

# The European Union representation in Spanish media: discourses and polarization through the energy crisis

La representación de la Unión Europea en los medios españoles: discursos y polarización a través de la crisis energética

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Spain's gradual integration into the European Union through the development of institutions and economic and structural changes is intrinsic to the construction of a pro-European public opinion in which the media have actively participated. **Objectives:** This research aims to analyse the topics disseminated by the leading Spanish media to detect how the EU is represented in these themes, determine the main, adjacent and counter-discourses and find out the degree of North/South polarisation. **Methodology:** By content analysis and critical discourse analysis, this paper studies 543 units from the Spanish media *El País*, *El Confidencial*, *ABC*, *El Diario.es*, *RTVE* and *Antena 3* from July 2021 to March 2022. **Discussion and conclusion:** Following the methodological application, the results obtained allow us to conclude that the construction of Europeanisation in the Spanish media is constructed about specific issues, and after an in-depth analysis of the energy issue, we can affirm that media coverage is neutral in general terms. Europeanisation is presented from a role with the greater weight of Spain in the common project than in previous historical stages presented in the introduction

to this paper. Likewise, there is a certain unanimity in the Spanish media, both in the thematic selection and in the actors who are given a voice in the information, as well as in the pre-European construction of public opinion, regardless of their editorial line.

**Keywords:** European Union; Media; Content analysis; Critical discourse analysis; Polarization.

## RESUMEN

**Introducción:** La integración gradual de España en la Unión Europea mediante el desarrollo de instituciones y cambios económicos y estructurales es intrínseca a la construcción de una opinión pública proeuropea en la cual los medios de comunicación han participado activamente. **Objetivos:** Esta investigación busca analizar los temas difundidos por los principales medios de comunicación españoles con el fin de determinar cómo se representa a la Unión Europea, los discursos, discursos adyacentes y contra discursos y averiguar el grado de polarización Norte-Sur. **Metodología:** Mediante el análisis de contenido y el análisis crítico de discurso se analizan 543 unidades procedentes de los medios El País, El Confidencial, ABC, ElDiario.es, RTVE y Antena 3 desde marzo de 2021 hasta julio de 2022. **Discusión y conclusiones:** Tras la aplicación metodológica, los resultados obtenidos nos permiten concluir que el sentimiento de europeización en los medios de comunicación españoles se construye sobre temas concretos, y tras un análisis en profundidad de la cuestión energética, podemos afirmar que la cobertura mediática es neutral en términos generales. La europeización se presenta desde un papel con mayor peso de España en el proyecto común que en las etapas históricas anteriores presentadas en la introducción de este trabajo. Asimismo, existe cierta unanimidad en los medios españoles, tanto en la selección temática como en los actores a los que se da voz en la información, así como en la construcción proeuropea de la opinión pública, independientemente de su línea editorial.

**Palabras clave:** Unión Europea; Medios de comunicación; Análisis de contenido; Análisis crítico del discurso; Polarización.

### 1. Introduction: Spain in the european union

Europeanization is a gradual process of integration, in which Spain has been developing common institutions and structural and economic changes and which has sought the political unification of Europe (López-Gómez, 2014). European identity is recent compared with national identities; it is possible to observe differences between member countries with a longer trajectory and countries that joined more recently (Grad et al., 2004). In the words of Juan Avilés (2004), there has indeed been criticism since Spain joined the EU, but it is worth noting that from 1996 onwards, the Europeanist discourse linked to pragmatism intensified and, years later, the positive view of the approval of the European Constitution.

The study on Euroscepticism (Hooghe and Marks, 2009) finds that most political parties are more pro-European than the voters are. The main Eurosceptic tendencies come from the populist right and the radical left. Euroscepticism is linked to the perception that the political elite is guided largely by its selfishness or self-interest than by the common good. In line with the concept of the "Euroscepticism spiral" attention has been paid to the intermediation of politicians, media and citizens and, it is through thematic selection and framing that public opinion is conditioned (Galpin and Trenz, 2017). According to Manuel Castells (2019), the formation of the European identity needs a link between the population and a feeling of belonging that does not yet reach the levels of belonging to their own countries. Without this link, the political or economic union of the people of Europe cannot endure (Castells, 2019). Likewise, affective polarisation constitutes an enduring social identity when individuals identify not only with a particular social group but also with political parties and leaders (Kingzette, 2021; Torcal and Comellas, 2022). It is interesting for this paper to consider the concept of affective polarisation

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concerning European identity as it is directly linked to identity-based ideology and, consequently, is mainly produced by ideological and other social identities increasingly ordered along party lines (Mason, 2018; Torcal and Comellas, 2022).

There are four temporal stages in which the Spanish linkage or sense of belonging to the EU was susceptible to change due to the concurrence of social, political, and economic events: The first stage focuses on the opening of the EU towards the East and the 20th anniversary of Spain's entry. The pro-European sentiment of Spaniards during the vote on the European Constitution in 2003 was manifest. According to the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas-CIS (2005), among the Spanish participants who voted in favour of the European Constitution, the main reasons given were that it was essential to continue the European construction (38.7%), it was what the political party with which they sympathized defended (24.2%) and because the Constitution created European citizenship (14.6%). In 2004, ten new countries joined the EU. During the period of EU enlargement, Spaniards turned mainly to television, radio, and the daily press to find out more information about the new members. Regarding the degree of information, there were "no major differences between the results obtained in Spain and the EU average, with 49.8% of Spaniards (49% of the EU average) considering themselves not very well informed about enlargement and 29.3% (28% of the EU average) saying they were not informed at all" (Eurobarometer, 2002). Spaniards' confidence in European institutions was higher than the EU average. Once the Europe of 25 consolidated, Spaniards maintained their position concerning the media. On the 20th anniversary of Spain's entry into the EU, according to a CIS study (2006), 58.8 % of Spaniards felt very or fairly attached to the EU, compared to 38.2 % who said they felt very little or not at all attached to it.

The second stage is the economic crisis of 2007-2008. Before this moment, the Spanish population considered that the media gave a positive image of the EU, only 8% believed that being an EU member state was negative (Eurobarometer, 2008). The political disaffection was channeled towards the Spanish political class, and the EU and its adopted economic policies, leading to the emergence of new parties (García-Carretero and Díaz-Noci, 2018). Financial and economic collapse generated a climate of distrust and political disaffection in Spain, especially among the younger population (Calvo et al., 2011; Likki, 2012; Fernández-Planells et al., 2014).

According to García-Gordillo, "information on the EU in the media is reduced to the summits of heads of state, the family photo and the odd anecdote [...]", which makes it difficult to "create a sense of belonging to a collective that goes beyond the national sphere" (2012, p. 77). Despite this, the informative treatment, for example, of the written press, should be a "referential axis when it comes to establishing the opinion of a society, which is why it is especially important to know what strategies it applies to this European political subject, and how these affect the construction of European identity" (Rivas-de-Roca, 2018, p. 1634). The author explains how the Spanish press disseminated news about the crisis in Europe using concepts that did not favour a positive sentiment (Rivas-de-Roca, 2018). The trust in the European project was eroded because Spaniards felt they had no voice to counteract these policies (Powell et al., 2013).

