



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

Research Summaries: Elite interviews

This series of summaries presents the results of different phases of research of MEDIATIZED EU, grouping all seven case-studies. The present issue summarises the results of elite interviews.

BELGIUM

This section of the study focuses on analysing interviews conducted using Q methodology with political and media elites in Belgium, spanning from summer 2022 to spring 2023. A total of 50 participants, comprising media representatives and political actors, took part in comprehensive interviews. During these interviews, participants were presented with 25 widely circulated statements regarding the EU and European Project, derived from the dominant discourses revealed in the Belgian media analysis. They were then asked to position these statements on a Q grid, evaluating their significance and indicating personal agreement or disagreement. Upon completing the grid, participants elaborated on their choices and provided reasoning for their ratings during in-depth discussions. Interviewers paid particular attention to dominant discourses not addressed by respondents, probing further to understand their perceptions. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. The data underwent both quantitative analysis, including correlation and factor analyses using the Ken-Q-Analysis online software for Q methodology, and qualitative analysis, which encompassed qualitative content analysis and critical discourse analysis for the subsequent in-depth interviews.

The selection of political elites was carefully curated to include members from major coalition parties such as Open Vld, MR, PS, Ecolo, Vooruit, and Groen, as well as representatives from the opposition, including N-VA and AGORA. This comprehensive approach ensured that the sample encompassed both right-leaning and left-leaning/progressive parties. Efforts were made to involve representatives from Vlaams Belang and BTB-PVDA to gain insights from far-right and far-left parties; however, they declined to participate in the study. The 24 participating politicians represented four Flemish, three Francophone, and one bilingual party, effectively covering the majority of media and political elites directly involved in governance and active opposition. Regarding the media elite selection, a diverse range of outlets in Flemish, French, and English



languages were included, providing valuable perspectives on Belgium's media landscape and its coverage of Europeanisation. The sample comprised 26 media representatives, including journalists and producers from influential Belgian media outlets such as VRT, RTBF, Médor, De Tijd, De Morgen, Contexte, B2 - Bruxelles2, BEL RTL, Belga, Politico.eu, Agence Europe, EURACTIV, BusinessAM.be, EU Observe, Science|Business, Euronews, Contexte, and EUobserver. Additionally, two independent journalists were interviewed due to their influence, regular coverage of political events in Belgium, and pivotal roles within the nation's complex media environment.

The quantitative Q analysis revealed three significant factors from the combined data set for both media and political actors, as well as two additional factors from the separate data sets for media and political elites. Factor 1, "Liberal European Identity," includes a diverse mix of political and media elites, Factor 2, "EU Human Rights Critical Actors," comprises environmentalist politicians and media figures critical of EU policies, especially regarding human rights and migration, and Factor 3, "Pro-EU Actors," includes politicians and media figures supportive of the EU with mild criticisms of EU-Russia policies. Additionally, one factor derived from the media elite data set, titled "EU Human Rights Critical Media Actor" includes a journalist associated with the left-leaning, Francophone news outlet Medor. Another factor from the political elite data set, named "Pro-EU Securitized Politicians" comprises all three members of the right-wing, Eurosceptic political party N-VA, as well as representatives from progressive environmental parties like Ecolo and Groen, and the liberal-leaning Open VLD.

The participants of Factor 1 prioritise liberal European values, advocate for coordinated EU efforts, and support EU enlargement whereas Factor 2 participants criticise some of the EU policies, especially regarding human rights and migration, and prioritise collective EU action on issues like Ukrainian refugees and healthcare crises. The Pro-EU actors of Factor 3, feature diverse political backgrounds but exclude socially conservative parties like N-VA. These participants prioritise statements endorsing EU collective action and human rights support while rejecting claims of EU erosion of Belgian culture or sovereignty. They emphasise EU solidarity, particularly in aiding Ukrainian refugees, and advocate for a stronger EU role in geopolitics. The EU Human Rights Critical Media Actor offers deeper insights into criticisms of the EU concerning migration and human rights issues, taking a notably stronger critical stance on these matters. In the "Pro-EU Securitized Politicians" grouping, the inclusion of parties like the right-wing euro-sceptic N-VA alongside historically liberal-pro-EU Open VLD reflects a highly pragmatic yet new identity-based pro-EU discourse, which reflects a more EU foreign policy-driven prioritisation, since the war in Ukraine takes centre stage and EU securitisation is ranked highly with priority given to countering foreign threats, most notably Russia.

