

Mapping Europeanization in the Greek online public sphere: Assessing the Europeanizing dynamics of social media

Cartografias da Europeização na esfera pública grega online: Avaliação das dinâmicas de europeização nas redes sociais

Ioanna Archontaki*, Achilleas Karadimitriou**, Iliana Giannouli***, Stylianos Papathanassopoulos****

*  PhD Candidate – Researcher, Laboratory of Journalism Studies and Communication Applications, Department of Communication and Media Studies, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (ioannarx@media.uoa.gr)

**  Adjunct Professor – Researcher, Laboratory of Journalism Studies and Communication Applications, Department of Communication and Media Studies, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (akaradim@media.uoa.gr)

***  Adjunct Professor – Researcher, Laboratory of Journalism Studies and Communication Applications, Department of Communication and Media Studies, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (giannoul@media.uoa.gr)

****  Professor in Media Organization and Policy, Director of Laboratory of Journalism Studies and Communication Applications, Department of Communication and Media Studies, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (spapath@media.uoa.gr)

Abstract

For more than a decade, following the peak of the debt crisis, Greece has been facing multiple challenges. Amongst them, a pandemic (COVID-19) that brought the global and thus the Greek economy to a halt, an energy crisis that threatens to flatten entire social classes, a refugee crisis, and wider regional instability. All of these concurrent problems reflect crucial socio-economic transformations compounding the country's unsustainable debt. Despite these adverse factors, in the present research the anti-European sentiments have almost entirely disappeared from the online public sphere. To examine the presence of Europe in the Greek online public discourse, a quantitative content analysis was conducted. The sample was based on 700 posts published on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube coming from mainstream media organisations' accounts, individual users' accounts, and public pages. According to the research findings, social media platforms function, to some extent, as alternative agenda setters, fostering the dissemination of topics, or the expression of viewpoints that are circumvented by the media organisations' posts. Moreover, the online discussion regarding EU prospects and the European institutions' policies are largely descriptive, devoid of any critical reflection or conflict. Therefore, Greece's position in the EU looks like a one-dimensional issue, a feature that can be attributed to the fact that, in the Greek online public sphere, alternative voices and sources have a limited presence within the most viewed content of social media platforms.

Keywords: Europeanization, European public sphere(s), Euroscepticism, social media platforms.

Resumo

Há mais de uma década, após o auge da crise da dívida, que a Grécia enfrenta múltiplos desafios. Entre eles, uma pandemia (COVID-19) que paralisou a economia global e, conseqüentemente, a grega, uma crise energética que ameaça afetar inteiras classes sociais, uma crise de refugiados e uma instabilidade regional mais ampla. Todos esses problemas simultâneos refletem transformações socioeconômicas cruciais que agravam a dívida insustentável do país. Apesar desses fatores adversos, na presente pesquisa, os sentimentos anti-europeus praticamente desapareceram da esfera pública online. Para examinar a presença da Europa no discurso público online grego, foi realizada uma análise quantitativa de conteúdo. A amostra foi baseada em 700 postagens publicadas no Facebook, Twitter e YouTube, provenientes de contas de organizações de mídia mainstream, contas de usuários individuais e páginas públicas. De acordo com os resultados da pesquisa, as redes sociais funcionam, em certa medida, como definidores de agenda alternativos, promovendo a disseminação de tópicos ou a expressão de pontos de vista que são contornados pelas postagens das empresas jornalísticas. Além disso, a discussão online sobre as perspectivas da UE e as políticas das instituições europeias é em grande parte descritiva, desprovida de qualquer reflexão crítica ou conflito. Portanto, a posição da Grécia na UE parece ser uma questão unidimensional, uma característica que pode ser atribuída ao fato de que, na esfera pública online grega, vozes e fontes alternativas têm uma presença limitada no conteúdo mais visualizado nas redes sociais.

Palavras-chave: Europeização, esfera(s) pública(s) europeia(s), euroceticismo, redes sociais.

Introduction

The EU *polycrisis* (Euro, immigrants, Covid-19 pandemic, Brexit) combined with the so-called communication deficit of EU institutions has revitalized scholars' interest in the role and the prospects of a truly European public sphere (Tuñón Navarro & Carral Vilar, 2021). According to Risse (2003, p. 5-6) "a public sphere is a social construction constituting a community of communication" that emerges "through social and discursive practices, in the process of arguing about controversial questions". Broadly speaking, it can be argued that "public spheres are arenas in which political issues and positions are discussed" (Adam, 2015).

Most importantly, the concept of a public sphere is closely related to democracy since it is a prerequisite for a participatory democratic society. In effect, Auel and Tiemann (2020: 36) contend that a public sphere provides people with information on political issues (problems and solutions), enables citizens to hold politicians accountable for their actions, fosters the participation of citizens and groups in the public debate by enabling them to make their voices heard by the politicians and, finally, advances social cohesion and trust by building a collective identity that helps activate a feeling of belonging to the same (European) community. Furthermore, the Europeanization of political communication and the consolidation of a genuine European public sphere are regarded as requirements for building a European identity (Van Os, 2005). As Trenz suggests (2013:7), a European public sphere "should not only empower individual citizens to make use of their civic, political and social rights, but also bind them together and engage them in a process of public opinion and will formation".

At the same time, since the evolution of internet technologies, social media platforms have been operating as a new arena where public conversations are held (Shah, 2016). Therefore, it is reasonable to claim that in contemporary democracies the discussion of a considerable number of public issues and the active engagement of citizens in civic and political activities are influenced both by mass media and digital platforms. However, the increasing use of social media and digital technologies for political purposes (engagement in and deliberation about political affairs) has raised the need to re-examine the question of whether the contemporary communication field, characterized by the phantomization of communication, has contributed to the emergence of a truly mediated transnational European public sphere as well as a deliberative and engaged European citizenry (Gil de Zúñiga, 2015).

