

ESTUDIOS

The volume provides a cohesive summary of the MEDIATIZED EU research and findings overall to readers unfamiliar with the project or interested in comparative research on Europeanization drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship and perspectives. It is composed of nine chapters, including a theoretical framework chapter, seven country case study chapters and a conclusion chapter. Country case study chapters offer deeper dives into particular national contexts, while applying a coherent analytical approach that allows for comparison and contrast. The concluding chapter synthesizes key findings from country case studies to advance a comparative analysis of the key discourses on Europeanization and their perceptions across national contexts. It reviews the similarities and differences in how pragmatic and identity factors shape media representations, elite discourses and public perceptions of the European Union. It also offers recommendations for key policy interventions informed by the research in light of the key EU strategic priorities.

Overall, the edited volume offers a comprehensive summary of the project's key research outputs and findings, and signals its significance and impact for scholarly, policy making and governance stakeholders. The edited volume is aimed at readers familiar with the overall domain of European studies and EU integration literature, but highlights the project's groundbreaking methodological innovations and theoretical contributions showcasing how the project research moves beyond the state-of-the-art of existing scholarship.

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MEDIATIZED DISCOURSES ON EUROPEANIZATION
AND THEIR REPRESENTATIONS IN PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS

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LIA TSULADZE
TETYANA LOKOT
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Preface and acknowledgements

The MEDIATIZED EU project was funded under the Horizon 2020 program "SOCIAL CHALLENGES – Europe in A Changing World – Inclusive, Innovative and Reflective Societies", which aims to foster a greater understanding of Europe, provide solutions and support inclusive, innovative and reflective European societies in a context of unprecedented transformations and growing global interdependencies. Addressing the transformation of European media landscapes and Europeanization, our research draws on regional, national and European data to analyze transformations of the European media landscape from the turn of the 21st century to the current day. In this context, MEDIATIZED EU examines the patterns of construction, dissemination and consumption of media representations and narratives on major European political and cultural issues, markers, symbols and identity elements.

The many challenges and crises facing Europe today call for more complex comparative analyses that go beyond national borders to develop a foundation upon which national and European contexts can be better understood. This requires interventions that unfold the potential of shared ideas for the European future to create new synergies and shared understandings, while also acknowledging the heterogeneity of Member States and the diversity in culture, regions and socio-economic settings as a European strength.

This edited volume is the culmination of our efforts to address these challenges over the four years of the project's lifetime. Illuminating the role of contemporary media in fostering or hampering political and cultural Europeanization and societal cohesion through re-shaping European political and cultural representations and public opinion, our insights equip policymakers with cutting-edge knowledge about the impact of the changing media landscape on European politics and on the Europeanization project. Our research findings also contribute to developing Europeanization strategies that foster settings in which European, national and ethnic identities can coexist and be mutually enriching, while building a stronger Europe as a global protector of

democracy and human rights and as a champion of the European way of life on the global stage.

The MEDIATIZED EU project team is deeply grateful to the European Research Executive Agency for its support and guidance during the project lifetime. We would also like to acknowledge the engagement and support of all the partner institutions involved in the project, including Center for Social Sciences, Georgia; Budapesti Corvinus Egyetem (Corvinus University Budapest), Hungary; Centro de Estudos Sociais (Center for Social Sciences), University of Coimbra, Portugal; Dublin City University, Ireland; European Neighbourhood Council, Belgium; Tallinna Tehnikaülikool (TalTech), Estonia; and Universitas Nebriensis SA (University of Nebrija), Spain. Finally, we would like to record our appreciation and gratitude to all of our research participants whose time and ideas contributed to the success of our research project.

Chapter 1

Theoretical Framework and Research Design

LIA TSULADZE

SUMARIO: 1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK. 1.1. *The mediatization of politics*. 1.2. *Research aim & objectives*. 1.3. *A discourse analytical approach to the mediatized EU politics*. 1.4. *The CDA approach to the study of Europeanization*. 2. RESEARCH DESIGN. 2.1. *Media analysis*. 2.2. *In-depth interviews integrating Q Methodology*. 2.3. *Population survey*. REFERENCES. APPENDIX 1. APPENDIX 2.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1. THE MEDIATIZATION OF POLITICS

A key concept in understanding the role of the media in the transformation of contemporary societies is "mediatization", which refers to the process of social change whereby the influence of media on all aspects of social life has significantly increased (Stromback and Esser 2014). Indeed, as Hjarvard notes, *mediatization* is "the process whereby society to an increasing degree is submitted to, or becomes dependent on, the media and their logic" (2008, 113). The author defines the *media logic* as "the ways in which the media distribute material and symbolic resources, and operate with the help of formal and informal rules" (Hjarvard 2013, 17).

One of the areas in which mediatization becomes especially notable today is the *mediatization of politics*. The latter represents "a long-term process through which the importance of the media and their spill-over effects on political processes, institutions, organizations and actors have increased" (Stromback and Esser 2014, 6). The mediatization of politics is believed to have a profound impact on modern politics through reshaping

"the fabric of politics" (Axford 2001, 3) and transforming political communication in its entirety (Negrine and Papathanassopoulos 2011). Moreover, it is suggested that the contemporary media are decisive in the promotion of reflexive modernity, which signifies the end of "real" politics (Axford 2001, 9). Scholars argue that in recent years "media democracy" has been developing across Europe and beyond, "in which the individual, media-savvy performance of politics seems to become more important than the political process" (Wodak 2021, 15). Besides, as powerful culture industries enter the scene, politics is increasingly "conditioned by the demands of image making and breaking, of product placement, niche marketing and the routine use of negative research" (Axford 2001, 8). Moog and Sluyter-Beltrao (2001) claim that in such conditions news coverage has become increasingly negative/cynical in its representation of politics, while also ushering in remarkable public alienation from both political processes and media.

From the perspective of the mediatization of politics the media that matter most are *news media*. These are television, radio, newspapers and news magazines in their traditional or digital formats. Building on the definition of media logic, Stromback and Esser (2014) identify three main dimensions of *news media logic*: professionalism, commercialism and media technology. *Professionalism* implies the differentiation of journalism as an occupation from other social institutions, which accounts for its autonomy from outside influences, its practicing of a particular set of norms and values, and its claim to serve the public interest. *Commercialism* refers to the media as commercial organizations that have a significant impact on the processes of news selection, production and presentation. Finally, *media technology* refers to how the communication technologies shape the processes of news production and presentation (Stromback and Esser 2014, 17-18). The mediatization of each dimension happens to a different extent: The media can be more or less autonomous from political institutions, more or less commercialized, more or less guided by media logic as opposed to political logic with variations across different media and different countries (*ibid*, 7). Although political institutions and actors might try to exert their influence over various media, in order to be successful they have to anticipate possible media actions and reactions. A key concept in understanding this process is *self-mediatization* (Meyer, 2002), which "captures the process through which political actors have internalized and adapted to the media's attention rules, production routines and selection criteria – that is, news media logic – and try to exploit this knowledge to reach different strategic goals" (*ibid*, 21). Self-mediatization might trigger what Asp calls a *spiral of mediatization* (Asp in Stromback and Esser 2014,

22), which implies that political institutions and actors can influence and manipulate the media though the main tool for such influence and manipulation is the internalization of media logic itself.

Based on the above understanding, news media logic is employed through the media's attention rules, production routines, and selection criteria. In other words, news media logic is performed via *priming* (that is, making a consideration salient), *framing* (that is, connecting a particular consideration to a political object) and *cueing* (that is, instilling a bias) (Hooghe and Marks 2005, 13). These strategies are implemented via various discursive tools, and hence it is essential to focus on the discursive use of media and scrutinize the "discoursal nature of media power" (Fairclough 1995, 3). According to Fairclough, media power is expressed through three main media outputs: *Representations, identities, and relations*. The author notes that media discourse is "simultaneously representing, setting up identities, and setting up relations" (*ibid*, 5), and is a powerful means of constructing a particular reality as well as particular identities with respective relations. This is relevant in any political context as "discourse serves to explain political events, to legitimate political actions, to develop political identities, to reshape and/or reinterpret political history and, all in all, to frame the national political discussion" (Schmidt and Radaelli 2004, 202).

Considering the abovementioned, a *Discourse Analytical Approach* is recognized as a useful tool for studying mediatized political communication in general, and that related to the EU and Europeanization in particular (Ekstrom and Firmstone 2017). In this context, discourse is defined as a set of ideas and as an interactive process through which these ideas are disseminated (Schmidt and Radaelli 2004), thus a rather inclusive understanding of discourse is applied. In order to empirically analyze EU-related discourses, scholars suggest combining various methods of analysis such as content analysis (press, TV programs, statements of interest group leaders and other influential actors in the media, etc.), semi-structured interviews with politicians and policy experts, and the bottom-up approach to Europeanization, that is, analyzing the public's responses through public opinion surveys (*ibid*, 205-206).

1.2. RESEARCH AIM & OBJECTIVES

Adopting the Discourse Analytical Approach, we consider the representations of the European project and Europeanization in various media in wider Europe, including the so-called Old and New European countries, as well as those of Eastern Partnership. The seven target countries

for MEDIATIZED EU include Belgium, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Ireland, Portugal and Spain. In particular, we investigate how the media discourses are constructed to foster or hamper the European project and how they resonate among the population. We examine this issue in a longitudinal perspective through focusing on the transformations of the European media landscape and their impact on the Europeanization discourses from the turn of the 21st century to the present day.

Thus, the **aim** of MEDIATIZED EU is to study the discourses of the traditional and new media on the European project and Europeanization as well as their representations in public opinion, focusing on the role of the media as a mediator between elites and citizens.

Scholarly literature identifies two main approaches to European integration and Europeanization: *rationalist institutionalism* and *constructivist or sociological institutionalism* (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2002). The former makes the basis of the *rational utilitarian or pragmatic* framework that focuses on the local actors' assessment of the gains and losses stemming from the country's Europeanization such as the strengthening of democratic institutions (including protection of human rights), the reinforcement of security and the economic benefits of the free trade area vis-à-vis certain political or economic drawbacks. Meanwhile, the latter makes the basis of the *value-based* or *identity* framework that focuses on the shared identity and cultural factors, in particular, the ascribed and achieved aspects of national and supranational attachment (Toshkov *et al.* 2014). Later the third approach of *discursive institutionalism* was introduced that focuses on how policy issues are constructed and interpreted by various actors, and how these visions and interpretations shape their preferences (Schmidt and Radaelli 2004). This approach becomes essential when dealing with the political actors' representations of the European project and their attempts to legitimize it in the eyes of citizens through discourses on pragmatic and identity considerations, as well as the citizens' responses to the elites' messages and their perceptions of the abovementioned considerations. Furthermore, this approach enables us to focus on the discursive "usage" (Jacquot and Woll 2003) of Europeanization by the local media, which act as a mediator between elites and citizens, and contribute to the shaping of respective public attitudes.

We integrate all three approaches in our research studying the representations of the pragmatic and identity factors in the Europeanization discourses by focusing on the elite-media-public triangle. Thus, the research **objectives** are as follows:

1. To study the framing of the pragmatic and identity factors related to Europeanization in the media and its representations in public opinion;
2. To explore the role of political and media elites in the media framing of the pragmatic and identity factors related to Europeanization;
3. To trace the interconnections between the political and media elites' discourses, EU framing, and public opinion.

In order to achieve the above aim and objectives, we use a mixed-methods approach integrating qualitative, quantitative and deliberative research designs. The research design consists of the following components: *Desk research* focusing on available knowledge about the changing media landscapes and their influence on the Europeanization discourses since the EU's Eastern enlargement; *media analysis* focusing on the quantitative and qualitative content analysis and critical discourse analysis of the traditional and new media outlets; *in-depth interviews integrating Q Methodology* with political and media elites (thus uniting qualitative and quantitative methods); and *public opinion surveys* with citizens residing in the seven target countries. Finally, *deliberative discussions* provide us with the opportunity to reflect on the research findings and obtain immediate feedback from the public.

One of the main assets of the project is the selection of target countries, which includes diverse parts of wider Europe: Belgium where the EU headquarters are seated, the Northern part represented by Ireland, the Southern part represented by Spain and Portugal, the countries of Eastern Enlargement represented by Hungary and Estonia, and an EaP country represented by Georgia. In this way, we aim to explore media discourses on the EU and Europeanization and their representations in the public opinion within the EU and beyond it, thus tracing the role of media in (re)shaping European political and cultural representations as well as in fostering or hampering the European project.

1.3. A DISCOURSE ANALYTICAL APPROACH TO THE MEDIATIZED EU POLITICS

As noted above, we adopt a discourse analytical approach to study the representations of the EU and Europeanization in the context of the elite-media-population triangle. However, it should be noted that this approach does not imply a single direction but unites several directions with specific features and a number of common characteristics. Five main analytical

directions are identified within the discourse analytical approach: Frame analysis, critical discourse analysis (CDA), the governance school, discursive institutionalism (DI), and the Copenhagen school (Lynggaard 2019, 6).

Originating from Erving Goffman's theory (1974), frame analysis looks at the context clues that establish a frame for us to interpret and react to what is going on. It is based on the premise that the way an issue is presented/framed to the audience influences the choices people make about how to process this information. Using Goffman's theory for the analysis of the interrelation between the media and politics, framing is described as "the process by which a communication source, such as a news organization, defines and constructs a political issue or public controversy" (Nelson, Oxley, & Clawson 1997, 221). Such a construction has a profound impact on the perception of the news, as the audience is told not only what to think about (agenda-setting) but also how to think about this issue (framing). Although this approach is not explicitly formulated as a discursive one, it still offers a useful tool to deconstruct various discursive frames. If we apply this approach to the study of EU-related topics, it will focus on "the study of the role of knowledge and expertise in EU politics, political communication, public opinion, or broader meaning systems variously conceptualized as policy frames, paradigms (Hall 1993), belief systems (Sabatier 1998) or narratives (Patterson and Monroe 1998)" (Lynggaard 2019, 8).

The CDA approach originates from Michel Foucault's ideas and its main focus is on how discourse is constructed and how those behind these constructions exercise control over public opinion. As Foucault puts it in his "Politics and the Study of Discourse" (1991), it is crucial to know not only what is said but also who makes the decisions of what should be said. Through controlling what is said the decision-makers also control public knowledge, and through controlling access to particular knowledge they also control what people think and how they act. Thus, discourse is a powerful tool to structure and control human thinking and action, and because of this, it is necessarily political. CDA employs a comprehensive approach looking not only at texts as the products of discourse but also at discursive practices, that is, the processes of text production and text consumption, as well as sociocultural practices, that is, the wider social and cultural context in which the communication takes place (Fairclough 1995, 57). If we apply this approach to the study of Europeanization, it will focus on media discourse (Fairclough, van Dijk, etc.) and its role in the formation of the European public sphere (Ekstrom and Firmstone, Coleman and Ross, etc.), European and national political identities (Wodak, Krzyzanowski,

etc.), the everyday practices of EU institutions and actors (Wodak, Coleman and Firmstone, etc.) and so on.

The governance school closely linked to the CDA approach studies EU governance based on discourse analysis and is often inspired by Foucault or Habermas. As Lynggaard notes, "[t]hose highlighting the structural side of discourse, or 'the power of discourse,' in EU governance tend to be inspired by Foucault, while studies emphasizing discursive agency, or 'the power in discourse', in EU governing tend to lean towards Habermas" (2019, 7). However, it is also common to encounter a mixture of the discursive structure and agency approaches. The governance school focuses on the discursive construction of Europeanization, that is, the impact of European integration on national policies and practices, as well as on how the EU and the Europeanization process are discursively legitimized. In this context, the use of pragmatic and identity considerations for the legitimization or delegitimization purposes plays a particularly important role.

DI can be considered a continuation of the governance school. Based on the title of discursive institutionalism, it connects discourse analysis and institutional research; in particular, it focuses on the role of ideas and discourse in their institutional context and their political consequences. According to Lynggaard, "[i]deas concern the substance of discourse, whereas discourse conveys and transforms ideas, making discourse a key mechanism of political change. DI thus emphasizes the transformative power of discourse as essential in understanding the politics of change" (*ibid*, 9). When applied to the study of EU politics, this approach focuses on discourse as a tool for triggering or hindering political reforms, as an instrument for political elites to justify certain policy choices, as well as a means to capture public perceptions about EU policies and their impact on the national ones.

Finally, the Copenhagen school focuses on how the perceptions of the nation and the state relate to the concepts of Europe and how these perceptions shape the EU member states' policies towards European integration. This approach originates from international relations and security studies, and its main argument is that domestic perceptions of the nation and the state are projected into national EU policies and the views about the prospects of European integration (*ibid*, 6).

Our research aims to integrate the elements of the abovementioned discourse analytical approaches. However, the main emphasis will be on CDA with some elements of frame analysis in order to look at how media

discourses about the EU and Europeanization are framed and how they contribute to the construction of a particular reality, that is, whether they aim at reproducing or challenging the status quo, thus exploring the transformative power of discourse that is also the focus of the DI approach. In this context, the governance school approach will also be integrated to reveal how particular discourses are used by the media, elites and citizens for the legitimization or delegitimization of the European project and Europeanization, and what role the pragmatic and identity factors play in this process. We are less interested in the Copenhagen school approach that is specific to international relations and security studies, and focuses on the discursive aspects of shaping the EU member states' policies towards European integration.

1.4. THE CDA APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF EUROPEANIZATION

As noted above, our main approach to the study of the representations of the EU and Europeanization in the context of the elite-media-population triangle is CDA that originates from Michel Foucault's ideas. Foucault focuses on the specific conditions of producing political discourses, as well as their relations with the past and contemporary discursive and non-discursive events. For this purpose, he provides a framework for analysis that consists of "the set of rules which at a given period and for a given society define the limits and forms of" the *sayable, conservation, memory, reactivation, and appropriation* (1991, 59-60). If we contextualize these five aspects of producing and spreading discourses within the Europeanization framework and especially with regard to our project objectives, we have to address the following major questions:

1. Sayable – what discourses on the EU and Europeanization are dominant? What pragmatic and identity considerations are highlighted in these discourses and what is the role of the media in framing these issues?
2. Conservation – which discourses related to the EU and Europeanization have remained prevalent over time or disappeared from the media, political and public rhetoric? How have the representations of pragmatic and identity factors been manipulated in these discourses?
3. Memory – which discourses have been recognized as valid and invalid or even foreign and by which actors? What is the role of pragmatic and identity factors in depicting certain discourses as invalid or foreign?

4. Reactivation – which past discourses have persisted and what transformations (if any) have they undergone, especially in terms of representing pragmatic and identity considerations?
5. Appropriation – which actors/groups have competed to maintain their control over these discourses, especially in terms of depicting identity and pragmatic considerations?

The Foucauldian model once again confirms that discourse is a powerful means of constructing a political reality, in our case the EU's political reality. Indeed, some scholars consider the move from the cultural definition of a European identity to its sociological and political construction as one of the key shifts of the present times (Ifversen 2002). This sociological construction of the European identity and more generally of the European project is exactly what authors mean when focusing on the "usage of European integration" and especially its discursive usage (Jacquot and Woll 2003). Based on the above considerations, a theoretical framework for the analysis of EU discourses and their role in the construction of the European project and the European identity has been developed.

The first major point in this framework is "to investigate the formation of different constructions and images of Europe" (Wodak and Weiss 2005, 128), that is, how Europe is invented (Delanty 1995). As Wodak and Weiss underline, there are various "regional, local, national and European identities, which are constantly re-negotiated and co-constructed by different elites and social groups" (2005, 128). The second point that can be derived from the first one is that these negotiations of identities are context-dependent and discursively co-constructed through various interactions. In this process, one of the key factors influencing the construction of identities is hierarchical and institutional power (*ibid*). Thus, asymmetrical power relations among the EU states and beyond them play an important role in the (re-)negotiation and (re-)construction of the European project and the European identity. The third point is that "new public spaces, media, and communication technologies have changed the basic rules for discourses by shaping the space-time-structures" (*ibid*, 129). The question that is necessarily asked in this context is: "Who uses these public spaces, who is included, who is excluded?" (*ibid*, 129). The fourth point is based on the idea of diversity vs. standardization: Although many political activities are controlled at the local, regional and national levels, major policy decisions are still made by the centralized institutions in the EU's headquarters (*ibid*).

Wodak and Weiss argue that the listed dimensions are used for legitimizing the political construction of the EU and Europeanization with the main forms of legitimization resonating with the respective dimensions: "*Legitimization through idea* (identity, history, culture); *Legitimization through procedure* (participation, democracy, efficiency), and *Legitimization through 'standardization'* (of social standards, economic standards)" (*ibid*, 131). The dimension of *inclusion and exclusion* as the major principle of group demarcation is relevant in the case of all three legitimization strategies. To connect these forms of legitimization to the EU-related pragmatic and identity factors that represent the main focus of our project, the first form of legitimization that refers to the idea of Europe and focuses on the identity and cultural dimensions fosters the value-based or identity approach to the EU, while the other two forms legitimize/delegitimize the EU based on the rational utilitarian or pragmatic views that have to do with democratic, economic and other outcomes stemming from Europeanization.

Based on the abovementioned framework, Wodak and Weiss offer three main perspectives – historical, communication, and participation and representation – towards the discursive analysis of the European project and the European identity, which are closely interrelated to the Foucauldian five-dimensional model. Each perspective is accompanied by the respective questions, as in the case of the Foucauldian model. The *historical perspective* searches into "[w]hat historical Europe-concepts underlie the national discourses? And how are the concepts and images [...] reproduced in modern fields of discourse (political speeches, media discourses, everyday discourses)?" (2005, 132). To contextualize this historical perspective within the Foucauldian model, it addresses the limits and forms of *sayable, conservation and reactivation*. To further scrutinize it in the context of our project aim and objectives, it inquires what images of the EU are offered by the media and how the media discourses resonate with the political and popular ones. The *communication perspective* asks the following questions: "How are the respective images of Europe transmitted or communicated inter-culturally and multi-modally?" What is the role of elites, the media (traditional and new), and the public in constructing and transmitting these images? "How and which new public spaces are created by these new media?" (*ibid*). This perspective resonates with the Foucauldian limits and forms of *appropriation* focusing on various actors' agency in constructing and maintaining control over particular discourses. As for our project aim and objectives, the inter-cultural (seven target countries) and multi-modal (the elite-media-public triangle as well as the traditional and new media) perspectives are integrated. Besides, by addressing how new public spaces are created by the media we also look at how the media contribute to the

abovementioned dimension of inclusion and exclusion, especially in relation to the European identity. The *participation and representation perspective* is interested in the implications of the images of Europe/the EU projected through national discourses for the questions of political legitimization at the supranational level. In this way, it attempts to respond to the question of how the discursive relationship of "*identity-legitimization-representation*" is understood beyond the nation-state (*ibid*). Indeed, it is argued that the search for the EU's political legitimacy entails a search for a redefinition of a European (institutional) identity (Krzyzanowski 2005, 138). This perspective resonates with the Foucauldian limits and forms of *memory* focusing on the labelling of certain discourses as valid or invalid for the purpose of their legitimization or delegitimization. As clear from the abovementioned aim and objectives, the project focuses on how the European identity, the European project and Europeanization are legitimized or delegitimized through the media-elite-public discourses.

Wodak and Weiss's ideas closely resonate with those of van Leeuwen, who also underlines the role of discourse in legitimizing certain practices and lists four categories of legitimization that he believes are especially relevant in the present conditions: 1. *Authorization* is legitimization by reference to the authority of tradition, custom or persons who are attributed a certain kind of authority; 2. *Moral evaluation* implies legitimization by reference to certain (often quite vague) value systems; 3. *Rationalization* is legitimization by reference to certain goals and an institutionalized social action to achieve them; and 4. *Mythopoesis* is legitimization "through narratives whose outcomes reward legitimate actions and punish non-legitimate actions" (2008, 106). If we contextualize these four categories of legitimization within the Europeanization research, it is obvious that the first two categories legitimize certain EU-related practices based on identity considerations, while the last two legitimize them based on pragmatic considerations. This once again confirms that the identity and pragmatic considerations are discursively used for the legitimization or delegitimization of the EU and Europeanization, and as noted above, they can serve as a means of manipulation by the media, elites, and various social groups.

When it comes to the issues of legitimization and identity politics, the study of myths and emotions related to the EU is considered essential. In this context, two types of myths are identified: "foundational myths" and "functional myths" (Della Sala in Lynggaard 2019, 116). The first type is used to explain the feelings of solidarity and public support for common political institutions. Due to the fact that Europe lacks the territorial and cultural unity, the presence of foundational myths in the EU is questioned. Instead,

it is believed that the EU's legitimacy and the idea of European identity rely on functional myths that, in contrast to foundational myths about, say, "the birth of the nation", relate to policy ideas, political events and actors. It is argued that "a political myth is discourse in the sense that it is made up by collective understandings of causal relationships, the roles of involved actors and links between events in an area of politics", and it works only if it is emotionally appealing to the members of a particular society (Lynggaard 2019, 117). Thus, in order to better understand the discursive legitimization of the European project and identity politics, it is inevitably necessary to explore the role of myths and emotions in the construction of various images of the EU, as well as in the different actors' perceptions of identity and pragmatic considerations.

No doubt, the media is one of the most influential tools for constructing and disseminating these myths and respective emotions and by doing so, fostering particular images of the EU. The media can do this via deciding "what to include and what to exclude, and what to 'foreground' and what to 'background'" (Fairclough 1995, 4). This is exactly what Fairclough means when he talks about the "discoursal nature of media power" (*ibid*, 3) and focuses on how media language might work ideologically. The author notes that "the ideological work of media language includes particular ways of representing the world" (say, certain representations of the EU and Europeanization), "particular constructions of social identities" (say, certain representations of EU officials who feature on radio or TV programs), "and particular constructions of social relations" (*ibid*, 12) (say, certain representations of relations between politicians and citizens in the course of implementing EU reforms). Through these representations the media foster particular images of the EU and Europeanization and invoke respective emotions among the audience. In this process, foregrounding and backgrounding are used as a means of manipulation via overstressing certain images or concealing others. Hence, we deal with the "normative use" or "creative use" of media discourse (*ibid*, 60) – the former contributing to the reproduction of the status quo, and the latter contributing to its transformation.

Despite such an important role of media power, the media does not only affect but is also affected by power relations – both political and economic – within a society. Thus, political and commercial pressures on the media might have a significant impact on how certain political and economic issues are framed, and hence how certain reality is represented. As Fairclough notes, because of the mobilizing power and the ideological potential of the media, "[t]he state does have an interest in controlling media output" (*ibid*, 45). Furthermore, "[m]edia texts and programmes are [...] symbolic, cultural

commodities, produced in what is effectively a culture industry, which circulate for profit within a market, and they are very much open to the effects of commercial pressures" (*ibid*, 42). These two aspects – the politics of media and the economics of media – have a substantial influence on whether media discourse is used in a normative or creative way, as well as on what themes and issues are foregrounded or backgrounded by the media. Another important aspect the politics and economics of media influence is "choice relations" (though it is not about actors' free choices as the selection among alternatives is socially conditioned) vis-à-vis "chain relations", that is, what communicative events "are chained together" and "how earlier texts in the chain are embedded in later ones" (*ibid*, 64-65). The former has to do with what discourses (in our case, the ones about the EU and Europeanization) are represented by various actors (elites, media, citizens) and how they are interrelated, as well as how diverse they are. If we refer to the Foucauldian framework, this aspect matches with the forms and limits of *sayable*, *memory* and *appropriation*. The latter has to do with how the present discourses are related to the past ones and what transformations they have undergone over time. Again, referring to the Foucauldian framework, this aspect matches with the forms and limits of *conservation* and *reactivation*. In order to empirically explore these questions, Fairclough considers necessary "to specify the repertoire of voices, discourses and genres within the order of mediatised political discourse, the relationships of choice and alternation within each of these repertoires, and how particular voices, discourses and genres are articulated together in different types of media output" (*ibid*, 185). For this purpose, the author introduces his three-dimensional model with the following elements: *text*, *interaction*, and *social context*. In order to capture a holistic picture, he analyzes the intersections of these three elements via focusing on the *description* of text, the *interpretation* of the interrelation between text and interaction, and the *explanation* of the interrelation between interaction and social context (Fairclough 2015, 128-176).

Thus, Fairclough's CDA framework is very useful for the empirical analysis of media discourses, from the simple level of utterance to the wider context and intertextual analysis, as well as for the exploration of how media language works ideologically. As noted above, the concept of ideology is inseparable from that of manipulation, and both represent key notions in Teun van Dijk's socio-political discourse analysis (2001). According to van Dijk, manipulation is used in an attempt to persuade others. At the cognitive level, manipulation is used as a means of controlling others' thinking, while at the discursive level, manipulation implies various forms of ideological discourse. Therefore, discourse should be analyzed as a means of rhetorical performance of a certain ideology. Based on this assumption, van Dijk

develops an *ideology schema* that organizes the beliefs of an ideology and consists of the following major categories (2013, 178):

- Identity: Who are we? Who belongs to us? Who is a member and who can join?
- Activities: What do we (have to) do? What is our role in society?
- Goals: What is the goal of our activities?
- Norms and values: What are the norms of our activities? What is good or bad for us?
- Group relations: Who are our friends and our enemies?
- Resources: What material or symbolic resources form the basis of our (lack of) power and our position in society?

If we contextualize the above ideology schema within the Europeanization research, we should focus on the concept of European identity underlined in Wodak and Weiss's framework (2005) along with the European norms and standards and respective implementation activities aiming at Europeanizing the EU's member and aspirant states. As noted by the abovementioned authors, one of the key factors influencing the construction of identities is hierarchical and institutional power; therefore, it is essential to focus on how the power asymmetry among the EU member states and beyond influences group relations of inclusion and exclusion, as well as who are perceived as friends and enemies. No doubt, all of these aspects have a considerable impact on the constructions and images of the EU. Thus, an ideology schema can offer particular representations of the European project with respective social identities and social relations.

Furthermore, ideological discourse is socially situated, that is, embedded in the social, political and institutional context, which can be made explicit when ideologies are used by political parties or mass media. Therefore, analyzing media discourse, especially news stories, is a useful means of deconstructing any ideology schema. As van Dijk notes, "[i]deologically news implicitly promotes the dominant beliefs and opinions of elite groups in society". This happens through the *perlocutionary or persuasive dimension* of news, that is, "the formulation of meanings in such a way that they are not merely understood but also accepted as the truth or at least as a possible truth" (1988, 83). This is what Fairclough calls the politics of media. Besides the perlocutionary dimension, one more aspect that is important for the selection of news items, their framing and their outreach is *news values*, which are often "formulated in the economic terms

of news production in different market systems and within profit-oriented organizations" (*ibid*, 119). This is what Fairclough calls the economics of media. Thus, the politics and economics of media play a key role in the construction of media discourses (making it necessary to study the impact of political and economic elites on media discourses) and as noted in the introductory part, are themselves governed by the media logic that results in the spiral of mediatization. On their side, elites and media jointly contribute to the construction of public views, and hence it is necessary to focus on the elite-media-public triangle while analyzing the mediatized discourses about the EU and Europeanization.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN

In order to achieve the project's aim and objectives, we have used a mixed-methods approach integrating qualitative and quantitative research. As we focus on the media-elite-public triangle, our empirical research consists of the following three stages:

- Quantitative and qualitative content analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA) of traditional and new media outlets;
- In-depth interviews integrating Q methodology with political and media elites;
- Nationwide representative surveys with the population.

Each of these stages are explained in detail in the following sections.

2.1. MEDIA ANALYSIS

The media analysis phase lasted from July 2021 to March 2022, and between 6-8 selected media outlets were analyzed per country.

As media outlets that are considered more credible and enjoy higher popularity have more power to influence the audience's perspectives on political issues, the most popular outlets based on their readership and ratings were selected with both Euro-optimistic and Euro-critical, or, where relevant, with pro-European and anti-European rhetoric. We analyzed the EU framing offered by these outlets regarding the pragmatic and identity factors related to Europeanization, their reflections on the future prospects of the European project, and their discursive maneuverings to promote or hinder a certain agenda. We analyzed both traditional media (TV programs/talk shows on EU-related topics and newspapers covering respective issues) and new/online media (items on EU-related issues in digital media outlets).

Based on the Foucauldian theoretical framework, we looked at how the traditional and new media define and construct the European project and Europeanization, what discourses are offered by the media (agenda-setting) and how these discourses are constructed (framing). We analyzed both overt and latent discourses offered by the selected media outlets to identify the context clues that establish certain frames and detect their dependency on respective political practice. We also looked at how these frames are utilized for different purposes by diverse media outlets and how they could be deconstructed through the analysis of the limits and forms of *sayable*, *conservation*, *memory*, *reactivation* and *appropriation*.

The common criterion for the media selection is their popularity. The most popular media in all the target countries are television and online media. The consumption of radio has considerably fallen all around the EU and this trend is even more visible in the case of printed press (European Commission 2019). It should be stressed that the consumption of radio and printed press has been traditionally quite low in Georgia. However, it should also be emphasized that since the rise of digitalization of media and growing internet use by media consumers, most traditional media outlets (especially printed press) have also created online platforms in all the target countries, where the majority of audiences access their online versions. Another crucial aspect is the popularity of particular media outlets within both traditional and online media. The question is what makes certain TV channels or online newspapers/magazines more appealing to audiences than others? Alongside general criteria such as consumption rates (access/views by audience) and ownership (public vs. private), there are certain culture-specific aspects that are of crucial importance. These include the availability of the media outlet in different languages (in the case of Belgium and Estonia), the role of ideological divisions (such as, for instance, right/left in the case of Spain and Portugal or liberal/conservative in the case of Estonia and Georgia), and a strong division between pro-governmental and pro-oppositional media (in the case of Georgia and Hungary). Therefore, while adopting certain common criteria (in particular, popularity and ownership) as the key media selection principle, each target country also based its media sampling on local specificity.

In the case of TV channels, primetime news programs and major political talk shows were selected, while ideological divisions or Euro-optimistic and Euro-critical sentiments were considered crucial in the case of selecting printed/online newspapers. Special keywords were used to quickly locate relevant information in each country's sample, such as 'European Union', 'European Parliament', 'European Commission', 'European market', 'EU budget', 'EU aid', 'EU standards', 'EU regulations',

'European integration', 'European Neighborhood Policy', 'Eastern Partnership', 'Association Agreement', 'DCFTA', 'visa-free movement', 'migration', 'seasonal workers', 'LGBTQ', 'human rights', 'European identity', 'national identity', 'populism', 'Euro-optimism', 'Euro-scepticism', 'misinformation', 'disinformation', etc. The materials from selected media outlets were analyzed using quantitative and qualitative content analyses and CDA.

Quantitative content analysis focused on the occurrence and frequency of the used words/terms/concepts, which provided an initial insight into the data. It allowed for considerable reduction of a large amount of data to a smaller subset of organized segments, simplifying the subsequent qualitative content analysis. The data collected from the target media outlets were coded via the following stages:

- Developing a coding frame related to the theoretical framework;
- Testing and updating the coding frame in the process of data collection;
- Coding the selected texts and creating a data file for analysis;
- Creating a codebook that explains the following aspects: 1. The specifics of the coding frame; 2. The frequency of the revealed codes; and 3. The reliability of the coding process.

The basic codebook consisted of the following items:

Type of media	Name of media outlet	Date of production	Unit of analysis	Theme	Actor	Pro-European/Euro-optimistic discourse	Anti-European/Euro-critical discourse

Quantitative content analysis was followed by the qualitative stage that focused on thematic analysis of the coded texts. The latter aimed to show how the target media outlets set a particular agenda. Furthermore, CDA was performed to reveal the framing of the agenda set by the selected media outlets. We followed the CDA approaches developed by Fairclough (2015), Wodak (2021), and van Dijk (2013), and ultimately, contextualized the analyzed data within the Foucauldian framework.

2.2. IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS INTEGRATING Q METHODOLOGY

Media analysis was followed by in-depth interviews with political and media elites that took place from autumn 2022 to spring 2023. We interviewed 25 representatives of political elite (MPs, governing and oppositional parties) selected based on purposive sampling (so that they represented the most popular political parties in each country) and 25 representatives of media/media business elite (owners, editors and journalists of influential media outlets) selected based on positional sampling. In the course of in-depth interviews Q methodology was integrated. Despite its quantitative focus, Q methodology is typically used with rather small samples allowing a deeper analysis of individual cases (McKeown & Thomas 2013). In the course of research, the participants are provided with pre-formulated statements that should be placed on a Q grid based on the respondents' perception of their importance/unimportance and concurrently their agreement/disagreement to them. A limited number of cells on a Q grid forces the respondents to select the most prioritized statements, while the least prioritized ones are left for the neutral category.

Q methodology implies four stages of data analysis: correlation analysis, factor analysis, factor rotation, and calculation of factor scores (Z-scores). Based on correlation analysis, consensus-dissensus is measured between two categories of variables assessed on the scale from +1 to -1. A strong positive correlation, say, +0.70 means that the respondents who have a high score on one variable also have a high score on another variable; while a strong negative correlation, say, -0.70 means that those who have a high score on one variable have a low score on another variable. As a result, a correlation matrix involving all Q columns (Q sorts) is developed that shows similarities and differences between the respondents' views. At the next stage, the major factors are identified in the abovementioned matrix and all the factors whose value is above 1 are selected for factor rotation upon which the most important factors are grouped to enable a better interpretation. Finally, the factor scores are measured showing the value of each statement within each factor, as well as the consensus-dissensus among the factors (Watts & Stenner 2014). The Ken-Q Analysis online software is used for the data analysis¹.

As Q statements are derived from the previous research that suggests the discourses for further testing and analysis, each country team identified the most dominant discourses related to the European project based on the former stage of media analysis. Both the most widespread common statements across country contexts and country-specific ones widely

1. <https://shawnbanasick.github.io/ken-q-analysis-beta/index.html#section1>

circulated in local contexts were selected. The discourses focusing mainly on pragmatic and identity factors were transformed into Q statements (25-26 statements per country). The respondents identified the most important statements they highly agreed/disagreed with and provided explanations regarding their choices, which generated follow-up open-ended questions during the in-depth interviews.

Existing research shows that, despite their divergent prioritization, major pragmatic and identity factors are common among the EU's so-called old member states and the countries of Eastern enlargement (Tsuladze 2023). Therefore, even if their formulations did not match, the contents of major pragmatic and identity factors considerably overlapped. We traced both the importance of various pragmatic and identity factors in shaping the respondents' views towards the European project and the consensus-dissensus among different respondents, which provided the opportunity for comparative analysis. Ultimately, we revealed the interconnections between the political and media elites' views and the media discourses.

The sample Q grid for 25 statements and the list of Q statements for each country case are presented in Appendix 1.

2.3. POPULATION SURVEY

The nationwide representative surveys were conducted in the seven target countries in July-August 2023². 1,000 or more respondents were sampled per country (7000 or more in total). The sample was representative of the 18+ adult population based on age, sex, region, and settlement type. Multistage cluster sampling was applied consisting of the following stages: At the first stage, primary sampling units were randomly selected based on regional administrative units, followed by the stratified selection of settlements within regions based on urban-rural divisions proportional to the size of population. In the case of CAPI, households/addresses were selected randomly from the population register and in each household one individual was sampled using the Kish grid (in a few cases CATI was used and phone numbers were randomly sampled).

The survey was conducted using a questionnaire encompassing core and optional questions. The core questions focused on the consumption of various media outlets, trust in domestic and EU institutions, knowledge

2. The nationwide surveys were conducted by public opinion research centers as follows: Red C Research (Ireland); CRRC Georgia (Georgia); Analysis and Research (Ael) (Spain); Turu-uuringute AS (Estonia); Equação Lógica (Portugal); Dedicated (Belgium); and TÁRKI (Hungary).

about EU-related questions, perceptions of political elites' polarization on EU-related values, views on the benefits stemming from the EU, support of further EU integration, etc. In addition, respondents were asked to rank the statements about the pragmatic and identity considerations related to the EU, which resulted from the media analysis and interviews with political and media elites. The final section of the questionnaire consisted of socio-demographic data. The core questionnaire is presented in Appendix 2, though it is important to note that each country used a country-specific version of the questionnaire with a number of optional questions added³.

The survey data were analyzed using univariate, bivariate and multivariate analyses (frequencies, crosstabulations, regression analysis, principle components analysis).

The synthesized findings from the various research stages in each target country case are presented in the following chapters of this volume, followed by a final chapter summarizing the key comparative conclusions and policy implications from our research.

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3. Full country-specific questionnaires with both core and optional questions can be found in the project's Open Research Data Pilot survey dataset at <https://zenodo.org/records/14552176>

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APPENDIX 1

A sample Q Grid for 25 Q statements [In the case of countries with 26 statements, an additional cell was added to the neutral category]

Q Grid

Please, place the statements on the scale below according to the following principle: place those statements that you agree with in the "+" category and put those you disagree with in the "-" category. At the same time, please rank them according to their relevance, marking with "+3" those that are most important to you and you strongly agree with and marking with "-3" those that are most important to you but you strongly disagree with. The statements that cannot be placed within any of "+" or "-" categories, will be automatically displayed in "0" category that points to their relatively neutral meaning. Please, put the number of the respective statement in each graph.

[illegible]

The list of county-specific Q statements (seven countries)

Belgium

1. *The EU provides safety to Europe through collective defence.*
2. *The EU and NATO are collectively more effective against Russian aggression.*
3. *The EU provides more cost efficiency through collective defence.*
4. *The EU negotiates with Russia and others more effectively together, including heavy-weights like France.*
5. *The EU is effective in protecting its borders and avoiding Belarussian and Russian weaponization of migration.*
6. *The EU better secures gas and other prices caused by the war in Ukraine than its individual member states.*

7. The EU is more effective and tackles more issues with a shared budget than its individual member states.

8. The EU has reinforced its support of vulnerable parts of Europe to avoid disasters, socio-economic hardships, and other issues that can spill over elsewhere.

9. The EU is quite effective in countering its internal threats (COVID-19, economic crisis, etc.).

10. The EU is quite effective in countering its external threats (conflicts, cyber threats, etc.).

11. The EU actively supports human rights and democracy not only within but also beyond the union.

12. The EU, as a collective actor, does not put enough effort in overcoming the health crisis.

13. The EU/Frontex does not respect human rights and pushes back migrants at border in Belarus.

14. The EU and NATO are expanding in Eastern Europe, which has caused the escalation in Ukraine.

15. The EU is implementing totalitarian and top-down vaccination regulations that restrict freedom of speech and liberty.

16. The EU should not enlarge further, since it will cost more and risk threats of corruption and organized crime.

17. The EU's efforts against Russia in Ukraine risk leading to the European instability and war.

18. The EU's efforts against Russia in Ukraine risk leading to higher gas prices and other consumer prices for Europeans.

19. The EU's efforts for a bigger budget unfairly punish saving economies and reward economies that spend too much.

20. The EU is exemplary in collectively supporting fellow Ukrainian refugees.

21. The EU shows true solidarity in supporting its fellow Europeans' budgets.

22. The EU has a moral and historical/cultural responsibility to act in Ukraine.

23. The EU will support Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova to join the EU, because they are culturally European/family.

24. *The EU erodes its members states' sovereignty.*

25. *The EU erodes its member states' cultural values.*

Estonia

1. *The EU has been quite effective in taking measures against the COVID-19 pandemic.*

2. *The EU actively supports the protection of human rights in Estonia.*

3. *The EU effectively contributes to solving the migration crisis in Belarus.*

4. *The EU is a security guarantor for its member states against Russian threats.*

5. *Estonian products are highly competitive on the European market.*

6. *Estonia knows better than the EU what reforms should be implemented and laws adopted within the country.*

7. *Free movement across borders encourages crime in the EU.*

8. *The EU's green turn strategy is unlikely to succeed.*

9. *The EU does not support its border countries in dealing with refugees/migrants.*

10. *EU regulations serve the interests of the so-called old European countries.*

11. *EU membership damages Estonia's economy.*

12. *Estonian legislation is too much influenced by the EU.*

13. *EU membership is a guarantee of Estonia's territorial integrity.*

14. *EU regulations are necessary for the further modernization of Estonia.*

15. *The Estonian government accepts EU policies uncritically.*

16. *EU sanctions against Russia help to ease the crisis in Ukraine.*

17. *For Estonian politicians it is beneficial to self-present as pro-European.*

18. *European liberal values threaten Estonian national values.*

19. *The EU threatens the sovereignty of European countries.*

20. *The EU spreads the values that are a source of moral degradation.*

21. *The Soviet occupation has distanced Estonia from Europe to such an extent that it still needs to recover from its effects.*

22. *Christianity is the major feature defining Estonians' European identity.*

23. *The EU's support of LGBTQ rights threaten the Estonian identity.*

24. *The EU matters, because we are part of the common European identity.*

25. *Models of Hungary and Poland offer some alternative for Estonia to follow.*

Georgia

1. *The government deviates from the European course.*

2. *The opposition deviates from the European course.*

3. *Deviation from the European course goes against the state interests.*

4. *Russia attempts to make Georgia turn its back on the EU.*

5. *If Georgia deviates from the European course, it will inevitably end up under the Russian influence.*

6. *The EU is guided by double standards in relation to Georgia.*

7. *The EU supports human rights protection in Georgia.*

8. *The EU endorses Georgia's democracy by supporting the proportional electoral system and judicial reform.*

9. *The EU is Georgia's safeguard against Russian threats.*

10. *European integration is a guarantee of Georgia's territorial unity.*

11. *Georgia needs to implement the EU's 'painful' reforms in order to modernize.*

12. *If the reforms are not implemented, the EU will not further financially support Georgia.*

13. *The 'Associated Trio' jointly aspires for European integration.*

14. *After implementing EU reforms, Georgia will ultimately become a EU member state.*

15. *Georgia is in the process of becoming a European state in terms of improvement of its democracy.*

16. *Georgia is politically polarized and the EU is a key actor helping the country to overcome this polarization.*

17. *The EU uses its financial support to maintain its influence in Georgia.*

18. *Georgia does not need the EU's financial support because of the country's economic growth.*

19. *The EU intrudes in Georgia's internal affairs.*

20. *The majority of Georgian politicians stage a pro-European performance.*

21. *Euro-Atlantic integration is a choice of the Georgian people.*

22. *Georgia as a Christian country is a member of the European family.*

23. *Georgia is in the process of becoming a European state in terms of its citizens' "mental Europeanization".*

24. *European liberal values represent a threat to Georgian values.*

25. *Through supporting LGBTQ rights, the EU threatens Georgian family traditions.*

Hungary

1. *HUXIT should never be on the agenda under any conditions.*

2. *Hungary's economy is performing better than those of other EU countries.*

3. *Member states should be allowed to proceed in the integration process at their own pace according to their best interest.*

4. *Only the EU and NATO ensures Hungary's security in the current context of war.*

5. *The current EU policies threaten the energy security of the Hungarian households.*

6. *During the COVID-19 pandemic the Hungarian epidemic management performed better than that of most EU-countries.*

7. *The EU is the best guarantee for preserving democracy, human rights and the rule of law in each member state.*

8. *The EU should not intervene in any minority issues – including gender, race and sexual orientation – in the member states.*

9. *The EU should stand up against authoritarian tendencies in each member state, irrespective of economic interests of national or international actors.*

10. *Hungary betrays the fundamental values of the EU.*

11. *The EU is effective in countering Russian and Chinese disinformation in each member state.*

12. *During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Hungarian opening to the East proved to be an epidemiological and economic failure.*

13. *The Hungarian government misleads the EU and uses EU resources in corrupted ways.*

14. *The EU's conditionality requirements are only a façade to intervene into national politics.*

15. *The EU's "old" member states located in Western Europe dominate (over) its "new" member states located in Eastern Europe.*

16. *Immigration from non-EU countries solves labour market problems in the EU.*

17. *Hungary is being persecuted under false pretexts by the EU.*

18. *The Hungarian opposition betrays its homeland in Brussels.*

19. *Hungary upholds true European values such as Christianity and the institution of family.*

20. *The current Brussels elite is a threat to the Hungarian cultural identity.*

21. *The Brussel's elite wants to transform the EU into an empire.*

22. *The EU is a threat to the Hungarian national sovereignty.*

23. *Immigration from non-EU countries is a threat to Europe's identity.*

24. *Countries of Central Europe share values and traditions that should be respected by the EU.*

25. *The so-called LGBTQ propaganda of the EU is harmful for children.*

26. *The functioning of the West is chaotic, ineffective and declining.*

Ireland

1. *Brexit has caused many damages and disruptions to Ireland's relations with EU states, including many sectors of Irish life.*
2. *The EU has handled Brexit negotiations with care and generosity.*
3. *Ireland has the support of the EU in relation to Brexit.*
4. *Brexit negotiations are a matter of trust among all involved parties (UK, EU, Ireland).*
5. *The EU bolsters the economy of its member states.*
6. *Ireland's economic interests and economic model may clash with those of the EU.*
7. *There is solidarity among member states in the EU.*
8. *The EU protects human rights and diversity (LGBT+ etc.).*
9. *Policy on migration has hardened in the EU in recent years.*
10. *The EU is taking actions for climate crisis and the protection of the environment.*
11. *There are several tensions among EU member states that may weaken the EU.*
12. *The EU is protecting migrants' rights.*
13. *The EU law has primacy over member states' (national) law and this sometimes causes tensions.*
14. *The EU protects democratic ideals and peace around the world.*
15. *The EU has taken all necessary measures for citizens' protection during the COVID-19 pandemic.*
16. *The EU has supported member states (also economically) during the COVID-19 pandemic.*
17. *The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed weaknesses in the EU.*
18. *The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated issues of equality and rights in the EU.*
19. *The EU should be doing more regarding its migration policies.*

20. Ireland works in concert with the EU to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

21. The EU supports Ukraine in war with Russia and offers humanitarian help.

22. Ireland's membership in the EU is a "two-way affair" as it benefits both sides and leads to simultaneous "Europeanisation and Hibernicization".

23. Ireland strongly supports the EU values and ideals.

24. Ireland occupies a special place in the heart of the EU.

25. The Irish are explicitly pro-European and Ireland can be considered a true EU peer because of the citizens' strong pro-EU sentiments.

26. Ireland is in solidarity with EU position on humanitarian assistance to Ukraine because of its shared European identity.

Portugal

1. Portugal lacks adaptation to the EU and the world dynamics and markets, in terms of competition, innovation or modernization in general.

2. EU support comes with imposed conditions that harm Portugal.

3. The EU supports Portugal in times of economic and financial crises.

4. Portugal's modernization and scientific innovation benefit from integration into the EU.

5. EU commercial policies and trade agreements harm Portugal's economic development.

6. Integration in the European common market is beneficial for Portugal's economic development.

7. Portugal is exemplary in complying with EU norms.

8. Being a peripheral country, Portugal lags behind in the European Union ("nacauda da Europa").

9. Portugal plays a prominent role in EU policy- and decision-making processes.

10. The EU and its institutions lack transparency and hence need to be reformed in terms of policy- and decision-making.

11. Portugal must better promote and protect its national interests in the EU.

12. *Decision-making processes and citizen participation make the EU a democratic institution.*

13. *The EU promotes and reinforces democracy and human rights in its member states.*

14. *Regarding pandemic health policies, Portugal has a good performance compared to the EU and other member states.*

15. *The EU and NATO are successful in safeguarding the Euro-Atlantic safety from threats and new emerging challenges.*

16. *The EU is under attack and must defend itself from foreign aggression.*

17. *The EU is an incapacitated actor regarding security and defence issues.*

18. *EU decisions usually contemplate only the interests of the stronger members and do not consider Portugal and other member states' conditions and views.*

19. *The EU's fiscal policies help Portugal manage its economy responsibly.*

20. *Migration and asylum policies lack coordination / harmonization within the EU.*

21. *The EU is a global actor that brings democracy and peace to other regions and helps improve international relations in general.*

22. *The EU lacks unity and its member states disagree on fundamental values.*

23. *Portugal strongly supports EU values and can contribute to strengthening the Union.*

24. *Portugal welcomes and integrates migrants and/or refugees because of the country's fundamental values.*

25. *The militarization of European foreign policy contradicts EU values.*

Spain

1. *The EU recovery funds are a window of opportunity for Spain.*

2. *The centralized purchase of vaccines has benefited Spain and helped it in fighting covid-19.*

3. *The EU's management of Energy crisis is creating a gap between Spain and the EU.*

4. *The EU fosters the protection of human rights and the rule of law in Spain.*

5. Blocking Poland and Hungary from the recovery funds to induce compliance with human rights is necessary.

6. EU membership provided Spain with the opportunity to challenge the North-South divide.

7. The EU displays double standards when dealing with migration issues depending on the origin of the migrants.

8. Spain needs the EU's support to better manage the migration issue.

9. The EU is short of measures to tackle the rise of the far right in Spain and across Europe.

10. The EU needs to consolidate its geopolitical weight in order to protect the security of its members.

11. The EU is too dependent on the US and NATO for its security.

12. The EU is a safeguard and a guarantor of Spain's geopolitical interests in its Southern borders.

13. The EU responded decisively to the outbreak of Ukraine crisis.

14. The EU's security and defence cooperation has been strengthened since the beginning of the war in Ukraine.

15. Brexit has demonstrated, especially during the pandemic, that leaving the EU is "myopic" and could have seriously negative impact on the local markets.

16. Brexit has harmed Europe and Spain.

17. The EU is not balancing well its duty to provide protection to refugees and manage irregular flows while ensuring internal security.

18. The EU is unable to maintain unity of action and achieve progress regarding the transition to green energy.

19. The EU's management of the COVID-19 crisis has transformed it towards more unity and solidarity.

20. The EU's centralized purchase of vaccines exemplifies a European way of doing things and should spill over to the energy field.

21. The EU is a more transparent and trustworthy actor compared to political parties in Spain.

22. Being the first to receive the recovery funds has reinforced the European sentiment in Spain.

23. Spain has played a more visible leadership role in the last year, especially in connection with the pandemic and the energy crisis.

24. Human rights and the rule of law are core EU values and Spain strongly supports those values.

25. Spain strongly supports the EU's efforts to promote LGBTQ rights.

26. Internal divisions hamper the geopolitical role of the EU.

APPENDIX 2

Core questionnaire for public opinion survey

As part of the MEDIATIZED EU H2020 project, a survey is being conducted on issues related to European integration (<https://mediatized.eu/>). The aim of the research is to study public opinion on European integration and the role of the media and elites in this process. After the analysis of collected data, research reports containing aggregated information will be made available to the scientific community and the general public. Your participation is voluntary, you can withdraw from the research at any time. The opinions and data collected during the research will be used anonymously, and no identifiable data (name, contact information) will be stored.

If you agree, let us begin.

INTERVIEWER: Never provide (Don't know), (Refusal) or other voluntary answers (in brackets) when spelling out the options!

I – MEDIA USE, TRUST, MEDIA DISCOURSES

First we want to ask a few questions about media and institutions.

Q1. *I am going to read out a few media outlets, please tell me how often you usually use them to access news. Do you use... never, occasionally, or regularly?*

READ OUT. ROTATE. ONE ANSWER PER LINE

[INCLUDE LIST OF MEDIA OUTLETS USED FOR THE MEDIA ANALYSIS Mention short, clear name of outlets, used in everyday speech. Only the name of the media outlet, not the special program within it]		Use				
		<i>never</i>	<i>occasionally (1-2 times a month or less often)</i>	<i>regularly</i>	<i>(Don't know)</i>	<i>(Refusal)</i>
1		1	2	3	98	99
2		1	2	3	98	99
3		1	2	3	98	99
4		1	2	3	98	99
5		1	2	3	98	99
6		1	2	3	98	99
7		1	2	3	98	99
8		1	2	3	98	99

Q2. *Beyond these media outlets are there any other media outlets (newspaper, TV, radio, online news portal, social media, etc.) that you regularly use to access news? Which one(s)?*

WRITE IN 0-3 MENTIONED MEDIA OUTLETS. BE AS SPECIFIC AS POSSIBLE.

97	<i>(No other media outlets)</i>
98	<i>(Don't know)</i>
99	<i>(Refusal)</i>

Q3. *Please tell me on a scale of 1-7 how much you personally trust each of the following. 1 means you do not trust at all, 7 means you have complete trust and 4 is the middle of the scale. Firstly...*

READ OUT. ROTATE. ONE ANSWER PER LINE

		No trust at all				Complete trust				(Don't know)	(Refusal)
1	...[country]'s parliament?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		98	99
2	...the European Parliament?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		98	99
3	...[country]'s government?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		98	99
4	... the European Commission?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		98	99
5	... politicians in [COUNTRY]?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		98	99
6	... journalists in [COUNTRY]?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		98	99
7	... regional parliament? (OPTIONAL)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		98	99
8	... regional government? (OPTIONAL)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		98	99
9	... NGOs in [COUNTRY]? (OPTIONAL)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		98	99
10	... the Church in [COUNTRY]? (OPTIONAL)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		98	99

Q4. *To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?*

Media coverage about politics in [COUNTRY] is polarized.

READ OUT. ONE ANSWER

1	<i>Strongly disagree</i>
2	<i>Disagree</i>
3	<i>Neither agree nor disagree</i>
4	<i>Agree</i>
5	<i>Strongly agree</i>
98	<i>(Don't know)</i>
99	<i>(Refusal)</i>

Q5. *And to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?*

The majority of the media in [COUNTRY] distorts reality.

READ OUT. ONE ANSWER

1	<i>Strongly disagree</i>
2	<i>Disagree</i>
3	<i>Neither agree nor disagree</i>
4	<i>Agree</i>
5	<i>Strongly agree</i>
98	<i>(Don't know)</i>
99	<i>(Refusal)</i>

Q6. *How often do you think that you have been personally exposed to disinformation and fake news over the past 7 days?*

Flash Eurobarometer FL011EP – Media & News Survey 2022

READ OUT. ONE ANSWER

5	<i>very often</i>
4	<i>often</i>
3	<i>sometimes</i>
2	<i>rarely</i>
1	<i>never</i>
98	<i>(Don't know)</i>
99	<i>(Refusal)</i>

II – ATTITUDES TOWARDS POLITICS

Now we want to ask a few questions about politics and government.

Q7. *When you get together with your friends, relatives, or colleagues⁴, how often do you discuss politics?*

READ OUT. ONE ANSWER

1	<i>Never</i>
2	<i>Rarely</i>
3	<i>Sometimes</i>
4	<i>Often</i>
98	<i>(Don't know)</i>
99	<i>(Refusal)</i>

4. In case of doubt think about the most typical.

- Q8.** *On a scale from 1 to 7 how much influence do the following persons have on important questions for the country? 1 means they do not have influence at all, 7 means they have complete influence and 4 is the middle of the scale. Firstly...*

READ OUT. ROTATE. ONE ANSWER PER LINE

		No influence at all							Com- plete influence	(Don't know)	(Refusal)
1	A member of the [NATIONAL] parliament	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	98	99	
2	A [NATIONAL] member of the European Parlia- ment	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	98	99	
3	The prime minister	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	98	99	
4	The mayor of the capital	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	98	99	
5	The top manager of a mul- tinalational company	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	98	99	
6	The editor-in-chief of a large newspaper	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	98	99	
7	The president of a large bank	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	98	99	
8	A person like you	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	98	99	

- Q9.** *In politics people sometimes talk of "left" and "right"⁵. Where would you place yourself on a 1-7 scale, where 1 means the left, 7 means the right and 4 is the middle of the scale?*

READ OUT. ONE ANSWER

Left							Right	(Don't know)	(Refusal)
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	98	99	

5. Detail if needed: Generally, socialist parties are considered 'left wing' while conservative parties are considered 'right wing'.

Q10. *Now thinking about the [country] government⁶, how satisfied are you with the way it manages EU-related issues? Please answer using a 1-7 scale, where 1 means extremely dissatisfied and 7 means extremely satisfied.*

READ OUT. ONE ANSWER

Extremely dissatisfied							Extremely satisfied	(Don't know)	(Refusal)
1	2	3	4	5	6	7		98	99

Q11. *Those who have real influence on crucial issues of the country usually compete and argue, but they can also agree upon basic values. To what extent do you feel that [COUNTRY's] elites are unified or disunified concerning basic values in EU-related issues? Please answer using a 1-7 scale where 1 means totally disunified, 7 means totally unified and 4 is the middle of the scale.*

READ OUT. ONE ANSWER

Totally disunified							Totally unified	(Don't know)	(Refusal)
1	2	3	4	5	6	7		98	99

6. The persons now governing, the present regime.

- Q12.** *And how unified or disunified should the elites be concerning EU-related basic values? Please answer again using a 1-7 scale where 1 means totally disunified, 7 means totally unified and 4 is the middle of the scale.*

READ OUT. ONE ANSWER

Totally disunified							Totally unified	(Don't know)	(Refusal)
1	2	3	4	5	6	7		98	99

III – PERCEPTIONS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION AND EUROPE

Now some questions about the European integration process.

- Q13.** *I am going to read a few statements about the European Union that one can find in the media. Could you please tell me how much you agree or disagree with each one on a scale of 1-7 where 1 means complete disagreement, 7 means complete agreement and 4 is the middle of the scale?*

READ OUT. ROTATE. ONE ANSWER PER LINE

[COMMON STATEMENTS]		Complete disagreement				Complete agreement				(Don't know)	(Refusal)
1	The EU has an important role in protecting human rights and democracy in [COUNTRY]	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		98	99
2	The EU threatens [COUNTRY'S] national identity and related traditional values	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		98	99
3	The EU has a positive role in [COUNTRY'S] economic development	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		98	99

[COMMON STATEMENTS]		Complete disagreement				Complete agreement			(Don't know)	(Refusal)
4	The EU intrudes in [COUNTRY'S] internal affairs and endangers its sovereignty	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	98	99
5	The EU increases [COUNTRY'S] security in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	98	99
6	[OUR COUNTRY] should leave the EU. (IN GEORGIA: Our country shouldn't join the EU)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	98	99
7	The EU has helped the better management of the COVID crisis	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	98	99
8	The EU lacks solidarity and unity	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	98	99
9	The EU plays an important role in providing humanitarian assistance to Ukraine	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	98	99
10	Some member states' deviation from the European course endangers the EU	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	98	99
...	[ADD FURTHER COUNTRY-SPECIFIC STATEMENTS BASED ON MEDIA AND Q ANALYSIS]	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	98	99

Q14. *Thinking about the European Union, some say European integration should go further. Others say it has already gone too far. What number on the scale of 1-7 best describes your position where 1 means 'integration has already gone too far' and 7 means 'integration should go further'?*

READ OUT. ONE ANSWER

Integration has already gone too far							Integration should go further	(Don't know)	(Refusal)
1	2	3	4	5	6	7		98	99

- Q15.** *Some people think about European integration primarily as enlargement of the EU with new member states, while others put emphasis on strengthening the central institutions of the EU, like the European Commission. What is closer to your interpretation of European integration: enlargement of the EU or strengthening its central institutions?*

READ OUT. ONE ANSWER

1	<i>Enlargement</i>
2	<i>Strengthening central institutions</i>
3	<i>(Both)</i>
4	<i>(None)</i>
98	<i>(Don't know)</i>
99	<i>(Refusal)</i>

- Q16.** *Taking everything into account, would you say that [OUR COUNTRY] has on balance benefited or not from being a member of the EU?*

[IN GEORGIA] Taking everything into account, would you say that [OUR COUNTRY] would benefit or not from being a member of the EU?

READ OUT. ONE ANSWER

[IN GEORGIA]

1	<i>Benefited</i>	<i>Would benefit</i>
2	<i>Not benefited >> Q18</i>	<i>Would not benefit >> Q18</i>
98	<i>(Don't know)</i>	<i>(Don't know)</i>
99	<i>(Refusal)</i>	<i>(Refusal)</i>

[IF Q16=1]

Q17. *What do you think the most important benefits of EU membership are [FOR GEORGIA: will be] for [your country]? Please select the two most important ones.*

READ OUT. ROTATE. SELECT 2

1	Better protection of human rights and democracy
2	Support of economic development
3	Better protection of security
4	Reinforcement of cultural values and identity
5	Better protection of social welfare
6	Better management of migration
7	Better management of green policy
8	(Other - please specify:)
9	(None of the these)
98	(Don't know)
99	(Refusal)

Q18. *And what about people like you? Have people like you on balance benefited or not from [OUR COUNTRY]'s EU membership? [IN GEORGIA] And what about people like you? Would people like you on balance benefit or not from [OUR COUNTRY]'s EU membership?*

READ OUT. ONE ANSWER

[IN GEORGIA]

1	<i>Benefited</i>	<i>Would benefit</i>
2	<i>Not benefited</i>	<i>Would not benefit</i>
98	<i>(Don't know)</i>	<i>(Don't know)</i>
99	<i>(Refusal)</i>	<i>(Refusal)</i>

Q19. *I'm going to read you two statements. Please tell me which of them comes closest to your view:*

READ OUT. ONE ANSWER

<i>The main aim of the EU should be to make the European economy more competitive in world markets</i>	1
<i>The main aim of the EU should be to provide better social security for all its citizens</i>	2
<i>(Both)</i>	3
<i>(None/ Don't know)</i>	98
<i>(Refusal)</i>	99

Q20. *In most European countries today, political decisions are made at three different levels of government: at the regional level, at the national level, and at the level of the European Union. In your opinion in an optimal case which level should be responsible for each of the following policy areas?*

[IN GEORGIA] In most European countries today, political decisions are made at three different levels of government: at the regional⁷ level, at the national level, and at the level of the European Union. In your opinion, if Georgia were a member of the European Union, which level should be responsible for each of the following policy areas?

READ OUT. ROTATE QUESTIONS. ONE ANSWER PER LINE

7. Regional refers to sub-national level, like county or district.

		Regional level	National level	EU level	(Not an area to be dealt with by any level of government)	(Regional and national)	(National and European)	(Regional and European)	(All three)	(Don't know)	(Refused)
1	Fighting unemployment	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	98	99
2	Immigration policy	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	98	99
3	Environmental policy	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	98	99
4	Energy policy	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	98	99
5	Security policy (OPTIONAL)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	98	99
6	Health care policy (OPTIONAL)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	98	99

Q21. *Thinking about the European Union over the next ten years or so, can you tell me whether you are in favour or against the following? We are interested in an optimal case.*

READ OUT. ROTATE QUESTIONS. ONE ANSWER PER LINE

		Strongly against	Somewhat against	Somewhat in favour	Strongly in favour	(Neither in favour nor against)	(Don't know)	(Refused)
1	A unified tax system for the EU	1	2	3	4	97	98	99
2	A common system of social security in the EU	1	2	3	4	97	98	99
3	A common EU foreign policy	1	2	3	4	97	98	99
4	A common EU army	1	2	3	4	97	98	99
5	An EU minimum wage	1	2	3	4	97	98	99

Q22. *People may feel different degrees of attachment to their town or village, to their region, to their country, or to Europe [as a whole].*

Please tell me how attached you feel to...?

READ OUT. ONE ANSWER PER LINE

		<i>Not at all attached</i>	<i>Not very attached</i>	<i>Some-what attached</i>	<i>Very attached</i>	<i>(Don't know)</i>	<i>(Refusal)</i>
1	<i>Your town/ vil-lage⁸</i>	1	2	3	4	98	99
2	<i>Your region⁹</i>	1	2	3	4	98	99
3	<i>(OUR COUNTRY)</i>	1	2	3	4	98	99
4	<i>Europe</i>	1	2	3	4	98	99
5	<i>theEuropean Union</i>	1	2	3	4	98	99

IV – INFORMATION ABOUT THE EU

Q23. *Can you tell me whether the following countries are members of the European Union?*

READ OUT. ROTATE. ONE ANSWER PER LINE

		<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>(Don't know)</i>	<i>(Refusal)</i>
1	<i>Croatia</i>	1	2	98	99
2	<i>Malta</i>	1	2	98	99
3	<i>Norway</i>	1	2	98	99

8. IF RESPONDENT ASKS “where you live”.

9. IF RESPONDENT ASKS “regional” refers to sub-national level, like county or district.

Q24. *According to your knowledge did the [COUNTRY's] government vote for the latest round of EU sanctions against Russia during the Ukrainian war? [For Georgia: ...did the government support...]*

ONE ANSWER

1	Yes
2	No
98	(Don't know)
99	(Refusal)

V – GLOBAL DEVELOPMENTAL HIERARCHIES

(OPTIONAL BLOCK)

VI – SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

ISSP Background Variables Questionnaire (BVQ)

The final set of questions are about yourself.

