

Brussels will pay for everything. The shaping of the European public sphere before *NextGenerationEU*

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Recommended citation:

Rivas-de-Roca, Rubén; García-Gordillo, Mar (2022). "Brussels will pay for everything. The shaping of the European public sphere before *NextGenerationEU*". *Profesional de la información*, v. 31, n. 3, e310301.
<https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2022.may.01>

Article received on October 26th, 2021
Accepted on February 28th, 2022



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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic meant challenges in crisis management for democratic institutions such as the European Union (EU). To achieve an economic and social recovery to the crisis, the EU institutions have promoted the *NextGenerationEU* (NGEU) program, a massive recovery package for this purpose. This action takes place at a time of strong visibility of Euroscepticism within a global phenomenon of distrust in political authorities. The present work aims to know the shaping of the European Public Sphere when NGEU is launched. First, the evolution of EU support during the pandemic is described, analyzing the possible factors that influence on this variable. On this matter, a secondary analysis of data is applied on different waves of the *Eurobarometer* (EB 92, 93, 94 and 95). The statistical method is also used to give items that determine the image of the EU. Moreover, the communicative dissemination of this plan is drawing upon semi-structured interviews with some of the professionals who deal with the task. The objective is to provide an overview of how the public sphere made up of citizens and institutions is defined before a moment of symbolic relevance. The results reveal a trend towards greater positivity with the EU after the pandemic. However, among other possible factors, the degree of support depends on the ideological position and, to a lesser extent, on the type of community where the citizens live. EU officials assess this rise of Europeanism as an opportunity, targeting the NGEU communication campaign especially at young people.

Keywords

Institutional communication; Public opinion; European public sphere; Opinion polls; Semi-structured interviews; Europeanism; Euroscepticism; *Eurobarometer*; Covid-19; Pandemics; *NextGenerationEU*; European Union.

Funding

The author Rubén Rivas-de-Roca has been beneficiary of a PIF predoctoral contract, in the framework of the *Sixth Institutional Research and Transfer Plan* of the *University of Seville* (VI PPIT-US).

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has posed a huge communication management challenge for democratic institutions, including international organizations such as the European Union (EU) that could play a fundamental role in overcoming this crisis. After an initial focus on the health dimension (Wang; Hao; Platt, 2021), the messages of governments and EU institutions developed to address how the pandemic could be overcome in economic and social terms (Hancu-Budui; Zorio-Grima; Blanco-Vega, 2020).

In the case of the EU, on 21 July 2020, the *European Council* approved the *NextGenerationEU (NGEU)* program, a €750 billion recovery fund to be used between 2021 and 2023. This financial package is considered to represent an unprecedented measure at the European level, being the first supranational aid program based on EU bonds (Codogno; Vanden-Noord, 2020). This step towards greater integration is occurring in a context of rising Euroscepticism, with strong visibility following Brexit (Caiani; Guerra, 2017).

This development of movements contrary to the European project parallels a process of polarization and discrediting of the traditional political class (Bennett; Pfetsch, 2018; Bimber; Gil de Zúñiga, 2020), which connects with an acceleration of public communication. Populist forces find in social networks a way to undermine trust in democratic institutions (Bruns et al., 2016; Crilley; Gillespie, 2019), through the dissemination of false or inaccurate messages in line with their interests (Pérez-Curiel; Velasco-Molpeceres, 2020). One of the biggest recent examples of this was Brexit, where such actors linked the EU to the concept of “crisis” (Krzyżanowski, 2019) and achieved a result in favor of their interests in the 2016 referendum.

The economic recession in the early 2010s already represented a threat to the legitimacy of the European project (Brosius; Van-Elsas; De-Vreese, 2019). In this regard, the literature highlights a growing politicization of the debate on the EU, deriving from the fact that the EU increasingly deals with ideologized issues (Hutter; Kriesi, 2019). The particularities of this entity, comprising a set of supranational institutions based on the Member States, mean that they are not regarded homogeneously in terms of polarization (Fletcher; Cornia; Nielsen, 2020). In most countries, a “permissive consensus” has been observed over the years, whereby European integration receives tacit support from citizens, accompanied by limited knowledge of its functioning (Ares; Bouza, 2019).

This raises the question of how European public opinion might understand and value the ambitious *NGEU* plan. At the start of the pandemic, the EU suffered from strong criticism for an alleged lack of solidarity (Nielsen et al., 2020). Faced with this, initiatives such as the *NGEU* can drive Europeanist visions that assume the concept of “Europe” as a solution (Kermer; Nijmeijer, 2020). In this context, this study aims to contribute to the state of the art by describing the evolution of support for the EU during the years of the pandemic and analyzing the social factors that condition it. It also explores the communicative dimension of the mentioned investment plan through interviews with professionals from EU institutions. The aim is to shed light on how the European public space (formed of citizens and institutions) is structured at this important time.

