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Evidence from the 2014 European elections in Italy**

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How do Eurosceptic Parties and Economic Crisis affect News Coverage of the European Union? Evidence from the 2014 European Elections in Italy

ABSTRACT This article aims at understanding to what extent the presence of Eurosceptic actors, along with the effects of the economic crisis, have affected the news coverage on Europe and the European Union during the 2014 EP election campaign in Italy. We rely on an original dataset based on content analysis of the 50 days prior to the 2014 EP elections in four mainstream newspapers (n=2,499) and four mainstream TV newscasts (n=519). Our findings show that, while Italian mainstream media covered EU issues through a more positive frame compared to domestic political issues, Eurosceptic parties and economic issues, especially in relation to the austerity policies supported by the EU, were the two explanatory factors that clearly affected the coverage of the EU.

KEY WORDS: Visibility, Europeanness, Europeanization, news coverage, European Parliament elections, Euroscepticism, economic crisis

Introduction

News coverage of European Union (EU) activities is crucial for connecting European citizens with institutions and for raising public awareness of EU politics. Banducci and Semetko (2003) found that EU news coverage affects turnout in European elections, while other scholars have shown a correlation between citizens' support for future European integration and the features of news coverage on the EU (e.g. Maier & Rittberger, 2008; Vliegenthart *et al.*, 2008). EU news coverage also contributes to enhance the process of the Europeanization of national public spheres (e.g. Fossum & Schlesinger, 2007) and to strengthen the legitimacy of the EU institutions (e.g. Trezz, 2008). As stated by Schuck and de Vreese (2011: 268), investigating European Parliament election coverage is important for at least three reasons: 'In the absence of European perspectives, actors, and topics, (1) citizens are more likely to conceive of the EP elections as domestic rather than European political contests, (2) the emergence of Europeanized public spheres or a European public sphere is less than likely, and (3) the legitimacy of the European Parliament is questioned and the ability for citizens to hold their elected representatives accountable on European issues is undermined'.

This article examines mainstream media coverage of the 2014 EU elections, adopting the case of Italy as an illustration. The 2014 European elections can be considered in many ways a turning point. As regards electoral results, they were marked by a general rise of the Eurosceptic parties, most notably the Front National party in France and the UK Independence Party in the United Kingdom. More generally, these were the first European elections held in a political climate marked by the consequences of the economic and Euro crisis. The article aims at investigating whether and to what extent these two contingent factors – Eurosceptic parties and economic crisis – may have affected the news coverage of the EU. For this purpose, the Italian case is enlightening, because it helps in understanding the role of the mainstream media in covering the EU in a country hit by a severe economic crisis and affected by a significant rise of Euroscepticism.

As regards Euroscepticism, interpreting the results of the 2014 elections in Italy, the outcome that gained the greatest attention was the performance of Matteo Renzi, leader of the *Partito Democratico* [PD, Democratic Party] and Italian prime minister, at that moment. He was able to lead a pro-EU mainstream centre-left party to an unexpected result of 40.8%, one of the few cases of a governing party in Europe not punished by voters (Segatti, Poletti & Vezzoni, 2015). This performance overshadowed another extremely significant result: there was a veritable explosion of Eurosceptic parties in Italy, even more relevant than in other European countries.

For a long time, Italy has been considered a Europhile country (Huysseune, 2010; Conti & Memoli, 2010, 2013). In 2009, among the main political parties, the only ones supporting Eurosceptic positions were the ethno-regionalist party *Lega Nord* [LN, Northern League] and two parties of the radical left, *Rifondazione Comunista* [RC, Communist Refoundation] and *Sinistra, Economia e Libertà* [SEL, Left, Ecology, and Freedom]. In both cases, Europe was the subject of criticism in general, but the target of election campaigns did not focus directly against the EU.

In 2014, the situation had radically changed. Over the previous five years, the Eurosceptic share within the Italian party system had substantially increased. In addition to the LN and the Radical Left (renamed the ‘Tsipras List’ for the occasion), a further three parties had openly joined the Eurosceptic side. On the right, Berlusconi’s *Forza Italia* (FI) [FI, Go Italy] ran a campaign under the slogan ‘More Italy in Europe, Less Europe in Italy’.¹ On the same area, *Fratelli d’Italia* [FDI, Brothers of Italy], a Berlusconi ally, had been campaigning close to the Eurosceptic positions of Marine Le Pen. Finally, the most voted Eurosceptic party in the 2014 elections was the *Movimento Cinque Stelle* [M5S, Five Stars Movement], the campaign of which was based on the request for a referendum on the Euro and the refusal of the restrictive policies imposed by the EU (e.g. the

¹ ‘We are tired of having to do homework. We need to change the economic policies, we do not like a European Union led by the Germans.’ Interview with the Forza Italia MP, Maria Stella Gelmini, *Il Mattinale*, 28 March 2014.

inclusion of the fiscal compact and balanced budget principle in the Italian Constitution).² To sum up, while Eurosceptic parties did not reach 20% in 2009, they exceeded 50% of the votes in 2014.³

In terms of the economic situation, in 2014 Italy was still in a recession phase, according to the main economic indicators (Verney & Bosco, 2013; Engler & Klein, 2017). After the global financial crisis (2007–2008) and the worldwide recession (2009), sovereign debt rose significantly due to an increase in government spending and a decrease in revenues: the debt-to-GDP ratio continued to rise from 99.8 in 2006 to 132.6 in 2016 (Eurostat). Despite the austerity measures imposed by the EU, many countries – especially Southern Europe countries – experienced a second recession starting in 2011. This was mainly reflected in a surge in unemployment that was higher than 12% in 2014, while it was less than 7% in 2006 (Eurostat). Previous research has shown that the electorate, in this situation, was affected by the impact of a negative economic cycle, unemployment and various issues related to the economy. However, this did not simply mean a decrease in electoral turnout (Passarelli & Tuorto, 2014). Instead, it determined the way in which the most politically oriented voters voted, by assigning responsibility differently, according to their perceptions of the main culprits (Bellucci, 2014). Surveys of elites also showed that the impact of the crisis had only a small influence on their attitudes toward the EU (Di Mauro, 2014). Based on three MP surveys, Conti, Cotta & Verzichelli (2016) found that although some parties had made an effort to politicise the EU issue in the 2014 EP campaign, attitudes did not show relevant changes before and after the crisis, and Euroscepticism did not increase in the views expressed by individual party representatives.