The complex nature of Belgium's media and political landscape posed a challenge in the sense that different communities in the country operate under different regulatory and political rules, which are largely based on unique historical and linguistic divisions, rendering Belgium a unique case. Despite such divisions, it is remarkable that only limited levels of immediate or easily detectable polarisation were evident at first glance. Elite perceptions in Belgium generally exhibited a pro-European sentiment, with a strong belief in the European project and further European integration. Most political and media elites view their national or regional identity as

compatible with and complementary to the European identity and project. This sentiment is pervasive and transcends language communities, encompassing both Flemish and Francophone perspectives. Furthermore, there is a widespread acceptance and promotion of a European identity among elites in Belgium. The notion of a European identity is deeply ingrained in political and media landscapes. This trend is reinforced compared to previous media analyses, particularly with conservative liberal and central political figures showing a firm pro-EU stance on liberal values and geopolitics, in contrast to more hesitant traditional social democratic actors. However, divisions emerge concerning migration, with traditionally Eurosceptic parties adopting a securitised discourse and anti-migration stance, especially in relation to Ukraine. This trend of migration weaponization aligns with the mainstream EU discourse, notably embraced by right-wing parties. Progressive green and human-rights-oriented actors criticize this view, indicating divergences in EU policy. Geopolitical concerns and security policy are central themes, uniting both progressive and conservative actors across linguistic and party lines, while also highlighting critical views on alleged EU hypocrisy regarding human rights. The report indicates that new forms of pro-EU identity discourse are developing, while pragmatic considerations are “catch-all” arguments for many topics.



ESTONIA

Interviews with Estonian political and media elites on the topic of Europeanisation were conducted in the context of the February-March 2023 parliamentary elections (5 March). As a result, feedback on 25 statements from an earlier media survey on values, the activities of the state and the authorities in implementing EU policies was received. Since the media analysis was conducted in 2021, i.e. before Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the relevance and significance of the statements found in the media discourse had changed considerably. COVID-19 had "disappeared" from the Estonian public discussion almost overnight after February 24th 2022, the migration problems on the Belarus/Lithuania border had also lost their acuteness. Issues of national security and defence had come to the forefront in the context of the war, the European Union as a territorial integrity and security guarantee was stressed in the interviews, alongside with the importance of NATO.

Estonia is small (1.3 million), and the media elite and the political elite are relatively accessible: the Estonian sample included a number of influential politicians, ministers and former parliamentarians, party leaders, as well as leading political journalists from various channels, and representatives of Russian-language media.

56 questionnaires were delivered to politicians and journalists at meetings and online, and as a result, 47 completed questionnaires were received. Comments on the questions within the questionnaire were gathered during the interviews (filling the questionnaires).

Q-analysis was conducted to analyse the results of the questionnaires, and discourse analysis was used to analyse the comments.

Based on the Q-methodology analysis of the Factor Scores and corresponding ranks, three key focal points related to Europeanisation emerged:

- Political orientation and understanding of Europeanisation,
- Pragmatic considerations related to Europeanisation,
- Identity considerations related to Europeanisation.

The analysis reveals a diverse range of views regarding Estonia's political orientation and its understanding of Europeanisation. Some respondents perceive the EU positively, acknowledging its effectiveness in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU's active support for human rights and its contribution to resolving the migration crisis in Belarus. On the other hand, some respondents express scepticism about the EU's role as a security guarantor against Russian threats and question the influence of EU regulations on Estonia's economy.

In assessing pragmatic considerations related to Europeanisation, respondents have shown mixed opinions. While some perceive Estonian products as highly competitive in the European market and believe that EU regulations are necessary for Estonia's modernization, others express concerns about the negative impacts of EU policies on specific sectors, such as the NGO sector. Additionally, there are divergent views on the effectiveness of the EU's green turn strategy and the support provided by the EU to border countries in managing refugee and migrant challenges.

The analysis also sheds light on identity considerations related to Europeanisation. While some respondents perceive EU membership as a guarantee of Estonia's territorial integrity and emphasise the importance of a common European identity, others express concerns about the potential threat to Estonian national values and sovereignty posed by the EU. There are also contrasting views on the influence of European liberal values on Estonian identity and the potential moral degradation associated with EU values.

When comparing the interviews with politicians and journalists with the discourses and statements from the media analysis conducted earlier by the Mediatized EU project, it appears that the views of the political and media elite are much more diverse and rather multifaceted compared to the black and white picture of the media.

The interviews indicate an ideological polarisation in Estonian society and its political elites, as the remarkable part of society remains critical of the European Union and liberal values, which are often related to the image of Europeanisation.

The EU discourse of the major dailies and portals during the period under study was characterised by a routine mirroring of the official Estonian line, an avoidance of debates and sharp questions on official policy, and a propagandistic anti-EU bashing of “alternative” publications.

