



MEDIATIZED EU - Mediatized Discourses on Europeanization and Their Representations in Public Perceptions

Recommendations for EU policy-makers

August 2024

This report compiles the recommendations developed by MEDIATIZED EU for policy-makers in the European Union (EU), based on the results of the seven country case studies. These policy recommendations address the key current [EU strategic priorities](#) and are based on key findings from the project's media analysis, interviews with political and media elites, public opinion surveys, and civic discussion forums held in each of the seven target countries. Read the key policy takeaways and country-specific policy recommendations below.

Key policy takeaways

- Even with clear pro-European tendencies among all major interest groups, all research teams agree that Eurosceptic ideas can easily gain support in some segments of society. Euroscepticism tends to arise on sovereignty and identity issues or EU involvement in what are seen as national issues, aggravating the existing polarization within societies. **Prioritizing 'EU literacy' and public awareness about EU governance and benefits should be higher on the policy agenda to promote the European way of life.**
- Identitarian discourses are primarily used by Eurosceptic outlets and fueled by disinformation. As media becomes more and more digital, without the digital skills of the population increasing with the same speed, the risk of disinformation increases. **Developing new ways to grow digital literacy skills to empower citizens and measures to combat disinformation/FIMI is key for ensuring a Europe that is fit for the digital age.**
- The general polarization of European societies means that there is less trust in institutions and media, which also provides opportunities to exploit the fear and lack of information among people to make them overly sceptical of EU initiatives. **Policy initiatives giving civil society and the public more visibility and voice on core EU issues and developing**



connections between elites and the general public on core EU matters should be at the heart of strategies to support European democracy.



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BELGIUM

Abstract

Belgium presents a complex but revealing case within the European Union, where broad support for the European Project exists alongside differences between linguistic lines in how EU policies are perceived and communicated. This document outlines key recommendations for EU policymakers to enhance public trust and support. These include addressing regional media discrepancies, engaging conditionally pro-EU groups, managing the securitization of migration, enhancing EU-related media literacy, emphasizing the benefits of collective action, and maintaining transparency in budget allocations. By focusing on these areas, the EU can strengthen its connection with Belgian citizens and ensure that its policies resonate more effectively across diverse communities.

Executive Summary

Belgium's relationship with the European Union is characterized by strong support across its diverse linguistic and regional communities, yet this support is nuanced by differing perceptions of specific EU policies. To navigate these complexities, the EU must adopt strategies that resonate with the unique dynamics within Belgium. One of the key recommendations is for the EU to address regional media discrepancies. Flemish media often exhibits more scepticism toward the EU, while Francophone media tends to be more supportive. Tailoring communication strategies to the specific concerns of each linguistic community will help promote a unified European message that resonates across the country. Another critical area is engaging with groups/citizens that hold conditional support for the EU. These individuals support EU enlargement and appreciate the Union's commitment to human rights and democracy but express concerns about entities like Frontex. Addressing these concerns transparently will reinforce the EU's commitment to its core values and strengthen its role in migration management.

The EU should also manage the discourse surrounding migration, particularly the increasing trend toward securitization in Belgian media, especially in the Flemish community. Promoting a more balanced narrative that includes both security and humanitarian aspects can help reduce polarization and foster a more cohesive understanding of migration policies. Additionally, the EU should enhance media literacy across Belgium to help bridge the gap in how EU-related issues are

covered and perceived in different regions. Media literacy programs tailored to address regional biases can empower citizens to critically engage with EU-related content.

Finally, maintaining transparent communication regarding EU budget allocations is crucial. Transparency builds trust among both the general population and elites, who are more likely to support budget increases when they understand how and where funds will be directed.

Policy Recommendations

1. Engage with Conditionally Pro-EU Groups: A key focus for the EU should be engaging with groups/citizens that hold a conditional optimism toward the Union. These individuals, revealed by the population survey conducted in Belgium under the MEDIATIZED EU project, support the EU's enlargement, particularly regarding Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, and appreciate the EU's commitment to LGBTQ rights, minority protections, and democracy. However, they express concerns about the actions of Frontex, which they perceive as conflicting with the EU's core value of human rights. Given that Belgian citizens expect the EU to take responsibility for shaping migration policies, it is essential to address these concerns transparently and demonstrate a commitment to upholding human rights within all EU operations, including Frontex.

2. Maintain Transparent Communication on Budget Allocations: The EU should prioritize clear and transparent communication regarding how budget increases are allocated across different sectors. Transparency is crucial because it builds trust among both the general population and elites in Belgium. When citizens and leaders understand where and how funds will be directed, there is greater support for budget increases. This approach is particularly important in Belgium, where public opinion and media discourses reveal a need for greater clarity on EU financial decisions.

3. Emphasize the Benefits of Collective Action: The EU should continue to emphasize the importance of collective action, especially in light of the positive recognition this approach has gained since the COVID-19 pandemic. Belgian citizens and elites alike have seen the benefits of working together as a Union, particularly in securing better deals and outcomes for Europe as a whole. Highlighting successful examples of collective action can further solidify the EU's image as a unified entity capable of addressing challenges more effectively.

4. Address Regional Media Discrepancies: The EU should be aware of the regional differences in media coverage and public opinion within Belgium. Flemish media exhibits more scepticism towards the EU, particularly regarding issues like migration and security, whereas Francophone media is more supportive. This discrepancy necessitates tailored communication strategies that address the specific concerns of each linguistic community while promoting a unified European message. Ensuring that EU policies and actions are communicated effectively across these diverse media landscapes will help maintain and strengthen public support for the EU in Belgium.

5. Address the Securitization of Migration: The EU should carefully manage the discourse surrounding migration, particularly the increasing trend towards securitization. Research indicates that migration has been heavily securitized in Belgian media, especially in the Flemish community. To counterbalance this, the EU could promote a more balanced narrative that emphasizes both the security aspects of migration and the EU's humanitarian responsibilities. Additionally, extensive public outreach and factual awareness campaigns on both the necessity of migration and the challenges it presents should be domestically promoted across all communities in the EU. This approach would not only help mitigate the polarizing effects of current discourses but also foster a more informed and cohesive understanding of migration policies among EU citizens.

