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The European Union – From Agenda Setting and Media Frames to Citizens' Conversations

Abstract

Agenda setting and framing have been shown to affect public opinion on a variety of topics through accessibility and interpretation schemas. Since most of the citizens lack a direct experience in European matters, media might be a key dimension in determining how citizens approach issues related to the European Union. Therefore, this study examines the effects of agenda setting and framing of European subjects on citizens' interest and interpersonal conversations agenda. The research is based on a comparative analysis between two corpus of articles published between 1-31 March, 2013 and 25 April-25 May, 2014 on the two main online news portals in Romania (ziare.com and hotnews.ro), and 39 in-depth interviews.

The findings show that citizens rely on national media for information about the EU; thus, through agenda setting and framing effects, media provide a solid base for debate as well as interpersonal discussion parameters. However, citizens' concern about EU topics is relatively low and their involvement is driven by a national or personal relevance of the topic.

Key words: agenda setting, framing, media effects, EU interest, conversations agenda.

1. Introduction

The future of the European project depends on citizens' interest, support and involvement since a political dimension cannot be developed in a context of apathy, rejection and lack of motivation for understanding the changes that ultimately impact all of us. This is where media influence interferes with the Europeanization process, as a Europeanized discourse can bridge the gap between the abstract, elitist approach toward the EU and the citizens, by ensuring the necessary amount of information. Thus, citizens can have the informational basis to understand changes, become interested in the process and get involved in the integration advancements. Agenda setting and framing are important tools that influence the way European topics are considered by the citizens, as important points of interest and discussion, the way they evaluate and interpret the events.

Therefore, since national media are important agents in determining the EU's evolution and in establishing connections with its citizens, the present study examines the effects of agenda setting and framing of European topics on citizens' interest and interpersonal conversations agenda. The research methodology included the content analysis of a corpus of 11710 articles published between 1-31 March, 2013, and 25 April-25 May, 2014 on the two main

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online news portals in Romania, ziare.com and hotnews.ro, and 39 in-depth interviews. The analyzed time frames included important events for both the EU, and Romania.

Media are the primary source for citizens to connect with the European Union, to become interested and active. Therefore, media have to increase the visibility of EU subjects, to frame and cover them from a European perspective. This would ensure the basis for understanding and assessing the implications of the EU issues. Covering the democratic deficit and attracting the public support are real challenges for the EU, as evolution is only possible by involving the citizens. Therefore, the present study focuses on how media and citizens approach the issues related to the European Union.

2. Agenda setting and the Europeanization process

Europeanization is an interdisciplinary concept that integrates a wide variety of processes, either with reference to Europe as a transnational factor of influence, or with reference to EU's impact on member states. According to Kevin Featherstone, Europeanization is perceived as a *historical phenomenon* – the European civilization is central to this approach, assuming the transfer of influence and European rules from EU countries with developed economies to other countries; as a *transformative cultural diffusion* – takes into account the transfer of values, practices and symbols of member states; as *institutional adaptation* – includes the institutional reconfiguration of government, parliament and local authorities, nongovernmental organizations, parties, academic environment as a consequence of implementing EU legislation and norms; as *policies adaptation* – the influence of national policies through European institutions (Featherstone, 2003, pp. 6-9). One of the most cited definitions of Europeanization belongs to Claudio Radaelli (2004, p. 3) and describes the process as the "a) construction, b) diffusion and c) institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, 'ways of doing things' and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the EU policy process and then incorporated in the logic of domestic (national and subnational) discourse, political structures and public policies."

Thus, Europeanization is a form of "societal interpenetration" since European societies become more and more convergent and mixed as a result of the common currency, migration, multiculturalism, common norms, educational exchanges or media broadcasts with European distribution (Delanty & Rumford, 2005, p.18). The concept has become the norm for analyzing how EU regulation is implemented and how the adaptation pressure is exerted on member states (Bafoil, 2009). However, the European project cannot lay the foundations for future development unless it obtains the consent and support of its citizens. In order to generate a supportive attitude for EU's plans and actions or to develop a sense of belonging to the EU, media play an important role by increasing the EU presence in citizens' lives and making the European reality more visible (Maier & Risse, 2003). The media system can be a facilitating factor in triggering internal changes (Börzel & Risse, 2000) and agenda setting is the primary mechanism to make Europe a subject of interest and concern for the citizens.

Agenda-setting theory states that media, through selecting certain issues and covering them more prominently, influence people in perceiving those issues as being more important than others. Therefore, the agenda-setting phenomenon deals with the transfer of issue salience or how media determine the perceived importance of an issue and the level of awareness through the amount of coverage (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Agenda setting is a memory-

based or an accessibility-based model stating that the most salient issues in ones' mind will become accessible and influence people's decisions (Price & Tewksbury, 1997). The effects of the model are based on quantitative aspects, as a greater frequency in reporting will increase the chances of an issue to be used by the audience (Scheufele, 2000).

