

Article

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

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Submitted: 27 April 2023 | Accepted: 3 July 2023 | Published: 19 October 2023

## Abstract

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

## Keywords

European Union; geopolitics; media discourses; security; Spain; Ukraine; war

## Issue

This article is part of the issue “Media Discourses on European Integration: Information, Disinformation, and Polarization” edited by Ana Pérez-Escoda (Antonio de Nebrija University) and Tetyana Lokot (Dublin City University).

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## 1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

## 2. The EU's Geopolitical Role

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### 3. Methodology

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### 3.1. News Item Sampling

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

with a link to a news item from the 12 Twitter accounts (@elpais, @elpais\_espana, @elpais\_inter, @abc\_es, @abc\_mundo, @ECInter, @elconfidencial, @eldiarioes, @rtvenoticias, @telediario\_tve, @antena3int, and @A3noticias) were downloaded and stored from July 2021 to March 2022.

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

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

### 3.2. Content Analysis

The first analysis conducted after uploading the final sample to NVivo was content analysis. The team followed the approach of Thayer et al. (2007). According to this, the method is ideal for communication research as it reveals connections between concepts and relationships between ideas that might not be evident. At this

point, with the aim of ensuring reliability and following the research team elaborated a codebook by means of establishing categories and codes to identify key topics discussed when covering the EU (Krippendorff, 2013; Lombard et al., 2002). Those categories included, as mentioned earlier, issues such as human rights, migration, and economy—and with the outbreak of the war, we added a code for the Ukraine war. Eight researchers were involved in the codification of the news items.