SD1. *Are you...*

1	Male
2	Female
3	(Other)
99	(Refusal)

SD2. *When were you born?*

WRITE IN THE YEAR OF BIRTH (USE FOUR DIGITS FOR THE YEAR)

|_|_|_|_|

9999	(Refusal)

SD3. What citizenship(s) do you have?**MULTIPLE ANSWERS POSSIBLE**

1	<i>citizen of [COUNTRY]</i>
2	<i>citizen of another EU member state(s)</i>
3	<i>citizen of a non-EU country(ies)</i>
...	<i>[INCLUDE OTHER RELEVANT OPTIONS IF NECESSARY]</i>
98	<i>(Don't know)</i>
99	<i>(Refusal)</i>

SD4. What nationality(ies) do you belong to?

**IF MORE THAN ONE NATIONALITY LISTED, WRITE DOWN
IN THE PROVIDED SEQUENCE**

.....

SD5. What is the highest level of education that you have attained?**READ OUT. ONE ANSWER**

1	<i>Uncompleted primary (elementary) education</i>
2	<i>Completed primary (elementary) education</i>
3	<i>Vocational qualification</i>
4	<i>Completed secondary education (middle school) with graduation certificate</i>
5	<i>Still a student</i>

6	<i>College, university or other tertiary (third-level) degree</i>
7	<i>(Other qualification)</i>
99	<i>(Refusal)</i>

The next questions deal with your work situation. By work we mean doing income-producing work, as an employee, self-employed or working for your own family's business, for at least one hour per week. If you temporarily are not working for pay because of temporary illness/ parental leave/ vacation/strike, etc., please refer to your normal work situation. If you work for more than one employer, or if you are both employed and self-employed, please refer to your main job. If you are retired or not currently working, please refer to your last main job.

SD6. *Are you currently working for pay, did you work for pay in the past, or have you never been in paid work?*

READ OUT. ONE ANSWER

1	<i>I am currently in paid work</i>	>> SD10
2	<i>I am currently not in paid work but I had paid work in the past</i>	
3	<i>I have never had paid work</i>	
99	<i>(Refusal)</i>	

SD7. *Are/were you an employee, self-employed, or working for your own family's business?*¹⁰

READ OUT. ONE ANSWER

10. For those who currently are not in paid work but had paid work in the past ask about the last main job.

IF IT IS ASKED: employee means 'wage worker' while self-employed includes terms such as 'freelancers', 'independent professionals', and other respondents working on their own account.

1	<i>An employee</i>
2	<i>Self-employed, working in family business</i>
99	<i>(Refusal)</i>

SD8. Do/did you supervise other employees?¹¹

ONE ANSWER.

1	<i>Yes</i>
2	<i>No</i>
98	<i>(Don't know)</i>
99	<i>(Refusal)</i>

SD9. What is/was your occupation?

WRITE DOWN AND DESCRIBE AS CLEARLY AS POSSIBLE, THEN CODE. ONE ANSWER

.....
*International Standard Classification of Occupations 2008 (ISCO-08)*¹²

1	<i>Manager</i>
2	<i>Professional</i>
3	<i>Technician and Associate Professional</i>
4	<i>Clerical Support Worker</i>

11. Supervision is to be understood as a leadership function of monitoring and being responsible for the work of others.
12. More details: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/ramon/nomenclatures/index.cfm?TargetUrl=LST_NOM_DTL&StrNom=CL_ISCO08&StrLanguageCode=EN&IntPcKey=&StrLayoutCode=HIERARCHIC&IntCurrentPage=1 <https://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/stat/isco/isco08/>

5	<i>Services and Sales Worker</i>
6	<i>Skilled Agricultural, Forestry and Fishery Worker</i>
7	<i>Craft and Related Trades Worker</i>
8	<i>Plant and Machine Operators and Assembler</i>
9	<i>Elementary Occupation</i>
10	<i>Other</i>
99	<i>(Refusal)</i>

SD10. Which of the following best describes your current situation?

If you temporarily are not working because of temporary illness/ vacation/strike etc., please refer to your normal work situation.

READ OUT. ONE ANSWER

1	<i>In paid work as an employee</i>
2	<i>Self-employed, or working for your own family's business>> SD12</i>
3	<i>Doing casual work</i>
4	<i>Unemployed</i>
5	<i>Pensioner (old age, disabled, widowed)</i>
6	<i>On parental leave</i>
7	<i>Doing housework, looking after the home, children or other persons</i>
8	<i>In education (not paid for by employer), in school/student/pupil even if on vacation</i>
9	<i>Other</i>
98	<i>(Don't know)</i>
99	<i>(Refusal)</i>

SD11. *Do you belong to a religion and, if yes, which religion do you belong to?*

READ OUT. ONE ANSWER

1	<i>No religion</i>
2	<i>Catholic</i>
3	<i>Protestant</i>
4	<i>Orthodox</i>
5	<i>Other Christian</i>
6	<i>Jewish</i>
7	<i>Islamic</i>
8	<i>Buddhist</i>
9	<i>Hindu</i>
10	<i>Other religions</i>
98	<i>(Don't know)</i>
99	<i>(Refusal)</i>

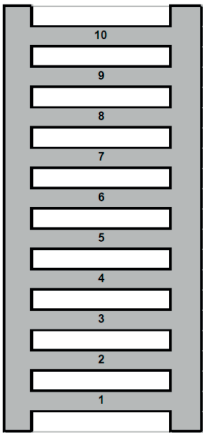
SD12. *Apart from such special occasions as weddings, funerals, etc., how often do you attend religious services?*

READ OUT. ONE ANSWER

1	<i>Regularly</i>
2	<i>Occasionally (1-2 times a month or less often)</i>
3	<i>Never</i>
98	<i>(Don't know)</i>
99	<i>(Refusal)</i>

SD13. *In our society, there are groups which tend to be towards the top and groups which tend to be towards the bottom. In a scale of 1-10 where 10 is the top and 1 is the bottom, where would you put yourself?*

READ OUT. ONE ANSWER

	10	TOP
	9	
	8	
	7	
	6	
	5	
	4	
	3	
	2	
	1	BOTTOM
	98	(Don't know)
	99	(Refusal)

SD14. *Do you have a spouse or a steady partner and, if yes, do you share the same household?*

READ OUT. ONE ANSWER

1	<i>Yes, I have a spouse/partner and we share the same household</i>
2	<i>Yes, I have a spouse/partner but we don't share the same household</i>
3	<i>No, I don't have a spouse/partner</i>
99	<i>(Refusal)</i>

SD15. *Including yourself, how many people usually live in your household (including adults and children)?*

WRITE IN THE NUMBER (USE TWO DIGITS)

|_|_|>> *IF MORE THAN 1 (SINGLE-HOUSEHOLD) ASK SD16*

99	(Refusal)

SD16. *And how many children below 18 years usually live in your household?*

WRITE IN THE NUMBER (USE TWO DIGITS)

_ _	99 (Refusal)

SD17. *After taxes and other deductions, what on average is your own total monthly income?*

WRITE IN THE NUMBER

|_|_|_|_|_|_|_| [NATIONAL CURRENCY]

98	(Don't know)

99	(Refusal)

>> *IF SINGLE-HOUSEHOLD DO NOT ASK SD18 (SD15=1)*

SD18. *After taxes and other deductions, what on average is the total monthly income of your household?*

WRITE IN THE NUMBER

|_|_|_|_|_|_|_| [NATIONAL CURRENCY]

98	<i>(Don't know)</i>
99	<i>(Refusal)</i>

SD19. *Would you describe the place where you live as...*

READ OUT. ONE ANSWER

1	<i>A big city</i>
2	<i>The suburbs or outskirts of a big city</i>
3	<i>A small city or town</i>
4	<i>A country village</i>
5	<i>A farm or home in the country</i>
99	<i>(Refusal)</i>

SD20. *How many languages (including your native language(s)) do you speak well enough to take part in a conversation?*

ONE ANSWER

1	1
2	2
3	3+
98	<i>(Don't know)</i>
99	<i>(Refusal)</i>

SD21. *Do you have (non [NATIONALITY]) foreigners among your friends, relatives, or fellow workers?*

1	Yes
2	No

98	<i>(Don't know)</i>
99	<i>(Refusal)</i>

SD22. *Have you ever lived outside [country] for a period longer than 3 months?*

1	Yes
2	No
98	<i>(Don't know)</i>
99	<i>(Refusal)</i>

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ANSWERS.

Chapter 2

Mediatized Discourses on Europeanization in Belgium

ASUMAN KUBRA BAS

THOMAS JACOBS

SAMUEL DOVERI VESTERBYE

SUMARIO: 1. INTRODUCTION. 2. MEDIA ANALYSIS: DISCOURSES ON THE EU AND THE EUROPEAN PROJECT IN THE BELGIAN MEDIA. 2.1. *Dominant EU discourses in the Belgian media: Trends in Flanders and Wallonia.* 2.2. *Mediatization of the European project.* 3. ELITE INTERVIEWS: CHARTING ELITE SUPPORT FOR THE EU. 3.1. *Q analysis: support and criticism.* 3.2. *Interview analysis: Doing politics and journalism in Belgium's complex pro-European climate.* 3.3. *Pro-European rhetoric.* 3.4. *Navigating and concretizing the consensus.* 3.5. *Weaponizing the consensus.* 3.6. *Securitizing the consensus.* 4. SURVEY ANALYSIS: PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF EUROPEANIZATION. 4.1. *Sample characteristics.* 4.2. *Media consumption in Belgium.* 4.3. *Media Polarization in Belgium.* 4.4. *Attachment to the EU.* 4.5. *Perception of statements about the EU.* 5. CONCLUSION. REFERENCES.

1. INTRODUCTION

This contribution delves into the mediatized discourses surrounding the EU and the idea of European collaboration, identity, and unity (often referred to as the 'European Project'), exploring how they are perceived and instrumentalized in the Belgian political and media landscape. As the seat

of the European capital and the host of the most important European institutions, Belgium is in certain respects a poster child for the "permissive consensus" that surrounds the EU (Hooghe & Marks 2009). Support for the EU is traditionally thought to be high, EU policies and institutions are rarely subject to controversy or intense political debate and scrutiny, and the idea of Europe is dear to Belgium's citizens and the Belgian national identity (Delreux & Randour 2015; Wolfs & Van Hecke 2021). The multilevel and decentralized governance that the EU imposes on its member states is perceived as normal and evident by Belgians (Justaert *et al.* 2012). Unlike in many other EU member states, the foremost far-right and Euroskeptic party traditionally does not organize or campaign much around European issues or the EU (Deschouwer & Van Assche 2008). When Belgian voters express Euroskeptic sentiments, they do so in a "soft", issue-specific manner (Brack & Hoon 2017).

However, the Belgian case also has its own peculiarities. Support for the idea of a European identity and European values does not always entail automatic support for the EU's concrete policies (Brack & Hoon 2017). The data presented below will additionally show that on certain issues, public opinion and the opinions of the media and political elites about Europe and the EU do not always align – the latter at times being more pro-European and pro-EU than the former. Additionally, the two major language communities in Belgium differ in how they perceive Europe and the EU, at the level of both public opinion and political and media elites.

As such, the pattern of how Europe and the EU are perceived in Belgium is complex. On the one hand, there is very broad support for the European project across the political spectrum and throughout the media landscape. European affairs are mostly depoliticized, subject to widespread consensus. Political contention is largely absent when it comes to Europe and the EU. One could argue that the European project effectively limits what is sayable and thinkable in the Belgian political discourse: political proposals cannot be explicitly anti-European, because attachment to the idea of European collaboration and unity is an integral part of the collective national memory that supersedes most other national political cleavages. Even far-right parties make the effort to 'Europeanize' their nationalist agenda (Laible 2008). Thus, only political discourses that explicitly inscribe themselves in the European project are considered valid.

On the other hand, this support does not express itself in a monolithic fashion. In Flanders, support for the EU is occasionally interspersed with (rare) Euroskeptic discourses, whereas a *cordon médiatique* and a *cordon sanitaire* against the far-right in the media and party politics largely prevent

the circulation of such discourses in Wallonia. Even though they have been a strong electoral and political force ever since the 1990s, no radical right populist party has ever exercised power in Belgium and managed to challenge the *cordon sanitaire*, an informal agreement in which all democratic parties vow to exclude the far-right from coalition governments at all levels of government (Biard 2021). This barrier against the entry of far-right parties into power is more challenged in Flanders (Biard 2021). This aligns with the common view that the Flemish region leans predominantly toward the right, while the Walloon region is often seen as leaning predominantly toward the left (Billiet *et al.* 2021). However, the last legislative and European elections (2024) upset this tendency on both sides of the country. Furthermore, over the past two decades, Belgian media has seen a trend towards commercialization, privatization, and sensationalism. This trend has advanced at a faster and more liberalized pace in Flanders, while Wallonia has maintained a *cordon médiatique* against anti-EU discourses and the airing of far-right parties. As such, there is more room for anti-European discourses in Flemish media, even if a pro-European consensus persists in the public debate on a national level.

This consensus, however, is not necessarily aligned with public opinion. As the third section of the chapter reveals, there is an enthusiastic support for the EU among media and political elites in both parts of the country. However, the fourth section shows that EU support among the general population is lower than anticipated. Even though caution is necessary when drawing direct comparisons, due to the different data and methodologies involved in the study of elite and public opinion, the former seems more pro-European than the latter. In the third section, we show that, in the context of specific political topics, for instance, migration, security policy, and geopolitical crises such as the war in Ukraine, pro-European sentiments can be re-articulated in novel ways and their all-encompassing effect can temporarily be weakened or circumscribed.

This complex context creates a highly interesting and multifaceted discursive opportunity structure for discussions about the EU and European politics in the Belgian media and political debate. A strong sense of European identity in which the European project is part of the national identity and the collective heritage circumscribes what can realistically be said and proposed in Belgian politics. It is impossible to launch an 'anti-European' political proposal in a serious and legitimate manner. However, pragmatic and practical considerations can temporarily weaken or alter this heavily pro-European leaning of political debate, thus creating room for disagreement and the expression of different opinions and policies. For instance, right-wing parties in Belgium have heavily criticized and

repudiated the EU's management of migration and border issues – not out of a principled opposition to the EU's competence in this policy area, but out of a pragmatic disagreement with the concrete policies it pursues. European values can also be "weaponized" against political proposals deemed to go against the hegemonic European identity. If one can make an opponent appear 'anti-European', they will lose a lot of legitimacy and attractiveness. Similarly, pro-Europeanism is frequently "leveraged" to argue in favor of political proposals. One of the strongest pro-austerity arguments in Belgian politics is that the EU recommends – and the European rules insist – that Belgium implement budget cuts.

This contribution seeks to explore the effects and the functioning of this complex discursive structure. Concretely, it first proposes a media analysis to map the mediatized discourses around the EU and the European Project, focusing on four influential events that increased the number of news related to the EU between the period of August 2021 and March 2022: 1) the COVID-19 vaccination policy and protests, 2) the EU budget(s), 3) the migration crisis (Belarus), and 4) the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The next section focuses on the interviews with Belgian influential media actors and politicians to examine these mediatized discourses in more depth. These interviews are first analyzed quantitatively, using Q-methodology. Several examples of how Belgian politicians and journalists navigate and use the complexities and intricacies of this discursive infrastructure and the variegated pattern of support for the EU and the European project are then explored in detail through a discourse-analytic lens. Finally, the population survey findings on the EU and Europeanization are presented.

2. MEDIA ANALYSIS: DISCOURSES ON THE EU AND THE EUROPEAN PROJECT IN THE BELGIAN MEDIA

Belgium's complex federal political system intricately shapes its media environment and the discourses surrounding the EU and the European Project. The federalized system, divided media sectors, the absence of pan-Belgian media, the legal framework, and cultural norms create a distinctive media landscape that sets Belgium apart from other European countries in terms of structure, legal frameworks, ownership, and cultural components. Central to Belgium's media landscape is the linguistic divide between the French-speaking and Flemish-speaking communities. This division extends to the media sector, with separate media outlets catering primarily to each linguistic group. The French-speaking media, largely based in Wallonia and Brussels, operates within a Francophone cultural and political context, while the Flemish-speaking media, predominantly situated in Flanders, reflects Flemish cultural and political perspectives. This linguistic division

significantly influences the emphasis, coverage, and narratives on Europeanization within each media sector.

In Wallonia, media outlets operate under an informal agreement, often referred to as a *cordon sanitaire médiatique*. This agreement, coupled with concentrated ownership rates, leads the Walloon media to coordinate and agree not to give access and airtime to far-right parties. Consequently, this arrangement acts as a form of agenda-setting and narrative framing, resulting in a lower prevalence of anti-EU sentiments and narratives in the Walloon media. However, this practice is not observed in Flanders, where media outlets do not engage in a coordinated censorship of political speech or parties (De Jonge 2019). The Flemish media landscape is characterized by commercialization and liberalization, making it a more competitive media market compared to Wallonia. These differences, alongside the protectionist cultural-regional and linguistic policies and regulatory frameworks, significantly shape EU-related discourses in Wallonia and Flanders.

Understanding the discourses around the EU and the European project within this linguistic and cultural context requires a specialized approach tailored to Belgium's unique media dynamics. To delve into these discourses, alongside considering identity and pragmatic considerations, a careful sampling was important. Six local Belgian media outlets were chosen based on specific criteria, including audience/readership demographics, editorial lines, and media type (traditional/online, mainstream/alternative). Furthermore, the representation from both the Francophone and Flemish language divisions was ensured to maintain a balanced coverage across the linguistic lines. The coverage of EU-related news between July 2021 and March 2022 from the selected outlets underwent quantitative and qualitative content analyses, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of diverse perspectives in a country with a divided media system serving two distinct language communities. Quantitative and qualitative content analyses are followed by critical discourse analysis (CDA), which examines both textual aspects and socio-economic, structural, and situational factors. This is important to better understand the link between identity and pragmatic considerations voiced by different actors in diverse socio-economic and situational contexts of power relations.

The selected media outlets encompass a range of platforms, including public and private broadcasters, newspapers, and online news portals. Specifically, RTBF and VRT represent the Francophone and Flemish public broadcasters, respectively, both with television channels. *Le Soir* and *De*

Standaard are the main private newspapers in their respective linguistic communities. The online news landscape is covered by Médor, a left-wing Francophone outlet, and Doorbraak, a right-wing Flemish outlet. This selection ensures a balanced representation of the media landscape across different mediums, language communities, and political perspectives.

In addition to selecting appropriate media outlets, keywords and key events related to the EU in the target period were identified, which became the focus of media analysis. The four dominant events that were selected include: 1) the COVID-19 vaccination policy and protests, 2) the EU budget(s), 3) the migration crisis (around Belarus), and 4) the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In essence, most of the written and oral news material collected from the sampled media outlets related to these four events.

2.1. DOMINANT EU DISCOURSES IN THE BELGIAN MEDIA: TRENDS IN FLANDERS AND WALLONIA

In Belgian media outlets, irrespective of linguistic divisions, editorial stance, or popularity, two predominant and often conflicting discourses emerge. The most frequently occurring discourse focuses on the perception that the EU is too ineffective against Russia and its aggression against Ukraine, emphasizing a call not to act. This perspective critiques the EU's sanctions and other measures as insufficient in addressing the conflict. This viewpoint is often expressed by right-wing or far-right individuals, but it can also be found among left-leaning politicians, experts, and journalists in Belgian media. Conversely, the second most prevailing discourse contends that enough is being done, with policies and sanctions against Russia proving effective and yielding positive results. Table 1 below summarizes the major, adjacent and counter-discourses revealed in the analyzed media outlets.

Table 1. Major, adjacent and counter-discourses in Belgian media

Discursive Unit	Major Discourse	Adjacent Discourse	Counter-Discourse
1. The EU's role in the war in Ukraine	1. The EU has not incited the conflict but has a responsibility to act. 2. The EU is too ineffective against Russia (a call not to act).	1. It's a human catastrophe, but the EU's influence is limited. 2. The sanctions are backfiring and hurting the EU's economy and living standards.	1. The EU has no responsibility and has been dragged into the conflict. 2. Enough is being done and the policies and actions are effective against Russia.

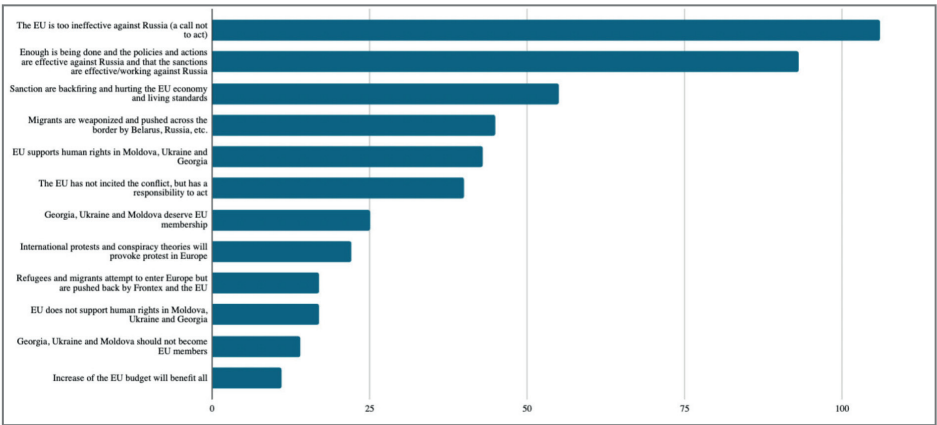
Discursive Unit	Major Discourse	Adjacent Discourse	Counter-Discourse
1.1. EU membership aspirations of Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova¹	1. Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova deserve EU membership. 2. The EU supports human rights in Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia.	1. EU membership is important, but the accession process and reform must be respected. 2. EU should have open border policy for Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia.	1. Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova should not become EU member states. 2. The EU does not support human rights in Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia.
2. The EU's role in the COVID-19 vaccination regulations and protest	International protest movements and conspiracy theories will evoke protest in the EU.	More discussion about the COVID regulations and its impacts are needed.	The COVID restrictions are breaching fundamental freedoms.
3. Migration, borders and "fortress Europe"	Refugees and migrants attempt to enter Europe but are pushed back by Frontex and the EU.	Migrants are weaponized ("utilized") and Turkish Airlines directly facilitated this illegal migration.	Migrants are weaponized and pushed across the border by Belarus, Russia, etc.
4. The Belgian government's support for EU budgets and other EU measures	1. Increase of the EU budget is of benefit to all. 2. The government moving closer to the EU to further integrate in its system.	1. EU budgets have to take into account specific policy areas. 2. The opposition is turning away from the EU.	1. EU budgets should be reduced because we are not benefitting. 2. Other forms of European alliance-building are possible, including sovereign alliances.

It is important to note that this analysis was conducted shortly after the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine began, and was therefore subject to the limitations of what Foucault (1991) refers to as "conservation". This means that certain discourses were bound to disappear, while others would

1. This sub-discursive unit was added separately because it was frequently attached and mentioned in tandem with discursive unit 1, based on the understanding that membership aspirations of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine would logically increase in importance as a result of the war in Ukraine.

endure as the war continued. In fact, the gravity of the ongoing invasion undoubtedly influenced the articulation of these discourses as they were responses to real-time geopolitical challenges that impact security, economic stability, energy prices, and overall life standards.

Figure 1. Dominant discourses (all media)



The pragmatic considerations behind the two dominant discourses underpin the complexities of the EU-related discourses observed in Belgian media, emphasizing the dynamic interplay of media discourses and tangible realities. In Francophone media, the most prominent discourse asserts that 'enough is being done' and that the policies and actions against Russia are effective. This reflects a relatively supportive stance towards EU and NATO strategies, emphasizing their success in addressing the crisis. Additional discourses highlight the EU's role in supporting human rights in Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia, reinforcing a positive view of the EU's actions. In contrast, Flemish media is dominated by a more critical discourse, with the prevailing discourse stating that 'the EU is too ineffective against Russia (a call not to act)'. This reflects skepticism about the EU's ability to address the crisis effectively. Another prominent discourse criticizes the sanctions against Russia as backfiring, arguing that they harm the EU's economy and living standards. While some supportive narratives exist, such as acknowledging that 'enough is being done', they are less emphasized compared to the Francophone perspective.

The major discussion around the COVID-19 pandemic centered around the coverage of protests and the implementation of regulations across EU member states. Attention was directed towards the EU's formulation of

these regulations and how protesters coordinated their responses against them. The discourse evolved throughout 2021, driven initially by the pandemic's demands for increased spending and later influenced by the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022. The war necessitated an uptick in EU budgets for defensive purposes, sparking further discussions and pro-EU narratives regarding the EU budget within Belgian media. These discussions were driven by pragmatic considerations stemming from a spectrum of crises, spanning from energy and employment challenges to migration and security threats associated with Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Taking all the dominant discourses into account, it becomes evident that security-related discourses, intertwined with pragmatic considerations, hold significant sway. Whether the focus is on migration issues or the war in Ukraine, these discourses take precedence, reflecting the ongoing geopolitical challenges and their tangible impacts on security and stability. This is supported by the findings concerning the weaponization and securitization discourse surrounding Europeanization and migration. This trend cuts across linguistic divisions and is present in all media outlets, where pro-EU discourses about the threat of "weaponized migration" by Belarus and Russia have become widespread, overshadowing humanitarian concerns.

Figure 2. Dominant discourses in Francophone-Belgian media

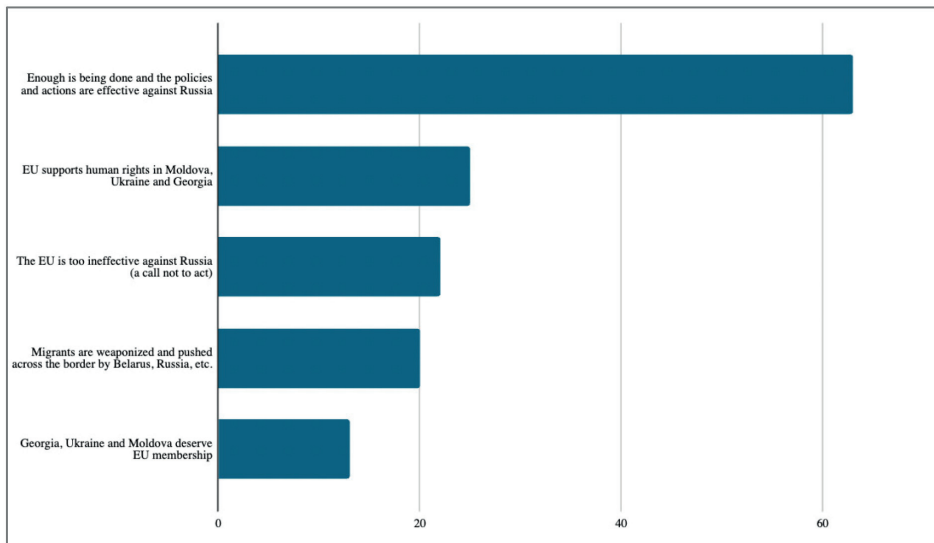
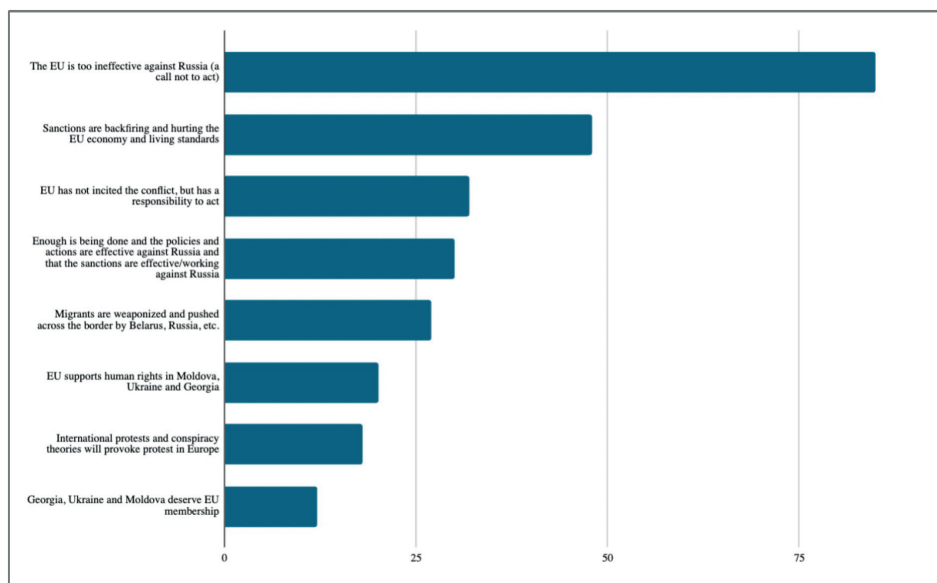


Figure 3. Dominant discourses in Flemish-Belgian media



When scrutinizing the two distinct media sectors catering to the French and Flemish-speaking populations, namely, the Francophone and Flemish Belgian media, a discernible difference emerges regarding the most popular discourses during the examined period (Figures 2 and 3). In Flemish media, a prevalent discourse highlights skepticism towards the EU's response to the conflict, focusing on the narrative that 'the EU is too ineffective against Russia (a call not to act)'. This perspective critiques the EU's perceived inability to implement impactful measures against Russia, reflecting doubts about the effectiveness of its sanctions and broader actions.

On the other hand, Francophone media predominantly features a counter-discourse emphasizing the effectiveness of current policies and actions against Russia, along with showcasing the EU's strength and the success of sanctions. Despite these divergent views, both Flemish and Francophone media converge on the topic of the "weaponization of migration", indicating a shared concern about this issue. This commonality underscores the growing trend of securitization in pro-European media discourses, which increasingly intertwined themes of threat and conflict. Notably, these trends are not confined to linguistic divisions but permeate across both Flemish and Francophone media landscapes. Another notable similarity lies in the frequency of dominant discourses related to the EU's

support for human rights. In addition to these observations, Francophone-Belgian media appears to cover EU budget discourses more positively, with less emphasis on COVID-19 protests and critical stances towards EU regulations compared to Flemish media. This divergence in coverage suggests a nuanced approach to EU-related topics within the Belgian media landscape, reflecting varying editorial priorities and audience interests across linguistic divisions.

The findings reveal a notable divergence in what is deemed "sayable" across linguistic lines, aligning closely with the political party structure within the Flemish and Francophone communities, as well as with the dynamics of federal governance, media governance, the *cordon sanitaire*, and ownership structures. This delineation therefore underscores how discursive boundaries are intricately shaped by linguistic, political, and institutional factors within the Belgian media landscape. In particular, the limits of the sayable between Flemish and Francophone media differ when it comes to EU policies in the context of the war in Ukraine. However, any divergence remains relative, particularly regarding the EU's core values, namely, supporting human rights. Belgium's political model maintains a moderate level of polarization compared to many other countries. The unique political landscape of the country also sees far-right parties having limited success in gaining power, thanks in part to the country's consociational democracy, which encourages coalition governments and power-sharing (Caravaca *et al.* 2022).

2.2. MEDIATIZATION OF THE EUROPEAN PROJECT

The mediatization of EU-related topics in Belgian media is a dynamic process influenced by various factors, including media ownership, political dynamics, audience preferences, and the evolving EU agenda as explained in the introduction. The mediatization process often involves a spectrum of discursive orientations, ranging from pro-EU arguments to critical or skeptical viewpoints. The findings reveal several noteworthy patterns and trends.

One important trend is the discourse around migration. Across all dominant media discourses in various outlets, it is notable that the discourse surrounding the weaponization of migrants emerges as a leading topic in most media channels, except for *De Standaard*. This discourse reflects ongoing debates and concerns about migration policies within the EU, as stated above. This reveals that a rising trend is occurring, which includes the tendency to develop pro-EU discourses increasingly based on identitarian and pragmatic considerations surrounding security, border

threats, and the weaponization of migrants or refugees. This demonstrates that while far-right parties like Vlaams Belang have gained traction by addressing immigration and security issues among the Flemish residents, the discourse on migration has expanded beyond party politics, and it now permeates various media outlets across the spectrum.

Another prominent aspect is the prevalence of EU critical discourses in the Flemish right-leaning online media, particularly in outlets like Doorbraak, which frequently highlight concerns regarding the weaponization of migrants, COVID-19 protests, and pro-Russian sentiments. In contrast, more mainstream pro-EU discourses dominate public television broadcasters, such as Francophone RTBF and Flemish VRT. A high dominance of journalists as an actor across all media outlets indicates the significant role of journalists in shaping and voicing the discourses analyzed. Journalists are identified as the most trusted actors, followed by the EU as the second most dominant actor, according to a survey conducted in Belgium between July and August 2023. This suggests that EU-related topics receive considerable attention and coverage in these outlets, contributing to a predominantly pro-EU discourse.

While public broadcasters retain a more pragmatic and pro-EU discourse, it is noteworthy that online media, and to a lesser extent newspapers, include more identity-related and anti-EU discourses in their coverage. This is equally observed in terms of coverage rates concerning, for example, COVID-19 protests, which are covered by fewer occasions across the Francophone media, compared to the Flemish media outlets. The correlation observed between anti-EU sentiments and identitarian discourses points to a nuanced interaction between identity politics and Euroskepticism in the media. The outlets that emphasize identitarian discourses often express greater skepticism towards EU policies, whereas those focusing on pragmatic perspectives tend to exhibit a mixed but generally pro-EU stance.

Furthermore, editorial stance, type of platform (online vs offline), and linguistic division (Flemish vs French) have an impact on the prevalence of anti-EU discourses. For instance, Flemish media outlets like Doorbraak and, to a lesser degree, *De Standaard* exhibit a higher concentration of Euroskeptical discourses, indicating a correlation between editorial position and discourse orientation. In this light, it is interesting to note that both Doorbraak and *De Standaard* have roots in the Flemish movement. Their tracks separated a long time ago though, with *De Standaard* evolving into a politically neutral broadsheet, while Doorbraak morphing from a Flemish nationalist magazine spanning the political spectrum into a more narrowly

right-wing outlet. Similarly, the reactivation of dormant migration discourses, especially in the online media like Doorbraak², contributes to a more polarized and more radicalized discursive landscape.

Lastly, the resurgence of discussions surrounding EU membership for Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova in the aftermath of Russia's war against Ukraine reflects dynamic shifts in the media focus and priorities during the examined period. This resurgence underscores the profound impact of the war on a range of topics, notably the prioritization of enlargement. This shift became evident as the EU promptly approved Ukraine's and Moldova's membership applications in June 2022 (European Council 2022), followed by Georgia in December 2023.

In summary, the mediatization of EU-related topics and the EU's dominance as an actor in all media outlets underscores the significant attention and coverage that EU-related issues receive, particularly in mainstream outlets, contributing to a predominantly pro-EU rhetoric within most of the media sector. However, the emergence of EU-critical discourses in specific media outlets, especially online platforms like Doorbraak, highlights that the hegemony of the European project is also challenged and not entirely accepted within the Belgian media landscape. This creates a more complex environment for debates about the EU, Europe, and the European project.

3. ELITE INTERVIEWS: CHARTING ELITE SUPPORT FOR THE EU

The media analysis was followed by 50 in-depth interviews integrating Q-methodology conducted with political and media elites from autumn 2022 until spring 2023. To capture a diverse range of perspectives and voices within Belgium's political and media landscape, politicians from the six major parties forming the current coalition were included, along with representation from the largest opposition party, N-VA, and one minor party, AGORA, known for its focus on participatory democracy. This selection aimed to encompass both right-leaning and left-leaning/progressive ideologies, with politicians from the Flemish, Francophone, and bilingual parties participating in the study. It should be noted that efforts were made to have an equal representation of all actors from all political spectrums and linguistic groups. However, due to the lack of responses from some groups, political actors from Vlaams Belang and PTB-PVDA were not included in the sample, as they could not be reached, despite continuous efforts.

2. Doorbraak launched its paper version in January 2022.

The study also engaged journalists and producers from influential broadcasters like VRT and RTBF, prominent newspapers such as *De Morgen* and *De Tijd*, as well as online platforms including Politico.eu, Euractiv, EUobserver, Science|Business, and Euronews. Both Flemish- and Francophone-language media were represented to ensure a comprehensive understanding of media discourses across linguistic lines. Additionally, interviews were conducted with journalists and producers from news agencies like Belga, Agence Europe, and Euractiv, as well as pan-European media outlets with headquarters in Brussels such as B2 – Bruxelles2, Contexte, EU Observe, BusinessAM.be. and Contexte. Both commercial audiovisual and public audiovisual Belgian media were included in the sample, encompassing outlets in Flemish, French, and English languages. Two independent journalists were also interviewed, considering their influence and essential roles in Belgium's complex media landscape.

3.1. Q ANALYSIS: SUPPORT AND CRITICISM

Five significant factors with eigenvalues higher than 1 were extracted from the combined (political and media actors) database. However, we chose to analyze three of these factors because they more clearly represent the coalitions between political and media actors, while the other two did not offer as much insight into these relationships. The three examined factors alone account for a total explained variance of 52%, indicating that they have substantial explanatory power.

The first factor, identified as "Supporters of a Liberal European Identity", holds a robust pro-EU stance, emphasizing the effectiveness of the EU's collective efforts in tackling external and internal threats, such as conflict, health crises, and security concerns. They strongly support European liberal values, including human rights, democracy, and LGBTQ+ rights, and reject the notion that the EU or NATO expansion in Eastern Europe caused the escalation in Ukraine. The group also acknowledges the potential risks associated with the EU's measures against Russia in the context of the war in Ukraine. These risks include the possibility of escalating tensions with Russia, concerns about the security of European territory, rising energy prices, and broader economic challenges for EU member states. Despite these concerns, the group maintains a strong belief in the EU's ability to act more effectively when united, especially in negotiating with global powers like Russia. Their collective support for EU enlargement and integration reflects a liberal, pragmatic vision for Europe's future, with a focus on unity and shared European identity values.

The second factor, labeled "EU Human Rights Critical Actors", has an eigenvalue of 2.4 and includes a diverse group of political ideologies and media actors, such as the Francophone ecological party ECOLO, the Flemish environmentalist party Groen, and left-leaning media outlets like Médor. This group emphasizes a strong commitment to human rights and social inclusivity within the EU framework. They believe that the EU can better tackle issues like health crises and external threats through coordinated actions, and they strongly support the EU's efforts to promote human rights, democracy, and LGBTQ+ rights. However, they are also critical of certain EU actions, particularly regarding migration, where they express concerns about Frontex's handling of migrants, especially at the Belarus border, accusing the agency of not respecting human rights. While they support aiding Ukrainian refugees, they are equally critical of the EU's role in managing migration from other regions, especially regarding Frontex's practices. This group rejects the notion that the EU undermines Belgian sovereignty or erodes local culture, reinforcing their universalist and progressive stance. Though they acknowledge the EU's role in collective defense, including in response to Russian aggression, their focus remains firmly on holding the EU accountable for upholding human rights and addressing migration policies critically.

Lastly, the third factor, titled "Proponents of the EU's enhanced security", has an eigenvalue of 1.8 and includes members from the right-wing, Euroskeptic party N-VA, along with progressive environmental parties like Ecolo and Groen, as well as the liberal-leaning Open VLD. This group showcases new or evolving convergences between parties that traditionally hold differing viewpoints. The most significant aspect of this group is their shared focus across party lines and linguistic divides on the geopolitical and security-related aspects of EU-related statements. They all exhibit a strong stance against Russia and advocate for a more robust geopolitical EU, signifying a convergence of progressive and socially conservative perspectives. This convergence is illustrated by their shared belief in the effectiveness of collective EU and NATO actions against the Russian aggression. Notably, this group shows less enthusiasm for internal or domestic EU integration compared to their emphasis on geopolitical or external integration.

The consensus among the interviewed elites is notably strong regarding the EU and European Project, particularly on core EU values, collective EU actions, migration policies, and the war in Ukraine. Within Belgium's elite circles, a shared understanding and support for the fundamental principles that underpin the EU are notable, including commitments to human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. The strong belief regarding the EU's core

values limits what is sayable on the EU and the European Project, therefore making certain discourses valid and invalid, and leaving just a small room for criticizing the EU regarding its core values. This is particularly visible when it comes to the migration from non-EU countries. When examining migration discourses, their assessment hinges on the specific context at hand. In the context of the war in Ukraine, migration is not perceived as a pressing concern for the EU/Belgian citizens. This is primarily due to the shared cultural elements between EU citizens and Ukrainians, coupled with the EU's duty to uphold fundamental values such as human rights support. In the Ukrainian scenario, migration is not primarily framed as an identity issue since there is a lack of distinct identity conflicts. Typically, identity-based conflicts drive public discourse on migration. However, the absence of a conventional discursive framework necessitates a fresh and untested approach when discussing migration within the context of the Ukrainian conflict. Unlike traditional anti-migration discourses, which typically oppose the acceptance of migrants and refugees, these arguments do not apply to the Ukrainian context. This is largely due to the perception of cultural similarities with Ukrainian migrants and the proximity of the war, unfolding at Europe's borders. As a result, these older discourses are incompatible with the current situation and cannot be revived or adapted to this new framework.

When examining migration in relation to Frontex and pushbacks, criticism of the EU is predominantly voiced by a specific cohort encompassing media and political actors aligned with green parties such as Ecolo and Groen, along with the left-leaning media outlet Médor. However, this critique comes with a caveat: it is contingent upon the belief that the EU upholds democracy and human rights. Moreover, Belgium's socio-cultural fabric has shaped conservatives and even some far-right groups to be more accepting and less authoritarian than their counterparts in many other countries, particularly when it comes to liberal issues like LGBTQI+ rights. Among these actors, only that from Médor openly criticizes the EU's migration policies. It is noteworthy that Médor stands alone in this stance among all the participants involved in the study.

3.2. INTERVIEW ANALYSIS: DOING POLITICS AND JOURNALISM IN BELGIUM'S COMPLEX PRO-EUROPEAN CLIMATE

The media analysis and Q analysis have demonstrated that Belgian media and politics are generally in favor of European integration and supportive of EU policies. However, a discursive analysis of the in-depth interviews reveals that this consensus is not monolithic or all-encompassing. Global events, different attitudes across linguistic

communities, and political preferences ensure that Belgium's pro-European political landscape has a rugged and uneven topography. In this section, we explore some of the discursive strategies that politicians and journalists use to navigate this landscape and to leverage discourses of Europe, Europeanization, and European integration.

3.3. PRO-EUROPEAN RHETORIC

At face value, nearly all members of the Belgian political and media elites express a strong commitment to the European identity and a stance in favor of (further) European integration, while also supporting most of the concrete policies pursued by the EU. They see their national identity as compatible with and complimentary to the European project. Many politicians and journalists in interviews repeatedly state that Europe and Belgium support each other. A liberal MR politician argues that "(...) the European Union reinforces Belgium and its culture and supports it and allows it to be put in the spotlight. (...) I am very, very pro-Europe". One of his Flemish colleagues from the liberal Open VLD wholeheartedly agrees with him, contending that "[the EU] enforces [Belgium] and it makes it stronger. It puts more emphasis on Belgium and the Belgian culture (...) it does not erode, it is a cooperation of the forces (...) it does not take the way, it adds".

Both interviewees combine their European and their Belgian identity and support the European project on a level that goes beyond the surface of the utterance. They express themselves in very explicit and colorful terms, constructing interrelated discourses that are locally coherent and that build on one another. They speak fast, with a rich vocabulary, and without hesitation. All of this shows that the matter under discussion is one that is close to their heart, and they find it easy and comfortable to express themselves on this topic. On a more explicit textual level, in the quotes above we witness the interviewees bypassing casual discussion, in order to genuinely situate these beliefs as part of their collective political, national, and civil identity. To be European is, for both interviewees cited above, something that is enshrined and conserved deeply within their worldview. Using the Foucauldian terminology, one could say that for these interviewees, Europe is part of the discursive infrastructure of what is sayable and thinkable – it is not merely an issue to discuss or a political subject to have an opinion about, but rather a foundational element of how they conceive and imagine the political landscape.

While we can find a consensus in favor of the European project and European integration across the political spectrum, it is unsurprising that

the most explicit and unambiguous ones are found with politicians from the MR and the Open VLD: both are historically among the most pro-EU parties in Flanders, they have European politicians with a high level of visibility, and the Open VLD is one of the least regionalist and nationalist parties in Flanders.

3.4. NAVIGATING AND CONCRETIZING THE CONSENSUS

Crucially, Belgium's pro-EU consensus does not paralyze debate on European issues. Even though nearly all political parties and media outlets agree on the core values of the European project and their role in shaping Belgian identity, they still disagree on how these values should be practically applied. The general acceptance of Europe in Belgium does not erase the space for debate; it simply structures and organizes how this debate unfolds and what political discourses and strategies are available to its participants. Belgium's pro-EU consensus limits what is sayable and thinkable, and as such, restricts the ways in which participants in the public debate can engage with one another. But this consensus can be navigated using many different strategies, and it can be translated into a wide variety of concrete policy positions, many of which are completely at odds with one-another.

A Flemish N-VA politician, for instance, strongly repudiates the suggestion that Belgium has an obligation to financially support fellow Europeans:

The thing about money is a lot of people actually believe that if you pour more money into an organization, it will solve problems. No. It does increase your ability to solve problems, but it does not say anything about the efficiency of doing so. In history, there were a lot of political systems and empires that spent a lot of money, but they were very inefficient and also very corrupt. It required more money.

The speaker anticipates that an ill-intentioned political opponent could construe this refusal to show financial solidarity with fellow member states as Euroskeptic and anti-European – and that this is a powerful accusation in the context of Belgium's pro-European consensus. The speaker therefore goes to great lengths to show that his position is perfectly compatible with and in fact driven by European values. He preempts the charge of euroscepticism by venturing into a historic exposé about the cultural and religious differences between the north and the south of Europe. In doing so, he attempts to claim that his position does not go against the consensual idea of Europe, but is in fact a product of European history:

But we have to make sure that the budgets we give are also used correctly. And if we can make cuts because of increasing bureaucratization or overheads, there should be cuts where possible. And there, I do see a little bit of a difference historically between the north and the south of Europe. They have a different type of economy, that is one thing. But especially the legacy of the catholic system versus Protestantism is very well felt in a country like Germany, where this division runs just through the country. You can also see it. The southern countries and the Latin Catholic countries are more easygoing, and money must flow. And if some money happens to flow away, that is part of the game where the north of Europe is more engaged to look if actually the accounts are well written and if everything is accounted for. And in that regard, I find it very, very sad that the United Kingdom has left the European Union because they had a tradition where they actually did check all the financial books.

This exposé links the speaker's opposition to financial solidarity to a personal interpretation of what Europe is, what the European identity looks like, and what the European values are. In his view, the Southern "periphery" of Europe is less accountable, less well organized, less financially solid, and all of this makes these countries less 'European' in nature. The austere, careful, economical way of doing things typical of the Northern "core" of Europe is implicitly framed as the true and correct approach for Europe. This winding and detailed historical reasoning is noteworthy. In a different political context, opposing financial solidarity might simply be justified on economic grounds. However, in Belgium, the argument requires a cultural and historical legitimization to avoid accusations of being anti-European or a clash with the pro-European consensus.

It is interesting to compare the statement above to the following quote by a reporter from Politico. Both statements advocate for completely different policies, but share interesting similarities on a rhetorical level:

Belgium has an obligation of solidarity to increase its shared budget to support fellow Europeans. (...) pragmatically, you know, it is kind of part of the EU that we are in this together, so you share part of the burdens from the wealthier countries to the poorer countries (...) I think it is also partly an identity issue as the EU movement. Yeah, it could be both. I think because the identity of the EU is also really this feeling of, we are together and we share, you know, we share our values, but we also try to share our wealth, so that everybody can kind of have a better life.

Whereas the N-VA politician rejects solidarity, the Politico reporter advocates for it. And whereas the N-VA politician imagines Europe through a historical prism, the Politico reporter talks about identity and

morality. However, for both, it is their conception of Europe that determines their stance on the question of whether Belgium should or should not show budgetary solidarity. Both answer the budgetary question by invoking (a different interpretation of) European identity, rather than political-economic or financial arguments. Yet because their accounts of what constitutes this identity and how it ought to be put in practice are so radically different, they end up advocating for diametrically opposite policies.

These examples show that European identity and European values being shared across the political spectrum does not stifle political debate, because of diverging views on how this identity and these values should be put in practice. Belgium's pro-EU consensus simply provides a political context that participants in the public debate need to navigate using a variety of discursive strategies. Interestingly, both statements analyzed above also reproduce a certain power asymmetry and a hierarchy between north and south, between west and east, between rich and poor. Both imply a certain enlightened benevolence from the former, as the true heirs of the European identity, to the latter, who are almost-but-not-quite-fully European – they merely differ in whether this benevolence is best shown through the lesson of austerity or the gift of solidarity.

3.5. WEAPONIZING THE CONSENSUS

The examples above show how a pro-European consensus can still leave room for radically different policies: the identity and values around which there is consensus are abstract, general, and in need of concretization. This can be done in radically contradictory and opposite manners. But not only does Belgium's pro-EU consensus need to be navigated and concretized: it can also be weaponized against ideas and discourses deemed to be anti-European. Calling out a political opponent's stance as anti-European is a powerful and effective rhetorical move in Belgian politics, for it situates said opponent beyond the limits of what can legitimately be thought, said, or proposed in Belgian politics. He or she is in other words put in the position of the radical, who goes against the wishes of the people, and whose positions are squarely outside the window of political possibility. The result of this rhetorical strategy is often a discursive competition for who can be more "European".

An example of this can be found in the following statement of a Groen politician, who, out of a list of Q statements, picks the statements "The EU/ Belgium supports the culture of human rights, democracy, and LGBTQ" and "The EU/ Frontex does not respect human rights and pushes back

migrants at the border in Belarus" as the two statements she agrees with the most. There is obviously a paradox here: how can it simultaneously be true that the EU supports and violates human rights? She explains this paradox by arguing that when it comes to the issue of migration, "the EU is really sort of in conflict with itself in terms of respecting human rights". In other words, she blames Frontex and the EU for failing to live up to the democratic values that are part of the European identity by showing a lack of respect for human rights. She indirectly leverages the European identity and its values against those who (can be made to appear) to transgress them, in this case, Frontex. In other words, a distinction is made between the idea of Europe, which exists in Belgian memory, and which has long been conserved as an integral part of the Belgian national identity and the Belgian political debate, and the EU, as a concrete political attempt to incarnate these values. The "conserved" memory of a European idea, in the Foucauldian terms, is then "reactivated" and "appropriated" to be used against a specific EU policy.

Poland, Hungary, and the EU's more conservative member states are frequently victims of this rhetorical device. Their lack of support for LGBTQ + rights, projected as part of the European values, is frequently deemed 'non-European'. A concrete example can be found in the following statement by an Open VLD politician:

It is really a belief (...) It is a conviction of course that grew over time. If this kind of convictions evolve, if you had asked this a century ago, then of course support for LGBTQ rights would have been less for human rights, not so much that. But nowadays it is on average because there are always exceptions in the population, but on average it is well conceived, and people do not have a problem at all with it. (...) In the EU, you see a difference between Western Europe and Eastern Europe, I think. And this is just part of an evolution. I am sure that at some point in time the visions will come together towards accepting the fashion of LGBTQ.

She explicitly frames the lack of support for human and LGBTQ rights in Eastern Europe as an "exception". But Eastern Europe will necessarily evolve to support fundamental human rights like respect for the LGBTQ+ community – after all, these values are an integral part of what it means and entails to be European. In another example of the hierarchical account of Europe as having a core and a periphery, which was also seen in the solidarity example in the previous section, Eastern Europe is framed as old fashioned and lagging behind, but evolution and progress are teleological and inevitable. Interestingly, the EU's failure to address this 'non-European' stance in turn reduces the extent to which the EU itself can be understood as incarnating European values. What we see here is the

discursive weaponization of the European identity against Poland and Hungary.

(...) in the EU, many countries are supporting the culture of human rights, democracy and LGBTQ, but not all of them. I know, for example, in Hungary and Poland, we now see that some of these rights that we thought were completely obtained by everyone, are not fully supported throughout the EU.

The fact that both examples above are drawn from a Flemish context illustrates how powerful the weaponization of the European identity can be; in theory, the effect of this discursive strategy could be expected to be even stronger in the politics and the media of Francophone Belgium, where Euroskeptic discourses are even rarer than in the Flemish politics and media, and where accusations of euroscepticism would thus carry an even graver undertone.

3.6. SECURITIZING THE CONSENSUS

While Belgium's pro-European consensus is strong, it is not encompassing, and its effects can at times be weakened or escaped for a short period. One way in which politicians and journalists frequently do this is by invoking the need to be pragmatic. However, the most powerful discursive strategy through which European identity and European values are temporarily "turned off" is securitization. By casting a particular issue as a matter of (inter)national security, it can temporarily escape the normative implications of Belgium's pro-European consensus. An example can be found in the discourse of a Belga journalist, who argues that the EU's forceful approach to COVID vaccines does not constitute a turn towards totalitarianism. Despite the question simply being about COVID and having nothing to do with geopolitics, the respondent frames COVID as a "foreign aggressor", a metaphor used to transform the question into a security matter. He does so because in security matters, values and identities can temporarily be put aside, thereby allowing and excusing any behavior on the part of the EU that is not aligned with European values:

It is the fact that we face a virus, we face an invasion of a foreign aggressor. (...) It is more of trying to protect the wealth and the security that Europe has built on upon the last years, decades.

A different form of securitization can be found in the following statement by a *Contexte* journalist, as he explains why he is only moderately convinced by the claim that Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine should join the

EU because they are part of the European family and share a European culture:

Because, I mean, it is not the only reason that the EU and Belgium will support these countries. I think most issues are more like a geopolitical risk and stuff like that and the respect of EU law, international law. Um, but I think that one of the elements that goes (...) is something about the European family and some common cultural heritage.

The journalist does not contest the premise that Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine are part of the European family and share a European culture. However, in the context of Belgium's strong support for European integration, this would then imply that these countries should become EU members, and the journalist does not want to go that far. As such, he disempowers and turns off Belgium's pro-European consensus by framing the European identity as only "one of the elements that goes" in this debate, the other, seemingly more important element, being security concerns, which trump the pro-European consensus.

Securitization is a well-researched discursive phenomenon: it is well established that to frame a topic using geopolitical and security concerns tends to heighten its importance in the public debate and move it up the political agenda, and vice versa, that geopolitical and security-related issues tend to be the most salient and the most capable of capturing media and political attention (Vultee 2010). Above, we saw interviewees talk about public health and European integration as related to security, despite the fact that neither is remotely presented as such in the Q statement they were discussing. Yet, by securitizing these issues, their salience and their importance is discursively enhanced and previously inconsiderable courses of action become available.

In the statement quoted below, a member of N-VA party explains why he would support Georgian, Moldovan, and Ukrainian membership of the EU but would be more skeptical of Turkish EU membership by invoking geographical and historical considerations. He considers it necessary to reflect about the question in such fundamental terms because he argues that the geopolitical dimension of enlargement renders it more fundamental, more profound, slower, and, at the same time, more decisive than the conventional rhythm of day-to-day politics:

If they [Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine] adhere to that, to the requirements made by the European Union for extension, then it is okay. The only reserve I have is the geopolitical bounds of two different continents. [...] For instance, I do have a problem with Turkey. And the reason is, uh, there is only a small part

of Turkey which is actually located in the European continent, and that is after the division of the Ottoman Empire, after the First World War and the rise of the Turkish Republic. The founder of the Turkish Republic, Ataturk, actually wanted to model his country more to the West, and the idea was to ensure the survival of his country for the coming decades and centuries. So he was, in that sense, a bit of a pragmatist. It was also visionary. And when that happened, he did, he considered that a lot of the former Ottoman Empire territories were lost. [...] But then, of course, things start to evolve. And currently we see that either the political leadership, or the people who chose this political leadership, are geared to a certain extent towards a repeat of revisionism (N-VA).

Another respondent, a politician from the Flemish social democratic political party Vooruit, discusses the collective European purchase of gas prices in similar, albeit far less grandiose terms. There is no reference to century-old geopolitical events or to continental geography, and yet, in a far more mundane and understated fashion, geopolitics is once again conceptualized as something that underlies and structures regular politics, that operates at a more important and more profound level. Pragmatic considerations such as economic stances, energy supply, and bargaining power, as well as ideological considerations such as European collaboration and integration, are embedded in a geopolitical infrastructure, which she considers to be inherently unstable:

I generally think that from an economic point of view, it is just smarter to join forces and use our economic stance and power in the world or bargaining power as a collective organization. Regarding both Russia and the US and other providers of gas if we join forces. I strongly believe that is something we need to do in an unstable geopolitical world to ensure affordable gas prices (Vooruit).

The examples above illustrate how Belgium's pro-European consensus is instrumentalized by its political and media elites. The idea of Europe, European identity, and European values are widely loved and cherished in the Belgian public debate. But those notions are sufficiently ambiguous and vague to allow politicians and journalists to interpret, navigate, leverage, and appropriate them, and even weaponize them against opponents. They can even escape Belgium's pro-European consensus by using security arguments, which let them temporarily evade the limits on what can be said about 'Europe'.

4. SURVEY ANALYSIS: PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF EUROPEANIZATION

This section looks at how people in Belgium view the influence of Europeanization as it is presented through the media. To examine this, a nationwide survey was conducted between July 25 and August 18, 2023. In this section, media consumption patterns in Belgium, public knowledge of EU issues, media polarization, attachments to the EU, and perceptions of EU responsibility in key policy areas are examined, followed by an analysis of the media statements about the EU.

4.1. SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

The sample consists of 1,006 respondents, with 50% identifying as male and 50% as female. The respondents are categorized into six major age groups (18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, and 65+), with the largest cohort (24%) in the 65+ age group. Regarding educational attainment, 41% of the respondents hold a college, university, or other tertiary (third level) degree, while 36% have completed secondary education. A smaller percentage (7%) possess vocational qualifications, and 8% have either completed only primary education or did not complete primary school. The geographical distribution of respondents includes representation from all major regions: Brussels (11%), Flanders (57%), and Wallonia (32%).

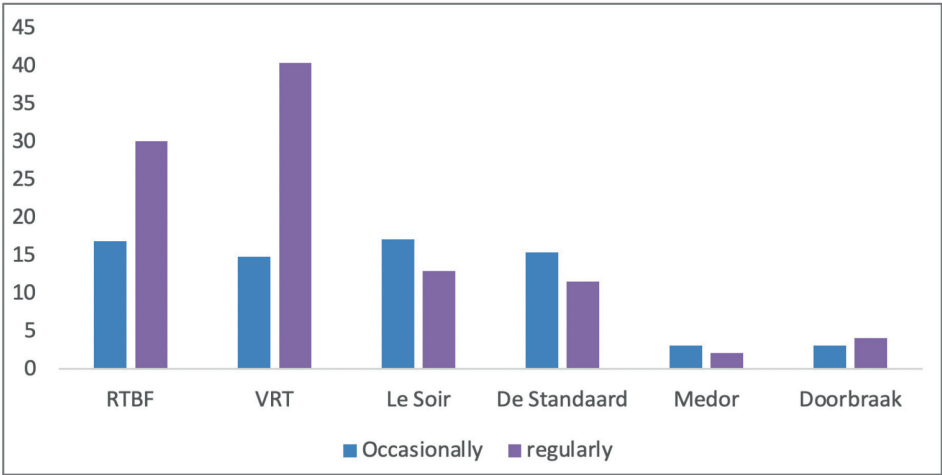
4.2. MEDIA CONSUMPTION IN BELGIUM

TV is the most commonly used media channel to consume news, and public TV and radio stations (including online ones) are the most trusted news sources in Belgium (Flash Eurobarometer 2023). The public service media organizations VRT (Flemish) and RTBF (Walloon) play a pivotal role in the Belgian media landscape, significantly contributing to shaping public opinion and perceptions. Nearly half of the respondents indicated that they either regularly or occasionally consume news from RTBF. Similarly, more than half of the respondents reported that they regularly or occasionally follow VRT. Belgian citizens exhibit a relatively lower level of interest in reading newspapers like *Le Soir* and *De Standaard*, with around a quarter to a third of respondents reporting readership. This trend aligns with the overall decline in print newspaper readership across Belgium, especially among popular newspapers (Connic *et al.* 2018; Flash Eurobarometer 2023).

Online news platforms come right after TV in citizens' preferences for consuming news. However, only a handful of small-scale online local outlets are available in Belgium, and most of them struggle to gain traction.

Nevertheless, Médor (left-leaning) and Doorbraak (right-leaning) stand out due to their distinct editorial lines, which diverge significantly from those of public broadcasters and traditional newspapers. Doorbraak, being more widely known, had a readership of approximately 7% of the respondents, whereas Médor was regularly or occasionally followed by around 5%. Trust in journalists and TV broadcasters in Belgium is high, ensuring that media outlets and actors continue to exert considerable influence on citizens' perspectives.

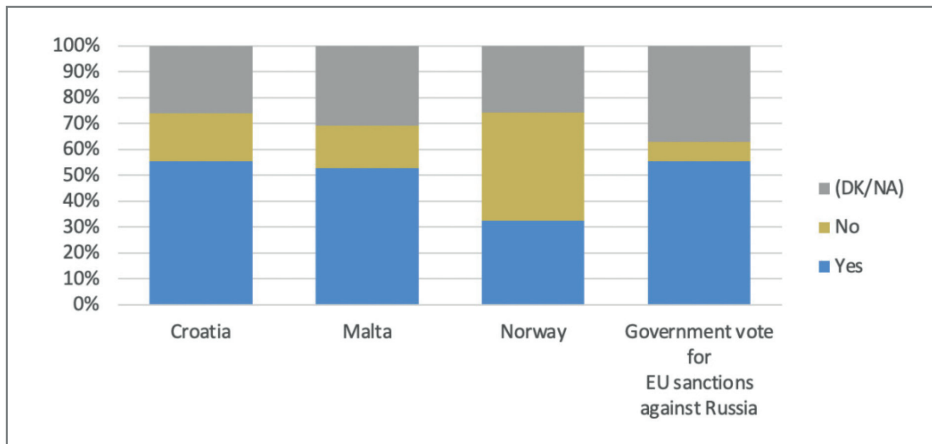
Figure 4. Media consumption among Belgian respondents



Recent Eurobarometer polls have shown that Belgian citizens consume EU-related news through media (Flash Eurobarometer 2023) and have a certain level of awareness regarding some EU-related matters. This awareness is particularly evident in areas like the sanctions imposed on Russia, with 55.6% of respondents aware that their national government supported these sanctions. However, it is important to note that significant gaps in knowledge remain (Figure 5). For example, over one-third of respondents either do not know or refuse to answer certain EU-related questions. More than 50% of respondents are unaware that Croatia and Malta are EU member states, with 30% not knowing that Malta joined the EU nearly 20 years ago. Additionally, many respondents incorrectly believe that non-EU countries such as Norway are part of the EU. Notably, Francophones demonstrate a higher level of knowledge on EU matters compared to their Flemish counterparts. The degree of knowledge about the EU correlates significantly with age and gender. Women are less

knowledgeable than men, and those over 65 have more knowledge than people aged 19 to 29.

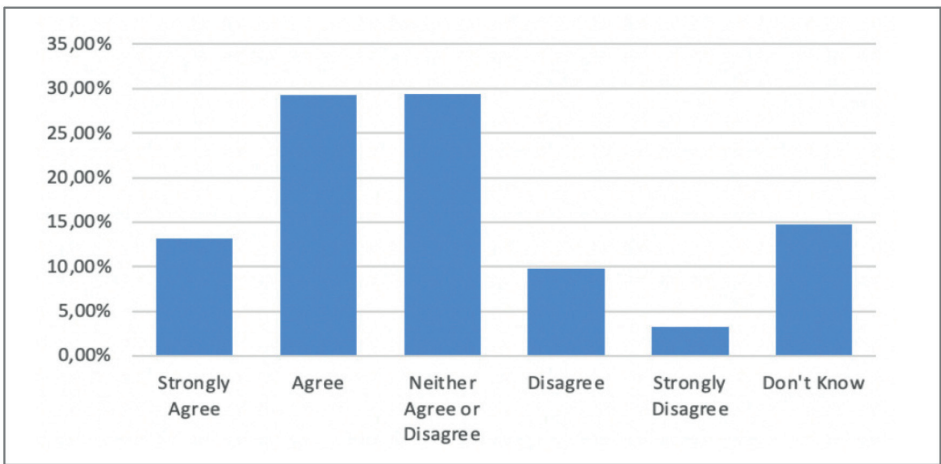
Figure 5. General knowledge about EU issues in Belgium. *Question wording: "Can you tell me whether the following countries are members of the European Union?" and "Q32. According to your knowledge, did Belgium's government vote for the latest round of EU sanctions against Russia during the Ukrainian war?"



4.3. MEDIA POLARIZATION IN BELGIUM

Only a small percentage of the population considers media coverage to be non-polarized. When asked whether the media coverage of politics in Belgium is polarized, nearly 42% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, compared to almost 30% who remained neutral and only 13% who disagreed or strongly disagreed. This could be due to a number of factors, including the growing prominence of right-wing editorial influence in some Belgian online media outlets, the commercialization of Flemish media, and the unpreparedness of the Belgian media landscape to tackle or deal with disinformation.

Figure 6. Perception of polarization of media coverage in Belgium (%)



4.4. ATTACHMENT TO THE EU

The proportion of respondents feeling attached to Europe is higher than the proportion of those who feel attached to the EU. This difference can partly be attributed to the tendency of political parties across the spectrum to use the EU as a convenient scapegoat, making it an easy target for criticism. This regular attribution of various issues to the EU contributes to a more critical public perception of the EU compared to the broader concept of Europe. Almost 60% of Belgians reported they feel either somewhat or very attached to Europe, whereas the percentage decreased to 47% when it comes to feeling attached or somewhat attached to the EU. Narrowed down to the language groups, the data revealed several important findings: Francophones (around 18%) have a stronger sense of attachment to the EU than Flemish citizens (11.3%). Despite a moderate level of attachment to the EU, Belgians strongly disagree with the idea of leaving the EU, and discussions about the EU are framed by Belgium's continued membership and the citizens' European identity. There is a strong consensus among the population that the EU should uphold core values, such as human rights and LGBTQI+ rights, and provide humanitarian assistance to Ukraine in response to the war caused by Russia.

4.5. PERCEPTION OF STATEMENTS ABOUT THE EU

The section below outlines preferences for the various statements that were presented to the respondents for ranking on a Likert scale. 19

statements deriving from the dominant discourses identified during media analysis were provided, nine of which were unique to the Belgian case. The statements covered a wide range of topics, from COVID-19, sovereignty, and LGBTI+ rights to EU membership, Frontex, and foreign policy. As a result of factor analysis of survey responses to the 19 media statements, four factors with eigenvalue above 1 emerged.

Table 2. Statements and factors concerning the EU (rotated component matrix)

	Only 0.3 or more			
Statements	C1	C2	C3	C4
The EU has an important role in protecting human rights and democracy in Belgium	0.4020			
The EU threatens Belgium's national identity and related traditional values		0.4719		
The EU has a positive role in Belgium's economic development	0.4554			
The EU intrudes in Belgium's internal affairs and endangers its sovereignty		0.4622		
The EU increases Belgium's security in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine	0.3943			
Belgium should leave the EU		0.4315		
The EU has helped the better management of the COVID-19 crisis	0.4183			
The EU lacks solidarity and unity		0.4696		
The EU plays an important role in providing humanitarian assistance to Ukraine				
Some member states' deviation from the European course endangers the EU				
FRONTEx does not respect human rights			0.5464	

	Only 0.3 or more			
Statements	C1	C2	C3	C4
Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine should be part of the EU			0.3629	
An increase in the EU budget benefits Belgium				
The EU collectively better handles energy prices, crisis and geo-political issues compared to individual EU countries	0.3098			
The EU has implemented totalitarian top-down vaccination regulations				
The EU should continue supporting human rights, democracy and LGBTQ worldwide			0.4072	
EU expansion in Eastern Europe caused the escalation in Ukraine				0.5975
NATO expansion in Eastern Europe caused the escalation in Ukraine				0.5986
Russia caused the war in Ukraine			0.4784	

The first and the most powerful factor labeled as "Stronger together" consists of five statements that discuss the strength that comes from European unity. This component contains statements on various issues, including the protection of human rights, strengthening the Belgian economy, EU's role as a security actor in the context of the war in Ukraine, tackling the COVID-19 crisis, and managing energy prices. Most of them are pragmatic but one is also identity related. The core idea of this factor is that collective work within the Union produces greater results than acting alone, despite the fact that the topics are varied. Similar to findings from the media and elite interview analysis in Belgium, the war in Ukraine appears to be again promoting a convergence of public perceptions of the EU, while pragmatic considerations continue to provide an "overarching" argument for different topics.