The salience of issues or objects and the afferent effects constitute the first level of agenda setting. Developments in agenda setting research led to the study of issue attributes, also called the second-level agenda setting, based on the presumption that prominent attributes in the media will influence the salience of those attributes in people's perceptions (Shaw & McCombs, 1977). The first level is associated with opinion strength, while the second one with opinion direction, as an issue gains people's attention and they learn about it, and then they form impressions (McCombs, 2004). Consequently, media tell us what we should think about and how to think about the issues in question, and their emphasis supports thinking and learning about topics which determine strengthened attitudes (McCombs & Reynolds, 2002). There is also correspondence between the valence of media coverage (in terms of positivity, neutrality, and negativity) and the valence of audience descriptions (McCombs, Lopez-Escobar & Llamas, 2000). The agenda-setting effects are higher when the public lacks a direct experience with the covered topics (Zucker, 1978).

The research in the field is also concerned with factors that shape media agendas and the influence media agendas have on each other (Du, 2012). Along with the new technological transformations, studies question if media still have agenda setting effects (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008, Chaffee & Metzger, 2001) since the increased number of media lead to audience fragmentation and higher selective exposure. Thus, in the future, the discussion about agenda setting effects might turn to "what issues people tell the media they want to think about" (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001, p. 375), since the audiences might actually be the ones setting the agenda and only afterwards the issues are reinforced by media (Du, 2012).

With regards to Europeanization, an important step towards enhancing the process is to increase the visibility of EU issues through agenda setting. According to the citizens, they gather their knowledge of the EU from the media, and therefore, including these issues in the media agenda is fundamental (Kunelius & Sparks, 2001).

Depending on their focus, media might determine an increase in the Europeanization process on a vertical level, if they confer a high visibility to the EU, European policies and actors, or on a horizontal level, if they cover more aspects related to the member states' actions and actors (Koopmans & Erbe, 2004, p.6). By focusing on some aspects over the others in terms of vertical or horizontal Europeanization, media support a comprehensive process of Europeanization (when both levels are present), a segmented Europeanization (when the vertical dimension is promoted), a Europeanization aloof from the EU (when media reports on the horizontal dimension) (Brüggemann & Königslöw, 2009, p. 29). Media extended coverage of European issues is usually associated with highly important events for the EU, which generate peaks of visibility (Meyer, 2010).

However, not only the increase in the EU issues coverage matters, but also the coverage of positive or negative news as they tend to influence the public support for EU membership (De Vreese et al., 2006). Another limit of the Europeanization process through media can be found in the citizens' lack of interest regarding European topics and in the prevalence of national perspectives when covering these issues (Lauristin, 2007). As the public's agenda and the media agenda are interconnected, if in a member state there is a low level of identification with the EU, media entities will assume that they are unlikely to sell the European topics, and in consequence, they will not cover these topics as much (Brüggemann & Königslöw, 2009).

Through agenda setting, media can provide the necessary information and knowledge to enhance people's interest in European issues and their involvement in debates and opinion formation processes. Though agenda-setting is an important step in the Europeanization process, a European perspective, a positive or neutral attitude and the presence of citizens' support are other factors to consider. Media can also have an influence on these aspects through the way they frame the EU issues and set the discussion and evaluation parameters.

3. Framing EU subjects – effects and implications

The way media shape and contextualize news content related to the European Union is considered to have some influence on the Europeanization process. Through framing, media can increase the level of interest and support for the EU, can influence the way people perceive and evaluate the issues, can determine positive or negative assessments in terms of gains and losses, can increase the level of understanding and accessibility of sensitive topics and motivate citizens to consume EU related content.

Media framing research shows that frames affect public opinion by increasing the salience of attributes of a topic (Iyengar, 1991; de Vreese, 2002). Through framing, media set the "central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events", they suggest "the essence of the issue" (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, p. 143). According to Robert Entman (1993, p. 52), to frame means to "select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating context." The process implies selecting and stressing some aspects of an issue, while leaving others in the shade, developing patterns of interpretation and processing information (Scheufele, 2000).

Therefore, media can portray an issue in various ways and emphasize only some perspectives of a story (Nelson & Kinder, 1996), in order to organize information and present a specific context to the public (Tewksbury et al., 2000). Some frames are applicable only to specific topics and events and these are called "issue-specific frames", while others can be used in relation to many different topics regardless of the time period or the cultural contexts, these being called "generic frames" (de Vreese, 2005, p. 55). Irrespective of their form, news frames are seen as important tools in constructing the meaning of an issue, in ensuring its understanding, and therefore they affect the public debates and decisions (Nelson & Kinder, 1996).

Framing research was conducted under two different traditions– the psychological and the sociological approach. The first approach states that framing means presenting the same piece of information in different ways, while what is presented remains "informationally equivalent". This is also called "equivalence framing." (Scheufele & Iyengar, 2011, p. 5). The second research tradition, under which the present study has been conducted, relies on a more permissive definition of framing and refers to different ways of presenting and highlighting information on a certain issue. It is also called "emphasis" framing (Scheufele & Iyengar, 2011, p. 7).

