Constructing "Normative power Europe": A critical analysis of the human rights narratives in Spanish media discourses on the European Union

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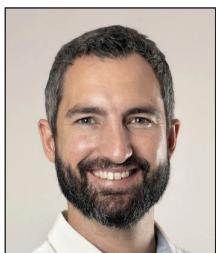
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Abstract

The conceptualization of the EU as a normative power has become a central theoretical framework in the field of European studies. This concept highlights the EU's role in the promotion of normative principles, particularly those concerning its core values as laid out in article 2 of the *Lisbon Treaty*: human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights. While the majority of academic works on *NPE* have mostly focused on the EU's external action, there is a growing trend to apply this concept to the study of member States that challenge the core values of the EU. This paper takes a step further in that endeavor through the analysis of Spanish media discourses on the EU, and their role in the discursive construction of the EU as a normative power, both internally and externally. Specifically, our research focuses on how the EU's commitment to human rights norms and the rule of law are reflected in dominant media discourses on the EU in Spanish media. To conduct our study, six national Spanish media outlets were selected based on the following criteria: Ownership; ideology; consumption; and impact. A final sample of 540 news items published between July 2021 and March 2022 were selected for analysis. Using a qualitative methodological approach that includes content analysis and critical discourse analysis, we analyzed the major discourses identified in relation to the EU, focusing on those in which the construction (or deconstruction) of the EU as a normative power is more prevalent. We also attempted to unfold how this construction is projected internally and externally.

Keywords

European Union; European Commission; Normative power; Human rights; Rule of law; EU's identity; EU's international role; Migrations; Hungary; Poland.

1. Introduction

Joaquín Almunia (**Almunia**, 2011, p. 2), a Spanish politician and a former vice-president of the European Commission once said that

> "what distinguishes the EU from other international organizations is the fact that the Union's most appealing asset is not economical but rather lies in its principles and values."

This conceptualization of the European Union (EU) reflects the notion of Normative Power Europe (NPE), first coined by Ian Manners (**Manners**, 2002). NPE has become a central theoretical framework in the field of European studies, and it is often used as a main catalyst of academic debates on the international role of the EU (**Diez**, 2013; **Rodríguez-Prieto**, 2019). According to NPE, there are nine normative principles embedded in EU laws and policies that constitute its *acquis communautaire* and *acquis politique*. Those are: sustainable peace, freedom, democracy, human rights, rule of law, equality, social solidarity, sustainable development and good governance (**Manners**, 2002; 2008). Traditionally, academic works on NPE have focused on the EU's international role and how it diffuses its norms to other political actors outside the Union (**Manners**, 2002; 2011; **Rodríguez-Prieto**, 2019; **Jenichen**, 2022). Most recently, NPE is being invoked to study EU Member States (EUMS) that challenge the core values of the EU, as identified by NPE (**Pollack**, 2022; **Vida**, 2019; **Mos**, 2013).

Following **Diez**'s (2005, p. 626) observation that

> "the most interesting question about normative power therefore is not whether Europe is a normative power or not, but how it is constructed as one",

the aim of this study is to analyze if and how media discourses on the EU in Spanish media contribute to the discursive construction of the EU as a normative power. Specifically, our analysis focuses on if and how the EU's commitment to human rights norms and the rule of law are reflected in dominant media discourses on the EU in Spain. To conduct our study, six Spanish media outlets were selected based on the following criteria: Ownership (private *vs.* public); ideology (conservative *vs.* liberal); consumption (traditional outlets *vs.* online); and impact (audiences reached). A final sample of 540 news items published between July 2021 and March 2022 were selected for analysis. Using a qualitative methodological approach that includes content analysis and critical discourse analysis, we analyzed the major discourses identified in relation to the EU where human rights narratives are relevant. In our analysis, we studied how human rights narratives are used to portray or construct the EU as a normative power, and whether the marginalization or the discrediting of human rights narratives in debating certain issues can deconstruct the notion of NPE or contradict it. We also attempted to analyze how this construction is projected internally and externally. Our critical discourse analysis is based, inter alia, on a Foucauldian framework focusing on the forms and the limits of the sayable, conservation and appropriation (**Foucault**, 1991). We also attempted to identify communicative strategies that are used to promote narratives connected to the perception of the EU as a space of human rights values. The use of discourse analysis in international relations is becoming more common (**Diez**, 2001; **Holzscheiter**, 2014). Utilizing critical discourse analysis helps in unfolding the interplay between power and knowledge production, and it can explain how hegemonic discourses emerge, and how they are altered or challenged over time by the emergence of new discourses.

This article is composed of two basic parts. The first part reviews the emergence of the notion of NPE and the centrality of human rights and the rule of law in it. The second part analyzes to what extent major discourses on the EU in Spanish media conceptualize the EU as a space of human rights values and rule of law.

2. The EU as a Normative Power

The efforts to conceptualize and assess the identity and the nature of the EU and, above all, the role it plays in international relations have dominated the research agenda on the EU's foreign policy. One of the most widely used approaches –and to a large extent one of the most applauded ones– has been NPE, introduced in 2002 by **Manners** (2002).

Indeed, some innovative academic concepts emerged in the post-Cold War period, particularly after the approval of the *Maastricht Treaty*, which fostered the debate on the new role that the EU was expected to play in the global context

(**Whitman**, 1998). As Ian Manners himself recalls, authors such as **Duchêne** (1972) had already insisted that the EU, due to its particularities, had to be considered a "civilian power[1]" (**Maull**, 1990, p. 92). In contrast, others such as Hedley **Bull** (1982), insisted that military capabilities were relevant. He argued that in the absence of military capabilities, a *power* could not be considered as such, not even a *sui generis* or civilian power, as was argued in relation to the EU.

Overcoming these diatribes, **Manners** (2002) put forward a new concept: that of the EU as a "normative power". The concept of normative power overcomes the traditional approaches to understanding the EU not for what is does but rather for what is it,[2] that is a *changer of norms* (**Manners**, 2002) that

> "seeks to promote a different regulation in accordance with its own regulatory model" (**Rodríguez-Prieto**, 2019, p. 76).

Indeed, there have been five basic elements in normative terms that have constituted the EU internally: peace, freedom, the rule of law and human rights (**Manners**, 2002, p. 242). Additionally, one could speak of four additional norms within the constitution and practices of the EU. Those are social solidarity, anti-discrimination and the protection of minorities, sustainable development, and good governance. However, the latter are more contested (**Manners**, 2002). These are the same normative elements that the EU will also seek to project in its external action in such a way that they shape international relations and the different elements of the international system, thus contributing, in the words of former High Representative Javier Solana, "to the global common good" (**Hardwick**, 2011).

This projection takes place, in particular, through a series of strategies (**Manners**, 2002, p. 244):

- contagion or unintended diffusion;
- informational diffusion, the result of a conscious process of communication through declarations and other initiatives taken by the European institutions, the *Commission* above all;
- procedural diffusion, through the institutionalization of relations with third parties;
- transfer, based on the introduction of benefits and sanctions for compliance with the desired standards;
- open diffusion, resulting from the physical presence of the EU in the situations or contexts in question; and
- the cultural filter, relating to the learning and adaptation of standards by third parties.

