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# Search for central exclusive production of top quark pairs in proton-proton collisions at $\sqrt{s} = 13$ TeV with tagged protons

**The CMS collaboration and the TOTEM collaboration**

*E-mail:* cms-publication-committee-chair@cern.ch, totem-eb@cern.ch

Abstract: A search for the central exclusive production of top quark-antiquark pairs ($t\bar{t}$) is performed for the first time using proton-tagged events in proton-proton collisions at the LHC at a centre-of-mass energy of 13 TeV. The data correspond to an integrated luminosity of 29.4 fb$^{-1}$. The $t\bar{t}$ decay products are reconstructed using the central CMS detector, while forward protons are measured in the CMS-TOTEM precision proton spectrometer. An observed (expected) upper bound on the production cross section of 0.59 (1.14) pb is set at 95% confidence level, for collisions of protons with fractional momentum losses between 2 and 20%.

Keywords: Hadron-Hadron Scattering , Top Physics

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## Contents



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## 1 Introduction

Top quarks are copiously produced in proton-proton (pp) collisions at the CERN LHC. At LHC energies, the dominant production mode is via strong interaction processes, resulting in the production of top quark-antiquark pairs ($\mathrm{t\bar{t}}$). The LHC experiments have measured the inclusive $\mathrm{t\bar{t}}$ production cross section at various centre-of-mass energies, using different top quark decay channels [1–20]. Top quarks can also be produced singly in electroweak processes in three different modes known as $t$ channel, $s$ channel, and W-associated production (tW). The ATLAS and CMS Collaborations have observed or reported evidence for single top quark production in all three modes at several centre-of-mass energies [21–24].

A different mechanism can lead to the production of $\mathrm{t\bar{t}}$ pairs in pp scattering via the exchange of colourless particles, such as photons ($\gamma$) or pomerons. In this case, one or both protons may remain intact after the interaction, while part of their energy is used to produce the $\mathrm{t\bar{t}}$ pair. The process where the two protons survive the collision, $\mathrm{pp} \to \mathrm{pt\bar{t}p}$, is called central exclusive production. It receives contributions from quantum electrodynamics (QED) and quantum chromodynamics (QCD) diagrams [25]. The diagram with $\gamma\gamma$ fusion, sketched in figure 1, is expected to dominate in the phase space region accessible to forward proton

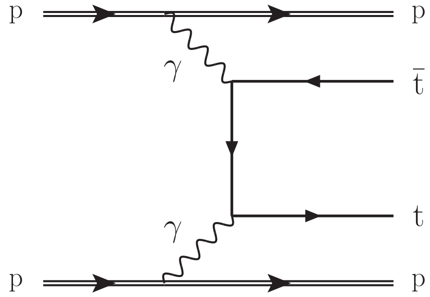


**Figure 1.** Leading Feynman diagram for $\mathrm{t\bar{t}}$ central exclusive production via $\gamma\gamma$ fusion.



detectors at the LHC [25, 26]; the pomeron-pomeron fusion, which can be described at the lowest order in perturbation theory as a colour-singlet two-gluon exchange, as well as the photoproduction ($\gamma$-pomeron) process, give negligible contributions in comparison.

Predictions for central $\mathrm{t\bar{t}}$ exclusive production in the framework of the standard model (SM) are available, including both QED and QCD contributions [26–32]. A critical element, in particular in the case of strong interaction processes, is the evaluation of the so-called proton survival probability. This is the probability that no additional soft interactions between the spectator partons of the colliding protons take place, which can lead to energy loss and/or break up of the interacting protons. For the $\gamma\gamma$ fusion process this value is close to unity, while it is limited to a few percent for the QCD processes. The cross section for the $\mathrm{pp} \to \mathrm{p}\gamma\gamma\mathrm{p} \to \mathrm{pt\bar{t}p}$ process (referred to as $\gamma\gamma \to \mathrm{t\bar{t}}$) amounts to $0.22 \pm 0.05\,\mathrm{fb}$ including next-to-leading-order (NLO) perturbative QCD corrections [32]. While the observation of the central exclusive production of $\mathrm{t\bar{t}}$ pairs is only expected to become possible at the high-luminosity LHC [33], contributions from physics beyond the SM could enhance the production cross section, making it detectable with the data collected so far. In particular, this production mechanism is sensitive to the $\mathrm{t}\gamma$ vertex, which makes it suitable for interpretations in the context of Effective Field Theory [34] or anomalous couplings [29, 35]. This offers complementary information to processes like $\mathrm{t\bar{t}}\gamma$ production, measured by CMS and ATLAS at 13 TeV [36–39]. This process is also sensitive to models that incorporate extra spatial dimensions [40].

This paper reports on a search for central exclusive $\mathrm{t\bar{t}}$ production at the LHC, carried out by reconstructing the top quarks from their decay products in the CMS central detector, and looking for the presence of two forward protons with the CMS-TOTEM precision proton spectrometer (CT-PPS) [41]. Each top quark decays almost always to a W boson and a bottom quark. At least one of the two W bosons from top quark decays is reconstructed in the leptonic ($\mathrm{e}\nu_\mathrm{e}$ or $\mu\nu_\mu$) channel (including $\mathrm{W} \to \tau\nu_\tau$ decays where the tau lepton decays leptonically), while the other W boson is reconstructed either in the leptonic or hadronic decay mode. Throughout the paper, the events where both top quarks decay in the leptonic channel are referred to as dileptonic, while events with one top quark decaying leptonically and the other hadronically are referred to as lepton + jets ($\ell$ + jets). The two scattered protons are detected by CT-PPS, one on each side of the interaction region. The analysis is based on data collected in 2017.

The paper contains seven sections. Section 2 briefly illustrates the CMS detector, the CT-PPS experimental setup, and the reconstruction of basic objects. Section 3 specifies the

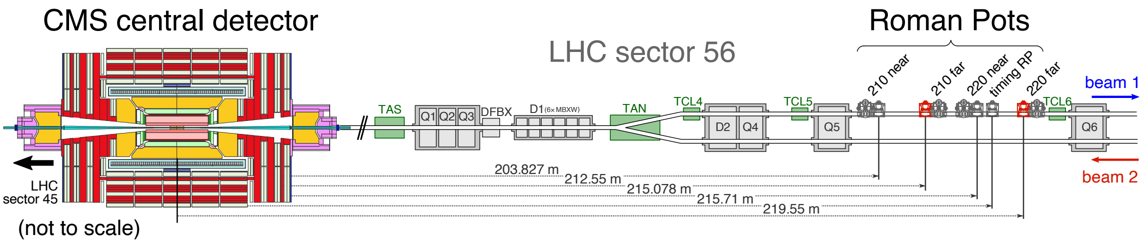


**Figure 2.** A schematic layout of one arm of CT-PPS along the LHC beam line. The RPs shown in red host the detectors used in this analysis.

data and simulation samples used in the analysis. Section 4 outlines the analysis strategy, and details its various steps. Section 5 is devoted to the treatment of systematic uncertainties. Section 6 describes the statistical analysis and presents the results. The paper is closed with a summary in section 7.

## 2 Experimental setup and particle reconstruction

### 2.1 The CMS detector and the CMS-TOTEM precision proton spectrometer

The central feature of the CMS apparatus is a superconducting solenoid of 6 m internal diameter, providing a magnetic field of 3.8 T. Within the solenoid volume are a silicon pixel and strip tracker, a lead tungstate crystal electromagnetic calorimeter (ECAL), and a brass and scintillator hadron calorimeter, each composed of a barrel and two endcap sections. Forward calorimeters extend the pseudorapidity ($\eta$) coverage provided by the barrel and endcap detectors. Muons are detected in gas-ionisation chambers embedded in the steel flux-return yoke outside the solenoid. A more detailed description of the CMS central detector, together with a definition of the coordinate system used and the relevant kinematic variables, can be found in ref. [42].

The CT-PPS detector is an array of movable, near-beam devices, called Roman Pots (RPs), enclosing tracking or timing detectors, and installed along the LHC beam line at about 210 m from the CMS interaction point (IP), on both sides, in LHC sectors 45 (“arm 0”) and 56 (“arm 1”). A sketch of the system layout for one arm is shown in figure 2. During normal data taking, detectors are inserted horizontally, their edges approaching the beam as close as 2–3 mm from its nominal orbit, in order to reconstruct the flight path of intact scattered protons coming from the IP. As insufficient information was available from the timing detectors in 2017, only data from the tracking stations are used in this analysis. In the 2017 configuration, one tracking station per side was equipped with silicon strip detectors [43] and one with silicon pixel detectors [44], at a distance of about 213 (“210 far”) and 220 m (“220 far”) from the IP, respectively. They can provide up to five and up to six measured points per track, respectively. Each strip tracker allows the reconstruction of at most one proton track per event; if hits compatible with more than one track are reconstructed in at least one strip tracker, the event is discarded, to avoid ambiguities arising from wrong combinations of orthogonal strips. Each pixel tracker allows the reconstruction of multiple tracks per event, up to 10.

### 2.2 Particle reconstruction

In CMS, object reconstruction is based on the particle-flow algorithm [45], which aims at reconstructing and identifying each individual particle in an event, with an optimised combination of information from the various detector elements.

The electron momentum is estimated by combining the energy measurement in the ECAL, including all bremsstrahlung photons spatially compatible with originating from the electron track, with the momentum measurement in the tracker. The transverse momentum ($p_{\mathrm{T}}$) resolution ranges from 1.6 to 5% for electrons with $p_{\mathrm{T}} \approx 45\,\mathrm{GeV}$ from $\mathrm{Z} \to \mathrm{e}^{+}\mathrm{e}^{-}$ decays [46].

The muon momentum is obtained from the curvature of the corresponding track. Matching muons to tracks measured in the silicon tracker results in a relative $p_{\mathrm{T}}$ resolution of 1% in the barrel and 3% in the endcaps [47], for muons with $p_{\mathrm{T}}$ up to 100 GeV.

The primary vertex (PV) is selected using tracking information only: vertices with at least four tracks and a longitudinal distance of less than 24 cm from the centre of the detector are selected. From these candidates, the PV is taken as the one with largest scalar sum of associated particle $p_{\mathrm{T}}$, as described in section 9.4.1 of ref. [48].

Jets are clustered from reconstructed particles using the anti-$k_{\mathrm{T}}$ algorithm [49, 50] with a distance parameter of 0.4. The jet momentum is determined as the vectorial sum of all particle momenta in the jet, and is found from simulation to be, on average, within 5–10% of the true momentum over the whole $p_{\mathrm{T}}$ spectrum and detector acceptance. To mitigate effects from additional pp interactions within the same or nearby bunch crossings ("pileup"), tracks identified to be originating from pileup vertices are discarded, and an offset correction is applied to correct for remaining contributions [51, 52]. Jet energy corrections are derived from simulation studies so that the average measured energy of jets becomes identical to that of particle-level jets. In-situ measurements of the momentum balance in dijet, photon+jet, Z+jet, and multijet events are used to determine any residual differences between the jet energy scale in data and in simulation, and appropriate corrections are applied [53]. The jet energy resolution amounts typically to 15–20% at 30 GeV, 10% at 100 GeV, and 5% at 1 TeV.

The missing transverse momentum vector $\vec{p}_{\mathrm{T}}^{\,\mathrm{miss}}$ is computed as the negative vector sum of the $p_{\mathrm{T}}$ of all the particle-flow candidates in an event, and its magnitude is denoted as $p_{\mathrm{T}}^{\mathrm{miss}}$ [54]. The vector $\vec{p}_{\mathrm{T}}^{\,\mathrm{miss}}$ is modified to account for corrections to the energy scale of the reconstructed jets in the event.

Intact protons emerging from interaction vertices at small angles are detected by CT-PPS, either with a single RP station (pixels or strips), or the combination of the information from two stations in the same arm (multi-RP reconstruction). The latter features superior resolution, thanks to the lever arm between the two stations, while it suffers from lower efficiency because of the double-track requirement. In this analysis, only multi-RP proton candidates are used. The proton reconstruction efficiency is evaluated as the product of three different contributions [55]. The first one is the efficiency of the strip detectors, locally degrading in time because of radiation damage. The second contribution is the multi-RP reconstruction efficiency, which combines the acceptance of protons propagating between the near and far stations, the pixel detector efficiency (similarly affected by radiation damage), and the efficiency of the reconstruction algorithm. Values for the combination of these two effects are determined, as functions of the position of the track in the transverse plane, for each of five



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data-taking periods ("eras"). Finally, the efficiency of the single-track requirement in the strips mentioned in section 2.1 is taken into account by applying scaling factors, derived globally per arm, for each era. This is the most significant contribution to proton reconstruction efficiency, with values below 50% for the periods with the highest instantaneous luminosity.

The kinematic state of the proton is characterised by the fractional momentum loss, defined as $\xi = (|\vec{p}_\mathrm{i}| - |\vec{p}_\mathrm{o}|)/|\vec{p}_\mathrm{i}|$, where $\vec{p}_\mathrm{i}$ and $\vec{p}_\mathrm{o}$ are the momenta of the incoming and outgoing protons, respectively. The value of $\xi$ is derived from the measured slopes and intercepts of the outgoing proton along with detailed knowledge of the LHC magnetic field. Dedicated alignment and calibration procedures are in place for different fills and LHC optics setup [55]. The detector acceptance as a function of $\xi$ is determined by the geometry of the detectors and the LHC collimators, and also depends on the specific LHC settings: in 2017, most detectable protons had $\xi$ values in the range $0.02 < \xi < 0.15$ [55]. Those used in the analysis are required to be within fiducial regions in the $\xi - \theta^*_x$ plane (with $\theta^*_x$ denoting the proton scattering angle in the horizontal plane at the IP) where the efficiency can be reliably determined.

## 3 Data and simulation samples

This analysis uses data collected in 2017 considering only runs where all CT-PPS strip and pixel detectors were operational, which corresponds to an integrated luminosity of $29.4\,\mathrm{fb}^{-1}$ [56, 57]. The beam crossing angle at the IP, $\alpha_\mathrm{X}$, defined here as the angle between the LHC axis and one of the beams, was set at different values, with most data being recorded at $\alpha_\mathrm{X} = 120$, 130, 140, or $150\,\mu$rad. The remaining data, corresponding to less than $1\,\mathrm{fb}^{-1}$, are not included in this analysis.

To simulate the signal and background processes, different Monte Carlo (MC) event generators are used. For all processes, the response of the central CMS detector is simulated using the Geant4 package [58].

A $\gamma\gamma \to \mathrm{t\bar{t}}$ signal sample is produced at leading order using FPMC [59] as the matrix element generator, with the equivalent photon approximation for the photon flux [60] and a proton survival probability of 0.9 [33, 35]. Events are generated for $0.02 < \xi < 0.20$. Top quark decays are simulated with MadSpin [61], selecting dilepton and $\ell$ + jets decays. The outgoing protons are propagated through the beamline from the IP to the RPs using a fast forward-proton simulation that includes beam-divergence and vertex smearing at the IP as well as the beam crossing angle dependence [55]. Hits in the CT-PPS detectors are simulated taking into account aperture limitations for a given crossing angle, and sensor acceptance and resolution. The efficiency is accounted for at a later stage by assigning appropriate weights to the events as discussed in section 4.4. The simulated hits are then used to reconstruct proton tracks by means of the standard CT-PPS reconstruction algorithms.

Backgrounds arise from a variety of hard processes in combination with two uncorrelated protons from pileup interactions within the CT-PPS acceptance. The dominant hard-process background is inclusive $\mathrm{t\bar{t}}$ production. A smaller contribution comes from single top quark production in the tW channel and, for the $\ell$ + jets channel, from QCD multijet events; additionally, depending on the $\mathrm{t\bar{t}}$ decay channel, there are small but non-negligible contributions from V + jets, where V is either a W or a Z boson, and Drell–Yan events. Other possible background sources such as inclusive $\mathrm{VV'}$ production and other single-top production channels have been found to have negligible impact and are not considered further in the analysis.