2. Background

2.1. Limitations and possibilities of the European public sphere

When addressing the genesis of public opinion around the EU, it is common to refer to the concept of the European public sphere (EPS). This notion alludes to the existence of a deliberative space shared by the political class, the media, and citizens and that provides legitimacy to the European project (Herkmann; Harjuniemi, 2015). Following the Habermasian conceptualization of public spheres, citizens in this common space act as holders of democratic legitimacy (Habermas, 1962).

Despite this constructed character of the concept of public spheres, the EPS is widely cited in literature as the ideal on which the European political system is based (Gil de Zúñiga, 2015; Rivas-de-Roca; García-Gordillo, 2021). One of the main problems related to its development is the greater media interest in affairs of state (Lloyd; Marconi, 2014), in addition to the different national conditions that determine perceptions of the EU (Vaccari, 2017). This lack of interest in such issues is linked to the usual interpretation of European elections as second-rank, despite their gradually increasing relevance (Risse, 2015).

The *European Parliament (EP)* elections are regarded as an exceptional symbolic moment of European political communication. Several studies have analyzed the ability of this democratic event to foster a shared sphere, albeit with inconclusive findings. On the one hand, this electoral campaign represents a moment of visibility for European politics (Boomgaarden; De-Vreese, 2016; Braun; Schäfer, 2021). On the other, transnational debates at the EU level remain restricted to an elitist minority (Rivas-de-Roca; García-Gordillo, 2020), which is also repeated during the legislature in the work of MEPs, including their management of Covid-19 (Tuñón-Navarro; Carral-Vilar, 2021).

“ The ambitious *NGEU* plan raises the question of how a potential European public opinion is articulated in the face of such a transnational recovery program ”

To address this political conception of the EU as segmented and rooted in statehood, the EU institutions have implemented an active communication policy, including elements of self-analysis related to the hypothetical European public opinion, such as the *Eurobarometer* (**Andrino-San-Cristóbal**, 2014). During the last decade, both institutions and academia have focused on the role played by social media in the EPS, including the remarkable digital influence of the candidates to chair the *EU Commission (Spitzenkandidaten)* during the *European Parliament* elections (**Nulty et al.**, 2016; **Vesnic-Alujevic**, 2016).

Beyond the electoral period, social networks seemed to exhibit certain characteristics that could favor the emergence of a transnational sphere such as the EPS. Such channels include Europeanized debates that transcend the institutional sphere (**Bossetta; Segesten; Trezn**, 2017; **Hänksa; Bauchowitz**, 2019). However, the achievement of a true European digital democracy seems distant because of the persistence of structural deficiencies related to a lack of identification with the EU (**Sarikakis; Kolokytha**, 2019). Optimism about a new type of public discussion on the internet clashes with the evidence that a large fraction of the citizens remain unaware of the EU's basic institutional mechanisms (**Gattermann; De-Vreese**, 2020).

The main consequence of this is the difficulty that the media and voters face in attributing responsibilities within European politics (**Goldberg; Brosius; De-Vreese**, 2021). This acts as a brake on the accountability required by any democratic system, maintaining the EU's traditional deficit in this area at a time when digital technologies are opening the way for greater participation (**Hennen**, 2020).

2.2. The rise of Euroscepticism in a multilevel Europe

In a Europe with competences segmented between local, national, and supranational political authorities, the EU has been criticized in recent years because of the gap between the European elite and the people, associated with national public spheres (**Tuñón-Navarro; Oleart; Bouza-García**, 2019). Eurosceptic narratives have emerged with particular virulence in countries that have a complex relationship with the European project [the Atlanticist position of the United Kingdom vis à vis the continent, the communist legacy and late democratization of the Visegrád countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia), etc.], but that also permeate European public opinion as a whole (**Caiani; Guerra**, 2017).

Although the development of such Euroscepticism can be located within a global populist wave (**Bennett; Pfetsch**, 2018), the EU itself has also been subject to strong turbulence, including the debt crisis, refugee management, or Brexit, which have heightened this process. All these events had high levels of visibility and resulted in controversy for a European project that, as discussed above, was thitherto based on "permissive consensus" (**De-Wilde; Laupold; Schmidtke**, 2016). The presence of EU issues has led to a politicization related to the EU (**Risse**, 2015), to the point that some issues such as climate change, the economy, or immigration can act as fissures that influence voting in European elections (**Braun; Schäfer**, 2021).

Such politicization favors the consolidation of the EPS by contributing to the idea of inclusiveness, that is, to citizens' feeling issues as their own and being informed about them, following **Habermas** (1962). The flip side is that this can also generate excessive polarization based on manipulated information, thereby undermining confidence in EU institutions and creating a wholly negative attitude toward their policies. According to **Treib** (2021), Euroscepticism is a long-term cultural phenomenon based on the construction of a central-periphery axis in European politics. Note that important divergences are also observed, mainly resulting from the ideological orientation of the parties that spread such messages in Europe (**Alonso-Muñoz**, 2020).

This proliferation of Euroscepticism occurs in a hybrid communicative framework in which conventional media coexist with new technologies in shaping public opinion (**Langer; Gruber**, 2021). Academia has extensively considered the ability of social media to drive polarization, although recent contributions have indicated that this process can also operate the other way around, with polarization motivating a certain use of such platforms (**Nordbrandt**, 2021). The preceding rise of Euroscepticism would thus explain a digital conversation that favors its interests.

