

# The Eurosceptic Europeanization of Public Spheres: Print and Social Media Reactions to the 2014 European Parliament Elections

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## Abstract

The present study tests the theoretical claim that Eurosceptics contribute to the Europeanization of national public spheres. Although advocating a renationalization of European politics, Eurosceptic parties can engender public media debates of transnational or European relevance. Through a comparative research design of two national cases (Sweden and Denmark), we examine the public discourse on the day following the 2014 European Parliament elections across three media: print, Twitter, and Facebook.

Separating the discussions of Eurosceptic issues and actors from other topics of the election coverage, we find that the discourses about Euroscepticism exhibit a higher degree of Europeanization in four of the six media analyzed. Moreover, while we detect significant differences in valence between the Swedish and Danish press when reporting about the Eurosceptics, such national variation is much less pronounced on the social networking sites. The findings suggest, firstly, that Eurosceptics' contestation of the EU may have the unintended effect of giving national media debates a stronger European dimension. Secondly, the study warrants moderate optimism for the Europeanization potential of social media vis-à-vis traditional media structures: print media was more Europeanized in scope, whereas social media publics were more aligned in their sentiment towards Euroscepticism.

**Keywords:** Euroscepticism, Political Communication, Facebook, Twitter, Sweden, Denmark

## Introduction

The 2014 European Parliament (EP) elections marked an unprecedented rise in Euroscepticism: twenty-one national political parties from both the left and right gained mandates by taking up critical positions towards European integration (Treib, 2014, p. 1543). National media in several Member States construed the results as a transnational backlash to the EU, and citizens across Europe took to their social media accounts to join the post-election discussions online. The present study investigates journalists' and citizens'

immediate reactions to the 2014 EP election results, in order to test whether Eurosceptic parties are – rather paradoxically – contributing to the Europeanization of national public spheres.

Understanding *Europeanization* as a process whereby a feature of domestic politics takes on a European dimension, we are interested in uncovering whether media discourses about right-wing Eurosceptics are more Europeanized than public debates concerning other EU topics. We posit that right-wing Eurosceptic parties, through their controversial practices of EU contestation, garner media coverage that increases the saliency of European issues within national political debates. Our findings suggest that this phenomenon, which we refer to as the *Eurosceptic Europeanization of public spheres*, is indeed taking place across traditional and online political communication channels. Focusing on print and social media as public arenas for Eurosceptic Europeanization, we ask the research questions: To what extent were media reactions to right-wing Eurosceptics' success in the 2014 EP elections Europeanized? How was the success of the Eurosceptics portrayed across different national contexts and across different media?

Breaking new empirical ground in the Europeanization literature, we compare the degree of Europeanization across three media platforms – newspapers, Facebook, and Twitter – and two national contexts: Sweden and Denmark. Using data collected on the day following the EP elections, we determine the *scope* and *tone* of media reactions to the elections' results. Scope refers to the discursive context of the reaction, i.e. whether it referred to national politics, politics in other EU Member States, or EU politics at the supranational level. Tone, on the other hand, refers to the valence attached to the Eurosceptics' success: positive, negative, or neutral. By distinguishing the discursive reactions to Eurosceptics from other

aspects of the election, we are able to test the hypotheses that Eurosceptic actors and issues are a stronger catalyst for Europeanization than other aspects of European politics.

Our results for scope indicate that the immediate reactions to the EP elections were, by-and-large, interpreted through the lens of national politics. However, the discourses specifically about right-wing Eurosceptics tended to display a higher proportion of references to other Member States and European politics than the post-election discourse more broadly. While this tentatively confirms our Eurosceptic Europeanization hypothesis, the results of our tone category reveal significant variations in how the Eurosceptics were evaluated. Particularly in the case of print media, Swedish and Danish evaluations of the phenomenon differed, with the Swedish journalists tending to cast national and other Member State Eurosceptics in a more negative light than Danish reporters. We construe this result as an unfavorable condition for cross-border dialogue about Europe between the two countries' media. Interestingly, the discussions about Eurosceptics on social media, especially Twitter, exhibited far less national difference than in the press. This finding warrants moderate optimism for the potential of online environs as arenas for meaningful, cross-border communication about European politics.

## Theory

In this study we are interested in how, and to what extent, discourses about politics take on a European dimension within national public spheres. Public spheres are understood broadly as “open forums of communication” (Neidhardt, 1997, p. 4, cited in Risse, 2014, p. 6) that are accessible to all actors in a society. Due to the nationally-bound infrastructure of political systems, media systems, and culture (e.g., language), public spheres are predominantly restricted to a national scope. Scholars interested in the existence of a pan-European public sphere tend to agree that one is unlikely to emerge (de Wilde and Lord,

2016, p. 148); however, national public spheres can be Europeanized to varying degrees. The Europeanization of public spheres, according to Risse (2014, pp. 10-11), occurs when three factors are present: the salience of the EU or EU-related issues, the inclusion of (European) non-national actors, and the discussion of EU topics through similar frames that enable transnational discussion. Europeanization takes place, then, when the content produced or shared within a national public sphere carries a European relevance and when both non-national and EU-level actors are brought into the national conversation.

While the concept of Europeanization traditionally deals with the degree of fit between national and EU-level institutions (Radaelli, 2003), Europeanization has more recently been applied in political communication research. Trenz (2008, p. 278), for example, writes that the “Europeanization of public and media communication can be analyzed as a process that enlarges the scope of public discourse beyond the territorial nation state.” Approaching Europeanization from a communicative lens is important, since the citizens of any democratic polity should be able to exchange opinions and engage in discussions about politics. In the distinct case of the EU polity, national media may bridge interlocution among Member States and their publics. Such discursive enlargement beyond national political affairs can occur in two directions: vertical or horizontal (see Brüggemann and Kleinen von Königslöw, 2007, pp. 21-24). *Vertical* Europeanization occurs when supranational EU actors, issues, or policies are “downloaded” into the national discourse. *Horizontal* Europeanization, on the other hand, takes place when the domestic discourse is directed ‘sideways’ to include references to events and actors in other EU Member States.

The down- or cross-loading of European topics across Member States is heavily “dependent on the output of the mass media” (Kevin, 2003, p. 52; see also Pfetsch, Adam and Eschner, 2008). National media communicate European issues to their respective publics and serve as the primary loci where debates about the EU take place (Statham and Trenz, 2013). We

argue that traditional mass media, having independent agendas (Bennett and Iyengar, 2008) and preferred modes of communication (Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999, p. 248), are integral drivers of Europeanization. Traditional media selectively filter and voice political information and, consequently, affect the relationship between politicians and citizens on EU-related topics.