The inclusive $t\bar{t}$ sample is simulated at NLO precision using the POWHEG (v2.0) [62–64] event generator. The inclusive $t\bar{t}$ production cross section is scaled before the fit to the best available theoretical prediction at next-to-next-to-leading-order (NNLO) in QCD, amounting to 832 pb [65]. For all background sources containing top quarks, the $p_T$ spectra of top quarks in simulated samples are reweighted according to predictions at NNLO QCD accuracy [66]. For both signal and background event generation, a top quark mass of 172.5 GeV is assumed.

For all processes, the parton showering and hadronisation are simulated using PYTHIA 8.2 [67] with the CP5 underlying event tune [68]. The NNPDF3.1 [69] NNLO parton distribution functions (PDFs) are used.

No simulated sample is used to evaluate the contribution of the QCD multijet background. Instead, a purely data-driven method is applied, as described in section 4.3.

## 4 Analysis strategy

The analysis is conducted independently for the events in the dilepton decay channel and for those in the $\ell+$jets decay channel. The resulting distributions from the two channels are used as input to a common maximum likelihood fit, and a combined result is extracted.

### 4.1 Event selection

Events of interest are selected by CMS using a two-tiered trigger system. The first level, composed of custom hardware processors, uses information from the calorimeters and muon detectors to select events at a rate of around 100 kHz [70]. The second level, known as the high-level trigger (HLT), consists of a farm of processors running a version of the full event reconstruction software optimised for fast processing, and reduces the event rate to around 1 kHz before data storage [71].

In the dilepton analysis, events are selected using a combination of single-lepton and dilepton triggers that identify leptons within $|\eta| < 2.5$. The single-lepton HLT selection requires the presence of an isolated electron [46] (muon [47]) reconstructed with $p_T > 35$ (27) GeV. Alternatively, a 24 GeV requirement is applied for muons within $|\eta| < 2.1$. The dilepton HLT selection requires the presence of two isolated electrons with $p_T > 23$ and 12 GeV, two isolated muons with $p_T > 17$ and 8 GeV, one isolated electron with $p_T > 23$ GeV and one isolated muon with $p_T > 8$ GeV, or one isolated muon with $p_T > 23$ GeV and one isolated electron with $p_T > 12$ GeV.

In the $\ell+$jets analysis, events are selected using a combination of single-lepton and jet triggers. The single-lepton HLT selection requires the presence of a single isolated electron (muon) with $p_T > 35$ (27) GeV, reconstructed within $|\eta| < 2.5$. The remaining selections require the presence of a single electron with $p_T > 28$ GeV and a sum of the $p_T$ of the jets greater than 150 GeV, or the presence of a single electron with $p_T > 30$ GeV and at least one jet with $p_T > 35$ GeV; in both cases, the electron must be reconstructed within $|\eta| < 2.1$.

Offline, the reconstructed lepton with highest $p_T$ must have $p_T > 30$ GeV and, if it is an electron, it must have $|\eta| < 2.1$, while if it is a muon it must have $|\eta| < 2.1(2.4)$ for the



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dilepton ($\ell$ + jets) analysis. In the dilepton analysis, the lepton with the second highest value of $p_T$ must have $p_T > 20\,\text{GeV}$ and $|\eta| < 2.4$. Additionally, the charged leptons are required to satisfy specific quality criteria. A set of scale factors is applied to simulated events as a function of the lepton $p_T$ and $\eta$ to account for differences observed in the lepton trigger, reconstruction, and identification efficiency between data and simulation [46, 47].

Reconstructed jets are required to have $p_T > 30$ (25) GeV in the dilepton ($\ell$ + jets) channel, and $|\eta| < 2.4$. Moreover, the angular distance $\Delta R = \sqrt{(\Delta\eta)^2 + (\Delta\phi)^2}$ between a jet and a lepton must be greater than 0.4, where $\phi$ is the azimuthal angle in radians.

Jets originating from the hadronisation of b quarks are identified with the DeepCSV algorithm [72] as b-tagged jets. The "medium" working point is used, corresponding to a typical efficiency of about 70% for correctly identified b quark jets, with a misidentification probability of 12 (1)% for c quark (gluon or light quark) jets. Scale factors are applied to the simulated events as a function of the jet $p_T$ and $\eta$ to account for the differences observed in the b jet identification efficiency between data and simulation.

The final selection in the dilepton channel requires the presence of at least two leptons, with the two highest $p_T$ leptons having opposite charge; the dilepton system they form is required to have an invariant mass $m_{\ell\ell} > 20\,\text{GeV}$. For the events with two reconstructed leptons of the same flavour, $m_{\ell\ell}$ is required to be outside a 30 GeV window around the Z boson mass peak: $(m_{\ell\ell} < 76\,\text{GeV}) \cup (m_{\ell\ell} > 106\,\text{GeV})$. Events are categorised according to the final-state charged leptons as ee, e$\mu$, or $\mu\mu$. Only events with at least two b-tagged jets are retained. In the $\ell$ + jets channel, the final selection requires the presence of exactly one lepton (electron or muon), at least two jets passing the b tagging selection criteria, and at least two jets failing the b tagging selection criteria.

Both the dilepton and the $\ell$ + jets analysis require one multi-RP proton track to be reconstructed in each arm.

The overall efficiency of the selection, including detector acceptance, is about 2% for the dilepton channel and 0.8% for the $\ell$ + jets channel.

### 4.2 Top quark pair reconstruction

Full reconstruction of the $t\bar{t}$ pair can be used to relate its kinematics to that of the forward protons. In central exclusive production, the momentum transfer at the interaction vertex is typically quite small, implying very small values (below 1 GeV) for the transverse momentum of the outgoing protons and, consequently, of the central system. Moreover, the invariant mass and the rapidity of the central system $X$ are related to the momentum loss of the protons by the expressions:

$$m_X = \sqrt{s\xi_1\xi_2}, \tag{4.1}$$

$$y_X = \frac{1}{2}\ln\frac{\xi_1}{\xi_2}, \tag{4.2}$$

where $\sqrt{s}$ is the centre-of-mass energy and $\xi_1$, $\xi_2$ are the fractional momentum losses of the outgoing protons in the positive and negative $z$ direction, respectively. The reconstruction of a $t\bar{t}$ candidate through its decay chain is carried out independently for the dilepton and $\ell$ + jets channels, in order to take advantage of their different kinematic properties. In the dilepton channel, the $\mathrm{t\bar{t}}$ system is reconstructed by means of an analytic method, briefly outlined in the following, and the resulting $\mathrm{t\bar{t}}$ observables are used as input to the multivariate discriminant described in section 4.5, together with the kinematic observables of the tagged protons. In the $\ell +$ jets channel, the kinematics matching between the $\mathrm{t\bar{t}}$ system and the tagged protons is explicitly used as a constraint in a global kinematic fit.

In the dilepton analysis, the two charged leptons and the two b-tagged jets with the highest $p_{\mathrm{T}}$ are selected. The association of the leptons with the jets relies on a kinematic reconstruction algorithm [73] that also estimates the kinematics of the top quark and antiquark. The missing transverse momentum is assumed to originate solely from the two neutrinos in the decay, and the W boson and top quark masses, $m_{\mathrm{W}}$ and $m_{\mathrm{t}}$, are constrained to their known values [74]. For both lepton-jet combinations, multiple replicas of the energy-momentum conservation equations are generated, with particle momenta varied according to their resolution and the width of the W boson. For each of them, the solution with the smallest value of the $\mathrm{t\bar{t}}$ invariant mass ($m_{\mathrm{t\bar{t}}}$) is chosen, and a weight is assigned based on the resulting invariant mass of the lepton and b quark jet system, with the generator-level spectrum as reference. The weights are then used to obtain weighted averages of the kinematic observables of the top quark and antiquark. The combination of leptons and jets that yields the highest sum of weights is chosen. This algorithm finds a physical solution in about 90% of the events passing the previous selection, both for data and for simulation. For simulated $\mathrm{t\bar{t}}$ events, the correct association of lepton and b jet is achieved in 70% of the cases. The events for which no physical solution is found are not removed, but a fixed, unphysical value is assigned to their $\mathrm{t\bar{t}}$ observables.

In the $\ell$+jets analysis, only the b-tagged jets and the non-b-tagged (denoted 'light-flavour') jets with the highest $p_{\mathrm{T}}$ values are considered: up to four of each type are selected. Top quark candidates with the W boson decaying leptonically are reconstructed from combinations of a b-tagged jet, the selected lepton, and a neutrino candidate. The neutrino candidate is initially reconstructed from the missing transverse momentum, with the longitudinal component assigned by imposing the constraint $m_{\ell\nu} = m_{\mathrm{W}}$. In cases where the two solutions of the resulting quadratic equation are real, the one closest to the longitudinal momentum of the lepton is chosen. Top quark candidates with the W boson decaying hadronically are reconstructed from combinations of a b-tagged and two light-flavour jets. The choice of the two b quark jets to be used for top quark and antiquark reconstruction, and of their association with the other objects, is based on the invariant mass of the reconstructed t and $\bar{\mathrm{t}}$ candidates, $m_{\mathrm{t}}^{\mathrm{reco}}$ and $m_{\bar{\mathrm{t}}}^{\mathrm{reco}}$. The combination that yields the lowest value of $|m_{\mathrm{t}}^{\mathrm{reco}} - m_{\mathrm{t}}^{\mathrm{ref}}| + |m_{\bar{\mathrm{t}}}^{\mathrm{reco}} - m_{\mathrm{t}}^{\mathrm{ref}}|$ is selected, where $m_{\mathrm{t}}^{\mathrm{ref}}$ is chosen to be 173.1 GeV, from direct measurements [74]. Using this procedure, b quark jets are found to be correctly assigned in 75% of all cases. The kinematic observables of all reconstructed objects are further corrected by means of a kinematic fit. The momentum components of the lepton, the four jets, and the neutrino, as well as the fractional momentum loss of the forward protons, are used as inputs to the fit and allowed to float, constrained by Gaussian probability distribution functions centred on their measured values and with the widths equal to the measurement uncertainties. The longitudinal component of the neutrino momentum is left free to float in the fit. The W boson mass ($m_{\mathrm{W}}$) and $m_{\mathrm{t}}$ are constrained to their known values, and the total $p_{\mathrm{T}}$ of the

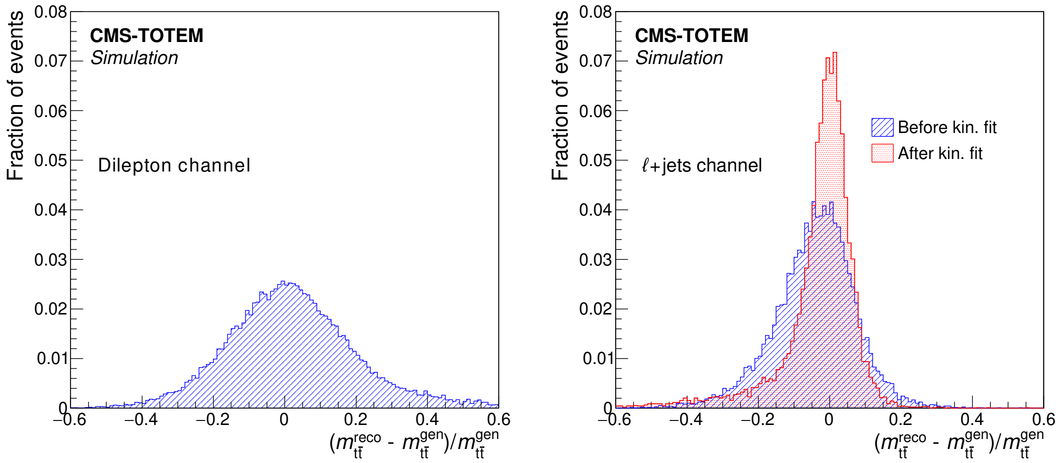


**Figure 3.** Normalised distribution of the relative resolution of the reconstructed $m_{t\bar{t}}$ in simulated signal events, for the dilepton (left) and $\ell +$ jets (right) analyses. The resolution is shown only for events where the reconstruction is successful. For the $\ell +$ jets decay mode, the hatched blue and the dotted red histograms represent the distribution before and after applying the kinematic fit, respectively.

$t\bar{t}$ system is set to zero. Finally, $m_{t\bar{t}}$ and the fractional momentum loss of the protons are required to satisfy eq. (4.1), where $X$ is the $t\bar{t}$ pair.

Figure 3 shows the $m_{t\bar{t}}$ resolution achieved for the dilepton and $\ell +$ jets channels. The poorer resolution obtained for the dilepton mode, for which the width of the Gaussian core of the distribution is $\simeq$15%, is understood from the presence of two neutrinos in the final state. For the $\ell +$ jets case, the resolution is shown before ($\simeq$7.5%) and after ($\simeq$5%) applying the kinematic fitter.

### 4.3 Background from multijet events

For the $\ell +$ jets analysis, the background originating from QCD multijet events has been evaluated with a data-driven approach. The method is based on the observation that the leptons selected in such events are generally not produced promptly in the primary interaction, but are rather real leptons from semileptonic decays of hadrons, or other objects incorrectly identified as leptons.

Samples of events enriched with nonprompt leptons are created by imposing looser selection criteria on the lepton. A "tight-to-loose" ratio is defined as the ratio of the number of nonprompt lepton events satisfying the tight (nominal) selection to the number of those passing the loose ID selections described in refs. [46] and [47] but not the tight one. It is evaluated in a data sample mostly populated by multijet events ("control region", or CR) and then used to estimate the number of nonprompt lepton events passing the nominal $\ell +$ jets selection ("signal region", or SR) described in section 4.1.

The CR is defined by the same selection criteria as the SR, except for the requirement that no jet pass the b tagging selection, and that $p_{\mathrm{T}}^{\mathrm{miss}} < 20\,\mathrm{GeV}$. Contributions from background sources other than multijet events are subtracted using the simulated samples. Values of the tight-to-loose ratio are calculated as a function of the lepton $p_{\mathrm{T}}$ separately for the two lepton flavours, and then applied to data in the SR, after all simulated contributions from prompt-lepton background sources have been subtracted.

This method can be used to obtain the distribution of any kinematic variable for the nonprompt lepton component, as well as of the multivariate discriminant used for signal extraction described in section 4.5. For the latter, the resulting shape is observed to be consistent, within statistical uncertainties, with that from the dominant inclusive $t\bar{t}$ background. Since the inclusive $t\bar{t}$ normalisation is a free parameter in the final fit described in section 6, separately for the dilepton and the $\ell +$jets channels, and the contribution of the nonprompt lepton component is estimated to be much smaller (about 13%), an independent QCD multijet background contribution is not included in the final fit.

### 4.4 Signal and background models

The presence of multiple proton interactions within the same LHC bunch crossing results in the superposition of objects from different PVs both in the central CMS apparatus and in CT-PPS. The probability to have at least one proton in the acceptance of a given arm of CT-PPS, for any bunch crossing, ranges from 40 to 70% depending on the LHC optics settings and instantaneous luminosity. However, while the pileup activity in the central detector can be modelled with adequate accuracy, no simulation has been validated so far for protons from uncorrelated diffractive events, where the pp interaction is mediated by strongly interacting colour-singlet exchange. As a consequence, in the MC samples, background events contain no forward protons, while signal events contain exactly two forward protons on opposite sides (though not necessarily within the acceptance).