6. Enhance EU-Related Media Literacy and Public Awareness: There is a noticeable difference in how EU-related issues are covered and perceived across different linguistic and media landscapes in Belgium. To bridge this gap, the EU could initiate media literacy programs that educate citizens on how to critically engage with EU-related content, addressing regional biases and narratives. Additionally, fostering collaboration between Belgian and non-EU media outlets would allow journalists to access broader, ground-level perspectives on complex geopolitical issues. Alongside media literacy, constant public outreach is crucial, with universities, municipalities, and local institutions partnering to engage citizens through assemblies, high school education, and public forums. These initiatives would emphasize the importance of European integration for budget stability, social cohesion, defence, and mitigating risks, encouraging a deeper understanding of the EU's role and value.

Final Remarks

Belgium plays a significant role within the European Union, not only as the host of major EU institutions but also as a microcosm of the challenges and opportunities the Union faces in maintaining cohesion across diverse member states. One of the primary challenges identified is the need for the EU to address regional media discrepancies that shape public opinion. Flemish media tends to be more critical of the EU, particularly regarding issues like migration and security, whereas Francophone media is generally more supportive. The EU must tailor its communication strategies to address these differences, ensuring that its policies are effectively conveyed and understood across all linguistic communities in Belgium. Engagement with conditionally pro-EU groups/citizens is also crucial. These groups, while supportive of the EU's broader goals, have specific concerns, particularly regarding the actions of Frontex and the EU's approach to human rights. By addressing these concerns transparently and demonstrating a commitment to upholding EU values, the Union can solidify its support among these key constituencies.

The concept of collective action should remain a cornerstone of the EU's approach. The positive reception of collective efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic in Belgium highlights the potential for the EU to continue promoting this message. By emphasizing the advantages of working together, the EU can strengthen its image as a unified force capable of achieving more than any single member state could alone. Lastly, transparent communication about EU budget allocations

is essential. In Belgium, where public trust is closely tied to the clarity of financial decisions, ensuring that citizens understand how and where EU funds are allocated is vital for maintaining and increasing support for the Union's initiatives.

In conclusion, by focusing on tailored communication, engagement with critical groups, the promotion of collective action, and transparency in budget allocations, the EU can enhance its relationship with Belgium and ensure that it continues to play a constructive role within the Union.

 **ESTONIA**

Abstract

Estonia shows that an enthusiastic, committed EU Member, with mainstream political parties and two-thirds of people supporting EU membership may still be sceptical about further and deeper integration. EU membership is regarded in a utilitarian fashion, beneficial for economy and security. Hesitation about involvement in identitarian matters opens for disinformation about 'cultural imposition'. The challenge for policymakers is to build on recognised benefits, not alienating people through perceived distance from the issues people care about, while encouraging active Europeans, not afraid to discuss common values that unite Europeans, keeping the debate free from disinformation aiming at undermining European unity.

Executive Summary

EU membership is supported by a majority of the Estonian population including diverse ethnic and geographical groups and ages. There are relatively few and small differences between different groups regarding the perception of the EU, as compared to some other Member States. There are no major differences in the media consumed by the elite and the general population, although the Russian speaking minority consumes media that is distinct from the majority population. Online media is prevalent in general. Pragmatic issues are of greater interest than identity issues; EU being seen as important for economic and practical reasons. Security issues are of prime concern especially since the start of the Russian aggression toward Ukraine.

As in many countries, the perceived benefits of EU Membership are focused on specific topics and building on this can be a successful way to strengthen the feeling of being European citizens, gradually coming to care more also for the identitarian aspects. Estonians find it self-evident that Estonia is a European country in the European family of values, but there is less agreement on what exactly these values are. An open and honest discussion is needed, as otherwise there is a greater risk of disinformation. In addition, the potential of the positive aspects of digitalisation, such as use of technology to debunk falsehoods is important. Digital literacy should remain a high priority. The fight against disinformation is an essential part of cybersecurity, a topic of high concern for Estonia. Media in Estonia tends to deal superficially with the EU. Only a few media

outlets have resources for in-depth stories. Given increasing polarisation, attention should be given to the question of trust in institutions, including EU institutions and cooperation between national and EU institutions.

Policy Recommendations

1. Given the increasing polarisation and risks of disinformation, the question of trust in institutions, including EU institutions and the cooperation between national and EU institutions is essential. The issue concerns the whole of the EU. The lack of trust can be combated through better knowledge and understanding about the EU as such, its relationship with member states and member state institutions. Local and EU policymakers can contribute, and the information should be targeted to different groups, including sceptical ethnonationalist communities and ethnic minorities.

2. Cybersecurity policy and strategy should include tools related to media content, directly aimed at combatting disinformation, thus increasing trust in media. Disinformation is prevalent especially in social media to emphasise this negative perception in order to create discord among European states. The more disinformation spreads, the less trust people have in media of any kind. Estonia is a very digital society, which means potential for utilising positive aspects of digitalisation, such as a use of technology to debunk falsehoods. Such efforts need practical support. Digital literacy should remain a high priority, and more digitally advanced countries can support those with larger problems of digital literacy. The digital media content issue as an aspect of cybersecurity should remain in focus for EU policymakers.

3. EU policymakers should support discussions in member states on common European identity issues by encouraging an open debate on European values. Estonia is one of many member states where a value-based discussion on European issues and a proactive approach to shaping common European values is lacking in the political debate and media. Exceptions are seen on matters of direct and dramatic importance to Estonia, like a common approach against Russian aggression. Given its status as a frontline state with experience of such aggression in the past, Estonia has been prominent in pushing for common European tools. Scepticism regarding EU involvement in identitarian matters is to some extent based on a lack of deeper knowledge and understanding concerning the EU among the general population. This scepticism is politically exploited by right-wing populists that have gained popularity over recent years, for example by claiming that the EU forces countries to accept liberal views on minorities, immigration etc. The Estonian mainstream political community and media have been hesitant in the more principled discussion about European values even if society regards itself as an obvious member of the European community. EU policymakers can actively support and promote an open and inclusive discussion, showing how the EU is a united whole, even while recognising distinct concerns of members.

