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# The image of the EU as crisis manager: a multilevel analysis of framing in Italian political discourse during the pandemic crisis by Covid-19

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## ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic posed an unprecedented challenge to the European Union, exposing it to new legitimacy pressures. This article analyses the image of the EU as crisis manager in the Italian political discourse during the pandemic crisis, combining framing analysis and political claim analysis in two communicative arenas: the national press (*La Repubblica* and *Corriere della Sera*) and political communication on Twitter. Through a mixed-methodological approach, the study investigates how political actors and media have constructed narratives of legitimisation or delegitimisation of the Union in the period 2020-2022. The results show that the visibility of the EU increased significantly during the crisis, with a strong polarisation between government and opposition. Prevailing frames focus on symbolic dimensions, in particular solidarity, initially evoked in a critical sense and later reactivated in a positive key with the approval of the NextGenerationEU. The press tends towards a more articulated narrative evolution, while Twitter is confirmed as a highly polarised communicative arena. The study contributes to the understanding of the discursive mechanisms of legitimacy in crisis contexts and shows how the pandemic acted as a catalyst for the (re)construction of the EU's public image in the Italian national debate.

## KEYWORDS

Framing analysis; EU studies; Italian politics; political discourse; crisis management; COVID-19


## 1. Introduction

Over the past decade, the European Union has been traversed by a succession of crises that have tested its internal cohesion, decision-making effectiveness and institutional legitimacy. Among these, the Covid-19 pandemic crisis represented a particularly critical turning point. Unlike previous crises, the pandemic affected all Member States simultaneously, requiring a rapid, coordinated and multilevel response in an area – public health – over which the EU has limited competence. Containment measures, restrictions on freedom of movement and the need for extraordinary resources raised urgent questions not only about the Union's operational capacity, but also about its legitimacy in the eyes of citizens (Reinl et al., 2024).

The pandemic has thoroughly tested the resilience of European governance, accentuating already known challenges and raising new ones. According to Georgiev (2023), although lessons were learned from previous crises, the approach to governance adopted during the health emergency had a negative impact on the perceived legitimacy of the Union. With the dynamics of 'destructive dissent' and increasing politicisation, the pandemic placed significant pressure on the EU's legitimacy processes, requiring a rethinking of its communication and institutional strategies.

Italy presents itself as a highly emblematic case study. It was one of the countries most affected by the pandemic in its initial phase, positioning itself at the centre of expectations for a solidarity-based intervention by the EU. At the same time, it embodies a structural ambivalence toward European integration: a long-standing institutional Europeanism coexists with growing disillusionment, shaped by prior crisis experiences and the rise of populist and Eurosceptic rhetoric (Bobba, 2021; Caiani & Guerra, 2017). This duality permeates the Italian public debate, which remains deeply polarised – including in the representation of European institutions during the emergency.

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This polarisation makes the analysis of Italian narratives particularly significant. Despite Italy being one of the main beneficiaries of EU support – most notably through the Next Generation EU programme – public discourse has continued to oscillate between appreciation and criticism. Such ambivalence confirms that the legitimacy of the EU is not a fixed attribute but rather the result of ongoing negotiation and discursive reformulation.

Italy's experience during the pandemic reveals multiple layers of complexity. It was among the first European countries hit, with initial contagion cases in late January 2020 and a nationwide lockdown implemented in early March, preceding the WHO's declaration of a global pandemic. The crisis struck a country already marked by a decade of political instability and a strained healthcare system, placing Italy in a particularly fragile institutional position.

Although the pandemic represented a symmetric shock across the EU, its management required multi-level coordination under conditions of extreme urgency and uncertainty. The initial EU response, however, was fragmented: Member States reinstated national borders, restricted medical exports, and acted unilaterally. The European institutions' initial silence, compounded by communicative missteps – such as European Central Bank President Lagarde's controversial remarks (BCE, 2020) – deepened public mistrust.

Subsequently, the EU adopted exceptional measures, culminating in the approval of the €750 billion Next-GenerationEU fund (NGEU), with a substantial share allocated as non-repayable transfers. This shift fostered a renewed narrative grounded in solidarity and a revitalised commitment to integration. Nonetheless, the pandemic also laid bare persistent limitations in EU governance, fuelling both reformist aspirations and critical discourse (Bremer et al., 2024). In Italy, the image of the EU became a site of intense contestation, shaped by political affiliations and the strategic framing adopted by different actors.

This research is part of studies on EU legitimacy in crisis contexts, with a specific focus on the discursive dynamics activated by the pandemic. The aim of the analysis is to address how, during the pandemic, political actors and media constructed, reinforced or contested the image of the European Union as crisis manager in Italy, investigating the variety of frames used, their evolution over time and their distribution among actors. To achieve this objective, the following components will be explored: (a) the salience of the debates over time; (b) the intensity of the expressed evaluations; (c) the profile of the actors constructing the narratives (their role, affiliation and political orientation); and (d) the multidimensional nature of the factors contributing to the evaluations (i.e. the software and hardware factors involved in the crisis management process). Among the dimensions shaping these evaluations, particular attention is paid to the distinction between material and structural aspects of crisis management and more symbolic and normative components, such as solidarity, cohesion and leadership. This distinction will be theoretically grounded in the following section.

Hence, the approach adopted presents several innovative elements. Firstly, the multilevel perspective: the analysis combines two communication arenas – the national press (*La Repubblica* and *Corriere della Sera*) and political communication on Twitter – to observe how frames are articulated, reinforced or contrasted between traditional and digital media. Secondly, the methodological dimension: the analysis integrates qualitative and quantitative tools, combining framing analysis and political claim analysis with quantitative descriptive and inferential techniques providing a more comprehensive understanding of how legitimacy is discursively constructed in times of crisis, with the support of advanced coding software (MAXQDA).

## 2. Legitimacy, crisis and discursive representations of the EU

The question of legitimacy is central to understanding the EU's resilience, particularly in times of crisis. This study adopts an empirical perspective, focusing on legitimacy not as a normative ideal but as a matter of social acceptance and public justification (Hurrelmann et al., 2007). It is useful to distinguish between legitimacy as a recognised institutional quality – being perceived as just or appropriate – and as a dynamic process by which such recognition is constructed, challenged, or withdrawn (Barker, 2001). Legitimation is inherently communicative: authority systems cultivate their legitimacy through language (Fairclough, 2003), which serves as the primary medium for political justification (Van Leeuwen, 2007).

Public discourse is therefore a key space in which legitimacy is built or contested, especially when the EU becomes politicised – salient, contested, and open to conflict (Zürn, 2014; Zürn et al., 2013). In these

contexts, political elites may engage in practices of ‘polity maintenance’ (Ferrera et al., 2021), using language not only to justify policy choices but also to uphold the symbolic foundations of the political community by reinforcing trust, shared identity, and institutional cohesion (Ferrera & Burelli, 2019). During the pandemic, the EU’s discursive legitimacy can be examined by analysing how its actions – or inactions – were represented in public debate and how such representations shaped perceptions of its legitimacy.

Crises mark moments of redefinition for institutional legitimacy. In EU scholarship, the Union is increasingly viewed as a ‘polity under stress’, subject to continuous political and symbolic tests. The pandemic posed an unprecedented challenge: it exposed structural limitations in health policy while also triggering exceptional responses, such as the NextGenerationEU fund, that opened discursive opportunities for re-legitimation (Alcaro & Tocci, 2021). During this period, legitimacy was assessed in terms of output (responsiveness), throughput (transparency), and input (representation) (Schmidt & Wood, 2019), though symbolic dimensions like solidarity and cohesion were especially central to discourses of legitimation and delegitimation.

Crises catalyse political change, influence perceptions of EU legitimacy (Tosun et al., 2014), and heighten issue salience in public debate (Di Mauro & Memoli, 2016). Yet the EU’s multi-level governance often blurs accountability, making it hard for citizens to identify decision-makers and creating space for political actors to engage in ‘blame shifting’ – strategically assigning responsibility to the EU to deflect domestic criticism (Basile et al., 2021; Hobolt & Tilley, 2014). Thus, crises are not merely functional tests but moments of discursive renegotiation, where the institutional order may be challenged or reaffirmed.