The frames of populist discourse are not exclusive to political actors linked to the extreme right or left, but rather include all kinds of political figures. This was demonstrated during the Covid-19 crisis, when presidents with various political leanings applied such methods (**Manfredi-Sánchez; Amado-Suárez; Waisbord**, 2021). EU institutions themselves appear to have taken a more proactive step in this direction, thus the former apathy towards the EU could move toward more positive and negative approaches.

The usual inability of European institutions to set the public agenda, which stemmed from the absence of a shared communication strategy (**Bouza-García; Tuñón-Navarro**, 2018), collided in 2020 with a health pandemic and an infodemic of disinformation. This double crisis could strengthen populist actors but will also determine the main political actions of the EU in the years to come (**Tuñón-Navarro; Bouza-García**, 2021), as demonstrated by the *NGEU* program. The wave of information disorders brought about by the pandemic was characterized by the use of data with some kind of empirical basis (**García-Marín**, 2020), although a reduction in inequalities in access to news content has also been noted (**Case-ro-Ripollés**, 2020).

Increased information consumption may have positive implications for public awareness, including in the EU. In addition,

the European situation of increasing politicization and thus polarization opens interesting prospects regarding the reconfiguration of the EPS. Considering that these changes do not allow hypotheses to be defined based on the literature, we establish the following research questions herein:

- RQ1. What has been the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on support for European integration?
- RQ2. Which factors may motivate perceptions of the EU?
- RQ3. What are the communication objectives according to those responsible for the *NGEU* program?

3. Methodology

The methodological design of this study is based on a triangulation of research techniques, combining secondary data analysis with semistructured interviews. For the statistical analysis, we apply the results of four waves of the *Eurobarometer*:

- 1) The *Standard Eurobarometer 92* (autumn 2019). This survey was conducted between 14 and 29 November 2019. The final sample of responses was 32,510 people from 28 countries using a stratified system to analyze 1,001 variables.
- 2) The *Standard Eurobarometer 93* (summer 2020). This study was conducted between 9 July and 26 August 2020, with partially remote interviews due to the pandemic. The sample reached 26,681 individuals from 27 Member States, because of the departure of the UK in January 2020, applying a stratified system.
- 3) The *Standard Eurobarometer 94* (winter 2020–2021). This survey was conducted between 12 February and 18 March 2021. Interviews included 27,409 people (in person or virtually) from all 27 Member States, based on a stratified sample. The data from this wave are used to evaluate the interaction between the variables, being the last one whose database is accessible to the authors and having been carried out after the *NGEU* initiative was approved.
- 4) The *Standard Eurobarometer 95* (spring 2021). This survey was carried out between 14 June and 12 July 2021, in hybrid (face-to-face/virtual) form in the 27 Member States. A total of 26,544 interviews were conducted in these countries.

The sample error of all the *Eurobarometer* waves applied herein was $\pm 1.4\%$ for a 95% confidence level. Note that these surveys target citizens from the age of 15 years. The *EU Commission* has carried out this transnational and longitudinal study since 1973, with the aim of monitoring public opinion regarding the EU. The survey is published twice each year (in spring and autumn), although Covid-19 modified this. The *European Commission's Directorate-General for Communication (DG COMM)*, and in particular the *Strategy, Corporate Communication Actions, and Eurobarometer Unit*, is responsible for its design, while the company *Kantar Public* was responsible for its implementation during the analyzed period.

The *Eurobarometer* has *Standard* and *Special* editions. The former queries opinions and attitudes about European integration, its institutions, and concrete policies, as functions of the basic sociodemographic variables of the respondents. Each survey includes approximately 1,000 interviews per country as well as separate samples for historically unique territories such as Northern Ireland or the former East Germany. In addition, for some variables, 12 additional countries and territories are included, such as candidate countries seeking accession or the UK. Meanwhile, the *Special Eurobarometer* addresses specific issues such as the environment, the economy, or technology, at given time points.

For this study, three dependent variables were extracted from the *Standard Eurobarometer*:

- The image of the EU: Three categories were included here: positive, neutral, and negative or don't know (DN). Intermediate levels are recoded to improve representativeness. Thus, "positive" and "quite positive" are combined into a single category called "positive," while "quite negative" and "negative" are grouped under the term "negative."
- Trust in public institutions. Three categories are applied, indicating preference for the European Union, the national government, or the national parliament.
- Opinion regarding the future of the EU. Three categories are used: optimism, pessimism, and don't know (DN).

Using these classic variables, which appear continuously in the *Eurobarometer*, a secondary data analysis is applied to evaluate their evolution throughout the pandemic. The results are also compared with the data for the "effectiveness of the *NextGenerationEU* program," which was included in the *Eurobarometers 94* and *95*.