4. Support and joint projects should be created to help the media to pay more attention to EU issues and explain key political challenges to the public. Few journalists in many small EU member

states have the competence to discuss EU issues in depth. Instead of debate there are press releases from government and agencies. The EU can play an active and practical role in supporting the media.

Final Remarks

Even with a strong self-identification as 'European' among all major interest groups, Eurosceptic ideas can easily get support in segments of the society. Scepticism tends to arise on sovereignty and identity issues or EU involvement in what is seen as national issues. Identarian discourses are primarily used by Eurosceptic outlets and fuelled by disinformation that aims to discourage European unity. In Estonia, as in some other EU members, the support for European values is often presented by the media and the political debate as a polarising issue, where the EU wants to enforce its values or at least expects member states to adjust to values that come from the 'outside'. As media becomes more and more digital, without the digital skills of the population increasing with the same speed, the risk of disinformation increases. External forces, hostile to the EU rule based and democratic system are very active in spreading disinformation and exploiting vulnerabilities of open societies. Furthermore, the general polarisation of society means that there is less trust in institutions or in the media, which also provides opportunities to exploit the fear and ignorance of people to make them overly sceptical of EU initiatives. The EU and local policymakers must be conscious of such risks and active in combating them, with tools against disinformation and for increased security in the digital sphere, as well as with informed and open debates about European values and how identitarian and practical, pragmatic questions coexist and support one another.



Abstract

Our research has shown that the sharp political polarization in Georgia has deeply influenced the media landscape, where various channels, including TV, print, and online platforms, are used to advance political interests. This polarization creates a fertile ground for the Russian state-supported anti-Western and anti-European propaganda. Pervasiveness of the blame game among political actors and the lack of substantial discussions regarding EU-related issues amplified with the mediatized manipulation and instrumentalization of Europeanization discourses contribute to the ambiguity of the public opinion. Predictably, this renders the Georgian population more susceptible to anti-European/anti-Western propaganda and disinformation, especially through pro-governmental media outlets.

Given these findings, we have developed policy recommendations revolving around two broad dimensions related to the mediatized discourses on Europeanization and their resonance among the public in Georgia: (1) Depolarization of the discourses on Europeanization and (2) Fighting disinformation related to it. In this document, we present the recommendations specifically targeting EU policymakers.

Executive Summary

Georgia's media landscape reflects its deeply polarized politics, with pro-government, pro-opposition, pro-European, and anti-European outlets crafting divergent narratives on European integration and Europeanization. These outlets shape public perceptions through the strategic discourse construction. The prevailing discourses focus on accusations of pro-Russian bias, highlighting the ruling party's or opposition's deviation from the European path. Since 2021, the Georgian government has engaged in discursive opposition with EU representatives. Initially defensive, this stance escalated to an offensive one after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with the ruling party accusing the EU of double standards and the attempts to drag Georgia into the conflict. Illiberal discourses (mainly nationalistic and homophobic), previously marginal and promoted mainly by pro-Russian media outlets, became mainstream after the war in Ukraine.

With rising tensions between the ruling party and the EU, these discourses are now echoed by high-level government officials and broadcasted on the pro-government TV channels. Interviews with political and media actors reveal that both generate overlapping discourses, using historical and cultural arguments to frame Georgia's European integration. Again, affective polarization between the ruling and opposition parties is evident in mutual accusations of betraying European liberal values. The opposition criticizes the ruling party's conservative stance as an indicator of betraying the European path, while the ruling party questions the authenticity of opposition's liberalism. This reflects how both sides strategically use and instrumentalize Europeanization to legitimize their own actions and discredit each other, further intensifying the country's political polarization. Although the survey data show that the Georgian public views the EU positively, there is significant uncertainty and limited awareness of EU-related information. This suggests that blame games among political actors, a lack of substantial discussions on EU-related issues, and the mediatized manipulation of Europeanization discourses contribute to the ambiguity in public opinion. Consequently, this makes the Georgian population more vulnerable to anti-European and anti-Western propaganda, especially through pro-government media outlets.

Policy Recommendations

1. Depolarization of the discourses on Europeanization: Promoting depolarization in Georgia requires a multi-faceted approach that addresses the underlying causes of political division while fostering a more constructive and policy-focused political environment. The EU could play a crucial role in reducing political polarization by engaging with different actors through various channels.

- First of all, the EU should actively continue pushing the Georgian government to repeal undemocratic legislation, especially the "foreign agents" law, which threatens civil society and independent media.
- The EU can act as a mediator or facilitator, organizing forums or roundtable discussions where representatives from both the ruling and opposition parties can engage in a constructive dialogue. These discussions should focus on common goals, such as national interests, European integration and democratic development, rather than divisive issues.
- Through diplomatic channels, the EU should encourage Georgian leaders to take responsibility for their role in promoting or exacerbating polarization. The EU can offer incentives for positive behaviour, such as increased cooperation or support, while making it clear that a continued divisive rhetoric may have consequences for Georgia's relations with the EU.
- The EU should continue to support independent media outlets in Georgia, ensuring that they have the resources and capacity to provide a balanced coverage of political issues. Independent journalism is crucial in reducing the echo chambers that contribute to polarization. The EU can collaborate with Georgian media organizations to enforce ethical standards in journalism. This includes discouraging sensationalism, which often exacerbates polarization, and promoting fact-based reporting that encourages informed public debate.
- The EU should increase its support for civil society organizations by providing additional funding, capacity-building initiatives, and opportunities for networking with similar organizations across Europe. The EU can help organize public forums where citizens, civil society, and political actors come together to discuss important national issues in a non-partisan environment. These forums can serve as a space for constructive debate and can help bridge divides between different segments of society. Moreover, the EU can provide support for educational initiatives that focus on teaching the public about democratic values and the dangers of polarization. Civic education, particularly targeting younger generations, can help build a more resilient and informed electorate that values unity over division.

