

Article

Media Portrayal of EU Commission and Its Leaders: A Content Analysis of Spanish Press (1976–2024)

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Abstract: The role of the media is key in mediating civil society and its political representatives in EU institutions. In this context, this paper aims to describe the representation of the European Commission, one of the EU's most important institutions, and its leaders by two leading Spanish newspapers. In order to address this objective, an automated content analysis was carried out on 13,340 news items published between 6 June 1976 and 15 February 2024 in *El País* (social democratic media) and *ABC* (conservative, monarchist media). The sample was subjected to a sentiment analysis as well as topic modeling. The latter method made it possible to identify five predominant issues on the agenda: Economy, Foreign Affairs, Internal Politics, Spanish Politics, and the Future of the EU. The average sentiment, which is close to neutral, has tended slightly toward the negative over the years, although the current president, Ursula von der Leyen, has the highest rating of all the leaders studied. Both *El País* and *ABC* provide more negative coverage of the EU when leaders of their ideological opposition govern, a phenomenon that can weaken the European model and encourage political drifts with consequences that are difficult to predict in the medium term.

Keywords: European Commission; general press; European Union; media coverage; Spain



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1. Introduction

Spain's entry into the European Economic Community (EEC) took place in 1986 after a long period of dictatorship in which the EEC was reluctant about its admission. Since then, the country has undergone a gradual process of Europeanization (García-Carretero et al. 2022). This term has been criticized for its limitations in representing the complexity of European transformation, given its polysemic and ambivalent nature (Olsen 2002). However, the idea of Europeanization can be useful for the study of some phenomena and interactions that occur within the supranational organization (Radaelli 2004).

In general terms, Europeanization “is a process of change affecting domestic institutions, politics and public policy. Change occurs when political behaviour at the European Union (EU) level has a transformative effect on domestic political behaviour” (Radaelli 2012, p. 1). Featherstone (2003) identifies four distinct approaches to this concept in the academic literature. Thus, Europeanization can be understood as a historical phenomenon; as the growing diffusion of cultural norms, identities, and behavioral patterns within the European framework; as a process of institutional adaptation to the EU; and as the set of effects that the EU has on the public policies of member states (Featherstone 2003).

This integration involves the construction of a truly European identity, a sense of community resulting from the convergence of shared beliefs, values, and aspirations, which can be called “new nationalism” or “supranationalism” (Haas [1958] 2004, p. 10). The institutional recognition of this concept occurred in 1973 with the Declaration on European Identity, which aimed to strengthen cohesion among the member countries of the EC (Bergbauer 2018). In this sense, the relationship between nationalism, regionalism, and European identity is relevant, an issue that has been widely addressed by academics (Diez-Medrano and Gutiérrez 2001; Carey 2002). In the Spanish case, according to Sojka and

Vázquez (2014), national and regional identities are compatible with the European one, even reinforcing it.

From the perspective of social constructivism, communication and discourse are fundamental aspects of the creation of a European identity (Risse 2009). In this regard, numerous studies have addressed the Europeanization of national public spheres through analyses of media coverage on EU-related issues (de la Porte and van Dalen 2016; Koopmans 2007). In the European context, the quality of transnational communication depends on member states discussing the same topics at the same time and through similar interpretive frameworks (Risse 2009).

Furthermore, support for Europe from political parties is higher than that from citizens (Hooghe and Marks 2009). These elites have a certain influence on the perception of the EU and European sentiment in public opinion, as different studies have shown (Bruter 2005; Hooghe and Marks 2005; Pridham 2007). However, according to Bruter (2005), this is not always positive. Through their actions, the elites can also make it difficult for citizens to identify with Europe.

For their part, the media play a fundamental role in mediating civil society and its European representatives (Caiani and Guerra 2017) in terms of accountability, transparency, and literacy (Lafuente-Pérez and Zurutuza-Muñoz 2012) and are important agents of socialization that contribute to the construction or deconstruction of European identity (Vasiliki and Vadratsikas 2016).

According to News Production Theory (Van Hout and Jacobs 2008; Niblock and Machin 2014), the media holds significant influence over public opinion. The way topics are covered is crucial for constructing reality in the eyes of citizens (Tuchman 1987). In this way, the frame within which a topic is presented affects the message and, by extension, people's perception and interpretation of that topic (Goffman 1974). Entman (1993) argues that framing involves selecting certain aspects of reality and highlighting them within a communicative text. This approach promotes a characterization of the problem, an interpretation, and an evaluation of the issue at hand. However, the media impacts not only how citizens think but also what they think about. According to agenda-setting theory, the media agenda and the public agenda are closely related, as the media decides which aspects of current events are most relevant by giving them space in their content (McCombs et al. 2014).

In this regard, there are several factors that justify the study of the media treatment of the EU or its political figures. On the one hand, 65% of Spaniards are very or quite interested in news about the EU (CIS 2024). In this context, national traditional media are the information channels that citizens trust the most. Specifically, like the majority of Europeans, they place more trust in public television and radio, followed by the press (Eurobarometer 2022). On the other hand, numerous studies have confirmed the ability of these media to alter the widespread perception of the EU (De-Vreese and Boomgaarden 2003; De-Vreese and Semetko 2004; Vligenthart et al. 2008).

1.1. The European Sentiment in Spain

Among the EU member states, Spain has traditionally been characterized by a high degree of enthusiasm regarding integration into the supranational organization, present both in public opinion (Otero-Felipe 2008) and in political parties (Avilés 2004). This trend is conditioned by a strong pragmatic or utilitarian dimension (Sánchez-Cuenca 2000; Ruíz-Jiménez 2005) so that Spanish citizens base their stance on Europe on the positive consequences that membership implies in terms of the economy, democratic development, and social modernization.

The European sentiment, understood as a collective emotional and ideological connection to shared European values and identity (Pagden 2002), varies depending on the temporary circumstances. According to García-Carretero et al. (2022, pp. 805–6), four stages can be distinguished in which the convergence of certain political, economic, and social events created a context in which the sense of belonging of the member countries to the EU

was particularly susceptible to change: the opening of the EU toward the East and the XX anniversary of Spain in the EU (2004–2006), the economic crisis (2007–2009), the refugee crisis (2013–2016)¹, and the COVID-19 crisis (2019–2022).