Another aim of this study is to identify possible explanatory factors for the different social viewpoints regarding the EU. For this, two independent variables are used:

- Ideological positioning. This is divided into six categories, with the variable being recoded to generate more significant constructs: extreme left, center left, center, center right, extreme right, and nonaligned.
- Size of locality. This is divided into three categories: large cities, medium-sized towns, and rural areas.

These variables are applied because the literature refers to them as elements relevant to Euroscepticism (Treib, 2021), interwoven with the clash between cosmopolitan and traditional values, beyond sociodemographic criteria such as age or income. Although the *Eurobarometer* includes other ordinal variables, such as frequency of internet use or social class, we believe that the ideological dimension and locality of residence will be better linked to possible explanatory factors of European sentiment. This is based

“ In recent years, the EU has been criticized for pointing to a gap between the European elite and the people ”

on the rooting of Euroscepticism in national policy issues (De-Vries, 2018). The *Eurobarometer* includes numerous nominal variables such as gender, occupation, or educational level, but this research aims to understand the relationship between the categories in the survey where order is relevant. This is the case of the “Image of the EU” itself, as an indicator of support for European integration.

In this research, comparative statistical analysis (Cassero-Ripollés, 2017) is applied for *Eurobarometer 94* between the independent variables “Ideological positioning” and “Community size” (X) and the dependent variable for the “Image of the EU” (Y), interpreted as the most important descriptor of the level of Europeanism. The statistical analysis was carried out using *IBM SPSS* statistics software version 28. The Spearman correlation coefficient (ρ) was also calculated for ordinal variables, describing the degree of dependence and the relationship between them. This coefficient acts as a nonparametric measure describing the rank correlation. It is implemented using two-way tests, for which the null hypothesis is that X and Y are mutually independent. Results close to 1 indicate statistical dependence between the dataset (ranking) provided by each variable.

Regarding the aim of determining the communicative objectives of the *NGEU* program, we carried out semistructured interviews with some of its managers. This method, typical of exploratory approaches, allows us to delve into the motivations underlying such communicative activity (Weiss, 1994). Snowball sampling (Noy, 2008) was carried out, aimed at professionals working in EU institutions whose functions include communication of the *NGEU*. This fieldwork was carried out between April and July 2021 through online interviews.

The sample includes eight interviews (four from the *European Parliament* and four from the *European Commission*), at which point possible saturation was detected in the sense that the informants did not seem to add new data. The interviewees were selected based on their different degrees of responsibility for the common task of EU communication, thus also including senior roles that could provide a more strategic overview of such work. Table 1 presents the profile of each interviewee, respecting their confidentiality since some agreed to participate only under the condition of anonymity.

The qualitative content was subject to thematic analysis to identify common patterns (Braun; Clarke, 2006), applying the phases defined by the cited authors: familiarization with the answers, production of the initial codes, search and review of topics, and drafting of the final report. The interview sessions were structured into four sections:

- 1) previous experience,
- 2) importance of *NGEU* in their daily work,
- 3) citizens’ vision of the EU, and
- 4) future challenges facing the European project.

Table 2. Questionnaire for semistructured interviews (%)

Theme	Dynamic questions
Previous experience	1. Have you always been involved in the field of European affairs? In which other institutions/companies have you worked?
	2. How long have you been in the institution? What is your exact role?
The importance of the <i>NGEU</i> in your daily work	3. What is your daily professional activity?
	4. Which subjects are the focus of your work? Does current affairs set the agenda?
	5. * Alludes to the role of disinformation related to the <i>NGEU</i> according to the response.
	6. How are messages segmented, i.e., by age, socioeconomic issues, etc.? How is this information distributed?
Citizens’ vision of the EU	7. What view do you think citizens have of the EU in the aftermath of the pandemic?
	8. What factors may contribute to a greater/lesser degree of Europeanism?
	9. How do you rate the way in which the EU processes information?
	10. Do you think that the work of institutions on social media can increase citizen participation?
Future challenges facing the European project	11. What future challenges does the EU face in terms of communication?
	12. *Reference to the function of journalism versus unmediated communication, according to the response.

Table 1. Interviewee profile (%)

Institution	Years of experience in the EU	Position
<i>European Parliament</i>	2	Communication assistant
<i>European Parliament</i>	31	General manager
<i>European Parliament</i>	12	Press officer
<i>European Parliament</i>	5	Communication assistant
<i>European Commission</i>	14	Press officer
<i>European Commission</i>	5	Project manager
<i>European Commission</i>	16	Unit head
<i>European Commission</i>	30	General manager

These sections formed part of the semistructured questionnaire applied in this work (Table 2). The qualitative information was processed using *Atlas.ti* software version 9, aimed at research adopting this methodology. A single hermeneutic unit was created to delimit common

codes and locate possible perspectives in a more intuitive way than by manual analysis. Also, the network of relationships between the main codes is presented visually. The *Eurobarometer* data were then compared with this material to provide an overview of the communicative environment surrounding the *NGEU* funding plan.

