Ursula von der Leyen: The study of her leadership from the media perspective

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"The person more qualified to lead is not the physically stronger person. It is the more intelligent, the more knowledgeable, the more creative, more innovative. And there are no hormones for those attributes."

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

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Resumo

A dissertação trata de avaliar a liderança política de Ursula von der Leyen na imprensa europeia de dezembro de 2019 a setembro de 2021. Ao considerar que Ursula von der Leyen é a primeira mulher presidente da Comissão Europeia, esta dissertação foca como a mídia enquadra sua liderança através de uma abordagem interdisciplinar. Mais especificamente, esta investigação busca caracterizar a liderança política de Ursula von der Leyen através do agendamento e a cobertura de tom nos discursos midiáticos; como também, identificar se há uma presença simbólica de empoderamento de Ursula von der Leyen nos veículos de comunicação. Para alcançar os objetivos estabelecidos, é realizada a análise temática de manchetes com língua original coletadas de quatro jornais europeus (The Guardian, Público, Le Monde, El País). É empregada uma abordagem qualitativa, permitindo interpretar os resultados através tanto de uma lente construtivista para caracterizar liderança política de Ursula von der Leyen, como também, de uma lente de gênero. O evento político predominante da análise temática é a pandemia do coronavírus, no qual refletiu tanto numa maior visibilidade no pilar Valores europeus da agenda política de Ursula von der Leyen, como também, na redução de uma cobertura estereoptizada nos discursos midiáticos. O modo como a imprensa europeia enquadra a liderança política de Ursula von der Leyen é indissociável do contexto de pandemia de coronavírus em que essa liderança tem lugar, contribuindo para revelar o impacto de contextos excepcionais na liderança política internacional.

Palavras-chave: liderança política, Ursula von der Leyen, discurso, imprensa europeia, gênero

Abstract

The dissertation concerns assessing Ursula von der Leyen´s political leadership in the European press from December 2019 to September 2021. Considering that Ursula von der Leyen is the first woman president of the European Commission, this dissertation focuses on how the media frames her leadership through an interdisciplinary approach. More specifically, this investigation seeks to characterize Ursula von der Leyen´s political leadership through agenda-setting and the tone coverage in media discourses; and to identify whether there is a symbolic empowerment presence in media outlets of Ursula Von der Leyen. To achieve the established objectives, a thematic analysis is carried out with headlines in the original language collected from four European newspapers (Guardian, Público, Le Monde, El País). A qualitative approach is employed, allowing us to interpret findings by applying both a constructivist lens to characterize Ursula von der Leyen´s political leadership as well as a gender lens. The predominant political event of thematic analysis is the coronavirus pandemic, which reflected both higher visibility of the European values pillar in Ursula von der Leyen´s political agenda, as well as in the reduction of stereotyped coverage in the media discourses. The way in which the European press frames Ursula von der Leyen´s political leadership is inseparable from the context of the coronavirus pandemic in which this leadership takes place, contributing to revealing the impact of exceptional contexts on international political leadership.

Keywords: political leadership, Ursula von der Leyen, discourse, European press, gender

Index

List of Figures and Tables

Glossary of Acronyms

CDU	Christian Democratic Union
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease
DB	Double Bind
DG	Director-General
EC	European Commission
ECB	European Central Bank
EEC	European Economic Community
EP	European Parliament
EU	European Union
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IO	International Organization
IR	International Relations
LT	Lisbon Treaty
MHH	Hanover Medical School
PM	Prime-Minister
TA	Thematic Analysis
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization
UNHCR	United Nations Higher Commissioner for Refugees
US	United States
UvdL	Ursula von der Leyen
WHO	World Health Organisation

Introduction

Ursula von der Leyen became (UvdL) the President of the European Commission (EC) in December 2019. Despite a late entry into politics, she acquired political credentials throughout her political career in Germany in various national portfolios, starting with social and health until the military portfolio before her pathway to EC.

She is the first woman in the position of the EC president, earlier Kantola (2010) highlighted the absence of women as EC presidents. In this context, she assumed the function of EC president with a five-year mandate, thus her political leadership gained media attention. Concerning political leadership in the European supranational governance, the EC is "mediatized" (Müller, 2020, p.184) which supports the relevance to examine the political leadership of UvdL from a media perspective.

The EC president exhibits political functions when exercising political leadership, which is expressed by formulating agenda-setting (Müller, 2020). This dissertation is developed following a theoretical framework on agenda-setting produced by Müller (2016; 2017; 2020) to examine political leadership of the EC president. Through combining literature on leadership and gender, women's political leaders have been researched since national contexts until supranational organizations, as well as media coverage on women in political leadership positions, enhances the importance of studying UvdL´s political leadership within this literature.

Taking these theoretical assumptions as a starting point, we aim to assess Ursula von der Leyen´s political leadership from the media perspective. More specifically, this investigation seeks to characterize Ursula von der Leyen´s political leadership through agenda-setting (the pillars of political agenda that receives visibility, main political events and EU issues), and the tone coverage in media discourses; and to identify whether there is a symbolic empowerment presence in media outlets of Ursula von der Leyen. To examine UvdL´s political leadership from a constructivist approach, we formulate the following research question: *How Ursula von der Leyen´s political leadership is framed by the European press from December 2019 to September 2021?*

To answer this research question, the dissertation is divided into three chapters. The first chapter introduces the UvdL´s political pathway to becoming EC president and contextualizes the research object by considering concepts and arguments underlined by relevant authors, thus constructing the state-of-the-art. In the second chapter, we provide the methodological structure to develop this dissertation, adopting thematic analysis as a methodological tool. Chapter 2 designs the thesis analytical framework, describing the process of collection corpus of 204 newspapers headlines from four European newspapers (The Guardian, Público, Le Monde, El País), ultimately, presenting the systematic coding scheme to be conducted on a computer program. The third chapter, firstly, presents findings of the empirical analysis; secondly, it discusses results through a constructivist lens to characterize UvdL´s political leadership as well as applying a gender lens to interpret the findings. Concluding the importance to study political leadership in supranational organizations from a media perspective as well as women´s political leadership in crisis contexts, arguing that UvdL´s political leadership is context-dependent on the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic event orients higher visibility of European values in the political agenda as well as an empowering discourse on headlines when portraying UvdL´s political leadership.

CHAPTER 1

Literature Review

This first chapter aims to contextualize the research, considering concepts and arguments underlined by relevant authors, thus constructing the state of the art for the following object of study: the political leadership of Ursula von der Leyen (UvdL) from the media perspective. It is divided into three sections, the first one presents the UvdL´s political pathway to becoming EC president. The second introduces the concept of political leadership, and simultaneously, discusses how it has been applied to the President of the European Commission. Thirdly, it explores women exercising political leadership in both national contexts and supranational institutions, ultimately, addressing the coverage of media on women politicians' leadership.

1.1.   The pathway: becoming Commission President

A brief contextualization of UvdL´s biography prior to holding the position of EC president allows an understanding of her political credentials to exercise political leadership. Ursula von der Leyen is a Belgium woman born on 8, October 1958. She grew up in the European political sphere, her father, Ernst Albrecht, was a German politician. He was a high-ranking European civil servant in Brussels, had a political career in the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) as well as served as Prime Minister of Low Saxony (1976-1990) (Müller & Tömmel, 2022). Regarding her personal life, UvdL is married and has 7 kids.

Despite the political circle that she has lived in since young, she began in politics later. After graduating in economics at Göttingen and Münster University, in 1980, she attended medical school at Hanover Medical School (MHH). She earned her medical degree in 1987 and accomplished her doctorate in 1991. Until 1992 she worked as an assistant physician in the Women´s Clinic at MHH. However, from 1992 to 1997, she moved to the US with her family. In 1998 UvdL resume her position at MHH until 2002 (European Commission, n.d.-a).

UvdL was a latecomer in politics (Müller & Tömmel, 2022), however, she had a steadily ascendant. In the time span of 18 years, she occupied different positions, gaining great visibility in the German political scene (Table 1.1.1). In her political path, Angela Merkel was an important figure, a supporter within the CDU, as Merkel not only recognized UvdL´s political capacities and pragmatism to implement a revolutionary family policy by introducing

parental benefits and expanding public childcare but also, she politically supported UvdL in the German political scene (Rahlf, 2009; Müller & Tömmel, 2022).

Table 1.1.1. The political career of Ursula Von der Leyen in Germany

Date	Political position
2001-2004	Local political position in the region of Hanover
2003-2005	Member of the CDU in the State Assembly of Lower Saxony
March, 2003 – November, 2015	Minister for Social Affairs, Women, Family Affairs and Health in Lower Saxony
December, 2004	Member of the Presidium of the CDU
2005-2009	Federal Minister for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth
2009-2019	Member of the German Bundestag
2009-2013	Federal Minister of Labour and Social Affairs
2013-2019	Federal Minister of Defence

On the 1st of December 2019, UvdL assumed the function of EC president with a five-year mandate until 2024. Given the intricate political process of selecting the EC president "Von der Leyen was a surprise candidate proposed by Macron who aimed to find a way out of the deadlock" (Müller Gómez & Thieme, 2020, p.6). When becoming EC president, UvdL announced to envisage a "geopolitical Commission" to advance Commission´s role in international affairs (European Commission, 2019), emerging with a strategic agenda that involves six ambitions for Europe: a " European Green Deal"; "an economy that works for people"; "a Europe fit for the digital age"; "protecting our European way of life"; "a stronger Europe in the world"; "a new push for European democracy" (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, von der Leyen, 2019).

1.2. The concept of political leadership

In the domain of International Relations (IR), theories usually interpret the world according to "levels of analysis", which provides the unit - individual, state, international systems – that scholars acknowledge as the main ones in understanding global politics (Singer, 1961). Waltz (1959) refers to these analytical layers as images, which he calls the "first image" to address individual behaviour such as the role of political leaders in international politics. Considering the "first image" as the primary level, Byman & Pollack (2001), through analysing historical cases, stresses the importance of studying individuals to enrich our understanding of international events. By giving examples of individual political leaders that influenced the

history of twenty-century, it specifically presents political leaders as "great men" (Byman & Pollack, 2001).

The dominant presence of men in leadership positions is similar when looking at the debate of leadership in Western political thought. Keohane (2014) argues that Western political philosophy can contribute to understanding different forms of leadership. For instance, Machiavelli, Weber and Plato suggest violence at the foundation of political leadership (Keohane, 2014). Likewise, Blondel (1987) emphasizes how leadership relies on coercive power. Aristoteles suggests men in the position of political leadership, defining a statesman as one who "exercises his authority in conformity with the rules imposed by the art of statesmanship and as one who rules and is ruled in turn" (Keohane, 2014, p.29). Despite the figure of the political leaders being predominantly male, in the *Republic* Plato considers the possibility that women can also be suitable practitioners of political leadership due to women in the guardian class being educated together with men and having an equal pattern of life (Keohane, 2014).

In the words of the father of leadership studies, "leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth" (Burns, 2010 [1978] p.2). It is worth noting that Burns (2010 [1978]) outlines that the genesis of leadership concerns the relationship between leader and follower. Critically, Sjoberg (2009) suggests to re-think the conception of political leadership in relation to "the complex interdependence of leaders and followers, as well as the space in between leadership and followership" (Sjoberg, 2009, p.169). In turn, this offers a theoretical foundation for an alternative approach in studying leadership.

The concept of political leadership is a sociopolitical phenomenon (Müller, 2020). Concerning the construction of political leadership, critical approaches have emerged in leadership research. According to Bensimon (1989), a feminist perspective on leadership concentrates on the influence of gender on interpretations of leadership, considering that "our understanding of leadership is socially constructed over time" (Ospina & Sorenson, 2006, p.190) thus, gender should also be considered when defining leadership. In fact, "traditional definitions of leadership emerged at a time when both political leadership and the scholars who studied it were almost exclusively male" (Sjoberg, 2009, p.151) leading to the invisibility of women's political leadership within the leadership literature. Thus, a gender lens provides a fruitful conceptualization of political leadership.

Gender is a significant and usually neglected aspect of political leadership dynamics (Fletcher, 2004), however, Sjoberg (2009) asserts that the social construction of political leadership is gendered. Tickner (1992) highlights that masculinity and politics are well-associated throughout history, thus there is a common idea that masculine traits predominate in the context of political leadership (Sjoberg, 2009; 2014; Sykes, 2014).

