

Dual Functionalism:
European Integration in the Post-Truth Communication Landscape

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Abstract

This paper examines how post-truth political communication shapes European integration through the lens of "integrational panic" during several key EU crises. The media's role in constructing political realities supports a new "Dual Functionalist" framework that recognizes the divergent but interconnected tracks of European integration. While postfunctionalism accurately captures how identity politics increasingly constrains integration at the public level, it fails to explain continued integration at the elite level. Case studies of the Eurozone crisis (2009-2015), the migration crisis (2013-2016), and Russia's invasion of Ukraine demonstrate how media framing transforms policy disagreements into existential threats through rapid volume increases, negative tone, and emphasis on societal tensions. Successful analysis of European integration requires acknowledging both tracks: elite intergovernmentalism that enables deeper coordination without visible sovereignty transfers, and public identity politics that shapes which policies can advance and which face insurmountable resistance. This framework explains seemingly contradictory patterns of simultaneous integration and fragmentation across different policy domains in the European Union.

Introduction

In October of 2019, the public EdTech foundation The Commonwealth Centre for Connected Learning Foundation held a conference, composed of over two hundred delegates from a variety of backgrounds in Malta, to attempt to move towards a consensus understanding of a newly coined concept: "Post-Truth". At its core, attendees seemed to speak with great concern about dangerous trends in our media landscapes, wary of a sort of poison that they felt was causing a political disorientation of the masses. The Minister for Education and Employment of Malta, Evarist Bartolo claimed, laden with a quiet but desperate attention to the change in

political communication, that “We have lost our comfort zones; we try to recreate them, like nomads in the desert, trying to find our bearings... We are all collectively responsible for the murder of truth.”¹

These claims are quite drastic in nature, but their urgencies are reflected in the general uncertainties presented by the changing status quo – the demise of the neoliberal dominance and the rise of the new populism. And for as dystopian as a suggestion as “the murder of truth” might seem, these discourses of truth and its conception are easily traceable to longer disputes about political truth. Historically, however, the conception of truth has been argued not to have been murdered, but changing via a range of inputs. While Rawls argued in *Political Liberalism* that political justification should rely on 'reasonableness' rather than contested notions of truth, Habermas contends in *The Theory of Communicative Action* that truth itself emerges through rational consensus across objective, social, and subjective communicative domains.² These claims about the 'murder of truth' should therefore be understood not as the kind of dramatized domination portrayed in Orwell's famous works, but rather as describing the disruption of society's capacity to coalesce around a rational consensus. Instead, we can identify what has happened to political communication, from interpretation of the most trusted media outlets to the political sentiments of the engaged masses, as a shift toward an ideological preference of one world of “truth” to another.

European Integration is often understood and debated surrounding a certain set of “crises of the European Union”, and the social development of “crisis”, whether economic, migratory, or health-related, becomes particularly potent in this fragmented media environment. Cross and

¹ Sood, Ira. “3CL Malta Conference on Post-Truth Society: Day One Recap.” 3CL Foundation, November 17, 2022.

² Habermas, J. *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1984; John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1993.

Ma's definition of "integrational panic" provides valuable insight into how media coverage transforms policy disagreements or economic challenges into existential threats to European integration. Their analysis demonstrates that international media consistently frames events as crises through three key mechanisms: rapidly increasing volume of coverage after a crisis trigger, consistently negative tone emphasizing dire predictions, and focus on societal tensions that pit different groups against each other.³ This pattern of coverage creates the conditions for what they establish as "integrational panic", simply described as the societal anxiety arising from threats to European integration. There is enough reason to suggest that their legitimation in the media therefore becomes a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy as markets, publics, and policymakers respond to these narratives. During several "crises of the European Union", including the 2005 Constitutional Crisis, media coverage almost entirely ignored the substantive terms of the proposed Treaty itself, only 2% of coverage, instead focusing overwhelmingly on public-elite tensions, about 60-100% of coverage across publications.⁴ This selective emphasis creates a distorted understanding of European issues among publics, where technical policy debates are transformed into existential identity conflicts. Case studies examining the interaction between post-truth media and right-wing populism should therefore pay close attention to which aspects of complex issues are emphasized or marginalized in media coverage, and how these framing choices align with populist narratives about European integration.

The current state of political communications and European integration gives rise to two separate questions: first, how is our new political communication, if we accept post-truth to be a result of the rise in populist attitudes, contributing to an integrational panic, and second, how has this

³ Cross, Mai'a K. Davis, and Xinru Ma, "EU Crises and Integrational Panic: The Role of the Media.", *Journal of European Public Policy* 22 (8): 2015.

⁴ Ibid.

version of integrational panic been felt, interpreted and acted upon by actors in the European Union?

The current state of political communications and European integration reveals a fundamental duality: while post-truth communication contributes to an "integrational panic" among the general public, EU political and economic elites have developed sophisticated response mechanisms that operate according to a different logic. This divergence is best explained through a "Dual Functionalist" framework that recognizes how elite intergovernmentalism coexists with populist-driven identity politics, with media functioning as both the battlefield and the primary mechanism through which these competing understandings of European integration are constructed and contested.

This paper examines how post-truth political communication shapes European integration through the lens of "integrational panic" during several key EU crises. I begin by defining European integration and establishing a conceptual framework for understanding the media's role in constructing political realities during the age of "post-truth". I then examine traditional theories of European integration, evaluating their strengths and limitations in explaining contemporary integration dynamics. Next, I analyze how media shapes political communication and identity formation in the European context, drawing on framing theory, discursive institutionalism, and research on elite-media relationships in both traditional and digital environments. This framework provides the foundation for examining three critical case studies: the Eurozone crisis (2009-2016), the immigration crisis (2014-2018), and Russia's invasion of Ukraine (2022-2025). Each case illustrates how media framing constructs political realities and shapes integration outcomes through distinct communicative processes. Following after is a discussion section which synthesizes insights from these cases to develop a "Dual Functionalist"

framework that explains the divergent but interconnected tracks of European integration. I conclude by examining the theoretical and practical implications of this dual-track integration for European governance, democratic legitimacy, and future crisis management. Throughout, I demonstrate that understanding European integration in the post-truth era requires attention not only to institutional design or national preferences but to the communicative construction of political realities that shape how different constituencies understand the European project and its challenges.

Literature Review

The rise of populist nationalism in recent years and the potential dissolution of liberal notions of free trade from the United States in recent months has thrown the current world order into a unique state of confusion. Whether one believes in theories of multipolarity or the continued dominance of the soft and hard powers of the United States, many have started to question where the European Union fits into the next edition of international affairs. When it comes to Europe and the EU, discussions of where the system will head next tend to surround theories of integration, or rather the discussion of incentives and actions of interest groups and Member States of the European Union. Theories of European Integration tend to be mostly constructed around three central camps: neofunctionalism, which is under the branch of supranationalism; intergovernmentalism, and postfunctionalism. Primarily involved in the historical development of Integration theory is a critical assessment of the choices of rational, interested actors in some form of system, whether anarchic or concrete. Each successive theory attempts to re-examine the previous' analysis under the guise of it not being particularly applicable to a new moment, to which this paper is arguing has potentially occurred in the discourse for the current moment.

The first critical perspective in the literature on European Integration is its originating theory, Neofunctionalism, which belongs to a wider perspective sometimes referred to as “institutionalism” or “supranationalism”. The founding thinker of Neofunctionalist thought is Ernest B. Haas, who outlined that the incentives for the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community were reliant on a need for supranational cooperation.⁵ The theory has three core characteristics – an overarching focus on so-called “spillover”, the role of societal groups in the process of integration, and a focus on elite interests and actors. Spillover, according to Haas’ theory, is the concept that cooperation in one policy area would create certain pressures in a neighbouring policy area and the placement of a policy on the agenda, ultimately leading to continued integration in a sort of domino-effect. In simpler terms, it can be referred to as a situation in which cooperation in one field necessitates cooperation in another.⁶ Haas also believed in the role of societal groups, structurally important actors and institutions, arguing specifically that interest groups and political parties would be key actors in driving integration forward,⁷ with differences in incentives being aggregated in the process of regional integration. In this way, European integration can be seen as a process driven by the self interest of groups rather than by any ideological vision of a united Europe or a shared sense of identity. Lastly, Haas outlined a tendency in this process of regional integration to be driven by functional and technocratic needs of elite actors such that regional democratic and accountable governance held a minimal role. Instead, Haas suggested that benign elitism assumes tacit support of European peoples in a form of permissive consensus.⁸ In addition to these core tenets, Haas and most

⁵ Haas, Ernst B., Desmond Dinan. *Uniting Of Europe: Political, Social, and Economic Forces, 1950-1957*, University of Notre Dame Press, 2004.

⁶ Hooghe, Liesbet, and Gary Marks, “A Postfunctionalist Theory of European Integration: From Permissive Consensus to Constraining Dissensus,” forthcoming in the *British Journal of Political Science* 2007.

⁷ Haas, Ernst B. *Uniting Of Europe: Political, Social, and Economic Forces*, 1958, 1968, 2004.