This study is based on the EUMEPLAT research project, incorporating a content analysis of 700 posts published on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, derived from mainstream media organizations' accounts, individual users' accounts, and public pages, with the aim of investigating the presence of Europe in Greek online public discourse. Moreover, the study critically examines potential topics regarding Europe, discussed by the above-mentioned groups of online users, as well as the degree to which the Europe-related content, disseminated through social media platforms, is oriented towards national or European aspects of the debatable events, raising the question of whether there is a trend of interconnectedness between them. The research findings reveal that, despite the multiple crises afflicting Greece, anti-European sentiments seem to have almost disappeared from the Greek online public sphere.

Theoretical perceptions regarding the European public sphere(s) and the Europeanization process

Scholars have identified varied conceptualizations of a European public sphere. Some of them suggest, based on the analysis of singular cases of media coverage, that there is evidence of an EU-wide public sphere, founded in the absence of nationally defined media discourses and in crosscutting cleavages that put together debates taking place across different member states (Van de Steeg, 2004). Nonetheless, the concept of a single and unified

public space where all European citizens could address, at the same time, identical political issues, under the same criteria of relevance and subsequently be exposed to the same arguments and counterarguments has long been rejected as utopian (Auel & Tiemann, 2020: 37). Instead, the academic focus has turned into the re-conceptualization of the public sphere as consisting in “the overlap between various national public spheres” (Nitoiu, 2013:32). To put it differently, while there may not be a well-established, unified European public sphere, there are observable transnational segmented publics. These segments are likely to challenge the legitimacy of power in a context of public spaces permitted by European cooperation and problem solving (Eriksen, 2005: 358). Here, the concept of *Europeanization* of public discourses and the representation of European-related topics, under a European rather than a national prism, has emerged as a fruitful area of academic research. Relevant studies that have been conducted aim at shedding some light on the salience of European issues as compared to local, national, or global affairs, as well as on the role that frames have played on citizens’ engagement and identification with the EU (Bruter, 2003; De Vreese & Kandyla, 2009; Clement, 2015).

Europeanization is a dynamic process that has been conceptualized as having a vertical and horizontal dimension of communication. The first is related to national media references regarding supranational aspects of European affairs, while the second concerns the communication connections of national media organisations with sources and issues of other EU member states (Koopmans & Erbe, 2004). Another conceptualization incorporates the division between normative and structural features. Both types refer to the interconnectedness of the national public spheres through similarities; however, the former places emphasis on common European norms that treat the European Union and Europeans as relevant themes of public deliberation, whereas the latter highlights common ground in timing, framing and the issues raised across the national public spheres (Sicakkan & Heiko Heiberger, 2022: 234).

The EUMEPLAT research consortium has mapped 19 approaches entailing a complex interweaving of essentialist, discursive, relativist, socio-spatial, material and politico-spatial components that shape the diverse manifestations of European identity (Carpentier et al. 2023), noting that the ultimate objective of Europeanization is to align and harmonize regulatory aspects of the economy. The authors have also emphasized the difference between *EU-ization* and Europeanization.

Thiel (2012:13), by highlighting national media’s role and structure, argues in favor of different degrees of “Europeanization” of media discourse in different member-states. He contends that although the synchronous discussion of the same European affairs in the different member-states might suggest the existence of a Europeanization process in domestic public spheres, strong national presentation of the contested issues with little reference to foreign views “attests to the rudimentary existence of a European public sphere”. Research projects analyzing the Europeanization of national public spheres have identified a pattern of “segmented Europeanization”, discernible both in quality (Wessler et al., 2008) and tabloid press (Königslöw, 2012), in the sense that a growing interest in the EU is found separately in each of the analyzed public spheres. However, what is missing is the cultivation of a common European discourse. This pattern displays, among the European countries, a type of stable national segmentation, with member-states lacking interest in each other (Königslöw, 2012: 456). It should be noted that the EUMEPLAT research project has highlighted collaboration between national public broadcasters to promote European media content and media representations of Europe as the bridges between discursive and material components of Europeanization (Carpentier et al., 2021).

Moreover, considering that the Europeanization of national public spheres, resulting in the formation of a common European public sphere, is a highly challenging, if not elusive, venture, Sicakkan and Heiko Heiberger (2022) propose an alternative model regarding the public sphere for Europe by utilizing Facebook data and based on “a cleavage theory of Europeanization” (232). What emerges is the operationalization of the European public

sphere “in terms of the transnational political cleavages that it accommodates” recognizing the existence of complicated public spheres structures with a considerable role played by the political context in which communication, deliberation and contestation are taking place (245).

Europeanization has also been discussed in relation to the journalism field with emphasis placed on the potential implications of transnational journalism networks for the Europeanization of coverage by national media (Heft, Alfter & Pfetsch, 2019). Relevant research highlights the important role of several factors such as the networks’ degree of organization and control, and the intensity of cooperation among network journalists aimed at cross-border reporting.

Europeanization in the context of social media

By the end of the 2000s, the notion of Europeanization was comprised by different meanings and applied in diversified ways in research on the public sphere, resulting in a lack of theoretical infrastructure and methodological coherence. At the same time, relevant research adopted a rather restrictive perspective on Europeanization in the existing media spheres. These restrictions raised the need to find and propose theoretical, methodological and normative frameworks upon which Europeanization could be defined and measured in the context of the transformation of the national public spheres (Trenz, 2008).

As Kermer and Nijmeijer (2020) argue “Europeanization takes national public spheres as starting points for the emergence of European identity” (33). That is why for years most scholars investigated the emergence and the intensity of coverage of European issues, as well as the common use of ‘master frames’ in national public spheres as manifestations of an ongoing Europeanization process (Van Cauwenberge, Gelders, & Joris, 2009; Machill, Beiler, & Fisher, 2006.) However, since media are embedded in national contexts and subjected to state-defined structures, they “tend to tell European stories through a national filter” (Kermer & Nijmeijer, 2020:33).