Moreover, media reportage about politics increasingly follows a commercial logic championing sensationalism and the personalization of politics, whereby elections are commonly framed as battles resulting in winners and losers. The mediatization of politics, a widely used but vague concept (Esser and Strömbäck, 2014, p. 5), refers to politicians acting in ways that appeal to the media's commercial logic in bids to attain public visibility through the media. Media thus indirectly influence the behavior of Eurosceptic politicians, who portray a 'no-EU or bust' scenario and ensure the dissemination of their messages to national publics. Since the media are key influencers of public opinion (Hay, 2007), it is perhaps unsurprising that within national public spheres, the "polarization of opinions, interests, or values" (De Wilde, 2011, p. 566) regarding the EU is on the rise.

However, traditional mass media are not the *only* loci where debates about contemporary European politics take place; EU citizens also discuss and get information about politics on social media. In order to test the Europeanization of public spheres, then, we also need to account for digital environs where information and communication about politics is exchanged among citizens. Social networking sites (SNSs) typically have non-exclusive participation criteria, allowing virtually anyone with internet access to 'join the conversation.' If public spheres are understood as inclusive forums where all actors in society can participate, then SNSs become particularly valuable sites to investigate empirically.

Although mass media maintain a powerful influence online, the agenda-setting and gatekeeping power of journalists is challenged by the heightened impact of citizens on the flow of political information and communication through SNSs. While mainstream media elites are among the key actors driving a Europeanization process from the top down, social media can facilitate Europeanization from below in two ways. Firstly, SNSs enable citizens to be producers of political information and therefore generate content about Europe autonomously. Secondly, citizens can act as mediators of political content by selectively diffusing mass media content of European relevance across their online social networks. Given the unbounded spatial restraints of online communication, user networks and communication flows can more easily transcend national borders when a discussion pertains to pan-European events (see, for example, the study of transnational engagement with the Eurovision Song Contest on Twitter by Highfield *et al*, 2013). Structurally, social media may harbor greater potentials for Europeanization than traditional media like television or print.

However, not all social media platforms are the same; SNSs are analytically distinguishable on account of their varying “digital architectures” (Bossetta *et al*, 2017). A social media’s digital architecture refers to the back-end, technical operations that simultaneously facilitate and constrain user behavior on the site. Digital architectures influence both how and why a particular SNS is used and subsequently, its user demography. For example, Twitter’s hashtag function and low levels of algorithmic filtering encourage the rapid and widespread diffusion of information, drawing a highly educated, news interested demographic to the site. Facebook, by contrast, delivers more curated content that is calculated, in part, from the actions of friends that typically correspond to a user’s offline connections. Moreover, the broader scope of content offered by Facebook’s algorithms attracts a user base that is, on the

whole, more representative of the general public than Twitter's. Digital architectures, by governing the rules of engagement on a social networking platform, necessarily affect who participates in a conversation as well as how they do so. Therefore, SNSs with differing digital architectures can be considered analytically distinguishable public spheres, despite the cross-platform sharing that can occur across them.

### Hypotheses and Case Selection

We are interested in testing whether media discourses about right-wing Eurosceptics are more indicative of Europeanization than public debates about other EU topics. If so, Eurosceptics' contestation of Europe may have the unintended implication of priming participants in the national public spheres to engage in discussions about transnational or supranational politics. Considering print newspapers, Twitter, and Facebook to be analytically distinguishable public spheres, we further seek to compare the degree of Europeanization across each of the media.

We choose to focus specifically on the reactions to the 2014 EP election results on May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2014, the day after the election. Capturing the immediate reactions to this pan-European event allows us to assess the press corps' and citizens' responses to Euroscepticism – not the political campaigning leading up to the vote. We assume, furthermore, that these initial reactions influence the subsequent media discussions in the days and weeks following the election. Through examining public discourses surrounding the rise of the Eurosceptic right, we aim to uncover whether journalists and the public construe the phenomenon in a national or European context. Given that Eurosceptic parties tend to politicize Europe, especially during European political events like EP elections, we hypothesize that:

**H1: Following the 2014 EP elections, media reactions to the success of the Eurosceptic right will be *more Europeanized* than other aspects of the election results.**

Furthermore, we nuance the specific *scope* of Eurosceptic Europeanization by distinguishing whether it is framed in a horizontal (transnational) or vertical (supranational) context. Previous research finds little evidence for horizontal Europeanization. When discussing Europe, few national media outlets tend to cite sources from other Member States or include references to non-national political actors and processes (Sifft *et al*, 2007; Brüggemann *et al*, 2008). Based on this evidence, as well as the assumption that Eurosceptics tend to contest *EU-level* actors and issues (and not the policies and institutions those of other Member States), we hypothesize that:

**H2: Eurosceptic Europeanization will be more *Vertical* than *Horizontal***

Hypotheses 1 and 2, respectively, are developed to test the degree and scope of Europeanization. We consider these factors to be largely influenced by existing political and media systems (i.e., how the media tends to report about political issues). Therefore, we select two similar national cases – Sweden and Denmark – for comparison in order to see if national differences in Eurosceptic Europeanization can be observed. Both states belong to the Nordic family and have fragmented, multi-party political systems characterized by “proportional representation, stable parliamentary democracy and a social democratic welfare state” (Demker, 2012, p. 239). Regarding media systems, both countries are exemplars of what Hallin and Mancini (2004, p. 143) dub the “democratic-corporatist model,” characterized by a high newspaper circulation, an autonomous free press, and strong public service broadcasting. Furthermore, the countries share the “political and commercial preconditions” of the Scandinavian media markets that make them “extremely suitable for comparative research” (Lund, 2007, p. 121). Besides their egalitarian media practices, Sweden and Denmark both display high levels of internet use by the general public and



political elites (Moe and Larsson, 2013; Mjøs *et al.*, 2014), making the cases appropriate for social media analysis.

Despite these similarities, the two countries differ in one important aspect pertinent to this study: the political hierarchy of their right-wing Eurosceptic parties. In Denmark, the most prominent Eurosceptic party, the Danish People's Party (DF), won 26.2% of the votes in the 2014 EP elections – an 11.2% increase from 2009. DF's top candidate for the EP, Morten Messerschmidt, set a new record for the total number of personal votes by garnering approximately one out of four votes cast. The successful trend was confirmed in the national elections the following year (June 2015), when DF gained 21% of the votes and became the second largest party in Denmark. Even though plagued by scandals connected to the misuse of EU funds, DF remains a major force in Danish domestic politics.

Sweden's Eurosceptic party, the Sweden Democrats (SD), has a political program and communication strategy heavily inspired by DF. However, SD received its first mandate in the European Parliament only in 2014, bringing in 9.7% of the popular vote compared to just 3.3% in 2009. National elections were scheduled in September of 2014, called a 'super election year' by the media since both EP and national elections occurred within the same year. Nationally, the Sweden Democrats garnered 12.9% of the votes and became the country's third largest party. Despite this success, the SD were (and still are) considered by all other Swedish parties as an unwanted political partner, and they wield less influence than their Danish counterparts. In sum, support for the Eurosceptic far-right is more pronounced in Denmark than in Sweden, pointing to deeper differences in public attitudes towards European integration.