⁸ *Ibid.* 1958, 1968, 2004.

contributors to Neofunctionalist thought believe that economic integration would strengthen all states involved, consequently leading to political integration.⁹ Neofunctionalism's main strength is in its description of "spillover", which helps to explain the desire from Member States (MS) for the Single European Act and the creation of a single market because of functional problems with heterogeneous national regulations in the (at the time) European Community,¹⁰ or the political desire for interest groups to increase their chances of success through support of European solutions.¹¹ Even in more contemporary discussions, Neofunctionalist theories of spillover have provided ample space for understanding the migrant crisis, as related to intergovernmental dynamics,¹² different EU countries put pressure on Schengen agreements and lack of border control, creating a need for common asylum structure, an example of functional spillover.

Neofunctionalist theory is not without its critics. Some have argued there is potential for a disintegrative element to spillover, which can be referred to as "spillback", which can be evidenced by the crisis of Brexit. However, these periods of spillback are typically followed by processes of spillover,¹³ leading to long run political integration. Keohane and Nye argued for a shift towards an interdependent perspective, arguing that "institutions such as EC/EU should be analyzed against the background of growth in international interdependence, rather than as

⁹ Strøby Jensen, Carsten. "Neo-functionalism". In *European Union Politics, 7th ed*, edited by Michelle Cini, and Nieves Pérez-Solórzano Borragán, Oxford: *Oxford University Press*, 2022.

¹⁰ Tranholm-Mikkelsen, J. "Neo-functionalism: Obstinate Or Obsolete? : a Reappraisal in the Light of the New Dynamism of the EC." Volume 20, Issue 1 of *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Millennium, 1991.

¹¹ Ekaterina Turkina & Evgeny Postnikov, "Cross-border Inter-firm Networks in the European Union's Eastern Neighbourhood: Integration via Organizational Learning," *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Wiley Blackwell, vol. 50(4), pages 632-652, 2012.

¹² Niemann A., Speyer J. 2018. "A Neofunctionalist Perspective on the 'European Refugee Crisis': The Case of the European Border and Coast Guard." *Journal of Common Market Studies*: 56(1):23–43.; Börzel, Tanja A., and Thomas Risse. 2017. "From the Euro to the Schengen Crises: European Integration Theories, Politicization, and Identity Politics." *Journal of European Public Policy* 25 (1): 83–108.

¹³ Strøby Jensen, Carsten. "Neo-functionalism." 2022.

regional political orgs”.¹⁴ Despite these claims, neofunctionalism has remained impactful on current understandings of European integration. As argued by Sandholz and Stone Sweet, as transactions increase in number across EU borders, which in turn increases need for European level regulation, generates a process of institutionalization leading to the establishment of what the authors call supranational governance.¹⁵ Potentially the most useful modern understanding of Neofunctionalist thought is neo-neofunctionalism, which argues that European Integration tends to develop as a consequence of crises,¹⁶ which in the context of my media-based analysis, can provide a reasonably strong framework in either support or denial of Media’s impact on crises of the European Union. However, the most important criticism of neofunctionalism is exposed by the second perspective discussed here, Liberal Intergovernmentalism, which highlights the limitation of neofunctionalist thought as a comprehensive theory of European integration.

The second most important theory of European Integration is Andrew Moravcsik’s Liberal Intergovernmentalism, which argues that neofunctionalism “appears to misdirect both the trajectory and the process of EC evolution”.¹⁷ Liberal Intergovernmentalism (LI) is the most important branch of “intergovernmentalist” thought, which generally argues for a state centric explanation of the European integration process drawn from realist/neorealist accounts of interstate bargaining. Instead of being reliant on a supranational level of analysis, intergovernmentalism is focused on the interaction of self-interested states in an anarchic

¹⁴ Keohane, Robert O. “International Organization and the Crisis of Interdependence.” *International Organization* 29, no. 2 (1975): 357–65.

¹⁵ Stone Sweet, Alec, “Neofunctionalism and Supranational Governance”, 2010.; Sandholtz, W. and Stone Sweet, A.. *Neo-functionalism and supranational governance*, Oxford Handbook on the European Union, Oxford Press 2012, pp. 18-33.

¹⁶ Schmitter, Philippe C. Neo-neofunctionalism (2004). In: Wiener, A., & Diez, T. (2004). *European integration theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press., Lefkofridi, Z., and P.C. Schmitter. 2015. *Transcending or descending? European integration in times of crisis*. *European Political Science Review* 7(01): 3–22.

¹⁷ Moravcsik, A., "Preferences and Power in the European Community: A Liberal Intergovernmentalist Approach," *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Wiley Blackwell, vol. 31(4), pages 473-524, December. 1993.

environment in which no global authority is capable of securing order,¹⁸ with state interests focused mostly on survival as states are rational, unitary actors that define interests based on evaluation of their position in the system of states¹⁹ – Thus EU Member states are the most important actors in the intergovernmentalist perspective. Even further, intergovernmentalism stresses that EU integration implies a pooling or sharing of sovereignty, not a transfer of sovereignty²⁰ or possibly a “delegation of sovereignty”, or the transfer of functions from state executive to EU institutions.²¹ However, classical intergovernmentalism plays down constraints that MS may feel from interdependence, and also fails to take in the “novelty of the European integration project”, as bargains struck at European level are not simply a set of national interests.²² Liberal Intergovernmentalism proposes a flexibility to the classical iteration, in which it views the EU as a successful intergovernmental regime designed to manage economic interdependence through negotiated policy coordination, and emphasizes importance of both the preferences and power of the states.²³ Moravcsik proposes a supply and demand side to European integration. On one hand, the demand side utilizes liberal theories of national preference formation to claim that state goals can be shaped by domestic pressures and interactions in a pluralist understanding of state relations. The supply side, on the other hand, suggests that relative power among states is shaped above all by asymmetrical

¹⁸ Jervis, R.. “Hans Morgenthau, Realism, and the Scientific Study of International Politics.” *Social Research* 61, no. 4 (1994): 853–76. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40971063>.

¹⁹ Dunne, T., & Schmidt, B.. Realism. In J. Baylis, S. Smith , & P. Owens, *The Globalization of World Politics* (p. 86). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. 2011

²⁰ Keohane, Robert O. et Hoffman, Stanley (Ed.). *The New European Community : Decision Making and Institutional Change*. Boulder (Col.), Westview Press, 1991, 216 p.

²¹ Pollack, Mark A. “Delegation, Agency, and Agenda Setting in the European Community.” *International Organization* 51, no. 1 1997: 99–134.

²² Rosamond, B. *Theories of European Integration*. Palgrave Macmillan: Hampshire, 2000.

²³ Moravcsik, A. “Preferences and Power...” 1993.

interdependence.²⁴ Combining the demand and supply mechanisms of LI is the concept of institutional delegation, where governments delegate and pool sovereignty in European institutions to secure substantive bargains that they have made by ensuring that all parties are obliged to commit to cooperation. While LI succeeds in describing a two-level game that states play in the European system, where states first define interests nationally then express them on an international stage through inter-state bargains,²⁵ it seems quite outdated in an era of increasing politicization of the European system itself. Liberal Intergovernmentalism fails to properly account for the impact of crises and implications of the politicization of the EU and seems to ignore long established European system norms,²⁶ as well as reducing the influence and importance of EU executive bodies like the Commission²⁷. However, Liberal Intergovernmentalism, and intergovernmentalist approaches more broadly, still poses a useful avenue for understanding how a post-truth media landscape might be involved with the interests and incentives of elite political actors.

The final theory of European integration I will discuss is postfunctionalism, which centers around the politicization of European integration itself. Postfunctionalism stresses that as integration moves into core areas of state sovereignty and national identity, and produces effects reaching deeply into national economic/welfare policies, it increases the domestic salience of the EU and creates cultural and economic integration losers/winners. Where neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism conceive of European integration as a cooperative process between

²⁴ Moravcsik, A. *The Choice for Europe: Social Purpose and State Power from Messina to Maastricht*. 1998. Ithaca, NY. Cornell University Press.

²⁵ Putnam, Robert D. "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games." *International Organization* 42, no. 3 (1988): 427–60.

²⁶ Schimmelfennig, F., "Liberal Intergovernmentalism and the Crises of the European Union," *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Wiley Blackwell, vol. 56(7), pages 1578-1594, 2018.

²⁷ Beach, D., *Leadership and Intergovernmental Negotiations in the European Union*. in M Egan, N Nugent & W Paterson (eds), *Research Agendas in EU Studies*. *Palgrave Macmillan*, pp. 92-116. 2010

interest groups and MS governments, postfunctionalism sees the process as conflictual by nature due to incompatible belief systems. Therefore, “the range of possible outcomes under postfunctionalism encompasses not only the status quo or its punctuated reform, but also disintegration”,²⁸ a critical departure to the pre-existing literature on integration.

