Media Discourses on European Integration: Information, Disinformation, and Polarization

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Edited by Ana Pérez-Escoda and Tetyana Lokot

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Editorial

Charting the Impacts of Media Discourses on the European Integration Project

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Abstract
The over-exposure to information facilitated by the hybrid media system and social networks is a key factor contributing to the increasing polarization of public opinion on major political issues. The European integration project is one of the major political processes affected by information manipulation and disinformation. In this regard, social networks have become powerful tools for nurturing news siloes or "echo chambers," influencing people's perceptions of important political issues in a manner that could have a destabilizing effect on democratic processes and institutions. In this context, the role of media discourses and their circulation among networked publics has become particularly relevant, leading audiences to adopt different views supporting or rejecting the European project. This thematic issue features a range of articles considering how the Europeanization process is impacted by discourses circulating in the hybrid media system or threatened by the destructive dynamics of disinformation and polarization.

Issue
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1. Introduction

The over-exposure to information facilitated by the hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2017) and social networks is a key factor contributing to the increasing polarization of public opinion on major political issues (Tucker et al., 2018). The European integration project is one of the major political processes affected by the logics of the networked attention economy, yet also subject to the threats posed by information manipulation and disinformation amplified by the dynamics of the 24-hour news cycle and the algorithmic architectures of social media platforms. In this regard, social networks have become powerful tools for nurturing news siloes or "echo chambers," and thus influencing people's perceptions of important political issues in a manner that

could have a destabilizing effect on democratic processes and institutions.

In this context, the role of media discourses and their circulation among networked publics has become particularly relevant, leading audiences to adopt different views supporting or rejecting the European project (Tsuladze et al., 2016). The implications of this discursive power require ongoing scholarly attention as European powers and decision-makers globally are once again focusing on the continent in light of recurrent political turmoil and an all-out war waged by Russia on Ukraine. Understanding the present and future of European enlargement and the ongoing dynamics of Europeanization through the prism of media and communications studies is thus particularly timely. This thematic issue features a range of articles examining how the

Europeanization process is impacted by discourses circulating in the hybrid media system or threatened by the destructive dynamics of disinformation and polarization.

2. Media Discourses Contributing to Europeanization or Euroscepticism

As convincingly argued by many Europeanization scholars, several analytical models have evolved to explain the dynamics of the European project and the attitudes associated with it. In this regard, Europeanism and Euroscepticism have become catch-all terms integrating several attitudes engaging or opposing the EU project (McCormick, 2010). One of the great achievements supporting the EU project in generating broadly pro-European attitudes has been the Schengen Agreement (Davis & Gift, 2014). Adriana Ştefănel, Antonio Momoc, and Romina Surugiu (2023) provide in their study a fascinating analysis of how Eurosceptic discourses arose in Romania and Bulgaria in the weeks before and after the Justice and Home Affairs Council (December 2022) in the context of the countries' Schengen accession. The results show that the tactic used in mainstream media discourse was meant to minimize or downplay Euroscepticism and, on the other hand, to discursively promote the benefits of European integration.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine is one of the most significant recent events impacting Euroscepticism or pro-European sentiments in the public domain. This thematic issue contains two articles providing different lenses of analysis for this case: On the one hand, Gracia Abad Quintanal, Sonia Boulos, and Branislav Radeljić (2023) analyze how Spanish media discourses on the EU's geopolitical role in the context of the war influence or obstruct the process of European integration. The analysis of the Spanish media discourses revealed how Russia's attack on Ukraine has significantly increased news coverage of the EU's external dimension. The authors highlight that in their analysis, the representations of the EU in Spanish media discourses have shifted over the past few months from being reactive and vulnerable to more determined, united, and effective, with a more defined position on the international stage, including in its relations with NATO. They also show that EU member states were presented as being even more aware of the value of EU membership.

On the other hand, Mihnea S. Stoica and Andreea Voina (2023) analyze the case of Romania in the face of Russia's war on Ukraine, examining the degree to which anti-EU appeals of AUR (Alliance for the Unity of Romanians) nurture Eurosceptic attitudes among Romanian citizens. In the study, the authors pursued two different goals: firstly, revealing the narratives within the political discourse of AUR, a new anti-EU populist party that has gained significant influence in the latest Romanian parliamentary elections; and secondly, assessing which of the discourses supported by AUR had the most influence on fostering Eurosceptic attitudes in Romania.

3. Polarization and Disinformation in Media Discourses Affecting Public Opinion

Radu M. Meza (2023) offers in his research a particular vision of polarization processes in media coverage of the Schengen accession. Presenting a qualitative analysis of news headlines, the findings of the study indicate three distinct ways in which coverage of the Schengen Area accession has the potential to fuel Euroscepticism and generate polarization: (a) by fostering animosity and outrage toward foreign actors, either collective ones such as the Netherlands and Austria or individual ones such as key state officials; (b) by encouraging detachment from politics through a cynical state of amusement in response to politicians' strategic communication and news; and (c) by fostering a sense of self-victimization and insinuating conspiracy.

Disinformation shaping public opinion is ably captured by Ágnes Urbán, Gábor Polyák, and Kata Horváth (2023) in the case of Hungary. The research illustrates how pro-government media generate and disseminate disinformation and examines how disinformation is reshaping the public discourse in Hungary. The Russian invasion of Ukraine provides a stark illustration of Hungary's misinformation environment and its disastrous impact on democratic public discourse. Disinformation blaming Ukraine for starting the war was spread in the early stages of the invasion. Later, discourses in the same media widely promoted the belief that only Hungary was committed to maintaining peace and that the West was only interested in going to war. Throughout the autumn of 2022, the emphasis switched away from the war and toward sanctions, with the messages becoming more and more anti-EU.

Sara Monaci, Domenico Morreale, and Simone Persico (2023) also focus on disinformation in social media discourses using a different but equally captivating example, that of the Eurabia doctrine (a far-right, anti-Muslim conspiracy theory claiming that globalist entities, led by French and Arab powers, aim to Islamize and Arabize Europe). Arguing that conspiracy theories in social media have become key factors undermining societal perceptions of European integration, the authors offer a chronological study (2020, 2021, and 2022) based on 50,000 tweets related to the topic of the conspiracy in different European languages. Their findings show how conspiracy theories about the Eurabia doctrine can become influential in public opinion and thus harmful to the framing of EU actions. They also argue that political actors appear to be using such conspiracies consciously to increase their prominence in online discussions.

4. Media Representations of the European Project

In their study, Marcos Mayo-Cubero, Lucía García-Carretero, María-José Establés, and Luis-Miguel Pedrero-Esteban (2023) examine the representation of the EU in Spanish media, observing changes in public opinion

as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Next Generation funds received by Spain. The study analyses media discourses from six leading Spanish news media through qualitative and quantitative methods by applying content and critical discourse analysis. The findings add new information to previous scholarship (García-Carretero et al., 2022), demonstrating the significance of media discourses related to European funding as particularly relevant for shaping favorable public opinion about the EU.

In another study on representations of the European project, Maria Raquel Freire, Sofia José Santos, Moara Crivelente, and Luiza Almeida Bezerra (2023) provide a compelling analysis of Portuguese media discourses focusing on populism. Using critical thematic analysis and examining how populism as a topic was used to create and negotiate political EU representations, this article focuses on media discourses in Portuguese mainstream media during a complex political period that included national elections. Their study, building on a historical perspective, finds that populism was used in the media and by the media as a discursive mechanism of political stance and/or delegitimization or criticism of political actors, agendas, or actions.

5. Digital Literacy as a Means of Combating Fake News and Disinformation

In the context of intensifying disinformation and fake news circulation in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, digital literacy has played an important role in addressing this global issue (Mason et al., 2018). Moreover, there is also an emergent connection between digital literacy and political opinions in an era where political communication and international relations debates have moved into the digital arena (Pérez-Escoda & Freire, 2023). The article authored by Charo Sádaba, Ramón Salaverría, and Xavier Bringué (2023) investigates the value of digital literacy with a focus on adults. Their research demonstrates how participants' political views affect their capacity to recognize false information. As their findings highlight, progressive political views are linked to higher right-biased headline accuracy detection and lower left-biased headline accuracy detection. Conservative stances result in more accurate recognition when the headline has a progressive bias, but when the headline has a right-wing slant, detection is less accurate.

6. Conclusion

The ongoing transformations of both the hybrid media environment and the digital political communication sphere documented in this thematic issue highlight that perceptions and representations of the European project are impacted by the manifold media discourses circulating in the traditional and digital media, but also shaped by the potentially harmful dynamics of algorithmic bias,

disinformation and resulting political polarization. It is our hope that the research in this thematic issue, which highlights the various facets of these phenomena and their significance for the European public sphere, contributes to existing scholarship but also inspires future academic inquiry into this quickly developing field.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

Downplaying Euroscepticism in Mainstream Media: The Schengen Accession of Romania and Bulgaria

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Abstract

Scholars have expressed concern about the growth of Eurosceptic discourses in the media since Taggart's (1998) article on Euroscepticism. While some progress has been made in understanding the media's role in increasing Euroscepticism, previous studies have primarily focused on Western European media discourses. This research aims to address the knowledge gap on Eurosceptic discourse in Eastern Europe by analysing the impact of the veto against Romania and Bulgaria's application to join Schengen, as reflected in mainstream media. The research question is: To what extent the Eurosceptic discourse arose in both countries in the weeks before and after the Justice and Home Affairs Council (8–9 December 2022)? The findings indicate that mainstream-mediated discourse employed a strategy of downplaying Euroscepticism. The Romanian and Bulgarian political class labelled the failure to join Schengen as "disappointing," "unfair," "unjustified," and "regrettable." This research provides evidence of how mainstream media discourses addressed the issue while promoting the European integration project by minimising Euroscepticism.

Issue

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1. Introduction

The disappointment of Romanian civil society with Austria's rejection of Schengen accession resulted in a boycott against Austrian companies (Olariu, 2022) and customers withdrawing their money from Austrian banks or demanding the nationalisation of the OMV oil company. Romanians started posting under #BoycottAustria on Twitter and other social media platforms after Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer stated that Vienna would not support Romania's accession to Schengen. Politicians were held responsible for the failure, and the political class from Bulgaria and Romania could have transformed social dissatisfaction into political populism by appealing to Eurosceptic, anti-EU messages. Certain Bulgarian politicians even proposed boycotting the Netherlands ("#BoycottAustria campaign goes viral,"

2022). This study examines the politicians and mainstream media discourse from Romania and Bulgaria aimed at managing popular discontent. This article will address the following research questions:

RQ1: What were the major themes presented in the mainstream media and politics in Romania and Bulgaria during and immediately after the decision to postpone the accession to the Schengen Area?

RQ2: Do the major themes in the establishment discourse emphasise or downplay Euroscepticism in the Schengen accession project?

RQ3: What is the role of discursive populist elements in the mainstream media and politicians' statements? And how are they connected to Euroscepticism?

To answer these questions, the article is structured as follows: It starts with an analysis focused on the dynamics between Euroscepticism and Europeanisation, and on the relationship between Euroscepticism and populism—commonalities and differences. Then it succinctly describes the stages of the EU integration of Romania and Bulgaria and their candidacy for the Schengen Agreement. After presenting the methodological approach, it exposes the findings on the predominant themes of the Schengen Agreement process within the mainstream discourse of media and politicians, emphasising the presence/absence of Eurosceptic and populist elements.

2. Theoretical Review

2.1. Euroscepticism and Europeanisation

In the past two decades, various definitions of Euroscepticism have been developed, and different analytical models have been created. Szczerbiak and Taggart (2008, p. 239) view Euroscepticism as a "generic, catch-all term, encapsulating a disparate bundle of attitudes opposed to European integration and in opposition to the EU in particular." This definition is based on Taggart's (1998, p.365) seminal observation that Euroscepticism "was used as a term for contingent or qualified opposition, as well as incorporating outright and unqualified opposition to the process of European integration" and consider the fact that Euroscepticism must be rated a "phenomenon imminent to the construct of the EU right from the beginning" (Bürkner, 2020, p. 550).

Taggart and Szczerbiak (2001, 2004) have refined the definition of Euroscepticism in several publications and working papers, differentiating between "hard" and "soft" Euroscepticism. The distinction is mostly applicable to Central and Eastern European candidate states at the beginning of the 2000s, where there was a "relatively high degree of consensus among political elites about the positive nature of European integration and specifically of their respective state's need to join" (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2001, p. 9). The quoted authors divide Euroscepticism into "hard" for those outside the consensus who express hostility to the idea of European integration, and "soft" for those expressing limited objections to the nature of the accession process. They identify two types of "soft Euroscepticism," both compatible with support for the European project: "policy Euroscepticism" expressed in terms of reluctance to specific extensions of EU competencies and "national-interest Euroscepticism," which involves employing the rhetoric of defending or standing up for "the national interest" in the context of debates about the EU (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2001, pp. 10–11).

Kopecký and Mudde (2002) have criticised Taggart and Szczerbiak's model, arguing that it is too broad, lacks specific criteria of categorisation, and that every disagreement related to any aspect of the EU could be categorised as soft Euroscepticism. The distinction can be made between Euro-optimism and Euro-pessimism. These lead to four types of positions that can be recognised: Euro-enthusiasm, Euro-pragmatism, Euroscepticism, and Euro-rejection. Although a variety of populist discourses can be found in any of the four categories, the majority of populists are at least Euro-pessimists.

We contend that the typology that distinguishes between hard and soft Euroscepticism (Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2008) can serve as a successful analytical model. As such, this article employs the definition of hard Euroscepticism as "a principled opposition to the project of European integration as embodied in the EU, or the ceding or transfer of powers to a supranational institution such as the EU" (p. 247). Soft Euroscepticism arises when there are no objections to the European integration project, but "there is opposition to the EU's current or planned trajectory based on the further extension of competencies that the EU is planning to make" (p. 248).

Euroscepticism can be defined by its adversity towards political institutions and cultural values, but also by constantly relating to borders and national territories. Bürkner (2020, p. 562) states that "Euroscepticism might prove to be much more heterogeneous than political and media narratives of rising populism and radicalism throughout Europe currently suggest." The author proves that, ever since the EU's inception, Euroscepticism contested the Europeanisation process described "as the manufacturing of political consent about rules, procedures and institutions of the European Union" (Radaelli, 2004, as cited in Bürkner, 2020, p. 546). Europeanisation always generated countermovements rooted in nationalism, regionalism and "opposition to EU-imperialism." While Europeanism, including Schengen, stands for the erasure of internal borders, Euroscepticism militates for raising fences at the member states borders, particularly at the EU periphery, considering that "their significance rises with the degree of destabilisation or the speed of change that these borders are subject to" (Bürkner, 2020, p. 560). The supporters of the political-cultural Euroscepticism are endorsing "the restoration of traditional state boundaries" (Vollaard, 2018, p. 223).

Taggart and Pirro (2021) examined the stances of political parties in EU member states regarding European integration, ranging from soft to hard Euroscepticism. Their research indicated that the participation of populist parties in government is no longer a peripheral phenomenon. They examined the correlation between the electoral expansion of European populist parties, their increasing influence on politics in national governments, and the EU and their Eurosceptic agendas. Populist radical right parties are the most Eurosceptic party group.

This article combines the definitions of Szczerbiak and Taggart (2008) with the typology of Kopecký and Mudde (2002) while taking into account the aforementioned recent developments. The study focuses on Romania and Bulgaria, which joined the EU in 2007 and have yet to receive extensive research attention.

2.2. Euroscepticism and Populism: Commonalities and Differences

Rooduijn and van Kessel (2019) researched the affinity and tandem between Euroscepticism and populism. The authors note that populist parties may display varying degrees of Euroscepticism. Therefore, the relationship between Euroscepticism and populism, as well as the impact of populism on European integration, are matters of scientific interest.

Mudde (2004, pp. 543–544) defines populism as "a thin, rarefied ideology, considering that society can be divided into two antagonistic groups: the virtuous people versus the corrupt elite, arguing that politics should express the general will of the people." Pappas (2019, p. 39) identifies democraticness and illiberalism as the constant properties of populist regimes.

The variable properties of the populist ideology include the strategic use of polarisation ("us versus them," with the elite/others as "the enemy of the people"), the populist discourse ("appeal to the people"), the particular communication style, and the charismatic leadership.

Populism has been studied as a strategic political discourse (Laclau, 2005), a type of rhetoric (Reinemann et al., 2016), or a communication style (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007) of chameleonic entities (Taggart, 2000) such as populist parties. More recently, it has been studied as a political ideology (Abts & Rummens, 2007) or even a political regime (Pappas, 2016, 2019).

The populist communication style is centred on several discursive elements, including the "people" vs. "elite" antagonism (Canovan, 1981; Gherghina & Mişcoiu, 2010; Laclau, 1977, 2005; Taggart, 2000). Populists claim to speak for ordinary people "against the power block" (McGuigan, 1992). The "power block" includes politicians, mainstream media, and experts (Stanyer, 2010, p. 149). Anti-elitism is an important constituent, allowing radical critique of the establishment (Canovan, 1981, 2002).

2.3. European Integration of Romania and Bulgaria

Romania and Bulgaria joined the EU on January 1, 2007, following the Accession Treaty signed in Luxembourg on April 25, 2005. Neither country has yet adopted the euro currency or become part of the border-free Schengen Area, both of which are political objectives that have been continuously utilised in electoral campaigns. Since 2007, the level of Euroscepticism in both countries has increased as expressed by a decreasing trust in the EU. According to statistical data aggregated by the authors from 18 Standard Eurobarometers published between June 2014 and February 2023 by the European Commission (see Figure 1), ordinary people's
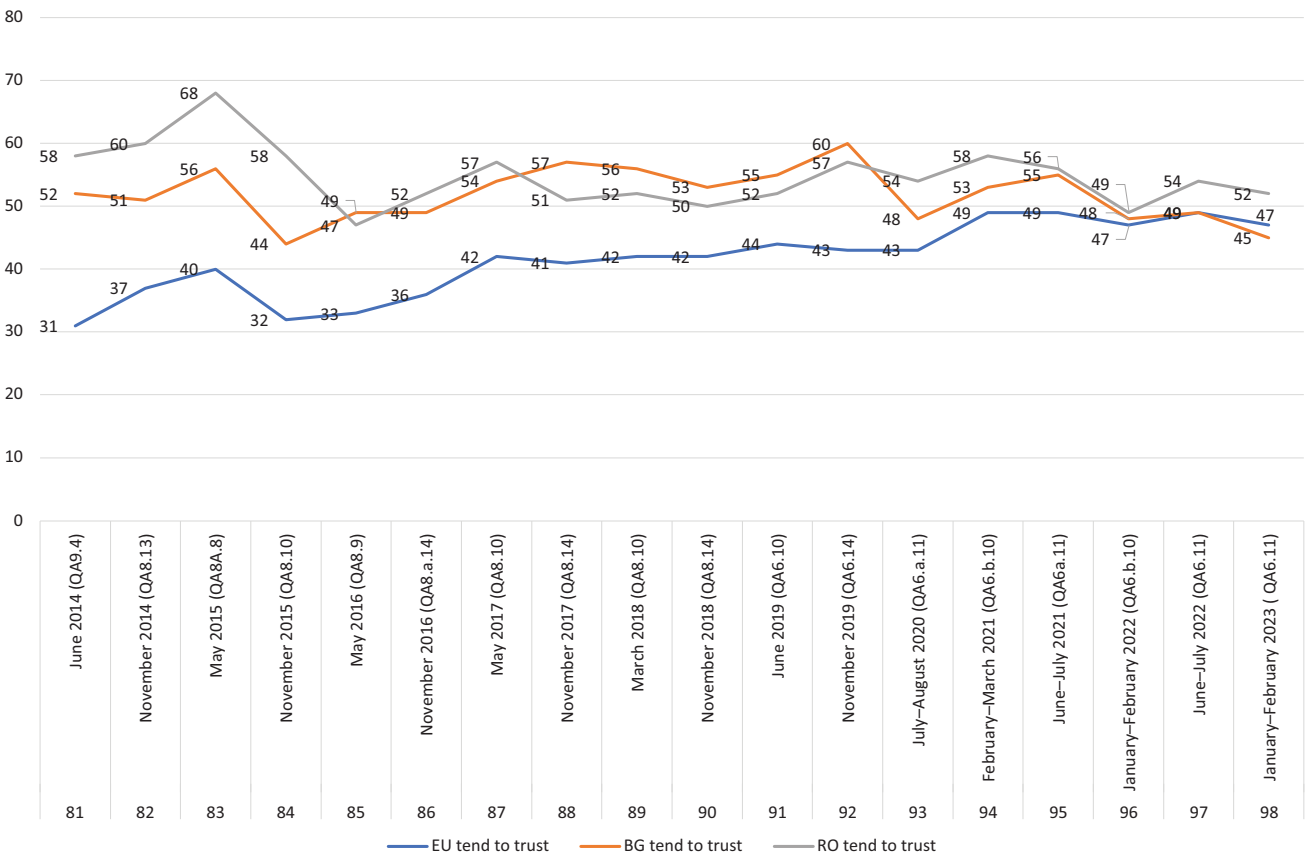
Figure 1. The evolution of the trust in the EU, 2013–2023. Source: Authors' work based on data from European Commission (2014a, 2014b, 2015a, 2015b, 2016a, 2016b, 2017a, 2017b, 2018a, 2018b, 2019a, 2019b, 2020a, 2020b, 2021a, 2021b, 2022a, 2022b).

trust in the EU has decreased from 52% to 45% in Bulgaria and from 58% to 52% in Romania (with a peek of trust in 2015, 68%) in the last decade, aligning with the European average, which is in 2023 at 47%.

Moreover, as it results from the Chapel Hill experts survey, there is an increase in the number of Eurosceptic voices in the Bulgarian political arena and the adoption of Eurosceptic themes in the discourse of mainstream parties (e.g., the social democrats).

Nevertheless, with some exceptions, the political establishment in both countries (see Figures 2 and 3) have supported the EU, leaving a possible gap to be filled by Eurosceptic discourses.

In both countries, the Eurosceptic parties are rather an exception, such as Nacionalno Obedinenie Ataka in Bulgaria with scores of 2.4 and 2.5 and a minimum of 1.5 in 2014, while at the European level, there are parties with scores lower than 1.5. In Romania, the lowest scores were attributed to a party that disappeared soon after the EU integration (scores of 3.55 and 3.7). Mainstream parties in Romania and Bulgaria display high scores of 5 and 6 which in the quoted study signify a low presence of Euroscepticism in the political discourse. We also note that one common feature of both countries is the low representation of EU themes in political debates even during the electoral campaign for the

Figure 2. Overall orientation of Bulgarian parties toward European integration measured on a scale from 1 (*strongly opposed*) to 7 (*strongly in favour of*). Source: Authors' work based on data from Jolly et al. (2022).

Figure 3. Overall orientation of Romanian parties toward European integration measured on a scale from 1 (*strongly opposed*) to 7 (*strongly in favour of*). Source: Authors' work based on data from Jolly et al. (2022).

EP elections. For example, Styczyńska (2015) observed that during the 2014 European Parliament election campaign, none of the Bulgarian parties who took part in the elections debated the major issues that Europe was facing at the time. Similarly, in Romania, during the same elections, mainstream parties paid more attention to national themes than to European ones (Ștefănel, 2017).

The accession of former communist countries from Central and Eastern Europe to the EU and EU enlargement fuelled Western populism (Bélanger & Wunsch, 2022, pp. 653–672; Berman, 2021, pp. 71–88). This populism primarily focuses on combating extra-community immigration to the EU while also seeking to protect national states from internal EU immigration, particularly from Eastern Europe (Betz, 1993, pp. 413–427; Meardi, 2007, pp. 39–56; Shehaj et al., 2021, pp. 282–293). Populism in Eastern Europe has expanded along with the transition to the market economy, globalisation, and EU integration (Bretter, 2022, pp. 183–206; Kende & Krekó, 2020, pp. 29–33).

However, populist parties in Romania have generally been supportive of the EU and have not attributed all of the country's issues to the EU or its leaders (Florian & Climescu, 2012, pp. 9–15, 18–19, 24). Romanian populists have not promoted Eurosceptic messages or described the EU project as a threat to Romania, given the high level of trust Romanians have in the EU (Corbu et al., 2016, p. 328).

In Bulgaria, the most influential mainstream parties have adopted a banal, "soft" nationalism and a "catch-all" strategy, unlike the more radical messages promoted by ultra-nationalists. For instance, Slavi Trifonov and his ITN party have utilised popular culture to cultivate patriotic sentiments and connect with compatriots both domestically and abroad (Brankova, 2021).

Bulgarian scholars contend that the country is experiencing a new type of populism that differs significantly from the radical right-wing populism witnessed in Western Europe during the 1990s. This "soft populism" employs a more moderate and distinctly pro-EU (albeit still populist) rhetoric that resonates with mainstream voters. The 2008 global economic crisis has also sparked increased nationalist sentiments and mounting Euroscepticism (Andreev, 2009, pp. 375–393). It has given rise to the number of nationalist parties (two such political formations were represented in the 2014 Bulgarian parliament) and deepened the nationalist EU divide: "Soft" populists have been more successful than extremist right-wing populists and their supporters have similar demographic profiles to those of the mainstream parties' supporters (Zankina, 2017).

Krasteva (2020, as cited in Bürkner, 2020) analyses Bulgaria's path from Europeanisation to present-day ethnonationalist Euroscepticism, considered to be the outcome of successive periods of state-influenced debordering and rebordering. The post-communist elite fed on people's disappointment with the EU's unfulfilled promises and became stronger during the recent EU crises, which reinforced the national identity based on ethnic and cultural exclusion. For example, supporting the borders meant keeping out the Syrian refugees. In this context, several embraced a so-called crypto-Euroscepticism, as Krasteva argued. The political mainstream was infused with right-wing extremist or populist elements oriented against EU domination, globalisation, and cosmopolitanism. Krasteva defined this as a process of identitarian symbol formation, in which bordering aligns with state power and national identity construction: the top-down political instrumentalisation of "native" sentiments is the main driver of Euroscepticism.

3. Case Study, Data, and Methodology

3.1. Schengen Agreement

The accession to the Schengen Area involves abolishing internal EU border checks and is stated in the EU Accession Treaty of the Republic of Bulgaria and Romania (Protocol concerning the conditions and arrangements for admission of the Republic of Bulgaria and Romania to the European Union, 2005). The European Parliament and Commission have an advisory role in the accession process, and the Justice and Home Affairs Council (JHA) within the EU Council makes the final decision by unanimous vote. The Schengen Area functions based on: (a) effectively managing the EU's external borders; (b) consolidating internal measures related to police cooperation, security, migration management, and the National Signalling Information System; (c) ensuring solid preparation and governance (Losneanu et al., 2022). In Special Eurobarometer 474 (European Commission, 2018c), over 60% of Romanians and Bulgarians declared that the Schengen Area was one of the EU's main achievements.

In May and October 2022, the Commission recommended that Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia be admitted to the Schengen Area after meeting the accession criteria, as stated in a journalistic report on the state of the Schengen Area for 2022 (Gavril et al., 2022). In November, the Commission requested the Council make the necessary decisions without delay to allow full accession of these three countries ("EC: Romania is ready to join Schengen," 2022), considering their successful application of Schengen rules. The report of the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism presented on November 22 by the European Commission showed that Romania and Bulgaria fulfilled their commitments upon joining the EU (Chirileasa, 2022). In December 2021, the Council confirmed that Croatia fulfilled the conditions to become a Schengen member ("Schengen decision looms," 2022).

Despite the Commission's recommendation, Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer stated he could veto Romania and Bulgaria's accession due to insufficient efforts to stop illegal migrants, claiming that "about 75,000 of the 100,000 illegal migrants who entered Austria in 2022 were not registered in any EU country on their route to Austria" ("The chancellor of Austria," 2022). The Austrian authorities' investigations allegedly revealed that most of these migrants passed through Bulgaria and Romania.

On December 2, the Dutch government announced that it would accept Romania's accession to Schengen but would block Bulgaria for not meeting the necessary conditions. On December 6, Chancellor Nehammer declared that Austria opposed the accession of both Romania and Bulgaria to the Schengen Area. The subject of the application of the Schengen acquis in Bulgaria, Croatia, and Romania was on the agenda of the JHA on December 8–9 (Council of the European Union, 2022). The Council adopted Decision No. 14239/22 on the full application of the provisions of the Schengen acquis only for Croatia and blocked the accession bids for Romania and Bulgaria.

This article argues that a sceptical discourse emerged regarding the ability of the Romanian and Bulgarian political classes to achieve their objective. The objective

of this study is to identify the discourse strategies used by mainstream media and politicians to communicate the European Council's decision from December 8, 2022, which postponed Romania and Bulgaria's accession to the Schengen Area to an undetermined date. This research aims to identify the Eurosceptic-related themes in the mediated discourse of Romania and Bulgaria during this major political event. While progress has been made in understanding the media's role in increasing Euroscepticism, previous studies focused primarily on Western and Central European media discourse (Bijsmans, 2021; Caiani & Guerra, 2017).

3.2. The Methodological Approach

This research employs a qualitative approach to discourse analysis to identify the main themes present in mainstream media reports, TV, and radio shows from Romania and Bulgaria over four weeks (November 24—December 22, 2022). The selected period covers the days before, during, and after the December 8, 2022 vote in the JHA of the EU Council. Through this vote, Romania and Bulgaria's accession bids were rejected, while Croatia, the third candidate and also the newest member of the EU (2011), was unanimously accepted. Although the accession of Croatia is significant, the present study focuses on Romania and Bulgaria as they are evaluated in tandem when it comes to European integration (Dimitrov & Plachkova, 2020; Dimitrova, 2021).

The corpus consists of 561 standard pages, that comprise 418 media texts such as news agency reports, television and radio show transcripts, media conference transcripts, politicians' declarations, and print and online newspaper or magazine articles from Romania and Bulgaria. While the corpus can be characterised as a convenience sample, it provides a good illustration of how the political establishment reported and commented on the event. The selection of media texts was provided by the RADOR news agency from Romania, which applied the "Schengen" filter on all its databases during the aforementioned time frame. RADOR aggregates news from Romania and other European countries, including Bulgaria, and has a database with transcripts of radio and TV programmes. The texts from both countries were in Romanian. Qualified translators working for RADOR translated Bulgarian and English texts into Romanian. Due to the linguistic limitation caused by the translation of Bulgarian and international news and political declarations into Romanian, the research focuses on the latent level of the text.

The study uses a deductive–inductive approach, starting from the premise that mainstream politics would express a low level of Euroscepticism. Therefore, the definition of the situation (accession to Schengen) and its characterisation are key elements that the study covered. Based on this observation, a series of open codes was generated, and their occurrence was analysed using NVivo 12. In addition, by using an inductive approach,

the open coding process generated two more themes: Romania and Bulgaria as "second-rate countries" and time as a downplaying element for Euroscepticism.

Each intervention in texts made by journalists, politicians, spokespersons, experts, or ordinary citizens was coded (N = 1,220) and analysed to identify the occurrence of codes. We conducted an inter-coder reliability test on 10% of the sample (n = 122), with a calculated Krippendorff's alpha score above 0.8.

The methodology used the thematic analysis framework (Clarke & Braun, 2017; Nowell et al., 2017), which enabled the identification of key themes and sub-themes in the context of a rich data corpus, presented in Table 1.

4. Findings

4.1. Defining the Intricate Issue of Romania and Bulgaria's Accession to the Schengen Area

The complex phenomenon of Romania and Bulgaria's accession to the Schengen Area was presented uniformly and non-Eurosceptically by mainstream media and politicians in both countries (see Figure 4). The decision to postpone the accession of Romania and Bulgaria and to accept Croatia, taken in JHA on December 8, 2022, was approached more as a "reluctant gesture," "political hesitation," and "objection" rather than a "clear opposition" (TVR 1, Bulgarian National Radio, *Trud*, December 8). While media texts emphasised the veto of Austria and the Netherlands, the overall discourse downplayed the political failure, noting the support shown by other European countries such as Sweden, Germany, Estonia, Lithuania, Greece, Italy, and Poland.

Of these countries, Germany is consistently mentioned as a supporter of both Romania and Bulgaria. Sweden is presented as having doubts (Bulgarian National Radio, Radio România Actualităţi, December 2), particularly when it comes to Bulgaria's accession. Hungary vigorously supports the accession and exploits the moment in a populist manner, with news agencies including political declarations in which a Hungarian minister condemned the "endless hypocrisy" (Magyar Távirati Iroda, December 9, 13; RADOR, December 9) of the EU. Lithuania, Estonia, and Greece are also mentioned as supporters. Additionally, key figures in the EU, such as Roberta Metsola, the president of the European Parliament, Ylva Johansson, the Home Affairs commissioner, and Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the European Commission, called for a decision in favour of Romania and Bulgaria.

News reports and declarations by political figures underline or at least mention the support of countries with high symbolic value for the EU, noting that Germany and Sweden were previously against Romania and Bulgaria's accession. Regarding Austria and the Netherlands, certain politicians from opposition parties supported the accession, claiming that ruling parties were against it. Many media reports and

Table 1. The coding results.

Themes	Open-coded category	Occurrences (percentages from theme)	Occurrences (percentages from total)
1. Defining the problem	Support	16.52	5.79
	Refusal	11.30	3.96
	Unfriendly gesture	9.57	3.35
	Hypocrisy	7.83	2.74
	Mean/petty interests of local politicians	7.83	2.74
	Veto	7.83	2.74
	Clean opposition	6.96	2.44
	Political hesitation	6.96	2.44
	Reluctant gesture	6.96	2.44
	Objection	6.09	2.13
	Decision in favour of Bulgaria and Romania	5.22	1.83
	Elite	2.61	0.91
	Offensive	2.61	0.91
	European unity/European consensus	1.74	0.61
	Total	100.00	35.06
2. Qualifying the JHA decision	Disappointing	18.33	6.71
	Unfair	18.33	6.71
	Unjustified	17.50	6.40
	Regrettable	16.67	6.10
	No valid reasons for the veto	11.67	4.27
	Solidarity	7.50	2.74
	Cynicism	5.00	1.83
	Inflexible position	3.33	1.22
	European unanimity	1.67	0.61
	Total	100.00	36.59
3. Second-rate countries	Political games	35.29	5.49
	Tandem	35.29	5.49
	Double standard	13.73	2.13
	Peripheral countries	9.80	1.52
	Suppliers of cheap labour	3.92	0.61
	Grey zone	1.96	0.30
	Total	100.00	15.55
4. Time	Postponement	35.71	4.57
	More time	30.95	3.96
	Not now	16.67	2.13
	Prematurely	16.67	2.13
	Total	100.00	12.80

politicians emphasise that 25 EU countries generally support the accession, while only two oppose it (*Dnevnik*, December 6; RADOR, December 8, 10).

Romania and Bulgaria are presented as having met the technical and political criteria and making extraordinary efforts to accede to the Schengen Area (RADOR, December 12; *24Chasa*, December 13). In Bulgaria's case, President Rumen Radev and other officials publicly responded to Mark Rutte's remarks about Bulgaria's ability to guard its borders by qualifying them as "offensive" and stressing the efforts and sacrifices made by Bulgarian border control. Rutte was reported to imply

that "migrants could illegally cross the country's border if they paid €50 for the transaction" (Liboreiro, 2022).

Romanian mainstream politicians characterised the declaration of Austrian representatives regarding migration as not related to the subject and as an "unfriendly gesture" (Radio România Actualități, December 6). Austria's internal political issues become a motivation for the veto expressed by this country, which is shared by experts and politicians. Moreover, the same argument is also present in media reports and politicians' declarations from Bulgaria, with a focus on the Netherlands' veto.
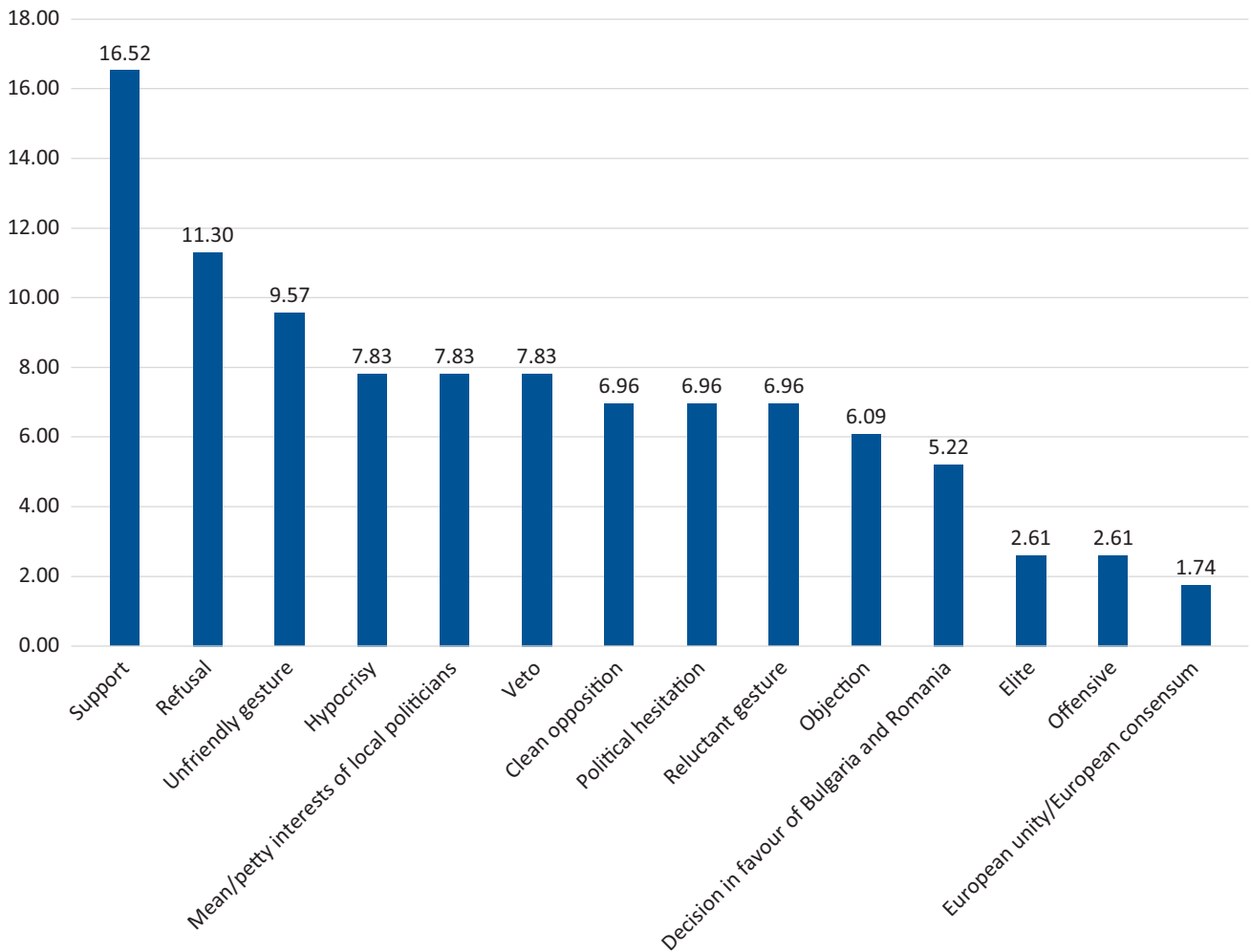
Figure 4. The coding result for the theme Defining the Problem.

There is no reference to the EU, its institutions, or other traces of Eurosceptic discourse. However, the subject is treated in a populist way, with a focus on the polarisation between European unity ("consensus") and singular elements that oppose it (the "elite" from Austria and the Netherlands). Media texts include declarations of politicians and experts who argue that there are "mean/petty" interests of local politicians from Austria and the Netherlands, suspecting a connection with the Ukraine war and Russian interests.

4.2. Qualifying and Justifying the Justice and Home Affairs Council Decision

The decision made by JHA on December 8 was labelled as "disappointing," "unfair," "unjustified," and "regrettable" by various Romanian and Bulgarian politicians (see Figure 5). The Romanian prime minister and president highlighted Austria's "inflexible position," which ignored the realities of Romania and blocked "European unanimity" (RADOR, December 8). In Bulgaria, the president and other officials denounced the decision as "unfair" and a breach of "European principles of solidarity and unity." On December 15, the Bulgarian interim foreign

affairs minister argued that only two countries used their veto and "broke the philosophy of European integration" (*Trud*, December 15).

Both Romanian and Bulgarian politicians emphasised that there were no valid reasons for the veto by Austria and the Netherlands. While the issue of migration was presented as the primary obstacle for both countries, Romanian politicians explained that the migration phenomenon is complex and cannot be resolved by excluding Romania from the Schengen Area. Bulgarian politicians emphasised that national border control contributes to the security of all EU countries at the cost of human lives.

President Radev of Bulgaria wrote on his Facebook profile that Bulgaria received cynicism instead of European solidarity. The Bulgarian MEP Anghel Djambazki (VMRO) further elaborated that Western countries have treated Bulgaria and Romania as second-rate countries for 11 years. Djambazki claimed that the reasons for excluding Bulgaria and Romania from the Schengen Area are purely economic as Western countries support their transport sector and do not want Bulgarian and Romanian transport sectors as rivals (BTA, December 22).
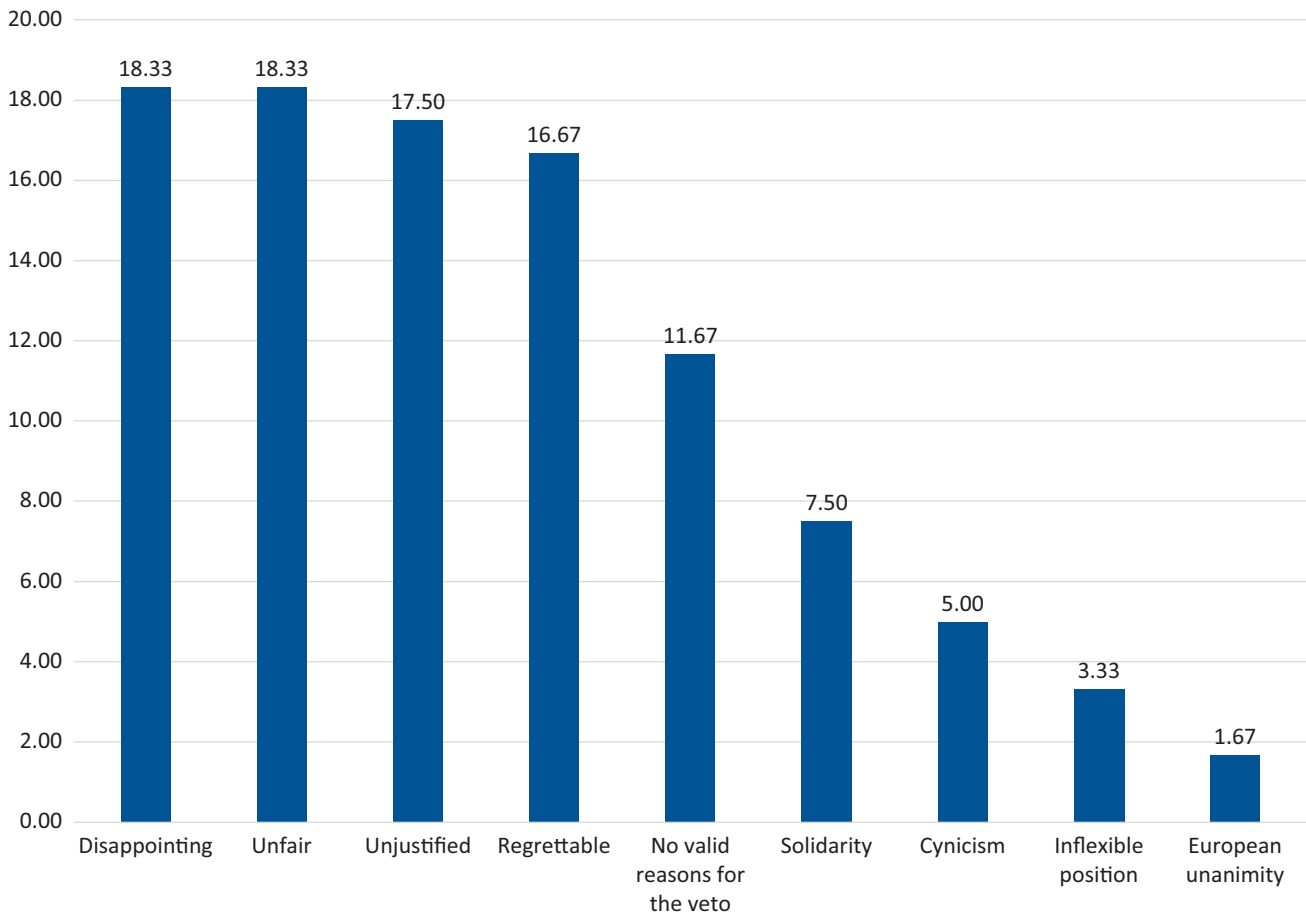
Figure 5. The coding result for the theme Qualifying the JHA Decision.

