



The discursive framing of European integration in EU-wide media: actors, narratives and policies following the Russian invasion of Ukraine

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Abstract

This article examines how major EU-wide media discursively framed European integration in terms of prevalent actors, narratives and policy areas in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Based on the combination of theoretical insights from discursive institutionalism and the grand theories of European integration, the article performs a qualitative analysis of textual content in six of the most influential EU-wide media sources as of 2023, taking the form of a competitive theory testing. Challenging the established literature on EU-related national media coverage, it finds that, consistently with discursive neo-functionalism, the Russian military aggression of Ukraine has led to the discursive empowerment of EU supranational actors, most notably the European Commission, and to an increased salience of more European integration and transnational solidarity narratives. This has happened despite the fact that the conflict was mainly framed as falling within the realm of intergovernmental policy areas, such as energy policy, security and defence.

Keywords European integration · EU-wide media · Russian invasion · Discursive institutionalism · Grand theories

Introduction

On February 24, 2022, following heightened tensions due to a sudden escalation in its military build-up, Russia initiated a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, ushering in an ongoing global crisis. The European Union (EU) found itself at a crucial juncture, facing an unparalleled challenge to its longstanding commitment to peace and regional stability. European leaders swiftly interpreted the Ukrainian crisis as necessitating a collective EU response rather than individual national

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countermeasures. Government representatives affirmed EU support for the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of Ukraine, emphasizing that 'the European Council will remain seized of the matter' (European Council 2022a).

The Russian war in Ukraine adds up to the 'polycrisis' the EU has gone through over the last decade (Zeitlin 2016), raising widespread academic interest in the field of EU studies. Scholarly research has started addressing questions about the implications of the conflict for European integration at large (Anghel and Jones 2022; Genschel 2022) as well as for specific policy areas (Anghel and Dzankić, 2023; Genschel et al. 2023), governance methods (Meissner and Graziani 2023) and institutional actors (Håkansson 2024). However, so far, little attention has been paid to how EU-wide media framed the crisis in terms of prevalent actors, narratives and policies in the EU's own response to it. This is all the more relevant as, in times of emergency and uncertainty, media framing plays a key role by placing the contesting political actors—including EU institutions, national governments and the civil society—in front of a wider public (Statham and Trenz 2013). To this effect, EU media coverage is consequential: it discursively empowers some actors, issues and narratives at the expense of others, with the potential to alter their balance of power or relative salience (Oleart and Gheyle 2022). This resonates well with discursive institutionalist theorising, which identifies 'communicative discourse'—that is, the process through which ideas or frames are conveyed to the mass public—as a fundamental power-distributing instrument (Schmidt 2008).

The literature on media coverage of EU issues has focussed on how national media outlets framed the EU's response to the different instances of the polycrisis. Investigating who will benefit from media-based communicative discourse, these works conclude that national media logic tends to emphasise the role of intergovernmental executive actors at the EU level and domestic governments at the national level, as well as the salience of intergovernmentalist narratives. In his seminal study on the Europeanisation of the public sphere, Koopmans shows that 'the only actors that are systematically overrepresented [in the media] are government and executive actors' (2007, 199). Similarly, analysing evidence from the Euro crisis (2009), the refugee crisis (2015) and Brexit (2016) in six European countries, de Wilde finds that 'media coverage favors member state governments' and 'continuously reconstructs the image that the EU is an intergovernmental organization, with the European Council as the most important political body' (2019, pp. 1203 and 1208). Finally, focusing on Dutch and Spanish media during the COVID-19 pandemic, Oleart and Gheyle (2022) largely corroborate this finding, showing the prevalence of EU intergovernmental institutions and national executives over other types of actors.

Consistently with such an intergovernmental representation of EU politics, these studies single out 'intergovernmental conflict' and 'national interests' as the prevailing narratives in national media outputs. At the same time, however, they also hint that the nature of a given policy area may affect the type of actors and narratives that are emphasised in media discourse. To this effect, while intergovernmental policy areas—such as security and defence—come with a discursive empowerment of intergovernmental institutions (like the European Council) as well as of national governments, EU supranational policy areas—like trade or competition policy—will



be associated with a discursive prevalence of supranational actors, like the European Commission and the European Parliament (Koopmans 2007).

This article contributes to the existing literature on media coverage of the EU in three respects. First, it shifts the level of analysis from national to EU-wide media. The recent proliferation of EU-wide media outlets, coupled with the decade-long emergence of multiple EU crises common to most if not all member states, has indeed favoured the emergence of a European public sphere in which issues of common relevance are increasingly framed in a European rather than a national context (Dutceac Segesten and Bossetta 2019). This Europeanised public sphere—involving elite media, mass media as well as social media—constitutes one of the main arenas in which the politicisation of European integration takes place. Whether that leads to the consolidation of a sense of European identity or ‘Europeanness’, the strengthening of EU legitimacy in the eyes of citizens and the long-term pursuit of supranational integration rests to a large extent on who is discursively empowered by EU media coverage and which narratives come to prevail (Risse 2015; see also Rauh and Parizek 2024). To this effect, the article investigates communicative discourse in six of the most influential EU-wide media sources as of 2023 (see Sect. “[Methods and data](#)” below). Second, the article focuses on the Russian invasion of Ukraine as the latest instance of the EU polycrisis. Following on from empirical research on previous crises, it analyses how the major EU-wide media discursively framed the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in terms of prevalent actors, narratives and policy areas. Thus, it not only contributes to contextualising the current conflict within the continuum of EU crises, but it offers empirical insights to compare and contrast the discursive construction of the EU’s response to such crises and its impact on policy-making dynamics at the EU level as well as on European integration at large (see for instance Rauh and Parizek 2024).

Finally, this article challenges the existing literature’s main findings. Drawing on an original discursive neo-functional framework, it shows that the Russian military aggression of Ukraine has led to the discursive empowerment of EU supranational actors (especially the European Commission, but also the European Parliament) and to an increased salience of neo-functional narratives (e.g. more European integration and transnational solidarity) as opposed to intergovernmental actors (i.e. the European Council and the Council) and narratives (e.g. national interests and moral hazard). What is more, this has happened despite the fact that the conflict was mainly framed as falling within the realm of intergovernmental policy areas (i.e. energy, security and defence policy), which provide intergovernmental institutions with a greater control over the decision-making process. Interestingly, the European Commission was by far the most discursively empowered actor in the EU’s response to the war, which may point to its increasing ability to exercise forms of supranational entrepreneurship in policy fields in which it traditionally held a weak position (Capati 2023; Håkansson 2024).

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. Section “[Theoretical framework: discursive institutionalism meets grand theories](#)” elaborates the theoretical framework and derives a set of research hypotheses based on the combination of discursive institutionalism and grand theories. Section “[Methods and data](#)” illustrates the methodological approach and the data. Section “[Results](#)” presents the results of



the empirical analysis. The final section summarises the main findings, draws implications for future research and concludes.