Today, the supremacy of social media platforms among citizens and political actors has also influenced the way governmental institutions reach their base (Mickoleit, 2014). This adoption of trends by the latter, has raised questions related to what extent online media can foster the emergence of a pan-European communication space either through journalist-filtered public opinions or through the free-willed and spontaneous viewpoints of online users. Further, the role of social media in cultivating a transnational communication space should not be overlooked since their strategic use in the context of political communication, as well as their embeddedness within traditional media, have rendered them a crucial part of the process of creating a European identity (Kermer & Nijmeijer, 2020:34).

Çela, (2015: 127) argues that “cyberspace is a new public space”, where public opinion is formed through exchanges on social media platforms. Social media platforms seem to provide the ideal vehicle for citizen participation in the public debate on politics. By eliminating the barriers of space and power control, social media allows for a more diverse pool of voices to be heard in the European community. By and large, they are considered important tools in setting up an open space for EU politicization.

One distinctive finding with regard to online public spheres is the pervasive discontent with the EU polity. Relevant research reveals that in the mainstream online media organizations’ framing and discussions of EU politics, there seems to exist a symmetrical pattern on how the European Union is contested through the dominant frame of national politics, with emphasis placed on the present rather than the future when it comes to Eurosceptic perceptions. This confinement of EU politics’ framing to the national sphere by online news platforms is argued to resemble the corresponding framing provided by their offline counterparts, an identification that

makes reporting on EU politics operate as an important factor, separating citizens into “us” and “them” and thus hindering the pan-European perspective upon which EU polity is assessed (Michailidou, 2015: 333).

On the other hand, studies on social media platforms reach different conclusions with regard to the extent of the European perspective in public discourse. Positive attitudes towards EU performance and support for further strengthening have been found to be cultivated by news consumption on social networking sites as opposed to receiving European news from other online environments (such as blogs), which are related to more negative attitudes. Overall, political discussion is argued to contribute to antithetical outcomes by enhancing the sense of efficacy inside the EU, but, at the same time, by multiplying feelings of fear relating to integration (Mourao et al., 2015: 3214).

Trying to answer the question of whether social media can operate as a means for the emergence of a transnational European public sphere, another study focuses on Twitter activity around Greece’s 2015 bailout negotiations and reveals the potential of the platform to achieve transnational interactions enabling the embodiment of an “ad hoc trans-national European communication space” that displayed clear signs of Europeanization (Hännska & Bauchowitz, 2019: 11).

Another study also tried to explore whether there is a Europeanized public discourse on Twitter concerning the hot issue of migration, by analyzing tweets during the period 2014-2019. The authors employed an operationalization of Europeanization and indeed found evidence of a Europeanization process taking place in the public deliberation on social media, where citizens act as the driving forces of the transnationalization of the migration discourse on the platform (Dutceac Segesten & Farjam, 2022). In fact, the authors suggest that there are two Europeanization processes taking place at the same time, since their analysis revealed two ideologically divided camps of users participating in the transnational discourse on migration; one pro-refugee camp and, on the other side, an anti-migration one. This finding, i.e., that social media provide a fruitful ground for the Europeanization of the migration discourse to flourish, has been further supported by the following research aiming at comparing the migration-related content between traditional and social media. The researchers conclude that social media retains a transnational scope of its content, compared to the predominance of the national one in traditional media. Furthermore, the study reveals that in social media the dominant themes are EU and Global Politics, as contrasted with the traditional media where the above-mentioned themes have proved to lag behind national political reporting (Farjam et al., 2023).

Twitter has also been investigated in terms of its potential to create a European *demo* based on discussions taking place under two hashtags of European significance (namely #schengen and #ttip). The research findings, derived from sentiment analysis, reveal the emergence of European consciousness as reflected in the tendency of the users to perceive the implications of the relevant topics primarily as European citizens or European community (self-reference as “we Europeans”) rather than as nationals of particular countries. Moreover, the adoption of a highly critical perspective of the issues under discussion by users’ expressing negative sentiments is not interrelated to a lack of support towards EU and European institutions. These are indicators of Europeanization or European belonging, fostered by Twitter, that confirm the concept of the “European lite identity” in the sense that Twitter users appear as “a collectivity of individuals belonging to Europe and not a demo existing beyond and above the nation” (Ruiz-Soler et al., 2019: 10).

As to the Facebook platform, a study examining the operation of social media as an institutional communication tool of EU cohesion policy combined with the potential emergence of a European public field reveals the existence of an “horizontal Europeanization” in Facebook discourse with several topics being discussed at the same time in different countries. Europeanization is argued to take two forms: in the case of shared discontent, as reflected in citizens’ comments on Local Managing Authorities’ (LMAs) posts, giving rise to the emergence of a public sphere,

as well as in the case of institutionalized communication procedures coming from LMAs and resulting in horizontal links. Another articulation of the European public sphere is found in the Euroscepticism discourse incorporating topics voiced internationally and reflecting a negative stance towards the EU funding scheme (Barberio et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, the Europeanization dynamics of social media platforms is not a universally confirmed finding in the studies. For instance, research investigating the content disseminated through the European Parliament's social media accounts in Latvia highlights their limited role in cultivating the notion of European citizenship among youth (Gausis, 2017). Moreover, a study investigating journalists' and citizens' reactions to 2014 European Parliamentary results, raising the question whether the Eurosceptic parties' discourses through Twitter, Facebook and printed media influence the Europeanization of national public spheres, reveals the great power held by Eurosceptic messages in Europeanization to a greater extent than other EU topics. Although the public discourses regarding Euroscepticism seem to have the power to attribute a European dimension to national media debates, the Europeanization dynamics of social media proves weaker compared to the corresponding potential of the printed media. Comparing the Eurosceptic discourse articulated in printed media organizations and social networking sites it was found that the latter failed to operate as a means of further Europeanization, since discussion about Euroscepticism on those platforms was mostly based on references to national parties rather than on transnational cases, making pan-European discourse have a scant presence on the online public sphere. The national perspective was found to dominate in most of the immediate reactions to the EP election results, regardless of their Eurosceptic orientation (Dutceac Segesten & Bossetta, 2017: 374-375).

