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Media attitudes towards the EU:
an Analysis of Italian Newspapers
during the Covid-19 crisis

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Dedicated to my beloved mother, father and sister.

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic represented an unprecedented crisis for the European Union, with Italy being the hardest-hit European country. This situation sparked discussions about the EU's response to Italy's requests for assistance. During crises, the media, particularly newspapers, play a crucial role in guiding citizens through uncertain times. This thesis examines how major Italian newspapers portrayed the EU in their articles and identifies the attitudes reflected during this period of crisis. Through qualitative content analysis of 113 articles from "La Repubblica," "La Stampa," "Il Sole 24 Ore," and "Corriere della Sera," the study reveals a nuanced portrayal of the EU, highlighting both specific support for EU policies and forms of Euro-alternativism. This research contributes to understanding the media's attitudes towards the EU in Italy, offering insights into the relationship between national media and European institutions during times of crisis and addressing a gap in the literature of Euroscepticism/EU attitudes in Italy.

Pandemia COVID-19 stanowiła bezprecedensowy wydarzeniem dla Unii Europejskiej, a Włochy były najbardziej dotkniętym tym kryzysem krajem europejskim. Pandemia wywołała dyskusje na temat reakcji UE na prośby Włoch o pomoc. Podczas kryzysów media, w szczególności gazety, odgrywają kluczową rolę w prowadzeniu obywateli przez niepewne czasy. Niniejsza rozprawa bada, w jaki sposób główne włoskie gazety przedstawiały UE w swoich artykułach i identyfikuje postawy wobec UE w okresie kryzysu. Poprzez jakościową analizę treści 113 artykułów z „La Repubblica”, „La Stampa”, „Il Sole 24 Ore” i „Corriere della Sera”, badanie przedstawia zniuansowany obraz UE, podkreślając zarówno konkretne poparcie dla polityki UE, jak i formy euro-alternatywizmu. Badanie to przyczynia się do zrozumienia postaw mediów wobec UE we Włoszech, oferując wgląd w relacje między mediami krajowymi a instytucjami europejskimi w czasach kryzysu i wypełniając lukę w literaturze dotyczącej eurosceptycyzmu i postaw wobec UE we Włoszech.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has unleashed a series of crises across European nations, beginning with a healthcare emergency marked by challenges in managing healthcare infrastructure, followed by an economic downturn characterized by production slowdowns across nearly all sectors, leading to increased job losses and unemployment due to lockdown measures (van Der Wielen & Barrios, 2021). Consequently, questions have arisen regarding the role of the European Union in addressing these crises and the potential increase in distrust towards European institutions, stemming from perceptions of delayed and inadequate initial responses during the pandemic's onset (Dandolov, 2021). Italy, known for its significant history of Euroscepticism (Pasquinucci, 2016), emerged as one of the pandemic's hardest-hit countries, experiencing profound effects both in terms of mortality rates and economic repercussions. (ISTAT, 2022). Since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, various European initiatives have been launched to assist Italy. These include the transfer of Italian patients affected by the virus to German hospitals, the European Commission granting flexibility on budgetary rules, the SURE plan aimed at mitigating unemployment risks, and the European Central Bank agreeing to temporarily increase purchases of Italian bonds (Poli, 2020). However, EU cooperation came late, and the unilateral closure of borders with Italy and limited political and economic cooperation was exacerbated by comments from the ECB president on the Italian financial situation, further fueling a sense of abandonment by European institutions in Italy (Poli, 2020) (European Central Bank, 2020). It's worth mentioning that 55% of Italians viewed the EU's assistance to Italy during the COVID-19 crisis as insufficient, and 49% felt that Italy was being treated unjustly by the EU and fellow member states, particularly regarding budgetary policies (Fontana, 2020). A definitive turnaround in the response of European institutions to the crisis was the introduction of the Recovery and Resilience Facility, simply called the Recovery Fund in Italy. This agreement, which is part of the Next Generation EU initiative, marked an unprecedented action by the EU (European Commission, n.d.).

Meanwhile, as early as February 2020, both traditional and digital media started to extensively report on the evolution of the healthcare crisis and on the political measures enacted to mitigate its effects, with a significant impact on citizens (Ferraresi, 2020).

Indeed, especially during times of crisis, when individuals seek guidance on significant issues they're uncertain about, they turn to the media to understand social realities. The media plays a crucial role

in providing this orientation (Weaver, 1980), and has the capacity to reach individuals at the grassroots level, effectively disseminating important information on various subjects, particularly those outside individuals' direct experiences (Medina et al., 2021). In Italy, this reliance on the media was pronounced, with a significant portion of the population seeking information through television broadcasts, newspapers, and radio channels during the pandemic (CENSIS, 2021).

Existing literature has explored how the national media of EU member states have portrayed the European Union during times of crisis (Bijmans, 2017, 2021), as well as how newspapers have covered the EU during the pandemic in Turkey (Üstün, 2022) and in the UK (Copeland & Maccaferri, 2023). However, there appears to be a lack of research contributions on media reporting on the European Union in Italy, both in general and within the context of COVID-19 in Italy. This study therefore aims to fill this gap by shedding light on the attitudes of newspapers, which serve as a vital source of information for citizens, regarding European institutions during this unprecedented crisis period in Italy.

Against this backdrop, this research aims to investigate prevalent attitudes during this period in Italy, with a specific focus on media coverage of the European Union's actions. The central questions guiding this study are as follows: RQ1. "How did Italian media report on the European Union during the COVID-19 pandemic?"; RQ2. "What kind of attitudes do the Italian media show towards the European Union during COVID-19?".

The analysis conducted in this thesis employs a qualitative content analysis methodology to examine Italian newspapers' attitudes towards the European Union during the COVID-19 crisis. This method involves the subjective interpretation of textual data through a systematic process of coding and identification of themes or patterns (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Thus, the study aims to outline the patterns, topics and themes of Italian newspapers that reflect their attitudes towards the EU during this period.

The dataset comprises 113 articles from four major Italian newspapers: "*La Repubblica*", "*Corriere della Sera*", "*La Stampa*" and "*Il Sole 24 Ore*". The articles were selected according to specific keywords related to the EU and COVID-19, and cover the period from 9 March 2020 to 31 December 2022. Subsequently, they were classified into categories - positive, negative, mixed or factual - based on their representation of the EU's crisis management during the pandemic.

The theoretical framework is mainly based on the work of Copeland and Maccaferri (2023), who examined the interaction between the COVID-19 pandemic and Eurosceptic discourse in the UK. This framework was adapted to the Italian context, focusing on the representation of the EU in the

Italian media. The analysis classified articles according to the sentiments conveyed: positive (praising the EU's handling of the crisis), negative (criticizing the EU), mixed (showing both praise and concern) and factual (simply reporting news without opinion). Furthermore, the second part of the analysis explores the specific types of attitudes found, including the potential presence of Euro-alternativist positions, which involve criticism of EU policies or institutional design while fundamentally supporting European integration. This comprehensive approach aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the Italian media's portrayal of the EU during the COVID-19 crisis.

The thesis is structured as follows: after the introduction, we move to the second chapter that provides a literature review, offering an overview of existing research on Euroscepticism, media framing and public attitudes towards the EU, especially during crises, and identifies the gaps that this research aims to fill. Thereafter, the third chapter presents the theoretical framework, the methodology used and the data collection, discussing the rationale for the chosen methods and addressing potential limitations. The fourth chapter illustrates the results of the first segment of the analysis, reporting on the Italian media's portrayal of the EU during the COVID-19 pandemic. Following this, the fifth chapter, dedicated to discussion, offers an in-depth analysis of the selected articles' attitudes towards the EU, linking them to the existing theoretical framework and literature. Finally, the last chapter offers a summary the main findings, discussion about their wider significance and suggested directions for future research. Reflections on the limitations of the study and the potential impact of its findings on policy and practice are also discussed in the last part of the thesis.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

As stated earlier in the introduction, the objective of this study is to analyze the portrayal of the EU by Italian newspapers amidst the COVID-19 crisis and to observe their specific attitudes. It is therefore necessary, to clarify the scope of this thesis, to present an examination of euroscepticism and EU attitudes in the scholarly literature in order to shed light on the concept and its determinants. The first section attempts to clarify the term euroscepticism, illustrating the discussions about it, and to explain its evolution in the literature. The second section delves more into detail and illustrates the state of the art regarding the analysis of attitudes towards the European Union during times of crisis. This section is also crucial because it falls within the specific context of analysis of this thesis, namely the pandemic crisis. The third section provides even more detail about the context of this thesis and illustrates through the academic work previously conducted, the evolution of Euroscepticism and opinions on the European Union in Italy among parties and citizens. The final section focuses on the core of the research scope, summarizing the key analyses previously conducted in the literature regarding media and public attitudes towards the European Union.

2.1 From Euroscepticism to attitudes towards the European Union

The concept of euroscepticism, as political scientists point out, originated in the 1980s in the UK when Margaret Thatcher opposed the entry into the EEC (Spering, 2004). Over the years, this phenomenon has expanded across various European states, manifesting itself in different forms, causes, and types of opposition. Most scholarly works have become popular after the Maastricht treaty, specifically focusing on political parties (Di Mauro & Memoli, 2016). The Maastricht treaty represents the watershed in Euroscepticism studies because it represents the change in citizens' opinion from a "permissive consensus", which implied a passive approval of the European integration process by national elites (Di Mauro & Memoli, 2016) towards a "constraining dissensus", after the signing of the treaty in which a more critical approach towards the European Union began to be observed once European policies started to have an impact on citizens' lives (Hooghe & Marks, 2009; Di Mauro & Memoli, 2016). Today, the term euroscepticism is very generally used by scholars to describe opposition to the EU integration process (Vasilopoulou, 2017). This term, however, as Leruth, Startin and Usherwood (2017) point out, is recognized as too generic and vague, risking explaining nothing about the reasons for opposition to the EU, its forms or the specific object to which it applies (Leruth et. al., 2017). The first attempt to tighten the concept is provided by Taggart &

Szczerbiak (2002) who distinguished between Hard Euroscepticism and Soft Euroscepticism. Hard Euroscepticism is characterized by principled opposition towards the EU and European integration, which results in a demand by the party for exit from the EU. Conversely, Soft Eurosceptical parties do not fundamentally oppose the EU but may have reservations about specific policy areas, emphasizing national interests against EU directives. Building on these concepts, other scholars have contributed to narrowing the definition of Euroscepticism, specifically criticizing the characterization of Soft Euroscepticism. Kopecký & Mudde (2002) for instance described the definition of Soft Euroscepticism as too broad and generic. Consequently, they proposed, in their study on the positions of parties in Central and Eastern Europe, to adapt a new theoretical approach based on the difference between 'specific' and 'diffuse' support for European integration (Kopecký & Mudde, 2002). For 'specific' support (EU optimists and EU pessimists), parties endorse European integration as it is developing institutionally and politically. In contrast, 'diffuse' support (Europhiles and Europhobes) refers to support for the general ideas of European integration underlying the EU (Kopecky & Mudde, 2002). From these distinctions, the scholars identify euroenthusiasts, eurosceptics, europragmatists, and eurorejects. Euroenthusiasts support European integration, viewing the EU as the institutionalization of these ideas, while eurorejects oppose both integration and the EU. Eurosceptics believe in the ideas of European integration but are pessimistic about how the EU reflects these ideas in its current institutional setup. Finally, 'Europragmatists' do not fully endorse European integration but support the EU for pragmatic reasons, even if they don't entirely agree with its core concepts. Conti (2003) refers to Kopecky and Mudde's typology but focuses on distinguishing attitudes towards European integration based on an ideological (principled) or pragmatic (contingent) approach. He identifies two types of euroscepticism: Hard Euroscepticism and Identity Europeanism. Hard Euroscepticism, opposing integration, aims for the EU's exit or a radical change in its trajectory. Identity Europeanism fully supports integration and advocates for a supranational role for the EU. Conti (2003) also identifies Soft Euroscepticism and Functional Europeanism, based on a more pragmatic approach. Soft Euroscepticism involves concerns and criticisms of specific European policies, often accompanied by constructive reform proposals. Functional Euroscepticism supports integration only if it aligns with national interests, using it as a means to achieve broader goals (economic stability, modernization, etc.). In her 2011 study, Vasilopoulou expanded the discussion on defining Euroscepticism by introducing specific indicators for classifying party positions. She identified four key aspects related to European integration and the EU: a shared cultural definition of Europe, the principle of cooperation at a European multilateral level, EU policy practice, and the aspiration to create a future European polity (Vasilopoulou, 2011). Using these indicators, Vasilopoulou classified radical right parties into three patterns of Euroscepticism: rejecting,

conditional, and compromising. Condruz-Băcescu's work (2014) extensively categorised the manifestations of Euroscepticism investigated in scholarly literature, delineating them based on various dimensions of the European Union, including its economic, sovereignty, democratic, and political aspects..