Theoretical framework: discursive institutionalism meets grand theories

In order to derive empirically testable research hypotheses on how EU-wide media discursively constructed the Russian-Ukrainian crisis in terms of prevalent actors and narratives, the article combines insights from the tradition of discursive institutionalism (Schmidt 2008, 2010) and the grand theories of European integration (Hooghe and Marks 2019). Discursive institutionalism (DI) conceptualises discourse as ‘the interactive process of conveying ideas’ (Schmidt 2008, p. 303), which can take the form of frames, narratives and collective representations. In particular, narratives provide specific accounts of events, including crises, by highlighting their nature, plausible causes, the actors addressing them and potential outcomes. Along these lines, crises do not just occur; they are discursively constructed by powerful agents to be crises of a certain type which necessitate a certain type of institutional or policy response (Capoccia 2015; see more recently Capati 2024). DI draws a fundamental differentiation between ‘coordinative discourse’, taking place among political leaders in the restricted circles of policymaking, and ‘communicative discourse’, which is directed to the general public instead (Schmidt 2010). As such, communicative discourse often involves the media as an intermediary, channelling frames towards the so-called informed publics (Rein and Schön, 1994). While mediated discourse might incorporate journalists’ reporting biases, it has the advantage of reaching a wide audience, with the potential to influence public opinion and political action alike (Ferrera et al. 2021).

The application of discursive institutionalist insights to grand integration theories leads up to three theoretical perspectives through which to raise expectations on the framing of European integration in EU-wide media: discursive neo-functionalism, discursive new intergovernmentalism and discursive post-functionalism. Discursive neo-functionalism (DNF) builds on the neo-functional argument that European integration is the rational solution to problems exogenous in nature and trans-national in scope (Haas 2004). The concept of crisis itself is thus central to neo-functional theorising. Indeed, neo-functionalists understand crises as a booster of the scale and scope of regional integration. The very notion of crisis is linked to the ‘spillover’ mechanism on which neo-functionalism relies to explain punctuated advancements in European integration (Niemann 2021). In a path-dependence logic, newly established institutions in response to a given crisis are supposed to produce self-reinforcing mechanisms which are inherently difficult to alter. Path-dependence favours a dynamic of institutional reproduction, the reversal of which is associated with high costs (Pierson 1996).

Neo-functional scholars expect crises to expose the mismatch between the EU’s policy requirements (function) and its current institutional architecture (form) in a given policy area. Such a mismatch gives rise to societal pressures (most notably from firms and business groups) to increase the sectoral scope of European



integration. As positive feedback mechanisms come into play, integration in one policy area is in turn expected to produce externalities that spill over into adjacent policy areas, leading to mutual trust and community-building efforts. To this effect, crises act as a trigger for functional pressures towards deeper integration and the emergence of trans-national solidarity sentiments. The ensuing economic, social and political interdependence fosters the creation and strengthening of supranational institutions—like the European Commission or the European Parliament—with authority beyond that of individual member states. While supranational entrepreneurship in response to crisis-driven integration may initially come with some degree of counter-mobilisation at the national level, ‘mass publics would [ultimately] be aroused to protect the *acquis communautaire* against the resistance of entrenched national political elites’ (Schmitter 2009, p. 211). As it happens, neo-functionalism resonates well with Jean Monnet’s famous statement that ‘Europe will be forged in crises, and will be the sum of the solutions adopted for those crises’.

DNF also draws insights from the ‘new supranationalism’ literature (Bauer and Becker 2014; Dehousse 2016), which contends that even after the post-Maastricht rise of intergovernmental institutions and national executives as the new centre of EU politics, supranational actors—including the European Commission, the European Central Bank (ECB) and the so-called *de novo* bodies—managed to preserve and even expand their policy formulation and implementation powers through the exercise of ideational entrepreneurship and discursive persuasion (Schmidt 2024). For instance, many of the institutional innovations adopted following the Eurozone crisis, such as the European Semester or the Banking Union, stemmed from the ideational leadership of the European Commission and the ECB, resulting in their increased control over national macro-economic and financial policies (Bauer and Becker 2014). To this effect, contrary to the traditional supranationalists’ focus on the pursuit of hard power, the new supranationalists emphasised actors’ discursive abilities and ideational endeavours (Schmidt 2024). As a result, DNF posits that, especially in times of crisis, the actors and narratives emphasised by neo-functionalism and new supranationalism will be those empowered by EU-based media discourse (de Wilde 2019). The article thus raises the following discursive neo-functionalist hypotheses:

[DNF-1]: EU-wide media emphasise the salience of EU supranational actors and/or societal actors following the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

[DNF-2]: EU-wide media emphasise the salience of increased European integration and/or trans-national solidarity narratives following the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Compared to DNF, discursive new intergovernmentalism (DNI) shifts the focus of attention from supranational institutions and societal interests to member state governments, who are identified as the main drivers of regional integration. To this effect, DNI draws on the new intergovernmentalist argument that, since the Treaty of Maastricht, European integration has not been pursued through supranational policymaking or the so-called Community method, but rather through the voluntary coordination of member state governments within the main EU intergovernmental institutions, notably the European Council, bringing together member states’



Heads of State and government, and the various Council configurations, comprised of the line ministers (Bickerton et al. 2015). In particular, following new intergovernmentalist theorising, the European Council—as the intergovernmental institution *par excellence*—has evolved into the EU’s new ‘centre of political gravity’ (Puetter 2012, p. 161), providing the institutionalised framework in which top political leaders seek to advance their national interests and strike policy compromises through unanimity-based negotiations. Against this backdrop, traditional supranational institutions such as the European Commission and the European Parliament, which are generally associated with the pursuit of an ‘ever closer union’, are instead expected to act as either implementing or consultative bodies at the service of member state governments (Bickerton et al. 2015). EU governments are thus seen as delegating authority to supranational institutions—most notably the Commission—to facilitate collective action by providing complete information to the parties, overseeing the respect of intergovernmental agreements, and appeasing moral hazard concerns (Kassim and Menon 2003).

In addition, crisis situations are characterised by a sense of urgency that requires swift political action at the highest level. In such situations, institutionalised decision-making procedures tend to give way to intergovernmental executive bodies as the key policymaking actors. As former Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker admitted with reference to the management of the Eurozone crisis, ‘at the height of the crisis, far-reaching decisions had often to be taken in a rush, sometimes overnight. In several cases, intergovernmental solutions were chosen to speed up decisions or overcome opposition’ (2015, p. 17). Intergovernmental summits between government leaders offer the perfect institutional context for off-the-record conversations and small working group negotiations, whose informal character exempts policymakers from rigid accountability as well as publicity constraints. According to White, the explosion of critical exogenous events thus fosters what he defines the ‘hour of the executive’ (2019, p. 27).

Incidentally, the new intergovernmentalists maintain that the policymaking process within the European Council and the Council ultimately revolves around the exercise of ideational and discursive power, as member state government representatives strive to reach political compromises in the framework of consensus-seeking and deliberative practices (Bickerton et al. 2015; Schmidt 2024). In doing so, while most of the new intergovernmentalists have distanced themselves from both ‘old’ realist and liberal intergovernmentalists, with their respective focus on intergovernmental hard-bargaining aimed at the promotion of national political or socio-economic interests, others have integrated insights from these previous literatures, acknowledging that intergovernmental negotiations take place in the context of structural power asymmetries which may witness the pre-eminence of some actors’ discursive endeavours over others’ (Fabbrini 2016).

