

Article

## Polarization in Media Discourses on Europeanization in Spain

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Submitted: 31 October 2022 | Accepted: 12 January 2023 | Published: 17 May 2023

### Abstract

Political and media polarization has had a detrimental impact on democratic principles and democratic processes on a global scale. In Europe, such polarization has eroded the trust in national and European institutions and has challenged the basic values that stand at the heart of the European integration project. The aim of this study is to analyze Spanish media discourses on Europeanization, with an attempt to identify key areas in which polarizing narratives related to Europeanization are more prevalent. To conduct our study, six national media outlets were selected based on four criteria: media format, ownership, ideology, and consumption. A final sample of 540 news items collected between July 2021 to March 2022 was selected for analysis. Using a qualitative methodological approach, the study was carried out in two stages. In the first phase, we conducted a content analysis to identify the main topics discussed in relation to the European Union and the actors represented in them. This led to the identification of polarizing narratives and discourses emerging in the context of the discussed topics. In the second phase, we used critical discourse analysis to analyze polarizing discourses.

### Keywords

democracy; Europeanization; European Union; media discourses; polarization; political communication; Spanish media

### Issue

This article is part of the issue “Hate Speech, Demonization, Polarization, and Political Social Responsibility” edited by Luis M. Romero-Rodríguez (Rey Juan Carlos University), Pedro Cuesta-Valiño (University of Alcalá), and Bárbara Castillo-Abdul (Rey Juan Carlos University).

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### 1. Introduction

Democratic stagnation has been on the rise since the beginning of the 21st century (Carothers & O’Donohue, 2019). The crumbling support for traditional parties, the rise of illiberal political leaders exhibiting autocratic traits, the increasing influence of authoritarian powers, and the unprecedented levels of political polarization are becoming a major challenge for new and established democracies alike (Arbatli & Rosenberg, 2021; Carothers & O’Donohue, 2019; Kaufman & Haggard, 2019). In Europe, old patterns of consensual competition between the center-right and the center-left are being challenged by political polarization and populism, endangering, hence, traditional political institutions and norms

(Carothers & O’Donohue, 2019). This is reflected in the recent rise of anti-establishment parties in Europe, and in the increasing distance between political parties and the erosion of a common ground between their respective voters (Casal-Bértoa & Rama, 2021). Attempts to conceptualize political polarization pose a complex question on how to draw a line between positive polarization that enriches democratic processes and harmful polarization that hinders the legitimacy of the entire system and the values it represents (Carothers & O’Donohue, 2019; Pausch, 2021). Kaufman and Haggard (2019, p. 418) conceptualize polarization as “a cumulative process through which cross-cutting cleavages are submerged into a single, re-enforcing dimension that pits ‘us’ versus ‘them’ on a range of issues.” According to DiMaggio et al.

(1996, p. 693), polarization is both a state and a process. Polarization as a state refers to “the extent to which opinions on an issue are opposed in relation to some theoretical maximum.” Polarization as process refers to “the increase in such opposition over time” (DiMaggio et al., 1996, p. 693). Polarization is dangerous because it hinders group formation at the center of opinion distribution and fosters the formation of groups with irreconcilable policy preference (DiMaggio et al., 1996). Acute political polarization leads voters “trade off democratic principles for partisan interests,” making highly polarized societies more vulnerable to democratic backsliding (Svolik, 2019, p. 23). Pausch (2021) highlights four characteristics of polarization: discrepancy of opinions, group formation that divides the world into “us versus them,” purism and the rejection of reconciliatory positions, and the existence of a political struggle to promote polarized positions.

The European Union (EU) has never been a polarizing political project in Spain. Historically, the public opinion in the country reflected a high degree of pro-Europeanness, as well as a strong consensus among Spanish elites regarding European affairs (Vázquez et al., 2014). Moreover, empirical studies, such as the one conducted by Sojka and Vázquez (2014), demonstrate that the identification of Spanish elites with the European project (above 90% identify with the EU) is stronger than the identification of Spanish public with it (60%). Among Spanish elites, political elites show the highest levels of identification with the EU, followed by media and union elites (Sojka & Vázquez, 2014). This general agreement among the elites and the citizens on Europeanization has resulted in clear support for the idea of shared governability between the EU and its member states (Sojka & Vázquez, 2014).

Having this context in mind, the aim of this study is to analyze Spanish media discourses on the EU in an attempt to identify polarizing narratives related to Europeanization, and key areas in which such narratives arise. It also attempts to identify the actors behind the emergence of polarizing narratives and the communicative strategies they deploy to promote them.

## 2. Europeanization and Polarization in Spain

Following Dutceac and Bossetta (2019, p. 1054), we use the term Europeanization to refer to “any process whereby a feature of the domestic (whether it be an identity, a policy, or a discourse) takes on a European dimension.” Europeanization in Spain has been marked by a strong political pro-European consensus from the moment Spain first applied for membership in the European Community (EC) until today (Avilés, 2004; Real-Dato & Sojka, 2020; Ruiz & Egea, 2011). After the death of Franco, “Europeanism” become a national project promoted by the leading political figures of the transition period. The emerging political consensus identified freedom and democracy with moderniza-

tion and Europeanization (Ruiz & Egea, 2011). Joining the EC was largely perceived as an opportunity for Spain to overcome years of isolation during Franco’s dictatorship. In the early years of accession, the Spanish public opinion believed that the greatest benefit derived from EC membership consists in Spain’s increased role in world affairs (Powell, 2007). While marginal, some Euroscepticism existed in the first decades following Spain’s accession to the EC. For example, the United Left (IU) criticized the neo-liberal orientation of European institutions and their democratic deficit (Avilés, 2004; Ruiz & Egea, 2011). The IU’s position could be categorized as “soft” Euroscepticism. The latter is defined as the existence of:

Not a principled objection to the European integration or EU membership but where concerns on one (or a number) of policy areas lead to the expression of a qualified opposition to the EU, or where there is a sense that “national interest” is currently at odds with the EU’s trajectory. (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2008, p. 8)

