

journalism and media

Special Issue Reprint

Challenges for the European Union from the Perspective of Journalism, Political Communication and Digital Platforms

Edited by
Concha Pérez-Curiel, Ricardo Domínguez-García and João Pedro Baptista

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Challenges for the European Union from the Perspective of Journalism, Political Communication and Digital Platforms

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About the Editors

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Editorial

Strategic Communication and Democratic Resilience in the European Union: Journalism, Citizens and the Geopolitics of Narrative

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The European Union, like other liberal democracies around the world, is currently undergoing a profound transformation of its communication ecosystem. The proliferation of populist discourse, growing disinformation, social polarisation, and the fragmentation of the digital public sphere have shaped a scenario in which institutional credibility and social cohesion are at stake. This Special Issue brings together fourteen original studies that explore the challenges of political, institutional and journalistic communication in Europe within this context of geopolitical, media and social crisis, with particular attention to the role of digital platforms, emotional narratives, disinformation dynamics, and the active (or passive) role of citizens.

The fourteen articles offer a rigorous and multifaceted examination of the current communicative landscape of the European Union, at a time when the battle over narratives is also a battle for democracy. EU institutions face the challenge of communicating effectively in a hyper-fragmented environment; journalism must rethink its role under pressure from disinformation and political polarisation; and citizens need critical tools to navigate a digital sphere saturated with emotion, polarising narratives, and partial truths.

If Europe is to maintain its democratic, cohesive, and pluralistic project, it must win the battle for narrative. Regulatory measures or information campaigns alone are not enough. A comprehensive communication strategy is required—one that places institutions at the centre of the narrative and ensures that their messages reach the media and, ultimately, the public.

This Special Issue forms part of the R+D project RED2022-134652-T, funded by MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033 and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). The volume presents multidisciplinary research examining the construction, dissemination, and reception of strategic narratives within the European public sphere. The analysis is structured around three central actors: European institutions, journalism, and citizens.

1. The European Union as a Communicative and Strategic Actor

Several articles explore how the EU seeks to project a coherent and effective discourse to citizens, especially during crises such as the war in Ukraine. The article "*European Institutional Discourse Concerning the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on the Social Network X*" analyses the communication strategies deployed by the European Commission, the European Parliament, the European Council, and the EEAS on X (formerly Twitter) during the first year of the conflict. It finds coherence in their narratives but also a notable lack

of genuine interaction with civil society and the media (Ruiz-Incertis & Tuñón-Navarro, 2024).

The media's capacity to either strengthen or undermine this institutional image is also examined. "*Media Portrayal of EU Commission and Its Leaders: A Content Analysis of Spanish Press (1976–2024)*" provides a longitudinal analysis of how the Spanish press has covered the Commission and its presidents, revealing a tendency towards negativity, influenced by the political leanings of the media outlets and national governments (Gallardo-Agudo et al., 2024).

Similarly, "*Cross-Border Communication Strategies: An Approach to Spanish Euroregions on Twitter (X)*" investigates how Spanish border regions communicate their membership of Euroregions. The study concludes that, rather than promoting a shared European identity, official accounts tend to focus on institutional self-promotion and the management of European funds, overlooking the opportunity to foster a deeper sense of integration (Rivas-de-Roca et al., 2025).

In the realm of digital regulation, "*The Role of Requests for Information in Governing Digital Platforms Under the Digital Services Act: The Case of X*" discusses the implementation of the EU's Digital Services Act through a case study of proceedings against the X platform. The article raises concerns over the opacity of the oversight process and the lack of public transparency in ongoing investigations, which undermines democratic accountability (Fabbri, 2025).

2. Journalism and Media in a Fragmented Digital Ecosystem

Another key focus of this Reprint is the role of journalism as a democratic mediator in an environment shaped by disinformation and polarisation. In "*The Factuality of News on Twitter According to Digital Qualified Audiences: Expectations, Perceptions, and Divergences with Journalism Considerations*", the authors examine how highly educated young Europeans assess the truthfulness of news content, revealing a gap between their expectations of journalistic quality and the realities of content shared on social media (Rojas Torrijos & Garrote Fuentes, 2025).

Media coverage is also analysed from a rhetorical and linguistic perspective in "Emotionalization of the 2021–2022 Global Energy Crisis Coverage: Analysing the Rhetorical Appeals as Manipulation Means in the Mainstream Media". This article studies how British and American outlets used emotional appeals to frame the global energy crisis, contributing to polarised public perceptions of fossil fuels versus renewables (Teneva, 2025).

The tension between freedom of expression and institutional responsibility is explored in "*Public Figures and Social Media from a Freedom of Expression Viewpoint in the Recent U.S. and EU Jurisdiction*", which compares the regulatory frameworks in the United States and the European Union regarding political discourse on social media, highlighting implications for digital governance and democratic debate (Gosztonyi et al., 2025).

Meanwhile, "*Public Service Media and Platformization: What Role Does EU Regulation Play?*" reflects on the impact of global platforms on public service media in Europe. It assesses the EU's regulatory capacity to preserve their independence and ensure they fulfil their democratic mandate amid political pressures and funding challenges (Dragomir et al., 2024).

3. Digital Citizenship, Populism, and Disinformation

The article "*A Scathing Indictment: How European Opinion Leaders Framed Putin's Aggression Against Ukraine*" analyses more than 1000 opinion pieces from major European newspapers and reveals a shift towards more negative and moralising framings of Putin's actions in 2022 compared to 2014. This study illustrates how opinion leaders contribute

to the construction of external enemies and shape collective identities in times of crisis (Franch et al., 2025).

Far-right communication strategies are the focus of "*Attracting the Vote on TikTok: Far-Right Parties' Emotional Communication Strategies in the 2024 European Elections*", which analyses 472 videos by far-right leaders across Europe. The study identifies a dual approach that combines positive emotions (hope, ambition) with negative ones (fear, uncertainty), proving highly effective in generating engagement, especially among younger audiences (Cartes-Barroso et al., 2025).

In a similar vein, "*Populist Leaders as Gatekeepers: André Ventura Uses News to Legitimize the Discourse*" examines how the Portuguese politician André Ventura uses headlines from traditional media to reinforce nationalist and anti-immigration rhetoric on X, constructing a polarised worldview through the dichotomy of "us" versus "them" (Baptista et al., 2024).

From an academic standpoint, "*Beyond Information Warfare: Exploring Fact-Checking Research About the Russia–Ukraine War*" offers a review of scholarly literature on fact-checking initiatives during the war, concluding that media literacy and citizen journalism are vital tools for verifying information in conflict settings (Morais et al., 2025).

Finally, "*Digital Political Communication in the European Parliament: A Comparative Analysis of Threads and X During the 2024 Elections*" compares how the European Parliament adapted its communication strategies across different platforms. The study reveals significant differences in content, format and engagement, reflecting the fragmented nature of institutional communication in the digital age (Velasco Molpeceres et al., 2025).

4. Final Reflections

Together, these contributions offer a pluralistic and rigorous overview of the communication challenges currently facing the European Union. Through diverse but complementary perspectives, the articles examine issues that affect institutions, the media, and citizens alike. Their insights are valuable not only to researchers, but also to communication professionals, policymakers, and civil society actors seeking to understand—and engage with—the complex processes involved in shaping Europe's democratic narratives in a global context marked by uncertainty, polarisation, and digital transformation.

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Article

Cross-Border Communication Strategies: An Approach to Spanish Euroregions on Twitter (X)

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Abstract: In a political climate of social polarization and distrust in public institutions, which in turn fosters misinformation, the European Union (EU) faces the challenge of becoming closer to its citizens. At the same time, the EU has well-established collaboration mechanisms at the local and regional levels. In this context, this study aims to analyze the Euroregions project, one of the strategies used by the EU to manage the different regions of Europe through cross-border collaboration. Thus, the main objective of this study is to find out, using the social network X (formerly Twitter), the communication strategies deployed by the regional governments that make up each of the five Spanish Euroregions on institutions of cross-border cooperation. The results show that regional governments do not promote effective communication strategies to publicize these Euroregions. Rather, these governments try to communicate their management success, focusing their discourse on the issue of European funds and thus generating a situation of misinformation around the benefits of belonging to the European Union. Our findings contribute to the budding literature on regional European areas, arguing that certain political actions could ameliorate the feeling of disaffection of the population towards European institutions.

Keywords: political communication; institutional communication; misinformation; European Union; Euroregions

1. Introduction

Following the fall of dictatorships and the birth of democracies in Spain and Portugal at the end of the 20th century, a process of the "deactivation of borders" began (Márquez Domínguez et al., 2017). This movement was consolidated with the accession of both countries into the European Union (EU) in 1986, as well as with the approval of the Schengen Agreement in 1985. Specifically, the Schengen Convention supplements the Schengen Agreement to establish an area without internal border controls. It was signed on 19 June 1990 and entered into force in 1995. Both the agreement and the convention, together with related agreements and tools, become EU legislation in 1999.

Despite the removal of physical barriers, the EU is often represented as distant from the interests of its citizens (Yordanova et al., 2024). Support for European integration is determined by factors such as political orientation or media consumption (van den Hoogen et al., 2022), which explains the need to employ a perspective of institutional communication. In addition, there is a proliferation of disinformation targeting European institutions, which, in turn, have developed mechanisms for coping with this challenge (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2023).

In the framework of a consolidated EU, the territories affected by the EU's internal borders have benefited from the arrival of significant European resources within the framework of different cross-border cooperation programs. Among them, resources financed by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) or more specific ones that have been periodically approved, such as INTERREG I (1990–1993), INTERREG II (1994–1999), INTERREG III (2000–2006), POCTEP (2007–2013), INTERREG VA (2014–2020), and POCTEP (2021–2027), stand out.

However, the long-lasting distance between European citizens and the EU is related to the not-yet-existing European public sphere (Bijsmans & Altides, 2007; Walter, 2017). The media alone is not able to solve this problem (Lecheler et al., 2024), which is also shaped by the existence of different political cultures between countries.

Beyond the problem of not sharing a unified discourse and political experience, cross-border cooperation projects also face difficulties because they comprise regions with divergent populations or different levels of gross domestic product (GDP). Despite the problems arising from differences between regions or from the changes in government in Spain, France, and Portugal over more than 40 years of cross-border cooperation, these countries have established several structures, entities, and cooperation projects (e.g., the co-governance of shared projects in neighboring territories).

However, approaches to the communicative dimension of this cross-border cooperation are lacking. We assume that comprehensive information about the communicative dimension of this cooperation would allow for the correct attribution of responsibilities among the political actors involved (Goldberg et al., 2022). Therefore, our work aims to analyze communication aspects of one of the mechanisms with which the EU has managed the shared projects of European regions through cross-border collaboration. In this sense, the so-called Euroregions are cooperation projects between regions of neighboring countries that seek to promote the economic development of an area and generate a feeling of belonging to the supranational European project (Wolf et al., 2006).

These initiatives are defined by the existence of "a cross-border strategy; a common structure at local and regional level, and the participation of private actors and civil society" (Letamendía, 2010). Although the first Euroregion was created in 1958 on the German–Dutch border, most have been established since the 1990s. The economic investment in these entities by European institutions affects citizens' opinion of the EU, although, as stated before, there are other aspects that determine support for European integration. In Spain, five Euroregions have been institutionalized over the last 20 years: the Pyrenees–Mediterranean Euroregion (EPM), made up of the Spanish regions of Catalonia and the Balearic Islands and the French region of Occitania; the Galicia–Northern Portugal Euroregion; the EUROACE Euroregion, made up of the Portuguese regions of Alentejo and Centro and the Autonomous Community of Extremadura; the Alentejo–Algarve–Andalusia Euroregion (EuroAAA); and the Spanish–French Euroregion of New Aquitaine–Euskadi–Navarre.

The strength of cross-border economic development in all European policies has been evident since the early establishment of the EU (García Fernández et al., 2017), but the crucial role that social cohesion and a feeling of belonging to a shared transnational project play in the construction of the so-called Europe of the Regions cannot be ignored (Medeiros, 2011).

The previous literature has underlined the role of politicization, understood as the enhancement of the political significance of actions developed within the framework of the EU (Yordanova et al., 2024), which applies to the Euroregions project. The media has a role in generating cross-border connections and cooperation, but some scholars have pointed out how the distant characteristic of the EU is linked to structural dimensions (Seoane Pérez, 2013). According to this author, the public disengagement with the European project

is derived from the way in which the EU was built and governed (i.e., elite-driven) and the kind of cultural community that Europe is, as it is not a nation.

Although the communication problems of the EU are not solely due to mediation, Euroregions represent a quite unique initiative as they mix supranational European and regional approaches. Hence, our research aims to delve into the possibility of implementing communication strategies by these public institutions (Jiménez Alcarria & Tuñón Navarro, 2023; Rodrich Portugal, 2012) on X to promote knowledge sharing between the different territories of a Euroregion and strengthen social solidarity. The main objective of this study is to explore the institutional communication strategies deployed by the governments of the regions that are part of the five Euroregions located on the Iberian Peninsula.

2. Institutional Communication and the Building of European Citizenship

In a political climate of social polarization and distrust in institutions, which in turn increases the spread of disinformation, the EU faces major challenges. European institutions are aware of the need to communicate with citizens and gain their support. After the impact of the financial crisis and Brexit (de Vries, 2018) and considering the rise of some Eurosceptic governments such as those of Hungary or Slovakia, the European Commission has set goals to fight against disinformation and promote effective communication with citizens (Tuñón Navarro & Sánchez del Vas, 2022).

Similarly, in recent years, populism has become an internal problem in the EU. Populist movements from the far right (Mudde, 2007) typically find enemies in dominant elites, which, in the European case, usually comprise EU leaders and institutions (Caiani & Guerra, 2017). According to many authors, the wide and rapid impact of these movements cannot be understood without considering the magnifying potential of social media and its ability to spread antiestablishment ideas typical of populism (Gerbaudo, 2018; Pérez-Curiel et al., 2021).

Prior research has confirmed that the negative messages of these political forces tend to focus on criticizing politicians, especially those involved in EU institutions (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2023). This type of discourse tends to portray the EU as an elitist bureaucratic entity that governs the lives of citizens from Brussels and makes decisions on the allocation of huge regional funds from the EU budget. In fact, a large proportion of these European funds are managed at the local and regional levels (Rivas-de-Roca & García-Gordillo, 2022). These criticisms, generally supported by disinformation, have boosted Euroscepticism. This is a movement that criticizes European integration projects (Álvarez, 2012) and has also resulted in a growing force of politicization, which can have ambivalent effects (Hutter et al., 2016). Eurosceptics, in addition to questioning the effectiveness of EU institutions and their tendency towards bureaucracy, are usually opposed to the primacy of the European law, as it is seen as an erosion of national sovereignty.

In contrast to this trend, Europeanism defends greater political integration, arguing that it guarantees democratic principles and the rights and freedoms of EU citizens (Martín de la Guardia, 2016). Europeanism understands that transnational collaboration can enable European nations to effectively face global challenges and improve the economic and social prosperity of the continent. Since the establishment of the European project, one of the main challenges has been the creation of a sense of European identity and citizenship, but this is a difficult task, as the EU comprises different Member States with different languages, traditions, and particularities. Thus, EU institutions need to encourage European citizens to identify with a supranational organization made up of 27 countries, cultivating a feeling of belonging to each Member State.

Faced with this concern about citizen disaffection, which became especially latent at the beginning of the first decade of the 2000s, the EU has carried out a whole range of initiatives and created tools that seek to involve citizens in its daily functioning through greater transparency. However, in the Euro crisis (2008–2012) (Alphandéry, 2012), the difficulties in attributing responsibilities to specific politics at the European level became perceivable again (Nienstedt et al., 2015). Communication is necessary for the survival of public institutions and an essential way to bring their work closer to people, demonstrate how their management affects them on a daily basis, generate trust, and create links with citizens. For this reason, the EU has become aware of the importance of developing communication strategies "so that citizens can more easily access information on Union policies and better understand their impact at European, national and local level" (European Commission, 2007).

EU institutions have developed an ambitious communication policy (Martín González, 2005) by expanding their Directorate-General for Communication, increasing their budgets, and adapting their priorities to improve the information they disseminate through the media (European Commission, 2006; Colomina Saló & Pérez-Soler, 2022). With the consolidation of new platforms, the EU has resorted to social networks to be present in the daily lives of their citizens and to expand the impact of communication (Gálvez Caja, 2020; Tuñón & Carral, 2019), using these tools to share news and events to foster greater understanding among European citizens.

However, since 2015, a new challenge related to public opinion has been identified: disinformation campaigns (Domínguez-García & Pérez-Curiel, 2023), especially from Russia, which interfere with the public opinion of the citizens of Member States by promoting the polarization of political debates and electoral contests (Rivas-de-Roca, 2020). This phenomenon involves disinformation and misinformation (Gebel, 2021), as well as malinformation, which is understood as information based on true facts that is spread to cause harm (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). The main difference between the first two concepts lies in the concept of intentionality, as the first implies the existence of an external actor that tries to intentionally destabilize public opinion, while the latter refers to incorrect or incomplete information (Jerit & Zhao, 2020) due to unintentional errors.

The EU is targeted by disinformation campaigns, but the literature has proven over time that knowing more about the EU does not necessarily mean aligning with it more (Karp et al., 2003; Marquart et al., 2019). Studies on the regional framing of the EU are scant, with one study showing a pattern in Spain of presenting the EU as just being at a higher level of the political system and seeing it as a distant political, economic, or bureaucratic entity (Seoane Pérez, 2013). This framing has prevented citizens from assessing EU issues as significant.

Furthermore, there is a lack of academic contributions on Euroregions, including those in Spain and its neighboring countries. Only some evidence exists on the little public knowledge about the Euroregions between Spain and Portugal, even in higher education contexts (Vázquez Gestal & Fernández Souto, 2017). Meanwhile, while the social network X is used by EU institutions in a coordinated way to reach the public (Ruiz-Incertis & Tuñón-Navarro, 2024), data are not available at the regional level.

Considering that we also aim to analyze whether the communication strategies used to publicize cross-border cooperation policies may be linked to misinformation, the objective of this study is to examine regional governments' discourse on Euroregions. In this regard, the following research questions are posed:

RQ1. What institutional and political communication strategies are used by the governments of the Spanish Euroregions on X, formerly Twitter?

RQ2. What role does the EU play in the political narrative built by the regional governments on X, formerly Twitter?

RQ3. What is the response of the public to this discourse on X, formerly Twitter?

3. Method

To answer these research questions, we conducted an analysis of the communication strategies deployed by the regional governments that make up each of the five Spanish Euroregions. A quantitative–qualitative comparative content analysis was applied (Krippendorff, 2004; Silverman, 2016), which allowed us to examine messages posted on the social network X, formerly Twitter. This platform has had the most relevance in political communication for several countries (Campos-Domínguez, 2017). In addition to its importance in studying the communication strategies of political institutions, the selection of this social network was because it was the only one used by all the institutions that made up the Spanish Euroregions during the period of time studied.

All coded data were subsequently analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics statistical software, version 29, to obtain crosstabs and frequency tables. Our research design delves into the accounts of the regional governments that are part of the five Euroregions in which Spain is involved: the Pyrenees–Mediterranean Euroregion, made up of the Spanish regions of Catalonia (@Gencat) and the Balearic Islands (@Goib) and the French region of Occitania (@Occitanie); the Galicia–Northern Portugal Euroregion (@Xunta and @CCDRN); the EUROACE Euroregion, made up of the Portuguese regions of Alentejo (@CCDRAlentejo) and Centro (@CCDRN) and the Autonomous Community of Extremadura (@Junta_Ex); the EuroAAA, made up of Alentejo (@CCDRAlentejo), Algarve (@CCDR_Algarve), and Andalusia (@AndaluciaJunta); and the New Aquitaine–Euskadi–Navarre Euroregion (@NvelleAquitaine, @Gob_eus, and @Gob_na). The sample includes all tweets published during the ten years before the end of the survey period (between 1 January 2014 and 1 January 2024) and containing the keyword Euroregion in all official languages (eurorregión, eurorregião, eurorégion, euroregió, eurorrexión, or euroeskualde), as well as mentions of the other regions that collaborate in these cooperative bodies.

Following these criteria, a total of 672 tweets were selected and analyzed using a coding manual on 16 variables, which were grouped into three large blocks in order to answer each of the research questions. In addition, our research also studied the digital discourse of these institutions from an issue/game perspective. According to the theory of Aalberg et al. (2011), the establishment of a thematic agenda (issue frame) and the implementation of communication strategies (game frame) are key elements to understanding current public communication. The issues of the thematic agenda and the game frames are defined deductively through exclusive and exhaustive categories based on the most relevant issues and strategies during the time frame studied. The tone (positive, neutral, or negative), the origin of the message, and the audiovisual content are also considered. Likewise, the relevance of the Euroregion is coded into the messages of each regional government, together with any mention of that political body, other regions, and Europe, as well as the main characteristics of the message.

The audience response to these communications is relevant as a way of observing public interest in the communications of the Euroregions. This response is measured through the level of virality that the messages reach on X (i.e., number of retweets, likes, and responses). To analyze virality, a formula applied in previous studies was used (Pérez-Curiel et al., 2021), which assigns a double value to retweets compared to likes and responses. This formula is based on the sum of likes, replies, and retweets multiplied by 2, divided by the number of tweets (viral capacity = (SUM retweets*2 + SUM likes)/SUM tweets published).

4. Results

4.1. The Discourse of the Governments of the Spanish Euroregions

The messages posted on X by the regional governments about the Euroregions illustrate that it is a topic of little importance in the political narrative of these institutions, since they only published a total of 672 tweets over ten years. This number is small, with an average of just over five tweets per year for each institution, but clear divergences are found between the different Euroregions. The Euroregions of New Aquitaine–Euskadi–Navarre (29.9% of the total), Galicia–Northern Portugal (27.1%), and EUROAAA (24.3%) have a much greater presence than EUROACE (11.8%) or the Pyrenees–Mediterranean (7%) Euroregions.

If we look at these data from regional governments (Figure 1), the accounts of the CCDR do Norte (19.3%), the CCDR do Algarve (13.7%), the Region of Occitania (13%), the Government of Navarre (12.8%), and the Basque Country (11%) are the ones that publish the most about the Euroregions. On the other hand, it is striking that the Generalitat of Catalonia (0.7%) and the CCDR do Centro (0.3%) produce hardly any messages about cross-border cooperation.

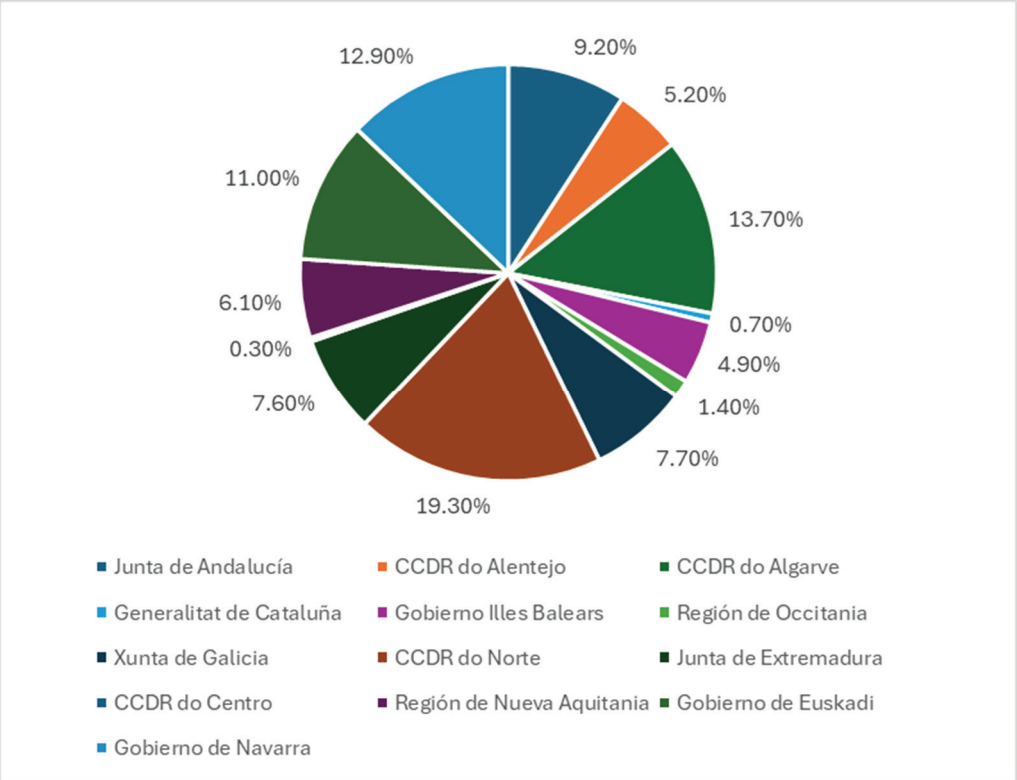


Figure 1. Distribution of tweets by regional government.

Moreover, the data show that the year of highest interest in Euroregions was 2020, confirming the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the need for different regions to strengthen ties between them to deal with its health-related, economic, and social consequences.

Regarding the characteristics of the messages published by regional governments, the metrics show a clear majority of tweets being accompanied by images (44%), generally photographs of events or infographics, or links (33.5%), usually to the institutional website. On the contrary, messages that are supported by other tweets (13.1%), videos (7.3%), or just text (2.1%) are scant. The absence of edited videos about the Euroregions may be related to the very low importance that the regional governments give to this issue. In fact,

most of the tweets that are supported by audiovisual material were from the autonomous communities of Andalusia and the Basque Country.

In terms of topics, the data obtained from our study point to the idea that regional governments tend to focus their discourse on cross-border cooperation in the fields of economy and employment (23.1%), as well as education, culture, and sport (18.6%). Other relevant issues are the environment and the agri-food sector (7.3%), infrastructure (5.7%) and tourism (5.2%). This contrasts with messages that focus on health (2.1%) or security (2.8%), which are few. In addition, most tweets (35.3%) do not correspond to a specific thematic axis since they deal with the Euroregion in a general way or address topics of lesser importance.

In the detailed figures for the regional governments (Figure 2), it is worth highlighting the preference of the Generalitat of Catalonia (80% of its messages) and the Government of the Balearic Islands (42.4%) for culture. This is due to the strong cooperation between both institutions to strengthen ties in linguistic matters. Another particularity lies in the interest of the CCDR do Centro (50%) and the CCDR do Alentejo (22.9%), both Portuguese, in tourism.

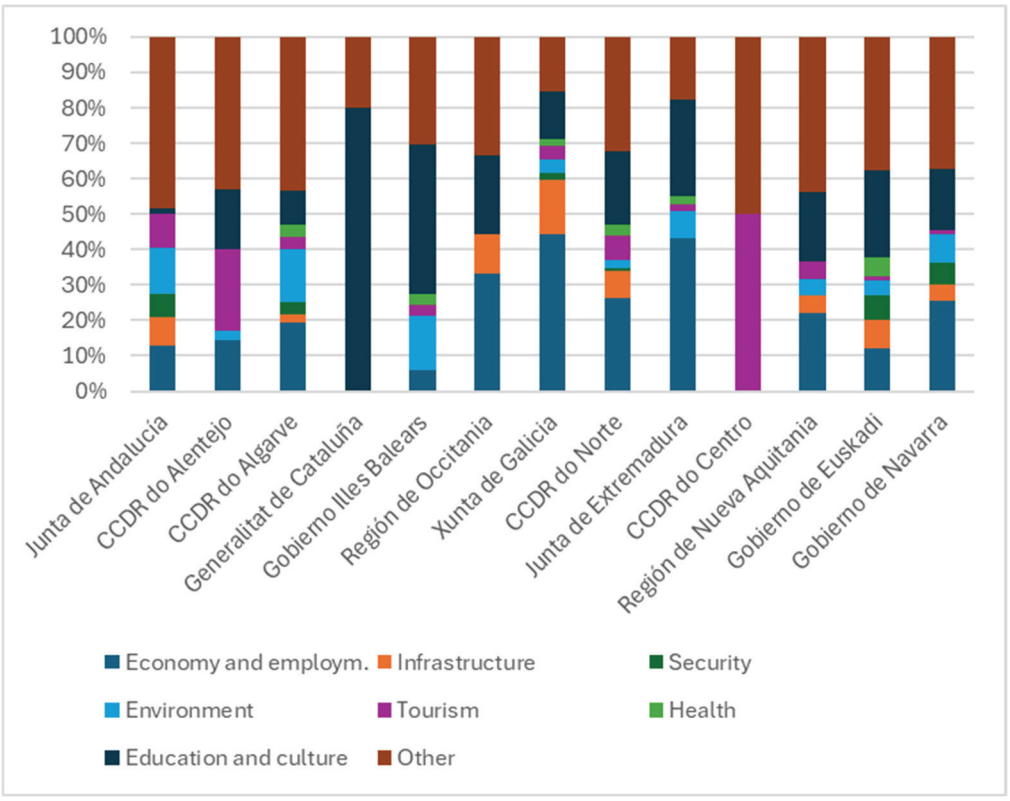


Figure 2. Thematic distribution of each regional government.

Regarding game frames, the results confirm a strong interest of the regional governments in disseminating information on the management (77.2%) of cross-border cooperation, although there are few messages that seek to promote events related to the Euroregions (12.2%) or that seek to encourage confrontation (6.1%). In this sense, cooperation between cross-border regions is an issue that rarely leads to conflicts between administrations. When a conflictual strategy appears, it refers to demands from central governments for greater investments, especially in the area of infrastructure.

In line with this commitment to spreading regional management, the data also show that regional governments use a mostly neutral (67%) or positive (31.8%) tone, so negative messages are minimal (1.2%). Considering the particularities of each region studied, it is

noteworthy that the regions of Occitania (77.8%), Andalusia (58.1%), and Algarve (55.4%) are more likely to post positive messages, generally related to their management.

4.2. The Communicative Role of Europe and the Euroregions

Regarding the importance that the EU and its institutions have in the messages studied, most of the messages deal with the Euroregion project in a secondary way (41.4%), since they focus on reporting on projects and programs derived from this cross-border cooperation. However, there are a significant number of tweets (30.7%) that focus on the functioning of the Euroregions themselves or on bilateral cooperation outside of these organizations (28%).

The data from each regional government (Figure 3) allow us to identify different patterns. Beyond the tendency for regional governments to address Euroregions in a secondary way, there are also governments that choose to focus on the functioning of these organizations themselves, such as the Junta de Andalucía (59.7%), the CCDR do Centro (50%), or the Region of New Aquitaine (46.3%).

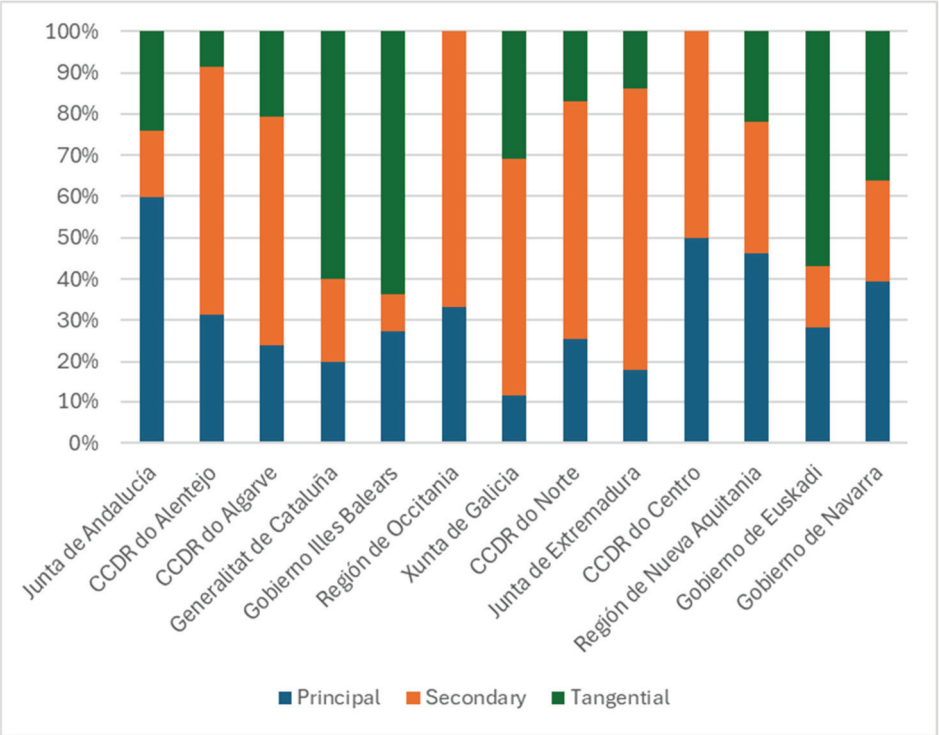


Figure 3. Relevance of Euroregions in the communications of each regional government.

Furthermore, other regional governments prefer to address bilateral cooperation, limiting the focus on Euroregions in their discourse. This is the case for the governments of the Balearic Islands (63.6%) and the Generalitat of Catalonia (60%), as well as the governments of the Basque Country (56.8%) and Navarre (39.5%). These are regions with strong ties between them and which mainly advocate for direct cooperation, without considering Euroregions. Following this, the results show that the majority of messages include a direct mention to Euroregions (63.4%), with the exception of the four governments mentioned above.

However, one of the most striking patterns emerging from this study is that tweets that mention EU institutions are outlined as a clear minority. In fact, they make up only 57 of the 672 messages analyzed, which represents 8.5% of the total. The only significant cases are the governments of Occitania (33.3%), Algarve (25%), and Andalusia (19.4%), which occasionally mention Europe and its institutions. These data illustrate that regional

governments tend to appropriate the management of the Euroregions without recognizing the origin of the European economic funds that support them or the commitment of EU institutions to cross-border cooperation.

This theory is reinforced by the fact that most messages come from speeches or public events run by politicians from regional governments (69.3%). However, there are a minority of tweets specifically prepared for social networks (23.4%) or from the media (5.7%).

The previous data were expanded on by analyzing the protagonist of the messages, i.e., the subject of the communication, showing that most tweets focus on members of the regional governments (56.4%). Moreover, most of the tweets were posted by regional presidents (31.8%), councilors (17.7%), or other lower-ranking members (6.8%). In addition to this, there is a very significant number of posts that do not show any protagonist (43%), but the most surprising finding is that only 0.6% of all the posts focus on the participation of members of EU institutions.

4.3. Citizen Response

Through the metrics of retweets, likes, and responses, different nuances related to the interest of the digital public were identified. According to the data, users of the social network X show very low interest in this matter. In fact, each post reaches an average of only 3.2 retweets, 5 likes, and 0.4 responses, which means a virality figure of 11.8 based on the chosen formula.

If these metrics are explored for each account studied (Figure 4), notable differences are observed. The regions of Occitania (55.6), Galicia (35.1), Andalusia (33.5), and Catalonia (22.8) have more virality. This contrasts to the accounts of the CCDRs of Algarve (2.5), North (3), or Alentejo (3.1), which obtain minimal percentages of virality. This finding could be related to the limited role these Portuguese initiatives play at an institutional level.

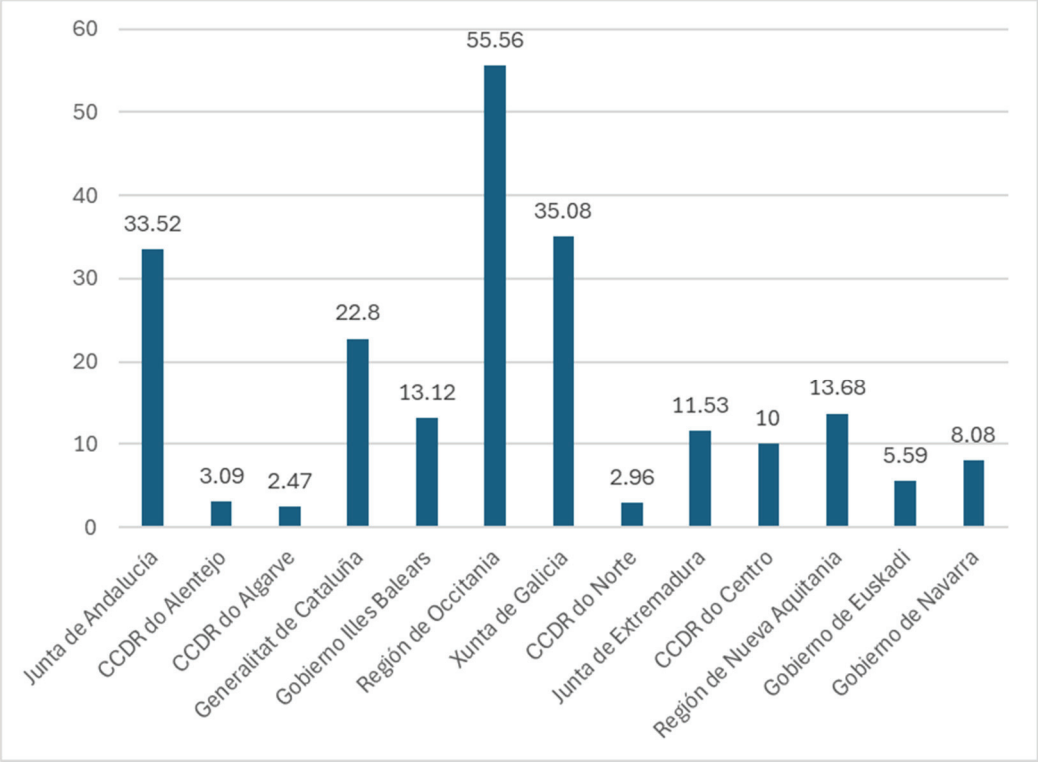


Figure 4. Virality of communications by regional government.

At the thematic level, the study of virality shows that some of the issues that attract the least attention from regional governments are those that arouse the greatest interest from

citizens. Health (18.1), tourism (14.1), and infrastructure (16.2) reached the highest metrics, while security (5.6) caught the least interest. Regarding strategies, it was confirmed that messages based on conflict achieved the highest virality (17.8), ahead of those that sought to disseminate management information (12) and far ahead those promoting events (7). Moreover, positive messages (14) aroused the greatest interest, ahead of neutral messages (10.9) or negative ones (5.5).

Considering the relevance of the Euroregions, the messages that directly addressed the functioning of these organizations had the highest impact on the social platform (14.4), ahead of those that did so in a secondary (12.2) or tangential manner (9.7). However, the greatest differences are observed in the protagonist of the messages, given that citizens are far more interested in tweets featuring regional presidents (18.7) than those that focus on European authorities (11.5) or regional councilors (9.9) or those that do not feature any specific figure (8.7). Another finding on the response of the audiences is that users interact more if the messages are accompanied by videos (37.4) or photographs (13.7) than if they contain links (6.9) or other tweets (3.9).

5. Discussion and Conclusions

As presented throughout this study, cohesive policies at the level of Euroregions can be seen as a key tool for the economic development of border territories in Europe. However, the commitment of EU institutions to these entities does not translate into an effective communication policy on X (formerly Twitter) that raises awareness of these Euroregions to the public. The content analysis revealed findings that answer the research questions. First, the discourse of the regional governments addressed the Euroregions in a secondary way in most of their messages (RQ1), focusing on programs created to disseminate information on the management of each regional government. A strong presence of regional presidents or councilors was observed. In addition, the EU and its institutions were scarcely mentioned.

Our second conclusion offers evidence regarding the digital action of the regional governments of the five Euroregions (RQ2), which only published a collective 672 tweets on this subject over the 10 years analyzed. This is even more significant in the case of the accounts of the Commission for the Coordination and Regional Development of the Centre and the Generalitat of Catalonia. According Márquez Domínguez et al. (2017), this could be assessed as a communicative attempt to reduce European initiatives and investments in favor of a greater role for Spanish or French regional power, or for the state in the case of Portugal. The appropriation of EU accomplishments by regional governments is not only related to communication but also to the EU as a political institution in terms of subsidiarity (Seoane Pérez, 2013).

The third contribution furthers our understanding of the lack of interest from digital audiences (RQ3). The fact that the messages examined had an average of 3.2 retweets, 5 likes, and 0.4 responses makes it clear that Euroregions are a minor issue for the citizens of these regions, although X is not a social network with high volumes of interaction (Campos-Domínguez, 2017).

Based on our results, it is clear that regional governments are not developing communication policies to foster a strong interregional cultural identity (Medeiros, 2011) on X and are limited to taking advantage of the economic potential of European funds to gain prominence and, in a certain way, appropriate the beneficial impact they have on society. Taking previous research into account (Jerit & Zhao, 2020; Manfredi, 2024), it can be stated that these governments fuel a situation of incomplete information or misinformation, which favors the building of an image of Europe as a distant bureaucratic entity that is inefficient in the management of public funds.

In recent years, European issues have had increased visibility, triggering a politicization of the EU (Hutter et al., 2016). This political element seems essential to combat the traditional communication deficit of the European project, something that could be solved by correct information visibility around investments at the local level (Rivas-de-Roca & García-Gordillo, 2022), for which the Euroregions stand out. The communication strategies of Euroregions could be seen as tools to enhance the legitimacy of the EU at the closest level to citizenship, but the construction of interregional identities between the territories involved was found to be incomplete through the digital action analyzed, as neutral messages and low virality revealed scant citizen engagement.

It should be noted that our work has several limitations. The sampling was restricted to the Euroregions linked to Spain. In addition, it was based on the social media platform X, which may have undergone changes in its usage patterns throughout the decade considered. X (formerly Twitter) is populated by bots, especially since its acquisition by Elon Musk and its renaming to X. Therefore, our study of virality acknowledges this limitation, as many of the likes and retweets could have been performed by bots and not human users.

Following the above, the selection of tweets could have been significantly influenced by biases that may affect the reliability and generalizability of our findings. For instance, the presence of bots—automated accounts designed to mimic human behavior—can distort sentiment analysis, topic modeling, and other data-driven research, leading to inflated or skewed representations of public opinion. Additionally, changes in the platform's user demographics, which very much differ from those of the general population (i.e., younger, more progressive, more male, and urban/city residents), can introduce temporal biases, making older datasets less reflective of current trends.

Future research should check whether the narrative constructed on social networks by territorial institutions corresponds to the discourse of the political leaders themselves or to their relevance in the media agenda. This could be implemented together with studies in broader contexts. Moreover, X is not the only place where people look for information about these Euroregions. Studying regional media in these locations would likely give us additional information on how the work executed by Euroregion bodies is covered, which is a potential avenue for future studies. Regional media has greater potential and scope for informing citizens. Therefore, generalizations on the role of X as a source of political information on Euroregions must be avoided.

In conclusion, the European Euroregions in Spain currently represent a wasted opportunity in terms of digital communication. Their political action on X is displaced by particular issues. Although the intentional manipulative logic behind disinformation is not present, misinformation also has very negative effects, which here refers to unintentionally framing the EU as a distant political entity. This situation affects not only the democratic quality of the European project but also the legitimacy of the Euroregions as political actors that manage public funds.

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Article

Populist Leaders as Gatekeepers: André Ventura Uses News to Legitimize the Discourse

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Abstract: This study explores the role of populist leaders as gatekeepers on social media, seeking to understand how André Ventura, president of Chega!, uses news to legitimize his political discourse. The methodology involved collecting 90 tweets containing legacy media news features, posted by Ventura on the social media platform X. These tweets cover key political events such as the resignation of Portugal's Prime Minister, the dissolution of the Portuguese Parliament, and European elections. Quantitative analysis using Voyant Tools identified key terms related to Ventura's ideological stance, while Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) examined how these terms support his political narrative. The findings reveal a strategic use of news to promote themes like nationalism, immigration control, corruption and social dichotomy between "us" and "them". Ventura's tweets leverage news headlines to enhance his persuasive appeal, acting as heuristic shortcuts to reinforce his political messages. This study highlights the relevance of understanding social media's role in promoting populism and suggests avenues for future research, including comparative analyses of other populist leaders and the impact of these narratives on voter behavior and perceptions.

Keywords: populism; social media; radical right-wing; Critical Discourse Analysis; Portugal; André Ventura

1. Introduction

The level of political knowledge and involvement is related to the way citizens consume news (Hao et al. 2014). For example, political interest is a reason for more active engagement and can increase selective news exposure (Barnidge et al. 2020). Furthermore, it is known that news helps most citizens, in democratic societies, to learn about politics (Kriesi 2004) and its sharing can result in an action of social interaction, namely in promoting a sense of community (Swart et al. 2019) or in an act associated with a participatory culture (Brake 2014; Meikle and Young 2011). However, news consumption has changed with technological developments. Social media have become its main distributors, which has contributed to a less regulated and more biased consumption of information (Messing and Westwood 2014). Faced with this situation, political actors began to share news on social media as an action of political strategy (Buyens et al. 2024; Heidenreich et al. 2024). The sharing of news on social media by politicians seeks to achieve the same objective as the sharing of other types of content, mainly related to actions of self-promotion and party mobilization (Ernst et al. 2019; Pérez-Curiel 2020; Filimonov et al. 2016). Sharing news on social media can also serve as a political object to criticize opponents (Auter and Fine 2016) and to criticize traditional media (Egelhofer et al. 2021). Thus, party leaders find in social media, such as X, Facebook and more recently TikTok, ways to bypass traditional media and establish a closer and more direct relationship with citizens (Pérez-Curiel 2020).

This set of social dynamics makes social media a fertile ground for promoting right-wing populist attitudes (Pérez-Curiel and Baptista 2024). Several studies (Engesser et al. 2017; Gerbaudo 2018; Gründl 2022) recognize that populist attitudes and messages adapt perfectly to the characteristics of social media. Social media has been used by right-wing populists to promote anti-immigration rhetoric, nationalist ideals and anti-elitist narratives, based on the dichotomy "us" (people's defenders and spokespeople) against an enemy and corrupt elite, "them" (Lorenzetti 2020; Pérez-Curiel and Baptista 2024).

In Portugal, the populist radical right has legitimized its ideals with the help of traditional media and online social platforms (Rydgren 2018; Pérez-Curiel and Baptista 2024). Although ideologically it self-identifies as "liberal-conservative", the Chega! represents the populist radical right (Mendes 2021; Marchi 2023; Lisi et al. 2021; Mendes and Dennison 2021). Chega! integrates the ideological group of the populist radical right by adopting the characteristics that are attributed to these parties (Mudde 2007), namely the defense of national sovereignty, the appeal to the "true people", intolerance towards social minorities and commitment to social division between "us" and "them".

Founded in 2018, Chega! elected for the first time, in 2019, a deputy to the Assembly of the Republic. Currently, it is the third political force in Portugal, having elected 50 deputies to the Portuguese parliament in the last national elections. To grow electorally, the Chega! party rejects the stigma of belonging to the extreme right (Mendes and Dennison 2021) and depends on the leadership of a popular and charismatic politician, André Ventura, who personifies himself around a common cause, uniting the people against the enemy elite. Chega! is, therefore, considered a "one-man-show" party (Biscaia and Salgado 2023) due to the media popularity of its leader (Marchi 2023; Marcelino 2020; Palma et al. 2021).

André Ventura has managed to capture the attention of traditional media more than any other politician (Almeida 2024). The populist leader adopts a simple communicative style based on informal language, which makes him a "charismatic" leader with more followers on social media (Baptista et al. 2024; Prior 2024). Even when he was the only Chega! deputy in the Portuguese parliament, André Ventura managed to obtain greater media coverage than other leaders, most particularly by adopting of a sensationalist and controversial manner of speech (Palma et al. 2021).

Like other politicians (Kissas 2020), the social network X, formerly Twitter, continues to be the most used by André Ventura. On the same network, André Ventura's tweets receive greater engagement than publications from the Chega! party's own account (Baptista et al. 2024).

Our study is based on the argument that social media brings populists closer to their voters, exposing them to their ideals, normalizing radical discourse through ideological learning, which results in a collective identity that is created through shared content (Schwemmer 2021). Therefore, it is increasingly important to understand how leaders of the populist radical right consolidate, through social media, their political positioning, legitimize their beliefs and reinforce their political agenda.

This study, of an exploratory nature, aims to analyze how André Ventura uses the sharing and collage of news, on the social platform X, to legitimize his speech, normalize his ideals and promote the populist narratives associated with the radical right in Portugal. Several studies have sought to understand how the media has helped to legitimize the discourse and ideals of radical right parties (Haanshuus and Ihlebæk 2021; Krzyżanowski and Ekström 2022; Ekström and Morton 2017; Ekström et al. 2022). However, these studies essentially focus on a perspective that comes from journalism and the media in general, namely trying to understand how media coverage of radical right parties contributes to their normalization. Studies in Portugal also seek similar objectives (Novais 2022a, 2022b). Conversely, few studies have analyzed the news shared by the radical right as an act of political legitimation (e.g., Dowling 2024).

Therefore, we believe that our study can be a contribution to the contemporary debate surrounding the selective use of news by political agents, with the aim of creating a reality that legitimizes their political attitudes and beliefs.

We carried out a quantitative discourse analysis (using the Voyant Tools software, v. 2.6.14) and a Critical (van Dijk 1993; Fairclough 2013) of an exploratory sample of 90 tweets with news, published by André Ventura (@AndreCVentura, https://twitter.com/AndreCVentura (accessed on 8 July 2024)). The tweets were analyzed according to rhetorical strategies, identity construction techniques and the narratives used to frame the news.

With this research we seek to answer the following general research questions:

- RQ1—How does André Ventura use news to legitimize his political speech on the social media platform X?
- RQ2—What are the most common rhetorical strategies used by André Ventura when referencing news in his tweets?
- RQ3—Which speeches and behaviors are most often legitimized through André Ventura's use of news on Twitter?

Our findings show that there is a selective choice of news around topics such as immigration, corruption and security to support his political proposals, while influencing public opinion.

2. Theoretical Background

Populism is a concept that does not have a consensual definition. Mudde (2004) classifies populism as an ideology, which, although tenuous, focuses on the social dyad that opposes the "people" to the "elite". Laclau (2005) considers it rather as a discursive game between antagonistic elements, such as people and power. Other authors (Moffitt 2015, 2016) approach populism as a performance or communicative strategy (Engesser et al. 2017) that makes social communication its stage of action (Moffitt and Tormey 2014). Hameleers (2020) considers populist action to be tactical, seeking to accuse the establishment of deceiving people. The relevant literature has found in right-wing populism a discourse aimed at citizens, critical of the power of elites and the corrupted system, which victimizes itself to justify intolerant rhetoric towards immigrants (Krämer 2017; Engesser et al. 2017).

Social media has given rise to "populism 2.0" (Gerbaudo 2014), where populist actors seek to strengthen relationships with their voters, while spreading their political messages (Engesser et al. 2017). Currently, the populist radical right is seen as a political trend (Rydgren 2018) and is presented as a threat to democracy (Pérez Curiel and Domínguez García 2021).The radical right, where the Chega! party ideologically fits, appears associated with a "new right" (Flanagan 1987; Inglehart 1971) of an authoritarian nature in response to the new Left parties, what Ignazi (1992) called " Silent Counterrevolution" This political ideology is known mostly for its intolerance towards immigrants, for the defense of traditional and nationalist values and for the valorization of a more severe social and political authority (Eatwell and Goodwin 2020; Mendes and Dennison 2021). These ideals integrate populist messages, made up of simple, informal and rude linguistic styles that great impact on social media (Moffitt 2016) while also capturing the attention of traditional media. In fact, populists adopt a political strategy designed for social media, called "pop politics" (Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2019) or "politainment" (Berrocal-Gonzalo et al. 2023), specifically designed to engage their audience. This populist style of communicating is part of the communication strategy of populist leaders on social media (Bracciale et al. 2021) and consists of using emotional speech, which arouses anger, fear or anxiety in users (Bracciale et al. 2021).

In Portugal, there is a greater commitment from the Chega! and its president, André Ventura, on social media, than is found in other mainstream parties and politicians. Recently, a journalistic report showed that there is an international campaign script with a strategy designed for the political communication of populist parties on social media (Malhado 2024).

The recent rise of the populist radical right in Portugal has earneddeserved the attention of academics, with studies focusing on communication strategies and André Ventura's narrative (Ramos-Antón and Baptista 2022; Reis 2020; Dias 2022; Prior 2024; Novais 2023). André Ventura uses a carefully structured narrative, assuming himself as the defender of the "good Portuguese" (Novais 2023). His speech presents him as

the messiah, the savior who is invested with a divine mission to transform and save Portugal (Figueiredo 2021; Jaramillo 2021; Dias 2022). Its political communication strategy is markedly opportunistic, adapting according to the context to achieve its objective of excluding certain social groups, such as Rroma and people of African descent, often portrayed as bandits (Melo 2021; Santos and Roque 2021).

Ventura also explores sensitive issues such as corruption and public security, defending extreme measures such as life imprisonment and chemical castration for sexual crimes, shaping himself as the only politician truly outraged by the corrupted system (Fernandes and Magalhães 2020; Prior 2024). Social networks serve to maximize the reach of his speech, combining anti-elitist and anti-system rhetoric with the image of an honest politician close to the people, reinforcing his popularity among voters dissatisfied with traditional politics (Jaramillo 2021; Baptista et al. 2024).

This narrative construction and the strategic use of the media and social networks have been fundamental to the exponential growth of Chega!, which has consolidated itself as the third political force in Portugal (Pérez-Curiel and Baptista 2024). However, in Portugal, the media were, until the emergence of Chega!, an exception in their resistance to political populism (Caeiro 2019; Salgado 2019; Salgado and Zúquete 2016). Before 2019, traditional media did not provide significant coverage of populist speeches, positions or parties (Caeiro 2019; Salgado 2019). With the election of André Ventura, the positioning of the Portuguese media changed, becoming a more positive and frequent media coverage, essentially because Ventura was a media figure (former sports commentator on an information channel and former politician of the Social Democratic Party (PSD)) (Salgado 2022).

It is important to emphasize that the Portuguese media system has been, over the years, the target of several debates. Hallin and Mancini (2004) included the Portuguese media system in the "Polarized Pluralist" model, which includes southern European countries, and is characterized by strong political parallelism, a weak journalistic culture and significant state intervention. However, several authors argue that the Portuguese media system has characteristics that distinguish it from other countries in the same group, showing an evolution towards a more liberal and less polarized model (Álvares and Damásio 2013; Brüggemann et al. 2014; Fishman 2011; Serrano 2014). The Portuguese media promote inclusion and favor heterogeneous points of view, with levels of professionalization on par with the European Union average (Álvares and Damásio 2013; Fishman 2011; Santana-Pereira 2016).

This professionalism and the decrease in political parallelism, recognized by Hallin and Mancini (2017), indicate a greater independence of the Portuguese media in relation to partisan influences, something that has contributed to a more balanced coverage that is less susceptible to populist manipulations. Even with the effective use of social media by figures like Ventura, the traditional Portuguese media system continues to resist, with a critical stance, a complete capture by polarizing discourses, maintaining a more moderate and inclusive approach (Salgado 2022). Given this media scenario, the spread of polarizing populist discourses through traditional media is difficult. Therefore, Ventura may be encouraged to turn to social media to directly reach the target audience that shares his views, promoting selective exposure and, therefore, greater political polarization (Stroud 2010).

At an international level, several studies have recognized that the populist radical right effectively exploits digital tools, namely through the creation of online communities and alternative media (Marwick et al. 2022; Marwick and Lewis 2017; Castelli Gattinara and Froio 2024). Online disinformation is a propagandistic instrument commonly used among radical right populists (Baptista and Gradim 2022b; Freelon et al. 2020; Mancosu et al. 2017). For example, some studies (Haanshuus and Ihlebæk 2021; Baugut and Neumann 2019) have shown that radical right-wing groups reshape news for their benefit. Haanshuus and Ihlebæk (2021) have shown that the radical right recontextualizes news to legitimize anti-Semitic speech. This type of strategy aims to create a collective identity, maintaining a cohesive group around its ideals and beliefs (Swart et al. 2019; Goh et al. 2019; Gaudette et al. 2021). The notion of collective identity implies the emergence of a social movement, which involves the mobilization of a group around common interests (Polletta and Jasper 2001).

This sharing of news motivates interaction and digital "mobilization" that translates, in cyberspace, into likes, comments, and shares. In this sense, Perry and Scrivens (2016, p. 69) consider that, within the scope of populist action, "collective identity provides an alternative frame for understanding and expressing grievances; it shapes the discursive "other" along with the borders that separate "us" from "them"; it affirms and reaffirms identity formation and maintenance; and it provides the basis for strategic action".

In this environment, politicians are, currently, gatekeepers who have the ability to select and filter the information they intend to pass on to their supporters (Thorson and Wells 2016; Dowling 2024). These opportunities offered by social media allow political leaders to interfere in the flow of information and, when they have numerous followers, can be crucial for amplifying content (Buyens et al. 2024). Sharing news on social media is more common among political forces that are in opposition than among forces that govern (Buyens et al. 2024). Therefore, with politicians assuming themselves as "opinion leaders" on social media (Pérez-Curiel 2020) and with a political message designed to make the content widely shared (López-García 2016; Campos-Domínguez 2017), right-wing populist rhetoric is more easily normalized.

3. Methods

3.1. Corpus Selection

We collected 90 news tweets (Table S1), published on the social media X, by André Ventura (@AndreCVentura) over a seven-month period. All selected tweets are associated with topics closely related to radical right-wing ideology (nationalism and national sovereignty; criticism of the EU, i.e., loss of national autonomy; immigration; security; social policies [LGBT, traditional values, criticism of gender ideology]; justice [harsher penalties]; and corruption [fighting corruption]). Only original tweets by André Ventura that correspond to a news feature collage were considered (Figure 1). Ventura uses screenshots of the news title in his tweets, not directly sharing the link to the news website, which further contributes to decontextualize the content.



(**a**) (**b**)

Figure 1. Example of two tweets by André Ventura with news collage. (**a**) The news has the following title: "Grandfather got 15-year-old granddaughter pregnant in Braga". Through the design of the news website, it is possible to identify the image as belonging to Correio da Manhã, a Portuguese tabloid newspaper. André Ventura's description reads: "How is it possible that this man was sentenced to just 8 years in prison after raping and impregnating his own granddaughter? With CHEGA ruling, he would never see the light of day outside of prison again!" (**b**) The news has the following title: "Two men stabbed in a fight in Praça do Martim Moniz in Lisbon". The news website cannot be identified. André Ventura comments: "Another serious case in the middle of Martim Moniz square, in broad daylight. "Two men" stabbed in a fight? What is the nationality of those involved? The result of the immigration policy with open doors, without rules and without any control, is visible to everyone. Is this what you want for Portugal and Europe? Don't stay at home on 9th June and vote for those who truly defend you".

For the corpus of analysis, all news tweets from André Ventura, posted between 7th November and 7th June, were considered. This period begins with the resignation of António Costa as Portuguese prime minister, followed by the dissolution of the Portuguese parliament (on 15 January 2024)[1] and legislative elections are called for 10 March 2024.[2] In the legislative elections, Chega! becomes the third political force in Portugal and elects 50 deputies (out of a total of 230) to the Portuguese parliament.[3] Meanwhile, the European elections took place, with the electoral campaign ending on 7th June.[4] This period is, therefore, marked by several important events: (a) the resignation of the prime minister due to a comment from the Portuguese General Prosecutor; (b) legislative elections with the radical right obtaining the largest victory ever and (c) European elections.

3.2. Textual Analysis from Voyant Tools

Firstly, we carried out a quantitative analysis of the text corpus (N = 90 news tweets) posted by Chega¡s president, André Ventura. The analysis was carried out using the online software Voyant Tools v. 2.6.14 (Sinclair and Rockwell 2020). We use this software because, in addition to being free, it is easy to use and has a kit of important textual analysis tools to highlight the most important words in the text, allowing the terms to be statistically correlated (Sinclair and Rockwell 2020). Voyant Tools has already been used in communication studies that involve the analysis of news content or content published on social media (Baptista et al. 2023; Ittefaq et al. 2022; Corvo and Caro 2020).

The preliminary analysis of the corpus made it possible to identify a set of topics that are entirely related to the political ideology of the radical right (Mudde 2004, 2007). The Voyant Tools software, by identifying the most relevant words in the corpus, considering the number of occurrences of the words, corroborated the categories that were previously identified. An ideological categorization of the corpus was then carried out according to the words found and the correlations presented. We therefore seek to understand how the following ideological categories are present in the text: (1) nationalism and national sovereignty, (2) positioning towards the European Union, (3) immigration, (4) (in)security, (5) social issues (LGBT, traditional values, criticism of gender ideology), (6) justice (harsher penalties), and (7) the fight against corruption. In this procedure, we categorized the main keywords and observed how they correlate by calculating the Pearson correlation coefficient between the relative frequency of words.

3.3. Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) aims to study language through different social and political contexts (Wodak and Meyer 2009). This qualitative method is not tied to an exclusive approach, but rather to an analysis with a multidisciplinary nature (Wodak and Meyer 2009; van Dijk 1998; Fairclough and Mulderrig 2011). We set out for this analysis, aware that CDA aims to understand the dimension of discourse, through the analysis of present discursive formations, dependent on an ideology and a context.

In this way, our CDA starts from the 90 news tweets posted by André Ventura, already mentioned previously. We believe that this is a corpus of operational text and, as it is not very long, it does not compromise the qualitative stance of our study (van Dijk 2001; Meyer 2001). The analysis was based on a comparative approach between André Ventura's speech and the content of each news item that served as the basis for his description in each tweet. In this way, it is possible to understand the role of the news in legitimizing the speech of Chega!'s president.

Similar to the quantitative analysis, developed using Voyant Tools, we also focused the CDA on the seven thematic categories presented previously. Furthermore, we analyzed the tweets considering specific strategies related to discourse normalization techniques, namely legitimation and delegitimization strategies, nationalist and emotional appeals and polarization and identity construction strategies through the identification of the "us" vs. "them" dichotomy (Van Leeuwen 2007; Fairclough 2003).

4. Results

4.1. Voyant Tools Analysis

Analyzing the ranking formed by the most frequent concepts in our corpus (Table 1), our study allows us to perceive, at first, a nationalist focus in Ventura's speech. The words "Portugal", "Portuguese" and "country" are the most frequent and reinforce an ideology centered on the national qualities and the defense of the country's identity and interests.

Table 1. Top 10 most frequent words in the analyzed tweets.

Top 10	Words	*n*	Co-Occurrences
1	Portugal	31	Policy (3), to finish (3), we want (2)
2	Chega	23	I took (2), situation (2), reason (2)
3	Portuguese	17	Truth (3), security (2), stupid (2)
4	Country	15	It needs (3), to go back (2), Portugal (2)
5	Security	9	Portuguese (2), forces(2), control (2)
6	PS	9	Vote (1), enables (1), tics (1)
7	Policy	9	Result (3), Portugal (3), immigration (3)
8	Immigration	9	Policy (3), ilegal (2), out of control (2)
9	Control	9	Borders (4), security (2), rules (2)
10	Money	8	Health (3), we will have (1), to know (1)

Source: voyanttools.org (accessed on 8 July 2024).

Additionally, the frequent use of "Portuguese" may indicate the use of the rhetorical strategy of "us" vs. "them". It is possible to see the construction of a collective identity that resonates with the target audience.

On the other hand, we find other words related to their ideological positioning, such as "security", "immigration" and "control". If we also consider the co-occurrences with words such as "illegal", "uncontrolled", "borders" or "control", and "security", then this denotes a concern with national identity and security, supporting policies that limit the entry of immigrants and increase control over immigration.

This trend can be seen through the way words are correlated when organized by categories (Table 2).

Table 2 shows the words, organized by categories, that are statistically and positively correlated in the analyzed corpus. This means that the words show a similar tendency, increasing and decreasing together. Analyzing Table 2, it is important to highlight the correlation between words such as "Portugal" with "Wide open" (r = 0.76, p = 0.01), "Borders" (r = 0.74, p = 0.01) or "Europa" with "Wide open" (r = 0.76, p = 0.01) and "Control" (r = 0.07, p = 0.01) which feed a nationalist sense of protection against external influences. In this respect, it is important to highlight the correlation between the word "Portuguese" and "Immigrants" (r = 0.65, p = 0.03), corroborating the creation of a polarization between "us" and "them".

As for the immigration category, the correlation of the word "Immigrant" with "Extinction" (r = 0.66, p = 0.03) is evident as a warning to the perceived dangers of uncontrolled immigration, suggesting that unrestricted immigration is irresponsible and harmful to society, resonating with the idea of a great replacement, a far-right conspiracy theory.

In the corruption category, the correlation of words like "Clean-up" (r = 0.74, p = 0.01) and "Finish" (r = 0.72, p = 0.01) with "Cushy job" appeals to a feeling of renewal and national purification, where the objective is to restore the integrity of the government and institutions, dominated by "them" (corrupt parties) "PS" (r = 0.84, $p < 0.001$) and "PSD" (r = 0.65, p =−0.05).

Table 2. Association between words (r of Pearson).

Category	Word	Positive Correlation (Words)
Nationalism and National Sovereignty	Portugal	Wide open (r = 0.76, p = 0.01) Borders (r = 0.74, p = 0.01)
	Portuguese	Immigrants (r = 0.65, p = 0.03)
	Borders	Control (r = 0.07, p = 0.01)
	Control	-
	We (our)	-
Criticism of the EU	Europe	Wide open (r = 0.76, p = 0.01) Control (r = 0.63, p = 0.04)
Immigration	Immigration	Uncontrolled (r = 0.80, p < 0.001) Foreigners (r = 0.80, p < 0.001) Illegal (r = 0.61, p = 0.05)
	Immigrant	Illegal (r = 0.83, p < 0.001) Extinction (r = 0.72, p = 0.01) Government (r = 0.61, p = 0.05)
	Nationality	Illegal (r = 0.76, p = 0.01) Uncontrolled (r = 0.76, p = 0.01) Law (r = 0.76, p = 0.01) Enter (r = 0.76, p = 0.01) Immigration (r = 0.72, p = 0.01) Migrations (r = 0.71, p = 0.01) Extinction (r = 0.66, p = 0.03)
	SEF	Illegal (r = 0.93, p < 0.001) Imports (r = 0.88, p < 0.001) Immigrants (r = 0.81, p < 0.001) Migrations (r = 0.75, p = 0.01) Reverse (r = 0.75, p = 0.01) Nationality (r = 0.71, p = 0.01)
(In)security	Security	Criminality (r = 0.65, p = 0.04)
	Insecurity	Climate (r = 0.81, p < 0.001) Criminality (r = 0.70, p = 0.01) Daily (r = 0.70, p = 0.02)
	Assault	To happen (r = 0.75, p = 0.01)
	Police	Convicted (r = 0.82, p < 0.001) Criteria (r = 0.82, p < 0.001) People (r = 0.82, p < 0.001) Bandit (r = 0.65, p = 0.01)
Social politics	Gender Ideology	-
	LGBT	-
Justice (Severe Penalties)	Prison	Assaults (r = 0.93, p = 0.001) Politicians (r = 0.76, p = 0.01) Doors (r = 0.67, p = 0.03)
	Penalty	-
Corruption	Corruption	Taxpayers (r = 0.71, p = 0.01)
	Cushy job	Corruption (r = 0.93, p < 0.001) PS (r = 0.84, p < 0.001) Minister (r = 0.82, p = 0.003) Clean-up (r = 0.74, p = 0.01) Acabar (r = 0.72, p = 0.01) Shady deals (r = 0.66, p = 0.03) PSD (r = 0.65, p = −0.05)

Source: voyanttools.org (accessed on 8 July 2024).

4.2. Critical Discourse Analysis: Identifying Topics and Patterns

André Ventura's tweets on the social media platform X use news articles to legitimize his political–ideological stance, particularly concerning political corruption, "uncontrolled" immigration, and the lack of strict punishment policies for these two "problems". In addition to these topics, we identified other recurring themes in the radical-right discourse. Some tweets comment on news with a clear appeal to nationalism and national sovereignty, inciting fear and distrust in the socio-political system to justify measures. In one tweet, describing news that "residents of Porto complain of insecurity" (Supplementary Material, Table S2 T1), Ventura claims that "the Portuguese people are captured by globalist interests sold to multiculturalism, while system politicians live in luxury condos [. . .]", labeling them as "traitors to Portugal!" (T1). In this case, the president of Chega! appeals to a vision of Portugal as a country that must be protected from external influence, advocating for national sovereignty.

Alongside these themes, the analysis of tweets highlights the sharing of alarmist news to justify security policies or stricter legislation. His discourse includes phrases like: "Robberies in broad daylight" (T2) or "a good thug is a jailed thug!" (T3) and a repeated reference to a "climate of insecurity" (e.g., T2). André Ventura shares a screenshot of a news article with the headline "Crime reaches its highest level in 10 years". To this news feature (the source of which is not identifiable), he adds the description in the tweet that "[. . .] this is the country the socialists left. We need to restore police authority and the speed of justice. A good thug is a jailed thug!" (T3). In this case, there is an amplification of the sense of insecurity to legitimize the need for harsher penalties to combat crime and restore safety in the streets.

In our analysis, sharing crime news serves to support the argument that the country needs a stricter judicial system. André Ventura criticizes the judicial system for being lenient. In the tweet where he shares the news "Convicted criminal tutor arrested for abusing two minors in Viana do Castelo", the president of Chega! writes that it is "another shocking news" and that "with Chega, pedophiles and rapists will not have suspended sentences, nor will they run scot-free" (T4). In another tweet, he shares the news: "Grandfather impregnated 15-year-old granddaughter in Braga". In the same tweet, Ventura expresses his outrage, asking, "how is it possible that this man was sentenced to only 8 years in prison after raping and impregnating his own granddaughter?" and promises that "with Chega governing, he would never see the light of day outside prison again!" (T5). These news stories legitimize a stricter justice system, with harsher sentences for violent crimes, portraying the current situation as permissive.

In this ideological line, there seems to be a strategic framing in the approach to the news being shared. For example, the news chosen often serves to illustrate a scenario of danger, be it from immigration, insecurity, or corruption, in which the Chega! party presents itself as the only viable solution. André Ventura makes statements like "if Chega ruled, a monster like this would never see the light of day again" (T6) or that "Portugal doesn't need this [. . .] our women and children need to be safe" (T7).

In a critique of the so-called "gender ideology", the president of Chega! uses news about the rejection of financial support for security forces (T8) to criticize resource allocation. Ventura frequently legitimizes his position on social policies by invoking traditional values and cultural norms. By criticizing the allocation of resources for promoting "gender ideology", the president of Chega! seeks to legitimize his position by suggesting that these resources would be better used in other areas. This appeals to the traditional value of good financial management and prioritization of what he considers to be the real needs of society.

We can look at another example where André Ventura tweets about news on increasing support for LGBTQ+ people and access to healthcare for transgender individuals (T9). The far-right politician positions himself as a defender of the general interests of the Portuguese population, highlighting the lack of family doctors and the waiting lists that should be the government's priority, saying, "what sense does it make that thousands

of Portuguese are without family doctors, dying in hospitals [. . .]". Ventura seeks to delegitimize the government's actions by implying that resources allocated to healthcare for transgender people are misdirected, as seen in the following: "[. . .] and, at the same time, the Government prioritizes resources for 'transgenders'?" The use of quotation marks around "transgenders" may suggest an attempt to devalue or question the legitimacy of this identity. The dichotomy between "us" (needy Portuguese) and "them" (the transgender community and the government) continues to be a central tactic in his discourse. Ventura aims to show that there is a conflict of interest between ordinary Portuguese citizens and government policies that he considers overly focused on specific minorities.

In addition to these themes, throughout our analysis, we also encountered some textual passages that involve nationalist appeals, with a strategy of polarization and construction of a common identity, often based on social divisions between "us" and "them". There is a defense of policies that supposedly protect national interests against external influences (immigration) and internal corruption. The following points of the analysis focus only on the following two categories: immigration and corruption.

4.2.1. Immigration

The topic of immigration has gained more prominence in the period leading up to the European elections. The sharing of news articles framed around the theme of immigration is a strategy used by André Ventura to delegitimize current immigration policies. Throughout the analysis, we found tweets of news articles that support the thesis of "uncontrolled" immigration, thus necessitating stricter border security policies. In Figure 2, we observe four tweets in which Ventura uses the news to justify a more severe policy regarding the entry and legalization of immigrant groups in Portugal. In Figure 2A, we read a headline stating that "The majority of Portuguese people agree with Chega! and believe that immigration is out of control" (T10). Sharing this headline allows the president of Chega! to legitimize his discourse, using logical and stylistic arguments presented by an authority, in this case a study from the Faculty of Law of the University of Lisbon, as mentioned in the lead. Figure 2B presents the sharing of an international news article about a crime in Paris (T11), committed by "an Islamic radical". In this tweet, Ventura uses a crime committed by an alleged immigrant to warn Portugal about the danger that "uncontrolled" immigration can represent for the Portuguese.



Figure 2. André Ventura's tweets about immigration. (**A**) The news article presents the following headline: "Majority of Portuguese agree with Chega and believe that immigration is out of control". In the lead, the following can be read: "a study from the Faculty of Law of the University of Lisbon concludes that about 55% of Portuguese people believe that immigration is out of control and nearly 50% think that Portugal should establish immigration quotas". (**B**) The news article presents the following headline: "Islamic radical kills one person in Paris; the victim was a German tourist". The lead of the news article is incomplete. The translation of André Ventura's comment can be read in Table S2 of the Supplementary Materials (T11).

André Ventura characterizes immigration policies as reckless and dangerous through his description of the news in the following tweet: "Portugal does not learn from what is happening in other European countries", stating that "it leaves the doors open to everyone, borders without control, risking the safety of all Portuguese people" (T11). Here, there is a clear association of "uncontrolled" immigration with the country's insecurity. The president of Chega! frequently seeks to justify the need for stricter immigration policies, which include the deportation of immigrants who commit crimes and the reactivation of the Foreigners and Borders Service (SEF). For example, he shared a news story about a woman who was raped by a driver during a trip to Lisbon (T7). The crime is attributed to an Indian immigrant. Ventura shares the news to justify deportation policies based on the need to maintain legal order, commenting that "for this [Indian immigrant] and others like him, there is only one word: deportation!" He then resorts to emotional appeals by stating, "[. . .] our women and children must be safe" (T7). In other tweets, the radical right-wing leader uses emotionally charged language to evoke fear and insecurity among the population, such as when he writes, "we warned that this climate of insecurity would reach our cities" in a comment on a news story that blames immigrants for "robberies and assaults" presented in a television news report (T2).

Thus, André Ventura uses the news to create a sense of urgency and fear, associating immigration with insecurity, which can reinforce stereotypes and prejudices without solid factual basis.

Focusing on the theme of immigration, the analysis of the corpus allows us to establish a division between "us" (the true Portuguese) and "them" (the immigrants and those who support immigration policies). Ventura calls for the defense of "our children" and "our women" (T7). Immigrants are presented as a direct threat to the safety of Portuguese families. Another passage that reinforces this dichotomy is when Ventura says, "We warned that this climate of insecurity would reach our cities". "We" refers to himself and the members of Chega! who have been raising national security alerts, while "they" (immigrants) continue to be associated with increased insecurity.

4.2.2. Corruption

Corruption is the most prominent topic in the analyzed corpus. This theme is present in tweets posted from November to May. As the European elections approached, as previously noted, Ventura began to prioritize sharing news related to immigration and security policies. During the legislative election campaign, corruption was the most predominant theme.

In general, the use of news sharing framed around this topic serves to delegitimize traditional political parties, accusing them of being corrupt and dishonest. Ventura often suggests that politicians, especially those on the left, are untrustworthy, undermining their legitimacy without necessarily offering concrete solutions to combat corruption. Voting for Chega! is presented as the only solution. For instance, when he states that "your [socialist party] corruption will not pass" (T12) or when he says that "we need a public administration that is not suffocated by party cards and regime boys" (T13).

The use of terms like "rotness" (Figure 3), "regime boys" (T13), or "party deals" (T14) in comments on the news that he shares aims to discredit and instill distrust in established parties, associating them with corrupt practices. This idea is evident in Figure 3, which shows a screenshot of a television news story that reads: "corruption and immigration are the main focus of Chega!". In the tweet, it reads that it is necessary to "clean the rot that exists in the institutions in Portugal".

"Furthermore, André Ventura creates another social division based on the dichotomy of 'us' (Chega! and the Portuguese) and 'them' (corrupt politicians). In comments on shared news articles, it is often read that Portugal 'needs cleansing' (Figure 4).



Figure 3. Tweet that exemplifies the use of coarse language.



Figure 4. Example of a Tweet by André Ventura in which he calls for the "cleaning" of Portugal. Note: The screenshot of the news has the following title: "MP [Ministério Público] says that Lacerda can continue alleged criminal activity because Costa [ex-prime minister], "his best friend", is in office until March 10th". In the photo, António Costa, former prime minister, appears on the phone. In full, André Ventura's comment says: "Prime Minister and leader of the PSD under suspicion of serious crimes. This is rottenness. Portugal needs cleaning!".

In this way, politicians and public institutions are classified as 'rotten' or 'dirty,' thus requiring a 'cleansing' that only Chega! can achieve. André Ventura uses news about corruption to reinforce the need for drastic measures. By sharing a news article about the 'teia operation', which involves corruption cases (T15), the leader of Chega! clearly aligns himself with the people ('us') against the corrupt elite ('them'), commenting that 'we continue to vote, they continue to steal' (T15). In response to this situation, he adds 'this has to stop. This will end!' (T15), promising that, with Chega!, as corroborated by the news, corruption will come to an end.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The analysis of tweets with news, posted by André Ventura, president of the Chega! party, on social media X, has allowed us to verify that there is a clear political communication strategy based on sharing news to justify its political–ideological positioning.

Our findings show that there is a selective choice of news around topics such as immigration, corruption and security, which is used to support their political proposals while influencing public opinion. By ignoring or minimizing topics that could be unfavorable, Ventura not only guides the focus of public debate, but also reinforces social divisions, such as the dichotomy between "us" and "them".

The results obtained in our quantitative and qualitative analyses complement each other. Voyant tools have made it possible to verify that concepts such as "security", "immigration" and "control" are recurrent, showing a concern with national security and restrictive immigration policies, or that words like "cleanliness" correlate with corruption. Meanwhile, the CDA has made it possible to confirm, in a more detailed way, that André Ventura curates the news to promote his interests and legitimize his speech.

According to Thorson and Wells (2016), this action by Ventura can be called "strategic curation", a type of content curation that exposes his followers or political supporters to a selective reality. In fact, any user can effectively be a gatekeeper in today's digital information environment (Buyens et al. 2024), with the possibility of playing the role of opinion leader on social media (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955). However, politicians are not ordinary users, they seek influence on social media through the opportunity it offers, rather than through social media. Through social media, political leaders, namely populist actors, escape the criticism they are most frequently subjected to in traditional media (Salgado 2022). In the case of André Ventura, the advantage of "strategic curation" lies in the ability to control the public narrative. By carefully choosing which information to promote, Ventura can direct attention to topics that are favorable to him, such as immigration, security or corruption, while ignoring or minimizing aspects that could be harmful to his image.

Furthermore, our findings seem to be in line with other studies, which have discovered a strategic use of news on online platforms to build a collective identity (Baugut and Neumann 2019; Swart et al. 2019; Haanshuus and Ihlebæk (2021); Dowling 2024). In 1997, Cappella and Jamieson (1997) reported on the importance of framing news for its influence on public opinion. This is why André Ventura skillfully uses news headlines that can be used to support his arguments and which justify his ideal.

It is also important to note that the president of Chega!, on his X account, does not share news itself, that is, he never shares the link to the news website and the original news feature. Often, the source of the media is only identified through the design of the news website. In this sense, we can argue that André Ventura uses the cloning of the news title (screenshot) only to serve as a heuristic shortcut (Petty and Cacioppo 1986; Entman 2007) in his persuasive strategy. Ventura makes tweets, commenting on news, with the purpose of using the persuasive authority of journalists and the news they report.

We found that this use of news effectively serves to amplify fears and insecurities. By commenting on news about crime, insecurity or corruption, Ventura is promoting the acceptance of strict policies. When news about crimes committed by immigrants is shared, there is a clear objective of generalizing the threat and exclusion of a certain group. Filtering this type of news can effectively legitimize your political position. Several studies have shown that the greater the media coverage of topics such as immigration or crime, the greater the tendency for voters to be in favor of anti-immigration policies (Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart 2007; Burscher et al. 2015). Therefore, André Ventura's narrative coincides with the radical right's discourse by promoting collective anguish over others or "them" (Orazani et al. 2020). In fact, there is clearly the use of the "politics of fear" through their comments on the news, particularly when dealing with the threat that "they" (always represented as non-Portuguese or corrupt politicians) represent to "us" (good Portuguese and victim of the elites) (see Wodak 2015; Ekström et al. 2022).

In terms of populist platitudes, and similar to other studies (Prior 2024; Novais 2023; Santos and Roque 2021; Pérez-Curiel and Baptista 2024), our research has highlighted corruption and threats to national sovereignty, namely the increase in immigration, as the main topics of André Ventura's speech. In general, the president of Chega! maintains a rhetoric that coincides with his party's proposals, appealing to a vision of Portugal as

a country that must be protected from external influences. Immigration gained prominence close to the European elections, while corruption was addressed more during the legislative election campaign. The news shared essentially serves to delegitimize migration policies and public institutions, positioning Chega! as the solution to these problems.

To conclude, our study reveals the relevance of understanding the role of social media in promoting populism, highlighting how news can serve as heuristic shortcuts in legitimizing the discourse of the populist radical right. We contribute to the existing literature by demonstrating how strategic news curation is part of André Ventura's populist communication, distinct from non-populist strategies that generally do not employ such a calculated selection of content to influence public opinion. While other communication approaches may seek to build consensus or inform in a balanced way, populist strategies, such as those employed by Ventura, are explicitly aimed at manipulating public perception through the amplification of fears and prejudices (Berti and Loner 2023). Thus, in some ways our findings also reinforce the theory of the "politics of fear" (Wodak 2015; Ekström et al. 2022) as an important element in populist communication and offer new insights into how these tactics are operationalized in the digital environment.

We believe that this practice is based on the principle that news, especially that coming from recognized sources, has an inherent legitimacy that is transferred to the discourse with which it is associated (Mindich 2000). This happens because the news is perceived by the public to be an impartial representation of reality, giving credibility to the narratives built around it (Reich 2010). News credibility becomes a powerful tool in political communication, especially in contexts where trust in the political system is low and the populist narrative finds fertile ground. Ventura capitalizes on this credibility to reinforce the idea that his speech is based on facts, even though the selection of this news is partial and oriented to support a specific, generally alarmist or exclusionary, view. This strategic use of authentic news by Ventura resembles, in a certain aspect, the tactics of disinformation agents, who create or disseminate fake news to legitimize their speeches. Both cases start from the recognition that the news is perceived as a legitimate source of information (Baptista and Gradim 2022a). However, while Ventura selects true news that aligns with his speech, misinformation agents create fake content that mimics the structure of authentic news in an attempt to give his speech an appearance of legitimacy.

We believe that this study can be expanded to comparative analyses with other populist leaders in different international contexts, examining the effectiveness of communication strategies on social media.

Furthermore, future research can explore the impact of these narratives on voter behavior and perceptions, as well as the interaction between traditional and digital media in the construction of populist discourse.

6. Limitations

Although our study provides important contributions to the understanding of populist communication strategies, it is necessary to recognize its limitations. First, the analysis is restricted to a single case study—populist leader André Ventura—which limits the generalization of results to other contexts and populist leaders. Furthermore, the analysis focused exclusively on one platform (X), not considering other social media or communication channels that can also influence public discourse. Second, although the study uses both quantitative and qualitative analyses, the interpretation of the data still relies significantly on qualitative discursive analyses. This approach, although rich in details, can introduce interpretative biases.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/journalmedia5030084/s1; Table S1: Sample of tweets analyzed in the study; Table S2: Translation of André Ventura's tweets cited as an example in the analysis text.

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Notes

1 For more information, see https://www.dn.pt/4219714261/president-da-republica-decretou-a-dissolucao-do-parlamento/ (accessed on 8 July 2024).

2 More information at https://pt.euronews.com/2024/02/26/arrancou-a-campanha-para-as-legislativas-de-10-de-marco (accessed on 8 July 2024).

3 See https://cnnportugal.iol.pt/eleicoes-legislativas/andre-ventura/extrema-direita-pode-superar-os-40-deputados-e-rocar-o-milhao-de-votos/20240310/65ee258ad34e8d13c9b8aaf9 (accessed on 8 July 2024).

4 See https://eco.sapo.pt/2024/06/09/portugal-vai-hoje-as-urnas-eleger-21-eurodeputados-mas-ha-paises-na-ue-que-ja-votaram-saiba-quais/ (accessed on 8 July 2024).

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Article

Public Service Media and Platformization: What Role Does EU Regulation Play?

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Abstract: Conceived as institutions funded by the public purse and intended to exist devoid of political influence, the mandate of public service media (PSM) entities is to disseminate reliable news content and high-quality audiovisual productions to all demographic segments, inclusive of marginalized communities and audiences that are typically under-served. Over the previous ten years, the rise in prominence of global platforms in national media systems has precipitated many changes in the media sector, including unique challenges for PSM institutions guided by specific public service values. Using a holistic conceptual framework for assessing the implementation of these values, this article analyzes the impact of platformization on Europe's PSM and discusses how the Union's policy approaches affect related challenges to PSM. The analysis indicates that while the European Union (EU) has accorded a high priority to PSM within its media policy framework, the role that Brussels plays in protecting the independence and efficacy of PSM has been circumscribed, given that the onus of regulating PSM entities rests with national governments. This has engendered contrasting experiences wherein certain PSM outlets enjoy political independence and command significant public trust while others function as state-controlled propaganda vehicles, advancing the objectives and interests of governing bodies. The EU has addressed global platform power in recent attempts to safeguard its digital future, including the Digital Services Act (DSA), Digital Markets Act (DMA), and the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA). However, these acts do not adequately address PSM's two central and often interconnected problems: funding challenges and political pressures.

Keywords: public service media; media policy; EU regulation; Digital Services Act; Digital Markets Act; European Media Freedom Act; platformization

1. Introduction

The historical development of public service media (PSM) is one punctuated by a myriad of significant challenges, spanning from political pressures (Šimunjak 2016) to fervent competition with commercial broadcasting entities and the relentless lobbying barrage launched by privately controlled media groups (Sjøvaag et al. 2019; Bardoel and Lowe 2007).

This intricate dynamic has consigned PSM to an exceptionally distinctive quandary. In terms of one aspect, it has been the object of political bodies and individuals who strive to wield these outlets as tools to accomplish their objectives while occupying a position of power. As a result, governmental bodies often seize control of the editorial direction of these broadcasters.

Yet, PSM institutions also find themselves in a unique position as they benefit from many advantages, encompassing public funds as well as regulatory privileges and protections. As a result, privately held media conglomerates have been incessantly trying to

destabilize their financial structure to undermine PSM's competitiveness and relevance (Lowe and Berg 2013).

Beyond those challenges, PSM organizations have grappled with diminishing public support. The public has progressively distanced themselves from these broadcasters in nations where PSM entities are subject to intense politicization. The expansion of the multi-channel broadcasting system during the 1990s exacerbated the identity crisis faced by PSM institutions within Europe (Larsen 2016). This evolution allowed audiences to avail themselves of an increasing group of commercial competitors, frequently presenting audiovisual content markedly more appealing than PSM conglomerates.

The advent of the Internet in the first decade of the 21st century ushered in a unique wave of complexities for all media players. PSM organizations, in particular, faced a series of obstacles in adjusting to the new ecosystem, especially in their endeavors to retain viewership, now allured by a copious assortment of content providers burgeoning across a rapidly expanding multiplicity of platforms. The digital economy, invigorated by the substantial technological progress of the two preceding decades, led to platformization, a phenomenon that fundamentally transformed the paradigms of content creation, dissemination, and exchange (Nieborg et al. 2019; Nieborg and Poell 2018; Helmond 2015).

As defined by Nieborg et al. (2019), platformization is understood as "the penetration of economic, governmental, and infrastructural extensions of digital platforms into the web and app ecosystems, fundamentally affecting the operations of media industries and production practices" (Nieborg et al. 2019). Such penetration has also affected PSM organizations as platformization prompted a departure from an editorially steered approach towards a demand-driven process (Poell et al. 2017). This paradigm shift carries profound implications for media outlets, impacting their journalistic independence and institutional autonomy (Pranz and Prinzing 2023). In the face of a world dominated by platforms, media entities were compelled to assimilate their operations into the most influential and renowned tech platforms, which have become the chosen destination for their audiences who moved there en masse to consume content (Poell et al. 2017).

To adjust to the platformized environment, PSM organizations had to transform their modus operandi to align with the evolving landscape (D'Arma et al. 2021; van Es and Poell 2020; Donders 2019). A segment of these organizations found themselves in a position where they needed to overhaul their distribution approaches (D'Arma et al. 2021), while others were forced to devise methods to assimilate audience commoditization (Sørensen et al. 2020) without exercising undue control over users or intruding on their media predilections (Andersson Schwarz 2016).

Some PSM organizations understand that the process of transformation ought to begin with an expansion of their mission as they swiftly transition into public service platforms (PSPs) (Bonini Baldini et al. 2021) while adjusting their operations to compete and stay relevant in the new market and technological logic imposed by social media platforms. As part of this process, some of them also understood that prioritizing user engagement (Marzal-Felici et al. 2021) is an indispensable strategy.

Drawing the line, the outcome of the PSM's attempts to adapt to and compete within this new landscape remains shrouded in ambiguity. Some academics argue that the PSM adjustment to platformization is an evolutionary process they will eventually undergo to survive (Berry 2020; Martin 2021). Other scholars predict a potential downfall for numerous PSM entities, as they would succumb to the pressures of this new reality as a result of several factors, ranging from an aversion to change, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and dwindling financial support (Fuchs and Unterberger 2021), to the swift fragmentation of their audiences (Gesto-Louro and Campos-Freire 2020).

As PSM organizations contend with both old and contemporary challenges, the EU has been expected to intervene more vigorously.

Historically, the EU has championed the protection of public service broadcasting, offering both regulatory measures and political backing. However, its influence has been circumscribed, as the Amsterdam Protocol[1] grants member states the ultimate power to

regulate the funding, governance, and mission of their respective public service broadcasters (Llorens 2019). Thus, national authorities ultimately determine and enforce most PSM- and media-related regulatory standards.

In the last five years, the EU has introduced a series of laws which are anticipated to directly (European Media Freedom Act adopted in 2024[2]) or indirectly (Digital Services Act (DSA)[3] and Digital Markets Act (DMA)[4] adopted in 2022) influence Europe's public service media sector (see Table 1). The DSA regulates online intermediaries and platforms to prevent illegal and harmful activities online and the spread of false news. The DMA aims to make the digital sector markets fairer by regulating the large digital platforms that provide platform services. The EMFA regulates the gatekeeping power of the platforms over access to media content. Of the three, EMFA is the only one with specific provisions for PSM.

Table 1. Relevance of the latest EU acts related to PSM.

	Aim Specifically Related to the PSM	**Scope Relevant for PSM**	**Implications for PSM**
Amsterdam Protocol	To strengthen the recognition of the value of public service broadcasting and its contribution to the democratic, social, and cultural needs in society, and to the preservation of media pluralism	Stipulates that the funding, definition, commissioning, and organization of public service broadcasting are the competence of each member state.	National governments have full authority to regulate PSM, provided that PSM financing schemes do not distort competition or the market.
Digital Services Act (DSA)	None	Introduces obligations on tech platforms to notify PSMs about changes in limitations imposed on their content. Offers PSMs new venues to lodge complaints against tech platforms in cases of measures limiting their content.	The relationship between PSMs and the third-party online platforms on which they distribute their content is expected to become more structured.
Digital Markets Act (DMA)	None	Prevents tech platforms from exploiting their dominant position in unfairly prioritizing certain services.	
European Media Freedom Act (EMFA)	To ensure "editorial" and "functional" independence of PSM	Requires member states to introduce mechanisms for fair appointment and dismissal of governing bodies, adequate and transparent funding schemes, and independent monitoring.	Although these provisions explicitly require guarantees for PSM independence, it will be up to national governments to decide what mechanism they will introduce (limitations of Amsterdam Protocol applying).

Sources: authors based on EU legal documents.

This article analyzes the repercussions of these three EU laws (DSA, DMA, and EMFA) for PSM organizations. Its objective is to identify the PSM-related areas in which EU legislation is likely to exert influence and those where the EU should intensify its efforts to protect PSM organizations more efficiently.

2. Materials and Methods

This analysis is based on a qualitative thematic analysis of the most recent media-related EU legal acts to understand how they address the challenges faced by PSM organizations. The three EU acts chosen for this study are the EMFA and the twin DSA and DMA legal package. These were selected as the key EU legal documents that were envisaged or hoped to influence PSM organizations (Rozgonyi 2023; Llorens and Muñoz-Saldaña 2023; Cole 2023; Voorhoof 2023; Holtz-Bacha 2024; Pollicino and Paolucci 2024).

The DSA and DMA are designed to strengthen the European digital marketplace by enforcing shared responsibilities for all suppliers of digital services, with a particular focus on online platforms. The EMFA was created to improve and protect the independence of the European media, putting forward provisions in areas such as the transparency of media ownership, the independence of media regulation and public service media, media pluralism, and diversity.

