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European Sentiment in time of crises. The point of view of young university students¹

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Abstract. The latest emergencies – economic, refugee, and the pandemic of Covid-19 – has impacted in European collective identity construction, especially in Southern Europe. This article investigates if the pandemic crisis has activated in young Italian and Spanish university students nationalistic or/and European responses. The analysis, based on an online survey, uses the partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) statistical method to perform an exploratory analysis of the explanatory theoretical model of European sentiment. The results show that young people attribute several meanings to Europe during the pandemic, which are based mainly on making informed decisions and recognizing a common space of interaction as an opportunity of peace, security and democracy. The findings highlight the role of EU communicative actions in increasing trust in national and European institutions.

Keywords. European identity, trust, youth, social media, disinformation.

INTRODUCTION

The pandemic of Covid-19 is another challenge for the European Union project after the economic-financial recession and the management of migration flows. These crises involve the friction between national resistance and the need for stronger integration to tackle the global threats, furthermore they show a critical relationship between citizens and European project (D'Ambrosi 2019; Parito 2019). The Southern European countries have been highly affected by the previous crises and the recent emergencies (the Covid-19 pandemic and Ucraina-Russia conflict) have impacted exacerbating social problems. The economic-financial recession and the migratory emergency have stimulated in Southern EU member states a public debate highly politicized, with an important role played by Eurosceptic political actors (Statham, Trenz 2013; Risse 2015; Hutter *et al.* 2016) and nationalistic and populist responses (Pasquinucci, Verzichelli 2016). The pandemic has determined uncertainty for the future and negative shift in the level of trust in

¹ The article is the result of the collaboration of the authors. In the final draft, Introduction and Conclusions are to be attributed to L. D'Ambrosi e M. Parito; the par. European Identity In The Making and The European Union Crises: The Southern Member States Point Of View to M. Parito; the par. The Youth's Trust In European Institutions In Times Of Crises and Discussion to L. D'Ambrosi, the par. Methodological Design and Results to R. Pérez-Calle.

European institutions and in European integration during the first months of the pandemic (Eurobarometer 2020). This impact has been felt more in Italy and Spain where the citizens declare discontent for the measures taken to fight the pandemic by the European Union, showing the lowest satisfaction levels of all EU Member States together with Germany and France (European Parliament 2021).

The paper analyses the sense of belonging to European project among Southern Europe citizens, as well as the trust in EU institutions and actions during the first period of Covid-19 outbreak. The investigation considers the incidence of the disease and its social and economic effects in Italy and Spain. Both countries were significantly affected by Covid-19 manifesting in the first stage of the pandemic an important decline in optimism towards EU in Italy (-28%) and in Spain (-26%) (Eurobarometer 2020). In particular, the article aims to investigate if the pandemic crisis has activated in young Italian and Spanish people nationalistic responses or/and European responses. Our hypothesis is that the pandemic crisis acts as a trigger event that could change the perception of collective identity stressing the 'nationalistic sentiment' or the 'European sentiment'. Both Italian and Spanish young generations are suffering more than older generations the effects of the economic crisis² through high unemployment rate. In May 2021, the youth unemployment rate aged 15 to 24 was 17.3 % in the EU and 17.5 % in the euro area (Eurostat 2021): 36.9% in Spain, 31.7% in Italy. On the other hand, many scholars highlight a generational cleavage (Norris, Inglehart 2019) with the youngest more pro-European Union than the older (Lubbers, Scheepers 2010; Lauterbach, De Vries 2020). Recent data (European Council on Foreign Relations 2020) show a majority of people in Italy and Spain have worsened the attitudes towards EU during the crisis, and previous research (Daniele, Geys 2015) suggests that in these Euro debtor states, younger people are less supportive of further integration.

The article is organized as follows. In the first section, the theoretical framework is described, focusing on the concepts of European identity and the implications of youth's trust in Southern Europe arising from the Covid-19 pandemic. The other sections outline, first, the impact of the multiple crises, including the Covid-19, in the Southern Europe scenario; then the impact of the crises on young people. The following section focuses on the communicative and mediatized construction of sense building regarding European integration.

