Nonuse and hypocritical use of strategic narratives in Megaprojects: The case of the Florence high-speed railway

Fabrizio Coticchia and Marco Di Giulio [ID]

Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche e Internazionali, Università di Genova, Genova GE 16125, Italy

Bionotes Fabrizio Coticchia is an Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Genoa. His fields of research are Italian and European defense, military transformation, and strategic narratives. His articles have appeared, among others, on *International Relations, Government and Opposition, Foreign Policy Analysis, International Peacekeeping*, and *Armed Forces & Society*. Some of his books are *Italian Military Operations Abroad: Just Don't Call it War*, with P. Ignazi and G. Giacomello (Palgrave, 2012); *Italian Foreign Policy under Matteo Renzi: A Domestically-Focused Outsider and the World*, with J. Davidson (Lexington, 2019); and *Reluctant Remilitarisation: Transforming Defence and the Armed Forces in Germany, Italy, and Japan After the Cold War*, with F. N. Moro and M. Dian (Edinburgh University Press, 2023).

Marco Di Giulio is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Genoa. His current research interests encompass the role of technology in organizational and policy design, the analysis of policy change, and the governance of collective goods. His articles appeared on *Policy Sciences*; *Public Policy and Administration*; *Journal of European Public Policy, Evaluation, Review of Policy Research*; *International Review of Administrative Sciences*; *Utilities Policy*; and *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice.*

Corresponding author: M. Di Giulio, Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche e Internazionali, Università di Genova, Piazzale E. Brignole, 3A, Genova GE 16125, Italy. Email: marco.digiulio@unige.it

Abstract

Since megaprojects are costly, impactful, and often contentious policymaking processes, scholars have started to look at policy narratives as instruments that actors use strategically to justify their preferences and achieve their goals. But is this really the case? Do actors always adopt a narrative to support their goals? Do they develop arguments that are consistent with their official goals and in a timely manner? This paper suggests that, when megaprojects are not salient, narratives are likely to be strategically nonused or used in a hypocritical way, as such strategies better fit the process-related goals of significant actors. Such a claim is illustrated by a case study on the construction of a new high-speed railway line and station in the city of Florence (Italy). Relying on content and discourse analysis of official documents, and experts' interviews, the paper shows that, despite favorable premises for the emergence of a battle of narratives, this never took place, as some of the proponents choose to nonuse a strategic narrative, while others occasionally publicly used arguments to jeopardize the whole project. In turn, opponents effectively developed a strategic narrative that, differently from other similar cases, mostly relied on technical arguments and emplotment. Hence, the case study generates hypotheses that could be tested in further studies on the conditions under which a coalitional dynamic emerges and the role played by policy narratives in the process.

Keywords: Megaprojects, strategic narratives, NIMBY, conflictuality, project management

Management and policy studies have rediscovered narratives as distinctive subjects (Brown, 1998; Jones & McBeth, 2010; Radaelli, 1999; Shanahan et al., 2018; Weible et al., 2016). Several empirical

investigations have focused on the discursive and ideational elements of policy processes, stressing how actors are inclined to make strategic use of narratives as an instrument to pursue their own policy goals (Mintrom & O'Connor, 2020; Miskimmon et al., 2017; Terlizzi, 2021). But is this really the case? Do actors always adopt a narrative to support their goals in a given policy process? Do they develop arguments that are consistent with their official goals and in a timely manner? Analogous to what Thomas Schelling posited for the role of military forces in a conflict (1960, 9), we argue that narratives may be strategically nonused. Moreover, the very content of these narratives may be inconsistent with the actual policy goals of the actors who developed them.

This paper contributes to the scholarly debate on the strategic use of narratives in a megaproject by focusing on a case study of the design and implementation of a new high-speed (HS) railway track and station in the City of Florence (Italy). Planned in the 1990s and still unfinished, this is an extremely controversial project due to trials and criticalities that emerged during the implementation process, causing backlashes until today. The case is puzzling because, despite these hurdles, the interaction between the narratives by both proponents and opponents has manifested in unexpected ways. In fact, relevant actors among the proponents preferred not to develop a strategic narrative as an instrument to govern the process; others pleaded for project abandonment while remaining committed in the decision-making process. Conversely, opponents failed to enlarge their coalition and instead developed a narrative in which technical arguments prevailed over ideological and emotional stances. This case study suggests that, when megaprojects are not salient, narratives are likely to be strategically nonused or used in a hypocritical way, as such strategies better fit the process-related goals of significant actors.

The following section discusses the literature on project management and narratives, arguing that a better conceptualization of the strategic use of narratives in policy processes is needed. Additionally, it further introduces the case at hand. We illustrate how theory-driven expectations that could align with this case are not met. The rest of the paper uses discourse and content analysis to trace the narratives produced by the main policy actors, including interviews with policymakers actively involved in the process. The conclusion summarizes the main results, paving the way for further research to generalize the findings, by assessing with other approaches and larger sample the conditions under which narratives are nonused or employed in a hypocritical way.

The nonuse and hypocritical use of narratives as strategies

This section reviews the literature on megaprojects, highlighting how strategic narratives constitute a topic of rising importance in debates concerning the social, political, and institutional feasibility of this specific policy area. Megaprojects provide a suitable case to develop our theoretical arguments about the unexpected and undertheorized strategic uses of narratives. In fact, the literature reasonably assumes that, given the high salience and social impact of megaprojects, the actors involved in them often elaborate narratives with content and causal arguments mirroring their goals. However, we suggest that, under certain conditions, policymakers may avoid using narratives, or, if they are deployed, they may not be necessarily time-consistent, or their content may be apparently at odds with actors' goals.

Megaprojects, conflictuality, and strategic narratives

Megaprojects require large (and often public) investments to build infrastructures that have relevant, durable, and often risky impacts on societal actors (Flyvbjerg et al., 2003; Gellert & Lynch, 2003; Söderlund et al., 2017). Consequently, conflicts are likely to emerge among the various stakeholders (van Den Ende & van Marrewijk, 2019). Due to the contentious nature of many of these projects, scholars have focused extensively on their social, political, and institutional feasibilities (Davies et al., 2017; Derakhshan et al., 2019; Scott & Levitt, 2017; Van Marrewijk et al., 2008). While policy studies have engaged with this topic as a case of participatory governance and deliberative democracy (Esposito et al., 2023; Nagel & Satoh, 2019), scholars concerned with project management have adopted a "stakeholder management" perspective (Winch, 2017). Either way, scholars have begun exploring how narratives constitute an important dimension of the whole phenomenon and how actors can use them strategically (Havermans et al., 2015), either they belong to the proponents or they are protesters of the megaproject (Esposito et al., 2022; Ninan & Sergeeva, 2021, 2022a, 2022b).

Strategic narratives

Symbols, discourses, and stories constitute an essential part of the behavior of parties, groups, movements, governmental agencies, companies, and all the possible actors involved in a policy process. Consequently, scholars have given increasing attention to policy narratives as a key feature of decision-making processes, often assuming that narratives can shape such processes and lead them to the desired direction. In short, actors use narratives strategically.

But what makes a narrative strategic? Should its content be aligned with actors' goals? Should its content and discursive strategies be time consistent? Are actors always expected to develop discursive strategies? Recent research in the field of international relations (Catanzaro & Coticchia, 2022; Colley, 2017; Miskimmon et al., 2017) has attempted to answer these questions, focusing on elements as the plot formation and the strategic goals also to distinguish strategic narratives from concepts such as master narratives, master frames, and frames. Indeed, along with emplotment, the strategic dimension—i.e., "influencing public opinion by developing a storyline" (Catanzaro & Coticchia, 2022, 9)[1]—is the crucial factor that identifies strategic narratives from other discursive forms. Thus, it is reasonable to expect that strategic narratives are deliberately designed by political actors to convince their audiences.

Accordingly, recent empirical studies have demonstrated how narratives must fit a certain set of criteria to be considered strategic. Mintrom and O'Connor (2020), in a study of the policy narratives adopted in the US to craft Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) actions, affirm that, "a narrative that has a consistent, overarching message about how and why a policy or a set of policy is being implemented enables people to understand why changes are occurring and determine how their – and their action – fit in the broader scheme." Terlizzi (2021), in his study on Italian migration policy, emphasized how narrative serves as a "glue" helping policymakers to stabilize actors' behavior. Analyzing the planning of the HS 2 railway line in Britain, Ninan and Sergeeva (2021) argue that strategic use of narratives concerns not only what actors say but also the use symbols and reasoning to cope with challenges in policy implementation. They suggest that narratives—if used to mobilize others—are likely to be systematically repeated, endorsed by prominent figures, harmonized with other policies, and actioned, as actors are supposed to underpin their discursive behaviors with concrete actions in specific places (Ninan & Sergeeva, 2021, 530–532). Moreover, they highlight the importance of external stakeholders, understood as players not directly involved in the project implementation but potentially affected by it, who thus become relevant if mobilized by proponents or opponents and represent a strong incentive for the latter to develop strategic narratives.