Today, as Arregui (2022, p. 1) points out, the EU “has become the most important frame of reference for [Spanish] national actors.” The early stages of Spain’s membership in the EC were marked by European and local debates that lead to the adoption of the Single European Act in 1987, culminating in the establishment of the single market. Spain had to prove that it is a trustworthy partner, capable of developing a “Europeanist” approach that transcends narrow national interests (Powell, 2007). This meant that the government of Felipe Gonzalez had to support initiatives that purported to deepen the EC without demanding too much in return in a period of internal economic crisis. The EC’s decision to grant regional, structural, and development funds to enable less developed members to adapt to the single market helped the Spanish government to promote the idea that “deepening” the EC is fully compatible with the promotion of national interests (Ruiz & Egea, 2011). Fear of peripheralization was evident as early as 1989 in governmental circles due to the economic vulnerability of Spain. As a result, Spain vehemently rejected the idea of “multi-speed Europe,” which entailed that the different European countries would integrate at different levels and pace, depending on their internal political situation (Powell, 2007).

The unanimous support for joining the EC did not reflect a unified vision of Europe. The two major Spanish parties—the Spanish Socialist Worker’s Party (PSOE) and the Popular Party (PP)—had different visions on how Europe should be constructed. For the PP, it was a project that should be based on cooperation between states, rejecting, hence, the idea of a federal model of the EU. On the other hand, the socialists believed in the construction of a more social Europe, in the adoption of the European Social Charter, and in the territorial cohesion

of the EU (Avilés, 2004; Powell, 2007). The debates on the adoption of a European constitutional treaty demonstrated best the gap that existed then between the PP and PSOE. While the PP government, led by Jose Maria Aznar, was in favor of a European constitutional treaty, it insisted that Spain should retain the same power within the EU institutions that it had under the Nice Treaty. This position was not shared by the PSOE (Ruiz & Egea, 2011). The PP was also very critical of the European policies of Felipe Gonzalez, accusing him of failing to defend Spain's national interests in the EC. The PP's neoliberals argued that Spaniards had become accustomed to a wide range of public subsidies, under the auspices of González's European policy, which were incompatible with genuine socio-economic modernization (Powell, 2007). However, when the PP came to power, Aznar's own rhetoric resonated with that of the PSOE. To justify the implementation of internal reforms, required for incorporating the single currency, the government argued that it was in Spain's interest to make more Europe and not less Europe (Roch, 2019). Both parties had also shown a similar approach to the eurozone crisis, and both implemented drastic austerity measures under the auspices of EU institutions. Both parties supported the 2011 amendment of Article 135 of the Spanish Constitution, which prioritized the payment of the Spanish debt over social spending (Roch, 2019). This suggests that the ideological gap between the two parties on the construction of the European project is not very significant.

### *2.1. Europeanization and End of Bipartidism in Spain*

Spain was hit hard by the eurozone crisis and by the austerity measures mandated by the EU. This led to the emergence of anti-austerity public mobilizations that voiced criticism of European institutions. In 2011, the 15-M movement emerged as a social movement against austerity measures (Feenstra et al., 2017), and it set the stage for the emergence of new political parties ending decades of bipartidism in Spain (Pavan, 2017). The institutionalization of these social movements led to the establishment of Podemos (in English, "We Can") in 2014, a political party that presented itself as an alternative to the traditional left (della Porta et al., 2017). While Podemos challenged the neoliberal policies promoted by national and EU institutions and elites, it did not reject the European project altogether. Instead, it attempted to redefine the meaning of Europeanization, as reflected in the words of one of its most prominent founders, Pablo Iglesias (Iglesias, 2015, p. 27): "The strategy we have followed is to articulate a discourse on the recovery of sovereignty, on social rights, even human rights, in a European framework." A 2014 manifesto, initiated by the founders of the party, alludes to the "crisis of legitimacy of the EU," with the EU mandated austerity measures being labelled as a "financial coup d'état" against Southern European countries (Podemos, 2014, p. 1). Podemos described the amendment of

Article 135 of the Spanish constitution as "the surrender of sovereignty" (Fernandez, 2014). The party portrayed Europe as a fractured project between the North and the South (Roch, 2019), with Southern Europeans wanting to recover "the dignity and the future" of their peoples (Fernandez, 2014). While emphasizing that the party "loves Europe" if it means "freedom, equality, and fraternity," Podemos accused the Spanish political elites of wanting to convert Spain into "a German colony." It also accused European elites of corruption, linking the president of the European Central Bank, Mario Draghi, to Goldman Sachs, and comparing Jean-Claude Juncker to Al Capone (Fernandez, 2014).

Some mainstream media outlets attempted to associate Podemos with far-right positions towards the EU. This was met with an increasing effort by Podemos to present itself as a pro-European party, fighting for a new social democracy in Europe (della Porta et al., 2017). In the 2015 elections, the party's manifesto lacked an explicit criticism of the EU. Reference to the EU included mainly a call to advance the European integration in key policy areas, such as single fiscal policy, eurobonds, common EU budget, common defense, and security policy (Real-Dato & Sojka, 2020). Likewise, in the 2016 elections, the EU was barely present in the manifesto of Unidas Podemos (United We Can), a coalition formed by Podemos and IU. The manifesto included a positive stance towards European integration, calling for the democratization of the eurozone economic governance, the flexibilization of the Stability and Growth Pact, and the creation of a common fiscal policy and a European investment plan (Real-Dato & Sojka, 2020).