At such times, the politicisation of European integration intensifies (Hutter et al., 2016), with political actors and media shaping the meaning of the crisis and assigning responsibility. The EU’s image becomes a tool for internal legitimisation or delegitimation, depending on the actors’ strategic goals (De Wilde, 2011; Statham & Trenz, 2015). Framing – the process of selecting and organising information to promote a specific interpretation (Entman, 1993) – is essential to understanding these dynamics. Competing frames reveal divergent interests and visions of Europe, portraying the EU as effective and supportive, or fragmented and distant (Hurrelmann et al., 2020).

In the Italian context, the pandemic prompted intense framing activity, with clear differences between government and opposition and between media platforms (Bobba, 2021). The digital sphere in particular intensified polarisation and simplification, highlighting the EU’s symbolic and strategic use in political discourse. Within this theoretical framework, the present research tests four hypotheses to investigate how the EU’s image as crisis manager was constructed, affirmed, or undermined in Italian political discourse during the pandemic. To analyse narratives of EU legitimacy during the pandemic in Italy, this study examines two complementary communication arenas: national press and Twitter (X).

The selected newspapers, *Corriere della Sera* and *La Repubblica*, were chosen for their wide circulation, centrality in public debate, and recognition in the literature as key media framers (Lund & Willig, 2010). As generalist outlets, they provide comprehensive coverage of European affairs and shape the media agenda while linking political elites and the public. Their lack of overt ideological alignment ensures a nuanced view of the discursive landscape.

In parallel, political communication on Twitter enables an exploration of more polarised, unmediated discursive dynamics. Twitter has become central to real-time political dialogue, influencing both traditional media and policy processes (Ceron, 2017; Papacharissi, 2015; Vaccari & Valeriani, 2015). It allows political elites to directly engage voters and shape narratives through rapid and viral content dissemination (Habel & Theocharis, 2018; Kwak et al., 2010; Stier, 2016). As a fragmented and competitive space, it fosters contestation among political actors, media, and citizens, often linking EU representation to identity and party strategies.

If legitimacy is shaped through discursive processes of justification and contestation, the specific dimensions of crisis management that are foregrounded in public debate become analytically relevant. Not all aspects of institutional performance carry the same normative weight: some concern technical capacity, while others relate to expectations about solidarity, cohesion and political leadership. Distinguishing between these dimensions enables a more fine-grained analysis of the conditions under which crisis politicisation translates into delegitimation.

In the literature on crisis management, a distinction is often drawn between ‘hardware’ and ‘software’ components of institutional performance. Hardware factors refer to material and structural capacities,

such as legal competences, financial instruments, and technical resources (Boin & 't Hart, 2012; Kapucu, 2006). Software dimensions, by contrast, concern leadership, coordination, solidarity, trust, and the broader normative foundations sustaining collective action. While hardware factors relate primarily to output effectiveness, software components are more closely tied to normative expectations about fairness, cohesion and shared responsibility. From a legitimacy perspective, these normative dimensions are particularly sensitive to contestation, as they touch upon symbolic representations of political community and solidarity (Ferrera et al., 2021; Zürn et al., 2013). Consequently, claims that frame crisis management in terms of cohesion, solidarity or leadership failures may be more likely to trigger delegitimising evaluations than claims focused on technical or material capacity.

Building on the theoretical considerations discussed above, the present study derives four hypotheses (H) concerning the evolution and distribution of legitimacy claims during the pandemic crisis.

First, crises have been conceptualised as focusing events that increase issue salience and concentrate public and political attention on specific policy domains (Birkland, 1998). In the context of European integration, politicisation entails a rise in the visibility of EU-related debates within national public spheres (De Wilde, 2011; Hutter et al., 2016). If the pandemic functioned as a focusing event for EU governance, legitimacy-related claims concerning the Union's role as crisis manager should become more frequent over the course of the crisis (H1).

Second, crises are also associated with intensified responsibility attribution and the activation of constraining dissensus, whereby EU governance becomes more openly contested (Hooghe & Marks, 2009; Hobolt & Tilley, 2014). Under conditions of heightened uncertainty and perceived institutional stress, legitimacy debates are expected to become more conflictual and negatively charged (H2).

Third, legitimacy contestation is not evenly distributed across actors. Previous research shows that journalists and opposition politicians have stronger incentives to problematise EU governance, while executive actors tend to engage in 'polity maintenance' and defensive legitimisation strategies (Ferrera et al., 2021; Statham & Trenz, 2015). This suggests that negative legitimacy claims are more likely to be articulated by opposition actors, journalists and civil society representatives than by political actors in executive positions (H3).

Finally, drawing on the distinction between hardware and software dimensions of crisis management (Boin & 't Hart, 2012; Kapucu, 2006), it can be argued that not all frames are equally prone to trigger delegitimation. Hardware factors concern material and technical capacity (e.g. financial resources, speed of action), whereas software dimensions relate to normative expectations such as solidarity, cohesion and leadership. Since legitimacy is inherently linked to normative justification and shared expectations about political community (Ferrera & Burelli, 2019; Zürn et al., 2013), claims framing crisis management in terms of software dimensions may be more likely to produce delegitimising evaluations than those focused on technical performance (H4).

### 3. Data and methodology

This study is based on an original dataset collecting newspaper articles and Twitter political communications. Regarding newspapers, all articles published by *Corriere della Sera* and *La Repubblica* in the three days before and after the main European Council summits between March 2020 and December 2022, where the response to the pandemic crisis was discussed, were selected.<sup>1</sup> The high-profile nature of the European Council means that its meetings provide newspapers and political actors with an opportunity for broader reflection on the process of European integration (Hurrelmann & Wagner, 2020). Moreover, some scholars have argued that, in many respects, the Covid-19 crisis appeared to replicate the 'emergency politics' experienced during the Eurozone crisis, with a clear tendency for executive politics to privilege national governments and the European Council (Hodson & Puetter, 2019; White, 2020). Then, the thematic selection only included articles that made direct references to the EU's role in the context of the emergency.

For Twitter, the collection was carried out by systematically monitoring the official accounts of 72 Italian political actors. Elected members of the major parliamentary groups of the Chamber and Senate who held key roles within their groups (e.g. President, Vice-President, Chamber Delegate) and members of parliamentary committees dealing specifically with policy areas affected by the pandemic were included in the sample.

Following the same principle of relevance and institutional responsibility, key members of the government were also selected.<sup>2</sup>

This strategy ensures triangulation between sources and voices: newspapers allow us to observe the public narrative as mediated and contextualised by journalists, while tweets capture the more immediate, strategic and polarised dimension of political communication. The integration of these two arenas enables a more comprehensive reconstruction of the Italian debate on the legitimacy of the EU as crisis manager.

The analysis adopts a mixed-method approach combining qualitative content analysis, framing analysis and political claim analysis with quantitative descriptive and inferential techniques. The qualitative coding constitutes the foundation of the study, as all subsequent quantitative analyses rely on manually coded variables derived from a theory-driven codebook. The statistical models and co-occurrence analyses are therefore based on categorical coding rather than on computational processing of raw textual data. The aim is to reconstruct how Italian political actors and media represented, justified or contested the EU's legitimacy in the context of the pandemic crisis.

Firstly, a qualitative content analysis strategy was adopted (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Krippendorff, 2013), which allows for in-depth interpretation of language use, identifying patterns and conceptual categories in texts. The coding was conducted by a single trained researcher. Given the interpretative nature of framing and political claim analysis, this choice ensured conceptual coherence and consistency in the application of the coding scheme across the entire dataset. To enhance internal reliability, the coding process followed a structured multi-step procedure. First, a detailed codebook was developed on the basis of established models (Hurrelmann et al., 2016; Van Gorp, 2005), clearly defining categories and subcategories.<sup>3</sup> Second, the dataset was coded in two iterative rounds, with temporal distance between them, allowing for systematic cross-checking of category boundaries and re-evaluation of ambiguous cases. Particular attention was devoted to borderline claims and to the consistent operationalisation of evaluative categories (positive, negative, neutral). While intercoder reliability measures are typically employed in multi-coder designs, in single-author qualitative research internal consistency and transparency of the coding procedure constitute key safeguards for reliability (Krippendorff, 2013). The use of MAXQDA further ensured traceability and replicability of coding decisions.