In addition, the Italian case also allows us to assess how the media system has covered the EU, during a period of crisis, in a country like Italy, which Hallin and Mancini (2004) have classified - along with France, Greece, Portugal and Spain - as belonging to the plural-polarized model

² The M5S election manifesto is available online at <http://beppegrillo.it/europee/programma/> (last accessed June 2017).

³ In the 2009 EU elections, all together, Eurosceptic parties took 16.7% of votes (LN 10.2%, RC 3.4%, SEL 3.1%). In 2014, Eurosceptic votes rose to 51.9% (M5S 21.2%, FI 16.8%, LN 6.2%, Tsipras List 4% and FDI 3.7%).

characterized by a weak media market, relevant state role, low degree of journalistic professionalism and strong political parallelism.

In the light of the above, the article shows the combined consequences that the presence of the economic crisis and Eurosceptic parties produced in the EU coverage. In the section below, we discuss the literature on the EU news by focusing on the visibility and Europeanness of European affairs within the coverage of mainstream media. We then review the literature on the link between Euroscepticism, economic crisis, and EU coverage. In section 3, we outline methods and sampling, while in section 4 we examine the coverage of the 2014 EP elections campaign in Italy. This analysis explores differences between media EU coverage compared to other political news items. Our general hypothesis is that the relevance of Eurosceptic parties and the economic crisis in the news coverage may correlate positively with the EU coverage. The article thus assesses which conditions may affect the visibility of the EU and the Europeanness of the news. Descriptive analyses provide preliminary information in this regard, while a multivariate analysis tests our hypotheses. According to our findings, while Italian mainstream media cover EU issues through a more positive frame compared to domestic political issues, Eurosceptic parties and economic issues, especially in relation to the austerity policies supported by the EU, appear as the two explanatory factors that clearly affect the coverage of the EU.

1. Studying the EU news

In the past two decades, several scholars have increasingly focused their studies on the media coverage of the EU. Analyses of media coverage of European politics answered questions about the Europeanization of national public spheres (e.g. Fossum & Schlesinger, 2007) and contributed to our understanding of the democratic legitimacy of the EU institutions (e.g. Trenz, 2008). Irregular and limited news coverage could unfavourably influence public citizens' awareness of the EU and especially the relationship between representatives and represented (Shephard, 1997). Regular

coverage, on the contrary, would enhance the opportunities for citizens to take note of EU activities and foster trust in European institutions (Norris, 2000; Nardis, 2015).

As is well known, news about the EU is not traditionally widespread in mainstream media, while quality newspapers usually tend to cover European affairs (Trenz, 2004; Machill, Beiler & Fischer, 2006). In general, especially on television, EU news has been limited, irregular, and mainly focused on domestic issues or actors (e.g. de Vreese, Peter & Semetko, 2001; Peter & de Vreese, 2004; Meyer, 2005; Boomgaarden *et al.*, 2010). Starting from 2008, the economic and Euro crises have begun to change this approach to covering the EU (e.g. Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2012). At the same time, another series of issues – including humanitarian intervention, common defence, immigration policy, and terrorism – is becoming more transnational, potentially contributing to the Europeanization of national public spheres (e.g. Koopmans, 2004; de Vreese & Kandyla, 2009; Kantner, 2011).

Scholars have mainly addressed the study of European Union news coverage by taking into account several dimensions, such as the visibility of EU news (e.g. Boomgaarden *et al.*, 2010), the degree of Europeanization (or domestication) (e.g. Koopmans, 2007; McQuail & Bergsma, 1983; Peter & de Vreese 2004), the tone of the news regarding European integration, and the framing of EU affairs (e.g. de Vreese *et al.*, 2006).

As clearly illustrated in several studies by Boomgaarden, de Vreese, and colleagues (Boomgaarden *et al.*, 2010; Boomgaarden *et al.*, 2013; Schuck & de Vreese, 2011), the visibility of the EU in the news is relevant, since it could provide citizens with 'information about the issues at stake and cues them about the importance of EP [European Parliament] elections' (Boomgaarden *et al.*, 2013: 611). Visibility of the EU is defined as the volume of coverage related to the EU compared to the entire coverage. The general picture clarifies that the visibility during EP election campaigns is generally increasing, even though member states differ in the attention they pay to the EU. Nevertheless, it is undisputed that the level of visibility is highly increased: in the first elections of 1979, the EU was virtually absent until the final weeks before the elections (Blumler, 1983;

Siune, 1983), while the last comparative data, referring to the 2009 EP elections, have shown that more than 20% of all TV news coverage and almost 13% of the stories in the press in the three weeks leading up to the vote were devoted to the elections (Schuck *et al.*, 2011).