The literature on framing often includes the concept in the agenda setting framework. However, scholars in the field have come to belong to two main schools of thought. Some scholars militate in favor of grouping agenda setting, priming and framing under the same theoretical approach, as all these models are affiliated to the key concept of agenda setting. Media influence perceptions by emphasizing the importance of issues – first level agenda setting, and their attributes – second level agenda setting. They perceive priming as a result

of agenda setting, and define framing as an equivalent to second level agenda setting (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; McCombs 2004).

The latter group of scholars places framing on different theoretical premises than agenda setting. Framing is considered to be an applicability effect, meaning that the way in which information on a certain issue is presented can determine how it is processed by using the proposed outline, but these effects are dependent on the consistency of the previous mental patterns of the audience (Price & Tewksbury 1997). Agenda setting and priming are perceived as accessibility-based effects, meaning that media influence the salience of objects and attributes through increased frequency, which determines an increased level of accessibility at the memory level and therefore, a greater influence on attitudes and decision making processes (Iyengar, 1991; Scheufele & Iyengar, 2011). However, in both cases the premise is that media frames influence the audience frames, the individuals' cognitive patterns and responses (Scheufele, 1999).

Nevertheless, framing effects are differentiated by individuals' knowledge, interest and experience regarding the framed issues, by the level of repetitiveness and accessibility of a frame, by positive and negative emphases (D'Angelo & Kuypers, 2010). One of the variables that can limit or enhance the framing effects is the importance of the issue for the individual. The issues that have a high importance to individuals are associated with higher levels of knowledge, preexisting ideas and with stronger attitudes, and therefore they are less likely to be altered. Framing might be more effective in altering the beliefs, associations and attitudes towards issues that are less important (Lecheler, de Vreese, Slothuus, 2009).

An issue can be considered important at a personal level, important to a social group or to a country. However, the personal importance is the strongest indicator for the attitude strength, while the national importance is mostly inconsequential when it comes to cognitive or behavior patterns (Miller & Peterson, 2004). Therefore, information that is personally relevant to individuals determines them to actively process data and take into consideration more aspects than a single offered frame. Another moderator connected to the issue importance, is the political knowledge. Individuals with high level of political sophistication are less likely to be influenced by framed messages, as their knowledge resources will allow them to counter-argue (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Schuck & de Vreese, 2006). Other studies reveal that only knowledgeable people can be influenced by framing, as they have the information to understand and process the message, to integrate the frames into their systems of opinions (Druckman & Nelson, 2003).However, framing effects can also occur by affecting belief importance or strengthening already existing attitudes (de Vreese, 2004), and therefore the findings are not necessarily contradictory.

Framing effects can be expanded through repetitiveness, as this increases the level of accessibility and implicitly, the applicability of a frame (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Other variables with a moderator effect can be the system of values, the characteristics of the source, interpersonal communication, and competitive framing (Lecheler, de Vreese & Slothuus, 2009). Positive or negative frames are known to provide an evaluative framework that influences individuals' thoughts and support for an issue. (Domke et al., 1998).

In the case of media framing of European issues, the effects are mostly connected with variations in citizens' support and interest for the Europeanization process. The level of issue importance for the individuals and the political knowledge are important moderators. For example, political knowledge has been found to positively correlate with higher degrees of EU support (Inglehart et al., 1991). Framing European issues in terms of gains or losses, em-

phasizing the perceived threats or the impact of expected personal benefits, can also influence individuals' evaluations and impact their support for the EU integration (Schuck & de Vreese, 2006). Therefore, differences in the usage of frames in various contexts are likely to cause different ways of talking about Europe.

Consequently, EU media coverage and framing constitute an important aspect in supporting the Europeanization process, in increasing people's understanding, interest, involvement in deliberations and approval for the EU integration. Since national media are essential agents in determining the EU's evolution and in establishing connections with the citizens, the present study examines the effects of agenda setting and framing of European subjects on citizens' interest and interpersonal conversations agenda.

4. Methodology

The study examines the effects of agenda setting and framing of European subjects on citizens' interest and interpersonal conversations agenda. The research objective is to determine to what extent dominant topics and frames covering European subjects in the media influence citizens' interests and interpersonal conversations agenda.

The research questions guiding the study were:

RQ1: Which are the most visible European topics in the analyzed periods?

RQ2: Which are the most used generic frames when covering EU issues?

RQ3: Which are the European topics that constitute an interest for the citizens and to what extent these topics match those covered in the media in the two analyzed periods?

RQ4: Which are the main frames citizens use in evaluating or discussing European topics and to what extent are they consistent with the prevailing media frames?

In order to analyze the most visible EU topics and the most used generic frames, we conducted a content analysis of a corpus of 11710 articles published in March 2013 and 25 April-25 May 2014 on the two main online news portals in Romania, ziare.com and hotnews.ro. The selected time frames include important European events as the rejection of the 2014-2020 EU budget, the severe crisis in Cyprus, the rejection of Romania and Bulgaria's request to join the Schengen area at the JHA Council in 2013, and the European election campaign, the conflicts and elections in Ukraine, EU's approach towards Russia in the context of geopolitical animosities, in 2014. The framing analysis consisted in a deductive approach, using a grid that quantified the economic consequences, responsibility, conflict and human interest frames according to the criteria developed by Holli Semetko & Patti Valkenburg (2000, p. 96).