Making reference to Tickner´s assumption (1992), Sjoberg (2009) outlines that the values we connect with political leadership, namely "strength, power, autonomy, independence, and rationality, all typically associated with men and masculinity". Then she continues, "even women who have experience in foreign policy issues are perceived as being too emotional and too weak for the tough life-and-death decisions" (Tickner, 1992, p.3). Similarly, Pittinsky et al. (2007) suggest a gender-neutral view of political leadership that address the functions which could be accomplished by different behaviours necessary for exercising leadership, thus making political leadership neither feminine nor masculine.

Some scholars indicate that "male-centred theories of leadership may indeed need to be re-examined in light of the rise of women in leadership positions" (Genovese & Steckenrider, 2013, p.10). Similarly, Sjoberg (2014) argues that the under-representation is not only of women but also of femininity in political leadership. From this assumption, the author stresses the gendered idea of what constitutes good leadership, outlining the connection of good leadership with traits correlated with masculinity, in the other words, a good leader overlaps substantially with what it means to be a good man. As result, even when women take part in political leadership, their integration continues with masculine understandings of what it means to be a good leader (Sjoberg, 2014). Likewise, Elliot & Stead (2009) highlights that the narratives of leadership in society continue to be emphasized by male images. Therefore, our views of what is a good leader are masculinized, together with it, masculinized notions of leadership have been naturally adopted in our understanding of leadership.

1.2.1. Political leadership in the European supranational governance

Despite the European Commission's (EC) presidency not explicitly supposed to pursue political leadership due to its restricted political power, the mandate cannot successfully be accomplished without some expression of political leadership due to its plenty of political functions (Tömmel, 2013; Kassim et al., 2013; Müller, 2017). Indeed, "the Commission´s exclusive right to initiate legislation, shaping the EU´s formal agenda (to agreed upon by the European Council) through strategic agenda-setting is one of the Commission´s primary political functions" to exercise political leadership (Müller, 2020, p.77). Additionally, the EC

President has "a stronger position in acting as a political figurehead" (Wille, 2013, p.164) due to the fact that "still unique in representing the *union´s* common interest" (Müller, 2020, p.184). Briefly, EC presidents can exhibit political leadership by transferring

> political ambitions of a Pan-European scope into consensual agendas (*agenda-setting leadership*) [...] [that] can be effectively mediated through the intra- and inter-institutional arenas of decision-making at a European level (*mediative-institutional leadership*) and gain support among European public spheres (*public leadership*) (Müller, 2016, p. 69; Müller, 2017, p. 130)

Considering that the EC serves as a defender of European community interests, its president requires to promote a positive view of European integration as well as its institutions in a wide European public sphere (Cini 1996; Endo 1999; Kassim et al., 2013; Tömmel 2013; Wille 2013; Müller, 2016; Müller, 2017; Müller, 2020). As a result, according to Müller, a "(...) comprehensive analysis of political leadership must consider the public performance of political leaders" (Müller, 2020, p. 183). In this sense, political leadership in the EC is "mediatized" (Müller, 2020, p.184) due to the politicization in the European public scope (Müller, 2020; Eckert & Galpin, 2022).

Tömmel & Verdun (2017) introduced an extensive literature debate on political leadership in European governance, offering a relevant theoretical contribution. Specifically, the seminal study concerning the Commission's presidency commenced with Walter Hallstein (1958-1967) as President of the European Economic Community (EEC), focusing on his contribution to the process of European integration (Von der Groeben, 1998). In fact, presidents of the EC are the largest researched leaders in European institutions, especially Jacques Delors´s presidency (1985-1995), as occurred in a crucial moment for European integration (Tömmel & Verdun, 2017). Since then, scholars have applied approaches and leadership theories to analyse the political leadership of EC presidents.

Following case study approach, Delors´s presidency has been extensively described in terms of his achievements and failures (Ross, 1995; Drake, 2000) as well as analysing of Delors´s political discourse in relation to European integration, ultimately, acknowledging his supranational political leadership (Drake, 1995). Similarly, Ross & Jenson (2017) applied Young´s typology[1] (1989; 1991) to examine Delors´s failures and success in leading the supranational EC, particularly exhibiting leadership in the intergovernmental context of the EU Council. As result of it, Ross & Jenson (2017) and Van Assche (2005) acknowledged Delors as an entrepreneurial leader. In addition, Endo (1999) produced a comprehensive study on Delors´s tenure with an established theoretical framework to analyse political leadership, making difference between constraints and opportunities considering three parameters: institutional resources, situational and personal factors.

Secondly, Jean-Claude Juncker´s presidency (2014-2019) has drawn the attention of scholars. Tömmel (2019) explored to what extent Juncker exercised political leadership by analysing his provision of agenda-setting and mediative-institutional leadership through a qualitative approach, arguing that the mid-term of Juncker´s incumbency dealt with the constraining institutional and situational circumstances by engaging in mediative-institutional leadership, consequently, achieving a political role for the EC´s president. In this case, Tömmel (2019) acknowledges that a leader-followership relationship arouses between the Commission president and the member of the central EU institutions: the Council, the EU Council, and the European Parliament (EP). Likewise, Kassim & Laffan (2019) analysed how the operationalisation of Juncker´s "political Commission", framed as a new model of Commission´s leadership and resulted through the *Spitzenkandidaten* process, shaped the institution internal´s organisation. Methodologically, Kassim & Laffan (2019) relied on an online survey and interviews conducted with staff across the EC. By using a similar methodology approach, Kassim (2013) & Kassim et al. (2013) discussed the José Manuel Barroso´s presidency (2004-2014), signalling that his presidential style of leadership strongly contrasts to his precedents.

A recent study by Müller & Tömmel (2022) has provided an assessment of the EC´s President incumbent, UvdL (2019- present) by examining both her positional and behavioural leadership. Müller & Tömmel (2022) analysed her biography, the situational context of

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[1] Young (1989; 1991) categorizes leadership in international bargaining into three typologies: structural, entrepreneurial and intellectual. While the first focuses more on the power position, for instance the president´s country of origin, the second relies on negotiation skills to shape the result of a bargain, finally, the third category emphasises the power of ideas (Young, 1991; Tömmel & Verdun, 2017).

appointment; the agenda-setting through studying Leyen´s speech from November 2019 to June 2020, considering both her priorities and venue shopping; the performance under the severe situational constraint, COVID-19; concluding that her personal qualities are essential to exhibit a strategic leadership. As she is still an incumbent, an extended temporal analysis of her mandate is necessary for solidified conclusions.

Comparative studies represent another approach to study the President Commission´s leadership. Lord (2002) provided a comparison of two cases, Delors and Jacques Santer´s presidency (1995-1999), signalling that context is more decisive than institutional shift and personality in constructing the form[2] of political leadership by the EC´s President. Likewise, Cini (2008) discussed extensively Santer and Romano Prodi´s tenure (1999-2004), highlighting that the international political and economic situation as well as the inter-institutional context explain whether the EC´s role will include a political leadership element. Therefore, the context is seemed to play a crucial role when it comes to analysing political leadership.

Furthermore, quantitative studies took place to examine EC´s presidency. Boucher (2006) provided quantitative research based on a cross-case analysis of seven Commission presidents, through interviews with political actors and questionaries filled out by scholars and journalists, arguing that President´s effectiveness is strongly linked with political/institutional context and a leader´s charisma. In the same way, Kassim et al. (2013) elaborated descriptive statistics to compare the performance of Delors, Santer, Prodi and Barroso. In fact, European Commission´s presidency effective performance involves "setting a policy agenda, effectively managing the house, delivering on policy priorities, and defending the Commission" (Kassim et al., 2013, p.164). Contrarily to the focus on the successful performances, Dinan (2013) emphasised the disappointing performances of former presidents, Franco Malfatti (1970-1972), Gaston Thorn (1981–1985) and Santer, concluding that EC´s president performance depends on, to a certain extent, some factors, such as country of origin, incumbent´s personality, experience, and acumen. Given the discussion of Elgie (2015) on philosophical perspectives when studying political leadership, these referred studies adopt a positivist paradigm, providing a window of opportunity to applying constructivist approaches.

When it comes to public performance of political leadership, Müller (2016), applying the agency-structure duality, to evaluate the public performance of political leadership on

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[2] Lord (2002) relies in five potential models of political leadership: conditional-leadership; strategic leadership; constructive leadership; consolidating leadership; failed leadership.

Barroso´s presidency in comparison to the former Commission´s president, Delors. Concerning the agency-structure duality, academics argue that "the more power is concentrated in the hands of an individual leader (structure), the greater the influence of that leader's personality and preferences (agency)" (Elgie, 1995, p. 204; Byman & Pollack, 2001, p. 140 *as cited in* Müller, 2016 p.69). However, according to Müller (2016) the opposite also occurs, in other words, the "weaker institutional the institutional structure of an office, here the Commission presidency, the more the provision of political leadership by its incumbents depends on their personal agency" (Müller, 2016, p.69).

In the referred comparative analysis, Müller (2016), firstly, examined how the institutional competence of the Commission´s presidency and its legal-procedural powers prior to and afterwards, the Lisbon Treaty (2009), are essential to understand political leadership´s potential. Secondly, she explores the public performance of both former presidents by correlating the recurrence and central topics of their speech with their specific coverage in the periodical *Financial Times*. Subsequently, Müller (2020) advanced further this study, considering the public impact of Commission presidents, on one hand, by comparing the convergence of the main topics of their speeches between media coverage of Hallstein, Delors and Barroso regarding UE issues, on the other hand, by evaluating the coverage by the newspaper (positive, neutral, negative). The author reaches the conclusion that Delors, compared to Hallstein and Barroso, was the most successful in ensuring significant public attention during his tenure as well as receiving the most positive coverage in the analysed newspaper whereas Barroso had the most negative one. Consequently, Delors, Hallstein, and Barroso achieved, respectively, successful, moderate, and unsuccessful public leadership.

In addition, some scholars focus on the political leadership concerning the performance within the EU institutional system. Müller (2020) comparatively analysed the mediative-institutional leadership performance of Hallstein, Delors and Barroso, in other words, the EC president´s role of "mediating and facilitating consensus among member states in the European Council, the Council of Ministers, and increasingly between the Council and the European Parliament to promote the Union´s common interest" (Müller, 2020, p.132). Likewise, Kassim (2012) compared three presidencies – Hallstein, Jenkins (1977-1981), and Delors – regarding the institutional opportunity framework of each mandate´s period as well as observing that all three former incumbents had intellectual prowess, Hallstein in the legal domain while Jenkins and Delors in the financial and economic realm.

Other comparative studies applied theoretical leadership´s framework to analyse the leadership of EC presidents. Firstly, Tömmel (2013) suggested three aspects for exhibiting political leadership: the institutional framework, the personal qualities of incumbents and the situational context. Considering that, Tömmel (2013) applied Burns ([1978], 2010) classification of leadership transactional and transformational to examine to what a certain degree these factors shape three leadership's presidents, Delors, Santer and Prodi, for exercising either a transactional or transformational leadership. While the former indicates the "basic, daily stuff of politics, the pursuit of change in the measured and often reluctant dose"; the latter concerns "alterations in entire systems" and "radical change in outward form or inner character" (Burns, 2003, pp.24-25). Tömmel (2013) acknowledged Delors´s presidency as a transformational leadership whereas Santer and Prodi predominantly acted as transactional leaders. A more recently qualitative study elaborated by Farcas (2020), relying on Young´s typology leadership framework (1889, 1991), analyses comparatively the leadership of Delors, Juncker and Von der Leyen, through candidacy and inaugural speeches, with a focus on their agenda-setting function. According to Farcas (2020), Von der Leyer presents an entrepreneurial leadership due to the fact of acting as "agenda-setter and broker by introducing environmental issues on the European agenda" (Farcas, 2020, p. 14), simultaneously, an intellectual leadership concerning "Leyen set the agenda from ground zero, proposing new approaches to existing issues, a new system of ideas that would shape thinking" (Farcas, 2020, p. 16) by inaugurating "a new vision, Green Deal" (Farcas, 2020, p. 14). However, Farcas's (2020) analysis is limited due to its time-frame analysis as well as the fact of Von der Leyen is still an incumbent, challenging a strongly conclusive statement.