However, it should be noted that, first of all, most of the studies that have been conducted on this subject have parties as their object of analysis. Many studies as we have seen have explored various forms of Euroscepticism, particularly concerning the Eurosceptic positions of parties (Vasiloupoulou, 2011; Conti, 2003; Kopecký & Mudde, 2002). Secondly, it should be noted that, the fact that the term itself contains the word 'scepticism' indicates a negative connotation towards the process of European Integration (Di Mauro & Memoli, 2016). In this regard, Di Mauro and Memoli in their work titled "Attitudes Towards Europe Beyond Euroscepticism" discussed the importance in research of going beyond the concept of Euroscepticism, which is seen as limiting, and considering that European citizens "have ideas about Europe as a whole and its policies, ranging from support to opposition" they suggest "finding a more comprehensive theoretical and analytical framework, able to explain public attitudes towards the EU" (Di Mauro & Memoli, 2016). They also added that recent efforts to incorporate additional dimensions into the concept of Euroscepticism have effectively led to the abandonment of the term in favor of a broader and more suitable definition, i.e. simply "attitudes towards Europe". The emblem of this paradigm shift in the study of Euroscepticism is represented by Boomgaarden, Schuck, Elenbaas and de Vreese (2011), who provided a different theoretical framework to go beyond the uni-dimensionality of the concept of Euroscepticism and analyze the different specificities of opinions towards the European Union. In analyzing public attitudes towards the EU through a survey analysis, the researchers have identified five key dimensions. The first dimension focuses on emotional responses, particularly feelings of fear and threat related to the EU, marking the emergence of an emotional affective dimension in EU attitudes for the first time. The second dimension concerns European identity. The third dimension evaluates the EU's performance, including its democratic and financial operations. The fourth dimension encompasses utilitarian attitudes, including general support, benefit assessments, and post-materialist considerations regarding the EU. Finally, the fifth dimension looks at future support for the EU, reflecting agreement with expanded decision-making powers and further integration (Boomgarden et al., 2011). This study as well as others on EU attitudes and EU support (Bakker & de Vreese, 2016; de Vreese et. al. 2019; Di Mauro & Memoli, 2016) have contributed to the creation of more specific frameworks of analysis within the framework of studies on opinions towards the European Union, providing more inclusive and less limiting explanations of the phenomenon, and looking more specifically at public attitudes.

2.2 Attitudes towards the EU during crisis

Part of the literature on Euroscepticism and attitudes towards the European Union has focused on analyzing the levels and types of support, or opposition, of citizens and parties and the factors influencing these attitudes in times of crisis. Bârgăoanu, Radu, and Negrea-Busuioc (2014) conducted a longitudinal analysis of public opinion in times of crisis in the time range from 2008 to 2013, and revealed that austerity measures exacerbated Eurosceptic sentiments among the public (Bârgăoanu et al. 2014). Constantin Schäfer and Martin Gross (2020) in their analysis of the euro crisis and levels of Euroscepticism among parties and citizens, found that crisis led to a decline in both specific and widespread support for the EU, with the former driven by economic dissatisfaction and the latter reflecting a longer-term trend against European unification. Regarding the effects of the financial crisis (2007-2010) on member states' levels of Euroscepticism, and specifically whether the economy was the primary cause of negative feelings about the Union, scholars Serricchio, Tsakatika and Quaglia found in their research that the role of national identity and national institutions actually caused an increase in distrust towards European institutions (Serricchio et. al, 2013). The scholars explain that during the crisis, a trade-off existed between confidence in national institutions and confidence in EU institutions. In the early stage of the crisis, specifically the banking crisis, citizens predominantly turned to their national governments for financial solutions. Since national institutions were chiefly involved in implementing banking rescue plans and similar measures, the level of confidence in these institutions significantly influenced the rise of Euroscepticism (Serricchio et. al., 2013). Tanja Börzel (2016) further explains that the economic and migration crises heightened politicization along the EU cleavage (see also: Hooghe and Marks 2018; Emanuele, Marino, and Angelucci 2020). This was amplified by radical right-wing populist politicians and parties, who excel in promoting illiberal, nationalist visions of Europe that do not fundamentally oppose the EU but advocate for a different version that deviates from the liberal modernization project that characterized the European integration thus far (Börzel, 2016). On a different note, Ann-Kathrin Reinl (2019) discussed the role of solidarity in shaping attitudes towards the EU during financial and migration crises. The analysis shows that individuals who support collaborative and solidarity-based policies within the EU, such as shared financial instruments and refugee responsibilities, are less likely to harbor negative opinions towards the EU (Reinl, 2019). This has also been seen in some analyses that have as their context the COVID-19 crisis. Especially regarding aid policies such as the Next Generation EU, public opinion has been shown to be very favorable towards the EU (Bremer et al. 2023; Bauhr & Charron, 2023). Luís Russo (2023) also investigated how the pandemic may have

driven solidarity between member states and trust in the European Union, describing it as an “opportunity for EU bonding and polity-building” (Russo, 2023). A further explanation as to why the pandemic crisis reversed the Eurosceptic trend is provided by Olan McEvoy (2024), who, interpreting statistical data on the attitudes of European citizens (Portugal, Spain, Italy, Bulgaria, Germany, Denmark, France and Sweden) towards European integration, shows that the majority of respondents manifested support for greater European cooperation and that this is most likely due to the different nature of this crisis (McEvoy, 2024). Indeed, while in the 2010s, the Eurozone was destabilized by crises linked to its monetary structure and the EU's inadequate framework for managing the rising influx of refugees escaping the Syrian war, the pandemic crisis was more external in origin and potentially had more straightforward solution (McEvoy, 2024).

2.3 EU attitudes in Italy: from Europeanism to Euroscepticism to Europeanism?

The main contributors to the literature on Italian attitudes towards the European project reconstruct the history of how Italy went from being a mainly Europhile country to one that tends to show Eurosceptic attitudes, especially among right-wing parties (Brunazzo, 2020; Zappettini & Maccaferri, 2021; Poli & Valentiner, 2014; Lucarelli, 2015). Italy is one of the founders of the European project and has for a long time been considered among the most Europhile nations, advocating for a closer and deeper integration. After the Second World War, Italy saw the European project as a catalyst for political and economic prosperity (Brunazzo, 2020). Since the 1990s, particularly following the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty, which marked a significant advancement in European integration and included key political elements such as citizenship, redistributive policies, and the single currency, attitudes of Euroscepticism began to emerge. Silvio Berlusconi (leader of the center-right party Forza Italia), who served as Italy's Prime Minister from 2001 to 2006, embodied these Eurosceptic sentiments, particularly during a crucial period for economic and monetary integration. Throughout his tenure, Berlusconi and his allies, including The League party, directed several criticisms towards the EU and the Euro. The introduction of the Euro as the new currency in Italy in January 2002 brought about uncertainty regarding its actual purchasing power. As the Euro became integrated into daily life, a perception emerged among Italians that it had less purchasing power compared to the Lira (Brunazzo, 2020).

Following a two-year period during which Italy was governed by the center-left under Prime Minister Romano Prodi, Berlusconi returned to power in 2006, coinciding with the onset of the global financial crisis and its European impact. During his tenure, which lasted until 2011, Italy's reputation and economic situation steadily deteriorated. Eventually, in November 2011, Berlusconi was compelled to resign (Brunazzo, 2020).

If the financial crisis and the Berlusconi government already gave rise to feelings of mistrust towards European integration, the subsequent technocratic government led by Mario Monti, well-regarded by European elites, only further solidified Italian euroscepticism. Monti is known for his austerity programme implemented to lift Italy out of the European crisis, and it is precisely this programme that, according to a study, led to a decline in Italian trust in the European Union from 56% to 36% (Demos & Pi, 2012).

While on one hand the economic crisis led Italy to experience skepticism towards European integration, another major issue would soon continue to fuel distrust of the EU: the migrant crisis. During the period from 2013 to 2015, while the center-left Democratic Party was in power, a significant number of refugees and migrants attempted to reach Europe by sea, with many passing through Italy. As Brunazzo (2020) further explains: “Italy felt overwhelmed, especially many of the poorer areas of the south which had to deal with the incoming migrant streams, processing them through rundown reception centres and inhospitable migrant welcome centres. Asking for help from the EU through various schemes such as Frontex was the formal procedure, but official Italy saw that the EU was unresponsive. To the unofficial Italy, this seemed like being left alone and betrayed. The Democratic Party kept the lines of communication with the Member States and Brussels informed, but there seemed to be paralysis and deafness” (Brunazzo, 2020). This resulted in the defeat of then-Prime Minister Matteo Renzi of the Democratic Party, leading to new elections in 2018, which saw the rise of two populist and Eurosceptic parties, the League and the Five Star Movement, to government (Zappettini & Maccaferri, 2021). These two parties are recognized in the literature on Italian Euroscepticism as the most critical towards the European Union, only to be joined later by the Brothers of Italy party (Marone, 2014). Zappettini and Maccaferri (2021) trace the history of these two parties in their research. Specifically, they explain that under Matteo Salvini's leadership from 2013, Lega underwent a major ideological shift towards explicit Euroscepticism, moving from regionalism to nationalism and targeting the EU, immigrants, and liberal values (Zappettini & Maccaferri, 2021).

In 2018, Salvini established Lega's right-wing, ethnocentric, and Eurosceptic positions, promoting nationalist ‘Italians/Italy first’ policies and strong anti-immigration stances so much so that, as Minister of the Interior in 2019, he implemented the *porti chiusi* policy, blocking NGO ships with migrants from docking in Italy (Zappettini & Maccaferri, 2021). Salvini's transformation of Lega into a major national force involved significant digital media strategies and personalization of his political image, contributing to its success as the largest party in the 2019 European Parliament election (Zappettini & Maccaferri, 2021). Another famous Eurosceptic party in Italy is The Five Star

Movement (M5S). This party, founded in 2009 by comedian Beppe Grillo, was characterized by its anti-corruption and anti-establishment messages, with interpretations of its ideology ranging from right-wing populism to a potential force for popular political engagement and gained traction and influence in Italian politics through its opposition to Berlusconi and Monti's technocratic government, becoming the leading political force by 2019 (Zappettini & Maccaferri, 2021). M5S initially held a strong Eurosceptic position, with Grillo advocating for a return to the Lira and an exit from the Eurozone, a stance that was formalized in their 2014 European elections manifesto, but under Luigi Di Maio, M5S has shifted towards reforming the EU from within, although its Eurosceptic tendencies persist, primarily driven by domestic socioeconomic concerns (Zappettini & Maccaferri, 2021). During their coalition government, the League exhibited hostility towards the European Union by refusing to cooperate with any EU migration policies, closing Italian ports, and clashing with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) over migrant rescue operations at sea (Brunazzo, 2020). Meanwhile, the Five Star Movement's Eurosceptic stance stemmed from their perception of the EU as being corrupt and bureaucratic, while emphasizing themes of social justice and solidarity at both national and European levels (Zappettini & Maccaferri, 2021). Subsequently, with the crisis of this coalition government 2019, the Five Star Movement (M5S) formed an unlikely coalition with the Democratic Party (PD) (Brunazzo, 2020). Conti, Maragngoni and Verzichelli (2020) pointed out that despite the presence of the Five Star Movement (M5S) in the government, the presence of the Democratic Party (PD) helped to make the government more pro-European (Conti et al., 2020).

Moving on to the Italian public perceptions of the EU, Lucarelli (2015) made an interesting contribution on how attitudes towards the European Union evolved between Italy's First and Second Republics. The scholar points out, on one hand, that in general, Italian support for the EU moved from an "affective" Europeanism, towards a more specific/utilitarian support. On the other hand, she argued that Italy might be more defined by intense 'poliscepticism' (scepticism towards politics) than by euroscepticism. This indicates that dissatisfaction seems to be directed more towards the political system as a whole rather than the EU. For instance, when looking at surveys from three European elections (2004, 2009 and 2014), she found that the most common reason given for abstention was a "lack of trust in/dissatisfaction with politics in general" (Lucarelli, 2015). Specifically, 30%, 37%, and 29% of Italian respondents abstained for this reason. These percentages were above the EU average and significantly higher than the trend in the founding Member States (Lucarelli, 2015). Lucarelli (2015) further explains that the widespread lack of trust in politics in Italy is likely linked to the country's high perception of corruption, which indicates that a significant portion of the population is not necessarily for or against the EU, but rather disillusioned with national institutions.