The media expressed their astonishment at the EU's lack of reactivity and pointed to the shortcomings of economic policy (Krugman, 2009). Discourses focused on economic problems, unemployment, youth precariousness and the real estate bubble. The Spanish public did not find a European perspective to construct its identity, in line with Díaz-Nosty's (2005) 'media deficit'. The EU was not the main actor in media coverage as "crisis reporting on Spanish television, as observed, has focused on events in the Iberian Peninsula" (Martín-Quevedo et al., 2016, p. 819). In 2010 the Spanish government announced the first major cutback in public spending and the positive image of the EU in Spain fell from 73% in 2007 to 47% in 2010 (Aixalá-i-Blanch, 2014). There was a lack of interest in the European issue

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and television did not help to bring information related to the EU and its institutions closer to the population (Zurutuza and Lafuente, 2012).

In Spain, between 2013 and 2016, emerged new political parties through the institutionalisation of social movements against austerity (della Porta & Mattoni, 2014) capitalizing this political disaffection (Sampedro and Sánchez-Duarte, 2011). The gap between Eurosceptics and pro-Europeans increased during this period. According to the Eurobarometer, Spanish citizens' confidence in the European project plummeted, as they perceived Brussels as a distant and bureaucratic reality. The solution to this gap in public opinion lies in the creation of a transnational public debate on issues of interest or concern to the European population and the creation of European public opinion (Benedicto-Solsona, 2016). Some research has found that the spread of Eurosceptic attitudes occurred mainly through the media and social networks (Brack and Startin, 2015).

The third stage began when the European narrative with the largest media presence focused on the migrant crisis. In 2015, Europe faced the most serious refugee crisis since World War II. Most Spaniards were in favour of creating a common European agenda on migration and were more tolerant of immigration than the EU (Eurobarometer, 2014). Positive news in the Spanish media focused on discourses of solidarity for Spain's contribution. Spain was a net contributor to the budget of more than 10 billion euros mobilised by the EU to help the most affected countries and pledged to take in more than 16,000 refugees (DSN, 2016; CEAR, 2016). As the crisis progressed, Europeans became more critical: "if we refer to immigration of people from outside the EU: 59% report negative feelings and only one-third (34%) positive. In Spain, the majority had a positive opinion (53%) compared to a third (38%) who said they were negative" (Eurobarometer, 2015). In the media, the construction of public opinion focused on generating a sense of identification with refugees by highlighting common characteristic features, to appeal to sensitivity and emotions (Cassanova and Massó, 2018). However, there are substantial differences in media representation between northern and southern European countries (Amores et al., 2020).

The fourth stage is the EU's management of COVID-19 and its economic consequences. While the economic crisis of 2008 weakened the link between citizens and the EU, the management of the pandemic has marked a turning point in citizens' perceptions. Spaniards are more optimistic than average about the future of the EU, the 81% of those surveyed feel that they are citizens of the EU (Eurobarometer, 2022). Spaniards were the fourth least confident member in the EU-27, behind only France, the Czech Republic and Bulgaria (InfoLibre, 2020). However, as the pandemic progressed, trust in the EU increased. Whereas in April 2021, 49% of respondents were dissatisfied with the measures taken by the EU to curb the coronavirus, now two out of three Spaniards are confident that the EU will make the right decisions in the future of the pandemic (Eurobarometer, 2022).

In the economic response, there are differences between the austerity measures that the EU promoted in the face of the 2008 economic crisis, and the consequences of the coronavirus. The economic response is based on the Next Generation EU recovery funds, both Spaniards and Europeans trust the recovery funds and believe that they will be effective in responding to the pandemic (Eurobarometer 2021, 2022). The communication scenario characterised by the proliferation of channels and platforms, the abundance of communication and increased competition between media has resulted in an information-saturated ecosystem where the task of informing oneself is becoming increasingly difficult for citizens. Since 2020, Spanish media discourse on Europeanisation and citizens' sense of belonging to the EU has focused on the rise of disinformation and fake news (Almansa-Martínez et al., 2022). In this sense, "the dissemination of deliberately false information has become a health problem" (Salaverría et al., 2020, p. 2). Despite this, the traditional media continue to be the reference source of information because, in times of crisis, citizens look for common points of reference such as the mass media to shape public opinion (Besalú, 2020).

## 2. Objectives and methodology

The study explores the role of Spanish media outlets advocating the European project by analyzing their discourses, by means of content analysis (CA) and critical discourse analysis (CDA). In terms of public opinion and in opinion of major political parties, Spain is a pro-European country. The Spanish political landscape is polarized according to the left-right divide but its Europeanization and the support for the EU represent uncontested political projects (Ruíz and Egea 2010).

### 2.1. The sample

The period of the analysis is from July 2021 to March 2022. The selection of the media analysed follows four selection criteria: format (traditional-digital), ownership (public-private), editorial line (conservative-liberal) and scope. As a result, the media selected were: *El País*, *El Confidencial*, *ABC*, *El Diario.es*, *Televisión Española (RTVE)* and *Antena 3*. The accounts of the media under study on Twitter were used to constitute a double channel of media dissemination in Spain (Casero-Ripollés, 2020). To select a representative sample, filtering of the news was done considering the profiles of the media on Twitter. For the capture of these tweets, we used NCapture which is part of the QSR Nvivo software, following the process of previous research work already tested (García-Carretero et al., 2022; Pedrero-Esteban et al., 2021). Subsequently, the researchers filtered the messages to detect discourses on Europeanisation and anti-Europeanisation to obtain the final sample. In the filtering process keywords were used, previously agreed upon considering the research objectives. The sample contains news items, opinion articles, editorials and reports from the newspapers, while in the case of television, news items broadcast on news programmes were analysed. The final sample comprises 543 units (Table 1).

**Table 1.** *The filtering and final sample.*

Media	Tweets	Final Sample									
		Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Total
<i>ABC</i>	27,708	7	6	5	11	15	8	7	14	9	82
<i>Antena 3</i>	18,325	5	1	5	9	9	8	6	7	11	61
<i>El Confidencial</i>	21,804	9	0	9	23	23	4	7	18	12	94
<i>ElDiario.es</i>	24,902	8	7	11	28	28	14	10	18	17	130
<i>El País</i>	35,592	10	6	3	9	9	7	7	13	17	80
<i>RTVE</i>	34,613	8	7	7	11	11	12	10	17	11	96
<i>Total</i>	162,944	47	27	40	95	95	53	47	87	77	543

**Source:** Own elaboration.

### 2.2. First methodological phase: CA

The general objective of this research is to find out and analyse the topics disseminated in the main Spanish media to detect how the EU is represented. In this line, is important to know how mediatisation (Couldry and Hepp, 2013; García-Carretero, 2018) intervenes in the configuration and representation of Europeanisation.

To this end, this research follows a qualitative perspective based on CA. The purpose of CA using Nvivo is to make inferences from texts, whether they are in written format or audiovisual content (Krippendorf, 2013). Following the definition proposed by Bernard Berelson (1971) to explain this



qualitative technique, it must involve an objective, systematic and quantifiable description of the manifest content. It aims to delve into the sender, the receiver, and the message of the communicative process (Colle, 2011). Although it is a flexible technique (Berelson, 1971), this qualitative method must be standardised and mechanical (López-Noguero, 2002).