These strategies are ultimately based on

> "persuasion, argumentation and the acquisition of prestige or embarrassment" (**Manners**, 2011, p. 235).

Manners (2008, p. 46) identified three principles that should govern the EU's promotion of its substantive values: 'living by example', 'being reasonable', and 'doing least harm'.

Manners (2011, p. 233) himself would highlight years later the importance of consistency and coherence in the promotion of these norms. In this sense, if the actions taken to promote certain values contradict them, the effectiveness of the projection will be reduced and the capacity of the actor, the EU in this case, to act as a normative power gets reduced accordingly as well. Similarly, if the EU fails to assert these principles domestically (**Cohen-Tanugi**, 2021, p. 91), or sovereignty or self-interest of states take priority over normative commitments (**Hardwick**, 2011), or some members call these values into question (**Cadier**, 2019, p. 37), the EU´s ability to project its norms beyond its borders could also be reduced.

It is important to note that the concept of normative power accounts for both civilian and military capabilities. Moreover, the notion of normative power is in line with that of "smart power," as a combination of hard and soft power in the right way and in the right proportion, as **Nye** (2009) would later argue. In order to be a normative power, it would be then necessary to have smart power, i.e., both, strong military and economic capabilities as well the ability to project influence and generate appeal. This being said, however, we must consider that not every actor with smart power is necessarily a normative power.

The events that followed the end of the Cold War proved the wisdom of this approach, with the display of significant progress by the end of the 1990s, not only in the field of civilian capabilities but also in that of military capabilities[3] (**Abad-Quintanal**, 2021), reflecting the EU's growing efforts to advance towards its strategic autonomy (**Palm**, 2021).

Consequently, the growing civil, ideational and military power of the EU has created a basis on which to consolidate over decades its role as a normative power. A power capable not only of acting internally on the basis of clearly established norms, but also capable of exporting these norms abroad –what has been called the 'Brussels effect' (**Cohen-Tanugi**, 2021, p. 91). Accordingly, these become the cornerstone of its external projection and its capacity to condition the behavior of non-EU member states (*SEAE*, 2016) and to define international relations according to its own preferences.

Diez and Pace argue that NPE

> "is a discursive construction rather than an objective fact" (**Diez**; **Pace**, 2007, p. 210);

the power of the concept, hence,

> "rests in the identity it provides for the EU and the changes it imposes on others, partly through its hegemonic status" (**Diez**; **Pace**, 2007, p. 210).

It is

> "first and foremost a discourse in which EU actors themselves construct themselves as 'model citizens'" (**Diez**; **Pace**, 2007, p. 211).

Diez argues that

> "the narrative of 'normative power Europe' constructs the EU's identity as well as the identity of the EU's others in ways which allow EU actors to disregard their own shortcomings unless a degree of self-reflexivity is inserted" (**Diez**, 2005, pp. 626-627).

The same author emphasizes that the articulation of identities is always infused with power. However, judging whether the construction of a particular identity is problematic or not depends on the context in which it is viewed. In the case of NPE, the content of the norms in itself is positive, since it envisions a more peaceful and a cosmopolitical world. Nevertheless, if these norms are projected without self-reflection,

> "the identity construction that they entail allows the continued violation of the norms within the EU" (**Diez**, 2005, p. 632).

Some scholars have claimed that the EU's decision to ignore or downplay human rights violations in certain countries and to focus the attention on violations in others suggests that the EU is not driven exclusively or primarily by its commitment to universal norms, instead, it can be driven by its own interests (**Zimmermann**, 2007; **Haukkala**, 2008; **Erickson**, 2011, **Pollack**, 2022). Others claim that the EU's material interests may underlie its normative policies. For example, **Kelemen** and **Vogel** (2009) argue that the EU environmental leadership is motivated not only by concern over the environment but out of economic interests.

Since the discursive construction of the EU as a normative power is a precondition for the EU and its institutions to be able to project themselves as normative actors, the aim of this study is to analyze whether media discourses on the EU in Spain contribute (or not) to the construction of the EU as a normative power.

The media landscape in Spain is characterized by a high level of political parallelism (**Teruel-Rodríguez**, 2016). Media parallelism refers to

> "a pattern or relationship where the structure of the political parties is somewhat reflected by the media organizations" (**De-Albuquerque**, 2018).

However, joining the European Community has never been a polarizing political project in Spain. A strong pro-European consensus always existed among political elites in Spain. When Spain joined the European Community, Europeanization was viewed as a path to democratization by the major political forces at the time (**Pérez-Escoda** *et al.*, 2023; **Ruiz**; **Egea**, 2011). The stance of the Spanish media on European integration is aligned with the strong pro-European tendencies of the major political parties in the country (**Sojka**; **Vázquez**, 2014). However, Spanish media outlets remain highly focused on national political systems compared to European affairs (**Sotelo**, 2009). **Candón** and **Márquez** (2014) note that there is a traditional deficit of coverage of the EU by the Spanish media. Additionally, a European perspective is not sufficiently taken into account in the analysis of the processes of European integration (**Díaz-Nosty**, 2005).

A study by **Menéndez** (2010) suggests that even pro-European media are likely to highlight negative stories in covering the EU, since negative or conflicting news attract readers. According to his study, there were more negative stories about the EU in pro-European Spanish media (and in France and the UK) compared to positive or neutral stories.

At a European level, media coverage of the EU depends highly on official sources, which leads the media to reproduce the messages of EU experts, especially in economic matters (**Arrese**; **Vara-Miguel**, 2016).

Having this context in mind, our study attempts to address the following questions:

- To what extent does the EU and its officials construct the EU as a normative power in discussing major issues covered by the Spanish media?
- Is the EU consistent in invoking human rights narratives in discussing major European issues?
- To what extent do the Spanish media adopt a human rights framing for covering major European affairs?

3. Methodology

The article is based on a mixed methodological design that aims to combine the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative research methods. The research is divided into two phases, based on the framing theory developed by **Borah** (2011).

In the first phase, the research team used content analysis to extract quantitative data from the selected news outlets (table 1). This technique systematically and objectively analyzes text-based communication content to identify patterns and trends throughout the exploration of large datasets.

In the second phase, critical discourse analysis (CDA) was applied to examine the news items from a qualitative perspective. CDA is a method of analysis that focuses on the language and discourse used in communication and how it can be used to construct and reinforce social norms and power dynamics. This approach allows for a more in-depth and interpretive analysis and can provide insights into the underlying meanings and ideologies present in the data.

Analyzing data can be challenging, especially when it involves multiple researchers who may have different interpretations of the data being studied. A rigorous methodology was put in place to ensure the coders' neutrality and coherency. This methodology involved a series of meetings and work sessions between September and December 2021. During these meetings, the research team agreed upon specific analysis criteria that would be used to interpret the data consistently. Nine coders formed the team. To ensure consistency and accuracy in the coding process, each researcher's work was reviewed and adjusted according to the operational definitions of each category. This step was essential to guarantee that each researcher understood correctly the categories and keywords used to interpret the data. The list of 20 keywords used to analyze the data included terms such as Europeanization, European Commission, polarization, Brexit, recovery funds, human rights, LGTBIQ, European migration, European frontiers, Ukraine, European affairs, European parliament, rule of law, European regulation, feminism, multiculturalism, refugees, minorities, sanctions, security, and cybersecurity. These keywords were chosen to cover a broad range of topics relevant to the study, ensuring comprehensive data analysis.