The latest challenge for the European Union as well as a crisis that has led to conflicting feelings between citizens and parties is marked by the advent of the pandemic crisis. Italy experienced a profound impact from the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in significant strain on its healthcare infrastructure and substantial economic repercussions. Unexpectedly, this period also revealed other internal challenges within the EU and among its Member States. These challenges included shortages of personal protective equipment (PPE), a lack of coordination among Member States and border closures between Member States (Brunazzo, 2020). Consequently, the perception of the European Union in Italy emerged significantly weakened by the health emergency. Scholar Cachia (2021) in a research on the EU's COVID-19 pandemic response revealed that, despite the Union's efforts having led to important results in the health sector, few people in Italy and other countries think the European Union has adequately addressed the pandemic and that many were unaware of the EU's efforts (Cachia, 2021). His work then highlights several issues that came out of the pandemic and that the EU needs to tackle in the future, including poor communication, inadequate guidelines, insufficient leadership, and the need to combat misinformation (Cachia, 2021). According to Zubani's analysis (2022) however, the pandemic crisis was an opportunity for Italian parties to reassess their stance towards EU institutions, with M5S and The League opting for a more moderate approach, collaborating with traditional parties in the name of responsibility and national interest. The demands of the Covid-19 emergency triggered the need for coordination and cooperation among Member States, which in turn contributed to a positive debate on EU membership in Italy. Indeed, it seems that opinion is now more positive and trust in the EU has increased. With regard to parties that were considered Eurosceptic, Zubani (2022) points out that although parties such as The League cannot yet be considered totally pro-European, there seems to be a shift towards a utilitarian pro-EU perspective, especially following the announcement of the Recovery and Resilience Facility funds allocated to Italy (Zubani, 2022).

As for Italian public opinion, a study showed that Italians' trust in the EU increased during the COVID-19 crisis, but at the expense of their trust in the government (Berti, 2020). As a matter of fact, inefficiency of public administration in managing aid requests created delays and obstacles for citizens and organizations in need, impacting public confidence in the government's ability to effectively respond to crises, despite the possibility of using the funds made available by the Union (Berti, 2020). Hence, it is challenging to determine if the public's view towards the European Union is positive due to its effective endeavors in various fields, notably healthcare, or if it's primarily because of the historic agreement among all member states on a substantial financial fund, with Italy being the primary recipient.

2.4 Media and EU attitudes

The media serve as a crucial tool for citizens to stay informed about European issues, potentially sparking greater interest and participation in European politics. The way the media cover the EU significantly influences political debate and shapes public opinion. This impact has led to a growing academic focus on various facets of media coverage concerning EU affairs (Caiani & Guerra, 2017). The majority of scholarly works on Euroscepticism and EU attitudes tend to prioritize the examination of political parties and public sentiment, allocating notably less emphasis to exploring the interplay between the media and opinions towards the EU (Bijsmans, 2017). However, research has shed light on the significance of analyzing media opinions towards the European Union and European integration. A number of scholars have done research on how media coverage influences opinions towards the EU in the UK (Anderson, 2004), on the effects of the media on Euroscepticism in general (de Vreese, 2007), or on the correlation between the media and Eurosceptic votes (van Spanje & de Vreese, 2014). A study was done specifically on online newspapers and social media and how they affect public support for the European union (Mourao et. al., 2015). This research found that obtaining European news from blogs tends to create negative perceptions of the EU. In contrast, social media platforms contribute to a more favorable view of the EU's performance and increased support for its further integration (Mourao et. al., 2015). Menéndez Alarcón (2010) focused on discussing the role of newspapers in defining the EU and their contribution in creating social representations of the EU among the public in Spain, France and the UK (Menéndez Alarcón, 2010). Similarly, another study analyzed how newspapers reported on European affairs in Germany, Croatia, Belgium and Greece from both a qualitative and quantitative perspective (Gioltzidou et. al., 2023). Other scholars have focused on analyzing and categorizing the individual opinions found in newspapers. For instance, Startin (2015) proposed a categorization of British press attitudes, distinguishing between 'Europositive,' 'Euroambivalent,' and 'Eurosceptic' views. 'Euro-positive' views denote a generally favorable stance towards European integration and supportive of ongoing measures for closer cooperation. 'Euroambivalent' category reflects a neutral position towards the European Union, lacking clear partisanship regarding integration efforts and not consistently covering EU-related issues. Finally, 'Eurosceptic' stances indicate opposition to further integration measures, criticism of the EU in general, and, in some cases, opposition to UK membership (Startin, 2015). Similarly, Karner (2013) identified three types of opinions in his analysis of Austrian newspapers: EU-scepticism, which views EU membership in national rather than European terms, perceives minimal benefits from EU membership, and predicts the potential disintegration of the European Union; pragmatic positions rooted in primarily national perspectives but recognizing the instrumental advantages provided by the EU, and thirdly, pro-EU positions. Schuck and de Vreese (2006) directed

their study towards opinions found in both national and regional German newspapers regarding European integration, discerning the existence of frames centered on risk and opportunity. Within the 'risk' frame, concerns are raised, highlighting potential adverse effects of the enlargement process like heightened costs, rising crime rates, and increased instability. Conversely, the 'opportunity' frame fosters optimism and assurance, accentuating potential beneficial outcomes of incorporating new nations into the EU, such as the advancement of democracy, freedom, human rights, or economic prosperity (Schuck & de Vreese, 2006). Vliegthart, Schuck, Boomgaarden and de Vreese (2008) identified two other types of frames in an interesting analysis on news coverage and support for European integration: benefit frame and conflict frame (Vliegthart et al., 2008). Going into even more detail as compared to Schuck and de Vreese (2006), the scholars define the benefit frame in media portrayal of EU membership and European integration as beneficial, both in generic and policy-specific terms, while they measure the conflict frame on the basis of the presence of news reporting disagreements between groups, states, individuals or EU institutions (Vliegthart et al., 2008). Koehler, Weber and Quiring, in a research that focused specifically on the euro crisis, have instead identified other discursive patterns in the media that can influence opinions about the European Union, namely the attribution of roles of responsibility and victim (Koehler et al., 2019). The researchers found that the way the European Union is presented has a significant impact on citizens' attitudes towards European integration. When the EU is depicted as a victim, it leads to a decline in supportive attitudes. Conversely, when the EU is portrayed as responsible and capable of addressing the crisis, it results in a more positive and supportive stance among citizens regarding European integration (Koehler et al., 2019).

In the same research context, i.e. crises in the European Union, Patrick Bijsmans (Bijsmans, 2021) conducted an analysis on the different forms of critique and resistance against the EU as portrayed in quality newspapers in Austria, Ireland, and the Netherlands during the Eurozone crisis of 2012. His investigation revealed that numerous viewpoints could be categorized as Euro-alternativism, which involves criticism aimed at aspects of EU policies or its institutional structure, often coupled with alternative suggestions, yet fundamentally upholds support for both the EU and European integration (Bijsmans, 2021). All these contributions have helped shed light on the various opinions regarding the EU and European integration, underscoring the significance of media opinion on European matters. However, the specific focus of this analysis pertains to the attitudes of Italian newspapers during the recent Covid pandemic crisis, an area that still lacks extensive literature. In this regard, only a few studies have been identified. The first by Paul Copeland and Marzia Maccaferri (2023) in the UK, and another by Çiğdem Üstün (2022) in Turkey. Copeland and Maccaferri's study involved analyzing the content of British newspapers during the Covid pandemic. They categorized how the

crisis management was depicted based on the sentiments conveyed by journalists or individuals quoted in the articles, which could be positive, negative, mixed, or factual. Additionally, they assessed the intensity of these portrayals, classifying them as high, medium, or low (Copeland & Maccaferri, 2023). Meanwhile, Üstün's (2022) investigation centered on identifying delegitimizing opinions towards the European Union during the pandemic in Turkey, employing Easton's (1975) framework of specific support regarding concrete policy outcomes and Scharpf's (1998) output-oriented legitimization theories. Another study was done on Spain by Mayo-Cubero, García-Carretero, Establés and Pedrero-Esteban (2023) with the aim of looking at how the Spanish media represent the Next Generation recovery funds and to determine the main discourses around this issue. The scholars conducted an analysis of posts from six main news outlets in Spain in the social media Twitter (X), and observed a significant shift in media discourse towards a pro-European sentiment, marking a departure from previously prevalent Eurosceptic views. This shift, as they point out, can be attributed to the positive impact of the Next Generation EU funds on Spanish public perception (Mayo-Cubero et al., 2023). Moreover, the findings of the study highlighted that the Spanish media now emphasize a pro-European outlook, portraying the EU's economic response as a crucial opportunity for Spain to implement substantial political, societal, and economic reforms (Mayo-Cubero et al., 2023). Finally, the only study dealing with EU attitudes in the Italian media during the crisis by COVID-19 was done by Miconi, Cannizzaro and Risi (2023). Their research focused on the analysis of social media such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter (X) with the aim of investigating which narratives about the European Union were published by Italian users. The results showed that the political and media narratives on social media primarily directed blame towards national authorities for inefficiencies in managing the pandemic crisis in Italy, rather than targeting European institutions (Miconi et al., 2023).

This shift in focus led to a notable change in perception: Europe was no longer seen as the scapegoat for domestic issues. Instead, the European Union became a benchmark for assessing the performance of Italy's national government (Miconi et al., 2023). As a result, the EU was viewed more positively, with its role and response during the pandemic being seen as a standard for effective crisis management. This reframing allowed for a more favorable comparison, highlighting the EU's supportive measures and contrasting them with the perceived shortcomings of Italy's domestic policies (Miconi et al., 2023).

Despite the fact that this research provides an important contribution to research on the media, the European Union and the pandemic crisis in Italy, unfortunately, it appears that there is still a lack of research in the matter. Therefore, this thesis aims to fill this gap by contributing new insights and

analysis, specifically analyzing the Italian press. By focusing on this underexplored area, the study seeks to contribute to the improvement of our understanding of media attitudes towards the European Union during the COVID-19 crisis

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK & METHODOLOGY

This chapter provides a comprehensive explanation of the methodology used in this research and the theoretical framework on which the analysis is based. It begins with a detailed discussion of the theoretical framework chosen to conduct the analysis. This explanation is crucial to ensure the robustness and validity of the entire research work, allowing readers to accurately contextualize the findings and assess the relevance and originality of the study. The chapter elaborates on why this particular theoretical framework was selected from many alternatives, providing a thorough justification for this choice.

Following the discussion of the theoretical framework, the chapter outlines the methodology adopted for the analysis. The rationale behind the choice of this specific methodological approach is explored in depth to highlight its relevance and appropriateness to the context of the study. This section aims to demonstrate how the chosen methodology effectively helps to answer the research questions and contributes to the overall objectives of the study.

The chapter then moves on to a detailed description of the dataset used in the research. It explains the data selection process, including the inclusion and exclusion criteria, and provides an overview of the data sources. This in-depth explanation ensures the transparency of the research process and enables readers to understand the basics of the analysis.

Finally, the chapter concludes with a reflection on the limitations of the research. This section acknowledges the potential constraints and challenges encountered during the study, offering insights into how these limitations may affect the results. By addressing these limitations, the chapter provides a balanced view of the research, highlighting its strengths and areas for future improvement.

3.1 Theoretical Framework

Since the literature on the Italian press and its attitudes towards the European Union was unavailable, finding a theoretical framework that offered a comprehensive introductory overview of the topic proved challenging. Therefore, the decision was made to divide the analysis into two parts. The first segment of the analysis allowed to answer the research question “How was the European Union portrayed by Italian media during the COVID-19 pandemic?” and is based on the framework

developed by Copeland and Maccaferri (2023). The second segment investigates the specific types of attitudes found in accordance with the first analysis.

The first part consisted in providing generally descriptive results on the topics and news reported, followed by opinions, on the European Union's actions regarding the pandemic crisis in Italy. Therefore, this part involved categorizing the portrayal of crisis management based on the perspectives expressed by journalists or individuals quoted within the articles, namely positive, negative, mixed, or factual. This approach, as mentioned above, drew inspiration from the framework developed by Copeland and Maccaferri (2023) in their study but was adapted to the Italian context of the crisis. Their research explored the interplay between the COVID-19 pandemic and the evolving Eurosceptic discourse within the United Kingdom (UK) concerning its departure from the European Union through qualitative content analysis. The choice of using and readapting Copeland and Maccaferri's codes for this specific research was driven by the lack of a suitable alternative in the literature of media and Euroscepticism during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the presence of Üstün's (2022) research on Euroscepticism in Turkish media during the COVID pandemic, employing the categories used in his study may not be suitable for this research. In Üstün's (2022) analysis, for instance, categories are created to analyze legitimizing or delegitimizing opinions regarding the EU in newspapers that in Turkey are classified as either pro or against the government. However, this research aims to analyze the topics and arguments used by Italian newspapers regarding the EU during the pandemic without categorizing them based on political affiliation, as there seems to be no way to assess it accurately and reliably. For this reason, this research used the positive, negative, mixed and factual categories illustrated by Copeland and Maccaferri (2023) as a first approach of analysis, readjusting them to the context of the covid crisis in Italy. Specifically, the category positive therefore indicates an article that shows that the EU is handling the crisis well and promptly helping Italy recover from the crisis. As Copeland and Maccaferri explain, "such positive expressions are to be also found within the opinion of the journalist, the quotes given by individuals used within the article, the factual evidence or the language used. The latter is reflective in the tone and words used to describe a situation" (Copeland and Maccaferri, 2023). The articles classified as negative primarily highlight concerns and criticisms regarding the EU's handling of the pandemic crisis in Italy. They often convey a sense of abandonment and inadequate support from EU institutions. Negative expressions in these articles can be found in the articles' opinions, quotes from individuals, factual evidence presented, or the language used and includes the tone and specific words chosen to report on events (Copeland and Maccaferri, 2023). Mixed articles, on the other hand, express both praise and concern with how EU is managing the crisis but do not seem to take a stand on either side. This type of articles will include quotes and/or opinions from both points of view. Finally, articles that do not express any opinion on

the EU's handling of the pandemic but simply report news and facts have been identified as factual. These categories are summarized in the table below (TABLE A).

