“This Time it’s Different”?
Euroscepticism and European Parliament Elections in the Dutch Press

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Introduction

The Maastricht Treaty has been called a turning point in European integration, signalling an end to the so-called ‘permissive consensus’ (e.g. Hooghe and Marks 2009; Wallace and Smith 1995). Since then, Euroscepticism – often equated with (or reduced to) opposition to the European Union (EU) – is widely believed to have gained ground in contemporary Europe, even in Member States that were traditionally seen as pro-integrationist. The Netherlands is a good example of a country where European integration has become subject to an increasingly critical debate. During the 1991 intergovernmental conference the Dutch government proposed a far-reaching blue print for a federal Europe. Yet, 14 years later, on 1 June 2005, Dutch citizens overwhelmingly voted against the Constitutional Treaty. Since then Dutch political and public opinion has been more critical of European integration and EU institutions and policies (van Holsteyn and Vollaard 2015).

This paper aims at exploring the idea of an increasingly Eurosceptic debate on EU affairs by portraying varieties of Euroscepticism and opposition to the EU as present in the mediated debates in the context of the 2009 and 2014 European elections. Based on a qualitative content analysis of Dutch newspapers, it focuses on the debates as represented in national media. To date, there has been relatively little attention for mass media in studies on Euroscepticism. Yet, with the latter’s apparent spread, expanding our scope beyond public opinion and political parties is important (Usherwood and Startin 2013).

The empirical analysis compares the mediated debate about the European elections from 28 May to 10 June 2009 with the debate in the period 15 to 28 May 2014, thus looking at the week preceding the respective elections, as well as the actual elections and the immediate aftermath. As such, these two elections coincide, respectively, with the start of the Eurozone crisis and with the slow recovery of the Eurozone, which gradually took hold since 2012 (Hodson 2013). The newspapers will be studied using a form of claim-making analysis. Referring to the 2014 elections, the European Parliament (EP) itself claimed “this time it's different”. Can we also see a change when it comes to varieties of Euroscepticism and opposition to the EU?

This paper starts by briefly outlining the role of media in democratic society, with a particular focus on EU affairs. Next, it will discuss the concept of Euroscepticism, including existing research on Euroscepticism and media. An outline of the analytical framework then
precedes the presentation of the first findings for three of the five newspapers analysed in the context of research.

**Media and democracy in the EU**

Common understanding has it that media play an important role in democratic societies. As Bennett and Entman (2001, p.1) put it, “many polities have reached a point where governance, along with a host of related processes such as opinion formation, could not occur in their present form without various uses of media.” Media provide society with the possibility to debate, influence and criticise political deliberations and policymaking. Media are not just transmitters of political messages, but also produce their own statements and viewpoints through, for example, editorials.

Throughout history media have gone through many transitions, leading to intensive debates about their contribution to society. Some of these changes concern the media themselves; others are due to changing political and public preferences. As such, media, citizens and political actors together shape the public sphere, the ‘space’ where modern day public politics often takes shape (e.g. McNair 2003).

Debates about the role of the media in contemporary democratic societies concern national politics, but also EU politics. Attention for the role of media in European affairs has been triggered by concerns about EU democracy. One of the arguments that has been put forward is that discussions concerning the EU and its policies do take place, but many issues go unnoticed or political decisions taken at the EU level may be mentioned in the media, but little real discussion precedes them (e.g. Sifft et al, 2007, p.149; Teschner 2000, p.81; Tsakatika 2008). In the words of Lord (1998, p.129), “the EU has developed an elaborate system of deliberation at *elite* level (…) however, the public is scarcely involved at all.”

Such concerns have led to an increase in scholarly attention for mass media reporting about European affairs (e.g. Bee and Bozzini 2010; Koopmans and Statham 2010; Lloyd and Marconi 2014; Risse 2015). Despite some exceptions (e.g. Nitiou 2015), research has predominantly focussed on both the extent and the content of EU affairs reporting by national media, a choice based on the widespread assumption that national media will

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1 Emphasis in the original.
constitute the main platforms for the European public sphere (see Risse 2010: 109-113). Media coverage of EU affairs has increased, especially at times of important events and when European policies are considered to be controversial at the national level (e.g. Boomgaarden et al. 2010; Sifft et al. 2007). Hence, the increased visibility of the EU in national media has not been an even development, there being differences between countries, policy fields and institutions (e.g. Seifert 2006).