Specifically, the textual data were coded following the principles of framing analysis, adopting Entman's (1993) definition, according to which the frame is the result of a communicative selection aimed at making specific aspects of reality salient. According to this definition, each frame consists of at least four elements: problem definition, causal diagnosis, moral evaluation and solution proposal.

The minimum unit of analysis is a political claim, i.e. a public statement expressing a relevant opinion with respect to the role of the EU in collective decision-making (Koopmans & Statham, 1999). Within each claim, the presence of frame elements was identified and coded. Claims may be evaluative (positive/negative), propositional (demands) or both. Evaluative categories refer specifically to the assessment of the EU's role as crisis manager. A claim was coded as positive when it explicitly defended or endorsed the EU's capacity, legitimacy or appropriateness in managing the crisis; as negative when it criticised or questioned the EU's performance, responsiveness or normative adequacy; and as neutral when it reported actions or positions without expressing an explicit evaluative stance.

Claims that, while referring to national policies, established an explicit link to the EU were also considered relevant.<sup>4</sup> Hence, the analysed corpus is composed of 730 claims, of which 469 are from the press and 261 from Twitter.

The methodological approach followed is predominantly deductive, with categories derived from the theoretical framework on EU legitimacy in times of crisis. However, a flexible multi-step coding process was adopted, which allowed the initial categories to be reformulated or extended based on the empirical material (Kuckartz, 2014). The final coding book is based on the models of Van Gorp (2005) and Hurrelmann et al. (2016) and includes seven main categories: claimant, addressee, problem definition, origin of the problem, solution or call for change, justification and evaluation.

The empirical analysis is divided into two main phases. The first involves a descriptive statistical analysis of the collected data, allowing for the observation of differences between communication arenas and the relative frequency of positive, negative, or neutral evaluations of the EU. It also includes a co-occurrence analysis

conducted with MAXQDA to identify relationships among the most frequent categories across the seven coding classes.

The second phase combines qualitative interpretation with hypothesis-driven inferential analysis. In order to test H3 and H4, binary logistic regression models are employed. The dependent variable is a binary indicator capturing whether a political claim expresses a negative (delegitimising) evaluation of the EU. Given the overall number of claims ( $N = 730$ ), the models include a limited number of predictors and are estimated separately for the newspaper and Twitter datasets. This strategy reduces model complexity and helps avoid overfitting.

For H3, the main predictor is the actor category (e.g. executive actors, opposition politicians, journalists, civil society representatives). For H4, the predictor concerns the type of problem definition, operationalised through the aggregation of coded subcategories into hardware and software components, with references to the protection of Italian national interests treated separately. This modelling strategy allows us to estimate the probability that specific actor types or framing dimensions are associated with delegitimising evaluations, while maintaining analytical parsimony.

#### 4. Data analysis

The empirical analysis is divided into two main phases. The first consists of a descriptive statistical analysis of the collected data which allows us to observe the differences between communication arenas, as well as the relative frequency of positive, negative or neutral evaluations of the EU; the second focuses on a qualitative and inferential analysis, aimed at exploring the activated frames and testing the research hypotheses.

A total of 821 segments were coded against a dataset consisting of 360 newspaper articles (555 coded segments) and 261 tweets (266 coded segments).<sup>5</sup>

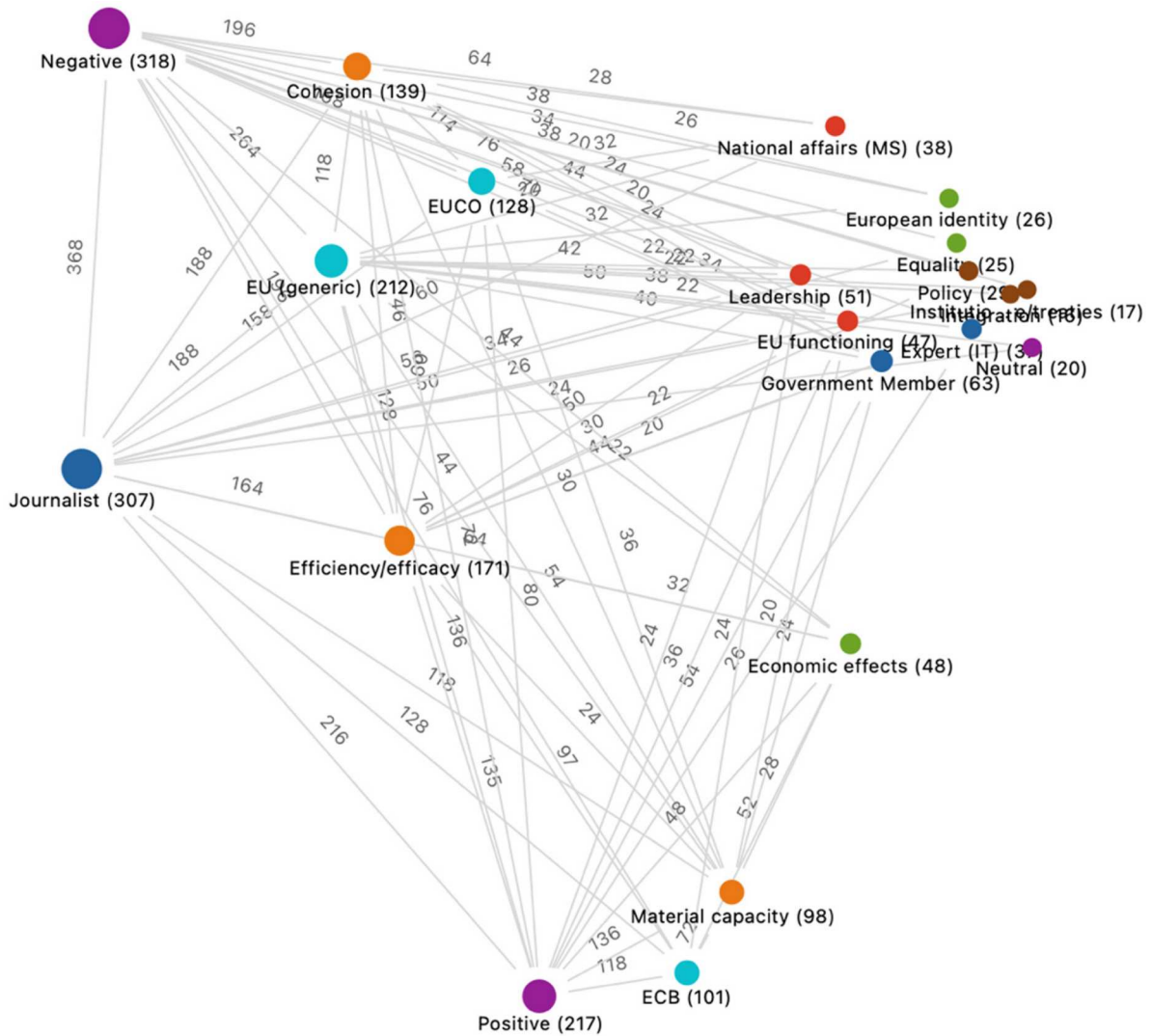
To explore the connections between the coding categories, a co-occurrence analysis was conducted in order to identify patterns of association among certain narrative elements. For example, the solidarity frame is frequently associated with positive assessments from government actors, while the absent leadership frame tends to be accompanied by negative claims from the opposition. This exploratory phase makes it possible to identify the main discursive junctures in the representation of the EU during the pandemic, forming the basis for the in-depth qualitative analysis and the subsequent statistical test of hypotheses.