TABLE A. FRAMEWORK FOR THE PORTRAYAL OF THE EU DURING THE PANDEMIC (SOURCE: COPELAND & MACCAFERRI, 2023)

CODE	DESCRIPTION
POSITIVE	EU is handling the crisis well and promptly helping Italy recover from the crisis. “Such positive expressions are to be also found within the opinion of the journalist, the quotes given by individuals used within the article, the factual evidence or the language used. The latter is reflective in the tone and words used to describe a situation.” (Copeland and Maccaferri, 2023)
NEGATIVE	“Expresses concern, criticism or disapproval of the manner in which the crisis is being managed by EU.” (Copeland & Maccaferri, 2023) Expresses feeling of abandonment and lack of proper help by the EU institutions. “Such negative expressions are to be also found within the opinion of the journalist, the quotes given by individuals used within the article, the factual evidence or the language used. The latter is reflective in the tone and words used to describe a situation.” (Copeland and Maccaferri, 2023)
MIXED	Expresses both praise and concern with how EU is managing the crisis but does not take a stand on either side. This type of article will include quotes and/or opinions from both points of view.
FACTUAL	The article is factual and presents no opinion on how the crisis in Italy is being managed by the EU.

In the previous chapter, i.e. the literature review, it has been illustrated how the concept of Euroscepticism shows several limitations that make it difficult to frame the phenomenon simply as opposition to the European union. For this reason, in this research rather than looking at whether the media in Italy can be defined as Eurosceptic or not, I chose to analyze what specific positions newspapers show towards the European Union and what is the nature of these attitudes. In fact, Di Mauro and Memoli (2016) explain how numerous scholars have changed their approach to the

phenomenon by referring to the concept of political support defined by Easton (1975) and how this concept has multiple dimensions and facilitates testing at various levels, simplifying scientific vocabulary and promoting theoretical development, while the primary limitation of Euroscepticism is its unidimensional nature (Di Mauro & Memoli, 2016). Building on the simple concept of support, according to Easton (1975), this notion involves an evaluative attitude. By including both negative and positive evaluations, support can be described as a person's favorable or unfavorable orientation towards an object. Easton (1975) then differentiated between specific and diffuse support towards political authorities. Specific support refers to judgments on the performance of policies, while diffuse support refers to a sense of allegiance, attachment, or loyalty to governing institutions, focusing on what the object symbolizes rather than its specific actions (Gabel, 1998). However, diffuse and specific support are not completely distinct. Diffuse support may attenuate a decline in specific support (Gibson 1989; Tyler 1990) and may in any case remain high (Di Mauro & Memoli, 2016), just as different levels of specific support may influence diffuse support for political authorities. In other words, this indicates that not all negative sentiments towards the political system have the same impact or significance (Easton, 1975), and that the types of attitudes towards political institutions, and in this specific case towards the European Union, may vary depending on the object of support or criticism, i.e. policies or the entire institutional and political system and what it represents. Lindberg and Scheingold (1970) refined the typologies of specific and diffuse support by renaming them as utilitarian and affective support. They argue, specifically, that to the extent to which support is concerned with policy and not polity, it is fundamentally utilitarian in nature, and thus based on the perceived advantages and disadvantages of EU membership (cost/benefit calculations) while affective support refers to emotions and affection towards Europe in general. As better explained by the two scholars these typologies allow for the distinction “between support based on some perceived and relatively concrete interest (utilitarian) and support which seems to indicate a diffuse and perhaps emotional response to some of the vague ideals embodied in the notion of European unity (affective)” (Lindberg & Scheingold, 1970). However, both Easton's and Linberg and Scheingold's typologies seem to be very similar, indicating more or less the same concepts.

In this specific case of research, it proved particularly interesting also to investigate the presence or absence of Euro-alternativist attitudes, which as anticipated in the literature review chapter of this thesis, was investigated by Patrick Bijsmans (2021) in his research on Euroscepticism in the European media. The concept of Euro-alternativism was originally coined by FitzGibbon (2013) in his research on civil society and EU referendums. Patrick Bijsmans (2021) later used the term to argue that the European media rather than expressing Eurosceptic positions, where Euroscepticism refers to soft and hard Euroscepticism as articulated by Taggart and Szczerbiak (2002), appear to display a

substantial presence of opinions expressing “criticism towards (elements of) EU policies or its institutional design [...] often accompanied by alternative proposals, but essentially is supportive of the EU and European integration” (Bijsmans, 2021). In his research on European media attitudes, Bijsmans has indeed shown that there might be an increase in Euro-alternativist rather than Eurosceptic positions in the modern day and that these positions relate more to EU policies than to its polity. In his analysis, in fact, he also considered the object of the newspapers' attitudes, which could be “the EU's constitutional and institutional design” or “different policy proposals put forward for dealing with the crisis”, similar to the Eastonian analytical framework (Bijsmans, 2021).

Starting from these concepts, an attempt was therefore made, in the second part of the analysis, to interpret whether the attitudes found in the articles of the newspapers “*La Repubblica*”, “*La Stampa*”, “*Corriere della Sera*” and “*Il Sole 24 Ore*” show diffuse/affective or specific/utilitarian support, as well as if there is evidence of euro-alternativist attitudes. This choice was made in order to provide a complete picture that could at the same time tell us more about the object of criticism or approval by the Italian newspapers analyzed since there is a general lack of literature concerning the Italian case and in particular relating to Italy and the pandemic crisis. This second part of the analysis is explored further in the chapter dedicated to the discussion of the results and aimed at answering the second research question: “What kind of attitudes do the Italian media show towards the European Union during COVID-19?”.

3.2 Qualitative Content Analysis

This research uses a qualitative content analysis methodology to analyze the attitudes of Italian newspapers toward the EU during the COVID-19 crisis. Qualitative content analysis is “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This research aims to identify patterns, topics, and themes in Italian newspapers, delineating the attitudes of Italian media towards the EU during the COVID-19 crisis.

The choice of analyzing newspapers in this research stems from the importance of traditional media during the pandemic crisis. As early as February 2020, both traditional (i.e., press) and digital media (i.e., social media) started to extensively report on the evolution of the healthcare crisis and the political measures enacted to mitigate its effects, with a significant impact on citizens (Ferraresi, 2020). Indeed, especially during times of crisis, when individuals seek guidance on significant issues they are uncertain about, they turn to the media to understand social realities (Weaver, 1980). The media plays a crucial role in providing this orientation and has the capacity to reach individuals at the grassroots level, effectively disseminating important information on various subjects, particularly

those outside individuals' direct experiences (Medina et al., 2021). This reliance on the media was pronounced in Italy, with a significant portion of the population seeking information mainly through newspapers, among other media, such as television broadcasts and radio channels, during the pandemic (CENSIS, 2021).

Consequently, with the understanding that Italian citizens heavily relied on newspapers for information during the lockdowns, and considering the substantial body of literature demonstrating the media's capacity to shape our opinions, attitudes, and understanding of current events and global issues (Nergiz, 2015; Carey & Burton, 2004; McCombs & Shaw, 1972), it is imperative to explore how newspapers covered news pertaining to the European Union amidst the pandemic. Notably, I opted not to analyze social media or discourses by political actors, as my interest lies in examining how Italian newspapers, primarily serving the purpose of informing the citizenry, reported on EU-related matters during the COVID crisis. Analyzing social media platforms, such as Twitter, would entail the risk of encountering fake news, which proliferated significantly during the pandemic (Naeem, Bhatti & Khan, 2020). Furthermore, I chose to analyze newspapers rather than the discourses of political actors (both online and in public speeches) because ample literature already exists on this topic (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2020; Danaj et al., 2018; Gregor & Macková, 2015) and the aim of this analysis is not to delve into the differing political stances on the European Union from the left or right perspectives.

3.3 Dataset

TABLE B. NUMBER OF ARTICLES ANALYZED (SOURCE: AUTHOR'S OWN ELABORATION)

Newspaper	N. Articles
<i>La Repubblica</i>	26
<i>La Stampa</i>	17
<i>Corriere della Sera</i>	32
<i>Il Sole 24 Ore</i>	38
TOTAL	113

The newspaper selected for analysis are “*La Repubblica*,” “*Corriere della Sera*,” “*La Stampa*,” and “*Il Sole 24 Ore*”. The choice of these specific newspapers stems from the fact that, according to the publication of recent data on press diffusion in Italy, the newspapers mentioned above appear to be the most influential and read sources of information among Italians as of 2022 (YouTrend, 2022). Since the focus of this thesis is to analyze the portrayal of the European Union during the specific scenario of the global pandemic, the data have been selected through a careful search in the database

Factiva, which included keywords such as “EU,” “Coronavirus,” “European Union,” “Covid-19”, “European Commission,” “Pandemic” and “Recovery Fund.” Moreover, only editorials and opinion pieces, as well as general reporting articles, were selected for analysis, and this was done in order to obtain a diverse sample of newspaper articles and to prioritize coverage focused on pandemic management and the European Union as primary topics, rather than being merely incidental to other main news stories (Copeland & Maccaferri, 2023).

All data have been retrieved according to the timeframe that went from the 9th of March 2020, day one of the lockdown in Italy, until the 31st of December 2022, which marks the end of a year full of challenges when it came to preventive measures against Covid-19 (e.g vaccines and curfews) and the reopening of all types of commercial activities (ANSA, 2023).

The number of documents retrieved and analyzed based on the keyword search and the selected time period totaled 113 (see *TABLE B* above). The remainder of the articles, which reported the exact keywords, were discarded as they did not show substantial content concerning the pandemic crisis in Italy and the conduct of the European Union. Instead, these articles mainly provided incidental and irrelevant information, which was considered peripheral to the scope of this research.

3.4 Limitations

Despite the careful methodology employed in this research, several limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the analysis is based solely on a selection of four major Italian newspapers, namely "La Repubblica," "Corriere della Sera," "La Stampa," and "Il Sole 24 Ore." While these newspapers are considered influential and widely read, they may not represent the entirety of the Italian media landscape. Thus, the findings might not be fully generalizable to all Italian media outlets. Secondly, selecting articles from Factiva using specific keywords may potentially overlook articles that discuss related topics under different terminology, thereby limiting the comprehensiveness of the analysis. Thirdly, the subjective nature of qualitative content analysis introduces the risk of researcher bias during the coding process. Despite efforts to ensure reliability and validity, the interpretation of newspaper content remains inherently subjective and open to different interpretations. Additionally, given that the analyzed data are in Italian, there is a limitation regarding language bias, as nuances and subtleties in meaning may not fully translate into English. Finally, while efforts have been made to categorize and analyze the portrayal of the EU in Italian newspapers, the findings of my thesis might not fully capture the depth and complexity of media discourse. Other perspectives, biases, or underlying themes may exist beyond the scope of this study, and it is hoped that additional research efforts may address these gaps and provide further insights.

