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# Reporting EU Politics in News Venues: An Issue of Democratic Deficit?

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## Abstract

In a qualitative research design comprising 34 expert interviews and 18 focus groups from two distinct research projects, interviewees and participants discussed the status of EU reporting as well as its impact on and importance for the alleged democratic deficit of the EU. This article subsumes their views and attempts to answer the following questions: Can EU reporting positively influence European democracy? What are the obstacles and possibilities to strengthen EU reporting? The article first lays out the theoretical foundation of the impact of EU reporting and the role of the media in European democracy. Based on a qualitative analysis, it then shows the current perceived status of EU reporting in the media on local, national, and supranational levels. Lastly, the article illustrates possible examples and ideas to improve EU reporting—e.g., by demonstrating EU topics' concrete relevance for daily life.

## Keywords

communication; democracy; democratic deficit; European public sphere; European Union; interviews; (local) journalism; media

## 1. Introduction

To understand the politics of the EU, it is imperative to possess a comprehensive understanding of the arguments that are presented, the dynamics that govern decision-making, and the specific decisions that are made. Given that the majority of EU politics is conducted in Brussels, this information is more difficult to obtain than for local politics. Therefore, the media plays a pivotal role in disseminating information that is crucial for citizens to actively participate in the political processes and in forming a European public sphere (EPS). The media is found to be "central to any debate about a European public sphere" (Statham, 2010a,

p. 4), and the public communication happening in and through it is found to be "a sine qua non of a European public sphere" (Pfetsch & Heft, 2014, p. 31). Furthermore, studies show that the citizens' support for the EU can be affected by the media exposure in indirect or direct ways (Marquart et al., 2019, p. 642; Mendez et al., 2020, p. 1034) and that the reception of political news affects "opinions, attitudes and identifications in the EU" (Biel et al., 2023, p. 5). As the complexity and distance of EU affairs often render them inaccessible to citizens residing in member states, local newspapers assume a special role among the media outlets. They do not only represent the most significant source of political news, but also frequently solely execute a variety of other functions within their respective regions, including the dissemination of information, the formulation of public opinion, the expression of criticism, and the exercise of control (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2020, p. 474; Vonbun-Feldbauer et al., 2020, pp. 13–14).

Simultaneously, though, there is a standing consensus that the EU suffers from a democratic deficit (Føllesdal & Hix, 2006, pp. 534–537; John, 2013, p. 189). Intertwined with it is a publicity deficit. It exists because political decisions are made at the EU level, but little to no coverage is given to many of these decisions in the media (Gerhards, 2000, p. 292; Gerhards et al., 2009, p. 538; Rivas-de-Roca & García-Gordillo, 2022, p. 383; Rohrer, 2010, p. 69). Hereby, Risse (2010, pp. 15, 227) speaks of an "insulation of EU policymaking from mass politics and political mobilization." EU citizens are not sufficiently informed with regard to the processes occurring at the EU level and the decisions taken therein. The level of transparency is inadequate and information is often inaccessible. However, an EPS based on EU reporting, communication, and publicity is found to be a prerequisite for democracy in the EU and regarded as the basis of the EU's legitimacy (Benert & Pfetsch, 2022, p. 365), "providing a space where supranational institutions and their leaders can be made more transparent and accountable" (Nitoiu, 2013, p. 27).

Turning to research, most studies looking at EU reporting and an EPS are quantitative. Cross-sectional analyses that cover a wide range of topics and are limited in time and longitudinal or cross-sectional analyses that are restricted to specific topics dominate (Latzer & Saurwein, 2006, pp. 20–21; Machill et al., 2006; Peters & Wessler, 2006; van de Steeg, 2010). The participation and appropriation practices of the audience are rarely analyzed (Lingenberg, 2010, p. 118). Furthermore, regional news, explicitly included here, is mostly excluded from research (see Mendez et al., 2020, pp. 1034–1036). Overall, the available studies are very heterogeneous and therefore difficult to compare, sometimes even contradictory (Berkel, 2006, p. 25; Latzer & Saurwein, 2006, p. 21; Lingenberg, 2010, p. 106). This article, by including participants from eight countries and two distinct research projects, taking local newspapers into account—specifically through the integration of local journalists and actors in expert interviews—looking at individuals' perceptions and actions, and proceeding with a qualitative research design, tackles some of these shortcomings and adds new perspectives to research that has been ongoing for several decades. Following from there, this article seeks to address the following questions: Can EU reporting positively influence European democracy? What are the obstacles and possibilities to strengthen EU reporting?

This article first lays out briefly the theoretical foundation of the impact of EU reporting on and the role of the media in European democracy, which builds the background for the analysis. Based on a qualitative analysis of interviews and focus group discussions, it then shows the current perceived status of EU reporting in the media on local, national, and supranational levels. Lastly, the article illustrates possible examples and ideas to improve EU reporting that were highlighted by interviewees and participants.