To analyze the transition of EU subjects and frames from media to citizens' conversations, we conducted a qualitative research consisting in two series of 20 and 19 respectively in-depth interviews with Romanian graduate students, in the time period immediately following the media coverage analysis. We focused on people's interest in EU issues, media consumption level, perspectives and involvement in discussions on European topics.
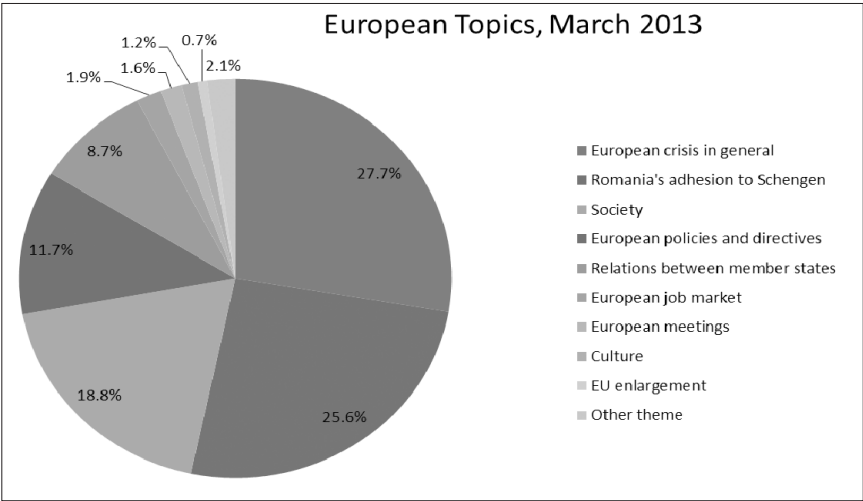
5. Findings

5.1. Content analysis

The content analysis included 6626 news items published on 1-31 March 2013 (64.7% of the news items were published on ziare.com and 35.3% on hotnews.ro) and 5084 news items published between 25 April – 25 May, period that coincided with the 2014 European parliamentary elections (57.8% of the items were published on ziare.com and 42.2% on hotnews.ro).

The subjects related to the European Union represented 12.9% in March 2013, and 13.1% during the 2014 EP campaign. Considering the media share of European subjects in the 2009 European campaign – 12.7% for Romania, we can notice a slight increase. However, these values are still under the EU average – 20.2% (Schuck et al., 2011, p. 46).

The European subjects covered by media were mostly from the political (50.8% compared to 70%), economic (33.0% compared to 19.6%) and social fields (10.9% compared to 5.6%), both in 2013 and 2014.
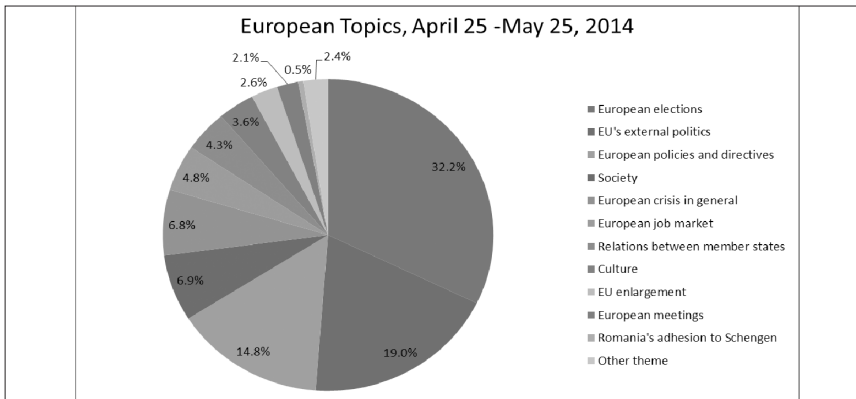
Figure 1. Main European topics in March 2013.

