

Article

The EU as an ATM? Media Perception Analysis of Next Generation Funds in Spain

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has been a turning point in terms of communication and economics within the borders of the EU. Hence, the economic response to the consequences of the pandemic has been different from previous crises. Both factors influence the media's representation of the European project, and the construction of this image is particularly relevant to generating a favourable public opinion towards the European project. This research aims to determine how the Spanish media represent the Next Generation recovery funds and to determine the main discourses around this issue. We analysed news items disseminated by a sample of six leading Spanish news media through qualitative and quantitative methods by applying content and critical discourse analysis. The selection collects data via Twitter from July 2021 to March 2022. We found that media discourse reflects a pro-European sentiment, departing from previous Eurosceptic views. Next Generation funds have positively influenced Spanish perception of the EU and shifted the narrative towards Europeanisation. The EU's support for Spanish funds management advances European integration, but concerns about transparency and control remain. The findings show how the Spanish media present a pro-European view, placing the economic response as a window of opportunity for profound political, societal, and economic structural changes in Spain.

Keywords

disinformation; Europeanisation; journalism; media; Next Generation EU; political polarisation; recovery funds; Spain

Issue

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1. Introduction

1.1. *Shaping European Identity: Economic Crisis and Public Opinion in Spain*

Europeanisation is the gradual integration process in which Spain developed common institutions and structural and economic changes, striving for political unity in Europe (López-Gómez, 2014). European identities are new if compared to national identities. Differences can be seen between long-lived member countries and those who have recently joined (Grad et al., 2004). In the words of Avilés (2014), there has been criticism since Spain

acceded to the EU, but after 1996 the Europeanist discourse related to pragmatism intensified, and a few years later the approval of the European Constitution was seen positively, which is worth noting.

A study on Euroscepticism (Hooghe & Marks, 2009) found that most political parties are more pro-European than voters. According to Castells (2019), the formation of European identities requires connections between populations and a sense of belonging that has not yet reached the level of belonging to one's own country. Without these connections, no political or economic union of European peoples can exist (Castells, 2019). Similarly, emotional polarisation represents a lasting

social identity when individuals identify not only with particular social groups but also with political parties and leaders (Kingzette, 2021).

The pro-European mood of the Spaniards in the 2003 vote on the European Constitution was evident. According to the CIS (2005), the main reason why Spanish participants voted for the European Constitution was that it was essential to continue building Europe (38.7%), and they agreed with a political party (24.2%), and because the European Constitution created federal citizenship (14.6%). In 2004, 10 new countries joined the EU. During the period of EU enlargement, Spaniards mainly turned to television, radio, and daily newspapers to obtain information about new members. Regarding the level of information, there is no significant difference between the results obtained in Spain and the EU average, with 49.8% of Spaniards (49% of the EU average) believing that the enlargement is not very well known, and 29.3% (28% of the EU average) saying that they were not informed at all (Directorate-General for Communication, 2023a). Spaniards' trust in European institutions was higher than the EU average. After Europe-25 was united, the Spaniards maintained their position with the media. According to a CIS (2006) survey, on the 20th anniversary of Spain's accession to the EU, 58.8% of Spaniards felt attached or very attached to the EU, while 38.2% felt little or no attachment.

Before the 2007–2008 economic crisis, Spaniards believed that the media portrayed a positive image of the EU, and only 8% felt that being an EU member state was negative (Directorate-General for Communication, 2023b). The financial and economic collapse has created a climate of mistrust and political discontent in Spain, especially among the younger population (Calvo et al., 2011; Fernández-Planells et al., 2014) and “the Eurocrisis found a boot in the politicisation of Southern Europe” (Hutter & Kriesi, 2019). Nevertheless, the informative treatment by written publications, for example:

Is a referential axis when it comes to establishing the opinion of a society, which is why it is especially important to know what strategies it applies to this European political subject, and how these affect the construction of European identity. (Rivas-de-Roca, 2018, p. 1634).

The authors describe how the Spanish media spread the news about the crisis in Europe with positive sentiments and unfavourable notions (Rivas-de-Roca, 2018). The EU institutions, especially the European Commission and the European Central Bank, approached the 2008 financial crisis from neoliberal postulates with the main objective of obtaining positive results at the macroeconomic level, such as the reduction of the deficit and public debt, to the detriment of the improvement of other economic indicators of a more social nature and with a greater impact on the real economy (Torres López, 2020). For example, the unemployment rate in Spain

stood above 20% since the fourth quarter of 2010 and remained above that figure for almost six years until the second quarter of 2016 (National Statistics Institute, 2016). The discourse focused on economic problems, unemployment, youth instability, and the housing bubble. The Spanish public has not found a European perspective to construct their identity, in line with Díaz Nosty's (2005) “media deficit.” In 2010, the Spanish government announced its first significant cuts in public spending, and the positive image of the EU in Spain fell from 73% in 2007 to 47% in 2010 (Aixalá-i-Blanch, 2014). The interest in European affairs was low, and television did not help to reach the public with information about the EU and its institutions (Zurutuza Muñoz & Lafuente Pérez, 2012). The relationship between the EU and public opinion, as indicated by the authors (Herkman & Harjuniemi, 2015), is built through the European public sphere and the main problem it faces refers to the aforementioned media deficit (Díaz Nosty, 2005), since national issues are prioritised and European issues are considered of second order (Risse, 2015; Rivas-de-Roca & García-Gordillo, 2022; Vaccari, 2017).

The EU's financial and budgetary stability measures that began in 2010 obliged Spain to modify Article 135 of the Spanish Constitution to ensure the payment of the public debt as a priority over any other expenditure of the country and to respect a balanced budget of the public accounts. These measures, together with the 2012 Spanish bank bailout formalised through the European Stability Mechanism, are part of the Euro Pact of 2011 and the European Fiscal Compact of 2012. In Spain, between 2013 and 2016, new political parties emerged (Sampedro Blanco & Sánchez-Duarte, 2011). During this period, the gap between Eurosceptics and pro-Europeans widened. According to the Directorate-General for Communication (2023c), Spanish citizens' confidence in European projects has declined as Brussels has been perceived as a remote and bureaucratic reality. The solution to this opinion gap lies in the shaping of European public opinion through a cross-border debate on issues of concern for Europeans (Benedicto-Solsona, 2016). Some studies have found that the spread of eurosceptic attitudes goes primarily through media and social networks (Brack & Startin, 2015).

