

The media coverage of the European Union and the extreme right. A comparative study between Spain, France, and Italy

La cobertura mediática sobre la Unión Europea y la extrema derecha. Un estudio comparado entre España, Francia e Italia



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Abstract:

The parliamentary representation of far-right political parties is growing in several European Union countries, particularly after the Great Recession. This has increased the media attention they receive. These parties share eurosceptic positions or question the idea of European integration, but does their rise alter public discussion on the European Union? Using a quantitative content analysis (N=974) conducted in 6 media outlets: *El País* and *El Mundo* (Spain), *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro* (France), and *Corriere della Sera* and *La Repubblica* (Italy), the research describes and compares media coverage on issues related to the European Union before and after the Great Recession and how the rise of the far-right has affected the European public sphere. The results indicate that public discussion about the European Union is in decline and that national and top-down Europeanisation approaches are on the rise, coinciding with increased coverage of the far-right.

Keywords:

Media; European Union; far-right; media coverage; public sphere.

Resumen:

*La representación parlamentaria de los partidos de extrema derecha crece en varios países de la Unión Europea, en especial después de la Gran Recesión. Ello hace que aumente la atención mediática que reciben. Estos partidos comparten posiciones euroescépticas o de cuestionamiento sobre la idea de integración europea, pero, su auge ¿altera la discusión pública sobre la Unión Europea? Con un análisis de contenido cuantitativo (N=974) llevado a cabo en 6 medios de comunicación: *El País* y *El Mundo* (España), *Le Monde* y *Le Figaro* (Francia) y el *Corriere della Sera* y *La Repubblica* (Italia), la investigación describe y compara la cobertura mediática sobre temas referentes a la Unión Europea antes y después de la Gran Recesión y cómo ha afectado el aumento de la extrema derecha a la esfera pública europea. Los resultados indican que la discusión pública sobre la Unión Europea está en declive y que aumentan los enfoques nacionales y de europeización vertical en coincidencia con una mayor cobertura de la extrema derecha.*

Palabras clave:

Medios de comunicación; Unión Europea; extrema derecha; cobertura mediática; esfera pública.

1. Introduction

The public discussion about the European Union is influenced by the themes addressed in the media and their corresponding treatment. At the same time, the notion of integration linked to the European Union faces scrutiny due to the rise of far-right political factions, which, to a varying degree, are eurosceptic or advocate positions that contradict European values. Media outlets must incorporate articles reflecting diverse political realities in their content in light of the electoral support for such parties, especially after the 2008 economic crisis. Consequently, it is logical to believe that there is heightened media coverage about the far-right. However, to what extent is the public discussion concerning the European Union different before and after the onset of the Great Recession? Is there a greater or lesser presence of the far-right in media content during these periods?

The research aims to quantitatively examine this phenomenon across three European Union countries (Spain, France, and Italy) by conducting a content analysis of two prominent newspapers from each country. The papers cover the pre-election and post-election periods preceding the Great Recession, as well as the most recent elections held up to the drafting of this article. Thus, comparisons are drawn among the three European Union countries across six media outlets and between two distinct temporal periods that have marked the recent history of the Union.

The methodology proposed has been updated according to the suitability of quantitative content analysis, as indicated by the existing literature. Likewise, the selection of countries was conducted using a non-probabilistic sampling approach, taking into account contextual characteristics detailed in the Methodology section. Furthermore, the sample of media outlets per country

was determined by their relevance in readership. These methodological considerations make the article relevant regarding its potential for replication using different samples in future research.

The study examines a growing phenomenon in the continent: the rise of the far right and its impact on the public perception of the European Union through the media. For this reason, this research offers insights into contemporary political and media challenges. Moreover, the study's relevance is underscored by its analysis of the pre-and post-2008 Great Recession periods, thus shedding light on a pivotal period in the history of the European Union.

Similarly, by comparing different countries, it is possible to observe how common challenges are shared regardless of the particular features of the political and media systems, which are analysed through current and innovative data.

Consequently, the study poses three research questions, although the first one encompasses two interconnected issues.

RQ1: Does the emergence or rise of the far-right alter the public discussion surrounding the European Union in the analysed media outlets (during the analysis periods)?

RQ1.1 What journalistic genre, news or opinion, is associated with the emergence of the far-right?

RQ1.2 Do the analysed media outlets reproduce opposition to European values embodied by far-right parties within their related content?

RQ2. Are there more topics about the European Union, focusing specifically on integration or from the perspective of national interest, before or after the Great Recession within the analysed media outlets and countries?

RQ3. Is there vertical or horizontal Europeanisation in the analysed content before and after the Great Recession?

1.1. Theoretical framework

1.1.1. The rise of the far-right in Europe

The growth of the far-right political spectrum, also referred to as the ultraright, constitutes a well-documented phenomenon in Europe, as evidenced by the electoral results in various countries in recent years. Moreover, this phenomenon has been extensively analysed (Lazaridis, Campani and Benveniste, 2016; Golder, 2016; Steinmayr, 2017; Minkenberg, 2017; Astier and Errasti, 2018; Halikiopoulou and Vlandas, 2019; Minkenberg, 2019).