Despite the variety of approaches employed in the literature, analysing political leadership through agenda-setting has attracted the attention of academics since it deals with a political function. An agenda is defined as "a collection of problems, understandings of causes, symbols, solutions, and other elements of public problems that come to the attention of members of the public and their governmental officials (Birkland, 2007, p.63; Müller, 2020, p.78). In the realm of comparative studies, Müller (2017) assessed quantitatively the agenda-setting method of three former presidents Hallstein, Delors and Barroso over their time in office. Through content analysis of speeches, Müller (2017) produced an exploratory approach based on four thematic categories: (1) "Main topics/political agenda", (2) "Main political internal/external events", (3) "EEC/EC/EU general issues", (4) "ECC/EC/EU policies" (Müller, 2017, p. 131). In fact, Müller (2017) provided insights into supranational incumbents´ agenda-setting strategies to understand their political leadership throughout the

course of European integration, concluding that "a successful agenda needs to match and be securely rooted in the situative context of each presidential term" (Müller, 2017, p. 140). Afterwards, Müller (2020) adopted a mixed method to compare systematically the agenda-setting of the three former incumbents mentioned previously. Expanding the four established categories, Müller (2020) also includes venues classification to understand the audience type, as follows: (1) "EEC/EC/EU Institutions"; (2) "National Governmental Institutions"; (3) "International Conferences"; (4) "EEC/EC/EU Civil Society Organization/Advocacy Groups" (Müller, 2020, p.80). Briefly, an outstanding agenda relies upon, four demands, *when, what, where,* and *how* the agenda is conveyed (Müller, 2020). Lastly, (Müller, 2020) concluded that Delors fulfilled effectively the all four requirements of supranational agenda-setting in comparison to the other analysed incumbents.

Specific themes on the supranational agenda also have been researched. Abels & Mushaben (2020) developed a descriptive analysis of UvdL´s first 100 days of performance to boost the EU Gender Equality Agenda. Concerning the environmental agenda, Commission presidents have exhibited little interest in engaging in environmental policy (Wurzel, 2008), however, there are some exceptions. Rietig & Dupont (2021) emphasised descriptively the role of the presidential leadership style of EC presidents, Barroso, and Juncker, in progressing climate policy integration with 'bottom-up' (hierarchical) and 'top-down' (inclusive) leadership styles, respectively, and suggested that UvdL shows a strong political commitment to environmental policy integration by adopting the European Green Deal. These studies contributed to the leadership literature, however, there is still a gap in grasping how UvdL´s leadership is characterized under the COVID-19 context through a media perspective, considering her political agenda and gender issues.

In summary, considering "the first image" Waltz (1959) which addresses individuals, represented in the figure of political leaders is a meaningful category of analysis in the International Relations field. As discussed previously, the concept of political leadership is not only associated with men holding the position but also with a gendered understanding of leadership. When this concept is applied to European supranational governance, the literature has displayed a variety of approaches to examining the political leadership of EC presidents.

1.3.   Women in political leadership

In their seminal study on women in leadership and foreign policy beliefs, Holsti & Rosenau (1981, p. 328) argued that "the foreign policy beliefs of women in leadership positions differ significantly from those of their male counterparts". They expect that:

> women will tend to have a more benign and optimistic view of the international system, to give priority to socioeconomic-humanitarian issues rather than to political-strategic concerns, and to be less inclined toward the use of military capabilities and force as a means of dealing with global issues (Holsti & Rosenau, 1981, p. 328).

However, they found marginal support for systematic difference and concluded that "whatever the differences between women and men among the entire population, their views converge at the leadership level" (Holsti & Rosenau, 1981, p.328).

Against this background, academic scholarship has focused on the underrepresentation of women in political leadership positions (Eagly & Carli, 2011; Genovese & Steckenrider, 2013; Rhode, 2017). At the same time, some authors have looked at their presence in the legislative branch – national parliaments (e.g., Celis et al., 2008; Hughes, 2013; Paxton & Hughes, 2014; Alexander, 2012, 2015; Franceschet et al., 2012). In a different vein, Bauer & Tremblay (2011) provided a global perspective [3] study of rising women representation in political executives worldwide, while Jalalzai (2014) analysed the factors that foster women in attaining political leadership positions - the presidential and prime minister (PM) - in Europe.

Other scholars focused on understanding the career path of women who achieved political leadership positions. Gillard & Okonjo-Iweala (2020) relied on the interviews with former or current presidents and PM – Jacinda Arden, Michelle Bachelet, Erna Solberg, Ellen Sirleaf, Theresa May and Joyce Banda – to understand the different pathways to power, respectively, in New Zealand, Chile, Norway, Liberia, the United Kingdom (UK) and Malawi. In a similar vein, Watson et al. (2005) produced a study of women world leaders' profiles, examining both their backgrounds and political experience to establish commonalities among them.

This literature argues that most women political leaders were well-educated and had previous political experience (Genovese, 1993; Jalalzai, 2004; Jensen, 2008; Bashevkin,

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[3] Bauer & Tremblay (2011) offered a comprehensive study of women in political executives in nine geopolitical areas: the Arab states, South and Southeast Asia, Oceania, Central and Eastern Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, North America, Western Europe.

2018). Watson et al. (2005) highlight that most women political leaders derive from moneyed families with connections to politics. Overall, scholars found a consensus that women in political leadership positions worldwide (Jalalzai, 2004; Jalalzai, 2008; Jensen, 2008; Jalalzai & Krook, 2010), in Latin America (Jalalzai, 2016) and in South and Southeast Asia (Richter, 1991; Fleschenberg, 2011) have families ties with political leaders, however, Sub-Saharan Africa is the exception (Bauer, 2011; Genovese & Steckenrider, 2013).

Another common ground in the literature concerns the challenges that women leaders deal with when attaining political leadership, symbolised in three metaphors: *concrete wall*, *glass ceiling* and *labyrinth* (Eagly & Carli, 2007). The *concrete wall* refers to barriers that completely exclude women from all positions of leadership, whereas the *glass ceiling* concerns that women attain lower-level position, but it implies that still exist a barrier preventing women to access high-level positions (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Concerning the *labyrinth* (Eagly & Carli, 2007), women political leaders face a dilemma, in which "highly communal female leaders may be criticized for not being agentic enough, but highly agentic female leaders may be criticized for lacking communion" (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p.102; Eagly & Carli, 2011, p.108). Communal features are greatly ascribed to women, described as "affectionate, helpful, kind, sympathetic, interpersonally sensitive, nurturant, and gentle"; in contrast, agentic characteristics, closely related to leadership, are attributed greatly to men, characterised as "aggressive, ambitious, dominant, forceful, independent, self-sufficient, self-confident, and prone to act as a leader" (Eagly & Karau, 2002, p.574). According to Rhode (2017) women political leaders regularly experience this double bind due to the opposing expectations:

> On the one hand, they are supposed to comply with the female role by promoting women's demands and being cooperative, warm and altruistic. On the other hand, they are supposed to comply with the role of politician by (...) being self-assertive, competent and competitive (Rhode, 2017, p. 41).

The women´s leadership literature has also focused on symbolic empowerment, as their presence in political leadership positions has been discussed as a source of symbolic importance (Denmark, 1993; Campus, 2013; Jalalzai, 2013; Rhode, 2017). As noted, "visible women in politics might function as role models and carry a kind of symbolic significance — sending the message to women citizens that politics is an inclusive domain, open to them" (Burns et al., 2001, p.351).

14

Similarly, Jalalzai (2018) adopted a global analytical approach to provide the picture of empowerment that women in presidencies and prime ministerships offer through appointments (women leaders might be more prone to appoint women to political office), policy-making (women leader's capability to suggest or enforce policies linked to women's equality), and symbolising (the visibility of women executives can boost women's political engagement in society), ultimately, exercising political impact both domestically and globally.

More recently, women's political leadership in times of crisis has drawn scholars' attention. For instance, Angela Merkel´s leadership (2005-2021), the former Chancellor of Germany, has been widely researched due to multiple crises throughout her mandates. Helms et al. (2018) analysed Merkel´s political performance in her third tenure, suggesting the presence of conviction leadership in the eurozone and refugee crises. Theoretically, Helms et al. (2018) highlight that conviction leadership seems to have affinity to Burns' conception of transformational leadership (2010 [1978]), because "transforming leaders are considered to exert a form of moral leadership that is driven by conviction" (Helms et al., 2018, p.3). They concluded that Merkel´s conviction did not come from self-interest, but by an ethical element (Helms et al., 2018).

Similarly, Helms & Van Esch (2017) applied the Leadership Capital Index (LCI) as an analytical instrument to understand to what extent Merkel retained her authority, from 2005 to 2015, throughout the eurozone crisis and the beginning phase of the refugee crisis. By using the same approach, Van Esch & Erasmy (2022) expanded the time's analysis of Merkel's leadership in managing crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. They concluded that Merkel presented a strong political capital when dealing with the Eurozone crisis (Helms & Van Esch, 2017) and the COVID-19 pandemic, encouraging her authority (Van Esch & Erasmy, 2022).

On a global scope, Abras et al. (2021) applied a gender lens to examine the role that women´s leadership play in tackling the COVID-19 pandemic in nineteen countries which have a women Head of States, suggesting that countries governed by women have a more effective performance.

Considering all this, the studies discussed are concentrated in the national contexts. Some authors outline not only women´s underrepresentation in political leadership, but also understanding the career path of women who achieved political leadership positions. Other studies focused on the challenges that women leaders deal with when attaining political leadership, whereas some scholars discuss this phenomenon in terms of symbolic empowerment, more recently, academics have been examining the women´s leadership in times of crisis.

1.3.1. Women leadership in the supranational organizations

As stated by Tickner (1992), there is a worldwide belief that "military and foreign policy are arenas of policy-making least appropriate for women" (Tickner, 1992, p. 3). Despite this assumption and the predominance of supranational organisations led by men, the presence of women leaders in these institutions in the last decades has gradually increased (Barraza Vargas, 2019), for instance at the United Nations (UN) (Haack, 2014a; Haack, 2014b) as well as in the EU (Müller & Tömmel, 2022).

When it comes to women in supranational institutions, Haack (2014a) discussed women's leadership in the UN systems. Contextual crises play a crucial role in promoting women's leadership positions, particularly in the UN' specialized agencies where the access to women´s political leadership is dependent on elections and appointments by member states (Haack, 2014a). In contrast, Jalalzai (2013) identified a marginal statistical interaction between contextual crisis and women's access to political leadership. To understand it in-depth, a further study analysed the elections of Gro Harlem Brundtland, director-general (DG) of the World Health Organisation (WHO), 1998-2003, Christine Lagarde, manager director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), 2011-2019; and Irina Bokova, DG of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), 2009-2017; Margaret Chan, DG of the WHO, 2007-2017 (Haack, 2017). This study concerns women´s political accessing to the UN agencies, the mentioned women broke the glass ceiling in context of crisis, concluding that crisis legitimize women as an appropriate candidate. In turn, when examining Margaret Chan's election, Haack (2017) suggested that since the glass ceiling has been broken, the next generation of women leaders can be successful independently of the crisis scenario.

The nature of portfolios in which women leaders are appointed in supranational organisations seems to reinforce a gendered dichotomy. In other words, there is a division between soft, female portfolios, and hard, male portfolios at the international level (Haack, 2014a; Haack, 2014b). In fact, this division "appears to map easily onto the distinction between "high politics" (security) and "low politics" (welfare, human rights and the environment)" (Haack, 2014a, p. 233). In this sense, Haack (2014a) not only asserted that women's leadership in the UN agencies is associated with soft, female portfolios, such as education, health, welfare, human rights, children, and gender but also highlighted the exceptions of women leaders in masculine portfolios, such as economic and security, respectively, Christine Lagarde in IMF and Angela Kane as UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs. Likewise, Barraza Vargas (2019), by examining discourses, using the Systematic Functional Linguistics theory, and policy agendas of Sadako Ogata and Ruud Lubbers of UN Higher Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), argued that women leaders in International Organizations (IO) are more prone for adopting social policies in comparison to their male counterparts by virtue of being socialised in acting as caregivers.