In this research, we designed different categories for the standardization applying the software for the coding of the main themes and actors involved in the information. By an inductive approach of CA, "we can establish categories in an inductive way, that is, by creating the different labels under which we are going to order our information as they emerge from the exploitation of our sources" (Guix, 2007, p. 28). Through the thematic analysis we find out the main themes disseminated with Europeanisation, their context or frame and whether causes are established for specific problems, consequences, and solutions (Bardin, 2022; Entman, 2004; Gitlin, 1980). Thus, the process of inductive content analysis is organized into four steps. First, the parallel categorization by the researchers of part of the sample; second, the sharing of categories and analysis; third, the creation of a coding protocol with all selected categories and their definitions; and finally, the complete analysis of the sample and the recoding of the content that did not fit the categories of the protocol.

As in previous works (Pedrero-Esteban et al., 2021; García-Carretero et al., 2022; Guerrero-Pico et al., 2022), the analysis criteria agreed upon in different working sessions and the codifications made and revised by each researcher have been considered, under the operational definitions of each category, to maximize neutrality in their codification.

### **2.3. Second methodological phase: CDA**

From the media CA, we obtained quantitative data regarding the dominant topics discussed concerning the EU. It shows a broad picture of all themes discussed. To analyse the media items gathered, the material was divided on topics, such as health, economy, energy and so forth since we believe it is the most appropriate method to detect discourses in the Spanish context. This research seeks to delve deeper into one of the key issues disseminated by the media based on the relationship between Spain and the EU, as shown by the results of the first phase of analysis: the energy crisis and climate change.

The first specific objective is to determine the main discourse, adjacent discourses and counter-discourses about the issue of the energy crisis and climate change. For this purpose, the methodological framework of CDA focuses on the model of van Dijk (2013), Foucault (1991) and Wodak and Weiss (2005). The second specific objective is to analyse the degree of North/South polarisation according to the friend-enemy dichotomy (van Dijk, 2013) and Foucault's limits and forms of memory and appropriation (1991).

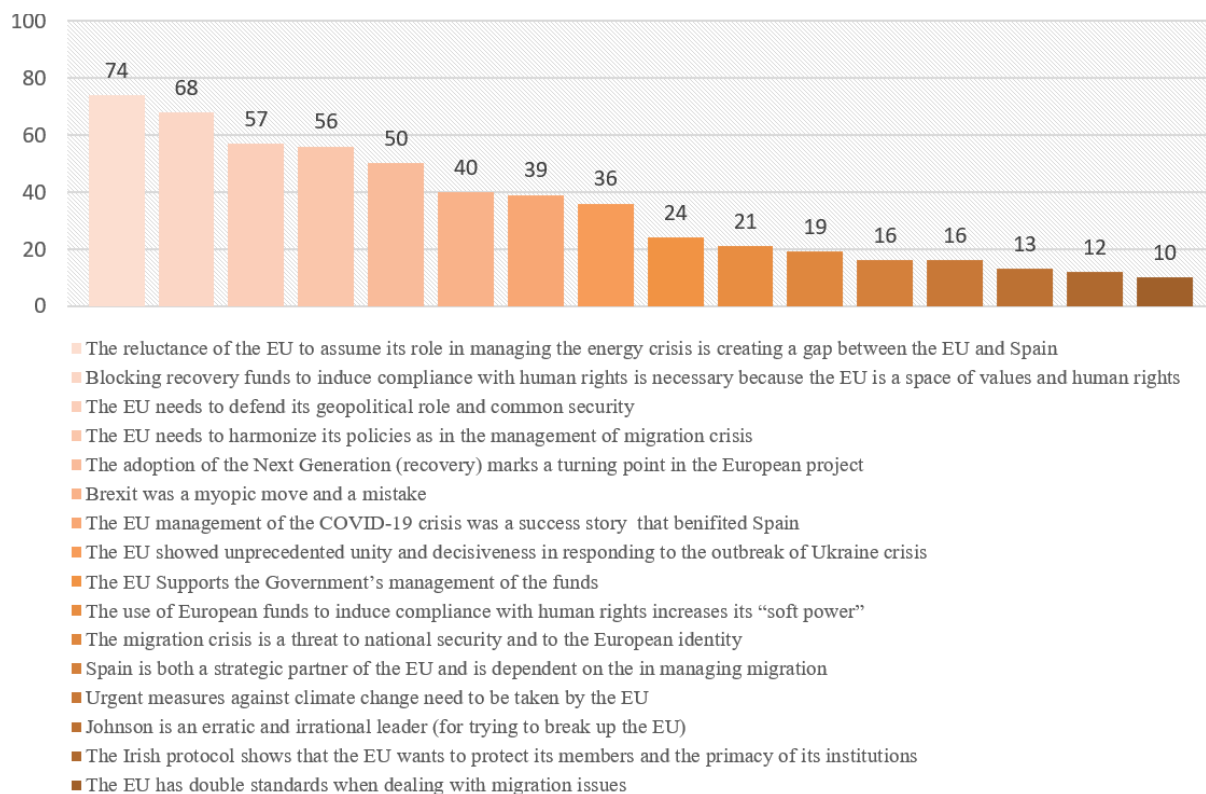
To detect the discourses that emerge in the context of the energy crisis and climate change, we used the Nvivo functionality called memos. It allows the creation of collaborative working documents. Memos are "a type of document that enable you to record the ideas, insights, interpretations or growing 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. Memos can evolve into an important part of the 'writing up stage of the project'" (Nvivo, 2022). Specifically, the research used "memos for a code" (Nvivo, 2022). That is, "to describing the significance of the codes and the patterns or ideas that emerge from the references" (Nvivo, 2022) that have been raised in the CA phase. Once the memos were written, each researcher carried out a critical analysis of the discourses detected in the selected sample, following the authors model of Critical Discourse Analysis and including references from de media. This was done by including references to communicative strategies that are relevant for conducting CDA.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. First phase: Dominant discourses and main actors

We obtained quantitative data regarding the dominant discourses discussed in the EU from the media CA. The data provides a complete picture of all themes discussed related to the dominant discourses were detected. Data on major discourses are represented in frequencies to ensure comparability among all media outlets analyzed. From the results, Figure 1 includes the most dominant discourses and the discourses with a frequency lower than 10 are not represented. According to the CA, the main issue is “the reluctance of the EU to assume its role managing the energy crisis is creating a gap between the EU and Spain”. That is the reason why this issue will be analyzed in the second phase of critical discourse analysis. In addition, the theme of climate change will be further analyzed given its possible link to the main issue of energy.