2. Fighting disinformation: Dealing with a hostile anti-Western/Anti-EU rhetoric of the ruling party requires a nuanced and strategic approach that balances a firm diplomatic pressure with a continued engagement and support for democratic institutions and civil society.

- The EU should use its diplomatic channels to directly address the ruling party's hostile discourses. This includes high-level dialogues, where EU representatives can express concerns about this rhetoric and its implications for EU-Georgia relations. When necessary, the EU can issue public statements or engage in public diplomacy to counteract false or hostile discourses. By communicating directly with the Georgian public, the EU can clarify its positions and counter disinformation spread by political actors.
- The EU should make it clear to the Georgian public that its continued support, including financial aid, economic cooperation, and potential EU membership discussions, is conditional on the Georgian government's adherence to democratic norms, constructive

communication, and respect for the EU's values. This conditionality can be applied to both bilateral agreements and EU funding programs.

- The EU should bring together reform-minded individuals from different sectors, including politics, business, academia, and civil society, to discuss and promote a pro-European agenda. This can create a broader coalition of support for EU values within Georgia.
- The EU should increase its support for independent media in Georgia, helping to ensure that there are credible, fact-based alternatives to the government's rhetoric. This could include the funding for investigative journalism, training for journalists, and support to media outlets that are critical of the government's stance.
- The EU should continue to fund and support CSOs that work on democracy, human rights, and European integration in Georgia. These organizations can play a vital role in countering the government's hostile rhetoric by providing accurate information and advocating for democratic values. The EU can support initiatives that specifically track and expose disinformation campaigns by the Georgian government. This could include creating a dedicated task force or supporting the existing fact-checking organizations that focus on Georgia.
- The EU should invest more resources in information campaigns aiming at providing citizens with substantial and accurate information about the EU and its institutions, as well as about European values in general. This would facilitate bringing some balance in the public sphere dominated by political blame games and disinformation.
- If the Georgian government continues to escalate its hostile rhetoric and undermine democratic institutions, the EU should consider implementing targeted sanctions against individuals responsible for these actions. These sanctions should be carefully calibrated to avoid harming the general population while sending a clear message to the government. As a last resort, the EU could also consider diplomatic measures, such as reducing the level of diplomatic engagement or suspending certain forms of cooperation, to signal its disapproval of the government's actions.

Final Remarks

Coordinated efforts among political actors, media, and civil society are essential to ensure that the representation of the EU and Georgia's Europeanization in public discourse aligns with the country's foreign policy goals. However, it is important to note that the Georgian political landscape has shifted significantly with the adoption of the "foreign agents" law on May 28, 2024, which primarily targets civil society and independent media, and generally undermines democracy. Therefore, it is crucial for the current Georgian government to repeal this law, stop undermining Georgia's European integration, and normalize the country's relations with the European and Western partners. The recommendations mentioned above are only achievable within a framework of democratic governance and the rule of law.

Abstract

With regard to policy considerations a fundamental issue in Hungary is how policies can ensure firm grounds for improved connections between Hungary and the EU. By now Hungary has gone far on the road of autocratisation. Constrained media freedom and the government anti-EU propaganda fundamentally influence discourse regarding the European Union. The media shows similar asymmetric polarization that features the political regime: the governmental anti-EU propaganda dominates. This has negative consequences on public norms. Our research demonstrated that the Hungarian polity's democratic credentials and opportunities are closely intertwined with the country's EU connections, which highlights the significance of relevant policy frames.

Executive Summary

The findings and the follow-up recommendations are based on three major research directions: media discourse analysis, elite interviews, and public opinion surveys. The research aimed to reveal how the media impact EU related discourse and who are the prime movers in this process. The media discourse analysis proved that EU-critical propaganda is dominant in the centralized pro-government media, which enjoys majority position. This media mainly reports top politicians' EU-related opinions while journalists play a secondary role.

Normative and non-factual information about the EU is frequent in this press and is tainted with misleading fake news conspicuously imported from Russian sources. Elite interviews qualified these findings in a number of respects. First of all, despite the obvious media constraints the integrationist discourse was most dominant among the elite followed by sovereigntist and more marginal multi-speed and HExit discourses. Furthermore, we have found a divide between the government and non-government elite respondents' answers, the former advocating sovereigntist discourse, while most of the opposition politicians are integrationists. These findings highlight the internal divide of the broader elite and the elevated role of the governing political elite. In the focus of argumentation identity-based discourse elements are more prominent at the detriment of pragmatic discourse features. The pro-government discourse in particular applies identity-based aspects. Public opinion surveys added to the above findings: amidst the anti-EU government propaganda and discourse most of the Hungarian population remains pro-EU continuing a lasting trend. At the same time while within the elite the HExit discourse is represented by a small far-right parliamentary party which is critical both toward the EU and toward the government, the HExit discourse among the public is related to uncritical government support. This is a warning sign that a segment of the public is vulnerable to anti-EU propaganda and confuses sovereigntist and HExit type of criticism.

Policy Recommendations

1. The EU should get closer to the public. The pro-government media and government forces aim to increase their domestic electoral support by blaming the EU decision makers. Disinformation and lack of information run in parallel with smear campaigns against EU actors. One way to challenge this condition could be the frequent and active presence of relevant EU information providers in domestic politics. This could serve a number of goals in parallel. Through personalization the alienation and externalization of the EU, which is an instrument of government propaganda, could be diminished. Furthermore, EU actors' presence and visibility at different relevant forums could be combined with the presence of Hungarian politicians who are involved in the working of the European Parliament or other EU organizations. These events and the cooperative presence of the EU and the domestic actors in the media or at other public forums would bring the EU closer to the public through the personalization of the EU. Naturally, this would require the activity of the relevant actors on the Hungarian side as well – parties, media actors, influential think tanks first of all. Last and probably most prominently these occasions would not only bring the EU closer to the public but could serve as forums of information provision and challenge false, fake, information about the EU.