These laws were analyzed based on a normative and empirical framework for the study of PSM developed by the authors (Dragomir et al., forthcoming) as an instrument to evaluate the influence that recent trends in four operational and activity areas of PSM (remit and governance, funding, audience, and content production) have on the guiding values of these institutions, as defined by the European Broadcasting Union (EBU): accountability, diversity, excellence, independence, innovation, and universality (EBU 2012).[5] The set of six values has gained universal acceptance and endorsement from the sector (EBU's 115 PSM organizations in 56 countries signed off on them), prominently featuring in the value-focused literature about PSM (Michalis 2023; Campos-Freire et al. 2019; Murschetz et al. 2023).

An analysis of how these challenges are addressed or likely to be influenced by EU-level legislative measures (namely, the three relevant EU laws examined for this article) is provided below after a summary of the value-related challenges facing PSM as operationalized by the framework.

3. Framework Results: Platformization and Challenges to PSM Values

Defined as digital structures functioning as intermediaries, platforms bridge the gap between a plethora of users, including advertisers, service providers, producers, and suppliers (Srnicek 2017). They have expanded across the digital milieu, establishing themselves as the architecture of the World Wide Web (Plantin et al. 2018; Van Dijck 2021). They are not merely a venue for user interaction and value creation but also potent instruments designed to mine and accumulate data from their users, a process that forms the bedrock of their business model (Van der Vlist and Helmond 2021; Arvidsson and Bonini 2015; Dong et al. 2024).

The concept of platformization has been extensively examined from various angles in recent years, with the literature covering an extensive range of topics such as society (Van Dijck et al. 2018), academia (Kumar et al. 2019), journalism (Hase et al. 2022), workforce (Gandini 2021), and the public domain (Smyrnaios and Baisnée 2023), to name but a few. With the rise of platforms as the dominant infrastructural and economic paradigm within the social web (Helmond 2015), platformization has significant implications for media industries and their production methods (Nieborg et al. 2019; Nieborg and Poell 2018).

The impact of platformization on PSM has also been extensively covered in the literature for nearly a decade. Yet, analyses have often taken a piecemeal approach, focusing on specific aspects such as collaboration with commercially funded streaming platforms or their presence on social media (D'Arma et al. 2023).

The normative framework established to examine PSM in the platform economy described above (see Section 2) was designed to provide a holistic analysis of the impact of platformization on PSM values (Dragomir et al., forthcoming). PSM organizations are confronted with challenges that are analogous to those encountered by their commercial counterparts. However, as they adapt to a platformized environment, they need to ensure that they adhere to the core values underpinning their mission. A departure from these values would result in a transformation of the institutions in question, potentially leading to an alignment with the values and characteristics observed in their commercial media counterparts.

The application of the framework revealed that funding and governance represent the most critical challenges facing PSM organizations across all four areas of investigation. One area, funding, is influenced by platformization. PSM organizations are forced to develop a financing model that is both justifiable and transparent to users, who must be able to

understand the value they receive in return for their payments. The other area, governance, is not connected to platformization and represents an older challenge. PSM organizations have historically been subject to political pressures and state-controlled manipulation. The majority of solutions to address issues in these two areas are primarily policy-driven.

Another area of significant challenges for PSM is audience engagement. PSM institutions strive to develop a communication and public participation model that is both distinctive from commercial competitors and sustainable, while also appealing to users. In professional development, there is more balance between threats and opportunities, which is unsurprising given that platformization affords all media outlets new venues to flourish and experiment with innovative content models. While certain policies can facilitate improvement, more comprehensive intervention from PSM organizations, particularly their management, is necessary to effectively address the issues related to audience engagement and professional development.

Finally, of the six values that underpin the PSM mission, independence, diversity, and excellence are the most vulnerable to platformization-related challenges. Diversity is also the PSM value with the greatest potential for advancement thanks to platformization (see Appendix A).

4. Analysis: The EU's Regulatory Responses to the Challenges to PSM Values

Two types of intervention—policy-based and organization-led—are required to address the challenges faced by PSM outlets in Europe as identified through the application of our normative and research framework (see Appendix A). Given the EU's purported influence in media-related policymaking, particularly regarding PSM, this section will examine the potential impact of the EU's most recent legal acts on PSM operations during unprecedented change. The analysis will concentrate on the four areas identified by the normative framework.

4.1. Legal Overview

The rise of digital platforms has prompted the EU to approve several regulatory measures that respond to the latest trends in the digital economy. In 2022, the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Digital Markets Act (DMA) received official approval. The two laws are designed to strengthen the European digital marketplace by imposing a series of requirements on the suppliers of digital services. The law primarily targets online platforms (Llorens and Muñoz-Saldaña 2023).

Specifically, the DSA mandates platforms to articulate their strategies for mitigating the risks stemming from the unlawful dissemination of content and the manipulation of services that threaten public safety, democratic procedures, and user practices (Stollfuß 2024). It is incumbent upon these platforms to transparently showcase their efforts in content moderation, particularly in addressing the systemic risks that the DSA classified into four categories: risks linked to the propagation of illicit content, risks impinging on fundamental rights, deleterious impacts on democratic processes, and risks compromising public health, the safety of minors, and severe adverse effects on people's physical and mental wellbeing, or gender-based violence.[6]

The DSA can be relevant for PSMs as they will be notified when tech platforms alter or limit the exposure of their content. This legislation also allows PSM organizations to lodge objections against such decisions or regulatory non-compliance via both internal and external mechanisms (EBU 2023).

On the other hand, the DMA serves as a bulwark against platforms exploiting their dominant position to unfairly prejudice other services, including via the manipulation of content prioritization (Mazzoli 2023), which could potentially yield advantageous outcomes for PSM outlets.

However, the opportunities for PSM brought about by the DSA and DMA remain limited because no criteria for prioritizing PSM content have been included, a "missed opportunity" to address the imbalance between PSM and dominant platforms (Rozgonyi 2023).

Ultimately, additional EU laws, such as the Copyright Directive (2019) or the Regulation on Artificial Intelligence (2024), are anticipated to exert indirect influence on PSM, particularly in areas such as disinformation, copyright protection, and the media ecosystem (EBU 2024b).

4.2. Responses in the Areas with the Highest Risk for PSM: Governance and Funding

When it comes to governance, the prevailing circumstances within numerous PSM institutions throughout Europe continue to be fraught with difficulties, primarily attributable to their operational independence, which is often compromised by the processes of appointment and the dismissal of their boards. The Media Pluralism Monitor, a research project funded by the European Union, has identified 17 EU member states that are confronted with a medium and high risk concerning the independence of their respective PSM entities (CMPMF 2024).

The process of appointing the members of the PSM governing bodies continues to be vulnerable to political manipulation, particularly in—but not limited to—the Central and Eastern European nations where attempts to reform erstwhile state broadcasters into autonomous PSMs have been persisting for more than three decades, yet yielding largely unsuccessful outcomes (Jakubowicz 2008; Mungiu-Pippidi 2003). The matter of political party allegiance among the members of the PSM governing bodies is universally acknowledged as a significant obstacle to their independence. This has prompted the enactment of legal provisions in some European nations, prohibiting the appointment of people with political affiliations to PSM boards (Cabrera Blázquez et al. 2022).

The few positive examples of governance models that have proven effective in protecting the PSM's independence show the importance of including civil society in the selection and removal of governing bodies, as well as of diluting political sway by endowing political parties with equal power in the selection of those bodies. This approach is preferable to exclusively permitting the ruling party to make those decisions (Dragomir and Söderström 2022). On a more negative note, the politicization of governing bodies can also add another layer of instability to PSM governance. In Spain, for instance, the nationwide public service broadcaster RTVE has had three different Presidents over the last three years, a situation that hampers the implementation of a clear strategy.

When it comes to financing, PSM organizations within Europe predominantly derive their funding from a combination of state budget allotments and public financial resources external to the state budget. In 2022, state subsidies represented the most substantial segment of the budget for PSM organizations in approximately 60% of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) nations. Conversely, license fees and diverse modes of financing constituted the most significant portion of the budget for PSM institutions in the remaining 40% of the countries (EBU 2024a).

In recent years, PSM institutions have struggled with a significant predicament, namely the crisis of the license fee-based model. One key factor that led to it is the shift in audience preferences towards video-on-demand (VoD) platforms where consumers enjoy the liberty to pay for the content of their selection. Another consequential factor is the mounting pressure from diverse political factions, particularly those leaning toward the far-right spectrum. These groups express dissatisfaction with the editorial coverage of PSM channels, seizing the opportunity presented by the rise of subscription-based platforms to critique the public funding-based models that keep PSM organizations afloat (Spudich 2023).

The funding model crisis poses the most severe threat to the future of PSM among all challenges identified within the scope of our framework. In the platform-centric media ecology, PSM organizations are compelled to pursue a funding paradigm that conforms to established benchmarks such as stability and adequacy, independence from political meddling, fairness and justifiability, as well as transparency and accountability. However, this is an intricate task, given the legal restrictions imposed on PSM organizations and the political terrain in which they function. Additionally, any refurbished PSM funding model needs the endorsement of audiences, which would only happen if audiences discerned

value in the PSM content vis-à-vis the programs available on commercial platforms and embrace the concept of public good that underpins PSM operations. Addressing this tension between the principles of PSM funding and the new content consumption logic imposed by platformization is by far the most daunting task that lies ahead for PSM outlets.

Regarding the challenges associated with their remit and governance, specifically the mechanisms for appointing and terminating PSM board members and the criteria for their qualification, governments throughout Europe have made no strides toward depoliticizing PSM governance structures.

Furthermore, except for a handful of PSM entities that have effectively transitioned to a levy/tax-based financing structure, funding solutions tailored to the platform economy have yet to be tested. This poses considerable risks to PSM organizations. Neither of the two non-tax-based solutions being circulated as solutions thus far seems adequate. A model fully anchored in the state budget will only amplify governmental control over these media entities. On the other hand, a shift towards a subscription model or privatization would inevitably lead to the disintegration of these organizations.

The EU has recently addressed PSM governance and funding-related challenges through the EMFA (see Table 2), an act that has been perceived as an attempt by the European Commission to increase the scope of its activities (Holtz-Bacha 2024). The EMFA acknowledges that media corporations cannot be treated like other enterprises, and their independence must be protected within the EU framework (Kozak 2024).

According to the EMFA, Member States are encouraged to establish protective mechanisms to ensure their independence. This is primarily achieved through the appointment of governance bodies, the financing of public services, and the institution of authorities or entities to oversee compliance.

However, it is unlikely that EMFA provisions will result in any tangible outcomes in the two areas. This is primarily because Member States have significant autonomy in determining the nature of their public audiovisual service, as set out in the Amsterdam Protocol (Cole 2023). This particularly applies to decisions related to the mission, operation, and content of such services.

This was the main reason why, historically, the EU could do little to effectively protect the independence of national PSM organizations. Apart from the European Parliament voicing concerns about potential threats to PSM independence in certain Member States[7] or endorsing the recommendations by the Council of Europe[8], the EU's response remained limited.

Regarding funding, the EU has been addressing the financial aspects of public media through its package of rules on state aid, which were adopted in 2001 and revised in 2009[9]. Over the decade ending in 2024, the Commission has issued a total of four resolutions in instances of state aid for public service broadcasting.[10] In three of them, the Commission decided not to voice objections, concluding that aid was compatible with the common market. In one case, the Commission put forth suitable measures to clarify the definition and scope of PSM.[11]

The Commission intervened in financial PSM-related issues, but only seldom and usually at the request of local NGOs and activists. However, there was room for improvement in the timeliness and efficiency of its response. In 2016, Mérték Média Monitor, a Hungarian media NGO, in collaboration with a Hungarian radio station and a Hungarian MEP, submitted a joint complaint to the European Commission. The complaint detailed how unlawful state aid is used to fund the Hungarian public media.[12] It took the Commission three years to request a response from the Hungarian authorities. After six years of assessments, the Commission accepted the Hungarian government's response in the summer of 2022. However, the Hungarian authorities' assertion that the Hungarian public service broadcasting financial mechanism has remained unchanged for nearly three decades lacked substantiation. Historically, the funding model of the Hungarian state-administered media has undergone significant alterations, transitioning from a license fee structure to a state budget model. This concluded the EU's involvement in the matter.

4.3. Responses in the Audience Engagement Area

Effective audience engagement strategies are paramount to the evolution of media outlets and are particularly crucial for PSM institutions, given their financial and regulatory advantages. The use of public funds to create content intended to cater to the broadest demographic, including marginalized communities with minimal or non-existent access to content, renders PSM outlets exceptionally responsible. Concerning the need to improve audience engagement, this responsibility is fulfilled when a significant level of distinctiveness, compared to its commercial counterparts, is attained.

Despite the swift proliferation of digital media in certain nations, PSM institutions have succeeded in maintaining or augmenting their distinctive programming. In several European countries, people discern that the quality of news content produced by PSM is higher than that of all other media offerings (Sehl 2020). In other countries, PSM organizations have successfully attracted politically diverse audiences spanning the left–right political continuum (Schulz et al. 2019). PSM channels are also one of the few media platforms that actively accommodate minority audiences, which do not present attractive commercial potential for privately owned media companies (Jacobs et al. 2016; Horsti and Hultén 2011).

Nevertheless, to achieve the level of audience engagement commanded by potent tech corporations and social media networks, PSM organizations still have to make significant progress. So far, many PSM institutions have exhibited a somewhat languid pace in involving audiences in content creation (Glowacki and Jaskiernia 2018). Engagement has remained confined to rudimentary forms, such as promoting user-generated content (Vanhaeght and Donders 2021).

A salient repercussion of the intensifying schism between certain PSM entities and their respective audiences is their diminishing appeal among younger spectators who prefer alternative platforms for entertainment and news consumption. As noted in the latest EBU report on PSM audiences, the ability of PSM to reach young audiences continues to decline, with weekly PSM reach falling by 3.2% in 2023 compared to the previous year (EBU 2024c).

Faced with this challenge, PSM organizations across Europe are trying to identify the most effective formats for engaging with their audiences in online spaces, with varying degrees of success. For example, in 2016, the BBC announced its decision to stop broadcasting BBC Three as a linear television channel (a decision reversed six years later) and move the service entirely online, citing the loss of younger viewers as the main reason for this strategic shift (Woods 2017). In contrast, in Germany, funk, an online video-on-demand platform run by the country's public broadcaster and aimed at younger audiences, has been highly successful in terms of aligning its distribution strategy with audience habits and preferences (Stollfuß 2019, 2024).

In terms of audience engagement, the EU is expected to play a role through the DSA and DMA, which are likely to provide PSM with more information about the limitations that social media platforms impose on their content (see Table 2). However, when it comes to significant initiatives, such as the development of strategies to re-engage with audiences in the platformized environment, the responsibility primarily falls on the management of PSM organizations.

4.4. Responses in the Professional Development and Content Production Area

The rapid evolution of the digital marketplace, coupled with the alterations triggered by the platform economy, has also forced PSM organizations to likewise embark on a process of adjusting their content strategies and newsrooms, moving away from a conventional production and distribution model that predominantly concentrated on broadcasting, to a more varied and multi-platform approach.

In certain countries, this has prompted a reconfiguration of the production process. To illustrate, the BBC implemented a strategy entailing collaborative newsgathering operations with platform-specific production to bolster efficiency and coordination (Sehl et al. 2019). On the other hand, in nations such as Italy, France, and Poland, PSM groups have been faced with an uphill task of converging their digital initiatives into a singular online

portal (Sehl et al. 2019). In the process, the reticence of staff voicing concerns regarding prospective job attrition has played a significant role. The reshaping of content production within PSM outlets has also been influenced by factors related to governance, including political interference and resistance by powerful trade unions, as well as considerations related to funding (Cañedo et al. 2024).

But besides all these difficulties, the platform economy has also furnished PSM with substantial opportunities for improved content propagation. PSM organizations frequently demonstrate superior dynamism on social media platforms than their commercial counterparts, disseminating more content on such platforms (Ferrer-Conill et al. 2023). Nonetheless, increasing dependence on social media networks can harm some PSM outlets (Meese and Hurcombe 2021).

In addition to these platformization-induced developments, PSM organizations consistently fight with a raft of longstanding hurdles in content creation and professional growth. One such trend is the wave of pressures levied by commercial rivals who decry what they perceive as an unfair competitive advantage enjoyed by PSM channels due to their access to public funds. This contention has recently garnered significant momentum, primarily facilitated by the presence of social media platforms, which offer a fecund environment for PSM critics to express themselves (Cushion 2019).

In terms of professional development and content production, the situation is somewhat mixed. The EU's DSA and DMA provide for PSM organizations, as they do for other media outlets, with enhanced opportunities to challenge social media platforms in instances where they restrict content (see Table 2). However, when it comes to addressing external pressures that impact the professional capacity of PSM organizations, none of the EU laws are applicable. Concurrently, a significant portion of the responsibility for the content development strategies devised by PSM organizations falls upon their management, contingent upon the outcome of their internal decision-making processes.

Table 2. EU responses to challenges to PSM values.

Area/Issue	Challenges/Threats	EU Response	Potential Impact of EU Law on National PSMs
Remit and governance			
Appointment and dismissal mechanisms for governing body members	Dominance by one political faction	EMFA	Dependent on national authorities
	Lack of civil society participation	None	
Qualification criteria for governing body members	Absence of professional competence as a criterion	None	
	Absence of provisions barring candidates with political links	EMFA	Dependent on national authorities
Relationship with state bodies	Reporting to state authorities: possibility of dismissal of board members and budget cuts	None	
Financing			
Funding trends	Flat growth of PSM funding	None	
	Forecast decrease in PSM funding	None	
Funding models	Failing to retain public funding models (license fee, various forms of taxation)	EMFA	Dependent on national authorities
	Reliance on state budget allocations	EMFA	Dependent on national authorities
	Switch to user-based funding models (i.e., subscriptions, etc.)	None	

Table 2. *Cont.*

Area/Issue	Challenges/Threats	EU Response	Potential Impact of EU Law on National PSMs
Preferential access to infrastructure	Loss of advantaged position in the frequency spectrum *	Not covered by the analysis	
	Audiences		
Use of public service media content	Dwindling trust in PSM news output	Organization-specific, limited room for EU regulation	None
	Decline of diverse, balanced political coverage	DSA, DMA	Transparency over content exposure limitations
	Low awareness of the PSM mission	Organization-specific, limited room for EU regulation	None
Audience outreach	Aging audiences	Organization-specific, limited room for EU regulation	None
Public participation in content production	A mismatch between the goals of the media and the interest of the public	Organization-specific, limited room for EU regulation	None
	Professional development and content production		
Automation and digital integration	Slow adoption of new tech, especially artificial intelligence, in content production	Organization-specific, limited room for EU regulation	None
	Failure to boost the content distribution, access to more sources and data	DSA, DMA	Lodging complaints against large platforms
	Role in reducing exposure to false news	DSA, DMA	Lodging complaints against large platforms Transparency over content exposure limitations
External pressures	Intensification of pressures from commercial players	None	
	Government pressures	EMFA	Dependent on national authorities
	Pressures from social networks on editorial strategy	DSA, DMA	Lodging complaints against large platforms
Safeguards for editors and newsroom	Lack of legal provisions guaranteeing newsroom's independence	None	

* new problem, yet not related to platformization. Source: authors.

5. Conclusions

Although the EU uses various policy tools to protect the independence of PSM organizations throughout the continent, the influence of EU legislation on the essential aspects of PSM's editorial and operational independence has been relatively minimal.

In the past decade, the convergence of technology has blurred the lines between traditional media platforms and digital outlets. This shift has posed a challenge for both EU and national policymakers, who often struggle to address the multifaceted nature of modern media within existing regulatory frameworks. In this complex landscape, PSM organizations face a string of complex challenges, including ever-evolving technology, the increasing power of global platforms in national markets, political polarization, and diminishing trust in democracy and democratic communication among citizens.

The way that PSM organizations in the EU have responded to the phenomenon of platformization has differed among countries. Some outlets have successfully taken advantage of the opportunities presented by the platform economy, while others have yet to. Some organizations adapt faster to the platformized media environment, while others are falling behind (Dragomir and Tuñez, forthcoming).

It is safe to say that PSM all over Europe face many apparent challenges to their values as a result of technological changes, new audience preferences, and a heightened competitive landscape, for example, due to the shift to over-the-top platform services and the global dominance of actors such as Netflix (Arjona Martín 2021). The influence of social media platforms has prompted some PSM organizations to develop content delivery channels that align with the platform's logic. In Germany, for instance, the introduction of funk, an online video-on-demand platform operated by the country's public broadcasters, was prompted by the rapid decline in traditional television viewership among younger demographics. While the service was commended by some for its responsiveness to the evolving media landscape, its creation was also perceived as a sign of a growing alignment between television and social media culture, which could potentially give tech platforms greater influence over the future of public service television (Stollfuß 2019).

At the same time, platformization can be viewed as a complex and controversial development for PSM (Rivero 2023), and not only as a negative development. For instance, it has been argued that the presence of PSM in social media platforms can support some of the core values and aims, such as universality via dissemination and diversity via dialogues (Moe 2008).

Today, with the challenges and promises of artificial intelligence (AI) significantly impacting the field of the media era, there are many new opportunities for PSM. From the perspective of individual audience members, PSM AI can function similarly to any media in curation and personalization by offering relevant, tailored content and services, thus supporting individual citizens' information, educational, and entertainment needs. In terms of industry impact and values, PSM can become a leader through the ethical use of AI and by innovating for distinct applications of AI. Most importantly, from the perspective of societal value, PSM AI can be a tool with a specific public service mission to support human rights and citizenship through, for example, exposure to diversity and reversing bias (Horowitz et al. 2023).

Research conducted for this article revealed two challenges that all PSM organizations across Europe are confronted with: a deepening crisis of the PSM funding model, made worse by platformization's pressures, and an increased level of state control, which has been a long-standing issue for PSM organizations, predating platformization.

Regarding funding, PSM entities, especially those reliant on license fees or other forms of audience contributions, are facing increased scrutiny for reform. There is a prevailing consensus that, to maintain a PSM that remains true to its fundamental mission and values, embracing a tax-based funding model is preferable to relying on subscriptions or other forms of revenue used by commercial providers. In countries where PSM organizations rely on government funding, the issue of political influence remains a significant concern, affecting the independence of these institutions.

The second key finding that emerged through the application of our framework is the troubling connection between the government and PSM. This linkage is conspicuously starting to influence broadcasters hitherto perceived as independent, such as ORF in Austria and the BBC among many others (Dragomir and Tuñez, forthcoming), menacing these institutions' capacity to execute their public service obligations.

This intersection between financial instability and government control is a significant threat to upholding diversity and independence, two of the six values underpinning the PSM mission.

The EU addresses the two major threats to the EMFA, which is undoubtedly the EU's most ambitious effort to protect European media freedom. However, the mechanisms to ensure that the EMFA provisions are followed at the national level are lacking.

Moreover, the European Commission's role in the EMFA implementation is limited to issuing opinions, engaging in a dialog with national governments, and conducting regular monitoring activities, which are not likely to have a palpable effect on the national level. As noted by Bayer and Cseres (2023), the EMFA provisions do not offer sufficient guidance on how decisions should be made or by whom. With much room for Member States to make decisions on these matters, the EU has "no direct impact on the definition, governance or structure of PSM" (Llorens and Muñoz-Saldaña 2023, p. 11).

On the other hand, legal acts evolve in response to emerging issues, as is likely to be the case with the three acts under consideration. However, this could be too late for PSM organizations as they may be compelled, in their attempt to adapt to the platform-centric environment, to compromise, if not wholly abandon, the values that underpin their mission. The problem is, as van Es and Poell (2020) note, that PSM strategists and policy-makers are acutely aware of the impact of platformization but have not yet been able to develop powerful and coherent responses to the opportunities and challenges posed by the dominance of commercial platforms. Our analysis suggests that a comprehensive response is needed, not only from national policies, but also from the EU, which could play a significant role in supporting those efforts from several vantage points. So far, such a policy approach from the EU is not evident.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Overview of the challenges to PSM values: a normative and empirical framework for the study of PSM.

Area/Issue	Challenges/Threats	PSM Value under Threat	Key Factor	Type of Response Needed
Remit and governance				
Appointment and dismissal mechanisms for governing body members	Dominance by one political faction	Independence Diversity Accountability	Older problem	Policy
	Lack of civil society participation	Independence Diversity Accountability	Older problem	Policy

Table A1. *Cont.*

Area/Issue	Challenges/Threats	PSM Value under Threat	Key Factor	Type of Response Needed
Qualification criteria for governing body members	Absence of professional competence as a criterion	Excellence	Older problem	Policy
	Absence of provisions barring candidates with political links	Independence Accountability	Older problem	Policy
Relationship with state bodies	Reporting to state authorities: possibility of dismissal of board members and budget cuts	Independence Accountability	Older problem	Policy
Financing				
Funding trends	Flat growth of PSM funding	Independence Excellence Diversity Innovation	Platform-related	Policy
	Forecast decrease in PSM funding	Independence Excellence Diversity Innovation Universality	Platform-related	Policy
Funding models	Failing to retain public funding models (license fee, various forms of taxation)	Independence Universality	Platform-related	Policy
	Reliance on state budget allocations	Independence Accountability Diversity	Older problem	Policy
	Switch to user-based funding models (i.e., subscriptions, etc.)	Universality Diversity	Platform-related	Policy Organization-led
Preferential access to infrastructure	Loss of advantaged position in the frequency spectrum	Universality	New problem *	Policy
Audiences				
Use of public service media content	Dwindling trust in PSM news output	Universality Accountability	Platform-related Older problem	Organization-led
	Decline of diverse, balanced political coverage	Independence Diversity	Older problem	Policy Organization-led
	Low awareness of the PSM mission	Universality Independence Accountability	Older problem	Organization-led
Audience outreach	Aging audiences	Universality Diversity Innovation	New problem	Policy Organization-led
Public participation in content production	A mismatch between the goals of the media and the interest of the public	Excellence Innovation	Platform-related	Organization-led
Professional development and content production				
Automation and digital integration	Slow adoption of new tech, especially artificial intelligence, in content production	Excellence Innovation	Platform-related	Organization-led
	Failure to boost the content distribution, access to more sources and data	Excellence Innovation Universality	New problem	Organization-led
	Role in reducing exposure to false news	Excellence	Platform-related Older problem	Organization-led

Table A1. *Cont.*

Area/Issue	Challenges/Threats	PSM Value under Threat	Key Factor	Type of Response Needed
External pressures	Intensification of pressures from commercial players	Independence Excellence Universality Diversity	Platform-related Older problem	Policy Organization-led
	Government pressures	Independence Accountability	Older problem	Policy
	Pressures from social networks on editorial strategy	Independence Diversity Excellence	Platform-related	Policy Organization-led
Safeguards for editors and newsroom	Lack of legal provisions guaranteeing newsroom's independence	Independence Diversity Excellence Accountability	Older problem	Policy

* new problem, yet not related to platformization. Source: Reference removed anonymization.

Notes

1 Treaty of Amsterdam amending the Treaty on European Union, the Treaties establishing the European Communities and certain related acts—Protocol annexed to the Treaty of the European Community—Protocol on the system of public broadcasting in the Member States, Official Journal, 10 November 1997, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:11997D/PRO/09 (accessed on 10 May 2024).

2 Regulation (EU) 2024/1083 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 April 2024 establishing a common framework for media services in the internal market and amending Directive 2010/13/EU (European Media Freedom Act) OJ L, 2024/1083, 17 April 2024, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2024/1083/oj (accessed on 1 May 2024) (BG, ES, CS, DA, DE, ET, EL, EN, FR, GA, HR, IT, LV, LT, HU, MT, NL, PL, PT, RO, SK, SL, FI, SV).

3 Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on a Single Market For Digital Services and amending Directive 2000/31/EC (Digital Services Act) (Text with EEA relevance) PE/30/2022/REV/1 OJ L 277, 27 October 2022, pp. 1–102.

4 Regulation (EU) 2022/1925 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 September 2022 on contestable and fair markets in the digital sector and amending Directives (EU) 2019/1937 and (EU) 2020/1828 (Digital Markets Act) (Text with EEA relevance) PE/17/2022/REV/1 OJ L 265, 12 October 2022, pp. 1–66.

5 Universality underscores the importance of PSM in guaranteeing accessibility to all segments of society. Independence is commonly perceived as the capacity of these media organizations to make independent decisions regarding their operations and organizational matters, including programming choices, editorial agendas, and staffing strategies. The concept of excellence in PSM is defined by the commitment to upholding high professional standards. Diversity entails the presentation of a wide range of perspectives from various segments of society, including minority groups, different age cohorts, and diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. Innovation refers to the promotion of novel and creative journalistic and programming formats, technologies, and methods of audience engagement. To ensure accountability, PSM need to establish comprehensive editorial guidelines and embrace transparent policies, budgets, and editorial decision-making processes.

6 See more on the European Commission website: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/digital-services-act_en (accessed on 10 July 2024).

7 Report on media pluralism and media freedom in the European Union (2017/2209(INI)), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-8-2018-0144_EN.html (accessed on 10 July 2024).

8 See note 7.

9 Communication from the Commission on the application of State aid rules to public service broadcasting, Official Journal of the European Union, 27 October 2009, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52009XC1027(01)#ntr1-C_2009257EN.01000101-E0001 (accessed on 20 July May 2024). It should be noted that the application of state aid rules is anchored in various other EU legal documents. For example, the state aid assessment is covered by the Treaty on European Union, and the competition rules and aid to promote culture are regulated by the Treaty of Maastricht. The Treaty of Amsterdam and the Amsterdam Protocol also have provisions that cover the financial aspects of public service broadcasting. The AVSMD refers to public service media, albeit vaguely, stating that benefiting from "technological progress" is necessary for the fulfillment of the mission of public service broadcasting. Finally, the Transparency Directive puts forward a series of requirements on the

transparency needed in public undertakings. The Commission has also adopted a series of communications on the application of the state aid rules.

10 European Commission Competition Directorate-General, "Legal Framework conditions applicable to State aid to public service broadcasting", 31 March 2022, https://competition-policy.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-06/stateaid_decisions_public_service_broadcasting.pdf (accessed on 1 August 2024).

11 European Commission, 'State aid: Commission approves amended financing regime of Belgian broadcaster RTBF', 7 May 2014, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_14_523 (accessed on 1 August 2024).

12 'Funding for public service media in Hungary—a form of unlawful state aid?', Mérték, 9 January 2019, https://mertek.eu/en/2019/01/09/funding-for-public-service-media-in-hungary-a-form-of-unlawful-state-aid/ (accessed on 1 August 2024). For more, see State aid complaint No. 45463.

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Digital Political Communication in the European Parliament: A Comparative Analysis of Threads and X During the 2024 Elections

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Abstract: In an era marked by digital transformation and political polarization, the European Union faces significant challenges in maintaining effective communication and public trust. This study examines the European Parliament's use of Threads and X (formerly Twitter) during the 2024 European Parliament elections, analyzing the types of content published, multimedia resources employed, and engagement generated on both platforms. Using a quantitative content analysis of 171 posts from the official English-language accounts, this research identifies key differences in communication strategies across platforms. Findings reveal that X prioritizes video content, mentions, and reposts, fostering higher user engagement, whereas Threads leans toward infographics and a more informative approach. The study highlights the fragmented nature of digital political communication and underscores the necessity for the European Parliament to adapt its strategies to the dynamics of each platform. These insights contribute to a broader understanding of institutional communication in an evolving digital ecosystem and its implications for electoral mobilization and public discourse.

Keywords: social media; Twitter; X; Threads; political communication; digital communication; European parliament

1. Introduction

The European Union (EU) is navigating an era of intensified digital transformation, where Euroscepticism, political polarization, and misinformation have emerged as defining challenges (Wardle, 2023; Broda & Strömbäck, 2024; Gosztonyi, 2024). As traditional media struggle to maintain credibility and influence, digital platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and Threads have become essential tools for institutional communication, political engagement, and electoral mobilization (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2023). However, while these platforms provide opportunities for direct interaction, they also expose institutions to algorithmic bias, audience fragmentation, and the influence of political influencers (Bennett & Livingston, 2018).

The 2024 European Parliament elections illustrate the growing importance of digital political communication as political actors increasingly rely on social media to mobilize voters, counter misinformation, and shape public opinion (Nulty et al., 2016; Husovec, 2024). At the same time, the fragmentation of audiences across platforms complicates institutional messaging, requiring strategic adaptations that balance credibility, transparency, and engagement (Poell et al., 2019). Algorithm-driven visibility, audience segmentation, and viral

political narratives further reshape traditional models of political discourse, making digital adaptation a necessity rather than an option (Trenz et al., 2021).

In light of these challenges, this study examines how the European Parliament has evolved its digital communication strategy, focusing on its use of X and Threads. By analyzing 171 posts from the official English-language accounts, this research identifies key differences in content formats, audience engagement strategies, and narrative approaches. The findings contribute to a broader understanding of how institutional actors navigate an increasingly volatile digital ecosystem—one shaped by personalized algorithms, artificial intelligence, and evolving political rhetoric. As the EU seeks to maintain democratic legitimacy and transparency, this study provides crucial insights into the effectiveness of social media in contemporary institutional communication.

2. Theoretical Framework: The Digital Turn in Political Communication

The digitalization of political communication has transformed how political actors interact with citizens, shaping electoral processes, political discourse, and governance strategies. Unlike traditional media, which historically mediated political communication through structured gatekeeping, digital platforms now allow for direct, unfiltered interaction between politicians and voters. Social media has profoundly reshaped how citizens access, consume, and share information, becoming fertile ground for disinformation. In times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the global energy crisis of 2021–2022, the overabundance of unverified information—referred to as an infodemic—has generated confusion and hindered accurate understanding of events (Pérez-Curiel & Velasco Molpeceres, 2020a, 2020b; Dutta et al., 2022).

This phenomenon is linked to a crisis of trust in traditional institutions, where the media play a key role in shaping social reality through the selection and framing of facts. This shift has been particularly significant in the European Union (EU), where issues such as Euroscepticism, political fragmentation, and declining public trust have compelled institutions to adopt new digital engagement strategies. Information manipulation is not a new phenomenon, but the digital era has amplified its reach. In this regard, emotions—such as fear, anger, and frustration—have been strategically used as tools of manipulation, fostering public polarization and the spread of conspiracy theories.

This process fuels Euroscepticism and reinforces social divisions (Happer & Philo, 2013; Arnold-Forster, 2023; Liu, 2022; Teneva, 2023). Audience fragmentation and emotional manipulation on digital platforms have hindered EU institutions' efforts to counter negative narratives. In this context, populist movements, particularly those on the far right, have exploited emotions to mobilize public opinion against European institutions, deepening the disconnect and complicating the construction of a shared European identity (Tuñón Navarro & Sánchez del Vas, 2022; Gerbaudo, 2018; Casero-Ripollés et al., 2023; Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2023; De Vries, 2018).

The 2024 European Parliament elections exemplify the increasing reliance on digital platforms for political messaging (Gosztonyi, 2023; Dąbrowski & Suska, 2022). Social media networks such as X (formerly Twitter), Threads, Facebook, and TikTok have emerged as dominant spaces for mobilization, discourse shaping, and information dissemination. These platforms allow political figures and institutions to bypass traditional media filters, target specific demographics, and optimize their campaigns through algorithmic curation (Gerbaudo, 2024).

Additionally, personalized digital campaigning, AI-driven voter segmentation, and microtargeting have reshaped the dynamics of electoral competition (Campos-Domínguez et al., 2022). This is not exclusive to Europe: Donald Trump's 2024 campaign in the United States

has demonstrated how digital strategies—such as the strategic use of deepfake content, AI-powered political persuasion, and social media echo chambers—have redefined modern electoral tactics.

Despite the democratizing potential of digital engagement, these technological advancements also pose significant risks. The rapid spread of misinformation, algorithmic bias, and the amplification of populist rhetoric have intensified polarization and weakened institutional trust. Political actors increasingly exploit engagement-driven algorithms that favor viral content, often at the expense of factual accuracy and democratic deliberation. The weaponization of digital platforms for political manipulation raises critical concerns about the integrity of democratic processes (Altay et al., 2022). As political engagement becomes increasingly intertwined with algorithmic decision making, it is crucial for policymakers, scholars, and regulatory institutions to address these challenges. Future governance frameworks must strike a balance between promoting open political discourse and mitigating the risks associated with digital misinformation, AI-driven manipulation, and the monopolization of electoral narratives.

2.1. The Platformization of Politics: A New Electoral Landscape

Media, broadly understood, are considered fundamental pillars of democracy in the Member States of the European Union (EU). In fact, the EU promotes and mandates the existence of public service media (PSM), whose development has been shaped by a complex process influenced by structural challenges and both political and commercial pressures (Dragomir et al., 2024). Since their inception, PSM have played a crucial role in providing impartial and accessible information to citizens, aligning with public interest and the common good. However, these media outlets have been subjected to attacks by political actors and private media conglomerates seeking to influence their editorial agenda or undermine their economic viability (Šimunjak, 2016).

The expansion of multichannel broadcasting in the 1990s and the subsequent digitalization brought about an identity crisis for PSM, forcing them to compete with commercial platforms, thereby affecting their editorial independence and public service mission (Larsen, 2016). The rise of the internet and the expansion of digital platforms in the early 21st century have profoundly transformed the production, distribution, and consumption of content. This phenomenon of "platformization" (Nieborg et al., 2019; Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Helmond, 2015) has reconfigured the media ecosystem, with digital platforms permeating all aspects of the information landscape. The rise of platformization—the dominance of social media and digital ecosystems in political communication—has profoundly reshaped electoral campaigns, governance models, and political engagement (Poell et al., 2019). Unlike traditional public service media (PSM), which historically curated political debate through journalistic oversight, contemporary platforms prioritize engagement-driven content, often favoring sensationalist narratives over substantive policy discussions.

One of the most visible consequences of platformization is the fragmentation of political audiences. Unlike traditional media, which reached broad and diverse populations, digital platforms enable highly personalized, microtargeted political messaging. This has contributed to the creation of ideological echo chambers and filter bubbles, where users are exposed primarily to viewpoints that reinforce their preexisting beliefs (García-Orosa, 2021).

Right-wing populist movements, including Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany, Rassemblement National in France, and Lega in Italy, have leveraged these dynamics to mobilize support through platform-optimized messaging. Studies show that populist narratives—often framed around themes of nationalism, anti-immigration sentiment, and

Euroscepticism—gain disproportionate algorithmic amplification, further intensifying polarization and disinformation (Bíró-Nagy & Szászi, 2024; Wagner & Enyedi, 2024).

The emergence of political influencers represents another key shift in digital-era politics (Campos-Domínguez et al., 2022). Figures like Elon Musk, Nigel Farage, and Giorgia Meloni have leveraged digital spaces to circumvent institutional gatekeepers, shaping political narratives through viral, memetic, and algorithmically optimized content.

Unlike traditional politicians, political influencers lack institutional accountability while exerting significant influence over electoral discourse. Their content strategies—rooted in provocation, populist rhetoric, and direct audience engagement—resonate particularly well within platform-driven environments (Guevara & Theviot, 2024).

As electoral strategies become increasingly dependent on AI-driven content amplification, misinformation regulation, electoral transparency, and the ethical dimensions of algorithmic persuasion emerge as urgent policy considerations (R. Liu et al., 2022). Without stronger governance measures, the political information ecosystem risks becoming an unregulated, engagement-driven battleground, where emotionally charged content eclipses democratic debate.

2.2. Digital Democracy and the Transformation of Political Institutions

The digitalization of democratic institutions has profoundly reshaped political engagement, governance transparency, and electoral participation. The increasing reliance on digital tools by political institutions, particularly in the European Union (EU), has transformed traditional models of governance and political communication. However, while digital democracy fosters greater accessibility and participation, it also presents challenges related to disinformation, cybersecurity, and the evolving role of non-institutional political actors.

Historically, political communication was mediated by mass media, where institutional legitimacy played a central role in shaping public opinion (McNair, 2017). Today, social media platforms have disrupted this structure, enabling real-time interactions between political actors and citizens while simultaneously undermining institutional credibility through algorithmic bias and the amplification of populist discourse (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2024; Gosztonyi, 2024). The EU, in response, has attempted to modernize its political outreach, adopting digital governance models that emphasize participatory democracy, real-time engagement, and counter-disinformation efforts.

Despite these advancements, the integration of digital tools in democratic processes raises concerns over electoral manipulation, data privacy, and the role of foreign influence operations in shaping political discourse. The challenge facing European institutions is ensuring that digital democracy remains transparent, inclusive, and resistant to the risks posed by algorithmic-driven disinformation and cybersecurity threats.

The European Parliament and national legislatures have increasingly turned to digital platforms to modernize electoral communication and mobilize voter participation. Unlike traditional campaigns that relied on mass media and centralized messaging, contemporary digital strategies enable direct interaction with voters, real-time policy discussions, and algorithmic-driven audience segmentation (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2024).

Key components of digital electoral mobilization include the following:

(1) Real-time citizen engagement: European institutions have expanded their digital presence through live Q&A sessions, interactive policy forums, and real-time debates. Platforms like X (formerly Twitter), Facebook Live, and YouTube have become essential tools for legislators to engage directly with the public (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2024).

(2) Transparency and digital governance: The European Parliament provides real-time updates on legislative proceedings, policy decisions, and voting outcomes through online platforms. This initiative aims to bridge the democratic deficit by fostering greater institutional accountability (Shahreza, 2024).
(3) Counter-disinformation initiatives: To address the proliferation of fake news and manipulated political narratives, the EU has partnered with fact-checking agencies, AI-driven verification tools, and independent media watchdogs (Zinnbauer, 2021). These measures seek to ensure that electoral processes remain free from digital manipulation.

However, despite these innovations, institutional communication faces challenges in competing with the digital strategies employed by non-institutional actors. Political influencers, populist leaders, and digital activists often outperform official institutional accounts due to their ability to harness viral content, emotive rhetoric, and microtargeted messaging. Studies indicate that digital-native populist movements, particularly those on the far-right, have successfully utilized social media algorithms to dominate political discourse, sidelining institutional narratives (R. Liu et al., 2022).

Furthermore, political institutions struggle with algorithmic disadvantages—unlike influencers and partisan media outlets, whose content benefits from high engagement metrics, official institutional messaging often appears bureaucratic and less engaging within platform-driven digital ecosystems (García-Orosa, 2021). Addressing this disparity will require innovative content strategies, including more personalized messaging, interactive digital storytelling, and partnerships with trusted independent media outlets.

The expansion of digital democracy has coincided with an escalation of cybersecurity threats, foreign disinformation campaigns, and electoral manipulation. The 2024 European Parliament elections were particularly affected by coordinated foreign interference from state-affiliated actors, including Russian and Chinese disinformation networks (Gerbaudo, 2024). These operations aimed to undermine trust in European institutions, spread Eurosceptic narratives, and exacerbate political divisions over sensitive issues such as NATO, the Ukraine war, and EU immigration policies.

Foreign-led disinformation efforts in European elections have typically followed three primary strategies:

(1) Amplification of Eurosceptic and nationalist rhetoric: state-sponsored media outlets and troll farms have strategically promoted anti-EU sentiment, portraying Brussels as an authoritarian bureaucracy that undermines national sovereignty.
(2) Deepfake propaganda and AI-generated misinformation: advances in artificial intelligence have enabled the creation of hyper-realistic deepfake videos, falsely depicting EU officials and candidates engaging in fabricated scandals or making misleading policy statements.
(3) Exploitation of algorithmic biases: foreign actors have leveraged social media platforms' engagement-driven algorithms to spread viral misinformation, ensuring that misleading content reaches millions before fact-checking mechanisms can intervene (R. Liu et al., 2022).

A key challenge in combating foreign digital interference is that disinformation spreads more rapidly than fact-checking efforts can contain it. Research suggests that false narratives travel six times faster than verified news, primarily due to the emotional and sensationalist nature of misinformation (Vosoughi et al., 2018). While platforms such as Meta and X have implemented stricter moderation policies, enforcement remains inconsistent, and loopholes in digital governance allow disinformation networks to adapt and persist.

Beyond disinformation campaigns, cybersecurity vulnerabilities pose a direct threat to electoral integrity. Political institutions, campaign offices, and electoral databases have

become prime targets for cyberattacks, with hacking attempts aimed at disrupting voter registration systems, altering public perception, and leaking sensitive government information (Gosztonyi, 2024).

Key concerns include the following:

(1) Election infrastructure attacks: reports indicate that cyberattacks targeting electoral commission databases, campaign email servers, and government digital platforms have increased in frequency, raising concerns over potential data breaches (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2024).
(2) Bot-driven political manipulation: automated bot networks have been used to flood social media discussions with fabricated narratives, artificially amplifying divisive political debates while suppressing legitimate discourse (García-Orosa, 2021).
(3) Algorithmic content distortion: malicious actors manipulate search engine algorithms and trending topics to ensure that misleading political content dominates online political discussions in critical election periods (Tucker et al., 2018).

To counteract these threats, the EU has adopted regulatory measures such as the following:

(1) The Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Digital Markets Act (DMA): these legislative frameworks impose stricter obligations on digital platforms regarding content moderation, political advertising transparency, and data protection (Kettemann & Schulz, 2023).
(2) Fact-checking partnerships: European institutions have established collaborations with independent media organizations and fact-checking agencies to mitigate the spread of digital misinformation (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2024).
(3) Election security task forces: coordinated efforts between EU cybersecurity agencies and member-state intelligence services aim to strengthen digital infrastructure resilience and prevent foreign electoral interference (Gerbaudo, 2024).

Despite these initiatives, challenges remain in enforcement and platform compliance. Major technology companies often resist regulatory intervention, citing concerns over free speech and operational autonomy. Additionally, the sheer volume of digital misinformation exceeds the capacity of fact-checking institutions, making it difficult to contain its impact before it influences voter behavior (Vosoughi et al., 2018).

As European institutions continue to embrace digital democracy, the balance between technological innovation and democratic integrity will remain a defining challenge. Future strategies must develop more sophisticated digital engagement strategies to compete with populist digital actors, strengthen cybersecurity defenses to protect electoral integrity, and enforce stronger platform accountability measures to curb algorithmic manipulation and misinformation and expand digital literacy programs to empower citizens in navigating online political discourse.

The digital transformation of political institutions presents opportunities for greater political participation, but without robust safeguards, transparency mechanisms, and regulatory enforcement, digital democracy risks being overshadowed by misinformation-driven electoral manipulation and cybersecurity vulnerabilities.

2.3. Misinformation and Algorithmic Manipulation in Elections

Misinformation has become one of the defining challenges of digital political communication (Zuhdi et al., 2023). The growing reliance on social media platforms for political discourse has led to an ecosystem where profit-driven, engagement-maximization algorithms prioritize viral, sensationalist content over fact-based political messaging. As a result, political misinformation spreads rapidly, shaping public perceptions and influencing electoral decisions in ways that undermine democratic deliberation.

Algorithmic curation of political content has fundamentally altered the way elections are contested, particularly in democratic systems where free access to information is essential. Research suggests that platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and TikTok rely on algorithmic recommendation systems that disproportionately amplify emotionally charged narratives over policy-based discussions (Borz & De Francesco, 2024). These biases manifest in several ways:

(1) Emotional Amplification and Political Polarization: Studies indicate that anger, outrage, and fear-based narratives perform better than fact-based, policy-driven discussions (Borz & De Francesco, 2024). This phenomenon fosters ideological polarization, making bipartisan consensus-building increasingly difficult (Campos-Domínguez et al., 2022).
(2) Filter Bubbles and Echo Chambers: Algorithmic personalization leads to self-reinforcing ideological echo chambers, where users are repeatedly exposed to content that aligns with their preexisting beliefs, reducing exposure to diverse perspectives (Bene et al., 2025). This has significant implications for voter behavior, as users become less likely to engage with countervailing viewpoints (Törnberg & Törnberg, 2024).
(3) The Rise of Algorithmic Populism: Populist rhetoric thrives in high-engagement digital environments, disproportionately amplifying anti-establishment messaging while sidelining institutional perspectives (McNair, 2023). This has led to an increase in populist electoral successes, as algorithm-driven amplification provides a direct pathway to mass mobilization without reliance on traditional media channels (Taneja, 2024).

The intersection of digital misinformation and algorithmic bias has introduced new vulnerabilities to electoral integrity. Social media networks, driven by business models that prioritize user engagement, often facilitate the spread of misleading or outright false political content (Bene et al., 2025).

Several key trends characterize this landscape:

(1) Automated disinformation networks: Political campaigns and foreign actors have increasingly relied on bot networks to manipulate electoral discourse. These AI-driven systems can flood digital platforms with coordinated narratives designed to influence voter sentiment (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2024).
(2) Deepfake political content: The 2024 European elections and Donald Trump's U.S. presidential campaign saw an increase in the use of AI-generated political deepfakes. These sophisticated disinformation tactics erode public trust and make it increasingly difficult to differentiate between genuine political messaging and synthetic media.
(3) Platform resistance to regulation: Despite increased scrutiny, major digital platforms have resisted comprehensive regulatory oversight, citing concerns over free speech and innovation (Kettemann & Schulz, 2023). The European Union's Digital Services Act (DSA) represents a step toward platform accountability, yet enforcement mechanisms remain limited in scope (Gerbaudo, 2024).

In conclusion, the 2024 European elections and Trump's 2024 digital campaign highlight the escalating role of digital platforms in shaping political outcomes. As electoral engagement becomes increasingly algorithmic, new challenges will emerge in the following areas:

(1) Regulating AI-driven misinformation and political deepfakes: governments must strengthen regulatory oversight to combat emerging threats such as AI-generated disinformation and synthetic political content.
(2) Ensuring electoral transparency through stronger governance mechanisms: the enforcement of digital political advertising disclosures, content moderation policies, and data privacy protections is essential for maintaining democratic accountability.

(3) Empowering digital literacy initiatives to combat algorithmic polarization: public education on media literacy and critical thinking is necessary to counteract the effects of algorithmic bias and misinformation.

Future regulatory frameworks must adapt to safeguard democratic integrity in an era where digital media monopolize political engagement (Borz & De Francesco, 2024). Without proactive intervention, the unchecked spread of digital misinformation threatens to erode the foundations of free and fair elections in democratic societies.

The 2024 European elections and Trump's 2024 digital campaign highlight the escalating role of digital platforms in shaping political outcomes. As electoral engagement becomes increasingly algorithmic, new challenges will emerge in regulating AI-driven misinformation and political deepfakes, ensuring electoral transparency through stronger governance mechanisms, and empowering digital literacy initiatives to combat algorithmic polarization. Future regulatory frameworks must adapt to safeguard democratic integrity in an era where digital media monopolize political engagement (Borz & De Francesco, 2024). Without proactive intervention, the unchecked spread of digital misinformation threatens to erode the foundations of free and fair elections in democratic societies.

3. Objectives and Research Questions

The objectives of this study are as follows:

(O1) To analyze the posts made on the European Parliament's Threads and X accounts during the 2024 European Parliament election campaign.
(O2) To identify the differences in content publication between the European Parliament's Threads and X accounts in their English versions.
(O3) To quantify the engagement of followers on both social media platforms.

The research questions are as follows:

(RQ1) What type of posts does the European Parliament publish on the Threads and X social media platforms?
(RQ2) Are there any differences in the content posted on the European Parliament's Threads and X accounts?
(RQ3) What is the engagement level of followers on the European Parliament's Threads and X accounts?

4. Materials and Methods

This analysis focuses on the period between 1 May and 9 June 2024, coinciding with the electoral campaign for the 2024 European Parliament elections. This time frame allows for an examination of the European Parliament's communicative behavior in a context of high informational activity and political relevance.

For the study, the official English-language accounts of the European Parliament were selected, as they attract the largest number of followers and constitute the preferred language in European institutional communication. This selection is based on representativeness and outreach criteria, ensuring that the results reflect the communicative impact of the posts on the target audience.

The sample analyzed consists of a total of 171 posts distributed across the two platforms: 67 posts from Threads and 104 from X. In the case of X, three posts that were subsequently re-shared were excluded in order to avoid duplicates and ensure the integrity of the data. These data were manually collected on 20 and 21 January 2025. Therefore, the engagement data and follower count refer to those dates. To avoid reliability errors in content coding, this task was carried out by a single researcher. This ensures the reliability of the data.

This study considers four main dimensions for analyzing the posts. First, the type of content published was examined, classifying it into various categories: original posts, re-shared posts, re-shared posts with mention, individual posts, thread posts, and complete threads. This classification allows for the identification of the strategies employed by the European Parliament on each platform.

Second, the multimedia resources used in the posts were analyzed, including text, photographs, edited images (images with added graphs or images created from scratch using computer software), infographics, external links, surveys, videos, emojis, memes, and GIFs. This analysis aims to explore the diversity and complexity of the visual and textual elements used. It also allows for an assessment of the multimedia narrative capacity of each of the social media platforms.

The third dimension examined the interactions generated by the posts, considering engagement metrics such as the number of user interactions—likes, comments, and shares—as well as the use of mentions and hashtags. This approach enables the evaluation of audience response to the posts on both platforms. For calculating engagement rate, we used the formula used by Tardy (2022) and Xu et al. (2023). The authors calculated the engagement rate for each of the tweets they analyzed. In our case, we calculated all of them at once. For this reason, we adjusted the formula by dividing the result of the interaction-to-user ratio by the number of posts analyzed for each social network in our work (67 for Threads and 104 for Twitter). This way, we obtained the appropriate result. Then, the formula used was as follows:

$$\text{Engagement rate (in \%)} = [(\text{total interactions} / \text{number of followers})] / \text{number of post analyzed} \times 100$$

"Any percentage above 1% can be considered a very high engagement tweet, 0.16% to 0.99% a high engagement tweet, 0.05% to 0.15% an average or good engagement tweet, and 0% to 0.04% a low engagement tweet" (Xu et al., 2023, p. 2018). As it is a social network based on the same parameters as Twitter, the Threads values have been considered in the same terms.

Finally, the intention of the message was analyzed, distinguishing between posts whose primary goal is to inform, persuade, or issue a call to action. Informative publications are those whose purpose is to convey data, facts, or knowledge objectively, without influencing the recipient's opinion. On the other hand, persuasive content aims to convince or influence the recipient's attitude, opinion, or behavior, delivering messages that rely more on emotions than on data. In this case, these were publications that seek to persuade users to go and vote. Below are some examples of both types of publications (Figures 1 and 2).

It is important to note that a single post may serve one or more of these functions, allowing for a richer understanding of the communicative strategies employed.

The methodology used is based on the quantification and comparison of posts made on the two selected platforms. First, the total number of posts made on Threads and X was recorded, classifying them according to the variables described above. Subsequently, the obtained data were compared to identify differences and similarities in the use of both platforms.



Figure 1. Example of persuasive publication in Threads.

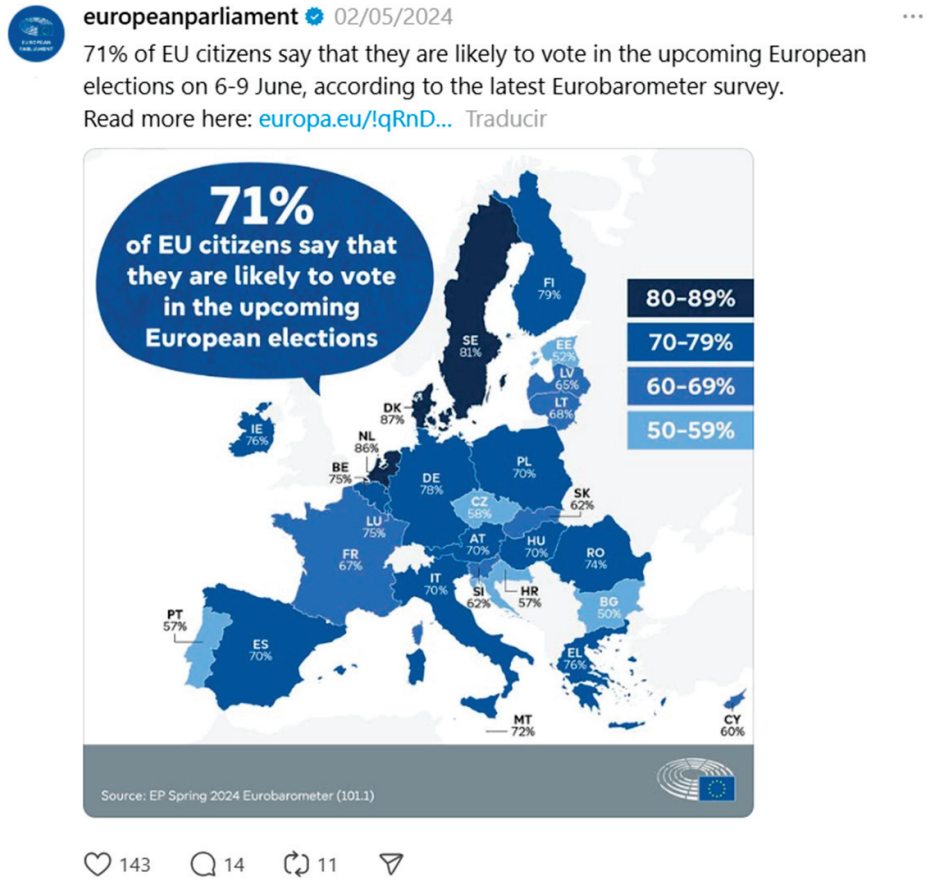


Figure 2. Example of informative publication in Threads.

5. Results

Upon analyzing the data, it is observed that X has 37 more posts than Threads during the analyzed period. This is logical, considering that the X account has nearly one million followers. This implies that the European Parliament's account on X has 10 times more followers than its counterpart on Threads, which is also natural considering X existed as a social network (even as Twitter) long before Threads did. In fact, the date when the European Parliament joined Twitter is April 2009, while it joined Threads in December 2023, as both profiles of these social platforms show. For this reason, the communication department of the institution increased its efforts on X, as they could reach a much larger audience, consisting of 989,497 followers on X compared to 91,706 followers on Threads.

The messages conveyed on both networks are, on some occasions, very similar, but in most cases, the content on one platform is distinctly different from the other. For example, on 2 May, while X was discussing agricultural policy, Threads published an infographic about voting intentions in different countries. The posts published on 9 May 2024 also present a striking case. On X, nine posts were made, six of which referred to Europe's support for Ukraine in its war with Russia and three of which encouraged voting in the 6–9 June elections. On Threads, only one post was made, celebrating Europe Day. This desynchronization is seen throughout the month and nine days analyzed. Therefore, it does not seem that there is a coordinated posting strategy across both social media platforms.

This section may be divided by subheadings. It should provide a concise and precise description of the experimental results, their interpretation, as well as the experimental conclusions that can be drawn.

5.1. Types of Posts

Regarding the type of posts uploaded on each social media platform, clear differences are observed between the accounts on the two networks.

As shown in Figure 3, 100% of the posts on Threads are original creations from the European Parliament's account. Therefore, no reposted content appears on this platform. This is not the case on X, where 86.54% of the posts are original—90 posts—while 13.46%—14 posts—are reposted from other accounts. Additionally, reposted content with mentions is also included. In this case, the X account uses this option to generate content on its feed, thereby reinforcing its message through other accounts.

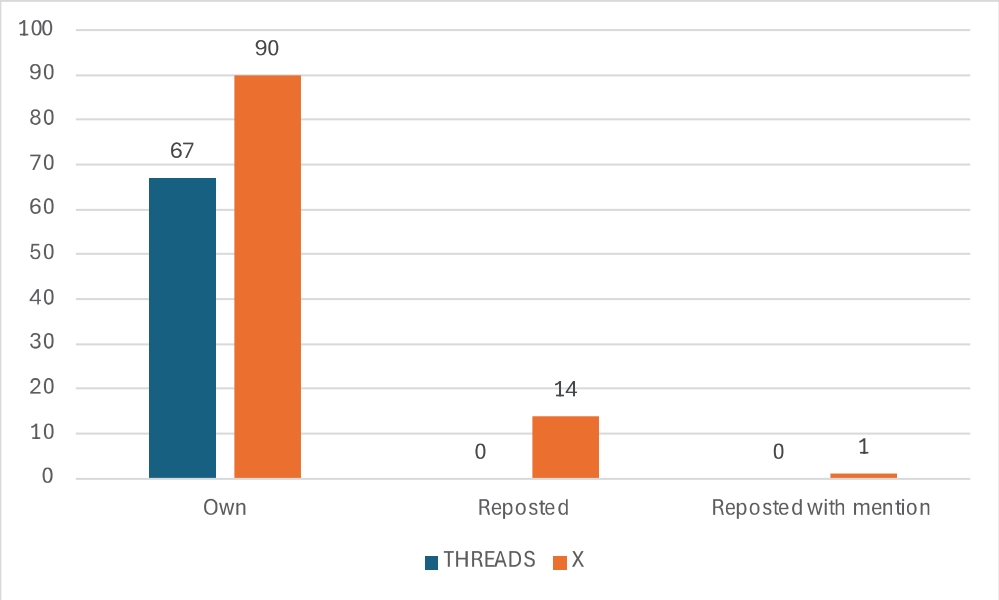


Figure 3. Types of authorship on Threads and X.

A significant difference is observed between individual posts and those that are part of a thread (Figure 4). For Threads, individual posts account for 34.33%—23 posts—while on X, they account for 93.27%—97 posts—of the total. Thus, threads are much more frequently used on Threads than on X. On Threads, 22 threads were created—totaling 44 posts, or 65.67% of the total. It is important to note that all of the threads consist of only two posts. On X, however, only five threads were identified—totaling eight posts, or 7.69% of the total. In this case, the threads are as long as those on Threads, each containing two posts.

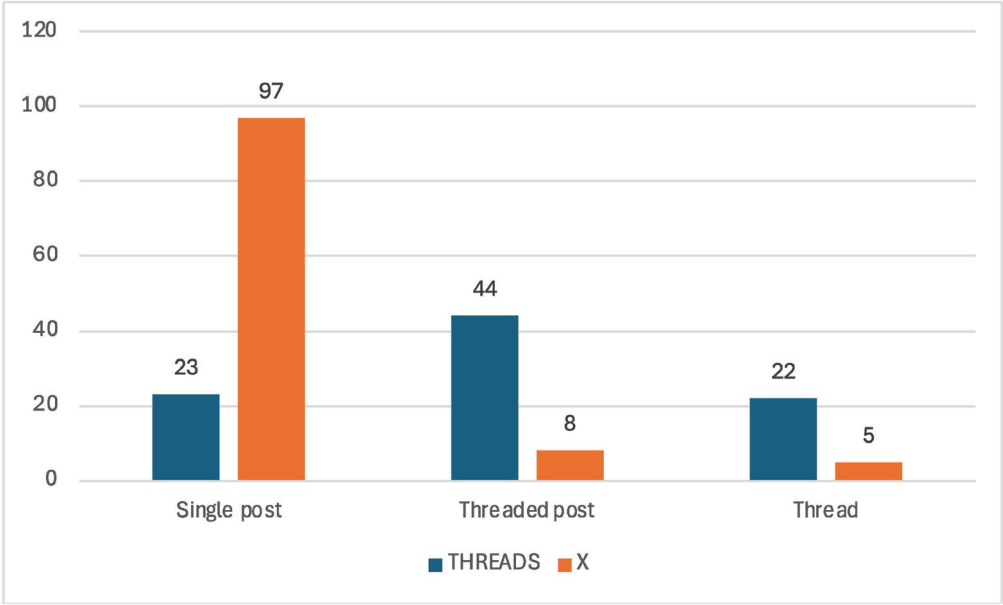


Figure 4. Types of posts on Threads and X.

In general, threads consist of an initial post followed by a second post providing a link to expand on the information being shared. Both accounts follow the same structure in this regard.

5.2. Multimedia Resources

As seen in Figure 5, regarding the use of multimedia resources, X has a higher quantity of these. This is expected, as X also has a larger number of posts. However, when considering the percentages of usage across both networks, differences between the two accounts become apparent.

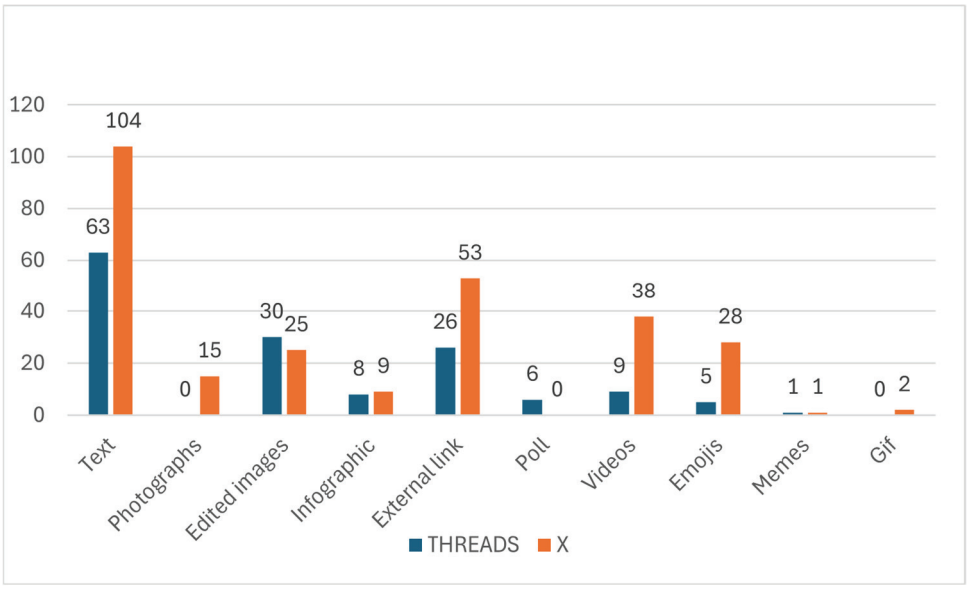


Figure 5. Multimedia resources used on Threads and X.

The most commonly used multimedia resource on both social networks is text. This is logical, as both platforms are centered around text, enabling users to convey their messages. In 63 of the 67 posts published on Threads, this format is used, representing 94.03%. On

X, this resource is used in 104 tweets, which makes up 100%. Therefore, text is the most abundant resource in both networks, as one would expect.

Within the text, an element frequently used in social media conversations is emoticons. In this case, the Threads account uses at least one emoticon in 7.46% of its posts. This is a relatively low figure, considering the common use of emoticons on social media. In contrast, X's account uses emoticons in 26.92% of its posts. This indicates an attempt to appeal to a younger audience, who uses these pictograms for quick and visual communication. Therefore, it appears that X makes much greater use of this resource than the Threads account.

Regarding the use of photographs, it is notable that no photographs were found on Threads, while they appear in 14.42% of the posts on X. On the other hand, Threads includes 30 posts with edited images, accounting for 44.78% of its posts. This is a relatively high figure, considering that X uses this resource in only 24.04% of its posts. In this regard, Threads nearly doubles X.

Another resource used by both accounts is infographics, which are highly useful for explaining large sets of information. In this case, once again, the Threads account has more content of this type, with a total of eight infographics (11.94% of posts). The X account, on the other hand, published nine infographics, which account for 8.65% of its total posts.

If photographs, edited images, and infographics were counted as a single multimedia resource, considering that they are published as images on both social networks, Threads would use this resource in 56.72% of its posts, while X would use it in 47.12% of its posts. In this case, the multimedia narrative employed on the Threads account is richer than that of X.

In terms of video content, the Threads account includes videos in nine posts, or 13.43% of its total posts. X, on the other hand, uses this format more frequently, including it in 36.54% of its posts (38 videos). This somewhat compensates for the lower use of images in posts. Video is currently the most widely used format by internet users. The use of this resource generates more engagement on X than on Threads, achieving higher levels of interaction compared to other multimedia elements. The 38 posts with video content on X garnered 13,793 likes (43.15% of the total), 4269 reposts (39.24% of the total), and 3421 comments (48.1%). These figures show that 35.51% of posts featuring this format almost account for half of the total interactions on the account during the analyzed period.

This is not the case for Threads, where the numbers decrease considerably. Posts with videos on Threads received 486 likes (10.49%), 62 reposts (12.42%), and 17 comments (11.41%). Therefore, it seems that the use of video on Threads does not generate as much engagement as on X.

On the other hand, external links appeared 26 times on Threads and 52 times on X. This represents 38.81% and 50.96%, respectively. In this case, it is X that more consistently encourages users to visit external websites, primarily the European Parliament's website, in order to provide more comprehensive information.

Regarding polls, none were found on the X account, while six polls were published on Threads during the analyzed period. The use of this tool is a good strategy, as it fosters closer engagement between followers and the European Parliament. Additionally, it is a way to gauge public opinion on specific matters. Therefore, it is striking that the X account did not make use of this feature.

Finally, in terms of multimedia tools, memes and gifs are also present, although to a much lesser extent than the other elements. One meme was posted on each account. As for gifs, two were posted on X, while the Threads account did not use any.

5.3. Interactions on the Accounts

As shown in Figure 6, the number of likes, reposts, and comments on the X account are significantly higher than those on the Threads account. As with the multimedia elements, this is expected, given that X has 40 more posts. Furthermore, the X account has 10 times the number of followers as the Threads account. However, when analyzing the engagement per follower for each account, it becomes apparent that the engagement is very similar on both social networks of the European Parliament.

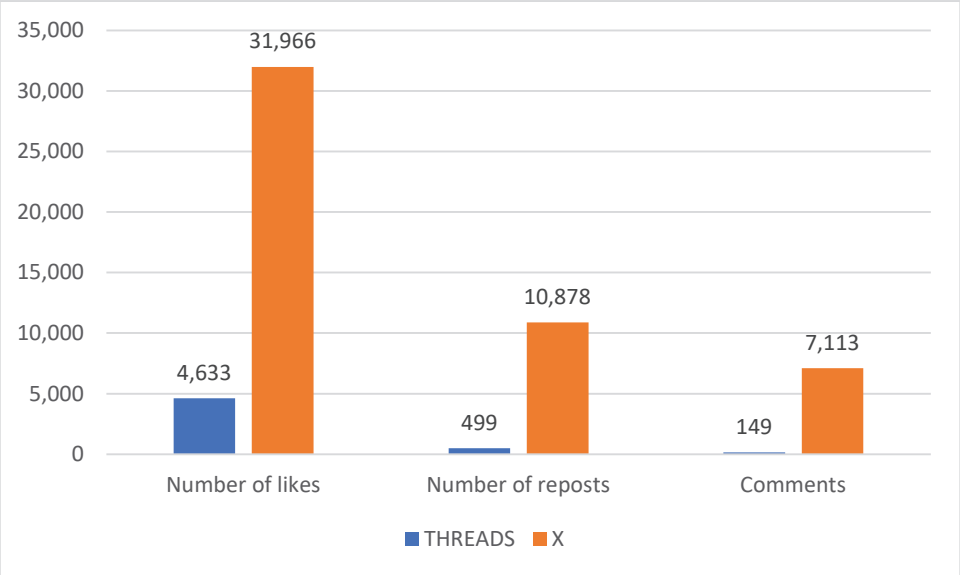


Figure 6. Interactions on the European Parliament's X and Threads accounts.

In the case of Threads, the engagement rate is 0.09%, while on X it stands at 0.05%. Both accounts have a good engagement rate, with Threads having a slightly higher rate. Therefore, both accounts show very similar engagement rates despite the significant difference in followers and interactions on each platform.

Regarding mentions and hashtags, no mentions were found in any of the posts analyzed from the Threads account. In contrast, mentions were identified in 11 posts on X, accounting for 10.58% of the total posts from this account.

As for hashtags, 28 posts on Threads include them in their text, representing 41.79% of the total posts. On X, the number of posts featuring hashtags is higher, with 58 posts using them, which represents 55.77% of the total.

What stands out in the case of Threads is that, in many posts, despite using the phrase "Use Your Vote", which is employed as a hashtag on several occasions, it is not actually used as a hashtag. This results in a missed opportunity to reach new users, as this tool allows for specific searches within the platform. Consequently, this approach can be considered a poor strategy.

5.4. Message Intent

The posts published on both accounts served three main functions: (1) to inform, (2) to persuade, and (3) to call users to action—primarily to mobilize citizens for the elections.

Figure 7 illustrates that the primary intent of informing is the most prevalent in posts made by the European Parliament on both X and Threads. On X, this intent appears in 72 instances (69.23%), while on Threads, it is evident in 53 posts (79.1%).

The intention to call users to action, whether to vote or to engage in other actions, such as participating in surveys within the app, appears in 65 instances on X (62.5%) and in 47 posts on Threads (70.15% of the posts).

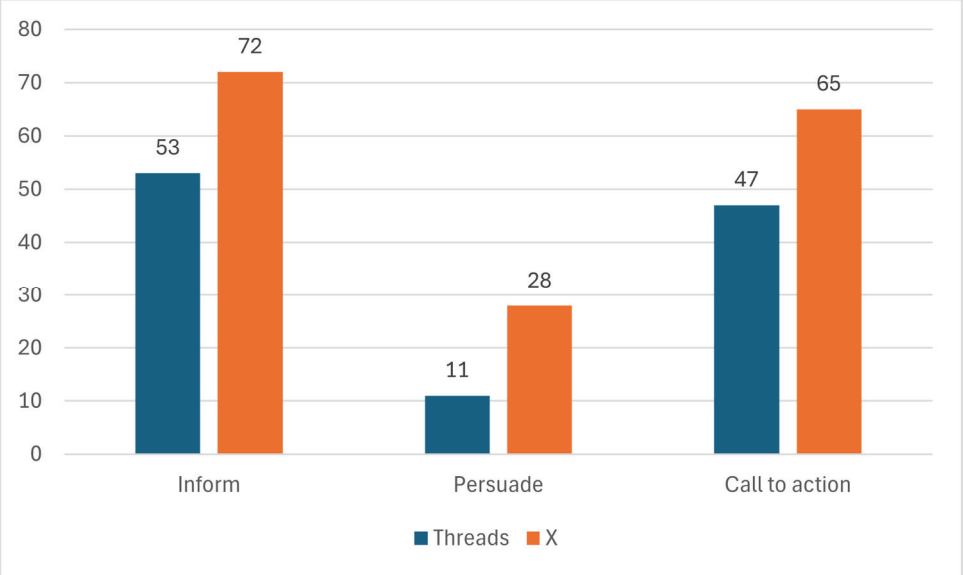


Figure 7. Intended message of post.

Lastly, the persuasive intent to encourage voting is observed in 11 posts on Threads (16.42%) and in 28 on X (26.92%). Often, posts fulfill one or more functions, rather than just one of the three identified during this period.

6. Discussion

The results of this study on the European Parliament's communication on X and Threads during the 2024 elections reveal significant differences in how digital platforms facilitate political interaction. As previous research has shown, digital transformation has structurally altered institutional communication, enabling direct engagement with citizens but also presenting challenges such as audience fragmentation and the spread of misinformation (Poell et al., 2019; Gerbaudo, 2018; Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Gosztonyi, 2024).

One key finding is the higher participation and interaction on X compared to Threads, suggesting that platform-specific characteristics influence the reach and dissemination of institutional messages. While X has become a space where political communication relies on immediacy and the virality of audiovisual content, Threads maintains a more informative approach, emphasizing infographics and text-based posts (Nieborg et al., 2019; Gerbaudo, 2024). These results align with broader trends in social media, where highly visual content and algorithmic personalization enhance engagement and amplify political messages (García-Orosa, 2021; Campos-Domínguez et al., 2022).

6.1. Audience Fragmentation and Algorithmic Logic

One of the most evident challenges of digital political communication is audience fragmentation and the impact of algorithms on information dissemination. Previous studies have shown that recommendation algorithms generate echo chambers and filter bubbles, where users are predominantly exposed to content that reinforces their pre-existing beliefs (Bene et al., 2025; Törnberg & Törnberg, 2024). This may explain why interaction on Threads is lower, as the platform has not yet developed an algorithmic ecosystem as optimized as X for content amplification (García-Orosa, 2021).

Additionally, the absence of reposts and mentions on Threads suggests that the European Parliament has opted for a more controlled dissemination strategy, with less reliance on external amplification. Conversely, in X, where reposts and mentions account for 13.46% of total posts, interaction dynamics seem to be driven by virality and the strategic posi-

tioning of political figures such as European Parliament President Roberta Metsola, whose posts generated high levels of engagement (Gerbaudo, 2024; Guevara & Theviot, 2024).

6.2. Emotionality and Virality in Political Communication

Emotions play a crucial role in digital political communication. Studies have demonstrated that messages eliciting indignation, fear, or euphoria are more likely to go viral on social media (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2023; Bíró-Nagy & Szászi, 2024). On X, the most posts with the most interaction included videos and messages about the war in Ukraine, reinforcing the idea that emotionally charged content is more effective at capturing public attention and generating online debate (Gerbaudo, 2018; García-Orosa, 2021).

In contrast, the predominant use of infographics and polls in Threads suggests a less emotional and more informational strategy. Previous research has indicated that such content can help reduce polarization and misinformation by providing structured information rather than divisive messages (Pérez-Curiel & Velasco Molpeceres, 2020a, 2020b; Zinnbauer, 2021). However, the challenge of this approach lies in achieving greater engagement in an environment where virality is driven by emotional impact rather than factual depth (R. Liu et al., 2022; Borz & De Francesco, 2024; Gosztonyi, 2024).

6.3. Disinformation and Algorithmic Manipulation

Another key challenge of institutional digital communication is disinformation. Recent studies have raised concerns about the spread of deepfakes and disinformation campaigns in electoral processes, which can distort public perception and weaken trust in democratic institutions (R. Liu et al., 2022; Borz & De Francesco, 2024). The amplification structure of X, combined with its broader reach, could make it a more vulnerable environment for misinformation compared to Threads, which, being a more closed ecosystem, limits exposure to unverified content (McNair, 2023; Altay et al., 2022).

The Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Digital Markets Act (DMA) have been promoted by the European Union as regulatory frameworks aimed at enhancing transparency in content moderation and political advertising (Kettemann & Schulz, 2023). However, enforcing these regulations remains a challenge, particularly in terms of real-time detection and removal of manipulated content (Vosoughi et al., 2018; Gosztonyi, 2024). In this regard, using differentiated communication strategies on X and Threads could serve as a preventive measure against information manipulation in the European electoral context.

6.4. Institutional Communication Strategies in the Digital Era

The findings of this study reaffirm the need to tailor institutional communication strategies to the specificities of each platform. While X is better suited for the dissemination of high-impact messages and audiovisual content, Threads offers an opportunity to strengthen institutional communication based on structured and less polarized information (Dragomir et al., 2024; Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2024).

To improve the effectiveness of political communication on digital platforms, the following strategies are suggested:

Content optimization for each platform: the European Parliament may use videos and mentions on X to increase engagement and visibility, while on Threads, they could develop more interactive infographics and structured informational posts.

Engagement strategies based on participation: implementing polls and real-time Q&A sessions could increase interaction on both platforms, strengthening the connection between the European Parliament and citizens (Shahreza, 2024).

Monitoring and content verification: to counteract disinformation, it is advisable to reinforce partnerships with fact-checking agencies and AI-powered verification tools for early detection of misleading content (Zinnbauer, 2021).

Balancing transparency and digital security: as political campaigns become more dependent on algorithmic segmentation, it is crucial for European regulation to ensure data transparency and accountability in political advertising (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2024).

6.5. Conclusions

The analysis of the European Parliament's use of X and Threads during the 2024 elections highlights the importance of adapting communication strategies to the specific characteristics of each platform. X fosters greater virality and but also presents risks of manipulation and polarization, whereas Threads offers a more controlled and objective communication style, and a bit of a higher engagement rate. These findings confirm that political communication in the digital age requires differentiated strategies that combine interactivity, transparency, and monitoring to ensure effective and democratic communication.

7. Conclusions

This study examined the European Parliament's use of X and Threads during the 2024 European Parliament elections, focusing on content publication, engagement levels, and platform-specific communication strategies. The findings indicate that the institution does not follow a fully unified social media strategy but rather adapts its messaging to the characteristics and user behaviors of each platform. These results highlight the importance of platform differentiation in digital political communication, particularly in the context of algorithm-driven visibility, audience segmentation, and engagement patterns.

7.1. Key Findings and Insights

X prioritizes multimedia content and interaction-driven engagement, leveraging videos, mentions, and reposts to maximize visibility. This aligns with the platform's algorithmic design, which amplifies dynamic and emotionally engaging content, making it an effective medium for political mobilization and high-reach messaging.

Threads, by contrast, focuses on structured, informational content, relying more on text-based posts and infographics. This suggests a deliberate strategy to maintain an objective, less polarized communication style, consistent with Threads' positioning as an extension of Instagram's ecosystem.

User base size significantly impacts engagement dynamics, with X boasting a much larger audience and greater algorithmic amplification potential. However, engagement per follower remains relatively similar across both platforms, indicating that Threads, despite its smaller reach, still fosters meaningful interaction when the content is tailored effectively.

Content desynchronization is evident, as messaging differs not only in terms of format but also timing and thematic focus. This suggests that the European Parliament employs a platform-specific adaptation approach rather than a synchronized cross-platform strategy.

Message intent varies between the platforms, with X placing greater emphasis on calls to action and persuasive discourse, while Threads maintains a more neutral and information-driven tone. This reflects broader trends in digital political communication, where X fosters reactive engagement and Threads supports deliberative discourse.

7.2. Strategic Implications for Institutional Digital Communication

Given these insights, several strategic recommendations emerge for optimizing the European Parliament's social media approach:

(1) Enhancing cross-platform coordination without losing differentiation: While distinct messaging strategies for X and Threads are valuable, ensuring better content synchronization where relevant could strengthen message consistency and reinforce

institutional narratives. And developing a complementary posting strategy—where Threads serves as an informative hub while X maximizes engagement through real-time interactions—could enhance the effectiveness of institutional messaging.

(2) Leveraging the unique strengths of each platform: X should continue to be the primary space for high-engagement political discourse, utilizing videos, mentions, and reposts to drive visibility and mobilization. Threads should be optimized for credibility and transparency, emphasizing fact-based communication, infographics, and structured posts to counter misinformation and foster civic awareness.

(3) Expanding multimedia and interactive strategies on threads: while X benefits from the virality of video content, Threads' engagement potential could be improved by introducing more interactive formats, such as explainer graphics, polls, and Q&A sessions.

(4) Strategic content scheduling for maximum impact: Identifying and aligning optimal posting times on each platform can enhance audience engagement and content visibility. And utilizing data-driven scheduling approaches could improve content reach across different demographic segments.

(5) Moving beyond traditional engagement metrics: Instead of focusing solely on likes, shares, and reposts, engagement should be measured by qualitative factors, such as policy impact, discourse longevity, and audience sentiment analysis. Threads, despite lower overall interaction levels, could serve as a repository for structured political communication, complementing the more fast-paced, reaction-driven engagement on X.

7.3. Final Considerations

This study underscores the complexity of institutional digital communication, revealing that X and Threads serve distinct but complementary functions in the European Parliament's outreach strategy. X excels at engagement, virality, and mobilization, while Threads provides a more stable and credible environment for structured information sharing. As digital platforms continue evolving, institutional actors must refine their strategies to maximize visibility, strengthen credibility, and foster meaningful public interaction.

By balancing platform differentiation, engagement optimization, and message coherence, the European Parliament can enhance its ability to navigate the challenges of digital political communication, ensuring greater transparency, accessibility, and audience impact in future electoral campaigns.

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Article

Beyond Information Warfare: Exploring Fact-Checking Research About the Russia–Ukraine War

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Abstract: The Russian invasion of Ukraine has also ignited a battleground in the domain of information. The conflict has been accompanied by a relentless disinformation offensive designed to manipulate public opinion and undermine democratic processes. This paper deals with the role of academia and scholars in focusing this information warfare. This study conducts a comprehensive analysis of scientific articles to examine how researchers and institutions have addressed fact-checking initiatives. To this end, performance analysis and literature review are combined to observe the state of academic investigations on fact-checking during the first thousand days of war in Ukraine (from 24 February 2022 to 19 November 2024). To do this, we identified 595 fact-checking articles in the Web of Science database within the "Social Sciences" category and narrowed the focus to 270 articles in the field of "Communication". Finally, through an in-depth literature review of eight manuscripts, we seek to understand the specific strategies employed by academics to address the conflict between Russia and Ukraine through fact-checking. Our findings suggest that fact-checking research on the Russia–Ukraine war predominantly examines the impact of disinformation in conflict contexts, the role of media literacy in countering false narratives, and the contribution of citizen journalism to verification efforts. These conclusions can shed light on the crucial role of academia in safeguarding truth and fostering informed public debate in an era of information overload and manipulation.

Keywords: fact-checking; disinformation; performance analysis; literature review; Web of Science; social sciences; communication; Russia; Ukraine; war

1. Introduction

Although the concept and existence of mis- and disinformation are not new, their importance has reached an unprecedented dimension in the new media ecosystem. At least since 2016, it has become clear that "the online information infrastructure was particularly permeable to disinformation and misinformation, [and] more and more groups decided to turn their attention to fact-checking" (Mantzarlis, 2018, p. 82). In this context, what is new is that manipulation is now "fueled by new technologies", including advanced techniques such as deepfakes or AI-generated content, but also the use of social media as the main spreading channel. In addition, Ireton and Posetti argue that we have witnessed a "weaponisation of information on an unprecedented scale. Powerful new technology makes the manipulation and fabrication of content simple, and social networks dramatically amplify falsehoods" which "are shared by uncritical publics" (Ireton & Posetti, 2018, p. 15).

It is precisely the dimension and impact that disinformation and misinformation have today that makes this phenomenon a new and disturbing object of study. Following Wardle and Derakhshan (2018), we should highlight the distinction between both terms: misinformation refers to "information that is false, but the person who is disseminating it believes that it is true", while "disinformation is information that is false, and the person who is disseminating it knows it is false". The difference is that in the second case, we are talking about a "deliberate, an intentional lie, and points to people being actively disinformed by malicious actors" (p. 44).

In this context, if it is true that "the spread of disinformation and misinformation is made possible largely through social networks and social messaging, which begs the question of the extent of regulation and self-regulation of companies providing these services" (Berger, 2018, p. 8), we cannot ignore the fact that these platforms continue being used as the primary source of information by a significant number of people (Cardoso et al., 2023). This shift in news consumption occurs in an environment where false content spreads faster than authentic content, in addition to being more attractive and, therefore, more easily shared than the latter (Baptista & Gradim, 2022; Vosoughi et al., 2018).

This new disinformation and misinformation scenario, together with broader trends in the communication and information ecosystem, explain the growth of fact-checking initiatives, especially its second wave, "concentrated as much on fact-checking public claims as debunking these viral hoaxes" (Mantzarlis, 2018, p. 82). According to the latest data from Duke Reporter's Lab, "457 fact-checking projects in 111 countries were active over the past two years" (Stencel et al., 2024).

Hence, our first objective (O1) is to examine the increasing significance of fact-checking in academic research. Moreover, this investigation aims to comprehensively analyze scholarly publications about fact-checking within the Social Sciences and Communication domains. We seek to understand the trend of such articles during this period, also identifying the most prominent authors, journals, institutions, and countries in this line of research, as well as the main keywords used in the published articles. The reason why we decided to study fact-checking in the context of academic publications arises from the relevance that this practice, considered by many to be a new journalistic genre (Almeida-Santos et al., 2023), has gained in recent years in the context of studies on disinformation (Salaverría & Cardoso, 2023). Nevertheless, it also results from the fact that several studies have identified gaps in studying the long-term, systemic impacts of fact-checking (Dias & Sippitt, 2020), suggesting that the practice of fact-checking could be more effective and more efficient in the context of global misinformation challenges if there were closer collaboration between academia and industry (Tejedor et al., 2024).

After several studies have analyzed fact-checking activities in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Almeida-Santos et al., 2023; Rivas-de-Roca & Pérez-Curiel, 2023; Sousa et al., 2022; Ferreira & Amaral, 2022), more recent studies have highlighted the role of what they call "war fact-check" (Magallón-Rosa et al., 2023), which, taking as a starting point the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, study the verifications carried out in the frame of this war (Baptista et al., 2023b; Burel & Alani, 2023; Zeng et al., 2024). Following these studies, our second goal (O2) is to comprehend how fact-checking about the war has been tackled by academia during the first thousand days since the beginning of the offensive (from 24 February 2022 to 19 November 2024). The choice of this period for analysis was not random but rather the result of several criteria.

First, when President Putin announced a "special military operation" in Ukraine, on 24 February 2022, the conflict took on a new dimension, with levels of disinformation about this war never seen before (Zecchinon & Standaert, 2025). For fact-checkers themselves, it

has become, in many cases, impossible to "fact-check everything" due to "geographical distance and a lack of background information", but also due to propaganda mechanisms (Dierickx & Lindén, 2024). On the other hand, "the Russian invasion is the first war waged to occur in Europe in the age of social networks" (Zecchinon & Standaert, 2025, p. 62), therefore having very particular characteristics, insofar as "it is not a lack of information that makes this war opaque, but the amount of data disseminated in record time, especially during the first weeks of the war" (Zecchinon & Standaert, 2025, p. 62). These were precisely the reasons that led us to analyze academic research and its expression through scientific articles since February 2022 because we considered that we could find research that already referred to the beginning of the tensions in 2014, but also because we understood that, as happened with the COVID-19 pandemic (Igartua et al., 2020), and despite the time lag that generally exists between the research work and its publication, we could find, from the very beginning, articles about fact-checking and the war in Ukraine.

As for the thousand days, it is a question of choosing an ephemeris, following one of the news values of selecting events that applies to journalism, the criterion of time, which can be understood as current affairs, the cliffhanger, or extension of the event (Traquina, 2002). In this case, it is the date, the thousand days, that serves as a temporal benchmark because it constitutes a news peg, which justifies the newsworthiness of an event that has already occurred in the past and, in this case, also serves as a temporal limit for the search for investigations that address fact-checking about the war (Traquina, 2002).

This paper is structured into four key sections. The first section briefly overviews the history of fact-checking, highlighting its importance in combating disinformation. The second section explains how the ongoing war in Ukraine has not only led to significant geopolitical shifts but has also been accompanied by an unprecedented wave of disinformation and misinformation. In the third section, we describe the methodology used for the study, namely the performance analysis. The fourth section presents and discusses the results of our analysis. Finally, we conclude by discussing the limitations of the research and suggesting directions for future studies.

2. State of the Art

2.1. The Role of Fact-Checking in Modern Journalism

Fact-checking is not a new practice, and it has been seen traditionally as an inherent function of newsrooms. It is part of the process of journalistic verification, of confirming sources and facts, a guarantee of the quality of the work produced, which included checking information before publication (Bigot, 2017; Mantzarlis, 2018; Graves & Amazeen, 2019). Renowned weekly magazines, such as *TIME*, pioneered this process in the 20th century. However, the economic crisis that affected journalism in the 21st century reduced or abolished many fact-checking departments. Nowadays, only some prestigious magazines still maintain teams dedicated to this function (Mantzarlis, 2018, p. 81).

Thus, while internal verification lost space, external verification grew. This external verification is what we refer to as fact-checking, or as Mantzarlis (2018) points out, "ex-post" fact-checking. "This form of 'ex-post' fact-checking seeks to make politicians and other public figures accountable for the truthfulness of their statements. Fact-checkers in this line of work seek primary and reputable sources that can confirm or negate claims made to the public" (Mantzarlis, 2018, pp. 81–82). Projects like Factcheck.org and Channel 4 Fact Check, launched in the early 2000s (Amazeen, 2020), boosted this practice.

According to Mantzarlis (2018), two moments help to explain the growth that fact-checking has had in recent decades: the 2009 Pulitzer Prize award to PolitiFact, which introduced the "Truth-O-Meter" to rate the veracity of statements; and the rise in fake news in mid-2016, which generated a wave of projects dedicated to combating online

disinformation and misinformation. "This second wave often concentrated as much on fact-checking public claims as debunking these viral hoaxes. Debunking is a subset of fact-checking and requires a specific set of skills that are in common with verification" (Mantzarlis, 2018, p. 82).

With the increase in the number of fact-checking projects, international networks were created to help regulate the work of fact-checkers, as well as to ensure their independence and the validity of their methodologies. This is the case of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), founded in 2015 at Poynter, and playing a pivotal role in the global fact-checking movement, mostly due to their code of principles, which includes more than 150 signatories (Lauer & Graves, 2024). The principles are the result "of consultations among fact-checkers from around the world and offer conscientious practitioners' principles to aspire to in their everyday work" (IFCN, 2024).

More recently, in 2022, the European Fact-Checking Standards Network was launched with over 40 European fact-checking organizations, after six of them had guided the process to create the Code of Professional Integrity for Independent European Fact-checking (European Fact-Checking Standards Network Transparency Centre, 2023). As of December 2024, it has 55 verified members (EFCSN, 2024).

Thus, fact-checking has evolved from an internal newsroom function to a crucial tool in combating misinformation in the digital age. However, Duke Reporter's Lab claims that "the number of reporting and research teams that routinely intercept political lies and disinformation is plateauing" (Stencel et al., 2024). The data from the last census from the Center for Journalism Research in the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University show that "457 fact-checking projects in 111 countries were active over the past two years. But so far in 2024, that number has shrunk to 439" (Stencel et al., 2024).