It has, more generally, been argued that the way in which EU affairs are covered is problematic, with the focus on national perspectives and the misrepresentation of policymaking often identified as important shortcomings (for example Sifft et al. 2007). Cécile Leconte (2010) argues that such apparent deficiencies in national media reporting may be an important source of Euroscepticism (cf. Anderson 2004: 170; Lloyd and Marconi 2014). To be able to discuss this claim, we should first have a look at what Euroscepticism actually entails.

Euroscepticism

Much scholarly work has been done on trying to unpack the concept ‘Euroscepticism’ (for a good overview, see: Guerra forthcoming, 2016). It is a term that originated in the British press during the 1980s and was used to describe Margaret Thatcher’s strained position towards European integration. Since then it has increasingly become what Rodríguez-Aguilera de Prat (2013) refers to as a ‘catch-all’ concept, especially in the context of media reporting, though some scholarly work and other publications also have not helped clarifying what Euroscepticism is and is not (see, for instance, Byfält and Johansson n.d.). Similarly, Usherwood (2013: 280) argues that “[i]t is tempting to think of those opposed to the European integration process as an uninformed and undifferentiated group of people, a thought best summed up in the pejorative connotations in the overly reductive term ‘eurosceptic’.” Finally, Harmsen (2010: 336) writes that the current use of the term Euroscepticism has “blurred the distinction between genuine oppositions to European integration and that which might more reasonably be regarded as a normal (and desirable) politicization of European issues within the framework of a multi-level polity.”

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2 Emphasis in the original.
One of the things that should be noted is that the advance of Euroscepticism is far from uniform across the EU (e.g. Lubbers and Scheepers 2010). This even applies to countries that share many similarities. For instance, Belgium and the Netherlands are similar on many accounts and Flanders and the Netherlands, in particular, share a largely common language and history. Even so, criticism towards European integration seems to be less prominent in Belgium than in the Netherlands (Abts, Heerwegh and Swyngedouw 2008: 357). As such, EU integration was much less of an issue in Belgium than it was in the Netherlands during both the 2009 (Crespy 2011; de Wilde, Michailidou and Trenz 2013; Vollaard 2011) and 2014 (Bijsmans forthcoming, 2017) European elections.

In addition, while criticism on the EU may be on the rise, scholars have argued that this usually concerns qualified opposition to certain policies, institutional arrangements, etc., rather than opposition against the EU as such (e.g. Arzheimer 2015; Clements et al 2014; Katsourides 2016). As such, the term Euroscepticism lacks nuance. The seminal definitions of ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ Euroscepticism as introduced by Taggart and Szczerbiak (2008) have therefore also been criticised, resulting in several attempts to produce new definitions and conceptualisations (e.g. Kopecký and Mudde 2002; Krouwel and Abts 2007).

Studies looking into Euroscepticism tend to look at the level of party politics or public opinion. Surprisingly, despite growing body of literature on Euroscepticism and a similar rise of the number of works on media coverage of EU affairs, there has actually been little dedicated research that combines both perspectives. Yet, as has been argued by several authors (Usherwood and Startin 2013; Vasilopoulou 2013), there is a need to expand the scope of research into Euroscepticism to other areas, including media. This is also why more research is needed to substantiate Leconte’s (2010) claim that a misrepresentation of EU affairs in national media may be an important source of Euroscepticism.

**Euroscepticism and media**

The aforementioned problematic use of terms such as ‘Euroscepticism’ and ‘Eurosceptic’ also applies to their use in the media, as well as to references to, for instance, ‘Eurosceptic media’ in scholarly work. For example, in his study on the transnational media’s reporting of EU climate change policy, Nitiou (2015: 536) looks into how transnational media coverage
differs from that of national media “dominated by Eurosceptic media reporting”. Amongst his conclusions is the following:

“These findings also point to the fact that within the ‘Brussels bubble,’ Eurosceptic journalism seems to be almost non-existent in the discourse of transnational media toward global climate change policy. Criticism toward the EU only surfaced in relation to the Union’s inability to live up to its ambitious goals or the tendency of some member states to act individually while disregarding the common values shared by the Union.” (Nitiou 2015: 549)

Here, scepticism and criticism are more or less treated as being the same, whereas, as we have just seen, this does not reflect the variety of scepticism and opposition towards the EU.

