

The EU as a Normative Symbol: Perceptions of Political and Media Elites in Spain

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Abstract

Democratization occupied a significant weight in Spain's accession to the European Economic Community. Accession was viewed as a remedy to Spain's isolation, 'backwardness' and questionable 'Europeanness'. In this process, pro-European political and media elites and civil society in Spain constructed the EU as a symbol of modernity and democracy. This article examines how media and political elites in Spain conceptualize the role of the EU as symbol and a normative actor, distinguished by its commitment to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, after almost four decades of accession. By integrating Q methodology with in-depth interviews, we attempt to study the subjective perceptions of elites regarding the role of the EU as a normative actor and whether this role is constructed through identitarian or pragmatic factors.

Keywords

Spain, EU, European Union, Europe, Democracy, Human rights, Rule of law, Elites, Identity.

1. Introduction

Democratization occupied a significant weight in Spain's accession to the European Economic Community (EEC), the predecessor of the European Union (EU). As López-Gómez (2014) highlights, integration into the EEC was shaped "by the fact that the beginning of the process coincided with the existence of a national authoritarian regime."

After the death of the Spanish dictator Francisco Franco in 1975, Spain's commitment to upholding democracy and the rule of law in its new political and legal order were central to its transition to democracy.

Spain's engagement with Europe has run parallel to the process of political, economic, social, and cultural modernization in the country (Moreno-Juste, 2010). Due to its peripheral position and to other historical processes, contemporary Spain emerged as politically and culturally separate from Europe, which the latter representing the idea of modernity. This ideological 'separateness' explains the historical division within the Spanish society regarding Spain's relationship with Europe. On the one hand, there were those who adopted a more traditionalist approach, highlighting national idiosyncrasy, supporting, hence, Spain's isolationism from the rest of 'modern Europe'. In Franco's era, the Francoist propaganda portrayed liberal European democracies, labeled as 'inorganic democracies', as 'dangerous' and 'inferior', and a first step towards Communism. Franco's 'organic democracy' was juxtaposed with 'inorganic democracy' and was portrayed as a 'natural' harmonious order, that is based on traditional 'Spanish' institutions, mainly the Church and the family (Jáuregui, 2002). On the other hand, there were those who understood that the modernity and modernization represented by Europe were the solution to Spain's problems.¹ This meant that Spain needed to *Europeanize* in order to overcome its political, economic, social, and cultural backwardness.

¹ This approach is famously depicted by Ortega y Gasset quote: *España es el problema, Europa la solución* (Spain is the problem, Europe the solution).



Therefore, as **Zaratiegui-Labiano** (2014) highlights, the debate around Europe has been historically framed by ideological, not pragmatic considerations.

For many, accession to the EEC was viewed as a remedy to an isolation that predated the civil war in Spain and the rise of Franco. As **Powell** (2015) highlights

“accession has been described as a cure for the collective inferiority complex nurtured by Spaniards for generations...[as] doubts as to Spain’s ‘Europeanness’ in other parts of the continent long predated the Civil War and the dictatorship.”

It is not surprising, then, that in his inaugural address to the *Spanish Parliament*, King Juan Carlos (Quoted in **Jáuregui** (2002)) narrated that:

“The idea of Europe would be incomplete without reference to the presence of the Spaniard, and without a consideration of the acts of many of my predecessors. Europe should reckon with Spain, for we Spaniards are European.”

Jáuregui (2002) argues that Europe played a crucial role in the construction of a cohesive Spanish national identity during the period of transition to democracy by functioning as a unifying prestige-symbol and a source of national pride. According to him ‘Europeanness’ did not result from

“mere geographical location, history, or culture, but rather something that had to be achieved through the accomplishment of certain moral and political conditions” (**Jáuregui**, 2002).

López-Gómez (2014) highlights that political and media elites and pro-European civil society groups played a key role in “communicating a vague idea of Europe connected to democratization and welfare.” During the transition period, a strong political consensus emerged among Spanish political elites, regardless of their political ideology, which “identified ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’ with the desire to achieve a ‘modern’ and ‘a European’ status” (**Jiménez de Haro**, 2011). This was evident in the slogans adopted by the two parties that gained the majority of seats in the first democratic Parliamentary elections of 1977: *Unión de Centro Democrático* (The Union of the Democratic Center) (*UCD*), led by Adolfo Suarez, and *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party) (*PSOE*), led by Felipe González. The former’s slogan was ‘Vote Center. The ideologies that make possible a democratic Europe. The people that will make possible a democratic Spain’. The latter used the slogan ‘The key to Europe is in your hands. Vote PSOE’ (quoted in **Jáuregui** (2002)).

The framing of the debate on Spain’s accession to the EEC was based on broad conceptual categories such as democracy (**López-Gómez**, 2016). Human rights and the principle of the rule of law were not central to this debate. However, they had an indirect influence on Spain’s accession to the EEC as they were subsumed within the broader framework of the democratization, which was based on the concept of liberal-social democracy. This concept of democracy emerged in Europe after the Second World War (**Rodríguez-Adrados**, 1997; **Requejo-Coll**, 1990), and it encompassed the following organizational principles: democracy, human rights and individual freedoms, social rights, a mixed economy, and restraint in applying the collective right of national self-determination (**Moreno-Juste**, 2010).

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Beyond identitarian factors that prompted Spanish political elites to embrace democracy to assert the ‘Europeanness’ of Spain, accession was also viewed as a guarantee that Spain would not slide back to authoritarianism (**López-Gómez**, 2014). Accession in itself provided the new political establishment with the legitimacy it needed internally. As **Powell** (2015) highlights, only the recognition of the EEC “could render the new parliamentary monarchy fully legitimate in the eyes of most Spaniards.” With the passing of years, as the research on Europeanization in Spain suggests, discussions on the EU were increasingly shaped by pragmatic considerations (**Arregui**, 2022; **Abad-Quintanal et al.**, 2023; **Mayo-Cubero et al.**, 2023; **García-Carretero et al.**, 2022). However, the protection of human rights remains one domain where pragmatic considerations and identity questions intersect more clearly. The role of the EU in promoting and protecting human rights cannot be disentangled from its own *identity* as an international actor and from how this European identity interacts with local national identities (**Boulos et al.**, 2023) (**Boulos et al.**, 2023).

More recent research on Europeanization in Spain confirms that the EU and the European integration project still enjoy high support among Spanish political elites (**Vázquez et al.**, 2014; **Sojka**; **Vázquez**; **García-Carretero et al.**, 2022). Even when the popularity of the EU declined during the Eurozone crisis, the longstanding pro-European consensus among traditional Spanish

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parliamentary elites remained high (**Real-Dato; Sojka, 2020; Rodríguez-Teruel et al., 2016**). This did not prevent the emergence of Eurosceptic discourses among certain political circles from the radical left and the ultra-right. The Eurozone crisis of 2008, which led to the adoption of harsh austerity measures in Spain, triggered anti-austerity public mobilizations highly critical of EU institutions. These mobilizations culminated with the establishment of the 15-M movement in 2011 and later on the emergence of *Podemos*, a new radical left party (**Pavan, 2017; Feenstra et al., 2017; Della-Porta; Mattoni, 2014**). However, after joining the governing coalition led by *PSOE* since November 2019, *Podemos* had to soften its anti-institutional discourses, and its populist characteristics have gradually faded away (**Magre et al., 2021**). On the opposite side of the political map, the Catalan crisis and the migration crisis generated Eurosceptic discourses by *Vox*, an ultra-right party that entered the *Parliament* in the elections of 2019. Like other European ultra-right parties, *Vox* defended a traditionalist Christian conception of Spanish society; it opposed same sex marriage; called for the protection of the “natural family”; opposed “gender ideology” and displayed a clear anti-immigration stance. However, according to **Rama et al. (2021)**, the Euroscepticism propagated by *Vox*, “is very much dwarfed in comparison to that advocated by the Western European peers.”