After a few years of growth, explained mainly by Brexit, Trump's run for the White House, and the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of new projects began to stagnate globally. The authors conclude that "2023 was the first time there were more departing fact-checking teams than new ones—18 closures to 10 starts" (Stencel et al., 2024).

Building on this historical background, this article examines how academia has approached fact-checking initiatives and strategies. Thus, although fact-checking "has grounded itself as a worldwide movement, particularly in Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) countries [. . .], literature on fact-checking beyond the West is still forthcoming" (Vinhas & Bastos, 2022, p. 1). Above all, meta-analysis about fact-checking demonstrates empirical research essentially focused on the US (Walter et al., 2020; Vinhas & Bastos, 2022).

In the next section, we try to understand what space studies on fact-checking occupy within the scope of studies on disinformation. More importantly, we seek to understand to what extent the war in Ukraine, central to this article, has been tackled within this field of studies.

2.2. Academic Approaches to Disinformation Research

As Salaverría and Cardoso (2023) noted, "in parallel with the surge of disinformation, academic interest in this phenomenon has grown in recent years" (p. 2). The authors highlight that "the projects, methodologies, and contexts by which the public dissemination of falsehoods is studied have multiplied, to the point where they now compose a diverse and especially fruitful corpus of research" (p. 2). According to some bibliometric studies, in recent decades, but especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, disinformation and misinformation have become one of the most researched topics in the fields of social sciences and communication (S&ět al., 2024; Durr-Missau, 2024; Tătaru et al., 2024; Navarro-Sierra et al.,

2024; KaabOmeir et al., 2024; Pandey & Ghosh, 2023; Salvador-Mata et al., 2023; X. Li et al., 2023; Pérez-Escolar et al., 2023; García-Marín & Salvat-Martinrey, 2021; Bran et al., 2021).

But in the context of growing studies on disinformation, how much attention has been paid to fact-checking? Salaverría and Cardoso (2023) argue that the main lines of work for disinformation studies include "typological studies", that is, studies focused on classification and definition of disinformation content, distinguishing between involuntary errors (misinformation) and deliberate falsehoods (disinformation) (e.g., Tandoc et al., 2018; French et al., 2023; Salaverría et al., 2020); "fact-checking studies", focused on the analysis of the work of fact-checking organizations, including their professional roles, ethical standards, and corporate structures (e.g., López-Pan & Rodríguez-Rodríguez, 2020; Tejedor et al., 2024; Wasike, 2023; Dafonte-Gómez et al., 2022; Moreno-Gil et al., 2021; Rodríguez-Pérez et al., 2021); "studies on disinformation on digital platforms", with analysis of the "online dissemination of disinformation content", trying to understand falsification practices (e.g., Diaz Ruiz, 2023; Arce-García et al., 2022; Chan, 2024; Rincón et al., 2022; Di-Domenico et al., 2021; Culloty & Suiter, 2021; Bruns et al., 2020; Freelon et al., 2020; Walker et al., 2020); and "studies in media literacy", that is, investigations into strategies for teaching critical thinking and fact-checking skills (e.g., Sádaba & Salaverría, 2023; Frau-Meigs, 2022; Dame Adjin-Tettey, 2022; Valverde-Berrocoso et al., 2022; Hameleers, 2020; Richter, 2019; Jones-Jang et al., 2019).

We can see how fact-checking stands out as one of those main lines of work within disinformation studies. However, in the existing bibliometric studies, we found few or no references in studies on disinformation to the war in Ukraine, one of the most striking events in the recent history of Europe and the world. Perhaps because most of the studies are still very focused on the effects of the pandemic: according to Sandět al. (2024), for example, the bibliometric analysis conducted shows "the rise of the COVID-19 misinformation theme as a motor theme for the 2019–2022 period" (S&ět al., 2024, p. 39). Thus, and considering that several fact-checking organizations, projects, and observatories have paid considerable attention to the impacts of misinformation about war (e.g., Dierickx & Lindén, 2024; EDMO, n.d.; Ukraine War Resource Hub, 2024; Iberifier, 2024; #UkraineFacts, 2024), we attempt in this article to see whether academia has paid attention to fact-checking strategies during the ongoing war in Ukraine. This conflict has seen various actors, including state and non-state entities, engage in information warfare to manipulate public perception and influence international response, which demand further understanding. Moreover, the importance of this research also lies in the growing recognition of information warfare as a central element of modern conflicts.

Thus, considering the objectives we set for this research, but above all based on studies that highlight "the importance of disinformation as an object of study" and that "future research can be oriented to fill gaps, go a step further than the most common themes and areas and respond to emerging challenges, or those less studied, in this field of study" (Navarro-Sierra et al., 2024, p. 17), we decided to start by trying to understand the evolution of production on fact-checking in recent years. With these data, we could create the context that would help us understand to what extent scientific research has accompanied the work of fact-checking organizations (Dierickx & Lindén, 2024) when the topic is the war in Ukraine, considering that, in this case, the effort to combat disinformation is more effective if it is combined (Tejedor et al., 2024).

Therefore, based on the existing research mentioned in the previous paragraphs, we pose the following research questions to guide the analysis:

- RQ1: How has scientific production on fact-checking evolved during the analyzed period?

- RQ2: Who are the authors with the highest number of papers published on fact-checking during the analyzed period?
- RQ3: Which universities had a higher scientific production on fact-checking during the analyzed period?
- RQ4: Which countries had a higher scientific production on fact-checking during the analyzed period?
- RQ5: Which are the journals publishing most scientific articles on fact-checking during the analyzed period?
- RQ6: What are the most cited articles on fact-checking published during the analyzed period?
- RQ7: What are the most used keywords in the articles on fact-checking published during the analyzed period?

Moreover, in order to comprehend how academic articles on fact-checking have tackled the Russia–Ukraine War, we pose our last research question:

- RQ8: What are the main topics and methods used in the academic articles on fact-checking related to the Russia–Ukraine War published during the analyzed period?

3. Materials and Methods

This paper combines descriptive bibliometrics and a literature review to establish a comprehensive observation of the research on fact-checking during the first thousand days of war in Ukraine (from 24 February 2022 to 19 November 2024). As we have already mentioned, the choice of this period results from several criteria. Although the information conflict between Ukraine and Russia began in 2014, it escalated after President Putin announced a "special military operation" on 24 February 2022, leading to unprecedented levels of disinformation regarding the war (Zecchinon & Standaert, 2025). Fact-checkers have found it increasingly difficult to verify claims due to geographical distances, a lack of background information, and robust propaganda mechanisms (Dierickx & Lindén, 2024), but also due to "the virality of (fake) news raised by these events" (Zecchinon & Standaert, 2025, p. 62).

Moreover, the Russian invasion marks the first European war in the age of social media, where the volume and high speed of disseminated data complicate transparency (Zecchinon & Standaert, 2025). Consequently, we aimed to analyze academic research published since February 2022, hypothesizing that initial studies referencing the 2014 tensions might also exist, but also considering that we can witness a movement similar to what happened with the COVID-19 pandemic, which received unprecedentedly quick academic attention within months, also in fields like communication (e.g., Igartua et al., 2020). Given the contextual importance of "a thousand days", selected as a temporal milestone that underscores the conflict's ongoing relevance, we set this duration as a framework for our investigation into fact-checking research related to the war.

On the other hand, we look at scientific production in the field of Communication because we try to understand whether, after 24 February 2022, we can find an increase in the "number of scientific publications devoted to the Russian-Ukrainian war, both by Ukrainian authors and authors from other countries" (Ostapenko et al., 2023, p. 12) in these fields of knowledge, like some studies prove has happened in others: "the structural analysis shows the prevalence of publications from social, medical, and economic sciences" (Ostapenko et al., 2023, p. 12). Additionally, following the invasion, "the emergence of such trend as the formation of thematic special issues of journals about the Russian-Ukrainian war should be noted" (Ostapenko et al., 2023, p. 12).

So, according to C. Li et al. (2025), "bibliometric involves the quantitative review and investigation of existing literature within a specific field (. . .) The process includes collect-

ing data on authors, keywords, journals, countries, affiliations, and references" (p. 314). Moreover, Donthu et al. (2021) and Passas (2024) state that bibliometric analysis involves two main approaches or categories: (1) performance analysis and (2) science mapping. The present study is based on the first approach, that is, on describing the performance of the research production, which requires "evaluating the impact of researchers, institutions, and countries using metrics such as total publications, author contributions, and citation-related indicators" (Passas, 2024, p. 1019).

To this end, we identified articles about fact-checking published in journals indexed in the Web of Science (hereinafter, WOS) under the general field of "Social Sciences" (n = 595). Then, we focused on the articles published in the "Communication" discipline (n = 270). Finally, through an in-depth literature review of 8 manuscripts, we try to understand the specific strategies employed by academics to address the conflict between Russia and Ukraine through fact-checking. Although there are other indexing databases (e.g., Scopus) or online bibliographic search platforms (such as EBSCOhost), we have chosen WOS due to its international recognition, its demanding standards for journal's inclusion, and the usability of its interface.

Regarding the sampling strategy, it is divided into three steps. In Social Sciences, data on the n = 595 articles were obtained with this search algorithm[1]: (Topic = "fact-check*" OR "news fact-check*") AND (Document Type = "Article") AND (WOS Index = "SSCI" OR "ESCI") AND (Publication Date: 24 February 2022 to 19 November 2024). The search terms had to be located on the title, abstract, or keywords of the articles.

On the other hand, Communication papers (n = 270) were obtained with this new search algorithm[2]: (Topic = "fact-check*" OR "news fact-check*") AND (Document Type = "Article") AND (WOS Index = "SSCI" OR "ESCI") AND (WOS Categories = "Communication") AND (Publication Date: 24 February 2022 to 19 November 2024). Again, the search terms had to be located on the title, abstract, or keywords of the articles. The third step led to the selection of those papers of the sample that focused on fact-checking in the context of the Russia–Ukraine War.

In the following section of the manuscript, results are presented according to the three stages of the selection process: first, the observations regarding fact-checking in Social Sciences will be used as a descriptive and preliminary contextualization; second, the analysis of articles on fact-checking within the Communication domain will allow us to answer the first to seven RQ's; finally, the last RQ will be answered in detail using the articles on fact-checking in the context of the Russia–Ukraine War.

4. Results

4.1. General Approach to Social Sciences Production

Starting with the distribution of papers among disciplines, Figure 1 shows that Communication is the field that contributes the most to the study of fact-checking. Together with Communication, other disciplines such as Information Science and Computer Science are also very present in this distribution. This is particularly relevant if we consider that Salaverría and Cardoso (2023) argue that multidisciplinary studies on disinformation are still scarce. The need for more trans- and multidisciplinary studies also arises in the wake of the results of other research focused on disinformation in academic studies (Navarro-Sierra et al., 2024) or even on fact-checking (Tejedor et al., 2024), which highlighted "the importance of reinforcing the interdisciplinary and multi-thematic nature of research on fact-checking" (Tejedor et al., 2024, p. 8).



Figure 1. Top 10 disciplines of scientific articles on fact-checking in Social Sciences (*n*). Source: WOS.

It is also worth mentioning that papers published in journals indexed in the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) represent 65% (*n* = 387 papers), and manuscripts in journals in the Emerging Sources Citation Index (ESCI) represent the remaining 35% (*n* = 208 papers). When referring only to the Communication discipline (*n* = 270 papers), the distribution of manuscripts is SSCI = 192 (71.11%) and ESCI = 78 (28.89%).

4.2. Performance Analysis of Communication Papers

To answer our first research question on understanding the publication trend of fact-checking studies during the first thousand days of the war in Ukraine (from 24 February 2022 to 19 November 2024), Figure 2 shows the yearly number of publications focusing on fact-checking during the analyzed period both in Social Sciences and in the more specific field of Communication.

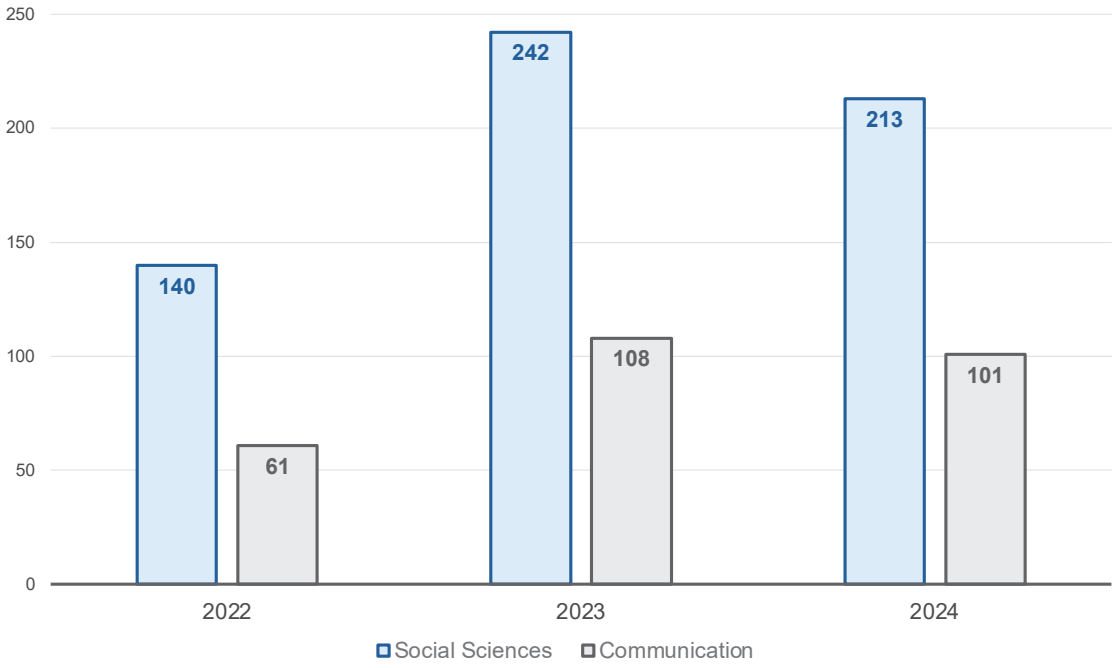


Figure 2. Evolution of scientific production on fact-checking during the analyzed period (*n*). Source: authors' own elaboration using WOS data.

Ahead of any interpretation, it should be noted that our period comprises 311 days in 2022, 365 in 2023, and 324 days in 2024, which might help to explain the amount of articles published each year, with the highest in 2023. However, despite this factor, there appears to be a slight increase in the number of articles on fact-checking between 2022 and 2023, although that increase is not expected for 2024. Even though academic interest in fact-checking has been significantly increasing over the last years, the practice itself has become democratized, no longer a novelty, which might lead to a publication stabilization trend.

Next, we wanted to identify the authors with the strongest publication record addressing fact-checking in the studied period. Figure 3 shows the authors with at least three scientific articles on fact-checking in WOS journals. The top five authors are well-renowned names in the field: Lucas Graves (professor and researcher at the Reuters Institute), Michael Hameleers (associate professor in political communication at the Amsterdam School of Communication Research), Oscar Westlund (professor at the Department of Journalism and Media Studies at Oslo Metropolitan University), Steen Steensen (professor of journalism at the Department of Journalism and Media Studies at Oslo Metropolitan University), and Valerie Belair-Gagnon (associate professor from the Hubbard School of Journalism & Mass at the University of Minnesota).

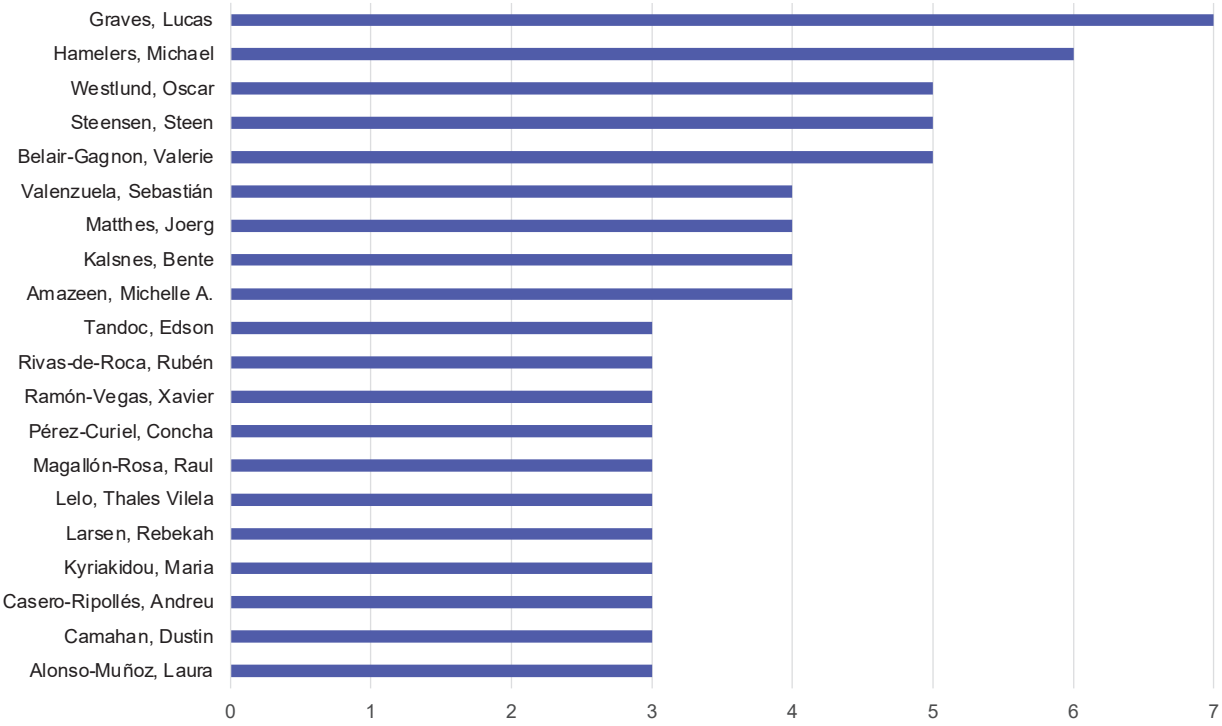


Figure 3. Top 20 researchers in Communication with most articles on fact-checking published during the studied period (*n*). Source: authors' own elaboration using WOS data.

After identifying the authors who publish the most on the topic of fact-checking, we also seek to determine which universities are more present in the scientific production on this issue in the field of Communication (RQ3). In Figure 4, we can see that two American universities appear at the top of the institutions that publish the most on this subject, but we can also observe that, as with authors, several Spanish universities stand out in these ranking.



Figure 4. Top 20 universities in Communication (*n*). Source: WOS.

These figures, which are consistent with previous studies, and which are sometimes partly explained as a result of collaborative work (Tejedor et al., 2024), are also aligned with the most frequent countries of affiliation. Thus, among the countries that contribute most to the development of this topic through the publication of scientific articles (RQ4), the USA appears at the top of the list, closely followed by Spain. The People's Republic of China and Brazil come afterwards at a significant distance (Figure 5).

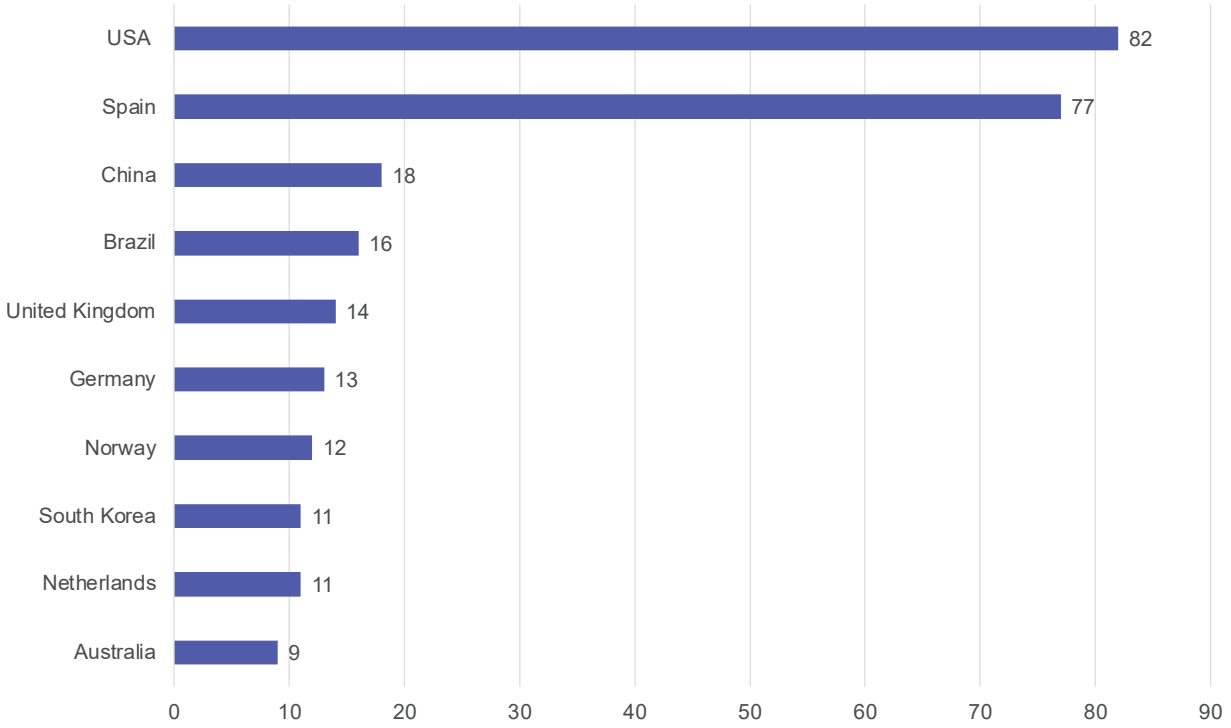


Figure 5. Top 10 affiliation countries of the articles' authors on fact-checking published during the studied period (*n*). Source: authors' own elaboration using WOS data.

Concerning journals indexed in the field of Communication publishing the most articles on fact-checking (RQ5), *Journalism Practice* and *Profesional de la Información* seem to

be the leading publications, with 21 articles each over the studied 1000-day period. Figure 6 shows the 10 most active journals in the Communication field, with strong predominance of the subfield of Journalism. Together with Anglo-Saxon journals from the USA and United Kingdom, we can also find some Spanish journals, also aligning with previous studies (Tejedor et al., 2024). It is also important to highlight that in terms of the WOS index, 71% of the published articles (n = 192) belong to SSCI, while the other 29% (n = 78) are part of ESCI.

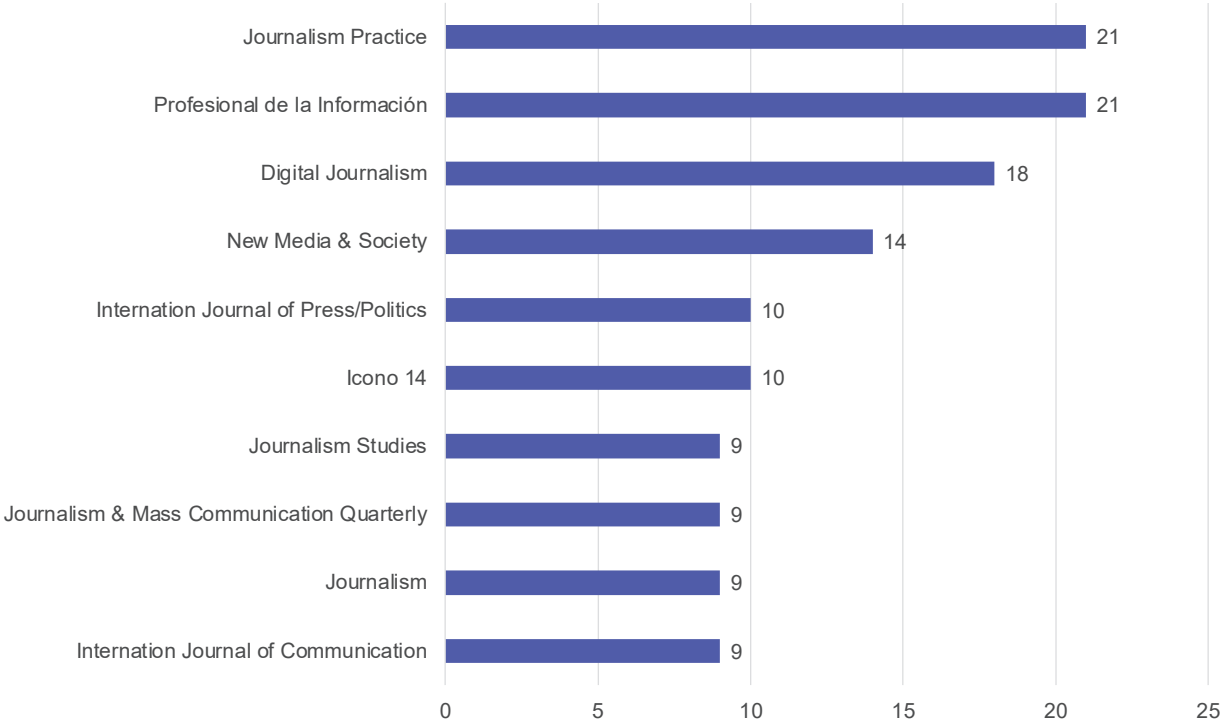


Figure 6. Top 10 journals publishing scientific articles on fact-checking (n). Source: authors' own elaboration using WOS data.

Among the papers that comprise the sample, we also sought to identify the most cited ones (RQ6). In Table 1, we present the 24 with the highest number of citations as of December 2024.

One of the first aspects that stands out is that in this topic, more than half of the papers address issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic or, more generally, address misinformation and fact-checking related to health issues. These results align with previous studies that also identified "a predominant research interest in detecting misinformation within the health and healthcare domain" (S&ět al., 2024, p. 38). Some studies (Blanco-Herrero et al., 2024) have identified a growing attention to war-related misinformation due to the wars in Ukraine or Gaza, although the presence of these events, both in fact-checking agencies and in academic research, is far from that of the pandemic. It is also worth noting that only one of the most cited papers addresses the issue of fact-checking in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Morejón-Llamas et al., 2022).

Finally, regarding the keywords most used in the papers that make up the sample (RQ7), Table 2 shows that *fact-checking* is the term that stands out, which is to be expected, as it is the topic of study. Similarly, *disinformation*, *misinformation*, and *fake news* appear afterwards, given the strong interconnection and subordination of fact-checking studies and the more general scope of studies on mis- and disinformation. The results are once again in line with other investigations already carried out (Tejedor et al., 2024).

Table 1. Most cited papers on fact-checking published during the studied period.

Rank	Citations	Complete References	Citations
1	Jiang (2022)	Jiang, S. H. (2022). The Roles of Worry, Social Media Information Overload, and Social Media Fatigue in Hindering Health Fact-Checking. *Social Media + Society*, *8*(3). https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221113070	34
2	Amazeen et al. (2022)	Amazeen, M. A., Krishna, A., & Eschmann, R. (2022). Cutting the Bunk: Comparing the Solo and Aggregate Effects of Prebunking and Debunking COVID-19 Vaccine Misinformation. *Science Communication*, *44*(4), 387–417. https://doi.org/10.1177/10755470221111558	24
3	García-Marín and Salvat-Martinrey (2022)	García-Marín, D., & Salvat-Martinrey, G. (2022). Viralizing the truth: predictive factors of fact-checkers' engagement on TikTok. *Profesional de la Información*, *31*(2). https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2022.mar.10	21
4	Moon et al. (2023)	Moon, W. K., Chung, M., & Jones-Jang, S. M. (2023). How Can We Fight Partisan Biases in the COVID-19 Pandemic? AI Source Labels on Fact-checking Messages Reduce Motivated Reasoning. *Mass Communication and Society*, *26*(4), 646–670. https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2022.2097926	17
	Morejón-Llamas et al. (2022)	Morejón-Llamas, N., Martín-Ramallal, P., & Micaletto-Belda, J. P. (2022). Twitter content curation as an antidote to hybrid warfare during Russia's invasion of Ukraine. *Profesional de la Información*, *31*(3). https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2022.may.08	
	Xiao (2024)	Xiao, X. Z. (2024). Let's verify and rectify! Examining the nuanced influence of risk appraisal and norms in combatting misinformation. *New Media & Society*, *26*(7), 3786–3809. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221104948	
5	Badrinathan and Chauchard (2024)	Badrinathan, S., & Chauchard, S. (2024). "I Don't Think That's True, Bro!" Social Corrections of Misinformation in India. *International Journal of Press-Politics*, *29*(2), 394–416. https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612231158770	16
6	Brookes and Waller (2023)	Brookes, S., & Waller, L. (2023). Communities of practice in the production and resourcing of fact-checking. *Journalism*, *24*(9), 1938–1958. https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849221078465	15
	Graves et al. (2023)	Graves, L., Bélair-Gagnon, V., & Larsen, R. (2023). From Public Reason to Public Health: Professional Implications of the "Debunking Turn" in the Global Fact-Checking Field. *Digital Journalism*. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2023.2218454	
7	Lu and Shen (2023)	Lu, Y. D., & Shen, C. H. (2023). Unpacking Multimodal Fact-Checking: Features and Engagement of Fact-Checking Videos on Chinese TikTok (Douyin). *Social Media + Society*, *9*(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221150406	14
	Sun (2022)	Sun, Y. Q. (2022). Verification Upon Exposure to COVID-19 Misinformation: Predictors, Outcomes, and the Mediating Role of Verification. *Science Communication*, *44*(3), 261–291. https://doi.org/10.1177/10755470221088927	

Table 1. *Cont.*

Rank	Citations	Complete References	Citations
8	Bachmann and Valenzuela (2023)	Bachmann, I., & Valenzuela, S. (2023). Studying the Downstream Effects of Fact-Checking on Social Media: Experiments on Correction Formats, Belief Accuracy, and Media Trust. *Social Media + Society*, *9*(2). https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231179694	13
	Hameleers (2023)	Hameleers, M. (2023). The (Un)Intended Consequences of Emphasizing the Threats of Mis- and Disinformation. *Media and Communication*, *11*(2), 5–14. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v11i2.6301	
	Mare and Munoriyarwa (2022)	Mare, A., & Munoriyarwa, A. (2022). Guardians of truth? Fact-checking the 'disinfodemic' in Southern Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of African Media Studies*, *14*(1), 63–79. https://doi.org/10.1386/jams_00065_1	
	Steensen et al. (2022)	Steensen, S., Belair-Gagnon, V., Graves, L., Kalsnes, B., & Westlund, O. (2022). Journalism and Source Criticism. Revised Approaches to Assessing Truth-Claims. *Journalism Studies*, *23*(16), 2119–2137. https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670x.2022.2140446	
	Steensen et al. (2024)	Steensen, S., Kalsnes, B., & Westlund, O. (2024). The limits of live fact-checking: Epistemological consequences of introducing a breaking news logic to political fact-checking. *New Media & Society*, *26*(11), 6347–6365. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231151436	
	Yu et al. (2023)	Yu, W. T., Payton, B., Sun, M. R., Jia, W. F., & Huang, G. X. (2023). Toward an integrated framework for misinformation and correction sharing: A systematic review across domains. *New Media & Society*, *25*(8), 2241–2267. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221116569	
9	Herrero-Diz et al. (2022)	Herrero-Diz, P., Pérez-Escolar, M., & Aramburu, D. V. (2022). Fact-checking skills: a proposal for Communication studies. *Revista de Comunicación*, *21*(1), 231–249. https://doi.org/10.26441/RC21.1-2022-A12	12
	Lelo (2022)	Lelo, T. (2022). The Rise of the Brazilian Fact-checking Movement: Between Economic Sustainability and Editorial Independence. *Journalism Studies*, *23*(9), 1077–1095. https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670x.2022.2069588	
	Moreno-Gil et al. (2022)	Moreno-Gil, V., Ramon-Vegas, X., & Mauri-Ríos, M. (2022). Bringing journalism back to its roots: examining fact-checking practices, methods, and challenges in the Mediterranean context. *Profesional de la Información*, *31*(2). https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2022.mar.15	
	Rodríguez-Ferrándiz (2023)	Rodríguez-Ferrándiz, R. (2023). An Overview of the Fake News Phenomenon: From Untruth-Driven to Post-Truth-Driven Approaches. *Media and Communication*, *11*(2), 15–29. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v11i2.6315	

Table 1. *Cont.*

Rank	Citations	Complete References	Citations
10	Dierickx et al. (2023)	Dierickx, L., Lindén, C. G., & Opdahl, A. L. (2023). Automated Fact-Checking to Support Professional Practices: Systematic Literature Review and Meta-Analysis. *International Journal of Communication*, *17*, 5170–5190.	11
	Frau-Meigs (2022)	Frau-Meigs, D. (2022). How Disinformation Reshaped the Relationship between Journalism and Media and Information Literacy (MIL): Old and New Perspectives Revisited. *Digital Journalism*, *10*(5), 912–922. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2022.2081863	
	Vu et al. (2023)	Vu, H. T., Baines, A., & Nguyen, N. (2023). Fact-checking Climate Change: An Analysis of Claims and Verification Practices by Fact-checkers in Four Countries. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *100*(2), 286–307. https://doi.org/10.1177/10776990221138058	

Source: authors' own elaboration using WOS data.

Table 2. Top 20 most used keywords.

Rank	Keywords	*n*	Rank	Keywords	*n*
1	Fact-Checking	173	17	Motivated Reasoning	8
2	Disinformation	91		Platforms	
3	Misinformation	90		Post-Truth	
4	Fake News	66		Twitter	
5	Social Media	50	18	Content Analysis	7
6	Journalism	46		Elections	
7	COVID-19	41		Engagement	
8	Verification	31		Experiment	
9	Artificial Intelligence	25		Media	
10	Digital	22	19	Computational Methods	6
11	Media Literacy	18		Credibility	
12	Correction	13		Ibero-America	
	Transparency			Journalism Practice	
13	Trust	12	20	Automated Fact-Checking	5
14	Health Communication	11		Climate Change	
15	Europe	10		Comparative Research	
	Hoaxes			Interviews	
	Spain			Partisanship	
16	Audiences	9		Perceived Credibility	
	Communication			Propaganda	
	Infodemic			Survey	
17	Debunk	8		WhatsApp	

Source: authors' own elaboration using WOS data.

We found *social media*, *journalism*, *COVID-19*, *verification*, *artificial intelligence*, or *digital* in a second group of keywords, showing other recurrent approaches in papers on fact-checking.

Thus, we can see that key themes explored in these articles involve the efficacy of counter-narratives in combating disinformation and misinformation, the role of AI and other new technologies in fact-checking, or the dynamics of misinformation sharing and perception on social media platforms. We can also note that several studies specifically examine how credible sources can be discredited, the significance of public service media, and the impact of media literacy. The articles seem to employ diverse methodologies, including experiments, surveys, and content analysis, although more in-depth studies are needed to assess this.

Regarding emerging trends, there is a noticeable emphasis on the role of technology, particularly AI, in enhancing or complicating fact-checking efforts and how journalists navigate the complexities of information disorder. The main findings across the studies suggest practical implications for journalists, public service media, and policymakers in enhancing their strategies against misinformation and fostering a more informed public. Overall, this corpus of articles produced in the field of Communication encapsulates the multi-faceted approaches to understanding and addressing disinformation and misinformation in contemporary media landscapes, emphasizing the vital role of credible information dissemination and adaptive fact-checking practices.

4.3. In-Depth Review of Fact-Checking Articles About the Russia-Ukraine War

The previous section has drawn a general perspective of fact-checking articles in the field of Communication during the studied period (from 24 February 2022 to 19 November 2024). This period, as already explained, has been selected because it marks the first thousand days of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Thus, in order to comprehend how scientific articles have tackled fact-checking initiatives in the context of this conflict, it is necessary to identify which corpus we would work with. Considering the 270 articles included in the previous part of the study, and after searching by title, abstract, and keywords, we located eleven articles referencing the conflict. However, in a more detailed analysis, three of those cases were removed from the subsample, as their focus was not really on the war, and mentions to the conflict or the two involved countries were indirect or contextual. The final eight articles that form our corpus of analysis are shown in Table 3. A more detailed analysis of each one is presented in Appendix A.

Table 3. List of articles on fact-checking in the context of the Russia–Ukraine conflict.

Citations	References
Charlton et al. (2024)	Charlton, T., Mayer, A.-T., & Ohme, J. (2024). A Common Effort: New Divisions of Labor Between Journalism and OSINT Communities on Digital Platforms. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*. https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612241271230
García-Marín and Salvat-Martinrey (2023)	García-Marín, D., & Salvat-Martinrey, G. (2023). Disinformation and war. Verification of false images about the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. *Icono 14*. https://doi.org/10.7195/ri14.v21i1.1943
Magallón-Rosa et al. (2023)	Magallón-Rosa, R., Fernández-Castrillo, C., & Garriga, M. (2023). Fact-checking in war: Types of hoaxes and trends from a year of disinformation in the Russo-Ukrainian war. *Profesional de la Información*. https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2023.sep.20
Morejón-Llamas et al. (2022)	Morejón-Llamas, N., Martín-Ramallal, P., & Micaletto-Belda, J. P. (2022). Twitter content curation as an antidote to hybrid warfare during Russia's invasion of Ukraine. *Profesional de la Información*. https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2022.may.08

Table 3. *Cont.*

Citations	References
Sacaluga-Rodríguez et al. (2024)	Sacaluga-Rodríguez, I., Vargas, J. J., & Sánchez, J. P. (2024). Exploring Neurocommunicative Confluence: Analysis of the Interdependence Between Personality Traits and Information Consumption Patterns in the Detection of Fake News. A Study with University Students of Journalism and Communication Using Enneagrams. *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*. https://doi.org/10.4185/rlcs-2024-2281
Springer et al. (2023)	Springer, N., Nygren, G., Orlova, D., Taradai, D., & Widholm, A. (2023). Sourcing Dis/Information: How Swedish and Ukrainian Journalists Source, Verify, and Mediate Journalistic Truth During the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict. *Journalism Studies*. https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2023.2196586
Tulin et al. (2024)	Tulin, M., Hameleers, M., de Vreese, C. et al. (2024). Why do Citizens Choose to Read Fact-Checks in the Context of the Russian War in Ukraine? The Role of Directional and Accuracy Motivations in Nineteen Democracies. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*. https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612241233533
Zecchinon and Standaert (2025)	Zecchinon, P., & Standaert, O. (2025). The War in Ukraine Through the Prism of Visual Disinformation and the Limits of Specialized Fact-Checking. A Case-Study at *Le Monde*. *Digital Journalism*. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2024.2332609

Source: authors' own elaboration using WOS data.

The first observation relates to the fact that only one of the eight articles has a publication date of 2022, the year that marked the beginning of the conflict. The remaining articles were published in 2023 or 2024. This aspect is relevant, above all because it helps to explain why some of the bibliometric studies carried out on disinformation (S&ět al., 2024; Durr-Missau, 2024; Tătaru et al., 2024; Navarro-Sierra et al., 2024; KaabOmeir et al., 2024; Pandey & Ghosh, 2023; Salvador-Mata et al., 2023; X. Li et al., 2023; Pérez-Escolar et al., 2023), but were very concretely about fact-checking (Tejedor et al., 2024), still do not present many studies on the Russia–Ukraine War. This is probably explained by the duration of scientific production, including data collection and analysis, but also publication processes. However, this is an aspect that deserves to be highlighted, especially because recently, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen a considerably different trend, with articles on misinformation, fact-checking, and the pandemic appearing very quickly in scientific journals. Although the difference between the topics is understood, the truth is that, just as happened concerning the pandemic, in this case we also witnessed a considerable and never-before-seen increase in false content about the war, so high that it even posed challenges to the work of fact-checkers (Dierickx & Lindén, 2024), leading to the need to create task forces to deal with the situation (EDMO Task Force on Disinformation on the War in Ukraine, n.d.).

Related to this, the data considered for the analyses in most articles' date back to the first months of the conflict. This might illustrate what the authors regard as the peak of disinformation during the war in Ukraine or, alternatively, the peak of fact-checking activities, as posterior events, such as the war in Gaza, might have also removed the spotlight from the conflict in Ukraine. However, once again, the time gap between the moment data are produced and their later publication, although it may also be related to the journals' operating times, may also refer to the need to collect databases for analysis, especially if we consider that several articles' content analyzes the work conducted by fact-checkers.

It should also be noted that some articles address the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, but only in an instrumental way, that is, the objectives of the articles are more comprehensive, going beyond this single conflict. This is the case of the article by Sacaluga-Rodríguez et al. (2024), which does not only analyze disinformation related to

the conflict, but rather the skills to identify disinformation, including aspects also related to war. This research is also relevant because it approaches disinformation and fact-checking from an innovative angle, that of neuro-communication, as it seeks to establish a relationship between personality traits, information consumption patterns, and the ability to detect false information. Therefore, the work thus aligns with others who have sought to study how the brain perceives issues of misinformation (Pennycook & Rand, 2021; Martínez-Costa et al., 2023). By doing so, this investigation falls within the scope of what Salaverría and Cardoso (2023) call "emerging fields for disinformation studies", also in connection to their call for "multidisciplinary studies of disinformation".

As noted, Sacaluga-Rodríguez et al.'s article is also one of those least centered on the issue of fact-checking. In this regard, two more focus on fact-checking (Springer et al., 2023; Charlton et al., 2024), but not on ex-post fact-checking (Mantzarlis, 2018), but with the practice inherent to journalistic work, that is, verification before publication. In the case of Charlton et al. (2024), they analyze the role of communities that form verification networks for information that appears online even before it reaches journalists. In the case of Springer et al. (2023), they seek to understand how journalists determine if information is problematic or needs cross-checking, and how they use this information.

Then, we have four articles (Zecchinon & Standaert, 2025; García-Marín et al., 2023; Magallón-Rosa et al., 2023; Morejón-Llamas et al., 2022) studying the work conducted by different fact-checking organizations. Zecchinon and Standaert (2024) use a case study to learn about the practices used by the fact-checking unit of the newspaper *Le Monde* (Les Décodeurs) to check visual disinformation around the Russia–Ukraine conflict. García-Marín et al. (2023) also address visual disinformation related to the Russian–Ukrainian conflict: besides characterizing this disinformation, they also analyze the reaction time of international fact-checking agencies to false images related to the war, while also comparing the disinformation strategies of Russia and Ukraine. The study by Magallón-Rosa et al. (2023) focuses the behavior and dissemination patterns of disinformation during the first year of the war by examining the work carried out by a group of Spanish fact-checkers. Finally, the research by Morejón-Llamas et al. (2022) also seeks to analyze the work carried out by a group of Spanish fact-checkers about the war, but paying special attention to Twitter (currently X). This platform also provides the sample for the study of Sacaluga-Rodríguez et al. (2024). The Discord platform was analyzed in another study from the sample (Charlton et al., 2024). Hence, these works integrate what Salaverría and Cardoso (2023) call "studies on disinformation on digital platforms", although focused on the issue of fact-checking.

The last study in the sample is the one conducted by Tulin et al. (2024), who address fact-checking from the perspective of citizens' motivation. The research seeks to analyze and understand the motivations in citizens' decisions to read fact-checks about the war in Ukraine, but also to know how country-level factors such as polarization, press freedom, and geographical proximity to the war influence citizens' fact-checking behaviors.

After learning about the topics covered in each article and observing their different foci regarding fact-checking, we tackle now the diversity of methodological approaches. Half of the articles present a mixed-methods approach (Zecchinon & Standaert, 2025; Springer et al., 2023; Magallón-Rosa et al., 2023; Morejón-Llamas et al., 2022). In their case study, Zecchinon and Standaert (2024) carry out a quantitative content analysis of fact-checks, complementing these data with semi-structured interviews with journalists. Springer et al. (2023) adopt a similar strategy, albeit content analysis does not focus on fact-checks but on journalistic coverage carried out by the media. Interviews with journalists from two countries also complement the study, and in this case, the investigation also adopts a comparative perspective between the two countries. This study goes back the furthest

in terms of the analysis period (it starts in 2017), which leads to a different understanding of the beginning of the conflict. Magallón-Rosa et al. (2023) also carry out a quantitative analysis through a content analysis that considers the number of verifications, format, time distribution, etc., together with a qualitative study of narrative and discursive strategies. Morejón-Llamas et al. (2022) also speak of a mixed-methods approach, combining a quantitative, qualitative, and discursive measurement of the information produced by the selected fact-checkers.

From the remaining four articles, three use solely quantitative approaches. In two cases (Sacaluga-Rodríguez et al., 2024; Tulin et al., 2024), the technique chosen for data collection is the questionnaire. In the case of García-Marín et al. (2023), there is an analysis of false images verified by fact-checkers, with the authors employing then descriptive and inferential statistical analyses. Finally, only Charlton et al. (2024) adopt a solely qualitative approach: a qualitative content analysis of a case study.

In total, even in articles with a mixed-methods approach, the quantitative dimension seems to be privileged (Navarro-Sierra et al., 2024), which reveals that the results of our study are in line with others already carried out and focused more broadly on fact-checking (Tejedor et al., 2024).

From the theoretical framework's perspective, the approaches are quite different among the eight articles. The literature review of the study by Morejón-Llamas et al. (2022) focuses mainly on the idea of hybrid warfare, highlighting the role of social networks as a battlefield, but also addresses the concepts of disinformation, the role of fact-checkers, the understanding of fact-checking as a new journalistic practice, and also content curation as an important element within the scope of fact-checking and considering the role assumed by social networks in the dissemination and circulation of false content.

In the article by García-Marín and Salvat-Martinrey (2023), the literature review focuses mainly on war propaganda, addressing aspects such as the use of different strategies in the production of disinformation, the power of false context as a preferred strategy for visual disinformation, and even the predominant use of Facebook as a platform for disseminating much false content.

The study of Magallón-Rosa et al. (2023) is also a theoretical framework focused on the role of social platforms in war journalism. It still addresses the prevailing narratives in terms of disinformation regarding the war in Ukraine. The study also addresses, in the literature review, the evolution of the journalist's role, referring to changes in *gatekeeper* theories and the emergence of the *gatewatcher*.

The article by Springer et al. (2023) fits theoretically into the investigation of the factors that influence the verification of news about conflicts. In the literature review, the authors discuss how journalists, geographically dispersed and far from the war, deal with the common ideal of the search for journalistic truth as a professional duty.

In the research by Sacaluga-Rodríguez et al. (2024), the theoretical framework is centered on the intersection between personality traits, information consumption patterns, and the ability to detect fake news. The authors use a neuro-communicative approach.

In turn, the study by Tulin et al. (2024) fits within the scope of studies that seek to identify the motivations for reading fact-checking articles. The authors address different motivations that may help explain the selection of fact-checks about the war in Ukraine. The study also addresses the truth default theory, according to which people tend to accept the honesty of information unless they are alerted to suspicions related to specific content, which calls into question the value of the information.

The article by Charlton et al. (2024) theoretically fits into the interactions between journalism and open-source intelligence and investigation (OSINT) communities. In the

literature review, the study also addresses the concepts of monitory democracy, associated with the networked public sphere, and the Dynamic Intermediation Model (D(X)IM.

Finally, the initiative by Zecchinon and Standaert (2024) addresses in its theoretical framework the disorder of information and visual propaganda, namely the concept of multimodal disinformation. It also addresses the change in the traditional role of the journalist as a *gatekeeper* and refers to the concept of *gatebouncing*, which emerges as a retroactive activity of information selection.

Having analyzed the central theme of the articles and the methodologies adopted, as well as the theoretical framework, we have a better understanding of the scientific production on the topic of fact-checking and the war in Ukraine. However, we should point out that there is not yet a considerable corpus of articles on this specific issue in WOS. This aspect is relevant to us, especially if the conflict is entering its third year of activity and the analysis focuses on one of the most extensive scientific journal and article databases. Despite the relevance of the conflict and the extensiveness of the WOS database, the scarcity of research on this event may have several explanations, including the fact that there are publications in journals that are not part of WOS (e.g., Baptista et al., 2023b). The limitations of fact-checking, considered by some to be an ineffective practice (Baptista et al., 2023a; Walter et al., 2020; Walter & Salovich, 2021), may also help to explain these results.

Similarly, we need to consider the complexity of a still ongoing and highly dynamic event and the difficulty to collect accurate and reliable data, making in-depth studies more difficulty. It is also essential to consider the duration of the scientific and publishing process itself, which means that the limited amount of scientific articles on the topic could change in the coming years as researchers continue to analyze data and develop new methodologies for fact-checking in conflict contexts.

5. Conclusions

In a context of growing concern about the threat posed by mis- and disinformation, studies on fact-checking have gained significant relevance. This study seeks to understand the state of fact-checking research in WOS journals in the context of a striking event such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The ongoing war, which began on 24 February 2022, has been fought on the battlefield and in the realm of information. The manipulation of facts and dissemination of disinformation have emerged as critical tactics employed by various actors, leading to significant implications for public perception and international relations.

Although research on fact-checking is predominantly carried out within the field of Communication, the issue is also being approached by other disciplines, such as psychology or neuro-communication. However, during the period of analysis, the first thousand days since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the number of articles had not significantly increased, perhaps in line with a certain slowing trend in the number of new fact-checking initiatives (Stencel et al., 2024). Although this study has not sought a comparison of topics, there are hints showing how the interest of fact-checking initiatives, just like that of academic research, shifts depending on the events taking place in the world. Hence, fact-checking and misinformation research grew initially in connection with political events, such as Donald Trump's first presidency (e.g., Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017); the COVID-19 pandemic became a clearly predominant theme for some years, as it has been observed in this and other studies (Blanco-Herrero et al., 2024); more recently, the war in Ukraine, and later also in Gaza, gained relevance. Although there have been relevant contributions (e.g., Tulin et al., 2024), this topic is still far from the predominance of others, perhaps due to its specific location or due to the time lag of academic publications. In fact, the study clearly shows the lag between an event or topic

arises and its scientific presence; this was not the case with the COVID-19 pandemic, which received unprecedentedly quick academic attention within months, also in fields like Communication (e.g., Igartua et al., 2020), but our study has shown that it is indeed the case of the war in Ukraine, with attention to the topic starting significantly later than the war started.

Focusing on the main findings of our study, we have identified who the leading actors (authors, universities, countries, and journals) behind scientific articles on fact-checking during this period are. A key observation is the role played by the USA and Spain. Although the leading role of the USA could be expected (Walter et al., 2020; Vinhas & Bastos, 2022), the role of Spanish scholars and universities might be seen as more surprising. Although more in-depth studies are needed to comprehend this role, one potential explanation is the relevance of the Spanish fact-checking movement, being one of the countries with most fact-checker signatories of the IFCN code of principles and the EFCSN (which also had Spanish participation in its origin). Moreover, this also relates to the proportionally higher concern about the topic of mis- and disinformation in this country compared to other European countries (European Commission, 2023; Vara et al., 2022). Finally, and more related to the functioning of academia, there are several Spanish-speaking journals indexed in SSCI and, especially, ESCI, which might also make the publication of Spanish authors easier.

The answers to the first questions helped to create the context for the growth of publications on fact-checking in the context of studies on disinformation. However, they also opened doors for the following question, which arises in line with the need identified by some research studies to address emerging challenges and less-explored topics in this field of research, going beyond the most prevalent themes and areas (Navarro-Sierra et al., 2024).

Together with this broader approach to studies on fact-checking, we have paid specific attention to scientific articles on fact-checking in the context of the war in Ukraine. It should be noted that we have identified a limited number of publications on this specific issue. Other topics, such as health (mostly in connection to the COVID-19 pandemic) or political issues, seem to still be dominant; the recency of the still-ongoing conflict, combined with the duration of the research and publication processes, might change this trend in the years to come. Although more research is still needed on this topic, we have observed that the existing articles seem to focus on analyzing the work conducted by fact-checking organizations in different contexts, frequently adopting a quantitative or mixed-methods perspective. There is also a significant interest in examining what happens in social media, a space particularly conducive to the dissemination of disinformation. In addition, contrary to what has been an emerging trend in disinformation studies, we have not identified, within the scope of this work, that artificial intelligence has a central role in fact-checking studies about war.

These observations are relevant in connection to well-established communication theories, such as the agenda setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Previous studies have shown that misinformation has the capacity to determine the agenda (e.g., Vargo et al., 2018) and so does fact-checking (e.g., Feng et al., 2021). This helps to explain the relevance of academic research on these topics, given that understanding their spread, practices, and foci helps scholars comprehend the way these types of communication can influence public discourse. Moreover, the analysis of the articles demonstrated that the volume of fact-checks is closely linked to the news cycle and the intensity of coverage of the war in Ukraine. In this context, fact-checkers help shape the public agenda, deciding which claims and information deserve to be verified and which topics receive more attention. Through this process, fact-checkers can influence how the public perceives war-related events and issues. On the other hand, the results also suggest that although academic interest in

fact-checking has increased significantly in recent years, the practice itself has become democratized, which could lead to a tendency for fact-checks to stabilize. This stabilization could have implications for the agenda itself since the attention given to specific topics could also decrease or stagnate.

On the other hand, the results obtained, namely through the analysis of articles that directly address fact-checking on the war in Ukraine, bring important contributions to research in this field of studies because the findings highlight the importance of media literacy in combating disinformation. However, the results also refer to citizens' motivation to read fact-checks about the war in Ukraine, analyzing how factors such as polarization, freedom of the press, and geographical proximity to the war can influence citizens' fact-checking behaviors. The results also highlight how easily credible sources can be discredited in a war context, reinforcing the role of media literacy.

To conclude, bibliometric studies, while valuable for analyzing research trends and impact, have several limitations that also apply to this work. Bibliometric databases like WOS and Scopus do not capture all publications, particularly those from non-English sources, conference proceedings, or books; thus, a relevant portion of the scientific literature on fact-checking cannot be studied. Related to this, data selection cannot be ignored, since search terms and periods can influence the results. In this study, the period of analysis is determined by the first thousand days of the war in Ukraine, as it was sought to contextualize fact-checking during this period, but longitudinal studies with a longer period of analysis might be able to identify more consistent and long-term trends.

We should highlight that our approach is relevant to understand the interplay between misinformation, fact-checking, and the war in Ukraine, but analyzing the production of scholars does not capture the complexity of these factors. We have identified a selection of studies addressing information manipulation during the war with different approaches, but future works need to keep paying attention to social media discourse or direct witnesses accounts for more comprehensive perspectives.

Moreover, it should be acknowledged that focusing on fact-checking offers a limited view of the current misinformation scenario, in which other factors, such as geopolitics or the rise in national-populist forces, also play a determining role. In this context, fact-checking has shown a positive but limited effect (Bachmann & Valenzuela, 2023; Walter et al., 2020), but it is, per se, not sufficient to counter a phenomenon that goes beyond exclusively communication issues.

Finally, bibliometric data provide descriptive quantitative information but do not capture the qualitative aspects of research, such as its originality, significance, or societal impact. To remedy this limitation, we have conducted a qualitative analysis of the articles about fact-checking in the context of the war. By combining both methods, we have obtained a broader quantitative understanding of existing patterns in fact-checking studies, complementing them with more in-depth observations of the fact-checking in the context of the war. As Dias and Sippitt (2020) highlight, significant time and effort have been dedicated to fact-checking as a strategy to combat mis- and disinformation. Thus, we must examine its possible effects comprehensively, considering how it could address the global challenge of information disorder. Without this understanding, we cannot fully grasp how fact-checking can enhance our democratic systems.

Thus, this research has not only provided a novel overview of studies on fact-checking, but also a more complete understanding of the role of fact-checking in one of the most critical events in Europe's recent history.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Summary of papers about Russia–Ukraine War from a Communication perspective.

References	Principle Goals	Methods and Materials	Main Findings
Charlton et al. (2024)	• To understand how OSINT communities use digital platforms, such as Discord, to organize and coordinate their activities. • To examine the interactions between OSINT communities and journalistic actors on digital platforms.	• Qualitative method: case study. • Corpus: two OSINT communities. • Qualitative content analysis: three events that involved OSINT practices and were covered by journalism. • Timeframe: May to July 2022.	• OSINT communities on Discord serve as an intermediary between the initial sources of information and the final public dissemination, verifying and validating the information before passing it on to journalistic actors. • OSINT communities engage in a constant monitoring and validation process, shifting between being the recipient and the source of information, in order to sort through the abundance of unverified information in the digital public sphere. • The interactions between OSINT communities and journalists represent a new division of labor in the digital public sphere, where both parties engage in a process of co-monitoring the information and knowledge production.

Table A1. *Cont.*

References	Principle Goals	Methods and Materials	Main Findings
García-Marín et al. (2023)	• To characterize the visual disinformation related to the Russo–Ukrainian conflict. • To find the international reach of that content by quantifying the number of countries where each hoax had circulated. • To analyze the reaction of international fact-checking agencies in terms of the time taken to check the false images related to the war. • To compare the disinformation strategies of Russia and Ukraine.	• Quantitative method: descriptive and inferential statistical parameters. • Corpus: 326 false images. • Timeframe: January to April 2022.	• False context is the most common type of visual disinformation related to the Russo–Ukrainian conflict. • Facebook and Twitter are the main platforms used to spread this disinformation. • The highest intensity of disinformation occurred in March 2022, shortly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine.
Magallón-Rosa et al. (2023)	• To collect the verifications of Spanish fact-checkers on the Russian invasion of Ukraine. • To study the behavior and patterns of disinformation dissemination during the first year of the war. • To analyze the distribution of hoaxes by typology, subject, month, country involved, etc.	• Quantitative (number of verifications, format, time distribution, etc.) and qualitative content analysis (narrative and discursive strategies). • Corpus: 307 fact-checks from six fact-checkers. • Timeframe: 24 February 2022 to 23 February 2023.	• The volume of fact-checking verifications is closely tied to the news cycle and intensity of coverage of the Russo–Ukrainian war, with March 2022 seeing the highest number of verifications. • The Spanish fact-checking organization *Maldita.es* was the most prolific, publishing nearly half of the unique hoaxes identified in the study. • Hoaxes related to Ukrainian President Zelensky were one of the most prevalent narratives in the Russian disinformation strategy.

Table A1. *Cont.*

References	Principle Goals	Methods and Materials	Main Findings
Morejón-Llamas et al. (2022)	• To conduct a comparative analysis of the activity and impact (likes, retweets, and comments) of the Twitter accounts of the fact-checking organizations *Maldito Bulo*, *Newtral*, and *EFE Verifica* during the early days of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. • To understand the ability of these fact-checkers to curate content on social media. • To define the evolution of the verifications and the ability to react to a war with high disinformation.	• Mixed-methods: quantitative, qualitative, and discursive measurement of the information produced by the selected fact-checkers. • Corpus: 397 tweets. • Timeframe: 21 to 28 February 2022.	• Fact-checkers rapidly increased their Twitter activity to counter disinformation surrounding the Russian invasion of Ukraine, with a peak in publications on the day of the invasion. • The fact-checkers focused more on expanding and contextualizing information as well as debunking false claims, rather than on improving media literacy. • The fact-checkers' posts, while rapid, were often repetitive in their content and lacked innovation in their visual presentation, which may have limited their impact and engagement on Twitter.
Sacaluga-Rodríguez et al. (2024)	• To analyze the general disposition to detect disinformation in relation to the different existing enneatypes. • To evaluate the competences of identification of disinformation related to the main topics in which a greater number of fake news is observed, and the differences that the enneatypes have when detecting them.	• Quantitative method: survey. • Sample: 144 students in their final years of communication and journalism degrees at the European University of Madrid. • Timeframe: February to March 2023.	• The study found that personality type, as measured by the enneagram, influenced the ability to detect disinformation, with some enneatypes showing greater susceptibility than others. • The majority of participants were identified as having enthusiast, loyal, and challenger enneatypes, comprising 60% of the sample. • The individualist and researcher enneatypes performed significantly worse than other types in detecting disinformation.

Table A1. *Cont.*

References	Principle Goals	Methods and Materials	Main Findings
Springer et al. (2023)	• To understand individual and collective verification routines in news journalism. • To investigate how journalists determine if information is problematic or needs cross-checking, and how they use this information. • To understand how the verification determination process is made transparent to audiences.	• Mixed-methods: content analysis of media coverage and interviews with journalists. • Corpus and sample: 149 news articles from Swedish and Ukrainian media outlets; 7 Swedish and 11 Ukrainian journalists. • Timeframe: content analysis between 2017 and 2019; interviews between spring 2019 and spring 2020.	• Sourcing and verification practices in conflict news reporting are largely individualized, with a lack of innovation, and collective practices of trusting which can lead to confirmation bias. • Source transparency is often lacking, and journalists may use linguistic framing to delegitimize certain sources or perspectives, which can undermine the audience's understanding of the information's reliability.
Tulin et al. (2024)	• To investigate the role of accuracy-motivated goals versus directionally motivated goals in citizens' decisions to read fact-checks about the Russian war in Ukraine. • To examine how country-level factors such as polarization, press freedom, and geographical proximity to the war influence citizens' fact-checking behaviors.	• Quantitative method: survey. • Sample: 19,037 citizens from 19 countries. • Timeframe: April to May 2022.	• Accuracy motivations (i.e., seeking to know the truth), rather than directional motivations (i.e., seeking to confirm existing beliefs), drive citizens to read fact-checks about the Russian war in Ukraine. • Individuals are more likely to read fact-checks if they perceive false information to be deliberately spread (disinformation), have a higher need for cognition, and find the issue more personally relevant. • Country-level press freedom is negatively associated with the likelihood of reading fact-checks, suggesting that citizens in countries with lower press freedom are more motivated to verify information.

Table A1. *Cont.*

References	Principle Goals	Methods and Materials	Main Findings
Zecchinon and Standaert (2025)	• To understand how the fact-checking unit of *Le Monde* (*Les Décodeurs*) organized its practices in response to visual disinformation surrounding the Russia-Ukraine conflict. • To place the practices of *Les Décodeurs* within the broader framework of previous research on fact-checking and disinformation. • To understand the discursive positions that fact-checkers develop about the function of fact-checking in the context of war.	• Mixed-methods: semi-structured interviews (qualitative) and content analysis of fact-checks (quantitative). • Corpus and sample: 48 debunks and five semi-structured interviews. • Timeframe: interviews from November 2022 to February 2023; debunks from 24 February 2022 to 31 December 2022.	• The majority of visual disinformation surrounding the war in Ukraine involved authentic images with misleading captions rather than sophisticated manipulation. • Existing categorizations of disinformation were able to effectively classify the visual disinformation analyzed in the study. • The study suggests refining the "false context" category to better capture the nuances of how authentic visuals are misused to spread disinformation.

Source: authors' own elaboration using analysis and data provided by *Elicit*.

Notes

1 Information retrieved from WOS. https://tinyurl.com/249c5s92, accessed on 28 November 2024.
2 Information retrieved from WOS. https://tinyurl.com/3d3uuxtx, accessed on 28 November 2024

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Article

Attracting the Vote on TikTok: Far-Right Parties' Emotional Communication Strategies in the 2024 European Elections

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Abstract: This study analyses the emotional communication strategies employed by far-right party leaders on TikTok during the 2024 European elections, focusing on their appeal to voters. Combining quantitative and qualitative content analysis of 472 videos from 27 leaders in 24 countries, the research examines the dominant emotions, themes, stylistic resources, and their impact on engagement. The results reveal a dual strategy that combines positive emotions such as hope and ambition, which generate the highest levels of engagement, with negative emotions such as fear and uncertainty, which emphasise crisis narratives. Leaders who balance optimism with polarising narratives show greater resonance, particularly with audiences. The findings underscore the growing role of TikTok in far-right political communication and demonstrate its effectiveness in mobilising emotional engagement among young people. Despite limitations, the study highlights the sophistication of emotional strategies in digital political communication and provides insights into how far-right leaders use TikTok to influence voter behaviour.

Keywords: political communication; TikTok; far-right party; emotional communication strategies; European elections

1. Introduction

The year 2024 has been a key year in world politics. Many elections have taken place in which parties of different ideological approaches, with their leaders at the forefront, have come to power in the United States, Russia, and Europe, in a context of global uncertainty due to constant disinformation and polarisation (Colomina, 2023), as well as manipulation and suspicions of electoral fraud (Carothers & Lee, 2024), not to mention the fear of possible interference by foreign countries.

One of the most important elections was that of the European Parliament, where more than 360 million citizens of the continent—specifically of the 27 member states of the European Union (hereafter, EU)—were summoned from 6 to 9 June to choose the destiny of Europe through 720 parliamentarians who will represent them in a legislature that will expire in 2029 (Gómez et al., 2024).

Attention has once again turned to far-right parties, characterised by their constant questioning of democracy and promotion of Eurosceptic and anti-immigration ideas (Moreno Moreno & Rojo Martínez, 2021), among other arguments. These parties have already performed well in the 2014 and 2019 elections (Manucci, 2021) and were predicted to gain more power in the 2024 elections and thus shift the European Parliament further to the right (Mudde, 2024b). The main consequence is an alignment similar to that of

many member states, which have normalised and consolidated far-right parties (Mondon & Winter, 2020; Mudde, 2019).

The final results of the election partially confirmed the predictions. The far-right has increased in Austria, France, Hungary, and Italy (Ivaldi, 2024). Therefore, the ultra-vote has made this political spectrum the second preferred choice after the European People's Party, with one in four parliamentarians belonging to the radical right, which theoretically falls into different groups based on ideology, albeit not always in practice (Mudde, 2024a). Most of these formations are found in the Patriots for Europe, European Conservatives and Reformists, and Europe of Sovereign Nations groups, although they can also be found in the European People's Party and the non-attached.

These parties have garnered significant support from the youth electorate, a significant segment of the population, during these elections. According to Eurostat (2024a), an estimated 22 million individuals were eligible to vote for the first time. This figure does not include the youth population of Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, or Poland, as these data are not available. In this regard, it is noteworthy that in nations such as Germany, Austria, Belgium, and Malta, 16-year-olds are eligible to participate in elections, as well as 17-year-olds in Greece (Goujard et al., 2024). But this figure would go up even more with the rest of Generation Z's youth vote, which is made up of people born between 1995 and early 2000. Nonetheless, despite the 64% of EU young people under the age of 30 expressing their intention to vote in these elections to the European Parliament (European Union, 2024b), with Romania and Portugal exhibiting a positive attitude, while Luxembourg, Lithuania, and Malta exhibited a less committed attitude, the final turnout of those under the age of 24 was 36% (European Union, 2024a).

Many of these young individuals are deeply concerned with safeguarding peace and enhancing international security and cooperation, combating climate change and economic and social disparities, and advocating for human rights, democracy, and employment prospects (European Union, 2024b). They are also aware of other issues, such as mass immigration or access to housing, but they feel apathy towards traditional politics and flirt with extreme right-wing parties, as they have done in these European elections. There has been an increase in the percentage of youth voters who vote for parties of this type. For example, in Germany, the support for Alternative for Germany (AfD) among voters between the ages of 24 and 30 increased by 11% for the 2019 European elections. For France's National Rally (RN), the increase was 10%, with this force obtaining 30% of the youth vote at the state level (Vinocur & Goury-Laffont, 2024).

This young audience can obtain information or access news through social networks. Furthermore, in 2023, 97% of young Europeans under the age of 29 used the Internet daily, with 88% participating in social networks (Eurostat, 2024b). According to the findings of We Are Social (2024), a significant proportion of 16–24-year-olds worldwide utilise social networks for various reasons. These includes but are not limited to keeping in touch with family and friends (47.5%), occupying leisure time (43.9%), discovering content (34.5%), observing current affairs (32.3%), and perusing news and stories (29.2%). Therefore, it is not surprising that political parties of any ideological spectrum are increasingly entering the world of social networks in order to reach their target audience and to connect emotionally with them and amplify their messages on platforms such as X, Instagram, YouTube, or, more recently, TikTok.

The primary objective of this paper is to scrutinise the emotional communication tactics employed by leaders of extreme right-wing parties on TikTok during the campaign for the 2024 European elections. This is done to identify how they are trying to attract the youth vote. This study therefore aims to achieve the subsequent specific objectives:

SO1. Determine the predominant emotions in audiovisual messages (positive, negative, and neutral).
SO2. Examine the recurring themes used to connect voters' concerns or aspirations, especially young people.
SO3. Analyse the stylistic and narrative resources used to generate emotional impact (music, language, visual effects, etc.).
SO4. Determine the frequency and type of emotional content generated by the videos.
SO5. Compare the strategies of the different leaders of the parties analysed.

Therefore, this study has been developed because of the following research questions:

RQ1. Which emotions dominate the videos posted by the leaders of extreme right-wing parties on TikTok during the period analysed?
RQ2. What are the most common themes found in the messages published on TikTok?
RQ3. Which audiovisual resources are used to enhance the emotional impact, including music, editing, effects, and body language?
RQ4. What is the magnitude of these messages, and how does it relate to affective polarisation (positive, negative, or neutral) in TikTok posts by far-right leaders?
RQ5. What are the variations in emotional strategies based on the country or political leader?
RQ6. What types of interactions are generated by videos containing emotional content, such as "likes", comments, and shares?
RQ7. Is there a correlation between the utilisation of particular emotions and the degree of engagement?
RQ8. Are there any particular appeals to identity, cultural, or social values specifically aimed at young people?

After establishing the objectives and research questions, we propose a series of hypotheses that will guide the analysis of the content disseminated by the leaders of far-right on TikTok parties during the 2024 European elections. These hypotheses seek to explore how emotional, thematic, and stylistic strategies are used to connect with different segments of the audience, especially young people, and how these strategies impact the interaction generated by the videos.

General Hypothesis:

GH: Leaders of far-right parties on TikTok employ emotional, thematic, and stylistic communication strategies designed to maximise impact and engagement. They adapt to the characteristics and preferences of digital audiences.

Specific Hypotheses:

SH1: The messages disseminated by far-right party leaders on TikTok are designed with a style, content, and tone that specifically appeal to young audiences. They incorporate topics relevant to their interests and forms of communication characteristic of this demographic.
SH2: Negative emotions such as fear, anger, and disgust dominate the analysed videos and are used as tools to polarise and mobilise the audience.
SH3: Videos that integrate negative and unpleasant emotions generate a higher level of interaction and engagement than videos that lack these elements.

1.1. TikTok, a Vein for Political Communication Targeting Young People

The 2008 US elections marked the dawn of a new era in global political communication, owing to the emergence of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. This, among other factors, led to the election of Barack Obama as the 44th President of the United States of America (Costa, 2009; Hendrix, 2019). Other nations have since adopted this approach, initially as political communication tools and later as communication strategies

(Román-San-Miguel et al., 2021). Leaders and parties are increasingly using social networks to disseminate their messages (Estellés & Castellví, 2020).

The scholarly literature pertaining to political communication and social networks, including but not limited to Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, has been gaining increasing prominence in recent times (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013; Casero-Ripollés, 2018; Corchia, 2019; Lipschultz, 2022; Subekti et al., 2023). However, it is notable that TikTok has recently been incorporated into party communication strategies. This social network of Chinese origin, initiated in 2016, has experienced a rapid expansion lately, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. This is due to its short and appealing videos, which provide a novel platform for social entertainment. It presents an opportunity to communicate that has not been overlooked by political parties and leaders (Berdón-Prieto et al., 2023; Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021; Cervi et al., 2023; Moir, 2023; Morejón-Llamas, 2023; Zamora-Medina et al., 2023), as was previously the case with other social platforms (Tucker et al., 2018). However, there is a more compelling reason, as TikTok is an application where young people have a significant presence, unlike Facebook, Instagram, or X.

Despite its resemblance to other social networks, TikTok possesses distinct characteristics, such as its vertical layout and incorporation of musical elements or songs (González-Aguilar et al., 2023). Furthermore, the relatively brief duration of its videos, which, from a political standpoint, favours a more informal approach (Gekker, 2019), has the potential to captivate young users (Medina-Serrano et al., 2020) and allows parties to send their messages to these audiences directly and without filters (Albertazzi & Bonansinga, 2024).

The utilisation of social media by populists and the far right as their primary means of disseminating their political message (Guerrero-Solé et al., 2020) is not a novel occurrence. However, it has definitely increased with the emergence of TikTok, initiating a trend that leads to concern about how nationalist and conspiratorial content thrives, sponsored by the platform's algorithm, which boosts the content that generates the most participation and popularity (Hohner et al., 2024). Social media platforms have played a significant role in this phenomenon, as evidenced by the utilisation of brief and direct videos, sometimes featuring rebellious language, which aim to captivate viewers' attention within a few seconds. This facilitates the dissemination and propagation of the messages. To achieve this, the parties use simplified content with powerful phrases and a visual aesthetic based on striking images edited with musical and textual effects, memes, symbols, colours, etc. These initiatives aim to reach out to people who are disenchanted with the traditional political system and economic elites.

The scientific community is still unsure about the importance of studying TikTok, youth, and extreme right-wing parties. Studies on the impact of the TikTok network on Generation Z can be found regarding the youth binomial. On the one hand, there exists research on the causal correlation between the use of TikTok by young individuals and their civic behaviour in real life (Moffett & Rice, 2024; Seppälä, 2022), as well as the opportunities and risks associated with the expression of social movements on TikTok (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2023). However, there are also studies on the significant increase in young people's interest in political practices presented in short videos (Hindarto, 2022) and political and entertainment content during elections (Cervi et al., 2023).

Studies that include extreme right-wing parties also cover various countries in Latin America, the United States, Spain, and Canada. In the context of Latin America, they concentrate on the utilisation of the network of political leaders and parties in Argentina and Chile (Ariza et al., 2023; Rivera López et al., 2024). Concerning the United States, we have discovered research on the presence of right-wing and left-wing populism among young individuals through interactions on TikTok (Amend, 2024). The analysis of the impact of the network on the political identity of young adults aged 18 to 25 conducted by

Church (2022) indicates that 91% of the respondents have altered their political ideology. In Canada, we find studies of propaganda aimed at young people by the Groyper movement (Quintal, 2022), and in Spain, we find comparative studies between political leaders in Spain and Poland (Zamora-Medina et al., 2023) or studies of the political party Vox (Castro Martínez & Díaz Morilla, 2021).

Since then, very little research has been conducted on a continental European scale (Albertazzi & Bonansinga, 2024) and, to date, we have not found any that refer to the European elections of 2024. This does not only represent a novel contribution to the investigation of a social network to which the European Commission placed restrictions in 2023 for its use by its employees, for fear of security and access to their data (Sweney, 2023). It also contributes to the verification of the strength of the continent, as pointed out by Goujard et al. (2024): "Around Europe, the social media platform has become populist leaders' experimental lab during elections, sharing bombastic TV appearances and fiery speeches framed by bright backgrounds and emojis while attacking migrants, Islam, and climate change".

1.2. Emotional Strategies for Political Communication

The success of these parties is explained, among other factors, by how they use communication to mobilise their supporters, as well as to persuade and recruit undecided voters or new followers, such as young people of voting age. The communication strategy of the far right frequently employs diverse tactics, utilising emotions (Freistein et al., 2022) as valuable tools to establish a connection with voters, a practice that is also employed by traditional parties (Szabó, 2020).

Emotions have become of crucial importance in the digital ecosystem. An important part of online communication has an emotional component (Gheorghe, 2019). The mobilisation of the electorate is triggered by emotions. Citizens vote out of passion, anger, rage, indignation, hope, anger, nostalgia, etc. A citizen who has no feelings declines to abstain from voting (Crespo-Martínez et al., 2022). Love, disgust, fear, or humour constitute the foundation of any political campaign and are conveyed through both conventional and digital media (Méndez-Muros, 2021) and social networks.

In this sense, the media are relevant in terms of emotional connection, as spaces of ideological reproduction and social legitimisation beyond being a source of knowledge and transmission of opinions. In all of them, emotions play a fundamental role in connecting with the public, and political leaders create images that shape an identity for their followers (Rebollo-Catalán & Hornillo Gómez, 2010). This is particularly evident among populist politicians, who are not reticent to seek any assistance that facilitates emotional expansion (Charaudeau & Gentile, 2009).

The use of a broad spectrum of emotions linked to populism is common to a large part of extreme right-wing parties (Guerrero-Solé et al., 2023). Populist communication, therefore, is used strategically, with direct messages that appeal to the emotional side of voters. These are emotive and polarising messages, which are disseminated on social networks on the Internet (with ephemeral stories, shocking images, or short videos) and appeal to feelings such as fear. This is precisely one of the most emblematic emotional approaches of the far right, namely the appeal to fear and external threat to elicit concern among voters. According to Brader's (2005) research, voters who are exposed to messages of fear or anxiety exhibit an increase in their levels of vigilance and information-seeking. Similarly, populist politicians employ positive emotions, such as presenting themselves as ordinary individuals to achieve public identification on social networks (Kissas, 2024) or cultivating a sense of closeness with citizens (Bast, 2021).

Emphasising the insecurity of nations is a good weapon to use against the foreigner. In fact, a common tactic is to exaggerate the dangers of non-European citizens' immigration to their nations, seeing it as a threat to national identity, cultural customs, and their economy. From this stems the fear of terrorism, for example Islamist terrorism, as well as the criminality of certain groups or communities (Vasilopoulos et al., 2019).

Far-right parties use other frames, such as frustration and antipathy with the traditional political system, to blame other institutions for failing to solve problems such as unemployment, uncontrolled immigration, etc. It is therefore not surprising to find tactics such as the generation of distrust towards the political and economic elites (European Union, European Central Bank, traditional parties, etc.). Against this backdrop, a political revival is proposed, which these parties believe they embody with the backing of the populace. It is a valid strategy to attract voters who have been ignored or disappointed by the competition by presenting themselves as rebel, Eurosceptic, or anti-establishment parties (Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2024). They often portray themselves as victims of the political and media system.

Another pertinent approach is to appeal to identity and nationalism, wherein formations evoke past grandeur in a nostalgic manner. Formations employ national symbology and narratives to foster a sense of belonging and collective identity, ultimately leading to the rejection of the different. A recurring tactic is the protection of traditional national values (such as homeland, family, and religion) against moral decadence in Europe (Donders, 2020). It also involves the incorporation of songs or figures from popular culture (Dunkel & Schiller, 2025), which exhibit emotional efficacy for both young individuals and traditional audiences.

In addition to the above, the use of crisis rhetoric is another axis of interest in the emotional communication employed by far-right parties. They declare an economic, migratory, and social crisis in a Europe that requires transformation (Boréus, 2022). They employ strategies that appeal to the emotions of urgency to mobilise voters to act swiftly, relying on their postulates (Nguyen et al., 2021).

2. Materials and Methods

This study expands upon the theoretical foundations previously outlined and scrutinises the emotional communication tactics employed by far-right party leaders on TikTok, employing a methodology that integrates quantitative and qualitative content analysis (Callejo, 2010; Flick, 2004; Krippendorff, 2004; Wimmer & Dominick, 1996) and employs a comparative approach (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). However, it is imperative to note that the extreme right is a broad term that encompasses both radical (populist) and extreme forms of right-wing politics: "the far right includes all those ultranationalist collective actors sharing a common exclusionary and authoritarian worldview—predominantly determined on sociocultural criteria—yet varying allegiances to democracy" (Pirro, 2023, p. 103).

Three key dimensions of the phenomenon are explored: (1) the political party, (2) the political leader and his or her profile on TikTok, and (3) the videos posted during the 2024 European election campaign. The initial phase of the analysis comprised of identifying the parties and leaders who would constitute the research sample. The initial selection of the sample comprised 45 political parties from 26 nations that participated in the 2024 European elections and were identified with a far-right ideology: Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs—FPO (Austria); Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie—N-VA and Vlaams Belang—VB (Belgium); Има такъв народ/Ima Takŭv Narod and Възраждане (Bulgaria); Domovinski pokret—DP and Most nezavisnih lista (Croatia); Εθνικό Λαϊκό Μέτωπο—ELAM (Cyprus); Občanská demokratická strana—ODS and Svoboda a přímá demokracie—SPD (Czech Republic); Danmarksdemokraterne and

Dansk Folkeparti—DF (Denmark); Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond—EKRE (Estonia); Perussuomalaiset/Sannfinländarna—PS (Finland); Rassemblement national—RN and Reconquête—REC (France); Alternative für Deutschland—AfD (Germany); Dimokratikó Patriotikó Kínima—NIKI, Ellinikí Lýsi—EL/ΕΛ, and Foni Logikis (Greece); Fidesz-Magyar Polgári Szövetség—KDNP and Mi Hazánk (Hungary); Fratelli d'Italia—FdI and Lega Salvini Premier (Italy); Nacionālā apvienība (Latvia); Lietuvos lenkų rinkimų akcija—Krikščioniškų šeimų sąjunga or (Lithuania); Alternativ Demokratesch Reformpartei—ADR (Luxembourg); Conrad Borg Manché (independent) and Imperium Europa (Malta); BoerBurgerBeweging—BBB, Forum voor Democratie—FvD, Partij voor de Vrijheid—PVV, and Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij—SGP (The Netherlands); Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość and Prawo i Sprawiedliwość—PiS (Poland); CHEGA—CH (Portugal); Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor—AUR and SOS România—SOS (Romania); Republika and Sloboda a Solidarita—SaS (Slovakia); Nova Slovenija–Krščanski demokrati—N.Si and Slovenska demokratska stranka—SDS (Slovenia); Se Acabó la Fiesta (SALF) and VOX (Spain); and Sverigedemokraterna—SD (Sweden).

This classification was determined by a report in the newspaper Público (Sangiao, 2024), which was based on the academic initiative The PopuList, which we have also used (Rooduijn et al., 2023), although it is outdated to 2022. In addition, the parties of this ideology present in the previous European elections were included in this ranking, included in the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and Identity and Democracy (ID) groups of the European Parliament.

In 2024, from this initial group, 40 parties from 25 countries achieved parliamentary representation, with the only exceptions being Ireland and Malta. However, it was considered that mere membership in the ECR and ID groups does not necessarily imply that all groups are extreme right. Therefore, a thorough review of the ideological characteristics of each party was conducted, excluding parties that, although initially labelled as far-right typologies, we consider to be more aligned with other right or centre-right positions: liberalism, conservatism, nationalism, or other typologies (Christians, democrats, etc.). Specifically, the political parties that have been dropped are the following: Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie—N-VA (Belgium); Има такъв народ/Ima Takŭv Narod (Bulgaria); Občanská demokratická strana—ODS (Czech Republic); Danmarksdemokraterne (Denmark); Lietuvos lenkų rinkimų akcija—Krikščioniškų šeimų sąjunga or (Lithuania); BoerBurgerBeweging—BBB (The Netherlands); Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij—SGP (The Netherlands); and Se Acabó la Fiesta (SALF) (Spain). Following this process, after consulting party websites and other sources (Flores & Charte, 2024; Señorán López, 2024), the sample was reduced to 32 far-right political parties from 24 countries, distributed across five groups in the European Parliament: Patriots for Europe (PfE), European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR), Europe of Sovereign Nations Group (ESN Group), and the European Union.

However, not all of the leaders of the former far-right formations have profiles on the Chinese social network. For the analysis of the emotional strategies of their leaders on TikTok, we considered the official accounts of their representatives. The final sample consisted of 27 verified or, failing that, unverified accounts, covering a total of 19 countries (Table 1). Profiles that raised questions regarding their authenticity or representativeness were discarded, having searched for this information on the parties' websites and on the profiles of the leaders on other social networks. This is the case of dubious profiles of Christos Christou, from Εθνικό Λαϊκό Μέτωπο—ELAM (Cyprus); Martin Helme, from Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond—EKRE (Estonia); Raivis Dzintars, from Nacionālā apvienība (Latvia); Alexandra Schoos, from Alternativ Demokratesch Reformpartei—ADR

(Luxembourg); Geert Wilders, from Partij voor de Vrijheid—PVV (The Netherlands); and Jaroslaw Kaczynski, from Prawo i Sprawiedliwość—PiS (Poland).

Table 1. Sample and units of analysis of the research.

Country	Political Party	Leader's Name	Number of Videos
Austria	Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs—FPO	Herbert Kickl	9
Belgium	Vlaams Belang—VB	Tom Van Grieken	62
Bulgaria	Възраждане	Kostadin Kostadinov	4
Croatia	Domovinski pokret—DP	Ivan Penava	0
Czech Republic	Svoboda a přímá demokracie—SPD	Tomio Okamura	56
Denmark	Dansk Folkeparti—DF	Morten Messerschmidt	1
Finland	Perussuomalaiset/Sannfinländarna—PS	Riikka Purra	0
France	Rassemblement national—RN	Marine Le Pen	21
France	Reconquête—REC	Éric Zemmour	8
Germany	Alternative für Deutschland—AfD	Tino Chrupalla	11
Germany	Alternative für Deutschland—AfD	Alice Weidel	
Greece	Dimokratikó Patriotikó Kínima—NIKI	Dimitris Natsios	10
Greece	Ellinikí Lýsi—EL/ΕΛ	Kyriakos Velopoulos	46
Greece	Foni Logikis	Afroditi Latinopoulou	4
Hungary	Fidesz-Magyar Polgári Szövetség—KDNP	Viktor Orbán	24
Hungary	Mi Hazánk	László Toroczkai	21
Italy	Fratelli d'Italia—FdI	Georgia Meloni	21
Italy	Lega Salvini Premier	Matteo Salvini	46
Poland	Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość	Slawomir Mentzen	2
Portugal	CHEGA—CH	André Ventura	31
Romania	Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor—AUR	George Simion	31
Romania	SOS România—SOS	Diana Sosoaca	10
Slovakia	Republika	Milan Uhrík	35
Slovenia	Nova Slovenija–Krščanski demokrati—N.Si	Matej Tonin	0
Slovenia	Slovenska demokratska stranka—SDS	Janez Janša	1
Spain	VOX	Santiago Abascal	18
Sweden	Sverigedemokraterna—SD	Jimmie Åkesson	0
TOTAL			472

A key aspect of data collection was the determination of the time of analysis, which was set between 22 May and 9 June 2024, inclusive, covering a total of 19 days. This interval is two days before and two days after the official election campaign calendar set by the Spanish Central Electoral Board (2024). As not all nations commence and conclude their electoral campaigns on identical dates, we opted to scrutinise the Spanish instance, which spanned from 24 May to 7 June, with an additional two days preceding and following this period. This ensures a broad observation framework that culminates on Election Day itself, allowing for both the activity before and immediately after the official campaign period. In

this context, 472 videos were manually collected through the TikTok app, which constitute the units of analysis of this research. This figure represents the total number of videos (universe) of each political leader during the above timeframe. The recording and field study of the videos was carried out over the months of October, November, and December 2024. Below is the analysis sheet used for this content.

According to the stated objectives and to address the research inquiries, a content analysis was conducted (Krippendorff, 2004), employing an analysis sheet. The selection of categories was based on a combined inductive and deductive approach. On the one hand, the theoretical foundation for emotional analysis is supported by research on universal emotions and their recognition in communication (Ekman, 1992; Sautera et al., 2010; Ortega Fernández & Rodríguez Hernández, 2021), on the role of emotions in political polarization and mobilization (Freistein et al., 2022; Badajoz-Dávila et al., 2023), and on the impact of political discourse on social media (Crespo-Martínez et al., 2022; Moret-Soler et al., 2022; Domínguez-García et al., 2023; Colussi et al., 2024; Martínez-Fresneda & Zazo-Correa, 2024). On the other hand, an exploratory phase was conducted to identify recurring patterns in the videos, allowing the adaptation of existing categories to the specific digital and political context of the study. This process ensured that the categories were theoretically consistent and mutually exclusive, preventing coding overlaps and guaranteeing analytical clarity.

An analysis sheet has been applied to each of the key dimensions, including contextualisation of the party, the leader and his TikTok account, and the content analysis of the publications. This sheet defines the primary study variables, which can be summarised as follows:

Dimension 1: contextualisation of the party. This includes variables such as the name of the party, territorial scope, year of the foundation, motto, logo, website, and political spectrum (which can range from extreme left to extreme right). Additionally, the ideology of the party is defined, which may include categories such as identity nationalism, national conservatism, anti-communism, Euroscepticism, Christian nationalism, and extreme right-wing populism.

Dimension 2: the leader and their TikTok account. Information is collected regarding the leader's name, gender, age, and brief background. The TikTok account is also looked at, including its verification, profile picture, description, number of followers, and "likes".

Dimension 3: content analysis. This dimension collects descriptive variables such as the video link, date of publication, video duration, and the inclusion of descriptive text, hashtags, or mentions. Engagement variables are also analysed, such as the number of "likes", comments, and shares. Due to the scope of the research, we have selected a singular option to categorise themes, emotions, strategic orientation, and target audience, among other factors. The main themes are identified, such as cultural identity, security, immigration, criticism of the political system, etc., and the target audience is identified. In the emotional content variables, we determined the predominant emotion in the video (for instance, fear, pride, hope), the polarisation (positive: emotions fostering well-being, hope, or belonging; negative: emotions inducing fear, anger, or rejection; neutral: balanced or low-intensity emotions), and the strategic orientation of the emotion, which encompasses positive emotions related to personal well-being and social connectedness; negative emotions linked to danger, anger, or suffering; and neutral emotions with both positive and negative tendencies. In this regard, the predominant emotion coding includes categories such as "Positive emotions of personal enjoyment", "Emotions of empathy and social connection", "Pride and ambition", "Emotions of danger and insecurity", "Intense negative emotions", "Emotions of displeasure", "Hope and excitement", and "Emotions of suffering and vulnerability." These categories were selected because they encompass both emotions that foster identification and political mobilization as well as those that generate

polarization and rejection, key elements in far-right communication (Freistein et al., 2022; Badajoz-Dávila et al., 2023). Additionally, criteria were established to ensure that these categories are theoretically consistent and mutually exclusive, ensuring that each video is classified under a single predominant emotion and preventing overlaps in coding. Finally, stylistic and technical aspects are considered, such as the use of music and visual effects, body language, and the presence of symbolic elements (flags, national or party symbols).

To ensure quality of the analysis, a detailed codebook (García-Estévez et al., 2025) was developed and coders were trained through a two-stage calibration process. Initially, a pilot analysis was conducted to identify and rectify any potential inconsistencies in the analysis card. Next, inter-rater reliability was assessed using Scott's indices and Cohen's Kappa coefficient (k) to reach a high level of agreement (90%), supporting the robustness of the coding tool. For data processing and the creation of contingency, frequency, and cross-tabulations and graphs, IBM SPSS Statistics was used, version 30.

Given the intricate and extensive nature of the data, an interpretative-hermeneutic approach was selected, in accordance with the recommendations of Gadamer (2015, 2004) and Ferrater Mora (1990). This methodology, which facilitates a comprehensive comprehension of the significances underlying the data, is complemented by qualitative discourse analysis methodologies, such as those advocated by Coffey and Atkinson (1996) and Sayago (2014). The qualitative techniques employed encompass open coding, which involves identifying recurring themes in the analysed content; narrative analysis, which examines the stories or narratives emerging from the videos and their connection with emotions and political messages; and contextualisation, which integrates the data into its cultural and political context to guarantee precise interpretation. It has been possible to identify patterns, recognise similarities and differences between discourses, and draw richer and more meaningful conclusions.

3. Results

3.1. Contextualising the Party, the Leader and His TikTok Account

The far-right parties under study vary significantly in terms of year of foundation, slogans, and ideological orientations, although they share a common political spectrum and converge on key themes such as identity nationalism and far-right populism. The chronology of the parties varies from historical formations such as the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, founded in 1956, to recent movements such as Foni Logikis in Greece (2023). This is indicative of a resurgence of the far-right political landscape, as evidenced by the emergence of novel actors in recent decades, such as SOS România (2021), Republika (2021), and CHEGA (2019).

The parties studied have a broad geographical spread across Northern, Southern, Eastern, and Western Europe. This aspect allows us to investigate how specific contextual factors, such as the migration crisis or political disaffection, shape the communication strategies and ideological discourses of the far right in different regions of the continent. Some parties stand out for their use of nationalist slogans that appeal to identity and protectionist sentiments, such as 'Our country first' (Alternative für Deutschland, Germany) or 'First the people themselves' (Vlaams Belang, Belgium). Others opt for messages of justice or traditional values, such as 'Justice for Hungary' (Mi Hazánk, Hungary) or 'Faith, Nation, Family' (NIKI, Greece). However, not all parties present clear-cut slogans, which could reflect differences in their communication strategies.

As for their ideological orientations, bearing in mind that they all fall within the spectrum of the extreme right, we must recognise that it is precisely ultra-right populism that is the predominant category (Figure 1). Seven parties identified along these lines were identified. This approach combines anti-elite discourse with nationalist claims to

attract disenchanted segments of the population. Identitarian nationalist ideology is present in six parties, an ideology that focuses on preserving and prioritising national cultural and ethnic identity over external influences. Both national conservatism and Euroscepticism are represented in four political parties, highlighting a tendency towards traditional policies and rejection of supranational European integration. To a lesser extent, Christian nationalism manifests itself in two distinct factions, emphasising a narrative founded on religious principles. It is surprising that none of the parties explicitly prioritise the categories of anti-communism and anti-globalisation, which may indicate a shift from traditional far-right approaches towards novel discursive axes.