Subsequently, the methodology of the present study is explained, including the hypotheses and specific objectives. The next section examines and discusses the empirical findings. Finally, the conclusions and further implications are presented.

EUROPEAN IDENTITY IN THE MAKING

The experiences of recent years show that the European integration is an uncertain process. Nevertheless, many scholars observe that a post-national Europe is a consequence of the globalisation age and the way to properly manage its effects, risks, and uncertainties (Castells 2000; Beck, Grande 2004; Giddens 2007). We can also argue that the latest emergencies – economic, refugee, pandemic of Covid-19 – could push the Europeans to recognise the interconnected problems and the need for strategies to tackle them. A kind of perception – is the hypothesis discussed in this paper – which could drive the citizens toward nationalistic or European responses.

The distance between institutional Europe and the citizens is often emerged (Hix 2008; Beck 2012; Fabbrini 2017). The failure of the Constitutional treaty, the late entry into force of the Lisbon treaty, and Brexit, all for the citizens' rejection in the referendum are examples of the impact of what Europeans do. But, as Castells (2018: 179) explicitly states: «The term 'Europeans' is of course the tricky part of the equation. Because who are they?».

The debate regarding European identity links many questions. The analyses focused on the political dimension (Habermas 2004) are often joined with the cultural dimension (Castells 1997), because the features that found a sense of community and create a collective "we" can be hard to distinguish.

In this paper, we consider the European collective identity as a project in the making (Castells 1997), resulting of a wide set of sources of meaning: symbolic features originating in history and memory, cultural characteristics and attitudes shared by citizens in the different states, values and rights fixed in the treaties. But these heterogeneous elements can generate a collective identity just through processes of common building of meaning that imply a process of discursive construction. Communication allows the sharing of meanings and the shaping of a symbolic common space.

European identity building may be founded on a discursive process through which the citizens of the member states can recognize each other, and develop a shared story made of acknowledged values, symbols, and meanings. Communication practices have signifi-

² Eurobarometer data show both in Italy and a Spain a decline regarding the trust in the EU in the years 2011-2014, when the consequences of the economic crisis were perceived the most by the citizens.

cant involvement in these goals. In particular, European public sphere may be considered as the space in which a dual communicative construction takes place: the space in which the European society is communicatively constructed; and the one in which the communicative construction of the legitimacy of EU politics takes place (Hepp et al. 2016: 6). So, the structure of the EU public sphere – including national and European institutional and political actors, media systems, information flow, issues – is relevant in the making of a common space of interaction, framing and sense building about the living together at the European level. It should be noted that politicized debate, coupled with tough controversial discourses, suggest a dynamic European public sphere in the making (Belluati, Marini 2019), but polarized disputes mixed with false or misleading contents contribute to shaping a polluted discursive arena.

European institutions too have recognized the relevance of the communication processes to support integration, mainly in the stages that have strengthened the institutional architecture and during the global crises in which they have promoted strategies and policies to face the questions. Moreover, they considered young Europeans a privileged target for sustaining knowledge, trust and sense of belonging to the EU. Now, the EU institutions consider the Covid-19 as an extra-ordinary case that accelerates the need to improve new communication practices, also to tackle the new disinformation challenge. Facing these trials, we can consider the EU communication strategy a way to sustain people trust and sense of belonging in the supranational project (D'Ambrosi et al. 2021).

In this scenario, we argue that young people are an interesting viewpoint for investigating the relation between national and European identity building. Young Europeans are born in a plural society, they have always lived in a Europeanized society, most of them with a common currency, European elections, no borders for studying, working and travelling (Pirni, Raffini 2018). They are 'de facto' European citizens. But their experience is socially constructed, supported and solicited by social media, in everyday interactions and mediated environment: both could be affected by a nation-based way of thinking (Beck 2004).