4.3. Romania and Bulgaria as "Second-Rate Countries"

The literature reviewed describes Romania and Bulgaria as countries that are closely linked in their efforts towards EU integration (Dimitrova, 2021) and Schengen. The politicians in Bulgaria tend to take a populist stance, viewing the two countries as second-rate. An example of this is a statement made by Bulgarian MEP Anghel Djambazki, who criticised the treatment of Romania and Bulgaria as "second-rate countries" subject to "double standards" and considered them to be "peripheral countries," part of a "grey zone," and "suppliers of cheap labour" (*Novini.bg,* December 3).

On December 8, the traditional media in Romania quoted an opinion poll where two-thirds of respondents agreed that their country is a second-level member of the EU. However, politicians did not adopt the rhetoric of "second-rate countries" and instead made negative comments about the "dirty" political game played by Austria (see Figure 6). Despite this, Romanian citizens initiated a boycott of Austrian companies, which mainstream politicians did not encourage in their discourse.

4.4. Time as a Downplaying Element

Since the pre-accession period, the issue of time has been important in the presentation of topics related to the EU for Romania and Bulgaria. Time has become a discursive resource that feeds Eurosceptic populist discourses. The label of "reform laggards" and a series of related stereotypes have been attached to both countries. Their accession to the EU was perceived as taking place "prematurely" (Dimitrova, 2021, p. 295).

Before the JHA Council (December 8), the Romanian and Bulgarian media started to mention a possible "postponement" of the decision, which would have given Austria and the Netherlands more time to analyse the progress regarding border control, the rule of law, and corruption (see Figure 7). The news portal *Novini.bg* presents a declaration of the Dutch prime minister who pointed out that the Netherlands "does not say 'no' to Bulgaria but 'not now'" (*Novini.bg*, December 6). In Romania, the RADOR news agency quotes the Austrian chancellor saying that his country needs "more time" (RADOR, December 8).

In his speech on December 8, the Romanian president stated that Schengen remains a strategic objective, and Romania will not stop pursuing it. The Romanian Minister of Internal Affairs underlined that Romania has been protecting EU borders for 11 years, investing in human resources, capabilities, and modern technologies. The economic loss of not having free movement within the EU is "incommensurable" (Radio România Actualităţi, December 15).
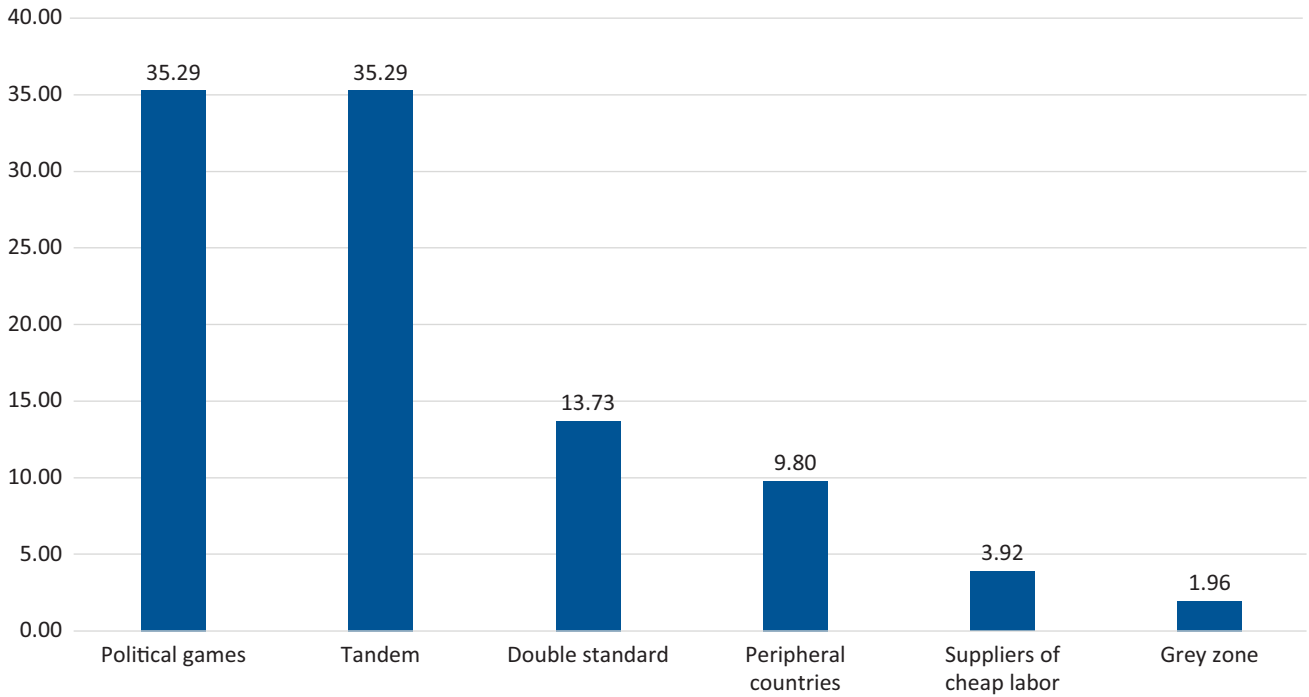
Figure 6. The coding result for the theme Second-Rate Countries.

The objective of this article was to identify the mainstream media discourse strategies related to the Schengen decision. The research showed that the establishment—mainstream media, politicians, and experts—chose a discursive strategy that downplayed the significance of the JHA decision from December 8, 2022. Although the Schengen veto intensified the Eurosceptic discourse of certain populist actors, mainstream politicians tried to minimise its significance using euphemisms and moderate optimism regarding a positive decision in the near future.

Regarding RQ1, we note that the major themes presented in the mainstream media and politics in Romania

and Bulgaria during and immediately after the decision were: minimising the veto through expressions like "reluctant gesture," "a political hesitation"; criticising the decisions of the member states Austria and the Netherlands as "disappointing," "unfair," "unjustified," and "regrettable"; Romania and Bulgaria described as "second-rate countries"; time and near future as downplaying elements.

As for RQ2, we conclude that the themes in the establishment discourse downplayed Euroscepticism related to the Schengen accession as a strategy to minimise the postponement of the decision. We consider that downplaying Euroscepticism in Romania and Bulgaria
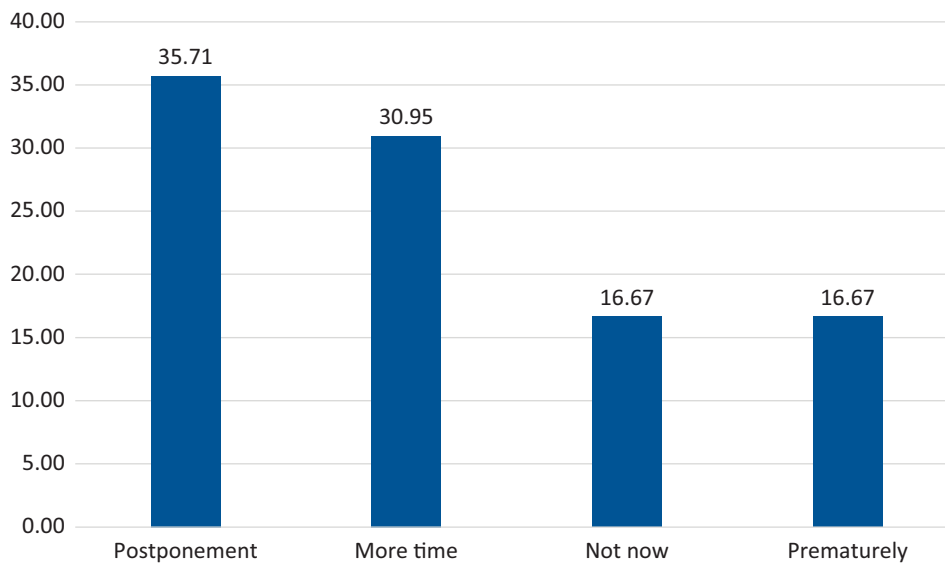
Figure 7. The coding result for the theme Time.

occurs for a pragmatic reason: The mediated message is not to leave the EU, but to negotiate in favour of the future entrance in the Schengen Area (Euro-pragmatism). Although they use populist elements in their speech, downplaying Euroscepticism in the media has the effect of supporting the integration process.

RQ3 aimed to identify the role of discursive populist elements in the mainstream media and the politicians' statements and their connection to Euroscepticism. Our findings show that there is a polarisation between European unity and the "singular elements" that oppose it (Austria and/or the Netherlands). There is also an antagonism between the fact that the Romanians and Bulgarians "deserved" to join Schengen, but politicians with local electoral interests opposed the decision. The populist argument of the Romanian and Bulgarian politicians was that without joining Schengen, the countries will face economic issues and that the Eurosceptic trend will grow because the Eastern states are not treated equally to the other EU member states.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

There is a possibility that the Euroscepticism of Romanians and Bulgarians could be enhanced by the delay of the decision to be accepted into the Schengen Area. Joining the Schengen Agreement signifies that the EU member states abolish permanent physical border control between them and opens the way to gain economic advantages. In this context, in line with the literature review, we argue that Euroscepticism may take the shape of the revival of national states and their ethnic values favouring borders, ethnic nationalism, and local patriotism. This study emphasises Euroscepticism as a reaction to rejection from or delay in joining the European structures and institutions. The discourse of the mainstream media and the political establishment in Romania and Bulgaria criticises the opposing member states (in the 2022 case, Austria and the Netherlands), without encouraging the EU exit and without criticising the EU as an institution. Romania and Bulgaria present themselves in the mainstream media discourse as "defenders of the EU borders," not of their own national territories, nor as supporters of the borders between the member states.

Downplaying Euroscepticism in Romania and Bulgaria occurs for a pragmatic reason: The mediated message is not to leave the EU, but to negotiate in favour of the future entrance in the Schengen Area (Euro-pragmatism). Although politicians use populist elements in their speech, downplaying Euroscepticism in the media has the effect of supporting the integration process. The Romanian and Bulgarian politicians from the establishment minimised the importance of the JHA December 8, 2022 decision through populism discourse and endorsed soft Euroscepticism by blurring the Schengen non-performance. The mainstream media approached a state-interest Euroscepticism, defending "the national interest," and softened the

Schengen decision in their discourse with an attitude of Euro-pragmatism.

The present research presents evidence on how mainstream media discourses are created to promote the European integration project, by downplaying Euroscepticism. There is no reference to the EU and its institutions or other traces of Eurosceptic discourse. Despite the anti-Austrian sentiment in Romania or anti-Dutch sentiment in Bulgaria surrounding the decision to block the country's Schengen accession, the political establishment minimised the veto on the Schengen bid by downplaying Euroscepticism in mainstream media.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of Interests

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Article

The War in Ukraine and the EU's Geopolitical Role in Spanish Media Discourses

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Abstract
The EU's ability to protect common interests and effectively address the challenges faced by its members relating to external threats is one of the most debated questions in the European landscape. Understandably, the war in Ukraine has had a major impact on discourses regarding the EU Common Security and Defense Policy, granting them more space and thus visibility in the media and public debates. Our study examines Spanish media discourses about the EU's geopolitical role and, more specifically, to what extent such discourses foster or hamper European integration processes. To collect data and carry out this study, we selected six media outlets based on their ownership, ideological stance, consumption frequency, and impact on public opinion. Our sample includes 540 news items, collected between July 2021 and March 2022. Our discourse analysis benefits from, inter alia, a Foucauldian framework that focuses on the sayable, conservation, memory, reactivation, and appropriation. In addition, we also identify communicative strategies that are employed to promote different discourses, as well as possible policy alternatives, concerning the EU's geopolitical role and future prospects.

Issue
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1. Introduction

For the EU, speaking with a single voice has never been easy. With foreign policy being traditionally associated with individual nation states' sovereignty, the Brussels authorities have often struggled with intergovernmental preferences, especially with regard to austerity measures, greater influxes of refugees, the environment and energy provisions, the 2003 and 2011 involvements in Iraq and Libya, the recognition of Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence, and so on. To bridge the gap, the EU has utilized initiatives ranging from the promotion of democracy and greater citizen participation to a collective European identity, and common policies in the field of security and defense. Their relevance is even greater

when juxtaposed with the polysemous word "Europe" and the obvious differences that come with it (Bayley & Williams, 2012).

The Russian war of aggression in Ukraine has prompted discourses about vulnerabilities of intergovernmentalism and the EU's capacity to independently determine its geopolitical orientation—this despite the widespread argument about the EU as a "normative power" (Whitman, 2011). In this article, we are concerned with Spanish media discourses. Looking more broadly, even though the Spanish political landscape is highly polarized (with a whole range of left and right options), the country's EU membership has never been questioned (either by public opinion or political and media elites; Pérez-Escoda et al., 2023). Spain has sought

to play a more central leadership role (Gobierno de España, 2021, p. 34; Malo de Molina, 2020). The general absence of an anti-European agenda also suggests that the Spanish media possess high levels of appreciation for the EU (Sojka & Vázquez, 2014) even if they criticize some of its policies.

This article proceeds as follows. We consider the impact of the war in Ukraine on media discourses regarding the EU Common Security and Defense Policy, and the EU's geopolitical role. Our study examines to what extent such discourses foster or hamper European integration processes. In analyzing the discourses on the war in Ukraine, we attempt to identify the main aspects of a Foucauldian framework—defined by the sayable, conservation, memory, reactivation, and appropriation—that our treatment of media discourses has largely benefited from. The main part of the article is dedicated to findings and messages, which are supposed to cumulatively shed light on prospects for a stronger, more assertive EU. We also identify communicative strategies that are employed to promote different discourses. Finally, apart from inviting fresh contributions to the literature, we also identify aspects that might inform policymaking in times of geopolitical uncertainty.

2. The EU's Geopolitical Role

Long before the outbreak of war in Ukraine, the EU's geopolitical role came to occupy a central position in the debate. While the immediate post-Cold War analyses saw the EU as a place busy with integration (marked with the Maastricht treaty), as well as disintegration (as in the case of the former Yugoslav federation), those produced on the verge of the new millennium went so far as to argue that the EU was "a paradoxical business" (McAllister, 1997, p. 8), or a player with "no real capacity to predict crises and no forward contingency planning for crises" (Mayhew, 1998, p. 106). The handling of the Kosovo question additionally exposed the presence of divisions among EU members (Radeljić, 2014), providing for skepticism according to which "a common foreign and security policy seems a remote and perhaps unattainable ambition" (Ferguson, 2005, p. 257).

The lack of political unity was complemented by the eurozone crisis and equally alarming expressions of economic nationalism, so the EU came to be seen as "a spent geopolitical force" and a region "condemned to second-tier status" (Moravcsik, 2010, p. 91). Subsequently, the Arab Spring and the 2015 refugee crisis prompted a new set of questions about the EU's external engagement, and the UK's 2016 decision to trigger Article 50 and then leave the EU sent a clear message that some other members may follow suit. Brexit has suggested that the EU's geopolitical compactness is not purely a matter of outside challenges (posed by China and Russia or Turkey's adversarial positioning), but also of in-house estrangements resulting from polarization of societies through populist discourses that promote unfounded alternatives (Radeljić, 2021).

The war in Ukraine has presented the EU with Russia's realist rampage. Thinking back, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 confirmed that Russia is "a colossal and enigmatic neighbor that wanted to assert its power status and with which the West had failed to create a lasting and comprehensive dialogue and a long-term strategy to face the post-bipolar world order" (Cucciolla, 2016, p. 14; see also Cafruny et al., 2023). The expansion of Russia's geostrategic goals through Ukraine (Johannesson & Clowes, 2022), and thus its drive for confrontation over cooperation, is assessed as a direct threat to the EU's interests.

In response to Russia's invasion, the Brussels' administration imposed sanctions against Russia (Consilium, 2023), and identified means of support (mostly military, financial, and humanitarian) for the Ukrainians. Such an approach, coupled with the need to ensure uninterrupted energy supplies (Poitiers et al., 2022) and independence from Russian fossil fuels (European Commission, 2022), has also suggested that the EU's urgency to consolidate its geopolitical role stems from the fact that "Western sanctions on Russia may unintendedly accelerate de-globalization by forcing pre-emptive decoupling by regimes that are non-aligned with or hostile to the West" (Markus, 2022, p. 486; see also Mariotti, 2022). Accordingly, the EU's Strategic Compass, adopted in March 2022, stressed the need to acquire the necessary means to confront "growing strategic competition, complex security threats, and the direct attack on the European security order" (Consilium, 2023).

Across the EU proper, while the French leadership has promoted the idea of a more autonomous EU ("not an autocracy but a form of European independence," as they put it), it has also transpired that, in terms of security and defense, what the EU has predominantly hoped for is a stronger bond with the US and NATO (Leali & Moens, 2022). The EU's general insecurity and NATO's argument that "the EU cannot defend Europe" (2021) explain the signature of the Joint Declaration on EU–NATO Cooperation, in January 2023, which identified Russia and China as "strategic competitors," capable of exploiting instability in the European neighborhood to destabilize European societies and the provision of security (NATO, 2023). In this context, the EU's Strategic Compass—despite its obsession with the notion of "resilience"—is insufficient on its own, if not subordinated to North American geopolitical preferences. In return, this also suggests that "more probably, and as usual, Europeans will wait for the US to tell them what to do, as it departs for the Pacific" (Witney, 2022; see also Babić et al., 2022).

Understandably, for European media outlets, reporting on the above-mentioned developments is far from straightforward. With the outbreak of the war, they found themselves trapped—intentionally or not—between the polarizing narratives, primarily focused on blame, war, and extent of violence, and the "good us vs. bad them" reporting (Eddy & Fletcher, 2022; Erlich

& Garner, 2023; OECD, 2022). In the Spanish context, analyzing the contribution of the Spanish media to the construction of the European integration project, in general, the fact that the Spanish media is characterized by a high level of political parallelism needs to be taken into consideration (Teruel-Rodríguez, 2016). This entails the polarized structure of the political map being reflected in the structure of the media (de Albuquerque, 2018). However, in the absence of political polarization on European integration among Spanish political elites, who remain strongly pro-European (Pérez-Escoda et al., 2023), no such polarization is expected in media discourses on the EU. A study conducted by Sojka and Vázquez (2014) demonstrates that media elites in Spain show high levels of identification with the EU. A key feature of the coverage of the EU at the European level, in general, is the excessive dependence of the media on official sources. In this sense, the media simply reproduces the messages of experts (Arrese & Vara-Miguel, 2016). According to Rivas-de-Roca and García-Gordillo (2023), excessive dependence on official sources creates journalism of statements that conveys the interests of the political class to citizens. Therefore, it is expected that the coverage of the war in Ukraine by Spanish media would be consistent with these trends, i.e., the absence of polarization and visible reliance on EU officials.

3. Methodology

The methodological design on which this article lies combines both quantitative and qualitative research methods. To that end, the research has been conducted in two phases, following the framing theory put forward by Borah (2011). The first phase was devoted to obtaining quantitative data from selected news outlets (Table 1) whereas, during the second phase, we proceeded to discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis, seeking to analyze the news items also from a qualitative point of view.

This provided a comprehensive view of how the EU is constructed as a geopolitical actor in Spanish media discourses, and following the theoretical framework adopted in the context of the research project MEDIATIZED EU, we had to diversify the sample by focusing on the following rigorous criteria: ideology (conservative vs. liberal), ownership (public vs. private), format (traditional vs. digital), and type of medium (television and newspapers with the highest viewership or consumption; see Table 1).

Not only for the sake of rigor but also of coherence, the team held several meetings between September and December 2021. These meetings allowed the research team to adopt common specific criteria for the analysis and interpretation of data. A two-stage coding process was subsequently developed on the base of a list of keywords. In the first stage of coding, we used keywords such as: "EU," "European Union," "European Commission," "European Parliament," "Brussels,"

"Europe," and so on. These keywords helped us identify news items related to the EU in general.

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

Ownership	Public	Private
	RTVE	*elDiario.es*
	El Confidencial	
	Antena 3	
	El País	
	ABC	
Origin	Legacy	Digital-born
	RTVE	*elDiario.es*
	Antena 3	*El Confidencial*
	ABC	
	El País	
Editorial line	Center-right	Center-left
	Antena 3	RTVE
	ABC	*El País*
	El Confidencial	*elDiario.es*
Medium	TV	Newspaper
	RTVE	ABC
	Antena 3	*El País*
		elDiario.es
		El Confidencial

In the second stage of codification, we relied on thematic keywords to conduct content analysis. These keywords helped us organize news items thematically. This included keywords such as: "Brexit," "cyber security," "geopolitics," "energy," "sanctions," "human rights," "LGBTQI," and "migration." Some keywords, such as "sanctions," "energy," and "geopolitics," were directly related to the topic of geopolitics. But even in keywords not directly related to geopolitics, we tried to look for discourses that could have an impact on the geopolitical role of the EU. For example, news items on Ukrainian refugees could indirectly touch upon the role of the EU as a geopolitical actor. News on the anti-LGBTQI stance of some counties and the talk about internal divisions could also have bearing for the geopolitical role of the EU.

3.1. News Item Sampling

As far as sampling is concerned, the team used the Twitter accounts of all the selected media to proceed with a massive data download. We relied on the Twitter accounts of the chosen outlets because Spanish media uses them as channels to project their views and reach their audiences directly (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2022). Although the analysis focuses on six media outlets, we collected data from 12 Twitter accounts to cover the general accounts of these outlets (e.g., @abc_es) as well as their international accounts (e.g., @abc_mundo) or from news programs in the case of TV (e.g., @antena3inter). Thus, all the original tweets

with a link to a news item from the 12 Twitter accounts (@elpais, @elpais_espana, @elpais_inter, @abc_es, @abc_mundo, @ECInter, @elconfidencial, @eldiarioes, @rtvenoticias, @telediario_tve, @antena3int, and @A3noticias) were downloaded and stored from July 2021 to March 2022.

The scraping technique was developed thanks to the NVivo web browser function "Ncapture." It helped us to easily retrieve all the tweets published from these accounts during the selected time frame. The researchers downloaded the captured data and stored it in Excel sheets. As a result, 162,944 tweets were extracted from the 12 accounts. After retrieving and storing the tweets, the research team filtered the data to detect items related to the EU. Once this was done, the research team conducted an additional filtering of news items to narrow down the sample, since critical discourse analysis requires a smaller sample on which an in-depth analysis can be carried out. This final stage of filtering aimed at selecting those items that developed over time in terms of their coverage of events, or were more complete or updated. For instance, if the EU member states had a meeting in Brussels, the initial sample contained news items over several days and each day the items were slightly more updated. We only selected the most updated version.

The final sample consisted of 543 news items published in the six media outlets between July 2021 and March 2022 (n_1 = 543). Table 2 shows the selected news items by medium and month of the analyzed period. This sample covers all topics discussed concerning the EU, including issues related to geopolitics. The selected items were uploaded to NVivo; visual material was transcribed and uploaded to NVivo.

3.2. Content Analysis

The first analysis conducted after uploading the final sample to NVivo was content analysis. The team followed the approach of Thayer et al. (2007). According to this, the method is ideal for communication research as it reveals connections between concepts and relationships between ideas that might not be evident. At this point, with the aim of ensuring reliability and following the research team elaborated a codebook by means of establishing categories and codes to identify key topics discussed when covering the EU (Krippendorff, 2013; Lombard et al., 2002). Those categories included, as mentioned earlier, issues such as human rights, migration, and economy—and with the outbreak of the war, we added a code for the Ukraine war. Eight researchers were involved in the codification of the news items.

Subsequently, an inductive analysis was performed, which examined the dominant themes and the primary actors involved in the selected items. To enhance the neutrality of the coding process, the team followed a standardized approach during various working sessions to establish analysis criteria and revise each researcher's codifications per the operational definitions of each category. Specifically, we systematically coded and categorized the content of the news stories based on the dominant topics that were detected as can be seen in Figure 1. To test the inter-coding reliability, all researchers were requested to codify a small number of news items for comparison. The results showed a high rate of compatibility. Subsequently, the codification of items was divided between all researchers thematically. The research team held weekly meetings to discuss the progress of the thematic analysis.

3.3. Discourse Analysis

After completing the content analysis, we attempted to detect the discourses that might emerge in relation to the different themes. Therefore, the team worked on the elaboration of collaborative documents in the form of NVivo memos. In those memos, the team included ideas, insights, interpretations, or tentative conclusions based on the analysis of the material. The distribution of dominant discourses in the media was calculated on the basis of the proportion of each discourse present among all detected discourses in the analyzed media during the chosen period. In addition to the major discourses detected, we analyzed adjacent discourses and counterdiscourses related to the major ones. The results in Figure 2 show the top eight most dominant discourses

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

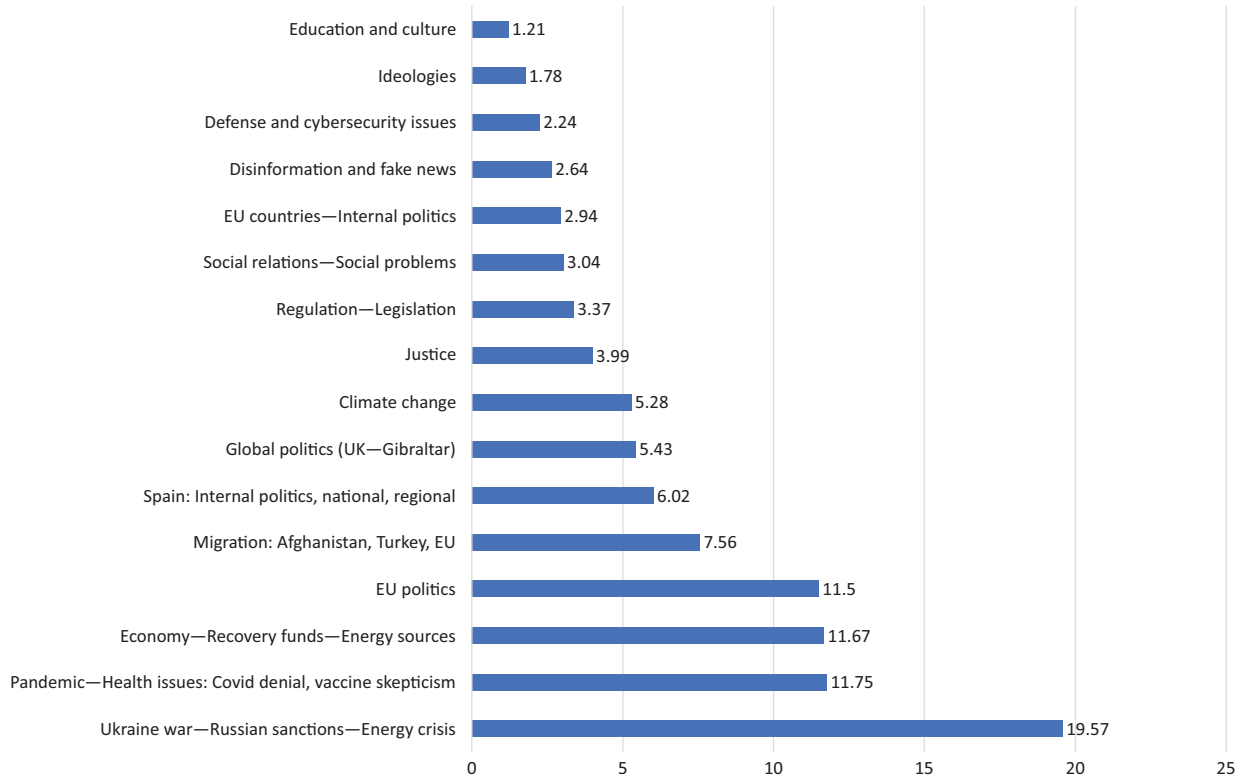| Media outlets	No. tweets	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
ABC	27,708	7	6	5	11	15	8	7	14	9	82
Antena 3	18,325	5	1	5	9	9	8	6	7	11	61
El Confidencial	21,804	9	0	9	12	23	4	7	18	12	94
elDiario.es	24,902	8	7	11	17	28	14	10	18	17	130
El País	35,592	10	6	3	8	9	7	7	13	17	80
RTVE	34,613	8	7	7	13	11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

Figure 1. The most dominant topics. Note: The major topics covered by the sample are in percentages.
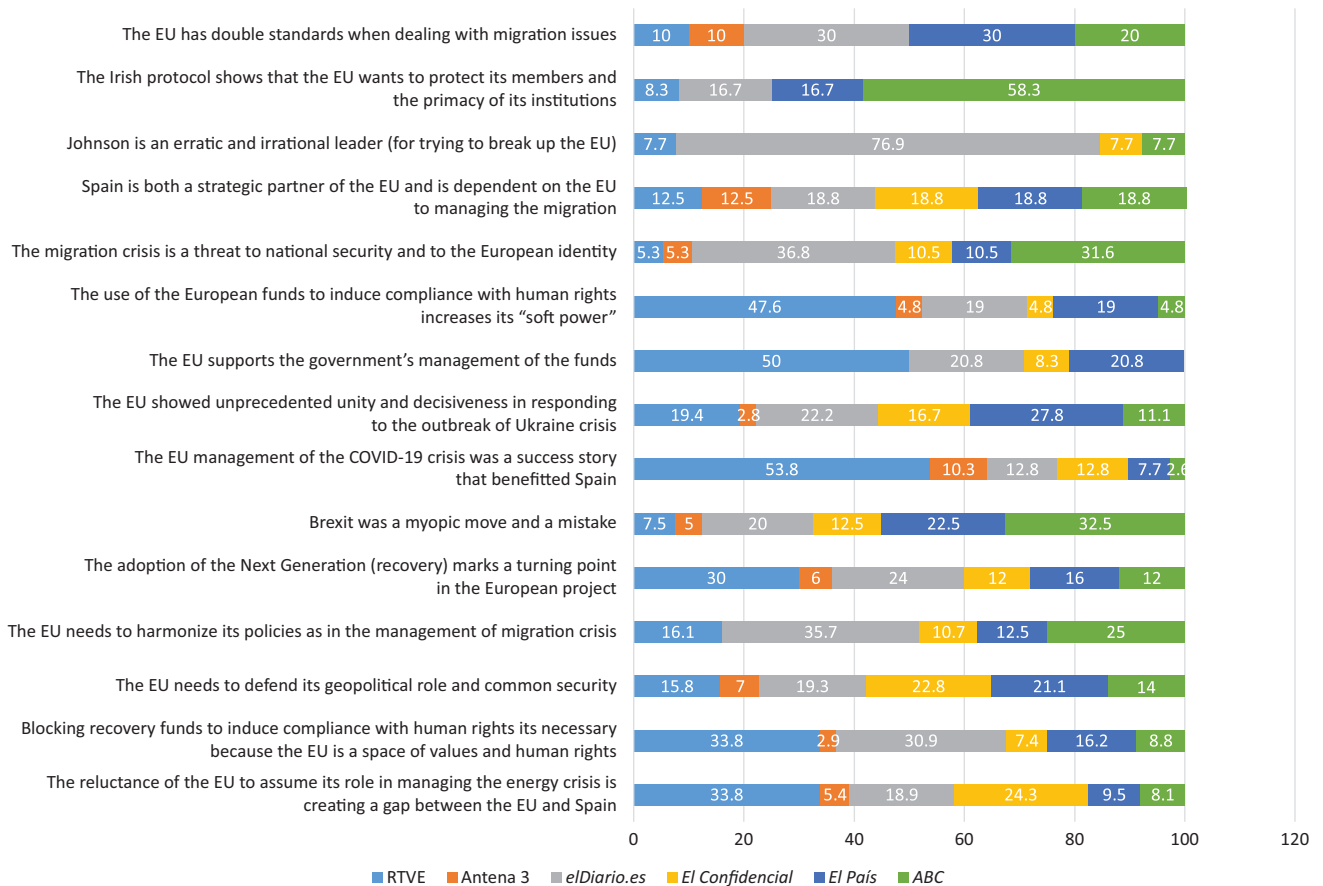

Figure 2. Dominant discourses per media outlet in percentages.

for each media outlet regarding the EU, as well as the adjacent and counterdiscourses.

Among those discourses, we identified two discursive units connected to geopolitics. The first one focuses on the geopolitical role of the EU and its security structures in general; the second one focuses on the EU's response to the war in Ukraine. As can be seen in Figure 3, the major discourse detected in the first unit calls for the EU to strengthen its geopolitical role. Adjacent discourses criticize the excessive dependence of the EU on NATO and highlight the negative impact of internal divisions among EU member states on the EU's geopolitical role.

The major discourse detected in relation to the second unit focuses on the EU's response to the crisis in Ukraine. According to this discourse, the EU has demonstrated unprecedented decisiveness and unity in its response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This discourse was supported by adjacent discourses highlighting the increased cooperation between EU member states in the domain of security and defense, and a discourse on the improved relations between the EU and NATO. However, one minor counter-discourse was detected, which accused the EU of being too slow and ineffective in responding to the crisis; these minor narratives were more prevalent at the beginning of the crisis. It is worth noting that only two items suggested that the sanctions could impoverish EU citizens.

3.4. Critical Discourse Analysis

In the final stage of our research, we used critical discourse analysis to uncover communicative strategies, hidden meanings, and connections in the sample. At this point attention is paid to the reconfiguration of the sayable: (a) what is said and how it is said in the identified discourses, (b) how these discourses change over time, and (c) how they are appropriated by different actors (Foucault, 1991).

4. Analysis

4.1. Quantitative Analysis

While news items covering issues related to geopolitics were detected throughout the period of analysis, the Russian invasion of Ukraine led to increased coverage of geopolitical issues. This can be seen clearly in Figures 3 and 4. As can be seen in Figure 1, news items covering defense and cybersecurity amounted to 2.24% of the final sample. Likewise, new items covering disinformation and fake news amounted to 2.64% of the sample. News items on global politics amounted to 5.43% of the sample. This category included news on geopolitical issues such as Brexit, and the EU's relationship with the US and other actors. In comparison, news relating to the crisis in Ukraine, including the sanctions against Russia and the energy crisis resulting from the war, amounted to 19.57% of the sample, even though they emerged only toward the end of the period of analysis. Figures 4 and 5 demonstrate the increase in news items on geopolitics with the outbreak of the war.

Likewise, and this is particularly relevant as Figure 4 shows, among the issues related to the EU's geopolitical role, there are two that most increase its presence in the context of the war in Ukraine. These are the unity and decisiveness shown by the EU in the context of this crisis, and the need for the EU to defend its geopolitical role.
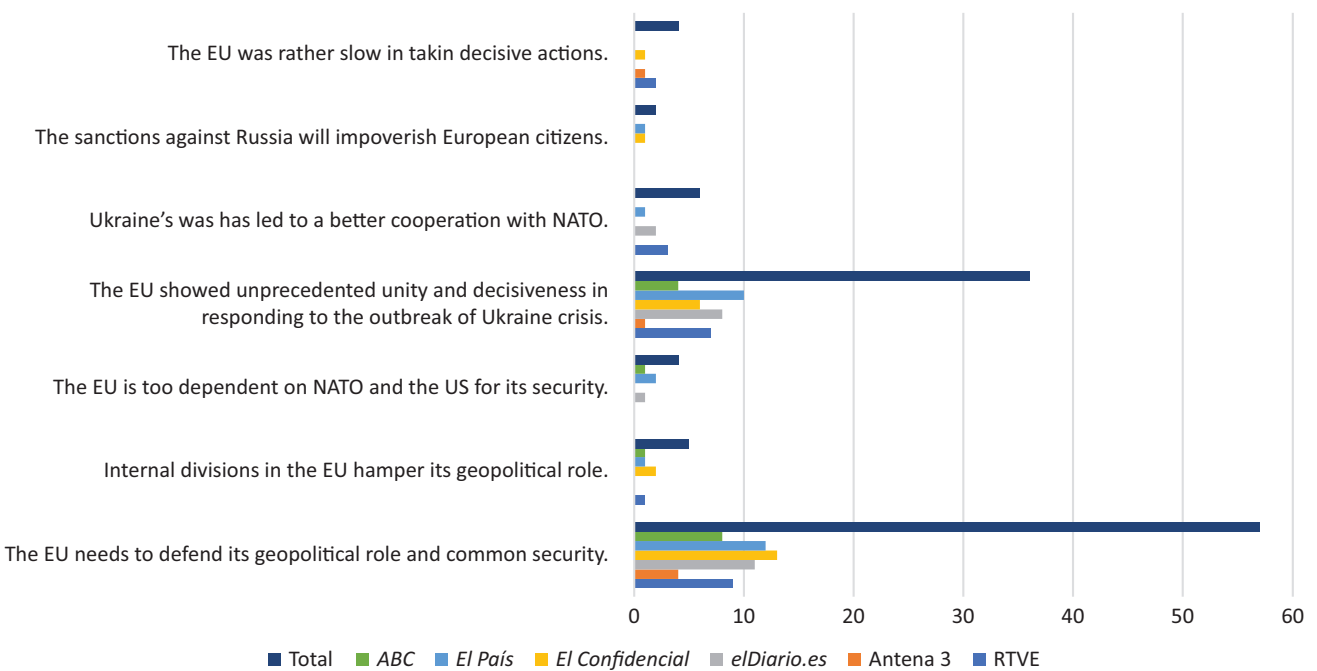
Figure 3. Major and adjacent discourse on geopolitics per media outlet.
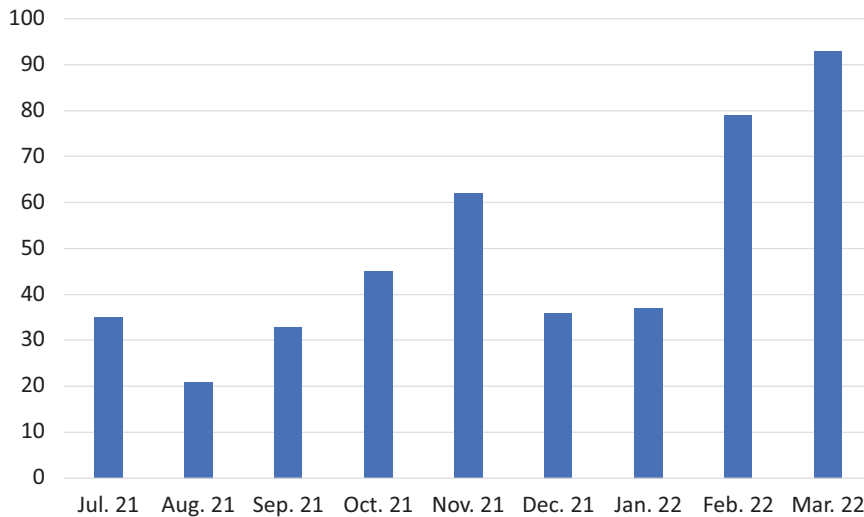
Figure 4. Total news on geopolitics per month.
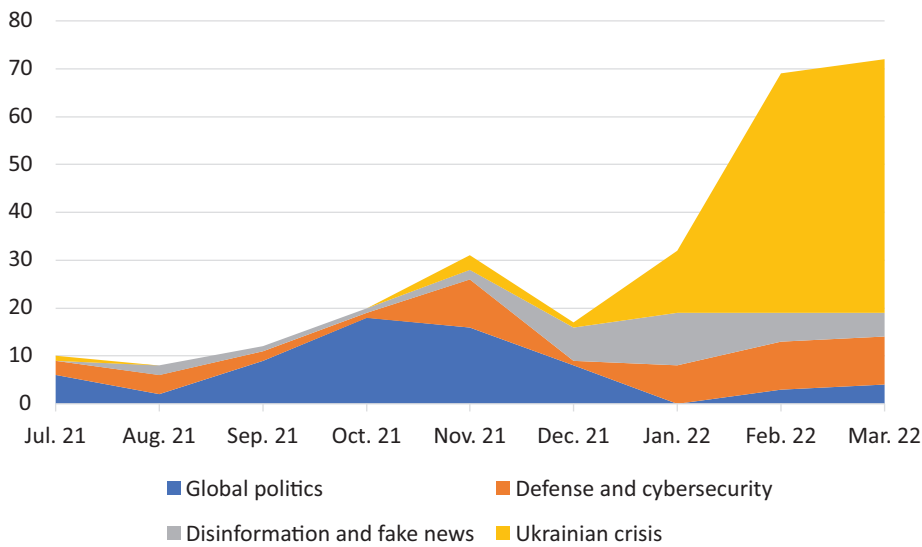
Figure 5. Geopolitics themes per month.

4.2. Qualitative Analysis

At the beginning of the period of analysis, media discourses tended to criticize the EU's geopolitical leadership with statements like "Europe is in a merely reactive position" (Naïr, 2021). Some items portrayed the EU as a weak geopolitical actor, compared to the US, China, and Russia:

> Faced with the economic, military, political and ideological hegemony of the United States, [both] Russia and China act as a permanent strategic counterweight in the domain of armament or economy. Meanwhile, Europe, apart from its commercial capacity, has no role to play. It is not a nation, nor can it even think of a simple cooperative military force. Experience to date has also shown that Europe is in a merely reactive position: in Africa, in the Mediterranean and in the countries of the East, not

to mention its exclusion from the Middle East and its non-existence in the Pacific, the main focus of world economic growth. (Naïr, 2021)

This vulnerability is reflected in additional headlines, such as "Victim of Its History: Why Does Europe Find It so Hard to Achieve Its Strategic Autonomy From the United States?" (Rodríguez, 2021), or "The European Union, trapped Between US Determination and Russia's Alliance With China" (Sánchez, 2022). Spanish media link the current vulnerability of the EU to past historic events:

> Europe is the victim of a history marked for centuries….Any excuse has been good enough to go to war in the Old Continent: religion, empires, dynasties, colonial competition, borders, ideological clashes, and State-building as a key part of the international order. After the First and Second World Wars, the United States helped take the use of force out of

the European equation, assuming a military protagonism that has ended up proving unsustainable. (Rodríguez, 2021)

Josep Borrell, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs, is a central actor in the construction of the narratives on the need to enhance the EU's common security, with his famous statement "we love the world of Kant, but we live in the world of Hobbes" (Gil, 2022a). The Strategic Compass is portrayed as a first step toward achieving this goal:

> Josep Borrell has completed the draft of the so-called Strategic Compass, a document that aims to forge a common position in the EU on the geopolitical threats facing the club and that proposes, as a first step, the creation of a military force of emergency before 2025. "Europe is in danger and Europeans are not always aware of it," warns Borrell during a meeting held with the main European media. (Gil, 2022a)

This line of critique was detected in conservative and progressive media alike. There are two factors that are highlighted by the media that explain this weakness. The first factor is the lack of unity between EU member states. Ultra-nationalistic governments are portrayed as posing a serious challenge to the EU by media outlets regardless of their ideological tendencies. This is reflected in headlines such as "Do Two European Unions Fit in Europe?" (González Pons, 2021). The prospect of additional members exiting the Union is perceived as a threat:

> Representatives of Poland's ruling nationalist and populist party have declared that if the EU does not behave as they expect it to, they will have to seek drastic solutions just as the British did. This is a warning that, on the one hand, is credible given the Polish government's constant decisions. (González Pons, 2021)

"Polexit" is seen as a threat since it could signify a devaluation of the EU and its membership. As a result, the Spanish media attempts to highlight the value of this membership by bringing the voice of the Polish people to reassert the value and importance of belonging to the EU:

> If we weren't in the European Union, we would now be like Ukraine or like Belarus, you know? The Russians would be threatening us and half of Poland would be trying to cross the border to go to Germany. (Gayo Macías, 2021)

Borrell himself frames internal divisions as a source of geopolitical weakness:

> There is a structural element that remains: the EU-27's worldviews are so different that it is very dif-

ficult to build unanimous positions. This has a cost: if Europe wants to be a geopolitical actor or if we want to use the language of power, we need to have the same understanding of the world. (González, 2021)

The second factor that explains the geopolitical weakness of the EU is the lack of sufficient geopolitical autonomy and the excessive dependence on NATO and the US. This discourse emerges in connection to the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the conclusion of AUKUS (the trilateral security pact between Australia, the UK, and the US). The critique of the EU's lack of geopolitical autonomy is reflected in headlines such as: "The Afghanistan Crisis Demonstrates the Weakness of European Foreign Policy and Its Dependence on the US" (Gil, 2021a). Other statements describe these developments as a wake-up call for the EU:

> Some describe the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan and the AUKUS agreement between the US, Australia, and the UK as a wake-up call for Europe. The European Commissioner for the Internal Market at the Atlantic Council declares: "after recent events, there is a strong perception that trust between the EU and the US has been eroded." (Gil, 2021b)

A TV presenter described the outcomes of AUKUS for France's submarine deal as an "open wound," and that the agreement created a rift between Washington and the EU that felt excluded. The presenter uses the term "*sentar como un tiro*" (had the effect of the gunshot) to describe how the EU was impacted by the agreement (Cifuentes & Muñoz, 2021). Another item highlights that "some European governments have felt belittled by the US treatment" (Alarcón, 2021). In a sense, these discourses on the rift between the EU and the US reopen the question of a group relationship between the EU and the US (Van Dijk, 2013). This historical friendship is suddenly questioned by the above-mentioned discourses that oppose the hierarchal relationship between the EU and the US.