In the light of the second-order elections thesis (Reif & Schmitt, 1980; Schmitt, 2005), the Europeanness of the news, namely the extent to which EU news is (or is not) domesticated (Boomgaarden *et al.*, 2013; Boomgaarden & de Vreese, 2016), has been assessed through different dimensions. Europeanization has been defined as a vertical or horizontal process: vertical Europeanization ‘consists of communicative linkages between the national and the European level’, and horizontal Europeanization ‘consists of communicative linkages between different member states’ (Koopmans & Erbe, 2004: 101).

By using both of these dimensions, Schuck & De Vreese (2011: 289) showed that newspapers are still more important as agents of Europeanization than television news; the quality press and public television are more European in focus than their broadsheet and commercial counterparts. Mainly focused on the vertical dimension, Boomgaarden *et al.* (2013: 623–624) examined the prominence of EU actors in news coverage and found that when there is increasingly more elite conflict, there is less of a European focus in the news, and this also applies to the presence of negativity among the political elites: the more negative, the less European (or vice versa). Following Boomgaarden *et al.* (2013), we focus in this article on the vertical dimension of the Europeanization, namely the prominence of EU actors in the news, as detailed below in section 3.

2. Explaining the EU News Coverage among Growing Euroscepticism and Economic Crisis

In recent years, several studies have pointed out that the presence of Eurosceptic parties in a domestic context emphasizes the political discussion and coverage of European issues. The presence of political conflict about European integration, as characterized by the existence and electoral strength of Eurosceptic parties, has been shown to lead to more EU news (de Vreese, Lauf & Peter, 2007) and to increase the visibility of EU news between two EP elections (de Vreese &

Boomgaarden, 2012). Schuck *et al.* (2011), analysing the 2009 EP elections in 27 EU member states, argued that the visibility of EP elections is increasing and that – under certain conditions – the degree of political contestation over Europe contributes to this growth. Based on a comparative study of 21 EU member states in 2009, van Spanje & de Vreese (2014) also found that media evaluations of the EU affect voting for Eurosceptic parties. EU coverage may be influenced by contextual factors, including country size and, to some degree, Euroscepticism (Brüggemann & Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2009). Boomgaarden and colleagues have highlighted the importance of national politics for both visibility and the Europeanness of news, and they suggest that EP elections, by becoming less consensual and more conflict-laden, as indicated by increasingly successful Eurosceptic parties, might be moving towards a more important political event in the minds of journalists and the public (2013: 626).

A second series of studies has highlighted the importance of economic issues in the coverage of Europe. Although suffering from a democratic deficit (Trenz, 2008), it cannot be disputed that the EU, even before the economic and financial crisis, was an active and prominent decision-maker on economic issues, and that economy was one of the EU topics most covered by the media, in addition to politics (Deirdre, 2003). Therefore, the crisis, which since 2008 has affected several European states, has increased the public debate about several EU institutions (such as the European Commission, the European Central Bank, etc.) at both the European and domestic levels. A handful of studies offer explanations for the variation in news coverage of the EU related to the economic crisis, hitherto. Nienstedt, Kepplinger & Quiring (2015), for example, demonstrated that in many countries media coverage blames domestic economic policies for the crisis, and that European institutions are often depicted as responsible for addressing it. Kleinen-von Königslöw (2012) comparing 2008, the year of the global financial crisis, with the previous years, found that interest in EU institutions and politics has predominantly stagnated, if not ebbed, and also that the level of horizontal integration has remained stable. Focusing on the actors involved in the coverage of the Euro crisis, Hubé, Salgado & Puustinen (2015) found that although national political leaders still

receive the most coverage (in particular, German Chancellor Angela Merkel appears in the news across the entire continent), some heads of European institutions – mainly those related to economic issues – are relevant in the flow of news.

In this article, we were interested in understanding whether the presence of Eurosceptic parties, along with the effects of the economic crisis, have affected the visibility of the EU and Europeanness of the 2014 EP election coverage in Italy. We focused especially on the elements that contributed to defining the features of media election coverage. European elections are second-order elections (Reif & Schmitt, 1980), namely they are perceived as less important than domestic ones by voters and politicians, so that journalists tend to deal with them through domestic frames of reference (de Vreese, 2009). News media – especially legacy media – play a crucial role, given that the majority of Italian and European voters obtain political information mainly through television news and newspapers (e.g. Standard Eurobarometer, 84, *Italian National Report*: 8). Previous research has shown that the level of presence of EU news items can affect the formation and variation of public opinion and voting behaviour. Low media coverage of the elections and European issues may, by contrast, increase the indifference of citizens to this type of election and reduce the legitimacy of the European institutions (Azrout, van Spanje & de Vreese, 2012; Banducci & Semetko, 2003; de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006).

Studying the visibility and Europeanness of news coverage in the period before the elections clarifies how the public debate in a given system – in our case, the Italian one – provides room for the campaign, political actors, and European issues. Moreover, it also clarifies the conditions that foster the visibility of EU news stories. At the same time, by analysing the tone of each news story, it clarifies whether the media cover the EU in a positive or negative way.

In the light of the above, we argue that (H1a) *the presence of Eurosceptic actors in a news item increases EU visibility* and (H1b) *the presence of Eurosceptic actors in a news item increases the*

*Europeanness of the news coverage.*⁴ At the same time, we also expect that (H2a) *reference to economic crisis increases EU visibility compared to other political news items*, and (H2b) *reference to economic crisis increases the Europeanness of the news coverage compared to other political news items*, meaning that the higher visibility of economic and financial issues will be associated with higher EU visibility and Europeanness.

With regard to medium-specific characteristics, previous research has shown that newspapers generally cover European affairs more than television (de Vreese, Lauf & Peter, 2007). Therefore, we derive the following two expectations: (H3a) *Newspapers generally show higher degrees of EU visibility in their coverage than television programs* and (H3b) *Newspapers show generally higher degrees of Europeanness in their coverage than television programs*.