THE EUROPEAN UNION CRISES: THE SOUTHERN MEMBER STATES POINT OF VIEW

The Covid-19 pandemic impacts EU and European citizens after multiple crises. The economic-financial recession and the migratory emergency have stimu-

lated a highly politicized public debate, with an important role played by Eurosceptic political actors (Statham, Trenz 2013; Risse 2015; Hutter et al. 2016), and nationalistic and populist responses (Martinelli 2013; Pasquinucci, Verzichelli 2016). Some studies point out that the stronger support for authoritarian values and populist attitudes (Mudde 2017; Norris, Inglehart 2019) was influenced by some main factors: the Great Regression and the theory of economic inequality as drivers of public discontent (Dustman et al. 2017); the *cultural backlash thesis* as a reaction against the progressive cultural change and the liberal democracy (Norris, Inglehart 2019); the fluctuating trust level in political institutions (Edelman 2018) and the growing of popular sovereignty and anti-establishment politics (Barr 2009).

These factors have interactive effects on a critical relationship between citizens and European project (D'Ambrosi 2019; Parito 2019; D'Ambrosi et al. 2021). In some Mediterranean countries, characterized by austerity measures and a negative impact on the economy, the growth of populist parties has fostered feelings of frustration about the integration and the perceived performance of the EU. The electoral success of some populist parties such as Podemos in Spain and Five Stars Movement in Italy, along with sovereigns parties such as Lega and Brother of Italy in Italy, and Vox in Spain, was founded mainly in the defense of national or regional interests and in making "Euroscepticism more central in its appeal" (Ivaldi et al. 2017).

Covid-19 has fuelled this friction between national resistance and the need for stronger integration in adopting integrated containment policies and local intervention measures, exacerbating social problems. Even if the attitudes towards the EU remain positive with their highest levels in more than a decade, partly attributable to the coronavirus recovery package (Eurofond 2020), this critical situation has produced considerable decline in the sense of attachment to EU, which represents a threat to supranational cohesion (Daniele et al. 2020). The crises had a negative impact on public trust in EU (Sericchio et al. 2013; Clements et al. 2014). The Covid-19 crisis has generated a new degree of cohesion in which member states work as an integrated part of the EU. In particular, in the countries most affected by the coronavirus, such as Italy and Spain, citizens are not entirely satisfied with the measures taken by supranational institutions to fight the pandemic (44% and 46%, Eurobarometer 2021). This negative attitude seems to be correlated with a more general distrust in national governments and parliaments, which lost points globally (Edelman 2021), confirming the relationship according to which citizens who distrust the national govern-

ment distrust the European institutions too (Muñoz *et al.* 2011; Harteveld *et al.* 2013; Brosius *et al.* 2019). Despite this trend, some scholars suggest that this is a short-term effect: a rebound in pro-European confidence emerges, especially when citizens perceive high-quality governance in managing economic and social recovery (de Wilde 2021). So, the shared experience of the pandemic and the use of EU funds to combat the economic recession could mitigate the feeling of mistrust by generating new support in the European project.

We can wonder if the Covid-19 pandemic has fostered new attitudes and responses to European integration, not only divided between pro-European positions and Eurosceptic nationalists, but more articulated. Some studies indicate that the virus has changed the public worldview of Europe «blurring the distinctions between nationalism and globalism» (Krastev, Leonard 2020: 1). Looking at the ECFR (2020) data, a new group of pro-Europeans (41%) is emerging who see supranational cooperation as an opportunity to preserve their own “strategic sovereignty” rather than relying on global multilateral institutions. Considering this point of view, the European project is not based on shared ideas and values, but on the idea to act together to face the challenges of the future (Krastev, Leonard 2020).

THE YOUTH'S TRUST IN EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONS IN TIMES OF CRISES

Especially for young people, hit by the social and economic impacts of another crisis, the pandemic opens risks for the future and a high level of uncertainty for employability and well-being. Despite the negative effects of this crisis, which has produced a significant erosion of trust in national governments, young people continue to trust the EU (Eurofond 2020; OECD 2020). This trend confirms the literature on generational differences in attitudes towards the EU (Lubbers, Scheepers 2010; Lauterbach, De Vriesb 2020): some scholars highlight a generational divide regarding the preservation of national sovereignty and a wave of resentment against the EU (Norris, Inglehart 2019). In the Brexit referendum to leave the EU in 2016, for example, the populist vote was stronger among older cohorts than among younger generations. Furthermore, a recent study shows the new generation remain more optimistic in EU actions than other age groups during the pandemic, encouraging young people to recognize a *de facto* integration based on a common space of problems (Sam-pugnaro 2015; D'Ambrosi *et al.* 2021).