2. Correct and factual information about EU affairs including EU and homestate connections should be extensively provided. Our research highlighted that the public is generally under informed – even if not necessarily misinformed - about EU affairs. Correct information provision could serve three aims: strengthen the pragmatic aspect of EU – Hungary connections, provide defence against fake news, and challenge misleading government discourse. EU related discourse is divided into pragmatic and identity frames. The former focuses on fact-based considerations and explains the EU and member-state connection in policy terms while the latter focuses on nativist ideology and is often based on unproven grounds, and this is prominent in Hungarian progovernment dominated media discourse. The introduction and articulation of pragmatic aspects would clarify a number of issues that until now are absent or are misinterpreted in the government propaganda. It is fundamental that this information be accessible to the public thus broadly spread. Among others, pragmatic information would be essential about why access to the EU resources is under constraints, what concrete steps are required so that the former resource allocation patterns continue, what does the defence of the Schengen borders imply and what are the risks of non-compliance, what are the concrete conditions so that the Erasmus and Horizon programmes could continue, what would be the context, the requirements and the potential advantages of joining the European Public Prosecutor's Office? These are just examples and topics that would help the Hungarian public to make informed decisions about domestic or international (EU) affairs. In addition to the diverse forums and instruments mentioned in the previous paragraph other measures seem applicable to achieve these information goals: educational programs, short and factual booklets about concrete issues in the local language, placement of particular news items in the media (not neglecting local, printed, and on-line sources).

Our research has found that fake news (including international propaganda) are broadly present in Hungarian pro-government media discourse. Even more importantly cc. 40 percent of the public respondents claimed that they had come across misinformation and fake news. This is a real threat to democracy per se as disbelief and lack of trust in the media and accessible information undermines the belief in correct information provision. Moreover, it discourages democratic participation and leads to passivity. Without active and self-confident citizens democracy is under threat. Finally, this type of pragmatic information provision would and could challenge misleading government discourse. This is the common interest of the Hungarian public and the larger Europe and could be a defence of the democratic values.

3. The EU should establish and develop connections with new partners. To establish the above goals the EU agents should develop connections with new partners. When the government discourse is adversary and even hostile the EU should identify support sources and identify actors that can provide new impetus in information provision. While inter-governmental routes are fundamental in working out strategic steps and in preparing concrete decisions regarding the EU and member-state connections in the given circumstances non-government sources and partners would be fundamental as they could provide new and diverse perspectives, present argumentation and draw attention to interests that do not appear in government politics and policies. These direct and not mediated connections could include diverse civic organisations, think tanks, local governments. They could be supporting mechanisms to EU decision-makers.

4. The EU's discrimination against Hungarian academics and students is a misguided measure that needs to be revised. Hungarians consider freedom of movement, student exchanges and support for science and the arts to be among the EU's greatest achievements. Restricting these rights and support mechanisms could have a counterproductive effect. Such measures might undermine the EU's credibility, alienate people from the EU and increase the popularity of HUXit. As an unintended side effect of the measures, it is not only the universities on the banned list that are unable to cooperate. Increased uncertainty and information costs also reduce the willingness of international partners to cooperate with Hungarian universities in general. Until the ban is lifted, we recommend that the European Commission immediately clarify in a direct statement: the majority of Hungarian universities, scientific and artistic institutions are entitled to cooperate and receive support.

Final Remarks

Democratic subversion in Hungary is a key challenge. Our research highlighted that people regard the EU as a safeguard of democracy and public safety. Academic research and political perspective equally noted that the relevant EU authorities did not notice in time this democratic subversion. For at least a decade the EU did not consider the autocratisation process as a cause of concern despite the warning signs. Although internal domestic affairs are the authority of the domestic population when elections are not fair and government propaganda channels disinformation democratic institutions and processes are undermined. Although more recently the EU

transformed its understanding in relation to the breakdown of the rule of law the government discourse has not changed, and democratic subversion continues. As the academic literature notes the autocracy trap of the EU might well continue in face of the broken norms. The EU policy makers should be aware that this is not the opinion of the majority of the Hungarian people or those in non-governing elite positions. The Hungarian public and the polity as such would require external support mechanisms as well as fair and unambiguous steps on the side of the EU.

IRELAND

Abstract

Though the Irish public and political ruling elites consistently display high levels of positive attitudes towards the EU, much of this hinges on a pragmatic "mutual benefit" framing, underscoring the special Ireland-EU relationship built on shared European values. This positive sentiment co-exists with a low level of "EU literacy", with citizens lacking knowledge about EU affairs and the internal workings of EU institutions. Our policy recommendations point out the risks inherent in this knowledge gap, typical of many established EU member states, and propose interventions aimed at preventing the destructive impact of disinformation, civic disenfranchisement and political polarization, and ensuring more meaningful member state integration and more informed public participation in the European project.

Executive Summary

In Ireland, as in many other EU states with consistently high levels of pro-EU elite and public attitudes, the discursive sphere is dominated by the pragmatic "mutual benefit" framing, underscoring Ireland's special relationship with the EU built on the shared European values of human rights, democracy and rule of law, seen as largely intrinsic to Irish identity. At the same time, this positive sentiment is concurrent with a low level of what we term "EU literacy": lacking public knowledge about EU affairs and the internal workings of EU membership and institutions. The political and media elites in Ireland, while exhibiting mostly pragmatic EU sentiments and a healthy level of critical assessment of the Ireland-EU relationship, are only beginning to note the implications of a public that is not well informed - and potentially easily manipulated. This disconnect creates a gap that is at risk of being exploited by actors seeking to polarize European society in the service of anti-EU agendas or identitarian politics.

Following a round of European elections which saw relatively low turnout, there is now more focus on how to improve public communication about what it means to be part of the EU and what "solidarity" and "shared values" mean in day-to-day life. Our policy recommendations therefore focus on potential threats to EU solidarity posed by disinformation, disenfranchisement and

political polarization, and the need for interventions aimed at preventing these destructive tendencies and building on the shared European values and common pragmatic benefits in order to develop a more robust member state integration and more informed and enthusiastic public participation in the European project.