Another newly established far-right party that introduced Eurosceptic discourses was VOX. The party became the third parliamentary party in the November 2019 general elections (Real-Dato & Sojka, 2020). The party was formed in 2013 by members of the PP who were disappointed with the policies of the government, which they perceived as too moderate (Real-Dato & Sojka, 2020). VOX capitalized on the migration crisis and the political crisis triggered by the separatist process in Catalonia to rally political support. Both crises had bearing on the public perception of the EU (Real-Dato & Sojka, 2020). Like Podemos, VOX did not advocate a straightforward rejection of the European integration project. In the 2014 European elections, VOX defined itself as deeply Europeanist (VOX, 2014). Failing to gain seats, VOX intensified its nationalist and nativist positions in subsequent national, regional, and European elections. This entailed the adoption of a Eurosceptic stance calling for the respect of the supremacy of national law over EU law and promoting an inter-governmental model of the EU (Lerín, 2022; Real-Dato & Sojka, 2020). In its 2019 manifesto for the European elections, VOX reasserted its "Europeanist vocation," while concurrently rejecting "the goal of turning the Union into a disguised federal state," which in the party's view has been achieved "fraudulently in recent years by reducing the [number

of] issues that require unanimity within the Council, conferring greater power on the Commission” (VOX, 2019, p. 5). VOX also called for repealing or adopting a “radical amendment” of Article 7 of the Lisbon Treaty, in order to prevent the EU from interfering in the democratic decisions of member states based on the “respect for democratic values” clause (VOX, 2019, p. 8). VOX accused the EU and its institutions of political bias against certain member states due to the influence of leftist ideologies. Referring to the secessionist movement threatening the territorial integrity of Spain, the manifesto accused the EU of being “stingy in defending the unity of Spain as the basis and foundation of Europe,” describing the current state of integration as “European project of elites far from reality” (VOX, 2019, p. 6).

However, the Eurosceptic stance of both Podemos and VOX lacks consistency when analyzed over time. This suggests that their discourses on the EU are usually shaped by their electoral strategies (Real-Dato & Sojka, 2020).

## 2.2. Media and Europeanization in Spain

The Spanish media is characterized by a high level of political parallelism (Teruel-Rodríguez, 2016). This term refers to “a pattern or relationship where the structure of the political parties is somewhat reflected by the media organizations” (de Albuquerque, 2018). In such contexts, polarization requires the confluence of political and media actors (Teruel-Rodríguez, 2016). In the absence of anti-European agenda in the Spanish political landscape, it is not surprising, then, that media elites in Spain show high levels of identification with the EU (Sojka & Vázquez, 2014). However, Spanish media outlets remain highly focused on national political systems. The coverage of the EU is given a lower priority (Sotelo, 2009). A study by Berganza (2009) suggested that more attention was given to the EU by the Spanish media when the new socialist government prioritized Spain-EU partnership over the United States–Spain bilateral relations, prioritized by the previous government.

Another feature of the coverage of the EU by European media in general is its dependence on official sources. As a result, the media tend to reproduce

the messages of experts, especially in economic matters (Arrese & Vara-Miguel, 2016). Rivas-de-Roca and García-Gordillo (2023) point out that excessive dependence on official sources could create a journalism of statements, that mostly consists of the transferal of the interests of the political class to citizens. This could enhance the existing distrust among citizens towards media, as pointed by Pérez-Escoda (2022).

A comparative study by Menéndez (2010) suggested that even when a media outlet is pro-European it can still portray the EU negatively. According to him, there were more negative stories about the EU in pro-European Spanish media (and in France and the UK) compared to positive or neutral stories. This could be explained by the general tendency of the media to highlight negative or conflicting news to attract readers. The prioritization of negative frames, such as the recurrent use of the term “crisis,” could eventually diminish the public’s identification with the European project (Rivas-de-Roca & García-Gordillo, 2023).

## 3. Objective and Methodology

This study analyzes Spanish media discourses on the EU, and it aims to identify polarizing narratives related to Europeanization and key areas in which such narratives arise. It also attempts to identify the actors behind the emergence of polarizing narratives. The study adopts a qualitative methodology using content analysis in the first phase of analysis, and critical discourse analysis (CDA) in the second one. This allowed the research team to engage in a deeper reflection on the analyzed news items in line with the framing theory (Porismita, 2011). The sample was obtained from six different Spanish nationwide media outlets, selected based on four criteria (see Table 1): (a) ownership (public/private), in order to represent both models existing in the Spanish media landscape; (b) format (traditional/digital) to guarantee the representation of the digital media market; (c) editorial line (conservative/liberal) by selecting media outlets from the most conservative to the most liberal editorial lines; and (d) type of media (TV stations and newspapers), for representing the media with the largest readership and viewership in Spain.

**Table 1.** Media outlets description according to the selection criteria.

Media outlets	Ownership	Format	Editorial line	Type	Readership/Viewership*
ABC**	Private	Traditional	Conservative	Newspaper	Fourth position
Antena 3	Private	Traditional	Soft conservative	TV station	First position
<i>El Confidencial</i>	Private	Digital	Conservative	Newspaper	First position***
<i>elDiario.es</i>	Private	Digital	Liberal	Newspaper	First position***
<i>El País</i>	Private	Traditional	Liberal	Newspaper	First position
RTVE	Public	Traditional	Soft liberal	TV station	Second position

Notes: \* According to the 2021 KREAB Report (Cabirta et al., 2022); \*\* the oldest conservative daily newspaper in Spain; \*\*\* first positions as rigorous digital media outlets.

### 3.1. Sample and Row Material

One of the major challenges in obtaining the final sample was deciding on how to access news items and subsequently make a final selection. The research team opted for the Twitter accounts of all selected media to carry out a massive data download. Spanish media use their Twitter accounts for their agenda-setting and to reach their audiences directly via an alternative channel (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2022). Using the scrapping technique, which is the most adequate for managing a huge amount of data, all data from 12 Twitter accounts belonging to the selected media outlets were downloaded and stored during a period of nine months (July 2021 to March 2022). The selection of the chronological period was established in the context of the European project Mediatized EU. The accounts selected were: *El País* (@el\_pais; @elpais\_espana; @elpais\_inter), *ABC* (@abc\_mundo; @abc\_es), *El Confidencial* (@ECInter; @elconfidencial), *elDiario.es* (@eldiarioes), Antena 3 (@antena3int; @A3Noticias), and RTVE (@rtvenoticias; @telediario\_tve). The scrapping technique was applied by using the web browser from NVivo software called NCapture that allowed a quick and easy capture of all tweets posted in the Twitter accounts of the selected media outlets.