Golder (2016) states that far-right parties are experiencing the fastest growth in Europe. These political organisations often share euroscepticism and a populism of exclusion (Allen, 2015) and nationalist, racist, authoritarian, populist, or reactionary stances (Morelock, 2018; Hartzell, 2018; Ince, 2019). According to Vieten and Poynting (2016), the rise of the far right, coupled with the associated populist racism, can potentially disrupt the European Parliament and pose a significant challenge to the Union.

Cerrone (2022) also highlights that the discourse propagated by the far-right is eurosceptic, indicating either partial or complete opposition to European integration while advocating against globalisation and immigration. Similarly, Dalton and Berning (2022) note the emergence of the far-right in Western Europe and define these parties as extremely conservative

in cultural cleavage. According to Bjånesøy, Ivarsflaten and Berntzen (2023), the far-right agenda has garnered significant political influence within Western European democracies.

The tenets of far-right ideology contradict the values promoted by community institutions outlined in their treaties, which are universally adopted by all Member States, such as equality and the protection of human rights, including those of minorities (Treaty on European Union, 2010). Indeed, Tortola and Rensmann (2022) highlight that the far-right's instrumentalisation of the past aims to resurrect nostalgic ethnonationalism as a means of instigating an authoritarian revolt against liberal democracies and cosmopolitan change in Europe.

The financial and economic crisis of 2008 is regarded as a rupture in the welfare state across European countries (Astier and Errasti, 2018), which led to increased economic inequalities and, together with the implementation of austerity policies (Vieten and Poynting, 2016; Fernández-Rovira, 2019a), paved the way for far-right discourses. The refugee crisis has also been identified as a turning point in the ascent of the far right, with these forces garnering increased support in various European countries between 2014 and 2015 (Steynmayr, 2017).

The electoral backing for the far right, however, does not stem from a single factor; it is beyond the scope of this article to determine the causes of this rise. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy to mention that cultural backlash, economic grievances, and protest voting are recognised as elements that benefit radical right-wing parties (Brils, Muis, Gaidyté, 2022).

This ideology has proliferated both in the East and in the West of the continent, encompassing countries that receive European funds and net contributors. As of early 2020, national parliamentary representation of the far-right was evident in Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Poland, Germany, The Netherlands, Belgium, France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Hungary, Greece, Portugal, and outside the European Union, The United Kingdom, and Switzerland. Pioneering states in European integration, such as France, have the far-right party National Front, which secured 21% of the votes in 2017, making it the second-largest political force. Similarly, Germany has the Alternative for Germany party, which attained 12% of the votes in 2017, positioning it as the third-largest political force, but states that joined during the last significant enlargement (2004-2007), such as Poland (Law and Justice) and Hungary (Movement for a Better Hungary), have far-right parties in government.

1.1.2. The debate on the European Union and its public sphere.

While the surge of the far right in Europe has been studied, little evidence exists regarding its relationship with the European public sphere, representing a novel aspect of this work.

The existence of a European public sphere has been the subject of ongoing debate since the 1990s, which has been linked to the so-called democratic deficit within the Union (Müller, 2016), as a shared public sphere facilitates popular sovereignty (Eriksen, 2004). The notion of the democratic deficit in the European Union constitutes another debate in itself (Moravcsik, 2004; Folledstal and Hix, 2006), stemming from the fact that successive phases of European political integration lack adequate accountability mechanisms. De Vreese (in Kandyala and De Vreese, 2011) defines the public sphere as the arena wherein citizens can discuss the same political issues, making it fundamental to maintaining democracy.

The three normative functions that citizens expect public spheres to perform in representative democracies include giving a voice to diverse perspectives, empowering citizens to criticise political authorities and disseminating credible information on matters of public interest (Goenaga, 2022). Therefore, the scope of European public discussion warrants attention.

While the consensus was that national public spheres could not be directly applied to the European level (Castells, 1997), currently, the debate is leaning towards the perspective that the European environment in Brussels fosters a transnational public sphere within Europe (Bee and Bozzini, 2010). This shift is fueled by media coverage of European issues and the holding of supranational elections (Boomgaarde and De Vreese, 2016; Bozzini, 2016; Walter, 2017). The European Union has been promoting the development of a public sphere since the mid-2000s, specifically in Europe (Fernández-Rovira, 2019b).

From other perspectives, Eriksen (2005) argues that while public spaces do exist, they have yet to generate a shared public sphere at the European level. Additionally, according to Scammell and Semetko (2018), public life is no longer territorially articulated by radio, television, newspapers, and books. Instead, the multiplicity of network communication spaces has fragmented the notion of a unified public sphere, giving rise to overlapping and interconnected public spheres.

Kandyla and De Vreese (2011) argue that, in its ideal form, the European public sphere constitutes a shared communicative space transcending the confines of the nation-state. Following Meyer's contributions (2005), the focus should be on the Europeanisation of debates to connect multiple levels of governance with processes of opinion formation. Consequently, Europeanisation entails the adaptation of Member States to the European Union, and it refers to any content expressing consensus or dissent concerning issues pertinent to decision-making at the European level (Kandyla and De Vreese, 2011). From this perspective, the same authors (2011) emphasise the importance of distinguishing between vertical Europeanisation (when news directly refers to supranational institutions or Union-related topics) and horizontal Europeanisation (when news refers to other political actors in different Member States).

