associations with the extreme left wing.

The Italian map (4), unlike the French one, reveal a scarcity of political websites which created direct links with articles concerning Roma. In this map we can see three well-defined clusters of relations representing the general distribution of Italian political discourses on the web and their correlation with articles about Roma.

Map 4 : Italian Corpus politics vs Article



On the left, we find a cluster mostly grouping Roma and pro-Roma associations, strictly connected with articles concerning Roma (the yellow points on the map). The **Associazione 21 Luglio** stands out among these associations due to its centrality in the network, the large number of quotations it receives from other associative sites and the numerous articles related to it. It is actually the only association able to direct the flow of information about Roma on the web and to be quoted significantly by other sites. In social network analysis terms, the Associazione 21 Luglio represents an **authority**, in other words, a site quoted by many other sites.

In the middle, we find the network of political sites related to the **Movimento 5 Stelle**, a political party led by Beppe Grillo, in a dominant position. This party originated on the web and normally uses the web as its main instrument for political action (the party's political discourses often evoke a more or less plausible conception of "web democracy"), particularly **Beppe Grillo's blog**, which represents a large hub on the map.

On the right, we can see a cluster of political sites strictly connected to Prime Minister Matteo Renzi's websites (Partito Democratico). **Matteo Renzi's twitter** represents an important authority on the map and is quoted by many others.

All the other players in the Italian political sphere hold marginal positions on the map. In particular, we could point out the area in which we find the political sites linked to Forza Italia, Silvio Berlusconi's party, which, while still being the right wing party with the highest number of voters, is almost non-existent on the map.

The first point to highlight: this map shows us that Italian politicians, also in comparison with the French, do not make great use of the web as an instrument for political communication and/or action. Only the Movimento 5 Stelle distinguishes itself through the use of the web and through the difficulty to locate it in the traditional political categories. Here we are dealing with a political party, originating from a movement on the web, that cannot be defined either as right wing or left wing, because it involves political issues from both traditional wings simultaneously. This is actually a specificity not only within the Italian context, but also on the international political landscape. The Partito Democratico led by Renzi is conducting a policy that aims to narrow the gap between the web and traditional parties, while the other parties clearly still prefer to use more traditional communication/action instruments (for example, Forza Italia's huge conventions organised in many Italian towns and directly led by Silvio Berlusconi during electoral campaigns).

A second point to highlight: in any case, we can see from this map that Italian politicians have no direct links with articles on Roma. The only political players really interested in Roma are associations, especially the Associazione 21 Luglio in Rome. This does not mean that Italian politicians make no use of Roma issues at all for electoral aims. In fact, we will see below that Roma topics were very frequently used in political discourses by the extreme right and by right wing Italian politicians during electoral campaigns. But these political players generally do not use their websites to communicate, preferring to rely on traditional media like radio, television and the press through declarations given to journalists, as we will see later. Before proposing any further comparative reflections, we will present the second kind of map we created, which merely represents the networks between media websites and articles concerning Roma. The aim of these maps is to identify which information sites were especially interested in Roma during the local electoral campaigns (maps 5-6).

The French map (5) immediately reveals that French media treat the subject rather superficially. Only half of the topics is original, which means that the articles deal with news reported by one media only. Furthermore, most of them come from the local press, and from two news sites in particular: **Le Parisien** and **La voix du Nord**. These sites basically publish first hand news concerning various short news items (i.e. forced evictions, demonstrations, etc.)

Legend of map 5 & 6

Red = media web site

Blue = isolated articles

Yellow = topic

If we consider the topics with the highest degree (that is the highest number of relations between the players) we find:

- the publication of a report on 2013 forced evictions by the "Ligue des droits de l'Homme" (LDH) and "European Roma Rights Centre" (ERRC) associations;
- the publication of a report on Roma by Amnesty International;
- the publication of an annual report by the "Commission Nationale Consultative des Droits de l'Homme" (CNCDH).

The top three topics therefore come from the associative sphere but with a national range. However, the importance of information from associations contrasts with the idea that Roma are a subject treated above all by politicians.

The following six important topics are:

- the death of a child in a fire;
- Le Pen's trial after declaring that "les Roms volent naturellement comme les oiseaux" (it is in the nature of Roma to steal or take flight like birds)
- the ban on bus travel (a discrimination event in Saint-Denis)
- the occupation of the Saint-Ouen gas power station
- Dibrahnis' appeal following the case of Leonarda
- the acid attack on a family living in the street in Paris.

Only Le Pen's trial and Dibrahnis' appeal related to issues of national importance, while the other topics related to various news items which were only brought to national visibility thanks to being published by Le Parisien. The ability of this medium to make a local news item national depends on the Paris centralism of French media, regularly highlighted by many observers.