CHAPTER 4

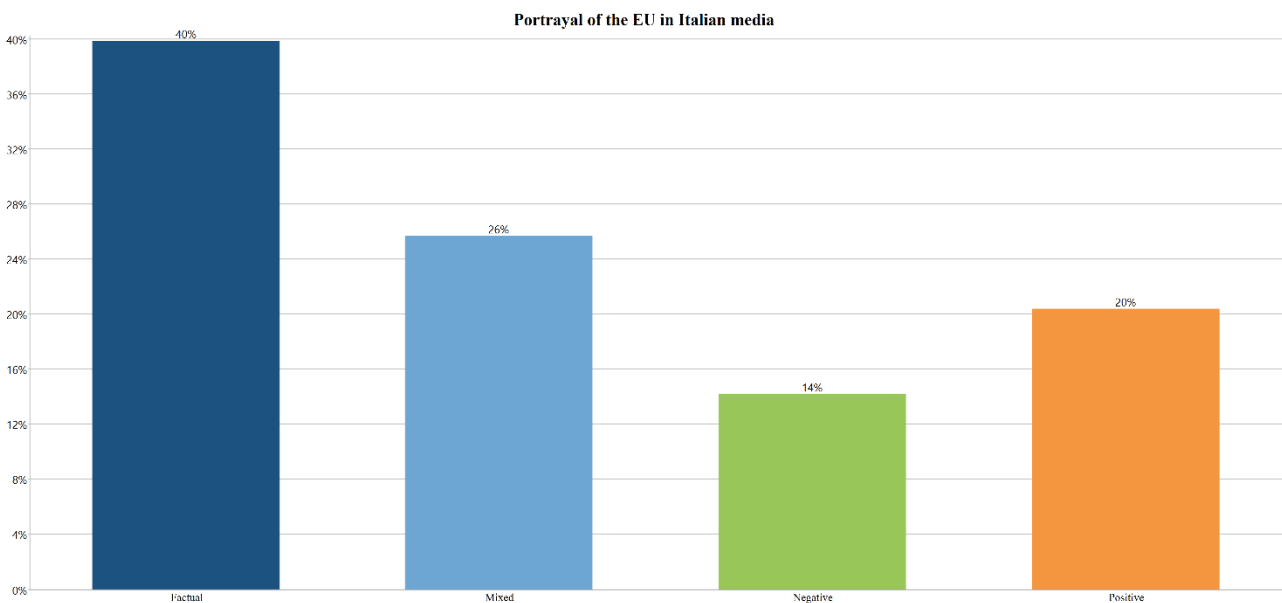
RESULTS

This chapter is intended to show the results of the analysis of the newspapers “*La Repubblica*”, “*La Stampa*”, “*Il Corriere della Sera*” and “*Il Sole 24 Ore*” and to examine how they addressed the European Union during the pandemic in Italy. For the specific purpose, this chapter is divided into five sections. The first illustrates the results of a macro analysis of positive, negative, mixed or factual attitudes found in the analysis of all four newspapers analyzed. In the next four sections, the specific results of the individual newspapers are illustrated, i.e. the most widely reported news about the handling of the pandemic crisis at the European level and their related opinions. The purpose of this chapter is to provide the reader with a general picture, as complete as possible within the limits explained in the previous chapter, of how the news concerning the European Union during COVID-19 was reported in the Italian press.

4.1 Portrayal of the EU in Italian media

As shown in the figure below (Fig. 1), the most prominent tendency of all four newspapers is to report factual news, or to describe facts and provide information in articles without voicing particular opinion or argument.

FIGURE 1. PORTRAYAL OF THE EU IN ITALIAN MEDIA (SOURCE: AUTHOR’S OWN ELABORATION)

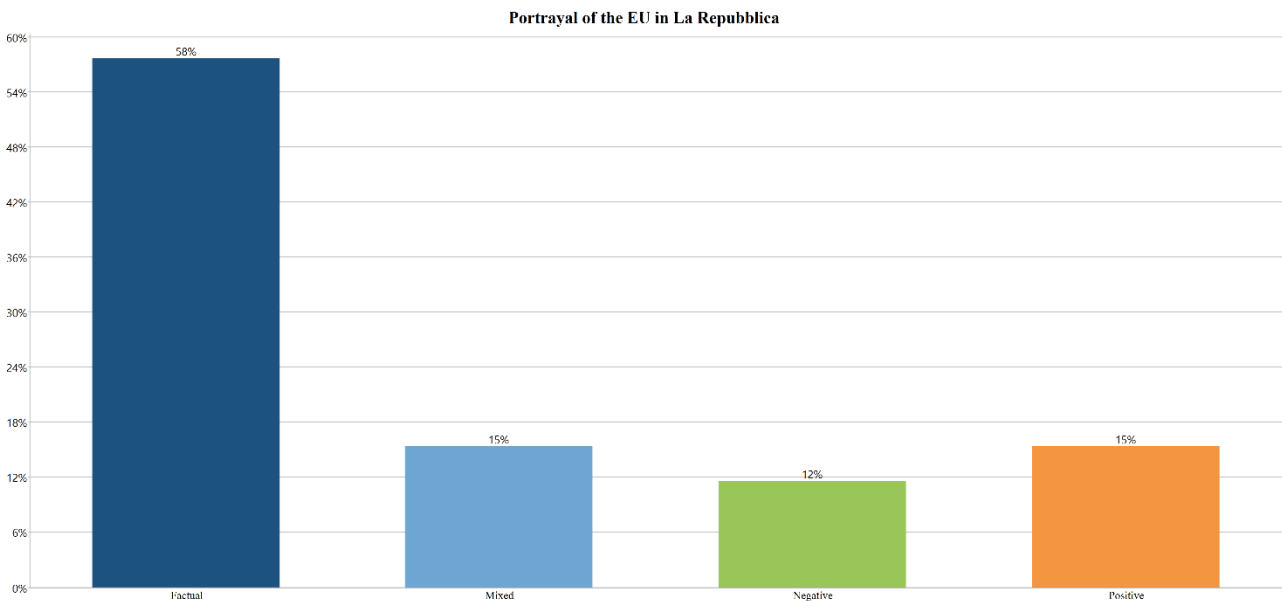


However, it is particularly striking from the figure that despite 40% of factual news, 26% of opinions are mixed and not positive. Positive opinions are in fact third in the table in terms of frequency, which gives us a sign that the Italian media do not show an obvious Europeanism, but rather one that is nuanced. Indeed, it will be shown in more detail in the following sections how the mixed opinions of the individual newspapers are those that report more varied and specific arguments about the European Union's actions to deal with the pandemic crisis or about the member states of the European community. However, one can see from the graph that the news reporting positive opinions on the EU were only 6% less than the mixed ones. Indeed, it will be possible to observe that generally all the newspapers analyzed report positively on the collective efforts of the EU towards the countries that have suffered most from this crisis, including Italy. Specifically, it will be shown how financial solidarity policies such as the Recovery and Resilience Facility as part of the NextGeneration EU is praised in all articles. Finally, the remaining 14% of the opinions identified as negative refer to the evident delay of the European Union, especially in the first moments of the pandemic crisis, to adequately assess the seriousness of the situation in Italy and to intervene promptly. Other arguments concern a feeling of lack of solidarity between Member States and the still persistent feeling of division between northern and southern European countries.

4.2 *La Repubblica*

As shown in the figure below (Fig. 2), the analysis of *La Repubblica*'s articles shows, first of all, that the majority in the news are factual (58%).

FIGURE 2. PORTRAYAL OF THE EU IN ARTICLES FROM *LA REPUBBLICA* (SOURCE: AUTHOR'S OWN ELABORATION)



Specifically, this type of news focused on providing information about the significant measures taken by the European Union to deal with the crisis. These included the anti-crisis emergency packages or SURE and the suspension of the ESM (European Stability Mechanism) (*La Repubblica*, 3 April 2020), the European vaccination plan launched by the Commission (*La Repubblica*, 17 June 2020), the introduction of the Recovery and Resilience Facility agreement (*La Repubblica*, 25 July 2020), but also information on Italy's main economic indicators during the crisis and the growth forecasts provided by Brussels (*La Repubblica*, 6 May 2020).

With regard to the opinions found in the selected articles, it is possible to say that in general there do not seem to be any significant negative opinions in reporting news about the work of the European Union. With the exception of factual reporting, the majority of the articles in fact show mixed or positive (both 15%) attitudes with a few articles expressing scepticism towards the EU.

The analysis shows a tendency to report positively on the economic aid allocated by the European Union, which is seen as fundamental for an economic recovery of Italy. In particular, the suspension of the conditions for access to the ESM is defined in the headline of the *Repubblica* article of 8 May 2020 as “Brussels (paving the way for Italy)”. Or again, the news of the allocation of the NextGenerationEU funds is reported as a “burst of pride and farsightedness” on the part of the Union, a “step forward [...] that no one thought would materialize so easily” (*La Repubblica*, 26 October 2020) and “an unrepeatability opportunity to modernize our country” (*La Repubblica*, 18 January 2021). Furthermore, *La Repubblica* expresses positively how, in general, the common battle between the EU states and the feeling of solidarity that has ensued, also thanks to the RRF (Recovery and Resilience Facility) aid, have weakened the “anti-European front” (*La Repubblica*, 29 May 2021).

The first mixed opinions date back to the beginning of the lockdown in Italy, precisely in an article of 15 March 2020 in which the serious need for unity, solidarity and cooperation in the European Union particularly exudes from the words reported. In the article in fact, former Prime Minister Enrico Letta expresses the need for a coordinated response at the European level, proposing the establishment of a “European safety net” to protect governments from financial instability. Letta criticizes the closure of intra-European borders and warns that Italy could become increasingly Eurosceptic if the Union fails to manage the crisis effectively, while suggesting that a renewed sense of unity could revive the country's economy (*La Repubblica*, 15 March 2020). The solidarity of the member states towards Italy is called into question by the article of 11 June 2020, when the debate on the approval of the RRF (Recovery and Resilience Facility) funds began, which emphasizes that the road to Italy's access to the funds is not an easy one and that it will in fact be the “frugal countries” that will dictate the rules and “insist on the strictness of the conditions for disbursing them (the funds) and on the

actual importance of what will be done with them”. At the same time, the article is positive about the RRF, described as more of an opportunity than a risk (*La Repubblica*, 11 June 2020). There is also a contrasting portrait of Ursula Von der Leyen drawn up in the article of 1 December 2020, which, tracing the most important stages of her presidency during the pandemic crisis, is reported as follows:

Between February and March she stumbles on Covid: she does not immediately understand what is happening in northern Italy, the gravity of the situation that in a few weeks will engulf Europe. An error of judgement only partly justified by the absence of EU competence on health. She gradually manages to coordinate governments on the pandemic, to recompose Schengen and above all Europeans owe it to her intuition if the Union signs collective agreements with vaccine manufacturers, sheltering the Union from the challenge with the US on the remedy. However in April she goes offside again: when Merkel and Macron argue about the Recovery Fund, Von der Leyen abdicates his super partes role and publicly sides with the Chancellor against the Fund, infuriating half of Europe. A few days later, however, Merkel turned around and embraced the Eurobonds and Ursula was ready to turn around. and Ursula is ready to turn: with great skill she rides the momentum and with the courageous proposal of the 750 billion Eurobond Fund she a momentous political victory. (*La Repubblica*, 1 December 2020)

It can be seen, therefore, that according to the article, on the one hand her role in coordinating European efforts in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic and in signing contracts with vaccine manufacturers is acknowledged, improving Europe's position in global competition. However, faults are highlighted in the initial handling of the pandemic, such as the slow response of the seriousness of the situation in Italy. In addition, her decision to publicly side with Angela Merkel against the Recovery Fund drew criticism from some European countries, although she was later able to capitalize on Merkel's change of position to achieve a significant change with the RRF (Recovery and Resilience Facility) funds.

Later, in an interview with President Ursula Von der Leyen herself on 2 February 2021, the discussion focuses on the European Commission's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing mainly on the management and challenges of vaccine distribution (*La Repubblica*, 2 February 2021). It is noted that, on the one hand, its efforts to defend the work of the Commission and to try to ensure a sufficient supply of vaccines for the EU are acknowledged, despite the challenges encountered with companies such as AstraZeneca. However, delivery delays and disputes with pharmaceutical companies are reported, leading to a perceived lack of confidence in the effectiveness of the EU vaccine strategy.

Finally, with regard to criticism of the commission's work, only two articles in *La Repubblica* were identified as demonstrating negative views. The first article dates back to 21 October 2020 and expresses scepticism about the sufficiency of RRF funds to counter the Italian economic recession,

especially following the second wave of Covid and the subsequent lockdowns and restrictive measures. In particular, on the hypothesis of increasing the funds, the article emphasizes the lack of solidarity and support from the so-called frugal countries, with which Italy (and the southern European countries) will have to fight “yet another battle” (*La Repubblica*, 21 October 2020). The second article showing scepticism towards the EU refers to the business sector, specifically the trade fair sector, reporting an interview with Maurizio Danese, president of AEFI (Association of Italian Exhibitions and Fairs). The interviewee says he is “very worried” (*La Repubblica*, 19 July 2021) that the Italian trade fair sector could suffer negative consequences due to the silence of the European Commission regarding the request to overcome the state aid regime, and also highlights the comparison with German colleagues, who have obtained more substantial relief.

Overall, the opinions expressed by *La Repubblica* newspaper are mostly mixed or positive, with only a minority of articles expressing scepticism towards the EU. The mixed opinions reflect the challenges and opportunities the EU faced during the pandemic, while both the successes and criticisms of the EU's actions are emphasised, particularly with regard to Ursula Von der Leyen's initial management of the crisis and her subsequent ability to capitalise on policy changes to achieve significant results. Ultimately, the analysis highlights a mix of assessments of the EU's performance during the pandemic, with an emphasis on the economic and solidarity measures undertaken to address the crisis.