The presence of pileup protons, uncorrelated with the event reconstructed in the central detector, has two effects:

- a background event may be selected because exactly one random proton per arm has been reconstructed in CT-PPS;
- a signal event may be rejected because of the multiple proton reconstruction inefficiency, or it may be wrongly reconstructed because a background proton is selected instead of the signal one that went undetected as a result of detector inefficiency or limited acceptance.

In order to correctly take these effects into account, a pool of forward proton pairs reconstructed in the collision data is collected to be used as a sample of pileup protons, from events subject to the same requirements of the nominal selection (including one reconstructed proton in each CT-PPS arm) except for those on b-tagged jets. In the procedure outlined below, the proton reconstruction efficiency discussed in section 2.2 is considered as a function of $\xi$. Moreover, the probability of having zero (not including multitrack inefficiency) or one proton reconstructed in each arm is taken from the same studies [55]. Because the detector and beam conditions varied significantly throughout the data taking, both the forward proton pools and the efficiency/probability values are considered separately for each of the five eras and, except for the reconstruction efficiency, for four values of the beam crossing angle $\alpha_X$ at the IP (120, 130, 140, and 150 $\mu$rad).

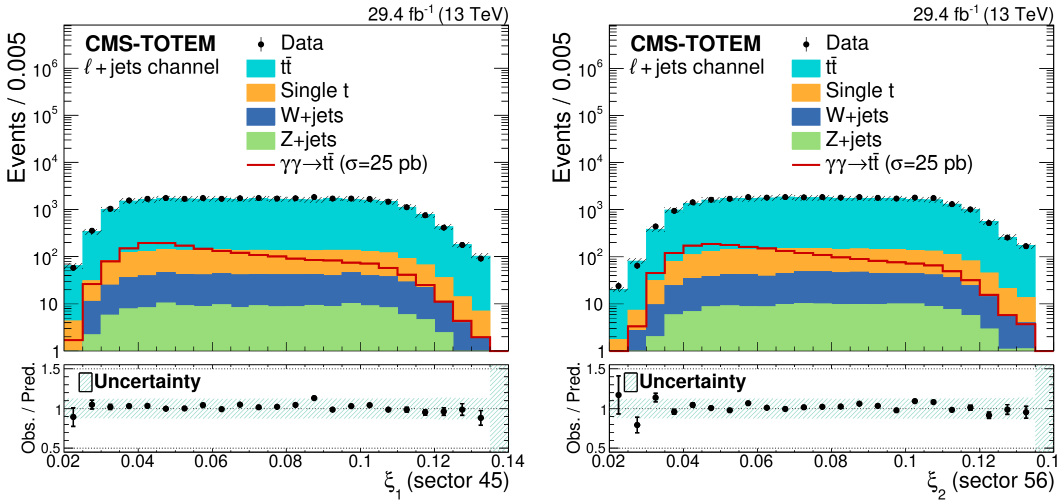


**Figure 4.** Distribution of $\xi$ in data and background simulated samples after pileup proton mixing and pileup reweighting, in the $\ell +$ jets channel. Protons in CT-PPS arm 0 (left) and arm 1 (right), as defined in the text. The solid histograms show the expected background contributions, while the red open histograms show the expected signal shapes, normalised to a cross section of 25 pb, approximately $10^5$ larger than the SM cross section prediction from ref. [32]; points with statistical error bars represent collision data. The lower panels show the data-to-prediction ratios; the hatched bands represent the relative uncertainty in the predictions.

For each simulated event, a pair of protons is selected from the pool according to the relative normalisation of the (era, $\alpha_X$) samples. Then, the following procedure is applied:

- for background events, the proton pair is added and a weight corresponding to the probability of reconstructing one proton in each arm is assigned;
- for signal events, the number of reconstructed protons is first determined according to the detector acceptance and a random correction based on the multi-RP reconstruction efficiency. If only one of the original protons is left, the other is replaced with one from the pool, and an appropriate weight is assigned to the event, according to the probability of ending up with exactly one proton in that arm. Events in which neither forward proton is reconstructed are treated in the same way as background events, as described above.

In order to match the pileup conditions for simulated events to those in the collision data, a further reweighting procedure is applied to simulated events, based on the number of reconstructed interaction vertices. The normalised distribution of this number for a given simulated sample, $P^{\mathrm{MC}}(n_{\mathrm{vtx}})$, and that for the data in each of the 20 $(\mathrm{era}, \alpha_X)$ regions, $P^{\mathrm{data}}(n_{\mathrm{vtx}} \mid \mathrm{era}, \alpha_X)$, are determined. A weight $w_{\mathrm{PU}} = P^{\mathrm{data}}(n_{\mathrm{vtx}} \mid \mathrm{era}, \alpha_X)/P^{\mathrm{MC}}(n_{\mathrm{vtx}})$ is assigned depending on the sampled region.

To assess the validity of the background model obtained from this procedure, the distributions of various event variables in data and simulated samples are compared, and very good agreement is observed. Figure 4 shows the overall distribution of $\xi$ in each arm of CT-PPS for the $\ell +$ jets decay mode.

### 4.5 Multivariate analysis

In order to enhance the signal content of the selected samples, information from variables showing discriminating power against background sources is efficiently exploited by means of multivariate analysis techniques. For both the dilepton and the $\ell+$jets channels, a boosted decision tree (BDT) algorithm [75] is used, implemented with the TMVA toolkit [76]. The training samples consist of simulated signal events with both protons reconstructed, and simulated inclusive $\mathrm{t\bar{t}}$ production events, by far the largest source of background, with two pileup protons added from collision data, as described in the previous section. In general, effective discrimination is mostly achieved by exploiting the absence of extra jets in the exclusive production event, and the kinematic closure when including both the forward protons and the centrally produced objects. Because of the different final products in the two final states and their related kinematics, the specific choice of the discriminating variables is different for the two decay modes. For each decay mode, a large set of variables was initially tested, and then reduced to a smaller set through optimisation, where the most performant and uncorrelated variables were selected.

For the dilepton decay mode, the following 15 kinematic variables are used: the mass and the rapidity of the central system reconstructed both from the $\mathrm{t\bar{t}}$ decay products and from proton kinematics (eqs. (4.1) and (4.2)); $p_{\mathrm{T}}^{\mathrm{miss}}$; the invariant mass and the angular distance $\Delta R$ of the two leptons; $|\Delta\phi|$ of the two selected b-tagged jets; the rapidity of the system formed by the two b quark jets and the two leptons, and the sum of the absolute values of their individual rapidities; the rapidity of the system formed by all other reconstructed jets, and the sum of the absolute values of their individual rapidities; the squared energy sum for all objects used for the $\mathrm{t\bar{t}}$ reconstruction; the minimum absolute value of the rapidity difference for any two systems formed by a lepton and a b-tagged jet; and the number of light-flavour jets.

For the $\ell+$jets decay mode, the following 10 kinematic variables are used: the number of light-flavour jets and of b-tagged jets; the sum of the invariant mass of all jets; the total energy of all light-flavour jets; the mean $\Delta R$ for all pairs of light-flavour jets; the total energy of all extra jets (not used for $\mathrm{t\bar{t}}$ reconstruction); the lepton momentum and a variable quantifying its isolation from other particles in the event [46, 47]; $m_{\mathrm{t\bar{t}}}$; the difference in central system rapidity reconstructed from the $\mathrm{t\bar{t}}$ and the pp systems (eq. (4.2)); and the $\chi^2$ of the kinematic fit.

The distributions of some of the kinematic variables of interest are shown in figure 5 for the two decay modes.

## 5 Systematic uncertainties

Several sources of systematic uncertainty affect the normalisation of the signal and background yields, as well as the shape of the BDT output used as the final discriminant. For each of them, the impact on the final result is assessed by varying appropriately the parameters involved, and repeating the analysis. When the variations imply a change in the BDT shape, a smoothing procedure (using the '353QH' algorithm described in ref. [77]) is applied to the associated template used in the fitting procedure described in section 6. Modified BDT shapes are compared to the nominal one using a Kolmogorov-Smirnov-inspired test: if the



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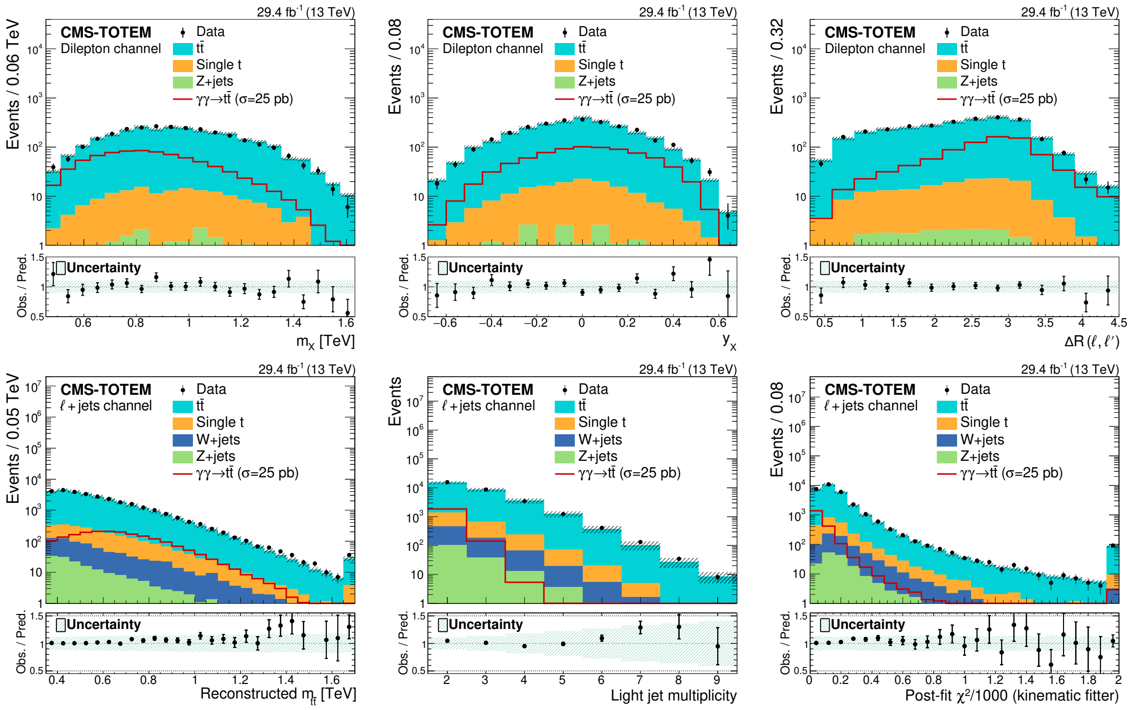


**Figure 5.** Distribution of a selection of the kinematic variables of interest for the dilepton (upper) and $\ell$ + jets (lower) analysis. The solid histograms show the expected background contributions, while the red open histograms show the expected signal shapes, normalised to a cross section of 25 pb, approximately $10^5$ larger than the SM cross section prediction from ref. [32]; points with statistical error bars represent collision data. The lower panels show the data-to-prediction ratios; the hatched bands represent the uncertainty in the predictions. The leftmost and rightmost bin in each histogram includes accepted events outside the histogram range.

test result (calculated as described in section 6.2.2 of ref. [78]) is larger than 0.95 for both the upwards and downwards variation, the corresponding systematic uncertainty is only included as an overall normalisation effect; otherwise, the shape uncertainty is included as a nuisance parameter and profiled in the likelihood fit.

The sources of systematic uncertainty can be subdivided into experimental and theoretical components.

**Experimental uncertainties.** The measured integrated luminosity that is used to normalise the MC predictions has an associated systematic uncertainty of 2.3% [56, 57]. Several uncertainties arise from the reconstruction and identification of various objects. For leptons, b quark jets, and forward protons, efficiency correction scale factors are varied within their uncertainties [46, 47, 53, 55], which affect both the shape and normalisation of the final discriminant. The uncertainty in the jet energy has an effect on the reconstruction of the kinematic variables used to calculate the discriminants: the corresponding uncertainty is evaluated by rescaling the $p_{\mathrm{T}}$- and $\eta$-dependent scale factors of the reconstructed jet energy [53] and jet energy resolution. The variation in four-momentum for each selected jet is propagated to $\vec{p}_{\mathrm{T}}^{\text{miss}}$ and the b tagging scale factors. Uncertainties in the efficiency corrections for the lepton trigger are estimated as functions of the lepton $p_T$ and $\eta$ from control samples in data; for electrons (muons) they are within 3% (below 1%), except for $p_T < 35\,\text{GeV}$, where they range up to 8 (3)%. In the pileup proton mixing procedure described in section 4.4, the normalisation of the simulated data samples is performed according to the pileup proton probability measured in real data with no requirement on the b quark jet multiplicity. A possible bias of the proton tag probability arising from the different b quark jet selection is estimated by measuring the proton tag probability again after requiring $N_{\text{b jet}} \geq 1$: the difference in the predicted tagged proton probability is taken as the corresponding systematic uncertainty. For the signal sample, the simulation of forward protons is tuned to reproduce the expected bias and resolution in $\xi$ reconstruction assuming perfect knowledge of the detector alignment and LHC optics. The effect of uncertainties in this assumption is estimated by shifting, in each event, the reconstructed $\xi$ values according to the "systematics" contribution described in ref. [55].

**Theoretical uncertainties.** The uncertainties related to the choice of the factorisation and renormalisation scales at the matrix element level are estimated by varying the scales independently by factors 2 and 0.5 [79]. For PDF modeling, two effects are considered: a variation of the strong coupling constant $\alpha_S$, and the root-mean-square of the variations from a collection of PDF error eigenvectors sets, as described in the PDF4LHC Collaboration recommendations [80]. The uncertainty associated with parton shower emission in initial and final state is evaluated by varying the renormalisation scale for QCD emissions by factors of 2 and 0.5. For the signal sample, only the final state radiation uncertainty is considered, and is taken to be fully correlated with that of the background processes. The normalisation of the inclusive $\mathrm{t\bar{t}}$ background (incorporating any additional contribution from events with nonprompt leptons) is free to vary around its nominal values for the $\ell +$jets and the dilepton channels separately, while single top quark and other backgrounds normalisation uncertainties are taken to be 5% [81] and 30% [82–84], respectively. Finally, the effect of the finite size of the simulated samples used for the analysis is taken into account with the Beeston-Barlow method [85].

## 6 Results

A profile maximum-likelihood fit is performed to the distributions of BDT discriminants for the two decay modes. While the sensitivity with the current data does not allow to obtain evidence for central exclusive $\mathrm{t\bar{t}}$ production, an upper limit for its cross section can be derived. The limits are computed based on an asymptotic approximation of the distributions of the test statistics, which in turn is based on the profile likelihood ratio, under given hypotheses for the signal and the background [86–88]. The sources of systematic uncertainty described in section 5 are included in the fit as nuisance parameters.

The impact of a given systematic uncertainty on the upper limit is defined as the relative difference between the nominal limit and the limit extracted by including all other systematic uncertainties but excluding the uncertainty in question. For the final result, uncertainties whose impact on the upper limit is less than 0.1% are not included.