Postfunctionalism has its strengths in its rooting of the response to the Euro Crisis in domestic politics, taking into account “the rise of nationalist opposition to European integration that petrified governments even as the economic costs of inactivity rose”.²⁹ In the Euro Crisis, the functional pressure for EU coordination was met with resistance to supranational solutions, with the tabloid media acting supposedly as the voice of the public resistance. As a result, governments were reluctant to engage with supranational solutions as domestic parties were acutely aware of public opinion,³⁰ bringing the Eurozone close to collapse due to this lagging response. However applicable postfunctionalism might be, it remains a naturally limited viewpoint in the greater context of European integration, making it also somewhat unfit as an overarching theory for recent integration patterns. Postfunctionalism’s main limitation lies in its explanatory gap that it shares with neofunctionalism in comparison to LI’s analysis of intergovernmental negotiations, as its power to understand how integration outcomes feed back into intergovernmental preference and power constellations gives it weight that other theories lack.³¹

²⁸ Hooghe, Liesbet, and Gary Marks. “A Postfunctionalist Theory of European Integration: From Permissive Consensus to Constraining Dissensus.” *British Journal of Political Science* 39, no. 1, 2009: 1–23.

²⁹ Hooghe, Liesbet, and Gary Marks, “Grand Theories of European Integration in the Twenty-First Century.” *Journal of European Public Policy* 26 (8): 2019, 1113–33.

³⁰ Jacoby, W. ‘Europe’s new German problem: the timing of politics and the politics of timing’ 2015., in M. Matthijs and M. Blyth (eds.), *The Future of the Euro*, Oxford: OUP, pp. 9-10; Schmidt, V. (2014) ‘Speaking to the markets or to the people? A discursive institutionalist analysis of the EU’s sovereign debt crisis’, *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 16: 188–209.

³¹ Schimmelfennig, F. “Liberal intergovernmentalism and the crises of the European Union.” *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 2018

In the context of a discussion on European integration, Postfunctionalism might seem to be just as lacking in substantive relationship to the theorized post-truth media landscape we seem to inhabit since the rise of populist nationalism around a decade ago. Yet it still remains the most modern analysis of the situation overall, and its attentiveness to the politicization cannot be ignored in a supposedly post-truth media environment where Euroscepticism has become an integral part of the European Union's political discourse. Even so, I cannot entirely disregard intergovernmentalist and neofunctionalist theories in this discussion of European populism and post-truth media, and thus all perspectives will be considered as a result of their inherent strengths and weaknesses at describing certain crises and scenarios involved in the formation of the European Union. Therefore, while postfunctionalist thought might be the most recent major development in the literature, I will attempt to extend this theory with the current media landscape as context, and will attempt to use other theories, or develop a new extension of one to multiple of these theories, where necessary to develop a better understanding of European integration in this particular political climate.

Media, Politicization and Identity Formation

In order to properly investigate the validity of postfunctional thought in the current European political sphere, we must develop a flexible understanding of what "politicization" means in this context. In doing so, I will utilize the media as the single most effective method of "political communication", to which all other dimensions can be related with and compared to. The work of Robert Entman provides a useful descriptor of how the media turns an idea or event into political communication through the process he calls "framing". According to Entman, framing is the process of selecting "some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition,

causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described".³² Framing, therefore, is a sort of generalized value judgment system, where regardless of any sense of intentionality, an audience is subconsciously made selectively responsive to a certain perspective. In the context of European Integration, Entman's theory on framing can be applied powerfully, as "framing" clearly outlines the mechanism which determines the specific aspects of integration that are highlighted and which are minimized. For example, when the media frames the EU primarily through economic benefits (i.e. prosperity, benefits from the single market structure), the language used promotes a particular ideological understanding of European integration as a beneficially utilitarian project. Conversely, when frames emphasize sovereignty concerns or cultural identity, integration can become ideologically constructed as a threat to national autonomy or identity.

Entman further elaborates that frames are manifested by "the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments".³³ In European contexts, this has been evidenced by the distinct "opportunity" and "risk" frames in EU coverage that correspond to pro-integration and Eurosceptic ideological positions respectively.³⁴ Importantly, Entman's work demonstrates that framing is not merely descriptive but constitutive—frames don't just reflect ideological positions but actively construct them by determining what aspects of European politics citizens perceive as most relevant and how they interpret those aspects.

³² Entman, R. M., Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 1993, 52.

³³ Entman, R. M., Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 1993, 52.

³⁴ Bos, L., van der Brug, W., & de Vreese, C., How the Media Shape Perceptions of Right-Wing Populist Leaders. *Political Communication*, 28(2), 2011. 182–206.

In context of the institutions of the European Union themselves, Vivien Schmidt's discursive institutionalism represents a seemingly accurate label for the methods by which communication shapes political change.³⁵ Unlike traditional institutionalist approaches that focus primarily on structures, Schmidt emphasizes the role of ideas and discourse in shaping institutional development. Discursive institutionalism, as described by Schmidt, is an approach that "concerns itself with how ideas are communicated through discourse, and how this discourse follows rules and norms that are themselves also the results of discourse".³⁶ Schmidt's suggestion therefore presents a recursive relationship between political communication and institutional development, one that has legitimacy in the majority of the traditional theories due to their differences largely resulting in contrasting sets of preferences over jurisdictional architecture.³⁷ According to "discursive institutionalism", there exists two main types of discourse that shape ideological formation in European politics. First is "coordinative discourse", where communication among policy actors that develops policy ideas and programs, and with the second being "communicative discourse" where communication between political actors and the public that presents, deliberates, and legitimates political ideas.³⁸ When examining different EU institutions, this distinction can explain operational differences, such as the European Council's engagements primarily being in coordinative discourse among national leaders, while the European Parliament and Commission must engage more intensively with communicative discourse directed at the general populace.

Media Relationship to Elite Classes

³⁵ Schmidt, V. A., Discursive institutionalism: The explanatory power of ideas and discourse. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 11 2008, 303-326.

³⁶ Ibid., 305

³⁷ Hooghe, Liesbet, and Gary Marks. "A Postfunctionalist Theory of European Integration: From Permissive Consensus to Constraining Dissensus," 2009.

³⁸ Schmidt, V. A., Discursive institutionalism: The explanatory power of ideas and discourse, 2008.

When examining the communicative relationship between the media and the elite political class, which is of primary concern due to their institutionalization in the EU decision making process, several perspectives are of great concern. One of the first significant modern commentaries on this relationship is Herman and Chomsky's concept of "manufactured consent". Utilizing a propaganda-exposé type of rhetoric, the theory of manufactured consent outlines the systematic pressure, described as "filters", that exists within the media process to necessitate the support of structural factors, rather than through conspiracy or direct control of elite political perspective.³⁹ This effect is particularly visible when an elite consensus forms, traditionally explained in the integration theory literature as the "permissive consensus" of Haas,⁴⁰ as a forced aligning of political messaging results from such a complicity in ideology and communication. When elites are largely aligned on integration benefits, media coverage has tended to reflect this consensus. As elite consensus fractured, particularly after the Maastricht Treaty, media coverage became more contested but still largely reflected elite divisions rather than independently challenging the framing of those elites, thus placing media coverage and political communication at the heart of the first shift in European integration from neofunctionalist school to the liberal intergovernmentalist understanding.

A theory that can help us understand the specific mechanism for how coverage aligns with elite interests is W. Lance Bennett's indexing theory. It argues that "mass media news professionals, from the boardroom to the beat, tend to 'index' the range of voices and viewpoints in both news and editorials according to the range of views expressed in mainstream government

³⁹ Herman, E. S., & Chomsky, N., . *Manufacturing consent: The political economy of the mass media*. Pantheon Books. 1988

⁴⁰ Haas, Ernst B., Desmond Dinan. *Uniting Of Europe: Political, Social, and Economic Forces, 1950-1957*.

debate about a given topic".⁴¹ Indexing, therefore, can be used to explain why certain perspectives on European integration remain marginalized in mainstream coverage despite their popularity with segments of the public. When major political parties shared a pro-integration consensus, Eurosceptic perspectives received limited coverage. Only when significant party actors adopted Eurosceptic positions, seen in the post-Maastricht crises of the European Union such as the 2005 Constitutional Crisis or the debates about involvement in the Iraq War, did these views receive substantial media attention. Bennett's theory argues that this indexing is not the result of explicit bias but of professional journalistic practices that prioritize "authoritative" sources and conflict within established institutions.⁴² In European politics, this focus on authority has led to coverage typically focused on disagreements between member states or EU institutions rather than more fundamental questions about integration itself. Supporting this theory is a range of empirical evidence. Koopmans (2007) found that European public communication remains largely dominated by national executives and EU executives, with civil society actors receiving far less coverage.⁴³

Also insightful is the insights from related sociological perspectives, such as Bordieu's "field theory" on how journalistic norms develop in relation to power structures. These perspectives tend to claim that journalism operates as a "field", novel and complete with its own logic, yet remains one that is heavily influenced by proximity to other fields of power, particularly economic and political. Benson's (2004) application of field theory shows how journalistic autonomy is constrained by both external pressures (economic and political power)

⁴¹ Bennett, W. L., Toward a theory of press-state relations in the United States. *Journal of Communication*, 40(2), 106. 1990.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Koopmans, R., Who inhabits the European public sphere? Winners and losers, supporters and opponents in Europeanised political debates. *European Journal of Political Research*, 2007. 46: 183-210.