The public sphere, understood as the place to hold public debates and generate public opinion (Habermas, Lennox and Lennox, 1974), is strongly linked to the media. Still, the public sphere does not only come about when content reaches the audience but also when citizens receive, understand, and use media content (Dahlgren, 2006).

Masip, Ruiz-Caballero and Suau (2019) underscore the transformative impact of the Internet on the concept of the public sphere, leading to the emergence of the terms "digital", "virtual", and "online" to refer to the public debate held online. Moreover, they outline three approaches to the change in the public sphere brought about by the internet: firstly, the Habermasian perspective envisions a unified public sphere where the media play a hegemonic role; secondly, there is the notion that this concept may no longer apply; and finally, the perspective that the idea must be maintained, but requires new contributions (2019). According to Rivas-de-Roca and García-Gordillo (2022), the increasing politicisation of the term "Europe" and the widespread use of digital platforms foster the emergence of a European public opinion that acts jointly.

This study analyses the digital editions of several national newspapers, taking into account the power of the media to mediate public debate both online and offline. According to Eurostat (2019), the decline in the import value of newspapers, periodicals, and other publications (down by 13% annually) within the EU-28 indicates a trend towards digital media that significantly impacts press consumption patterns.

Following the approach provided by News Production Theory (Van Hout and Jacobs, 2008; Niblock and Machin, 2014), it is acknowledged that the media wield considerable power to influence public perceptions about particular issues and determine how and why an event is covered journalistically. Therefore, the interpretive sociological framework is applied to news, a concept pioneered by Tuchman (1978), who asserted that new reporting entails the construction of reality rather than portraying it. This makes it necessary to consider the notion of framing, defined by Goffman (1974) as the organising principles governing individuals' interpretation and subjective participation in social events.

Therefore, the media play a pivotal role in generating and reproducing the imaginary surrounding the European Union and the far-right parties, making their joint analyses extremely relevant. According to Krzyżanowski and Ekström (2022), the media not only disseminate and normalise the discourse and political ideology of the far-right but also serve as tools and targets for radical right-wing groups, making their relationships increasingly stronger and complex.

According to Menéndez (2010), more news stories about the EU equates to greater visibility, leading to increased knowledge about the European Union. This suggests that the European public sphere strengthens as the number of related news items increases, as there are more elements to consider in public discourse.

Previous research has explored the media portrayals of the European Union concerning its identity and international role (Menéndez, 2010; Amer, 2019). These studies have categorised coverage as positive, neutral or negative while also exploring specific topics, such as the environment, austerity measures, economy or energy policies (Papaioannou y Gupta, 2017; Lalli et al., 2018; Koehler, Weber y Quiring, 2018). Others have recently examined media coverage of the rise of the far-right in Europe, focusing on issues such as the relationship between the support bases and media coverage of the far-right, including comparisons between mainstream media coverage and that of the far-right, as well as analyses of their discourse (Gattinara and Froio, 2019; Von Nordheim, Müller and Scheppe, 2019; Velázquez, 2019).

However, this study is pioneering in that it explores whether media coverage of the rise of the far right influences public discourse concerning the European Union.

2. Methodology

This study uses quantitative content analysis, a crucial tool in mass communication research (Riffe et al., 2019) whose suitability was already theorised by Holsti (1969). The Factiva database was used for content collection, which allows for the retrieval of content from several digital and print media worldwide in a computerised form.

The study sample consists of two founding countries of the European Union, France and Italy, and a country where the far right has only recently entered parliament: Spain.

The National Rally, formerly known as the National Front, stands as one of the most enduring far-right parties with parliamentary representation, having been active in France since 1972. However, the most recent entry of such political forces into parliament has occurred in Spain. Vox burst onto the scene in the 2019 general elections, securing 24 MPs, which rose to 52 in the 2019 rerun elections held that same year. In Italy, where Silvio Berlusconi epitomised populism during the 1990s and

2000s, there is currently a party called The League, which identifies with the far-right ideology and attained 34% of the votes in 2019, emerging as the leading political force.

Two newspapers have been selected for each country: *El País* and *El Mundo* (Spain), *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro* (France), and *Corriere della Sera* and *La Repubblica* (Italy). During the analysis periods, articles mentioning the European Union and the relevant political parties were extracted from these newspapers. Furthermore, these selected newspapers represent diverse ideological perspectives.

Once the research questions were defined, keywords were chosen to conduct a content search in the database, a crucial step in any news search (Deacon, 2007). Accordingly, the keywords “European Union” and the names of the far-right political parties from each country included in the analysis (“Vox” for Spain, “Lega” for Italy and “National Front/National Rally” for France) were selected, all in their respective languages. Subsequently, 974 journalistic articles mentioning the European Union were retrieved, with each article as the analysis unit. Among them, articles containing any reference to the far-right parties were identified.