The news items studied in both phases were selected from six of Spain's leading national media outlets based on four criteria: ownership (public *vs.* private), format (traditional *vs.* digital), editorial line (conservative *vs.* liberal), and type of medium (television and newspapers). This selection process ensures that the study is representative of the diverse range of news outlets in Spain.

3.1. News item sampling

Sampling was a major strategic decision. Namely, defining which news items were to be analyzed and how they were to be accessed. The team used the *Twitter* accounts of all the selected media to perform the massive data download. At the global level, news organizations have consolidated their official social media accounts as an additional communication channel with their audience in addition to their offline strategy. Spanish media use their official *Twitter* channels to disseminate their agenda-setting to reach their audiences directly as an alternative channel (**Casero-Ripollés**; **Alonso-Muñoz**; **Marcos-García**, 2022). The scraping technique was the most suitable one for managing large amounts of data. All data from 12 *Twitter* accounts from the six selected news organizations were downloaded and stored from July 2021 to March 2022. The official accounts were:

- *El País* (@el_pais; @elpais_espana; @elpais_inter)
- *ABC* (@abc_mundo; @abc_es)
- *Elconfidencial.es* (@ECInter; @elconfidencial)
- *Eldiario.es* (@eldiarioes)
- *Antena 3* (@antena3int; @A3Noticias)
- *Televisión Española* (@rtvenoticias; @telediario_tve).

Table 1. News media selection by criteria (N=6)

Ownership	Public	Private
	RTVE	Eldiario.es Elconfidencial.es Antena3 El País ABC
Format	**Legacy**	**Digital native**
	RTVE Antena3 ABC El País	Eldiario.es Elconfidencial.es
Editorial line	**Conservative**	**Liberal**
	Antena3 ABC Elconfidencial.es	RTVE El País Eldiario.es
Platform	**TV**	**Newspapers**
	RTVE Antena3	ABC El País Eldiario.es Elconfidencial.es

The scraping technique was applied using the *NVivo* web browser software "NCapture," which allowed us to quickly and easily capture all the tweets published from these accounts during the selected timeframe. The researchers downloaded the captured data every 15 days and stored it in *Excel* sheets for retrieval. As a result, 162,944 tweets were extracted from the 12 accounts. Once the tweets were captured and stored, the research team filtered the messages to detect items related to the EU to obtain the final sample. The filtering process was carried out using keywords previously agreed upon by the researchers and considering the research objectives. Table 2 shows the filtered news items by medium and month of the sample period. A final sample of 543 news items was selected for analysis between July 2021 and March 2022 (n=543).

Table 2. News items per outlet and month (n=162,944)

| Media outlets	No. tweets	News items selection per month									
		Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
ABC	27,708	7	6	5	11	15	8	7	14	9	82
Antena 3	18,325	5	1	5	9	9	8	6	7	11	61
Elconfidencial.es	21,804	9	0	9	12	23	4	7	18	12	94
Eldiario.es	24,902	8	7	11	17	28	14	10	18	17	130
El País	35,592	10	6	3	8	9	7	7	13	17	80
RTVE	34,613	8	7	7	13	11	12	10	17	11	96
Total	162,944	47	27	40	70	95	53	47	87	77	543

3.2. Content analysis (CA)

The final sample was analyzed using a two-stage approach that began with content analysis. According to **Thayer** *et al.* (2007), this method is ideal for communication research as it reveals connections between concepts and relationships between ideas that might not be immediately apparent. To ensure reliability, the research team established categories and codes to identify key discourses. A codebook was created and used by all researchers to ensure a robust and reliable analysis (**Lombard**; **Snyder-Duch**; **Bracken**, 2002; **Krippendorff**, 2013). The analytical standards were agreed upon in previous studies related to the current project (**Pedrero-Esteban**; **Pérez-Escoda**; **Establés**, 2021; **García-Carretero** *et al.*, 2022), and the team of nine researchers worked together to develop codes and meanings. Any doubts about the codification were resolved through majority voting to reach a consensus on the operational definitions of each category and maintain neutrality in the coding (**Lincoln**; **Guba**, 1985). The data was then downloaded into the *NVIVO SQR* software for further analysis.

3.3. Discourse analysis (DA)

In this study, we employed a mixed methodology approach to identify major discourses present in the sample of news stories. Following **Krippendorff** (2013), this approach involved both content analysis (CA) and discourse analysis techniques. Implementing *NVIVO* with CA and discourse analysis DA techniques facilitates deriving insights from written and audiovisual content (**Krippendorff**, 2013). Based on Bernard Berelson's (**Berelson**, 1971) definition, this analysis involves the objective, systematic, and quantifiable description of manifest content to comprehend the sender, the receiver, and the message of the communication process. While the technique is flexible, it must be standardized and mechanical (**Berelson**, 1971). This is accomplished through various attributes and categories for coding within the software. The team employed a deductive approach to design the details of the attributes for analysis, including media, authorship, approach, stance towards the EU (pro/neutral/anti), journalistic genre, and semiotic elements used in each piece of information.

In the second phase of category attribution, an inductive analysis was performed, which examined the dominant themes and the primary actors involved in the narratives presented by the media. To enhance the neutrality of the coding process, the team followed a standardized approach during various working sessions to establish analysis criteria and revise each researcher's codifications per the operational definitions of each category. This process was consistent with previous work conducted by the team (**García-Carretero** *et al.*, 2022). Specifically, we systematically coded and categorized the content of the news stories based on the dominant topics that were detected, such as Covid-19, immigration, Brexit, and so forth, as can be seen in Graph 1.