DNI predicts that the new intergovernmentalists’ focus on intergovernmental institutions and member state governments, as well as on national interests and moral hazard considerations, is not only reflected but even exacerbated by EU-based media coverage. As they feature well-known political leaders, national governments and meetings between government representatives in intergovernmental fora lend themselves to media logic and mediated discourse better than supranational



institutions, which are often perceived as distant and technocratic (de Wilde 2019). As a result, national interest and moral hazard narratives tend to prevail. For this reason, the article puts forward the following discursive new intergovernmentalist hypotheses:

[DNI-1]: EU-wide media emphasise the salience of EU intergovernmental actors and/or national governments following the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

[DNI-2]: EU-wide media emphasise the salience of national interest and/or moral hazard narratives following the Russian invasion of Ukraine.¹

Finally, discursive post-functionalism (DPF) is more sceptical about the prospects of European integration as well as about the role of either supranational institutions or member state governments to push it forward in the long run (Wendler and Hurrelmann 2022). The post-functionalist literature highlights how, as the scope of European integration increases, the integration process becomes politicised at the national level (Hooghe and Marks 2019). To this effect, the relation between crises and European integration is conceived in terms of a trade-off whereby crisis-driven politicisation constrains the integration process, increasing the scope for domestic contestation of EU-related issues. That is allegedly because, since the Maastricht Treaty resulted in the Europeanisation of policies traditionally at the heart of national sovereignty (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2014), European integration has shifted from a context of ‘permissive consensus’, characterised by depoliticization and elite-based closed-door agreements, to one of ‘constraining dissensus’ (Hooghe and Marks 2009), where the nature of EU decision-making processes becomes a matter of domestic political debate beyond a restricted circle of government officials, hence involving national parliaments, parties and the mass public.

While EU-related discussions among political leaders were mainly driven by economic interests before the Maastricht juncture, the mass-politics arena (including elections, party competition and parliamentary representation) produces conflicts that are also based on identity concerns (Hooghe and Marks 2009). This owes much to the fact that the integration process has come to include a political dimension that is perceived as threatening national sovereignty and longstanding national identities. Post-functionalism thus places the nation state at the core of integration dynamics, but emphasises actors empowered by mass politics, shifting the focus away from national governments towards national parliaments and parties. As politicisation is, in turn, expected to promote identity-based claims and forms of contestation, the mobilisation of national identity becomes a formidable constraint on the integration process. Contrary to any emerging European or EU-based identity, national identity is deeply rooted in citizens’ ‘way of life’ and it likely remains what they ascribe most importance to (Koopmans 2007).

¹ In this article, moral hazard is conceived as a situation in which an actor has an incentive to increase its exposure to an economic, political or military risk because they do not bear the full cost of that risk. To this effect, moral hazard lies primarily with agency and ideas as strategic resources available to actors to influence others in achieving their aims (Pierret & Howarth 2023; see also note 5 below on how moral hazard was coded in the article).



As the discursive post-functionalism literature has suggested, the ability of national political actors to politicise European integration depends to a large extent on how EU-related issues are framed in the public debate (Wendler and Hurrelmann 2022). Politicisation thus assumes a discursive character, resulting from national policymakers' claims about controversial aspects of the integration process as well as from the public resonance of such claims. Depending on the discursive framing of EU politics, politicisation may have effects on EU policymaking beyond the traditional post-functionalist 'constraining dissensus', including the possibility of 'unconstraining' or even 'empowering' dissensus (Hurrelmann and Wendler 2023; Oleart 2021). In this respect, DPF identifies the mass media as the primary locus where the EU-related politicisation process unfolds, providing national parliaments and parties—as the expected drivers of politicisation—with a platform to reach wide audiences (de Wilde 2014). In their communication about Europe, parliaments and party members cater to a national public with a specific political culture and national identity. Media coverage is thus expected to empower national parliaments and parties as the preeminent frame of reference for EU politics in times of crisis and to favour discussions of European integration that revolve around issues of national identity. Accordingly, the following discursive post-functionalist hypotheses are raised for empirical testing:

[DPF-1]: EU-wide media emphasise the salience of national parliaments and/or national parties following the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

[DPF-2]: EU-wide media emphasise the salience of national identity narratives following the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Methods and data

This article performs a qualitative content analysis aimed at competitive theory testing with the assistance of the software *NVivo*. Such a competitive theory testing effort involves the examination of empirical data to assess the relative explanatory power of a set of theories based on expectations deduced from each of them and explicated in the form of research hypotheses (Blatter and Haverland 2012). To this effect, research hypotheses derived from theories at a given level of abstraction single out one or more observable implications or propositions at lower levels of abstraction that the empirical analysis seeks to find evidence of. The empirical analysis thus leads to the confirmation or falsification of the research hypotheses, allowing for a competitive testing of the theories they stemmed from. Specifically, this article derived six research hypotheses, entailing observable implications in terms of prevailing actors and narratives in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, from three theories—DNF, DNI and DPF—explaining crisis framing in EU-based media discourse. Qualitative content analysis is used 'for systematically describing the meaning of qualitative material by classifying data as instances of the categories of a coding frame' (Schreier 2012, p. 1). It thus allows for the interpretation of textual data by 'reading' it deductively through the lenses of a pre-established



theoretical or analytical framework, and consists in a set of systematic methodological steps that ensure the validity and reliability of results.

First, we elaborated a theory-driven codebook that serves as the structured framework of rules governing the interpretation of data. The codebook includes codes, hierarchically organised in main categories and sub-categories; definitions for all main categories and sub-categories of codes; and coding examples, or excerpts of data coded to the main categories and sub-categories. Based on our set of research hypotheses, we defined the type of actors (EU actors, national actors and societal actors), the narratives and the policies associated with the EU's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine for the coding process (see Table 1 in Appendix A to this article). Second, using the electronic depository of newspapers *Factiva*, we collected and manually coded textual content (title and main text) from 45 articles for each one of six among the major EU-wide media outlets as of 2023, i.e. *Euractiv*, *Euronews*, *Financial Times*, *Politico*, *Reuters*, and *The Economist*, for a total of 270 documents and 2353 coding references.² By EU-wide media, the article refers to news outlets that, contrary to national media, have all of the following characteristics: (a) they are written in English; (b) they can boast a readership that extends beyond national boundaries; and (c) they regularly cover EU affairs. Consistently with this, the selected news sources are written in English, have a broad EU-wide readership and are considered as either 'fairly influential' or 'very influential' for EU decision-makers based on insider access, level of expertise and the quality of information about EU politics. For this reason, these are generally thought of as 'European wide' or 'transnational elite' media, can be assumed to be crucial 'framers' of EU-related issues and able to influence communicative discourse in other EU-wide news sources (Nitoiu 2015). To this effect, for instance, while the *Financial Times* and *The Economist* are UK-based news sources and often report through a national perspective, their coverage usually transcends domestic boundaries, catering for a European as well as a global audience. In addition, the *Financial Times* is considered within the 'Brussels Bubble' as the only truly 'European newspaper', standing out for EU policymakers in terms of prestige and reliability (Raeymaeckers et al. 2007).³

The qualitative content analysis in this article takes the form of a 'frame analysis' (Goffman 1974). Frames can be operationalised as the organising ideas shaping 'shared perceptions in society concerning public matters by emphasising certain aspects of social reality while excluding others' (Ojala and Harjuniemi 2016, p. 3). Frames are thus connotations of events that are selected and made salient in a communicating text. As such, they contribute to defining problems—explicating their nature or the dimensions of reality they touch upon—making judgements on agents and their activities as well as suggesting remedies. Along these lines, the task of framing involves 'making a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful

² Most influential EU-wide media sources as of October 2023. Source: EU Media Poll-BCW Belgium. <https://www.bcw-global.com/newsroom/belgium/eu-media-poll-23-politico-just-beats-the-economist-in-tight-fight-to-the-top>.