## 2. Theoretical Considerations

In the literature, there is consensus that an EPS did not form or develop at the same time as economic and political integration of the EU (Gerhards, 1993, p. 99; Tobler, 2010, p. 11). But with each transfer of further competences to the EU level, its need for legitimacy, democracy, and publicity increases, and the democratic gap between national democracy and decisions at the EU level widens (Brüggemann, 2008, p. 24; Kantner, 2004, p. 65). A publicity deficit thus emerged as a "side-effect of European integration," as supranational decision-making was not accompanied by the parallel formation of transnational forums for the formation of European will and opinion (Conrad, 2014, p. 36). As stressed before, citizens are not sufficiently informed about EU policies and transnational debates on EU issues are lacking. However, authors such as de la Porte and van Dalen (2016, p. 280) stress that EU politics that have an impact on the national policymaking must "be part of the public debate in national media." And Splichal (2022, p. 204) points out that "the public, publicity, publicness, and the public sphere are essential for a collective self-understanding process and constitutive to democratically organized societies." It is imperative that EU citizens possess a comprehensive understanding of EU politics to participate effectively in supranational political processes and to make well-informed decisions, e.g., in European elections.

This article follows the liberal-representative approach to the formation of an EPS, which is based on systems theory (Luhmann, 1984, 1997, 2017), and liberal-representative theories of democracy (Ackerman, 1989; Berkel, 2006, p. 17; Latzer & Saurwein, 2006, p. 13; Rawls, 1993). Here, the public sphere (PS) forms an observation system accessible to all subsystems, whose most important goal is the creation of transparency (Berkel, 2006, p. 18; Lingenberg, 2010, p. 31). This transparency consists of a passive right to access information and an active obligation to make political information from institutions accessible (Rohrer, 2010, p. 71). Additionally, the public as an intermediary and communication system fulfils functions of information collection (input), processing (throughput), and application (output; Gerhards & Neidhardt, 1990, pp. 12–13; Schulz, 2011, p. 117). It thus contributes to the aforementioned transparency of EU affairs, enables validation and orientation, and has functions of control and legitimation (Berkel, 2006, p. 18; Lingenberg, 2010, p. 36; Seeliger & Sevignani, 2021, p. 12; Trenz, 2005, p. 191). Gerhards (1997, p. 11), therefore, describes the PS as a mirror of the communicated contributions of a pluralistic society. Mutual respect and the acceptance of the opinions of others are assumed in the discourse (Gerhards, 1997, p. 11). Public opinion is thus produced as a majority opinion through the aggregation of individual communications and not, as in the deliberative approach (see Habermas, 1990, 2006, 2022), through consensus or argumentation (Gerhards, 1997, pp. 11–12; Martinsen, 2009, p. 60; Schulz, 2011, p. 116). In sum, the EPS and Europeanization can help to bring EU issues out of the confined circle of policy-makers to the citizens, who are unable to participate directly in EU politics, mostly taking place in Brussels. They can then make informed choices and actively discuss and contribute to EU policies, which can be seen as contributing to the democratization of the EU. Trenz (2010, p. 28) highlights this by stating that Europeanization, contributing to an EPS, "is ultimately measured as the developing of a potential for integration. It is thus perceived as a principal positive, in some cases even a civilizing force in the sense of unifying european societies and enhancing their regulative and communicative capacities."

Researchers differentiate between a supranational EPS, vertical Europeanization between the national and European level, and horizontal Europeanization between member states (Koopmans & Erbe, 2004, p. 101). However, the existence of the first form is deemed as unlikely and not necessary because "the already

existing infrastructure of the existing national PS is sufficient for Europe-wide communication" (Habermas, 2014, p. 9; Koopmans & Statham, 2010, p. 36; Trenz, 2010, p. 18). Furthermore, there is a consensus that a singular EPS is only theoretically and normatively conceivable (Latzer & Saurwein, 2006, p. 11; Saxer, 2006, p. 62). The audience of supranational news media—e.g., Financial Times or Euronews—remains limited and attempts to build pan-European media have failed in the past (Antoniazzi & Bengesser, 2023, p. 371; Baisnée, 2007, p. 500). This leads to vertical and horizontal Europeanization that take place in national PS. There, the national media include more European topics and actors as well as other member states in their reporting. Therefore, the Europeanization of national PS can be understood as the discussion of the same themes "at the same time under similar criteria of relevance" (Eder & Kantner, 2000, p. 306; Koopmans & Erbe, 2004, p. 100). Whereby, following the mirror metaphor, the same criteria of relevance do not encompass a universally valid European perspective, but rather refer to mutual awareness and reciprocal observation (Risse, 2010, p. 117). In addition, three dimensions of Europeanization can be distinguished and operationalized for analysis: (a) the visibility of European actors, issues, and policies as issue salience; (b) the presence of European actors as speakers and audiences as the actor dimension; and (c) the use of "similar frames of reference" or claims-making across member states (Risse, 2014a, pp. 10–11, 2014b, pp. 152–153). An increase in Europeanization would result in a greater number of EU-related issues and actors being visible in local and national media, potentially leading to a more uniform framing of these issues across member states. This could have a positive impact on EU democracy by increasing transparency and a shared understanding of EU affairs, and by providing the information necessary for the functioning of and participating in democratic processes at the EU level, thereby alleviating the alleged democratic deficit.