In 2013, the most visible EU topics were the Euro crisis – 27.7%, Romania and Bulgaria's adhesion to the Schengen area – 25.6%, followed by subjects related to society – 18.8% and European policies – 11.7%.
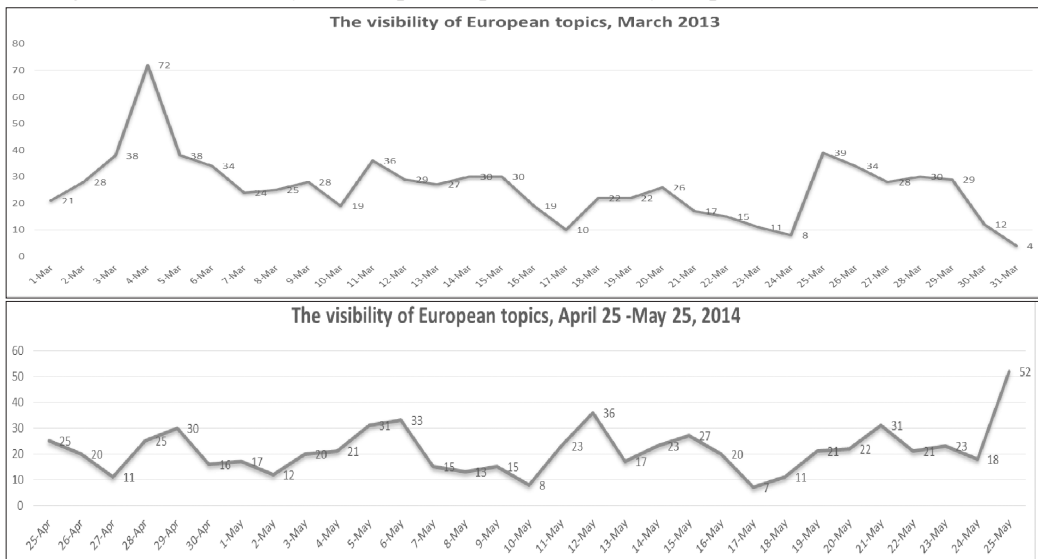
In 2014, the main topics were the European elections – 32.2%, the EU's external politics 19%, the European affairs and policies 14.8% and society related issues – 6.9%.

Figure 2. Main European topics during the European campaign, 2014.

In 2013, the visibility progress of the European issues highlighted two peaks. The first one was registered on the 4th of March (72 EU related articles) and concerned the rejection of Romania and Bulgaria's request to join the Schengen area at the JHA Council, a topic that determined heated discussions among several European leaders and Romanian politicians. The second visibility peak was on 25 March (39 articles) and dealt with the crisis in Cyprus, the consequences of the euro crisis and the discussions over the possibility of Cyprus leaving the Eurozone. In 2014, the first visibility peak was registered on 25 May (52 articles), when media presented the opinion poll results for the European elections and for the presidential elections in Ukraine, along with the possible geopolitical implications of the Ukrainian situation. The second visibility peak was registered on 12 May (36 articles), covering the intensification of the crisis in Ukraine, the referendum held by pro-Russia separatists, in Donetk and Lugansk, and the subsequent discussions about the low involvement of EU in solving the crisis between Russia and Ukraine (a crisis that also affects Europe).

Figure 3. The visibility of European topics in the analyzed periods.

In both analyzed periods, media focused on important EU events that had also a national impact, as the Schengen case or the euro crisis in Cyprus that impacted some bank subsidiaries in Romania, the European elections, the crisis involving Russia and Ukraine along with its geopolitical effects and its possible consequences on Moldavia and Romania. Moreover, the predominant contextualization for the European topics was still the national one –55.4% (in 2013) and 47.4% (in 2014).

Through media framing analysis we aimed at identifying the most prominent generic frames used in covering the European topics. We used a deductive approach following Holli Semetko and Patti Valkenburg's (2000) criteria for quantifying generic frames: *economic consequences frame, responsibility frame, conflict frame*, and *human interest frame*.

The frames were measured using batteries of 3 to 5 questions (see Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000), coded as "1" for "Yes" and "0" for "No", where "yes" means the frame is present in the news item, in the particular dimension reflected by each question. The intensity of the frame was computed as the mean of the values of all items in one frame.
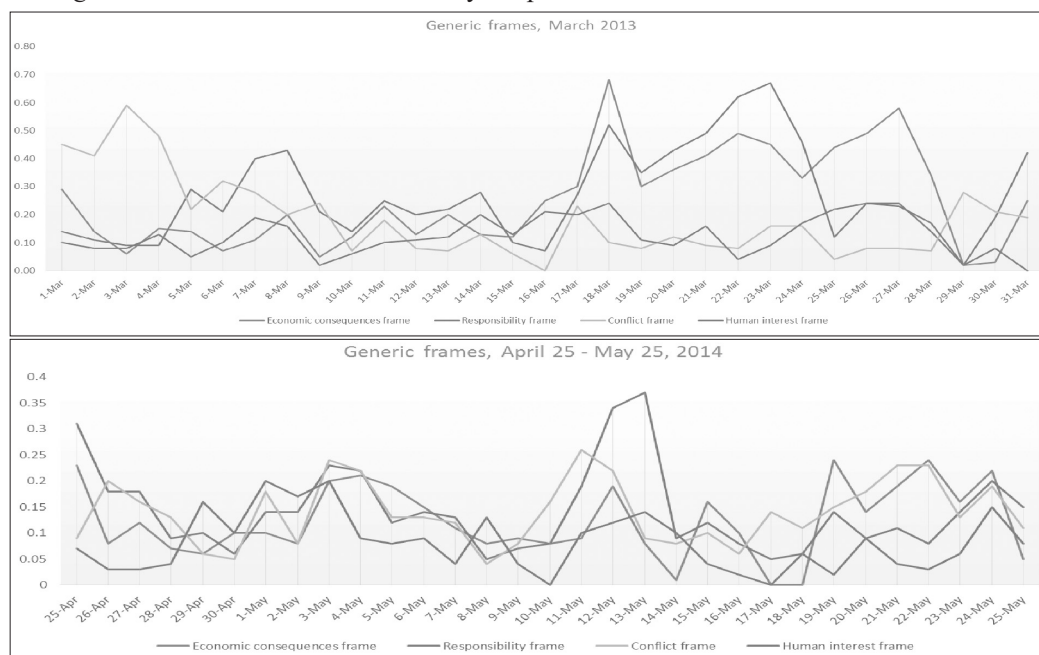
The means of frames intensity showed important differences from one year to another, but only small differences in terms of the hierarchy of dominant frames.