This article attempts to answer the following questions:

- To what extent the EU continues to enjoy a symbolic aura in Spain after almost four decades of accession?
- Have the increasingly pragmatic approach to Europeanization in Spain replaced the identitarian approximation of the European integration project?
- How and to what extent identity factors continue to be deployed in discussing the EU in Spain?

To achieve this goal, we used a mixed quantitative and qualitative methodology that integrates Q methodology and in-depth interviews with political and media elites in Spain, as we attempt to study the subjective perceptions of elites regarding the role of the EU as a normative symbol. This article builds on previous research that provides a historical perspective on the ideological debates surrounding the accession of Spain to the EEC, and more recent research on the Europeanization in Spain, which approaches the EU from a pragmatic perspective focusing on the impact or the perception of different EU policies and Europeanization in Spain. This article is innovative in its attempt to bridge between the historical research on Europeanization and more recent scholarship that reflects a pragmatic approach to EU since European integration is no longer discussed as an ideal and abstract project, but through various EU policies that impact Member States. Our research attempts, from a Foucauldian perspective, to answer the question whether old idealistic discourses on the EU and identity questions that shaped historical discussions on Europeanization are still conserved after almost four decades of membership, or whether an increasingly pragmatic approach to the EU has led to their disappearance. Also relying on the Foucauldian concept of memory, we try to understand how recent Spanish discourses on democracy and human rights relate to past ones (**Foucault, 1991**). The article is composed of three main sections. The first section delves into the role of the EU as a normative actor, distinguished by its commitment to democracy, human rights and the rule of law. The second section reviews the process of Spain’s accession to the EEC, focusing on democratization as a key component of this process. The third section presents the finding of the Q analysis and a discourse analysis of the in-depth interviews.

2. EU and Human Rights

The formal integration of Europe started after the end of WWII in the *Congress of Europe*, held in The Hague in 1948 (**Aldecoa; García-Cancela, 2023**). The European integration process started as a utopian ideal of achieving peace through co-operation among former enemies, economic development and democratic consolidation (**Lucarelli, 2006**). **Manners (2002)** highlights that in the immediate aftermath of WWII, peace and liberty were the defining features of Western European politics. Democracy, human rights and the rule of law gained more prominence later on as a way of distinguishing democratic Western Europe from communist Eastern Europe.

Democracy as a membership norm was first codified in the *Davignon Report* (1970, p. 2) that envisioned the European integration project as one that

“should be based on a common heritage of respect for the liberty and rights of man and bring together democratic States with freely elected parliaments.”

The emphasis on democracy and human rights as key accession criteria was further solidified in the Copenhagen criteria, established by the EU at the *European Council* meeting in Copenhagen in 1993, in response to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the prospect of Eastern enlargement. The Copenhagen criteria made

“stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities”

a key condition for accession. This conditionality was enforced through extensive scrutiny mechanisms that aimed at examining the compliance of a candidate State with the EU’s human rights, rule of law and democracy conditionality (**Albi, 2009**).

The amended Article 2 of the *Treaty on European Union (TEU)* entrenched the EU's commitment to democracy, human rights and the rule of law by declaring that the Union

“is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities” (EU, 2012b).

The promotion of the said values, both internally and externally, is considered under Article 3 of *TEU* as one of the objectives of the EU. Article 49 of *TEU* makes accession contingent upon respecting the values enshrined in Article 2. Article 7 of *TEU* states that “a serious and persistent breach” of the values enshrined in Article 2 by a Member State could lead to the suspension of its rights under the treaty. In 2000, the EU adopted the *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union* (the Charter) (EU, 2012a). The Charter became legally binding only with the entry into force of the *Treaty of Lisbon* in 2009 (EU, 2007). The preamble of the Charter highlights that

“the Union is founded on the indivisible, universal values of human dignity, freedom, equality and solidarity; it is based on the principles of democracy and the rule of law.”

Della-Porta and Caiani (2011) highlight the importance of the “symbolic construction of Europe.” They further argue that “steps and effects of the process of integration are not directly determined by the exogenous interests of the main actors but are instead strongly influenced by their ‘imagined Europe’” (Ibid).

In his seminal article “Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?” **Manners** (2002) conceptualized the EU as “a normative power of an ideational nature characterized by common principles.”

The commitment of the EU to democracy, human rights and the rule of law are “part of its international identity in world politics” (**Manners**, 2011). Manners identified nine normative principles embedded in EU laws and policies that constitute its *acquis communautaire and acquis politique*: sustainable peace, freedom, democracy, human rights, rule of law, equality, social solidarity, sustainable development, and good governance (**Manners**, 2008; 2002). **Manners** (2002) highlights that these values lead the EU to place universal norms at the core of its relations with its Member States. The representation of the EU as normative power not only constructs its identity “against an image of others in the ‘outside world’” (**Diez; Manners**, 2014), it also constitutes a precondition that enables the EU to engage other actors and influence their behavior by agreeing to adopt the norms promoted by the EU (Ibid).

Diez and Pace (2011) argue that this conceptualization “is a discursive construction rather than an objective fact.” The power of this conceptualization

“rests in the identity it provides for the EU and the changes it imposes on others, partly through its hegemonic status” (Ibid).

Others have highlighted the EU's inconsistency in promoting human rights, or the prioritization of economic and other interests over human rights (**Zimmermann**, 2007; **Haukkala**, 2008; **Erickson**, 2013; **Pollack**, 2020; **Kelemen; Vogel**, 2010).

Public support for European integration (or lack of) can be based on pragmatic/utilitarian factors or on identity-based factors. Pragmatic factors focus on expected gains or losses resulting from EU membership whereas identity-based factors focus on the impact of integration on local identity (**Doyle; Fidrmuc**, 2006; **Dimitrova et al.**, 2015). Enhancing human rights protection is perceived as one of the most important pragmatic benefits of joining the EU. In the case of Spain, identity factors generally meant embracing Europe as a symbol of modernity and democratization. But identity factors can play a role in resisting the normative framework of the EU, especially in relation to gender equality or LGBTQ+ rights, that can be perceived as a threat to national cultural and religious identity (**Vida**, 2019; **Mos**, 2013). Indeed, it can be argued that LGBTQ+ related issues are being politicized, affecting both inter-party conflicts at the national level and intergovernmental conflicts at the EU level, which, at the same time, increases the politicization of the European integration project (**Pérez-Escoda et al.**, 2023; **Hutter; Kriesi**, 2019; **Hooghe; Marks**, 2018). Radical parties are more likely to politicize certain political issues in Eurosceptic terms when mainstream political parties try to avoid these issues or emphasize them in a more pro-European direction.

3. Spain's Integration Process into European Institutions

Spain was excluded from the establishment of the first European institutions due to the autocratic nature of its political regime. It officially applied for membership in the EEC on February 9th, 1962. This request represented an evolution of the Francoist regime's attitude towards Europe: from a clear opposition –Europe was seen as a “compendium of all the evils that Spain must avoid in order to remain itself” (**Zaratiegui-Labiano**, 2014) – to a pragmatic Europeanism, which considered Europe as an instrument for the modernization of the Spanish economy but without introducing any political change (**Zaratiegui-Labiano**, 2014; **Moreno-Juste**, 2010; **Sanz-Díaz**, 2016). Although the accession's petition was rejected, it led to the adoption of a *Preferential Trade Agreement* in June 1970 between Spain and the ECC.