In the context of the liberal-representative approach to the formation of an EPS, the mass media can be regarded as an "infrastructural requirement of EU democracy" (Trenz, 2008, p. 298). Huber (2012, p. 22) describes the fact that adequate reporting on European politics is essential for a functioning European democracy as "common sense." News about the EU should be available to an extent that provides EU citizens with the minimum amount of information necessary for democratic control (Trenz, 2008, p. 298). This is in line with the public service role of the media, which includes that they "devote time and space to the public policy agenda in order to reveal to political leaders and citizens the strengths and weaknesses of various policy proposals" (Graber et al., 1998, p. 3). Local newspapers can make EU decisions accessible and show their effects on one's own life on the ground (Liebetruth, 2012, p. 43). They can reduce the complexity of EU affairs and provide offers of factual and interactional as well as identity-forming orientation (Liebetruth, 2012, pp. 20–23). Such offers of local and EU-related orientation can arise through the local observation of EU actors (vertical Europeanization), the observation of actors from other EU member states from a local perspective (horizontal Europeanization), or a local discursive exchange with either of them (Liebetruth, 2012, pp. 24–27, 42–44).

While looking at the media, their "dual role" described by Koopmans and Statham (2010, p. 47) as an "institutionalized forum for carrying mediated politics resulting from collective actors' claim making and as a 'political actor' who advances positions in the public sphere" must be kept in mind.

## 3. Methods and Materials

Before delving deeper into the empirical section, the methods and materials will be explained. The qualitative analysis is based on data from two distinct research projects. First, 34 interviews of 45 to 90 minutes with

local journalists, EU correspondents based in Brussels, MEPs, and press officers of the EP, press officers from EUROPE DIRECTs (EDIC), which are information centers of the EU that are based in the member states and work closely with the European Commission, and representatives from civil society and national ministries are included. Those 34 interviews were conducted by the author between June 2022 and January 2023 in three countries (Germany, France, and Austria). The interviews were part of the author's PhD project, which has a specific focus on EU democracy and local newspapers. Second, the analysis also includes 18 focus groups of around 90 minutes with master and bachelor students in the field of European studies and/or political science, that were conducted between December 2021 and April 2024 in six countries (Slovenia, Germany, France, Croatia, Finland, and Bulgaria) by members, and as part, of the Jean Monnet Network "Debating Europe." Participants were selected among the students of the researchers in the project based on varying criteria and as part of research seminars. The goal of the focus groups was to explore sources of contemporary EU-criticism and to describe the character of the gap between EU elites and citizens. Regarding the case countries, Slovenia, Germany, France, Croatia, Finland, Bulgaria, and Austria, large and older as well as smaller and newer member states and countries from the North, West, South, and East of the EU were integrated. Furthermore, some of the participants were international students who were from outside Europe. This allows for the inclusion of various perspectives from Europe and beyond.

Both interviews and focus groups are based on lead questionnaires. The questionnaires for the interviews were handled flexibly and adapted to the position and profession, e.g., slightly different questions when speaking with an MEP than with a journalist. Whilst the focus groups used pictures for some of their questions, this was not part of the interviews. However, there are similarities in the questionnaires as questions about democracy, an EPS, transparency, the role of the media, and how to get information on EU topics were included in the interviews and in the focus groups. This means that they relate to one another insofar as the topics discussed were similar and many aspects overlap, although seen from different perspectives and individual positions. Therefore, they allow for comparison, complement, or contrast with one another and provide answers to similar questions. Regarding the analysis, the students represent the perspective of well-educated EU citizens who know not only the basic facts about the EU but, depending on their level of study (bachelor's or master's), possess knowledge of more detailed EU processes and actions. They can also be seen in a position as consumers of (local) news. In contrast, the interviewees can be regarded as EU communication experts, because it is their daily task and particular interest to communicate EU information. Doing so, they step into the role of producers of news, and they deliver the information that is necessary to inform about the EU. Taken together, interviewees and focus group participants contribute two different perspectives and provide answers from two points of view on the topic at hand. However, all participants and interviewees were generally pro-European, aware of and interested in the EU as they were either studying in the field of political science and/or European studies, working or volunteering, or personally interested in the EU.