The “elite” interviews revealed that the positions of liberals and conservatives as well pro EU and anti-EU interviewees may even coincide on some issues. Liberal politicians and journalists, principled EU supporters, can be quite critical of the EU in their personal views, e.g. on regulations, doubt the EU as an engine of innovation, doubt the EU's ability to provide security guarantees, and think that, for example, Hungary's way of asking questions about the functioning of the EU is perfectly appropriate (even if the answers they offer are wrong in the eyes of the people involved). At the same time, right-wing populists who are anti-European or critical of the EU within the parliament discussions can constructively discuss the positive aspects of the EU and demonstrate

its importance as a catalyst for Estonia's development. This statement is based on the Q methodology analysis, which takes into consideration subjective opinions of participants.

Estonian news journalism has mostly avoided going into the deep substance of the European Union and its principal guidelines. The common European identity has been just rarely highlighted and the focus of media discourses has been on pragmatic issues. The media has tended to confine itself to formal coverage of the subject: official European issues have been seen as a boring and bureaucratic area that readers do not find interesting and are simply a must-read (compulsory literature). In this sense, it can be argued that the news discourse that reaches the Estonian audience through the media is polarised around pro-European or anti-European views to a much greater extent than the views of the opinion leaders who dominate public life.

Most journalists, with the exception of a few special correspondents and editors, have no real competence to discuss EU issues in depth. As a result, there has not been a rich debate, confining itself to the official flow of press releases from government and other agencies. Among the journalists interviewed for the project, there were a number of foreign policy and EU-specialist journalists who, when responding in person to the questionnaire, provided much more varied commentary than is usual in their work on EU issues.

These varying perspectives indicate a spectrum of political orientations and levels of support for Europeanisation in Estonia.

 **GEORGIA**

This section of the research delves into the analysis of interviews utilising Q methodology with political and media elites in Georgia, conducted from October 2022 to January 2023. A total of 50 participants - 24 politicians and 26 media representatives (journalists, editors, producers) focusing on Georgia's foreign policy matters - participated in in-depth interviews. The respondents were provided with 25 widely circulated statements on Georgia's Europeanisation, derived from the preliminary stage of media analysis of six popular media outlets. They were then asked to position these statements on the provided Q grid, assessing their importance and expressing personal agreement or disagreement. Following the grid completion, the respondents elaborated on their choices and discussed their rationale for rating the statements in a particular way. Subsequent in-depth interviews, lasting from 45 minutes to 2 hours, included the researchers' follow-up questions. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed. The data underwent quantitative analysis through correlation and factor analyses for Q methodology (using the Ken-Q-Analysis online software) and qualitative analysis through qualitative content analysis and critical discourse analysis for the subsequent in-depth interviews.

The selected media actors represented diverse outlets - TV, newspapers (both printed and online), and news agencies. Interviews included Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB), pro-governmental TV Imedi, and pro-oppositional channels Mtavari, Formula, and TV Pirveli. Print media and news agencies like Netgazeti, Rezonansi, Radio Tavisupleba, Civil.ge, Interpressnews, and editors from FactChek.ge and Media Development Foundation (MDF) were also interviewed.

Instances of refusal to participate were noted, particularly from outlets with overtly anti-EU or pro-Russian stances, with the exception of TV Obieqtivi affiliated with the pro-Russian party Alliance of Patriots of Georgia.

The politicians were selected based on purposive sampling, covering major parties such as the ruling party Georgian Dream (GD) and the largest opposition party, United National Movement (UNM), along with its smaller factions like European Georgia, Strategy Aghmashenebeli, Droa, Girchi, as well as other opposition parties like Lelo, For Georgia, and For People - all positioning themselves as pro-European. Mostly party leaders and those handling foreign affairs were interviewed. Parties with anti-EU sentiments, notably Alliance of Patriots of Georgia and Democratic Movement - United Georgia, declined participation.

The quantitative Q analysis identified three significant factors reflecting diverse perspectives on Georgia's European integration and Europeanisation. Factor 1 consists of oppositional political and media actors, Factor 2 consists of governmental political and media actors, and Factor 3 includes a single respondent – a representative of a pro-Russian media outlet. Thus, these factors can be titled as “Oppositional Actors” (Factor 1), “Governmental Actors” (Factor 2), and “Pro-Russian Actor” (Factor 3). The primary theme that unites the opposition parties and pro-opposition media outlets in Factor 1 revolves around the concerns regarding Georgia's current foreign policy issues: it centres on the deviation discourse and hence, the Georgian government's role in leading the departure from the European course. The primary distinction between Factor 1 and Factor 2 lies in their perspectives on the ruling party's role in the country's European integration: as anticipated, governmental actors reject the idea of their deviation from Georgia's European path.