To be able to detect the discourses that emerge in the context of the identified topics, we used the *Nvivo* memos, which allowed the creation of collaborative working documents that can be consulted in real-time by all members of the team. Memos enabled us to record the ideas, insights, interpretations, or growing understanding of the analyzed material. The distribution of discourse dominance within media outlets was calculated based on the proportion of each discourse present in all the discourses analyzed in the chosen media outlets during the agreed timeframe. In addition to the major discourses detected, we analyzed adjacent discourses, and counter-discourses related to the former. Adjacent discourses refer to those closely related or connected to the major discourses. Counter-discourses refer to those that challenge
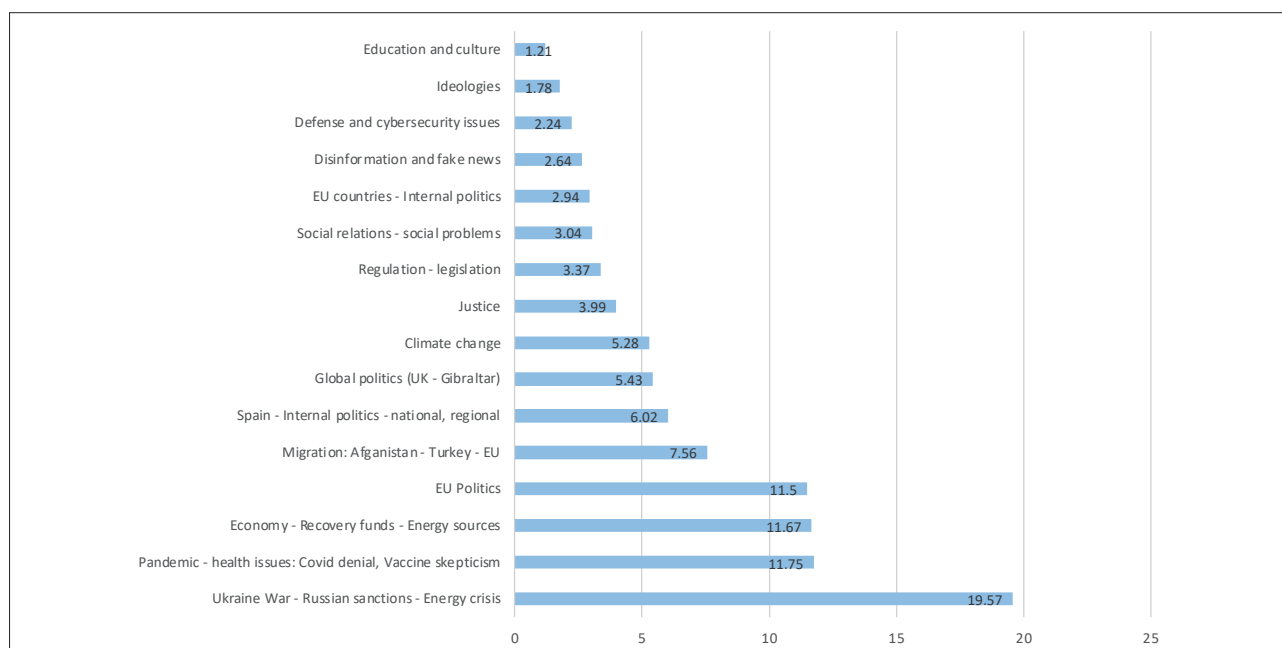

Graph 1. Dominant topics
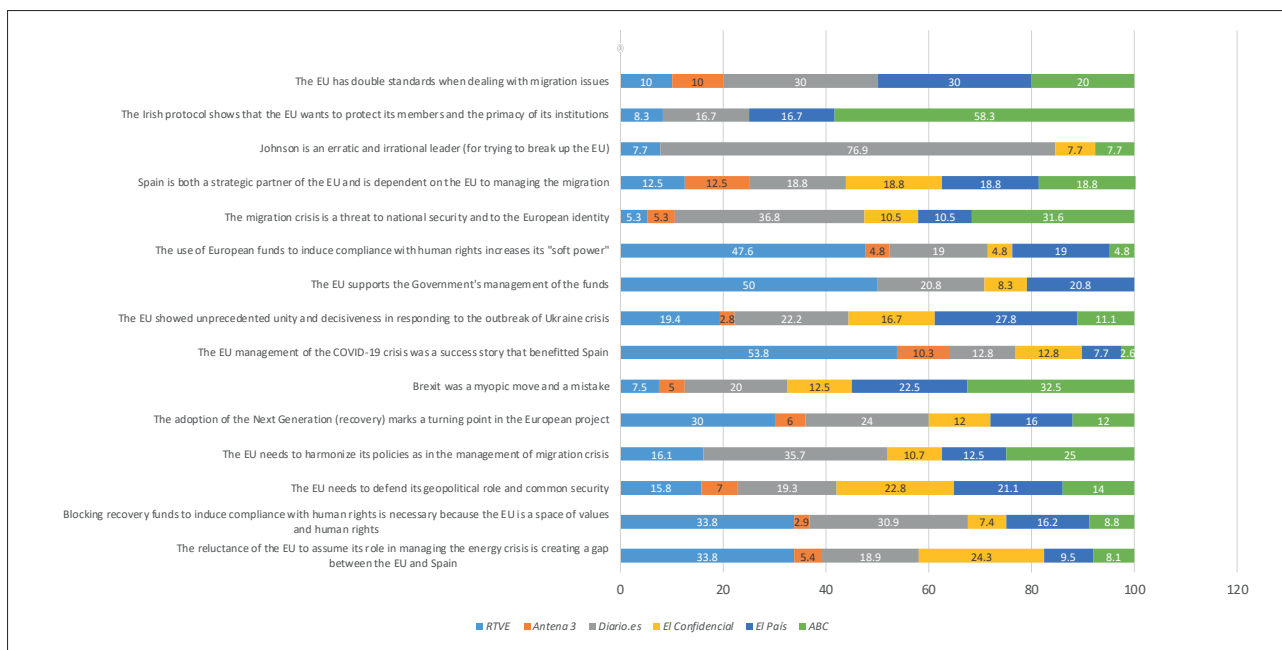
Graph 2. Major discourses and their adjacent and counter discourses per media (%)

or contradict the major discourses. The results in Graph 2 show the top eight most dominant discourses for each media outlet regarding the EU and their adjacent and counter discourses.

The construction (or deconstruction) of the EU as a Normative Power was detected in more than one discourse, whether major, adjacent, or counter. As will be further elaborated in section 4, human rights narratives can be used to frame certain discourses or can be embedded in them, as demonstrated in Graph 3.