This national difference in attitudes towards the far-right leads us to consider the element of *tone* as an important variable in the evaluation of Eurosceptic Europeanization. A key

criterion for Europeanization is the existence of common frames of reference about the EU as a precondition for mutual understanding about the polity among national publics (Risse, 2014, p. 11). While discussing similar issues – whether national or European – can facilitate cross-border dialogue, achieving mutual understanding across publics is arguably best achieved through shared valence about an issue. Given the different positions of DF and SD in their national political systems, we expect that:

**H3: The Swedish public spheres will exhibit a negative tone towards the Eurosceptics, whereas the Danish public spheres will be more positive.**

#### **Data Collection**

For the print media, we selected the two largest national daily newspapers from each country by circulation, according to each country's national statistics bureau for 2014. We chose the two largest national dailies specifically to capture the national reporting. For Denmark, the largest circulated weekday newspapers in 2013 were *Politiken* (90,000 daily copies) followed by *Jyllands-Posten* (84,000). For Sweden, the two largest dailies were *Dagens Nyheter* (266,000) and *Aftonbladet* (166,000).

We retrieved the four newspapers from May 26, 2014 using Infomedia, a digital database of scanned newspapers. We chose May 26, the day after the European Parliament elections, since we wanted to measure the print media's reporting about the election results and not the campaign coverage leading up to the elections. We selected all the articles in each newspaper that related directly to the outcome of the European Parliament elections, resulting in 11 articles from *Jyllands-Posten*, 17 from *Politiken*, and 22 each from *Aftonbladet* and *Dagens Nyheter*.

Twitter communication is largely organized around the use of hashtags: specific keywords that can create communities of discussion along common themes, expand the audience of a given topic, and index conversations. For our Twitter data collection, we chose the official hashtag promoted by the European Parliament: #EP2014. The European Parliament actively promoted this hashtag, used more than one million times over the week preceding the election as part of a get-out-the-vote campaign (Twitter, 2014). We decided to exclude nationally-specific hashtags to keep the selection criteria equal across the cases and attempt to capture the tweets with the highest potential for harboring Europeanized comments. As with the print media, we were interested in capturing only the immediate reaction to the elections results. Therefore, we only collected tweets on the day following the election.

To obtain a complete dataset of tweets, we contracted the company Union Metrics to gather all Twitter messages posted in Swedish and Danish with the hashtag #EP2014 via their TweetReach Historical Analytics product. Having a back-end agreement with Twitter, Union Metrics provides a complete list of all ‘publicly available’ tweets. Since very few Twitter messages are tagged with geographic information, we chose to exclude messages in English, since this would incorporate users from outside Sweden and Denmark in our dataset. While we acknowledge these shortcomings, we do not consider these factors to compromise the overall findings of the study.

For Denmark, we collected 324 tweets from May 26, 2016. Of these, 41% were original messages (115 tweets and 17 @mentions), and the rest were retweets. For Sweden we collected 666 Twitter messages, 37% of which were original posts (232 tweets and 17 @mentions). These rather low numbers are not particularly surprising, given the second-order characteristic of EP elections and the comparatively small number of users actively

posting in the two countries. According to Twittercensus (2014), less than 1% the Danish population tweets once a month compared to 2.5% of Swedes. We do assume, however, that those tweeting during the EP elections include elite influencers and that a larger proportion of the Danish and Swedish population was exposed to these messages without necessarily posting themselves.

To incorporate a more representative online public sphere in the study, we include Facebook comments to each of the selected print media's posts about the EP elections on May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2014. Whereas a Twitter public sphere can be identified openly through hashtags, public conversations on Facebook take place primarily on 'Pages': open content profiles belonging to, for example, political and media actors. Therefore, we used the Rfacebook package (Barberá *et al*, 2017) for the programming software R to harvest all public comments in response to posts about the EP elections that were issued by the four selected newspapers' Facebook pages. This resulted in 12 posts each for Denmark and Sweden, and about half of these posts concerned the rise of Eurosceptics explicitly.

In comparison to Twitter, Danes engaged significantly more with Facebook content, generating a total of 904 comments to the 12 articles posted by *Politiken* and *Jyllands Posten*. In contrast, Swedes did not comment much on Facebook: 181 comments were left on the Facebook pages of *DN* and *Aftonbladet*, with some articles receiving only 2-3 comments per post. In total, our dataset consists of 932 media paragraphs (from 72 articles), 381 original tweets and 1395 Facebook comments made to 24 articles that pertained to the general coverage of the EP election.

## Method

To analyze the collected data, we developed a coding scheme designed to test our hypotheses on the media reporting and online reactions to the right-wing Eurosceptics following the EP elections. Using MAXQDA for the coding process, we selected *paragraphs* as the unit of analysis for the media, *tweets* as the unit of analysis for Twitter, and *comments* as the unit of analysis for Facebook. For Twitter, we decided to not code retweets for three reasons. First, retweets were by-and-large identical copies of regular tweets included in our data and therefore added no new content to our dataset. Second, while we acknowledge that there is empirical value in measuring the number of times a tweet has been retweeted (to gauge its exposure) and by whom (to trace communication flows), coding retweets would have skewed the proportions of our results by incorporating double-coded content. Third, as opposed to user-generated regular tweets or interactive replies to tweets, retweets can be considered a lower degree of engagement (Bossetta *et al*, 2017): passively reposting pre-existing content is typically less resource intensive than actively engaging with public dialogue.

Since we were interested only in media and public reactions to the Eurosceptic far-right, we coded all paragraphs, tweets and comments that mentioned far-right: national parties, EP party groups, politicians/MEPs, and references to Euroscepticism as a critique of European integration in general. All other paragraphs and tweets were coded as ‘Non-Eurosceptic’. For each unit belonging to the Eurosceptic narrative, we assigned to two parent codes: Context and Tone. Context measures Europeanization by identifying through which scope the Eurosceptics are mentioned according to three sub-codes: Vertical, Horizontal, or National. We coded the unit of analysis ‘Vertical’ if the far-right element mentioned was referring to EU institutions, actors, or the rise of the Euroscepticism as a pan-European phenomenon. We coded the unit of analysis ‘Horizontal’ if the unit of analysis mentioned another European Member State, its EP election results, or non-national political parties/politicians. Both the

Vertical and Horizontal codes represent Europeanization processes, whereas the ‘National’ code marks the unit of analysis as dealing with primarily domestic issues or actors. The code ‘Unknown’ was also incorporated when the context could not be inferred from the text.

The code ‘Tone’ was designed to test differences in how the right-wing Eurosceptics were treated normatively between the two countries and has three sub-codes: Positive, Neutral, and Negative. The sub-code ‘Positive’ was assigned if the Eurosceptics or their success was portrayed positively, ‘Neutral’ if the tone was balanced or factual (e.g., solely the dissemination of election results), or ‘Negative’ if portrayed in critical terms. Often such evaluations were not expressed explicitly, particularly in the case of print media. It is therefore important to note that our Tone code captures the sentiment conveyed at the level of journalists’ word choice, even though the intention might have been factually descriptive. We would code Negative, for example, all instances of “right-wing extremist,” because the terms carry a stigmatizing connotation – particularly in Scandinavia. Similarly, for Facebook, we coded comments in relation to the posts that primed them. For example, the comment “Terrible” would be coded Negative and National, if the post concerned reporting about the victory of DF in Denmark. Based on a test subset across each of the media, the intercoder reliability among the authors was 89%.