³ The *Financial Times* also features a 'European Edition' tailored to readers in Europe, which covers daily news about the EU.



or memorable to audiences' (Entman 1993, p. 53). Consequently, media framing is here understood as the media's ability to advance 'an array of symbols, images and arguments through an underlying organising idea that suggests what is at stake on the issue' (Gamson 2004, p. 245). To this effect, the frame analysis was performed to identify the relevant frames in the selected newspaper articles with respect to the definition of the problem (for instance, which policy areas were most affected by the Russian invasion of Ukraine), judgements on agents and their activities (for instance, whether policymakers acted according to solidarity concerns or national interests) and suggested remedies (for instance, whether the conflict demanded supranational entrepreneurship or intergovernmental coordination).

To ensure an accurate representation of the relevant frames, rather than coding the general discursive theme of the articles based on their title and lead (e.g. Oleart and Gheyle 2022), we used individual paragraphs as coding units. This means that one article could include multiple and even competing frames about actors, narratives and policies in the EU's response to the Russian aggression of Ukraine when these emerged in separate paragraphs of an article's text. The selected newspaper articles covered one full year from the launch of the Russian military invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 to 24 February 2023. This time frame encompasses the elaboration and adoption of all major EU policy measures in response to the war, including sanctions against Russia, arms delivery to Ukraine, the launch of accession negotiations with Kiev and the welcoming of Ukrainian refugees fleeing the conflict into the Union's territory (European Council 2022b). Therefore, issue framing by the media in this period was particularly consequential as it contributed to the consolidation of a dominant interpretation of the crisis which relevant actors at the EU and national level could leverage to warrant those policy measures.

To retrieve the relevant material, we adopted the following Boolean search string syntax:

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[Russia OR Putin OR Ukraine] AND [EU OR Europe OR European Union]
AND la=en
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The number of articles we retrieved was too large for a manual coding effort. Between 2022 and 2023, *Euronews* alone published 2830 pieces including our search terms. Similarly to previous qualitative research (Wonka et al. 2023), we thus drew a random sample of the material by year-month to ensure a balanced coverage of each month in our 1-year time frame.

The following section presents and discusses the results of the content analysis.

Results

Before testing our research hypotheses, the content analysis immediately offers valuable descriptive insights into how the Russian invasion of Ukraine was framed as an EU crisis in terms of policy areas. Most of the selected EU-wide media emphasised its nature as either an energy policy or a security and defence policy crisis, with 307 and 247 total coding references, respectively (Fig. 1).



Both security and defence under the CFSP/CSDP and energy policy are largely intergovernmental policy areas. In CFSP/CSDP, the adoption of legislative acts as per the supranational Community method is excluded, and decisions are taken in the form of actions or positions through the voluntary coordination of member state government representatives within the European Council and the Council of the EU (hereinafter, Council), in cooperation with the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP) (Art. 25 and 26 TEU; see also Fabbrini 2015). Along the same lines, while some areas of EU energy policy have become a shared competence between the EU and the member states with the Lisbon Treaty, ‘each member state [maintains] the right to decide the conditions for exploiting its own energy resources, choose between different energy sources and decide the general structure of its energy supply’ (Art. 194 TFEU). In both these policy fields, the role of the European Commission and the European Parliament remains thus secondary to that of EU intergovernmental bodies and member state governments (Bocquillon and Maltby 2020).

Following energy and security, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict was also frequently associated with enlargement policy (89 coding references) and economic and budgetary policy (83), both intergovernmental areas too, whereas supranational competences such as trade, monetary policy and agriculture were not as salient, with 73, 24 and 23 coding references, respectively. To this effect, EU-wide media downplayed the narrative about the economic costs stemming from the imposition of EU trade barriers with Russia, including references that ‘an embargo would plunge Europe into recession without doing much to hurt Vladimir Putin and his war effort’ (The Economist 2022a), and emphasised instead the necessity of doubling down on sanctions against the Russian aggressor for preserving security in Europe, for instance pointing that ‘to prepare the Continent for a military threat, some members of the European Parliament are pushing for a much faster increase in [defence] spending’ (Politico 2022a). Overall, this contributed to the media framing of the EU’s response to the Russian war in Ukraine mainly as requiring policy action in the field of intergovernmental coordination.

The results of the content analysis are thus to be assessed against this backdrop. As Fig. 2 illustrates, all selected EU-wide media except *The Economist* emphasised EU actors over national and societal actors in the EU’s response to the Ukrainian crisis.

In some newspapers, like *Politico*, *Euractiv* and *Euronews*, EU actors displayed about twice or more as much salience as national and societal actors combined, with coding density of 72.0%, 64.8% and 60.9%, respectively. In others, like the *Financial Times*, the gap was less pronounced but still apparent. The exception of *The Economist*, which emphasised the salience of national actors (56.8%) more than EU actors (17.8%) and societal actors (25.4%), is consistent with findings from previous research highlighting limitations in the Europeanisation of media discourse in the UK (Dutceac Segesten and Bossetta 2019). Overall, out of 1,041 total coding references to the types of actors involved in the EU’s response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, EU actors counted 582, national actors 342 and societal actors 117 (see Table 2 and Figure 6 in Appendix A to this article). In terms of comparative theory testing, while this finding challenges the explanatory power of DPF, disputing



DPF-1 due to its emphasis on actors at the national level, it is in principle consistent with both DNF and DNI, which posit the empowerment by EU-based media discourse of different types of EU actors, that is supranational and intergovernmental actors, respectively.

To this effect, disaggregated data at the level of EU actors allow for a more cogent testing. As Fig. 3 shows, supranational actors were more emphasised than intergovernmental actors in EU-related media discourse about the Russian-Ukrainian war.

The European Commission was by far the most referenced EU institution in all selected EU outlets, ranging from a minimum of 54.6% of coding references in *The Economist* to the overwhelming 78.4% in *Reuters*. As a consequence, the European Commission was the only EU actor to be present in mediated discourse following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in association with all policy areas, with the reasonable exception of monetary policy (see Table 3 in Appendix A to this article). Following the European Commission, the European Parliament was the most emphasised EU body by *Euractiv*, *Euronews* and *Politico*; the European Central Bank (ECB) by *The Economist*; and the Council by the *Financial Times*. The European Parliament scored second in average percentage points of coding references for EU actors across selected EU-wide media at 14.5%, followed by the Council at 7.3%, the European Council at 7.0%, the ECB at 6.3%, the HR/VP at 2.7% and the European External Action Service (EEAS) at 0.5% (see Figure 7 in Appendix A to this article).