The selection of the term “European Union” is justified as it is the most specific, which helps prevent the occurrence of false positives; in other words, this approach avoids using terms with multiple meanings, thereby enhancing the study’s validity. Opting for a term that is too precise, as highlighted by Deacon (2007), is a possible limitation because it can generate false negatives by excluding relevant cases. Therefore, to ensure the validity of the search, a test was conducted using other terms related to Europe and its institutions. However, these alternative terms did not increase the relevant cases for the study. Consequently, the chosen term demonstrates content validity because its systematisation captures the intended focus of the study (Adcock and Collier, 2001). Moreover, following Weber (1990), the search meets the criteria of face validity by measuring the content related to the European Union to be analysed. Additionally, it is a term previously used in analyses, which gives it concurrence validity (Adcock and Collier, 2001).

Computerised searches should be designed in such a way as to exclude duplicate cases, as was implemented in this study, to ensure the reliability of the data and thus obtain consistent results based on the study sample.

Two coders carried out the analysis, ensuring intercoder reliability through the use of the same consensus codebook. Reliability was measured using Krippendorff’s (2004) Alpha coefficient on the entire sample, and all variables met the reliability conditions, as the coefficients ranged between 0.89 and 0.91.

After obtaining the units of analysis, they were classified into different categories (by media outlet, country, genre, date, focus, type of Europeanisation, topic, protagonist, and whether the article opposed European values). All the categories were derived from revised literature within the theoretical framework.

To address the research questions, distinct analysis periods were established. On the one hand, for each country, two weeks before and two weeks after the most recent general election were analysed. On the other hand, two weeks before and after the last elections held before the Great Recession were analysed. These analysis periods, focused on national general elections rather than European elections, were chosen specifically to observe the emergence, or lack thereof, related to the European Union and its approach to vertical or horizontal Europeanisation (Kandyla and De Vreese, 2011).

The most recent general elections took place in Spain on 10 November 2019. Consequently, the most recent analysis period spans from 28 October 2019 to 24 November 2019. The dates preceding the Great Recession correspond to the general election of 9 March 2008, between 25 February and 23 March 2008.

For France, the presidential elections were held on 23 April and 7 May 2017 (since they were held in two rounds). Therefore, the analysis period spans from 16 April to 13 May 2017. In the period before the Great Recession, the dates cover 16 April to 13 May 2007, as the elections were held on 22 April and 6 May.

Italy's most recent analysis period spans from 19 February to 18 March 2018, as the general election was held on 4 March. Prior to the Great Recession, the studied period spans from 1 to 27 April 2008, as the elections were held between 13 and 14 April.

3. Results

3.1. Public discourse on the European Union is declining

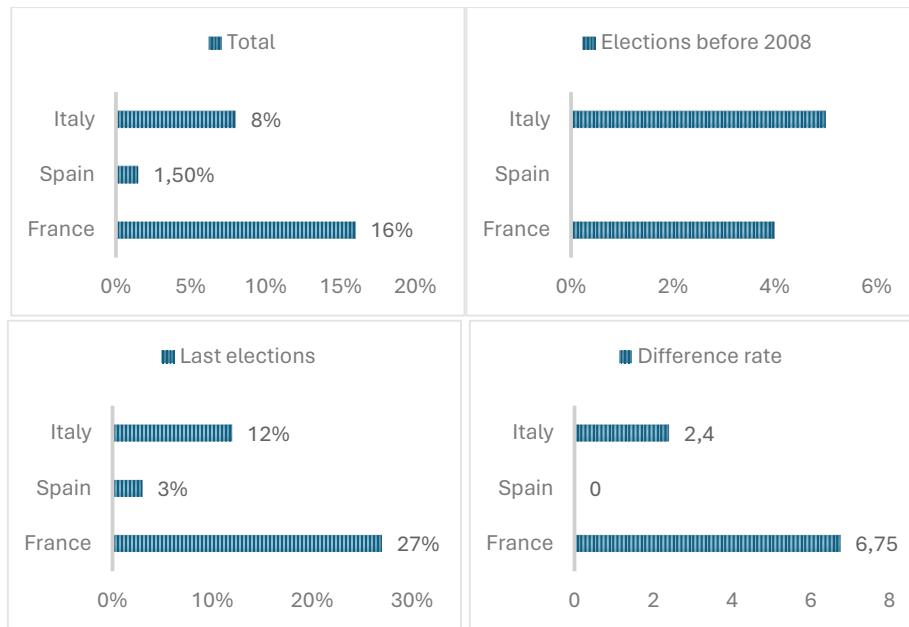
Public discussion surrounding the European Union does not increase in the studied media during the analysed periods. In fact, more news items mention the European Union in the period preceding the 2008 economic crisis, during which there were fewer far-right-wing parties. Specifically, 53% of cases were observed before 2008, compared to 47% of news stories mentioning the EU in the most recent period (Figure 1).

The fact that there are currently more news items related to the far right does not strengthen the European public sphere. In the total sample of news items mentioning the European Union, in the period analysed before the Great Recession, 3% of news items mentioned the far right, while in the period related to the most recent elections in each country, 12% of news items mentioned the far right.