Policy Recommendations

1. Further enhance citizen media literacy and design more robust strategies for protecting citizen agency and rights online. The public are increasingly using digital media channels to obtain news and information, yet they display more concern about media manipulation, as well as the rise of populist and divisive rhetoric in digital spaces. At the same time, internet users are concerned about potential restrictions and censorship of political debates on online platforms. These issues require a unified EU approach that is more participatory, focuses on enhancing citizen media literacy and is based on best practices from across the EU. Building on relevant European directives, such as the EU Audiovisual Media Services Directive, the Digital Services Act or the EU Network and Information Security Directive, and operationalising national regulatory acts and strategy documents such as the Online Safety and Media Regulation Act 2022 or the National Cyber Security Strategy, EU member states should also prioritise the protection of fundamental rights online and seek to enhance civic agency and individual security, giving citizens greater control over their data, news flows and discursive spaces online.

2. Support greater citizen engagement with EU institutions through new opportunities for participation. Fostering more active interest and engagement in EU-related affairs and debates among citizens emerges as one of the most pressing issues for media and political elites. Media coverage should also focus on public interest aspects and explanatory reporting about opportunities for citizen participation in EU affairs in practical ways. Such efforts should support grassroots, civil society and community contributions to normative and political initiatives, as well as provide opportunities for training and skills exchange to promote community leadership initiatives and cross-EU collaborations.

3. Strengthen societal resilience to online disinformation. Amid broader European concerns about disinformation, there has been an ongoing trend in Ireland (and other EU states) of a decline of trust in news and concerns about under-regulation of online political advertising. The use of disinformation in political disputes and campaigns, resulting in growing political polarisation and mistrust in public institutions, should be the focus of attention in Europe's efforts to tackle these issues. Despite the emerging mechanisms and institutional frameworks regulating digital media, and member states' active participation in the EU Code of Practice on Disinformation, the EU should devise a more forward-thinking strategy to counter disinformation and strengthen societal resilience. Such a strategy should necessarily include the independent media sector, and the digital platform industry to ensure accountability and best practice adoption, but should also actively involve non-governmental organisations and community groups to understand the needs of key

civic groups, adapt literacy and disinformation initiatives to these needs, and address emergent concerns as they arise.

Final Remarks

These policy recommendations focus on the key challenge of low levels of awareness of EU affairs or "EU literacy" among the public. This challenge and the connected threats of further political polarisation, civic disenfranchisement, and the circulation of disinformation by foreign governments or domestic political groups with the aim of undermining the European integration project warrant greater attention at the EU level. Timely policy measures should aim to enhance citizen knowledge and engagement with the EU, bolster trust in independent media, promote media literacy and digital rights, combat threats of interference and manipulation during pan-European crises or election periods, and safeguard a pluralistic and transparent media and political landscape in the EU.

Policy responses at EU level should facilitate the adoption of effective strategies to respond to manipulative, identity-driven Eurosceptic discourses and counter disinformation, while ensuring an informed, empowered citizenry keen on political participation and showcasing greater awareness of and interest in the European project and its values and benefits for European citizens. These recommendations ultimately aim to contribute to a more robust strategy for Europeanization, EU enlargement, and more enthusiastic public participation in the European project.



PORTUGAL

Abstract

Portugal's public debate showcases a positive attitude towards the country integrating into the EU and the Union itself. Different views on the EU coexist, but media coverage tends to be generally superficial and leaves little room for critical and in-depth perspectives. Still, the debate does not follow a pro- or anti-EU divide logic, resting on distinct views of advantages and disadvantages, benefits and costs. Based on the Portuguese case study's results, this document identifies priorities for EU policymaking and outlines recommendations in four areas of concern: public knowledge about political and EU-related issues; journalism and media literacy in the European Union; civic engagement with the EU; the prevention against disinformation.

Executive Summary

The Portuguese political and media elites and the public opinion are generally aligned in favour of EU integration and have a very positive view of the Union. Criticisms exist in conjunctural or structural aspects but tend to be less present in the media and, politically, are mainly voiced by the left and, at times, by the right-wing. Despite this critical assessment of the EU, instead of a pro-

and anti-EU divide, the public debate has been marked by a discourse on the advantages and disadvantages of integration and Portugal's role in this project, prioritising a rationale focused on pragmatic elements, namely the economy, with social, political, environmental, technological, and security issues compounding the debate. Axiological aspects are also embedded in both dominant and counter-discourses –sometimes enmeshed with pragmatic factors.

These findings are in line with Portuguese foreign policy, which has consistently and coherently approached the EU as a political project to which the country naturally belongs and as a tool to continuously develop towards progress and modernisation. In this context, the study's results are clustered in four areas of concern. First, although no censorship was identified, public perceptions may be affected by the superficiality of the news on the EU and the media's over-reliance on official sources, leaving little room for more diverse or even critical views. This translates into the reproduction of institutional perspectives that have been fixed in dominant discourses. Secondly, journalism has suffered from a lack of material resources needed for more complex, in depth coverage of EU-related issues, which media professionals remarked as a reason for the superficiality identified. Thirdly, the Portuguese public is predominantly supportive of EU integration. However, different socio-demographic conditions have affected how people understand and engage with this project, distancing them from political or EU-related debates. Finally, and especially in a context of increased representation of the extreme-right and possibly of polarisation, the combination of these factors may facilitate the spread of disinformation amidst the public, further alienating the Portuguese from politics in general and from the EU project in particular.

Policy Recommendations

1. Further knowledge and literacy on political and EU-related issues. Political engagement and knowledge of the EU are better among respondents who hold a higher level of formal education and have a more significant income, although results are generally low among the Portuguese surveyed. This trend indicates a need for more access to quality information that promotes interest in political and EU-related matters and enables civic engagement through informed participation. Promote initiatives that bring civil society organisations and the ordinary citizen closer to EU affairs in their capacity of agents, and not just as the general public, through further support to civil society in activities such as civic training and youth awareness raising on political issues, representativity, direct democratic participation, and institutions functioning both at the national and EU levels, to ensure enlarged reach and scope of EU-knowledge as EU issues are about economics and politics, but also about social aspects, the environment, and other topics of relevance, with impact in the populations' daily lives.