Overall, salience-wise, supranational actors (including the European Commission, the European Parliament and the ECB) dominated intergovernmental institutions (comprising the European Council, the Council and the EEAS) in mediated discourse related to the Ukrainian crisis. This is even more interesting, if not surprising, as the Russian invasion of Ukraine was mainly framed as falling within the realm of intergovernmental policymaking (see above), which arguably provided DNI with a comparative explanatory advantage with respect to DNF. Nonetheless, in light of our findings, DNF ultimately appears to have a better explanatory power with respect to the framing of actors by EU-wide media than DNI, as the empirical analysis supports DNF-1 and rejects DNI-1. In particular, the staggering salience of the European Commission in EU-related media discourse on the Ukrainian crisis is consistent with recent research showing that, while the supranational executive has traditionally held a weak position in the field of CSFP/CSDP, it was able to increase its decision-making ambitions after the war started and assumed a greater geopolitical role, for instance by steering the adoption of sanctions against Russia (Håkansson 2024).

As for national actors, national governments turned out to be the most salient in all selected EU-wide media, with a total of 322 coding references. National governments were associated with all policy areas in the context of the Russian aggression of Ukraine, including once with monetary policy ('on the second day of a summit in Brussels, the leaders of the 27 nations will place the blame for a spike in inflation and sagging growth across the globe squarely on Russia's invasion of Ukraine that began four months ago to the day' [Reuters, 2022a]). National parties and parliaments lagged far behind, totalling 19 and 6 coding references, respectively (see Fig. 4).



National parties were mostly discussed in relation to democracy promotion ('Fidesz in Hungary and the Law and Justice party in Poland have been repeatedly dragged to the courts by Brussels over reforms they have undertaken curtailing the independence of the judiciary' [Euronews 2022a]), whereas national parliaments were mentioned with respect to enlargement policy or external relations more broadly, as in:

France tabled a last-ditch proposal at a summit in Brussels last week in which it called upon Skopje to incorporate some of Bulgaria's demands (to recognise its Bulgarian minority and significant Bulgarian historical and cultural ties). The Bulgarian parliament approved the proposal but North Macedonia has yet to agree to it, after criticising Paris for not having taken its interests sufficiently into account (Financial Times 2022a).

This finding further disconfirms DPF as, not only were national actors shown to be less salient than EU actors in media discourse over the Ukrainian crisis across selected newspapers (see above), but national parties and parliaments played a much smaller role than national governments in the media framing of the EU's response to the crisis. As it stands, DPF-1 thus lacks any empirical support. At the level of national actors, DNI finds instead empirical evidence, but its explanatory power is qualified by the smaller salience that national actors (and thus, national governments) have with respect to EU actors and supranational institutions in particular.⁴ As a result, in terms of actors framing, our competitive theory testing comes to the following conclusion:

$$DNF - 1 > DNI - 1 > DPF - 1$$

In terms of narratives, 'more EU integration' and 'solidarity' were largely prevalent in EU-related media discourse concerning the Russian-Ukrainian conflict across policy areas (see Fig. 5), with 107 and 79 coding references each. The 'more EU integration' narrative was particularly driven by discourse on enlargement policy, with such references as 'Ukraine has been granted official European Union candidate status, after being endorsed by the bloc's 27 leaders during a summit in Brussels', or "'We owe this to the Ukrainian people. They're fighting for our values," said French President Emmanuel Macron, adding the decision sends a "strong signal" to the Kremlin' (Euronews 2022b). This narrative was also often associated with security and defence policy, including frequent references to the need to move from unanimity to majority voting in an 'area in which it is particularly important that we speak with one voice' (Financial Times 2022b), as well as with economic and budgetary policy, for instance through mentions to an increase in the EU's own resources or to the extension in time and scale of EU joint borrowing capabilities 'in light of the war in Ukraine' (Euractiv 2022).

In addition to defence and the economy, 'solidarity' featured heavily in migration and asylum policy discourse, as in the following excerpts:

⁴ National actors featured 32.9% of the coding references for types of actors across selected EU media, compared to 55.9% of EU actors and 11.2% of societal actors (see Table 2 in Appendix A).



Speakers on a migration panel at the World Economic Forum have said the European Union’s response to the arrival of millions of Ukrainian refugees was a stellar example of solidarity—but it also served as a reminder of the need for an overhaul of the bloc’s migration policy (Euronews 2022c).

The EU’s borders, which have gradually closed to most refugees since a big influx from Syria and Afghanistan in 2015-16, are opening up for Ukrainians. Poland, already home to nearly 1.5m Ukrainians—some displaced by Russia’s earlier aggression in the Donbas—will provide “every refugee from Ukraine” with shelter and assistance, says Mariusz Kamiński, the country’s interior minister. Romania is prepared to accommodate up to 500,000 (The Economist, 2022b).

National interest, moral hazard and national identity narratives did not feature much in the EU-wide media’s framing of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, totalling 21, 10 and 4 coding references, respectively. However, national interests were prevalent in EU-related media discourse on trade policy, with statements such as ‘strengthening exemptions for Russian fertilizer and food exports won’t make as much difference in Africa as Western European governments—motivated more by self interest than altruism—claim’ (Politico 2022b). At the same time, while enlargement policy mainly fuelled further EU integration narratives, it also somewhat lent itself to national identity interpretations, such as:

Neighboring EU members Greece and Bulgaria long obstructed the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia’s candidacy for the EU and NATO to demand that it change its name and accept Sofia’s narrative about its own history and its Bulgarian minority (Politico 2022c).

Finally, moral hazard was mostly associated with discourse on security and defence policy as well as energy policy, both not surprisingly having a largely intergovernmental character. For instance, on 24 June 2022, Reuters reported that ‘some member states have resisted deeper sanctions, particularly Hungary, whose prime minister, Viktor Orban, cultivates closer ties with the Kremlin than others in the bloc’ (Reuters, 2022b).⁵ However, moral hazard narratives’ salience in EU-based media discourse over the Ukrainian crisis remained very limited overall. ‘More EU integration’ and ‘solidarity’ were the first and second most salient narratives in all selected EU newspapers. Along with ‘national interests’, these narratives featured at least one coding reference across all selected outlets; ‘national identity’ was present in *Euractiv*, *Politico* and *The Economist*, whereas ‘moral hazard’ in *Reuters* only (see Figure 8 in Appendix A to this article).

These findings confirm DNF-2, which posits the EU-wide media’s empowerment of increased European integration and transnational solidarity narratives following

⁵ This excerpt was coded to ‘moral hazard’ rather than ‘national interest’ because EU sanctions were adopted to ‘thwart Russia’s ability to continue its aggression’ against Ukraine (Council of the EU 2024), and it is arguably not in the Hungarian government’s interests to let Putin drag its war efforts on. It thus seems more reasonable to suggest that Viktor Orban prioritized its economic ties with Moscow under the assumption that, in case of Ukrainian defeat, he would be able to rely on NATO or the EU’s CFSP/CSDP as a collective defence insurance mechanism (see also Pierret and Howarth 2023, p. 4).