While the anti-European stance of parts of the British press is rather well documented (e.g. Daddow 2012; Price 2009; Startin 2015) – even though also here authors sometimes just make anecdotal references to ‘the media’ (e.g. Taylor 2008: 17) – this does not apply to most other European countries. There are some studies that have focussed in more detail on EU media coverage and Euroscepticism. Yet, the body of work that specifically deals with this issue is relatively small, certainly when taking into consideration the substantial amount of work on media coverage of EU affairs in general terms (but see Caiani and Guerra, forthcoming 2017).

Moreover, these studies often take a different approach to media and Euroscepticism. Some have looked into the extent to which media are Eurosceptic, an issue that is especially salient within the UK (Daddow 2012; Price 2009). Others have examined the effects of media coverage on opinions about the EU, in general, and the spread of Euroscepticism, in particular (Adam 2009; de Vreese 2007). Media have also been used as a source for exploring other aspects of Euroscepticism, such as party competition (Statham et al. 2010) and conceptual issues (Skinner 2012).

These studies – and some that do not specifically refer to Euroscepticism (for example de Vreese et al. 2006; D’Haenens 2005) – often resolve around the question

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3 Emphasis added.

4 Research on stereotypical coverage of certain countries in media (for instance Touri and Rogers 2013) could, arguably, also be looked at from the perspective of Euroscepticism.
whether news media coverage of EU affairs is predominantly negative or positive, thereby overlooking the rich variety of opinions referred to in existing literature on Euroscepticism (see Guerra, forthcoming 2016). This chapter intends to move beyond this negative/positive dichotomy, following the aforementioned supposition that that Euroscepticism comes in many different forms and is not constrained to just a pro/con contrast.

Few media studies have so far worked along similar lines. For instance, Startin (2015, 321) proposes to distinguish between ‘Euro-positive’, ‘Eurosceptic’ newspapers and ‘Euro-ambivalent’ newspapers, which are “generally in favour of the European Union per se, not being clearly partisan either way with regard to ongoing measures designed to foster closer European cooperation and not necessarily covering EU-related issues with any great regularity and as a matter of priority.” De Wilde, Michailidou and Trenz (2013) devised a more elaborate new typology consisting of six possible positions towards European integration. These range from ‘Affirmative European’, entailing a positive assessment of European integration, to ‘Anti-European’, representing a complete rejection of integration.

Other scholars have also drawn attention to the variety of possible positions towards the EU. In his analysis of Austrian Euroscepticism, Karner (2013) argues, among other things, that Austrian quality media include alternative evaluation of European affairs. Based on a claim-making analysis of political party positions as covered by the media, Statham et al. (2010: 271) argue that criticism mostly concerned ‘the substance of Europe’. That is, certain aspects of the EU and its policies were criticized and sometimes alternatives were put forward, but integration as such was not questioned. Statham and Trenz (2013) refer to so-called ‘Eurocritical claims’ to describe claims that are based on alternative visions of Europe, rather than an outright rejection of any form of European integration. Their detailed study of the debate about the Constitutional Treaty in the French public sphere suggests that these types of claims have become more important, indicating a normalisation of politics about the EU.

Analytical framework

So far, this paper has argued that work on media coverage of EU affairs and work on Euroscepticism have largely developed parallel to each other, with only few attempts to really bring these perspectives together. This is exactly the aim of the current research. This
paper aims at portraying varieties of Euroscepticism and opposition to the EU as present in Dutch mediated debates during the 2009 and 2014 European elections. European elections may largely be second-order affairs, but they do constitute a regularly returning opportunity to voice criticism or support for the EU and its policies. As such they present a good context for the study of public debates, in general, and Euroscepticism, in particular.

As far as the choice for the Netherlands is concerned, national interests have become more prominent in the Dutch political debate since the 1990s. The Dutch position vis-à-vis European integration has been very much affected by what has become known as ‘Black Monday’ (30 September 1991), when a far-reaching proposal for a new Treaty on European Union was rejected by all Member States except Belgium. Consecutive Dutch governments have grown more hesitant towards further integration, although they have, so far, continued to support new policy measures and increased cooperation (Schout and Rood 2013).

The 2005 referendum on the Constitutional Treaty firmly placed Eurosceptic arguments at the centre of public debates about the EU (van Holsteyn and Vollaard 2015). Even so, European integration has only recently become more prominent in Dutch public debates (Beyers, Vollaard and Dumont 2015: 11-12). It has been argued that Dutch media pay less attention to European affairs than media in other Member States (de Beus and Mak 2009). Media coverage of European elections has also not been particularly prominent (de Vreese et al. 2006; Schuck et al. 2011).