Furthermore, there are some critiques on the democratic potentials ascribed to social media's ability to form a new public sphere, in principle. The ability of the internet and digital media environment to serve as a public sphere has been widely challenged on the grounds that online interactions lack rational deliberation (Papacharissi, 2010) or they are devoid of political relevance (Dahlgren, 2005). In addition, social media platforms are believed to have the ability to enhance underrepresented interests, but, at the same time, it is contested whether they can mitigate inequalities in the political sphere (Hennen, 2020: 83-84).

Demertzis and Tsekeris (2018:9) remind us that public space is not equal to public sphere and highlight the obstacles regarding the emergence of genuine deliberation in the online public sphere, such as "parallel spheres", "cyberghettos" or "filter bubbles", all of them indicative of a selection process that enables citizens' exposure to be ideologically aligned with online communities. Furthermore, toxicity and incivility have emerged as alarming components of the platformized public debates, challenging the premises of democratic deliberation in the public sphere (Boswell, 2015: 315). One of the potential harmful effects is the extreme polarization of political views, which in the European context may threaten the emergence of a common core of the public sphere, leading to fragmented discourses nurtured by parallel communities (Winiarska-Brodowska, 2020: xxii). As Kermer and Nijmeijer (2020) argue, "social media logic gives precedence to virality over factuality, which can prove disruptive when the topic of discussion is something as complex as the EU" (34). By and large, perceptions and representations about the EU are shaped by the media discourses circulating in both offline and digital media, despite being also impacted by the dynamics of disinformation and information manipulation facilitated by echo-chambers and algorithmic bias (Perez-Escoda & Lokot, 2023:3).

Greece: From Europhilia to Euroscepticism?

In the modern history of Greece, since the collapse of the seven-year dictatorship (1967-1974) and the restoration of democracy, Euroscepticism has taken on divergent trends at political and societal level. Particularly in regard to the field of politics, Euroscepticism emerged in the first period after the fall of the military coup when the Prime Minister of the time submitted a formal application for the country's accession to the European Economy Community (June 1975), an initiative that triggered reactions from the opposition parties, the Greek Communist party (KKE) and the PASOK socialist party, with the latter justifying its Eurosceptic stance on the grounds of safeguarding Greek national sovereignty (Vasilopoulou, 2018: 313). However, the assumption of power by PASOK for almost the entire 1980s, under the prime ministership of Andreas Papandreu, led the government to gradually moderate its confrontational strategy and rhetoric in a context of securing European loans against a background of unsustainable Greek financial policy. In the years that followed (the 1990s and 2000s), Euroscepticism at a political level was fueled only by opposition parties of minor parliamentary dynamics, but, nevertheless, from a societal perspective public opinion in Greece was mainly supportive of EU ideals (Vasilopoulou, 2018: 314).

Therefore, Greece is considered a traditionally pro-European member state of the EU. However, the 2008 global financial crisis proved to be a milestone that defined a reversal in the attitude of the Greek public opinion towards European institutions, reflecting a shift from Europhilia to Euroscepticism (Katsanidou & Lefkofridi, 2020: 165-166). As revealed by the Eurobarometer data, prior to the period of financial recession, Greek citizens were supportive of EU integration. However, already within that time span, an ideal seemed to have lost its momentum, with negative attitudes towards EU membership showing an extraordinary increase especially during the period of 2007-2011 (Serricchio, Tsakatika & Quaglia, 2013: 57-58). Despite this undisputable trend, it has been argued that public opinion in Greece, in effect, shifted from the warm feelings towards the EU to a Euro-critical, but not Euro-rejectionist, attitude (Clements, Nanou & Verney, 2014: 252).

The negative attitudes towards the EU, which commenced in the years just before the Eurozone financial crisis but then escalated evidently during the debt crisis period, reflect a crucial multifaceted phenomenon described as "game-changer". It was a phase of realignments for public perceptions, with distrust being voiced in respect of both domestic political institutions and the EU (Verney, 2015: 292). Greek citizens – in response to the implications of the debt crisis – became more Eurosceptic, articulating their diminishing support for the EU in general, even though they refused to leave the Eurozone (Clements, Nanou & Verney, 2014).

In effect, Greek citizens experienced a radically new socio-political context. Yet, the transformation of Greek society from a pro-European to a Eurosceptic one cannot be attributed merely to the crisis of confidence afflicting the domestic political system. Support for Eurosceptic parties (during the 2014 Parliamentary elections, four out of the seven parties that won EP seats were, to varied degrees, critical of EU integration, with SYRIZA being first ranked) and changes in peoples' attitudes towards the EU developed at a time when Eurosceptic parties' viewpoints increasingly appealed to the public (Verney, 2015: 292-293).

At the height of the financial recession, spanning the period 2009-2013, the Greek public sphere was characterized by Euroscepticism and especially anti-German sentiments against a background of narratives, derived from news media and social media content, which indicated a power struggle between the people and the political elites and a conflict between different political ideologies (Michailidou, 2017). In response to a climate of anti-Greek rhetoric coming from European media (Bickes et al. 2014; Tzogopoulos, 2020), the Greek media were found to place emphasis on national politics, accompanied by powerful, sensationalist anti-German frames, occasionally invoked by political actors of various ideological orientations (Michailidou, 2017: 101 & 103).