Table 1. Media frames (means) for the analyzed periods.

Media frames		2013				2014			
		Economic frame	Respon-sibility frame	Conflict frame	Human interest frame	Economic frame	Respon-sibility frame	Conflict frame	Human interest frame
Portal ziare.com	Mean	0.21	0.17	0.25	0.13	0.12	0.12	0.15	0.10
	N	431	431	431	431	345	345	345	345
	Std.	0.35	0.30	0.29	0.25	0.25	0.23	0.22	0.20
	Deviation								
hotnews.ro	Mean	0.28	0.30	0.16	0.13	0.15	0.18	0.14	0.06
	N	367	367	367	367	319	319	319	319
	Std.	0.38	0.39	0.27	0.21	0.28	0.28	0.25	0.15
	Deviation								
Total	Mean	0.24	0.23	0.21	0.13	0.13	0.15	0.14	0.08
	N	797	797	797	797	664	664	664	664
	Std.	0.36	0.35	0.29	0.24	0.26	0.26	0.23	0.18
	Deviation								

In both analyzed periods, the results do not indicate the clear prevalence of one generic frame or another. In 2013, the main used frame was the economic consequences frame, registering a mean of 0.24. However, the difference from the responsibility frame – 0.23 and the conflict frame 0.21 is almost insignificant. In 2014, all the means registered a decrease. Thus, during the European campaign, the main used frame was the responsibility one, which registered a mean of 0.15, followed closely by the conflict frame – 0.14 and the economic frame – 0.13. In 2013 media focused more on aspects related to economic consequences and responsibility designation, while in 2014 on responsibility and conflict in the special context of the electoral campaign and the conflicts in Ukraine. The intensity of frames throughout the analyzed periods can be observed in the figures below:

Figure 4. Generic frames for the analyzed periods.

In 2013, the economic consequences frame was mainly used in relation to the crisis in Cyprus, especially after 18 March when the Cyprus Parliament debated the European bailout plan, the possibility of reopening the Cypriot banks and their branches in the member states. The conflict frame had the highest values in relation to the declaration pertaining to the German minister for internal affairs that Germany was going to oppose to Romania and Bulgaria's adhesion to the Schengen area at the Justice and Home Affairs council in Brussels, followed by heated debates among national political actors and European leaders. The responsibility frame had high values during the JHA council, the Cypriot Parliament's debates on the bailout plan, and the rejection of the initial plan that caused a wave of reactions among EU leaders along with financial difficulties. The human interest frame had the lowest values compared to other generic frames and was mainly used in relation to Cyprus' crisis and the afferent economic difficulties.

In 2014, the most used frame was the responsibility one, followed closely by the conflict and economic frames. The responsibility and conflict frames were mostly prominent in relation to the European elections and the crisis in Ukraine, while the economic frame was mostly used in covering the economic and geopolitical implications of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine and of EU's actions in dealing with the crisis.

The human interest frame had a lower mean (0.08) than in 2013, showing that media are not concerned with explaining how the citizens are affected by EU's policies and actions, how the citizens feel and react to all the changes they have to deal with. The fact that the responsibility and conflict frames are the most used ones in both periods, shows that media still have to bridge the gap between the EU and its citizens, and the usage of the human frame shouldincrease in order to catch citizens' interest and determine their involvement.

5.2. In-depth interviews

To analyze the influence of media coverage and framing of EU subjects on citizens' interpersonal conversations agenda, we conducted a qualitative research consisting in two series of 20 and 19, respectively, in-depth interviews with Romanian graduate students. The interviews were conducted immediately after the two analyzed periods. The main analyzed aspects were the interest in EU issues, the media consumption level, the perspectives and the involvement in discussions on European topics.

The internet is the most used information source among the interviewees, followed by TV newscasts. Twenty-five of them are regular news consumers who watch or read news more than 2-3 hours a day, while 14 (out of 39) are occasional consumers. For EU related information, the internet remains the primary source (32 out of 39), while 4 rely on TV news and only one on information provided by friends. Apart from the 7 respondents (out of 39) who have no interest in issues related to the European Union, the rest engage in consuming news on European topics and finding out more details about the events that involve the member states.

"I don't watch EU topics or look at talk-shows regarding the EU issues; they aren't ofany interest to me." (Catalin, 24/2013).