Finally, we have expectations regarding the tone of news coverage. First of all, the literature shows an increasing gap between traditional and online media. While the former (with some relevant exceptions) are advocates of the EU process that they have narrated over several decades (Bayley & Williams, 2012), the latter are newer and have a shorter-term vision of the EU rooted in the difficult years of the economic crisis, thus they have emerged as important platforms for opposing the EU (de Wilde, Michailidou & Trenz, 2013; Nulty *et al.*, 2016). The coordinated top-down approach of traditional media is frequently contrasted with the peer-to-peer interaction of online media (especially social media), which is more permeable to the attitudes of public opinion. Indeed, the most recent literature shows a convergence towards Euroscepticism in online media, but not in traditional media. Since the analysis in this paper only covers traditional media, we could expect some resilience from mainstream journalists who may replicate conventional representations

⁴ It is worth noting that, from a logical point of view, the opposite may also be true: the coverage of EU issues increases the probability that mainstream media will mention Eurosceptic actors. However, since the Eurosceptic parties openly campaigned during the 2014 EP Italian elections against the integration process and the decisions taken in Brussels, it appears more likely that the direction of the hypothesis corresponds to that assumed in the text, namely that the independent variable relates to a previous point in time with respect to the dependent variable.

of the EU that they have narrated over a long period of time. This is especially relevant for our case study, since journalists and the media in Italy have been a major source of support for (and uncritical narration of) the EU (Bayley & Morley, 2012; Marletti & Mouchon, 2005; Mazzoni & Barbieri, 2014). Therefore, since Italian mainstream media are generally considered as Europhile, we expect that (H4a) *the presence of a positive tone in a news item is positively correlated to EU visibility* and (H4b) *the presence of a positive tone in a news item is positively correlated to Europeanness*. Furthermore, we also expect that (H4c) *a positive tone is more correlated to Europeanness than to EU visibility*.

3. Data and Methods

The sample

This study draws upon a coverage content analysis carried out on the Italian ‘information environment’, defined, according to Jerit, Barabas & Bolsen (2006), as the amount and characteristics of media coverage during the election campaign. National newscasts and newspapers were analysed because of their importance as sources of political information, and because citizens continue to be widely exposed to such media.⁵ We focused on a set of four television news bulletins and four domestic newspapers, selected according to two main criteria: the readership/audience of the outlets and their political orientation. In addition, with regard to TV news bulletins, our sample also distinguished between public and private broadcasting companies. In more detail, as regards newspapers, we considered *Il Corriere della Sera* and *La Stampa* as non-partisan media, while *Il Giornale* and *la Repubblica* were included as, respectively, the main centre-right and centre-left newspapers. As regards TV newscasts, we selected *TG1* and *La7* as more neutral, while *TG5* and

⁵ Although it is true that the Internet is growing as a source of information, citizens often obtain information online from the websites of mainstream newspapers: among Italians who regularly use the Internet, 67% say they read online newspapers (Demos, 2015). For this reason, the combination of television and newspapers is an effective sample for studying the ‘information environment’ in the Italian case.

TG3 were included as the most significant newscasts, respectively, for rightist and leftist voters.⁶

Our analyses extended over a period of 50 days before the EP election (7 April – 25 May 2014). All relevant news items were collected either digitally (TV) or as hardcopies (newspapers). The first three stories of each evening newscast were analysed.⁷ For the daily press, we adopted different selection criteria: (i) all the news items reported on the front page were considered, regardless of the issue addressed; and (ii) all the opening news, the editorial and all the news addressing issues of domestic politics, the EU and/or the EU election were considered with reference to both the front and internal pages.

Coding was conducted by a team of three trained and supervised coders. Tests of intercoder reliability were repeated on 10% of the sample, yielding satisfactory results (reported below). The final database includes 4,329 news items: 3,664 newspaper stories and 575 TV stories. News items specifically focused on politics totalled 3,020 – 2,501 published in newspapers and 519 broadcast on TV.

⁶*La Repubblica* is the second-most-read Italian newspaper (average daily circulation 433,892 in 2014. Source: ADS – Accertamento Diffusione Stampa). Nevertheless, in our sample, it was considered for its political orientation, namely the editorial line explicitly against Silvio Berlusconi and the centre-right. Similarly, *Il Giornale* was selected as the most-read newspaper oriented against the centre-left (average daily circulation 175,752 in 2014). The audience of these four newscasts in 2014 was on average 12,725,000, that is 67.0% of the total. Respectively: 5,302,000 (27.9%) for TG1, 4,351,000 (22.9%) for TG5, 1,781,000 (9.4%) for TG3 and 1,291,000 (6.8%) for La7. Source: AGCOM, *2015 Annual Report [Relazione annuale 2015]*, downloaded from: www.agcom.it.

⁷ Even though the evening newscasts had different agendas according to their broadcasting strategies, selecting the first three stories allowed us to gather on average more than 80% of the political news broadcasted. In detail: Tg1 85.7%, Tg3 72.6%, Tg5 100%, La7 64.3% (percentage calculated on 7 days of our sample randomly selected: April 7, 13, 15, 21; May 1, 12, 24).

Variables and coding procedures

The following methodological strategies were adopted for empirically handling those concepts identified in the literature as relevant for addressing the study of mainstream media coverage of EU issues.

First of all, for each news story included in the sample, the volume was registered, using it as a proxy of the degree of media attention on issues covered. With regard to the press, the length of the article was measured according to the number of words, while TV was estimated in terms of the length in minutes and seconds (mm:ss). Both of these measures were then normalized on a common scale ranging from 1 to 100 (LENGTH).