The filtering process was carried out by using keywords previously agreed upon by the researchers and considering the research objectives. Table 2 shows the monthly filtered news items per media during the selected period. A final sample of 543 news items from July 2021 to March 2022 were selected for analysis.

### 3.2. Methodological Stages: Content Analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis

Once the final sample was obtained, all data stored in Excel sheets was downloaded to NVivo SQR Software in order to proceed with a dual-step analysis. The first stage consisted of content analysis, which according to Thayer et al. (2007), is more appropriate for communication research since it reveals hidden connections between concepts and relationships among ideas that

might seem disconnected at a first glance. As in previous works related to the project (García-Carretero et al., 2022; Pedrero-Esteban et al., 2021), analytical standards were agreed upon in various working sessions. The codes developed and modified by a researcher were taken into account by the rest of team using the same operational definitions for each category to maximize coding neutrality. A code book was designed and followed by all researchers in order to ensure a rigorous analysis. The coding process related to the content analysis included two different steps:

1. Coding all news items based on attributes, defined as a set of characteristics describing the units of analysis of our research. The attributes were designed in a deductive way. The team relied on theoretical references to define the attributes of analysis, such as media, authorship, approach, stance toward the EU (pro/neutral/anti), journalistic genre, and semiotic elements used in each piece of information.
2. Assigning theme-based nodes for an in-depth content analysis. These nodes are understood as categories or containers generated while examining the selected data. As pointed by Guix (2008, p. 28), in the content analysis “we should establish the categories in an inductive way, i.e., by creating the various labels under which we will order our information as they emerge from the exploitation of our sources.” In this study, two different categories were created: main actors involved in the analyzed items and dominant topics.

The content analysis provided us with quantitative data that allowed a second stage of analysis using CDA for an in-depth study of the identified polarizing narratives and discourses. As stated by Van-Dijk (2016, p. 204) this is not a methodological approach *per se* but “an analytical practice that can be found in all discourse studies areas...the CDA is defined as the study of discourses within an attitude.” This practice allows researchers to analyze social problems, discursive power relations, and the relationship between the text analyzed and society,

**Table 2.** Sample description per media and month.

Media outlets	No. tweets	News items selection per month									
		Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
<i>ABC</i>	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
<i>El Confidencial</i>	21,804	9	0	9	12	23	4	7	18	12	94
<i>elDiario.es</i>	24,902	8	7	11	17	28	14	10	18	17	130
<i>El País</i>	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
<b>Total</b>	<b>162,944</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>543</b>



offering an important interpretative frame. As Fairclough (2003, p. 163) described it previously: “Explanation is a matter of seeing a discourse as part of processes of social struggle, within a matrix of relations of power.” The adoption of this approach helps decoding meanings and connections implied in the analyzed news items. According to Berelson (1971), such analysis lies in the description of objective, systematic, and quantifiable manifest content. Lately, the development of critical discourse studies has legitimized this methodology, which has become a valid and rigorous approach to study the ways in which discourses and ideologies are disseminated across different channels of communication (Machin, 2013; Van Leeuwen, 2013).

Although CDA is a flexible analytical approach, it is essential that it is carried out in a standardized way. As López-Noguero (2002) points out, this standardization allows us to detect polarization in the discourses. To this end, the research team used the Memo functionality from NVivo SQR Software based on the creation of collaborative working spaces. Memos are defined as:

A type of document that enable the team to record the ideas, insights, interpretations or growing understanding of the material in your project. They provide a way to keep your analysis separate from (but linked to) the material you are analysing. (NVivo, 2022)

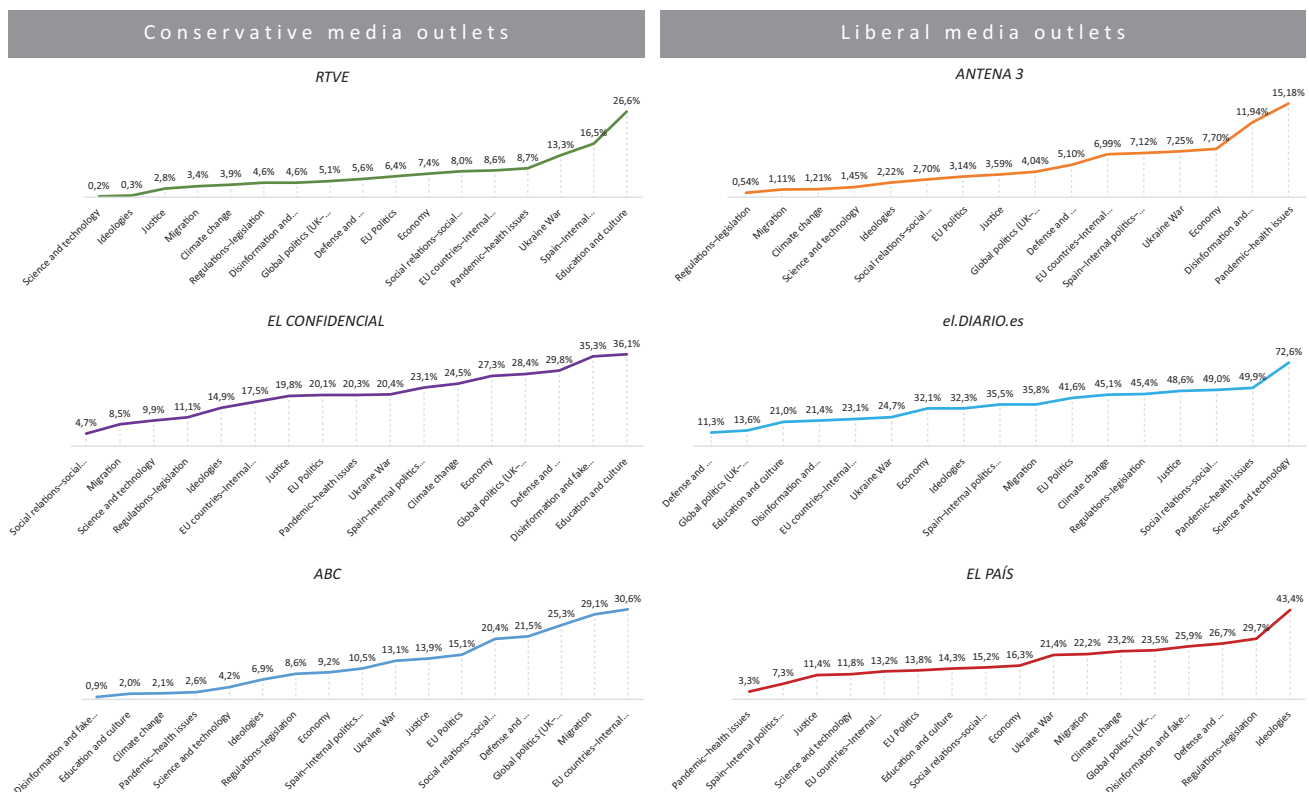
Specifically, the research team used “memos for a code.” This process was enabled by the previous content analysis phase. Once the memos were written, the team carried out a critical analysis of the discourses that contain a polarizing effect according to the “us vs. them” rhetoric and other communicative strategies (Van-Dijk, 2016). The analysis also considers Foucault’s (1991) limits and forms of the sayable, conservation, reactivation, memory, and appropriation.