1.2. Pandemic, Europeanisation, and Spanish Economic Challenges

The economic crisis of 2008 weakened citizens' ties with the EU, but the management of the Covid-19 pandemic provided a tipping point in public perception despite the shortcomings in communication about the pandemic and its consequences (de Sola, 2021; Elías & Catalan-Matamoros, 2020). The Spaniard is above average optimistic about the EU's future, with 81% of respondents feeling like an EU citizen (Directorate-General for Communication, 2023d). Spain was the fourth most indebted member of the EU-27, after France, the Czech

Republic, and Bulgaria (“Una encuesta en plena pandemia detecta un fuerte recelo en España hacia la UE,” 2020). But as the pandemic went on, confidence in the EU grew. As of April 2021, 49% of respondents were dissatisfied with the EU measures to contain the coronavirus, while two out of three Spaniards were confident that the EU would make the right decisions in the future (Directorate-General for Communication, 2023d). However, over the last 20 years, Spain received a high volume of economic resources from the European structural and investment funds in the international financial framework, which were significantly reduced from 2014 when Spain surpassed the average per capita income of the EU (Forte-Campos & Rojas, 2021). The application of these funds is heterogeneous as it depends on the local and regional scope, and despite the differences within the Spanish territory, their main application is linked to R&D, green economy, or support to small and medium-sized companies (Forte-Campos & Rojas, 2021). The austerity measures pushed by the EU in the face of the 2008 economic crisis differed from the economic reaction in the face of the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. Before the EU’s Next Generation recovery fund, the EU already had various funds available to promote economic, social, and territorial cohesion (European Parliament, 2023). Since 2021, the European Social Fund, called ESF+, has financed in Spain almost 13 million euros to promote employment in the 2014–2020 period (European Commission, 2020). In the period 2021–2027, it will have an overall budget of 99.3 billion euros (European Commission, 2023), in a post-pandemic scenario. Another example is the European Regional Development Fund, aimed at the transformation of declining industrial regions and the development of less developed regions of the EU. In the period 2021–2027, Spain will receive European Regional Development Fund funds amounting to 23.539 million euros (Ministry of Finance and Civil Service, 2021). Another example is the Cohesion Funds, which are projects related to the environment and trans-European transport infrastructures. In the periods 2014–2020 and 2021–2027, Spain has not received funding from these funds as they are intended for member states whose gross national income per capita is less than 85% and 90% of the EU average respectively (European Parliament, 2023). Finally, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development finances rural development programmes under the Common Agricultural Policy with an overall financial envelope for the period 2014–2020 and 2021–2027 of 100 and 78 billion euros respectively (Ministry of Finance and Civil Service, 2021).

The economic package is based on the EU’s Next Generation recovery fund, which both Spaniards and Europeans trust and believe is effective in responding to the pandemic (Directorate-General for Communication, 2023c, 2023d). As a consequence of the European Union’s measures taken since the pandemic, the image of the institution and the confidence in the European

project has increased, and “Covid-19 can be identified as another example of politicisation of the European project with positive consequences for its legitimacy; an increasingly recurrent finding in the literature” (Rivas-de-Roca & García-Gordillo, 2022, p. 10). However, it is necessary to take into account that, since 2020, the European public sphere (Herkman & Harjuniemi, 2015), the discourse in the Spanish media on Europeanisation, and the citizens’ sense of belonging to the EU have focused on the rise of disinformation and fake news (Almansa-Martínez et al., 2022). In this sense, “the dissemination of deliberately false information has become a health problem” (Salaverría et al., 2020, p. 2). Nonetheless, traditional media are still a referential source of information, and, in times of crisis, citizens look for common points of reference such as mass media to shape public opinion (Besalú, 2020). This situation of communication crisis and media controversy in relation to the EU should be perceived as an opportunity by the media, especially through social networks, to reformulate messages, methodologies, and communication guidelines that bring the EU closer to the audience (Tuñón & Carral, 2019).

2. Objectives

The main objective of this article is to determine how the Spanish media represent the European economy topics, in particular the Next Generation recovery funds, and to find out the main discourses around this issue. Furthermore, the specific objectives are:

1. To analyse economic topics with respect to other topics disseminated in the Spanish media that are related to the European Union, by applying a content analysis;
2. To compare the differences in the treatment of economic information according to the editorial line of each Spanish media outlet, and to explore what sources of information are used to report on economic news, by applying a content analysis;
3. To detect how political elites and media conduct their discourses on economic issues, by applying discourse analysis.

3. Methodology

The article develops a mixed methodological design that capitalises on quantitative and qualitative research methods. The research is divided into two phases based on Borah’s (2011) framing theory. In the first phase, content analysis was used to extract quantitative data from selected news outlets (see Table 1). That involved objectively analysing textual communication content to identify patterns and trends in large datasets. The second phase employed critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine news items qualitatively. CDA focuses on language and discourse and how they shape and reinforce

Table 1. News media selection by criteria ($N = 6$).

| Ownership | Public | Private |
|-----------------------|--|---|
| | RTVE <i>El Confidencial</i> Antena3 <i>El País</i> ABC | <i>elDiario.es</i> |
| Origin | Legacy | Digital-born |
| | RTVE Antena3 ABC <i>El País</i> | <i>elDiario.es</i> <i>El Confidencial</i> |
| Editorial line (wing) | Center-right | Center-left |
| | Antena3 ABC <i>El Confidencial</i> | RTVE <i>El País</i> <i>elDiario.es</i> |
| Medium | TV | Newspaper |
| | RTVE Antena3 | ABC <i>El País</i> <i>elDiario.es</i> <i>El Confidencial</i> |

social norms and power dynamics, enabling a deeper and more interpretive analysis of underlying meanings and ideologies.

The political leanings of Spanish news media were established following the classification method based on Twitter data users (Guerrero-Solé, 2022). News items in both phases were selected from six relevant Spanish news media outlets, based on four criteria: ownership (public vs. private), origin (legacy vs. digital-born), editorial line (center-right vs. center-left), and medium (television vs. newspapers). The sample is based on robust and previously tested research on the Spanish media ecosystem in different mediums/platforms (Mayo-Cubero, 2021, 2022). Hence, this selection process ensured that the study represented the diversity of news organisations in Spain (see Table 1).