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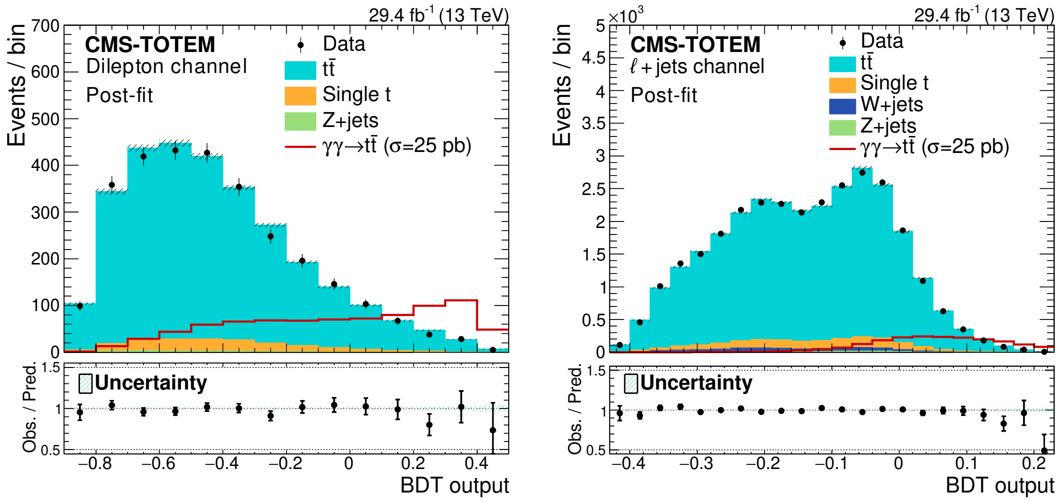


**Figure 6.** Distribution of the BDT output in the signal region for simulated events after the fit, and for data. Left: dilepton channel; right: $\ell+$jets channel. The different ranges of the two BDT output distributions depend on the specific details of the algorithms chosen in the two cases. The solid histograms show the expected background contributions, while the red open histograms show the expected signal shapes, normalised to a cross section of 25 pb, approximately $10^5$ larger than the SM cross section prediction from ref. [32]; points with statistical error bars represent collision data. For both reconstruction modes, all signal regions are combined. The lower panels show the data-to-prediction ratios; the hatched bands represent the relative uncertainty in the predictions.

In the dilepton analysis, a simultaneous fit is performed to each of the final-state lepton combinations ee, e$\mu$, and $\mu\mu$, integrating over era and $\alpha_{\mathrm{X}}$. For the $\ell+$jets analysis, the simultaneous fit is performed on each of the 20 samples defined by (era, $\alpha_{\mathrm{X}}$), combining the two lepton flavours. These choices are the result of an optimisation based on a compromise between the expected sensitivity and the statistical uncertainty. The BDT distributions are binned in 14 and 22 intervals for the dilepton and the $\ell+$jets analysis, respectively.

The expected and observed distributions of the BDT variable for the dilepton and $\ell+$jets decay modes are shown in figure 6, where all signal regions are combined. The values of the nuisance parameters returned by the fit are consistent with their inputs; in particular, the normalisation factors for the $\mathrm{t\bar{t}}$ contribution to the background are $0.96\pm0.04$ and $1.02\pm0.03$ for the dilepton and the $\ell+$jets channel, respectively. The goodness-of-fit has been checked with toy-MC studies.

In the dilepton decay mode, the fit yields an observed (expected) 95% confidence level upper limit on exclusive central production of $\mathrm{t\bar{t}}$ pairs of 1.71 (2.02) pb; in the $\ell+$jets mode, an upper limit of 0.78 (1.54) pb is obtained. The two modes are then considered jointly in a combined fit, where each source of systematic uncertainty is treated as fully correlated between the two channels. The observed (expected) limit resulting from the combined fit is 0.59 (1.14) pb.

The results of the fit are shown in figure 7, for the separate decay channels, as well as for the combination. The value of the extracted limit depends mostly on the statistical precision; the increase due to inclusion of the systematic uncertainties is about 10%. The

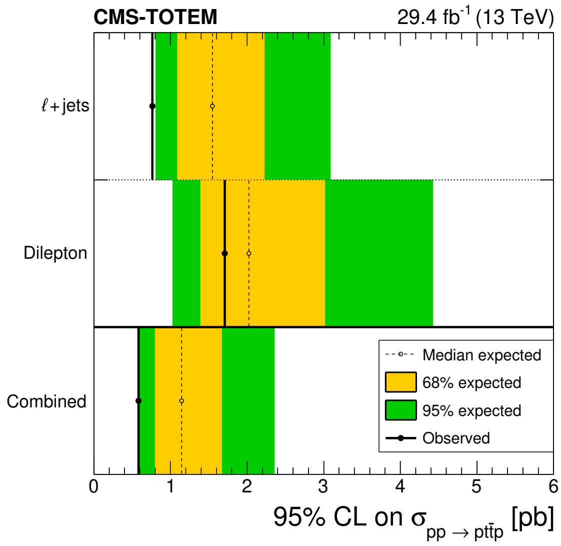


**Figure 7.** Expected and observed 95% confidence level (CL) upper limits for the cross section of $pp \to pt\bar{t}p$, for the dilepton and $\ell$ + jets channels separately and combined. The green and yellow bands show the 68 and 95% intervals, respectively, for the expected upper limit.

most important contributions from systematic uncertainties are those related to background normalisation, final-state radiation modelling, jet energy corrections and resolution, as well as proton reconstruction with CT-PPS.

## 7 Summary

A search is reported for the central exclusive production of top quark-antiquark pairs in proton-proton interactions, $pp \to pt\bar{t}p$, for the first time using tagged intact protons, reconstructed by the CMS-TOTEM precision proton spectrometer. The $t\bar{t}$ pairs are reconstructed by the CMS detector either in the dilepton or the lepton + jets decay modes. The search is conducted both separately for the two modes, and in a combined fit. With a data sample of proton-proton collisions at a centre-of-mass energy of 13 TeV corresponding to an integrated luminosity of 29.4 fb$^{-1}$, results consistent with predictions from the standard model are obtained. An upper limit of 0.59 pb at 95% confidence level (compared to an expected limit of 1.14 pb) is set on the central exclusive production of $t\bar{t}$ pairs, with fractional momentum loss of the intact protons in the range $0.02 < \xi < 0.20$. These results are tabulated in the HEPData record for this analysis [89].

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## The CMS collaboration


**Yerevan Physics Institute, Yerevan, Armenia**
A. Tumasyan

**Institut für Hochenergiephysik, Vienna, Austria**
W. Adam, J.W. Andrejkovic, T. Bergauer, S. Chatterjee, K. Damanakis, M. Dragicevic, A. Escalante Del Valle, P.S. Hussain, M. Jeitler[1], N. Krammer, L. Lechner, D. Liko, I. Mikulec, P. Paulitsch, F.M. Pitters, J. Schieck[1], R. Schöfbeck, D. Schwarz, S. Templ, W. Waltenberger, C.-E. Wulz[1]

**Universiteit Antwerpen, Antwerpen, Belgium**
M.R. Darwish[2], T. Janssen, T. Kello[3], H. Rejeb Sfar, P. Van Mechelen

**Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Brussel, Belgium**
E.S. Bols, J. D'Hondt, A. De Moor, M. Delcourt, H. El Faham, S. Lowette, S. Moortgat, A. Morton, D. Müller, A.R. Sahasransu, S. Tavernier, W. Van Doninck, D. Vannerom

**Université Libre de Bruxelles, Bruxelles, Belgium**
B. Clerbaux, G. De Lentdecker, L. Favart, D. Hohov, J. Jaramillo, K. Lee, M. Mahdavikhorrami, I. Makarenko, A. Malara, S. Paredes, L. Pétré, N. Postiau, E. Starling, L. Thomas, M. Vanden Bemden, C. Vander Velde, P. Vanlaer

**Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium**
D. Dobur, J. Knolle, L. Lambrecht, G. Mestdach, M. Niedziela, C. Rendón, C. Roskas, A. Samalan, K. Skovpen, M. Tytgat, N. Van Den Bossche, B. Vermassen, L. Wezenbeek

**Université Catholique de Louvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium**
A. Benecke, G. Bruno, F. Bury, C. Caputo, P. David, C. Delaere, I.S. Donertas, A. Giammanco, K. Jaffel, Sa. Jain, V. Lemaitre, K. Mondal, J. Prisciandaro, A. Taliercio, T.T. Tran, P. Vischia, S. Wertz

**Centro Brasileiro de Pesquisas Fisicas, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil**
G.A. Alves, E. Coelho, C. Hensel, A. Moraes, P. Rebello Teles

**Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil**
W.L. Aldá Júnior, M. Alves Gallo Pereira, M. Barroso Ferreira Filho, H. Brandao Malbouisson, W. Carvalho, J. Chinellato[4], E.M. Da Costa, G.G. Da Silveira[5], D. De Jesus Damiao, V. Dos Santos Sousa, S. Fonseca De Souza, J. Martins[6], C. Mora Herrera, K. Mota Amarilo, L. Mundim, H. Nogima, A. Santoro, S.M. Silva Do Amaral, A. Sznajder, M. Thiel, F. Torres Da Silva De Araujo[7], A. Vilela Pereira




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**Universidade Estadual Paulista, Universidade Federal do ABC, São Paulo, Brazil**
C.A. Bernardes[5], L. Calligaris, T.R. Fernandez Perez Tomei, E.M. Gregores, P.G. Mercadante, S.F. Novaes, Sandra S. Padula

**Institute for Nuclear Research and Nuclear Energy, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia, Bulgaria**
A. Aleksandrov, R. Hadjiiska, P. Iaydjiev, M. Misheva, M. Rodozov, M. Shopova, G. Sultanov

**University of Sofia, Sofia, Bulgaria**
A. Dimitrov, T. Ivanov, L. Litov, B. Pavlov, P. Petkov, A. Petrov, E. Shumka

**Beihang University, Beijing, China**
T. Cheng, T. Javaid[8], M. Mittal, L. Yuan

**Department of Physics, Tsinghua University, Beijing, China**
M. Ahmad, G. Bauer[9], Z. Hu, S. Lezki, K. Yi[9,10]

**Institute of High Energy Physics, Beijing, China**
G.M. Chen[8], H.S. Chen[8], M. Chen[8], F. Iemmi, C.H. Jiang, A. Kapoor, H. Liao, Z.-A. Liu[11], V. Milosevic, F. Monti, R. Sharma, J. Tao, J. Thomas-Wilsker, J. Wang, H. Zhang, J. Zhao

**State Key Laboratory of Nuclear Physics and Technology, Peking University, Beijing, China**
A. Agapitos, Y. An, Y. Ban, C. Chen, A. Levin, C. Li, Q. Li, X. Lyu, Y. Mao, S.J. Qian, X. Sun, D. Wang, J. Xiao, H. Yang

**Sun Yat-Sen University, Guangzhou, China**
J. Li, M. Lu, Z. You

**Institute of Modern Physics and Key Laboratory of Nuclear Physics and Ion-beam Application (MOE) — Fudan University, Shanghai, China**
X. Gao[3], D. Leggat, H. Okawa, Y. Zhang

**Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, Zhejiang, China**
Z. Lin, C. Lu, M. Xiao

**Universidad de Los Andes, Bogota, Colombia**
C. Avila, D.A. Barbosa Trujillo, A. Cabrera, C. Florez, J. Fraga

**Universidad de Antioquia, Medellin, Colombia**
J. Mejia Guisao, F. Ramirez, M. Rodriguez, J.D. Ruiz Alvarez

**University of Split, Faculty of Electrical Engineering, Mechanical Engineering and Naval Architecture, Split, Croatia**
D. Giljanovic, N. Godinovic, D. Lelas, I. Puljak

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**University of Split, Faculty of Science, Split, Croatia**
Z. Antunovic, M. Kovac, T. Sculac

**Institute Rudjer Boskovic, Zagreb, Croatia**
V. Brigljevic, B.K. Chitroda, D. Ferencek, D. Majumder, M. Roguljic, A. Starodumov[12], T. Susa

**University of Cyprus, Nicosia, Cyprus**
A. Attikis, K. Christoforou, G. Kole, M. Kolosova, S. Konstantinou, J. Mousa, C. Nicolaou, F. Ptochos, P.A. Razis, H. Rykaczewski, H. Saka

**Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic**
M. Finger, M. Finger Jr., A. Kveton

**Escuela Politecnica Nacional, Quito, Ecuador**
E. Ayala

**Universidad San Francisco de Quito, Quito, Ecuador**
E. Carrera Jarrin

**Academy of Scientific Research and Technology of the Arab Republic of Egypt, Egyptian Network of High Energy Physics, Cairo, Egypt**
S. Elgammal[13], A. Ellithi Kamel[14]

**Center for High Energy Physics (CHEP-FU), Fayoum University, El-Fayoum, Egypt**
M.A. Mahmoud, Y. Mohammed

**National Institute of Chemical Physics and Biophysics, Tallinn, Estonia**
S. Bhowmik, R.K. Dewanjee, K. Ehataht, M. Kadastik, T. Lange, S. Nandan, C. Nielsen, J. Pata, M. Raidal, L. Tani, C. Veelken

**Department of Physics, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland**
P. Eerola, H. Kirschenmann, M. Voutilainen

**Helsinki Institute of Physics, Helsinki, Finland**
S. Bharthuar, E. Brücken, J. Havukainen, M.S. Kim, R. Kinnunen, T. Lampén, K. Lassila-Perini, S. Lehti, T. Lindén, M. Lotti, L. Martikainen, M. Myllymäki, J. Ott, M.m. Rantanen, H. Siikonen, E. Tuominen, J. Tuominiemi

**Lappeenranta-Lahti University of Technology, Lappeenranta, Finland**
P. Luukka, H. Petrow, T. Tuuva

**IRFU, CEA, Université Paris-Saclay, Gif-sur-Yvette, France**
C. Amendola, M. Besancon, F. Couderc, M. Dejardin, D. Denegri, J.L. Faure, F. Ferri, S. Ganjour, P. Gras, G. Hamel de Monchenault, P. Jarry, V. Lohezic, J. Malcles, J. Rander, A. Rosowsky, M.Ö. Sahin, A. Savoy-Navarro[15], P. Simkina, M. Titov



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**Laboratoire Leprince-Ringuet, CNRS/IN2P3, Ecole Polytechnique, Institut Polytechnique de Paris, Palaiseau, France**
F. Beaudette, A. Buchot Perraguin, P. Busson, A. Cappati, C. Charlot, F. Damas, O. Davignon, B. Diab, G. Falmagne, B.A. Fontana Santos Alves, S. Ghosh, R. Granier de Cassagnac, A. Hakimi, B. Harikrishnan, G. Liu, J. Motta, M. Nguyen, C. Ochando, L. Portales, J. Rembser, R. Salerno, U. Sarkar, J.B. Sauvan, Y. Sirois, A. Tarabini, E. Vernazza, A. Zabi, A. Zghiche

**Université de Strasbourg, CNRS, IPHC UMR 7178, Strasbourg, France**
J.-L. Agram[16], J. Andrea, D. Apparu, D. Bloch, G. Bourgatte, J.-M. Brom, E.C. Chabert, C. Collard, D. Darej, U. Goerlach, C. Grimault, A.-C. Le Bihan, P. Van Hove

**Institut de Physique des 2 Infinis de Lyon (IP2I), Villeurbanne, France**
S. Beauceron, C. Bernet, B. Blancon, G. Boudoul, A. Carle, N. Chanon, J. Choi, D. Contardo, P. Depasse, C. Dozen[17], H. El Mamouni, J. Fay, S. Gascon, M. Gouzevitch, G. Grenier, B. Ille, I.B. Laktineh, M. Lethuillier, L. Mirabito, S. Perries, V. Sordini, L. Torterotot, M. Vander Donckt, P. Verdier, S. Viret

**Georgian Technical University, Tbilisi, Georgia**
G. Adamov, I. Lomidze, Z. Tsamalaidze[12]

**RWTH Aachen University, I. Physikalisches Institut, Aachen, Germany**
V. Botta, L. Feld, K. Klein, M. Lipinski, D. Meuser, A. Pauls, N. Röwert, M. Teroerde