#### 4. Results

##### 4.1. Content Analysis: Topics and Actors in Spanish Media Outlets Discourses

The detection of main topics in media discourses was one of the main objectives of the first stage of analysis. In this regard, the following topics were detected in the news items discussing the EU. Each Spanish media outlet can show a higher or lower percentage of coverage of certain topics depending on its own media agenda. Figure 1 displays these topics per media outlet.

Our content analysis revealed that one area in which polarizing narratives are more prevalent is EU politics. Our codification also introduced (soft) Euroscepticism as a sub-category. Table 3 shows the percentage of both categories, EU Politics and Euroscepticism represented



**Figure 1.** Main topics detected in the content analysis stage per media in percentages. Notes: For missing categories: Social relations–social problems (human rights, LGBTI, etc.); global politics (UK–Gibraltar, etc.); defense and cybersecurity issues; disinformation and fake news; Spain–Internal politics–national, regional, and local issues; EU countries–Internal politics–national, regional, and local issues.

**Table 3.** Presence percentage of topics EU Politics and Euroscepticism in Spanish media.

	Antena 3	ABC	El Confidencial	El País	elDiario.es	RTVE
EU Politics	3.14%	15.06%	20.05%	13.77%	41.56%	6.42%
Euroscepticism	7.41%	8.59%	20.21%	6.06%	54.97%	2.75%
	Right-wing			Left-wing		
EU Politics	38.25%			61.75%		
Euroscepticism	36.21%			63.78%		

in the Spanish media discourses. As shown in this data, *elDiario.es* is the Spanish media outlet that scored highest in both categories: EU Politics (41,56%) and Euroscepticism (54,97%). In comparison, the two TV stations scored lowest in these two categories. If we analyze this data from a political perspective, we realize that media outlets on the left give more importance in their agenda setting to EU politics (61.75%), and account for 63.78% of news items giving visibility to Euroscepticism, compared to right wing media with an average of 35.25% for EU Politics, and 36.21% for Euroscepticism.

Analyzing in depth (the CDA method) the discourses that emerge from the two above-mentioned categories, the selected media show a clear pro-European tendency in their discourses on EU Politics (62.90%) and illustrate the anti-EU discourses stemming from Eurosceptic parties within the EU (71.53%; see Figure 2).

Likewise, this research has detected the sources and actors most relied upon by the Spanish media when explaining the topics listed above. In this sense, representatives of EU institutions as well as representatives of the EU member states, including those of the Spanish government, are the main actors detected (see Figure 3).

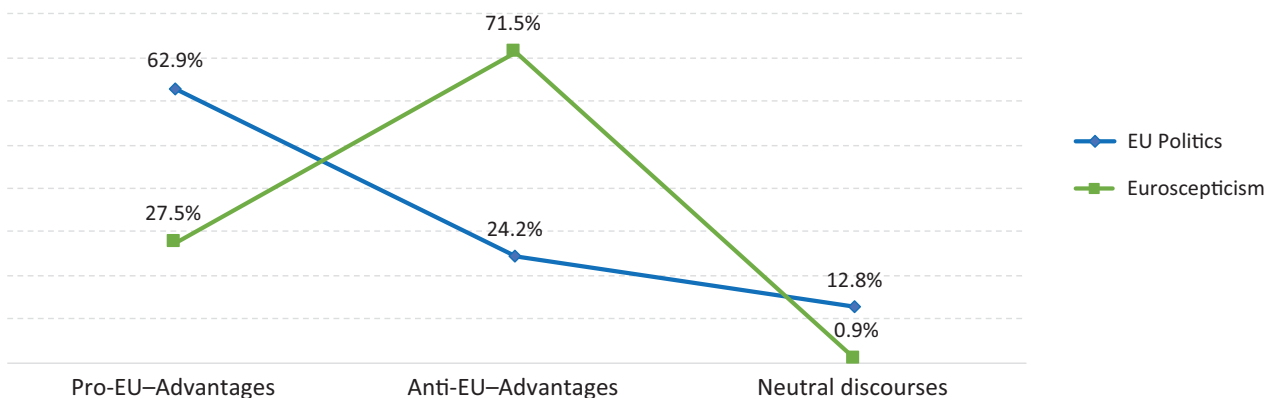
#### 4.2. Critical Content Analysis: Three Poles of Polarization in Spanish Media Outlets

##### 4.2.1. North–South Divide

Fear of marginalization and the attempt to challenge power asymmetries between the North and the South within the EU is still vivid in media discourses on the EU,

even when the EU itself is praised. Discourses on the Next Generation funds is a good example of it. The Next Generation funds are presented as a window of opportunity for the future of the Union, as reflected in statements such as “Europe in this last year has been a space for opportunities” (Gallardo, 2021a). The adoption of the funds is described as a “historic” decision (Gallardo, 2021a), and “without a doubt, a gigantic step” (Gallardo, 2021a). These funds are viewed as an opportunity for a deeper and more just economic integration, as stated in an item published by *elDiario.es*: “In this crisis, unlike in previous crises, the economic health of Southern Europe is to be prioritized” (Gil, 2021a). Even Von der Leyen’s state of the union address, covered by the Spanish media, is based on this narrative: “A just recovery lies ahead, [one] that avoids social fracture and prepares us for future crises” (Gallardo, 2021d). This speech is described by a TV host as “moving,” emphasizing that “we have heard the word soul on several occasions,” and that many of its headlines “are called to improve people’s lives” (Gallardo, 2021d).