However, the outbreak of the war in Ukraine transforms some of the discourses on the EU's geopolitical role. Discourses on weakness and internal divisions are replaced by discourses on decisiveness and unity. Likewise, discourses on the hierarchy between the US and EU and on the erosion of trust are replaced with discourses on mutual respect and enhanced collaboration. This change does not happen overnight. At the beginning of the crisis, the Spanish media calls for robust European action while questioning its ability to do so. Also here, Spanish media construct the meaning of current events based on past historic events:

> We Spaniards are as familiar with the images of Franco with Hitler in Hendaye as we are with those of Soviet soldiers planting the flag with the hammer and sickle on the Reichstag after the fall of Berlin in

May 1945….These events are worth remembering in the face of those who argue that what is happening in Ukraine is not the business of European democracies and those who claim Russia's right to "take back its territory" or to defend its citizens living on Ukrainian territory. What is at stake today is Europe's and the West's response to a new attack by the enemies of democracy and freedom. (Martín Barbero, 2022)

In the early stages of the Ukrainian crisis, the media cast doubts on the ability of the EU to respond decisively to Russia's aggressive behavior. This is reflected in headlines such as "Everyone Calls Papa Biden: Putin Pricks the Balloon of European Strategic Autonomy" (Alarcón, 2022a). This item suggests that strategic autonomy was nothing more than an inflated balloon and unrealistic:

Despite all the European efforts in recent months to change the dynamic, to start a serious debate on the need to achieve the oft-mentioned "strategic autonomy," the threat against Ukraine by Russian President Vladimir Putin has once again put Europe's feet on the ground. (Martín Barbero, 2022)

Some media ridicule the EU's policy, with headlines such as "You to Washington and me to Moscow: The European Diplomatic Swarm at Ukraine Crisis" (Alarcón, 2022b). However, with the imposition of a series of harsh sanctions on Russia, our analysis detected a transformation in media discourses that parted from the image of weakness created by previous discourses. The sanctions are portrayed by the media as decisive measures and a sign of unity. This is reflected in headlines such as "Von der Leyen Threatens With 'Brutal Sanctions'" ("Borrell, sobre Ucrania," 2022), or statements such as:

The extraordinary European Council convened urgently in Brussels, has agreed new sanctions "with very harsh and severe consequences for Russia for its action....We have approved a package of massive sanctions that together with the G7 and together with other economies, what we are going to do is inflict very significant economic damage on the Putin government," said the President of the Government, Pedro Sánchez. (Gil, 2021c)

The decisiveness of the EU is captured through the repeated use of words such as massive and pay:

The European Union has announced that it will respond with "massive" sanctions to Russia's military aggression against Ukraine, assuring that Russian President Vladimir Putin will "pay." ("Borrell, sobre Ucrania," 2022)

The imposition of sanctions on Russia is viewed as a necessary measure to underpin the EU's normative power. Therefore, the sanctions are justified by resorting to prag-

matic and identitarian arguments. This is reflected in the following statement by Borrell:

We must stand united in support of Ukraine, of our security and global stability. This has a price, it is not free, the sanctions will affect us, they have a cost, we must be willing to pay this price now because if not tomorrow it will be much higher. (Gil, 2022b)

A more direct invocation of values such as freedom and democracy to justify the EU's harsh response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine is evident in another speech by Borrell, in which he says "we will not allow this to end with a suppression of the freedom of the Ukrainians and with their legitimate government, replaced by a puppet government" (Redondo, 2022). Fear of disproval of the sanctions due to their possible impact on gas prices triggered the most powerful narratives on the importance of solidarity, as expressed by Borrell:

Everyone should make an individual effort to cut gas consumption….When Russia invaded Crimea we said that we need to reduce our dependence on Russian gas. From then until now we have increased it. Cut off the gas in your homes, reduce the dependency on those who attack Ukraine and [let us] commit ourselves more to a collective defense. This is a treaty obligation to which we have paid far too little attention so far. (de Bobadilla, 2022b)

Beyond describing the sanctions as massive, harsh, or severe, media discourses portray the EU as going through a transformation. The decision of the EU to arm Ukraine seems to mark a clear deviation from its historical preference to deploy diplomacy over military measures. This deviation is described as the breaking of a taboo by EU actors themselves:

After the meeting with the EU Defense Ministers, the High Representative for Cooperation and Security of the EU explained the breaking of "a taboo," that "a peace alliance, such as the EU, could not bring weapons to a third country." (Gil, 2022b)

This deviation is framed in a positive tone, as reflected in the item "Questions and Answers on the Shipment of Arms From the European Union to Ukraine" published by *El País*:

The war in Ukraine has prompted the European Union to adopt new measures aimed at defending the country against attack from Russia. The European Commission will coordinate the purchase of lethal material—also non-lethal—to arm the Ukrainian Army, in a decision that represents a milestone in its defense policy, as it is the first time it has participated in the purchase of weapons and assumes the coordination to distribute the material….450 mil-

lion euros will be allocated for combat weapons and 50 million for non-lethal material. The European Commission thus wants to encourage partners to send weapons and not simply defensive or medical equipment. (de Miguel, 2022)

Some items even speak of "a new Europe":

Today's conference has focused mainly on how to finance that Europe that is more independent of Russia's energy or that is more militarily strong, that new Europe, as Emmanuel Macron said yesterday, that has to emerge in the face of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. (de Bobadilla, 2022b)

This construction of a new Europe is also implicit in a key speech by Borrell, according to which:

We all prefer butter over guns, the EU countries spent, fifty years ago, 4% of their GDP on defense, and now this amounts to 1.5% of their GDP….But now we have to say that our way of life has a price, that we have Europe like a French garden, and outside the jungle grows. And if we want our garden not to be invaded, we must take care of it and defend it. (Gil, 2022c)

As mentioned earlier, discourses on internal divisions are replaced by discourses on unprecedented unity between EU member states. What makes this unity unique is the fact that it includes even Eurosceptic governments, such as the Polish government. However, some occasional rifts are noted involving the same EU member states, i.e., Germany and Hungary. In the case of Germany, the media attributes its initial hesitance to approve certain sanctions involving Russian gas to its dependence on it (Clemente, 2022; Serbeto, 2022). In the case of Hungary, the media attributes Orbán's position not only to energy considerations but also because he is a "friend" of Putin (Mañueco, 2022).

The ideological differences between the analyzed media outlets are almost unnoticeable in the coverage of the Ukraine war; this can be seen from the fact that the news items are practically the same in many cases (almost verbatim) regardless of the different orientations, political leanings, or editorial lines of the media in which they appear.

The EU's response to the war in Ukraine also redefines the borders of Europe by reopening the question of who we are and who belongs to us (Van Dijk, 2013). This leads to the emergence of "us vs. them" rhetoric, the "us" being Europe, a space of values, where people are "outraged" in the face of the "brutal" actions of the other, which is Russia—a country that "has no respect to international laws," as highlighted by Von der Leyen (de Bobadilla, 2022a), and this "us vs. them" dichotomy is represented in additional forms, such as the above-mentioned quote by Borrell on Europe being a "French garden, and outside the jungle grows" (see Gil, 2022c).

The war in Ukraine also alters the discourses on the EU's relationship with NATO and the US. The language of "dependency" is replaced by the language of cooperation between equals. The EU is portrayed as capable of forging constructive cooperation with third states and organizations, especially NATO. Examples include: "The NATO Secretary General said: 'We are monitoring the situation closely, and we continue to consult among allies and with partners such as Ukraine and the European Union'" (Gil, 2021d), or "the President of the Council of Europe, Charles Michel, recalled in Munich that the EU and NATO are working on a new joint declaration that should be adopted soon" (Rizzi & Sevillano, 2022).

5. Conclusions

The EU has always had great difficulty speaking with one voice. These difficulties have been particularly pronounced on issues related to the Union's foreign policy, and security and defense policy. This has contributed to the EU's reduced capacity to act as a genuine geopolitical actor, despite its insistence on the importance of its normative power. Over the last decades, episodes such as Kosovo and the annexation of Crimea were strong proof of this. In the case of Spain, for many years the scarce presence of news related to the EU's external role was a reflection of this reality. However, the large-scale invasion launched by Russia in February 2022 seems to have changed things. The analysis of the Spanish media that we have explained in these pages reflects how this event has led to a notable increase in news related to the EU's external dimension in the Spanish media. At the same time, the narratives and discourses identifiable in these news items have also transformed substantially. Indeed, the passing months show the shift from a reactive and vulnerable EU to one that is increasingly determined, united, and effective, with a more considerable role on the international stage—including in its relations with NATO—and whose members are now even more aware of the value of belonging to the organization, leaving little room for even the most Eurosceptic approaches. Using Foucault's (1991) framework, at the beginning of the period of analysis the EU is portrayed as a weak geopolitical actor. In terms of the sayable, two main issues are highlighted to construct this image of weakness. First, the EU is portrayed as lacking strategic and geopolitical autonomy due to its excessive dependence on NATO and the US. This dependence is portrayed as hierarchal, as opposed to a relationship between equals. Second, internal division within the EU and competing national interests are also blamed for this weakness, with ultranationalistic government perceived as a threat to the integration project. With the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, discourses begin to transform; the language of weakness is replaced by the language of decisiveness, and the language of division is replaced by the language of unprecedented unity. Even the relationship with NATO is perceived as more balanced. It is important

to note that no ideological divisions were noted when analyzing the news. Media outlets from the left and the right were supportive of the EU's response to the war, giving visibility to EU elites for constructing supportive narratives.

Additionally, the transformation of media discourses on the geopolitical role of the EU goes beyond perceiving the EU as a more decisive and united actor; they also demonstrate a transformation in the framing of the EU's geopolitical role. The discourses on a vulnerable EU at the beginning of the period of analysis focus on a narrow conception of security paying less attention to the role of the EU as a normative power. However, the discourses emerging after the Russian invasion of Ukraine resort, in part, to normative language on the role of the EU in defending democratic values and freedom on a global scale to gain public support for imposing sanctions that have a price. Interestingly, enhancing the role of the EU as a normative actor goes hand in hand with enhancing its common defense and security policies. As mentioned in the analysis, this change is portrayed as the breaking of a taboo, given the EU's willingness to go beyond its traditional diplomacy and arm Ukraine to assist it in exercising its right to self-defense. It remains to be seen if these discourses on a stronger and a more unified EU persist over time since our analysis covers only the first months of the war.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Article

Measuring Receptivity to Eurosceptic Media Discourses in the Vicinity of War: Evidence from Romania

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Abstract
Ever since its accession to the EU, Romania was considered an exceptional case among member states, given the unwavering high levels of popular support for the EU. However, the most recent elections held in Romania brought about the unexpected emergence of the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), a far-right populist party that strongly opposes the European project, which it accuses of resembling "a harmful hegemony." The war in Ukraine represented another chance for AUR to bash the EU for its reaction in supporting Ukraine. The current article examines the degree to which anti-EU appeals of AUR influence Eurosceptic attitudes in Romania. In doing so, the present research pursues two distinct, but complementary goals. The first is to perform a content analysis of Eurosceptic narratives disseminated by AUR through its main social media channels since the start of the war. The second goal is then, employing four logistic regression models and using unique data collected through an online interactive survey, to test which of these narratives matter the most in shaping Eurosceptic attitudes. The article allows us to develop a nuanced understanding of what triggered a change of heart in a significant part of the Romanian electorate vis-à-vis the EU and the influence of Eurosceptic media discourse in this sense.

Keywords
Euroscepticism; far-right; political communication; populism; Romania; social media; war

Issue
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1. Introduction

Euroscepticism is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon that comprises a range of concerns regarding the EU and its policies. Both earlier (Boomgaarden et al., 2011; Hooghe & Marks, 2007; Taggart, 1998; Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2002) and more recent studies (Mariano & Schneider, 2022; Treib, 2021) seek to identify the factors that drive its success. Most explanations rest on perceptions related to economic insecurity, political legitimacy, or cultural anxiety.

For Eastern European countries, Euroscepticism is primarily linked to the fear of being "absorbed" by a larger "progressive" Western European culture. Therefore, it has developed around issues such as national culture,

tradition, and religion. Additionally, Euroscepticism is often explained by disappointment with the outcome of the political transition these countries have experienced, given the very high expectations that accompanied their accession to the EU (Styczyńska, 2017). As such, it was argued that the two main types of Euroscepticism are on the one hand identity-based, and on the other policy-based (Riischøj, 2004). The first type represents opposition to transforming the European project into a cultural melting pot, where people of different cultural (ethnic, national, sexual, etc.) backgrounds fuse. The second one represents resistance to decisions taken in Brussels which then must be implemented at the national level, questioning the legitimacy of EU institutions; this is an expression of the idea that the EU

should limit integration (Styczyńska, 2017) and enlargement (Bélanger & Wunsch, 2022). For our study, we will refer to the first as attitudes towards EU politics and to the latter as attitudes towards EU policies.

Studying public opinion at the European level, De Vries (2018, p. viii) framed a benchmark theory grounded on the idea that "people's evaluations of and experiences with the European project are fundamentally framed by the national circumstances in which they find themselves." Moreover, although voters' attitudes towards the EU may be similar for supporters of parties in the same family, the different experiences of Western Europe and Central and Eastern Europe countries may undergird various cleavages to substantiate support for the far right; for instance, citizens' dissatisfaction with post-communist democracy is highly compatible with far-right parties' anti-democratic rhetoric (Allen, 2017). Similarly, countries of new Europe tend to embrace Euroscepticism as a way of committing to strategic autonomy, thus populist parties arguing for national interests to the detriment of adopting EU decisions in cases such as sanctions against Russia or the Ukrainian refugee crisis tend to gain traction among their publics (Song, 2023).

To expand on this idea, there are at least two other explanations for Euroscepticism in Eastern Europe that need to be taken into consideration, especially in light of the ongoing war in Ukraine. Although with different intensities, communist nostalgia is still a driving force behind Euroscepticism in Eastern Europe, as it stems from the belief that the EU has failed to deliver on its promises of prosperity and security and that the communist era was a time of greater economic stability and social cohesion. Recent surveys show that Communist nostalgia is particularly prevalent in countries like Hungary, Poland, and Romania, a sentiment that is not specific only to older generations but is also growing among younger people who were born after the fall of communism (Wike et al., 2019). Many times, communist nostalgia is wrapped in a sentiment of admiration for Vladimir Putin's Russia. Recent studies have highlighted that higher levels of communist nostalgia determine resentment towards the West and support for authoritarianism (Neundorf et al., 2020). Examining supporters of pro-Russian parties in the EU and those of mainstream parties, Snegovaya (2022) found that the electoral bases of most pro-Russian parties hold significantly more Eurosceptic attitudes, being particularly vulnerable to Kremlin's anti-EU narratives. Scholars identified a "Russia-friendly" type of Euroscepticism (Tereszkiewicz, 2018), that praises the superiority of Russia over the EU or supports the idea that the EU is responsible for the deterioration of its relations with Russia. Throughout the current article, we will refer to these viewpoints as attitudes towards Russia.

Finally, the war in Ukraine has generated yet another source of Euroscepticism in Eastern Europe, as countries in this region have been confronted with a massive influx of Ukrainian refugees. According to publicly available statistics, most of the 8.1 million refugees from Ukraine crossed borders with Poland and Romania to reach safety (UNHCR, 2023). The refugee intake put pressure on the two states, which overnight needed to find financial resources to help Ukrainians fleeing their own country. Refugee crises pose risks for European democracies, as they meet popular contestation over issues related to sovereignty and polarise the electorate especially when it comes to quotas; populist actors can capitalise on such opportunities to develop negative anti-establishment narratives, thus undermining citizens' trust in the EU (Bustikova & Guasti, 2017). The Ukrainian refugee crisis was a window of opportunity for Eurosceptics to exhibit their welfare chauvinism, in line with their view of the "otherness" as a threat to the economic stability of the society (Mudde, 2022). People who accept such ideas consider that the support given to Ukraine is what fuels the war. As such, they consider the war to be the result of Ukraine's unwillingness to let go or negotiate peace with Russia. Within our study, we refer to this new line of Eurosceptic positioning as attitudes towards Ukraine.

2. The Rise of Euroscepticism in Romania: The Alliance for the Union of Romanians

Both before and after their country's accession to the EU, Romanian citizens' level of trust in the EU remained well over that of the average numbers in other EU countries. As a result, in much of the research devoted to the subject, Romania came to be known for its almost non-existent political Euroscepticism (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2002). For quite some time, Romania had been an exception in the region, as Eurosceptics were absent from its political landscape (Popescu & Vesalon, 2022).

However, the situation turned around rather suddenly. Romania held elections in December 2020, and the outcome has taken politicians, analysts, journalists, and even pollsters aback: In the context of a very low turnout (31.91%), the populist ultra-conservative Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) became the county's fourth largest party in Parliament, with 9.1% of the entire share of votes. What is more surprising is that AUR's gain came only three months after the local elections, when it capitalised only about 1% of the entire vote share.

The success of AUR also marked an important moment in the political history of post-communist Romania: never has the Eurosceptic discourse proven so appealing for a significant part of those who participate in elections. Capitalising on the citizens' decreasing trust in the state and the EU during the Covid-19 pandemic, AUR's innovative campaigning style heavily relied on controversy and spectacle expressed via new technologies; their rhetoric was infused with old ideological devices such as nationalism, religion, and traditional values, as well as new ones, like environmentalism and critique against globalisation (Doiciar & Crețan, 2021).

Moreover, they created a distinctive anti-communist narrative, in which, for instance, they oppose "communist" EU policies, coupled with anti-neo-Marxist rhetoric framing "gender ideology" or multiculturalism as enemies of the people (Popescu & Vesalon, 2022). The anti-gender tropes used by AUR in their political discourse, such as "gender ideology" or "LGBTQ propaganda," mirror the rhetoric employed by populists in other European countries (Dragolea, 2022). The latter appeal to Christian heritage as a form of resistance against EU-imposed "cultural aggression," such as political correctness, expression of freedom limitations, or the "madness" of gender ideology (McMahon, 2022). This is particularly important for AUR's rhetoric due to the fact that mobilising individuals based on religious ties can be a profitable strategy in post-communist countries (Allen, 2017), as supporters of pro-Russian parties from post-Communist European countries are more likely to hold traditionalist views on sexual minorities and generally embrace cultural conservatism (Snegovaya, 2022).

But in general, studying the rise of AUR is relevant for quite a number of reasons: Firstly, it allows us to understand the dynamics of the anti-EU discourse not only in Romania but in the broader European context, after the Covid-19 pandemic and during the war in Ukraine. As such, it brings a solid contribution to a strain of academic literature that is only now developing. Secondly, AUR is a relevant case study because it strengthens the argument that social media is an optimal environment for the amplification and dissemination of narratives that challenge the EU (Fortunato & Pecoraro, 2022). As such, the current article brings a meaningful insight into what narratives disseminated via social media spark discontent with the EU. Thirdly, AUR is a significant case study because it advocates against the process of Europeanisation, eroding trust in the idea of a united Europe and undermining cooperation. Understanding what are the main arguments that trigger Eurosceptic sentiments is especially important in the lead-up to the campaign for the EU elections. Therefore, the relevance of this case study goes beyond Romania, as similar narratives can be used by populist forces in quite a number of EU countries, especially those in which citizens' anxieties related to ongoing events coincide (Fernández et al., 2023).

The rise of AUR has also elevated the political power of social media to new heights. Not only did social media allow this new party to rise from obscurity (Ghender, 2021), but through the regimented use of Facebook, AUR managed to disseminate its ideas in ways that the mainstream media was not capable of. As such, Facebook has remained the preferred communication channel of AUR, a platform that it uses to distribute and circulate its Eurosceptic narratives. Therefore, the current article seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the main Eurosceptic narratives disseminated by AUR through Facebook?

RQ2: Which of AUR's narratives matters most in shaping the Eurosceptic attitudes of citizens?

3. Research Design

3.1. Data

The current article uses two sets of data: firstly, textual data representing the media discourse of AUR and its leader George Simion, which consists of Facebook posts published on their official social media pages between 24th February 2022 (the date of the Russian invasion) and 31st December 2022 (n = 895). The data was collected manually.

Secondly, to measure receptivity to the Eurosceptic media discourse of AUR, we employed a large-N non-probability data set collected online in the first year of the war waged by the Russian Federation against Ukraine. The data collection fully complied with EU privacy (General Data Protection Regulation) regulations and adhered to the ethical norms of the university under which the research was conducted. The variables included in the analyses were asked as part of a political compass which was launched in 2022, after the start of the war in Ukraine. A sample of 5,709 respondents provided answers to all of the variables included in our study. For all analyses in the current article, we make use of this sample. However, given the fact that, in general, political compasses generate opt-in samples that are non-representative of the general population (van de Pol et al., 2019), we limited sampling error by using targeted recruitment: The sample obtained closely matches the characteristics of the general population of Romania, as presented by the 2021 census (National Institute of Statistics, 2022). As such, in terms of gender, our sample is formed of 51.2% female respondents and 48.8% male respondents. In terms of education, 78.3% of the respondents have a lower and medium level of education, whereas 22.7% have a university diploma. In addition, 57.9% of the total number of respondents reside in urban areas, whereas the rest 42.1% are in rural areas.

Using data from a political compass was especially relevant for the current study given the fact that academic literature underlines how, in general, data collected through online political compasses are superior in studying the sources of radical party support (e.g., Hooghe & Teepe, 2007; Wall et al., 2009), and AUR perfectly fits in the profile of such a political party (Cmeciu, 2023).

3.2. Content Analysis of Alliance for the Union of Romanians Media Discourse

To capture a nuanced understanding of AUR's media discourse, we broke the timeline of the war waged by Russia against Ukraine into four main phases. Figure 1 provides a timeline referring to the year 2022 and indicates the four stages that we analysed, as well as relevant milestones for each of the phases.
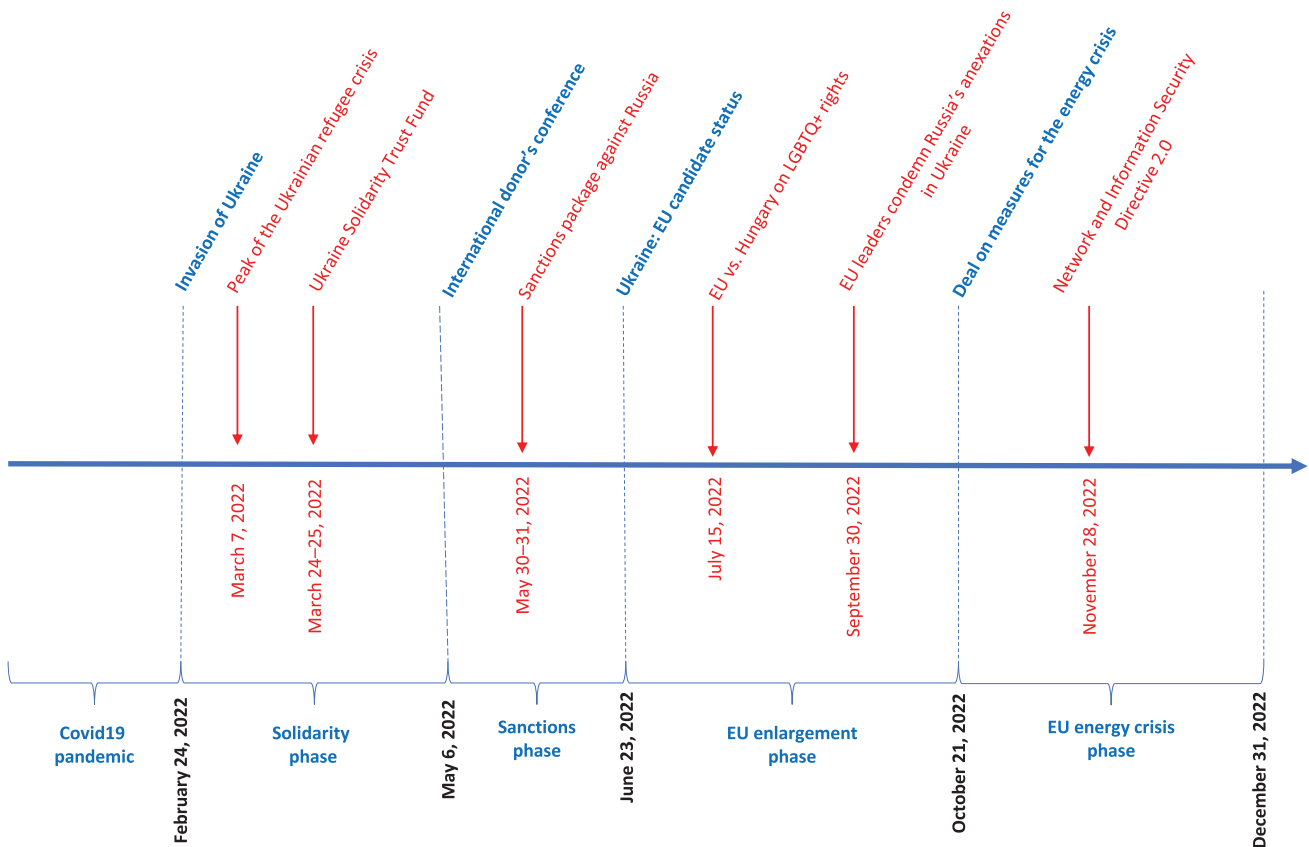
Figure 1. Timeline and phases of the Russian-Ukrainian war (2022).

Due to AUR's masterful use of Facebook to maximise its reach for success among the public, through its content and that of its leader, George Simion (Coțofană, 2023; Doiciar & Crețan, 2021), the media discourse of AUR was analysed based on a corpus formed from both Facebook pages (see Supplementary Material). Their posts consisted of text, photo, and video content that was structured into eight documents (referenced in the analysis as AUR1, GS1, etc., corresponding to each phase in the timeline and each actor analysed), further coded and analysed using ATLAS.ti. Photo and video content was accessed through the links to the posts found in the eight documents and coded accordingly. The code groups and markers relied on literature on Eurosceptic narratives in political parties' discourse (as shown in Table 1) and were compiled to unpack AUR's Eurosceptic narratives in wartime. Intercoder reliability was computed using ATLAS.ti Inter-coder Agreement mode and resulted in a Krippendorf's alpha of 0.93 across code groups. The novelty of our approach comes from combining AUR's media discourse with public opinion data, thus contributing to a deeper understanding of Euroscepticism in the Romanian case.

3.3. Method and Variable Measurements for the Political Compass Data

This study assesses to what extent perceptions of EU policies, perceptions of EU politics, attitudes towards Russia, and attitudes towards Ukraine have determined Euroscepticism in Romania in the context of the war that is undergoing in its vicinity. For each of these theories, corresponding independent variables are included in separate regression models to assess and compare their explanatory power. A full model comprises all variables simultaneously. The dependent variable, i.e., respondents' degree of Euroscepticism, was measured by adding together all the scores for each self-placement within the political compass. The result labelled each respondent as "Eurosceptic" which was coded as "0" and "Pro-European" which was coded as "1." Because the dependent variable is binary, we estimated logistic regression models (Abts et al., 2023; Table 2). All models include demographic control variables measuring respondents' background characteristics, i.e., age, gender, and education.

In regards to the EU policies model (POL model), to test the hypothesis that negative attitudes towards the EU as a bureaucratic apparatus will lead to Euroscepticism, the first submodel (COVID) included attitudes towards the Covid-19 vaccination mandate. The second submodel (CYSE) referred to the attitude towards EU policies on cybersecurity.

The EU politics model (POS model) tests how adversity towards the EU's identity politics leads to Euroscepticism. For the first submodel, we included opposition to EU enlargement (NEXT), and for the second one, opposition to Hungary being sanctioned for violating LGBTQ+ rights (LGBTQ+).

Table 1. Data structure.

Codes	Markers
Attitudes towards Russia	Dissatisfaction with democracy, as opposed to Russian-style authoritarianism (Zilinsky, 2019);
	Outright admiration for Russia (Polyakova, 2014);
	Communist nostalgia (Boym, 1995);
	Desire not to harm relations with Russia (Abts et al., 2023);
	References to infringement on Russia's sphere of influence (MacFarlane & Menon, 2014);
	Framing energy independence from Russia as impossible/extremely costly/harmful (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014).
EU policies	Covid-19 conspiracies (Eberl et al., 2021);
	Negative effects of anti-Covid-19 vaccination (Żuk & Żuk, 2020);
	Fostering distrust in EU cybersecurity policies (Carrapico & Farrand, 2021);
	Lack of trust in online privacy (Kerry & Brotman, 2017).
EU politics	Opposition towards EU enlargement (Bélanger & Wunsch, 2022);
	Framing the EU as the "main" cause of the war (Ádám, 2023);
	Rejecting deeper EU integration (Gómez-Reino & Llamazares, 2013);
	Outlining incompatibility with EU values, practices, and norms (Meret & Siim, 2013);
	Stressing identity politics (Noury & Roland, 2020);
	"Gender ideology" as a threat (Kováts, 2018);
	"Othering" LGBTQ+ movements, people (Yermakova, 2021).
Attitudes towards Ukraine	Cultural incompatibility with Ukrainian refugees (Styczyńska, 2018);
	Welfare chauvinism (Havlík & Kluknavská, 2023);
	Condemning Ukraine's refusal to communicate/negotiate with Russia (Soare, 2023);
	Historical anguish between Romania and Ukraine/Troublesome neighbourhood (Kruglashov, 2011);
	Framing Ukraine as the "real" cause of the war (Ádám, 2023).

The attitudes towards Russia model (RUS model) is divided into two submodels. The first submodel (SRU) refers to the support of respondents for EU sanctions against Russia. We hypothesised that those who are not supportive of sanctions imposed by the EU against Russia are more likely to be Eurosceptic. In the second submodel (EIRU) we look at how less support for energy independence from Russia generates Euroscepticism.

Finally, the attitudes towards Ukraine model (UKR model) tested whether a lack of support for Ukraine generates more Euroscepticism. The first submodel (UKRR) refers to the idea of integrating Ukrainian refugees into Romanian society, and the second submodel (REUKR) looks at how opposing the idea of supporting the reconstruction of Ukraine leads to more Euroscepticism. All independent variables are measured on a five-point scale ranging from −2 = *totally disagree* to 2 = *totally agree* (Cronbach's α = 0.85).

4. Results

4.1. Content Analysis

Results indicate that the Eurosceptic media discourse of AUR and its leader, George Simion, displayed a subtle, yet corrosive rhetoric throughout the phases under analysis, by skilfully framing anti-EU narratives and fuelling anti-EU sentiment via domestic issues and blaming assigned actors of the establishment. Table 3 provides an overview of the results, mapping the most salient topics AUR tackled in each phase of the Russian-Ukrainian war, as well as the distribution of Eurosceptic narratives across AUR's discourse.

Overall, the most recurrent topics in AUR and George Simion's Facebook posts across the four phases under analysis consist of EU politics (42.49%). Narratives related to attitudes towards Ukraine (26.61%) and

Table 2. Overview of hypotheses by model and submodel.

Model	Submodel	Number	Hypotheses
RUS	SRU	1	Citizens who are not supportive of EU sanctions against Russia are more likely to be Eurosceptic.
	EIRU	2	Citizens who are less supportive of energy independence from Russia are more likely to be Eurosceptic.
POL	COVID	3	Those who opposed the anti-Covid-19 vaccination mandate imposed by the EU are more likely to be Eurosceptic.
	CYSE	4	Those who feel unsafe with the EU cybersecurity policies that are currently in place are more likely to be Eurosceptic.
POS	NEXT	5	Opponents of EU enlargement are more likely to be Eurosceptic.
	LGBTQ+	6	Opponents of sanctions against Hungary for violating LGBTQ+ rights are more likely to be Eurosceptic.
UKR	UKRR	7	Those who oppose the idea of supporting the integration of Ukrainian refugees into society are more likely to be Eurosceptic.
	REUKR	8	Those who oppose the idea that the EU should support the reconstruction of Ukraine are more likely to be Eurosceptic.

attitudes towards Russia (20.17%) were also consistently present in their Facebook communication, but the latter dropped significantly within the EU energy crisis phase (6.38%), once the deal on measures for the energy crisis was adopted by the EU. Up until that point, AUR and George Simion communicated about how the debate surrounding energy regulation was against the national interest and live-streamed their disruptive interventions in the parliament. They also framed the government as actually representing the personal interests of public officials in the energy industry. Attitudes towards Ukraine were most intense in the Solidarity phase (31.33%) when the party and its leader focused on supporting the Romanian ethnicities in Ukraine. The least tackled topics were those related to EU policies (10.73%), and they solely emerged in the Facebook posts when referencing the economic effects of Covid-19 vaccine acquisition and the Covid-19 measures as abusive on behalf of the government. Next, the markers corresponding to the four code groups will be presented in detail, as shown in the Facebook posts of AUR and George Simion.

Throughout the phases included in our analysis, references to Russia were rather subtle and implicit, as AUR and Simion only mentioned it when referencing polarizing perspectives shown in the media or expressed by other politicians, but without a clear positioning on the Russian-Ukrainian war or Russian sanctions. For instance, Simion criticized the media for giving their manifestation pro-Ukrainian claims, emphasizing that "some call [AUR] pro-Russian, other call [them] pro-Ukrainian. [They are] merely Romanian patriots" (GS1). There were two posts in which they favoured an isolationist approach, arguing that it was "not our war" (GS4) and we should not get involved in "others' war" (AUR1); moreover, a post about protecting the Romanian minority in Ukraine ended with a vague recognition of Russia's "military aggression" and pleaded for peaceful dialogue and negotiations, yet hinting at Ukraine's refusal to engage in such an endeavour (GS1). One association of AUR with Russia was made in Simion's post on 30 October, 2022, where he cited Save Romania Union's President Dan Barna saying he hoped AUR would never become an option for governing Romania, adding that he also labelled AUR as a

Table 3. Media discourse topics of AUR and George Simion across the timeframe.

	1: Solidarity phase	2: Sanctions phase	3: EU enlargement phase	4: EU energy crisis phase	Narrative distribution
RUS	24.10%	17.65%	28.85%	6.38%	20.17%
UKR	31.33%	23.53%	23.08%	25.53%	26.61%
POL	13.25%	5.88%	9.62%	12.77%	10.73%
POS	31.33%	52.94%	38.46%	55.32%	42.49%
Totals	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

pro-Russian party and ending the post with a playful emoji, implying a joke (GS4).

Attitudes towards Russia emerging from AUR's media discourse across the first three phases were mainly focused on dissatisfaction with democracy, framing energy independence as costly, and communist nostalgia. Under the pretence of fostering national interest, AUR and Simion took positions that favoured Russia's interests. Although not employing communist nostalgia per se, they weaponized post-communist politicians' government performance to emphasize acting against citizens' interests. This feature coupled with dissatisfaction with democracy, is framed as both too authoritarian in relation to the citizens (the Covid-19 "sanitary dictatorship"; see AUR1, AUR2, GS1) and too weak in relation to the EU. In all phases of our analysis, the focus in AUR and Simion's posts was EU politics; thus, their media discourse consistently featured incompatibility with EU values, practices, and norms, from criticizing gender quotas (AUR2) or opposing sending weapon supplies to Ukraine (GS1) to inviting to boycotts due to Austria's decision to block Romania's Schengen accession (AUR4, GS4). But rather than blaming the EU directly, their positioning was mainly against the establishment in terms of "servants" of the EU (GS1, GS4), also defined as "the government of national betrayal" (GS2). However, amidst a recruitment campaign for party members in November, Simion posted a picture of AUR MPs and stated "not want[ing] to be led by Ursula von der Leyen and faceless bureaucrats" (GS4).

The topic of energy independence was incrementally introduced from the Solidarity phase, escalated in the Sanctions phase, and ramped up in the EU enlargement phase in a "patriotic violence" approach (Grapă & Mogoș, 2023); Simion's media discourse showed disruptive communication, live feeds in which he burst into media outlet headquarters or committee hearings to provoke reactions. Instead of opposing Russian sanctions, Simion boycotted Parliament's debates and voting process for Offshore Law no. 157/2022, aimed at enhancing Romania's independence from Russia, and kept the energy-related discourse in the public's attention by relating it to a salient topic for Romanian citizens, which is corruption among public officials. He attacked the Minister of Energy for theft, claiming personal ties of the minister with the oil industry (GS3), and labelled the law "a new national heist" (GS2); moreover, he mocked the government's fuel subsidy scheme for citizens (GS2, GS3).

Although gender references were missing in the Solidarity phase, "gender ideology" was framed as a threat in the following phases, as well as "othering" the LGBTQ+ movement. AUR's culturally conservative discourse included celebrating traditional family as an artefact of healthy education (AUR2, AUR3), and clearly argued against gender equality and sex education in schools (AUR2, AUR4). Moreover, they implicitly referenced EU politics when mocking the LGBTQ+ march and

the separation of "parent 1" and "parent 2" with reference to Save Romania Union's internal rupture (AUR2), and trivialized Romanian MPs debate on gender equality by denouncing wrong country priorities, detrimental to debating the treatment of Romanian citizens in the EU (AUR4). To a significantly greater extent than gender issues, AUR and Simion heavily relied on stressing identity politics in the Facebook discourse across all phases. In the construction of identity politics discourse, they invoked historic moments and romanticized the potentially unified homeland together with the Republic of Moldova, all the while framing Hungarian minority members and politicians as scapegoats for all evils.

In terms of attitudes towards Ukraine, identity politics intersected with historical anguish between Romania and Ukraine in AUR and Simion's discourse of concern for the Romanian minority in Ukraine, most prominently in the Solidarity phase (AUR1, GS1). The main claims identified in their discourse are calls for hosting Romanian families: "rather than criticising...host a Romanian family from Chernivtsi, as I will do, and the Bessarabian brothers...had rather request unification with the Country" (GS1), as well as protecting the cultural identity of Romanian minorities in Ukraine, such as through an agreement to protect the Romanian language in the region (GS1, AUR1). In a similar fashion to Vladimir Putin's gift to Igor Dodon consisting of a map of the Greater Republic of Moldova from 1790 (Soare, 2020), Simion posted a map of Greater Romania (see Figure 2), asking the followers where they were born, thus hinting at Romanian minorities from Ukraine and Moldova.

Figure 2. Example of historical anguish between Romania and Ukraine, featured in Simion's Facebook post.

Coupled with the historical anguish displayed, welfare chauvinism also emerged in AUR and Simion's discourse in various instances, when referring to the Romanian minority in Ukraine or the support offered to Ukrainian refugees, illegal migrants, or foreign economic agents rather than Romanian citizens in need (AUR1, AUR2,

AUR3, AUR4, GS1, GS4). Figure 3 features a diagram that unpacks the complex dynamics of AUR's media discourse throughout the phases of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2022.

4.2. Regression Analysis

In Table 4 we show the logistic regression results from the four theoretical approaches, as well as a full model that combines all four. By far, the full model has the largest explanatory power (Nagelkerke R^2 = 0.72), but when comparing the four models, we see that the POL model has a superior explanatory power (Nagelkerke R^2 = 0.45), followed by the POS model (Nagelkerke R^2 = 0.41). The UKR model (Nagelkerke R^2 = 0.38) and the RUS model (Nagelkerke R^2 = 0.37) have the smallest explanatory powers.

A closer look at the POL model indicates that the vaccination mandate submodel (COVID) is the strongest driver of Euroscepticism in Romania. The result is rather surprising: in spite of the fact that Europe has been shook by the war in Ukraine and Romania has been in the proximity of the war for several months already, the issue of the pandemic has exerted such a powerful impression on citizens that their attitudes vis-à-vis the EU are much more associated with issues related to the pandemic, which are currently quite marginal in the media. The same model offers another pertinent finding: Euroscepticism is strongly associated with dissatisfaction vis-à-vis the EU cybersecurity policies, another topic that is less present in the public debate.

The POL model is closely followed by the POS model, which reveals that the issue of LGBTQ+ rights is still sensitive. This is in line with previous findings which show that gender issues are at the heart of populist discourse in Romania (Stoica, 2021). Within the UKR model, the submodel which refers to integrating Ukrainian refugees (UKRR) shows that identity politics is a strong predictor of Euroscepticism in Romania. Lastly, within the RUS model, the submodel referring to sanctions against Russia (SRU) shows that EU's intention to punish the Russian Federation is associated with Euroscepticism much more than the EU's strife for energy independence (EIRU).

Moreover, our likelihood ratio tests (Table 5) show that all models significantly predict Eurosceptic attitudes better than the null model (χ^2_{RUS} = 675.12, χ^2_{POS} = 888.92, χ^2_{POL} = 1,002.81, and χ^2_{UKR} = 708.09; $p < 0.01$ in all cases).

We also assessed the goodness of fit for all of the models. Table 6 presents the pseudo-R^2, the area under the curve, and the proportional reduction in error values for each of the models (Abts et al., 2023; King & Zeng, 2001).
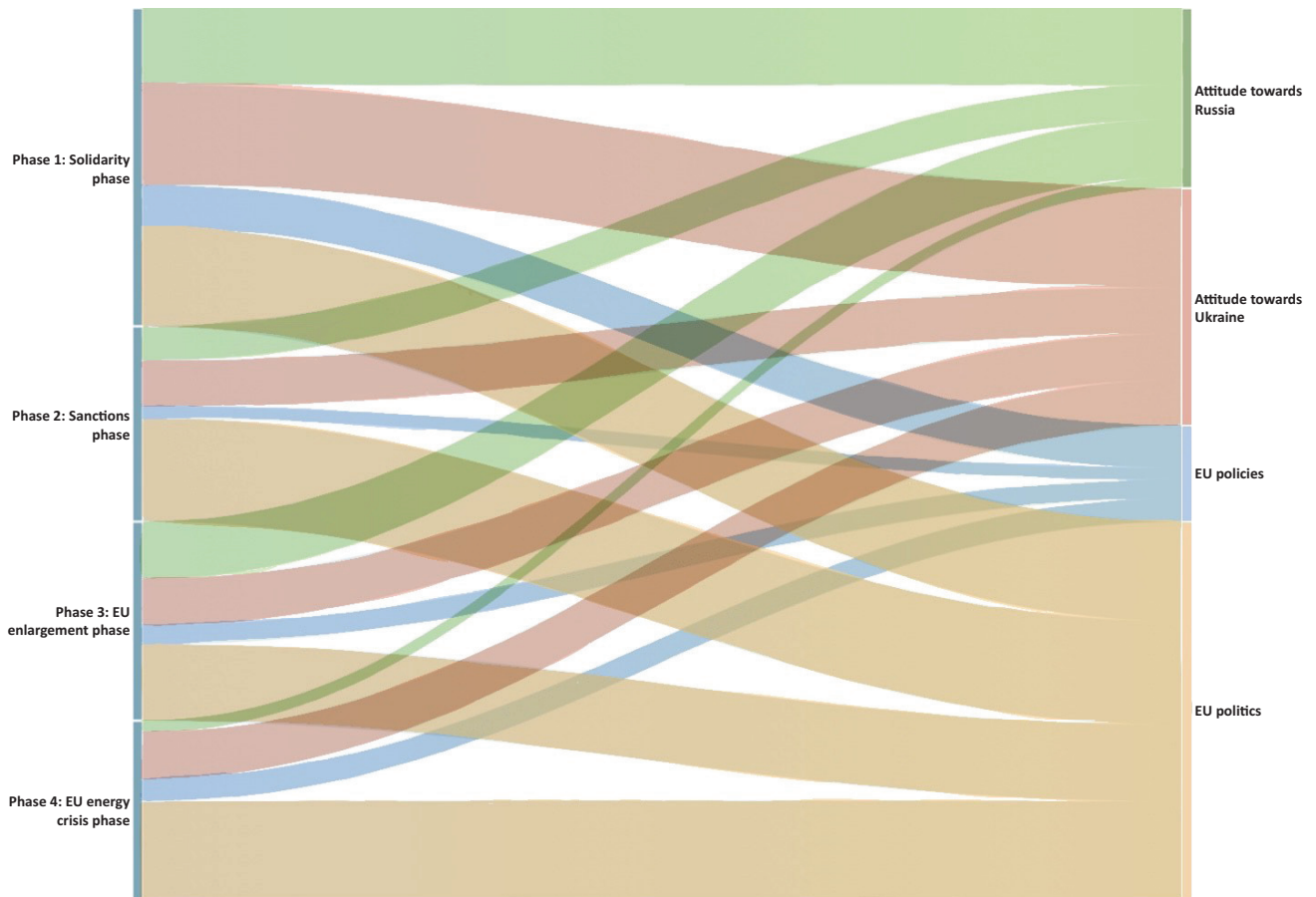
Figure 3. Diagram of Eurosceptic narratives in AUR and George Simion's media discourse.