Figure 1 shows the results from the coverage of the role of European institutions as crisis managers in the two newspapers selected for analysis. The chart shows a strong association between negative evaluations and journalists, who are clearly the most represented narrative voice (54.92 per cent) followed by the government members (11.27 per cent).<sup>6</sup> The most frequent target of the framing process were the European Union, generically referred to (36.18 per cent), and the main institutions: European Council (EUCO, 21.84 per cent), European Central Bank (ECB, 17.24 per cent) and European Commission (EC, 12.8 per cent). Interestingly, the two categories most targeted by the negative evaluation are the EU (generic reference) and the European Council. The most significant association between negative evaluation and problem definition concerns 'cohesion' or, rather, the (in)ability to find the cohesion necessary to achieve convergence in the negotiation between Member States on the measures to be implemented. This suggests that, during the COVID-19 crisis, much of the criticism levelled at the EU in the newspapers focused on the perceived lack of unity and collaboration between member states or within the EU institutions as also shown by the primacy of references in the coded segments related to the efficiency and effectiveness of the European institutions (21.43 per cent) and cohesion (17.42 per cent).

Covid raises the pressure in the EU. The 27 and the Commission have spent the day on the brink of an argument. The Omicron variant puts on two different trenches those who believe it is sufficient to tackle the new enemy with vaccines alone and those who, like Italy Greece and France, have already put in place additional measures. Starting with buffers for those travelling within the Union.

*(La Repubblica, 16/12/2021, author: Claudio Tito)*

Interestingly, the justification of the evaluation is mostly related to economic effects with 45.28 per cent. This can explain why the positive evaluations mainly refer to the ECB and are strongly associated with material capacity, which is the third most frequent category in the elements of problem definition (12.28 per cent).



**Figure 1.** Network visualisation of codes co-occurring in newspaper articles at the subcategory level.

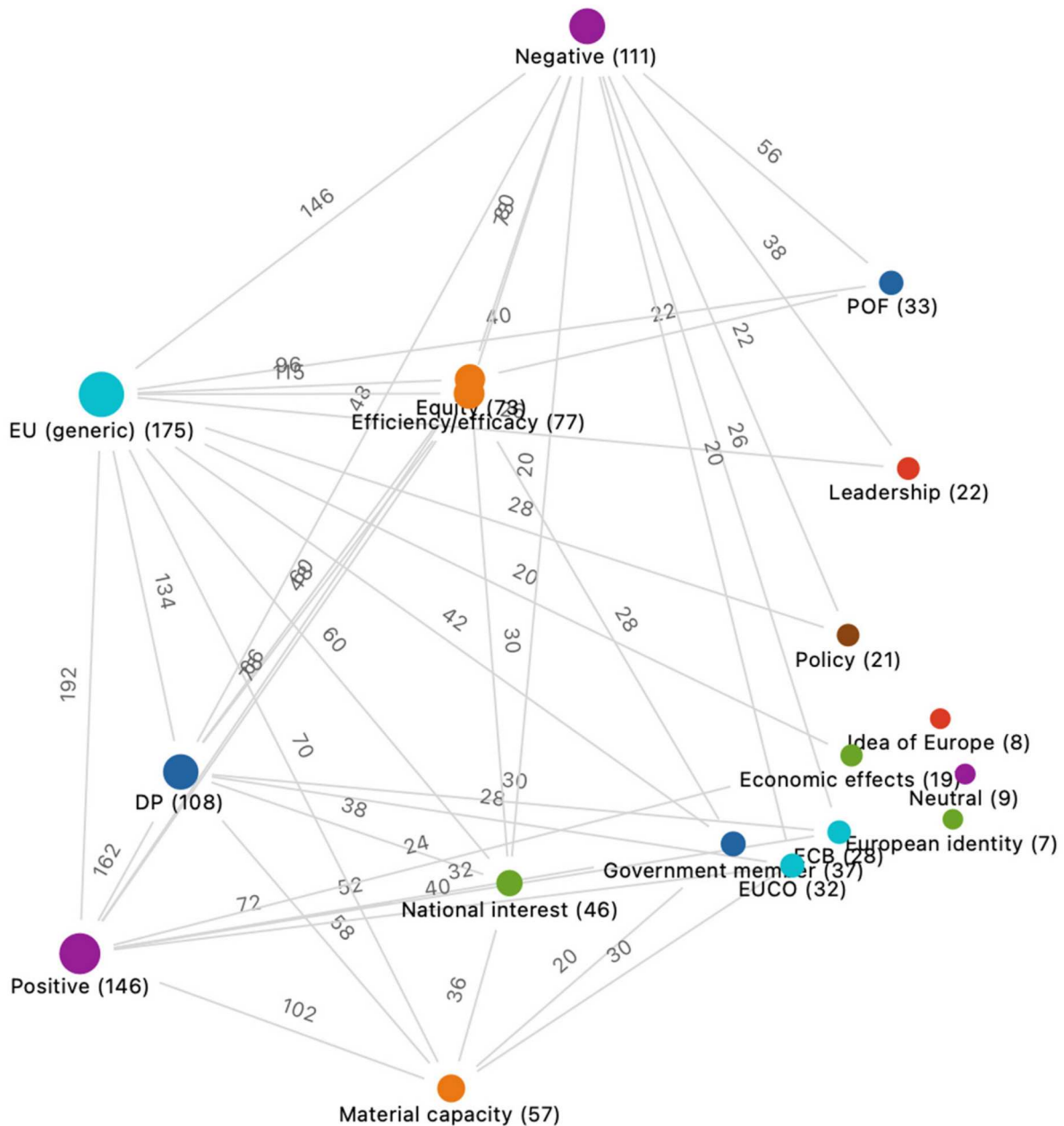
Note: Each node represents a specific category characterised by a different colour: blue means the actor (who produces the narrative), light blue is the addressee (who is the subject of the framing process), orange represents the problem definition, red is the origin of the problem, brown means the policy solution and/or the request for change, purple is the evaluation and green means the justification. The number in brackets indicates the frequency of the reports. The label 'generic EU' collects references to the EU/Europe as such, as a system of institutions, without specifications. The number on the links indicates the frequency of the co-occurrence of the categories.

This suggests that concrete and tangible actions to mobilise the necessary resources to mitigate the effects of the crisis, such as economic support and resource management, were particularly appreciated. The ECB, in particular, received recognition for its role in mitigating the economic effects of the crisis, especially for the monetary policies it adopted to stabilise the economy and support Member States.

'Finally, the ECB's 'war cabinet' hastily convened on Wednesday evening, when even the French began to be alarmed by the rising yields on government bonds, tried definitively to make those seven words forget with a maxi 750 billion euro bond purchase plan.'

(*La Repubblica*, 23/03/2020, author: Tonia Mastrobuoni)

The network visualisation highlights the most central nodes and their strongest co-occurrences. In the newspaper dataset, the densest connections emerge between *negative evaluation*, *journalists*, and problem definitions related to *efficiency/efficacy* and *cohesion*. The thickness of the links indicates that criticism is primarily structured around perceived coordination failures within EU institutions. By contrast, positive evaluations are more closely associated with *material capacity* and references to the European Central Bank, signalling a distinction between symbolic and performance-based frames.



**Figure 2.** Network visualisation of codes co-occurring on Twitter at the subcategory level.

Note: Each node represents a specific category characterised by a different colour: blue means the actor (who produces the narrative), light blue is the addressee (who is the subject of the framing process), orange represents the problem definition, red is the origin of the problem, brown means the policy solution and/or the request for change, purple is the evaluation and green means the justification. The number in brackets indicates the frequency of the reports. The label 'generic EU' collects references to the EU/Europe as such, as a system of institutions, without specifications. The number on the links indicates the frequency of the co-occurrence of the categories.

Figure 2 shows data on the role of European institutions as crisis managers in the tweets of the selected Italian politicians and Members of Parliament. Regarding the actors responsible for the production of the narratives, 40.60 per cent of the coded segments are attributed to parliamentarians or prominent members of the Democratic Party (DP), 13.91 per cent to members of the government, and 12.41 to espousers of Go Italy (GI). As in the newspaper dataset, the most targeted addressees were the generically referred EU (65.30 per cent), the EUCO (11.94 per cent) and the ECB (10.45 per cent).