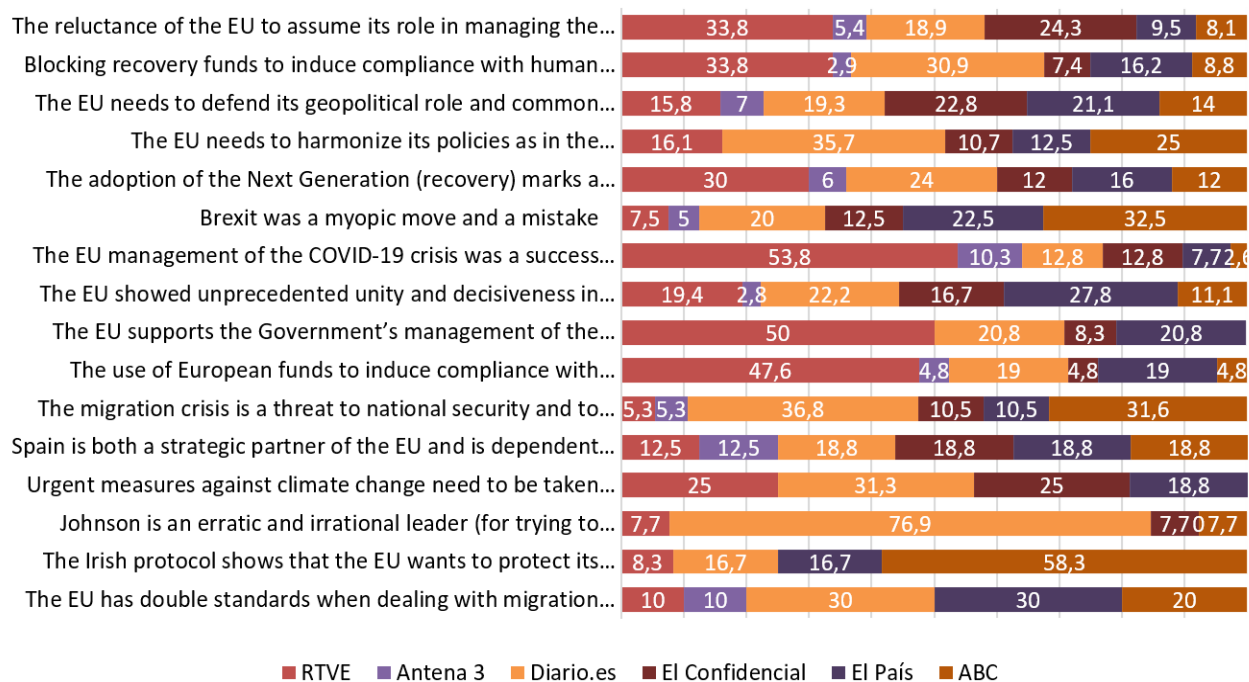
**Figure 1:** *The most dominant discourses for all media outlets from all pieces (%)*



**Source:** Own elaboration.

All media outlets mention the energy issue (Figure 2) but is most frequently voiced on public television, *RTVE*, followed by *El Confidencial* and *ElDiario.es*: 33.8%, 23.4% and 18.9%, respectively. On the other hand, should be mentioned the low rate of frequency in *Antena 3* (5.4%), *ABC* (8.1%) and *El País* (9.5%). No ideological reasons for this difference were found. "The EU's management of the COVID-19 crisis is a success story benefiting Spain" (53.8%) was also a very common argument on public service station *RTVE* (37.8%). The same applies to the discourse: "The EU supports government management of funds" (50%) and "Using European funds to ensure respect for human rights" increases its "soft power" by 47.6%. With regard to migration, *ElDiario.es* expresses this discourse exclusively, this is a pragmatic one: "The EU must coordinate its policies in dealing with the migration crisis" (35.7%); and another *Identarian*: "The migration crisis is a threats to security and European identity" (36.8%).

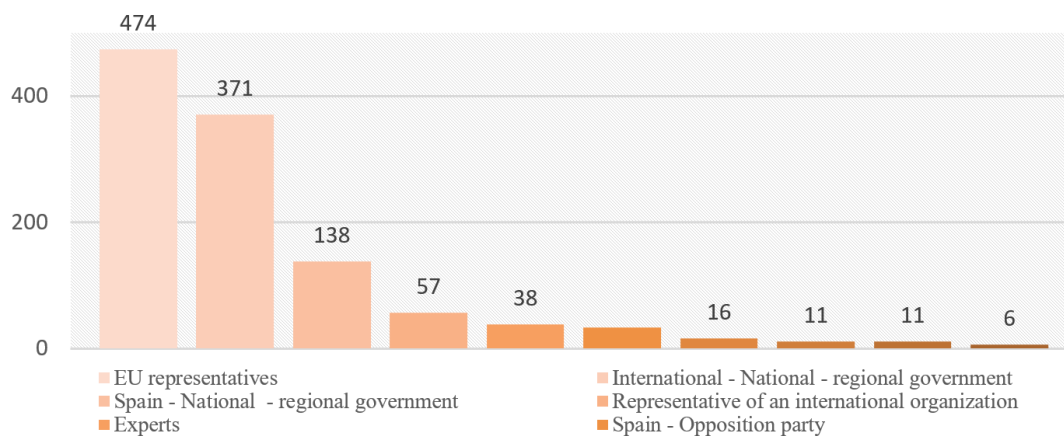
**Figure 2: Representation of discourses of all media outlets (%)**



Source: Own elaboration.

According to the data analyzed, the three main groups of actors identified in terms of their presence in the media are EU representatives: international-national-regional governments and Spanish-national-regional governments (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Actor's dominance (frequencies) in media discourses**

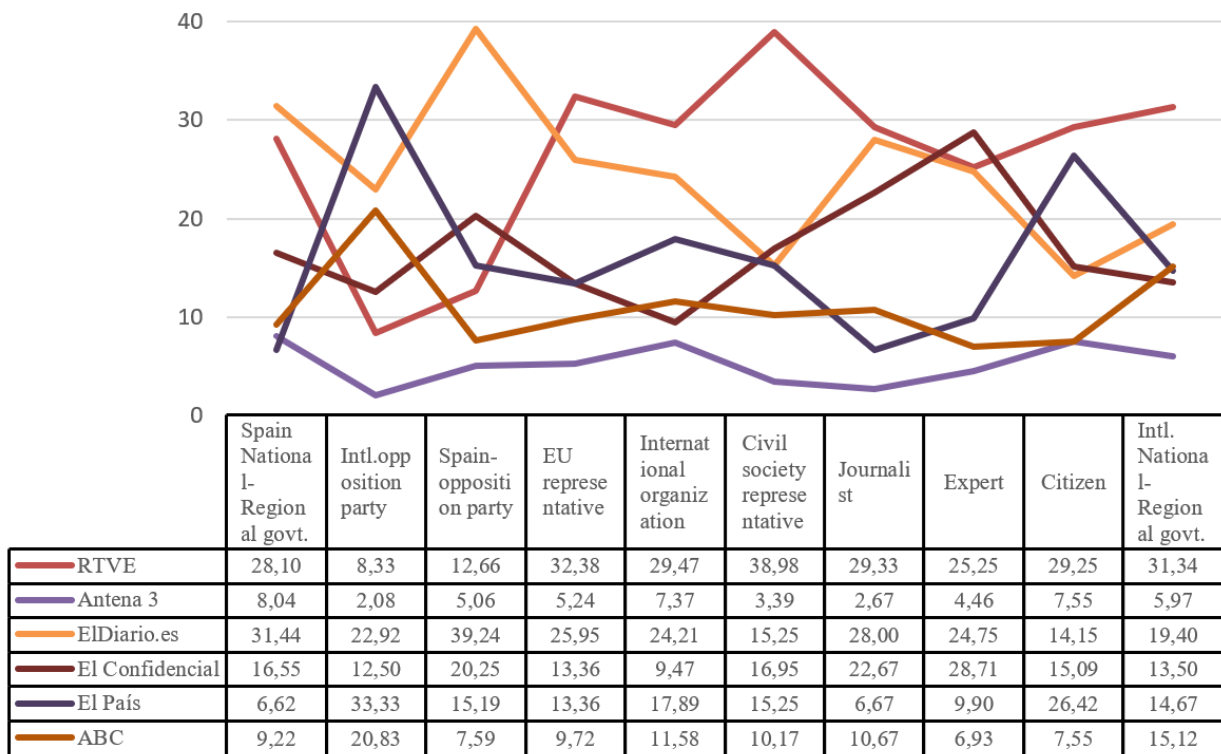


Source: Own elaboration.



