The Postmodernity of European Integration: Affirming EU Core Values, Identities and Principles in the Mass Media

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Abstract: The unparalleled evolution of the European political model was thoroughly evoked by a seminal literature. This paper contemplates on the postmodernity challenges of European integration in the aftermath of the Treaty of Lisbon having in focus the reflections of the European Union (EU) core values, identity(ies) and principles in the mass media. Methodologically, the study was designed to cover (1) the selection of international online news sources spanning an admissible period, (2) identifying and selecting articles, (3) manual coding of articles, (4) analysis and interpretation of results. The main objective of this study is to render a fair analysis of the imagological profile that can be discovered in media depictions on EU core values, identities and democratic principles by taking into account the frequency in media coverage and the analysis of main themes associated to the selected articles. The analysis thus concentrates on identifying journalistic trends in the coverage of the European integration process, the challenges of the European project, globalization and national/local identities, the relations among the EU and its Member States. The paper concludes on the specificities in media projections and coverage of the fundamental values and objectives of EU construction, bringing into discussion media reflections of EU competences, usage of democratic principles and democratization in terms of institutional architecture and decision-making process.

Keywords: *European Union; postmodernity; identity; fundamental values; democratic principles.*

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1. Background and literature review

The unparalleled evolution of the European political model was thoroughly evoked by a seminal literature. The Treaty of Lisbon has been widely viewed as recovering the reform process and “recuperating” the major innovations of the Constitutional Treaty (Luzarraga & Llorente, 2011, p. 21). The Lisbon Treaty thus makes a clear statement on EU’s objectives and fundamental values in Article 2 TEU, placing “democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights” at the core of this construction. The revised treaties specifically state the structure of the architecture of competences and rather “constitutionally” regulate the usage of powers aimed at reaching the assumed objectives (Larik, 2014: pp. 935-962). The architecture of minority rights in the interpretation of the Lisbon Treaty (Barten, 2015: pp. 74-94) and the worldwide promotion of democratic principles and human rights (Crawford, 2008: pp. 172-191) were issues which received major attention from international organizations, NGOs and civil society, political parties, think tanks, citizens and the entrepreneurial environment. Recently, a very strong strand of research and consideration was directed towards new genres of civil rights such as “privacy and data protection” which as EU values were categorized as still meaningful to the “information society” (Hijmans, 2016: pp. 17-75).

Grounding their discourse on the EU as a “normative power” argument (Pardo, 2007: p. 142), researchers have questioned themselves over the influence placed by the EU ensemble of values, identity(ies) and principles on the Union’s domestic policies, but also on its external affairs (Goncalves & Gameiro, 2014: pp. 21-33). As such, a series of articles placed their interest on the intertwined facets of EU values and principles and EU foreign relations, subject to interpretation within the EU neighborhood policy (Bogutcaia, Bosse, & Schmidt-Felzmann, 2006: pp. 117-137), Eastern Partnership (Bosse, 2009: pp. 215-227) and also strategic visions for proximate and worldwide geopolitics (Duke, 2011: pp. 83-99). EU fundamental values were at the core of enlargement criteria (Sjursen, 2012: pp. 502-521), while the EU aims regarding the use of a wide array of instruments and mechanisms to promote human rights, peace, stability and security abroad and ensure its domestic security constituted a post-Lisbon research pattern (Zwolski, 2012: pp. 988-1005; Nakanishi, 2018; Panchuk & Bossuyt, 2014: pp. 1341-1348). Reasoning from this, researchers grasped the essence of the interdependence between EU law, fundamental values, ethics and policy-making (Tallacchini, 2009). Consequently, enlargement towards the East might be perceived and studied from the magnifying glass of EU’s

“civilizational” activity, bringing forward cultural and religious factors (McMahon, 2017: pp. 307-324).

It has been shown that international organizations’ governance impulses are determined by institutional layouts and power structures (Borrás & Radaelli, 2011: pp. 463-484). EU’s will to implement the strategic development and ongoing transformation is a consequence of its unique institutional formula of competences awarding, sharing and coordinating. Recent studies identified and analyzed media reflections of such a governance architecture of complex institutional matrix and shifting attributes in policy-making, establishing a complex institutional profile of supranational democratic structures (Georgescu, Olimid, Olimid, Georgescu & Ghergh, 2017: pp. 109-122).