Two topics especially help to explain the correlation between the "Roma issues" and the Plaine Commune local electoral campaign.

- the occupation of the Saint-Ouen gas power station
- the enrolment of Roma in the Saint-Denis electoral registry.

The first topic concerns the occupation of the railway that serves to move in the raw material of the Saint-Ouen gas power station by some Romanian Roma. The left wing politician, who was Mayor of Saint-Ouen at that time, decided to write an open letter to the Internal Affairs Minister Manuel Valls informing him of the risk that this occupation could represent for the little town's heating provisions (8 November 2013).

Roma had been in conflict with the Saint-Ouen City Council since the creation of an "integration village" in 2005 and, in order to confront the Mayor and the Minister, they called up the extreme left party (NPA - Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste) against their forced eviction.

To study this story, we should firstly ask ourselves why this Mayor from a political party that generally supports the Roma's political fights, chose to go against them in this case.

Did this choice impact on the loss of the City Council some months after? In a political context where different left parties are in competition, to chose an agenda setting on right wing topics as security issues can destabilise traditional coalitions. This let us suppose that the right wing wins (as it won in this case) when the left wing enhance security rhetoric.

The second topic concerns a debate inside the political arena of Saint-Denis. Matthieu Hanotin, a candidate from the PS (Parti Socialiste), denounced the supposed illicit enrolment of 80 Roma on the Saint-Denis electoral registry to support the PC (Parti Communiste) candidates who held the City Council.

We can interpret this controversy as a clear pro or anti-Roma communication strategy for electoral purposes. Here we should ask whether, and how, this strategy impacted on the electoral results since the PS candidate failed by only 165 votes! Did his criticisms not go far enough? In any case, he received the support of the FN (Front National) candidate, therefore, local electoral campaign controversies allow us to identify which political players enhance security rhetoric.

The Italian map, which only shows the networks between media websites and articles concerning Roma (map 8), reveals the presence of four clusters of relations between different kinds of information sites.

On the right we find two big clusters roughly representing two large local press editorial groups.

In the top left, we find the cluster of national and local press agencies.

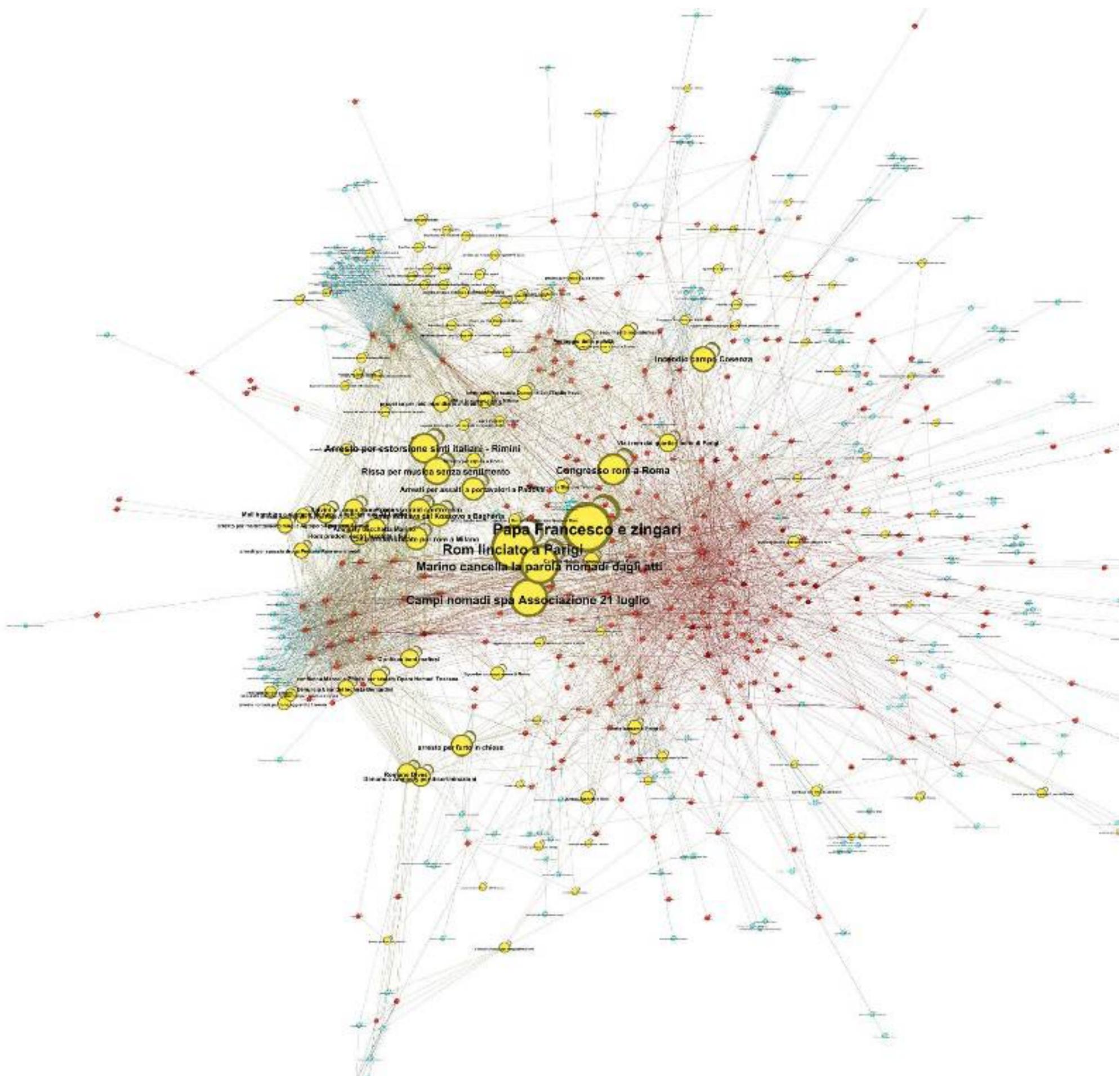
In the bottom left, we find the cluster of national newspapers.