As can be seen in Figure 4, the public service station, RTVE, gives civil society representatives 38.98% of the vote and 29.25% of the referendum, which is expected for a public service with a mission to represent the people. It differs from other media, all of which have ratings below 17%. The Spanish opposition was dominated by EIDiario.es (39.24%), which may have been an unexpected result, but these media, with 31.44%, showed a similar representation, an expected attitude among pluralist democratic media.

**Figure 4:** Representation of actors according to the media outlets based in the total of each actor (%)



Source: Own elaboration.

Despite the unequal representation of actors in the different media studied, the media maintained a certain balance in the representation of actors in relation to other media, albeit with differences. For example, hardly any significant differences were found, whereas *RTVE* gave more voice to civil society representatives, *Antena 3* gave more voice to the Spanish government, and *El País* gave more voice to the international opposition; *ABC*, like *El País*, *El Confidencial* will the majority of votes went to experts, while *EIDiario.es* went to the Spanish opposition (Figure 4).

### 3.2. Second phase: Energy crisis in media discourses a turning shift in the relationship Spain-EU

The CDA of media discourses shows that energy management is central to the relationship between Spain and the EU. This also includes the ecological transition. Overall, this issue is treated with a pro-European identity narrative that is not exempt from certain criticism (soft Euroscepticism) towards the EU. According to Van Dijk's group relations (2013), which establish the friend-enemy association, the Spanish government exercises its rights and obligations as a member state and legitimizes its voice

and opinion through the legitimization by participation (Wodak and Weiss, 2005) without questioning the European project. Table 2 shows the main, adjacent, and counter discourses resulting from the analysis. All news items referenced and cited in text for the CDA in the following paragraphs are coded in Table 3, available in Figeshare (Pérez-Escoda, 2022).

**Table 2.** *Main discourses from the CDA*

The reluctance of the EU to assume its role in managing the energy crisis is creating a gap between the EU and Spain.		
Discourse	Adjacent discourse	Counter discourse
The price of electricity: an open negotiation between Spain and the EU.	The energy issue is widening the gap between the EU and the two Europes (Northern Europe and Southern Europe) according to national government energy criteria.	EU says partners have room for policy action to reduce energy prices.
Urgent measures against climate change need to be taken by the EU.	EU and Spain share environmental values	Both nuclear energy and coal energy cannot be considered green energies and that the EU puts economic and industrial interests before environmental commitment.

**Source:** Own elaboration.

### 3.2.1. The price of electricity: an open negotiation between Spain and the EU

The debate on the price of energy, especially linked to the price of electricity, is the most prominent theme that emerges in the context of energy management. Its narrative in the media offers a bidirectional perspective: EU-Spain and Spain-EU narrative. This bidirectional perspective offers two main discourses depending on the origin of the discourse. On the one hand, we have the discourse coming from the EU: "EU says partners have room for policy action to reduce energy prices". On the other hand, according to the discourse coming from the Spanish government: "The energy issue is widening the gap between the EU and the two Europes (Northern Europe and Southern Europe) according to national government energy criteria". This bidirectionality focuses on both identity and pragmatic aspects.

From an identitarian perspective, it addresses how and to what extent Spain is integrated into the EU. Spain is portrayed as fully integrated and the Spanish Prime Minister is a valid interlocutor who engages the EU directly, unlike previous governments, as can be seen in headlines such as: "Pedro Sánchez proposes to the EU the joint purchase of gas to reduce the price of electricity" (El Confidencial, 2021c); "Sánchez proposes at the Mediterranean summit to open a debate in the EU on the price of electricity" (RTVE, 2021d). From a pragmatic perspective, this relationship is manifested in the attempt to determine whose responsibility or who exercises the power to regulate energy prices: "Sánchez achieves his goal of getting the EU to allow the 'Iberian exception' to curb energy prices" (El País, 2022b).

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When setting the focus on the EU, the main discourse identified is that the EU-27 enjoy enough margins within the existing regulatory framework to be able to regulate energy prices. This narrative reflects in news items such as "Brussels will include capping electricity and gas prices in its proposals to EU leaders" (El País, 2022b). Implicit recognition of this is found in the following statement: "some partners, mainly Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands and Denmark raised fierce opposition arguing that intervening in the market goes against the energy transition and increases dependence on Russia" (El País, 2022b). Significantly, as the piece recounts, some international media use the metaphor of Sánchez as "a Don Quixote fighting against imaginary windmills" and see the Belgian leader as "his Sancho Panza". Nonetheless, from the beginning of the period under analysis, the EU executive grants the Spanish government a certain degree of latitude as long as it complies with European regulations:

Spain can modify national rules applicable to the electricity sector, provided that the changes comply with EU internal market rules [...] We are aware of the discussions in Spain on the recent fluctuations in the wholesale price of electricity and the measures the government is taking with the reduction of the overall cost of electricity bills. We are following the situation closely and are in contact with the Spanish authorities. (EIDiario.es, 2021a).

The price of electricity is portrayed as a point of disagreement between the EU and Spain since, according to the media, the EU should assume a leading role in the search for solutions to the high price of energy- a role that the EU is not going to assume. According to the Spanish government "Spain seems to assume that there is not going to be a European response to the issue of electricity and so it is asking the Commission to let each country do it in its own way" (RTVE, 2021e). In the media, the proactive attitude of the Prime Minister is evident: "Pedro Sánchez is in Brussels to demand measures to curb the price of electricity: "We would like to go faster" (Antena 3, 2021b). The Spanish president is not too optimistic and finds the attitude of the EU insufficient: "[...] the division in the EU is expressed by Spain, Italy, France, Portugal and Greece, on the one hand, and by Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, Finland and Belgium on the other" (RTVE, 2021b). The distrust detected in the discourse of the media continues till the end of the analysis period: "The European Commission leaves the decision to intervene in the market during the energy crisis in the hands of EU leaders" (EIDiario.es, 2022f) where it is stated: "The European Union is not getting wet", using the simile of "getting wet", which denotes in Spanish "a lack of involvement", making it clear that Brussels is not involved in such regulation.