EU visibility was defined as the visibility of elements relating to EU issues in news stories. We were interested in assessing not only the presence of the EU focus in news stories, but also on the volume of coverage on this issue. Thus, a dichotomous variable was coded to register the presence (or absence) of the EU focus in news stories (1= EU news; 0= other political news) (Krippendorff's alpha 0.776). This variable was then combined with LENGTH variable to obtain a continuous variable ranging from 0, for a political news story without any reference to the EU, to 100, which is the maximum extension registered for a news story focused on EU issues (avg.=6.280; std. dev.=15.092).

We proceeded similarly in defining *Europeanness*. As anticipated, we opted for the vertical dimension of Europeanization, namely we focused on the presence of EU political actors (candidates, incumbent MEPs, incumbent commissioners, BCE representatives, EU Agencies representatives) in news stories. Thus, we started from coding a dichotomous variable registering the presence of at least one EU political actor in a news story (0=any EU political actor is covered; 1=at least 1 EU political actor is coded), and then we combined it with the LENGTH variable. We computed therefore a continuous variable ranging from 0, when any EU political actor was covered, and 100, which is the maximum extension of a news story focusing on EU political actors (avg.=7.149; std. dev.=14.014).

As already mentioned, we identified a set of factors potentially relevant for explaining EU media coverage, coded and computed as detailed below.

Euroscepticism is a variable that considers the degree of prominence of Eurosceptic actors in news stories. In order to combine these two levels of analysis (presence and coverage extension), we adopted the following procedure. Starting with the variable referring to the presence of political actors in news stories – a maximum of 5 political actors were registered for each news story (Krippendorff's alpha 0.743) – we identified those actors belonging to Eurosceptic parties. It is worth mentioning that, in order to distinguish between actors with respect to their attitude towards the EU, we analysed party manifestos, identifying the party positions and statements regarding the EU and the issue of European integration. We considered whether they tend to support the current status quo and/or are in favour of further expansion of the EU or whether they are critical of the EU as an institution and/or propose to put a halt to further expansion. All those parties with positive or neutral references about the EU in their manifesto were considered Europhiles. By contrast, all those parties expressing critical views towards the EU and the EU integration process were considered as Eurosceptic. On the basis of this distinction, we recoded the original list of political actors: the code 0 was attributed to political actors affiliated to Europhile parties and the code 1 to political actors classified as belonging to Eurosceptic parties. In more detail, considering the explicit presence of statements about the EU in electoral manifestos of the parties, all political actors belonging to the *Partito Democratico* (Democratic Party), *Nuovo Centro Destra* (New Centre Right) and *Scelta Civica* (Civic Choice) were coded as Europhile parties (= 0). Political actors belonging to *Forza Italia*, *Sinistra Ecologia e Libertà* (Left Ecology, and Freedom), *Fratelli d'Italia* (Brothers of Italy), *Movimento 5 Stelle* (5 Stars Movement) and *Lega Nord* (Northern League) were coded as Eurosceptic parties (= 1). We then computed a new dichotomous variable where the code 0 indicated news stories where Eurosceptic actors were not covered, while the code 1 applied to all news stories where at least one Eurosceptic actor was covered. This variable was then combined with the LENGTH variable, ranging from 0, when any Eurosceptic actor was reported, to a

maximum of 100, registering the degree of attention provided to Eurosceptic actors in media coverage.

Concerning the *economic crisis (IV2)*, we relied on a dichotomous variable distinguishing between news items framed as related to the economic crisis (=1) and news items framed as related to any other issues (=0) (Krippendorff's alpha 0.714).

A further dichotomous variable identified the *media type (IV3)*, where the code 0 was assigned to all TV news stories and the code 1 was attributed to press news items.

Finally, with regard to the *tone of the news item (IV4)*, we relied on the Nepocs standard⁸ for tonality, measuring the level of negative or positive tonality of the story. This assessed the overall tone of the story, namely whether the report 'convey[s] primarily a positive, negative, balanced or neutral impression of politics, political records, conditions or views' (Lengauer, Esser & Berganza, 2012: 195). Thus, the variable was coded as negative tonality when a news item presented elements related to, for example, 'political failure, fiasco, disaster, crisis, frustration, collapse, flop, denial, rejection, neglect, default, deterioration, resignation, scepticism, threats, cynicism, defeatism or disappointment'. By contrast, the positive tone was identified by depictions of 'political success, problem solutions, achievement, improvement, advance, prosperity, accomplishment, enthusiasm, hope, benefit, gain, sustainability, gratification or accomplishment'. If the story did not reveal negative or positive tones, then the variable was coded as 'neutral'. If the story revealed indications of both negative and positive tones, the variable was coded as 'balanced' (Krippendorff's alpha 0.704).⁹ For the sake of simplicity, because we were interested in isolating the two polarities, we

⁸ The Network of European Political Communication Scholars (NEPOCS) is a network for research and teaching in comparative political communication, involving scholars from 15 EU countries. The network is directed by Frank Esser, Jesper Strömbäck and Claes de Vreese.

⁹ Intercoder reliability yielded satisfactory results in general. It was calculated on a sub-sample of news items equal to 10% of the total number of news items collected.

recoded this variable into three main categories where 0 corresponded to neutral and balanced tone, 1 corresponded to positive tone, and -1 corresponded to negative tone.

Finally, our analysis also considered the timing in terms of the number of days preceding the election day, assuming that the approaching electoral competition would boost the level of media attention on the EU, with an impact on EU visibility and Europeanness.