In contrast to the first factor, the second factor, labeled as "Euroskepticism", contains negative statements, such as those describing the EU being a threat to the national identity, traditional values and sovereignty of Belgium, and the EU lacking solidarity and unity. This factor also includes the statement that "Belgium should leave the EU", which is one of the statements that saw the least agreement among all the respondents. It should also be emphasized that the Belgian elites largely disagreed with these Euroskeptic statements during the interview stage.

The third factor reflects an optimistic view toward the EU but with notable reservations, which is why it is labeled "Conditional EU Optimism". This perspective emphasizes the positive role the EU should play, such as advocating for the membership of countries like Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, as well as its support for LGBTQ rights, human rights, and democracy. At the same time, it voices concerns about specific EU actions, such as the criticism that "Frontex does not respect human rights", indicating a belief that the EU falls short in certain areas. While the statement "Russia caused the war in Ukraine" absolves the EU of direct responsibility for the conflict, it still frames the EU in a positive light by suggesting that its actions are not to blame. Overall, this group is optimistic about the EU's potential, but their optimism is tempered by concerns about human rights and governance, making it conditional on addressing these issues.

The last factor, called "Western Expansionism", consists of two statements that blame the expansion of NATO and the EU in Eastern Europe for provoking the war in Ukraine. These statements reflect the narrative that the EU and NATO's growing presence in the region directly led to the conflict. This viewpoint is most likely shaped by anti-Western and anti-EU rhetoric, often propagated by Russian media and state-sponsored narratives. Russian propaganda has consistently framed NATO and EU expansion as a threat to regional stability, fostering skepticism and opposition within certain groups. It is important to note that these statements also represent one of the least agreed-upon positions among Belgian politicians and media actors.

To summarize, on the one hand, pro-European sentiment is strongly present and pragmatic considerations continue to be the overarching arguments on a range of issues, including the economy, the energy crisis, and COVID-19, similar to the findings of the elite interview analysis. However, the issue of migration, and particularly criticism of Frontex, complicates this positive outlook. Frontex's handling of EU migration and accusations of human rights violations introduce a degree of skepticism,

contributing to what is termed "Conditional EU Optimism". This factor reflects support for the EU's broader goals, but with significant reservations about specific policies, particularly regarding migration and human rights. These reservations create a form of optimism that is contingent on the EU addressing these concerns, especially in areas like border control and human rights, which remain controversial topics within the context of Europeanization.

5. CONCLUSION

While Belgium's pro-EU consensus necessarily limits what can be said about Europe, Belgium's federalized system, its complex media landscape, and the abstract nature of this consensus leave room for a variety of discourses on the EU and the European Project. Politicians and journalists therefore need a variety of discursive strategies to navigate, instrumentalize, and even weaponize the consensus on the EU and the European project.

Belgium's media landscape is strongly shaped by its federal political system and linguistic divide, which in turn influences political and media discourses surrounding the EU and the European Project. Mainstream media outlets on both sides of the country generally adopt a pro-EU stance. The convergence between the Flemish and Francophone media is most apparent on security-related topics, where a similar evolution in the public debate took place in both parts of the country. In Flanders' more competitive media market, EU-critical discourses are mostly apparent in specific media. In Wallonia there is a more coordinated boycotting of far-right parties, fostering a rhetoric with less anti-EU sentiments. The understanding of Europe in the Belgian political and media landscape is sometimes shaken by geopolitical events and crises such as COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine, which may impact differently across linguistic divides.

On a political level, similarly strong support for the EU is readily apparent, particularly concerning core values and collective actions. Even right-leaning conservative parties are showing increasing pro-EU sentiments. Even though critical perspectives on specific EU policies, such as migration and responses to the war in Ukraine, exist, the European project remains highly consensual, unifying conservative and liberal actors across linguistic lines despite population's belief that the elites should be more unified. As such, the Belgian public debate about EU politics takes place in the context of a pro-European consensus and a universal investment in the European identity and European values. This makes the public and media debate more pro-European than public opinion as

expressed in a nationwide survey. While, in public survey data, a pro-European majority exists on all levels, support for the EU is linked to linguistic divisions, with Francophone respondents generally displaying higher levels of EU knowledge and support. European security is strongly linked to geopolitical events such as the war in Ukraine. High levels of trust in journalists and in the EU indicate a nuanced and complex democratic relationship between citizens and authorities.

While the overarching sentiment among Belgian elites leans heavily pro-European, this support is multifaceted, variegated, and subject to interpretation. Belgium's pro-European climate is complex and puts a variety of different discursive strategies at the disposal of politicians and journalists alike. A strong sense of European identity is frequently emphasized to advocate for further European integration. However, within the framework of Belgium's pro-European consensus, disagreements often emerge regarding the practical implementation of those collective European values and policies. Moreover, the pro-European consensus in Belgium is often weaponized against ideas and discourses deemed to be anti-European. Calling out opponents as anti-European can serve as a potent rhetorical device, positioning dissenting voices outside the bounds of legitimate political discourse. This tactic reinforces the hegemonic nature of the pro-European narrative in the Belgian politics and media. Finally, securitization can temporarily shift public and political focus, leading to moments where concerns about national security or external threats override Belgium's usual pro-European consensus, allowing more critical or skeptical perspectives on the EU to surface.

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Chapter 3

Mediatized Discourses on Europeanization in Estonia

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SUMARIO: 1. INTRODUCTION: POLITICAL AND MEDIA LANDSCAPE. 1.1. *The impact of societal polarization on political and media discourses.* 2. MEDIA DISCOURSES ON EUROPEANIZATION. 3. ELITE INTERVIEWS. 4. SURVEY ANALYSIS: POPULAR SUPPORT FOR THE EUROPEAN PROJECT. 4.1. *Media consumption.* 4.2. *Conservative and liberal views and political engagement.* 4.3. *General perceptions of political affairs and the EU.* 4.4. *Public perceptions of EU-related statements.* 5. CONCLUSION. REFERENCES.

1. INTRODUCTION: POLITICAL AND MEDIA LANDSCAPE

The core objectives of this research were to understand how the Estonian public, political elites and media conceive of Europeanization, whether they support or oppose further EU integration, and which future vision of the European Union more closely aligns with their preferences. The chapter analyses Estonian media discourses on Europeanization as well as the results of in-depth interviews with political and media elites and data from a population survey concerning Europeanization in Estonia during the period of 2021-2023. Our main finding is that, even though the

Europeanization process in Estonia after the EU accession in 2004 has been overall consistently supported by the majority of the Estonian society¹, media, and political elites, further ethnic and ideological polarization could potentially encourage more Euroskeptical outcomes. A strong Euroskeptical challenge has been identifiable in the Estonian discursive space since 2004 and if this circumstance is not taken into consideration, the analysis of the conceptions of Europeanization in Estonia might yield misleading results. It is also notable that support for the EU tends to increase in times of crisis, such as the pro-Russian riots of 2007 or the COVID-19 pandemic (Mölder *et al.* 2023).

There seem to be two sources that produce Euroskepticism in Estonia – influences coming from the Russian Federation, including historical background and memory, and the nationalist-protectionist wave that has strengthened in Europe after the 2007-2009 economic crisis, especially with the advent of Brexit and the European migration crisis. In order to consider different segments of an increasingly polarized society, besides the mainstream public, we pay attention to two specific identity communities – the Russophone community consisting of the Russian-speaking population in Estonia (around 30% of total population) and the Estonian ethnonationalist community, a relatively new phenomenon based on the most conservative segments of the society who are opposed to European integration from the nationalist-protectionist perspective. Euro-optimist and Euroskeptical attitudes are significantly related to the ideological polarization between the conservative-nationalist circles emphasizing Traditionalist-Protectionist policies and the liberal-cosmopolitan circles emphasizing Progressive-Integrationist policies. According to polls and election results during the research period, the support for Euroskeptical parties has increased slightly, fluctuating between 15 and 25%.

The regular surveys conducted by the Estonian Ministry of Defense (2023) on national defense and societal issues confirm stable support for EU and NATO membership over the years since accession in 2004². According to the surveys, the overall trust in the EU and NATO has remained relatively high, but the Estonian-speaking population sees the European integration in a more positive light than the Russophone community. Estonian-speakers rely more on NATO than the EU, at least on security issues, while Russian-speakers tend to distrust NATO more than the EU, even though the support for NATO has constantly grown. Trust in the EU has started to

1. Support for the European Union has since 2004, with some fluctuations, been constantly expressed by about two thirds of Estonian society.
2. National Defence and Society yearly surveys can be found from <https://kaitseministeerium.ee/en/objectives-activities/national-defence-and-society>.

grow in Estonian society since the COVID-19 pandemic, and trust in NATO saw growth after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The majority of the population makes a significant distinction between the EU and NATO in security issues, identifying the EU primarily as an economic institution and NATO as the main security guarantee for Estonia, while the number of those who identify the EU as a security guarantee has decreased (Estonian Ministry of Defense 2023).

In Estonia, media is generally privately owned, although there is also a Public Service Broadcaster with television and radio channels (ERR), as well as some municipal media outlets. Another more recent trend is that media are moving to primarily online spaces, while the impact of printed media is progressively decreasing. Data from the Estonian Media Association shows a surge in digital subscriptions. In September 2019 there were around 76,000 digital subscriptions to Estonian media, while by autumn 2020 the number was around 120,000 (Kõnno 2020). According to 2022 Eurobarometer statistics, 54% of the population uses internet sources and 30% use social media as the prime source for news, which is above the EU average compared to 66% of TV users, 35% radio users and 17% of printed media users, which is below the EU average (European Commission 2022). Estonia dropped from fourth place in 2022 to eighth place in 2023 in the RSF Press Freedom Index (Reporters Without Borders 2023) due to perceived risks of anti-defamation cases or cyber bullying, yet it remains among the countries with the freest press globally.

1.1. THE IMPACT OF SOCIETAL POLARIZATION ON POLITICAL AND MEDIA DISCOURSES

The Western world has always retained a strong position in Estonia, even during the Soviet occupation when the Baltic states were often called the Soviet West. After Estonian re-independence the aim was to return to the West (Lauristin *et al.* 1997). In principle, Europeaness by identifying the Estonian society as a part of European civilization, is widely accepted by all communities although there is criticism regarding the EU, European integration and liberal-democratic values, which are frequently emphasized as European values. The social values of Estonian society tend to remain closer to Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries with whom Estonia shares its communist past (Hajdu & Klingova 2020).

However, in the era of societal polarization, it would not be correct to focus solely on the mainstream society and ignore alternative streams. If loyalty to certain distinct views is permanent and related to a unique long-run identity affiliation, we can speak of a separate community (Ashmore *et*

al. 2004; Ritzer 2007; Zhang *et al.* 2017). These parallel communities can be 'imagined communities,' socially constructed and imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of a group (Anderson 1991, 6-7). Especially when relying on divergent media spaces, they may also produce contrasting beliefs and perceptions.

The Russophone community includes people that mainly use the Russian language (e.g. ethnic Russians, Ukrainians, Belarussians, Tatars, Jews) and makes up 29.6% of the Estonian population (Włodarska-Frykowska 2016), compared with 21.55% ethnic Russians that are part of the Estonian population (Statistikaamet 2021). The society became divided into Estonian and Russophone communities as a result of the Soviet occupation, when the number of Russians grew from 8.2% in 1934 to 30.3% in 1989. These communities never fully integrated and manifested contrasting identities with their own culture, historical memory, values, and traditions. The Russophone community was strongly influenced by Russian Federation media channels until their broadcasting in Estonia was banned in 2022 due to Russia's war against Ukraine. For example, in January 2020, polls identified that the Russian-speaking minority watched mostly Russian state-affiliated channels: RTR Planeta (13.5%), the PBK (12.3%) and NTV Mir (9.6%), whereas ETV+ (the Estonian Public Service Russian language channel) reached only around 1% of Russophone viewers (Bahovski 2020).

The ideological divisions in the Estonian political landscape are more appropriately described along Conservative-Nationalist versus Liberal-Cosmopolitan lines than the left-right divide. The roots of Euroskepticism in Estonia are related to the emergence of the Estonian ethnonationalist community. Their ideology is part of the broader Conservative-Nationalist ideological agenda that appeared in the mid-2010s as a societal reaction to globalization, promoting nationalist, protectionist, nativist, anti-environmentalist and anti-immigration views (Eger & Valdez 2014). The ethnonationalist community mainly supports the ideology of the Estonian Conservative People's Party (EKRE) and remains strongly Euroskeptic. It has actively turned to alternative and social media channels, which offer more Euroskeptic, nationalist, isolationist and protectionist views compared to the mainstream media (Postimees 2018). In Estonia, the primary question for Euroskeptic circles is not whether to leave the EU, but rather revolves around criticism of liberal democratic values and practices associated with the EU. Even when EKRE was a part of the government (March 2019 – January 2021), they continued to disseminate alternative and mostly anti-European discourses, which often conflicted with the policies of the government to which they belonged.

Alternative political ideology here refers to political engagement that is culturally specific and historically embedded yet exists mostly outside the standard political parties and institutional fora (Slater & Steinhoff 2024), while mainstream politics is represented by political elites that transfer their views to the audience through various power instruments (e.g. government policies, media, legislation). Alternative media thus articulates ideological and political viewpoints that are in some sense dissonant from those of the mainstream media (Downing 2001). There are political leaders who make use of alternative media and make it increasingly relevant in mainstream political communication (Atkinson *et al.* 2022). Alternative (populist) politics are built on the political logic of 'the people' vs 'the elite', where the elite represents an allegedly illegitimate powerful group (De Cleen 2019) that currently holds power. Populist alternatives pick up and play on public expectations on various social issues (i.e. migration, LGBTQ, green deal, pandemic restrictions) by antagonizing the suspected intentions of ruling political elites.

The dichotomy of mainstream vs. alternative is also characteristic of media consumption that may describe how members of a group converge around a specific action such as watching a particular news channel (European Commission 2023). Traditional mainstream media outlets have been challenged by newcomers in a hybrid media system where technology allows social media to have increasing influence which can negatively impact on news consumption, especially for young people (European Commission 2023). New media tools and logics are efficiently used by alternative political movements to reach the public through populist rhetoric and create opportunities for the diffusion of polarizing forces and views into mainstream media in addition to alternative media platforms. Populist alternative media thus plays a significant role in shaping discourses and reinforcing polarizing ideologies amongst those already polarized and could play a growing role in political radicalization (European Commission 2023).

The ideological polarization is also characteristic of the Estonian media market, which encourages a dichotomy between mainstream and alternative media. The alternative media has been efficient in disseminating Euroskeptic discourses. The conservative-nationalist agenda is mainly found in marginal outlets, although in recent years one of the significant mainstream publications (Postimees) has tilted toward the conservative-nationalist side, albeit not consistently (Mölder *et al.* 2023). There are signs of an ongoing process of "mainstreamization" by which several Conservative-Nationalist narratives promoted by alternative political movements have been gradually accepted by the rest of the society as they

appear more frequently in mainstream media (Naxera 2023). The mainstreaming of alternative discourses indicates that the integration of the ethnonationalist community into the broader Estonian society occurs through the gradual adoption of populist narratives by the mainstream public, and there is almost no evidence indicating that mainstream narratives are somehow adopted by the ethnonationalist outlets. Therefore, in addition to mainstream media, this chapter considers the role of alternative (ethnic and ideological) communities in shaping perception of Europeanization, as these narratives may significantly differ from the majority held views.

2. MEDIA DISCOURSES ON EUROPEANIZATION

The selection for the media analysis included eight outlets in Estonia based on the popularity and diversity. In Estonia the Euroskeptical views can be just rarely met in the mainstream media, which is why specific outlets that differ from the mainstream on the issues of interest for the research have been included. Russian language media is relevant due to not only the large proportion of Russian speakers in Estonia but also the fact that media content is known to differ between the Estonian language and Russian language media. Therefore, four outlets represent the mainstream Estonian community, and four outlets Russophone and ethnonationalist ones. The sampling period of media analysis covers three months before and three months after local elections. ERR (Estonian Public Broadcasting) is a public service media financed from the state budget. Other outlets are owned by private enterprises. Eesti Päevaleht (a joint newsroom with the news portal Delfi) represents AS Ekspress Group. Postimees represents AS Postimees Group, including an online portal and a TV station. Õhtuleht is the largest daily newspaper in Estonia, owned in equal shares by the Ekspress Group and another private company the Alexela Group. All these mainstream outlets have promoted increasingly pro-European discourses as Estonian society has been more and more integrated to European institutions. In addition to the mainstream outlets, two outlets representing the Estonian ethnonationalist community (Uued Uudised, Objektiiv) and two Russian language outlets RusDelfi and MK Estonia representing the Russophone community have been included.

The discursive units identified in this study are based on quantitative content analysis of the eight media outlets. The research was supported by the private research engine Station.ee. The content analysis mapped the important subject areas, the sub-topics (keywords) in the articles, and the important nodes on which the various arguments (arguments for and against) were made. The majority of analyzed pieces qualify as either

commentary or opinion pieces (53%) or news (34%), but reportages and interviews have also been represented. The EU discourse of the major dailies and portals during the period under study was characterized by a routine mirroring of the official Estonian government line, displaying an avoidance of debates and sharp questions on official policy, and the propagandistic anti-EU bashing by 'alternative' publications. The Estonian news media has mostly avoided discourses about the deeper substance of the EU and its principal rules and regulations. Given the authors' deep knowledge and familiarity with the Estonian media and journalism sector, we note that instead of ideational debates, press releases from government agencies dominated in media discourses, as EU issues were regarded as too abstract and uninteresting for the everyday news agenda.

The media analysis involved qualitative content analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA). In total, 3,454 items have been identified, of which 1,918 (55.53%) were classified as pro-European and 1,536 (44.47%) were classified as anti-European. Furthermore, 1,669 items (48.32%) could be labelled as more identitarian and 1,785 (51.68%) as referring to more pragmatic discourses. The large number of anti-European discourses (Table 1) may be caused by the fact that these topics have been more actively discussed in the Euroskeptical media. The discourses manifest as pro-European as well as anti-European stances, and there are just slightly more pro-European discourses represented than opposite ones, even though six of the eight outlets are pro-European. Additionally, the number of pragmatic and identitarian discourses was almost equal. The study identifies that identitarian discourses are more represented in the Euroskeptical media. Therefore, anti-European stances became more visible in the media discussion and the Euroskeptical community became more vocal in shaping public attitudes in Estonia (Table 1).

Table 1. Media discourses in the selected outlets

Media Outlets	Total number of discourses	Pro-European discourses	Anti-European discourses
ERR	408	296 (72,5%)	112 (27,4%)
Eesti Päevaleht/Delfi	280	262 (93,6%)	18 (6,4%)
Postimees	390	380 (97,4%)	10 (2,6%)
Õhtuleht	269	189 (70,3%)	80 (29,7%)
Uued Uudised/Objektiiv	1130	213 (18,8%)	917 (81,2%)

Media Outlets	Total number of discourses	Pro-European discourses	Anti-European discourses
Rus.Delfi	417	400 (95,9%)	17 (4,1%)
MK Estonia	325	292 (89,8%)	33 (10,2%)

The influence of alternative outlets in the media market is increasing and they have been very active in marketing their ideological agenda. Table 1 indicates that only alternative outlets Uued Uudised and Objektiiv have been strongly Euroskeptic. The ideological polarization between more conservative and more liberal parts of the society is strongly mirrored in the media discourses and may refer to divergent and even incompatible understandings of Europeanization. Among mainstream outlets, ERR and Õhtuleht were more open to accommodating anti-European discourses than other mainstream outlets. This can be explained by their focus on economic and environmental issues, which produce more criticism of the EU's positions while security-related discourses display mostly pro-European attitudes. The number of anti-European discourses published in Eesti Päevaleht/Delfi (including their Russian channel Rus.Delfi) and Postimees was minimal and even in the Russophone outlet MK Estonia relatively few such discourses were present. Coverage of European issues tended to be more formal in EPL/Delfi and Postimees. They focused more on security issues than economics and environment, which makes them overwhelmingly pro-European according to the discourses analyzed. As confirmed by our study, Russophone outlets in general were quite pro-European, but these outlets do not necessarily represent the full picture of media influence on the Russophone community, as the study did not include the influence of external media from the Russian Federation which were banned in Estonia after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. However, at the same time, the Russophone media in Estonia was more open to Russian-friendly and conservative discourses than the mainstream Estonian-language media.

Thirteen discursive units (see Table 2) have been identified based on quantitative content analysis. These discourses represent both pragmatic and identity considerations. Three discursive units have been classified as identitarian, six as pragmatic, two as pragmatic-identitarian and one as identitarian-pragmatic. Discourses on the war in Ukraine and the Belarus refugee crisis are not measured in the identitarian vs pragmatic scale as these discourses are situational.

Table 2. Major, adjacent and counter-discourses in the Estonian media

Discursive unit	Major Discourse	Adjacent discourse	Counter-discourse
1. Estonia's European identity (Identitarian).	Estonia is a Western (European) country. Preserving cultural identity plays a central role in the European integration process.	The Soviet occupation distanced Estonia from Europe.	Estonian politicians consciously self-present as pro-EU at the expense of national identity.
2. Estonian values - Nordic or East European? (Identitarian).	Estonia shares European values, common to the EU.	Estonia shares a more similar identity with Nordic countries. There is an identity gap between "old European countries" (including Nordic countries) and newcomers from Central and Eastern Europe.	Estonia shares specific (and Euroskeptic) values with Central and Eastern European countries (especially Poland and Hungary).
3. The role of Russian Federation in Estonia's European integration (Identitarian-pragmatic).	Russia attempts to make Estonia deviate from the European path.	The EU protects Estonia against Russian influence.	Estonia and Russia share a common history and Christian faith.
4. Membership in the EU strengthens Estonia's security (Pragmatic).	The EU is a security guarantor against the Russian threat.	The EU helps to protect Estonia's territorial integrity.	Euro-Atlantic integration is imposed from outside.
5. The EU's role in promoting human rights and liberal values (Pragmatic).	The EU supports the protection of human rights in Estonia.	The EU protects minority rights in Estonia.	European integration is a source of Estonia's moral degradation and European liberal

Discursive unit	Major Discourse	Adjacent discourse	Counter-discourse
	Estonia shares the same values with the EU.		values are a threat to Estonian identity.
6. The EU is promoting “green deal” policies” (Pragmatic-identitarian).	The EU’s green deal strategy deserves to be implemented in Estonia.	The EU’s green deal strategy is recognized, but unrealistic.	The green deal policies are supporting “the liberal plot” in Europe.
7. The EU stands against the migration crisis (Pragmatic-identitarian).	The EU is solving the migration crisis.	The EU protects migrants’ rights.	Migration is a threat against the Estonian identity.
8. The EU supports free movement of its citizens (Pragmatic).	The Schengen agreement has opened borders for free movement.		Free movement across borders encourages migration and transnational crime.
9. The EU's role in Estonia's economic development (Pragmatic).	EU membership has a positive impact on Estonia’s economy.	Joining the Eurozone has strengthened Estonia’s economy.	EU membership damages Estonia’s economy and fiscal sovereignty.
10. The EU's role in the management of the COVID-19 pandemic (Pragmatic).	The EU supports Estonia in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 pandemic had a big impact on the course of European integration.	The EU shares important information related to COVID-19.	There is a lack of cooperation in the EU concerning COVID-19.
11. The EU’s interference in Estonia’s domestic affairs (Pragmatic).	EU regulations are necessary for the modernization of Estonia.		Estonia knows better which reforms and laws need to be established.
12. Estonia and the EU threatened by the Belarus refugee crisis.	The EU supports Poland and Lithuania in fighting	The EU reinforces border security.	The EU has failed in standing against hybrid attacks on its border.

Discursive unit	Major Discourse	Adjacent discourse	Counter-discourse
	against hybrid attacks.		
13. Estonian and EU security is threatened by the war in Ukraine.	The EU provides large-scale aid to Ukraine.	The EU has started accession negotiations with Ukraine.	The EU is hesitant in providing necessary support to Ukraine.

The division between pragmatic and identitarian concerns is not always black and white. Ideological affiliation may to some extent influence the designation of considerations as identitarian or pragmatic. For instance, several characteristically pragmatic discourses are not regarded as such according to the conservative-traditional agenda, but instead are associated with the left-liberal ideology (implying the influence of a certain political identity), related to environmentalist and globalist pro-migration attitudes. For example:

The [study of grocery chains in Estonia] project is financed by the European Economic Area's Active Citizens Fund, which is mediated by the Open Estonia Fund in cooperation with the Association of Non-Governmental Organizations. Most of the participants are clearly bearers of left-liberal ideology. (*Uued uudised*, 15.02.22).

The systematic opposition to green deal policies, migration or LGBT community strongly characterizes the guiding principles of the ethnonationalist community.

It is sad for sovereign Estonia how Estonia's own projects burn because of the European Union's green policy, while Rail Baltic, which the ordinary citizen of Estonia does not particularly benefit from, is given preference. (*Uued uudised*, 18.12.2021).

In an example of ideological polarization between conservative and liberal communities, Poland and Hungary are portrayed as defending traditional and conservative values.

The second point is the rejection of migrants – although Poland gets fire and tar on its neck from the left-liberals in Brussels for this, it is still the right way, because if you start accepting migrants, process their applications and then try to send them back, then things will end up like Greece full of migrant camps. (*Uued uudised*, 12.12.2021).

The LGBTQ issues have been excluded from the selection of discourses, having been covered almost exclusively by Euroskeptic outlets with almost no coverage in mainstream outlets.

The first set of discourses in Table 2 (1-5) refers to the sense of Europeanness, including culture and geopolitics. While almost all discourses overwhelmingly identify the Estonian culture as a part of European culture, keeping and preserving a national cultural identity still plays a crucial role. The identitarian discourses associate Estonian cultural identity with European history, Western cultural space and the Christian tradition. The pragmatic discourse relies on Estonia's geopolitical position, which has been seen in constant danger, as Estonia strongly identifies itself as a border country on the eastern border of the EU. The second set of discourses (6-11) focuses on pragmatic issues related to the European project like economics, healthcare, migration or free movement issues. During the ideological polarization, they may sometimes also take an identitarian format (e.g. green deal). Finally, two special discursive units in the Estonian media can be identified: 1. The 2021-2022 Belarus–European Union border crisis lasted throughout the sampling period, which made it a crucial security issue in the Estonian media discourses closely related to the EU's border security; 2. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which started in February 2022, has had a wide impact on Estonian media discourses, but the media analysis covered only the first months of the war, and these impacts are more evident in the next stages of the research – elite interviews and population survey.

The Estonian media primarily reflects current global or European topics, such as at different times the Belarussian refugee crisis; fight against COVID-19; fight against disinformation; the war in Ukraine and Brussel's support for Ukraine; the ecological crisis and implementation of the "green deal". Both pragmatic and identitarian views are represented, but the identitarian discourses occur with greater frequency in Euroskeptic outlets. European values have been important factors in both supportive and critical discourses regarding the European project. Some general implicit assumptions seem to prevail in both pro- and anti-European discourses, such as "Estonia is a European country" (pro-European discourse) vs "European liberal values endanger Estonian culture" (anti-European discourse), which may refer to opposing assessments on the European identity vs European integration (in other words European civilization vs the European Union) scale. The Europeanness in its broader sense does not necessarily support the European integration.

The alternative channels question mainstream interpretations of the EU and Europeanness, but they do not offer competitive discourses for refuting the mainstream understanding of Europeanness. Instead, they complain about the EU's attempts to reduce the sovereign decisions of individual countries. Another dividing issue is Russia-related, in which Western European countries are often suspected of openness toward cooperation with Russia. The dichotomy between "old European countries" (which joined the EU before 2004) and the CEE countries is often referred to in Euroskeptical discourses. Conservative publicist Lauri Vahtré noted that the Eastern enlargement actually made the European Union stronger.

The last major expansion of the European Union, which also included us, put a great economic burden on the "old" Europe, which has not been completely overcome until now. Among other things, the expansion also meant a noticeable lengthening of the eastern border of the European Union and a sharp shift to the east. In theory, such a thing cannot be good for the security of Western Europe. Atypically, however, this (weakening) expansion has rather strengthened Europe's eastern border. Thanks to Poland, which probably is the last notable power in Europe that knows exactly what to expect from the East and how to counter it. (ERR, 15.11.2021).

Analyzing these discourses through the prism of key aspects of the Foucauldian framework (Foucault 1991), including notions of *sayable*, *conservation*, *memory*, *reactivation*, and *appropriation*, reveals a remarkable level of ideological polarization between liberal-cosmopolitan and conservative-nationalist (or traditionalist-protectionist) discourses in Estonian media.

Sayable: The liberal (pro-European) discourses state that the EU preserves liberal values associated with the European project and builds a cooperative framework for handling crises and instabilities. The conservative (Euroskeptical) discourses idealize traditionalist values, nation-states, sovereignty and national identity. The key is either building trust or distrust regarding EU policies and achievements. The image of "declining Europe" has often been associated with conservative discourses.

Conservation: The polarization between liberal and conservative discourses remains sustainable throughout the period, with no intention visible either to reach agreement between opposing sides or mitigate polarised views.

Memory: The liberal and conservative discourses follow their own logic in image-building and representing historical narratives through discourses. The focus of Euroskeptical discourses has been on amplifying

threats coming from the EU (i.e. migration, LGBT, green deal) rather than presenting national alternatives.

Reactivation: The pro-European discourses focus increasingly on pragmatic issues and practical outcomes of EU membership, while the Euroskeptic discourses stress the necessity to preserve nationalist identity against external threats and influences. This explains a strong representation of identitarian issues in the Euroskeptic media.

Appropriation: Conservative/nationalist actors attempt to "mainstream" their discourses (to force others to accept their narratives) rather than to find compromises with the liberal/cosmopolitan opponents. They have been efficient in disseminating alternative discourses which successfully compete with the mainstream narratives.

3. ELITE INTERVIEWS

Interviews with Estonian political and media elites were conducted in February–March 2023 in the context of parliamentary elections on 5 March 2023. 48 interviews incorporating Q methodology were completed with Estonian political and media actors face to face and online. The sample was roughly divided in half to represent politicians and journalists of different genders and different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. As a result, 26 politicians (nine of them female) from the Reform Party (Reformierakond), the Centre Party (Keskerakond), the Conservative People's Party (EKRE), Isamaa (Patria) and Social Democratic Party (SDE) were interviewed. These included one minister in office, several MPs, one Parliament party leader, former ministers, a Deputy Mayor and several municipality councilors from Tallinn. There were altogether 22 journalists (nine of them female) who represented all the major dailies such as Postimees, Eesti Päevaleht, internet portals Delfi.ee, rusDelfi.ee and business daily Äripäev. The sample also included journalists from liberally leaning monthly outlet Mõõrileht, independent media portals Edasi.org and Feministeerium, commercial TV channel TV3 and the public broadcasting company ERR, including channels in Russian – ETV+ and Radio 4.

25 statements derived from the dominant discourses identified in the media analysis stage were chosen to be ranked and discussed in the interviews with political and media elites on the issue of Europeanization³. The results of the interviews were analyzed using Q Methodology. As a result, we distinguished between four main factors

3. The list of statements is different for each country, see the Appendix 1 of the Theoretical Framework and Research Design chapter for country lists of statements.

among the respondents. In order to provide a general view of each factor, we point to the most distinct statements from each. Notably, each factor represents a different set of priorities: Factor 1 prioritizes identity and modernization, Factor 2 prioritizes crisis-response and cooperation, Factor 3 is predominantly concerned with critical policy engagement, while Factor 4 is preoccupied with historical recovery and sovereignty. There are also some cross-cutting concerns across the factors, such as security, modernization, and human rights.

In Factor 1, labelled "EU as a foundation for modernization and stability", the statements ranked as most important were: 1) The EU matters because we are part of the common European identity (S24); 2) EU regulations are necessary for the further modernization of Estonia (S14); 3) EU membership is a guarantee of Estonia's territorial integrity (S13); 4) The EU is a security guarantor for its member states against Russian threats (S4); 5) EU sanctions against Russia help to ease the crisis in Ukraine (S16).

This factor views the EU as a stabilizing and modernizing force that ensures Estonia's security, sovereignty, and identity. It underscores the EU's role in countering external threats (e.g., Russian aggression) while fostering shared European values such as human rights and democracy. The focus on modernization (S14) and identity (S24) is distinctive to this cluster. The prioritization of identity reflects the understanding of Estonia's post-Soviet recovery and integration into Europe.

The majority of pro-EU statements refer to the two major reasons for Estonia's European integration, representing the pragmatic value of Europeanization: 1) Estonia shares the European identity with other European nations; 2) It is important to participate in the common decision-making process of the EU. Another obviously decisive factor is the Russian threat, especially in light of the ongoing war in Ukraine, which emphasizes the need for further European integration in the Nordic-Baltic region.

Factor 2, labelled "EU as a driver of collective security and cooperation", ranked the following statements as most important, in descending order: 1) The EU has been quite effective in taking measures against the COVID-19 pandemic (S1); 2) The EU effectively contributed to solving the migration crisis in Belarus (S3); 3) EU regulations are necessary for the further modernization of Estonia (S14); 4) The EU is a security guarantor for its member states against Russian threats (S4).

Many of top statements here (S14, 4) overlap with those in Factor 1, showing a shared emphasis on modernization, security, and human rights. The pragmatic focus on crisis management (S1, 3) is unique to this factor.

Factor 2's unique position thus lies in recognizing the EU's crisis-response capabilities.

Factor 2 also highlights the importance of EU regulations for Estonia's modernization, but also focuses on the EU's role as a key security guarantor and the importance of collaborative EU management of crises. Also, there is the pragmatic argumentation that the EU can stimulate free trade and economic progress for Estonia. For example, an MP reveals the benefit of belonging to the EU and advantages of unity and collaboration:

Membership of the European Union gives us access to a market of half a billion consumers, essentially without any restrictions, so it's good for a small country in every sense of the word.

The positive impact of EU actions is emphasized by Factor 2 respondents via stressing that the EU has been effective in implementing measures against the COVID-19 pandemic and has supported the protection of human rights in Estonia. A cabinet member said:

I myself automatically think of minorities, whether it's disability rights, accessibility requirements and all that sort of thing, which I don't think we would have come up with at this pace if it wasn't for the support of the European Union.

A journalist in this Factor ironically noted the tensions between liberal European solidarity and conservative inclinations:

If we have a lot of liberal values – I think I'm a terrible liberal – but I think we are working against national values a little bit, because Estonians have to be a bit like friendly bees, who are willing to do their bite anyway. So, we have to be a bit more conservative, because otherwise we will die out here.

This indicates that Estonian society like other Eastern European nations is more socially conservative. Memories of being part of the Soviet Union and fear to lose the sovereignty and identity of a small nation has a strong resonance. This provides a strong basis for Euroskepticism as EU is seen as shifting away power from the national state, despite acknowledgment of its pragmatic benefits.

In Factor 3, labelled as "Critical engagement with EU policies", respondents gave the highest priority to the following statements: 1) The EU's green deal strategy is unlikely to succeed (S8); 2) Estonian legislation is too much influenced by the EU (S12); 3) EU regulations serve the interests of the so-called "old European countries" (S10); 4) The EU has been quite

effective in taking measures against the COVID-19 pandemic (S1); 5) Free movement across borders encourages crime in the EU (S7).

Factor 3 is uniquely characterized by evident skepticism regarding EU policies, critiquing its policy directions and influence on Estonia. Concerns about the Green Deal strategy (S8), the EU's regulatory overreach (S12), and unequal benefits for member states (S10) dominated. While recognizing the EU's successes in areas like pandemic management and security, this cluster reflects a cautious attitude towards the EU, emphasizing the need for greater balance and preserving national sovereignty.

First, there is skepticism towards the Green Deal strategy and EU regulations in general exemplified by a skeptical view of the current environmental policies. A young Russian-speaking journalist, working in an Estonian monthly, put it thusly:

Again, I would say that this is not about the European Union's green strategy, it is about what the current green strategy is in a broader sense, and how the green strategy is being talked about. I think that to a large extent our overall green strategy is doomed to failure.

Another example comes from a municipal political official, who juxtaposes the urgency of EU green policies with the increased national spending following major crises:

It is very hard to sell to people, in the face of several crises, that we still have big costs ahead of us and that we have to bear them, so to speak, for the future. A very large number of people, those who are actually left behind, do not understand that. We can see a little bit from the examples of Hungary and Poland, and also from the example of the EKRE in Estonia, these seeds are falling on very fertile ground.

Statements such as "Estonian legislation is overly influenced by EU demands" and "EU regulations primarily serve the interests of the so-called 'old European countries'" reflect perceptions among respondents in Factor 3 that the EU's influence may not always align with Estonia's interests. The respondents recognize the ongoing federalization, which comes with stronger integration and may create fears to remain in the periphery of a big empire. Estonian society tends to remain more skeptical on federalization for fear of losing sovereignty. Here is how a public broadcast journalist expressed these concerns:

Rather, I think that sovereignty of the states is decreasing, because given the number of different competences that are constantly being transferred to the European Union and which are increasingly being taken over by the so-

called 'schemes' that are being thought up, whether it's the buying of vaccines, or obviously the buying of ammunition, all sorts of other things, and these are just the easiest examples at the moment, but ideally it seems to me that a lot of the functions of the state are slowly moving in that direction.

Another interpretation came from a member of parliament from a Euroskeptic party, pointing to the transactional view of EU membership from what they deemed to be a peripheral position in the Union:

When the European Union was created very clearly on the initiative of the great powers of the European Union, Germany and France, it was an economic union. Without reason the classics say: states have no love for each other, states have interests. If we are talking about empires, well, the European Union is basically in this phase. One of the features of the development of all empires is that the periphery always loses. Unfortunately, we are geographically in a position where we do not have a beautiful future there.

Statements such as "The EU effectively contributed to solving the migration crisis in Belarus" and "Models of Hungary and Poland offer alternatives for Estonia to follow" were assessed critically by respondents in Factor 3, but not completely dismissed. A member of parliament and former cabinet member noted:

I like their, let's say Hungary's less, but with Poland I like their courage to take a different view. Hungary was right about one thing, when they said that the border should be closed to these migrants, afterwards everybody accepted that they were right, at the time they were cursing.

Such complex interpretations suggest that the Estonian elites might be more open to Polish influence due to their serious attitude towards the perceived danger from Russia and the willingness to take concrete steps to increase defense expenses, also playing an active role in supporting Ukraine.

Factor 4, which we labelled "Historical distance and national sovereignty", prioritized the following statements with regard to Europeanization: 1) The Soviet occupation has distanced Estonia from Europe to such an extent that it still needs to recover from its effects (S21); 2) Estonian legislation is too much influenced by the EU (S12); 3) EU regulations are necessary for the further modernization of Estonia (S14).

Factor 4 places Estonia's relationship with the EU in a historical context, emphasizing the lasting effects of Soviet occupation (S21). It reflects a cautious optimism toward the EU, recognizing its contributions to

modernization, security, and human rights while expressing concerns about Estonian sovereignty and external influence (S12). In this sense, this factor could also be characterized as bringing together "identitarian EU-supporters". Respondents in Factor 4 view the historical impact of the Soviet occupation as significant and believe it has influenced Estonia's relationship with Europe. For example, an experienced journalist states:

Yes, the fact that the effects of the occupation are still relevant, I quite agree with that, because we have a lot of immigrants, like Russian-speaking people, who live in a different information space.

A member of parliament echoes these views:

We have a certain part of the population here that is very influenced by the Soviet era and the particularities of the Soviet-era, Soviet-era social organization. And this is still of course an issue to overcome, it will also change with the generations, but certainly the problem is there.

In general, it is interesting to note that, although the majority of the political elite distance themselves from Russia and see it as a threat to Estonia's sovereignty and sustainability, this does not prevent them from manifesting traditional and conservative views on society and nationhood in the context of European integration that can be quite similar to the rhetoric used by their Russian adversaries.

There was an important distinction in the status of the respondents that requires separate attention: both media and political elites were distributed across different factors rather evenly, standing for a variety of opinions across different statements. In light of this observation, however, Factor 2 ("EU as a driver of collective security and cooperation") seems to be the exception, since the concentration of highly positive and negative Z-scores attributed to political respondents in this factor was the highest, with representatives of far-right parties voicing the most disagreement on the statements related to security and cooperation in the EU.

Comparing interviews with politicians and media elites with the results of the media analysis, the positions of liberals and conservatives, or pro- and anti-EU interviewees do not provide a black and white picture, and even coincide on some issues, considering their subjective opinions. Liberal politicians and journalists holding pro-Eu views, can be quite critical about EU regulations in their personal opinions. For instance, they tend to doubt the EU as an engine of innovation and the EU's ability to provide security guarantees and consider Hungary's more critical EU policy as valid, even if they do not support Hungary's government ideologically. At the same

time, anti-European populist elites may also recognize the importance of the EU as a catalyst for the country's development and economic progress.

4. SURVEY ANALYSIS: POPULAR SUPPORT FOR THE EUROPEAN PROJECT

In cooperation with Turu-uuringute AS, the survey research was conducted from 6 September to 18 September 2023, and the data was collected through personal interviews with 1,007 respondents⁴. The general profile of respondents in the survey corresponds to the demographic distribution of the Estonian population. 68% of the respondents were of Estonian ethnicity and 28% of Russian ethnicity. 65% of respondents had Estonian as their home language and 34% declared Russian as their home language.

The distinction between 'native' and 'home' languages was made in the Estonian questionnaire, as the "home language" is the true indicator of linguistic and cultural preferences, rather than nativity or citizenship. The results of audience survey thus have to be interpreted in light of the findings from the analysis of discourses in the media and elite interviews.

Two major dichotomies are significant in the interpretation of the Estonian survey data. The first one relates to distinguishing between Russophone respondents and Estonian-speaking respondents, based on the question about their home language. Second, the self-identification of respondents as either conservatives or liberals is also an important distinction which has gained significance since the legalization of same-sex marriage and the refugee crisis back in the mid-2010's, when the dominant discourse in politics shifted from the polarization between left and right to the fundamental contradiction between conservative and liberal values. The importance of the rise of conservative values in Estonian society⁵ is reflected in the survey data. This makes the public opinion landscape much more nuanced than one might expect in light of the media discourses and the representations of the EU in elite interviews.

There are five areas of interest in relation to Estonian public opinion on the process of Europeanization that are worth examining in detail. First, we consider Estonians' media consumption habits. Second, there is an

4. The sample was drawn with random sampling to ensure representativity, formed from the online panel of Turu-uuringute AS. The target group were inhabitants of Estonia aged 18+.

5. The far-right conservatives (EKRE) entered parliament in 2015 (7 seats; the Estonian parliament has 101 seats); their share increased to 19 seats in the 2019 elections, and in 2023 EKRE had 17 seats.

important line of distinction emerging from the variable of respondents' self-determination as either conservative or liberal and their overall engagement with politics. Third, we review the overall public perceptions of political affairs and the EU's role in them. Then we take a closer look at how Estonian respondents evaluate EU-related statements derived from the media analysis and what this can tell us about their perceptions of the EU more broadly. A separate subsection describes the divergent views on European integration among Russophone and Estonian-language media consumers. Finally, our analysis of survey data also revealed that interest in political discussions is a highly relevant aspect in terms of understanding political preferences of the Estonian public and their relation to EU perceptions.

4.1. MEDIA CONSUMPTION

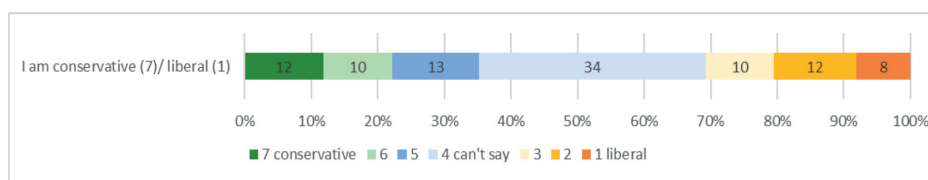
The media consumption preferences of the Estonian- and Russian-speaking communities in our survey differ significantly. We can say that Estonians and non-Estonians live in separate media spheres due to their consumption of media in different languages. Less than 3% of Estonians regularly follow media in Russian and less than 11% of Russians regularly follow media in Estonian. At the same time, the Russian-language audiences are not as consistent in their media consumption preferences as Estonian-language audiences and the random choice of channels among this cohort is much greater.

Television channels, such as the Estonian Broadcasting Corporation (ERR), are in the first place for Estonian-speaking media consumers, followed by various news portals belonging to the private media sector; and friends and acquaintances as a news source come in third place for Estonian-speaking audiences. For the Russian-speaking audiences, the top choices in their media diet are much less formal and rely on social capital. Friends and acquaintances are the most important source of news for this cohort, while social networks (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, etc.) are the second most important news source, followed by Estonian private news media online portals. The Estonian Public Broadcasting also runs Russian-language radio- and TV channels, which became increasingly popular during the COVID-19 pandemic and, later, during the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Russian social network sites occupy a relatively modest position in the media diet of Russian speakers, and Estonian-language channels are also marginal for Russian-speaking audiences.

4.2. CONSERVATIVE AND LIBERAL VIEWS AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

The distinction between conservative and liberal values has become increasingly important across the Estonian society. To some extent, this may also serve as an indication of the respondents' desire to more actively participate in political discussions and locate themselves more clearly in the political landscape. The general balance between conservatism and liberalism among the respondents is almost equal (see Figure 1 below). At the same time, more than half (57%) are not very enthusiastic about choosing their political worldview: 34% indicated a neutral or centrist response, while 13% and 10% of the respondents said they are slightly leaning towards conservatism or liberalism, respectively.

Figure 1. Self-determination on the conservative-liberal spectrum. N=1007, Q9: Sometimes people talk about "liberal" and "conservative" values. On a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 means you are liberal, 7 means you are conservative, where would you put yourself?



A regression analysis of the respondents' likelihood to discuss political issues against education attainment levels, 'home language', gender and location on the 'conservative vs liberal' scale showed no statistical significance from the gender angle (with only a slight trend suggesting that males may discuss political issues more frequently), nor from the angle of home language (meaning that language is not likely to be a decisive factor in determining the frequency of political discussions). Interestingly higher levels of education were on average associated with slightly lesser frequency of participation in political discussions. Nevertheless, there was a statistically significant correlation suggesting that individuals leaning more towards conservatism were more likely to engage in political discussions. The significant positive effect of conservative values on political discussions highlights the potential influence of political ideology. This might also suggest that, currently, the voice of conservatives (elites and supporters) in society may be more prominent than could be inferred from the conclusions of the media CDA and the findings from the elite interviews.

We also investigated the potential relationship between 'home language' and the respondents' location on the 'conservatism vs liberalism' scale. Where the domestic language was stated as "Russian" the likelihood of seeing oneself as a "conservative" was also much higher. Those more likely to speak Estonian as their home language also tended to identify themselves as more liberal on the scale⁶, which implies a significant association between home language and the scale of liberal to conservative values. However, this correlation between linguistic choices and conservatism should also be interpreted in light of the level of education, that is rather equally dispersed throughout the survey sample. In our dataset, higher education attainment levels are strongly associated with lower scores on the scale of liberal to conservative values: that is, the higher the level of education, the more likely individuals are to think of themselves as liberals.

4.3. GENERAL PERCEPTIONS OF POLITICAL AFFAIRS AND THE EU

While the majority of Estonian respondents (65%) express dissatisfaction with the functioning of the national political system (Figure 2), a greater proportion of them are satisfied with how the Estonian government handles EU-related issues. As shown in Figure 3, 36.5% were satisfied in this respect, while only 39.9% were dissatisfied.

6. On average, for each one-unit increase in the home language variable (a higher value here means more likely to be an Estonian speaker), the dependent variable (scale of liberal to conservative values) is estimated to increase by 9.471 units (a higher value here means more liberal self-perception). The p-value of this analysis (Sig.) of ,000 indicates that the coefficient for home language is highly statistically significant.

Figure 2. Satisfaction with the functioning of the political system in Estonia (%)

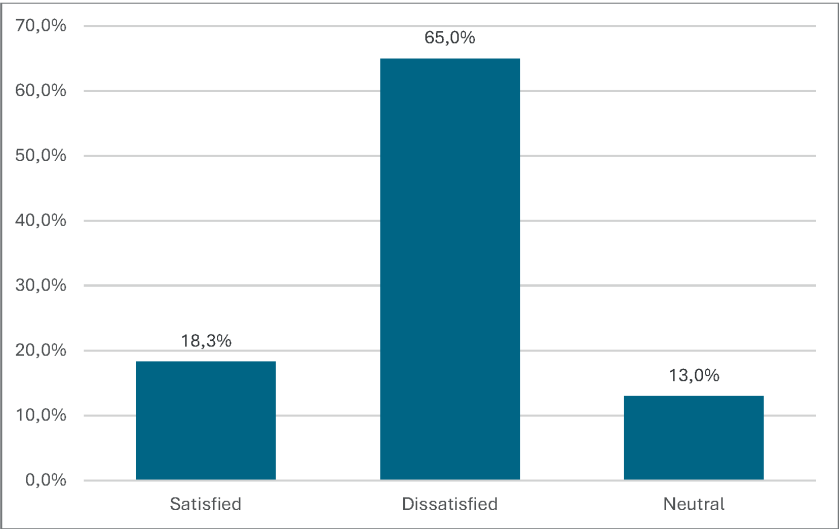
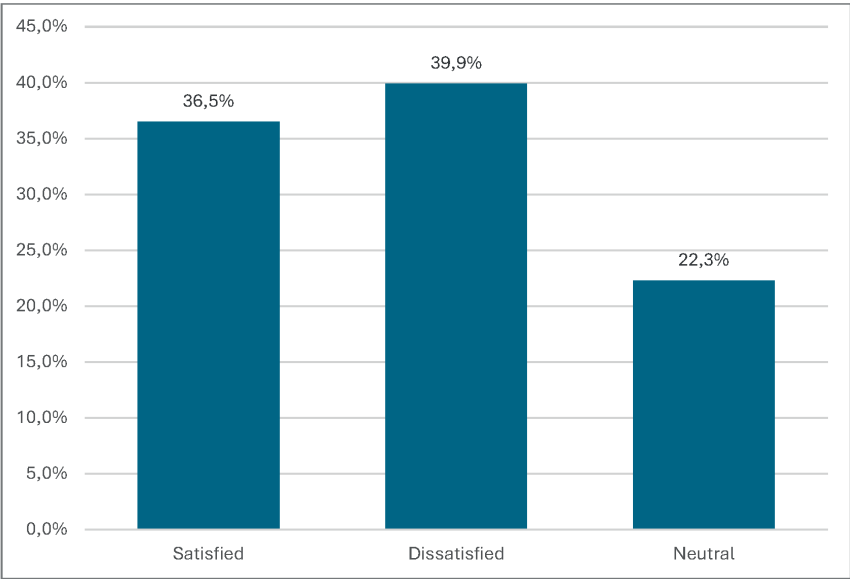


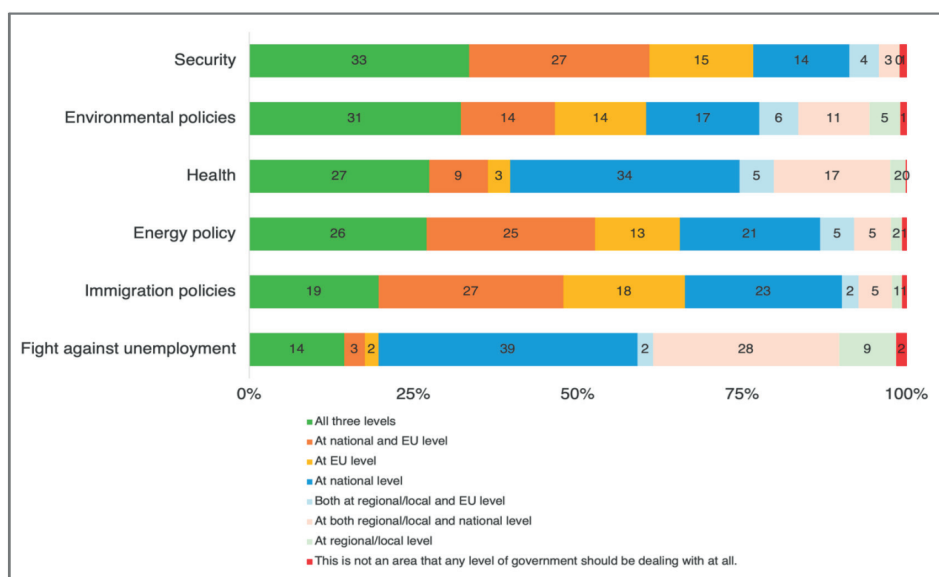
Figure 3. Satisfaction with Estonian government's management of EU-related issues (%)



At the same time, more Estonian respondents felt that the national elites were disunified (44.9%) rather than unified (23.3%) on basic EU values. 53.8% of respondents also believed the political elites should be more unified on EU values in the future.

In addition, the survey asked respondents to indicate their preferred levels of decision-making on different policy issues (Figure 4), demonstrating that the involvement of EU policymaking institutions was seen as equally necessary or nearly as necessary as that of national bodies on a range of matters, with some exceptions. At the same time, we could speculate that support for both EU and national/regional involvement on policy issues could be seen as a mutual checks and balances approach meant to ensure national and EU levels collaborated on key matters.

Figure 4. Preferred levels of decision-making in key policy areas. N=1007, Q: At which level do you think decisions should be taken in the following policy areas?



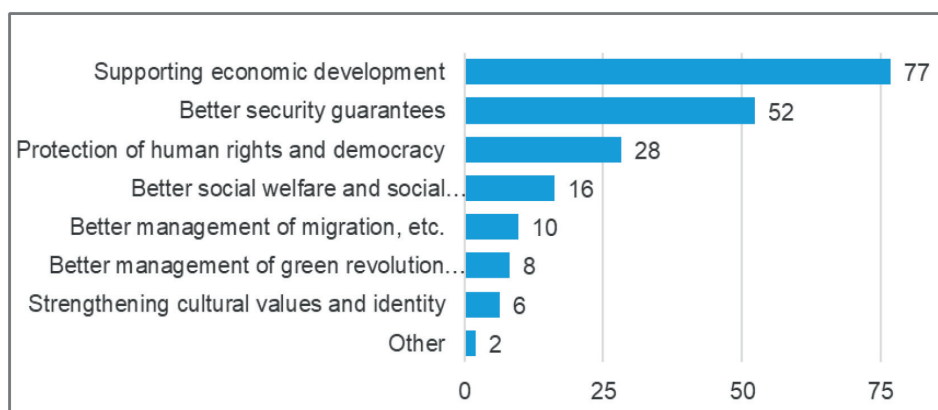
While more respondents believed security and environment were areas where policy decisions should be taken at the regional, national and EU level, more than a third (34%) said that health-related decisions should be taken only at the national level. Managing unemployment was also primarily seen as a matter for national policymakers (39%), and 28% said decisions here should also be made at the regional/local level. Decisions on energy policy should be taken either at all three levels (just over a quarter

of respondents at 26%) or at both the national and EU level (a quarter of respondents at 25%). Interestingly, 27% of respondents thought immigration policies should be decided primarily at both national and European level, while 23% thought they were only a national matter. It's worth noting that not a single policy area was seen as primarily the responsibility of EU decision-makers.

A number of survey questions aimed to shed light on perceptions of EU integration and the role that the EU could play in the future of the Estonian society. Different views on EU integration were fairly evenly distributed across the sample, though the proportion of those believing EU integration has already gone too far (39.9%) was almost twice that of those believing it should go further (21.5%), and 21.7% holding a neutral view (17.5% chose the "Don't know" option).

The criteria for evaluating the benefits of EU membership (Figure 5) are similar to the pragmatic considerations in Figure 5: The respondents tended to evaluate the EU in a positive way because it supported economic development and offered security guarantees, while being more reserved on its other benefits. The financial support from European funding in different areas of Estonian society is generally well-known and recognized, whereas issues such as "democracy" and "human rights" were seen as much more abstract and not directly connected to the EU's perceived role.

Figure 5. Key benefits of EU membership (%). Q: In your opinion, what are the most important benefits of EU membership for Estonia? Please select the two most important

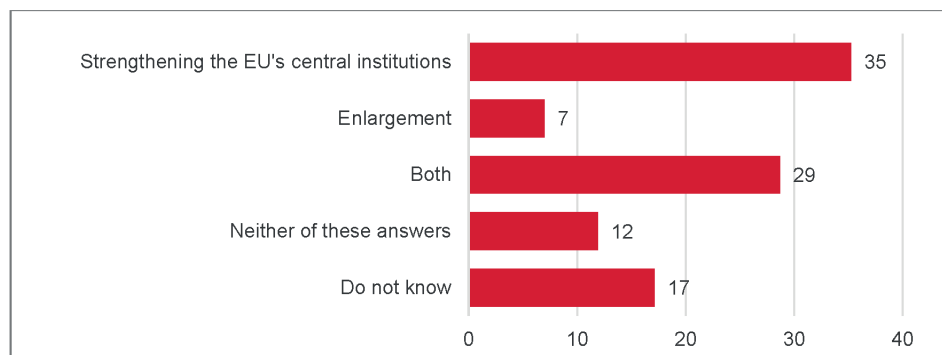


EU membership was seen as beneficial for the country by 75% of respondents and beneficial for themselves personally by 77%. EU membership was seen as having brought benefits in terms of support for economic development (77%), better security guarantees (52%) and, to some extent, better protection of human rights and democracy (28%). Better management of the green revolution (i.e., environmental transition) was chosen by 8% and strengthening cultural values and identity by only 6%. The benefits of EU membership for the Estonian state were more pronounced for those aged 34 and under and those with higher education attainment levels. Instead, 35-49 years olds were more likely to be critical. Respondents of Russian nationality were more likely to think that EU membership has not benefited either Estonia or themselves.

We ran a regression analysis on the current and desired extent of European integration as a dependent variable and home language as an independent variable. The analysis identified a positive relationship between these variables: those identifying as part of the Russophone community in Estonia tended to hold more skeptical views regarding EU integration, while Estonian-speaking respondents tended to hold more favorable views on European integration. Comparing Estonians and Russian-speakers, only 10% of Estonians felt that the influence of Estonia in the EU is weaker than it should be. Correspondingly, 32% of Russian-speakers (who were previously revealed as more likely to hold conservative views) shared this attitude.

The research findings also reveal a rather vague understanding of what European integration actually means. 39.2% of the respondents were either neutral or unable to answer the question about the levels of European integration. If we compare these views to Figure 6, which shows how Estonians interpret integration, we can conclude that in the majority, people are satisfied with how things currently stand and while some think strengthening EU institutions could be beneficial (35%), many see no reason for further EU enlargement. Only 7% of survey respondents thought EU integration referred primarily to enlargement, while 29% thought it meant both enlargement and strengthening central institutions. 41% of men and only 30% of women interpreted integration primarily as strengthening the EU's central institutions. Younger age groups (51% of 18-24-year-olds and 46% of 25-34-year-olds) felt the same way.

Figure 6: Interpretations of European integration (%). N=1007, Q 16: Some people think of European integration primarily in terms of the enlargement of the EU to new Member States, while others put the emphasis on strengthening the EU's central institutions, such as the European Commission. Which is closer to your interpretation of European integration?



Overall, we find that pragmatic considerations regarding perceptions about the EU dominate among the Estonian population. The survey results also support the fact that the geopolitical position on the border of both the EU and Russia has a significant impact on Estonians' attitudes towards European integration, further shaping them in mostly pragmatic terms. Therefore, we can say that pro-European pragmatism often challenges the Euroskeptical identitarianism in the mindset of the Estonian people⁷.

4.4. PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF EU-RELATED STATEMENTS

In order to better understand the relationships between respondents' perceptions of the key EU-related pragmatic and identity considerations we conducted a principal component analysis (PCA) of their evaluations of the relevant statements on European integration derived from the media analysis stage and used in our survey. These statements were clustered together to create thematic units (components) that reflect specific trends in public perceptions. The two most significant components (with an eigenvalue above 1) were retained. The first component, labeled "EU's socioeconomic and democratic role", is dominated by statements reflecting Estonia's relationship with the EU in terms of democracy, economic benefits, and values. It captures public perceptions regarding the EU as a

7. Identitarianism is a transnational ethnonationalist movement against globalization, immigration, and Islam in Europe, rooted in the French intellectual movement *Nouvelle Droite* (New Right) (Zuquete 2018).

protector of economic stability, security, and democratic ideals while also acknowledging concerns about the erosion of national identity. The second component, labeled "Challenges of EU policies and governance", highlights public concerns regarding the EU's governance and policy challenges, such as perceptions of uneven burden-sharing between member states, policy-related tensions, and external shocks such as Brexit. This component also reflects a degree of skepticism about the EU's internal solidarity and the Union's adherence to its foundational values.

Within these two major components, we identified some significant correlations between statement pairs indicating a complex set of perceptions combining pragmatic and identity considerations. A positive correlation suggests that as one statement's score increases, the other statement's score tends to increase as well, and vice versa, indicating higher levels of significance or agreement. Pairs of statements that had a positive correlation in our survey include the following:

- 1) "The EU has an important role to play in protecting human rights and democracy in Estonia" and "The EU plays a positive role in Estonia's economic development". This correlation highlights a link between the EU's role in fostering democratic values and its contribution to economic development. It suggests that respondents who recognize the EU's democratic contributions also tend to perceive it positively in economic terms, reflecting a broad approval of EU influence across key societal pillars.
- 2) "The EU has an important role to play in protecting human rights and democracy in Estonia" and "The EU has contributed to better management of the COVID crisis". This connection underscores the perception of the EU as a multifaceted institution capable of addressing diverse challenges, including human rights and public health crises. Respondents may associate the EU's governance strengths in one area with its ability to manage broader crises effectively.
- 3) "The EU plays a positive role in Estonia's economic development" and "The EU boosts Estonia's national security in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine". This relationship indicates that those who value the EU's economic contributions are likely to appreciate its role in strengthening Estonia's national security, particularly in the context of geopolitical tensions. It also emphasizes a holistic view of the EU as a stabilizing force.

- 4) "The EU has an important role to play in providing humanitarian aid to Ukraine" and "The EU defends democratic ideals and peace in the EU and around the world". This correlation reflects a shared belief in the EU's moral and practical leadership on global issues. Respondents who value its humanitarian efforts in Ukraine also tend to see the EU as a defender of democracy and peace on a broader scale.
- 5) "Some Member States' deviation from the 'European course' puts the EU at risk" and "The EU helps better manage immigration from non-EU countries". This pairing suggests that concerns about internal EU cohesion (e.g., deviations from shared values or policies) are tied to the perception of the EU as an effective manager of external challenges like immigration. It points to an underlying emphasis on the importance of unity for operational success.
- 6) "The EU helps better manage immigration from non-EU countries" and "Estonia's economic model and interests often conflict with those of the EU". This link may reflect a nuanced view where respondents acknowledge the EU's strengths in managing immigration while also recognizing potential misalignments with Estonia's specific economic interests. It suggests a tension between collective benefits and individual state concerns.

There was instead a negative correlation between certain pairs of statements within the significant components which suggests that as one statement's score increases, the other statement's score tends to decrease, indicating disagreement or lower levels of significance of some issues over others. Pairs that had a negative correlation in our survey suggest visible tensions between more pragmatic and identity-driven considerations regarding Europeanization among respondents:

- 1) "The EU threatens Estonia's national identity, and the traditional values associated with it" and "The EU has an important role to play in protecting human rights and democracy in Estonia". This inverse relationship suggests that respondents who perceive the EU as a threat to Estonia's identity are less likely to see its contributions to human rights and democracy as significant. It underscores a tension between national identity and supranational influence.
- 2) "The EU threatens Estonia's national identity, and the traditional values associated with it" and "The EU has contributed to better

management of the COVID-19 crisis". Respondents who view the EU as undermining traditional values may also downplay its contributions to practical governance, such as handling the COVID-19 crisis. This points to a broader skepticism about the EU's role.

- 3) "Estonia should leave the EU" and "The EU has an important role to play in protecting human rights and democracy in Estonia". This correlation reflects a stark divide in perceptions of the EU. Those advocating for Estonia's departure from the EU are unlikely to see value in its democratic or human rights contributions, highlighting ideological or political divides.
- 4) "Estonia should leave the EU" and "The EU plays a positive role in Estonia's economic development". Similarly, this negative correlation emphasizes that respondents favoring an exit from the EU, driven by identitarian concerns, are less likely to acknowledge its economic benefits.
- 5) "The EU interferes in Estonia's internal affairs and threatens its sovereignty" and "The EU has contributed to better management of the COVID-19 crisis". Those who see the EU as a meddler in Estonia's sovereignty are less inclined to credit its pandemic response. This reflects a view where concerns about overreach outweigh perceived pragmatic benefits.
- 6) "Estonia should leave the EU" and "The EU boosts Estonia's national security in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine". Although in the minority, respondents advocating for Estonia's departure from the EU were less likely to see the EU as a security asset, even amid heightened tensions from the Russia-Ukraine war. This may indicate a prioritization of national sovereignty over collective security.

5. CONCLUSION

The results of our research confirmed a wide consensus within the society that Estonia is a European country and a widespread understanding that the political path towards Euro-Atlantic integration is a valid choice. Political elites were mostly constructive and pragmatic in their recognition of the EU as a catalyst for Estonia's development. EU membership was recognized as a positive alternative to the further political and economic integration with the Russian Federation, which more and more Estonians see as a threat. Nevertheless, the study also found that a fairly significant

segment of Estonian society has remained critical of the EU and especially the prospects of further European integration. Results regarding the adoption of European values by Estonians were more divergent. The Estonian case study indicates that the Euroskeptical discourses are often adjacent to the main discourses deriving from the growing polarization between conservative-nationalist and liberal-cosmopolitan views. As we have demonstrated, the more conservative segments of Estonian society tend to assess the European integration process more negatively since for them, it is closely associated with the further spread of liberal-democratic values.

In Foucauldian terms, the increasing role of digital media broadens the potential impact of the "sayable" in discourses on Europeanization and makes the distinction between mainstream media and alternative media far less pronounced. In Estonia, the influence of alternative media outlets is increasing, which has led to a demarginalization of many Euroskeptical discourses which were previously peripheral and rarely featured in mainstream media. The enhanced hybrid media space can significantly influence the "conservation" and recurrence of Europeanization discourses as well. For example, we can see that the Russophone community in Estonia assesses historical memory (i.e. the Soviet past, World War II) differently than the mainstream Estonian-speaking community, while the ethnonationalist cluster of the elites and the public constructs yet another singular interpretation of which historic discourses should be conserved by prioritizing nationalist and protectionist policies. These discursive contests also impact the "*reactivation*" of certain discourses, as the various communities may recognize different and even opposing values depending on their pragmatic and identity concerns. The liberal democratic values, for instance, are emphasized in pro-European discourses, but alternative discourses stemming from conservative elites tend to question them and, as a result, may reactivate Euroskeptical discourses in response. In this case, the goal of such alternative communities is rather to "appropriate" discourses about Europeanization and shared values by seeking enhanced support from the public for their more skeptical and previously marginalized narratives through the process of mainstreamization.