By and large, the severe austerity measures imposed on Greek society combined with the troika's explicit involvement in Greece's financial policy are believed to have contributed to the Eurosceptic trend in Greek public opinion. After a temporary decline, Euroscepticism flared up again in 2016, in the aftermath of the refugee crisis, since Greece became the first host country of the immigrant populations coming from the East with the aim of residing in the European Union (Vasilopoulou, 2018: 314).

Methodology and research questions

This research is part of the EUMEPLAT project (European Media Platforms: Assessing Positive and Negative Externalities for European Culture) and was conducted in accordance with the methodology framework for analyzing platform journalism in ten countries (Cardoso et al., 2021). Within the context of this study, we conducted a quantitative content analysis of Greek posts regarding professional content from media outlets' pages, user-generated content from public pages, and public groups on three social media platforms: Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube (n=700). The posts were collected based on three crucial themes for EU citizens, according to the 2022 Eurobarometer: the economy, climate, and health. The posts were selected according to the relevance of their content to the European Union/ Europe, always cross-referenced with the thematic dimensions cited above. In the cases of Facebook and Twitter a secondary parameter was used to select the ten most engaging posts per dimension and per month ("total interactions" on Facebook, "reach" on Twitter). However, in the case of YouTube, due to the inherent lack of available relevant videos, the entirety of available content was collected and analyzed.

The analysis covered the period ranging from September 2021 to November 2021, a synchronic research period across the ten countries under investigation within the scope of the Eumeplat project. We considered both the posts and any accompanying links, meaning any hyperlink to a particular website or news source. The coding process involved codifying text, images and/or videos. Additionally, we determined the type of agent or entity that posted the content (individual users, media outlets, other sources). Subsequently, we coded the major subject of the posts, identifying the main topic or theme being discussed. We also categorized the scope of the posts, distinguishing whether they focused on global, European, national, regional, or local angle of the debated issues. In addition, we considered 19 dimensions of Europeanization (Cardoso et al., 2021), as defined in the semantic map analysis by Carpentier et al. (2023). This included coding for elements such as EU law and governance, institutions, values, culture, among others. Lastly, we coded the tone of the posts, assessing the stance or attitude expressed towards the EU and its institutions. This allowed us to categorize the posts based on whether they conveyed a positive, negative, or neutral sentiment towards the EU.

Before delving into the analysis of the results, it is essential to address some inherent limitations of this study. To begin with, the datasets used in this research were constructed exclusively from publicly accessible data via APIs. Consequently, they were confined to public information, in accordance with GDPR regulations. Another important factor was our deliberate choice to focus on the ten posts with the highest reach and interaction per platform, dimension, and month. Our rationale for this selection lies in the belief that reach and interaction serve as reasonable proxies for gauging the level of user engagement with a post. Additionally, it is worth noting that this study is of a synchronic nature, meaning that the results may vary significantly over different time periods. However, it is important to underline that the primary objective of this study is to identify similarities and differences in EU coverage in the countries under investigation.

Given the theoretical framework outlined above, the key research questions we address can be summarized as follows:

- a) What are the most pertinent issues being discussed by various stakeholders (individual users' public pages, groups, and media organizations)?
- b) What is the prevailing tone used in these discussions?
- c) What are the primary characteristics that contribute to the Europeanization of the online public sphere, as discerned in the most widely viewed content disseminated on Greek social media platforms?

Results

According to research findings, in terms of social media post format, the component of hyperlink, referring to content, which is external to the platform, is predominantly used by media organizations both on Facebook and Twitter, reflecting the tendency of news media outlets to employ social networking sites as an attractive means of redirecting online users to the media organization's news portals. To this end the use of image is also considered imperative, a case applicable more on Facebook media organization accounts than on Twitter, where the essence of the posting lies principally in the 280-character message [$\chi^2(5, N=700) = 242.03, p < .001$]. Hyperlinks, though to a lesser extent, are also employed quite frequently in posts disseminated by individual users, primarily on Twitter and Facebook media organization accounts, and secondarily by Twitter individual users and Facebook users. As to images, they seem to excel on Facebook over the Twitter platform. The video component embedded in the post is a trend primarily found on Facebook individual user accounts (table 1).

Table 1. Media format of social media posts (n= 700)

	Text	Link	Image	Video
FB All Users	119	54	79	38
FB Groups	132	36	85	4
FB Media	120	119	119	0
Twitter All Users	120	75	43	4
Twitter Media	118	117	37	1
YouTube All Users	74	30	1	84
TOTAL	683	431	364	131

Source: Authors' own elaboration on data from EUMEPLAT project

In terms of content's authorship, the data reveal that media agents (legacy media or digital media outlets) prove to be the most frequent distributors regarding engaging content (n=377) compared to political agents (n=132), other organizations (n=31), or common citizens (n=146). Their appealing posts are reasonably mostly disseminated through the media organization accounts – both on Facebook and Twitter – and, to a lesser extent, through individual user accounts, primarily those of YouTube and Twitter platform. Common citizens appear as the second most frequent feeders of the most engaging content that is most frequently being disseminated on Facebook group pages [$\chi^2(5, N=700) = 477.2, p < .001$]. Political agents (e.g., political parties, politicians, EU parliament members), who are third in rank in terms of their frequency as engaging content contributors, tend to disseminate posts through individual user accounts, mainly on Facebook and, secondarily, on Twitter [$\chi^2(5, N=700) = 234.8, p < .01$] (table 2).