As for the opposition to Franco's regime and part of the Spanish civil society, they identified Europe with modernization and democracy. As **Moreno-Juste** (2010) argues, this started in the 1960s when Spaniards began to equate Europe to

welfare and to democracy. A collective consensus emerged in support of the idea that in order to be a full democracy, Spain had to be a full member of European institutions. Hence, the political and social groups opposing Franco's regime — comprising liberals, Christian democrats, socialists, and communists— firmly associated the democratization of Spain with its integration into the ECC. Therefore, they vehemently opposed any efforts by Franco's regime to participate in European institutions, fearing that this could lead to the normalization of the dictatorship (**Guirao-Piñeyro; Gavin-Munté, 2013**).

Associating Europe with modernity and democracy meant that cultural or historical considerations of *Europeanism* always prevailed over other pragmatic considerations such as economic interests (**López-Gómez, 2016; Avilés, 2004**). In fact, the idea of Europe reached a “mythic dimension” in the Spanish social imaginary that impeded a real discussion about the “European question” (Trouvé cited by **López-Gómez (2016)**). In this regard, **Bassols (2006)** acknowledged

“Our entry into the European Communities was a political necessity, because we knew that it would anchor us definitively in democracy, freedom, respect for Human Rights and the Rule of Law.”

Back then, democracy was not a formal prerequisite for joining the ECC, given the technical and economic nature of the *Treaty of Rome* (**Fernández-Soriano, 2010**). The political and institutional requirements to the accession were expressed in the section II.3 of the *Birkelbach report* issued by the *European Parliamentary Assembly* in December 1961:

“The guarantee of the existence of a democratic form of State, in the sense of a liberal political organization, is a condition for membership. States whose governments lack democratic legitimacy and whose peoples do not participate in government decisions either directly or through freely elected representatives cannot claim to be admitted to the circle of peoples that make up the European Communities” (**European Parliamentary Assembly, 1961**).

Thus, it was clear that only a democratic state, understood as a liberal organization with deliberative political processes, could become a full member of the ECC.

Although democratization of the political system stood at the heart of the Spanish transition period after the death of Francisco Franco in 1975, human rights and the rule of law played an indirect yet significant role in the country's political and social transformation. They were introduced to the debate primarily through the influence of external actors, such as the *Council of Europe* and the *European Parliament*. For instance, in September 1974 the *Council of Europe* issued a “Report on the Situation in Spain” expressing concerns about the censorship, repression, the absence of democratically constituted political parties and trade unions, and the lack of democratic elections in Spain (**Council of Europe, 1974**). Similarly, in March 1974, the *European Parliament* passed a motion expressing concern over the increasing repression in Spain, condemning human rights violations in the country, and affirming that these practices hindered Spain's accession to the EEC. Consequently, in November 1976, the *Spanish Parliament* passed the law for Political Reform which was approved by referendum one month later. The law was a milestone event in the transition to democracy, stating in its Article 1.1 that:

“Democracy in Spain is based on the supremacy of the law, the expression of the sovereign will of the people. The fundamental rights of the individual are inviolable and are binding on all the organs of the State” (**Spanish Parliament, 1977**).

A year later, Spain formally requested accession to the ECC. Its application was approved within two months. This signified an official acknowledgment of Spain's status as a democratic state and an affirmation of its ‘Europeanness’. In his televised speech of 29 March 1985 to announce that Spain had reached a definitive agreement that would allow it to join the EEC, Prime Minister Felipe González (Quoted in **Jáuregui (2002)**) framed the moment as historic:

“As a historic fact, it [accession] signifies the end of our age-old isolation. It signifies, as well, our participation in the common destiny of Western Europe. For democratic Spain, for the Spain which lives in freedom, it also signifies the culmination of a process of struggle of millions of Spaniards who have identified freedom and democracy with integration in Western Europe.”

Jáuregui (2002) demonstrates how equating Europeanization with the embracement of democratic values was also echoed in media discourses of central media outlets regardless of their ideological tendencies, with the media describing Europe as a space of “tolerance, freedom, and rights”, and accession as a “genuine democratic baptism.”

With the passing of the years, a more pragmatic approach to the EU emerged in political discussions of Europeanization in Spain (**Abad-Quintanal et al., 2023; Arregui, 2022; García-Carretero et al., 2022; Mayo-Cubero et al., 2023**). This includes discussing the role of the EU in promoting human rights, both in Spain and at a European and a global level (**Lombardo; Bustelo, 2012; Lombardo, 2017; Cantó; Arregui, 2022; Boulos et al., 2023**). However, as mentioned earlier, in the human rights domain, pragmatic and identitarian factors intersect more forcefully in discussing Europeanization. In recent years, ultra-right actors in particular, have politicized gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights to hamper, or at least restructure, the European integration project. This goal was pursued by presenting these rights as a threat to national identities and local societal cultures and religion (**Vida, 2019; Mos, 2013; Buzogány, 2012**).

In Spain, only Vox appropriated similar narratives. As mentioned earlier, Vox defends a traditionalist Christian Spain. It opposes same sex marriage, requests protection for the “natural family”, and pledges to reform abortion laws, making them more stringent (Vox, 2019). Vox also opposes “gender ideology”, and claims that “subsidized radical feminist organizations” should be suppressed (Vox, 2019). However, driven by electoral considerations in a highly pro-European society, Vox usually resorts to discursive balancing. In its 2019 manifesto for the European elections, Vox asserted its “Europeanist vocation” declaring that “we believe in Europe because we are Europe.” Europe is constructed as a harmonious fusion between the Greek philosophy, Roman law and Christian spirituality, and a civilization enriched by the diversity of its cultures and the diversity of its nations. In challenging the role of the EU as a normative power, it called for repealing or adopting a “radical amendment” of Article 7 of the Lisbon Treaty, in order to prevent the EU from interfering in the democratic decisions of Member States based on the “respect for democratic values” clause. In the direct interaction between Vox and European institutions, Vox shows more restraint compared to the messages it conveys to its own constituency. For example, in 2021 Member of the *European Parliament* (MEP) Margarita de la Pisa sent a letter to the late David Sassoli, against the organization of a side event on gender equality and reproductive rights in the context of the *Conference on the Future of Europe*. In her letter, she argued that none of the four experts proposed is critical of ‘gender ideology’, which does not respect the plurality of parties represented in the *European Parliament*. However, a note on the letter published on the official website of Vox used an entirely different language:

In recent years, ultra-right actors in particular, have politicized gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights to hamper, or at least restructure, the European integration project

“[i]n a new attempt to impose the culture of death, blur our identity, and destroy the Christian culture of Europe, the European Parliament has introduced, without consensus or plurality, gender ideology and abortion in the 'Conference for the Future of Europe'.” (Vox, 2021).

These discourses of Vox are portrayed as an anomaly to the Spanish political landscape both by the media and by major political parties both from the right and from the left (Boulos *et al.*, 2023). But in the Spanish context, identity-based narratives continue to be used to defend the role of the EU as normative power. They continue to be instrumentalized to reaffirm Spain’s Europeanness, portraying it as a true representative and defender of European values. Usually, they are invoked at the inter-State level to discredit Eastern-European ultra-nationalist governments and to question their Europeanness in a way that enhances Spain’s own Europeanness (Pérez-Escoda *et al.*, 2023; Boulos *et al.*, 2023).