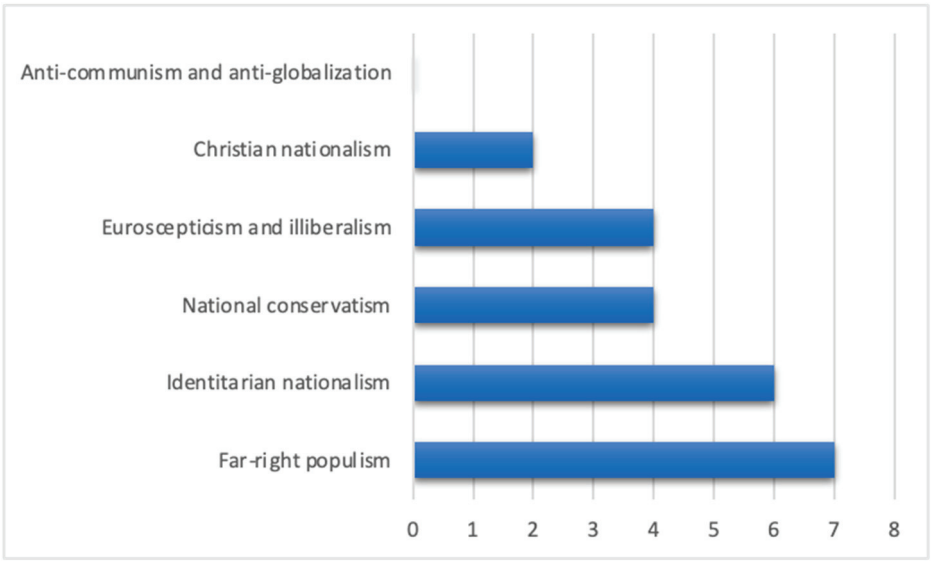


Figure 1. Extreme right-wing political ideology of the analysed parties.

The analysis of political leaders and their TikTok accounts reveals significant characteristics, both in terms of demographics and visual and communication strategies. Male representation is predominant, with 18 men outnumbering 6 women, indicating a distinct gender disparity in the political leadership of European far-right parties. The average age is 48.38 years, with slight differences between genders. Men have an average age of 48.89 years, and women have a slightly lower average age of 46.83 years. These data suggest that parties tend to select leaders who are at a stage of professional and political maturity, with a slight preference for older male leaders.

These political actors tend to use profile images that focus on close-ups (17 cases) or medium shots (7 cases), conveying closeness and personalisation. Leaders typically appear in close-up or medium shots, attired in formal attire comprising suits, shirts, and ties, with occasional instances of more casual attire. These visual choices reflect political leadership expectations, as well as national and strategic differences in how each public figure is presented.

Leaders often highlight their political positions and slogans related to their roles in their account descriptions, most of which are not officially verified (14 accounts versus 10 verified). For instance, Marine Le Pen and Matteo Salvini emphasise their responsibilities as national representatives, whereas others, such as Tom Van Grieken, opt for more direct communications aimed at political mobilisation. This approach strengthens their authority and links their profile to their party and national identity.

The number of followers and "likes" on profiles varies significantly, reflecting both the popularity of leaders and the effectiveness of their digital strategy. Leaders with a more charismatic and relatable approach, such as Éric Zemmour (356,900 followers and

5,900,000 likes) or Marine Le Pen (1,200,000 followers and 17,700,000 likes), stand out as being the most successful in terms of interaction. However, leaders who are less media-friendly, such as Dimitris Natsios (1620 followers) may have a limited digital presence, which could affect their ability to mobilise on this social network.

In summary, the purpose of profile pictures and descriptions is to convey crucial aspects of one's identity, such as the following:

— National symbolism and professionalism. Leaders such as Slawomir Mentzen and Marine Le Pen employ flags and official contexts in their photographs, thereby reinforcing their nationalist identity and connection to traditional values.
— Closeness and spontaneity. Leaders such as Viktor Orbán or Jimmie Åkesson opt for a more casual and informal approach, incorporating photographs taken outdoors or with an active attitude. This aims to connect with young audiences and create a more accessible image.
— Distinctive narrative style. Leaders such as Diana Șoșoacă stand out for their distinct character, combining populist messages with emotional and cultural content, such as in the case of music videos.

3.2. Content Analysis of European Far-Right Leaders' TikTok Publications

3.2.1. Analysis of the Descriptive Variables

We start by examining the descriptive characteristics and engagement of videos posted on TikTok by European far-right party leaders during the period from 22 May to 9 June 2024. This part of the study aims to identify patterns in the frequency of posts, the length of videos, the use of text, hashtags, and mentions as well as the average impact through engagement variables such as "likes", comments, and shares/favourites.

The characteristics include the frequency of publication. In this regard, the total quantity of videos published by the leaders analysed exhibits significant variation. The average number of posts per party is 21.3 videos, with a maximum of 62 (Vlaams Belang) and a minimum of 0 (Domovinski pokret, Nova Slovenija-Kranski demokrati, Perussuomalaiset/Sannfinländarna, and Swedendemokraterna). The distribution of this platform shows a disparity in the use of this platform as a communication tool. The duration is approximately 1 min and 31 s. A range of 6 seconds to 20 min was observed, indicating significant differences in the narrative and content strategies employed.

The analysis of the videos reveals a predominant utilisation of text and hashtags, while a lower frequency of mentions is observed. A total of 96.2% of the videos utilised hashtags, a prevalent practice in social media platforms to enhance the visibility of the content. However, only 3.8% of videos were presented without any descriptive text, suggesting that it is important to complement videos with written information. Although mentions were present in a much lower percentage (1.3%), they were mainly used to respond to other users or to tag journalists or media outlets.

3.2.2. Analysis of the Variables of the Message and Its Emotional Content

An analysis of the frequency distribution of the predominant themes in TikTok videos of European far-right political parties allows us to obtain an overview of the most recurrent themes in this type of content. The frequency table (Table 2) shows a clear preference for certain themes over others. The most frequent ones include the following: (1) campaign actions, rallies, and appeals to vote (182 videos), which is expected given the political content; (2) criticism of the political system and other parties (73 videos), indicating a strong tendency towards polarisation and political confrontation; and (3) security and immigration (53 videos), indicating a significant concern for security and immigration issues. On the contrary, the least frequent themes are the following: (1) promises for youth

(5 videos), which may indicate less attention to youth concerns for the parties analysed; and (2) rejection of progressive social movements (8 videos), since this theme, although present, does not seem to be a priority in the discourse of these parties.

Table 2. Frequency distribution of the main themes of the videos analysed.

Code	Theme	Frequency	%
1	Cultural and national identity	14	2.97
2	Security and immigration	53	11.23
3	Criticism of the political system and/or other parties	73	15.47
4	Promises for the youth	5	1.06
5	Rejection of progressive social movements	8	1.69
6	Appeal to traditional values	18	3.81
7	Narrative of crisis or decline	19	4.03
8	Euroscepticism and anti-globalisation	14	2.97
9	Campaign actions, rallies and call to vote	182	38.56
10	Other	86	18.22
TOTAL		472	100

Campaign actions, rallies, and appeals to vote are the most represented topic in the videos viewed by most of the leaders, such as those of Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Slovenia, Italy, Poland, Portugal, and Romania, as well as for Marine Le Pen (RN), Kyriakos Velopoulos (EL/ΕΛ), Afroditi Latinopoulou (Foni Logikis), and László Toroczkai (Mi Hazánk). There are also other relevant issues for some politicians, such as security and immigration for the representatives of AfD (Germany), VB (Belgium), and CHEGA (Portugal); criticism of the political system or European institutions for the leaders of EL/ΕΛ (Greece), Mi Hazánk (Hungary), and Svoboda a přímá demokracie (Czech Republic); the appeal to traditional values for the leader of the Greek NIKI party; the narrative of crisis or decline for Slawomir Mentzen from Poland; and the rejection of progressive social movements for Morten Messerschmidt, candidate of Dansk Folkeparti. Other issues of varying content were included in the category of other issues, which are of interest to the leaders of Vox (Spain), Republika (Slovakia), Reconquête (France), Foni Logikis (Greece), KDNP (Hungary), and Fratelli d'Italia and Lega Salvini Premier (Italy).

In general, the vast majority of TikTok publications by the political leaders analysed are targeted towards a diverse audience, with only 25 out of 472 videos examined targeting youth. Videos aimed at young voters tend to focus on topics related to campaign actions and calls for votes (10 videos), promises for youth (5 videos), security and immigration (3 videos), traditional values (3 videos), and narratives of crisis or decline (2 videos). These topics are essential to the speech of the extreme right. Moreover, efforts are made to mobilise young people through calls for votes and specific youth pledges. These findings suggest that far-right parties seek to strengthen their support base among young people through issues that reinforce a sense of national identity, security, and rejection of globalisation, while to a lesser extent, they also attempt to connect with their expectations through direct promises.

Some political leaders who are targeting young audiences are Alice Weidel (Germany), Tom Van Grieken (Belgium), Santiago Abascal (Spain), Marine Le Pen (France), Dimitris Natsios (Greece), Viktor Orbán (Hungary), Matteo Salvini (Italy), André Ventura (Portugal), Tomio Okamura (Czech Republic), and George Simion (Romania). In the case of the AfD

leader, the theme of connecting with this audience focuses on political campaign actions and appeals to vote (2 videos), as does the leader of the AUR (1 video). This theme is also used by the leader of VB (1 video), alongside issues of national security and immigration (2 videos), criticism of the political system and other formations (1 video), and election promises to the youth (1 video). The leader of VOX, in addition to releasing a video on appealing to the youth vote, also published a video on another topic, a scenario akin to that of CHEGA. The videos include a video on campaign actions and rallies and another on immigration. The SPD leader, in addition to urging young people to vote in a video, also exposes the decline of the country to them in a video and makes specific promises in another video. These proposals or commitments to the young public are also recurrent topics for the leaders of Rassemblement National (1 video) and Viktor Orbán (1 video). Lastly, the leaders of Lega Salvini Premier and Niki dedicate a video each to connecting with young people through traditional values.

An analysis of the prevailing emotions reveals a strategic plan based on the balanced use of positive and negative emotions to mobilise the electorate. The most prevalent emotion was pride and ambition (80 videos, 16.95%), a positive emotion that aims to reinforce national identity and the perception of personal and collective accomplishment, focusing on the voter's self-worth and their part in shaping political change. However, emotions of intense negative emotion (74 videos, 15.68%) and those of danger and insecurity (73 videos, 15.47%) also stand out as key pillars of emotional communication. This shows a strategy that appeals to fear, the urgency and perceived threat of factors such as immigration, globalisation, or cultural decline, negative emotions that could be explained in the context of a continent affected by a high level of irregular immigration, receiving thousands of illegal immigrants every year, especially from Southern and Eastern European nations, as well as thousands of asylum seekers. This situation is being exploited by a large part of the extreme right-wing parties to demand protection for their countries and strict border control from the European Union, as they see immigrants as responsible for a large part of the continent's problems (insecurity, social conflict, criminality, loss of cultural identity, etc.).

On the other hand, emotions of hope and illusion (68 videos, 14.41%) and empathy and social connection (65 videos, 13.77%) complement this framework, providing a balance for emotional contrast and motivating the audience with visions of a better future under their leadership. Despite the relative weight of emotions such as personal enjoyment (57 videos, 12.08%) and displeasure (55 videos, 11.65%), their presence reinforces the narrative of enjoyment under traditional values and rejection towards political actors or institutions considered adversaries. This emotional design shows a sophisticated use of TikTok to capture the public's attention, creating a balance between fear and optimism. In videos that are specifically targeted towards young individuals (24 videos), these emotions are amplified to mobilise this crucial audience towards the polls.

Analysis of the data shows that far-right European political leaders strategically structured their emotional content on TikTok during the elections, using specific combinations of predominant emotions, levels of polarisation, and strategic orientations (Table 3).

The majority of the videos analysed exhibit negative emotions. These include "Emotions of danger and insecurity" (73 videos), "Emotions of displeasure" (49 videos), and "Intense negative emotions" (74 videos). These emotions are predominantly associated with negative polarisation (208 videos) and strategic orientations focused on danger and insecurity (107 videos) or anger and suffering (93 videos). In many of these videos, the possible dangers of immigration and the dissatisfaction with the political practices of the European Union and, above all, of the representatives and political leaders of the respective nations, are central themes with negative connotations. This approach reflects a communication strategy that appeals to fear, mistrust, and indignation, typical elements in extreme

right-wing speeches, which aim to mobilise the audience by highlighting threats such as immigration, globalisation, or progressive movements.

Table 3. Frequency distribution of the predominant emotions, polarisation, and strategic orientation of the analysed TikTok videos.

Predominant Emotion	**Frequency**	**%**
Positive emotions of personal enjoyment	57	12.08
Emotions of empathy and social connection	65	13.77
Pride and ambition	80	16.95
Emotions of danger and insecurity	73	15.47
Intense negative emotions	74	15.68
Emotions of displeasure	49	10.38
Hope and illusion	51	10.81
Emotions of suffering and vulnerability	15	3.18
Other	8	1.69
Polarisation	**Frequency**	**%**
Positive	214	45.34
Negative	208	44.07
Neutral	50	10.59
Strategic orientation of emotion	**Frequency**	**%**
Positive ones related to personal well-being	88	18.64
Positive social connection and hope	119	25.21
Negative statements related to danger or insecurity	107	22.67
Negative feelings related to anger or suffering	93	19.70
Neutral with positive trend	37	7.84
Neutral with negative trend	28	5.93
TOTAL	275	100

Nevertheless, there exists a deliberate utilisation of positive emotions, such as "Hope and Illusion" (51 videos) and "Pride and Ambition" (80 videos), which are associated with positive polarisation (214 videos) and strategic orientations focused on social connection and hope (119 videos) or personal well-being (88 videos). These emotions provide an optimistic message, presenting leaders as a solution to the problems. This approach helps build a "rebirth" or "new opportunity" narrative that is especially attractive to young voters.

Although neutral strategic orientations are less common, they do have a specific role. Emotions such as "pride and ambition" and "positive emotions of personal enjoyment" are occasionally associated with neutral positive or negative trends (28 videos), suggesting a tactical approach to connecting with indecisive audiences or moderate emotional polarisation. Emotions of empathy and social connection are mostly linked to positivity and a focus on hope, which humanises the political message and strengthens the emotional bond with the public.

The distributions reflect a dual strategy of mobilisation through negative emotions (crisis, fear) and an optimistic and hopeful message based on positive emotions (pride, illusion). This balanced narrative allows for the engagement of more radicalised supporters while

attracting undecided or moderate voters. This approach confirms the use of emotionally sophisticated and characteristic communication techniques in electoral contexts.

Emotional tactics differ across nations and political leaders. The communicative strategies of the far-right formations have identifying nuances in each of them, sharing, however, some features and factors in terms of the issues addressed, as we have seen, and the impressions conveyed. For example, the negative emotions of displeasure and those linked to danger and insecurity correspond in many cases to current events, acts, or speeches in which leaders express their misgivings and concerns about what they see as a social and cultural drift of their nations and of Europe itself, mainly due to the effects of the migration crisis. The risks that uncontrolled immigration has and may have for citizens and national customs are the focus of many of the messages we have seen, with allusions to problems of coexistence, crime, rape, and terrorism and radicalisation, in the case of Islamism. As irregular immigration is a problem that especially affects Southern and Eastern European nations, this emotion of danger is more prevalent in the discourses of far-right leaders in these regions, as can be seen in the cases of the Czech Republic, Portugal, Slovakia, and Spain, but also in other nations with a high foreign population (Belgium and Germany). Negative emotions and dislike, in addition to the previous immigration theme, is also linked to apathy and criticism of both the political system (other parties, opposition, etc.) and European institutions. This only goes to show the dissatisfaction of European far-right leaders with the political context of their nations and the continent.

Emotions of danger and insecurity are prevalent across the board in the videos of the two AfD leaders, present in more than half of the cases (6). This emotion is also strongest in the videos of candidates Milan Uhrk, André Ventura, and Santiago Abascal (8 videos each), although in the case of the Slovak leader, positive emotions of personal enjoyment and others of displeasure also stand out (6 videos each). In the case of the two Iberian leaders, the positive emotions of personal enjoyment (7 videos in CHEGA) and empathy and social connection (4 videos in VOX) are also noteworthy. However, in the videos of the Austrian leader, the Greek Natsios, and the Slovenian Jana, the emotions related to hope and illusion shine more brightly (4 videos, 4 videos, and 1 video, respectively), as is the case with Tom Van Grieken, where these emotions, together with those of danger and insecurity, tie in number (16 videos each) and represent more than half of the VB sample.

The emotions of empathy and social connection are the most important for leaders Kostadinov (3 videos) and Sosoaca (5 videos), being also relevant for Orbán (10 videos), together with the emotions of hope and illusion and pride and ambition (4 videos each). It is precisely this emotion of pride that appears most frequently in the leaders of Mi Hazánk (9 videos), Fratelli d'Italia (7 videos), Lega Salvini Premier (16 videos), and Konfederacja (1 video), although it is not in the majority. Therefore, it is possible to discern pronounced negative emotions in the cases of Salvini (16 videos), Toroczkai (5 videos), and Mentzen (1 video), as well as positive emotions of personal enjoyment in the five videos of Meloni.

These negative emotions can also be observed in the leaders Okamura (23 videos) and Simion (12 videos), as well as others of danger and insecurity (11 videos) in the Czech politician and pride and ambition (11 videos) in the Romanian politician. Lastly, we would like to highlight other predominant emotions that were observed in the remaining candidates. After analysing the accounts of the leaders of Denmark and France, we observe a preference for positive emotions and personal enjoyment (1 video for Messerschmidt, 9 for Le Pen, and 6 for Zemmour), as well as for the Greek leader Latinopoulou (2 videos). In the context of the EL/ΕΛ formation, it is noteworthy that 14 videos exhibit emotions of displeasure, in contrast to 11 videos where empathy and social connection prevail.

The frequency distribution of intensity levels reveals a predominance of medium-intensity messages (249 videos), followed by those with high intensity (143 videos). Ulti-

mately, messages of low intensity are the least prevalent, accounting for a total of 79 videos (Table 4).

Table 4. Contingency table between the polarisation and intensity variables of the analysed TikTok videos.

	Intensity Low	**Intensity Medium**	**Intensity High**
Negative polarisation	57	104	53
Positive polarisation	6	116	86
Neutral	16	30	4

The Chi-square test conducted between the variables 'polarisation' and 'intensity' yields a Chi-square value of 63.63, with a minimal p-value ($p < 0.001$), indicating a significant correlation between the two variables. The expected frequencies reflect significant differences in the observed distribution of the data. In particular, messages of low intensity are predominantly associated with negative (57 observed versus 35.82 expected) and neutral (16 observed versus 8.37 expected) polarisation. However, messages of high intensity are more present in messages with positive polarisation (86 observed versus 63.02 expected), while messages of average intensity show a more balanced distribution, with significant differences between the polarisation types.

This result indicates that the intensity of the messages is not agnostic to their polarisation. Positive messages tend to be more intense, possibly to inspire optimism and mobilisation, while negative or neutral messages tend to be less intense. This is likely a strategy to reduce the emotional impact and avoid emotional overload in the recipient. This suggests a strategic design for message intensity based on emotional and political orientation.

3.2.3. Analysis of Stylistic and Technical Variables

The predominant absence of music (248 videos), together with neutral or ambient music (67 videos), reflects a strategy based on verbal or visual communication without musical support, to avoid distractions and focus attention on the main message (Table 5). On the contrary, the utilisation of cheerful or lively music in 16.07% of cases (76 videos) indicates an attempt to establish a light and optimistic emotional connection, likely aimed at a younger audience. Although less utilised (30 videos), epic or tense music is strategically employed in settings where values such as heroism, conflict, or urgency are sought to be highlighted, in accordance with the mobilising narratives of certain political parties. Moreover, the low use of nostalgic or melancholy music (14 videos) suggests that the analysed videos do not prioritise the appeal to emotions related to tradition or loss but are more focused on the present and future.

It is interesting to explore whether there is a relationship between the type of music used and the predominant emotion of the message. We conducted a Chi-square analysis on these two variables, revealing a Chi-square value of 164.38, a p-value of 5.17×10^{-17}, and a degree of freedom of 40 degrees. This outcome indicates that there exists a statistically significant correlation between the two variables, as the p-value is significantly lower than the conventional significance threshold of ($p < 0.05$). This enables us to reject the null hypothesis that the predominant emotions and the utilisation of music in videos are unrelated. The statistical significance suggests that emotions conveyed in videos are closely associated with the types of music used. This means that the creators of the videos do not use random music but rather use certain musical styles to reinforce or amplify the emotions they want to convey. Certain trends in the contingency table are highlighted below:

1. Absence of music. It is commonly used to convey feelings of disharmony, danger, and insecurity, as well as intense negative emotions. Music alone can be used to create a crudeness or realism effect that intensifies emotional perception.
2. Neutral or ambient music. It appears to be associated with emotions of empathy and social connection, as well as with hope and illusion. This type of music has the potential to serve as a background that does not cause any distraction but rather complements and reinforces warmer and more emotional messages.
3. Epic music. It is primarily related to emotions of pride and ambition and hope and illusion. Epic music emphasises emotions of achievement, grandeur, and optimism.
4. Cheerful or lively music. It is more prevalent in positive emotions, such as hope and illusion, and less common in personal enjoyment. This style promotes optimism and energy, aligning with lighter and more motivating messages.
5. Nostalgic or melancholic music. Although less frequent, it is associated with intense negative emotions and feelings of suffering and vulnerability. Music of this type is probably used to evoke memories or to appeal to feelings of loss and sadness.
6. Tense or dramatic music. It is prevalent in emotions of apprehension and apprehension, as well as in heightened negative emotions. This type of music is often used to intensify drama, fear, or the perception of urgency in the message.

Table 5. Contingency table between the predominant emotion and music usage variables of the analysed TikTok videos.

Predominant Emotion/Music	Absence of Music	Neutral or Ambient	Epic	Cheerful or Lively	Nostalgic or Melancholic	Tense or Dramatic	TOTAL
Positive emotions of personal enjoyment	11	12	2	29	2	1	57
Emotions of empathy and social connection	17	9	6	24	4	5	65
Pride and ambition	40	14	12	6	3	5	80
Emotions of danger and insecurity	48	10	3	3	2	7	73
Intense negative emotions	52	10	5	2	0	5	74
Emotions of displeasure	41	4	1	2	0	1	49
Hope and illusion	20	6	9	9	3	4	51
Emotions of suffering and vulnerability	12	1	0	0	0	2	15
Other	6	1	0	1	0	0	8
TOTAL	247	67	38	76	14	30	472

Finally, we investigate the inclusion of symbols and emblems of the country, party, or others in these videos and their relation to the effectiveness of national strategies (Table 6). The results suggest that the videos of the leaders of the European extreme right-wing on TikTok prioritise the absence of symbology in general, with national emblems mostly

absent (407 videos), with a background presence in 45 cases and prominent use in only 20 videos. This strategy appears to emphasise more direct messages, wherein national symbols are utilised on a one-off basis to reinforce emotions of pride and national identity in crucial contexts, appealing to collective emotional connection without resorting to visual excess. Similarly, the party symbols are absent in a significant number of videos (248), yet their presence is evident in the background (180 videos) and prominent in certain instances (43 videos). This suggests a deliberate strategy to consolidate party identity and establish trust without polarising the audience.

Table 6. Frequency distribution of the inclusion of country symbols, party emblems, or other symbology in analysed TikTok videos.

	National Symbols	**Party Symbols**	**Other Symbols**
Absent	407 (86.23%)	248 (52.54%)	436 (92.37%)
Present in the background	45 (9.53%)	180 (38.14%)	36 (7.63%)
Prominent	20 (4.24%)	43 (9.11%)	0

The absence of any other symbols (436 videos) and their almost non-existent utilisation in the background (36 videos) indicates that they are not pivotal to communication strategies, thereby reinforcing a more controlled and holistic approach. The limited utilisation of symbols indicates a strategy that prioritises verbal and emotional narratives, bolstered by other elements such as tone and music. This strategy facilitates the transmission of emotions such as pride, hope, and social connection, while avoiding oversaturating the message visually. In general, these strategic decisions reflect a calculated strategy to mobilise emotions without over-polarising, thereby optimising reach for a diverse audience, particularly young individuals.

3.2.4. Analysis of Engagement and Response Variables

The engagement metrics analysed (such as "likes", comments, and shares) exhibit a diverse distribution. While the average number of "likes" was 15,991, with a standard deviation of 47,210, the maximum values reached indicate a high potential for viralisation of some contents. The average number of comments is 827, indicating moderate user interaction, whereas the average number of shared comments is 963.8, indicating a tendency to disseminate content. The descriptive statistics for these variables are presented below (Table 7).

The distribution and range of "likes" goes from 2 to 522,100. Videos with more than 100,000 "likes" represent extreme cases; in the comments, the range varies between 1 and 27,100, showing a high concentration at low levels with some outliers; and in shared/favourites, the distribution ranges from 0 to 74,500.

Table 7. Descriptive statistics of the engagement variable.

Variable	**Average**	**Standard Deviation**	**Minimum**	**Maximum**
Likes	15.991	47.210	2	522.100
Comments	827	2.710	1	27.100
Shared/Favourites	963.8	3.492	0	74.500

We have investigated whether there is a significant relationship between the number of "likes" and the main theme of the video. To achieve this, it is necessary to consider the popularity of the leader (in terms of number of followers on TikTok) by normalising

the number of "likes" received by each video by dividing that number by the number of followers of the corresponding leader. These values have been converted into percentages to enhance comparability. As a result, the topics have been ordered based on the average of "normalized likes", from highest to lowest (Table 8).

Table 8. Main topics and normalised likes (%).

Main Topics	Normalised Likes (%)
Rejection of progressive social movements	9.69
Appeal to traditional values	4.27
Cultural and national identity	4.02
Campaign actions, rallies, and calls to vote	3.99
Other	3.92
Security and immigration	3.12
Criticism of the political system and/or other parties	3.03
Euroscepticism and anti-globalisation	2.41
Promises for youth	2.26
Narrative of crisis or decline	1.86

This indicates that videos related to the rejection of progressive social movements, the appeal to traditional values, cultural and national identity, and campaign actions and rallies generate the most interaction. This is followed by general themes (others) and those pertaining to security and immigration, or criticism of the political system and other parties. On the contrary, the less popular topics are those associated with Euroscepticism and anti-globalisation, promises for youth, crisis narratives, and rejection of progressive social movements, which may reflect a lower perceived emotional resonance or relevance in these areas.

In the same vein, we have examined whether there exists a significant correlation between the average normalised likes and the predominant emotion of the video, resulting in the following result (Table 9).

Table 9. Predominant emotion and normalised likes (%).

Predominant Emotion	Normalised Likes (%)
Positive emotions of personal enjoyment	5.88
Emotions of suffering and vulnerability	4.99
Hope and illusion	4.98
Emotions of danger and insecurity	4.01
Emotions of displeasure	3.96
Emotions of empathy and social connection	3.31
Pride and ambition	2.78
Others	1.88
Intense negative emotions	1.88

It is observed that positive emotions of personal enjoyment generate the greatest normalised engagement, closely followed by those related to suffering and vulnerability and hope and excitement. These emotions, which mobilise both personal and collective aspects, appear to have a high impact on the interaction, adjusted to the popularity of

the leader. Emotions such as danger and insecurity and unpleasantness also achieve a certain level of resonance, although to a lesser extent. Conversely, intense negative emotions and ambiguous categories such as other emotions generate significantly lower levels of engagement. These results, along with the calculated Engagement Rate (%) of 17.78%, underscore the importance of emotional content in driving engagement on TikTok. This pattern suggests that despite positive emotions leading to a close interaction, certain negative narratives manage to capture attention, possibly due to their emotional intensity.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The 2024 European elections are an example of the fact that emotional communication strategies are still more relevant than ever in the field of politics. This is in light of the intricate nature of these elections, as despite sharing a legislative body, there are 27 national elections that are entirely distinct in terms of parties, campaigns, and electoral regulations (Mudde, 2024a). As previously analysed, far-right groups have adeptly implemented these tactics, eliciting both positive and negative emotions. In this regard, they employ strategies that aim to evoke the deepest sentiments of voters, mobilising those who are uncertain, uninformed, or abandoned by traditional political parties or current systems.

In addition to speeches, rallies, and campaign actions, social networks have emerged as a potent vehicle for conveying their messages, capturing voters' attention through polarisation and conflict (Kakavand, 2024; Guerrero-Solé et al., 2020). Among these networks, TikTok stands out as a formidable battlefield for both traditional (Cervi et al., 2023; Zamora-Medina et al., 2023) and extreme right-wing parties (Albertazzi & Bonansinga, 2024; González-Aguilar et al., 2023) and has additionally emerged as a potent instrument for attracting younger voters (Medina-Serrano et al., 2020). Chinese platforms have promoted parties from this ideological spectrum, such as the German AfD (Gilbert, 2024). Because of their visual format, these and other parties deliver messages that are emotional, appealing, and ready for rapid consumption by a wide audience. The content seeks controversy and debate, utilising Eurosceptic, anti-immigrant, and anti-establishment approaches, in accordance with other research (Malet, 2025; Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2024).

This research has specifically focused on the analysis of the emotional communication strategies employed on TikTok by the leaders of European extreme right-wing parties. The objective is to comprehend how they aim to entice the youthful voter, specifically for the elections held in June 2024. The conclusions obtained are in accordance with the objectives and research inquiries posed, furnishing a comprehensive understanding of the utilisation of emotions, themes, and stylistic resources in their publications, as well as their impact on the engagement generated.

The dominant emotions in the videos analysed (RQ1) reflect a balanced strategy between positive and negative emotions, designed to mobilise both undecided voters and their more radical bases. The emotions of 'hope and illusion' (51 videos) and "pride and ambition" (80 videos) stand out as the most efficacious, generating substantial levels of engagement, particularly in terms of "likes" (63,809 and 15,847 on average, respectively). These positive emotions convey an optimistic and motivating message, portraying leaders as icons of change and solutions to the challenges presented. Furthermore, these emotions are particularly important when addressing young audiences, where optimism and interpersonal connection are key to encouraging their political participation. Conversely, negative emotions such as 'danger and insecurity' (73 videos) and 'intense negative emotions' (74 videos) are recurrent and align with the narrative of the political, economic, and social crisis, although they generate less interaction in terms of engagement. This suggests that, despite the efficacy of fear and outrage in attracting attention, their capacity to sustain

emotional connection is limited in comparison to positive emotions such as optimism and belonging.

As for the recurrent themes in the messages (RQ2), the results indicate a clear predominance of 'campaign actions, rallies, and appeal to vote' (182 videos) and 'criticism of the political system and other parties' (73 videos). These concepts reinforce polarisation and political mobilisation (Castelli Gattinara et al., 2022), crucial strategies in the discourse of the far right. However, themes such as 'promises for youth' (5 videos) and 'rejection of progressive social movements' (8 videos) are less frequent, which suggests that attention to specific concerns of young people or social movements is limited. Despite this, the 25 videos specifically targeting young audiences address issues related to campaign actions, specific promises, and narratives of hope, reflecting an attempt to connect directly emotionally with this audience. However, in some cases, these TikTok accounts may have spread lies and conspiracy theories (Morozova & Šlerka, 2024).

The analysis of stylistic and narrative resources (RQ3) reveals a preference for the absence of music (248 videos) or the utilisation of neutral or ambient music (67 videos), strategies that aim to focus attention on the verbal or visual message without any distractions. Nonetheless, upbeat or lively music (76 videos) and epic music (30 videos) are strategically employed to reinforce emotions of optimism, pride, and ambition, particularly in messages aimed at a youthful audience. However, the lack of nostalgic or melancholic music (14 videos) indicates a focus on the present and future, rather than appealing to emotions related to tradition or loss. This scenario contrasts with the dedication to the popular music of each nation, which is likely to be utilised in other political endeavours (Dunkel & Schiller, 2025).

Regarding the frequency and types of interactions generated (RQ5 and RQ6), the findings indicate that videos related to "campaign actions, rallies, and call to vote" garner the highest average "likes" (23,361.50), followed by those related to general themes ("others", 17,842.17) and "Euroscepticism and anti-globalisation" (16,485.71). This suggests that messages promoting direct involvement in the electoral process are those that generate the greatest emotional resonance and connection with the audience. There exists a significant correlation between the type of emotion and the level of engagement generated. Positive emotions, such as "hope and illusion" and "empathy and social connection", are known to generate more interactions, whereas negative emotions, despite being prevalent in crisis narratives, exhibit a more moderate impact in terms of engagement. Nonetheless, the transfer of a certain number of "likes" or shares to the final votes proves to be arduous.

A comparison analysis of leaders (RQ5) highlights differences in emotional and thematic strategies by country and political context. For instance, leaders such as Marine Le Pen and Éric Zemmour amalgamate both positive and negative emotions to produce a balanced emotional impact. Others, such as Tom Van Grieken or Viktor Orbán, emphasise negative emotions linked to insecurity and displeasure, reflecting a more polarised approach. Albertazzi and Bonansinga (2024) praised Le Pen as a serious, responsible, and supportive leader, while Zemmour and Salvini also combined other elements of entertainment and motivation for the spectators, something that is typical of Abascal. These differences demonstrate that contextual factors, such as the migration crisis or political disaffection, shape each leader's communication strategies. The truth is that many of them disseminate messages with a high negative and polarising emotional component, showing recurring themes such as the dangers of irregular immigration (conflict, crime, terrorism, etc.), as well as attacks on other political leaders, the opposition, and even institutions such as the European Union, blaming all of them for the ills of their countries and the continent. This discontent and other negative factors, as well as positive ones, help us to understand how far-right parties construct or mould tailor-made ideological discourses based on vari-

ous contextual axes and frameworks, with differences and similarities between leaders and with a greater or lesser degree of radicalisation.

In relation to RQ8, there is a recurring appeal to identity, cultural and social values specifically directed at young people, although only to a limited extent. The videos analysed include symbolic references to national elements, such as flags and colours of homelands, particularly in contexts of "campaign actions" and "pride and ambition". However, their use is limited, since most videos prefer to convey identity narratives through verbal and emotional language, avoiding the visual saturation of symbols. Social values, such as the protection of the family, security, and rejection of globalisation, are incorporated into speeches addressed to both youth and the general electorate. These values reinforce the collective identity, attracting shared concerns and projecting an image of renewal and stability under their leadership.

Ultimately, it has been confirmed that there exists a significant correlation between the utilisation of specific emotions and the degree of engagement attained (RQ6). The emotions of "hope and illusion" and "empathy and social connection" not only generate more "likes" but are also associated with narratives that promote interpersonal connection and optimism, key aspects to mobilise the young electorate. Conversely, adverse emotions, such as "danger and insecurity" or "displeasure", although effective in attracting attention, exhibit a more limited impact in terms of sustained interaction. This pattern suggests that videos that seek to connect emotionally from a positive perspective are more likely to generate social media reactions. Leaders who bet on hope and human connection could be using a more effective strategy to capture public attention and support.

At this stage, it is essential to revisit the hypotheses and compare them to the results obtained during the analysis. This allows us to evaluate to what extent our initial expectations about the communication strategies used by far-right party leaders on TikTok during the European elections campaign are confirmed. Regarding the general hypothesis (GH), which suggests that far-right party leaders employ emotional, thematic, and stylistic communication strategies to maximise impact and engagement, adjusting to the characteristics and preferences of digital audiences, we can partially confirm this hypothesis. Certain leaders successfully incorporated TikTok's tools and possibilities, including montages, transitions, and music, by adjusting their content to the platform's dynamics. Other leaders, however, opted for a more traditional approach, simply posting clips of parliamentary speeches or media appearances without significantly tailoring their content for TikTok.

For the specific hypotheses, the results were as follows.

SH1: The messages disseminated by far-right party leaders on TikTok are designed with a style, content, and tone that specifically appeal to young audiences, incorporating topics relevant to their interests and forms of communication typical of this demographic. This hypothesis has been partially disregarded. Although TikTok is highly popular among young people, we observed no consistent effort to connect specifically with this audience. Despite the widespread popularity of TikTok, it is noteworthy that only 25 out of the 472 videos analysed were explicitly targeted towards younger audiences, indicating a lack of thematic and stylistic specialisation.

SH2: In the analysed videos, negative emotions, such as fear, anger, and disgust, dominate and are employed as tools to polarise and mobilise the audience. This hypothesis is also rejected, contrary to our expectations. During the analysed period, the results indicate a balance between positive and negative emotions, with a slight predominance of positive emotions (244 cases, 51.7%) compared to negative emotions (228 cases, 48.3%). Positive emotions include categories such as "personal well-being" and "social connection", while negative emotions encompass "danger and insecurity" and "anger or suffering".

SH3: Videos that incorporate negative and unpleasant emotions generate a higher level of interaction and engagement compared to videos that do not. Moreover, this hypothesis is rejected. Positive emotions generated higher levels of engagement in terms of likes, according to the data. Furthermore, the analysis of normalised likes by predominant emotion confirms this trend. Positive emotions of personal enjoyment (0.0588) and hope and excitement (0.0498) led to normalised engagement, while emotions such as danger and insecurity (0.0401) and unpleasantness (0.0396) resonated less strongly. Intense negative emotions (0.0188) showed the lowest level of engagement, suggesting a limited emotional relationship in these cases. This pattern demonstrates the preponderance of positive emotions in generating interaction, although certain negative narratives maintain some capacity to capture attention.

To summarise, the leaders of European far-right parties utilise TikTok as a crucial platform to mobilise their supporters and voters through sophisticated emotional tactics. They achieve a narrative balance by combining positive emotions that inspire optimism and belonging with negative emotions that emphasise threats and crises. The predominant themes and stylistic resources employed, such as the strategic use of music and limited inclusion of symbols, reflect a calculated approach to maximise emotional impact without over-polarising the audience. These results underscore the importance of understanding how emotions and narratives are used in social networks to influence political behaviour, especially in extreme right-wing contexts where emotional communication plays a central role. Our initial assumptions assumed that European far-right parties would heavily rely on negative emotions, which would generate greater impact and engagement. Nevertheless, the results indicate otherwise. Furthermore, it is not supported that European leaders utilise TikTok exclusively to target young individuals, indicating a more comprehensive communication approach than initially anticipated.

However, we must highlight some limitations of our study. Firstly, the complexity of analysing videos in the 15 languages used by far-right leaders (Flemish, Bulgarian, Czech, Danish, French, German, Greek, Hungarian, Italian, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Slovak, Slovenian, and Spanish) is significant, since the authors of this research did not have language skills in all of them. This situation has been a handicap for the process of coding emotions and themes, but thanks to the function of subtitles automatically generated by voice recognition in TikTok, the analysis of body language and the observation of speech traits, the consultation of the texts accompanying the videos, the overlays, and the comments of the followers in the videos, as well as consultations on the Internet, we consider that this has been carried out correctly.

Secondly, the research has been segmented due to the absence of personal profiles on TikTok or publications in the studied period by leaders of far-right groups. Even so, in such cases, it appears that their parties do appear to have accounts on the Chinese platform, opting to corporatise their presence on social networks. Furthermore, another limitation is that the analysis has exclusively focused on the leaders of the formations and not on prominent politicians who have participated in European elections. For example, Jordan Bardella, president and head of the list of the National Rally, is one such example. He has been able to use TikTok to tell his daily life and reach an audience of young people more interested in viral dances than in conventional politics (Goujard et al., 2024). And finally, a last limitation would be to know the discourse, through rhetoric, employed by these politicians, something we would like to put into practice in a forthcoming research.

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A Scathing Indictment: How European Opinion Leaders Framed Putin's Aggression Against Ukraine

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Abstract: Putin's Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 and launched a massive invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This study is predicated on framing theory, which posits that the media contribute to the creation of individuals' perceived reality. We analyzed how the European press presented Russian President Vladimir Putin during both episodes. Content analysis was used to examine a sample of 1009 opinion articles and editorials published in two leading newspapers in each of the five largest European economies. Subsequently, we quantified the frequency of the predominant frames as well as the tone (positive, neutral, or negative) the articles struck towards Putin. The results show that many more articles were published in 2022 than in 2014, and that the degree of negative views of Putin is also more pronounced in 2022. In both instances, historical motives were most often employed to frame Putin's actions, such as Putin's urge to reassert Russian influence in the former Soviet space and his reaction to the alleged lack of recognition of Russia as a superpower.

Keywords: content analysis; framing theory; European press; Ukraine-Russia war; Putin; quantitative study; opinion articles

1. Introduction

In February 2014, following the so-called Maidan Revolution, Russia initiated a process of annexation of the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea that culminated in mid-March when the Duma approved the incorporation of the territory into the Russian Federation. Eight years later, on 24 February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. Vladimir Putin's main justification for the aggression was to overthrow the alleged "pro-Nazi" regime of President Volodymir Zelensky, thereby protecting the population of the eastern Ukrainian Russian-speaking regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, whose independence the Kremlin had just recognized.

The 2022 invasion meant the outbreak of a new war on European territory, this time perpetrated by a nuclear superpower and permanent member of the UN Security Council and the G7. The reaction in Europe was one of alarm, indignation, and solidarity with the Ukrainian people. Most governments rushed to help Ukraine, even militarily, while European society, in general, turned to welcome refugees fleeing the war. Throughout this process, the media helped shape the public's perception of the conflict.

The present study explores the way in which opinion articles in the European press have portrayed Vladimir Putin, his person, and the decisions he has made. A large sample of 1009 opinion articles, gathered from the time period just before and after each of the two aggressions in 2014 and 2022, was subjected to content analysis. We analyzed articles published in the most widely read newspapers in Germany, United Kingdom, France, Italy, and Spain.

Our results show that considerably more opinion pieces were printed in 2022 than in 2014, and that unfavorable views of Putin were more frequent and more pronounced in 2022 than in 2014. In both instances, Putin's actions were predominantly attributed to historical motives: first and foremost, his impulse to reinstate Russian power in what he views as a former Soviet territory by rights, and his frustration at the alleged lack of recognition of Russia as a superpower after the Cold War. Among further motives for the aggression, we identified Putin's desire to maintain and increase his political power by waging war to undermine domestic opposition, as well as his intention to weaken and destabilize the European Union and the Western alliance, which he views as a threat to his power. We are mindful that this negative portrayal of Putin's actions may have contributed to Europe's (EU and UK) reaction toward Russia, but further scientific studies should be carried out to confirm this cause-and-effect relationship, which cannot be deduced directly from our study.

2. Theoretical Framework/State of the Question

2.1. Framing and Media Effects

This study is predicated on the theoretical principle that the media contribute to shaping the perceived reality of their audiences. As early as 1922, Walter Lippmann (Lippmann, 1922) established the link between the media narrative and the representation of what happens in the world in his work *Public Opinion*.

Building on Lippman's work, there is a substantial body of scholarship which explores the media's impact on audiences' opinions. Following a behaviorist approach, several scholars have explored the persuasive effect of the media and how this may result in a change of audiences' mental states, thereby contributing to changing people's behavior, which is indeed the ultimate goal of political communication (Lasswell, 1927; Lazarsfeld et al., 1948; Hovland et al., 1953; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; O'Keefe, 1990).

Habermas (1962/1991) contributed to this debate by introducing the concept of the public sphere (*Öffentlichkeit*), the space where citizens identify and debate social issues of general interest, thus prompting and shaping political action. The role the media play in this process can hardly be overstated. It is therefore crucial to understand how the European media and their commentators frame Vladimir Putin and his war against Ukraine, as the particular frames chosen by the authors of the opinion pieces affect the readership's perception and may determine the political decisions of their governments.

In the field of international relations, social constructivism (Wendt, 1999) must be added to the classical realist approach (Morgenthau, 1948; Waltz, 1979) and the liberal (Doyle, 1986; Keohane & Nye, 1977) approach. This current of thought argues that there is no objective social or political reality independent of our understanding of it. According to social constructivists, individuals as well as collectives help 'construct' the world in which they live and act. People's beliefs and assumptions become especially consequential when they are widely shared. To this end, the media contribute greatly to enhancing the Habermasian public sphere. It is thus imperative to factor the media's role into the social construction of a leader like Vladimir Putin and a country like Russia in European public opinion. Understanding how this image is constructed in the minds of European citizens through the frames offered by opinion makers may provide insight into the motives for the response of European governments and institutions. It follows that framing theory is an effective method for analyzing how the media present Putin to the European public.

In the 60s and 70s, agenda-setting became the predominant theoretical framework (Cohen, 1963; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Some scholars view agenda-setting as the precursor to framing theory. For instance, McCombs, among others, argues that framing theory is an extension or equivalent to the so-called second level of agenda-setting (Lang & Lang,

1981; McCombs, 2004; McCombs & Ghanem, 2001). Both agenda-setting and framing are theories based on the mechanism through which the human brain retrieves and processes information. According to Semetko and Valkenburg, "framing analysis shares with agenda-setting research a focus on the relationship between public policy issues in the news and the public perceptions of these issues." (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000, p. 93) By highlighting certain topics, the media, whose impact is caused above all by their joint and aggregate action, facilitate the retrieval of information in the audience's memory (Iyengar, 1990).

Our study is thus predicated on framing theory combined with content analysis. Chong and Druckman submit that "framing refers to the process by which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue" (Chong & Druckman, 2007, p. 104). Scholars have proposed various definitions of framing in the media context. De Vreese holds that "framing involves a communication source presenting and defining an issue" (De Vreese, 2005, p. 51). Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) highlight the following definitions: "[frames are] conceptual tools which media and individuals rely on to convey, interpret and evaluate information" (Neuman et al., 1992, p. 60). Reminiscent of Habermas' *Öffentlichkeit*, Tuchman submits that frames set the parameters "in which citizens discuss public events" (Tuchman, 1978, p. IV). Similarly, Goffman believes that frames are a useful device for audiences to "locate, perceive, identify, and label" information obtained through the media (Goffman, 1974, p. 21).

For our purposes, we part from the basis established by Entman, who states that

> to frame is to *select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation* for the item described [original italics]. (Entman, 1993, p. 52)

In 2003, Entman revisits the four framing effects he posited, and he concludes that

> substantive news frames perform at least two of the following basic functions in covering events, issues, and political actors: (a) defining effects or conditions as problematic; (b) identifying causes; (c) conveying a moral judgment for those involved in the framed matter; and (d) endorsing remedies or improvements to the problematic situation. (Entman, 2003, p. 417)

We propose to prioritize Entman's second (b) and third (c) functions of framing, seeing that both the annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Ukraine constitute highly "problematic situations" (a); indeed, in the articles we analyzed, we did not seek to identify proposed solutions to the crisis (d). Instead, we focused on identifying the causes of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine and instances of moral judgment, aspects which indeed abounded in the articles we examined.

Nevertheless, Sniderman and Theriault (2004) observe that often audiences are not exposed to a single frame on any issue. Rather, the media environment provides competing frames which not only compete with each other, but also display a dynamic nature. In fact, they evolve and transform over time, since they are the result of social interaction.

It bears noting that in our analysis we do not foreground the assessment of the cognitive effects that media news content has on individuals and how it shapes public opinion. Rather, we carry out an inductive study in which we employ content analysis to determine the main issue or topic frames (D'Angelo, 2018)—unlike the generic frames proposed by Entman—which prevail in the opinion pieces published in the main European dailies about Putin and his Ukraine policy. In our analysis of the 1009 texts in our sample, we are mindful of Tschirky and Makhortykh's claim that: "framing is particularly effective for bringing together different interdisciplinary perspectives, in particular when used to

study how specific phenomena (e.g., armed conflicts) are represented and not necessarily what are the effects of representation" (Tschirky & Makhortykh, 2024, p. 167).

Thus, by following the steps described by Chong and Druckman, we first identify an issue or event and, rather than speculating on the effects on the audience, "an initial set of frames for an issue is identified inductively to create a coding scheme" (Chong & Druckman, 2007, p. 107), which will then guide the content analysis that allows us to discern the specific issue or topic frames which ultimately determine the portrayal of Vladimir Putin's policy towards Ukraine, always within the context of the problematization and moral judgment of the commentators.

Therefore, as opposed to the distinction between frames in communication and frames in thought (Druckman, 2001), our analysis is concerned with the first type, because we look at the words and arguments used in conveying the information rather than the cognitive process that takes place in the individual receiving the information.

Entman (1993, p. 52) distinguishes four locations where frames can be found in the communicative process: the communicator, the text, the receiver, and the culture. In our analysis, we give precedence to the second location—the text– and strive to determine the frames which emerge in it through inductive reasoning.

D'Angelo (2018) distinguishes four types of frames: journalist frames, issue frames, audience frames and news frames. According to this classification, our analysis is confined, as mentioned above, to the second type. These issue frames, also referred to as advocacy frames,

> are held and expressed by individuals who construct an argument from considerations, which are reasons for favoring one side of an issue over another [. . .]. Individuals, groups, or organizations typically express issue frames as informed opinions or policy statements relating to a topic, such as an event or issue, or a topic in which an event is linked to an issue. (D'Angelo, 2018, p. xxviii)

Unlike our study, most scholarly texts examine framing in straightforward news reporting, whereas we analyze editorials and opinion articles. In this genre, the frames (in the sense of perspectives from which realities are represented) are much more evident since an opinion piece is by definition a positioning on the part of the author on a particular issue or incident.

2.2. Vladimir Putin and the Media

The aim of our research is to analyze how the most prominent European newspapers have presented the figure of the Russian president to their readers. Several studies have pointed out the consistent negative portrayal of Russia, and particularly the Russian president, in the Western media. Seliverstova et al. (2021) analyzed digital editions of the *Daily News* (USA) and *Der Spiegel* (Germany) from 2000 to 2004 and 2018 to 2020. They observed that although certain linguistic resources displayed a more favorable image of the Russian leader in *Der Spiegel* between 2018 and 2020, they were rather marginal. The authors therefore concluded that the media deliberately constructs a predominantly negative image of Russia to influence the perceptions of English- and German-speaking audiences. This finding is corroborated by the work of Sahide and Muhammad (2023), who analyzed 120 news stories published between 15 February and 15 March 2022 by *The Jakarta Post*, *Al Jazeera*, *Reuters*, and *The New York Times*. According to their findings, these media outlets primarily depicted Russia as an aggressor and invader of Ukraine while also criticizing its policy measures.

Stovickova (2021) examines how Czech online news media presented Vladimir Putin over the course of three presidential elections using a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach. The study detects a negative bias in the portrayal of Putin, Russian policies, and

Russia, aligning closely with dominant Western media discourses. It found that overall, the media portrayed Putin as trying to restore Russia's status as a global superpower, similar to the Cold War era, and revealed frequent use of sarcasm and negative tones throughout their coverage.

From a Russian perspective, Antonenkova (2019) scrutinized the portrayal of Putin in the U.S., British, and German press in 2015 on the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II. She concludes that the general tone was more negative in the U.S. press than in the European press, and that their reporting was conducive to what the author calls "conditions of confrontation." Also from a Russian perspective, Oganesyan (2016) studies the image the Western press offered of Putin during the 2012 Sochi Olympics. Comstock (2022) examined journalists' questioning of Presidents Putin and Dmitry Medvedev at international summits from 2000 to 2015 and detected what she calls "adversarial questioning", which intensified progressively over the period she examined.

Another aspect of analysis pertinent to our research is the rhetorical recourse to history to legitimize Russian governmental decisions. Putin is in the habit of imparting lectures on Ukraine's Russian past in order to justify the 2022 invasion and his push to regain control over Ukraine. Several studies delve into this aspect of Vladimir Putin's policy: Pakhalyuk (2018) explores Putin's excursions into history in his speeches from 2012 to 2018 and concludes that in his third presidential term a "securitization of historical memory" consolidated itself. What is more, Pakhalyuk found that Putin's practice of brandishing historical arguments to justify far-reaching political decisions increased markedly over time. In a similar vein, Shiller (2023) argues that Putin's Russia leverages the memory of World War II as a tool of counterrevolution. This involves highlighting Ukrainian antisemitism and Holocaust denial while simultaneously promoting a narrative of Russian victimhood in the current conflict with Ukraine. For Gatov (2016), the weight of history is starkly present in the image of Russia that is forged during Putin's presidency with the manifest purpose of restoring the importance and exceptionality of his country.

Among other publications, we deem the following noteworthy: through content analysis, Oleinik (2023) has examined how the war speeches by the leaders of Russia, Ukraine, the United States, and the United Kingdom were covered in the media. He found that the propagandistic effect of the speeches decreases or increases in proportion to the degree of distortion with which the media convey the contents of the speech. The closer to the original, the higher the propagandistic effect. Demasi (2023) analyzes how Putin (and NATO) justify the actions taken in the context of the war of 2022 in their public statements. He concludes that both sides resort to three strategies: a morally justifying narrative, using precedent as pretext, and the adversaries' threatening actions to justify one's own course of action.

In documentary research which analyses 100 news articles published in Spanish, Escudero (2024) examines how the Russia-Ukraine conflict is framed for readers. The study finds that 85% of the analyzed content adopts a vocabulary aligned with war journalism, undermining the notion of mediation within the body of the news stories. Hanley et al. (2023) compare coverage of the Russian invasion of Ukraine across Western, Russian, and Chinese media ecosystems, highlighting that Western press outlets primarily emphasize the military and humanitarian dimensions of the war.

Focusing on the period between February 2014 and February 2015, Ojala et al. (2017) explore visual representations of the conflict in *The Guardian*, *Die Welt*, *Dagens Nyheter*, and *Helsingin Sanomat*, identifying three dominant frames: the Ukraine conflict as a national power struggle, as a case of Russian intervention, and as a broader geopolitical confrontation. Boyd-Barrett (2015) outlines ten key narratives that constitute the battleground of information warfare between nuclear powers, focusing specifically on mainstream Western

media coverage of events in Crimea, Odessa, and Eastern Ukraine between February and October 2014.

Two studies stand out regarding the manner in which the invasion of Ukraine is framed in the social networks. The first is the aforementioned study on the siege of the city of Mariupol. It is predicated on the four types of frames distinguished by Entman, and it concludes that "the prevalence of human interest and conflict frames (. . .) aligns with earlier research on war framing in journalistic media" (Tschirky & Makhortykh, 2024, p. 163). The second study by Ptaszek et al. (2023) compares how the official Russian and Ukrainian agencies use Telegram to report on the war, concluding that the Russian agencies foreground military issues and international rivalry, while official Ukrainian posts on Telegram employ a moralizing framing of the conflict.

3. Research Question and Goals

The research question we pose is the following: How does the press of the five major European countries report on the Russian president in the context of the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine in their opinion articles? We also compare both periods and the five countries among them, looking at the number of articles and the ensuing differences in tone.

However, the core of our research consists of finding the main frames through which the European op-ed leaders present Putin and his actions.

The inductive analyses we carried out rendered four frames favored by European commentators to elucidate Putin's decisions in 2014 and 2022. We then quantified their emergence in the analyzed articles and editorials we examined. The four issue-specific frames we found were the following:

Frame 1: The main motivation for Putin's aggressions identified by European commentators is the nostalgia for the hegemony of the Soviet Union and Russia's desire to regain prominence in the international arena.

Frame 2: The main motivation for Putin's aggressions identified by European commentators is the psychology behind his actions, his individual state of mind, and his ideology and values.

Frame 3: The main motivation for Putin's aggressions identified by European commentators is his need to acquire absolute power and to eliminate all internal opposition.

Frame 4: The main motivation for Putin's aggressions identified by European commentators is economic and geostrategic: to present himself as a hegemonic power vis-à-vis NATO and Europe. Putin seeks to counteract the threat posed by Europe by leveraging Europe's energy dependence on Russia.

Once we identified the main frames, the goal of the research was to analyze and code the 1009 articles and editorials.

4. Methodology

4.1. Method

We analyzed the content of opinion articles (both those authored by individuals as well as those conveying the opinion of the paper) published in ten mainstream, opinion-leading newspapers published in the five largest European countries in terms of population and GDP. We drew our sample from two newspapers from each country. Germany: *Die Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) and *Die Süddeutsche Zeitung*; the United Kingdom: *The Times* and *The Guardian*; France: *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro*; Italy: *Corriere della Sera* and *La Repubblica*; and Spain: *El País* and *El Mundo*.

The analysis of these newspapers centers on two moments of great tension in Europe: the first is the Russian offensive that ended in the occupation and annexation of the Crimean

Peninsula in 2014. We analyzed the time span from 24 February to 20 March (25 days). The second interval covers the attack on Ukraine in 2022. The 2022 dates match those in 2014, from 24 February to 20 March 2022 (also 25 days).

The newspapers were chosen because they are influential and historically renowned. They cover news in a similarly mainstream, conventional fashion, and they are among the most widely read newspapers in their respective countries. (ACPM, 2022; AIMC, 2022; Axel Springer, 2022; Ofcom, 2022; Prima Online, 2022). Another selection criterion was the political leaning of the two newspapers from each country. We sought to cover both the center-left and center-right of the political spectrum. Thus, *Die Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *The Times*, *Le Figaro*, *El Mundo*, and *La Repubblica* are representative of the conservative center-right, while the remaining five are considered progressive center-left newspapers (Sintes-Olivella et al., 2022). The selection includes newspapers which constitute examples of the three models of journalism identified and categorized in the benchmark study by Hallin and Mancini (2004).

To access the editorials and opinions pieces in our sample (n = 1009) we drew on the Factiva database as well as on research subscriptions. We searched in each of the ten newspapers for the keyword "Putin" and set the search parameters to the time intervals in question, and to the genres "commentary/opinion" and "editorial". We removed repeated articles and those that did not fit the category "opinion article" or "editorial". In some cases, we found that we needed to verify contents by consulting the digital archive of the newspapers or the print version.

A methodology based on content analysis (Bardin, 1977; Berelson, 1952; Brennen, 2022; Denzin, 2017; Jick, 1979; Krippendorff, 2004a; Weber, 1990), comprising both a quantitative and qualitative dimension, was used to analyze the selected sample, with each of the 1009 articles or editorials constituting a unit of analysis.

The authors conducted individual, interpretive content analysis. Each of the coders read the articles with the aim of identifying the fragments in which the authors presented Putin and his actions. The five authors held several norming sessions in order to elaborate and refine the analysis and to agree on criteria to identify the main frames in which Putin was presented to the readers in each of the respective countries. After the initial inductive analysis of a small sample of the selected articles, it was observed that some frames related to a specific issue appeared more frequently. For this reason, we resorted to determining frames which single out particular subject matters. We found four thematic frames, as shown in Table 1. Each author was assigned a country of publication and then analysed the entirety of the articles from each country, identifying in which of them the four main frames appeared.

Table 1. Categories, subcategories, and analysis criteria for the sample of articles.

Categories	Subcategories	
Country	Germany	Check one
	Italy	
	France	
	United Kingdom	
	Spain	

Table 1. *Cont.*

Categories	Subcategories	
Paper	Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung	Check one
	Süddeutsche Zeitung	
	Corriere della Sera	
	La Repubblica	
	Le Monde	
	Le Figaro	
	The Times	
	The Guardian	
	El País	
	El Mundo	
Author and Publication date		Enter information
Genre	Editorial	Check one
	Opinion article	
Tone toward Vladimir Putin	Positive	Check one
	Negative	
	Neutral	
Motivations for Putin's aggressions	Frame 1: Russian history and Russian values	Check up to two frames or "none of the above"
	Frame 2: Personal psychological characteristics and human values	
	Frame 3: Russian domestic politics	
	Frame 4: Economical and strategic motivations	
	None of the above	

Source: the authors.

For our analysis, we employed spreadsheets for each newspaper and time interval with six categories per article (Table 1).

Lastly, we entered into the spreadsheets the main adjectives and epithets used in each article to characterize Vladimir Putin.

4.2. Reliability of the Results

To ensure the reliability of the coding of criteria we analyzed, part of the sample was subjected to a double-checking process (Kirk & Miller, 1986; Krippendorff, 2004b). Thus, of the 1009 total articles, 117 (11.6%) were re-coded by different researchers. The parts of the content analysis that underwent the double-checking process were the variables referring to the tone of the article (positive, negative, neutral) as well as the variables referring to the motives attributed to Putin for undertaking his actions.

The five authors themselves were responsible for carrying out the abovementioned double-checking, making sure the researcher who re-coded was not the same researcher who had done the original analysis. After re-coding, the percentage of coincidence between the coders was calculated using the formula: (coincidences/total re-coded articles) $\times$ 100.

The resulting coincidence rate was 90.71%, a level considered adequate in the scientific literature on interobserver reliability.

5. Results

5.1. Germany

During the time intervals we chose to gather our sample, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* published a total of 249 opinion articles which reference Vladimir Putin in the context of the 2014 and 2022 conflicts between Russia and Ukraine. The 2014 sample comprises a mere 53 (21.29%) articles, whereas in 2022 commentators dedicated 196 articles (78.71%) to the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Out of the 249 articles, 131 (52.61%) make some sort of reference to the possible motives that drove Vladimir Putin to annex Crimea and invade Ukraine. Out of these 131, in 2014, 35 (26.74%) articles attributed the reasons for the aggression to Putin personally, while in 2022, 96 (73.28%) articles referenced at least one of several aspects that may have prompted Putin to take military action.

In 2014, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* published more than twice as many articles (38) as the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (14) although the articles in the progressive *Süddeutsche* tended to be considerably longer. This disparity remained similar in 2022 with 59 articles published in the *Süddeutsche*, and 137 in the *Frankfurter*. Out of all the articles in the sample, 239 were opinion articles authored by one or several authors, and only 10 were editorials.

All but 4 of the 249 articles struck a negative tone regarding Vladimir Putin, that is to say they are somewhere on the spectrum between subtly critical or extremely critical of Russia and its president. In 2014, only one of the articles struck a neutral tone towards Putin, and in 2022 there were only three. None of the articles in the sample could be considered positive in tone regarding Putin in the sense that they condoned in any form the Russian military actions in 2014 and 2022. In 2022, the two German newspapers devoted four times as many articles to the conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine compared to 2014, the general tone, however, remained consistently negative.

It is worth recalling that the methodology of this study establishes that a maximum of two out of four categories of possible motives for Putin's actions could be selected per article for the analysis. If more than two could be detected, the two most pronounced and salient aspects were chosen. Thus, in the 131 German articles which made mention of Putin's motives, the total tally of references is 179, i.e., in the 131 articles, in 179 instances one or two of Putin's motivational forces were quantified.

The main incentive for Putin to launch his invasions according to the articles in our sample, which emerged 58 times (32.40%), was rooted in Russian history, Russia's grievances against the West, and the desire to restore Russia's imperial greatness. Thus, Jürgen Kaube argues in the *Frankfurter* (25 February 2022) that "Putin can hardly be said to have concealed his conviction to make Russia Great Again and to deny Ukraine its right to exist."

Tied for second place with 44 references each (24.58%) are two categories of incentives for military action. The first is predicated on Putin's dictatorial style of government, quashing any opposition and dissident voices. The second category revolves around Putin's desire to weaken and destabilize the EU, NATO, and Western democratic governments in general, which he regards as weak and outdated while at the same time perceiving them as a threat. Silke Bigalke (01 March 2022) writes in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, "With his attack on Ukraine, this ruler is demonstrating what the people of Russia have long felt: how much he despises, and probably even fears, democracy and freedom. Now the West expects Russians to protest against an apparatus of power that makes demonstrations more dangerous for participants year after year."

And finally, 33 (18.43%) arguments pinpoint Putin's personality, lack of morals, and his psychological condition as the main drivers of his military attack on Ukraine. Designations of his personality and state of mind mentioned in the German press include arrogance,

thirst for power, megalomania, ruthlessness, narcissism, and egotism, to name just a few of a much longer list. *Süddeutsche* columnist Joachim Käppner gets to the heart of matter: "Russia is a major military power. It is unlikely that its president, who has abandoned all reason and morality, would stop his war of conquest because the West threatened him with fighter jets."

As for the adjectives or epithets ascribed to the Russian president, the most frequent ones were those evoking his untruthfulness and mental instability, as well as his unscrupulousness in his power aspirations, a choice selection of which are as follows: mendacious, cruel, insane, sick, brutal, criminal, merciless, inhumane, despotic, gone wild, warmonger, neofascist, malicious, paranoic, barbaric—the list goes on.

5.2. Spain

In Spain, the newspapers *El País* and *El Mundo* published a total of 225 articles on Vladimir Putin and the conflict between Russia and Ukraine in the intervals we chose in 2014 and 2022. In 2014, there were 27 (12%), and in 2022, 198 (88%). Of the total of 225, 132 (58.66%) referred in one way or another to the reasons that led Vladimir Putin to launch attacks on Ukraine, with 22 articles (16.66%) issued in 2014 and 110 (83.33%) in 2022.

During the time interval we examined in 2014, the two newspapers published practically the same number of articles (14 *El País* and 13 *El Mundo*). In 2022, however, *El Mundo* published many more articles than its competitor, that is, 118 articles compared to 80 in *El País*. Overall, the number of opinion pieces (168) almost tripled the number of editorials (57).

Of the 225 articles, an overwhelming majority (220 = 97.77%) take a negative tone toward Putin, i.e., they are critical or very critical of Russia and the Russian president. Only 5 articles (2.22%) of neutral tone were found: 3 in 2014 and 2 in 2022. No articles with a positive tone, endorsing Russian action, were identified. Thus, not only did Spanish newspapers devote many more articles to the clash between the Russian Federation and Ukraine in 2022, but they also published more articles with a harsher tone toward Putin in 2022 compared to 2014.

Of the aforementioned 132 articles discussing Putin's motives for his 2014 and 2022 attacks on Ukraine, most of them (out of a total of 179) referred to motives related to Russian history, Russian values, past grievances, or Putin's imperialistic designs. These motives were identified 63 times (35.2%). An example of this frame arises in an article by Julián Casanova in *El País* (26 February 2022): "Putin wants to become the tsar of a rebuilt Russian empire".

The second most frequent frame evokes the authoritarian nature of the Russian regime and Putin's lack of respect for democracy. These aspects were identified in 55 articles (30.7%). Thus, an article by Iñaki Ellakuría in *El Mundo* (25 February 2022) finds that "[. . .] Putin's objective, in order to guarantee the stability of his Stalinist autocracy, has always been the destruction of liberal democracy and its organs of consensus".

Third place goes to economic and strategic motives (34 = 19.6%), while arguments pointing to Putin's psychology as a cause of the conflicts with Ukraine number 26 (14.5%).

As for the adjectives or epithets dedicated to the Russian president, the most frequent were those referring to his dictatorial behavior such as "tyrant", "criminal", "Adolf Putin", or "imperialist moron" to name a few.

5.3. France

French newspapers *Le Figaro* and *Le Monde* published a total of 164 articles and editorials in the two periods studied in 2014 and 2022. In 2014 they published 51 (31.1%), and in 2022, more than twice as many, 113 (68.9%). Out of the 164, 120 (73%) made

unmistakable reference to Putin's motivations for taking military action against Ukraine. Out of these 120 articles, 44 were published in 2014, and 76 in 2022.

No striking disparities can be discerned between the two publications for each period, although both published more articles when Russia attacked Ukraine in 2022. In 2014, *Le Figaro* published 25 articles and *Le Monde* 26, while in 2022, *Le Figaro* published a few more (63) than *Le Monde* (50). As for the distinction between opinion articles and editorials, a higher proportion of editorials appear in *Le Figaro* than in *Le Monde*. The difference is particularly noticeable in 2022, when in *Le Monde* only 9 of the 50 articles published are editorials (18%), compared to 19 of the total of 63 in *Le Figaro* (30.2%).

In two thirds of all articles (66.5%), the authors strike a negative tone toward Putin, and in the remaining third it is almost exclusively neutral (32.3%). However, in two texts from 2014, one from each newspaper, the authors take a favorable tone toward Putin (1.2%). Then again, rather than praising Putin or Russian action in Crimea, the occupation and subsequent annexation of the peninsula is justified on historical and cultural grounds.

In the majority of the 120 articles, Putin's motivations for his aggressions against Ukraine are viewed as grounded in Russia's history, past grievances, and nostalgia for tsarist Russia, the USSR, and the territory subjected to the Soviet yoke. This type of historical, nationalist, and imperialist rationale emerges in 68 (43.3%) of the 157 references we identified in the 120 articles. In *El Figaro*, for instance, Pierre Rouselin (6 March 2014) affirms that "in Vladimir Putin's mind, the borders of Catherine II do exist. There can be no question of allowing them to disappear."

The second most frequently referenced type of motivation (44 = 28%) is attributed to Putin's geostrategic designs and his confrontation with Europe and the West in general, as well as the Kremlin's (alleged) attempt to destabilize the EU by leveraging Europe's dependence on Russian energy. Thus, *Le Figaro*'s Ivan Rioufol (11 March 2022) contends that "in his martial excess, Putin reveals the paranoid fury of a leader too long rejected by the West, and especially the United States."

On 30 occasions a lesser, yet still significant, type of incentive for Putin's aggressions emerges, largely to do with Russian domestic politics. Indeed, in 30 instances (19.1%), we identified references to Putin's desire to neutralize his political opposition and to flaunt his dictatorial, anti-democratic power plays, which prove nothing short of catastrophic for the Russians themselves. Thus, *Le Monde*'s Arthur Larrue (3 March 2022) declares that "the Russians are not citizens; they are subjects who fearfully cower under cover."

In only 15 instances (9.5%) do the articles in the French press allude to possible psycho-emotional issues affecting Putin's conduct. Françoise Thorn, for instance, writes in *Le Monde* (5 March 2014) that Putin is driven by "a sense of insecurity and an unresolved post-imperial complex".

In the two French newspapers, the most common epithets bestowed on the Russian president highlight his dictatorial, authoritarian, and violent behavior towards the neighboring country. By far the most common is "aggressor", which appears up to 19 times in the two newspapers: 12 in *Le Figaro* and 7 in *Le Monde*, albeit solely in 2022, not in 2014. The second most common appellation is "autocrat," which is used up to 10 times, in 2022 seven times in *Le Monde* alone, among others such as "tsar" and "dictator".

5.4. Italy

A total of 127 articles referencing Vladimir Putin were gathered from the Italian *Corriere della Sera* (41 articles) and *La Repubblica* (86 articles). In 2014, 16 articles were published (12.6%) and in 2022, 111 (88.2%), suggesting an increased media interest in Vladimir Putin's role during the invasion of Ukraine. Both in 2014 and in 2022 there is a predominance of opinion articles, 118 (92.9%), over editorials, 9 (7%) in the two newspapers. This points to

a bid on the part of the print media to approach Putin from an individual and subjective perspective rather than the collective and consensual opinion of each newspaper.

The results show that in the two Italian newspapers the tone regarding Vladimir Putin is predominantly negative, accounting for 66.1% of the total number of articles we analyzed. *Corriere della Sera* strikes a harsher tone towards Putin with 78% of the articles taking a clearly unfavorable view, whereas in *La Repubblica* 60.5% convey a disapproving view. The percentages of publications with a neutral tone are significantly lower, representing 33.9% of the total sample, i.e., 22% of the articles in *Corriere della Sera* and 39.5% in *La Repubblica*. No articles with a positive tone were found, confirming that, overall, Italian dailies assumed a censorious stance towards Russia's actions and policies during the 2014 and 2022 episodes.

Like the UK newspapers, the Italian press focuses mainly on Russia's domestic policy in their criticism of Vladimir Putin. We found 84 mentions in 67 out of 127 articles (7 in 2014 and 60 in 2022). In 39 cases (46.4%) the president is portrayed as a dictator who represses the opposition and acts defying fundamental democratic values and international humanitarian norms. Indeed, Michele Serra in *La Repubblica* (3 March 2022) goes so far as to affirm that Putin "may not be Hitler, but he surely resembles him. So much so that he has dominated Russia for 22 years. And he was responsible for massacres in Chechnya and Syria, massacres of women and children, the destruction of cities and villages and systematic violations of human rights."

The second most frequently referenced cluster of motives (22 = 26.2%) were those predicated on the economy as well as on Putin's attempts to weaken and destabilize the Western world: "The aggression against Ukraine is a (deliberate!) attack on the European political order," *Corriere della Sera*'s Federico Fubini (13 March 2022) observes, and he claims that Putin aims to "push more and more refugees into the Union, weaponizing them to destabilize our countries."

While historical considerations rank first in Germany, France, and Spain, this frame ranks only third in the Italian newspapers. We counted 15 references (17.9%), for instance, in an article in *Corriere della Sera* (9 March 2022) in which Danilo Taino argues that "Vladimir Putin is waging yesterday's war. Moved by the past and aiming at the past", while "he would like to return to the reconstruction of a Russian-Tsarist or Russian-Soviet space, both erased by history".

Lastly, there are those motives that allude to Putin's psychology and human values, of which we found 8 mentions (9.5%). In another article by Michele Serra (*La Repubblica*, 3 March 2022) he writes that "Putin has reasoned and behaved more or less like the male who kills the mate who wants to leave him," because for him "Ukraine either exists as 'his', or else it has no right to exist. Better dead than free".

The Italian press variously dubbed Putin "dictator" (4), "tyrant" (4), "despot" (3), and "bloodthirsty" (3).

5.5. United Kingdom

The British newspapers *The Guardian* and *The Times* published 244 opinion articles and editorials addressing Putin and the aggressions against Ukraine in the period we explored. The vast majority (89.8%) appeared in 2022, while in 2014 there were only 25 articles (10.3%). In terms of distribution by newspaper, *The Guardian* leads with 155 (63.5%) articles in both time intervals, which almost double those in *The Times* (89 = 36.5%)

Opinion articles (168) make up 68.9%, while 79 (31.2%) are editorials. The ratio of editorials is higher in *The Times*, with 41.6% versus 25.2% in *The Guardian*.

A total of 88.9% of the articles in the two British newspapers strike a negative tone toward President Putin, condemning his actions in Ukraine. Only a small number (11.1%)

of the articles are neutral. We did not identify any favorable views of Putin's role in the conflict with Ukraine. Both newspapers printed mostly unfavorable opinion pieces. The progressive *The Guardian* printed more articles with a negative tone (94.2%) and thus took a noticeably harsher view of Putin than the conservative *The Times* (79.8%).

In 156 of the articles (16 in 2014 and 140 in 2022), we coded 206 references to Putin's motives for the aggressions. The most recurrent (71 instances, corresponding to 34.5% of the total) cite Putin's domestic policy, branding him as a dictator who tolerates no opposition and wields absolute control in the Kremlin. This view portrays Putin as a leader who disrespects Russian citizens and scoffs at the rules of democracy.

The second most frequently cited motive for Putin's actions (63 instances, 30.6%) was his intention to weaken and destabilize the EU, NATO, and the West in general through economic and strategic means: "He believes that Russia is surrounded, threatened by an aggressive, expansionist NATO and needs to act to protect its borders, influence and global standing," according to an editorial in *The Times* (28 February 2022).

The two remaining frames (Russian history and values/Putin's frame of mind) were given equal importance and were cited 36 times each (17.5%). The commentators attribute to Putin nostalgia for the USSR and resentment over historical grievances. Thus, Geoffrey Robertson states in *The Guardian* (24 February 2014) that "Putin appears oversensitive to diplomatic slights, in part because he feels that since the collapse of the Soviet Union Russia has not been given sufficient respect in the international arena. His longing for respect partly explains his nostalgia for Soviet times and regret at the break-up of the Soviet empire". Other commentators home in on Putin's psychology, like *The Times*' Ben Macintyre, (18 March 2022) who contends that "The fate of Ukraine will be settled on the battlefield but it is also being fought out in Putin's mind, an organ shaped by the KGB and its history of internal treachery, paranoia and self-destruction".

In both opinion articles and editorials, various appellations were used to describe Putin, most of which have a negative connotation. The most frequent terms were "evil" (7), "isolated" (6), "villain" (4), "paranoid" (4), "autocrat" (4), "authoritarian" (4), and "mad"/"madman" (4). Though less frequently, some articles featured neutral adjectives such as "rational", "tactical", "pragmatic", or "oversensitive".

5.6. Overall Results

The largest number of articles were printed in the two German newspapers (Table 2), 249 texts, followed by the United Kingdom (244), Spain (225), France (164), and, lastly, Italy (127). All five countries published far fewer texts in 2014 (172) than in 2022 (837). We saw the most striking contrast in the UK newspapers, where only 25 texts were printed in 2014 and 219 were printed in 2022. Similarly, the Italian newspapers printed only 16 articles in 2014 compared to 111 in 2022. In France, the gap was the smallest, with 51 articles in 2014 and 113 in 2022. In the two northern European countries (the UK and Germany), opinion leaders had a lot more to say about Putin than in the Mediterranean, although in 2022 Spanish newspapers came in second in numbers of articles printed, after the UK and closely followed by Germany. It would appear that the war that started in 2022, including its brutality, its effect on civilians, the glaring aggression, and lack of justification in the eyes of most Europeans, aroused much more output by print media commentators than the events of 2014.

Table 2. Total number of articles by tone, country, and year.

Country	Number of Articles			Tone					
	Articles/Year		Total	Positive		Negative		Neutral	
	2014	2022		2014	2022	2014	2022	2014	2022
France	51	113	164	2	0	27	82	22	31
Germany	53	196	249	0	0	52	193	1	3
Italy	16	111	127	0	0	9	75	7	36
Spain	27	198	225	0	0	24	196	3	2
UK	25	219	244	0	0	21	196	4	23
				2	0	133	742	37	95
TOTAL	172	837	1009	2		875		132	

Source: the authors.

We ranked the newspapers irrespective of their country of providence (Figure 1) and found that the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* leads with 176 texts, followed by *The Guardian* with 155. Coming in last are *Le Monde* with 76, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* with 73, and the *Corriere della Sera* with only 41 articles. If we look at 2022 alone, the ranking is the same. The newspapers that dedicated the largest number of opinion pieces to the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine were the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *The Guardian*, and the Spanish *El Mundo*, followed by *El País* tied with *La Repubblica*.

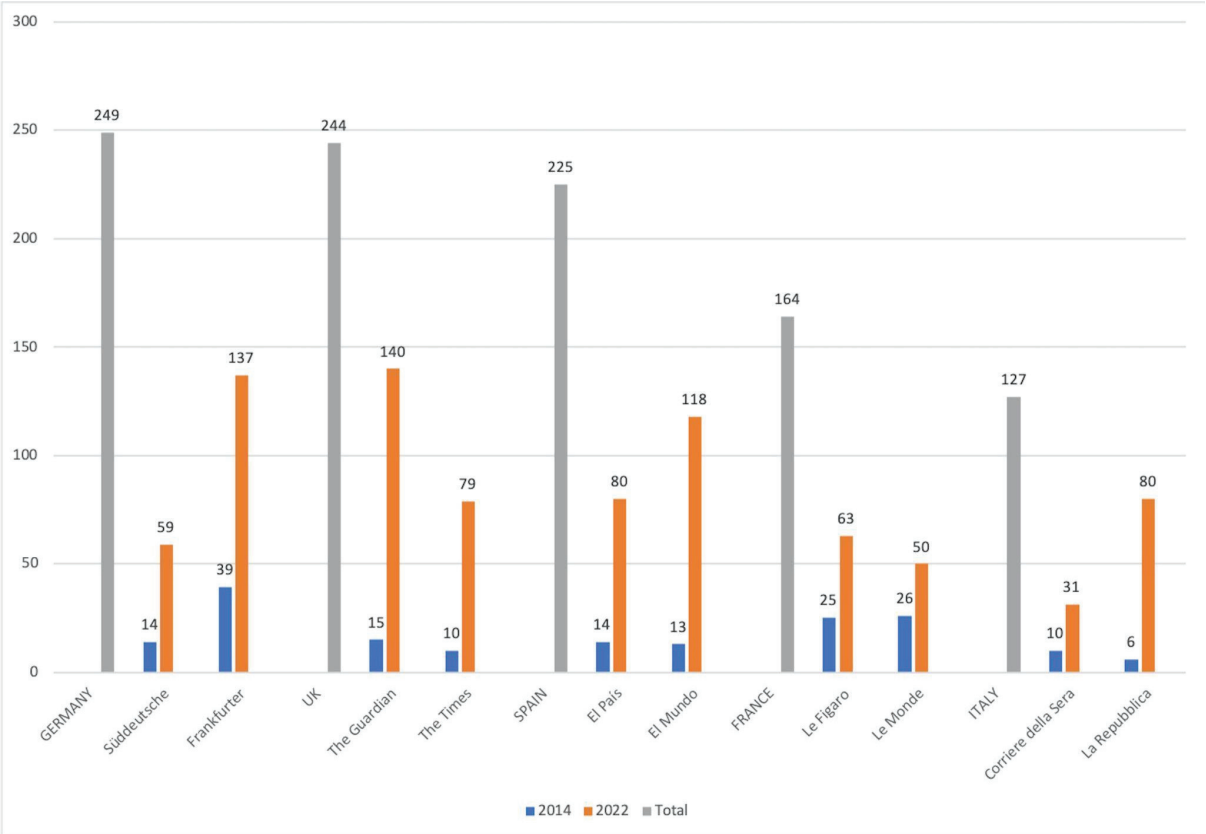


Figure 1. Total number of publications by year, newspaper, and time interval. Source: the authors.

In both periods, and in all 10 newspapers (Figure 2), opinion articles vastly outnumbered editorials. Cases that stood out were *El Mundo*, which printed few articles, though

more than twice as many editorials (9) than articles (4) in 2014, and the *Corriere della Sera* and the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, which did not publish a single editorial in the two time spans we examined. Italy's *La Repubblica* did not publish any editorials in 2014 and only 9 in 2022, compared to 71 opinion articles. Overall, the German print media had the lowest output of editorials, and the two British broadsheets the highest. *The Times* stands out for the highest editorial-to-article ratio (41.5%), with the added peculiarity that in 2014 it printed 9 editorials and only one opinion article.

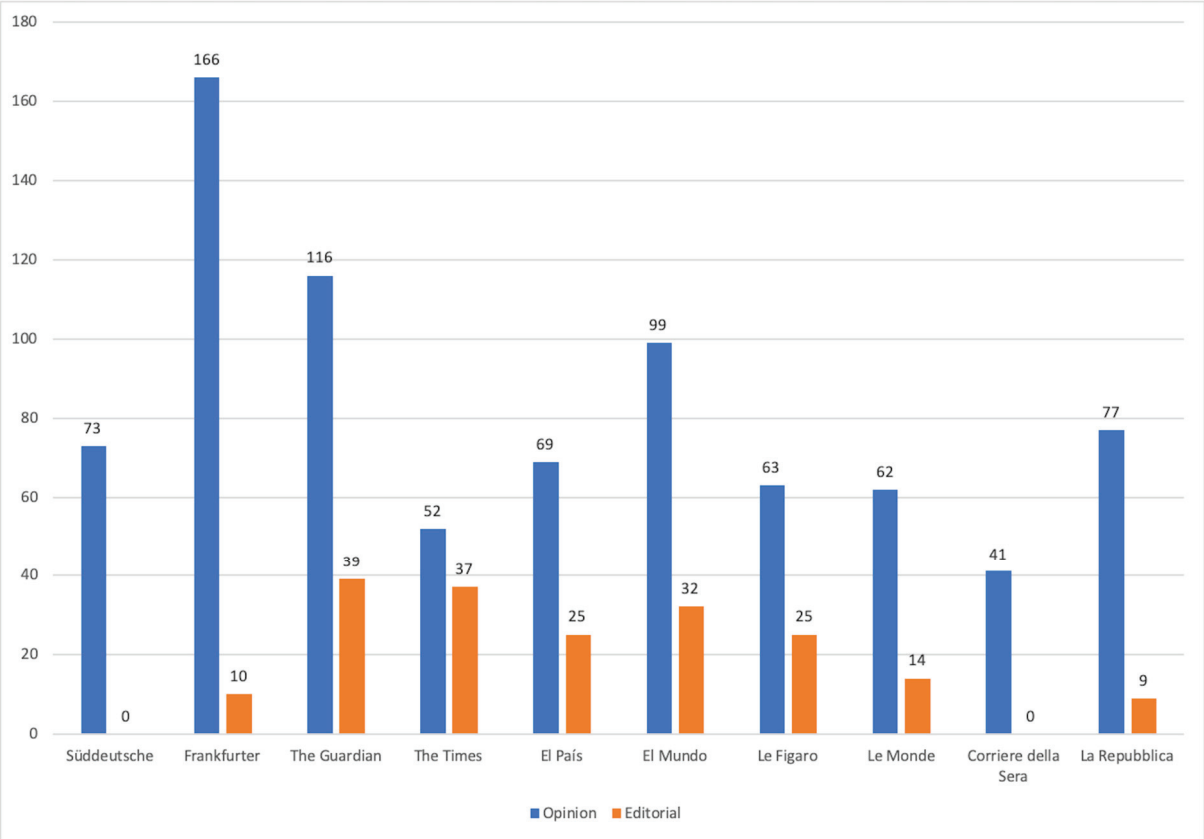


Figure 2. Total number of articles by genre (opinion articles vs. editorial) and newspaper. Source: the authors.

Since the United Kingdom and Italy are exemplars of different media systems according to the classification by Hallin and Mancini (2004), the notably higher output of editorials in the UK compared to the low yield in Italy merits further research.

Across all countries, newspapers, and time spans (Table 2, Figure 3), the tone the commentators took toward Putin is overwhelmingly negative. Of the 1009 articles we analyzed, 875 (86.7%) were clearly disapproving, 132 (13%) were neutral, and only 2 French articles in 2014 (an insignificant 0.2%) struck a positive tone. In 2022, we could not identify any articles which in any way endorsed or supported Putin's attack on Ukraine. In 2022, 88.7% of the articles censured Putin, while in 2014, 77% did so. Among the five countries, Germany and Spain were the most critical, followed by the United Kingdom. Italy and France were the countries that were least critical of Putin. The Italian newspapers printed fewer censorious articles than any other press, yet, unlike in two French articles we found, they did not actually go so far as to show approval for Putin's actions.

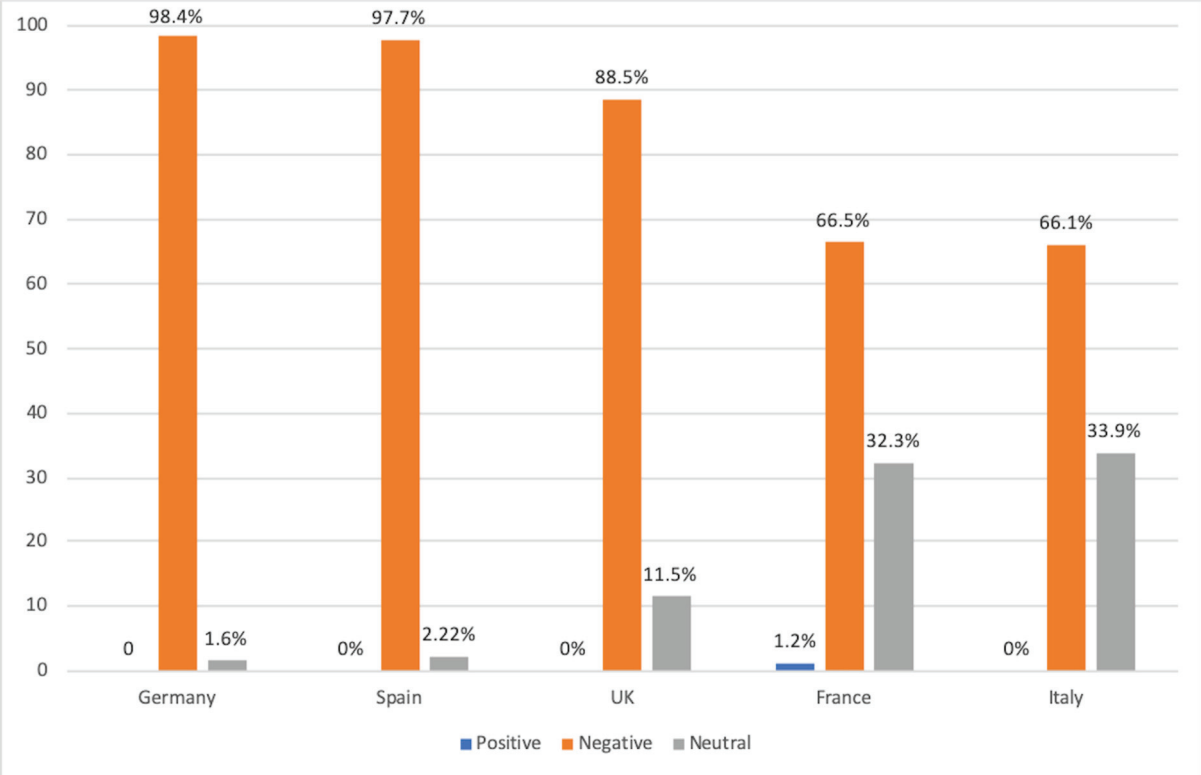


Figure 3. Percentage of publications by tone and country. Source: the authors.

Lastly, we scrutinized each article for references to the four frames we established at the outset (Figure 4) and we entered a maximum of two (the most prominent) in our spreadsheets. Overwhelmingly, the articles framed the Russian aggressions against Ukraine either in terms of Russian/Soviet history or in the interest of domestic policy, or both. A total of 31.5% of the most recurrent arguments evoked Russia's historical grievances (frame 1): USSR nostalgia, willingness to restore Soviet strength over its former area of influence, Soviet-style domination of Russia's neighbors, or traditional imperialism rooted in the tsarist era, and Putin's imperative to protect Russians abroad. Some pundits even saw similarities to Nazi expansion in the 1930s.

A total of 29% of the articles allude in some fashion to Russia's domestic policy (frame 3): Putin acts internally as a dictator and ruthlessly suppresses all opposition; Russia acts as a totalitarian regime, scoffing at basic democratic values.

A total of 25.2% of the articles authored by European commentators couch the conflict in an economic and geostrategic context (frame 4). Thus, Putin aims to weaken or destabilize the EU, NATO, and "the Western world" in general. Several writers stress that Putin is leveraging energy resources against Europe. The motivations identified in this category also include that, notwithstanding Putin's assessment of Western regimes as weak and outdated, he cannot help perceiving them as a threat. This may account for Putin frequently flaunting disrespect for international law and the sovereignty of neighboring countries, as many commentators point out.

Not as frequent as frames 1–3, though still significant, are references to frame 2: Putin's psychology, personal attributes, and moral values. A total of 14.3% of the articles are framed in terms of personality defects such as arrogance, ambition, lust for power, egotism, narcissism, intolerance, and anti-democratic attitudes.

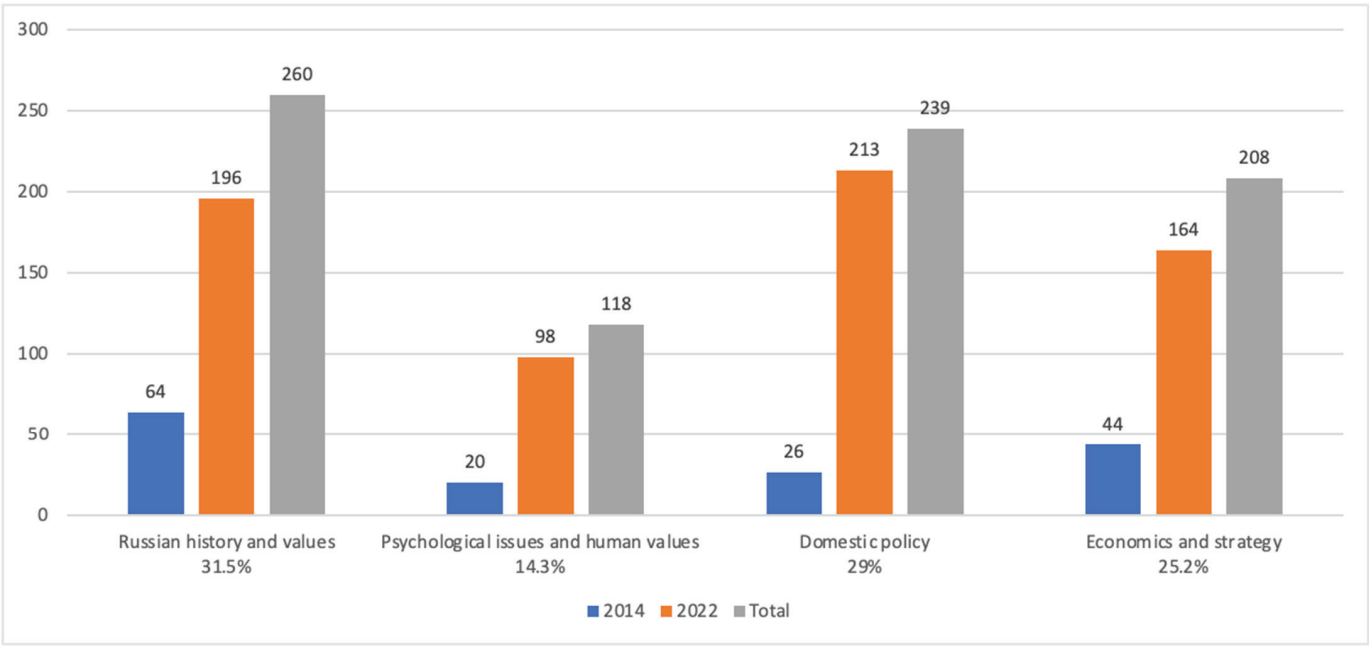


Figure 4. Number of publications by frame across all newspapers in 2014 and 2022. Source: the authors.