4.3 *La Stampa*

From the newspaper *La Stampa*, the majority of articles (53%) report events and do not express particular points of view. However, there is a substantial percentage of articles expressing positive views on EU news (24%). The articles reporting mixed opinions are slightly more than those of *La Repubblica* (18%) and only 6% of the articles were identified as reporting criticism of the EU.

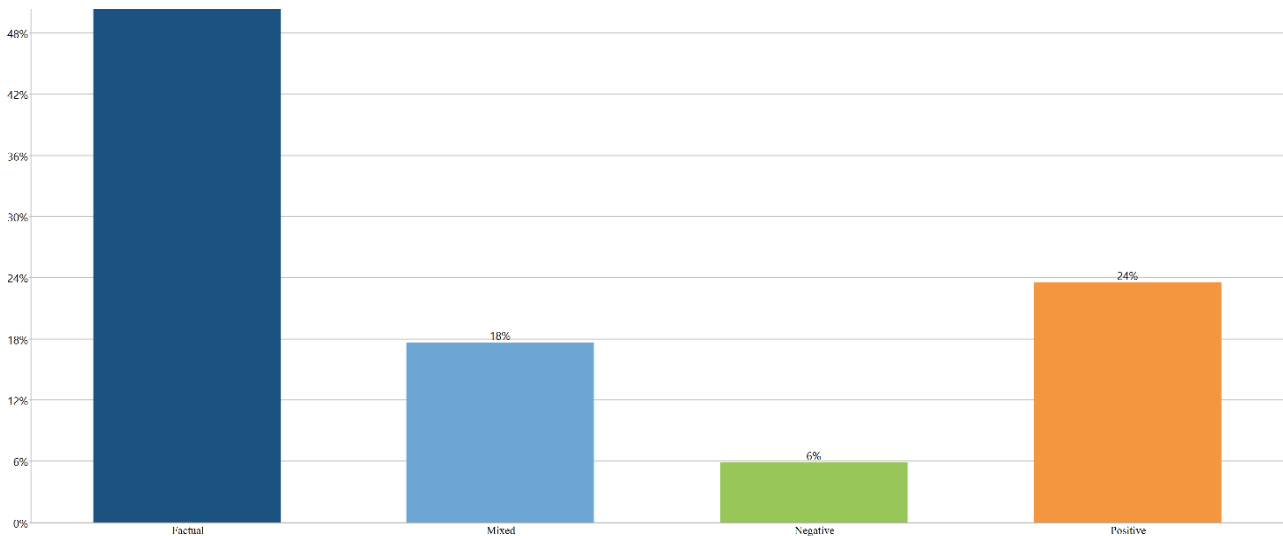
In general, it is noteworthy that among the articles reporting facts, without expressing particular opinions, the news stories concern the European policy packages to counter the covid crisis, including the temporary suspension of the ESM (*La Stampa*, 13 March 2020), the announcement of the suspension of the Schengen zone (*La Stampa*, 15 April 2020) and the call by France, Germany, Italy and Spain to strengthen the European security and defence dimension by supporting military missions in fragile countries (*La Stampa*, 30 May 2020).

Moreover, alongside the announcement of the RRF funds (*La Stampa*, 28 November 2020), the Commission's estimates of Italy's economic indices (*La Stampa*, 11 February 2021, 4 June 2021), as

well as indications on the European digital travel certificate (*La Stampa*, 18 April 2021, 8 July 2021) were reported.

Positive opinions are also substantial (24%).

FIGURE 3. PORTRAYAL OF THE EU IN ARTICLES FROM *LA STAMPA* (SOURCE: AUTHOR'S OWN ELABORATION)



An article published on 17 June 2020 reflects a positive view of the European Central Bank (ECB) and the European Commission, attributing them a significant role in reducing the spread between Italian and German government bonds. The ECB is praised for its timely intervention through the Pandemic Emergency Purchase Programme (Pepp), a plan to purchase public and private bonds in order to stabilize the eurozone. The European Commission, on the other hand, is praised for the creation of the Next Generation EU fund. In particular, the ECB is acknowledged for demonstrating that it is “present in supporting eurozone stability” (*La Stampa*, 17 June 2020) and for hinting at its readiness to “broaden measures to contain the financial turmoil” (*La Stampa*, 17 June 2020), and the Next Generation EU fund is seen as a welcome initiative by investors because it represents a “transfer of funds in pure solidaristic style”. In another article, a more general positive view of the European Union is expressed by highlighting the record reached in the indices of business and household confidence, indicating a clear economic and emotional recovery following the fallout of the pandemic (3 May 2021). With regard to the crisis in Italy, the article of 28 November 2020 positively emphasizes the Union's commitment to help manage the health and labor sector, quoting Von der Leyen's own words: “this is why I have been working for Italy since the beginning of the pandemic. First some patients were transported to Germany and Austria, some doctors arrived from abroad, and the European integration fund project went ahead” (*La Stampa*, 28 November 2020). This air of confidence can also be glimpsed through the words of Mario Monti, who declares, as quoted in the

same article, that “the EU has revitalized its way of deciding in emergencies, disconcerting the most scepticals” (*La Stampa*, 28 November 2020). Furthermore, it is pointed out that 'Italy's fight against the pandemic is also “made in Eu” (*La Stampa*, 21 September 2021), referring to the European Commission's contribution in supporting the fight against the pandemic through the purchase and distribution of disinfection robots in Italian healthcare facilities.

Mixed views on the handling of the pandemic and aid by the EU and Member States focus mainly on the issue of the RRF and how the measure was temporarily blocked due to an appeal by *Bündnis Bürgerwille*, a German anti-euro association linked to Bernd Lucke, the founding economist of the far-right party Alternative für Deutschland. (*La Stampa*, 27 March 2021). The appeal raised doubts about the legitimacy of the RRF funds, opening a debate on debt sharing, which is a controversial topic within the EU. The article points out that the appeal, which was accepted by the Karlsruhe Court, would have caused a serious delay that would have risked 'delaying the entry into force of the Next Generation EU and thus the arrival of the first funds destined to Italy' (*La Stampa*, 27 March 2021). The German court is also described as “the sword of Damocles” that “hangs over European integration once again” (*La Stampa*, 27 March 2021), highlighting how Germany has been an impediment to the implementation of this measure that is fundamental for the economic and social recovery of EU countries, including Italy. However, the article also reports how the European Commission and the German Minister of Finance are confident that the issue will be resolved soon and that the integrity of the EU decision-making process will not be compromised, showing determination to pursue the European recovery and cohesion plan despite the legal obstacles (*La Stampa*, 27 March 2021).

The remaining opinions identified as mixed refer to the Italian government's handling of the pandemic and its ability to meet the European Commission's demands for access to Recovery and Resilience Facility funds. Such a pattern of opinions, however, was not found in the newspaper *La Repubblica*. For example, the article of 8 July 2020 reports the Italian economic situation showing a GDP contraction of 11.2%, the worst in Europe, and an estimated unemployment growth of over 12.4% according to the OECD. Subsequently, however, it is emphasized that if on the one hand “Europe” can “certainly make its contribution” in improving the Italian situation, on the other hand “the hard work” must be performed by Italy (*La Stampa*, 8 July 2020). What is reported thus seems on the one hand to express trust in the EU's fundamental contribution, but on the other seems to place greater responsibility on the Italian government itself. And the opinion on the Italian government does not seem to be positive. Another article discusses Italy's failure to submit its 2020 National Reform Programme to the Commission, highlighting the lack of coordination and concreteness in the Italian

government's approach to European policies. A sense of regret and astonishment is noted for this shortcoming, also underlining how “a country that struggles to equip European dossiers risks not being able to benefit as much as it needs from the Recovery and Resilience Facility” (*La Stampa*, 28 June 2020). Notably in the article there is a criticism of the Italian policy approach, suggesting that it would be sufficient to follow clear guidelines and believe in the common European project instead of finding excuses or alibis for lack of action. It can be seen, therefore, that in this case *La Stampa's* opinion on the EU reflects a complex view, recognizing its benefits but also urging greater commitment and coordination from individual member states, particularly Italy.

Finally, as far as negative attitudes are concerned, among the articles in *La Stampa* only one was identified as such. The article of 27 July 2021 expresses a critical opinion of the European Commission's communication strategy regarding the vaccination campaign, describing it as being based on “fake news” (*La Stampa*, 27 July 2021) and highlights alleged omissions and inaccuracies in official statements. In particular, the article refers to the European Commission's official statement claiming that the European Union has kept its promises regarding reaching 70% of the adult population vaccinated by July. However, the text points out a discrepancy between the European Commission's claims and what was previously stated by Health Commissioner Stella Kyriakides, who had publicly acknowledged the delays in the EU vaccination campaign. This is specifically reported as follows:

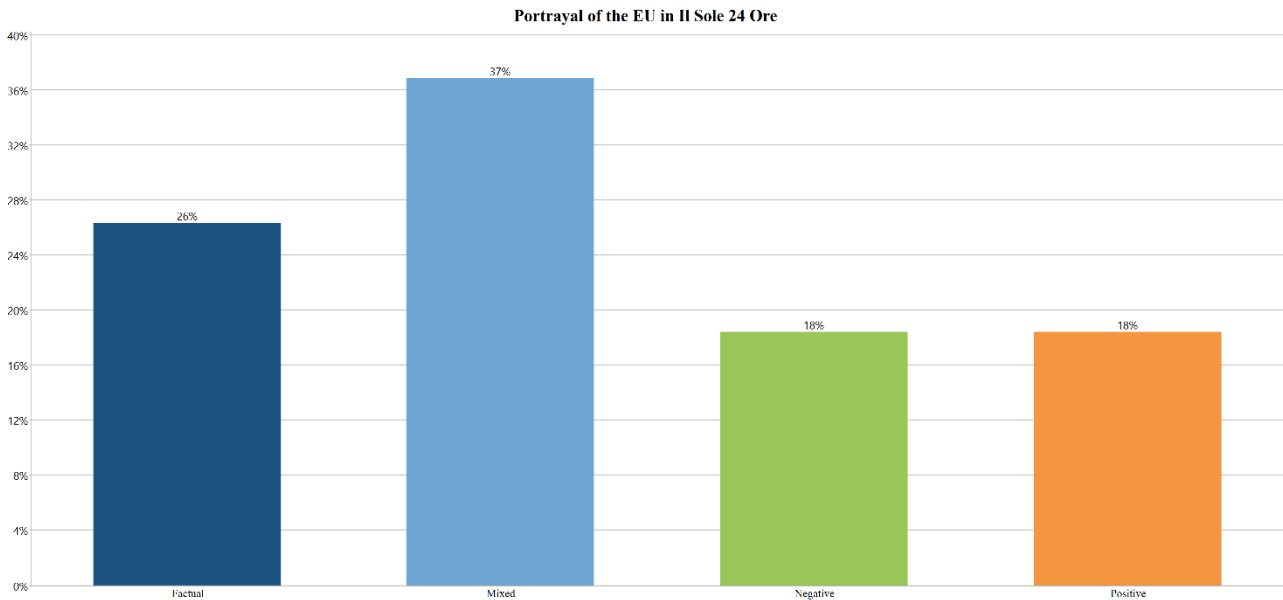
The EU Health Commissioner had therefore already publicly acknowledged the delays. Yet Von der Leyen wanted to play dumb. For the sake of visibility and the eagerness to tell everyone that the EU works for the whole citizenry and that the EU can be trusted, Von der Leyen proceeded with a reckless communication strategy. So much so that the announced press conference turns out to be a public statement, with no opportunity to ask questions (*La Stampa*, 27 July 2021)

In sum, the analysis of the articles in *La Stampa* newspaper reveals a variety of perspectives on the EU during the coronavirus crisis. While most of the articles are factual in nature, mainly highlighting the EU's actions and initiatives to deal with the pandemic, there is also a significant presence of positive opinions, applauding the EU's efforts in providing economic support and solidarity to its members. However, there is no shortage of mixed and negative opinions highlighting critical issues in the management of the pandemic and the European Commission's communication. In addition, the complexity of the relationship between the EU and the Member States emerges, with Italy often at the center of the debate regarding the coordination and implementation of EU policies.

4.4 *Il Sole 24 Ore*

The newspaper *Il Sole 24 Ore* reveals a significant majority of mixed opinions on the European Union in its articles (37%) while factual coverage accounts for 28%.

FIGURE 4. PORTRAYAL OF THE EU IN ARTICLES FROM *IL SOLE 24 ORE* (SOURCE: AUTHOR'S OWN ELABORATION)



At the same time, the favorable opinions shown in the newspaper towards the EU appear to share the same percentage as the negative ones (18%).