Table 2. Agent that posted the content (n=700)

	Political agents	Media agents	Other Organisations	Common Citizens
FB All Users	72	28	12	13
FB Groups	2	5	4	119
FB Media	0	120	0	0
Twitter All Users	46	61	3	9
Twitter Media	0	109	0	0
YouTube All Users	12	54	12	5
TOTAL	132	377	31	146

Source: Authors' own elaboration on data from EUMEPLAT project

The three primary categories of media organizations differ in their preferred social media platforms for content distribution. Print media predominantly utilize Facebook for posting content, while broadcasters exhibit a distinct preference for Twitter and YouTube. Conversely, digital-native media outlets employ a more diversified online strategy, disseminating popular posts across all three platforms (table 3).

Table 3. Type of media as posting agents (n=385)

	Print	Broadcast	Internet only
FB All Users	6	2	20
FB Groups	0	0	5
FB Media	55	9	55
Twitter All Users	8	43	10
Twitter Media	21	65	32
YouTube All Users	0	33	21
TOTAL	90	152	143

Source: Authors' own elaboration on data from EUMEPLAT project

When it comes to the topics covered in the most widely viewed posts within the sample, a common theme that emerges across all platforms is the discussion of public institutions (n=544), which includes governmental organizations or national governments in a broader sense (table 4). The institution-oriented character of the social media platforms content is also reflected in the high incidence of political agents (political parties and political actors) as topics in Europe-related posts. This trend seems to be more intense on Facebook individual users' accounts, however it is also significantly evident in all the other platforms of the sample (Facebook group and media organization accounts, Twitter individual user and media organization accounts and, to a lesser extent, YouTube user accounts).

Table 4. Subject of the post (multiple choice)

	FB All Users	FB Groups	FB Media	Twitter All Users	Twitter Media	YouTube All Users	TOTAL
Pol. Agent	70	49	43	42	46	37	287
Pol. Party	29	10	11	8	2	5	65
Politician	59	49	38	37	45	34	262
EP Group	3	2	2	0	2	0	9
Newsmedia	3	8	8	4	6	0	29
Other Org.	93	97	95	103	96	72	556
Public Inst.	88	94	94	102	96	70	544
Private Inst.	8	4	16	7	10	20	65
Non-Inst.	20	24	27	4	3	21	99
TV host	3	2	3	0	0	6	14
Influencer	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Citizen	14	15	19	1	3	12	64
Other	16	31	18	18	10	11	104

Source: Authors' own elaboration on data from EUMEPLAT project

On the other hand, political actors use Twitter to express the near-future plans or the achievements of Greece compared to other European countries in a wide range of sectors: environmental, national defense, health-related/Covid-19-related (e.g. the Prime Minister posts "It is our duty to ensure that we do not hand our children a damaged planet", while the Minister of Development and Investment posts "The fact that we are among the only 7 European countries that have already managed to make up for the consequences of the Pandemic is a reason for pride and optimism for all Greeks and proof of the correctness of our Economic Policy"). The platform is also employed as a digital space for dissemination of concerns regarding the energy crisis mainly on the part of the government's opponents (e.g., the leader of the Opposition tweets, "With the highest inflation in 10 years. With the highest electricity price in Europe. With oil on the rise. I asked for a pre-scheduled debate in Parliament regarding the accuracy and lack of will of the government to protect households & businesses").

As to the non-organizational or non-institutional agents (e.g., influencers, celebrities, TV hosts, citizens, or others), their presence as subjects on Europe-related posts is much more limited, having a higher frequency of occurrence on Facebook or YouTube platforms rather than on Twitter. The same trend applies to citizens who emerge as being part of the thematic core of the posts, primarily on Facebook and secondarily on the YouTube platform (table 4).

According to overall research findings, in the Europe-related posts content creators adopt either a national or a European perspective reflecting the multimodal type of discussion developing on social media platforms where European affairs are perceived through a European or national lens (table 5), indicating the interconnectedness between Europe as a whole and its member-states. The European perspective has a high incidence both on Twitter (individual users' and media organizations' accounts) and Facebook, with the latter platform disseminating this perspective primarily through media organization accounts [$\chi^2(5, N=700) = 94.1, p < .001$]. By contrast, the national perspective can be found more frequently on Facebook rather than on Twitter, with Facebook individual users or Facebook groups displaying more interest in that trend compared to Facebook media organization accounts [$\chi^2(5, N=700) = 36.5, p < .001$]. Users posting on YouTube are also oriented mainly towards the national perspective of Europe-related content, indicating the platform's tendency to speak to the online public adopting mainly a domestic scope on the events, mostly on regional and local levels [$\chi^2(5, N=700) = 80.7, p < .001$]. Although to a lesser extent, the global perspective of Europe-related content can be more frequently

found on media organization accounts both on Facebook and Twitter, without any significant difference between the various types of accounts (table 5).

Table 5. Scope of post (n= 688, multiple choice)

	Global	European	National	Regional / Local
FB All Users	18	62	86	9
FB Groups	11	50	94	10
FB Media	26	81	66	5
Twitter All Users	14	91	61	1
Twitter Media	23	96	46	0
YouTube All Users	9	28	53	25
TOTAL	101	408	406	50

Source: Authors' own elaboration on data from EUMEPLAT project

Two dimensions of Europeanization in Europe-related content stand out. These dimensions are mainly related to European institutions and European law and governance, followed, albeit to a much lesser extent, by European people, matters related to territory, and European values (table 6). This trend indicates the tendency of social media content creators to discuss European affairs by giving prominence to a range of institutional players or legal transformations, being treated as defining features of European developments. In particular, institutions are frequently discussed on all platform postings of the sample, with the greatest weight given to Facebook group accounts, Twitter media organization accounts and YouTube user accounts. In terms of law and governance aspects of Europe-related content, these seem to have a greater incidence on Facebook group accounts or on Twitter user and YouTube accounts, rather than on media organization accounts. Looking at the less frequent dimensions of Europeanization, it is observed that European people and European value aspects are referred to primarily on Facebook group accounts, whereas the European territory feature is mainly present on Twitter media organization accounts. What is striking is the low incidence of public sphere, social movements, and democratic practices as dimensions of Europeanization on all social media platforms of the sample (table 6).