and internal dispositions (professional norms and habitus).⁴⁴ As a result, these pressures resemble systemic limitations on the ability for elite critique that goes beyond individual intention or outright censorship. In the European context, field theory can be utilized to explain why national media systems produce different patterns of EU coverage despite the same baseline of event reporting. As Benson and Hallin (2007) demonstrate in their comparative analysis of French and American journalism, different national journalistic fields prioritize different values and maintain different relationships to political and economic elites⁴⁵. Therefore, when looking cross-nationally, countries with strong public service broadcasting traditions and greater journalistic autonomy from commercial pressures (like Sweden or Germany) tend to produce more substantive EU coverage than countries with more commercialized systems.⁴⁶

Even so, the relationship between elite interest and mediatized politics is not as clear-cut as the previous theories might suggest. Silvio Waisbord's research on watchdog journalism challenges the notion that media primarily serves elite interests through a documentation of the impact of adversarial journalism on accountability. Waisbord defines his concept of watchdog journalism as reporting that "scrutinizes the actions of governments, political parties, and other powers in society, and uncovers wrongdoing, scandals, corruption, and abuse by uncovering information that an individual or organization wants to keep secret".⁴⁷ In the European context, this watchdog function has been evident in coverage of EU corruption scandals, such as the resignation of the Santer Commission following media exposure of mismanagement and

⁴⁴ Benson, R.. Bringing the sociology of media back in. 2004. *Political Communication*, 21(3), 275-292.; Benson, R. Field Theory in Comparative Context: A New Paradigm for Media Studies *Theory and Society*, Vol. 28, No. 3. 1999., pp. 463-498.

⁴⁵ Benson, R., & Hallin, D. C.. How States, Markets and Globalization Shape the News: The French and US National Press, 1965-97, *European Journal of Communication*, 22(1), 2007. 27-48.

⁴⁶ Brüggemann, M., & Kleinen-von Königslöw, K., 'Let's Talk about Europe': Why Europeanization Shows a Different Face in Different Newspapers, *European Journal of Communication*, 24(1), 2009, 27-48.

⁴⁷ Waisbord, S. R.. *Watchdog journalism in South America: News, accountability, and democracy*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press. 2000, 92.

nepotism. In this way, the journalistic form is essential to a conversation of political identity and European Crises are the sharp spikes of quick, immediate reporting that a watchdog-esque media mentality can bring. For many of the crises of the European Union, the aforementioned “integrational panic” is the result of the media’s watchdog mentality, as in several cases (Eurozone Crisis, Iraq War tensions in 2003, etc.), outlets sought to find the cracks in the foundations of the Union itself through their discussion of public-elite tensions. Therefore, the role of the media in European crises can be twofold – both in support of public-facing watchdog commentary, and a long term support of elite interest and pro-institutional rhetoric.

However, disruptions brought about by emerging forms of technology and digitized communication have fundamentally altered the elite-media relationships. Researchers Bennett and Pfetsch’s argument on the concept of digital disruption identifies four key areas where traditional elite-media relationships have been challenged: political fragmentation, shifts towards greater individual communicative power, affective polarization, and dominance of online social media platforms which heavily utilize algorithms and business models prioritizing engagement.⁴⁸ Newer forms of communication have tended to establish a heavier focus on the individual as politically significant than legacy media, seen in the diverse ideological viewpoints propagated through online political blogs or the cult-of-personality politics of social media platforms. What results is “disordered public spheres,” where elite messages no longer flow predictably through established media channels.⁴⁹ In European contexts, this has enabled the rise of alternative media ecosystems that explicitly challenge mainstream narratives about European integration.

Understanding how the traditional dynamics between media and elite interest have evolved today

⁴⁸ Bennett, W. L., & Pfetsch, B. Rethinking political communication in a time of disrupted public spheres. *Journal of Communication*, 2018, 68(2), 243-253.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

cannot exist without a proper understanding of how these new channels of communication have forced a fundamental reconfiguration of the European political information space. Evidence for this transformation is particularly visible in the rise of Eurosceptic digital networks preceding the 2016 Brexit campaign, where social media-based “Vote Leave” messaging reached millions outside traditional media gatekeeping.⁵⁰ Developments such as these represent not merely a technological change but a structural transformation in how European integration is communicated, contested, and ultimately constructed in public consciousness.

Postfunctionalism and Post-Truth Media

While media environments have transformed dramatically, integration theory has also evolved to account for changing political realities. And for there to be development in our understanding of European Integration as a set of theories describing the motivations and interests of actors involved in the European Union through the lens of the media, we must first deeply understand the political environment across Europe. As remarked by the leading scholars in postfunctionalist theory themselves, theories of European Integration require an understanding of how “identity” is mobilized in the current political climates of greater European politics. The current postfunctional reasoning follows a general structure: preferences over the jurisdictional architecture (the core mechanism targeted by both of the aforementioned leading theories of Neofunctionalism and Liberal Intergovernmentalism) of the European Union are the product of three separate and distinct logics – efficiency, distribution, and identity.⁵¹ Starting with the assumption that European Integration has become “politicized” in elections or referendums, based on the observation of the preferences of the general public and of national political parties

⁵⁰ Chadwick, A. and Vaccari, C.,. News sharing on UK social media: misinformation, disinformation, and correction. Loughborough: Online Civic Culture Centre, Loughborough University. 2019

⁵¹ Hooghe, Liesbet, and Gary Marks. "A Postfunctionalist Theory of European Integration". 2009.

having become decisive for jurisdictional outcomes. Thus, postfunctionalism rationalizes that identity is critical in shaping contestation in Europe, and as a result, is critically important to understand how identity is currently conceived and communicated.

A particular theory that can prove useful to understanding identity formation and communication in the current European and global environment is the “post-truth” of right-wing populism. As liberalism has entered into the middle and later stages of its existence in the status quo, it is only natural that a particular challenge is brought up against its central moral structure – that challenge takes the form of a perceptible distaste for the singular social conception of truth that liberalism seems to subliminally suggest. Across the globe, this perception is derived from a growing sense of media mistrust and a feeling that there is a growing obfuscation of fact, abandonment of evidential standards in reasoning, and outright lying taking place.

In terms of European Integration itself, postfunctionalist thinking visualizes the long run social trends of the Union as having moved from the "permissive consensus" of the pre-Maastricht period to the "constraining dissensus" of the 21st Century. Leading postfunctionalist thinkers Hooghe and Marks describe this shift to “constraining dissensus” as the public salience of the European Union rose through the supranational sphere’s entrance into "the world of party competition, elections and referendums".⁵² Boomgaarden et al. support such a perspective through their longitudinal study of EU news coverage, which revealed a significant intensification of visibility and politicization of EU affairs after key constitutional moments, which can be understood as supporting the theoretical timeline of when European Integration was an elite concern only.⁵³ This shift in consensus sentiment can provide a compelling

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Boomgaarden, H.G., De Vreese, C.H., Schuck, A.R.T., Azrout, R., Elenbaas, M., Van Spanje, J.H.P. and Vliegthart, R., Across time and space. *Eur J Polit Res*, 52: 2013, 608-629.

framework for understanding the rise of post-truth media alongside right-wing populism by explaining the process of “politicization” as the movement of these processes into the sphere of mass salience.

If media mistrust is the resulting heat, then the inciting flame is surely representative of the rise of populist attitudes across Europe in recent decades, irrespective of position across a right/left political axis. In Western Europe, the difference in levels of trust of legacy media between those with self-reported populist views and non-populist views is staggering, with Spain, Sweden and France all having over 20 point differentials between populist and non-populist trust in news media⁵⁴ with Germany having a differential of 31 points. While not conclusive enough evidence to suggest a clear departure in trust in the media based off of political affiliation, these trends are suggestive of the idea that shifting political attitudes have some level of influence on the communication of European politics through the media sources and hints to a difference in interpretations based on self-ascribed identity.

Even so, the idea of truth itself being under attack, both as a philosophical and political entity, is decidedly a politicized idea in its own right, if the concept of “post-truth” is to be assessed by its most broad observation. Indeed, “post-truth” politics has been argued to be a reactive label of neoliberal intellectual thought against the democratizing forces that challenge their assumptions of power.⁵⁵ Yet a more useful and actionable understanding of “post-truth” sees its proponents not as campaigners of the claim that facts don’t matter, but instead as holders of the conviction that facts can always be shaded, selected and presented within a political context that favors one

⁵⁴ Eddy, K., and Fletcher, R. “Perceptions of Media Coverage of the War in Ukraine.” Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, June 15, 2022.