3.4. Critical discourse analysis (CDA)

This final stage of the research used critical discourse analysis (CDA) to conduct an in-depth study of the narratives identified through content analysis. This approach aims to unravel the hidden meanings and connections in the sample. Here we find a reconfiguration of the sayable, i.e., what is said and how it is said in the identified dominant discourses, and how these discourses change overtime, and how they are appropriated by different actors (**Foucault**, 1991). We analyzed the use of rhetorical devices, framing, and other language-based techniques that can shape public opinion. CDA is not a methodology in and of itself but rather an analytical practice that allows researchers to examine social issues, power dynamics in discourse, the relationship between the text and society, and the interpretative framework (**Van-Dijk**, 2017).
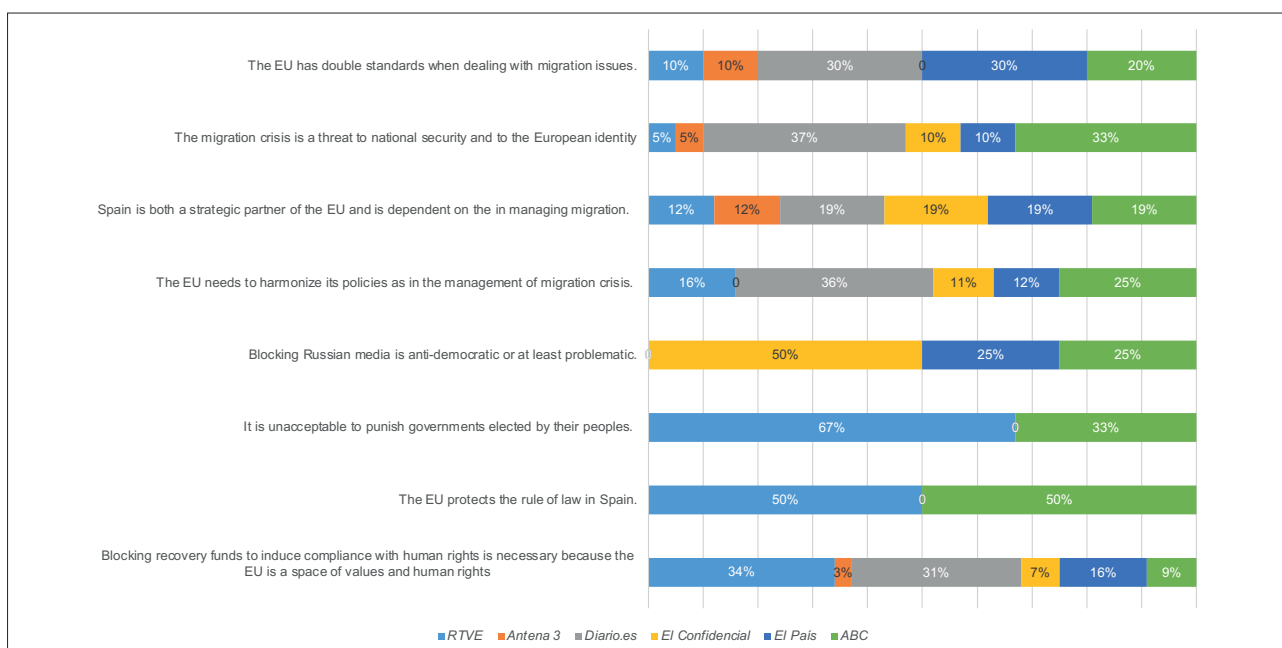
Graph 3. Human rights and the rule of law related discourses per outlet (%)

4. Analysis

According to our study, narratives that construct the EU as a space of human rights values and norms are transversal, and they are embedded in different thematic discourses on the EU. However, their visibility and their role in shaping major discourses and their adjacent secondary discourses varies depending on the issue involved. For example, the coverage of the EU´s decision to withhold funds from Hungary and Poland due to democratic and human rights concerns was dominated by human rights narratives. In the coverage of other topics, such as the recurrent migration crises, human rights narratives were present but overall they were not the dominant narratives used to frame this issue. Instead, they were overshadowed by a securitarian approach to migration. In the coverage of some issues, such as discourses related to the need to strengthen the geopolitical role of the EU and the need to depend less on the United States for defending EU interests, human rights narratives were invisible. Interestingly, in the sample analyzed, the strongest human rights narratives are invoked in the context of internal debates, where the transformative power of the EU in the field of human rights is captured in relation to Member States, and less in relation to third States, as demonstrated in subsequent sections.

4.1. Allocation of *Next Generation* funds

Media discourses on the allocation of the Next Generation funds are built on an ideology schema (**Van-Dijk**, 2013) that strongly constructs the EU as a space of human rights values and the rule of law. Europeans are portrayed as strong supporters of these values. For example, in "The Europeans want the funds to go only to countries that respect the rule of law," the *ABC* gave an extensive coverage to the *Eurobarometer on the State of the Union*, highlighting that EU citizens view the rule of law and democratic values as key values that should be respected by Member States, therefore the reception of funds should be conditioned by the respect of those values (**R.C.**, 2021). Even the title chosen for this item gives visibility to the EU as a space of human rights values.

The media discourses not only treat human rights and the rule of law as pivotal for the construction of the European identity, but they also highlight the role of the European legal order in ensuring the centrality of those principles internally through institutionalization. This can be seen in news headlines such as:

> "The *Commission* will use all its powers to defend the primacy of European law in the face of Poland's challenge" (*RTVE*, 2021d),

> "Brussels asks the European justice system to impose economic sanctions on Poland for its assault on judicial independence,"

and

> "Brussels squeezes Hungary and Poland with revision of European funds for their authoritarian and homophobic drift" (**González**, 2021).

The discourse on the centrality of human rights and the rule of law in the EU's political and legal order continues till February 2022 when the President of the *European Parliament*, Roberta Metsola, applauds the fact that

> "the *Commission* and the *Parliament* have managed to link European funds to the democratic behavior of these governments [referring to Poland and Hungary]" (**Serbeto**, 2022b).

This discourse was also adopted by Spanish politicians. In an interview in *TVE* the socialist MEP Eider Gardeazábal applauds the *European Court*'s ruling authorizing the withholding of funds:

> "The challenge now is to explain the link between the rule of law and the budget. What we must make very clear, and not only to the governments of Hungary and Poland, but to everyone, is that the aim of this regulation is not to sanction. The aim of this regulation is to ensure compliance with the rule of law and that governments respect the rule of law" (*RTVE*, 2022a).

Another manifestation of the adoption of human rights discourses by local politicians is the declarations of Juan Fernando López Aguilar, chairman of the *European Parliament*'s *Civil Liberties Committee*:

> "...[freedom of expression] is essential for the existence of information pluralism [...] pluralism is consecrated as a superior value of democratic legal systems that deserve that name, of course this is the case of Spain, and it must also be so in the European Union [...] And we say again and again to the rulers of Hungary and Poland [...] that in no case can democracy be reduced or confined simply to the majority that supports you in *Parliament*. Because democracy is not only the Government by a majority that supports you, it is, above all, respect for minorities that oppose you" (*RTVE*, 2021e).

He further added that the EU is based on "rights and obligations. And you cannot enjoy all the rights, to vote, come here, speak endlessly in the European Parliament and then not abide by the rules that the rest of us abide by" (*RTVE*, 2021e).

The EU's decision to withhold funds from Hungary and Poland was backed by the Spanish left and the Spanish right alike. For example, in a statement by *Izquierda Unida* ('United Left'), it is emphasized that:

> "The discriminatory law against the LGTBI community passed by the Hungarian government requires a firm reaction, and I am glad to have listened today to Mr Michel and Mrs Von der Leyen's [...] clear position in defence of the rule of law" (*RTVE*, 2021c).

An example from the right could be evidenced in a statement by politicians from *Partido Popular* (*PP*) (Popular Party):

> "The European *PP* defends the rule of law among the 27 Member States, and this is an immovable principle for us. That is why we were one of the signatories to the call for European funds to be conditional on compliance with the rule of law by all parties" (*RTVE*, 2021c).

The only dissenting voice was that of the radical right wing party *Vox*, which did not support this move as expressed by Jorge Buxadé, vice-president of the party and a MEP:

> "We have not created the EU to subject the governments that have been legitimately appointed by their people to the path that it decides" (*RTVE*, 2021c).

However, even the conservative media criticize the position of *Vox* and its leadership. An example of this is the article "La caverna de Santiago Abascal" (The Cavern of Santiago Abascal), published in the conservative media outlet *El Confidencial* (**Amón**, 2021). The article criticizes Abascal's anti-European stance ("Abascal doesn't like the euro or Europe"), and his position on key human rights related issues:

> [*Vox*] poisons society with the sinister choreography of xenophobia, machismo, nationalism, anti-Europeanism, homophobia, obscurantism and resistance to the evidence of climate change. Nothing better than Abascal's messianism to excite the instincts and stimulate the emotions [...] He would like Spain to be the Hungary of Orbán, the Poland of *Law and Justice* (**Amón**, 2021).