If both periods of analysis are considered, the country with the highest number of news items about the European Union mentioning the far-right is France, with 16%, followed by Italy, with 8% and Spain, with 1.5%. It is in France where the most significant increase in this type of content can be seen in the most recent period analysed, since from the 4% of the news items mentioning the far-right just before the economic crisis of 2008, it has risen to 27% in the most recent period.

In Spain, there were no results before the 2008 crisis, as no extreme right-wing party was contesting elections, and in the current period, 3% of content referred to the far right. In Italy, there is an increase from 5% to 12%.

All the press from the countries analysed reflect the emergence of extreme right-wing parties in EU-related content.

Figure 1. Percentage of news stories about the European Union mentioning the far-right

Source: created by the authors

Regarding the media in each country, *Le Monde* (France) published the most news mentioning the far right when referring to the European Union, accounting for 45%, followed by *Corriere della Sera* (Italy) and *Le Figaro* (France), both with 11%. There are fewer contents in *La Repubblica* (Italy) with 5.5%, *El Mundo* (Spain) with 1.7%, and *El País* (Spain) with 1%.

In the period analysed before the Great Recession, *Le Monde* was already the newspaper that included this content the most, with 25%. At the same time, its competitor, *Le Figaro*, only mentioned the far-right in news about the European Union in 2% of cases. *La Repubblica* slightly mentioned this content more (6%) than *Corriere della Sera* (4%).

In the most recent period analysed, *Le Monde* (57%) is the newspaper that mentions the far right the most in its news about the European Union, followed by *Le Figaro* (20%) and *Corriere della Sera* (17%). *La Repubblica* mentions it in 4% of cases. The Spanish case makes its debut in the appearance of the far right in the media, with 4% of this content in *El Mundo* and 2% in *El País*.

Generally speaking, the informative genre dominates the analysed content, comprising 78% as opposed to 22% of opinion content. However, the proportion of opinion content increases when there is more far-right content in general terms. Therefore, the percentage of opinion content about the European Union in which the extreme right was mentioned before the Great Recession, which was 26%, increased to 35% in the most recent period.

In the content about the extreme right, there is 80% information and 20% opinion before the 2008 crisis, increasing to 75% and 25% respectively, in the most recent period. In the case of Italy, before the Great Recession, in the articles about the EU in which the far-right was mentioned, 70% was information and 30% opinion. These percentages changed from 42% to 58%, respectively, indicating a significant increase in the opinion genre. However, this was not the case in the news about the EU, in which the far-right was not mentioned, with 76% information and 24% of opinion in the most recent period.

In the period analysed before the Great Recession in Spain, no articles mention the extreme right regarding the EU, with the sample of news about the European Union being 76% information and 23% opinion. In contrast, in the most recent analysis period, it has been demonstrated that 50% of EU-related content mentioning far-right belongs to the opinion genre. Regarding France, before the Great Recession, there was 77% of information in which the EU was mentioned, of which 4.4% referred to the far-right.

The percentage regarding opinion was 22%, of which 3.8% mentioned the far-right in France. In the most recent period, information occupied 82% of the cases, of which 27% mentioned the far-right. On the other hand, in the French case, 18% of content about the EU belongs to the opinion genre, and from this, 28% mentions the far-right.

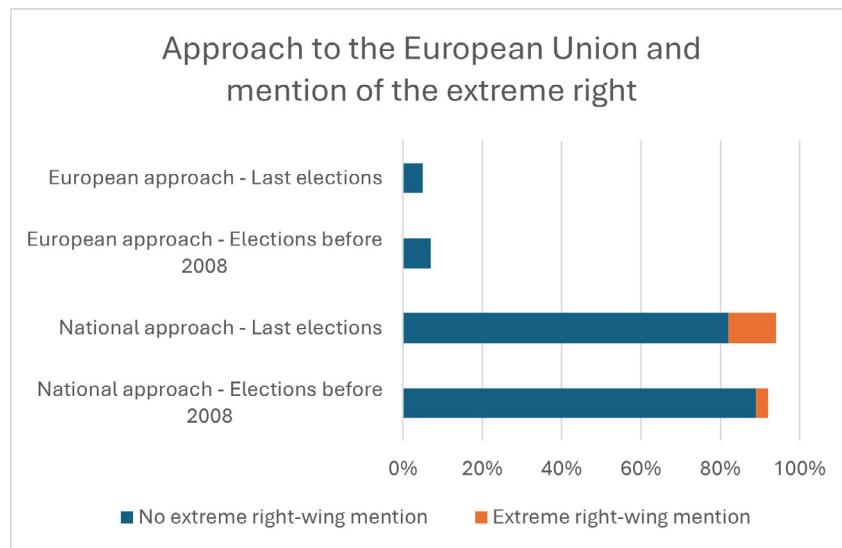
When examining the combined periods of analysis, it becomes evident that *Le Monde* is the newspaper with the highest proportion of opinion content referencing the far right (50%), while *El País* displays the least (3%). *El Corriere della Sera* demonstrates 31%, *La Repubblica* 10%, *Le Figaro* 9.7%, and *El Mundo* 3.7% of such content.

