The European Union on the Italian Mainstream Media: A Restraint or a Megaphone for Euroscepticism?

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Abstract

2014 European Parliament elections revealed a growing consensus for Eurosceptic parties. Also in countries considered as Europhilic, political parties criticizing the European integration process improved their electoral performance. Several scholars underlined that such negative climate of opinion combined with the economic crisis and its consequences, which required common and organized policies coordinated by EU, is facilitating and boosting a process of EU politicization. Literature on this regard provides a large theoretical framework, in this paper we choose to focus on EU salience, operationalized as the visibility of EU on mainstream media coverage.

In particular we address the case of Italy, which represents a privileged point of view for understanding the combined dynamics of Euroscepticism and EU politicization within the frame of a (former) Europhilic country. The aim of this paper is thus to understand to what extent the growth of the Euroscepticism, along with the effects of the economic crisis, have affected the public debate on Europe and the European Union during the Election campaign for 2014. More in detail, we suggested that a) Eurosceptic political actors are positively correlated to the EU salience compared to other political actors within the news coverage; b) news stories concerning economic and financial issues are positively correlated to the EU salience compared to other political news items; b) the EU coverage is negatively framed since both the consequences of economic and financial crisis as well as Eurosceptic political actors emphasize critical issues.

We rely on an original dataset based on a content analysis carried out along the 50 days prior the 2014 EP elections on four mainstream newspapers and four mainstream TV newscast. A total of 4,328 news items have been coded; news items specifically focused on politics are 3,018: 2,499 were published on newspaper, 519 broadcasted on TV. Interestingly, our expectation are only partially confirmed by data. If EU salience is positively affected by Euroscepticism and economic and financial issues, Italian mainstream media adopt a quite positive approach towards EU. In other words, media normalized the resentment against EU driven by Eurosceptic parties by acting as a brake.

Keywords: Politicization, Europeanization, EP elections, Italy, Public Sphere
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1. Introduction

The 2014 European elections can be considered in many ways a turning point. As regards electoral results, they were marked by a general rise of the Euro sceptic parties, most notably that of the Front National party in France or that of the UK Independence Party in United Kingdom. More generally, these were the first elections held in a political climate marked by the consequences of the economic and the Euro crisis. According to Hooghe and Marks (2009), these events have negatively affected the process of European integration, by fostering the spread of Euro sceptic sentiments among the population and a wide use of anti-EU rhetoric, even by traditional political parties. For other authors, instead, the European institutions, on the pretext of the crisis, have strengthened the process of European integration and deepening monetary union by introducing a number of technical reforms resulting in a reduced autonomy of the member states on political economy, supervision of financial markets and the related sanctions regime (Schimmelfennig 2014; Tosun, Wetzel and Zapryanova 2014). However, most scholars agree that the process of politicization of Europe has accelerated over the past few years. Evidences of this process could be observed on three main dimensions: the growing salience of Europe, a polarisation of opinion, and an expansion of actors and audiences engaged in monitoring EU affairs (de Wilde, Leupold & Schmidtke 2016: 4).

This article focuses on the first dimension - salience - and it will assess what are the features of the coverage about the EU and what determines the salience of EU news stories in Italy. It also aims at clarifying which is the role played by the mainstream media with respect to the process of politicization of Europe and the growing Euroscepticism. As well known, the media play a central role within the European public sphere and the coverage that they provide to the actors and to European issues can contribute to reduce the democratic and information deficit that marks the EU institutions (Ward 2004).

This article examines mainstream media coverage of the 2014 EU elections, adopting the case of Italy as an illustration. When interpreting the results of the 2014 elections, the most stressed point was the performance of Matteo Renzi, leader of the Partito Democratico (PD – Democratic Party) and current Italian prime minister. He was able to lead a pro-EU mainstream centre-left party to an unexpected 40.8 per cent, one of the few cases of governing party in Europe not punished by voters. This performance has overshadowed another extremely significant data: also in Italy there has been a veritable explosion of Eurosceptic parties even more relevant than in other European countries.

For a long time Italy has been considered as a very Europhile country (Huysseune 2010; Conti and Memoli 2013). In 2009, among the main political parties, the only ones supporting Eurosceptic positions were the ethno-regionalist party Lega Nord (LN – Northern League) and two parties of the radical left (Rifondazione Comunista Party and Left and Freedom Party). In both cases, Europe was the subject of criticism in general, but the target of election campaigns did not focus directly against the EU.
In 2014 the situation has radically changed. Over the past five years the Eurosceptic supply within the Italian party system has substantially increased. In addition to the LN and the Radical Left (renamed ’Tsipras List’ for the occasion), other three parties have joined the Eurosceptic team. On the Right field, Berlusconi’s Forza Italia (FI) ran a campaign under the slogan ‘More Italy in Europe, Less Europe in Italy’\(^1\). On the same field Fratelli d’Italia (FDI – Brothers of Italy), a Berlusconi ally, has been campaigning close to the Eurosceptic positions of Marine Le Pen. Finally, the most important Euro-sceptic party in the 2014 elections was the Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S – Five Star Movement) whose campaign was based on the request for a referendum on the Euro and the refusal of the restrictive policies imposed by the EU (e.g. the implementation of the fiscal compact and balanced budget principle into the Italian Constitution)\(^2\). To sum up, while the Eurosceptic parties did not reach 20 per cent in 2009, they have exceeded 50 per cent of the votes in 2014\(^3\).