In his sense, anti-Europeanism is associated with negative attitudes towards human rights. The discourses on the EU's commitment to human rights and the rule of law are utilized to create "us vs. them" dichotomy, with "us" being Europeanists who believe in human rights values and "them" the nationalists who challenge them, as could be seen in this quote by Juan Fernando López Aguilar:

> "In the last 10 years, anti-European seats have multiplied in the *European Parliament*, and today they applauded the nationalist and reactionary speech of Polish Prime Minister Morawiecki with avarice, and the extreme right applauded with glee. But fortunately, clearly pro-European majority is still breathing in the *European Parliament*, and it has told Prime Minister Morawiecki what he had to hear. It cannot be that a State accesses all the benefits of being a member of the European Union, including resilience and recovery funds, without fulfilling any of the obligations and duties, starting with respect for European law that all the rest of us comply with (*RTVE*, 2021e).

LGBTQ rights are invoked to create this dichotomy between "us" vs. "them." This is exemplified in the recurrent use of the term homophobia in referring to Orbán and his anti-human rights policies. This is reflected in headlines and statements such as

> "Brussels squeezes Hungary and Poland with revision of European funds for their authoritarian and homophobic drift" (**González**, 2021);

> "The Hungarian government is absorbed in its homophobic drift" (*RTVE*, 2021a).

RTVE goes as far as comparing Orbán's censorship of books on LGBTQ rights to policies of Nazi Germany:

> "In Hungary, they want books to be marked with a label. It is very similar to what the Nazis did with degenerate art, etc., and it's a super harmful thing to know that these are not just stories for LGBT families. They are stories for all audiences that simply show an LGBT reality" (*RTVE*, 2021b).

It is interesting to note that the narratives characterizing the EU as a space of values that must be promoted and defended by EU institutions are not contested even when Spain's own record is being criticized. When the EU criticizes Spain for its failure to renew the *Spanish General Council of the Judiciary* (*CGPJ*), narratives criticizing the EU's stance on this issue or accusing it, for instance, of interfering in internal affairs of Spain are absent, even in media outlets that are close to the Government's ideological tendencies. Instead, we find statements such as

> "it is important that European standards are taken into account and that all affected parties are consulted" (**Gil**, 2021a).

The underlying assumption of news items mentioning the EU's stance on this issue is that the EU promotes the rule of law in Spain.

4.2. Sanctions against Russian media

Very few discourses addressing the sanctions imposed on the Russian media outlets after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine criticize the EU for *deviating* from its human rights values. One line of criticism accepts the EU's assertion that Russian propaganda is dangerous; still, it presents the measures adopted by the EU to counter Russian disinformation and propaganda as contentious. For example, in an item published by *El Confidencial* the blocking of Russian media was described as "a delicate decision." While the piece does not dispute the dangerous nature of Russian propaganda, it suggests that the EU's decision could be counterproductive because Russia could ban foreign press from operating in the country. But more importantly, the item underlines the fact that Russian journalists are quitting their positions at Russian media as an act of protest against the war in Ukraine, indirectly insinuating that collective sanctions could be unfair. Another item published by the same media outlet labels the EU's measure as a "debatable precedent" and casts some doubts on the efficiency of the sanctions (**Iriarte**, 2022). A different piece published by the same outlet directly accuses the EU of deviating from its own values:

> "Faced with the authoritarian and nineteenth-century project of Vladimir Putin's regime, we cannot be a mere reflection in a mirror. Europe must defend Ukraine, but above all it has an obligation to defend principles and values. Because the war in Ukraine is also about that" (**Julibert-González**, 2022).

The characterization of Putin as authoritarian and dangerous does not prevent the media from questioning the legitimacy of the EU's measure claiming that the Ukraine's war is not Europe's war:

> "It is a thorny decision [to block Russian media] which we can only understand in the dialectic of war, a space for which there is no respect for the rule of law. But is Europe at war? It is not a rhetorical or trivial question. It is an issue that we must define clearly. If the answer is no, and that seems to be the case judging by what our leaders declare, applying these types of measures once again results in a frontal attack on our way of seeing the world (**Alarcón**, 2021).

A different line of criticism rejects the EU's blanket characterization of all Russian media as propaganda and criticizes the EU's decision to block them. This is reflected, for example, in the item "Propaganda and cynicism," published in *El Diario*:

> "The answer to those who censor is not more censorship, but more journalism and democracy. In those media there are also interesting points of view and truthful news that we don't see here. We have the right to know all the sides in order to understand why we are where we are. Western propaganda wants to impose the single narrative of pro-*NATO* warmongering in which there is only one bad guy and there are no other causes to explain the conflict" (**Gallego**, 2022).

This piece suggests that the EU is not giving due regard to the value of media pluralism and reverses the EU's accusations on Russia's toxic propaganda by accusing the "West" of launching its own propaganda.

As for political parties, the only party that manifestly criticized the EU's sanction against Russian media is radical left-wing party *Podemos*:

> "Regarding the measures that the EU is preparing to veto the Russian media *Russia Today* and *Sputnik*, the leader of the formation [of *Podemos*] has said that both can be 'propaganda media' of the Kremlin, but has added that the possible censorship opens, in his opinion, a 'dangerous spiral', given that Russia can 'question' foreign media correspondents in Moscow, which 'does not benefit' 'neither one side nor the other' (*El País*, 2022).

This suggests that the construction of the EU as a Normative Power is questioned due to the adoption of measures that are perceived as anti-democratic.

4.3. Discourses on migration

Discourses on the recurrent "migration crises" demonstrate that, in some contexts, narratives on human rights values yield to securitarian narratives. This is consistent with previous studies that emphasize the primacy of nationalistic rationale in addressing migration issues, often linking migration to illegal and criminal activities (**Ferreira**, 2019; **De-Sousa-Ferreira**; **Alonso-Riveiro**, in press). While the management of "migration crises" have clear human rights implications, the latter are overshadowed by narratives that frame migration as primarily a security issue. The framing of migration crises whether as a humanitarian issue or as a security issue reflect different constructions of Europe where universal values compete with local values. This tension is captured by the following quote from a piece discussing the crisis in Calais in *El País*:

> "Sovereignty and nationalism returned to the core of Western political vocabulary after decades of rhetoric about globalization and liberal and universal values" (**Bassets**, 2021).

Politics of fear (**Wodak**, 2015) are deployed to frame migration as a security issue, as the use of certain terminology indicates. Repeatedly, some media outlets, particularly conservative ones, use hyperbolic expressions and metaphors, related to natural threatening phenomena, such as 'flood' and 'tide' to talk about migratory flows, as illustrated by the following headline in an *ABC* piece that brings both concepts together:

> "Lukashenko threatens with flooding the EU with a tide of migrants" (**Serbeto**, 2021b).