From 2007 to 2010, the percentage of Spaniards who had a positive image of the EU was higher than the European average. From 2011 onwards, it has always remained below or equal to this. The lows are between 2011 and 2012 (26%), when the effects of the Great Recession were felt, and between 2014 and 2015 (25%). However, in the same period, a proportion of more than 50% of Spaniards had always considered the fact that the country is a member of the organization to be beneficial. The percentage has only been below the average of European citizens between 2013 and 2014 and between 2016 and 2017. Similarly, the stage from 2021 to 2023, coinciding with the coronavirus health crisis, has been the one in which the most Spaniards have agreed with this statement (81%) (Eurobarometer 2024). On the other hand, unlike other member states, the institutional weight of Eurosceptic political parties in Spain has been very limited until the recent emergence of Vox². It is therefore plausible to think that this has conditioned the newspapers' news agenda.

1.2. The Coverage of the EU in the Spanish Media

Although the volume of scientific publications on the media treatment of the EU in the international sphere is notably higher, numerous works have also addressed the issue in the case of the Spanish national media (Pradel-Miquel 2008; Menéndez-Alarcón 2010; Rivas-de-Roca-García 2018; Montes-Rodríguez 2021; Sales-Piñeiro and Capriotti-Peri 2022; García-Carretero et al. 2022, 2023; Mayo-Cubero et al. 2023; Fernández-Rovira and Carniel-Bugs 2024). The works of Sales-Piñeiro and Capriotti-Peri (2022), García-Carretero et al. (2022), and García-Carretero et al. (2023) are general approaches to the object of study, while the rest either offer a comparative perspective between different countries or focus on the treatment of specific cases in the community context. It is worth noting that the time periods analyzed by these previous studies usually do not cover more than a decade or focus on specific events, so the knowledge we have about media coverage on our subject of study is atomized and fragmented.

Sales-Piñeiro and Capriotti-Peri (2022) provide a diachronic analysis of EU treatment between 2000 and 2018, distinguishing this range into three stages: euphoria (2000–2007), crisis (2008–2014), and post-crisis (2015–2018). Throughout the entire period, more than half of the 23,972 news articles analyzed had a negative assessment, a proportion that grew during the crisis and post-crisis phases, while during the euphoria phase, positive information exceeded 52%.

On the other hand, García-Carretero et al. (2022) and García-Carretero et al. (2023) address, respectively, the media representation of the EU and the dominant themes and discourses in its coverage between 2021 and 2022. The main conclusions drawn from the studies are that the sense of Europeanization conveyed by the media is articulated around specific topics (García-Carretero et al. 2023). There are five main themes linked to the representation of the supranational organization: the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the COVID-19 crisis, the economy, EU policies, migration, and national politics (García-Carretero et al. 2022).

Studies report a certain discursive similarity between the media but also concrete differences. For example, the issue of the migration crisis as a security threat or Brexit as a mistake carries more weight in newspapers like ABC. On the other hand, an issue like the EU's double standard on the migration question is more prevalent in progressive outlets such as *El País* or *eldiario.es* (García-Carretero et al. 2023). It should be emphasized that, according to García-Carretero et al. (2023), the most present figures in the media are the representatives of the EU, although their appearance is three percentage points higher in *El País* than in ABC.

Mayo-Cubero et al. (2023), for their part, study the treatment of Next Generation funds. The study observes a pro-European trend in the media discourse, which moves away from the Euroscepticism prior to this measure. Regarding the differences between

the press, the coverage of *El País* was twice as extensive as that of *ABC*. Moreover, the predominant discourses of the former are related to human resources and the EU's support for national fund management while those of the latter are oriented toward the turning point that they represent in the European project and the need for their blockade. However, both agree on the prevalence of the economy as the main topic. Both [García-Carretero et al. \(2023\)](#) and [Mayo-Cubero et al. \(2023\)](#) study media coverage through a critical discourse analysis (CDA). Although it is not the most commonly used technique in this type of work, it has been applied in various Spanish and international studies ([Hawkins 2012](#); [Dempsey and McDowell 2019](#)) on the representation of the EU.

There are other authors who base their analysis on specific cases using other methodologies, mainly content analysis. In 2008, [Pradel-Miquel \(2008\)](#) studied the treatment of Spain's integration process into the EU by the national press through five relevant cases in the European sphere that took place between 1997 and 2003: the 1999 European elections and the Haider case, the creation of the EU's Committee of the Regions, the directive on the regulation of genetically modified foods, the drafting of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, and the European Employment Strategy. The analysis reveals that these issues receive very limited coverage from the Spanish media and tend to have more presence when they are directly linked to the national agenda. The protagonists of most publications are political actors. In this sense, it is the case that 'EU issues are often used to reflect on the national political situation and to judge the attitude of national political figures' ([Pradel-Miquel 2008](#), pp. 250–51).

[Montes-Rodríguez \(2021\)](#), for his part, moves away from European processes and events to focus on a specific individual: Ursula von der Leyen. On the qualitative level, the author detects frames marked by gender stereotypes, among which the roles of mother, inexperienced woman, or the first woman to access the position stand out.

Some studies also opt for the comparative approach. In this vein, [Menéndez-Alarcón \(2010\)](#) compares media coverage of the EU in France, Spain, and the UK. According to the results, between 2005 and 2007, the Spanish press produced fewer pieces on European issues than the French press, but more than the British press. Regarding the internal differences in Spanish newspapers, the proportion of neutral and positive articles is higher in *El País*, while the percentage of negative ones is higher in *ABC*.

Similarly, the comparison by [Rivas-de-Roca-García \(2018\)](#) between Spain and Germany during the period 2011–2015 determines that the informational treatment of the EU is not the same in all member countries, as each develops a series of singularities in its coverage. For example, in the German case, agency information has a greater presence, and reporting is among the most frequent journalistic genres; in Spanish, while the journalist is the author of most of the pieces, texts of low journalistic quality are detected.

[Fernández-Rovira and Carniel-Bugs \(2024\)](#) offer a comparative study between Spain, France, and Italy. In the analysis, based on the work of [Kandyla and de-Vreese \(2011\)](#), they distinguish between vertical Europeanization approaches (news about supranational EU issues) and horizontal Europeanization (news about other actors in other member countries). Among the media analyzed from the three countries, the Spanish newspaper *El País* is the one that has published the most content with a European integration focus. Moreover, before the 2008 crisis, this newspaper was also the one with the most publications with a vertical Europeanization focus, while *El Mundo* was the one with the least. In general, the results indicate a decline in public discussion about the EU and an increase in national approaches.