The qualitative analysis was done using MAXQDA. The focus groups were first coded deductively and inductively by the project members in various rounds of coding. They constantly discussed the material and specified codes based on their readings of the material and theoretical as well as personal knowledge. This process ended with a detailed coding system that was then applied to all focus groups. However, the author applied parts of her own coding system, which was developed in the interview analysis during the PhD project, to the focus groups' transcripts to extract the necessary information. This coding system was developed deductively, inductively, and in various rounds to not overlook anything. For the interviews, the

coding done beforehand for the PhD project was sufficient. Applying the same coding system to all the available data enabled us to compare and synthesize along specific issues, e.g., transparency. In addition, regular talks and discussions of the findings among researchers working on analyzing the focus groups and the author were part of the process. However, it must be noted that the coding was subjective in both projects. The knowledge and perspectives, as well as the researcher's individual focus on specific topics, became naturally a part of the coding system. This means that the findings could have been slightly different if other researchers had done the coding. Still, the coding system was developed in such a way that it is comprehensible to and replicable for outsiders, and the various in-depth discussions of the researchers helped to not overlook important aspects and avoid too subjective interpretations.

For the analysis in Sections 4 through 7, the findings from the interviews and the focus groups were integrated. The statements below serve as examples of bigger themes or categories. They are extracted from the focus groups whenever students are speaking. All other actors were interviewed within the other project. The quotes used in this article were edited insofar as to make them understandable, e.g., by deleting "hm" or "äh." Quotes from interviews conducted in German or in French were translated by the author herself. Statements by focus group participants were translated into English by the Network members when conducted in a specific national language.

## 4. On Democracy and the Role of the Media

Proceeding with the empirical section, in the interviews and the focus groups, questions about the status of EU democracy or the EPS were asked. Answers and statements on these, which are connected to the role of the media, journalists, transparency, and the EPS, will be discussed in the following Sections 4 through 7 and connected to the theoretical considerations in Section 2.

On democracy, in the interviews, a volunteer from Germany (pos. 376–378) highlighted that the EU "must have a certain more direct link between the citizens and the Parliament." This hints at possible improvements of EU democracy by enabling vertical Europeanization and by reforming the EP. Such reforms have often been proposed, e.g., transnational lists for EP elections. They (pos. 400–402) stated that: "we will have to do something about European democracy," stressing that "the work of journalists would also be important here, so that people actually know: What is in the treaties? What is actually provided for? What is in the Parliament's decision?" Thereby pointing to the public service role and orientation function of (local) journalism that entails informing the citizen and explaining ongoing processes not only of local or national but also of European politics. An Austrian MEP (pos. 264–266) similarly pointed out that there is "a need for information," because "ultimately it's not just about the Member of the European Parliament trying to find out how I can be present in the media and how I have to make my statement." This hints again at an expected responsibility that journalists should take on and a certain level of information on EU affairs that should be available in the national and local news to enable factual and interactional orientation.

In the focus groups, the students discussed the status of EU democracy at length. By doing this, the important role of the media, the necessity to inform EU citizens, and a lack of transparency came up. A German student (2nd FG, pos. 231) explained: "democracy is a lot about being able to vote and if you have more information on the impact….Yes, if you know more about that, that will also improve democracy, in my opinion." This shows that the students connected voting to being informed, which does not directly point to the media or

any communication policy, but to the need for well-informed citizens to be able to be active in EU politics. The latter becomes explicit in Dahl's (1989) concept of "enlightened understanding," which highlights that citizens need to be properly informed to cast a vote (Gerhards, 2000, p. 287, 2002, p. 3). Similarly, a student from France (1st FG, pos. 111) found it necessary "to inform people more about what the European Union is." They explained that such better information could lead to higher interest in EU elections that usually have a lower turnout than national elections: "When we understand what the European Union is, when we are informed about what it does, we are aware that there is an election and then we want to take part in it."

Another student from France (3rd FG, pos. 107) directly referred to the role of the media as a fourth estate. The student advanced that "the media have a lot of work to do," because there is a "distancing between the citizen and the EU institutions" which they regarded as being connected to not enough "reporting on what is actually being said, and not necessarily on what the EU says about itself but on what other players might say about the EU." This statement hints at a perception that the media is not reporting critically enough and should include different perspectives in its EU reporting. Such a responsibility is stressed by Schulz (2011, p. 44), who finds that critique and control of political power belong to the media's tasks. In this regard, local media, especially, has been the subject of considerable criticism for its perceived lack of critical scrutiny and its tendency to passively reproduce press material (Kretzschmar et al., 2009, pp. 82–115).

Furthermore, a Croatian student (3rd FG, pos. 103) raised the question about the freedom of the press and the communication and information systems in the member states by referring to "the availability of information" and to the possibility to speak freely. A look at the ranking of press freedom for 180 countries, which is found to have deteriorated significantly in 2025, in a global comparison, shows that, among the case countries, Finland is best off on fifth position, which means that it is in a good position regarding the protection of free journalism by the state, authorities, and laws. Germany (11th), France (25th), Austria (22nd), and Slovenia (33rd) are in positions that are still described as satisfactory. However, problems are visible in these countries, e.g., increasing verbal abuse, threats, insults, or fear of physical violence, as well as decreasing media diversity. Meanwhile, Croatia is ranked 60th and Bulgaria 70th, which means there are recognizable problems, e.g., danger of prosecution or intimidation for journalists in Croatia (Free Press Unlimited, 2025; Reporter ohne Grenzen, 2024, 2025). Altogether, journalists in the case countries work mostly independently and freely, but various problems can complicate or even hinder critical and investigative reporting.