4. Methodology

To examine the standpoint of media and political elites concerning the EU as a normative symbol and actor, we conducted 50 in-depth interviews (25 politicians and 25 media representatives) integrating Q methodology. The Q methodology was first devised and developed by William Stephenson in the 1930s to “bring a scientific framework to bear on the elusiveness of subjectivity” (Coogan; Herrington, 2011). This methodology explores correlations between personal viewpoints through revealing areas of agreements and disagreement that exist on a topic. First, the participants are presented with a set of statements that were developed based on previous research with similar target groups. Subsequently, the participants are asked to rank the statement onto a Q grid, based on two interrelated criteria: the level of agreement/disagreement with the statement and the importance attached to the statement. The Q grid has two extreme poles: + (agreement) and – (disagreement), and a neutral category for placing statements that are perceived as less relevant/important. The limited number of cells at the extreme poles of the Q grid, requires the respondents to place only the statements they prioritize most (whether they agree or disagree with them) on the extremes, while placing the rest onto the neutral category. Once the Q grids are completed, through factor analysis, the participants are correlated by the way they think about the researched topic; those who share similar ways of thinking are clustered together. For the Q methodology, the number of respondents can be small, ranging from 30 to 100, depending on the research focus, given the in-depth approach of the methodology that resembles a qualitative approach (Watts; Stenner, 2005).

In our study, 25 politicians have been sampled using purposive sampling based on their party affiliation; while maintaining an accurate balance between the ideological tendencies of parties (based on the number of seats they hold in the *Spanish Parliament*) as explained in Table 1.

Table 1: Number of Respondents by Political Party.

Political Party	Number of Respondents
Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE)	10
Partido Popular (PP)	9
Unidas Podemos (UP)	3
Vox	2
Ciudadanos (C's)	1
Total	25

Table 2: Number of Respondents by Political Category.

Position Category	Number of Respondents
Ex-Prime Ministers and Ex-Ministers	4
Members of the Parliament -MP- (current or former)	4
Members of the European Parliament -MEP- (current or former)	9
Other Senior political positions -directors of governmental agencies, spoke persons, senior advisors- (current or former)	8
Total	25

As for the 25 media respondents, they were affiliated with a wide range of outlets –TV, radio, newspaper (both printed and online), and a news agency. Media respondents and media outlets were chosen taking into account their ideological tendency– progressive or conservative as explained in Table 3. In this article, the term progressive journalist refers to a journalist working in a progressive media outlet. The term conservative journalist refers to a journalist working in a conservative media outlet.

Table 3: Number of Respondents by Media Outlet's Ideology.

Ideology	Type of Media Outlet	Media Included	Total
Progressive	Press	ElDiario.es, 20minutos, The Objective	14
	TV	Tele5, RTVE, LaSexta	
	Radio	Cadena SER, RNE	
Conservative	Press	ElConfidencial.es, ABC	10
	TV	Antena 3	
	Radio	COPE, ESRadio	
Neutral	News Agency	EFE	25

All respondents were asked to place 25 statements related to the EU in a scored grid (Q grid). These statements were based on the previous research stage, in which we analyzed media discourses on Europeanization in Spain in six Spanish media outlets (*El País*, *RTVE*, *Diario.es*, *ABC*, *A3* and *El Confidencial*), in the period between July 2021 and March 2022. A final sample of 543 news items was selected for content analysis and critical discourse analysis. The media analysis focused on identifying the major discourses on the EU in Spanish media. After its completion, the dominant discourses were clustered into eight discursive units (Table 4), where major discourses were often accompanied by adjacent and/or counter-discourses.

Table 4: Main Discursive Units.

1. The reluctance of the EU to assume its role in managing the energy crisis is creating a gap between the EU and Spain.
2. Blocking recovery funds to induce compliance with human rights is necessary because the EU is a space of values and human rights.
3. The EU needs to defend its geopolitical role and common security.
4. The EU needs to harmonize its policies as in the management of migration crisis.
5. The adoption of the recovery funds marks a turning point in the European project.
6. Brexit was a myopic move and a mistake for the UK.
7. The EU management of the COVID-19 crisis was a success story.
8. The EU showed unprecedented unity and decisiveness in responding to the outbreak of Ukraine crisis.

For the purpose of conducting the Q methodology, the identified discourses were used to prepare 25 statements. Among the 25 statements, five statements referred directly or indirectly to human rights: (i) Human Rights and the rule of law constitute core EU values and Spain strongly supports them; (ii) The EU fosters the protection of human rights and the rule of law in Spain; (iii) Spain strongly supports the EU's efforts to promote LGBTQI+ rights that constitute Spanish and European values; (iv) Blocking Poland and Hungary from the recovery funds to induce compliance with human rights is necessary; and (v) the EU displays double standards when dealing with migration issues depending on the origin of the migrants.

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, which were conducted from November 16th, 2022, to May 3rd, 2023, lasted between 45 to 60 minutes.

The placement of the statement on the Q grid reflects the subjective point of view of each interviewee in terms of prioritizing identity or alternative pragmatic factors in attaching importance of each statement for the European integration project, and also it would indicate the personal stance toward the integration by agreeing/disagreeing with statements that are predominately pro-European.

The statements (see Table 5) were used in the Q methodology and the follow up interviews.

Table 5: 25 Q Statements.

1. The EU recovery funds are a window of opportunity for Spain.
2. The centralized purchase of vaccines has benefited Spain and helped it to fight the Covid- 19 pandemic.
3. The EU's handling of the energy crisis is creating a gap between Spain and the EU.
4. The EU fosters the protection of human rights and the rule of law in Spain.
5. Blocking Poland and Hungary from recovery funds to induce compliance with human rights is necessary.
6. EU membership provided Spain with the opportunity to challenge the North-South divide.
7. The EU displays double standards when dealing with migration issues depending on the origin of migrants.
8. Spain needs EU support to better manage the migration issue.
9. The EU needs to consolidate its geopolitical weight to protect the security of its members.
10. The EU is too dependent on the US and NATO for its security.
11. The EU is the safeguard and guarantor of Spain's geopolitical interests on its southern borders.
12. The EU responded decisively to the outbreak of the crisis in Ukraine.
13. EU security and defence cooperation has been strengthened since the start of the war in Ukraine.
14. Brexit has harmed Europe and Spain.
15. Brexit has demonstrated, especially during the pandemic, that leaving the EU is "short- sighted" and could have a negative impact on local markets.
16. The EU is not balancing well its duty to provide protection to refugees and manage irregular flows while ensuring internal security.
17. The sanctions against Russia have impoverished European citizens.
18. The EU's management of the COVID-19 crisis has transformed it towards greater unity and solidarity.
19. The centralized purchase of vaccines by the EU is an example of the European way of doing things and should be extended to the energy field.
20. The EU is a more transparent and reliable actor compared to political parties in Spain. 21. Being the first to receive recovery funds has reinforced European sentiment in Spain. 22. Spain has played a more visible leadership role in the last year, especially in relation to the pandemic and the energy crisis.
23. Human rights and the rule of law are fundamental values of the EU and Spain strongly supports them.
24. Spain strongly supports EU efforts to promote LGBTQ rights as a Spanish and European value.
25. Internal divisions hamper the EU's geopolitical role

5. Analysis

The integrated analysis of the Q grids revealed that all eight factors generated by the Ken Q software had an eigenvalue higher than one, indicating that the respondents do not diverge much in their perceptions, an outcome that is consistent with the Spanish political landscape. Subsequently, we inserted the data of politicians and journalists separately. However, the separate analysis did not provide additional insights or clues to enhance the Q analysis of the integrated data.

The culminative explanation variance of the eight factors is 63%, with Factor 1 having the highest eigenvalue (9.65) and Factor 8 the lowest (1.4). We decided to analyze the five factors with the highest explained variance, since the remaining factor did not provide additional insights.