1.3. Justification and Objectives

As noted, the role of the media is fundamental in mediating European citizens and their representatives in various EU institutions. Likewise, it is an agent of socialization with a role to play in the construction or deconstruction of European identity. Previous studies have primarily employed content analysis and, to a lesser extent, critical discourse analysis; however, this area has barely been explored using sentiment analysis, a technique

applied in studies on media coverage of other phenomena (Enevoldsen and Hansen 2017; Garvey and Maskal 2020; Bleich and van der Veen 2021; Córdoba-Cabús et al. 2023).

While there are numerous studies on media representation of the organization in specific periods, the volume of specific research on the coverage of major political figures in the European sphere by the press from a diachronic perspective is smaller. Among these figures, the European Commission stands out as the executive branch of the European Union, playing a central role in shaping and implementing EU policies and becoming a crucial subject of study. However, research on the Commission's media coverage has been limited, creating a gap in our understanding of its dynamics and impact. The Commission's relevance arises from its authority to propose legislation, enforce EU laws, and manage the daily operations of the EU. Established in 1958 as part of the Treaty of Rome, it has evolved into a key institution driving European integration. Currently, it is led by President Ursula von der Leyen from the Christian Democratic Union (CDU).

In this context, the aim of this paper is to study the informative treatment of the European Commission and its leaders in Spanish newspapers over the last 50 years, given that it is probably the most visible institution in the EU as it holds executive power. Using a sentiment analysis approach, this research aims to complement existing studies, providing new evidence to help interpret and contextualize them. From this general objective, the following specific objectives are proposed:

(O1) Describe the news coverage of the European Commission and its members, as well as its evolution over time, in the Spanish press, considering the emotional tone of the messages and the predominant topics in each of them.

(O2) Compare the treatment applied to the leaders of the European Commission by two leading newspapers in the Spanish context: *El País* and *ABC*.

2. Materials and Methods

To respond to the objectives, an automated quantitative content analysis was proposed as the main research technique. In this way, the two longest-running print media of the Spanish press were chosen in order to propose a diachronic analysis based on their archives: the social democratic *El País* (since 1976) and the conservative, monarchist *ABC* (since 2001). *ABC* was selected from the conservative spectrum of newspapers based on technical criteria as the data collection from *El Mundo* did not guarantee completeness. Additionally, *ABC* is the oldest Spanish generalist newspaper with a national focus. Given the different editorial lines of the two newspapers, the proposed design also allows us to observe the political-media parallelism typical of the polarized pluralist model in which the Spanish media system is framed (Hallin and Mancini 2004), in addition to being two of the three primary national media outlets according to the EGM³ over the past decades.

The tags of the eight politicians who have presided over the European Commission in the last 38 years were searched: the socialist Roy Jenkins, the liberal Gaston Thorn, the socialist Jacques Delors, the popular Jacques Santer, the liberal Romano Prodi, the popular José Manuel Durão Barroso, the popular Jean-Claude Juncker, and the popular Ursula von der Leyen. In the case of *El País*, information about the eight leaders was found; in *ABC*, however, the old publications are not completely digitized, so no pieces were found on Roy Jenkins, Gaston Thorn, and Jacques Santer.

Once the corresponding tags were located, the headlines, subtitles, and metadata of all the available news within each of the tags were downloaded using *data scraping* techniques. The sample consisted of 13,340 pieces (Supplementary Table S1). The analysis was carried out considering the following variables:

- Newspaper (dichotomous variable). *El País* or *ABC*.
- Title (nominal variable).
- Subtitle (nominal variable).
- News author (nominal variable).
- Date (quantitative variable). Day, month, and year of publication of the piece.

- **Headline allusion (nominal categorical variable).** Measures which of the eight representatives mentioned the title of the piece refers to (Roy Jenkins, Gaston Thorn, Jacques Delors, Jacques Santer, Romano Prodi, José Manuel Durão Barroso, Jean-Claude Juncker, or Ursula von der Leyen).
- **Timing (ordinal variable).** Before, during, or after the mandate.

A sentiment analysis was conducted using XLM-RoBERTa-base for Sentiment Analysis⁴, a natural language processing model trained with over 198 million tweets published between May 2018 and March 2020 in more than 30 languages, which calculates the probability of a message being positive, negative, or neutral. While the performance of the algorithm varies depending on the language, the results for massive sample analysis in Spanish have shown considerable robustness, with an accuracy of around 85%, surpassing other models of a similar nature, such as VADER or TextBlob (Córdoba-Cabús et al. 2023). Even though it is important to note that this model has limitations in detecting irony or sarcasm, these forms of expression are less frequently found in media headlines compared to the more common analyses of social networks (Maladry et al. 2023). Additionally, when these nuances are present, they tend to be mitigated by the law of large numbers, which suggests that errors can cancel each other out when working with substantial datasets.

The variables derived from the sentiment analysis are as follows:

- **Positivity load (quantitative scale variable).** Probability of the message being positive.
- **Neutrality load (quantitative scale variable).** Probability of the message being neutral.
- **Negative load (quantitative scale variable).** Probability of the message being negative.
- **Headline sentiment (quantitative scale variable).** Measured from 0 to 100 based on a re-coding of the emotional loads of positivity, neutrality, and negativity, with 0 being extremely negative and 100 being extremely positive.
- **Predominant feeling (nominal categorical variable).** The headlines were divided into negative (sentiment between 0 and 33.33), neutral (between 33.34 and 66.66), and positive (66.67 and 100).

The headlines were also subjected to a frequency analysis using an ad hoc Python script that utilizes pandas, nltk, collections, and string libraries. From the resulting list of the most frequent words, those considered *stopwords*, words without semantic load, such as prepositions or determiners, were omitted.

The population, coinciding with the sample, is made up of the 13,340 news articles published in the last 48 years between 6 June 1976 and 15 February 2024 by the national newspapers *El País* and *ABC*. These articles are distributed relatively uniformly across the decades, with the exceptions of the incomplete decades of the 1970s (2.0%) and the current decade (8.0%), with a peak observed in the 2000s (38.7%), coinciding with *ABC*'s commencement of digitizing and indexing its archives. Furthermore, the proportion of articles is greater in *El País* during periods of strict overlap (accounting for 52.0% compared to 48.0% for *ABC*).