⁵⁵ S. Fuller, *Post-Truth: Knowledge as Power Game*, London-New York, *Anthem*, 2018 [Pietro Daniel Omodeo]; M. Lambek, V. Das, W. Keane, D. Fassin, *Four Lectures on Ethics: Anthropological Perspectives*, London, Hau Books, 2015 [Lorenzo Urbano];, on "Studi culturali, Rivista quadrimestrale" 3/2018, pp. 467-470, doi: 10.1405/92835

interpretation of truth to another. As Lee McIntyre describes in his book *Post-Truth*, the concept most critically involves the “intrinsic linking of politics and personal interpretations, the obfuscation and disregarding and endless questioning of need for objective fact, not just their state of existence”.⁵⁶ We can utilize this understanding of post-truth in the constructivist sense, that its most threatening weapon to the supposed “truth” of the status quo is its epistemological necessity for a particular fact, thus creating the idea that some facts matter more than others.

Postfunctionalist theory helps us to understand why these narratives of truth have been so effective. Identity concerns, which are particularly salient in mass politics and less so in elite politics, are especially susceptible to "priming", or the process of making considerations salient, "framing", or the process of connecting considerations to political objects, and "cueing", which denotes the instilling of bias.⁵⁷ Post-truth communication excels at this process of framing because of its deliberate attention to emotional resonance over factual accuracy. For those who already have longer running socialization of an “exclusive national identity”, such as the one primarily found in German nation-building processes⁵⁸, these identities can be "cued to believe that love of their country and institutions is incompatible with European integration”.⁵⁹ Right wing populist parties provide evidence of this process as they aim to convert national identity into Eurosceptic attitudes, which we can understand as “disintegrational”. Hameleers and de Vreese detail this pattern through their multidimensional measurement of populist attitudes, concluding that media messaging most effectively activates populist sentiments when it

⁵⁶ McIntyre, Lee C. *Post-Truth*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018.;

⁵⁷ Hooghe, Liesbet, and Gary Marks. "A Postfunctionalist Theory of European Integration". 2009.; Green-Pedersen, C., A Giant Fast Asleep? Party Incentives and the Politicisation of European Integration, *Political Studies*, 60: 2012, 115-130.

⁵⁸ Brubaker, R. *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992, Introduction.

⁵⁹ Hooghe, Liesbet, and Gary Marks. "A Postfunctionalist Theory of European Integration". 2009.

specifically targets perceived outgroups and creates clear boundaries between "the people" and "the others".⁶⁰ Therefore, the postfunctionalist account of politicization can prove extremely useful as a methodological tool to measure precisely how media framing interacts with identity-based predispositions.

Politicization of the European Union as an institution of public importance thus created space for post-truth media to flourish alongside the right-wing populist movements that effectively mobilize this new development. Postfunctionalist theory extends this understanding by claiming that political entrepreneurs have strategically mobilized tensions between rapid jurisdictional change and relatively stable national identities. These "entrepreneurs" are often roles occupied by right-wing populist party leaders, such as Orban and Le Pen, who have excelled at "politically constructing" links between exclusive national identities, cultural and economic insecurities, and European integration as an independent mechanism.⁶¹

The relationship between the media and identity formation, as conducted through post-truth communication methods, is fundamentally reciprocal rather than unidirectional. While post-truth political communication is decidedly a constructor and shaper of exclusive national identities, these identities are developed as responses to pre-existing identity concerns among its audience. We can understand this as a sort of reciprocal dynamic in which a feedback loop is established, where identity-based anxieties are both reflected and amplified through media coverage, especially given modern media focus on an intense volume of reporting, gradually pushing both the media ecosystem and public discourse toward more polarized and politicized

⁶⁰ Hameleers, M., Schmuck, D., Bos, L., & Eeklebe, S. (2020). Interacting with the ordinary people: How populist messages and styles communicated by politicians trigger users' behaviour on social media in a comparative context. *European Journal of Communication*, 36(3), 238-253. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323120978723> (Original work published 2021)

⁶¹ Hooghe, Liesbet, and Gary Marks. "A Postfunctionalist Theory of European Integration". 2009.

positions. Crucially, Hooghe and Marks observe that identity "does not speak for itself in relation to most political objects, but must be politically constructed".⁶² Post-Truth's inherent danger, therefore, is its ability to excel at this process of transforming latent or ambiguous identity concerns into explicit political positions. We can observe this process as post-truth patterns of communication frequently connect abstract European integration processes to concrete threats to national sovereignty, cultural homogeneity, or economic security as a means of creating one particular set of "truths" in furtherance of a particular agenda.

Case Studies

The Eurozone Crisis (2009-2015) as Communication Phenomenon

The Eurozone crisis, which began in the years following the Great Recession of 2008 and lasted until the mid 2010s, represents a critical case for examining how communication shapes political realities. What began as a fiscal crisis in Greece evolved into an existential threat to the European monetary union, exposing fundamental tensions between national sovereignty and European integration. While economists often analyze this crisis through financial mechanisms, a communication-focused approach reveals how the crisis was discursively constructed, framed, and managed through competing narratives. The case of the Eurozone Crisis, as it was established and discussed within the media itself, brings about three key communication dimensions: the framing contest between competing crisis narratives, the relationship between media coverage and elite crisis management, and the first emergence of counter-narratives in digital media environments.

The first dominant frame propagated by European mass media was one that portrayed southern European countries, particularly Greece, as "fiscal sinners" who had violated Eurozone

⁶² Ibid.

rules through profligate spending, corruption and mismanagement. As can be inferred by the nature of the messaging itself, this inherently provocative frame was particularly evident in northern European media and political discourse. As Mylonas (2012) documents, German publications like Der Spiegel and Bild framed the crisis through moralistic language that personified Greece as an undisciplined, lazy debtor who had deceived responsible northern neighbors.⁶³ Headlines like "Sell your islands, you bankrupt Greeks!" and visual representations of Greeks as parasites exemplified this frame, with similar patterns appearing in Finnish, Dutch, and Austrian media.⁶⁴ Framing southern European countries as "Fiscal sinners" was not merely descriptive but actively constitutive of policy responses. As Entman's (1993) theory would predict, by defining the problem as one of economic irresponsibility, this frame naturally suggested austerity as the appropriate treatment recommendation.⁶⁵ It also assigned clear blame to the Greek government and citizens while absolving northern European banks and the Eurozone's structural design from criticism within the media, a form of protection for the interests of the economically and politically elite of the Union. In a sense, the "fiscal sinners" frame was the first integrational panic amongst the newer forces of post-truth and longer trends of burgeoning populist rhetoric deriving from an intense rise to prominence through media overexposure.

A competing frame of "a systemic design flaw" emerged in response, particularly from academics, economists, left-leaning publications and some southern European media outlets. In contrast to the "fiscal sinners" perspective, this frame defined the problem as a structural design flaw in the Eurozone itself, arguing the idea of the Eurozone as a purely monetary framework

⁶³ Mylonas, Y.. Media and the economic crisis of the EU: The 'culturalization' of a systemic crisis and Bild-Zeitung's framing of Greece. *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique*, 10(2), 2012, 646-671.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Entman, R. M., *Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm*, 1993.

without fiscal union, transfer mechanisms, or adequate banking regulation. However, despite extensive support and coverage in the longer context of the crisis, this frame struggled to gain adequate support to uproot the initial framing. Schmidt argues this was due to the relative weakness of intellectualized communicative discourse that could effectively translate technical economic arguments into compelling public narratives.⁶⁶ Even further, the roots of “post-truth” and the effectiveness of appeals to emotion or ideology are central to understanding the failure of the explanation of systemic failures of the system, particularly relevant to the Eurozone as it is chronologically at the beginning of the current curve of right-wing populist sentiment sweeping over Europe. As it was seen by the public, a structurally-critical frame lacked the moral clarity and emotional resonance of the "fiscal sinners" narrative, a trend that would continue for the rational defenses of the Immigration Crisis and beyond.

The dominance of the "fiscal sinners" frame had profound implications for crisis management. As predicted by Strömbäck and Esser's (2014) mediatization theory, political actors adapted their crisis response to align with the dominant media frame, implementing harsh austerity measures and loan conditions that satisfied the moral logic of the dominant narrative even when many economists questioned their effectiveness.⁶⁷ The German government, led by Angela Merkel, was particularly responsive to domestic media framing. As Picard (2015) documents, German media coverage consistently framed assistance to Greece as a moral hazard

⁶⁶ Schmidt, V. A., Speaking to the markets or to the people? A discursive institutionalist analysis of the EU's sovereign debt crisis. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 16(1), 2014, 188-209.

⁶⁷ Strömbäck, J., & Esser, F. (2014). Mediatization of politics: Towards a theoretical framework. In F. Esser & J. Strömbäck (Eds.), *Mediatization of politics: Understanding the transformation of Western democracies* (pp. 3-28). *Palgrave Macmillan*.

that would reward irresponsibility, creating powerful constraints on Merkel's ability to pursue alternative policies despite her apparent recognition of systemic factors.⁶⁸

Bennett's (1990) indexing theory helps explain how media coverage of the Eurozone crisis largely reflected elite disagreements while marginalizing more radical alternatives.⁶⁹ As Picard (2015) demonstrates, European newspaper coverage overwhelmingly sourced government officials, EU institutions, and financial actors while giving minimal voice to civil society groups, labor unions, or affected citizens.⁷⁰ This pattern created what a propaganda-based model of mediatized political communication would predict: the narrowing of debate to options that seemed to refuse a rocking of the financial and political elite boat. Media coverage extensively debated the size, timing, and conditions of bailout packages while giving minimal attention to more fundamental alternatives like debt jubilees, Eurozone exit, or comprehensive monetary reform. Kaiser and Kleinen-von Königslöw (2017) provide empirical evidence for this indexing effect in their content analysis of European newspaper coverage. They found that 76% of sources quoted in Eurozone crisis stories were either government officials or financial experts, while only 8% represented civil society organizations and 3% were ordinary citizens affected by austerity measures.⁷¹

Cross-national examination of media systems shows a divergent level of coverage. Examples of countries with stronger public service broadcasting traditions and less commercialized media systems, such as Germany, provided more substantive coverage of

⁶⁸ Picard, R. G. (Ed.). *The euro crisis in the media: Journalistic coverage of economic crisis and European institutions*. I.B. Tauris. 2015.