**RWTH Aachen University, III. Physikalisches Institut A, Aachen, Germany**
S. Diekmann, A. Dodonova, N. Eich, D. Eliseev, M. Erdmann, P. Fackeldey, D. Fasanella, B. Fischer, T. Hebbeker, K. Hoepfner, F. Ivone, M.y. Lee, L. Mastrolorenzo, M. Merschmeyer, A. Meyer, S. Mondal, S. Mukherjee, D. Noll, A. Novak, F. Nowotny, A. Pozdnyakov, Y. Rath, W. Redjeb, H. Reithler, A. Schmidt, S.C. Schuler, A. Sharma, L. Vigilante, S. Wiedenbeck, S. Zaleski

**RWTH Aachen University, III. Physikalisches Institut B, Aachen, Germany**
C. Dziwok, G. Flügge, W. Haj Ahmad[18], O. Hlushchenko, T. Kress, A. Nowack, O. Pooth, A. Stahl[19], T. Ziemons, A. Zotz

**Deutsches Elektronen-Synchrotron, Hamburg, Germany**
H. Aarup Petersen, M. Aldaya Martin, P. Asmuss, S. Baxter, M. Bayatmakou, O. Behnke, A. Bermúdez Martínez, S. Bhattacharya, A.A. Bin Anuar, F. Blekman[20], K. Borras[21], D. Brunner, A. Campbell, A. Cardini, C. Cheng, F. Colombina, S. Consuegra Rodríguez, G. Correia Silva, M. De Silva, L. Didukh, G. Eckerlin, D. Eckstein, L.I. Estevez Banos, O. Filatov, E. Gallo[20], A. Geiser, A. Giraldi, G. Greau, A. Grohsjean, V. Guglielmi, M. Guthoff, A. Jafari[22], N.Z. Jomhari, B. Kaech, A. Kasem[21], M. Kasemann, H. Kaveh, C. Kleinwort, R. Kogler, M. Komm, D. Krücker, W. Lange, D. Leyva Pernia,

K. Lipka, W. Lohmann[23], R. Mankel, I.-A. Melzer-Pellmann, M. Mendizabal Morentin, J. Metwally, A.B. Meyer, G. Milella, M. Mormile, A. Mussgiller, A. Nürnberg, Y. Otarid, D. Pérez Adán, A. Raspereza, B. Ribeiro Lopes, J. Rübenach, A. Saggio, A. Saibel, M. Savitskyi, M. Scham[24,21], V. Scheurer, S. Schnake[21], P. Schütze, C. Schwanenberger[20], M. Shchedrolosiev, R.E. Sosa Ricardo, D. Stafford, N. Tonon[†], M. Van De Klundert, F. Vazzoler, A. Ventura Barroso, R. Walsh, D. Walter, Q. Wang, Y. Wen, K. Wichmann, L. Wiens[21], C. Wissing, S. Wuchterl, Y. Yang, A. Zimermmane Castro Santos

**University of Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany**

R. Aggleton, A. Albrecht, S. Albrecht, M. Antonello, S. Bein, L. Benato, M. Bonanomi, P. Connor, K. De Leo, M. Eich, K. El Morabit, F. Feindt, A. Fröhlich, C. Garbers, E. Garutti, M. Hajheidari, J. Haller, A. Hinzmann, H.R. Jabusch, G. Kasieczka, R. Klanner, W. Korcari, T. Kramer, V. Kutzner, J. Lange, A. Lobanov, C. Matthies, A. Mehta, L. Moureaux, M. Mrowietz, A. Nigamova, Y. Nissan, A. Paasch, K.J. Pena Rodriguez, M. Rieger, O. Rieger, P. Schleper, M. Schröder, J. Schwandt, H. Stadie, G. Steinbrück, A. Tews, M. Wolf

**Karlsruher Institut fuer Technologie, Karlsruhe, Germany**

J. Bechtel, S. Brommer, M. Burkart, E. Butz, R. Caspart, T. Chwalek, A. Dierlamm, A. Droll, N. Faltermann, M. Giffels, J.O. Gosewisch, A. Gottmann, F. Hartmann[19], M. Horzela, U. Husemann, P. Keicher, M. Klute, R. Koppenhöfer, S. Maier, S. Mitra, Th. Müller, M. Neukum, G. Quast, K. Rabbertz, J. Rauser, D. Savoiu, M. Schnepf, D. Seith, I. Shvetsov, H.J. Simonis, N. Trevisani, R. Ulrich, J. van der Linden, R.F. Von Cube, M. Wassmer, M. Weber, S. Wieland, R. Wolf, S. Wozniewski, S. Wunsch

**Institute of Nuclear and Particle Physics (INPP), NCSR Demokritos, Aghia Paraskevi, Greece**

G. Anagnostou, P. Assiouras, G. Daskalakis, A. Kyriakis, A. Stakia

**National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens, Greece**

M. Diamantopoulou, D. Karasavvas, P. Kontaxakis, A. Manousakis-Katsikakis, A. Panagiotou, I. Papavergou, N. Saoulidou, K. Theofilatos, E. Tziaferi, K. Vellidis, E. Vourliotis, I. Zisopoulos

**National Technical University of Athens, Athens, Greece**

G. Bakas, T. Chatzistavrou, K. Kousouris, I. Papakrivopoulos, G. Tsipolitis, A. Zacharopoulou

**University of Ioánnina, Ioánnina, Greece**

K. Adamidis, I. Bestintzanos, I. Evangelou, C. Foudas, P. Gianneios, C. Kamtsikis, P. Katsoulis, P. Kokkas, P.G. Kosmoglou Kioseoglou, N. Manthos, I. Papadopoulos, J. Strologas

**MTA-ELTE Lendület CMS Particle and Nuclear Physics Group, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary**

M. Csanád, K. Farkas, M.M.A. Gadallah[25], S. Lökös[26], P. Major, K. Mandal, G. Pásztor, A.J. Rádl[27], O. Surányi, G.I. Veres

**Wigner Research Centre for Physics, Budapest, Hungary**
M. Bartók[28], G. Bencze, C. Hajdu, D. Horvath[29,30], F. Sikler, V. Veszpremi

**Institute of Nuclear Research ATOMKI, Debrecen, Hungary**
N. Beni, S. Czellar, J. Karancsi[28], J. Molnar, Z. Szillasi, D. Teyssier

**Institute of Physics, University of Debrecen, Debrecen, Hungary**
P. Raics, B. Ujvari[31]

**Karoly Robert Campus, MATE Institute of Technology, Gyongyos, Hungary**
T. Csorgo[27], T. Novak

**Panjab University, Chandigarh, India**
J. Babbar, S. Bansal, S.B. Beri, V. Bhatnagar, G. Chaudhary, S. Chauhan, N. Dhingra[32], R. Gupta, A. Kaur, A. Kaur, H. Kaur, M. Kaur, S. Kumar, P. Kumari, M. Meena, K. Sandeep, T. Sheokand, J.B. Singh[33], A. Singla, A. K. Virdi

**University of Delhi, Delhi, India**
A. Ahmed, A. Bhardwaj, B.C. Choudhary, M. Gola, S. Keshri, A. Kumar, M. Naimuddin, P. Priyanka, K. Ranjan, S. Saumya, A. Shah

**Saha Institute of Nuclear Physics, HBNI, Kolkata, India**
S. Baradia, S. Barman[34], S. Bhattacharya, D. Bhowmik, S. Dutta, S. Dutta, B. Gomber[35], M. Maity[34], P. Palit, P.K. Rout, G. Saha, B. Sahu, S. Sarkar

**Indian Institute of Technology Madras, Madras, India**
P.K. Behera, S.C. Behera, P. Kalbhor, J.R. Komaragiri[36], D. Kumar[36], A. Muhammad, L. Panwar[36], R. Pradhan, P.R. Pujahari, A. Sharma, A.K. Sikdar, P.C. Tiwari[36], S. Verma

**Bhabha Atomic Research Centre, Mumbai, India**
K. Naskar[37]

**Tata Institute of Fundamental Research-A, Mumbai, India**
T. Aziz, I. Das, S. Dugad, M. Kumar, G.B. Mohanty, P. Suryadevara

**Tata Institute of Fundamental Research-B, Mumbai, India**
S. Banerjee, R. Chudasama, M. Guchait, S. Karmakar, S. Kumar, G. Majumder, K. Mazumdar, S. Mukherjee, A. Thachayath

**National Institute of Science Education and Research, An OCC of Homi Bhabha National Institute, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India**
S. Bahinipati[38], A.K. Das, C. Kar, P. Mal, T. Mishra, V.K. Muraleedharan Nair Bindhu[39], A. Nayak[39], P. Saha, N. Sur, S.K. Swain, D. Vats[39]

**Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IISER), Pune, India**
A. Alpana, S. Dube, B. Kansal, A. Laha, S. Pandey, A. Rastogi, S. Sharma



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**Isfahan University of Technology, Isfahan, Iran**
H. Bakhshiansohi[40,41], E. Khazaie[41], M. Zeinali[42]

**Institute for Research in Fundamental Sciences (IPM), Tehran, Iran**
S. Chenarani[43], S.M. Etesami, M. Khakzad, M. Mohammadi Najafabadi

**University College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland**
M. Grunewald

**INFN Sezione di Bari[a], Università di Bari[b], Politecnico di Bari[c], Bari, Italy**
M. Abbrescia[a,b], R. Aly[a,b,44], C. Aruta[a,b], A. Colaleo[a], D. Creanza[a,c], N. De Filippis[a,c], M. De Palma[a,b], A. Di Florio[a,b], W. Elmetenawee[a,b], F. Errico[a,b], L. Fiore[a], G. Iaselli[a,c], M. Ince[a,b], G. Maggi[a,c], M. Maggi[a], I. Margjeka[a,b], V. Mastrapasqua[a,b], S. My[a,b], S. Nuzzo[a,b], A. Pellecchia[a,b], A. Pompili[a,b], G. Pugliese[a,c], R. Radogna[a], D. Ramos[a], A. Ranieri[a], G. Selvaggi[a,b], L. Silvestris[a], F.M. Simone[a,b], Ü. Sözbilir[a], A. Stamerra[a], R. Venditti[a], P. Verwilligen[a]

**INFN Sezione di Bologna[a], Università di Bologna[b], Bologna, Italy**
G. Abbiendi[a], C. Battilana[a,b], D. Bonacorsi[a,b], L. Borgonovi[a], L. Brigliadori[a], R. Campanini[a,b], P. Capiluppi[a,b], A. Castro[a,b], F.R. Cavallo[a], M. Cuffiani[a,b], G.M. Dallavalle[a], T. Diotalevi[a,b], F. Fabbri[a], A. Fanfani[a,b], P. Giacomelli[a], L. Giommi[a,b], C. Grandi[a], L. Guiducci[a,b], S. Lo Meo[a,45], L. Lunerti[a,b], S. Marcellini[a], G. Masetti[a], F.L. Navarria[a,b], A. Perrotta[a], F. Primavera[a,b], A.M. Rossi[a,b], T. Rovelli[a,b], G.P. Siroli[a,b]

**INFN Sezione di Catania[a], Università di Catania[b], Catania, Italy**
S. Costa[a,b,46], A. Di Mattia[a], R. Potenza[a,b], A. Tricomi[a,b,46], C. Tuve[a,b]

**INFN Sezione di Firenze[a], Università di Firenze[b], Firenze, Italy**
G. Barbagli[a], B. Camaiani[a,b], A. Cassese[a], R. Ceccarelli[a,b], V. Ciulli[a,b], C. Civinini[a], R. D'Alessandro[a,b], E. Focardi[a,b], G. Latino[a,b], P. Lenzi[a,b], M. Lizzo[a,b], M. Meschini[a], S. Paoletti[a], R. Seidita[a,b], G. Sguazzoni[a], L. Viliani[a]

**INFN Laboratori Nazionali di Frascati, Frascati, Italy**
L. Benussi, S. Bianco, S. Meola[19], D. Piccolo

**INFN Sezione di Genova[a], Università di Genova[b], Genova, Italy**
F. Ferro[a], R. Mulargia[a], E. Robutti[a], S. Tosi[a,b]

**INFN Sezione di Milano-Bicocca[a], Università di Milano-Bicocca[b], Milano, Italy**
A. Benaglia[a], G. Boldrini[a], F. Brivio[a,b], F. Cetorelli[a,b], F. De Guio[a,b], M.E. Dinardo[a,b], P. Dini[a], S. Gennai[a], A. Ghezzi[a,b], P. Govoni[a,b], L. Guzzi[a,b], M.T. Lucchini[a,b], M. Malberti[a], S. Malvezzi[a], A. Massironi[a], D. Menasce[a], L. Moroni[a], M. Paganoni[a,b], D. Pedrini[a], B.S. Pinolini[a], S. Ragazzi[a,b], N. Redaelli[a], T. Tabarelli de Fatis[a,b], D. Zuolo[a,b]



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**INFN Sezione di Napoli[a], Università di Napoli 'Federico II'[b], Napoli, Italy; Università della Basilicata[c], Potenza, Italy; Università G. Marconi[d], Roma, Italy**
S. Buontempo[a], F. Carnevali[a,b], N. Cavallo[a,c], A. De Iorio[a,b], F. Fabozzi[a,c], A.O.M. Iorio[a,b], L. Lista[a,b,47], P. Paolucci[a,19], B. Rossi[a], C. Sciacca[a,b]

**INFN Sezione di Padova[a], Università di Padova[b], Padova, Italy; Università di Trento[c], Trento, Italy**
P. Azzi[a], N. Bacchetta[a,48], M. Biasotto[a,49], P. Bortignon[a], A. Bragagnolo[a,b], R. Carlin[a,b], P. Checchia[a], L. Ciano[a], T. Dorigo[a], S. Fantinel[a], U. Gasparini[a,b], G. Grosso[a], L. Layer[a,50], E. Lusiani[a], M. Margoni[a,b], A.T. Meneguzzo[a,b], J. Pazzini[a,b], P. Ronchese[a,b], R. Rossin[a,b], F. Simonetto[a,b], G. Strong[a], M. Tosi[a,b], H. Yarar[a,b], M. Zanetti[a,b], P. Zotto[a,b], A. Zucchetta[a,b]

**INFN Sezione di Pavia[a], Università di Pavia[b], Pavia, Italy**
S. Abu Zeid[a,51], C. Aimè[a,b], A. Braghieri[a], S. Calzaferri[a,b], D. Fiorina[a,b], P. Montagna[a,b], V. Re[a], C. Riccardi[a,b], P. Salvini[a], I. Vai[a], P. Vitulo[a,b]

**INFN Sezione di Perugia[a], Università di Perugia[b], Perugia, Italy**
P. Asenov[a,52], G.M. Bilei[a], D. Ciangottini[a,b], L. Fanò[a,b], M. Magherini[a,b], G. Mantovani[a,b], V. Mariani[a,b], M. Menichelli[a], F. Moscatelli[a,52], A. Piccinelli[a,b], M. Presilla[a,b], A. Rossi[a,b], A. Santocchia[a,b], D. Spiga[a], T. Tedeschi[a,b]

**INFN Sezione di Pisa[a], Università di Pisa[b], Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa[c], Pisa, Italy; Università di Siena[d], Siena, Italy**
P. Azzurri[a], G. Bagliesi[a], V. Bertacchi[a,c], R. Bhattacharya[a], L. Bianchini[a,b], T. Boccali[a], D. Bruschini[a,c], R. Castaldi[a], M.A. Ciocci[a,b], V. D'Amante[a,d], R. Dell'Orso[a], M.R. Di Domenico[a,d], S. Donato[a], A. Giassi[a], F. Ligabue[a,c], E. Manca[a,c], G. Mandorli[a,c], D. Matos Figueiredo[a], A. Messineo[a,b], M. Musich[a,b], F. Palla[a], S. Parolia[a,b], G. Ramirez-Sanchez[a,c], A. Rizzi[a,b], G. Rolandi[a,c], S. Roy Chowdhury[a,c], T. Sarkar[a,34], N. Shafiei[a,b], P. Spagnolo[a], R. Tenchini[a], G. Tonelli[a,b], A. Venturi[a], P.G. Verdini[a]