The analysis allowed, firstly, to take a general snapshot of the publications about the presidents of the European Commission and their evolution over time and, secondly, to propose a comparison between the coverage of both newspapers.

3. Results

3.1. Main Themes

“Brussels” is the most repeated term among the headlines analyzed, mentioned 1788 times, as it houses the headquarters of the main EU institutions, including the Commission itself, and acts as a metonym for them. This is shown in Figure 1. For its part, “Spain” appears 1062 times. After Spain, other countries, such as France (329), Italy (319), and Germany (225) are present. It is worth highlighting the fact that, among the 50 most repeated words, only two national leaders appear: Zapatero, president of the Government of Spain between 2004 and 2011, and Berlusconi, president of the Italian Council of Ministers in the periods 1994–1995, 2001–2006, and 2008–2011. The surnames of the presidents of the

Table 1. Topic modeling (1976–2024) ¹.

Topic	Name	Words
1	Economy	Commission, millions, Spain, Germany, plan, Portugal, euros, leader, France, coronavirus
2	Foreign Affairs	Commission, United, states, year, pact, EU-27, summit, partners, crisis, next
3	Internal Politics	Commission, Ukraine, measures, governments, years, Euro, market, Parliament, Berlin, Spain
4	Spanish Politics	Commission, agreement, Spain, United, Kingdom, country, PP, executive, national, Germany
5	Future of the EU	summit, policy/politics/political ² , crisis, change, Commission, Ukraine, Russia, Italy, gas, Spain

¹ Topic coherence: 0.32778. Method: Latent Dirichlet Allocation. ² "Política" in Spanish in the original.

Economy brings together terms directly related to finance, such as "euros" or "millions", and terms related to some of the member countries with more prominence in this regard (Spain, Germany, Portugal, and France), with a very active role in the administration and negotiation of the funds. Regarding crises, "coronavirus" is another word that appears in this group. Messages like *Política* (*El País*, 24 June 2022, sentiment: 68/100) or "Brussels proposes a package of measures against the recession worth 200 billion euros" (*ABC*, 26 November 2008, 59) are framed in this theme.

Foreign Affairs collects agreements between member countries and external political figures to the EU, among which the United States is one of the most represented. "Summit", "partners", and "pact" are some of the most frequent terms that make up many of the headlines about this topic: "The EU and China try to smooth out their trade differences and on Ukraine" (*ABC*, 7 December 2023, sentiment: 85/100) or "The European summit demands that the United States exclude cinema from the GATT" (*El País*, 12 December 1993, 22).

The following group, Internal Politics, is made up of the main events that mark the current situation in the European context, such as the implementation of new measures, political decision making, or changes related to the euro or the common market. For its part, the term "Ukraine" is predominant given the information explosion since the Russian invasion in February 2022. It also highlights "Berlin" as an important engine of the EU and a heavyweight figure in the community framework. Internal Politics, therefore, brings together a wide variety of publications, among which the following can be found: *Delors resumes the European social dialogue on labor flexibility and employment* (*El País*, 25 January 1993, sentiment: 88/100), "Brussels is nearing a purchase agreement for a potential future coronavirus vaccine with CureVac" (*ABC*, 20 August 2020, 72), or "The European Parliament agrees to vote on Wednesday for Barroso's re-election" (*ABC*, 10 September 2009, 53).

Spanish Politics, for its part, includes national approaches to European issues, mainly addressing the impact on the country ("national" and "country") of certain measures or the statements of Spanish figures ("PP" (People's Party) and "executive") regarding community matters. This type of message can be seen in headlines, such as "A MEP criticizes the absence of the PP in the face of the production crisis" (*El País*, 6 September 2003, sentiment: 6/100). It also includes terms related to other countries, such as Germany or the United Kingdom ("Kingdom" and "United"), as external agents with decision-making capacity or influence in their interaction with Spain.

Finally, Future of the EU encompasses a wide range of issues in a similar way to Internal Politics. However, in this case, the topic is focused on risk issues that may have a significant impact on Europe in the coming years, even going as far as to set the course for the supranational organization. The main ones are the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Russia and Ukraine), the energy crisis ("gas"), and climate change ("change"). Italy also

stands out as a frequent word, which can be attributed to two fundamental reasons: the rise of the far-right in the country and the seed of Euroscepticism, phenomena embodied in representatives like Silvio Berlusconi or Giorgia Meloni.

3.2. Evolution of General Sentiment

The average sentiment toward the EU has experienced slight fluctuations over time. Between 1976 and 2024, the supranational organization went through hugely different political moments in contexts of both crisis and prosperity. In the meantime, therefore, a wide range of information has been published on the European Commission and its representatives, representative of the current situation. In this sense, the agenda has been able to determine these ambivalences.

However, none of them have led to significant changes in the global trend, which can be considered downward; that is, toward a more negative average emotional load. It can be checked through a comparison by decades: in the seventies, the average sentiment was 48; in the eighties, it was 45; in the nineties, 41. This is a sustained decrease of seven points on average over 24 years. In the 2000s, the figure drops to 38, where it remains throughout the 2010s. This may be due to a real change in the media perception of the EU once Spain joined the organization or to a change in headlines in the context of a transition from print to digital format. However, it should be noted that between 2020 and 2024, the average sentiment increased by three points to reach 41, with a slight rise observed during the COVID and post-COVID periods.

Globally, the average emotional load from *El País* is 40, ten points below total neutrality. The same happens in the case of *ABC*. Since the nineties, the figure has always remained below 50. The lowest point occurred during the euro crisis, with an average below 30, while the highest occurred during coronavirus management, with an average much closer to 50.

Regarding the comparison between *El País* and *ABC*, no significant differences are observed in the average treatment. There are stages in which the average sentiment of *El País* is slightly higher than that of *ABC* and vice versa, as reflected in Figure 2. However, the following section will delve into the aspects where a greater disparity between the two media can indeed be observed.