The Italian case is therefore interesting because it allows to understand reasons leading a country from a situation of (relative) Europhilia to a more open criticism or opposition to the EU. In particular it allows to investigate the role of mainstream media that, in many ways, continue to be the unknown player in European integration (Trenz 2008). The results address the question of which attitude towards the EU the media played during the crisis. More in general they show the combined consequence that the presence of economic crisis and Eurosceptic parties result in public debate.

In the following paragraph, we discuss literature about politicization and Europeanization of national public sphere paying attention to political and media dynamics affecting EU salience within the news coverage as well as the role played by issues and political actors. In paragraph 4 we discuss methods and sample, while in paragraph 5 we examine the coverage of the 2014 EP elections campaign in Italy. This analysis explores differences between media EU coverage compared to other political news items and our general hypothesis is that Eurosceptic parties may be positively correlated with the EU salience within the EP elections news coverage assessing which conditions may affect the salience of EU within the media coverage. Descriptive analyses provide preliminary information on this regard, while a multivariate analysis will test our hypothesis. According to our findings, while Italian mainstream media cover EU issues through a more positive frame compared to domestic political issues, there is no evidence that the growing political relevance of Eurosceptic parties within the Italian system has increased the probabilities that the media publish EU news stories. We can also clearly see that what really affects the coverage on EU are the economic issues, especially linked to the austerity policies supported by the EU. We conclude that Italian mainstream media has acted as a brake for Euroscepticism, by reducing the coverage of those parties opposed to the EU and providing a public image of Europe more positive than the Italian one.

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

\(^2\) The M5S election manifesto is available at: beppegrillo.it/europee/programma.

\(^3\) In 2009 EU Elections, all together, Eurosceptic parties gained 16.7% of votes. In detail: NL 10.2%, Communist Refoundation (RC - Rifondazione Comunista) 3.4%, Left Ecology and Freedom (SEL - Sinistra ecologia e Libertà) 3.1%. In 2014, the Eurosceptic votes raises up to 51.8%, in detail: M5S 21.2%, FI 16.8%, NL 6.2%, Tsipras List 4% and FDI3.7%.
2. Politicization of the EU integration and Europeanization of national public sphere: The salience of European elections within news coverage

The economic crisis and the Euro crisis have led European issues at the centre of deep controversy among EU citizens both in media debates and in party political competition (Marks and Steenbergen 2004; Risse 2015). Two ongoing processes explain these transformations: the politicisation of Europe, on the one hand, the Europeanization of national public spheres, on the other hand.

The process of ‘politicisation’ of European institutions and issues has been studied mainly focusing on party politics, media coverage and public opinion (De Wilde 2011; De Wilde and Zürn 2012; Hooghe and Marks 2009; Statham and Trenz 2013; De Wilde, Leupold and Schidtke 2016). Even though different positions exist of what exactly politicisation involves, de Wilde, Leupold & Schmidtke (2016) point out that scholars operationalize politicisation around three intertwined elements: (a) salience of Europe, (b) a polarisation of opinion, and (c) expansion of actors engaged with the EU (cf. De Wilde 2011; De Wilde and Zürn 2012; Green-Pedersen 2012; Hutter and Grande 2014; Statham and Trenz 2013; Hutter, Grande, & Kriesi, 2016).

The persistence of the Eurozone crisis, the increasing citizens’ discontent and vote gains for Eurosceptic parties both at national and European level has prompted several scholars to argue that politicization of Europe will inevitably advance (Statham and Trenz 2013) and that efforts to reverse this trend have little chance of success (De Wilde e Zürn 2012). This picture also implies that important actors of this new wave of politicisations are populist, right-wing and national conservatives parties (Hooghe and Marks 2009; Dolezal and Hellström 2016). As regards issues, economy and immigration are those more connected with the process of politicization. The Euro crisis has made clear that macroeconomic factors as well as the distribution of wealth between EU member states have become essential elements in explaining the politicisation of Europe (Statham and Trenz 2013, Leupold 2016 Wonka 2016). Immigration is considered a «twin issue» of European integration (Hoeglinger 2016). As argued by Kriesi et al. (2012), both issues are part of an emerging new globalisation cleavage. However, immigration is more salient, and conservative traditional, authoritarian and nationalist parties have emphasised immigration much more than European integration. According to Hoeglinger (2016: 59) «not European integration, but immigration is the issue these parties first turn to in order to mobilise their constituencies. Moreover, immigration is emphasised most by parties with a culturally conservative and an economic rightist stance». The sum of these elements - populist, nationalists and Eurosceptic political actors, together with controversial issues such as the Euro crisis and immigration - has thus undoubtedly produced an increase of politicization, that has however negatively affected the integration process in both national public debates and public opinion (Grande and Hutter 2016; Grande and Kriesi 2016).