From this perspective, the European transnational

public sphere is understood from the young generation as a social and cultural experience to be conducted on the horizontal plane (Bruter 2005; Cicchelli 2012). These experiences of interaction and involvement are fostered by transnational mobility and study exchange programs (such as Erasmus+) that unite people and cultures across borders, increasing the identification of a community identity (Mitchell 2012; Jacobone, Moro 2015). A new sense of the European identity and citizenship is growing among young people. According to some empirical studies on the European identity of Erasmus youth, the strength of the relationship seems to depend on the specific national contexts from which the students come (Van Mol 2018; 2019). Based on the analysis approach of Cram (2012), we distinguish two different dimensions: the first refers to being part of a group with which individuals identify themselves *as Europeans*, the second, *with Europe*, is related to the affective components with which individuals express support for the EU.

Following this point of view, a research points out how transnational mobility is significantly related to changes in the identification of Erasmus students *as European* (Mitchell 2015), furthermore, in some European countries as Italy, Spain, France and Germany, social interaction with local students has been relevant in influencing the affective component of collective identities. In contrast, the participation of British students in Erasmus did not improve European identity³, reporting an average decrease in the propensity to identify with Europe (Mitchell 2015). However, some recent studies suggest that a positive feeling towards Europe is more present in the group of people with higher education and prone to cross-cultural experiences (Van Mol 2018). This suggests that young students assign different meanings and emotional values to the European public sphere, as an intermediate and horizontal space in which connected actors shape daily life practices and new expressions of self-fulfilling citizenship (Bennett 2008).

METHODOLOGICAL DESIGN

The paper aims to analyse the sense of belonging to European project among Southern Europe young citizens. Because previous research showed trust in EU actions to curbing the negative impact of Covid-19 disinformation encouraged the feeling of belonging (D'Ambrosi *et al.* 2021), we assume the pandemic crisis acts as a trigger event that could change the perception of collective iden-

³ This feature qualifies British people of all age. They are transnationalised in their practices, but they seem not subjectively Europeanised (Favell 2017).

tity. The purpose is to investigate if the pandemic crisis has activated in young Italian and Spanish people nationalistic or/and European responses, reinforcing the attitudes towards one or the other or towards both dimensions. We therefore aim to test these hypotheses:

- H1_The crisis caused by Covid-19 increases nationalistic responses among young people
- H2_The crisis caused by Covid-19 increases European responses among young people
- H3_ The higher European sentiment is associated with higher trust in Eu and national institutions

Among this hypothesis, the research addressed the following questions: RQ1_The Covid 19 has shown the need for greater or less EU integration? RQ2_What perception of UE has produced among young people? RQ_3 What elements impact on nationalistic and European sentiments?

To meet the objectives of the exploratory and quantitative research, it is necessary to build a robust observation and measurement system, both for the variables to be explained (in our study 'European sentiment' and 'nationalist sentiments') and for the different explanatory variables. To do this, a survey tool was created to be carried out on Italian and Spanish university students from a broad variety of science and humanistic degree courses and different ages (18-25 years old). The survey questionnaire was administered in both country's local language during the fall (September-October) of 2020. The survey was conducted among 1000 students⁴, and the total number responses was N=746. The sample obtained, according to the exploratory nature of the study, is not probabilistic nor representative of the population analysed.