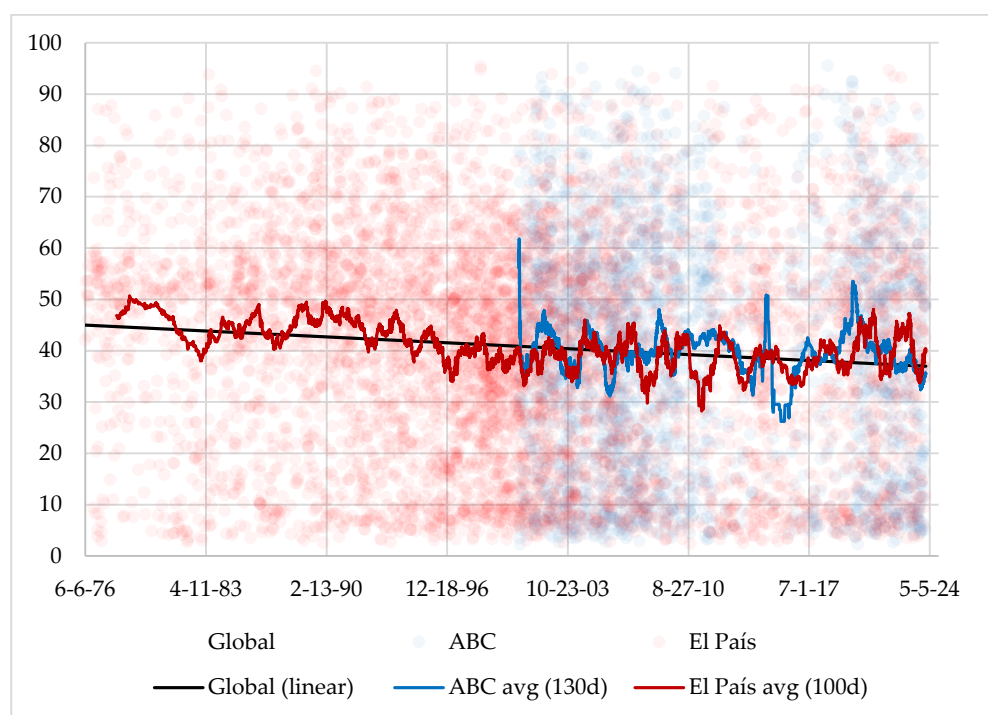


Figure 2. Evolution of the average sentiment toward the European Commission through its leaders.

3.3. Treatment and Representation of EU Leaders

Overall, it can be seen from Table 2 that the average sentiment in the treatment of EU political leaders has declined over time. While Roy Jenkins has the highest number (51)—based solely on the data from *El País*—Jean-Claude Juncker receives the most negative sentiment on average (38). It turns out that 44.9% of the posts related to the latter are negative, a proportion that is three times higher than the percentage of positive ones.

Table 2. Average sentiment of each of the presidents of the European Commission ¹.

President	N	ABC	<i>El País</i>	Average
Roy Jenkins	32		51	51
Gaston Thorn	50		45	45
Jacques Delors	354	35	46	40
Jacques Santer	126		40	40
Romano Prodi	642	39	40	39
José Manuel Durão Barroso	524	43	41	42
Jean-Claude Juncker	274	40	37	38
Ursula von der Leyen	217	45	43	44
Group		ABC	<i>El País</i>	Average
Socialists	386	35	48	41
Populars	1.141	43	41	42
Liberals	692	39	41	40

¹ The sentiment is measured on a scale from 0 to 100, with 0 being extremely negative and 100 being extremely positive. The color of the presidents' names indicate their political group: red for socialists, blue for populars, yellow for liberals.

In the coverage of the first two presidents, Roy Jenkins and Gaston Thorn, about 70% of the headlines from *El País* are neutral. However, in the rest of the cases, there seems to be greater polarization in both media outlets, with a neutrality load always below 50%. In general, the bulk of the messages are divided between positive and negative, with a predominance of the latter group.

However, the treatment of Ursula von der Leyen implies a slight increase in the average sentiment compared to the previous ones, being an exception in the described trend. It happens even in *El País*, a center-left media outlet, where only 31.8% of the headlines are negative, 50.2% are neutral, and 18.2% are positive. In fact, regarding this newspaper, she's the person with the highest average positive rating (20.9%), only behind the socialist Jacques Delors (22.2%). Only José Manuel Durão Barroso before von der Leyen had an average sentiment higher than his predecessor, with an average of 42 compared to Romano Prodi's 39 points.

If the tone is observed based on the groups, it can be seen that, while in *El País* the socialists (48) receive a more favorable treatment than the populars (41), in the pieces by *ABC*, the opposite happens (socialists: 35 and populars: 43). Although the differences in both cases are seven or eight points, coverage tends to be more neutral in the first newspaper and closer to negative in the second. The liberals are the most similar group when comparing the sentiment of the headlines of *El País* (41) and *ABC* (39), with only a two-point difference.

Regarding the treatment over time, Figure 3 shows a clear decline in the representation of *El País*—the only media outlet where we could compile the complete historical series—of all European leaders. In most cases, the largest decline in average sentiment occurs in the last part of the mandate and the most positive peak occurs at the beginning or somewhere in between. Gaston Thorn is an exception to this trend, as he receives opposite coverage and the latest news about him is the closest to positivity.

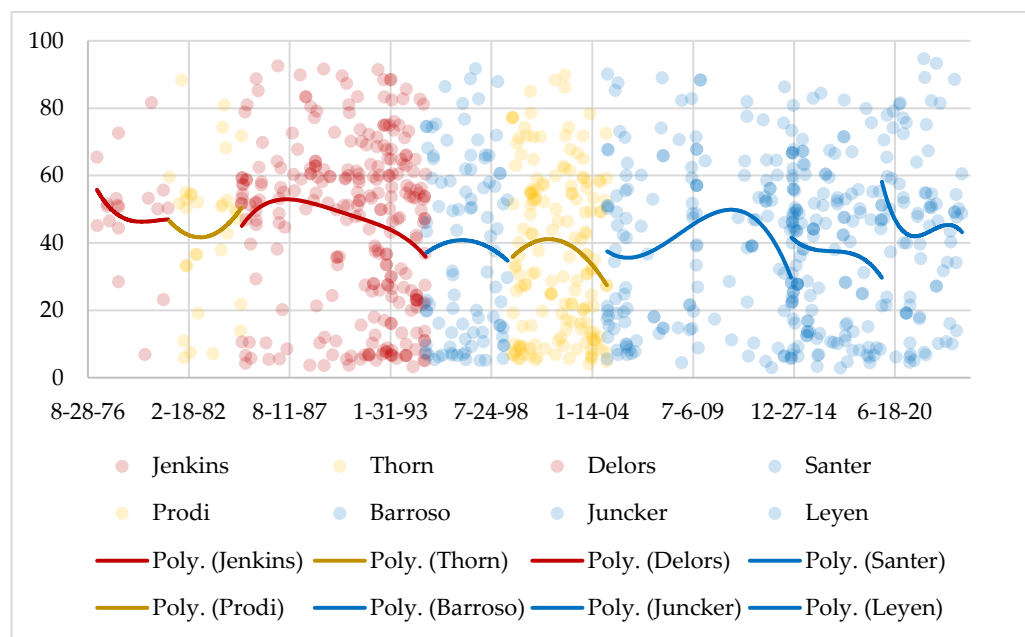


Figure 3. Evolution of sentiment toward each of the leaders of the European Commission.