Analysing data can be challenging, especially when multiple researchers have different interpretations. To ensure impartiality and consistency, we included collaborative meetings and work sessions held over four months (September–December 2021), where the research team agreed upon specific analysis criteria for interpreting data uniformly. A team of nine coders reviewed and ensured consistency in the coding process. Operational definitions of each code were scrutinised and adjusted to guarantee correct comprehension of categories and keywords used in data interpretation.

3.1. Sampling

To conduct the data download, the team employed the official Twitter accounts of the selected media, which

have increasingly become an additional communication channel for news organisations to reach their audience. News media outlets use their Twitter channels to directly disseminate their agenda-setting to their audiences as an alternative means (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2022). The data from the 12 official Twitter accounts of the six chosen news organisations were downloaded and stored for the analysed period. The official accounts were: *El País* (@el_pais, @elpais_espaa, @elpais_inter), ABC (@abc_mundo, @abc_es), *El Confidencial* (@EConter, @elconfidencial), *elDiario.es* (@eldiarioes), Antena 3 (@antena3int, @A3Noticias), and RTVE (@rtvenoticias, @telediario_tve). The scraping technique was deemed appropriate for managing vast amounts of data. The scraping method was performed using the NVivo web browser software NCapture, which comprehensively captured all the tweets published from these accounts during the stipulated timeframe. The captured data was downloaded every 15 days and stored in Excel sheets for later retrieval. Subsequently, the research team filtered the tweets to detect items about the EU, using pre-agreed-upon keywords and considering the research objectives. Nine coders formed the team. To ensure consistency and accuracy in the coding process, each researcher's work was reviewed and adjusted according to the operational definitions of each category. This step was essential to guarantee that each researcher understood the categories and keywords used to interpret the data. The list of 15 keywords used to analyse the data included critical issues such as European economy, political corruption, borders, energy sources, Europeanisation, European Commission, European Parliament, polarisation, Next

Generation, recovery funds, European affairs, rule of law, European regulation, European representatives, and economic sanctions. These keywords were chosen to cover a broad range of topics relevant to the study, ensuring comprehensive data analysis.

Overall, 162,944 tweets were extracted from the 12 accounts. A final sample of 543 news items was chosen for analysis between July 2021 and March 2022 (see Table 2).

3.2. Content Analysis

We developed a two-stage approach to analyse the final sample, beginning with content analysis. Thayer et al. (2007) argue that content analysis is an ideal method for communication research as it reveals connections and relationships between concepts and ideas that may not be immediately apparent. To ensure reliability, the research team developed categories and codes to identify critical discourses, using a codebook that was created and used by all researchers to provide robust and reliable analysis (Krippendorff, 2013; Lombard et al., 2002). The analytical standards were established in previous studies related to the current research project (Boulos et al., 2023; García-Carretero et al., 2022; Pedrero-Esteban et al., 2021) and a team of nine researchers worked together to develop codes and meanings. Any uncertainties regarding the codification were resolved through majority voting to reach a consensus on the operational definitions of each category and maintain neutrality in the coding under the principles of Lincoln and Guba (1985). Finally, the data was imported into the NVIVO SQR software for further analysis.

3.3. Critical Discourse Analysis

A recent study has examined the possible factors influencing perceptions of the EU and Next Generation recovery funds using a mixed methodology (Rivas-de-Roca & García-Gordillo, 2022). This article follows this research strand and employs a mixed methodology approach using content analysis and CDA techniques to identify major discourses present in the sample (Krippendorff,

2013). The implementation of NVIVO software has been used to facilitate deriving insights from written and audiovisual content. The analysis involves an objective, systematic, and quantifiable description of manifest content to comprehend the sender, the receiver, and the message of the communication process (Berelson, 1971). The technique requires standardisation, mechanical attributes, and categories for coding within the software. The categories used in the CDA were four: economy, European recovery funds, energy sources, and political corruption. Each of them was accompanied by three subcategories related to the cost/benefit analysis: pro-EU, anti-EU, and neutral discourse. And the categories used in the content analysis were eight: Spanish national government, Spanish opposition parties, EU representatives, international organisations, civil society representatives, journalists, experts, and citizens.

A deductive approach was used to design the attributes for analysis, including media, authorship, approach, stance towards the EU, journalistic genre, and semiotic elements used in each piece of information. An inductive analysis was then performed to examine dominant themes and primary actors involved in the narratives presented by the media. To maintain neutrality, the team established analysis criteria and revised each researcher's codifications through the operational definitions of each category, consistent with previous work conducted by the team (Boulos et al., 2023; García-Carretero et al., 2022; Pérez-Escoda et al., 2023). The content of news stories was systematically coded and categorised based on the detected dominant topics, with the economy being the third most dominant topic (11.75%) in the sample. NVIVO memos were used to detect discourses emerging in the context of identified issues, allowing for the creation of collaborative working documents that can be consulted in real-time by all team members. The distribution of discourse dominance within media outlets was calculated based on the proportion of each discourse present in all the discourses analysed in the chosen media outlets during the agreed timeframe.

The final stage of the research used CDA to conduct an in-depth study of the narratives identified through

Table 2. News items per outlet and month ($n = 162,944$).

| Media outlets | No. of tweets | News items selection per month | | | | | | | | | |
|-----------------|---------------|--------------------------------|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-------|
| | | Jul | Aug | Sept | Oct | Nov | Dec | Jan | Feb | Mar | Total |
| ABC | 27,708 | 7 | 6 | 5 | 11 | 15 | 8 | 7 | 14 | 9 | 82 |
| Antena3 | 18,325 | 5 | 1 | 5 | 9 | 9 | 8 | 6 | 7 | 11 | 61 |
| El Confidencial | 21,804 | 9 | 0 | 9 | 12 | 23 | 4 | 7 | 18 | 12 | 94 |
| elDiario.es | 24,902 | 8 | 7 | 11 | 17 | 28 | 14 | 10 | 18 | 17 | 130 |
| El País | 35,592 | 10 | 6 | 3 | 8 | 9 | 7 | 7 | 13 | 17 | 80 |
| RTVE | 34,613 | 8 | 7 | 7 | 13 | 11 | 12 | 10 | 17 | 11 | 96 |
| Total | 162,944 | 47 | 27 | 40 | 70 | 95 | 53 | 47 | 87 | 77 | 543 |

content analysis. CDA is an analytical practice that allows researchers to explore social issues, power dynamics in discourse, the relationship between the text and society, and the interpretative framework (Van Dijk, 2017). This approach aims to unravel the hidden meanings and connections in the sample, examining the use of rhetorical devices, framing, and other language-based techniques that can shape public opinion. Here we find a reconfiguration of the sayable, i.e., what is said and how it is said in the identified dominant discourses, how these discourses change over time, and how they are appropriated by different actors (Foucault, 1991).