However, the praise of the European funds is paralleled with a discourse that attempts to discredit previous fiscal measures advocated by Germany within the EU. The said measures exemplified the power asymmetries that exist between the North and the South in Europe. To challenge this asymmetry, different actors in the media resort to intertextuality, i.e., constructing the significance of the (historic) recovery funds by comparing them to the previous (notorious) austerity measures. This is reflected in the statement of a progressive member of the European Parliament (Garrido) on RTVE:



**Figure 2.** Pro, anti, and neutral discourses detected in the CDA stage within the topics EU Politics and Euroscepticism.

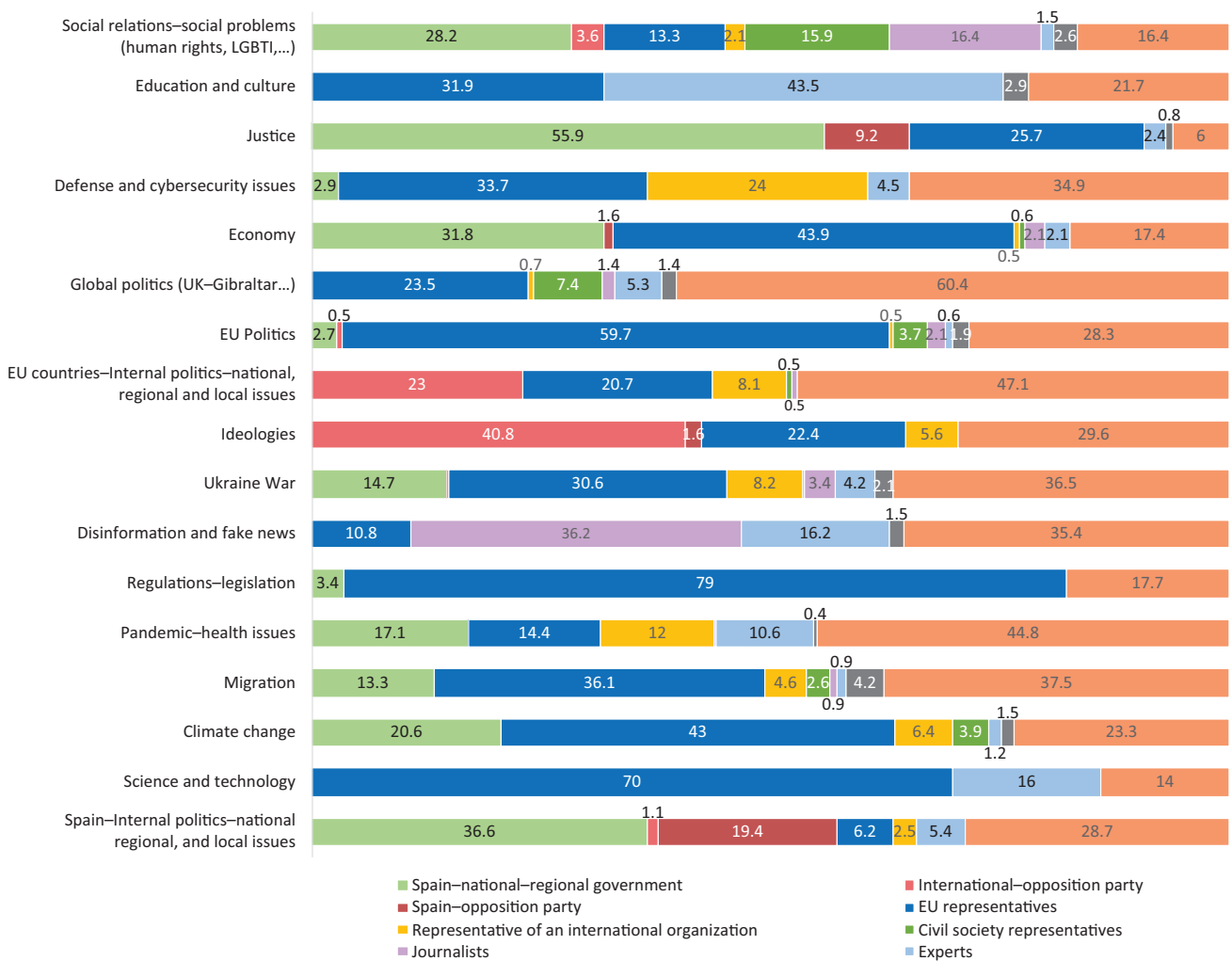


Figure 3. Main actors detected in the content analysis phase.