At the same time, for the Schengen area the role of “free movement [...] as core value” on “framing borders and borderlands” was studied and as such one proclaimed the importance of framing in discursive acts aimed at establishing major European policies (Coman, 2017). Researchers also embarked on studying the prescriptions of the European social model according to the Treaty of Lisbon, igniting analyses on the inception of the Charter for Fundamental Rights (Bercusson, 2009: pp. 87-105), the interdependence between the European governance and public healthcare policies in the current migration crisis nexus (Olimid, 2017a: pp. 496-510; Olimid, 2017b) and the manner in which this interdependence is framed and communicated by media services to the consuming public (Georgescu, 2017: pp. 221-233).

Acknowledging the uncertainty and uncontrollable dynamics of the current environment, researchers argued that the guarantee of EU fundamental organizing values in the context of forging and accepting new times can be managed with the appropriate optics by adequately reforming procedures and disposing of institutions with appropriate competences, recognizing the need of new strategies and strategic partners (Schinas, 2012: pp. 267–275).

2. Problem statement

This paper contemplates on the postmodernity challenges of European integration in the aftermath of the Treaty of Lisbon having in focus the reflections of the European Union (EU) core values, identities and principles in the mass media. EU fundamental values and objectives as expressed in Article 2 TEU have been perceived as making a clear statement over the “European project” (Luzarraga & Llorente, 2011, p. 65). Lisbon

Treaty has been seen as advancing and clarifying the institutional transfer and distribution of competences. The paper analyses the specificities in media projections and coverage of the values and objectives of EU construction, bringing into discussion media reflections of EU competences, usage of democratic principles and democratization in terms of institutional architecture and decision-making process.

3. Launching the research questions

Considering the objectives and purpose of this study, methodologically the analytical research was conducted under the guidance of the following research questions: RQ1. How are EU values covered in international/European independent media? RQ2. What was the frequency of EU values and democratic principles-related articles in the selected online news sources? RQ3. What were the major themes/major issues covered by the media as regards EU values, identities and democratic principles? RQ4. In the aftermath of the Lisbon Treaty how was governmental action in the field of Member States/third countries reported by the media? RQ5. Which were the narratives of EU action associated to EU values, identities and democratic principles or as regards some issues raised by them?

4. Purpose of the study

The main objective of this study is to render a fair analysis of the imagological profile that can be discovered in media depictions on EU fundamental values, identities and democratic principles by taking into account the frequency in media coverage while analysing main themes associated to the selected articles. The analysis thus concentrated on identifying journalistic trends in the coverage of the European integration process, the challenges of the European project, globalization and national/local identities, the relations among the EU and its Member States.

5. Methodological display of the research

Methodologically, the study was designed to cover (1) the selection of international online news sources spanning a sufficient period for raising conclusions, (2) identifying and selecting articles, (3) manual coding of articles, (4) analysis and interpretation of results. The study included three international online news sources: *EurActive.com* (www.euractiv.com), *New Europe* (www.neweurope.eu) and *POLITICO* (www.politico.eu) which were exposed to a monitoring activity covering the period Jan 1, 2010- Dec 31, 2017. The period was selected having as main judgements to span over the

sign and entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty and the dynamics in the evolution of the regional and international security climate, the ever increasing role of Justice and Home Affairs field, the drift of the rule of law in Central and Eastern Europe, enlargement challenges and the current refugees crisis. Articles included in the research were identified using a Boolean search for keywords in the international online news sources archives: “EU fundamental values” OR “EU core values” AND “EU democratic principles”. The search operated resulted in a number of articles which was narrowed after the removal of duplicate copies, irrelevant articles and press releases etc. The selected articles were scanned for relevance, afterwards were categorised for frequency and associated theme(s). Manual coding of articles also took into account the journalistic categories and filters operating on the online news sources archives.

6. Findings

6.1. *Distribution of selected articles*

The distribution of selected articles during the monitoring period Jan 01, 2010 – Dec 31, 2017 suggested a visible interest in the activation, guarantee and use of Article 2 TEU fundamental values and democratic objectives settled at EU’s core. The online search for the above mentioned period resulted in 1286 entries. Paradoxically, the lowest values appeared in 2010, while the highest scores were registered in 2017, and even earlier in 2013-2014 (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Distribution of selected articles during the period Jan 01, 2010 – Dec 31, 2017

The distribution of articles per online news source showed a rather constant, robust and astute interest in covering the use, claim and guarantee of EU fundamental values and democratic principles, with *New Europe*

covering 41% of the total share of articles, *POLITICO* issuing 30% and *EurActiv.com* 29% (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Distribution of selected articles per news source during the selected period

6.2. Thematic analysis – article themes and trends in journalistic portrayal

The following section is dedicated to presenting the results of thematic analysis undergone with the purpose of identifying the article themes and discussing the major trends in journalistic coverage.