Among the content about the European Union that mentions the far-right in the total sample, there are only 4 instances where the rejection of European values is explicitly shown. Specifically, this content portrays the far-right's perspective on the rejection of immigration, the questioning of the right to asylum, doubts about a common currency and criticism of the EU by the French National Front.

It can be seen from the above that the media analysed do not predominately reproduce a Eurosceptic or anti-EU discourse typically associated with the far right. However, there is less content in general about the European Union when the far right is present, but there is an increase in opinion-based articles compared to informative ones.

3.2. The national focus predominates on European integration

The presentation of content about the European Union from a national rather than integration perspective has predominated throughout all periods of analysis and in all countries. Moreover, there has been an increase in content that mentions the far-right and emphasises the national point of view in a general way.

Figure 2. Approach to the European Union and mention of the extreme right

Source: created by the authors

Before the Great Recession, articles dealing with European issues from a national point of view without mentioning the far-right comprised 89%, while those mentioning the far-right accounted for 3%. From an integration perspective, there was 7% content before the Great Recession, and none related to the far-right. In the most recent period of analysis, the national focus (without mention of the far-right) continues to dominate but slightly decreases to 82%, while the European focus also declines to 5%. Among the content mentioning the far-right, the national approach increases to 12%, while the inclusive approach remains absent (Figures 2 and 3).

The media deals with European issues and analyses them from the perspective of each country's national interests, and those who mention the far right follow the same line.

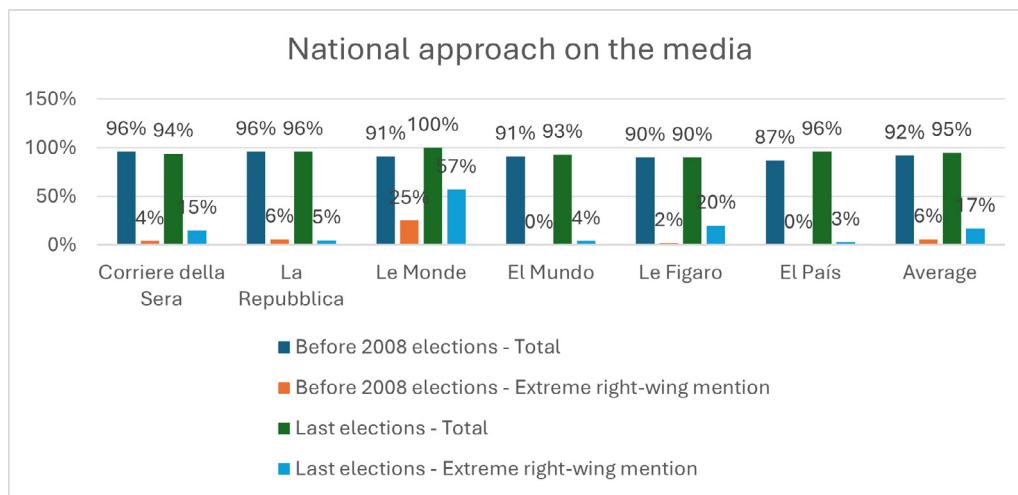
Before the Great Recession, the media with the most content related to the EU from a specifically national point of view were *Corriere della Sera* (96%), *La Repubblica* (96%), *Le Monde* (91%), *El Mundo* (91%) and *El País* (87%). Within these contents, there is a presence of the far-right linked to the national focus in *Le Monde* (25%), *La Repubblica* (6%), *Corriere della Sera* (4%) and, to a lesser extent in *Le Figaro* (2%). At the same time, there are none in *El Mundo* and *El País* (in the period before the 2008 crisis).

Regarding the focus on European integration, *El País* has the most content on this subject, comprising 12%, followed by *Le Figaro* with 9.7%, *Le Monde* with 8.5%, and *El Mundo* with 8%. In contrast, this focus is less prominent in the Italian media, with 4% in *Corriere della Sera* and 3% in *La Repubblica*. In neither case is this approach related to the mention of the far right.

In the most current period, *Le Monde* has focused all its analysed content from a national perspective, followed by *La Repubblica* with 96%, which offers the most EU-related content from a national interest perspective, followed by *El País* with 95.5%. This is followed by *Corriere della Sera*, 94%; *El Mundo*, 93%; and *Le Figaro*, 90%. Of this content, 57% is related to the far-right in *Le Monde*, while 19.7% is associated with the extreme right in *Le Figaro*. In *Corriere della Sera*, this content accounts for 15%, followed by 4.7% in *La Repubblica*, 4% in *El Mundo* and 2.7% in *El País*.

The newspaper that offered the most content from a European integration perspective before the crisis, *El País*, experienced a decline in this focus in the most recent period, falling to 4.5%. *Le Monde* has also dropped, becoming non-existent in the most recent period. In contrast, *Le Figaro* (9%), *Corriere della Sera* (5%) and *La Repubblica* maintain the same or very similar values. Only 1% in *Corriere della Sera* and *Le Figaro*, respectively, mention the far-right.

Figure 3. National focus in the media analysed



Source: created by the authors

The focus on European integration in EU issues has traditionally been low in Italy during the analysed periods. Furthermore, this approach has declined in Spain and France as far-right positions have emerged or grown in public debate, focusing on national media being related to a national perspective.