Focusing on the Spanish government, the discourse reflects its dissatisfaction with the economic consequences of energy prices and the very small margin for action granted to States:

The European Commission, together with the competition regulators, the CNMC in Spain's case, has taken over almost all control of energy policies. The margin of governments for manoeuvre to face supply and demand tensions is nowadays very reduced, as Vice-President Teresa Ribera never tires of repeating, who, by the way, approved in 2019 a Royal Decree-Law that increased the powers of the CNMC after the Commission opened a case against Spain. (El Confidencial, 2021a).

In the narrative about energy and the exercise of sovereign rights by the Member States, the Spanish government takes measures to increase its competencies based on energy price regulation, although it reaffirms its position that it does not have sufficient legal mechanisms to put this national sovereignty into practice.

Speaking of *reactivation* (Foucault, 1991), the discursive relations of power are constructed in two directions that are presented as compatible. Firstly, the relationship of "equals" established by the

Spanish government in its relations with the different EU bodies, showing itself as a government with a voice and a vote within the EU and, therefore, occupying a new space of power:

The European Commissioner for Energy, Estonian Kadri Simson, has received a letter from Spain. In this letter, Vice-Presidents Rivera and Calviño propose to Brussels, among other things, to create a European platform that centralizes the purchase of gas to prevent the escalation of the price of electricity. (RTVE, 2021d).

Secondly, keeping the pro-European focus, the counter-hegemonic relationship is articulated in the face of decisions (or lack thereof) by the EU without representing a threat to the common European project. It is here that the Spanish government, as a micro-level actor, puts Spain's interests ahead of the EU guidelines: "Images of a week in which countries such as Spain and Italy have begun to pressure Brussels to include the price of energy in European debate" (RTVE, 2021d). The construction of the discourse emphasizes the position of governments, using terms such as 'paradoxical' or 'coping' to describe those who are dealing with this problem:

The paradox, however, is that it is not the regulators who have to deal with the problem of rising electricity prices, much less the officials in Brussels, but the governments who have to face up to the citizens when the streets are on fire. (RTVE, 2021a).

In this context, group relations, as explained by the theorist van Dijk (2013), take on special relevance. As the examples show, the discourse by the Spanish government defends its interests and positions -energy price regulation- assuming that the conflict has an instrumental value without calling into question the basic beliefs shared by the EU group. The statements by the Minister of Finance and Public Function, María Jesús Montero, make clear reference to the price of energy:

Europe is very dependent; not so much Spain, which has a certain independence from gas. The current events are having a very negative impact on prices. Spain has always proposed that Europe develops coordinated actions to change the existing regulation that fixes the price of electricity and to cap the price of gas [...]. As a collective project, it is important that the European Union adopts strong measures [...]. Spain will take them if Europe does not. (RTVE, 2022a).

These declarations are an example of how Spain legitimizes the European project through the procedure (Wodak and Weiss, 2005). Spain renegotiates and reconstructs the European project on the energy issue by showing its opinion as a member country and considering itself an agent with a voice and vote within the shared project. Spain's legitimization through the procedure-participation is based on the Government's pragmatic views. The Spanish government's active role in this issue is recurrent in the media:

[...] this month, the Spanish government proposed to Brussels to apply to the energy crisis a model of joint action similar to that of the vaccination campaign, based on the centralisation of the purchase of doses by the European Commission. On this occasion, the idea would be to create a joint system for the purchase of gas. However, the EU executive's capacity for action does not, for the moment, allow such a plan to be implemented. (El Confidencial, 2021b).

Political elites are also speaking out, with vice-president Teresa Ribera, one of the most authoritative voices in the debate, going so far as to describe the packages of EU measures as "very disappointing, and the damage to the economy could be a real hemorrhage" (*Antena 3*, 2021a). Vice-president Ribera has conveyed the message that price regulation goes against EU law and uses a significant metaphor, "time bomb", about possible sanctions, in the piece entitled "To what extent does the EU limit what

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the government can do with the price of electricity in Spain?" (ElDiario.es, 2021a). In this item, the Commission believes that there is some leeway for EU members to act in their respective national markets. It adds that "an integrated energy market is the best way to protect citizens with a secure supply and with prices under control". In a more moderate way, but along the same line, President Pedro Sánchez has expressed himself in another piece on *Antena 3*:

In the EU, steps are still being taken at a slower pace, less intense than we would like. The Spanish government is, of course, taking many measures at the national level, but we also need the European complement. (Antena 3, 2021b).

Nevertheless, at the end of the period, President Pedro Sánchez will take "the same path as his energy vice-president, Teresa Ribera, who stated in Congress that the best option is to agree on measures at the European level" (ElDiario.es, 2022e). Going further in the face of the Russian threat, she added that "The government is going to do everything in its power to defend industry, companies and families from Putin's energy blackmail" (El País, 2022a). Thus, the media report on how Spain's demand regarding the price of energy has been taken up by the EU, which recognized the existence of an energy island (Spain and Portugal) at the European Council on 24 and 25 March 2022. As Wodak and Weiss (2005) underline, the asymmetric relationship and institutional hierarchical power between the EU and Spain on the energy issue is renegotiated. The idea of diversity versus standardization is understood as Spain's energy independence or Iberian Exception versus dependence on other EU countries and that the political decision of the regularization of energy prices should not be taken centrally by the EU. Statements by former Spanish Foreign Minister José Manuel García-Margallo describe the situation as a "relative success":

There is a certain hope. [...]. If the price of gas that averages the different offers on which the price of energy is fixed were limited, and it seems that there is talk of capping it at 165 euros a day (even if it is a very initial talk), the price of electricity would go down, and that is always good news because people can't make ends meet now. (RTVE, 2022b).

It will be interesting to see the differences that the media shows based on ideological orientation. While there is a certain bias in the more conservative media to support the EU narrative, there is also a consensus in the Spanish media in defending greater leeway in price regulation. An example of this is the opinion piece by Carlos Sánchez, deputy editor of *El Confidencial*:

[...] the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (Article 119 et seq.) makes it clear that the action of the Member States and the Union shall include "the adoption of an economic policy which shall be based on the close coordination of economic policies in the internal market and on the definition of common objectives and conducted per the principle of an open market economy with free competition". (El Confidencial, 2021g).

However, this pro-EU stance responds more consistently to criticizing the Spanish left-wing government by the conservative media than to the defence of the EU narrative itself. In this sense, the position of the newspaper *El Confidencial* is because the coalition government has been able to propose 'more expansive' budgets, on issues such as the Ecological and Energy Transition, for example, thanks to the intervention of the EU, but not on its own merits: "Government passes the most expansionary budget ever thanks to Europe" (El Confidencial, 2021d). Nonetheless, criticism of the EU about electricity prices can also be found in conservative media:

(...) Of the three major reforms that Spain was asking for at the European level to tackle the price of electricity, only one appears in the document, and is quite diluted as it is left for later. The



minister Teresa Ribera herself has already described this package as disappointing and claims that the damage to the economy could be a real hemorrhage. As to Spain's star proposal, the joint purchase of gas (similarly to vaccines), the Commission has so far only promised to study it. (Antena 3, 2021a).