Measuring the European sentiment during the first stage of the Covid-19crisis

For the better observation of this latent variable, four proxies were generated, related to the advantages obtained during the crisis by belonging to the EU and the need for greater integration and a unified response in the future (European sentiment). Thus, the respondents were asked their level of agreement with the following statements, asking that it be indicated on a scale from 0 (not agree) to 10 (totally agree):

- *The crisis caused by Covid-19 has shown the need for greater EU integration*

⁴ They are students of several disciplines in different Universities (mainly in Italy: Sicily and Marche; Spain: Comunidad Autónoma de La Rioja, Comunidad Autónoma de Madrid, Comunidad Autónoma de Aragón).

- *The crisis caused by Covid-19 has shown that belonging to the EU makes us stronger when it comes to coping with crises*
- *The crisis caused by Covid-19 has shown that the EU should develop a more coordinated response between Member States to counter global threats and challenges*
- *The crisis caused by Covid-19 has shown that Member States should be more willing to share the financial burden of a crisis like the current one*

The quantification of the pro-European sentiment was carried out by the average of the four responses obtained.

Measuring nationalist sentiments during the first stage of the Covid-19 crisis

Following the previous methodology, for the observation and quantification of this latent variable, the respondents were asked about their level of agreement with the following statements:

- *The crisis caused by Covid-19 has shown that EU integration can slow down responses to crises*
- *The crisis caused by Covid-19 has shown that the construction of the EU is an ideal project that is difficult to achieve*
- *The crisis caused by Covid-19 has shown that EU powers should be transferred to countries*
- *The crisis caused by Covid-19 has shown that each Member State should decide on its own*
- *The crisis caused by Covid-19 has shown that there should be more border control between EU member states*

The quantification of the nationalist sentiment was carried out by means of the average of the five responses obtained.

Measurement of explanatory variables

For the construction of the theoretical model, 15 latent variables and 33 indicators were generated, observed and measured through the survey tool. The explanatory variables are divided into three categories:

- Control variables, consisting of the determination of a series of characteristics of the individuals in the sample;
- Explanatory variables related to feelings of usefulness and trust in the institutions, people or other actors involved;
- Explanatory variables related to objective assessments of the role played by institutional actors, the capacity to identify fake news and the impacts caused by fake news.

Table 1. Explanatory variables of the theoretical model.

Latent Variable	Indicator	Description	Type
Use of Digital media	V1	Frequency of use of social networks	Scale
	V2	Frequency of use of digital media	Scale
	V3	Trust in social networks / digital media	Scale
Use of Legacy Media	V4	Frequency of use of legacy media	Scale
	V5	Trust in traditional media	Scale
Confidence Identify Fake news	V6	Confidence in being able to identify fake news	Scale
Assessment Actions Against Fake news	V7	Assessment of the EU's action against the spread of fake news about COVID-19	Scale
	V8	Assessment of the action of national governments against the spread of fake news about Covid-19	Scale
Impact Fake news	V9	Impact of fake news on Covid-19 in Italy / Spain	Scale
	V10	Impact of fake news on Covid-19 in the EU	Scale
Advantages EU	V11	Perceived individual benefits of EU membership (freedom to travel, work ...)	Scale
	V12	Perceived collective advantages of EU Membership (Democracy, peace, safety, economic prosperity...)	Scale
Trust EU	V13	Trust in the EU institutions	Scale
	V14	Trust in EU citizens	Scale
	V15	Variation in trust in the EU after the Covid-19 crisis	Scale
Trust Country	V16	Trust in national institutions	Scale
	V17	Trust in local / regional institutions	Scale
	V18	Trust in the citizens of your country	Scale
	V19	Variation in trust in IT / ESP after the Covid-19 crisis	Scale
Nationality	V20	Nationality	Dummy
Erasmus	V21	Erasmus student	Dummy
Gender	V22	Gender	Dummy
Age	V23	Age	Scale
Health Studies	V24	Belonging to the health study area	Dummy
European Sentiment	EU1	In favour of further integration of the EU	Scale
	EU2	Feeling of greater strength for belonging to the EU	Scale
	EU3	In favour of greater EU coordination	Scale
	EU4	In favour of sharing economic efforts	Scale
Nationalist Sentiment	N1	Sensation that the EU slows down the response to crises	Scale
	N2	Belief that the EU project cannot be achieved	Scale
	N3	In favour of the transfer of competence to the countries	Scale
	N4	In favour of the autonomy of decision of the countries	Scale
	N5	In favour of greater border control between EU countries	Scale

The Table 1 lists all the latent variables of the theoretical model (Hair *et al.* 2019). There are dummy type and scale type variables, obtained from the coding of the responses obtained on a Likert scale.