Depending on the country, commentators prioritize the four frames differently. Frame 1, Russian history and values, is the most frequently referenced in France, Germany, and Spain, while in the United Kingdom and Italy frame 1 ranks third. In these two countries, frame 3 (Domestic policy) is prioritized, followed by frame 4 (Economics and strategy). In Spain and Germany, domestic policy ranks second, while in France, economics and strategy ranks second. In all five countries, the least mentioned frame corresponds to Putin's psychology and personality defects.

In 2022, the framing that gains the most traction is the one portraying Putin as a dictator who crushes internal opposition, who governs as a totalitarian ruler, and who disrespects Russia's neighbors. Compared to 2014, the number of references to this frame are eight times higher, rising from 26 to 213 (Figure 4). In second place, the frame casting him as arrogant, ambitious, irresponsible, narcissistic, or selfish increases five-fold. Although this portrayal is the least frequent overall, it is noteworthy because references to Putin's personal defects increase sharply after the Ukraine invasion, almost as much as the references to his dictator-style ruling of Russia. This may be accounted for by opinion leaders accepting a fait accompli in 2014, and perhaps giving Putin the benefit of the doubt. However, when in 2022 a full-scale invasion of a sovereign European country reignited Cold War fears, Russia's aggressiveness could no longer be denied, and Putin was unequivocally recognized as an authoritarian dictator and as a threat to European democracies. Commentators no longer held back their anger and frustration at the Russian president's unforgiveable aggression.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

As our findings bear out, in the time before and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the major European newspapers published many more opinion articles and editorials about Vladimir Putin than before and after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014.

The tone of the articles was much more negative in 2022 than in 2014. In both periods, the predominant tone was negative towards Putin, but the disapproval and condemnation of Putin was significantly more severe in 2022, when almost nine out of ten texts were negative. This finding is in line with previous studies, which also highlight the disapproval

with which Putin and Russia are presented to Western readerships (Seliverstova et al., 2021; Sahide & Muhammad, 2023; Stovickova, 2021).

None of the articles and editorials from 2022 submit arguments which might go some way to endorsing or justifying the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. By contrast, we did find articles published in 2014 which hazarded such arguments, reminding readers of the Russianness of Crimea and pointing out that more than 90% of the Crimean population is Russian speaking, and many feel a sense of belonging to Russia rather than Ukraine.

Upon concluding our content analysis, the framing of Putin's role as we observed it in the articles can be parsed as follows:

Two frames stand out clearly in the 1009 journalistic texts we analyzed: frame number 1 and frame number 3. The most frequently applied frame (number 1) portrays Putin as yearning for the glorious Soviet past, greedy for power and influence over Eastern Europe. He reacts to what he claims is a threat emanating from the West, accusing the Western world of striving for domination by seeking to expand the Atlantic Alliance to Ukraine. The authors of these articles frame their coverage of Putin's actions as those of a nostalgic heir to the Soviet era, when the Kremlin wielded absolute control of the 15 republics of the USSR. Thus, after the end of the Cold War in 1991, the Balkan wars of the 1990s, and the expansion of NATO, Putin feels that Russia has ceased to be a decisive player on the world stage, a state of affairs he is determined to put right. This assessment tracks with findings by Stovickova (2021) in her studies on Czech online news media.

Frame 3 brands Putin as a dictator, who flaunts his disdain for democratic values, democracy, and freedom, and who crushes internal opposition, just as he denies the sovereignty of neighboring Ukraine. Already, in 2014, he annexed the Crimean peninsula. In 2022, he launched a massive military attack on Ukraine with the pretext (entirely unconvincing to European commentators) of overthrowing an alleged pro-Nazi Zelensky regime and protecting the Russophone population of the independent republics of Donetsk and Luhansk.

Frame 4, ranked third in our quantitative analysis, frames Putin's actions as a result of pragmatic motives predicated on economic and geo-strategic factors. This category of framing overlaps to a certain degree with frame 3 in that Putin perceives the Western countries as a threat which would culminate in Ukraine joining NATO and the European Union. According to many pundits who favor this frame, Putin is determined to destabilize and weaken the Western alliance by leveraging the flow of Russian energy resources, in particular the gas supply on which many European countries, above all Germany, depend. Hence, Putin's objectives owe more to geopolitical and economic considerations and less to the dictates of domestic policy, his thirst for unchecked power, or reclaiming the vast hegemony of the Soviet era.

Finally, frame 2 (ranked 4th), credits Putin's aggressive actions to psychological motives, to his personality, and moral values, or lack thereof. Many of the adjectives and epithets ascribed to Putin contribute significantly to this frame. They account to a large degree for the negative tone emanating from the authors of the articles. A selection of the choicest appellations on a very long list would include cruel, criminal, paranoid, autocrat, tyrant, dictator, despot, aggressor, bloodthirsty, and inhuman.

We submit that our study confirms the applicability of framing theory and the method of content analysis for the study of journalistic opinion texts. As we have made clear at the outset, it was not the objective of this study to gauge the media effects, nor the way in which the articles in our sample sought to condition the opinions of the European public. We would be remiss, however, if we did not point out that an opinion poll carried out by the European Council on Foreign Relations (Puglierin & Zerka, 2023) seems to confirm that the opinion of Europeans regarding Russia worsened in 2023 compared to

2021. According to this study, in the EU member states "a majority agrees that Russia is their country's -and Europe's- "adversary", with Germany proving to be one of "the main hawks in this respect". Puglierin and Zerka also state that "on average, the share of respondents who see Russia as Europe's "rival" or "adversary" has increased from around one-third to almost two-thirds. At the same time, sympathies towards Russia have dropped considerably", from 2021 to 2023. The European Union Eurobarometer published in December 2023 confirms that support for Ukraine prevails among EU citizens: "almost nine in ten (89%) agree with providing humanitarian support to the people affected by the war, and more than eight in ten (84%) agree with welcoming into the EU people fleeing the war" (European Commission, 2023).

The data obtained in our study highlight the demand for further research into the role the media have played in the decline of Russia's image among European opinion leaders. Our research has yielded robust, quantifiable results which substantiate the impact of framing on the treatment and portrayal of Vladimir Putin's person in the opinion articles and editorials printed in the major daily newspapers from the five largest countries and leading economies in Europe.

Nevertheless, some considerations may be in order. The authors believe that this study contributes to highlighting the political significance of media framing in liberal democracies. By framing Putin as an aggressive leader, as an autocrat, as an imperialist, as nostalgic of the past *glory* of the USSR, European commentators do much more than interpret a political event. They participate in the construction of the political legitimacy and moral responsibility on which Europe bases its response to Russian aggression. The act of framing Putin's actions has consequences for public opinion and government policy decisions: when European newspapers overwhelmingly adopt frames of moral condemnation, these frames can help justify government responses such as sending military aid to Ukraine, increasing military spending, and (in the 2025 context of Trump's U.S. shift away from Europe) creating a sense of danger and threat that justifies rearmament in the face of a potential Russian enemy.

The stance of the major European newspapers, their readership, and their countries' leaders likewise appears to align and maintain coherence over time. The responses of these three actors thus evolved jointly, shifting from a less forceful position in 2014—where some room for doubt regarding the Kremlin's true intentions still remained—to a much firmer and more unanimous moral condemnation of Putin following the 2022 invasion. In line with, and influenced by, the positions of the media and the public, political leaders also reacted in markedly different ways to the first and second instances of Russian aggression.

From the constructivist perspective of international relations, the identity of international actors is not naturally fixed but socially constructed, so that the way Putin and Russia are framed contributes to the formation of the identities of *us* (Europe) and *the other* (Russia). Thus, in this context, the image of Putin in the media contributes to reinforcing European identity as a democratic, peaceful space based on the rule of law and individual freedom, as opposed to a Russia ruled by a revisionist dictator who violated international law and invaded a sovereign neighbor. Foregrounding Putin's nostalgia for the Soviet era also places him outside the post-1990 international order, thereby establishing a clear good–bad or civilized–barbaric dichotomy, thus reaffirming the identity of a modern, 21st century Europe, based on democratic values, versus an archaic Russia, ruled by an autocratic, violent, and repressive leader of his people and his neighbors.

Therefore, the media's framing of Putin as an aggressive leader may have a performative consequence, as it constructs the discourse on which governments' decisions, negotiations and mediations in the international public sphere are based.

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Exploring Conflict Escalation: Power Imbalance, Alliances, Diplomacy, Media, and Big Data in a Multipolar World

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Abstract: The analysis in this study covers how power imbalance, alliance cohesion, diplomatic and media framing, and big data analytics affect scaling up in the conflict in a multipolar world. This research applies the Constructivist International Relations Theory to examine survey data of 250 international relations experts, policymakers, and analysts using Survey Structured Equation Modeling (SEM) via SMART-PLS. Power imbalance and the way the media frames the situation are found to lead to an escalation of conflicts, but strong alliance cohesion, diplomatic effort, and big data analytics can mitigate the risk of the escalation. Strategic diplomacy, media regulation, and real-time data monitoring have thus shown their capacity to prevent conflict. These contribute to conflict studies by incorporating political IR models, data science knowledge, and policy advice on global security governance. This means they can support the prediction and prevention of conflicts by means of diplomatic transparency, ethical media practice, and AI early warning systems. This study is limited by the use of self-reported data; however, the results of this study indicate that this topic is under-explored in cultural and geopolitical terms. The results help inform policymakers and security entities on ways to address conflict resolution as a matter of discretion and from a multidimensional perspective. Survey Structured Equation Modeling (SEM) via SMART-PLS is a technique used for analyzing structural relationships between measured variables and latent constructs, providing valuable insights into complex models. Survey Structured Equation Modeling (SEM) via SMART-PLS is a technique used for analyzing structural relationships between measured variables and latent constructs, providing valuable insights into complex models.

Keywords: diplomatic efforts; political science; conflict escalation; media framing; power imbalance

1. Introduction

Past and present international conflicts confirm the compound dependence of countries and blocs on each other and global security (Schweitzer, 2021; Väyrynen, 2023). Research so far has discovered that power imbalances contribute to tension rise, at times resulting in violent confrontations when militancy routes are taken to oppose strong powers (Exner-Cortens et al., 2023; Siangulube et al., 2023; Udawalpola et al., 2021). Nonetheless, alliance cohesion equally matters, as strong alliances militate against conflicts, while fragmenting does the opposite (McGlynn & Đureinović, 2023). Besides military and strategic alliances, the resolution of conflict has always depended on diplomacy. Good diplomatic engagement could hamper tensions by promoting the ability to communicate and negotiate

the settlement (Denzenlkham, 2021; Zhang, 2022). Geopolitics today plays a key role in media framing, as it molds public opinion and influences policymaking. The main media (and, increasingly, digital media) tends to sensationalize or distort conflicts, exacerbating their hostilities, whereas responsible reporting could help mitigate the public's opinion in terms of negative sentiments and reduce tensions (Betus et al., 2020; Sievert et al., 2022).

Big data analytics has become a strong processing tool for the prevention and monitoring of conflict due to the advancement in technology. Data-driven intelligence, through an initial warning system, can analyze real-time social media sentiment and geopolitical trends to determine the increase in tension (Blair & Sambanis, 2020; Watts, 2020). Unfortunately, the incorporation of big data analytics in a conflict resolution context is a relatively untouched issue in existing research.

Although previous studies have significantly advanced our understanding of conflict dynamics (Konrad & Levine, 2021; Väyrynen, 2023), this study stands out in several important respects. To quantitatively assess the interaction of independent variables in predicting conflict escalation tendencies, this study uses structural equation modeling (SEM) via SMART-PLS. This research includes many variables in a comprehensive model, in contrast to earlier research that focused only on one or two variables.

Conceptually, this study is built on an interdisciplinary framework that blends media studies, data analytics, and theories of international relations. The strengths of each field are used in this study to give a thorough knowledge of the conflict escalation process, in contrast to previous studies that relied only on a single theoretical lens. Previous research approaches restricted the generalizability of their findings by concentrating exclusively on certain geographical areas or conflict kinds (Féron, 2020; Väyrynen, 2023). On the other hand, this study has a global viewpoint and covers a wide range of conflicts from varied geographical areas and power dynamics.

According to this study's first findings, factors such as power imbalances, alliance cohesion, diplomatic attempts, media framing, and big data analytics all contribute to the likelihood that a conflict will escalate. Power imbalances and media framing, in particular, became crucial factors in the escalation. The implications of these findings for policymakers are extensive. Recognizing and addressing power disparities, as well as using the right media coverage strategies, could potentially prevent conflict from escalating. By providing a full model that explains the complex relationships between variables that affect conflict escalation, this work advances our understanding of the subject.

Problem Statement

Relevant studies to the task at hand focused on individual factors like the effect of power asymmetry, alliance structures, diplomacy, media narratives, and technology, and not the ways by which these factors interacted. By fragmenting such analysis, one is unable to grasp how these variables, in fact, work in tandem in a multipolar world defined by ever more complex and unpredictable conflicts. Additionally, mere binary classifications or qualitative analysis characterizing the escalation dynamics is not sufficient in most cases for the traditional techniques. In this manner, out of the need to provide related, data-driven, and interdisciplinary research, there is a demand for research that examines the combined effect of power imbalance, alliance cohesion, diplomatic intensity, media framing, big data analytics, etc., on conflict escalation in the face of an emerging world where the frequency of wars in changing rapidly. To cover this gap, this study employs a quantitative framework that combines insights from International Relations and Communication Studies as well as computational analytics to discuss the dynamics of a conflict.

The objective of this study is to explore the intricate relationship among the different circumstances that lead to conflict escalation in the conditions of a multipolar world. Specifically, it seeks to:

1. To study the impact of power imbalances, alliance cohesion, and diplomacy in combination and evaluate the impact of those three together on increasing, respectively, reducing the chances of global conflicts becoming violent.
2. To assess the effect that media framing and big data analytics have in determining conflict narratives, public perception, and early warning signs for conflict prevention.

Through the accomplishment of these objectives, this research fills the gap between conventional international relations thinking and current high-technology developments by recommending knowledge-based solutions to policymakers, security organizations, and conflict resolution professionals.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Power imbalances, alliance cohesion, diplomacy, media framing, and big data analytics are all discussed in Section 2, along with the theoretical underpinnings and conceptual framework of conflict escalation. The method is explained in Section 3, along with the survey design, data collection, and usage of SEM via SMART-PLS. The empirical analysis of the results is presented in Section 4, which is followed by a discussion of the policy implications. Section 5 concludes by summarizing key findings and arguing potential directions of future research to understand and control tendencies to escalate conflict.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Conflict Escalation Tendencies

Conflict Escalation Tendencies is a crucial field in conflict studies for studying the evolution and the strength of global conflicts. This variable measures the danger of transformation of a small-scale conflict into a more severe crisis with staggering effects (Andersen et al., 2022; Boroș, 2020). In order to understand global conflict management and resolution strategies, it is necessary to accurately assess and predict conflict escalation tendencies (Scheppa-Lahyani & Zapf, 2023; Yakter & Tessler, 2022).

Prior studies have focused on how important it is to understand conflict escalation tendencies because of their wide-ranging effects. Galtung's seminal work of 1965, the notion of the "escalation ladder," demonstrated how disagreements rise through ranks of escalation, almost always escalating in hostility and, in worst cases, to violent confrontations (Cunningham, 2023; Ivie, 2022).

2.2. Relationship Between Independent Variables and Dependent Variables

Conflict escalation tendencies are related to independent factors, power imbalance, alliance cohesion, diplomatic intensity, media framing, and big data analytics in a complex and diverged manner. Current research explains these links.

The complex context of conflict escalation involves a number of crucial variables. The power imbalance is one such element, which (Exner-Cortens et al., 2023; Siangulube et al., 2023; Martins, 2020) empirically studied. If the weaker party feels that it has less power, it may take drastic measures to make up for that imbalance of power, so the research indicates that they are more likely to escalate when there is an imbalance of power between the parties. It further emphasizes (Exner-Cortens et al., 2023; Ivie, 2022) the importance of alliance coherence in the fact that powerful and coherent coalitions can be powerful stabilizing forces that maintain diplomatic solutions (Denzenlkham, 2021; Zhang, 2022). argues that increased diplomatic efforts are a measure of deterrence to conflict escalation since it provides open and communicative channels to de-escalate and resolve conflicts in peace. In 1980 debates, Gitlin also stressed the importance of media framing. The issue

may become worse by sensationalized or biased representations of conflicts, which hurts public morale (Ninan et al., 2022; Sievert et al., 2022). (Abkenar et al., 2021) finally asserted the very essence of big data analytics on current conflict sciences, especially that the use of real-time social media sentiment monitoring can serve as a concave of escalating tensions (Blair & Sambanis, 2020; Watts, 2020).

In the digital age, big data analytics has created new possibilities for researching and even managing disputes. Researchers like (Blair & Sambanis, 2020; Watts, 2020). How sentiment analysis on social media platforms may offer in-the-moment insights into the general mood and opinions around conflicts. This is crucial for prompt action since it enables the early observation of rising tensions before they explode. Big data can also be used to research a variety of topics, from army movements to economic indicators, providing a more comprehensive understanding of conflict situations (Blair & Sambanis, 2020; Watts, 2020). For instance, machine learning algorithms can be used as an additional layer of predictive intelligence, going through massive databases to seed an anticipating war by locating preposterous patterns or currents. Thus, big data analytics can be used as a conflict avoidance and resolution preventative mechanism, as well as as an observational instrument.

The researcher lacks the literature on the integration of power imbalance, alliance cohesion, diplomatic efforts, and framing of media with big data analytics and the interaction of all of these factors and their impact on conflict escalation tendencies in the multipolar environment (Walther et al., 2023; Yakter & Tessler, 2022; Hu et al., 2021). Many of these, in some way, have been researched individually; however, very little has been conducted as a whole, considering them interdependent and explaining the whole process of conflict escalation.

Currently, the available literature is most concerned with studying individual components that make up conflict escalation views and overlooking the complex interactions between them. The presence of this gap implies the importance of an exhaustive study on the connections among power disparity, the coherence of alliance, diplomatic attempts, media framing, and big data analytics as variables that contribute to warring escalation tendencies. Therefore, the problem at hand can be described as follows:

Present studies do not know how power imbalances, alliance cohesion, diplomat's efforts, media framing, and big data analytics would play a role in the interplay of power imbalances, alliance cohesion, diplomatic efforts, media framing, and big data analytics to predict conflict escalation tendencies in a multipolar world.

3. Theoretical Framework

By representing the project against Constructivist International Relations Theory, this study argues specifically that conflict escalation trends are not only bent on by inherent disparity of abilities but by the views, linkages, and correspondence among entrusting celebrations (Debrix, 2015). Within this theoretical framework, international players act upon and help create their perception of power and interests based on contact and conversations, which in turn affects their decisions as to whether the conflict is to escalate or de-escalate.

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *It is more likely for conflicts to escalate when the power imbalance is higher. It is based on the assumption that parties that perceive themselves to be power disadvantaged may resort to extreme measures to compensate for their perceived inferiority (Exner-Cortens et al., 2023; Siangulube et al., 2023; Hirsch & Koppenberg, 2020).*

Hypothesis 2 (H2). *The stronger the alliance cohesion, the greater the inverse association with the tendency to escalate into a conflict. Cohesion treaties benefit the diplomatic solution and offer the forum for posturing the dispute instead of escalation (McGlynn & Đureinović, 2023).*

Hypothesis 3 (H3). *Diplomatic intensity is increased, and it helps reduce conflict escalation tendencies. Strong diplomatic efforts allow for opening communication channels and possibilities for peaceful outcomes (Scheppa-Lahyani & Zapf, 2023; Yakter & Tessler, 2022; Anand & Radhakrishna, 2017).*

Hypothesis 4 (H4). *Media framing influences the tendency of conflict escalation. The biased or sensationalized media coverage can increase negative feelings and aggravate disputes (Rooke, 2021; Rowbotham et al., 2019; Sievert et al., 2022; Gui, 2021).*

Hypothesis 5 (H5). *Big data can be used effectively to reduce conflict escalation. Early warning signals that can be found in analyzing opinion trends and social media chatter include growing tension (Blair & Sambanis, 2020; Watts, 2020).*

Using the framework of Constructivist International Relations Theory, this study delves into these hypotheses to ascertain how other components of factors play a role in enhancing conflict escalation tendencies in a global system with multiple powers Figure 1.

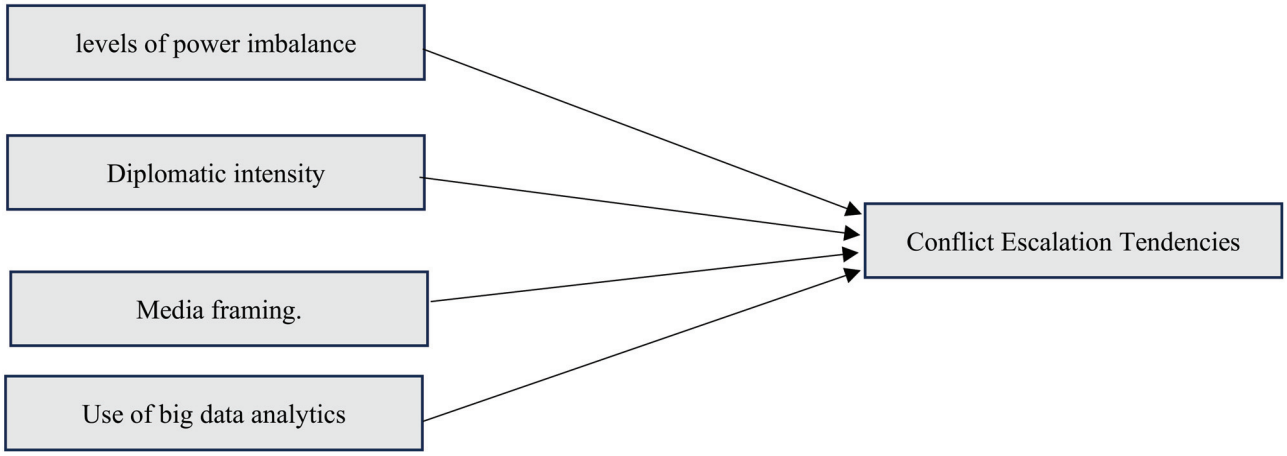


Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

4. Methodology

The members of the research population are international relations professionals, analysts, policymakers, and academics with international conflicts and diplomacy expertise. Geographical and sectoral diversity in the sample was ensured through stratified random sampling (Ab Malik et al., 2010; Singh & Gorey, 2019). International dispute prevalence was used to define the strata so that there was representation from various geopolitical regions. The use of this approach not only applies this study to different conflict contexts but also addresses selection bias.

4.1. Research Design

The research design of this study is quantitative, and the focus of this study is conflict escalation, especially in power imbalances, alliance cohesion, diplomacy, big data mining, and media framing of conflicts. In order to analyze relationships between latent variables, structural equation modeling (SEM) via SMART-PLS was chosen as it constitutes an appropriate way of dealing with the complexity involved in relationships. It is the Constructivist IRT that furnishes the theoretical footing and an interpretative lens with which to interpret how actors who they take to be viewing the multipolarity of the world see power dynamism and alliance, diplomatic maneuver, etc.

4.2. Sample and Data Collection

Stratified random sampling was used to ensure that there would be a balanced representation of expertise in international relations. Finally, 250 respondents were distributed as follows:

- International Relations Experts (35%)
- Policymakers (25%)
- Academics (20%)
- Analysts (20%)

The primary data were collected using a structured electronic survey questionnaire distributed via email invitations and professional conferences on international relations. An attempt was made to minimize sampling bias and achieve representativeness by applying a mix of expert selection and randomization.

4.3. Survey Instrument and Measurement Constructs

The survey is composed of 42 structured items, each measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree). The measurement model includes five key constructs that influence conflict escalation (Table 1).

Table 1. Detailing the construct measurements is presented below.

Construct	Items	Measurement Scale
Power Imbalance	1 . . . 7	7-point Likert scale
Alliance Cohesion	8 . . . 14	7-point Likert scale
Diplomatic Intensity	15 . . . 21	7-point Likert scale
Media Framing	22 . . . 28	7-point Likert scale
Big Data Analytics	29 . . . 35	7-point Likert scale

Each construct captures critical dimensions of conflict escalation, ensuring consistent measurement of respondents' perceptions. The structured design allows for comparability across responses, facilitating reliable quantitative analysis in this study.

4.4. Pretest and Pilot Testing

4.4.1. Pretest

A pretest was conducted with 50 respondents to evaluate the clarity, relevance, and comprehensibility of the questionnaire items (Table 2).

Table 2. Pretest Results.

Item Number	Clarity	Relevance	Comprehensibility
1	4.2	4.5	4.3
2	4.5	4.7	4.6
. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .
42	4.1	4.4	4.2

Note: Scores are based on a scale of 1 (Poor) to 5 (Excellent).

The findings of the pretest show that the questionnaire items were generally well-received; respondents gave all of the items good marks for clarity, relevance, and comprehensibility. The pretest participants' input was used to improve the phrasing of some questions and make sure the questionnaire was appropriate for the intended responders.

4.4.2. Pilot Testing

A pilot test (n = 70) was conducted to validate the survey instrument and identify potential issues before full deployment (Table 3).

Table 3. Pilot Testing Results.

Item Number	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
1	4.6	0.52
2	4.7	0.48
...	...	...
42	4.5	0.56

Note: Scores are based on a scale of 1 to 5.

The results of the pilot testing demonstrate that respondents consistently rated the questionnaire items favorably in terms of mean scores, demonstrating that they thought the items were clear, pertinent, and understandable. The low standard deviations suggest that participant responses to the pilot test were generally consistent.

Both pretest and pilot testing confirmed the clarity, applicability, and internal consistency of the questionnaire. Minor adjustments were made based on feedback, improving overall quality and ensuring data reliability.

4.5. Reliability and Convergent Validity

To assess internal consistency, Cronbach's alpha (α) values were calculated. Means, standard deviations (SD), and factor loadings were also examined (Table 4).

Table 4. Reliability, Means, and Factor Loading Range.

Constructs	Cronbach's alpha (α)	Means (SD)	Factor Loading Range
Power Imbalance	0.87	4.56 (0.68)	0.72–0.88
Alliance Cohesion	0.89	4.62 (0.61)	0.75–0.90
Diplomatic Intensity	0.85	4.48 (0.72)	0.69–0.87
Media Framing	0.88	4.35 (0.69)	0.70–0.89
Big Data Analytics	0.86	4.58 (0.67)	0.71–0.88
Conflict Escalation	0.90	4.22 (0.71)	0.74–0.91

All Cronbach's alpha values exceed 0.85, indicating high reliability. Factor loadings confirm strong convergent validity.

4.6. Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity was verified by comparing inter-construct correlations with the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) (Table 5).

Table 5. Discriminant Validity.

Construct Correlations	Power Imbalance	Alliance Cohesion	Diplomatic Intensity	Media Framing	Big Data Analytics	Conflict Escalation
Power Imbalance	1.00					
Alliance Cohesion	0.63	1.00				
Diplomatic Intensity	0.42	0.54	1.00			
Media Framing	0.34	0.41	0.37	1.00		
Big Data Analytics	0.27	0.39	0.25	0.45	1.00	
Conflict Escalation	0.31	0.36	0.29	0.40	0.33	1.00

The moderate correlations between constructs demonstrate that the notions are distinct but related. Good discriminant validity is indicated by the square root of the AVE being larger than the correlations for each construct.

4.7. Data Analysis and Justification for SEM via SMART-PLS

SEM Via SMART-PLS was chosen because:

- It is suitable for complex models with latent constructs.
- It works well for small-to-moderate sample sizes while ensuring robustness.
- It analyzes direct, indirect, and moderating effects in conflict dynamics.

The SEM analysis follows a two-step approach:

1. Measurement Model Validation—Assessing convergent and discriminant validity.
2. Structural Model Assessment—Testing hypotheses using path coefficients and bootstrapping (5000 resamples).

4.8. Addressing Common Method Bias

- Respondent anonymity reduced social desirability bias.
- Harman's single-factor test confirmed that no single factor explained excessive variance.
- Randomized survey item distribution minimized order bias.

5. Results

Results of Hypotheses Testing

Conflicts with greater degrees of power imbalance are more likely to escalate, according to Hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *It was discovered that there is a strong positive correlation between power imbalance and a propensity for conflict escalation (path coefficient = 0.29, t-value = 4.12, p 0.01). This result is in line with that of (Denzenlkham, 2021; Exner-Cortens et al., 2023), who found that disputes are more likely to worsen when they take place inside unequal power systems. Weaker parties may resort to drastic measures to make up for their perceived disadvantage when power disparities are severe. This study emphasizes the importance of taking power imbalances into account when developing conflict prevention and resolution strategies.*

Hypothesis 2 (H2). *According to Hypothesis 2, conflict escalation tendencies are inversely correlated with stronger alliance cohesion (H2). This study discovered a significant inverse relationship (path coefficient = −0.18, t-value = −3.09, p 0.01) between alliance cohesion and conflict escalation tendencies. This finding supports (McGlynn & Đureinović, 2023) assertion that coherent coalitions are stabilizing forces that reduce the risk of conflict escalation. When alliances are strong, explicit diplomatic efforts and communication lines can at least be utilized to contain hostilities.*

Hypothesis 3 (H3). *Diplomatic intensity is increased, which reduces the tendency for conflict escalation.*

According to the path analysis, there exists a significant inverse relationship between diplomatic activity and a tendency toward escalation of conflict (path coefficient = −0.16, t-value = −2.82, *p* 0.01). This confirms (Scheppa-Lahyani & Zapf, 2023; Yakter & Tessler, 2022; Rozanov et al., 2021) the notion that effective diplomatic projects can halt the escalation of conflict by supporting peaceful resolution. Diplomatic fervor encourages open communication, discussion, and the chance to resolve disputes before they become crises.

Hypothesis 4 (H4). *Media framing influences conflict escalation tendencies.*

This study found that conflict escalation tendency was positively correlated with media framing, with a path coefficient of 0.24 (t value = 3.67, p 0.01). This supports (Ninan et al., 2022; Ogbodo et al., 2020; Milutinović, 2021) that media framing of conflict may lead to the escalation of conflict by influencing public perceptions and emotions. How the media portrays, conflicts can influence other people's perspective of them, thus exacerbating tensions.

Hypothesis 5 (H5). *Effective utilization of big data analytics can mitigate conflict escalation tendencies.*

The analysis shows a significant inverse correlation between the big data analytics and the escalation tendencies of conflict path coefficient = −0.13, t value = −2.21, p 0.05. This result is consistent with (Blair & Sambanis, 2020; Watts, 2020) research that shows how big data analytics can provide real-time information about growing tensions. Conducting this helps stakeholders spot warning indicators and do what is needed before a crisis hits (Table 6).

Table 6. Hypotheses Testing Results.

Hypothesis	Path	Path Coefficient	t-Value	Standard Error	Result
H1	Power Imbalance	0.29	4.12	0.07	Significant
H2	Alliance Cohesion	−0.18	−3.09	0.06	Significant
H3	Diplomatic Intensity	−0.16	−2.82	0.05	Significant
H4	Media Framing	0.24	3.67	0.06	Significant
H5	Big Data Analytics	−0.13	−2.21	0.06	Significant

These results clarify the interlocked determinants of conflict escalation tendency in a multipolar world and help support the hypothesized interlaced between the independent and dependent variables. This will lead to the discussion of the impact of these findings on decision-makers and the extent to contribute to understanding of conflict dynamics.

6. Discussion

It has also been found that power imbalances among the actors, alliance cohesion, diplomatic efforts, media framing, and big data analytics, to some extent, affect the escalation of conflict. Structural equation modeling (SEM) through SMART-PLS verifies the findings that power imbalances and framing in the media result in conflict intensity. Mitigating factors include strong alliances, diplomatic engagement, and big data analytics, which will help to lower the probability of escalating.

- **Key Findings and Interpretations**
  - **H1 is supported** (path coefficient = 0.29, $p < 0.001$), indicating that power asymmetry is a major driver of conflict escalation. This is consistent with the findings of (Farrés-Fernández, 2019; Väyrynen, 2023), which show that for weaker actors, escalation is used to deal with stronger forces (Exner-Cortens et al., 2023).
  - **H2 is supported** (path coefficient = −0.18, $p < 0.01$), demonstrating that alliance cohesion negatively correlates with conflict escalation. When the group is strong with an alliance, then stability and conflict resolution are promoted; however, a fragmented alliance may increase instability (McGlynn & Đureinović, 2023; O'Hagan et al., 2021).

- **H3 is supported** (path coefficient = -0.16, $p < 0.01$), reinforcing the role of diplomacy in preventing crises (Denzenlkham, 2021). Diplomatic efforts facilitate dialog, negotiation, and conflict de-escalation.
- **H4 is supported** (path coefficient = 0.24, $p < 0.001$), showing that media framing has a very significant effect in motivating conflict escalation. Media coverage, especially sensationalized and biased, exacerbates hostilities, especially in conflicts at the global level (Betus et al., 2020; Ninan et al., 2022).
- **H5 is supported** (path coefficient = -0.13, $p < 0.05$), and there is a highlight on how big data analytics acts as an important instrument in early conflict detection and mitigation. Real-time data monitoring via AI can spot warning signs and proactively attempt to take measures (Blair & Sambanis, 2020; Watts, 2020).

- **Policy Implications and Future Research**
  - Strengthening diplomatic frameworks to address and counterbalance power imbalances (Denzenlkham, 2021).
  - Regulating media narratives to prevent misinformation-driven escalations and reduce the impact of biased reporting (Betus et al., 2020).
  - Utilizing AI-driven predictive models to enhance early detection of conflict escalation and provide real-time security insights (Blair & Sambanis, 2020).
- **Study Limitations and Areas for Further Research**

This study is subject to several limitations that should be addressed in future research:

1. Reliance on self-reported data: Responses from international relations experts, policymakers, and analysts may be influenced by subjective interpretations, leading to potential response bias. Future studies should complement survey data with empirical case studies or historical conflict data for validation.
2. Absence of case-specific conflict analysis: While this study provides a broad framework applicable to a multipolar world, applying this model to specific geopolitical conflicts (e.g., ongoing diplomatic tensions and regional conflicts) would enhance practical relevance.
3. Lack of qualitative expert interviews: Incorporating in-depth qualitative interviews with conflict resolution professionals, diplomats, and media analysts would provide richer insights into the nuances of power asymmetry, media influence, and diplomatic negotiations.
4. Clarifying the selection criteria for a varied geopolitical area: Future research should clearly define what constitutes a "varied geopolitical area", considering factors such as regional conflict history, economic power, political alliances, and media freedom. Establishing a systematic selection criterion would ensure that findings are more generalizable.

7. Conclusions

This research delved into the trends in conflict escalation in a multipolar world where issues of power imbalance, alliance cohesion, diplomatic actions, media bias, and the presence of big data analytics do exist. A study with an empirical test of five hypotheses via structural equation modeling (SEM) Via SAMR-PLS and validation of the dynamic relationship between these factors in determining conflict trajectories was carried out. Power imbalances in the country, as well as media framing, significantly increase the likelihood of conflicts, whilst strong alliance cohesion, diplomatic actions, and large amounts of data analytics can mitigate these risks, the findings showed.

- **Key Contributions and Implications**

This research unfolds the empirical understanding of conflict dynamics by combining quantitative modeling with international relations and communication theories. This study explores the role of power asymmetry in igniting conflicts and proves that diplomatic intensity and alliance cohesion are stabilizing forces (path coefficients = -0.16 and -0.18, respectively, $p < 0.01$) in conflicts (the path coefficient in the hypothesized model is 0.29, $p < 0.001$). Big data analytics exists in a negative correlation relationship with conflict escalation (path coefficient = -0.13, $p < 0.05$) and indicates how frequently AI-based conflict monitoring systems are becoming critical in preventing crises by providing early warning mechanisms.

- **Policy implications:**

Using intervention in diplomatic events and realignments of power politics to address power imbalances.

Develop a framework around alliances to increase world security.

Regulating this media narrative provides a method to control escalation risks and misinformation.

Putting already existing AI-driven models of conflict prediction to the task of real-time monitoring.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Although the results of this study provide some empirical insight, there are a number of limitations to this study.

However, such data collected via self-reported survey may introduce response bias.

This research does not provide any specific case studies to provide more contextual analysis.

Further future studies need to include a varied geopolitical area and incorporate qualitative expert interviews to confirm findings.

- **Final Reflections**

Using the framework defined in this study, I bridge the gap between political science, media studies, and AI-driven analytics to furnish a comprehensive understanding of conflict escalation. Its findings enrich academic discourse and, at the same time, have practical applications for policymakers, security analysts, conflict resolution specialists, and so on. In this context, to achieve a sustainable strategy of conflict prevention, diplomatic negotiation needs to be combined with responsible media practices in terms of when, where, and how information is shared to serve the rights of people in need and should bring about real-time analytics enhanced by the public to provide real-time insights on the contributions and impacts of each intervention in a given context.

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The Role of Requests for Information in Governing Digital Platforms Under the Digital Services Act: The Case of X

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Abstract: The Digital Services Act (DSA) is the first supranational regulation aimed at improving the safety, transparency and accountability of online platforms. However, the DSA enforcement process is substantially opaque due to the scarcity of publicly available legal documents on methods, sources and results of the investigations carried out under its scope. This paper examines the transparency of the DSA enforcement process, focusing on the legal and political motivations of the progression from requests for information (RFIs) to the initiation of proceedings, using the European Commission's investigation against X as a case study.

Keywords: Digital Services Act; platform governance; transparency

1. Introduction

The Digital Services Act (DSA) (European Parliament and Council, 2022) is the first supranational regulation addressing the influence of online platforms on society through provisions aimed at fostering their safety, transparency and accountability towards users. As of 17 February 2024, the DSA applies "to all online intermediaries in the EU", and therefore also online platforms[1] (European Commission, 2024d): this means that every online platform is now liable for failing to comply with its requirements on, among other things, content moderation, recommender systems, advertising transparency and systemic risk assessment. For what concerns very large online platforms (VLOPs) and search engines (VLOSEs), defined as those reaching more than 10% of the EU population or 45 million users, the deadline for full compliance with the DSA was set in August 2023. The Commission has the exclusive supervisory and enforcement power for the obligations concerning VLOPs and VLOSEs. Consequently, to verify any failure to comply with the new rules, the Commission sent requests for information (RFIs) to various VLOPs, including X, Facebook, Instagram, AliExpress, TikTok and YouTube, starting from October 2023 (European Commission, 2025b) The RFI is the first stage of an investigation under the DSA, which can be followed by access to the data and algorithms used by the platform, the conduction of interviews with informed subjects and inspections at the platform's premises. The information gathered through RFIs has already motivated the opening of various proceedings of infringement, including against X, TikTok, AliExpress, Facebook, Instagram and Temu between December 2023 and December 2024.

In the perspective of clarifying the structure and implications of the DSA enforcement process, this analysis focuses on the progression from an RFI to the initiation of proceedings against a platform: in particular, this contribution aims to provide insights on which type of evidence collected by the Commission through investigations can justify the decision to open a procedure of infringement under the DSA. Given that the text of already submitted RFIs is not publicly available, nor is it possible to access official documents about further

investigative steps (as they may not have taken place yet), this article will compare the press release about a specific RFI with its first legal consequence, i.e., the Commission decision on initiating proceedings against X (hereafter Commission decision), published on 18 December 2023 (European Commission, 2023a). Preceded by considerations on the problems raised by an opaque public governance of online platforms, this comparison will set the ground for understanding how the evidence collected by the Commission can justify the initiation of proceedings. This analysis relies on documents available through the European Commission website, including press releases, executive summaries, calls for applications and the Commission decision itself, which is the first legal document publicly disclosed regarding the DSA enforcement process, apart from designation decisions. The other decisions on initiating proceedings integrally publicly shared to date concern the one against AliExpress, the second of the three against TikTok (regarding TikTok Lite's "Task and Reward Programme", which has been suspended in the EU) and the one against Temu, in order of appearance (European Commission, 2025b). X is the only platform whose proceedings led to preliminary findings, which have been announced by the Commission through a press release (European Commission, 2024c).

2. The Problems Raised by Opacity

Notifying the initiation and development of proceedings against VLOPs through press releases, without publicly available legal documents backing most of the announcements, underscores the opacity of the communication strategy adopted by the Commission regarding DSA enforcement. The reason for sharing only a minority of the legal documents about the proceedings in such an inconsistent fashion has not been provided. However, the public availability of legal and policy evidence about the DSA enforcement procedures is essential for fostering scrutiny by researchers and platform users (Liesenfeld, 2024). Moreover, sharing information on *who does what and how*, i.e., which entity of the Commission is responsible for selecting specific evidence about the illegal activities of platforms and how such evidence can justify the opening of proceedings, is a necessary requisite for a transparent and accountable governance.

The lack of integral legal documents on the DSA enforcement strategy and on how the Commission evaluates DSA-mandated audits and information provided by VLOPs motivates concerns about platforms' compliance practises[2], outlining the risk of transparency washing (Zalnieriute, 2021) and regulatory capture. As Terzis et al. (2024) put in evidence regarding algorithmic auditing for VLOPs, "the breadth of systemic risks that the DSA requires to be considered also allows considerable room for framing, bringing the auditor's priorities and worldview and constructing the DSA requirements around them, rather than the other way around". Auditors' priorities also include maintaining good business relationships with VLOPs that may already use their services for financial audits, as the Delegated Regulation on the Performance of Audits (DRPA) (European Commission, 2023b) clarifies that concerns for conflict of interest "should not exclude auditing organisations who have performed statutory financial audits" (recital 8 DRPA). While "responsibility for the initial formulation of the benchmarks against which compliance is/will be sought, rests with the audited organisation (DRPA art. 5 (1) (a))", the "back-and-forth between the auditing organisation and the [...] audited organisation is likely to have a considerable impact on the way auditing benchmarks are formulated and/or standardised in the future" (Terzis et al., 2024). Consequently, as, de facto, "the primary responsibility for the formulation of benchmarks is left to the auditing organisation, [...] benchmark disparities amongst different auditors may incentivise platforms to choose their assessors and auditors based on their benchmarks (easy or difficult, simple or complicated)" (*ibidem*). Therefore, it can be argued that the market of platform auditing is going to expand but not necessarily by

diversifying its offer: it might indeed align along minimalist interpretations of regulatory provisions advanced by large consulting companies.

The need for transparency regarding the DSA enforcement process the has also been highlighted by an EU institution holding the Commission accountable: in fact, on 14 November 2024, the European Ombudsman (2024) issued a letter to the President of the Commission challenging the "general presumption of confidentiality" which, the Commission argues, applies to all documents related to DSA enforcement. In particular, following the Commission's rejection of a request to publish X's systemic risk assessment report in 2023 (which would have anyway been published by November 2024 as mandated by the DSA), the Ombudsman argues that "the requirement for professional secrecy laid down in Article 84 of the DSA [. . .] does not mean that all information the Commission obtains under the DSA should, as such, be considered as confidential" (European Ombudsman, 2024). Therefore, in the Ombudsman's view, "applying a general presumption of confidentiality to the risk assessment report at issue [. . .] constituted maladministration" (*ibidem*). In this regard, clarifications on the boundaries of what the Commission considers confidential information in the scope of the DSA are urgently needed to prevent accusations of maladministration, which might weaken public trust (Field & Roberts, 2020) and limit the overall effectiveness of the enforcement process. Indeed, the sharing of knowledge among the different social stakeholders involved, which would help design solutions for a pluralistic platform governance, is prevented by "behind-closed-door" enforcement and compliance dynamics. While the legal premises of the DSA align, in theory, with the principle of cooperative responsibility outlined by Helberger et al. (2018), the practises of its application have until now followed a different approach, focused on the political bargaining between regulators and regulated entities. For example, while recital 90 DSA invites VLOPs to consult users' representatives for the assessment and mitigation of systemic risks, it is not possible to know, in many cases even after reading platforms' systemic reports, which organisations have been consulted; the same holds for the investigations carried by the Commission.

3. The Content and Consequences of a Request for Information

According to the related press release, the RFI sent to X (European Commission, 2023d) on 12 October 2023 concerned "the assessment and mitigation of risks related to the dissemination of illegal content, disinformation, gender-based violence, and any negative effects on the exercise of fundamental rights, rights of the child, public security and mental well-being". The Commission aimed at scrutinising X's "policies and actions regarding notices on illegal content, complaint handling, risk assessment and measures to mitigate the risks identified". Following the submission of the RFI, the Commission decision identified five areas of concern in which the platform is suspected to have infringed the DSA provisions. A closer look at the document of the decision can help highlight the content and consequences of an RFI to a VLOP.

Firstly, Twitter International Unlimited Company (TIUC), "the main establishment of the provider of X in the European Union", failed to "diligently assess certain systemic risks in the European Union stemming from the design and functioning of X and its related systems, including algorithmic systems, or from the use made of their services" (European Commission, 2023a). In particular, the company did not "put in place reasonable, proportionate and effective mitigation measures" for "the actual and foreseeable negative effects on civic discourse and electoral process stemming from the design and functioning of X in the European Union": in fact, the current solutions "appear inadequate [. . .] notably in the absence of well-defined and objectively verifiable performance metrics" (*ibidem*). This failure is particularly evident in the moderation of content featuring languages

different from English or pertaining to specific local and regional contexts. Suspicions that "insufficient resources [are] dedicated to mitigation measures" (*ibidem*) focus on the role of Community Notes, the collaborative feature that allows users to "leave notes on any post and, if enough contributors from different points of view rate that note as helpful, the note will be publicly shown on a post" (X Help Center, n.d.).

Secondly, the company would systematically fail to process efficiently, "take decisions in a diligent, non-arbitrary, and objective manner" and answer "without undue delay" to the "notices [. . .] of allegedly illegal content hosted on X" (European Commission, 2023a); therefore, X's content moderation would be insufficient also when the input comes from users. Thirdly, the recent possibility of purchasing the blue checkmark that once marked an account as verified is considered deceptive and manipulative for users of X, who "are led to interpret [. . .] checkmarks as an indication that they are interacting with an account whose identity has been verified or is otherwise more trustworthy, when in fact no such verification or confirmation of trustworthiness appear to have taken place" (*ibidem*). Fourthly, the company did not abide by the transparency requirements for online advertising, "by not providing searchable and reliable tools that allow multi-criteria queries and application programming interfaces to obtain all the information on such advertisements as required by Article 39(2)" of the DSA (*ibidem*). Lastly, the VLOP seems "to have denied access to data that are publicly accessible on X's online interface to qualified researchers" (*ibidem*) by imposing costs for using the API and prohibiting the scraping of publicly accessible data, in violation of Article 40(12) of the DSA.

As the excerpts from the Commission decision highlight, the proceedings against X were initiated as a follow-up to the platform's response to the RFI submitted on 12 October 2023: in particular, the problematic issues regarding the handling of notices of illegal content, the measures to mitigate systemic risks and the platform's moderation policy, indicated in the press release about the RFI, correspond to the main areas of concern addressed by the decision. The consequentiality between the RFI and the decision is underlined also by points 4 and 5 of the latter: in fact, while point 4 refers to the submission of the RFI and the response provided by X, point 5 states that, according to Article 66(1) of the DSA, "the Commission may initiate proceedings in view of the possible adoption of decisions [. . .] in respect of the relevant conduct by the provider of the very large online platform or of the very large online search engine that the Commission suspects of having infringed any of the provisions" (*ibidem*).

4. Next Steps of the Enforcement Process

The areas of concern addressed by the Commission decision include issues that emerge both from the bottom-up interaction with the platform and the top-down governance of its socio-technical ecosystem: data access by researchers and users' notices of illegal content pertain to the former, while the identification of systemic risks and the measures adopted to mitigate them pertain to the latter. The co-existence of top-down and bottom-up perspectives is not only motivated by the necessity to address issues coming from different sources (e.g., complaints filed by recipients of the service versus a letter from the Commission to the platform requesting clarifications); it is also functional to investigate different aspects of the same area of concern (e.g., the use of Community Notes to support content moderation, whose effectiveness is questioned both by users and by the Commission as the platform's reliance on such collaborative feature may hint at the lack of dedicated personnel for this delicate role). The structure and content of the decision indicate that, after the enforcement of the DSA, VLOPs and VLOSEs may not be able to consider anymore *prima facie* compliance as separated from the obligations to provide reasonably prompt and reliable answers to the issues raised by individual users and researchers. In practice, platforms are expected

to go beyond the understanding of compliance as a checking-the-box effort; instead, they should engage in a substantive dialogue with users regarding content moderation and with researchers regarding data access.

The investigation initiated by the Commission decision aims to establish whether the failures outlined above "would constitute infringements of Articles 34(1), 34(2) and 35(1)" of the DSA as regards the first area of concern (inadequate assessment and mitigation of systemic risks), Article 16(5) and 16(6) for what concerns the second one (handling of notices of illegal content), Article 25(1) with respect to the third one (deceptive design of checkmarks), Article 39 with reference to the fourth one (lack of tools to ensure transparency in ads) and Article 40 apropos the fifth one (denied data access to researchers) (European Commission, 2023a). According to the European Commission (2023c), the next steps of the investigation will include gathering further "evidence, for example by sending additional requests for information, conducting interviews or inspections". Following the opening of formal infringement proceedings, the Commission will be empowered "to take further enforcement steps, such as interim measures, and non-compliance decisions" and "to accept any commitment made by X to remedy on the matters subject to the proceeding" (*ibidem*). Interestingly, the "DSA does not set any legal deadline" for the end of the proceedings, whose duration will depend on several "factors, including the complexity of the case, the extent to which the company concerned cooperates with the Commission and the exercise of the rights of defence" (European Commission, 2023c). The responsibility of carrying out the investigation pertains just to the Commission, whose decision "relieves Digital Services Coordinators, or any other competent authority of EU Member States, of their powers to supervise and enforce the DSA in relation to the suspected infringements of Articles 16(5), 16(6) and 25(1)" (*ibidem*). In this context, it is difficult to make hypotheses about a timeline for the conclusion of the proceedings against X.

The preliminary findings announced by the Commission in July 2024 (European Commission, 2024c) address three of the issues motivating the initiation of proceedings (dark patterns, advertising transparency and data access for researchers), while for the rest of them the investigation continues. The investigation was based on an "analysis of internal company documents, interviews with experts, as well as cooperation with national Digital Services Coordinators" (*ibidem*). As can be observed, neither the evidence sent by X in response to the RFI nor the content of the interviews with experts was made available by the Commission, which has kept both the methodology and the results of its investigation opaque. The reported preliminary findings sent to X substantially correspond to the assumptions of the Commission decision, as the investigation outcome highlights that: firstly, "X designs and operates its [...] 'Blue checkmark' in a way that [...] deceives users", because, as "anyone can subscribe to obtain such a 'verified' status", users may be prevented from making "free and informed decisions about the authenticity of the accounts and the content they interact with"; secondly, "X does not comply with the required transparency on advertising, as it does not provide a searchable and reliable advertisement repository" allowing "for the required supervision and research into emerging risks brought about by the distribution of advertising online"; thirdly, "X fails to provide access to its public data to researchers in line with the conditions set out in the DSA"; for example, by preventing scraping or making the access to its API too burdensome or expensive (*ibidem*).

5. The Intertwined Role of ECAT, DG Connect and External Contractors

Given the amount of investigative work that the Commission will embark on to enforce the DSA, it is useful to focus on the entities involved in this process: on the one side, the European Centre for Algorithmic Transparency (ECAT), within the Joint Research Centre (JRC), and, on the other side, the DSA enforcement team, within Directorate F

(Platforms Policy and Enforcement) (European Commission, 2024e) of DG Connect. While the DSA enforcement team should have the responsibility of enforcing the regulation, some crucial investigative procedures, like "algorithmic system inspections" and "technical tests to enhance [...] the understanding of their functioning" (European Centre for Algorithmic Transparency, n.d.-a), would be carried out by ECAT; therefore, it is unclear how the collaboration and the division of duties between the two institutional bodies will be managed. On the research side, the mission of ECAT is to study the "short, mid and long-term societal impact" of algorithmic systems, identify and measure "systemic risks associated with VLOPs and VLOSEs" and develop "practical methodologies towards fair, transparent and accountable algorithmic approaches, with a focus on recommender systems and information retrieval" (*ibidem*). On the enforcement side, the DSA enforcement team will be composed of "multi-disciplinary teams [. . .] co-operating with regulatory authorities in the Member States", which "will engage with stakeholders and gather knowledge and evidence to support the application of the DSA and to detect, investigate and analyse potential infringements of the DSA" (European Commission, 2024e).

The information provided by the Commission is currently not sufficient to understand how the work of ECAT and the DSA enforcement team intertwines specifically. Indeed, both these entities focus on gathering knowledge and evidence about VLOPs and VLOSEs to support the enforcement of the DSA, to the point that ECAT features an "Algorithm inspections & DSA enforcement" (European Centre for Algorithmic Transparency, n.d.-b) team[3], whose work overlaps even nominally with that carried out at DG Connect. In particular, the profile of a technology specialist in the enforcement team at DG Connect is, if not similar, at least complementary to that of a researcher/inspector at ECAT. In fact, technology specialists "will work in seamless cooperation with the European Centre for Algorithmic Transparency (ECAT) and facilitate interactions with technical teams at very large online platforms and search engines" (European Commission, 2024f). The relevance of distinguishing between researchers at ECAT and technology specialists at the DSA enforcement team lies in the undefined borders of the presumption of confidentiality regarding the DSA enforcement (European Ombudsman, 2024). In fact, although ECAT is a governmental research centre, no publication on the DSA, systemic risks and algorithmic systems inspections can be found in its publicly accessible repository (European Commission, n.d.-a). This underscores, again, an undeclared confidentiality policy that does not align with ECAT's aim of sharing "knowledge and facilitation of discussions on algorithmic transparency with international stakeholders" (European Centre for Algorithmic Transparency, n.d.-a). If the research on the DSA produced by ECAT is considered confidential, then it would fall under the scope of the DSA enforcement according to the presumption of confidentiality advanced by the Commission and challenged by the Ombudsman. If this were the case, however, there would be no distinction between the role of an ECAT researcher working on algorithmic inspections and that of a data scientist or technology specialist at the DSA enforcement team; therefore, it is not clear why these two overlapping roles would be included in two different directorates-general, i.e., the JRC and Connect.

Between November and December 2024, VLOPs and VLOSEs have published the systemic risk assessment reports describing the measures they undertook to comply with the DSA requirements on the identification and mitigation systemic risks (art. 34 and 35), which lie at the core of the proceedings initiated by the Commission. However, the amount of work needed to verify the information provided by platforms cannot be carried out by the Commission alone, which will in fact rely on external contractors to produce the evidence needed to enforce the DSA systemic risk framework. In June and July 2024, respectively, two calls for tenders have been published by DG Connect to recruit external contractors to support the gathering of evidence for the DSA enforcement regarding VLOPSEs. The

first call (European Commission, 2024a), which has an estimated total value 600.000 euros for a maximum duration of four months, involves carrying a study that "should inform with scientific and technical and other relevant insights the Commission's work on the first edition of a report on systemic risks and their mitigation, as referred to in Article 35(2) DSA". The second call (European Commission, 2024b), which has an estimated total value of 12 million euros for a maximum duration of three years, is divided into three lots: the first one is aimed at developing "(real-time) monitoring and "early warning" systems and tools to inform and alert the European Commission about technological developments related to platform architectures, functions and features; economic and market trends; the emergence of systemic risks (including linked to the protection of minors, i.e., dangerous challenges on social media); as well as the emergence of potential digital threats"; the second one is devoted to "Evidence gathering and compliance monitoring of prominent and recurring risks in Member States and specific areas"; the third one concerns "Evidence gathering and compliance monitoring of online marketplaces and compliance with online advertising provisions".

6. Conclusions

The application of the DSA is proceeding at a fast pace: between the end of 2023 and the end of 2024, most social media VLOPs have been subject to investigations under the DSA, and four pornographic and two fashion retail platforms have been designated as VLOPs. While the DSA has come into force for every online platform since 17 February 2024, the main questions about the modalities and timeline of its application and the actions that platforms will need to take to ensure compliance are still open. In particular, it should be clarified which regulatory mechanisms and investigative evidence undergird the progression from an RFI to the initiation of proceedings against a platform. Considering that there is no legal deadline for the end of the proceedings, neither platforms nor users can have an estimate of their duration. Users are the main beneficiaries of the protection granted by the DSA, but if they are not involved in shaping its enforcement, the new provisions may not have tangible beneficial outcomes. The evidence on which the DSA enforcement relies risks being crafted by the interested interpretations of the regulatory requirements by auditing companies, while a wider stakeholder involvement does not appear under way. This contribution shows the direction of the first enforcement procedure under the DSA, thereby highlighting the type of evidence that European regulators see as symptomatic of non-compliance. The outcome of the ongoing proceedings against VLOPs will set a milestone for the future DSA enforcement strategies and their implications for users' online experience. The DSA has the potential to change the interaction between digital companies and EU citizens by enhancing public accountability and users' empowerment. However, for this potential to be realised, regulatory principles need to be translated into clear and transparent enforcement practises, which should be publicly disclosed to European researchers and citizens.

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Notes

[1] European Commission (n.d.-b) provides an outline of the pyramidal governance framework established by the DSA for intermediary services, hosting services and online platforms: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/digital-services-act_en (accessed on 18 December 2023).

[2] Regulatory guidelines are emerging to direct compliance in certain areas, such as the Code of Conduct on Disinformation, which was approved on 13 February 2025 (European Commission, 2025c). When its commitments are aligned with related DSA articles, the Code "represents a further operational and complementary layer, including reporting obligations, on top of existing legal obligations" (European Commission, 2025a) and therefore constitutes a compliance benchmark for its signatories, including VLOPs. However, the adoption of the Code is voluntary and not following it does not create a prejudice on the evaluation of compliance.

[3] Notably, the webpage corresponding to this reference, which detailed ECAT's teams (Research and Algorithms & Inspections) with the names of their respective members, has been recently removed or hidden, pointing to a voluntary reduction in transparency about the organisational structure of this research centre.

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Article

European Institutional Discourse Concerning the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on the Social Network X

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Abstract: The outbreak at the end of February 2022 of the Russian invasion of Ukraine—and the Russian–Ukrainian hostilities that began in 2014 with the Euromaidan—has led to numerous dramatic episodes from both a humanitarian and an informative perspective. In this context, social media have been filled with rhetoric and narrative mechanisms, both from civil society organisations and from European media and institutions, in their eagerness to define their position within the dialectical battle. This research aims to address organisational communication in the European Union during the first year after the invasion, taking as its object of study the publications of four institutional bodies: European Commission, European Parliament, European Council, and European External Action Service. For this purpose, a content analysis of tweets was carried out, as well as in-depth interviews with specialised actors in institutional communication and disinformation at the EU level. Overall, the results show that the parallel narrative of the Commission, the Parliament, the Council, and the EEAS has been quite similar and lacks significant divergences, reflecting coherence and coordination in the communication strategies around the Ukrainian war, although there are interesting findings on the interaction of the institutions with the media and other civil society actors in communicating this international crisis via social media.

Keywords: EU communication; European Union; Ukraine; Russia; institutional communication; European institutions; hybrid wars; disinformation; social media

1. Introduction

Institutional communication plays a fundamental role in the global political landscape, especially in situations of crisis and international conflict. In this context, the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine, which definitively erupted on 24 February 2022, has generated a series of communicative challenges for European institutions.

As the so-called digital era progresses, social media has become a key channel for the dissemination of information and the construction of discourses. For governmental bodies and community institutions, X has evolved into a strategic platform for conveying messages, establishing positions, and responding to the demands of an increasingly connected and discerning audience. However, the Russian–Ukrainian conflict presents new challenges in terms of communication, given its impact within Europe and the necessity to address sensitive issues such as disinformation, geopolitical tensions, and the internal repercussions within the European Union (hereafter, EU).

To date, institutional communication at the governmental level, both within the EU and in the multilevel arena, has been largely underestimated in terms of systematic analysis and study, particularly concerning predominantly European issues. Even in the overlapping fields of International Relations, Comparative Politics, and Political Communication, the approaches and methodologies employed have not favoured an exhaustive exploration of this subject, as noted by Tuñón and Carral (2019, p. 1221).

Therefore, this research aims to make a modest contribution to the field of institutional political communication, focusing on the supranational perspective of the EU and employing a hybrid methodology that combines quantitative techniques, such as content analysis, with secondary qualitative techniques, such as in-depth interviews.

The present study specifically addresses how European institutional communication has been conducted during the first year following the onset of the Russian–Ukrainian conflict, focusing on the publications of various EU institutions on this issue on the social network X, namely, the European Commission, the European Parliament, the European Council and the European External Action Service (EEAS).

Given that it is a relatively recent event, little has been written about communication strategies from the perspective of this war at the heart of the European continent (Vahdat-Nejad et al. 2023; Benabid 2022; Ruiz-Incertis et al. 2024). There are numerous previous studies on European affairs, organisational communication, polarisation, new wars, and crisis communication, but it is indisputable that—using previously designed methodologies and building on a solid theoretical framework—new relevant conclusions can be drawn regarding the narratives constructed around Russia, Ukraine, and, ultimately, the future that awaits the EU.

The threat of disinformation and Eurosceptic arguments, which give rise to the so-called euromyths, have compelled institutions to adopt alternative strategies to engage with the citizenry through their communication policies. This post-truth era (Valadier 2017; Sánchez-Illán 2021; Thompson 2020) has also led to the so-called hybrid wars, as a consequence of foreign interference in a turbulent geopolitical landscape. These occur especially during democratic processes such as electoral processes (Bennett et al. 2017), but also in critical cases such as the one at hand. Other examples are the subsequent polycrises in the 21st century: refugees, financial, political, and institutional.

The eruption in late February 2022 of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Russian–Ukrainian hostilities, which began in 2014, has resulted in numerous dramatic episodes, both from a humanitarian and informational standpoint. In this context, social media has been inundated with ideological rhetoric and narrative mechanisms, originating from civil society organisations as well as European media and institutions, in their efforts to define their stance within the dialectical battle.

The choice of such a specific timeframe responds to the need to thoroughly analyse the EU's discursive formulas during a significant period, such as the first year of the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine (the end of which was not foreseeable at the time of writing this text), according to a series of parameters that will be detailed in the subsequent sections.

2. Literature Review

2.1. European Online Communication: A Shift from Conventional Institutions to the 2.0 Ecosystem

In recent decades, the coverage of European affairs has gained substantial relevance in the public sphere, largely due to the tendency to differentiate between communications originating from respective national governments and those emanating from "Brussels." The latter tends to be associated with negative connotations depending on its convenience and impact; when European policies fail to achieve the desired effect, governments—either directly or indirectly—blame supranational bodies, whereas, when outcomes are favourable, "they tend to claim credit and scarcely acknowledge the support provided by the EU" (Tuñón and Elías 2021). Furthermore, the number of fake news and rumours associated with the European project has exponentially increased in recent years, particularly in response to the management of the COVID-19 crisis, leading to a context of dual pandemics—health and disinformation (Pérez-Curiel and Velasco-Molpeceres 2020).

Since the early 2010s, the EU has been a pioneer in addressing institutional communication via the internet and social media, which has materialised in the promotion of the European public space through a bidirectional and unmediated conversation, fos-

tering transparency and streamlining communicative processes that are usually highly bureaucratic, as many successive studies concluded (Morante 2014; Rivas-de-Roca 2019; Lozano 2022b; Sádaba and Salaverría 2023). A certain media-institutional collaboration has already existed in the coverage of European topics, with cases such as Euronews, Euroactiv, Euradio, European Data News Hub or the European Newsroom, although there remains a need for a well-connected and properly coordinated pan-European communication network, as will be explained later on.

In any case, to address the challenges arising from the lack of knowledge and disinformation regarding European matters, it is imperative to tackle issues such as the identity crisis or the branding problem of the EU, which oscillates between its limited visibility in citizens' everyday lives and the negative perception in public opinion fueled by the rise of Eurosceptic populism and resulting in more skepticism as a consequence (Pérez-Curiel 2020; Rivas-de-Roca et al. 2023); the EU's deficient communication policy; the limitation of information sources and the 'precarious' coverage of EU affairs in media outlets not based in Brussels; the complexities of multilingualism in communicating relevant information; and some failed media solutions to bring the EU closer to its audience (Tuñón 2017).

Indeed, experts and academics (Bennett et al. 2017; Higgins 2019; Pérez 2022; Tuñón and Bouzas 2023) concur that communication or storytelling remains one of the significant unresolved challenges in constructing a European narrative, or even various European narratives, considering the complex multicultural landscape that Europe is. It is widely regarded that the EU has a "good story, but it fails to narrate it attractively" (Battista et al. 2014). Despite the recent progressive professionalisation of European communication services, thanks to the efforts of international journalists specialising in the EU—who manage a continuous and sometimes overwhelming flow of information across various platforms, such as websites and social media—the goal of delivering a single and clear institutional message remains unachieved (Tuñón 2021b).

Undoubtedly, it must be recognised that different digital environments and tools are crucial for reaching citizens and conveying reliable yet engaging and relatable information. Vilanova (2014) argued a decade ago that EU-related information can no longer be conceived vertically; instead, it is horizontal now. In other words, we are facing a new paradigm in the field of institutional communication, with new formats, audiences, channels, and message formulation mechanisms, oscillating between textual and audiovisual elements (Ruiz-Incertis et al. 2024).

As with any new phenomenon, it must be analysed to identify weaknesses and where improvements can be made. Therefore, it is also necessary to promote interaction with various civil society actors to establish synergies that not only contribute to strengthening the European public sphere but also foster public diplomacy and the general image of the EU abroad, especially in times of crisis such as the present (Bennett and Kneuer 2024; Sánchez del Vas and Tuñón-Navarro 2024). Consequently, the coordinated action of communication offices of EU-affiliated bodies through powerful channels like social media—Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, LinkedIn, Facebook, etc.—or websites is deemed indispensable for connecting with new audiences and engaging them daily in complex issues that concern and affect them (Gleason 2018).

2.1.1. The Role of EU Communication Offices in the Digital Era

Nowadays, information has ceased to be a mere communicative instrument and has transformed into a product with inherent value, both symbolically and corporately. In light of this reality, public institutions must also respond accordingly. Hence, for years, the EU as a whole, and not just its Member States, has been striving to bring the administration closer to citizens. Communication offices are a fundamental tool for this.

Although the internet has not completely altered the dynamics of their work, it is gradually changing the daily relationship between communication offices and the media. In the very beginning of digital communication strategies' development, the internet offers

communicators the possibility to address their audiences without exclusively relying on traditional communication channels. Communication offices can now interact and convey messages to journalists and citizens through the web (Canel and Sanders 2012).

This has led to the emergence of online communication offices, which transmit messages to citizens more directly (although the mediation role of platforms is still there) by establishing links with them, allowing the users to interact with the content they publish and the messages they share through comments, likes or reposts, for example. By using social media, Rodríguez-Guillén (2013, p. 23) notes that "any receiver can select, decode, and transform information to disseminate it from their virtual space to other receivers, as if it were a media outlet."

In this regard, European authorities have decided to keep citizens properly informed about decisions made at the community level (Kent 2013; Clark 2014). This measure arises from the recognition of the existing gap between the EU and its citizens. This gap is considered a significant obstacle to the proper development of a supranational entity that, in many cases, remains largely invisible and even incomprehensible to a significant portion of its population. The use of a new pseudo-mediated digital space "offers the possibility of developing new communicative processes, or simply transferring the traditional ones to the new instrument or communication channel" (Rodríguez-Guillén 2013, p. 33).

Institutional communication is experiencing its golden age thanks to platforms like Twitter, where users follow political events and foster debate through continuous interactions with other social network users, mentioning and referencing politicians' accounts (Jiménez-Alcarria and Tuñón-Navarro 2023; Barisione and Michailidou 2017). According to Freelon and Karpf (2015), "Twitter facilitates the judgement of decisive moments in political debates and actions." This characteristic demonstrates a shift towards a more participatory culture among receivers, enabled by new technological tools. From the perspective of cyberdemocracy, studies such as Sierra's (2012) demonstrate that new online communication formulas "offer unexplored possibilities for decentralised governance, cultural and socio-economic enhancement and development".

However, organisational communication does not follow similar premises in all contexts. In practice, "the use of Twitter presents uneven adoption across different countries and communities, with Spaniards and Italians being the most active users compared to Germans and Belgians" (Scherpereel et al. 2016, p. 1222). As previously mentioned, the proliferation of social media plays a decisive role in content production and message transmission between senders and receivers (Duggan 2015; Quan-Haase and Sloan 2017). Although Twitter is still far from surpassing Facebook as the social network with the most global users (Duggan 2015), its characteristics have made it the preferred platform for political debate and communication, as well as for social and scientific research in these fields (Tuñón and Carral 2019).

2.1.2. Dynamics and Strategies of European Institutions on Social Media

The European Parliament was the first institution to address the existing information deficit, followed by the European Commission. Both institutions swiftly took action, in theory and practice, to remove the barriers between the supranational organisation and its citizens and to promote a sense of European identity among the public. This gave rise to what is known as the Europe of Information, where information and communication are used as essential tools to foster a sense of belonging to a supranational entity and to generate a European consciousness, giving rise to the so-called *Homo Europeus.*

The apathy shown by citizens towards European political activity seems to reflect the general disinterest in politics, as participation in national elections in different countries does not differ significantly from participation in European elections. However, according to this same author, the EU's information and communication policy is yielding results, largely due to the implementation of new technologies in this field.

In disseminating a message to EU citizens, institutions must consider the inherent difficulty in ensuring that the message has a uniform impact across Europe. This is primarily

due to the cultural diversity existing within the Member States. As Rodríguez-Guillén (2013, p. 101) explains, while some institutions have more intensively used social media, it is essential that all of them continue to foster an increasingly active presence in this area. The four institutions face a new horizon through which they can develop tools that allow them to evolve into an online cabinet 2.0 or even 3.0, thereby promoting interaction and proximity with European citizens (Bennett et al. 2017; Hänska and Bauchowitz 2019; Gleason 2018).

In summary, it is crucial that the EU's communication policy adjusts its guidelines to incorporate emerging technological methodologies, particularly social media (García-Gordillo et al. 2023; Kent 2013). Furthermore, although academic research in the field of public relations and organisational communication is limited, especially concerning government information, some conceptual perspectives could be applied fruitfully.

According to Canel and Sanders (2012, p. 93), concepts such as "branding," "reputation," and "symmetrical communication" could be valuable and essential tools in the search for alternatives to current institutional communication and information policies in Europe. If the EU seeks to become closer to European citizens, its institutions must continue to evolve in the same direction, "achieving greater interaction through the online 2.0 office" (Rodríguez-Guillén 2013, p. 101).

Based on the analysis of various legislative documents on communication policy, authors such as Rodríguez-Guillén (2013) conclude that EU institutions have sought to change their communicative approach. They have transitioned from a highly institutionalised communication style focused merely on the transmission of information to a more interactive communication approach that allows for a two-way dialogue between citizens and institutions (Fazekas et al. 2021). The objective is "to achieve more coherent and integrated communication that is accessible to citizens and promotes an associative approach" (Rodríguez-Guillén 2013, p. 62). This involves strengthening ties not only among local, regional, national, and European authorities but also among citizen associations.

Communication policy must be well-defined and integrated, and efforts must be made to reach not only the media but also citizens and other organisations, including companies and civil organisations. Between 2004 and 2014, the Barroso Commissions aligned themselves with the aforementioned generic policies and renewed the call for cooperation, both internally within the Commission and interinstitutionally, as explained in the report *Communicating Europe to citizens and media*.

The communication team of the European Parliament acknowledges the importance of finding a balance between presenting topics that are of interest to the media and those that are strategic for the institution (Canel and Sanders 2012). Authors such as Olsson and Hammargård (2016) conclude that the European Commission has room for improvement in its social media communication strategy, particularly through greater involvement from directorates-general, directors-general, and institutional staff. This would help convey a closer and more dynamic image. On the other hand, the European Parliament stands out as the institution that has best adapted its communication to social media, although it must continue to make progress in areas such as tone and multimedia content. Additionally, it is deemed essential for the Council to continue its communication policies but with greater coordination and increased visibility online. This entails, to begin with, a more active presence on social media (Kent 2013).

2.2. Hybrid Warfare: Between Conflict and Disinformation

Hybrid threats constitute one of today's significant challenges across various domains. Consequently, they have become integral to the official documents and security strategies of many states. Both the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have taken serious measures to counteract activities related to these hybrid threats. Although their definition remains flexible to accommodate their volatile nature (Colom-Piella 2014), for the EU, the concept of hybrid warfare, or "asymmetric warfare," aims to capture "the mix of coercive and subversive activities, conventional and unconventional methods—diplomatic,

military, economic, technological—that can be used in a coordinated manner by state or non-state actors to achieve specific objectives just below the threshold of formally declared war" (European Commission 2016, p. 2).

However, as Lesaca (2018) asserts, digital and communicative disruption has solidified as an effective weapon of war, which needs to be defined and identified as a distinct discipline from offensives and cyber-attacks. Disinformation campaigns thus fall within the scope of hybrid warfare and involve the design and dissemination of rhetorical mechanisms aimed at generating influence through social media, as well as progressively manipulating public perception with false or misleading information (Patel et al. 2020). From this perspective and framework, disinformation campaigns affect various closely linked domains—a total of 13, as identified by the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats and the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission, including the cyber, social, political, administrative, and cultural domains (Arcos and Smith 2021).

While NATO acknowledges that deception has served military interests since time immemorial, its influence has exponentially increased to become a key element of modern hybrid warfare, facilitated by the speed and intensity of communication enabled by the Internet. Deception is an illegal practice in peacetime but a legal means of warfare. This contradictory division exists only in theoretical terms, as contemporary hybrid wars unfold in a blurred and complex territory where being at war or not is a matter of nuances, as noted by Suárez-Serrano (2020).

The two world wars turned the media—gradually including the press, radio, and television—and public opinion into international actors capable of influencing the outcome of armed conflicts. Since then, the success of military operations has depended almost as much on the management of public opinion as on the work of armies on the ground. In fact, the European Parliament refers to this process as "information warfare," asserting that it is a historical phenomenon as old as war itself, although its categorisation did not become widespread until the 20th century, during the Cold War.

Currently, asymmetric warfare involves "a powerful propaganda machinery and massive information operations through alternative channels" (Colom-Piella 2014, p. 13). Castells (2009) considers that the main communicative change at the beginning of the 21st century was the advent of what he defines as "mass self-communication media."

Castells' reflections suggest that communication has altered how elite power functions, as the Internet has made it accessible for anyone to speak on whatever they consider important. In this sense, digital social communication platforms and digital marketing techniques "have reconfigured the way public opinion is created and have altered the roles traditionally assigned to political and administrative institutions, media, and citizens" (Lesaca 2018, p. 166). In other words, the triangular relationship between the main communication agents has been modified.

The same author argues that, since humans make decisions based on their frames—processes of constructing reality through meanings and interpretations of the world—and the information available through symbolic interpersonal interactions and various media, information can be deliberately used for malign activities that produce cognitive, affective, and behavioural effects.

Due to the systematic prohibition of violence in international relations following the promulgation of the United Nations Charter, the use of the term "war" is generally avoided. Instead, euphemisms with more diffuse and incomplete connotations, such as "conflict" and, more specifically, "armed conflict" or "military conflict" are employed (Herráez 2016).

Thus, our digital communication environment and the social tools we use daily for legitimate purposes are also being exploited by hostile authoritarian actors and/or their representatives on a scale that has even interfered with democratic processes, such as in the case of interference in various elections. Almost imperceptibly, they erode trust in institutions, polarise society, and generate animosities between states and their international partners (Arcos and Smith 2021; Kelly 2022; Bennett and Kneuer 2024).

One of the primary hybrid strategies involves the dissemination of disinformation by external or internal actors through the aforementioned ad hoc campaigns (Bennett et al. 2017; Tuñón 2021a). In the field of institutional and political communication, fake news is integrated into orchestrated plans that use technology and artificial intelligence to craft segmented messages that progressively manipulate discourse through propaganda techniques.

Specifically, "computational propaganda" refers to "a set of practices executed by computer programs to persuade people of the merits of ideas, individuals, or initiatives on social networks and other digital platforms" (Redondo 2017). Its articulation, Rodríguez-Fernández (2019) asserts, has become widespread in recent years, pushing governments to develop specialised teams to counter the strategies of so-called professional cyber troops.

2.2.1. The Era of Post-Truth and Disinformation in Europe

In the era of "information disorder" (Bennett and Livingston 2018), social media has decentralised the production of information, deconstructing and reconfiguring the concepts of truth and objectivity (Alonso-González 2021). Today, numerous information dissemination channels converge, with social media standing out as platforms that "self-distribute" informational content (Castells 2009). Thus, audiences themselves decide what to consume and how to do so, assuming a role traditionally held by the mainstream media, creating an environment of informational overabundance (Keane 2013).

However, social media has also become the public space where fake news is most widely disseminated (Vázquez and Pulido 2020; Pérez-Curiel 2020), serving as the breeding ground for the proliferation of fabricated news, graphic manipulations, conspiracy theories, and intentionally decontextualised content (Salaverría et al. 2020). People have seen a multiplication of the messages they receive daily, yet many of these messages are false, "either due to the non-deliberate spread of erroneous content or as a result of the premeditated dissemination of intentionally misleading messages" (Sádaba and Salaverría 2023, p. 18). In response, recent research highlights that the ecosystem surrounding these platforms exacerbates the adverse effects of disinformation, extending its reach (Lelo and Fígaro 2021; Ruiz-Incertis et al. 2024).

In this context, Elías (2021) argues that the novelty of digital platforms lies in their design, which exploits the cognitive biases of the public, being based on algorithms that determine what is visible and what is not, thus facilitating the manipulation of public opinion. These mechanisms disseminate disinformative content to those audiences most susceptible to trusting and sharing it, owing to their strong belief systems. In other words, the potential of social media to spread disinformation increases its social relevance while solidifying its role as a primary source of information (Gottfried and Shearer 2016), particularly today, when public opinion is increasingly polarised (Lewandowsky et al. 2017).

Experts such as Casero-Ripollés et al. (2023) suggest that a reformulation of the pan-European journalistic model would be pertinent, given that we live in a reality marked by disinformation, fake news, and other hybrid threats. As Duch-Guillot (2021, p. 159) emphasises, disinformation is countered with information, "but information cannot come directly from an institution, a government, or a parliament. It must always come through quality media."

Fake news is as alarming as the lack of information, for it is in ignorance that falsehoods find fertile ground to proliferate. Both disinformation and ignorance have been major challenges for EU communication since the 1980s (Grill and Boomgaarden 2017).

Numerous initiatives and legislative tools at the European level aim to ensure that people can participate in a truly democratic system through free and informed decision-making without interference and illegal manipulation, such as interference or conspiratorial currents (Bennett and Kneuer 2024). Sánchez-Illán (2021, p. 144) notes that intentionality and planning are key in what could be termed a new "disinformation ecosystem," where falsehoods "have become mass dissemination artefacts through the all-powerful social

networks." Political unrest and polarisation contribute to the manipulation of the masses through new information and communication technologies, "which now serve, more effectively than ever, the always effective appeal to emotion rather than reason, in line with Goebbels' established doctrines" (ibid., p. 145).

We are, ultimately, living in the full era of post-truth, a concept as reiterated as it is ambiguous. Post-truth or emotional lies is a relatively recent term defined by some authors (Tuñón and Elías 2021; Sánchez-Illán 2021; Kelly 2022; Rivas-de-Roca 2020) as an intentional distortion of reality, where objective facts have less impact than appeals to emotions and personal beliefs. Its goal is to shape public opinion and influence social attitudes.

The Brexit referendum, for instance, was the result of decades of media coverage with an exclusionary and sensationalist focus, portraying the Brussels elite as a threat to the sovereignty and economic prosperity of the United Kingdom (Tuñón 2021a). This anti-European disinformation campaign was considered one of the longest in contemporary history, dating back to the late 1970s, and its translation to other countries embracing EU secession could only be combated with a responsible press "that does not belong to monopolies, is not distorted by political power, or does not fall into journalistic populism in search of clicks" (Duch-Guillot 2021, p. 161).

Faced with the growing problem of disinformation, European public authorities have adopted a dual approach. On the one hand, they have implemented legal measures to establish a stronger legal framework to address the intentional dissemination of disinformative content (Sánchez del Vas and Tuñón-Navarro 2024). Through this more defined and stringent legal framework, the goal is to create a safe environment in which digital platforms assume their corresponding responsibilities (Higgins 2019; Bennett et al. 2017).

In 2018, the European Commission promoted the creation of an independent high-level group, composed of forty professionals representing social networks and technology companies, fact-checkers, media, academics, and civil society members, tasked with drafting the Report of the Independent High-Level Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation (European Commission 2018b). From a European institutional perspective, this group was charged with "defining and quantifying disinformation, as well as studying possible legal mechanisms and countermeasures to combat it" (Tuñón et al. 2019, p. 247).

Although this report was non-binding, it had a significant impact on a subsequent communication from the European Commission titled "Tackling Online Disinformation" (European Commission 2018a). In it, the creation of a more transparent, reliable, and accountable online ecosystem was proposed based on a code of good practice, among other measures (Higgins 2019). Appropriately, in December 2020, the European Commission published a proposal for a Digital Services Act that defines a clearer framework for transparency and "accountability for online platforms tailored to their role, size, and respective impact in the online ecosystem," as a response to emerging digital risks (European Commission 2020).

On the other hand, a model of shared responsibility has been promoted, wherein citizens are equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to face the threat of disinformation. Launched in December 2020 following the development of the proposal on digital services, the European Democracy Action Plan was conceived to empower citizens and build more resilient democracies across the EU. This model promotes active citizenship capable of evaluating the quality of information received and massively shared on social networks, as agreed by Sádaba and Salaverría (2023, p. 27). In conclusion, the EU is progressively consolidating a model of combating disinformation based on a multi-level set of solutions.

2.2.2. The Importance of Communication in Times of Crisis: The Russian–Ukrainian Case

Researchers such as Herráez (2016, p. 305) argue that "it is sufficient to analyse those military milestones regarded as manifestations of hybrid warfare, such as the case of Daesh and its actions in Syria and Iraq or Russia's interventions in Ukraine" to understand that the scope of new conflict paradigms is vast. The case of the Islamic State exemplifies the

effective adaptation of "mythological narratives" to the new digital informational context, integrated by various communicative agents (Lesaca 2018). Consequently, asymmetric wars often present actors, actions, and situations that differ significantly from one another.

Kasapoglu (2015) suggests that Russia's new hybrid warfare techniques began to be applied in 2008 with the war between Russia and Georgia, although they gained particular prominence with the Euromaidan mobilisations in Ukraine and during the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in March 2014. This assertion is supported by Davis (2015), who contends that since 2008, Russian media have employed distinct narrative strategies aimed at different audience segments: some aimed at garnering international support for Russia's attempts to achieve a peaceful resolution to the crisis in Ukraine, and others targeted at internal and pro-Russian audiences within the country, promoting sentiments of nationalism and victimhood using ideological resources such as "otherness."

The NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence acknowledges in a report prepared in 2014 that Russia "has demonstrated its willingness to modernise Soviet-era tools and adapt them to the complex current informational environment." This NATO report also considers that information and communication campaigns were central to Kremlin operations in Ukraine.

Indeed, the systematic use of disinformation within strategic narratives has led the European Commission to classify them as "a serious threat to institutional integrity and democratic life, and consequently, to intensify its focus and fight against them" (Tuñón and Bouzas 2023). The exposure of European citizens to continuous disinformation practices represents a significant challenge.

In this context, the European Commission had already highlighted in 2018 how a range of national and third-country actors were using mass dissemination of falsehoods to increase distrust and create social tensions, which could severely undermine our online security It also stated that actions by these external actors—specifically pointing to Russia—could pose hybrid threats to internal security, particularly if combined with cyberattacks (Tuñón and Elías 2021).

In this regard, a report of activities developed by the European Commission (2019) reflects that, during the weeks leading up to the European elections that year, there were deliberate attempts to undermine the credibility of the European Parliament, encourage voter abstention, and provoke voter radicalisation (De Miguel 2019). Gullo and Tuñón (2009) conclude that Russia is behind most false or misleading information related to the EU, tactics used to destabilise the European project in favour of Russian geopolitical interests. The most recent example is the ongoing situation between Russia and Ukraine, where numerous disinforming rhetorical mechanisms have been detected as an alternative weapons of war (Tasente et al. 2023).

In this regard, the EU's interest in disinformation has led to a particular concern regarding the vulnerability of democracies and the European project to manipulation by foreign powers, specifically the Russian Federation. The key actor in developing this perspective has been the European External Action Service (EEAS), whose initial intervention was informal, involving the development of the East StratCom Team and the EU vs Disinformation campaign in 2015. This communication team collaborates with fact-checkers and foundations to expose the dissemination of false news by Russia in the Eastern states of the EU's neighbourhood policy (Tuñón et al. 2019; Tasente et al. 2023).

On the other hand, the 2020 health pandemic, as a historical moment of crisis, also posed a challenge for the EU in terms of combating hybrid disinformation strategies. Numerous community initiatives were thus proposed to strengthen the defence against "sharp power" threats from certain countries intending to create an atmosphere of confusion and cynicism in which so many different narratives existed that distinguishing truth from falsehood became impossible (Pérez-Curiel and Velasco-Molpeceres 2020; Tuñón and Elías 2021; Bennett and Kneuer 2024).

Crisis situations have always been interpreted within the European narrative as the ideal moment to oscillate between action and reaction. García-Campos (2017, p. 23) points

out that there is a kind of "crisis-stimulus" correlation, understood "either as a reaction by states in times of political or economic instability, or as a response to external threats that challenge internal stability, generating incentives and opportunities for greater integration."

Majone (2014, p. 217) summarises this in the "bicycle theory," according to which "the process must keep moving forward, especially in times of crisis, to prevent the bicycle from falling." This author considers that the European discourse is accompanied by an integrative dialectic, whereby a period of stability is followed by one of conflict "whose resolution results in the strengthening of institutions and/or community policies" (ibid.). This assertion seems to be true, in that the whirlpool of polycrises that have engulfed Europe in the last decade, such as the euro crisis, the refugee migration crisis, or Brexit—is remedied with more European solidarity, not less, but also with greater coordination among member states, not less (García-Campos 2017).

In the face of such a scenario of communicative disruption in the digital age, international institutions and bodies must direct their efforts towards developing strategic crisis communication plans that meet current demands. The gradual replacement of traditional nation-states by models of "virtual states" constitutes, according to Lesaca (2018), the ideal environment for the emergence of new power actors who, in most cases, do not prioritise the respect for democratic rights and freedoms of citizens.

Therefore, if hybrid conflict unfolds concurrently on the battlefield and in social media timelines such as Twitter or Facebook, supranational organisations and the media must be present to launch an offensive that protects citizens' right to accurate information and, consequently, safeguards public interests.

3. Materials and Methods

In this section, the research objectives and hypotheses, along with the successive stages that constitute the research itinerary, will be explained. Given the study's subject matter and the work's purpose, it has been decided to primarily employ the quantitative technique of content analysis, supplemented by the additional qualitative technique of in-depth interviews. The development of the previous state-of-the-art and theoretical framework of the study has been made possible through meticulous prior literature review efforts, which have, therefore, involved the development of the critical literature analysis technique.

3.1. Research Objectives

The general objective of this research, given its descriptive nature, is to analyse European storytelling on social media during times of international conflict and hybrid wars, as well as its capacity to generate relevant conversations among the various actors that shape public opinion. To this end, the specific case study of the Russian–Ukrainian war will be examined through the X publications of four EU institutions.

Thus, a series of aspects (variables) related to the form, content, and reach of the tweets will be analysed to subsequently determine whether the EU institutions act in a coordinated manner during crises and conflicts, employing a uniform tone and language or, conversely, develop divergent communication plans on key points.

3.2. Hypotheses

According to the objectives described and as previously outlined, the following five hypotheses are proposed as the starting point for this research:

H1. *EU institutions favour a politico-symbolic narrative over an administrative-procedural narrative regarding the ongoing international conflict.*

H2. *The fight against disinformation and the promotion of citizens' literacy in European affairs play a crucial role in the conception of communication strategies on social media by EU institutions during times of hybrid wars.*

H3. *EU institutions' posts on X concerning the Russian–Ukrainian war adopt a highly professionalised audiovisual format.*

H4. *The communication of European institutions primarily consists of interpersonal interactions with international bodies and leaders in their posts but only establishes a digitally intermediated relationship with media outlets, academics, or civil society organisations in very specific instances.*

H5. *The posts on the official accounts of the EU institutions achieve high levels of engagement, considering their large number of followers.*

3.3. Analysis Development

Following previous studies in political and/or organisational communication (Wolter et al. 2017; Giglietto and Selva 2014; Hoffman and Fodor 2010; Niciporuc 2014; Congosto 2015; Calvo et al. 2017; Marcos-García 2018; Tuñón and Carral 2019, among others) that pursued similar objectives, the tweet or post on X was selected as the primary unit of analysis. After all, it is content analysis that underpins the core of this research. Each tweet published by the official account of a European institution or representative aims to engage with a niche audience (followers) or a potential audience (prospective followers). Simultaneously, each tweet can also be analysed using a series of parameters that allow for a detailed study of its form and content.

3.3.1. Selection Criteria

When selecting the X accounts to be studied, it was deemed essential to include in the corpus three of the quintessential community institutions: the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the European Council. These institutions form the backbone of the European institutional framework and the core of the communication strategy from Brussels. The Council of the EU was excluded from the selection due to its rotating presidency, which means that it does not communicate with the public through a single account on this social network but rather changes channels periodically, depending on the country leading the Council each semester.

Moreover, the Court of Justice of the EU, the European Central Bank, and the European Court of Auditors were excluded, as these institutions primarily focus on legal or economic matters. Instead, the European External Action Service (EEAS) was included, a body based in Brussels with offices worldwide that constitutes the EU's diplomatic service. Although not a community institution per se, it is equivalent to the Union's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, playing a crucial role in foreign policy and having been actively involved in covering the Russian–Ukraine conflict from the perspective of organisational communication.

Regarding the sample, 886 posts from four official EU accounts on X will be analysed. The main objective is to establish a comparison between the communication approaches adopted in the digital environment by the community institutions in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Additionally, the analysis will explore whether these rhetorics converge or diverge in essence from those of other EU institutions.

3.3.2. Procedure for the Execution of Content Analysis

To conduct the content analysis of tweets published on the selected accounts within the designated period, a coding scheme has been developed based on a series of analytical variables. These variables, to be subsequently detailed, were chosen from those employed in prior descriptive studies on political and organisational communication on social media, specifically X, such as those by Tuñón and López (2022), Montes-Sáez (2021), Carral and Tuñón (2020), Tuñón and Bouzas (2023), and Jiménez-Alcarria (2021).

Firstly, tweets corresponding to the study period (a full year) were automatically downloaded using the T-Hoarder tool, which combines the REST, Search, and Streaming APIs of Twitter (Congosto et al. 2017). As Magallón-Rosa (2019, p. 235) describes, T-Hoarder operates "through a methodology known as t-hoarder_kit, an open-source tool used since

2012, and which meets the requirements of objectivity, transparency, and knowledge-sharing." The download of tweets allows for the retrieval of information such as the date and time of publication, tweet content, link to the tweet, number of followers, language, retweets, and likes (Magallón-Rosa 2018).

Additionally, the use of the Twitonomy tool has proven valuable in gaining an overview of the general usage trends of the selected X accounts during the research time-frame: how many tweets are posted on average per day and month, how many users are mentioned, how many retweets and "likes" are given and received, how many hashtags and links are included, etc.

Once the data was downloaded and imported into a spreadsheet, it was cleaned and corrected to obtain the desired sample and proceed to coding. The fundamental filtering parameters were that the tweets were published in English, thus favouring the international scope of the research since it remains the principal working language of European institutions even after Brexit (Basurto and Domínguez 2021). Furthermore, the tweet copy or text had to include at least one, if not several, of the following key terms:

- Ukraine
- Russia
- Ukraine's
- Russia's
- Ukrainian
- Russian
- Ukrainians
- Russians
- Kyiv
- Kremlin
- Kiev
- Putin
- Zelensky
- Zelenski
- Poland
- Hungary
- Mariupol
- Donetsk
- Luhansk

These terms were selected based on their relevance after conducting a superficial examination of a sample equivalent to 10% of the total number of tweets in the dataset. This preliminary study confirmed the frequent use of these words when the tweet content addressed topics related to the situation between Russia and Ukraine.

Finally, the coding, analysis, and extraction of results (tables and figures) were conducted using Microsoft Excel and IBM SPSS Statistics.

3.3.3. Single-Case Study Analysis

This research adopts a single-case study analysis (X posts concerning the Russian invasion of Ukraine) by applying a set of variables to eight study objects or sub-cases, namely, the official accounts of EU institutions.

According to Landman (2003), a single-case study is considered comparative if it employs concepts applicable to multiple study objects, develops concepts relevant to multiple study objects, and/or aims to make broader inferences. It is important to acknowledge that the inferences drawn from single-case studies are necessarily less robust than those drawn from comparisons of multiple or many study objects. Nonetheless, these analyses are valuable for examining a range of comparative issues. Moreover, single-case studies provide contextual descriptions, develop new classifications, generate hypotheses, confirm or refute theories, and help explain deviations identified through comparison with other previous or subsequent cases.