The fact that several megaprojects are highly contentious led scholars to focus on how narratives vary in type. In fact, if we assume that most actors involved in a policy-making process have a high stake in the realization of the project, it is easy to take for granted that the contents and use of narratives will always be consistent with their preferences. However, selecting cases in this way may leave questions about the possible strategic nonuse of narrative unanswered. Moreover, actors can make a hypocritical use of narratives when their goals in the policy process fail to align with the very content of their narratives (Calossi et al., 2022). Such behavior is strategic if used to increase the bargaining power of an actor interested in side payments, especially in the context of low audience costs. The literature on megaproject management has so far largely neglected these features, as in such impactful policies, actors are likely to have intense preferences and external stakeholder easy to engage by both proponents and opponents.

We contend that narratives can be strategically nonused or hypocritically used when a significant number of actors in the policy arena have process-related goals. In fact, policy processes are seldom populated by players who participate because the decisions at stake represent priorities for their agenda. While proponents or opponents may fit this model well, other actors normally join the policy-making due to their institutional role or because they see the process as an opportunity to pursue their own agendas, sometimes with motives and interests that may diverge from the overall implementation of the megaproject.

---

[1]   As stressed by the authors, "strategic narratives are different from frames because, while frames are not always used strategically, strategic narratives are [...] framing, as an action, is sometimes purposeful, sometimes accidental, and sometimes instinctive. On the contrary, as previously stated, strategic narrative is always purposeful (Catanzaro & Coticchia, 2022, 10)

Case study and puzzles

This section presents the case study, focusing on both the theoretical and empirical elements that make it puzzling for the literature on the strategic use (and nonuse) of narratives in megaprojects.

The case

The first Italian HS track connecting Rome to Florence became partially operational in 1977 and fully in 1992. Although the complete HS line, which now connects Milan to Salerno, was not envisioned at that time, the idea of bypassing the city of Florence with a tunnel dedicated to HS services emerged in the 1980s. The initial planning involved the Italian state–owned railway company, Ferrovie dello Stato Italiane (FSI), and the City of Florence. The pillar of this initiative was to dedicate the Campo di Marte Station—placed on the southern side of the city and easily connected to the Florence–Rome track—to the HS services. This choice would have allowed HS trains to avoid the terminal station of Santa Maria Novella (SMN), located in the city center, and save time. Besides, from Campo di Marte, HS services would have been headed to Bologna in a new dedicated line.

This idea changed in the 1990s, as the Toscana regional government took an active role in the decision-making process concerning infrastructures (Morisi & Tebaldi, 2001; Interview 8). The regional government underpinned a whole revision of the project aimed at improving regional services. This new plan had initially been included in the project for the HS trunk connecting Florence to Bologna (operational since 2009), but when it was signed in July 1995, the part concerning the "Florence junction" was written off.

In 1998, the regional government conducted an environmental impact assessment of the possible alternatives for the city bypass, which excluded the possibility of an overground solution. A year later, a second assessment, required to proceed with the works, approved an underground bypass (Regione Toscana, 2012). The project encompassed 8 km of a new line dedicated to the HS service, six of which would be underground, from Campo di Marte to the area of Castello, on the northern side of town, where it would have been connected with the new Bologna–Firenze HS track. The project also included a new station—"Firenze Belfiore"—to be built about 1.5 km away from Florence SMN. In 1999, the municipality of Florence, the province of Florence, the regional government, the FSI, and the national government signed an agreement underpinning this project.

A major reshuffle of the project occurred in 2002 when a tender for the new station was set. Contextually, the site for the new station had been moved from the Belfiore area to a different one, about 500 m northbound, and thus also farther from the central station. In 2004, the new project, based on the preexisting impact assessment study, became executive. Public works, awarded in 2007 to a consortium of construction cooperatives (Coopsette), started in 2011.

The entire processes underwent several technical, financial, and judicial backlashes (Figure 1). Among the technical issues, at least two deserve mentioning. The first is related to the disposal of earth excavated from the building sites in the city of Florence. In 2008, a solution was found in a new infrastructure needed by some municipalities of Valdarno, a rural area between the provinces of Florence and Arezzo. The project was developed in 2015, and the acquisition of this material was a condition for its realization. However, it was only in February 2021 that Rete Ferroviaria Italiana (RFI), the railway network operator and a subsidiary of the FSI group, and three municipalities of the area signed a deal to implement the program, which included €21.5 million in compensation. The second technical issue, still not solved, is about the link between the new station and the city center.

Financial and judicial setbacks arose in 2013 when the Procura of Florence investigated the contractor for allegations of corruption. After several inquiries and severe financial problems, Coopsette was acquired by the Condotte group in 2014. A new backlash emerged in 2018, when the Condotte group went bankrupt and its president was arrested for corruption charges. After 2 years of interruption, RFI became the new general contractor of the project and works started once again in 2021.

Moreover, these setbacks during the implementation process occurred within a broader context of negative feedback. The development of the HS services made terminal stations less efficient, and, accordingly, several projects of passing stations have been developed over the last few decades: Porta Susa in Turin and Tiburtina in Rome, which are today operative. Yet, the assessment of these projects has been overall negative, as the huge financial investment did not pay off in terms of both mobility (passengers still prefer central stations) and commercial activities. Moreover, at the local level, the Firenze HS megaproject has been paralleled by other infrastructural conflicts in the surrounding areas,

Figure 1. Timeline.
Source: Authors' elaboration.

such as the construction of a waste treatment plant in the territories of Campi Bisenzio and Sesto Fiorentino and the enlargement of the Firenze airport. These two conflicts yielded collective actions by institutions, political parties, and citizens. Additionally, in 2010, the party Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S) began politicizing the issue at both the local and national levels (Biancalana, 2020). Alfonso Bonafede, a local activist and lawyer who helped the opposing coalition with legal actions against the project, became a member of Parliament with the M5S and Minister of Justice in 2018. At the same time, Beppe Grillo, renowned comedian and founder of the party, supported the cause on several occasions when visiting Florence during his tour.

Expectations and puzzles

For Casula et al. (2021), a significant body of exploratory research, "also well suited for deductive approaches," has emerged in the social sciences. As stressed by Shanahan et al., rather than testing hypotheses, studies "may chose instead to articulate expectations […] that allow the exploration of policy narratives by the way of qualitative techniques" (Shanahan et al., 2018: 335–6).

A large, expensive, and impactful project such as the Florence HS track and station can be used to generate specific and theory-driven expectations about the narrative strategies of the actors' involved (see Table 1). Such expectations concern both the content of the narratives and the presence and type of emplotment strategy used by both proponents and opponents. In particular, proponents are likely to use images of "modernization" to emphasize the overall utility of the project for the general public in terms of economic growth and efficiency. This was the case in both the HS 2 railway in the UK (Ninan & Sergeeva, 2021) and the HS tunnel between France and Italy (Esposito et al., 2022). Moreover, in cases like these, proponents are likely to rely on technical arguments as a key emplotment strategy (see Esposito et al., 2022).

Conversely, opponents are likely to emphasize the democratic deficits of a policy process as their dominant master frame (infra), as in the case of the Stuttgart 21 megaproject (Nagel & Satoh, 2019).

Table 1. Summary of expectations.

	Proponents	Opponents	Interaction
Content	Emphasize the overall rationality of the project in terms of general utility (Ninan & Sergeeva, 2021; Esposito et al., 2022)	Emphasize the nondemocratic nature of the project (Nagel & Satoh, 2019)	Both parties are expected to develop strategic narratives coherent with their goals (Winch, 2017) and consistently over time (Dailey & Browning, 2014)
Emplotment	Explicit, developed, and relying on technical arguments (Esposito et al., 2022; Shanahan et al., 2019)	Explicit, developed, and relying on ideological arguments (Esposito et al., 2022; Nagel & Satoh, 2019) Explicit, developed, and relying on technical arguments (Shanahan et al., 2019)	

Source: Authors' compilation.

Instead, expectations about emplotment strategies are difficult to outline ex ante; opponents can use either ideological (Esposito et al., 2022; Nagel & Satoh, 2019) or technical arguments, along with the endorsements of experts (Shanahan et al., 2019), to be effective.

Finally, expectations can be formulated regarding the interaction between the strategies of both parties. In particular, the literature on stakeholder management has highlighted the importance of developing narratives coherent with actors' policy goals, noting that the time consistency of such narratives amplifies their effectiveness (Dailey & Browning, 2014).