Security-related and economic concerns tend to engender more supportive arguments for pro-European stances in Estonia, as they are grounded in more pragmatic viewpoints. Large-scale crises or external threats, such as Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine alongside the recent Belorussian migration crisis, have had a significant influence on the perceptions on Europeanization in Estonia. At the same time, environmental and social welfare issues have been more affected by

ideological polarization in the Estonian discursive space and have led to more resistance to the European project, framing the EU as intruding on national matters. The identitarian discourses on Europeanization have been more instrumentalized by the ethnonationalist community, which has sustained the Euroskeptical position by emphasizing national identity over the shared European identity. Additionally, while several policy issues (e.g., migration, LGBTQ rights, the European green deal) were framed as pragmatic concerns in the mainstream media and elite debates, they were appropriated and reframed as identitarian in the discourses disseminated by alternative media and political entities in an attempt to instrumentalize the Europeanization debate to shift the balance of power in the national political context.

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Chapter 4

Mediatized Discourses on Europeanization in Georgia

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SUMARIO: 1. INTRODUCTION: OVERVIEW OF GEORGIA'S POLITICAL AND MEDIA LANDSCAPE. 2. MEDIA ANALYSIS: THE DEVIATION DISCOURSE AS AN INDICATOR OF GEORGIA'S POLITICAL AND MEDIA POLARIZATION. 3. Q METHODOLOGY: THE RULING PARTY BLAMED FOR DEVIATING FROM THE EUROPEAN COURSE. 3.1. *Political and media actors' civilizational and security-related discourses.* 3.2. *Oppositional actors' discourse: GD deviates from the European course.* 3.3. *Defensive and offensive discursive strategies applied by pro-governmental actors.* 4. SURVEY ANALYSIS: MEDIATED INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF EUROPEANIZATION AS REFLECTED IN PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS. 4.1. *Sample characteristics.* 4.2. *Media consumption and trust in domestic and EU institutions.* 4.3. *Attitudes towards the EU.* 5. CONCLUSION. REFERENCES.

1. INTRODUCTION: OVERVIEW OF GEORGIA'S POLITICAL AND MEDIA LANDSCAPE

The current chapter discusses Europeanization discourses in Georgia, focusing on the elite-media-public triangle. Considering the political context for Georgia's Europeanization, one visible trend that best describes it is polarization, which has been shaping the country's both domestic and foreign policy dynamics (Gegeshidze and de Waal 2021). Political polarization permeates into the media landscape, where various channels, including TV, print, and online platforms, are employed to advance the interests of different political entities. The influence of political actors on editorial policies contributes to a polarized media environment, while political and media polarization creates favorable conditions for disseminating anti-Western/anti-European propaganda (often replicating the Russian authorities' messages). The Kremlin's propaganda became especially noticeable since 2013-2014, after the initiating and signing of the EU-Georgia association agreement, when various online platforms and right-wing groups spreading anti-Western/anti-European messages emerged in the country. Anti-European messages primarily focus on the perceived threats to the national identity as well as the losses vis-à-vis gains related to Georgia's European integration. Identity threats are linked to the perceptions of the EU as imposing non-traditional family values vis-à-vis Russia as a safeguard against the Western decadent values. As for pragmatic considerations, the main losses are depicted in economic and security terms, portraying the EU as unsupportive and ineffective compared to Russia (Tsuladze *et al.* 2016; Tsuladze *et al.* 2021). Thus, the EU vs. Russia dichotomy is depicted in terms of threats vs. salvation, respectively. The Georgian government lacks a well-defined strategy to counter this challenge. So far, local and international NGOs have been key actors revealing and publicizing anti-Western/anti-European disinformation and propaganda and raising public awareness about these issues (for instance, Media Development Foundation (MDF) reports on anti-Western Propaganda (Kintsurashvili 2015-2022)).

Shifting to politicians from both the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party and opposition parties, it should be stressed that they used to express predominantly optimistic views regarding Georgia's European integration, emphasizing the EU's role in safeguarding Georgia against Russia's imperialistic ambitions. Moreover, political elites anticipated positive outcomes in terms of human rights protection and economic development resulting from the country's European integration (Tsuladze *et al.* 2016, Tsuladze *et al.* 2021; Tsuladze 2021; Tsuladze 2023). However, the political landscape has dramatically changed since the ruling party's reintroduction

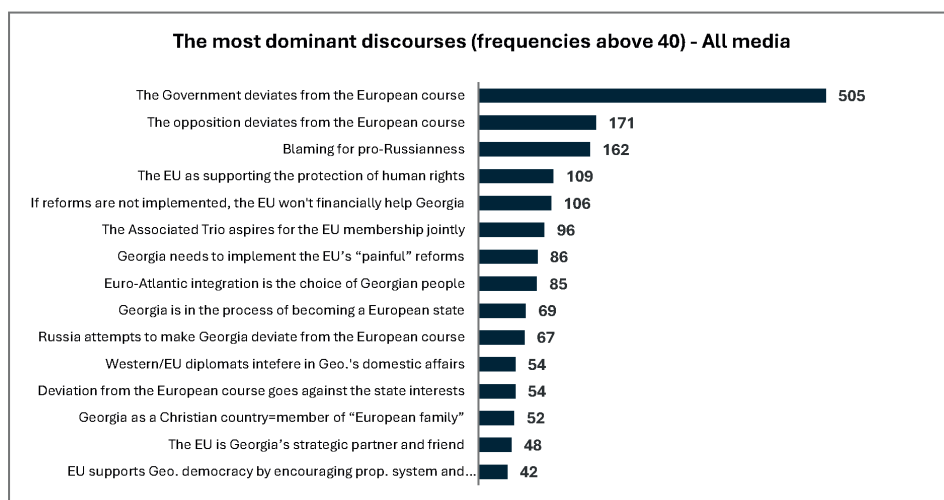
(the third time after 2017 and 2023) of the Russian-style "foreign agents" law on April 3, 2024 (though certain negative shifts in relation to the EU have been noticeable since July 2021, after GD's withdrawal from President of the European Council Charles Michel's document aimed at resolving the political crisis in Georgia). This law, purportedly in the name of "financial transparency", seeks to restrict freedom of expression by targeting independent media outlets and non-governmental organizations that receive international funding. It mandates the creation of a special registry, requiring these entities to register as "agents of foreign interests". Despite significant public and international opposition, the Parliament of Georgia, in which the constitutional majority is held by the ruling GD party, adopted the law after overriding the President's veto on May 28, 2024. The entire process was accompanied by the GD's highly hostile and aggressive anti-Western rhetoric, thus sabotaging Georgia's EU bid and undermining the country's European aspirations. Furthermore, GD officials, along with anti-European media outlets, have attempted to manipulate public sentiments, depicting the EU (and generally the West) as a threat to Georgia's national identity and sovereignty, as well as accusing the EU of pursuing double standards towards Georgia in terms of imposing its own conditions though being reluctant to reward the country. It is noteworthy that the preservation of national values and identity from foreign influences has long been a concern among the Georgian population (See CRRC Georgia public opinion polls since 2009). Despite this fact, public discourses strongly resonate with what can be termed as *pragmatic Euro-optimism* (Tsuladze 2023), as they anticipate various benefits from the country's European integration, especially the acquisition of EU membership (based on the CRRC Georgia's latest Caucasus Barometer survey (Spring 2024), 70% of Georgia's citizens aspire for EU membership).

Considering the above context, the current chapter delves into the political and media discourses and popular perceptions about Georgia's Europeanization based on the empirical data resulting from methodological triangulation: Content and discourse analyses of the most popular pro-governmental and pro-oppositional media outlets, as well as those voicing pro-European and anti-European discourses; in-depth interviews integrating Q methodology with Georgia's political and media elites; and a nationwide representative survey of Georgia's adult population (18+).

2. MEDIA ANALYSIS: THE DEVIATION DISCOURSE AS AN INDICATOR OF GEORGIA'S POLITICAL AND MEDIA POLARIZATION

The present media analysis is based on the analysis of six popular media outlets in Georgia, in the period of July 2021-March 2022. These media outlets were selected based on the following criteria: TV channels were selected based on their popularity and ownership –public (Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB)) and private (pro-governmental Imedi TV and pro-oppositional Mtavari TV), while print/online media outlets were targeted based on their dissemination of pro-European (Radio Tavisupleba and Netgazeti) and anti-European (Georgia and the World (GeWorld)) discourses. The analysis targeted key events in the EU-Georgia relations during the research period: July 2021, the right-wing groups' attack of the journalists covering the anti-homophobia rally in Tbilisi; in the same month, GD's withdrawal from Charles Michel's document mediating the country's political polarization; August-September 2021, the ruling party's refusal to accept the EU's Macro-Financial Assistance (MFA), announcing that because of the country's unprecedented economic growth there was no need in taking an additional debt; October 2021, the self-government elections in Georgia criticized by the EU for an unequal electoral environment; March 2022, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Georgia's application for EU candidate status. The dominant media discourses voiced by the six media outlets (based on the sample of 587 analyzed units and 5195 coded segments) in the period of July 2021-March 2022 are summarized in the chart below.

Figure 1. The most dominant discourses (frequencies >40)



Based on the analysis of all the six media outlets, the major, adjacent and counter-discourses on Georgia's Europeanization have been revealed, resulting in their quantitative and qualitative content analysis and critical discourse analysis. It should be underlined that all the presented major and adjacent discourses are derived from the rhetoric of the three target TV channels and pro-European media outlets, while the respective counter-discourses result from the rhetoric of the only anti-European media outlet.

Table 1. Major discourses, adjacent and counter-discourses

Discursive Unit	Major Discourse	Adjacent Discourse	Counter-Discourse
1. The government's/ opposition's role in Georgia's European integration.	The government deviates from the European course (pro-oppositional and pro-EU media)// The opposition deviates from the European course (pro-governmental media).	Deviation from the European course goes against the state interests.	Georgia's government has finally 'woken up' and raised its voice against the West's "slavery".
2. Russia's role in Georgia's European integration.	Blaming political opponents for pro-Russianness; Russia attempts to make Georgia deviate from the European course.	If Georgia deviates from the European course, it will end up under the Russian influence.	The EU is guided by double standards imposing its conditions and refusing to reward Georgia; The EU pretends to be Georgia's friend, while Russia is its real friend.
3. The EU's support of human rights.	The EU supports human rights protection in Georgia.	The EU upholds Georgia's democracy by supporting the proportional electoral system and a judicial reform.	The EU imposes moral degradation and homosexual relations on Georgia.
4. The EU's financial support.	If the reforms are not implemented, the EU will not fur-		Georgia does not need the EU's financial support because of the

Discursive Unit	Major Discourse	Adjacent Discourse	Counter-Discourse
	ther financially support Georgia.		country's economic growth; The EU uses its financial support to maintain its influence in Georgia.
5. Georgia's aspiration towards European integration.	The Associated Trio jointly aspires for European integration.		The EU/West has provoked the war in Ukraine; The EU/West is a disseminator of disinformation in the course of the war in Ukraine.
6. "I am Georgian and, therefore, I am European".	Euro-Atlantic integration is the choice of the Georgian people.	Georgia as a Christian country is a member of the European family.	European liberal values represent a threat to Georgian values.
7. How European is Georgia? [Both pragmatic & identity considerations are implied: improvement of democracy and mental Europeanization].	Georgia is in the process of becoming a European state.		The majority of Georgian politicians stage a pro-European performance (political level) & Georgia's population is polarized (popular level).
8. The EU's interference in Georgia's internal affairs.	The EU is concerned about the weakening of its influence in Georgia.	The EU is Georgia's strategic partner and friend.	The EU intrudes in Georgia's internal affairs.

As illustrated by both Figure 1 and Table 1, the key message disseminated by the media outlets in the analyzed period is what we call *the deviation discourse*: opposition parties and pro-oppositional media blame the ruling party for the deviation from the European course, while the ruling party and pro-governmental media divert the same blame towards opposition parties. Further delving into the deviation discourse, it is obvious that in the period of July 2021-March 2022, the most widespread

discourse in all the media outlets is that "the government deviates from the European course", even voiced in the anti-European media outlet. It is also voiced on pro-governmental Imedi TV, which alongside this discourse offers another one: "The opposition deviates from the European course". Usually, these discourses are followed by the blaming of one's own political rival for pro-Russianness and stressing that it is Russia that makes Georgia deviate from the European course. Finally, it is noteworthy that the deviation from the European course is represented as a matter of concern by all the media outlets, except for anti-European "GeWorld" assessing it as a positive development.

The deviation discourse was especially active while Georgian political actors were negotiating the Michel document. In this period, it became even the EU's dominant rhetoric directed towards both the ruling party (that withdrew from the document) and opposition parties (that initially refused to join it and signed the document only after the government's withdrawal from it). The discourse on the government's deviation from the European course invigorated in the period of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, when the ruling party refused to join EU sanctions against Russia and labelled all political parties openly condemning Russia's invasion as "war parties". Finally, this discourse further reinforced during the large-scale rallies titled "Home to Europe!" in support of Georgia's European bid after the country's EU candidacy was suspended in June 2022. Overall, the instrumentalization of the deviation discourse by the two rival political camps clearly points to a highly polarized character of the Georgian political landscape, as well as to the fact that the existing political polarization has a significant impact on the media landscape. It also illustrates that Europeanization is one of the major themes aggravating political and media polarization in Georgia.

In this context, it is important to mention *the blaming for pro-Russianness discourse*. Here the dichotomy between the EU and Russia is activated, viewed in a contrasting way by pro-European and anti-European media outlets. Furthermore, there is a discrepancy in the perception of this dichotomy between pro-governmental and pro-oppositional media outlets, despite the fact that both attempt to align with the EU. The actors' configuration within the EU-allies pole is viewed differently in both cases, which points to the political and media polarization once again: Pro-governmental actors depict the EU-allies pole as represented by the ruling party, Georgia's Orthodox Church and Georgian people, while opposition parties, far-right groups and Russia occupy an opposite pole. In the pro-oppositional actors' taxonomy, the EU-allies pole is represented by opposition parties and Georgian people, while the ruling party, Georgia's Orthodox Church, far-right groups and Russia are placed on the opposite

pole. The actors located on the opposite pole in both groupings are believed to hinder Georgia's pro-European trajectory, simultaneously being labelled as pro-Russian actors. Various discursive strategies are used to enact this blame game such as *fabrications* (Goffman 1974), *metaphors and allegories* (van Dijk 2013), *intertextuality* (Wodak 2011), *topoi* (Wodak 2011) and *the politics of fear* (Wodak 2021).

It is also crucial to highlight pragmatic and identity considerations related to Georgia's Europeanization that are emphasized by the target media outlets. The main pragmatic gains stemming from the country's Europeanization, as viewed by the pro-European media outlets, are the EU's support of human rights in Georgia, as well as the financial assistance to implement the reforms necessary for the country's modernization. In terms of identity considerations, the pro-European media outlets underline the importance of Georgia's getting closer to the "European family", as well as its accompanying "mental Europeanization". In contrast to the abovementioned vision, the anti-European media outlet argues that the EU violates the rights of the majority of Georgians via endorsing non-heterosexual relations, as well as it uses financial leverage to maintain its influence in Georgia. Consequently, the anti-European media outlet depicts the EU as a threat to both the Georgian identity and the country's sovereignty. If we compare these findings with those of our former studies of the political and popular discourses on Europeanization in Georgia (Tsuladze *et al.* 2016, Tsuladze *et al.* 2021), it is obvious that the same pragmatic and identity considerations have been on agenda and used as a means of discursive manipulation at least since signing of the EU-Georgia association agreement in 2014. It is noteworthy that based on the former studies, another essential pragmatic gain stemming from Georgia's European integration is believed to be the safeguarding of Georgia's security and territorial unity from Russia's imperialistic ambitions. Although this discourse has not emerged among the dominant ones during the current media analysis, it has been reactivated in the pro-European media outlets after Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

What does the summary of the media analysis findings within the Foucauldian framework for the study of politics and discourse (1991) reveal, focusing on the five key aspects of *sayable*, *conservation*, *memory*, *reactivation*, and *appropriation*?

Sayable: Throughout the timeline (July 2021-March 2022), in all the media outlets the dominant discourses address the government's or the opposition's deviation from the European course, accompanied by the respective accusations of pro-Russianness. As expected, the pro-

governmental media outlet disseminates the discourse on the opposition's deviation from the European course, while the pro-oppositional one, as well as other target media outlets, focus on the government's deviation from the European path. As the latter is voiced in all the media outlets, even the pro-governmental one, it makes the central discourse in the context of Georgia's Europeanization.

Conservation: The media analysis shows that the dominant discourse is steady along the analyzed period, becoming especially active when the ruling party withdrew from Charles Michel's document, as well as upon Russia's invasion of Ukraine when the Georgian government refused to join the EU's sanctions against Russia. As the analysis reveals, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has also triggered certain new discourses, especially those related to Georgia's European perspective, focusing on the window of opportunity opened for Georgia alongside Ukraine and Moldova, as well as on the Georgian government's "enforced" submission of the EU membership application. All of these discourses are voiced by civil society representatives and opposition parties in the target media outlets. The anti-European media outlet also started producing new discourses in this period, stating that the EU/West had provoked the war in Ukraine and that the EU/West disseminated disinformation in the course of the war. Thus, it is evident how certain discourses are invented and strategically used by different actors setting and framing particular agenda.

Memory: As already noted, two main factors shape the perceptions of the identified discourses as valid or invalid: pro-European vs. anti-European and pro-governmental vs. pro-oppositional stances. Consequently, the discourses offered by actors representing one pole of the above dichotomy are considered invalid by those representing another pole. As a rule, the discourses circulated by pro-European media outlets are labelled as foreign and imposed from outside by the anti-European media outlet. Both the pro-European and anti-European media outlets, as well as the pro-governmental and pro-oppositional ones, offer their own versions of what pragmatic and identity gains vs. losses related to Georgia's Europeanization should be anticipated, utilizing them as "discourses of justification" (Wodak 2006).

Reactivation: To follow the above line of thought, the pro-European media outlets underline the most significant pragmatic (the EU's support of human rights, the EU's provision of financial support, an EU membership perspective) and identity (reactivation of Georgians' European identity, mental Europeanization) considerations stemming from Georgia's Europeanization. In contrast, the anti-European media outlet undermines

the benefits resulting from the country's European integration and depicts the EU as a threat to both the Georgian identity and the country's sovereignty. These findings closely resonate with those of our previous studies of political, media and popular discourses on Europeanization in Georgia (Tsuladze *et al.* 2016, Tsuladze *et al.* 2021).

Appropriation: Finally, when we look at the major actors voicing the presented key discourses, as well as how they compete to maintain their control over these discourses, it is evident that pro-governmental vs. pro-oppositional and pro-European vs. anti-European media represent two sets of rivals that use various discursive strategies and ideological schemas (van Dijk 2013) to impose their own versions of reality on the public. EU officials' discourses are carefully selected and strategically used by these media outlets in support of their own arguments. Thus, the discursive "usage of European integration" (Jacquot and Woll 2003) reveals how the latter is instrumentalized for discrediting one's own political opponents in Georgia's polarized political and media settings. Overall, the media analysis confirms that the existing political polarization directly translates into the media polarization and that European integration makes one of the major themes contributing to the political and media polarization in Georgia.

3. Q METHODOLOGY: THE RULING PARTY BLAMED FOR DEVIATING FROM THE EUROPEAN COURSE

The media analysis was followed by in-depth interviews integrating Q methodology conducted with political and media elites in October 2022-January 2023. 24 politicians (party leaders or those responsible for foreign affairs) and 26 media representatives (editors, producers and journalists focusing on Georgia's foreign policy issues) were interviewed. All the major political parties are represented, with the ruling *GD* party officials amounting to one third of the sample of politicians. Other respondents represent the largest opposition party – *UNM* and its smaller offspring parties, namely, *European Georgia*, *Strategia Aghmashenebeli*, *Droa* and *Girchi*, as well as other opposition parties such as *Lelo*, *For Georgia* and *For People*. All the listed opposition parties position themselves as pro-European. As in our former studies on Georgia's Europeanization, it was impossible to persuade the parties with anti-EU (that usually overlaps with pro-Russian) sentiments to participate in the research. However, it should be noted that such parties are not currently represented in the Parliament of Georgia. As for media actors, they represent a wide range of media outlets – TV, newspaper (print/online), and news agency. Among TV outlets, the most popular ones have been targeted based on their ownership – public

and private. Thus, we have interviewed producers and journalists of *Georgian Public Broadcaster* (GPB), as well as private TV channels: pro-governmental *Imedi* and pro-oppositional *Mtavari*, *Formula*, and *TV Pirveli*. In addition, editors and journalists of various newspapers and news agencies have been interviewed. As in the case of anti-EU parties, representatives of TV channels and newspapers openly disseminating anti-EU or pro-Russian messages have refused to participate in the research.

As a result of Q analysis, two major factors have been identified in which political and media actors have been grouped: The leading factor, with a very high eigenvalue of 31 and the explained variance of 62%, consists of opposition politicians and media actors representing pro-oppositional TV channels (*Mtavari* TV, *Formula* and *TV1*), and the second factor, with the eigenvalue of 4 and the explained variance of 8%, consists of merely the ruling party officials and media actors representing pro-governmental *Imedi* TV. The two factors derived from Q analysis clearly align with the two rival political camps in Georgia, reinforcing the abovementioned argument on the political and media polarization. The cumulative explanatory value of the two factors amounting to 70% and their composite reliability of above 0.9 point to a high explanatory power and reliability of the research findings.

What are the major themes that cause the occurrence of these two opposing factors? The main concern of the actors comprising Factor 1 – representatives of almost all the listed opposition parties and pro-oppositional media outlets – is Georgia's current foreign policy course. There are top four statements with the highest positive value (Z-score), that is, the respondents' strongest agreement, which create a single thematic unit structured around *the deviation discourse*. The first two statements in this unit target the ruling GD party blamed for the deviation from the European course. In particular, the statements with the respondents' strongest agreement are as follows: "The government deviates from the European course" and "Deviation from the European course goes against the state interests". The next two statements with the strongest agreement relate to the role of Russia in triggering this deviation and offering an alternative to European integration: "If Georgia deviates from the European course, it will inevitably end up under the Russian influence" and "Russia attempts to make Georgia turn its back on the EU".

As for the statements with the highest negative value, that is, the respondents' strongest disagreement, they encompass a whole range of utilitarian and identity concerns. Their sorting confirms again that the actors comprising this factor have only positive expectations regarding

Georgia's European integration. The top two statements located on the ultimate negative pole relate to the identity and sovereignty threats stemming from the country's European integration. In particular, the respondents highly disagree that "European liberal values represent a threat to Georgian values" and that "The EU intrudes in Georgia's internal affairs and endangers its sovereignty". The next statement with the highest disagreement is the one that accuses "the EU of being guided by double standards in relation to Georgia". Another important aspect is that oppositional actors disagree with the statement that "Georgia is in the process of becoming a European state" in terms of either improving its democracy or internalizing European values. In this way, they underline that they do not acknowledge the current ruling party's role in Georgia's Europeanization.

The actors comprising Factor 2 – representatives of the ruling party and the pro-governmental media outlet – view the provided statements quite differently than their counterparts from Factor 1. Although there is an absolute consensus between the actors comprising both factors on Russia's role in hindering Georgia's European integration (namely, the statements that "Russia attempts to make Georgia turn its back on the EU" and "If Georgia deviates from the European course, it will inevitably end up under the Russian influence" are among the top five statements with the highest positive Z-scores), there is also an optimistic view (exclusively characteristic to this factor) that "Georgia is in the process of becoming a European state in terms of improving its democracy". Thus, the ruling party and pro-governmental media actors try to highlight both the GD government's contribution to the development of Georgia's democracy and their awareness of Russian threats. It is also noteworthy that the statement that "European integration is the choice of the Georgian people" has the highest positive Z-score within this factor, which makes us assume that governmental actors try to underline that their top priority is to comply with the wish of the Georgian people.

It is especially interesting to scrutinize the negative pole in Factor 2. The governmental actors' views fully resonate with those of oppositional actors, when it comes to both identity and sovereignty concerns related to Georgia's European integration (though the situation has drastically changed since May 2023 when the ruling party officials started disseminating the discourse that liberal values represent a threat to the country's sovereignty, after being forced to withdraw the so-called "foreign agents" law as a result of massive public protests (Agenda.ge, May 4, 2023; Civil.ge, May 12, 2023)). In fact, all the abovementioned statements placed on the ultimate negative pole in Factor 1 are also placed on the ultimate

negative pole in Factor 2, with the exception of a single statement that incurs the highest disagreement among government officials and pro-governmental media actors: "The government deviates from the European course". As noted above, this statement is subject to the strongest agreement among opposition politicians and media actors. It should be underlined that neither the politicians from the ruling party nor the media actors from pro-governmental media argue that the opposition deviates from the European course, which is the government officials' key discourse on pro-governmental Imedi TV, and hence points to their strategic usage of the deviation discourse to discredit their political opponents in the citizens' eyes. Considering the overall distribution of the statements with the highest positive and negative values in both factors, we can argue that it is the views of the ruling party's role in the country's European integration that invoke the major difference between the two opposing groups, and these views diverge to such an extent that they result in the two distinct factors highlighting the two rival camps' affective polarization based on mutual othering and moralization (Iyengar *et al.* 2019).

3.1. POLITICAL AND MEDIA ACTORS' CIVILIZATIONAL AND SECURITY-RELATED DISCOURSES

In line with previous studies on elite discourses about Georgia's Europeanization (Tsuladze *et al.* 2016; Tsuladze *et al.* 2021; Tsuladze 2021; Tsuladze 2023), the present in-depth interviews reveal a strong discursive consensus over Georgia's European course. This path is portrayed as having no alternative by most media representatives and politicians (regardless of party affiliation), which confirms the hegemony of the European project in Georgia (Gamkrelidze 2019). The shared discursive construction is backed by two major arguments that in turn encompass various pragmatic and identity considerations. The first one emphasizes the importance of "catching up" with the developed West and imagines the country as either progressing or regressing at the universal developmental ladder with the EU-associated ideal model on top of it. Approximation with the latter is seen as the only way to reach progress in economic, political and cultural domains (we call it *the civilizational discourse*). Another argument relates to security issues and predicts a bleak future for the small country with limited resources, if it chooses to isolate and stay away from the strong alliance (we call it *the security-related discourse*).

The "no alternative" discourse is further reinforced by framing it as an obvious choice between the desirable EU and undesirable Russia, in the context of which the EU represents the possibility of a better life for Georgians, while Russia is associated with decline and danger. It should be

mentioned that while the West-Russia discursive dichotomy already dominated the political field in Georgia (See Kobakhidze 2021; Tsuladze *et al.* 2016; Tsuladze *et al.* 2021; etc.), Russia's invasion of Ukraine further intensified it, especially in terms of security matters. The participants agree that if any government deviates from the pro-European development path, it will go against the state's interests. Yet, it is exactly this accusation that drives the major discursive struggle between the ruling and opposition parties.

Below we will discuss the key discursive strategies that oppositional and governmental actors (the political and media elites) apply in this struggle, making the issue of European integration its cornerstone. At first, we will focus on various oppositional actors who seem to be united around the claim that GD deviates from the European path – the most persistent discourse of the time that our study has revealed. Later, we will focus on the ruling party's and pro-governmental media actors' defensive and offensive discursive strategies, utilized in response to the above accusations (Tsuladze *et al.* 2024). Notably, the civilizational and security-related discourses remain equally characteristic to both sides. Nevertheless, we can also observe the governmental actors' simultaneous self-presentation as protecting the national interests vis-à-vis the EU, if necessary. This slight difference deserves a particular attention, as we are looking at the data retrospectively.

3.2. OPPOSITIONAL ACTORS' DISCOURSE: GD DEVIATES FROM THE EUROPEAN COURSE

The deviation discourse is strongly characteristic of opposition parties and pro-oppositional media actors who express their fear that despite claiming so, the ruling party does not subscribe to the European course any longer: through "talking the EU talk" (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier 2005, 11-12), that is, performing a "rhetorical action", the ruling party keeps "tricking" both the EU and the Georgian society as if it genuinely pursues European aspirations. Actually, – they argue, – we have witnessed the transformation of GD's institutional structure and its attitudes towards the EU from 2012 to 2016: If previously the ruling party was represented by clearly pro-Western political actors in positions of power (e.g. Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister of Defense, etc.), since 2016, there has been a rising trend towards democratic backsliding and autocracy.

As the respondents note, the change of heart about the EU was particularly reflected in certain decisions GD made throughout the recent period – from dumping Charles Michel's document that "slows down the

process [of Georgia's European integration], even though 84% of the Georgian population believes Georgia should be a member of the European family" (producer, *Formula*), to not showing more explicit support towards Ukraine. As a consequence of shying away from joining EU sanctions against Russia, it is argued that Georgia has also "cut itself off from the Eastern Partnership" (editor, *Commersant*). Considering these actions, the refusal of the European Commission to grant Georgia candidate status along with Ukraine and Moldova in June 2022 is viewed as a logical consequence. At the same time, the political elite's deviation is contrasted with the strong popular support towards European integration: In the above case, for instance, the reference to statistical data is used to strengthen the claim that the GD's turning back from the EU is illegitimate.

According to the participants, this deviation is largely triggered by the GD's attempt to maintain power at all costs. As one of the opposition party leaders has pointed out, the ruling party actively seeks to undermine institutions such as the non-governmental sector and media that are critical to ensuring the transparency of democratic processes. Furthermore, the GD's "signature" is considered to be its informal governance, the hijacking of state institutions, and a lack of accountability and transparency in all political decisions. As argued, all these features make the Georgian government resemble oligarchy rather than democracy, while "European values and democracy are incompatible with an oligarchic way of governance" (MP, *UNM*). Consequently, the participants find the situation somewhat paradoxical: a non-democratic political power is called upon to lead the country in a European (recognized as democratic) manner of governance that will logically lead to its demise as a consolidated power in the country, which is the opposite of the GD's political goals.

It is argued that the ruling party still tends to formally follow the pro-European discourse, given the public support towards the EU, as well as the conditionality principle engrained in EU-Georgia relations. Being aware of the expected harsh reaction of the Georgian society, GD continues to claim it does everything possible to facilitate the country's European integration. At the same time, it does not want to "displease" the EU either, which "demands reforms, fighting corruption, and in general is in the position of a teacher who makes assessments and gives them [GD] a bad grade" (journalist, *Interpressnews*). However, the change at the discursive level is still noticed, which shifts the boundaries of what is "sayable" (Foucault 1991) concerning the EU. According to one of the respondents, after Ukraine's invasion, the GD's averse rhetoric towards Europe has got worse, demonstrating unequivocally that the Georgian government's pro-Europeanness is just a façade. To illustrate the discursive shift, the

participants point to the increasingly hostile communication dynamics with the EU, where GD "pushes back in an Orbán manner ["Orbánistically"] after each critical comment made by the EU [addressing the Georgian government]" (MP, *For Georgia*).

Yet, the respondents also fear that the Georgian ruling party seeks to undermine the Georgian people's pro-European attitudes in "a regular and slow manner", especially through manipulating national and religious sentiments (producer, *Formula*). This strategy should ultimately invalidate the popular motto "I am Georgian and, therefore, I am European" that has never been questioned before, and hence it challenges the public "memory" (Foucault 1991). All of this "reactivates" (*ibid.*) the EU-Russia dichotomy based on which the deviation discourse is primarily structured: If GD does not pursue the pro-European path, then it leans towards Russia. As one of the pro-oppositional media actors puts it, GD is not only anti-Western but also "the first pro-Russian government in Georgia, encouraged and supported by Russia. It does not believe in Russia's defeat [in Ukraine] and hence is scared of it" (producer, *Mtavari TV*). It is argued that this very fear triggers the GD's "non-irritation politics" towards Russia. The turn towards authoritarianism also reminds the respondents of Russia's domestic politics. They argue that Russia, which asks neither for human rights protection nor the rule of law or independent judiciary, will logically make a better ally for the ruling party than the EU. Therefore, it is concluded that the GD's *modus operandi* is fully consistent with "Russia's grey zone and post-soviet setup" (MP, *UNM*).

If you [the government] obstruct the execution of judicial reform, you are allowing the country to veer from the European trajectory, and in the Georgian context, being anti-Western means being pro-Russian. You have no place in the Western world if your country lacks independent media and judiciary. The current regime is fighting every democratic institution, while openly or covertly cooperating with Russia (Producer, *Formula*).

The oppositional actors argue that GD being sympathetic to Russia also has its economic logic awaiting certain financial benefits. Since the introduction of sanctions, new opportunities to transfer Russian finances to Georgia have emerged and the ruling party, labelled by one of the editors as "a large group of businessmen and barely a pure political elite", sees an excellent opportunity for personal economic gain. It is noted that to distort public perceptions, anti-Western propaganda is a potent weapon in the ruling party's hands, which is heavily influenced by the Kremlin rhetoric. For example, participants argue that the concept of "Sovereign Democracy" and the West/EU meddling in Georgian internal affairs is actively exploited in the ruling party's everyday rhetoric, particularly voiced by its "People's

Power" faction as an alternative discourse. In fact, all the major discourses offered by the anti-European/pro-Russian "GeWorld" in the course of media analysis (July 2021-March 2022) have been "appropriated" (Foucault 1991) by the ruling party since March 2023, upon the initiation of the so-called "foreign agents" law, and further reinforced since May 2023, when GD officials started disseminating the discourse that the Western liberal values threaten the country's sovereignty. This is the reason we can argue that illiberal rhetoric characteristic of anti-EU/pro-Russian media outlets has been mainstreamed among the ruling party officials since 2023 (See Tsuladze & Abzianidze (forthcoming)).

3.3. DEFENSIVE AND OFFENSIVE DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES APPLIED BY PRO-GOVERNMENTAL ACTORS

As in the case of oppositional actors, the discourses of the ruling GD party and pro-governmental media often go hand in hand, although politicians tend to be more vocal compared to media actors. In the discursive battle with oppositional actors, the pro-governmental fraction utilizes a mixture of defensive and offensive discursive strategies (See also Tsuladze *et al.* 2024): As part of the offensive strategy, GD officials blame opposition parties for targeting the ruling party's reputation among the population through instrumentalizing the publicly sensitive issue of Europeanization, which they believe is aimed at the opposition parties' enhancing of their own power. Delegitimizing their opponents as insincere and performative, governmental actors attempt to strip their accusations of any validity and truthfulness. Moreover, the opposition is at times portrayed as itself deviating from the European path. Thus, the governmental camp actively utilizes "topoi" (Wodak 2011) against its opponents. Discursive strategies similar to those of oppositional actors, such as references to large public support for European integration, as well as the (more covert) portrayal of the opposition as being associated with Russia, are likewise applied here to strengthen the claims. Furthermore, governmental actors defensively stress that the Europeanization process steadily progresses in Georgia, so the accusations of deviation are not grounded in reality. Unsurprisingly, this discourse reflects the "catching up" logic shared by both sides, in the scope of which institutional Europeanization becomes the primary point of contestation.

According to the pro-governmental camp, the opposition's objective is to create false perceptions among the Georgian public that the country's leadership is pro-Russian and deviates from the European course. In their words, "the political opposition, which has no guts other than attacking the government's political agenda" (MP, GD), capitalizes on the fact that

European integration is supported by the majority of Georgians and promotes the idea that GD is a pro-Russian power, the so-called "Russian Project". The participants argue that this cannot be further from the reality and instead feeds off "fabricated assumptions made up by opposition parties to appease their voters" (MP, *GD*). As the argument goes, strategically speaking, the opposition even benefits if the country does not obtain EU candidate status, because "granting GD candidate status would, in fact, permanently harm the opposition's political future as it would remain with nothing" (MP, *GD*). So, according to this argument, given that it is the ruling party that is responsible for being awarded candidate status, logically, it is in the opposition's best interests to impede Georgia's further European integration. This blame game is a vivid example of how "fabrication" (Goffman 1974) can be utilized to accuse one's own political opponent of fabrication.

Similar to the deviation discourse, the ruling party's defensive discourse is also structured based on the dichotomy between the EU and Russia. As one of the politicians has argued, "Russia is built on a criminal and corrupt system and getting closer to it is of course a threat to our country". It is stressed that there is no such a threat to Georgia, nor are there any underlying motivations on the side of the ruling party to create one. Instead, GD officials portray their party as devoted to the European path because it is motivated by actual pragmatic benefits associated with the EU that are related to Georgia's development, security, etc.: "It is better in Europe, European standards are better, and these are purely pragmatic, not emotional motivations" (MP, *GD*). Thus, the ruling party grounds its arguments on the same pragmatic Euro-optimism that, as noted in the introduction, the public sentiments are primarily built on.

The blame for deviation from the European path is instead shifted towards the opposition itself. While based on the Q grids, neither representatives of the ruling party nor pro-governmental media actors subscribe to this discourse, it still comes up in the process of interviews where more space is given to the participants for further elaboration, pointing to their performative practices. Although it is not directly claimed that the opposition deviates from the European course, pro-governmental actors argue that instead of authentic self-identification with European values, the opposition adopts a populist strategy and merely stages pro-European performance to gain votes: "Naturally, when 85% want to integrate with Europe, the resistance to this desire will fail you politically" (MP, *GD*). Furthermore, GD officials and pro-governmental media actors usually point to the older generation of UNM, who, – they argue, – despite self-presenting as pro-European actors, proved to deviate from the

European path themselves by human rights violations when in power. Additionally, UNM, as the former governing party and the GD's major political rival, is blamed for the handing of strategic objects to the Russian companies and even for Georgia being occupied by Russia. Thus, diverting the blame towards its political opponents, mainly via utilizing topoi and the politics of fear, unveils the GD's attempt to compensate for the recent lack of its own pro-European performance.

The GD's offensive discourse is directed to not only domestic opponents but also the EU, accused by MPs from the ruling party of pursuing double standards towards Georgia. This discursive strategy points to the shift in the GD's boundaries of "sayable" (Foucault 1991). The EU's treatment of Georgia is presented as particularly unfair, while its criticism towards the ruling party as too harsh. As one of the GD officials notes, the EU uses various pretexts to refrain from granting candidate status to Georgia and there are several reasons behind this: To begin with, the EU knows that granting Georgia candidate status will strengthen GD, while the opposition can lose its political capital, he argues. So, this way the EU will involuntarily support the one-party leadership in Georgia, which it opposes. The second factor is thought to be the EU's "sympathy towards UNM", which makes GD assume that the EU is rather partial. The final factor mentioned by the MP underlines asymmetrical power relations between the EU and Georgia, stressing the current ruling party's "disobedience", while "the EU wants other countries to be submissive. It will grant candidate status to those who are obedient". Thus, the above arguments illustrate how European integration is "appropriated" (*ibid.*) by local political actors and to what extent it becomes instrumentalized in their internal discursive battle.

In parallel, the defensive discursive strategy is also applied, which aims to assure the audience that European integration is, in fact, underway and successful. It is argued that the ruling party neither criticizes nor expresses any hostility towards the EU, rather it is engaged in the normal process of two sides (Georgia and the EU) becoming more connected. This way, the ruling party's obvious "discursive disengagement" with the EU (Tsuladze *et al.* 2024) is presented as part of usual diplomacy, aiming to further the country's European integration, which is another clear example of "fabrication". Governmental actors argue that in this process, certain flexibility of Georgia does not necessarily imply a deviation. Instead, it is the principle of "appropriateness" applied to EU requirements, suiting Georgia's interests better:

The fact that the interests of Georgia and the EU do not always coincide and that you do not always implement specific EU requirements according to the

established plan does not mean that you deviate from the European course. Some things could be politically damaging to your country. As a result, this is known as the logic of appropriateness (MP, GD).

Thus, here as well, the pronounced discursive opposition to the EU, which underlines that not all EU regulations might benefit Georgia, is presented as a mere selectivity in the European integration process. The claims of the changing political course, stemming from the oppositional camp, are further dismissed on the same grounds: How does the government deviate from the European course, if it has willfully applied for candidate status and has done its best to prepare its application? "If we hadn't supported Georgia's European integration, we wouldn't have applied [for candidate status], and so many state institutions wouldn't have done their best to respond to four thousand questions within three months" (MP, GD). This argument aims at invalidating the opponents' claims and constructing one's own version of "memory" (Foucault 1991).

Such a self-presentation as a firmly pro-European party, which simultaneously is not afraid to "disobey" the EU to ensure that Georgia's interests are fully met, also links to the persistence of another discourse among pro-governmental actors – Georgia is in the ongoing process of becoming a European state (which is the GD's exclusive discourse not voiced by other domestic or international actors). This discourse stresses the country's progress, particularly concerning institutional Europeanization, where the government is deemed most responsible. Not surprisingly, the perspectives of the governmental and oppositional respondents, even though both are similarly entrenched in the linear hierarchical understanding of development, diverge regarding the extent of success in this process. GD officials and pro-governmental media actors denote the ongoing process of Georgia "becoming" the European state as gradual and taking years. They are also quick to point to the progress that has been already reached in terms of "political culture, the structure of economics, the direction of integration, legislative framework, and the volume of partnerships" (MP, GD). Oppositional actors, in turn, remain quite critical of issues around oligarchy, human rights, the judiciary system, and media freedom, which they regard as far from being European.

Thus, despite divergent stances, the discursive battle between the governmental and oppositional camps points to the instrumentalization of similar arguments (agenda setting) and discursive strategies (framing), which might result in the public's ambivalent perceptions. Therefore, it is crucial to find out how political and media discourses are reflected in popular views about Georgia's European integration.

4. SURVEY ANALYSIS: MEDIATED INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF EUROPEANIZATION AS REFLECTED IN PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS

The following section addresses the question of how the mediated instrumentalization of Europeanization resonates among the public in Georgia. For this purpose, a representative survey of Georgia's population has been conducted in the period of July-August 2023. A total of 1022 interviews were conducted. In this section, firstly, general characteristics of the sample – socio-demographic composition, media consumption patterns as well as trust in domestic and international institutions – are reviewed, followed by the analysis of knowledge about and attitudes towards the EU.

4.1. SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

The sample consists of 1022 respondents, among whom 46.4% identify as male and 53.6% identify as female. Being categorized in 4 major age groups (18-29, 30-44, 45-64, and 65+), a predominant cohort (33.5%) emerges in the age group of 45-64, which underlines the prevalence of individuals in the middle-age range. The majority of respondents (47.2%) have completed secondary education, while 33.4% hold a college, university or tertiary degree. Those with vocational qualifications constitute 19.4%. The cumulative percentages show that 99.8% of the surveyed population has achieved at least a secondary education level. A substantial share of the respondents (39.7%) is currently engaged in paid work, while 33% have prior experience in paid employment. Notably, 26% have never participated in paid work.

Looking at settlement types, 43.3% of the respondents live in rural areas and the rest in urban areas, with 28% representing the residents of the capital city. 99% affirm their citizenship as Georgian. Among them, 87% identify their nationality as Georgian, while 13% report belonging to other ethnic groups, predominantly, Azerbaijani and Armenian. Furthermore, 85.5% report belonging to Orthodox Christianity, while Islam holds a presence at 12.2%. The majority constituting 68% demonstrate a positive inclination towards cultural exposure/openness (a composite variable combining information on language proficiency, social connectedness with non-nationals, and extended residency abroad). However, the share of the respondents reporting the lack of cultural exposure/openness is also notable (31.5%).

4.2. MEDIA CONSUMPTION AND TRUST IN DOMESTIC AND EU INSTITUTIONS

In order to analyze how mediatized discourses on Europeanization resonate with public perceptions of this process, it is of utmost importance to look at the patterns of media consumption among citizens. While in the course of survey the respondents were asked to rate the regularity of consuming specific media outlets, in the process of analysis the latter were grouped according to the following classification: Pro-governmental media, encompassing Imedi TV, Rustavi2 and POSTV (a recent self-proclaimed conservative and anti-Western TV station that has adopted the pro-governmental stance); pro-oppositional media, encompassing Mtavari TV, Formula and TV1; and the so-called non-partisan media, encompassing Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB), Netgazeti and Radio Tavisupleba. Pro-governmental Imedi TV turned out to be the most popular outlet with 32.7% of respondents reporting its regular consumption for accessing news, while the least popular media outlet is the so-called party neutral online newspaper Netgazeti, whose regular users represent only 1% of the respondents. Pro-governmental media outlets (at least, one of them) are watched by 40.5% of the respondents, pro-oppositional ones by 28%, while the party neutral ones by 12.8%. Thus, the majority of the population access news via the media outlets that are quite hostile towards each other and, as demonstrated by our media analysis, are engaged in constant blame games, contributing to the translation of political polarization into media polarization.

Because of the growing anti-Western/pro-Russian disinformation and propaganda campaigns within the last years (See MDF reports on anti-Western propaganda 2015-2022), we were curious to find out whether and how successfully the public can identify them. The data reveal that the respondents can hardly identify disinformation, as 31% report to have never encountered it within the last week. Only 25.8% say they have often/very often encountered disinformation. There is a considerable portion (17.4%) of those who are uncertain about having encountered any disinformation. The questionnaire has provided the respondents with the opportunity to identify the main sources of disinformation, focusing on local and international media, governmental and oppositional actors, as well as officials of the EU and authoritarian countries. Out of this list, local media is most often mentioned as an actor disseminating disinformation (27.2%), while the EU and, surprisingly, officials of authoritarian countries are least often mentioned as actors spreading disinformation (1.4% and 1.5%, respectively). Correlation analysis shows that those who watch pro-governmental media outlets tend to perceive oppositional actors as major

disseminators of disinformation (12%) though also see a certain agency of government officials (4.1%). The reversed pattern is revealed in the case of pro-oppositional media consumers: They tend to perceive governmental actors as major disseminators of disinformation (12%) though also see a certain role of oppositional actors in spreading it (4.2%). Thus, we can trace the impact of political polarization through the media consumption patterns. The public seems to be aware of this polarization in the political and media realms. Around half of the respondents assess the media coverage of political matters in Georgia as polarized, while political elites as disunified over EU-related matters, thinking they should be more unified (76%). Overall, a predominant majority (73%) considers the country's political and media environment to be polarized. Those residing in the capital city, as well as those with higher education/students are more likely to acknowledge this polarization.

Beyond the media consumption patterns, another factor affecting how mediatized discourses of Europeanization can affect public perceptions is the interrelation between the trust in local and EU institutions. It turns out that the Georgian and EU institutions are trusted to an almost similar extent, with the trust in the latter slightly exceeding the trust in the former (36% and 33%, respectively). However, disaggregated variables provide more substantial information about distrust: Georgian executive and legislative institutions are less trusted compared to EU institutions: 25-28% of respondents distrust the European Parliament and Commission, while up to 38-39% distrust the Georgian parliament and government. Only 21.5% trust the opposition, which also tends to be one of the most distrusted actors. Finally, a rather large portion of responses fall under the "Don't know/refuse to answer" category when it comes to the trust in EU institutions and local NGOs, pointing to the fact that the citizens are less familiar with these actors and struggle to shape their opinion about them.

Not surprisingly, trust in local and EU institutions correlates with the patterns of media consumption. Around half of pro-governmental (54%) and non-partisan (46%) media users trust the Georgian government, while only 27% of pro-oppositional media consumers share this trust. At the same time, 54.5% of pro-oppositional and 51% of non-partisan media users tend to trust EU institutions, while 39% of pro-governmental media consumers express this trust. The correlation between media consumption and trust in institutions is statistically significant, except for that between pro-governmental media consumption and trust in the EU (Table 2).

Table 2. Correlation between media consumption and trust in institutions

Trust towards Georgian governing institutions and the EU by Media Consumption (%)					
		Trust-Geo	No Trust-Geo*	Trust-EU	No Trust-EU*
Pro-governmental media	Watches	53.6	46.4	38.8	61.4
	Does not Watch	19.7	80.3	34.7	65.3
	Correlation	Chi ² =127.409, df=1, p=.000; Cramer's V = .353		n/sign.	
Pro-oppositional media	Watches	26.6	73.4	54.5	45.5
	Does not Watch	36	64	29.2	70.8
	Correlation	Chi ² =8.241, df=1, p = .004; Cramer's V = .09		Chi ² =57.165, df=1, p=.000; Cramer's V = .237	
Non-partisan media	Watches	46.6	53.4	51.1	48.9
	Does not Watch	31.4	68.6	34.1	65.9
	Correlation	Chi ² =11.774, df=1, p=.001; Cramer's V = .107		Chi ² =14.318, df=1, p=.000; Cramer's V = .118	

*** "No trust" combines responses that express neutral opinions and distrust.

Spearman's correlation test reveals that those who regularly consume pro-governmental media are more satisfied with how the government deals with EU relations compared to those who do not consume this media. On the contrary, there is a negative correlation between the consumption of pro-oppositional media and the level of satisfaction: Consumers of pro-oppositional media are less satisfied with the government's handling of the country's relations with the EU compared to non-consumers. There is no significant correlation when it comes to the consumption of non-partisan media. Interestingly, the level of satisfaction with the government's performance in relation to the EU further correlates with the liberal-conservative divide, with the conservatives being more satisfied compared to liberals, which is not surprising given the ruling party's explicit turn to

the conservative discourse in the recent years (Tsuladze & Abzianidze (Forthcoming)).

Considering that Georgia’s foreign policy course is viewed in the context of the EU vs. Russia dichotomy, public perceptions of Georgia’s Europeanization cannot be analyzed without taking into account their attitudes to Russia, especially bearing in mind the ruling party’s openly declared "pragmatic politics" towards it (IPN.ge, January 29, 2023). Despite the fact that Georgians consider Russia the country’s main enemy (as the recent Caucasus Barometer survey (Spring 2024) shows, 69% of Georgia’s citizens think so), our survey has revealed that up to 64% still think that Georgia should have good relations with Russia (which demonstrates the power of the ruling party’s manipulative discourses and how they resonate among the public). The support towards this idea increases along with age and tends to be more prevalent among rural residents. At the same time, those who regularly use at least one pro-governmental media outlet tend to be more supportive of pragmatic relations with Russia (74%), compared to pro-oppositional media consumers (49%). The more respondents trust the Georgian government, the Georgian parliament and the Georgian Orthodox Church, the more they tend to support good relations with Russia. On the contrary, the more they trust the European Commission, the European Parliament, the opposition and NGOs, the less they tend to support such relations (Table 3). These findings reveal the configuration of actors within the EU-allies vs Russia-allies camps, and how the trust in various local and international institutions as well as the media consumption patterns shape respective preferences.

Table 3. Attitudes towards Russia

	Correlation of Trust in actors and institutions with Positive attitudes towards Russia						
	Geo. Gov- ernment	Geo Par- liament	Geo Orth. Church	EC	EP	Geo opposi- tion	NGOs
Posi- tRU	$r_s = .343$ $p < .01$	$r_s = .319$ $p < .01$	$r_s = .170$ $p < .01$	$r_s = -.155$ $p < .01$	$r_s = -.141$ $p < .01$	$r_s = -.166$ $p < .01$	$r_s = -.244$ $p < .01$

4.3. ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE EU

To capture the insights of public attitudes towards the EU and Georgia's Europeanization, principal component analysis (PCA) was employed, using 20 statements with various pragmatic and identity considerations related to European integration gathered during the media analysis stage. These statements were clustered together to create thematic units (components) that reflect specific trends in public perceptions. The PCA identified four major components with eigenvalue above 1 and significance above the value of 0.3 (Table 4), which clearly resonate with the major findings from the previous stages of research. In fact, the deviation discourse occupies a prominent place among the identified components with the highest positive value (0.6). The PCA also reveals how the ruling party's discourse on the sovereignty threats and the EU's double standards has been reflected in the public views. The four components are as follows: The first component, labelled as the *perceived EU threats towards the national identity and sovereignty*, is composed of statements such as "The EU threatens Georgia's national identity", "The EU intrudes in Georgia's internal affairs", and "The EU support comes with imposed conditions that harm Georgia". The second component, termed as *pragmatic considerations related to the EU*, encompasses optimistic perceptions focused on the benefits of EU involvement, especially its role in the reinforcement of democracy. The third component – *Georgia's deviation from the EU* – includes two statements: "Georgia's government deviates from the European course" and "Georgia's economic interests clash with those of the EU", suggesting a deviation both in terms of political alignment and economic interests. The fourth component is labelled as *the EU's double standards*, as it suggests that no matter how well Georgia follows EU requirements, the country still has not obtained/will not obtain candidate status because of the artificially created barriers. The statements comprising this component reflect the discourse propagated by government officials and pro-governmental media outlets regarding Georgia's denial of candidate status in June 2022, stressing perceived inconsistencies in EU policies.

Table 4. Principal Component Analysis of statements

Principal Component Analysis (PCA) of the 20 statements			Only 0.3 or more			
q15 #	Label	Var name	Comp1	Comp2	Comp3	Comp4
1	The EU has an important role in protecting human rights	meddisc_comm1		0.3514		
2	The EU threatens Georgia's national identity	meddisc_comm2	0.3171			
3	The EU has a positive role in Georgia's economic development	meddisc_comm3				
4	The EU intrudes in Georgia's internal affairs	meddisc_comm4	0.3322			
5	The EU increases Georgia's security	meddisc_comm5				
6	The importance for Georgia to integrate with the EU is overrated	meddisc_comm6				
7	The EU has helped the better management of the COVID crisis	meddisc_comm7				
8	The EU lacks solidarity and unity	meddisc_comm8				
9	The EU plays an important role in providing assistance to Ukraine	meddisc_comm9		0.341		
10	Some member states' deviation from the European course endangers the EU	meddisc_comm10				-0.685
11	The EU support comes with imposed conditions that harm Georgia	meddisc_GE1	0.3039			
12	Georgia's economic interests clash with those of the EU	meddisc_GE2			0.3826	
13	Georgia shares the same values with the EU	meddisc_GE3				
14	Georgia's government deviates from the European course	meddisc_GE4			0.5995	
15	Georgia's opposition deviates from the European course	meddisc_GE5				
16	Economic relations with Russia are beneficial to the country	meddisc_GE6				
17	The EU is guided by double standards in relation to Georgia	meddisc_GE7				
18	Deviation from the European course leads to the Russian influence	meddisc_GE8				
19	Georgia has been denied candidate status because it is not in the state of war	meddisc_GE9				0.3395
20	Implementing 12 recommendations is not a sufficient precondition for candidate status	meddisc_GE10				0.4188

Based on the 20 statements mentioned above and the insights gleaned from the PCA results, a set of variables was created for further statistical analysis: *PragmEU* – statements representing pragmatic gains stemming from the EU (1, 3, 5, 7); *IdentEU* – statements referring to threats towards the national identity and traditional values stemming from the EU (2, 13 reversed); *SovernEU* – statements pointing to the sovereignty concerns related to the EU's influences (4, 11, 12); and *DoublstndEU* – statements stressing that the EU is guided by double standards towards Georgia (17, 19, 20). Furthermore, a *KnowEU* variable was created, which measures the knowledge about the EU using two questions: Identifying EU member countries and knowing whether Georgia has supported EU sanctions against Russia. The scores range from 0 (no correct answers) to 4 (all correct answers).

Overall, we can argue that despite the fact that the absolute majority of the population support Georgia's European integration and believe that

Georgia will benefit from EU membership (81.5%), concurrently, there is very low awareness/knowledge and quite a high level of uncertainty about EU-related matters. It is noteworthy that only 1.7% provided correct answers to all the four knowledge questions (KnowEU), while 70% did not know any or knew only one fact out of the listed four. As expected, higher education levels correlate with better EU knowledge and urban residents have higher EU knowledge compared to rural ones. Furthermore, consumption of pro-oppositional media is associated with greater EU knowledge, while consumption of pro-governmental media with less EU knowledge. When it comes to the respondents' uncertainty, it is obvious that the latter is closely intertwined with the lack of respective knowledge: Although the predominant majority of Georgians (around 70-80%) have been consistently supporting the country's European integration and reporting they want Georgia to become a member state (CRRRC Georgia, Caucasus Barometer 2009-2024), based on our study, 44% are still uncertain whether European integration should go further or not, which indicates that they do not realize the fact that without European integration going further (in terms of widening) Georgia cannot become EU member state.

The Georgian citizens' uncertainty is most vividly reflected in the sovereignty concerns related to European integration (SovernEU) as well as their perceptions of the EU as being guided by double standards (DoublstndEU). Around 35-36% of the respondents are uncertain whether or not the EU intrudes in Georgia's internal affairs or imposes harmful conditionality. The statement on whether Georgia's economic interests clash with those of the EU invokes even higher uncertainty (44%), while that of the EU's double standards towards Georgia generates the highest uncertainty with a half of the respondents being undecided. Among those who provide answers, a larger portion (30.3%) believes the EU is guided by double standards vis-à-vis those thinking otherwise (18.7%). As our media analysis has shown, the discourse that the EU is guided by double standards towards Georgia has been voiced by the ruling party and widely circulated by pro-governmental media since June 2022, and hence it is predominantly the consumers of pro-governmental media outlets who are concerned about the EU's double standards. Likewise, the sovereignty concerns appear to be particularly pronounced among those who watch and trust pro-governmental media, notably TV Imedi. These findings confirm the power of propagandistic messages disseminated by the respective media, especially since May 2023 when the ruling party and pro-governmental media outlets started portraying liberal values as a threat to the country's sovereignty (Agenda.ge, May 4, 2023; Civil.ge, May 12, 2023).

The abovementioned uncertainty is even evident when it comes to the benefits (PragmEU) associated with Georgia's European integration. Although those with positive views regarding the EU's role in reinforcing Georgia's democracy and economy (around 60% each) significantly outnumber those with negative views (around 13-14%), one third is still undecided about the pragmatic gains stemming from the country's European integration. The same portion of uncertain respondents has been identified when assessing the impact of the EU on Georgian identity and values (IdentEU), which is the most sensitive theme often manipulated by anti-Western and pro-Russian propaganda. While 43% of respondents disagree that the EU threatens Georgia's national identity and traditional values, 27% anticipate such threats, and almost one third remains undecided. Previous studies highlighted the concerns about the perceived identity threats due to the EU's promotion of LGBTQ+ rights and its harm to traditional family values (Tsuladze *et al.*, 2016; Tsuladze *et al.*, 2021). However, positive dynamics can be traced, with 47% agreeing that Georgia shares the same values with the EU, compared to 18% who disagree with this statement. Furthermore, around 63% of respondents agree with none of the statements viewing the EU as a threat to the national identity, indicating a shift in respective attitudes.

To summarize, the survey findings reveal the lack of factual knowledge about the EU and a considerable level of uncertainty in the public perceptions about Georgia's Europeanization. The data shows how the media consumption patterns influence the citizens' attitudes, highlighting the role of pro-governmental vis-à-vis pro-oppositional media outlets in shaping respective views. It also illustrates that the ruling party's recent rhetoric on liberal values threatening the country's sovereignty and the EU pursuing double standards towards Georgia has been instantly reflected in public perceptions. Based on these findings, we argue that the mediated instrumentalization of Europeanization in Georgia results in notable ambiguity in public opinion. Unsurprisingly, this makes the Georgian population rather vulnerable to anti-European/anti-Western propaganda.

5. CONCLUSION

Reflecting on the political discourses on Europeanization in Georgia, we can trace a growing trend of the ruling GD party's discursive disengagement from the EU within the recent years. The latter became visible in July 2021, after the GD's withdrawal from Charles Michel's document aimed at mitigating the political polarization in Georgia; intensified in March 2022, after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, when GD refused to join the EU's sanctions against Russia and labelled those openly

condemning the Russian invasion as "war parties"; further escalated in June 2022, when the EU refused to grant Georgia candidate status; and reached its peak on April 29, 2024, when the GD's founder and honorary chairman Bidzina Ivanishvili publicly declared at the government-organized rally in support of the so-called "foreign agents" law that the main enemy of the country was "the global war party" that influenced the EU's and NATO's decisions, and attempted to provoke a revolution in Georgia using the local proxies, that is, opposition parties and NGOs (Civil.ge, April 29, 2024).

Thus, we can trace a gradual shift in the ruling party's boundaries of "sayable": Based on our extensive research starting from 2014, no major political party in Georgia expressed its discursive opposition to the EU until July 2021, when the EU first voiced its concern that the ruling party was deviating from the European course (stressed by opposition parties much earlier) and GD responded with its defensive discourse that Georgia firmly followed its European path. Later, after Russia's invasion of Ukraine and especially the EU's refusal to grant Georgia candidate status in June 2022, GD's defensive discourse shifted to the offensive one, accusing the EU of pursuing double standards towards Georgia and "punishing" the country for not being in the state of war, then blaming the EU for "wanting to drag Georgia into the war", and finally, accusing the EU of being controlled by "the global war party" that planned to provoke a revolution in Georgia. Thus, we can trace the reactivation (in Foucauldian terms) of the ruling party's blame games, expanding them from the local opponents ("war parties") to the international ones ("the global war party"), alongside the latter's growing criticism regarding the country's democratic backsliding.

As expected, pro-governmental media readily reproduced and circulated the ruling party's discourses, attacking GD's both local and international critics. In parallel, opposition parties and pro-oppositional media have become increasingly vocal in highlighting the ruling party's discursive opposition to the EU and pointing to its deviation from the European course. Using the Foucauldian concept of "conservation", we can argue that the latter represents the discourse that retains its dominance throughout the analyzed period among all the discourses on Georgia's Europeanization. The ruling party, on its side, has reversed the deviation discourse directing it towards the opposition. These blame games have been actively appropriated by pro-governmental and pro-oppositional media outlets, which further aggravates the existing political and media polarization, and makes European integration one of the main themes of affective polarization in Georgia. No doubt, all of this has a profound impact on the population, whose majority access the news via partisan media outlets. This is how political and media polarization permeates the public

domain and, as revealed by our research, invokes considerable uncertainty among the population. Nevertheless, it is obvious that the European project retains its hegemony in Georgia not only among the citizens whose absolute majority support the country's European integration but also among the politicians "disengaging" from the EU. This is evident from the fact that despite accusing the EU of its revolutionary plans against the ruling party, GD's founder Bidzina Ivanishvili still promised the public to ensure EU membership for Georgia by 2030 (Civil.ge, April 29, 2024).

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Chapter 5

Mediatized Discourses on Europeanization in Hungary

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SUMARIO: 1. INTRODUCTION. 2. MEDIA DISCOURSES ON THE EU AND THEIR RAMIFICATIONS. 3. ELITE DISCOURSES: MAJOR FACTORS AND THEIR UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS. 4. SURVEY ANALYSIS: PUBLIC VIEWS ABOUT THE EU, THE ELITE AND THE MEDIA. 4.1. *Pragmatic and symbolic aspects in promoting further integration*. 5. CONCLUSION. REFERENCES. APPENDIX 1.

1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter investigates how European integration and Europeanization were represented and constructed by the Hungarian elites and the media, and how these appeared in the Hungarian public opinion. In the triangle of elite, media, and public opinion we aimed to identify the

basic features of relevant discourses, the prime movers and the patterns of public perception¹.

In political respects Hungary has gone through democratic subversion since 2010 under Fidesz government and the uninterrupted prime ministerial leadership of V. Orbán (Kelemen 2020; Ágh 2016; Bogaards 2018). Initially the EU followed democratic subversion passively. By 2022 the diverging interests between the EU and the Hungarian government became manifest via infringement actions with reference to the Rule of Law Conditionality Regulation. The transformation of the political and economic circumstances after 2010 has led to a significant change in the way politicians speak publicly about the EU (Berend 2021). Previously predominant technocratic and pro-European discourses have been replaced by symbolic messages about national sovereignty (Fabbrini-Zgaga 2024; Verzichelli 2020), in which the EU has been presented in a negative role, often as a threat. Discourses about the EU rarely reflected the fact that Hungary was part of the EU, and the EU was generally seen as an external actor.

The overall media situation (Hallin & Mancini 2004; Urbán *et al.* 2017; Dobek-Ostrowska 2015, 2019; Bátorfy 2019; Dragomir 2019; Martin 2019) has had a major impact on the development of the discourse. With the authoritarian turn, the Hungarian media system features high polarization, signs of capture by the government, and low public trust. The media conditions follow similar polarization that we can observe in the realm of politics: pro-government media supported by huge public resources dominates while independent, market-based media outlets struggle to survive (Éltető & Martin 2024; Hann *et al.* 2023; Urbán 2024; Bajomi-Lázár & Horváth 2023).

Democratic subversion has gone in parallel with elite transformation (Lengyel & Ilonszki 2016; Ilonszki & Lengyel 2024). The takeover of the Orbán government in 2010 was not a mere government change, which would normally bring about changes in elite positions, but also a break with the elite consensus on the liberal-democratic foundations of the system, and a thorough transformation of the political, economic, and media elites, leading to sweeping systemic consequences.

1. The authors would like to thank Ákos Bocskor, Erika Kurucz, Réka Tamássy, Ágnes Urbán and Anna Vancsó for their valuable contributions to the research reports this chapter is based on. Thanks are also due to the colleagues and students at the Corvinus University of Budapest (CUB) who participated in the information gathering, content analysis and interviews.

In the research process we have conducted content and discourse analyses of the influential media outlets followed by interviews with the political and media elites to identify the main Europeanisation discourses and their components. We will discuss how different discursive blocks have emerged and how polarization has strengthened. Building on the previous phases, with a public opinion survey we have explored public views on the EU and Europeanisation. We will highlight how public views on European integration are influenced by pragmatic and identity-based symbolic aspects, as well as by the public's perception of the role of elite and media in the country's Europeanisation.

2. MEDIA DISCOURSES ON THE EU AND THEIR RAMIFICATIONS

The aim of this part of the project was to identify and analyze media discourses on the EU between July 2021 and March 2022. During this period, the political landscape was extremely turbulent: the run-up to the upcoming parliamentary elections intensified government propaganda on the EU, and opposition parties built up a pro-active collaborative strategy to counter the populist and EU-sceptic stance of the dominant pro-government media. The elections in April 2022 brought about the success of the Orbán government again. Russia's aggression against Ukraine had a role in Fidesz victory and influenced the EU-related discourse as well: the EU ever since appears as a scapegoat for "mishandling" the war, which is presented as a point of reference to explain measures such as governing by decrees or economic underperformance.

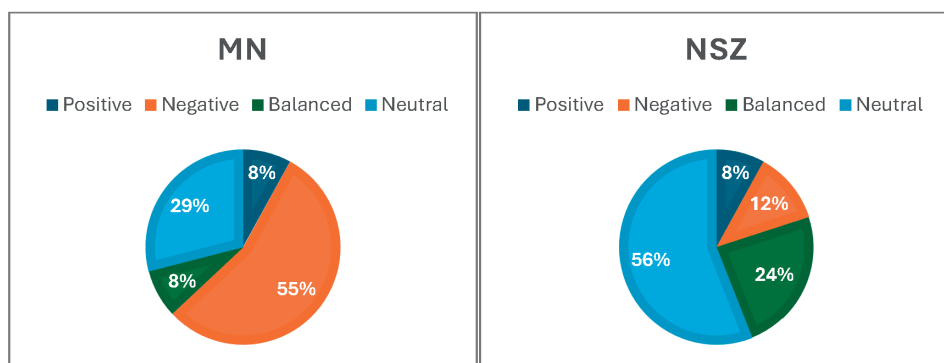
At this stage of the research, we selected eight widely known Hungarian media sources including public and private, online and print, pro-government and pro-opposition media. We monitored the evening news programs of two television stations, one public and one private (M1 and RTL), and the online and print versions of two daily newspapers, the pro-government Magyar Nemzet (MN) and the government-critical Népszava (NSZ). In addition, two popular online publications (HVG and ORIGO) were also included, the first from a government-critical and the second from a pro-government side. Finally, we added HÍR TV and ATV, where political debates were frequent. The former is pro-government, the latter used to represent liberal-critical positions, although recently this characterization was questioned due to the change of ownership and tone.

In the selected media, we collected items containing the following keywords related to the EU: European Union, EU, Brussels, European Parliament, European Commission, and European Council. About two thirds of the corpus (articles, news, transcripts of conversations) appeared

in pro-government media, one third in government-critical or neutral media. Then, based on the preliminary research and test coding, we processed further selection within the corpus, using additional keywords per macro topics that had attracted public interest during the period under study. Macro topics allow for the analysis of the relationship between text and social context and can thus be used to explore discourse characteristics (Wodak 2020). European identity and the future of Europe, migration, pandemics, disinformation, war, and sexual minorities were the macro topics analyzed in the subsamples of the EU-related corpus.