## 5. No European Public Sphere

Asked about the existence of an EPS in the interviews, a German correspondent (II, pos. 34) answered that it "is not possible at the moment." Similarly, a German press officer (pos. 264) spoke about a "fragmented, non-existent" EPS. Such a segmented EPS has been a finding of certain studies, such as from Peters and Wessler (2006, p. 141), or Sifft et al. (2007, pp. 148–150), and Kleinen von Königslöw (2012, p. 458) and seems to persist until today. The press officer of a German EDIC (I, pos. 160–162) said: "The European public in so far as it is truly cross-border, probably not. Or only to a very small extent," thereby stressing the low level of horizontal Europeanization across member states that becomes visible in local newspapers, e.g., when they report on neighboring boarder regions in other member states. A French press officer (pos. 278–282), who was unsure about the existence of an EPS today, argued:

> I think, despite the world being more and more open, we having fewer boundaries, and we can reach out to anybody at any time, I'm not sure that the mentalities are that open. I think people are more and more, I mean in France, closing in on themselves.

This hints at a general perception that nationalism and individualism are on the rise worldwide. In contrast, a French journalist (pos. 42) was convinced "that there is a European political space." But he narrowed down: "Political, that is, at the level of politics. It hasn't yet completely descended to the level of the citizen, but there is already a European political space in effect. This is obviously very important." This perception of an elite PS was seen by a German press officer (pos. 270–276), too, but only connected to the English language:

> There are, of course, these English-language media or Twitter conversations in such a political bubble, which is definitely European. The different interests and people are there, but it's limited to English. And then on TV and radio, it's very dependent on the national language. It exists much less there.

Likewise, studies show that an (elite) EPS forms around specific topics, such as football (Biel et al., 2023) or economics (Hubé et al., 2016), among MEPs and a European political elite on Twitter (Tuñón-Navarro & Carral-Vilar, 2021, pp. 145–146), among political elites in general (Koopmans, 2007), or among readers of a specific medium, such as the Financial Times (Corcoran & Fahy, 2009). A transnational EPS, however, is found to be highly unlikely, as previously explained.

In the focus groups, an EPS was only mentioned once explicitly. However, this one mention is quite similar to the statements made in the interviews. A French student (3rd FG, pos. 107) argued that "there is no European public space being created," which results in there being "no awareness of what Europe is doing for us when there is no communication about it." Local newspapers could contribute to this specifically by showing the local impact of EU politics and explaining which areas of citizens' daily life are directly affected by the EU, thereby enhancing vertical Europeanization.

## 6. The Current Perceived Status of EU Reporting

Looking at how interviewees and focus group participants saw the status of EU reporting, three findings stand out particularly and will be discussed here: The EU reporting was perceived as being not much, as being too negative, and EU topics were found to be too complex and complicated to understand.

### *6.1. Not Much*

"Europe plays no role at all in these local sections," the press officer of a German MEP (I, pos. 284) advanced about local newspapers specifically. A feeling that was mirrored by most of the other interviewees for local and national media. For example, a German volunteer (pos. 244–248) complained about missing EU reporting, stating that "people don't realize what's happening." And a press officer in Brussels (II, pos. 250–252) explained that when the EP was talking about the increased cost of living, "a lot of media they refused to report about that [increased cost of living], because they saw no interest for their readers or their news." This missing interest of the reader was acknowledged by the journalists, too. "Not relevant are many processes in the European Parliament. I think it's always very difficult to get that into the newspapers," stated a German correspondent (I, pos. 22–24), who found the EP to be "the big loser of the perception"

(I, pos. 36–38) and spoke about the perceived lack of interest and the resulting lack of reporting. Such a marginalization and underrepresentation of parliaments and parliamentary actors, such as the EP and MEPs, in media coverage has been confirmed in various studies (Marschall, 2009, pp. 216–217; Trenz, 2004, pp. 300–301). Furthermore, empirical studies find that EU reporting is dominated by national political and economic actors, while civil society is underrepresented, which further contributes to the elite-perception of EU politics (Adam & Pfetsch, 2009; Grande & Kriesi, 2016; Koopmans, 2007, 2010; Koopmans et al., 2007; Liebert, 2012; Statham, 2007, 2010b; Statham & Trenz, 2013).