Research design and methods

This research examines how narratives in the policymaking process of a megaproject can be strategically nonused or used hypocritically. Hence, relying on Catanzaro and Coticchia (2022), this paper explores how policy-related narratives can be unpacked into different layers: frames, master frames, and strategic narratives. Frames are snapshots and differ from master frames, which are broader "in terms of scope, functioning as a kind of master algorithm" that affects actors (Benford & Snow, 2000, 618). Conversely, strategic narratives are "compelling storylines which can explain events convincingly and from which inferences can be drawn" (Freedman, 2006, 22). According to Archetti, they are a sequence "of events tied together by a plot line" (Archetti, 2017, 220). Thus, political actors use strategic narratives as tools to "extend their influence, manage expectations, and change the discursive environments in which they operate" (Miskimmon et al., 2014, 2). In line with the preexisting literature on the subject (Livingston & Nassetta, 2018; Miskimmon et al., 2014; Roselle et al., 2014), we conceive of strategic narratives as storylines composed of frames, as bricks of a broader plot.[2] Indeed, as aforementioned, the plot formation and strategic dimension differentiate narratives from frames and other forms of discourse (Catanzaro & Coticchia, 2022; Colley, 2017; Entman, 2003). As a corollary, not all discursive actions taking place in the policy process constitute a strategic use of narratives. Thus, such conceptualization allows one to trace whether actors or coalitions choose not to develop any master frame and whether such strategy variates over time.

Methods

This article investigates the narratives (and counter-narratives) adopted by local (political, social, and economic) actors to support or contrast the Treni Alta Velocità (TAV, HS trains) megaproject in Florence. We adopted discourse and content analysis to describe actors' narratives and their use. Discourse analysis investigates the "discursive battles over [the] meaning and definition of reality" (Lindekilde, 2014: 196). Thanks to primary and secondary sources (documents, newspaper articles, and public

---

[2] According to Livingston and Nassetta, "frames are situated within the contours of strategic narratives; they are to strategic narratives what particular storms are to global weather patterns" (Livingston & Nassetta, 2018: 103). Frames, which "do not establish causal relationship between means, ways and results" (De Graaf et al., 2015: 249), can be defined as "schemata of interpretation that enable individuals to locate, perceive, identify, and label, making events or occurrences meaningful and thereby function to organize and guide action" (Benford & Snow, 2000: 614).

releases), we scrutinized how actors interpreted and reported the events. Moreover, the empirical analysis illustrates the framing strategies adopted across time, as "frame alignment" or "frame bridging" of two unrelated frames (e.g., the rising costs of the TAV with the financial crisis). Through computer-supported content analysis (Phillips and Hardy, 2002), combining deductive and inductive coding strategies, we examined the frequency of the master frames that contributed to shaping the broader counter-narrative against the megaproject, revealing their saliency. Finally, we conducted a dozen semi-structured interviews with political leaders, experts, members of social movements and trade unions, and engineers.[3] This research triangulates the results of these interviews with the content and discourse analysis to assess the expectations of narratives and counter-narratives. The next section illustrates the main results.

Concepts and coding

Our empirical investigation observed both the single frames that—as snapshots—built the broader narratives, and the master frames, which refer to a "generic type of collective action frame that is wider in scope" (Benford, 2013: 1), as "an analytical anchor for many activities of social movements" (Carroll & Ratner, 1996, 610). Master frames are flexible, "expanded" frames (Snow et al., 2004, 390) and "interpretative packages" that connect selected issues to the public discourse.

For content analysis, we primarily focused on the features of the master frames elaborated by the network of actors who have opposed the tunnel and underground station in Florence. Only this coalition produced a coherent and time-consistent strategic storyline of the project. Conversely, the actors that, albeit with different intensity, sustained the infrastructure were scarcely active in creating plots to purposely justify their views. This is a finding that is discussed later using discourse analysis and qualitative interviews.

The counter-narrative developed by these actors—who established a permanent committee (involving experts, other movements, parties, and institutions) in its battle—is synthesized by the following storyline: "useless, imposed, and dangerous megaproject".[4] Within this plot, three master frames emerge: (1) the useless and expensive megaproject; (2) the imposed, undemocratic megaproject for private interests; and (3) the dangerous mega project for public health and territory.

In the case of the standardized content analysis, we assessed the relative salience of the three master-frames by looking at the frequencies of the frames that compose them. For instance, "the useless and expensive megaproject" contains frames as cost or technical problems; "the imposed, undemocratic megaproject for private interests" comprises schemata referring to corruption or the mafia; and the "dangerous mega project for public health and territory" includes manifold references to the environment. We compiled a vocabulary of logically connected terms of different master frames by scrutinizing the public releases—which are texts with similar lengths and structures—produced by the committee from 2006 to 2021. The word frequency list, "keywords in context," and the frequency of categories have been highlighted.[5]

Before examining the results of the quantitative content analysis, we illustrate the main findings regarding the qualitative discourse analysis, which have focused on the discursive environment related to the megaproject.

Analysis and results

In line with the literature, actors involved in megaproject's policymaking process can be divided into promoters and opponents (Esposito et al., 2022; Ninan & Sergeeva, 2021). The Ministry of Transport, FSI, the regional government, the city of Florence, and other local institutions were part of the promoting committee, which signed the main official agreements and should therefore be considered as the primary promoters. The main trade unions also belong to this category: the regional branch of the Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori (CISL)-Toscana, deserves mentioning because it assumed

---

[3] Interviews had an average duration of 40 min. Several political and institutional actors who supported the project did not accept to be interviewed or did not answer our invitations. See the Appendix.

[4] They have also adopted the acronym *Grandi Opere Inutili e Imposte*.

[5] We utilized the software AntConc (Version 3.2.4), available from http://www.antlab.sci.waseda.ac.jp/antconc_index.html (latest access on 5 July 2022). "Keywords in context" illustrates the extracted piece of text where the word is collocated, helping in the interpretation of terms The frequency of categories reveals how many times the categories of the vocabulary appear in each speech. The frequency of the master frames shows their saliency. See the Appendix for further details. The authors are available to provide additional information upon request.

Table 2. Actors and their position.

Organization	Description	Position	Intensity	Time consistency
City of Florence	Local institution	Pro	High	Low
Province of Florence	Local institution	Pro	Low	High
Toscana Regional Government	Local institution	Pro	High	High
Ministry of Transports	National institution	Pro	Low	High
FSI	National Railway company and infrastructure manager	Pro	Low, high (2006–2014)	Low
Cisl-Toscana	Local branch of a national trade union	Pro	High	High
Partito Democratico (PD)	Political party	Pro	High	High
Lega Nord	Political party	Pro	Low	Low
Forza Italia	Political party	Pro	Low	High
M5S	Political party	Con	High	Low
Comitato NO Tunnel Tav	Local group against the project	Con	High	High
IDRA	Local environmental group	Con	High	High
Legambiente Toscana	Local branch of a national environmental group	Con	Low	High
Italia Nostra—Toscana	Local branch of a national environmental group	Con	Low	High
Medicina Democratica	Local general interest group	Con	Low	Low

Source: Authors' elaboration.
FSI: Ferrovie dello Stato Italiane

the leadership among labor organizations on this issue. Conversely, Comitato NO Tunnel-TAV emerged in 2006 as an umbrella organization promoted by residents and activists to coordinate the activities of different local associations. These included the IDRA (a local environmental association established in 1998 to oppose the Bologna-Firenze HS project) and Legambiente Toscana and Italia Nostra Firenze, two local branches of national environmental groups.

Table 2 shows the actors involved in this process, whether they belong to promoters or opposers, and the intensity and time consistency of their support. We attributed values regarding the intensity of actors' preferences on the basis of their statements during the process, which have been cross-checked during in-depth interviews. Time consistency is measured as low in the case of an actor changing the content of its narrative strategy (from being in support to being against or vice versa) or transitioning from use to nonuse of strategic narratives.

Promoters: the strategic narrative that never existed

Despite several actors backing the project, official documents explicitly justifying decisions were rare if not absent. By examining the public debate on the TAV in Florence, it proved challenging to find strategic narratives and even master frames shared by the supporters of the megaproject. This is the first interesting finding. As aforementioned, master frames refer to broader action frames that provide a common framework and collective language to social and political actors (Catanzaro & Coticchia, 2022). Instead, parties, leaders, companies, and trade unions that backed the TAV in Florence often adopted snapshots (frames, indeed) to emphasize selected issues.