Table 4. Regression coefficients for the four models and the combined full model.

	RUS	POL	POS	UKR	Full model
Female (male = 0)	0.42*	0.30	0.19	0.27	−0.10
	(0.15)	(0.16)	(0.15)	(0.15)	(0.20)
Age (18–65)	0.01	−0.01	0.02*	−0.01	−0.01
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Higher education	−0.26	−0.17	−0.28	0.01	−0.28
	(0.15)	(0.16)	(0.16)	(0.15)	(0.21)
Sanctions against Russia	1.20***				0.53***
	(0.06)				(0.09)
Energy independence from Russia	0.55***				0.58***
	(0.06)				(0.09)
Vaccination mandate		1.21***			0.89***
		(0.07)			(0.09)
EU cybersecurity		1.04***			1.04***
		(0.07)			(0.10)
EU enlargement			0.94***		0.57***
			(0.07)		(0.09)
Sanctions against Hungary for violating LGBTQ+ rights			1.04***		0.60***
			(0.64)		(0.09)
Integration of Ukrainian refugees				1.16***	0.72***
				(0.08)	(0.12)
Reconstructing Ukraine after the war				0.84***	0.71***
				(0.07)	(0.09)
Constant	1.75***	2.34***	2.51***	1.84***	1.10***
	(0.15)	(0.16)	(0.16)	(0.16)	(0.23)
Observations	5,709	5,709	5,709	5,709	5,709

Notes: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$; standard errors in parentheses.

Table 5. Likelihood ratio tests.

Model	Compared with	Chisq	p	sig
RUS	Null	675.12	0	***
POL	Null	1,002.81	0	***
POS	Null	888.92	0	***
UKR	Null	708.09	0	***
Full	Null	1,402.57	0	***

Table 6. Goodness of fit statistics for all models and full model.

	Models				
	RUS	POL	POS	Attitudes towards Ukrainian	Full
Nagelkerke R^2	0.37	0.45	0.41	0.38	0.72
Area under the curve value	0.81	0.94	0.88	0.84	0.95
Proportional reduction in error	38.11	46.22	41.63	39.74	71.25

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The current article sought to bring a substantial contribution to the relatively scarce academic literature on Euroscepticism in Romania, especially since the start of the war in neighbouring Ukraine. In doing this, we referred to the main narratives that drive negative attitudes towards the EU.

To determine which narratives matter the most in the case of Romania, we pursued two distinct, but complementary goals: On the one hand, we highlighted these narratives within the political discourse of AUR, a new anti-EU populist party that won a significant number of votes in the most recent Romanian parliamentary elections. On the other hand, we tested which of these narratives pursued by AUR matter the most in shaping Eurosceptic attitudes in Romania. We did this by analysing original data collected through an online political compass.

The results of the content analysis indicate that AUR's media discourse strongly concentrates on issues that have to do with EU politics, which is in line with the party's ultra-conservative stances highlighted by previous studies (Gheorghiu & Praisler, 2022). Given the ongoing nature of the war in the neighbouring country, the second main topic in AUR's media discourse is Ukraine. Furthermore, AUR's discourse focuses on Russia using subtle techniques, through expressing dissatisfaction with the democracy—portraying the establishment as either weak in relation to the EU or abusive towards citizens, i.e., via the sanitary dictatorship, or by disrupting the establishment's efforts to secure energy independence from Russia by claiming to act on behalf of the people who would pay the costs. Only lastly does the party refer to EU policies. AUR and its leader's Eurosceptic media discourse employed narratives such as the establishment's servant status to the EU, the EU-mainstreamed "gender ideology," and the forthright commitment to protecting the status of the Romanian minority in Ukraine, all embedded in an incendiary rhetoric (Morini, 2020) of populism with its local flavour, that of performed "patriotic violence" (Grapă & Mogoș, 2023).

The regression analysis illustrates a slightly different image. Negative attitudes towards the EU are mainly driven by public perceptions related to EU policies, most prominently by the vaccination mandate. It might be the case that the effects of the previous crisis (the pandemic) still override public perceptions related to the current crisis (the war), which confirms predictions found in the literature (Robinson et al., 2021). The second driver of Euroscepticism is EU politics, leaving attitudes towards Ukraine and attitudes towards Russia to be less relevant in shaping Euroscepticism, at least in the first year of the war.

However, the overall results suggest that in Romania, Euroscepticism is fed by identity politics, as it ranked first in the political discourse of AUR and second in public perceptions that determined Euroscepticism. And rather than seeing it isolated from other factors, identity politics should be understood as a catalyst that increases hostility towards the EU in the presence of other factors (Braghiroli & Petsinis, 2019). Future studies should examine closer the role of identity politics in determining Euroscepticism in Romania, as well as look at how changing attitudes toward Ukraine and Russia influence attitudes towards the EU, especially in the context of the evolution of the war.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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Article

Rhetorics of Hope and Outrage: Emotion and Cynicism in the Coverage of the Schengen Accession

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Abstract
Discourses on European integration and Euroscepticism have benefitted from increased interest after Brexit. Researchers point out that there is a great variance from one national context to another and that there is a gap in the literature concerning non-elite discourses and perspectives from Central and Eastern European countries such as Romania. The Eurobarometer findings of early 2023 indicate a shift in Romanian public opinion towards Euroscepticism. To better understand the potential causes for these shifts, we approach the politicisation of the issue in Romania through an analysis of online news headlines and related social media news sharing metadata. In the aftermath of the decision not to accept Romania and Bulgaria, this research investigates shifts in the media framing of the Schengen issue and EU over two months (from October 15 to December 15, 2022) in the 14 most accessed Romanian online news sites (with more than 10 million visits per month). Quantitative analysis of news headlines (N = 3,362) shows that the coverage focuses on Romanian politicians in power and emphasises conflict. Furthermore, the analysis of the interactions produced by news sharing of the analysed sample shows the impact of the political rhetoric encouraging the boycotting of Austrian companies in retaliation for the denial of Schengen Area accession: scapegoating and disenchantment with politics and politicians. The two-step approach used and results that use Facebook interactions as indicators of public resonance of politicisation and strategic framing may be replicated in future research.

Issue
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1. Introduction

Romania's accession to the Schengen Area has long been a subject of interest for Romanian politics and media. Negotiations for Romania's accession have been going on for more than 20 years, having started in 2001. After joining the EU in 2007, expectations for joining the Schengen Area increased and throughout the following decade attempts to join were met with fragmentary support. The accession needs to be supported by the European Parliament and be accepted by unanimous vote by the Council of the European Union for Justice and Home Affairs (JHA)—ministers of justice and/or home affairs of the EU member states. There have been two enlargements since 2011, with Lichtenstein joining in 2011 and

Croatia in 2023. Neighbouring countries Romania and Bulgaria joined the EU in 2007 and have since then been legally bound to join the Schengen Area. Formal accession criteria are considered met by both countries and the European Parliament has shown support for the two countries' accession as early as 2011. In the JHA Council vote in September 2011, the Dutch and Finnish ministers voted against Romania and Bulgaria's accession, whereas in the JHA Council vote in December 2022, the Dutch and the Austrian ministers voted against the two countries' accession.

An early in-depth analysis of international and national coverage of Romania's accession to the Schengen Area (Bârgăoanu, 2011) shows that there is considerable coverage of the issue in Romanian media—

as compared to other European issues—and that internal actors and other European countries are represented as the protagonists of the news stories—while Europe is represented rather as an impersonal, anonymous actor. However, in the context of the coverage of the 2011 unsuccessful accession bid, the same research identifies two dominant framings of the European Union: (a) "Europe as a higher power punishing Romania (deservedly or undeservedly)" and (b) "Romania occupying a marginal position in Europe" (Bârgăoanu, 2011, pp. 129–130).

In a public statement made on October 12, 2022, following a meeting with Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, Romanian President Klaus Iohannis expressed optimism about Romania's accession to the Schengen Area but also noted that "a failure in this national objective will probably lead to an increase of Euroscepticism in Romania" (Pîrv, 2022). Early 2023 Eurobarometer results show that since the summer of 2022, support for the EU's common trade policy has declined in Romania by 8% (from 63% to 55%) over six months—the steepest decline in the 27 member countries (European Commission, 2023). The Eurobarometer results also show that agreement about the European Union's priorities has also dropped by 8%—with 46% of Romanians agreeing that the interests of their country are taken into account in the EU and 48% disagreeing (European Commission, 2023). A significant drop in agreement (11%) was also registered concerning agreement about Romanians' voices being considered in the EU. The majority opinion on how democracy works in Romania has also shifted from satisfaction to dissatisfaction (European Commission, 2022, 2023). The Eurobarometer findings of early 2023 may indicate a significant shift in Romanian public opinion towards Euroscepticism.

Multiple voices in societies throughout Europe have noted a rise in Euroscepticism and that "in terms of Euroscepticism, the EU is divided in its diversity" (De Vries, 2018, p. 5). In her attempt to identify country-specific patterns and define a benchmark theory of EU public opinion, De Vries (2018) concludes that people tend to attribute responsibility for good or bad conditions primarily to national governments and not the EU, but that Euroscepticism is determined by national conditions as compared to the rest of the EU. De Vries also discusses types of "differentiated governance" such as the "multi-speed Europe"—eurozone membership—and "variable geometry"—Schengen Agreement—that allow for multiple levels of integration to exist at the same time or alongside, but that contribute to at least an image—if not an institutionalisation—of "two-class membership." Criticisms brought to future paths of "differentiated governance" include the facilitation of "centre-periphery" discourses and "us–them" rhetoric to which we will return.

Politicisation is an emerging niche of interest for research in European integration that includes the role of online news media and social media in the issue.

Following the introduction of the concept by Hooghe and Marks (2009) in their post-functionalist theory of European integration, De Wilde (2011) argues that the politicisation of European integration can be operationalised by looking at three interrelated components: (a) polarisation of opinion, (b) intensifying debate, and (c) public resonance. This exploratory research focuses on these components through an analysis of online news headlines by (a) identifying actors' roles, (b) analysing the intensification of news coverage and social media interactions, and (c) analysing the amplification of particular discourses and stances on social media.

In Leruth et al. (2017, pp. 15–16), Szczerbiak and Taggart state that there is "a major lacuna in the published academic literature on Euroscepticism in the Balkan states," noting that the phenomenon has been virtually non-existent in Bulgaria and Romania. Romania is regarded as one of the most Euro-optimistic countries, and anti-Europeanism has been mostly circumstantial in recent years (Toma & Damian, 2021), with various politicians—such as former president of the Social Democratic Party, Liviu Dragnea—using anti-EU rhetoric in the context of defending personal or group interests and politicising anti-corruption judicial investigations. The 2020 Romanian national elections saw the surprising emergence of a significant new political player in Romanian politics in the right-wing populist and nationalist party Alliance for the Unity of Romanians. However, although some "RO-exit" mentions have been made by members and affiliates, the party defines itself as "Eurorealist" and is part of the soft Eurosceptic anti-federalist European Conservatives and Reformists Group, its political programme explicitly positioning it as pro-Schengen accession. Szczerbiak and Taggart (2017) pinpoint the biggest knowledge gap in contemporary research on Euroscepticism as being the lack of research on its impact on European politics and policy, noting however, considering the Brexit vote, that European issues are now more significant in domestic party politics, that research is needed into "non-elite Euroscepticism" and research on the topic in Central and Eastern Europe is limited and focused mostly on the Visegrad states.

Romania's 2022 bid for Schengen Area accession ended in intense and emotional public debate and public calls from politicians to boycott Austrian companies, which were amplified by the online news media and found resonance in social media, despite appeals to calm by both Romanian and Austrian politicians. This case of public dissatisfaction with an EU integration decision amplified by politicians, the online news media, and social media may provide insight into emerging Eurosceptical positionings and narratives emerging in the national context of one of the most Euro-optimistic EU countries.

To fill a gap in existing research into the politicisation of European integration in the online news media and social media in Romania—a less studied, mostly Euro-optimistic Eastern European country—

this research explores the discursive patterns in the Romanian online news media's coverage of the Schengen Area 2022 enlargement focusing on framing, actor roles, and emotionality.

2. Euroscepticism and Euro-Optimism

2.1. The Media Coverage of European Issues

From early, foundational research into public opinion (Lippmann, 1922) and the formulation of agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) to the third level of media effects proposed in the network agenda-setting framework (Guo & McCombs, 2011), agenda-setting theory suggests that patterns of news media coverage of issues transfer the salience of objects, attributes, and relationships between the two from the media agenda to the public. The converging agenda-setting and framing models (McCombs & Ghanem, 2001) emerged as the dominant approach in the past decades in communication research, based on a conceptualisation of news media frames as being "manifested by the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments" (Entman, 1993, p. 52) that allows for established methodologies such as content analysis and discourse analysis, but also network analysis of message content (Danowski, 1993).

It is important to distinguish between the framing of Schengen Area policy in substantial debates in the context of the (a) elite discourses produced by European institutional actors such as the European Commission or European Parliament and (b) media coverage of European integration or specific Schengen Area related issues in national or transnational news. Coman (2019) identifies four frames emerging in the legitimation discourses over Schengen reform debates in elite discourses: (a) values/impact for people, (b) conflict/sovereignty, (c) market/integration, and (d) securitisation. However, media coverage of European politics often differs from the substantial debates that take place in European institutions.

The news media coverage of European politics is a widely researched topic, with some results consecrating conceptual frameworks and methodological approaches for several decades, such as the influential analysis of framing by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), which identified five generic frames in the coverage of European politics: (a) attribution of responsibility, (b) conflict, (c) economic consequences, (d) human interest, and (e) morality. Cross-national comparative studies (de Vreese, 2001) show that news coverage of European affairs is cyclical, registering peaks during certain high-interest events and low visibility before or after such events. The practice of political marketing is associated with growing public cynicism about politics, political leaders, and institutions (Norris, 2000) according to a sequential pro-

cess that begins with (a) the development of political messages, progresses through (b) news-media coverage and ends with (c) effects at the level of the public. In earlier research, de Vreese (2001) pointed out that, concerning European politics, the "agenda-setting" role of news media has shifted from "respectful and cautious" coverage to a more proactive approach, exercising increased discretion. Later research by the same author (de Vreese, 2007) attributes the cause of Euroscepticism to media coverage—referencing the spiral of cynicism effect coined by Cappella and Jamieson (1997)—particularly through strategic news framing of European politics such as (a) evaluation of politicians' handling of an issue, (b) politicians' actions concerning public opinion, (c) politicians' gain/loss, and (d) war or game metaphors. de Vreese (2007) finds that emphasising consensus among the political elite is likely to generate strategically framed news coverage, which in turn is likely to fuel Euroscepticism.

With the overarching goal of exploring the news coverage on a salient European integration issue that—through politicisation and strategic news framing—is likely to fuel Euroscepticism effects, we then formulate the first research question:

RQ1: What were the overall patterns of coverage for the case of Romania's 2022 bid for Schengen Area accession?

Beyond general patterns of coverage, De Wilde's (2011) framework for analysing the politicisation of European integration includes a component of polarisation of opinion related to actors' positioning. In this case, the relevant actors are primarily politicians at the national and European levels whose public statements or actions on the issue are covered by the news media.

Caiani and Guerra (2017) review a complex conceptualisation of Euroscepticism from initial definitions to later subdivisions of two to six distinct positionings on various spectra of Euroscepticism and Euro-enthusiasm to the newest two emerging stances of Euroscepticism as outright opposition to the EU and Euroalternativism or pro-systemic opposition that supports European integration but contests or criticises current decisions or policies.

Bijsmans (2017) distinguishes between *polity* (core elements and institutional design) and *policy* (choices over specific issues) and further outlines four possible positions on European integration and EU policies: (a) support, (b) Euroalternativism, (c) soft Euroscepticism, and (d) hard Euroscepticism.

In the same collection of texts, Galpin and Trenz (2017) also use the spiral of cynicism model to discuss Euroscepticism concerning media negativity and specific framing of European issues in news stories—(a) conflict-centred negativity, (b) emotional fear stories, (c) identity frames (out-groups), and (d) cynicism/self-interested politicians:

Attention to distant events outside the familiar national context is more easily drawn when they convey drama and conflict when serious repercussions can be emphasised, when the integrity of particular actors and institutions can be undermined or when the news can be related to feelings of fear and scepticism. (Galpin & Trenz, 2017, p. 52)

Although, as stated previously, there are no hard Eurosceptic Romanian political groups, the aftermath of Romania's failed Schengen accession bid provided context for some politicians to take somewhat aggressive stances—towards the EU in general or Austria specifically—that may gain support from the dissatisfied.

Wodak (2007) focuses on "us and them" as a framework in her discourse-historical approach to discourses in the European Union, defining "inclusion" and "exclusion" as the fundamental construction of "in-groups" and "out-groups'' in various public spaces, structurally and discursively. The "us and them" discourses are identified as key features of populism, mobilising the public against out-groups who are constructed as privileged or threatening.

Recent research that links Eurosceptic discourses with populist discourses (Pirro & Taggart, 2018; Pirro et al., 2018) shows that left-wing populist discourses tend to frame criticism of Europe in socio-economic terms whereas right-wing populist discourses tend to frame the issue in cultural terms, although the context of the recession also allowed for right-wing socio-economic framing. Even though, there are no hard Eurosceptical parties in Romania and the government is supported by a coalition of the two largest parties—the Social Democratic Party and the National Liberal Party—recent years have seen a proliferation of populist discourses from various political groups. Furthermore, this research also aims to explore how the issue is used strategically by politicians and political groups. We then formulate the second question to identify the most prominent actor types—power/opposition and national/European—in the Romanian news coverage of the 2022 Schengen accession:

RQ2: What type of actors are the most prominent in the coverage?

2.2. Indicators of News Values, Frames, and Emotionality

As our approach relies on lexicon-based automated coding of a relatively large sample of headlines, research into linguistic indicators of news value indicators, frames, and emotionality provides the grounding for our approach.

According to Statham (2016, p. 133), journalists struggle to fit European issues into news formats, "European politics appears to be inherently unsuited for 'making news' and the information received difficult to make relevant to readers." Caiani and Guerra (2017) stress that newsworthiness seems to be promoted by factors such as (a) clear attribution of responsibility, (b) strong conflict, or (c) opportunities for personalisation/dramatisation, all aspects that are mostly absent in reporting on European politics.

Contributions made by Bednarek and Caple (Bednarek & Caple, 2014; Caple & Bednarek, 2016) show how—going beyond news values/"news factors" as selection criteria employed in newsroom practice (Galtung & Ruge, 1965)—linguistic devices used to construct or emphasise the specific newsworthiness of journalistic news values can be used in discourse analysis in both text-only and multimodal approaches: negativity, timeliness, proximity, superlativeness, eliteness, impact, novelty, personalisation, and consonance. Updated news values scholarship (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017) include exclusivity, bad news, conflict, surprise, audiovisiuals, shareability, entertainment, drama, follow-up, the power elite, relevance, magnitude, celebrity, good news, and the news organisations' agenda. As news values research involves looking at decision-making in professional practices of news selection, which is not within the scope of this research, we rely on the reasoning put forward by Bednarek and Caple to analyse linguistic indicators in news headlines that may point towards an emphasis on conflict, negativity/bad news, or good news/positivity. We focus on indicators of conflict as this is integral to the first component of the analytical framework proposed for politicisation by De Wilde (2011).

Our investigation of discursive tropes is also rooted in the framework of framing research (Entman, 1993). Hence, we employ the literature on generic news frames (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000) as well as literature-specific frames of European integration and Euroscepticism and frames identified in previous research on the news coverage of the 2011 Romanian bid to access the Schengen Area (Bârgăoanu, 2011).

In an analysis of party-based Euroscepticism across member states, Taggart and Szczerbiak (2018) identify four main post-Brexit "frames" of contestation: (a) economic factors, (b) immigration, (c) democracy/sovereignty, and (d) national factors, but warned that "some very different frames were being deployed in the service of Euroscepticism and that it was important to pay attention to the importance of different national contexts" (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2018, p. 1025).

The issue of Euroscepticism and analyses of the mediatisation of European politics are, however, mostly focused on discourses emerging in the context of Western members of the EU. Pirro et al. (2018) warn that the discursive patterns of European integration and Euroscepticism are very different in Central and Eastern Europe. Boukala and Dimitrakopoulou (2018) analyse Greek political and media discourses on the refugee crisis in the context of emerging debates around Greece's expulsion from the Schengen Area and find that the European refugee crisis was transformed into a national issue that reveals ambivalence and polarisation with the

topos of "threat" at the core, but articulated in two distinct blaming strategies: the threat of isolation (from Europe) due to governmental inefficacy/irresponsibility, and the threat of European cruelty/punishment, against which political actors emerge as "defenders of the nation." These two frames are also at least partially in line with the findings of Bârgăoanu (2011) in the case of Romania's 2011 failed accession to the Schengen Area. While the polarisation of opinion and intensification of debate may be observed through the frequency and prominence of the issue and actors respectively, the conflict metaphors and frames used are also relevant. The third research question is then:

RQ3: What linguistic indicators of metaphors and frames are most frequently identified in the headlines?

Within the framework provided by De Wilde (2011), we connect the intensification of debate with public resonance—understood as the participation of the public in contexts such as social media by sharing, commenting, and reacting.

Wahl-Jorgensen (2020) signals "an emotional turn" in journalism studies, referring to the emergence of a growing body of scholarly work engaging with the concept of emotion in the context of (a) news production, (b) content, or (c) consumption, from immersive journalism to emotional appeals, fuelling fear or sharing behaviours and incivility in online comments. The context afforded by new digital platforms has generated what Papacharissi (2015) called "affective publics"— social movements and mobilisation collaboratively constructed around the use of hashtags or other digital means of aggregation and characterised by a combination of shared subjective experiences, opinions, and emotional expression. These new dynamics disrupt traditional media treatment of politics, constructing "the personal as political."

From the Twitter social movements and mobilisation to populist discourses, there is a growing body of research using social media engagement mechanisms as indicators—from retweets to reactions. Research finds that the emotional valence of political messages fits with the dominant indicators of audience engagement—at least for the binary constituted by negative and positive content ("angry" reactions and "love" reactions, respectively, in the case of Facebook posts; Jost et al., 2020). Similar research (Eberl et al., 2020) also shows that there is an effect of issue salience of "angry" reactions.

Research on emotion in news content shows that news coverage is shaped by engagement with emotion and "audiences are more likely to be emotionally engaged, recall information and take action when news stories are relatable" (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020, p. 189). Wahl-Jorgensen (2020, p. 188) also points out that the digital media landscape allows for data-driven sentiment analysis and emotion detection methods, the

use of which relied on the assumption that "emotions are inseparable from opinion, evaluation and decision-making." As stated previously, the fourth research question attempts to connect indicators of news values, frames, and framing metaphors employed in headlines with resonance in social media engagement:

RQ4: What are the discursive characteristics of the headlines that generated the most engagement on social media?

3. Method

3.1. Data Collection and Sampling

To construct the dataset, the websites of the most visited Romanian online news outlets—presented in Table 1— were scraped using the keyword "Schengen." National online news outlets appearing in the Internet Traffic and Audience Study (Romanian Transmedia Audit Bureau, 2022) with over 10 million visits per month in November 2022 were included. Web scraping was done using the Web Scraper Chrome extension (https://webscraper.io) on each of the 14 distinct websites. From each of the 14 publications, the scrapers collected only the headline, the publishing date, and the URL for each article. The data collection timeframe was from October 15, 2022, to December 15, 2022, with the final vote on the issue having taken place on December 8. This resulted in the main headline sample (*N* = 3,362).

In the second stage of data collection, the URLs from the dataset were searched through the CrowdTangle API (CrowdTangle, 2021) to obtain Facebook interaction data resulting from the link sharing on Facebook pages and groups. The API interrogation was limited to 10 maximum posts for each link shared—top 10 according to total interactions: reactions, comments, and shares. Not all the links were shared on Facebook and most likely some of the links that were widely shared probably generated more than 10 Facebook posts. Having selected only the most popular posts sharing news articles, we focus mostly on news sharing in the public Facebook contexts created by the public pages of news media institutions, politicians and political parties as well as the larger online communities in public Facebook groups that support political groups or aggregate around particular topics. Public sharing in personal contexts is not within the scope of the research.

3.2. Data Analysis

Data were analysed using a lexicon-based approach after a preliminary analysis using Pinpoint, a named entity recognition tool offered by Google. The lexicons were defined over two main categories: actors and linguistic indicators of frames. The actors' lexicon was constructed using the preliminary named entity recognition provided by Google Pinpoint and official

Table 1. Romanian news outlets sampled with traffic data for November 2022.

News outlet	Page views	Visits	Unique clients
digi24.ro	75,459,085	39,849,212	9,833,666
stirileprotv.ro	45,045,675	29,152,642	8,552,721
playtech.ro	53,918,172	27,982,040	8,524,889
libertatea.ro	43,131,513	24,160,042	9,277,470
observatornews.ro	26,369,688	18,889,957	7,400,975
romaniatv.net	26,042,664	18,411,271	7,061,589
evz.ro	26,417,865	17,050,099	5,032,637
cancan.ro	40,611,404	15,615,421	5,130,680
fanatik.ro	18,378,630	14,176,837	5,924,785
antena3.ro	20,085,617	13,975,562	5,763,680
hotnews.ro	29,651,404	13,888,171	3,985,664
stiripesurse.ro	41,609,153	13,510,655	4,344,379
adevarul.ro	23,888,701	13,025,650	5,186,392
g4media.ro	20,116,450	11,856,951	2,936,694

information from the Romanian government website and the European Parliament website. The actors' lexicon contains two categories: persons and countries. The linguistic indicators lexicon contains two categories: news values and frames, and metaphors. The news values and frames indicators partially overlap—for example in the case of the indicators for "conflict." Linguistic indi-

cators for four of the generic news frames are defined in Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), news values emphasis is described in Bednarek and Caple (2014), and framing metaphors stemming from previous research on Romanian Schengen accession are defined by Bârgăoanu (2011). The code categories are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. An overview of the lexicons and details on linguistic indicators used for automated coding.

Code	Linguistic indicators (implemented in Tableau)
Actors	
Countries	Romanian language word/stem for country name and demonym
RO_Power	Names of all members of the Romanian government and leaders of the political party groups in power: Social Democratic Party, National Liberal Party, and Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania
RO_Opposition	Names of leaders of the Romanian opposition parties in the Romanian parliament: Save Romania Union, Alliance for the Unity of Romanians, etc.
RO_Europolitician	Names of Romanian MEPs and EU commissioner
Foreign Politician	Names of non-Romanian politicians who are neither MEPs nor EU commissioners
Foreign Europolitician	Names of non-Romanian MEPs and EU commissioners
RO_Other	Various Romanians (celebrities, pundits, journalists, media personalities), not politicians
Tropes, news values, and frames	
conflict	Generic frame (8–10 distinct words, including various antagonisms) and news value
consequences	Generic frame (8–10 distinct words, including "boycott")
morality	Generic frame (5–6 distinct words, including "bad/evil" and "hate")
responsibility	Generic frame (5–6 distinct words, including "responsible," "guilty," and "blaming")
shame	Victimisation frame (8–10 distinct words, including "victim," "humiliation," "shame," and "slave")
hope	Anticipation frame (10–12 distinct words, including "good news") and positivity news value
negativity	Negativity news value (10–12 distinct words, including "disaster," "failure," and "scandal")
military_metaphor	Framing metaphor (8–10 distinct words in the semantic family of "military operations")
game_metaphor	Framing metaphor (8–10 distinct words in the semantic family of "game")
family_metaphor	Framing metaphor (5–6 distinct words in the semantic family of "family")

4. Findings

The overview of the data collected reveals that 26% of the articles come from a single publication which intensely covered the issue (Figure 1). Furthermore, 15% of the articles were published on December 8, 2022 (Figure 2). And there is a significant increase in the number of articles published in the week leading up to the

decisive JHA vote and in the week following the rejection of Romania's accession bid.

When looking at the individual actors mentioned, we notice that in 47.5% of the articles there is at least a mention of one of the individual persons coded, Romanian politicians and Europoliticians, foreign politicians and Europoliticians, as well as others, such as journalists, experts, pundits, or various colourful characters
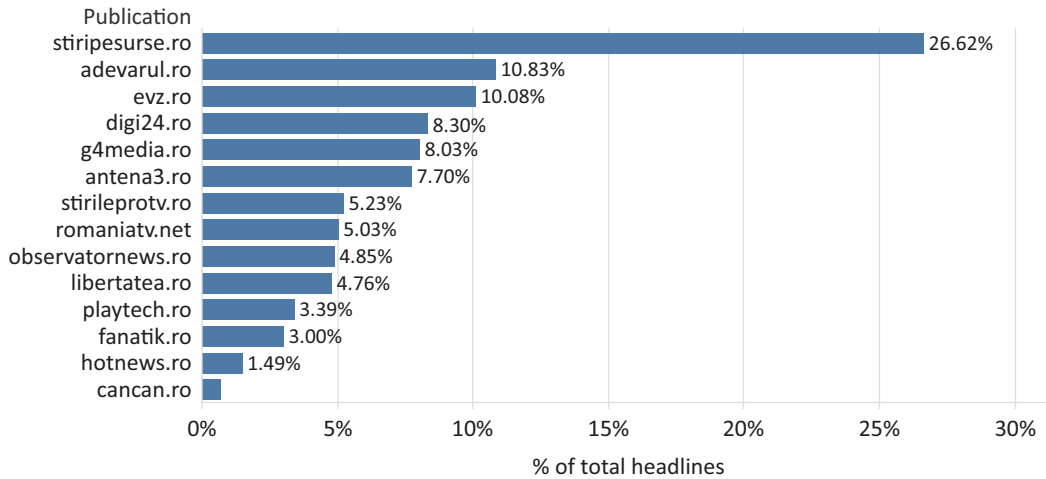

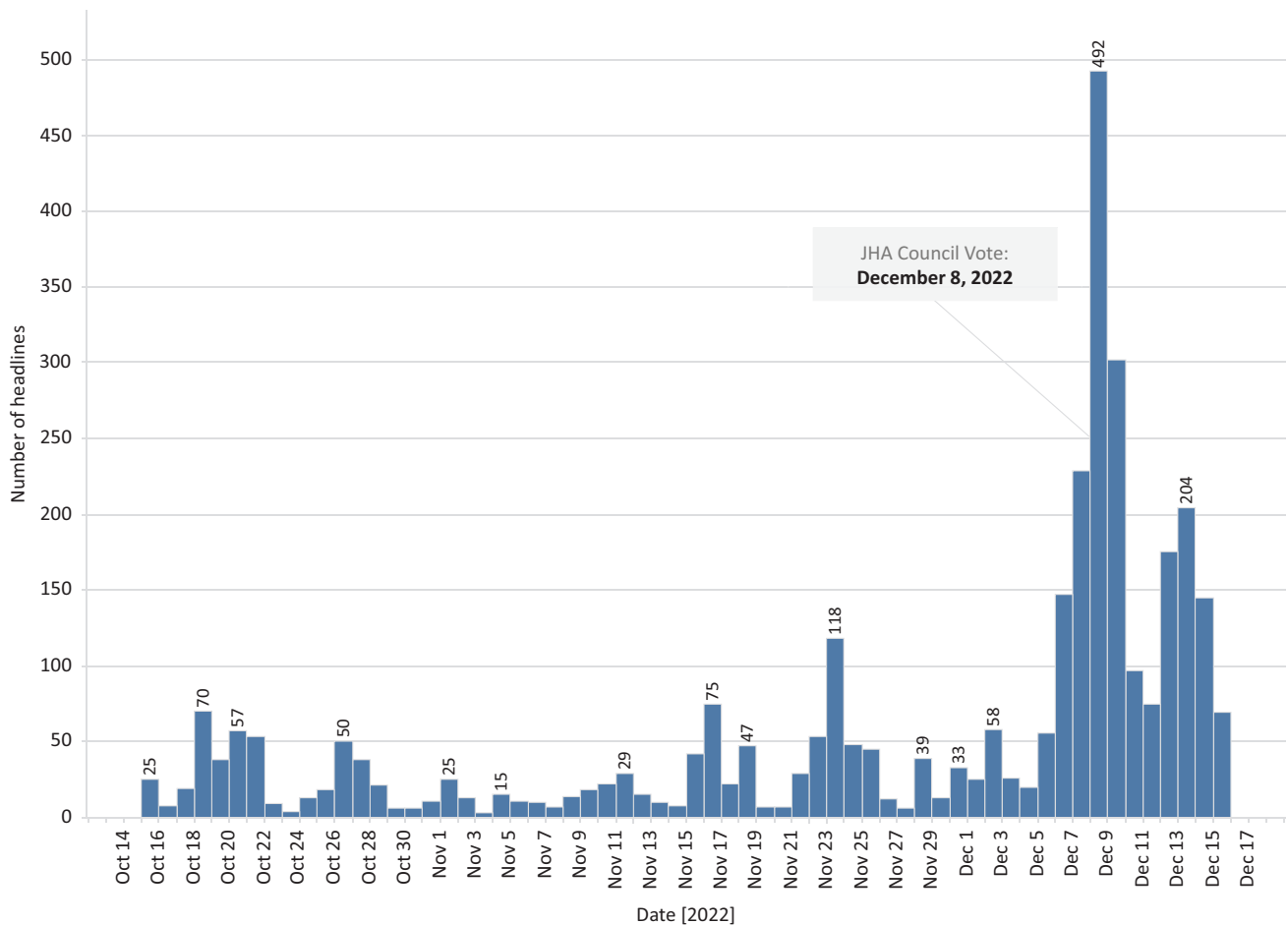**Figure 1.** Percentage of articles by source (*N* = 3,362).

Figure 2. Number of articles by date (*N* = 3,362).

whose reactions to current events make headlines. Figure 3 shows that the most frequently mentioned are Romanian politicians belonging to the governmental coalition—It must be mentioned that the coalition is made up of the two largest political parties: the Social Democratic Party (centre-left) and the National Liberal Party (centre-right). The second most prominent category is that of Romanian Europoliticians, mostly MEPs who are represented lobbying for the accession of offering up more reliable opinions based on proximity. This is somewhat exceptional since Romanian MEPs are regularly less visible in Romanian news. Foreign politicians are frequently represented expressing positions of support and in news headlines about meetings with Romanian politicians in power. The Romanian opposition is less visible, except for the last week of the time frame when the media coverage becomes very emotional and opposition representatives, as well as various Romanian experts,

journalists, pundits, celebrities, and various colourful characters, are represented producing opinions or emotional reactions to the outcome of the situation, especially in the context of widespread calls for boycotting Austrian companies in retaliation of the Austrian ministry's vote in the JHA Council.

Although a high emphasis on individual actors is expected, as theory on news values suggests there is a preference towards personalisation, the use of references to the more abstract collective actors—countries and nations—is also very prominent. More than half (53.18%) of headlines mention a country or nationality as can be seen in Figure 4.

While in the first part of the timeframe, there is a high representation of the Netherlands—in the context of Prime Minister Rutte's visit to Romania and the Dutch parliament's vote on the issue—the weeks around the final JHA vote are dominated by mentions of Austria
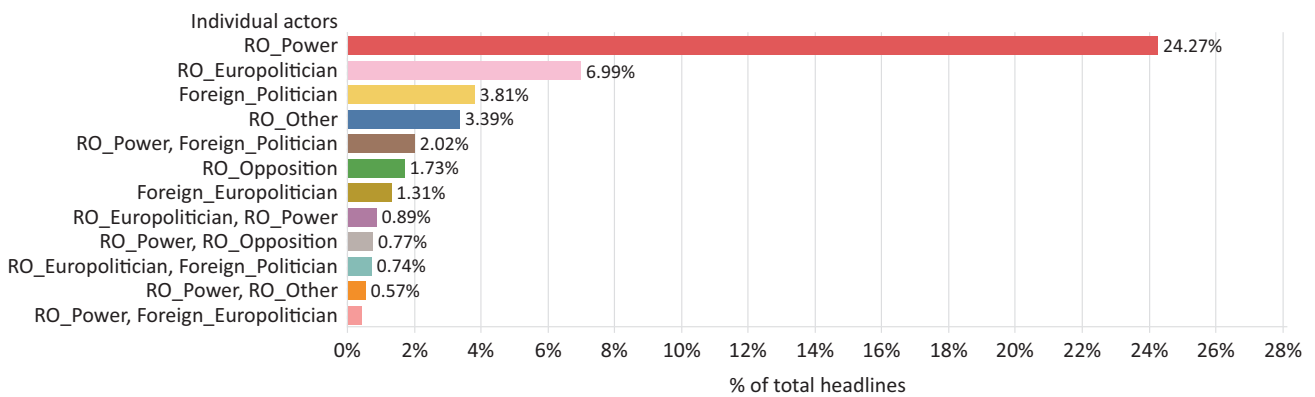

Figure 3. The mentions of types of individual actors in headlines (*N* = 3,362). Note: Headlines with no mentions and smaller categories were excluded from the visualisation.
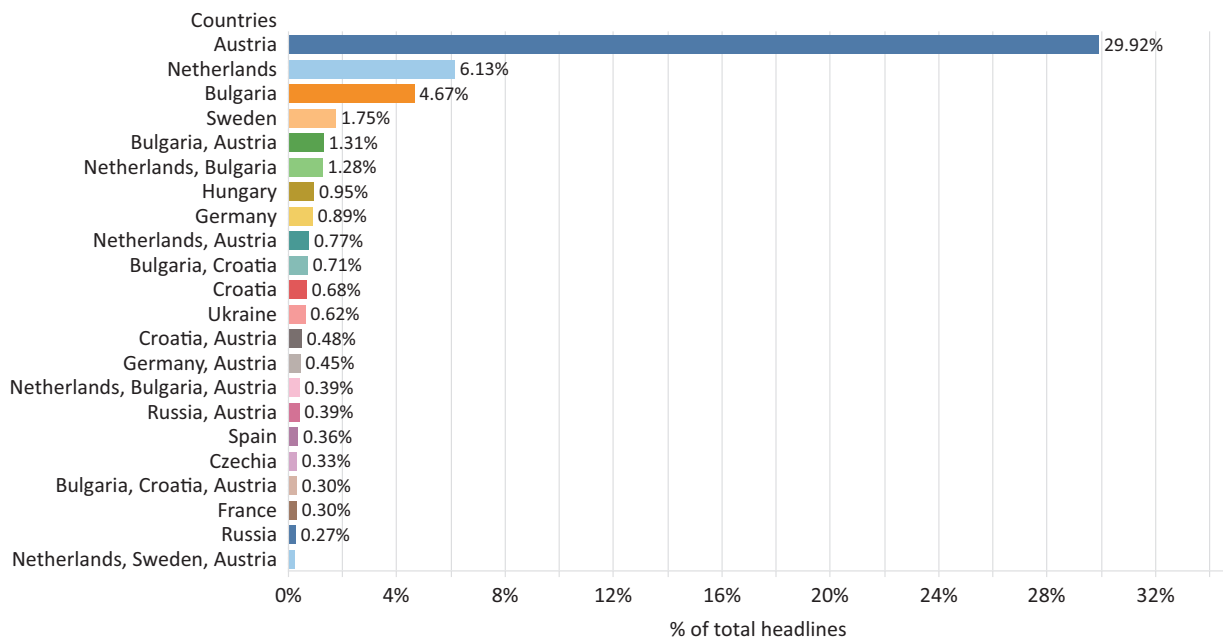

Figure 4. The most mentioned collective actors: Countries/nationalities (*N* = 3,362). Note: Headlines with no mentions and smaller categories were excluded from the visualisation.

and the Austrians. This is due to negativity bias and a tendency to vilify these collective actors who are represented as responsible for the negative outcome.

The lexicon of linguistic indicators used to detect discursive tropes, news values, and frames yielded results in 32.27% of the headlines analysed. The results are presented in Figure 5.

Conflict was the most salient trope, which is in line with the literature on generic frames and news values. Consequences, negativity, shame, and morality become significantly more salient after the final vote on December 8. Hope (the anticipation frame with an emphasis on positivity) is also present, apparently in episodes, throughout the entire timeframe, but is most salient in the days leading up to December 8. The "military metaphor" is more salient than the "game metaphor" whereas the "family metaphor" is barely observable, in a similar result with research on the coverage of the previous bid for accession (Bârgăoanu, 2011).

When analysing the Facebook interaction data, we noticed higher-than-average engagement with some of the news headlines in the sample shared online. The following list summarises the coverage that generated more interactions on Facebook in the analysis timeframe:

- October 20: Social media reactions to the Dutch parliament voting against Romania's accession to the Schengen Area.
- October 29: Social Democrat Party leader accuses opposition of potentially sabotaging Romania's bid

for Schengen. When sharing on Facebook, one of the news outlets packages this news with two others, more sensationalist news—one about the highly debated pension reform and another about a potential Russian nuclear strike on Germany.
- November 5: The Schengen Area accession-related news is a reserved but optimistic statement of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. However, the same news outlet packages this news in the same post with a human-interest story about a child's death and a story about potential territorial disputes between Romania and Ukraine.
- November 13: News about new opposition to Romania's accession to the Schengen Area (Sweden).
- November 30: The agenda of the December 8 vote is announced. News is packaged with several other topics.
- December 3: News about Austria's predicted opposition to Romania's accession.
- December 8: The JHA Council vote. Some Romanian politicians and public figures call for boycotts and protests against Austria.
- December 14: The Romanian president makes a statement about a possible accession in 2023.

Overall, the last week of the analysis timeframe is characterised by higher engagement and high values for "angry" type reactions, comments, and shares in the context of several calls for boycotting Austrian businesses having been made. "Haha" type reactions are also

A. Generic frames indicators
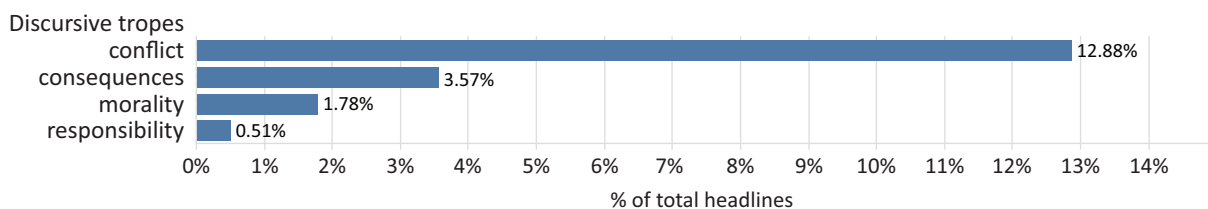
B. News value emphasis indicators
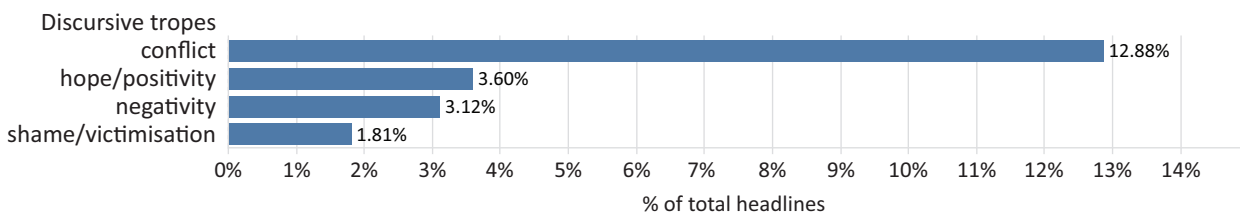
C. Framing metaphor indicators
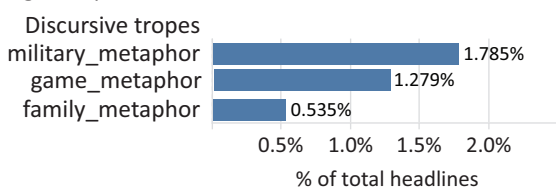
Figure 5. The most salient discursive tropes based on linguistic indicators identified (*N* = 3,362).

significantly higher, suggesting some Romanians adopting a more relaxed attitude towards the issue and the pathos invested in it by some politicians and media institutions. The coverage of one source in particular (digi24.ro) generates high numbers of "haha" reactions.