3.3. Vertical Europeanisation prevails in all countries.

Consistent with the prevailing focus on national interests in treating European issues within the analysed media, the study confirms the preponderance of vertical Europeanisation outlined by Kandyla and De Vreese (2011). Moreover, across the entire sample and throughout all periods of analysis, content referencing the extreme right is associated with vertical Europeanisation (Figure 4).

In the entire analysis, 65% of the content shows vertical Europeanisation; of this, 6% references the extreme right. Conversely, horizontal Europeanisation is evident in 35% of the content, and 1% is related to the extreme right.

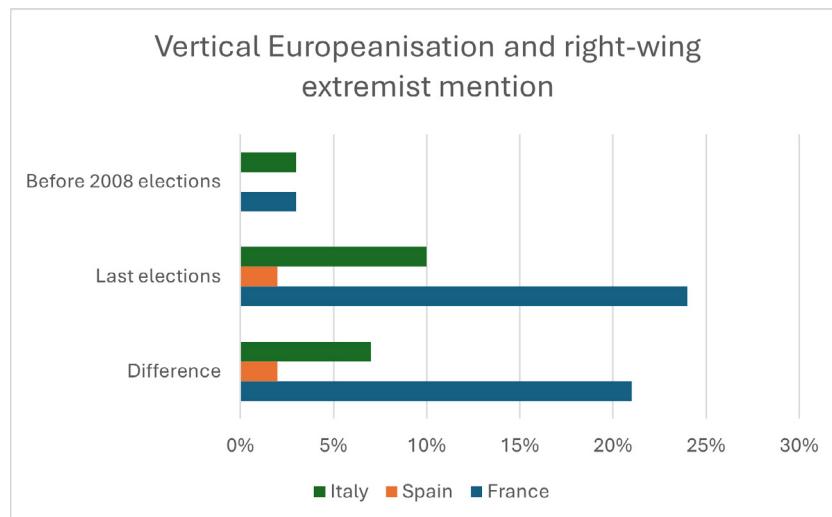
In the period preceding the Great Recession, in the French case, 62% of the content demonstrates vertical Europeanisation, of which 3% mentions the extreme right.

In Spain, 70% of the content features vertical Europeanisation (without the presence of the extreme right), while in Italy, this figure stands at 67%, with 3% mentioning the extreme right. During the most recent analysis period, in France, content featuring vertical Europeanisation increased to 78%, of which 24% mentions the extreme right. In contrast, in Spain, content showing vertical Europeanisation decreases to 54%, with only 2% mentioning the extreme right, given the recent incorporation of this ideology into the parliamentary scene.

The decrease in content showing vertical Europeanisation is also evident in Italy, accounting for 58%. However, there is an increase in mentions of the extreme right among the vertical Europeanisation content, reaching 10%.

Spain transitioned from being the country with the highest vertical Europeanisation content in the period analysed before the Great Recession to the country with the lowest content in the most recent analysis period. In contrast, France is the only country to witness an increase in its vertical Europeanisation content. Among this content, in all three countries, the number of articles mentioning the far-right has increased, from 0% to 2% in Spain, but it is in France where the highest increase is found, from 3% to 24%. Similarly, in Italy, there is an increase from 3% to 10%.

Figure 4. Vertical Europeanisation and mention of the far-right



Source: created by the authors

Regarding the media analysed, *El País* is the newspaper with the highest percentage of vertical Europeanisation content before the Great Recession, with 81%. At the same time, its competitor, *El Mundo*, had the most minor content in the entire sample, with 57%. This was followed by *Le Monde* (75%), *La Repubblica* (68%), *Corriere della Sera* (64%) and *Le Figaro* (61%). *El País* shows the lowest vertical Europeanisation with 52% in the most recent analysis period, indicating a notable decrease. This trend also occurs in *La Repubblica*, which drops from 68% to 38% and is the only media to show more horizontal than vertical Europeanisation. In contrast, content on vertical Europeanisation increased in *Corriere della Sera* to 72%, *Le Figaro* to 78%, and *Le Monde* to 80%. In *El Mundo*, the percentage remained stable at 57%.

Vertical Europeanisation content mentioning the extreme right was highest in *Le Monde* (16%) before the Great Recession, while in other media outlets, it ranged from 0% to 4%; in the most recent period, *Le Monde* also demonstrates a higher percentage of content mentioning the extreme right about vertical Europeanisation, with 42%, and there are increases in the rest of the media as well. In *Le Figaro* it rises to 19.7%, in *Corriere della Sera* to 14%, and to 4% in *El Mundo* and *La Repubblica*, respectively. However, in *El País*, it does not reach 1%.