The left-wing and publicly owned media, such as *TVE*, tend to place the responsibility for the rise in energy prices on the EU, as a result of the ideological proximity or distance between the Spanish government and the media. In this way, we find semantic constructions such as the personification: "the electricity bill hurts the pocket" (*RTVE*, 2021d), the use of epithets: "the skyrocketing electricity prices" (*ElDiario.es*, 2021a) or "risky proposal" in how Brussels sees the Spanish proposal (*RTVE*, 2021f). In addition, *El Confidencial*, of a conservative tendency, uses terms such as "it goes in like a knife in the electricity bill" or the personification "it is the governments who show their faces when the streets are on fire" (*El Confidencial*, 2021a), in defence of the regulation of energy prices according to national criteria.

### 3.2.2. Urgent measures against climate change need to be taken by the EU

The EU's energy transition to zero CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by 2050 is another key issue. In this context, viewing nuclear and coal as green energy has become a relevant issue in the EU debate. As an estoppel, neither energy source can be considered green energy, and the EU puts economic and industrial interests above environmental commitments. The Spanish government's position on the issue is one of the most critical among EU member states. Spain's position will be defended at the International Climate Summit (ACOP 26) in Glasgow from 31 October to 12 November 2021. Since that meeting, Spanish media have showcased the EU's global leadership in taking action against climate change but have also stressed that these actions are not enough. This issue is relevant because there is a strong controversy and even contradictions between the measures announced at the International Climate Summit and what Brussels and some member states, such as France, intend to do by considering coal and nuclear energy as green energies. Therefore, speeches and headlines with soft Euroscepticism are detected using the antithesis "Europe, the 'yes, but not so much' of the fight against global warming" (*El Confidencial*, 2021).

There is also room for pro-European discourses focused on the transition to decarbonized energy (*RTVE*, 2021f). This revives an outdated debate on nuclear energy, especially in the wake of the intense debate following the Fukushima nuclear accident in 2011. Now, the EU is considering a renewed heavy reliance on nuclear power if it is to meet these targets. This would imply an investment of half a trillion euros in new nuclear reactors between now and 2050, according to what the European Commissioner for the Internal Market, Thierry Breton, quoted in the article entitled "Brussels calculates that half a trillion euros must be invested in new nuclear power plants" (*El Confidencial*, 2022b). The introduction of these European proposals into the nuclear debate has very significant relevance. The political media elites are pursuing a 180-degree turn in the narrative they have been making until now. Breton defends the proposal to integrate nuclear energy into the so-called "green" energies. The aim is to encourage the arrival of capital for this type of project. In favour: France; against Spain, Germany and Austria. Nuclear energy currently accounts for 26% of the European energy mix and is expected to double in the next 30 years. The EU members are sovereign in their choice of energy sources, but the commitment is to zero carbon dioxide emissions by 2050.

Finally, another issue of high relevance in the media under analysis is the fact that the EU and Spain share environmental values. Accordingly, Spain and the EU share the categories that construct van Dijk's (2013) ideology: identity, activities, norms and values, belonging to the same group and shared resources. Common identity is shown by Spain's commitment to the European Green Pact and in the

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words of Ursula Von der Leyen words that affirm it is a "pillar of the future of the European Union" (RTVE, 2021c). These values are connected to policies –or activities following Van Dijk– that have been helping for decades to bring cohesion to the areas most affected by climatic, energy, demographic and economic issues through the funds of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) following Van Dijk's ideological resources. In the media, this discourse appears and disappears throughout the period analysed, highlighting pragmatic pro-European narratives regarding the benefits of European policy for Spain. This is shown in different news items: "Intensive Spain: how the countryside has changed as a result of the CAP and the market" (*ElDiario.es*, 2021b), where we find statements such as: "The new investment model in Spain coexists with an atomized sector of small and medium-sized producers for which the Common Agricultural Policy, the CAP, was designed"; "The Government sends to Brussels the CAP Strategic Plan, the guide for distributing 47,724 million until 2027" (*ABC*, 2021b), where more sustainable novelties in the new plan are pointed out, such as: "the 'green' conditionality: the 'eco-schemes'" (*ABC*, 2021b), about the receipt of CAP funds by Spain. Fishing problems also appear in this narrative since October, with headlines such as: "Europe is still not committed to more sustainable fishing" (*El Confidencial*, 2021f); or "Brussels cuts fishing days for the Mediterranean fleet by 6% and puts thousands of jobs at risk" (*ABC*, 2021a). The period of analysis ends with the problem on the table, as the Spanish Minister of Agriculture declares:

If we talk about environmental sustainability or biological stocks, then sustainability must also be economic and social for our fishermen. And the question of how we can collectively respond to this issue has been put to the European Commission for the next Council of Ministers. It is not an exclusively national issue, it is a European issue and we must give a European response to both the CAP and the Common Fisheries Policy. They are European policies and therefore we have to give a European response. (RTVE, 2022b).

Consequently, the EU is presented as a supranational body that must look after the welfare of the most unprotected and needy areas of the member states; Spain is one of the countries with many territories that could be protected by this common policy.

Relating to this environmental discourse, in January 2022 there was a controversy in the Spanish media over the 'macrogranjas' (intensive farming), following statements by the Spanish government's Minister for Consumer Affairs, Alberto Garzón. This issue is of relevance as it not only divides the government and the political opposition but also the coalition government itself. Some of the most significant headlines were: "Garzón reaffirms himself after Moncloa's disapproval: 'what I said is impeccable'" (*El Confidencial*, 2022a) or "Evil Garzón and green nuclear" (*ElDiario.es*, 2022a), "Unidas Podemos questions Sanchez's 'loyalty' for 'giving fuel to a right-wing hoax' against Garzón" (*ABC*, 2022) or "Garzón says the controversy over his statements is a 'use of disinformation' to wear him down" (*ElDiario.es*, 2022b).

The essential aspect of this issue is that the relationship between the EU and Spain does not directly confront these environmental values. Spain is a member of the EU group according to Van Dijk's group relations. However, it does reveal an internal controversy within the Spanish government between PSOE, the government's majority partner, and the Minister for Consumer Affairs of Unidas Podemos party. The prime minister treated the issue with the utmost caution:

Sánchez was careful on Monday [January 10, 2022] not to directly attack his minister, but he also showed himself to be calculated and eloquent. "I regret this controversy, I think I am saying everything with that," said the President of the Government when asked about the issue that has been used for days by PP and Vox to attack the Executive. He then added that Spain produces meat of "extraordinary quality" that "meets the highest standards of Spanish and European regulations". (*ABC*, 2022).

However, Brussels defends the Spanish minister on what 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. This was also pointed out by the European Commissioner last week on the eve of his trip to Spain during an interview with the EFE news agency (declarations by the European Commissioner for Agriculture, Janusz Wojciechowski. (*ElDiario.es*, 2022c).

As adjacent issues to the environmental commitment, natural disasters and their management emerge with a clear European protagonism. Firstly, the case of the eruption of the volcano on La Palma, which took place between 19 September 2021 and 13 December 2021, stands out with a pro-European media discourse, while the EU, through the aid of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), makes economic funds available to the citizens and administrations of La Palma to compensate for the multi-million-dollar losses of this natural disaster:

The visit [of the European Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development] to La Palma has been very welcome because it has shown the solidarity of the European Union and the European Commission, with the island of La Palma and its farms and farmers. And then he was able to talk to Minister Luis Planas about very important issues for Spain, which is a great agricultural power. He was able to talk about the strategic plan that is practically being finalised to continue to benefit from everything that such a classic and strategic policy as the CAP entails" (statements by the EU communications officer. (*ABC*, 2021a).