The graph shows a strong association between negative evaluations and GI politicians. The main criticisms concern the efficiency of the EU in managing the Covid-19 crisis and fairness/solidarity which are also the most frequent problem in absolute terms, 24.37 per cent and 23.10 per cent respectively. The recipient of the criticism is primarily the EU as a whole, without specifying particular institutions or bodies.

No more distinctions or calls for absurd constraints in the face of thousands of deaths. If #Europe does not change gear it will find itself in a crisis of consensus and role. To our friends in the European 'club' I want to say it clearly: either we save ourselves together, or nobody is saved. #COVID2019

25/03/20, @BerniniAM, Anna Maria Bernini (GI)

On the other hand, positive evaluations are strongly associated with the politicians of the DP and are mainly related to the perception that the EU has demonstrated an adequate capacity to manage and mobilise material resources during the crisis. This kind of assessment is often justified with the protection of national interests. The centrality of these issues is also confirmed by the fact that references to the ability to mobilise material resources is 18.04 per cent in the category related to the issue, regardless of the evaluation, while references to the protection of national interests reach 59.74 per cent of the evaluation justifications.

From #Europe an important signal in defence of employment. Today, the first 10 billion of the #Sure fund to support work and social shock absorbers were disbursed to Italy. Onward with concrete aid to the most fragile categories, so that no one is left alone.

27/10/20, @Piero\_De\_Luca, Piero De Luca (DP)

In the Twitter dataset, the visualisation shows a clearer polarisation pattern. The strongest links connect *negative evaluation* with opposition actors and frames related to *equity* and *efficiency*. Conversely, positive evaluations cluster around *government members* and *material capacity*, often linked to national interest protection. Compared to newspapers, the network structure appears more compact and actor-driven, reflecting the personalised and strategic nature of political communication on social media.

#### 4.1. Quantitative analysis: hypothesis testing

##### 4.1.1. H1. Visibility of the EU in public discourse

The graph in Figure 3 shows the frequency distribution of time-coded segments in the two different datasets (newspaper articles and tweets). The daily scale adopted makes it possible to observe daily fluctuations in the frequency of articles and tweets. This level of detail is particularly useful for identifying immediate reactions to specific events. For example, a sudden spike could correspond to an important political statement or

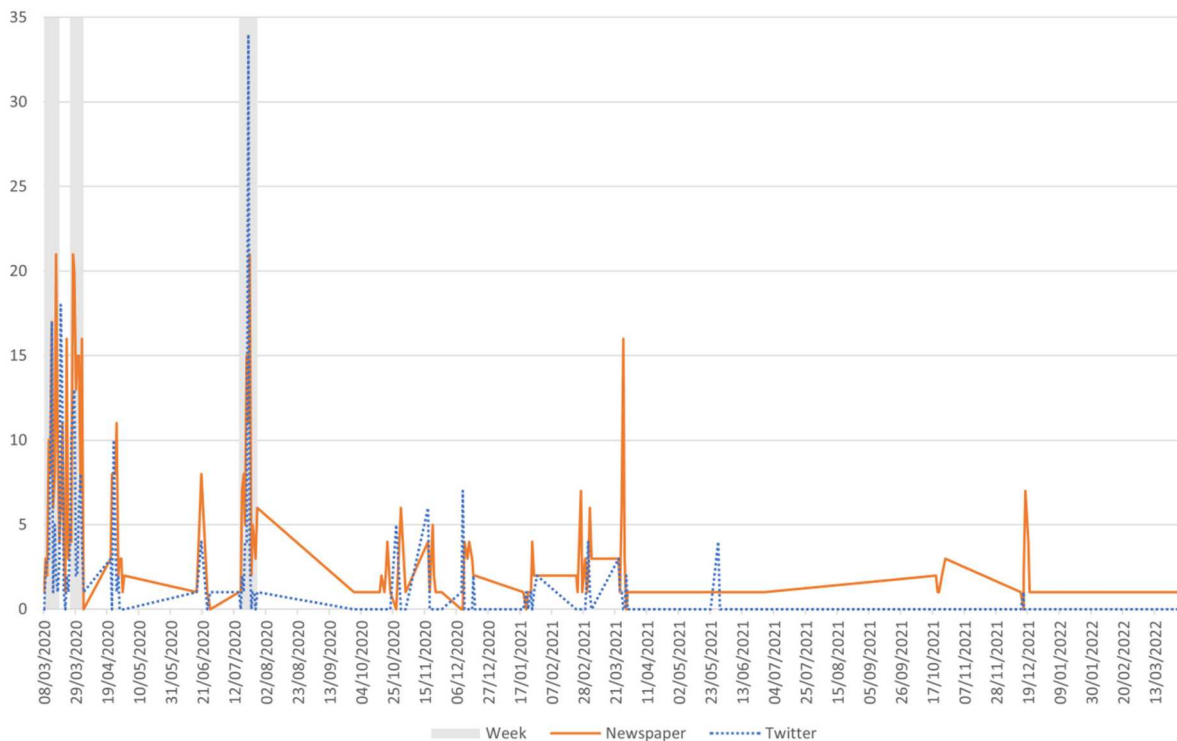


Figure 3. Daily frequencies of coded segments.

a new development in the crisis or a relevant press release. This type of chart also makes it possible to assess media responsiveness, i.e. to analyse how quickly traditional and social media react to events. This is crucial for understanding the immediacy with which information is disseminated and discussed (i.e. comparing the responsiveness of newspapers with that of tweets can reveal differences in the pace of news dissemination between traditional and social media).

The dataset records three main peaks of discursive activity (see grey areas in [Figure 3](#)), common to both newspapers (*Corriere della Sera* and *La Repubblica*) and political actors' tweets.<sup>7</sup> These peaks coincide with key decision-making moments at the European level ([Table 1](#)), such as the introduction of the first containment measures, the debate on the ESM and the approval of the NextGenerationEU. At each of these stages, a prevalence of negative assessments of the EU is observed, with frames questioning its operational efficiency, fairness of responses and cohesion between Member States.

Overall, the analysis shows an intensification of narratives about the legitimacy of European action in the early phase of the crisis, when media attention is highest and public expectations highest. The increased exposure of the EU correlates with a critical narrative, centred on perceptions of inadequacy, lack of solidarity and misalignment among European actors. It is only at a later stage, with the introduction of extraordinary instruments such as the NGEU, that there is a partial reversal in the discourse, with more favourable and legitimising assessments emerging.

#### 4.1.2. H2. Evolution of (negative) valuation

[Figure 4](#) shows that 70.9 per cent of the total news in the newspaper dataset is concentrated in the period from March to July 2020. This news is predominantly negative (58.5 per cent).

This concentration of news in the first months is also associated with the presence of most peaks. In fact, of the 34 dates on which there is a peak, 31 occur not only in the first year, but precisely in the first four months of the pandemic crisis, of which 22 are negative and 12 positive peaks. This strong presence of peaks in the first part of the crisis can be explained by the nature of the crisis: suffice it to say that six European Council meetings were held between February and May 2020, against an average of four to six meetings per year.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the higher number of peaks with negative evaluations, however, we are not in the presence of a statistically significant difference in the frequency between news reports with non-negative and negative evaluations over the crisis period. This result can be explained by the rather uniform presence of negative and positive (or neutral) news, a tendency that only shows shocks in the presence of specific events. If, on the other hand, we analyse the dynamics of negative evaluations of the EU in crisis management over time, we observe that the average frequency in the first year is statistically higher at a significance level of 5 per cent ( $p$ -value = 0.011) than in the second year.

Moreover, after the first few months (i.e. from September 2020), there is a decrease in both positive and negative news. In addition, a decrease in polarisation can be seen from [Figure 5](#): in fact, the balance between positive/neutral and negative evaluations approaches neutrality (average 0.17).