Starting with positive opinions, *Il Sole 24 Ore* appears to praise the EU Commission's decision to suspend the stability pact to provide flexibility to countries, allowing them to manage the COVID-19 crisis. In particular, it reports Ursula Von der Leyen's statement "We are all Italians" (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 20 March 2020), indicating a sense of solidarity and closeness with Italy during the COVID-19 crisis and emphasizing that the European Union is united in the fight against the pandemic and that all member states, not just Italy, are part of this collective effort. In another article entitled "What does Europe do for us? Here are the eight anti-virus moves by Brussels" (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 18 May 2020), all the efforts made by the European Commission are listed, covering "all fronts: from the economy to the internal market, from competition to free movement, from public health to procurement and foreign investment." (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 18 May 2020), and calling them "indispensable steps" to overcome the crisis and criticizing those who do not give relevance to these positive interventions ("Yet, positive interventions have taken a back seat to the usual scenario of an EU responsible for all ills") (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 18 May 2020).

More specifically, policies such as the Recovery and Resilience Facility and the SURE instrument are viewed positively by *Il Sole 24 Ore*. Even, the RRF is defined as a “game changer” that “will help European countries most affected by the coronavirus such as Italy” (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 20 May 2020) and support the European economy (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 11 November 2021) while the SURE fund, in an article titled “Integration that saves jobs” is considered a remarkable effort by the European Union to mitigate the negative impact of the pandemic on Italian employment (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 22 December 2020). Furthermore, just over a year after the start of the pandemic, *Il Sole 24 Ore* reports how the European Union's response to the COVID-19 crisis has been “extraordinary” (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 22 June 2021) and that there has been “an unparalleled spirit of solidarity” (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 16 May 2021). The article published on 16 May 2021 then quotes the words of the then Finance Minister and current Federal Chancellor of Germany Olaf Scholz, who describes the Next Generation EU as “an important milestone of European integration” and “an extraordinary achievement because it shows that the European Union is capable of acting united” (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 16 May 2021).

Turning to the articles that report mixed opinions, it can be seen from the analysis that some criticism is made of the European response to the pandemic in Italy as well as in the other member states, especially at the beginning of the crisis when the urgency of the situation was not assessed in a timely manner, but the efforts that were subsequently made by the Commission to help Europe recover are recognized. The article of 13 March 2020 positively reports the news of the suspension of the SGP (Stability and Growth Pact), acknowledged as “a first, important response by Brussels to the onslaught of the crisis” (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 13 March 2020). However, the article emphasizes the delay with which this measure was taken and how some countries such as France and Germany failed to take note of the serious situation, demanding that they “quickly adopt drastic measures to contain the virus, following the example of what our country is doing” (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 13 March 2020). Similarly, while the article of 23 March 2020 emphasizes the importance of the budgetary flexibility brought about by the suspension of the SGP, it is also admitted that the solution is not easy, emphasizing the “persistent resistance of the more traditionally rigorist Nordic countries” (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 23 March 2020). In other articles, the solidarity shown by some member states is praised, especially with regard to the supply of sanitary material (“France has donated one million masks and 20,000 protective gowns to Italy; from Germany one million masks are on their way, 300 respirators have already been delivered”) (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 31 March 2020). However, this solidarity is described as delayed and “less conspicuous” (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 31 March 2020) when compared with that shown by other non-European countries: “in the days when the coronavirus emergency still seemed to be just an Italian problem, with the rest of Europe looking on from the outside and more concerned with protecting itself, the first to fill the void by picking up Rome's requests for help were the Russians, the Chinese,

and the Cubans” (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 31 March 2020). The aid provided by France and Germany is thus appreciated, but at the same time it is emphasized that a more sudden response was expected from the Union. With regard to the SURE jobs aid plan, although it is positively acknowledged as an additional EU support instrument, the article of 6 April 2020 raises the question of the fair distribution of a total of EUR 100 billion in financial assistance among EU member states, considering the disparities in price levels between countries such as Denmark and Bulgaria, and highlighting the persistent North-South divide in Italy as a further obstacle (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 6 April 2020). In another article, it is interesting to note how the positive opinion towards the European Union emerges from a criticism of the sovereignist leaders Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini for not recognizing that Italy would not have been able to cope with the pandemic crisis without the Union (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 27 April 2020), emphasizing, however, the need for further efforts by the latter and highlighting the problem of the fair distribution of resources among EU Member States through grants and instead of loans, with a focus on the need to find sufficient funds for the RRF (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 27 April 2020; *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 27 May 2020). It is precisely with regard to the RRF and the redistribution of funds that *Il Sole 24 Ore* on the one hand praises the European Commission's initial proposal to allocate resources according to contagion rates in the Member States and past economic performance, while on the other hand it stresses that although the decision to focus on current economic damage is clear and understandable, it would have been desirable to consider more proactively the vulnerability of individual European regions, especially in relation to their industrial structure, which, the article explains, are exposed to two types of vulnerability internal (economic consequences of local contagion and impact of new safety regulations) and external (participation in global value chains) (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 23 July 2020).

Continuing on to opinions regarding vaccines in Europe, *Il Sole 24 Ore* criticizes the EU for the slowness and inefficiency of its campaign, with unfavorable comparisons to the US, the UK and Israel (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 2 September 2021). However, it acknowledges a change in the European Union's performance in this regard, which has gone “in nine months from flop to global leader” in relation to the percentage of the population vaccinated in 2021. It is observed how, specifically, this success is due, as *Il Sole 24 Ore* expresses it, to the implementation of the Eu Digital Covid Certificate, which is considered an “indispensable” tool to allow the European population to travel safely, especially during the summer months (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 2 September 2021; *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 13 September 2021). Nonetheless, it is noted that the European digital certificate, although considered generally efficient, is still criticized in an article of 23 November 2021 that highlights its weaknesses and the complications generated by the fragmented approach of the member states in applying and

interpreting the rules, which creates “chaos” and confusion among citizens (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 23 November 2021).

Among the articles in which purely critical views of the European Union and its efforts to respond to the pandemic emergency were found were arguments concerning the lack of solidarity between member states, in which prejudices between northern and southern European states were also mentioned, and the management of the European vaccination campaign. For example, the article in *Il Sole 24 Ore* of 6 April 2020 strongly criticizes the northern European countries' argument that southern countries, such as Italy, intend to exploit the pandemic in order to obtain funding through Eurobonds, describing this “prejudice” as “nonsense” (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 6 April 2020). The inadequacy of the European Stability Mechanism as a reference instrument to help countries deal with the pandemic crisis is also highlighted, criticizing its intergovernmental nature that would allow “the decision-making and veto power of a few large countries (and their parliaments) to be magnified” (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 6 April 2020). The intergovernmental nature of the European Union is also viewed negatively with regard to the health crisis and the administration of vaccines. Specifically, the article of 23 March 2021, using a comparison between the US and EU management of the vaccination campaign, considers that the US campaign had “twice the vaccination efficiency of the European one” (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 23 March 2021). In fact, it is pointed out that the mistakes made by the European Commission on vaccination policy are caused by the “constraints imposed by the member states (with regard to the cost of vaccines, the responsibilities of pharmaceutical companies, negotiation times)”, which instead are not present in the United States (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 23 March 2021). In conclusion, it thus seems that the critical views of *Il Sole 24 Ore* towards the European Union refer specifically to the absence of authority of the European Commission and excessive power of the European Council (*Il Sole 24 Ore* 29 March 2021).

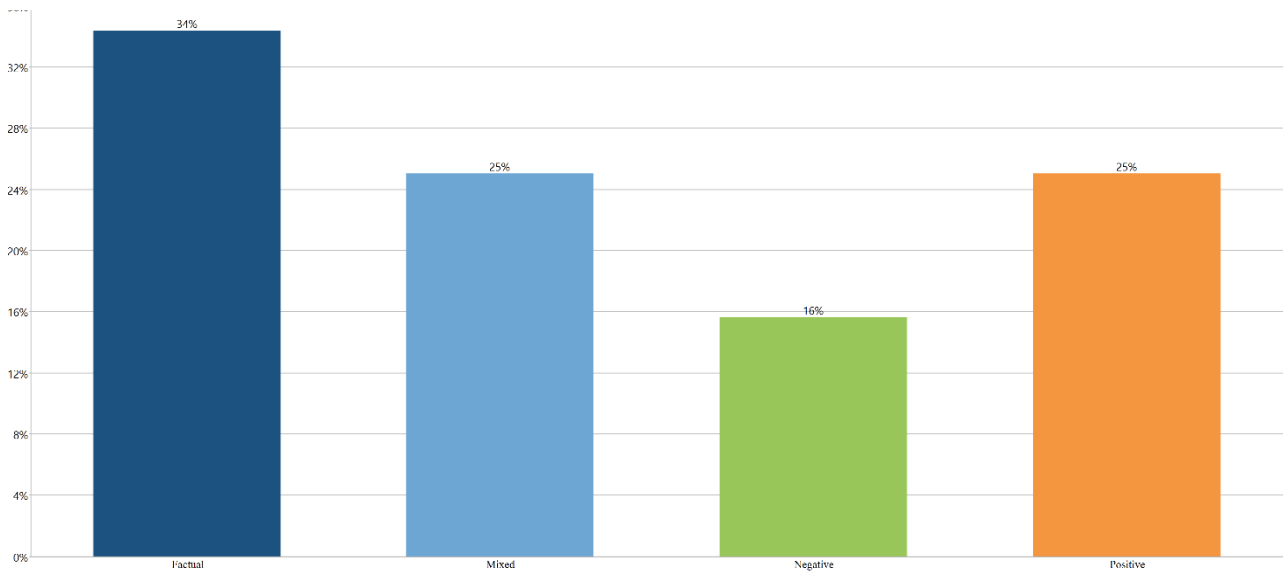
Ultimately, a narrative emerges from the analysis of this specific newspaper that emphasizes the importance of a strong and supportive European Union, but at the same time highlights the need for reforms and improvements in order to effectively tackle future challenges.

4.5 *Corriere della Sera*

When analyzing the articles in the *Corriere della Sera* newspaper, there appears again to be a large proportion of factual articles (34%) but an equally large proportion of positive and mixed articles (25%) (Fig. 4). The factual articles generally report monthly bulletins about the number of covid infections in together with news about the actions of the European Union, the Italian government and regional authorities to counter the health crisis (e.g. see *Corriere della Sera*, 1 July 2020).

Positive comments are observed regarding the Recovery and Resilience Facility and the Temporary Support to Mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency (SURE). The newspaper in specific expresses how the Union is “making an enormous effort” (*Corriere della Sera*, 4 August 2020) and how the measures put in place by the EU have mitigated the impact of the crisis in Italy even in the labour market (*Corriere della Sera*, 5 November 2020; *Corriere della Sera*, 12 May 2021). In addition, the newspaper often reports the words of the former Prime Minister Mario Draghi to parliament, who considers the role of the European Union to be “unique, necessary and irreplaceable” (*Corriere della Sera*, 20 October 2021) and emphasizes that without its intervention, Italy would not have had the ability to recover from the pandemic crisis.

FIGURE 5. PORTRAYAL OF THE EU IN CORRIERE DELLA SERA (SOURCE: AUTHOR’S OWN ELABORATION)



The newspaper's mixed opinions in the broader context underline how the European response came late in Italy. The article of 16 April 2020 reports, through the words of Ursula Von der Leyen herself, how “many were absent when Italy needed help at the beginning of this pandemic” (*Corriere della Sera*, 16 April 2020). On the other hand, however, it is noticeable how even the acknowledgement of this delay, and the sense of solidarity conveyed by Von der Leyen's words “we are all Italians”, had a positive impact on the opinion of *Corriere della Sera*, which emphasized in an interview with the President of the European Commission how significant these words were for Italy (*Corriere della Sera*, 21 March 2020). In an article in the *Corriere della Sera*, an investigation by the British Guardian newspaper is reported, which denounced the “shocking silence” with which the EU greeted Rome's request for help during the early stages of the virus' spread, when the number of contagions in Italy was rising every 48 hours (*Corriere della Sera*, 15 July 2020). This suggests criticism of the EU for its lack of a timely and coordinated response to the crisis. On the other hand, the article quotes the

Brussels Commissioner for Emergency Management, Janez Lenarcic, as saying that the reason for the lack of support would not be a lack of solidarity, but rather a lack of equipment and the general unpreparedness of all European countries to deal with the pandemic. This suggests a justification or mitigation of EU responsibility, as it highlights that Italy was not the only one unprepared and that the lack of solidarity may not have been intentional but rather due to circumstances and logistical limitations.

Another topic that shows mixed opinions in the *Corriere della Sera* articles is related to the distribution of vaccines. In both the article of 2 February 2021 and the article of 25 February 2021, on the one hand, the agreement on the European vaccine certificate is mentioned, which represents a step forward in coordination between member states to facilitate travel and economic recovery (*Corriere della Sera*, 2 February 2021; *Corriere della Sera*, 25 February 2021). On the other hand, both articles underline the criticism of the European Commission for its management of contracts with pharmaceutical companies and for delays in the delivery of vaccine doses. In particular, the AstraZeneca case and the problems with deliveries in the first quarter are mentioned (*Corriere della Sera*, 2 February 2021; *Corriere della Sera*, 25 February 2021).