The regional government of Toscana represented the only exception. They promoted the more significant and ambitious revision of the project while also providing a comprehensive and technical justification based on the benefits for commuters, arguing that the project would have "freed tracks on the surface" and allowed for the SMN Station to focus on regional trains [quoted in Comunicato del Comitato No Tunnel Tav (CNTT), 17 October 2016][6], in addition to improving the "regional railway traffic" without unnecessary demolitions. At the formulation stage, former Regional Infrastructure Alderman, Riccardo Conti, was particularly committed to this, along with the regional bureaucracy (Interview 8; see

---

[6] See the Appendix for details on all the public releases quoted.

also Morisi & Tebaldi, 2001). The former President of the Region, Rossi, a crucial actor of the supporting coalition, claimed that Tuscany could not be excluded by "a strategic axis", referring to the Rome-Milan line (CNTT, 17 June 2010). As affirmed by another former President of the Region, Chiti, "the fast railway connection is important, a necessity of the country. This is a great work that must make Italy feel proud with a view to modernization".[7]

Although the regional government was highly committed and developed a proper master frame in their media interviews, a comprehensive communication strategy to engage external stakeholders was lacking. This finding also clearly emerged in our interviews. For example, members of the Ordine degli Ingegneri di Firenze, former directors of the FSI, and the delegate of the Osservatorio ambientale pointed out that communication was largely absent, with the only attempt being "some informative signboards placed by Italferr in the City of Florence as in the early 2000's some explorative excavations were made" (Interview 9). The Osservatorio ambientale "could have had a role in the communication of the reasons underpinning the project, but it had never been entitled to do that" (Interview 8). Moreover, regional executives who followed the government led by Enrico Rossi deprioritized the entire issue.

Promoters also adopted other argumentative lines lacking a proper emplotment aimed at silencing the issue. If plot formation allows for the differentiation between narratives, frames, and other forms of discourse (Colley, 2017), the absence of a proper strategic narrative emerges as a relevant finding here. The first claim is related to the nature of opponents. The opposition to the project was often portrayed—sometimes in a very harsh way[8]—as a consequence of the traditional Not In My Back Yard (NIMBY) syndrome that contests the possible development of a city. Relatedly, the backers of the project portrayed the opponents as environmentalists opposed to all infrastructural projects, posing unnecessary bureaucratic obstacles that hinder development. In the words of the President Rossi, we are in front "right wing anti-modern ecology against development" (quoted in CNTT, 28 May 2012). Moreover, contingencies were used as shortcuts to avoid discussions regarding the pitfalls emerging during the implementation process. Supporters did not want to "reassess projects already adopted" after a long decision-making process (quoted in CNTT, 10 February 2011) because the alternative project on the surface would have slowed down the trains (quoted in CNTT, 10 April 2009). Thus, revisions to the project "would have hurt the commuters" (quoted in CNTT, 29 October 2018). Additionally, the backers of the project aimed to avoid "wasting other time" and, after a lot of money spent, to conclude the works (quoted in CNTT, 9 January 2019).

Promoters: hypocritical use of narratives

Several promoters also explicitly demonstrated radical discontent about the project, questioning its overall utility and announcing their abandonment. This happened two times, in 2009 and 2016, with the key players being the City of Florence and FSI. In 2009, the then-mayor of Florence, Matteo Renzi, criticized the overall utility of the project and eventually endorsed a revision in which works for the construction of suburban train stations were written off in exchange for compensation from FSI to the city. Such a revision had, on the one side, reinvigorated the commitment of the City, as the mayor could claim credit for a cost-effective action. But on the other hand, this action affected the coherence of the whole project, undermining the plausibility of the regional government's plot concerning the improvement of local mobility. In fact, since the new HS was relocated farther from the city center, a dense network of public mobility would have been essential. Conversely, both the city council and FSI began losing faith in the viability of the new station, supported by surveys suggesting that passengers would prefer SMN (Interview 10), thus reinforcing the negative feedback of the case of the Roma Tiburtina Station. In 2016, the project was questioned once again: Matteo Renzi became Prime Minister and the newly appointed FSI Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Renato Mazzoncini, abruptly declared that the Foster Station was no longer necessary. Due to technological improvements in railway traffic management, it would have been possible to use the existing stations without any significant efficiency loss. This shocking declaration led to a new project that was struck by the national government and local authorities. In particular, the mayor of Florence, Dario Nardella, developed a new concept—the "mobility Hub"—to refocus

---

[7]   Chiti non si pente: "Sono orgoglioso della Tav", *Il Tirreno*, 27 ottobre 2006.

[8]   The former CEO of the FS, Mauro Moretti, insulted the committee and its members defining them "four idiots" (December 2011). The committee openly contested Moretti, especially after the dramatic disaster of Viareggio (*infra*), which was shamefully called "an unpleasant accident" by the CEO of the FS. See "Viareggio? Uno spiacevole incidente", *Il Corriere Fiorentino*, 4 March 2010.
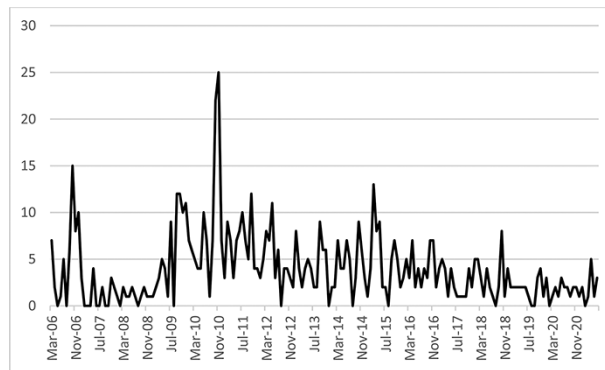
Figure 2. Releases by comitato no tunnel (count).
Source: Authors' elaboration.

the project on local mobility issues, assuring that the new station would become the hub for regional bus lines.

Opponents: a "technical" counter-narrative

This section provides a discourse and content analysis of the counter-narrative. Contrary to the varieties of actors supporting the project, the "Comitato No Tunnel TAV di Firenze" (The Committee), established in 2006 to contest the project in Florence, has constantly embraced the strategic narrative of the "useless, imposed, and dangerous mega project". Figure 2 shows the monthly counts of releases by the committee via their website.[9]

Two things should be noted. First, as aforementioned, the committee has been stably active. Second, its mobilization peaked in 2010, when Renzi questioned the project. A similar magnitude has not been reached since, neither after the 2013 judicial investigation nor in 2016, when FSI's CEO declared the project useful and claimed alternatives to be viable.

Discourse analysis: "useless, imposed, and dangerous mega project"

What have been the features of the strategic narrative adopted by the committee? To answer this question, we examined the content of the storyline in detail, identifying three main master frames that contribute to building the plot. According to our expectations, the master frame of the nondemocratic nature of the mega project (Nagel & Satoh, 2019) should emerge. Moreover, in line with the scholarly debate on policy narratives, the focus on the harms posed by the project (Shanahan et al., 2019) as well as the useless costs for the community (Gupta et al., 2014; Shanahan et al., 2019) could shape the other possible master frames.

The useless and expensive megaproject

The first collective action frame refers to the "useless and expensive megaproject", which can be characterized by the following aspects.

First, the megaproject is conceived as "useless" (CNTT, 13 February 2015) due to the possibility of a cheaper and more effective alternative. The network of actors involved in the fight against the TAV has regularly relied on meticulous technical assessments to criticize the "absurd" project (CNTT, 17 January 2013), highlighting its "uselessness" in solving railway traffic problems around Florence (CNTT, 8 February 2010). The support of scholars, professors of architecture and urban planning, engineers, geologists, and other relevant experts was crucial in presenting, in a very technical way, a firm opposition to the TAV project. Since the very beginning, the presence of "alternative proposals" (CNTT, 22 March 2006) marked the communication efforts made by the committee, whose birth is deeply related to such an "alternative project". Even the media defined the committee's purpose as "studying an alternative project".[10] In order to escape from the frame—which has been largely adopted by supporters of the project—of local

---

9   See http://notavfirenze.blogspot.com (latest accessed on 3 July 2022).
10   I. Ciuti, "TAV. A committee for studying an alternative project [authors' translation]", *La Repubblica*, 13 October 2006.

movements that "say no to everything", the committee has ensured its purpose "to do something", but in the "right direction" (i.e., the alternative proposal would have reinforced the actual railway network on the surface by adding two tracks, CNTT, 5 September 2006). To oppose the NIMBY framing ("we do not suffer from the NIMBY syndrome!" see CNTT, 25 June 2008), the committee explained on several occasions how "no TAV doesn't mean no to high-speed trains, but no to the underground tunnel" in Florence (CNTT, 11 October 2006). The committee, which affirmed that they were "not ideologically against the tunnel" (CNTT, 15 October 2010), portrayed the political battle over TAV as a struggle between the "University Experts" and "the ultras of the project" (CNTT, 18 September 2009). The communication was based on "robust criticism and alternative proposals" (CNTT, 15 October 2010), constantly presenting a self-defined "boring list" (CNTT, 23 January 2014) of technical details, comparing and contrasting—in terms of costs, time saving, and impact—the main project with the alternative elaborated in 2007 with the University of Florence.[11]

In other words, the attempts to demonstrate the "feasibility of the alternative project" (CNTT, 11 February 2009; 24 September 2009) were structured around detailed technical assessments. The committee put special emphasis on the absence of the VIA (Valutazione di Impatto Ambientale, the assessment of the environmental impact) for the project, stressing the risks derived from a "superficial technical analysis" (CNTT, 13 March 2008). The "lack of planning" (CNTT, 13 March 2008) represents an interesting concern for an actor who fights against a megaproject.