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

### 3.3. Discourse Analysis

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

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

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

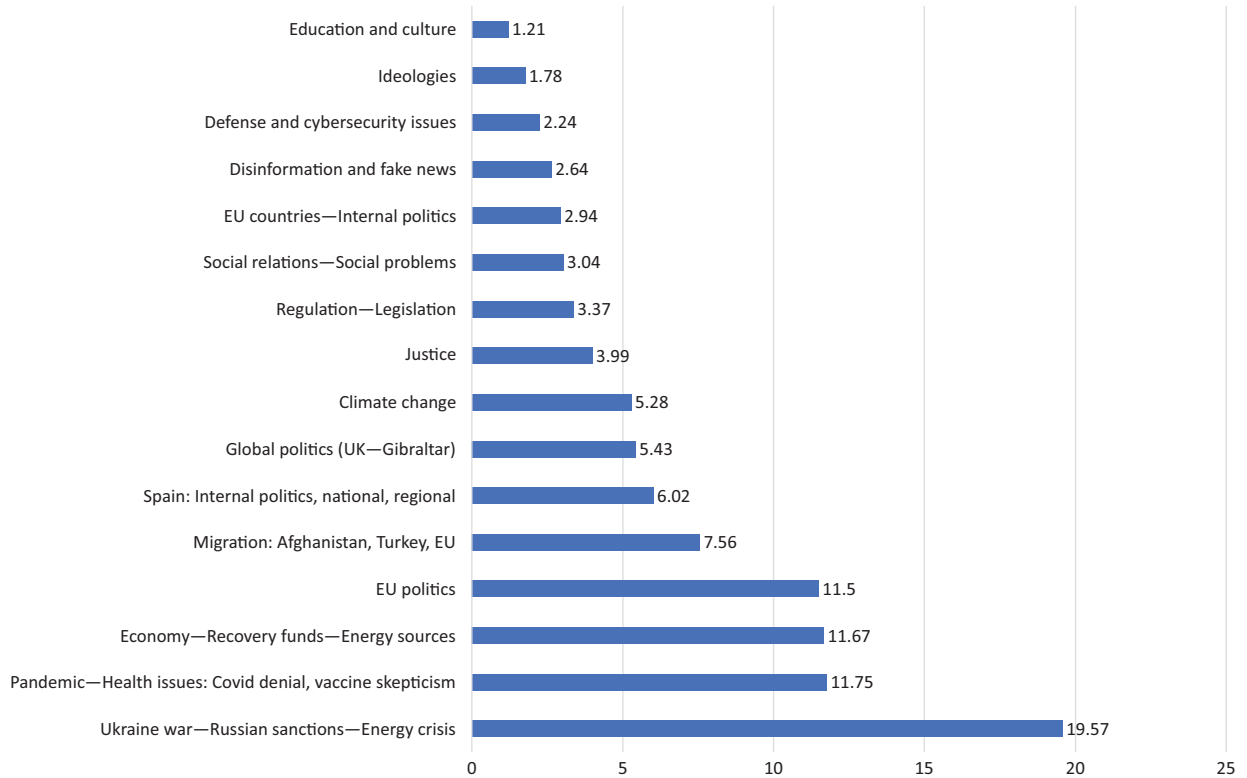


Figure 1. The most dominant topics. Note: The major topics covered by the sample are in percentages.