Table 6: Factors with the Highest Explained Variance.

Factor Characteristics	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5
Eigenvalue	9.6577	4.3371	4.07	3.3109	2.1239
% Explained Variance	21	9	9	7	5
No. of Defining Variables	8	6	6	10	5
Avg. Rel. Coef.	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8
Composite Reliability	0.97	0.96	0.96	0.976	0.952
S.E. of Factor Z-scores	0.173	0.2	0.2	0.155	0.219

All factors had a high composite reliability and a very low standard error of its Z-scores. All extracted factors contained representatives of media and political elites from the left and from the right. Three factors were left-leaning factors since the left/progressives were more represented, and two were right-leaning factors since the right/conservatives were more represented in the factor. This is consistent with the Spanish political reality in which no profound polarization can be detected in relation to the EU and the European integration project.

The number of respondents in each factor ranged between 5 and 10 respondents. A careful analysis of the factors suggests that even within the same political camp, respondents seem to display different forms of prioritization or concerns regarding the expected benefits of EU membership, as would elaborated in the subsequent sections. Human rights were not the leitmotif of any of the five factors analyzed. The clustering of the respondents with similar views was centered around other themes.

In Factor 1 (left-leaning Euro-optimists), the respondents expressed a very optimistic view regarding the EU's response to the crises it has faced recently. They placed statements praising the adoption of the *Next Generation EU* funds, the centralized purchase of vaccines during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the decisive and unified response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the positive pole of the Q grid. On the negative pole, the respondent highly disagreed with the statement "The sanctions against Russia have impoverished EU citizens." Beyond expressing a clear pro-European stance, the three statements with the highest Z-score on the positive pole of the Q grid encompass transformative elements. They suggest that the recent challenges facing the EU have had a positive transformative impact on the

European integration process. The recovery funds were viewed as a “window of opportunity”, the centralized purchase of vaccines should “spill over” to other fields, and the EU’s response to the Ukrainian crisis is “unprecedented.”

The respondents in this factor had a pragmatic approach to the EU, focusing on recent challenges facing the union and its member states from a perspective that engages primarily with gains and benefits. At the same time, there are certain identity elements at play, since the statement “The EU’s centralized purchase of vaccines exemplifies a European way of doing things and should spill over to the energy field”, which received the second highest Z-score, encompasses an identitarian element reflecting a unique “European” perspective on promoting the common good.

Factor 2 (left-leaning geopolitical critics) and Factor 4 (left-leaning geopolitical optimists) focused on geopolitics and defence related statements. Although in both factors left-leaning respondents were more represented, they diverged in their perception of the EU’s geopolitical role. Respondents of Factor 2 were more critical of the EU’s role as a security provider showing a high agreement with the statements “the internal divisions hamper the geopolitical role of the EU,” “the EU is too dependent on the US and *NATO* for its security,” and “the EU needs to consolidate its geopolitical weight in order to protect the security of its member.”

This stance is reminiscent of the historical and more ideological left in Spain, which was more critical of the dependence of both Spain and the EU on the United States and *NATO* in defence matters. Although the *PSOE* abandoned its anti-*NATO* rhetoric during the first term of the Felipe González government (1982-1986) and campaigned for remaining in *NATO* in the referendum of 1986 (Mateos, 2016), the party continued to support the forging of a common defence policy at the EU level (Ballesteros-Martín, 2012). Therefore, this criticism should not be understood as an opposition to *NATO* or to the alliance with the US; instead, it reflects an agreement between the respondents on the importance and necessity for the EU to acquire greater autonomy in the defence domain. Another interesting finding in this factor relates to the statement “human rights and the rule of law constitute core EU values and Spain strongly supports them.” Although this statement is not part of the “geopolitical” logic that defines this factor, only in this factor the statement obtained (+2) in Q sort value, while obtaining (0) in Q sort value in the rest of the factors. This could be explained by the fact that this factor reflects the historical approach of the left, which also includes highlighting the role of the EU as a normative power.

In comparison, in Factor 4, the respondents showed a more optimistic pragmatism, one that is less tuned with the historical position of the Spanish left. The respondents showed a high agreement with the statements “The EU responded with an unprecedented unity and decisiveness to the outbreak of Ukraine crisis” and “the EU’s security and defence cooperation has been strengthened since the beginning of the war in Ukraine.”

Additionally, they highly disagreed with the statement “The EU’s management of the energy crisis created a gap between Spain and the EU.”

In Factor 3 (the radical right/left), there was a higher representation of the far right and the radical left compared to other factors. As explained earlier, the placement of the statements on the Q grid depends on two interrelated criteria, the importance attached to the statement for the European integration project, and the level of agreement or disagreement with it. In this factor, the respondents attached a high importance to a number of statements, however, they had conflicting views on their validity. On the positive pole of the grid, the statement “EU membership provided Spain with the opportunity to challenge the North-South divide” was viewed as highly important by the respondents. Right-wing respondents agreed with it while left-wing respondents disagreed with it. The statement was placed on the positive pole since right-wing respondents were the majority in this factor. These opposing views reflect ideological differences between the two political camps. The political right in Spain has always emphasized the importance of economic development in discussing Europeanization. They view the economic development in Spain following accession as a source of national pride, and economic gains as highly valuable. However, from a left-leaning point of view, national gains are not so valuable in the process of European integration if power asymmetries and social inequalities continue to exist between Member States. On the negative pole of the grid, the statement “Brexit demonstrated that leaving the EU was an error and myopic, especially during the pandemic” generated more disagreement among right-wing participants, while left-wing participants were more likely to agree with it. The placement of this statement by most respondents of this factor on the negative pole must not be understood as a sign of Euro-scepticism or support for the idea of a Spanish exit. Such an idea is unthinkable in the public discourse of the Spanish political right, including in the more radical circles. It can be seen rather as an expression of sympathy towards some of the arguments invoked by Brexiteers, such as the vindication of national sovereignty and fear of immigration and multiculturalism. Ideological differences were clearly visible in relation to the statement “Blocking Poland and Hungary from the recovery funds to induce compliance with human rights is necessary”, which obtained the second highest negative Z-score. In general, right-wing respondents were more likely to oppose the monetary sanctions imposed by the EU on Hungary and Poland or even question the existence of human rights’ violations that justifies EU action. This can be attributed to the relative ideological proximity between part of the Spanish conservative elites and the Polish and Hungarian governments’ policies. In comparison, all left-wing respondents agreed with the underlying assumption

that Hungary and Poland show disrespect towards the rule of law and human rights values, and they were more likely to support this type of measures to exert pressure on those governments.

In Factor 5 (the anti-Brexiteers), the statement “Brexit demonstrated that leaving the EU was an error and myopic, especially during the pandemic” was the single most distinguishing statement of this factor. Only in this factor this statement was assigned a positive Q sort value, and it was the highest one possible (+3), with four respondents placing in (+3) and one respondent in (+2). The second most distinguishing statement of this factor is also related to Brexit: “Brexit has harmed the EU and Spain.” In other words, only in this factor the respondents were preoccupied with Brexit and its implications and continued to view Brexit as a highly important event in discussing the EU.

As can be seen from the brief description of the five factors, human rights and the rule of law were not the leitmotiv of any of them. However, they were relevant to understanding the clustering of a couple of factors. For example, in Factor 3, which reflects the accentuated ideological divide between both ends of the political spectrum, the statement on sanctioning Hungary and Poland demonstrated how certain human rights issues can generate polarization. In general, statements relating to human rights and the rule of law scored the lowest Z-score variance, meaning that the values they generated on the scale of -3 to +3 were less dispersed compared to other statements. However, this low level of divergence could also be understood as a declining interest in symbolism and an increasing interest in more urgent challenges facing the EU. As mentioned earlier, except for Factor 2, the statement “Human Rights and the rule of law constitute core EU values and Spain strongly supports them” obtained (0) in Q sort value in the rest of the factors. To understand whether this outcome signifies a decline in the perception of the EU as a normative actor of symbolic importance, we analyzed the comments provided by the respondents during the in-depth interview when talking about human rights related statements.