## **Results**

To test Hypothesis 1, that the coverage of the Eurosceptics will be more Europeanized than the coverage of the EP elections in general, we report the results of our Context code for each of the media in Figure 1. ‘General Reactions’ reflects the number of units coded ‘Non-Eurosceptic,’ whereas ‘Eurosceptics’ relays coded units relating to Eurosceptic far-right actors and issues. Figure 1 also reveals whether the Eurosceptics were discussed through a national, horizontal, or vertical European scope.

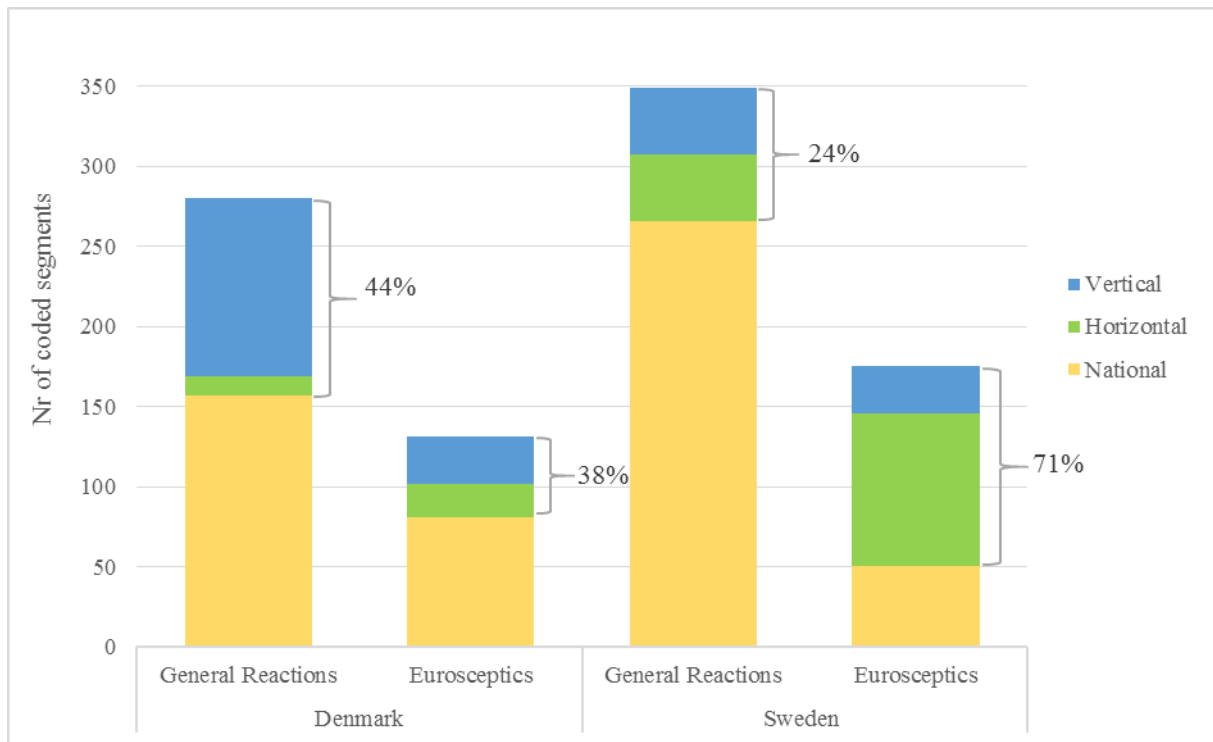


Figure 1. Degree of Europeanization (Print)

We measure the degree of Europeanization by adding the Vertical and Horizontal codes together. This resulted in 38% of the Danish and 71% of the Swedish print media coverage of the far-right Eurosceptics being Europeanized. In Sweden, then, the print media covered the Eurosceptics in a more Europeanized manner than the elections in general, and the Eurosceptic Europeanization took a predominantly Horizontal scope. The Danish print, by contrast, reported news and analysis about Eurosceptics in a less Europeanized fashion than its general post-election reportage.

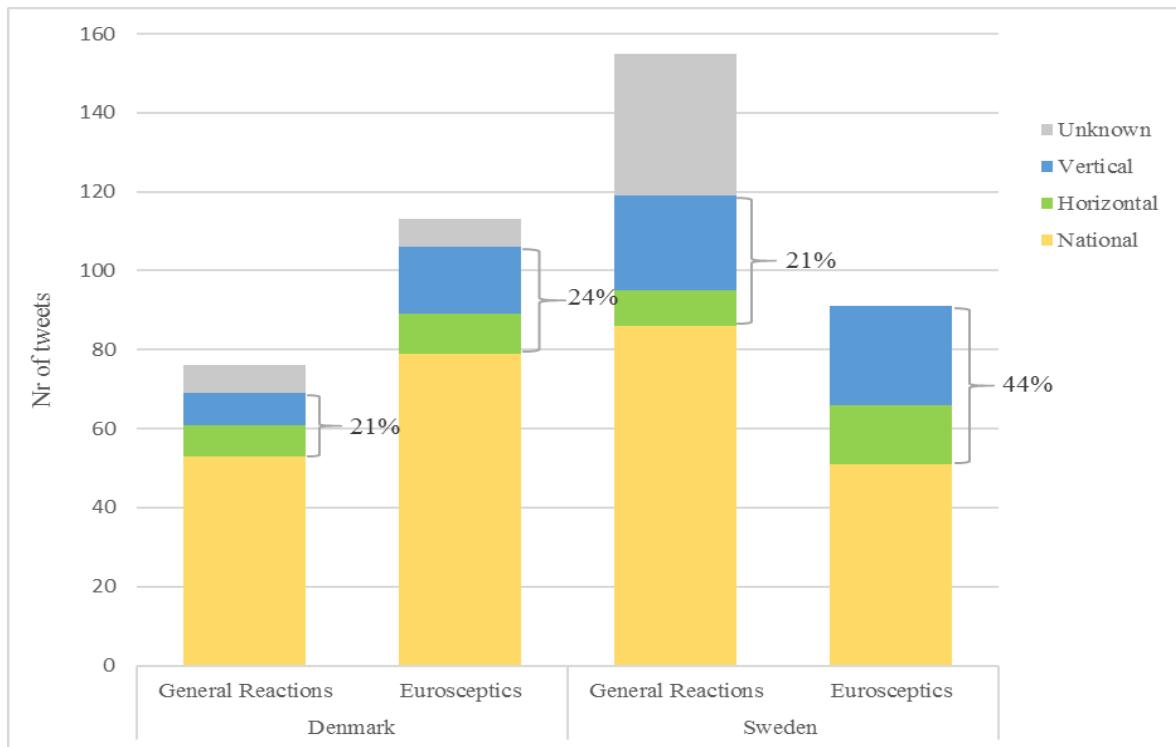


Figure 2. Degree of Europeanization (Twitter)

As shown in Figure 2 above, the reactions to the success of Eurosceptic parties on Twitter were more Europeanized than reactions to other aspects of the EP election results. Again, Sweden displays this tendency towards a Europeanized Eurosceptic discussion more poignantly than Denmark.