Besides the process of politicization of Europe, in the last few decades a second political process took place, namely the Europeanization of national public spheres, understood as a process through which national media translate to their domestic audience the specific and often technical contents which are discussed at the European level (Schlesinger and Kevin 2000; Kevin 2003; Koopmans and Pfetsch 2007). Precisely because of the greater politicization of European issues, even the national public spheres have become more Europeanized in recent years (Risse 2014).
Empirical studies of the Europeanization of national public spheres have operationalized the concept by looking at: (1) the attention of national media for EU politics, (2) domestication of European issues, (3) discourses on European matters, (4) similarities between media coverage of European issues in different member states, (5) communicative exchange between national public spheres, and (6) European identity constructions (Bärenreuter et al. 2009: 13-20). While points 4 and 5 refer to a comparative framework and point 6 does not match the focus of this article, the remaining three elements are essential to clarify how the media cover EU issues.

- **The attention of national media for EU politics:** European Union has always been weakly covered by the national media (Machill et al. 2006; de Vreese 2002). European elections and some other major institutional or political summit were the only occasions when, at least in part, the media attention focused on European issues (Boomgaarden et al. 2010). Notwithstanding, the process of Europeanization of national public spheres is considered by many scholars as a process constantly growing, albeit slowly (Vliegenthart et al. 2008). Last research showed that visibility of the EP elections in Italy was close to the old member states’ average, with a declining trend between 1999 and 2009. The 2009 EU elections confirmed the low involvement and the scarce interest of Italian mainstream media in the campaign election coverage, combined with a on-going process of ‘transnationalization’ of public opinion, defined as ‘an increasing tendency of journalistic circles and the media [...] to deal, in a European perspective, with events and issues of other national contexts’ (Marletti and Mouchon 2005).

- **Domestication of European issues:** As regards issues coverage, according to the well-known ‘second-order election’ hypothesis (Reif and Schmitt 1980; Schmitt 2005; Hix and Marsh 2011), domestic issues usually prevailed on European ones. Nevertheless, as aforementioned, the process of Europeanization of national public spheres is having an impact on public and political agendas, therefore domestic problems tend to be increasingly covered together with European issues or in a European frame (Risse and van de Steeg 2003: 21; Krzyzanowski and Wodak, 2006).

- **Discourses on European matters:** Scholars agree that, while debates about the future of Europe and European institutions still lack so far, EU-discourses on concrete policies can be found when looking at the domestic member states' public debate. Bärenreuter et.al (2006), analysing the debate on the ratification of the Constitution in Germany found that discourses remained limited primarily to national spheres and, in addition, they focused on issues having little or no long term interest (i.e. the quality of the campaign) instead on more relevant issues about European integration.

The coverage on Europe and the EP elections thus plays an important role for both the politicization of Europe and the Europeanization of national public spheres. According to the theory of agenda setting (McCombs and Shaw 1972, 1993; Shah et al. 2009; Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007), the salience of a news story is central to explain how and why people think and rank various social issues. Problems receiving a high coverage by the media have the capacity to influence even the salience of the issue among voters (Scheufele 2000). There is thus a significant correlation between the amount of coverage generated by the media on a given issue and the importance that is attributed to it by citizens who get informed through the media. What has been only partially investigated, so far, are the factors affecting the salience of the EU within the media coverage.
Several studies have pointed out that the presence of Eurosceptic parties in a national context emphasizes the political discussion and coverage of European issues. For example, Schuck et al. (2011), analysing the 2009 EP elections in 27 EU member states argued that the salience of EP elections is increasing and that – under certain conditions – the degree of political contestation over Europe contributes to this growth. Based on a comparative research of 21 EU member states in 2009, van Spanje and de Vreese (2014) also found that media evaluations of the EU affect voting for Euro-sceptic parties. The concept of salience was also widely used to examine how political parties deal with European issues in order to achieve electoral advantage both by contesting European institutions (Steenbergen and Scott 2004) or by highlighting or neglecting the issue of European integration (Netjes and Binnema 2007).