It should be mentioned that, in contrast to the consistent governmental narrative observed in the media analysis, which asserts the opposition's deviation from the European path, the interviews with ruling party politicians and pro-governmental media actors revealed a notable divergence: unlike their earlier claims, they stressed that neither they nor their political rivals deviated from the European course. This highlights the manipulative nature of governmental discourses, specifically their use of the deviation narrative to discredit the opposition parties in the eyes of wider society that is highly supportive of Georgia's European integration. Factor 3 turned out to be quite loaded with discursive manipulations. It is very typical for pro-Russian actors to claim support for Georgia's political neutrality, asserting their objection to external forces determining the country's fate. Yet, on closer examination, the term "external power" often refers specifically to "the West" rather than Russia. Consequently, they avoid acknowledging that distancing from the Western influence implies falling under the Russian influence for Georgia.

Three core themes were derived from the interviews with politicians and media representatives: Georgia's political orientation, pragmatic considerations linked to the country's European integration, and identity considerations stemming from the country's Europeanisation. Summarising key points on Georgia's political orientation, the views of political and media elites converge on four interrelated meta-arguments. The Choice argument explores Georgia's options, framing it within the dichotomy of the West vs. Russia, often viewed in terms of development vs. backsliding and liberalism vs. authoritarianism. The Small State argument highlights the country's

vulnerability due to its size, resource constraints, and security challenges, especially in the face of Russian threats. The Geopolitics argument delves into the clash between Russia and the EU/West, emphasising Russia's strategic interest in countering Western influences, leading to its attempts to divert countries like Georgia from the European path. Lastly, the Influence Mechanisms argument examines the tools employed by Russia and the EU, emphasising soft power strategies such as Russian propaganda and EU conditionality that point to the power imbalance between these actors and Georgia.

Pragmatic considerations of political and media actors focus on two prevailing discourses: One emphasising the EU's role in safeguarding Georgia's territorial unity and the other highlighting the EU's role in supporting human rights in the country. Identity considerations related to Georgia's European integration centre on the alignment of EU-associated liberal values with the Georgian identity. Political and media representatives generate overlapping discourses, drawing on historical and cultural arguments to naturalise Georgia's European integration. The polarisation between the government and opposition surfaces in accusations of betraying European liberal values, with the opposition critiquing the ruling party's conservative discourse as deviating from the European path, while the ruling party questioning the authenticity of the opposition's liberalism. This demonstrates the instrumentalisation of Europeanisation by both governmental and oppositional actors as a discursive strategy to legitimise own actions and discredit the opponent, which points to what Jacquot and Woll call the “strategic usage” of Europeanisation, amplifying the country's political polarisation.



HUNGARY

The research summary highlights the main findings of the interviews that had been conducted with 60 members of the Hungarian political and media elite between November 2022 and March 2023. The process followed the Q methodology supplemented with interviews, that is we first asked the interviewees to place 25 statements on a grid that followed the form of a reversed pyramid. The participants were asked to place the statements, which all originated in the Hungarian media, according to how they agree or disagree with them. The statements all referred to the European Union and related topics.

The elite interview sample reflects the two-thirds versus one-third proportion of the government – opposition divide following the media distribution as identified in the former stage of the research. The political elite sample includes members of the Hungarian Parliament (MPs), members of the European Parliament (MEPs), high-ranking ministerial civil servants (heads of departments and in similar or higher positions). The media elite comprises chief editors and leading journalists of the printed and on-line papers, televisions and radios along with members of the boards representing the owners. Snowball method has been applied to reach respondents. Anonymity was ensured throughout the process; both the interviewers and the interviewees received a code-number. The 60-member sample consists of 49 men and 11 women, half of the sample was over 50 years old, 29 belonged to the political elite and 31 to the media elite. The former group included 17 MPs and

MEPs and 12 civil servants, while the latter included 24 editors and journalists along with 7 media owners. In terms of political self-classification 3 out of 5 persons belonged to the right, roughly a quarter to the left, while the remainder belonged to the centre, marking 4 on a 7-point scale.

The Q analysis of the elite interviews identified four main factors: integrationist, sovereigntist, multi-speed and Huxit standpoints, explaining 70% of the variance. It is presumed that the description of the factors pinpoints the characteristic views of the Hungarian political and media elite about European integration. This presupposition is not self-evident, we cannot simply argue that the factors reflect the authentic opinion of the elite groups as the interviewees - due to the methodology of Q analysis – were obliged to choose between the given statements. Nevertheless, two substantive arguments support the hypothesis that the findings closely describe elite opinion patterns. First, the statements themselves have been imported from media discourses where elite opinions dominate. Second, the interviewees commented on their choices, and their arguments convincingly supported and refined the decisions relating to the factor classification.