Among the focus group participants, a Croatian student (2nd FG, pos. 49) found the citizens not to be "aware of the way in which decisions are made, nor how they are made." Another student pointed out that "the EU citizens should be, like better informed about what the EU are doing" (Finland, 3rd FG, pos. 362–364), thereby hinting at a lack of information on EU politics in the media in general. This was likewise done by a German student (2nd FG, pos. 130), who stated that the EU "would be more transparent if the citizens feel more included in the decision making." Thereby, as already shown in Section 4, connecting the need for information to transparency and citizens' active participation in EU politics. This was similarly stressed by a student from France (2nd FG, pos. 109): "We don't know, and many people don't necessarily know, what is going on, and what's more, we don't know how it's happening, and we don't know how to intervene in it." A Finnish student (1st FG, pos. 383) complained that they would like to know more about the processes: "How did we get there? How did the discussions look between the different countries, between the different representatives, who said what? Who came up with this? How did we reach this goal?" Altogether, these statements show that the students' interests in EU politics and details of decision-making on the supranational level are high, while at the same time they lack access to information on the EU. Some of the interviewees, who worked on EU topics voluntarily, stressed similarly that the citizens have a high interest in EU politics. However, this is in contrast to the journalists interviewed, who perceived a generally low interest in EU politics among their readers, which shows a gap between the perceptions of the different actors in this analysis.

Furthermore, a German student (1st FG, pos. 66) found that "the focus is not so much on the European level, not in the media coverage." And a French student (3rd FG, pos. 88) added that "the debate in the media remains very much in the national sphere," both hinting at national glasses. Such a focus on national issues could, on the one side, lead to a risk of distortions in the reader's perception of the EU, but, on the other side, facilitate EU news and make them easier to understand, e.g., when adding a local point of view in local newspapers (Liebetruth, 2012, pp. 68–71; Plavec, 2020, p. 19).

### *6.2. Too Negative*

In the interviews, it was often mentioned that Brussels serves as a scapegoat. A press officer from Brussels (I, pos. 146–150) explained that "when there is something that is not so popular in the country, they [the politicians] are going to say: 'This comes from Europe!' " This points to politicians concealing that they participated in EU decisions themselves while portraying the EU as the only responsible party. Such scapegoating could affect the EU's image negatively. The blaming of unpopular decisions on the EU by national politicians has been described as ultimately undermining EU legitimacy (de Wilde, 2023, p. 239; Plavec, 2020, p. 25). The leader of a German EDIC (pos. 144) had the impression that "there is really an EU bashing." That this feeling is also shared in editorial teams was pointed out by a German journalist

(II, pos. 244–246) who explained: "When it's negative, it's actually more noticeable. So, the EU is a bureaucracy monster and that doesn't just affect the readership, but the EU doesn't always have the best image in the editorial team either." In this sense, interviewees highlighted that negative stories often work better than positive ones. For example, a public institution officer from Germany (pos. 38–40) advanced that: "You have to try to get someone interested and the experience is simply that they are not particularly interested in such positive stories." This was similarly supported by a German MEP (pos. 351–353) who mentioned the phrases "Good news are no news" and "Bad news are good news" and added that often people will be known better through scandals than through their political work. This is supported by findings from Boomgaarden et al. (2013, p. 623) and Galpin and Trenz (2018, p. 155), who find that often reporting on the EU happens more when there is disagreement, negativity, or scandals.

Likewise, the focus group participants criticized the overwhelmingly negative reporting. For example, a Bulgarian student (2nd FG, pos. 125) stated: "What reaches you through the information channels that you are used to are actually only negatives, and this transparency is being used in some way that is not beneficial for the EU." Similarly, a German student (2nd FG, pos. 60) criticized that "a lot of things you hear in the news are just always bad and you don't really think about that it's nice to have the EU." A French student (2nd FG, pos. 106) pointed to the abovementioned scapegoat issue, finding that the media is unable to convince the public "that Brussels is something other than a scapegoat that will make sure that you have less food in your fridge at the end of the month." This was similarly addressed by a Bulgarian student (2nd FG, pos. 125) who claimed that "all that reaches you about the EU is the rather negative stuff. You don't know what benefits there would be from it."

All these statements and perceptions are related to the news factor "negativity" and the negativity bias, which studies have shown to be influential and present in the media (Mendez et al., 2020, p. 1038). However, if there is only negative coverage, it can affect the image and perception of the EU. It appears only as a scapegoat, while its achievements and positive aspects remain invisible. In general, reporting should be critical, questioning, and explanatory of decision-making, but it should not exclusively focus on negative aspects of EU politics.

### *6.3. Too Complicated*

Among the interviewees, the EU, EU politics, and decision-making were seen as complex, complicated, and difficult to understand. The EU was described as a "very complex machine" by a German press officer (pos. 60). A French press officer (pos. 306–308) said that: "the European affairs are said to be complicated, and few journalists have the background and the trainings necessary to understand everything." This shows that it is not only the readers but also the journalists themselves who have problems in understanding EU affairs. Such a high level of complexity of EU policy is at odds with the logic of the media (Balčytienė & Vinciūnienė, 2010, pp. 146–148; Nesti & Valentini, 2010, p. 401), making EU coverage more difficult. Journalists would have to take more time to learn about the EU to report accurately and explain details. However, time is a limited factor, especially in local journalism.