Through means of a qualitative content analysis – which allows for a more detailed insight into political statements and opinions – the research project looks into coverage of the European elections in 2009 and 2014 by the five main national newspapers: *Algemeen Dagblad*, *De Telegraaf*, *De Volkskrant*, *NRC Handelsblad* and *Trouw*. This selection includes newspapers from different sides of the political spectrum, as well as quality newspapers and more popular dailies. The current paper presents the first findings, based on a comparison of the main quality newspapers *De Volkskrant* and *NRC Handelsblad*, and the leading popular newspaper *De Telegraaf*.

The 2009 elections took place on Thursday 4 June, the 2014 elections on Thursday 22 May. The analysis focuses on the week before the elections, the actual elections, and their immediate aftermath; on the periods from 28 May to 10 June 2009 and 15 to 28 May 2014.

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5 There are no tabloids in the Netherlands.
Articles have been retrieved using the newspaper database LexisNexis, with a specific focus on news, background and analysis, as well as columns, opinion articles, readers’ letters and editorials. Articles that appeared in regional editions were excluded, as were articles that included no links with the elections. The following search terms – separately or combined – were used to retrieve articles: eu!, parl!, elec!, Brussels! and Strasbourg!.

The analysis zooms in on the assessment of EU affairs as put forward by actors in the mediated public sphere in the context of the European elections – including national, European and international (representatives of) citizens, media, political actors (cf. Koopmans and Statham, 2010). As such, the unit of analysis was not the individual article, but rather individual statements that occur in those articles, with a particular focus on who claimed what and on determining the assessment of EU affairs put forward by means of those claims (see also Statham et al. 2010; De Wilde, Michailidou and Trenz 2013). This type of claim-making analysis tends to be used in more quantitatively oriented studies, but here a predominantly qualitative approach has been adopted. This allows for a more in-depth analysis which can help to more precisely uncover the objects and nature of arguments (Hardy, Harley and Phillips, 2004).

As highlighted before, despite these attempts to broaden our understanding of Euroscepticism and other forms of criticism towards the EU, empirical research on media and Euroscepticism tends to confine its focus to a pro-con EU discussion. Some of the research that does apply a more extensive categorisation, limits itself to the issue of integration and does not cover policy (de Wilde, Michailidou and Trenz, 2013) or is based on typologies that are useful for analysing overall positions of media towards the EU, but are less suitable for analysing specific positions taken up by a variety of actors in mediated debates (Startin, 2015).

This paper proposes an approach that deviates from both the work of Taggart and Szczerbiak (2008) on ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ Euroscepticism, as well as from studies that have proposed conceptualisations based on multiple forms of opposition and scepticism (e.g.

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6 In LexisNexis the exclamation mark constitutes a tool to find all words starting with, for instance, ‘eu’ (‘EU’, ‘Europe’, ‘European’, etc.).

7 The approval of new legislation, as well as opinions about policy implementation were included. Criticism from EU officials was also included, but their policy proposals were not as the latter tend to represent the topics being discussed in the public sphere.
Kopecký and Mudde 2002; Krouwel and Abts 2007). Instead, the paper employs the categories of soft and hard Euroscepticism, but contrasts these with pro-EU positions. In addition, it introduces what FitzGibbon (2013) has called ‘Euroalternativism’, which, rather than being ‘rejectionist’ in nature, concerns expressions of ‘pro-system opposition’. Here, actors support the EU and European integration, but aim for alternative policies or institutional reforms.

Table 1: Possible positions on European integration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aimed at Position</th>
<th>(I) Polity</th>
<th>(II) Policy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>Support for European integration and the existing institutional design</td>
<td>Support for the policies currently being pursued</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Euroalternativism</td>
<td>Support for European integration, but arguing for a more supranational institutional design</td>
<td>Support for EU involvement in a new policy or arguing for a different approach in an existing policy field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soft Euroscepticism</td>
<td>Support for a form of European integration, but arguing for a more intergovernmental institutional design</td>
<td>Opposition to EU involvement in a policy field or to a specific EU policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard Euroscepticism</td>
<td>Principled opposition to integration and aiming for withdrawal from the EU*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Here there is no distinction between claims aimed at polity or policy, as actors argue against the EU in all its facets.