Lastly, among the mixed opinions of the *Corriere della Sera*, it is also worth mentioning how the article of 24 April 2021 positively recognizes the active involvement of the European Commission in requesting details on the reforms envisaged in Italy's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), demonstrating an interest in ensuring the effective use of European funds (*Corriere della Sera*, 24 April 2021).

However, a “long-standing scepticism” of EU authorities on Italy's ability to implement structural reforms is also emphasized, highlighting internal tensions and obstacles in the process of defining reforms (*Corriere della Sera*, 24 April 2021). It seems here too, therefore, as in the case of the articles in *La Stampa*, that the criticism is actually directed rather at the Italian government than at the European Union.

The articles in *Corriere della Sera* that show a negative view of the European Union's handling of the pandemic crisis, with the exception of one article expressing criticism of the lack of involvement of Italian local authorities in the decisions taken in Brussels (*Corriere della Sera*, 12 October 2020), mainly concern the issue of vaccine distribution (*Corriere della Sera*, 25 January 2021). The article of 4 March 2021 highlights the European Union's decision to block the export of AstraZeneca vaccine shots to Australia, due to the “shortage of doses” in the EU (*Corriere della Sera*, 4 March 2021). This measure, although symbolic due to the small number of doses involved, reflects a growing frustration within the EU over the delay in vaccination campaigns compared to other nations such as the US and

UK. Furthermore, the article highlights the failures of pharmaceutical companies producing vaccines approved by the European Medicines Agency (EMA), raising doubts about the effectiveness of the EU's management of vaccine procurement and distribution (*Corriere della Sera*, 4 March 2021). In another article, the lack of coordination in the distribution and procurement of vaccines is specifically criticised, pointing out that the idea of entrusting the EU with the procurement of vaccines, while theoretically valid, has not proved effective in practice (*Corriere della Sera*, 23 March 2021). Specifically, the lack of a central decision-making authority in the EU is emphasized, suggesting that such a decentralized European approach may be inadequate to deal with the pandemic crisis (*Corriere della Sera*, 23 March 2021). This article also finally compares the EU's response to the pandemic with that of the United States, adding the following words as a conclusion: “When we look across the Atlantic, we can be sure that the United States has a government. We, on the other hand, have regulations and coordination” (*Corriere della Sera*, 23 March 2021).

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

In the previous chapter, all four Italian newspapers' attitudes towards the European Union during COVID-19 were examined. Furthermore, it was observed that, with the exception of the articles noted as reporting factual news, the majority of opinions can be described as positive or mixed. However, there are nuances to these opinions that are worthy of an analysis that goes beyond the positive/mixed/negative categorization and reveals in detail the nature of support, or lack thereof, towards the EU.

First of all, the analysis reveals a significant presence of discussion regarding the need for solidarity from the EU towards Italy, especially during the first phase of the pandemic crisis. Indeed, reference is repeatedly made to the delay with which the EU took action to help Italy, but also to how some Member States were initially reluctant to approve financial support to mitigate the economic and health damage caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. With the discussion of the Recovery and Resilience Facility fund, and thus a concrete test of European policy to deal with the crisis, the opinions of all the newspapers analysed generally shift towards support for the European Union, which would seem to play more of a life-saving role (Carletti, 2021).

Nevertheless, it is worth explaining specifically what kind of support, or in some cases, criticism, is revealed in the analysis of the newspapers “*La Stampa*”, “*La Repubblica*”, “*Corriere della Sera*” and “*Il Sole 24 Ore*”. Taking into consideration the theories of Easton (1975) and Scheingold (1970), one can observe attitudes in the Italian media that resemble the framework proposed by the two scholars.

The analysis of Italian newspapers reveals that almost all opinions (positive, negative or mixed) in “*La Repubblica*”, “*La Stampa*”, “*Corriere della Sera*” and “*Il Sole 24 Ore*” appear to refer on one hand, to the importance of solidarity and cooperation in the European Union, thus showing discussions of polity. However, it would be incoherent not to note equally a significant presence of opinions that seem to show support for, or criticism of, specific EU policies, such as the economic measures that appear most often, namely the Recovery and Resilience Facility Fund and the temporary suspension of the Stability and Growth Pact. It, therefore, appears as if this type of habit is based on a specific/utilitarian approach theorized by Easton (1975) and Lindberg and Scheingold (1970).

It would actually not be the first time that such an approach has been visible in Italy vis-à-vis the European Union. As Giuliani (2006) and Lucarelli (2015) explain, Italy has progressively shifted from an approach of idealistic Europeanism, as a country among the founders of the European project, towards a more materialistic and utilitarian approach. Lucarelli (2015) specifically in her research in which she analyses the evolution of attitudes of public opinion and parties towards European integration, she points out how during the First Republic (1970-1990) support could be considered of an affective type, while starting from the Second Republic (1990) this support changed acquiring specific/utilitarian characteristics when the negative effects of integration in everyday life began to be perceived in Italy (Lucarelli, 2015). In addition, Brunazzo (2020) refers to the presence in Italy of “pro-Europeans out of desperation”, i.e. those who support the EU mainly because they lack trust in Italian political institutions and the national political class, and consider EU membership as an advantage. Although these two studies demonstrating an utilitarian and policy-specific nature of support for the EU are based on analyses made on public opinion and parties, and not on media specifically, it seems worth noting how this phenomenon can also be seen in this analysis of Italian newspapers. Specifically, some “pro-Europeans out of desperation” stances can be noted in particular among the articles of the newspaper “*La Stampa*”, whose opinions identified as mixed show several criticisms and distrust of the Italian government's management of policies carried out by the European Union to counter the pandemic crisis (*La Stampa*, 28 June 2020; *La Stampa*, 28 July 2020). This perspective also aligns with the research conducted by Miconi, Cannizzaro, and Risi (2023), who delved into the analysis of social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter to explore the narratives surrounding the EU as disseminated by Italian users. Their findings revealed a noteworthy shift in focus, with political and media narratives predominantly attributing blame to national authorities for the inefficiencies in managing the pandemic crisis in Italy, rather than targeting European institutions directly. This shift had a profound impact on public perception, transforming Europe from a scapegoat for domestic issues to a benchmark for evaluating the performance of Italy's national government.

It was also noted that, in the same newspapers analyzed, and sometimes in the same articles, several criticisms addressed to specific policies implemented by the European Union during the pandemic crisis were also present, but they were simultaneously followed by proposals for solutions. This specific phenomenon, which cannot be defined as support for the EU but neither as lack of support (Euro-scepticism), resembles Euro-alternativism as theorized by FitzGibbon (2013) and addressed by Bijsmans (2020) in his research. Some articles, therefore, remain fundamentally supportive of the EU and the idea of European integration, while making constructive criticisms and proposing alternatives or modifications (Bijmas, 2020). This approach emerges in particular in the newspaper “*Il Sole 24*

Ore”, in which one can see, among the mixed and negative articles, how, following criticism of the EU's handling of the pandemic crisis, proposals for solutions, or rather alternatives, to the problems noted are reported. As seen, for example, “*La Stampa*” puts forward alternative proposals regarding the allocation of RRF funds that suggest carefully considering the vulnerability of individual European regions (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 23 July 2020), reviewing the fair distribution of SURE fund resources among EU member states, considering the disparities in price levels between countries and trying to overcome North-South divisions (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 6 April 2020), and allocating funds through grants instead of loans, thus ensuring greater equity and a more effective distribution of resources (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 27 April 2020; *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 27 May 2020). Moreover, the Euro-alternativist approach can also be traced back to the stance found in both “*Il Sole 24 Ore*” and “*Corriere della Sera*” on the need to establish a stronger and above all supranational power to be able to effectively manage the pandemic crisis, with particular regard to the issue of vaccine distribution (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 6 April 2020) and sometimes even showing federalist visions for the future of the Union (*Corriere della Sera*, 23 March 2021).

Overall, despite the fact that Italy faced difficult times due to the pandemic and suffered from the delay in EU intervention and from the initial lack of solidarity, it can be argued on the basis of the results of the analysis conducted that the Italian press does not seem to have expressed particularly controversial or assertive opinions towards the European Union, on the contrary, it seems for the most part to express support towards specific policies implemented in aid of the most in need countries. Therefore, to answer the first question of this research “How was the European Union portrayed by Italian media during the COVID-19 pandemic?” it can be concluded that generally the newspapers analysed reported positively on all events concerning EU affairs, with particular regard to aid policies to counter the crisis such as the Recovery and Resilience Facility, although they did at times show constructive criticism. It should be noted, however, that there is also a considerable amount of articles that do not express opinions but merely report facts. All this says, to answer the second, somewhat more specific research question “What kind of attitudes do the Italian media show towards the European Union?” that, first of all, there seems to be a tendency to show more interest in specific policies than in European integration and the union as a political order, thus showing a kind of attitude that goes back to Easton's (1975) and Lindberg and Scheingold's (1970) concept of specific/utilitarian support. Specifically, then, as seen above in the results, several views reported in the articles seem to draw on FitzGibbon's (2013) Euro-alternativism as found by Patrick Bijsmans (2020) in his research on European media attitudes. Rather than outright criticism of either the work or the ideals of the European Union, it seems that during the pandemic the Italian media limited themselves to highlighting problems and proposing solutions and alternatives. In the Italian case, and in the specific

context of the pandemic crisis, therefore, it is possible to state that when media opinions are not positive about the work of the European Union, they show themselves as Euro-alternativist rather than Eurosceptic.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

This thesis aimed at filling a gap in research on media attitudes towards the European Union during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a specific focus on the Italian press. First, an overview of the concept of Euroscepticism and EU attitudes was presented, followed by a focus on the crisis context, the Italian context and the media. Thereafter, through a detailed analysis of four major Italian newspapers – “*La Repubblica*”, “*Corriere della Sera*”, “*La Stampa*” and “*Il Sole 24 Ore*” - the study investigated how the EU was portrayed and what attitudes were prevalent during this critical period. The results contribute significantly to the understanding of media narratives and their implications for public opinion on the EU in Italy.

The analysis revealed that the Italian press generally reported EU actions and policies during the pandemic in a factual manner. A large proportion of articles focused on providing information without expressing strong opinions. When opinions were presented, they tended to be more supportive or constructively critical rather than overtly negative or Eurosceptic. Supportive attitudes towards the European Union focused on specific policies, proving in line with the support-specific/utilitarian theory of Easton (1975) and Lindberg and Scheingold (1970). Although there was a general tendency to report positively on EU actions, some constructive criticism was also noted. These criticisms were not intended to discredit the EU, but rather to suggest improvements and highlight areas where the response could have been more effective. This is in line with the concept of Euro-alternativism, where the focus is on proposing alternatives and solutions within the EU rather than on opposition or Euroscepticism.

Another noteworthy aspect found in the analysis is the emergence of ‘pro-European out of desperation’ positions. This position reflected a complex and somewhat paradoxical sentiment, in which support for the EU is motivated more by frustration and dissatisfaction with national governance than by any real enthusiasm for the EU.

Overall, the findings presented here suggest that despite the severe crisis period in Italy, characterized by lockdowns, uncertainty, and an initial sense of abandonment, the Italian media sphere expressed itself more positively than negatively towards the European Union. This outcome is somewhat surprising given the context, where one might have expected a more critical stance due to the intense hardships faced by the country. Nevertheless, as observed, special attention is given to the specific policies of the EU rather than to the institution as a whole. This approach may have implications for

the Italian media's perception of European integration during crisis, that suggest a tendency towards a practical rather than an ideological viewpoint of the EU.

This thesis contributes to understanding media attitudes towards the EU in Italy during the COVID-19 crisis. By illuminating the complex interplay between media and the European Union it provides valuable insights for scholars, policymakers and media practitioners. The COVID-19 pandemic proved to be a test for the resilience and cohesion of the European Union and the lessons learnt from this period will be crucial in addressing future challenges and strengthening the European project.

Although this research aimed to provide a general introductory picture of the media portrayal of the EU in Italy, it is not without its limitations. The analysis was confined to four major newspapers, which, while influential, do not represent the entirety of the Italian media landscape. Future research could expand the scope to include a broader range of media outlets and consider other forms of media, such as television and social media, to provide a more comprehensive picture. Further analysis could also include surveys to investigate how media impacts public opinion on matters related to the European Union. Additionally, analyzing other newspapers could ensure replicability or reveal whether similar results can be observed across different publications. The subjective nature of qualitative content analysis means that different interpretations are possible; therefore, further studies could use different methodologies or theoretical frameworks to validate and extend these findings.

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