Among women leaders at the international level, Christine Lagarde has been the most studied by scholars. Catherine & Martins (2020) case study focused on Lagarde, the pioneer woman managing the IMF, identifying four elements, "idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individual consideration" (Catherine & Martins, 2020, p.47), that characterised her transformational leadership. Kapusuzoğlu & Eriçok (2018) qualitatively analysed Lagarde's life story to understand her leadership style in the context of women's leadership, concluding that the fact of Lagarde being in a top position can indicate a source of inspiration for women to achieve leadership positions. Verdun (2022) qualitatively explored her leadership performance as president of the European Central Bank (ECB) in reaction to the COVID-19, finding that Largade stressed issues of gender equality, among other issues, and sought to perform a clear public communication.

When it comes to women's leadership in the EU scope, the book *Women's Leadership in the European Union* written by Müller & Tömmel (2022) offers the first contribution to women's leadership in a supranational European setting, particularly within European institutions. The referred book produced an analytical framework through combining the literature of women´s access to leadership and the exercise of political leadership in EU institutions, whether intergovernmental or supranational (Müller & Tömmel, 2022).

1.3.2. The media coverage of women politician

As politics has turned mediatized (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999), the media coverage of women political leaders has received prominence in the literature. According to Campus (2013), the media coverage of women political leaders concerns visibility, both quantitatively and qualitatively. The visibility of women politicians has been researched, especially in comparison to man counterparts (Kahn 1996; Norris, 1997; Devit, 2002; Bystrom et al., 2004; Van der Pas & Aaldering, 2020). Qualitatively, a common matter of media coverage on women leaders focuses on appearance, personal traits, and family relationships (Campus, 2013).

The scholarship on the topic, however, it is not unanimous. Norris (1997) outlined that the press draws smaller attention to women leaders than men, even a renowned woman such as Margaret Thatcher, whereas Devit (2002), Bystrom et al. (2004) and Wiliarty (2010) suggested a more gender-balanced in amount of coverage on political candidates. As observed by Campus (2013), there is an increasing pattern that women leaders have received more visibility on mass media in quantitative terms, compared to the past.

The analysis of the United States (US) Senate and gubernatorial races elaborated by Bystrom et al. (2004) and the cross-national research developed by Kittilson & Fridkin (2008) illustrates common findings, suggesting that the press associate often "male issues" (e.g., military, economy, foreign policy) to man candidates while "female issues" (e.g., health care, education, social welfare, environment) to women candidate´s coverage. As most of the studies shows that media analysis of political campaigns tends to cover more "male" issues in comparison to "female" issues[4] (Kahn & Goldenberg, 1991; Kahn, 1996), women, therefore, receive less visibility. However, Bystrom et al. (2004) indicated that a "male issue", such as international affairs, was substantially connected to women political candidates due to the prominence of international circumstances, for instance, focus on Palestinian-Israel relations in Hillary Cliton´s US senate campaign in 2000.

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[4] Male" and "female" issues are classifications based on sex stereotypes (Kahn, 1994; Kahn, 1996), in which "male" issues are those linked to which men are seen more competent while "female" issues that women are considered more qualified.

Much evidence supports media reference to women politician's physical appearance such as clothes, shoes and hairstyle, and marital status (Kahn, 1996; Devit, 2002; Bystrom et al., 2004; Byerly & Ross, 2006; Fowler & Lawless, 2009; Murray, 2010; Campus, 2013; Rhode, 2017; Gillard & Okonjo-Iweala, 2020; Van der Pas & Aaldering, 2020). Furthermore, on the contrary to men, women political leaders are usually mentioned by their first name, either alone or together with their surnames (Campus, 2013; Murray, 2010). As the meta-analysis of 90 studies developed by Van der Pas & Aaldering (2020) has shown that most of the research on media coverage of women politicians is highly concentrated in North America, calling for further research to expand this field outside this region.

Media coverage performs a significant role in the gendered representation of both women leaders and women candidates to hold political executive leadership (Murray, 2010; Elliot & Stead, 2017). The book *Cracking the Highest Glass Ceiling: A Global Comparison of Women Campaigns for Executive Office* edited by Murray (2010) provides several cases studies which applied a framework based on three central components of gendered media coverage with sub-categories: gender stereotypes (traits, ideology, issues); media framing (appearance, first name, first woman, change, wife of, emotions, the volume of coverage compared to men candidates); the mixed effect of the previous categories creates the third one, namely double binds – masculine/feminine, young/old, experience/change, connected/independent, silence/shame (Murray, 2010).

By employing this framework and, simultaneously, relying on different media sources, the comparative study offers a qualitatively analyses of media coverage on women, comparing women who have not succeeded and those who achieved holding political office. The contend analysis showed that no significant presence was found for the component gender stereotype. Regarding the second one, media framing was predominant focused on appearance. And finally, among the types of double binds, the feminine/masculine double bind is seemed to be a central hurdle (Murray, 2010).

The scholarship also highlights how very often metaphors and stereotypes have been used in media to cover women in political leadership positions to minimize women´s leadership (Elliot & Stead, 2017; Baxter, 2018). Three stereotypes are commonly used in media coverage to describe women political leaders: "queen bee", "iron maiden", and "selfless heroine" (Elliot & Stead, 2017, pp.351-353). The "queen bee" metaphor is applied when women in higher positions do not support their woman colleagues, the "iron maiden" metaphor refers to women who adopt masculine traits and characteristics when exercising leadership, and finally, the "selfless heroine" metaphor displays women as duty bound and self-sacrificing, this stereotype is linked to motherhood (Elliot & Stead, 2017).

Baxter (2018) analyses women leader stereotypes: "iron maiden or battle-axe", "seductress", "mother or school marm", "pet", and "queen bee" (Baxter, 2018, pp.26-32). The "mother o school marm" refers to a traditional role of authority, often situated within the domestic and private family´s circle or conventionally feminine occupations. The "seductress" refers to the objectified view of woman serving a man; and finally, "pet" stereotype is applied to women to symbolize cuteness and innocence (Baxter, 2018). The author analysed the British press coverage on women leaders. In the case of Theresa May´s leadership, the former British PM (2016-2019), Baxter (2018, p.39) states that "the repeated use of the term 'Mrs. May' throughout the article suggests that TM is primarily a wife and that her actions in the role of PM may be at odds with her normative gender identity" (Baxter, 2018, p.39). Thus, this coverage not only undermines May´s leadership but associates her political functions to her husband. Despite that, Theresa May is constructed as an iron maiden due to the use of violent and military imagery (Baxter, 2018).

Likewise, Eckert & Galpin (2022) sought to comprehend through a gender lens how May´s performance has been evaluated by tabloids and quality newspapers produced in Germany and UK and the type of May´s leadership exercised during the Brexit negotiations. The results of media analysis concludes that May´s leadership is portrayed as a balanced one, according to them, it "playing a caring and communal role while at the same time with displaying strong leadership in masculine terms", signalling that "though May herself largely avoided militaristic language in discussing the Brexit negotiations, the newspaper did not, with her leadership frequently described in the language of war and defeat" (Eckert & Galpin, 2022, p.226).

In conclusion, the literature review shows gaps, providing avenues to develop this dissertation. Scholars have widely studied women in political leadership at the national level while the international one is still emerging. Given her recent role as a political leader compared to other women political leaders, studies on UvdL are scarce. There are a few studies that assess her leadership with a limited time frame analysis, as she is the current incumbent, and studies examining her political leadership in the EC from the media perspective are still lacking. The literature on media coverage of women political leaders predominantly adopts a national scope emphasizing on women political candidates, particularly many of the analysis is traditionally focused on the North America and, more recently in the UK. In turn, this restricted view offers a horizon to extend for a regional organization, such as the EU.

CHAPTER 2

Methodology

Considering the literature review previously presented, this chapter provides the research design that supports this thesis methodologically, in other words, the structure of analytical approach to answer the following research question:

How Ursula von der Leyen´s political leadership is framed by the European press from December 2019 to September 2021?

To do so, firstly, it introduces the objectives of this thesis. The second part introduces the theoretical framework. The third section, following Thematic Analysis (TA) as a methodological tool, designs the thesis analytical framework, describing the process of collection of headlines from newspaper articles, explaining the development to create themes aiming to analyse headlines as well as justifying the decisions made, ultimately, presenting the systematic coding scheme to be conducted on a computer program.

2.1.   The objectives of analysis

In this dissertation, research object is developed under the problematization of Ursula von der Leyen becoming the first woman as EC president. As the presence of women in political leadership has been argued in the literature as a source of symbolic significance, in turn, it highlights the importance to examine if it occurs in the case of UvdL via media channels. As discussed previously, political leadership in EC is "mediatized" (Müller, 2020, p.184) which supports the relevance to examine the leadership of UvdL from a media perspective.

The focus of this monograph analysis consists of examining leadership through agenda-setting, as it is seen as a political function of the EC (Müller, 2020), as indicated in Lisbon Treaty (2009), the EC president is responsible to "lay down the guidelines within which the Commission is to work" (Art. 17 (6) TEU), thus through establishing the political guidelines the EC president exhibits political leadership. This dissertation follows a theoretical framework on agenda-setting produced by Müller (2016; 2017; 2020) to study political leadership exercised by EC presidents based on four thematic categories, as follows: 1) "Main topics/political agenda", (2) "Main political internal/external events", (3) "EEC/EC/EU general issues", (4) "ECC/EC/EU policies". We opted to use only the three first categories, as

from the initial analysis it was possible to grasp that overall UvdL´s agenda already correlates with the EU policies.

By adapting the above-mentioned theoretical framework to our purposes, this study's main objective is: to assess Ursula von der Leyen´s political leadership from the media perspective. More specifically, this investigation seeks (1) To characterize Ursula von der Leyen´s political leadership through agenda-setting (the pillars of political agenda that receives visibility, main political events and EU issues), and the tone coverage in media discourses;(2) To identify whether there is a symbolic empowerment presence in media outlets of Ursula von der Leyen. These objectives allow to examine political leadership from a constructivist perspective.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

Constructivism acknowledges a socially reality-oriented, in which "the beliefs and meanings that people create and use fundamentally shape what reality is for them" (Neuman, 2014, p.104). Against this background, "mass media creates their own reality" (Risse, 2010, p.113) because "media frames influence opinions by stressing specific values, facts, or other considerations, endowing them with greater apparent relevance to the issue than they might appear to have under an alternative frame" (Nelson et al., 1997, p.569).

When studying political leadership, "constructivists exhibit both a skeptical ontology and epistemology" (Elgie, 2015, p.78). Constructivist account highlights political leadership as a relational process, understanding political leadership as "a co-created, performative, contextual, and attributional process where the ideas articulated in talk or actions are recognized by others" (Barge & Fairhurst, 2008, p.232).

Political leadership is contextualized in "a specific situation and is recognized in the response of the followers to individual acts and speeches" (Eldeman, 1964 [1985] p.75). Specifically, the performative accounts of political leadership highlight the creation of social reality through language (Elgie, 2015), reinforcing "[political] leadership as a phenomenon which is created through language use and communication" (Takala et al., 2012, p.149). From that, discourse emerges as an amalgam of language and communication (Barge & Fairhurst, 2008) as discourse "applies either to written or spoken language that is used for some communicative purpose" (Ellis, 1999, p.81). Through media discourses, the European press communicates to their audience an evaluation of leadership´s performance because "some frames to be inherently valenced while others appear to be more neutral. By valence [they]

mean that some frames are indicative of 'good and bad' and (implicitly) carry positive and/or negative elements" (Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2003, p.363).