A second series of studies have highlighted the importance of economic issues in coverage on Europe. Although suffering from a democratic deficit (Trenz 2008), it is undisputed that the EU, even before the economic and financial crisis, has been an active and prominent decision maker on the economic issues and that economy was one of the EU topic most covered by the media, beside politics (Deirdre 2003). Therefore, the crisis, which since 2008 has affected several European states, has increased the public debate on several EU institutions (such as the European Commission, European Central Bank, etc.) both at European and national level. For example Nienstedt, Kepplanger, and Quiring (2015) showed that in many countries media coverage blames national economic policies for the crisis, but that European institutions are often depicted as responsible for addressing it. Hubé, Salgado, and Puustinen (2015), focusing on the actors involved in the coverage of the Euro crisis, found that, although the national political leaders are still the most covered (in particular the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, appears in the news across the entire continent), also some heads of European institutions – mainly those related to economic issues – are relevant within the flow of news.

In this article we are interested in understanding whether the growth of the Euroscepticism, along with the effects of the economic crisis, have affected the public debate on Europe and the European Union in Italy. We studied especially which elements have contributed to define the features of media elections coverage. As is well known, the European elections are second order elections (Reif and Schmitt 1980): they are perceived as less important than national ones by voters as well as politicians and journalists tend to deal with them through domestic frames (De Vreese 2009). News media – especially legacy media – play a crucial role given that the majority of Italian voters, as well as the European ones, get political information mainly through television news and newspapers (e.g. Standard Eurobarometer, 84). Previous research has shown that the level of presence of EU news items can produce effects on the formation and change of public opinion and on voting behaviour. Low media coverage of the elections and European issues can increase, on the contrary, the indifference of citizens towards this type of elections and reduce the legitimacy of the European institutions (Azrout et al. 2012; Banducci and Semetko 2003; de Vreese and Boomgaard 2006). Studying the salience of Europe in the period before the elections allows to understand how the public debate in a given system – the Italian one in our case – provides visibility to the campaign, political actors and European issues. Moreover, it allows to fully understand which are the conditions that foster the visibility of EU news stories. At the same time, through the analysis of the tone of each news story, it will be clarify whether the media cover the EU in a positive or negative way.
Given the extant literature, our argument is that in Italy the 2014 EP elections have been a turning point. In addition to the growth of the EU as a crucial economic actor in the Italian public debate, a real political dispute between Europhile parties and Eurosceptic parties occurred for the first time. We argue that (H1) Eurosceptic political actors are positively correlated to the EU salience compared to other political actors within the news coverage, namely a higher visibility of Eurosceptic political actors will correspond to a higher salience of EU within media coverage. At the same time, we also expect that (H2) news stories concerning economic and financial issues are positively correlated to the EU salience compared to other political news items, that is the higher visibility of economic and financial issues will be associated with higher EU salience; (H3) the EU coverage is negatively framed since both the consequences of economic and financial crisis as well as the controversies on the EU emphasized by Eurosceptic political actors, in other words we expect that negative coverage will be likely to be correlated to EU salience.

4. Data and methods

The sample

This study draws upon a coverage content analysis carried out on the Italian ‘information environment’, intended, according to Jerit et al. (2006) as the amount and characteristics of media coverage during the election campaign. National newscasts and newspapers were analysed because of their importance as sources of political information, and also because citizens continue to be largely exposed to such media. We focused on a set of four television news bulletins and four national newspapers, selected according to two main criteria: the readership/audience of the outlets and their political orientation. More in detail, as regards newspapers, we considered Il Corriere della Sera and La Stampa as non-partisan media, while Il Giornale and la Repubblica have been included as, respectively, the main centre-right and centre-left newspapers. As regards TV newscast, we selected TG1 and La7 as neutral while TG5 and TG3 have been taken into account as the most significant newscast, respectively, for rightist and leftist voters.

Our analyses extended on a time period of 50 days before the EP election (7th April 2014 - 25th May 2014). All relevant news items were collected either digitally (TV) or as hardcopies (newspapers). As concerns the story selection, the first three stories of each evening newscast were analysed. On daily press, we adopted a different criteria of selection: a) all the news items reported in the front page were considered, regardless the issue addressed; b) all the opening news, the

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

5 La Repubblica is the second most read Italian newspaper (average daily circulation 433,892 year: 2014. Source: ADS - Accertamento Diffusione Stampa). Nevertheless, in our sample, it was considered for its political orientation, namely the editorial line explicitly against Silvio Berlusconi and the centre-right. Similarly Il Giornale was selected as the most read newspaper oriented against the centre-left (average daily circulation 175,752, year: 2014). In 2014, the audience of these four newscasts was on average 12,725,000, that is 67.0% of the total. Respectively: 5,502,000 (27.9%) for TG1, 4,351,000 (22.9%) for TG5, 1,781,000 (9.4%) for TG3 and 1,291,000 (6.8%) for La7. Source: AGCOM, 2015 Annual Report (Relazione annuale 2015), retrieved from: www.agcom.it.
editorial and all the news addressing issues on to national politics, the EU and/or the EU election have been considered with reference both on the front page and on the internal pages.

Coding was conducted by a 3 trained and supervised coders. Tests of intercoder reliability were repeated on the 10% of the sample yielding satisfactory results (reported below).