⁶⁹ Bennett, W. L., Toward a theory of press-state relations in the United States. 1990 *Journal of Communication* 40(2) 1990.

⁷⁰ Picard, R. G. (Ed.), *The euro crisis in the media: Journalistic coverage of economic crisis and European institutions*. 1990

⁷¹ Kaiser, J., & Kleinen-von Königslöw, K., The framing of the Euro crisis in German and Spanish online news media between 2010 and 2014: Does a common European public discourse emerge? *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 55(4), 2017, 798-814.

complex economic issues, while more commercialized systems (like those in the UK) focused more on dramatic conflict narratives and personalization. In this way, national differences reinforced divergent public understandings of the crisis: German citizens primarily understood it as a fiscal discipline issue requiring punitive responses, while Greek citizens increasingly viewed it as an external imposition threatening their democratic sovereignty.⁷² Furthermore, social media platforms enabled the circulation of counter-narratives that challenged dominant framings. During the height of the Greek crisis in 2015, Twitter hashtags like #ThisIsACoup gained international traction, providing alternative interpretations of the crisis that framed it as an undemocratic imposition of austerity rather than a necessary fiscal correction. Emerging digital media systems also enabled the formation of transnational solidarity networks that traditional national media largely ignored throughout the long-term coverage of the Eurozone crisis. Furthermore, Spanish Indignados, Greek anti-austerity protesters, and Occupy activists utilized digital networks that shared alternative economic analyses and protest strategies,⁷³ creating what Fraser (1990) would call "subaltern counterpublics" outside mainstream discourse.⁷⁴

What resulted from these counter-narratives was the furthering of populist movements to bypass traditional media gatekeepers.⁷⁵ In Greece, SYRIZA effectively used social media to promote an anti-austerity narrative that framed the crisis as a class conflict between ordinary Greeks and a corrupt alliance of domestic and European elites. The group's messaging eventually proved electorally successful despite limited mainstream media support. Similarly,

⁷² Picard, R. G., *The euro crisis in the media: Journalistic coverage of economic crisis and European institutions*. 2015

⁷³ Zajc, M., Social media, presumption, and dispositives: New mechanisms of the construction of subjectivity. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 15(1), 2015, 28-47.

⁷⁴ Fraser, N., Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. *Social Text*, (25/26), 1990, 56-80.

⁷⁵ Aslanidis, Paris, and Nikos Marantzidis. "The Impact of the Greek Indignados on Greek Politics." *Southeastern Europe* 40, no. 2 (2016): 125-157.

right-wing populist parties across northern Europe used digital platforms to promote nationalist interpretations of the crisis.⁷⁶ The maturation of post-truth to a fully fledged modern issue exists within these perspectives, which largely blamed EU institutions for the perceived transferring of hard-earned taxpayer money to undeserving foreigners.⁷⁷ While these competing populist narratives shared an anti-elite frame, their existence as fundamentally divergent ideological perspectives identifies populism's communicative logic of antagonistic political identities.⁷⁸

The “Migration Crisis” (2013-2016)

The European Migration Crisis refers to the period of roughly the years 2013 to 2016, yet still represents one of the most significant “crises of the European Union” and European identity since its formation. Throughout the Migration Crisis, legacy media outlets have acted with three separate but distinct patterns: a focus “crisis framing”, a focus on social actor representation, and utilization of content vs. actor approaches. “Crisis framing” involves the tendency to present immigration as an acute emergency requiring immediate action, even when flows may not warrant such action.⁷⁹ “Social actor representation” refers to the portrayal of migrants themselves through the categories of im/personalization, individualization/collectivization, and categorization/nomination/functionalization.⁸⁰ “Content vs. Actor related approaches” refers to whether coverage focuses on issues of immigration at wider scales or at the individual level.

⁷⁶ Aalberg, Toril, Frank Esser, Carsten Reinemann, Jesper Strömbäck, and Claes H. de Vreese, eds. *Populist Political Communication in Europe*. New York: Routledge, 2017

⁷⁷ Caiani, Manuela, and Paolo Graziano. "Understanding Varieties of Populism in Times of Crises." *West European Politics* 42, no. 6 (2019): 1141-1158.

⁷⁸ Waisbord, S., Why populism is troubling for democratic communication. *Communication Culture & Critique*, 11(1), 2018, 21-34.

⁷⁹ Simon, Julia. 2022. “The Crisis Discourse’s Blind Spot: EU-Level Politicization and the Endogenization of the Migration Crisis.” *Journal of European Integration* 45 (5): 711–27.

⁸⁰ Van Leeuwen, T., The representation of social actors. In C. Caldas-Coulthard & M. Coulthard (Eds.), *Texts and Practices: Readings in Critical Discourse Analysis*, 1996. 32–70

Starting with “crisis framing”, media across Europe has been especially susceptible to label the flows of migration into Europe as existential threat to the Union’s security and long-term future, utilizing sensationalized imagery and a high volume of reporting, in order to increase the salience of the particular issue. Such an effect has been elucidated by researchers such as Reddy and Thiolet in their analysis of French press coverage from 2008 to 2020 on the media-based construction of a crisis.⁸¹ Utilizing textual analysis and quantitative analysis, the researchers found that conservative newspapers overwhelmingly frame issues as a “migration or migrant” crisis rather than one of asylum or refugees, despite the humanitarian nature of many population movements. These conservative outlets utilized intense frequency and persistent coverage of the issue in order to create a “sense of slow-burning or creeping migration crisis”⁸² that picked at emotional appeals to European identity. This pattern is supported by Greussing and Boomgaarden, who found that “despite the dynamic development of events, media coverage remained largely static and dominated by standardized narratives”, indicating that the initial humanitarian framing gradually gave way to securitization and economization frames as the crisis progressed.⁸³ In total, this tendency fits squarely within “crisis discourse”, where states are centered quite strongly. Furthermore, this tendency can lead to blind spots in understanding migration issues by assuming nation-states as the primary actors and reference points, rather than considering European-level dynamics or migrants' perspectives.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Reddy, M., & Thiolet, H., The Making of a Crisis: Migration and Polarization in the French Press. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 2023.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Greussing, Esther, and Hajo G. Boomgaarden.. “Shifting the Refugee Narrative? An Automated Frame Analysis of Europe’s 2015 Refugee Crisis.” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 43 (11): 2017, 1749–74.

⁸⁴ Simon, Julia. “The Crisis Discourse’s Blind Spot: EU-Level Politicization and the Endogenization of the Migration Crisis. 2022.

Representation of migrants in European media during the crisis also had several consistent patterns. The first pattern is the criminal portrayal of migrants themselves, next to their underrepresentation in the wider discussion in favor of other institutional or state-centric considerations. Even amongst the neutral and humanitarian representation that migrants did receive from media outlets, the media framing was largely dependent on specific groups with some groups receiving more favorable coverage than others. On a broader scale, the coverage of the Migration Crisis was often negative and conflict-centered, and frequent exposure to such messaging was correlated with negative attitudes towards immigration overall⁸⁵. While these conclusions seem to provide very supportive evidence of the establishment of a particular viewpoint via news media coverage, “significant differences exist between countries in terms of the sources used, language employed, solutions proposed, and the political leanings of individual newspapers”.⁸⁶ A UNHCR-commissioned report would later verify this stipulation, finding that the German press were the most positive toward refugees, while coverage in the UK was the most negative.

Overall, the Migration Crisis itself has contributed significantly to the rise of right wing populist attitudes and communication across the European Union. In studying how national identities helped to shape political responses to the refugee crisis, researchers Bachleitner and Betts identified a “normative dissensus” among EU member states regarding policies aimed at repairing the constructed crisis.⁸⁷ This dissensus has meant a heterogenization of approaches to

⁸⁵ Eberl, J.-M., Meltzer, C. E., Heidenreich, T., Herrero, B., Theorin, N., Lind, F., Berganza, R., Boomgaarden, H. G., Schemer, C., & Strömbäck, J., The European Media Discourse on Immigration and Its Effects: A Literature Review. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 42(3), 2018, 207–23

⁸⁶ Berry, M., Garcia-Blanco, I., Moore, K., Morani, M., Gross, B., Askanius, T., & Linné, T., Press Coverage of the Refugee and Migrant Crisis in the EU: A Content Analysis of Five European Countries. 2016.