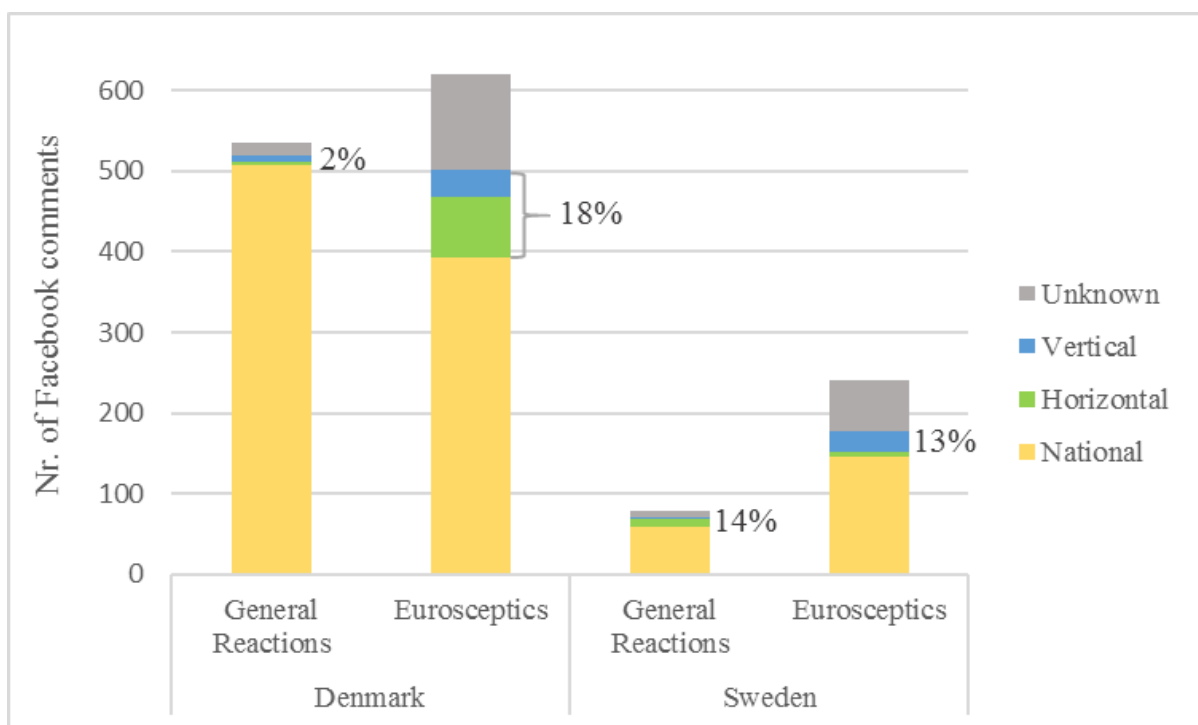


Figure 3. Degree of Europeanization (Facebook)



In Denmark the Facebook comments, like the Twitter messages, show Eurosceptic discourses to be more Europeanized than reactions to other aspects of the election. By contrast, in Sweden the social media users seem to place both general reactions and reactions to Euroscepticism equally in a European context.

To summarize, we find grounding to suggest that the discourses about Euroscepticism are more Europeanized than the reporting or commenting to the results of the EP election in general, thus **confirming Hypothesis 1**. However, the trend is uneven, with Danish print media and Swedish Facebook comments as exceptions. Moreover, it is important to note that, overall, the percentage of Europeanized media discourse in the post-election coverage is predominantly national in scope, with the exception of the Swedish print.

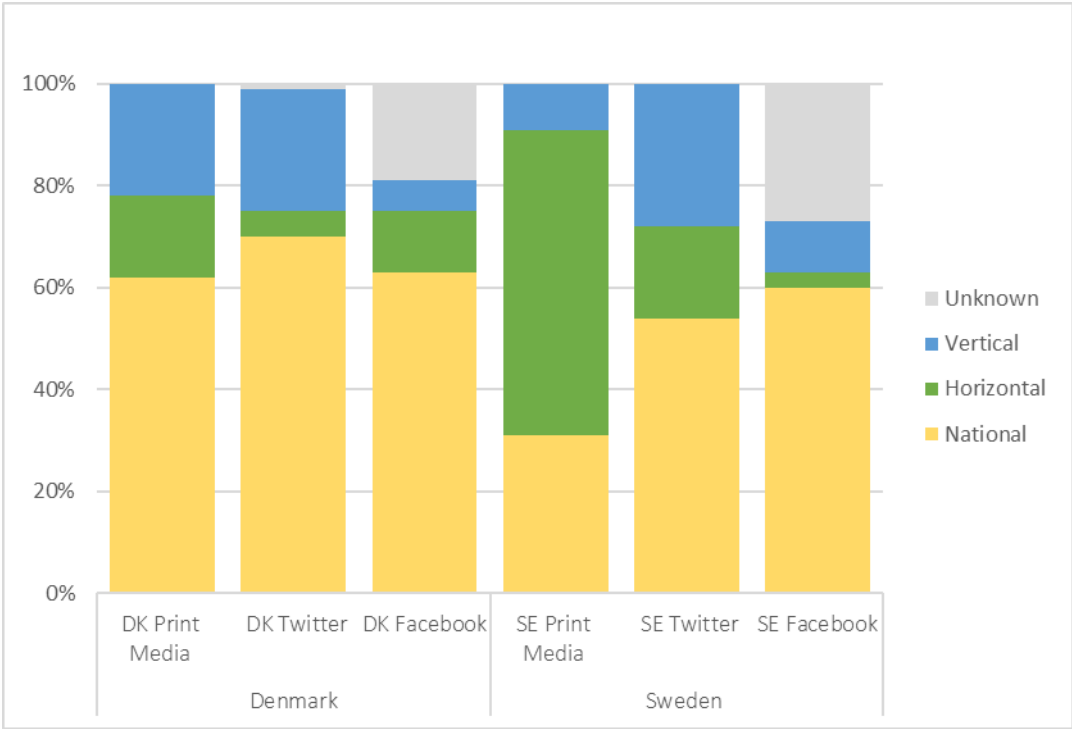


Figure 4. Reactions to the Eurosceptics across media type

Figure 4 reports only the Eurosceptic coded segments to compare Eurosceptic Europeanization across each of the media studied. The results of our coding suggest that **Hypothesis 2**, that Eurosceptic Europeanization will be more vertical than horizontal, is **partially confirmed**. In four of the six public spheres analyzed, the discourse about Eurosceptics took a vertical scope, with the clear exception of the Swedish print. Danish print media (22%), Danish Twitter posts (24%) as well as Swedish Twitter (28%) and Facebook comments (10%) all privileged discussions of Euroscepticism in a pan-European or EU-level focus as opposed to a horizontal, cross-border perspective. Overall, as with the non-Eurosceptic EP reportage, each media exhibits a clear orientation towards placing the reactions to the growth of Euroscepticism in a domestic context, with a majority of paragraphs, tweets, and comments coded as National.