Finally, the attention over the climbing and "enormous" costs (CNTT 29 July 2009) of the "pharaonic project" has been massive (CNTT 31 March 2006). Press releases have continually shown how the underground solution was more expensive (from 10 to 50 times) than the alternative project proposed by the committee. The Comitato contrasts "a useless hole under Florence" (CNTT, 2 January 2009) with the alternative on surface: "small, useful, and needed projects" rather than "mega, imposed, and useless projects" (CNTT, 19 October 2014). Especially during the financial crisis, the frame bridging (i.e., linking two frames) connected the costs of the TAV with the cuts imposed at the national level, comparing the tunnel with the declining public recourses (CNTT, 17 February 2012). The committee also linked the significant resources devoted to the TAV to the mounting needs of commuters, contrasting the megaproject to the day-by-day requirements of regional travelers (CNTT, 29 July 2019). By using the same mechanism, the committee provided manifold details (through releases and expert analyses, for example) on the rising costs, advancing other ways to spend the same amount of money for protecting the soil and other small railway infrastructures (CNTT, 27 July 2006).

Moreover, the committee used ambiguity frames (which are frames that highlight the inner inconsistency of the main narrative) to highlight the contradictions of TAV supporters, who often expressed significant doubts of the project, as occurred in the cases of the mayors of Florence Renzi and Nardella (as well as by the Osservatorio Ambientale and by the members of several left-wing parties within the majority coalition in the Region. The committee harshly criticized the "side payments" (funds for other public infrastructure projects) established between the City of Florence (at the time of Renzi's criticism of the project) and the RFI (CNTT, 14 September 2010). The constant changes in the project (such as the position of the station and the connection with SMN), the technical problems and investigations (*infra*), and all the diatribes regarding the TAV among the supporters have been exploited by the committee ("ambiguity frames"), who stated that they were "tired of being right" (CNTT, 28 April 2010).

Finally, by examining the relationship between the social actors with the local and regional political context, it emerges that only the far-left (as Rifondazione Comunista or the coalition Si—Toscana a Sinistra[12]) has constantly supported the whole Grandi Opere Inutili e Imposte narrative since 2006. Also, other left-wing actors expressed criticism (see CNTT, 6 September 2006), while the Five Star Movement (which obtained stunning successes at the national level but limited results in Florence) openly shared their struggles against the TAV. For instance, in May 2015, two Italian MPs of the Five Star Movement, Luigi Di Maio, later deputy Prime Minister, and Alfonso Bonafede, subsequently Minister of Justice, visited the building site with the Committee (CNTT, 11 September 2015). Finally, even though the center-right has generally been in favor of the TAV, some members of the Northern League and the former center-right candidate for mayor of Florence, Giovanni Galli, remarked their opposition. Despite such differences, the committee has pointed out the significant link between right and left (at the regional

---

[11]   See http://notavfirenze.blogspot.com/p/per-saperne-di-piu.html (accessed on 21 March 2022).
[12]   Even the name of the coalition was a way to contrast the frame of the "movements that say not everything" (Interview 5).

and national level) to develop the project, notwithstanding the doubts by a few local actors (CNTT, 8 September 2009).

The imposed, undemocratic megaproject for private interests

This master frame refers to the "absence of democracy and participation" in the decision-making process, as well as the benefits granted (in legal or illegal ways) by the TAV to a "small elite" (CNTT, 29 July 2013) at the expense of the public interests, thus "disempowering politics" (CNTT 12 October 2013). Two main aspects composed the master frame: the lack of democracy and the corrupt features of the "TAV system".

First, the committee has constantly stressed "the absence of a democratic debate" (CNTT, 27 March 2009) with citizens over the megaproject, especially concerning its "costs and benefits" (see CNTT, 31 May 2006; 6 November 2019). While the center-left in the region affirmed that the "elections" gave legitimacy to the leaders to develop the project, the Comitato continued searching for an open discussion on the tunnel (CNTT, 31 March 2006). The fact that such a debate never occurred was exploited as proof of the absence of democratic processes in the megaproject "imposed" earlier, which was framed as exclusively for private interests at the expense of the collective good (see CNTT, 7 July 2006; 9 February 2010). The networks of actors who opposed the TAV asked (without success) to take part in the integrated local plans for mobility, requesting open moments of confrontation within and outside the institutions (CNTT, 30 September 2009; 12 January 2010). The committee strongly opposed the demand of the trade unions for a "Commissario straordinario" (Special commissioner) for the project, defining such a move as "an undemocratic complication" (CNTT, 2 March 2016). The presence of "controllers who do not control" has been remarked (CNTT, 18 February 2011). Above all, the "shameful silence" around the TAV, a "rubber wall" in front of their requests for debate (CNTT, 30 June 2017), was frequently denounced. The committee focused on the "TAV system" that had imposed the project "at any cost, even against common sense, especially against democracy" (CNTT, 8 July 2020), without providing detailed information on its costs and impact.

Second, such a system is viewed as "rotten" because of "the inevitable failure of the indebt companies involved in the project" (CNTT, 21 January 2013). The (negative) peculiarities of the system behind the "megaprojects" have been deeply pointed out. TAV is conceived as "strategic" only for "saving the companies full of debts involved in the project" (CNTT, 9 January 2018). When investigations and arrests began,[13] the committee exploited the opportunity, strongly urging for the project to cease (CNTT, 13 February 2015). The Comitato was active in denouncing irregularities, especially after the legal controversy over the excavated ground, s.c. "terre di scavo" (CNTT, 5 September 2014). Local networks of actors involved in the battle against the TAV in Florence linked their struggle to national (and even international) campaigns against the "grandi opere", providing information (CNTT, 21 January 2010) on what happened in Valsusa (TAV Torino-Lyon) or in Stuttgart, where a contested railway station was planned (CNTT, 12 October 2010). They also stressed the scandals and contradictions of the (hypothesized) bridge between Messina and Reggio Calabria or the MOSE in Venice (CNTT, as joint release, 27 September 2010). Finally, the prosecutions surrounding the TAV in Italy were exploited to shed light on the risks of other similar projects, emphasizing the role of the mafia and the "collusion between political actors, private companies, banks, and criminal networks, to get money out of the state" (CNTT, 23 June 2008).

For the committee, there was no "real difference between center-left and center-right" on "loot" or the benefits for private actors derived from the megaprojects (CNTT, 2 November 2006). The committee compared and contrasted the traditional left-wing "solidarity nature of the cooperative of workers" with the major role played by the cooperatives involved in the TAV business in the building sites (CNTT, 5 March 2010). Interestingly, the Comitato remarked on how "the protest was not against the workers on the building sites", but rather demonstrated that alternative projects presented better ways to develop infrastructures and create new jobs (CNTT, 26 April 2010). Great efforts were made to carefully describe how the megaprojects were financed ("project financing" or "general contractor"), emphasizing the "legal fraud" of the whole mechanism that brings huge debts for public entities and massive profits for private corporations (CNTT, 13 March 2008; 2 November 2006). The frame of corruption shaped

---

13 See "Arrestato Presidente del consorzio Nodavia", *Nove da Firenze*, 17 September 2013; F.Selvatici and G.Adinoldi "Tangenti, arrestato Ercole Incalza", *La Repubblica*, 16 March 2015; "Arrestato il Presidente di Condotte, la ditta della TAV a Firenze", *Firenze Today*, 13 March 2018.

the communications of the committee while highlighting, through frame bridging, the negative consequences of privatizations in the railway sector—especially "lowering the security standards" (CNTT 30 June 2009)—specifically referring to the dramatic disaster of Viareggio (infra).

In front of the master frame of the "imposed, undemocratic mega-project for private interests", the supporters of the TAV in Florence simply did not address the issue and avoided giving salience to scandals and problems, while emphasizing how the decision to approve the projects has already been taken. As the former President of Tuscany, Enrico Rossi, affirmed, "we have been talking about this project for 15 years" (quoted in CNTT, 17 June 2010).