It is a common feature of the analyzed media that incumbent politicians are vastly overrepresented among the speakers. This connects to– and partially explains– some features such as the dominance of overarching and symbolic themes in discourses. Politicians tend to displace experts and journalists not only in the news, but also in articles and opinion-forming reviews. A handful of government politicians channel the communication themes to the media. International speakers are less frequently speaking, and they are better visible in the opposition media outlets. Figure 1 shows patterns of EU perceptions in the two major dailies.

Figure 1. Perception of the EU in two dailies: the pro-government Magyar Nemzet (MN) and the government-critical Népszava (NSZ) (%). Sample: first three weeks of July and November 2021



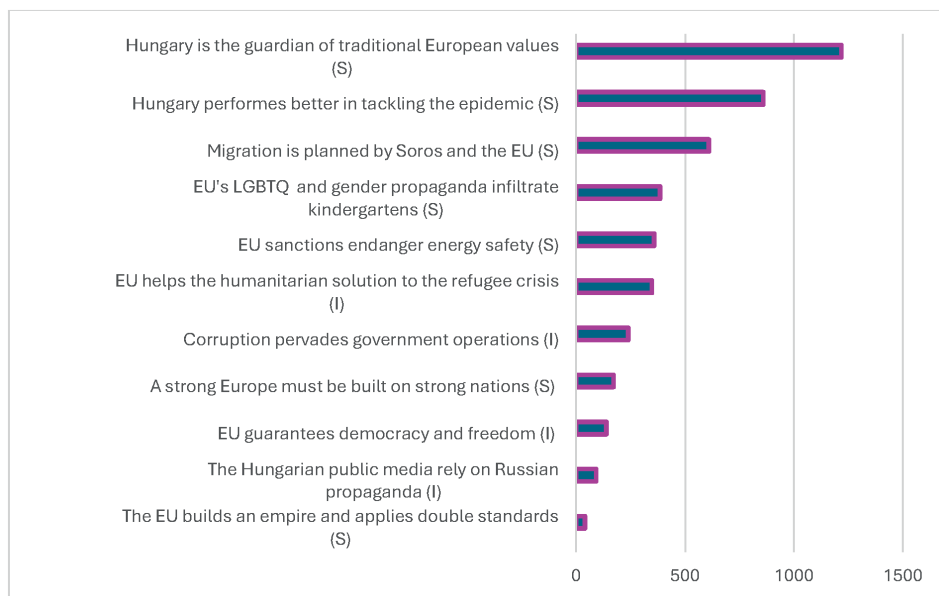
The first lesson of the content analysis is that the vast majority of the corpus contained neutral factual information without evaluative elements. But – and this is the second and more important lesson – in those articles where the EU was the dominant topic, we could observe a significant divergence in the tone of the pro-government and government-critical media. The pro-government MN broadcast a predominantly negative view

of the EU, while the assessment of the government-critical NSZ was more neutral and balanced. The share of positive EU assessments in both media sources was around 8%. The government-critical media is critical of the EU when it feels the need to be and is not characterized by a one-sided tone of praise. It uses the tools of argument and counterargument more often, and in some cases shows the characteristics of internal pluralism. The difference between the two types of media is that while the pro-government media is critical of the EU but not of the government, the government-critical one is occasionally critical of the EU as well. In the former, articles critical of the EU are predominant, in the latter, articles with a positive and negative tone are roughly balanced, but neutral and balanced items dominate.

From the perspective of discourse analysis two major blocks emerged: the views of sovereigntism and integrationism. The sovereigntist block's discourses characterize the dominant pro-government media's view of the EU. The pragmatic and identity factors are inherently intertwined in all relevant discourses, since sovereignty is the main interpretative framework, and pragmatic aspects are dominated by identity-based lines (Wodak 2020). According to this view, the Hungarian government is only trying to protect the 'tradition' and 'normality' that Hungarian citizens and European people across the EU want and demand.

The sovereigntist position is best expressed in positive terms by the phrases that *"Hungary is the defender of traditional European values"* and *"a strong Europe must be built on strong nations"*. In a negative sense, however, the emerging sovereigntist stance is pervaded by nativism and an "Us versus Them" interpretation of Hungary-EU relations, where "Them" is frequently identified with the West itself. The 'West' is often described as decayed, abnormal, sick, and consequently only the Central European region can defend the European tradition. The pro-government media, when using this discourse, constantly reconstructs the message that the united opposition wants to sell the country to the "West" and gives up all traditional, Christian, Hungarian values. The mobilizing ideology of the ruling elite, based on an image of the enemy, enforces polarization in domestic politics. Figure 2 shows the most prominent sovereigntist and integrationist discourses on the EU by their appearance in the headlines.

Figure 2. EU-related sovereigntist and integrationist media discourses. Sample: EU-related Hungarian media coverage, July 2021–March 2022. Legend: S – sovereigntist; I – integrationist



The other discursive block also includes several discourses, represented mainly by the pro-integration category, which recognizes the necessity of further integration. This includes those who ascribe moral or symbolic value to the EU and report a European identity as well as those who recognize the pragmatic benefits of a liberal and managed central administration based on appropriate regulatory and redistributive powers. The East/West discourses are based on the dominance of the West, which is to be rejected or accepted as a model for Hungarian future developments.

Integrationism is organized as a *counter-discourse* to sovereigntism in the media in two ways. One way is directly – and more frequently – when it seeks to refute or challenge a sovereigntist claim. The other way is indirectly, as seen in Figure 2, when it brings forward the EU's role in protecting democracy, and issues that criticize the government, such as the discourses of corruption, or disinformation.

In this way, there is a dominant nationalist block which claims that Hungary and Hungarians are European already but are treated as second class by mainstream Western European discourses which came into being

as early as in the late 1990s (Melegh 2006). There is an additional one, which would like to counterbalance "Eastern" nationalism, via civilizational upgrading, which also came into being in the 1990s already. The nationalist views among others rely on reactivated topics of Hungarians' Eastern origin as voiced between the two World Wars (i.e. Turanism). The *reactivation* (Foucault 1991) of the historical memory of the Hungarians' claimed Turkic origins is part of the arsenal of identity politics, in the spirit of opening to the East. It is left unclear how this is compatible with the discourse of Hungary as the bastion of Christianity.

The sovereigntist and integrationist blocks are linked with a West-East hierarchical image, but with different interpretations. In most sovereigntist discourses, the West is a source of threat, while in the integrationist discursive block it is a guarantee of freedom and prosperity. Another type of connection/link is that the dominant discourses of some macro-topics appear as sub-discourses of others as well.

When an immanent critique of the EU does emerge among integrationist views, it tends to be of a pragmatic nature, targeting, among other things, negative side effects, information vacuums and bureaucratic slowness. In this framework, integration is a concept with multiple meanings, and the strengthening of federal institutions is one possible interpretation along with others, such as infrastructure development and enlargement.

The contrast between the two discursive blocks on the EU is rooted in the highly polarized nature of politics and the polarized media, which all increase the sense of insecurity and distrust (Melegh 2023). There is a parallelism between politics and the media, i.e. both politics and the media are asymmetrically polarized, with the predominant influence of the governing elite. As mentioned above, the reason for parallelism between politics and media is a media capture carried out by the governing elite (Éltető & Martin 2024; Dragomir 2019). While polarization is an increasingly common feature of European politics today (Beaudonnet & Gomez 2024, Bettarelli *et al.* 2023, McCoy & Sommer 2019, Guriev & Treisman 2020), this *asymmetric polarization* further explains the characteristics of the discursive blocks, both in terms of influence and orientation towards the EU. Table 1 provides a summary of discourses concerning EU-related macro topics.

Table 1. Sovereigntist and integrationist discourses according to macro topics

Discursive unit (Macro topic)	Sovereigntism	Integrationism
National and European identity	Hungary is the savior of traditional European values of Christianity and family; Don't let Brussels dictate us; Today Europeans have no right to their country... their family, their God; We are the only Eastern people left in Europe.	The EU is a guardian of democracy and rule of law; The EU protects human rights and minorities; European and national identities are compatible; Hungary belongs to the West.
Future of Europe	A strong EU must be built on strong nations; The EU is creaky, Hungary has a clear and consistent vision; The EU builds an empire and applies double standards.	The EU should be empowered; The EU should become an effective regulator of nationalist extremism and norm breaching.
Migration and the EU	Migration is the plan of George Soros and the EU; Migration is a security issue.	The EU manages a humanitarian solution to the refugee crisis; The EU represents the "normal" management of migration and the related fundamental values.
Pandemic and the EU	Hungary performs better than the chaotic EU in tackling the epidemic; Russia and China perform better; The EU is selfish, it exploits the crisis to advance its own interest.	Hungary underperforms in healthcare and economic competition; Eastern procurement of vaccines and ventilators by the government is a hotbed of corruption; Because of grand corruption of government clients, there is no money for healthcare and education.

Discursive unit (Macro topic)	Sovereigntism	Integrationism
Disinformation and the EU	Discourse about disinformation helps the expansion of EU-bureaucracy.	The Hungarian public media use Russian propaganda as a source.
Hybrid war and the EU	Hybrid warfare is between the normal people and the liberal lobby; Hybrid war is fueled by the EU.	The migrant crisis on the Polish-Belarus border is part of Russia's hybrid war against the EU.
War, security, geopolitics, EU	EU sanctions ruin us; The left and EU would take the country to war, Fidesz guarantees peace; We will not let us pay the price of the war; EU sanctions endanger energy safety.	The lies of Fidesz ruin us; Hungary is part of the West and needs to be loyal to its allies, not to Russia; The Hungarian government plays a dangerous game when it simultaneously seeks the favor of Russia, China, Trump and the European far-right; EU sanctions are justified, but they can also punish those who should be supported.
LGBTQ propaganda and the EU	LGBTQ and gender propaganda infiltrate kindergartens; The EU wants to take away the parents' rights, and the Hungarian government only protects families; LGBTQ propaganda harms the mental health and sexuality of children.	Family is family; The government deliberately confuses homosexuality with pedophilia.

We could identify several eponyms such as 'Soros' or 'Brussels,' which were born in sovereigntist discourses and then spilled over into the public discourse through media advertisements and giant posters. Discursive elements are often repetitive, key messages of one macro-topic appear in other macro-topics as well. The praise of Hungarian performance in

sovereigntist discourses reappears in the topics of pandemics, migration, and the future of Europe. By contrast, in the integrationist argument these are denied, the EU's civilizational impact is emphasized in a variety of contexts.

Pragmatic discourse is subordinated to identity issues in the government media, and it is weak even in the neutral and government-critical media as these media outlets often reflect and respond to the dominant government discourse. This appears to be a *discursive trap* in the given context, as it places the narrative in an ideological field and thus overrides the possibility of confronting everyday experience.

It happens—particularly regarding the themes of migration and Russia's war against Ukraine— that there is silence about crucial facts and interpretations. This "empty space" is filled with "commentary" on the EU as intended by the communicator. The EU is instrumentalized: its claimed negative role in these events serves as a disguise to reject reality. Some narratives – which often connect to fundamental values, like humanitarian aspects of migration– disappear from the discourse and are superseded by fake news. In such cases, the rhetorical device of "*whataboutism*" is often used: instead of uncomfortable facts, an alternative topic is raised that may embarrass the other party.

Our research shed light on the *versions of silence* (Melegh 2023; Hameleers *et al.* 2023). Certain types of refugees, uncomfortable facts and comparative data, names of political opponents, and initially even the naming of the war could all sink into silence. At the other pole of silence, we find the example of the Hungarian exit from the EU, which was not in the *sayable* range in the pro-government media, despite the EU-critical tone. All of these relate to democratic subversion supported by the asymmetric polarization of the media in which the government-critical press cannot reach a significant part of the public.

3. ELITE DISCOURSES: MAJOR FACTORS AND THEIR UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS

Sixty members of the Hungarian political and media elite were interviewed between November 2022 and March 2023. The sample of elite interviews reflects the two-thirds to one-third government-opposition split identified in the previous phase of the research. The sample of political elites was drawn from Hungarian Members of Parliament, Hungarian Members of the European Parliament and senior officials. The media elite included the editors-in-chief and senior journalists of print and online newspapers,

television and radio stations, as well as board members representing the owners. We applied the snowball approach to reach respondents and ensured confidentiality throughout the process using code numbers for the interviewers and respondents alike. The 60-member sample consisted of 49 men and 11 women, half of the sample was over 50 years old, 29 belonged to the political elite and 31 to the media elite. The former group consisted of 17 MPs and MEPs and 12 civil servants while the latter included 24 editors and journalists, in addition to 7 media owners. In terms of political self-classification, around 60% claimed to belong to the right, roughly a quarter to the left and the rest to the center with a score of 4 on a 7-point scale.

The Q-analysis of the elite interviews identified four main factors: the *integrationist*, *sovereigntist*, *multi-speed* and *Huxit* stances. We could rightly assume that the factor structure accurately describes the views of Hungarian political and media elites on European integration as the statements were imported from media discourses where elite opinions dominated, moreover respondents commented on their choices and in most cases approved that the presented statements were relevant. Their arguments convincingly supported and refined the factor ranking decisions.

Figure 3 introduces the pattern of the integrationist factor. This factor represents those who share pro-integration views in terms of promoting further ties and strengthening institutions within the EU. In addition to economic benefits, many highlight the freedom to travel:

We receive 4% of Hungary's GDP from the European Union, without EU support, there would be a very serious recession in Hungary, which is also to be expected if we could not agree very quickly on the original funds, and then we do not discuss the next seven-year cycle about the funds. So, we are absolutely a net beneficiary of the European Union financially. This is one, the financial side, and the social side is mobility. The fact that anyone can go to the West to learn, to live. The boundaries have become more or less formal. ... So, the world opened up (member of the political elite, opposition).

Critics of the government point to the constraints the EU places on political autocratization:

If there was no EU [here], it would be a hybrid democracy of the 1930s and a mixture of the Putin era (member of the government-critical media elite).

The pro-integrationist position includes federalism, as well as the support of EU enlargement, pragmatic considerations related to the EU's role in reinforcing the country's democracy and security, and the strengthening of cultural ties among European countries. Some

representatives of this view attach outstanding historical importance to European integration:

[That] the integration of the EU should be continued... I put it here among the strongest yes-s, because I think that European integration was one of the greatest achievements of the 20th century (member of the government-critical media elite).

Figure 3. Characteristic features of the integrationist factor within the elite

Composite Q sort for Factor 1						
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3
The operation of the West is chaotic, ineffective and declining.	The EU threatens Hungary's national sovereignty.	The EU should not interfere in any minority issues in the Member States.	The Western European "old" member states of the EU dominate over	* ► The EU must stand against authoritarian tendencies in individual	The Hungarian government used EU funds in an insufficiently transparent	** ► EU membership is beneficial for Hungary.
We should leave the EU sooner or later.	** The current policy of the EU threatens the energy security of	** ◀ The EU's so-called LGBTQ propaganda is harmful to children.	* Immigration from non-EU countries threatens Europe's	* EU integration must continue.	European identity is an important value for us and is compatible with	** ► Hungary's security in a war situation is guaranteed by the EU and
	Hungary's economy performs better than that of most EU	During the Covid epidemic, Hungarian epidemic management	European integration must be a multi-speed process.	The EU must act effectively against Russian and Chinese disinformation	** ► The EU is the best guarantee for the preservation of democracy.	
		** ◀ The EU must return to cooperation between sovereign	The countries of Central Europe represent common values	** ► The central institutions of the EU must be strengthened.		
			** ► Migration solves the EU's labor market problems.			
			The EU mainly serves the interests of large companies.			
			Hungary is the custodian of true European values, Christianity			

Legend

* Distinguishing statement at $P < 0.05$

** Distinguishing statement at $P < 0.01$

► z-Score for the statement is higher than in all other factors

◀ z-Score for the statement is lower than in all other factors

The second strongest factor supports the reinforcement of sovereignty. Its pattern is introduced in Figure 4. The statements comprising this factor emphasize that the EU's institutional developments and symbolic gestures point toward the wrong direction:

This is a debate between two concepts, the Europe of nations and a federal Europe, and I firmly believe that, as the founders of the European Union and Coal and Steel Community and the founders of the European Community, in the 1950s, Christian-democratic politicians thought that the right line was the Europe of nations and nation-states, and this federal Europe, this is a non-existent fiction, and nothing good will come of it (member of the political elite, government).

They claim that the EU's sanctions pose a concrete threat to Hungary's energy security:

The current EU policy is endangering the energy security of Hungarian households, as is clear from the way prices are rising, and we are lucky to have a much better petrol price, at least temporarily. So, it was shocking to see in the last few months that in Germany, for example, on Sunday, there is no traffic on Sunday. It got very little publicity, but it was a state organization, so it was not voluntary. Or in France, for example, when we went to Strasbourg, how shocking it was queues at the petrol stations. That was not the plan here. It can be clearly compared what the difference is (member of the political elite, government).

According to sovereigntists, the government's corruption-free record with EU funds is unquestionable and its defense against EU interference is justified:

I don't think the EU uses its existing power well in economic matters, and it does use it terribly in political matters (member of the political elite, government).

On the part of the European institutions, the two very common accusations are the rule of law accusations in general, and especially the use of European Union funds... not so much its transparency, because I think its transparency is clear, as the Hungarian laws, such as the Public Procurement Act, is one of the strictest... in the entire European Union. So, no one can say that resources are used in a non-transparent manner. ...the EU institutional system launches political attacks against Hungary (member of the political elite, government).

They believe the EU's central authorities are unfair and apply double standards to stifle dissent. They deny that migration could have a positive impact on the labor market or that the EU should act against Russian and Chinese disinformation in member states. The sovereigntist view is largely

based on domestic electoral considerations and defends the government's political position. Somewhat in contrast however, the sovereigntist view includes that the EU and NATO guarantee national security:

For Hungary, EU membership is beneficial, and being a small, weak country, its security can only and exclusively be guaranteed by its Western allies, so this is out of the question (member of the political elite, government).

Figure 4. Characteristic features of the sovereigntist factor within the elite

Composite Q sort for Factor 2						
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3
We should leave the EU sooner or later.	The EU is the best guarantee for the preservation of democracy.	The EU should not interfere in any minority issues in the Member States.	The EU mainly serves the interests of large companies.	The countries of Central Europe represent common values	** ▶ The current policy of the EU threatens the energy security of	The EU must return to cooperation between sovereign
* ◀ Migration solves the EU's labor market problems.	** ◀ The Hungarian government used EU funds in an insufficiently transparent	* ◀ The EU must act effectively against Russian and Chinese disinformation	** The EU threatens Hungary's national sovereignty.	The Western European "old" member states of the EU dominate over	** Hungary is the custodian of true European values, Christianity	Immigration from non-EU countries threatens Europe's
	The central institutions of the EU must be strengthened.	European integration must be a multi-speed process,	* ▶ Hungary's economy performs better than that of most EU	EU membership is beneficial for Hungary.	The EU's so-called LGBTQ propaganda is harmful to children.	
		The EU must stand against authoritarian tendencies in individual	* ◀ European identity is an important value for us and is compatible with	* Hungary's security in a war situation is guaranteed by the EU and		
			During the Covid epidemic, Hungarian epidemic management			
			The operation of the West is chaotic, ineffective and declining.			
			EU integration must continue.			

Legend

* Distinguishing statement at $P < 0.05$

** Distinguishing statement at $P < 0.01$

▶ z-Score for the statement is higher than in all other factors

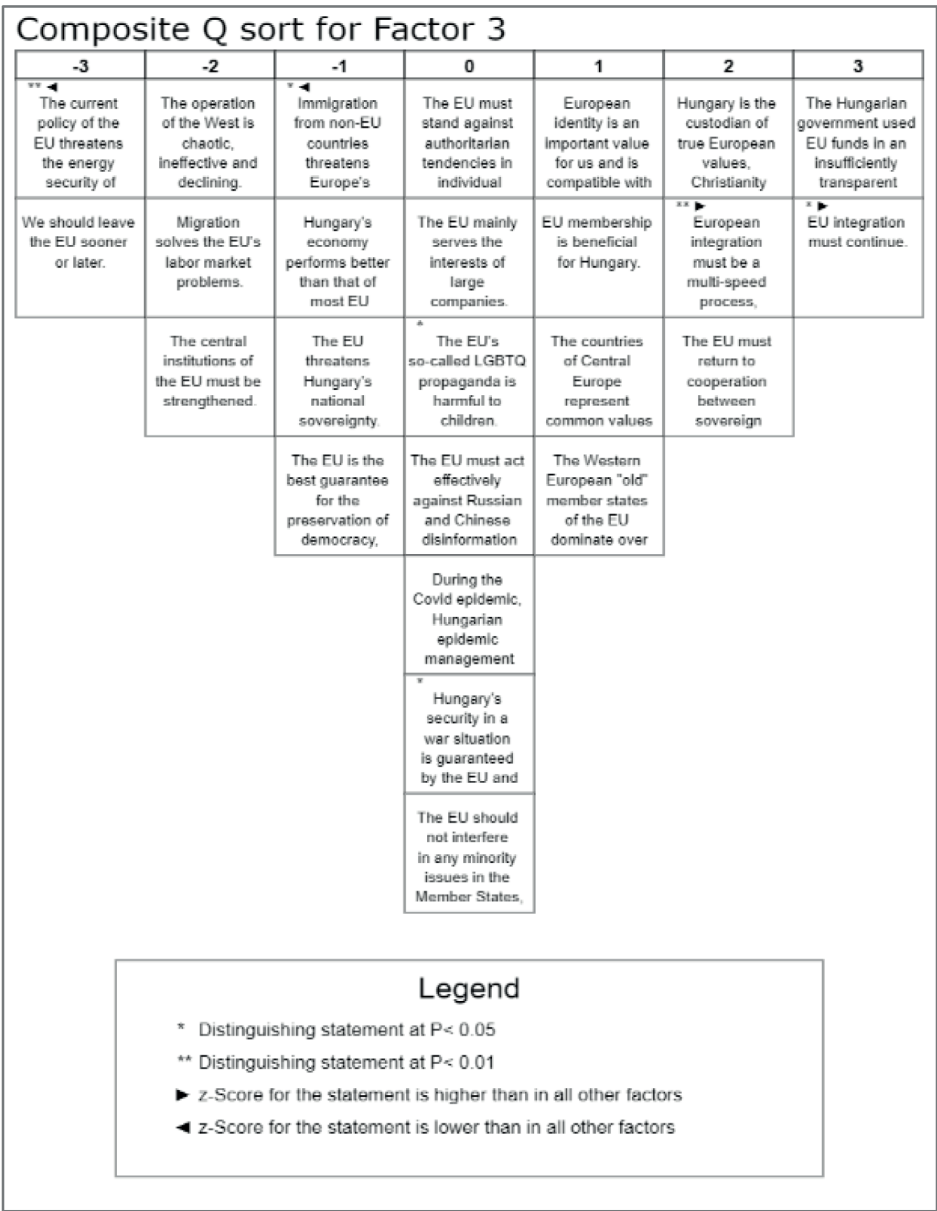
◀ z-Score for the statement is lower than in all other factors

According to the sovereigntist perspective, European and national identities are compatible. This explains – just like in case of the elite members who share the integrationist and multi-speed outlook – why the sovereigntist elite members are also against leaving the EU.

These internal contradictions verify that the discourse of endangered sovereignty serves tactical performative purposes, and that European integration is instrumentalized among the incumbent elite. It signals the opposition to 'Brussels', designates the enemy for mobilized followers while accepting the EU's framework and values. We will see below that the message is not always interpreted in this way among followers though, as its internal distinctions and nuances may well be misunderstood or overlooked.

In addition to the two main factors – integrationist and sovereigntist – we find two marginal factors: the multi-speed EU and the Huxit alternatives. The first suggests that each member state should proceed with integration according to its own readiness and will. According to the second, Hungary, like the UK, will have to leave the EU sooner or later. Figure 5 below and Figure 6 present the components of these two factors subsequently.

Figure 5. Characteristic features of the multi-speed factor within the elite



At this stage, we should also note that factor types tend to connect to particular modes of discourse. We have identified a normative and a

contemplative discourse mode. In the normative discourse, the claims and demands are clearly formulated, the modals of "should" and "must" or "must not" are frequently applied, and the interviewee's personal, often emotionally charged opinion is expressed. In the contemplative discourse, the topic is described as an object of analysis, where pros and cons are often weighed. The interviewee may form an opinion, or the personal opinion may remain hidden. These are not necessarily differences between politicians and journalists, but differences between attitudes that connect to discourse patterns. Multi-speed EU and Huxit discourses appear more often in the contemplative-analytical discourse mode.

Although the multi-speed approach is compatible with both the sovereigntist and the integrationist viewpoints, it departs from them in important details. It particularly differs from the support of sovereignty, as it makes the tighter integration goal explicit:

Now there is a very, very big difference between paying in euros three years from now or never paying in euros. And that this is an existing goal that we want to achieve, we are working on it, we just don't know yet. The first one is obviously an understandable, multi-speed process, there are more speeds because there is a constraint, but they will grind together somehow. The other one says that it's good that way, that it's here there it is. I think it's really not good (member of the pro-government media elite).

The multi-speed discourse is based on the principle, expressed among others by President Macron, that each country should move forward with integration according to its own readiness and will. As a member of the pro-government media elite argued, it is *"because the preparedness, attitude, history and past of the member states are very different"*. In the Hungarian elite context this discourse claims that the government is not using EU funds in a transparent way. Furthermore, it denies that the Hungarian economy is performing above the EU average or that the West is chaotic and declining, themes that characterize the sovereigntist factor. It is categorically opposed to the idea of Huxit, or that the EU threatens Hungarian sovereignty and the energy security of Hungarian households. It positively assesses the benefits of the EU on a pragmatic basis and recognizes European identity, while claiming that Hungary is the embodiment of true European values, the defender of Christianity and family values.

The claim of the fourth factor (Figure 6) that we call the Huxit factor is that Hungary must eventually leave the EU. This view is held by a small proportion of respondents belonging to the far-right opposition. They see the EU as the embodiment of negative trends and as a threat to Hungary's independence and energy security.

Figure 6. Characteristic features of the Huxit factor within the elite

Composite Q sort for Factor 4						
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3
** ◀ Hungary's security in a war situation is guaranteed by the EU and	During the Covid epidemic, Hungarian epidemic management	Hungary's economy performs better than that of most EU	** The current policy of the EU threatens the energy security of	** ▶ The EU should not interfere in any minority issues in the Member States,	The EU must return to cooperation between sovereign	** ▶ The EU threatens Hungary's national sovereignty.
** ◀ EU membership is beneficial for Hungary.	Migration solves the EU's labor market problems.	The EU must stand against authoritarian tendencies in individual	Hungary is the custodian of true European values, Christianity	European identity is an important value for us and is compatible with	Immigration from non-EU countries threatens Europe's	** ▶ We should leave the EU sooner or later.
	The central institutions of the EU must be strengthened.	The EU is the best guarantee for the preservation of democracy,	** The Hungarian government used EU funds in an insufficiently transparent	The EU must act effectively against Russian and Chinese disinformation	The EU's so-called LGBTQ propaganda is harmful to children.	
		EU integration must continue.	The Western European "old" member states of the EU dominate over	The EU mainly serves the interests of large companies.		
			The countries of Central Europe represent common values			
			European integration must be a multi-speed process,			
			The operation of the West is chaotic, ineffective and declining.			

Legend

* Distinguishing statement at $P < 0.05$

** Distinguishing statement at $P < 0.01$

▶ z-Score for the statement is higher than in all other factors

◀ z-Score for the statement is lower than in all other factors

These elite respondents deny that EU membership is beneficial for Hungary:

They are colonizing us, I think, especially Germany... they take more money out of the country than comes here as EU support... even the policy of Fidesz, which is very critical of the EU, accuses Brussels of bureaucratization, places all responsibility on Brussels, and makes Brussels the scapegoat, ultimately says that it is much better within the Union and there is a completely excluded, absurd idea that the Union should be left. However, the example of Great Britain also shows that there is life outside the EU. Even after the Union, I think you should mostly prepare for that (member of the political elite, far-right opposition).

The Huxit factor argues that the EU should not interfere in minority issues within member states. This factor is close to the sovereigntist positions, especially on questions of migration and gender, but represents a more radical version. At the same time, it also incorporates views that are critical of the government, and in particular, that the government does not manage EU funds in a transparent way.

The Q-analysis on the views of political and media elites confirmed and nuanced the picture obtained from the media analysis. Here again, integrationism and sovereigntism proved to be the two dominant discourses; nevertheless, two marginal factors also appeared: multi-speed Europe and Huxit. The media, as we have seen, were dominated by the sovereigntist approach. This was in parallel with the views of the incumbent political elite. In contrast, most opposition politicians as well as government-critical and neutral media elites held integrationist views. A minority supported the multi-speed Europe alternative, and a marginal far-right party took the Huxit position within the elite. With this it was also confirmed that the vast majority of the Hungarian political and media elites remained committed to the EU during the period of analysis, despite their alternative visions of desirable EU developments.

4. SURVEY ANALYSIS: PUBLIC VIEWS ABOUT THE EU, THE ELITE AND THE MEDIA

The aim of the nationally representative survey of 1,021 respondents was to analyze opinions of the Hungarian adult population about European integration, and the role of elites and media in this process. Given the increasing political polarization and the dominance of pro-government media propaganda highly critical of the EU in the observation period, first we wanted to reveal the interest of the public and the reflection of public

interest regarding EU-related matters. How and on what grounds do they reflect on the discourse patterns of the elite and the media?

The survey found that just over half (56%) of the population have a low level of interest in politics, while 44% say they sometimes or often discuss political issues. At the extremes: around 12% of the population say they never talk to their friends about politics, while one in nine do so often. Gender is not related to cognitive mobilization as opposed to age: the majority of young people claim that they do not or rarely participate in political debates, compared to the 45-64 age group, which is the most interested one. The political interest of the retired age group is around the national average. In addition to age, occupation has a significant impact on political interest. Typically, managers and professionals show well above average political interest levels, while unskilled workers and those in clerical or service jobs show significantly below average political interest levels.

In terms of political affiliation, about 30% of the population identify themselves as left-wing, 44% as right-wing and about a quarter as somewhere in between. Political interest is significantly higher on the left and is average on the right. The vast majority of those in the middle never discuss political issues with people they know.

A relative majority of the public clearly notes both elite and media disunity in relation to EU affairs. Half of the public believe that the elite is not united, and only less than a quarter think it is united on EU issues. By contrast, 58% would expect the elite to be more united on core values about the EU, while one in five think the opposite. In other words, a relative majority of the population sees the elite as divided and absolute majority would expect greater unity of the elite concerning EU-related issues.

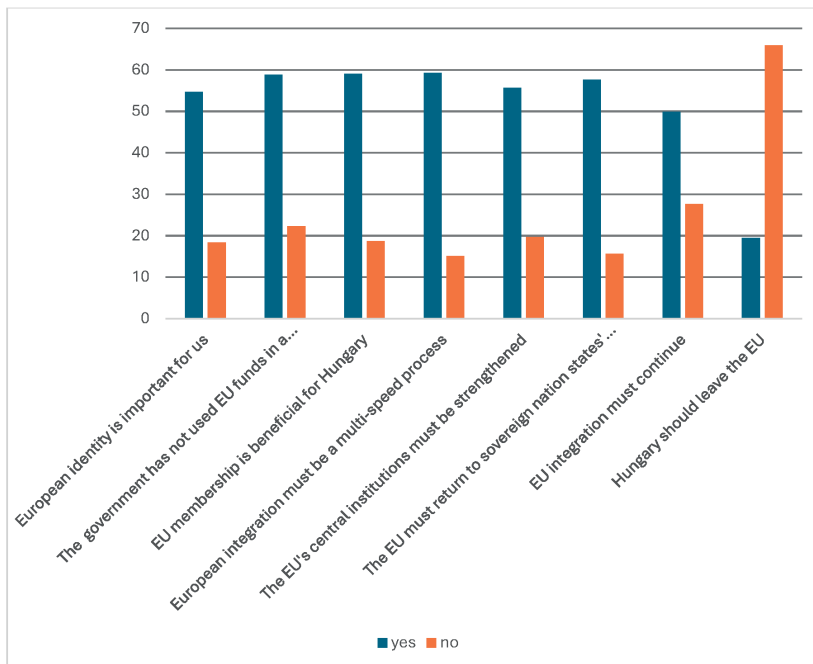
Similarly, people tend to believe that the media is polarized and distorts reality, only 15 % of respondents deny this view. As regards the exposure to disinformation and fake news, 40% say they have often encountered it. Trust in EU institutions is slightly higher than trust in domestic ones and the relative majority is dissatisfied with the government's EU policy.

Looking at media consumption patterns in terms of pro-government vs. other (government-critical or neutral) media, we find that about 40% of respondents did not name either pro-government or non-government media. Around 15% mentioned only pro-government and 25% only non-government media as their main sources of political information. More than 18% read/watch both pro-government and other types of media.

We can rightly suppose that the media consumption patterns of the public are divided along government versus non-government lines, and this divide re-appears in their EU related attitudes: those who are exclusively informed by pro-government media are more likely than average to think that EU membership is not beneficial for the country and are more likely than average to think that the elites are unified.

In spite of the heterogeneity of public views, still the typical views and main breakdowns should be clearly noted. Figure 7 provides an overview of EU-related public views. It is worth recalling that less than one fifth of respondents agreed with the idea of "leaving the EU", while two thirds were against it. By contrast, the absolute majority of respondents reported attachment to the EU, while less than a fifth opposed it. A relative majority of public opinion supports the continuation of integration, and an absolute majority agrees with the key claims of empowering the EU, multi-speed integration and sovereigntism, as well as the claim that the Hungarian government has not used EU funds in a transparent way.

Figure 7. Views on the EU among the Hungarian population (%). MEDIATIZED EU survey, July 2023



Two phenomena are clearly visible here. The first is that the Hungarian public is committed to the EU and the majority is critical of the government in this respect. The other is that the political alternatives within the EU have not yet crystallized in public minds to the extent that they have become individual convictions, forcing people to make decisions. This will be seen below in the analysis of public discourses on the EU.

Examination of means and variances can be meaningful in comparisons between groups even when the groups are highly polarized, as they can reveal hidden facts. We briefly summarize here the results comparing the averages of elite and public discourse statements. First of all, there are positive statements that both the political elite and the population accept. The three most important are that EU membership is beneficial for the country, that security in wartime is guaranteed by the EU and NATO, and that European identity is important for us, being compatible with national identity. Furthermore, there are claims that neither the political elite nor the general public agree upon. Most importantly, there is the rejection of the idea of Huxit among both the political elite and the general population. This is with a large standard deviation in both groups, as many are in a position of total rejection, so the median and mode of opinions are well below the mean. Finally, the views of the political elite and the public differ significantly not only in depth but also in direction on statements that are critical of the government. These include the claim that the EU is the best guarantee for the preservation of democratic institutions and the rule of law in the member states, which is rejected by the incumbent political elite, but which enjoys considerable public support. Statements of disagreement include the criticism that the Hungarian government has not used EU funds in a transparent way. This assessment is also rejected by the political elite, dominated by governing party politicians, but accepted by the majority of public opinion.

Turning toward the principal component analysis among the public, it resulted in a four-factor model, which in their main features resemble the results of the Q analysis of elite interviews. The four factors of public opinion were *pragmatic integrationism*, *sovereignism*, *Huxit*, and *EU-related government-criticism*.

Of the four factors that emerge in public opinion, the strongest one combines statements in favor of EU integration. Among them pragmatic considerations, which emphasize European identity, the positive impact of the EU on Hungary's economic development, external security guarantees and the protection of human rights and democracy play a prominent role. This factor also includes statements relating to federalism and multi-speed

development, which – unlike among the elite, where the political implications of the claims are more explicit – do not represent alternative political agendas among the public.

The second factor is that of sovereigntism, built on the cooperation between sovereign nation states and on the support for government policies. This is mainly combined with instrumentalized ideological statements (such as that Hungary is the bearer of true Christian and family values) and references to the common values and traditions of the Central European countries. This defensive sovereigntism criticizes the EU for interfering in domestic affairs, voicing LGBTQ propaganda, and serving the interests of powerful EU countries and big businesses.

Third, Huxit, which calls for Hungary's withdrawal from the EU, mainly points out the inertia and chaos of the West and claims that the Hungarian economy is doing better than that of most European countries. This is presented as a separate factor from sovereigntism, because it differs from sovereigntism precisely in that it reaches a radical conclusion about EU membership. Finally, the fourth factor also appears as distinct as it contains a criticism of the government for the non-transparent way in which it has used EU funds.

We can observe a link between the perception of Hungary's developmental level and the public opinion factors. The approval of integrationist and government-critical discursive statements tend to underrate Hungary's developmental performance, while the support of sovereigntist and Huxit statements tend to overrate it.

Whereas above we were comparing elites and the general public, now we are looking at the differences within the general public. This is an increasingly relevant approach as recent academic research notes the increasing heterogeneity of public opinion and the Hungarian data show high level of public opinion average heterogeneity towards European integration (Palacios & Arnold 2024). On the above grounds we can add to the literature, which tends to distinguish between hard and soft Euroscepticism. We apply these terms to individuals, not to parties (Szczerbiak & Taggart 2008; Lengyel & Göncz 2009) and examine whether our factor typology can be applied. We consider those who come to a critical position on the EU on a pragmatic basis, weighing up the pros and cons, as representing soft skepticism. They are critical of the current form of integration, they have a different vision, but they do not question integration as a whole (Ilonszki 2009; Bíró-Nagy & Szászy 2024). In contrast, the views of those who distance themselves from a supranational unity on

the basis of identity are harder to change. Huxit followers are hard Eurosceptics, their aim is to leave or – as one of the interviewees put it – “*to survive until the EU’s collapse*”; while in the views of the sovereigntists, soft and hard Euroscepticism are mixed.

There are some consensus statements in all factors, even if the intensity of agreement varies significantly. For example, that the EU helps to manage migration, that the rules favor the hegemony of old member states and big companies. There is also agreement that the EU should act against Russian and Chinese disinformation. But so are positive perceptions of European identity, multi-speed integration, the value of common Central European traditions and sovereignty. We can note the interconnections and transitions between the different viewpoints, sometimes linked to key elements of the discourse such as identity, sovereignty and multi-speed development. Within the elite these claims were linked to competing alternatives, but within the population the boundaries of political alternatives are more blurred. Substantive analysis requires that we do not abandon consensus statements as saving these information aspects helps us to explore how rigid or how flexible are the views that emerge in the polarized context.

On the other hand, there were clear fault lines between Huxit and all other opinion groups, such as whether EU membership had benefited the country, whether integration should continue, whether the EU and NATO really would provide protection in times of war. In the case of pragmatic integrationism, the characteristic rejection of the EU as a threat to national identity and traditions, and the denial of the negative side-effects of sanctions, are such features that appear in contrast to all other factors.

Sovereigntism in the public opinion differs from pragmatic integrationism and Huxit as well, but it seems to have different implications and meanings than for the EU-critical elite. Among the elite, sovereigntist position is the defender of the government’s EU policy and is opposed to both federalism and Huxit positions. In the public opinion, sovereigntism is rather a general umbrella term, based mainly on fears and grievances. In this perception, we need to return to cooperation between independent nation states because the EU mainly represents the interests of the old member states and big business. Its propaganda and misguided policies not only endanger the energy supply of households, but also the psychological development of children.

Government policy is supported by sovereigntists and Huxitarians as well. That is, the government propaganda and pro-government media

actually can reach both sovereigntists and Huxit believers. Criticism of Brussels is part of the sovereigntist rhetoric among the elite. In the sovereigntist elite rhetoric, the slogan "*stop Brussels*" fits with the idea that "*if the EU falls apart, we will be among the last ones there, holding the last beam and working to stop it*" or, in another version, "*our plan is not to leave it, but to reorganize it*". In the public opinion, however, the "*stop Brussels*" statement is associated either with aggrieved resentment ("*don't hurt the Hungarians*") or with Huxit and reinforces these sentiments relying on long-held fears (Lengyel & Blaskó 2002).

4.1. PRAGMATIC AND SYMBOLIC ASPECTS IN PROMOTING FURTHER INTEGRATION

As we have seen, half of the population supports further integration. In the following, we use linear regression models to investigate which social factors influence support for further integration, including media effects as well as pragmatic and symbolic aspects of the EU perception. First, we consider a model of control variables comprising resources and endowments, complemented by a model of media effects, media discourse, and then pragmatic and symbolic factors.

The set of control variables includes, in addition to socio-demographic endowments, factors of material, cultural and social resources, including foreign friends, language skills, readiness to discuss political issues, action potential – that is entrepreneurial and migration propensity –, indicators of subjective well-being, social status, and trust. We then look at the impact of media consumption and elite perception on the promotion of integration. By this we mean, on the one hand, the media consumption habits of the respondent, for example, whether he/she only gets information from pro-government media (around 15%) or only watches TV (39%). We also look at the extent to which he/she perceives the media and the elite as polarized, the extent to which he/she thinks the media distort reality and the extent to which he/she feels exposed to disinformation.

Next, we examine the impact of the media discourses identified in the factor analysis, controlling for the variables mentioned in the previous steps. Here we are primarily interested in the effects of Huxit and sovereignty, as the other factors include elements that appear in the models as dependent or explanatory variables. Finally, in light of these, we consider how pragmatic and symbolic attitudes towards the EU affect support for integration when controlling for the above results. We therefore decompose the discourse factors and examine the impact of their individual claims.

Table 2 (provided in Appendix 1) shows the results of the regression models.

The baseline model shows that language proficiency and life satisfaction, but also the voice potential (willingness to stand up for one's rights and protest in the face of serious harm), have a positive influence on support for further integration. Support for integration is positively influenced by generalized trust, i.e. trust in other people, while right-wing orientation reduces the support.

In the second model we find that those who rely exclusively on the pro-government media are negative, and those who want to see the elite more united are positive about further integration. It is also revealed that those who are informed only by TV have a positive attitude towards integration. This – at first sight surprising – result is due to two reasons. One is the effect of neutral TV broadcasts. While pro-government media often carry advertisements and messages critical of the EU, the most popular neutral TV does not carry such political content. The other is that TV-viewers who support integration are more open to generalized positive messages. They do not follow the enemy-seeking, mobilizing ideology of the governing elite, and on neutral TV they are more likely to find content that suits their tastes. It should be added that the effect of the media consumption habits – whether one only watches TV or reads dailies and weeklies – was only revealed in the model, that is, not in paired correlation, but in the light of the cross-effect of the pro-government media. Relying exclusively upon pro-government media sources has a direct negative effect on the perception of integration. On the other hand, among those who are not informed by pro-government media, support for integration is over-represented in the circle of those who only watch TV.

The lesson of the third model measuring the controlled effect of EU-critical media discourses is that Huxit retains its negative, i.e. anti-integration character even with the controlled effects. However, the factor of sovereignty can be reconciled with support for integration if the influence of social and political factors is filtered out. When tested in pairwise correlations, Huxit was significantly negatively related to support for integration, while sovereigntism was not significant. When the sovereignty factor is included separately into the model, it has a significant positive effect. The positive association between sovereignty and support for further integration remains even when it is included in the model together with Huxit, and then the effect of Huxit also becomes significant, with unchanged negative content. This result, surprising at first glance, needs an explanation, since, as we have seen, in media discourses sovereignty was a

catch-all term for views against integrationism, and it also appeared in elite discourses as its most important alternative. Digging deeper, the explanation is that public opinion does not follow all of the allusions of elite and media discourses at this point. The key position of the sovereigntist discourse in public opinion is also that the EU must return to cooperation between sovereign nations. However, under identical socio-cultural conditions, the effect of sovereignty on integration is positive, as its representatives accept that the EU is beneficial to them, see EU identity as a value and seem to find a form of integration that suits their needs. Huxitarians, on the other hand, deny both the benefits of the EU and the acceptability of supranational identity.

Finally, the inclusion of pragmatic and identity-based variables, as expected, significantly increased the explanatory power of the model. Attachment to the EU in particular proved to have a strong positive effect in addition to pragmatic aspects. For example, those reporting that they have personally benefitted from Hungary's EU membership were significantly more supportive of integration than the average. Similarly, believing that the EU is an important actor in solving the COVID-19 crisis and in migration management and that it has an important role in protecting democracy and human rights, also indicates a significant positive relationship with support for further integration. The effect of claims that the EU plays a positive role in domestic economic development and that the EU and NATO guarantee the country's security in a war situation is also positive for support for integration, but this relationship is no longer significant in the model.

5. CONCLUSION

In line with the literature, our research results suggest that in the Hungarian case, political-media parallelism has resulted in *asymmetric polarization*. This polarization erodes the internal pluralism of media forums and preserves a disproportionate external pluralism, with a predominance of pro-government media. In this situation, the influence of the incumbent elite on the media in shaping the EU agenda is dominant not only as an actor but also as a narrator who interprets the situation for the public, marginalizing journalists, public intellectuals and opposition politicians.

This asymmetric polarization of the media has an impact on public views and on the formation of blocks of opinions and discourses. The ruling elite, in addition to promoting a sovereigntist ideology, is trying to create an international platform to support a "*Brussels as a source of external threat*" frame, and solutions reminiscent of disinformation propaganda are also

finding their place in the pro-government media. The structure of EU discourse illustrates how domestic political developments are linked to EU integration.

In the media and among elites, sovereigntism and integrationism are two dominant EU discourses. The sovereigntist position advocates that the Hungarian government is the defender of traditional European values, families and Christianity. According to the integrationist view, the EU is the defender of democracy and the rule of law. Sovereigntists believe that the "Eastern opening" is important, while integrationists believe that "we belong to the West". Sovereigntists say that the EU should return to cooperation of member states, integrationists say the EU should be strengthened. The former claims that migration is a security problem, heated by George Soros, while according to the latter, migration is primarily a humanitarian issue. There are substantive differences between them regarding government performance (the Hungarian government did better than the EU during the pandemic, versus the claims that Hungarian vaccine purchases were a breeding ground for corruption and the EU helped fight the pandemic) or minority rights (the EU's gender propaganda appears as a threat to the rights of Hungarian parents versus the argument that Hungarian government propaganda deliberately confuses pedophilia with homosexuality). Sovereigntists say, "we should stay out of the war", the integrationists say we should not confront the value-based EU community. One says sanctions are harmful to Hungarian households, the other says sanctions can be justified, but may have unintended and unequal negative consequences on member states.

The research revealed that – although they overlap significantly – in certain cases it is worth distinguishing between anti-Brussels and anti-EU rhetoric. The first one criticizes the current practices of the Brussels institutions but does not question the need to stay in the EU. In the pro-government media, Brussels appears as the eponym of the bureaucratic EU-elite. In this context Brussels is a threat in two contradictory senses. As a *strong threat*, Brussels represents the oppressive European empire. In this narrative, the Hungarian PM appears in a David–Goliath analogy. As a *weak threat*, Brussels is a helpless, ineffective scapegoat, being the symbol of the disintegrating, declining West. Against the conflicting visions of a violent empire and a powerless, declining West, the government narrative offers a sovereigntist alternative based on primordial national identity. In many respects, this sovereigntist vision can co-exist with multi-speed intergovernmental pragmatism. However, the "*strong EU based on strong nations*" sovereigntist discourse leaves in the dark what could ensure the

EU's strength if both its redistributive and regulatory capacities are limited to a minimum.

Sovereignism and integrationism are dominant among the elite and in the media, while the marginal discourses of Huxit and multi-speed integration are also emerging among the elite. In the sovereignist elite and media discourse there is an attempt to reactivate folk theories about the Hungarians' Eastern origin. In public opinion, the integrationist and sovereignist views prevail, Huxit and EU-related government-criticism are also present. These are the similarities in the elite-media-public opinion triangle.

However, public opinion differs from elite and media framing of the EU at certain points. In elite and media discourse, sovereignism is the main alternative to integrationism and these alternatives are mutually exclusive. At the same time, in the public opinion the boundaries are more blurred. A significant proportion of those who share sovereignist views also recognizes the usefulness of the EU, accepts European identity and does not oppose all forms of integration.

While the governing elite is sharply critical of the EU, public opinion—like the independent media and most opposition politicians— is predominantly pro-EU both in its symbolic and pragmatic manifestations. The governing elite rebuffs criticism that EU funds have not been used in a transparent way and denies that the EU is the main guarantee of democratic institutions in Hungary. In contrast, public opinion tends to agree with the EU's critical assessments of the government.

For the political elite, federalism, sovereignty and Huxit are real alternatives, with concrete, mutually exclusive institutional consequences. This is why sovereignism is the dominant narrative among the governing elite, which emphasizes autonomy within the EU. Huxit is an opposing narrative, critical of government and the EU. In public opinion, these categories are more blurred. The dominant narrative emphasizes the benefits of integration. This is recognized even by the supporters of sovereignty who defend the government against criticism. Among the elite, Huxit includes statements critical of the government. In public opinion, however, the thin Huxitarian layer is a defender of government policy. Huxit supporters among the public are in minority, they deny the benefits of the EU but support the government and interpret the anti-EU rhetoric of the ruling elite as justification for their own radical views.

The concepts related to supranational politics are less differentiated call words in public opinion. But from the results of models, controlling for a

wide range of resources and for media effects, it appears that only exclusive pro-government consumers and the Huxit minority are negative about further integration.

It is of theoretical and political relevance that the ruling elite's sovereigntist critique of Brussels *reactivates* reflexes of grievance politics and the Huxit idea in public thinking. Anti-integration is strongly supported by a marginal minority associated with the far right. In public opinion, supranational and national identities are seen as compatible by the majority. The Huxit alternative is rejected by an absolute majority, with a consensus among public opinion and political elites.

The discursive arena concerning Europe, and the EU has become vastly politicized directly and a complex polarization has been formed. Up till now this has not led to an overall questioning of EU integration and cross-European collaboration, but there is a chance that it will change. It is also of theoretical and political importance that among the governing elite, the idea of Huxit belonged to the zone of *unsayable* until 2024. The Hungarian PM in a speech² in the Summer of 2024 said that the EU as a political project collapsed and should be maintained only as an economic one. He also contemplated about what conditions might require an exit. His speech brought the idea of Huxit into the realm of *sayable* alternatives.

It confirms that he aims to pursue further polarization, hoping to strengthen his positions in domestic and international politics. The catchwords of the discourses may also change, depending on the changing political context within the EU. It may happen that sovereigntism will be replaced by patriotism, with or without the associated narrative changing significantly.

It remains open whether the EU can successfully constrain the government's strategy (Kelemen 2024). The chances are small, but not zero, that the government will move towards compromises. There is a higher probability that the governing elite will lose popularity, due to difficulties in making ends meet and because the public has more confidence in EU institutions than in domestic ones. Alternatively, anti-Brussels propaganda will strengthen and if the European resources are delayed, the government can turn large segments of the public to undermine the existing EU sympathies that connect to pragmatic considerations.

2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aPXesn6dZfA>. Accessed 27 July 2024.

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APPENDIX 1

Table 2. Regression models to support further integration (Beta values)

Variable	1. Baseline model	2. Media and elite influence	3. Influence of media discourses	4. Effect of pragmatic and symbolic factors	VIF (Final Model)
number of languages spoken	.081*	.118***	.086*	.07*	1.424
foreign friend				.068*	1.36
willingness to protest	.108***	.124***	.125***	.112**	1.238
left-right scale	-.201****	-.239****	-.217***		
satisfied with life	.204****	.205****	.192***	.087**	1.393
generalized trust	.097***			.075*	
gets information from TV only	x	.103***	.086*		

Variable	1. Baseline model	2. Media and elite influence	3. Influence of media discourses	4. Effect of pragmatic and symbolic factors	VIF (Final Model)
gets information from pro-government media only	x	-.105***	-.189**		
the domestic media is polarized	x			-.072*	1.425
the majority of the domestic media distorts reality	x			.086*	1.677
how often does experience disinformation	x			.078*	1.485
believes that the elite should be more united	x	.082*			
Huxit	x	x	-.171***	x	
sovereignty	x	x	.185***	x	
European identity is important to us and is compatible with national identity	x	x	X	.186****	1.707
attachment to the EU	x	x	X	.106***	1.685
EU membership is beneficial on an individual level	x	x	X	.103***	1.458
the EU plays an important role in the protection of democracy and human rights in Hungary	x	x	X	.132***	2.301
The EU played an important role in solving the COVID crisis	x	x	X	.123***	1.736

Variable	1. Baseline model	2. Media and elite influence	3. Influence of media discourses	4. Effect of pragmatic and symbolic factors	VIF (Final Model)
the EU helps to manage immigration from outside	x	x	X	.143****	1.547
constant	4.317	2.893	1.963	-.517	
N	761	741	689	699	
R ²	.135	.178	.199	.447	

The dependent variable is measured on a 7-point scale where 1 means that the integration has gone already too far and 7 means that it should continue. The variable fits the normal distribution curve, with a mean of 4.1, a median and mode of 4, and a standard deviation of 1.7. Legend: empty cell– non-significant variable; x– variable is not included in the model. Variables found to be insignificant in model 1: municipality, gender, age, years of schooling, activity, subjective social status, internet use, EU knowledge, action potential, cognitive mobilization, liberal-conservative (on a 7-point scale where 1 one is the absolute liberal and 7 is the absolute conservative), friends abroad, institutional trust. Variables found to be insignificant in model 2: municipality, gender, age, years of schooling, activity, subjective social status, internet use, EU knowledge, action potential, cognitive mobilization, liberal-conservative scale, friends abroad, generalized and institutional trust; media concentration. Variables found to be insignificant in model 3: municipality, gender, age, years of schooling, activity, subjective social status, internet use, EU knowledge, action potential, cognitive mobilization, liberal-conservative scale, friends abroad, institutional trust; informed only by government media, sense of elite and media division. Variables found to be insignificant in model 4: municipality, gender, age, years of schooling, activity, subjective social status, internet use, languages spoken, knowledge of EU, cognitive mobilization, liberal-conservative scale, left-right (on a 7-point scale where 1 is the absolute left and 7 is the absolute right), friends abroad, institutional trust; informed only by government media, sense of elite division, EU contributes to domestic economic development, country's security in wartime guaranteed by EU and NATO, primordial identity, pride in domestic cultural achievements.

Chapter 6

Mediatized Discourses on Europeanization in Ireland

TETYANA LOKOT

ALESSIO CORNIA

SUMARIO: 1. INTRODUCTION: OVERVIEW OF IRELAND'S POLITICAL AND MEDIA LANDSCAPE. 2. MEDIA ANALYSIS: 'MUTUAL BENEFIT' KEY IN IRELAND'S EUROPEAN TRAJECTORY. 3. ELITE INTERVIEWS: PRAGMATIC PRO-EUROPEAN VIEWS LEAVE ROOM FOR CRITICAL DEBATE. 3.1. *Instrumentalizing the mutual benefit consensus*. 3.2. *Legitimizing EU solidarity and shared values*. 4. SURVEY ANALYSIS: PRAGMATIC PUBLIC SUPPORT THREATENED BY LACK OF EU AWARENESS. 4.1. *Sample characteristics*. 4.2. *Media consumption and trust in media*. 4.3. *General political attitudes*. 4.4. *Perceptions of Irish and EU institutions*. 4.5. *Attitudes towards the EU and Ireland's Europeanization*. 5. CONCLUSION. REFERENCES.

1. INTRODUCTION: OVERVIEW OF IRELAND'S POLITICAL AND MEDIA LANDSCAPE

This chapter provides an overview of Europeanization discourses in Ireland. The Irish media, political elites and public display an overwhelmingly positive disposition towards the EU, guided by predominantly pragmatic considerations and an overarching framing of Ireland's relationship with the EU as one of 'mutual benefit'. However, the pluralist Irish public sphere also allows for EU-critical and even Eurosceptic views, make Europeanization-related discourses open to appropriation by

EU-critical or Eurosceptic actors seeking to manipulate the relatively poorly informed public.

Ireland joined the European Economic Community (EEC), the predecessor of the European Union, in 1973. The country has occupied a strategically important space in the European public sphere, given its centrality in the ongoing tensions around Brexit, its consequences for pro- and anti-European sentiments, and their reflection in European and global media discourses. The Irish population also remains politically active amid regular elections and referenda, with the media playing a key role in informing these debates and mediating political engagement.

Our analysis of existing scholarship and data on Irish public opinion, media and elite discourses on Europeanization throughout the development of Ireland's relationship with the EU reveals a predominantly favorable disposition of Irish media, elites and public towards the EU over time, but also notes the comparatively low level of awareness of key EU affairs, especially among the public. Evidence suggests that the Irish public is guided by predominantly pragmatic considerations in shaping opinions about the EU and Europeanization, while identity factors remain insignificant.

Journalism and media scholars characterize Ireland as a convergent digital mediascape. These are usually observed in fairly globalized states with high to medium political, social and economic development, a medium developed media market, partially fragmented television audiences, and a high to medium position of public television (Peruško, Čuvalo, and Vozab 2020). Increasingly, the Irish media landscape is dominated by digital and online media platforms, though television and radio retain some of their popularity (Wheatley et al. 2023). Ireland boasts a 95.2% internet penetration rate and its national broadband targets are in line with the Digital Decade 2030 aims: 87% of Ireland's premises have access to high-speed broadband ('Ireland 2024 Digital Decade Country Report' 2024). Ireland is also home to the European headquarters of major internet giants. This hybrid media system (Chadwick 2017) continues to be the key locus where mediatization of elite and public discussions about Europe and Europeanization occurs.

The Irish public sphere is heavily mediatized, yet displays little evidence of political parallelism or polarization (Fletcher, Cornia, and Nielsen 2020). Thus, media coverage of EU affairs is less prone to explicitly pro- or anti-EU framings, yet matters related to EU integration and Ireland's role in the Union are often discussed through the prism of domestic politics. Media

coverage mostly seeks to domesticate EU-related considerations for its Irish audience, connecting national policy issues and actors to key aspects of EU policymaking and focusing on both pragmatic and identity-related outcomes of EU-level processes for Ireland.

Just in the past decade, Irish citizens have participated in a referendum on abortion, a presidential election and, most recently, a general election at the start of 2020. Between these polls and Brexit, it is not surprising that 76% of Irish people express an interest in political news. The Irish digital news environment has also seen a rise of some online partisan alternative media initiatives, however marginal, mirroring developments in other European countries. However, mediated political engagement is tempered by the Irish public sharing the pan-EU concerns about the threat of disinformation and the need to regulate political advertising on social media platforms (Wheatley et al. 2023).

Although the meaning and interpretation of Europeanization has changed over the course of Ireland's European Union membership, the Irish generally have been quite favorably inclined towards the EU, according to multiple Eurobarometer surveys (Simpson 2019). Yet, the relatively high political engagement of the Irish public is at odds with the lack of public knowledge about EU affairs in Ireland (Simpson 2018). One factor that may explain this discrepancy is that Ireland's mainstream media tend to echo and represent the views of the Irish elites on the EU and Europeanization. There is evidence of elite dominance in how media frame Europeanization, creating a disconnect between public concerns relating to the EU and elite representations.

The persistent 'mutual benefit' frame, promoted by the Irish elites, highlights the pragmatic benefits of EU membership and stresses Ireland's unique contribution to the EU, allowing for a positive assessment of the EU's role and minimizing the threat to Irish national identity (Hayward 2010). This frame persists in elite and media discourses, however such arguments are less successful when public attitudes are threatened by identity factors, such as the perceived impacts of EU interference during the 2009-2010 austerity crisis on Irish sovereignty (Gora 2019). Still, the perception of the EU as a "reliable decision maker" in comparison to the national government has persisted in Irish public opinion, and support for the EU grew in the Irish elite-public-media triangle during the Brexit crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic based on how EU's actions to protect Ireland from the fallout resonated in national elite and media discourses, and how they were framed through the *conserved* discourse of 'solidarity'.

Irish political elites regarded Brexit as a matter of both pragmatic considerations regarding trade and identity issues ensuring the continuation of the peace process. The Brexit period saw likely the highest amount of EU-related coverage in Irish media, which was overwhelmingly positive. Marginal voices agitating for an "Irexit" were drowned in the dominant positive assessments of the EU's role. Irish public attitudes about EU membership remained consistently positive throughout the post-Brexit period: Simpson (2019) shows that between 2013 and 2018, when asked the question 'Taking everything into consideration, Ireland has on balance benefited from being a member of the EU' in the Standard Eurobarometer survey, the lowest level of support for the EU in Ireland was 80% (in 2013) while the highest was 91% (in 2018).

The elite strategy of domestication or "Hibernicization" of EU affairs, including through the media coverage, has been enabled by the relative lack of political polarization and an overall pragmatic optimism towards EU-Ireland relations. The anti-EU or Eurosceptic rhetoric has thus been relatively low in the Irish public sphere and mainstream media.

While in the run-up to 2020-2021, there has been a low perceived threat of disinformation in Irish scholarship and public opinion, this has changed during the later years of the Brexit crisis and during the COVID-19 pandemic (Culloty and Suiter 2021). The threat posed by disinformation in the digital public sphere is evidenced by the permeability of the Irish public to polarized or manipulative discourses online during Brexit and COVID-19. The possible risks of disinformation and populist narratives are made more acute by the consistently low level of public awareness about EU affairs, at odds with the EU-positive attitudes towards the EU in Ireland. This was especially relevant in assessing the risks posed by hostile actors seeking to influence the dominant EU-related discourses in the Irish media in the run up to EU elections in 2024 and the ongoing European security crisis around Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The latest regulatory and other initiatives by the Irish government and other stakeholders to address these threats in light of Ireland's unique role in the EU digital ecosystem, as well as efforts to bolster digital and media literacy and support for public service media and quality journalism in Ireland, suggest that the Irish government and policymakers are slowly becoming aware of these threats.

2. MEDIA ANALYSIS: 'MUTUAL BENEFIT' KEY IN IRELAND'S EUROPEAN TRAJECTORY

Our media analysis collected and examined the dominant media discourses about the EU and the European project in a sample of the most

popular Irish print, broadcast and online media outlets. The analysis timeline from July 2021 to March 2022 included media coverage referencing salient EU-related issues including the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing repercussions of Brexit. January-March 2022 saw a growing number of references to EU defense and security policy in connection with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and a revival of discourses about EU solidarity, unity and shared values.

We analyzed EU and Europeanization coverage in seven Irish media outlets, aiming to identify the dominant pragmatic and identity discourses and the actors producing them who were quoted or reported on by media editors and reporters. Ireland is known to have a low level of political parallelism and partisanship in the news media sector, which is also becoming increasingly digitized. Therefore, we first selected six media outlets that were popular and credible across print, broadcast and online, with some diversity in their ideological background. All of these were mainstream outlets, including: RTÉ News (Irish public broadcaster), Virgin Media One (private TV station), the Irish Times (national newspaper), the Irish Independent (national newspaper), and two news websites, Breakingnews.ie and Thejournal.ie. The seventh outlet, Gript.ie, a fringe news website, was added to represent the Euro-skeptical stance which is less prevalent in the Irish media landscape.

We conducted a content analysis and critical discourse analysis on material covering EU and Ireland's relationship and Europeanization, collected from July 2021 to March 2022. For our data collection, we focused on daily evening news bulletins for the two TV channels, analyzing references to EU affairs or Europeanization. We used the Irish Newspaper Archive for sampling print media coverage, selecting any articles that referred to EU affairs or Europeanization using a set of pre-selected keywords such as "EU", "European Union", "European integration", "Europeanization", etc.

For online media outlets we examined articles that included reference to the EU or Europeanization using the same set of keywords, excluding those without any relevant political, current affairs or policy context. The initial coding during the content analysis phase using NVivo coding software and deploying a shared coding book allowed us to categorize the coverage thematically, referring to key themes (e.g., migration, climate change, security or defense), notable events (e.g., Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic or Russia's invasion of Ukraine) or time periods (i.e., the European austerity crisis). The initial coding enabled further analysis of dominant discourses, which were classified as either identity-driven or

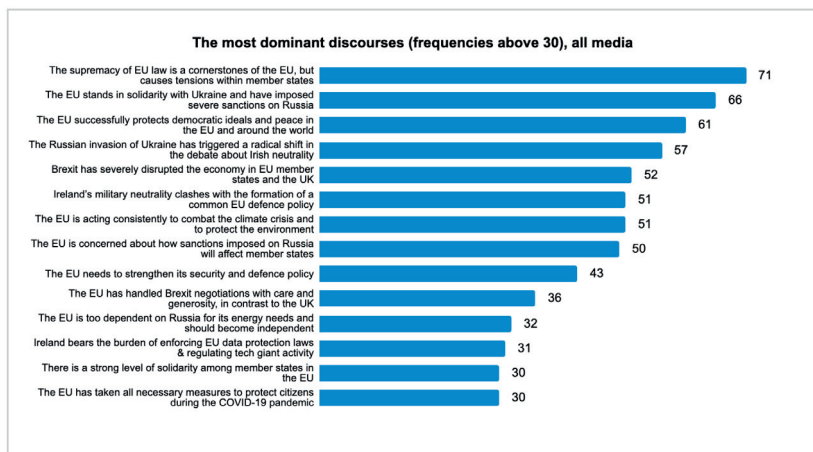
pragmatic (or, occasionally, both). The dominant discourses were finally clustered into discursive units, where major discourses were often accompanied by adjacent and/or counter-discourses. A total of 590 articles and/or news segments were analyzed across all chosen media, resulting in 1,186 unique references.

The elites-media-public triangle, well-established in political communication, is represented in the discourses we have analyzed. A key initial finding in our media analysis is the dominance of elite actors in our sample. Elite voices – i.e., Irish politicians, EU policymakers and journalists – clearly dominated the discursive space across Irish media of all types, with far less representation from civil society, citizen and academic actors.

With regard to discourse allocation across media outlets, the density of references in online and print media was more frequent and thus, they constituted the main corpus for our discourse analysis. Very few references were traced in TV news broadcasts (RTÉ One News and Virgin Media One) demonstrating that although television is one of the dominant media for news in Ireland, it remains largely silent in relation to coverage of Europeanization.

The Irish media adopted a moderate, mostly politically centrist tone in their coverage of the EU-Ireland relationship, reflecting the dominant sentiment in the Irish public sphere. Unsurprisingly, pragmatic discourses dominated media coverage of EU affairs and the Ireland-EU relationship (92% of total references), and the majority of these discourses were pro-European (53% of total references), providing evidence of conservation of the 'mutual benefit' narrative. This echoes our preliminary observations from the historical desk research analysis that the Irish media tend to view EU and Irish-EU relations in largely pragmatic terms, while retaining a predominantly positive view of Europeanization.

The most dominant discursive units referenced salient EU-related issues including the EU's role in managing the COVID-19 pandemic and the Brexit negotiations, as well as broader aspects of EU's normative power in, e.g., protecting democratic ideals and peace globally (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The most dominant discourses overall, with $n > 30$, across all Irish media

The last months of the sample period were dominated by discussions of EU defense and security policy and Irish neutrality in connection with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, as well as a revival of discourses about EU enlargement and shared EU values. Key discursive clusters can be seen in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Major discursive units

Discursive Unit	Major Discourse	Adjacent Discourse(s)	Counter-Discourse(s)
1. The membership of Ireland in the EU (<i>identity and pragmatic factor</i>).	Ireland has benefited from its EU membership, but the EU had also benefited, so membership works as a two-way affair (Europeanization & Hibernization).	Ireland shares the same values with the EU.	Ireland's economic model and interests may clash with those of the EU.
2. Brexit, Ireland and the EU (<i>pragmatic factor</i>).	The EU has handled Brexit negotiations with care & generosity.	Ireland has the support of the EU in the context of Brexit.	The EU needs to be more flexible and open-minded regarding Brexit & to protect the peace process on the island of Ireland;

Discursive Unit	Major Discourse	Adjacent Discourse(s)	Counter-Discourse(s)
			Brexit has caused many disruptions in several sectors of society & economy in Ireland & other EU member states.
3. The EU protects human rights, peace and democracy (<i>pragmatic and identity factor</i>).	The EU successfully protects democratic ideals and peace in the EU and around the world.	The EU is a guarantor of global peace.	The EU needs to reconsider its international strategy in order to become a stronger protector of democracy.
4. The application of EU law to national legislation of member states (<i>pragmatic factor</i>).	The supremacy of EU law over national laws is a cornerstone of EU integration.		The EU imposes policies on the member states and challenges their sovereignty; There are tensions between member states & the EU due to EU law supremacy).
5. The neutrality of member states and Russia's invasion of Ukraine (<i>pragmatic and identity factor</i>).	Russia's war in Ukraine has caused a debate about Irish neutrality.	The war in Ukraine has triggered a radical shift on issues of political & military neutrality in the EU.	Russia's aggression in Ukraine cannot be stopped with military means [& Ireland should maintain its neutrality / not contribute to EU military support].
6. The EU's united response to Russian aggression in Ukraine (<i>pragmatic factor</i>).	The EU and member states stand in solidarity with Ukraine and have imposed severe sanctions on Russia.	There was unity in the EU member states' response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine; Ukraine should become EU member but faces some challenges.	EU member states were fragmented in their response to the Russian invasion & have disagreements about Ukraine's accession to the EU.