Hence, as set out in Table 1 (cf. Bijsmans, forthcoming 2016; Bijsmans, forthcoming 2017), four possible positions can be identified: support for the EU and its policies, Euroalternativism, soft Euroscepticism and hard Euroscepticism. Combining insights from some of the aforementioned works, the four categories have been further refined to also distinguishes between:

(I) positions concerning the idea of European integration, including institutional design, EU membership and core elements of the EU (such as the Euro or Schengen) and;

(II) policy fields and policy choices, including choices related to stricter budget norms vs. more spending (that is, related to the Euro) or choices related to whether or not to (temporarily) allow for internal border controls (that is, related to Schengen).
Findings

2,176 claims were derived from the selected articles. Table 2 presents an overview of the way in which the EU and its policies were evaluated in the context of the European election in both newspapers. For both years we see that most claims were issued in De Volkskrant and NRC Handelsblad. This comes as no surprise; these are leading national dailies, with influential op-ed sections. While the number of coded claims only marginally increased for NRC Handelsblad, there was a more substantial increase for De Telegraaf. What is most noteworthy is the sharp rise of the number of claims in De Volkskrant – here it needs to be stressed that the analysis will be double-checked when all five newspapers have been analysed.

During years, supportive claims only amounted to just over 30% of all coded claims. Euroalternativist claims represented 30 per cent of the claims in 2009 and 26% in 2014. Taken together, soft and hard Eurosceptic claims represented 37 per cent of coded claims in 2009 and 44 per cent in 2014. In other words, when combined supportive claims and pro-system criticism – both in favour of European integration – still outweigh calls for less or even no EU, the latter seem to be gaining prominence. The relative increase of hard Eurosceptic claims in NRC Handelsblad and De Telegraaf is striking, whereas there is relatively little change in the distribution of coded claims in De Volkskrant.

In 2009 only 22 per cent of all claims concerned policy issues; in 2014 this increased slightly to 24 per cent. In other words, we see that the debate in the context of the European elections was already very much a pro-con debate in 2009, something that hardly changed in 2014. The next two subsections take a closer look at these first findings, with the aim being to present a more detailed insight into what these findings actually entail.
### Table 2: Distribution of claims

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2009</th>
<th></th>
<th>2014</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NRC</td>
<td>TEL</td>
<td>VK</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support I</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>115</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>249</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(31%)</td>
<td>(25%)</td>
<td>(32%)</td>
<td>(30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support II</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3%)</td>
<td>(3%)</td>
<td>(2%)</td>
<td>(3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Euroalternative I</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>52</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(14%)</td>
<td>(20%)</td>
<td>(15%)</td>
<td>(15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Euroalternative II</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>44</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(12%)</td>
<td>(23%)</td>
<td>(14%)</td>
<td>(15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soft I</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>60</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(16%)</td>
<td>(17%)</td>
<td>(16%)</td>
<td>(16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soft II</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(5%)</td>
<td>(1%)</td>
<td>(4%)</td>
<td>(4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>73</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(20%)</td>
<td>(11%)</td>
<td>(17%)</td>
<td>(17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>374</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>832</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Euroscepticism and the 2009 elections**

Existing research has suggested EU integration was highly contested in the run up to the 2009 elections and resulted in more extensive media coverage. De Wilde, Michailidou and Trenz (2013: 139) argue that this increased attention for the EP elections was due to the aforementioned referendum on the Constitutional Treaty, which has been “the single most important event in recent history shaping Dutch public opinion, public discourse and party contestation concerning European integration.” The debate itself was not so much about substantive issues, but rather about being for or against the EU and about ‘the perceived European threat to the Netherlands’ (Vollaard 2011: 97).

This also becomes apparent from the analysis of claims in *De Telegraaf*, *De Volkskrant* and *NRC Handelsblad*. In fact, two general observations can be made. First, the theme ‘more or less EU?’ indeed dominated the debate, revolving around questions concerning European integration and the institutional design of the EU and not so much about policies. Second, the number of Eurosceptic claims is actually quite substantial,
representing 37% of total claims made, more than the supportive claims and Euroalternative claims. Of course, the latter also represent criticism of the EU (or its policies), but criticism based on a positive stance to the overall idea of European integration.