The analysis of interactions generated by news sharing on Facebook concerning the representation of individual actors reveals that Romanian social media audiences have a preference for sharing news about Romanian individual actors. A relatively high number of "haha" reactions suggests the kind of disenchantment with politics that is based on the spiral of cynicism effect with the strategic communication of politicians being perceived as entirely self-serving. It is interesting to notice that it is only in the case of foreign individual politicians (Figure 6A) that "angry" type reactions are produced more than other reactions such as "haha." In this case, it is probably news vilifying either Austrian or Dutch politicians as the scapegoats for the failed accession to the Schengen Area. A similar analysis concerning reactions but based on indicators of discursive tropes reveals that discourses that contain linguistic indicators of consequences and military metaphors are eliciting the highest rates of "angry" type reactions.

It seems that Romanian audiences that engage with news sharing on Facebook manifest amusement as a form of detachment from the issue, which is sometimes represented emotionally by the media and politicians. We see, however, significant indicators of engaging with the issue's negative and emotional reporting in the relatively high percentage of "angry" reactions. It is perhaps due to different reception and negotiated meanings at the level of individual audience members who seem to fall into two categories: (a) the cynical, detached, amused onlookers and (b) the involved, emotional engagers.

Figure 7 provides an interesting result: In terms of total interactions generated, the indicators of the consequences frame which included coding for "boycott" surpass the interactions generated by headlines containing indicators of the conflict frame. Similarly, there seems to be another reversal in the number of interactions generated by the sharing of headlines that feature indicators of the "game metaphor" rather than the "military metaphor." Both results are likely generated in the context of the public resonance aspect of politicisation (De Wilde, 2011), with social media amplification of discourses and actors' positioning.

The most reacted-to headlines—translated below— illustrate how news sharing on Facebook may contribute to amplification through positive interactions with boycott supporters and Eurosceptics, negative reactions to anti-boycott stances, and stereotype-driven amusement that suggests disenchantment with politics:

- "The rejection of Romania's accession to Schengen makes the Russians happy. The mocking image posted by a person close to the Kremlin leader" (romaniatv.net): 17,469 likes, 5,418 shares, 5,280 comments, 1,291 "love" reactions, 209 "angry" reactions, 283 "haha" reactions, 143 "sad" reactions—most shares, comments, likes and "love" reactions (see Figure 8);
- "VIDEO—Klaus Iohannis thunders: There will be no boycott towards Austria. It is excluded!" (stiripesurse.ro): 106 likes, 45 shares, 1,648 comments, 1,967 "love" reactions, 3.820 "angry" reactions; 42 "haha" reactions, 634 "sad" reactions— most "angry" reactions;
- "Viorica Dăncilă says that she intuited the vote in the Dutch parliament against Romania: 'Intuition? Possible. Experience? Certainly'" (digi24.ro):

A. Reactions to news shared including mention of individual actors
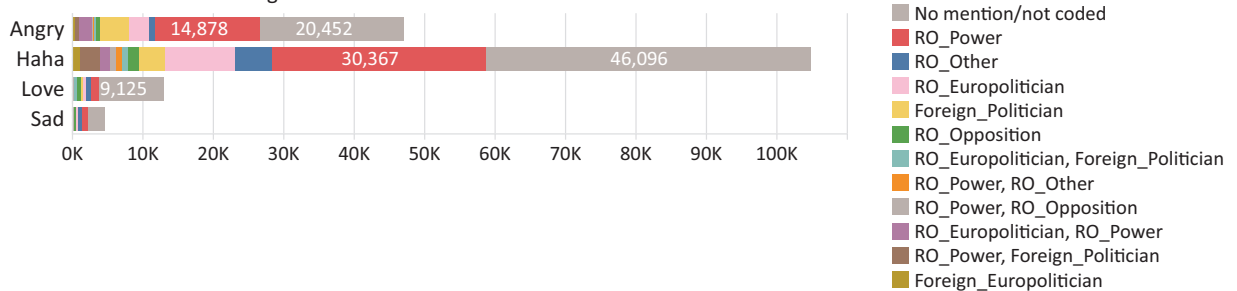
B. Reactions to news shared including mention of collective actors
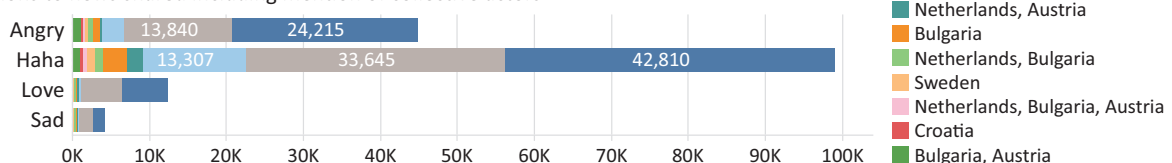
Figure 6. The distribution of total significant reactions other than "like" with respect to actors.

A. Total interactions generated by headlines mentioning individual actors

Individual actors

	% of total Interactions
RO_Power	17.98%
RO_Europoliticlan	5.95%
RO_Other	5.57%
Foreign_Politician	3.52%
RO_Opposition	2.25%
RO_Europoliticlan, Foreign_Politician	1.52%
RO_Europoliticlan, RO_Power	1.48%
RO_Power, Foreign_Politician	1.12%
RO_Power, RO_Opposition	0.95%
RO_Power, RO_Other	0.85%
Foreign_Europoliticlan	0.57%

(x-axis: 0% to 20%, % of total Interactions)
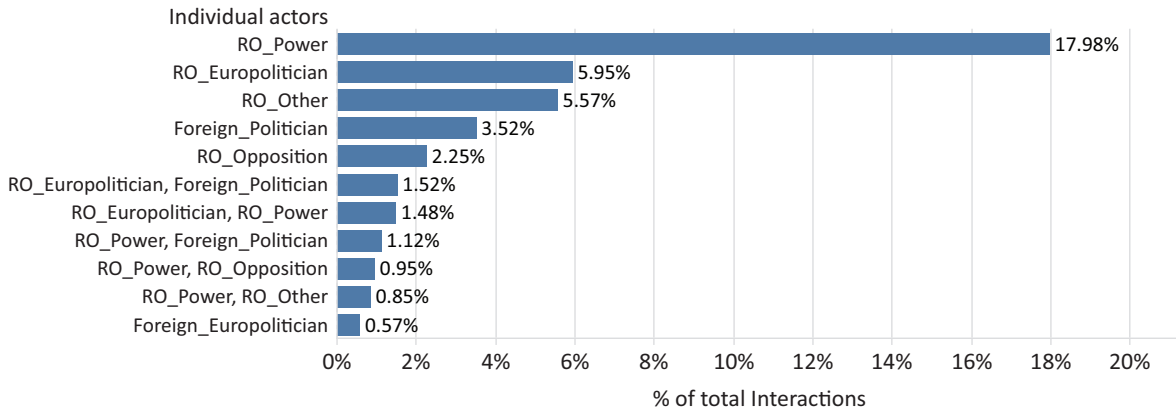
B. Total interactions generated by headlines mentioning collective actors

Countries

	% of total Interactions
Austria	49.12%
Netherlands	5.74%
Bulgaria	2.18%
Netherlands, Austria	2.01%
Sweden	1.07%
Netherlands, Bulgaria	1.07%
Bulgaria, Austria	0.87%
Netherlands, Bulgaria, Austria	0.81%
Czechia	0.60%
Hungary	0.45%
Croatia	0.43%
Russia, Austria	0.38%
Germany, Austria	0.38%
Germany	0.30%
Bulgaria, Croatia, Austria	0.28%
Croatia, Austria	

(x-axis: 0% to 55%, % of total Interactions)

C. Total interactions generated by headlines containing framing indicators

Discursive tropes

	% of total Interactions
consequences	12.24%
conflict	12.19%
morality	1.54%
responsibility	0.40%

(x-axis: 0% to 14%, % of total Interactions)
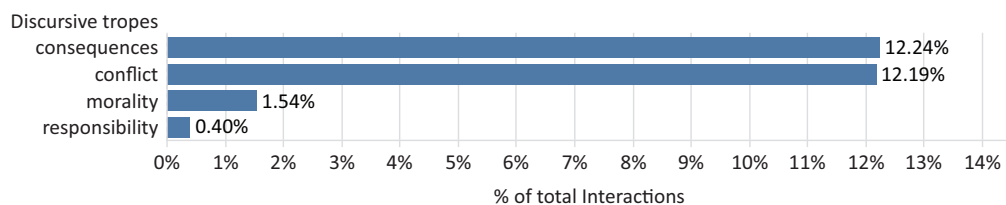
D. Total interactions generated by headlines containing indicators of news value emphasis

Discursive tropes

	% of total Interactions
conflict	12.19%
negativity	4.36%
shame/victimisation	2.92%
hope/positivity	1.58%

(x-axis: 0% to 14%, % of total Interactions)
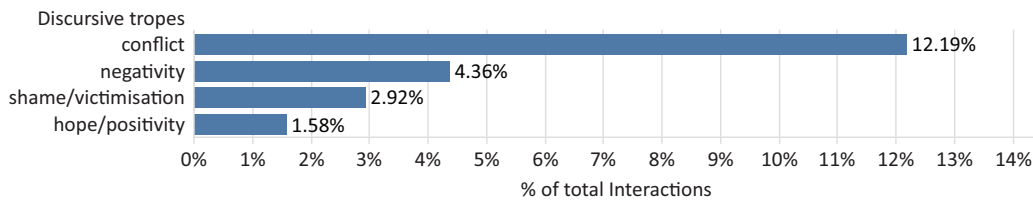
E. Total interactions generated by headlines containing indicators of framing metaphors

Discursive tropes

	% of total Interactions
game_metaphor	3.556%
military_metaphor	2.140%
family_metaphor	0.118%

(x-axis: 0% to 4%, % of total Interactions)

Figure 7. The impact of news sharing on Facebook (*N* = 1,158,841 interactions). Note: Interactions are calculated as a sum of shares, comments, likes, and every other type of reaction.

1,348 likes, 64 shares, 1,604 comments, 24 "love" reactions, 78 "angry" reactions, 2,891 "haha" reactions, 10 "sad" reactions—most "haha" reactions.

The headline that generated the highest number of interactions is shared along with two other links to news stories and a live video broadcast of România TV's pundit television format featuring some key figures of emergent Romanian Euroscepticism. Hence, the post also references the following headlines: "Putin Is Convinced the War in Ukraine Will End. An Agreement Has to Be Reached in the End" and "Scandal at the Protest Organised by George Simion at the Austrian Embassy." George Simion is the leader of the Alliance for the Unity of Romanians Party, a soft Eurosceptic, populist, anti-federalist emergent political group in Romania.

Figure 8 shows somewhat polarised responses on social media—a combination of likes, "love," and "haha'' reactions.

The headline that generated the highest number of "angry" reactions features the Romanian president's reaction to calls for boycotting against Austria. The headline that generated the highest number of "haha" reactions seems to be ironic of former Prime Minister Viorica Dăncilă—the first and only female Romanian prime minister, negatively stereotyped as a puppet figure for former Social Democratic leader Liviu Dragnea.

An analysis of the headlines—available in the additional tables—that triggered the highest engagement on Facebook (see the Supplementary Material) reveals the following. First, the news headlines which have generated the highest scores, number of sha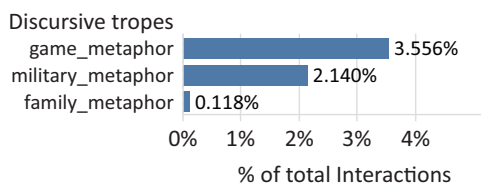res, comments, likes, and "love" reactions are stories about individuals' and companies' attempted boycotting of Austrian companies after the outcome of the JHA accession vote that seem to have romantic narratives personalising revenge/justice against "the villain." Second, the headlines that generated the most "angry" reactions are mostly news headlines that feature statements against the boycott, calling for calm by the Romanian president and Austrian chancellor and an additional, earlier headline about the Szekler National Council being against Romania's accession—the tragic narrative of "betrayal" and "siding with the enemy." Third, the headlines that generated the highest number of "haha" reactions reveal alternate readings of the reporting on boycotts but more importantly, they reveal the media's instrumention of negative stereotyping (and expected misogyny and bigotry), in this case headlines based on statements by former Prime Minister Dăncilă and informal Roma leader Cioabă—the satirical spectacle of helpless, pitiful actors observed from the outside. Fourth, although there is not a substantial number of "sad" reactions, they reveal an emerging narrative of victimisation that paints the Romanians as "second-class citizens," "beggars" who are the victims of "hidden agreements," providing grounding for Euroseptical populist discourses and conspiracy theories.

Figure 8. A screen capture of the Facebook context where the headline resulting in the highest number of interactions was shared. Note: The link is shared on Facebook by România TV news television in the context of a live stream of a political talk show which included live coverage of a protest at the Austrian Embassy in Bucharest on December 9, 2022. Source: România TV (2022).

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The patterns of news media coverage for Romania's 2022 failed bid for Schengen Area accession fit the elements of politicisation of European integration. The issue's coverage is greatly intensified in the context of polarisation of opinion in the context of the final JHA Council vote. Indicators of conflict (frame and news value emphasis) emerge as the most prominent in the analysis. The dominant metaphors are the military metaphor and the game metaphor, suggesting the use of strategic framing by politicians—Romanian politicians affiliated with the Coalition Government of Social Democrats (centre-left) and National Liberals (centre-right) are the most visible individual actors, while Austrians are the most covered collective actors, mostly in the aftermath of the Austrian representatives' veto, which led to the negative outcome for the accession bid. The analysis of Facebook interactions generated by news sharing allows us to also assess public resonance, the third element of De Wilde's analytical framework. The boycott against Austria as a reaction to the outcome of the vote generates the most interactions and both "love" and "angry" reactions.

The research results show that the coverage of the Schengen Area accession has the potential to drive Euroscepticism in three distinct ways: (a) by fuelling negativity and outrage at international actors, either as collective actors such as the Netherlands and Austria or as individual scapegoats such as Mark Rutte or Gerhad Karner; (b) by stimulating detachment from politics in a cynical state of amusement as a reaction to politicians' strategic communication and news media's over-emotionalisation; and (c) by engaging in self-victimisation and hinting at a conspiracy. The research results fit with previous research on the media representation of 2011's Romanian bid for Schengen Area accession (Bârgăoanu, 2011) and add the supplemental investigation into news sharing and reactions in an attempt to explain how the coverage of the issue can become a catalyst for cynicism and Euroscepticism. News that triggers high emotional responses is preferred in the social media ecosystem and there is already significant literature on the topic (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020). This seems to lead to a tendency of newsmakers to prefer emotional issues—such as boycotting Austrian companies—or over-dramatisation and "news inflation"—with some news outlets creating an unnecessary number of articles in the coverage of a story by collecting emotional reactions from as many public figures as possible.

Although further in-depth research using qualitative methods is needed to elaborate on narrative myths identified in the coverage of the Schengen Area accession, it seems the scapegoat emerges as a structure applied even to the more abstract collective country actors even beyond the context of the initial reporting that bears more personalisation. Even if in the construction of the news discourse politicians strategically position themselves as crafty, comedic heroes, or even self-sacrificing romantic ones, the reading accepted by a significant part of the audience is that of satire—a reaction to strategic news framing and news inflation but also a reaction to the media's instrumentalisation of negative stereotypes.

This research has limitations derived from the methodological approach of lexicon-based automated coding. A very small subsample of the headlines that got the most interactions on Facebook was also analysed in order to formulate the conclusions, but further qualitative or mixed methods research is needed to investigate discourses on European integration in the context of the Schengen Area accession in Romania. The approach and results of this research are relevant for future work into the politicisation of European integration and analyses of the coverage of the future national and European-level debates on "differentiated governance." Our use of the conceptualisation of politicisation proposed by De Wilde (2011), the two-step approach used in data collection, and results that use Facebook interactions as indicators of public resonance of politicisation and strategic framing may be replicated in future research.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Additional tables show the headlines that generated the highest number of total Facebook interactions. Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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Article

How Public Service Media Disinformation Shapes Hungarian Public Discourse

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Abstract

The structure of the illiberal Hungarian media system is well documented. Fewer publications address the question of how disinformation is reshaping public discourse in Hungary. The most important feature of disinformation in Hungary is that it is often generated and disseminated by the pro-government media. This is certainly unusual, as in other EU countries it is typically the fringe media which are responsible for spreading disinformation. The Russian war against Ukraine illustrates how the disinformation ecosystem works in Hungary, and it also reveals its devastating impact on democratic public discourse. Public service media play a prominent role in spreading disinformation. We were able to identify several false narratives in the period of the first year since the start of the war. In the first few months of the war, a key element of disinformation that was being spread in Hungary suggested that Ukraine had provoked the armed conflict. Later, the prevailing message was that only Hungary wanted peace, while the Western powers were interested in a continuation of the war. During autumn, the focus of the disinformation campaign increasingly shifted to the EU, disseminating an anti-EU message that was more concerned with the sanctions than the war. The pro-government media constantly told news consumers that the economic difficulties and the rise in energy prices had not been caused by the war launched by Russia but by the sanctions that the EU had imposed in response to the aggression. Public opinion research clearly shows the impact of these narratives on the perceptions of the Hungarian public. The polls readily capture how the Hungarian public's opinion has changed over time. This study is primarily based on a content analysis of the relevant shows of the M1 public television channel, but we have also relied on some insights from public opinion polls to inform our analysis.

Keywords

disinformation; Hungary; propaganda; pro-Russian media; public service media; sanctions; war

1. Introduction

The spread of disinformation has long been a major focus of media research. However, this issue has become particularly important in recent years. The Covid-19 pandemic and then the Russian invasion of Ukraine have highlighted the importance of credible information and the vulnerability of the democratic public to the spread of disinformation.

After the invasion of Ukraine, Russian state-owned media outlets in Europe were shut down to protect the European market from disinformation about the war. This was obviously the right step, but, unfortunately, there is an EU member state in which Russian propaganda continues to be broadcast without hindrance. This is Hungary, where Russian propaganda is still being intensely disseminated. Furthermore, what makes the situation particularly grievous is that this is the

responsibility not only of Russian but also of Hungarian-owned media companies.

In Hungary, the influence of pro-government investors in the media market is very significant and the narratives they present reach almost the entire Hungarian public (Polyák et al., 2022). The phenomenon of media capture provides an appropriate description of the media situation in Hungary. Its main elements, such as the acquisition of privately-owned media outlets by figures with political connections and the capture of public service media (PSM), are very manifest in Hungary. It is also well documented that media companies acquired by pro-government investors follow a very pronounced pro-government editorial line, and, as a result, large segments of the media are comprehensively unable to fulfil their watchdog functions (Dragomir, 2018, 2019; Griffen, 2020).

The Hungarian media system has been subject to international criticism for years now. However, since the launch of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the role of state-funded propaganda has become even more evident. The pro-Russian narrative is especially pronounced in the government-controlled media. By contrast, in other European countries, pro-Russian propaganda is only disseminated by fringe media and social media (GlobalFocus Center et al., 2022). In Hungary, this narrative is extremely strong in the PSM. The goal of the article is to analyse the role of the PSM in an illiberal media system. In contrast to traditional models, the PSM can play a role not only in representing credibility and professionalism but also in influencing public thinking and bringing about profound social change through the widespread dissemination of disinformation.

In this article, we discuss the role of the PSM in the democratic public sphere, with a special focus on the crucial importance of reliable and credible public media in the fight against disinformation (Section 2). We describe the situation of the PSM in Hungary, highlighting that the presence of propaganda is well documented in content analyses conducted over the past decade (Section 3). Section 4 presents the results of our qualitative research. We analysed the content of the evening news shows broadcast by the public television channel M1 in October 2022 and February 2023, focusing on the energy crisis and the geopolitical situation. We also looked at how public opinion about these issues has changed.

2. The Role of Public Service Media in Combating Disinformation: A Literature Review

2.1. Public Service Media and Democratic Values

PSM are traditionally mandated to inform, educate, and entertain the audience. They have always been expected to provide high-quality content and embody the highest professional standards. Today, these media organisations are struggling to remain relevant in the changing technological environment (Van den Bulck et al., 2018).

Bardoel and Lowe (2007) describe the mission of PSM as embracing an audience-centred perspective. This does not imply abandoning devotion to serving the public as citizens. "On the contrary, it implies serving citizens in all the ways their public interest activities seek to fulfil their social, cultural, and democratic needs" (Bardoel & Lowe, 2007, p. 22). This approach shows that the responsibilities of PSM may be much more complex in the 21st century than in the past.

PSM can guarantee professionalism in the creation of media content, as well as the universal distribution of trustworthy content and services. They can also provide citizens with tools for understanding information disorders and increasing media awareness. Essentially, PSM are expected to regain trust in journalism and educate the public about disinformation (Horowitz & Lowe, 2020).

PSM operate not only in well-established democracies but also in countries where institutional autonomy is weak, and politics directly interferes with the work of PSM. Polyák (2019) clearly identified political pressure and the emergence of a pro-government narrative in the case of Hungary. In Poland, the public media are constantly subject to politicisation and party control. However, after the Law and Justice Party (PiS) came to power in 2015, political pressure became particularly pronounced (Mocek, 2019; Połońska, 2019). The political capture of PSM is also well known in the Western Balkans; Milosavljević and Poler (2018) explain this partly by the small size of the countries and insufficient funding.

2.2. The Challenge of Disinformation From the Public Service Media Point of View

One of the biggest challenges facing the democratic public today is the spread of disinformation. A growing trend of disinformation has been a long-standing phenomenon (Posetti & Matthews, 2018), but the Covid-19 epidemic (Grimes, 2021) and the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Erlich & Garner, 2023) have rendered the problem particularly visible. It is worth examining what role PSM, which are traditionally viewed as credible, can play in the fight against disinformation.

As Horowitz and Lowe (2020) explain that the historically respected notions of objectivity and truth are no longer broadly accepted, and there is a growing institutional distrust. At the same time, there is also increasing economic pressure since news providers are forced to compete with digital platforms for advertising revenue and attention. The authors use the term "information disorder" to analyse the role of PSM in helping "to distinguish between types of false information; to offer a guaranteed chain in creation, production, and distribution; and to supply content that addresses audiences as citizens instead of targeted audience micro-segments" (p. 179).

Humprecht et al. (2020) built a framework for boosting the resilience to online disinformation. The authors

identified seven political, economic, and media environment factors that weaken resilience. One of the factors is the weakness of the public services media. Boulianne et al. (2022) used the resilience model in their four-country study on misinformation and they examined the role of PSM. The results were controversial. In the UK, consumption of the BBC's media services did not significantly correlate with greater awareness of fake news stories or sharing misinformation. However, it did correlate with increased self-assessed exposure to misinformation. In France, watching France TV did not correlate with an awareness of, exposure to, or the sharing of misinformation. In Canada, consuming CBC News increased awareness of fake news stories and self-assessed exposure to misinformation, but it did not influence the likelihood of sharing misinformation. Overall, the authors could not prove that the consumption of PSM contributed to resilience.

Horowitz et al. (2022) created a three-dimensional framework to assess the role of PSM in countering disinformation. First, governments should ensure the independence of PSM to allow them to play a leading role in responsibly and credibly fighting disinformation. Second, PSM should be encouraged to collaborate with fact-checking groups and to become more involved in civil anti-disinformation efforts. PSM should be allocated the necessary resources for producing quality content, leading media literacy efforts, and innovating their online presence to increase the impact of these efforts.

The fight against disinformation is still not sufficiently prioritised in practice. Cañedo et al. (2022) identified 12 PSM public value components which often appear across the corpus of European national legislations and grey literature based on reports published on PSM websites. The components of PSM's public value were categorised according to their relevance, resulting in three levels of values: (a) essential value, (b) important value, and (c) interesting value. Surprisingly, media literacy was included in the third group of the least relevant components, even though experts point out that it is crucial in combatting disinformation.

3. Disinformation in the Hungarian Public Service Media

3.1. Propagandistic Editorial Line of the Public Service Media

In the last decade, several scandalous cases highlighted the fact that the Hungarian public media disseminates propaganda. Most of these cases led to intense public reactions (Kovács et al., 2021). Studies, including content analyses, have shown that the Hungarian PSM engage in highly biased and propagandistic broadcasting practices.

Already in 2014, at the time when Crimea was annexed by Russia, the presence of the Russian narrative was identifiable in the coverage of the state-owned MTI news agency, which had been integrated into the PSM system in 2011. As Rácz (2016) found in his content analysis, MTI clearly favoured the Russian narrative. There was even a case of open manipulation when MTI reported news published in the Ukrainian media but distorted the wording in a politically sensitive way. To be fair, some other events in Ukraine, like the shooting down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, were reported in a fair way.

The so-called Spot Check (Szúrópróba in Hungarian) series, published by the Hungarian media watchdog organisation Mertek Media Monitor, chose one public television news show per month and analysed if it complied with the requirements of the media law. Mertek analysed whether the news show was balanced, whether any biased or manipulated content had been published, and whether the editorial practices were biased, focusing only on amplifying the government's communication. The analyses examined manipulative practices in the selection of topics covered and in the way the news blocks were structured and also reviewed whether propagandistic elements appeared in the wording or the visual or audio elements accompanying the individual news items. The news analyses identified a strong bias in favour of the government, as the coverage was practically a verbatim repetition of the ruling party's narrative (Polyák, 2021).

The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights Parliamentary Elections report also analysed the news shows of the M1 public television channel and found strong bias during the election campaign:

> In its editorial coverage, M1 showed bias in favour of the ruling coalition and the government, which received around 61 percent of the news coverage. On average, 96 percent of it was positive in tone, while 82 percent of the coverage devoted to the opposition was negative. This is at odds with OSCE commitments and international standards on fair access to the public broadcaster's programmes and undermined the public's corresponding right to receive media output. (Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2018, p. 20)

The findings concerning the coverage of the 2022 election campaign were very similar. The public media news channel M1 displayed a clear bias in favour of the government and the governing party, Fidesz, by allocating 50% of political news coverage to the government and 5% to the ruling party Fidesz; the vast majority of these news were positive towards the government and Fidesz. There was no clear distinction between the coverage of the government and the ruling party. The opposition coalition received 43% of the total coverage, and this coverage was overwhelmingly negative. Reports were often laced with comments and unsubstantiated allegations attacking the opposition candidate (Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2022).

Particularly strong evidence of bias towards the governing party was manifest in an audio recording of an

internal editorial meeting before the 2019 European Parliament elections. Balázs Bende, a senior PSM editor, instructed journalists about the editorial guidelines, and the audio recording was leaked to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Referring to the election campaign, Bende said "I'm sure no one here will be surprised to hear that this institution does not support the opposition list." He was also very clear about the expectations from his colleagues: "Whoever is in charge must produce content according to the appropriate narrative, method, and direction, mostly about migrants and Brussels." The censorship was readily apparent when he said that: "If anyone is not prepared to work under these conditions, he is free to file his resignation immediately" (Keller-Alánt, 2020).

The PSM in Hungary do not play the same role as their counterparts in well-established democracies. The main goal of the Hungarian PSM is not to seek the truth and present reality but to serve the government's communication objectives.

3.2. Disinformation as a Topic in the Hungarian Public Service Media

Disinformation does appear as a topic in the Hungarian public media. However the Hungarian public media do not cooperate with independent fact-checking organisations at all, and their references to disinformation serve to build a political narrative rather than furthering actual fact-checking.

Analysing the *Hirado.hu* news portal of the Hungarian PSM, Bódi et al. (2022, p. 25), concluded that before 2020, fake news:

Was presented in the articles of *Hirado.hu* primarily as a problem specific to online communication, with its potential political and social implications, as well as the methods for countering it. In 2020, this changed, and the accusation of fake news emerged as a communication instrument against the domestic independent media, the opposition, and the international liberal elite.

In other words, in the Hungarian public media, the Covid-19 pandemic brought about a change in communication as a result of which the concept of "fake news" is used to stigmatise actors critical of the government.

A section called "Fake News Figyelő" (Fake News Observer) is still available on *Hirado.hu*. Ostensibly, this Fake News Observer is a fact-checking site, but it is rather one-sided in its selection of topics. The news items on the site were published between 1 March and 20 September 2022. Most articles were published during the campaign period leading up to the April 2022 parliamentary election, which suggests that the series was essentially used for political and campaign purposes. The vast majority of the news items sought to deny information about Ukrainian casualties, demonstrate the oppo-

sition's alleged pro-war stance, and respond to claims in non-government media. Regardless of whether the fact checks published on the site are well-founded, it is clear that the purpose of the effort overall is not to combat disinformation but to reinforce the government narrative.

3.3. Editorial Line in the Days Following the Outbreak of the War

Just like the public opinion in other countries, the Hungarian public, too, was taken by surprise when Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The media play a major role in such situations because everyone is trying to keep up with events and waiting for the news to be explained. This is a huge responsibility for journalists. During this period, quality media everywhere sought to shed light on the unfolding events by consulting geopolitical analysts and international experts. However, the dynamics in Hungary were fundamentally different, and the public service news is a case in point.

Already in the days following the start of the war, starting on February 24, 2022, the PSM featured a heavily pro-Russian narrative. This was all the more surprising since at the time, the government party politicians were still silent on the issue. They typically did not make any comments siding with Russia. Nevertheless, the M1 news channel started featuring pro-Russian "talking heads" who clearly advanced the Kremlin's narrative.

A so-called national security expert, George Spöttle, a former German police officer, compared the Ukrainian people to the Volkssturm of Nazi Germany. György Nógrádi, the government's other favourite national security expert, said that "since the creation of Ukraine in 1991, the Ukrainian leadership has been either pro-Russian or pro-Western, neither of which was very fortunate. I have never seen a truly pro-Ukrainian leadership" (Urbán, 2022). The third expert, Ágnes Bernek Daunerné, who was not previously known in mainstream media, simply blamed NATO for the situation in Ukraine (Urbán, 2022).

Another striking development was that the official Hungarian news agency, MTI, which operates as part of the PSM network, also followed the Kremlin's narrative in avoiding the use of the term war in the first days of the invasion. Their use of the term "Russian military operation" clearly served to relativise the gravity of the situation and glossed over the fact that, in reality, Russia had launched a war against one of her neighbours (Szalay, 2022).

Although the reaction of the PSM was downright shocking, some optimistically believed that they were simply professionally not up to handling this situation and would correct their mistakes over time. In the case of MTI, this did happen to some extent—In response to the press scandal that followed in the wake of their use of the term "military operation," they started calling the war a war. Still, on the whole, the PSM has continued to present the relevant geopolitical developments

in an extremely biased manner. The past year has shown that the daily news show of the M1 news channel hews closely to the government's communication, which—unlike its paralysis in the first days of the war—openly espouses a pro-Russian stance in the international arena as well (Kazharski, 2023). The PSM and the pro-government private media have significantly shaped Hungarian public opinion on this issue since the start of the war.

4. Empirical Research

4.1. Methodology

The research analysed the main news programme of the public service channel M1, which starts at 19:30 pm. The analysis covered two periods, 1–14 October 2022 and 1–14 February 2023. The content analysis focused on narratives dealing with the geopolitical situation, including the energy crisis and its economic consequences. We analysed how public service news programmes captured the complexity of the situation, how they presented different interpretations, and to what extent they helped their viewers understand the current processes. During the analysis, key messages were identified, with a particular focus on regularly repeated messages.

The choice of time periods was a conscious decision. In October 2022, energy prices were very high across Europe, and in Hungary, too, the question of what challenges the next winter would bring loomed large. In February 2023, it was already clear that the winter period had been basically well managed in the European countries, and no dramatic situation had developed. At the same time, it was also apparent at that point that Hungary experienced a very high inflation rate, and the domestic economy was doing considerably worse than in other EU member states.

We also looked at opinion poll data published between autumn 2022 and spring 2023, which show the changes in public opinion in Hungary. The polling data are from public sources.

4.2. The Presentation of the Geopolitical Situation in October 2022

The first 14 days of October 2022 marked an especially important period in the government's communication. For one, because of the high energy prices and the looming winter, a sense of uncertainty prevailed at the time. The economic prospects were hazy and the government needed to come up with a narrative framework for the difficulties that the Hungarian population was likely to be confronted with in the following months. Second, the prime minister had just announced at the end of September that a so-called national consultation would be launched on the sanctions against Russia. This was when the topics of the planned consultation and its exact

questions were publicly introduced (Cseke & Horváth Kávai, 2022).

Almost every evening news show during the period investigated featured a news block called "Energy Crisis," which generally lasted 10–15 minutes and reviewed the European energy situation. This block devoted a lot of airtime to high energy prices, emphasising that the public was in distress in many countries. On the one hand, it was of course true that prices were rising across Europe and beyond, and that there was a great deal of uncertainty as to what the winter would bring. Nevertheless, the public service news show substantially overstated how dramatic the situation was. They claimed, for example, that many people in Denmark sold their houses and "there were people who sought to make it through the winter using camping sites" (October 6); in Germany, "living standard deteriorated dramatically," and in fact "public lighting had been turned off in many major cities" (October 9), while every "Finnish household had to brace itself for potentially sustained electricity outages" (October 14).

The news programme presented people's everyday difficulties in an exaggerated form. This had no real news value, it merely tried to emphasise the difficulties faced by Western societies by highlighting banal situations. Thus, for example, the news programme claimed that "French public television recommended that people use their mobile phones less" due to the energy crisis (October 4); in Germany, the revenues of pawnshops were rising (e.g., on October 12, a woman was shown pawning her vacuum cleaner); and in Belgium "a growing number of people stopped showering at home and instead did so at work, at public swimming pools or gyms" (October 13). The public service news show frequently presented the difficulties faced by the public in other countries by airing locally produced reports that were obviously taken from foreign news coverage. Thus, during the period investigated, viewers of the Hungarian public service news shows learned about a Belgian bakery that was shut down; they saw a report on the Danish school where it was colder than usual, and about a French public swimming pool where the water was cold. The news show also repeatedly covered demonstrations in major foreign cities.

Not once during the period examined did anyone in the news say that Russia—or Putin specifically—bore responsibility for the high energy prices. In fact, the public service news show clearly blamed Brussels for the problems in the energy markets. It is important to stress that the government's communication had been talking about "Brussels" for a long time as part of an effort to steer public sentiments against the EU. They presumably do this because the EU has positive connotations for many, while Brussels had started out as a basically neutral term and is now increasingly perceived as negative. "Brussels sanctions" was a recurring term on the news show, as in "Brussels' sanctions don't work" (October 2), "the ill-conceived Brussels sanctions have

backfired" (October 3), "the sanctions hurt Europe a lot more than Russia" (October 5), and "Brussels sanctions have no regard whatsoever for European interests" (October 11).

Naturally, the public service news show did not only report on the difficulties but also on the presumed solutions, which were all without fail policies introduced by the government. Hence, the government's firewood price-cap programme was repeatedly discussed, and it was pointed out that, in European comparison, the Hungarian population had fared best during the crisis: "Hungarian families are the safest in all of Europe" (October 8); "Hungarians still pay the lowest energy prices" (October 11); "while utility prices are increasing everywhere, in Hungary they are still cheaper" (October 12). Those news consumers who informed themselves only from PSM might well have perceived that the reality they lived in was an alternative one of sorts, namely one in which everything is all right in Hungary while the populations of other countries are suffering and many people are not even sure if they will make it through the winter season.

The public service news show was an early indicator that Hungary would chart its own distinct foreign policy course on the war, separate from the other members of the Western alliance system. The Hungarian prime minister said that to "achieve peace, Russia and the United States need to negotiate directly with one another" and that "Hungary is pro-peace, and as Hungarians, our interest is that peace prevails as quickly as possible" (October 11). The viewers were not necessarily aware of how much of an outlier the Hungarian government's position was within the EU, as a report published on the next day said that "the support for the prime minister's stance within the European Council seems to be rising steadily" (October 12). The Hungarian foreign minister, Péter Szijjártó, went even further when he asserted that "we are fully invested in preserving the energy cooperation between Russia and Hungary" (October 13). This was also the time when the government's tone had become critical of the United States; this critical tone subsequently emerged as a dominant theme in Hungarian foreign policy in 2023. Viktor Orbán said that "something is amiss, and we need to ask our American friends what is going on here and who profits from this issue because we Europeans are definitely losing and it looks to us like you're winning" (October 14).

The biased editorial practices of the public television channel manifested themselves in several ways. They repeatedly referred to the "left," always in a negative context, such as "the dollar-left in Hungary [a reference to foreign funding that the opposition had received during the campaign for the 2022 election] has fully embraced the stupid decisions of the Brussels' elite" (October 4). At the same time, not once did the PSM ask Hungarian left-wing politicians to speak about their own solutions to the issues raised. Only government party politicians were asked to comment on these issues, and the narra-

tive conveyed in the coverage also reflected their positions. The same was true of the experts invited to comment, as only well-known pro-government think tanks were given such opportunities.

Thus, the PSM news unequivocally and very visibly followed the government's narrative in its coverage of the energy crisis. That is, they claimed that the sanctions imposed by Brussels are the root cause of the problems and that life across Europe had become extremely hard while the Hungarian government shielded the local population from the hardships—This was highlighted every day in the public service news show. Despite the lies in the narrative above, the constant reiteration of the message and the deliberate disregard for opinions that disagreed with it might well have convinced many viewers that this was the reality.

4.3. The Presentation of the Geopolitical Situation in February 2023

It emerges clearly from the February 2023 analysis that the Hungarian public television continues to cover the geopolitical situation based on three central narratives. For one, it claims even more openly than before that there is a clear link between inflation and the sanctions imposed by the EU. Furthermore, while it presents the government as pro-peace, it continues to portray the opposition as a supporter of the war. Finally, there is an increasing presence of anti-Ukrainian attitudes in its coverage. The latter manifests itself in citing Russian sources without adding commentary or context, and in highlighting inhumane actions allegedly committed by the Ukrainian armed forces and the presumably staggering losses suffered by the latter.

According to the M1 news programmes, Brussels bears the sole responsibility for the sanctions. The EU and the sanctions imposed by the latter are consequently also responsible for the overwhelming majority of negative repercussions stemming from the war. In this context, the public service news coverage has also continued the trend of exclusively inviting government party politicians or experts with ties to Fidesz to comment on war-related issues. In addition to the existing, continuously voiced references to "sanction-triggered inflation" (February 2, 6, 10) and the "energy crisis" (February 1, 2, 3, 14), a reference to the "energy catastrophe" (February 2) was introduced as a new element in the coverage of the war. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán was often quoted on the issue. Thus, he informed the viewers of public service television that "it is futile to expect Brussels to step up and help, the only thing coming from [Brussels] are sanctions" (February 1) and that "this policy of sanctions constitutes a step towards war" (February 7). All government party politicians who were asked to comment proffered the same narrative. Thus, Fidesz MEP Tamás Deutsch said that "the EU's sanctions policies hurt Europe more than Russia" (February 2). And Deputy Minister Csaba Dömötör noted

that "energy prices are high because of the sanctions, and the energy prices in turn cause record inflation levels" (February 4).

The other central message disseminated by public television—in addition to the core message that the record-high inflation is due specifically and exclusively to the sanctions introduced in response to the war—is the everyday struggle of other European countries with inflation. Slovakia "continuously confronts the increase in the price of basic foodstuffs. The numerous closings could lead to a shortage of basic foods" (February 1); "the government asks Germans to save continuously" (February 3); "the prices of district heating have skyrocketed in Slovenia" (February 4); "experts say that petrol prices increase and shortages could emerge in Austria" (February 5); and, in Ireland, "almost 40% of families reported skipping meals or reducing portions in order to be able to feed their children properly" (February 12).

Opposition politicians still hardly get any opportunities to comment, the editorial policy is very biased in this respect. They are only featured as "Brussels' accomplices," in the vein of "the dollar-left continues to support the sanctions that cause the energy crisis" (February 3–5, 10, 12–14). And if they do get the chance to speak on the inflation issue, it is accompanied by curious commentary: "The same dollar-left talking about inflation now is the one that takes money from foreign powers to mindlessly support every sanction Brussels imposes" (February 10). To understand the context, we need to add that, starting in autumn 2022, the government's communication began to feature the term "dollar-left," which creates the impression that opposition politicians, independent media, and NGOs work as foreign agents of sorts, funded from abroad.

Neither blaming Brussels nor casting opposition politicians in a negative light is a new phenomenon. We already reported on this in the previous part of this study. In reality, this has been a dominant theme in PSM television's coverage for years now. However, a new element in our February 2023 analysis is that pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian narratives are now directly featured in the coverage.

One of the dominant methods of conveying pro-Russian narratives is that comments by the Russian side and its representatives are broadcast in the news without any explanation or commentary. Examples include a statement by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov claiming that "Russia strives to resolve the conflict peacefully" (February 2) or Putin's speech, in which he said that "the most important thing is to protect the areas near the border against Ukrainian attacks; the residents have had to be relocated from several counties on account of the immediate threat to their lives" (February 2) and that "German tanks are threatening Russia once again" (February 2). Another indication of the overall trend is the use of vocabulary that the Russian side tends to use, such as telling viewers that cities in the Donetsk region are being "liberated" (February 1 and 13) and speaking

of American "terror attacks" in the context of the North Stream pipeline.

Even more striking is the negative presentation of the Ukrainian armed forces. A recurrently featured item—and a long one, too, as compared to other news segments—concerned alleged compulsory recruitment practices in Ukraine, "which some consider manhunts" (broadcast on February 3, 4, 5, 8, 11, and 12). Using recordings made with phones as illustrations, one news segment claimed that "many recounted the experience that [the recruiters] presented blank draft letters when they wanted to take someone;" that "uniformed men scour the streets in packs," and that "there is a veritable manhunt for men between the ages of 18 and 64 in Ukraine." The report further mentioned that they have to use footage from Telegram—a questionable source— because the freedom of the press is being violated in Ukraine. The latter is also allegedly the explanation for why Ukrainian television has referred to the videos in question as "part of the Russian propaganda efforts" (February 8).

In both periods under review, the M1 television channel presented a pro-Russian narrative, and in February 2023 it was already openly using elements of Kremlin propaganda.

4.4. The Impact of the Pro-Russian Communication

There is a strong correlation between the political narrative conveyed by the PSM and the evolution of public opinion polls on the issues touched upon here. However, in looking at the causal link, two factors need to be taken into account. For one, causality is not unidirectional. That is, it is not necessarily the PSM that influences the audience's worldview. On the whole, we can assume that the viewers of the heavily pro-government public service television are more likely to be persons whose political views lean in this direction anyway, and their expectations influence the editorial line. At the same time, for many, the PSM were obviously not the only source of information about the government's political narratives since a majority of privately-owned media corporations are also under the effective control of the ruling party (Polyák et al., 2022). It is hence impossible to capture the impact or quantify the influence of any single media outlet. What is nevertheless worth investigating is how the propagandistic editorial practices of the governing party media reshape the way people think and how this is reflected in the trends we see in the polls. We chose the M1 public television channel because it is accessible all across Hungary, the brand is well known domestically, and the institutional governance ensures the dissemination of the governing party's communication messages.

The data published by the reputable pollster Medián in October 2022 showed that while in April 2022, 41% of respondents had said that they strongly disagreed with the sanctions imposed on Russia; by October, this ratio had surged to 52%. In light of the government's

communication on the issue, it is hardly surprising that the public is heavily divided along partisan lines: The October 2022 poll showed that 81% of the government party (Fidesz) supporters rejected the sanctions, while only 26% of opposition voters said the same (Szurovecz, 2022).

In 2022, the think tank Political Capital published a survey in which it also looked at how informed respondents were. This was also of pre-eminent importance because the government's communication on the issues discussed here and its actual policies were diametrically opposed. Even though the Orbán government had voted for all the eight EU sanctions packages adopted up to that point, 36% of the total sample and 50% of Fidesz supporters in the sample thought that this had never happened (Political Capital, 2022). "The misguided Brussels" sanctions were a regularly recurring element of the public service news coverage, along with the claim that the sanctions caused the surge in European energy prices. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that many were misled on the subject of the sanctions since it would have followed logically from the government's position for the Hungarian government to vote against the sanctions it deemed as harmful.

The Publicus Institute looked at the attitudes concerning the war in several studies, and the results were publicly disseminated as part of a conference presentation. According to these results, between April and October 2022, there was a significant shift in public opinion concerning the question "Do you think it is possible to nurture good relations with both the EU and Russia simultaneously?" In April, respondents were heavily divided on this issue, with 45% saying yes—that is they believed this was possible—and 47% saying no, "Hungary needs to decide where it wants to belong." By October, the public mood had changed, with only 30% believing that a balance was possible and 65% saying that Hungary needed to make a choice. This is not surprising in and of itself. However, crucially, the opinions of Fidesz voters did not change at all between April (52 vs 38%) and October (51 vs 39%). In both surveys, a few per cent of respondents could not or did not want to answer the question (András, 2022). It is striking that even as the Hungarian public's opinions shifted as events changed, the opinions of Fidesz voters were completely frozen. It appears that geopolitical developments have not had any impact whatsoever on the perceptions of Fidesz voters.