Table 5. Most mentioned European dimensions in a post

	FB All Users	FB Groups	FB Media	Twitter All Users	Twitter Media	Youtube All Users	Total
People	4	21	4	6	10	4	49
Media	0	0	0	1	1	0	2
Territory	9	8	5	6	4	5	37
Values	11	15	4	7	3	2	42
Media Industry	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Interactions	4	6	3	3	1	1	18
Culture	2	4	2	1	1	0	10
Democratic Models	2	2	0	2	0	0	6
Institutions	37	42	24	33	45	37	218
Law & Governance	23	39	13	36	29	31	171
Social Movements	2	1	2	4	2	0	11
Public Sphere	2	1	0	3	2	2	10

Source: Authors' own elaboration on data from EUMEPLAT project

Overall, on platform-disseminated content the economic and political aspects of European affairs do not take precedence, in most cases, over the scientific ones (table 7), a trend implying that on social media platforms the theme of Europe is frequently approached with reference to the implications or influences exerted by the agreements and negotiations taking place among the different European countries. The unusual high occurrence of scientific posts is directly linked with political decisions of mandatory vaccination campaign and in a context of harsh lockdown policy.

Table 6. Type of content

	Scientific	Political	Economic
FB All Users	18	60	60
FB Groups	33	58	59
FB Media	38	43	54
Twitter All Users	32	62	63
Twitter Media	30	58	66
YouTube All Users	24	46	51
TOTAL	175	327	353

Source: Authors' own elaboration on data from EUMEPLAT project

In terms of tonality, the Europe-related content incorporates predominately neutral viewpoints or thoughts regarding Europe (table 8), adopting mainly a descriptive or informative character, a trend that is equally visible on all types of Facebook and Twitter accounts. As to the positive and negative tonality, though it displays a limited incidence within posts, its usage varies among the platforms of the sample with the positive approach being present mainly on Twitter and YouTube, and the negative approach excelling mainly on Facebook groups' accounts (table 8).

Table 7. Tone of post regarding the European Union

	Positive	Negative	Neutral
FB All Users	8	10	107
FB Groups	8	20	104
FB Media	1	5	113
Twitter All Users	12	8	100
Twitter Media	16	6	96
YouTube All Users	12	3	70
TOTAL	57	52	590

Source: Authors' own elaboration on data from EUMEPLAT project

Comparing posts in terms of interactions, Facebook media organizations' accounts stand out in the number of followers and potential reach they could have but lack in the average dynamics of interactions among the online users. On the contrary, posts with user-generated content on Facebook (groups and users' pages) perform much higher in terms of interactions compared with media accounts. Similarly, on Twitter, professional media accounts over-perform in terms of followers. However, due to much lower engagement rate compared to common users' accounts, media accounts end up underperforming in their average reach (tables 9 & 10).

Table 8. Comparison among posts with most interactions on Facebook (all users, groups, media)

	Facebook All Users (n=126)		Facebook Groups (n=125)		Facebook Media (n=120)	
	Avg	Total	Avg	Total	Avg	Total
Followers/ Members	212 235.9	26 741 726	N/A	N/A	337 543	40 505 167
Total Interactions	5 855.8	741 618	266.7	33 335	368.3	44 192
Comments	463.9	58 452	20.6	2 573	70.2	8 425
Shares	32.7	4 122	27.4	3 424	19.9	2 386

Source: Authors' own elaboration on data from EUMEPLAT project

Table 9. Comparison between posts with most interactions on Twitter (all users, media)

	Twitter All Users (n=120)		Twitter Media (n=120)	
	Avg	Total	Avg	Total
Followers	412 314.2	49 477 701	460 264.5	55 231 746
Reach	109 351.6	13 122 191	34 692.2	4 163 073
Replies	47.9	5 748	2.05	247
Retweets	60.4	7 253	3.1	377
Impressions	635 995.8	76 319 496	601 810.9	72 217 316
Avg engagement rate ¹ %		0.017		0.0008
Reach vs followers %		26.52		7.53

Source: Authors' own elaboration on data from EUMEPLAT project

¹ Engagement rate: Number of engagements divided by impressions. Source: <https://help.twitter.com/en/managing-your-account/using-the-tweet-activity-dashboard>

Discussion and Conclusions

The potential of the internet to democratize political communication and public discourse constitutes a controversial issue, but it is nevertheless acknowledged that it has permitted the emergence of an online space for political communication, incorporating features that circumvent the traditional media (Hennen, 2020: 84). In contrast to the classic concept of public sphere, mainly dominated by institutional actors (media and political parties), this new, "networked public sphere" provides actors from all sectors of society (groups, NGOs, single individuals) with a free space to make their voices heard (Benkler, 2006). In other words, the democratization function of social media platforms is highly related to their potential to constitute bottom-up public spheres (Ruiz-Soler, 2018). More precisely, Ruiz-Soler (2018), in his study on European topics contestation on Twitter, has found that empirical validation for the *de-hierarchization of traditional gatekeepers* paved the way for new, non-elite actors to gain more visibility and frame the dialogue on European issues.

The fact that both Twitter and Facebook posts, derived from users, present higher followers' engagement rate in comparison to media pages, is a peculiarity that provides concrete support for a more diverse online public place where non-institutional voices can be heard and contribute to the final outcome of the public discussion.