One of the objectives of comparison is contextual description. Single-case studies that solely describe or interpret political phenomena have been referred to by various terms: "theoretical" and "interpretative" (Lijphart 1971, p. 691) or "configurative-ideographic" (Eckstein 1975, p. 96). Strictly speaking, such studies are not comparative, but they are useful for comparison because of the amount of information they provide directly and indirectly. Thus, single-case studies that provide new classifications are indeed useful for comparison, as they are highly practical for generating hypotheses for theories that have not yet been fully specified. As "plausibility probes" (Eckstein 1975, p. 108), they suggest that the generated hypothesis should be tested on a broader sample, either explicitly or implicitly.

As previously noted, these single-case studies do not prove or refute a theory but merely confirm or disconfirm its applicability to other study objects. In fact, deviating objects are particularly useful for theory generation, as such deviation invites further investigation into overlooked alternative explanations and necessitates reevaluating how the study's key variables were originally operationalised.

3.4. Research Variables and Categories

To operationalise the aforementioned hypotheses through the quantitative technique of content analysis, the variables shown in Table 1 have been established.

Table 1. Classification of variables studied to operationalise the hypotheses of the research. Self-elaboration.

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Control Variables
Digital Communication of European Institutions on the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on X @EU_Commission @Europarl_EN @EUCouncil @eu_eeas	Narrative level in tweets about the Russia–Ukraine conflict	Predominant topic Keywords (Hashtags) Purpose
	Interaction level in tweets about the Russia–Ukraine conflict	Formal and hypertextual strategies Mentions Quotations
	Engagement level in tweets about the Russia–Ukraine conflict	Retweets/RT Likes Quoted tweets

All of the variables are nominal, as they involve a distinction between different categories without defining any specific order among them.

The dependent variable of the narrative level primarily refers to the narrative and persuasive elements deduced from the analysed tweet content, hence the selected indicator variables. As for the interaction level, this research will focus on the hypertextual elements used in tweet composition—which largely constitute its format and content—as well as mentions and quotations of other accounts belonging to actors within the international community.

Both dimensions—the narrative and interactive—along with the level of engagement, form the basic foundations of any institutional communication strategy via an X account. In this regard, the level of audience engagement is measured by the number of retweets, likes, and quoted tweets each post had at the time the sample was analysed. Quoted tweets (tweets that add a comment to the original post) replace the subvariable or control variable "Comments" used in other social media studies. This decision was made because, due to recent changes on X, it was deemed impossible to count them automatically, and manual counting was consistently inaccurate. In any case, this technique was effectively employed in research such as Jiménez-Alcarria and Tuñón-Navarro (2023) and Scherpereel et al. (2016).

Therefore, the code (extensively detailed in Appendix A) was designed with dependent variables and detailed categories to systematise the execution of the tweet content

analysis. The categories established for coding each of the variables have been appropriately defined following methodological criteria of exclusion, exhaustiveness, homogeneity, relevance, clarity, and productivity.

3.5. In-Depth Interviews

Additionally, as a secondary technique, in-depth interviews were conducted with specialists in European affairs communication and public opinion. These interviews were carried out after reviewing the literature and applying the quantitative content analysis method, aiming to corroborate the research findings and provide supplementary insights to the factual data obtained through the other techniques. Consequently, quotes and extracts from these interviews are predominantly included in the "Discussion" and "Conclusions" sections, using INT plus an ID number assigned to each interviewee.

This procedure has allowed for methodological triangulation in the research, incorporating contextual information of interest to enhance the understanding of the subject matter through a holistic perspective. The interview method is considered effective for gathering expert opinions and perspectives on emerging phenomena (Tracy 2013), thereby broadening knowledge on the subject or providing additional context to the study.

Consistent with previous studies on communication and disinformation within the EU context, these interviews were conducted using a semi-structured questionnaire. The questions were framed according to organisational and practical criteria recommended by other scholars (Campos-Domínguez et al. 2021; Hernández-Sampieri et al. 2010). To improve interaction and conversational experience, efforts were made to conduct these interviews in person, where possible, or otherwise via telematic means.

Some researchers assert that the interview is the qualitative research technique that grants participants the greatest freedom during interaction. This allows the interviewer to obtain responses through an informal conversational climate, avoiding the rigidity of a standardised form. Thus, it creates a comprehensive human encounter between the interviewer and the informants (Sanmartín-Arce 2000), resembling spontaneous verbal interaction (Gaitán and Piñuel 1998).

The eight interviewees (whose profiles are described in Appendix B and identified with ID codes along the article) are professionals specialising in various fields that intersect with the subject of this research. After the interviews were completed, they were transcribed using Trint Advanced online software (for interviews conducted in English) and a programming code based on voice recognition technologies (for interviews conducted in Spanish). This code enabled the processing of audio files and utilised advanced algorithms to automatically convert spoken content into written text, thereby saving the researcher time and effort by facilitating the analysis and search for specific information within the transcriptions.

4. Results

This section may be divided by subheadings. It should provide a concise and precise description of the experimental results, their interpretation, and the experimental conclusions that can be drawn.

4.1. European Commission (@EU_Commission)

The European Commission's profile exhibits the highest frequency of posts during the analysed period, with a total of 344 tweets, accounting for 23% of the total sample. The potential reach of these tweets is further enhanced by the account's significant follower base, exceeding 1.8 million. In this regard, INT-3 notes that the European Commission aims not only to engage with the existing social media audience but also to attract a broader one: "In a crisis like the one we are currently experiencing, it is crucial to monitor the topics of conversation, identify trends, and diversify our presence across all possible channels within the social ecosystem: X, LinkedIn, Telegram, Mastodon... We strive to convey a

consistent political message across all platforms, in line with the actions of the Parliament and the Council."

4.1.1. Narration Level

At the narrative level, regarding predominant thematic areas, the campaign to support Ukraine ranks first among the European Commission's posts during the studied period, comprising over a quarter of the sample (25.5%). Following this, in second and third place are tweets addressing issues stemming from the energy crisis (17.4%) and those explaining the actions taken to sanction Russia (13.9%). Topics such as disinformation or the displacement of the Ukrainian population receive considerably less coverage from the institution, with less than 5% of the posts.

In this regard, to reinforce the thematic focus of the posts, various aspects of tone and form have been employed, most notably the evident use of common hashtags or tags. Nearly half of the tweets include hashtags that express solidarity with Ukraine (43.8%), such as #StandwithUkraine, #EUSolidarity, #WithUkraine, or #SlavaUkraini. In contrast, 33.6% do not include any hashtags in the text of the post. In third place are hashtags referring to the energy crisis (9%), with #LightUpEurope being the most prominent.

Concerning the intended purpose or function of the coded sample, out of the 344 posts from the European Commission, 152 are aimed at providing conclusions on measures taken by the European executive to address the consequences of the conflict (44.1%). As shown in Figure 1, in second position are posts that aim to express solidarity with the Ukrainian people through the promotion of symbolic acts, such as artistic displays or the projection of the Ukrainian flag on the façades of Commission buildings, as well as those whose primary function is to call for action from society and/or other institutions regarding a specific issue (11.9%). In third place, we find tweets intended to openly condemn the actions of the Kremlin (10.4%), often with explicit mention of Putin and the Russian army.

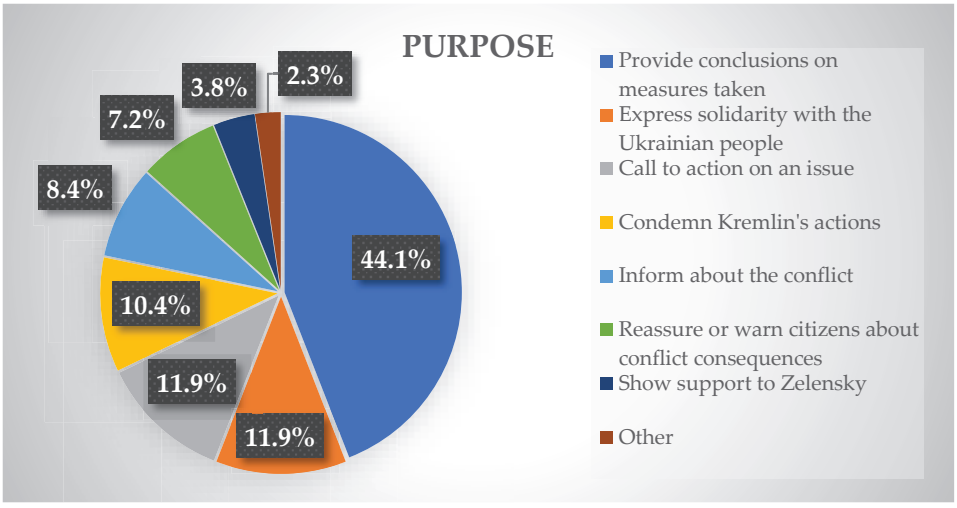


Figure 1. Purpose or function attributed to the tweets published by the official account of the European Commission, broken down by percentage. Self-elaboration.

4.1.2. Interaction Level

On the other hand, focusing on the level of interaction, the format adopted by more than half of the European Commission's tweets (53.6%) is predominantly text combined with a link to its own website or social media channels, along with other multimedia elements that enhance the post. Audiovisual formats also prevail, representing more than 40% of the sample: 23.2% of the posts on X include images, infographics, or animated GIFs, while 18.6% incorporate videos or audio clips of varying lengths.

Regarding mentions of other accounts to foster conversation between political and civil society actors, a significant percentage (66.7%) of the tweets do not include any reference

to external profiles. In distant second and third positions are mentions of other European institutions or leaders (17.1%)—such as the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen—with the aim of mutual engagement, as well as references to political representatives from countries beyond the Member States (7.5%).

In the same vein of interaction, quotations were also considered, specifically those tweets that quote their own account or external accounts, adding additional text to comment on the original post. A significant portion of the sample (73.9%) does not follow this pattern, indicating that the Commission generally does not share prior content on this social network. The remaining 26% consists of tweets quoting other institutions or EU leaders (25.8%), with a negligible 0.3% referring to other political leaders.

4.1.3. Engagement Level

Concerning the level of engagement, it is important to consider the retweets, likes, and quoted tweets associated with the European Commission's posts on topics related to the conflict. Regarding Figure 2, more than half of the tweets garnered fewer than a hundred reposts, with 49.3% receiving between 26 and 100 retweets, 21.4% exceeding this range and reaching up to 200, and 10.4% reaching up to 300. Notably, 7.2% of the posts achieved over 500 retweets, which is a remarkably high level of engagement.

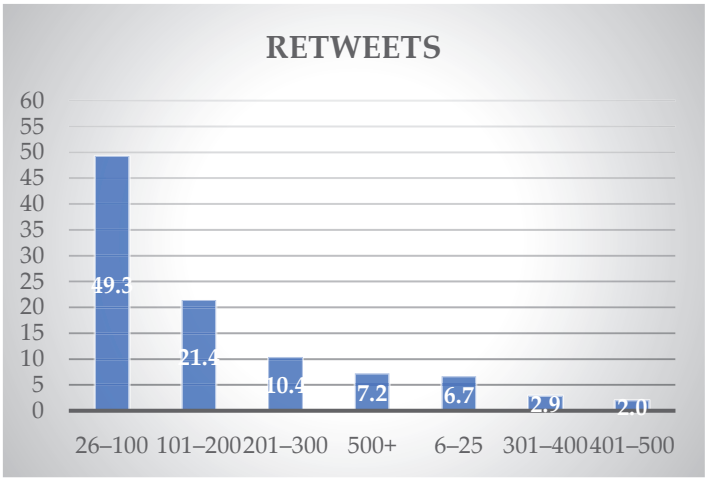


Figure 2. Retweets on posts published by the European Commission, broken down by percentage. Self-elaboration.

However, followers are more inclined to interact through likes. Almost 30% of the tweets received over half a thousand likes, while a significant proportion (22.3%) did not surpass 200. Approximately 16% of the posts garnered between 201 and 300 likes.

Finally, in terms of comments on the Commission's posts, engagement is measured through the count and percentage calculation of quoted tweets (original tweets with additional commentary). Over 50% of the tweets received between 6 and 25 quotes, 20% received between 26 and 100, and 18% had between 1 and 5 quoted tweets, representing a minimal percentage.

4.2. European Parliament (@Europarl_EN)

The 111 posts from the main European Parliament account during the studied period represent 8% of the sample. This figure is comparable to the communication output on X by its president, Roberta Metsola. However, the Europarl account boasts over 970,000 followers, double the number of Metsola's followers, yet still falling short of the reach held by its sister institution, the European Commission.

According to INT-2, what sets the European Parliament's communication strategy apart from those of other bodies is the freedom in tone and style, which he considers an advantage: "The Parliament has opened up a bit more to a youthful tone in recent years

because we are now on Instagram, LinkedIn, X, Facebook, and on TikTok, we've been cautioned about Chinese interference, but otherwise, we would exploit it further. We are on all platforms and try to experiment with all formats."

4.2.1. Narration Level

Narratively, the aid campaign for Ukraine once again takes the top spot among the European Parliament's tweets throughout the first year, accounting for more than a quarter of the sample (see Figure 3). Additionally, 20.7% of the posts focus on meetings with international powers or intergovernmental forums where the agenda includes matters related to the conflict. In third place are tweets concerning the escalation of the invasion or attacks on territories in Ukraine and neighbouring countries, such as Poland (13.5%). Other key issues, such as Russian disinformation and propaganda, Ukraine's potential EU membership, or migration movements caused by the war, receive less than 5% of the Parliament's attention.

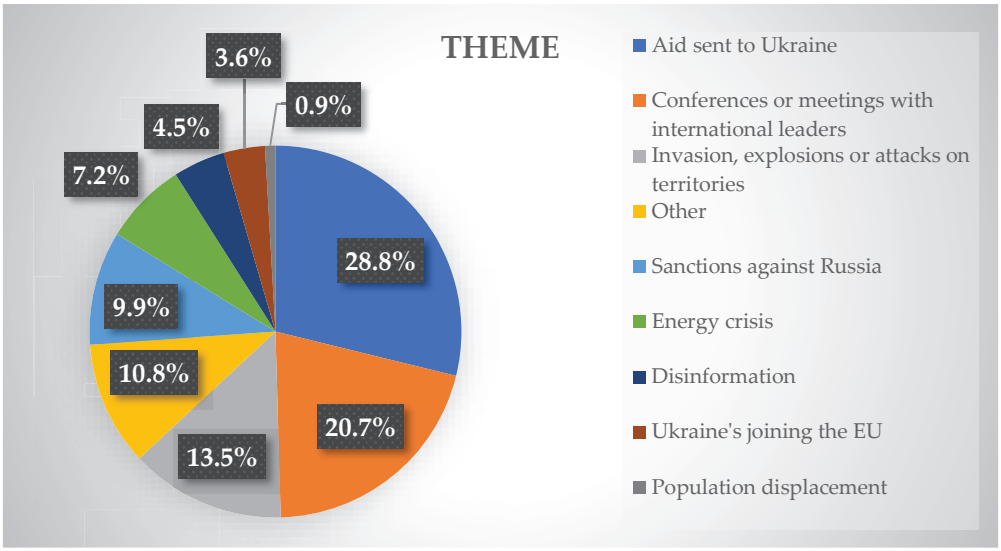


Figure 3. Predominant topics in the tweets published by the official account of the European Parliament, broken down by percentage. Self-elaboration.

Regarding the use of hashtags, more than half of the tweets (52.3%) do not include any in the text. Of the remaining 47.7%, nearly 30% are used to express solidarity with the Ukrainian people, while 11.7% incorporate more general tags about the Russia–Ukraine conflict, such as the names of countries or invaded or attacked cities in English.

In relation to the purpose or attributed function of the coded sample, of the 111 European Parliament posts included in the total sample, 30.6% are aimed at drawing conclusions on measures taken at the European level to mitigate the war's consequences. On the other hand, the second and third most frequent types of posts are those providing information on the conflict's progression (22.5%) and those conveying a message of solidarity with the moral and mortal victims in Ukraine (19.8%).

4.2.2. Interaction Level

Regarding the level of interaction, nearly 40% of the European Parliament's tweets follow a format of text combined with a link to their own website or social media accounts, accompanied by other multimedia elements such as images or videos (see Figure 4). Notably, video emerges as the primary resource in 27% of the Parliament's posts, while images or infographics are relegated to fourth place, behind the basic use of text without any complementary audiovisual resources (15.3%).

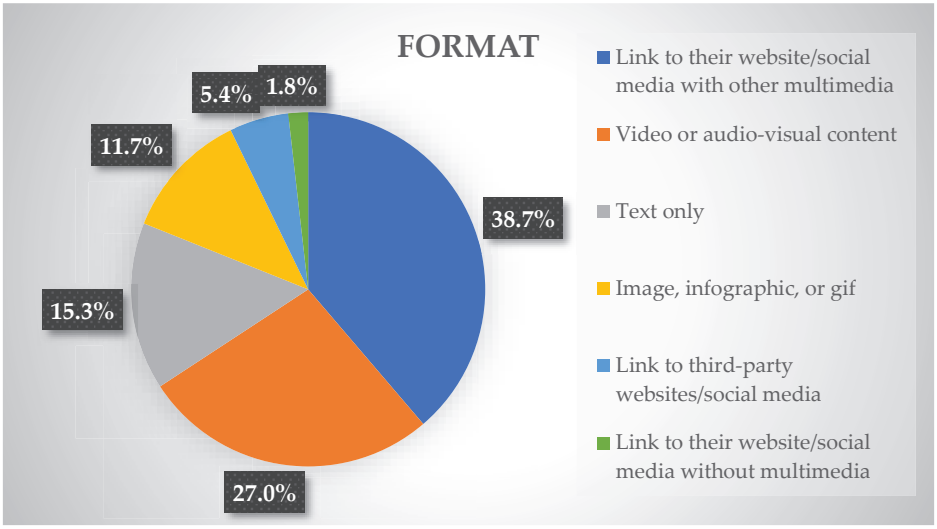


Figure 4. Format of tweets published by the official account of the European Parliament, broken down by percentage. Self-elaboration.

In terms of establishing interaction with other accounts, nearly two-thirds of the sample (62.2%) do not include any mentions of other accounts as part of the tweet. However, 22.5% of the posts refer to other European institutions and representatives, such as the Parliament's President, Roberta Metsola. Mentions of political leaders from countries within and outside the EU make up 12.6% of the sample. Mentions of other actors listed in the coding for this variable are practically nonexistent.

Regarding quotations, more than half of the European Parliament's tweets (specifically 52.3%) are not identified as quoted tweets from their own or other accounts with subsequent comments. Of the remaining half, 45% are tweets from other EU institutions or leaders, such as President Roberta Metsola or European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, while only 1.8% are quotations of tweets from international political leaders.

4.2.3. Engagement Level

Moving on to the analysis of the level of engagement, nearly 60% of the European Parliament's studied posts receive fewer than 100 retweets (with 23.4% garnering between 6 and 25 reposts, and 36.9% receiving between 26 and 100). In contrast, 13.5% of the posts exceed 500 retweets, which is a significant figure for an institutional publication.

Regarding likes, the distribution follows a pattern similar to those in European Commission posts: 37% of the posts accumulate more than 500 likes, while 44.1% receive between 26 and 200 positive interactions from X users.

Finally, quoted tweets are examined, where the frequency is again lower than the other variables of engagement. Nearly 38% of the posts have fewer than 5 quoted tweets; 28% have between 6 and 25 quoted tweets; and 24.3% have between 26 and 100 quoted tweets.

4.3. European Council (@EUCouncil)

The European Council's posts within the selected study sample total 186, accounting for 13% of the overall sample, thus ranking third in terms of prevalence. The main account of this institution has over 752,000 followers on X.

4.3.1. Narration Level

At the narrative level, tweets concerning the Russia–Ukraine conflict predominantly address sanctions against Russia (23.7%) and conferences or meetings with global powers (23.1%). The third most notable theme is the aid packages sent to Ukraine (20.4%).

In this context, the most frequently used hashtags in these posts refer to messages of solidarity with Ukraine (43.5%), such as #StandwithUkraine, #EUSolidarity, #WithUkraine,

and #SlavaUkraini, as well as more generic tags related to the invasion of Ukrainian territories (28%). Nearly 12% of the tweets do not use any hashtags.

The main purpose or objective of more than half of the institution's posts is to communicate to the public the conclusions regarding measures adopted in response to the situation (53.2%), following the trend observed with the European Commission. Second, there are informative messages about the progress of the conflict (14%), while 7.5% encompass posts with functions other than those proposed in the coding of this variable, as illustrated in the following figures.

4.3.2. Interaction Level

Regarding the format of the tweets, an overwhelming percentage (around 80%) includes, in addition to the base text, a link to their own website or a previous X post, along with other multimedia elements. At a considerable distance, in second and third place, are the audiovisual formats: video and image or infographic represent 7% and 6.5% of the European Council's sample, respectively.

In terms of interaction, 81.7% of the institutional posts do not include mentions of other accounts, as Figure 5 shows. Those that do reference external X profiles correspond to 7.5% for international organisations such as the UN or UNHCR, and 4.8% for European and non-European political representatives.

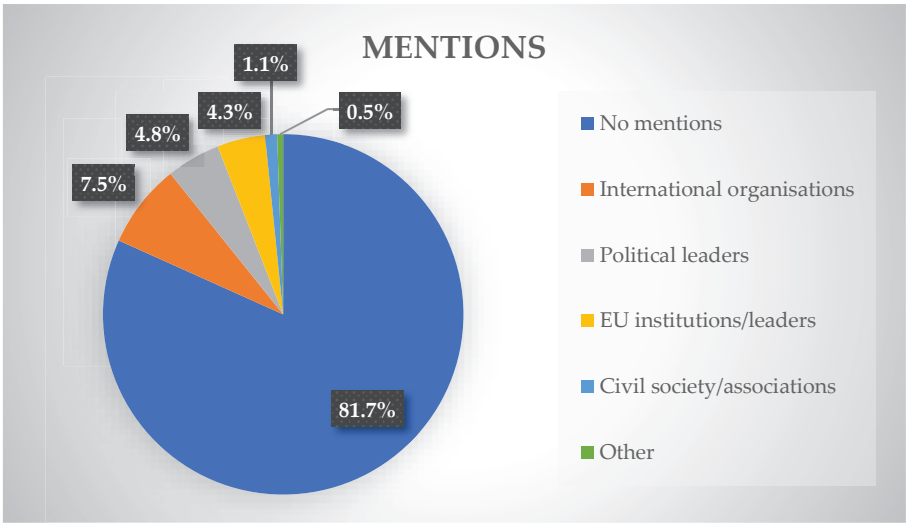


Figure 5. Mentions of other accounts in tweets published by the official account of the European Council, broken down by percentage. Self-elaboration.

A similar situation is observed regarding quotations: nearly 75% of tweets are not based on previous content with an extra commentary, and the remaining percentage consists of quoted tweets from the European Council itself, its President Charles Michel, or other EU institutions and leaders (25%).

4.3.3. Engagement Level

Regarding audience reactions to posts on X, the number of retweets ranges from 6 to 25 for 42.5% of the posts, from 26 to 100 for 34.4%, and exceeds 100 retweets for 7.5%.

Additionally, more than half of the posts accumulate between 26 and 100 likes (51.6%), while 15.6% surpass 500 likes, and at the other end, 12.4% receive fewer than 25 interactions on the platform.

Finally, in terms of engagement, an examination of quoted tweets reveals that three-quarters of the European Council's sample (over 77%) do not exceed 25 interactions of this type, with 10.8% receiving no quotations at all, as shown in Figure 6.

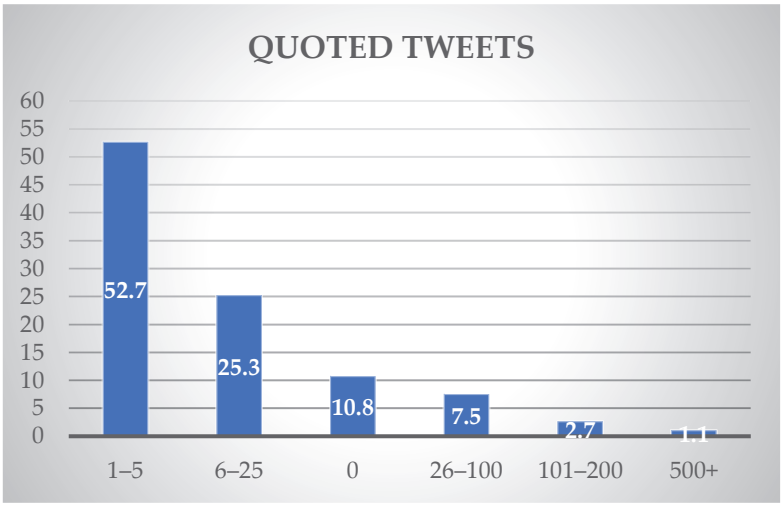


Figure 6. Quoted tweets of the publications of the official account of the European Council, broken down by percentage. Self-elaboration.

4.4. European External Action Service (@eu_eeas)

Out of the total 1466 posts analysed, 245 tweets belong to the institutional account of the European External Action Service (EEAS), representing 17% of the sample and positioning it as the second most prominent account within the study. The reach of these posts is further determined by its more than 445,000 followers on X.

4.4.1. Narration Level

The predominant theme in the tweets from this institution is meetings with international powers, both public and private, to discuss matters related to the war (35.3%). In second place are posts explaining milestones of the invasion, such as explosions or attacks on Ukrainian territories or neighbouring areas (22.9%), followed by factual information about the aid packages sent to Ukraine (14.3%).

These topics are often reinforced by incorporating hashtags related to the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, whether they are more specific or more generic (see Figure 7).

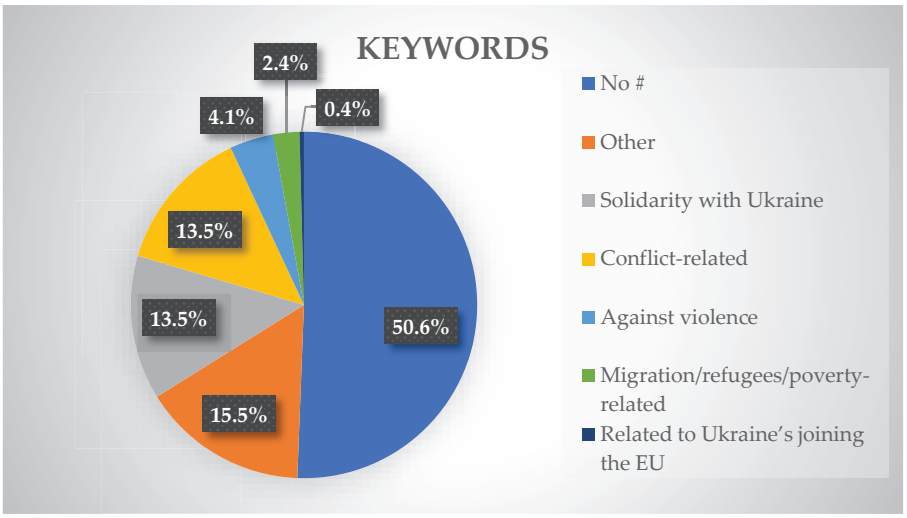


Figure 7. Hashtags included in the tweets published by the European External Action Service, broken down by percentage. Self-elaboration.

However, 50% of the EEAS tweets do not use any hashtags, while 15.5% use other hashtags not directly related to the theme of the war. In contrast, hashtags that express

solidarity with Ukraine or include symbolic terms about the conflict each represent 13.5% of the total.

Regarding the third variable at the narrative level, nearly a quarter of the tweets (23.3%) aim to inform about the progression of the conflict, and another 23% summarise the conclusions of measures taken to address its consequences. The set of posts calling for action on specific issues, such as the energy crisis, disinformation, or shortages affecting the population, constitutes 18% of the EEAS's institutional messages on X.

4.4.2. Interaction Level

In terms of interaction, there is a notable predominance of audiovisual formats. Sixty-three posts (25.7%) include a link to the institution's website or social media along with other multimedia elements, such as images, infographics, or video clips. Tied for second place with 25% each are tweets with text plus a link to other pages without additional multimedia resources and those featuring an image, infographic, or GIFs. Lastly, the use of pre-recorded or streaming video or audio is around 10%.

EEAS's posts are among the most neutral observed: 37.6% of these do not include interaction options with other X accounts through mentions. Of the remaining percentage, 23.3% of references are to EU institutions or representatives, and over 17% are to other international organisations.

Similarly, the use of tweet quotations, whether from its own or external sources, is not common in the EEAS feed. 54.7% of the posts are not quoted, while of the remaining percentage, 43% are from EU institutions and leaders, and 1.6% are from other actors not specified in the code.

4.4.3. Engagement Level

Regarding the level of engagement, 40.4% of the tweets have been shared between 26 and 100 times. More than a third of the posts (34.3%) accumulate between 6 and 25 retweets, and 12.7% exceed 100 retweets. Only 2.4% of the posts receive more than 500 retweets, the highest category considered when coding this variable.

As shown in Figure 8, the largest percentage of likes also falls within the 26 to 100 range (35.1%). Conversely, nearly 20% of the EEAS's posts receive more than 500 likes, which is close to the 18.4% at the other end of the spectrum, with fewer than 25 likes.

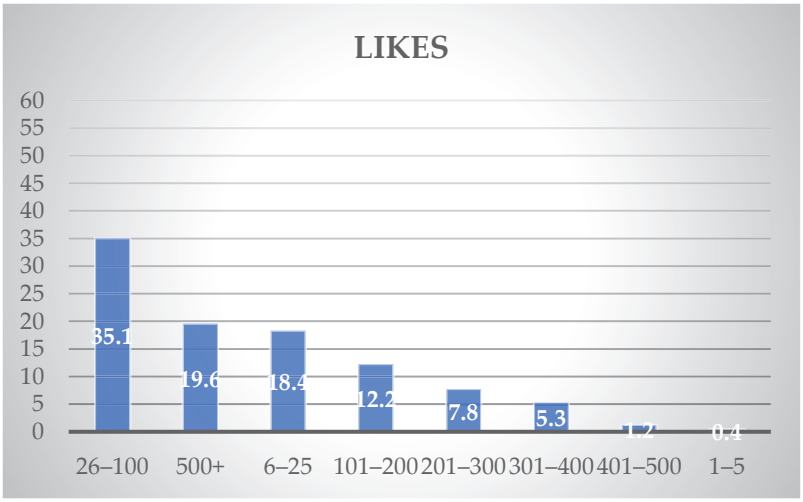


Figure 8. Likes on posts published by the official account of the European External Action Service, broken down by percentage. Self-elaboration.

Concerning tweet quotations, which were analysed under the "Comment" variable, it is noteworthy that 77.5% of the sample do not exceed 25 quotations, and nearly 15% fall

between 26 and 100 quotations. Almost 5% of the posts have had minimal impact when it comes to being shared with additional commentary.

5. Discussion

5.1. Narration Level

Based on the results obtained through content analysis and their comparison with the in-depth interviews, a discussion will now be conducted by examining the trends, potential correlations, and divergences identified in the communication of the various EU bodies at three levels: narration, interaction, and engagement. To this end, the discussion will focus on the research objectives, as outlined in the hypotheses presented in the second section of this study.

H1. *EU institutions favour a politico-symbolic narrative over an administrative-procedural narrative regarding the ongoing international conflict.*

The verification of this hypothesis is primarily structured around the analysis of the variables within the narrative dimension, particularly focusing on the theme and purpose of the European institutions' publications. It was initially assumed that the predominant theme in the tweets from EU bodies revolves around sanctions against Russia and that the main function of these contents is to express solidarity with the situation of the Ukrainian people. In the case of the European Commission, addressing sanctions against Russia emerges as one of the key issues (14%), as well as the purpose of showing solidarity with Ukraine (12%) through its X content, which is also evident from the repeated use of pre-established hashtags in English or Ukrainian, such as #StandwithUkraine, #WithUkraine, #EUSolidarity, and #SlavaUkraini (see Figure 9).



Figure 9. Examples of tweets published by the official profile of the European Commission on X. @EU_Commission.

This pattern does not hold true, however, for the European Parliament at the thematic level, although it does at the functional level, where a similar pattern of using hashtags with messages of solidarity towards the Ukrainian people is observed. Neither assumption is valid in the case of the European External Action Service, which favours different narratives and purposes compared to other European bodies. However, the European Council partially meets the proposed hypothesis: the primary thematic area of its publications is the EU's sanction packages (24%), and most of the hashtags used are those showing solidarity

with Ukraine (43%), but the function attributed to more than half of the tweets is to provide conclusions on measures taken (53%).

According to INT-6, the European institutions adopted "a very different order of priorities in communication compared to the current one" during the first year after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, especially in the case of the Commission: "Initially, the main objective was to inform people that unprecedented sanctions against Russia were being approved. Then it shifted to measures, with messages like 'we are going to reform the electricity market, so you pay less on your electricity bill'. Until 24 February 2023, communication was more focused on explaining all the sanctions, and now it has shifted to how this will impact citizens and how they can resolve it."

INT-6 also notes that the European Commission has improved its communication as the decision-making process has progressed. "If you make a legislative proposal that reflects a common understanding, it is much easier to communicate than negative news. You don't communicate a migrant rescue in Greece the same way you do the approval or implementation of the Recovery Fund. Since the 2019 European elections, and even before, in the wake of Brexit, I believe that the communication policy of the institutions has improved significantly. Not just the Commission, but also the Parliament and the Council are involved in this."

In INT-8 words, "many countries that did not take the European Union seriously have started to do so now, following the war. We project an image of confidence, which is why more and more countries want to join the EU." In this regard, however, INT-1 highlights that "there is a lot of debate about how to communicate and reach more people," without being entirely sure that "the role of the European institutions is to maximise their propaganda capacity right now, but rather to try to connect the European debates in Brussels with national debates"; a significant matter developed in a previous work (Tuñón et al. 2019).

In light of the above, the first hypothesis is partially confirmed concerning the theme and purpose of the tweets. EU institutions generally place greater emphasis on the aid packages (economic, social, health, etc.) sent to Ukraine rather than on the sanctions imposed on Russia, despite both topics being closely related.

However, the data regarding the purpose of publicising the measures taken to support Ukraine and sanction Russia is also significant for the EU institutions or bodies, sometimes surpassing the number of tweets expressing solidarity with the Ukrainian people. The political-symbolic and administrative-procedural narratives, therefore, occasionally converge in the EU's posts on X.

H2. *The fight against disinformation and the promotion of citizens' literacy in European affairs play a crucial role in the conception of communication strategies on social media by EU institutions during times of hybrid wars.*

In response to the alarming challenge posed by disinformation, European public authorities have resolved to adopt a dual approach, encompassing both legal and informational strategies (Higgins 2019; Tuñón et al. 2019). After all, the dissemination of a certain volume of incorrect information is an inherent characteristic of public communication: it is impossible to guarantee the accuracy of every message that reaches the audience, as communication processes often involve confusion, misunderstandings, and unintentional errors, which can lead to the spread of inaccurate data (Sádaba and Salaverría 2023; Rivas-de-Roca et al. 2023).

"For more than a decade now, there have been malign actors who produce or amplify this social unrest, distrust, and confusion, which leads to the proliferation of conspiracy theories. We are seeing this now with the war, but also during the COVID-19 pandemic" (INT-4). The Director of Strategic Communications at the EEAS notes interesting correlations in studies on the spread of disinformation and the propensity of certain publics to

believe in such conspiracies during times of crisis, highlighting "a certain openness to trust pro-Kremlin sources, for instance, or anti-Western narratives."

INT-2 points out that the EU has experienced "very dark moments during the migration crisis and the pandemic; fake news and disinformation were very, very strong at that time. In response to all of this, Europe has legislated very effectively. We now have the Digital Services Act, which regulates how platforms must monitor and moderate the content that appears on them." Currently, from the European Parliament's perspective, there is concern about Russian interference and the use of bots and Artificial Intelligence by China, but they have more tools to defend themselves (Sánchez del Vas and Tuñón-Navarro 2024).

In theory, both the Parliament and the Commission have aligned their communication strategies very similarly, with no significant differences. The Council has also followed this approach, except for "certain blocking elements." INT-1 argues that much more emphasis is being placed on the dimension of disinformation and its impact on citizens: "In fact, it was these institutions that pushed for the idea of banning Russia Today and Sputnik. At the same time, one wonders what influence this has. I think, overall, the communication has been rather coherent and consistent."

According to INT-2, there are various types of disinformation that always arise when discussing Europe: "that it is distant and disconnected from reality, that it is for the lobbies, that it adopts absurd laws, that it disregards citizens. . . These are variations of a discourse we mainly see from the far-right, particularly from Eurosceptic populists. We have to live with it; if they are real hoaxes, we try to debunk them. Sometimes we choose not to respond, but we believe it is better to make it clear what statements are false and support them with facts so that this negative view of the EU does not continue to spread."

In this context, it was presumed that the research findings would indicate that the fight against fake news has become one of the priority issues in European communication, especially in the context of any international conflict, where the war is fought not only on physical terrain but also in the virtual space. This was an assertion that this second hypothesis sought to confirm. However, in practice, it is not one of the topics to which EU institutions pay the most attention when posting on X.

Strictly considering the content analysis data, institutions such as the European Commission, the European Parliament, or the European External Action Service (Figure 10) dedicate an equal or less than 5% of their content to warning about the scourge of disinformation and the impact it has on the coverage and understanding of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. When addressed, there is a tendency to condemn the profusion of fake and misleading information (misinformation) on social networks—often originating from communication channels aligned with the Putin regime—highlighting the punitive measures that have been taken and using hashtags like #EUvsDisinfo. It is also noteworthy that the European Council does not even include this topic among the ten priority issues in its communication strategy regarding the Russia–Ukraine conflict.

The latest initiatives aimed at combating disinformation, supported by both European and national public institutions, concur on the inclusion of media literacy as a key element (Sánchez-Illán 2021). Indeed, some recent theoretical proposals have suggested expanding this concept towards what is termed "transmedia literacy." This involves considering the information consumer as an "active actor who not only acquires increasingly advanced skills to understand new narrative formats but also increasingly contributes to the creation, combination, and sharing of content on digital networks" (Sádaba and Salaverría 2023, p. 21).

The connection between the growing convergence of media and disinformation is mainly manifested in the fact that nowadays, certain false messages reach the population through multiple platforms simultaneously (Gottfried and Shearer 2016). Unlike the past, when falsehoods were disseminated in a scattered and occasional manner, today they often reach the audience through multiple channels simultaneously, which increases their credibility and persuasive power (Vázquez and Pulido 2020; Elías 2021; Lelo and Fígaro 2021; Bouza and Tuñón 2018).

The turning point or shift in the EU's communication strategy occurred in response to the disinformation surrounding Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Rodríguez-Fernández 2019; Tasente et al. 2023; Bennett and Kneuer 2024), as noted by INT-1: "It is curious because, actually, the European Union did not take disinformation seriously until Brexit and then rushed to claim a victory after the fact. In the end, it was shown that the EEAS was somewhat ahead of the other institutions in this regard."

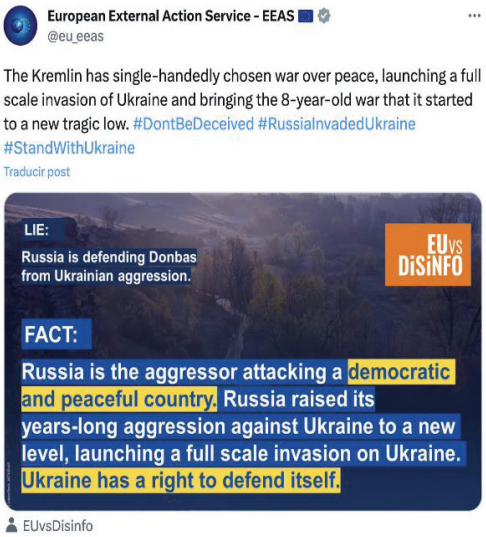


Figure 10. Example of a post about disinformation published by the EEAS. @eu_eeas.

Regarding specifically the EEAS's actions against fake news, INT-4 confirms this trend and explains that the agency perceived an increase in the Russian Federation's spending on war propaganda machinery and its media agencies, television channels, and the state-controlled (dis)information ecosystem a year before the conflict even erupted.

"We observed an increase in the frequency of messaging, the violence and aggressiveness of the narratives, and the spread through new channels. In the months of November, December, and January 2021 to 2022, we saw a clear increase in narratives related to the alleged genocide perpetrated by Ukraine against Russians in Donbas or about secret US biological weapons laboratories in Ukraine and an imminent plan for Ukrainians basically to invade their own territory. Then we saw an even greater intensification after the invasion began, especially in the first half of the year: when the EU sanctions were imposed on certain Russian propaganda media, there were many attempts by Russia to immediately adjust its tactics" (INT-4). Those statements agree with the research carried out by Tasente et al. (2023) and Sánchez del Vas and Tuñón-Navarro (2024), providing further evidence.

All of this reaffirms the need for greater cooperation between European institutions and media in the fight against disinformation and the truthful communication of issues concerning the EU. However, there is an implicit duty in the transmission of media-institutional messages that the media be fair and impartial in addressing European issues so that these contents are perceived as information rather than propaganda (INT-6).

This way, there will be a gradual literacy of the public that will mitigate the alarming ignorance about EU-related topics, increase their interest, and reduce the incidence of hoaxes or "Euromyths" in public debate (Lozano 2022b; Valero 2022). Paradoxically, Pfetsch and Hertz (2015) point out that although there is evidence that good news about Europe increases the sense of identity among Europeans, the effects of bad news about Europe can only be speculated upon so far.

Censoring or eliminating disinformers, INT-1 argues, "is still a somewhat depoliticised perspective on what the public sphere is. A well-functioning 'European Republic' requires conflict, different points of view, and as little disinformation as possible, obviously.

But disinformation will not be completely eradicated; total coordination of the types of messages that European nations send is not likely to solve much."

Given all the above, it can be asserted regarding this second hypothesis that EU bodies emphasise the importance of combating disinformative trends during times of hybrid threats, as well as advocating for media literacy on a European scale. However, in practical terms, this emphasis is not generally reflected in their X posts, at least not in those dealing with the Russian invasion of Ukraine during the examined period. The analysis does not suggest that disinformation narratives play a key role in the EU's discourse on the Russia–Ukraine conflict, which leads to the hypothesis being refuted.

5.2. Interaction Level

H3. *The EU institutions' posts on X concerning the Russian–Ukrainian war adopt a highly professionalised audiovisual format.*

The use of audiovisual formats has become a constant in the application of new narratives and, consequently, in the mechanics of organisational communication both at the public and private levels on social media platforms like X (Rodríguez-Guillén 2013; Sierra 2012; Jiménez-Alcarria and Tuñón-Navarro 2023). The EU has not lagged behind in this regard, as highlighted at various points in this study. Its communication and press services have adopted new rhetoric and formulas to convey its message to a heterogeneous and constantly connected audience in the digital age (Olsson and Hammargård 2016; Vilanova 2014; Battista et al. 2014; Gleason 2018).

Related to these studies, INT-5, member of the press team at the European Council, emphasises the relevance of adapting content to different channels, both in tone and form, by designing "different products for different platforms." "On LinkedIn, we mainly publish news or communications in English and French, as well as on the Facebook page, while on X, it is primarily in English because it is the quickest and most effective way to reach the European audience. Instagram, on the other hand, allows for more experimentation because the stories are in vertical format, whereas on X, all videos are in horizontal viewing format. We also do live streaming there sometimes; we always strive for content diversification across platforms, although we do reuse materials."

The saying "a picture is worth a thousand words" is particularly relevant in an age of information overload and overexposure, where time is scarce, and the impact of a photograph on the receiver within seconds is infinitely greater than that of a long text, as numerous scientific studies have demonstrated. INT-3 remarks that, from the European Commission's DG COMM, they have learned that "if we want the political message to resonate, we must use all available tools to disseminate it in terms of content and form. We are pushing towards more innovative and direct formulas, especially when it comes to social media like X." The political communication expert believes it is essential to target the intended audience, listen to their demands, and foster interaction with them, for instance, through multimedia links and dynamic, engaging videos. "In terms of impact and visual communication, they better capture the attention of those on the other side of the screen. This allows for the creation of an online community connected to the institution" (Ruiz-Incertis et al. 2024).

In this regard, INT-7 argues that, in an institutional setting, "creating a YouTube video or doing a live stream on X will be perceived by the citizen as an attempt at accessibility, breaking down the barriers of distance. The simple fact that a political leader gives a speech via Twitch streaming already changes people's perceptions significantly; even if it's the same message, it will be perceived as more approachable."

According to data from the content analysis, this statement holds true: the European Commission opts to include an external link alongside other multimedia elements in its tweets or to embed images/infographics or video clips in more than 90% of cases. This trend towards using links in combination with audiovisual formats is reinforced by the

European Parliament's posts (Figure 11), which favour moving images more than twice as often as static images and also frequently use simple text with hashtags, unlike other institutions that do so only occasionally.

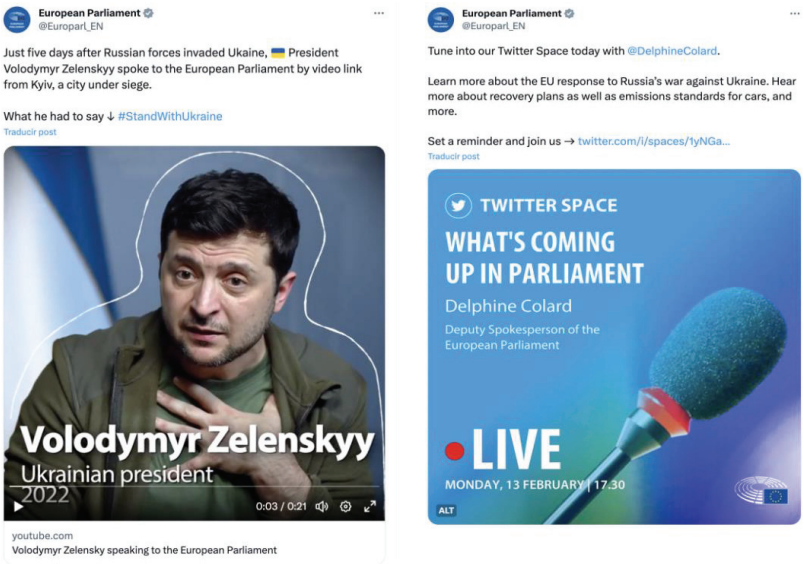


Figure 11. Examples of posts with links and audiovisual resources published by the European Parliament. @Europarl_EN.

Conversely, there is a certain preference for images over videos in the EEAS's posts; also, 25% of them incorporate links alongside other hypertextual resources. The European Council's tweets extensively use interactive links (more than 80% of them are in text plus multimedia format), while a percentage lower than 10% relies entirely on photos and videos.

These data are corroborated by the testimony of INT-3, who explains that "the presence of European institutions on social media has increased considerably across different platforms, and follower numbers continue to rise, which is even more important. This is a result of how we have adapted our messages to social media, but generally also to the emergence of digital communication tools that make it more immediate. We continue to rely on traditional forms of information, such as websites, which is why we include links to our press releases, articles, and statements, but we now use many infographics and short explanatory videos as well. It's a new dimension, in line with the times, that always responds to the EU's need to communicate, something the Commission, Parliament, and Council have always agreed on and have tried to emphasise as much as possible."

In summary, this research confirms the third hypothesis. European institutions favour multimedia formats, incorporating links, images, and videos into their posts. However, the degree of professionalisation and/or complexity of the content depends on the management of each official profile on X.

H4. *The communication of European institutions primarily consists of interpersonal interactions with international bodies and leaders in their posts, but only establishes a digitally intermediated relationship with media outlets, academics, or civil society organisations in very specific instances.*

In light of the results, the relationship between European institutions and other international actors has proven unsteady in the digital sphere. This is particularly evident with those operating outside official channels (such as supranational organisations and representatives), who often have greater penetration in public opinion, namely: media outlets, academic members, non-governmental organisations, or citizen associations (Canel and Sanders 2012; Ruiz-Incertis et al. 2024).

According to INT-1, civil society is composed of those actors "who often operate as a kind of broker, connecting debates in different countries; a transnational coalition of actors mobilising to find common ground, because generally, conversational frameworks tend to be quite similar." The issue, the researcher also notes, "is that European nations often perceive civil society as if it works for them, as if it only aims to weave a network of ambassadors to promote the European Union when this is not how it works: civil society must be there to challenge institutions, not to propagate them."

Moreover, INT-6 points out that "the weight civil society carries in the public sphere is often greater than politics itself (. . .) For example, neighbourhood associations: middle-aged people with concerns and complaints. Many of these complaints could likely be addressed by the European Union if their demands were listened to, considering that 68% of the laws passed in Spain originate from the EU, which people are unaware of. The EU must be brought out of its bubble through initiatives and projects with real impact" (Ordiz 2018).

The most recent instance of engaging with civil society is the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE), which INT-2 describes as an expansive listening exercise: "Besides the social media channels, we had a platform for citizens to leave comments, suggestions, or proposals about what Europe should look like in 5, 10, 20 years." The deputy director of the European Parliament's Office in Spain emphasises the high level of participation in the CoFoE; however, these figures are rigorously questioned by other non-institutional sources like INT-6, INT-1, and INT-7. "It was the most comprehensive social listening exercise we've undertaken, although, of course, we couldn't reach everyone, only the best-informed: university students, civil society associations, media outlets that covered it. . . Self-employed individuals or retirees participated less because they are more distant from the political debate, and that too is an issue that needs to be addressed" (INT-2; INT-5).

According to the analysis of X publications, international organisations and political leaders, both from the EU and beyond, are among the most frequently mentioned and quoted in the case of the Commission, the Council, and the EEAS. References to international organisations such as the UN or FAO or intergovernmental forums like the G7, however, are not prevalent in the case of the European Parliament. As a general rule, tweets without any mentions dominate the studied sample, with a percentage ranging between 60% and 80% in the first three institutions, a figure that hovers around 40% in EEAS posts. It is precisely this organisation that allocates more space to linking accounts of media outlets and the scientific community, although these remain minimal (around 3%, respectively).

According to INT-7, it justifies why the European Union still seems distant and difficult to understand for the average citizen (Ruiz-Incertis et al. 2024). "The more content options we have to consume about the EU, such as articles with good context, political leaders speaking clearly about Europe and explaining something about it, television programmes discussing this topic, associations creating events, institutions creating online or in-person forums inviting civil society actors, the more myths about the EU will gradually be dismantled. All of this will lead to people having an increasingly well-founded opinion, and whether they are for or against the project or want it to go in one direction or another, they will be able to argue it, to have those tools and that critical judgment."

The fourth hypothesis is thus validated, as interaction with media outlets, researchers, and civil society actors on social media, specifically on X, is limited and even non-existent from some official EU institutional accounts. Nevertheless, when one or more accounts are referenced or quoted, they usually belong to the categories of "EU Institutions/Leaders," "Political Leaders," or "International Organisations" in more than 50% of cases.

5.3. Engagement Level

H5. *The posts on the official accounts of the EU institutions achieve high levels of engagement, considering their large number of followers.*

Considering the results obtained from the content analysis and interviews, it can be deduced that the "personalisation" (Pérez-Curiel and Limón-Naharro 2019; Bennett 2012) of an institution through a profile with a specific name and surname enhances the connection between the audience and the European political representative, and through them, with the supranational organisation in question (Capati 2019; Deželan et al. 2017; Bouza and Tuñón 2018; Pérez-Curiel 2020). In fact, the personal accounts of EU leaders tend to accumulate a larger number of followers despite often being managed by a communication team identical or similar to that of the institutional accounts.

As authors such as Rodríguez-Guillén (2013), Canel and Sanders (2012), and Olsson and Hammargård (2016) pointed out, the organisational communication strategies of the EU have usually been articulated by the communication and press departments (DG COMM) or from institutional offices. However, in recent years, the role of the opinion leader, or in this case, the representative of the institution, has gained prominence, with the content being professionalised from this perspective as well, adapting to new times and channels (Fazekas et al. 2021; Hänska and Bauchowitz 2019; Gleason 2018), as the interviewees point out.

INT-6 suggests that "the European Union must be brought closer to all age groups, to the local village neighbour, to the generation that isn't connected to X or Instagram via their mobile phones." He notes that "middle-aged people also need to understand how Europe works, and the communication strategy directed at them is not the same as the one applied to young people. Here, European institutions have work to do because they focus heavily on social media and do not reinforce other parallel channels when their communication must be transgenerational."

Maintaining a balance between different communication strategies and doing so in a coherent and appealing way can be incredibly challenging. In this regard, in the interview with INT-7, the concept of "complementarity" in the use of social media and other communication strategies was discussed: "The offices must fulfil their public service function, even if it is a more aseptic, neutral, and commanded communication (. . .) On the other hand, we, as content creators on YouTube, do not have someone dictating what to say and how; it's more informal."

In conclusion, the fifth hypothesis is thus partially refuted, verifying that posts from EU's institutional accounts on X demonstrate a variable level of engagement from the audience, as the degree of involvement depends significantly on the topic at hand and the mentions made of European leaders.

6. Conclusions

The communication of European affairs has gained substantial relevance over the past two decades. Communication is, within the framework of community policy, a priority axis for ensuring that citizens identify with the European project in the 21st century. Consequently, the various EU institutions have sought to exploit new narratives and tools through unexplored and increasingly diverse channels, such as social media (Facebook, X, Instagram, Telegram, or TikTok), to reach a heterogeneous audience. However, they have not lost sight of the fact that mass media remains an indispensable avenue for influencing public opinion, given its penetration among a high percentage of the adult population.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has marked a further step in the paradigm shift of institutional communication, representing a new moment of crisis in the European order, as was the migration crisis or the Brexit rupture process yesteryear. The necessity to communicate the multiple consequences of the conflict and to show solidarity with the Ukrainian people on the one hand, and to explain the humanitarian actions and measures taken by the European executive to mitigate the impact of the war on the other, have characterised the publications of the various EU bodies during the first year after the invasion of Ukraine.

Broadly speaking, through the analysis of their communication strategy on X (formerly Twitter), it has been observed that the EU's efforts have focused on highlighting the

problem, condemning it, and showcasing how Brussels is supporting (both materially and symbolically) Zelensky and those affected by the war, as well as the various initiatives undertaken to help European citizens cope with the adverse effects of the conflict, such as rising energy prices, food shortages, market saturation, migrations, and so on. In this regard, the institutions have adhered strictly to the expected discourse under conventional organisational communication terms, albeit adapted to a 2.0 environment with invisible mediation, such as social media.

The parallel narrative of the Commission, the Parliament, the Council, and the EEAS has proceeded in a rather similar manner, without significant divergences, reflecting coherence and coordination, whether intentional or not, in communication strategies concerning the Ukraine war (INT-2; INT-3; INT-5).

It is noteworthy that, as evidenced by the results of the various studied variables, there is an extremely small—practically non-existent—percentage of links, mentions, or quoted tweets corresponding to national or international media. This fact underscores the pressing need to incorporate greater interaction between European institutions and European journalists into the digital conversation, as this absence could determine the ineffectiveness of many of their communication strategies aimed at citizens (Lesaca 2018; Lozano 2022a; Tuñón and Bouzas 2023). INT-6 deems it necessary to "rethink European information and give it more weight and importance." However, he attests to a growing ambition to address certain deficiencies, particularly since the pandemic, "because we have realised at the media level that decisions made in Brussels matter a lot and have a very direct impact on people's daily lives."

European communication flow, in summary, must begin to operate on a dual track: institutional and media (Ruiz-Incertis et al. 2024; Bennett and Kneuer 2024), to achieve its goal of effectively reaching the audience and combating misinformation "that has been present for a long time and seems to be ignored in times of social, political, and economic prosperity"(INT-4). In this media-institutional symbiosis, there should be no aspiration to indoctrinate but rather to inform: "Journalists have an important role because, in the end, we don't only report the positive aspects of European institutions. There is a lack of constructive criticism. We tend to be either very friendly or very destructive in general, as if everything about the European Union were black or white. What is in abundance in Europe is grey" (INT-6).

Similarly, it would be advisable and enriching to involve external actors in the European project, such as academics, researchers, or civil society organisations (Tuñón et al. 2019). As INT-8 points out, "sometimes you need to step back and speak with other actors to gain perspective. From inside the "Eurobubble," the EU is viewed differently than it is perceived from outside." The opinion of INT-1 on this matter is also significant: "European nations often view civil society as if it worked for them and should only promote the merits of the EU. But civil society needs to be there to challenge institutions, not to act as their propaganda; the same applies to the media."

Regarding hypertextual strategies, it would be prudent to continue investing in multimedia formats inherent to the so-called new narratives promoted on social media. Indeed, the European Commission ventured in September 2022 to launch its first purely transmedia initiative: a "European metaverse" where citizens had the opportunity to interact with everything the EU offers through a virtual world, not without various criticisms. Audiovisual and transmedia formats hold an indisputable place in the evolution of organisational communication, but anticipating their incorporation into digital strategies without understanding their potential impact, or designing them without a solid foundation, indicates that there is still much work to be done in this area.

6.1. Limitations

In the development of the content analysis, tweets from the timeline of each studied account within the established timeframe were sampled. This included retweets and quoted tweets— as specified in the explanation of this variable—which could partially skew the

overall results for purists of social network analysis (SNA). A similar issue arises with the measurement of the variable "Commenting" based on quoted tweets associated with each post rather than considering the total number of comments due to the impossibility of obtaining such data. Nonetheless, these shortcomings will be addressed in future studies through the design of an ad hoc methodology and the use of advanced computational programs for analysis.

It should also be noted that there were no significant implications from the transition of the social network Twitter to X by Elon Musk at the end of July 2023. These changes in the verification of accounts (official or paid), functions of premium users, or the network's name did not affect the period studied from February 2022 to February 2023 but did impact the subsequent use of tools such as Tweetdeck or Twitonomy, which faced serious limitations in obtaining specific data due to the new policy, such as the total number of posts from each profile within that timeframe. Furthermore, throughout the article, the term X has been used instead of Twitter to reflect a revised and updated version of the original work, although the content analysis was conducted prior to the name change.

6.2. Future Reseach Directions

Future articles will conduct a more detailed analysis of the digital communication strategy of EU institutions concerning the Russian invasion of Ukraine, covering a more extended and, therefore, significant period. Additionally, it could be of great interest to study the progressive incorporation of artificial intelligence (AI) tools in the configuration and management of institutional communication policies at the European level, particularly in addressing disinformation flows on social media, a topic underscored by projects such as EUvsDisinfo.

Another event occurred amidst the crisis of institutional credibility in 2024, once again influenced by the proliferation of hybrid threats: the European election. This event, as in 2019, was marked by waves of Euroscepticism but also by the developments of the war in Ukraine, the conflict in Gaza, and foreign interferences, largely emanating from Russia. It seems pertinent to study the EU's communication in this context and how citizens engage or do not engage in the digital conversation about the elections and their impact on civil society and the media.

Pragmatic considerations also necessitate addressing other critical issues surrounding the creation of a global public sphere, such as the barriers arising from multilingualism and the digital divide, which would warrant an entirely separate research project. The analysis of the limits of the European public sphere prompts us to question the extent to which there can be, if not a single narrative for Europe, at least a series of narratives about Europe that foster constructive debates and shape strategies to enhance public opinion identification. Therefore, future studies could build on the formulation of hypotheses regarding this matter, with the aim of testing or refuting them.

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Appendix A. Code Designed for the Content Analysis

Narrative Level

Variable 1: Predominant theme in the tweet content

1. Aid sent to Ukraine
2. Invasion, explosions or attacks on territories
3. Population displacement
4. Scarcity of goods and services
5. Energy crisis
6. Sanctions against Russia
7. Ukraine's joining the EU
8. Conferences or meetings with international leaders
9. Disinformation
10. Other

Variable 2: Keywords (hashtags) primarily used

1. No #
2. Solidarity with Ukraine
3. Against violence
4. Conflict-related
5. Related to Ukraine's joining the EU
6. Migration/refugees/poverty-related
7. Energy crisis-related
8. Other #

Variable 3: Purpose or function attributed to the tweet

1. Express solidarity with the Ukrainian people
2. Condemn Kremlin's actions
3. Show support to Zelensky
4. Inform about the conflict
5. Call to action on an issue
6. Reassure or warn citizens about conflict consequences
7. Provide conclusions on measures taken
8. Other

Interaction Level

Variable 4: Format adopted in tweet content

1. Link to their website/social media without multimedia
2. Link to their website/social media with other multimedia
3. Link to media outlets
4. Link to third-party websites/social media
5. Image, infographic, or gif
6. Video or audio-visual content
7. Text only
8. Other

Variable 5: Participation—Mentions (@) of other X accounts

1. No mentions
2. EU institutions/leaders
3. International organisations
4. Political leaders
5. Academics/researchers/scientists
6. Civil society/associations
7. Media outlets
8. Other actors

Variable 6: Participation—Retweets or quoted retweets of other X accounts

1. No quotation
2. Tweet from EU institutions/leaders
3. Tweet from EU Member States' institutions
4. Tweet from political leaders
5. Other quotations

Engagement Level

Variable 7: Retweets

1. 1–5
2. 6–25
3. 26–100
4. 101–200
5. 201–300
6. 301–400
7. 401–500
8. +500
9. 0

Variable 8: Likes

1. 1–5
2. 6–25
3. 26–100
4. 101–200
5. 201–300
6. 301–400
7. 401–500
8. +500
9. 0

Variable 9: Quoted tweets

1. 1–5
2. 6–25
3. 26–100
4. 101–200
5. 201–300
6. 301–400
7. 401–500
8. +500
9. 0

Appendix B. Classification and Description of Interviewees' Profiles for the Research

Representative	Profile	Position and Institution	Date	ID Code
Academics and experts	Political communication, public sphere, and disinformation in the EU	Professor at the Université Libre de Bruxelles and member of various Jean Monnet European Chairs	3 May 2023	INT-1
European institutions	EU communication and digital policies	Spokeperson of European Parliament Office in Spain, Public Relations and Institutional Affairs at DG COMM	1 June 2023	INT-2
Representative	**Profile**	**Position and Institution**	**Date**	**ID Code**
European institutions	Information and communication on EU policies	Assistant in political communication at DG COMM in the European Commission	31 May 2023	INT-3
European institutions	EU strategic communication and disinformation	Member of Strategic Communication division and contact for Ukraine and Belarus in Brussels at the European External Action Service	28 June 2023	INT-4
European institutions	Information and communication on EU policies	Member of Press team at DG COMM in the European Council	27 March 2023	INT-5
Media	International communication and European politics	European politics analyst and international correspondent at Spanish newspapers	3 May 2023	INT-6
Social media outreach	EU information	Public Affairs consultant Brussels and content creator on European Affairs on social media	4 May 2023	INT-7
European institutions	Information and communication on EU policies	Communication representative at the European Parliament	9 June 2023	INT-8

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Article

Media Portrayal of EU Commission and Its Leaders: A Content Analysis of Spanish Press (1976–2024)

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Abstract: The role of the media is key in mediating civil society and its political representatives in EU institutions. In this context, this paper aims to describe the representation of the European Commission, one of the EU's most important institutions, and its leaders by two leading Spanish newspapers. In order to address this objective, an automated content analysis was carried out on 13,340 news items published between 6 June 1976 and 15 February 2024 in *El País* (social democratic media) and *ABC* (conservative, monarchist media). The sample was subjected to a sentiment analysis as well as topic modeling. The latter method made it possible to identify five predominant issues on the agenda: Economy, Foreign Affairs, Internal Politics, Spanish Politics, and the Future of the EU. The average sentiment, which is close to neutral, has tended slightly toward the negative over the years, although the current president, Ursula von der Leyen, has the highest rating of all the leaders studied. Both *El País* and *ABC* provide more negative coverage of the EU when leaders of their ideological opposition govern, a phenomenon that can weaken the European model and encourage political drifts with consequences that are difficult to predict in the medium term.

Keywords: European Commission; general press; European Union; media coverage; Spain

1. Introduction

Spain's entry into the European Economic Community (EEC) took place in 1986 after a long period of dictatorship in which the EEC was reluctant about its admission. Since then, the country has undergone a gradual process of Europeanization (García-Carretero et al. 2022). This term has been criticized for its limitations in representing the complexity of European transformation, given its polysemic and ambivalent nature (Olsen 2002). However, the idea of Europeanization can be useful for the study of some phenomena and interactions that occur within the supranational organization (Radaelli 2004).

In general terms, Europeanization "is a process of change affecting domestic institutions, politics and public policy. Change occurs when political behaviour at the European Union (EU) level has a transformative effect on domestic political behaviour" (Radaelli 2012, p. 1). Featherstone (2003) identifies four distinct approaches to this concept in the academic literature. Thus, Europeanization can be understood as a historical phenomenon; as the growing diffusion of cultural norms, identities, and behavioral patterns within the European framework; as a process of institutional adaptation to the EU; and as the set of effects that the EU has on the public policies of member states (Featherstone 2003).

This integration involves the construction of a truly European identity, a sense of community resulting from the convergence of shared beliefs, values, and aspirations, which can be called "new nationalism" or "supranationalism" (Haas [1958] 2004, p. 10). The institutional recognition of this concept occurred in 1973 with the Declaration on European Identity, which aimed to strengthen cohesion among the member countries of the EC (Bergbauer 2018). In this sense, the relationship between nationalism, regionalism, and European identity is relevant, an issue that has been widely addressed by academics (Díez-Medrano and Gutiérrez 2001; Carey 2002). In the Spanish case, according to Sojka and

Vázquez (2014), national and regional identities are compatible with the European one, even reinforcing it.

From the perspective of social constructivism, communication and discourse are fundamental aspects of the creation of a European identity (Risse 2009). In this regard, numerous studies have addressed the Europeanization of national public spheres through analyses of media coverage on EU-related issues (de la Porte and van Dalen 2016; Koopmans 2007). In the European context, the quality of transnational communication depends on member states discussing the same topics at the same time and through similar interpretive frameworks (Risse 2009).

Furthermore, support for Europe from political parties is higher than that from citizens (Hooghe and Marks 2009). These elites have a certain influence on the perception of the EU and European sentiment in public opinion, as different studies have shown (Bruter 2005; Hooghe and Marks 2005; Pridham 2007). However, according to Bruter (2005), this is not always positive. Through their actions, the elites can also make it difficult for citizens to identify with Europe.

For their part, the media play a fundamental role in mediating civil society and its European representatives (Caiani and Guerra 2017) in terms of accountability, transparency, and literacy (Lafuente-Pérez and Zurutuza-Muñoz 2012) and are important agents of socialization that contribute to the construction or deconstruction of European identity (Vasiliki and Vadratsikas 2016).

According to News Production Theory (Van Hout and Jacobs 2008; Niblock and Machin 2014), the media holds significant influence over public opinion. The way topics are covered is crucial for constructing reality in the eyes of citizens (Tuchman 1987). In this way, the frame within which a topic is presented affects the message and, by extension, people's perception and interpretation of that topic (Goffman 1974). Entman (1993) argues that framing involves selecting certain aspects of reality and highlighting them within a communicative text. This approach promotes a characterization of the problem, an interpretation, and an evaluation of the issue at hand. However, the media impacts not only how citizens think but also what they think about. According to agenda-setting theory, the media agenda and the public agenda are closely related, as the media decides which aspects of current events are most relevant by giving them space in their content (McCombs et al. 2014).

In this regard, there are several factors that justify the study of the media treatment of the EU or its political figures. On the one hand, 65% of Spaniards are very or quite interested in news about the EU (CIS 2024). In this context, national traditional media are the information channels that citizens trust the most. Specifically, like the majority of Europeans, they place more trust in public television and radio, followed by the press (Eurobarometer 2022). On the other hand, numerous studies have confirmed the ability of these media to alter the widespread perception of the EU (De-Vreese and Boomgaarden 2003; De-Vreese and Semetko 2004; Vligenthart et al. 2008).

1.1. The European Sentiment in Spain

Among the EU member states, Spain has traditionally been characterized by a high degree of enthusiasm regarding integration into the supranational organization, present both in public opinion (Otero-Felipe 2008) and in political parties (Avilés 2004). This trend is conditioned by a strong pragmatic or utilitarian dimension (Sánchez-Cuenca 2000; Ruíz-Jiménez 2005) so that Spanish citizens base their stance on Europe on the positive consequences that membership implies in terms of the economy, democratic development, and social modernization.

The European sentiment, understood as a collective emotional and ideological connection to shared European values and identity (Pagden 2002), varies depending on the temporary circumstances. According to García-Carretero et al. (2022, pp. 805–6), four stages can be distinguished in which the convergence of certain political, economic, and social events created a context in which the sense of belonging of the member countries to the EU

was particularly susceptible to change: the opening of the EU toward the East and the XX anniversary of Spain in the EU (2004–2006), the economic crisis (2007–2009), the refugee crisis (2013–2016)[1], and the COVID-19 crisis (2019–2022).

From 2007 to 2010, the percentage of Spaniards who had a positive image of the EU was higher than the European average. From 2011 onwards, it has always remained below or equal to this. The lows are between 2011 and 2012 (26%), when the effects of the Great Recession were felt, and between 2014 and 2015 (25%). However, in the same period, a proportion of more than 50% of Spaniards had always considered the fact that the country is a member of the organization to be beneficial. The percentage has only been below the average of European citizens between 2013 and 2014 and between 2016 and 2017. Similarly, the stage from 2021 to 2023, coinciding with the coronavirus health crisis, has been the one in which the most Spaniards have agreed with this statement (81%) (Eurobarometer 2024). On the other hand, unlike other member states, the institutional weight of Eurosceptic political parties in Spain has been very limited until the recent emergence of Vox[2]. It is therefore plausible to think that this has conditioned the newspapers' news agenda.

1.2. The Coverage of the EU in the Spanish Media

Although the volume of scientific publications on the media treatment of the EU in the international sphere is notably higher, numerous works have also addressed the issue in the case of the Spanish national media (Pradel-Miquel 2008; Menéndez-Alarcón 2010; Rivas-de-Roca-García 2018; Montes-Rodríguez 2021; Sales-Piñeiro and Capriotti-Peri 2022; García-Carretero et al. 2022, 2023; Mayo-Cubero et al. 2023; Fernández-Rovira and Carniel-Bugs 2024). The works of Sales-Piñeiro and Capriotti-Peri (2022), García-Carretero et al. (2022), and García-Carretero et al. (2023) are general approaches to the object of study, while the rest either offer a comparative perspective between different countries or focus on the treatment of specific cases in the community context. It is worth noting that the time periods analyzed by these previous studies usually do not cover more than a decade or focus on specific events, so the knowledge we have about media coverage on our subject of study is atomized and fragmented.

Sales-Piñeiro and Capriotti-Peri (2022) provide a diachronic analysis of EU treatment between 2000 and 2018, distinguishing this range into three stages: euphoria (2000–2007), crisis (2008–2014), and post-crisis (2015–2018). Throughout the entire period, more than half of the 23,972 news articles analyzed had a negative assessment, a proportion that grew during the crisis and post-crisis phases, while during the euphoria phase, positive information exceeded 52%.

On the other hand, García-Carretero et al. (2022) and García-Carretero et al. (2023) address, respectively, the media representation of the EU and the dominant themes and discourses in its coverage between 2021 and 2022. The main conclusions drawn from the studies are that the sense of Europeanization conveyed by the media is articulated around specific topics (García-Carretero et al. 2023). There are five main themes linked to the representation of the supranational organization: the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the COVID-19 crisis, the economy, EU policies, migration, and national politics (García-Carretero et al. 2022).

Studies report a certain discursive similarity between the media but also concrete differences. For example, the issue of the migration crisis as a security threat or Brexit as a mistake carries more weight in newspapers like *ABC*. On the other hand, an issue like the EU's double standard on the migration question is more prevalent in progressive outlets such as *El País* or *eldiario.es* (García-Carretero et al. 2023). It should be emphasized that, according to García-Carretero et al. (2023), the most present figures in the media are the representatives of the EU, although their appearance is three percentage points higher in *El País* than in ABC.

Mayo-Cubero et al. (2023), for their part, study the treatment of Next Generation funds. The study observes a pro-European trend in the media discourse, which moves away from the Euroscepticism prior to this measure. Regarding the differences between

the press, the coverage of *El País* was twice as extensive as that of *ABC*. Moreover, the predominant discourses of the former are related to human resources and the EU's support for national fund management while those of the latter are oriented toward the turning point that they represent in the European project and the need for their blockade. However, both agree on the prevalence of the economy as the main topic. Both García-Carretero et al. (2023) and Mayo-Cubero et al. (2023) study media coverage through a critical discourse analysis (CDA). Although it is not the most commonly used technique in this type of work, it has been applied in various Spanish and international studies (Hawkins 2012; Dempsey and McDowell 2019) on the representation of the EU.

There are other authors who base their analysis on specific cases using other methodologies, mainly content analysis. In 2008, Pradel-Miquel (2008) studied the treatment of Spain's integration process into the EU by the national press through five relevant cases in the European sphere that took place between 1997 and 2003: the 1999 European elections and the Haider case, the creation of the EU's Committee of the Regions, the directive on the regulation of genetically modified foods, the drafting of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, and the European Employment Strategy. The analysis reveals that these issues receive very limited coverage from the Spanish media and tend to have more presence when they are directly linked to the national agenda. The protagonists of most publications are political actors. In this sense, it is the case that 'EU issues are often used to reflect on the national political situation and to judge the attitude of national political figures' (Pradel-Miquel 2008, pp. 250–51).

Montes-Rodríguez (2021), for his part, moves away from European processes and events to focus on a specific individual: Ursula von der Leyen. On the qualitative level, the author detects frames marked by gender stereotypes, among which the roles of mother, inexperienced woman, or the first woman to access the position stand out.

Some studies also opt for the comparative approach. In this vein, Menéndez-Alarcón (2010) compares media coverage of the EU in France, Spain, and the UK. According to the results, between 2005 and 2007, the Spanish press produced fewer pieces on European issues than the French press, but more than the British press. Regarding the internal differences in Spanish newspapers, the proportion of neutral and positive articles is higher in *El País*, while the percentage of negative ones is higher in *ABC*.

Similarly, the comparison by Rivas-de-Roca-García (2018) between Spain and Germany during the period 2011–2015 determines that the informational treatment of the EU is not the same in all member countries, as each develops a series of singularities in its coverage. For example, in the German case, agency information has a greater presence, and reporting is among the most frequent journalistic genres; in Spanish, while the journalist is the author of most of the pieces, texts of low journalistic quality are detected.

Fernández-Rovira and Carniel-Bugs (2024) offer a comparative study between Spain, France, and Italy. In the analysis, based on the work of Kandyla and de-Vreese (2011), they distinguish between vertical Europeanization approaches (news about supranational EU issues) and horizontal Europeanization (news about other actors in other member countries). Among the media analyzed from the three countries, the Spanish newspaper *El País* is the one that has published the most content with a European integration focus. Moreover, before the 2008 crisis, this newspaper was also the one with the most publications with a vertical Europeanization focus, while *El Mundo* was the one with the least. In general, the results indicate a decline in public discussion about the EU and an increase in national approaches.

1.3. Justification and Objectives

As noted, the role of the media is fundamental in mediating European citizens and their representatives in various EU institutions. Likewise, it is an agent of socialization with a role to play in the construction or deconstruction of European identity. Previous studies have primarily employed content analysis and, to a lesser extent, critical discourse analysis; however, this area has barely been explored using sentiment analysis, a technique

applied in studies on media coverage of other phenomena (Enevoldsen and Hansen 2017; Garvey and Maskal 2020; Bleich and van der Veen 2021; Córdoba-Cabús et al. 2023).

While there are numerous studies on media representation of the organization in specific periods, the volume of specific research on the coverage of major political figures in the European sphere by the press from a diachronic perspective is smaller. Among these figures, the European Commission stands out as the executive branch of the European Union, playing a central role in shaping and implementing EU policies and becoming a crucial subject of study. However, research on the Commission's media coverage has been limited, creating a gap in our understanding of its dynamics and impact. The Commission's relevance arises from its authority to propose legislation, enforce EU laws, and manage the daily operations of the EU. Established in 1958 as part of the Treaty of Rome, it has evolved into a key institution driving European integration. Currently, it is led by President Ursula von der Leyen from the Christian Democratic Union (CDU).

In this context, the aim of this paper is to study the informative treatment of the European Commission and its leaders in Spanish newspapers over the last 50 years, given that it is probably the most visible institution in the EU as it holds executive power. Using a sentiment analysis approach, this research aims to complement existing studies, providing new evidence to help interpret and contextualize them. From this general objective, the following specific objectives are proposed:

(O1) Describe the news coverage of the European Commission and its members, as well as its evolution over time, in the Spanish press, considering the emotional tone of the messages and the predominant topics in each of them.

(O2) Compare the treatment applied to the leaders of the European Commission by two leading newspapers in the Spanish context: *El País* and *ABC*.

2. Materials and Methods

To respond to the objectives, an automated quantitative content analysis was proposed as the main research technique. In this way, the two longest-running print media of the Spanish press were chosen in order to propose a diachronic analysis based on their archives: the social democratic *El País* (since 1976) and the conservative, monarchist *ABC* (since 2001). A*BC* was selected from the conservative spectrum of newspapers based on technical criteria as the data collection from *El Mundo* did not guarantee completeness. Additionally, *ABC* is the oldest Spanish generalist newspaper with a national focus. Given the different editorial lines of the two newspapers, the proposed design also allows us to observe the political–media parallelism typical of the polarized pluralist model in which the Spanish media system is framed (Hallin and Mancini 2004), in addition to being two of the three primary national media outlets according to the EGM[3] over the past decades.

The tags of the eight politicians who have presided over the European Commission in the last 38 years were searched: the socialist Roy Jenkins, the liberal Gaston Thorn, the socialist Jacques Delors, the popular Jacques Santer, the liberal Romano Prodi, the popular José Manuel Durão Barroso, the popular Jean-Claude Juncker, and the popular Ursula von der Leyen. In the case of *El País,* information about the eight leaders was found; in *ABC*, however, the old publications are not completely digitized, so no pieces were found on Roy Jenkins, Gaston Thorn, and Jacques Santer.

Once the corresponding tags were located, the headlines, subtitles, and metadata of all the available news within each of the tags were downloaded using *data scraping* techniques. The sample consisted of 13,340 pieces (Supplementary Table S1). The analysis was carried out considering the following variables:

- Newspaper (dichotomous variable). *El País* or *ABC*.
- Title (nominal variable).
- Subtitle (nominal variable).
- News author (nominal variable).
- Date (quantitative variable). Day, month, and year of publication of the piece.

- Headline allusion (nominal categorical variable). Measures which of the eight representatives mentioned the title of the piece refers to (Roy Jenkins, Gaston Thorn, Jacques Delors, Jacques Santer, Romano Prodi, José Manuel Durão Barroso, Jean-Claude Juncker, or Ursula von der Leyen).
- Timing (ordinal variable). Before, during, or after the mandate.

A sentiment analysis was conducted using XLM-RoBERTa-base for Sentiment Analysis[4], a natural language processing model trained with over 198 million tweets published between May 2018 and March 2020 in more than 30 languages, which calculates the probability of a message being positive, negative, or neutral. While the performance of the algorithm varies depending on the language, the results for massive sample analysis in Spanish have shown considerable robustness, with an accuracy of around 85%, surpassing other models of a similar nature, such as VADER or TextBlob (Córdoba-Cabús et al. 2023). Even though it is important to note that this model has limitations in detecting irony or sarcasm, these forms of expression are less frequently found in media headlines compared to the more common analyses of social networks (Maladry et al. 2023). Additionally, when these nuances are present, they tend to be mitigated by the law of large numbers, which suggests that errors can cancel each other out when working with substantial datasets.

The variables derived from the sentiment analysis are as follows:

- Positivity load (quantitative scale variable). Probability of the message being positive.
- Neutrality load (quantitative scale variable). Probability of the message being neutral.
- Negative load (quantitative scale variable). Probability of the message being negative.
- Headline sentiment (quantitative scale variable). Measured from 0 to 100 based on a re-coding of the emotional loads of positivity, neutrality, and negativity, with 0 being extremely negative and 100 being extremely positive.
- Predominant feeling (nominal categorical variable). The headlines were divided into negative (sentiment between 0 and 33.33), neutral (between 33.34 and 66.66), and positive (66.67 and 100).

The headlines were also subjected to a frequency analysis using an ad hoc Python script that utilizes pandas, nltk, collections, and string libraries. From the resulting list of the most frequent words, those considered *stopwords*, words without semantic load, such as prepositions or determiners, were omitted.

The population, coinciding with the sample, is made up of the 13,340 news articles published in the last 48 years between 6 June 1976 and 15 February 2024 by the national newspapers *El País* and *ABC*. These articles are distributed relatively uniformly across the decades, with the exceptions of the incomplete decades of the 1970s (2.0%) and the current decade (8.0%), with a peak observed in the 2000s (38.7%), coinciding with *ABC*'s commencement of digitizing and indexing its archives. Furthermore, the proportion of articles is greater in *El País* during periods of strict overlap (accounting for 52.0% compared to 48.0% for *ABC*).

The analysis allowed, firstly, to take a general snapshot of the publications about the presidents of the European Commission and their evolution over time and, secondly, to propose a comparison between the coverage of both newspapers.

3. Results

3.1. Main Themes

"Brussels" is the most repeated term among the headlines analyzed, mentioned 1788 times, as it houses the headquarters of the main EU institutions, including the Commission itself, and acts as a metonym for them. This is shown in Figure 1. For its part, "Spain" appears 1062 times. After Spain, other countries, such as France (329), Italy (319), and Germany (225) are present. It is worth highlighting the fact that, among the 50 most repeated words, only two national leaders appear: Zapatero, president of the Government of Spain between 2004 and 2011, and Berlusconi, president of the Italian Council of Ministers in the periods 1994–1995, 2001–2006, and 2008–2011. The surnames of the presidents of the

European Commission, such as Prodi (616), Barroso (536), Juncker (366), and Leyen (283), are also recurrent.

Regarding the political processes taking place in the European sphere, among the most frequent words are terms related to institutions (EC: 671, Union: 473, EEC: 319, and Parliament: 259), to the people involved (government: 660, president: 508, countries: 394, minister: 225, presidency: 173, and leaders: 168), and to the interactions between both (agreement: 429, summit: 369, plan: 344, aids: 321, pact: 222, and funds: 188). It is worth highlighting the collaborative nature and action or dialogue of this last group. In relation to the contexts, the most prominent word is "crisis", with 415 occurrences. This term is present not only in the headlines of articles related to the Great Recession or the coronavirus crisis but also in publications about situations of adversity unrelated to these two contexts: "Prodi's last effort to avoid a serious political crisis in Italy" (El País, 8 October 1997, sentiment: 40/100) or "The EU ends its institutional crisis with the signing of the Treaty of Lisbon" (ABC, 12 December 2007, 39).



Figure 1. Word cloud with the terms most frequently associated with the leaders of the European Commission.

On the other hand, the frequency of the verbs 'asks' (445), 'proposes' (313), 'wants' (192), 'says' (187), and 'warns' (179) reflects the predominant dynamics of political figures in their media representation. Propositional actions and those of desire or complaint characterize the discourse, as can be seen through headlines such as "The European Commission proposes that Spain have 58 deputies in Strasbourg" (El País, 7 June 1984, sentiment: 67/100) or "The EC asks Italy to adjust its stimulus measures to the deficit target" (ABC, 3 May 2013, 49).

Through the Latent Dirichlet Allocation method, *topic modeling* was carried out. This generative model makes it possible to identify predominant themes in the coverage of the European Commission and its presidents from a set of data, bringing them together in different thematic groups. Previously, from the list of terms, all those terms with little semantic load (positions, entities, and empty verbs) and all those names of presidents that confine the action to specific periods were removed so that groups could flourish regardless of personalities or specific events. After this procedure, five main non-exclusive themes emerged: Economy, Foreign Affairs, Internal Politics, Spanish Politics, and Future of the EU, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Topic modeling (1976–2024) [1].

Topic	Name	Words
1	Economy	Commission, millions, Spain, Germany, plan, Portugal, euros, leader, France, coronavirus
2	Foreign Affairs	Commission, United, states, year, pact, EU-27, summit, partners, crisis, next
3	Internal Politics	Commission, Ukraine, measures, governments, years, Euro, market, Parliament, Berlin, Spain
4	Spanish Politics	Commission, agreement, Spain, United, Kingdom, country, PP, executive, national, Germany
5	Future of the EU	summit, policy/politics/political [2], crisis, change, Commission, Ukraine, Russia, Italy, gas, Spain

[1] Topic coherence: 0.32778. Method: Latent Dirichlet Allocation. [2] "Política" in Spanish in the original.

Economy brings together terms directly related to finance, such as "euros" or "millions", and terms related to some of the member countries with more prominence in this regard (Spain, Germany, Portugal, and France), with a very active role in the administration and negotiation of the funds. Regarding crises, "coronavirus" is another word that appears in this group. Messages like Política (El País, 24 June 2022, sentiment: 68/100) or "Brussels proposes a package of measures against the recession worth 200 billion euros" (ABC, 26 November 2008, 59) are framed in this theme.

Foreign Affairs collects agreements between member countries and external political figures to the EU, among which the United States is one of the most represented. "Summit", "partners", and "pact" are some of the most frequent terms that make up many of the headlines about this topic: "The EU and China try to smooth out their trade differences and on Ukraine" (ABC, 7 December 2023, sentiment: 85/100) or "The European summit demands that the United States exclude cinema from the GATT" (El País, 12 December 1993, 22).

The following group, Internal Politics, is made up of the main events that mark the current situation in the European context, such as the implementation of new measures, political decision making, or changes related to the euro or the common market. For its part, the term "Ukraine" is predominant given the information explosion since the Russian invasion in February 2022. It also highlights "Berlin" as an important engine of the EU and a heavyweight figure in the community framework. Internal Politics, therefore, brings together a wide variety of publications, among which the following can be found: Delors resumes the European social dialogue on labor flexibility and employment (El País, 25 January 1993, sentiment: 88/100), "Brussels is nearing a purchase agreement for a potential future coronavirus vaccine with CureVac" (ABC, 20 August 2020, 72), or "The European Parliament agrees to vote on Wednesday for Barroso's re-election" (ABC, 10 September 2009, 53).

Spanish Politics, for its part, includes national approaches to European issues, mainly addressing the impact on the country ("national" and "country") of certain measures or the statements of Spanish figures ("PP" (People's Party) and "executive") regarding community matters. This type of message can be seen in headlines, such as "A MEP criticizes the absence of the PP in the face of the production crisis" (El País, 6 September 2003, sentiment: 6/100). It also includes terms related to other countries, such as Germany or the United Kingdom ("Kingdom" and "United"), as external agents with decision-making capacity or influence in their interaction with Spain.

Finally, Future of the EU encompasses a wide range of issues in a similar way to Internal Politics. However, in this case, the topic is focused on risk issues that may have a significant impact on Europe in the coming years, even going as far as to set the course for the supranational organization. The main ones are the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Russia and Ukraine), the energy crisis ("gas"), and climate change ("change"). Italy also

stands out as a frequent word, which can be attributed to two fundamental reasons: the rise of the far-right in the country and the seed of Euroscepticism, phenomena embodied in representatives like Silvio Berlusconi or Giorgia Meloni.

3.2. Evolution of General Sentiment

The average sentiment toward the EU has experienced slight fluctuations over time. Between 1976 and 2024, the supranational organization went through hugely different political moments in contexts of both crisis and prosperity. In the meantime, therefore, a wide range of information has been published on the European Commission and its representatives, representative of the current situation. In this sense, the agenda has been able to determine these ambivalences.

However, none of them have led to significant changes in the global trend, which can be considered downward; that is, toward a more negative average emotional load. It can be checked through a comparison by decades: in the seventies, the average sentiment was 48; in the eighties, it was 45; in the nineties, 41. This is a sustained decrease of seven points on average over 24 years. In the 2000s, the figure drops to 38, where it remains throughout the 2010s. This may be due to a real change in the media perception of the EU once Spain joined the organization or to a change in headlines in the context of a transition from print to digital format. However, it should be noted that between 2020 and 2024, the average sentiment increased by three points to reach 41, with a slight rise observed during the COVID and post-COVID periods.

Globally, the average emotional load from *El País* is 40, ten points below total neutrality. The same happens in the case of *ABC*. Since the nineties, the figure has always remained below 50. The lowest point occurred during the euro crisis, with an average below 30, while the highest occurred during coronavirus management, with an average much closer to 50.

Regarding the comparison between *El País* and *ABC*, no significant differences are observed in the average treatment. There are stages in which the average sentiment of *El País* is slightly higher than that of *ABC* and vice versa, as reflected in Figure 2. However, the following section will delve into the aspects where a greater disparity between the two media can indeed be observed.

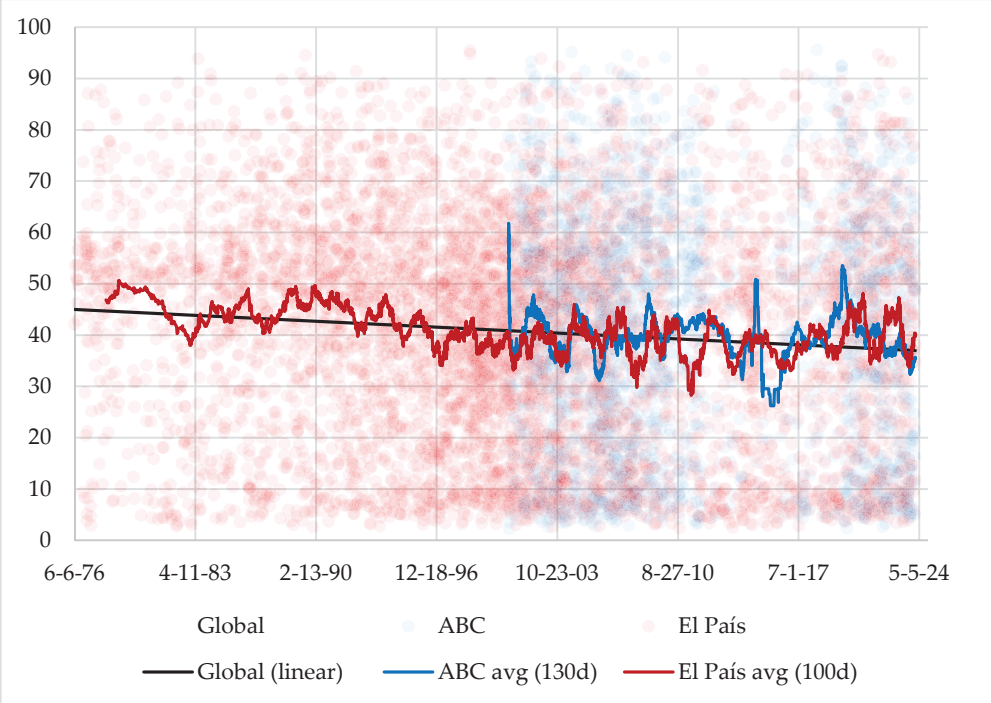


Figure 2. Evolution of the average sentiment toward the European Commission through its leaders.

3.3. Treatment and Representation of EU Leaders

Overall, it can be seen from Table 2 that the average sentiment in the treatment of EU political leaders has declined over time. While Roy Jenkins has the highest number (51)—based solely on the data from *El País*—Jean-Claude Juncker receives the most negative sentiment on average (38). It turns out that 44.9% of the posts related to the latter are negative, a proportion that is three times higher than the percentage of positive ones.

Table 2. Average sentiment of each of the presidents of the European Commission [1].

President	N	*ABC*	*El País*	Average
Roy Jenkins	32		51	51
Gaston Thorn	50		45	45
Jacques Delors	354	35	46	40
Jacques Santer	126		40	40
Romano Prodi	642	39	40	39
José Manuel Durão Barroso	524	43	41	42
Jean-Claude Juncker	274	40	37	38
Ursula von der Leyen	217	45	43	44
Group		***ABC***	***El País***	**Average**
Socialists	386	35	48	41
Populars	1.141	43	41	42
Liberals	692	39	41	40

[1] The sentiment is measured on a scale from 0 to 100, with 0 being extremely negative and 100 being extremely positive. The color of the presidents' names indicate their political group: red for socialists, blue for populars, yellow for liberals.

In the coverage of the first two presidents, Roy Jenkins and Gaston Thorn, about 70% of the headlines *from El País* are neutral. However, in the rest of the cases, there seems to be greater polarization in both media outlets, with a neutrality load always below 50%. In general, the bulk of the messages are divided between positive and negative, with a predominance of the latter group.

However, the treatment of Ursula von der Leyen implies a slight increase in the average sentiment compared to the previous ones, being an exception in the described trend. It happens even in *El País*, a center-left media outlet, where only 31.8% of the headlines are negative, 50.2% are neutral, and 18.2% are positive. In fact, regarding this newspaper, she's the person with the highest average positive rating (20.9%), only behind the socialist Jacques Delors (22.2%). Only José Manuel Durão Barroso before von der Leyen had an average sentiment higher than his predecessor, with an average of 42 compared to Romano Prodi's 39 points.