The first factor represents those who share the integrationist standpoints. This is the strongest factor, which explains 1/3rd of the variance. Its decisive features are the following: it states that EU membership is advantageous for Hungary, the safety of Hungary is ensured by NATO and the EU, and the EU is the best guarantee to save democracy, human rights, and the rule of law in the member-states. The integrationist position is a broad umbrella term in the mindset of the Hungarian political and media elites. Alongside federalism it includes the idea of EU enlargement as well as pragmatic considerations and the strengthening of cultural links. Besides pragmatism, some representatives of this view attribute historical importance to European integration.

The statements of the second strongest, sovereigntist factor (explaining 23% of the variance) emphasise that the EU's institutional developments and symbolic gestures threaten national sovereignty, and its sanctions embody a concrete threat against energy safety in Hungary. The sovereigntists strongly oppose the criticism that the Hungarian government does not use the EU resources in a transparent way. They deny the views that migration could have a positive impact on the labour market, or the EU should step up against Russian and Chinese disinformation in all member-states. The sovereignty view largely reflects domestic political considerations and defends the political position of the government. Somewhat in contrast to these views they argue that the EU and NATO guarantee national security. They also accept that European and national identity are compatible.

Besides the two major factors of integrationism and sovereigntism there are two marginal ones: the multi-speed and the Huxit alternatives, explaining 8% and 6% of the variance respectively. It is also worth noting that there are two modes of discourse in elite interviews: a normative and a descriptive-analytical one. These are not necessarily differences between politicians and journalists, but differences of topics. Marginal discourse topics more often appear in the descriptive-analytical mode of discourse.

The multi-speed perspective posits that the integration process should continue in accordance with the preparedness of the individual state and not through the strengthening of central institutions This standpoint is different from sovereigntism as it claims that the Hungarian

government does not use the EU resources in a transparent way. Moreover, it denies that the Hungarian economy performs above the EU average or that the West is chaotic and declining, topics that widely appear in the sovereigntist factor. It categorically opposed Huxit or that the EU threatens Hungarian sovereignty and the energy safety of Hungarian households. It positively evaluates the EU's advantages in pragmatic terms and recognising European identity, while it also claims that Hungary is the embodiment of true European values and the defender of Christianity and family values.

The defining statement of the fourth factor is that sooner or later Hungary should exit the EU. This view is represented by a small number of respondents from the extreme right opposition. They regard the EU as the embodiment of negative trends, the respondents think that the EU is threatening the independence and the energy safety of Hungary. They contest that EU membership is advantageous for Hungary. They argue that the EU should not intervene in minority issues within the member-states. This factor is close to the sovereigntist standpoints, especially in migration and gender issues, but it represents a more radical version. At the same time, they also advocate views that are critical about the government and particularly they posit that the government does not handle the EU resources in a transparent way.

One of the differences between political and media elites is that among politicians sovereigntism, while within the media elite integrationism is the dominant discourse. The other main difference is that Huxit as a discourse in its own right appears only among politicians.

IRELAND

This stage of the research covers the analysis of interviews with political and media elites in Ireland using the Q methodology, conducted from October 2022 to May 2023. To understand the views of Irish political and media elites on Europeanisation and Ireland's relationship with the EU, fifty respondents were recruited. The interviews applied the Q methodology where interviewees were asked to sort 26 dominant statements relating to media coverage of EU affairs, foreign policy, and Ireland-EU relations, derived from the media analysis stage of the project research. Interviewees were asked to position the statements on the Q grid, assessing their relative importance and expressing personal agreement or disagreement with each statement. The grid ranking exercise was followed by in-depth interviews where respondents elaborated on their choices and explained their statement sorting rationale. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

The data generated using the Q grids underwent quantitative analysis through correlation and factor analyses used in Q Methodology, employing the Ken-Q Analysis online software package. The collected in-depth interview data underwent qualitative content analysis and critical discourse analysis to further explain the key factors derived from the Q grids used to categorise respondent groupings and reflections.