In all three newspapers we see that the pro-con debate dominates, though it is even more prominent in De Volkskrant and NRC Handelsblad. On the one hand, it may come as a surprise to see so many of these claims in these two quality dailies; on the other hand, the combination of their nature as quality newspapers and their role as platform for debates mean that more actors are given a voice. The latter is, for instance, illustrated by articles that in NRC Handelsblad (NRC 08.06.09; 09.06.09) presenting an overview of the rise of Eurosceptic movements across Europe.

In all three newspapers the focus tends to be on the national debate, highlighting the second order nature of European elections. The main actors in this debate were Geert Wilders’ Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV; Party for Freedom), the main anti-European party, and the pro-European Greens (GroenLinks) and Democraten 66 (D66; Democrats 66). The other parties were seen as taking an unclear position, generally being in favour of the EU, but raising criticism at the same time. In other words, the debate was simplified to one between opponents and supporters of the EU, something that was also recognised by all three newspapers. De Telegraaf (02.06.09) referred to an election with “only two tastes” and one NRC Handelsblad (05.06.09) editorial was titled “pro and contra Europe”. According to De Volkskrant (05.06.09) the campaign for the elections was “governed by Euroscepticism”.

The three newspapers themselves supported the European project. De Volkskrant (05.06.09) argued that “the Netherlands cannot do without Europe”. De Telegraaf (05.06.09) argued that integration had “absolutely” increased security in Europe. NRC Handelsblad (03.06.09), for its part, noted that criticism on the EU was all too easily put forward:

“Many of these advantages [of the EU; PB] have become so normal, that they no longer feature in our minds and, hence, in our hearts. That is unjust.”

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8 These are references to the days on which articles appeared, where 08.06.09 stands for 8 June 2009 and newspapers are abbreviated as NRC (NRC Handelsblad), TEL (De Telegraaf) and VK (De Volkskrant).
9 All translations from Dutch to English are the author’s.
What little attention there was for debates in other countries often concerned the rise of Eurosceptic movements, as already mentioned above. As we will see below, the rise of the Front National (FN) was an important topic in the 2014 elections. Yet, in 2009 NRC Handelsblad referred to the fact that it was generally believed that the French supported the EU, even though they criticised ‘neo-liberal’ policies (NRC 04.06.14). In other words, they were seen as generally taking what could be called a Euroalternative position, with basic attitudes to European integration being positive. In fact, one of the biggest winners was the pro-European environmental party Europe Ecologie (VK 08.06.09). There was somewhat more focussed attention for the precarious situation that UK prime minister Gordon Brown is in. His unpopularity and a huge expenses scandal were expected to result in a loss for Labour. One of the parties that was said to gain from this is Nigel Farage’s UK Independence Party (UKIP), which wants Britain to leave the EU (e.g. NRC 05.06.09; TEL 02.06.09).

In both newspapers political actors dominate the debate, but citizen opinions also feature. Sometimes these appear in more general terms. For instance, on 30 May NRC Handelsblad columnist Filip de Kam writes that only a small minority of Dutch voters wants the Netherlands to leave the EU, but a substantial majority believes that the EU often deals with issues that are better left to the Member States. But there are also individual voices that feature through short items or interviews or through readers’ letters. Quite a lot of criticism is raised by these people, on several aspects related to the EU, such as the fact that the EP meets in both Brussels and Strasbourg:

“It is important that the EU does not spend too much of our money. Therefore, I am against the European Parliament moving from Brussels to Strasbourg twice a year [sic].” (TEL 03.06.09)

Yet, not all citizens were voting because of reasons related to the EU or its policies. As one reader explained in De Volkskrant (05.06.09):

“I, for instance, also voted for the PVV. But not because I am against Europe, because I am not. And also not because I support the PVV, because I don’t. But I did do so...

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10 Actually, the same article in NRC Handelsblad argued that basic attitudes across Europe were still positive.
because I’ve had enough of the current government’s policy. And voting for the PVV is the best way to show this.”

Euroscepticism and the 2014 elections

With the 2014 European Parliament elections approaching, commentators once again predict a heated debate between pro-integrationist and Eurosceptic parties. The analysis shows that the theme ‘more or less EU?’ once again dominated the debate. Compared to 2009 even more Eurosceptic claims were found, increasingly statements that rejected integration altogether (often combined with a call to leave the EU). The majority of coded claims concerned arguments pro or con European integration or EU policies; in fact, just over half of the coded claims in De Telegraaf and NRC Handelsblad were of a soft or hard Eurosceptic nature.