"The dangerous megaproject for public health and territory"

A third master frame employed in the communication of the committee focuses on the hazards related to the project that "causes harm to public health" (CNTT, 17 May 2016). One of the first press releases elaborated by the Comitato referred to a "city sick with smog" (CNTT, 21 March 2006), covered by dust and mud because of the construction sites. The cultural heritage of the city, as well as the stability of the private buildings, was also portrayed as at risk. Already in the first year of its life (2006), the committee exposed the dangers to the soil posed by the project, which intercepts the water table. It also expressed concern for possible floods and even earthquakes caused by underground constructions (CNTT, 5 May 2009). Similarly, the lack of "rigorous seismic studies" on the area was also stressed (CNTT, 21 May 2011). Furthermore, the support of technical analyses and experts (e.g., *Medicina Democratica*", a nongovernmental organization of doctors for public health) characterized the communication efforts. The committee also relied on a letter drafted by The United Nations Organization for Education, Science, and Culture that expressed concern for the effects of the underground works (CNTT, 21 November 2015). Beyond the NIMBY syndrome, the committee affirmed to defend not just the backyard but also the whole territory, "conceived as a common good" (CNTT, 19 July 2008). With the purpose of protecting such a territory, the committee started a legal battle on the nature of the waste excavated from the building site (CNTT, 29 June 2011).

Once again, the committee adopted aligned frames, linking the (expected) environmental problems of the TAV in Florence to harms that occurred in similar projects, such as those in Mugello (CNTT, 22 March 2006). Specific attention was given to the tragedy that occurred in Viareggio (29 June 2009) after the derailment of a train and the subsequent fire killed 32 people. In the subsequent prosecution, the CEO and former CEO of RFI were taken to trial. The event was linked to the battle of the committee for devoting resources to a "safe and efficient public transportation" for commuters and travelers rather than to megaprojects (CNTT, 30 June 2009).

Moreover, the committee organized rallies to defend a building set for demolition due to the new station and at a school close to the building site that would have been affected by the dust and noise (CNTT, 22 May; 14 December 2009). Finally, they connected the struggle against the TAV with the recent protests of students for protecting the environment, the so-called "Friday for Future" (CNTT, 25 September 2019). In the most recent releases, the Comitato still focused on the environment after the COVID-19 crisis, highlighting the need to use the resources of the Next-Generation EU for this purpose, "rather than for the cement" (CNTT, 30 December 2020).

Content analysis

Figure 3 illustrates the main results of the content analysis of the committee's releases (2006–2021). The table highlights the saliency of the three primary master frames adopted. The figures that reveal the frequency of the master frames ("frequency of the categories") derived from the sum of each term (which comprise the vocabulary) found in the texts, out of the total amount of words. The findings[14] show that the master frame of the "The useless and expensive megaproject" has been the most salient. The references to technical aspects, as well as to analyses and studies aimed at revealing the uselessness and excessive costs of the project, compared to the alternative solution advanced by the committee, were continuous. The master frame of the "dangerous megaproject for public health and territory" was less salient than the first despite its overall relevance, especially regarding the concerns related to the

---

[14] The first master frame collected 3266 words token, the second 1484, and third 2436. The overall words token of all the documents are 178,618 (for 15,084 word types). See the Appendix for further details.
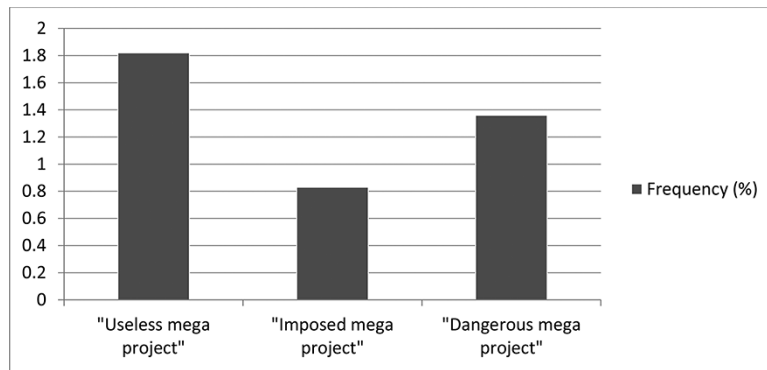
Figure 3. Frequency of the master frames.
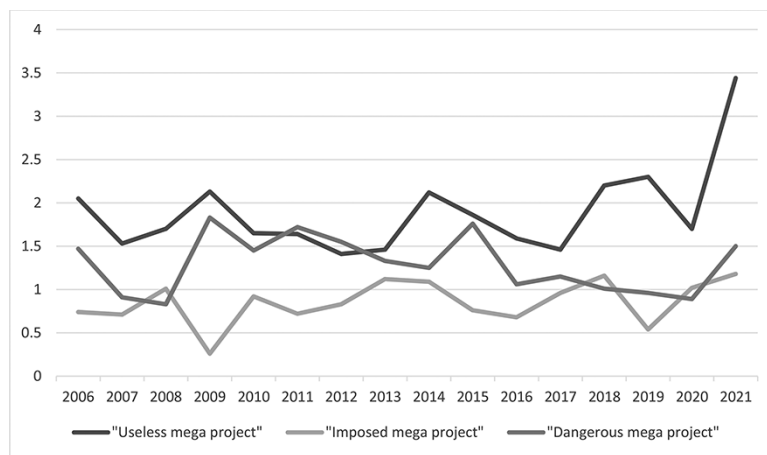*Source*: Authors compilation.

Figure 4. Frequency of the master frames across time.
Source: Authors compilation.

environment and the expected damages caused by the megaproject to the "fragile" territory. The consequences of the underground works for private buildings, as well as for the cultural heritage, were regularly stressed.

Finally, notwithstanding its potential impact on public opinion, the master frame of the "imposed, undemocratic megaproject for private interests" attracted less attention. The scandals and arrests, the benefits granted only to private companies at the expense of public interest, and the lack of a democratic debate over the TAV were at the center of the communication efforts, but the committee has preferred to focus more on the technical problems of the project.

We have also disaggregated data per year, providing content analysis to illustrate the evolution of the master frame across time. Figure 4 illustrates the results and confirms the preeminence of "the useless and expensive megaproject" master frame in (almost) all the years examined.[15] It is worth noticing the first two peaks in the adoption of the useless mega project master frame, especially at a time of the revision of the project in 2009 and after the beginning of its implementation in 2014 (also see Figure 1).

Discussion and conclusion

The management and policy literature on megaprojects emphasizes how narratives constitute a strategic tool for all the actors involved to engage stakeholders in support or against a given infrastructure

---

[15] See the Appendix for additional details.

project. Our empirical investigation focused on the construction of a new HS track and station in the City of Florence that, despite several reasons in support of strategic use of narratives, emerged as puzzling. Three findings deserve attention.

First, the strategies adopted by promoters largely diverged from our expectations. Notably, the regional government of Toscana did not invest efforts in crafting a complete and coherent narrative. Additionally, while the regional government initially provided a plot based on the potential improvements of the regional public transport, over time, this strategy shifted from use to nonuse of the narrative, as it began relying on simple snapshots against opponents and the inevitability of the project without any significant emplotment.

Second, some relevant actors among the proponents have openly changed their minds about their engagement, notably the City of Florence in 2009 and the FSI in 2016. Interestingly, in both cases, they strategically used the core argument of the counter-narrative. This finding is also supported by interviewees of both sides that, when asked to name other actors and classify them as allies and adversaries, refused to characterize the arena in such a way: "coalitions hardly exist" (Interview 4; same concept in Interviews 3 and 7).

This led to the third (and related) finding, which has to do with the counter-narrative. Opponents have constantly tried to be perceived as reliable and science-based, showing that "they were not a NIMBY movement". Nevertheless, even if no results have emerged so far (Interview 1), it is also puzzling that the counter-narrative also remains stable (see Figure 4) and no appreciable attempts to place more emphasis on a different master frame have been detected. Interviewed actors supporting the megaproject affirmed that they never engaged with opponents, even if they "searched for us" (Interview 3). A more subtle argument perhaps is that the project has changed several times, providing proof that all the possible interests have been included and that actors still opposing it have no ground to stand on (Interview 7; similarly see Nagel & Satoh, 2019). Conversely, experts backing the TAV simply did not consider the alternatives advanced by opponents as viable, despite the fact that they openly admitted that the project, as is, lost its coherence from a mobility point of view, and no credible solution to connect the new station with the city center has been designed (Interviews 8 and 9; see Ziparo et al., 2011).

Two elements may help solve this puzzling evidence. First, different from other cases, the implementation of the HS track and station in Florence did not motivate relevant external stakeholders to mobilize despite the many pitfalls and backlashes against the project. Additionally, since promoters had mild preferences (the city of Florence) or lost their commitment over the years (FSI, the regional government), they had little incentive to develop strategic narratives, while in some cases, they created a morally hazardous situation which led some actors to adopt a hypocritical use of their discursive stances (Interviews 3, 8, 9, and 10). In turn, the absence of potential external stakeholders constituted a constraint for opponents who became progressively aware that the mass public will continue not to care (Interview 1), thus rationally focusing their efforts on proving themselves right, as the project was clearly "unfeasible" (Interview 2).