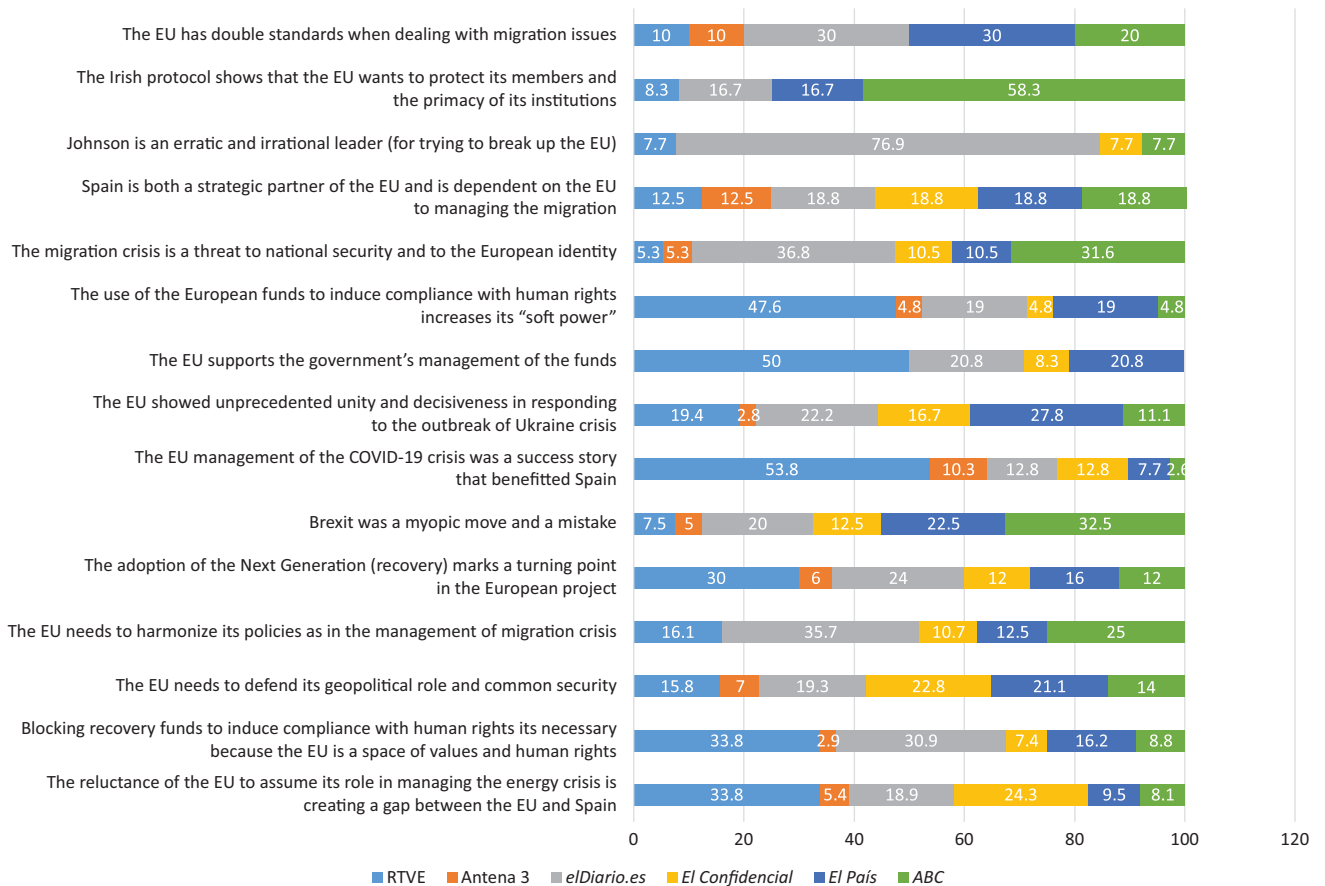


Figure 2. Dominant discourses per media outlet in percentages.

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

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

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

### 3.4. Critical Discourse Analysis

In the final stage of our research, we used critical discourse analysis to uncover communicative strategies, hidden meanings, and connections in the sample. At this

point attention is paid to the reconfiguration of the sayable: (a) what is said and how it is said in the identified discourses, (b) how these discourses change over time, and (c) how they are appropriated by different actors (Foucault, 1991).

## 4. Analysis

### 4.1. Quantitative Analysis

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

Likewise, and this is particularly relevant as Figure 4 shows, among the issues related to the EU's geopolitical role, there are two that most increase its presence in the context of the war in Ukraine. These are the unity and decisiveness shown by the EU in the context of this crisis, and the need for the EU to defend its geopolitical role.

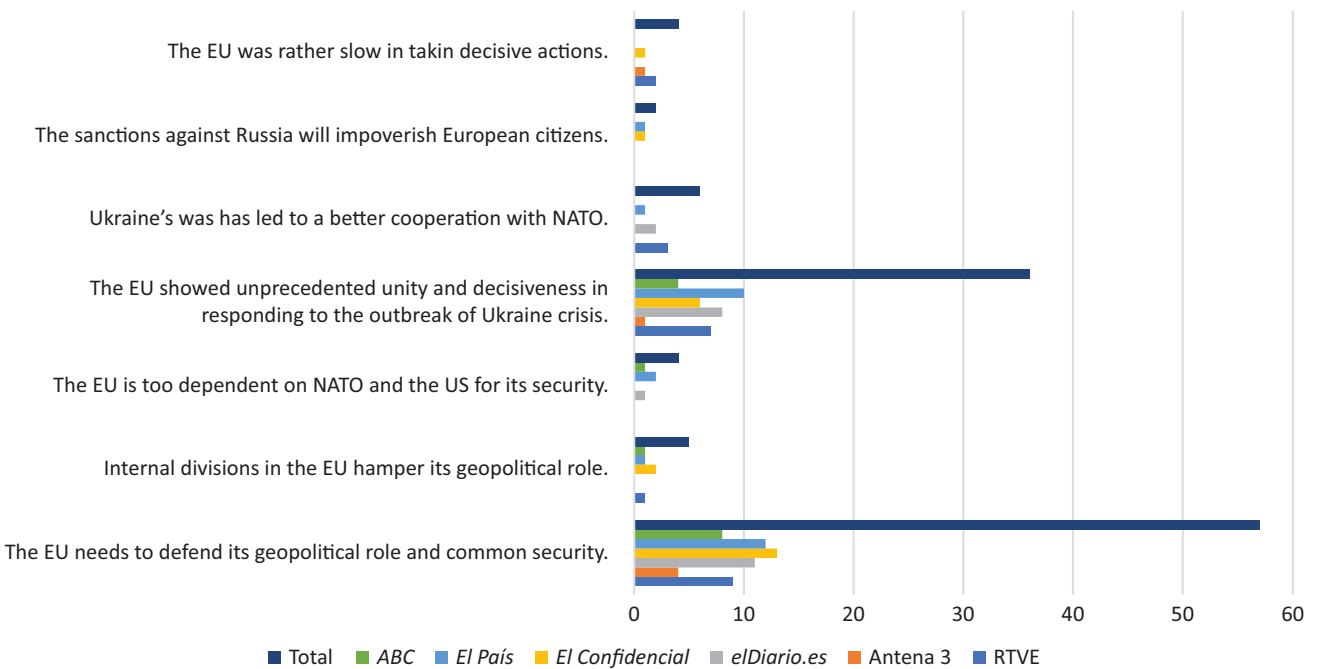


Figure 3. Major and adjacent discourse on geopolitics per media outlet.