4. Results

The findings are presented in two parts. Firstly, quantitative data obtained from the main themes identified through content analysis are reported. Secondly, results from CDA are presented.

4.1. Content Analysis of Media Outlets

During the analysed period spanning from July 2021 to March 2022, various topics relating to the EU were detected in media outlets through content analysis. These topics include Spain's internal politics, climate change, migration, regulations and legislation, the Ukraine war, internal politics of EU countries, global politics (countries outside the EU), defence and cyberse-

curity, education and culture, science and technology, justice, pandemic and health issues, disinformation and fake news, ideologies, economy, and social relations and problems. The extent to which each Spanish media outlet covers these topics varies based on its media agenda. Figure 1 displays the distribution of these topics across the analysed media outlets.

Considering the main objective of this article, which is to analyse how the Spanish media represent the European economy topics, in particular the Next Generation recovery funds, and to find out the main discourses around this issue, it has been detected in the content analysis phase that one of the main topics is economy (see Figure 1).

On the one hand, in Figure 2, it is noted that over 70% of the analysed news articles that address topics on the economy and European affairs are produced by left-wing media outlets. Specifically, 39% come from the only public media outlet analysed (RTVE), 21% from the digital newspaper *elDiario.es*, and 13% from *El País*. As for right-wing media outlets, the digital newspaper *El Confidencial* accounts for 18% of economy news, the newspaper *ABC* for 6%, and the private television network Antena3 for 3%.

On the other hand, within the economy topic, three subtopics have been identified and coded: European recovery funds, energy sources, and political corruption. Furthermore, Figure 3 shows the percentage of the main topic and the three secondary topics represented in each

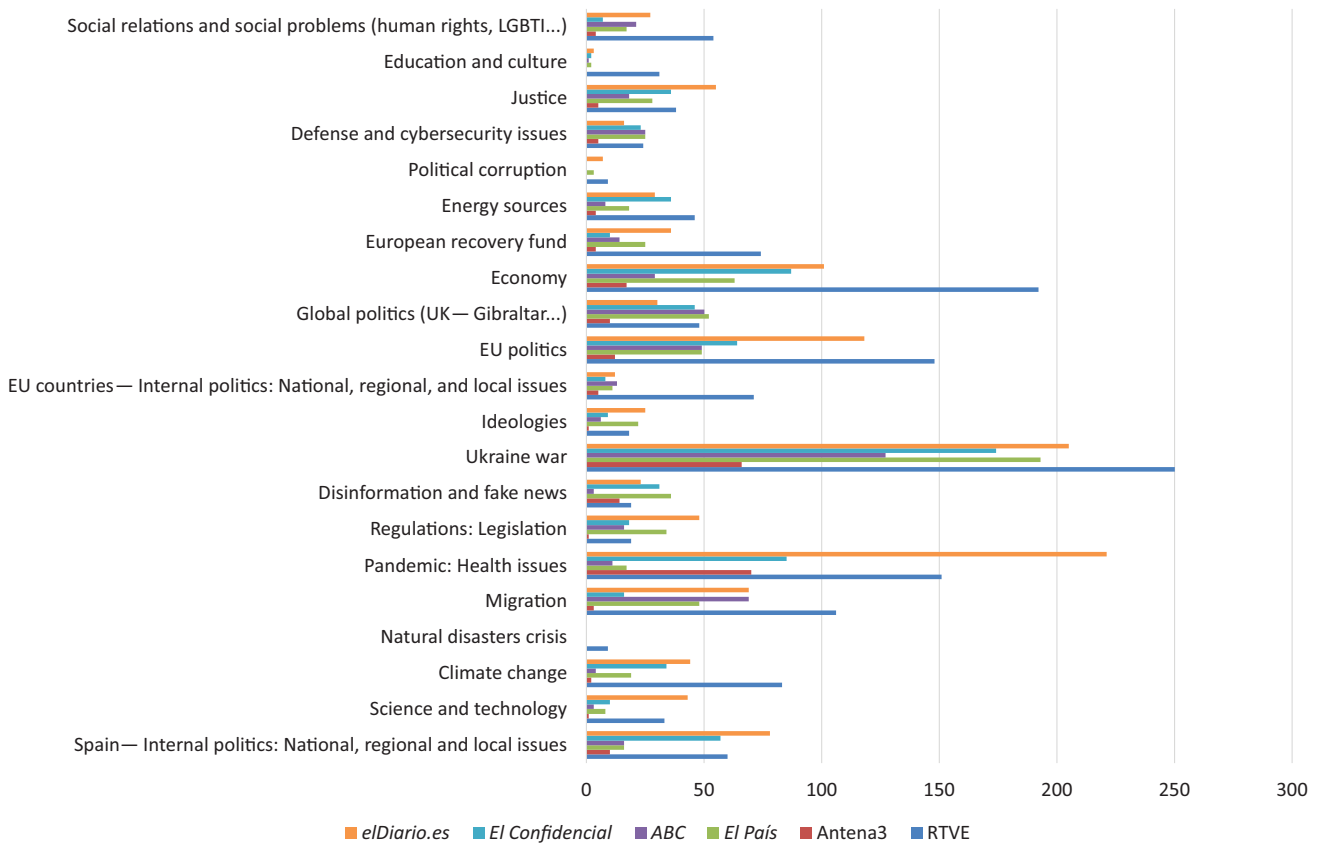


Figure 1. Distribution of all topics detected and analysed in each Spanish media sampled.

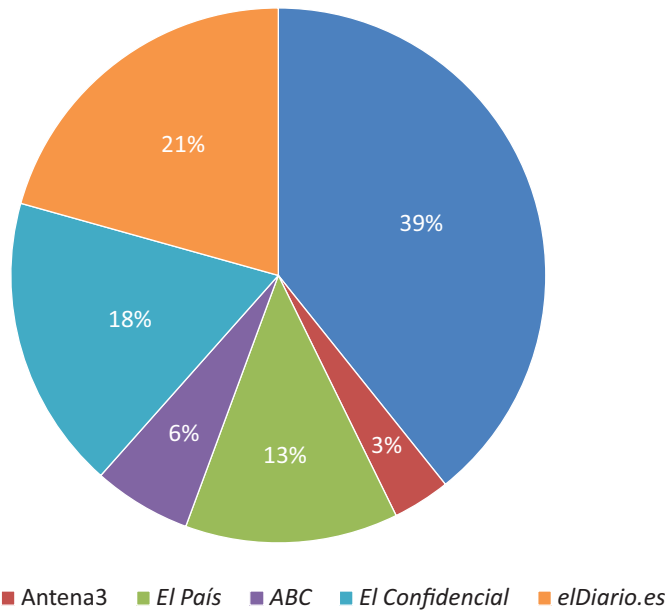


Figure 2. News coverage: Percentage of the economy topic analysed by media.