Looking at the readers, a German journalist (III, pos. 112–114) said: "I bet that most of my readers are not familiar with the legislative process in the European Union, i.e., this interplay between Council, Commission and Parliament." And a German correspondent (II, pos. 304) recommended that "complex topics are presented in an understandable way," but pointed out that "for that you simply have to pay the price of

brutal simplification." Such simplification could lead to lost detail, distorted, and oversimplified reporting. Likewise, an Austrian correspondent (pos. 88–96) explained that: "often the basic knowledge about the functioning of the European institutions is worse than the basic knowledge about the functioning of the national political institutions." This suggests that, compared to national or local reporting, EU reporting cannot take as much knowledge for granted and therefore needs to be approached differently, including more explanations and clarifications.

The students in the focus groups similarly highlighted the high complexity and their own difficulties in understanding EU politics and decision-making. The students stated that even though they were studying EU subjects, they had problems understanding the complex processes of EU decision making: "I've studied this for the past two years, and it doesn't get easier, the more you learn, it just doesn't get easier. And it gets more and more confusing" (Bulgaria, 3rd FG, pos. 77). Likewise, a Finish student (1st FG, pos. 261–263) advanced: "I mean, we've been studying this, and I cannot say I still understand it completely." Education and the provision of more accessible knowledge about EU affairs seem even more important when even students in the field are unable to fully understand the EU's decision-making and European policy.

## 7. Two Ideas to Improve EU Reporting

At various points in the interviews and during the focus group discussions, possible solutions, recommendations, or suggestions were mentioned that could improve EU reporting and, in consequence, lead to a better-informed public and more EU democracy. Two of them will be explained in more detail below.

### *7.1. Facilitate Access*

The facilitation of access to EU information for citizens was mentioned by various actors in the interviews. A German volunteer (pos. 70) explained that they had worked together with journalists previously in the way "that a journalist thought about the questions, I answered them myself in writing beforehand and then we shortened it down together." This helped to facilitate access and ended up getting more EU stories into the articles. It is connected to the lack of time and resources that prevails, especially in local journalism, and often hinders detailed EU reporting. A German correspondent (II, pos. 96–100) had the idea to create a glossary online "so that readers can perhaps refer back to it if they are interested, in order to understand more of this complexity," which would then make it easier for them to understand EU news. Such glossaries already exist, but are often not directly linked to the articles or not linked to the newspaper websites at all. The importance of a "low threshold" in EU reporting to reduce complexity, as mentioned in Section 6.3, was highlighted by a public institution officer in Germany (pos. 242). An Austrian head of unit (II, pos. 49–51) stressed that "if you don't prepare it for them in a bite-sized format, then there's nothing there," which similarly points to the need for short pieces of information that are quick and easy to understand, conveying information without the need for extensive background knowledge.

"I would love for maybe once a day or once a week you could have like a special segment for EU news," said a Finish student (3rd FG, pos. 396) and a French student (2nd FG, pos. 80) proposed an insert "on public service television, at prime time, for five minutes" that explains in detail how the EU works. Both students suggested proposals for a special format for EU news in the media. Such formats already exist, but they are not usually

broadcast as part of the main news on television, but rather as a niche offering. Another student from France (1st FG, pos. 399) proposed a "European Union section" in the daily news. Some local newspapers have such a page dedicated to the EU, while others include the EU in their (international) politics pages. A Croatian student (2nd FG, pos. 39) spoke about Hrvatska radiotelevizija (HRT), where "the EU has a minute in the morning which gives out the most important story of the day." And a French student (2nd FG, pos. 81) spoke of "programs specializing in European issues, such as 'L'Europe dans le monde' or 'Une semaine dans l'UE' " to learn more about the EU. They also mentioned "Toute l'Europe," which they found "incredible, the way they do newsletters with daily press reviews. There, we can have access to the different opinions, the small differences, which I think is cool." Such programs, websites, or newsletters could be used as a model for other local or national media. Furthermore, a Finnish student (1st FG, pos. 405–410) suggested installing a "media platform that's somehow independent of the EU" that would lead to more transparency, "so that you know as an EU citizen how you can affect things if you want to." The EU has two such websites that facilitate direct participation: the first, What Europe Does for Me (https://what-europe-does-for-me.europarl.europa.eu), shows the concrete impact of EU politics; the second, Have Your Say (https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say_en), is a public portal for consultations and feedback. However, it appears that these channels are not widely known among EU citizens.