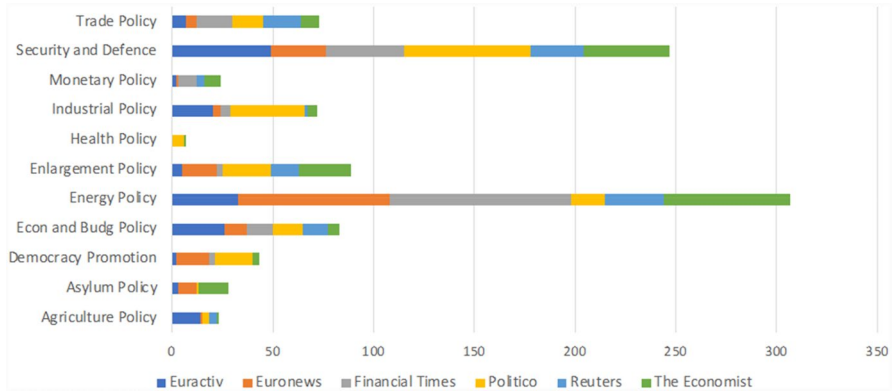


Fig. 1 Total number of coding references for policy area by EU-wide media

the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and confirms DNF’s larger explanatory power vis-à-vis DNI and DPF, with their focus on national interests and moral hazard (DNI-2) and national identity narratives (DPF-2), respectively. Similarly to our results concerning actors framing, our competitive theory testing with respect to EU-related media narratives concludes as follows:

$$DNF - 2 > DNI - 2 > DPF - 2$$

Conclusion

This article has examined the EU-wide media framing of European integration in terms of prevalent actors, narratives and policies in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. To this effect, the article has analysed communicative discourse in six of the most influential EU-wide media sources as of 2023. Through the combination of theoretical insights from discursive institutionalism and the grand theories of European integration, it has come up with three distinct theoretical perspectives—i.e. discursive neo-functionalism, discursive new intergovernmentalism and discursive post-functionalism—each with a set of two research hypotheses on the actors and narratives empowered in EU news coverage in times of crisis. The article has thus carried out a qualitative analysis of textual content in selected newspapers, taking the form of a competitive theory testing. The article has shown that, consistently with discursive neo-functionalism, the Russian military aggression of Ukraine has led to the discursive empowerment of EU supranational actors, most notably the European Commission, and to an increased salience of more European integration and transnational solidarity narratives. Interestingly, this has happened despite the fact that the conflict was mainly framed as falling within the realm of intergovernmental policy areas (i.e. energy policy as well as security and defence policy), which provided discursive new intergovernmentalism with a comparative explanatory advantage.



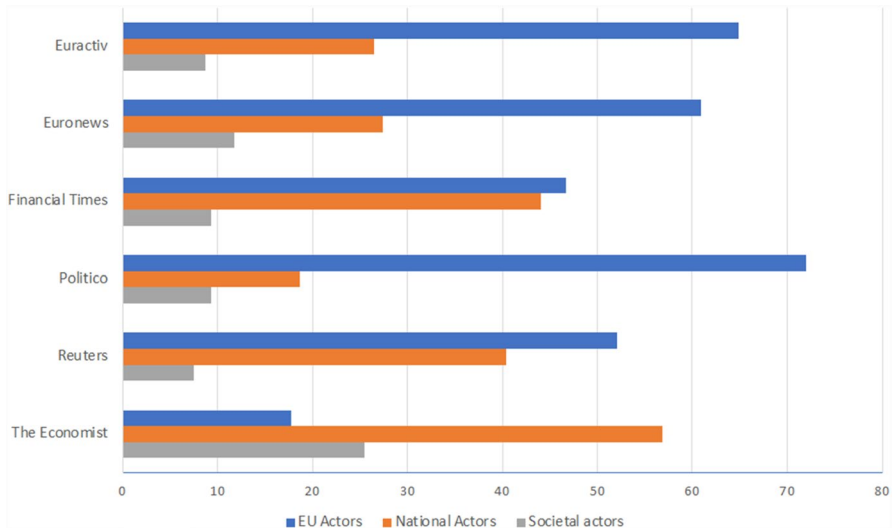


Fig. 2 Percentage of coding density for type of actors by EU-wide media

The article makes both a theoretical and an empirical contribution. Theoretically, it builds on recent attempts at integrating discursive analytical tools into European integration theorising while challenging their accounts of media discourse on EU issues. The article finds that, in the case of EU-based media coverage of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, discursive neo-functionalism has a better explanatory power than discursive new intergovernmentalism, and that discursive

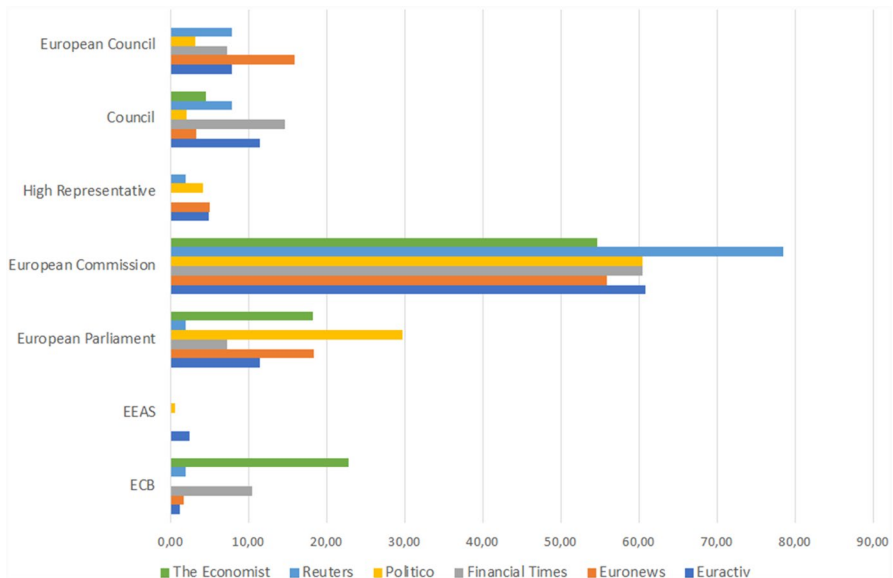


Fig. 3 Percentage of coding references for EU institution by EU-wide media



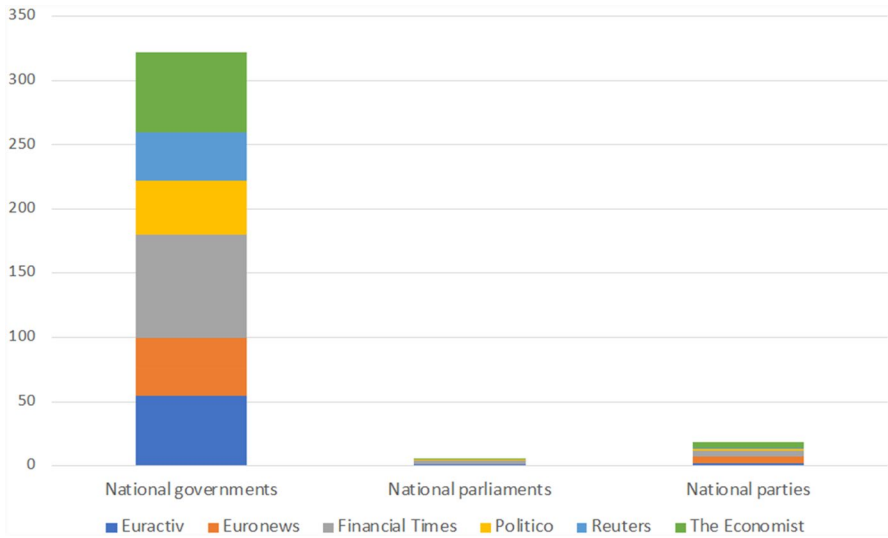


Fig. 4 Total number of coding references for type of national actors by EU-wide media