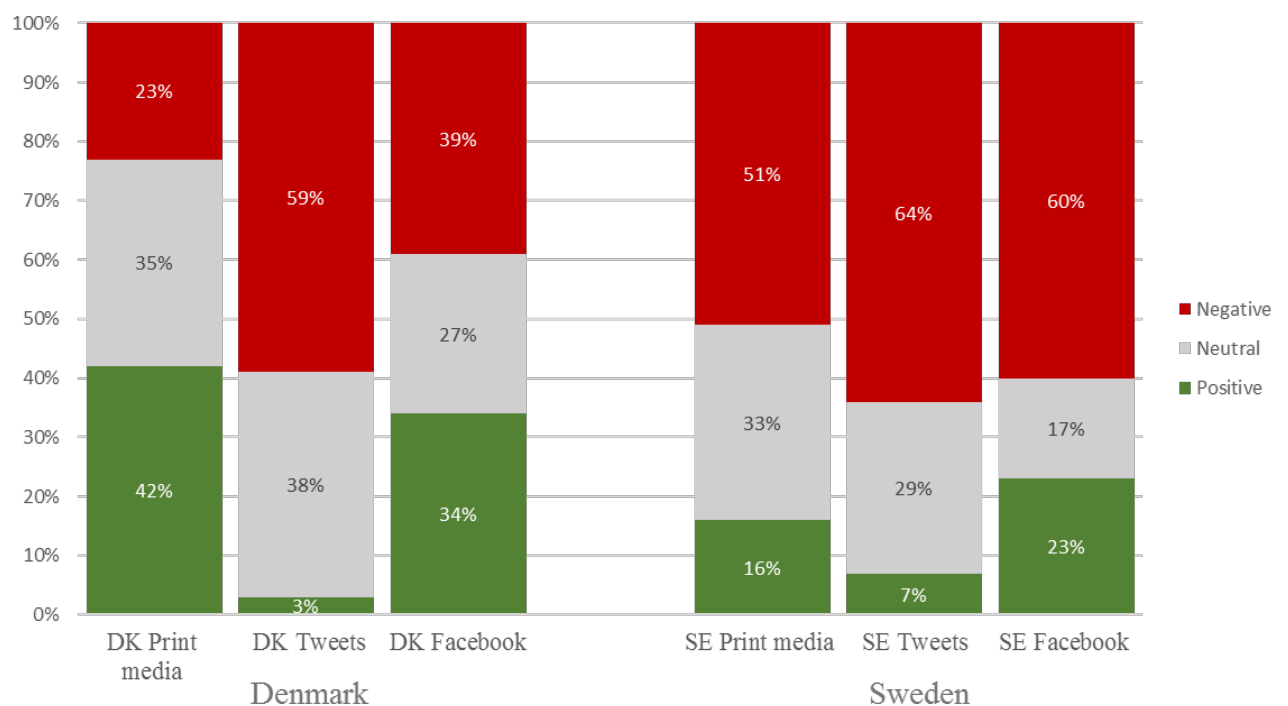


Figure 5. Tone Difference in the Eurosceptic Narrative

Our findings for the code Tone, reported in Figure 5, **confirm Hypothesis H3**: that the Swedish media reactions to the rise of the Eurosceptics will be more negative than in Denmark. Indeed, the Swedish print media reported about right-wing Eurosceptics in a negative light 51% of the time, compared to the Danish media's 23%. Conversely, the Danish media discussed the Eurosceptics' success as a primarily positive development (42%) compared to the Swedish print (16%).

On Twitter, however, both Danes and Swedes considered the rise of the Eurosceptics as a primarily negative phenomenon, (59% and 64%, respectively) with little support shown for Eurosceptic politicians or parties (3% and 7%, respectively). The Facebook comments on the pages of the two Swedish newspapers, meanwhile, were 60% negative and 21% positive. In contrast, comments on Danish Facebook pages about were only 39% negative 37% positive.

So far, our Context and Tone codes reveal the *overall* scope and normativity of media reactions to right-wing Eurosceptics/Euroscepticism. The last part of our results reports the co-occurrence of our Context and Tone codes in order to pinpoint precisely which contexts of Eurosceptic discourse were portrayed positively, neutrally, or negatively. For example, the results of our Tone code in the previous section revealed that the Danish print media was negative towards the far-right 23% of the time. However, we do not know precisely where this negativity was directed. Were the Danish media negative towards the right-wing Eurosceptics primarily at a vertical, horizontal, or national level?

Figure 6 below, which should be read from left to right, shows the percentages of how often each level of context was discussed in a positive, neutral, or negative context.