The reasons why the average sentiment declines at the end of most terms are multiple in each case. However, in the coverage of some leaders, certain issues stand out with negative treatment. For example, in the coverage of some leaders, certain issues stand out with negative treatment. For example, in the last stage of Jacques Delors, *El País* published particularly critical headlines, such as “Solchaga criticizes the ‘Delors package’ as insufficient for economic cohesion” (*El País*, 23 April 1992, 5), “Should Delors resign?” (*El País*, 30 September 1992, 17), or “American sanctions and McSharry’s criticisms compromise Delors’ political future” (7 November 1992, 8). On the other hand, the latest steps of José Manuel Durão Barroso are marked in both newspapers by the leader’s statements regarding the consequences of the euro crisis: “Barroso believes that the EU’s austerity policy «has reached its limit»” (*ABC*, 23 April 2013, 18), “Barroso believes that the greatest risk to recovery is political” (*ABC*, 23 September 2013, 31), and “Barroso blames the capitals for the mistakes in the euro crisis” (*El País*, 29 October 2014, 6).

The case of Ursula von der Leyen is unique in that, although there is also a decline in her final phase, with a peak of negativity in 2021, the most negatively charged news in this period relates to tensions with Turkey and Hungary: “Von der Leyen claims to have felt ‘hurt and alone’ by the snub from the Turkish president” (*El País*, 16 April 2021, 7) and “Von der Leyen threatens Orbán with cutting European funds if he does not stop the homophobic stance” (*El País*, 7 July 2021, 5). Her last days in office, however, were marked by the handling of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict; this is shown by headlines such as “Urtasun accuses Von der Leyen of ‘double standards’ for condemning the organization’s attack and not the Israeli occupation of Palestine” (*ABC*, 9 October 2023, 6) or “Criticism of Ursula Von der Leyen for not coordinating her support trip to Israel” (*ABC*, 17 October 2023, 24). Her highest levels of positivity coincide with the management of the economic and health crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The most repeated terms in the headlines related to each president of the European Commission allow us to track some of the topics most associated with them by each media outlet. Table 3 shows that these lists of words that were once frequent institutional terms, such as “EU” or “Commission”, are excluded in any publication regardless of the subject it features.

Table 3. Terms most associated with the presidents of the European Commission (1976–2024).

President	ABC	El País
Roy Jenkins (1977–1981)	—	Spain (5), Madrid (3), future (3), party (3), leader (3)
Gaston Thorn (1981–1985)	—	Spain (14), income (5), visit (4), crisis (3), entry (3)
Jacques Delors (1985–1995)	dies (1), former president (1), years (1), led (1), minister (1), economy (1), France (1)	González (27), Spain (21), requests (16), agreement (14), proposes (13), economic (12), summit (11), social (11), Spanish (10), construction (10), monetary (10), crisis (10)
Jacques Santer (1995–1999)	—	against (10), employment (6), Parliament (5), asks (5), summit (5), euro (5), Aznar (5), Kohl (5), portfolios (5)
Romano Prodi (1999–2004)	Berlusconi (31), Italy (20), pact (15), Zapatero (12), Aznar (11), stability (11), asks (9), says (9), crisis (9), minister (9), confidence (9)	Italy (32), Berlusconi (24), Italian (23), Aznar (14), Spain (13), asks (13), says (13), crisis (12), center-left (12)
José Manuel Durão Barroso (2004–2014)	crisis (16), Zapatero (12), support (11), censorship (10), Spain (10), politics (9), Sarkozy (9), front (9), president (9), Buttiglione (9), says (9), announces (8), Goldman Sachs (8)	minister (20), Portuguese (17), first (16), against (14), asks (12), Spain (12), socialists (11), leaders (10), executive (10), Europeans (10), Zapatero (10)
Jean-Claude Juncker (2014–2019)	plan (5), Goldman Sachs (4), Brexit (4), assures (4), Spain (4), doubt (3), crisis (3), Johnson (3), United Kingdom (3), Greece (3), asks (3), May (3), state (3)	plan (26), against (20), Spain (16), Brexit (13), million (12), investment (11), euro (11), Merkel (10), Rajoy (10), agreement (10), leader (10)
Ursula von der Leyen (2019–act.)	agreement (8), Spain (7), Ukraine (7), PP (6), plan (6), Johnson (6), promises (5), asks (5), European (5), Russia (5), Sánchez (5), as (4), post-Brexit (4), Kingdom (4), United (4), Kiev (4), Feijóo (4)	crisis (9), Poland (8), German (8), agreement (7), Johnson (7), Hungary (7), Michel (7), Ukraine (7), British (6), promises (6), defends (5), speech (5), Spain (5), warns (5), reconstruction (5) first (5), visit (5), defense (5), Russia (5), PP (5), millions (5)

In the case of Roy Jenkins, the representation by *El País* is very general, with very common terms in political journalism, such as “party” or “leader”. However, in the coverage of his successor, Gaston Thorn, words related to Spain’s accession to the supranational organization (‘membership’ and ‘entry’) begin to appear. The information from both representatives also covers their respective visits to Spain (“Madrid” and “visit”).

With Jacques Delors, some of the most repeated terms among the pieces of *El País*, such as “proposes”, “asks”, “agreement”, or “summit”, highlight the coverage of the internal dynamics of the organization in a context where Spain is already a member country, hence the recurrence of “construction.” These news items are also associated with Felipe González and Spain (“González”, “Spain”, and “Spanish”) and introduce the economic aspect (“economic”, “monetary”, and “crisis”).

In numerous publications of *El País*, Jacques Santer appears represented from opposition and confrontation, with “against” being the most repeated word among the headlines. For instance, Santer calls to “fight” against those who wish to dilute the European Union (El País, 18 January 1995, sentiment: 20/100) or “Santer warns against the ‘Helms-Burton law’” (El País, 13 June 1996, 32) are illustrative of this dynamic, which is repeated in the coverage of José Manuel Durão Barroso.