⁸⁷ Bachleitner, Kathrin, and Alexander Betts, “The EU’s Normative Dissensus on Migration: How National Identities Shaped Responses to the European Refugee Crisis.” *Journal of European Integration* 47 (3): 2024, 469–84.

immigration policy, such as German Chancellor Merkel's welcoming stance in 2015 in comparison to Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán's restrictive policies. As argued by researchers Krzyżanowski, Triandafyllidou, and Wodak, "unprecedented mediatization and politicization of the 'refugee crisis'" created these conditions, in which "political discourses not only drew on pre-existing xenophobic and racist imagery but also legitimized such views by placing them at the center of immigration policy"⁸⁸ Even though much of the more direct rhetoric in this fashion was propagated by those on the right, the widespread and overzealous coverage of the issue in media overall contributed to an environment where, for the first time, European political elites and their remaining permissive consensus had to contend with the politicized, post-truth populism of the growing right wing. Therefore, the portrayal of the Migration Crisis across Europe can be described as having both undertones of European interdependence and while having overtones of anti-immigrant sentiment, as the widespread portrayal of the issue in the media ultimately lead to its legitimization as a crisis, despite it not necessarily having warranted such a title.

The Russian Invasion of Ukraine

While the Ukraine case is not the most traditionally rigid example of a "crisis of the European Union", based on these frames in their intensity and their direction, the result was something close enough to previous integrational panics for it to be analyzed in parallel with the rest. When viewed as an integrational panic, the case study of the Russian invasion of Ukraine provides ample opportunity to explore the impact of political communication, expressed through avenues such as legacy media outlets or otherwise, in the development of European integrative forces. In the months following Putin's announcement of the "denazification" of Ukraine and the full scale assault on the independent state by the Russian army, the media response in both

⁸⁸ Krzyżanowski, Michał, Anna Triandafyllidou, and Ruth Wodak, "The Mediatization and the Politicization of the 'Refugee Crisis' in Europe." *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 16 (1-2): 2018, 1-14.

Western and Eastern Europe was, as expected, immense in its size and breadth of coverage. According to Eurobarometer surveys conducted by the European Parliament from March of 2022, the impact of both the act itself and its framing in the media coverage across the Union created unprecedented shifts in public opinion.⁸⁹ Extremely negative opinions of Putin, and by extension the entire nation of Russia, skyrocketed in both Western and Eastern countries, including a more than doubled figure in a month's span in the post-Soviet state of Bulgaria.⁹⁰ Russia's military actions were intensely framed as justified and necessary based on multiple dimensions. These frames included primarily a defense against "Nazism", "Genocide [of the Slavic peoples]", "West as an Enemy", "Slavic Unity", "Liberation of Ukrainian Lands", and "Russia as a Victim of Western Sanctions and Russophobia".⁹¹ In the post-truth sense, where public emotions are the most important reasoning behind the communication and establishment of "truth", these attempts at framing are clearly targeted less at policy and more at the emotional impact of the framing itself, instilling a rhetoric that prefers one set of "truths" to another, despite the validity of all of these claims being dubious at best.

To fully understand the impact of media political communication and Russian post-truth methods on European integrative processes, we must first understand the framings employed by various outlets at certain points in the war. Across European media, we can see a focus on three separate frames – a security and defense frame, a resources frame, and a policy and external regulations frames – through utilizing topic modeling analysis from both western outlets (Euronews) and eastern outlets (Kyiv Post).⁹² The first frame, the security and defense frame,

⁸⁹ European Commission. Flash Eurobarometer 506: EU's Response to the War in Ukraine. Brussels: European Union, May 2022. <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/506>.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Verbytska, A., Topic modelling as a method for framing analysis of news coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022–2023. *Language & Communication*, 99, 2024, 174–193

⁹² Ibid.

was dominant in both media ecosystems, presenting as 26% of Euronews coverage and 31% of Kyiv Post coverage, yet differed in emphasis. Western media tended to focus more on broader geopolitical implications, where Eastern media had a closer, more localized focus on what conflicts were happening where. The second frame, the resource frame, received significantly more attention in Western media than Eastern media, with Euronews utilizing this frame for about 25% of the coverage while Kyiv Post was only at 13%. Furthermore, Western media was particularly focused on energy security and the financial implications of the conflict, mostly arguing for EU-wide sanctions. The last frame, the policy and external regulations frames, were extensively used at 37% of Western coverage and 40% of Eastern coverage, with Western focuses being more regional and Eastern focuses being on international aid and in particular weapons delivery. These frames all contribute, to some degree, to the media's counter-propaganda/counter-post-truth narrative, and they all serve to instill political messaging that can be understood as integrational pressure.

As a post-truth “alternate media” source, Russian state media such as RT established itself in European digital environments by strategically attaching to divisive domestic issues.⁹³ This RT coverage was intentionally “post-truth”, in that it aligned particular strings of emotionally charged facts in order to push frames desired by the Russian government. As Henriksen et al. discovered, these strings of supposed fact were different based on the public that was being focused upon – in German-speaking regions, RT content primarily addressed issues like COVID-19 policies, while in Nordic countries, foreign policy matters including the Russia-Ukraine war received more emphasis. On March 1, 2022, the Council of the European Union

⁹³ Henriksen, F. M., Kristensen, J. B., & Mayerhöffer, E., Dissemination of RT and Sputnik Content in European Digital Alternative News Environments: Mapping the Influence of Russian State-Backed Media Across Platforms, Topics, and Ideology. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 29(3), 2024 795-818.

adopted Regulation 2022/350, restricting operations and broadcasting of Russian media, primarily RT and Sputnik.⁹⁴ This message was echoed by political leaders in the European Commission, such as Ursula von der Leyen who stated “We will not let Kremlin apologists pour their toxic lies justifying Putin's war or sow the seeds of division in our Union”.⁹⁵ In this line of logic, the actions by political elites were clearly backed up by the language of the Western and Eastern media, as they all hinted towards a greater need for integration and intergovernmental strength.

Discussion and Analysis: Towards a “Dual Functionalist” Framework

Limits of Single-Theory Approaches

When examining the crises of the European Union, whether financial, migratory, or constitutional, we must fully understand the implications of a "politicized" European project in order to make sound judgments on the development of integration theories. Conventional theories on European integration have tended to assume state-centric orientations of EU crisis discourse in order to project conclusions and diagnoses, which appears to be inherently limited in explanatory power given the context of the dramatic shifts in mediatized political communication. Given that the theory has been developed consciously within the constraints of the 21st century media environment, Postfunctionalism appears most equipped to address politicized communication of European integration, as it relates the construction of identities to the politicization of issues.⁹⁶ As the leading postfunctionalist theorists Hooghe and Marks argue,

⁹⁴ Council of the European Union. Council Regulation (EU) 2022/350 of 1 March 2022 Amending Regulation (EU) No 833/2014 Concerning Restrictive Measures in View of Russia's Actions Destabilising the Situation in Ukraine. Official Journal of the European Union L 65, March 2, 2022: 1–3.

⁹⁵ European Commission. Ukraine: Sanctions on Kremlin-Backed Outlets Russia Today and Sputnik. Press release, March 1, 2022. Brussels.

⁹⁶ Simon, Julia, “The Crisis Discourse’s Blind Spot: EU-Level Politicization and the Endogenization of the Migration Crisis, 2022.

identity concerns have increasingly disrupted the permissive consensus that once enabled the elite-driven integration preferred by Neofunctionalists at the supranational level, with Liberal Intergovernmentalists preferring the national level.⁹⁷ However, this approach offers limited insight into how elites themselves navigate the tension between functional pressures and identity politics.

Where postfunctionalism appears insufficient is in its bottom-up, state-focused design that confines the study and agents of politicization to the separate political arenas of Member States, rather than providing a comprehensive multi-level analysis. On the regional level, where political and economic elites were once understood as the salient class but are now challenged by national interests, "the places to look for politicization of European issues are primarily intergovernmental interactions".⁹⁸ A complementary top-down analysis – one that sees Postfunctionalism as an inherently valuable yet explanatory limited structure – can provide the lack of perspective and detail that escapes the bottom-up system.

New Intergovernmentalism and Elite Adaptation

In considering a method by which a top-down complementary analysis could be implemented onto current understandings of postfunctionalism, "New Intergovernmentalism" offers a crucial complement by explaining how integration proceeds despite increasing identity-based constraints.⁹⁹ Critically, this approach argues that national governments have pursued deeper cooperation in the post-Maastricht era while simultaneously avoiding traditional supranational delegation. Instead, they have developed new governance methods that preserve their decision-making authority through deliberative intergovernmental coordination.

⁹⁷ Hooghe, Liesbet, and Gary Marks. "A Postfunctionalist Theory of European Integration", 2009, : 1–23.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 13.

⁹⁹ Bickerton, C. J., Hodson, D., & Puetter, U.,. The new intergovernmentalism: European integration in the post-Maastricht era. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 53(4), 2015, 703-722.