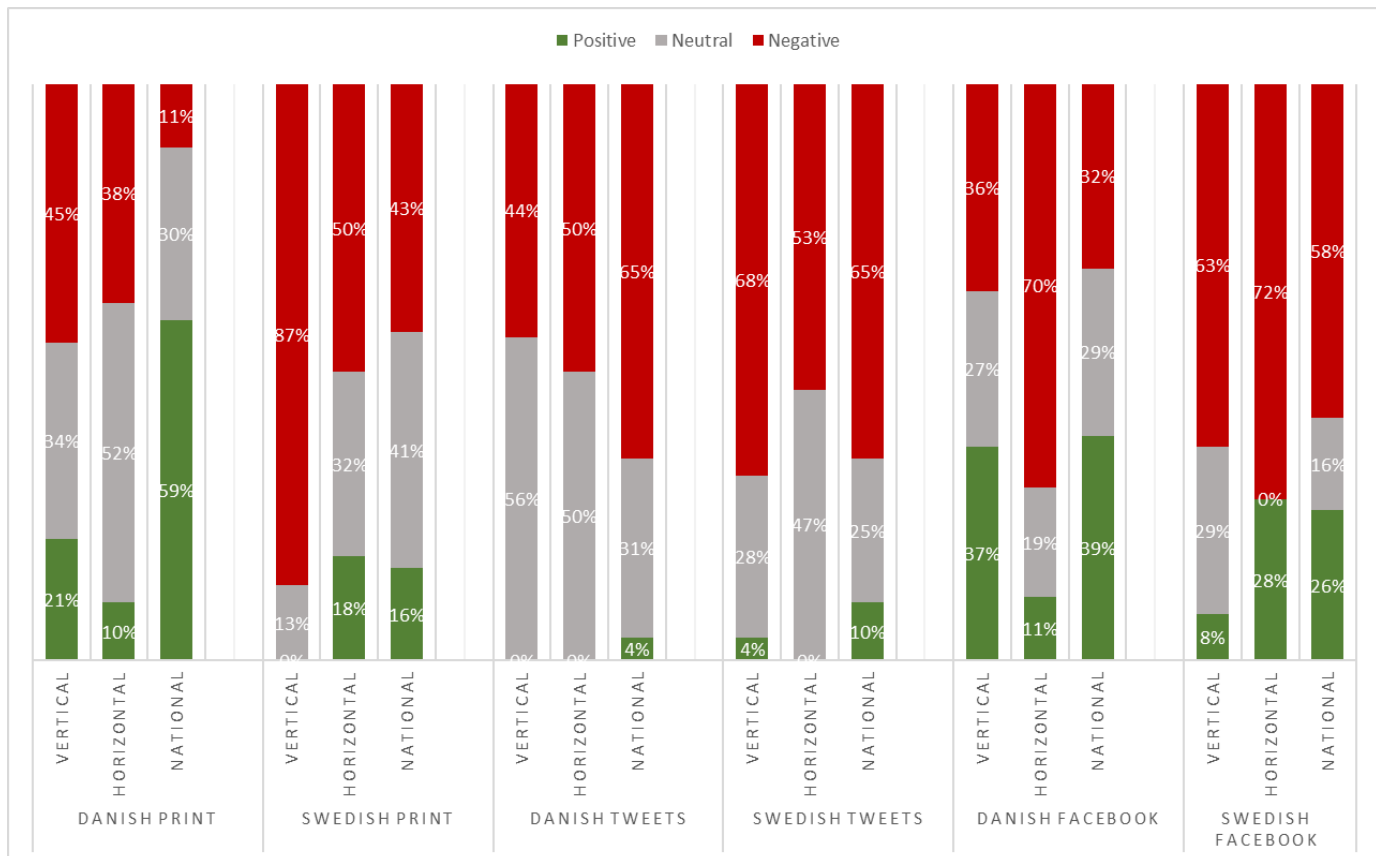


Figure 6. Intersection Tone and Context

The first row of Figure 6 clearly shows that Danes were primarily negative when discussing the Eurosceptics in a vertical, EU-level context. Conversely, when discussing them in a national context (i.e., mentions of DF), the Danish tone is primarily positive (59%) and rarely negative (11%). It appears, then, that the success of anti-EU parties is perceived by the Danish print as a negative development for Europe but a positive trend for Denmark. On the other hand, the Swedish print construed the rise of the Eurosceptics as predominantly negative across all three context levels. These findings provide further evidence to support Hypothesis 3, that the Swedish media coverage will be more negative towards the Eurosceptics than the Danish media.

Figure 6 also reveals that Twitter users in both Denmark and Sweden rarely mentioned Euroscepticism in a positive light, suggesting that the Twitter publics in the two countries exhibit less national difference in their valence of right-wing Eurosceptics than the other two

media. In both countries, moreover, Twitter reactions differed from the reporting of their respective national print media, although more so in Denmark than in Sweden. The Danish Twittersphere, as opposed to the Danish print, presented national far-right success as primarily negative. The Swedish Twittersphere also differed from its national print media (albeit to a lesser extent) by being more neutral towards vertical and horizontal far-right developments. This suggests a dissonance between print media reporting and Twitter posts in both countries.

On Facebook, the relationship between print media and social media is more complex, as we investigated the comments made by individual users to the Facebook pages of the same newspapers analyzed in print. Interestingly, the Facebook comments diverged from the print articles' tone. In Denmark, Facebook users were very negative towards the spread of Euroscepticism in other EU member states (70%). The same process was treated as slightly positive when it took place at home (39%). This contrasts the tone used by journalists, who were mostly neutral when they reported on the horizontal spread of anti-EU support and clearly positive when reacting to the success of the Danish People's Party.

The Swedish case points to a smoother congruence between Facebook commenters and newspaper journalists. Like in the case of print, the rise in popularity of Euroscepticism is seen as a negative development regardless of whether it takes place domestically, in other European countries, or in the European institutions. The most negative tone is exhibited in Swedish comments to the lateral growth of Eurosceptic support in other EU states (72%), followed by a negative interpretation of the increase in the number of MEPs from Eurosceptic parties (63%). The fact that the Sweden Democrats got their first MEP is deplored in 58% of the comments but lauded in 26%.

Comparing Twitter and Facebook side-by-side, it is worth highlighting the contrast between the two social networking sites. Whereas Twitter reactions in both Denmark and Sweden were overwhelmingly negative, Facebook comments were more balanced, particularly in Denmark, where the valence of reactions to Euroscepticism was neutral when discussed in a vertical or national context. Even in Sweden, the share of positive comments towards the Eurosceptic success was far larger on Facebook than on Twitter.

### **Discussion**

Our results indicate that, in the immediate aftermath of the 2014 EP elections, the press corps' and publics' discourse about right-wing Eurosceptic parties was generally more Europeanized than other aspects of the election results. On the one hand, this can be considered an expected finding – discourses about Euroscepticism should necessarily incorporate a European dimension. On the other hand, the fact that European actors and issues were more often discussed in the context of Euroscepticism raises provoking questions regarding the impact of EU contestation on public opinion. If the Europeanization of national public spheres hinges upon the saliency of the EU, the inclusion of non-national actors, and the discussion of EU-related topics within national discourses (Risse, 2014), then our findings suggest that Euroscepticism is a more potent catalyst for Europeanization than non-Eurosceptic reportage of the EU's largest democratic exercise – the European Parliament elections.

We partly explain the print media's predilection to report about the Eurosceptics' success in a European context by mediatization, i.e. the mass media's penchant for increasingly championing provocative and sensationalist political coverage. The controversial political message and communication style exhibited by many Eurosceptics on the far-right fits well

with this commercial media logic and ensures their representation in national media reportage about the elections. While the EP elections' implications for the national and European demos were certainly included in the journalists' reporting, it remains a point of interest that 'Europe' was more often exhibited in the discourse surrounding actors contesting EU integration. While national actors and issues received the majority of reportage – especially in Denmark, where the election win of the Danish People's Party was particularly newsworthy – the results of our coding suggest that the media attempted to 'Europeanize' the Eurosceptics into a unified front against the EU. Taking into account the novelty of Eurosceptics' success, the controversial nature of their Eurosceptic agenda, and the breadth of their support across the EU, the 'Rise of the Eurosceptics' provided a marketable narrative for professional journalists to report and discuss the phenomenon in a European context.

Comparing the media platforms, we anticipated that social media would open up a more transnational discussion about Euroscepticism than print, given the ease of cross-border communication through social networking sites. Interestingly, however, we find quite the opposite. On both Twitter and Facebook, Euroscepticism was largely discussed through referencing Sweden and Denmark's national Eurosceptic parties – SD and DF respectively. As Figure 4 shows, the Europeanization of Eurosceptics was predominantly driven by print media, especially in Sweden. The general expectation that SNSs would prove to be a vehicle for further Europeanization was, therefore, not met.