Increased confidence in the EU is higher than experienced for national public authorities during the Covid-19 pandemic

4. Results

4.1. The effect of the pandemic on public support for the EU

The image of the EU appears to have been strengthened during the unexpected Covid-19 pandemic. The percentage of respondents who made a positive assessment of the European project increased by three percentage points since the 2019 edition (Table 3). The *Eurobarometer 93* data suggest that, initially, in 2020, the pandemic corresponded to a slight decline in the assessment of the EU. However, there was then a rebound in the winter of 2020–2021 (*EB 94*), which may have been driven by the creation of the *NGEU* program for economic recovery, but also by the management of the vaccination program by the EU.

Table 3. Image of the EU among citizens (%)

	EB 92 (2019)	EB 93 (2020)	EB 94 (2020–2021)	EB 95 (2021)	Covid variation
Positive	42	40	46	45	+3
Neutral	37	40	38	38	+1
Negative	20	19	15	16	-4
Don't know	1	1	1	1	0

The highest percentage for each variable is shown in **bold**.

Also noteworthy is the lower presence of negative perceptions, which is practically similar to the increase in positivity regarding the EU. Although the margins of improvement seem modest, the European project has not seen its image diminished by the pandemic according to the data considered herein. Indeed, the EU enjoyed a greater increase in trust in its institutions than is the case for national bodies. In linear terms, trust in the EU increased by up to six percentage points (Table 4).

Table 4. Trust in public institutions (%)

	EB 92 (2019)	EB 93 (2020)	EB 94 (2020–2021)	EB 95 (2021)	Change after Covid
European Union	43	43	49	49	+6
National government	34	40	36	37	+3
National parliament	34	36	35	35	+1

The highest percentage for each variable is shown in **bold**.

The data also reveal that, at the beginning of the pandemic (*EB 93*), national governments were the main source of trust. These authorities were responsible for managing everything related to health control measures, which resulted in a strengthening of support for them, which was diluted in the following waves analyzed (*EB 94* and *EB 95*). On the other hand, trust in the EU remained unchanged in the summer of 2020, but increased in 2021 when the end of the pandemic was closer thanks to vaccines, at the same time as the *NGEU* program was being implemented.

The *Eurobarometer* data indicate an increase in the level of trust in all the mentioned public institutions, remarkably so in the case of the EU. This is linked to the finding that optimism about the future of the EU also increased (Table 5). This variable was not queried in the edition 2020–2021 winter, but its inclusion in the rest of the available material (*EB 92*, *EB 93*, and *EB 95*) reveals a significant upward variation, from a frequency of 58% in 2019 to 66% in 2021.

The optimism detected, coupled with the parallel drop in pessimistic positions, is remarkable. The largest percentual changes in positive perceptions are found for trust in public institutions and the future of the EU rather than the image of the EU, an abstract notion in which the driving factors of the Europeanism–Euroscepticism axis come into play (Höpner; Jurczyk, 2015). However, the combination of these three variables indicates that citizens' perceptions of the European project improved during the course of the pandemic.

Table 5. Opinion on the future of the EU (%)

	EB 92 (2019)	EB 93 (2020)	EB 95 (2021)	Change after Covid
Optimism	58	60	66	+8
Pessimism	38	38	31	-7
Don't know	4	2	3	-1

The highest percentage for each variable is shown in **bold**.

4.2. Ordinal variables that affect the level of Europeanism

Euro-scepticism is a cultural phenomenon related to positions that oppose the European project. That is why the image of the EU acts here as an independent variable that synthesizes public opinion toward the institutions. The statistical analysis indicates a moderately strong correlation between ideological positioning and the image of the EU. The Spearman correlation coefficient takes a value indicating a strong positive association ($\rho = 0.65$), with significance at the 0.01 level (two-way).

The results presented in Table 6 show that the proportion of negative perceptions was higher at either end of the sample (8.6% in the extreme right, 9.2% in the extreme left). It is noteworthy that the extreme left category also shows an above-average frequency of positivity (7.7%). This may be related to a greater incidence of Euro-scepticism in far-right forces (Hutter; Kriesi, 2019).

Table 6. Effect of ideological positioning on the image of the EU (%)

		Positive	Neutral	Negative	Don't know	Total
Extreme left	Count	1,086	582	360	2	2,030
	% within the image of the EU	7.7	6.4	9.2	2.7	7.5
Centre left	Count	3,290	1,638	630	7	5,565
	% within the image of the EU	23.2	18.0	16.1	9.3	20.4
Center	Count	5,420	4,125	1,402	20	10,967
	% within the image of the EU	38.3	45.4	35.8	26.7	40.3
Center right	Count	2,901	1,497	883	12	5,293
	% within the image of the EU	20.5	16.5	22.5	16.0	19.4
Extreme right	Count	809	451	338	3	1,601
	% within the image of the EU	5.7	5.0	8.6	4.0	5.9
Nonaligned	Count	630	792	304	31	1,757
	% within the image of the EU	4.6	8.7	7.8	41.3	6.5
Total	Count	14,136	9,085	3,917	75	27,213
	% within the image of the EU	100	100	100	100	100

Above-average percentages in each row are shown in **bold**.