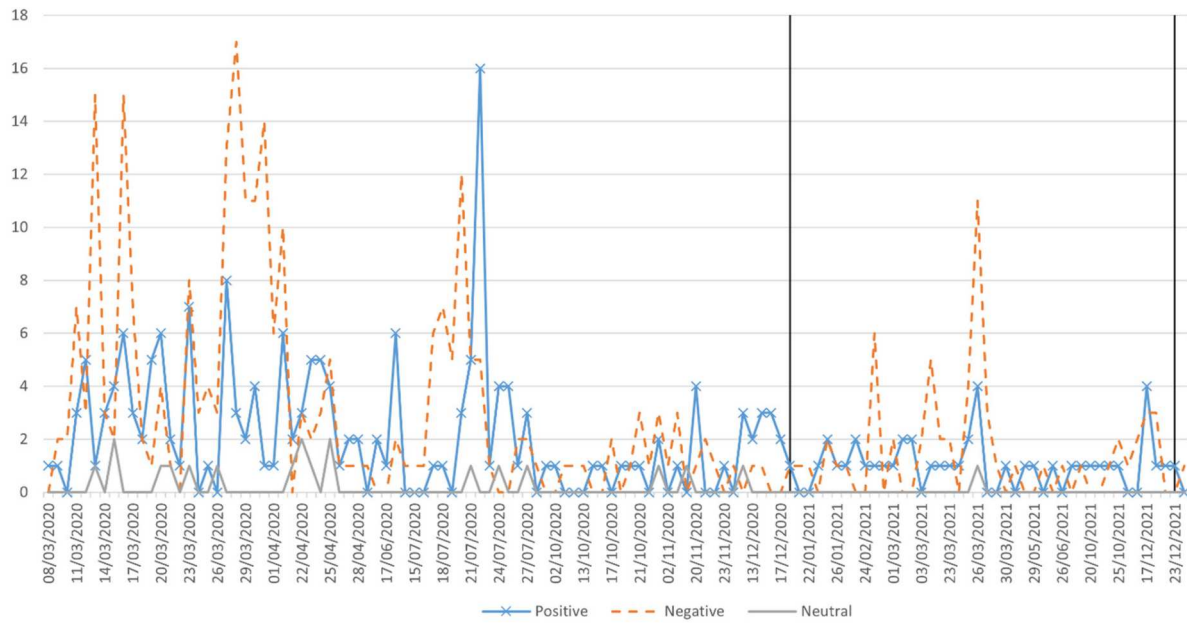
Looking now at the Twitter sample (X), it is interesting to note that here there is a prevalence of positive assessments of the EU's actions (54.7 per cent). In fact, although 6 out of the 10 peaks occurring in the first three weeks are negative, with an average number of 9.33 tweets, positive evaluations become prevalent in the following months (68.6 per cent), also recording 3 peaks (with an average number of 15.7 tweets). As [Figure 6](#) shows, of these peaks, the one occurring on 21 July with an intensity of 31 tweets is of particular relevance. The European Council of 21 July 2020 was a crucial meeting during which EU leaders reached a historic agreement on an economic recovery package to tackle the crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. This package, called 'NextGenerationEU' (NGEU), together with the long-term EU budget for 2021–2027, amounted to EUR 1,824.3 billion. The negotiations were particularly difficult and lasted four days and nights, from 17 to 21 July.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the clear predominance of positive news over negative news, in this case the hypothesis test on the average news does not reject the null hypothesis that the average distributions of positive/neutral and negative news are equal.

Comparing the trend in the number of evaluations over the two years, the data seem to indicate that, as the pandemic continues, politicians publish fewer posts about the pandemic (240 versus 25), devoting an increasingly smaller proportion of their tweets to discussing the pandemic. In addition, the tweets published

**Table 1.** Weekly peaks identified during the pandemic crisis.

COVID-19 CRISIS									
PEAK WEEK	REFERENCE DATE	SOURCE	EVENT	OUTCOME	POSITIVE EVALUATIONS	NEGATIVE EVALUATIONS	NEUTRAL EVALUATIONS	PROBLEM ID (newspapers)	PROBLEM ID (Twitter)
W1	10/03/2020	Newspapers (N) and tweets (T)	Video conference of European Council members + ***12/03/2020 *** Statement by C. Lagarde (ECB) 'We will be there, as I said before, using all the flexibility we can, but we are not here to close spreads.'	Coordinating EU efforts to respond to the Covid-19 epidemic. Expressing solidarity with Italy and other Member States that have been severely affected. They highlighted the need for a common European approach and close coordination with the European Commission, which is responsible for analysing needs and proposing initiatives to avoid shortages of medical equipment, in particular masks and respirators.	24 (N) 14 (T)	49 (N) 27 (T)	3 (N) 1 (T)	Efficiency/ effectiveness (37) Equity (20) Material capacity (19)	Equity (12) Efficiency/ effectiveness (10) Material capacity (9)
W3	26/03/2020	Newspapers (N) and tweets (T)	Video conference of EU Council members	Management of borders for people and goods and safeguarding the functioning of the Single Market. The Commission is invited to continue and accelerate its efforts to help ensure the urgent and adequate supply of medical equipment across the EU. The decisive action taken by the European Central Bank to ensure favourable financing conditions in all euro area countries is supported	26 (N) 16 (T)	92 (N) 46 (T)	1 (N) 1 (T)	Cohesion (81) Efficiency/ effectiveness (65) Equity (61)	Efficiency/ effectiveness (29) Equity (20) Cohesion (4)
W6	17-21/07/2020	Newspapers (N) and tweets (T)	Extraordinary European Council	In order to equip the Union with the necessary means to address the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Commission shall be authorised to borrow funds on the capital markets on behalf of the Union. The amounts raised shall be channelled to Union programmes in accordance with NextGenerationEU. Member States shall prepare National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs), setting out their programmes of reforms and investments for the period 2021–2023	39 (N) 35 (T)	47 (N) 14 (T)	3 (N) 3 (T)	Cohesion (67) Material capacity (59) Efficiency/ effectiveness (50)	Efficiency/ effectiveness (16) National interest protection (17) Equity (6)

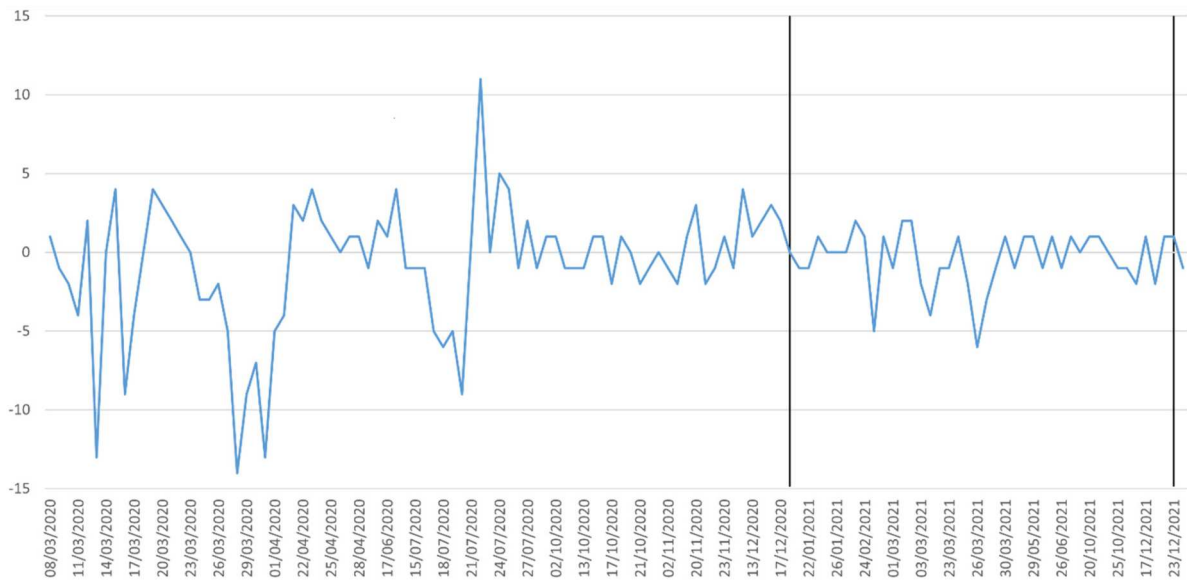


**Figure 4.** Daily frequency of positive (blue), negative (orange) and neutral (grey) evaluations. Newspaper dataset.  
 Note: The black vertical lines identify the transition of the year.