To generalize the abovementioned findings of this research, the conditions under which narratives are nonused or employed in a hypocritical way should be assessed by further research in different cases of megaprojects.

Conflict of interest

None declared.

Appendix
List of interviews

1. No Tunnel Tav, Coordinator, 19 May 2021, University of Florence; 20 May 2021, Fit-Cisl Toscana, Secretary; 27 May 2021, City Councillor; 28 May 2021, Sì, Regional Councillor; 4 June 2021Per un'altra Città; 8 June 2021Filca-Cisl Toscana, Secretary; 10 June 2021, Ordine degli Ingegneri di Firenze, President of the Transport Committe; 11 June 2021Former FSI delegate to the Florence HS project; 16 June 2021, Former Florence Mobility Alderman, 23 June 2021.

Public releases quoted—details

- Bonifazi, a member of the Democratic Party of Florence, highlighted how the project was "not a municipal competence", and thus, the role of the municipality is that of monitoring. Quoted in CNTT, 6 November 2013.
- Former President of Tuscany, Enrico Rossi, quoted by Comitato No Tunnel Tav, 17 October 2016.
- President of the Region, Enrico Rossi, quoted in CNTT, 28 May 2012.
- President of the Region, Enrico Rossi, quoted in CNTT, 17 June 2010.
- The Secretary of the Commission Mobility and Infrastructure of the Region, Paolo Bambagioni, quoted in CNTT, 10 February 2011.
- Marco Rettinghieri, Director of RFI, quoted in CNTT, 10 April 2009.
- The Regional Council Member Ceccarelli, quoted in Comitato No Tunnel Tav, 29 October 2018.
- CISL local leaders quoted in Comitato No Tunnel Tav, 9 January 2019.
- CNTT, 13 February 2015.
- CNTT, 8 February 2010. The committee also stresses the negative effects on the main railway station that would have lost centrality. Indeed, the new underground station was located around 1 km and half from the main railway station, SMN.
- CNTT, 22 March 2006.
- CNTT, 5 September 2006.
- CNTT, 25 June 2008.
- Letter to the Prime Minister Prodi, CNTT, 11 October 2006.
- CNTT, 15 October 2010.
- CNTT, 18 September 2009.
- CNTT, 23 January 2014.
- CNTT, 11 February 2009.
- On technical assessments, see, for instance, CNTT, 24 September 2009; 6 October 2009; 6 February 2018.
- CNTT, 17 January 2013.
- CNTT, 22 March 2018.
- CNTT, 17 October 2016. See the European Rail Traffic Management System (ERTMS) traffic lights; see also L. Caroppo, "Le Ferrovie resistono al Pressing", *La Nazione*, 31 December 2016. This was recognized also by the FSI since 2016. Official release by FS, 21 July 2016.
- CNTT, 13 March 2008.
- CNTT, 2 January 2009.
- CNTT, 19 October 2014.
- At the time of the spending review during the financial crisis, the committee sent a letter to the former Prime Minister Monti, emphasizing the significant costs for the project. CNTT, 17 February 2012.
- CNTT, 29 July 2019.
- CNTT, 27 July 2006.
- See the "appeals to the common sense": CNTT, 7 September 2010; 23 January 2017.
- The committe focused on the divisions within the "Ordine", naming the engineers who have openly contrasted the project. CNTT, 10 April 2021.
- CNTT, 14 September 2010.
- CNTT, 20 May 2009.
- CNTT, 26 September 2009.
- CNTT, 28 February 2018.
- CNTT, 28 April 2010.
- The Regional Council member of the Partito dei Comunisti Italiani (PdCI), Edoardo Bruno, affirmed in 2006: "TAV is not a priority". Quoted in CNTT, 6 September 2006.
- CNTT, 11 September 2015. In 2015, the No Tunnel Tav "front" was created, linking the committee with other association like Italia Nostra and Legambiente, with some parties/coalitions (M5S, PerUnaltracittà, Si Toscana a Sinistra).
- The Comitato emphasized the joint role played by the Minister of Transportation Matteoli (Alleanza Nazione, center-right) and Riccardo Conti (Regional Council Member for transportation, PD). CNTT, 8 September 2009.

- CNTT, 27 March 2009.
- CNTT, 31 March 2006. At the time of the "Yellow-Green government (Lega and M5S), the executive promoted a cost/benefit analysis on several infrastructures. The results regarding the TAV in Florence did not openly oppose the project, despite emphasizing the negative impact for the city. See Comitato No Tunnel Tav, 6 November 2019.
- R. Conti quoted in CNTT, 31 March 2006. The Committee has frequently highlighted how "democracy is not just elections". See CNTT, 3 April 2006.
- CNTT, 7 July 2006; CNTT, 9 February 2010. On the "powerful lobbies" behind the TAV, see CNTT, 26 November 2016 and 18 December 2016.
- CNTT, 30 September 2009.
- CNTT 12 January 2010.
- CNTT, 2 March 2016
- CNTT, 18 February 2011. The general contractor is responsible for environmental control. See also CNTT, 16 September 2020.
- CNTT, 30 June 2017.
- CNTT, 8 July 2020.
- CNTT, 21 January 2013. Members of the Committe participated at rallies in Valsusa.
- CNTT, 13 February 2015.
- CNTT, 5 September 2014.
- CNTT, 12 October 2010.
- CNTT, 27 September 2010.
- CNTT, 23 June 2008.
- "Works continue at accelerated pace while politics is on Mars" was the title of the CNTT, 29 September 2016.
- CNTT, 2 November 2006.
- CNTT, 5 March 2010.
- CNTT, 26 April 2010.
- CNTT, 13 March 2008.
- CNTT 30 June 2009.
- CNTT, 17 June 2010.
- CNTT, 21 March 2006.
- CNTT, 5 May 2009.
- CNTT, 21 May 2011.
- CNTT, 21 November 2015.
- CNTT, 19 July 2008.
- CNTT, 29 June 2011.
- CNTT, 22 May 2009; CNTT, 14 December 2009.
- CNTT, 25 September 2019.
- CNTT, 30 December 2020.

Content Analysis

The paper is based on the software AntConc (Version 3.2.4), available from http://www.antlab.sci.waseda.ac.jp/antconc_index.html (latest access on 5 July 2022). "Keywords in context" illustrates the extracted piece of text where the word is collocated, helping in the interpretation of terms Thanks to the "keywords in context", the software examines each term within the context of the sentence, thus erasing words whose meaning was not connected to the original sense or terms referring other issues (e.g., the word "law" in Italy is translated by "*legge*" that is also a verb, "to read". Therefore, when the term referred to the verb, it was erased.

The frequency of categories reveals how many times the categories of the vocabulary appear in each speech. The frequency of the master frames shows their saliency. We assess the relative salience of the three master frames by looking at the frequencies of the frames that compose them.

A vocabulary of logically connected terms of different master frames collects the words that we examine by scrutinizing the public releases—which are texts with very similar lengths and structures—produced by the Committee since its birth—2006—until 2021.

For instance, "the useless and expensive megaproject" contains frames as cost or technical problems, as "costi/benefici", "valutazione", and "progetto alternativo". The master frame of "the imposed, undemocratic megaproject for private interests" comprises schemata as corruption or mafia, focusing on frames as "inchiest*", interessi privati", "arrest*", and "subappalti". Finally, the "dangerous mega project for public health and territory" includes manifold references to environment, highlighting "rischi*" and "danni" for the "ambiente", and devoting a special attention to the "terre di scavo".

The vocabulary of terms has been developed in a deductive and inductive way, after several rounds of preliminary content analysis for two researchers, who have then confronted their results before drafting the final version of the list of words for each category.

The authors are available to give additional information upon request, providing the collected empirical material (categories with the vocabulary and results for each year/master frame) for replication.

Concerning the Figure 4 (Frequency of the Master Frames across time), it is worth noticing that the master frame of the "dangerous mega project" become the first (with a tiny margin) only in 2011 (when the project actually started and the issue of the "special waste" began to attract attention) and 2012. This master frame reached a peak in also 2009, when the tragedy in Viareggio occurred (along with the devastating earthquake in L'Aquila). The first master frame, which constantly shaped the counter narrative of the Committee, enhanced its relevance especially in recent years (when the issue cost–benefit analysis became central in the communication). It is also worth noticing that all the figures related to 2021 are extremely high due to the limited number of words examined for that year.

References

Archetti, C. (2017). Narrative wars: Understanding terrorism in the era of global interconnectedness. In A. Miskimmon, B. O'Loughlin & L. Roselle (Eds.), *Forging the world: Strategic narratives and international relations* (pp. 218–245). University of Michigan Press.

Benford, R. D., & Snow, D. A. (2000). Framing processes and social movements: An overview and assessment. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26(1), 611–639. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.26.1.611.

Benford, R. D. (2013). Master Frame. In *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements*.