Horizontal Europeanisation is represented in a lower percentage of content across all countries. Most articles demonstrating horizontal Europeanisation are only found in the most recent analysis period and are primarily featured in the newspaper *La Repubblica*, comprising 62%. In the remaining media outlets, during the period of analysis before the Great Recession, the percentages vary between the highest in *El Mundo*, at 42%, and the lowest in *El País*, at 18%. Regarding the most recent analysis period, *El País* follows *La Repubblica*, with 47%, and then the percentages decrease to 19% in *Le Monde*. Mentions of the extreme right in content showing horizontal Europeanisation are marginal in both analysis periods.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The rise of the far right has become more evident in several EU countries since the 2008 economic crisis. The study confirms that this increase is reflected in the media content mentioning the far-right in the analysed media. However, the visibility (Menéndez, 2010) of European issues in the articles in the sample has not increased, as there is less content referring to the European Union after the 2008 crisis than before it.

Furthermore, in countries with a longer tradition of far-right parties, such as France, it is evident that there is also more media content on this ideology. However, in general, the content mentioning the far-right among articles dealing with the EU does not explicitly specify the anti-EU ideology of these political forces. The greater parliamentary presence and increased media coverage do not necessarily entail content addressing opposition to the European Union or its values. This is related to the debate on the European public sphere insofar as the lower content on the EU recorded in the most recent period reflects reduced visibility in the media and, therefore, less space for discussion (Rivas-de-Roca and García-Gordillo, 2022) and less reinforcement of the public sphere in the Habermasian sense, resulting in fewer incentives for citizens to obtain reliable and sufficient information (Goenaga, 2022).

In any case, the existence of the public European sphere is evident through the media coverage (Boomgaarde and De Vreese, 2016; Bozzini, 2016; Walter, 2017; Rivas-de-Roca and García-Gordillo, 2022) about the European Union. However, the focus of this media coverage calls into question whether it constitutes a truly transnational public sphere (Bee and Bozzini, 2010).

Indeed, in line with Eriksen (2005), the predominant national interest focus of articles mentioning the European Union indicates that there are public spaces where the European Union is considered. Still, it does not constitute a truly communitarian or unified public sphere (Scammell and Semetko, 2018).

The emergence or rise of the far right in Europe and its subsequent media coverage of European issues correlate with the national focus of media content rather than with a focus on integration, which suggests that while public spaces may be strengthening, the EU public sphere itself is not necessarily being bolstered.

In this sense, the research explores the assumption of the Europeanisation of debates (Kandyala and De Vreese, 2011) and finds that the distinct levels of governance within the European Union and member states are recurring elements in journalistic reporting.

The process of adaptation to the European Union, known as Europeanisation, is evident in media content, particularly in its vertical Europeanisation variant, where most of the analysed content primarily includes references to European institutions. This indicates the existence of a European atmosphere fostered by Brussels (Bee and Bossini, 2010). Still, the lesser amount of content favouring the horizontal Europeanisation approach raises doubts about whether Europeanisation is adequate to characterise the European public sphere as fully integrated.

The study finds that the formation of public opinion is intertwined with the media (Habermas, Lennox and Lennox, 1974) as they portray European issues from specific perspectives (e.g. from the perspective of national interest and vertical Europeanisation). In doing so, they also influence the collective imagination by framing information in a certain way (Tuchman, 1978; Goffman, 1974). Although the analysis of framing within the content comprising the sample is beyond the scope of this research, it is evident that the media exert a significant influence when presenting issues of public interest (Niblock and Machin, 2014; Van Hout and Jacobs, 2008).

Therefore, regarding the coverage of content mentioning the far right, it is evident that the anti-EU discourses of extreme right-wing parties are not reproduced. Only a minority of articles show these parties' opposition to or questioning of the Union, highlighting the need for further analysis of the complex relations between the media and extreme right-wing political parties (Krzyżanowski and Ekström, 2022).

The article represents a significant contribution to the field of study as it addresses the research questions stemming from the rise of the extreme right and its impact on the public sphere, a clear challenge within the European Union. This phenomenon not only influences the imaginary of the Union itself but also ultimately shapes the ideas that citizens can form, particularly through media coverage. For instance, the discussion on the relevance of the insignificance of being part of the European club is particularly noticeable in the period analysed in the article.

However, the research has limitations regarding the number of countries analysed and the media included in the study sample, as a larger sample could yield more significant results regarding the problem analysed. Nevertheless, the study contributes to advancing our knowledge of media coverage of the European Union and the rise of extreme right-wing parties. Furthermore, it provides valuable comparative data among three relevant EU countries (Spain, France, and Italy).

Furthermore, it is beyond the scope of this study to observe tolerance towards far-right discourses (Brils, Muis and Gaidyté, 2022; Dalton and Berning, 2022; Bjånesøy, Ivarsflaten and Berntzen, 2023; Cerrone, 2023; Couperus, Tortola and Rensmann, 2023).

The research methodology can be applied to future research, with diverse samples of countries and various media outlets. The study can even be replicated for European elections, expanding the scope beyond national elections, which could constitute an interesting avenue for future research.

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Conception and design of the work	Cristina Fernández-Rovira and Ricardo Carniel-Bugs
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Data collection and analysis	Cristina Fernández-Rovira and Ricardo Carniel-Bugs
Discussion and conclusions	Cristina Fernández-Rovira and Ricardo Carniel-Bugs
Drafting, formatting, version review and approval	Cristina Fernández-Rovira and Ricardo Carniel-Bugs

7. Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest contained in this article.

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