There was also a significant presence of discourses that were EU-critical (35% of all references), though not necessarily anti-EU, legitimating concerns about the perceived ineffectiveness of some EU policies or about democratic backsliding among some EU members, namely Poland and Hungary. Thus, such critical discourses offer constructive criticism and a way forward for the EU and Ireland as its integral part, insisting there was 'room for improvement'. For example, in the following reference, there is no explicit pro- or anti-European sentiment but an implicitly positive reference to the EU, which is accompanied by a critical observation about the challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, Brexit or the economic crisis.

[Irish President] Mr Higgins will say that the future of the European Union had been challenged by the fall-out from the post-2008 recession, the Covid-19 pandemic and Brexit. (*Breakingnews.ie*, 26/08/2021).

The most dominant discourse in our data set was "The supremacy of EU law over national legislation is one of the cornerstones of the EU, but it sometimes causes tensions within member states", which underscores tensions between the overall positive assessment of the EU in Irish media and concerns Ireland's own interests on the global stage. On the other hand, the Brexit-related discursive cluster showed Irish media coverage recognized that "Brexit has severely disrupted several sectors of economy in EU member states" yet praised the EU for "handling Brexit negotiations with care and generosity, in contrast to the UK", while underscoring the Irish perception of the paramount importance of the Northern Ireland protocol and the border issue for Brexit negotiations. This cluster also aligns with the conserved 'mutual benefit' meta-discourse characterizing Ireland's overall perception of its 'special relationship' with the EU (Hayward 2010).

The most dominant identity-related discourses identified in our discourse analysis dealt with themes such as Ireland sharing the same values with the EU; the Irish identifying themselves as Europeans; and Ireland having benefited from its EU membership, while being of benefit to the EU (this discourse is at once an identity-driven and a pragmatic one, presenting Europeanization and Hibernization as a two-way affair).

The references to identity, though not always explicit, appear in discourses produced by journalists and political elites on issues of common EU policies, defense, and Irish sovereignty. The discursive strategies build on the framework of 'inclusiveness', engaged to express the common identity with the use of personal pronouns and direct quotes that connect Ireland with the EU. The articulation of discourses implies that meaning is produced by 'positioning elements always in particular relationship with

one other' (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 29) so that they produce semantic chains (Laclau and Mouffe 2014). Here are two examples of this 'inclusion' strategy:

We Europeans are challenged to define, through deliberation, the outlines of the Union that we now seek. (President Higgins, *Breakingnews.ie*, 26/08/2022).

The future of the EU is also Ireland's future. Membership of the EU brings responsibility to actively engage with the Common Security and Defence Policy of the EU. (*thejournal.ie*, 12/02/2022).

The leitmotif of Ireland sharing the same values and ideals with the EU is also apparent in some of the discourses in the later timeframe of our analysis, especially in relation to the threat of Russian aggression in Ukraine in early 2022.

The main *counter-discourse* in the discursive cluster on identity issues (which could also be classified as anti-EU) focused on issues of sovereignty and autonomy of member states bound by shared EU decisions, which sometimes go against national interests. Producers of such anti-EU/EU-critical discourses seek to "appropriate" the discourse of sovereignty, juxtaposing Irish national interests with those of the EU. More specifically, some references speak of a 'pooled sovereignty' in the EU context:

We dress this up, of course, with all sorts of fancy names. In the EU, we "pool our sovereignty". (*Gript.ie*, 30/08/2021).

Our analysis shows that the fringe anti-EU outlet Gript.ie adopted an identity-driven EU-skeptical stance, highlighting the need for Ireland to protect its own interests and guard its sovereignty against EU intrusions. Such EU 'meddling' was also portrayed through espoused concerns about larger EU states and their dominance in comparison to smaller members such as Ireland, indicating that asymmetrical power relations between EU member states play a key role in the discursive negotiation of European identity (Wodak and Weiss 2025). However, such identity-driven counter-discourses were peripheral to the overwhelmingly Euro-optimistic or Euro-critical pragmatic discourses in the other mainstream media in our sample, which formed the key discursive units identified in our analysis.

On the other hand, the Brexit-related discursive cluster showed that the dominant discourses in Irish media recognized the negative impact of Brexit on EU member states, but at the same time were complimentary of how the EU had handled the negotiation process, with special praise for the EU's attention to the Northern Ireland protocol and the border issue in Brexit

negotiations, which were of key importance to the Irish side. The contribution of the EU to resolving the deadlocks of Brexit is praised in many references, for instance:

The EU's offer on improving the Northern Ireland Protocol's operation was widely viewed as generous, and welcomed by business interests in the North, though London and unionist politicians demanded more. (*Irish Independent*, 5/11/2021).

This discourse was strongly associated with discourses of solidarity among EU member states, and solidarity between Brussels and Dublin in particular, and the positive benefits of Irish EU membership in this context.

Brussels and Dublin have reacted calmly to the British proposals, taking time to study them before offering a response. But when the time comes, they should leave Johnson in no doubt that he must fulfil the commitments he made in the protocol and that it will not be renegotiated. (*Irish Times*, 24/07/2021).

The adjacent discourse underlines the support of the EU for Ireland in protecting Irish interests in the Brexit deal:

The European Union is working together with Ireland in all the questions of what is important for the country. (*Germany's Olaf Scholz, thejournal.ie*, 24/09/2021).

In general, during our analysis period discourses of EU solidarity were reactivated in Irish media and invested with even stronger connotations that 'deepen' solidarity in the EU, while also promoting Ireland's important role in the Union. These are mostly prominent in the cases of Brexit, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, for instance:

Brexit has deepened Ireland's role in the European Union because defending the integrity of its single market has become intimately linked to solidarity with Ireland as the member state most directly affected by the United Kingdom's departure. (*Irish Times*, 31/07/2021).

Phrases such as 'The future of the EU is also Ireland's future' (Charles Flanagan TD, *thejournal.ie*, 12/03/2022) support this general strong discourse of a shared commonality between Ireland and the EU. At the same time, we find a number of references suggesting that Ireland is represented by influential people at many levels of the EU administrative pyramid and that it is important to 'exert meaningful influence on the overall direction of the Union' (EU Affairs Minister Thomas Byrne, *Irish Times*, 14/09/2021).

The discursive clusters formed around Russia's invasion of Ukraine was more controversial. On the one hand, the discourse of solidarity – both external (solidarity with Ukraine and Ukrainians) and internal (solidarity among EU members in response to Russian aggression) – was quite dominant and connected to the discourse of shared EU values. Online news website *thejournal.ie* referred to the Russian invasion as a 'European war that all Europeans should be united in resisting' (24/02/2022). Irish Tánaiste Leo Varadkar, commenting on the impact of the war, said:

...a democratic country in Europe is being invaded and the attempt is being made to overthrow a democratic government there. (*thejournal.ie*, 25/02/2022).

Another related discourse is the unity among EU member states in addressing Russian aggression and the breach of international law by Russia. For example, [then] Taoiseach Micheál Martin was quoted as saying that 'it's really important that we act in concert with our European allies' to support Ukraine (*thejournal.ie*, 24/02/2022). Another assessment, provided by EU Affairs Minister Thomas Byrne, showed that

The overall response to developments in Ukraine showed total unity and an urgent ongoing need for the European Union. [He said] Ireland totally supported Ukraine in the current crisis. (*Irish Independent*, 24/02/2022).

The overall leading role of the EU as a global normative power was acknowledged in discourses about its efforts to impose sanctions on actors that threaten democracy or human rights. European Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen is quoted as referring to the EU 'as a "security provider" with the responsibility to provide stability in our neighborhood and across different regions' (*Irish Times*, 16/09/2021).

However, there were several counter-discourses in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine that challenged the EU's efficiency as a guarantor of peace. This tension was evident in Virgin Media News reporting that 'there may be some divisions behind closed doors' in EU sanctions negotiations (24/02/2022) and the *Irish Independent* (22/03/2022) discussing disunity among member states in their response to the war in Ukraine, referring specifically to a 'moral dilemma' posed to the EU as it considered 'loss of livelihoods' in EU countries against 'life and death in Ukraine'.

In addition, Irish media also gave prominence to the critical discourse about Irish political and military neutrality in the light of Russia's war in Ukraine, presenting a range of political actors' interpretations. Neutrality

in Ireland vis-à-vis a common EU defense architecture was discussed by both pro-European and Euro-critical media as core issue. We noted a major distinction made in the references by Irish ruling political elites between military and political neutrality, with [then] Taoiseach Micheál Martin explaining:

We ...have never been politically neutral in the sense that we uphold democratic values and democratic principles. (*breakingnews.ie*, 28/02/2022).

This was echoed by [then] Tánaiste Leo Varadkar who said Ireland 'is military neutral but in this conflict is not neutral at all' (*thejournal.ie*, 24/02/2022).

It's worth noting that neutrality (and non-alignment) has been the subject of a long-standing debate in Ireland regarding the direction Ireland should move in so as to address security-related challenges and to align with its European partners. As noted in *The Irish Times*,

Opinion polls in recent years have shown a clear majority of people in favour of co-operation in European defence and it is time that the Government began to lead the discussion in an open and frank manner. (11/03/2022).

This discourse, then, was reactivated by the media and elites in response to the security crisis stemming from Russia's invasion of Ukraine. There was general agreement that the issue of neutrality was ripe for reconsideration in Ireland and other smaller EU countries. An article from *The Irish Times*, titled 'Invasion reshaping neutrality in Europe' (11/03/2022), provides an example of analysis on the matter:

...two weeks in, Russia's attack on Ukraine has triggered a radical shift in how smaller countries frame their neutrality in a time of war and their self-defence capabilities - alongside or inside NATO. (*Irish Times*, 11/03/2022).

There were more reserved approaches to Irish neutrality stressing the need for a slow and thoughtful approach, arguing that the Russian invasion could not be stopped by military means and required a diplomatic solution. 'The less guns, the less bombs, the less bullets you have, the better. It doesn't bring more peace,' independent Left group MEP Luke Ming Flanagan told *The Irish Times* (16/09/2021) months before the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The inclusion of common EU defense policy in Ursula Von der Leyen's speech in September 2021 'raised eyebrows among Irish MEPs, who are wary of how contentious the issue has proved domestically in the past' (*Irish Times*, 16/09/2021). It is evident that some political opposition representatives, along with key anti-EU minority voices, attempted to instrumentalize the debate around the war and to appropriate the discourse

about Irish neutrality to further their own political goals in the national context.

Some of the coverage refers to the issue of neutrality within this discourse as being 'anachronistic' and perhaps 'immoral', especially in the hypothetical scenario that Russia was to invade an EU member state.

How can you claim to be at the heart of Europe, proud EU citizens, and then be unwilling to defend EU? (*Gript.ie*, 25/02/2022).

The preceding quote is perhaps one of the few times that *Gript.ie*, the conservative right-leaning media outlet, provides space for discussing European solidarity in a non-negative framing and instrumentalizes the issue of solidarity to make an argument about the ambiguous meaning of Irish neutrality.

Reflecting on the insights from our media analysis findings through the prism of the Foucauldian framework (Foucault 1991), we focus on five key aspects of *sayable*, *conservation*, *memory*, *reactivation*, and *appropriation*. The discursive clusters around Brexit and Russia's war in Ukraine that dominated our media analysis solidified the *sayable* solidarity and unity discourses as underpinning the meta-discourse of Ireland-EU 'mutual benefit' relations. Despite the overwhelmingly pro-European discourses, there was also significant space for EU-critical stances on perceived 'disunity' of member states, demonstrating that the boundaries of *sayable* remained flexible. The counter-discourses on 'precarious' EU solidarity were seeded by anti-establishment actors attempting to *appropriate* the main solidarity discourse and to instrumentalize the idea of national sovereignty based on context-specific discursive construction of threats posed by the EU. In terms of the Foucauldian framework's *memory* aspect, the dominant pro-European discourse of 'mutual benefit' *validated* the course of the European project in Ireland, reaffirming its geopolitical role based on support for shared democratic values and peace as the common ground between Ireland and other EU members. Anti-European discourses in this context are few and they occupy a peripheral space in the overall discursive field. There is also scant evidence of instrumentalization of the EU, which only becomes apparent in attempts to domesticate EU issues to score points in national debates, as was the case with opposition actors appropriating the debate about common EU defense in connection with perceived threats to Irish neutrality to further their own political goals. Our analysis also revealed the dynamics of how some discourses (e.g., those of solidarity, shared values and mutual benefit), are *conserved*, while others, such as the discourse about Irish military neutrality, are *reactivated* or *re-appropriated* by

certain elite actors seeking to address new challenges to the Irish geopolitical position in the EU, such as the threat of Russia's invasion to EU security and shared values. Even in these cases, Irish media coverage largely mirrors the dominant elite discourses, and continually revisits the 'mutual benefit' narrative to circumscribe Ireland-EU relations, with little oxygen for overtly identity-driven or anti-EU counter-discourses.

3. ELITE INTERVIEWS: PRAGMATIC PRO-EUROPEAN VIEWS LEAVE ROOM FOR CRITICAL DEBATE

To further examine the elite views on Europeanization and Ireland's relationship with the EU, the media analysis was followed by in-depth interviews with representatives of Irish political and media elites. The interviews, held in November 2022-May 2023, applied the Q methodology where interviewees were asked to sort 26 dominant statements about EU affairs derived from the media analysis stage. Participants were asked to position the statements on the Q grid, assessing their relative importance and expressing agreement or disagreement. This was followed by in-depth interviews where respondents elaborated on their choices and explained their sorting rationale.

Fifty representatives of political and media elites were recruited to participate in the in-depth interviews: 25 politicians and 25 media representatives. Political elites were recruited using purposive sampling, based on their party or political affiliations, including TDs and senators (members of the Irish parliament, the Oireachtas, comprising the Dáil and the Seanad Éireann) from the ruling coalition and opposition parties; current and former Irish MEPs; local councilors; Irish staff in EU institutions. All the major political parties have been covered, with the ruling coalition representatives (Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party) representing half of the political elites interviewed. Other respondents represent the largest opposition party, Sinn Féin, and smaller opposition parties and factions, including Labour, Social Democrats, People Before Profit, and Independent TDs.

Media respondents were recruited among chief editors, political editors and reporters focusing on Ireland's foreign policy, politics or EU affairs to represent a range of Irish media. Representatives of popular broadcast media included public service broadcaster RTÉ, private TV broadcaster Virgin Media, and private talk radio station Newstalk (Bauer Media). For the print and online press, we recruited representatives from top broadsheet quality and tabloid newspapers (all privately owned), including *The Irish Times*, *The Irish Independent*, *Sunday Independent*, *Business Post*, and *Irish*

Mirror. We also recruited participants from the top national online news websites in Ireland (all privately owned), including theJournal.ie, breakingnews.ie, Irish Examiner, The Currency, and the online newsroom of RTÉ. Representatives of the fringe anti-EU media outlet from our previous analysis were invited, but did not consent to participating in the interviews. 50 respondents completed the Q grids, and 38 of these consented to participate in on the record interviews.

The data generated using the Q grids underwent quantitative analysis through correlation and factor analyses used in Q Methodology, while the in-depth interview data underwent qualitative content analysis and critical discourse analysis to further explain the key factors used to categorize respondent groupings and analyze their reflections.

As a result of Q analysis, we identified four major factors with the highest eigenvalue and the highest explained variance, allowing us to meaningfully group political and media elite actors. The four factors have a cumulative explanatory value of 55%, pointing to high explanatory power. All significant factors in the analysis have an eigenvalue higher than 1.

All selected factors have high composite reliability scores (above 0.96) and a very low standard error of Z-scores. Despite the small number of defining variables in each factor (indicating a pluralistic set of opinions and a low degree of polarization consistent with the Irish context), the high composite reliability values confirm that the patterns revealed by these factors are highly reliable.

Factor 1, "Media Euro-Experts", with the highest eigenvalue of 8.94 and the highest explained variance of 18%, encompasses representatives of Irish media elites and includes editors and correspondents focused on EU or political affairs. The top statements with the highest positive Z-score value for this factor encompass several geopolitical issues and include Brexit, suggesting media elites are keenly aware of its importance for Ireland-EU relations. In particular, the statement with the respondents' highest agreement (Z-score value) is "The EU has handled Brexit negotiations with care and generosity, in contrast to the UK", evidencing broad recognition of the EU's support for member states and solidarity with Ireland in particular during the Brexit negotiation period. The second-highest agreement is with the statement "There is a 'rule of law' backsliding in some EU member states, especially in Hungary and Poland" which illustrates that EU-level matters and concerns related to key EU values are also of importance to this group of media elites, alongside more domesticated EU-

related issues such as Brexit. Finally, the statement "The Russian invasion of Ukraine has triggered a radical shift in the debate about the political and military neutrality of some EU member states (including Ireland)" with the third highest positive Z-score value demonstrates the domestication of the EU-wide security discourse to reflect Irish concerns as a non-NATO state with a long history of military neutrality.

The statement with the highest negative Z-score value, that is, what the Factor 1 respondents felt strongly about yet disagreed with the most, is "Ireland's military neutrality clashes with the formation of a common EU defense policy". This brings the internal debate about Irish neutrality in conversation with the broader EU geopolitical debate on forming a common defense strategy. All but one media elite respondents ranked this statement as -3 on their Q grids, indicating their belief that Ireland can still be a meaningful participant of EU defense reforms without giving up its neutral stance wholesale. Another statement with a high level of disagreement, "The EU successfully protects democratic ideals and peace in the EU and around the world", indicated some skepticism of the EU as a protector of shared values. The respondents indicated that the EU as a whole did not apply equal effort to upholding democratic values and peace inside the Union and outside it. Such findings point to a fairly nuanced view of the EU's core strengths and weaknesses and the key issues EU member states are dealing with from a group of respondents who have significant expertise on the matter, a high level of geopolitical awareness, and operate in Ireland's pluralistic media space where critical and positive views of the EU can co-exist.

Factor 2, "Ruling Coalition Euro-optimists" (eigenvalue 7.75, explained variance 16%), encompasses representatives of the ruling party coalition and public service media. This factor groups the highest number of respondents – ten. The actors comprising this Factor view Ireland as an inextricable part of the EU and believe that the EU-Ireland relationship is based not only on 'mutual benefit', but also on core shared values. The top statement with the highest positive Z-score value for this Factor is "Ireland shares the same values with the EU". This statement was given high positive scores by most respondents in Factor 2, indicating a unified stance of the ruling coalition on core EU values. Despite this identity-related statement having the highest agreement score, Factor 2 respondents also demonstrate that their Euro-optimism also rests on pragmatic considerations: other statements with high agreement dealt with recognition of the supremacy of EU law being a cornerstone of the EU, positive assessment of the EU's efforts to combat climate change and acknowledgment of the EU's concern about the effects Russia-focused sanctions might have on member states.

As for the statements with the highest negative value in Factor 2, that is, the respondents' strongest disagreement, the two top-ranked statements also indicate that they view Ireland as an inextricable part of the EU and that differences in core policy areas do not mean that Ireland is at odds with EU values. The statement assigned the highest negative value was "Ireland's military neutrality clashes with the formation of a common EU defense policy" – all but two respondents strongly disagreed with this, which demonstrates that the ruling coalition representatives believe that Ireland's participation in shaping a common EU security strategy does not pose a threat to Ireland's neutrality and can improve the country's geopolitical defense posture. This aligns with Factor 1 responses, which also indicated the strongest disagreement with this statement. Similarly, the second-highest ranked statement in terms of disagreement was "Ireland's economic model and interests often clash with those of the EU" – this also demonstrates that, despite potential tensions, Irish ruling elites see its relationship with the EU as one of mutual benefit, where differences can be resolved constructively. Overall, the Factor 2 respondents' assessments align with Hayward's (2010) observations that Irish elite discourse on Europeanization hinges on a consistently conserved argument that Ireland's EU membership is beneficial not only for Ireland but also for the European project, with "Ireland making an important practical and idealized contribution to the EU" (Hayward 2010, 95).

Factor 3, "EU-Critical Elites" (eigenvalue 4.55, explained variance 9%), consists of the representatives of mostly left-leaning opposition parties and media elites. As evident from the statement rankings in this Factor, the respondents in this group are more explicitly critical of the EU and Ireland's relationship with the Union. The top statement with the highest positive Z-score value in this Factor, "The issue of the NI protocol and the border is of paramount concern in the context of Brexit negotiations, especially in relation to the peace process on the island of Ireland", focuses on the Ireland-specific concerns stemming from Brexit and the issue of the peace process to which all Irish political parties, including the opposition, devote significant attention nationally. For opposition parties, the issue also takes precedence in the context of EU negotiations with the UK, and they are adamant that the EU should recognize the importance of the border issue and the peace process as affecting not only Ireland, but also the EU as a whole.

The other highly ranked statements which saw agreement from Factor 3 respondents display a more critical stance towards EU decision-making and economic powers. In particular, the high ranking of statements "EU policies and decision-making are often led by powerful and influential

member states (e.g., Germany, France)" and "The supremacy of EU law over national legislation is one of the cornerstones of the EU, but it sometimes causes tensions within member states" strongly indicates that despite recognizing the EU's support and solidarity with Irish interests during Brexit, the opposition elites see some aspects of Ireland's EU membership as threatening the country's strategic autonomy. The statement critical of large EU powers and their outsize influence on EU policies is one of the distinguishing statements for Factor 3: nationalist and left-wing elites in Ireland seem more explicitly critical of an imbalance of power within the EU with regard to key strategic decisions.

The statements which elicited the strongest disagreement from Factor 3 respondents display the opposition's critical views on EU unity and solidarity. The statement receiving the highest negative Z-score was "The EU and its member states stand in solidarity with Ukraine and have imposed severe and sufficient sanctions on Russia", reflecting the view that the EU's response to Russian aggression was insufficient. Equally, the Factor 3 respondents strongly disagreed with the statement that "There was unity among EU member states in their response to Russia's invasion and the crisis in Ukraine", doubting how effectively the EU acts upon its "shared values". This skepticism also reflects the Irish opposition's criticism of the successes and failures of the ruling coalition government, currently responsible for implementing EU decisions in Ireland. This is yet another example of the domestication dynamic also evident in Irish media coverage of EU affairs.

Factor 4, "Cross-Domain Geopolitical Euro-Pragmatists" (eigenvalue 3.57, explained variance 7%), groups representatives of some ruling coalition parties, former MEPs and TDs, and mainstream/tabloid media who hold mostly pragmatic views of the EU-Ireland relationship and have a greater focus on geopolitical issues. The statement with the highest positive value and the most agreement in this Factor, "The EU successfully protects democratic ideals and peace in the EU and around the world", reflects a high assessment of the EU's geopolitical role globally, but also the pragmatic reasoning for why support for EU remains strong among Irish elites and the public, and why it makes sense for Ireland to be a part of the EU.

Among the statements with the highest negative value eliciting the respondents' strongest disagreement, the top-ranked statements point to critical assessment of the EU's role in protecting citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic and consistently supporting member state economies. While this might seem at odds with Ireland's general positive assessment

of EU supports, this disagreement can also be interpreted in light of Ireland's domestic situation, where the state-funded healthcare system has long been plagued with structural issues and lack of funding, and where the more systemic impacts of COVID-19 have also been felt across sectors of economy from housing provision to tourism and welfare supports. While the Euro-pragmatists don't fully reject the EU's actions in support of member economies, they disagree about the consistency of these actions. On the other hand, there was acknowledgement of the EU member states' more or less unified response to the threat of Russian aggression, as there was notable disagreement with the statement "European countries were divided in their response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine".

The above analysis of the four key factors among the respondents demonstrates that in general, pragmatic considerations remain dominant in discussing Europeanization among Irish elites, in line with their overall Euro-optimist inclinations and the recognition of the importance of the EU for Irish domestic socio-political developments. The prominence of the pragmatic approach to Europeanization is reflected in the high importance attached to issues such as economic supports, security and defense, and the implications of Brexit and more recent geopolitical crises such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine. A more pragmatic approach to Europeanization meant that even among representatives of the same political camp, thematic priorities could differ. This is most evident when comparing Factor 2 and Factor 4, both of which include ruling coalition members. Although both Factors positively assessed the EU's and Ireland's shared values and the Union's global importance, Factor 2 was more focused on defense and security, whereas Factor 4 prioritized economic issues and energy autonomy. Importantly, Irish elites across the board, including those opposition elites more critical of the EU (e.g., in Factor 3) as a whole, recognized the importance of EU support and the value of a shared European identity during moments of upheaval, most keenly felt in the positive assessment of EU's role in the Brexit negotiations. Here, we can also see evidence of the recurring leitmotif of the "mutual benefit relationship" between Ireland and the EU, where a number of statements reinforce that respondents agree on Ireland being an important part of the Union and contributing to its geopolitical standing.

Although there is no deep polarization between the ruling parties and opposition forces in Ireland regarding Europeanization, some broad ideological differences remain visible between the two camps. On the whole, opposition actors in Factor 3 were more critical about the level of solidarity among EU member states and more concerned about the

excessive dominance of large EU countries such as France and Germany in EU decision-making.

Finally, the issues that are viewed as being of high importance across all factors represent certain transformative events or moments for the EU and Ireland, or events that different factions are in consensus about as representing important changes in the process of Europeanization and EU integration. This includes the Brexit negotiations (especially in connection with the Irish peace process), the war in Ukraine and the reignited debates about EU's security architecture.

3.1. INSTRUMENTALIZING THE MUTUAL BENEFIT CONSENSUS

The in-depth interviews support the quantitative analysis findings and reveal a demonstrable consensus among Irish elites on the dominant discursive construction of Ireland's relationship with the EU as one of mutual benefit, which encompasses a number of pragmatic considerations. The framing of the Ireland-EU relationship as a 'two-way affair' was also evident in our previous desk research analysis (Hayward 2010) and in our analysis of relevant Irish media coverage of EU affairs. This dominant framing underscores the primacy of pragmatic considerations in Irish elite perceptions of Europeanization, while also displaying the penchant of the elites for domesticating European integration issues. We also demonstrate how political and media elite actors discursively deploy the 'mutual benefit' framing to discuss and frame key challenges, tensions and opportunities.

The discursive instrumentalization of the 'mutual benefit' is evident in how interviewees discussed the supremacy of EU law and the challenges arising from it. In particular, respondents in the Euro-optimist Factor 2 pointed to this being a fundamentally important principle that, despite tensions, enables interoperability and common standards across the EU, as explained by one ruling coalition lawmaker:

Obviously the reason that the EU can be effective is because it can impose laws or enact laws that member states are required to transpose or which are directly effective within member states. If it didn't have this significant power, I don't think the EU would be able to direct itself in the way that it has.

Similar pragmatic views were evident in how the EU's support for the Irish economy was often coupled with Ireland's framing as a "European success story", summarized in this quote from an EU correspondent for a national newspaper:

Ireland is obviously a key example as the poster boy for a country that arrives extremely poor and is now one of the wealthiest and strongest in terms of GDP growth in the European Union.

In the Irish context, there are particular hot button issues (e.g., agriculture, a core area for the Irish economy) where political elites feel the tensions are more severe and in these cases the supremacy of EU law may be perceived as a more direct threat to national sovereignty. Yet, in these cases, elites underscore Ireland's ability to compromise when dealing with such tensions, tying this back to the 'two-way affair' discourse which colors much of the pragmatic approach to Ireland-EU relations. Politicians in particular connected the EU's economic boons for Ireland to the 'mutual benefit' discourse, with one ruling coalition lawmaker arguing that the EU also benefited from Ireland's success:

I think there is [a mutual benefit] because there is an Irish way of of doing a deal and negotiating and finding common ground. Irish people are very good at that.

Respondents also acknowledged that Irish politicians can often instrumentalize these perceived threats for their own interests, either to legitimize their inaction in adopting (or failing to adopt) specific regulations or, in the words of one Euro-optimist ruling coalition TD, to "downplay the limitations that they operate under when it comes to the transposition of legislation from European directives". Both of the above discursive strategies can be interpreted as discourses of *justification* (Wodak 2006), while at the same time linking back to the recurrent narrative of Ireland's unique status in Europe and its special relationship with the EU summarized in the Europeanization-Hibernicization dynamic (Hayward 2010).

3.2. LEGITIMIZING EU SOLIDARITY AND SHARED VALUES

The "solidarity" discourse was a constant factor observed in Irish elite perceptions, and informed both pragmatic and identity considerations. Elite assessments of how strong EU solidarity was were mostly positive, while disagreement mainly revolved around how elites interpreted the meaning of solidarity and what threats to European solidarity they saw. Those who agreed predominantly based their reflections around pragmatic considerations and the recurring notion of mutual benefits for Ireland and the EU, although a few mentioned shared values as well. The other element of solidarity that was noted by several respondents among Euro-optimist and Euro-pragmatic political and media elites is the solidarity on a geopolitical or diplomatic level, based on shared democratic values, and

more practical capacity for collaboration such as joint EU rescue missions in conflict zones. Such a pragmatic approach was held up by Euro-pragmatists as yet another reason for Ireland's positive role as a contributing member of the EU, in yet another instance of the 'two-way affair' discourse.

Despite the prevalence of pragmatic factors shaping elite perceptions of the EU in Ireland, identity discourses play an important role in how the Europeanization process is further legitimized in the Irish context, which can be understood as a process of "legitimization through idea" (Wodak and Weiss 2025, 131). Resonating with the findings of our media analysis, cultural and historical arguments are typically put forward to support Ireland's "natural" compatibility with the EU and associated liberal and democratic values, engineering a shared "*memory*" to further validate the solidarity discourse. In the Irish case, key identity discourses are also influenced and shaped by the 'two-way affair' meta-discourse suggesting that Ireland is seen as making an important practical but also idealized contribution to the EU as a member state. Euro-optimistic political elites representing ruling parties felt that EU member states subscribed to a sort of shared "social charter" outlining key norms that members agreed to abide by. This illustrates the Irish elites' recognition of the Union's normative power and explains their concern about democratic backsliding in the EU. As one lawmaker put it, "some of the Eastern European countries maybe find the requirements of the social charter...difficult to acclimatize to", expressing concern about the future of the European Union as a key normative power.

The complex discourses around Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its impact on the EU and Irish economies and the solidarity of member states combined identity and pragmatic factors. We saw evidence of the re-emergence of the 'two-way affair' discourse and the themes of solidarity and shared values around the overall positive assessment of the EU's reaction to Russian aggression. Yet in other aspects, and specifically around the issue of security threats and Ireland's role in EU defense and security, the views were more contradictory and there was greater evidence of recontextualization of the debate (Krzyzanowski and Wodak 2009; Fairclough 2013) to a more domestically oriented discourse about military neutrality as a core element of Irish identity, despite shared EU values. A strategy used by the Irish elites to deal with threatening identity factors in the EU's normative power is their *discursive domestication* of Europeanization-related considerations to underscore Irish relevance to the EU on one side, and legitimation of national and local policy decisions on the other. Although the Irish neutrality debate was reactivated, concerns

about the EU's security policy dominance were recontextualized by elites into a debate about Ireland's unique position as a neutral "broker" and combined with pragmatic arguments for collaborating with the EU on security to preserve shared values.

The results of the combined quantitative and qualitative analysis of elite views in Ireland underscore that pro-EU views remain prevalent in the Irish public sphere. They also demonstrate that, by and large, the 'mutual benefit' discourse on Ireland's relationship with the EU is consistently *conserved* and *instrumentalized* by the Irish political and media elites. The elites use this frame to explain Europeanization's benefits as predominantly pragmatic, pointing to Ireland receiving continued support from the EU, while also asserting Ireland's unique contribution to the Union and its special status, thus allowing for positive assessment of the EU's role while minimizing the threat to Irish national identity and self-worth.

The 'solidarity' discourse is another constant (*conserved*) factor present in Irish elite perceptions throughout some the more transformative moments in our analysis, informed by both pragmatic and identity considerations. Another recurring strategy used by the Irish elites to deal with threatening identity factors or thornier aspects of the EU's normative power is their *discursive domestication* of Europeanization-related considerations and presenting them in a *recontextualized* way that underscores Irish centrality and relevance to the EU on one side and legitimates national and local policymaking and decisions on the other.

A key *reactivated* discourse in our analysis brought on by Russia's invasion of Ukraine was the debate about Irish neutrality, which was previously marginal. Here we could see concerns about EU's power to dictate common defense and security policy *recontextualized* by the elites into the domestic debate about Ireland's unique position as a "geopolitical broker" and the importance of its neutral, non-aligned status, while combining this with more pragmatic arguments for collaborating with the EU on security and defense and retaining autonomy on key aspects, to ultimately serve the dominant *sayable* discourse of shared values that remains at the core of the Irish-EU relationship.

4. SURVEY ANALYSIS: PRAGMATIC PUBLIC SUPPORT THREATENED BY LACK OF EU AWARENESS

This section examines how the key mediatized discourses of Ireland's 'mutual benefit' relationship with the EU and elite strategies of instrumentalizing this frame as well as selectively legitimizing discourses

of European solidarity and shared values resonate with the Irish public. In order to gauge public opinion, we conducted a representative survey of the Irish population in the period of July-September 2023. A total representative sample of 1,046 adults aged 18+ were interviewed. We first present the general socio-demographic composition of the sample and review respondents' media consumption patterns and levels of trust in domestic and international institutions. This is followed by the analysis of public knowledge about and attitudes towards the EU.

4.1. SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

Among 1,046 respondents, 49% identified as male and 51% as female. Proportions of respondents by age group were fairly evenly spread, in line with the Irish population, with those aged 45-64 being the largest cohort at 33%. 90.8% reported holding Irish nationality, and the remaining 9.2% held UK, Polish and other citizenship. The distribution of education attainment levels shows that 50% of respondents hold a third level (college or university) degree while the remaining 50% hold at least a secondary level degree. Cumulatively, 100% of the surveyed have completed at least a secondary education level. 29% of the respondents report their place of residence as Dublin (the capital), and 68% overall reside in urban areas. A significant proportion of respondents (65%) report currently being employed in paid work, and only 5.7% report never having held paid work. Those with higher education levels and living in urban areas reported higher income levels and more non-Irish connections and experience residing abroad.

4.2. MEDIA CONSUMPTION AND TRUST IN MEDIA

The Irish respondents' media diet is characterized by a relatively low level of consumption of traditional media (except public service TV and radio which enjoy continued popularity), a growing reliance on digital and online media, and a growing level of distrust towards journalists and traditional media organizations. Public television RTÉ One News stands out as the media with the highest frequency of consumption (with 85.7% of respondents watching it occasionally or regularly). Press publications (print and/or digital-only) are used less frequently than TV outlets. Among the latter, print newspapers stand out with slightly higher rates of consumption (but it should be noted both of these newspapers also have online websites which the public also use to consume news).

As to the population's trust in journalists (as a proxy for the media in general), we see that trust (38.5%) is marginally more prevalent than

distrust (33.4%). Male respondents tend to be more distrustful of journalists than women, and those more interested in politics are slightly more distrustful than those who are less politically engaged. With regard to perceptions of media polarization, despite the prevalence of those who trust journalists overall, almost half of the respondents (49.7%) consider the coverage of politics by Irish media in general to be "polarized" and 46.5% believe that the majority of media in Ireland "distort reality". Despite these findings, only a quarter of the respondents (23.6%) believe that they have been exposed often or very often to disinformation, while 39.8% believe they were only occasionally seeing disinformation.

4.3. GENERAL POLITICAL ATTITUDES

When asked to identify their political leanings, the majority of respondents (46%) identified as centrist or neutral, while 28% identified as left-leaning and 17.5% as right-leaning. At the same time, 35.2% said they held liberal views, and 15.7% held conservative views, with 42.9% saying they were somewhere in the middle.

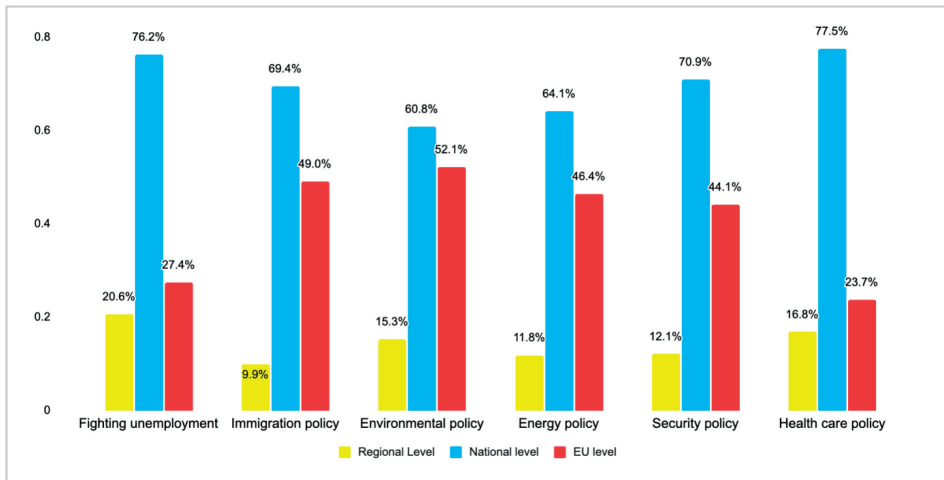
Older respondents were more inclined to discuss political affairs more frequently: 54.9% of those over 65 report discussing them sometimes or often. The proportion of younger respondents who never discuss politics is particularly high: 42.1% of the 18–29-year-olds reported never discussing politics with friends. Respondents with a tertiary level of education discuss politics more frequently (24.9% doing so often), while people with a primary level of education discuss politics less often (8.1% do so often, while 31.1% never do). Right-leaning individuals were marginally more likely to discuss politics, with 69.8% doing so sometimes or often, compared to 55.7% among left-leaning respondents, and 45.9% among those holding centrist views.

4.4. PERCEPTIONS OF IRISH AND EU INSTITUTIONS

In the majority, Irish respondents believed that European political institutions were the most "trustworthy" ones, with 46.8% saying they trust the European Parliament and 47.9% saying they trust the European Commission. Trust in Irish governing institutions, journalists and politicians was below the levels of trust in European institutions. The Irish parliament was by far the most trusted institution nationally, with 43.6%. Trust in the Irish Government was on par with trust in journalists (38.2% and 38.5%, respectively). The category "politicians in Ireland" enjoyed the least amount of trust with 21.6%.

Despite lower overall trust in national institutions, when asked about the level of governance that should be responsible for political decisions-making (regional, national, and EU level), respondents gave preference to the national level of governance over the EU level in all policy areas, from climate and energy to migration (Figure 2). At the same time, the majority of respondents were strongly or somewhat in favor of a potential future unified tax system in the EU (51.9%), a common EU social security system (66.1%), and a common EU foreign policy (64.1%). This finding is reflective of some of the tensions evident in our earlier analysis of elite and media discourses with regard to the supremacy of EU law and the importance of retaining a degree of national autonomy on key policy issues, but the uncertainty also reflects the relatively low level of EU affairs knowledge, as demonstrated further in this section.

Figure 2. Optimal level of responsibility for selected policy areas (n=1,046)



In general, respondents tended to be more satisfied than dissatisfied with how the Irish government manages EU-related issues. When asked, 33.6% of respondents were satisfied, compared to 28.6% who were not satisfied. Those with higher levels of education were the most satisfied with the government's performance on EU matters. Respondents with left-leaning views were less satisfied with the performance of the current center-right Irish government: 26.9% said they were satisfied, compared to 53.6% among those with right-leaning views. At the same time, a greater proportion of left-leaning respondents were satisfied with the state of the Irish economy (59.3%) than right-leaning ones (49.7%).

The majority of respondents (57.1%) also believe that Irish elites should be more unified on EU-related issues than they currently are (37.7% believe elites to be unified on EU issues). This is reflective of the pluralist media and political landscape in Ireland, where the dominance of EU-positive views does not preclude EU-critical elite debates on issues of national importance, which may come across as evidence of disunity in the eyes of the public.

4.5. ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE EU AND IRELAND'S EUROPEANIZATION

Knowledge of EU affairs (a composite measure comprised of four questions measuring public awareness of aspects of the EU) was relatively modest: only 29% of respondents correctly answered all four relevant questions, while 7.8% did not give any correct responses, and 11.8% only provided one correct response. EU affairs awareness tended to be higher for older age groups and male respondents (35.1% of them gave all correct answers compared to 23.2% of female respondents), and was also positively associated with higher levels of education (37.6% of these gave all correct answers). Politically right-leaning respondents tended to be slightly more EU-knowledgeable than left-leaning ones (which may be related to the fact that those identifying as right-leaning tend to discuss politics more frequently). The demonstrable lack of public awareness about EU governance is consistent with existing scholarship: Quinlan (2009) and O'Brennan (2009) explain this lack of knowledge of the particulars of EU affairs by a lack of elite engagement with the public. These findings resonate with the findings from our media analysis stage, which found the discursive space around Europeanization to be dominated by elite voices, with little space for or engagement with public interests or opinions.

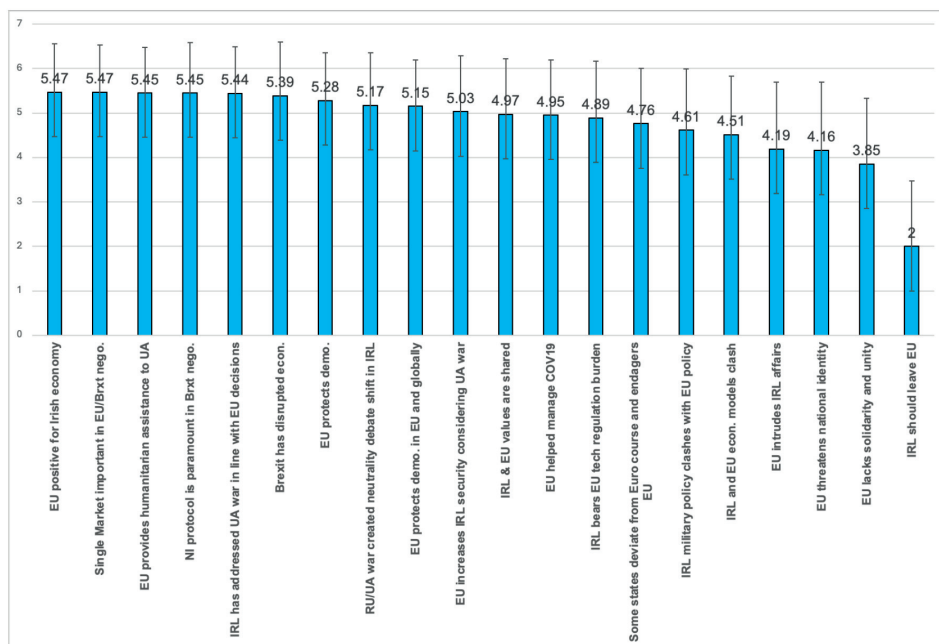
Despite modest levels of knowledge about EU affairs, an overwhelming 98.2% of the respondents thought Ireland has benefitted from EU membership. 84.2% also believed that being in the EU benefits them personally. This belief is especially prevalent among those with higher educational attainment (93.2% of those with third-level degrees), higher levels of EU knowledge (92.3% of those who gave four correct answers) and more politically active respondents (87.5% of those who discuss politics often). These findings are consistent with other regular polling data, such as those from Eurobarometer surveys and other national polls.

35.7% of the Irish population surveyed favored European integration and believed that it should go further. In contrast, a roughly equal number, 36.3% believed that European integration has already gone too far. Support

for more EU integration was more evident among female, younger and more educated respondents, as well as left-leaning ones, while those with higher levels of EU knowledge tended to take a more neutral stance. European integration was interpreted by the majority of respondents (41.7%) as both strengthening of the EU's central institutions and as EU enlargement. 33.6% said integration was more about strengthening EU governing bodies, while 21.8% said it was mostly about extending the Union with new member states. Most respondents (35.9%) believed the main aim of the EU was to both make the European economy more competitive worldwide and to provide better social security for all EU citizens. A greater number of respondents overall reported attachment to their country (75.7% 'very attached') than the EU (9% 'very attached'), and strong EU attachment was higher among those more educated, those with higher levels of EU knowledge and more friends from other countries.

When asked to reflect on statements about EU-Ireland relations derived from the earlier stages of media analysis and elite interviews, participants expressed the most agreement with a number of pragmatic considerations or benefits of EU membership for Ireland (Figure 3). The EU was seen as playing a positive role in Ireland's economic development (the statement with the strongest level of agreement, 81.7%; mean=5.47, st. dev.=1.087); supporting Ireland's interests in the Brexit negotiations, both in the context of the border and NI peace process (78.6% agreement; mean=5.45, st. dev.=1.133) and in the context of the Single Market (64.8% agreement, mean=5.47, st. dev.=1.056). Participants also agreed strongly with the EU's role as a protector of shared values and key guarantor of Irish and global security: the statement about EU being instrumental in protecting human rights and democracy in Ireland saw 77.2% agreement (mean=5.28, st. dev.=1.080) and the statement relating to EU increasing Ireland's security in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine saw 68.5% agreement (mean=5.03, st. dev.=1.253). The EU was also seen as playing an important role in providing humanitarian support to Ukraine (81.9% agreement; mean=5.45, st. dev.=1.024) and as a protector of democratic ideals and peace in Europe and globally (74.3% agreement; mean=5.15, st. dev.=1.048). All of the aforementioned statements saw above average levels of support by the respondents.

Figure 3. Level of agreement with EU-related statements (means & st. errors on a 7-point scale)



At the same time, there was some evidence of uncertainty among respondents with regard to potential threats presented by EU membership. These included above average agreement with a more pragmatic concern about Ireland bearing the excessive burden of enforcing EU user data protection policies and regulating the activity of tech giants (52.6% agreement). There was even greater uncertainty regarding identity-related issues, such as Ireland's internal affairs (e.g., military neutrality, economic model and interests) and sovereignty being intruded on by the EU (43% agreement, 29.2% disagreement; mean=4.18, st. dev.= 1.504) and the EU potentially threatening Ireland's national identity and related traditional values (43.8% agreement, 30.7% disagreement; mean= 4.16, st. dev. =1.538). Despite these areas of concern, there was also clear evidence that there was no appetite among the Irish public for entertaining the idea of Ireland leaving the EU: 81.8% disagreed with the statement "Ireland should leave the EU", with only 8.6% expressing agreement (mean= 2.00, st. dev.= 1.466).

In summary, the survey findings reveal both strong support for Ireland's European path and notable trust in EU institutions, while also showcasing considerable lack of factual knowledge about the EU. While the lack of

polarization in media coverage aligns with similarly low polarization among public perceptions, there is a level of disconnect between elite narratives and public awareness about EU affairs. As a result, while pragmatic benefits of EU membership are identified and supported by the public more readily, there is a considerable level of uncertainty in Irish public perceptions about the potential identity-driven concerns or threats from the EU's power. As we argue, the lack of public knowledge about the inner workings of the EU stems from a lack of elite engagement with the public on key EU issues (O'Brennan 2009). This further enables discursive strategies of *justification* and consistently presenting the relationship with the EU as one of *mutual benefit*, which we found to be employed by the Irish political elites. While currently the public expresses very high levels of support for the EU, we argue that the mediated *instrumentalization* of Europeanization by Irish elites leaves public opinion vulnerable to anti-European narratives and manipulation as, in the context of low EU awareness and lack of credible information, the public could also be susceptible to political forces seeking to manipulate identity concerns to foment anti-EU sentiment, as demonstrated by existing ambiguity on the identity-related questions in our survey.

5. CONCLUSION

As our analysis of Irish discourses and perceptions of Europeanization demonstrates, there emerges a disconnect between the media and political elite framing of the Irish-EU relationship and public opinion. The media coverage is dominated by elite actors and reflects elite perceptions regarding the *sayable* solidarity and unity discourses within the *conserved* meta-discourse of Ireland-EU 'mutual benefit' relations. Despite the dominance of pro-European discourses, the pluralist political and media environment allows for EU-critical stances on precarious EU solidarity and the imbalance of power within the Union, demonstrating that the boundaries of *sayable* remain flexible.

Considering the Foucauldian framework's *memory* aspect, the dominant pro-European discourse of 'mutual benefit' *validates* the course of Ireland's Europeanization, based on common support for shared democratic values and peace between Ireland and other EU members. We find that the 'mutual benefit' discourse is *instrumentalized* by the Irish elites to explain Europeanization's benefits as predominantly pragmatic, pointing to Ireland receiving continued support from the EU, while asserting its unique status. This ensures positive assessment of the EU's role while minimizing the threat to Irish national identity. A recurring elite strategy to deal with threatening identity factors is their *discursive domestication* of

Europeanization-related considerations to underscore Irish centrality and relevance to the EU.

Despite this continued *legitimization* of support for EU as based on pragmatic factors, largely internalized by the public, the survey evidence shows there is greater uncertainty on the potential identity threats posed by the EU. A key *reactivated* discourse brought on by Russia's invasion of Ukraine was the previously marginal debate about Irish neutrality. Concerns about the EU's power to dictate common defense and security policy were *recontextualized* by the elites into a debate about Ireland's unique "geopolitical broker" status, while highlighting pragmatic arguments for EU security collaboration to support shared EU values. At the same time, we could see similar *recontextualization* efforts in the counter-discourses of some anti-establishment and opposition actors, attempting to *appropriate* and reframe the solidarity discourse as one of 'precarity', and to *instrumentalize* the idea of national sovereignty by highlighting threats posed by the EU. While overtly anti-European discourses were peripheral, previous scholarship shows that Eurosceptic discourses, while less stable, tend to re-emerge and gain stronger positions in times of crisis, especially when identity considerations are reinforced by pragmatic concerns.

While we observed low polarization in public opinions, there was a level of disconnect with elite narratives, informed by low public awareness of EU affairs. While the public strongly supports pragmatic benefits of EU membership, there is a considerable level of uncertainty about the potential identity-driven concerns or threats from the EU's power to Irish sovereignty. On the one hand, low public knowledge further enables discursive strategies of *justification* and allows the elites to present the relationship with the EU as one of *mutual benefit*. On the other hand, this *instrumentalization* in absence of credible information about the EU also creates space for public opinion to be susceptible to political forces manipulating identity concerns to foment anti-EU sentiment, as demonstrated by ambiguity on identity-related survey questions. This is of concern given the growing public distrust towards traditional media and national political elites, while social media and online spaces, which are more readily embraced by the public, are now rife with anti-EU disinformation (Murphy 2024). As evidenced by some of the more recent polls (O'Cerbhaill 2024), the Irish public's uncertainty about EU affairs is already adversely impacting their voting turnout (as in the recent European elections). While destructive anti-EU rhetoric has been heretofore marginal in the Irish public sphere and mainstream media, it is now becoming more prevalent, and there is little doubt that anti-EU actors, both internal and external ones, are adjusting their discursive strategies to exploit low public

awareness on key EU issues (e.g., migration) as a tool of political polarization. Thus, while the EU's normative power is not currently subject to contestation in the Irish context due to persistent legitimization of pragmatic factors, the lack of elite engagement with citizens on Europeanization and the manipulation of identity aspects of Irish-EU relations by Euro-critical/anti-EU parties could adversely influence public perceptions going forward.

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Chapter 7

Mediatized Discourses on Europeanization in Portugal

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SUMARIO: 1. INTRODUCTION. 2. CONTEXTUALIZING AND CONCEPTUALIZING THE MAIN TRENDS IN PORTUGAL'S EUROPEANIZATION. 3. MEDIATIZED DISCOURSES ABOUT THE EU AND PORTUGAL'S EUROPEANIZATION: CONSENSUAL POLITICAL CENTRISM. 3.1. *Hegemonic and counter-discourses: the 'pragmatic imagination' of Portugal's place in the EU.* 4. ELITE PERSPECTIVES OF THE EU AND PORTUGAL'S EUROPEANIZATION: SEEKING A CENTRAL POSITION. 4.1. *Elite consensus and dissensus: revisiting the center/periphery debate.* 5. THE PUBLIC'S VIEW OF THE EU AND PORTUGAL'S PLACE IN THE PROJECT. 6. CONCLUSION: THE EUROPEAN PROJECT AND THE "PRAGMATIC IMAGINARY OF THE CENTER" IN MEDIATIZED POLITICAL CONTESTS. REFERENCES.

1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the results of the MEDIATIZED EU study conducted in Portugal. By following the Foucauldian framework (Foucault 1991) to historically articulate the main discourses on the European Union

(EU), the study identifies the protagonists behind their dissemination, and investigates how these actors compete and attempt to maintain control over discourses ("appropriation"), paying particular attention to the limits of what is "sayable", what is maintained in the narratives ("conservation"), validated, forsaken or invalidated ("memory"), and what is transformed or recovered ("reactivation").

Through the research findings, the chapter discusses how Europeanization, the European project, and its embodiment in the EU have been discursively represented and mobilized by the political and media elites and public opinion in Portugal. It argues that the presence of both pragmatic and identitarian dimensions in the analyzed discourses – even if the former is much more prominent and the latter is mostly implicitly present as premises or assumptions – emboldens the Portuguese expectation conflating the nature of the EU with the national ambition and interest of belonging to "the center of progress", echoing and validating an "imagination of the center" (Santos 1994; Rodrigues 2017; Pureza 2021). As our analysis finds that the pragmatic dimension dominates, we may call the outcome of these representations a "pragmatic imagination of the center".

For some societies and groups, "the center" is a politically, economically and socially grounded reality. The "imagination of the center", however, refers to the discursive construction of reality that does not correspond to the actual material and political living conditions of the societies in question. It suggests a detachment from reality in peripheral and semi-peripheral societies enacting or embodying the center. In the case of Portugal, this "imagination" entails discourses about the country's problems as "typical problems of the developed societies" (Santos 1994), thus conflating these two realities – center and periphery. It becomes "the elitist habit of thinking of Portugal as if it were a globally rich country, hiding the realities of a semi-peripheral society and its specific political needs" (Rodrigues 2017), which allows for "establishing an imaginary of economic robustness and political power on the reverse side of the peripheral condition that actually exists" (Pureza 2021). Furthermore, this enactment also portrays society as socio-politically moderate by opposition to extremism, polarization, radicalization, and irrationality. In this view, the political "center" is the place to be, where certain ideas and agendas can be presented and promoted as neutral, commonsensical, and consensual.

Hence, the chapter unveils this pragmatic imagination focusing on two levels: first, the perceptions of the benefits and the costs of Portugal's EU membership, and second, the different actors' instrumentalization of the EU and associated policies, practices and meanings to promote their

programs or views on Europeanization, as well as on conjunctural domestic, regional and international dynamics. As this contest is mediatized, the study finds that the different media outlets analyzed have played a crucial role in consolidating a positive attitude towards the EU that has been represented as a Europeanist consensus, and that criticism does appear, though much less visibly, regarding conjunctural and sometimes structural issues.

Programmatically, these discourses express diverse ideological conceptions and sociopolitical horizons. The dominant discourses have a generally "militant approach" to Europeism (Rocha 2017, 188), meaning there is wide and persisting identification with European principles and values and active engagement in their realization through the European project. This vision is linked to pragmatic and/or identity-related concerns, which are vital in the symbolic representations of Europeanness, Europe and the EU itself. Counter-discourses, in turn, translate into what Taggart and Szczerbiak (2004, 4) conceptualize as a "soft Euroscepticism" that engages in "contingent or qualified opposition" and criticism of the EU, for instance, against particular measures or policy initiatives or in defense of "national interests", but does not reject integration (Lisi & Borghetto 2018; Freire *et al.* 2023).

The first section briefly contextualizes the period of analysis by reviewing Portugal's Europeanization process and more recent political developments. The following sections present the study's findings and identify relevant discursive practices in the media, amidst political and media elites, and representations in public opinion. Finally, the chapter discusses how EU integration and Portugal's place in the Union are portrayed in this triangulation.

2. CONTEXTUALIZING AND CONCEPTUALIZING THE MAIN TRENDS IN PORTUGAL'S EUROPEANIZATION

Portugal joined the European Economic Community in 1986, 12 years after the Carnation Revolution that toppled a long-lasting dictatorship, on April 25, 1974. Portugal's democratization process is thus entwined with the redefinition and association of Portuguese identity with Europeanization and with its adherence to the European project, which helps explain the conflation of the EU with democracy and prosperity in public debate (Lobo 2003; Schukking & Niemann 2012). Therefore, this association is both axiological and pragmatic, as the country is usually depicted as benefiting from the EU as a normative actor promoting liberal values of democracy, the rule of law and human rights. However, there is

a reciprocity logic, as the EU is also perceived as benefiting from having a committed, engaged and contributing member state in Portugal, as it plays, for example, the role of "a privileged intermediary in the external relations between the Lusophone countries and the EU" (Cravo 2012, 224), fostering EU partnerships. Indeed, Portugal's fourth Presidency of the European Council, between 1 January and 30 June 2021, prioritized economic recovery, strengthening the European social model, and enhancing the EU's international partnerships, emphasizing the EU-Africa and transatlantic relations (Portuguese Government 2020).

Broadly speaking, perceptions of the EU tend to be overtly positive, supported by dominant political and media discourses. The major political parties, the Socialist Party (PS) and the Social Democratic Party (PSD), have avoided polarizing debates, fostering widespread support for the EU among the electorate (Lobo 2003; Moreira *et al.* 2010). This elite consensus leaves no space for anti-EU discourses or for serious proposals for a Portuguese withdrawal.

Criticism and opposition to the EU usually appear in moments of crisis, when EU directives and policies are seen as detrimental to national interests. A key example was the adoption of austerity measures during the intervention of the *troika* comprised of the European Central Bank, the European Commission and the International Monetary Fund between 2011-2014 – a memory sometimes evoked in public debates. Other critical arguments may be out of the spotlight but resurface occasionally, like the view that European integration was driven by political elites rather than popular demand (Moreira *et al.* 2010). Also, different parties like the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) and the conservative CDS-PP had initially opposed EU membership, citing economic and sovereignty concerns, or fearing it would compromise Portugal's Atlanticist orientation. Still, both later recognized potential benefits of EU integration (Lobo 2003).

A potentially disruptive political force is the extreme-right and populist party Enough (*Chega*). It has been rising in both media and Parliamentary representation since its creation in 2019, when it elected one among 230 deputies to the national Parliament, then 12 in 2022, and 50 in 2024. Yet, although *Chega's* rise reflects increasing political polarization, unlike similar parties in other countries, the party has not advocated for Portugal's withdrawal from the EU, but instead has proposed its own agenda for the Union (Freire *et al.* 2023).

Concerning public opinion, data collected since 1985 indicate a growing support for EU membership. In 2020, 90% believed Portugal benefited from

it (European Parliament 2020). While most of the respondents either have a high (64%) or medium-high (22%) agreement with EU values, the Portuguese are among those expressing higher identification with their nationality (93%, while the EU average is 73%) (European Commission 2021). This trend has not translated into citizen engagement, as the Portuguese have continued to forfeit participation in the European elections, although they have increasingly defended the Europeanization of crucial policies in foreign affairs and currency matters (European Commission 2024). This supports the view that Portuguese attitudes are positive but are formed on an instrumental basis (Moreira *et al.* 2010, 60), which has been confirmed by various empirical data collected and analyzed within this study.

The period of analysis (2021-2024) was marked by several domestic, regional, and international developments in which the EU appeared prominently in the Portuguese media and public debate. The COVID-19 pandemic, the so-called migration crisis, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and other debates have put the EU in the security and humanitarian spotlight. Also, in terms of domestic politics, there was a shift from the center-left to the center-right, with PS, in power since 2015, replaced by the Democratic Alliance coalition between PSD and the conservatives (CDS-PP) in 2024. Significantly, in this period, the Portuguese political debate over the EU's role focused, for instance, on the implementation of the Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP) endorsed by the European Commission (EC), which reflects the dominance of economic concerns across the political spectrum. Nevertheless, this has not fundamentally affected Portugal's Europeanization and the perceptions of the European project, as expressed by dominant discourses, while critical perspectives of the EU, in conjunctural and structural aspects, were continually evident in the less present counter-discourses.

3. MEDIATIZED DISCOURSES ABOUT THE EU AND PORTUGAL'S EUROPEANIZATION: CONSENSUAL POLITICAL CENTRISM

We analyzed the three most popular daily news shows on the following TV channels – SIC, TVI, and RTP1 (Dinheiro Vivo 2022) and the three daily newspapers with the highest readership – *Correio da Manhã*, *Jornal de Notícias*, and *Público* (APCT 2021)¹. The criteria used to select media outlets for analysis were their circulation and audience ratings in 2021. Television is the source of news and other information preferred by 57.7% of the

1. These newspapers and channels are privately owned, except for RTP1, which is subject to "public service" status under the state's responsibility.

Portuguese, followed by the internet (17.7%, excluding social media), social media (13.3%), printed press (7.3%) and radio (4.2%) (Cardoso *et al.* 2021, 27). The corpus of analysis includes 2,181 items covering diverse EU-related issues across all genres – news stories, interviews, editorials, opinion articles, reportages, and analytical commentaries – issued or aired from September 2021 to March 2022².

The overwhelming majority of items were news reports, followed by opinion articles and editorials in newspapers, and by reportages and political commentary or analysis in news shows. This coverage was thus presented as informative – though certainly not "neutral" – and less analytical or opinionative. "European news" was incorporated into the regular national reporting in a similar style and topics across the different outlets. Opinion, editorial pieces, and items from special series provided more nuanced perspectives, more time and expert perspectives, and thus an in-depth and/or diversified perspective of the EU, though in a significantly lower frequency than news reports, found to be more superficial. Still, key narratives that integrated dominant and counter-discourses were identified in all genres.

After journalists, editors, commentators or analysts, the study found that the main authors of these discourses were members of the Portuguese Government, the Presidency or Army officials appearing as protagonists of the news reported or as sources of information. The main actors of the events reported/analyzed are the EU, other states' representatives, Portuguese state representatives, political parties and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). All perspectives tend to appear in the analyzed media, although the predominant perspectives are those of the center-left, center, and center-right.

3.1. HEGEMONIC AND COUNTER-DISCOURSES: THE 'PRAGMATIC IMAGINATION' OF PORTUGAL'S PLACE IN THE EU

From the total references, 1,735 were coded for discourse, with 735 from TV samples and 1,000 from print newspapers. The dominant discourses identified in our target media outlets, listed by frequency, were: 1) Portugal must adapt to the EU and world dynamics (166); 2) The EU contributes to security and peace (161); 3) Portugal is peripheralized in the EU (135); 4) The EU is fragmented or troubled (134); 5) The EU must adapt or reform (129); 6) Portugal is at the center in the EU (128); 7) The EU is democratic

2. The sampling stage counted with two professional consultants, CISION and Marktest, and used keywords provided by the project's research design, complemented by the review of literature on Portugal's case.

and promotes democracy (116); 8) The EU stands united and resolute (102); 9) The EU contributes to Portugal's development (95); 10) The EU imposes norms and policies (94).

Figure 1. Main discursive units – TV and printed press

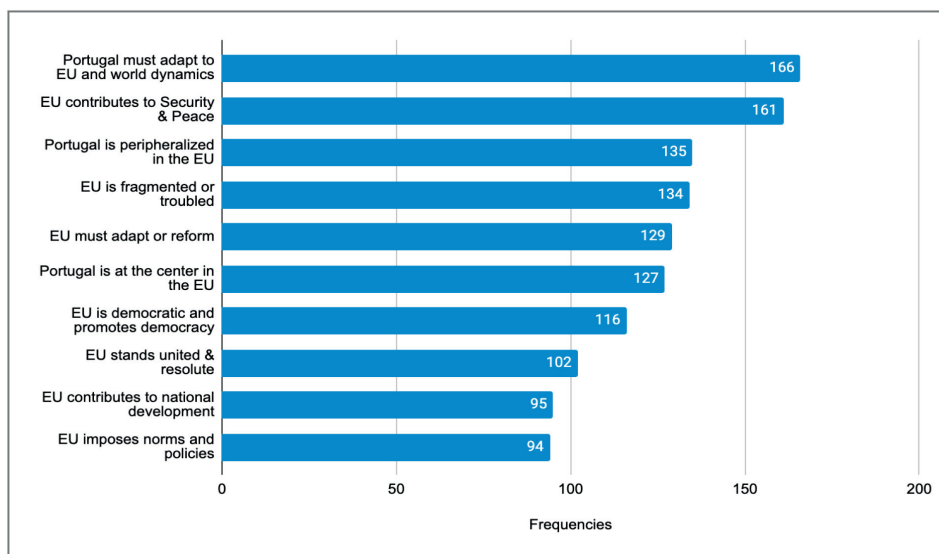


Table 1 below displays the major, adjacent and counter-discourses voiced by the target media outlets. Dominant discourses about the EU were positive throughout the period of analysis, with pragmatic elements underlining the centralization trend embedded in the representations of European integration. This positive construction of Europeanization has been a constant in the media, even if nuanced by criticism of Portugal's performance within/in relation to the Union. For instance, pessimistic narratives regarding Portugal's peripheralization and its inability to catch up with the economic development of other members have been conserved with the reiterated use of the expression "the tail of Europe", meaning Portugal's disadvantageous position, as also identified in previous studies regarding the country's peripheralization. It was also pervasive throughout political, socioeconomic and environmental issues, for example, and the underlying idea was that Portugal "must adapt" – which was the argument of the most frequently voiced discourse.

Table 1. Major, adjacent and counter-discourses in Portuguese media

Discursive Unit	Major Discourse	Adjacent Discourse	Counter-Discourse
1. Portugal must adapt to the EU.	Portugal must be a front-runner in the EU, adjust to its rules and world economic tendencies to modernize and be competitive.	Portugal must not fall back to its economic level before joining the then-EEC.	Portugal must defend its national interests, even if not in alignment with the EU.
2. The EU contributes to security and peace.	The EU guarantees regional security, and EU membership provides security assurance.	Peace remains a core EU value and Portugal contributes to defending it.	The EU is a weak security actor, dependent on NATO, and needs greater autonomy; As a militarized actor, the EU would not contribute to peace.
3. Portugal is peripheralized in the EU.	Portugal lags behind other EU countries.	Portugal scores in economic and social terms below the EU average.	Portugal is well-esteemed in Brussels, it is the 'good pupil'.
4. The EU is fragmented or troubled.	The EU faces disagreement among member states on key issues that hamper integration.	If the discord on issues central to EU integration is maintained, it will negatively affect the EU.	The EU is united and resolute.
5. The EU must adapt or reform.	The EU must adapt to new challenges, such as climate/energy transition, and affirm itself as an international actor.	If the EU adapts to new challenges (i.e. climate/energy transition), Portugal will follow suit.	EU is losing significance as it cannot cope with emerging international challenges.