The main themes from Q statements included key pragmatic and identity considerations of Irish elites regarding Europeanisation and arguments related to the EU's role in recent crises, including Brexit and Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Fifty representatives of political and media elites were recruited to participate in the in-depth interviews: 25 politicians and think tank representatives and 25 media representatives, including chief editors, political editors and reporters focusing on Ireland's foreign policy, politics or EU affairs. Political elites were recruited using purposive sampling, based on their party or political affiliations, including TDs and senators (members of the Irish parliament, the Oireachtas, comprising the Dáil and the Seanad Éireann) from the ruling coalition and opposition parties; Irish MEPs; local councillors; Irish staff in EU institutions; and EU-focused think tank representatives. All the major political parties have been covered, with the ruling coalition representatives representing half of the political elites interviewed. Other respondents represent the largest opposition party – Sinn Fein – and smaller opposition parties and factions, including Labour, Social Democrats, Independents.

Media elites recruited represent a range of Irish broadcast media, newspapers (broadsheet quality and tabloid), and digital news websites (national and local). Representatives of a fringe anti-EU media outlet were invited to participate, but did not consent to participating in the Q methodology interviews. A total of 50 respondents completed the Q grids, and 38 of these subsequently consented to participate in interviews. 28 respondents eventually gave full informed consent for the interviews to be recorded and transcribed.

The respondents' grid rankings and interview responses allowed us to identify four significant factors derived from the Q analysis displaying a range of diverse viewpoints on Ireland's relationship with the EU and the process of Europeanisation. Factor 1 (Media EuroExperts) includes representatives of Irish media elites as well as editors and correspondents focused on EU or political affairs, who are well-versed in EU affairs and have a balanced and mostly pragmatic view of Ireland-EU relations, focusing less on identity issues. Factor 2 (Ruling Coalition EuroOptimists) unites representatives of the ruling party coalition and public service media who share an overall positive and optimistic outlook on the EU's perception in Ireland and are enthusiastic about further Ireland-EU integration. Factor 3 (EU-Critical Elites) comprises representatives of opposition parties (mostly left-leaning ones) and several representatives of news media and local media, who share a more EU-critical set of views on a range of issues covered by the ranked statements and express more cautious sentiments about how Ireland's relations with the European Union are developing. Finally, Factor 4 (Cross-Domain Geopolitical Euro-pragmatists) brings together more pragmatically inclined political and media elite actors, including representatives of ruling coalition parties, EU-focused think tanks, and mainstream/tabloid media. These respondents express more pragmatic assessments of Ireland-EU relations, but can also be critical of the EU's role as a normative power in the region and of Ireland's successes in upholding EU values.

Elite respondents on the whole do not diverge significantly in their perceptions of the value of Europeanisation and European integration for Ireland. Dominant discourses amongst the political and media elite respondents included the supremacy of EU law, discussion of EU's support

for member state economies, and the pragmatic approach to internal EU solidarity prioritising shared values. Reflections on EU's relationship with Ireland and its leadership and support during crises such as climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic emerged. Pragmatic considerations dominated, even among Euro-critical respondents. Varied justifications were suggested for respondents' assessments of specific EU policies, even among more pro-EU respondents. The discourse of mutual benefit was prevalent, connecting Europeanisation with Hibernicisation.

The perception of Ireland as a "special case" due to its dual focus on EU and U.S. and as a "poster child for EU success" emerged across multiple discursive contexts. Respondents thought Ireland shared a common identity with the EU, intrinsic to their 'mutual benefit' relationship. Elites were more critical of the EU's role as a guarantor of democratic values, and felt that internal tensions (e.g., rule of law backsliding) posed a threat to European identity and EU's future. Key identity discourses were shaped by the 'mutual benefit' narrative; Ireland is seen as making an important practical but idealised contribution to the EU. The dominant discourses around Brexit focused on the EU's overall handling of negotiations and Ireland's border and peace process concerns; and the economic fallout of Brexit. Pragmatic factors predominated: Elites praised the EU's handling of Ireland's Brexit-related concerns while also asserting Ireland's unique contribution to the EU and its special status, allowing for positive assessment of the EU's role while minimizing the threat to Irish national identity.

The discourses around Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its impact on the EU and Irish economies and the solidarity of member states combined identity and pragmatic factors. Respondents also shared opinions on Ukraine's EU accession path, and, most prominently, their views on Irish neutrality in the context of EU's changing defence and security strategy amid new challenges. The 'two-way affair' Europeanisation discourse re-emerged alongside the themes of solidarity and shared values, and specifically around the issue of emerging EU security threats and Ireland's military neutrality.

The "solidarity" discourse is a constant factor present in Irish elite perceptions, and has informed both pragmatic and identity considerations. A strategy used by the Irish elites to deal with threatening identity factors in the EU's normative power is their discursive domestication of Europeanisation-related considerations to underscore Irish relevance to the EU on one side, and legitimisation of national and local policy decisions on the other. Although the Irish neutrality debate was reactivated, concerns about EU's power to dictate common defence and security policy were recontextualised by elites into a debate about Ireland's unique position as a neutral "geopolitical broker". This was combined with pragmatic arguments for collaborating with the EU on security but retaining autonomy in the service of the Irish-EU shared values.