The aforementioned case studies provide reasonable empirical support for this dynamic to be seen in at least a limited capacity. During the Eurozone crisis, member states created new institutions like the European Stability Mechanism and enhanced fiscal coordination mechanisms without corresponding sovereignty transfers to the Commission. Similarly, the Migration Crisis led to deeper intergovernmental cooperation on border management while avoiding federalization of migration policy. Most dramatically, the Ukraine crisis catalyzed unprecedented defense cooperation through intergovernmental channels whilst efforts were made individually by party leaders such as Olaf Scholz through multi-million dollar nationally-focused commitments in an attempt to preserve intergovernmental sovereignty.¹⁰⁰

What new intergovernmentalism captures that postfunctionalism misses is elite adaptation to the politicized environment. As Schmidt's (2014) discursive institutionalism demonstrates, political elites have developed sophisticated communication strategies that acknowledge identity concerns while preserving functional imperatives.¹⁰¹ The German government's framing of Eurozone bailout mechanisms as necessary safeguards rather than solidarity transfers is one of the most applicable examples of this adaptive approach. Importantly, new intergovernmentalism recognizes that deeper integration does not necessarily require sovereignty transfers. Instead, the post-Maastricht EU has increasingly relied on what Bickerton et al. call "deliberative intergovernmentalism"¹⁰² – consensus-oriented decision-making between national representatives in forums like the European Council. This approach

¹⁰⁰ Olaf, Scholz. "Policy Statement by Olaf Scholz, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany and Member of the German Bundestag, 27 February 2022 in Berlin." Bundesregierung, February 8, 2022.

¹⁰¹ Schmidt, V. A., *Speaking to the markets or to the people? A discursive institutionalist analysis of the EU's sovereign debt crisis*. 2014

¹⁰² Bickerton, C. J., Hodson, D., & Puetter, U., *The new intergovernmentalism: European integration in the post-Maastricht era*. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 53(4), 2015, 705.

allows for deeper functional integration while minimizing visible challenges to national sovereignty that might activate identity-based opposition.

Media Systems and the Construction of European Crises

The analysis of media framing across the aforementioned three major crises reveals how communication shapes both elite discourse and public understanding of European integration. Cross and Ma's (2015) concept of "integrational panic"¹⁰³ helps explain how media coverage transforms policy disagreements into existential threats through three mechanisms: rapid volume increases after crisis triggers, consistently negative tone, and emphasis on societal tensions.

This framing process is not uniform, however. As the case studies demonstrate, media coverage varies significantly across national contexts and ideological positions. In the Eurozone crisis, northern European media emphasized fiscal discipline and moral hazard, while southern European outlets more frequently highlighted systemic design flaws. During the Migration Crisis, right-leaning publications framed migrants as security threats, while left-leaning outlets emphasized humanitarian concerns. In light of these examples, the perceptible variations reflect not just differences in journalistic traditions but also how elite versus populist narratives gain traction in different media environments.

These developments and more help explain why postfunctionalism accurately captures public opinion dynamics while missing elite adaptation strategies, and why traditional intergovernmentalist approaches fail to account for the increasing constraints that digitally amplified identity politics place on elite action.

Toward a "Dual-Functionalist" Framework

¹⁰³ Cross, Mai'a K. Davis, and Xinru Ma, "EU Crises and Integrational Panic: The Role of the Media.", 2015.

The limits of existing theoretical approaches, as traced throughout the case studies in the elite preferences for intergovernmental integrative pressures, suggests a need for a more nuanced theoretical framework. Used to complement postfunctionalist understandings, New Intergovernmentalism can account for the apparent paradox where integration continues despite increasing identity-based opposition by showing how elites have developed new governance methods that preserve their decision-making authority.

What emerges from this analysis is a constructivist perspective I will term "Dual Functionalism". The term relies on a framework based in the general understanding of the implied functional benefit of "ultrasocial" structures,¹⁰⁴ despite differences in incentives, in order to suggest an alignment problem between elite actors and the general public. This dual framework comprises:

1. "New Intergovernmentalist" dynamics that more accurately explain elite interests and actions, where:
 - a. National Government representatives and the European Council form an elite that sustains itself through intergovernmental power structures
 - b. Integration deepens through coordination rather than delegation
 - c. Communication strategies emphasize practical benefits while minimizing sovereignty concerns
2. "Postfunctionalist" dynamics that better capture the general public's concerns and constraints, where:

¹⁰⁴ Cross, Mai'a K. Davis. *International Cooperation Against All Odds: The Ultrasocial World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023.

While the arguments presented within this paper are not exactly in line with the cited work in complete theoretical suggestion, the work incites a new particular need for looking past the dynamics of power and self-interested states, to which I present a similarly oriented outlook. This paper also does not disregard or disavow such dynamics, but attempts to move past them into a constructivist outlook for a comprehensive framework that understands European Integration within the greater historical flows of change and stasis.

- a. Identity activation increasingly constrains certain types of integration
- b. Media framing plays a crucial role in mobilizing identity concerns
- c. Digital disruption creates parallel information ecosystems that challenge elite narratives

Actionalizing this framework can help to explain seemingly contradictory observations taken from situations of European crisis. Looking retroactively, this “dual functionalism” has reasonable explanatory power in the Eurozone crisis, as it produced deeper fiscal integration despite public resistance; the Migration Crisis, which led to enhanced border cooperation despite divergent national approaches; and the Ukraine crisis, which catalyzed unprecedented defense integration despite traditional sovereignty concerns. These apparent and natural contradictions might be confusing in traditional European Integrative theories, but can be understood by Dual Functionalism’s critical recognition that elite and public processes follow different but interrelated logics.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Dual Functionalism offers several advantages over existing theoretical approaches. First, it acknowledges that communication is not merely epiphenomenal but constitutive of European integration processes. Media framing, elite discourse, and digital communication don't just reflect integration dynamics. Instead, they actively shape them by constructing how different constituencies understand the European project. Second, this framework explains why integration can simultaneously deepen in some domains while fragmenting in others. When elite coordination can occur through intergovernmental channels that minimize sovereignty concerns, integration can proceed despite public resistance. Conversely, when integration requires visible sovereignty transfers that activate identity concerns, postfunctionalist constraints become more

powerful. Third, Dual Functionalism helps explain the persistent democratic deficit within European governance. The gap between elite intergovernmentalism and public identity politics creates a structural disconnect between how integration decisions are made and how they are understood by citizens. This disconnect cannot be resolved through institutional tinkering alone – it requires addressing the increasingly instrumental communication processes that construct divergent understandings of integration.

For practitioners, this framework suggests that successful European integration requires attention to both tracks. Elite coordination must acknowledge identity concerns rather than dismissing them as irrational, while public communication must make intergovernmental processes more transparent and accessible. The key challenge is not choosing between deepening integration and respecting national identities, but finding communication strategies that can bridge the growing gap between elite and public understandings of what European integration means and why it matters.

Conclusion

The examination of media framing and political responses to European crises, from the Eurozone emergency to the migration challenge to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, reveals a persistent pattern that cannot be adequately explained by traditional integration theories alone. While postfunctionalism correctly identifies the growing constraints imposed by identity politics, it fails to account for how integration has deepened in certain domains, even as it faces resistance in others. Similarly, intergovernmentalist approaches capture elite coordination dynamics but underestimate how identity-based public opposition shapes the available policy space. The "Dual Functionalist" framework proposed here reconciles these apparent contradictions by recognizing that European integration now proceeds along two distinct but interconnected tracks.

The elite track, characterized by new intergovernmentalist coordination, enables deeper integration through means that minimize visible sovereignty transfers, while the public track, shaped by postfunctionalist identity politics, constrains and enables integration that explicitly challenges national autonomy. The communication processes that connect these tracks, whether through traditional media framing, political discourse, or digital post-truth counter-narratives, do not merely describe European realities but actively construct them. This dual dynamic helps explain the paradoxical nature of recent European developments: deeper fiscal coordination despite sovereign debt anxieties, enhanced border management despite migration controversies, and unprecedented defense integration despite traditional security sovereignty concerns. In each case, the framing of these issues through media and political communication proved decisive in determining which policies could advance and which would face insurmountable resistance.

Looking forward, the European Union faces significant challenges in addressing the growing gap between elite and public understandings of integration. The democratic deficit that has long characterized EU governance can no longer be addressed through institutional reforms alone, as it increasingly stems from fundamentally different constructions of what European integration means and how it relates to national identities. For EU leaders, the challenge will be developing communication strategies that can bridge these divides. The first step in such a process involves acknowledging identity concerns without abandoning functional imperatives, and making intergovernmental processes more transparent and accessible to citizens who increasingly consume information through fragmented media environments.

The success of future European integration will depend not on choosing between deepening cooperation and respecting national identities, but on finding ways to make these goals mutually reinforcing through more effective communication. In a post-truth era where

emotional and identity-based appeals often outweigh technical arguments, EU institutions must develop more sophisticated approaches to explaining the tangible benefits of integration while addressing the legitimate concerns that fuel populist narratives. Only by attending to both tracks of the dual functionalist framework can European leaders navigate the complex media landscape that increasingly determines the boundaries of possible integration.