As most of the students used social media as their main source of information, this can be seen as a possible way to inform, especially younger citizens, with ease. A Bulgarian student (2nd FG, pos. 246) pointed to the need for short and concrete information on social media: "[Y]ou need a very quick presentation of the information." And a German student (1st FG, pos. 181) found similarly: "There should be a directness and the goal to be communicated immediately. Not with many words, but to the point, straightforward." This was also highlighted by another German student (2nd FG, pos. 72) who found that we should be "bringing the terminology in the words we use back to the basics, so the people understand it." All in line with the general request to reduce complexity and lower the threshold of EU reporting. One Finish student (2nd FG, pos. 139) mentioned the use of ads on Instagram with which "the EU is definitely trying to educate maybe younger audience through social media," but criticized that "it's too superficial, and it's also very much biased because it only comes from the EU talking about itself." Using memes was another suggestion made by Bulgarian and Croatian students (Bulgaria, 2nd FG, pos. 71; Croatia, 3rd FG, pos. 33) who argued that memes would leave "some impression that works on a subconscious level much stronger than reading a 400-page regulation."

### *7.2. Demonstrate Concrete Relevance*

To demonstrate the concrete relevance of an EU topic to the citizens was considered particularly important. A hook to arouse interest was seen as necessary to convey EU news, especially in local newspapers. A German journalist (III, pos. 453) stressed: "But that means, of course, that we [journalists] have all the more responsibility and duty to make things…as interesting as possible." They underlined, referring to the topic of the harmonization of phone chargers, which likely affects everyone to a certain extent, that they assumed "that the more concretely the EU is perceived by people, the greater the interest" (III, pos. 457). A French press officer (pos. 160–162) pointed out: "I mean, usually it has to be obvious. If it's not obvious, it won't work, you know?" They explained: "Always finding a hook within the national interest/inside the national country where you're trying to sell your information," stressing that the journalist will ask: "Why are we concerned? Why are my readers, my viewers, my listeners concerned about this?" (French press officer, pos. 330–334). Such a focus on issues of concrete relevance can be found in some studies on regional news,

which "tend to focus on content that has a regional significance and impact on the everyday lives of readers" (Mendez et al., 2020, p. 1037). Liebetruth (2012, pp. 38–40) finds the local impact to be a prerequisite for EU reporting in local news, as topics must appear relevant to the readers. Vetters (2007, pp. 364–368) stresses, too, that regional newspapers take greater account of local and regional aspects and make use of local relevance. Hook and relevance, therefore, appear to be crucial factors for local coverage of EU affairs.

A student from Germany (2nd FG, pos. 144) highlighted that "it's like super important to bring to the people what the benefits of the European Union are," explaining that many "don't have any connection points with the European Union it's like so far away somewhere in Brussels." This refers to the in Section 6.2 mentioned positive coverage. It also underscores the need to dispel the misconception of Brussels as an isolated entity, emphasizing its tangible impact on citizens. Likewise, a Bulgarian student (1st FG, pos. 112) pointed out that "things should be presented more clearly and in a way that is both understood but also engaging. That is to say, both to explain what is being done and why it is important to me."

## 8. Conclusion

It can be concluded that EU reporting can positively influence European democracy under certain conditions. Interviewees and students pointed to the role and responsibility of the media and journalists in conveying information on EU politics and actors in their reporting. As in the liberal-representative approach, more information and more EU reporting were connected to a better-informed citizenship, more knowledge on EU politics, and higher turnout in European elections. However, they did miss the existence of an EPS, except for smaller elite PS confined to the English language and a specific public. The present findings are consistent with earlier research in this field, indicating that the development of an EPS has not advanced significantly in recent years, but rather persists at a low, relatively stable level.

Looking further at the obstacles and possibilities to strengthen EU reporting, first, the perception of there being too little EU reporting was highlighted. This goes along with a high complexity and a negativity bias that hinder understanding and do not necessarily provide a good impression of the EU. Readers' interest, however, was controversially perceived as either present or almost absent. Interviewees and focus group participants had various ideas to strengthen the EU reporting, two of which were to facilitate access and demonstrate the concrete relevance of a specific EU topic. This could be done, for example, by using new formats, by reducing complexity and explaining more details of EU decision-making, by showing local relevance and impact, or by linking European issues to local concerns in local newspapers. Local newspapers could play a leading role here, as they are usually closer to their readers and can break down big EU issues more locally, showing the specific local impact of EU policies on the daily lives of their readers.

Furthermore, social media is by now used extensively in election campaigns and was underlined to be the most used source for news by an overwhelming majority of focus group participants. Studies focusing on platforms, such as Twitter/X, showed that social media is mostly used to disseminate information during campaigns (Rivas-de-Roca & García-Gordillo, 2022, p. 385). Social media is less mediated, the journalist's role as gatekeepers is less important, and, therefore, allows for participation of more citizens and promotion of transnational networking (Benert & Pfetsch, 2022, p. 367). Finding out how journalists and the media could make use of social media to strengthen the EPS would make an interesting field of future research.

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