Models and analyses

Our research question focuses on the dynamics of mainstream media coverage of the EU in terms of both EU visibility and the Europeanness of EU news. By running two different OLS regressions, we investigated those factors contributing to an increase in media attention on EU issues. EU visibility, defined as the level of media attention on the EU, is thus our first dependent variable (DV1), while the Europeanness of EU news, defined here as the prominence in media coverage of EU political actors, has to be considered as our second dependent variable (DV2). Both models test the same set of independent variables: (i) Euroscepticism, meant as the prominence in media coverage of Eurosceptic political actors, (ii) the economic crisis, which is the presence in media coverage of financial or economic issues, (iii) the media type, and (iv) the tone of the news item.

Despite the fact that EP elections are still second-order elections, the EU issues are often the focus of media attention. This could be related to the economic crisis and the role played by EU institutions in demanding that member states implement economic policies and reforms. In other words, the interventionism of EU institutions on domestic agendas has raised the salience of the EU, triggering a quite negative climate of opinion blaming the EU for austerity policies. The anti-political feelings exacerbated by the economic crisis have been projected toward the European institutions, resulting in the strengthening of Eurosceptic parties, as confirmed by electoral outcomes.

Euroscepticism is then grafted onto widespread discontent, and political parties try to translate this discontent into votes. We suggest that media attention on the EU is a function of the attitudes of

the political parties towards the European Union. Media attention on the EU could be linked to the campaign strategies adopted by political parties and political actors. In particular, we suggest that a higher prominence of Eurosceptic actors, both in terms of visibility and the volume of coverage they received, could boost the media attention on the EU. In other words, we expect that the visibility of political actors belonging to Eurosceptic political parties will be associated with both higher EU visibility and Europeanness. Euroscepticism is thus the first independent variable included in our models (min=0; max=100; avg.=9.865; std. dev.=14.460).

We also argue that, due to the severe consequences of the economic crisis on the Italian economic and financial system, and of the pressure on the Italian government by EU institutions to adopt austerity policy reforms, media coverage about the economic crisis can reveal a relationship with the coverage of the EU, producing greater attention on the EU. For these reasons, we included in our model a second independent variable distinguishing between news items concerning references to economic policies and fiscal issues (coded as 1) and those that do not handle these matters (coded as 0).

The third independent variable relates to the media source, where the code 1 indicates that the news story is covered by daily press and the code 0 is assigned to TV's news stories. Television is the most important source of information for most Italians (82% receive their news daily on TV according to Demos 2015). For this reason, the study included the four most widely viewed evening newscasts. Nonetheless, as regards Europe, and politics more generally, we know that television has less impact than the press on the political agenda (Walgrave, Soroka & Nuytemans, 2008). Furthermore, since television news coverage has less space and follows more selective criteria, it is less likely to cover Europeanization, a slow and unworthy process. By contrast, the print media 'have a broader scope and more space than television, and Internet Web sites of newspapers make print media content more widely accessible and immediate than it was previously. In addition, newspapers allow a greater discursive elaboration and argumentation than television' (Koopmans & Statham, 2010: 50).

Finally, the fourth independent variable relates to the tone of the news. Considering that our study deals with the role played by the media in defining the EU public sphere in the light of a Eurosceptic climate of opinion, we needed to assess to what extent media attitudes towards the EU may contribute to boosting EU salience. Media logic drives attention on conflicts and emotional contents, so it would be reasonable to expect that EU media attention might be framed by a negative tone. However, this dynamic – we argue – does not work in the Italian information environment, where, as underlined by Mazzoni & Barbieri (2014), media tend to adopt Europhile attitudes. We suggest indeed that EU visibility, as well as the Europeanness of EU news, are correlated with a positive tone in media coverage. As illustrated above, our codebook included a variable indicating the tone of news items. It is an ordinal variable ranging from -1 (negative frame) to 1 (positive frame), where 0 means a neutral or balanced frame. However, for sake of simplicity, we recoded it into multiple dummies, and only positive tone (1= positive tone; 0= other tone) and negative tone (1= negative tone; 0= other tone) have been considered in our models.

4. Results: EU Elections in Media Coverage

Before we delve into the analysis of the determinants of media coverage on the EU, this section provides a general overview of Italian media coverage during the 2014 EP election campaign.

Table 1 clearly shows that the 2014 EU election campaign was not a crucial issue in media coverage of the election campaign. Indeed, only slightly more than one-fifth (20.4%) of the whole news items included in the sample focused on the EU during the seven weeks before the vote, while the largest portion of news stories refers to domestic political issues. Interesting differences can be found when considering the journalist frame by which news stories are depicted. First of all, the tone adopted by media when dealing with EU issues is far less negative than the one used for domestic political issues, respectively -0.13 vs. -0.21. Secondly, according to these figures, TV and daily press tackle the EU through different approaches. The EU benefits from a less negative tone than other domestic political issues both in TV and press. Within a general frame of negativity, TV

broadcasts present a higher level of negativity, both on EU news (-0.25) and on other news (-0.31), compared to press articles (-0.09 on EU news and -0.19 on other news).

Table 1. EU news on Italian media, coverage and frame: TV and press

	Coverage on EU issues			Tone of the news (avg.)		
	EU News Items %	Other Political News Items %	All News Items N	EU News Items	Other Political News Items	All News Items
Daily press	19.5	80.5	2,501	-.09	-.19	-.17
Newscasts	24.5	75.5	519	-.25	-.31	-.29
All news	20.4	79.6	3,020	-.13	-.21	-.02
<i>p</i> <0.000						

Table 2 details the prominence of Eurosceptic and Europhile political actors in media coverage. Here, one can easily see that the prominence of the political actors, either Eurosceptic or Europhile, is quite similar regardless of the focus of the news item. Indeed, in the news covering only Europhile actors, the differences between EU and other political news items are very limited (less than one percentage point). This news also benefits from the best coverage, especially when focused on the EU (the tone is indeed -0.07, close to neutral/balanced). Similarly, the variations are also very limited for news stories where at least one Eurosceptic political actor is covered. Nonetheless, it is worth underlining that their prominence is slightly higher among EU news items (45.4%) than in political news items (42.6%). With regard to the tone, when media cover news on the EU the average tone is less negative (-0.19) than in domestic political news (-0.24), even if Eurosceptic actors are covered in the news story. These latter findings suggest that, despite the Eurosceptic instances, media still tend to temper critical views on EU.