**INFN Sezione di Roma[a], Sapienza Università di Roma[b], Roma, Italy**
P. Barria[a], M. Campana[a,b], F. Cavallari[a], D. Del Re[a,b], E. Di Marco[a], M. Diemoz[a], E. Longo[a,b], P. Meridiani[a], G. Organtini[a,b], F. Pandolfi[a], R. Paramatti[a,b], C. Quaranta[a,b], S. Rahatlou[a,b], C. Rovelli[a], F. Santanastasio[a,b], L. Soffi[a], R. Tramontano[a,b]

**INFN Sezione di Torino[a], Università di Torino[b], Torino, Italy; Università del Piemonte Orientale[c], Novara, Italy**
N. Amapane[a,b], R. Arcidiacono[a,c], S. Argiro[a,b], M. Arneodo[a,c], N. Bartosik[a], R. Bellan[a,b], A. Bellora[a,b], J. Berenguer Antequera[a,b], C. Biino[a], N. Cartiglia[a], M. Costa[a,b], R. Covarelli[a,b], N. Demaria[a], M. Grippo[a,b], B. Kiani[a,b], F. Legger[a], C. Mariotti[a], S. Maselli[a], A. Mecca[a,b], E. Migliore[a,b], E. Monteil[a,b], M. Monteno[a], M.M. Obertino[a,b], G. Ortona[a], L. Pacher[a,b], N. Pastrone[a], M. Pelliccioni[a], M. Ruspa[a,c],

K. Shchelina[a], F. Siviero[a,b], V. Sola[a], A. Solano[a,b], D. Soldi[a,b], A. Staiano[a], M. Tornago[a,b], D. Trocino[a], G. Umoret[a,b], A. Vagnerini[a,b]

**INFN Sezione di Trieste[a], Università di Trieste[b], Trieste, Italy**
S. Belforte[a], V. Candelise[a,b], M. Casarsa[a], F. Cossutti[a], A. Da Rold[a,b], G. Della Ricca[a,b], G. Sorrentino[a,b]

**Kyungpook National University, Daegu, Korea**
S. Dogra, C. Huh, B. Kim, D.H. Kim, G.N. Kim, J. Kim, J. Lee, S.W. Lee, C.S. Moon, Y.D. Oh, S.I. Pak, M.S. Ryu, S. Sekmen, Y.C. Yang

**Chonnam National University, Institute for Universe and Elementary Particles, Kwangju, Korea**
H. Kim, D.H. Moon

**Hanyang University, Seoul, Korea**
E. Asilar, T.J. Kim, J. Park

**Korea University, Seoul, Korea**
S. Cho, S. Choi, S. Han, B. Hong, K. Lee, K.S. Lee, J. Lim, J. Park, S.K. Park, J. Yoo

**Kyung Hee University, Department of Physics, Seoul, Korea**
J. Goh

**Sejong University, Seoul, Korea**
H. S. Kim, Y. Kim, S. Lee

**Seoul National University, Seoul, Korea**
J. Almond, J.H. Bhyun, J. Choi, S. Jeon, W. Jun, J. Kim, J. Kim, J.S. Kim, S. Ko, H. Kwon, H. Lee, J. Lee, S. Lee, B.H. Oh, M. Oh, S.B. Oh, H. Seo, U.K. Yang, I. Yoon

**University of Seoul, Seoul, Korea**
W. Jang, D.Y. Kang, Y. Kang, D. Kim, S. Kim, B. Ko, J.S.H. Lee, Y. Lee, J.A. Merlin, I.C. Park, Y. Roh, D. Song, I.J. Watson, S. Yang

**Yonsei University, Department of Physics, Seoul, Korea**
S. Ha, H.D. Yoo

**Sungkyunkwan University, Suwon, Korea**
M. Choi, M.R. Kim, H. Lee, Y. Lee, Y. Lee, I. Yu

**College of Engineering and Technology, American University of the Middle East (AUM), Dasman, Kuwait**
T. Beyrouthy, Y. Maghrbi

**Riga Technical University, Riga, Latvia**
K. Dreimanis, A. Gaile, A. Potrebko, T. Torims, V. Veckalns[53]

**Vilnius University, Vilnius, Lithuania**
M. Ambrozas, A. Carvalho Antunes De Oliveira, A. Juodagalvis, A. Rinkevicius, G. Tamulaitis

**National Centre for Particle Physics, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia**
N. Bin Norjoharuddeen, S.Y. Hoh[54], I. Yusuff[54], Z. Zolkapli

**Universidad de Sonora (UNISON), Hermosillo, Mexico**
J.F. Benitez, A. Castaneda Hernandez, H.A. Encinas Acosta, L.G. Gallegos Maríñez, M. León Coello, J.A. Murillo Quijada, A. Sehrawat, L. Valencia Palomo

**Centro de Investigacion y de Estudios Avanzados del IPN, Mexico City, Mexico**
G. Ayala, H. Castilla-Valdez, I. Heredia-De La Cruz[55], R. Lopez-Fernandez, C.A. Mondragon Herrera, D.A. Perez Navarro, A. Sánchez Hernández

**Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico City, Mexico**
C. Oropeza Barrera, F. Vazquez Valencia

**Benemerita Universidad Autonoma de Puebla, Puebla, Mexico**
I. Pedraza, H.A. Salazar Ibarguen, C. Uribe Estrada

**University of Montenegro, Podgorica, Montenegro**
I. Bubanja, J. Mijuskovic[56], N. Raicevic

**National Centre for Physics, Quaid-I-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan**
A. Ahmad, M.I. Asghar, A. Awais, M.I.M. Awan, M. Gul, H.R. Hoorani, W.A. Khan, M. Shoaib, M. Waqas

**National Centre for Nuclear Research, Swierk, Poland**
H. Bialkowska, M. Bluj, B. Boimska, M. Górski, M. Kazana, M. Szleper, P. Zalewski

**Institute of Experimental Physics, Faculty of Physics, University of Warsaw, Warsaw, Poland**
K. Bunkowski, K. Doroba, A. Kalinowski, M. Konecki, J. Krolikowski

**Laboratório de Instrumentação e Física Experimental de Partículas, Lisboa, Portugal**
M. Araujo, P. Bargassa, D. Bastos, A. Boletti, P. Faccioli, M. Gallinaro, J. Hollar, N. Leonardo, T. Niknejad, M. Pisano, J. Seixas, O. Toldaiev, J. Varela

**VINCA Institute of Nuclear Sciences, University of Belgrade, Belgrade, Serbia**
P. Adzic[57], M. Dordevic, P. Milenovic, J. Milosevic

**VINCA Institute of Nuclear Sciences, University of Belgrade, Belgrade, Serbia**
V. Rekovic

**Centro de Investigaciones Energéticas Medioambientales y Tecnológicas (CIEMAT), Madrid, Spain**

M. Aguilar-Benitez, J. Alcaraz Maestre, A. Álvarez Fernández, M. Barrio Luna, Cristina F. Bedoya, C.A. Carrillo Montoya, M. Cepeda, M. Cerrada, N. Colino, B. De La Cruz, A. Delgado Peris, D. Fernández Del Val, J.P. Fernández Ramos, J. Flix, M.C. Fouz, O. Gonzalez Lopez, S. Goy Lopez, J.M. Hernandez, M.I. Josa, J. León Holgado, D. Moran, C. Perez Dengra, A. Pérez-Calero Yzquierdo, J. Puerta Pelayo, I. Redondo, D.D. Redondo Ferrero, L. Romero, S. Sánchez Navas, J. Sastre, L. Urda Gómez, J. Vazquez Escobar, C. Willmott

**Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Madrid, Spain**

J.F. de Trocóniz

**Universidad de Oviedo, Instituto Universitario de Ciencias y Tecnologías Espaciales de Asturias (ICTEA), Oviedo, Spain**

B. Alvarez Gonzalez, J. Cuevas, J. Fernandez Menendez, S. Folgueras, I. Gonzalez Caballero, J.R. González Fernández, E. Palencia Cortezon, C. Ramón Álvarez, V. Rodríguez Bouza, A. Soto Rodríguez, A. Trapote, C. Vico Villalba

**Instituto de Física de Cantabria (IFCA), CSIC-Universidad de Cantabria, Santander, Spain**

J.A. Brochero Cifuentes, I.J. Cabrillo, A. Calderon, J. Duarte Campderros, M. Fernandez, C. Fernandez Madrazo, A. García Alonso, G. Gomez, C. Lasaosa García, C. Martinez Rivero, P. Martinez Ruiz del Arbol, F. Matorras, P. Matorras Cuevas, J. Piedra Gomez, C. Prieels, A. Ruiz-Jimeno, L. Scodellaro, I. Vila, J.M. Vizan Garcia

**University of Colombo, Colombo, Sri Lanka**

M.K. Jayananda, B. Kailasapathy[58], D.U.J. Sonnadara, D.D.C. Wickramarathna

**University of Ruhuna, Department of Physics, Matara, Sri Lanka**

W.G.D. Dharmaratna[59], K. Liyanage, N. Perera, N. Wickramage

**CERN, European Organization for Nuclear Research, Geneva, Switzerland**

D. Abbaneo, J. Alimena, E. Auffray, G. Auzinger, P. Baillon[†], D. Barney, J. Bendavid, M. Bianco, B. Bilin, A. Bocci, E. Brondolin, C. Caillol, T. Camporesi, G. Cerminara, N. Chernyavskaya, S.S. Chhibra, S. Choudhury, M. Cipriani, L. Cristella, D. d'Enterria, A. Dabrowski, A. David, A. De Roeck, M.M. Defranchis, M. Dobson, M. Dünser, N. Dupont, A. Elliott-Peisert, F. Fallavollita[60], A. Florent, L. Forthomme, G. Franzoni, W. Funk, S. Ghosh, D. Gigi, K. Gill, F. Glege, L. Gouskos, E. Govorkova, M. Haranko, J. Hegeman, V. Innocente, T. James, P. Janot, J. Kieseler, N. Kratochwil, S. Laurila, P. Lecoq, E. Leutgeb, A. Lintuluoto, C. Lourenço, B. Maier, L. Malgeri, M. Mannelli, A.C. Marini, F. Meijers, S. Mersi, E. Meschi, F. Moortgat, M. Mulders, S. Orfanelli, L. Orsini, F. Pantaleo, E. Perez, M. Peruzzi, A. Petrilli, G. Petrucciani, A. Pfeiffer, M. Pierini, D. Piparo, M. Pitt, H. Qu, T. Quast, D. Rabady, A. Racz, G. Reales Gutiérrez, M. Rovere, H. Sakulin,

J. Salfeld-Nebgen, S. Scarfi, M. Selvaggi, A. Sharma, P. Silva, P. Sphicas[61], A.G. Stahl Leiton, S. Summers, K. Tatar, V.R. Tavolaro, D. Treille, P. Tropea, A. Tsirou, J. Wanczyk[62], K.A. Wozniak, W.D. Zeuner

**Paul Scherrer Institut, Villigen, Switzerland**

L. Caminada[63], A. Ebrahimi, W. Erdmann, R. Horisberger, Q. Ingram, H.C. Kaestli, D. Kotlinski, C. Lange, M. Missiroli[63], L. Noehte[63], T. Rohe

**ETH Zurich — Institute for Particle Physics and Astrophysics (IPA), Zurich, Switzerland**

T.K. Aarrestad, K. Androsov[62], M. Backhaus, P. Berger, A. Calandri, K. Datta, A. De Cosa, G. Dissertori, M. Dittmar, M. Donegà, F. Eble, M. Galli, K. Gedia, F. Glessgen, T.A. Gómez Espinosa, C. Grab, D. Hits, W. Lustermann, A.-M. Lyon, R.A. Manzoni, L. Marchese, C. Martin Perez, A. Mascellani[62], M.T. Meinhard, F. Nessi-Tedaldi, J. Niedziela, F. Pauss, V. Perovic, S. Pigazzini, M.G. Ratti, M. Reichmann, C. Reissel, T. Reitenspiess, B. Ristic, F. Riti, D. Ruini, D.A. Sanz Becerra, J. Steggemann[62], D. Valsecchi[19], R. Wallny

**Universität Zürich, Zurich, Switzerland**

C. Amsler[64], P. Bärtschi, C. Botta, D. Brzhechko, M.F. Canelli, K. Cormier, A. De Wit, R. Del Burgo, J.K. Heikkilä, M. Huwiler, W. Jin, A. Jofrehei, B. Kilminster, S. Leontsinis, S.P. Liechti, A. Macchiolo, P. Meiring, V.M. Mikuni, U. Molinatti, I. Neutelings, A. Reimers, P. Robmann, S. Sanchez Cruz, K. Schweiger, M. Senger, Y. Takahashi

**National Central University, Chung-Li, Taiwan**

C. Adloff[65], C.M. Kuo, W. Lin, S.S. Yu

**National Taiwan University (NTU), Taipei, Taiwan**

L. Ceard, Y. Chao, K.F. Chen, P.s. Chen, H. Cheng, W.-S. Hou, Y.y. Li, R.-S. Lu, E. Paganis, A. Psallidas, A. Steen, H.y. Wu, E. Yazgan, P.r. Yu

**High Energy Physics Research Unit, Department of Physics, Faculty of Science, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand**

C. Asawatangtrakuldee, N. Srimanobhas

**Çukurova University, Physics Department, Science and Art Faculty, Adana, Turkey**

D. Agyel, F. Boran, Z.S. Demiroglu, F. Dolek, I. Dumanoglu[66], E. Eskut, Y. Guler[67], E. Gurpinar Guler[67], C. Isik, O. Kara, A. Kayis Topaksu, U. Kiminsu, G. Onengut, K. Ozdemir[68], A. Polatoz, A.E. Simsek, B. Tali[69], U.G. Tok, S. Turkcapar, E. Uslan, I.S. Zorbakir

**Middle East Technical University, Physics Department, Ankara, Turkey**

G. Karapinar[70], K. Ocalan[71], M. Yalvac[72]

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**Bogazici University, Istanbul, Turkey**
B. Akgun, I.O. Atakisi, E. Gülmez, M. Kaya[73], O. Kaya[74], Ö. Özçelik, S. Tekten[75]

**Istanbul Technical University, Istanbul, Turkey**
A. Cakir, K. Cankocak[66], Y. Komurcu, S. Sen[66]

**Istanbul University, Istanbul, Turkey**
O. Aydilek, S. Cerci[69], B. Hacisahinoglu, I. Hos[76], B. Isildak[77], C. Simsek, D. Sunar Cerci[69]

**Institute for Scintillation Materials of National Academy of Science of Ukraine, Kharkiv, Ukraine**
B. Grynyov

**National Science Centre, Kharkiv Institute of Physics and Technology, Kharkiv, Ukraine**
L. Levchuk

**University of Bristol, Bristol, United Kingdom**
D. Anthony, E. Bhal, J.J. Brooke, A. Bundock, E. Clement, D. Cussans, H. Flacher, M. Glowacki, J. Goldstein, G.P. Heath, H.F. Heath, L. Kreczko, B. Krikler, S. Paramesvaran, S. Seif El Nasr-Storey, V.J. Smith, N. Stylianou[78], K. Walkingshaw Pass, R. White