Continuing with the discussion above, in the center right, there are outstanding values for a positive image (20.5%) and negative image (22.5%), while in the center left, there are only positive visions (23.2%). Therefore, negativity is also found to be right-oriented in the central part of the political spectrum. A neutral image of the EU appears significantly in people with a centralist ideology (45.4%) and those without a defined position (8.7%), evidencing the correlation between ideology and the perception of the European project.

According to these data, citizens who position themselves at the center of the political scale tend to express neutral views regarding the EU, while the extremes see a greater number of negative answers, particularly on the right wing. The formulation of positive responses for the center-right and center-left cases is of statistical interest. Indeed, it is exactly these ideologies, through the large Christian Democrat and Social-Democratic political families, that are identified as the great drivers of EU integration (De-Wilde; Laupold; Schmidtke, 2016).

The statistical analysis demonstrates a certain positive correlation in the effect of locality size on the image of the EU. The value of the Spearman's correlation coefficient indicates a moderate association ($\rho=0.36$), with significance at the 0.01 level (two-way). We find slight greater negativity in the rural sphere, with positive views of the EU emerging in large cities (Table 7).

Table 7. Effect of locality size on the image of the EU (%)

		Positive	Neutral	Negative	Don't know	Total
Large cities	Count	5,811	3,384	1,456	35	10,686
	% within the image of the EU	41.1	37.3	37.2	46.7	39.3
Med-sized locality	Count	4,771	3,290	1,388	23	9,472
	% within the image of the EU	33.8	36.2	35.4	30.7	34.8
Rural areas	Count	3,554	2,411	1,073	17	7,055
	% within the image of the EU	25.1	26.5	27.4	22.6	25.9
Total	Count	14,136	9,085	3,917	75	27,213
	% within the image of the EU	100	100	100	100	100

Above-average percentages in each row are shown in **bold**.

Rural populations rank above average regarding a neutral (26.5%) or negative (27.4%) image, although the difference between these percentages is small. In contrast, a slightly neutral perception (36.2%) stands out for med-sized localities. The latter category is characterized

by wide variety in the count values, in contrast to the large cities. Indeed, the responses of positivity (41.1%) and “don’t know” (46.7%) stand out in such cities. The highest frequency of positive perceptions of the EU thus occurs in large urban centers, despite a significant fraction of noncommittal responses.

The finding of only a moderate correlation between locality size and the image of the EU suggests that this independent variable is influenced by other factors that transcend territory. The clash between cosmopolitan and nationalist values, typical of populism and Euroscepticism, is not found only for urban populations, although the data indicate that the population of large cities is more positive about the EU. In addition, they are less daring when it comes to expressing their opinion.

A negative image of the European project is only reported to a significant extent in rural areas, leading to the conclusion that it is the inhabitants of such areas who might develop a more skeptical prior assessment of EU funding programs such as the *NGEU*. The danger for the European project is a schism between countryside and city, resulting in mistrust in the rural territories that receive a large fraction of *European Commission* funds.

Eurobarometers 94 and 95 provide data on the citizens’ views of the effectiveness of the *NGEU* program. According to its sample across 25 countries, the majority of respondents believe that it will be useful, reaching the highest levels of support in Malta (85%), Ireland (75%), and Poland (73%). In contrast, in Finland (58%) and Latvia (51%), more people think that this plan will not be effective. The results suggest that it is not the degree of urbanity that influences positive opinions of the program but rather the Europeanist tradition of the country (Malta and Ireland) or its dependence on European funds (Poland), notwithstanding the fact that a part of society favors EU integration in states that are a priori more Eurosceptic.

4.3. Motivations and objectives of the *NextGenerationEU* campaign

The European officials consulted stated that the management of the post-Covid-19 era had been the focus of their work in 2021, from a communication point of view. The aim is to convey the idea of a common route out of the crisis through the *NGEU* program and the *Conference on the Future of the EU*, in which different stakeholders from civil society participate to define the EU project in the years to come. Allusions to this conference were particularly made by those working in the *European Parliament*. According to their statements, the aim is to communicate progress and ensure that citizens have the information they need to participate, since the success of this proposal will depend on their involvement and sharing their ideas about the EU.

Professionals from both institutions described disinformation as a common problem that threatens the pillars of European integration. The proliferation of inaccurate messages is also related to the fact that a multitude of complex political events are crowded under the term “Brussels.” In this regard, we find the problem of the remoteness of the EU as described in the theoretical framework, which is related to a tendency among journalists and citizens to view its institutions according to national parameters:

“Some permanent challenges for us are multilingualism and the feeling of distance between Brussels and the Member States, which sometimes affects how the decisions of the institutions are communicated, as if they were a separate entity and not the democratic result of a level of governance that we have given ourselves to solve common problems in Europe” (general manager, *European Parliament*).

However, there is strong optimism among the officials interviewed regarding the image that citizens have of the EU in the aftermath of the pandemic. European funds have opened a window of opportunity for the European project, in which “Brussels will pay for everything” (codified as a utilitarian vision of the EU). According to the opinions gathered, this kind of European “manna from heaven” will allow a connection to be forged with layers of society hitherto forgotten in communication plans, such as young people or the most impoverished population groups.