The information and mobilization campaign carried out by the European Parliament on Twitter, with the promoted hashtag #EP2014 at its core, did not result in the explicit articulation of commentaries at a supra- or trans-national level. This may be attributed to Twitter's digital architecture, which lends itself more easily to immediate, succinct, and

affective reactions rather than in-depth, analytical political commentary. Another potential explanation is that the transnational consequences of an increased Eurosceptic presence in the European Parliament are difficult to grasp on the day immediately following the election, due to the complexity of the EU polity. Since national publics elect MEP's, it is likely that the national consequences of the elections take primacy over the European dimension in the immediate reactions of Twitter users.

Facebook reactions were also more Europeanized in the case of the Eurosceptic results, but like on Twitter, evidence of a pan-European discourse across the two national publics is scant in our data. While this is likely influenced by our criteria for data collection (i.e., selecting the Facebook pages of national media), many of those who commented on Facebook situated their interpretation of the rise of the Eurosceptics in a national context, regardless of their domestic Eurosceptic party's degree of electoral success. A further avenue of investigation would be to test the same hypotheses in other cases, particularly those countries where the Eurosceptics did not make significant advances (e.g., Ireland, the Netherlands, or Spain). Such cases would enlighten whether the position of a Eurosceptic party in a given political system can explain the scope through which Euroscepticism is discussed: national, horizontal, or vertical.

On the whole, our findings indicate that most of the immediate reactions to the EP election results, whether about Eurosceptics or not, were national in scope. Outside of horizontal reportage about other national results, we find little evidence to suggest cross-border dialogue about Euroscepticism is taking place. Future studies seeking to test this aspect of Europeanization may benefit from incorporating longitudinal research designs of media discourses to assess whether such communication is taking place. Nevertheless, our case



study of the day following a major pan-European political event demonstrates that Eurosceptic parties contribute to the EU's saliency within national political debates and provide similar frames of reference for national publics to engage with EU-related issues. This finding suggests that should a European public sphere emerge, it may be born from EU contestation – *not* mutual agreement on the purposes and features of the polity.

In terms of the contextualization of the EP election results coverage, the contrast between the Danish approach (national) and the Swedish one (horizontal) corresponds to our initial expectations, based on the position of each country's Eurosceptic party in the political system. The Danish newspapers had a higher percentage of vertical European discourse, even though their focus was largely national. Print reporting explored the consequences of the new distribution of mandates in the new European Parliament for Denmark, as well as the dynamics of power at the top of supranational institutions (the Commission as well as the Parliament). The Swedish print media was largely horizontal, yet the salience of European actors and issues was underrepresented. The preference of Swedish newspapers to comparatively report the rise of the far-right may stem from a desire to situate the gains made by Sweden Democrats into a broader, continental trend to help justify an uncomfortable reality: Sweden is now one of the many countries where the rise of the far-right is taking place. Reporting Eurosceptic developments in other European countries may be an effort to place such embarrassment, or 'guilt,' within the context of being a pan-European phenomenon. Our qualitative reading of the articles supports this idea as well as the notion that most horizontal media reporting of Eurosceptics in Sweden took place in elite media, namely print and Twitter.

National differences between the two cases were also pointed in our valence measurement, Tone, and corresponded to our expectations formulated in Hypothesis 3: that Swedes would be more negative towards Euroscepticism than the Danes. We expected this difference based on the popularity of each country's respective Eurosceptic party. The Danish inclination towards a positive reporting of Euroscepticism is related to the very established position of the main EU-critical party, the Danish People's Party, which moved from the fringes into mainstream politics following the national elections of 2001. On the other hand, Swedish political communication norms trend towards political correctness and a moralizing tone, as evidenced by our results. Moreover, the main Eurosceptic Swedish party, the Sweden Democrats, entered the national parliament only in 2010 and still struggles for acceptance against a non-cooperation strategy employed by all other Swedish political parties.

Interestingly, despite these systemic and cultural national differences, the Twitter reactions to the Eurosceptics' success are strikingly similar across the cases in terms of both context and tone. While a negative tone was expected for the Swedish tweets, the Danes' predominantly negative evaluation of the Eurosceptics on Twitter is surprising and may relate to the predominance of liberal demographics on Twitter (Barberá and Rivero, 2014). The Danish print media had a high degree of substantive analysis in contrast to Twitter's more emotional content, which has been argued previously to be a space for "affective news" (Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira, 2012). This finding contradicts the results of Gerhards and Schäfer (2010), who could not identify a contrast between Internet and print media sources in their comparison of American and German news. Another reason for the presence of neutrality in print versus sentiment on social media may stem from the latter's inclusion of citizens as producers of political content. Even under conditions of mediatization, there is a journalist code of conduct that typically aims to promote factuality

and a balanced representation of parties, whereas citizens' contribution of content is less circumscribed to such norms. Previous research on social media activity during elections finds that citizens can be highly active in promoting a political cause motivated by partisan affiliation (Dutceac Segesten and Bossetta, 2016).

An interesting path of exploration opened up by our results here concerns the relationship between print and online media. While Twitter coverage of political events can resemble print media reporting (Jungherr, 2014), we find a rather pronounced difference between the two media in terms of how Euroscepticism was discussed. The press corps covered the Eurosceptics' success by emphasizing the implications for supranational politics and by comparing results from other EU Member States. Twitter users, in contrast, responded mostly to the success of the far-right party from their own country and without much reference to similar wins across Europe or the potential consequences for Brussels. Moreover, the disconnect in tone between the original articles posted by newspapers' Facebook pages and users' comments to them suggests that either the cueing power of traditional media is not the strongest explanation for online content selection (Messing and Westwood, 2012) or that the relationship between media and commentators is less straightforward. Further research should explore more rigorously the relationship between offline and online media to assess this nexus' impact on contemporary public opinion formation. Future studies could, for example, examine the influence of a print media's Facebook post or journalist's tweet on cueing subsequent online political discussions. Furthermore, to overcome the limitations of the present study (a two-nation comparison of media coverage for only one point in time), we propose that subsequent studies include more national cases, types of media sources, and time periods to comprehensively assess the Eurosceptic Europeanization of public spheres.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, our study suggests that the Eurosceptic Europeanization of national public spheres is indeed taking place. By providing national publics with highly visible, transnationally relatable, and controversial topics for debate, Eurosceptic messages appear a more active catalyst for Europeanization than other EU issues or topics. However, the manner in which this Europeanization process is taking place varies across media as well as national political communication contexts. This variance confirms the argument that “European public spheres do not emerge above and beyond local, national, or issue-specific public spheres in some abstract supranational space but rather through the Europeanization of these various public spheres” (Risse, 2014, p. 3). Moreover, the fact that those voices opposed to Europe contributed to the coming together of the body politic and of the media discourse across the cases studied hints at the integrative potential of contestation. On account of our findings here, we urge scholars interested in the Europeanization of public spheres to consider Eurosceptic voices as an influential catalyst for cross-border dialogue.

**WORD COUNT: 7762**

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