6.2.1. 2010 in the news – a strong focus on religion-based discrimination and human rights matters

In 2010 the focus of journalists flattened over the question of human rights as it appeared correlated to religious freedom, religious practices, freedom of worship and the cultural differences at EU's close proximity (*New Europe*, 15 Nov 2010), the security of borders (*New Europe*, 14 Nov 2010), the EU China Summit (*New Europe*, 10 Oct 2010), Turkey's constitutional amendments aimed at acquiring EU membership (*New Europe*, 3 Oct 2010), financial system issues (*New Europe*, 12 Sep 2010), the 60th celebration of European Convention of Human Rights and EU's accession to it (*New Europe*, 19 Aug 2010). The same period, *EurActiv.com* covered discrimination against Roma, the European Citizens' Initiative and the increase in citizens' consultations, EU foreign policy doctrine, strategic planning and "soft power" actions, fighting internet piracy and the shift to new challenges on EU public agenda. In the meantime, the journalists from *POLITICO* have focused on EU's actions within the Millennium Development Goals, European Commissioner commitment to the fight against discrimination of Roma and the limitation of free movement of

people, making appeal to the rule of law in the partnership with third parties and membership-seeking countries, reform of core EU CAP, African continent issues regarding security and European immigration concerns in the context of the EU Africa Summit and the Eurozone crisis.

6.2.2. 2011 in the news – a focus on enlargement

In 2011 the journalists from *EurActive.com* continued to focus on the economy and the Eurozone crisis, Brexit, EU funds, enlargement with a focus on rule of law accession criteria, increased Eastern and Southern cooperation on the European Neighbourhood Policy, institutionally reforming the European Parliament, maintaining the French-German EU core motive, EU identity, sustainable development and EU environment policies, labour market, elections, securing third countries, freedom of movement, justice and fundamental rights with regard to personal data protection.

The archives from *New Europe* feature for 2011 the focus on EU values-based enlargement towards the East, common values to increase institutionalized security policies, solidarity in asylum policies, common policies for preventing extremism and terrorism, reforming the distribution of EU core democratic values through film production and sports, EU affairs on a more inclusive labour market, human rights issues regarding death penalty in third countries, the Eastern Partnership Summit, Syrian human rights issues, promoting human rights through arts and culture.

The journalists from *POLITICO* expressed their concerns related to the transgression against EU democratic values and authoritarianism in reference to the European close proximity, while also insisting mainly on EP agenda on Member States sanctions regarding breaches to the rule of law, children rights and struggle against abuse, restructuring the EU institutional architecture, common energy policy, migration and common border policies, increasing the fight against racism and discrimination and inclusion-based policies, enlargement, foreign policy, bringing democratization in the limelight of enlargement, consumers policy, the European Charter of Fundamental Rights, EU Affairs on food security and IT&C security, and the financial crisis challenges for Europe.

6.2.3. 2012 in the news – concerns over national authoritarian sideslips and policies in the vicinity

EU's foreign relations with the large actors in its close vicinity and signs of foreign policy drift in EU's close proximity were few of the quests on which the journalists from *EurActive.com* embarked themselves, while

covering the development of domestic policy-making in certain Member States discrediting their plight to the rule of law since acquiring EU membership. Other issues such as health-related common policy on domestic violence, common digital policy on copyright law, financial security and representative democracy, entrepreneurial culture in Europe, inserting democratic and human rights values in EU-UN partnership, budgetary policy, EU presidency outlook, opposition against new regulations on the border-free Schengen area, use of European Citizens' Initiative, incessant effects of the Eurozone crisis surpassing the core EU issues, coordinating culture to EU policy-making, discrimination, authoritarian concerns in domestic elections, new opportunities for social rights regulations and climate change policies. *New Europe* suggests the same concern on third countries undertaking the rule of law and fundamental rights while covering European citizens' representatives' institutional impulses in the field of justice and human rights. Moreover, it showed interest in data protection, the impact of party politics and elections within the EU but also on the possibility of extending the number of Association Agreements towards Europe's East, European Commissioners' selection, humanitarian aid and resilience to crisis support abroad, remarks and impulses on EU development triggered by the award of the Nobel peace prize, acknowledgement of EC CVM reports, online content distribution regulation, EP funding regulation for political parties and other types of organizations, EU-US market regulations and international trade. Meanwhile, *POLITICO* also featured European Commission nomination, the consequences brought by the award to EU of Nobel Peace Prize and the need to redress the EU to cope with the contemporary summons, EU's relations with Eastern countries in the prospect of enlargement endangered by the stifling of human rights, austerity measures, energy policy, concerns over the respect of democratic procedures at EU level and additional concerns in reference to certain governments authoritarian drives some of them ending in the chief of state impeachment procedures and MEPs commitment to address the funding of extremist parties, the deep relation between counter-terrorism and human rights, cohesion policy, activation of anti-monopoly competition policies.