Another example is the "new wave of displaced persons towards the center of Europe" right before the invasion of Ukraine (*El Confidencial*, 2022). Furthermore, war vocabulary is also used to deal with the so-called "migration crises." A good example is the following:

> "Calais, and the entire coast in northwestern France, is the front where the new battles are being fought –without real weapons, but with catastrophic human cost and high diplomatic tension– in the third decade of the 21st century".

Moreover, the item describes the crisis as a "battle of sovereignty" (**Bassets**, 2021). This fear-provoking vocabulary eventually overshadows human rights narratives and has bearing on the way human rights narratives are constructed.

Very often, the securitarian framing coexists with a human rights perspective. The human rights/securitization duality could be detected in the discourses of EU officials covered by the Spanish media. For example, Von der Leyen is quoted saying

> "Lukashenko's regime exploits people by taking advantage of their suffering to benefit its own ends. It has no scruples" (**Gil**, 2021c).

At the same time, she uses a strong securitarian language, stating that the EU

"has suffered a hybrid attack organized by the Lukashenko regime" (**Gil**, 2021c).

However, the human rights narratives usually focus on violations committed by non-EU actors and much less on the human rights obligations of EU Member States (EUMS) in relation to migrants and refugees. For example, in the crisis provoked by Belarus, EU officials speak of imposing sanctions on airline and transportation companies for their complicity in the "human trafficking" of migrants in connection to the crisis created by Belarus:

"The recent events at the EU border with Belarus could not have taken place without certain transport operators knowingly or unknowingly contributing to the exploitation of people, at enormous human and security cost at the EU's external borders, and stability in the region [...] The *Commission* proposes a new legal framework that allows the EU to adopt specific measures against the operators of any means of transport (land, air, or by waterways and sea), who participate in or facilitate human smuggling or trafficking into the European Union" (**Gil**, 2021c).

In comparison, the disregard of human rights obligations by EUMS is countered by a softer tone of criticism and with lack of actions. For example, the deployment of soldiers by Poland on its borders and its refusal to ask the help of *Frontex*, and the building of a wall are perceived as "colliding with European legislation on refugees" (**Serbeto**, 2021a). However, the tone is softer, even in case of a Member State that is facing sanctions due to rule of law concerns:

"The European Commissioner for the Interior, the Swedish Ylva Johansson, has gently warned that Poland should be 'more transparent' when it comes to protecting its borders with Belarus. And the president of the *European Parliament*, David Sassoli, 'alarmed' by the situation on the border, asked Poland to accept the intervention of *Frontex* to defend itself against the 'political power games' of the Belarusian dictatorship (**Serbeto**, 2021a).

The use of the terms "gently" and "asked" attest to a softer tone used to denounce the actions of a Member State in this specific context. Other forms of denouncements include the following statement of the spokesperson for the *European Commission*, Eric Mamer:

"Our position is that EU funds should not be used to build walls, which is not the same as saying that physical barriers cannot be built" (**Gil**, 2021b).

Financing the wall is presented as a contentious issue that divides European leaders. On the one hand, Austria, Bulgaria, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland and Slovakia have signed a letter calling for the financing of physical barriers by EU funds. The President of the *European Council*, Charles Michel, seems to support the argument that financing the wall is consistent with EU regulations. On the other hand, Ursula Von der Leyen, voices a clear opposition to using community money to build fences and gates (**Gil**, 2021b). A harsher criticism comes from the framing of the media itself:

"The *European Commission* remains in its refusal to pay, from the community budget, walls against migrants like the one that Poland insists on building on the border with Belarus. Poland, which has received a new blow from the European justice this Tuesday for its assault on the country's justice and that has banned journalists, humanitarian organizations and EU entities such as *Frontex* from accessing the border with Belarus" (**Gil**, 2021b).

The media also criticizes the concept of "Fortress Europe," as reflected in statements such as

"...[the EU's door] has slammed shut, claiming the lives of at least eight migrants so far" (**Glensk**; **Vulliamy**, 2021).

The media highlight the obstacles that human rights and humanitarian organizations are facing in attempting to provide necessary services for migrants and refugees in Poland:

"*Médecins Sans Frontières*' emergency manager, Crystal Van Leeuwen, told *The Guardian* last week that NGOs urgently need access to the safety zone to guarantee migrants' right to international protection" (**Glensk**; **Vulliamy**, 2021).

Some voices attempt to prioritize European values in the management of the crisis, such as the statement of Iratxe García, the leader of the *Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats* group in the *European Parliament*:

"...let's not get caught up in the extreme right's agenda, but rather defend the Europe that tore down walls, the Europe of solidarity. Let's take advantage to face the new threats, we are part of a union of values" (**Gil**, 2021c).

The dual human rights/securitization discourse was also evident in news items on the English Channel crisis, which gives rise to securitarian discourses, such as

"the French government wants to achieve a common effort from the EU, reinforcing border mechanisms" (**Quiñonero**, 2021).

A similar discourse is presented in another piece by *ABC*:

"The interior ministers of France, Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium, accompanied by representatives of the EU, *Frontex* and *Europol*, in Calais, summoned by the Government of Emmanuel Macron, agreed on Sunday afternoon to increase judicial and police measures to combat migration organized by mafias specialized in human trafficking, trying to take advantage of the 'attractiveness' of the UK's social and immigration policies" (**Quiñonero**, 2021).

At the same time, France (and the UK) denounces the actions of criminal groups specialized in human trafficking, and the French president announces that

> "France will not allow the English Channel to become a cemetery" (*EFE*, 2021).

Here, the human rights narrative focuses almost exclusively on tackling criminal organizations involved in human trafficking, diverting the attention from international human rights obligations of EUMS.

In fact, Gérald Darmanin, the French Minister of the Interior is quoted as saying

> "We [the interior ministers of France, Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium] also thought it important to remember that the British government should reduce the appeal of its immigration and asylum policies. Mafias and migrants think they can find work more easily in England, benefiting from more facilities to get papers to regularize their situation" (**Quiñonero**, 2021).

This criticism on the "appealing" immigration policies is hard to reconcile with human rights discourses that require States to respect international law standards on the right to seek asylum. Official discourses could be contrasted with discourses propagated by human rights organizations that require States to guarantee the safety of migrants and their right to seek asylum pursuant to international standards, such as the following statement, as indicated by Enver Solomon, executive director of the *Council for Refugees*:

> "How many tragedies like this do we have to see before the government fundamentally changes its approach by committing to an ambitious expansion of safe routes for those men, women and children who desperately need protection?" Every day, people are forced to flee their homes through no fault of their own. Now is the time to end the cruel and ineffective tactic of trying to punish or drive away those who try to find safety in our country" (**Harrison** *et al.*, 2021).

The duality of human rights/security disappears with the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis. The securitarian language is replaced with broad manifestations of solidarity with Ukrainian refugees throughout the EU. Media discourses on migration undergo a transformation (**Foucault**, 1991) by focusing primarily on the humanitarian aspects of immigration, and Spain's and EU's solidarity with the Ukrainian refugees. This is reflected in statements such as

> "...we see that solidarity, that avalanche of help that all Ukrainians are receiving, all the Ukrainian women who are leaving your country with that load, with that suitcase, with that car for the children" (*RTVE*, 2022b).