Spanish media outlet. To calculate this percentage, the weighting of these topics in relation to the other topics covered by each media outlet has been considered.

In this regard, relevant results are observed in Figure 3, such as the one indicating that the subtopic of political corruption is the least covered, especially by right-wing media outlets. Likewise, the subtopic of the Next Generation recovery funds is particularly addressed in the newspapers ABC and *El País*, having a significant value with respect to the main topic (econ-

omy). Additionally, the subtopic of energy sources is treated with special significance in the digital newspaper *El Confidencial*. These results confirm other academic studies around the importance of Next Generation recovery funds and how they affect positive feelings in the Spanish public sphere about EU membership after Brexit. In Rivas-de-Roca and García-Gordillo’s (2022) study, after the pandemic, European public sentiment towards the EU is increasingly positive, coinciding with the activation of Next Generation recovery funds. In fact, the

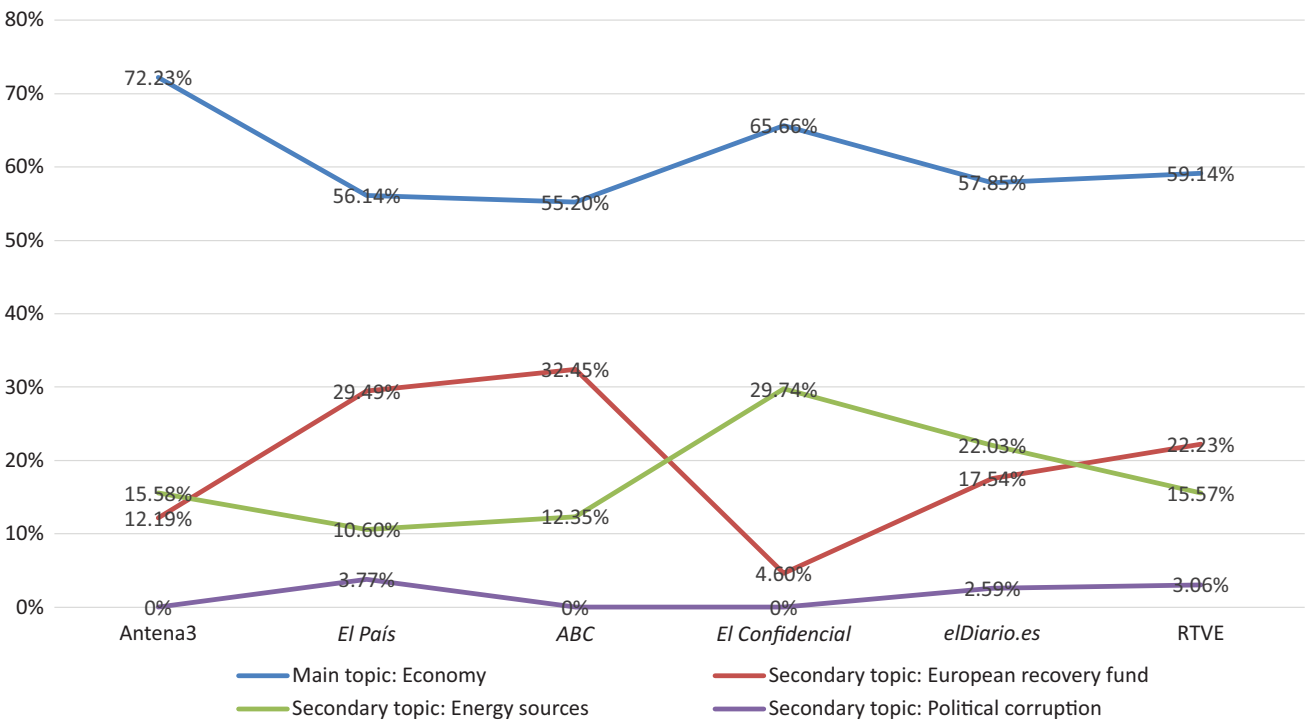


Figure 3. Content analysis of main and secondary topics about economic issues: Percentage of coverage by media.

politicisation of the European project, exemplified by Covid-19, has had beneficial effects on its legitimacy. These authors state that, from 2019 to 2021, there has been a general shift towards more pro-European positions across various factors analysed, although support for the European project remains diverse (Rivas-de-Roca & García-Gordillo, 2022).

According to the second specific objective, a relevant result obtained from the content analysis of the coded news articles about the economy is the use of information sources by media outlets to report on these topics (see Figure 4). It is clearer that the main source for addressing European economic issues are EU representatives, as well as representatives of international governments such as those governing at the state and regional level in Spain. Sources from the opposition are scarce, having slightly more relevance in the matter of the Next Generation recovery funds, while sources from other journalists, experts, and representatives of non-governmental international organisations are practically residual. This finding on the management of sources of information fits in with the organisation of newsrooms in the Spanish media. This statement confirms other academic studies about the news sources used by Spanish media outlets covering economic issues (Arrese & Vara, 2018; Ríos-Rodríguez & Arrese, 2021). In addition, a previous study has observed that the politics section is the largest, with 23% of the total journalists (Mayo-Cubero, 2022). Likewise, due to economic content, the business (16.5% of journalists) and international (14%) sections also work with related content.

Regarding the use of sources by different media outlets (see Figure 5), it is noteworthy that none of them use sources from citizens or opposition parties outside of Spain. Specifically, the only publicly funded media outlet in the sample, RTVE, mainly consults official sources that are in power: EU representatives (48.08%), interna-

tional governments (27.88%), and Spanish governments (17.31%), respectively.

On the other hand, the private TV channel Antena3 also uses its main sources from governing bodies (EU representatives and Spanish governments). In the case of newspapers, both *El País* and *ABC* use sources from Spanish opposition parties (22.22% and 16.67%, respectively), as well as the official sources mentioned earlier in the case of television channels. *El Confidencial* is one of the few media outlets that use sources from economic experts as well as politicians who are governing in European and Spanish institutions.