**Rutherford Appleton Laboratory, Didcot, United Kingdom**
A.H. Ball, K.W. Bell, A. Belyaev[79], C. Brew, R.M. Brown, D.J.A. Cockerill, C. Cooke, K.V. Ellis, K. Harder, S. Harper, M.-L. Holmberg[80], J. Linacre, K. Manolopoulos, D.M. Newbold, E. Olaiya, D. Petyt, T. Reis, G. Salvi, T. Schuh, C.H. Shepherd-Themistocleous, I.R. Tomalin, T. Williams

**Imperial College, London, United Kingdom**
R. Bainbridge, P. Bloch, S. Bonomally, J. Borg, S. Breeze, C.E. Brown, O. Buchmuller, V. Cacchio, V. Cepaitis, G.S. Chahal[81], D. Colling, J.S. Dancu, P. Dauncey, G. Davies, J. Davies, M. Della Negra, S. Fayer, G. Fedi, G. Hall, M.H. Hassanshahi, A. Howard, G. Iles, J. Langford, L. Lyons, A.-M. Magnan, S. Malik, A. Martelli, M. Mieskolainen, D.G. Monk, J. Nash[82], M. Pesaresi, B.C. Radburn-Smith, D.M. Raymond, A. Richards, A. Rose, E. Scott, C. Seez, A. Shtipliyski, R. Shukla, A. Tapper, K. Uchida, G.P. Uttley, L.H. Vage, T. Virdee[19], M. Vojinovic, N. Wardle, S.N. Webb, D. Winterbottom

**Brunel University, Uxbridge, United Kingdom**
K. Coldham, J.E. Cole, A. Khan, P. Kyberd, I.D. Reid

**Baylor University, Waco, Texas, U.S.A.**
S. Abdullin, A. Brinkerhoff, B. Caraway, J. Dittmann, K. Hatakeyama, A.R. Kanuganti, B. McMaster, M. Saunders, S. Sawant, C. Sutantawibul, J. Wilson

**Catholic University of America, Washington, DC, U.S.A.**
R. Bartek, A. Dominguez, R. Uniyal, A.M. Vargas Hernandez

**The University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, U.S.A.**
A. Buccilli, S.I. Cooper, D. Di Croce, S.V. Gleyzer, C. Henderson, C.U. Perez, P. Rumerio[83], C. West

**Boston University, Boston, Massachusetts, U.S.A.**
A. Akpinar, A. Albert, D. Arcaro, C. Cosby, Z. Demiragli, C. Erice, E. Fontanesi, D. Gastler, S. May, J. Rohlf, K. Salyer, D. Sperka, D. Spitzbart, I. Suarez, A. Tsatsos, S. Yuan

**Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, U.S.A.**
G. Benelli, B. Burkle, X. Coubez[21], D. Cutts, M. Hadley, U. Heintz, J.M. Hogan[84], T. Kwon, G. Landsberg, K.T. Lau, D. Li, J. Luo, M. Narain, N. Pervan, S. Sagir[85], F. Simpson, E. Usai, W.Y. Wong, X. Yan, D. Yu, W. Zhang

**University of California, Davis, Davis, California, U.S.A.**
J. Bonilla, C. Brainerd, R. Breedon, M. Calderon De La Barca Sanchez, M. Chertok, J. Conway, P.T. Cox, R. Erbacher, G. Haza, F. Jensen, O. Kukral, G. Mocellin, M. Mulhearn, D. Pellett, B. Regnery, D. Taylor, Y. Yao, F. Zhang

**University of California, Los Angeles, California, U.S.A.**
M. Bachtis, R. Cousins, A. Datta, D. Hamilton, J. Hauser, M. Ignatenko, M.A. Iqbal, T. Lam, W.A. Nash, S. Regnard, D. Saltzberg, B. Stone, V. Valuev

**University of California, Riverside, Riverside, California, U.S.A.**
Y. Chen, R. Clare, J.W. Gary, M. Gordon, G. Hanson, G. Karapostoli, O.R. Long, N. Manganelli, W. Si, S. Wimpenny

**University of California, San Diego, La Jolla, California, U.S.A.**
J.G. Branson, P. Chang, S. Cittolin, S. Cooperstein, D. Diaz, J. Duarte, R. Gerosa, L. Giannini, J. Guiang, R. Kansal, V. Krutelyov, R. Lee, J. Letts, M. Masciovecchio, F. Mokhtar, M. Pieri, B.V. Sathia Narayanan, V. Sharma, M. Tadel, F. Würthwein, Y. Xiang, A. Yagil

**University of California, Santa Barbara — Department of Physics, Santa Barbara, California, U.S.A.**
N. Amin, C. Campagnari, M. Citron, G. Collura, A. Dorsett, V. Dutta, J. Incandela, M. Kilpatrick, J. Kim, A.J. Li, B. Marsh, P. Masterson, H. Mei, M. Oshiro, M. Quinnan, J. Richman, U. Sarica, R. Schmitz, F. Setti, J. Sheplock, P. Siddireddy, D. Stuart, S. Wang

**California Institute of Technology, Pasadena, California, U.S.A.**
A. Bornheim, O. Cerri, I. Dutta, J.M. Lawhorn, N. Lu, J. Mao, H.B. Newman, T. Q. Nguyen, M. Spiropulu, J.R. Vlimant, C. Wang, S. Xie, R.Y. Zhu

**Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, U.S.A.**
J. Alison, S. An, M.B. Andrews, P. Bryant, T. Ferguson, A. Harilal, C. Liu, T. Mudholkar, S. Murthy, M. Paulini, A. Roberts, A. Sanchez, W. Terrill

**University of Colorado Boulder, Boulder, Colorado, U.S.A.**
J.P. Cumalat, W.T. Ford, A. Hassani, G. Karathanasis, E. MacDonald, F. Marini, R. Patel, A. Perloff, C. Savard, N. Schonbeck, K. Stenson, K.A. Ulmer, S.R. Wagner, N. Zipper

**Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, U.S.A.**
J. Alexander, S. Bright-Thonney, X. Chen, D.J. Cranshaw, J. Fan, X. Fan, D. Gadkari, S. Hogan, J. Monroy, J.R. Patterson, D. Quach, J. Reichert, M. Reid, A. Ryd, J. Thom, P. Wittich, R. Zou

**Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory, Batavia, Illinois, U.S.A.**
M. Albrow, M. Alyari, G. Apollinari, A. Apresyan, L.A.T. Bauerdick, D. Berry, J. Berryhill, P.C. Bhat, K. Burkett, J.N. Butler, A. Canepa, G.B. Cerati, H.W.K. Cheung, F. Chlebana, K.F. Di Petrillo, J. Dickinson, V.D. Elvira, Y. Feng, J. Freeman, A. Gandrakota, Z. Gecse, L. Gray, D. Green, S. Grünendahl, O. Gutsche, R.M. Harris, R. Heller, T.C. Herwig, J. Hirschauer, L. Horyn, B. Jayatilaka, S. Jindariani, M. Johnson, U. Joshi, T. Klijnsma, B. Klima, K.H.M. Kwok, S. Lammel, D. Lincoln, R. Lipton, T. Liu, C. Madrid, K. Maeshima, C. Mantilla, D. Mason, P. McBride, P. Merkel, S. Mrenna, S. Nahn, J. Ngadiuba, D. Noonan, V. Papadimitriou, N. Pastika, K. Pedro, C. Pena[86], F. Ravera, A. Reinsvold Hall[87], L. Ristori, E. Sexton-Kennedy, N. Smith, A. Soha, L. Spiegel, J. Strait, L. Taylor, S. Tkaczyk, N.V. Tran, L. Uplegger, E.W. Vaandering, H.A. Weber, I. Zoi

**University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida, U.S.A.**
P. Avery, D. Bourilkov, L. Cadamuro, V. Cherepanov, R.D. Field, D. Guerrero, M. Kim, E. Koenig, J. Konigsberg, A. Korytov, K.H. Lo, K. Matchev, N. Menendez, G. Mitselmakher, A. Muthirakalayil Madhu, N. Rawal, D. Rosenzweig, S. Rosenzweig, K. Shi, J. Wang, Z. Wu

**Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida, U.S.A.**
T. Adams, A. Askew, R. Habibullah, V. Hagopian, R. Khurana, T. Kolberg, G. Martinez, H. Prosper, C. Schiber, O. Viazlo, R. Yohay, J. Zhang

**Florida Institute of Technology, Melbourne, Florida, U.S.A.**
M.M. Baarmand, S. Butalla, T. Elkafrawy[51], M. Hohlmann, R. Kumar Verma, M. Rahmani, F. Yumiceva

**University of Illinois Chicago, Chicago, U.S.A., Chicago, U.S.A.**
M.R. Adams, H. Becerril Gonzalez, R. Cavanaugh, S. Dittmer, O. Evdokimov, C.E. Gerber, D.J. Hofman, D. S. Lemos, A.H. Merrit, C. Mills, G. Oh, T. Roy, S. Rudrabhatla, M.B. Tonjes, N. Varelas, X. Wang, Z. Ye, J. Yoo

**The University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa, U.S.A.**
M. Alhusseini, K. Dilsiz[88], L. Emediato, R.P. Gandrajula, G. Karaman, O.K. Köseyan, J.-P. Merlo, A. Mestvirishvili[89], J. Nachtman, O. Neogi, H. Ogul[90], Y. Onel, A. Penzo, C. Snyder, E. Tiras[91]

**Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland, U.S.A.**
O. Amram, B. Blumenfeld, L. Corcodilos, J. Davis, A.V. Gritsan, L. Kang, S. Kyriacou, P. Maksimovic, J. Roskes, S. Sekhar, M. Swartz, T.Á. Vámi

**The University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, U.S.A.**
A. Abreu, L.F. Alcerro Alcerro, J. Anguiano, P. Baringer, A. Bean, Z. Flowers, S. Khalil, J. King, G. Krintiras, M. Lazarovits, C. Le Mahieu, J. Marquez, M. Murray, M. Nickel, C. Rogan, R. Salvatico, S. Sanders, E. Schmitz, C. Smith, Q. Wang, G. Wilson

**Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas, U.S.A.**
B. Allmond, S. Duric, R. Gujju Gurunadha, A. Ivanov, K. Kaadze, D. Kim, Y. Maravin, T. Mitchell, A. Modak, K. Nam, J. Natoli, D. Roy

**Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, Livermore, California, U.S.A.**
F. Rebassoo, D. Wright

**University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland, U.S.A.**
E. Adams, A. Baden, O. Baron, A. Belloni, A. Bethani, S.C. Eno, N.J. Hadley, S. Jabeen, R.G. Kellogg, T. Koeth, Y. Lai, S. Lascio, A.C. Mignerey, S. Nabili, C. Palmer, C. Papageorgakis, M. Seidel, L. Wang, K. Wong

**Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts, U.S.A.**
D. Abercrombie, R. Bi, W. Busza, I.A. Cali, Y. Chen, M. D'Alfonso, J. Eysermans, C. Freer, G. Gomez-Ceballos, M. Goncharov, P. Harris, M. Hu, D. Kovalskyi, J. Krupa, Y.-J. Lee, K. Long, C. Mironov, C. Paus, D. Rankin, C. Roland, G. Roland, Z. Shi, G.S.F. Stephans, J. Wang, Z. Wang, B. Wyslouch

**University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota, U.S.A.**
R.M. Chatterjee, B. Crossman, A. Evans, J. Hiltbrand, Sh. Jain, B.M. Joshi, C. Kapsiak, M. Krohn, Y. Kubota, J. Mans, M. Revering, R. Rusack, R. Saradhy, N. Schroeder, N. Strobbe, M.A. Wadud

**University of Mississippi, Oxford, Mississippi, U.S.A.**
L.M. Cremaldi

**University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, Nebraska, U.S.A.**
K. Bloom, M. Bryson, D.R. Claes, C. Fangmeier, L. Finco, F. Golf, C. Joo, I. Kravchenko, I. Reed, J.E. Siado, G.R. Snow[†], W. Tabb, A. Wightman, F. Yan, A.G. Zecchinelli

**State University of New York at Buffalo, Buffalo, New York, U.S.A.**
G. Agarwal, H. Bandyopadhyay, L. Hay, I. Iashvili, A. Kharchilava, C. McLean, M. Morris, D. Nguyen, J. Pekkanen, S. Rappoccio, A. Williams

**Northeastern University, Boston, Massachusetts, U.S.A.**
G. Alverson, E. Barberis, Y. Haddad, Y. Han, A. Krishna, J. Li, J. Lidrych, G. Madigan, B. Marzocchi, D.M. Morse, V. Nguyen, T. Orimoto, A. Parker, L. Skinnari, A. Tishelman-Charny, T. Wamorkar, B. Wang, A. Wisecarver, D. Wood

**Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, U.S.A.**
S. Bhattacharya, J. Bueghly, Z. Chen, A. Gilbert, T. Gunter, K.A. Hahn, Y. Liu, N. Odell, M.H. Schmitt, M. Velasco

**University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana, U.S.A.**
R. Band, R. Bucci, S. Castells, M. Cremonesi, A. Das, R. Goldouzian, M. Hildreth, K. Hurtado Anampa, C. Jessop, K. Lannon, J. Lawrence, N. Loukas, L. Lutton, J. Mariano, N. Marinelli, I. Mcalister, T. McCauley, C. Mcgrady, K. Mohrman, C. Moore, Y. Musienko[12], H. Nelson, R. Ruchti, A. Townsend, M. Wayne, H. Yockey, M. Zarucki, L. Zygala

**The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, U.S.A.**
B. Bylsma, M. Carrigan, L.S. Durkin, B. Francis, C. Hill, A. Lesauvage, M. Nunez Ornelas, K. Wei, B.L. Winer, B. R. Yates

**Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey, U.S.A.**
F.M. Addesa, B. Bonham, P. Das, G. Dezoort, P. Elmer, A. Frankenthal, B. Greenberg, N. Haubrich, S. Higginbotham, A. Kalogeropoulos, G. Kopp, S. Kwan, D. Lange, D. Marlow, K. Mei, I. Ojalvo, J. Olsen, D. Stickland, C. Tully

**University of Puerto Rico, Mayaguez, Puerto Rico, U.S.A.**
S. Malik, S. Norberg

**Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana, U.S.A.**
A.S. Bakshi, V.E. Barnes, R. Chawla, S. Das, L. Gutay, M. Jones, A.W. Jung, D. Kondratyev, A.M. Koshy, M. Liu, G. Negro, N. Neumeister, G. Paspalaki, S. Piperov, A. Purohit, J.F. Schulte, M. Stojanovic[15], J. Thieman, F. Wang, R. Xiao, W. Xie

**Purdue University Northwest, Hammond, Indiana, U.S.A.**
J. Dolen, N. Parashar

**Rice University, Houston, Texas, U.S.A.**
D. Acosta, A. Baty, T. Carnahan, M. Decaro, S. Dildick, K.M. Ecklund, P.J. Fernández Manteca, S. Freed, P. Gardner, F.J.M. Geurts, A. Kumar, W. Li, B.P. Padley, R. Redjimi, J. Rotter, W. Shi, S. Yang, E. Yigitbasi, L. Zhang[92], Y. Zhang, X. Zuo

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**University of Rochester, Rochester, New York, U.S.A.**
A. Bodek, P. de Barbaro, R. Demina, J.L. Dulemba, C. Fallon, T. Ferbel, M. Galanti, A. Garcia-Bellido, O. Hindrichs, A. Khukhunaishvili, E. Ranken, R. Taus, G.P. Van Onsem