If the tone is observed based on the groups, it can be seen that, while in *El País* the socialists (48) receive a more favorable treatment than the populars (41), in the pieces by *ABC*, the opposite happens (socialists: 35 and populars: 43). Although the differences in both cases are seven or eight points, coverage tends to be more neutral in the first newspaper and closer to negative in the second. The liberals are the most similar group when comparing the sentiment of the headlines of *El País* (41) and *ABC* (39), with only a two-point difference.

Regarding the treatment over time, Figure 3 shows a clear decline in the representation of *El País*—the only media outlet where we could compile the complete historical series—of all European leaders. In most cases, the largest decline in average sentiment occurs in the last part of the mandate and the most positive peak occurs at the beginning or somewhere in between. Gaston Thorn is an exception to this trend, as he receives opposite coverage and the latest news about him is the closest to positivity.

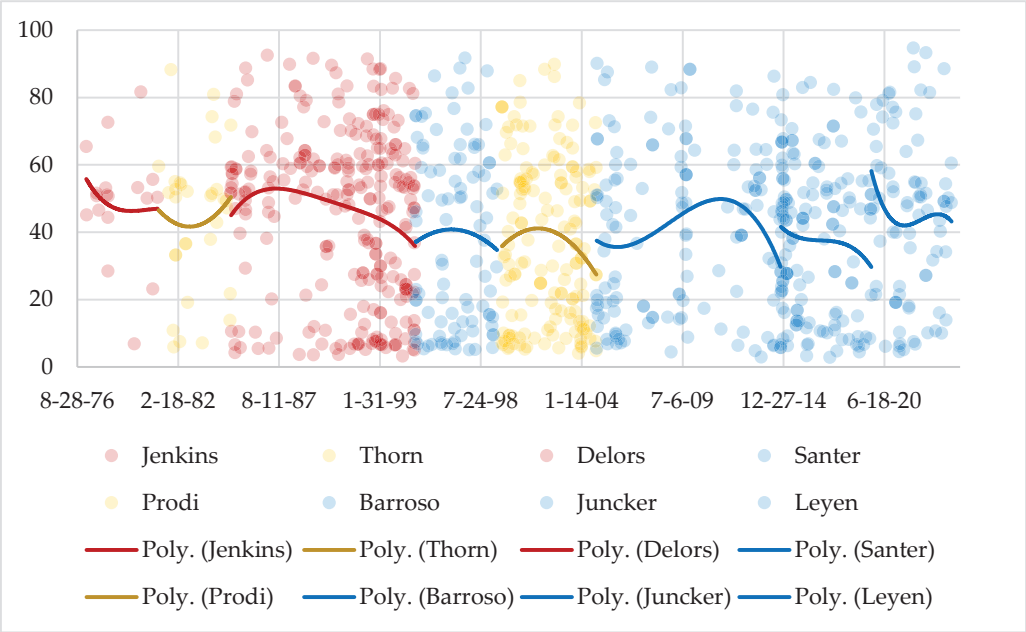


Figure 3. Evolution of sentiment toward each of the leaders of the European Commission.

The reasons why the average sentiment declines at the end of most terms are multiple in each case. However, in the coverage of some leaders, certain issues stand out with negative treatment. For example, in the last stage of Jacques Delors, *El País* published particularly critical headlines, such as "Solchaga criticizes the 'Delors package' as insufficient for economic cohesion" (El País, 23 April 1992, 5), "Should Delors resign?" (El País, 30 September 1992, 17), or "American sanctions and McSharry's criticisms compromise Delors' political future" (7 November 1992, 8). On the other hand, the latest steps of José Manuel Durão Barroso are marked in both newspapers by the leader's statements regarding the consequences of the euro crisis: "Barroso believes that the EU's austerity policy «has reached its limit»" (ABC, 23 April 2013, 18), "Barroso believes that the greatest risk to recovery is political" (ABC, 23 September 2013, 31), and "Barroso blames the capitals for the mistakes in the euro crisis" (El País, 29 October 2014, 6).

The case of Ursula von der Leyen is unique in that, although there is also a decline in her final phase, with a peak of negativity in 2021, the most negatively charged news in this period relates to tensions with Turkey and Hungary: "Von der Leyen claims to have felt 'hurt and alone' by the snub from the Turkish president" (El País, 16 April 2021, 7) and "Von der Leyen threatens Orbán with cutting European funds if he does not stop the homophobic stance" (El País, 7 July 2021, 5). Her last days in office, however, were marked by the handling of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict; this is shown by headlines such as "Urtasun accuses Von der Leyen of 'double standards' for condemning the organization's attack and not the Israeli occupation of Palestine" (ABC, 9 October 2023, 6) or "Criticism of Ursula Von der Leyen for not coordinating her support trip to Israel" (ABC, 17 October 2023, 24). Her highest levels of positivity coincide with the management of the economic and health crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The most repeated terms in the headlines related to each president of the European Commission allow us to track some of the topics most associated with them by each media outlet. Table 3 shows that these lists of words that were once frequent institutional terms, such as "EU" or "Commission", are excluded in any publication regardless of the subject it features.

Table 3. Terms most associated with the presidents of the European Commission (1976–2024).

President	*ABC*	*El País*
Roy Jenkins (1977–1981)	—	Spain (5), Madrid (3), future (3), party (3), leader (3)
Gaston Thorn (1981–1985)	—	Spain (14), income (5), visit (4), crisis (3), entry (3)
Jacques Delors (1985–1995)	dies (1), former president (1), years (1), led (1), minister (1), economy (1), France (1)	González (27), Spain (21), requests (16), agreement (14), proposes (13), economic (12), summit (11), social (11), Spanish (10), construction (10), monetary (10), crisis (10)
Jacques Santer (1995–1999)	—	against (10), employment (6), Parliament (5), asks (5), summit (5), euro (5), Aznar (5), kohl (5), portfolios (5)
Romano Prodi (1999–2004)	Berlusconi (31), Italy (20), pact (15), Zapatero (12), Aznar (11), stability (11), asks (9), says (9), crisis (9), minister (9), confidence (9)	Italy (32), Berlusconi (24), Italian (23), Aznar (14), Spain (13), asks (13), says (13), crisis (12), center-left (12)
José Manuel Durão Barroso (2004–2014)	crisis (16), Zapatero (12), support (11), censorship (10), Spain (10), politics (9), Sarkozy (9), front (9), president (9), Buttiglione (9), says (9), announces (8), Goldman Sachs (8)	minister (20), Portuguese (17), first (16), against (14), asks (12), Spain (12), socialists (11), leaders (10), executive (10), Europeans (10), Zapatero (10)
Jean-Claude Juncker (2014–2019)	plan (5), Goldman Sachs (4), Brexit (4), assures (4), Spain (4), doubt (3), crisis (3), Johnson (3), United Kingdom (3), Greece (3), asks (3), May (3), state (3)	plan (26), against (20), Spain (16), Brexit (13), million (12), investment (11), euro (11), Merkel (10), Rajoy (10), agreement (10), leader (10)
Ursula von der Leyen (2019–act.)	agreement (8), Spain (7), Ukraine (7), PP (6), plan (6), Johnson (6), promises (5), asks (5), European (5), Russia (5), Sánchez (5), as (4), post-Brexit (4), Kingdom (4), United (4), Kiev (4), Feijóo (4)	crisis (9), Poland (8), German (8), agreement (7), Johnson (7), Hungary (7), Michel (7), Ukraine (7), British (6), promises (6), defends (5), speech (5), Spain (5), warns (5), reconstruction (5) first (5), visit (5), defense (5), Russia (5), PP (5), millions (5)

In the case of Roy Jenkins, the representation by *El País* is very general, with very common terms in political journalism, such as "party" or "leader". However, in the coverage of his successor, Gaston Thorn, words related to Spain's accession to the supranational organization ('membership' and 'entry') begin to appear. The information from both representatives also covers their respective visits to Spain ("Madrid" and "visit").

With Jacques Delors, some of the most repeated terms among the pieces of *El País*, such as "proposes", "asks", "agreement", or "summit", highlight the coverage of the internal dynamics of the organization in a context where Spain is already a member country, hence the recurrence of "construction." These news items are also associated with Felipe González and Spain ("González", "Spain", and "Spanish") and introduce the economic aspect ("economic", "monetary", and "crisis").

In numerous publications of *El País,* Jacques Santer appears represented from opposition and confrontation, with "against" being the most repeated word among the headlines. For instance, Santer calls to "fight" against those who wish to dilute the European Union (El País, 18 January 1995, sentiment: 20/100) or "Santer warns against the 'Helms-Burton law'" (El País, 13 June 1996, 32) are illustrative of this dynamic, which is repeated in the coverage of José Manuel Durão Barroso.

Both in *ABC* and in *El País*, Romano Prodi appears closely related to Italy and Berlusconi. However, while the former mostly links the character with the Spanish socialist politician José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, the latter associates him with the popular José María Aznar, mainly in reference to different meetings that took place between the then president of the Government of Spain and the European representative.

As for José Manuel Durão Barroso, above all *ABC* relates the leader to "crisis" and "Goldman Sachs" in relation to the Great Recession, which took place during his term. The

recurrence of Buttiglione also stands out due to the coverage of the controversy surrounding Rocco Buttiglione, candidate for Commissioner of Justice and Equality in October 2004, who ended up resigning from the position after receiving criticism for homophobic behavior. *El País* links it mainly with the terms "first", "minister", and "Portuguese"—in reference to their previous position—and not with the management of the Great Recession. Among the headlines of both media, the name Zapatero is repeated, generally due to meetings or interactions between the two leaders: "Zapatero gives his support to Barroso but asks him to now 'listen'" (El País, 28 October 2004, sentiment: 33/100).

The so-called Investment Plan for Europe or Juncker Plan features in numerous pieces about the popular Jean-Claude Juncker, with "plan" being the most repeated term in both newspapers—in *El País*, "millions", "investment", and "euro" are also recurring. Another important topic associated with him is Brexit ("Brexit", "Johnson", "Kingdom", "United", and "May"). *ABC* and *El País* agree on these two issues. However, the second is the only one to frequently associate the leader with the former president of the Government of Spain, Mariano Rajoy, and the former German Chancellor, Angela Merkel (both conservatives).

The aftermath of Brexit continues to be present in Ursula von der Leyen's coverage, as can be seen through the recurrence of "agreement", "Johnson", "post-Brexit", "Brexit", "Kingdom", and "United". To this juncture is added the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Ukraine, Kiev, Russia, and defense). Beyond these two crises, *ABC* more frequently associates it with national politicians Pedro Sánchez and Alberto Núñez Feijóo (Sánchez and Feijóo), while *El País* mainly alludes to Poland and Hungary, member countries that have had tensions with Brussels, to which the first newspaper seems to pay less attention.

The way in which the presidents of the European Commission are referred to is the last aspect considered in the analysis of their media representation. In this sense, the use of the first name in addition to the last name stands out when mentioning leaders Roy Jenkins and Gaston Thorn in the headlines, as can be seen in Table 4. In the case of the former, 53.6% of the news items use the first name; in the case of the latter, the figure rises to 75.5%. This occurred at a time when Spain perceived the institution with greater distance, with all data sourced exclusively from *El País*.

From Jacques Delors onwards, once Spain was integrated into the organization, the proportion of news mentioning the first name did not reach 15%. In the case of Romano Prodi, José Manuel Durão Barroso, and Jean-Claude Juncker, the references to the name are so residual that they do not even occur in every third article. This decline may be due to a greater familiarity with the European Commission and its representatives once Spain joined the EU.

However, once again, the treatment of Ursula von der Leyen is presented as an exception to the trend. This is the most mentioned person by name in the last 20 years (12.3%), surpassing Jacques Santer (11.2%) and being less than two points away from that of Jacques Delors (14.1%).

Table 4. Percentage of mentions of the first name in relation to mentions of the last name.

Politician	*ABC*	*El País*	Average
Roy Jenkins		53.6%	
Gaston Thorn		75.5%	
Jacques Delors		14.1%	
Jacques Santer		11.2%	
Romano Prodi	11.4%	5.5%	8.4%
José Manuel Durão Barroso	0.0%	0.5%	**0.3%**
Jean-Claude Juncker	6.2%	3.9%	**5.0%**
Ursula von der Leyen	12.0%	12.6%	**12.3%**

4. Discussion and Conclusions

According to García-Carretero et al. (2023), the figures with the most presence in the publications of the Spanish media about the EU are its representatives. In the case of the European Commission and its leaders, as the visible faces of the executive and

those most responsible for the direction of the Union, they may also be the ones who can best capture Europeanist sentiment, conformity with community policies in each country, and in a general sense, the point at which the project of European construction finds itself. For all these reasons, it is relevant to address, from research, the media treatment they receive, in this case by the Spanish generalist press. Although the media is far from being a mere channel of transmission between citizens and politicians, a sentiment analysis of the media allows us to better understand the role of constructing emotional narratives about agenda issues and the informative protagonists, in this case, institutions and political representatives.

Objective 1 (O1) of this work aimed to describe the informational coverage of the Commission and its members and its evolution over time, considering the sentiment of the messages and the predominant topics. Five main themes were identified in which the bulk of this information can be framed: Economy, Foreign Affairs, Internal Politics, Spanish Politics, and Future of the EU. This outlines, in this way, an eminently pragmatic and utilitarian coverage by the press, which focuses on the main spheres in which the EU operates (economy and Foreign Affairs), on national implications, and on the future of Europe.

These five topics are present in other research of a similar nature, especially in aspects, such as the economy as a central theme (Mayo-Cubero et al. 2023; García-Carretero et al. 2023) or the weight of national politics in this type of publication (Pradel-Miquel 2008; García-Carretero et al. 2023; Fernández-Rovira and Carniel-Bugs 2024). On the other hand, an event like the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which authors like García-Carretero et al. (2023) classified as an independent topic, is included under more general themes, such as Internal Politics or Future of the EU.

The average sentiment experienced slight fluctuations between 1976 and 2024, with none of them particularly significant compared to the general trend, which is leaning slightly toward negativity and abandons the neutrality that characterized the period prior to the 1990s. The press coverage of the representatives of the European Commission was much more neutral when Spain had not yet joined the EU, despite being a country that values its membership in the organization above the average (Eurobarometer 2024). Now that the country is immersed in the dynamics of the supranational organization, from an internal perspective, the tone of the analyzed Spanish media has become more critical, which seems to imply an evolution toward distrust and a greater rejection of the general perception of the EU and its leaders over the last decades.

However, the changes in sentiment between the euphoria (2000–2007) and the crisis (2008–2014) and post-crisis (2015–2018) periods identified by Sales-Piñeiro and Capriotti-Peri (2022) are not as noticeable. With regard to the aforementioned fluctuations, these may be due to alterations in the political and media agendas and, especially from the 1990s onwards, to a change in the form of headlines in the context of the digital transition, from a shorter and inevitably neutral text to a longer and more interpretative one.

Objective 2 (O2) was to compare the treatment of the leaders of the European Commission by *El País* and *ABC*. In both cases, there is a noticeable trend toward negativity toward each new president. However, in *El País*, the socialists receive a more neutral treatment and the populars are more inclined to negativity. In *ABC,* the opposite happens, a bias that may be conditioned by the editorial line of each of the media and in whose coverage of the EU more differences have already been perceived (Mayo-Cubero et al. 2023; García-Carretero et al. 2023; Menéndez-Alarcón 2010). The data are coherent with the political parallelism present in the Spanish media system, the polarized pluralist: the representation and assessment of the Commission and its leaders by *El País* and *ABC* have been quite similar, respectively, to the political support of the PSOE and PP for the presidency in office, according to their European political affiliation. In this regard, it is worth recalling the historical tradition of pacts between these two European groups within the EU.

This aligns with framing theory (Entman 1993), as the media appears to depict political opposition leaders in a more negative light depending on their editorial stance. This can be

observed in both the overall sentiment of headlines and the themes associated with these figures. For example, *El País* links von der Leyen to Hungary and Poland, constructing a conflict-oriented frame, whereas *ABC* portrays her as an arbiter between the Spanish prime minister and the opposition leader. Similarly, the newspaper's portrayal of Juncker extends a critical, negative perception of his entire political spectrum.

This phenomenon reinforces the idea that the positioning of headlines significantly affects the way they represent political leaders and the EU as a whole, which in turn underscores the relevance of a plural and diverse media system to ensure the formation of a balanced and well-informed public opinion about Europe, its representatives, and the events that take place within it. Otherwise, biased coverage can undermine pro-European sentiment and even fuel Euroscepticism. In any case, the alternation of critical coverage with more benevolent coverage depending on the governments in power, in a political context as delicate as the current one, can generate a certain amount of noise about the media's pro-European stance, a phenomenon whose consequences are difficult to foresee in the medium term and which invites a profound reflection within the media on their role in the project of European construction.

The case of Ursula von der Leyen is presented as an exception to the general trend in the representation of European leaders: on one hand, the representative has a significantly higher average sentiment than her predecessors; on the other, she is the most mentioned person by name in the last 20 years. Regarding the first argument, it is noted how the leader has awakened, especially at the beginning of her term, a positive feeling that is unusual in recent decades, especially during the pandemic. This suggests that the expansive policies promoted during the coronavirus crisis have been considerably better received by the media regardless of their editorial line, unlike the austerity measures that were applied during the Great Recession and that burden the media representation of some of their standard bearers, as is the case with the popular José Manuel Durão Barroso and Jean-Claude Juncker. Even so, the final stages of her first term have been negatively affected by the handling of the Israeli invasion of Palestine.

Regarding the explicit mentions of her name, these differences add to the biased and stereotyped treatment that Montes-Rodríguez (2021) detects in the news coverage of von der Leyen from a qualitative perspective. The first woman to hold the presidency of the European Commission does not seem, therefore, to be detached from a differential component in her treatment that could reflect a sexist bias. In a period when Spain was outside the EU or newly integrated into the community, the use of the first names of less popular leaders in the media agenda, such as Roy Jenkins, Gaston Thorn, or Jacques Delors, can be explained. However, at present, the repeated use of the first name of von der Leyen cannot be explained by the same explanation of widespread ignorance and point to the aforementioned gender issue. Thus, further studies are needed to examine this phenomenon in a more detailed and profound manner, considering how media coverage of female political leaders compares to their male counterparts in various contexts. It is crucial to investigate whether these patterns are consistent across different media outlets and regions or if specific factors influence the disparity in coverage. This would help determine whether gender bias is pervasive and to what extent it affects the portrayal of leadership in the media.

In short, the findings of this study allow us to conclude that the media treatment of the European Commission's leaders is very pragmatic, somewhat biased by its editorial line, and focuses on aspects, such as the economy or national issues. In this sense, skepticism increased once Spain joined the EU, with a slight tendency toward negativity since then. Subsequent analyses may investigate the extent to which this coverage has influenced the emergence of Eurosceptic, populist, and ultranationalist political parties, or if, on the contrary, it is the appearance of these forces and their ability to place controversial topics on the news agenda that causes coverage with more negative sentiments toward the European project. This line of research can be enriched by new studies exploring news framing and employing discourse analysis techniques, such as qualitative coding, thematic analysis, or

critical discourse analysis, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the analyzed press articles.

On the other hand, von der Leyen's recent term in office, which began at the same time that the health crisis exploded, seems to be the only one to have redirected media representation toward a more positive sentiment, having harnessed the Union's supranational potential to provide a common response to a global challenge. Similarly, future research on the subject could study the evolution of this coverage not only in other traditional and digital media but also in other countries with different political contexts and attitudes toward the European project (Eurobarometer 2024), thus establishing comparisons according to the representation of Eurosceptic or Europhobic parties.

The future evolution of media coverage about the European Union and its institutions, which seems to be at a turning point at the moment, will ultimately determine whether the positive sentiment around the German leader and the measures implemented during her tenure represent the beginning of a change in public perception of European policies and representatives or just an exception to a worrying negative trend whose consequences may begin to be felt more intensely with the start of the new legislature.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/journalmedia5040103/s1, Table S1: News headlines, subtitles and metadata.

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Notes

1 The refugee crisis (2013–2016) refers to the mass influx of refugees and migrants, primarily from war-torn regions in the Middle East and Africa, seeking asylum in Europe, which created significant political, social, and humanitarian challenges across the continent.

2 A far-right political party in Spain, which gained significant support from 2018 onwards, driven by its nationalist, anti-immigration, and anti-Catalan independence stance, as well as its opposition to feminist and progressive policies.

3 The Estudio General de Medios (EGM) is a comprehensive media study conducted in Spain that provides detailed insights into media consumption habits and audience demographics. It surveys a wide range of media platforms, including television, radio, print, and digital, allowing advertisers, researchers, and media professionals to understand trends and shifts in audience behavior over time.

4 https://huggingface.co/cardiffnlp/twitter-xlm-roberta-base-sentiment (accessed on 10 September 2024).

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Article

The Factuality of News on Twitter According to Digital Qualified Audiences: Expectations, Perceptions, and Divergences with Journalism Considerations

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Abstract: This research analyzes to what extent qualified digital audiences perceive, understand, and value the factuality of news published by news media within a communicative ecosystem where unverified information proliferates on social media. Additionally, it examines which factors may influence what highly educated and critically capable information audiences expect to find when consuming journalism. A qualitative, comparative study was conducted from a sample obtained of the ten most relevant statements on socio-political topics with the highest number of interactions published on the Twitter (X) accounts of six European digital and legacy media (Médiapart and Le Monde, France; Tortoise and The Guardian, United Kingdom; El Diario.es and El País, Spain), along with their reflection and development on the respective websites. With an expanded analytical scope to 300 tweet-news items (n = 300), two in-person focus groups were held at the College of Europe in Natolin (Poland) with postgraduate students from nine countries to assess their perception of the degree of truthfulness, bias, quality, and credibility of the displayed information. The results indicate that young, qualified digital audiences feel secure and capable of detecting any disinformation disorder. They value the variety of mentioned and verifiable sources, the presence of expert voices, and data-based claims as key elements in constructing credible media narratives.

Keywords: factuality; disinformation; Twitter; digital audiences; journalism

1. Introduction

False stories conceived and distributed across various digital platforms are often perceived by audiences as genuine news. The multiplicity of actors and sources in the current communicative ecosystem, along with 24-h information flows and the accelerated production rhythms on social media, prompt media to publish quickly without adequate verification (Rosenberg & Feldman, 2008), thereby increasing misinformation among increasingly fragmented audiences who find it progressively challenging not only to distinguish falsehood from truth but also to differentiate factuality from speculation and opinion within statements. In this regard, several studies by the Pew Research Center (2018) and the Reuters Institute (2021) indicate that the problem lies not only in media verification but also in public expectations, valuation, and reading comprehension.

Although the academic literature has already extensively addressed considerations of what journalism is and how it should act to differentiate itself from other content creators in the current digital landscape (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018; Truyens & Picone, 2021; Pérez Curiel et al., 2021), this conceptual review of journalism's norms and roles has almost always

been conducted from the perspective of production rather than reception. Consequently, discrepancies arise between how professionals conceive their practice (Mellado & Van Dalen, 2013) and how audiences, especially younger ones, perceive that performance in terms of what can be considered top-quality journalistic work (Weaver et al., 2007; Costera-Meijer, 2007).

For all these reasons, this study aims to analyze whether the concept of factuality, as the foundation for constructing verified news facts (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014) that distinguish them from rumors and hoaxes (C. Silverman, 2015), remains relevant in the construction of contemporary journalistic discourse, both in traditional and new digital media, through the social channel Twitter (X). In doing so, it delves into the evaluation of two central aspects: first, whether new consumption habits developed on social media produce cognitive biases (Greifeneder et al., 2021) that may shape what digital audiences expect to find in publications by news media and, second, to what extent these audiences, accustomed to trusting what they read and share on such platforms (Karlsson et al., 2017; Wagner & Boczkowski, 2019), may validate information lacking factual basis and constructed from misleading statements or headlines (Luo et al., 2022).

For the purposes of this research, the analysis focuses on the perceptions and expectations that highly qualified digital audiences hold regarding journalism. This term refers to digital-native users (Prensky, 2001) familiar with technology, social media, and new devices who are further distinguished from other active audiences (Livingstone, 2019) by their high level of education and, consequently, critical thinking, knowledge of new media, and ability to detect misinformation (Orhan, 2023).

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. The Disinformative Context in Digital Environments

The transformation in the ways of producing and consuming information in digital environments has blurred traditional boundaries of journalism (Carlson & Lewis, 2015). Journalists and media organizations must redefine their role in response to the emergence of new communicative actors engaged in activities that may be perceived as journalism (Maares & Hanusch, 2020, p. 262) by audiences, whose perception is decisive as they are the ones who grant legitimacy and credibility (Deuze & Witschge, 2016; Kananovich & Perreault, 2021).

The arrival of these new content creators from journalism's periphery (Chua & Duffy, 2019), who occupy a significant communicative space by building follower communities and capturing audiences, has led journalists and news media outlets to try to distinguish themselves from these actors to safeguard their "professional jurisdiction" (Lewis, 2012), emphasizing traditional values and codes, such as verification, independence, impartiality, and transparency (Singer, 2015), in the production of factual stories. Simultaneously, digital environments have fostered spaces for adopting new journalistic routines, moving away from professional normativity and tending toward hybrid solutions (Ferrucci & Canella, 2023) in an increasingly social and participative landscape.

In this context of technological impact, the integration of citizen voices in multiplatform content production and audience fragmentation, digital-native mediahave emerged as alternatives to traditional media, proposing new relationships with audiences (Cabrera et al., 2019). These new media of the digital era are characterized by creating community through participatory strategies and thematic specialization, focusing on audience-centered journalism (García-Orosa et al., 2020, p. 12), and utilizing social platforms to do so.

With this priority, digital media outlets linked to virality emerged, especially in the 2010s (Denisova, 2023), relying on social media traffic volume as their primary distribution strategy (Hurcombe, 2022). This also led them to adopt clickbait techniques—that is, content

designed to capture user attention by enticing clicks through emotional, sensational, and misleading headlines (Chen et al., 2015). The centrality of social media in the production and circulation of information has resulted in greater polarization of public opinion, an increase in biased messages, and, most notably, an exponential rise in misinformation (Álvaro-Sanchez, 2018).

Indeed, there has been a surge in so-called fake news, which is distributed globally, massively, and instantly via social media channels and other digital platforms, amplifying the effects of scams (Tandoc & Seet, 2024) and creating confusion among news consumers (Elías & Teira, 2021). As Elías (2021, p. 21) points out, false or fabricated information coexists with real news but in a biased way through a series of processes "where different channels feed off each other, lending greater credibility to this toxic narrative."

Despite its popularization, the concept of fake news does not encompass all forms of information disorder that exist (Ireton & Posetti, 2018; Wardle, 2019), nor does it capture the complexity of a disinformation phenomenon that exists for various reasons and can reach different levels of severity (Salaverría et al., 2020). The public dissemination of false content has diversified to such an extent that scams range from simple jokes to decontextualization or deception and may be fabricated deliberately or arise from exaggerations, misinterpretations, or mere confusion.

Considering all circumstances, scams spread more quickly and have a greater impact than true news (Vosoughi et al., 2018). This disinformation pandemic, as an "indication of the collapse of the old news order and the chaos of contemporary public communication" (Casero-Ripollés, 2020, p. 3), has required the effective implementation of urgent fact-checking mechanisms by agencies and journalistic media to detect and combat it (Pérez-Curiel & Velasco Molpeceres, 2020).

2.2. Factuality as a Distinctive Element of Journalism

In the so-called "post-truth" era (Suiter, 2016), the power of facts has been diminished by the proliferation of falsehoods and conspiracies, "alternative facts," and moods that carry more weight than evidence itself (McIntyre, 2018). This has resulted in greater audience fragmentation (Webster & Ksiazek, 2012) and a breakdown of the consensus and common factual basis needed to conceive and interpret reality. Thus, factuality stands as the foundation of "objective journalism" (Schudson, 2001) and as the distinguishing element that grants legitimacy to journalistic media over other actors, including politicians and partisan outlets.

Grounded in the verification discipline as the essence of journalism (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014), news discourse has traditionally been constructed factually, meaning it is based on verified facts. The ability of media to provide truthful and reliable news is based on institutionalized professional norms and practices that confer knowledge and authority in the eyes of the public (Karlsson et al., 2017). In this way, factuality as the foundation of new construction is associated with truth and serves as a compelling method of work, involving the effective use of resources—particularly linguistic ones—and the use of evidential markers to earn audience credibility (Ekström & Westlund, 2019).

In today's landscape, despite the rise of search engines and social channels as information sources, traditional media that rely on factuality to build their news discourse remain the most credible for a large part of the public (Newman et al., 2021). Moreover, they serve as the best antidote to counter disinformation and align with the demands of audiences who increasingly seek fact-based news rather than content that is debatable and solely opinion-based (Wagner & Boczkowski, 2019). Therefore, media authority decreases drastically when they publish news that has not been properly verified (Parks, 2022) or when they fail to detect and expose false information (Graves, 2017).

Although the multiplication of voices and messages through social media does not always make it easy to clearly distinguish truthful news from falsehoods, it is the responsibility of media and journalists to help audiences recognize such misleading content and continue providing them with relevant information (Spradling et al., 2021).

2.3. Audience Expectations and Perceptions

There is no doubt that audiences have taken on a central role within the field of journalism, which increasingly directs its strategy toward them (Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018), as do other content creators in hybrid digital environments where, as mentioned earlier, professional and non-professional actors intermingle (Schapals et al., 2019). However, this prioritization of better understanding audiences through metrics is negatively impacting the quality of the information produced: there are more news stories on the same topics, content is published quickly with insufficient verification and context, and imprecise and superficial content proliferates (Furst, 2020). This raises the question of the value that digital audiences assign to journalistic quality.

Quality has been cited by professionals as a fundamental element in determining and assessing whether the types of content produced and distributed to audiences may ultimately be perceived by them as credible, engaging, and relevant (Sundar, 1999). However, its perception and evaluation remain unclear within the collective imagination of such heterogeneous audiences as those in the digital space (Molyneux & Coddington, 2020). In fact, generational behavioral differences exist among audiences based on their experience, motivations, and understanding of how news is constructed and where it originates. According to a study by Wunderlich et al. (2022), journalism is perceived differently among younger, digital-native audiences who have not developed defined consumption habits, access more non-journalistic sources, and tend to be more distrustful of the media and adult audiences, also familiar with the analog era, who show greater loyalty to specific media brands and assign higher credibility to the professional sources they follow.

These differing perceptions among audience segments regarding the relevance and reliability of certain content over others (Craft et al., 2016) also help explain the difficulty many users have in detecting the degree of truthfulness, factuality, or bias in messages, whether they contain false information or real information. This often leads them to share these messages on social media and digital platforms, either because they do not delve into the full story and focus only on the headline (Herrero & González-Aldea, 2022) or because they lend credibility to anything that has many interactions and has thus been previously shared and validated by others (Luo et al., 2022), especially within their own contacts (Gil de Zúñiga & Cheng, 2021). Other factors influencing the likelihood of false content spreading and going viral include the topics, especially if they are up-to-date (Hameleers et al., 2021); the presence of news values, such as controversy or the unexpected nature of events; as well as emotional appeal and human interest (Berger & Milkman, 2012).

In one way or another, we refer to active audiences or "new citizens" (Masip et al., 2019), who act as prosumers and take the initiative to participate in public debate by sharing content in online environments, particularly on social media, without any journalistic filtering. This also allows false information to thrive as there is no media intermediation (Cooke, 2018).

In light of the above, the relationship between what journalists do and think and how digital audiences consider and value professional work in terms of quality, trust, and credibility warrants further academic exploration (Karlsson et al., 2017, p. 162). Understanding and comprehending the expectations and perceptions of news-consuming audiences will help to better redefine the role of journalistic media within the new attention economy (Truyens & Picone, 2021, 2024).

Accordingly, the primary research objective of this study is to analyze to what extent qualified digital audiences perceive, understand, and value the factuality of news published by news media within a communicative ecosystem where unverified information proliferates on social media channels (RO1). Additionally, this study aims to determine how these audiences value quality journalistic work over other content from external platforms or non-media sites (RO2) and which possible factors influence what audiences expect to find in journalistic media, beyond merely considering the news relevant or of general interest due to its topic (RO3).

To address these objectives, the following research questions are raised:

- RQ1: To what extent do qualified digital audiences struggle to detect falsehood or bias in journalistic statements?
- RQ2: How do qualified digital audiences perceive and value news that is based on more facts and better source work?
- RQ3: Which factors are most influential in shaping news perception among qualified digital audiences?

3. Method

3.1. Sample Collection and Content Analysis

With these objectives in mind, this research was conducted following two methodological processes. The first comprised a comparative content analysis of a sample of the ten most relevant statements on political or social topics, with the highest number of interactions published on the Twitter (X) accounts of six leading European media outlets, as well as their reflection and development on the respective websites, between 1 January and 31 December 2021. Thus, the content analysis corpus comprises 60 tweets (n = 60) and their corresponding articles published in the digital editions of the media outlets under study.

To make the sample, not only tweets but also news articles were considered. Although Twitter provides readers with a mechanism for interpreting the meaning of news (Sadler, 2018) through headlines and links to media websites, it becomes fragmentary and sometimes misleading. Some studies on social media consumption indicate that audiences tend to share news sometimes without reading them or clicking on them (Sundar et al., 2024).

For sample selection, the Global Digital Subscription Snapshot, a media ranking by online subscribers published quarterly by the Fédération Internationale de la Presse Périodique (FIPP) in collaboration with CeleraOne—a German company specializing in digital technology and big data—was used as a reference. Specifically, the data used in this study correspond to the third-quarter 2021 report.

First, an exploration was conducted to identify the top three European digital-only media outlets with the highest number of subscriptions. According to this criteria, the following media outlets emerged (in order): Médiapart (France), Tortoise (United Kingdom), De Correspondent (Netherlands), El Diario.es (Spain), El Confidencial (Spain), The Local (Sweden), Zetland (Denmark), El Español (Spain), and Krautreporter (Germany). The remaining media on the list are digital subscriptions of outlets with a print edition. Since the Dutch outlet De Correspondent ceased publication in early 2022, the sample was comprised of Médiapart (France), Tortoise (United Kingdom), and El Diario.es (Spain).

Once these outlets were identified, the next step was to select generalist media outlets publishing newspapers in these same three countries or markets to compare publication strategies between online editions of traditional media and new digital media. The Twitter (X) accounts and online editions of leading print media outlets in subscriptions in their respective countries that are thus included in the study sample are, in order, The Guardian (United Kingdom), Le Monde (France), and El País (Spain) (See Table 1).

Table 1. Contextual data about the media accounts examined. Source: author's own elaboration.

Media Outlet	Media Type	Country	Foundation	Account	Joined Twitter
Médiapart	Digital only	France	2008	@Mediapart	2009
Tortoise	Digital only	UK	2018	@tortoise	2018
Eldiario.es	Digital only	Spain	2012	@eldiarioes	2012
Le Monde	Print/Digital	France	1944	@lemondefr	2009
The Guardian	Print/Digital	UK	1821	@guardian	2009
El País	Print/Digital	Spain	1976	@el_pais	2007

After the sample was collected, the different headlines were evaluated based on journalistic verification criteria, such as the distinction between information and interpretation and opinion, the presence of bias, source usage, background references, language use, and markers of fallacy.

To establish these verification criteria, an analysis sheet matrix with 29 items was created to measure and evaluate the information published by the media consistently using the same parameters. The matrix included, in addition to indicators of tweet location and dissemination (retweets, likes, and replies), a series of indicators related to each social statement, as well as each headline and body text of the information published on the websites of the media outlets in the analysis sample.

In addition to items related to the topic and geographic scope of each piece of information (national or international), the content indicators for tweets in the analysis sheet detail aspects such as the approach (informative, interpretative, or opinion-based), perspective (partial or declarative from a protagonist or global/with more than one protagonist), and bias. These same indicators (approach, perspective, and bias) are applied to the study of headline content, for which two additional aspects are analyzed: the degree of alignment with the tweet and its relationship to the main content of the news article body.

Regarding content indicators for the news texts on each website, not only are the approach, perspective, and bias measured—similar to the tweets and headlines—but also data usage (whether data are verifiable, unverifiable, or inaccurate), whether the information is contextualized, and the number of sources used, as well as the predominant typology in each news text (governmental institutional, non-governmental institutional, journalistic, documentary, expert, anonymous, or without sources).

To validate the consistency of this coding instrument, a content analysis was carried out to obtain some preliminary results that would later be debated in the focus groups. Among other findings from the perspective of social audience consumption, a greater viral impact and reliability are detected in tweet-news articles published by generalist media outlets, clickbait techniques promoted by digital natives are disapproved by users in their interactions, and the trend that audiences share information on Twitter without clicking on the links to the news is confirmed.

Thus, the first stage of the research served to justify and collect the research sample as well as to validate the coding process employed in the content analysis. As content analysis an important tool for social science in drawing valid inferences about media behaviors (Riffe et al., 2023), in this case on social media platforms and websites, a further methodological qualitative process was needed to respond to the research objectives. Thus, the categories and variables included in the content analysis would be used to conduct the discussion among the participants in the focus groups.

3.2. Focus Groups

Based on this structured content analysis, a report of results was obtained, which was further examined in a second phase of the research through two in-person focus groups.

The focus group was employed as an ideal methodological tool in social sciences to gather participants' perceptions (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996) and concerns through interaction, thus facilitating a qualitative analysis (Wilkinson, 1998). Unlike the so-called "discussion group," the focus group better meets the needs of this research as it allows for guiding the discussion more effectively using a pre-established questionnaire and obtaining individual responses from participants that are synergistic and comparable (Domínguez & Dávila, 2008, p. 105).

This second methodological stage thus addresses one of the stated research objectives: analyzing audience perceptions of published journalistic content and media behavior in light of the content analysis by presenting news examples for participant evaluation. This led to the preparation of these focus groups.

The working sessions were held on 24 and 25 November 2022 at the College of Europe in Natolin (Poland). This academic institution offers an Advanced Master's in European Interdisciplinary Studies, bringing together 125 students each year from across the continent, as well as from other regions, such as North Africa and the Middle East. These students come from various fields of study, are multilingual, and have strong academic records. Since the focus groups aimed, on the one hand, to incorporate participant interdisciplinarity and, on the other, to ensure their qualifications as information consumers with critical thinking skills, the College of Europe proved to be an appropriate setting for this study.

Two separate focus groups, each lasting two hours, were conducted. Each session, moderated by the research team and conducted in English, worked with a group of students ranging from six to eight participants, a range that authors like Prieto and March (2002) consider ideal. In total, there were fourteen participants (six men and eight women) from nine different countries (Poland, Portugal, Ukraine, Algeria, United Kingdom, France, Spain, Lebanon, and Ireland), with previous studies in up to eight different disciplines (Law, Business Administration, Journalism, Philology, International Relations, Political Science, History, and Economics). All participants, aged 24 to 30, were part of the "Nest" working group on disinformation within the aforementioned Advanced Master in European Interdisciplinary Studies and were recruited through the professor responsible for that working group, who served as a key informant to identify those with suitable profiles to participate in the sessions.

In this way, the focus groups were formed based on elements of homogeneity among participants as they shared common experiences within the same university campus, similar educational levels, and specific training relevant to this study. Meanwhile, diversity was ensured in terms of gender, background, and country of origin to analyze the extent to which these variables might affect their perception and evaluation of the news.

The Questionnaire

Each session began with a briefing on the research project associated with the focus group, as well as an outline of the procedure to be followed during the session. The second part of the presentation included a questionnaire with ten questions and examples of information published by the media outlets in the analysis sample to establish comparisons among them and measure participants' perceptions accordingly. As each of the ten examples was displayed on multiple screens in the classroom, participants had access on their computers to an online form containing all the content to respond to the questions individually. Of the fourteen focus group participants, only eight submitted a completed form.

The questionnaire was divided into two sections of five open-ended questions each (Table 2) and, at the end of each section, a group discussion was initiated among participants to gather opposing opinions and viewpoints in addition to the responses they had already

written on their respective forms. Thus, the focus group would yield two types of results: the collection of completed forms from participants and the recording of sessions with their contributions, which would later be transcribed for analysis.

Table 2. Battery of questions posed in the focus groups. Source: author's own elaboration.

Q1 To what degree do you think these tweet statements are true, partly true, or false?
Q2 Do you consider these statements information, interpretation, or comment?
Q3 Which one is the most based on facts and which one is the least factual?
Q4 Which tweet is the most attractive and appealing (in order to obtain engagement)? Why?
Q5 Which angle of the story is the most complete according to the number and quality of sources employed in the piece of news?
Q6 What parts of the story are more biased by taking into account those absent elements and points of view that would be necessary to complete the story?
Q7 To what degree do these headlines properly lead to understanding the stories or are they not directly related to the main element of the reported topic?
Q8 Please, compare these pieces according to the kind of sources employed in them.
Q9 Please, compare these pieces of news by the topic dealt with and if they are based on newsworthy criteria and can be regarded as general interest/relevant news.
Q10 To what degree do you think these tweet statements are true, partly true, or false?

The focus group included questions related to ten different statements (shown as screenshots) from the analysis sample. To enable comparisons within each focus group, it was essential to have news items from different media on the same topics, allowing us to transfer elements examined in the content analysis to the focus group. This led us to extract from the sample of 60 news items those that had been published by other media for comparison.

The selected news items were COVID-19 (three or four media outlets), the Pandora Papers (general and a specific story about Putin; only in the three consortium research media: Le Monde, The Guardian, and El País), the attendance of former People's Party leader in Spain, Pablo Casado, at a mass in memory of dictator Francisco Franco (The Guardian, El País, and Eldiario.es), the Citizen's Security Law or "Gag Law" according to the Council of Europe (El País and Eldiario.es), and the rape accusation of a former British Conservative MP (The Guardian and Tortoise). The French digital outlet Médiapart did not overlap with any other outlet, not even with Le Monde, on national or Francophone topics. This is because they prioritize unique topics and investigations to add value to their coverage for subscribers.

As the sample was considered insufficient to complete the entire questionnaire within the focus group, it was expanded through Twitter's advanced search function to include all news published by the six media outlets in this study that corresponded with the same topics and coverage as the tweet-news items in the initial sample. To increase the sample size, we used search parameters and keywords, such as the names of each media outlet plus topics like COVID or pandemic, Pandora Papers, Putin, Spain, political parties, Gag Law, Council of Europe, Britain/UK, France, and politics. This extended the scope of analysis to a potential 300 tweet-news items (n = 300). This expanded search yielded new examples, enabling the focus group to incorporate additional comparisons between statements and images.

In the double focus group, cross-comparisons were made among two or three outlets, either from different countries (COVID-19 or Pandora Papers), to observe the impact

of journalistic culture or the potential national perspective on international topics, or between two outlets from the same country (El País-Eldiario.es or The Guardian-Tortoise), to measure the traditional vs. digital-native variable.

With this dual objective, two types of information were initially posed in the focus group questionnaire:

1. Headlines and tweets published by different media outlets about the same topic;

2. Tweets and their respective links to news published by different media outlets on the same coverage.

Next, a question was included to assess whether the degree of informational bias varies when the same media outlet addresses different topics or protagonists. In this case, The Guardian's coverage of the appearance of Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Ukrainian counterpart, Volodymyr Zelensky, in the Pandora Papers:

3. Headlines and tweets published by the same media outlet about different news and political actors.

Finally, also with only one question of this type, a question was asked regarding the newsworthiness criteria used to include chosen topics on the agenda. For this, two of the most retweeted news items in Eldiario.es and Médiapart were selected to compare the dynamics between two digital-native outlets from different countries. In this way, an example from Médiapart was also included in the group discussion, as it was the only one of the six media outlets in the sample that had not appeared for the reasons explained above:

4. Tweets and their links to content that achieved high engagement and were published by different media outlets.

In the question set (Table 2), the order followed the variables analyzed in the first part of this study (content analysis). Since the main objective is to assess the extent to which audiences perceive and understand the factuality of news, the same question was asked at the beginning and end of the session regarding participants' general view of the statement shown and the degree of truthfulness or falsehood they could detect. By asking this question both at the start and the end of the session, the sequence of examples and questions served to check if, and to what extent, participants' initial perceptions changed or remained after viewing various examples and, most importantly, after discussing them with others.

4. Results

The prior content analysis of the six news media outlets in the sample provided the foundation to identify which publications would be presented and discussed with participants in the focus groups. Thus, to address the research questions, a sequence of ten structured questions was presented to the students, both in the presentation and via a form, to gather their impressions on the truthfulness, credibility, and bias of the information shown; the importance of source usage (data) and other quality measures; and the impact of content presentation and its appeal or impact; as well as the relevance of or public interest in the analyzed news items.

4.1. Reflections Shared During the Working Sessions

The conversation generated during the focus groups served as a starting point for reflection, later expanded and nuanced by the forms completed by participants. This discussion primarily aimed to analyze which factors may be most decisive for these qualified users to perceive and understand the informational content they consume in one way or another.

According to participants, in analyzing the perception of a news item, the value of accompanying images should be carefully considered as these often determine the tone and

focus of the news. Image selection is always an editorial decision that can imbue a greater interpretive load or, at the very least, intentionality in how the information is presented to the audience.

It was also interesting to note, based on participants' observations, how the perception of the same news piece can vary significantly and may even be conditioned by the timing of its reading. The example of the news about Vladimir Putin in the Pandora Papers investigation, before the onset of the war in Ukraine, illustrates how temporal context can influence receivers.

Additionally, participants, coming from different countries and, consequently, diverse informational cultures, highlighted that a reader's prior knowledge (background) is crucial for understanding and evaluating a news story. Sometimes, as they noted, that level of knowledge about the topic or person provides greater context for understanding and decoding the information. However, in other situations, that prior knowledge can lead to a predetermined bias or prejudice in its evaluation.

On the other hand, identifying elements that signal quality and factuality in a journalistic text, such as some of those presented and compared in the focus group, tends to lead to a more positive perception and even greater credibility. The most defining quality markers in this regard are the number of cited sources versus anonymous ones, as well as the inclusion of expert voices, both in the tweets and in the links within the news articles. According to the testimonies collected, sources not only make the news more factual but also help to expand the information and make it easier to understand.

Similarly, participants considered the journalist's involvement in narrating events to be a key factor that determines the degree of factuality of the information presented to them. In this sense, the writer's personal involvement in the story can lead to the inclusion of evaluative elements in the statements, which was noted during the focus groups as a subtle form of manipulation and bias that reduces authenticity and credibility in certain journalistic content.

On Twitter (X), as on many media websites, the shortest and most direct content does not always achieve the highest engagement. It all depends on the (factual) information and the precise choice of words. In several instances within the focus group, participants criticized certain journalistic formulas in tweets and headlines, associating them with issues related to sensationalism or clickbait techniques that are widespread in the digital world.

This last idea is also related to consumption habits in the attention economy, characterized by the limited time users generally have to read news, sometimes only engaging with the tweet/image/video or headline without clicking on the links. Participants were critical, suggesting that this dynamic sometimes leads media outlets to concentrate their entire messaging strategy on making these short statements attractive and attention-grabbing. These brief headlines or statements either aim to condense the essential elements of the news or choose a particular angle or focus, which may not always clearly correspond with the content of the article when the user clicks through.

4.2. Responses to the Forms (Working Document)

As stated, out of the fourteen students who participated and debated in the focus groups, only eight submitted the completed form. The participants were (P1) French, with a background in Law; (P2) Irish, History and Languages; (P3) Lebanese, Political Science; (P4) Polish, Law; (P5) Polish, Languages; (P6) Portuguese, Journalism; (P7) Ukrainian, Journalism; and (P8) Spanish, Law and Political Science. The responses of these participants have been grouped into different themes, all linked to the questions asked (from Q1 to Q10).

4.2.1. Veracity of the Statements (Regarding Q1)

The truthfulness of journalistic statements is a topic that generates extensive debate, especially in an environment where information flows continuously and sometimes overwhelmingly. Analyzing the opinions of focus group participants (P1 to P8) reveals a diversity of perceptions about the authenticity of the statements presented in tweets and news articles (Figure 1), reflecting the complexity of assessing truthfulness in the digital age.

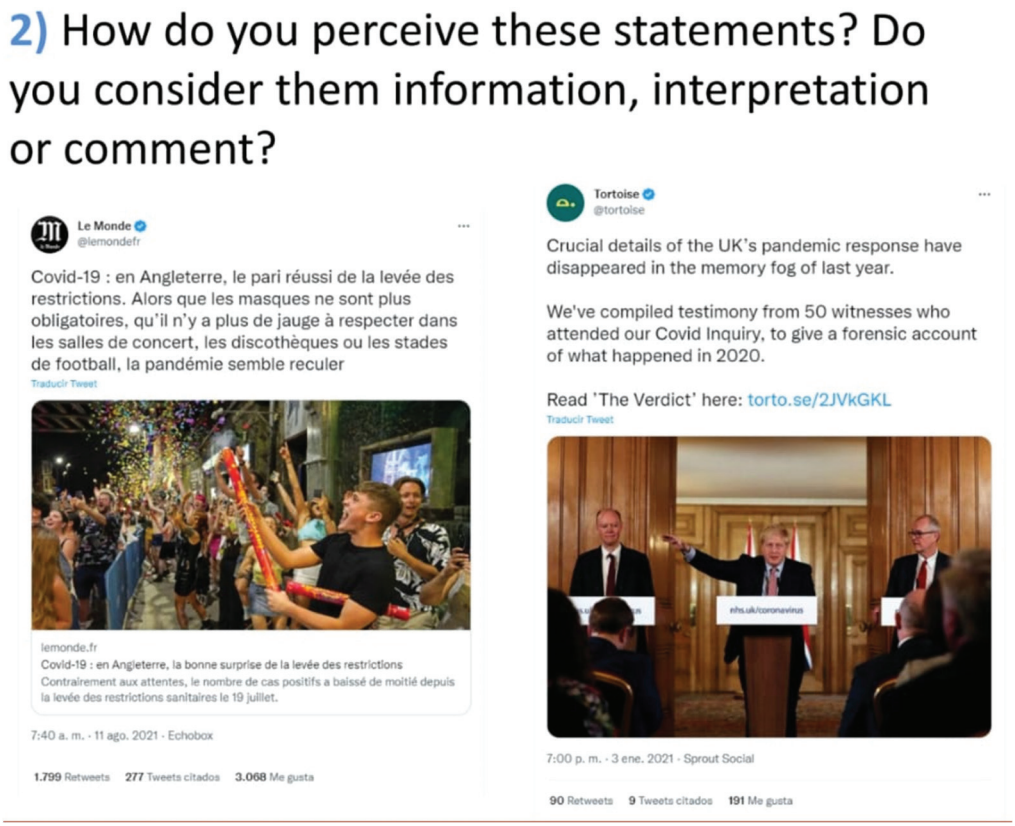


Figure 1. Second question posed to participants in the word form. Source: Twitter (X) and the author's own elaboration.

While the accuracy of details, the strength of context, and the depth of treatment are highlighted as factors that can significantly influence the perception of content authenticity (P1 and P2), fully judging truthfulness is challenging. This assessment depends not only on the presentation of facts and their context but also, and especially, on the reader's ability to understand and contextualize them (P3 and P4). In any case, the perception of a statement's truthfulness can be partial, depending on its presentation and the analysis it includes (P6, P7, and P8).

4.2.2. Perception About the Type of Statements (Regarding Q2)

The focus group participants also showed a disparity in understanding the type of statement they read. While some considered it purely informational content, others categorized it as commentary or even a biased interpretation.

For example, regarding the tweets about the management of the COVID-19 crisis in the United Kingdom shown during the sessions (Figure 1), the perceived degree of factuality of a piece is influenced by the inclusion of evidence rather than the journalist's personal interpretations (P7), as well as by the diversity of testimonies included (P8). However, participants noted that the way these elements are presented, depending on the opinions of the sources included and the language used by the author, can end up giving the text a

more interpretive (P2 and P6), rather than purely informational, personality (P5). They also pointed to the choice of images as an element that can lead to confusion and influence the interpretation of statements in one direction or another (P6).

4.2.3. Fact-Based Information (Regarding Q3, Q5, and Q8)

Continuing with the analysis of the responses collected, the inclusion of data supporting the facts stands out as a key factor in determining the perception of reliability and objectivity of the information presented (P8). However, not all data are equally verifiable, nor are all sources valued or interpreted in the same way, as they are associated with the tone in which the story is narrated and presented (P3) and with the presence of evaluations in the text that stray from a purely factual basis (P2 and P5).

4.2.4. Attractiveness and Impact (Regarding Q4)

According to the participants, the elements that make a tweet more appealing, generate engagement, and achieve greater audience impact can vary. They refer to the combination of visual and linguistic strategies as an effective means to capture audience attention and motivate reading of journalistic content (P1). In this regard, aspects such as the smart use of images featuring prominent figures or key subjects (P6), attention-grabbing headlines (P8), the inclusion of statistics, or specific designs and strategic uses of color to highlight information (P4) come into play.

4.2.5. Biases in Stories (Regarding Q6)

The identification of some type of bias often shapes the readers' final perception of the published story and its potential consideration as factual or not. This is also confirmed by the responses from participants in this focus group. Perhaps the most commonly noticed type of bias is the presence of the journalist's personal evaluations, which further blurs the line between information and interpretation (P7).

Another perceived partiality involves the balance in source selection (P1) and the inclusion of different perspectives on the same fact within the information (P6). Additionally, it was noted that more sensitive or controversial topics are particularly susceptible to bias, which is detected based on how facts are framed and which aspects are emphasized (P2).

4.2.6. Correlation Between News Headlines and Body Content (Regarding Q7)

A significant part of the evaluation of journalistic content lies in the construction of headlines as their wording and focus shape the expectations generated by the reader. From this perspective, participants emphasize the responsibility of media outlets to ensure that headlines accurately reflect the story's content to prevent misunderstandings or misinterpretations (P8 and P1).

The examples shown in this part of the focus group (Figure 2) prompted various considerations among participants. To ensure a proper understanding of the news, they believe that headlines should, in principle, be simpler and more direct (P7), though adding more detail or context, especially for complex or controversial topics, is necessary for audiences unfamiliar with the subject (P2). Therefore, they also recommend avoiding excessive simplification that may omit crucial aspects of the story (P6).



Figure 2. Seventh question posed to participants in the word form. Source: Twitter (X) and the author's own elaboration.

4.2.7. Relevance and Public Interest (Regarding Q9)

Finally, aspects that may affect digital audiences' perception of the relevance and general interest of stories were also explored. In this regard, participants highlight that for a story to be considered journalistically relevant, it should address issues that concern people and have social significance (P1), although this consideration may vary according to each person's life experience and cultural and social context (P8). Thus, the relevance of a story is measured not only by its theme but, above all, by its connection to the audience's experiences and concerns (P4 and P6).

Overall, the participants' contributions emphasize the need for media outlets to address meaningful topics in a comprehensive and engaging manner to capture the public's attention.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The current system of news production and consumption defines a landscape shared by the digital audience in a hybrid media ecosystem of both traditional and emerging outlets, as well as platforms (Chadwick, 2017). Journalism reaffirms its role of social responsibility and public service in an era where verification, impartiality, and transparency are essential to restoring public trust (Pérez Curiel et al., 2021). In this debate, digital-native and traditional media have developed strategies to compete with external prosumers who have the capacity to create viral narratives (Denisova, 2023) that do not meet the requirement of factuality, which is inherent to the journalistic profession (Ekström & Westlund, 2019).

As previous research shows (Casero-Ripollés, 2020; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017), audience disaffection toward public, political, and media institutions is directly related to the formation of digital communities led by active, often anonymous users, who share and virtualize content without meeting the basic standards of verification and reliability inherent in journalistic information.

In the media's urgency to reclaim the public sphere, quality and truthfulness in handling facts become a potential differentiator in countering the impact of false information. However, the challenge lies in making journalistic content attractive and relevant (Sundar, 1999) among such a diverse range of young and adult user profiles (Molyneux & Coddington, 2020) and in addressing narratives oriented toward brevity and immediacy (Scolari, 2020), where the tweet is incompatible with the depth of the journalistic text.

This study examines how qualified digital audiences—better educated and with greater potential for critical media consumption—perceive and value the factuality (RO1) of information published on Twitter and on the web by journalistic media in contrast with other content circulating online (RO2).

In this regard, participants demonstrated confidence and judgment, yet also differing criteria, when assessing the truthfulness and bias of the content analyzed in the focus groups (RQ1). They referred to analysis, contextualization, and information presentation as key factors in the general perception of authenticity, though they noted that this perception could be distorted depending on the journalist's involvement in the story and the type of source selected, as well as the tone and approach adopted in headlines and images.

These results align with previous research showing that individuals with higher education levels tend to be very confident in detecting potential disinformation disorders (Martínez-Costa et al., 2023) and that this self-confidence and self-awareness shape how these audiences access and understand the news (Nelson & Lewis, 2023; Webster, 2011).

Regarding the identification of elements that represent quality and factuality in a journalistic statement (RQ2), participants highlighted the variety of mentioned and verifiable sources, the presence of expert voices, and data-based claims as key to constructing credible media narratives, thereby promoting an informed and critical understanding of news events.

In this way, journalistic texts supported by evidence are given more credibility than those based primarily on opinion. This widespread conviction among digital audiences (Wagner & Boczkowski, 2019) has led media outlets to adopt and advocate for 'fact-based journalism' (Stalph, 2018) as a way to legitimize traditional journalistic practice in the public sphere against the proliferation of false news (Napoli & Royal, 2024).

The expectations that informational content can generate among audiences depend on various factors (RO3), which directly influence the final perception (RQ3). Among these factors, visual elements accompanying the information are prominent as they suggest and predispose the reader, particularly the wording and focus of headlines, which set the tone for the narrative. From this perspective, participants expressed a rejection of clickbait techniques and called on the media to ensure that headlines accurately reflect the content of the information, thus avoiding confusion and misleading interpretations.

As previous research has confirmed (Molyneux & Coddington, 2020; Chen et al., 2015), the adoption of clickbait in journalistic headlines by many digital-native media outlets is considered a form of distraction and a technique that has contributed to the rapid proliferation of misinformation on social networks, especially on Twitter (Khawar & Boukes, 2024).

Ultimately, audience perceptions and expectations of a particular informational content often differ because they are shaped by personal experiences. According to participants, perceptions of what is relevant or of general interest can vary widely depending on each person's life experience and cultural and social context. Furthermore, the relevance of a story is measured not only by its theme but, above all, by its connection to the audience's experiences and concerns.

This study presents a series of limitations inherent to the sample size and the method used. On the one hand, the analysis sample may be considered unrepresentative of the

entire universe of political-social news; however, it aligns with methodological models from previous studies (Baker, 2006; Cleary et al., 2014; D. Silverman, 2016) that recommend prioritizing quality over quantity in data collection in discourse studies.

In any case, the specific sampling was also established with consideration from a preliminary phase of research that helped set the criteria for selecting the news items that would ultimately be debated in the focus groups. Another limitation arises from the participant population in the discussions, with a highly homogeneous age range and educational level but, at the same time, diversity in terms of gender, country of origin, and cultural background. Although this might prevent comparisons between different informational consumption patterns exhibited by audiences in the whole digital ecosystem, this research remarks the importance of having specialized higher cycle training to develop more critical thinking about the news content delivered by media outlets rather than generalizing these findings to all young audiences.

This work suggests future lines of research, such as deeper exploration into new news consumption models among digital audiences who suffer from symptoms of information contamination (Gil de Zúñiga & Cheng, 2021; Luo et al., 2022) and may be influenced by cognitive biases in their interpretation of reality (Greifeneder et al., 2021; Martínez-Costa et al., 2023) or the comparative analysis of varying expectations prompted by the coexistence of journalists and content creators (Banjac & Hanusch, 2022) among audiences who largely avoid news (Toff et al., 2024) and challenge the boundaries between the journalistic center and its periphery.

This study provides an approach to the factors that shape new models of reception and interpretation of journalistic content circulating on social networks and, more specifically, to the importance that more qualified digital audiences place on fact-based journalism in today's disinformation-driven environment.

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Article

Public Figures and Social Media from a Freedom of Expression Viewpoint in the Recent U.S. and EU Jurisdiction

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Abstract: Social media has transformed political communication's landscape, reshaping how politicians engage with the public and express their views. The tension between freedom of expression and the need for responsible governance and politicians became more visible. This article examines the nuances of politicians' freedom of expression on social media, emphasizing the importance of the right to receive information and participate in public debate. Furthermore, it explores the idea of social media profiles as public forums, examines the level of protection afforded to public officials in public discourse, and compares the content moderation frameworks in the United States and the European Union.

Keywords: public figures; social media; content moderation; freedom of expression

1. Introduction

Freedom of expression (FoE) and political speech have long been a critical debate in the field of constitutional and human rights law. The tradition of studying FoE in the context of politicians looks back at decades of extensive research; however, though many have made conceptualization attempts and analyzed milestone decisions, there is still a heated debate about a critical question: what is the threshold of a politician's speech in terms of legality, and where should we draw the fine line between allowed and illicit forms of expressions? Though FoE is generally understood as a human rights principle that aims at protecting the fundamental right of expressing views without sanctions or retaliation, defining it is a near-impossible endeavor. It is one of the most renowned and oldest fundamental rights, yet it has no uniform, globally accepted definition; countries, regions, and different human rights conventions all define FoE differently and set up diverging standards (Barendt, 2010; Jørgensen & Zuleta, 2020). As Klonick (2018) underlined it too in her foundational piece on social media and FoE, contextualizing what constitutes free speech in a non-state-governed environment is even more challenging. In the present study, we aim to outline a specific segment of this discourse, namely the rights to FoE of public figures on social media, in a comparative manner focusing on the American and the European Court of Human Rights case law. The choice of these two jurisdictions is not accidental; as noted by numerous scholars, both the U.S.'s and the EU's FoE approaches have been instrumental in both the practice and theory of the study and interpretation of free speech (Post, 2000; Schauer, 2004; Barendt, 2010; Cannie & Voorhoof, 2011).

It is crucial to set out the two different concepts of FoE first as a premise. In the U.S. legal tradition, the First Amendment has been used as the core of the free speech discussion. Introduced in 1791, the First Amendment provides that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances". The broad concept of free speech includes a wide variety of protected expressions: acts, communications, symbolic activities, and even the right to not express views. In Handyside v. the United Kingdom (ECtHR, 1976), the European Court of Human Rights (hereinafter ECtHR) underlined that freedom of expression is the cornerstone of every democratic society and that this right includes the right to receive information and the right to participate in public debates. The ECtHR's position is specific in nature; it is a supranational authority that enforces the rights set out in the European Convention of Human Rights Council of Europe, (Council of Europe, 1950) and is available for a remedy for a violation of fundamental rights (including FoE) by anyone in all member states, each having a different constitutional framework regarding free speech. In contrast, the U.S.'s approach stems from its national court system, on the top of which stands the Supreme Court which judges a variety of cases and issues decisions that finalize legal conflicts in the United States.

Turning to our scope of investigation, public officials hold a unique position as their speech is (mostly) protected; it is also subject to higher scrutiny due to their influence and responsibilities. For politicians, this right is an important component of their professional duties. The right to express political opinions enables informed decision-making and strengthens accountability (Šmigová, 2022). Through their given speeches, the debates they take part in, and now social media, politicians convey ideas, propose policies, and engage with voters. Social media platforms have extrapolated the reach of political communication nowadays, allowing politicians to skip traditional media gatekeepers. This interaction could strengthen democratic values by ensuring diverse voices contribute to public discourse. It is also to be stressed, though, that this expansion has challenges (e.g., hate speech, fake news, or extremely polarized content). Balancing between the rights of freedom of expression and preventing online and offline harms is an issue that requires careful regulatory approaches. Sunstein (2017) recently highlighted the dual-edged nature of social media in democratic discourse as they simultaneously empower and endanger democratic norms.

However, the growing number and importance of echo chambers and algorithmic amplification could mean risks to the ideal situation (Papp, 2024). Empirical studies by Tambini (2021) and Viader Guerrero (2024) demonstrate the negative influence of algorithmic curation on democratic dialogue, urging policymakers to scrutinize these mechanisms more rigorously. The balance between these competing rights has the utmost importance as public officials are expected to set an example for the average citizen taking part in a responsible dialogue. Therefore, they have an elevated duty not to share or distribute inflammatory or otherwise misleading content. However, if legislators consider excessive restrictions on public figures' speech, democratic processes could easily be undermined. This is an ongoing debate, which can be clearly shown by the fact that the level of protection afforded to public officials varies across European and U.S. jurisdictions.

2. Materials and Methods

This paper employs two methods to investigate the issue at hand. Setting out the framework of the study, we applied the traditional doctrinal analysis, which aims at processing, identifying, interpreting, and applying relevant legal literature and instruments, including cases, decisions, rulings, and statutes to a specific question, in our case, the status of elected officials (Murphy & McGee, 2015). This methodological consideration allowed

for a normative and descriptive contextualization of our topic which was foundational in the progress of comparing the differing interpretations of what constitutes the rights of elected officials in different legal environments (Van Hoecke, 2011). In the context of our examination, the doctrinal analysis also ensured a rigorous assessment of how freedom of expression applies to public figures on social media across the two jurisdictions as amplified common points and differences in the comparative frameworks of both the U.S. and the ECtHR. Lastly, this method is widely accepted in legal scholarship when investigating constitutional and human rights issues, ensuring that the research aligns with established academic practices (Hutchinson & Duncan, 2012; Linos & Carlson, 2017; Van Hoecke, 2011; Bhat, 2020). The reliance on case law analysis further strengthens the study by systematically identifying key judicial decisions that shape the regulation of politicians' online speech. Finally, doctrinal analysis allows for a normative exploration of legal protections and limitations, helping to contextualize how digital platforms intersect with fundamental rights and democratic principles.

Lastly, as this method is based on systemization, we were able to effectively outline the key problems regarding free speech and elected officials, too (Kazmierski, 2014). This method is also used in related legal research as well, including thematical analysis of legal materials in the domain of Internet law, reviewing specific fundamental rights, and assessing standards regarding free speech (Dragomir et al., 2024; Raiu, 2024; Kapelańska-Pręgowska & Pucelj, 2023). In particular, following Dragomir et al.'s (2024) methodological outline, we discovered three key acts, the Communications Decency Act (CDA, 1996) with particular attention to Section 230 in the U.S. legislation, the E-Commerce Directive (ECD) (ECD, 2000) and the Digital Services Act (DSA, 2022) in the EU legislation. Though our main focus falls on European developments, the selection of Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act was justified because it serves as a cornerstone piece of legislation in the realm of freedom of expression and social media. This section provides immunity to internet service providers and website owners from civil lawsuits arising from content posted by third parties (Medeiros, 2017; Gosztonyi & Lendvai, 2024a). The choice of the EDC and DSA is also based on their huge impact on regulating social media and other online platforms (Cauffman & Goanta, 2021).

For the specific assessment of public figures in the American and European legal framework, we employed case law analysis with a systematic review of elected officials as the subject of our inquiry (Salehijam, 2018). Systematic, in the present case, means that we specifically focused on "key cases" or "milestone/landmark" cases which are often regarded as the most significant cases in a jurisdiction. This method allowed us to focus on and effectively evaluate the changes and the evolution of free speech principles.

3. Framework: The Human Rights Overview

3.1. Public Figures and the Protection of Their Speech

A study conducted by the University of Cambridge found that social media posts where politicians criticize their rival politicians tend to be more popular than those complementing their own political party (Rathje et al., 2021). Against the backdrop of the ever more virulent social media presence of politicians, it is necessary to analyze the origins of protections applicable to their speech. The European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (hereinafter ECHR) does not foresee a special category of people whose exercise of freedom of expression entails special rights or obligations. Article 14 explicitly mentions that "*[t]he enjoyment of the rights and freedoms set forth in this Convention shall be secured without discrimination on any ground*". Hughes traces the origin of the public figure doctrine to *Lingens v. Austria*, "*where it formed part of a move to protect freedom of expression from the risk of elected officials stifling the press with defamation law*"

(ECtHR, 1986; Hughes, 2019). Here, the ECtHR held that by inevitably and knowingly laying themselves open to scrutiny, politicians must display a greater degree of tolerance in case of criticism than private individuals. Since then, the ECtHR both expanded the scope of public figures and applied the public figure doctrine in novel contexts. For example, in *Janowski v. Poland* (ECtHR, 1999), the ECtHR noted that civil servants acting in an official capacity are, like politicians, subject to the wider limits of acceptable criticism, although they should not be treated on equal footing. The present paper does not aim to analyze the greater degree of tolerance of public figures in detail. Rather, the authors aim to identify the special rights and obligations of public figures during the exercise of their freedom of expression.

On the one hand, politicians and elected representatives enjoy certain rights as a consequence of their public figure status, specifically regarding matters of public interest and in electoral contexts. The present paper mainly focuses on the protection of speech granted based on the status of the speaker, rather than the content or the context of the speech, although these are often inseparable. In *Castells v. Spain* (ECtHR, 1992), the ECtHR opined that freedom of expression is especially important for elected representatives, as they represent the electorate, draw attention to their preoccupations, and defend their interests. More specifically, national courts should pay heightened attention to any restriction upon the exercise of freedom of expression of opposition members. The same applies to mayors under *Willem v. France* (ECtHR, 2009b). In *Feret v. Belgium* (ECtHR, 2009a), the ECtHR further specified that political parties have the right to disseminate their views in public, especially in an electoral context. In *Mamere v. France* (ECtHR, 2006c), the ECtHR held that elected representatives speaking in this capacity usually employ political or "militant" expression, which necessitates strong reasons on the side of states to justify any restrictions. In *Le Pen v. France* (ECtHR, 2010), the ECtHR also confirmed that individuals engaging in a public debate may resort to a certain amount of exaggeration, or even provocation. In *Brasilier v. France* (ECtHR, 2006a), the ECtHR ascertained that persons opposed to official ideas and positions must be able to find a place in the political arena, which includes the possibility of candidates discussing the regularity of a contested election even without factual background. In *Perincek v. Switzerland* (ECtHR, 2015b), the ECtHR gave special attention to the fact that the applicant denied the holocaust as a politician, not as a historical or legal scholar.

On the other hand, politicians and elected representatives bear special responsibilities as a consequence of their public figure status, specifically regarding divisive topics and in electoral contexts. In *Erbakan v. Turkey* (ECtHR, 2006b), the ECtHR has held that as the fight against all forms of intolerance was an integral part of human rights protection, it is crucially important for politicians to avoid making comments likely to foster such intolerance in their speeches. In *Feret v. Belgium* (ECtHR, 2009a), the ECtHR further specified that incitement to the exclusion of foreigners constitutes a fundamental infringement of the rights of individuals and therefore justifies special precautions by all, including politicians. Political parties must avoid advocating racial discrimination and resorting to vexatious or humiliating language or attitudes, as such behavior may provoke public reactions that are incompatible with a serene social climate and undermine confidence in democratic institutions. In an electoral context, specifically, racist or xenophobic speech contributes to stirring up hatred and intolerance, and the impact of such discourse becomes greater and more damaging. In *Pastörs v. Germany* (ECtHR, 2019), the ECtHR further added that even the speech of elected representatives in Parliament deserves little to no protection if their content is at odds with the democratic values of the ECHR, for example, constituting intentional untruths in order to defame the Jews and the persecution that they had suffered during the Second World War.

3.2. Online Content Moderation

The regulation of content on social media platforms is a complex and evolving issue, and the two key democratic frameworks (the CDA in the U.S. and the ECD and the DSA in the European Union) take similar but slightly different approaches.

Section 230 of the CDA has been instrumental in shaping the internet as we know it now (Kosseff, 2019). As a primary rule, it protects online platforms from liability for user-generated content while allowing them to moderate content in good faith. However, Section 230 has faced criticism for enabling illegal and harmful content to proliferate in a previously unknown volume. Critics argue that platforms should bear greater responsibility for the content they host, particularly in misinformation or hate speech cases (Silverbreit & Mollod, 2024). In the context of political expression, Section 230 allows platforms to enforce content policies without being deemed publishers. This has led to accusations of bias from both Democrats and Republicans, with some politicians alleging censorship and others calling for stricter enforcement (Gillespie, 2018). Platforms are also not required to constantly monitor content uploaded to them by their users, enabling the big tech giants to operate on their own rules (aka their terms of services). However, this approach has limitations, particularly in combating coordinated dis- and misinformation campaigns (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

The European approach to content moderation was enacted in 2000 into the ECD, which established a safe harbor liability framework as it shielded intermediaries from liability for user-generated content under certain conditions. In 2022, the DSA built strongly on this foundation, but introduced more severe obligations for platforms, particularly for very large online platforms (VLOPs). The DSA mandates transparency in content moderation practices, requires platforms to implement risk assessments and mitigation measures, and provides users with mechanisms to more effectively challenge content removal decisions. In contrast to Section 230 of the CDA, the DSA imposes proactive responsibilities on VLOPs, such as addressing systemic risks and preventing the spread of illegal or harmful content.

4. Analysis

4.1. The U.S. Case Law

4.1.1. The Knight First Amendment *Inst. At Columbia Univ. v. Trump*

It is noncircumventable to briefly analyze the American case law, as the U.S. jurisdiction was among the first legal systems that examined the critical issue of whether a social media platform is—essentially—a public forum, and thus, whether the principles and laws applicable to public fora shall apply to them. Considering social media profiles as public forums is a well-known tradition in academia. Public fora are spaces traditionally reserved for open discourse, such as parks or town squares, but nowadays, social media platforms have emerged as analogous spaces, primarily when used by public officials.

The most significant case on this polemic emerged in 2018 via *Knight First Amendment Inst. at Columbia Univ. v. Trump* (2018). The case concerned whether then-President Trump violated the First Amendment by blocking critics from his personal Twitter account. Created in 2009, Trump used his account extensively during his presidency to communicate official actions, policies, and—often controversial—opinions (Reade, 2020). In 2017, after several accounts tweeted critical replies to Trump's tweets, he blocked them, preventing these users from viewing, replying to, or interacting in any way with the content he disseminated directly through their accounts. After the blockings, the Knight Institute, a nonprofit organization based at Columbia University, and other blocked accounts sued, arguing that the account's interactive features constituted a public forum and that blocking users based on their viewpoints was unconstitutional viewpoint discrimination.

The central issue was, in theory, rather straightforward: can a public figure, especially of Trump's status, freely restrict individuals from the information they disseminate as a President on a website owned by a public company, or is this website essentially a public forum, which would imply blocking individuals from accessing governmental materials (Roberts, 2019). Both the district court and the Second Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in favor of the plaintiffs, concluding that the use of Trump's personal account, @realDonaldTrump, for official matters made it governmental in nature. The Court of Appeals determined that the account's "interactive space", where users could reply, retweet, and engage with tweets, was a designated public forum intentionally opened to public discourse. Thus, blocking individuals from this forum due to differing or disapproving views violated their First Amendment rights. The argument that the blocking was personal or that the account itself was private property was also rejected as it was emphasized that the account's operation for governance transformed it into a public forum (Celeste, 2020). To add more context to the decision, it is important to highlight Justice Clarence Thomas's concurring opinion. Justice Thomas agreed with the lower court's findings but focused on broader implications regarding public forums and the control private companies exercise over them. He noted that platforms—like Twitter—have become essential spaces for public discourse and raised concerns about whether First Amendment principles adequately address scenarios where private entities control public forums—an issue that has been seemingly ever-present since the democratization of social media platforms. One of the key arguments in his opinion is the accent on the tension between the government's use of private platforms for official purposes and the platforms' ability to moderate content and block users at their discretion. In this regard, Justice Thomas questioned whether the public forum doctrine could be meaningfully applied when private entities have the power to regulate and exclude users, potentially undermining free speech rights, suggesting that traditional legal frameworks, designed for physical public spaces, may ineffectively address the complexities of modern digital platforms. Moreover, he pointed out a critical issue, namely that platforms (like Twitter) are not neutral arbiters of speech and exert significant influence over public discourse. He also suggested that courts or legislatures may need to reconsider how free speech rights are protected in the digital age, potentially imposing more regulations on private companies to prevent viewpoint discrimination.

The *Knight First Amendment* case was, and still is, instrumental in understanding the American jurisdictional attitude towards social media platforms and the activity of elected officials thereon as it was clarified that while the tweets themselves could qualify as government speech, exempt from First Amendment challenges, the interactive features where users engaged with the content remained a public forum subject to constitutional protections. In more brief terms, therefore, it was not Trump's tweets that essentially made Twitter a public forum but the platform's innate objective which is to allow users to interact. Moreover, the case established a substantial precedent for public officials' utilization of social media, affirming that their accounts, when used for official purposes, are protected by free speech rights even on private platforms such as Twitter.

The case also raised critical questions about the responsibilities of public officials on social media. Should their accounts be treated like public property (Ludington et al., 2022) which is subject to transparency and inclusivity requirements, or do the public figures retain the right to moderate content and block users? Suzor (2019) has also explored these dimensions, advocating for more straightforward guidelines on the duality of public and private roles on digital platforms.

4.1.2. *Davison v. Randall*

Davison v. Randall (2019) may be regarded as an intriguing continuation of the "public forum precedent" set forth in the *Knights First* case. The case's core issue revolved around whether a government official's use of a Facebook page could be treated as a public forum under the First Amendment (cf. the *Sanchez* case introduced in Section 4.2.2). Phyllis Randall, Chair of the Loudoun County Board of Supervisors, created the "Chair Phyllis J. Randall" Facebook page to communicate with constituents and discuss government-related matters. After Brian Davison criticized members of the school board on the page, Randall banned him, preventing him from interacting or engaging with the page. Davison argued that the ban constituted "viewpoint discrimination" in a public forum and violated his First Amendment rights. The district court ruled in Davison's favor, concluding that Randall acted under the color of state law when managing the page and that the interactive space on the Facebook page functioned as a public forum—once again underlining that in governmental settings, even "personal-esque" pages fall under the category of public fora. Randall appealed, claiming that the actions made were of a private nature and that the page constituted government speech, which is exempt from First Amendment scrutiny.

The Fourth Circuit affirmed the lower court's decision. It held that Randall's page, designated as a "government official" page and used for official business, was governmental and not private. It was confirmed once again that the interactive component of the page, where constituents could comment and engage, was treated as a designated public forum and the fact that Davison was banned because of his critical viewpoint established that Randall engaged in unconstitutional viewpoint discrimination. Lastly, the court also rejected Randall's defense that the entire page was government speech, as her posts were distinguishable from public comments, solidifying the already existing notion that governmental officials may not exclude individuals from public forums based on their viewpoints.

4.1.3. *Campbell v. Reisch*

The *Campbell v. Reisch* (2021) ruling is of utmost importance as it adds a novel nuance to the above cases in regard to when elected officials' social media accounts are not clearly used for government purposes. The ruling concerns Missouri State Representative Cheri Toalson Reisch blocking Mike Campbell, a constituent, from her Twitter account after he retweeted a critical comment about her. Campbell sued Reisch, arguing that blocking him violated his First Amendment rights by restricting his participation in a public forum based on viewpoint discrimination. The district court ruled in Campbell's favor, concluding that Reisch acted under the color of state law and that her Twitter account functioned as a designated public forum for engaging with constituents. On appeal, the Eighth Circuit reversed the decision, holding that Reisch did not act under the color of state law when she blocked Campbell. The court stated that Reisch's Twitter account was primarily used for campaign purposes rather than official state business and that it was created when she announced her candidacy; thus, the page mostly featured campaign-related content and maintained its promotional nature even after she was elected. Subsequently, the court concluded that her use of the account to share legislative updates did not fundamentally alter its character, as the content largely aligned with promoting her suitability for reelection. In dissent, Judge Kelly argued that Reisch's use of the account after her election, including posts about legislation and her official duties, demonstrated that she acted under the color of state law. She asserted that blocking Campbell constituted viewpoint discrimination in a designated public forum, violating his First Amendment rights. The majority, however, held that Reisch's account remained private and that her actions were outside the reach of constitutional scrutiny. To highlight the aforementioned nuance, unlike the *Knights First*

and the *Davison* cases, Reisch's account lacked the hallmarks of an official government tool and remained private in nature; therefore, the court ruled that her blocking decisions were personal and not subject to First Amendment restrictions.

4.1.4. *Moody v. NetChoice*

Straying away from the public forum dilemma, one of the more important cases regarding social media and elected officials emerged in the first Supreme Court case of our investigation, *Moody v. NetChoice* (2024), the facial challenge judgment. The case involves challenges to laws enacted by Florida and Texas that regulate social media platforms' ability to moderate user content. Florida's law restricts platforms from removing or deprioritizing content from political candidates and certain other entities and requires detailed explanations when content is removed. Texas's law broadly prohibits platforms from "censoring" content based on viewpoint, which includes blocking, removing, labeling, or otherwise altering user posts. NetChoice, a trade association that represents the biggest platforms, including Facebook and YouTube, filed a lawsuit, contending that these laws violated the First Amendment by encroaching upon platforms' editorial autonomy. However, the lower courts reached divergent verdicts. The Eleventh Circuit blocked Florida's law, ruling that social media platforms' content moderation decisions constitute protected editorial judgment under the First Amendment. The Fifth Circuit upheld Texas's law, claiming content moderation is not expressive activity and can therefore be regulated. The case was delegated before the Supreme Court.

The Supreme Court vacated both decisions and remanded the cases, criticizing the lower courts for failing to conduct a proper analysis of the facial First Amendment challenges. It is critical to make a short conceptualization here of what a facial challenge is. A facial challenge is most known as a legal argument where a person claims that a law is unconstitutional in all or a significant number of its applications (Fallon, 2011). These challenges are rare for both administrative and substantial reasons, and there is an inconsistency in the Court's approach to the severability of challenges (Fallon, 2011). In this regard, the Court explained that facial challenges require evaluating whether a substantial portion of a law's applications are unconstitutional compared to its legitimate uses. It noted that both laws may impact not just curated feeds like Facebook's News Feed but other functions like messaging or review services, which the courts had not sufficiently considered. Notably, the Court clarified that platforms' content moderation practices—selecting, ranking, or labeling content—are forms of editorial discretion and thus protected expression, much like a newspaper editor's choices or a parade organizer's decisions. Furthermore, the Court also rejected Texas's argument that the law promotes a diversity of ideas. It reiterated that the government cannot compel private actors to carry speech to balance the marketplace of ideas, as this interferes with their editorial judgment, and strongly suggested that laws like Texas's are unlikely to survive First Amendment scrutiny when applied to curated platforms.

4.1.5. *Lindke v. Freed*

The last case analyzed stems from the Supreme Court's jurisdiction, too; the *Lindke v. Freed* (2024) case addressed whether a public official's actions on social media could constitute state action. The case involved James Freed, the city manager of Port Huron, Michigan, who managed a public Facebook page where he posted both personal and professional content. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Facebook user Kevin Lindke criticized the city's pandemic response by commenting on Freed's posts. At first, Freed deleted Lindke's comments; then, ultimately, Freed blocked Lindke, preventing him from further commenting. Lindke sued, arguing that Freed violated his First Amendment rights by censoring speech

on Facebook which Lindke characterized as a public forum. The District Court ruled in favor of Freed, finding that he managed the page in a private capacity, and on appeal, the Sixth Circuit upheld this decision, stating that Freed's social media activity did not constitute state action as his page was not maintained as an official government account.

The Supreme Court found the lower courts' analysis incomplete and laid out a "two-part test" for determining state action on social media. The test's first step was examining whether the official possesses actual authority to speak on behalf of the State regarding a particular matter. The second step was to investigate whether the official purports to exercise that authority when engaging in the disputed social media activity. As for the first part, the Court stated that the authority must stem from formal sources like statutes, ordinances, or regulations, or from longstanding customs and practices that carry the force of law. It is critical for the scope of authority to align with the content of the speech; this means that the official in question must have substantive responsibility over the matter discussed, ensuring that state action is rooted in real, not hypothetical, authority. In this regard, the Court found that officials may post job-related content for personal reasons, such as raising awareness or boosting their reputation, without necessarily invoking their governmental role. The Court clarified that merely sharing information already available elsewhere does not constitute state action. Using the Court's example; if an official announces a policy decision exclusively on social media with direct legal implications, that action is clearly official. On the other hand, sharing public information, such as a link to an official city website, likely falls within personal speech. Concerning the second step, the ruling acknowledged that ambiguity arises when social media accounts are of "mixed use", containing both personal and professional content. The Court also noted that tools like Facebook's blocking function, which operate on a page-wide basis, can complicate liability for mixed-use accounts: if an official blocks a user, they may inadvertently restrict comments on both personal and official posts; furthermore, officials who fail to keep personal content on clearly designated private accounts risk greater liability.

In conclusion, the Court ruled that public officials retain their own First Amendment rights to manage their personal speech and control their platforms. However, when they invoke state authority in specific posts, they may inadvertently cross the line into state action.

4.2. European Case Law

4.2.1. *Delfi AS v. Estonia*

The ECtHR first explored the monitoring obligations of online news portals with regard to their comment section in *Delfi AS v. Estonia* (ECtHR, 2015a). The applicant before the ECtHR—one of the largest online news portals in Estonia—made it possible for anonymous and unregistered users to post comments below articles on its website. The comments were automatically uploaded without being manually edited or pre-vetted by the company. The users themselves could not edit or remove their own comments after posting them. However, comments containing certain phrases were automatically deleted, and the company also operated an NTD system, meaning that users could also flag comments containing unlawful content or directly notify the company. In these cases, the company would swiftly remove the impugned comments. The company also published a notice under each article, highlighting that it does not take responsibility for the content of comments, as it has no control over them. At the time of the dispute, the company received around 10,000 daily comments and was well known for hosting defamatory and degrading comments.

One of the articles published by the company critiquing the activities of a ferry company received around twenty comments containing personal threats and offensive

language against the owner of the ferry company. Six weeks after being posted and upon a notice submitted by the owner, the company removed the impugned comments. The owner also initiated defamation proceedings against the company, which was ultimately ordered to pay EUR 320 in damages. The company lodged an application with the ECtHR claiming that the defamation ruling had unduly interfered with its freedom of expression under Article 10 of the ECHR.

The Chamber developed a novel test to assess whether the interference was necessary, taking into account (i) the context of the comments, (ii) the measures applied by the company in order to prevent or remove defamatory comments, (iii) the liability of the actual authors of the comments as an alternative to the company's liability, and (iv) the consequences of the national proceedings for the company. The judgment found that as a media publisher, the company was liable for any defamatory statements made in its media publication. The company could not exempt itself from these obligations, as it did not qualify as an intermediary service provider. Rather, the publication of articles and comments on its online news portal was found to amount to journalistic activity and the company—as administrator of the portal—was deemed to be a publisher. As the company acted in its professional capacity, relied on advertising revenue based on the number of comments, and could predict the nature of defamatory comments, the prior automatic filtering and notice-and-take-down (hereinafter NTD) system did not ensure sufficient protection for the rights of third parties. Accordingly, the Chamber found no violation of the applicant's right to freedom of expression.

The Grand Chamber, in its subsequent judgment, placed particular emphasis on the clearly unlawful nature of the respective comments—amounting to hate speech and direct incitement to violence. In fact, the ability of a victim of such speech to continuously monitor the Internet was more limited than the ability of the company to prevent or remove unlawful comments. Although the NTD system may in some cases be an adequate tool for preventing the spread of unlawful content, states may nevertheless impose liability on online news portals to remove clearly unlawful comments without delay, even without notice from the alleged victim or from third parties.

Interestingly, the Grand Chamber emphasized that the present judgment is only applicable to large professionally managed online news portals run on a commercial basis that published news articles of their own and invited their readers to comment on them. In contrast, the active monitoring obligation cannot apply to (i) discussion forums or bulletin boards, (ii) social media platforms, and (iii) websites or blogs run by private persons as a hobby. The main differences are—in the view of the Grand Chamber—that on these other fora on the Internet where third-party comments can be disseminated, (i) users freely disseminate ideas without the influence of the provider, and the provider (ii) does not publish any content on its own and (iii) is not financially motivated. Among other controversial aspects of the judgment, Gosztonyi questions the underlying rationale behind the distinction made between online news portals and social media platforms, as the Grand Chamber's argumentation is rather lacking in this respect (Gosztonyi, 2023, p. 124).

In their joint dissenting opinion, judges Sajó and Tsotsoria critique the majority's conclusion to require active intermediaries to remove comments without delay after publication, and not upon notice or on other grounds linked to actual knowledge. Referring to the strict delineation of the application of the present judgment to other fora on the Internet as "damage control", the judges anticipate that in practice, most active intermediaries will rather disable comments than be tasked with proactively monitoring them. In retrospect, this was rightfully so, as many online news portals indeed disabled their comment section due to the administrative burden posed by *Delfi AS v. Estonia*. It is at

most questionable whether this consequence means a win from the perspective of online freedom of expression.

4.2.2. *Sanchez v. France*

In *Sanchez v. France* (ECtHR, 2021, 2023a) the ECtHR grappled with the question of whether an elected official—a local councilor and candidate for election to Parliament—was obligated to remove unlawful comments under his Facebook posts. The applicant was convicted by the national courts for inciting hatred or violence by not removing unlawful comments on his publicly accessible Facebook "wall" used during his election campaign. In his defense, the applicant claimed that his original posts did not contain any incitement, that he had no control over the content of comments posted by his friends, and that it would require disproportionate effort to effectively monitor all of the comments. Without moderating prior or subsequent comments, the applicant posted a notice on his Facebook "wall" inviting his friends to "be careful with the content" of their comments. The applicant turned to the ECtHR claiming that the state has infringed his right to freedom of expression under Article 10 of the ECHR.

The Chamber judgment remarked the clearly unlawful nature of the comments and found that the freely accessible Facebook account of the applicant was used in connection with the election campaign, as a means of expression designed to reach the electorate in the broad sense, and hence the entire population. The Chamber also noted that the applicant was not reproached for using his right to freedom of expression, but rather for his lack of vigilance and reaction to the comments. Although he was not informed of the content of the comments before they were posted, by making his account public and posting content in the context of the upcoming election, the applicant was under a duty to monitor the comments due to their possibly polemical nature. The Chamber found no violation of the applicant's rights, even though—as opposed to *Delfi AS v. Estonia*—the comments were not anonymous, and users posting the impugned comments were also prosecuted. However, the Chamber held that the underlying basis was different in the case of the criminal measures—the dissemination of content inciting hatred or violence in the case of the commenters and the failure to remove such content in the case of the applicant.

The Grand Chamber, referring to *Delfi AS v. Estonia*, established that the comment section of a public Facebook page run by a politician constitutes other fora on the Internet where third-party comments can be disseminated. In contrast, the active monitoring obligation of the applicant was nevertheless established, against the backdrop of the special duties and responsibilities of elected officials, especially during an election campaign. The Grand Chamber conceded that this monitoring obligation may require considerable resources, also noting that exempting elected officials from all liability might facilitate or encourage abuse and misuse, including hate speech and calls to violence, but also manipulation, lies, and misinformation. As Facebook itself was already under specific obligations as an intermediary service provider, the Grand Chamber found it permissible to also subject the operators of public Facebook "walls" to this monitoring obligation. The Grand Chamber also remarked that a private individual of limited notoriety and representativeness would have fewer duties and in turn a lesser burden than a local politician or a candidate standing for election to local office (Korpisaari, 2022).

The reactions to the possible consequences brought about by the present judgment are alarming, to say the least. Alkiviadou argues that in the present case, the ECtHR failed to (i) provide an adequate contextual assessment of whether the content of the impugned comments indeed amounted to incitement and (ii) ascertain the necessity of criminal sanctions, which should be reserved only for the most serious cases (Alkiviadou, 2021). Van de Kerkhof opines that *Sanchez v. France* negates the obligations and responsibilities

of the underlying social media platforms, which are clearly better equipped to swiftly identify and remove clearly unlawful content (Van de Kerkhof, 2023). Baghdasaryan adds that the lack of foreseeability and the potential of criminal sanctions may deter candidates from communicating on such online platforms, or from running for office altogether (Baghdasaryan, 2023). Gosztonyi and Lendvai argue that the judgment can be understood as one further step towards digital authoritarianism (Gosztonyi & Lendvai, 2024b).

The NGO Media Defence criticized the judgment on grounds similar to those of judges Sajó and Tsotsoria in their joint dissenting opinion in the case of *Delfi AS v. Estonia*. By requiring the applicant to "distance himself" from unlawful comments posted on his public Facebook "wall", the present judgment makes all elected officials and politicians running for office prone to coordinated attacks to trigger their liability. Similarly to *Delfi AS v. Estonia*, this may lead to the prevention of all comments generally, which would be a major setback to online political discourse (Media Defence, 2023). The NGO Article 19 further added that "*in practice, this judgment means that certain prominent individuals on social media would have the same obligations as the platforms*" (Article 19, 2023).

4.2.3. *Zöchling v. Austria*

In *Zöchling v. Austria* (ECtHR, 2023b), the ECtHR revisited and confirmed its approach adopted in *Delfi AS v. Estonia*. The applicant, a well-known journalist, encountered defamatory comments made against her on a relatively smaller online news portal. Only users registered via their e-mail address could comment on the news portal, and the operator of the portal also placed a notice on the website discouraging users from posting unlawful comments. Comments were published automatically without any prior review. Against this backdrop, offensive comments about the applicant were repeatedly posted under articles published on the portal. Two days after the impugned comments were posted and upon a notice made by the applicant, the operator of the portal deleted the comments and blocked the users in question. The applicant also requested the e-mail addresses of the users, which the operator of the portal provided to her; however, the e-mail service providers refused to share the real names and addresses of the users. The national court of first instance found in favor of the applicant; however, the court of second instance did not, so the applicant lodged an application with the ECtHR alleging an infringement of her right under Article 8 of the ECHR.