According to data published by the Publicus Institute, between December 2022 and February 2023, the share of the Hungarian public who believed that the sanctions imposed by Brussels had caused food prices to rise increased from 47% to 63%. During the same period, the share of those who believed that the government's economic policies were to blame dropped from 74% to 65%. The fact that in February 2023, 96% of government party supporters believed that Brussels sanctions were responsible for rising prices, while only 26% of opposition supporters shared this assessment, reveals a lot about the state of political polarisation in Hungary today (Varga, 2023).

A poll conducted by Medián in February 2023 also confirmed that there are vast differences between citizens' opinions and these correlate heavily with partisan preferences. Thus, the voters who supported the parties that were part of the joint opposition list in the 2022 election believed overwhelmingly that corruption and the government's economic policy caused the economic crisis (92 and 91 points, respectively, on a 100-point scale). Fidesz voters, by contrast, clearly identified the sanctions (77 points) as the cause of the crisis, closely followed by the war (76 points). Furthermore, government party voters overwhelmingly thought that Fidesz's economic policy was least likely to blame for the economic situation; it received a score of only 29 points (hvg360, 2023).

5. Conclusion

The information provided by the Hungarian public media about the war and its consequences for Hungary constitutes deliberate disinformation. The PSM uncritically follow the narrative proffered by the Hungarian government, while the positions of the Western alliances or the Hungarian opposition, respectively, which contradict the government's positions, are either not presented at all or are disseminated in a distorted form.

The anti-EU narrative has emerged as the most dominant narrative in public communication about the war in Ukraine. This narrative is an extension of the "Brussels" antipathy, which has been a mainstay of government and PSM communication for years before the war broke out. This communication blames the presumably distant, invisible, elusive, imperial, and bureaucratic enemy for the new difficulties. At the same time, it is an important element in the efforts to absolve Russia and the Russian political leadership of responsibility for the current problems. Instead of Russia and Putin, "Brussels" is presented as the source of the problems that Hungary is facing as a result of the war and the government's policies.

The Hungarian public media has used the portrayal of the consequences of the war to build a narrative in which the citizens of Western Europe face dramatic difficulties in their daily lives while the Hungarian government successfully shields the Hungarian people from the negative repercussions. This simultaneously reinforces anti-Western sentiments and the national consciousness of a nation that is supposedly more successful than the West, while the Hungarian government and the Hungarian prime minister are presented as heroically defending the interests of the Hungarian people; in the pro-government media's presentation, this makes them deserving of unconditional respect. It is important to point out that even though it is true that the energy crisis has caused difficulties all over Europe, the Hungarian public media have failed to report on the cost-of-living crisis in Hungary, even as they grossly exaggerated the severity of the situation in Western Europe.

The Hungarian PSM's portrayal of the prevailing situation in Hungary and Europe contradicts the facts on the ground. The geopolitical reality is completely different from what is presented in the public media, while the Hungarian economy is performing abysmally, and Hungarian consumers struggle with the highest inflation rate in the EU.

The coverage of the war also features a constantly recurring narrative with a domestic political dimension: While the government is allegedly doing everything it can for peace, the opposition is portrayed as interested in prolonging and expanding the war, which is in line with Western interests. In other words, the opposition serves "Western" interests rather than the Hungarian national interests, putting the Hungarian people in danger.

All this has a clear impact on Hungarian society. As research has shown, although "the majority believe that Hungary's place is in the West, over the past two years the share of those who would prefer closer ties with Russia has doubled" (Bíró-Nagy et al., 2023, p. 2). This is a dramatic development at a time when Russia has invaded a neighbouring country (Bíró-Nagy et al., 2023).

In developed democracies, the PSM are an important part of the media system, they serve as guarantees of reliability and credibility. Their work is of particular importance in the fight against disinformation. The situation is completely different in Hungary, where public media are part of the problem rather than the solution. Public service news programmes constantly spread propaganda and disinformation that is obviously identifiable as serving Russian interests. Research has shown that this has had a spectacular impact on Hungarian public opinion. The Hungarian government's foreign policy is visibly pro-Russian, as is the editorial practice of the PSM.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

The Eurabia Conspiracy Theory: Twitter's Political Influencers, Narratives, and Information Sources

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Abstract

In recent years, conspiracy theories on social media have emerged as a significant issue capable of undermining social perceptions of European integration. Narratives such as the Eurabia doctrine, which would imply an ethnic replacement of the indigenous European population with migrants (Bergmann, 2018), have been a significant resonance. Thanks to computational analysis, we have collected data from Twitter over three years (2020, 2021, and 2022) during the Covid-19 pandemic. In this period, we collected over 50,000 tweets strictly related to the Eurabia doctrine topic in different European languages. Analysing the collected data, we identified the most relevant voices spreading conspiracy theories online, the emerging narratives related to the Eurabia doctrine, and the primary sources used by the most active or mentioned subjects in spreading disinformation.

Keywords

conspiracy theories; Eurabia doctrine; population replacement conspiracy; social media; Twitter

Issue

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1. Introduction: The Pandemic of Conspiracy Theories

The circulation of conspiracy theories has grown online during the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as its impact on public opinion related to political issues such as EU integration (Dow et al., 2021; Erokhin et al., 2022). According to multiple studies, social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit have had a fundamental role both in spreading fake news and enhancing its visibility (Allington et al., 2021; Shahsavari et al., 2020). On 4 May 2020, for example, the 26-minute video titled "Plandemic" posted on YouTube, claiming that Covid-19 was a laboratory product conceived to guarantee an enormous income to pharmaceutical giants from the vaccine, received 2.6 million likes in a few hours (Frenkel et al., 2020). Despite the multiplicity and diversity of conspiracy theories present online, the conspiracists' arguments are structured on recurring rhetoric.

At the base of the conspiracy theories, there is a progressive polarisation between the conspiracists—those who identify the cause of a phenomenon in the conspiracy—and the *trickster*: the real conspirators often identified in the techno-scientific, economic, political elites (Neville-Shepard, 2018). In the analysis of conspiratorial texts, it is necessary to identify, together with the speeches, also those who elaborate them. These issues stage a typical dramaturgy (Wexler & Havers, 2002) which includes at least four figures in its cast: the conspiracy theorists; the accused power elite (including public institutions, official agencies, and debunkers); the witnesses and experts the conspiracy theorists rely on; and the audience formed by the public of the wider society. As a result, the phenomenon of conspiracy is very broad and often ignores a single theory, presenting itself as a narrative format that targets different theories or subjects, and that can achieve an extraordinary echo.

The processes of formation and circulation of conspiracy theories have exponentially grown thanks to the internet. In fact, online communication emphasises the intertextuality of conspiratorial language that is the property of each speech to refer to other discourses from heterogeneous sources—politics, religion, economics, science and so on—with which it is eclectically assembled by web users (Panchenko, 2016).

Moreover, social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube represent the ideal meeting environment for supporters of conspiracy theories: Individuals, who in the pre-internet era were isolated, gained the means to connect with others who share their interests and can create aggregation to strengthen in-group bonds. However, there are differences, for example, in the Facebook groups dedicated to conspiracy theories: There are those who prefer to isolate themselves from external interference and those who instead have the specific goal of co-opting other individuals. Within Facebook, this distinction is identified in the privacy management methods used by groups: Some of them create private groups, accessible only by those who receive authorisation by an administrator. In this context, private groups become what have so far been defined as echo chambers. According to Axel Bruns (2017, p. 3), an echo chamber comes into being when a group of participants choose to preferentially connect, to the exclusion of outsiders. However, public groups aimed at proselytising represent the largest category: They collect a higher number of subscriptions and are the virtual arena in which the debate between supporters and detractors of the conspiracies takes place. These pages and groups are also used to spread propaganda mainly through the publication of audiovisual material. In relation to political conspiracy theories, such as the Eurabia doctrine, different scholars (Chen et al., 2023; Min, 2021) highlight that groups and social networks tend to be open and inclusive also with the aim of co-opting individuals in sharing their political narratives.

1.1. The Eurabia Doctrine

Conspiracy theories reached the core of EU political institutional debate entering the European Parliament, when radical right populists raised the issue of EU Islamisation and the threat of population substitution, with references to "the great replacement theory" or the Eurabia doctrine (Bergmann, 2018). The conspiracy theory claims that white Europeans are to be replaced by immigrants from non-European countries through the actions of politicians and power elites (Bergmann, 2021). The theory reached the wider audience concerning anti-immigration political positions and it has been reinforced by waves of refugees from the Middle East and Africa in recent decades. The term gained notoriety when it was used as a book title by Bat Ye'or, an Egyptian-born author who coined the expression *Eurabia*.

The narrative focusing on the alleged threat posed by radical Islam to Western societies appeared in the 1970s and 1980s in response to events of international resonance, including the Iranian revolution and the protests following the Fatwa against Salman Rushdie after the publication of the *Satanic Verses*. The "clash of civilisations" thesis was first proposed by Lewis (1990) and popularised by Huntington (1993). Huntington believes that the great conflicts after the fall of Soviet communism would have been linked not so much to political ideologies, as to values, culture, and religion. In this context, Islamic civilisation was identified as one of the most serious dangers for the survival of the West. Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, those ideas have spread with greater force.

Bat Ye'or, in her 2005 book *Eurabia: The Euro-Arab Axis*, argues that a process of Islamisation is underway in the West, encouraged by a European foreign policy favourable to Arab countries. According to Bat Ye'or, the turning point is represented by the energy crisis of the 1970s, which forced European policymakers to make concessions to the oil-producing Arab countries (Ye'or, 2005). The Italian journalist and writer Oriana Fallaci had a significant influence on the dissemination and popularisation of the Eurabia theory, with her widely translated book *The Force of Reason* (Fallaci, 2006).

As highlighted by recent studies, a strong driving force behind theories related to the danger of European Islamisation is represented by US thinkers and think tanks linked to the US far right mainly addressed to an internal public. They tend to show how the loss of traditional values, progressive policies about migration, and the extension of welfare are leading Europe to collapse (Pilbeam, 2011; Wodak, 2015). The recurring narratives in the US far right have favoured the consolidation of several core narratives: demography is used as a weapon for ethnic replacement, multiculturalism is an ideology used to weaken Europe against Islam, and the social democratic left is responsible for ethnic substitution through immigration and the extension of welfare to immigrants.

Anti-immigration conspiracy theories are particularly popular on social media. Recent studies highlighted the relationship between the affordances of social media sites and the online propagation of population replacement conspiracy theories. According to Ekman (2022), conspiracy theory contents follow *spreadability* logic (Jenkins et al., 2013), including controversial, sensationalist, and shocking content. Recent studies analyse, for example, the role of memes in spreading theories related to the Great Replacement. According to Hernandez Aguilar (2023), memes live in symbiosis with mainstream media endorsing population replacement conspiracy theories. They synthesise and make the content accessible, making extreme the meaning of mainstream media, "adding racial details to original sources" and inciting violence (Hernandez Aguilar, 2023). Memes also play a relevant role in allowing explicit content not to be blocked by the filtering strategies of social media algorithms. Thanks to memetic campaigns, content creators have been able to distribute

their content on Twitter, avoiding the content moderation policies of mainstream platforms. The meme campaigns about the demographic war narrative are part of this process. According to this narrative, the goal of population substitution is also pursued through the predatory behaviour of male Muslims towards European women. Memetic campaigns in fact, explicitly represent, through pseudo-pornographic contents, the predatory behaviour of Islamic men toward European women, with the goal of arousing strong emotional reactions (Evolvi, 2019) and reinforcing Islamophobic feelings (Fadil, 2023; Leidig, 2021).

In consideration of the broad scenario involving the spreadability tactics and processes related to anti-immigration conspiracy theories on social media, our article will focus on the Eurabia doctrine and its key narratives. Our objective is to gain insights into the driving forces, narratives, and sources that contribute to information dissemination within European linguistic communities, particularly on a topic that has become a significant part of the institutional political discourse.

This article addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: Which are the most relevant voices in the process of spreading the Eurabia Doctrine online?

RQ2: What are the emerging narratives?

RQ3: What are the sources used by the subjects most active or mentioned in the process of spreading narratives on the Eurabia Doctrine?

2. Methodology

To answer our research questions, we will rely on a mixed methodological approach that will put together a quantitative computational analysis and a qualitative phase of content exploration. Both phases will focus on different languages with an attempt to highlight the European dimension of the debate on Twitter. The languages chosen are those spoken in predominantly European states by at least five million native speakers. Twitter has been the subject of extensive research regarding how social media have shaped society, politics, and public opinion (Jungherr, 2016). An important aspect is that even if studies have demonstrated that users are not representative of the general population (McGregor, 2019) and are highly influenced by political players (Weeks et al., 2017), academics and journalists rely on Twitter as a source of public opinion. The reason is that it has been recently demonstrated that ideas and issues represented on Twitter still provide insight into what everyday citizens think (van Klingeren et al., 2021). We collected three years of data from Twitter (2020–2022) using Twitter API v.2 with Academic Research access. We used 4CAT (Peeters & Hagen, 2022) to collect and store data, and Twitter Capture and Analysis Toolset

(Borra & Rieder, 2014), for analysis purposes. In this period, we collected more than 50,000 tweets related to the topic of the Eurabia doctrine, applying the following query: Eurabia OR Eurabie OR Eurábie OR Eurábia OR Eurabien OR Eurabija OR Ευραβία OR Еврабија OR Еврабия OR Єврабія.

The quantitative analysis relied on digital methods (Rogers, 2019) for their ability to manage natively digital data on web platforms like social media and to represent collective phenomena, social changes, and cultural expressions. The theory in the field has moved towards *critical metrics* (Rogers, 2018) in contrast with the typical vanity metrics of social network sites. Critical metrics are used to define dominant voices and relevant narratives and can describe the position of each user by mapping the relationships between different entities. The concept of dominant voices conceptually identifies the most influential voices on a specific social issue. Accordingly, mention affordance is used to operationalise the "perceived influence" of a user in a particular debate and will be used to answer our RQ1. To answer RQ2 and identify relevant narratives debated in communities, we will rely on hashtags to perform topic modelling. In addition, critical metrics can describe a user's position on a topic based on relationships between entities of different natures, such as users and URLs/domains. Identifying the main sources of information used by dominant voices will lead us to answer our RQ3. We based the social network analysis on three specific entities—users, hashtags, and URLs domains—and we focused on the main languages (English, Spanish, Dutch, French, and Italian). These languages were identified through 4CAT, which applies an algorithm to guess the language of the tweet. At first, we analysed user dynamics by implementing mention analysis and highlighting the different communities with their dominant voices. Secondly, we filtered our dataset for each of the five main languages performing a co-hashtag analysis to map linguistic narratives. Finally, we focused on the relationship between users and information sources by performing a user–domain analysis. Those steps aim to map the different linguistic communities and their narratives, identifying the primary information sources shared inside and between communities.

We proceeded to generate the graph files with Twitter Capture and Analysis Toolset, which we later processed using Gephi (Bastian et al., 2009), an open-source tool for network analysis.

We built three different graphs:

1. The social graph by mentions describes connections among users by looking at the network of mentions between them (considering pure mentions, replies and retweets). This analysis will answer our RQ1 by showing dominant voices and their connections, potentially highlighting flows of information inside and between communities.
2. The co-hashtag graph describes connections among hashtags by correlating them when used in

the same tweet. The hashtags are a peculiarity of the platform: they can be used to perform a sort of topic modelling that will answer our RQ2 about main narratives.

3. The user-URLs graph, which describes the relationship between users and URL domains, identifies the main sources of information users rely on, answering our RQ3.

3. Analysis and Results

Concerning the focus on users, the mentioned analysis allowed us to identify communities and dominant voices in the debate about the Eurabia doctrine. To highlight the dominant voices of our dataset, we dimensioned labels proportionally to the number of mentions received, and we filtered by frequency of mentions, keeping only the most substantial ties between users who have been mentioned by others at least 10 times. We applied the OpenOrd algorithm using standard parameters to create the final layout, and with the modularity calculation, we coloured nodes by modularity to recognise the user communities. In Figure 1 we can appreciate the output of the steps described.

Figure 1 shows different communities that, with an explorative analysis of the dominant voices, can be easily categorised by language. A peculiarity is the absence of a significant Anglophone cluster: This is maybe related to the fact that English is used in this context as a transversal language for communication among the different communities. Other linguistic communities (Spanish, Dutch, French, and Italian) can be easily recognised as representative of the other most used languages of our dataset. The five main languages are quantified in Figure 2.

The second step of the analysis was to map subtopics and detect primary and secondary subjects using hashtags as references. For each of the five main languages, we performed a co-hashtag analysis, which highlighted the relations between hashtags allowing us to perform a sort of topic modelling for each linguistic community.

2'920 nodes
12'162 edges
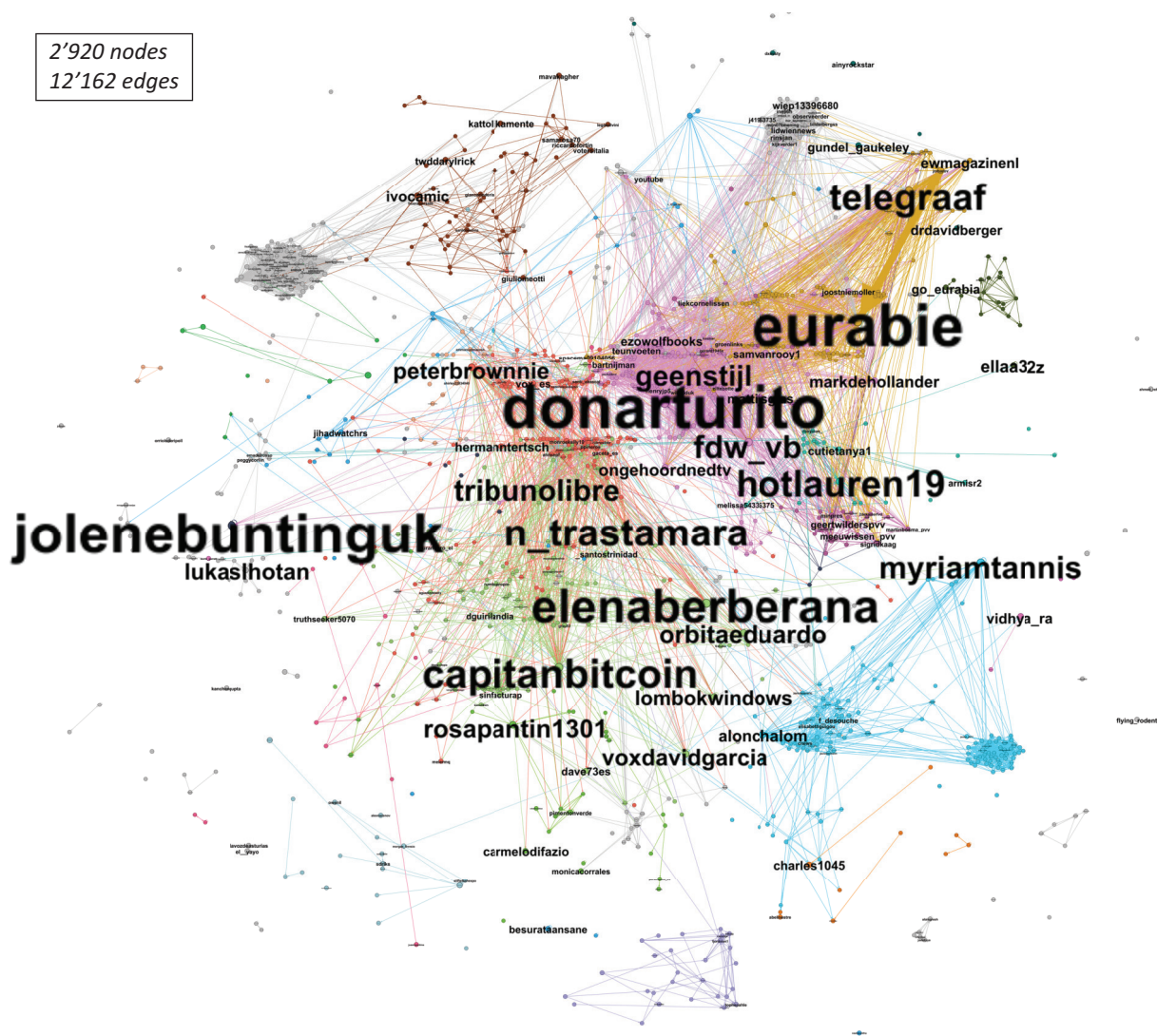
Figure 1. Mention analysis that highlights different communities and dominant voices.
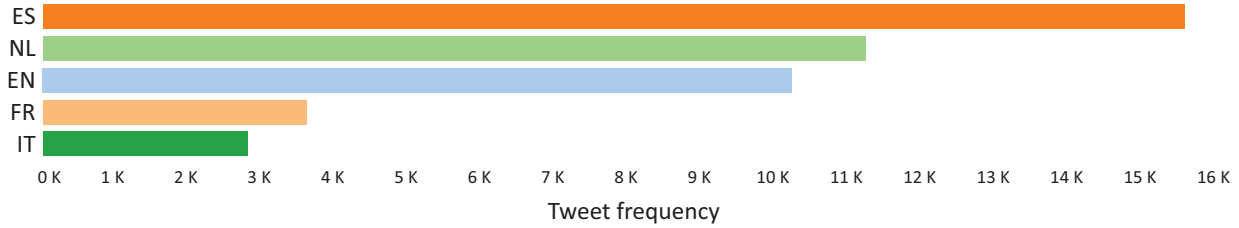
Figure 2. Histogram showing the five most represented languages in our dataset.

To perform the co-hashtag analysis, we shaped a graph that describes the connection between the hashtags when they were used in the same tweet. Applying the Fruchterman-Reingold algorithm with standard parameters, we performed a clusterisation that grouped the

hashtags to discern different narratives and the modularity calculation allowed us to identify the different clusters that we can see in Figure 3.

The figures show the different narratives for each language. Some narratives are common across languages
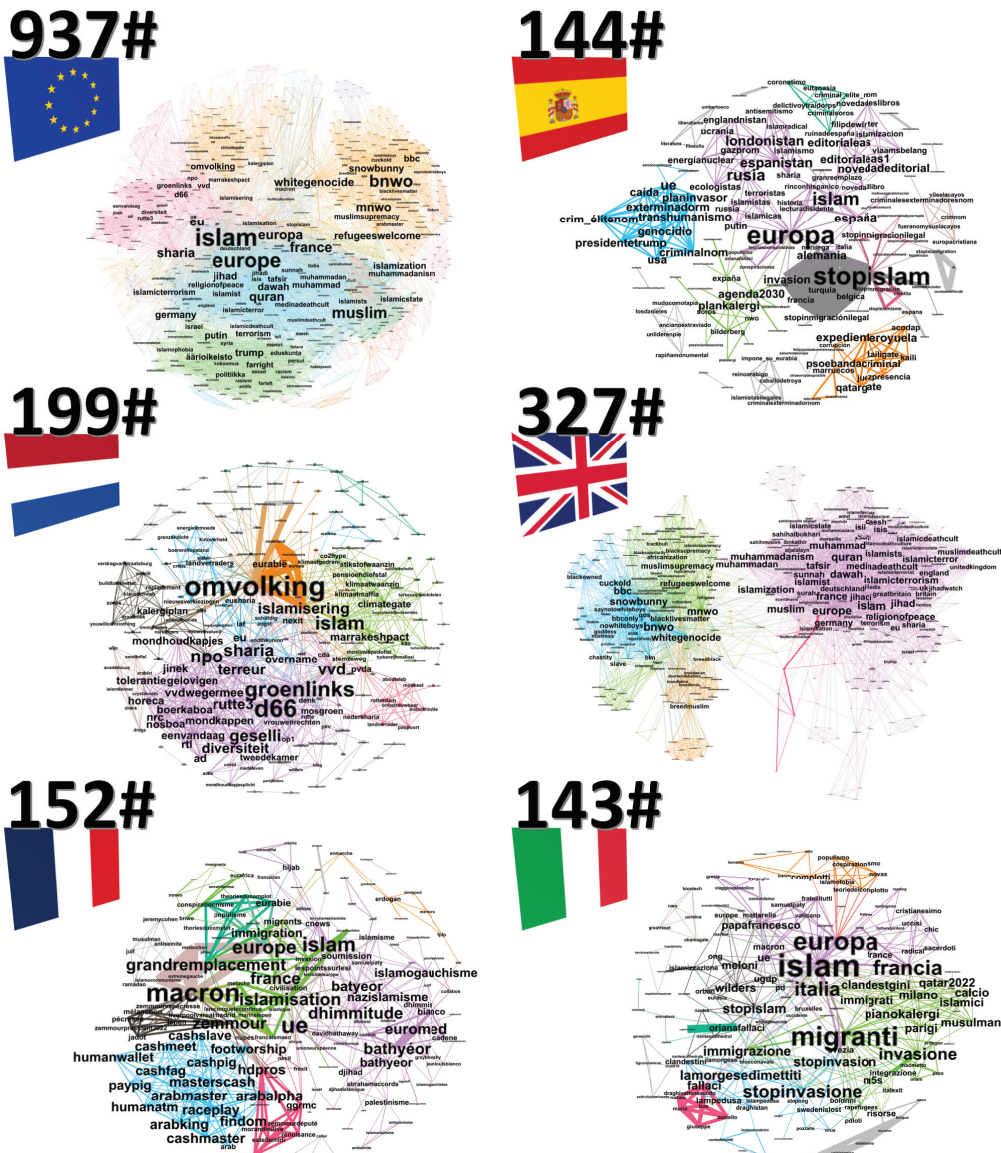
Figure 3. Co-hashtag analysis highlights the main narratives conveyed through hashtags. Notes: The top-left image represents the whole dataset, while the others focus on each of the languages considered; the number followed by the # indicates the number of hashtags in each graph.

and contain anti-immigration messages while others are language-specific and relate to news events. A particular feature of the English graph is the presence of two main clusters, one containing generic debate and the other containing instead supremacist, sexually explicit, and politically incorrect messages.

Finally, to detect primary and secondary sources of information, we performed a user–domain network analysis, which allowed us to highlight the relationship between sites shared on the platform and the users. In this case, we performed the analysis at first considering the entire dataset and later considering each of the different main languages identified earlier. Analysing a bipartite figure means having two distinct entities in the same figure that we differen-

tiated using the label's colour. We dimensioned the domain's labels by frequency of use and exploited users' homophily (Halberstam & Knight, 2016; Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954) as characteristic of social networks to detect communities that revolve around particular sources of information.

We applied the OpenOrd algorithm with standard parameters for the all-encompassing graph to show the complexity of the information ecosystem. For the single-language ones, we opted for the Fruchterman-Reingold algorithm giving more emphasis to the users connected to the main information sources. As previously, modularity calculation allowed us to visually highlight the main clusters shown in the top-left image (Figure 4), followed by linguistic-related graphs.
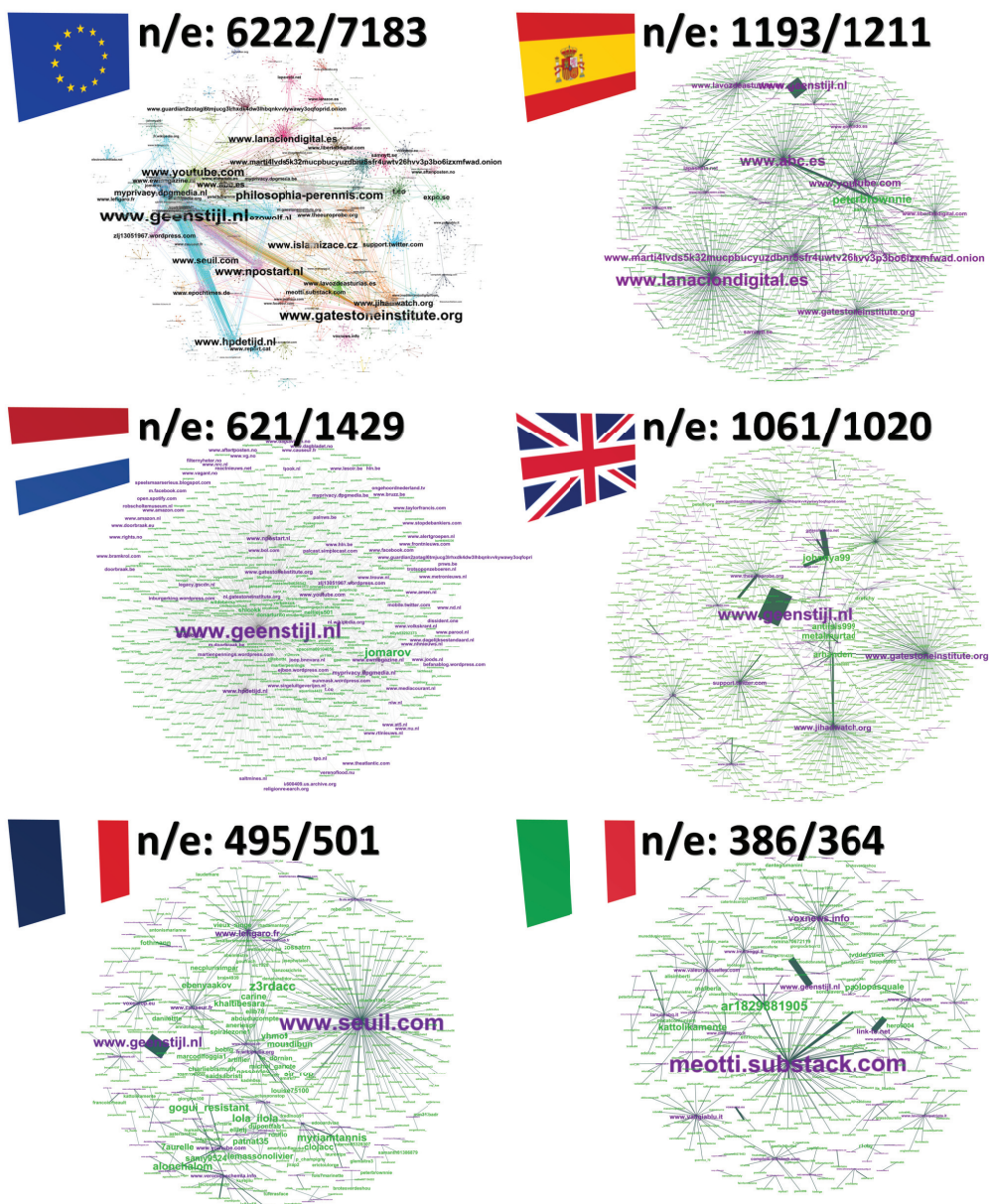

Figure 4. User–domain analysis highlights the primary information sources shared by users. Notes: The top-left image represents the whole dataset, while the others focus on each of the main languages; n/e indicates the number of nodes/edges of the graph.

These figures show the information ecosystem of each linguistic community. Primary evidence shows that each language community has its peculiar partisan sources. However, we can notice several pervasive sources, such as the Dutch blog Geenstijl, recurring in all five communities, and the alt-right American Gatestone Institute, appearing in all the communities except the French one.

Social network analysis allowed us to identify the voices of influencers, extreme topics and content, and hyper-partisan and polarised information sources. To finally grasp more nuanced aspects of the Eurabia doctrine debate and answer our research questions more precisely, we undertook a qualitative analysis phase. We analysed the content by classifying the most shared sources of information and correlating them, when possible, with the dominant voices. To gain more insights from each narrative, we qualitatively investigated users' profiles and interpreted the tweets in light of the literature review.

4. Discussion of the Results

4.1. Which Are the Most Relevant Voices in This Process?

Each linguistic cluster is characterised by few connections with the other ones and by the presence of some dominant voices (journalists belonging to print media or television) who re-launch recurring messages and narratives in political discourse, attributable to right and extreme right parties, and by activists who are spreading content from blogs and hyper-partisan newspapers. As explained in Section 2, dominant voices (Rogers, 2018) refer to the most mentioned profiles in a specific cluster as well as the profiles whose messages are more retweeted. Consequently, they can be considered influential regarding an issue debated on social media. Concerning the topic of Eurabia doctrine on Twitter, traditional opinion leaders' profiles (parliamentarians or party leaders) were not as prominent, in fact, as multiple individuals (journalists or activists) who variously discuss such theories. In other terms, linguistic communities appear cohesive around a limited number of *social influencers*. McCorquodale (2020) suggested that social influencers do share information from traditional media or opinion leaders, but their online information-sharing activities reflect mostly their views and perspectives. Influencers have more direct engagement with their audiences than traditional opinion leaders, and their social media activities can lead their audiences away from traditional media toward social platforms.

Given the particular features of the topics related to the Eurabia debate and the presence of specific dominant voices, it is possible to identify several Political Social Media Influencers (PSMIs) in each linguistic cluster analysed through digital methods. Bause (2021) defines PSMIs as users who become well-known on social media and, as self-created personal brands, regularly distribute self-produced political content with which they reach and potentially influence a dispersed audience. PSMIs and political opinion leaders share similar characteristics: both are extroverted, self-confident, and communicative individuals who occupy central positions within larger social (online) networks. They talk about political topics with people in their social networks who perceive them as credible communicators. This gives both political opinion leaders and PSMIs potential for political influence. Nevertheless, the role of PSMIs is much more preconditioned than that of opinion leaders. PSMIs are, in principle, public communicators who are dependent on social media platforms and their logics and algorithms. In the quest for visibility and attention, they must build an authentic personal brand capable of reaching an audience that systematically consumes their content. They are also heavily committed to engaging with their online followers to reinforce their social networks.

Based on the qualitative research conducted by scraping the text of profiles' tweets between the years 2020 and 2022, several significant pieces of evidence were identified. Following the division into linguistic communities described in Section 3, in the Spanish cluster we observe in particular the role of three PSMIs: Elena Berberana (@ElenaBerberana with 1,502 mentions), Noelia de Trastámara (@N_Trastamara with 984 mentions), and Capitan Bitcoin (@CapitanBitcoin with 1,089 mentions). The profile with the most followers is Captain Bitcoin with over 180,000, followed by Elena Berberana with 80,000, and finally Noelia de Trastámara with 35,000. The first case refers to a Valencian writer based in London and the author of a text criticising the hegemony of European leftists guilty of manipulating culture and the economic system and mortifying Spanish sovereignty in the name of opportunistic multiculturalism. Elena Berberana is a self-styled journalist, also linked to alternative news sites, who expresses populist positions linked to the new right-wingers in Spain and Latin America and repeatedly invokes conspiracy theories linked to the figure of tycoon George Soros and his alleged mission to "Arabize" Europe. Finally, Noelia de Trastámara writes in her feed that she has recovered her profile after two years of censorship from Twitter linked to her no-vax and denialist activism concerning Covid-19. Concerning the Eurabia theme, the three profiles particularly emerge between 2020 and 2021 commenting on some news events (attacks by immigrants towards European citizens) and referring to Oriana Fallaci's famous theses.

Among the linguistic communities, however, it is the Dutch one that merges the most influential profiles: notably Arthur van Amerongen (@DonArturito with 3,355 mentions) and Eurabië (@Eurabie with 3,078 mentions). The former is also a very active journalist on the Dutch blog Geenstijl, a news outlet known for political incorrectness and in which the profile writes repeatedly on the topic of Eurabia. The second profile, decidedly less followed, is nevertheless clearly aligned with a position

described as "against the conquest and population of the free West. Pro-Israel and against the EU."

The Italian cluster is very limited, and the only noteworthy profile is that of journalist Giulio Meotti (@giuliomeotti with 102 mentions) who has been writing for the newspaper *Il Foglio* since 2003. He is also the author of several books including *The New Barbarians: Is it Forbidden to Think (and Speak) in the West?* and *The Sweet Conquest: Europe Surrenders to Islam* from 2023. The profile is particularly interesting as it is linked to the Gatestone Institute, a US-based conservative think-tank with decidedly anti-immigration positions, also highly critical of European inclusion policies.

The English cluster shows the dominant profile of Jolene Bunting (@jolenebuntinguk with 2,392 mentions), a former councilwoman in Belfast who was suspended from political office for her ultra-nationalist and anti-European positions. Her feed is also explicitly critical of Ireland's migration policies and Europe in general.

On the other hand, a separate discussion deserves the dominant Hotlauren19 profile with 896 mentions, across the linguistic community, which instrumentally uses pornographic images and videos to highlight the "migration invasion" as a predatory attack by Arab males on European women. This particular narrative, which will be explored further in the next sections of the article, is hardly traceable to a "political" discourse or a "political" figure but clearly pursues political goals through a communicative strategy that leverages, as outlined in the introduction, the affective, emotional, and sensationalistic nature of *love Jihad* communication.

4.2. The Emerging Narratives on the Eurabia Theory

For each linguistic community, the most retweeted posts were quantitatively identified; secondly, a qualitative analysis of their content was carried out to identify the most exposed and visible sub-narratives of the Eurabia doctrine. The content analysis was carried out manually, by reading the most shared posts from our dataset and identifying several common topics which made it possible to define the emerging sub-narratives. We found that these sub-narratives are transversal among the different linguistic clusters. The analysis of the 30 most retweeted posts revealed the following sub-narratives.

Several retweeted posts are based on theories of ethnic replacement, sometimes celebrating anniversaries and episodes concerning influential personalities. In this category, which we could call "Eurabia doctrine exists," we included posts offering support for political actions to contrast "Islamic expansionism." Ten posts, namely 33% of the 30 most retweeted posts, fall under this category.

Six posts openly promote and disseminate the Eurabia doctrine. The most retweeted post (1,074 retweets and 1,914 likes) is from Noelia de Trastámara, who wrote on the 17th of August 2020:

I am going to say this straight because people do not seem to find out. Islam has a clear agenda for Europe; Eurabia. It consists in increasing its population and taking advantage of our laws to reach institutions and abolish what we call democracy and implant the Saharia.

Three of the most retweeted posts are about celebratory narratives regarding anniversaries of influential personalities concerning the theories of ethnic replacement. In particular, messages about Oriana Fallaci, an Italian journalist who promoted the Eurabia theory, were posted on the occasion of the anniversaries of the birth and death of the journalist. The most retweeted ones say:

Today we remember the great Oriana Fallaci, who was among the first to warn in the 1990s of the danger of a new Muslim invasion of Europe, predicting that the USA would become Eurabia if we Europeans did nothing to prevent it. (355 retweets, posted on the 29th of June 2020)

Writer Oriana Fallaci almost destroyed her career and her life for saying we were going to become "Eurabia." She went from being a respected "anti-fascist" intellectual to being considered an icon of the far right. She died of cancer, alone, before a trial in Italy for "Islamophobia." (735 retweets, posted on the 15th of September 2021)

Among the most visible posts is a message from the French linguistic community, supporting a political and social action to contrast "Islamic expansionism":

Bat Yeor, author of the pamphlet Eurabia (where contemporary European elites are said to renounce their Judeo-Christian roots and consign their people to a new *dhimmitude*) is a signatory regarding an article about 76 personalities affirming their solidarity with the Israeli people and call for a fight against Islamism in all its forms, in Israel as in France. (54 retweets, 99 likes)

A sub-narrative we could call "security threat in European cities: European immigration policies are to blame," emerges from posts including news reports on episodes of violence and attacks perpetrated by immigrants, or posts on speeches of political leaders on the security of European cities invaded by Islamic immigrants. They attack progressive European policies, open to immigration and in favour of extending welfare to immigrants. Fourteen among the top 30 posts fall under this category. Seven are news stories and political speeches on the security and Islamisation of European cities.

In the Spanish cluster, we found the most retweeted message (1,149 retweets and 2,340 likes) posted on the 6th of September, 2021 by Elena Berberana, who says:

I hope that the girl brutally attacked by ten Moroccans, including several unaccompanied minors MENAs, recovers. Apparently, her face requires plastic surgery. Left-wing feminism is silent in the face of the violence and aggression in this new Eurabia that Fallaci predicted after 9/11.

On the 17th of October, 2020, a post by Jolene Bunting reached 764 retweets. Her message is clear: "EUROPE HAS FALLEN: Thousands of ILLEGAL immigrants and their white Liberal apologists march through #Paris demanding citizenship for illegals. This march comes just 24 hours after a Professor was decapitated by an Islamist terrorist in Paris. #Eurabia #Islamisation." In the Spanish cluster, another post is among the most retweeted. Its author is Rosa Maria Pantin (@rosapantin1301), who says: "Paris, policewoman stabbed to death by a subject to the cry of 'Allahu akbar' this was immediately shot down by the police, well nothing, the success of multiculturalism and integration in full swing in Eurabia" (364 retweets and 484 likes).

Seven of the top 30 posts are critical of progressive European policies. They are considered wrong because they are open to immigration and do not preserve European cultural traditions from being cancelled by multiculturalism. Among the top retweeted posts, we found a tweet by the French profile @MyriamTannis who, on the 20th of May, 2022, wrote: "Who will judge who will wear them in France? Eurabia, Hitler's second career" (637 retweets and 555 likes). The post includes the link to an article on the mayor of Grenoble, who authorised the use of the burkini. The second most retweeted post comes from the Dutch cluster, where the dominant voice, Arthur Van Amerongen, @DonArturito, on the 13th of September, 2022, wrote: "Quite curious that all the Dutch media reacted in shock and bewilderment to the election results in Sweden. Have followed the news from Sweden in recent years?" The post (366 retweets and 1,303 likes) refers to the fact that progressive forces in Sweden, a symbol of integration and welfare, suffered a significant defeat in the national elections of September 2022.

A third sub-narrative, which we called "demographic war," is related to the Love Jihad trope, according to which the population substitution is pursued through sexually predatory behaviours of immigrants and sexual support provided by converted European women. The total number of retweets for the posts included in this cluster is 1,326. The posts supporting this subnarrative include pictures and memes that explicitly represent the predatory behaviour of Islamic males and encourage European women to engage in supporting *Love Jihad*. This provocative content aims to arouse strong emotional reactions in a strategy to spread Islamophobia (Fadil, 2023). According to Hernandez Aguilar (2023) and Fadil (2023), the diffusion of memetic campaigns on mainstream social networks is oriented towards synthesising complex content and providing

more extreme and emotionally activating readings to mainstream content: "mostly pornographic images of white women were used for mourning a loss, the replacement of populations….To create despair, a sense of urgency, a call to regain what is ours" (Hernandez Aguilar, 2023). The explicit contents detected in our cluster can be interpreted as triggers that aim to arouse strong emotional reactions and incite verbal violence. The most retweeted posts of the cluster come from accounts with explicit nicknames such as Refugees Welcome, FemSis, or MuslimMajority. The most retweeted ones (five posts over the 30 most retweeted posts of our dataset) include messages such as: "A tiny preview of a Muslim supremacy video I'm working on. Yay or nay? #mwo #muslimsupremacy #eurabia,'' followed by a pornographic video (299 retweets, 1,027 likes); "Islamic Europe. Submit now. #eurabia #refugeeswelcome #muslimworldorder #whiteinferiority," followed by a pornographic video (290 retweets, 955 like); "Europe in 2050 will be Eurabia," followed by a meme on the cultural invasion of Europe (282 retweets); "in #Eurabia, this will be a common sight: Alpha refugees publicly using wh*te girls. The best part? The girls will love it," followed by a pornographic video (187 retweets, 847 like); "their best weapon to conquer Europe is between their legs, #eurabia #islam #frankistan," followed by explicit pictures (67 retweets, 317 likes).

Only one post opposing the spread of Islamophobia is to be found among the top retweeted posts. It is a post by Vidhya Ramalingam, founder, and CEO of Moonshot, a US tech company. On the 14th of May, 2022, Vidhya posted the following message (retweeted 232 times):

> In 2011, after a white supremacist killed 77 people in Norway, I remember walking into E.U. government offices, trying to educate our leaders on the ideology that motivated the perpetrator—specifically the notion of "Eurabia," a supposed plot to destroy white civilisation.