Finally, in the case of *elDiario.es*, the main sources used are politicians who are governing in both Spanish and international governments, although they also occasionally use other sources from representatives of civil society.

4.2. Critical Discourse Analysis of Media Outlets

According to Foucault's (1991) and Van Dijk's (2017) models, the CDA has been used for the second analysis phase. In the process of CDA of the Spanish media sample, four main discourses were detected:

- The use of European funds to induce compliance with human rights increases its "soft power";
- The EU supports the Spanish government's management of the funds;
- The adoption of the Next Generation recovery funds marks a turning point in the EU project;
- Blocking Next Generation recovery funds to induce compliance with human rights is necessary because the EU is a space of democracy.

As can be seen in Figure 6, the analysis of discourse on European economic issues is mainly found in the

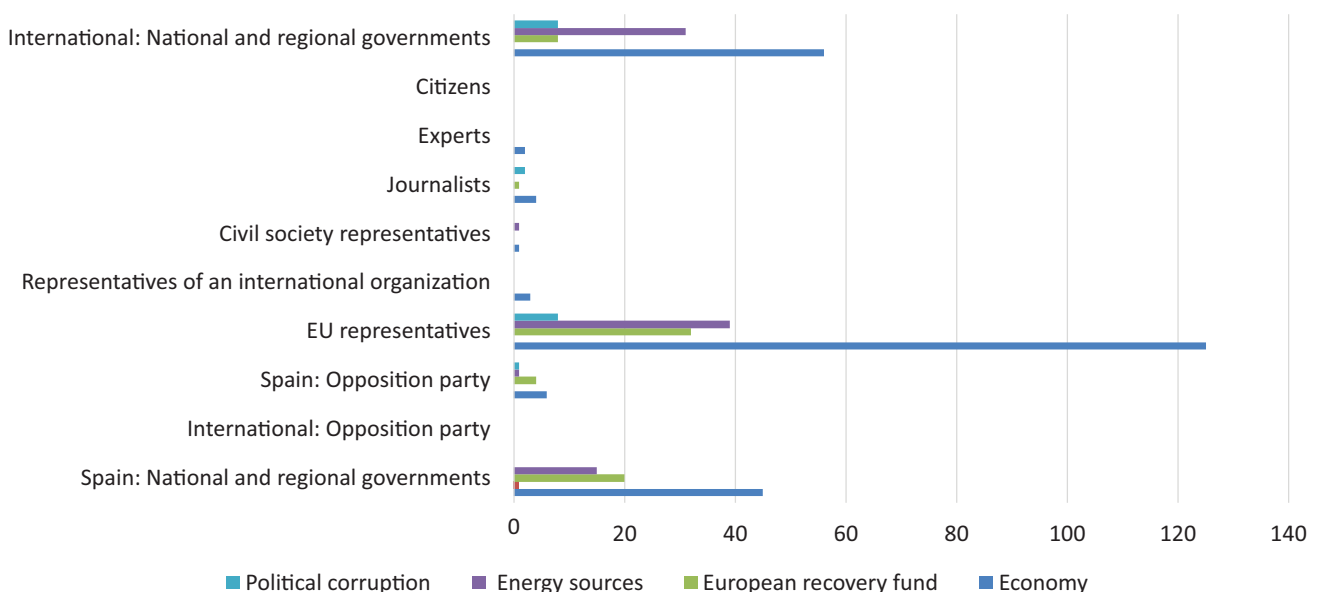


Figure 4. Main information sources consulted for every topic to explain economic news.

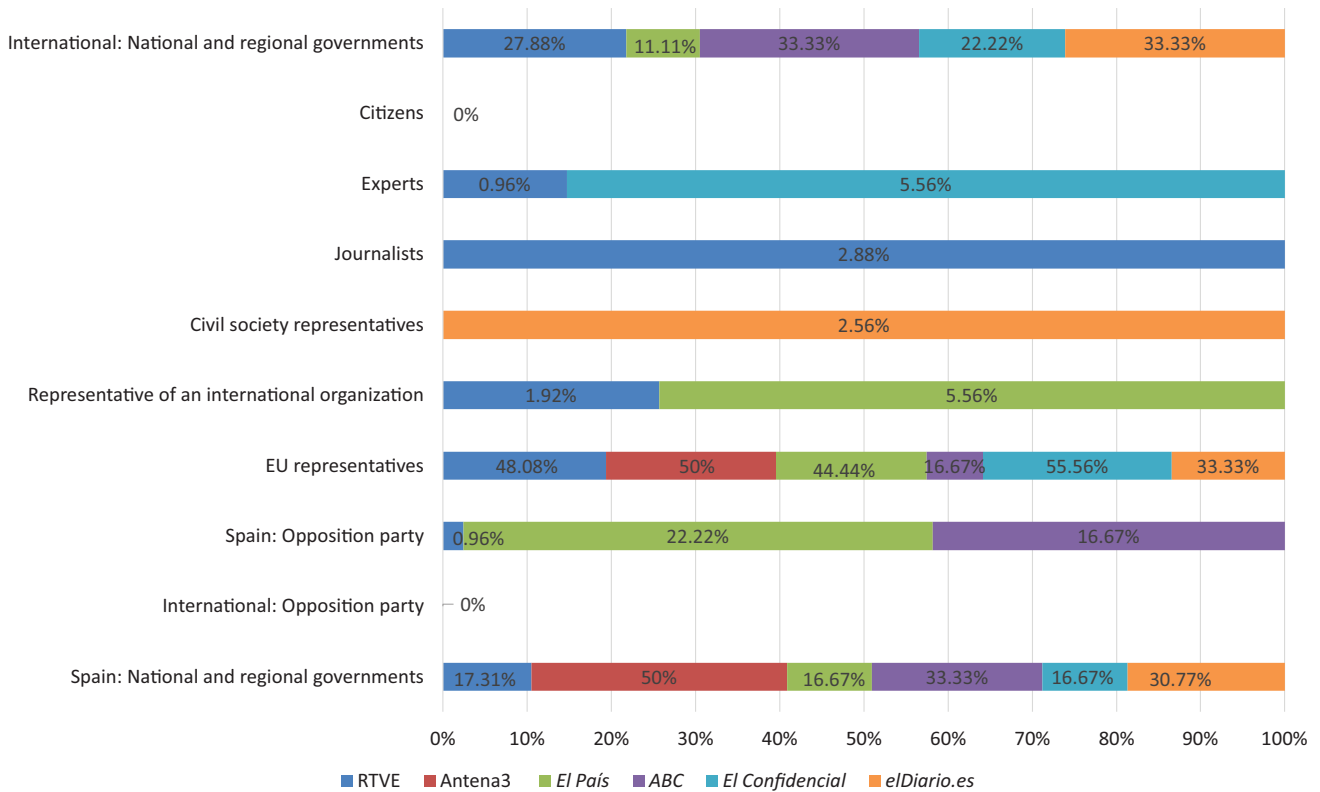


Figure 5. Percentage of sources consulted for economic topics divided by each media.