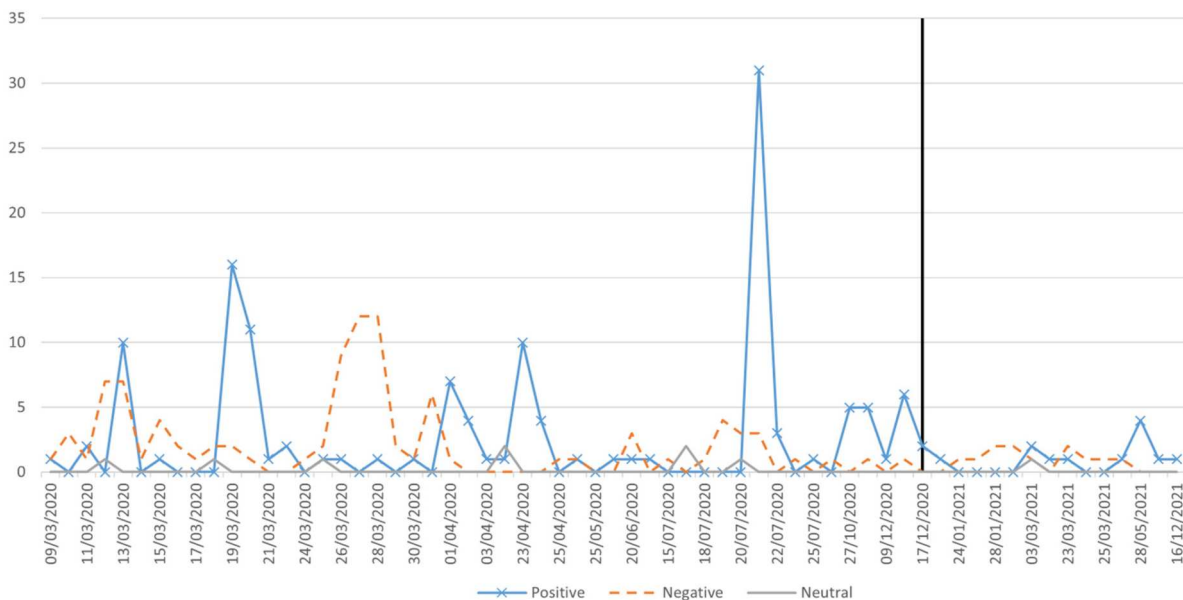
tend to be less positive in their assessment as time goes by: in the first year, tweets with positive assessments are 55.4 per cent and in the second year 48.0 per cent (as are negative tweets). Looking only at negative news, however, the statistical test shows no statistically significant increase in the average frequency of negative tweets during the crisis.

**4.1.3. H3 and H4 – Actors and arguments**

In addition to providing insights on the temporal dynamics of the legitimacy debates in Italy during the pandemic crisis, this analysis aims to identify the discursive conditions that lead to contesting the legitimacy of the EU. Hypotheses 3 and 4 highlight two explanatory factors: the different types of actors who are



**Figure 5.** Difference between the frequency of non-negative and negative evaluations. Newspaper dataset.  
 Note: The black vertical lines identify the passage of the year. The blue line shows the cumulative frequency: positive values define a situation where news is predominantly positive and vice versa.



**Figure 6.** Time series of positive (blue), negative (orange) and neutral (grey) evaluations. Dataset of tweets.

Note: The black vertical lines identify the passage of the year.

promoters of (de)legitimising claims (H3) and the issues identified as triggers of the evaluations expressed on the role of crisis managers of EU institutions (H4).

Hypothesis 3 posits that negative assessments of EU legitimacy come mainly from journalists, opposition politicians and civil society representatives, whereas politicians in executive functions at the EU and member state level tend to defend EU legitimacy.

The analysis of the results of the logit model applied to the sample of newspapers reveals three statistically significant findings with a significance level of at least 5 per cent. Journalists are 1.97 times more likely to make negative assessments of the role of crisis managers in EU institutions than politicians performing executive functions at EU and member state level<sup>10</sup> (reference category). Representatives of civil society (e.g. representatives of trade unions, trade unions, entrepreneurs, NGOs...) are also 2.29 times more likely than the reference category to make negative assessments. Finally, opposition politicians are 15.60 times more likely to produce negative evaluations than politicians performing executive functions at EU and Member State level.

Analysing the sample of Twitter data, on the other hand, it can be seen that all three categories under consideration do not produce statistically significant differences in evaluations of the performance of EU institutions than the reference category (politicians in executive functions).

From these observations it thus emerges that delegitimation occurs more frequently in the statements of journalists and civil society representatives than in those of EU executives, Member State executives and international representatives (i.e. leaders of non-EU states or international organisations), but that the most 'critical' category seems to be by far that of opposition politicians.

Turning to Hypothesis 4, it suggests that negative discourses regarding the legitimacy of the EU are more prevalent in arguments that extend beyond an evaluation of the hardware factors behind crisis management at the European level.

For this analysis, which focuses on the identification of the problem being framed, the subcategories identified in the coding book are aggregated into two main predictor variables. The first category captures hardware factors and include references to speed of action, efficiency/effectiveness, responsiveness and material capacity.<sup>11</sup> The second category capture software factors such as the protection of EU interests; the protection of the interests of one or more Member States (excluding Italy), fairness and cohesion.<sup>12</sup> The subcategory of the protection of Italian national interests was considered separately.

Table 2 presents the results of the logit model applied to the newspaper sample, highlighting two statistically significant findings at the 1 per cent and 5 per cent levels. Claims framing the crisis management

**Table 2.** Factors influencing the likelihood of delegitimisation: Problem definition (ability or inability of European institutions to ...). Regression results.

Variables	Newspaper	Twitter
Dependent variable: Negative evaluation	Odds ratio	Odds ratio
Independent variable: 'type of problem' Reference category ( <i>Hardware</i> )		
Software	1.7785***	1.6667**
National Interest	1.7608**	2.7273*

Note: \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$

process in terms of software components are 1.78 times more likely to express negative evaluations than those referring to hardware components ( $p$ -value < 1 per cent). Similarly, references to the protection of Italian national interests are associated with a 1.76 times higher probability of negative assessments compared to the reference category ( $p$ -value < 5 per cent). A comparable pattern emerges in the Twitter (X) sample. Claims invoking software components are 1.67 times more likely to articulate negative evaluations than those referring to hardware dimensions ( $p$ -value < 5 per cent). References to the protection of Italian national interests increase the likelihood of negative assessments by a factor of 2.73 relative to the reference category, although this effect reaches significance only at the 10 per cent level.

## 5. Discussion

The analysis of the framing of the pandemic in Italian political discourse returns an ambivalent and dynamic image of the European Union. More importantly, the findings clarify the discursive conditions under which crisis politicisation translates into delegitimisation. Rather than producing a linear erosion of legitimacy, the pandemic activated competing narratives structured around different dimensions of crisis management.

In particular, the results show that delegitimising claims were more likely to emerge when crisis management was framed in terms of symbolic and normative expectations – such as solidarity, cohesion and leadership – rather than purely technical or material capacity. This suggests that legitimacy contestation becomes especially intense when perceived failures concern the normative foundations of political community, not merely performance output.

At the same time, the approval of the NextGenerationEU marked a partial discursive reconfiguration: by activating frames of material capacity and concrete intervention, the EU was repositioned as an effective crisis manager, thus enabling a process of re-legitimation. Legitimacy therefore appears not as a static attribute, but as a fluctuating outcome of frame competition across actors and communicative arenas.

In the period between March and July 2020, there is a clear concentration of discursive coverage on the role of the EU in the pandemic: 70.9 per cent of the total claims relating to the pandemic crisis fall within this period. Of these claims, 58.5 per cent express a negative assessment of the EU. This strong exposure in the first months of the emergency reflects the centrality of the EU in the public discourse, but also highlights a significant vulnerability of its image. Criticism focuses on the apparent absence of solidarity, delays in response and controversial communication episodes – such as ECB President Lagarde's statement on the spread – that fuelled a delegitimising narrative.