The European Union has responded in a very different way than it did when the terrible financial crisis hit 10 years ago. [In] the great recession there was austerity, austerity, austerity. And now the disastrous [outcomes] of austerity are seen. Now the opposite has been done—investment—and the proof of that are the 750 billion euros that are going to be injected into the European economy for the recovery, [in accordance with] the famous recovery funds. (Gallardo, 2021d)

Previous measures, such as the Stability and Growth Pact, are criticized for being rigid and outdated with frugal states being portrayed as an obstacle, as reflected in an excerpt from *eDiario.es*: “But the governments of northern Europe, fiscally conservative, are reluctant to make efforts to substantially relax fiscal rules, compared to the positions of the southern countries” (Gil, 2021c). Another item in *eDiario.es* titled “Paradigm Change in Brussels?” highlights that “gone are the days of the Troika’s diktat and of the men in black to access European money” (Gil, 2022a). The same piece continues as follows:

The European Commission tries to escape from the long shadow of the Troika while enduring 800,000 million euros worth of debts to finance the recovery of the European Union that is struggling to get out of the coronavirus pandemic thanks to the vaccines negotiated and bought by Brussels for 27. Looking back in the mirror of a decade ago, Germany’s resounding *nein* on eurobonds has turned into Brussels enduring the largest joint debt in its history. (Gil, 2022a)

Using the Foucauldian concept of memory (Foucault, 1991), which refers to the particular way in which we look at old discourses, such quotes suggest that Eurosceptic discourses on the austerity measures, adopted more than a decade ago, are engraved in public memory albeit dormant. The new measures adopted by the EU only reaffirmed the validity of such critical old discourses that symbolize a highly polarizing moment in the history of the EU, leading to the emergence of new critical approaches to Europeanization such as the ones voiced by Podemos against the austerity measures.



#### 4.2.2. East–West Divide

The EU's decision to withhold funds from Hungary and Poland due to human rights and rule of law concerns gives rise to the discourse that human rights and the rule of law are central components of the European integration process and of Europe's identity. Therefore, the EU must act firmly to protect them. Conditioning the reception of the recovery funds with respecting these values is endorsed by media discourses across the board. These values become the site of contestation between the EU, fully supported by Spain, and states that argue that their sovereignty trumps European normative standards. This polarization is presented by the Spanish media as a conflict over the identity of Europe. Europeans (or true Europeans) are portrayed as strong supporters of these values. For example, in its item "The Europeans want the funds to go only to countries that respect the rule of law," the ABC covered the Eurobarometer on the state of the union and reported that the EU citizens view the rule of law and democratic values as key values that should be respected by member states. Furthermore, European citizens support withholding funds from governments that fail to respect European values ("Los europeos quieren," 2021). Statements by Spain's political elites show full support of the EU withholding funds from Hungary and Poland. An example of this explicit support could be found in the following statement by IU:

The discriminatory law against the LGTBQ community passed by the Hungarian government requires a firm reaction, and I am glad to have listened today to Mr. Michel and Mrs. Von der Leyen's...clear position in defense of the rule of law. (RTVE Noticias, 2021)

Likewise, statements by the political forces from the right display endorsement of the EU position:

The European PP defends the rule of law among the 27 member states, and this is an immovable principle for us. That is why we were one of the signatories to the call for European funds to be conditional on compliance with the rule of law by all parties. (Gallardo, 2021c)

The only party that objects the sanction imposed on Hungary and Poland is VOX. This is reflected, *inter alia*, in the statement of Jorge Buxadé, vice-president of the party: "We have not created the EU to subject the governments that have been legitimately appointed by their people to the path that it decides" (Gallardo, 2021c). However, even the conservative media criticized VOX's positions on such issues. The piece "The cavern of Santiago Abascal" is one example of that. The item criticized Abascal's anti-European stance ("Abascal doesn't like the euro or Europe") and his position on key human rights issues:

[VOX] poisons society with the sinister choreography of xenophobia, machismo, nationalism, anti-Europeanism, homophobia, obscurantism, and resistance to the evidence of climate change. Nothing better than Abascal's messianism to excite the instincts and stimulate the emotions....He would like Spain to be the Hungary of Orbán, the Poland of Law and Justice. (Amón, 2021)

These discourses also create the dichotomy of "us vs. them," with "us" being true Europeanists who believe in human rights values, such as the case of Spain, and "them" the ultra-nationalists who want to access "all the benefits of being a member of the European Union, including resilience and recovery funds, without fulfilling any of the obligations and duties, starting with respect for European law that all the rest of us comply with" (Gallardo, 2021e). Supporting LGBTQ rights becomes a key distinguishing criterion between "us" vs. "them." This is exemplified in headlines, such as "Brussels squeezes Hungary and Poland with the revision of European funds for their authoritarian and homophobic drift" (Gil, 2021b); likewise, the Hungarian prime minister, Viktor Orbán, is described as "ultra-conservative," for linking homosexuality with pederasty: "The Hungarian government is absorbed in its homophobic drift" (RTVE Noticias, 2021). One item on RTVE even compares Orbán's censorship of books on LGBTQ rights to policies of Nazi Germany:

In Hungary, they want books to be marked with a label. It is very similar to what the Nazis did with degenerate art, etc., and it is a super harmful thing to know that these are not just stories for LGBT families. They are stories for all audiences that simply show an LGBT reality. (Gallardo, 2021b)

#### 4.2.3. Internal Divide

While the Spanish political landscape remains highly pro-European, Europeanization and EU policies can be used as a leverage to feed internal political polarization. In other words, it is not the EU itself that is a subject of contestation, it is the way EU related policies are implemented or promoted by rival political parties. Regarding this internal polarization, two main issues were detected: macro-farms and discourses on the renewal of General Council of the Judiciary (Consejo General del Poder Judicial [CGPJ]). Both issues represent polarized discourses across the right vs. left division, and between the same political camp (left vs. radical left).