Table 2. EU news on Italian media, coverage and frame: Euroscepticism

	Coverage on EU issues (%)			Tone of the news (avg.)		
	EU News Items %	Other Political News Items %	All News Items %	EU News Items	Other Political News Items	All News Items
Europhile actor	36.6	37.1	37	-0.07	-.17	-.15
Eurosceptic actor party	63.4	62.9	63	-.19	-.24	-.23
N	369	1685	2054	-.14	-.21	-.20
<i>p</i> >0.000						

Looking at figures concerning the Europeanness of EU news (Table 3), namely the prominence of EU actors in media coverage, one can see that their visibility is not associated with the issues tackled in the news stories.

Comparing news stories where only domestic actors are covered with those news stories where at least one EU actor is reported, few differences can be found. Their visibility is similar regardless of the EU focus in news items. Clearly, there is a higher prominence of EU actors when media deal with EU issues, but the difference with news stories focused on other political issues is not remarkable (respectively 45.4% vs. 42.6%). And also when considering the tone of the news, the average tone is the same, no matter the political actors covered.

Table 3. EU news on Italian media, coverage and frame: Europeanness of news

	Coverage on EU issues (%)			Tone of the news (avg.)		
	EU News Items %	Other Political News Items %	All News Items %	EU News Items	Other Political News Items	All News Items
Domestic actors	54.6	57.4	56.8	-.14	-.21	-.20
EU actors	45.4	42.6	43.2	-.14	-.21	-.20
N	410	1759	2169	-.14	-.21	-.20
<i>p</i> >0.000						

These two tables suggest that actually looking at the mere visibility – namely, checking for the presence or absence of political actors – is not a sufficient measure for understanding the dynamics of media coverage on the EU. This is precisely the reason why inferential analyses when looking at Euroscepticism and Europeanness of EU news also take into account the degree of attention devoted by media to these actors; accordingly, the length of the news story was considered by computing two continuous variables (see section 3).

As mentioned above, EU visibility in media coverage is often related to economic issues. Our data confirms this pattern. Even though items on the economic crisis are a marginal portion of the whole sample, figures reported in Table 4 suggest a close relationship between economic crisis and

the EU. Indeed, there is a significant over-representation of articles devoted to economic issues among those news items concerning EU issues: they cover 18.4% compared to 5.4%.

Table 4. EU news on Italian media, coverage and frame: economic crisis

	Coverage on EU issues (%)			Tone of the news (avg.)		
	EU News Items %	Other Political News Items %	All News Items %	EU News Items	Other Political News Items	All News Items
News items focused on economic crisis	18.4	5.4	8	-.14	-.26	-.21
News items focused on other issues	81.6	94.6	92	-.13	-.21	-.19
N	615	2,405	3,02	-.13	-.21	-.20

p<0.000

The dynamics of media coverage on the EU: results

Table 5 presents the results of the two OLS regression models we ran in order to investigate the dynamics of media coverage on the EU. Model 1 refers to EU visibility, defined as the prominence of EU issues within the media coverage during the 50 days prior to the EP election day. As detailed in section 3, EU visibility measures the degree of attention devoted to EU issues, in terms of news story length. The highest value assumed by EU visibility means a more extensive coverage on the EU. Our findings clearly confirm our hypotheses 1a and 2a. Both Euroscepticism and economic crisis contribute to explain the higher media attention on the EU: there is a significant and positive correlation between the prominence of Eurosceptic actors in media coverage and the visibility of EU issues ($\beta = 0.217$). Similarly, the economic crisis is a good predictor of EU visibility, β is significant and positively correlated, meaning that when news stories focus on economic or financial issues a higher EU visibility is registered. Also, there is a significant relationship between tone and EU visibility. Even if coefficients are less robust than those registered for Euroscepticism and economic crisis, there is a significant correlation between coverage focused on EU and both positive and negative tone. Interestingly, with regard to negative tonality, β (-0.053) is negatively associated to the dependent variable, while it is positive (0.085) for positive tonality. This result confirms our Hypothesis 4a. Daily press, by contrast, do not show any significant coefficient,

meaning that the media source does not affect the level of EU visibility, thus rejecting Hypothesis 3a.

Moving to Model 2, where the Europeanness of news has been regressed by the same set of variables considered in Model 1, we can easily see that the dynamics of coverage on the EU may assume very different patterns. Europeanness of EU news is a measure of the Europeanization of the public debate. It focuses on the vertical dimension, namely the prominence of EU political actors in mainstream media coverage. In this case as well, the computed variable considers not only the presence of at least one EU actor in a news story, but also the length of the news.

In this instance, Euroscepticism is also a good predictor of Europeanness, β is indeed significant and positively associated ($\beta = 0.447$), and furthermore it is also more robust than what was registered for EU visibility. By contrast, even if still significant and positive, the β associated with the economic crisis is far less relevant when regressed for Europeanness ($\beta = 0.070$). However, both Hypothesis 1b and Hypothesis 2b are confirmed by analyses. The same could be said for Hypothesis 3b, since daily press in this case is significant and associated with Europeanness by a robust coefficient ($\beta = 0.244$). Therefore, the media source is not a relevant factor driving EU visibility, but it contributes to explaining the increasing Europeanness, confirming Hypothesis 3b. With regard to the tone of the news, neither negative nor positive tones are associated by a significant coefficient to the Europeanness of news, meaning we have to reject both H4b and H4c. Finally, we can observe that the timing before the EP election day is a significant factor explaining a higher prominence of EU political actors in media coverage, but it is negatively associated by a $\beta = -0.361$. This means that when elections are approaching, the media attention on EU political actors softens.