Final database includes a total of 4,328 news items: 3,662 newspaper stories and 576 TV stories. News items specifically focused on politics are 3,018: 2,499 were published on newspaper, 519 broadcasted on TV.

**Variables and coding procedures**

In this article we explore media coverage during the election campaign for the European Parliamentary elections. The purpose was to understand which are the main factors driving EU salience in media coverage, clarifying the role played by media within a climate of opinion supportive for Eurosceptic instances. Therefore, we carried out a set of descriptive and inferential analyses aimed to clarify the interaction between three main variables: a) EU salience; b) media frame; c) visibility of Eurosceptic political actors.

As regard EU salience, the codebook provided indications for coding one specific dichotomous variable that identified if a news story, both for newspapers and TV, was focused on EU or EU elections (Krippendorff’s alpha 0.776).

In order to assess the dominant media frame towards EU we relied on Nepocs standards related to tonality, that is measuring the level of negative or positive tonality of the story. This allowed to account for the overall tone of the story, namely whether the report ‘convey[s] primarily a positive, negative, balanced or neutral impression of politics, political records, conditions or views’ (Lengauer et al. 2012, 195). Thus, the variable was coded as negative tonality when a news item presented elements related to, for example, political failure, fiasco, disaster, crisis, frustration, collapse, flop, denial, rejection, neglect, default, deterioration, resignation, scepticism, threats, cynicism, defeatism or disappointment’. On the contrary, the positive tonality was indicated by depictions of political success, problem solutions, achievement, improvement, advance, prosperity, accomplishment, enthusiasm, hope, benefit, gain, sustainability, gratification or accomplishment. Whether the story did not reflect indications of negative or positive tonality, then the variable was coded as ‘neutral’. Whereas the story reported indications of both negative and positive tonality, then the variable was coded as ‘balanced’ (Krippendorff’s alpha 0.704). For the sake of simplicity, since we were interested in isolating the two polarities, we recoded this variable into three main categories where 0 corresponds to neutral and balanced tone, 1 corresponds to positive tone and -1 corresponds to negative tone.

As regard the visibility of political actors in media coverage, coders were asked to register up to five political actors per story. In the rare case where more than five actors were reported, only the most relevant actors have been coded (Krippendorff’s alpha 0.743). Relevance was assessed taking into account the space devoted to each actors measured as number of words, in case of daily press,
or minutes and seconds, in case of TV newscast. Finally, with the aim of distinguishing political actors with respect to their attitude towards the EU, we analysed party manifestos, identifying the party positions and statements regarding the EU and the issue of European integration. We considered whether they tend to support the current status quo and/or are in favour of further expansion of the EU or whether they are critical of the EU as an institution and/or propose to put a halt to further expansion.

This allowed us to differentiate into hard and soft Euroscepticism (Taggart and Szczepanik, 2001).\(^8\) In particular, we considered as hard Eurosceptic parties those demanding for dramatic changes in EU integration process (i.e. refusing of Euro as single currency, withdrawal from the European Union), while were considered as soft Eurosceptic those parties asking for specific (and limited) changes in Treaties of the European Union (i.e. redefinition of fiscal compact). All those parties with positive or neutral references about EU in their manifesto were considered as Europhile. Based on this tripartite division we have recoded the original list of political actors identified by the coders according to party affiliation, where the code 1 was attributed to political actors affiliated to Europhile parties, the code 2 was assigned to those political actors belonging to Soft Eurosceptic parties, the code 3 was referred to political actors from Hard Eurosceptic parties. In particular, considering the explicit presence of statements about EU in parties Electoral manifestos, all political actors belonging to Partito Democratico (PD - Democratic Party), Nuovo Centro Destra (NCD - New Centre Right), Scelta Civica (SC - Civic Choice), were coded as Europhile parties, namely 1; in the meanwhile, all those political actors belonging to FI and SEL were coded as Soft Eurosceptic parties, namely 2; finally political actors belonging to FDI, M5S and LN were coded as Hard Eurosceptic parties, namely 3.

Finally, since, as pointed out by several scholars, EU salience and Euroscepticism seems to be closely related to economic concerns (Statham and Trenz 2013, Leupold 2016, Wonka 2016) the codebook also included a dichotomous variable distinguishing between news items focused on economic issues (=1) and those news items related to any other issues (=0). Similarly, also for the immigration issue, we analysed the coverage seeking for evidence. However, the limited occurrences recorded during the election campaign (n = 59) did not allow further data processing.

**Model and analysis**

The relationship between salience, media frame and Euroscepticism has been explored through a set of descriptive tables presented, but in order to provide a more thorough analysis we also performed a multivariate model aiming to explain the determinants of EU salience on media coverage.