Discursive Unit	Major Discourse	Adjacent Discourse	Counter-Discourse
6. Portugal has a central position within the EU.	Portugal is pivotal for Europe as a team player and a bridging actor.	Portugal is part of the policy-making process and adopts the rules it helps creating.	Portugal depends on the EU and therefore is limited in influencing EU policy.
7. The EU is democratic and promotes democracy.	The EU promotes democratic values and processes in its member states, including Portugal.	The EU defends its constitutive values against attacks (e.g. Hungary, Poland).	The EU is plagued by nationalisms hindering democratic promotion.
8. The EU stands united and resolute.	The EU is united in face of common threats (e.g. sanctions against Russia).	Portugal is aligned with the EU, contributing to its unity.	The EU is divided, speaking with different voices (e.g. Hungary).
9. The EU contributes to Portugal's development.	EU funds bring resources and guidance to its members, including Portugal.	In the EU, Portugal can promote economic development, modernization.	The EU interferes in Portugal's internal affairs, at times contributing to stagnation and inequality.
10. The EU imposes norms and policies on its members.	Power imbalance within the EU privileges the interests of those with greatest power.	Imposition emerges because the EU needs to draw collective strategies.	Compliance with EU norms shows responsibility.

On the other hand, the austerity measures that the troika (which the EU integrated) "imposed" on Portugal, and which spurred discontent, were somewhat forgotten, with few exceptions, in counter-discourses. Austerity was mentioned in the period of study, but in dominant discourses, its charged, negative meaning seems to have been *remembered* as part of the EU's past practices. In these discourses, memory seems to have been *reactivated* as a contrast – to portray current policies positively, through the replacement of metaphorical keywords such as troika and austerity for Brussels and RRP/"bazooka", meaning the "European funds" earmarked for Portugal. This discursive transformation operated by the political elite – namely, the centrist politicians, especially the Government, and EU leaders or speakers – generated new dominant discourses *appropriated* by the media

elite. Criticisms countering the main discourse existed but were left to the fringes and mainly directed at national actors instead of the EU itself.

Dominant and counter-discourses were substantiated on a center/periphery dichotomy and mostly mobilized pragmatic concerns over the EU's impact on the Portuguese economy, democracy and capacity to deal with crises. Nevertheless, whereas dominant discourses implied a central-peripheral divide that opted for an aspirational outlook closer to the idea of the "imagination of the center" and tended to depict the EU in a positive and "normalized" way (Freire *et al.* 2023), counter-discourses openly emphasized and politicized Portugal's peripheral role when mobilizing criticism towards the EU. One example was seen in this editorial at the print newspaper *Jornal de Notícias*:

If the interest rate rise trend is more aggressive, only the protective hand of the ECB [European Central Bank] can free Portugal from another bailout. A country that grows little and lives on debt cannot hope for a better future³.

Amidst dominant discourses, diametrically opposing views emerged regarding Portugal's peripheral or central position in the EU, and about the EU's lack of cohesion and reluctance or its unity and decisiveness in dealing with new challenges. The pessimistic perspective dominated and was especially voiced by actors politically positioned in the center-right, including political commentators on TV or analysts in newspapers, while the optimistic take could be attributed to center-left actors, namely, the Socialist Government at the time. Nonetheless, even these opposing views were couched in the premise that Portugal belongs in the EU, as were all the dominant discourses. This premise can be considered a consensus among dominant discourses, an understanding supported by the fact that the most frequent view advocates that "Portugal must adapt to the EU and world dynamics". This prominence also qualified the pessimist view as one that saw Portugal "in the tail of Europe" – a demeaning characterization often repeated, especially by center or center-right actors and commentators, and establishing a need for Portugal to "catch up" in order to develop and to become a relevant player in the European project. Examples appeared on televised electoral debates, broadcasted on all three channels, as when the center-right candidate João Cotrim Figueiredo of the Liberal Initiative Party (*Iniciativa Liberal* – IL) stated that:

Portugal is in a kind of race that is developing, along with other European countries. We have already seen that with the PS, we are going backwards;

3. Nota Editorial, "Europa doa vacinas contra a Covid e quer um exército europeu", *Jornal de Notícias*, 16 Sep. 2021.

we see the other racers in the East overtaking us, and it will continue, it will continue. Portugal will move towards the tail of Europe⁴.

Similarly, the center-right candidate of PSD, Rui Rio, said that:

We see that there is a degradation in all ratios and that Portugal has lagged behind a lot in Europe; it is increasingly on its way to the tail of Europe. So, we have to do things differently; otherwise, we are really going to the tail of Europe. (...) [the Socialist Party policy] gave the results that we know, in which even the former Eastern countries, the former communist countries, poor countries that joined the European Union after Portugal, many of them have already overcome us⁵.

On a different note, the Prime Minister at the time, António Costa (PS), highlighted how Portugal has been moving towards the center: "Despite the pandemic, the country grew 4.6 per cent last year and once again converged with the European Union"⁶. Despite being a peripheral country, some argue that Portugal was once an empire known for building bridges across different cultures. This history positions it as a potential advantage to the EU, both within its borders and in terms of foreign policy. In one of the op-eds, the author praises Prime Minister António Costa for his

exemplary negotiation of the RRP, capable of assuming itself as the most powerful instrument of social cohesion and economic reconversion of countries in general and of Portugal in particular (...) And a Europe that is not afraid of disaggregation, knowing that it has many of the instruments to prevent it, through its deepening and the deepening of European policies as a matrix of development and sustainability. (...) Europe will be political, or it will not be. And if not, it will tend to wither away. Hence the importance of the role of Portugal⁷.

During the economic crises, Portugal has often been labelled as the "good pupil", diligently following conditions and implementing economic and financial recommendations to secure continued support. This was evident during the Troika intervention, when Portuguese authorities were praised for their reform efforts. The same pattern has been reinforced in the recent crisis, as the pandemic put pressure on the Eurozone. Despite the challenging circumstances, Portugal had made efforts to meet the recommended deficit targets. Media representations clearly reflected this effect of "recognition": "What is certain for now is that Portugal will end the

4. "Debate eleitoral entre Rui Rio e João Cotrim Figueiredo", RTP1, SIC, TVI 10 Jan. 2022.

5. "Debate eleitoral entre António Costa e Rui Rio", RTP1, SIC, TVI, 13 Jan. 2022.

6. "Crescimento do PIB português", *Jornal das 8*, TVI, 31 Jan. 2022.

7. Eduardo Vitor Rodrigues, "Mais Portugal, mais Europa", *Jornal de Notícias*, 13 Dec. 2021, p. 24.

year once again being the country of the positive balance sheet"⁸. Returning from Brussels, the Finance Minister commented on how "the country's economic growth exceeded all expectations and may even exceed forecasts for next year", this being the sixth consecutive year that Portugal has met the budget targets⁹, fulfilling the "good pupil" role.

A counter-discourse also emerged – though was much less present – with the left, emphasizing that beyond compliance, there have been sacrifices that the society was made to bear, which needed to be acknowledged. This discourse was reactivated in discussions about the RRP¹⁰.

Another dominant discourse particularly visible from January 2022 onwards stated that "the EU contributes to security and peace", accompanying arguments for the EU to embody a security actor by promoting stronger policies, as stated by *Público's* journalist de Sousa. She noted how the EU had reacted in unity and determination to the war in Ukraine, and how in parallel NATO's role had also become essential in its defensive and deterrent mission in European territory¹¹. The prominence of this discourse is explained by the gradual escalation in the East and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which was described in the media analyzed as the greatest security crisis in Europe since the end of the Cold War and even of the Second World War. Therefore, these results indicate a remarkable mobilization of voices pushing for the EU to fulfil a greater role in solving that crisis as a peace actor. RTP1 illustrated this, with the TV news presenter saying that "this is the first time that the European Union has decided to deliver lethal military material for a conflict", referring to a journalist reporting directly from Brussels:

(...) it is the first time, as you say, that [the peace support mechanism] is used to finance the purchase of lethal war material (...) as the European Union is a peace project, this is effectively a historic moment because there is an unparalleled demonstration of solidarity with the Ukrainian people and regime.

Less prominent counter-discourses also emerged, such as "the EU's militarization is hazardous" – which assumed that the EU was (being) militarized. For instance, when voting against the resolution in the

8. "Défice de 2.5% entre janeiro e setembro", *Jornal das 8*, TVI, 23 Dec. 2021, 8h17PM.

9. "Reunião do Eurogrupo - economia portuguesa deverá crescer", *Telejornal*, RTP1, 6 Dec. 2021, 8h18PM.

10. Pedro Filipe Soares, "Um orçamento fundamental", *Público*, 8 Oct. 2021, p. 8.

11. Teresa de Sousa, "Acabou a Europa em que estávamos habituados a viver", *Público*, 25 Feb. 2022, p. 13.

European Parliament about the invasion of Ukraine, a MEP from the Communist Party stated that the EU should avoid fueling the tensions and open a "path of dialogue and peace, which is absolutely fundamental to curbing the situation in question".

In another register, the idea that the EU was militarily weak and dependent on the US in security and defense matters was also present, and *Público's* columnist Teresa de Sousa could be quoted with significant examples of analyses on the European partners' rhetorical preparedness to "raise the 'ambition' of their common defense policy", which in her view was hindered by their inability to reach unanimity on the necessary strategy.

In the dominant discourses identified, pragmatic concerns such as those related to security and defense, or economics, often intertwined with axiological considerations on democratization, human rights and the rule of law – even if mostly assumed or implicit, for example, as part of the Portuguese identity and values, as well as part of the benefits of Europeanization. As mentioned by a journalist, "the EU is not just about money, it is also a community of rights and values"¹². Based on this notion, for instance, the polemics with Hungary and Poland in relation to the Union's principles of respect for the rule of law and democracy, which these EU members were deemed to be jeopardizing, were much discussed in the period of analysis (Freire *et al.* 2023, 106). This could also mean that democracy was deemed a beneficial outcome of EU integration, especially in the dominant discourses that argued that Portugal's "natural place" was within the EU *because* the country shared these values with the European project. In a logic of "conservation" and "reactivation", these discourses tended to be built upon ingrained memories that also involved axiological considerations: good – the democratic Carnation Revolution, for example, which was deemed to have ushered what the Portuguese call "April's values", such as political freedoms and social and international solidarity; and bad – pre-EU poor Portugal and the austerity period of 2011-2015. The following sections explore these considerations through elite interviews and the public opinion survey.

4. ELITE PERSPECTIVES OF THE EU AND PORTUGAL'S EUROPEANIZATION: SEEKING A CENTRAL POSITION

Building on the results of the media analysis, the second phase of this study, elite interviews, aimed to assess the opinions of political and media

12. Rita Siza, Luxembourg Prime Minister, "Depois do recado de Angela Merkel, líderes baixam o tom das críticas à Polónia", *Público*, 22 Oct. 2021, p. 22.

actors about the mediatized discourses through Q Methodology analysis, as well as to explore their in-depth commentary. Therefore, in late 2022 and early 2023, 25 political actors and 25 media professionals, the second vector of the media-elite-public triangle, were interviewed.

Political interviewees were selected amidst members of the Government Cabinet – namely, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of National Defense; members of the National and European Parliaments, and party cadres across the political spectrum. Media actors were selected based on their position in the news production process – journalists, editors, producers and directors in major newspapers and TV channels, as well as in a public news agency whose material is often reproduced by the latter. The aim was to capture a broad spectrum of elite opinions on EU integration. The dominant discourses and some counter-discourses voiced in the media were transformed into 25 statements to be sorted on a Q grid, commenting particularly on those placed at the extremes of the grid, to reveal their rationale or operant subjectivity. The results were similar to those of media analysis, highlighting significant convergence on key themes, although the interviews allowed further exploration of particular issues.

Four factors were deemed significant, explaining 53% of the variance with high reliability (composite reliability of 0.9). These factors were labelled based on their composition, as well as the ideological and programmatic perspectives that they represented, which resulted in four groups of actors, as detailed next. These groups mainly represent the voices of political actors, which outnumber media actors. Yet, while media actors were present in all groups, they were much more concentrated in the mainstream, i.e., converging with the dominant discourses of the government and much less with the criticisms voiced by opposition groups. The main discourses found in the right-wing and left-wing oppositions fit these political parties' usual stances, with the right focusing more on security and defense, and the left on economic and social policies.

4.1. ELITE CONSENSUS AND DISSENSUS: REVISITING THE CENTER/ PERIPHERY DEBATE

The results of the Q analysis helped organize respondents into four groups based on the congruence of viewpoints, ordered by eigenvalue, and named based on their stances in the domestic political debate about the EU and Portugal's place and performance as a member.

- 1) The "Optimistic Europeanists" were the biggest group, with a very positive assessment of and alignment with EU integration and Europeanization. This group viewed Portugal's role in the Union most positively, emphasizing the country's central position within the EU.
- 2) The "Pragmatic Europeanists" aggregated pragmatic opinions about the opportunities that integration brought to Portugal, such as economic development, technological modernization and democratization, and were more concerned with security and defense issues and migration. This group viewed Portugal's current position pessimistically, deeming it to be socioeconomically peripheral within the EU.
- 3) The "Transformists" had a critical view of the EU in structural and conjunctural terms, rejecting, for example, the conditions attached to different EU programs and policies identified as neo-liberal, reflective of the capitalist dynamics of exploitation. They were also critical of the militarization and securitization of key political and social issues.
- 4) The "Mediators" were positioned between the governing elite and the left opposition, disagreeing with the left on the conditionality and security issues, and standing with the former in that EU economic and commercial agreements could be very beneficial for Portugal, for instance.

No statement drew complete consensus among the four groups, but some ushered significant convergences and divergences between participants that reflect the different ideological agendas and programs. "Integration into the EU benefits modernization and scientific innovation in Portugal" was the statement deemed most relevant and widely agreed upon by three groups, while the left-wing opposition classified it as neutral. There was no clear "anti-EU" position, but there were critical readings about the EU and Portugal's role in it, more prominent in the interviews than in the media analysis. Still, the dominant understanding was that Europeanization and EU integration are crucial for Portugal, potentially re-centering it, and these distinct views framed them as processes under ongoing scrutiny.

Axiological considerations about fundamental values and principles were also entwined with pragmatic considerations in the interviews. This ambiguity reflects the complexity and the plurality of views, expressed in in-depth comments on the statements analyzed. "Fundamental values, the

Portuguese experience after April 25 [the Carnation revolution] and the idea of a welcoming poor country that expresses solidarity, is something that remains" (Interview with the Government's political advisor). This idea was seconded by an MEP from the Socialist Group stating that since the Carnation revolution there has been a political pact on the relevance of the Union for Portugal and the role Portugal might have in the strengthening of the Union (Interview with MEP, PS). Memory played a central role in the formulation of narratives about these values, principles, and the liberal-democratic regime, and was key in particular arguments about Europeanization and Portugal's natural belonging to the EU, re-centering the country in this context.

The Optimistic Europeanists could be ideologically positioned in the center-left. The Socialist Party, in power at the time, as well as members of Parliament and professionals from all the media, fundamentally agreed on the benefits of integration and Europeanization, especially in terms of economic gains. Moreover, in the context of the crises at play, the Recovery and Resilience Plan was most welcomed as a tool to assist in dealing with reforms and strengthen resilience in different sectors. Hence, the EU was understood as embodying the idea of progress and development, where Portugal wanted to play a central role. Even when discussing the associated challenges of this process, many interviewees from this group considered them to be reinforcing the country's positioning. For example, the director of one of the newspapers commented that Portugal

gained dimension and economic strength with integration in the common market, despite the other side of the coin, which is its inability to compete with other stronger European partners. But weighing the pros and cons, the advantages outweigh the disadvantages.

Overall, the Pragmatic Europeanists shared this view, which was arguably a reflection of the consensual "centrist" Europeanism in Portugal, with both groups sharing many concerns and assessments regarding Portugal's advantages with integration but promoting distinct views on Portugal's performance – with the Optimists adopting a much more positive perspective. Notably, an interviewee from the Pragmatic Europeanists cluster agreed that there are fundamental benefits coming from Portuguese integration in the EU but criticized the negative effects and sacrifices arising from Portugal's adaptation, and the successive governments' stance *vis-à-vis* the EU. Hence, this criticism was much more directed at the governing elites – both center-left and center-right, as they have succeeded one another in power, than at the EU. They commented that

structural issues [are key] (...) the truth is that the last governments did not address them, they never wanted to. And the last majority didn't either, and they would be the ones having the best conditions to make changes in structural terms (member of *Chega*).

The Transformists were the most vocal in defining the EU as a structure that enforced neoliberal principles and perpetuated dependence and inequality. They argued that as much as economic support might have been necessary, it did not translate into more autonomy but rather more subjugation, with a clear impact in key sectors. While there was investment for modernization, the EU's "liberalization" of these sectors hindered these same initiatives, and this was a consequence of the very "neoliberal matrix" in which the EU was operating (member of PCP). Moreover, a representative of the Left Bloc added that the EC performed the role of a "regulator" and a "legislator" when deciding on a series of matters regarding Portugal's economy despite the Portuguese citizens' opinions. They thus argued that

the European Union's trade policies and trade agreements are damaging Portugal's economic development, for exactly the same reason that they are competition policies that seek to protect the strongest economies in the euro and seek to privatise the Portuguese economy and 'integrate it', in quotation marks, into the European market (member of BE).

In this group's view, this lack of agency was a result of Portugal's peripheralization in the Union. While Optimists argued that integration has led or could lead Portugal to the forefront, or rather, centralize it within the EU, Transformists argued that Portugal only "lags behind" due to "the implementation of policies that use a single matrix that have unequal impact, such as the Euro or the single market", as a PCP member put it.

The Mediators brought important nuances to the centrist Europeanist consensus, mediating between the left and the center left. On the one hand, this group rejected the perception of the EU as a successful democratizing actor, for instance, citing Hungary's and Poland's non-compliance with democratic and human rights standards as contrary examples. On the other hand, the group deemed economic and commercial agreements to be potentially very beneficial for Portugal and argued that the EU did not impose conditions, but rather promoted compliance. Indeed, a member of the center-left party *Livre* ("Free")¹³, argued that conditions and procedures could be negotiated, and in this sense, "there is a process of co-responsibility both on the part of Portugal and the European Union as a whole".

13. The LIVRE Party actually positions itself as a bridge-builder and a mediator, "in the middle of the left", aiming to build convergences (Livre, 2013).

Emphasis on the relevance of the constitutive EU principles was found amidst the Optimists and the Pragmatic Europeanists, and the professionals of all media outlets, who focused on identity factors, but also tied them to pragmatic considerations such as the promotion of democracy, human rights, and peace, and concerns for security and defense. The discourse centered on the understanding of the EU as "a leader in defending democracy, its institutions, human dignity, security and equal opportunities", as a PSD member portrayed it. Similarly, an advisor to the PS Government said that the EU

has promoted and strengthened democracy and human rights in the member states. It has also created a favourable environment for citizens to genuinely appreciate life in democracy. Of course, it is linked to economic well-being and that is the great thing, I think it is the great trick, it is the great strength of the European Union, in that it associates life in a democracy with respect for human rights and economic well-being. And we genuinely appreciate that.

In this interplay between identitarian and pragmatic dimensions, principles were also crucial for the other groups, although the Transformists questioned the nature of European values promoted as abstract concepts, with agendas that were often concealed under Eurocentric assumptions. In the migration context, an interviewee criticized the EU stating: "There is an extraordinary thing: the European Union, without a European treaty, is pushing its member states to sign bilateral agreements with countries such as Libya and Turkey, sending people away to offshores of human rights" (member of BE).

Notably, amidst the Pragmatic Europeanists, a member of the extreme-right party *Chega* also expressed support for human rights, although they inconsistently stated that migrants' rights must be subjected to the states' interests and concerns, for instance, whereas "the borders of the European Union are wide open and therefore offer no guarantees" (member of *Chega*). They also criticized fundamental instruments such as the Treaty of Lisbon by saying that it

has brought about sovereignty issues. Indeed. And this path has been attempted with the aim of creating a Union of federated States, and we can actually see this happening in many situations. Well, I have to say that this is anything but what the founders of the European Union wanted (member of *Chega*).

Russia's invasion and the war in Ukraine, in association with debates over EU defense and security, was also analyzed by all groups. The Transformists said this context potentiates a militarization within/of the EU

and criticized NATO's role in this process. The Optimists, in turn, argued that the EU needed strategic autonomy and to balance between acquiring more capacities in this area and fostering the relationship with NATO, which they considered strategically relevant. The understanding was that "the values of the European Union are not contradictory to the values of security and defense", and that these could mean both "defense of sovereignty, defense of democracy" (MEP of PS). Members of the Pragmatic Europeanists group had a similar understanding that "democracy must be defended and will only be defended from a position of strength", and that the EU itself was under threat from "totalitarian countries" like Russia (PSD member); or that, as "we live in an integrated world, [...] we cannot fail to have clear and evident defense conditions", and that "the current situation" showed that "Europe cannot live" without these conditions (member of *Chega*). The group of Mediators, in turn, had an undefined official stance on NATO and the EU with regard to security matters. One interviewee said that NATO had a role to ensure security, but it also had "a strong bias" towards the interests of the United States, and the EU was therefore "somewhat hostage to American foreign policy" (member of *Livre*). Hence, in order to promote its interests, they argued, "the European Union needed to deepen its security and defense policy, and also in this sense, to guarantee this independence".

These interviews confirmed the interplay between pragmatic and identitarian dimensions in the media analysis. Pragmatic aspects – such as economic development, security, and democratic stability – prevailed, and the dominant discourses converged in a consensus that integration into the EU was essential for the country's progress. However, these discourses echoed identity-driven assumptions and aspirations, especially regarding Portugal's ambition to belong to the center, by reinforcing a national imagination that aligns and integrates Portugal with/into a European "center" and a modern, forward-looking Europe. As for the criticisms, the Transformists' concerns centered particularly on neoliberalism and militarization, and they conceived the EU as a project in need of reform, or rather as a structure to transform.

5. THE PUBLIC'S VIEW OF THE EU AND PORTUGAL'S PLACE IN THE PROJECT

The population survey, the third vector of the political elite-media-public triangle, also reinforces the prominence of pragmatic factors and the idea of conflation of EU and Portuguese interests, though bringing in interesting nuances. The fieldwork took place between 21 July and 23

August 2023 and engaged 1,013 respondents selected through a sampling process informed by the 2021 Portuguese census.

The surveyed population was mostly in their working-life period (62%). The majority (61%) declared they earn up to 1,500 euros, with 31% of the respondents saying they earn less than the minimum wage of 740 euros, while only 12% earn more than 1500 euros. The respondents were gender balanced: 53% women and 47% men. Finally, a significant portion (64%) were over 34 years old and have thus witnessed key EU developments, such as the creation of the Schengen Area and the introduction of the Euro.

The survey results suggest that Portuguese respondents have some general knowledge about the EU (30.1% responded correctly to all questions about the EU). Regarding media consumption, most respondents (74%) access news through TV, while 41% get their news from the printed press. Both the private and the public TV channels were equally popular among the public. Among print publications, *Correio da Manhã* and *Jornal de Notícias* are most routinely consumed (25% each), and *Público* is used by 14% of the respondents. These numbers confirm the relevance of the outlets analyzed in this study and the prevalence of TV over the printed press.

Overall, the survey showed a positive attitude towards Portugal's integration into the EU. A significant majority (86.8%) believe Portugal has benefitted from being an EU member, with only 13.1% saying otherwise.

When asked about political positions, 38% of the respondents self-identified with the center, 26% with the left, 24% with the right, and 11% did not know or refused to answer. People politically positioned across all spectrums were integration supporters, though with some differences. Those who positioned themselves on the left showed the most significant support (54.3%) and opposition (23.5%) to the integration process simultaneously. Those on the right also showed great support (51.5%) but had the lowest opposition to integration (16.2%). The political center expressed more ambivalent views on integration, though support was still high (48.2% support it while 22.6% oppose it).

Pragmatic benefits from EU integration were associated with economic development (56%), better protection of social welfare (30%), human rights and democracy (28%), security (25%), migration (18%), and green policies (17%). As for trust in institutions, the European Commission and the European Parliament enjoyed significant trust rates of 53% and 52%, respectively, making European institutions more trusted than the national ones (the Portuguese Government and Parliament had a 40% trust rate).

The survey shows the majority of the Portuguese have a positive view of European integration, especially concerning the provision of humanitarian aid in the context of the war in Ukraine, the EU as promoting economic development and assisting in times of crises, such as with COVID-19, and the protection and promotion of democratic principles. These views align with the mainstream political perceptions (from the center) and the media discourses. However, the EU's lack of solidarity and unity, which drew 67.9% agreement, and the idea that "EU decisions usually contemplate only the interests of the stronger members", with 59.8% agreement, show a critical stance on the EU as well.

This result indicates remarkable nuance in people's opinions of the EU on cooperation, depending on their conception of solidarity, for instance. Interestingly, the criticism related to the EU's lack of solidarity and unity is shared with the Mediators group in the elite interviews. Regarding the interests of the stronger countries, most of the respondents agree with the Transformists' critical opinion expressed in the interviews, in which the group of Optimistic Europeanists were the only other group who deemed it relevant enough to express disagreement with this statement, while the Pragmatic Europeanists and the Mediators were neutral towards it.

The question on the militarization of European foreign policy and its normative dimension found most respondents, 43.8%, agreed that militarization contradicts EU values, with only 12.9% of the respondents disagreeing. Moreover, this was the statement that gathered a significant proportion of neutral answers, which is quite interesting when read in conjunction with a substantial percentage of respondents in favor of a European army (67%). The current context of the war in Ukraine and its extension in time probably plays an important role here. The survey shows that most of the public aligns with the Transformists' and Mediators' opinions, mainly disagreeing with the government and right-wing groups on this issue. The debate on whether militarization conflicts with EU values was commented on in interviews but was almost non-existent in media analysis, likely because the timeline for the latter only included the first months of the full-scale invasion in 2022.

Additionally, more than half of the respondents (51.7%) agree that Portugal lags behind in the EU (in the "tail of Europe"), which suggests that many do not see the country as a central player in the Union, reasoning with the peripheralization argument and the idea that there is a constant effort to re-center policies and practices. To substantiate this understanding, 45.5% of the respondents also agree that "EU support comes with imposed

conditions that harm Portugal", while 28.2% disagree, mostly aligning with the Transformists and Mediators in the interviews.

Finally, the survey's results offer a picture of political engagement in Portugal and reveal a duality: the respondents express highly positive perceptions about the EU in general, while also criticizing certain EU policies, practices, and Portugal's peripheral position within the Union. In this sense, this part of our analytical triangle, combined with political elites' views and public opinion, both confirms the overall trend of centrism in Portugal and helps this chapter illustrate the diversity of perceptions and engagement found in each of these angles.

6. CONCLUSION: THE EUROPEAN PROJECT AND THE "PRAGMATIC IMAGINARY OF THE CENTER" IN MEDIATIZED POLITICAL CONTESTS

With an all-encompassing analysis of representations of the EU and European integration amidst the media-political elite-public triangle in Portugal, this chapter reveals two strategic visions regarding a) political centrism, as opposed to "extremisms"/"polarization"; and b) the centralization of Portugal in this project, as opposed to its peripheral position in geographical, socioeconomic and political terms. These strategic visions mobilize predominantly pragmatic factors (economy, development, security) to emphasize both the relevance of this project for the country and the way Portugal envisions itself centrally in it. One part of the dominant perspective on European integration and the country's place in the EU considers that Portugal has not only been "adapting" very well but also co-leading in certain significant instances, especially as voiced by the center-leftist PS, in power at the time. The other part of the dominant view considers that Portugal should still adapt, or "catch up", further, as mostly voiced by the center-right. In these views, such adaptation would unfold through modernization and other initiatives that can project Portugal toward the center, as well as by rejecting polarization, extremism, or populism, since these are harmful not only to the country but also to the European project.

The story conveyed in dominant mediatized discourses is that the EU is beneficial for Portugal and despite its imperfections, being part of the EU is preferable to not being part of it at all. Still, the study found significant differences between how the debate unfolds in the media and in the other public spaces or spheres. Notably, in the mediatized discussion, European issues were integrated into a broader information routine, often mixed with the coverage of national or local issues, thus normalizing the presence of

the EU in the Portuguese socio-political agenda. Yet, this coverage tended to replicate official accounts and stances through discourse appropriation. This way, mainstream media selected the set of discourses that populate the realm of what is *sayable*, thus becoming central actors in the validation and consolidation of this positive consensus around the EU. Of course, criticisms and counter-hegemonic views were also present, which speaks to some degree of media pluralism. But such views were much less prominently conveyed and were mostly reserved for opinion pieces or interviews, even though news pieces were not completely exempt from espousing certain views. Moreover, the media's superficiality and over-reliance on official sources limited and conditioned the debate, which facilitated the instrumentalization of the EU and European affairs by particular actors.

In all dimensions, the dominant, positive representation and understanding of European integration was primarily built around pragmatic elements and followed a logic of *conservation*, – i.e., existing for a long time as a process leading to the development and the recentering of Portugal in the European space. This representation of Europeanization also implied *reactivation* through significant past experiences that were recovered to provide implicit or explicit analogies that aided in understanding current and future scenarios, such as the implications of the transition process after the Carnation Revolution, leading to European integration as a success story, or the austerity period where the troika intervention profoundly shaped the Portuguese course in the EU.

This matrix accommodates opposing discourses: a dominant discourse on assistance and solidarity, and a counter-discourse on dependency and peripheralization. Although the EU was viewed mainly as a driver of development and growth, the underlying concerns about Portugal's peripheralization persisted as seen in the recurring metaphor of being at "the tail of Europe". This sense of disadvantage extended across political, socioeconomic, and environmental issues, underscoring the belief that Portugal "must adapt" to remain or become competitive. However, the harsh memory of austerity measures imposed by the troika has faded, replaced by more positive narratives about EU support through the Resilience and Recovery Plan (RRP). This discursive shift from "austerity" to "bazooka" (representing European funds) actually transformed how the Portuguese perceive the EU – with a consolidated perception of benefits arising from EU integration.

However, the pragmatic reading of Europeanization also supported arguments about Portugal's central relevance for the European project and

the country's need to join it, in order to promote economic and social development and not be left behind. Some of the specific areas of concern were social, environmental, and digital transformation policies. Yet, many of these concerns actually reflected a hybrid identitarian-pragmatic approach to the country's challenges in adapting and catching up, where Portugal appeared as performing sometimes positively and sometimes negatively, but still striving to – or needing to – do well in order to be a relevant, central part of the European project.

Hence, identitarian perceptions and representations of EU values and principles were also critical in this construction, as both the EU and Portugal were depicted as sharing, promoting and protecting liberal-democratic values, the rule of law, human rights and solidarity. Therefore, by juxtaposing identitarian factors, the EU was deemed a natural place for Portugal in political and axiological terms. In this dynamic, the EU and associated concepts, such as "European values" or "democracy", were articulated and instrumentalized in political and media discourses to both sustain the consensus regarding Portugal's integration into the EU and to score points in domestic, regional, and international political contests.

Criticism towards the EU seemed to have concerns of the same, pragmatic and axiological order, thus contesting the meaning and goals of Europeanization and the European project, mostly arguing for the EU's need to change in key conjunctural and structural respects and thus pushing different programs. Examples include propositions for coherent and coordinated policies in key areas, without which the EU was deemed fragmented or troubled, or, as was mainly argued by leftist parties and actors, for the EU to strengthen its social role in order to avoid the securitization of sensitive social and political issues such as migration and refugees, neoliberalist, or the repetition of austerity programs, and thus promote inclusive development and actual social and international solidarity. Still, the main proposition associated with most of those criticisms, especially from the left, and which this study interprets as reflecting a "soft Euroscepticism", was not that Portugal should leave the EU but rather contribute to the EU's change or transformation in these areas.

This chapter has shown, therefore, that the EU performs the dual function of representing the center and allowing the recentering of Portuguese politics through integration, even if there is a disconnection between the dominant discourse of benefits and growth, and the reality of a country continuously seeking a privileged position or a seat at the table. In this sense, the mediatized, public discussion was not polarized between pro-EU and anti-EU stances, and representations of Portugal's

Europeanization were rather characterized by different perspectives of advantages and disadvantages, as well as Portugal's periphery/center position in this process. Ultimately, the dominant discourses portrayed the EU as both a practical mechanism for national development and a space where Portugal could fulfil its historical ambitions of centrality and influence, a duality that deepened the country's identification with the European project.

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Chapter 8

Mediatized Discourses on Europeanization in Spain

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1. INTRODUCTION

Spain has been historically characterized by a strong pro-European consensus as well as a high agreement among political elites regarding European integration (Vázquez *et al.* 2014; Sojka & Vázquez 2014). The decades-long exclusion of the country from the European Communities due to the military dictatorship of Francisco Franco deeply impacted the social perceptions of Europeanization. Much of the growth of the Spanish

economy in the 60s and 70s was based on an increase in the economic relations with Western Europe, fostering, hence, a strong pro-European consensus amongst economic stakeholders (García Crespo 2019).

All the exiled pro-democratic political elites declared themselves pro-European as early as the 1950s, while considering Franco's dictatorship as the only obstacle for the normalization of relations between Spain and Europe. This has created a strong identification between Europe and democracy, as seen in the media and mainstream political discourses during the transition to democracy starting from 1975 (Powell 2003).

The unanimous endorsement of the European integration project in the early years of the Europeanization process in Spain coexisted with somewhat diverging visions of Europe. The two major Spanish parties, Partido Socialista y Obrero Español-PSOE and Partido Popular-PP, had different approaches to how the European integration project should be constructed. The PP advocated a model based on cooperation between states, as opposed to a federal model. The PSOE advocated the construction of a more social Europe, the adoption of a European Social Charter, and territorial cohesion (Avilés 2004; Powell 2007; Roch 2019). These different visions were evident in discussions on the adoption of a European constitutional treaty. Both parties supported the adoption of the treaty; however, the PP's Government, led by Jose Maria Aznar, insisted that Spain should retain the same powers within EU institutions that it had under the Nice Treaty (Ruiz & Egea 2010). The PP criticized the European policies of the socialist Government of Felipe Gonzalez, accusing him of failing to defend Spain's national interests. Furthermore, PP's neoliberals argued that González's European policies were incompatible with genuine socio-economic modernization (Powell 2007). But when Aznar came to power, his government adopted the same rhetoric used by PSOE, according to which it was in Spain's interest to make more Europe and not less Europe (Roch 2019). Both parties had also shown a similar stance regarding the economic crisis of 2008, agreeing to implement drastic austerity measures under the auspices of EU institutions (Roch 2019). Over time, this gap between the two major parties seems to have diminished.

The economic crisis and the adoption of harsh austerity measures led to the emergence of anti-austerity public mobilization that was highly critical of EU institutions, culminating in the establishment of the 15-M movement in 2011 (della Porta & Mattoni 2014; Feenstra *et al.* 2017). In 2014, a new political party, Podemos, emerged from the M-15 movement. While Podemos called the austerity measures a financial coup d'état against Southern European countries, it considered itself a pro-European party,

advocating for the recovery of sovereignty, and the promotion of social rights and human rights in a European framework (Pérez-Escoda *et al.* 2023). However, after joining the PSOE government in 2019, the party softened its anti-institutional discourses becoming hardly distinguishable from other mainstream left-wing parties (Magre *et al.* 2021).

The year 2013 also witnessed the emergence of Vox, a new ultra-right political party. Vox was established by members of the PP who disapproved of the policies of the party, considering them too moderate (Real-Dato & Sojka 2020). The party shares the ideology of other ultra-right parties in Europe, including defending a traditionalist Christian conception of the Spanish society; opposing same sex marriage; calling for the protection of the "natural family"; opposing what they call "gender ideology" and endorsing a clear anti-immigration stance (Olivas & Rama 2021). Like Podemos, the party did not adopt an outright Eurosceptic discourse, however, it presented a different vision of the EU. In its 2019 manifesto for the European elections, Vox reasserted its "Europeanist vocation", rejecting "the goal of turning the Union into a disguised federal state. The said objective has been achieved fraudulently in recent years by reducing the [number of] issues that require unanimity within the Council, conferring greater power on the Commission" (Vox 2019). According to Rama *et al.* (2021, 102), the Euroscepticism propagated by Vox "is very much dwarfed in comparison to that advocated by the Western European peers". This could be explained, as Conde Solares highlights, by the fact that "[w]here other European far-right parties use an ethno-nationalist narrative to paint the EU or other supranational powers as the enemy, Vox attacks the ethno-nationalism within its own nation. It is the Basque and Catalan nationalists who base their ideas on tribal and ethnic exceptionalism" (2019). In the case of both Vox and Podemos, discourses on the EU have been shaped by changing electoral strategies, making their critique of the EU lacking in consistency (Real-Dato & Sojka 2020).

Trouvé (2008) argues that the early pro-European consensus in Spain impeded a real debate about European policies beyond the national aspiration to become a member, calling this phenomenon the banalization of the European question. The strong support for the EU among the public, and in particular, the highly positive assessment of the benefits associated with Europeanization, have resulted in two patterns: First, the media is not preoccupied with discourses that aim to legitimize or justify EU membership. In other words, there is no real debate about pros and cons of EU membership since it is generally assumed that there is practically no alternative for Spain. Second, while debates on specific European policies, such as the Common Agricultural Policy or Cohesion Policy, can be

apprehended from a pragmatic perspective based on good or bad outcomes, Spanish membership in the Union overall is never questioned.

Similar to other European countries, Spain has increasingly become affected by digitalization, which explains the ever-present connection between media and political discourses. The Spanish media landscape is characterized by a high level of political parallelism (Teruel-Rodríguez 2016). Overall, the Spanish media landscape includes a wide spectrum of outlets (ranging from the most progressive left-leaning to the most conservative right-leaning), which is further complicated by the division between constitutionalist media (defenders of national unity) and nationalist media (supporters of greater autonomy or proper independence of administrative regions) (Rivas de Roca García 2018; Salaverría and Gómez-Baceiredo 2018). While news consumption is a key process in generating an informed and engaged citizenry (Casero-Ripollés 2020), public debates on the EU are framed through different national perspectives (Ares Castro-Conde 2016; Uribe-Otalora 2017). However, in the absence of political polarization over EU membership, media polarization over the EU is hardly detected. This does not mean that the Europeanization is not instrumentalized by the media to attack political opponents.

To complement the above analysis and to further probe existing knowledge, this chapter analyzes political and media discourses and popular perceptions concerning Spain's Europeanization. The chapter is based on empirical data obtained from the following sources: content and discourse analysis of six Spanish media outlets; 50 in-depth interviews integrating Q methodology with political and media elites; and a nationwide representative survey with 1,000 adult respondents. The conclusion seeks to add new insights to dominant arguments and claims about Europeanization in Spain and to pave the way for future research and policy considerations.

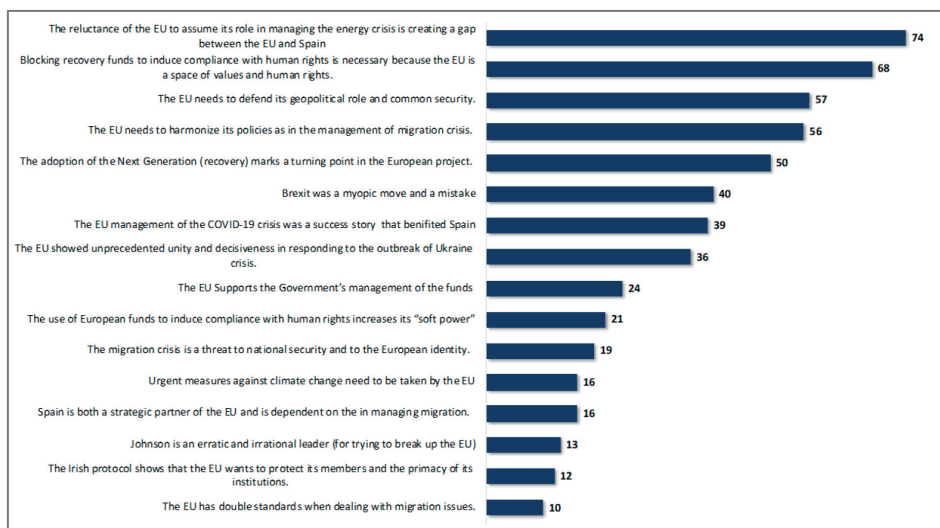
2. MEDIA ANALYSIS

For the purpose of media analysis, we selected six media outlets based on the following criteria: (a) ownership, that is, public vs. private; (b) format, that is, traditional vs. digital; (c) editorial line, that is, conservative vs. liberal, by selecting media outlets from the most conservative to the most liberal editorial lines; and (d) type of media, that is, TV stations and newspapers, which represent the outlets with the largest readership and viewership in Spain. Accordingly, the selected outlets include ABC, Antena 3, El Confidencial, edDiario.es, El País and RTVE. Their Twitter accounts were used, in order to obtain a robust pool of data; although we focus on

six media outlets, we have collected data (i.e., links to news items) from 12 Twitter accounts belonging to these outlets to ensure the best possible coverage (for example, @abc_es and @abc_mundo). A final sample of 540 news items, collected between July 2021 and March 2022, was selected for analysis combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. More to the point, the final sample was subjected to content analysis based on a codebook designed in collaboration with the project teams, which identifies the main keywords and themes discussed when covering the EU (issues related to EU recovery funds, migration, human rights, the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, etc.). Subsequently, an inductive analysis was performed, which outlines the dominant topics and actors involved.

Following the content analysis, we sought to detect the discourses that emerged in relation to the different topics discussed. The identification of dominant discourses was based on calculating the proportion of each discourse among all detected discourses in the analyzed media during the chosen period, as demonstrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The most dominant discourses for all media outlets in frequencies



In addition to the major discourses detected, we analyzed adjacent discourses and counter-discourses related to the major ones (Table 1).

2.1. MAJOR DISCOURSES

The major discourses we identified were consistent with the existing literature on Europeanization in Spain. Almost all of them reflected a clear pro-European sentiment. Even the discourses that were critical of the EU displayed soft Euroscepticism, understood as the "[lack of] a principled objection to the European integration or EU membership but where concerns on one (or a number) of policy areas lead to the expression of a qualified opposition to the EU, or where there is a sense that 'national interest' is currently at odds with the EU's trajectory" (Taggart and Szczerbiak 2008, 8). The case in point was the discourse maintaining that the EU needed to consolidate its geopolitical weight in order to protect the security of its members. Such criticism, which highlights the difficulties the EU has faced in achieving strategic autonomy (Nair 2021), was aimed at fortifying the security structures at the EU level. The media attributed these difficulties to far-right rhetoric and to the EU's internal divisions (González 2021), but also to the historical dependence on NATO and the United States. With this in mind, the start of the all-out war in Ukraine was seen as a key moment providing the necessary impetus to move forward (Rizzi 2022). In the early months of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, there was a notable transformation in the discourses regarding the EU's geopolitical role – a new discourse emerged according to which, the EU responded decisively to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Table 1. Major, adjacent and counter-discourses in the media

Table of major, adjacent and counter-discourses			
Discourse Units	Major Discourses	Adjacent discourses	Counter Discourse
1. The EU's management of the energy crisis	The reluctance of the EU to assume its role in managing the energy crisis is creating a gap between the EU and Spain		The States have enough margins to confront the energy crisis
2. The EU and the rule of law and human rights	Blocking recovery funds to induce compliance with human rights is necessary because the EU is a space of values and human rights	The EU protects the rule of law in Spain	It is unacceptable to punish governments elected by their peoples Blocking Russian media is anti-democratic or at least problematic Spain fails to meet its own legal obligations to guarantee the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary
3. The geopolitical role of the EU	The EU needs to defend its geopolitical role and common security	Internal divisions in the EU hamper its geopolitical role. The EU is too dependent on NATO and the US for its security The EU is a safeguard and a guarantor of Spain's geopolitical interests	The possible enlargement of the EU towards the Baltic states demonstrates that the EU is still an attractive geopolitical partner
4. The management of the refugee crisis	The EU needs to harmonize its policies as in the management of migration crisis	Spain is both a strategic partner of the EU and is dependent on the in managing migration	The migration crisis is a threat to national security and to the European identity The EU has double standards when dealing with migration issues
5. The adoption of the Next Generation funds.	The adoption of the Next Generation (recovery) marks a turning point in the European project. The EU Supports the Government's management of the funds	The use of European funds to induce compliance with human rights increases its "soft power"	Northern partners are still calling for a thorough audit of the management of funds
6. Brexit	Brexit was a myopic move and a mistake for the UK	Johnson is an erratic and irrational leader (for leaving Europe) The EU protects the interests of Spain in the Southern border The Irish protocol shows that the EU wants to protect its members and the primacy of its institutions	
7. The EU's Management of the COVID-19 CRISIS	The EU management of the COVID-19 crisis was a success story	The EU's management of the COVID-19 crisis has transformed it towards more unity and solidarity	It is doubtful that the EU response to the COVID-19 crisis will have a long-term impact on EU policies and functioning The health crisis is being used as an excuse to limit liberties
8. EU's actions relayed to the Ukraine war	The EU showed unprecedented unity and decisiveness in responding to the outbreak of Ukraine crisis	Ukraine's war has led to a better cooperation with NATO and other countries	The sanctions against Russia will impoverish European citizens The EU was rather slow in taking decisive actions

Another discourse involving soft Euroscepticism stipulated that the EU needs to harmonize its policies as a key player in the management of the migration crisis. Migration was a central issue that has an impact on European security and identity. While appreciating the EU's attention to the humanitarian and security dimensions of migration, the media were critical of the lack of capacity to provide common answers to the problem. There was a call for better coordination and a more robust policy on the part of the EU, which goes hand in hand with a greater preponderance of pragmatic factors. However, in response to the lack of agreement on the measures to be adopted, the basic approach demanded more involvement of the EU in the management of migration. Moreover, the media stressed the importance of developing instruments that go beyond the security dimension of the problem; otherwise, the notion of European values remained open to scrutiny (Boulos *et al.* 2023; Glensk and Vulliamy, 2021).

In terms of the "sayable" (Foucault 1991), events with a transformative potential for the EU dominated the discourse on Europeanization. This included discourses regarding the EU's position during COVID-19, the handling of Brexit, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. As pointed out, the EU's management of the COVID-19 crisis has resulted in more unity and solidarity, with measures including the centralized purchase of vaccines, the issuance of a COVID-19 passport, and the adoption of the Next Generation funds. The adoption of such measures was framed by some media outlets as a transformative moment for the EU:

[The EU] has every reason to be proud of the way the pandemic has been dealt with; because first it has offered a joint response, [...] the purchase of the vaccines was done by the European Commission at once, not by each state [separately] negotiating with the pharmaceutical companies, and rightly so. [...] The European Union has responded in a very different way than it did when the terrible financial crisis occurred ten years ago (RTVE 2021a).

For others, the positive change was supposed to serve to generate additional cooperation in other areas, such as immigration and energy (RTVE 2021b). The success of the measures accompanying the pandemic was celebrated by using identitarian terminology – done in a "European way". The same trend was observed in relation to the adoption of the NextGenerationEU recovery plan. According to the discourse, the recovery funds marked a turning point in the European project, with the NextGenerationEU plan being framed as a big deal for both Spain and Europe, as reflected in statements such as "Europe in this last year has been a space for opportunities" (RTVE 2021c). The recovery plan was also viewed as an opportunity for a deeper and more just economic integration, as stated

by *El Diario*: "[I]n this crisis, unlike in previous crises, the economic health of southern Europe is to be prioritized" (Gil 2021a). Interestingly, intertextuality seemed particularly relevant in talking about the NextGenerationsEU plan, with news items constantly introducing elements of old discourses (highly critical of the austerity measures adopted by the EU during the 2008 economic crisis) to contrast them with the NextGenerationEU measures (framed as transformative). A good example is the headline "A paradigm shift in Brussels?" that went on to argue that:

The European Commission tries to escape from the long shadow of the Troika while enduring 800,000 million euros worth of debts to finance the recovery of the European Union that is struggling to get out of the coronavirus pandemic thanks to the vaccines negotiated and bought by Brussels for 27. Looking back in the mirror of a decade ago, Germany's resounding nein on Eurobonds has turned into Brussels enduring the largest joint debt in its history" (Gil 2022a).

The recovery funds were also viewed as a transformative moment for the South-North relations and as an attempt to shake the power asymmetries within the EU. This was evident in the statements such as "the times of the diktat by the Troika and the men in black to access European money are over" (Gil 2022a).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine was also seen as a transformative moment for the EU given that it provided a considerable boost to the EU's geopolitical leadership and deepened collaboration on security issues. This was reflected in the discourse highlighting that the EU had responded decisively and with an unprecedented unity to the Russian invasion of Ukraine with special emphasis being placed on the adoption of sanctions against Russia (Gil 2022). The decision of the EU to arm Ukraine was perhaps the best exemplification of this transformation, marking a clear deviation from its historical preference to deploy diplomacy over military measures. This transformation was described by the media as the "breaking of a taboo" (Gil 2022b). This transformation or deviation was justified through resorting to value-based and identity-based arguments, as it was driven by the defense of some of the EU's core values, mainly freedom and democracy (Abad *et al.* 2023). Brexit was also representative of a transformative moment; however, it was a negative transformation for the UK, not the EU, as reflected in the discourse framing Brexit as a myopic move and a mistake. The resentment towards Brexit, which had jeopardized the ideal of European unity, triggered discourses that portrayed former British Prime Minister Johnson as an 'irrational other'. This explains the negative depictions of Johnson, who was accused of being chaotic and erratic, and the outlets' consequent pro-European sentiment.

While the pragmatic approach to Europeanization remained dominant, identity-based perspectives were still present. A clear example was the discourse that the rule of law and human rights represent core EU values, strongly supported by Spain as well. This discourse emerged in response to the EU's decision to withhold funds from Hungary and Poland due to human rights and rule of law concerns. These categories were framed as basic components of European identity, and were used to emphasize the Europeaness of Spaniards, who aligned themselves with the defense of EU values. The support for EU sanctions by the left and the right was explained by both pragmatic and identitarian considerations. The ultra-right party, VOX, was portrayed as anomaly to the Spanish political landscape due to its criticism of the EU's policies in relation to both countries (Boulos *et al.* 2023). An example of this is the article "Lacaverna de Santiago Abascal" (The Cavern of Santiago Abascal), published in the conservative media outlet El Confidencial (Amón 2021). The article criticized Abascal's position on key human rights related issues:

[Vox] poisons society with the sinister choreography of xenophobia, machismo, nationalism, anti-Europeanism, homophobia, obscurantism and resistance to the evidence of climate change. Nothing better than Abascal's messianism to excite the instincts and stimulate the emotions [...] He would like Spain to be the Hungary of Orbán, the Poland of Law and Justice (Amón 2021).

This critique equates anti-Europeanism with rejection of human rights norms, reaffirming the conceptualization of the EU as a normative power (Boulos *et al.* 2023).

As part of the strong pro-European stance of the Spanish political and media elites, some discourses attempted to highlight the increasing leadership role of Spain in the EU. This was reflected in the discourse stressing that the management of the energy crisis had created a gap between Spain and the EU. Although Madrid's approach to the energy crisis was critical of the Brussels authorities, especially in early reports on the issue, overall, the energy crisis was treated from a pro-European perspective. The active role of Pedro Sanchez in forging changes in the EU's energy policies is indicative of Spain's stronger position within the EU. The Spanish Prime Minister was portrayed as a valid interlocutor ready to address the EU directly, as can be seen from headlines such as "Pedro Sánchez proposes to the EU the joint purchase of gas to reduce the price of electricity" (Hernández 2021) and "Sánchez proposes at the Mediterranean summit to open a debate in the EU on the price of electricity" (RTVE 2021d). The narrative on the increasing leadership role of Spain legitimized the EU project in its entirety through "legitimization by participation" (Wodak and

Weiss 2005), since Spain is portrayed as an active and influential member. At the beginning of the analyzed period, the media was skeptical about the EU's willingness to accept Spanish proposals, but with time, the EU came across as more willing to discuss the Spanish call to cap the prices of gas and electricity, which was presented as a success for Spain.

Amidst the attempt to boost Spain's leadership role, the rhetoric of "us v. them" (Van Dijk 2013) emerged in the media discourses with the aim of challenging the asymmetric relations between Europe's North and South. This was reflected in the headlines "The division in the EU is expressed by Spain, Italy, France, Portugal and Greece, on the one hand, and by Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, Finland and Belgium on the other" (RTVE 2021e), and the statement according to which, "some partners, mainly Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands and Denmark raised fierce opposition arguing that intervening in the market goes against the energy transition and increases dependence on Russia" (Gómez *et al.* 2022). Media discourses aimed at challenging the hegemony of the North in an attempt to reconstruct European identity, since asymmetrical power relations between EU member states play an important role in the (re-)negotiation and (re-)construction of European identity (Wodak and Weiss 2005; Radeljić 2014; 2021). This was pursued by highlighting the role of Spain, thus challenging the stereotypical views about the European South, as reflected in the following statement: "Images of a week in which countries such as Spain and Italy have begun to pressure Brussels to include the price of energy in European debate" (RTVE 2021f). The use of the term "pressure" indicates that the South represented by Spain and Italy was strong enough to be able to exert pressure. Another piece highlighted Europe's dependence on the Russian gas whereas Spain calls for a solution:

Spain has always proposed that Europe develops coordinated actions in order to change the existing regulation that fixes the price of electricity, and in order to cap the price of gas [...]. As a collective project, it is important that the European Union adopts strong measures [...]. Spain will take them if Europe does not (*Montero 2022*).

At times, highlighting the Spanish role in the EU led to reinforcing power asymmetries between the East and the West, with Spain positioning itself as a true representative of Europe. This was particularly evident in discourses supporting the EU's decision to withhold funds from Poland and Hungary due to rule of law and human rights concerns. Human rights norms and the rule of law thus became a site for contestation between the two Eastern European governments and the EU. The issue was framed as a polarizing moment between "us", i.e., the EU, fully supported by Spain,

and "them", i.e. the ultra-nationalists who want to access "all the benefits of being a member of the European Union, including resilience and recovery funds, without fulfilling any of the obligations and duties, starting with respect for European law that all the rest of us comply with" (Gallardo 2021a). LGBTQ+ rights also became a dividing line between "us" v. "them". This is exemplified by headlines such as "Brussels squeezes Hungary and Poland with the revision of European funds for their authoritarian and homophobic drift" (Gil 2021b); likewise, the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is described as "ultra-conservative" for linking homosexuality with pederasty – "The Hungarian government is absorbed in its homophobic drift" (RTVE, 2021). Another item compares Orbán's censorship of LGBTQ+ books to Nazi Germany censorship:

In Hungary, they want books to be marked with a label. It is very similar to what the Nazis did with degenerate art, etc., and it is a super harmful thing to know that these are not just stories for LGBT families. They are stories for all audiences that simply show an LGBT reality (*Gallardo 2021b*).

The contestation of LGBTQ+ rights was framed as a conflict over the identity of Europe. Accordingly, "true" Europeans were portrayed as defenders of human rights and the rule of law. For example, while focusing on the Eurobarometer results about the state of the Union, the news item "The Europeans want the funds to go only to countries that respect the rule of law" stressed what really matters to EU citizens, but also argued that funds should be withdrawn from non-compliant states ("Los europeos quieren" 2021). As mentioned before, in this contestation, the ultra-right VOX was portrayed as an anomaly even by the conservative Spanish media. VOX's leader, Abscal, was accused of liking "neither the Euro nor Europe" (Amón, 2021). This suggests that that inter-state polarization on the role of the EU in promoting LGBTQ+ rights could become an internal one between VOX and other political forces in Spain concerning the role of the EU in promoting certain normative standards. An early sign of this could be seen in VOX's response to the imposition of sanctions: "We have not created the EU to subject the governments that have been legitimately appointed by their people to the path that it decides" (RTVE, 2021c)".

While the EU has never been a contested political project in Spain, it has been used to fuel internal polarization between the left and the right, with each camp occasionally accusing the other party of deviation from European values. Such discourses are less dominant, and they usually emerge when discussing internal implementation of European policies or norms. During the period of analysis, it was the right that exploited the EU as leverage to attack the left-wing government. This was evident in

discourses promoted by the opposition on economic matters, particularly the misuse of the NextGenerationEU funds. In discussing Spain's economic leadership, one opinion piece published in a conservative media outlet claimed the following:

Since the United Kingdom left the Union, the European engine cannot be formed solely by Germany and France. Italy is not up to the task, Portugal, the same, and Spain... Oh my Spain! Today, it is not there and is not expected to be, because the one who is leading it. German and French politicians believe it, and businessmen and investors of all nationalities, in short, the productive fabric of all economies, are saying it like this... we still have Sánchez, involved and obsessed as he is in playing the trick on Brussels to skip the fiscal pacts and continue to go into debt to infinity and beyond (*Pérez 2022*).

In relation to the management of the recovery funds, the opposition and heads of regional governments affiliated with the opposition accused the government of distributing European funds based on ideological criteria (*Abril & Marcos 2022*). Conservative media seemed to follow suit. The conservative outlet *El Confidencial* cast doubt on the ability of the government to deliver its promises to Brussels relating to the reforms needed for the reception of the recovery funds, as reflected in the headline "Spain commits to Europe to approve 60 laws in the midst of parliamentary gridlock" (*Sánchez 2021*). *ABC*, another conservative media outlet, argued that the government "buries its failure to implement European funds in a mountain of figures" (*Caballero 2022*). The same conservative outlet accused the Government of "opacity and lack of transparency" for excluding conservative media outlets from a briefing addressing the allegations of the opposition on the misuse of funds (*Pérez 2022*).

However, progressive media reporting suggested that the opposition used the recovery funds as a political weapon to wear down Pedro Sánchez's government (*RTVE 2021g*). They picked up the government's arguments to disprove the opposition's claims; for example, "Madrid, governed by PP, has received 100% of subsidies" (*Gómez 2022*) and "Of the six most benefited regions, four have PP governments" (*Cué 2022*). The EU was portrayed as a more trustworthy arbitrator, with headlines such as "Brussels disarticulates PP's arguments in its offensive against the management of European funds" (*Cué 2022*).

Using the EU as leverage to attack political opponents was also evident in debates on the appointment of members of the Spanish General Council of the Judiciary (CGPJ), a highly polarized issue in Spain. Put differently, the position of the EU requiring Spain to guarantee independence of the

judiciary was used by the opposition to attack the government and to fuel internal polarization:

The European Commission says very clearly that there is a lack of independence of the figure of the Attorney General in Spain [...] Europe has said it very clearly, and that is what the Partido Popular is in favour of. We are defending the same as the European Commission (Gallardo 2021).

However, some progressive media outlets criticized the polarizing discourses propagated by the opposition while highlighting the opposition's contribution to the CGPJ crisis: "In effect, the PP did agree on the renewal of RTVE, but has refused to do the same with the judicial governing body or the Ombudsman, for example" (Gil, 2021c; Pérez-Escoda *et al.* 2023).

Summarizing the media analysis outcomes within the Foucauldian framework (1991), five key aspects should be addressed: sayable, conservation, memory, reactivation, and appropriation.

In the period of analysis what was said or "sayable" about the EU presented evident pro-EU sentiment. Most major discourses such as the discourses on the recovery funds, the EU role in promoting human rights, the EU's management of the COVID-19 crisis, Brexit, and the response to the war in Ukraine all praised and supported the actions taken by the EU. Even when there was a critique of the EU, the underlying assumption in these discourses was that Europeanization remained central for Spain.

In terms of conservation, most discourses persisted over the entire period of analysis without substantial changes; however, some discourses underwent more significant transformation, mainly those on the geopolitical role of the EU and its common security. Prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the EU was portrayed as a weak actor, too dependent on the US and NATO for its security and hampered by internal divisions. The discourse on the gap between Spain and the EU regarding the management of the energy crisis also underwent a transformation when the Spanish efforts started to bear fruit. Finally, the discourses on migration constantly changed back and forth in the sense of framing of the issue discussed based on a humanitarian or a security approximation. The media analysis also suggests that old discourses on the austerity measures continued to be vivid even after more than 10 years.

In terms of memory, the media analysis provided an interesting opportunity to see how new discourses on the EU, especially those discussing economic integration, related to old discourses focusing on this

important aspect of Europeanization. The discourses on the recovery funds, which were viewed as a window of opportunity, were constantly juxtaposed with old austerity measures, reactivating and revalidating old discourses highly critical of the austerity measures adopted during the Euro crisis.

The media analysis shows that the reactivated discourses primarily related to the South/North divide and to the power asymmetry between the North and the South. This was evident in the discourses on the recovery funds. The progressive media in particular reactivated old discourses on the austerity measures adopted in 2008 that continued to be criticized, while accusing Northern states of being fiscally conservative, and reluctant to make efforts to substantially relax fiscal rules.

Our analysis also suggests that very often the media appropriated discourses coming from the EU, especially those related to economic wellbeing and resilience. This was evident in the discourses on the measures adopted by the EU for dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. In other issues, such as the energy crisis, where certain rifts existed between the Government and the EU, media discourses seemed to align with the Government's position demanding to cap energy prices. However, this could be unique to the issue of the energy crisis where the Government attempted to protect Spanish citizens from the skyrocketing prices of energy. Even conservative media had to support this measure, albeit questioning the ability of the Government to convince the EU to adopt it. But when political actors appropriated the discourses coming from the EU to use them as leverage to discredit political opponents, media outlets tended to align themselves with political elites from the same camp, appropriating their discourses against political rivals.

3. MEDIA AND POLITICAL ELITES

To examine the standpoints of media and political elites, we conducted 50 in-depth interviews (25 politicians and 25 media representatives) integrating Q-Methodology. Out of 50 interviews, 46 Q-grids were analyzed (four respondents refused to proceed with the exercise as they could not place enough statements they disagreed with on the negative pole of the grid). Since the statements presented to the participants were based on media discourses identified in the media analysis phase, and were predominantly pro-European, the refusal to place 9 statements on the negative pole of the grid attests to strong pro-European sentiment among elites and their refusal to show disagreements with statements that were favorable to the EU.

The eight factors generated by the kenQ output of the integrated data coming from the 46 Q-grids had a cumulative explanatory variance of 63%, with Factor 1 having the highest eigenvalue (9.65) and Factor 8 the lowest (1.4). We decided to analyze the five factors with the highest explained variance.

In Factor 1 (left-leaning Euro-optimists), the respondents expressed a very optimistic assessment of the EU's response to the crises it has faced. This assessment focused, *inter alia*, on the adoption of the NextGenerationEU funds, the centralized purchase of vaccines during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the response to the outbreak of war in Ukraine. All the respondents in this factor placed the statement "The EU recovery funds are a window of opportunity for the Union" in (+3), which means that they unanimously endorsed it as highly important for the European integration project. The importance of the NextGenerationEU funds was consistent with the historical emphasis of Spanish socialists on the need to construct a more social Europe (Avilés 2004; Powell 2007).

In Factor 2 (left-leaning geopolitical critics), the four statements with the highest Z-score were critical of the EU's role as a security provider. Those statements included (i) "the internal divisions hamper the geopolitical role of the EU", (ii) "the EU is too dependent on the US and NATO for its security", and (iii) "the EU needs to consolidate its geopolitical weight in order to protect the security of its member". These three statements appeared on the positive pole of the Q grid, while the fourth statement "the EU is the protector and guarantor of Spain's geopolitical interests in its Southern border" appeared on the negative pole.

However, the criticism of the EU's dependency on the US and NATO should not be understood as an opposition to the alliance; instead, it reflected an agreement between the respondents on the necessity for the EU to acquire greater autonomy in the defense domain. This position is consistent with the modern history of Spanish politics, where the left has traditionally adopted a more critical stance on the dependence of both Spain and the EU on the United States in defense matters (Mateos 2016). It is interesting to note that although the respondents in this factor were critical of the EU's geopolitical role, the statement "the EU responded with an unprecedented unity and decisiveness to the outbreak of Ukraine crisis" obtained (+1) in Q sort value, which means that the respondents tended to agree with it. Despite agreeing with this particular statement, the respondents remained skeptical about the transformation of the EU security structures as a result of the war.

Factor 3 (the radical right/left) had a higher representation of the extreme right and the radical left, focusing on two statements that generated polarization between the two camps. On the positive pole of the grid, the statement "EU membership provided Spain with the opportunity to challenge the North-South divide" obtained the highest Z-score. Right-wing respondents, who form the majority in this factor, were more likely to agree with this statement. The agreement with the statement was associated with a sense of national pride regarding the economic progress achieved by Spain since it joined the then European Community. Economic gains are highly valuable from the point of view of the political right and are perceived as central for assessing Europeanization. In comparison, the two left-wing respondents disagreed with it since leftists are more prone to believe that economic gains are not that important in the existence of power asymmetries and social inequalities between member states. The statement that scored the highest negative Z-score is "Brexit demonstrated that leaving the EU was an error and myopic, especially during the pandemic". Right-wing participants were more likely to place it on the negative pole, while the left-wing participants were more likely to place it on the positive pole. While none of the interviewed thought that Spain should follow in the footsteps of the UK and exit the EU, the right-wing respondents disagreed with the statement as an expression of sympathy towards some of the arguments invoked by Brexiteers, such as the vindication of national sovereignty and the fear of immigration and multiculturalism. The leftist journalist agreed with the statement, as expected, since the whole campaign of Brexit has been treated by the Spanish progressive media as the outcome of ultra-conservative and populist propaganda.

In Factor 4 (the left-leaning geopolitical optimists), the statements with the highest Z-score pointed to a feeling of unity and greater collaboration in the face of the Ukraine war. Those were "the EU responded with an unprecedented unity and decisiveness to the outbreak of Ukraine crisis", and the "EU's security and defense cooperation has been strengthened since the beginning of the war in Ukraine". In comparing Factor 2 with Factor 4, since they both focus on geopolitics and security and both are left leaning, both agreed that the EU has shown unprecedented unity and decisiveness in the face of the Russian aggression against Ukraine. However, the respondents of Factor 2 remained skeptical regarding the transformative nature of the measures adopted by the EU and continued to be critical of the EU security structures. The statement "Internal divisions hamper the geopolitical role of the EU" was one of the distinguishing statements between the two factors, scoring the highest value in measuring the differences between Factor 2 and Factor 4 (Diff. = 2,662). This statement was

highly agreed upon by the geopolitical skeptics, but it was slightly disagreed with by geopolitical optimists.

Regarding Factor 5 (anti-Brexiteers), the statement "Brexit demonstrated that leaving the EU was an error and myopic, especially during the pandemic" got the highest score on the positive pole of the Q grid. However, the respondents of this factor also believed that Brexit damaged, to a much lesser extent, both the EU and Spain. The strong pro-European sentiments of the respondents of this factor were also reflected in the following statements receiving the second and third highest Z-scores respectively: "The EU fosters the protection of human rights and the rule of law in Spain" and "The centralized purchase of vaccines benefited Spain and helped it to fight COVID-19". This points to the primacy of pragmatic factors among the respondents in this factor.

3.1. INTERVIEWS WITH POLITICAL ELITES: THE EUROPEAN PROJECT AS A MATTER OF POLITICAL COMPETITION

Interviews covered a range of political elites from the radical left to the extreme right, including the main national parties, with a few respondents working at the regional level or in trade unions after previously holding key political positions at the national or supra-national level (Spokespersons, Members of the European Parliament, etc.). Interviewees assumed various levels of responsibility within parties and public institutions, including current and former members of the national and/or the European Parliament, as well as current and former members of the national government.

As previously mentioned, there seemed to be a common appreciation of the meaning of European integration as a whole, at least within the main political parties. Thus, there was no questioning of Spanish membership in the EU, and the positive consequences for the country, especially regarding the impact of European funds on modernization of the country and identification with the European ideals of democracy and rule of law. As for the most recent debates and events at the level of European institutions, the discourses of the main parties did not seem to differ much. Interviewees from center-left and center-right agreed on the necessity to support the defense of Ukraine against the Russian aggression. Likewise, the role of the EU during the pandemic, especially the centralized purchase of vaccines, was generally praised, and it was also understood that a more active role of the European institutions at the energy market was needed. Yet, in these and other topics discourses often reflected nuances based on ideological differences, so that within a shared view of the role the EU must have

regarding a given topic, different ideology-based policies were proposed, transferring the internal political competition to the European level. Since the legitimacy of the EU institutions was not contested, we often observed parties trying to show that their views fit better with the "European spirit" and that they were more aligned with European partners than their opponents.