The Chamber held that the court of second instance failed to adequately assess the context, size, commercial interest, and content of the comments. Although the impugned comments clearly amounted to hate speech and the underlying articles intentionally stirred up antipathies against the applicant, these factors were not taken into due consideration by the national court. As regards the size of the online news portal, although smaller than that in the case of *Delfi AS v. Estonia*, the operator of the portal nevertheless had a commercial interest in receiving as many comments as possible. The Chamber judgment also criticized the lack of an NTD system operated by the online news portal, although the impugned comments were swiftly removed upon the applicant's notice. Reiterating its finding in *Sanchez v. France*, the Chamber underlined that in case of clearly unlawful content, states may impose liability on the providers of online news portals even without prompt notification from victims or third parties. From this, the requirement of a minimum degree of subsequent moderation or automatic filtering to promptly identify and delete unlawful comments logically follows, even in the absence of a notification by the injured party or others.

Tuchtfeld insightfully highlights the main criticism surrounding the present judgment: "the ECtHR's decision could be interpreted as constituting a positive obligation for states to order platforms to generally monitor their systems for unlawful content published by third

parties"—in stark contrast to the fundamental nature of immunity granted to intermediary service providers under European law (Tuchtfeld, 2023).

5. The Tweet of Damocles?

Our investigation sought to identify the key doctrinal measures and principles guiding the social media presence of public officials. We aimed at identifying them via a thorough examination of the American and the European case law having set forth the key legislative measures. In the table below, we provide a detailed comparative analysis of the obligations and responsibilities of elected officials in moderating third-party content on social media across the two frameworks to help recognize the legal and practical challenges public officials face in balancing free speech, liability, and accountability in digital public spaces or "fora" (Table 1).

Table 1. Comparative analytical framework on the rights and obligations of public officials on social media.

Comparative Criteria	U.S. Framework	European Framework	Impact and Implications
Obligation to Moderate Content	No general obligation exists to moderate third-party content.	Public officials may be obligated to monitor for clearly unlawful or hateful content.	U.S.: Protects free speech by avoiding mandatory moderation but focuses on viewpoint neutrality.
			EU: Monitoring obligations impose proactive responsibilities, risking over-censorship.
Status of Officials vs. Private Individuals	Public officials are analyzed under the state action doctrine. Liability arises only when acting under state authority.	Public officials bear higher duties than private individuals due to their role and public influence.	U.S.: Officials retain personal free speech rights unless acting in an official role.
			EU: Elevated standards differentiate officials, especially during elections, increasing their liability.
Impact of Mixed-Use Social Media Accounts	Mixed-use accounts are analyzed under a two-part test: authority and intent of use. Personal content can coexist with official speech.	Mixed-use accounts risk being classified as official if used for campaign or election-related communication.	Ambiguity in mixed-use accounts creates challenges. U.S. provides clearer guidelines; Europe imposes stricter scrutiny on election-related use.
Liability for Third-Party Comments	No liability exists for third-party content unless actions constitute state-mandated censorship.	Liability for unlawful comments arises when officials fail to moderate content, particularly hate speech or incitement.	U.S.: Viewpoint-neutral moderation safeguards speech.
			EU: High monitoring burdens on officials risk chilling speech, forcing proactive moderation (cf. *Sanchez* case).
Balance Between Censorship and Free Speech	Free speech takes precedence; public forums must remain viewpoint-neutral. Officials cannot engage in arbitrary blocking.	Stricter liability prioritizes preventing hate speech, even at the risk of limiting robust political discourse.	U.S.: Free speech and open forums are prioritized; avoiding censorship is key.
			EU: Liability ensures accountability but may encourage over-moderation to avoid sanctions.
Role of Platforms in Content Moderation	Platforms are treated as private actors with First Amendment protections, free to moderate content. Loose and liberal approach set forth in the CDA.	Platforms are required to act proactively to remove clearly unlawful content under the EDC/DSA framework.	U.S.: Platforms are essential private actors protected from forced moderation.
			EU: Platforms share responsibility with officials to ensure lawful discourse.
Election Campaigns and Enhanced Responsibilities	Election campaigns do not inherently impose additional duties, provided officials act in a personal capacity.	Public officials during campaigns are subject to enhanced obligations to moderate divisive or unlawful content.	U.S.: Campaign accounts blur the lines but can remain private.
			EU: Officials have heightened duties to ensure campaign speech avoids fostering hate or intolerance.

Source: authors' edit.

Another important implication and a significant agenda for future research arise from the rapid change in social media standards and guidelines and its conflicts with existing legal frameworks, whether they be the U.S. or the ECtHR. One can hardly imagine that a user's "first choice" of remedy when facing a restriction on their FoE on a social media

platform, especially in the case of a politician or public figure, is to immediately lodge a submission, patiently waiting for years the exhaustion of national remedies, and then submit the case to the ECtHR or the Supreme Court. Instead, content moderation decisions are often challenged through internal platform appeals, demonstrating the incessantly growing dominance of the privatization of speech regulation and the power imbalance between platforms, the state, and most importantly, the persons (Quintais et al., 2023; Koltay, 2019). In the current legal settings, politicians and public figures are subject to inconsistent moderation practices depending on where they operate. While the so-called "Brussels Effect"—the European Union's impact in shaping global regulatory standards by imposing stringent rules (Hadjiyianni, 2021)—has led platforms to align with European regulations in many instances, the still lasting absence of a global standard for digital governance results in over-enforcement in some regions and under-enforcement in others. Platforms, wary of regulatory scrutiny, may preemptively remove content to comply with EU regulations or other similar regulations in or outside the EU for that matter (cf. Tomaz, 2023), even when similar speech would be fully protected under U.S. law. Conversely, the broad protections of Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act in the U.S. and the lack of modernization and reformulation thereof allow platforms greater discretion in determining what content remains online, sometimes leading to accusations of selective enforcement or political bias (Montalbano, 2022; Citron, 2023). This uncertainty is even more problematic when applied to elected officials, whose speech carries public interest implications but is often moderated in ways that lack transparency or consistency (See Kang & Eisler, 2022).

In sum, we can state that the increasing reliance on private governance via which the many problems of the horizontal regulation of FoE emerged raises severe democratic concerns. We suggest that future research should focus on how platforms, policymakers, and legal institutions can develop governance models that uphold freedom of expression while ensuring fair and predictable content moderation standards across jurisdictions.

6. Conclusions or the European Amendments as Ruminations on a Possible Brussels Effect

Our digital age has placed freedom of expression under unprecedented scrutiny and regulation, in particular for public figures. After the extraterritorial success of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, 2016), the European Union tried to step in as a global leader for the regulation of cyberspace also. With the DSA, the European Union tried to address the so-far unresolved human rights challenges posed by (very large) online platforms. This could be described as the Brussels Effect (Bradford, 2020). The EU has influenced global practices through severe regulatory standards, compelling multinational corporations to align their operations with European norms to maintain access to its market.

The DSA has the potential to shape content moderation practices globally, but as it came fully into force in 2024, it cannot be decided yet. Measures like transparency mandates, appeals mechanisms, and algorithmic accountability could possibly affect regulatory regimes worldwide. This could be seen in 2025 in the ongoing debates around the possible amendment of Section 230 of the CDA. However, the Brussels Effect is not without challenges: the differences between European and U.S. legal traditions, in particular between the above-seen jurisdictions, show the complexities of exporting European standards extraterritorially.

One key element of the debates about online platforms is recognizing public figures' unique role in shaping democratic discourse. By the transparency and accountability rules, the legislator ensures platforms take more responsibility for content moderation while at the same time protecting fundamental rights (Frosio & Geiger, 2023). Public figures

are navigating in a complex ecosystem where their right to free expression coexists with significant responsibilities. Jurisprudence has consistently upheld the principle that public figures, given their influence on public debates, are subject to higher levels of legal scrutiny.

Nevertheless, critical questions remain about the practical implementation of these regulations. Without clear guidelines, platforms may "err on the side of caution to avoid possible subsequent liability" (*Delfi AS v. Estonia*, 2015). Similarly, global cooperation could be important to address the fragmented nature of the internet. As public figures from Donald Trump to Viktor Orbán increasingly engage in transnational discourse, more harmonized standards could be the key to preserving the global, open, and interoperable internet for public figures and everyday users too. Though not without limitations, the Brussels Effect shows the EU's potential to shape global standards, fostering a more accountable and transparent digital environment.

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Article

Emotionalization of the 2021–2022 Global Energy Crisis Coverage: Analyzing the Rhetorical Appeals as Manipulation Means in the Mainstream Media

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Abstract: As the issues of the world's overreliance on fossil fuels still remain unresolved, mainstream media play a central role in influencing public attitudes towards energy sources. This article aimed to consider Aristotle's rhetorical appeals as manipulation means in the news coverage of the 2021–2022 global energy crisis. Using computer-aided text analysis, media framing, discourse, and rhetorical analyses, this paper analyzes 600 news articles published on the websites of the four mainstream media sources from the key countries that were affected by the crisis. The results confirmed emotionalization of the news coverage that occurred through the use of similar rhetorical appeals and emotive language means aimed at inducing positive or negative feelings and shaping public opinion. The UK and US mainstream media appeared to rely more on the opinions of political, business, and energy authorities, highlighting a high level of politicization of their coverage. The findings also indicated polarization of the attitudes in the coverage, with mainly negative narratives about fossil fuels and more positive narratives about renewable energies, which contributed to public opinion manipulation and energy decision-making. This study opens up perspectives for future research on media emotions and rhetorical appeals as powerful manipulation means in applied linguistics, rhetoric, and journalism.

Keywords: global energy crisis; energy dependence; energy transition; rhetorical appeals; manipulation means; emotionalization of news discourse; media framing; Lippmann's public opinion; agenda setting; mainstream media

1. Introduction

The oil and gas industry is historically seen as a driving force of the global economy since mineral resources are 'natural capital' that ensures stable economic growth (Litvinenko et al., 2023, p. 95) and provides sustainable development worldwide (Zhou, 2023, p. 1). However, the depletion of the existing oil and gas fields and the problems in finding new fields have made it difficult to maintain stable growth in the production of hydrocarbon resources (HCRs) in the recent years (Arias & Colmenarez, 2024; Ganzulenko & Petkova, 2023). Thus, the global oil and gas industry is currently facing both opportunities for developing new fields and technologies (Kryltcov et al., 2021), shifting to renewable energy sources (RESs), and improving energy efficiency and introducing digital technologies (Belsky et al., 2024; Samylovskaya et al., 2022) and challenges that are related to the environmental risks (Ashish et al., 2024), overreliance on artificial intelligence (Haouel & Nemeslaki, 2024), and the exhaustion of readily available resources (Babyr, 2024).

The shortage of energy sources fueled the global energy crisis which began in 2021 and spiked in 2022 due to many factors, including global green movements to reduce

carbon emissions, the Ukraine–Russia conflict, and post-COVID-19 economic rebound. Some energy researchers pointed out that the global demand for crude oil would continue to decrease (Ponomarenko et al., 2024), while other scholars revealed challenges in implementing energy transition policies (Sikirica, 2024) and the high level of polarization in public debates on energy sources, with extremely negative narratives about fossil fuels and positive narratives about renewable energy sources (Dagiliūtė, 2024; Pierce et al., 2024). As a result, the issues of energy transition and energy efficiency (Gajdzik et al., 2024; Shklyarskiy et al., 2023), energy justice (Van Uffelen et al., 2024), and the impact of the energy crisis on the global economy (Ozili & Ozen, 2023) became the main topics of public and media debates (Sefa-Nyarko, 2024; Yun et al., 2022).

The majority of media studies on the global energy crisis coverage highlight the key role of the media in the process of public acceptance or non-acceptance of energy sources (Sovacool et al., 2022). Most studies pinpoint the politicization of the energy crisis coverage and climate change news content, which refers to the prominence of political actors in the coverage (Chinn et al., 2020) and indicates political bias in media. For instance, the study of Yun et al. (2022) confirmed the politicization of the energy crisis in the South Korean media and detected the role of fake news in fueling renewable energy conflicts and stimulating oppositions to locating renewable energy facilities or justifying such oppositions. Huan (2023) found that the coverage of the energy crisis was not predominantly energy-related but rather focused on political issues. The findings of Panchendrarajan et al. (2024) also proved that the energy crisis brought into the debate the issues of fair distribution of economic burdens and cost of living, social justice, and equity in the UK newspapers as well as local problems rather than energy issues. The study of Loschke et al. (2024) revealed that both positive and negative news discourse contributed to the polarization of attitudes towards energy policies, which allowed us to assume the significant role of positive and negative emotionality in shaping public opinion and sustaining certain ideology in the news discourse.

It is also worth noting that during the COVID-19 pandemic, mass media became more reliant on digital and social media, on the one hand, and susceptible to emotional manipulation and misinformation, on the other hand (Li et al., 2022). The overreliance on social media (Bi, 2023), the 'totalizing visualization' of new media (Dorofeev & Tomaščíková, 2021), and rapid digitalization of the modern world (Bylieva et al., 2022; Shestakova & Morgunov, 2023) led to the process of 'deep mediatization' (Hepp, 2020, 2022), which refers to the entanglement of the social world with media technologies. It concerns how we create our society through digital media and their infrastructures, and how they are reconfigured as a result. The proliferation of fake news and conspiracy theories in social and digital media gave birth to the phenomenon of the 'post-truth era' characterized by the prevalence of emotional arguments over rational arguments in both print and electronic media (Aïmeur et al., 2023; Teneva, 2023). Thus, appeals to emotions became one of the characteristics of modern media discourse (Alba-Juez & Larina, 2018).

On the one hand, the process of intentional embedding of emotions into news stories or 'emotionalization' of the media discourse (Alba-Juez & Larina, 2018) resulted in a large amount of 'sensational' news seeking to engage a wider audience and increase the circulation and revenue of commercial media outlets. As Samoilenko et al. (2017, p. 34) noted, emotions contribute to the commercial success of media outlets by "featuring sensations and scandals in which political actors become targets of public praise or condemnation". On the other hand, it resulted in challenges related to fact-checking of news information even in mainstream media, which are adjudged more credible despite heavier dependency on digital media for information (Salaudeen & Onyechi, 2020).

Most media studies paid little attention to the way media coverage affected how disputes around energy issues evolved (Van Neste & Couture-Guillet, 2022). Some media studies on the global energy crisis focused on sentiment analysis of the energy crisis discourse. For instance, Kim et al. (2024) found that intense negative emotions dominated Korean news comments about energy transition. Weber (2024) noted the deeply rooted criticism of nuclear power and the necessity of the expansion of renewable energies in European newspapers. Pierce et al. (2024) argued that emotions, such as anger and fear, are central to how coalitions advocate for policy change in the regulation of oil and gas drilling in Colorado. The study of Matthews (2024) found that reporting to UK TV audiences focused on political and economic issues such as elite inaction and profiteering from the energy crisis, though the coverage omitted any explanation and assistance for those audiences affected by the soaring energy costs. The study of Molek-Kozakowska (2024) revealed that the overall discourse on energy policy was used to stir anxiety among the public and thus manipulate it for political gain, which allowed us to assume the manipulative role of emotions in shaping public opinion on the energy-related issues in the online news discourse, since online news in general has a direct impact on democracy and political knowledge (Al-Rawi, 2019).

Although the majority of media studies focus on political bias in social and digital media coverage of the global energy crisis, little attention is paid to the issues of tackling language manipulation means and their hidden ideological meanings in the mainstream media that contribute to influencing public perceptions of the energy crisis and energy sources. Therefore, based on Aristotle's theory of rhetoric, Lippmann's (1929/2021) theory of public opinion, and agenda-setting and framing theories, the present study aims to identify and consider the most common rhetorical appeals and emotive language means that are used as means of public opinion manipulation in the online publications of the four mainstream media from the key countries that either benefitted or suffered from the 2021–2022 global energy crisis, including *The New York Times* (the USA), *The Guardian* (the UK), *The Times of India* (India), and *China Daily* (China) (Bolton, 2024; Ozili & Ozen, 2023; Rankin et al., 2021). This paper intends to contribute to the studies on the agenda-setting role of the news media and the manipulative use of Aristotle's appeals from rhetorical, linguistic, and journalistic perspectives. It should also be noted that the results of the present study can be applicable to the news coverage of the 2021–2022 global energy crisis only in the selected four mainstream newspapers.

2. Theoretical Context

2.1. The Study of Rhetorical Appeals, Emotions, and Manipulation in Mass Communication: An Overview

The study of rhetorical appeals has its roots in Aristotle's rhetorical triangle, according to which persuasion occurs through the use of the character ('ethos') of the speaker, the emotional state ('pathos') of the hearer, and the argument ('logos') itself (Aristotle cited in Rapp, 2023). The rhetorical triangle has a profound significance in the realm of public and political speeches (Samboang et al., 2024). In particular, appeals to 'ethos' (authority) are aimed at convincing the audience by using a speaker's credibility and authority or by emphasizing one's expertise and experience in a certain field to establish a speaker's rapport with his or her audience. 'Pathos' is about evoking feelings with the aim of establishing emotional connection with the audience, making the latter feel personally involved in the issue. Appeals to 'logos' involve supporting the argument with facts, statistics, and logical reasoning.

In Aristotle's triangle, 'logos', 'ethos', and 'pathos' should be balanced within a text (Aristotle cited in Rapp, 2023). Therefore, emotions are regarded as one of the basic

components of public persuasion. The study of Rocklage et al. (2018) confirmed a strong link between emotionality ('pathos') and persuasion, proving that the intent to persuade other people spontaneously increases the emotionality of individuals' appeals. Moreover, emotions can also be viewed as 'cognitively relevant' since they reflect not only feelings, but also "inaccurate beliefs and, therefore, their value is variable" (Aristotle cited in Coelho & Huppes-Cluysenaer, 2018, p. 16). As Nikunen (2019) noted, they can be influenced by cultural norms, practices, and social structures.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that Aristotle's fundamental appeals can be used as means to manipulate the audience (Gagich & Zickel, 2018; Teneva, 2023). In this sense, such appeals are regarded as 'fallacies' or false arguments that can weaken a speaker's arguments and mislead the audience. Thus, emotional fallacies can be used to play on the recipients' emotions rather than provide evidence (Kuchel & Rowland, 2023). According to Koszowy et al. (2022), ethotic techniques can be used to either emphasize or weaken and undermine a speaker's own or others' credibility and trustworthiness, whereas logical fallacies can rely on those facts and evidence which are favorable to the speaker's arguments (Teneva, 2023). Copi et al. (2018) developed a classification of fallacies, including 'argumentum ad hominem' (an appeal to authority in which the opinion of an authority figure (or figures) is used as evidence to support an argument); 'argumentum ad populum' (an appeal to the public, often emotionally laden, that claims a conclusion is true because most or all people irrelevantly think, believe, or feel that it is); 'argumentum ad numerum' (an appeal to numbers based on the number of people who hold a particular belief); and 'argumentum ad passiones' (an appeal to strong feelings, emotions, or enthusiasm rather than judgment in order to establish a conclusion) (Hansen, 2020). These four fallacies identified by Copi et al. (2018) serve as a basis for our further classification of rhetorical appeals in the news coverage of the global energy crisis.

It should be noted that theories about emotions and their role in media are abundant throughout the entire history of media and differ in their approaches (Eder et al., 2019). For instance, affect theory considers emotions as subjectively experienced feelings (Gibbs, 2011) and uses the term 'affect' as an umbrella term comprising any felt bodily state such as moods, reflexes, and felt bodily responses. According to this theory, social 'contagion,' which is a seemingly spontaneous process by which information, such as attitudes, emotions, or behaviors, is spread throughout a group from one member to others (Riggio & Riggio, 2023), is considered to be the original basis for all human communication and a central feature of the audience's emotional engagement (Plantinga, 2009), which is relevant to the present study of emotionalization of online news discourse.

Evolutionary media scholars consider innate affect programs, whereas cognitive appraisal theories of emotion view emotions that are produced from our interpretation of what we experience (Eder et al., 2019). According to the appraisal theory, emotions are elicited and differentiated on the basis of a person's subjective evaluation (Scherer, 1999). Thus, this theory can be applied to capture the judgment process in terms of emotions experienced by the reader or viewer and how the wider context such as the full news article, or even just the headline, forms a part of this process (AlZahrani & Alhuthali, 2024), which is also relevant to the present study on the role of emotive language in evoking the audience's emotional responses in the energy crisis discourse.

Habermas (1989) sidelined emotions and viewed the public sphere as an ideal arena of rational discussion. Nevertheless, he claimed that "emotion is to practical reason as sense perception is to scientific reason" (Habermas cited in Rehg, 2011, n. pag.). Thus, citizens who participate in public debates are individuals who bring to public discussion not only their beliefs but also their socially relevant affective concerns (Rosas & Serrano-Puche, 2018). This neglected aspect of the public sphere was highlighted by researchers who considered

emotions as an integral part of the public debates and motivators for political mobilization (Nussbaum, 2013) as well as social means of communication and information (Glück, 2018; Orts, 2022).

During recent decades, the interest in studying mediated emotions increased with what Patricia Clough and Halley (2007) identified as an 'affective turn'. As a result, the concept of the emotional public sphere emerged, highlighting the significant role of emotions in the media (Rosas & Serrano-Puche, 2018). As opposed to an old and rather simplistic view that journalists' own emotions have to be excluded in news reporting that adheres to the principles of truth, objectivity, freedom of expression, and the right of citizens to information, Stenvall (2014, p. 461) claimed that "emotionality does not necessarily run counter to objectivity but may operate alongside" with it. Furthermore, she argued that emotions perform a strategic function for journalists to structure news material, establish a link to news audiences, or emphasize emotive information in news coverage. Stenvall (2014) classified representations of emotions in news agency reports, including attributed and non-attributed affects, where journalists either write about observed, interpreted, or self-experienced affects. Wirth and Schramm (2005) also distinguished 'everyday' emotions from 'media-specific' emotions, considering particular emotions as effects of media usage under media-specific or genre-specific conditions.

From the viewpoint of Nabi (2003, p. 226), who focused on the relationship between emotion and cognition in understanding the influence of mediated messages, emotions are "internal, mental states representing evaluative reactions to external events, agents, or objects that vary in its intensity". In her opinion, they serve as frames for issues, highlighting certain information in terms of accessibility and thus guiding subsequent decision-making. This finding is relevant to the present study of the manipulative use of emotive language means that contribute to energy decision-making. Thus, according to Nabi (2003), actions triggered by mediated emotions vary depending on the nature of the emotion itself, with different emotions leading to different behaviors. For instance, fear and anger can differentially affect information accessibility, desired information seeking, and policy preference. These findings highlight the importance of studying the discrete emotions in persuasive contexts, which is relevant in the present study.

The study of De Los Santos and Nabi (2019) also revealed that the emotionality of news stories plays a significant role in determining how consumers respond to and selectively engage with online news content. According to their research, emotional stories that contained appeals to hope and anger encouraged readers to spend more time on the story page, whereas stories that appealed to fear and anxiety resulted in avoidance behavior. Likewise, considering the correlation between emotions and virality, Berger and Milkman (2013) also found that positive content is more viral than negative content. However, they concluded that "the role of emotion in transmission is more complex than mere valence alone" (Berger & Milkman, 2013, p. 21). For instance, users are more likely to take actions if they are exposed to such emotions as anger, happiness, and sadness in messages. These findings prove that appeals to emotions can be used as an effective manipulative strategy to evoke strong emotional responses in the audience, enhance decision-making, and maximize the reader engagement.

Modern studies of emotions note that emotions are pervasive in digital and social media, contribute to the commercial success of media outlets (Nikunen, 2019), enhance social media engagement (Bil-Jaruzelska & Monzer, 2022), and have a direct impact on political processes (Neyazi & Kuru, 2024). According to Eder et al. (2019), the impact of mass media on society is to a great extent based on human emotion. Thus, emotions are one of the key factors in determining news value.

As a result, on the one hand, the new forms of 'emotion-driven' journalism aim to create intimate and trustful relationships with audiences, thus highlighting the persuasive role of emotions in constructing media objectivity and contributing to public trust (Lecheler, 2020). On the other hand, digital media technologies provide tools that allow modern media outlets to manipulate public opinion on a wide scale, revealing the manipulative role of emotions in hindering objectivity and disseminating mis- and disinformation (Teneva & Bykov, 2023). Therefore, studying emotions from both rhetorical and journalistic perspectives is critical to mainstream media, which are also vulnerable to fake news and online misinformation (Al-Rawi, 2019). As Glück (2018) noted, one of the efficient ways to study mediated emotions is to consider them as evoked by a variety of textual devices in news discourse, including metaphors and rhetorical devices.

Prior studies uncovered challenges in defining manipulation and distinguishing it from persuasion, deception, coercion, and propaganda. The majority of the studies viewed manipulation as deceptive and hidden from the recipient who is not aware of being manipulated and, therefore, cannot control its consequences. For instance, Wood (2014) considered deception as a form of manipulation. Barnhill (2014) claimed that recipients may be aware of being manipulated so that manipulation is not always covert. Recent studies have shown that the distinction between manipulation and other forms of influence is more controversial and problematic. Klenk (2021) notes that although the manipulator wishes to conceal his intentions, the manipulatory act is sometimes overt. Noggle (2021) sees manipulation as a form of non-coercive pressure and a more general form of deception. In his viewpoint, the aim of 'global' manipulation is to deprive its victim of free will. Fischer (2022) places manipulation between two poles: persuasion aimed to convince others via arguments founded in good reason, on the one hand, and coercion aimed to force others to act in a certain way, on the other hand. Spencer (2020) defines manipulation as an intentional attempt to influence a subject's behavior by exploiting a bias or vulnerability. Durgeç (2024) distinguishes manipulation from propaganda, defining the former as a means of changing the behavior or opinions of the audience in line with the wishes of those who perform manipulation and the latter as the influence aimed at changing people's political preferences and mindset.

Van Dijk (2015) perceived discourse analysis as a sort of ideology analysis, claiming that discourse plays a major role in the expression and reproduction of ideologies. Van Dijk (2006) linked discourse, cognition, and society, arguing that most manipulation can be tackled through social, cognitive, and discursive perspectives since it takes place by text and form. He defined manipulation as a form of social power abuse, cognitive mind control, and discursive practice of "a manipulator, which exercises control over other people, usually against their will or against their best interests" (Van Dijk, 2006, p. 360). Thus, following the definition of manipulation by Durgeç (2024) and Van Dijk's (2015) view on discourse analysis, the present study aims to uncover manipulative language means and their hidden ideological meanings that contribute to changes in public opinion about the global energy crisis and energy sources in four English-language mainstream media.

2.2. The Role of Media in Public Opinion Manipulation Through Lippmann's and Agenda-Setting Theories

In times of international crisis, the rise of digital and social media contributed to the phenomenon known as 'infodemics' that is characterized by an overabundance of unverified and often contradictory information which is transmitted rapidly in digital and physical environments (Dutta et al., 2022). Therefore, the issues of public opinion manipulation in mass media became of vital importance to many scientists. Happer and Philo (2013) found that by focusing public interest on particular subjects, mass media may severely limit the information available to the audience and intentionally remove

alternative facts and solutions from the public debate, which is necessary to make informed decisions about the subjects and is a reminder of Lippmann's (1929/2021) theory of public opinion and its relevance in the modern media.

Walter Lippmann was the first to reveal the critical role of media in influencing public opinion through choosing facts and filtering information that favors those in power. In his famous book *Public Opinion*, Lippmann (1929/2021) considered public opinion formation and manipulation through constructing the subjective representations of the world or 'pseudo-environments' which represent an accumulation of distorted pictures that arise in people's minds and shape their perception of the world. According to Lippmann (1929/2021), people's behavior is based not on their knowledge or experience but on these pictures which are indeed their public opinions. These distorted images or 'stereotypes', as Lippmann (1929/2021) defined them, are powerful tools in public opinion formation since they serve as 'time-saving' and efficient devices for transmitting particular symbols and cultural patterns through mass communication and simplifying the complexities of the world. Nevertheless, they also pose a serious threat to the objectivity of information and knowledge since they are inherently subjective and prejudiced, which may lead to implicit bias and conspiracy theories (Arnold-Forster, 2023). Therefore, information in mass communication does not represent the objective reality but is a result of restructuring the news and filtering information based on personal values, emotions, and opinions. By harnessing stereotypes and emotional weaknesses of the audience, the media is able to control and direct public attitudes towards particular subjects in a way that is favorable to them. These Lippmann's (1929/2021) ideas are especially relevant in the modern digital media where both journalists and online users share their personal views and emotions, which contributes to the appearance of an information pseudo-environment (Liu, 2022) and the dissemination of online mis- and disinformation (Teneva, 2023).

Based on the theory of public opinion, the agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) also puts emphasis on shaping public opinion and emphasizes the power of news organizations to 'consciously' select and decide which facts to reveal to the public. It focuses on a cognitive process known as 'accessibility', which implies that if a news item is covered more frequently and prominently, the issue becomes more important and accessible to the audience. By increasing the intensity and highlighting the importance of particular subjects in the news coverage, the media have a powerful impact on public opinion and decision-making (Valenzuela & McCombs, 2019).

The original paradigm of this theory was developed into 'second-level agenda setting', which emphasizes how the media describes issues or objects rather than what they emphasize and considers affective (emotional) and substantive (ideological) aspects of media discourse (Buyanza-Mwidima, 2024). In essence, framing theory is similar to 'second-level agenda setting' (Arowolo, 2017) since it deals with how something that is presented to the audience (called "the frame") influences the choices people make about how to process that information (De Vreese, 2005). The rhetorical power of a frame comes from its function to heighten the saliency of some aspects of reality over others. Frames provide interpretive cues for facts and are composed of key concepts, metaphors, images, and symbols to structure transmission of meaning (Feste, 2011). While agenda-setting theory deals with the salience issues, framing is concerned with the presentation of issues.

Thus, Lippmann's (1929/2021) public opinion, agenda setting, and framing theories seem to be relevant to this study, which aims to consider rhetorical appeals and emotive language as means of public opinion manipulation in the online news coverage of the 2021–2022 global energy crisis.

2.3. The Concepts of Energy Dependence, Energy Efficiency, Energy Transition, Energy Nationalism, and Energy Democracy in the Energy Crisis Coverage

During the global energy crisis, the issues of 'energy dependence', 'energy efficiency', 'energy transition', 'energy nationalism', and 'energy democracy' became a topic of geopolitical, environmental, and economic debates in mainstream media worldwide (Panchendrarajan et al., 2024). Since these concepts are intertwined and directly related to media debates on the energy crisis and energy sources in the analyzed material of the present study, it is necessary to define them.

According to the study of Donchev (2014), energy dependence refers to humanity's reliance on primary or secondary energy sources. In his viewpoint, dependence on energy sources can be reduced by 'energy efficiency', which is a way of managing and restraining the growth in energy consumption (Ozturk, 2013). Lantz et al. (2021) defined energy efficiency as the key factor of 'energy transition', which refers to the shift from one dominant energy resource—or set of resources—to another, switching from low-efficiency energy sources towards high-efficiency ones. Notably, Yang et al. (2024) distinguished the explicit transition, which is usually captured by statistic data and information, from the implicit transition, which involves shifts in energy security, geopolitical structure, energy power, energy justice, and energy governance and receives relatively less attention in the current literature.

Scholarly and media debates on citizen participation in energy transitions also included calls for 'energy democracy' (Van Veelen & Van Der Horst, 2018). It is an emergent social movement advancing renewable energy transition by resisting the fossil-fuel-dominant energy agenda (Szulecki & Overland, 2020). Energy democracy is seen as a possibility to democratize society (Sasaki, 2022) and as incorporating more comprehensive and practical issues, including its relation to technologies, economic activities, and ecology (Yun et al., 2022). Szulecki (2018) emphasized the idea of a public component influencing energy democracy, claiming that citizens' participation is key to energy decision-making. Nevertheless, the rise of the concept of 'energy democracy', which still lacks agreed definition, also reflects the growing politicization of energy governance and climate policy (Szulecki & Overland, 2020), which allowed us to assume politicization of the energy crisis debates in mainstream media.

Żuk et al. (2024) claim that there are challenges in implementing energy transition that are due to 'energy nationalism' or 'resource nationalism' used to subordinate energy policy to national interests. They may have harmful implications for both climate policy and the costs of the energy transition with a risk of delaying it. In particular, resource nationalism may lead to state intervention, which may take different forms—from higher taxes to creating state-owned enterprises with equity participation in various projects, export controls, and even nationalization (Nakhle, 2023).

As Wagner (2018) claims, media framings highlighting or omitting certain economic, social, or environmental details can considerably affect both the knowledge base and motivation of the audience in their decision-making and acceptance of energy policies. Therefore, the news coverage of the global energy crisis plays an important role in shaping public attitudes towards energy dependence, energy efficiency, energy transition, energy democracy, and energy nationalism.

3. Research Aims, Hypothesis, and Methodology

3.1. Research Aims

The research objective was twofold: first, to identify the most common rhetorical appeals and emotive language means in the online publications of the four English-language mainstream media taken from the key countries that were most affected by the crisis,

and, second, to analyze their role in shaping public opinion on the energy crisis and energy sources and influencing energy decision-making. The following tasks were set to accomplish the research objective:

1. To analyze the content of the news articles about the 2021–2022 global energy crisis from the four English-language mainstream media sources within the framework of Lippmann's (1929/2021) theory of public opinion, agenda setting, and framing theories;
2. To study the sources of news information in the energy crisis coverage and tackle their role in setting public agenda and shaping public opinion about the energy-related issues in the selected mainstream media;
3. To identify the most common types of rhetorical appeals in the news coverage of the 2021–2022 global energy crisis, measure their frequency during the examined period (from 1 August 2021 to 31 December 2022), and analyze their role in shaping public opinion about the energy-related issues;
4. To detect and examine specific rhetorical strategies, devices, and emotive language means in accordance with Van Dijk's (2015) approach to discourse analysis, uncover their hidden ideological meanings, and analyze their role in inducing positive or negative feelings and attitudes towards the effects of the fossil fuel crisis and energy sources.

3.2. Research Hypothesis

The study hypothesizes that (a) the news coverage of the global energy crisis is emotionalized in the selected mainstream media; (b) emotionalization of the coverage occurs through the frequent use of similar rhetorical appeals and emotive language means, which contribute to shaping public opinion on energy-related issues, including energy dependence, energy efficiency, energy democracy, energy transition, and energy nationalism; (c) emotionalization of the news coverage can also contribute to polarizing public attitudes towards the crisis by inducing either positive or negative feelings towards the effects of the energy crisis and energy sources; and (d) the use of major news agencies as information sources can also contribute to setting public agenda and shaping public perceptions of the energy crisis and energy sources in the selected mainstream media.

3.3. Materials and Methods

This paper aims to tackle the manipulative use of rhetorical appeals and emotive language in the news articles about the 2021–2022 global energy crisis taken from the websites of the four mainstream media from the viewpoint of rhetoric, applied linguistics, and journalism. As this study is multidisciplinary, it utilizes a mixture of research methods, including computer-aided text analysis (CATA), media framing analysis (MFA), critical discourse analysis (CDA), and rhetorical discourse analysis (RDA). This mixed-method research, involving a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches, seems to be relevant in this study and essential for the multidisciplinary analysis of the news articles about the global energy crisis since it enhances the validity of the results by using the strengths of each method and helps the researchers draw objective and comprehensive conclusions from linguistic, rhetorical, and journalistic perspectives.

In order to understand how stories were constructed to evoke a particular reaction from the audience, CATA was utilized to process the large amounts of news articles and visualize the most frequent keywords and key phrases that reinforced a particular representation of the energy crisis and specific emotions toward it. CATA helps avoid unconscious biases in data collection and interpretation (Short et al., 2018). Then, to identify frames in the content of the news articles, media framing analysis (MFA) was applied. MFA

allows to better understand what is covered in the media, how the issues are covered, and what angles are taken in the coverage. Since this study mainly deals with examining the rhetorical appeals and language and is not focused on the visual framing of the energy crisis, MFA was applied to analyze metaphors and the most frequent keywords and phrases that were used to frame the energy crisis.

While CDA is a micro-level process of discourse analysis that aims to identify abuses of power by analyzing linguistic and semiotic features of the texts in light of the larger social and political contexts (Huckin et al., 2012), RDA is a macro-level process that deals with the analysis of the authority of the speaker, the persuasion, the goals, the interaction, the audience, and the response (Andrus, 2012). If CDA focuses on tackling ideologies and power in discourse (Wodak & Meyer, 2009), Van Dijk's (2015) socio-cognitive approach aims to study the language not only in terms of hidden power relations and ideologies that are embedded in discourse, but also in terms of cognitive processes that determine discourse structures, which is vital for linking language use with social situations and social structures (Van Dijk, 2015). This is the reason why Van Dijk's approach to CDA is relevant when studying the specific language means of public opinion manipulation in the news coverage.

The present research was carried out in several stages. Firstly, to make inferences about the news coverage of the energy crisis in different parts of the world that were seriously affected by the crisis, the four English-language mainstream newspapers (*The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *The Times of India* and *China Daily*) were chosen from the key countries that either benefitted from the crisis (the USA) or seriously suffered from the energy shortages (the UK, India, and China) (Ozili & Ozen, 2023; Rankin et al., 2021). Mainstream papers were chosen due to their credibility and agenda-setting role in providing news. As Chomsky (1997, n. pag.) claimed, they are considered to be "the elite media, sometimes called the agenda-setting media because they are the ones with the big resources, they set the framework in which everyone else operates", which corresponds to the research aim of this paper. The credibility of the results is also supported by the fact that these papers have high circulation and engagement rates and are among the top global English-language news websites (Top 50 news websites in the world, 2024). Furthermore, all four selected newspapers are circulated in the countries' capital cities, which makes them close to the political elites of these countries and, thus, can contribute to politicization of the news coverage about the energy crisis.

Secondly, to retrieve the news articles about the 2021–2022 global energy crisis from the websites of the selected papers, this study utilized Nexis Newsdesk as a comprehensive tool for media monitoring and analytics. We aimed at analyzing the online news discourse centered around the subject of the "2021–2022 energy crisis"; hence, this keyword was used as a relevant subject of the Nexis search. When gathering the data, the consecutive sampling method was applied as one of the most popular and best nonprobability methods, since it seeks to include all accessible subjects as part of the sample (Thewes et al., 2018). The initial database included 738 online publications that included both relevant and irrelevant news articles as well as opinion pieces about the energy crisis. This is due to the retrieval nature of Nexis search, where an article with at least a single occurrence of any search keyword is retrieved. To sift out the irrelevant and opinion articles from the corpus, we restricted the search only to those news articles that had substantive coverage of the energy crisis and contained at least two mentions of a '2021–2022 energy crisis' keyword. The selection of the news articles was also defined by the research timeline between 1 August 2021 and 31 December 2022, since the global prices for gas, electricity, oil, and other fuels increased significantly in August 2021, when economies began opening up after pandemic-related lockdowns, and remained relatively high until December 2022 when the inflation rate

slowed, mainly due to lower energy prices (Bolton, 2024). Thus, the guided search tool in Nexis Newsdesk allowed to gather a sample of 600 relevant news articles about the energy crisis from the selected papers, with 150 articles from each paper, accordingly. Moreover, with the help of Nexis Newsdesk, it became possible to identify news agencies as the sources of information, which allowed us to make inferences about their role in agenda setting and shaping public opinion in the selected media.

Next, to identify frames in the energy crisis coverage, this study applied media framing analysis, which often manifests itself by the choice of specific keywords and phrases that reinforce a particular representation of the reality and a specific emotion toward it. Thanks to the development of semantic web technologies and automated approaches for different kinds of framing analysis, it became possible to analyze large amounts of the news articles available on the Internet (Murzo et al., 2022; Nicholls & Culpepper, 2020). Thus, using the free online word cloud generator https://www.wordclouds.com (accessed on 24 June 2024), four word clouds were generated from each of the analyzed media, which allowed us to distinguish the top 200 most frequent keywords and visualize the top 100 most meaningful of them that were semantically close to the concept of 'energy crisis'.

The analysis of the relationships between the most common keywords allowed us to identify four main types of information in the energy crisis coverage: authorities (political, business, scientific and energy experts, and energy companies), energy transition, emotions, and statistics. Based on these types of information, the study used multiple keyword searches in Nexis Newsdesk, which allowed us to identify the frequency of the following mentions: mentions of the opinions of political, business, scientific, and energy authorities; mentions of large numbers and statistical data; mentions of emotions about the crisis; and mentions of calls for national unity and energy transition. Based on these analytics, a classification of the most common types of rhetorical appeals in the energy crisis coverage was proposed. MFA allowed us to identify five frames in the energy crisis coverage that elicited underlying assumptions behind the keywords in the news stories.

Finally, to analyze the role of the rhetorical appeals in news framing and describe manipulative language means, this study applied Van Dijk's (2015) SCA and RDA, which allowed us to tackle the specific rhetorical strategies, devices, and emotive language means that contributed to influencing public opinion on the energy-related issues. The rhetoric and discourse analyses of the fragments of the energy crisis discourse were applied to uncover hidden ideological meanings of rhetorical appeals and emotive language means and make inference about their role in inducing positive or negative feelings and shaping public perceptions on energy issues in the four analyzed media.

4. Results and Discussion

A total number of 600 news articles about the global energy crisis were collected from the websites of the four English-language mainstream media, using a '2021–2022 energy crisis' keyword in the guided Nexis search tool. To estimate how the media drew public attention to the issues of the energy crisis between 1 August 2021 and 31 December 2022, this study measured the frequency of the collected news articles on the energy crisis, which is presented in Table 1. Figure 1 is given for a visual presentation of the data from Table 1.

From Table 1 and Figure 1, it became clear that the overall trend was an exponential increase in the number of publications about the global energy crisis in all four media between August 2021 and December 2022. In fact, the number of publications fluctuated wildly, reaching a peak of over 25 articles in the British, American, and Chinese media between late August and September 2022, which was followed by a dramatic drop after October 2022. This increase could be explained by the following facts: The imports of Russian gas had fallen sharply by September 2022 and triggered an extreme natural gas

price spike between August and September 2022, which attracted a lot of media attention. After the September peak, energy prices started to decline steadily, so the wholesale electricity prices in Europe at the end of October 2022 fell by about half compared to September 2022 due to ample liquefied natural gas supplies, demand reduction, recession fears, and unusually warm weather (Bolton, 2024). As for India, by September 2022, the number of publications in the Indian media had dropped dramatically to four publications, which could be attributed to the fact that gasoline prices in India were significantly lower than in the developed countries in September 2022. In April 2022, India witnessed an acute power shortage due to an unavailability of coal supplies, which explains the peak of 19 articles in the Indian media between April and May 2022.

Table 1. Frequency of news articles about the global energy crisis in the four analyzed newspapers between 1 August 2021 and 31 December 2022 (N = 600).

Date	*The Guardian*	*The New York Times*	*The Times of India*	*China Daily*
August 2021	3	4	2	2
September 2021	20	1	2	1
October 2021	8	4	15	5
November 2021	1	2	2	9
December 2021	4	2	1	4
January 2022	13	2	2	4
February 2022	4	13	10	1
March 2022	8	14	15	4
April 2022	1	8	19	4
May 2022	3	7	19	6
June 2022	9	5	15	10
July 2022	9	14	12	9
August 2022	21	10	11	10
September 2022	30	27	4	26
October 2022	7	15	8	23
November 2022	6	10	12	17
December 2022	3	12	1	15
Total	150	150	150	150

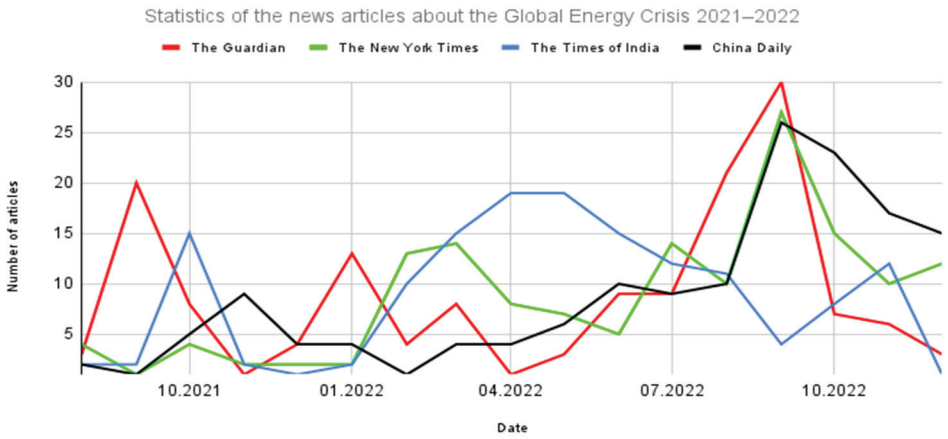


Figure 1. Frequency of news articles about the global energy crisis from 1 August 2021 to 31 December 2022.

Furthermore, Table 1 and Figure 1 also show that there were also several sharp increases in the number of publications: between August and October 2021 in all four media and between January and March 2022 in the British, American, and Indian media. By September 2021, global energy prices had increased significantly due to the post-COVID

economic recovery (Khan et al., 2022), while the beginning of 2022 was marked by the Ukraine–Russia conflict and fuel shortages in Europe, the U.S., and India (Bolton, 2024). As for China, the increase in the share of Russian oil in Chinese imports accelerated from 2022, making Russia China's main oil supplier, which explains the fact that the number of Chinese publications remained almost static until August 2022 when China experienced severe power outages lasting for two weeks (Shen et al., 2024).

Overall, the data in Table 1 and Figure 1 indicate the heightened media attention towards the global energy crisis between August 2021 and December 2022, which emphasizes the agenda-setting role of the media in creating public interest and manipulating public opinion on energy issues through increasing the intensity of their media coverage (Valenzuela & McCombs, 2019; Carroll, 2024).

Based on the Nexis search results, this study also identified the frequency of using news agencies as information sources, which is shown in Figure 2.

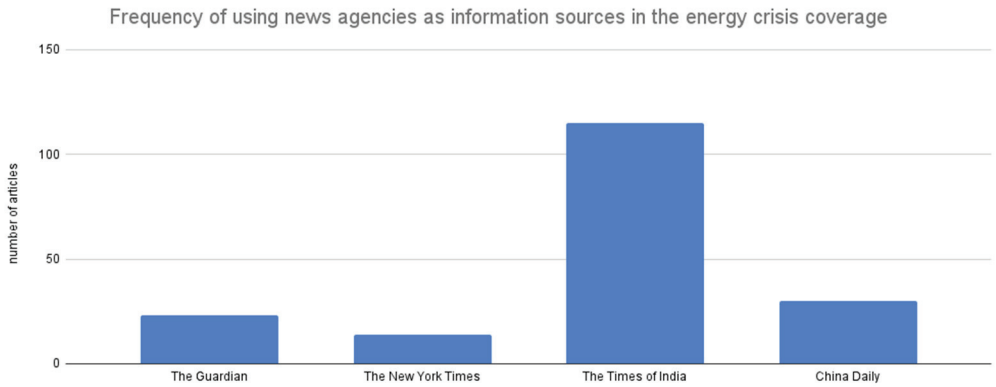


Figure 2. Frequency of using news agencies as information sources about the global energy crisis from 1 August 2021 to 31 December 2022 in the four analyzed media.

News agencies play a very important role in creating shared understanding in societies by providing information about different events (Afzal, 2012). From Figure 2, it became clear that all four media used news agencies as one of the main sources of news materials since they are considered to be the standard of reliable data during the large-scale crisis (Kultayeva et al., 2024; Van der Meer et al., 2017). Apart from using materials from such national agencies as PTI, Xinhua, and CGTN, all four media used the same global news agencies as information sources, including AP, Reuters, and Bloomberg, which can be viewed as a way of setting the same public agenda in all four analyzed media and, thus, shaping public knowledge and ideology (Tuchman, 1978) on the energy crisis. This finding contributes to the research hypothesis about the agenda-setting role of news media in influencing public perceptions about the crisis.

Next, to understand how the news on the energy crisis was framed, the study generated the lists of the top 200 most frequent keywords in each paper, using a free online generator https://www.wordclouds.com (accessed on 24 June 2024). To visualize the results, we created word clouds that included the top 100 most meaningful words from the top 200 most frequent keywords that were relevant to the subject of 'the energy crisis' and indicated the presence of frames in the energy crisis coverage. Figure 3a–d displays four word clouds which were created in a free online generator (https://www.wordclouds.com/, accessed on 24 June 2024). The size and color of each word show its frequency of occurrence in the analyzed material. Table 2 illustrates the lists of the top 200 most frequent keywords, as well as their ranking and frequency.

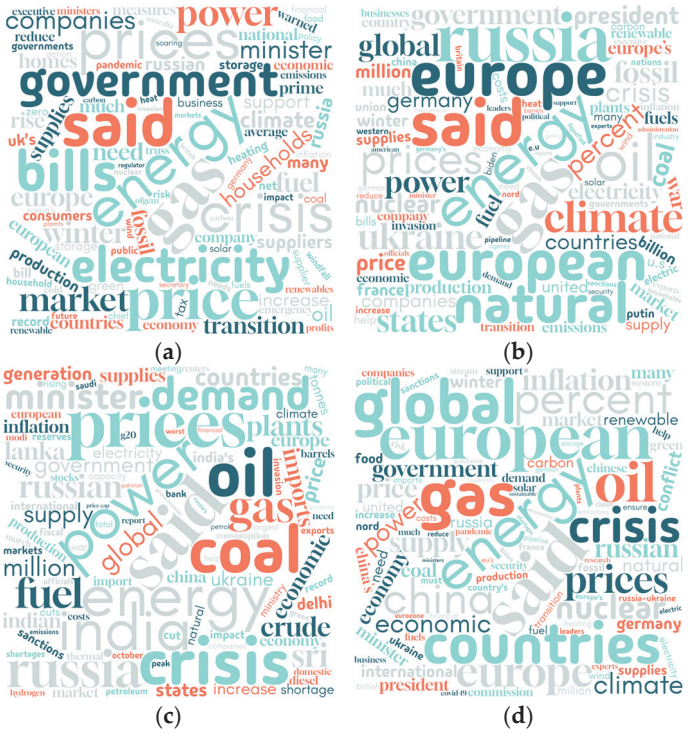


Figure 3. (**a**–**d**) The word clouds generated from the top 200 most frequent keywords within the 150 news articles about the global energy crisis in each analyzed newspaper: (**a**) *The Guardian*; (**b**) *The New York Times*; (**c**) *The Times of India*; (**d**) *China Daily*.

Table 2. The top 200 most frequent keywords, as well as their ranking and frequency, in the four analyzed newspapers between 1 August 2021 and 31 December 2022.

The Guardian	*The New York Times*	*The Times of India*	*China Daily*
1. energy (1800)	1. energy (1948)	1. power (749)	1. energy (1180)
2. gas (981)	2. gas (1719)	3. coal (665)	3. gas (662)
5. crisis (544)	4. oil (786)	4. energy (662)	4. China (504)
6. prices (465)	6. prices (669)	5. India (654)	6. percent (413)
8. government (423)	7. Europe (640)	6. oil (619)	7. crisis (360)
10. electricity (316)	8. Russia (604)	7. prices (446)	11. oil (283)
11. power (305)	10. climate (515)	9. crisis (409)	13. prices (269)
23. companies (184)	16. Ukraine (416)	12. gas (299)	15. Europe (226)
25. minister (182)	19. crisis (370)	16. Russia (252)	16. climate (207)
28. support (177)	23. government (328)	17. million (245)	23 nuclear (182)
31. Europe (163)	26. nuclear (315)	20. government (216)	27. Russia (169)
34. climate (149)	28. United States (291)	23. minister (189)	30. inflation (140)
36. need (147)	33. companies (253)	46. Europe (122)	35. economy (139)
37. oil (146)	39. president (229)	52. inflation (115)	41. shortage (131)
52. Russia (125)	57. emissions (178)	55. sanctions (111)	45. renewable (120)
66. many (110)	65. solar (169)	59. Modi (142)	63. security (97)
84. national (100)	68. Biden (167)	67. economy (98)	66. green (91)
94. Truss (93)	70. economy (163)	71. climate (91)	48. president (117)
95. green (92)	75. need (158)	83. president (83)	52. minister (111)
97. solar (92)	81. transition (146)	96. companies (74)	74. need (84)
110. economy (84)	116. inflation (120)	97. data (74)	82. transition (79)
115. reduce (82)	127. sanctions (112)	116. thermal (66)	84. fossil (78)
129. warned (78)	130. minister (111)	122. need (65)	90. national (76)
131. zero (77)	141. carbon (103)	147. solar (58)	91. pandemic (76)
137. Ofgem (71)	150. executive (95)	157. hydrogen (55)	92. companies (75)
140. pandemic (70)	189. liquefied (78)	161. green (54)	93. increase (75)
149. executive (66)	192. support (78)	168. pandemic (53)	104. domestic (70)
194. renewable (58)	200. experts (75)	186. worst (49)	186. research (47)

The analysis of the relationships of the most meaningful keywords from Figure 3a–d and Table 2 allowed us to reveal the following main types of information in the energy crisis coverage: energy crisis and its reasons; energy sources and energy transition; energy, business, and political authorities; statistics; and emotions. Thus, the occurrence of such words as 'energy', 'crisis', 'gas', 'oil', 'electricity', 'coal', 'power', 'shortage', etc., in Table 2 revealed the abundance of information related to framing of the global energy crisis and its socioeconomic ('pandemic', 'inflation', 'economy', 'prices'), political ('sanctions', 'Russia', 'Ukraine', 'security'), and environmental ('climate', 'fossil', 'carbon', 'emissions') causes and effects. The word 'energy' itself appeared to be the most frequently utilized word in all four media, with 1948 mentions in *The New York Times*, followed by 1800 mentions in *The Guardian*, 1180 mentions in *China Daily* and 749 mentions in *The Times of India*, which proves the significant role of agenda setting in emphasizing important issues in news coverage (Valenzuela & McCombs, 2019; Carroll, 2024). Such words as 'transition', 'nuclear', 'zero', 'green', 'solar', 'thermal', 'renewable', and 'liquefied' highlighted the framing of energy transition.

The names of the famous politicians ('Truss', 'Biden', 'Modi'), political institutions ('government'), political titles ('President', 'minister'), and countries ('United States', 'China', 'India') indicated the political framing of the news coverage in all four media, which is in line with the results of the recent studies (Huan, 2023; Meuleman, 2023; Molek-Kozakowska, 2024; Yun et al., 2022). It became clear from the data that the names of energy regulators, companies, and their executives were frequently mentioned in the news coverage. For instance, Ofgem, Great Britain's independent energy regulator, received 71 mentions in TheGuardian.com, while the word 'companies' appeared 253 times in NYTimes, 183 times in TheGuardian.com, 75 times in Chinadaily.com, and 74 times in Timesofindia.com, which contributed to the prominence of energy authorities in the coverage. Interestingly, the names of the corresponding countries in each paper and such words as 'national' and 'domestic' spiked in their frequency, which indicated media focus on local issues and problems rather than energy issues and corresponds to the recent findings of Panchendrarajan et al. (2024) and Huan (2023).

The words 'percent', 'increase', 'reduce', and 'million' and quantifiers such as 'many' signified the abundance of the words related to statistics in the news coverage, while the words 'experts', 'research', 'data', etc., showed the presence of scientific information given by energy experts. The analysis of the word clouds from Figure 3a–d also showed the abundance of modal verbs ('need', 'must') that express the necessity of transformations in energy policy as well as emotion-laden words, including 'warned', 'worst', 'support', and 'hope', which contributed to emotional framing of the news coverage.

Overall, drawing on a content analysis of the collected news articles, the following five frames were identified: 'a catastrophe for households and businesses', 'energy poverty', 'global villains', 'climate saviours', and 'government support of energy transition'. 'A catastrophe for households and businesses' and 'energy poverty' frames reflected the negative perception of the crisis as a 'global catastrophe' and its socioeconomic effects. Fossil fuels and energy companies were metaphorically framed as 'global villains', whereas clean sources of energy were framed as 'climate saviours', which allowed us to make inferences about the polarization of the attitudes towards energy sources in the news coverage. 'Government support of energy transition' allowed us to make inferences about the politicization of the energy crisis debates.

Next, in order to detect and measure the frequency of specific rhetorical appeals employed in the energy crisis discourse, we used multiple search queries in Nexis Newsdesk. The queries 'president', 'minister', 'business', 'executive', 'expert', 'energy institute', 'energy agency', 'regulator', 'supplier', 'research', 'oil company', 'European Union', 'Inter-

national Energy Agency', and 'OPEC' were applied in the search to measure the frequency of mentions of authorities in the collected material (see 1 in Table 3). The queries 'percent ', 'peak', 'surge', 'hundred', 'thousand', 'million', 'billion', 'minority', and 'majority' allowed us to identify the frequency of mentions of statistical data (see 2 in Table 3. The frequency of mentions of emotions (see 3 in Table 3) was detected by applying queries containing positive and negative words such as 'hope', 'support', 'feel', 'fear', 'warn', 'pain', 'worst', 'threaten', and 'worry' that were among the most frequent keywords. Finally, the terms 'energy transition', 'renewable', 'green', 'zero emission', 'solar', 'thermal', 'wind', 'sustainable', 'hydrogen', and 'low-carbon' allowed us to measure the frequency of mentions of energy transition (see 4 in Table 3). Figure 4 visualizes the data from Table 3.

Table 3. Types and frequency of information detected in the articles of the four newspapers about the global energy crisis between 1 August 2021 and 31 December 2022.

Types of Information	*The Guardian*	*The New York Times*	*The Times of India*	*China Daily*
1. Authorities	763	726	437	447
2. Statistics	686	776	774	537
3. Emotions	637	733	325	366
4. Energy transition	462	406	146	285

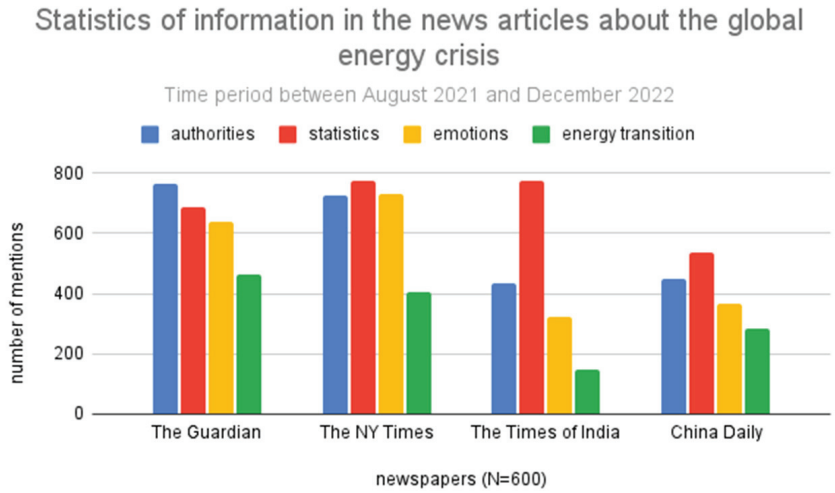


Figure 4. Statistics of information in the news articles about the global energy crisis in the four newspapers between 1 August 2021 and 31 December 2022.

Overall, Table 3 and Figure 4 show four main types of information in the news coverage of the global energy crisis. Based on these analytics, we proposed the following classification of rhetorical appeals:

1. Statements containing the opinions of politicians, energy and business experts, energy regulators, and companies, which are referred to as 'appeals to authorities' ('ethos');
2. Statements containing mentions of large numbers and numerical data, which are referred to as 'appeals to statistics' ('logos');
3. Statements containing emotion-laden language, which fall under the category of 'appeals to emotions' ('pathos');
4. Statements containing calls for energy unity and energy transition, which are identified as 'appeals to energy patriotism and energy transition' ('ethos' and 'pathos').

As is evident from this classification, appeals to authorities (1), statistics (2), and emotions (3) refer to Aristotle's rhetorical triangle ('ethos', 'logos' and 'pathos'). As for appeals to energy patriotism (4), they fall under both 'ethos' and 'pathos', since they rely on the

credibility of the speaker but also evoke emotional responses from the audience. Therefore, we put them into a separate category of appeals in the global energy crisis coverage.

Overall, the data from Table 3 show that references to statistics were very frequent in the coverage of the three media, including 776 mentions in NYTimes.com, 774 mentions in Timesofindia.com, and 537 mentions in Chinadaily.com, with the exception of TheGuardian .com, which relied more on the opinions of political and energy authorities (763 mentions) rather than on statistics (686 mentions). This finding supports the ideas of McConway (2016) who argued that numbers in the news are provided not only as factual evidence but for rhetorical reasons to increase the credibility and authority of a story, which confirms the research hypothesis about the manipulative use of rhetorical appeals.

The comparison of the data presented in Table 3 and Figure 4 also reveals discrepancies in the news coverage of the four mainstream media. As an overall trend, the articles of TheGuardian.com and NYTimes.com contained more appeals to authorities, emotions, and energy transition than the articles of Timesofindia.com and Chinadaily.com, which highlights the politicization of their coverage of the energy crisis.

Furthermore, the data from Table 3 show that journalists of the UK and US media utilized twice as many emotional appeals as their counterparts from the Indian and Chinese media. Although the appeals to energy patriotism and energy transition were the least common in all four media, they also fall under the category of emotional appeals since they aim to manipulate the audience by evoking patriotic feelings. Thus, this study identified the frequent use of rhetorical appeals in the energy crisis coverage and applied RDA and Van Dijk's (2015) approach (SCA) to analyze them.

4.1. Appeals to Authorities

When reflecting on public communication, Lippmann emphasized the role of experts who, according to his viewpoint, should guide public opinion by providing the audience with a picture of reality (Lippmann cited in Seyb, 2022). Lippmann's (1929/2021) idea of delegating the task of choosing relevant information to experts is still relevant today. Wilson (1983) also examined the role of experts (authorities) and distinguished the knowledge based on people's first-hand experience or what they have learned from the second-hand knowledge that they receive from cognitive authorities. 'Honest' cognitive authorities have credibility and expertise and are regarded as trustworthy as compared with organizational or administrative authorities that come from power hierarchies (Wilson cited in Froehlich, 2019).

The results of the rhetorical discourse analysis indicated that the news coverage of the energy crisis contained appeals to both 'honest' cognitive and organizational authorities, including citing the opinion of reputable energy scientists, thinktanks, energy agencies, and institutions as well as political leaders and institutions:

1. Any loss of power this winter would be disastrous for producers, experts claim. The worrying prediction suggests blackouts could hit mechanized producers (Gale, 2022a).
2. Experts are in agreement that nations around the world need to stop approving new coal-fired power plants, and new oil and gas fields, to avert the most catastrophic effects of climate change (Tabuchi, 2022).
3. UK must insulate homes or face a worse energy crisis in 2023, say experts <. . .>. Experts are warning that <. . .> expensive and unsustainable schemes will be needed. The IfG analysis warns that energy prices are now expected to rise further <. . .>. Experts believe a serious energy-efficiency programme could have a real impact within a year (Savage, 2022).

Examples No. 1–3 illustrate a widespread use of the opinions of scientific experts in the energy crisis discourse that are commonly referred to as 'experts', 'analysts', 'scientists', etc.

On the one hand, such claims based on the competence of energy, business, and scientific experts aim to convince the audience and increase the credibility of information and the trustworthiness of the provided arguments. On the other hand, by utilizing a wide range of emotion-laden words, including emotional adjectives ('disastrous', 'worrying', 'the most catastrophic'), verbs expressing beliefs and feelings ('believe', 'expect', 'warn', 'could'), and modals expressing necessity and high moral obligation ('need', 'must'), these appeals can be employed with manipulative aims ('argumentum ad hominem' (Copi et al., 2018)): either to evoke a negative emotional response in the audience towards the effects of the crisis (No. 1) and the production of fossil fuels (No. 2) or to promote positive attitudes towards energy efficiency policies (No. 3). Such claims can be classified as 'argumentum ad hominem' (an appeal to authority in which the opinion of an authority figure (or figures) is used as evidence to support an argument) in Copi et al.'s (2018) classification of fallacies. These narratives containing appeals to authorities based on their opinions rather than on factual evidence can contribute to the polarization of energy debates: either portraying the effects of the energy crisis extremely negatively (No. 1) or encouraging the public to shift away from fossil energy (No. 2) and ensure energy efficiency (No. 3). This finding proves the hypothesis about the manipulative potential of using rhetorical appeals. It also brings us back to Lippmann's (1929/2021) idea of 'manufacturing consent', according to which the public is not 'omnicompetent' to make informed decisions, so it needs 'experts' and institutes ('decision-makers') that could enact this in their interests. However, these 'omnicompetent' experts often choose information and evaluate it according to the interests of those in power (Arnold-Forster, 2023). Thus, Lippmann's (1929/2021) idea of 'manufacturing consent' is relevant in the energy crisis coverage.

This study also found that experts' opinions were often provided to boost the positive international image of a country as a reliable and trustworthy energy supplier in the news coverage:

4. Qatar, many energy experts said, is becoming the Saudi Arabia of natural gas—an indispensable energy supplier with vast reserves and very low costs (Krauss, 2022a).
5. Experts agree that the African continent is an extremely promising and interesting partner for Russia. <. . .> The region has excellent opportunities for the development of energy types such as geothermal, solar and nuclear power (REW-2022 hosts 'Russia-Africa: Sustainable Energy Development' session, 2022).
6. Renewable energy has become the principal source of the country's newly added installed generation capacity in recent years, which makes China the top country in wind and solar PV-installed capacity, said Wei Hanyang, a power market analyst at research firm BloombergNEF (Zheng, 2022).
7. Economic experts agree on the massive scale of the challenge, <. . .> with India as a potential generator of much-needed economic growth (UK economy: A crisis in the making for some time, with India trade deal offering hope, 2022).

As is evident from examples No. 4–7, experts' opinions were utilized to create a positive image of countries as reliable energy suppliers in the coverage, which supports the findings of the recent research on how media improve their national image and promote international collaboration from the foreign public with positive attitude and active support (Banterng, 2021). The countries' positive images were constructed through the use of emotion-laden words and expressions ('an indispensable energy supplier', 'vast reserves', 'promising and interesting partner', 'the top country', 'excellent opportunities', 'a potential generator') as well as intensifying adverbs ('extremely', 'very'). Example No. 4 illustrates the metaphorical framing of Qatar as the world's major producer and exporter of natural gas ('the Saudi Arabia of natural gas') to attract the readers' attention to Qatar and improve its image in the international news coverage, which is a way to manipulate public opinion

in the news discourse. As Edelman (1971, p. 68) claimed, metaphors are a 'subtle way of highlighting what one wants to believe and avoiding what one does not wish to face'.

Prior media studies (McAllister & Quinlan, 2019; Zamir, 2024) indicated increased personalization of politics in online media where political leaders are becoming more important in the news coverage than the political parties they represent. The news articles on the energy crisis also contained a lot of appeals to the opinions of specific political leaders:

8. EU must act now on 'catastrophic' energy price spike, says European Council chief (Rankin, 2022).
9. Habeck has talked of a 'nightmare scenario' facing Europe, especially Germany (Connolly, 2022a).
10. Swedish Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson warned that her country was facing the prospect of a 'war winter' (Weihua, 2022a).
11. Energy access should not be limited to the rich, says PM Modi (Energy access should not be limited to the rich: PM Modi, 2022).

Examples No. 8–11 show that mentions of politicians were increasingly frequent, which indicates politicization of the energy crisis coverage (Chinn et al., 2020) and confirms the results of the recent media studies (Huan, 2023; Molek-Kozakowska, 2024; Panchendrarajan et al., 2024; Yun et al., 2022). This finding corresponds to Lippmann's (1929/2021) idea of media serving the interests of those in power (Arnold-Forster, 2023). The citations with the politicians' opinions contain rhetorical devices, including hyperboles ('catastrophic energy prices') and metaphors ('nightmare scenario', 'war winter') that aim to evoke negative feelings of fear and anxiety in the audience. Such appeals can contribute to public opinion manipulation about the overreliance on fossil fuels. Example No. 10 reveals the rhetorical strategy of personification: the name of the Swedish Prime Minister is utilized allegorically to represent Sweden as 'her country'. The news headline in example No. 11 contains calls for energy democracy, which aims to improve the image of the Indian Prime Minister by appealing to a sense of justice and emphasizing the idea of energy democracy in the eyes of newsreaders. As Dorofeev (2023) claimed, the images of politicians are often used in the modern media as a means of advertising either politicians or (and) manipulating public opinion on some important issues.

It was revealed that the opinions of politicians containing mainly negative emotions were used to evoke feelings of danger and stir anxiety in newsreaders by portraying the energy crisis either as a global 'catastrophe' (No. 8–10) or as an opportunity to benefit from the crisis and enhance a country's international image (No. 12–13):

12. He [Emmanuel Macron] said he would make France "the first major nation to abandon gas, oil and coal" ahead of his win last month (Lawson, 2022).
13. "We need clean, we need cheaper and we need homegrown power," Ursula von der Leyen, the European Union president, said in August (Reed, 2022a).

In example No. 12, the journalist cited the French President, who claimed the superiority of France in phasing out fossil fuels, which enhances the image of France and discredits the image of fossil fuels. Example No. 13 shows the use of anaphora ('We need…we need…') that emphasizes the urgent need and calls for shifting to RESs. It increases the emotional influence on the audience to promote the use of 'homegrown' renewable energy sources, which conceptualizes energy nationalism in the context of the energy crisis debates. Żuk et al. (2024) argue that the more energy policies are circumscribed within the borders of individual nation states, the more difficult it will be to implement climate action on a global scale.

The energy crisis discourse also contained appeals to energy companies (No. 14) and the opinions of their executives (No. 15 and 16):

14. Glencore—predominantly a coalminer—complains some of its facilities may have to close <. . .>. Alcoa, BlueScope and Opalexpress doubts they can cut emissions fast enough (Readfearn, 2022a).
15. Many oil executives also complain that the future of their industry is clouded by political and regulatory uncertainty (Krauss, 2022b).
16. Michael Lewis, chief executive of supplier E.ON UK, said <. . .> he was "disappointed not to see a greater commitment to energy efficiency as a long-term solution to the current crisis" (Jolly, 2022).

References to oil companies and the opinions of their executives are extremely important in the energy crisis discourse since many of these companies were accused of profiteering from the energy crisis. As is clear from the provided examples (No. 14–16), the coverage contained emotional statements of the representatives of energy companies, which were used to improve their public image in the eyes of the newsreaders by appealing to the feelings of dissatisfaction and disappointment about the increase in energy prices and evoking a sense of solidarity of these companies and their leaders with the feelings and opinions of the news audience, which is another example of emotional and ideological manipulation in the energy crisis discourse.

4.2. Appeals to Statistics

Lippmann (1929/2021) considered facts as neutral to all our views of right and wrong. Nevertheless, the modern audience is convinced by those facts that coincide with their personal opinions and beliefs and that contain emotional experiences (Teneva, 2023). As Fuentes and Alberto (2022) claimed, objective facts are less decisive than personal opinions or emotions in the formation of public opinion. Post-truth assumes the inexistence of useful criteria to corroborate what is true and what is not; hence, emotions take center stage in the decisions that shape the world, over and above facts, the verdict of reason and self-criticism.

This study found a wide use of appeals to numbers (statistics) in the energy crisis discourse that were either accompanied by emotional elements or contained generalizations apart from providing factual evidence. On the one hand, large numbers and statistical data were embedded mostly in all news stories to increase both the credibility of information and the persuasiveness of the arguments about the crisis. On the other hand, numbers and statistics were frequently accompanied by emotion-laden words ('a determined move away'; 'broadly supportive'; 'severe shortages'; 'galloping prices') to incline the audience either in favor of energy transition (No. 17) or against energy dependence (No. 18), which indicated the manipulative use of such appeals:

17. The general public is also broadly supportive of a determined move away from fossil fuels, with 69 percent of Americans saying that developing sources of clean energy should be a high priority for leaders in Washington, and the same share supporting a transition of the U.S. economy to 100 percent clean energy by 2050, according to recent polling by the Pew Research Center (Gelles & Friedman, 2022).
18. Four out of five people in the nation of 22 million have reduced their food intake due to severe shortages and galloping prices (Bankrupt Sri Lanka seeks discounted Russian oil, 2022).

McConway (2016) noted that statistics are often used in mass media, not only for providing factual evidence but also with a manipulative aim to emphasize an issue in a news story, increase the credibility of information, and, thus, influence public opinion. This finding also echoes Lippmann's (1929/2021) ideas about facts being chosen to serve the interests of those in power. Examples show appeals to the exact number and percentage of people who either support clean energy transition (No. 17) or suffer from the increase

in energy prices (No. 18), aimed to incline the audience to support a move away from fossil fuels and support energy transition. Such appeals can be attributed to 'argumentum ad numerum' (appeals to numbers based on the number of people who hold a particular belief) in the classification of informal fallacies by Copi et al. (2018).

Frequent mentions of generalizations in statistics were also accompanied by emotion-laden words. Such appeals aim to draw the audience's attention towards the large scale of the energy crisis, increase the emotionality of the provided arguments, and, thereby, manipulate public opinion, for instance:

19. The broadcaster quoted Tamas Kovacs, a deputy mayor in the city of Szeged, as saying his community of 160,000 is typical of many tightening their belts after natural gas bills rose sevenfold (Gale, 2022b).
20. The 47-year-old Truss is tasked with steering Britain through a looming lengthy recession and an energy crisis that threatens the finances of millions of households and businesses (Reuters, 2022).
21. Hundreds of thousands of Britons face a "very, very difficult" winter thanks to rising household costs, No. 10 has been warned <. . .>. Damian Green, a former cabinet minister who was deputy to Theresa May, warned of the prospect of "very, very difficult times ahead for hundreds of thousands of people in this country"<. . .>. Labour said many households would be crippled by the "triple whammy" of energy price rises, the NI rise and universal credit cut (Mason & Ambrose, 2021).
22. Tens of thousands of French workers took to the streets on Tuesday across the country, striking for pay hikes that keep up with rising inflation <. . .>. Thousands also took to the streets on Sunday to march against rising prices <. . .>. Thousands protested in Prague twice last month partly due to high energy prices, airline workers have gone on strike in Germany and Sweden to demand higher pay, and everyone from nurses to rail employees in the United Kingdom have walked off the job to demand that their wages keep pace with inflation (Xinhua, 2022).

Examples No. 19–22 indicate the frequent use of statistical overgeneralizations that refer to hyperbolic exaggerations of statistics used for rhetorical emphasis of information in the news coverage ('160,000 is typical of many. . .') (Cline, 2019). The language markers of these overgeneralizations in the news discourse include indefinite pronouns ('everyone', 'nobody', etc.), quantifiers ('many', 'much', etc.), and words denoting large numbers ('hundreds of thousands', 'millions', etc.). Coupled with negative emotion-laden words and intensifiers ('threaten', 'warn', 'crippled', 'very, very difficult'), overgeneralizations can act as inducers of anxiety and fear towards the fossil fuel dependency by impressing the audience with large numbers of people who suffered from the crisis. The use of anaphora ('very, very difficult'; 'thousands took to the streets. . . thousands protested') is a way to emphasize information and increase its emotional effect on the news audience. Such appeals based on the sheer numbers of people who agree to something are used as a reason to get the audience to agree to it (Cline, 2019) and can be classified as 'argumentum ad populum' (Copi et al., 2018).

Moreover, the findings indicated examples of using statistical overgeneralizations that refer to national attitudes towards energy dependence and energy sources:

23. Europe would love to end its dependence on Russia (Krauss, 2022b).
24. Nations remain extraordinarily dependent on fossil fuels and are struggling to shore up supplies precisely at a moment when scientists say the world must slash its use of oil, gas and coal to avert irrevocable damage to the planet (Plumer et al., 2022).
25. Norway is 'skeptical' about the impact that an EU gas price cap would have on tackling the energy crisis (Weihua, 2022b).
26. Germany is more cautious about a potential Russia energy import ban (Powell, 2022).

27. More and more Germans were drawn to solar energy in 2022 (Eddy, 2022).

Examples No. 23–27 illustrate that overgeneralizations about the national attitudes towards fossil fuel dependence and energy sources are frequently accompanied by emotive language, including intensifiers and emotional verbs and adjectives ('more and more', 'extraordinarily', 'would love', 'skeptical', 'cautious'), used to induce positive or negative feelings in the audience, which contributed to framing of fossil fuels as 'villains' and using them as a 'danger' in the promotion of energy transition. According to Bennett (2013), the danger of such generalizations about a nation as a group of people is that they may become stereotypes if they are definitively applied to the individual members of a group and lead to media bias and the spread of online mis- and disinformation.

4.3. Appeals to Emotions

Events that evoke strong emotions tend to be remembered better (and more vividly) than non-emotional events (Van Dijk, 1988). Emotional contagion is carried out by putting an emphasis on the importance of emotions in communication (Plantinga, 2009). Emotional appeals or 'argumentum ad passiones' (Copi et al., 2018) are powerful motivators of political action (Karl & Cormack, 2023). According to Lupia and Menning (2009, p. 355), emotions "play an important role in the outcome of our political processes". Political and media campaigns routinely appeal to citizens' emotions, since such appeals influence the political behavior of the news audience (Bil-Jaruzelska & Monzer, 2022). Journalists employ emotional statements to draw the readers' attention and influence public opinion. The manipulation of beliefs and emotions is defined as 'post-truth', a situation in which people are more likely to accept an argument based on their emotions and beliefs, rather than one based on facts (Fuentes & Alberto, 2022; Teneva, 2023). Modern news stories are rife with the examples of emotional appeals, which influences the way the audience perceives information.

The results of the discourse analysis of the news articles showed high levels of emotionalization of all four media, with predominantly negative narratives about fossil fuel energy sources that contributed to inducing anxiety and fear among the audience as well as more positive narratives about the issues related to green transition. Emotions were embedded not only into the citations of the opinions of politicians and energy experts but also into the journalists' statements about the crisis and the news headlines:

28. U.N. Chief Warns of 'Catastrophe' With Continued Use of Fossil Fuels (Friedman, 2022).
29. 'Storm coming': Britain in a mess as ruinous energy bills meet austerity (Partington, 2022).
30. 'Crippling' Energy Bills Force Europe's Factories to Go Dark (Alderman, 2022).
31. EU must act now on 'catastrophic' energy price spike, says European Council chief (Rankin, 2022).

In examples No. 28–31, the news headlines contain emotional appeals that frame the global energy crisis as a global 'catastrophe'. Such emotional appeals seek to grab the audience's attention and contribute to shaping negative public opinion about energy dependence and the use of fossil fuels, which proves Van Dijk's (2015) idea that manipulation is a form of the exercise of discursive power. In these cases, emotional contagion is carried out through the frequent use of hyperboles ('Britain in a mess', 'ruinous energy bills', 'crippling energy bills', etc.) that are powerful tools for rhetorical emphasis since they are often used as a 'hook' to draw public attention, evoke strong emotional responses, and increase the emotional impact of the journalists' arguments on the audience and, thus, manipulate it. The results of discourse analysis also revealed the appearance of a new word—'gasastrophe' (a combination of the words 'gas' and 'catastrophe')—used to describe

the negative effects of the increase in gasoline prices on national economies and households during the 2021–2022 energy crisis. It contributes to framing natural gas as a key 'villain' of the crisis. These findings prove how hidden ideologies change public minds through the choice of specific words and phrases (Van Dijk, 2015).

The analysis of the material also indicated the metaphorical framing of the energy crisis in the news coverage, including metaphors such as 'storm coming' (No. 29) to describe the arrival of the energy crisis and its detrimental effects. Here are some more examples of using metaphors:

32. Oil remains India's Achilles heel <. . .>. This may well be a catalyst to recalibrate the energy transition strategy (Shetty, 2022).
33. In many ways, all across the continent, the Achilles' heel of Europe's green transition is gas (Eddy & Sengupta, 2021).
34. For months, a tsunami of high energy costs has borne down on Europe (Landler & Reed, 2022).

Metaphors play a significant role in shaping our perception of the world and influencing our actions (Carter, 2021). According to Al-Rubaie (2023), a metaphor is a mental mechanism that appears through language use and represents knowledge through its structure and its form. It not only allows information to be conveyed to readers, but it also shapes how they should think about the issues and, therefore, it is as a means of implicit speech impact (Kalinin & Ignatenko, 2024). Nevertheless, when interpreting metaphors, the context should be taken into account. In examples No. 32–33, the metaphor 'Achilles' heel' has the general meaning of a 'weak point' and expresses the negative attitude towards India's reliance on crude oil, while in example No. 34, a 'tsunami' is metaphorically compared to extremely high energy costs in Europe, which contributes to the negative framing of fossil fuel sources. Thus, metaphors are a powerful tool for manipulating public opinion (Van Dijk, 2006). Their interpretation suggests the knowledge of cognitive mechanisms involved in the macrounderstanding of the news text, which plays a vital role in tackling language manipulation (Van Dijk, 2006).

When studying the rhetoric of the energy discourse, Cozen and Endres (2024) revealed appeals to such emotions as jealousy or envy over renewable energy technologies; love or devotion for nuclear energy as a savior technology; and passion or zeal to share the story of nuclear support with others, which contributed to shaping public opinion on energy sources. The present study also found mentions of negative feelings related to fossil fuels in the energy crisis coverage, including the feelings of despair, worry, doubt, uncertainty, and fear:

35. It is worrying that the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries and its allies have come up short on recent pledges to increase output <. . .>. Whether liquefied natural gas shipments could offset a complete shut-off of Russian gas to Europe is doubtful (Reed, 2022b).
36. It remains uncertain how much the United States will actually do to curb its dependence on fossil fuels in the years ahead (Plumer et al., 2022).
37. The fear is that supplies of gas to meet Europe's demand will be insufficient (Elliott, 2022).
38. Germany stands a chance of emerging from the current crisis. But increasingly the question is being asked: how long will it be able to afford to do so? (Connolly, 2022b).

The findings revealed that appeals to emotions combined with the use of impersonal structures (No. 35–37) and rhetorical questions (No. 38) aimed to express journalists' personal opinions about the energy crisis, which makes such appeals sound more objective,

memorable, and persuasive (Derakhshani et al., 2021) by evoking the readers' emotional response and influencing their opinion about energy sources.

4.4. Appeals to Energy Patriotism and Energy Transition

Apart from appeals to authorities ('ethos') and emotions ('pathos'), this study revealed the use of appeals to energy patriotism and energy transition, which can be considered as a mixture of appeals to 'ethos' and 'pathos' since they rely on the readers' patriotic feelings, evoking strong emotions associated with being a part of a nation, on the one hand, and build on the credibility of the speaker, on the other hand. As Haines (2018) argued, patriotic appeals are electorally powerful because they bind candidates to the ideas, values, and norms that people associate with the heart and soul of a nation. The indicators of patriotic journalistic coverage include appeals to public emotions and public cognition (Ginosar & Cohen, 2019). They are often operationalized through references to national symbols and historical events that evoke positive emotional responses linked to national identity and pride (Grechanaya & Ceron, 2024). If British and American patriotism is based largely on the ideology defined by a shared duty of citizenship and service towards others and the state, Chinese and Indian patriotism has spiritual and religious nature, for instance:

39. Professor Solanki said, "If Mahatma Gandhi were alive today, what would he have done to educate Indians about the climate crisis? <. . .> That is what I am also trying to do—travel across India and encourage the use of solar energy" (Jain, 2022).
40. The PM said the present world situation has brought new opportunities to the country. "The whole world is looking for a reliable partner and India is fast emerging as one," he said <. . .> "We have strengthened India as a rashtra," he declared, pointing at one nation, one tax (GST) and one nation, one grid (for power), one nation, one ration card and one nation, one mobility card (mobile services) (Shah, 2022).

In examples No. 39–40, national symbols are used to enhance the image of India in the eyes of the newsreaders, convince the audience in the rightness of either experts', politicians', or journalists' claims, and thereby influence public opinion. Thus, in example No. 39, a reference to Mahatma Ghandi, who is an icon of inspiration and India's national symbol of peace and education, contributes to positive media representations of India as a peaceful country. The example of Professor Solanki, who is a follower of Gandhi, promotes the use of solar energy, which is a way to promote the green transition. Example No. 40 contains a quote from the Indian Prime Minister who refers to India as a 'rashtra' (a Hindu nation) in order to evoke patriotic feelings in the readers. Anaphora ('one nation', 'one tax', etc.) is used for rhetorical emphasis to foster a sense of unity among the Indian audience and, thus, incline it to support energy transition.

The results of discourse analysis also revealed polarization of attitudes in the news coverage, with predominantly negative narratives about fossil fuels and dependence on them (No. 41–42) and more positive narratives about renewables, energy transition, and energy efficiency (No. 43), which corresponds to the findings of the prior research on the competing narratives for and against the use of particular energy resources (King, 2020; Kuhl et al., 2024):

41. Nations remain extraordinarily dependent on fossil fuels and are struggling to shore up supplies precisely at a moment when scientists say the world must slash its use of oil, gas and coal to avert irrevocable damage to the planet (Plumer et al., 2022).
42. [Mr. Yergin]: Oil products are more difficult <. . .>. Diesel is a real problem <. . .>. Natural gas is the most challenging (Reed, 2022c).
43. Germany's finance minister Christian Lindner, of the centre-right Free Democratic Party, has taken to calling renewables "the energy of freedom" (Readfearn, 2022b).

According to Litvinenko (2020, n. pag.), HCRs are often viewed as a totally "unacceptable option without paying enough attention to the differences in fuels and the ways of their usage". Högselius (2023) also pointed out that fossil fuels are treated as metaphorical 'energy weapons'. The findings of the recent study (Dagiliūtė, 2024) confirmed the influence of positive and negative frames of energy sources on intentions to use them. Examples No. 41–43 provide evidence for these prior findings. HCRs were framed as a threat and a 'problem' that could damage the planet, whereas RESs were framed as 'energies of freedom'. Emotionality is operationalized through the use of various rhetorical strategies and emotive language means. For instance, example No. 41 contains generalization expressed by the word 'nations' to foster unity among the audience and promote energy transition. Overall, generalizations are a common rhetorical strategy used to summarize information and create a common ground in conversation, fostering rapport with the audience (Ierace, 2019).

Nevertheless, overgeneralizations can be a dangerous tool for manipulating public opinion (Teneva, 2023) when a speaker summarizes too many things or when arguments contain nothing but generalizations. Overgeneralizations can lead to misinformation and public distrust in media. Example No. 42 presents an extract from an interview with Daniel Yergin, who is a leading authority on energy, geopolitics, and the global economy. This is an example of the 'anti-hydrocarbon' narratives when a negative image of fossil fuels is created through the use of the negative words and phrases ('more difficult', 'a real problem', 'most challenging') and parallelism.

The research findings showed that the narratives about energy transition contained more positive emotions. In these cases, the 'collective' pronoun 'we' and the modal verb 'need' were widely used in the energy crisis discourse. According to Derakhshani et al. (2021), these parts of speech convey ideological meanings and can be used to manipulate public opinion:

44. We need to make faster progress on the transformation, and we need the capacity mechanism to help us do that to provide that safety net underneath as we engage in this significant transformation to a more renewable economy, a more renewable energy system with more storage (Hannam, 2022).

The use of both unification or 'we' strategy (Derakhshani et al., 2021) and anaphora ('we need. . .and we need') establishes a personalized connection with the audience, mystifies the responsibility of the journalists, and assumes the solidarity of journalists' feelings with the readers' feelings, thus making the readers believe that journalists are one of them and share their feelings and opinions. This is one of the common language means of public opinion manipulation (Teneva & Bykov, 2023). Overall, it was found that modals of obligation and necessity such as 'should', 'need', and 'must' were among the most frequent verbs in the energy crisis discourse and expressed the necessity of transition to RESs, which indicates their manipulative role in the energy crisis coverage.

5. Conclusions

The present study aimed to detect and analyze the most common rhetorical appeals and emotive language means that contributed to shaping public perceptions about the 2021–2022 global energy crisis in the news articles taken from the websites of the four English-language mainstream media. Four mainstream newspapers were chosen from the key countries that were seriously affected by the crisis, who either benefitted (the USA) or suffered (the UK, China, and India) from energy shortages. The results of the content, discourse, and rhetorical discourse analyses confirmed emotionalization of the energy crisis coverage in all four mainstream media, including *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *The Times of India*, and *China Daily*. It occurred through the use of similar rhetorical appeals expressed by a wide variety of emotive language means.

First and foremost, the findings of the computer-assisted content analysis showed that there was a significant increase in the intensity of news information about the global energy crisis from 1 August 2021 to 31 December 2022 in the analyzed mainstream media, which contributed to drawing public attention towards the crisis, influencing public agenda, and shaping public opinion on energy-related issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Notably, the analysis of the news sources also indicated that in the period of the energy crisis, all four mainstream papers relied on similar major news agencies and media companies, including AP (The Associated Press), Reuters, and Bloomberg, which is a way of standardizing information on the crisis (Kultayeva et al., 2024) as well as setting a similar public agenda in various media and, thus, shaping both knowledge and ideology on the energy crisis (Tuchman, 1978), which proves the research hypothesis about the agenda-setting role of the media on the energy crisis coverage and corresponds to Lippmann's (1929/2021) theory of public opinion.

Furthermore, the results of computer-aided content analysis revealed the top 200 most frequent keywords that related to four main topics about the crisis: authorities (scientific, political, business, and energy experts), statistics, emotions, and energy transition. The results of the content analysis allowed us to identify the following five frames in the news coverage: 'a catastrophe for households and businesses', 'energy poverty', 'global villains', 'climate saviours', and 'government support of energy transition'. These frames reflect the negative perception of the energy crisis as a 'catastrophe', fossil fuels as 'global villains', and the 'catastrophic' scale of socioeconomic effects of the crisis, on the one hand, and the more positive perception of transitions to clean sources of energy and their government support, on the other hand, which allowed us to make inference about the key role of emotions in both evoking strong emotional responses in the audience towards the crisis and energy sources and polarizing the attitudes towards energy sources in the news coverage of the analyzed media.

Drawing on the results of the content analysis, a classification of the rhetorical appeals in the energy crisis discourse was proposed, including appeals to authorities, statistics, emotions, and energy transition. The computer-aided content analysis showed that appeals to statistics and authorities were prevalent in the news coverage of the UK and US media, which indicates a higher level of politicization of their news coverage and corresponds to the findings of recent media studies (Huan, 2023; Meuleman, 2023; Panchendrarajan et al., 2024; Molek-Kozakowska, 2024; Yun et al., 2022). This finding also corresponds to Lippmann's (1929/2021) theory of public opinion and agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) about choosing 'favorable' facts to influence public opinion.

It is also worth noting that the appeals to authorities, statistics, and energy transition were frequently accompanied by emotional elements, which proved the hypothesis about emotionalization of the energy crisis coverage in the analyzed mainstream media. The results of the discourse analysis revealed similar emotive language means across all four mainstream media, starting from emotionally charged language (modals of obligation and necessity, intensifiers, emotion-laden words) to rhetorical devices (hyperboles, metaphors, repetitions, rhetorical questions, parallelism, etc.) and rhetorical strategies (unification and personification strategies, generalizations, etc.).

The findings of the rhetorical discourse analysis allowed us to conclude that emotive language means contributed to polarizing attitudes towards the crisis and sources of energy in the news discourse, with a negative framing of fossil fuels that induced feelings of anxiety and fear towards dependence on them among the audience and a positive framing of renewable sources of energy that promote green transition. Based on these findings, it was concluded that rhetorical appeals served as public opinion manipulation means in the news coverage of the four analyzed media. It also proved the relevance of

Van Dijk's (2006, 2015) approach to discourse analysis that reveals the sources of power and manipulation in the news discourse.

Overall, the results of this study could also be attributed to the global race to achieve energy transition between these four countries. The competition between renewables and conventional fossil fuel power technologies still remains critical, especially for such countries as the USA, UK, China, and India that are heavily reliant on fossil fuels. Therefore, it was concluded that the media narratives, containing positive or negative emotionality, contributed to setting the public agenda, shaping public perceptions of energy sources, and energy decision-making.

It is also worth noting that the results of this study are applicable only to the news coverage of the global energy crisis in the four analyzed media. Nevertheless, the findings can add practical implications for further media research on tackling hidden ideologies in any news discourse. In fact, using rhetorical appeals as manipulation means may pose a serious threat to the credibility and objectivity of information, leading to media bias and misinformation. It may influence public perceptions and intentions to use particular energy sources (Dagiliūtė, 2024). Therefore, the understanding of the manipulative role of rhetorical appeals in the news discourse can help both journalists and individuals develop their media literacy skills, which are necessary for tackling public opinion manipulation by uncovering the hidden ideologies and understanding the implicit parts of any media text. Thus, the present study opens up perspectives for further research on rhetorical appeals in news coverage within a wide range of fields, including rhetoric, journalism, applied linguistics, and discourse analysis.

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