Another interesting result concerns the strong polarisation between government and opposition actors. Opposition politicians – in particular the League and Brothers of Italy – used Twitter to spread strongly critical messages, activating frames of delegitimisation based on accusations of inaction, lack of solidarity and hyper-bureaucratisation. The data confirm that over 80 per cent of the negative evaluations came from representatives not belonging to the government majority.

Exemplary, in this sense, is the tweet by Anna Maria Bernini (GI), who accuses the EU of risking 'a crisis of consensus and role' if it did not live up to its responsibilities. These statements, amplified by the reactive and synthetic nature of Twitter, construct a simplified, polarising and identity-mobilising narrative.

In contrast, members of the government and representatives of European institutions have progressively reconstructed a discourse of legitimacy centred on concrete action and collective responsibility. This dualism reflects a strategic use of the crisis frame by political actors, where the EU becomes a target or a symbol depending on ideological positions and communicative objectives.

A crucial dynamic concerns the differences between press and social media in the construction of the EU's image. The mainstream press (*Corriere della Sera* and *La Repubblica*) tends towards a more articulated and

balanced narrative, evolving over time towards more positivity. Tweets, on the other hand, show greater polarisation and a more direct and identity-driven use of frames, confirming that Twitter is a highly conflict-intensive platform where critical opinions circulate more easily and with greater visibility.

This difference is not only quantitative but qualitative: the press also hosts comments and opinions from experts and academics, while on Twitter frames tend to be concise, conflict-oriented and often lack contextualisation. The overall effect is an increased exposure to delegitimising narratives on the digital channel, particularly among more politicised users.

The pandemic has offered a privileged lens through which to observe the mechanisms through which EU legitimacy is constructed and transformed. Despite a rocky start, the EU has introduced extraordinary tools – including the ECB bond purchase and the NGEU – that have helped rebalance the narrative and partially restore trust. However, its image remains exposed to rapid and deep discursive fluctuations, as evidenced by the data on the reduction of positive tweets in the second year of the crisis. The research confirms that the legitimacy of the EU is not a mere reflection of its policies, but the result of layered discursive processes, in which media, political actors, institutions and public opinion interact. In this perspective, the crisis is not only a disruptive event, but an accelerator of narratives, which exposes the fragilities of the European communicative and political architecture.

Beyond the Italian case, these findings suggest that the impact of crises on EU legitimacy depends not only on the intensity of politicisation, but also on the type of dimensions through which crisis management is interpreted. By distinguishing between hardware and software components, this study shows that legitimacy appears more vulnerable when contestation targets normative expectations – such as solidarity, cohesion and leadership – rather than purely technical performance. This distinction contributes to a more differentiated understanding of EU legitimacy under stress, highlighting that not all forms of criticism have the same delegitimising potential.

## 6. Conclusions

The analysis conducted in this study investigated how the European Union was represented in Italian political discourse during the pandemic crisis by Covid-19, with particular attention to the discursive construction of its legitimacy as crisis manager. Through a multilevel and mixed approach integrating traditional media discourse and political-digital discourse, and combining qualitative content and framing analysis with political claim analysis and quantitative descriptive and inferential techniques, the research showed that the pandemic represented a context of intense politicisation of the EU, revealing the tensions between contestation and re-legitimation, and between crisis of confidence and narrative opportunity.

The results confirm that the legitimacy of the EU is not a static attribute, but a construct continuously negotiated through the communicative action of public actors. The Union has been the subject of a highly polarised narrative: in the initial phase of the crisis, it was represented as distant, ineffective and lacking solidarity; later, with the approval of the NextGenerationEU, it partially regained centrality and credibility, becoming a symbol of a common response.

The empirical evidence supports the theoretical expectations advanced in this study. The pandemic increased the salience of legitimacy-related debates (H1) and initially intensified negative evaluations (H2), while contestation proved unevenly distributed across actors (H3). Most importantly, the findings demonstrate that delegitimation was more likely when crisis management was framed in normative and symbolic terms – such as solidarity and cohesion – rather than in strictly technical or material terms (H4). Legitimacy vulnerability seems to be closely linked to the type of dimension through which institutional performance is interpreted.

In this respect, the crisis proved to be fertile ground for the activation of strong identity frames, capable of shaping the perception of the EU far beyond its concrete actions.

The comparison between the press and Twitter highlighted how the communication arenas differ radically in the construction of the European discourse. The press tends towards a more articulated and adaptive representation, while social media favours polarisation and simplification, often strategically exploited by political actors to reinforce delegitimising narratives. This aspect confirms that the study of legitimacy in the context of crisis requires constant attention to the channels and modalities of its public articulation.

From a theoretical perspective, the study helps to clarify the role of frames and narratives in EU (de)legitimation processes, reinforcing the idea that crises constitute not only threats, but also discursive

opportunities to redefine the coordinates of institutional trust. The pandemic has highlighted the need for European institutions to equip themselves not only with effective operational tools, but also with symbolic resources capable of generating consensus and identification.

Looking ahead, it will be important to observe whether and how the narratives that emerged during the pandemic have had lasting effects on the relationship between Italy and the EU. A comparative extension to other Member States could clarify whether the mechanisms observed are specific to the Italian context or generalisable. Moreover, further monitoring of the discursive dynamics in the post-pandemic period may help to understand whether the re-legitimisation of the EU was conjunctural or part of a broader and lasting process.

## Notes

1. See Table 1 in the Supplementary materials online for the full list of the articles included in the dataset.
2. See Table 2 in the Supplementary materials online for the full list of the tweets included in the dataset.
3. See Table 3 in the Supplementary materials online for a detailed view of the coding book.
4. Each claim constitutes the basic unit of analysis, but multiple coding categories may be attributed within a single claim (e.g. problem definition, evaluation and justification), which explains the higher number of coded segments reported in the descriptive analysis.
5. See Table 4 in the Supplementary materials online for a detailed view of frequencies of the segments coded for each category.
6. During the three-year period of the pandemic crisis, two different executives followed one another in Italy, within the 18th Legislature (which saw a total of three executives in five years): the Conte II government (from 05/09/2019 to 13/02/2021) and the Draghi government (from 13/02/2021 to 22/10/2022). The Conte II government was supported by a coalition consisting mainly of: Five Star Movement (5SM), Democratic Party (DP), Free and Equal (FAE) and Italy Alive (IA) (until January 2021, when the party withdrew its support). The Draghi government was supported by a very broad, cross-party coalition, consisting of both centre-left and centre-right parties, plus the 5SM. This broad coalition was created to deal with the pandemic and related economic crisis, seeking to secure a solid, cross-party majority in Parliament to support the reforms and measures needed for recovery. According to Lehmann et al. (2025), DP and FAE are considered to be left wing parties belonging to the Social democratic group; GI is considered to be a right wing party belonging to the Conservative group; BOI and the LG are considered to be right wing parties belonging to the Nationalist / Radical right group and the 5SM is considered to be a left wing party belonging to the Special issue parties.
7. The peaks are defined as values above the mean plus the standard deviation.
8. Specifically, Article 15(3) TFEU states that: 'the European Council shall meet twice every six months on the invitation of its President. When the situation so requires, the President shall convene an extraordinary meeting of the European Council'.
9. European Council Conclusions 17–21 July 2020 – <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/07/21/european-council-conclusions-17-21-july-2020/>
10. Within this category, data collected from the following sub-categories identified in the coding book that guided the analysis were aggregated: Italian national political representative (categorised by role or political affiliation); EU executive actor mentioned in a generic way; EU institutional actor; national political representative of an EU member state.
11. Defined as the factors that make up the foundations of the integrated crisis management system, such as formal structures, technical equipment, legal frameworks and material resources.
12. For example, leadership, training, networking, trust, shared norms and ideals.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the author, MZ, upon reasonable request.

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