2.3.   Methodological Framework

To achieve the general objective of this dissertation, we selected a total of four quality newspapers from different European countries. Traditionally, the research on political leadership in the European scope is highly focused on UK national media (Tömmel & Verdun, 2017). To expand it, we decided to choose both quality and high circulation newspapers from other European countries (Table 2.2.1). Despite UvdL is still an incumbent, the time frame of this dissertation delimits on striking months of her political leadership, it commences with the beginning of Ursula Von der Leyen´s mandate in December 2019 until the end of September 2021 when UvdL delivers the second State of the Union address[5], on 15 September 2021. Aiming at covering this period comprehensively, we collected online published journalistic articles in the referred newspapers from 1st December 2019, until 30 September 2021, using Brandwatch, social media analytical instrument. The search is carried out with keywords in titles with the following *query structure*[6] (Figure 2.2.1)

Table 2.2.1. Newspapers selection

Country	Newspaper
United Kingdom	*The Guardian*
Portugal	*Público*
France	*Le Monde*
Spain	*El País*

Figure 2.2.1. The search of keywords

```
title:"ursula von der leyen" OR title:"der leyen" OR
title:("présidente" NEAR/5 "commission européenne") OR
title:("présidente" NEAR/5 "CE") OR
title:("president" NEAR/5 "EU comission") OR
title:("president" NEAR/5 "EC") OR
title:("president" NEAR/5 "european comission") OR
title:("presidente" NEAR/5 "comissão europeia") OR
title:("presidente" NEAR/5 "CE") OR
title:(("presidente" OR "presidenta") NEAR/5 "comisión europea") OR
title:(("presidente" OR "presidenta") NEAR/5 "CE")
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[5] In September each year, the EC president announces the State of the Union address to EP, which highlights accomplishments of the past year as well as presenting priorities for the following year (European Commission, n.d.-b).

[6] It refers to the solicitation of information from the database.

The terms "ursula von der leyen" or simply "der leyen" was searched in the titles. Afterwards, the algorithm was also asked to look for pairs of expressions that were not more than 5 words apart (see Figure 2.2.1, the expressions in the lines with NEAR/5). This search collected a total of 204 articles: 48, *The Guardian*, 67, *Público*; 32, *Le Monde*; 57, *El País* (Annexe A). There is a concentration of articles on the days that UvdL proclaimed speech, namely the State of Union address on 16 September 2020 and the speech on the state of play of the EU's COVID-19 Vaccination Strategy on 10 February 2021, finally, the State of Union address on 15 September 2021. Due to resource constraints, given that access to all integral articles demanded a paid subscription; we opted that the material of analysis would consist only of headlines from the collected data.

Headlines "act as a summary of news texts" (van Dijk, 1988, p.36). However, headlines could be divided, as those that "a summary of the story" or those that "rather than summarize the story, promote one of the details of the story" (Dor, 2003, p.697). Regardless of this distinction, they have a crucial role in readers' understanding of the news text because "news headlines are first and on top and for that reason are markers that monitor attention, perception and the reading process" (van Dijk, 1988, p.141). Indeed, news headlines usually predetermine whether the readers decide to read wholly the text (Thogmartin, 1991). Lastly, headlines impact readers because they "produce the same recall effects as reading the whole news stories" (van Dijk, 1988, p.152).

To analyse UvdL´s political leadership from a constructivist perspective, qualitative research method allows to interpret the data within a specific social context and enables deriving analytical themes, thus arranging data to build a coherent picture of her political leadership through a media lens. In this logic, employing Thematic Analysis (TA) to examine headlines emerges as an adequate methodological tool, because it is "a method for developing, analysing and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset, which involves systematic processes of data coding to develop themes – themes are your ultimate purpose" (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 4).

Researchers can apply a deductive or inductive approach to identify themes (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Kiger & Varpio, 2020). In this dissertation, we will follow a hybrid approach of deductive and inductive coding, which means, respectively, that some themes rely on a pre-existing theory or framework), while other themes are data-driven (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Kiger & Varpio, 2020). We will consider themes either semantic meaning at the explicit level or latent meaning which scrutinise connotation at the implicit level. These approaches are neither mutually exclusive nor indicate binary choices (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

We decided to follow the guide provided by Braun & Clarke (2006) to conduct our TA, which is summarised later as a "six-phases process – starting with dataset familiarisation, moving into a rigorous and systematic coding process, before starting to explore, develop, review, and refine theme, and finally producing the written analytic report" (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p.34). When applying it to headlines, our empirical analysis follows the six-phases process. These are: 1. "Familiarizing yourself with your data"; 2. "Generating initial codes"; 3. "Searching for themes"; 4. "Reviewing themes"; 5. "Defining and naming themes"; 6. "Producing the report" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.87).

To become familiarised with the dataset, the first phase involves the transcribing of data in Excel sheets, a skim reading of the headlines to obtain an overview of the collected data and an exploratory analysis with a small sample of 50 headlines.

The second step concerns generating primary codes, this phase seeks in the literature categories to study the agenda-setting of EC presidents. As a result, the following codes were considered: (1) "Main topics/political agenda", (2) "Main political internal/external events", (3) "EEC/EC/EU general issues" (Müller, 2016; 2017; 2020). In addition, Müller (2020) evaluated tone [7] coverage (positive, negative, neutral) in newspapers to study the EC president's public performance. The code tone is introduced with the aim to comprehend how newspapers evaluate UvdL´s political leadership. Basically, this code indicates whether occurs a positive, negative, or neutral bias in the headlines. These referred codes are established aiming to achieve the first specific objective of this dissertation, while we decide to include the code "Discourse" to reach the second one.

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[7] Articles are coded positive, negative, and neutral, respectively, when "directly or indirectly" approving and supporting, criticising, ultimately, showing neither support nor criticism of "the Commission president´s agenda, presidency, action, or leadership style" (Müller, 2020, p.187).

When it comes to the third phase, we identified potential themes. The code "Tone" relies on Müller´s framework (2020), considering the following themes: *negative, positive,* and *neutral*. Following an inductive approach, the code "Discourse" results in 3 themes: *indirect, direct,* and *indirect free*. These themes will focus on punctuation marks to understand whether discourses give a voice to UvdL, thus expressing a source of symbolic empowerment. Considering that agenda of the UvdL Commission (2019-2024) involves six priorities, these pillars generate deductively themes for the code "Political Agenda": *European Green Deal; European economy; European digitalization; European values; Geostrategic lead; European democracy*. It is worth noting that each theme includes related policy areas, which it will be considered during the encoding process. For the code "Main Political Internal/External events", themes are data-driven: *COVID-19 pandemic; Brexit; Sofagate; Afghanistan humanitarian crisis*. The themes related to the code "EU issues" are established through inductive coding, as follows: *military, foreign policy, economy, environment, health,* and *social welfare*.

The following steps require researcher flexibility as thematic analysis is "more a recursive process" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.86) which demands flexibility with back-and-forth movement throughout the process because "thematic analysis by its nature can only be developed over time" (Ely et al.,1997, pp. 209-210). Considering that, reviewing themes as well as defining and naming themes is a constant process throughout our analysis until to complete the code scheme (Annexe B). To enhance the internal validity of this qualitative research, we decide to conduct the thematic analysis with the software programme MAXQDA which allows considering the connections between themes to a detailed account of UvdL´s political leadership. In order to overcome the pitfalls of subjectivity, the coding process consists of codification in different moments to guarantee a coherent codification as well as the existence of a codebook to guide the coding process. Following the codification process, the final phase concerns the writing of the next chapters when the results are presented and examined.

Findings & Discussion of Headline Analysis

This chapter consists of two main sections, firstly, presenting findings, followed, by the discussion of results. It constructs an empirical basis to answer our research question: How Ursula von der Leyen´s political leadership is framed by the European press from December 2019 to September 2021?

3.1. Findings

This presents the findings from thematic analysis carried out in MAXQDA software aiming at grasping how UvdL´s political leadership is framed by the European press. To do so, we examine the headlines in their original language of four European newspapers: *The Guardian*; *Público*; *Le Monde*; *El País.*

3.1.1. Tone & Discourse

When evaluating tone coverage, we found a predominance of neutral tone in the headlines analysis (Annexe C). This tone implies the absence of words either negative or positive connotations, thus presenting a more impartial and objective perspective. Tone and Discourse are the most subjective codes in our analysis; however, the textual elements provide consistency in the coding process.

When it comes to political events, the COVID-19 pandemic, Brexit and Afghanistan humanitarian crisis are covered with a neutral tone alluding narratives to update readers about these referred events. (Table 3.1.1.1)

Table 3.1.1.1. Headlines with a neutral tone

Neutral Tone
Johnson and Von der Leyen extend Brexit talks by a month (The Guardian, 03/10/2020)
Von der Leyen y Johnson se reunirán en Bruselas para tratar de llegar a un acuerdo pos-Brexit (El País, 08/12/2020)
Ursula von der Leyen tente de dessiner l'Europe de l'après-Covid (Le Monde, 17/09/2021)
Covid 19: na produção de vacinas, a indústria precisa de se adaptar ao ritmo da ciência, diz Von der Leyen (Público, 10/02/2021)

The negative tone is present, for instance, when headlines address the Sofagate. Aiming to illustrate the negative tone, we explore the context of the following headline*: Union européenne: between Charles Michel and Ursula von der Leyen, a permanent rivalry* (Le Monde, 15/06/2021). This headline refers that Sofagate triggered tensions between the leaders of two European institutions, UvdL and Charles Michel who is the president of the European Council. (Table 3.1.1.2)

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic being framed with a neutral tone, a negative tone was present due to the clash with AstraZeneca, which delayed the schedule for delivering coronavirus doses, thus damaging UvdL´s leadership credibility amid the COVID-19 pandemic. This is illustrated in the following headline: *The clashes with London and AstraZeneca undermine the credibility of Von der Leyen in the middle of the crisis* (El País,02/02/2021) (Table 3.1.1.2)

In the negative evaluations, words charged with an explicit or implicit negative connotation were identified, such as: "disgrace", "victim", "blame", "permanent rivalry", "undermine" [8] reflect a negative tone. (Table 3.1.1.2)

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[8] In the original: "disgrace", "victime", "blâme", "rivalité permanente", "socavan"

Table 3.1.1.2. Headlines with a negative tone

Negative Tone
*German minister criticises Von der Leyen over Covid vaccines **'disgrace'*** (The Guardian, 04/02/2021)
*Ursula von der Leyen **victime d'une faute sexiste** de protocole: la Turquie **blâme** l'Union européenne* (Le Monde, 09/04/2021)
*Union européenne : entre Charles Michel et Ursula von der Leyen, une **rivalité permanente*** (Le Monde, 15/06/2021)
*Los choques con Londres y AstraZeneca **socavan** la credibilidad de Von der Leyen en plena crisis* (El País, 02/02/2021)

The positive tone alludes to words or expressions with an affirmative overtone. The positive tone is evident on the first day of UvdL´s mandate: *There was no better day for Ursula Von der Leyen to inherit the "treasure" that is the European Union* (Público, 01/12/2019). Thus, the inauguration of UvdL´s mandate on the European Commission is portrayed as positive. (Table 3.1.1.3)

Aiming to illustrate the positive tone, we explore the context of the following headline*: Ursula von der Leyen: "The European vaccination strategy is the right one*" (Le Monde, 01/02/2021). This headline concerns UvdL proclaiming the European vaccination strategy, thus projecting the EU as a regional reference under a pandemic context. (Table 3.1.1.3)