left-wing media, both public (RTVE) and private (*El País* and *elDiario.es*). On the other side, with respect to the right-wing media, the main dominant discourse is that the Next Generation recovery funds represent a turning point in the EU project, which contrasts with the analyses of the left-wing media, since they also highlight how the EU supports the policies of the Spanish coalition government (PSOE and Unidas Podemos, both left-wing political parties) when managing European funds, and also that the EU uses these funds to induce compliance with human rights.

Regarding the perception of discourses on economic issues and their relationship with the EU (see Figure 7), in the sample of selected media, half of the discourses were found to have a positive perspective. This contrasts with a third of the discourses detected which are presented from a critical perspective. The rest have a neutral stance. Both positions are developed in more detail below.

In particular, the analysis of media outlets delves into the discourse surrounding the EU’s recovery funds and how it has shaped the perception of the EU among Spanish citizens. The funds are seen as an opportunity to

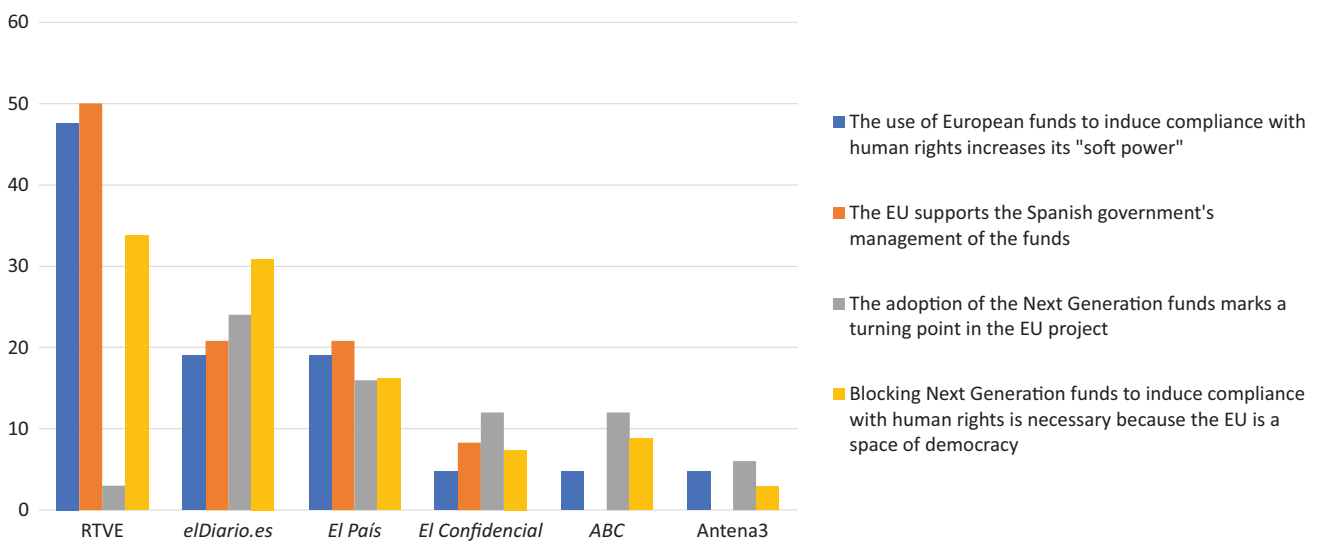


Figure 6. Top four most dominant discourses for each media outlet regarding the economy.

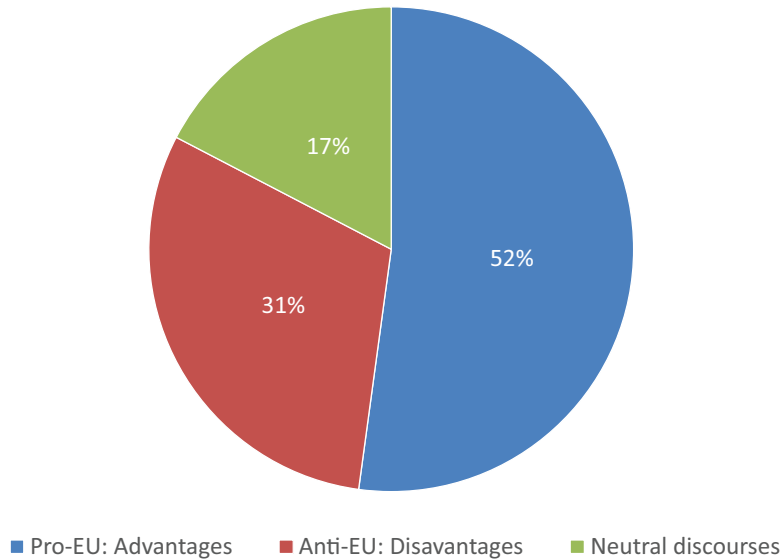


Figure 7. Perception (pro, critical, and neutral) of main economy discourses in Spanish media.

bring about structural changes in the production models of European partners, and the narrative is reinforced by the discourse of a financial dimension so “colossal” that the citizenship may perceive it as an ATM of “free” money (Gil, 2021a). However, the European politic elites highlight that it is important to remind citizens that this money comes from taxes and is not “free” (Gallardo, 2021).

The positive view of Brussels as a financial source is also reinforced by the news that the current president of the European Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen, has approved the Spanish recovery plan, which is easily understandable and far removed from the bureaucratic and often incomprehensible technical jargon of Brussels (Gil, 2021c). In this sense, the European funds represent a turning point in European economic policy if compared to the management of the 2008 economic crisis, when the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, led the European Union and its policies with strong austerity measures that included southern countries such as Spain.