5.1. The Role of EU in Spain’s Identity Regarding Human Rights

5.1.1. The analysis of th5.1. *The Role of EU in Spain’s Identity Regarding Human Rights*

Human Rights and the rule of law constitute core EU values and Spain strongly supports them” in neutral columns does not represent an ambivalent approach to the role of the EU as a normative actor. Instead, it could be interpreted as the decline of symbolism and the preoccupation with pragmatic issues such as the economy, defence policies and the war in Ukraine in discussing the EU after almost four decades of membership. Our interviews also show a trivialization of the normative role of the EU, as can be inferred from the comments of the respondents on the statement. For example, a conservative journalist stated that the normative role of the EU “is so obvious.” A progressive journalist commented “this issue is so basic.” Likewise, a left-wing politician argued:

“It is very important to underline that the European Union is the great stabilizer of democracies. In other words, if fears about the democratic destiny of the nations of the European Union are minimal, including in moments of economic crisis and populism, it is thanks to ... [what] the European Union represents. As a Spanish citizen who identifies Europe with democracy, my peace of mind, when my country has had moments of difficulty, comes from belonging to the European Union.”

However, decline in symbolism does not entail the vanishing of the identitarian approach to the EU’s normative role. Some respondents linked this role to identitarian narratives using biological metaphors. One progressive journalist stated:

Decline in symbolism does not entail the vanishing of the identitarian approach to the EU’s normative role

“If there is something that defines [the EU’s] most genuine identity, it is the defence of human rights. And I think that there is a generalized perception that it is a priority for the member states and that it forms part of the most essential DNA of the European Union.”

This identitarian discourse was used also by a politician from the far-right:

“[The protection of human rights] is what differentiates us, the West and especially Europe, from the rest of the world.”

Such narratives reassert the “Europeanness” of Spain by embracing the same values that set apart old, isolated Spain from the rest of Europe. Reasserting Spain’s Europeanness is also pursued through the discursive demarcation of European borders by reopening the question who we are and who belongs to us (Van-Dijk, 2013). This was evident in some of the discourses on the deviation of Poland and Hungary from the European normative framework. For example, a progressive journalist claimed that:

Reasserting Spain’s Europeanness is also pursued through the discursive demarcation of European borders by reopening the question who we are and who belongs to us

“The countries of the East that entered in the enlargement of 2004 (...) generated a climate of opinion (...) that in some way endangered a bit some of the essential DNA of the European Union. Isn’t it? (...) I believe that these countries have

contributed, in some way, from my point of view, negatively, they have not contributed to nourishing the European spirit. (...) These countries have often not been the best allies of the European project. And the worst thing, from my point of view, is that they have helped to legitimize that discourse (...). In the end, the echo chambers that are generated in the European Parliament, in the institutions (...) with some political leaders who row against the project or fight to impose points of view that I think are not those that match the most essential principles of the European Union. Well, I think that in the end they somehow managed to contaminate the media climate and the climate of opinion in the European Union.”

A left-wing politician stated

“[i]n sin is penance, because I think we could have been more demanding on these issues. Now it costs you more work because it is a partner.”

By opening the question of who belongs to us, these discourses attempt to move Spain from the periphery of Europe, with its Europeanness being questioned, to the heart of the European integration project. At times, the portrayal of Spain as a staunch defender of Europe’s core values is paralleled with the ‘othering’ of Eastern European states and pushing them to the periphery.

The Europeanness of Spain is also reaffirmed by claiming that it no longer needs EU guidance for guaranteeing human rights and the rule of law. For example, a progressive journalist claimed: “I believe that Spain, with all the problems it may have, is an established democracy.” Another progressive journalist highlighted that “[Spain] has also been leading in the past with socialist laws, we have been leading this social progress.” A left-wing politician claimed that human rights concerns might be an issue for other countries but “Spain and other European countries continue to be very, very, very at the forefront [...] of the defence of these values in the sphere of the Union.”

At times, the portrayal of Spain as a staunch defender of Europe’s core values is paralleled with the ‘othering’ of Eastern European states and pushing them to the periphery

A similar trend was also detectable in the comments of some respondents, both from the left and from the right, on the statement “The EU fosters the protection of human rights and the rule of law in Spain.” A left-wing politician emphasized:

I believe that at this moment the rule of law in Spain and human rights are not conditioned by our belonging to the European Union. In other words, if the delusion of leaving occurs to us, as it happened in United Kingdom, I believe that the rule of law would have some solid pillars, because the Spanish Constitution establishes it that way. Therefore, I do not share this perception.

Another left-wing politician argued:

I believe that within the European Union, Spain is a leader in [adopting] policies for the protection of human rights and the rule of law. And I would say something else... especially when socialist parties govern. I believe that in recent years Spain, unlike what has happened throughout its history, has been a pioneer in [adopting] various measures in the field of human rights and the rule of law... No, I don't think [the statement] is true.

A progressive journalist expressed a similar position: “That the EU promotes the protection of human rights and the rule of law in Spain, I do not see this so clearly, but I do not see it so clearly because I do not detect a problem of human rights vulnerability in Spain.” As for right-wing respondents, a conservative journalist explained:

I believe that this discourse on the issue of human rights, and especially in Spain, is over. The leitmotif of the European Union right now is not the protection of human rights in Spain or in any other member state. That is why it does not seem to me that it is necessary to appeal to human rights to emphasize the importance of the European Union for Spain.

Another right-wing politician argued that the EU’s role as promoter of human rights is no longer “a significant element in European politics now, beyond the fact that there are conflicts with some countries like Hungary or Poland”, the respondent further added “at this political moment today this [issue] is not under discussion.”

However, this narrative was challenged by few right-wing respondents. For example, a conservative journalist cites the close monitoring of European institutions of the controversial attempt to reform the Spanish General Council of the Judiciary (CGJ) as an example of why Spain still needs EU guidance:

I remember... last year [there was] an attempt by Government and Unidas Podemos to reform the General Council of the Judiciary, Brussels quickly raised the alarm saying that it was not the best option to reform the General Council of the Judiciary. (...) I think that is a key. In other words, the fact of belonging to the European Union forces you not to make reforms that go against European interests. So, in this sense, I believe that Spain is a free country... it is a full democracy, there is an unquestionable separation of powers, but the fact of belonging to the European Union also obliges you to make a series of reforms.

One right-wing respondent even argued that the EU is not only the guarantor of the rule of law in Spain, but also the guarantor of its territorial integrity:

I do not doubt that the government of Pedro Sánchez would have been delighted (...) to grant Catalonia independence if it depended only on the national Government and if we did not have a supranational entity such as the European Union, which put obstacles to the secessionist desires. (...) In this sense, I believe that we have to thank the European Union that Spain continues to be a united country.

These discourses attest more to internal polarization and less so to the role of the EU. Only one politician from the radical left recognized the role of European institutions in promoting human rights in current Spain, highlighting the role of the European Court of Justice in prohibiting evictions when the affected person had contracted a mortgage under fraudulent terms.