PORTUGAL

Based on results of media analysis, the CES team conducted interviews about the European Union (EU) and Portugal's integration, or Europeanisation, with Portuguese 50 media and political actors, in late 2022 and early 2023. We used the 10 discursive units and the related

major, adjacent, and counter-discourses to elaborate 25 statements, then contacted the main actors identified in media analysis for interviews in which we gauged their opinions about those statements. They thus represent the second vector of the media-elite-public triangle. The interviewees' answers form patterns that allowed us to gather them into four groups, shown ahead. Then, we described and compared each of these groups' perspectives, identifying the pragmatic and identity factors that underpin these actors' views about the EU and Portugal's place in it, and their main propositions.

Of the 50 participants, 25 were political actors from the main parties, including cadres and members of the national and the European Parliament, and of the Government Cabinet of the centre-left Socialist Party (PS). The opposition was represented by members of the second main force, the centre-right Social-Democratic Party (PSD), and others in the left- and right-wing: the Left Bloc (BE), the Communist Party (PCP), the centre-left Free Party (Livre), the centre-right Liberal Initiative (IL), and the extreme-right party Enough (Chega). The other 25 interviewees were positioned at the centre of the news production process and the business, in the most read newspapers and most watched TV news shows analysed in the previous phase of research. This approach enabled the team to reach and cover the opinions of people in various positions, and address the views of the elite.

Measuring the patterns of interviewees' answers enabled their gathering in distinct positions. In this case-study, this has resulted in the following four groups, ordered by size.

- 1) The "Optimistic Europeanists" are the biggest group, with a very positive assessment of and alignment with EU integration and Europeanisation. This group views Portugal's role in the Union most positively, emphasising the country's central position within the EU.
- 2) The "Pragmatic Europeanists" aggregate pragmatic opinions about the opportunities that integration brings to Portugal, such as economic development, technological modernisation and democratisation, and are more concerned with security and defence issues and migration. This group views Portugal's current position pessimistically, deeming it to be socioeconomically peripheral within the EU.
- 3) The "Transformists" have a critical view of the EU in structural and conjunctural terms, rejecting, for example, the conditions attached to different EU programmes and policies identified as neoliberal, reflective of capitalist dynamics of exploitation, as well as the militarisation and securitisation of key political and social issues.
- 4) The "Mediators" are positioned between the governing elite and the left opposition, disagreeing with the left on the conditionality and security issues, and standing with the former in that EU economic and commercial agreements can be very beneficial for Portugal, for instance.

The views expressed by all groups reveal convergences and divergences that follow the ideological agendas of the different parties. There is no clear “anti-EU” position, but there are critical readings about the EU and Portugal’s role in it that should be further analysed. The interviewees’ assortment of the statements determined their final grouping, but they brought in nuances in comments that show theirs as quite non-dichotomous perspectives.

No statement drew complete consensus, but some ushered significant convergence and divergence between participants. There is a great level of convergence on how Portugal’s integration contributes to modernization and scientific innovation, even though the left-wing opposition raises concerns about the limits of these possibilities and other unwanted effects. However, for most critics the question is not whether the country should leave the EU, but how this membership should be situated, which is the country’s advantages and disadvantages, and how the EU itself should be structured. Hence, there is no clear-cut assessment, and the first two statements drawing the most convergence illustrate this nuanced view, with one deeming the EU a global actor promoting democracy and peace, and the other one, that EU institutions lack transparency and must be reformed. Clearly, the underlying understanding is that Europeanisation and integration in the EU are crucial issues for the country, and these distinctions make them a process under ongoing scrutiny.



SPAIN

This part of the research focuses on the analysis of interviews combining Q methodology conducted with political and media elites in Spain from October 2022 to January 2023. It involved 50 representatives of media and political elites in Spain. All respondents were presented with 25 statements related to Europeanisation in Spain. These statements were based on the previous research stage, in which we analysed media discourses on Europeanisation in Spain in six Spanish media outlets.

In the interviews, the respondents were asked to place 25 statements in a Q grid, based on two correlated assessments of each statement: the importance of the statement for the European integration project and the level of agreement/disagreement with the statement. After completing the Q Grid, each respondent was asked to explain the rationale behind placing certain statements in the most extreme poles of the Q grid (3, 2, -3 and -2). The comments of the respondents were further explored by follow up questions. On average, the interviews lasted between 45 to 60 minutes. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed. The Q Grids of the respondents were subjected to quantitative analysis through correlation and factor analyses for Q methodology (using Ken-Q-Analysis online software) as well as qualitative content analysis.