Topics where disagreements were present included, for example, migration. Moderate parties from both the left and the right tended to call for more support and involvement on the part of the EU in the management of migration, especially in Southern European countries that are facing massive influxes of irregular migrants. However, the radical left was more critical of the idea of "Fortress Europe", and it accused EU institutions of hypocrisy and a racist bias in the treatment of migrants, whereas the conservative parties rather demanded the EU to be more restrictive in the admission of migrants. Likewise, parties tended to agree on the necessity of strengthening the strategic autonomy of the EU, but left-wing respondents, especially those espousing positions reminiscent of the old traditional left, saw dependence on NATO as excessive. This suggests that old discourses on the strategic autonomy of the EU have not vanished although they have indeed transformed by deploying a less divisive rhetoric in advocating a greater autonomy for the EU. Right wing-parties understand that both organizations must cooperate and reinforce each other. As to blocking Poland and Hungary from European funds due to the concerns regarding human rights and the rule of law, while major parties generally agreed that both countries had deviated from European values and therefore should suffer consequences, right-wing politicians tended to advocate alternative measures other than "economic sanctions". Politicians from the ultra-right and a few conservative members of the traditional right argued that neither Poland nor Hungary had violated the rule of law or universal human rights, questioning whether gender and LGBTQ+ rights were real rights. Here we see "memory" in operation, as the discourses of the "Fortress Europe" and that of Europe's excessive dependence on the US and NATO in terms of security have long been present, though it is interesting to trace how they have transformed in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Internal polarization was more echoed and evident in relation to the role of Spain and its leadership in the EU. Supporters of the current leftist government pointed to the influence of Spain on core decisions in energy policy (the adoption of the "Iberian exception") and presented the NextGenerationEU funds as a Spanish success, since Spain was one of the main beneficiaries. Members of the conservative opposition tended to

diminish the influence of Spain and associate the assignation of funds with the poor state of the national economy. Some respondents acknowledged the potential benefits from the funds but distrusted the capacity of the government to manage them adequately. Finally, one issue where the instrumentalization of European politics could be clearly noted was relation to the role of the EU as a promoter and guarantor of human rights, which was interpreted by each of the parties according to their convenience. Leftist respondents tended to argue that Spain no longer needed the EU for protecting human rights, emphasizing that Spain was a leader in the promotion of LGBTQ+ rights. Some interviewees from the right voiced the same argument. However, more conservative respondents saw the EU as a stronghold defending the rule of law in Spain against attacks from the government, mainly referring to the troublesome situation of judicial power and nationalist claims. One respondent even stated that thanks to the EU, the Spanish government did not grant independence to Catalonia. Such claims prove that, given the general acceptance and the positive views of the EU by Spanish public opinions, parties appropriate discourses coming from the EU and competitively arrogate a European aura for their policies and proposals, especially when this strategy helps them to score internal political gains against their rivals. This shows how discourses are appropriated by opposing parties and how they are used to shape the "sayable" of the European integration project.

3.2. INTERVIEWS WITH MEDIA ELITES: POLITICAL ELITES' INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF THE EUROPEAN PROJECT

Interviews with the Spanish media elites revealed the factors that facilitate the instrumentalization of discourses on European politics by national political parties. Despite a shared pro-European attitude among these parties, resulting in non-polarized coverage of the EU, there was no bipartisan position on European affairs. Indeed, it could be argued that there was no constructive debate about Spain's position within the EU. On some occasions, both the government and the opposition exploited the European debate as a means to delegitimize their political adversary. In this regard, Spanish media elites conveyed that the political and media noise within Spanish politics often distorted EU messages and policies. The existing polarization of Spanish politics, which permeates the entire political debate, could explain the politicization of the European discourse by political parties. However, media elites pointed to a deeper cause providing for instrumentalization – a profound lack of knowledge about the EU (institutions, policies, etc.) within Spanish society, which has had a significant impact on a number of issues.

First, as one respondent acknowledged, historically, Spain has been a staunchly pro-European country. Emerging from a dictatorship, Spaniards tend to associate the idea of Europe with concepts such as modernity, democracy, and prosperity. Thus, the lack of knowledge about the EU is filled by preconceived ideas of the benefits linked to Europeanization. This entails an uncritical engagement with the EU. According to Spanish media elites, this has had significant consequences. On the one hand, a significant number of respondents acknowledged that specific policies of the EU, particularly those related to COVID-19, have not had any positive impact on European sentiment within Spanish society due to the lack of understanding of the EU's role in this crisis. This outcome is noteworthy when compared to the pro-EU sentiment rates during the 2008 financial crisis. Back then, the restrictive EU fiscal policies adopted to address the economic downturn were not only highly criticized but they also negatively affected Spanish perceptions of the EU. However, despite generally positive evaluations of the EU's management of the COVID-19 crisis by Spaniards, it has not led to an increase in pro-EU sentiment. On the other hand, the positive, albeit uncritical, attitude towards the EU has led Spanish society to perceive national institutions as more corrupt and less transparent than EU institutions. Regardless of the accuracy of this perception, some respondents highlighted the lack of specific media coverage of European affairs in Spanish media as a partial explanation for this phenomenon. Consequently, the lack of interest in European affairs and the treatment of the European debate through the lens of national politics made European sentiment vulnerable to external circumstances unrelated to a critical examination of the EU as a political actor.

Second, and related to the previous point, the lack of knowledge about EU policies also means that the political debate does not differentiate between the adoption of policies – the realm of the EU – and the execution of those policies by national authorities. This blurs the line between the responsibilities of EU institutions and those of national governments. The respondents noted that, when asked about initiatives such as the NextGenerationEU funds or centralized vaccine procurement, parts of Spanish society tended to forget how necessary these actions were, as the national debate has focused solely on the Spanish government's management of them. Consequently, the confluence of Spanish political polarization and a lack of understanding of EU mechanisms often distort the Spanish society's perception of EU policy actions.

Spanish media elites also highlighted the importance of the narrative grounded in the idea that the EU serves as the last safety net for Spanish society. This demonstrates that the current discourses on Europeanization

remain connected to old discourses on how European integration is necessary to guarantee the democratic order and the modernization of the country. These narratives were used by both the government and the opposition, as well as the media outlets aligned to their ideological tendencies, to construct their political narratives against each other. Conservatives criticized certain government decisions by framing them as contrary to core EU principles such as the rule of law and the separation of powers. Left-wing journalists, on the other hand, positioned EU principles as a barrier against nationalist identitarian tendencies of the right-wing forces or those seeking to undermine the democratic process. Consequently, the EU has become a legitimizing device wielded by political parties against their adversaries. There is no critical assessment of the political proposals put forth by either the government or the opposition; instead, proposals are deemed as either good or bad based on their alignment with the instrumentalized idea of Europe that each political party holds. This demonstrates how the "memory" is constructed and how actors on the opposing poles "appropriate" respective discourse to validate their own arguments and invalidate those of their opponents.

Finally, some Spanish journalists also pointed to the existence of instrumentalization, or even manipulation, of certain discourses in support the European project. For instance, it was argued that during Brexit, there had been no complete and honest identification of the social groups supporting the UK's exit from the EU, including their motivations. It was suggested that Brexit supporters were portrayed as belonging to the uneducated and less prosperous parts of UK society, when this may not have been entirely true. Additionally, a journalist said that from his perspective, any criticism towards the EU or its institutions was automatically labeled as Eurosceptic and hence instrumentalized as contrary to the interests and goals of the EU integration process.

4. PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY

The pulse of this research, taken from the third relevant actor group – the public – allows us to offer a holistic perspective and a complete analysis that closes the circle of social actors involved in this study – the media, elites, and society. A survey of 1,000 people in Spain was conducted. The sample was balanced in terms of gender (50% men and 50% women). Regarding the level of education of the population surveyed, it is mainly composed of individuals holding a university degree or secondary education. The sample was distributed among the following age ranges: from 18 to 29; from 30 to 44; from 45 to 64; and 65 or more. Based on occupation, the participants were divided into three categories concerning socio-economic level: high

(35%), medium (44%) and low (16%). For habitat classification, the survey differentiated between populations with fewer than 100,000 inhabitants and populations with 100,000 or more inhabitants.

A key finding in relation to the citizens' media consumption was the low rate of consumption of traditional media and the growing distrust towards journalists. This trend is consistent with the reality of other European countries affected by digitalization and disintermediation (Pérez-Escoda and Freire 2023). It seems clear from the results of the public opinion survey that media discourses regarding the EU have very limited reach in society. Looking at the results, only 20% of the sample consumed *El País*, 12% consumed *El Diario.es*, 9% consumed *El Confidencial*, and 8% consumed *ABC*. Regarding television, the figures were somewhat higher, with 32% for TVE and 31% for Antena 3. These results suggest that the traditional media reach has diminished, which makes it difficult to study the impact of media discourses on the public. Another significant finding was the level of distrust towards journalists. A majority of the sample (74%) expressed distrust in them, which makes the relationship between the media and the public, who perceive themselves to be continually exposed to misinformation (6 out of 10 believe this to be the case), particularly challenging.

Politics was a topic of high interest, with 75% discussing political issues often or sometimes. The correlations between different variables yielded interesting results, some of which were expected. For instance, the most informed people (who also used multiple media sources) were those who showed more interest in political issues. Likewise, individuals with higher levels of education tended to be more interested in political issues (47%) compared to less educated respondents (37.1% for those with secondary education and 31.4% for those with lower education). Furthermore, political inclination did not appear to be a significant factor, with those on the left (46%) and those on the right (45%) showing similar levels of interest.

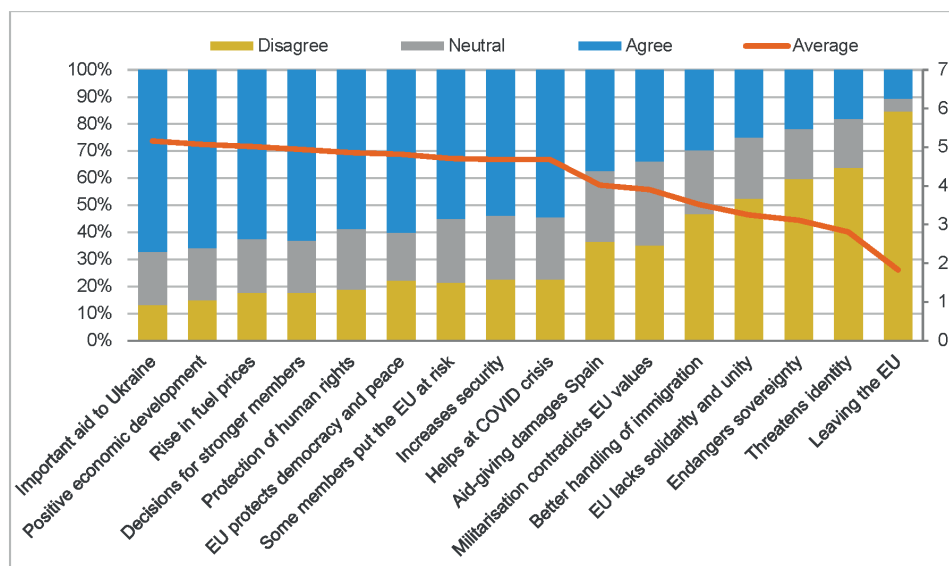
Nevertheless, eight out of ten respondents believed that they had no influence on important decisions in their country. This perception appears to be especially concerning among the most educated population (84.1% with university degree, 84.5% among the youngest (18 to 29 years old), and 85.4% among middle-aged respondents (30 to 44 years old) held this view). This sense of a lack of power is indicative of an inertia that is difficult to counter, particularly in light of the lack of trust in the political system. There was also a pervasive perception of the media as being polarized and that it distorted reality (70% of respondents indicated this perception, with the highest rates among the youngest and the middle-aged respondents).

Likewise, there was also a high level of distrust towards politicians, which is comparable to that of journalists – a finding that was consistent with previous studies on the issue (Díaz-Nosty 2005; Candón-Gautier and Márquez Ruiz 2014). Indeed, seven out of ten respondents indicated that they distrusted Spanish politicians. Upon itemizing this variable, the middle-aged sample exhibited the highest level of distrust (73.4%), followed by the youngest group, with a distrust level of 68.5%. In terms of ideology, those holding right-wing ideologies were the most distrustful (71.4%), followed by those with centrist ideologies (74.4%), and those with left-wing beliefs (56.8%). It is noteworthy that those who are least informed demonstrated the highest levels of distrust (79.6%), while the most informed manifested a percentage of 64.8%, which is still notable. The internal polarization among Spaniards was evident when measuring trust in the Spanish government. Remarkably, 71.2% of those on the right expressed distrust in the left-wing government, while only 26.5% of those on the left did so. Similar results were observed in relation to trust in the Spanish Parliament, with 50.5% of those on the right expressing distrust and 32% those on the left doing so.

Interestingly, European institutions were perceived as the most "trustworthy" political institutions, with an average above 4 points out of 7. Trust in Spanish institutions, journalists, and the government was 0.5 points below trust in European institutions. The strong pro-European sentiment among the Spanish public was also reflected in the fact that 86% of the respondents believed that Spain has benefited from its EU membership and 75.7% agreed that these benefits have been extended to citizens. The higher the level of education, the greater the perception of benefits of EU membership, both in terms of the country itself and benefits for citizens proper. One in ten respondents believed that Spain should leave the EU. In addition, four out of ten respondents believed that EU aid comes with imposed conditions that harm Spain. Likewise, 18% of the respondents believed that the EU threatens Spain's national identity. It should be noted that respondents who were opposed to staying in the EU had a greater perception of the threats to sovereignty that the EU posed for "getting involved in Spain's internal affairs", and because its help came with "imposed conditions".

Regarding the most important benefits of EU membership for Spain, the respondents highlighted economic development (70%), followed by protection of human rights (40%); this demonstrates that pragmatic factors remain dominant in assessing EU membership. However, the statement that scored the highest rate of agreement among the respondents related to the EU's humanitarian aid to Ukraine.

Figure 2. Agreement with statements regarding the role of the EU (% and average)

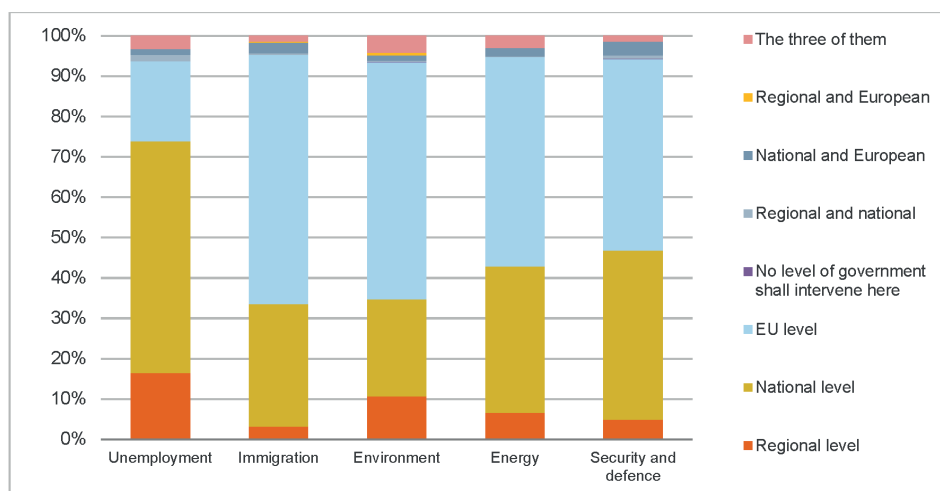


Considering attitudes towards the European integration process, it is worth noting that six out of ten respondents showed a positive attitude towards European integration and believed that it should go further, while only 19% of the population surveyed disagreed with this statement and supported the idea that the EU has already gone too far in this area. In this sense, left-wing respondents were more supportive of European integration (70.2% in favor) than respondents from the "center" and the "right" (52.5% and 49.6%, respectively). European integration was mainly perceived as a strengthening of the main bodies of the EU (67%). Those who conceived of European integration more as an extension of the EU with new member states represented only 25% of the respondents.

In the analysis of the level of governance that should be responsible for political decision-making (regional, national, and EU level), the EU was seen as the most appropriate level of governance for regulating migration (61.8% of the respondents), environmental issues (58.8%), energy (51.9%), and security and defense policy issues (47.5%). In terms of migration and energy policy, young people (18 to 29 years) stood out for believing that the level of responsibility should be at the national level (4 out of 10). When it came to security and defense policies, we saw two positions: while those under 45 believed that this was a national decision, those over 45 believed that it should be the responsibility of the EU. People with left-wing political

beliefs tended to stand out for considering a higher level of EU responsibility in matters such as immigration, environment, and energy policy. Unemployment on the other hand was perceived as an issue pertaining to national decision-making, with a majority of respondents (57%) agreeing that it should be the responsibility of the government at the national level to deal with unemployment.

Figure 3. Level of government that should be responsible in the different political fields



Strong pro-EU sentiment did not guarantee a high level of knowledge of EU affairs. When asked about basic EU information, the vast majority of respondents (90%) answered correctly that the Government of Spain voted in favor of the sanctions against Russia. However, only 14% of respondents gave the correct answer to all four questions measuring knowledge about the EU, while 26% were only able to give one or no correct answers.

When asked about their satisfaction with the way in which the Spanish government was dealing with EU-related issues, 40% of respondents were not satisfied with it, compared to 37% who were satisfied. Respondents with left-wing ideology were more satisfied with the performance of the current left-wing government. This suggests that internal political polarization influences citizens' assessment of the government's EU policies.

The North-South divide and the status of Spain as a member state of the EU continue to shape some of the discourses on Europeanization in Spain,

as explained above. When analyzing whether Spain's influence on EU matters corresponds to its economic power, population size, and political role at the international level, the respondents were divided in this regard: 51% believed that Spain's influence corresponds with its power, whereas 49% had the opposite opinion. The majority of the respondents (63.2%) agreed that EU decisions typically prioritized the interests of stronger members. With regard to Spain's political alliances, the majority of the respondents (56%) thought that Spain should adopt a flexible strategy, with different alliances depending on the matter at hand. On the other hand, we saw very little agreement with the rest of the strategies proposed, in particular, with Spain aspiring to alliances with Southern and Mediterranean countries in the EU (10%). This suggests that even if the general population recognized the existence of power asymmetries within the EU and their implications for Spain, the public's approach to the issue has remained highly pragmatic and less ideological, favoring the adoption of flexible cooperation strategy as opposed to alliances with the Southern and Mediterranean countries.

To conclude, the public opinion survey demonstrated strong support for the European integration project. European institutions were perceived as the most "trustworthy" political institutions whereas the local media and local political institutions were perceived as polarized and less trustworthy. Public approximation of Europeanization was primarily based on pragmatic factors with economic integration and the protection of human rights viewed as the most important benefits associated with EU membership. Support of the EU did not mean that the public was highly informed on EU affairs. This could be cause for concern, given the low trust in the local media and the fact that 1 in 3 respondents reported being exposed to false news and misinformation very often. Additionally, high support for Europeanization did not imply that the general public was unaware of political asymmetries within the EU and their impact on the position of Spain, with a high proportion of respondents believing that the EU prioritized the interests of strong states.

5. CONCLUSION

The present chapter offers an analysis of the political discourses on Europeanization in Spain. The outcomes of our research are consistent with the existing literature on Europeanization in the country, historically characterized by high support of the European integration project. The major discourses identified, which focused on events with a transformative potential for the EU, reflected both a clear pro-European sentiment and a pragmatic approach to Europeanization that focuses on national gains/

losses. This includes discourses on the management of the COVID-19 crisis and the adoption of the recovery funds, the EU's response to the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the energy crisis, and Brexit. Even when some discourses contained soft-Eurosceptic narratives related to issues such as migration and geopolitics, the aim of the critique was to strengthen the European integration project and not to weaken it. Our analysis reveals that identity-based justifications were present in some discourses on the EU, especially those concerning the protection of human rights, democracy, freedom and the rule of law. The analysis also suggests that Spain is attempting to enhance its leadership role and status within the EU. This was particularly evident in discourses on the energy crisis and the attempt of the government to promote an "Iberian exception" to the capping of energy prices. To assert Spain's leadership role, the "us v. them" strategy was detected in relation to two axes: the North-South divide and the West-East divide. First, it was deployed against the Northern countries, mainly Germany, to criticize their fiscal policies and lack of flexibility *vis-à-vis* the Southern countries. This was very evident in discussions on the recovery funds and the energy crisis. In relation to the former, media discourses reactivated old critical discourses that aimed to discredit the austerity measures of 2008 and to praise the current change in fiscal policies. Secondly, the strategy was used against ultra-right governments from Eastern Europe, but this time to enhance the position of Spain in the EU as a representative of true European values, while portraying nationalist Eastern European governments as a threat to the same values. Most importantly, the media analysis demonstrated that while Europeanization remains a highly consensual political project, endorsed by the left and the right, it can still be used as leverage to attack and discredit political opponents, thus fueling internal polarization. The instrumentalization of the EU to accuse political opponents of deviating from European values and standards was detected in the debates on the distribution of the recovery funds with the opposition accusing the government of misusing the funds. It was also detected in debates on the renewal of the CGPJ. On both occasions, the EU was used by the right-wing opposition to attack the leftist government. Likewise, the media analysis demonstrated, particularly in relation to the recovery funds, that the media aligned themselves with their preferred political camp. Conservative outlets reproduced the narratives on the misuse of European funds while the progressive media fended them off, also by referencing the EU's approval of the Spanish government's policies. This is consistent with prior studies on media parallelism in Spain. Just like the major parties in the country, the media framed the EU very positively, but at the same time, like the political parties, it was able to instrumentalize it to criticize and discredit political opponents.

Interviews with elites showed a similar trend. Political and media elites tended to display pragmatism and strong pro-European sentiments. The prominence of the pragmatic approach to Europeanization was reflected in the high importance attached to issues such as the Next Generation funds, geopolitics and defense cooperation, and Brexit, the key leitmotifs of the analyzed factors. While the pragmatic approach was dominant, some elements of identity or value-based assessments were also visible. The analyzed factors and the in-depth interviews also demonstrated how the EU can be instrumentalized to fuel internal polarization by accusing political opponents of deviating from the European values and standards. A factor that could facilitate the instrumentalization of the EU is the lack of knowledge about EU-related matters, as suggested by some of the interviewees from the media sector. When the public is less informed, it becomes easier for the elites to instrumentalize the EU for narrow political gains. Finally, the population survey contributed to further understanding of the public perception of how media and elite discourses frame the process of Europeanization. It also revealed what the Spanish people think about the EU, and how this relates to pragmatic, identity-based, and sociodemographic explanatory variables. The outcomes of the survey demonstrated a strong pro-European sentiment and a highly pragmatic approach to the EU, with economic benefits and the protection of human rights being viewed as the most important benefits of Europeanization. The survey also demonstrated that European institutions were perceived as the most "trustworthy" political institutions, whereas the local media and local political intuitions were perceived as polarized and less trustworthy. However, support of the EU did not automatically mean that the public was highly informed on EU affairs. This could be cause for concern, given the low trust in the local media and the fact that 1 in 3 respondents reported being exposed to false news and misinformation very often. This could pose a risk for the future of the European integration project, since a pro-European sentiment among a poorly informed constituency could be manipulated by populist anti-European circles, especially in an environment of distrust towards political and media elites.

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Chapter 9

Comparative Analysis and Conclusions

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TETYANA LOKOT

SUMARIO: 1. INTRODUCTION. 2. MEDIA ANALYSIS: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE. 3. ELITE INTERVIEWS: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE. 4. PUBLIC OPINIONS ON EUROPEANIZATION: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE. 4.1. *Trust in the media*. 4.2. *Trust in European institutions*. 4.3. *Knowledge about the EU*. 4.4. *EU integration*. 4.5. *Major benefits of EU membership*. 4.6. *Identity considerations*. 4.7. *Power asymmetries and bias*. 4.8. *Opinions about the EU*. 5. CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS. REFERENCES.

1. INTRODUCTION

As the European Union (EU) faces new challenges, from threats to democracy, media freedom, and European values in member states such as Hungary and aspiring states such as Georgia, election interference in Romania and Moldova, to continued security challenges posed by Russian aggression in Ukraine and political polarization, this volume offers insights into how media coverage, elite discourses and public perceptions of European integration interact and how they converge to shape the European Union's discursive representation.

MEDIATIZED EU conducted an ambitious program of research over four years to investigate how media and elite discourses about the EU and Europeanization resonate with and shape public perceptions to hamper or foster the European project. The research spanned seven countries,

including EU members Ireland, Estonia, Belgium, Spain, Portugal and Hungary, as well as Georgia, a candidate country within the Eastern Partnership.

Drawing together the notion of mediatization of politics (Stromback and Esser 2014) and Fairclough's concept of the "discoursal nature of media power" (Fairclough 1995, 3), MEDIATIZED EU used the Discourse Analytical Approach (Ekstrom and Firmstone 2017) in conjunction with Foucault's framework for "the study of politics and discourse" (1991) to examine the representations, identities and relations pertaining to Europeanization emerging in the triangle of media, political elites and public opinion. Thus, the aim of the project was to study the discourses on the European project and Europeanization produced by the media and elites as well as their representations in public opinion, focusing on the role of the media as a mediating actor between the elites and the citizens.

Focusing on the representations of key pragmatic and identity considerations in the Europeanization discourses, MEDIATIZED EU pursued the following research objectives: To study the framing of the pragmatic and identity factors related to Europeanization in the media and its representations in public opinion; to explore the role of political and media elites in the media framing of the pragmatic and identity factors related to Europeanization; and to trace the interconnections between the political and media elites' discourses, the framing of Europeanization, and public opinion.

To examine the elite-media-public triangle in each of the seven countries, MEDIATIZED EU devised a groundbreaking mixed-methods research approach integrating qualitative, quantitative and deliberative research methods. The qualitative research design included historical desk research focusing on existing scholarship and data about the changing media environments and their influence on the Europeanization discourses since the EU's Eastern enlargement, media analysis comprising content- and discourse analyses of items containing coverage of the EU in leading media outlets. The next stage, bridging qualitative and quantitative methods, included in-depth interviews integrating Q Methodology with each country's political and media elites. Following this, the quantitative research stage involved public opinion surveys in each participating European country. Finally, deliberative discussions with members of the public allowed us to reflect on the research findings and consider potential policy implications.

One of the main contributions of our research is the diverse selection of country cases, which includes various parts of wider Europe: Belgium, where the EU headquarters are located, the Northern part represented by Ireland, the Southern part represented by Spain and Portugal, the countries of Eastern Enlargement represented by Hungary and Estonia, and an EaP country, Georgia. This allowed us to explore discourses and perceptions of the EU and Europeanization in the EU and beyond it, to understand what part the media play in (re)shaping European political and cultural representations and how elite and media discourses impact public opinion, fostering or hampering the European project.

In the following sections, we provide a summary of the key insights from comparative analysis of country case studies and findings.

2. MEDIA ANALYSIS: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Pro-European discourses dominated media coverage on the EU in Belgium, Georgia, Ireland, Portugal and Spain. In other countries like Estonia, the percentage of pro-European discourses was slightly higher than Eurosceptic discourses. In Hungary, the pro-government media was in a dominant position, with a sovereigntist EU-sceptic tone.

Pro-European discourses tended to go hand in hand with a pragmatic approach to Europeanization. This trend was reflected in the dominant discourses detected in most target countries. For example, discourses relating to COVID-19, recovery funds, economy, Brexit, Russia's aggression against Ukraine, security, and the protection of human rights were detected in most target countries, and they often took on a pro-European pragmatic tone. In Georgia, where discourses on Europeanization are more abstract and less policy-specific since the country is not a member, pro-European media outlets highlighted protection of human rights and financial assistance as the main pragmatic benefits of EU integration.

Although political polarization and media parallelism exist in most target countries, including Georgia, Hungary, Estonia and Spain, their impact on mediatized discourses on the EU varies depending on the local context. In countries where Europeanization is a highly consensual political project, and is supported by all main parties, media discourses on the EU follow the same line. In the case of Georgia, despite the polarized political and media landscapes, both the pro-oppositional and pro-government media believed that deviation from the European course goes against Georgian interests. In this context, polarization was reflected in which political party was to blame for the deviation from the European course.

The opposition and pro-oppositional media blamed the government for deviating from the European course while the government and the pro-government media accused the opposition of such deviation. Polarization is also reflected in the way pro-oppositional and pro-government media construct the pro-European and anti-European poles in the country.

In contexts where Europeanization is viewed as a polarized political project and where media parallelism exists, this view was also reflected in the media. This was evident in Hungary, where the parliamentary elections only intensified the government's anti-EU propaganda. Pro-government media covered the EU in a predominantly negative light. This propaganda was countered by a pro-active collaborative strategy on the part of the Hungarian opposition to combat the populist and Eurosceptic stance of the dominant pro-government media. Government-critical media was more neutral, balanced and occasionally even critical in covering the EU. EU-related polarization in Hungary was evident in the emergence of two different approaches to framing Europeanization: sovereigntism and integrationism. The first approach, espoused by the pro-government media, portrayed the Hungarian Government as the protector of 'tradition' and 'normality' that both Hungarians and other Europeans strive for. The integrationist approach was more prevalent in the oppositional media and acted as a counter-discourse to sovereigntism. It challenged sovereigntism either directly by refuting a concrete sovereigntist claim, or indirectly by highlighting the EU's role in protecting democracy, or by focusing on internal corruption or disinformation spread by the government. In constructing its discourses, the integrationist approach relied on the affinity with EU values and on pragmatic benefits of EU membership. When the EU was criticized by adherents of integrationism, criticism was mostly based on pragmatic factors, such as the negative side effects of EU policies, the lack of information in relation to EU policies or excessive bureaucracy.

In Estonia and Belgium, the media is divided across linguistic lines reflecting ethnic and/or national divisions in the country. In Estonia, the conservative/liberal media divide overlaps with the linguistic/ethnic media divide between Estonian media and Russian-language media. Nationalist conservative and Russian-language media are more likely to espouse a Eurosceptic or anti-European agenda. In Belgium, the media landscape is divided between the French-speaking and Flemish-speaking communities. French-speaking media, based primarily in Wallonia and Brussels, operate within a Francophone cultural and political context. The Flemish-speaking media, based primarily in Flanders, operate within a Flemish cultural and political context. In Wallonia, media outlets operate under an informal *cordon sanitaire médiatique*. This informal arrangement limits access and

airtime to far-right parties, which has resulted in a lower prevalence of anti-EU narratives. The linguistic division in the Belgian media landscape shapes the coverage of the EU with each sector putting a different emphasis on European issues and using different narratives to cover Europeanization. For example, in both regions the major discourse detected by media analysis related to the EU's response to the war in Ukraine. In Francophone media, the major discourse assumed that "[e]nough is being done and the policies and actions are effective against Russia". In the Flemish media, the major discourse was "[t]he EU is too ineffective against Russia". However, other issues, such as the weaponization of migration by certain countries were approached similarly by both the Francophone and the Flemish media.

Our research demonstrates that pro-European media outlets, even in pro-European countries, can be critical of the EU. In such instances, such critiques tend to reflect soft Euroscepticism. In Portugal, critiques of the EU strove to protect the European integration project, with media discourses focusing on European solidarity and security. In Ireland, critical media discourses offered constructive criticism and a way forward for the EU and Ireland as one of its members. In Spain too, the critique of the EU purported to enhance the European integration project by improving its security structures, as reflected in the major discourse "the EU needs to consolidate its geopolitical weight in order to protect the security of its members".

Very often, identity-based arguments were invoked to disrupt the European integration project. Such discourses were detected in all target countries albeit in significantly varying degrees. In countries where influential political parties produced or disseminated such discourses, they were more visible in the media. In Hungary, identity-based arguments were more prevalent within the sovereigntist pro-government media discourses. Identitarian narratives were intertwined with pragmatic arguments through the interpretative framework of sovereignty. The so-called Christian Hungarian values were instrumentalized to discredit the EU, portrayed as decaying and abnormal. They were also used to discredit opposition by accusing it of selling the country out to the 'West'. In Georgia, LGBTQI+ issues were instrumentalized to accuse the EU of threatening Georgian 'traditional' identity. In Estonia, identity-based narratives were more prevalent in Eurosceptic media, where discourses referred to European integration as "a source of Estonia's moral degradation" and EU liberal values as "a threat to Estonian identity and self-preservation".

In the Belgian media landscape, Euroscepticism was more related to the linguistic-regional divide. Identitarian discourses were more prevalent in

the Flemish media, and they were often intertwined with Eurosceptic narratives. In countries where Eurosceptic views were voiced by marginal parties, the visibility of these discourses in the media was low. For example, in Ireland, the fringe conservative right-leaning media outlet Gript.ie propagated an identity-driven Eurosceptic stance and argued that the EU, dominated by the interests of larger states, intruded on Ireland's sovereignty. However, these discourses remained peripheral. In the case of Spain, only VOX, an ultra-right party, voiced criticism of the EU's decision to withhold funds from Member States due to their rejection of the EU's framework on LGBTQI+ rights. While these discourses were covered by the media, they were harshly criticized, including by conservative outlets. The Spanish media portrayed the party as an anomaly to the Spanish political landscape while accusing it of "xenophobia... anti-Europeanism, [and] homophobia" (Amón 2021).

Our analysis of media discourses demonstrates that, in some countries, identity-based arguments can be used to legitimize Europeanization processes and not only to discredit them. In Georgia, getting closer to the "European family" is an identitarian argument that is used to endorse the country's integration in the EU. In Estonia, the top two major discourses espouse a pro-European identitarian approach with the first being "Estonia is a Western (European) country" and the second "Estonia shares European values, common to the European Union". At times, pro-European identitarian arguments are entangled with pragmatic arguments. In the case of Ireland, some media discourses highlighted that Ireland shares the same values with the EU. The discursive strategies detected in the media analysis build on the framework of 'inclusiveness', as expressed by Irish President Higgins: "We Europeans are challenged to define, through deliberation, the outlines of the Union that we now seek" (McGrath 2022). This statement encompasses both identitarian and pragmatic elements that recognize the existence of a shared identity and mutual benefits. A similar trend was observed in Portugal. Beyond pragmatic considerations, the endorsement of the role of the EU in promoting human rights or its role in supporting Ukraine against the Russian invasion and aggression, are also based on an implicit underlying assumption on shared values concerning human rights and peace. As mentioned by one journalist, "the EU is not just about money, it is also a community of rights and values" (Siza 2021). In Spain, identity-based arguments are used to reaffirm the Europeaness of the country, focusing particularly on the defense of human rights and the rule of law. Such discourses were very visible in discussing the EU's decision to withdraw funds from Hungary and Poland due to rule of law concerns and threats to LGBTQI+ rights. Both left-leaning and right-leaning

Spanish media showed unconditional support for the EU's measures. This support of the media and all central political parties reflected a combination of pragmatic and identitarian assessments.

The media analysis findings in the seven countries suggest that the EU could be instrumentalized for political gains or to fuel internal polarization, even in highly pro-European countries. In Georgian media, Europeanization is instrumentalized by both the ruling party and the opposition to discredit political opponents by accusing them of deviating from the European path. In Spanish media, instrumentalization of the EU was used to discredit internal political opponents on several key issues, including accusations by the right-wing opposition of the left-wing government misusing the NextGenerationEU funds. Such discourses were echoed by conservative media, prompting the progressive media to accuse the opposition of weaponizing the recovery funds to wear down Pedro Sánchez's government. The EU was also instrumentalized by both the opposition and the progressive media in debates concerning the failure to renew the Spanish General Council of the Judiciary (CGPJ). In Ireland, such instrumentalization was scant and was only detected in attempts to domesticate EU issues to score points in national debates. For instance, the oppositional actors attempted to appropriate the debate about common EU defense in connection with the perceived threats to Irish neutrality to discredit the ruling coalition.

Instrumentalization of the EU can also be used at the inter-state level. LGBTQI+ rights are constantly instrumentalized to propagate Eurosceptic stances that resort to "us v. them" rhetoric, such as the case of the pro-government media discourses in Hungary, with the West being portrayed as decayed and abnormal while Hungary is portrayed as representative of true Christian and Hungarian values. In Spain, the "us v. them" rhetoric was used in the opposite direction given the country's history of Europeanization. During the years of Franco's dictatorship and even before, Spain's Europeaness was questioned. Therefore, Europeanization was viewed by pro-democratic forces as an affirmation of Spain's Europeaness, reflected in embracing liberal democracy. In current discourses on Europeanization in Spain, the "us v. them" is used to reaffirm Spain's Europeaness by portraying the country as a true believer and defender of European values, whereas Eastern ultra-nationalist governments are portrayed as having a questionable European vocation.

Very often, the use of the "us v. them" rhetoric at the inter-state level is intertwined with the question of power asymmetries between EU Member States. In Hungary, the sovereigntist and integrationist approaches are

linked to the West/East hierarchy. According to the sovereigntist approach, Hungary and Hungarians are Europeans but are treated as second class, therefore, the West is a source of threat. But according to the integrationist approach, the EU is the guarantor of freedom and prosperity. This approach too is connected to old discourses on the civilizational upgrading of Hungary, which emerged in the 1990s. In Estonia, some narratives attempted to challenge the West/East hierarchy by refuting the claim that the Eastern enlargement was a burden for "old Europe", insisting instead that the enlargement enhanced European security on the Eastern border.

In Spain, media discourses attempt to challenge the North/South divide by highlighting the leadership role of Spain. This was evident in discourses on the energy crisis and the Spanish initiative to cap gas prices in the power sector. In these discourses Europe is portrayed as divided: "The division in the EU is expressed by Spain, Italy, France, Portugal and Greece, on the one hand, and by Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, Finland and Belgium on the other" (RTVE 2021e)". To challenge the stereotypical views about the European South, Spain is portrayed as being a leading State, capable of adopting "strong measures" if "Europe does not" (Montero 2022). Similar criticism of the North/South divide was also detected in the discourses on the recovery funds. The Next Generations funds were viewed as more favorable to economic interests of the South. They were constantly juxtaposed with the austerity measures imposed during the Eurozone crisis, which were viewed as an imposition by the North, as reflected in the following statement "This is viewed in the statements such as "the times of the diktat by the Troika and the men in black to access European money are over" (Gil 2022a).

In Portugal too, the issue of center/periphery was very visible in media discourses. Like Hungary, it was framed in two opposing ways. Some of the discourses focusing on this issue assumed that the peripheral position of Portugal in the EU is its own fault. An example of this is the most dominant discourse identified in the Portuguese media analysis, according to which "Portugal must be a front-runner in the EU, adjust to its rules and world economic tendencies to modernize and be competitive". It is also reflected in another dominant discourse: "Portugal lags behind other EU countries". However, other discourses attribute Portugal's peripheralization to the EU's own actions or shortcomings. This is reflected in one of the dominant Portuguese discourses, framed as follows "Power imbalance within the EU privileges the interests of those with greatest power". The Portuguese media analysis also identified another discourse that challenges the narrative on peripheralization. This discourse reasserts that "Portugal is pivotal for Europe as a team player and a bridging actor".

In Ireland, as mentioned earlier, fringe conservative media discourses argued that the EU prioritizes the interests of the larger counties in a way that threatens Ireland's sovereignty.

To summarize, the media analysis demonstrates that pro-European discourses are dominant in the vast majority of the target states. In terms of the *sayable* (following Foucault's framework (1991)), most discourses focus on major challenges facing the EU at the time, including COVID-19, the recovery funds, migration, security, climate change, attacks on LGBTQ+ rights and the rule of law in some EU member states, and the war in Ukraine. This reflects a pragmatic approach to Europeanization. However, identity-based arguments are still invoked mainly to hamper EU integration by presenting the EU as a threat to national identity and values, but also to support Europeanization and to reaffirm the European identity of the country. In terms of *conservation*, no substantial shifts were noted in covering the EU in all target countries, with the exception of the war in Ukraine that changed the way the EU is conceptualized as a geopolitical actor. As for *memory*, in some countries, such as Spain and Portugal, discourses on importance of the recovery funds were juxtaposed with old austerity measures, reactivating and revalidating old discourses highly critical of the austerity measures for their negative impact. Discourses of the recovery funds and the energy crisis reactivated old discourses on the South/North divide. Finally, even if the EU is a consensual political project, it can still be instrumentalized to fuel internal polarization by accusing political opponents of deviating from the EU frameworks.

3. ELITE INTERVIEWS: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

In countries with more pronounced political polarization, such as Georgia or Hungary, the elite interview respondents more readily aligned along the political divides, e.g., ruling parties and pro-government media elites held similar views on Europeanization. Likewise, opposition politicians and independent media elites held similar views on Europeanization. Despite this, even in highly polarized environments, there was evidence of overall elite consensus on the countries' inevitable European course.

In Georgia, the only non-EU member among our target countries, elite interviews reveal a strong discursive consensus over Georgia's European course, regardless of party affiliation. This confirms the hegemony of the European project, where the EU is portrayed as the obvious choice for Georgia with no alternatives, both in terms of a pragmatic desire to catch up with the West and considerations about security. Both camps strongly

disagreed that "European liberal values represent a threat to Georgian values" and that "The EU intrudes in Georgia's internal affairs and endangers its sovereignty". However, the ruling and opposition actors employ different discursive strategies to frame each other's roles in Georgia's Europeanization.

The Georgian opposition elites strongly supported the so-called deviation discourse, accusing the government of leading the country away from its European course which "goes against the state interests". The opposition framed the government's stated support for Europeanization as performative and argued that in practice the ruling GD elites were mostly interested in preserving power, thus making Georgia vulnerable to Russian influence which further exacerbated Georgia's deviation from its way towards Europeanization and EU membership. In comparison, the ruling elites, while agreeing with Russia's negative impact on Georgia's Europeanization, also believed that "European integration is the choice of the Georgian people" and were more optimistic about Georgia "becoming a European state in terms of improving its democracy", whereas the opposition politicians were more skeptical about this. The Georgian ruling elites, however, also employed an offensive strategy, contesting the accusation that the government "deviates" from the European course and accusing the opposition of discrediting the ruling party's EU integration efforts as well as blaming the EU itself for alleged "double standards". This was complemented with a defensive strategy, wherein the ruling party was portrayed as devoted to the European path due to being motivated by actual pragmatic benefits associated with the EU related to Georgia's development and security.

It is worth noting that the Georgian Dream ruling party has drastically changed its discursive framing of the threats posed by liberal EU values to the country's sovereignty since mid-2023. Instead, it has steadily introduced measures aimed at curbing perceived external interference such as the "foreign agents" law, which saw mass public protests (Agenda.ge, May 4, 2023; Civil.ge, May 12, 2023). The divergent views of the political elite's roles in (and deviation from) the country's European integration path thus invoke the major difference between the two opposing groups and highlight the two rival camps' affective polarization based on mutual othering and moralization (Iyengar *et al.* 2019).

While similarly polarized, Hungary's politically divisive environment was mirrored in the two dominant interpretations of Europeanization identified among Hungarian media and political elites: those of integrationism and sovereigntism. The sovereigntist approach was

reflected in the views of the incumbent Hungarian political elite, who recognize the pragmatic benefits of EU membership and allow for the compatibility of European and national identities. At the same time, ruling elites also performatively criticized the EU's "double standards" on human rights and traditional values and instrumentalized the discourse of the EU interfering in local affairs and threatening Hungarian sovereignty to serve internal political interests.

In contrast, most Hungarian opposition politicians as well as government-critical and neutral media elites held integrationist views, affirming the view that deeper EU integration was beneficial for Hungary in both pragmatic and identity terms, expressing support for strengthening EU institutions and the EU's key role in protecting democracy and cultural connections in Hungary and wider Europe. A minority supported the multi-speed Europe alternative, and a marginal far-right elite cluster took the Huxit position, arguing Hungary should inevitably leave the EU. These findings confirm that the vast majority of the Hungarian political and media elites remained committed to the EU during the period of analysis, despite their alternative visions of desirable EU developments or the pace of EU integration.

In less polarized countries, sentiments about Europeanization were clustered in more nuanced ways, with respondents holding not only Euro-optimist or Eurosceptic views, but also assigning more or less importance to pragmatic or identity considerations or the geopolitical aspects of EU affairs. There was also a range of ways in which Europeanization discourses were instrumentalized by elites to legitimize their political preferences or to justify attacks on or criticism of their political opponents.

In Estonia, where the elite environment was characterized by historical linguistic divides and less by a clear right vs left divide, the EU was seen by the majority of the elites in pragmatic terms, either as a foundation for national modernization and stability or as a driver of collective security and cooperation. While both conservative and progressive elites allowed for critical assessments of EU policies, the EU was seen as playing an overall role in Estonian national development and protection of human rights. While the conservative, right-leaning elites voiced some identity-driven concerns regarding threats of liberal EU values to national identity, these were marginal and partially informed by Estonia's own history of recovering from former Soviet dominance and seeking more independence as part of the EU. Right-leaning elites perceived a greater threat of EU law supremacy to national power and state sovereignty but ascribed it to the dominance of old EU member states over new ones. Those more Eurocritical

among liberal elites also pointed to the power differential between larger and smaller EU states and offered up the models of Hungary and Poland's attempts to change the balance of power in the EU as possible alternatives to the Estonian status quo. Despite these identity-driven concerns used to instrumentalize the EU in internal political debates, there was widespread consensus on the pragmatic benefits of EU membership for Estonia's progress and modernization.

In Belgium, despite the linguistic national divides, there was little evidence of political polarization on EU issues. The liberal elites which hold both pragmatic pro-EU views and favor EU enlargement, more explicitly supported the idea of a shared European identity and values such as democracy and human rights. The liberals also held complimentary views of the EU's collective and unified efforts in tackling external and internal threats, such as conflicts and security concerns or health crises. The more left-leaning and progressive political and media actors across both Francophone and Flemish lines voiced agreement on the EU's strong commitment to human rights, democracy and social inclusivity and believed that the EU can better tackle crises and external threats through coordinated actions. However, this group disagreed that the EU undermines Belgian sovereignty or erodes local culture, and in fact was critical of EU actions on managing migration, arguing that human rights should be more centered in EU migration policies. Interestingly, there was also consensus among some right-wing, liberal-leaning and progressive elites on the need for a more geopolitically robust EU, as exemplified by their shared belief in the effectiveness of collective EU and NATO security actions against Russian aggression.

The notable consensus among Belgian progressive and socially conservative elites on core EU values of democracy and the rule of law, collective EU actions, EU migration policies, and the war in Ukraine limited what was sayable on the European Project, only validating criticism of the EU regarding its commitments to core values of inclusivity and human rights. Dominant pro-European consensus was part of the Belgian elites' discursive infrastructure and relied on closely interwoven Belgian and European identity yet did not invalidate debate on key European issues and policies. In fact, the Belgian context shows evidence of instrumentalization of the pro-EU consensus as various elite camps imbued it with a variety of meanings to engage in rhetorical competition, presenting themselves as more European, as opposed to other elites or other EU countries.

In Spain, elite views were clustered along a mix of ideological and more issue-specific lines, consistent with a less politically polarized environment

in relation to the European integration project. There was much praise for the EU's response to recent crises, such as the adoption of the NextGenerationEU funds, the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the response to the Russian aggression in Ukraine. The more geopolitically minded elites were divided between those who expressed a more critical view of the EU's role as a security provider, hampered by internal divisions, dependence on US/NATO and the need to consolidate its power globally to offer more security to its members, and those who believed that the EU responded with unprecedented unity and decisiveness to the Russian aggression against Ukraine and that the EU's security and defense cooperation has been strengthened since the beginning of the war. However, the criticism of the EU's dependency on the US and NATO should not be understood as an opposition to the alliance, instead signaling elite consensus on the necessity for the EU to acquire greater autonomy in the defense domain.

The political right saw EU membership as granting Spain the opportunity to challenge the North-South divide, and economic gains were perceived as central for assessing Europeanization. In comparison, the left-wing elites argued that economic gains did not outweigh the existence of power asymmetries between EU member states, though they dismissed the populist narratives about exiting the EU. The anti-Brexit view was shared by some right-leaning elites who saw it as damaging for the EU and Spain. Notably, Spanish elite discourses were often oriented towards conceptualizing Europeanization in terms of national gains and losses, focusing on predominantly pragmatic issues such as EU security and the war in Ukraine, and the EU recovery funds. Such a pragmatic approach to Europeanization means that even in the same political camp, whether left- or right-leaning, priorities could diverge. While pragmatic considerations remain dominant in elite evaluations of Europeanisation in Spain, some elements of identity or value-based considerations were also visible in discourses about "European" shared values or ways of geopolitical engagement. Though the Spanish political landscape retains the *conserved* pro-European consensus, the EU and its policies are also instrumentalized as leverage to feed internal political polarization; in this sense, the subject of contestation is never European integration itself, but rather the way EU is instrumentalized to discredit political opponents either by accusing them of deviating from the European framework (for example, the opposition accusing the government of misusing the recovery funds) or accusing the political opponents of failing to promote Spain's interests or failing to assume a leadership role in the EU.

In Portugal, elite discourses about the EU were divided along issue-specific party lines, with the right focusing more on security and defense, and the left on economic and social policies. While the center-left elites viewed the impact of Europeanization on Portugal most positively, emphasizing the country's central position within the EU, their opponents were more critical, deeming Portugal to be socioeconomically peripheral within the EU, yet this criticism was also directed at the national governing elites, showing evidence of instrumentalizing the EU discourse. Even the less Euro-optimistic elites held pragmatic pro-European views on the opportunities of EU integration, such as economic development, technological modernization and democratization. A smaller group of explicitly Euro-critical progressive elites rejected the conditions attached to EU programs and policies, labelling them as neoliberal, reflective of capitalist dynamics of exploitation, and expressed concern about the militarization and securitization of key political and social issues in Europe, advocating for changes in the Europeanization path.

Despite these differences, Portuguese elites converge in a consensus on the benefits of EU integration for Portugal's progress and modernization, such as economic development, security, and democratic stability. While there is no evident anti-EU stance among these elites, the Euro-critical views on key issues, especially the EU's geopolitical power and Portugal's role in the Union, are more explicit (more *sayable*). These discourses are instrumentalized by elite actors through identity-driven assumptions and aspirations, especially regarding Portugal's ambition to belong to the center of Europe, by reinforcing a national imagination that aligns and integrates Portugal with/into a European "center" and a modern, forward-looking Europe.

In Ireland, political and media elites positively assessed the EU's role in the Brexit negotiations. Being appreciative of the EU's support for Irish interests in the Brexit negotiations, a central issue for Ireland, did not prevent elites from expressing concerns about the role of the EU in addressing or responding to threats to the democratic order or the rule of law in some member states. They viewed Ireland as an inextricable part of the EU and believe that the EU-Ireland relationship is based not only on pragmatic considerations, but also on core shared values. The ruling center-right elites indicated that differences in core policy areas do not mean that Ireland is at odds with EU values, confirming the argument that Ireland's EU membership is also of benefit for the European project, with Ireland making an important contribution to the EU. Despite recognizing the benefits of EU membership in more recent geopolitical crises such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Irish elites readily expressed criticism of

the EU's effectiveness as a protector of democracy and peace globally and of European solidarity, while at the same time voicing concerns about the supremacy of EU law and the dominance of larger states in EU decision-making. Seen through the prism of domestication characteristic of Irish Europeanisation discourses, this skepticism also reflects the Irish opposition's instrumentalization of EU discourses to criticize the ruling coalition responsible for implementing EU decisions in Ireland.

Pragmatic considerations thus remain dominant in Irish elite perceptions of Europeanization, in line with their overall Euro-optimist inclinations and the recognition of the importance of the EU for Irish domestic socio-political developments. Irish elites, including those more critical of the EU, recognized the importance of EU support and the value of a shared European identity during moments of upheaval, e.g., the EU's involvement in the Brexit negotiations. We can thus see evidence of the *conserved* leitmotif of the Ireland-EU 'mutual benefit relationship'. This dominant framing underscores the primacy of pragmatic considerations in Irish elite perceptions of Europeanisation alongside long-standing discourses of solidarity and shared values. We also see Irish elites discursively instrumentalize the 'mutual benefit' framing of Europeanization to either legitimize or justify their (in)action, or downplay internal political challenges, while blaming their political opponents for perceived missteps.

In summary, there is considerably more agreement across elite camps and country contexts on the pragmatic benefits of EU membership. However, although identity considerations can be divisive, those divisions rarely extend to elites explicitly calling for EU exit or presenting this as a realistic solution to EU-related tensions. The exit position remains marginal, even in more Eurosceptic contexts such as Hungary or Estonia. Even in Georgia, a candidate country, the ruling party and the opposition both accuse each other of deviating from the European course, while claiming they are in support of EU integration. Rather, those expressing identity concerns gravitate towards a softer Euroscepticism, advocating for conditionality on further EU integration or enlargement and curbs on the EU's influence on national policymaking.

The impact of political polarization on elite discourses is most evident in the instrumentalization (to varying degrees) and appropriation of EU-related discourses by elites for their own political ends. This takes place in intra-state contexts, where elites use their discursive framing of EU to fight out local political battles or discredit opponents (e.g., in Georgia), or in inter-state contexts, e.g. to express concern about peripheralization (in the case

of Portugal or Estonia) or to bemoan the power imbalances in the EU affecting smaller EU states (in the case of Ireland). In more polarized contexts, such as Georgia and Hungary (and to some extent Estonia), the EU is sometimes presented as one of a cluster of powers (alongside NATO and the abstract "West") which are often framed as threatening national sovereignty and/or traditional values. Despite this threat discourse, the EU retains recognition as an important geopolitical actor and a guarantor of stability, democracy and prosperity in Europe and more globally. This discursive stability may serve as evidence of *conservation* of the EU's framing as a (uncontested) normative power¹ and recognition (even by critics) of its positive impact on shared European issues such as security, human rights, and prosperity, etc. Being part of the "European" sphere is thus accepted as a net positive by various political camps across most countries, despite differences in the perceived paths to Europeanization.

The other key trend is the shifting boundaries of the *sayable* and the growing permissibility of EU-critical discourses, even among mostly pro-EU elite groups. Perhaps supported by the consensus on the pragmatic benefits of EU membership, member state elites feel at ease critiquing certain aspects of the EU's *modus operandi* or its effectiveness. Given how highly the EU's performance in some crises (e.g., Brexit or COVID-19) has been assessed by both elites and the public, it is no surprise that there is expectation that it will need to up its game on other incoming threats, be in common defense in the wake of Russia's aggression in Ukraine or doing better on combating climate change and protecting human rights. It is worth noting here that while some EU criticism seems to become more allowable in times of crisis, drawing on the pragmatic *memory* of its past successful crisis responses, in many of our target countries elites deploy Euroskeptical discourses in an effort to domesticate Europeanization debates to deal with national political issues and power struggles, as mentioned above. In such cases, where the consensus about the benefits of "European integration" is framed in highly abstract terms, it can become a "floating signifier" to be (mis)interpreted in multiple ways, either critically or positively, to serve the domestic context and the specific political interests of the ruling elites.

Finally, in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, we observe a certain *reactivation* of previously dormant discourses related to the EU's geopolitical role, such as the ones discussing tensions between a

1. 'Normative power' in IR as coined by Manners (2002) refers to "power of an ideational nature characterized by common principles". The emphasis is on nine normative principles embedded in EU laws and policies: sustainable peace, freedom, democracy, human rights, rule of law, equality, social solidarity, sustainable development and good governance.

common defense policy and national sovereignty (e.g., the debate about military neutrality in Ireland) or ones related to managing the Russian threat (in Georgia or Estonia) vis-à-vis dependence on NATO or US, who, together with the EU, are presented by critics as posing a threat to national interests. This representation, though, may also be dependent on sustaining a working relationship with Russia, e.g., due to EU members' energy dependency or for other geopolitical reasons.

4. PUBLIC OPINIONS ON EUROPEANIZATION: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

The public opinion surveys conducted in the target countries provide some interesting insights into public attitudes towards national media, political elites and the EU. They also reveal the dominance of pragmatic considerations, as well as a number of important differences in how the role of the EU and its importance nationally and globally is perceived. Finally, while public opinion was divided on the strength of EU unity and solidarity, there is evidence of overwhelming public consensus among EU member states on the lack of desire for exiting the EU.

4.1. TRUST IN THE MEDIA

In most target countries the media is perceived as polarized. In Georgia, almost half of the respondents believed that the media is polarized. In Spain, more than 70% of the respondents believed that the media is polarized and distorts reality. In Hungary too, the majority of respondents believed the media is polarized and distorts reality. In Ireland almost half of the respondents believed that the coverage of politics by the media is polarized in general, while 46.5% believed that the media in Ireland distort reality. In Portugal, more respondents believed that the media is polarized (40%) compared to those who did not believe that the media is polarized (14%). In Belgium more respondents agreed with the statement that the media is polarized (42%) compared to the 13% who disagreed with it. In Estonia a third of respondents tended to agree that Estonian media coverage is polarized, but 27% disagreed.

4.2. TRUST IN EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONS

In almost all target countries, European political institutions were more trusted than national institutions. In Ireland, respondents believed that European institutions were the most "trustworthy" ones, with 46.8% saying they trusted the European Parliament and 47.9% saying they trust the European Commission. In Portugal, where trust in Portuguese politicians

and institutions is rather low, European institutions also scored higher. The same trend was observed in Spain where European institutions were perceived as the most "trustworthy" political institutions. 45.1% of the respondents trusted the European Commission compared to 34.6% who trusted the Spanish Government. Likewise, 44.8% of the respondents trusted the European Parliament compared to 33.2% who trusted the Spanish Parliament. In Hungary, too, European institutions were more trusted than national political institutions: 34% trusted the European Commission compared to 30% who trusted the Hungarian Government. Even in Georgia, the only non-Member State in the project, trust in EU institutions was slightly higher than trust in national institutions (36% as opposed to 33%).

Estonia and Belgium stand out as exceptions. In both countries, national public media and/or journalists were the most trustworthy actors. The Estonian Government scored slightly higher compared to the European Commission. In Belgium, too, the federal Government and the federal Parliament both scored slightly higher than European institutions.

4.3. KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE EU

Data from a recalculated index for four survey questions gauging respondents' knowledge on EU topics (membership status of three European states and national government's vote on EU sanctions against Russia in the context of the war in Ukraine, recalculated on a 0-4 scale) reveal a modest level of EU knowledge among both old and new EU member populations. At the top end of the knowledge scale, only 30.1% in Portugal and 29% in Ireland gave 4 out of 4 correct answers, while the proportion of those who got 3 out of 4 answers right ranged from 32.6% in Hungary to 25.4% in Portugal. In Belgium, 27% only gave one correct answer, while 3% gave zero correct answers. The highest proportion of those with zero right answers was in Ireland, with 7.8%. In candidate country Georgia, 1.7% gave all four correct answers, while 33% gave zero correct answers, however the proportion of those who got half of the answers right (2 out of 4) was higher in Georgia (23.5%) than in Portugal (21.1%) or Ireland (22.1%).

4.4. EU INTEGRATION

With the exception of Estonia and Ireland, more respondents in all target countries believed that European integration should go further compared to those who believed the integration had gone too far. In Georgia, the only non-member state in the project, 44.2% were uncertain about answering this question compared to 41.1% who thought that the EU should enlarge. In all

EU member target countries, more respondents believed that further integration meant strengthening the central institutions of the EU rather than enlarging the Union.

4.5. MAJOR BENEFITS OF EU MEMBERSHIP

With the exception of Belgium, more than half of the respondents in all target countries believed that EU membership benefits their country. In Ireland, Spain and Portugal more than 80% of the respondents held this view (93.4%, 84.1% and 82.3% respectively), followed by Estonia (75%) and Hungary (71%). In Belgium the percentage of those who held this view was 49.3%. In Georgia, an absolute majority of the population supported Georgia's European integration and believed that Georgia would benefit from EU membership (81.5%).

As for national benefits of EU membership, economic benefits and protection of human rights and security were the most important benefits associated with EU membership in most target countries. Economic benefits ranked first in all target countries. The protection of human rights and security guarantees alternated ranking (usually between second, third or fourth) depending on the country.

In Belgium, Estonia and Georgia, security guarantees and protection of human rights ranked second and third respectively. In Hungary, human rights protection ranked second, and security guarantees ranked third. In Spain protection of human rights ranked second, while protection of peace and democracy ranked third and security guarantees ranked fourth. In Portugal, human rights and democracy ranked third, and security ranked fourth. In Ireland, Brexit-related protections ranked second and third, while human rights protection generated the fourth highest level of agreement.

4.6. IDENTITY CONSIDERATIONS

Amidst support for integration, which is based primarily on pragmatic considerations, in some contexts the EU is still viewed as a potential threat to national identity. This was the case in Hungary, where 41.3% of respondents believed the EU posed a threat to national identity and related traditional values, while 37.2% disagreed. In Ireland, more than 40% of the respondents believed that the EU potentially threatens Ireland's identity and values, while over 30% disagreed. In Portugal, 41.1% agreed with the statement that the EU poses a threat to national identity and values while 32.9% disagreed with it.

In Spain, Belgium, Georgia and Estonia, more respondents disagreed with the above-mentioned statement. The highest percentage of disagreement was recorded in Spain, where 68.8 % disagreed with the statement that the EU threatens Spain's national identity and the traditional values associated with it while 18.1% agreed with it. In Estonia, 46% of the respondents disagreed with the statement compared to 34% who agreed with it. In Belgium, 37.1% disagreed, while 34.3% agreed. In Georgia 43% of respondents disagree that the EU threatens Georgia's national identity and traditional values, as opposed to 27% of respondents who anticipate such threats.

Likewise, it is important to highlight that even pro-European constituencies can believe that the EU can intrude on national sovereignty. In responding to the statement about the EU intruding into internal affairs and endangering national sovereignty, more than 40% of the respondents agreed with the statement in Hungary, Ireland and Portugal (44.6%, 43% and 43% respectively). In Belgium and Estonia more than 30% of the respondents agreed with the statement (34% and 33.2% respectively). Spain and Georgia had the lowest percentage of agreement with the statement, but still it surpassed 20% (27.6% in Georgia and 21.8% in Spain).

4.7. POWER ASYMMETRIES AND BIAS

Power asymmetries and bias, identified as concerns in the media and elite discourses of some countries, were also a matter of concern to survey respondents in those target countries. In the case of Georgia, a larger portion of respondents believed that the EU is guided by double standards toward Georgia (30.3%) than those thinking otherwise (18.7%). In Spain 63.2% of the respondents agreed with the statement that EU decisions tend to take into consideration only the interests of the strongest members. In Estonia 53% of the respondents agreed with the same statement. In Portugal, 59.8% agreed with the statement. As these concerns did not dominate in media and elite concerns in Ireland, Belgium or Hungary, this statement was not included in the public opinion surveys for these countries.

4.8. OPINIONS ABOUT THE EU

The majority of respondents in all countries agreed that the EU had an important role to play in protecting human rights and democracy in their national contexts. The proportion of those agreeing was highest in Ireland (77%) and lowest in Estonia (45%). There was also overwhelming agreement across the board that the EU had a positive role to play in their country's economic development, with Irish respondents expressing the

strongest agreement (81.7%) and Belgian respondents among the weakest (40.2%, which was still far higher than those disagreeing with the statement).

There was also consensus on the EU playing a key part in increasing national security in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. All EU member states among our target countries expressed support for this statement (between 68.5% and 44.2% agreed), and even in Georgia, 36.3% of respondents agreed, while only 22% disagreed. There was also overwhelming agreement that the EU provided crucial humanitarian assistance to Ukraine. The majority of respondents in most countries positively assessed the EU's role in helping the better management of the COVID-19 crisis.

Mirroring the dominant consensus from media analysis and elite interviews, there was very little appetite among the public for exiting the EU. In all EU member target countries, over half of the respondents disagreed (with Spain leading at 84.8% and Ireland second at 81.8%, Hungary at 63.9%, and Belgium lowest at 51.5%). The proportion of those in favor of EU exit was highest in Belgium (22.6%).

Despite a variety of opinions on identity threats posed by the EU and differing levels of political polarization, the majority of respondents in all countries agreed with the statement that "some member states' deviation from the European course endangers the EU" (with Ireland highest at 55.4% and Georgia lowest at 35.6%).

Public opinion was more divided on whether the EU lacks solidarity and unity. While in Spain, Ireland and Hungary, more respondents disagreed, in Estonia, Belgium, Portugal and Georgia a greater proportion of the public agreed the EU lacked unity and solidarity. It's worth noting that in most countries the differences between these camps were negligible, with the exception of Spain as the most optimistic (52.4% disagreed, 25% agreed) and Portugal as the most pessimistic (8.6% disagreed, 67.9% agreed).

The survey data reveals that in more politically polarized contexts, EU integration and the perceptions of the EU's role can also be a polarizing issue for the public, pointing to the possible impact of elite instrumentalization of EU-related topics for internal political needs. Despite some evidence of perceived concerns about EU interference in internal affairs and the potential threats posed by EU to national identity and values, the public in our target countries remains in agreement about and recognizes the pragmatic benefits of EU membership, shows evident

support for the European integration project and, in EU member states, displays a visible lack of appetite for leaving the EU.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The research-based insights in this volume highlight the important role of independent media, quality EU affairs reporting and European political elite engagement with the public in how Europeanization is framed, discussed and understood. At the same time, we show how political polarization, autocratic media capture, and instrumentalization of both pragmatic considerations and identity-driven concerns on EU issues for local political gain can pose a real threat to further European integration and the strengthening of European institutions. While the public opinion in all target countries remains committed to the European integration project, this pro-European sentiment coexists with a low level of public awareness of the key structures, mechanisms and functions of the European Union. This can lead to easier manipulation of public opinion through divisive, overly simplistic or one-sided discourses and misinformation promoted by both pro-EU and anti-EU actors in mainstream and social media. Even in contexts where the European integration project is not *per se* a politically contested project, the EU could still be instrumentalized to fuel internal polarization and to score internal political gains, this could eventually impact the EU negatively turning the EU itself into a polarized political project (Pérez-Escoda *et al.* 2023).

Our findings also seek to inform how we might imagine the future of Europe in the world and how better-informed citizens and free media can safeguard democracy and fundamental rights across the EU. As our research finds, unchecked divisive political rhetoric about the EU's perceived threats to national sovereignty and identity is much more convincing when it is uncritically platformed by the media in environments where there is a lack of knowledge about the fundamental principles of European collaboration. Likewise, accusations of deviating from the European path that are disingenuously weaponized for internal political gains against political opponents are much easier to sell when there is uncertainty about what the EU stands for and what shared values its members seek to uphold.

While a pragmatic approach to Europeanization remains the dominant one, identity-based argument remains relevant not only for the purpose of attacking the EU and accusing it of threatening national identities and values, identity-based arguments can also be used to reaffirm belonging to the EU as an ideational project that promotes democracy, peace, freedom

and human rights. This ideational conception of the EU was invoked, for example, to justify military aid to Ukraine as an imperative of the EU's role as a normative power. At the same time, it was invoked to criticize the militarization of the EU in relation to the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

Our research also suggests that even if the constituencies in the countries we examined are staunchly pro-European, in many countries both the elites and the public are growing weary of power asymmetries within the EU. In many instances, the EU is perceived as protecting the interests of Northern states at the expense of Southern States. This was evident, for example, in discourses on the EU recovery funds, which were perceived as more favorable to the economy of Southern Europe and were constantly juxtaposed with the austerity measures adopted during the Eurozone crisis, which were portrayed as an imposition by the North. Hierarchies were also perceived as existing between larger and smaller states, as well as between the West and the East. Hungary is one notable case where these perceived power inequalities were instrumentalized by local ruling elites to discredit the EU. At times, these hierarchies were reproduced in the media when discussing human rights and the rule of law to question the European vocation of ultra-nationalist governments in Eastern Europe.

While the issues highlighted here are complex, addressing them through both policy and informed debate is central to further European enlargement and the strengthening of European institutions and European solidarity. They are also at the forefront of ongoing strategic and policy-making work of building a stronger, more democratic Europe on the global stage. From key insights for the development of the European Democracy Shield to nurturing independent journalism and civil society resilience as part of the European Democracy Action Plan and combatting disinformation and foreign interference threats in both mainstream and digital media in the EU, our research findings aim to inform the EU's strategic priorities as a global protector of democracy and human rights and as a champion of the European way of life.

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