Our data have been modelled with logistic regressions. We argue that the EU salience could be significantly affected by the actors and political parties attitudes towards EU. In other words, we suggest that the presence within the news items of actors/political parties criticizing EU produces a higher salience of EU within the coverage. Our dependent variable, thus, distinguishes between

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\(^8\) Taggart and Szczepanik define as hard Euroscepticism the ‘outright rejection of the entire project of European political and economic integration and opposition to their country joining or remaining members of the EU’ (2001: 10). Soft Euroscepticism, instead, is a contingent objection to European integration showing opposition, criticism or disagreement on one or more issues.
news items on EU (coded as 1) e news items on other political news (coded as 0). Our model resorts to a series of independent variables that we hypothesize may impact on the media attention on EU.

According to literature on this issue, we argue that is on going a change in media attitude towards EU. Despite the fact that EP elections are still second order elections, the EU issues are often the focus of media attention. This could be related to the economic crisis and the role played by EU institutions in demanding for economic policies and reforms to member state. In other words, the interventionism of EU institutions on domestic agenda resulted in a high salience of EU, triggering a quite negative climate of opinion blaming EU for austerity policy. The feelings of anti-politics exacerbated by the economic crisis are projected towards the European institutions. Euroscepticism is then grafted onto a widespread discontent, and political parties try to translate this discontent into votes. We suggest that media attention would be a function of the political parties’ attitudes towards European Union. Media attention on EU could be linked to the campaign strategies adopted by political parties and political actors. In other words, we expect that visibility of political actors belonging to Eurosceptic political parties will be associated to higher EU salience. Thus our main independent variable is represented by Political Actors, coded as follows: 1= Europhile, 2= Soft Eurosceptic and 3 = Hard Eurosceptic.

Our model also includes a set of control variables, which we suggest may affect the level of media attention on EU. We argue that due to the severe consequences of the economic crisis on Italian economic and financial system and as a result of the EU institutions pressure on Italian government to adopt policy reforms of ‘austerity’, the media coverage about the economic crisis could show a relationship with the coverage on EU, producing a higher attention on EU. In particular we resort to a dichotomous variable distinguishing between news items concerning references to policies on economy and fiscal issue (coded as 1) and those which do not handle with this issue (coded as 0).

As underlined above, Italian political system during the EU election campaign was dealing with a new political equilibrium, with a new Prime Minister. The political effervescence, due to this novelty, was combined with a fastened agenda on policy reforms. Renzi’s government, indeed, aimed to redefine the relationship with EU partners and institutions, shelving the subaltern attitude towards EU requirements and claiming for more autonomy in defining structural and institutional reforms. On this regard, the new coalition government focuses more on domestic issues by using EU elections as a political test aimed to assess the consensus supporting the new government. With the purpose to understand whether the political attitude adopted by Italian government coalition towards Europe may also have impact on media coverage, we introduced a dichotomous variable distinguishing between political actors belonging to the coalition government (coded as 1) and those belonging to the political opposition (coded as 0).

Our model also includes a variable indicating the media frame. Since our research question deals with the role played by media in defining EU public sphere in the light of a Eurosceptic climate of opinion we needed to assess to what extent media attitudes towards EU may have contribute in boosting EU salience. As it is well known, media logic drives attention on conflicts and emotional

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9 Taking into account all the Italian party parliamentary groups, all political actors belonging to PD, NCD, SC, Unione di Centro (UDC - Centre Union), Centro Democratico (CD -Democratic Centre), Liberali per l’Italia (PLI - Italian Liberal Party) and Partito Socialista Italiano (PSI - Socialist Party) were coded as government coalition (=1) while FI, FDI, LN, M5S and SEL were coded as opposition (=0).

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contents, for this reason it is reasonable to expect that EU salience may be influenced by negative tonality on media coverage. We resort to the variable indicating the tonality of news items. It is an ordinal variable ranging from -1 (negative frame) to 1 (positive frame) where 0 means neutral or balance frame.

Finally, considering that television news and newspaper deal with the European issues in a different way, in our model we also looked at the media source, where 1= TV and 0= daily press. Television is the most important source of information for most Italians (82% get their news daily on TV according to Demos 2015), for this reason the study included the four most widely viewed evening newscasts. Nonetheless, as regards Europe, and more generally politics, we know that television have less impact than the press on the political agenda (Walgrave, Soroka, and Nuytemans 2008). Furthermore, since television news coverage has less space and follows more selective criteria, it is less likely to cover a slow and unappealing to the audience process as that of Europeanization. On the contrary, the print media «have a broader scope and more space than television, and Internet Web sites of newspapers make print media content more widely accessible and immediate than it was previously. In addition, newspapers allow a greater discursive elaboration and argumentation than television» (Koopmans and Statham 2010: 50).