50 representatives of political and media elites participated in the in-depth interviews integrating Q methodology: 25 politicians and 25 media representatives. Politicians were sampled using purposive sampling based on their party affiliations while maintaining an accurate balance between the ideological tendencies of parties based on the number of seats these they hold in the Spanish Parliament. Thus, the two major political parties, the left-wing and current ruling party PSOE and right-wing and largest opposition party PP, represent the majority of the sampling with

ten respondents from the PSOE and nine respondents from the PP. The remaining respondents represent smaller political parties such as the radical-left party Podemos and its allies, with three respondents; the far-right party VOX, with two respondents; and the centre-right Ciudadanos with one respondent.

As for the 25 media representatives, they represent a wide range of media outlets – TV, radio, newspaper (both printed and online), and a news agency. Media representatives have been chosen taking into account their ideological tendency – progressive or conservative. Among TV outlets, the most popular ones have been targeted based on their ownership – public and private. Radio outlets have been chosen also based on ownership (public and private) and ideology.

The key output of the integrated data revealed 8 factors with an eigenvalue higher than one, which indicates that the respondents do not diverge much in their perceptions regarding the Q statements. The results are consistent with the Spanish political landscape. Europeanisation in Spain has been marked with a remarkably strong pro-European consensus among all major political parties. We decided to analyse the five factors with the highest explained variance since the remaining factors did not reveal additional insights.

The major factors are: 1. The left-leaning Euro-optimists. Its respondents reveal a very optimistic assessment regarding the EU's response to recent crises facing it; 2. The left leaning geopolitical critics. The respondents of this factor are critical of the EU's role as a security and defence actor; 3. The polarised factor. This factor reflects a clear ideological divide between the (radical) left and the (extreme) right in issues that are viewed as important by the respondents of this factor; 4. The left-leaning geopolitical optimists. This factor reflects satisfaction with the EU's response to the war in Ukraine; and 5. The anti-Brexiteers.

The five factors analysed demonstrate that in general terms, pragmatic considerations remain more dominant in discussing Europeanisation in Spain. The prominence of the pragmatic approach to Europeanisation is reflected in the high importance attached to issues such as the Next Generation funds, geopolitics and defence cooperation and Brexit. While a pragmatic approach was dominant in all factors, some elements of identity or value-based assessments were also visible.

Most of the factors mentioned above are centred around recent crises or events that were perceived by many as encompassing a transformative element for European integration. This includes the adoption of the Next Generation funds, the war in Ukraine and to lesser extent Brexit. Some factors centred around possible transformation or shifts in the role and status of Spain in the EU.

Many respondents believed that the war in Ukraine marks a profound change in The EU's geopolitical role and in its security and defence policies. They believed that the war in Ukraine had a transformative impact exemplified in the increased collaboration of member states and the massive and unprecedented sanctions imposed on Russia. Some acknowledged this positive change however remained cautious about its implications for the long run. Some remain convinced that even with such positive measures, the EU still needs to change its security and defence structures.

In relation to the Next Generation funds, many agreed that the funds have a transformative nature, reflected in their agreement with the term “window of opportunity”. Some respondents evaluated positively the adoption of the funds; however, they were sceptical about their transformative nature. Only few conservative respondents criticised the adoption of the funds from a neo-liberal perspective or voiced criticism regarding their management by the government. A similar trend was detected in relation to the significance of the centralised purchase of vaccines. As for Brexit, it was perceived by most respondents as a negative transformative event for the UK and much less for the EU.

The status of Spain in the EU, and whether Spain was going through a transformative moment in pursuit of a greater leadership role triggered polarised responses. However, the polarisation reflects international polarisation between the left and the right, with leftist respondents praising the performance of the Prime Minister of Spain and his leadership role while right-wing respondents undermining his leadership role.

Overall, the interviews demonstrate a strong pro-European sentiments. Three out of the five factors reflect a positive assessment of European integration. Even the factor that criticises the EU’s geopolitical role, the respondents want the EU to acquire greater autonomy in the defence domain, deepening hence the process of European integration. The interviews also demonstrate that the EU can be used as a leverage to discredit political opponents by accusing them of deviating from European values and frameworks. This was evident, for example, in the statements relating to the protection of rule of law, where the opposition tended to praise the role of the EU in halting certain governmental policies. It was also evident in the opposition’s discourses on the inability of the government to properly use EU funds.

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This project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101004534