Biancalana, C. (2020). From social movements to institutionalization: The Five-star Movement and the high-speed train line in Val di Susa. *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 12(2), 155–168. https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2020.1743469.

Brown, A. D. (1998). Narrative, politics and legitimacy in an IT implementation. *Journal of Management Studies*, 35(1), 35–58. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-6486.00083.

Calossi, E., Coticchia, F., & Di Giulio, M. (2022). Managing incoherence. Social democratic parties and transnational issues in Europe. *European Politics and Society*, 23(2), 189–209. https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2020.1857639.

Carroll, W. K., & Ratner, R. S. (1996). Master framing and cross-movement networking in contemporary social movements. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 37(4), 601–625. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.1996.tb01755.x.

Casula, M., Rangarajan, N., & Shields, P. (2021). The potential of working hypotheses for deductive exploratory research. *Quality & Quantity*, 55(5), 1703–1725. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-020-01072-9.

Catanzaro, A., & Coticchia, F. (2022). The fog of words. Assessing the problematic relationship between strategic narratives, (master) frames, and ideology. *Media, War & Conflict*, 15(4), 427–449. https://doi.org/10.1177/1750635220965622.

Colley, T. (2017). Is Britain a force for good? Investigating British citizens' narrative understanding of war. *Defence Studies*, 17(1), 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2016.1256209.

Dailey, S. L., & Browning, L. (2014). Retelling stories in organizations: Understanding the functions of narrative repetition. *Academy of Management Review*, 39(1), 22–43. https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2011.0329.

Davies, A., Dodgson, M., Gann, D., & MacAulay, S. (2017). Five rules for managing large, complex projects. *MIT Sloan Management Review*.

De Graaf, B., Dimitriu, G., & Ringsmose, J. (Eds.), (2015). *Strategic narratives, public opinion and war: Winning domestic support for the Afghan War*. London: Routledge.

Derakhshan, R., Turner, R., & Mancini, M. (2019). Project governance and stakeholders: A literature review. *International Journal of Project Management*, 37(1), 98–116. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijproman.2018.10.007.

Entman, R. M. (2003). Cascading activation: Contesting the white house's frame after. *Political Communication*, 20(4), 415–432. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584600390244176.

Esposito, G., Felicetti, A., and Terlizzi, A. (2023). Participatory governance in megaprojects: The Lyon–Turin high-speed railway among structure, agency, and democratic participation. *Policy and Society*, 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1093/polsoc/puac029.

Esposito, G., Terlizzi, A., & Crutzen, N. (2022). Policy narratives and megaprojects: The case of the Lyon-Turin high-speed railway. *Public Management Review*, 24(1), 55–79. https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2020.1795230.

Flyvbjerg, B., Bruzelius, N., & Rothengatter, W. (2003). *Megaprojects and risk: An anatomy of ambition*. Cambridge university press.

Freedman, L. (2006). *The transformation in strategic affairs*. Routledge.

Gellert, P. K., & Lynch, B. D. (2003). Mega-projects as displacements. *International Social Science Journal*, 55(175), 15–25. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2451.5501002.

Gupta, K., Ripberger, T. J., & Collins, S. (2014). The strategic use of policy narratives: Jaitapur and the politics of siting a nuclear power plant in India. *The Science of Stories*, 89–106. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2451.5501002.

Havermans, L. A., Keegan, A., & Den Hartog, D. N. (2015). Choosing your words carefully: Leaders' narratives of complex emergent problem resolution. *International Journal of Project Management*, 33(5), 973–984. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijproman.2015.01.001.

Jones, M. D., & McBeth, M. K. (2010). A narrative policy framework: Clear enough to be wrong? *Policy Studies Journal*, *38*(2), 329–353. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1541-0072.2010.00364.x.

Lindekilde, L. (2014). Discourse and Frame Analysis: In-depth Analysis of Qualitative Data. In *Social Movement Research Methodological practices in social movement research*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Livingston, S., & Nassetta, J. (2018). Framing and strategic narratives: Synthesis and analytical framework. *The SAIS Review of International Affairs*, *38*(2), 101–110. https://doi.org/10.1353/sais.2018.0020.

Mintrom, M., & O'Connor, R. (2020). The importance of policy narrative: Effective government responses to Covid-19. *Policy Design and Practice*, *3*(3), 205–227. https://doi.org/10.1080/25741292.2020.1813358.

Miskimmon, A., O'Loughlin, B., & Roselle, L. (2014). *Strategic narratives: Communication power and the new world order*. Routledge.

Miskimmon, A., O'Loughlin, B., & Roselle, L. (2017). *Forging the world: Strategic narratives and international relations*. The University of Michigan Press.

Morisi, M., & Tebaldi, M. (2001). *Tra interessi e istituzioni locali: La tratta appenninica dell'alta velocità in Toscana: Una analisi "politologica"*. Giappichelli.

Nagel, M., & Satoh, K. (2019). Protesting iconic megaprojects. A discourse network analysis of the evolution of the conflict over Stuttgart 21. *Urban Studies*, 56(8), 1681–1700. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098018775903.

Ninan, J., & Sergeeva, N. (2021). Labyrinth of labels: Narrative constructions of promoters and protesters in megaprojects. *International Journal of Project Management*, 39(5), 496–506. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijproman.2021.03.003.

Ninan, J., & Sergeeva, N. (2022a). Battle of narratives: Interaction between narratives and counter-narratives in megaprojects. *Project Leadership and Society*, 3(110), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.plas.2022.100069.

Ninan, J., & Sergeeva, N. (2022b). Mobilizing megaproject narratives for external stakeholders: A study of narrative instruments and processes. *Project Management Journal*, 53(5), 520–540. https://doi.org/10.1177/87569728221102719.

Phillips, N., & Hardy, C. (2002). *Discourse analysis*, Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications.

Radaelli, C. M. (1999). Harmful tax competition in the EU: Policy narratives and advocacy coalitions. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *37*(4), 661–682. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5965.00201.

Regione Toscana (2012). Domande Frequenti. https://www.regione.toscana.it/documents/10180/24082/FAQ%20luglio%202012/5dbe4ea4-d901-4e0d-ae5c-601b6e5bf42a.

Roselle, L., Miskimmon, A., & O'Loughlin, B. (2014). Strategic narrative: A new means to understand soft power. *Media, War & Conflict*, *7*(1), 70–84. https://doi.org/10.1177/1750635213516696.

Scott, W. R., & Levitt, R. E. (2017). Institutional challenges and solutions for global megaprojects. In B. Flyvbjuerg (ed.). *The Oxford Handbook of Megaproject Management*, 96–117.

Shanahan, E. A., Jones, M. D., & McBeth, M. K. (2018). How to conduct a Narrative Policy Framework study. *The Social Science Journal*, 55(3), 332–345. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.soscij.2017.12.002.

Shanahan, E. A., Reinhold, A. M., Raile, E. D., Poole, G. C., Ready, R. C., Izurieta, C., McEvoy, J., Bergmann, N. T., & King, H. (2019). Characters matter: How narratives shape affective responses to risk communication. *PLoS One*, 14(12), 1–24. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0225968.

Snow, D. A., Soule, S. A., & Kriesi, H. (Eds.), (2004). *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*. Blackwell publishing.

Söderlund, J., Sankaran, S., & Biesenthal, C. (2017). The past and present of megaprojects. *Project Management Journal*, 48(6), 5–16. https://doi.org/10.1177/875697281704800602.

Terlizzi, A. (2021). Narratives in power and policy design: The case of border management and external migration controls in Italy. *Policy Sciences*, 54(4), 749–781. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11077-021-09440-4.

van Den Ende, L., & van Marrewijk, A. (2019). Teargas, taboo and transformation: A neo-institutional study of community resistance and the struggle to legitimize subway projects in Amsterdam 1960–2018. *International Journal of Project Management*, 37(2), 331–346. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijproman.2018.07.003.

van Marrewijk, A., Clegg, S. R., Pitsis, T. S., & Veenswijk, M. (2008). Managing public–private megaprojects: Paradoxes, complexity, and project design. *International Journal of Project Management*, 26(6), 591–600. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijproman.2007.09.007.

Weible, C. M., Olofsson, K. L., Costie, D. P., Katz, J. M., & Heikkila, T. (2016). Enhancing precision and clarity in the study of policy narratives: An analysis of climate and air issues in Delhi, India. *Review of Policy Research*, 33(4), 420–441. https://doi.org/10.1111/ropr.12181.

Winch, G. M. (2017). Megaproject stakeholder management. In B. Flyvbjerg (Ed.), *The oxford handbook of megaproject management*, 339–361.

Ziparo, A., De Zordo, M., & Pizziolo, G. (Eds.), (2011). *TAV sotto Firenze. Impatti, problemi, disastri, affari e l'alternativa possibile*. Alinea.