5. Results: EU Elections in Media Coverage

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

The 2014 EU election campaign was not a crucial issue in media coverage. It is not surprising that just 20.4% of news items was focused on EU during the seven weeks before the vote, while the largest portion of media news were focused on other political news dealing with domestic politics (Table 1). Overall 615 news items, among the whole sample of 3018, were focused on EU issues and or EU elections. This is a sign that the EU is becoming a structural feature in the Italian public debate, in particular it has to be underlined that news coverage about the EU and/or EP election was in percentage much more prominent in TV newscast (24.5%) than in press (19.9%). More relevant differences emerged in the journalistic frame on EU news coverage. On this regard, as scholars underlined as regard the 2013 Italian general elections, the effects of the economic crisis, the growing disaffection with politics and the blame upon EU for its pressure on Italian government to adopt the so-called austerity policy reforms produced a negative climate of opinion, which is mirrored in media coverage. Thus, it is not astonishing that media coverage presents in general such a quite negative frame. Nonetheless, within a general frame of negativity, there are deep differences between the two media considered in our analysis. As specified indeed, TV outlets present a higher level of negativity, both on EU news (-0.24) and on other news (-0.34), if compared to press outlets (-0.14 on EU news and -0.20 on other news).
Table 1 – EU news on Italian media, coverage and frame: TV and Press

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coverage on EU issues</th>
<th>Media frame (avg.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EU News Item %</td>
<td>Other Political News Item %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily press 19.5</td>
<td>80.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newscasts 24.5</td>
<td>75.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All news 20.4</td>
<td>79.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<0.000

Table 2 – EU news on Italian media, coverage and frame: economic crisis and Euroscepticism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coverage on EU issues (%)</th>
<th>Media frame (avg.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EU News Item %</td>
<td>Other Political News Item %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News item focused on economic crisis 18.4</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News item focused on other issues 81.6</td>
<td>94.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*N 615 | 2,403 | 3,018 | 

*p<0.000

Europhile parties 55.7 | 55.3 | 55.4 | -.18 | -.19 | -.19 |
Soft Eurosceptic party 29.4 | 30.8 | 30.5 | -.21 | -.25 | -.24 |
Hard Eurosceptic party 14.9 | 13.9 | 14.1 | -.12 | -.24 | -.21 |

*N 830 | 3,674 | 4,504 | 

*p>0.000

As previously said, EU visibility in media coverage is often related to economic issues. Our data confirm this pattern. Even though issues on economic crisis are a marginal portion of the whole sample of news items, figures reported in Table 2 suggest a close relationship between economic crisis and EU. Indeed, there is a significant over-representation of articles devoted to economic issues among those news items concerning EU issues: they cover 18.4% compared to 5.4%.

On the contrary, differences are quite blurred when considering political actors. Indeed, as regards Europhile political actors, there are very few differences between EU and other political news items. They are the most covered regardless EU salience. Few differences are found on soft Eurosceptic political actors (30.5% of the whole sample of news items, ranging from 29.4% within news focused on EU issues to 30.8% on other political news). Similarly, the variations are very limited also on hard Eurosceptic political actors, scarcely covered (14.1% on the whole set of news analysed) both on EU news (14.9) and on other political news (13.9%). These figures suggest that EU salience is not associated with political actors attitudes towards EU. Interesting differences are found, instead, when one considers the media frame. From a general point of view, it seems that higher level of negativity characterizes political news in general, while a relatively less negative tone on news items focused on EU issues is observed. This means that, even thought Eurosceptic political actors are usually covered less than domestic ones, when the discussion is about EU issues they are usually framed in a more positive way.
The dynamics of media coverage on EU: results

The logit model presented in Table 3 analyse the determinants of media coverage on EU. We rely on the computation of the odds ratios derived from the (natural) logarithmic transformation of the probabilities obtained on the basis of the logistic regression.

Table 3 - Logit model explaining EU visibility on media coverage. Dependent variable= EU news (0= other political news; 1= EU news)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>S.E.</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Exp(B)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eurosceptic approach (ref. Cat. Europhile Actors)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soft Eurosceptic Actors</td>
<td>.171</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>.635</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard Eurosceptic Actors</td>
<td>.186</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>.682</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic and Financial Issues (ref. Cat. Other issues)</td>
<td>.128</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>1.457</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Frame (ref. Cat. Negative tone)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral/Balanced Tone</td>
<td>.095</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>1.204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Tone</td>
<td>.215</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>1.470</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposition (ref. Cat. Government)</td>
<td>.166</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>.594</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV (ref. Cat. Daily Press)</td>
<td>.086</td>
<td>*****</td>
<td>1.600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.170</td>
<td>*****</td>
<td>.256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>4,451</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-2 Log likelihood</td>
<td>4190.718*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**** p <0.001; *** p<0.01; ** p<0.05; *p< 0.1

As reported in Table 2 several factors may explain the visibility of EU within media coverage, furthermore our premises seem to be only partially confirmed. The size of the effect of our independent variable on EU visibility within media coverage is indeed significant both for Soft Eurosceptic parties and Hard Eurosceptic parties, but since the coefficients are negative (respectively: .635 and .682) our results suggest that media attention is negatively affected by Euroscepticism. In other words, despite such a criticizing climate of opinion against EU Italian mainstream media are more prone to devote their attention to Europhile political actors. This results are coherent with coefficients concerning media frame. EU saliency indeed seems to be associated with a positive frame (1.470), meaning that mainstream media are inclined to adopt a more positive approach when dealing with EU. Even if these results do not meet our expectations we consider them as a very interesting outcome, suggesting that in a Europhile country, as Italy traditionally was, the growing consensus of Eurosceptic parties is actually counterbalanced by a mainstream media frame, still positive. Thus, it is not surprisingly that media attention on opposition shows a negative coefficient associated to EU salience (.594).