Furthermore, the research highlights the significant positive turnaround in the perception of the relationship with the EU among Spanish citizens. According to a piece of news published in the right-wing digital newspaper *El Confidencial*, a research study of the Real Instituto Elcano highlights that “91 percent of Spaniards perceive the relationship with the EU as positive” (Proto, 2022), with experts attributing this to the different EU economic reaction to Covid-19 pandemic, in contrast with the one designed to respond to the previous financial crisis.

Furthermore, the analysis also shows the dialectic presented from the perspective of Van Dijk’s (2017) model, which is the following: austerity policies (negative) and recovery funds (positive). The Spanish media assume the message that austerity is socially negative and do not question whether these measures have had positive consequences, or whether fiscal adjustment deserves a calm and profound reflection, as evidenced in the news item from the left-wing digital newspaper,

elDiario.es, “Northern European Countries Stir up the Ghosts of Austerity While the South Seeks New Economic Rules” (Gil, 2021a).

However, the research also highlights counter-discourses that convey the message that northern countries are calling for a thorough audit of the management of funds, reminiscent of the hegemonic discourse of mistrust related to the management of European funds that the Northern partners threw at the Southern partners during the past financial crisis. This type of message, mainly paternalistic and controlling speeches, damage the Europeanisation of Spaniards, who feel accused of being irresponsible in managing European funds by the Northern partners (Pérez, 2022).

Another important discourse detected in this research is how the EU’s support for the Spanish government’s management of the European funds is linked to the demand for two structural reforms: labour market reform and pensions (Gil, 2021c). The EU’s backing of the Spanish plans is also present in internal divisions on the use of European funds. When the opposition accuses the government of mishandling the funds, the EU comes into play as a more trustworthy authority to settle the internal debate. The public TV station, RTVE, suggests that the opposition is using the recovery funds as a political weapon to wear down Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez’s government (Gallardo, 2022).

The EU’s support of the Spanish government also highlights the organisation’s increasing soft power in promoting human rights and democracy. A piece of news from the left-wing digital newspaper *elDiario.es*, entitled “Brussels Squeezes Hungary and Poland With European Funds for Their Authoritarian and Homophobic Drift” (Gil, 2021b), connects with the following dominant discourse: The use of European funds to induce compliance with human rights increases its “soft power” (see Figure 6). The alternative narrative conveys the discourse that economic pressure to promote the EU’s

founding principles (human rights, democracy, respect for minorities, etc.) advances the Europeanisation agenda. In this sense, there are other headlines such as “Europeans Want Funds to Go Only to Countries That Respect the Rule of Law” (R. C., 2021) and “Poland Complies With Brussels’ Demands on Respect for Judicial Independence” (de Miguel, 2021a).

Additionally, the research touches on the EU’s aspiration to become a kind of commonwealth and exercise “soft power” or the capacity to influence the international sphere through popular culture and the prestige of its political institutions (Boulos et al., 2023). This is demonstrated through headlines from left-wing newspaper *El País* such as “Von der Leyen Threatens Orbán With Cuts in European Funds if He Does not Halt His Homophobic Drift” (de Miguel, 2021b). However, in this study we have also detected critical discourses about the Spanish government’s handling of the European funds, claiming that the lack of transparency and control in the awarding and execution of funds is a point of concern. The media has criticised the government’s handling of the European funds, with headlines from the right-wing newspaper *ABC* such as “The Government Buries Its Failure in the Execution of European Funds With a Mountain of Figures” (Caballero, 2022).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The study of the media discourse in the sample analysed, joining left- and right-wing media perspectives, underlines a narrative that oscillates from identity to pragmatic-based aspects, with a pro-European feeling remaining in both cases. In this regard, it implies one of the most important differences from previous studies (Aixalá-i-Blanch, 2014; Arrese, 2018; Avilés, 2014), which stated a Eurosceptic feeling detection among media discourses and citizenship, especially from the right wing, and even pointing out a divided Europe. As highlighted by other works such as Ríos-Rodríguez and Arrese (2021), the media discourses legitimised economic policies and influenced the audience’s perception. This in-depth study allows us to offer an innovative perspective that emerged from the Next Generation funds management, as it has been represented in the media discourses analysed, summarising in three main conclusions.

Firstly, the Next Generation recovery funds represent a turning shift in European economic policy if compared to the management of the 2008 economic crisis, but, more importantly, the recovery funds have been a lever of opportunity for a country such as Spain, which has demonstrated its commitment to complying with the policies set by Europe and its willingness to take advantage of the opportunity to get rid of the scourge that has traditionally marked the North–South divide. This statement confirms other academic studies that have analysed how the Next Generation recovery funds have contributed to generating a positive sentiment about the EU in Spain (Rivas-de-Roca & García-Gordillo, 2022).

Secondly, there is a turning shift in the feeling related to Europeanisation perception, which tends to be pro-European, either in left-wing or right-wing media, in contrast with the Euroscepticism feelings that emerged during the 2008 economic crisis. However, it is worth mentioning that over 70% of the analysed news articles on the economy and European affairs were produced by left-wing media outlets. In this regard, from the CDA, we conclude that the framing of news related to the EU’s recovery funds has played a significant role in shaping the perception of the EU among Spanish citizens, with a strong pro-EU stance noticeable in Spanish media, compared to the management of the previous economic crisis. Nevertheless, there are also counter-discourses that convey a different message and highlight the need for a thorough audit of funds management.

In addition, as a third conclusion, the EU’s support for the Spanish government’s management of Next Generation recovery funds is seen as an important step in advancing the Europeanisation agenda, as stated by Luo (2022, p. 374): “The recovery funds implied laying the cornerstone of completing a fiscal union in the Eurozone, for enhancing institutional functions of the European Commission, and for rediscovering the nature of European integration.” Nonetheless, some concerns about transparency and control in the distribution of funds have been detected. Despite these concerns, it seems obvious from the study presented that recovery funds management and changes in the economic policies based on new management by Ursula Von der Layen have marked a before and after in the European project as seen in the media discourse and in the identity and pragmatic narratives that emerge from them.

Finally, we consider that our research has some limitations. In this sense, to continue understanding the sociological and media impact of the Next Generation recovery funds in Spain, the sample period could be extended, as well as the coverage of more media outlets such as radio stations, thus going beyond television stations and digital press. Also, as future strands of research, we consider carrying out a cross-national comparison of how these recovery funds and their media and social impact have occurred in other EU countries.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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