Table 5. Explaining mainstream media coverage of EU during the 2014 EP elections

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Dependent variable: EU visibility		Dependent variable: Europeanness of news	
	β		β	
Euroscepticism	,217	*** (0.028)	,447	*** (0.025)
Economic crisis	,208	*** (1.776)	,070	** (1.606)
Daily press	,013		,244	*** (0.865)
Negative Tonality	-,053	*(0.901)	-,012	
Positive Tonality	,085	** (2.280)	,020	
N° of days before EP elections	,035		-,361	*** (0.026)
r^2	0.108		0.369	

Note: Coefficients are standardized regression coefficients (betas); *** $p < 0.000$; ** $p < 0.010$; * $p < 0.050$

5. Conclusion

This article has drawn upon an analysis of the coverage of the mainstream media during the 2014 EP elections campaign in Italy. The case study has offered the opportunity to investigate which factors may affect the coverage of the EU in a country that, after a long time of Europhile attitudes, in the last decade has been hit by a severe economic crisis and witnessed a significant rise in Euroscepticism (Di Mauro, 2014; Serricchio, 2014). This study has identified the main explanatory factors of variation in the coverage in newspapers and television news of European affairs, during an election period of 50 days.

Our analyses have shown that Euroscepticism contributes to both higher EU visibility and the Europeanness of the news. References to Eurosceptic actors are a predictor of the visibility of EU affairs and even more of Europeanness of a news item. This means that during the EP election campaign, leaders and candidates of Lega Nord, Forza Italia, Movimento 5 Stelle, Fratelli d'Italia (namely, the Eurosceptic parties in our sample) were mainly covered in relation to the EU. These results imply that, at least for them, the validity of the second-order election thesis (Reif & Schmitt, 1980) should be reconsidered, since the national and European perspectives have been regularly intertwined in their communication. More generally, for the first time in Italy this election campaign involved a public and political debate between Eurosceptic and Europhile positions (supported by the government parties): our findings confirm extant research that has already

suggested that the presence of political conflict and contestation about European integration leads to more EU news (de Vreese, Lauf & Peter, 2007; Schuck *et al.*, 2011).

The economic crisis also contributes to explaining the media attention on EU affairs. Especially as regards visibility, references to issues such as the sovereign debt, austerity measures, and unemployment are good predictors. With regard to Europeanness, even if still significant and positive, the economic crisis appears as a less relevant explanatory factor. So, essentially, news stories focused on economic or financial issues tend to increase EU visibility but, since these issues are mainly discussed at a national level and European actors are occasionally involved, the Europeanness of news coverage is only partially related to the economic crisis.

Although previous research has shown that newspapers tend to cover European affairs more than television (de Vreese, Lauf & Peter, 2007), our sample does not provide univocal evidence of this pattern. On the one hand, Italian daily press reports more about the EU than TV news in terms of the volume of the coverage, but no significant correlation between the media source and the level of EU visibility is shown by the OLS model. On the other hand, the daily press appeared as significantly associated with the Europeanness of news coverage, suggesting that medium-specific characteristics – even though not a relevant factor driving EU visibility – contribute to explaining the increasing Europeanness.

Our findings show that mainstream media tend to cover EU affairs in a less negative way compared to the general political coverage. Despite having a negative average tone, it is far less negative than that of the domestic political news, meaning that even if European issues are still less important than domestic ones, they are covered in a more positive way as a consequence of a positive prejudice that still prevails in the Italian mainstream media. This confirms our general expectation of the resilience of journalists who tend to replicate conventional representations of the EU. Moreover, descriptive analyses also explain that Europhile actors have received more positive coverage than Eurosceptic ones and suggest that the media system has framed the Eurosceptic and Europhile positions in opposite ways. This is likely to have occurred not only because the major

Italian media outlets were pro-EU, but especially because in that phase they were mainly pro-Renzi's government (with the notable exception of *Il Giornale*). Inferential models also show that both positive and negative tones are correlated with EU visibility: news items with negative tonality are negatively correlated, while news items with positive tonality are positively correlated. By contrast, no significant correlations are found between the tone of the news items and Europeanness.

To sum up, the analysis of the Italian news coverage during the 2014 EP elections campaign has shown that EU coverage has been inextricably linked with the claims of Eurosceptic parties, on the one hand, and with the consequences of the economic crisis, on the other. Both these elements contribute to explaining the level of EU visibility and the Europeanness of the coverage. The image of the EU in the news, however, is not as negative as one might expect: the media tend to cover European affairs in a less negative way than domestic politics and, consequently, to convey by comparison a more positive image of the EU. Finally, these findings testify that also in Italy the process of politicization of the EU (de Wilde, Leupold & Schmidtke, 2016) has taken a further step by putting the topics of EU integration and Italian membership at the heart of the political and public debate.

This study offers the first evidence of the relevance of Euroscepticism and economic crisis in the news coverage of the EU in Italy. Future research should include non-electoral periods, in order to assess their explanatory value during routine times. In addition, comparative studies would allow a better understanding of these two explanatory variables in different media systems, especially in those that share several media and political system' characteristics and have experienced the rise of Eurosceptic actors as well as the heavy consequences of the economic crisis, such as the countries of the Mediterranean or polarized pluralist model.

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