Both in *ABC* and in *El País*, Romano Prodi appears closely related to Italy and Berlusconi. However, while the former mostly links the character with the Spanish socialist politician José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, the latter associates him with the popular José María Aznar, mainly in reference to different meetings that took place between the then president of the Government of Spain and the European representative.

As for José Manuel Durão Barroso, above all *ABC* relates the leader to “crisis” and “Goldman Sachs” in relation to the Great Recession, which took place during his term. The

recurrence of Buttiglione also stands out due to the coverage of the controversy surrounding Rocco Buttiglione, candidate for Commissioner of Justice and Equality in October 2004, who ended up resigning from the position after receiving criticism for homophobic behavior. *El País* links it mainly with the terms “first”, “minister”, and “Portuguese”—in reference to their previous position—and not with the management of the Great Recession. Among the headlines of both media, the name Zapatero is repeated, generally due to meetings or interactions between the two leaders: “Zapatero gives his support to Barroso but asks him to now ‘listen’” (*El País*, 28 October 2004, sentiment: 33/100).

The so-called Investment Plan for Europe or Juncker Plan features in numerous pieces about the popular Jean-Claude Juncker, with “plan” being the most repeated term in both newspapers—in *El País*, “millions”, “investment”, and “euro” are also recurring. Another important topic associated with him is Brexit (“Brexit”, “Johnson”, “Kingdom”, “United”, and “May”). *ABC* and *El País* agree on these two issues. However, the second is the only one to frequently associate the leader with the former president of the Government of Spain, Mariano Rajoy, and the former German Chancellor, Angela Merkel (both conservatives).

The aftermath of Brexit continues to be present in Ursula von der Leyen’s coverage, as can be seen through the recurrence of “agreement”, “Johnson”, “post-Brexit”, “Brexit”, “Kingdom”, and “United”. To this juncture is added the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Ukraine, Kiev, Russia, and defense). Beyond these two crises, *ABC* more frequently associates it with national politicians Pedro Sánchez and Alberto Núñez Feijóo (Sánchez and Feijóo), while *El País* mainly alludes to Poland and Hungary, member countries that have had tensions with Brussels, to which the first newspaper seems to pay less attention.

The way in which the presidents of the European Commission are referred to is the last aspect considered in the analysis of their media representation. In this sense, the use of the first name in addition to the last name stands out when mentioning leaders Roy Jenkins and Gaston Thorn in the headlines, as can be seen in Table 4. In the case of the former, 53.6% of the news items use the first name; in the case of the latter, the figure rises to 75.5%. This occurred at a time when Spain perceived the institution with greater distance, with all data sourced exclusively from *El País*.

From Jacques Delors onwards, once Spain was integrated into the organization, the proportion of news mentioning the first name did not reach 15%. In the case of Romano Prodi, José Manuel Durão Barroso, and Jean-Claude Juncker, the references to the name are so residual that they do not even occur in every third article. This decline may be due to a greater familiarity with the European Commission and its representatives once Spain joined the EU.

However, once again, the treatment of Ursula von der Leyen is presented as an exception to the trend. This is the most mentioned person by name in the last 20 years (12.3%), surpassing Jacques Santer (11.2%) and being less than two points away from that of Jacques Delors (14.1%).

Table 4. Percentage of mentions of the first name in relation to mentions of the last name.

Politician	<i>ABC</i>	<i>El País</i>	Average
Roy Jenkins		53.6%	
Gaston Thorn		75.5%	
Jacques Delors		14.1%	
Jacques Santer		11.2%	
Romano Prodi	11.4%	5.5%	8.4%
José Manuel Durão Barroso	0.0%	0.5%	0.3%
Jean-Claude Juncker	6.2%	3.9%	5.0%
Ursula von der Leyen	12.0%	12.6%	12.3%

4. Discussion and Conclusions

According to García-Carretero et al. (2023), the figures with the most presence in the publications of the Spanish media about the EU are its representatives. In the case of the European Commission and its leaders, as the visible faces of the executive and

those most responsible for the direction of the Union, they may also be the ones who can best capture Europeanist sentiment, conformity with community policies in each country, and in a general sense, the point at which the project of European construction finds itself. For all these reasons, it is relevant to address, from research, the media treatment they receive, in this case by the Spanish generalist press. Although the media is far from being a mere channel of transmission between citizens and politicians, a sentiment analysis of the media allows us to better understand the role of constructing emotional narratives about agenda issues and the informative protagonists, in this case, institutions and political representatives.

Objective 1 (O1) of this work aimed to describe the informational coverage of the Commission and its members and its evolution over time, considering the sentiment of the messages and the predominant topics. Five main themes were identified in which the bulk of this information can be framed: Economy, Foreign Affairs, Internal Politics, Spanish Politics, and Future of the EU. This outlines, in this way, an eminently pragmatic and utilitarian coverage by the press, which focuses on the main spheres in which the EU operates (economy and Foreign Affairs), on national implications, and on the future of Europe.

These five topics are present in other research of a similar nature, especially in aspects, such as the economy as a central theme (Mayo-Cubero et al. 2023; García-Carretero et al. 2023) or the weight of national politics in this type of publication (Pradel-Miquel 2008; García-Carretero et al. 2023; Fernández-Rovira and Carniel-Bugs 2024). On the other hand, an event like the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which authors like García-Carretero et al. (2023) classified as an independent topic, is included under more general themes, such as Internal Politics or Future of the EU.

The average sentiment experienced slight fluctuations between 1976 and 2024, with none of them particularly significant compared to the general trend, which is leaning slightly toward negativity and abandons the neutrality that characterized the period prior to the 1990s. The press coverage of the representatives of the European Commission was much more neutral when Spain had not yet joined the EU, despite being a country that values its membership in the organization above the average (Eurobarometer 2024). Now that the country is immersed in the dynamics of the supranational organization, from an internal perspective, the tone of the analyzed Spanish media has become more critical, which seems to imply an evolution toward distrust and a greater rejection of the general perception of the EU and its leaders over the last decades.

However, the changes in sentiment between the euphoria (2000–2007) and the crisis (2008–2014) and post-crisis (2015–2018) periods identified by Sales-Piñeiro and Capriotti-Peri (2022) are not as noticeable. With regard to the aforementioned fluctuations, these may be due to alterations in the political and media agendas and, especially from the 1990s onwards, to a change in the form of headlines in the context of the digital transition, from a shorter and inevitably neutral text to a longer and more interpretative one.