6.2.4. 2013 in the news – breaches of the rule of law in Central Europe in the limelight

EurActiv.com featured articles on EU's strong national actors, environmental issues in the limelight of social media, Brexit vs. the "ever closer union" collocation, EU foreign policy, Central Europe's democracy

rift and the emerging nationalist extremist parties, enlargement, development policy, elections at the Holy See, but also national elections, EU's reaction at certain state's refusal to receive Syrian refugees, EC prospects of European values attention for the future, federalist drives across the EU and anti-government protests in third countries.

Likewise, *POLITICO* covered MEP's interest in cutting funds for extreme-right political parties, in line with MEP's negative report on fundamental rights development in Central Europe, and also at EU's external frontiers. Data protection, shadowing enlargement prospects, spurs of economic recovery from the international financial actors, concerns on third parties gains from the Syrian situation. Moreover, articles expressed deeper concerns on the exercise of fundamental rights and the rule of law in Central Europe, but also in Candidate Countries.

The end of 2013 witnessed the intense interest of *New Europe* as regards foreign affairs, on Ukraine's declination of the EU Association Agreement of free trade and the violence in Northern Africa, while home affairs were infused with EU citizenship depression triggered by "EU's identity and legitimacy" slump, EU support to Eastern Partnership countries committed to democratization and human rights and preparation for 2014 European elections.

6.2.5. 2014 in the news – growing anxiety on democratic values force within and outside EU

In 2014 opinion articles in *EurActive.com* expressed concerns on the prospects of Turkey's EU accession and interest in guiding EU foreign relations on human rights bond. Also, the year of European Council presidential mandate change also witnessed media interest in the personal data protection regulations as "fundamental right", EP reaction to national counter-terrorist proposals of monitoring flight passenger information, while expressing concerns over Central Europe's immersion into nationalist drives. *EurActiv.com* also featured articles on minorities' inclusion prospects in the new mandate of the EU legislative and executive, opinions on banning hate speech, the ascension of extreme Eurosceptic parties across Europe and uneasiness to the binding force of founding treaties with reference to EU democratic values. The Brexit issue was also covered on both sides of Euro-optimism and Euroscepticism. European elections campaign were also featured in interviews, news and opinion formats with the situation of Ukraine, foreign policy and energy interests at the core. EU conditioning of its enlargement on grounds of democratization, fundamental rights and rule of law was also covered in the context of Turkey's elections. Human rights

were thus shown to backbone the election of the new European Commission (*EurActiv.com*, Oct. 7, 2014), but also EU's trade relations with third parties (*EurActiv.com*, Mar 26, 2014) or EU aid within the development policy (*EurActiv.com*, Apr 1, 2014). In light of the Ukrainian crisis journalists covered EU-NATO cooperation and the ban of arms exports, while at home the European Commission made steps towards what it outlined as "systemic threats to the rule of law" (*EurActiv.com*, Mar 12, 2014). Sustainable development and climate change, energy, transparency of decision-making process, personal data protection and healthcare-related situations were also shown.

New Europe also inquired on the EU common values (still) shared within but uploaded abroad (*New Europe*, Nov 16, 2014), on the new mandate of the European Commission and its pledge to EU values as expressed in the founding Treaties (*New Europe*, Dec 10, 2014), reinforcing EU competences in the field of Justice and Home Affairs (*New Europe*, Dec 1, 2014), discussions on Member States solidarity in respect to migration policies (*New Europe*, Nov 26, 2014, *New Europe*, Nov 19, 2014), data protection as a civil right (*New Europe*, Nov 18, 2014) and the insertion of an anti-discrimination clause at the Olympics (*New Europe*, Sep 25, 2014). Health issues and humanitarian aid, emissions scheme and the economic recession were also present.