Asked about the variables that may determine Europeanism, the sampled professionals highlight the difficulty of reaching the most rural areas, without mentioning ideology. This leads to the implementation of communication campaigns aimed at the fishing and agricultural sectors. However, all the interviewees commented that the communicative presentation of *NGEU* is eminently digital in both the *European Commission* and *Parliament*, aiming for a young audience that is far from the usual in rural communities. In this sense, social media profiles have been opened on channels such as *Instagram*, *TikTok*, and *Twitch*.

The target audience of the campaign is mainly Generation Z (aged 16–24 years). This implies that the communication work of the *NGEU* program is proactive and subject to constant change. The role assigned to social media networks as a means to end communication problems is prominent, as reflected in the network of codes generated using *Atlas.ti* (Image 1). Two of the officials interviewed acknowledged that this focus on young people is owing to the fact that they constitu-

“The ideological orientation and, to a lesser extent, the territory of origin, influence the image of the European project”

te the future of the European project, hence this attempt to obtain their support. However, they also argue that the opinion of young people in the EU is not very different from that of other potential age groups.

The approach of European institutional communication to the *NGEU* plan seems to be based on the fact that abundant funding will help to close this gap. In any case, this problem is compounded by the fact that the European public space has a strong presence of populist actors, who take every opportunity to present the EU as a scapegoat. The criticisms of the officials are not only directed at populism but also at journalistic activity, in which they demand a greater consideration of European dynamics:

“The media should try to understand a little better how the EU works, what its competences are, etc. Misreporting also contributes to misinformation. In the long term, this has a negative impact on how the EU is perceived by citizens” (communications officer, *European Commission*).

Although several interviewees showed awareness of the remoteness problems of the European project, all of them considered that Covid-19 has boosted confidence in EU institutions, in line with the findings based on the *Eurobarometer* results. In addition, they argue that digital tools can favor direct communication with the EU, which could end the cold and bureaucratic image of the EU. A lower attribution of social transfer capacity to the conventional media is thus observed.

In the interviews, strong optimism regarding the *NGEU* program is perceived, which may have to do with the corporate and propaganda function of the institutions. Some interviewees underlined that Brexit made the reversible nature of the European project palpable, highlighting the benefits of integration. The economic and social escape from the pandemic is interpreted in the same sense, although those working at the *European Commission* emphasize that the last decade has seen a long process to improve its democratic transparency.

5. Conclusions and discussion

On the basis of a combined analysis of the different waves of the *Eurobarometer* and the interviews with officials from EU institutions, the aim of this study is to deepen understanding of the configuration of European public opinion in the face of the ambitious *NGEU* funding package. This initiative stems from the need to provide funds to EU Member States in the aftermath of the pandemic. The impact of Covid-19 on support for European integration (RQ1) is thus first analyzed. The *Eurobarometer* data reveal an increase in positive assessments according to the variables for the “image of the EU,” “trust in public institutions,” and “opinion on the future of the EU” during the course of the health emergency.

The increase in trust in the European project is greater than that experienced by the national public authorities. However, trust in the institutions and optimistic opinion about the future of the Union enjoy higher percentage increases than the “image of the EU,” which is classically considered to measure the degree of Europeanism. The longitudinal analysis reveals that the evaluation of the EU improved when vaccination was launched and the *NGEU* support program was defined (in the winter 2020–2021 and spring 2021 surveys), after deteriorating slightly at the start of the pandemic.

Regarding the elements that determine the image of the EU (RQ2), the findings reveal the existence of a strong correlation with ideological positioning, while the effect of locality size is moderate. Europeanism and Euroscepticism have a cultural dimension in which many factors are likely to be involved, but this second contribution reveals that citizens with more extreme ideological positions tend to value the EU in a negative way, something which is

“ EU officials channel their efforts to make the youngest aware of the benefits of *NGEU* ”