"No, I'm not interested (…). I don't watch or read things about the EU because first of all I don't have the time for that and because I prefer to use my spare time for something that interests me directly" (Andra, 24/2014)

The interviewees are particularly interested in topics that cover European issues with possible national consequences (20 out of 39) and in those that are highly visible in the media or have a direct impact on their lives (12 out of 39).

"I am not particularly interested, but if there is an important and interesting issue that is internationally or nationally debated and it has an echo in the media, than yes." (Olivia, 24/2013)

"If there is something that seriously affects me, than yes, I'm interested" (Teodora, 23/2014)

"Yes, I'm interested because after all my country is part of the EU with goods and bads and it affects us." (Sanziana, 25/2014).

Only one respondent stated that he watches European news for pleasure and that he has an interest in European topics before being members of the EU.

"Yes, I'm interested (in European topics), and not just in the last years, but for a long time (…). I search for information, for fun. It's a personal determination that I had even before we were part of the EU, since as a child I had contact with the Occidental world and I think this fact left a mark on my personality because what I saw when I was 12 in countries like France, Belgium, Holland, Germany, I didn't see even in 2000 in Romania." (Iulian, 35/2014)

Other aspects of interest mentioned by the respondents are political and economic subjects, Romania's status as a member state and the afferent implications, study and work opportunities abroad, EU funds, and educational and cultural programs.

The interviewees were also asked to indicate the EU topics they were interested in, topics picked from the analyzed periods. In March 2013, the respondents were mainly interested in the euro crisis (particularly the crisis in Cyprus – 9 out of 20) and the rejection of

Romania's adhesion to Schengen (6 out of 20). Other topics that attracted their attention included the Romanians' right to work in the UK, the EU budget for 2014-2020, the horsemeat scandal, budgetary cuts and other topics related to their work. In 2014, the interviewees mentioned mostly the European campaign (14 out of 19) and the crisis in Ukraine along with its geopolitical implications, the EU involvement and Russia's reaction (8 mentions). Other topics of interest were related to new policies and initiatives that had a direct impact on respondents' work. For both analyzed periods, the interviewed subjects were interested in the same topics that were the most covered by the media. As a consequence, we can say that media agenda influenced the citizens' agenda and attracted their attention by pointing out the topics of interest, topics that were perceived as being important by the respondents and that were easily recalled from memory.

The European events are not a common debate topic on citizens' interpersonal conversations agenda. Most interviewed subjects from 2013 discuss very little on these matters (8 out of 20). For them, EU becomes a debate issue if there is something of high visibility in the media that concerns the EU and, at the same time, if the events have national or personal implications.

"(I discuss) Only if it seems to have an impact on us (on the country), on me, if it could potentially influence my future." (Ionut, 24/2013)

"Usually, I don't (discuss on EU matters), but if there is a big subject or related to education, I do comment on it with my friends." (Mara, 23/2013)

Only five interviewees discuss European topics to learn more about the events and understand theirconsequences. They usually discuss with professors or people that are more knowledgeable. In 2014, only 10 people (out of 19) discussed about EU topics, 4 of which discussed exclusively the European campaign. The respondents indicated as a motivator for involving in discussions the coverage of major, important events in the media or events that affected the national plan. Three of them declared that they often deliberate on EU issues to acquire a better understanding of the events, while 6 of them do not even consider European related aspects as possible discussion topics.

"Yes, I discussed when the elections took place." (Alina, 24/ 2014)

"Yes, of course I discuss (EU issues). We can't escape it, we live in this European world, we like it or not…" (Mihaela, 26/2014)

"No, I don't (discuss on EU issues). We don't have the information so we don't want to just make some assumptions" (Anca, 24/2014)"

"Yes, if there is something that intrigues me, I usually discuss. Most of the times because I seize some things and I want to find out if the others seized them too and because I want to understand more." (Silvana, 23/2014)

Those who use todiscuss the news, discuss politics as well, and they are the ones to comment on the European issues (9 out of 19), indicating the existence of a possible connection between the level of political knowledge and the level of EU interest.

The interviewees were asked about their perception regarding the most used media frames in covering the EU topics and about the evaluation perspective or discussion angle they mostly use. In 2013, the respondents indicated the economic consequences frame (14 out of 20)

as being the most prominent in the media, followed closely by the responsibility and conflict frames. Their estimations matched the content analysis results. In 2014, their evaluation revealed that the economic frame is still perceived as the prominent one (8 out of 19), followed by the responsibility (6 mentions) and conflict frames (5 mentions), although the media analysis indicated the responsibility frame as having the highest mean, followed closely by the conflict and then the economic frame.

"In our media we don't discuss about the impact on citizens or this is so little approached that it doesn't even matter. They clearly discuss in economic terms and then in responsibility terms (…)." (Ionut, 24/2013)

"I think it's mainly the responsibility perspective – whom is to blame, who has to do things, and then the conflicts. Especially if it's something negative; then it's more visible in the media." (Catalina, 27/2014).