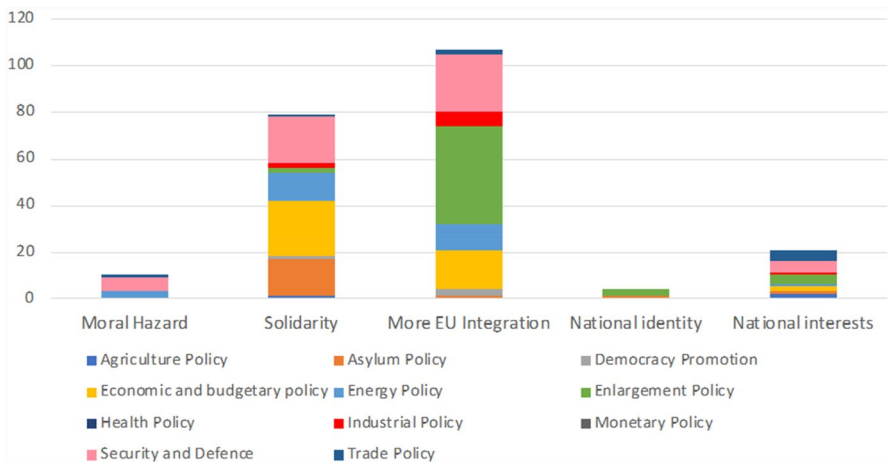


Fig. 5 Total number of coding references for narrative across policy areas

post-functionalism lags far behind the other two in terms of explanatory capacity. This holds true for theoretical expectations at the level of both actors and narratives. Further research is thus needed to establish the conditions under which each theoretical perspective has the potential to prevail, and whether the outbreak of large-scale exogenous shocks has any bearing on that determination.

Empirically, while the literature claims that national media logic tends to emphasise the salience of intergovernmental actors at the EU level, executive



actors at the national level as well as national interest narratives in times of crisis, this article finds that EU-related media discourse in the context of the Russian military aggression of Ukraine has empowered EU supranational institutions at the expense of intergovernmental bodies and national actors, in addition to emphasising further EU integration and transnational solidarity frames. This finding may imply that there is still a significant disconnect between the European and the national public sphere when it comes to EU news coverage, each of which frames European integration along different lines. Incidentally, the article also shows that the character of a given policy area as either supranational or intergovernmental does not, in and of itself, determine the type of actors or the narratives that are empowered in EU-related media discourse. This may well point to the rapid blurring of boundaries between the EU's supranational and intergovernmental regimes and to the emergence of an open-ended, experimentalist mode of governance, as suggested by part of the literature (see Schmidt 2024; Zeitlin 2016). Further work should thus assess the scope of these findings against crisis events touching upon diverse policy fields and decision-making systems.

Appendix

See Figs. 6, 7, 8 and Tables 1, 2 and 3.



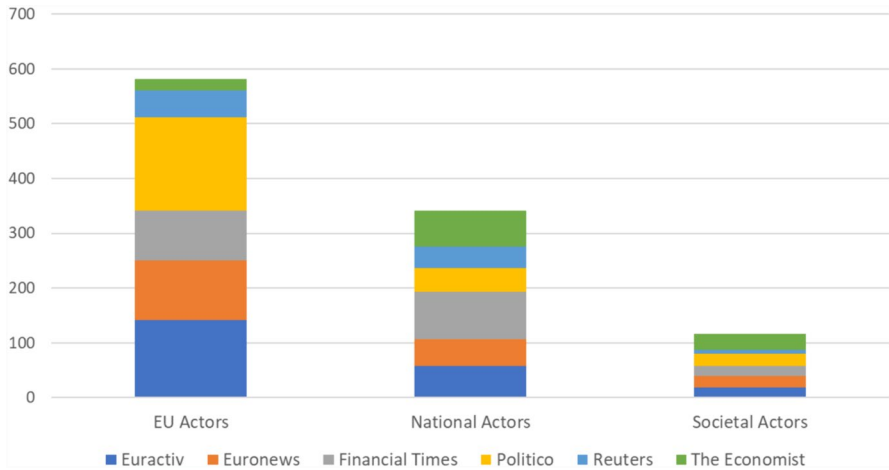


Fig. 6 Total number of coding references for type of actors by EU-wide media

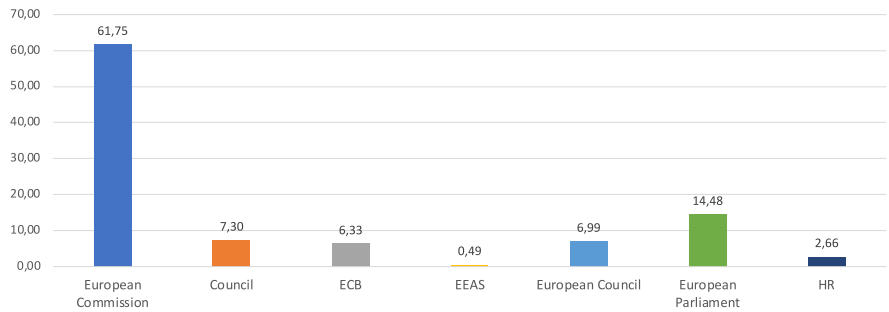


Fig. 7 Average percentage of coding references for EU actor across EU-wide media

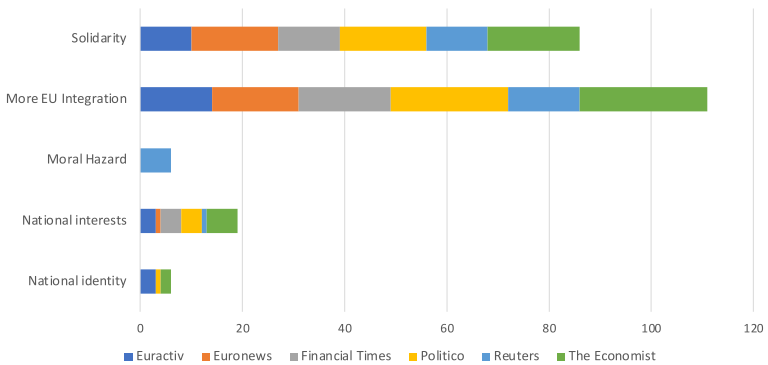


Fig. 8 Total number of coding references for narrative across EU-wide media



Table 1 Codebook for qualitative content analysis: codes, description and coding examples