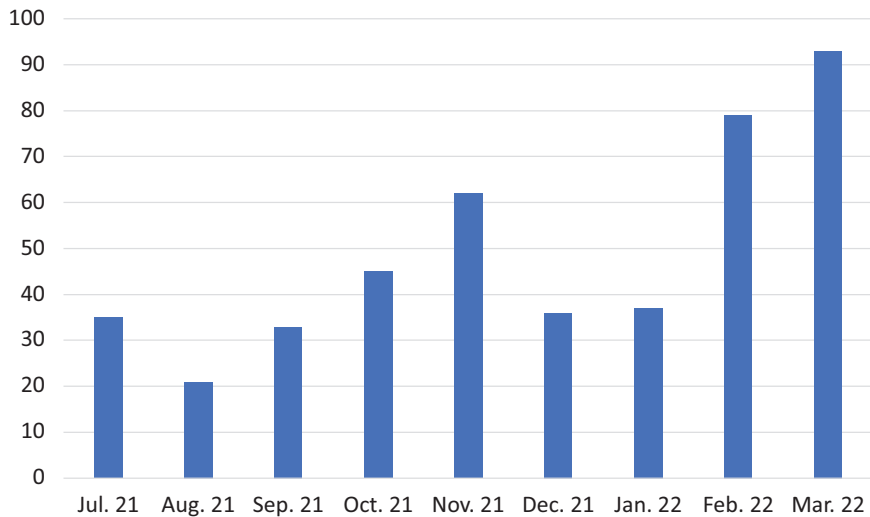


Figure 4. Total news on geopolitics per month.

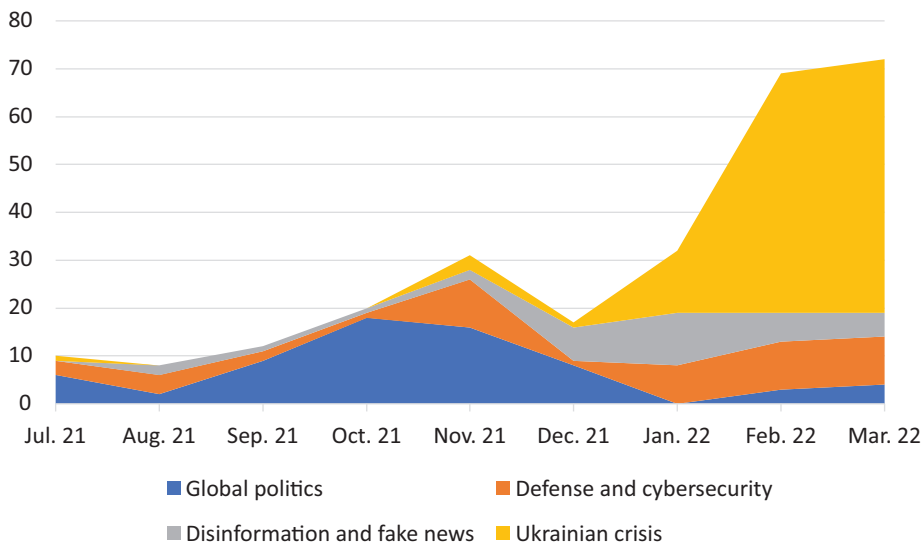


Figure 5. Geopolitics themes per month.

4.2. Qualitative Analysis

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Some items even speak of “a new Europe”:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 5. Conclusions

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

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

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

### Acknowledgments

This research study is part of a European research project titled MEDIATIZED: EU Mediatized Discourses on Europeanization and Their Representations in Public Perceptions. MEDIATIZED EU is financed by the Horizon 2020 program (MEDIATIZED EU Grant Agreement No.101004534, H2020-SC6-Transformations-2020), funded by the European Commission from January 1, 2021, to December 31, 2024.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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