The discussion concerning Europe, taking place on social media platforms in the period spanning from September 2021 to November 2021, is mostly based on institutional nuances with public institutions (including governmental ones) and political agents (political parties and actors) dominating posts in their thematic core. From the perspective of Greek social media users, Europe in public discourse is mostly related to those agents who take sides, influence, or get actively engaged in decision-making. This finding is in accordance with previous studies that have already been discussed. For instance, the Eurocrisis coverage by online news media has proved to be dominated by elite voices as opposed to the alternative voices that were given limited opportunities to be heard (Michailidou, 2015: 330).

Facebook turns out to be a welcome and preferred platform for themes either of high frequency (public institutions, political agents) or low frequency (non-organizational, non-institutional agents) of occurrence. In particular, the great emphasis placed by Facebook media accounts on public institutions, political agents and politicians cannot be regarded as an extraordinary trend, since previous research has revealed that online news media reporting on the Eurocrisis has given particular prominence to EU institutions (such as the European Central Bank and the Commission), whose considerable visibility is considered to result from journalistic choices (Michailidou, 2015: 330).

On the other hand, YouTube stands out as the preferred platform for topics incorporating private institutions or topics related to non-institutional agents. This finding implies the operation of YouTube as an alternative public space hosting public concerns that do not appear frequently on Facebook or Twitter, both of which represent platforms particularly receptive to themes with an institutional orientation. The tendency of non-institutional actors to find alternative outlets for expressing their non-widely disseminated viewpoints has also been highlighted in a previous study examining whether the voice of the public in online media (such as in social media platforms and commentary forums of online news websites), during the 2019 European Parliamentary Elections and the subsequent period of the Eurocrisis (2010-2012), contributed to the shaping of EU contestation. Topics such as the quality of democracy, or the implications of EU integration for democracy, overlooked by online news reporting, are found to be commented on by the readers of EU news in news commenting forums which operate as alternative digital spaces where public concerns regarding the state of democracy in Europe are articulated (Michailidou, 2015: 329).

According to Trezn (2013:8) the Eurocrisis has triggered the “re-nationalization” of public contestation regarding European affairs, with national interests and politics becoming more salient compared to the European ones. Nonetheless, the findings from the analysis of the Greek online public sphere attest to the adoption of either a national or European perspective by online users, which may be indicative of European affairs’ perception as a continuum in which the national and European element are in a mutually influencing relationship. Online discussion unfolds through a national and European lens, implying that the existence of European consciousness does not necessarily lead to circumventing the national perspective.

In particular, the tendency of media organisations to use Facebook as a platform for disseminating the European scope of Europe-related events, as opposed to Facebook individual users or Facebook groups, which show special interest in the domestic scope of Europe-related news, can be regarded as an indication of a pluralistic online space conducive to the dissemination of varied agendas. This trend emerges at a time (2021) when Facebook has been ranked first by online users for news purposes (52% of them use the platform as news source, according to Digital News Report 2021, Kalogeropoulos, 2021: 82-83). The explicit orientation of YouTube users to present Europe-related content through a national lens is in accordance with the use of the platform as an alternative online space where the quite overlooked – by Facebook and Twitter platforms – non-institutional/non-organizational voices can be heard.

All in all, this finding might be indicative of a “European ‘togetherness’ integrated into the national interpretative framework” (Olausson, 2010:148). The three analyzed themes (economy, climate, and health) for the purposes of our study are all selected based on their significance at the European level. However, subthemes and topics are specialized and framed according to the national context and the current political or social developments. Besides, as Olausson (2010:149) suggests, “in order for the less established European identity to become naturalized and integrated into everyday thinking and discourse, it needs to be anchored within the familiar and established national horizon”.

The predominance of the financial and political aspects of European affairs in online public discourse seems reasonable in the case of Greece, considering that the multiple crises afflicting the country are directly related to political decisions and initiatives bearing severe implications for the country’s finances. According to the research findings, the Europeanization of the public sphere is centred on the institutional or legal dimension of Europe, which can be attributed to the intense transformations taking place in the Greek political field over the past fifteen years, bringing to the fore the Eurosceptic shade. In the case of Greece, the relevance of Eurosceptic voices was reinforced by a series of peculiarities related to the multiple crises encountered by the EU and the multiple developments taking place in the political field. Among them, what stands out is the electoral success of Eurosceptic parties in 2015, the emergence of new parties classified in the Europhile section of the political spectrum, and the formation of a coalition government whose temporary cohesion was based on Eurosceptic and anti-austerity rhetoric (Vasilopoulou, 2018).

The limited prominence given to European people, territory, and values, as opposed to the intense consideration paid to European institutions and European governance, reflects quite a one-dimensional Europeanization of the online public sphere, dominated by the formalistic and bureaucratic processes that govern Europe. Divergences in the agendas raised within media organisations’ accounts compared to individual users’ or groups’ accounts have also been observed as regards aspects of so-called Europeanization, with Facebook groups emerging as the main disseminators of European people and European values, whose overall visibility is limited. This trend can be perceived as another indication of the Facebook platform as a public space in which alternative voices can flourish.

Last but not least, the neutral tonality that mostly accompanies Europe-related content on social media platforms is a feature reiterated in online news media. Similarly, journalistic coverage of the past Eurocrisis (2010-2012) has been found to be characterized by an apparently neutral framing tonality, incorporating technocratic and political elite actors whose actions are presented to the public without being subjected to any journalistic assessment or analysis (Michailidou, 2015: 330).

Overall, our research provides evidence of a democratization process of the Greek online public debate on European affairs, facilitated by the introduction of new topics and a variety of voices, which would otherwise be neglected from legacy media, finding their way into open public space through social media platforms. The ideal type of a networked public sphere aspires to be comprised of counterpublics, usually marginalized in mainstream public discourse. In the Greek case, however, legacy media organizations still stand out as “orchestrators” of online discussion on European issues. In effect, Media outlets produce much more content compared to other social media users, implying that the public sphere, either traditional or digital, is still a matter where the professional media prevail.

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