POLITICO also showed the conditioning of the new European Commission nomination on the respect for EU fundamental values (*POLITICO*, Oct 23, 2014), the urge for personal data protection online (*POLITICO*, Nov 12, 2014), the correlation between citizenship and migration crisis solutions (*POLITICO*, Jul 7, 2017), European Commission interest in identifying and redressing rule of law breaches throughout the EU (*POLITICO*, Mar 12, 2014), EU's response to the limitation or suspension of (social) media freedom abroad (*POLITICO*, Mar 21, 2014). *POLITICO* also aligned to the afore-mentioned issues by providing content on elections, health care, enlargement, EU-Africa relations, and social rights.

6.2.6. 2015 in the news – prospects for the future of the EU

EU fundamental values were again in the front of journalists' interest throughout 2015. *Brexit* was configured as a major theme for all three publications under scrutiny linking EU fundamental values to EU legislation, while other debate-triggering themes among Member States or different political factions from previous years persisted: regulating passenger data, setting prior requirements of human rights before granting aid to third countries, opportunities set by migration crisis to accession of candidate

countries in the region. *EurActiv.com* articles presented Brexit referendum preoccupations, asylum and refugees, journalists and media freedom, enlargement and the Eastern Partnership. References to the creation of an activation mechanism for Article 7 TEU were made repeatedly in relation to press freedom and other democratic values, death penalty and migrants (*EurActiv.com*, Sep 29, 2015, *EurActiv.com*, May 20, 2015). The refugee crisis occupied major attention for Justice and Home Affairs coverage in the media. Once more democracy, fundamental rights and the environment were interlinked to energy policy (*EurActiv.com*, Aug 6, 2015). Articles also covered Ombudsman concerns on EU Cohesion policy clash over fundamental rights. EU Affairs were tackled by *New Europe* journalists with a view to the need to address EU's democratic deficit through a structural representation-ensuring reform (*New Europe*, Dec 21, 2015), Brexit, security and terrorist attacks across EU. *POLITICO* discussed EU-Turkey relations in regard to resettling refugees' crisis and prospects of enlargement and also wondered on the challenges and perils for free media.

6.2.7. 2016 in the news – European security, populism, migration

2016 was all about security measures, counter-terrorism, migration crisis, identifying defense risks in the context of terrorist attacks, racism and increased populism. In relation to these, *EurActiv.com* reflected uncertainties that security measures could leave fundamental freedoms unaltered (*EurActiv.com*, Dec 1, 2016). Security issues, the challenges of decision-making, Brexit and the need for core social structural reforms above trade and economic interests were in the publication attention in 2016. The media expressed concerns on human rights deterioration and EU's global commitment to safeguard fundamental freedoms (*EurActiv.com*, Apr 11, 2016). *New Europe* journalists also showed concerns on Europe's capacity to cope to extremism fueling and migration crisis (*New Europe*, Dec 19, 2016). All three news sources covered with vivid interest the "Polish constitutional crisis", the rise in populism, international trade relations, Britain's referendum preparation, campaign and inception of new projections for the future EU.

6.2.8. 2017 in the news – the year of major (s)elections

In 2017 *EurActiv.com* focused on the environment-rule of law connection, the increasing challenges posed by far-right movements and erosion of fundamental rights and rule of law across the EU, at the same time with Catalonia's independence drives and the separation referendum and French elections. The press outlined Brexit negotiations, the prospects

and actual activation of Article 7 TEU against a serious breach to the rule of law in reference to Hungary and Poland (*New Europe*, Dec 20, 2017) and watched closely the European Commission President avenues of strategic future (even multispeed) development and/or reform for the EU (*POLITICO*, Sep 13, 2017).

7. Conclusions

To sum up, the paper has identified the specificities in media projections and coverage of the values and objectives of EU construction, bringing into discussion media reflections of EU competences in the focus of the day-to-day affairs of policy-making and the relations with Member States. Also, the research scrutinised the manner in which democratic principles and values may still imprint a pattern for EU's foreign relations and its enlargement policies and visions. The paper has been keen to understand the manner in which the media perceived and reflected the usage of democratic principles and democratization in terms of institutional architecture and decision-making process in an international climate characterised by extreme and rarely predictable dynamics. The media have portrayed EU's values and objectives as having been designed and perceived to ensure stability, prosperity and peace in a world of increased turmoil and unrest. Some reflections from the media, however, indicate anxiety related to their creators' commitment and will to maintain EU's democratic identity and functioning at supranational level and in relation to its Member States, Candidate Countries and other third parties seeking membership, trade relations or financial aid from this genuinely prototypal entity.

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