Secondly, the media highlighted the summer wildfires that took place last year in Spain and also in Greece, as well as the floods in Germany and Belgium. On this issue, Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez proposes the creation of a pan-European emergency unit, similar to the Military Emergency Unit (UME) (*RTVE*, 2021c). In this sense, the connection between climate change and natural disasters is intrinsically linked to the need to make rapid progress in the process of decarbonization, as pointed out in the European Parliament:

We have already seen the disasters in Europe this summer", said the spokesperson of the European People's Party, which together with the liberals and socialists supports the broad outlines of the Commission's climate plan; while the memory of the wildfires in Greece and the floods in Germany and Belgium flew over the debate, as did the UN report linking climate change with extreme weather phenomena. (*RTVE*, 2021a).

The second adjacent issue is also proof of these shared values between Spain and the EU: Spain is no longer in breach of European environmental regulations, but under the principle of conditionality at the risk of economic sanctions: "After seven consecutive years at the top, Spain is no longer the leading environmental offender in Europe". (*ElDiario.es*, 2022d).

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The situation in recent months at the national, international and EU levels has contributed to the emergence of a high-intensity political and institutional scenario. Political polarization and the rise of nationalist and populist reactions are taking place within and close to our borders (Ballester, 2022). Concurrently, the mediatisation (Couldry and Hepp, 2013), and media as intermediaries between political actors and institutions and the public has been affected by this polarization (Mason, 2018; Kingzette, 2021; Torcal and Comellas, 2022). An increase in the presence of the European Union in

the Spanish media was detected in previous works (García-Carretero et al., 2022) which contradicts the postulate of the media deficit established by Díaz-Nosty (2005). These factors could have affected the construction of a Spanish public opinion favorably to the common European project. However, in the current stage and in line with other studies (Rivas-de-Roca, 2018; Zurutuza and Lafuente, 2012), this research shows a neutral media coverage in general terms, with a strong pro-European component in the opinion pieces and an absence of anti-European discourse. Furthermore, the perception of the EU in the information published in the six media analysed is mainly determined by the issues disseminated and the media configuration or mediatisation (Couldry & Hepp, 2013) of these issues and the actors involved, establishing a positive relationship and a sense of belonging between Spain and the EU.

Following the general research objective, we can conclude that the topics published in the media concerning the European Union are linked to imminently topical issues in which, in many cases, Spain is affected or involved as a member of this organization. For this reason and to complete the research, is relevant to deep into how this relationship is constructed in the issue with the greatest media coverage, using a second methodology: critical discourse analysis. The main issue is “the reluctance of the EU to assume its role in managing the energy crisis is creating a gap between the EU and Spain”, followed by “blocking recovery funds to include compliance with human rights is necessary because the EU is a space of values and human rights”, “the EU needs to defend its geopolitical role and common security”, and, among others, “the adoption of the Next Generation (recovery) marks a turning point the European project”. The results of the first methodological phase show that the configuration of these issues is established by considering mainly national and international political representatives and representatives of the different EU bodies as valid actors. The analysis of media coverage and how this institution is represented in the media allows us to confirm the pro-European character of the media, as we have not detected any anti-European information or references.

Within the topic of energy, the principal discourse detected in the six media as mentioned above is “the reluctance of the EU to assume its role in managing the energy crisis is creating a gap between the EU and Spain”. Derived from it, the two adjacent discourses are “the price of electricity: an open negotiation between Spain and the EU” and urgent measures against climate change need to be taken by the EU. In the first adjacent discourse, the narrative in the media offers a bidirectional perspective linked to the price of energy, from the EU to Spain and vice-versa. On the one hand, we have the discourse coming from the EU: “EU says partners have room for policy action to reduce energy prices”. On the other hand, according to the discourse coming from the Spanish government: “The energy issue is widening the gap between the EU and the two Europes (Northern Europe and Southern Europe) according to national government energy criteria”. These two perspectives, the Spanish adjacent discourse and the UE counter-discourse are *a priori* the first sign of media and political polarization that makes it possible to differentiate two blocs within the European Union. These two groups have been particularly differentiated since the economic crisis of 2008 Northern-Southern and are present as we detect in the analysis: “some partners, mainly Germany, Ireland, The Netherlands and Denmark raise fierce opposition arguing that intervening in the market goes against the energy transition and increase the dependence of Russia”.

Although there is some controversy between EU and Spanish institutions regarding the regulation of energy prices, and although Spain takes a critical role in this matter, the discourse is pro-European as the relationship is established from the point of view of belonging. Spain is a member of the European project and criticism of this management is understood as 'soft criticism' to improve a common project of which it feels part. Therefore, the pro-European position is confirmed. In the same vein, although a north-south divide has been perceived in terms of price regulation terms polarization (Torcal and Comellas, 2022) no examples of the discursive dichotomy of "us" versus "them" (van Dijk, 2013) are decisive, even though Spain leads in the recognition of the Iberian Exception in terms of energy.



Therefore, we can refer to a pro-European identity understood in terms of the absence of affective polarisation (Mason, 2018) in the Spanish media and the confrontation between Spain and the European Union is understood as an instrumental value without calling into question the basic beliefs shared by the EU group.

Regarding the climate change issue, there is also a disagreement between the EU and Spain. This is not an anti-European discourse but a soft criticism in the same sense as in the previous example. Given the consideration of nuclear energy and coal as green energies, emerges a counter-discourse from Spain because the EU puts economic and industrial interests before environmental commitment. The common identity following van Dijk's (2013) friend-enemy relation is shown by Spain's commitment to the European Green Pact. This idea is reinforced by the fact that these values are connected to policies or activities (van Dijk, 2013) between Spain and the European Union. This is the case of cohesion in other examples found in the Spanish media such as climate and economic issues through the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) funds as the other examples found in the Spanish media.

If the construction of Europeanisation in the Spanish media is constructed about specific issues, after an in-depth analysis of the energy issue, we can affirm that media coverage is neutral in general terms. Europeanisation is presented from a role with the greater weight of Spain in the common project than in previous historical stages presented in the introduction to this paper. Likewise, there is a certain unanimity in the Spanish media, both in the thematic selection and in the actors who are given a voice in the information, as well as in the pre-European construction of public opinion, regardless of their editorial line. After carrying out this academic work, the challenge is to find out whether this tendency is common to the rest of the topics identified in the content analysis or whether it is an exception linked to the price of energy.

The limitations of this research work are determined by the period of analysis from which the news sample under study is drawn. This period does not include relevant moments such as the development of the war in Ukraine or the proclamation of the Iberian Exception and its consequences associated with the drop in energy prices in Spain and Portugal. As future research, it would be interesting and convenient to carry out the application of the same methodological choice in other discourses and topics arising from the first phase of analysis -Content Analysis - to delve deeper into the polarization around the European Union in complementary and tangential issues to this energy crisis.

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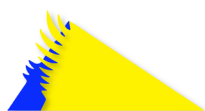
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