A first point to highlight is that the local press has the majority of links with articles concerning Roma. A systematic review of the articles linked with the different clusters shows that:

- the Italian national press generally does not produce original articles about Roma, and certainly much fewer than in France;
- the Italian local press produces a lot of first-hand news concerning various items, as in France;

- only in a few cases does the Italian national press repeat articles taken from the local press.

Map 6 italian corpus : mediatic topics



Therefore, we can only find convergent interest by both the national and local press for particular topics: those at the centre of the map, in the middle of the clusters (the large yellow ones).

If we omit the topic of a fire in the town of Cosenza (a topic with a high degree but low centrality because it related strictly to a local political controversy), we can see five other topics with the highest centrality and degree in this map:

- Pope Francis' declaration on "zingari" in Rome;
- the local political controversy created by Rome Council's refusal to provide a hall for a Roma association meeting for a bureaucratic problem;
- the local political controversy created by the Mayor of Rome's decision to erase the word "nomads" from administrative deeds;
- the publication of the "Campi Nomadi s.p.a." report by the Associazione 21 Luglio;
- the beating up of a Rom in Paris.

As regard to the first topic, on the occasion of the meeting sponsored by the Pontifical Council for the pastoral care of migrants and itinerant people, "The Church and Gypsies: to announce the gospel in the peripheries", Pope Francis remembered having personally observed many episodes of discrimination in the everyday life of Rome, and called for the commitment of local and national institutions and the support of the international community to identify proposals and interventions geared toward improving the Gypsies' quality of life. The numerous articles quoting this topic are probably due to the great visibility of someone like Pope Francis rather than its content, but it is exactly because of this great visibility that someone may have decided to comment on the Pope's words polemically. This is the case of the **Lega Nord** leader, **Matteo Salvini**, who probably gave declarations in opposition to the Pope in order to gain some media visibility in return.

The news about a Rom being beaten up in Paris, as well as other topics concerning Roma living abroad often quoted by many Italian information sites, could lead us to reflect on the inclination of the Italian press not to report on domestic problems and preferring to give more visibility to foreign ones. In the same period, news about a Rom being beaten up in Italy, supposedly not by unknown persons but by policemen, obtained only 7 mentions in the Italian press, against the 27 on the similar news in Paris. Is this a way to deny political responsibilities about the current situation of Roma in Italy?

The other three most important topics in this map concern local political affairs in Rome, i.e. web controversies essentially involving the local political sphere of Rome only. We observe here something similar to the French case, because, here too, the centralism of the capital city, a sort of capital city effect, seems to make Rome's local items become of national importance. This effect certainly does not depend on a supposed special or very different situation in Rome compared to other big Italian cities (Milan has the same problems concerning Roma as Rome). It could, however, depend on the higher concentration of information and political players in the city which does, in fact, represent the core of national politics. But it could also depend on another factor: the presence in Rome of the Associazione 21 Luglio, the only association able to create public debates on the web about Roma.

Lastly, a systematic review of the contents of the articles on the most important topics in this map shows us who, among the Italian political players, and with which aims, spoke about Roma during the local electoral campaign.

In brief, the extreme right and right wing politicians often spoke about Roma for electoral purposes, while associations often spoke about Roma trying to influence the national and local politics through their perspective on integration. But the question is: where is the Italian left? The Italian left, just like the Italian extreme left, did not mention Roma during the electoral campaign, and they won the elections. Could it be that the Italian left wing has understood that "Roma issues" do not bring in a good return in terms of votes?

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