Codes	Description	Coding examples
Actors	Includes references to the actors in the coded files	
EU actors	Includes references to EU actors in the coded files	
Commission	Includes references to the European Commission in the coded files	'The European Commission put forward ambitious proposals last week to position the EU as a global leader in green industry growth, yet how the industrial development should be financed on a European level remains an open question.'
Council	Includes references to the Council of the EU in the coded files	'The Council should "address the contagion effect of gas prices in electricity markets" and examine "in more detail and as a matter of urgency" the short-term options presented by the European Commission to alleviate the price crunch, the draft summit conclusions say.'
ECB	Includes references to the European Central Bank in the coded files	'Even if the euro area is spared a recession, then, the energy shock will be a drag on growth. The ecb faces an unenviable dilemma. With every increase in inflation on the back of food and energy prices, the European economy is getting weaker.'
EEAS	Includes references to the European External Action Service in the coded files	'The EU's diplomatic arm, the European External Action Service (EEAS), is working on the revisions of the Cyber Diplomacy Toolbox, which, according to documents seen by EURACTIV, will involve the development of a Public-Private Partnership inspired by the Ukrainian model of cyber threat intelligence.'
European council	Includes references to the European Council, EU leaders and EU summit in the coded files	'At a press conference yesterday, Charles Michel, the European Council president, underscored the difficult balancing act that leaders will need to strike at the planned G20 summit in Indonesia later this year.'
European parliament	Includes references to the European Parliament in the coded files	'Lawmakers in the European Parliament's legal affairs committee unanimously voted in favour of stricter sanctions against people found guilty of environmental crimes, with potential jail terms and fines reaching up to 10% of a company's global turnover.'



Table 1 (continued)

Codes	Description	Coding examples
HR	Includes references to the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy in the coded files	'EU's chief diplomat Josep Borrell said upon arrival at the meeting that there needed to be a deal, "otherwise, we will be in difficulties in order to continue supplying arms to Ukraine".'
National actors	Includes references to national actors in the coded files	'European Union leaders held talks on Thursday (23 March) with UN chief António Guterres on global food security and sanctions imposed on Russia over its invasion of Ukraine, and also endorsed a plan to supply more artillery shells to Kyiv.'
National governments	Includes references to national governments in the coded files	'In recent years members of parliament from parties across the political spectrum had pushed for a rethink of Germany's China policy, without much success.'
National parliaments	Includes references to national parliaments in the coded files	'Costa's Socialists (PS) were re-elected in January with an absolute majority that frees the party from its former dependence on two hard left parties, whose support brought him to power at the head of a minority government in 2015.'
National parties	Includes references to national parties in the coded files	'Bernd Schäfer, CEO of EIT RawMaterials and spearheading the European Raw Materials Alliance, highlights the need for an overarching strategy and urgent action to secure the future of Europe's strategic raw materials sector and ensure it can deliver on the green and digital twin transition.'
Societal actors	Includes references to societal actors in the coded files	'Another financing option includes increasing the EU's own resources. There are already several proposals on the table to increase them—most notably through the EU Emissions Trading System, the carbon border adjustment mechanism (CBAM), or the new OECD tax that targets profits from multinational companies.'
Narratives	Includes references to main narratives in the coded files	
More EU integration	Includes references to further EU integration in the coded files	



Table 1 (continued)

Codes	Description	Coding examples
Identity	Includes references to national identity in the coded files	'However, for some observers, the Dutch holdout echoes Sofia's own thwarting of the European integration of North Macedonia over disagreements on shared language, history and minority rights. This caused uproar among EU member states and Balkan countries such as Albania, who said Bulgaria was "holding hostage", a country that is both a European and a NATO member.'
Moral hazard	Includes references to moral hazard in the coded files	'The European Union needs a new strategy on the war in Ukraine as sanctions against Moscow have not worked, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban said on Saturday. The strategy should aim for peace instead of winning the war, Orban said in a speech in Romania.'
Solidarity	Includes references to transnational solidarity in the coded files	'European Commission vice president Margaritis Schinas said on Tuesday that the opening of borders to Ukrainian civilians had shown "Europe at its best".'
Policies	Includes references to main policy areas in the coded files	'The European Commission's proposal for halving the use of pesticides is still up for discussion, Food Safety Commissioner Stella Kyriakides stressed after a majority of member states called for a fresh impact study on the ramifications of such a step.'
Agriculture policy	Includes references to agriculture policy in the coded files	'EU Commission deputy: Response to Ukraine refugees showed "Europe at its best".'
Asylum policy	Includes references to migration and asylum policy in the coded files	'Exasperated, MEPs launched Article 7 proceedings against Poland and Hungary in September 2018. This procedure — often referred to as the "nuclear option" — opens the door to punitive measures including a suspension of voting rights at the Council level.'
Democracy promotion	Includes references to democracy promotion in the coded files	'Officials and political leaders suggest that Fund money could come from existing pots of cash that stem from the EU's Next Generation EU (NGEU) fund, an €800-billion joint debt instrument formed to support the economic recovery after the pandemic.'
Economic and budgetary policy	Includes references to economic, budgetary and financial policy in the coded files	

Table 1 (continued)

Codes	Description	Coding examples
Energy policy	Includes references to energy policy in the coded files	‘The European Commission “hit a political sweet spot” by allowing more nationalisation of electricity markets in its reform proposal tabled last week, according to Georg Zachmann.’
Enlargement policy	Includes references to enlargement policy in the coded files	‘Ukraine has been granted official European Union candidate status, after being endorsed by the bloc’s 27 leaders during a summit in Brussels.’
Health policy	Includes references to health policy in the coded files	‘Europe has had some successes—German companies were among those pioneering mRNA vaccines—but most of the cutting-edge research in science and technology is done at universities and companies elsewhere.’
Industrial policy	Includes references to industrial policy in the coded files	‘The European Commission put forward ambitious proposals last week to position the EU as a global leader in green industry growth, yet how the industrial development should be financed on a European level remains an open question.’
Monetary policy	Includes references to monetary policy in the coded files	‘Christine Lagarde’s insistence as recently as December that eurozone interest rates were “very unlikely” to rise this year is set to be confounded. Markets are pricing in, as soon as July, the possibility of the European Central Bank’s first upward move for a decade.’
Security and defence	Includes references to foreign, defence and security policy in the coded files	‘European Union leaders held talks on Thursday (23 March) with UN chief António Guterres on global food security and sanctions imposed on Russia over its invasion of Ukraine, and also endorsed a plan to supply more artillery shells to Kyiv.’
Trade policy	Includes references to trade policy in the coded files	‘The European Commission proposed a powerful new trade instrument on Wednesday (8 December) that would give it more power to impose sanctions on third countries.’



Table 2 Total number of coding references for type of actors by EU-wide media

	EU actors	National actors	Societal actors	Total
Euractiv	142	58	19	219
Euronews	109	49	21	179
Financial times	91	86	18	195
Politico	170	44	22	236
Reuters	49	38	7	94
The economist	21	67	30	118
Total	582	342	117	1041



Table 3 Total number of coding references for EU actor by policy area

	Agri-culture policy	Asylum policy	Democracy promotion	Economic and budgetary policy	Energy policy	Enlargement policy	Health policy	Industrial policy	Mon-etary policy	Secu-rity and defence	Trade policy
European Commission	28	5	19	45	107	15	2	34	0	56	21
Council	5	0	1	2	14	5	0	1	1	9	0
ECB	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	18	0	0
EEAS	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0
European council	0	0	0	8	13	8	0	2	0	13	1
European parliament	2	0	17	0	18	3	0	2	0	3	1
High representative	0	0	1	1	2	0	0	0	0	16	0



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Declaration

Competing interest The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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