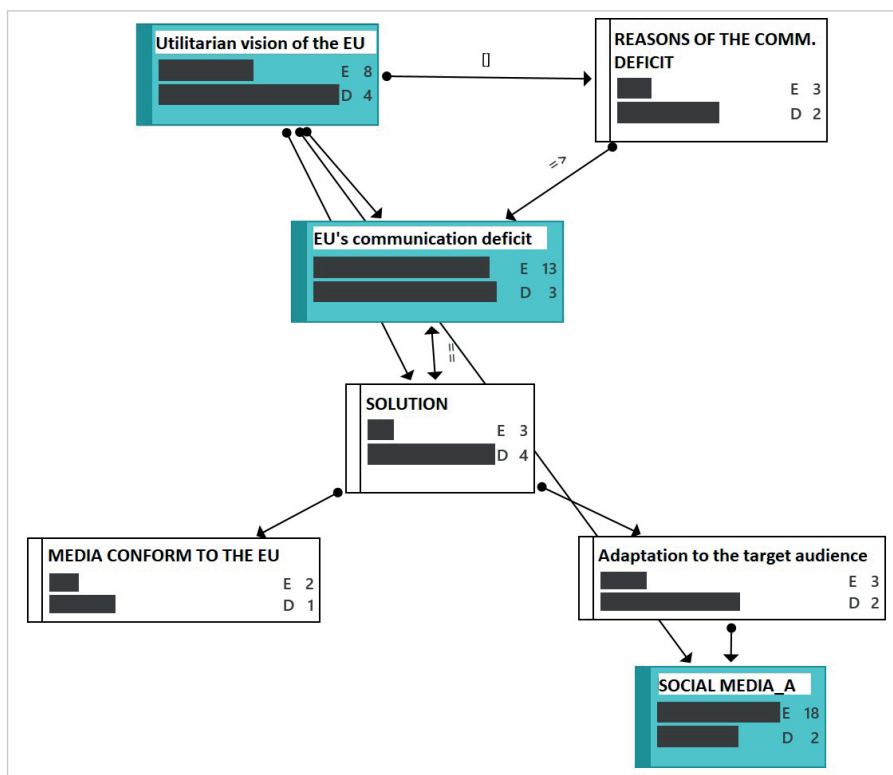


Image 1. Network of codes selected from the interviews.
*Codes in blue enjoy greater rooting and density in the sample.
Compiled with *Atlas.ti*

repeated on a smaller scale in rural areas. It is in large cities that a positive view of the EU predominates, which may be related to the elitist character of the European project (Sarikakis; Kolokytha, 2019).

As a third contribution, those responsible for communication of the *NGEU* program report how the management of the post-Covid-19 era is a focus of their work, seeing this moment as an historic opportunity to motivate support toward the EU (RQ3). This communication campaign is purely digital and highly youth-oriented, with allusions also to the rural population. There is an uncritical confidence that the remoteness problem of the European project is being resolved, thanks to direct dialog with the public, although the evaluation of the *NGEU* plan is disparate among countries.

The analogy that some of the interviewees make with Brexit shows how politicized issues can serve as division lines at the European level, reinforcing the role of the EU. This is linked to a growing politicization of the EU, that is, a higher level of polarization with regard to its policies (Hänska; Bauchowitz, 2019). Situations of dissent would promote European sentiment, as phenomena such as Brexit have highlighted the benefits of belonging to the EU.

The statistical analysis of the data is consistent with previous literature on Euroscepticism (Gattermann; De-Vreese, 2020), although the effect of locality size is less (moderate) compared with that of ideology in constructing the image of the EU (strong). Both variables show a positive correlation in this direction. The development of a rural–urban duality that threatens European integration is something that the professionals interviewed are concerned about, without mentioning ideology. The communicative actions of these officials are usually carried out on social media, which are precisely the space in which populism operates most (Nordbrandt, 2021).

One aspect to take into account is the criticism of the *Eurobarometer* by a sector of academia that considers it to be propagandistic (Höpner; Jurczyk, 2015). The use of inappropriate questions, the bias in the answers, or the elimination of questions that revealed a negative view of the EU are some of the problems that have been identified. The fact that the *European Commission* is responsible for planning the survey already presupposes a certain source bias. However, the *Eurobarometer* is the only longitudinal study that has systematically analyzed public opinion in Europe, which explains its interest. Note that the present research had to be restricted to a few of its multiple variables because it prioritized the development of a methodological triangulation.

Another limitation of this work is the reduced scope of the interviews, resulting from the high specificity of the object of study. Knowledge of the motivations and communication objectives of the *NGEU* campaign is obtained here through in-depth interviews with officials responsible for it, but it would also be interesting to probe the opinion of other stakeholders that make up the Brussels political bubble. A broader statistical analysis could also have been designed, subjecting the data to the control of various variables, but the type of information provided by the *Eurobarometer* invited a joint effort to define an approach to public opinion throughout the pandemic that would also convey the functioning of potential key factors. This corresponds to the objectives of this research.

In conclusion, European public opinion is becoming more favorable in relation to the EU after the pandemic, just as *NGEU* funds are starting to work. Covid-19 can be identified as another example of politicization of the European project with positive consequences for its legitimacy, an increasingly recurrent finding in the literature. All the analyzed variables moved to some degree toward Europeanist positions between 2019 and 2021, although support for the European project is by no means homogeneous. Ideological positioning, in addition to the territorial dimension, proves to function as an explanatory variable of Euroscepticism. Nationalist values, more typical of rural communities, collide here with the multiculturalism attributed to the EU, in a dialog that marks studies on populism today.

The challenge for the European project is to ensure that this high level of support is not deflated by a failure to meet the resulting expectations. It is true that the politicization of the EU is a well-established feature, but it also seems that ignorance of the operating processes of European institutions remains common. This undermines the classic principles of democracy, which the Union may fail to respect, which merits consideration by EU authorities that, as mentioned above, claim to be working toward greater transparency. Communication actions related to the *NGEU* are rather geared toward young people, to derive value from a context that is favorable for the EU. The pandemic constitutes a turning point in the degree of support for the European project that could improve the EU's progress if critical knowledge is deepened, a possibility that should be confirmed in future research.

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