2. Enhance civic engagement with the EU through Inclusive participation and transparent dialogue. Trust in European institutions such as the European Commission and the European Parliament is notably higher among the Portuguese than in their national institutions. There is also clear support for European integration among the Portuguese (over 70%). Nevertheless, discussing

politics, including EU-related topics, is not a common practice among the Portuguese, though men, those with higher education, and individuals with higher incomes tend to engage in these discussions more frequently. The EU should continue supporting national policies to foster greater civic interest and engagement with the EU by promoting transparency in decision-making processes and creating mechanisms that visibly demonstrate the EU's impact on daily life (e.g. implement localised citizen dialogues; easily accessible online platforms that show the impact of EU policies and funding; participatory budgeting for EU funds). Develop policies tailored to strengthen citizens' connection with the Union, particularly promoting gender equality and political engagement across all demographics.

3. Strengthen journalism and media literacy in the European Union. Overall, media trust is high in Portugal, nevertheless, quality and independent reporting/journalism require material conditions that have been structurally found lacking. Also, the media should ensure greater depth and diversity of perspectives, reportages, debates, and investigative reports and expand the space for larger political and ideological representation. For this, fostering a dynamic and informed media landscape across the EU that supports high quality, independent journalism by focusing on labour standards, educational investments, diverse media support, and enhanced media literacy is relevant. Implement an EU-wide policy that supports fair labour agreements for journalists, invests in specialised education for journalists on EU and foreign affairs, funds independent and alternative media outlets, and continues to promote media literacy projects that enhance diverse and informed public debate on EU issues.

4. Reinforce and continuously monitor the implementation of an assertive strategy to counter disinformation. The use of disinformation in political and ideological disputes, with effects on political and societal polarisation and mistrust in public institutions, has been disseminated and should remain centrestage in the overall EU's and its members' strategy to tackle this trend. Moreover, along with the strengthening of the mechanisms and institutional framework in place in Portugal, quite institutionalised and in line with European initiatives, to counter disinformation, attention needs to be drawn to the superficiality of some news reporting and the potential detachment from the EU it might lead to, creating space for disinformation, the spread of fake news and increased polarisation. The EU should ensure its strategy to combat disinformation is articulated with a well-devised strategy of quality news reporting to close the space to disinformation practices.

Final Remarks

Overall, the Portuguese perceptions of Europeanisation are positive and especially focused on pragmatic considerations for the country's development and economy. The Portuguese media has given space to views and perspectives from all political spectres, including those in criticism of the EU, especially in op-eds and opinion articles, and in letters from the general public, but in its mediatisation of the debate, the media have emphasised a centrist approach and thus helped normalise what became a mainstream, positive appraisal of EU integration. The

soft-Euroscepticism present in Portuguese society does not translate into anti-EU positioning, thus the debates about Portuguese integration into the EU take place around the costs and benefits of this process. Despite this positive assessment, it is fundamental to ensure the maintenance of a context open to debate and critical voices, which is translated into actual engagement with the diverse concerns raised. This effective openness needs to be cherished in a context where increasing polarisation and radicalisation are a visible trend throughout Europe, with the curtailing of fundamental liberties and principles in some member states putting democracy in jeopardy.

To this effect, media outlets in Portugal, even those owned by big groups, need better material conditions to produce independent and quality journalism. The EU should support national authorities to ensure that trust levels are maintained and potentially increased, with the media being a central part of the functioning of democracy. Further literacy on EU integration would also allow for a better interpretation of debates and political discourse among the general population, with critical thinking contributing to in-depth analysis and informing the public debates. Further integration of civil society in political processes, focusing on the EU, is also fundamental for the EU's political legitimacy. Also, fostering a stronger EU identity and inclusive participation across all demographics will reinforce citizens' connection to the Union, bridging the gap between EU institutions and citizens, and ensuring broader participation in the European project. Strengthening mechanisms to counter disinformation and have a wide impact in clarifying options, decisions, and contents should also be a priority, as disinformation practices are at the service of polarisation and fundamentally undermine democratic processes.



SPAIN

Abstract

In Spain, where pro-European sentiment prevails, soft Euroscepticism aims to reinforce rather than challenge EU integration. However, it is worth noting that support for the European project is stronger among Spanish elites than the general public. As a partner in the EU-funded MEDIATIZED EU project, Nebrija University conducted media analysis, elite interviews, and a public survey. The findings suggest that Spain is eager to increase its visibility and take a leadership role in the EU, particularly in southern European policy and addressing the rise of ultra-right-wing politics in Eastern Europe.

Executive Summary

Our analysis indicates that in Spain, nearly all discourses show a strong pro-European sentiment. Even critical views of the EU typically express only soft Euroscepticism; for example, this happens when advocating for the EU to enhance its geopolitical influence to protect member states, or for adopting stronger policies on migration in order to be able to safeguard European security and identity. Among 50 representatives of media and political elites in Spain, pragmatic concerns

dominate, with significant focus on issues such as NextGenerationEU funds, geopolitics, defence, Brexit, etc. Many interviewees believe that the war in Ukraine has driven increased collaboration among EU members. However, Spain's role in the EU has sparked polarized opinions, reflecting internal divisions between the left and right; leftists praise the Prime Minister's role, while right-wing respondents tend to undermine his leadership. The EU is also exploited as a tool to criticize political opponents, as seen in discussions on the rule of law. A public survey of 1,000 people reveals that 60% support further European integration, 19% think it has gone too far, and 21% are neutral. Left-leaning individuals are more supportive of integration than those in the centre or on the right. Trust in institutions and diverse media sources correlates with support for integration, yet distrust in media is prevalent (46%), with 7 out of 10 respondents considering the Spanish media to be polarized and distorting reality. Both politically engaged and uninformed individuals are more likely to distrust the media.