4.3. The Most Used Sources

The research highlighted a series of partisan blogs, portals, and information sites which represent the primary content sources concerning the theme of ethnic substitution (Table 1). There are some sites whose contents are often used across different clusters, like the Dutch Geenstijl.nl site, in which the blog *Safari Eurabia*, by Arthur van Amerongen, represents the most used source within the sample represented by our dataset (5,736 citations among the posts of all five of the most relevant linguistic clusters). GeenStijl is a news outlet with an ironic and sometimes aggressive tone. Among the most used sources are sites belonging to less-represented linguistic clusters in our dataset: The site https://www.islamizace. cz/in the Czech language (739 citations) or the blog https://philosophia-perennis.com in German (303 citations). Philosophia Perennis' website was founded by

David Berger, a German theologian, journalist and gay activist. He has been repeatedly prosecuted for his open criticism of Islam. The Eurosceptic UK blog https://www.theeuroprobe.org, used as a source 89 times, is also part of this group. These are sites based on editorial projects strongly critical of the alleged processes of Islamisation.

Among the blogs active in disseminating information on the Eurabia theory are those of dominant voices of the linguistic community, such as the Italian journalist Giulio Meotti, whose information blog and related newsletter are cited as a source 101 times.

Widespread dissemination also characterises online sites of international think tanks oriented towards the creation and distribution of contents that are highly critical of European immigration policies and which warn against presumed processes of ethnic substitution. The Gatestone Institute, whose website https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org is mentioned 416 times, is a US think tank founded in 2008 and active in publishing content on the danger of Islamisation. The Gatestone Institute is a common and transversal source used in four of the five main linguistic clusters of our dataset. The anti-jihadist website https://www.jihadwatch.org is linked as a source 152 times. It is a US blog directed by Robert Spenser, an expert on Islamic theology, law and history, author of several books and consultant for the FBI. A relevant source is the US far-right blog https://gatesofvienna.net, created in 2004 by Edward S. May. The blog hosts articles and posts written by anti-Muslim authors and is a prominent voice in the counter-jihad movement in the US and Europe. According to the Bridge Initiative of Georgetown University, https://bridge.georgetown.edu, Edward May is also a member of the board of directors of the International Free Press Society (IFPS), an American and Danish-based group. IFPS seeks to defend free speech from "forces within Islam [that] are conducting a jihad against the West." According to the anti-racism organisation HOPE not Hate, https://hopenothate.org.uk, IFPS's advisory board members include Bat Ye'Or and several US anti-Muslim actors such as Robert Spencer (author of the blog Jihad Watch).

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Conspiracy theories related to the Eurabia doctrine prove detrimental to EU policies aimed at devising measures that can address migration phenomena that have become particularly divisive in public opinion. Nevertheless, such conspiracies seem to be strategically instrumentalised by political actors, who, although at the margins of institutional processes, amplify their relevance in the social media debate. In response to RQ1, our analysis showed how certain actors, PSMIs, are the main amplifiers of this content. PSMIs are often journalists or private citizens with hyper-partisan positions who can catalyse dissent at the national level and polarise the debate on issues such as an alleged national primacy or the risk of uncontrolled invasion by migrants. The characteristic theme of the Eurabia doctrine is thus reframed, also thanks to the role of PSMIs, both in the tones of anachronistic nationalism and also through a decidedly more trivial reading as in the case of the *Love Jihad* narrative.

In response to RQ2, an in-depth analysis of the thirty most retweeted posts allow us to identify the emerging sub-narratives about Eurabia. The first sub-narrative is related to the Eurabia doctrine: Posts trying to persuade readers about international plans for ethnic replacement or celebrating anniversaries of influential personalities concerning ethnic replacement theories. A second emerging topic is the security threat in European cities caused by European immigration policies. These posts attack European policies open to immigration and in favour of extending welfare to immigrants (often disseminated by non-European sites, particularly US sites). A third sub-narrative is about "demographic war and sexually predatory Muslims," according to which population substitution is also pursued through the predatory behaviour of Arab immigrants toward European women. Posts supporting this sub-narrative often include pictures and memes that explicitly represent, even through pornography, the predatory behaviour of the Islamic male to provoke strong emotional responses (Fadil, 2023).

In response to RQ3, our analysis highlighted some sites whose contents are often used across different clusters, such as the news outlet Geenstijl.nl (Netherlands). According to Pilbeam (2011), we found that US websites linked to the US far right, which address a domestic audience, contribute to disseminating the Eurabia doctrine. They aim to admonish decision-makers regarding the loss of traditional values that led Europe to an alleged

Table 1. Most used sources of information.

Source	URL	Citations
Geenstijl.nl—blog Safari Eurabia	https://www.geenstijl.nl	5,736
Islamizace	https://www.islamizace.cz	739
Gatestone Institute	https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org	416
Philosophia Perennis	https://philosophia-perennis.com	303
Jihad Watch	https://www.jihadwatch.org	152
Giulio Meotti's Newsletter	https://meotti.substack.com	101
The Euro Probe	https://www.theeuroprobe.org	89

Islamisation. For instance, in our dataset, the Gatestone Institute website is used as an information source in four of the five main linguistic clusters. The US website Jihadwatch is also widely spread. Another relevant source is the United States far-right and anti-Muslim blog Gates of Vienna, created by Edward S. May, a member of the board of directors of the IFPS, an American/Danish-based group aiming to defend free speech from "the jihad against the West."

Our exploratory research was conducted through a single-platform analysis, Twitter, which represents a digital space where people comment on news and participate in political debate. Notwithstanding this limitation, our research may have outlined a methodological approach that could be applied to other digital environments, thanks to a cross-platform approach. On the other hand, the advantage of using Twitter data in our case is the ability to analyse user relationships, messages and sources of information that spread the Eurabia doctrine conspiracy and gain personal insight into users, allowing us to gather additional details. From the mapping of user perspectives, some points seem to be in line with the literature on the topic. The fragmented nature of social media platforms can be appreciated in the insights captured, where highly polarised positions can be identified. This polarization cannot be quantified in our research, but qualitative analysis allowed us to gather positions from a wide range of perspectives.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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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

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	*elDiario.es*
	El Confidencial	
	Antena3	
	El País	
	ABC	
Origin	Legacy	Digital-born
	RTVE	*elDiario.es*
	Antena3	*El Confidencial*
	ABC	
	El País	
Editorial line (wing)	Center-right	Center-left
	Antena3	RTVE
	ABC	*El País*
	El Confidencial	*elDiario.es*
Medium	TV	Newspaper
	RTVE	*ABC*
	Antena3	*El País*
		elDiario.es
		El Confidencial

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_espana, @elpais_inter), *ABC* (@abc_mundo, @abc_es), *El Confidencial* (@ECInter, @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
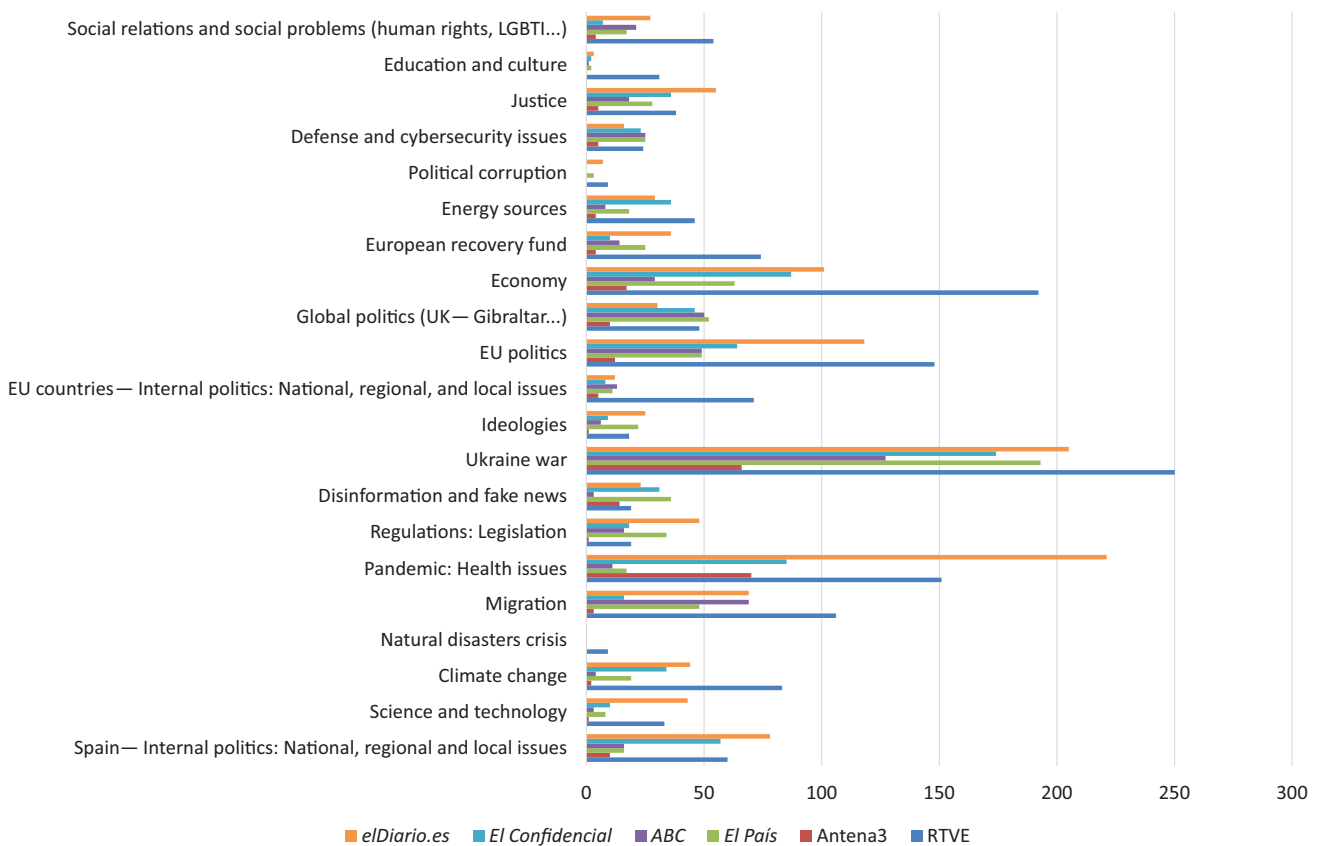

Figure 1. Distribution of all topics detected and analysed in each Spanish media sampled.
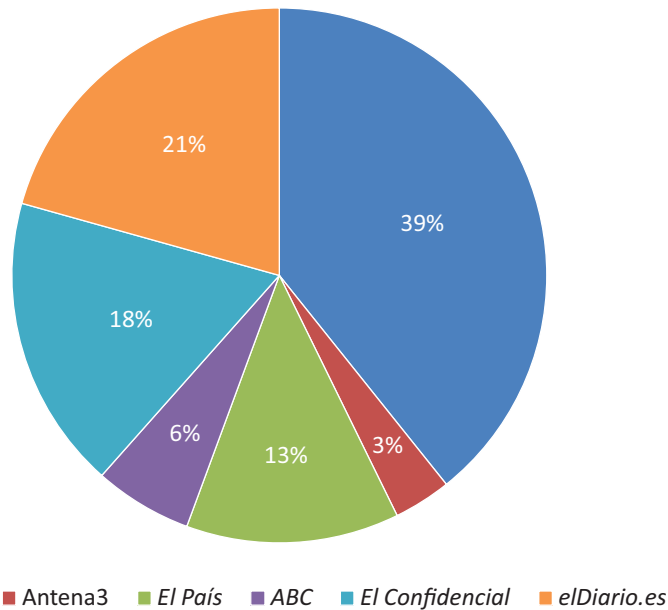
Figure 2. News coverage: Percentage of the economy topic analysed by media.

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).
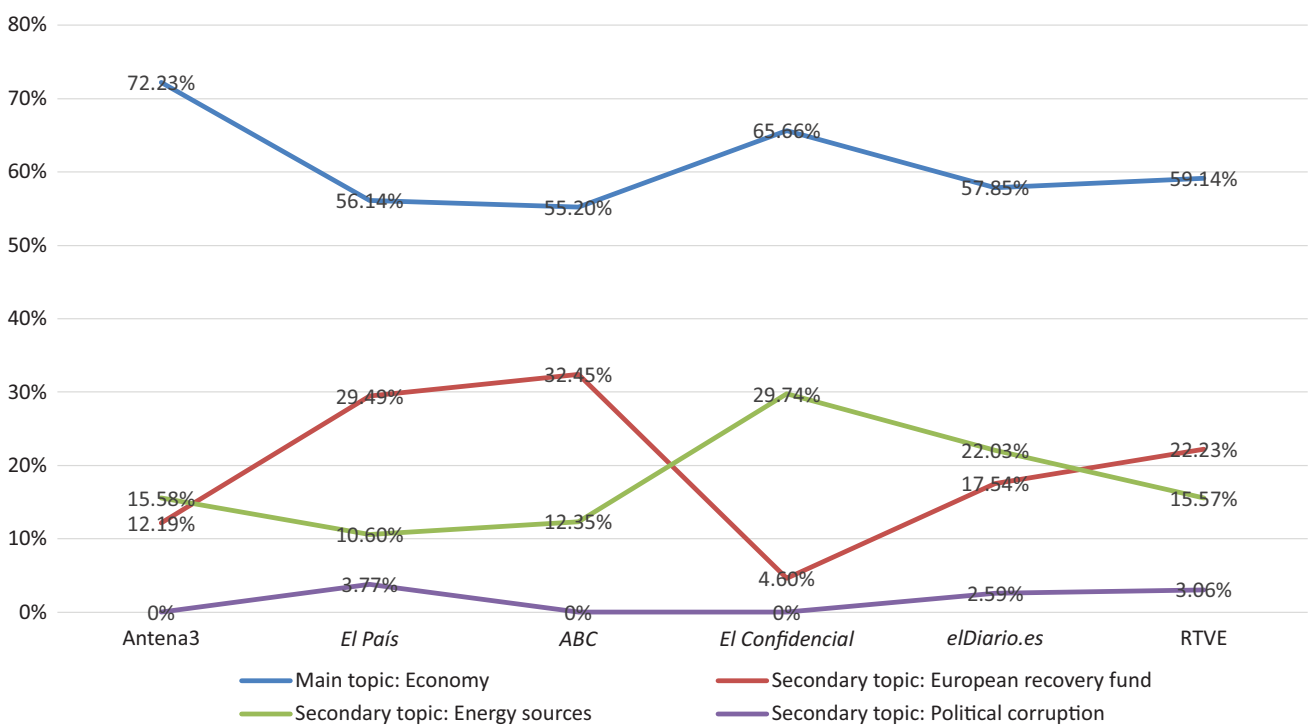
According to the second specific objective, a relevant result obtained from the content analysis of the coded news articles about the economy is the use of information sources by media outlets to report on these topics (see Figure 4). It is clearer that the main source for addressing European economic 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%), international 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
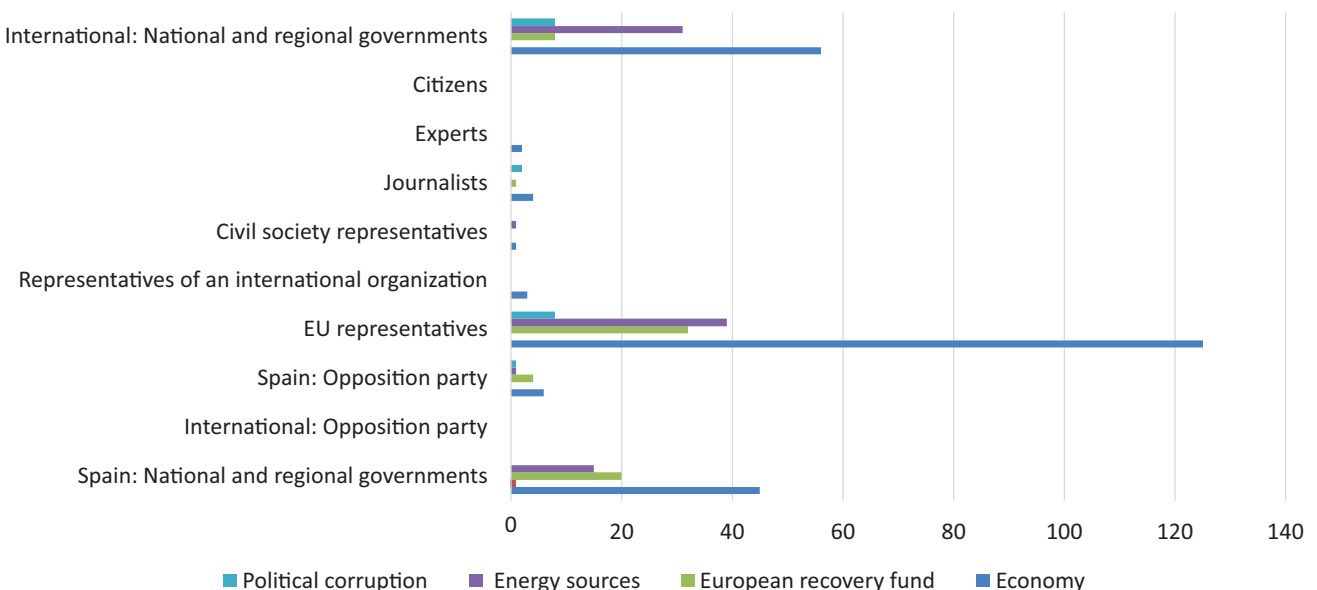
Figure 4. Main information sources consulted for every topic to explain economic news.
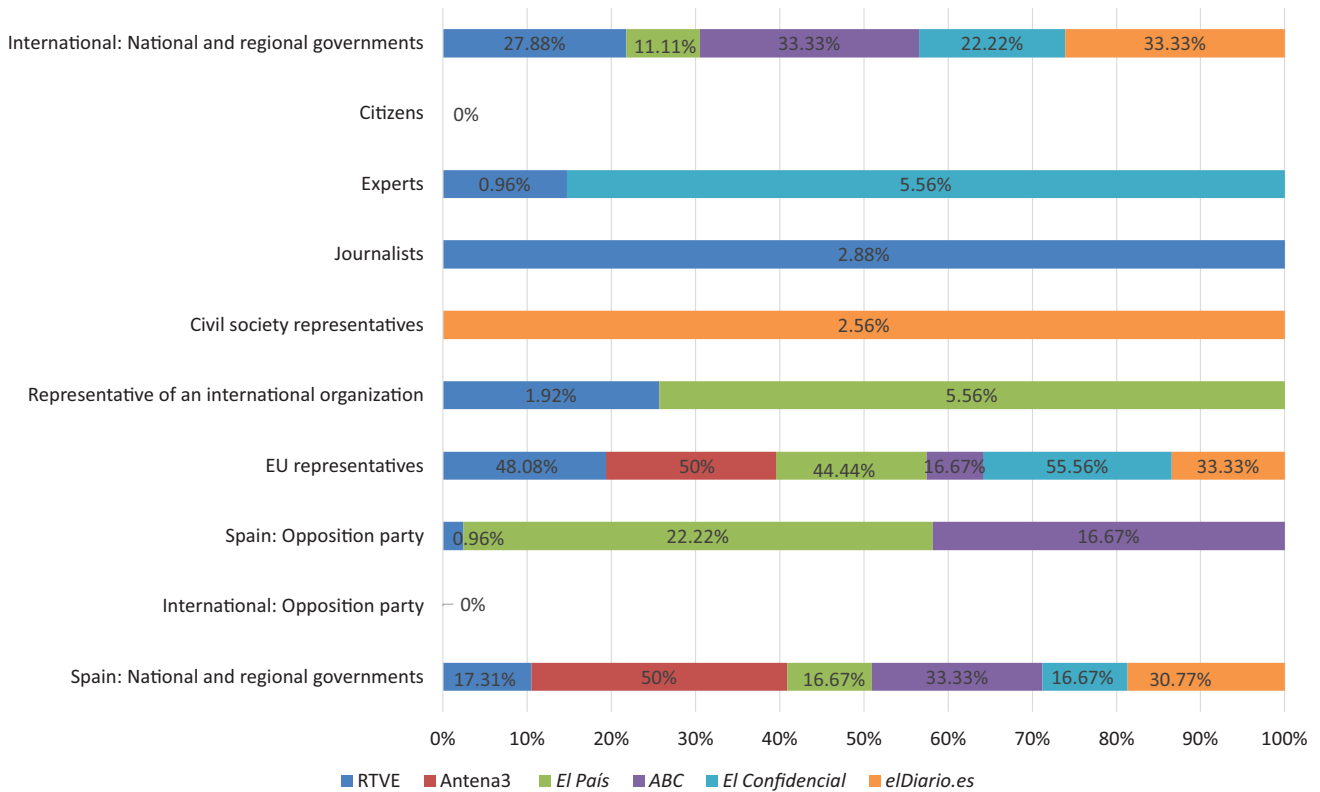
Figure 5. Percentage of sources consulted for economic topics divided by each media.

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).

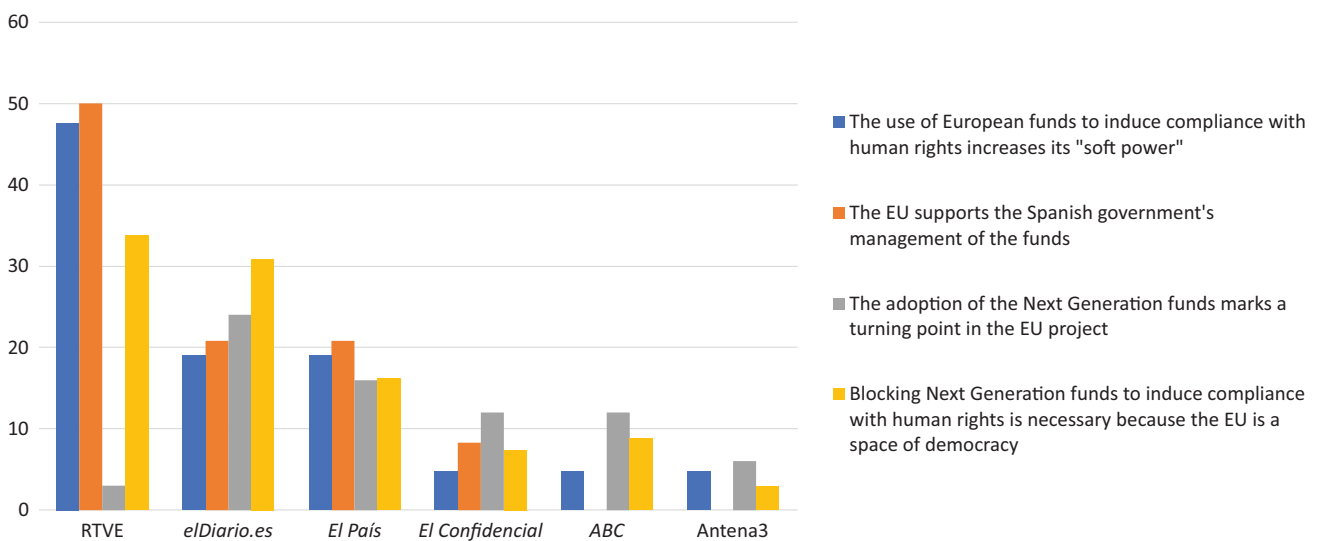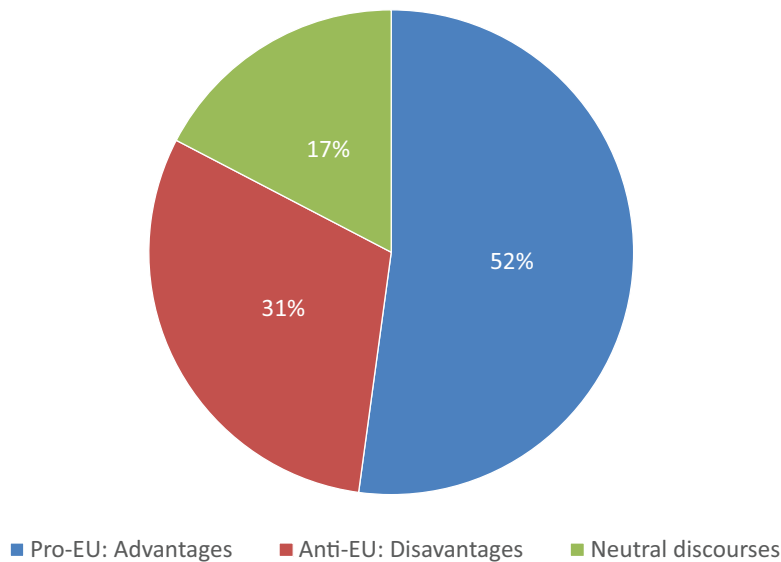The positive view of Brussels as a financial source is also reinforced by the news that the current president of the European Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen, has approved the Spanish recovery plan, which is easily understandable and far removed from the bureaucratic and often incomprehensible technical 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.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

EU Representations in Portuguese Media and Populism: Embodying Political Antipodes?

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Abstract
Mass media mediate different publics, thus being crucial in constructing political reality. By selecting which topics are covered (agenda), which voices are heard, or how social and political issues/actors/dynamics are represented (priming and framing), mass media impacts how political conversations and processes unfold. Acknowledging the increasing mediatisation of politics, this article zooms into media texts of the Portuguese media during a complex political period that included national elections to explore how populism as a term, label, or topic was used and/or co-opted to create and negotiate political EU representations. Building on a historical perspective and using critical thematic analysis, this article argues that populism was used in the media and by the media as a discursive mechanism of political positionality and/or delegitimisation or criticism of political actors, agendas, or moves, thus making populism and the EU co-constitutively used as embodying political antipodes and making the EU work as a discursive buffer concerning populism in the country.

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1. Introduction

The narratives that media select through agenda-setting, framing, and priming become crucial tools in constructing political reality (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007; Wolfsfeld, 2003). By shedding light on specific topics and perspectives, the media (re)produce (a selected) reality, rendering invisible all other realities that are not deemed worthy of sharing, making the selection a representation of the whole. In politics, it is not only the political agenda that matters, but also how it is presented. As such, what media tell about these dynamics and actors, in explicit and implicit terms (through the activation of imaginaries, connotations, and the creation of benchmarks), is critical in constructing how political conversations and, thus, politics unfold (McIlwain, 2007; Xenos & Becker, 2009). Political actors are aware of these dynamics and, thus,

model their narratives towards certain ends, competing for the ability to frame issues and for space in the media (Wolfsfeld, 2003). The EU is an example of how discourse and narratives may construct political reality and where media can perform a critical role (Radut-Gaghi, 2021). Although the EU's existence is seldom questioned, what it means or embodies is often the subject of wider political discussions (Bulmer & Joseph, 2016; Fabbrini, 2019) focusing on the EU itself or on wider issues, where the meaning of the EU emerges through intertextuality logics or connotations.

This article turns to Portugal and explores how media representations of the EU and populism in a time of crisis worked to reinforce a positive and consensual understanding of the EU in the country. Portugal's close alignment with the EU distinguishes the country's political scenario from the polarisation of other European

countries between pro-EU and anti-EU stances, with a more nuanced debate over the advantages and disadvantages of integration. At the same time, populism has been traditionally absent from Portuguese politics until the 2000s (Quintas da Silva, 2018). Recently, however, populism seems to have emerged as a discursive mechanism of political positionality and/or delegitimisation or criticism of political actors, agendas, or moves, thus enabling populism and the EU to be used as embodying political antipodes.

By grappling with these dynamics, this article presents an analysis of media texts conveyed by the Portuguese media during a complex political period. It explores how populism as a term, label, or topic was used to create and negotiate political representations of the EU. The analysis is grounded on the media effects tradition, which focuses on how media contribute to moulding audiences' perceptions and attitudes towards the world surrounding them and uses critical thematic analysis (Lawless & Chen, 2019) to articulate predominant frames concerning the EU and populism with wider structures of power and political disputes. Thus, it looks at how meanings are attributed and, above all, how the EU and populism directly or indirectly co-constitute themselves in mediatised political debates in Portugal.

Section 2 explores the literature on media and political communication concerning the media's crucial role in interpreting and generating effects on the world. Section 3 covers debates on populism, the phenomenon's development in Portugal and its association with the EU in the context of conversations and policies concerning European integration. Section 4 presents our analysis of the Portuguese media and the discourses found in the juncture between democracy, populism and the EU between September 1, 2021, and January 31, 2022, a period marked by local and national elections and by multiple crises: a peak of the Covid-19 pandemic, a budget crisis leading to the dissolution of the parliament and early elections. This section also characterises the Portuguese media and our corpus of analysis and explains our sampling and coding methods. Next, it discusses the study's results and deploys critical thematic analysis to tackle the main framings and discursive mechanisms used in the media that compound three broad themes associating populism with representations of the EU. Finally, the conclusion reconnects these issues to wider discussions on populism, the Portuguese debate over democracy, and European integration, with a focus on the media's role in these processes.

2. Media as a Pivotal Player in Making Sense of the World

Most of what is known in the world is mediated through communication. Among the different social actors that represent realities, the media are understood as particularly acute in (re)producing and validating specific narratives impacting societies (e.g., Goffman, 1974; McCombs

& Shaw, 1972; Shrum, 2017; Wolfsfeld, 2003). It is important to highlight, however, that this modelling power is not just a single lucky shot in the dark or, as early media effects theory understood, an effect akin to a hypodermic needle (e.g., Lasswell, 1927/1938). In fact, the media effects tradition has explored the different processes through which the media (re)produce reality including "quite diverse notions about the strength of the effects of mass-media use" (Jensen & Rosengren, 1990, p. 209).

In trying to make sense of this tradition in a processual logic, agenda-setting should be considered. When selecting a particular set of events, among an almost infinite plethora of possibilities, the media tell us what event to think about, rendering all others invisible (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). However, since media texts are narratives, the media do not tell us only what to think about, but also how to think. When depicting a given reality, the media choose a particular frame to represent a given topic, actor, or event and exclude other ways of narrating them or reporting information, thus giving audiences one perception of that reality (Goffman, 1974). In the process, certain imaginaries are activated in the audience, as these dynamics are associated with broader contexts, memory, and previous experiences. This is done through *priming*, by establishing priorities and communication shortcuts, as media texts can foster associations between ideas or concepts, thus impacting the audience's perceptions and actions (Dillman Carpentier, 2017). Therefore, in politics, priming, labels, and "standards" are used to "make political evaluations" (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987, p. 63), which influence how conversations unfold, and the political reality is constructed.

The consistency of the media system, its articulation with larger hierarchies in society (e.g., race, class, gender, geography, epistemology), and the "mediatisation of politics" (Hjarvard, 2008) make this construction process to be cumulative, lengthy, and ultimately effective in modelling political debates and, hence, societies. Although the media are the loudspeaker, different actors and practices concur in this process, namely journalism and news stories, opinion editorials, and political actors themselves. Despite being highly questionable, objectivity is an established guideline in modern journalism that "render[s] representations produced through journalistic mediation to be seen by audiences as the closest to reality and, hence, most likely absorbed as such" (Santos et al., 2022, p. 300). In turn, although editorials do not have to comply with specific formal professional rules, conveying narratives that are usually embedded in one's ideological perspectives, they constitute "an institutionalised site (or sites) of citizen discourse" where participants coming "from all levels of the social hierarchy" debate (Nikolaev & Porpora, 2007, p. 8).

As awareness of political actors concerning the power of the media increases, so does the mediatisation of politics, i.e., the process through which politics assumes a media form (Hjarvard, 2008). This means that political actors will strategically use rhetoric that

activates imaginaries, denotation and connotation mechanisms (McIlwain, 2007), and intertextuality (Kristeva, 1980), to present and mobilise for their agenda and/or elections. Grasping the processes of mediatisation in all its ramifications is, therefore, of utmost relevance in attempts to understand which narratives and arguments have been most disseminated, by whom, and with which effects over political processes (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014).

3. Populism, EU Representations, and Portugal

Media representations of the EU reflect this actor as the result of political understandings, and of disputes and their mediation. This informs European integration as an ongoing process reflected in institutional procedures, policies, and narratives. Therefore, different understandings about what the EU is and what it means are built through distinct political agendas, activating varied imaginaries. The EU is usually represented positively in Portuguese media, especially in news stories, with a main focus on economic issues. This is clear in debates in the Portuguese parliament, which have "mainly focus[ed] on the discussion of whether the country should want 'more Europe,' 'a better Europe' or 'another way for Europe'" (Cunha, 2016, p. 1). Amidst the public, and despite fluctuations, in 2020, 90% of the Portuguese shared the opinion that the country has benefitted from being in the EU (European Parliament, 2020). This overall positive perception reflects on EU representations and has been built over memories incarnating "good" developments (e.g., the democratic Carnation Revolution), "bad" experiences (e.g., the 2011–2014 austerity period), and prospects ahead (prosperity, democracy). The bottom line is that the EU is good for Portugal, and having it, even if imperfect, is better than having no EU. This means the EU is deemed a natural place for Portugal given the matching between the country's and the institution's political and axiological options and identity.

Our research on Portuguese representations of the EU finds that if Portugal's integration into the EU is seldom questioned, what the EU means and the political horizons it fosters and embodies have been subject to ample political debates, with criticism that sometimes breaches the "consensus," as it is portrayed in the media. No markedly "anti-EU" narrative is present in media representations of the EU, although there are critical propositions about the EU's need to change in some key conjunctural and structural respects, such as regarding the adoption of coherent and coordinated policies in certain areas. Moreover, as mainly argued by leftist parties and actors in Portugal, the EU needs to strengthen its social role by promoting inclusive development, avoiding securitising migration flows, curtailing the impacts of neoliberalisation, or ending the repetition of austerity programmes. The main proposition associated with these criticisms, also seen as "soft-Euroscepticism" (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2002), is not that Portugal should leave, but instead that the country should contribute to EU transformation.

Yet, in Portugal, despite the linkages to issues such as immigration or economic inequality, the populist narrative has not gained wide public space, facing resistance in the mediatised and political contexts. When the pandemic hit Portugal, the country was just recovering from the financial crisis that had extended since 2010 and was met by a bailout programme by the International Monetary Fund (2011–2014). Thus, successive social and economic crises have pressured the political elite. Considering existing trends across Europe and literature on the topic, it would have been expected that Portugal would follow the populist trend. The political environment and its mediatised version did not leave much room for populist rhetoric, but the political debate is somewhat crisscrossed at times for what Bobba and Seddone (2019, p. 2) characterise as "soft populism" on the part of actors who "occasionally resort to some elements of populism"—in Portugal's case, particularly in communicative aspects and not so much in ideological assertions, as explained ahead.

3.1. Portugal: A Populist Exception?

Portugal has long been perceived as immune to populism. Different authors identify three main reasons. On the demand side, though it has not been thoroughly studied (Santana-Pereira & Cancela, 2021, p. 210), there is a recent memory of the lengthy dictatorship under Estado Novo (1933–1974) causing a diffuse, enduring rejection of extreme right-wing ideas, parties and movements. Moreover, left-wing parties such as the Left Bloc (BE) and the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) are key aggregators of social mobilisation, absorbing discontent and anti-austerity or anti-establishment social movements—which in other South European countries led to the emergence of new populist parties—without having become empty ideological shells or populist parties themselves (Salgado, 2019, p. 53). Although Portugal has historically had far-right parties, Santana-Pereira and Cancela (2021) argue that reasons on the supply side include the lack of strategy and charismatic leadership among extreme-right parties and populist actors.

In the 2019 national elections, Chega, an extreme-right party just established under the leadership of André Ventura, won 1.3% of the vote and secured one member in parliament (Taggart & Pirro, 2021, p. 301). In the January 2022 national elections, Chega got 12 seats in parliament, a considerable increase in its formal representation. Nevertheless, the party's campaign did not manage to bring in the anti-EU populist narrative we see across Europe, following this "soft-Eurosceptic" approach instead (Lisi & Borghetto, 2018). Chega is ideologically "radical right" with an anti-bureaucracy and anti-tax agenda combined with nationalism and populism. Its leader, Ventura, gave an interview to *PÚBLICO* in 2019 where he claimed the party is "essentially a right-wing

[party] in the Portuguese style, very democratic and liberal in the economy" (Botelho, 2019). In its electoral programme, it pledged to defend traditional values, in line with those of the dictatorship period, highlighting the "family as a primary institution, the defence of the homeland from historical racial humiliation and stopping the danger of demographic substitution of the Portuguese" (As minhas eleições, 2021). On the EU, it remains selectively critical. In the 2019 interview with *PÚBLICO* mentioned above, Ventura said:

> We are completely against leaving the EU, what we say is that we do not want federalism, which would mean, in practice, the countries' annulment. We do not want to be a mere region. We have 800 years of history. We want a Europe of Nations, with strong diplomacy, even a strong military force, but which respects the national sovereignty of each state. Brexit, the Italian League, Poland, Vox, Chega, are people's reactions to an idea never voted for. (Botelho, 2019)

This shows an attitude of caution on the party's stance not to repeal support with extremist rhetoric while showcasing political ideas in line with the far-right.

Interestingly, in this context, there have been voices appealing for contention of criticism among the ruling elite regarding "winds of populism," as this might constitute "a risk" of extremism or polarisation. On October 5, 2021, the day the Portuguese Republic is celebrated, the former mayor of Lisbon referred to the Chega party underlining "the need to oppose everything that might put the Republic at risk, in other words, populism" (Borges, 2021). A Portuguese humourist published an opinion piece comparing the rise of the extreme right with Covid-19: "The major challenges were dealing with the rise of an extreme right-wing party and the emergence of a virus on a global scale, i.e., with an opportunistic worm that spread and infected thousands of Portuguese and with SARS-CoV-2" (Domingues, 2022).

There is an identification of Chega with a populist narrative, but this is not recognised as sufficiently coherent in its message, falling short at the supply level.

4. Populist Discourses in Portugal: An Analysis of Media

Media may successfully emphasise selected conceptions of events like elections or trends like the rise of populism. Not surprisingly, being aware of this media power and the increasing mediatisation of politics, political actors tend to model their political narratives accordingly, as analysed next.

4.1. Methodology, Corpus of Analysis, and Coding

Considering the particularities of the Portuguese mediascape, the criteria used for selecting the six outlets we analysed—three newspapers and three TV evening news programmes—were popularity/audiences and circulation/frequencies, as shown in Table 1. All of them are privately owned by media groups, except for one public service TV channel, as in Portugal there is no publicly owned print press. The most-read daily newspapers are *Correio da Manhã*, *Jornal de Notícias*, and *PÚBLICO*. According to data from the Portuguese Association for the Monitoring of Printing and Circulation, in 2021, *Correio da Manhã* sold 204,116 copies; *Jornal de Notícias*, 95,697; and *PÚBLICO*, 47,375 copies (APCT, 2021). Notwithstanding, the latter's digital version has the most subscribers among the dailies, with 45,648 paying readers in early 2022, compared to *Correio da Manhã*'s 2,834 and *Jornal de Notícias*' 4,190 (Muschketat, 2022). Among these, *Jornal de Notícias* was the most trusted news brand for 78.8% of the readers, followed by *PÚBLICO* for 75.9%, whereas *Correio da Manhã* (51.5%) is the least trusted among 13 brands (Cardoso et al., 2021, p. 48).

Of the TV channels, in 2022, SIC had the highest audience ranking, with a share of 17.5%, followed by TVI in second (16.3%), and RTP1 in third (11.8%; Ferreira, 2023).

Table 1. Media ownership, frequency, format and rankings.

Outlets	Ownership	Frequency and format	Audiences
Newspaper			Paid circulation
Correio da Manhã	Private company, Cofina	Daily, tabloid	204,116 copies
Jornal de Notícias	Private group, Global Media Group	Daily, tabloid and broadsheet	95,697 copies
PÚBLICO	Private sub-holding, Sonaecom (Grupo Sonae)	Daily, broadsheet	47,375 copies
TV channel/show			Audience shares
SIC/*Jornal da Noite*	Private, owned by the media group Impresa	Daily, evening news	19.9%
TVI/*Jornal das 8*	Private, owned by the media conglomerate Media Capital	Daily, evening news	18.9%
RTP1/*Telejornal*	Public service, Rádio e Televisão de Portugal (RTP)	Daily, evening news	11.8%

Sources: APCT (2021); Ferreira (2023); Grupo Marktest (2022).

In January 2022, RTP aired the most news reports, 2,529 in morning, afternoon, and evening shows, totalling over 87 hours; TVI aired 2,387, with over 76 hours; and SIC, with 1,784 and over 77 hours (Grupo Marktest, 2022). As for evening news programmes, in 2022, between 8 p.m. and midnight SIC's *Jornal da Noite* reached 19.9%, TVI's *Jornal das 8*, 18.9%; and RTP1's *Telejornal*, 11.8% (Ferreira, 2023). These news programmes last from 60 to 90 minutes, from 8 p.m. onwards.

The corpus of analysis was compounded with the help of two professional consultants, CISION and Marktest, based on desk research and selected keywords for the MEDIATIZED EU research project. The topics covered included the economy (including the common currency), regional and international partnerships, visa regime, fiscal policies, enlargement, human rights, democracy, immigration and asylum, national and European identity, disinformation, populism, the Covid-19 pandemic, and vaccination programmes. For this article, all items addressing these subjects published or aired from September 1, 2021, to January 31, 2022, were analysed. In total, the clipping resulted in a pool of 14,175 items made of 10,823 print news stories, editorials, interviews, readers' letters, and feature and opinion articles of the three selected newspapers and 3,352 news, reportages, interviews, political debates, comments, and analysis of the evening news of the three TV channels selected. Further sampling exercises narrowed the pool. This selection was made manually, with researchers reading or watching every item and then identifying what pieces were related to the research topics and keywords. The final corpus comprised 1,536 items—987 from print newspapers and 549 from TV.

In the open coding phase, by reading and watching each unit in the corpus, we identified certain issues and trends that were grouped under different categories and, within them, different codes. We have used the code "democracy," under the category "subject," to identify, among others, the issue of populism. This coding decision was made based on the literature review, which shows concerns for the direct link between the quality of liberal democratic regimes in the face of rising populism, in whatever conception of the term. It was also confirmed in the open coding phase, when the entire corpus was examined, to then refine the codebook and establish the interpretation parameters for each category through axial coding (see, e.g., Corbin & Strauss, 2014). This section shows the results for items coded with a combination of "democracy" as a subject and the EU or its leaders (e.g., European Commission's President von der Leyen) as an agent in the issues being covered/discussed.

On print press, out of the 987 items coded, *PÚBLICO* represented the biggest share (456 items), followed by *Jornal de Notícias* (315) and *Correio da Manhã* (217). These items' genres are mostly news reports (622) and opinion/feature articles (240), followed by editorials (47), guest contributions and readers' letters (33), interviews (30), reportages (23), and items akin to electoral debates (10), in which candidates in the January elections answered questions on specific issues. Moreover, 10 items are special reports of series covering EU issues, appearing in *PÚBLICO*'s "State of the Union," supported by the European Parliament (6); "The Europe We Want," co-funded by the EU (3); and "Investigate Europe," produced by a multinational group of journalists (1). The EU is an agent in 638 items. Of those, 136 are coded for "democracy."

While the main narrative found in the whole corpus of the three newspapers was "Portugal must adapt to EU and world dynamics," in 120 items, when filtered for the code "democracy," the same narrative appears in 54 out of the 136 items. Two other key narratives emerging from that selection were "Portugal is peripheralised in the EU," appearing in 42 items, and "the EU is democratic and promotes democracy," in 36, which reflects our overall conclusion about the prominence of concerns over Portugal's rightful place in the EU and its need to adapt to move to "the centre," as well as the idea that the EU represents democracy.

On TV, the numbers were more balanced between the three analysed channels. Of the total of 549 coded items, 212 were broadcast by SIC, 173 by RTP1, and 164 by TVI. Of these, 447 are news/reportages and 60 are commentaries/opinions. If we filter by EU as an actor we have 255 items. When we combine the pieces coded for the EU as an actor and democracy, there are 34 pieces, of which 32 are news reports and two are commentaries.

In the pieces focusing on the EU as an actor, the main narratives on TV were "Portugal is at the centre of the EU" (30), where the role that Portugal plays is seen as positive and active, and the "EU imposes norms and policies" (29), related to debates on the national budget, the Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP), and the restructuring of the Portuguese national airline company. This EU "imposition" was not always portrayed as something negative, but often as necessary to overcome the economic crisis. Another narrative was that "the EU contributes to security and peace" (24), mostly in the context of conflict with Belarus due to the growing flow of migrants through its border and the escalation of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Finally, the fourth most present narrative on TV was the "EU is democratic and promotes democracy'' (23), showing how this co-constitutive nature of the EU and democracy are represented in Portuguese media. On TV, among the 34 pieces that combined the codes EU as an actor and democracy, only one special reportage on TVI called *Destination: Europe* used the word populism/populist. This could indicate that TV is less available to label issues, parties, and attitudes as populist.