Also in 2014, the expected success of Eurosceptic parties across the continent was a prominent topic, with even Germany seeing a Eurosceptic party making it into parliament, the Alternative für Deutschland. The rise of Marine Le Pen’s FN was seen as being especially important. Le Pen was expected to not only play an important role in French politics, but also in European politics. Together with Wilders she was hoping to establish a new Eurosceptic party group in the EP. Le Pen proclaimed that her party’s win constituted a “massive rejection of the European Union” (TEL 26.05.14). Her success resulted in former President Nicolas Sarkozy calling for a radical reform of the Schengen agreement (NRC 24.05.14) and current President François Hollande concluding that the EU should reinvent itself (VK 28.05.14). The situation in the UK was also closely monitored, with Nigel Farage’s expected win being seen as another step towards a possible ‘Brexit’ referendum (NRC 26.05.14). In fact, he argued that Prime Minister David Cameron’s push for a new deal with the EU would not be successful:

“Look at the anti-British attitude during the Eurovision Song Contest. Then try to believe Cameron that he can achieve a good result in Brussels. It’s laughable.” (VK 17.05.14)
UKIP did not want to cooperate with Le Pen due to the FN’s anti-Semitic past, which was seen as a complication for Le Pen and Wilder’s goal to set up a new Eurosceptic group (TEL 26.05.14).

While there was ample attention for the general trend towards increased scepticism across the EU, the national debate in the Netherlands was a prominent issue once more. The predicted success of Wilders’ PVV was addressed, including references to the ‘horse-race’ between the anti-European PVV and the pro-European D66. More than half of the Eurosceptic claims in *De Telegraaf* were raised by national voices, be they citizens, politicians or others. This applied to nearly 4 out of every 10 Eurosceptic claims in *NRC Handelsblad* and just over 4 out of every 10 Eurosceptic claims in *De Volkskrant*. The newspapers themselves again recalled that the debate was mostly a debate about ‘more or less’ Europe (for example TEL 22.05.14).

Columns and editorials in *De Telegraaf* were often more outspoken in their criticism than those in the other two newspapers. For example, in an editorial of 16 May the newspaper criticised Europe for interfering:

“When you are going to vote for Europe next week it is good to be aware of the fact that the same Europe interferes with plastic bags in your supermarket, the shoes worn by hairdressers during their work, and the shape of bananas.”

In contrast, columnist Bert Wagendorp of *De Volkskrant* took a much more supportive position:

“I hope that my vote will be a little contribution to a further strengthening of European integration and to the end of small Dutch thinking [het kleine Hollandse denken].”

*NRC Handelsblad* (17.05.14) argued that a Euroalternative position is perfectly valid:

“A wholehearted choice for Europe does by no means exclude a critical approach towards the EU”.

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Coded articles addressed the elections and rising criticism in particular, including inventories of parties that were identified as being Eurosceptic (e.g. NRC 24.05; VK 26.05.14). These were often indirect claims. In fact, direct claims were usually limited to articles about the expected win of the Front National (FN) of Marine Le Pen in France and Nigel Farage’s United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) in Britain. It was only here that Euroscepticism moves beyond being a ‘catch all’ concept (Rodríguez-Aguilera de Prat 2013), as opinions were explained in more detail.

Newspapers included articles on the institutional fight between the EP and the European leaders on what the nomination of 'Spitzenkandidaten' should mean for the appointment of the new Commission President (e.g. NRC 28.05.14; TEL 27.05.14). According to academic René Cuperus (VK 24.05.14) this novelty would have no positive effect whatsoever as fat as the legitimacy of the EP is concerned. Substantive claims often concerned future economic and monetary policy, with Alexis Tsipras, ‘Spitzenkandidat’ of the radical left, being the most vocal protagonist for change.

Coverage by NRC Handelsblad and De Volkskrant mostly included claims by established political actors (political parties, institutions, governments and individual politicians). De Telegraaf provided a somewhat different take on the debate, by, for instance, including many citizen voices (85 out of a total of 280 claims). These generally featured in letters to the editors and polls amongst its readership (for example TEL 22.05.14). Often these readers were critical about the EU, sometimes refuting European integration altogether, but also at times issuing a more nuanced criticism:

“"I do not want to vote for a bunch of megalomaniacal politicians who invite ever more countries to join the EU, apparently unaware of the fact that the European house is already showing cracks. That is why, today, I have thrown away my voting pass. Because I am in favour of Europe. But against ‘Brussels’.” (TEL 17.05.14)

Discussion and conclusions

European elections represent the clearest and recurrent opportunity for citizens to directly influence European affairs. Yet, at the same time these elections have seen a decrease of voter turnout – while the parliament’s powers have increased. This paper studied the
debates in the context of the European elections of 2009 and 2014, using a typology that acknowledges that there are several potential positions as regards European integration and EU policies and assumes that one can only understand Euroscepticism by also taking into account EU-supportive opinions.