In the positive evaluations, words charged with an explicit or implicit positive connotation were identified, such as: "better progress", "treasure", "right", "We are together in this"[9]. (Table 3.1.1.3)

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[9] In the original: "better progress"; "tesouro", "bonne", "Estamos nisto juntos".

Table 3.1.1.3. Headlines with a positive tone

Positive Tone
*Brexit talks making **better progress**, says Ursula von der Leyen* (The Guardian, 20/11/2020)
*Não havia melhor dia para Ursula Von der Leyen herdar o "**tesouro**" que é a União Europeia* (Público, 01/12/2019)
*Ursula von der Leyen: «La stratégie de vaccination européenne est la **bonne** »* (Le Monde, 01/02/2021)
*Von der Leyen diz que a Pfizer assegura vacinas para o primeiro trimestre e garante unidade: '**Estamos nisto juntos'*** (Público, 15/01/2021)

When it comes to media discourse, the headline analysis shows us the predominance of indirect discourse. (Annexe C) In this typology, there is the presence of the narrator's voice, in this case, expressing the media perspective. This can be observed by subordinate clauses, reporting verbs or the complete absence of specific punctuation marks (quotation marks, dash, colon, and guillemet).

The indirect discourse is illustrated in the following headline: *Merkel and Von der Leyen, the two friends and political allies will lead Europe*[10] (Público, 01/07/2020). It is worth noting that this headline refers to Merkel, indicating the political alliance between them moved from the German national to the European regional level. Also, this headline presents a gender bias due to referring to them as two friends, thus removing the political tone of their meeting.

Conversely, direct discourse introduces the referred punctuation marks. The direct discourse parallels the authentic voice of Ursula von der Leyen as most of the headlines codified with this arrangement represent her proclaimed phrases. We explore the two following examples: (1) *Von der Leyen on sofagate:"I felt hurt, alone, as a woman and as a European"*[11] (Público, 26/04/2021)*; Sofagate' snub would not have happened to a man – Von der Leyen* (The Guardian, 26/04/2021). Both headlines present a direct discourse by quoting her speech, thus the media publicly support her statements.

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[10] In the original: *Merkel e Von der Leyen, as duas amigas e aliadas políticas vão dirigir a Europa* (Público, 01/07/2020).

[11] In the original: *Von der Leyen sobre o sofagate:"Senti-me magoada, sozinha, como mulher e como europeia"* (Público, 26/04/2021)

The first headline employs quotation marks and colons to enhance the voice of UvdL. It highlights her multiple identities, as a woman and a European citizen. The second headline uses a dash to give voice to UvdL in an emblematic event caused by gender discrimination. Thus, it becomes clear that when framing the Sofagate there is the presence of direct media discourse.

In comparison, the indirect discourse is less relevant in our analysis, since it combines elements of the two previous typologies, consequently, merging the media perspective and Ursula von der Leyen´s words. The following example shows the combination of textual elements of direct discourse by using guillemet and indirect speech due to the presence of a reporting phrase: *"I felt hurt": after the "sofagate", Ursula von der Leyen puts respect for women's rights as a prerequisite for dialogue with Turkey[12]* (Le Monde, 26/04/2021)

Thus, the tone contributes to understanding the public performance of UvdL while the discourse allows us to identify whether there is a symbolic importance of being both a woman and an EC president. Overall, the tone coverage is predominantly neutral while indirect discourse is prevalent in our thematic analysis.

3.1.2. Main Political Internal & External Events

Our findings allow us to understand the role of major political internal/external events on the coverage of UvdL´s political leadership by the press. When it comes to indicating statistics by qualitative group, the theme COVID-19 pandemic (44%) is the most relevant event in our analysis while *Brexit* (38%) is in second place. Following, Sofagate (15%) and Afghanistan Humanitarian Crisis (3%) draw the media's attention to a lesser extent when portraying UvdL´s political leadership. (Annexe C) The analysis provides examples of positive and negative words framing the tone coverage of the main political events (Annexe D).

The COVID-19 pandemic is crucial to understand how the UvdL´s political leadership is framed by the media. This event plays a role not only in orienting how the UvdL´s agenda-setting is framed by the media but also in reinforcing the idea that her leadership takes place in a context of an unprecedented situation.

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[12] In the original: *« Je me suis sentie blessée » : après le « sofagate », Ursula von der Leyen pose le respect des droits des femmes comme préalable au dialogue avec la Turquie* (Le Monde, 26/04/2021)

The tone coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic is mainly neutral; however, it is more inclined to a positive than negative one. On the day of UvdL´s speech on the state of play of the EU's COVID-19 Vaccination Strategy on 10 February 2021, the tone coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic is negative due to the delay in the EU´s COVID-19 vaccination schedule. In the subsequent months, the referred pandemic is portrayed with a positive tone, since UvdL enhances that the EU has achieved the coronavirus vaccine target, her leadership gain more credibility from the media. (Table 3.1.2.1, see annexe E for headlines in the original)

Table 3.1.2.1. COVID-19 pandemic

Headline	Tone (%)	Discourse
Ursula von der Leyen backs authorisation mechanism for Covid vaccine exports (The Guardian, 26/03/2021)	Neutral (55,2%)	Indirect
Covid-19 vaccines: Ursula von der Leyen admits EU failures (Le Monde, 10/02/2021)	Negative (20,7%)	
Ursula von der Leyen says EU has reached Covid vaccine target (The Guardian, 10/07/2021)	Positive (24,1%)	

Likewise, the political leadership of UvdL is marked by Brexit. It is seen as a historic event in the process of European integration. Despite its political and economic importance, this event is mostly covered with a neutral tone, as well as an equal percentage of headlines codified with negative and positive overtone. (Table 3.1.2.2, see annexe E for headlines in the original)

As illustrated in the table below, the negative tone refers to the faultlines of the trade deal. The headline with the positive tone is published on the day that marks the ending of a long process of negotiations, indeed, a remarkable moment in economic and trade terms after the United Kingdom left the EU. The positive tone reflects an agreement that frames a win-win situation for both parties, in which the UvdL´s leadership was crucial to achieving this outcome.

Table 3.1.2.2. Brexit

Headline	Tone (%)	Discourse
Brexit: Johnson to go to Brussels for face-to-face meeting with Von der Leyen (The Guardian, 07/12/2020)	Neutral (72,6%)	Indirect
Johnson's first meeting with Von der Leyen lays trade deal faultlines bare (The Guardian, 09/01/2020)	Negative (13,7%)	
Brexit: an agreement "good for Europe and the United Kingdom", welcomes Ursula von der Leyen (Le Monde, 24/12/2020)	Positive (13,7%)	Direct

Faced with the role of representing internationally the European Union, UvdL deals with the Afghanistan humanitarian crisis. This event presents a neutral tone coverage and a balanced of headlines codified with positive and negative overtone. The referred external event also employs direct discourse reinforcing her commitment to human rights and the EU's humanitarian role. (Table 3.1.2.3, see annexe E for headlines in the original)

Table 3.1.2.3. Afghanistan humanitarian crisis

Headline	Tone (%)	Discourse
Afghanistan: Von der Leyen: 'The 1,000 million humanitarian aid is conditional on human rights (El País, 21/08/2021)	Neutral (50%)	Direct
Von der Leyen, from Torrejón: "There are no political talks with the Taliban, there is no recognition" (El País, 21/08/2021)	Negative (25%)	
Von der Leyen considers the reception of Afghans in Spain "an example of the European soul" (El País, 21/08/2021)	Positive (25%)	Indirect Free

The Sofagate is seen as a unique event for the EC president regarding media framing of her leadership as a woman in the leadership position. It is the most complex event to analyse the tone coverage, given that words employed to portray this event are negative, however, a semantic evaluation unveils it positive tone.

With this in mind, we observe that the qualitative content in indirect media discourses consists of public disapproval of the Sofagate and mobilizing awareness to avoid the recurrence of similar circumstances in the future. Indeed, the European press supports UvdL´s statements. (Table 3.1.2.4, see annexe E for headlines in the original)

Table 3.1.2.4. Sofagate

Headline	Tone (%)	Discourse
Von der Leyen didn't have the right to a chair during a meeting with Erdogan — and the sofagate was born (Público, 07/04/2021)	Neutral (15%)	Indirect
Von der Leyen warns that she will not allow another rudeness like Ankara's against foreign leaders (El País, 12/04/2021)	Negative (80%)	
Charles Michel apologizes to Ursula von der Leyen and asks to turn the page (El País, 13/04/2021)	Positive (5%)	

3.1.3. Political Agenda & EU issues

The findings regarding the code Political Agenda indicate the prevalence of *European values*[13] pillar representing 56% of the agenda-setting (Annexe C). Most of the headlines codified in this theme concern the performance of UvdL in response to the European Health Union policy area, more specifically the COVID-19 pandemic. (Table 3.1.3.1, see Annexe F for headlines in the original)

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[13] This priority involves wide-ranging policies areas, such as Consumer protection, Education and training, European Health Union, European Security Union, Fundamental rights, Judicial cooperation, New Pact on Migration and Asylum, Rule of Law. (European Commission, n.d.-c)

Table 3.1.3.1. Headlines codified in European values

Headline	Tone	EU issue	Event
Covid 19: in the production of vaccines, the industry needs to adapt to the pace of science, says Von der Leyen (Público, 10/02/2021)	Neutral (46%)	Health	Covid-19 pandemic
German minister criticises Von der Leyen over Covid vaccines 'disgrace' (The Guardian, 04/02/2021)	Negative (23%)		
Covid-19: Von der Leyen sees 'light at the end of the tunnel' with vaccines in the EU before the end of the year (Público, 02/12/2020)	Positive (31%)		

Moreover, the findings from the theme European values refer, respectively, to the European way of life, fundamental rights and the EU´s migration (Table 3.1.3.2, see Annexe F for headlines in the original)

Table 3.1.3.2. Headlines codified in European values

Headline	Tone
Von der Leyen: "With the new passport, Europeans will be able to travel again" (El País, 17/03/2021)	Neutral
Hungarian law discriminating against LGBT+ population 'is a disgrace', says Ursula von der Leyen (Público, 24/06/2021)	Negative
Ursula von der Leyen: "This solidarity is at the very heart of Europe and this is what will allow it to be reborn" (Le Monde, 03/04/2020)	Positive
Von der Leyen: "The EU needs a migration pact that is effective and humane" (El País, 18/09/2020)	

The theme *European economy* [14] is the second most relevant in the agenda-setting, representing 16% (Annexe C). It connects, both explicitly or implicitly, to financial instability and the COVID-19 pandemic (Table 3.1.3.3, see Annexe F for headlines in the original).

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[14] This priority involves wide-ranging policies areas, such as a deeper economic and monetary union, Internal market, Jobs, growth, and investment, and Youth employment support (European Commission, n.d.-d).

Table 3.1.3.3. Headlines codified in European economy

Headline	Tone (%)	EU issue	Event
Von der Leyen signs off first of EU's Covid recovery fund plans (The Guardian, 16/06/2021)	Neutral (64%)	Economy	Covid-19 pandemic
Von der Leyen describes coronabonds as "a mere slogan" but does not exclude "no option" in the response to the crisis (Público, 29/03/2020)	Negative (18%)		
Von der Leyen confident in the ratification of the 'european bazooka' by the 27 by the end of the year (Público, 01/10/2020)	Positive (18%)		

Two headlines explore the connection between European economy agenda with economic issues at the implicit level: (1) *Von der Leyen: Next multi-year framework "must be our Marshall Plan"*[15] (Público, 02/04/2020); (2) *Ursula von der Leyen on tour to defend the recovery plan for Europe*[16] (Le Monde, 16/06/2021).

In the first example, it is attributed to a new meaning for the word "Plano Marshall", alluding to the economic plan carried out after the Second World War to reconstruct Europe, at this time, indicating the economic plan to deal with the effects triggered by the recent pandemic crisis. Concerning the second example which exhibits an absence of direct reference to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, it implies that the recovery plan for Europe signalizes the economic support for recovery in a post-COVID-19 scene. In addition, some headlines codified in the European economy is related to social welfare issues: *Von der Leyen announces the creation of a work Erasmus for unemployed* young *people*[17] (El País, 15/09/2021).

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[15] In the original*: Von der Leyen: próximo quadro plurianual "deve ser o nosso Plano Marshall"* (Público, 02/04/2020).

[16] In the original: *Ursula von der Leyen en tournée pour défendre le plan de relance européen* (Le Monde, 16/06/2021).