**The Rockefeller University, New York, New York, U.S.A.**
K. Goulianos

**Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, Piscataway, New Jersey, U.S.A.**
B. Chiarito, J.P. Chou, Y. Gershtein, E. Halkiadakis, A. Hart, M. Heindl, D. Jaroslawski, O. Karacheban[23], I. Laflotte, A. Lath, R. Montalvo, K. Nash, M. Osherson, S. Salur, S. Schnetzer, S. Somalwar, R. Stone, S.A. Thayil, S. Thomas, H. Wang

**University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Tennessee, U.S.A.**
H. Acharya, A.G. Delannoy, S. Fiorendi, T. Holmes, E. Nibigira, S. Spanier

**Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas, U.S.A.**
O. Bouhali[93], M. Dalchenko, A. Delgado, R. Eusebi, J. Gilmore, T. Huang, T. Kamon[94], H. Kim, S. Luo, S. Malhotra, R. Mueller, D. Overton, D. Rathjens, A. Safonov

**Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas, U.S.A.**
N. Akchurin, J. Damgov, V. Hegde, K. Lamichhane, S.W. Lee, T. Mengke, S. Muthumuni, T. Peltola, I. Volobouev, Z. Wang, A. Whitbeck

**Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee, U.S.A.**
E. Appelt, S. Greene, A. Gurrola, W. Johns, A. Melo, F. Romeo, P. Sheldon, S. Tuo, J. Velkovska, J. Viinikainen

**University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia, U.S.A.**
B. Cardwell, B. Cox, G. Cummings, J. Hakala, R. Hirosky, M. Joyce, A. Ledovskoy, A. Li, C. Neu, C.E. Perez Lara, B. Tannenwald

**Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan, U.S.A.**
P.E. Karchin, N. Poudyal

**University of Wisconsin — Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, U.S.A.**
S. Banerjee, K. Black, T. Bose, S. Dasu, I. De Bruyn, P. Everaerts, C. Galloni, H. He, M. Herndon, A. Herve, C.K. Koraka, A. Lanaro, A. Loeliger, R. Loveless, J. Madhusudanan Sreekala, A. Mallampalli, A. Mohammadi, S. Mondal, G. Parida, D. Pinna, A. Savin, V. Shang, V. Sharma, W.H. Smith, D. Teague, H.F. Tsoi, W. Vetens

**Authors affiliated with an institute or an international laboratory covered by a cooperation agreement with CERN**
S. Afanasiev, V. Andreev, Yu. Andreev, T. Aushev, M. Azarkin, A. Babaev, A. Belyaev, V. Blinov[95], E. Boos, D. Budkouski, V. Bunichev, O. Bychkova,

M. Chadeeva[95], V. Chekhovsky, A. Dermenev, T. Dimova[95], I. Dremin, M. Dubinin[86], L. Dudko, V. Epshteyn, G. Gavrilov, V. Gavrilov, S. Gninenko, V. Golovtcov, N. Golubev, I. Golutvin, I. Gorbunov, A. Gribushin,Y. Ivanov, V. Kachanov, L. Kardapoltsev[95], V. Karjavine, A. Karneyeu, V. Kim[95], M. Kirakosyan, D. Kirpichnikov, M. Kirsanov, V. Klyukhin, D. Konstantinov, V. Korenkov, A. Kozyrev[95], N. Krasnikov, E. Kuznetsova[96], A. Lanev, P. Levchenko, A. Litomin, O. Lukina, N. Lychkovskaya, V. Makarenko, A. Malakhov, V. Matveev[95], V. Murzin, A. Nikitenko[97], S. Obraztsov, V. Okhotnikov, I. Ovtin[95], V. Palichik, P. Parygin, V. Perelygin, M. Perfilov, G. Pivovarov, V. Popov, E. Popova, O. Radchenko[95], V. Rusinov, M. Savina, V. Savrin, D. Selivanova, V. Shalaev, S. Shmatov, S. Shulha, Y. Skovpen[95], S. Slabospitskii, V. Smirnov, D. Sosnov, A. Stepennov, V. Sulimov,A. Terkulov, O. Teryaev, I. Tlisova, M. Toms, A. Toropin, L. Uvarov, A. Uzunian, E. Vlasov, P. Volkov, A. Vorobyev, N. Voytishin, B.S. Yuldashev[98], A. Zarubin, I. Zhizhin, A. Zhokin

[†] *Deceased*
[1] *Also at TU Wien, Vienna, Austria*
[2] *Also at Institute of Basic and Applied Sciences, Faculty of Engineering, Arab Academy for Science, Technology and Maritime Transport, Alexandria, Egypt*
[3] *Also at Université Libre de Bruxelles, Bruxelles, Belgium*
[4] *Also at Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Campinas, Brazil*
[5] *Also at Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre, Brazil*
[6] *Also at UFMS, Nova Andradina, Brazil*
[7] *Also at The University of the State of Amazonas, Manaus, Brazil*
[8] *Also at University of Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing, China*
[9] *Also at Nanjing Normal University, Nanjing, China*
[10] *Now at The University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa, U.S.A.*
[11] *Also at University of Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing, China*
[12] *Also at an institute or an international laboratory covered by a cooperation agreement with CERN*
[13] *Now at British University in Egypt, Cairo, Egypt*
[14] *Now at Cairo University, Cairo, Egypt*
[15] *Also at Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana, U.S.A.*
[16] *Also at Université de Haute Alsace, Mulhouse, France*
[17] *Also at Department of Physics, Tsinghua University, Beijing, China*
[18] *Also at Erzincan Binali Yildirim University, Erzincan, Turkey*
[19] *Also at CERN, European Organization for Nuclear Research, Geneva, Switzerland*
[20] *Also at University of Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany*
[21] *Also at RWTH Aachen University, III. Physikalisches Institut A, Aachen, Germany*
[22] *Also at Isfahan University of Technology, Isfahan, Iran*
[23] *Also at Brandenburg University of Technology, Cottbus, Germany*
[24] *Also at Forschungszentrum Jülich, Juelich, Germany*
[25] *Also at Physics Department, Faculty of Science, Assiut University, Assiut, Egypt*
[26] *Also at Karoly Robert Campus, MATE Institute of Technology, Gyongyos, Hungary*
[27] *Also at Wigner Research Centre for Physics, Budapest, Hungary*
[28] *Also at Institute of Physics, University of Debrecen, Debrecen, Hungary*
[29] *Also at Institute of Nuclear Research ATOMKI, Debrecen, Hungary*
[30] *Now at Universitatea Babes-Bolyai — Facultatea de Fizica, Cluj-Napoca, Romania*
[31] *Also at Faculty of Informatics, University of Debrecen, Debrecen, Hungary*
[32] *Also at Punjab Agricultural University, Ludhiana, India*
[33] *Also at UPES — University of Petroleum and Energy Studies, Dehradun, India*
[34] *Also at University of Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, India*
[35] *Also at University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad, India*



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[36] *Also at Indian Institute of Science (IISc), Bangalore, India*
[37] *Also at Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Mumbai, India*
[38] *Also at IIT Bhubaneswar, Bhubaneswar, India*
[39] *Also at Institute of Physics, Bhubaneswar, India*
[40] *Also at Deutsches Elektronen-Synchrotron, Hamburg, Germany*
[41] *Now at Department of Physics, Isfahan University of Technology, Isfahan, Iran*
[42] *Also at Sharif University of Technology, Tehran, Iran*
[43] *Also at Department of Physics, University of Science and Technology of Mazandaran, Behshahr, Iran*
[44] *Now at INFN Sezione di Bari, Università di Bari, Politecnico di Bari, Bari, Italy*
[45] *Also at Italian National Agency for New Technologies, Energy and Sustainable Economic Development, Bologna, Italy*
[46] *Also at Centro Siciliano di Fisica Nucleare e di Struttura Della Materia, Catania, Italy*
[47] *Also at Scuola Superiore Meridionale, Università di Napoli 'Federico II', Napoli, Italy*
[48] *Also at Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory, Batavia, Illinois, U.S.A.*
[49] *Also at Laboratori Nazionali di Legnaro dell'INFN, Legnaro, Italy*
[50] *Also at Università di Napoli 'Federico II', Napoli, Italy*
[51] *Also at Ain Shams University, Cairo, Egypt*
[52] *Also at Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche — Istituto Officina dei Materiali, Perugia, Italy*
[53] *Also at Riga Technical University, Riga, Latvia*
[54] *Also at Department of Applied Physics, Faculty of Science and Technology, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Malaysia*
[55] *Also at Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología, Mexico City, Mexico*
[56] *Also at IRFU, CEA, Université Paris-Saclay, Gif-sur-Yvette, France*
[57] *Also at Faculty of Physics, University of Belgrade, Belgrade, Serbia*
[58] *Also at Trincomalee Campus, Eastern University, Sri Lanka, Nilaveli, Sri Lanka*
[59] *Also at Saegis Campus, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka*
[60] *Also at INFN Sezione di Pavia, Università di Pavia, Pavia, Italy*
[61] *Also at National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens, Greece*
[62] *Also at Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale Lausanne, Lausanne, Switzerland*
[63] *Also at Universität Zürich, Zurich, Switzerland*
[64] *Also at Stefan Meyer Institute for Subatomic Physics, Vienna, Austria*
[65] *Also at Laboratoire d'Annecy-le-Vieux de Physique des Particules, IN2P3-CNRS, Annecy-le-Vieux, France*
[66] *Also at Near East University, Research Center of Experimental Health Science, Mersin, Turkey*
[67] *Also at Konya Technical University, Konya, Turkey*
[68] *Also at Izmir Bakircay University, Izmir, Turkey*
[69] *Also at Adiyaman University, Adiyaman, Turkey*
[70] *Also at Istanbul Gedik University, Istanbul, Turkey*
[71] *Also at Necmettin Erbakan University, Konya, Turkey*
[72] *Also at Bozok Universitetesi Rektörlügü, Yozgat, Turkey*
[73] *Also at Marmara University, Istanbul, Turkey*
[74] *Also at Milli Savunma University, Istanbul, Turkey*
[75] *Also at Kafkas University, Kars, Turkey*
[76] *Also at Istanbul University — Cerrahpasa, Faculty of Engineering, Istanbul, Turkey*
[77] *Also at Yildiz Technical University, Istanbul, Turkey*
[78] *Also at Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Brussel, Belgium*
[79] *Also at School of Physics and Astronomy, University of Southampton, Southampton, United Kingdom*
[80] *Also at University of Bristol, Bristol, United Kingdom*
[81] *Also at IPPP Durham University, Durham, United Kingdom*
[82] *Also at Monash University, Faculty of Science, Clayton, Australia*
[83] *Also at Università di Torino, Torino, Italy*
[84] *Also at Bethel University, St. Paul, Minnesota, U.S.A.*
[85] *Also at Karamanoğlu Mehmetbey University, Karaman, Turkey*
[86] *Also at California Institute of Technology, Pasadena, California, U.S.A.*

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[87] *Also at United States Naval Academy, Annapolis, Maryland, U.S.A.*
[88] *Also at Bingol University, Bingol, Turkey*
[89] *Also at Georgian Technical University, Tbilisi, Georgia*
[90] *Also at Sinop University, Sinop, Turkey*
[91] *Also at Erciyes University, Kayseri, Turkey*
[92] *Also at Institute of Modern Physics and Key Laboratory of Nuclear Physics and Ion-beam Application (MOE) — Fudan University, Shanghai, China*
[93] *Also at Texas A&M University at Qatar, Doha, Qatar*
[94] *Also at Kyungpook National University, Daegu, Korea*
[95] *Also at another institute or international laboratory covered by a cooperation agreement with CERN*
[96] *Also at University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida, U.S.A.*
[97] *Also at Imperial College, London, United Kingdom*
[98] *Also at Institute of Nuclear Physics of the Uzbekistan Academy of Sciences, Tashkent, Uzbekistan*

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## The TOTEM collaboration


G. Antchev[a], P. Aspell[8], I. Atanassov[a], V. Avati[7,8], J. Baechler[8], C. Baldenegro Barrera[11], V. Berardi[4a,4b], M. Berretti[2a], V. Borshch[12], E. Bossini[6a], U. Bottigli[6b], M. Bozzo[5a,5b], H. Burkhardt[8], F.S. Cafagna[4a], M.G. Catanesi[4a], M. Deile[8], F. De Leonardis[4a,4c], M. Doubek[1c], D. Druzhkin[3a,8], K. Eggert[10], V. Eremin[c], A. Fiergolski[8], F. Garcia[2a], V. Georgiev[1a], S. Giani[8], L. Grzanka[7], J. Hammerbauer[1a], T. Isidori[11], V. Ivanchenko[12], M. Janda[1c], A. Karev[8], J. Kašpar[1b,8], B. Kaynak[9], J. Kopal[8], V. Kundrát[1b], S. Lami[6a], R. Linhart[1a], C. Lindsey[11], M.V. Lokajíček[†,1b], L. Losurdo[6b], F. Lucas Rodríguez[8], M. Macrí[†,5a], M. Malawski[7], N. Minafra[11], S. Minutoli[5a], K. Misan[7], T. Naaranoja[2a,2b], F. Nemes[3a,3b,8], H. Niewiadomski[10], E. Oliveri[8], F. Oljemark[2a,2b], M. Oriunno[b], K. Österberg[2a,2b], S. Ozkorucuklu[9], P. Palazzi[8], V. Passaro[4a,4c], Z. Peroutka[1a], O. Potok[9], J. Procházka[1b], M. Quinto[4a,4b], E. Radermacher[8], E. Radicioni[4a], F. Ravotti[8], C. Royon[11], G. Ruggiero[8], H. Saarikko[2a,2b], V.D. Samoylenko[c], A. Scribano[6a,11], J. Široký[1a], J. Smajek[8], W. Snoeys[8], R. Stefanovitch[3a,8], C. Taylor[10], E. Tcherniaev[12], N. Turini[6b], O. Urban[1a], V. Vacek[1c], O. Vavroch[1a], J. Welti[2a,2b], J. Williams[11], J. Zich[1a]

[1a] *University of West Bohemia, Pilsen, Czech Republic*
[1b] *Institute of Physics of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, Prague, Czech Republic*
[1c] *Czech Technical University, Prague, Czech Republic*
[2a] *Helsinki Institute of Physics, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland*
[2b] *Department of Physics, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland*
[3a] *Wigner Research Centre for Physics, RMKI, Budapest, Hungary*
[3b] *MATE Institute of Technology KRC, Gyöngyös, Hungary*
[4a] *INFN Sezione di Bari, Bari, Italy*
[4b] *Dipartimento Interateneo di Fisica di Bari, University of Bari, Bari, Italy*
[4c] *Dipartimento di Ingegneria Elettrica e dell'Informazione — Politecnico di Bari, Bari, Italy*
[5a] *INFN Sezione di Genova, Genova, Italy*
[5b] *Università degli Studi di Genova, Genova, Italy*
[6a] *INFN Sezione di Pisa, Pisa, Italy*
[6b] *Università degli Studi di Siena and Gruppo Collegato INFN di Siena, Siena, Italy*
[7] *Akademia Górniczo-Hutnicza (AGH) University of Kraków, Faculty of Computer Science, Kraków, Poland*
[8] *CERN, Geneva, Switzerland*
[9] *Istanbul University, Istanbul, Turkey*
[10] *Case Western Reserve University, Department of Physics, Cleveland, Ohio, U.S.A.*
[11] *The University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, U.S.A.*
[12] *Authors affiliated with an institute or an international laboratory covered by a cooperation agreement with CERN*

[†] *Deceased*
[a] *INRNE-BAS, Institute for Nuclear Research and Nuclear Energy, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia, Bulgaria*
[b] *SLAC, Stanford University, California, U.S.A.*
[c] *Authors affiliated with an institute or an international laboratory covered by a cooperation agreement with CERN*


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