In January 2022, a controversy emerged in the Spanish media over a statement by Spain's Minister for Consumer Affairs, Alberto Garzón, on macro-farms in an interview to *The Guardian*. In it, Garzón stated that meat produced in macro-farms was of worse quality than meat produced in extensive livestock production systems, in addition to being more harmful to the environment. This statement was interpreted by his political rivals

as downgrading the quality of Spanish meat. The fact that European Commissioner for Agriculture Janusz Wojciechowski supported Garzón's position added fuel to the polarizing effect of the statement. This issue is of relevance as it not only divides the government and the political opposition, but also the governmental coalition itself. Some of the most significant headlines were: "Garzón reaffirms himself after Moncloa's disapproval: 'What I said is impeccable'" or "Evil Garzón and green nuclear," "Unidas Podemos questions Sanchez's 'loyalty' for 'giving fuel to a right-wing hoax' against Garzón," or "Garzón says the controversy over his statements is a 'use of disinformation' to wear him down." The controversy reaches the EU, and its officials end up defending the Spanish minister on what had happened:

The minister for consumer affairs never said in the interview that Spanish meat was of poor quality or of worse quality than that of the rest of the European partners. What he did say was that the production of macro-farms—applicable anywhere in the world—is of poorer quality than that of extensive production. (Gil, 2022b)

Another issue where EU standards were utilized by the opposition to criticize the government on a highly polarized issue in Spain is the renewal of the CGPJ. Beyond being a highly polarized political issue in Spain, the renewal of the CGPJ had been expressly requested by the EU: "Brussels urges the renewal of the Spanish judiciary and constitutional bodies" (Gil, 2021a). This is used by the opposition as an argument against the government, as reflected in the following statement:

The European Commission says very clearly that there is a lack of independence of the figure of the attorney general in Spain...Europe has said it very clearly, and that is what the Partido Popular is in favor of. We are defending the same as the European Commission. (Gallardo, 2021c)

However, some media outlets criticize the polarizing discourses propagated by the opposition with the publication of EU report on the rule of law in Spain, reminding the former of its own role in the CGPJ crisis: "In effect, the PP did agree on the renewal of RTVE, but has refused to do the same with the judicial governing body or the Ombudsman, for example" (Gil, 2021a).

## 5. Conclusions

Our study on polarization in media discourses related to Europeanization reveals that even in contexts where the EU is strongly supported by political and media elites, polarization can still emerge. In such contexts, the aim of polarization is not to discredit the EU and its institutions, but to bolster certain perceptions and visions on the construction of the EU and its identity. Polarizing dis-

courses can also be utilized to challenge power asymmetries between member states or to reinforce them. In both cases, the aim is to improve the position of the state within the EU. This type of inter-state polarization was detected by our study in relation to fiscal measures adopted by the EU, and in relation to human rights and the rule of law issues. In relation to fiscal policies, the North–South divide is contested in media discourses by all Spanish actors. Resort to intertextuality to praise the Next Generation funds by discrediting old austerity measures is a strategy that aims to challenge the hegemony of Northern States. In relation to the promotion of human rights and the rule of law, the construction of the East–West divide also serves as a tool to promote Spain's vision of the EU and its identity and values. It also benefits Spain by positioning it in the group of states that genuinely represent European values. A second type of polarization is internal one, but it does not affect the EU itself; instead, it uses the EU and its policies as a leverage to discredit political rivals.

The polarizing narratives detected by our study reflect the Eurosceptic discourses that surfaced with the emergence of Podemos and VOX. In relation to Podemos, it seems that discourses on the austerity measures and the German influence are still vivid in the public memory and were recently validated, as reflected in the discourses on the Next Generation funds. As for VOX, its position on sanctioning Poland and Hungary for their human rights and rule of law record remains consistent with its European electoral program that calls for the primacy of national laws over EU law. Its position is also consistent with its criticism of LGBTQ rights.

The novelty brought by our study is conditioned by two factors. Firstly, by the end of bipartidism in Spain and the emergence of two opposite and radical political parties (Podemos and VOX). Both parties have adopted an incoherent stance towards the EU, amounting at times to Euroscepticism. It remains to be seen whether their future stance towards the EU will be more consistent and whether they are able to increase their role and influence in the political life of the country. Secondly, our study is conditioned by a specific post-Covid context and the beginning of a war in Ukraine (as the study covers the period between July 2021 and March 2022). This period was marked by two major crises that resulted in a higher visibility of the EU in the European media landscape and a more robust collective action at the EU level.

Although the concept of polarization is a complex one (DiMaggio et al., 1996; Kaufman & Haggard, 2019), an increasing number of authors point out to this phenomenon as the end of consensus (Magre et al., 2021; Pausch, 2021; Rodríguez-Virgili et al., 2022; Svulik, 2019). The analysis in this article yields interesting conclusions for academics, media outlets, and policy makers, which can be summarized as follows. First, while the Next Generation funds have improved the image of the EU and reflected a radically different response to the economic crisis triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic compared the

EU's response to the economic crisis of 2008, this by itself is insufficient to erase past experiences of peripheralization. This is evident in the continuous comparison between the (notorious) austerity measures, adopted during the eurozone crisis, and the new (historic) funds that are perceived as genuinely beneficial to all the members of the Union. This suggests that any future attempt to reintroduce rigid fiscal policies would be met with resistance and could lead to the surge of new wave of Euroscepticism, critical of the hegemony of the North and power asymmetries within the EU.

Second, polarization along the East–West axis could undermine the protection of human rights and the rule of law. When the contestation of European human rights and the rule of law standards results in the construction of a clear dichotomy between “us” vs. “them,” the space for dialogue and consensus is eroded. It is worth noting that while the “us vs. them” dichotomy on this issue in Spain remains on the inter-state level, the fact that VOX objected the sanctions imposed on Poland and Hungary poses the risk that this polarization could become internal one.

As a third conclusion, Rodríguez-Virgili et al. (2022, p. 97) argue that after studying 40 years of polarization in Spain it seems “that we are at the moment of maximum polarization since the approval of the 1978 Constitution.” It is not surprising then, that even if Europeanization is not a polarized political project in Spain, the EU can be used as a leverage to discredit political rivals. This was evident in discourses on the controversy over macro-farms and also in discourses on the failure to renew the CGPJ. Beyond fueling internal polarization, this could risk turning the European integration into a polarized political project.

While our analysis is based on a limited timeframe (July 2021 to March 2022), it offers evidence of a growing and worrying phenomenon, whose impact is seen not only in the political or the media sphere, but it is reinforced by technological disruption and the influence of social networks.

### Acknowledgments

This research study is part of the international project financed by the Horizon 2020 program “Mediatized Discourses on Europeanization and Their Representations in Public Perceptions” (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 interests.

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