Objective 2 (O2) was to compare the treatment of the leaders of the European Commission by *El País* and *ABC*. In both cases, there is a noticeable trend toward negativity toward each new president. However, in *El País*, the socialists receive a more neutral treatment and the populists are more inclined to negativity. In *ABC*, the opposite happens, a bias that may be conditioned by the editorial line of each of the media and in whose coverage of the EU more differences have already been perceived (Mayo-Cubero et al. 2023; García-Carretero et al. 2023; Menéndez-Alarcón 2010). The data are coherent with the political parallelism present in the Spanish media system, the polarized pluralist: the representation and assessment of the Commission and its leaders by *El País* and *ABC* have been quite similar, respectively, to the political support of the PSOE and PP for the presidency in office, according to their European political affiliation. In this regard, it is worth recalling the historical tradition of pacts between these two European groups within the EU.

This aligns with framing theory (Entman 1993), as the media appears to depict political opposition leaders in a more negative light depending on their editorial stance. This can be

observed in both the overall sentiment of headlines and the themes associated with these figures. For example, *El País* links von der Leyen to Hungary and Poland, constructing a conflict-oriented frame, whereas *ABC* portrays her as an arbiter between the Spanish prime minister and the opposition leader. Similarly, the newspaper's portrayal of Juncker extends a critical, negative perception of his entire political spectrum.

This phenomenon reinforces the idea that the positioning of headlines significantly affects the way they represent political leaders and the EU as a whole, which in turn underscores the relevance of a plural and diverse media system to ensure the formation of a balanced and well-informed public opinion about Europe, its representatives, and the events that take place within it. Otherwise, biased coverage can undermine pro-European sentiment and even fuel Euroscepticism. In any case, the alternation of critical coverage with more benevolent coverage depending on the governments in power, in a political context as delicate as the current one, can generate a certain amount of noise about the media's pro-European stance, a phenomenon whose consequences are difficult to foresee in the medium term and which invites a profound reflection within the media on their role in the project of European construction.

The case of Ursula von der Leyen is presented as an exception to the general trend in the representation of European leaders: on one hand, the representative has a significantly higher average sentiment than her predecessors; on the other, she is the most mentioned person by name in the last 20 years. Regarding the first argument, it is noted how the leader has awakened, especially at the beginning of her term, a positive feeling that is unusual in recent decades, especially during the pandemic. This suggests that the expansive policies promoted during the coronavirus crisis have been considerably better received by the media regardless of their editorial line, unlike the austerity measures that were applied during the Great Recession and that burden the media representation of some of their standard bearers, as is the case with the popular José Manuel Durão Barroso and Jean-Claude Juncker. Even so, the final stages of her first term have been negatively affected by the handling of the Israeli invasion of Palestine.

Regarding the explicit mentions of her name, these differences add to the biased and stereotyped treatment that [Montes-Rodríguez \(2021\)](#) detects in the news coverage of von der Leyen from a qualitative perspective. The first woman to hold the presidency of the European Commission does not seem, therefore, to be detached from a differential component in her treatment that could reflect a sexist bias. In a period when Spain was outside the EU or newly integrated into the community, the use of the first names of less popular leaders in the media agenda, such as Roy Jenkins, Gaston Thorn, or Jacques Delors, can be explained. However, at present, the repeated use of the first name of von der Leyen cannot be explained by the same explanation of widespread ignorance and point to the aforementioned gender issue. Thus, further studies are needed to examine this phenomenon in a more detailed and profound manner, considering how media coverage of female political leaders compares to their male counterparts in various contexts. It is crucial to investigate whether these patterns are consistent across different media outlets and regions or if specific factors influence the disparity in coverage. This would help determine whether gender bias is pervasive and to what extent it affects the portrayal of leadership in the media.

In short, the findings of this study allow us to conclude that the media treatment of the European Commission's leaders is very pragmatic, somewhat biased by its editorial line, and focuses on aspects, such as the economy or national issues. In this sense, skepticism increased once Spain joined the EU, with a slight tendency toward negativity since then. Subsequent analyses may investigate the extent to which this coverage has influenced the emergence of Eurosceptic, populist, and ultranationalist political parties, or if, on the contrary, it is the appearance of these forces and their ability to place controversial topics on the news agenda that causes coverage with more negative sentiments toward the European project. This line of research can be enriched by new studies exploring news framing and employing discourse analysis techniques, such as qualitative coding, thematic analysis, or

critical discourse analysis, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the analyzed press articles.

On the other hand, von der Leyen's recent term in office, which began at the same time that the health crisis exploded, seems to be the only one to have redirected media representation toward a more positive sentiment, having harnessed the Union's supranational potential to provide a common response to a global challenge. Similarly, future research on the subject could study the evolution of this coverage not only in other traditional and digital media but also in other countries with different political contexts and attitudes toward the European project (Eurobarometer 2024), thus establishing comparisons according to the representation of Eurosceptic or Europhobic parties.

The future evolution of media coverage about the European Union and its institutions, which seems to be at a turning point at the moment, will ultimately determine whether the positive sentiment around the German leader and the measures implemented during her tenure represent the beginning of a change in public perception of European policies and representatives or just an exception to a worrying negative trend whose consequences may begin to be felt more intensely with the start of the new legislature.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/journalmedia5040103/s1>, Table S1: News headlines, subtitles and metadata.

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Notes

- ¹ The refugee crisis (2013–2016) refers to the mass influx of refugees and migrants, primarily from war-torn regions in the Middle East and Africa, seeking asylum in Europe, which created significant political, social, and humanitarian challenges across the continent.
- ² A far-right political party in Spain, which gained significant support from 2018 onwards, driven by its nationalist, anti-immigration, and anti-Catalan independence stance, as well as its opposition to feminist and progressive policies.
- ³ The Estudio General de Medios (EGM) is a comprehensive media study conducted in Spain that provides detailed insights into media consumption habits and audience demographics. It surveys a wide range of media platforms, including television, radio, print, and digital, allowing advertisers, researchers, and media professionals to understand trends and shifts in audience behavior over time.
- ⁴ <https://huggingface.co/cardiffnlp/twitter-xlm-roberta-base-sentiment> (accessed on 10 September 2024).

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