[17] In the original: *Von der Leyen anuncia la creación de un Erasmus laboral para jóvenes desempleados* (El País, 15/09/2021).

The theme *Geostrategic lead* [18] concerns the third relevant pillar in the agenda, representing 13% (Annexe C). Headlines codified as Geostrategic lead is related to manifold EU issues, indeed, to a greater recurrence of foreign policy and military issues whereas economy and health issues to a minor degree. (Table 3.1.3.4, see Annexe G for headlines in the original)

Table 3.1.3.4. Headlines codified in Geostrategic lead

Headline	Tone	EU issue
Von der Leyen: EU must acquire 'political will' to build own military (The Guardian, 15/09/2021)	Neutral (70%)	Military
Von der Leyen asks the Veintisiete for sanctions for violent repression in Belarus (El País, 14/08/2020)	Negative (15%)	Foreign policy
Von der Leyen wants to improve EU preparedness and response capacity in health and defense (Público, 15/09/2021) *	Positive (15%)	Health/Military

*It was codified in two agendas: European Values and Geostrategic lead

The following headline codified as Geostrategic lead shows a connection to economy issues: *Mrs. Von der Leyen, "we must purely and simply abandon the trade agreement between the European Union and Mercosur"*[19](Le Monde, 05/05/2021).

It is worth noting that some headlines within geostrategic lead agenda is connected to an external political event, namely Afghanistan humanitarian crisis, e.g., *Afghanistan: Von der Leyen: 'The 1,000 million humanitarian aid is conditional on human rights'*[20] (El País, 21/08/2021). On one hand, this headline refers to Europe´s geostrategic lead by referring humanitarian aid; on the other hand, it refers another priority in the agenda-setting, European values, by mentioning human rights as a condition for humanitarian aid. Thus, some headlines merge more than one priority in agenda-setting.

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[18] This priority involves wide-ranging policies areas, such as EU´s development policy, Africa-EU partnership, European neighborhood, EU enlargement, Humanitarian aid and civil protection, EU and rules-based international cooperation, Security and defense, Trade policy, Relations with partners around the world. (European Commission, n.d.-e)

[19] In the original*: Mme Von der Leyen, « il faut abandonner purement et simplement l'accord commercial entre l'Union européenne et le Mercosur »* (Le Monde, 05/05/2021)

[20] In the original: *Afganistán: Von der Leyen: 'Los 1.000 millones de ayuda humanitaria están condicionados a los derechos humanos'* (El País, 21/08/2021).

In fourth place, the theme *European Green Deal* represents 11% of the agenda (Annexe C). This theme is intrinsically connected to another theme, namely environmental issues. There are headlines that deal with this agenda, simultaneously, highlighting its relation to environment in a more explicit manner. (Table 3.1.3.5, see Annexe G for headlines in the original)

Table 3.1.3.5. Headlines codified in the European Green Deal

Headline	Tone	EU issue
Ursula von der Leyen: "We are going to set up a second carbon market for transport and heating in Europe" (Le Monde, 13/07/2021)	Neutral (64%)	Environment
"Europeans will change their way of life to protect the planet", announces Von der Leyen (Público, 11/12/2019) *	Positive (36%)	
Von der Leyen praises Portugal's "investment" in energy transition (Público, 18/12/2019)		

*It was codified in two agendas: European Values and European Green Deal

The connection between the European Green Deal with the environment sometimes happens in a latent way, which is illustrated in the consecutive headline: *Ursula von der Leyen invited Greta Thunberg to a meeting of the European Commission [21]* (Público, 28/02/2020). When mentioning the name Greta Thunberg, who is a young environmental activist demanding world leaders for climate change mitigation, the headlines make a reference to environmental issues and, simultaneously, to the European Green Deal.

The theme *European digitalization* represents 4% of the agenda-setting (Annexe C). This theme is associated with other themes, such as foreign policy and economy issues. (Table 3.1.3.6, see Annexe G for headlines in the original)

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[21] In the original: *Ursula von der Leyen convidou Greta Thunberg para uma reunião da Comissão Europeia* (Público, 28/02/2020)

Table 3.1.3.6. Headlines codified in European digitalization

Headline	Tone	EU issue
Von der Leyen:"The value of European technology companies has grown by almost 50% in 2020" (El País, 02/12/2020)	Neutral (100%)	Economy
Von der Leyen: big tech firms need to be reined in despite Trump's exit (The Guardian, 20/01/2021)		Foreign policy

The theme portrayed as the less relevant in the agenda is *European democracy,* symbolizing only 2% (Annexe C) and it refers to national elections in Croatia. (Table 3.1.3.7, see Annexe G for headlines in the original)

Table 3.1.3.7. Headlines codified in European democracy

Headline	Tone
Von der Leyen under fire for involvement in Croatia's election campaign (Público, 07/07/2020)	Negative (100%)
Von der Leyen provokes the ire of socialists and liberals by taking sides in national elections (El País, 06/07/2020)	

Given an overview of the findings regarding the agenda, we highlight a headline that was published on the day that UvdL proclaimed the first State of the Union Address. The headline presents an interaction between agendas, respectively, the European Green Deal, European digitalization and Geostrategic lead. As follows: *A greener, more digital, and more "geopolitical" Europe: Ursula von der Leyen wants to relaunch her major projects*[22] (Le Monde, 16/09/2020). This headline is portrayed with a neutral tone, indirect free discourse and it is related to environmental and foreign policy issues. Thus, this illustrated headline show us that UvdL´s political leadership deal with the international role of the European Commission, enhancing the Europe Union as geopolitical, digital, and green actor in the international scene.

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[22] In the original: *Une Europe plus verte, plus numérique et plus «géopolitique»: Ursula von der Leyen veut relancer ses grands projets* (Le Monde, 16/09/2020)

The code EU issues has been discussed alongside the code Political Agenda. When it comes to examining quantitatively, among 129 headlines codified as EU issue we can describe the rising frequency of themes: health (38%); economy (24%); foreign policy (23%); environment (10%); military (3%); social welfare (2%) (Annexe C). Findings on EU issue allow us to apply a gender lens to interpret them.

In conclusion, the four political agendas – European values, European economy, Geostrategic lead and The European Green Deal – are the most salient pillars in the agenda-setting, respectively, from December 2019 to September 2021, while the two other agendas – European digitalization and European democracy – are neglected from the media angle. The analysis provides examples of positive and negative words framing the tone coverage of political agenda (Annexe D).

3.2. Discussion of Results

In light of the findings previously presented, this section aims to interpret the results according to the analytical objectives. The first part seeks to discuss the findings from a constructivist lens to characterize Ursula Von der Leyen´s political leadership through agenda-setting (the pillars of political agenda that receives visibility, main political events and EU issues), and the tone coverage in media discourses. While the second part concerns applying a gender lens to UvdL´s political leadership to identify whether there is a symbolic empowerment presence in the media outlets of Ursula Von der Leyen.

3.2.1. Characterization of Ursula von der Leyen´s political leadership

The empirical findings stress that European press frame Ursula von der Leyen's political leadership by focusing on two major political events – the COVID-19 pandemic and Brexit. Müller & Tömmel (2022), when examining UvdL´s speech from November 2019 until June 2020, found a similar result in which COVID-19 and Brexit were the predominant events in UvdL's political leadership. Thus, the convergence on topics between the media and the EC president is remarkable.

The COVID-19 pandemic is the most prominent theme in the analysis, which orients a higher emphasis on one dimension of the UvdL´s political agenda, namely European Values. Given the pandemic context, the European values dimension receives visibility in the media angle since this pillar includes the consolidation of the European Health Union policy area to respond collectively to health crises. The European press frame UvdL´s political performance mainly neutral under the COVID-pandemic event, and with a positive evaluation tendency, especially reinforcing UvdL´s performance in defending the EU´s vaccine strategy as well as achieving coronavirus vaccination target in the EU.

Moreover, Brexit is framed as a remarkable internal political event since it is an unprecedented event in the process of European integration. This referred event is framed with a neutral tone. Considering the EC president´s role in providing a positive view of the EU in the public sphere (Müller, 2020), UvdL manages to defend European integration in front of this emblematic event. Hence, UvdL´s performance succeeds in ensuring that when facing Brexit, negative connotations did not gain prominence in media discourses to damage her impulse for a good image of European integration in the European public sphere.

The overall neutral coverage of headlines allows understanding that the European press does not critics her political leadership. This is explained due to headlines are framed focusing more on the events that occurred during UvdL´s mandate than the political agenda itself.

Findings indicate that five pillars in the political agenda – European economy, Geostrategic lead, European digitalization, European values and the European Green Deal – are framed with a neutral tone. However, the two mentioned latter pillars present a positive evaluation tendency, highlighting UvdL´s engagement not only to promote the European vaccination strategy in a pandemic context but also to the ambitions of the green plan and energy transition. The European democracy is the only pillar framed by the European press that shows criticism of UvdL´s actions when exercising political leadership, this is explained due to the UvdL´s rupture of political neutrality, as she involved herself with national elections in Croatia. Although the negative tone, the frequency of headlines regarding the European democracy dimension seems insignificant when compared to the visibility of other pillars of the political agenda.

Despite UvdL denominating the Commission under her tenure as the "geopolitical Commission" (European Commission, 2019), highlighting her geopolitical ambitions on the international scene, our analysis demonstrates that the Geostrategic lead priority does not play a crucial role in political agenda compared to European values. Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic context orients media attention to European values priority as health issues are seen more relevant than foreign policy and military issues under this specific context.

In the same vein, our findings contrast not only with the suggestion by Rietig & Dupont (2021) on UvdL's strong political commitment to the European Green Deal but also with Müller & Tömmel´s results (2022). In our analysis, the predominant priority in political agenda is European values whereas Müller & Tömmel (2022) found a predominance of the European Green Deal in agenda-setting. Once again, a larger time scope of our analysis under the COVID-19 pandemic to characterize UvdL's political leadership compared to Müller & Tömmel (2022), showed us that the COVID- 19 pandemic influences the political agenda by dropping media´s attention on the European Green Deal pillar moving its attention European values one.

Therefore, the chosen time frame of our analysis as well as the source of material analysed plays a crucial role in orienting how UvdL´s political leadership is framed. As our analysis deal with journalist material, our results converge with Müller´s assumption (2020) which indicates that in the public sphere one issue is framed to gain attention by removing another topic from the agenda. Given that, we suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic context orients the UvdL´s agenda-setting towards a focus on the European values pillar in the political agenda.

3.2.2. A Gender lens to political leadership

We apply a gender lens when it comes to interpreting the results of EU issues. Considering the categorization of "female" and "male" issues in the media coverage of politicians (Kahn, 1994; Kahn, 1996), we cluster findings on the EU issues following this logic. On one hand, clustering economy, military, and foreign policy issues as "male" issues, thus representing 50%. On the other hand, clustering health, social welfare, and environment as "female" issues, hence, indicating 50%.

It is important to highlight that our findings concern an incumbent on a mandate that occurs within an unprecedented health crisis where issues involving health naturally receive visibility in the European public sphere. Therefore, the context seems to play a fundamental role in a more balanced coverage between "female" and "male" issues.

Our findings are in accordance with Bystrom et al. (2004) which outlines that international affairs are substantially connected to women politician candidates. In our case, foreign policy issues are the second most visible in the grouping of "masculine" issues while economic issues are in the first place. It might be explained because UvdL is acknowledged as the official head of the European Union which has as its genesis the European Single Market.