Only one respondent, a radical left-wing politician, questioned the characterization of the EU as a normative power:

The European Union as a project, in the end, what is seen is that it has a whole narrative on human rights that remains a narrative. But this narrative helps at the same time to justify the violations of human rights at the borders [...] the European Union should be a project with more of a political spirit and with more of a spirit of international solidarity, of inter-state cooperation... in reality it is a purely economic project. Even when there is a violation of human rights in some of the Member States, it simply washes its hands of it.

Another respondent, a right-wing politician, believed that the EU lacks the actual capability to promote human rights and the rule of law citing the controversy surrounding the reform the CGJ as an example. This respondent claimed that the EU “has made a statement, but its condemnation of the government's policies and actions has not been outright, and I believe that this is not positive.” Other two respondents from the left, one politician and one journalist, argued that the EU is not consistent in promoting human rights. This was evident in some of the comments on the statement “the EU displays double standards when dealing with migration issues depending on the origin of the migrants.” Interestingly, the disagreement on this statement was mostly between journalists on the one hand and politicians on the other. Most of the respondents supporting this statement, perceiving it as an important issue for the construction of the European project, were journalists. In comparison, most of those disagreeing with it were politicians. A conservative journalist argued:

You left these [Syrian and Afghani] immigrants in camps in Turkey with the agreement you reached with Erdogan. However, in the case of Ukraine, you have opened the borders of the European Union and allowed them in.

This could be explained by the proximity of journalists to the field and their personal encounter with stories of refugees on the ground. A progressive journalist claimed:

Unfortunately, I agree [...] with the refugees from the Ukraine doors open and for the first time the European Union applies a directive that it has had since the Yugoslavia war and that it had never applied, which is the temporary protection directive, which is very good. ... that is how they [Ukrainian refugees] bypass all the administrative problems ... to be able to reach a country, that they can have sufficient assistance, that they can work. That's great... [But] very recently we have had refugees from Syria ... I saw this first hand, because I was in a refugee camp in Lesbos, which is the Moria refugee camp, the largest refugee camp in Europe. But above all it is very representative of this [contrast].

Some respondents highlighted the different framing of the massive arrival of refugees (humanitarian vs. securitarian) based on their origin, pointing out to the bias implicit in migration policies. A progressive journalist claimed that when Ukrainian refugees arrived in greater numbers and in a shorter time span “no one spoke of a crisis, or a hybrid threat or anything of this style.” A politician affiliated with the radical left stated: “There is a dominant discourse precisely on threats. I think it is seen, for example, in relation to all the people who come from a Muslim background. A threat is seen to the way, the system or the type of culture dominant in the European Union.”

5.2. Yet Not all Human Rights are Equal

Although a strong consensus existed among respondents on the construction of the EU as a normative actor that promotes human rights and the rule of law, certain human rights norms were contested by some respondents, mainly from the ultra-right respondents. A politician from the far-right claimed:

Although a strong consensus existed among respondents on the construction of the EU as a normative actor that promotes human rights and the rule of law, certain human rights norms were contested by some respondents, mainly from the ultra-right respondents

Sometimes we misunderstand human rights, and we invent rights, or we create rights out of nothing, or we create rights that don't exist.

The same politician further added:

For me, the only European identity that I have and that influences me is one, the West, especially the European Union, it is the place in the world where human rights are most respected. It is so, thank God. [The EU] spends the day punishing

itself with this issue, as if there are no rights, it is an institution that is not very pragmatic. It is very ideological.

LGBTQI+ rights stand at the heart of this contestation as can be seen in the comments of some respondents on the statement “Spain strongly supports the EU’s efforts to promote LGBTQI+ rights that constitute Spanish and European values.” For example, a right-wing politician argued that LGBTQ+ rights are not included in any of the basic international or regional human rights instruments, they are simple “an ideological interpretation” of those instruments. Another right-wing politician used a mocking tone to criticize LGBTQI+ rights:

“It seems that the European Union is more committed to LGTBQ Z W rights than the rights of people with disabilities. And let’s be serious, LGTB Q Z or B12 people are a minoritarian group and people with disabilities are between eight and eleven percent of a country like Spain. So, I think we’re leading the way here to things that probably won’t be necessary.”

An implicit critique of the EU’s promotion of LGBTQI+ rights was also evident in comments on the statement “Blocking Poland and Hungary from the recovery funds to induce compliance with human rights is necessary.” A politician from the far-right claimed:

“In Hungary I don’t see the problem, I don’t see any problem because, for example, having refused to allow gender studies to be offered by universities, it is clear that gender studies have no scientific basis. The minimum that is supposed to be required of university studies is to have a scientific basis. (...) They do not accept the gender ideology. Well, they automatically become cursed and enemies to beat.”

Another right-wing politician argued:

“Human rights that I know of none have been violated. Well, someone could say because of the issue of universities.”

A far-right politician commented:

“I do not believe that it can be affirmed with a solid basis that Poland and Hungary do not meet the requirements ... of what is called the rule of law, or protection of fundamental rights.”

The respondent further added that policies in relation to families and in relation to education “are essentially ideological issues because they have a moral content” and the EU should tolerate “ideological liberties” in its ambit.

Others, such as the case of one conservative journalist, did not articulate an outright and frontal critique of LGBTQI+, instead the sanctions were viewed as problematic from the perspective of priorities referring to the massive arrival of Ukrainian refugees to both countries:

“What human rights take precedence over feeding those who have nothing? Giving water to those who come across on foot with children? or LGBT rights? [...] I don’t think we can be playing with the money of Hungary and Poland, having what we unfortunately have. Then, when we are all at peace and everyone has basic services and needs covered, we will talk about other things.”

All respondents who argued that there is no justification for withholding funds from Hungary and Poland where from the right. Some of those respondents hinted to the existence of institutional bias against both countries, emphasizing that in Spain too, the failure to renew *CGJ* raises serious concerns over the independence of the judiciary. A right-wing politician argued that the EU sanctions are discriminatory. A conservative journalist called them “extortion.” Another right-wing politician argued that the EU cannot function “as the moral oracle of Delphi that says you are not doing things right, do it because I tell you so.”

These discourses resonate with old discourses on the maladies of modern Europe that preceded accession to the EEC. This is not surprising, since *Vox* shares key ideological features with ultra-right parties in Eastern Europe (**Olivas Osuna; Rama, 2021**). The contestation of the EU’s normative framework could be understood as a form of de-Europeanization, defined as

“the progressive detachment of some countries from the political, administrative and normative influence of the Union.” (**Tomini; Gürkan, 2021**).

However, this form of de-Europeanization purports to defend the EU from its own deviations. It is not national sovereignty or identity that are juxtaposed with the EU’s ideology, it is the “true” essence of the EU that is being defended from deviation has been attributed to EU leftist elites “far from reality” (**Vox, 2019**). In other words, these discourses attempt to construct a different European integration project that reflects the true essence of Europe as stated in *Vox*’s 2019 manifesto for the European elections:

“This is the Europe in which we believe and want to defend and promote: the Europe that gave to the world the Law of Nations, inviolable human rights, respect for private property, protection of the family, individual freedom and the conception of a democratic State at the service of Man. Europe is Civilization, which is enriched and magnified by the diversity of its cultures and the diversity of its nations” (**Vox, 2019**).

5.3. EU as a Normative Actor: from Conceptualization to Action

Perceiving the EU as a normative actor that promotes democracy, human rights and the rule of law in from a mainly symbolic lenses, leads to different visions on how the EU should act as a normative actor from a pragmatic point of view. For example, some of the respondents who believed that both Poland and Hungary are deviating from the normative framework of the EU and its values, argued that using economic sanctions is inappropriate. Others believed that blocking EU funds could be counterproductive since it could be perceived as a collective punishment against citizens. A politician affiliated with the radical left explained:

“On the one hand I think that the European Union has to take effective measures to comply with human rights, but as soon as the recovery funds are used to force compliance, I think that what would cause precisely a contrary position within the Polish or Hungarian citizenship itself, within Poland itself (...) because that would further reinforce (...) the nationalist position in the face of a more open position.”