The influence of media framing on evaluation and discussion perspectives is increased only for the most prominent ones. In 2013, 5 respondents used preponderantly the economic angle in evaluating or discussing European topics, four used the responsibility frame and three chose the human impact perspective. In 2014, 6 used mainly the economic frame, 5 the responsibility frame and 5 the human impact frame. In both cases, no respondent indicated the use of the conflict frame although this frame had a close mean to other frames in the media. Also, the human impact frame was used by respondents in their discussions it had a low mean in the media. Thirteen interviewees (out of 39) indicated that this frame was not present in the media and that they felt the need of an increased focus on the human impact perspective when it comes to EU issues.

"It seems to me that the economic perspective decodes all the messages regarding the EU and all the actions of the European Union." (Mihai, 31/2013)

"More on the human part. Otherwise it seems to me that we discuss about some countries, about some decisions, but we don't talk about some humans that are there." (Ionut, 24/2013)

"On the responsibility level because once they have some objectives to accomplish, it's normal that people have expectations and those responsible should do something." (Anda, 23/2014)

"Mostly from an economic angle. For me, the European Union was formed with a clear economic purpose. What other relations developed in the meantime… is not well defined." (Mihai, 29/2014)

Overall, the respondents rely on national media to provide information about the EU; thus, through agenda setting and framing, media can influence citizens' interpersonal conversations agendaand their discussion parameters. However, at this point, citizens' interest in EU topics is mostly reduced and their involvement is driven by the impact of the events on national and personal plans.

6. Discussion and conclusions

The future of the European project depends on citizens' interest, support and involvement. If citizens reject the imposed changes or they have no interest in the evolution of a project they might not even believe in, then the whole structure might reveal its shallowness and the Union will remain only an economic project. Here is where media can support the evolution towards something bigger that includes the citizens, and not only the elites. Agenda setting

and framing are important tools that influence the way European topics are considered by the citizens as important points of interest, the way they evaluate and interpret the events and if they include the EU topics on their conversations agenda. Since national media are important agents in determining the EU's evolution and in establishing connections with its citizens, the present study examines the effects of agenda setting and framing of European subjects on citizens' interest and interpersonal conversations agenda.

The media content analysis showed a preference for political and economic issues when it comes to EU and, consequently, the most visible topics were the Euro crisis and the discussions about Romania and Bulgaria's adhesion to the Schengen area (in 2013), and the European elections and EU's external politics in relation to the Ukrainian conflict (in 2014). In both years, media focused on the major events that had also a national impact and the predominant contextualization for the European topics is still the national one, this approach hindering the support for the Europeanization process, as it does not develop a genuine interest for the EU.

In what concerns the most used generic frames in covering EU related topics, the means do not indicate a detached prevalence of one frame or another. However, in 2013 media focused more on aspects related to economics and responsibility designation, while in 2014 on responsibility and conflict in the special context of the electoral campaign and the conflicts in Ukraine.

Both agenda setting and framing proved to have an influence on what people were interested in, in terms of EU related topics, on what they chose for further information seeking or as debate subjects, as well as on their evaluation and discussion perspectives based on the perceived prominent perspectives in the media. Therefore, for both analyzed periods, the interviewed subjects were interested in the same topics that were the most covered ones in the media, these topics being perceived as important and, consequently, the respondents included them on their conversations agenda. However, the respondents were not too inclined to discuss on EU topics unless there was something of high visibility in the media that concerned the EU and, at the same time, if those events had national or personal implications.

Since the amount of media attention influenced citizens' choice of discussion topics, media outlets should increase the presence of EU topics on their agenda to support the Europeanization process. This should be a particular point of action, especially since the visibility of EU topics in national media is still under the European mean. Another aspect indicated by the analysis is the lack of a human interest frame in the media, a fact that does not fulfill the citizens' need for an increased focus on the human impact when it comes to EU issues (see Habermas' (2001) concept of "impact factor", the extent to which people become conscious of the impact that the common European decisions has on their life standards). In order to support something, people want to understand how they are impacted by it, how it reflects on their country and on themselves, how things operate on a concrete basis, not at a theoretical and abstract level. Furthermore, media frames influence their evaluation and discussion perspectives, but this is valid only for the two most prominent frames (the economic and responsibility frames), because these also match their needs of understanding and interpreting the events, of assessing the economic impact and identifying those who are accountable for the changes they are dealing with. Instead of a conflict frame, they would prefer a human-interest frame, a frame they also declared as being used in their conversations. However, as mentioned before, people's interest in EU topics and involvement in discussions is mostly reduced and is being driven by the impact of the events at a national or personal level.

Media, and especially the online news providers, are the primary source in connecting the citizens to the European Union and consequently, for people to become interested and active, media should increase the visibility of EU subjects, frame them appropriately and cover them from a European perspective. In order to lower the democratic deficit, people should be active pieces in the evolution of the EU, in the integration process by acknowledging the EU plans, by understanding the aimed results and the consequences of the new policies at a national and a personal level. A Europeanized discourse is a key aspect in supporting the integration process, in familiarizing the citizens with the new system they are part of so that in time they would be able to acquire a European identity and an active role in a common EU political system.

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