The next step of this research will be to round of the analysis of the two remaining newspapers, followed by a double-check of the analysis. A more detailed analysis will also be conducted as to determine what the nature was of the arguments put forwards (e.g. utilitarian vs. political arguments; cf. Leconte 2010). The paper has already shown that the objects of debate were mostly to be found along the polity dimension. The European elections would be an ideal opportunity to discuss future policies EU affairs. Yet, in both 2009 and 2014, the Dutch mediated debates did not really concern policy choices, but rather the pros and cons of integration.

Being for or against the EU was a core issue in the national debate in the Netherlands, but especially in 2014 there was also ample attention for the many Eurosceptic parties that gained votes across Europe. Actors were very critical about the EU, often representing soft and hard forms of scepticism instead of ‘pro-system opposition’ to the EU (FitzGibbon 2013) or ‘constructive criticism’ (Statham et al. 2010). Eurosceptic claims were already prominent in the Dutch newspapers in 2009, but even became more visible during the 2014 debate. Even when these concern claims from actors in other Member States, the fact that media serve as an intermediate in terms of disseminating information and opinions and covering debates elsewhere, can be interpreted as meaning that they try to represent the debate as it is currently taking place within national borders. In any case, the findings presented here show that Euroscepticism and criticism have become ever more mainstream (cf. Brack and Startin 2015) in the Dutch national discourses, with the EU and its policies no longer being taken for granted, but increasingly being the focus of debate.

Still, we need to be careful with these tentative conclusions. For one, events such as EP elections still draw most attention to the EU, not day-to-day EU affairs. At the same time, they are characterised by a mostly national coverage (de Vreese et al. 2006; Kevin 2003). Studies that have taken a more detailed look at how day-to-day EU affairs feature in the media suggest that these debates often do so too, yet this does depend on the issue at stake (Seifert 2006). Elsewhere this author used the same approach to study the occurrences of criticism and opposition to the EU over the period of a year of reporting in three countries.
These debates exhibited more evaluative statements concerning policy alternatives than soft or hard Eurosceptic claims (Bijsmans forthcoming, 2016).

In addition, the unspecified nature of Euroscepticism also became apparent during the analysis of the newspapers. Terms like ‘Euroscepticism’ and ‘anti-European’ were often used interchangeably – almost randomly even – and, as such, have been coded as hard Eurosceptic statements (unless when further specified). The same goes for ‘Eurofile’ and ‘pro-European’. One of the readers of NRC Handelsblad even commented on this in a letter:

“Word choice is everything. To me it seems necessary that you [PB: NRC Handelsblad] pick a more precise term for ‘anti-Europeans’; this will only benefit the substantive debate about Europe.” (NRC 28.05.14)

This simplification may be related to the media’s tendency to talk in terms of clear camps – pro- versus anti-European. However, it is also illustrative of the more general fuzziness of these terms and the Dutch debate, in particular, having been framed in terms of a pro/con the EU since the 2005 referendum (see above). One reader in De Volkskrant (06.06.09) even claimed that there was “hardly any talk about Europe” during the 2009 elections.

This does raise the question how Eurosceptic Euroscepticism actually is and to what extent the media’s attempt to represent European debates truly corresponds with the actual debates. This is a question that cannot be answered here, yet one that warrants further study. As such, Leconte’s (2010) suggestion that deficiencies in media reporting may be a source of Euroscepticism gains additional importance.

Finally, not only do European parliament elections constitute special events, but in these two cases they also took place at a very special time. The 2009 elections took place at the start of the Eurozone crisis and at a time when the Lisbon Treaty’s was still to be approved by the Irish voters. In 2014 the crisis had waned, but only after billions of taxpayers’ money had been used to save some Member States, while many others had to make cuts. One could imagine that in these situations a more critical debate is to be expected. What’s more, other studies have suggested that even in countries severely hit by the Eurozone crisis, there is still support for the EU (e.g. Clements et al 2014; Katsourides 2016).
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