Others opposed the imposition of economic sanctions favouring a political dialogue. Some respondents, especially from the right, prioritized geopolitical and security considerations over human rights and argued that Russian aggression against Ukraine should be taken into consideration:

“The war in Ukraine limits us, what we have to do to prevent Ukraine from being defeated and to prevent Russia from triumphing [...] it seems to me that sanctions against Hungary are necessary. In a normal situation, I would be totally in favour of them [...] at this moment the prudent thing [to do], the priority, is to maintain unity and therefore to postpone all policies that imply the aggravation of internal tensions within the European Union.”

Having different or even clashing opinions on how the EU should act as a normative actor is not surprising when taking into consideration that the historic discourses on joining the EEC focused on the broad category of democracy while constructing the EU as a symbol. As **López-Gómez (2014)** argues, the representation of the EU as a symbol hindered more profound debates on concrete questions that were common in other countries debating accession.

6. Conclusion

Democratization was a key element in Spain’s accession to the EEC. Accession was also viewed as a path to modernization, and as a remedy to Spain’s isolation and “backwardness.” More importantly, democratization was not viewed mainly through the lenses of pragmatic benefits associated with enhancing the protection of human rights. Instead, it was viewed as a fundamental

Democratization was not viewed mainly through the lenses of pragmatic benefits associated with enhancing the protection of human rights. Instead, it was viewed as a fundamental identity question relocating Spain from the periphery of Europe to the heart of the continent, challenging, hence, historical perceptions on Spain’s lack of ‘Europeanness’

identity question relocating Spain from the periphery of Europe to the heart of the continent, challenging, hence, historical perceptions on Spain’s lack of ‘Europeanness’. In this process, pro-European political and media elites and civil society in Spain constructed the EU as a symbol of modernity and democracy. As **Arregui (2022)** points out

“the Spanish approach to Europe has not simply been pragmatic and visible but has also had a distinct ideological component.”

However, after almost four decades of EU membership, resulting in an increasingly pragmatic approach to Europeanization focusing on specific policies of the EU, can we still identify identity-based discourses when discussing the EU’s role as a normative power? Relying on the Foucauldian notion of conservation, can we find traces of these old discourses in modern discourses on the EU? As for memory, how do current discourses on democratization and human rights relate to old discourses?

To answer these questions, we used a mixed quantitative and qualitative methodology that integrates Q methodology and in-depth interviews with political and media elites in Spain. The Q methodology revealed that key statements on human rights and the rule of law were not the leitmotif of any of the analyzed factors. The results also show that the statement “human rights and the rule of law constitute core EU values and Spain strongly supports them” was placed in the neutral column in four out of the five factors. This indicates that the respondents attached less importance to the normative role of the EU compared to pragmatic discourses focusing on recent challenges facing the EU, such as the recovery funds, COVID-19, the war in Ukraine and Brexit. This, in turn, suggests that the EU has lost part of its symbolic aura after four decades of daily engagement with complex, numerous and concrete EU policies. This is consistent with recent research on Europeanization, which suggests that pragmatic considerations, such as economy or security and defence issues, are predominant in the debate about the EU both at European level (**Braun; Schäfer, 2022**) and within Spain (**Arregui, 2022; García-Carretero et al., 2022; Mayo-Cubero et al., 2023; Abad-Quintanal et al., 2023**).

However, when asked directly about the role of the EU as a promotor of human rights and the rule of law during the in-depth interviews, only one respondent claimed that the EU is not a normative power and one more arguing that the EU

is incapable of promoting human rights. A few more respondents criticized the EU's record on human rights by accusing it of double standards, especially in relation to migrant rights.

The interviews also revealed that the Spanish elites' discourses remain strongly shaped by identity narratives that attempt to reaffirm not only Spain's Europeanness, but also its prominent position within Europe, as they highlight Spain's leading role in the promotion of EU values. This, in turn, leads to downplaying the need for EU guidance in protecting human rights and the rule of law locally, a fact that is reflected also in the low importance attached to human rights related statements when placed by the respondents on the Q grid. The latter narrative was at times challenged by right-wing respondents, who claimed that the current *PSOE* government jeopardizes human rights and the rule of law, that is why the EU's help is needed. Here, the EU is instrumentalized and used as a leverage to discredit political opponents. The interviews also suggest that reaffirming the Europeanness of Spain is pursued through the othering of Eastern European states and questioning their belonging to Europe while presenting Spain as the true representative of European values.

Spanish elites' discourses remain strongly shaped by identity narratives that attempt to reaffirm not only Spain's Europeanness, but also its prominent position within Europe, as they highlight Spain's leading role in the promotion of EU values.

Constructing the EU as a normative actor does not necessarily lead to a uniform vision regarding how it should exercise this role. Disagreement on the use of economic sanction to guarantee compliance with the EU normative framework is one example. The prioritization of geopolitical and security interests over human rights is another example. This too could be explained through historical lenses taking into consideration that discourses on Spain joining the EEC focused on the broad category of democracy, constructing the EU as a symbol and less so on detailed and nuanced discussions of the EU role and policies.

Finally, our research demonstrates that in Spain too identity-based argument can be instrumentalized to contest some human rights norms. Some right-wing respondents, especially from the far-right, were highly critical of LGBTQI+ rights and gender rights, in a manner that resonates with old narratives preceding accession to the EEC on the weaknesses and maladies of modern Europe. **Hutter and Kriesi** (2019) and **Hooghe and Marks** (2018) point out that while the rise of Euroscepticism in North and Western European countries, usually associated with far-right parties, was mainly motivated by identitarian factors relating to the increase in migration. But in Southern European countries, it was almost exclusively a phenomenon of the radical left-wing political parties, driven by the economic factors and harsh consequences of the 2009 Euro crisis and the austerity measures adopted by the EU to combat it. In Spain, *Vox's* instrumentalization of LGBTQI+ rights and gender equality was mainly deployed to attack internal political rivals. **Conde-Solares** (2019) argues that

“where other European far-right parties use an ethno-nationalist narrative to paint the EU or other supranational powers as the enemy, *Vox* attacks the ethno-nationalism within its own nation. It is the Basque and Catalan nationalists who base their ideas on tribal and ethnic exceptionalism.”

However, if we understand this detachment from the normative framework of the EU as a process, our interviews demonstrate that LGBTQI+ and gender rights are in fact being instrumentalized also to discredit the EU and not just internal actors. This evolution blurs the above-mentioned regional specificities in understanding Euroscepticism and highlights the emergence of an increasingly unified ideological movement across Europe questioning not the nature but the meaning of the EU as a normative actor.

Therefore, further research is needed on the impact of identity-based factors in shaping discourses on the EU. First, our findings reveal that even pro-European identity narratives concerning human rights can be instrumentalized to renegotiate the boundaries of Europe in a way that perpetuates the othering of certain regions within it, such as the discourses on Hungary and Poland lacking a true European vocation. Second, our analysis highlights that the instrumentalization of LGBTQI+ rights by the extreme right in Spain vis-a-vis the EU requires further studies.

7. Limitations

As mentioned before, the Q statements were extracted from a previous media analysis study covering 9 months (June 2021- March 2022). By the time the raw material was filtered and processed, and media discourses identified and analyzed, some of the themes covered by the media lost their relevance in the months after when we conducted the interviews between November 2022 and May 2023.

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