Other interesting results come from control variables. As expected, there is a relevant connection between the media emphasis on Economic crisis and EU salience in media coverage. As argued by several scholars, the economic crisis has driven media attention on EU institution, by enhancing the role of EU institutions. This is a result of the EU pressure on domestic agenda asking for reforms and specific policies of austerity. The exponentiations of regression estimates for the news items focused on this kind of policies are indeed significant, showing that the discussion of economic or fiscal policies increases the odds of EU visibility by a factor of 1.457. Finally, EU salience is positively associated with TV news items (1.600).

6. Discussion
This article draws on an analysis of the coverage of the mainstream media during the 2014 EP elections campaign in Italy. Our case study offers the opportunity to explore one of the more Europhile countries, which, in the last few years, has experienced a shift in the approach towards EU and EU issues. The growth of Eurosceptic parties in 2014 EP elections suggests that something is changed. Opinion polls underlined a growing criticism towards EU institutions, while EU institutions were blamed for its interference in domestic agenda by requiring 'austerity' reforms on economic and fiscal issues. As a consequence, several parties resorted to Euroscepticism as an electoral issue able to mobilize electoral consensus.

Since the salience of Europe within the media coverage is an essential element in defining the orientation of public opinion towards the EU, we have investigated which factors may affect EU salience and in particular whether the presence of Eurosceptic parties might increase it.

Our findings show how the coverage on Europe, despite having a negative average tone, is far less negative than that of the domestic political news, meaning that even if European issues are still less important than domestics ones, they are covered in a more positive way as a consequence of a positive prejudice that probably still prevails in the Italian mainstream media.

As regards our research question arguing that the visibility of Eurosceptic actors may increase the salience of the EU and EP elections compared to other political news, we found the opposite result. Despite a growing Euroscepticism, mainstream media did not appear very interested to cover positions and arguments of political actors against Europe. The media coverage on Hard or Soft Eurosceptic parties, according to our results, does not impact on the attention on EU issues. If anything, media attention on EU is driven by issues concerning the economic crisis. Our results suggest a strong connection between economic crisis and EU coverage. In relation to the economy, Europe is covered with an ambivalent attitude. It is described both as a constraint – for limits that are imposed to Italy, for example, in terms of the state budget – but also as an opportunity, as a possible solution to restart economic growth. On economic issues, there is a clear overlap between domestic and EU issues, mainly due to the reforms that the Italian government is implementing in the name of Europe.

To sum up, by a general point of view, EU salience, in the Italian case, is associated with a higher visibility of Europhile positions. In a political context of growing Euroscepticism Italian media seem to be clung to the traditional Italian Europhilia covering EU issues through a positive frame. In contrast to the findings of Schuck et al. (2011), the political contestation over Europe did not increase the EU salience in the Italian media. Media attention on EU is not driven by Euroscepticism. Despite some changes redefining the political debate about EU, our research still confirm media Europhile attitudes. EU salience is not linked to Eurosceptic parties increasing consensus, while it is influenced by issues related to economic crisis.

Our findings suggest that the media system has acted as a brake, reducing the relevance of Euroscepticism within the public debate. However, this is most likely occurred because the major Italian media outlets were in that phase pro-government (especially pro-Renzi), rather than pro-European.

Our findings also speak to the literature about politicization of EU as well as to the one about the Europeanization of national public sphere. As regards politicization, we found that the salience of
the EU could be explained by the emphasis the media gave to several critical issues. The polarization within the public debate does not oppose Eurosceptic and Europhiles parties, but rather domestic and European economic interests. Moreover, our results also suggest to consider the media as social and political actors when considering the expansion actors engaged with EU. The Italian case shows how the media system and single media outlets, besides being an arena in which the politicization process takes place, may also be political actors who play an active role in this process. As regards Europeanization of the Italian public sphere, the Italian case shows that the importance assumed by the European institutions within the economic context of the individual Member States is strengthening the process of domestication of European issues. In particular, in Italy, the increase in EU salience relies on the presence of concrete issues as were those of economic nature in the election campaign 2014 and as those related to immigration that are becoming increasingly important within the public debate.

This article suggest that a better understanding of the processes of politicization of EU and Europeanization of domestic public sphere could be conceivable by focusing on the role played by the media outlets as active political actors.

References


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