We then conducted a critical thematic analysis to explore what populism means in the Portuguese media and the concept's relation to the EU in this context, through unearthing the framing and priming processes created through or embodied in the analysed media texts. Following Lawless and Chen (2019, p. 7), in the open

coding phase, "guided by repetition, recurrence, and/or forcefulness," we identified "discursive patterns" and, afterwards, we moved to closed coding where we articulated "discourses with larger societal ideologies" and political positions, identifying, thus, key themes revolving and, hence, building discourses on EU and populism.

4.2. Results and Discussion

By analysing selected media texts conveyed by the Portuguese media during the identified period, we defined three broad themes through which populism as a term, label, or topic was used to create and negotiate political representations of the EU: EU and populism as antipodes; between political communication and "soft" populism; and declarations and perceptions of risks to democracy.

4.2.1. EU and Populism as Antipodes

Our study identified an underlying discourse, crosscutting most analysed narratives, that frames the construction of the EU and populism in a particular way so that they result to the audience as antipodes. Most of these discursive constructions occur by interlinking meanings with previous (and still pervasive) texts and activating specific ingrained imaginaries with clear political connotations to good/bad, regressive/modern, forward/backwards. The representation of the EU— in both news pieces and opinion articles—is usually constructed as embodying democracy and democratic values (to which "we" adhere or must comply), a fundamental good regime that fosters progress and embodies modernity. In turn, populism and the populists are commonly depicted (and commonly cornered) as the "others'' (anti-democratic/nationalist/illiberal/ authoritarian actors/means/goals) that hold an agenda contrary to European values, therefore, challenging the EU normative framework, or imperilling the inherently democratic European project. These representations appear both in isolation, leaving the articulation between their meanings to the audience, or articulated, co-constituting themselves in the text of the news or opinion articles. These discourses crosscut media texts (news and opinion) across disparate issues such as what can be perceived as more obvious topics like the overall quality of democratic regimes within the EU, and topics not so intuitively related like the health measures adopted during the Covid-19 pandemic. Concerning the different newspapers, discourses on the EU as fundamentally democratic appear especially in *Correio da Manhã*, whereas *PÚBLICO*, for instance, focuses more on the populism/democracy frame.

In a news in-depth story on "The Europe We Want" (*PÚBLICO*), different voices are given the floor sharing what they think about the EU, most times arguing with the imaginaries the EU activates on their political beliefs. One of the topics covered is a survey of the EU citizens'

views on democracy showing that values like gender equality and racial non-discrimination are perceived as the most important to preserve against "populist threats" (Paiva, 2022). Stating that the European project structuring the EU was formed with the values of democracy, the report quotes the Portuguese MEP of the centre-right PSD Lídia Pereira saying that "'freedom,' 'the rule of law,' and 'humanism' must be 'common' to all member-states" (Paiva, 2022) activating the humanist imaginary that the EU represents in its founding rhetoric and pointing to boundary lines concerning what defines the EU. It then asks whether they are indeed "common to all," to then quote Pereira charging: "There are national governments of member-states that are jeopardising the democratic governments of the EU," the "most serious cases" being Hungary, Poland, and Slovenia. She argues the global trend of "regression of democracies" rests on populist movements, whereas "the EU still is the bloc that most preserves these democratic values," pointing to a red flag when facing populism within the EU.

Still in *PÚBLICO*, one prolific columnist on EU and domestic political affairs has several pieces from which examples of the opposing contrast between populism and democracy are drawn, especially with an argument for moderation and a cherishing centrist political environment. She ponders the quality of electoral debates and the parties' performance, which she contends were overrun by their leaders' personal representations, and criticises the lack of attention to topics like "peace in Europe" (de Sousa, 2022), indicating as a subtext that greater political projects and identity risk being dismissed when facing current politics where short-term political gains tend to be privileged. In this light, she writes:

> This campaign, more than any other, almost liquidated the parties' role as institutions, as absolute primacy was given to the bosses and their personal organisation….The parties' arguments were often derisory. Key issues were left out, such as justice, defence, and investments. Peace in Europe was ignored. Notwithstanding, abstention decreased, which illustrates the interest raised. What was at stake was too serious….There are no excuses for the loss of moderate traditional parties to the left and right, the growing fragmentation of the party landscape, and the entrance of populist and extreme-right parties with the capacity to influence political debate. (de Sousa, 2022)

In other pieces, the same prominent columnist clearly frames the EU as democratic while making a clear connection between democracy and the EU:

> To hear Michel Barnier defend this thesis [on national sovereignty taking precedence over European law] after having led the "Brexit" negotiations by denouncing the British, in every step, for wanting to "revert" control over its sovereignty to Westminster is not

only pathetic, it is another proof that the European centre-right is barely resisting the "siren songs" of the populist and nationalist right, allowing itself to be dragged by some of its identitarian and anti-European banners, instead of fighting them. (de Sousa, 2021)

In *Correio da Manhã*, a university professor links populism with authoritarianism by claiming that Portugal is moving closer to "authoritarian populism" with the government's decision to impose and repeatedly extend confinement during the Covid-19 pandemic, thus intensifying a "pandemic panic," which translates into unpredictability, generalised fear, and a propensity towards extremism (Amaral, 2022). The author relates that to an imminent increase in Chega's representation in the parliament, and argues these trends are a "threat" to liberal democracy like that seen in other European countries and the US.

In *Jornal de Notícias*, a report consults several specialists to analyse how "populism has reached more supporters" and affected the voters' polarisation in Europe (Moura, 2022). The report focuses on political contests in France, which held the EU presidency. Whereas right-wing contenders lashed out at President Emmanuel Macron's government for hanging an EU flag over the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, causing him to backtrack from the symbolic move, Macron and France would benefit from holding the EU presidency, using the opportunity to regain the country's centrality in the Union. By activating ideas and texts of France's leading place in modern Europe aligned with Enlightenment (European) values, Macron's government is associated with the EU, though still preserving French identity, and on the opposite side, populism is associated with polarisation and right-wing nationalism (Moura, 2022).

On TV, the word "populism" appeared in a 25-minute reportage linking it to disinformation, fake news, denialist movements, and as an antipode of democracy:

Fake news and disinformation that have been trained in public discourse are today a political tool that feeds populism and threatens the stability of some of the most advanced democracies. With the rise of denialist movements, they are just confirmation of how reality has surpassed fiction. (Andrade, 2021a)

However, political meanings and agendas do not always occur in explicit terms, but rather through subtexts, connotations, and articulations. Indirect references to populism on TV were mostly related to fundamental values, such as respect for democracy, the rule of law, and freedom of expression. The mention of countries such as Poland was made along the lines that the Polish government "questioned one of the fundamental principles of European integration and decided not to recognise the primacy of European laws" (Costa, 2021b). Also, the same idea is put forth by stating that "the recent decision

of the Polish Constitutional Court…calls into question the principles of the European project" (Costa, 2021a). Similarly, the evening news by RTP used judicial stability and EU values to approach the subject: "Poland challenges the European legal order and the values of the Union, but the Polish prime minister came to Strasbourg to reaffirm that Poland will not leave the European Union" (Teixeira, 2021). The last part indicates the fear of a new Brexit, which could weaken the Union, also present in other news pieces. A commentator with TVI, Paulo Portas, stated:

It is not possible to have the best of both worlds: Either you want to be in Europe or you don't want to be in Europe. And if they want to be in Europe, they have to accept what the other 26 accept, otherwise, this would break any possibility of the system working well. (Andrade, 2021b)

These examples further illustrate populist narratives in countries such as Poland, that affect the EU at the core of its fundamental principles, overruling democratic practices in favour of a particular populist political agenda.

4.2.2. Ranging Between Political Communication and "Soft" Populism as Political and Rhetoric Options

Another discursive trend revolving around the EU and populism points to the usage of both terms as pieces of political and rhetoric options to be more persuasive concerning political audiences. Also, some of the discourses on the EU can be understood as "soft populism," as they grasp the "we the people vs. them" rationale in populist references or style of communication. The debates and media coverage of the RRP were illustrative of this trend. Negotiations for the state budget between the PS government, other political parties, trade unions, and employers' associations prompted statements, opinion articles, or commentaries featuring concerns with the implementation of the RRP endorsed by the European Commission in June 2021, and with the political and economic implications on a systemic level, such as socioeconomic instability and political polarisation.

In this context, there was an emphasis on the need to seize the opportunity of the "abundant" European funds available through the RRP to make the Portuguese economy more efficient and competitive, stressing Portugal's relative disadvantage or even "backwardness" (articulated with underdevelopment texts) in some sectors and thus the need to catch up, in the European context, especially considering that the pandemic could widen regional disparities. With the rejection of the state budget, part of these voices criticised the leftist parties for being "spenders" or for their position on the social issues mentioned, deeming them intransigent and accountable for the "political crisis" added to the health and looming economic crisis, and for the risks of casting doubts over the country's commitments associated with the RRP.

Moreover, some call the plan, in caricature or not, "the European bazooka," or "the bazooka," often charging the prime minister and his party with instrumentalising it for self-promotion. This becomes clear in comments like "there is a country that might be suspended by a prime minister that looks at power as a time-circumstance and not as service duty," and that using the RRP is part of unethical campaigning practices (Guedes, 2021, p. 2). This way, charges of instrumentalisation of public resources—or, for some, EU resources—for achieving electoral goals link to charges of populism, often replacing the notion of demagoguery and other misconducts, seen ahead.

4.2.3. Mixed-Up Declarations and Perceptions of Risks to Democracy

Prevailing narratives that use populism and the EU tend to show a general confusion or a conceptual conflation of "populism," "electoralism," demagoguery, and "strategic political communication" in parties' declarations, the government's statements, media reports, and political opinion pieces. Accusations about the instrumentalisation of the RRP funds for electoral purposes came out quickly and vocally, especially related to the campaign promises made by both the government and the main opposition party, PSD, for the use of European funds to catalyse economic recovery and improve the Portuguese people's socioeconomic situation out of the pandemic. They included comments on the expectations of the prime minister that voters would be impressed, though people understood that the money does not belong to the prime minister or his party, in *Jornal de Notícias* (Guedes, 2021, p. 2); reports on the prime minister's contender Rui Rio (PSD) charging Costa with weaponising the RRP as if he was "shooting with a machine gun," and sometimes missing the target, in *Correio da Manhã* (Pereira, 2021, p. 24); or that the "RRP will be used as other financial support packages in the past to avoid structural homework to overcome Portuguese peripheralisation in important sectors," in a *PÚBLICO* editorial (Carvalho, 2021, p. 4). Costa himself is cited in *Jornal de Notícias* on the need to "heal the wound of lack of social and territorial cohesion for a positive, effective and structural fight against the virus of populism" (Soares, 2021, p. 17), linking populist discourse to economic performance.

In this contested context, the role of the media in ensuring democratic and rigorous coverage was emphasised. For instance, during the electoral campaign, amid heated debate, the president of the republic, Rebelo de Sousa, underlined the need for independent journalism, quoted as saying that "a weak media weakens democracies and that this risk is enhanced at this time of radicalisms" (Lusa, 2021), thus considering journalism as a weapon to fight populism. Opinion-wise, one analyst argued that, in the face of political change in governments' colours in EU countries:

If things go well, a space for an alternative at the centre might open up—between the centre-right and centre-left—keeping in common the democratic and liberal values that are the mainstay of democracies. Maybe this is the best recipe to fight the extremes. (Carvalho da Silva, 2021, p. 32)

The perceived risk to democracy is also evident, for example, when one columnist and former MP of PSD writing for *PÚBLICO* charged both PS and PSD for prompting the "destruction of the centre and the crisis of democracy" that translates into "populism" considering "the degeneration of the democratic parties has a lot to do with this situation" (Pacheco Pereira, 2021). A journalist writes that candidates in the local elections from both the governing and opposition parties had crossed the threshold of democratic and legitimate speeches involving the RRP by "abusing the use of national issues to achieve private and electoral goals," making promises to their constituencies for particular benefits (Almeida, 2021, p. 12).

Therefore, the imaginaries revolving around the EU's fundamental values feed the concept of populism as opposed to what the EU is and should stand for. In this sense, the term "populism" is used for criticising opponents. Moreover, while evoking the "degeneration of democratic parties," the selected discourse sticks to the phenomenon and the concept(s) of populism as an antipode of Europe.

5. Conclusion

This study analysed Portuguese media texts circulating during a complex political period to explore how populism was used and/or co-opted to create and negotiate political EU representations. The study points to two main conclusions. Firstly, the normalisation of the EU discourse in Portuguese media, with factors such as European values, democracy, and human rights being completely absorbed by the narrative supporting the EU, and an emphasis on economic elements. Given that issues such as the economy are generally more visible than those concerning identity in media representations of the EU, the apparent consensus over the benefits of integration is the main idea standing out in this context, with critical views pushed to the back.

Secondly, the media depicts the EU and populism as co-constitutively embodying political antipodes, making the EU function as a discursive buffer limiting populism in the country. This is constructed through explicit text and comparison, but also by activating specific imaginaries, subtexts, and connotations that point to this contrast and opposition between the EU and populism, with the latter posing an existential threat to the former as if the EU vanishes or risks vanishing once populism enters the political debate. Indeed, although the term and label "populism" in the analysed discourse on the EU is largely limited, it is projected frequently to represent the antipodes of what the EU's fundamental values

mean, hence being implicitly used in the construction of EU imaginaries—what it means, implies, and provides. Within this framework, this article also pointed to the fact that populism was used in the media and by the media as a discursive mechanism of political positionality and/or delegitimisation or criticism of political actors, agendas, or moves.

As these factors are associated with the EU and democratic values, populism has found little space in practice, being in several instances conceptually conflated with the rhetoric of the opposition, demagoguery, or electoralist discourse. Possibly, the perception of Portugal being in a semi-peripheral position within the EU, but looking towards the centre, has contributed to preventing the populist logic from taking hold of the political debate among the political elite and in the media, and the EU is thus deemed an aggregating element barring polarisation.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

Overcoming the Age Barrier: Improving Older Adults' Detection of Political Disinformation With Media Literacy

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Abstract
This experimental study analyzes the effect of media literacy on the ability of Spanish seniors over 50 years of age to identify fake news. The experiment measures the improvement achieved by older adults in the detection of political disinformation thanks to a digital competence course offered through WhatsApp. The study comprises a total sample of 1,029 individuals, subdivided into a control group (n = 531) and an experimental group (n = 498), from which a qualified experimental subsample (n = 87) was extracted. Results reveal that participants' political beliefs, ranging from left to right positions, influence their ability to detect misinformation. A progressive political position is associated with higher accuracy in identifying right-biased news headlines and lower accuracy for left-biased headlines. A conservative position is associated with higher accuracy when the news headline has a progressive bias, but lower accuracy when the headline is right-wing. Users are more critical when the headline has a bias against theirs, while they are more likely to believe news that confirms their own beliefs. The study adds evidence on the relevance of cognitive biases in disinformation and supports the convenience of designing specific media literacy actions aimed at older adults.

Issue
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1. Introduction

During the last two decades, the public sphere debate has been intoxicated by both the emergence of polarized discussions (Kaiser & Puschmann, 2017) and information disorders (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). The Covid-19 pandemic has been an example of how the dissemination of false messages on social networks can be dangerous for the physical and mental health of citizens (Salaverría et al., 2020). More recently, Russia's strategic use of manipulated messages and images about the war in Ukraine (Yablokov, 2022) has highlighted the helplessness of citizens against disinformation.

The tense political climate of recent years in many Western countries has extended the shadow of disinformation beyond health and warfare. One of the fields where disinformation has spread the most has been politics (López-García et al., 2021). Political discussion has sometimes turned into noise where all those involved—rulers, politicians, media, and activists—use any tool to attack the opponent, including lies, half-truths, or facts taken out of context (Ribeiro et al., 2017). In their detailed review of the international academic literature on political disinformation, Tucker et al. (2018) detect close links between social media, political polarization, and disinformation and point out that future research should address "the effects of exposure to information and disinformation online" (Tucker et al., 2018, p. 6).

Although some studies suggest that we may be overestimating the real effect of disinformation on society (Guess et al., 2019), there is a growing concern regarding the truthfulness of public messages of all kind, which

apparently lead many citizens to distrust institutions (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Discredit also translates into citizens' disaffection with news media, especially those that do not align with their own ideology (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020).

Due to this widespread mistrust, it is particularly important that those groups most susceptible to being influenced by disinformation receive training in fake news detection. As a matter of fact, the fight against disinformation has become a priority for the governments of Western democracies (European Commission, 2018, 2022; Tucker et al., 2018). The European Union, for example, has launched various initiatives against this phenomenon through media literacy (Livingstone, 2014; Sádaba & Salaverría, 2023).

So far, initiatives to promote media literacy have mainly focused on young people, due to their vulnerability, their immaturity, their intensive consumption of digital content, as well as more practical reasons, such as the existence of channels through formal education that allow reaching them in an effective way (Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2022; Herrero-Diz et al., 2021). While the strategic importance of addressing the young age group is clear, attention should be drawn to another group that is also highly vulnerable: seniors, that is, those over 50 years of age. These people have a greater interest in the news (Brashier & Schacter, 2020), as well as lower digital competence (Papí-Gálvez & La Parra-Casado, 2022). The difficulty of reaching this segment of the population, given their diversity and dispersion, makes thinking of innovative ways to act necessary.

This article offers some evidence based on experimental research conducted in Spain during April and June 2022 on how the political orientation of senior citizens determines their ability to identify disinformation online. It also explores the efficacy of a digital literacy activity addressing this age group and how it interacts with their political orientation. Two-wave research was designed with a control and an experimental group, whose members were invited to take a training course via WhatsApp for 10 days. Results show that the political beliefs of the participants influence their ability to detect misinformation. Analysis establishes also that the training activity increased their ability to detect disinformation and mitigated the effect of political orientation.

2. Political Polarization, Disinformation, and Seniors

Political orientation has emerged as an important variable in the consumption of both information and disinformation. As Wong et al. (2016) argue, in highly polarized contexts individuals tend to consume content that confirms their own opinions. This manifestation of confirmation bias (Watson, 1960) results in the deliberate avoidance of exposure to views that oppose what one advocates (Rochlin, 2017). Also significant in this context is the role of the third-person bias (Corbu et al.,

2021), whereby people tend to think that others are more likely to be misled than themselves (Altay & Acerbi, 2023; Martínez-Costa et al., 2022).

The emotional component that usually accompanies polarized climates finds fertile ground in social media (Serrano-Puche, 2021). It could be said that disinformation content is psychologically and strategically designed (Au et al., 2022) and is based on the audience's loss of trust in traditional media.

All these elements have given rise to a debate about the extent to which social networks contribute to polarization by creating an "echo chamber" effect (Iandoli et al., 2021). While it is true that the "echo chamber" effect has been contested (Dubois & Blank, 2018) or it has been found how little its impact is for those voting for fringe parties (Boulianne et al., 2020), the debate is still open. Spohr (2017) warns of the importance of making citizens aware of the need to seek information from diverse sources (Bakshy et al., 2015). Media literacy has also been identified as pivotal to combat political polarization (Gaultney et al., 2022).

In this context, the 50+ population poses several challenges. On the one hand, their interest in news is clear (Brashier & Schacter, 2020), although traditional media are still a benchmark for them (Choudrie et al., 2021). This poses the second challenge, as this trust in traditional media may be related to lower digital competence (Papí-Gálvez & La Parra-Casado, 2022). The third challenge also has to do with this trust in the source, since when information reaches seniors through second-generation networks, such as WhatsApp, they tend to place their trust in the person sending them the message, a friend or family member, rather than in the medium that gives it (Valera-Ordaz et al., 2022), thus becoming potential disseminators of disinformation. Recent research has brought about another interesting aspect of WhatsApp concerning the spread of disinformation: its ability to become a friendlier space for correcting false content among family members, especially older ones, thanks to users' perception of being in a more private environment than first-generation networks such as Facebook (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2022; Malhotra, 2023). Finally, the interest in this age group as an object design of digital and media literacy strategies is recent (Ramírez García et al., 2017), which highlights the urgency of not delaying this approach any longer.

Some studies have emphasized the particular vulnerability to mis- and disinformation among individuals over 50 years of age (Brashier & Schacter, 2020; Choudrie et al., 2021; Moore & Hancock, 2022). This lower protection against misinformation is accentuated when age is associated with factors such as race or economic poverty. These worrying combinations have been detected, for example, among African American underserved older adults in the United States (Seo et al., 2019, 2021).

This article seeks to provide new evidence to help lay the foundations for future media literacy actions aimed at seniors. To achieve this goal, it is necessary

to understand how the ideological orientation of people over 50 years of age affects their competence to detect counterfeit messages. Consequently, we first seek to answer the following question:

RQ1: To what extent does the political orientation of senior citizens determine their ability to identify false content online?

Once this aspect has been determined, it is of interest to analyze the extent to which media literacy initiatives contribute to improving the ability of seniors to detect false content. To this end, and on an experimental basis, the impact of a training action aimed at this age group has been analyzed in accordance with these two other research questions:

RQ2: Can a digital literacy action increase the ability of seniors to identify disinformation?
RQ3: How does the political orientation of seniors affect the effectiveness of a training action to improve their ability to identify disinformation?

3. Methods

3.1. Sample and Data

To answer these questions, the results of the course What to Do to Detect False Information on the Internet, organized in Spain by MediaWise and the digital native media Newtral, were analyzed. Based at the Poynter Institute in the United States, MediaWise is a project that, with the support of Meta, has been promoting media literacy in several countries among people of all ages since 2018. The initiative developed in Spain was aimed at individuals over the age of 50 and consisted of a free 10-day course, launched in April 2022, for which par-

ticipants simply needed to have a smartphone and the WhatsApp application.

After subscribing, users received a daily session, which included a video with simple, practical techniques designed to improve their judgment in the use of internet information resources and digital skills. At the end of each session, they were asked a question about the content learned.

To test the effect of this course on seniors' ability to detect disinformation, research was designed in two waves, respectively at the beginning and the end of the training activity, on a total sample of 1,029 individuals. In the first wave, this sample was divided into two groups: an experimental group (n_{e1} = 498), which received an invitation to take the course, and a control group (n_{c1} = 531) which did not. In the second wave, 381 individuals dropped out of the experiment, reducing the total sample to 648 participants; both the experimental group (n_{e2} = 200) and the control group (n_{c2} = 448) were reduced in size.

Participants were selected from residents of Spain, aged over 50 and smartphone users. In 2019, 96% of Spaniards were estimated to own a smartphone, but only 51% of those aged 55 and over owned one (Statista, 2019). This lower smartphone usage among seniors limits the extrapolation of our results. Among mobile users, WhatsApp (90%) and Facebook (66%) were the two most used social networks in the same year (Statista, 2019). The sample composition details are shown in Table 1.

Two questionnaires were developed to assess, firstly, the baseline situation and, once the experimental group had completed the training, the effect of the course on their ability to identify disinformation. All subjects participating in the study, both in the experimental and control groups, completed the two questionnaires.

Of the 498 participants in the first experimental group (n_{e1}), 190 completed at least one of the

Table 1. Profile of the participants.

	Total sample		Experimental sample	
Sex	n	%	$n_{e2 > 5}$	%
Men	493	47.9	45	51.7
Women	536	52.1	42	48.3
Age	n	%	$n_{e2 > 5}$	%
50–59 years	335	32.6	33	37.9
60–69 years	448	43.5	41	47.1
≥70 years	246	23.9	13	14.9
Educational level	n	%	$n_{e2 > 5}$	%
Non formal	23	2.2	1	1.1
Secondary	400	38.9	25	28.7
Vocational	318	30.9	29	33.3
Polytechnic	87	8.5	11	12.6
Higher	143	13.9	12	13.8
Postgraduate	58	5.6	9	10.3
TOTAL	1,029	100.0	87	100.0

10 sessions of the course. For the purposes of data analysis, a subsample ($n_{e2>5}$) comprising 87 of these 190 cases was taken into consideration, consisting of those who, at the end of the course, had attended at least five sessions. This decision, while limiting the predictive potential of the data, is consistent with the objective of observing results clearly linked to the course.

Among the 87 participants in the experimental group subsample $n_{e2>5}$, there were slightly more men (51.7%) than women (48.3%). In the subsample of the experimental group, there was also a slightly higher percentage of people between 60 and 69 years old in relation to the total sample. The distribution of participants according to their educational level is similar (see Table 1). A chi-square test of independence showed that there was no significant association between profile of participants—sample or experimental—and sex ($p = 0.88$), age ($p = 0.90$), or educational level ($p = 0.25$; see Table 1).

The questionnaire was adapted from the one by Moore and Hancock (2022), with their permission. The questionnaire adapted for Spain was structured in six blocks. Block 1 asked participants to rate the truth or falsehood of selected headlines, using a seven-item Likert scale (from 1 = *clearly false* to 7 = *clearly true*). They were presented with a total of six headlines, three with false or inaccurate information and three with true news items. The falsehood of the news items used in the experiment was checked by using fact-checking organizations, which determined that these news items were not true. Among the false news items, one was congruent with a left-wing ideological bias, one was congruent with a right-wing ideological bias, and the third was neutral. The 12 headlines included in the two waves were extracted from media and news websites. Only news items from the last month prior to each wave were selected to potentially obtain a higher recall among the sample subjects. The Supplementary File shows the headlines used in the questionnaires for both waves.

Block 1 of the questionnaire also asked participants whether they had looked up information about the news before giving their opinion on the veracity of each headline. Block 2 asked about the technological skills of the participants. Block 3 asked about the level of trust in the information received through all media. Block 4 asked about participants' media and technology consumption habits and political preferences. Block 5 asked for demographic information. Finally, Block 6 explained any inaccuracies or misrepresentations in the headlines of Block 1.

The research was conducted between the end of April and the end of June 2022 and was carried out by the market research company YouGov. The project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Navarra.

3.2. Measures

In Block 1, participants were asked to rate the truth or falsity of each headline, using the following scale:

1 = *clearly false* to 7 = *clearly true*. For adjustment to the other research variables, the direction of the scale was reversed for responses to false headlines so that high scores represent high levels of correctness.

The political position of the participants was asked in two ways. The first one sought to define their affiliation with certain ideological groups ("Overall, in which of the following ideological groups do you recognize yourself?"). Respondents could answer one of the following options: 1 = Left, 2 = Right, 3 = Center, and 4 = Other. In the control group, 42% said they belonged to ideological groups of the Left, 27.7% to the Right, 18.8% to the Center, and 11.6% to the Other category. The distribution in the experimental group was very similar, with 41.4% responding Left, 26.4% responding Right, 13.8% responding Center, and 18.4% belonging to the Other category.

The second question consisted of asking participants for a general description of their views on politics ("In general, how do you describe your views on politics?"). Respondents could answer one of the following options: 1 = Very Progressive, 2 = Progressive, 3 = Moderate, 4 = Conservative, and 5 = Very Conservative. To adjust this variable to the analysis, it was recoded into three categories: (a) Progressive (Very Progressive and Progressive), (b) Moderate, and (c) Conservative (Very Conservative and Conservative). In the control group, 49.3% acknowledged holding a Progressive political view compared to 46% in the case of the experimental group. The Moderate viewpoint was almost equal between the two groups (40.8% control group vs. 41.4% experimental group). Conservative political views were in the minority in both groups, with a slightly higher incidence in the experimental group (12.6% vs. 9.8%). The difference in terms of political position and views on politics makes sense in the case of Spain, where there is a varied number of political parties not always aligned to the left/right axis but with a particular focus on identity (nationalist parties). Those parties are very relevant in some territories such as Basque Country or Catalonia.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the different views on politics according to the ideological affiliation of the participants. In the control group, subjects with a right-wing ideology defined themselves mostly as Moderate (77%). The experimental group repeated this pattern but in a less pronounced way (61%) and with a greater presence of a Progressive political point of view compared to the control group (30% vs. 17%). Of those with a left-wing ideology in the control group, 74% declared themselves to be Progressive and 23% Moderate, which was similar to the experimental group. In the control group, 52% of those with a centrist ideology said they held a Moderate political view, 32% said they were Conservative, and 14% were Progressive. In the case of the experimental group, there were fewer moderates and more conservatives (both 42%). Lastly, the ideological group configured as Others consisted mostly of subjects with Moderate political views (75% of the control group, 69% of the experimental group).
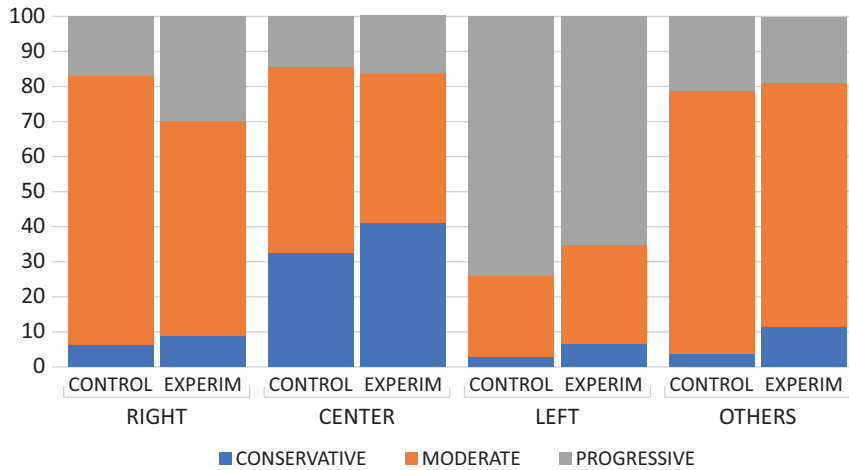
Figure 1. Political affiliation vs. viewpoint on politics: Control group (n_{c1}) and experimental group (n_{e1}).

3.3. Analysis Strategy

A t-test for related samples was applied to verify whether participation in the two waves of the study produced significant differences in the accuracy of the truth or falsity of the headlines. To investigate the relationship between political affiliation, general political views, the presence of political bias in news headlines (right-wing, left-wing, or neutral), and the degree of correctness of the truth or falsehood of each headline, we performed an ANOVA analysis. In the case of a significant relationship, we performed the Bonferroni post-hoc test indicating the effect size.

4. Results

The analysis of the difference in means indicates the presence of significant differences. For the control group, Wave 1 (M = 4.64; SD = 0.63) versus Wave 2 (M = 4.42; SD = 0.64) obtains a *p*-value of ≤0.001. For the experimental group, Wave 1 (M = 4.64; SD = 0.63) versus Wave 2 (M = 4.42; SD = 0.64) reflects a *p*-value of 0.025. These values indicate that the observed differences between the measurements are highly unlikely to have occurred by chance, supporting the idea that the differences are statistically significant. Regarding the magnitude of these differences for both groups, they can be considered between small and moderate (control group d = 0.19; experimental group d = 0.25).

4.1. Political Point of View

Taken together, the research data suggest that the general political viewpoint influences the ability to accurately verify the truth or falsity of a news headline depending on the political bias reflected in it. As can be seen in Tables 2 and 3, a Progressive political viewpoint facilitates greater accuracy in headlines with a right-wing political bias and less success when the headline has a left-wing bias. In the case of a Conservative political view, the trend is reversed: The hit rate is higher when the headline is biased to the left and falls when the approach reflects a right-wing view. In the case of holding a Moderate view, the influence of political bias to the right or left is not as pronounced in terms of the averages obtained. The absence of political bias in the news headline does not show a significant relationship with the political view of the participants and its possible influence on the verification of the news, both for the control group, except in the first wave—Wave 1: $F(2.448)$ = 3.35, MSE = 3.35, p = 0.036; Wave 2: $F(2.448)$ = 1.01, MSE = 1.22, p = 0.336—and in the case of the experimental group—Wave 1: $F(2.87)$ = 0.465, MSE = 0.521, p = 0.633; Wave 2: $F(2.87)$ = 1.56, MSE = 2.40, p = 0.216. This trend is similar between both groups, although in the case of the experimental group, there is more difference between the *p*-value obtained in both waves: p ≤ 0.001 (Wave 1) vs. p = 0.040 (Wave 2). Even so, the relationship is still significant, and it cannot be

Table 2. Control group: Political orientation.

	Wave	Conservative		Moderate		Progressive		$F(2.448)$	p	η^2
		M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*			
Left headline	1	4.02	1.43	4.08	1.27	3.42	1.33	13.3***	<0.001	0.056
	2	4.73	1.24	4.58	1.23	4.18	1.21	6.88**	0.001	0.030
Right headline	1	3.76	1.67	3.99	1.39	4.96	1.31	29.4***	<0.001	0.117
	2	3.88	1.38	4.06	1.18	4.58	1.15	12.2***	<0.001	0.052

Notes: * *p* < 0.05, ** *p* < .001, *** *p* < 0.001.

Table 3. Experimental group: Political orientation.

	Wave	Conservative		Moderate		Progressive		F(2.87)	p	η²
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD			
Left headline	1	5.59	0.97	3.86	1.30	3.47	1.33	11.6***	<0.001	0.217
	2	5.55	1.42	4.51	1.27	4.26	0.99	4.96**	0.009	0.106
Right headline	1	2.91	1.36	4.16	1.42	5.21	1.38	12.9***	<0.001	0.235
	2	3.41	0.97	4.35	1.29	4.63	1.53	3.35*	0.040	0.040

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

affirmed that the training action carried out has deactivated this influence.

For the control group, the post-hoc comparison using the Bonferroni test indicates a significant difference in 10 of the 18 pairwise comparisons made (see Table 4). The Conservative–Progressive pair shows five significant differences, more pronounced when assessing headlines biased to the right. The Progressive–Moderate pair accumulates four significant differences, all of them in headlines biased to the right or to the left. Finally, the Conservative–Moderate pair shows a single difference ($p = 0.043$) in the case of a neutral headline. The distribution by waves of significant differences is even in the case of right- and left-biased headlines and disappears in the case of neutral headlines during the second wave of the study.

The pairwise comparison of the experimental group shows eight significant differences between the ana-

lyzed pairs (see Table 5). On right- and left-biased headlines, the Conservative–Progressive pair shows four significant differences and the Progressive–Moderate pair three. The Conservative–Moderate pair shows a single case of significant difference for right-biased headlines (Wave 1). The wave analysis indicates that during the second phase of this research—after conducting formative modules—the significant differences between pairs decreased. They disappeared for the Conservative–Moderate and Progressive–Moderate pairs in the case of right-biased headlines and were smaller but did not disappear in the remaining cases.

4.2. Political Affiliation

The analysis did not find significant differences according to the political affiliation of the participants in the case of a neutral headline, both for the control group—

Table 4. Control group: Post hoc analysis for pairwise comparison groups.

	Wave	Post hoc			Effect size		
		C vs. P	C vs. M	P vs. M	C vs. P	C vs. M	P vs. M
Left headline	1	0.020*	1.000	<0.001***	0.470	−0.044	0.501
	2	0.024*	1.000	0.003**	0.448	0.118	0.330
Right headline	1	<0.001***	0.964	<0.001***	−0.867	−0.164	−0.703
	2	0.001**	1.000	<0.001***	−0.594	−0.153	−0.441
Neutral headline	1	0.040*	0.043*	1.000	0.416	0.405	0.011
	2	0.497	0.575	1.000	0.233	0.215	0.017

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; C stands for Conservative, M for Moderate, and P for Progressive.

Table 5. Experimental group: Post-hoc analysis for pairwise comparison groups.

	Wave	Post hoc			Effect size		
		C vs. P	C vs. M	P vs. M	C vs. P	C vs. M	P vs. M
Left headline	1	<0.001***	<0.001***	0.563	1.657	1.352	0.305
	2	0.007**	0.036*	1.000	1.083	0.873	0.210
Right headline	1	<0.001***	0.030*	0.005**	−1.649	−0.899	−0.750
	2	0.034*	0.138	1.000	−0.892	−0.690	−0.202
Neutral headline	1	1.000	1.000	1.000	0.310	0.163	0.147
	2	1.000	0.287	0.899	−0.334	−0.574	0.240

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; C stands for Conservative, M for Moderate, and P for Progressive.

Wave 1: $F_{(3.448)} = 0.397$, $MSE = 0.391$, $p = 0.0.760$; Wave 2: $F_{(3.448)} = 0.483$, $MSE = 0.586$, $p = 0.695$—and in the experimental group—Wave 1: $F_{(3.87)} = 0.770$, $MSE = 0.859$, $p = 0.514$; Wave 2: $F_{(3.87)} = 0.295$, $MSE = 0.470$, $p = 0.829$.

In the case that the headline reflects some kind of political bias, political affiliation is significant. As can be seen in Tables 6 and 7, the political affiliation Right reflects a higher mean score on left-biased headlines in the control group; in the experimental group, this pattern is not so clear because it achieves its highest mean score precisely when assessing right-biased headlines during the second wave of the study and after participating in training actions. A Center political affiliation is associated for both groups with a lower score if the headline is biased to the right. In the case of belonging to the Left group, both the control and experimental groups achieve higher hits on right-biased headlines (control group, Wave 1, $M = 4.98$; experimental group, Wave 1, $M = 5.28$) and significantly lower mean hit scores if the bias is to the left (control group, Wave 1, $M = 3.29$; experimental group, Wave 1, $M = 3.44$). The political affiliation category Others is defined as having a larger mean hit difference between the two waves when the headline reflects political bias to the left.

For the control group, in both waves and according to the type of political bias of the news headline, in the case of "headline with a bias to the right" the p-value is less than 0.001. The difference in this data between both waves in left-biased headlines is quite similar to the previous case (Wave 1, $p \leq 0.001$; Wave 2, $p = 0.005$). In the experimental group, the p-value varies across waves of the study. In the case of left-biased headlines, it goes

from 0.002 to 0.031 during the second wave. When the headline reflects a rightward bias, a nonsignificant difference is obtained during the second wave (Wave 1, $p \leq 0.001$; Wave 2, $p = 0.084$).

In the case of headlines with neutral political bias, the pairwise comparison is not significant under any assumption of this study (see Tables 8 and 9). For headlines with right or left bias and the control group, there is a significant difference in both waves for the pairs Right–Left and Left–Center. In the case of Center–Others, the difference is significant in both waves of right-biased headlines and in the first wave when the headline reflects a left bias. In the case of the pairs Right–Center and Right–Others the difference is significant only for right-biased headlines presented during the first wave of the study.

The experimental group has fewer instances of significant differences between pairs and all occur during the first wave of the research. In the case of right-biased headlines, significant differences are found for the pairs Right–Left, Left–Center, and Left–Others. For left-biased headlines, the significant difference is for the pairs Left–Center and Center–Others.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The analysis shows how the political beliefs of the participants influence their ability to detect misinformation. A progressive political position is associated with a higher accuracy for right-biased headlines and a lower accuracy for left-biased headlines. A conservative position is associated with higher accuracy when the headline has a progressive bias and lower accuracy when the headline is right-wing. In other words, users are more critical when

Table 6. Control group's mean number of correct answers to the question "In which ideological group do you recognize yourself?"

		Right		Center		Left		Others				
	Wave	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	$F_{(3.444)}$	p	η^2
Left headline	1	4.19	1.27	4.43	1.40	3.29	1.21	3.77	1.20	21.2***	<0.001	0.125
	2	4.63	1.29	4.70	1.25	4.22	1.10	4.33	1.35	4.39**	0.005	0.29
Right headline	1	3.98	1.37	3.42	1.58	4.98	1.20	4.58	1.30	31.0***	<0.001	0.173
	2	3.99	1.42	3.64	1.23	4.66	1.08	4.38	1.28	18.1***	<0.001	0.109

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 7. Experimental group's mean number of correct answers to the question "In which ideological group do you recognize yourself?"

		Right		Center		Left		Others				
	Wave	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	$F_{(3.83)}$	p	η^2
Left headline	1	4.22	1.33	5.13	1.21	3.44	1.27	3.66	1.52	5.41**	0.002	0.164
	2	4.13	1.28	5.25	1.44	4.39	1.05	4.94	1.18	3.10*	0.031	0.101
Right headline	1	3.85	1.72	3.54	1.25	5.28	1.20	4.06	1.54	7.45***	<0.001	0.212
	2	4.37	1.25	3.53	1.63	4.69	1.36	4.13	1.35	2.30	0.084	0.077

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 8. Control group: Post hoc analysis for pairwise comparison groups.

	Wave	Post hoc						Effect size					
		R vs. L	R vs. C	R vs. O	L vs. C	L vs. O	C vs. O	R vs. L	R vs. C	R vs. O	L vs. C	L vs. O	C vs. O
Left headline	1	<0.001*	1.000	0.268	<0.001*	0.092	0.020*	0.714	0.189	0.333	0.903	−0.381	0.522
	2	0.025*	1.000	0.845	0.018*	1.000	0.525	0.332	0.058	0.243	0.391	−0.089	0.302
Right headline	1	<0.001*	0.023*	0.042*	<0.001*	0.323	<0.001*	0.750	−0.412	−0.447	−1.162	0.303	−0.859
	2	<0.001*	0.198	0.272	<0.001*	0.660	0.002*	0.583	−0.302	−0.332	−0.885	0.251	−0.634
Neutral headline	1	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	0.081	0.049	0.053	0.131	−0.027	0.103
	2	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	0.116	−0.096	0.015	0.020	−0.132	−0.112

Notes: * indicates that $p < 0.001$; R stands for Right, L for Left, C for Center, and O for Others.

Table 9. Experimental group: Post-hoc analysis for pairwise comparison groups.

	Wave	Post hoc						Effect size					
		R vs. L	R vs. C	R vs. O	L vs. C	L vs. O	C vs. O	R vs. L	R vs. C	R vs. O	L vs. C	L vs. O	C vs. O
Left headline	1	0.194	0.352	1.000	0.002*	1.000	0.029*	0.581	0.683	0.422	1.264	−0.159	1.105
	2	1.000	0.061	0.246	0.200	0.780	1.000	−0.216	0.938	−0.676	0.721	−0.459	0.262
Right headline	1	0.002*	1.000	1.000	0.003*	0.034*	1.000	1.005	−0.215	−0.151	−1.220	0.854	−0.366
	2	1.000	0.560	1.000	0.081	1.000	1.000	−0.237	−0.604	0.179	−0.842	0.416	−0.426
Neutral headline	1	1.000	1.000	0.987	1.000	1.000	1.000	0.321	−0.269	0.456	0.052	0.134	0.187
	2	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	0.009	−0.196	0.237	−0.186	0.228	0.041

Notes: * indicates that $p < 0.001$; R stands for Right, L for Left, C for Center, and O for Others.

the headline has a bias opposite to their own, and, on the other hand, they tend to believe information that confirms their own beliefs more readily. It could be said that this is a confirmation bias (Watson, 1960) and at the same time a manifestation of the third-person bias.

The finding of a significant positive difference in the correctness of the truth/false assessment of the headlines between the two waves of the study and for both groups could lead us to think that the mere fact of having made them aware of this phenomenon through the questionnaire—whether they have participated in the training activity—already provides differences that cannot be attributed to chance. This result reinforces the idea of establishing and designing specific actions aimed at this audience. However, in the case of the control group, and in relation to political affiliation, the significant difference disappears for all ideological groups (Right, Left, Center, Other) in the second wave of the experimental group. Also during this second wave, right-wing participants significantly improve their accuracy in right-wing headlines (their "weak point"). All significant differences in the pairwise comparison also disappear. This is not the case in the control group, which allows us to infer that this difference is the result of the training received, which is in line with research pointing to media literacy's impact on reducing political polarization (Gaultney et al., 2022). This is reinforced by the fact that if the headline is neutral, there is no influence of the political affiliation variable, and both groups get it right more often.

Given the importance of emotions over objective knowledge in the current polarized ideological context,

it does seem relevant that media and digital literacy actions also consider the particularities of the target audience. Considering the recent interest in media and digital literacy actions aimed at this population segment (Ramírez García et al., 2017) and given their clear interest in news, this experimental study allows us to affirm the relevance of designing specific actions aimed at this population segment (Tucker et al., 2018). This study also confirms positive previous results of media literacy activities addressing this age group (Moore & Hancock, 2022).

This experiment gives hope to the role of digital and media literacy programs addressing senior citizens. In the case of Spain, using WhatsApp was perhaps detrimental to a higher involvement of the experimental group on the course content. Those designing similar initiatives in other countries should be aware of how this age group relates to different channels and platforms before choosing the most convenient one.

For the future, the results of our experiment invite us to explore whether media literacy measures have a comparatively more positive effect among older adults than the younger population. Since older citizens are more likely to vote, consume traditional media, and actively participate in politics, we can hypothesize that directing efforts to strengthen resilience against misinformation towards this segment of the population may have particularly beneficial effects on overall public trust recovery. However, this is a question that remains open for future studies. Among the limitations of this study is the fact that it included only part of this senior population, that is, those who owned a smartphone. Studies including the

whole age group will be necessary to get a more complete picture. Furthermore, the selection of WhatsApp as a channel for the training activity highlighted the need to adapt the media to their digital and media competence in the future.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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