A gender lens applies also when examining whether occurs the presence of explicit gender stereotypes in the headlines. Despite metaphors and stereotypes that have been used in the media to cover women in political leadership positions (Elliot & Stead, 2017; Baxter, 2018), the headlines in this dissertation exhibit an absence of explicit gender stereotypes. This might be interpreted within a time with an unprecedented global outbreak of coronavirus, so the political leadership of UvdL in the referred context is seen as a decisive moment for responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, where stereotypes are considered more inappropriate. Another explanatory reason consists of that headlines were extracted from quality newspapers instead of tabloids, which in turn, indicates more professional journalism is concerned with the reduction of content that reinforces gender stereotypes.

When discussing the Sofagate event from a gender lens, we observe that was a critical moment in UvdL´s political leadership when her gender identity as a woman was highlighted. Furthermore, the European press supports UvdL´s statements regarding this event. The media indirect discourse is predominant across newspapers mobilizing public repudiation to face the Sofagate, driving awareness for avoiding a recurrence of a similar situation with foreign leaders in the future and enhancement of gender equality in the international dialogue, and finally, the presence of speech quotes of UvdL regarding this event.

Based on our results, we suggest that a context of an unprecedented health crisis might reduce a more stereotypical media coverage referring to UvdL´s hairstyles, clothes, marital status physical appearance, at least in headlines. Since headlines present information in a few words, an in-depth study examining the headlines with the article in its entirety would be able to prove this finding accurately.

Conclusions

The dissertation examines UvdL´s political leadership from the media perspective. The thematic analysis of 204 headlines from four journals, allowed us to grasp how UvdL´s political leadership is framed by the European press from December 2019 until September 2021.

Drawing conclusions from the empirical findings, we argue that UvdL´s political leadership is context-dependent on the COVID-19 pandemic. In this specific context, the media discourse provides more visibility for one priority in the political agenda – European Values and presents empowering media discourse when framing UvdL´s political leadership from December 2019 until September 2021.

With this in mind, we understood that the European press frames UvdL´s political leadership in a way that European values is the predominant pillar of the political agenda. Indeed, the European press supports her political leadership in this specific dimension of the political agenda when highlights the European vaccination target. While the European economy, the Geostrategic lead, the European Green Deal and European Digitalization, the European democracy demonstrated to be pillars less relevant to the political agenda in terms of visibility. The tone coverage of Ursula Von der Leyen´s political leadership remained neutral over the analysed time frame. A qualitative analysis of how the tone is framed in headlines allows us to conclude that UvdL´s political leadership did not suffer prejudicial implications from the media angle.

Furthermore, this dissertation identifies the presence of symbolic empowerment of UvdL in the media discourse. The points to support the argument are: balanced media coverage on "male" and "female" issues when portraying a political leader, the reduction of UvdL being referred to by stereotypes in headlines, media discourse reinforcing public disapproval of Sofagate, while also media discourses reproducing her speech quotes regarding this incident.

When applying a constructivist approach and considering gender, it was possible to understand that an exceptional context has the capacity to decisively influence how the European press presents her political leadership. The focus on European values in the political agenda leads to the interpretation that UvdL´s presidency is characterized by feminine issues as health issues are closely associated in this dimension. However, this characterization is limited to the analysed time frame from December 2019 to September 2021, which is especially context-dependent on the COVID-19 pandemic.

This dissertation contributes to understanding the specificities of the political leadership of the first women president of EC from a media perspective under the COVID-19 pandemic. It expands the media coverage of women in political leadership by looking at different contexts from Anglo-American ones. It fills the literature gap concerning media coverage of women leaders under unprecedented situations leading to implications in media discourses, specifically on headlines, presenting a reduction in media stereotypical coverage. Also, it expands studies of the EC president from the media perspective as the literature used to rely upon one newspaper, *Financial Times*, while our analysis involved four newspapers.

Concerning the study´s limitations, the main one consists of that the newspapers selected (The Guardian, Público, Le Monde, El País) are left-wing on the ideological spectrum (Baxter, 2018; Pospecu et al., 2013), presenting a similar view on the characterization of UvdL´s political leadership. Since UvdL is still an incumbent in the present moment of this dissertation and our analysis of UvdL´s political leadership is context-dependent on the COVID-19 pandemic, in turn, it limits the potential to generalize that the focus on European values pillar in the political agenda is consistent throughout the whole mandate. In the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine, further research should be devoted to understanding the specificities of this context and understanding how UvdL´s political leadership is framed under this current event. To a conclusive statement that exceptional contexts lead to a reduction in media stereotypical coverage, further research should be conducted to examine the corpus of newspaper articles. Another limitation relies on the fact that the data analysed was based only on the written press, not being able to capture the televised news coverage. Future research should be devoted to the development of comparison between different newspapers to examine how UvdL´s leadership is covered depending on the interest of newspapers and the countries of each newspaper, as well as a comparison between tabloids and quality newspapers.

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Annexes

Annexe A. Collection of headlines (%) by newspaper
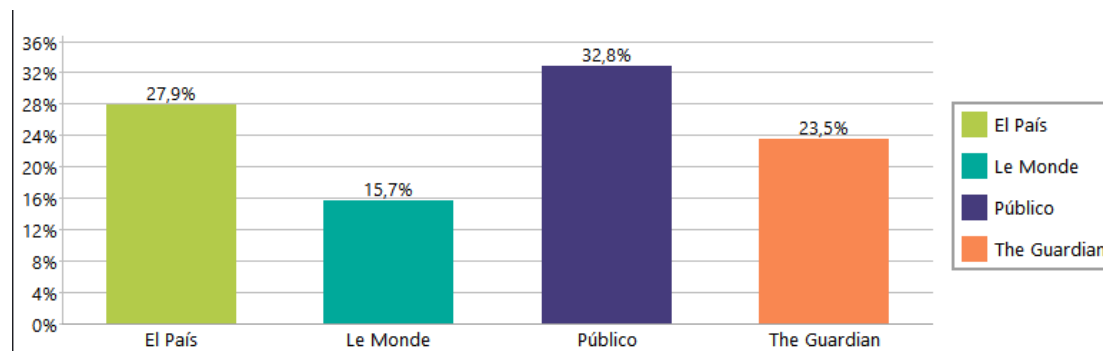
Annexe B. Code scheme

Tone
Negative
Positive
Neutral
Discourse
Indirect
Direct
Indirect Free
Main Political Agenda
The European Green Deal
European economy
European digitalization
European values
Geostrategic lead
European democracy
Main Internal/External Events
COVID-19 pandemic
Brexit
Sofagate
Afghanistan humanitarian crisis
EU Issues
Military
Foreign policy
Economy
Environment
Health
Social Welfare

Annexe C. Frequency of themes (%)

Code Scheme	Themes	Frequency of given themes (%)
Tone		
	Neutral	56%
	Negative	25%
	Positive	19%
Total:		100%
Discourse		
	Indirect	55%
	Direct	20%
	Indirect Free	25%
Total:		100%
Political Agenda		
	The European Green Deal	11%
	European economy	16%
	European digitalization	4%
	European values	54%
	Geostrategic lead	13%
	European democracy	2%
Total:		100%
Main Political Internal/External Events		
	COVID-19 Pandemic	44%
	Brexit	38%
	Sofagate	15%
	Afghanistan humanitarian crisis	3%
Total:		100%
EU Issues		
	Military	3%
	Foreign policy	23%
	Economy	24%
	Environment	10%
	Health	38%
	Social Welfare	2%
Total:		100%

Annexe D. Positive and Negative Tone

Main Political Internal/External Events	Positive	Negative
COVID-19 pandemic	"light at the end of the tunnel"; "good"; "brave and disciplined"; "reached vaccine target"	"undermine"; "disgrace"; "stupid war"
Brexit	"good"; "welcomes"; "better progress"; "good progress"; "political momentum"	"mock" "without result" "punish" "hurt" "faultlines"
Afghanistan humanitarian crisis	"an example of European soul"	"no conversations"
Sofagate	"apologize"	"insult"; "humilation"; "blame" "hurt" "tensions" "permanent rivalry"; "snub"
Political Agenda		
European values	"reached"; "We are in this together"; "effective and humane"; "solidarity at the very heart of Europe"; "light at the end of the tunnel"	"erros"; "threat"; "disgrace"
European economy	"no delay"; "confident"; "green light";	"a mere slogan"; 'unlevelling the playing field'; "pressure"
Geostrategic lead	"improve EU preparedness"	"sanctions"
The European Green Deal	"protect"; "praises"; "good way";	-
European democracy	-	"under fire"; "ire"

Annexe E. Headlines codified Major Political Internal/External Events in the original language

Covid-19 pandemic		
Headline	**Tone (%)**	**Discourse**
Ursula von der Leyen backs authorisation mechanism for Covid vaccine exports (The Guardian, 26/03/2021)	Neutral (55 %)	
Vaccins contre le Covid-19:Ursula von der Leyen admet des défaillances de l'UE (Le Monde, 10/02/2021)	Negative (21%)	Indirect
Ursula von der Leyen says EU has reached Covid vaccine target (The Guardian, 10/07/2021)	Positive (24 %)	

Brexit		
Headline	**Tone**	**Discourse**
Brexit: Johnson to go to Brussels for face-to-face meeting with Von der Leyen (The Guardian, 07/12/2020)	Neutral (72%)	Indirect
Johnson's first meeting with Von der Leyen lays trade deal faultlines bare (The Guardian, 09/01/2020)	Negative (14%)	
Brexit: un accord « bon pour l'Europe et le Royaume-Uni », salue Ursula von der Leyen (Le Monde, 24/12/2020)	Positive (14%)	Direct

Afghanistan humanitarian crisis		
Headline	**Tone (%)**	**Discourse**
Afganistán: Von der Leyen: 'Los 1.000 millones de ayuda humanitaria están condicionados a los derechos humanos' (El País, 21/08/2021)	Neutral (50%)	Direct
Von der Leyen, desde Torrejón: "No hay conversaciones políticas con los talibanes, no hay reconocimiento" (El País, 21/08/2021)	Negative (25%)	
Von der Leyen considera la acogida de afganos en España "un ejemplo del alma europea" (El País, 21/08/2021)	Positive (25%)	Indirect Free

Sofagate		
Headline	**Tone (%)**	**Discourse**
Von der Leyen não teve direito a cadeira durante encontro com Erdogan — e nasceu o sofagate (Público, 07/04/2021)	Neutral (15%)	
Von der Leyen avisa que no permitirá otro desplante como el de Ankara frente a líderes extranjeros (El País, 12/04/2021)	Negative (80%)	Indirect
Charles Michel se disculpa ante Ursula von der Leyen y pide pasar página (El País, 13/04/2021)	Positive (5%)	

Annexe F. Headlines codified Main Political Agenda in the original language

European values			
		EU issue	
Headline	**Tone (%)**		**Event**
Covid 19: na produção de vacinas, a indústria precisa de se adaptar ao ritmo da ciência, diz Von der Leyen (Público, 10/02/2021)	Neutral (46%)	Health	Covid-19 pandemic
German minister criticises Von der Leyen over Covid vaccines 'disgrace' (The Guardian, 04/02/2021)	Negative (23%)		
Covid-19: Von der Leyen vê 'luz ao fundo do túnel' com vacinas na UE antes do fim do ano (Público, 02/12/2020)	Positive (31%)		

European values	
Headline	**Tone**
Von der Leyen: "Con el nuevo pasaporte los europeos podrán volver a viajar" (El País, 17/03/2021)	Neutral
Lei húngara que discrimina população LGBT+ 'é uma vergonha', diz Ursula von der Leyen (Público, 24/06/2021)	Negative
Ursula von der Leyen : « Cette solidarité est au cœur même de l'Europe et c'est ce qui va lui permettre de renaître » (Le Monde, 03/04/2020)	Positive
Von der Leyen: 'La UE necesita un pacto migratorio que sea efectivo y humano' (El País, 18/09/2020)	

European economy			
Headline	**Tone (%)**	**EU issue**	**Event**
Von der Leyen signs off first of EU's Covid recovery fund plans (The Guardian, 16/06/2021)	Neutral (64%)	Economy	Covid-19 pandemic
Von der Leyen descreve coronabonds como "um mero slogan" mas não exclui "nenhuma opção" na resposta à crise (Público, 29/03/2020)	Negative (18%)		
Von der Leyen confiante na ratificação da 'bazuca' pelos 27 até ao fim do ano (Público, 01/10/2020)	Positive (18%)		

Annex G. Headlines codified Political Agenda in the original language

Geostrategic lead		
Headline	**Tone (%)**	**EU issue**
Von der Leyen: EU must acquire 'political will' to build own military (The Guardian, 15/09/2021)	Neutral (70%)	Military
Von der Leyen pide a los Vientisiete sanciones por la represión violenta en Bielorrusia *(El País, 14/08/2020)*	Negative (15%)	Foreign Policy
Von der Leyen quer melhorar a preparação e capacidade de resposta da UE na saúde e na defesa (Público, 15/09/2021)	Positive (15%)	Health-Military
The European Green Deal		
Headline	**Tone (%)**	**EU issue**
Ursula von der Leyen : « Nous allons mettre en place un second marché carbone pour le transport et le chauffage en Europe » (Le Monde, 13/07/2021)	Neutral (64%)	Environment
"Os europeus vão mudar o seu estilo de vida para proteger o planeta", anuncia Von der Leyen *(Público, 11/12/2019)*	Positive (36%)	
Von der Leyen elogia "investimento" de Portugal na transião energética (Público, 18/12/2019)		
European digitalization		
Headline	**Tone (%)**	**EU issue**
Von der Leyen: "El valor de las tecnológicas europeas ha crecido casi un 50% en 2020" (El País, 02/12/2020)	Neutral (100%)	Economy
Von der Leyen: big tech firms need to be reined in despite Trump's exit (The Guardian, 20/01/2021)		Foreign Policy
European democracy		
Headline	**Tone (%)**	
Von der Leyen sob fogo por envolvimento na campanha eleitoral da Croácia (Público, 07/07/2020)	Negative (100%)	
Von der Leyen provoca las iras de socialistas y liberales al tomar partido en unas elecciones nacionales (El País, 06/07/2020)		