Policy Recommendations

1. Support coverage of EU topics and EU policies. Strong pro-EU sentiment in Spain does not translate into a deep understanding of EU affairs. Both the public and political parties show limited interest in European issues, a trend linked to media and political polarization. The Ukraine war has recently sparked more media focus on EU matters, including the EU's ability to compete with powers like China and Russia, leading to increased media attention on EU affairs. However, there remains confusion about the roles of EU institutions versus national governments in policy making and implementation, leading to distorted public perceptions. EU policymakers could consider educational campaigns and media initiatives to clarify the roles of the EU and national governments in policymaking. This will reduce misinformation, decrease polarization, and improve public understanding of EU affairs.

2. Encourage in-depth EU-related debates to accommodate both left and right representatives. Spanish media elites observe that national political parties heavily instrumentalize European politics. Despite a common pro-European stance among these parties, there is no unified approach to EU affairs, leading to a lack of constructive debate on Spain's role in the EU. Both the government and opposition use the EU to undermine their opponents, causing political and media noise that distorts EU messages and policies. EU policymakers could consider cross-party dialogue on EU affairs to encourage a more constructive and less polarized debate. This could be in the form of forums for bipartisan discussions, focusing on common goals like migration and strategic autonomy, while reducing the use of EU issues for political point-scoring.

3. Fight Euroscepticism by talking about benefits from EU membership. A large majority (86%) believe EU membership benefits Spain, with stronger support among left-wing, highly informed, and educated individuals, as well as those with high trust in institutions. Although critiques of the EU are typically soft Euroscepticism, they should not be dismissed, especially given the EU's challenges. The public must understand the benefits of EU membership to control Euroscepticism. The 2023 Spanish EU Council Presidency emphasized European unity, bolstered by Spain's

economic progress. However, the EU narrative, used by both the government and opposition for political gain, could lead to public confusion and increased Euroscepticism. EU policymakers could consider launching public awareness campaigns highlighting the tangible benefits of EU membership, focusing on economic gains, core EU values, and initiatives like NextGenerationEU. The messages communicated should be clear and non-partisan to prevent confusion and reduce Euroscepticism.

4. Consult the public more. Based on the population survey, 80% of respondents feel they have no influence on important decisions in Spain; this sentiment is strongest among the most educated population, including the youngest (18 to 29 years) and middle-age (30 to 44 years) respondents. Women feel more influential than men and left-leaning individuals perceive greater individual impact than those in the centre or right. Distrust in institutions is higher among men, while left-leaning respondents trust institutions more. A widespread sense of powerlessness and distrust in the political system is evident, with seven in ten respondents distrusting politicians, particularly among middle-aged and least informed individuals. EU policymakers could consider initiatives that enhance civic participation, such as educational programs that empower citizens to engage in decision-making processes. Additionally, more attention should be paid to increasing transparency and accountability in political institutions to rebuild trust.

5. Support Spain's desire to play a leading role in the EU. Spanish political and media elites emphasize Spain's growing leadership in the EU, particularly in managing the energy crisis. Although Madrid initially criticized Brussels' handling of the crisis, the overall approach remains pro-European. Pedro Sanchez's role in shaping EU energy policies underscores Spain's increasing influence within the EU. However, this focus on Spain's role sometimes exacerbates power imbalances between Eastern and Western Europe, with Spain portraying itself as a true representative of Europe. This was evident in the support for withholding EU funds from Poland and Hungary over the rule of law and human rights issues. EU policymakers could consider promoting a more inclusive EU narrative that recognizes contributions from all member states to strengthen EU cohesion and thus to reduce regional power asymmetries.

6. Talk about the negative impact of disinformation and strategies to counter it. Media plays a crucial role in spreading disinformation, so governments need to develop frameworks that encourage cooperation between media and the state, ensuring accountability of media owners and content creators without compromising media freedom. EU member states must prioritize tackling disinformation and upgrading their technological tools. Effective legislation to penalize false information is also essential. Public awareness of disinformation's harms should be increased, and robust systems for monitoring and reporting should be established. EU policymakers could consider further measures to combat disinformation, including upgrading technology, enhancing public awareness, developing robust monitoring systems, as well as creating frameworks for media-state collaboration. Moreover, it is key to ensure effective legislation to penalize false information while protecting media freedom.

Final Remarks

Researchers agree that disinformation is a powerful tool for undermining public opinion and decision-making. Partisan media contribute to this issue in two main ways: they often discredit experts whose views conflict with their ideology and sometimes misinterpret evidence to create misunderstandings. Despite this, Spain remains strongly pro-European, with 86% of respondents acknowledging benefits from EU membership, and 75.7% recognizing benefits for citizens. Higher education levels are associated with a greater appreciation of these benefits. While media elites generally show pragmatic support for the EU, occasional polarization arises from the left-right political divide, occasionally using the EU to discredit opponents. The survey results shed light on how media and elite discourses shape perceptions of European integration, highlighting the influence of pragmatic, identity-based, and sociodemographic factors. Despite a diverse media landscape and overall media freedom, the risk of political influence on media remains, influenced by ownership and funding dynamics. This is critical in the context of rising disinformation risks. The EU began addressing disinformation in 2015, mainly targeting external threats from Russia. Given that crises can fuel political disaffection and Euroscepticism, it is essential for EU authorities to intensify their efforts to combat disinformation, which threatens democratic systems and the European integration project.

Key challenges and issues:

1. Disinformation: The power of disinformation to distort public opinion and decision-making.
2. Political Parallelism: Media bias and political influence affecting how EU-related issues are presented.
3. Media Influence: Ownership and funding biases impacting media content.
4. External Threats: Disinformation campaigns from external actors like Russia undermining EU democratic systems.
5. Crisis Impact: Economic and political crises fostering Euroscepticism and undermining EU support.

Overall policy recommendations:

1. Promote transparency in media ownership and funding to mitigate political bias.
2. Strengthen mechanisms to combat disinformation and its effects on public opinion.
3. Enhance cross-border cooperation to address external disinformation threats effectively.
4. Develop public awareness campaigns to counteract misinformation and bolster support for EU integration.

For more information on the project and on our results, visit us at
www.mediatized.eu