Even the discourses of the conservative European leaders change, as reflected in the discourse of the Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer:

> "We are a European family and families support each other" (**Serbeto**, 2022).

The Media analysis demonstrates a strong sense of unity among the 27 regarding the Ukrainian crisis, and therefore, a consensus within the EU around the defense of its values, through the humanitarian support of those fleeing the conflict. European solidarity towards the "Ukrainian exodus" (*RTVE*, 2022b) is praised in all media outlets.

This leads to the emergence of critical discourses that accuse the EU of double standards in the management of the refugee crisis as reflected in one opinion piece:

> "We saw the division that occurred in 2015 after the Syrian war, when only Germany received the refugees and those refugee quotas were denied by those Eastern countries, especially Hungary, Poland. And how, now, the doors are open to the Ukrainians without hardly putting up any kind of obstacles. The fast refugee situation is not recognized. And there is even talk that they can stay between one and three years, provide health, education and that they can even have their own job anywhere in Europe where they are going to be considered refugees" (*RTVE*, 2022c).

Accusing the EU of adopting double standards undermine the construction of the EU as a Normative Power or at least expose the limitations of the notion of NPE.

5. Discussion and conclusions

Diez and **Manners** (2007, p. 174) argue that a successful discursive presentation of the EU as a normative power constitute

> "a precondition for other actors to agree to the norms set out by the EU; it also constructs an identity of the EU against an image of others in the 'outside world'."

Our analysis demonstrates that in discussing EU related issues, human rights narratives are used very often to construct the EU as an actor characterized by its commitment to human rights values and the rule of law. This conceptualization of the EU shapes and informs media discourses on key issues related to the construction of the EU´s identity and its international role. The human rights jargon is part of the lexicon used in media discourses. Still, our study reveals that there is a lack of consistency in the reference to human rights in constructing the role and the identity of the EU.

In some discourses, such as the discourses on blocking Poland and Hungary from receiving European funds due to human rights and rule of law concerns, the construction of the EU as a *Normative Power* overshadows any other argument

or concern. Even the minority opinion of *Vox*, does not manifestly refute the centrality of human rights in the European political order, it refutes promoting them by impinging on State sovereignty. The discourses on the *Next Generation*'s funds also highlight how the EU would (and should) use its economic power to underpin its normative power, in order to guarantee compliance with human rights norms. The response to internal challenges or defiance posed by Hungary and Poland is utilized to reconstruct the normative power Europe (NPE). Perhaps this reflects a conviction that internal democratic backsliding constitutes a serious threat to NPE, both internally and externally.

However, our analysis also demonstrates that even when the assumption that the EU is a space of human rights and values is not contested, the interpretation of those values could be challenged. This is evident in the case of LGBTQ rights, contested by radical right-wing parties, and in the case of the sanctions against Russian media, where some dissent is present accusing the EU of deviating from democratic values. Lack of internal consensus and coherency on the interpretation of human rights could weaken the image of the EU as a normative power and could trigger accusations of hypocrisy and or even imperialism when the EU attempts to promote internally contested rights in its external actions.

It is worth noting that the construction of the EU as a Normative Power in Spanish media relies heavily on the accounts and statements of EU officials and of politicians and other actors such as civil society. The media tend to give visibility to such accounts portraying the EU as NPE and subsequently endorse them.

Another interesting insight that could be inferred from media discourses on LGBTQ rights and the creation of the "us *vs.* them" dichotomy is that human rights discourses could be used to reinforce power asymmetry between the West and the East in Europe, i.e., between the true Europeans and less true Europeans. In this sense, NPE could be used not only to construct the external other, but also to construct internal "othering," or making a certain European State foreign (**Diez**, 2005).

But most importantly, the discourses on the recurrent migration crises demonstrate that human rights narratives retreat in the face of securitarian ones. Our analysis demonstrates that securitarian framing is very effective in marginalizing human rights narratives in discussing the EU. This is achieved through resort to "politics of fear" to marginalize human rights discourses. Securitarian discourses also set the limits of human rights discourses that could accompany them. This is reflected in the tendency to focus on certain human rights violations committed by actors other than the EUMS while downplaying the failure of EUMS in respecting EU human rights values. Also, identity questions shape human rights discourses, as was evident in the discourses on the Ukrainian crisis, where expressions of solidarity framed the debate. Discourses on migration also demonstrate that different EU actors speak in a different voice on human rights issues. These different voices can challenge or even contradict each other.

Manners (2008, 60) argues that

> "the EU might be one of the most important normative powers in the world because of its ability to establish normative principles and apply them to different realities. It is this application of normative principles to different realities that is central to the EU's normative ethics –it should 'live by example'".

Nicolaïdis and **Nicolaïdis** (2006, p. 348) argue that

> "normative power can only be applied credibly under a key condition: consistency between internal policies and external prescriptions and actions."

The discourses on migration are a clear example of an area in which the EU fails to apply its norms consistently and fails to lead by example.

The gap between the abstract human rights rhetoric in media discourses and the actual measures adopted in relation to the recurrent migration crises undermine the conceptualization of the EU as a Normative Power. In fact, the perceived "double standards" in the treatment of refugees and migrants contradicts and challenges the representation of the EU as a "force for good;" this could debilitate the role of the EU as a normative power, especially towards third States. But most importantly, the increasing securitization of migration debilitates the position of the EU as a normative actor, even on the discursive and rhetorical level. The transformation of discourses on migration back and forth between security narratives and human rights narratives contradicts one of the basic tenets of NPE, which assumes that EU's actions are driven primarily by universal normative considerations and not narrowly defined self-interests.

Limitations

This study on the construction of the EU as a normative power has two limitations. First, the media analysis covers a limited timeframe (from July 2021 to March 2022).

The second limitation of our study is its exclusive focus on Spanish media outlets. Spain has been characterized, historically, by the existence of a strong pro-European consensus among political elites in the country.

Despite the study's limitations, the analysis has highlighted how human rights narratives are used to devise the EU as a *normative power*, while at the same time highlighting the existing divergences within the conceptualization of NPE, particularly regarding the articulation between identity and power.

6. Notes

1. According to **Maull** (1990), being a civilian power implies

"1) the acceptance of the necessity of cooperation with others in the pursuit of international objectives;

2) the concentration on non-military, primarily economic, means to secure national goals, with military power left as a residual instrument serving essentially to safeguard other means of international interaction; and

3) a willingness to develop supranational structures to address critical issues of international management".

2. An idea that has been the object of criticism by some academics given its idealist character (**Rodríguez-Prieto**, 2019, p. 78).

3. This includes the creation of the new pillar structure, which included one –the second– centered on the *Common Foreign and Security Policy* (*CFSP*), which was followed by the creation of the *European Security and Defence Policy* (*ESDP*), the EU responsibility for the Petersberg tasks, and the creation of a rapid reaction force and a police force, as agreed at the Cologne (1999), Helsinki (1999) and Santa Maria de Feira (2000) *European Councils*. Progress that, after a few years of impasse, would continue with the *Common Security and Defense Policy* (*CSDP*), the *Permanent Structured Cooperation* (*Pesco*), the *2016 Global Strategy*, and the 2022 strategic compass.

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