RESULTS

The inferential statistics calculations, to predict the endogenous variable through a set of independent vari-

ables, whose values are known, were carried out through the second generation statistical technique partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM), using the *Smart-PLS 3.3.5* software (Ringle *et al.* 2015). The multivariate data analysis PLS SEM fits with the exploratory nature of the study, meet the requirements of a composite measurement model, and offers flexibility in terms of different measurement scales and the ability to use non-parametric variables (Sarstedt *et al.* 2016; Hair *et al.* 2019).

Table 2. Results of the PLS-SEM structural model.

Latent Variable	Significance	VIF	Path coefficient
Use of Digital Media	>0.05		
Use of Legacy Media	>0.05		
Confidence Identify Fake news	0.004	1.076	-0.093
Assessment Actions Against Fake news	0.012	1.327	0.085
Impact Fakenews	>0.05		
Advantages EU	<0.001	1.865	0.184
Trust EU	<0.001	2.437	0.333
Trust Country	0.017	1.528	0.091
Nationality	>0.05		
Erasmus	>0.05		
Gender	>0.05		
Age	<0.001	1.047	0.130
Health Studies	0.014	1.064	0.072

The explanatory capacities obtained for the proposed models, following the methodology of Hair *et al.* (2019), were the following.

- Regarding the Explanatory capacity of the model, the coefficient of determination R^2 obtained for the explanatory model of European sentiment has been 0.352, which implies a moderate explanatory capacity (Chin 1998).
- Regarding the explanatory model of nationalist sentiment, the coefficient of determination obtained has been 0.097, a value with which it cannot be said that the established relationships have a minimum explanatory capacity (Falk, Miller 1992). Therefore, the description of the results obtained focuses on the theoretical explanatory model of European sentiment.

The PLS-SEM evaluation was performed in two stages (Hair *et al.* 2019): the assessment of the measurement model and the assessment of the structural model.

Regarding the structural model, the evaluation of the statistical significance of the path coefficients was carried out by the bootstrapping procedure (1.000 bootstrapp samples), which generated t-statistics and confidence intervals. Additionally, an analysis of possible collinearity problems was carried out, through the estimation of the variance inflation factor (VIF) – multicollinearity between the antecedent variables of the endogenous constructs must be avoided ($VIF < 3$) – (Hair *et al.* 2019).

The results obtained for the structural model are shown in the Table 2:

Therefore, many of the variables are not significant at the 5% level or lower.

Regarding the measurement model, the results for the indicators of each latent variable – composites estimated in mode B (Hair, Sarstedt 2019) - of the explana-

Table 3. Results of the PLS-SEM measurement model.

Latent Variable/Indicator	Loadings	Weights	VIF
Confidence Identify Fake news			
V6	1.000	1.000	1.000
Assessment Actions Against Fake news			
V7	1.000	1.034	3.031
V8	0.805	0.042	3.031
Advantages EU			
V11	0.484	0.018	1.283
V12	1.000	0.991	1.283
Trust EU			
V13	0.954	0.844	1.275
V14	0.518	0.136	1.237
V15	0.440	0.283	1.034
Trust Country			
V16	0.963	0.721	1.836
V17	0.791	0.304	1.895
V18	0.476	0.031	1.393
V19	0.367	0.138	1.105
Age			
V23	1.000	1.000	1.000
Health Studies			
V24	1.000	1.000	1.000
European Sentiment			
EU1	0.492	0.116	1.300
EU2	0.967	0.884	1.140
EU3	0.430	0.186	1.369
EU4	0.282	0.030	1.207

tory variables whose relationship with the endogenous variable were found to be significant are shown in the Table 3.

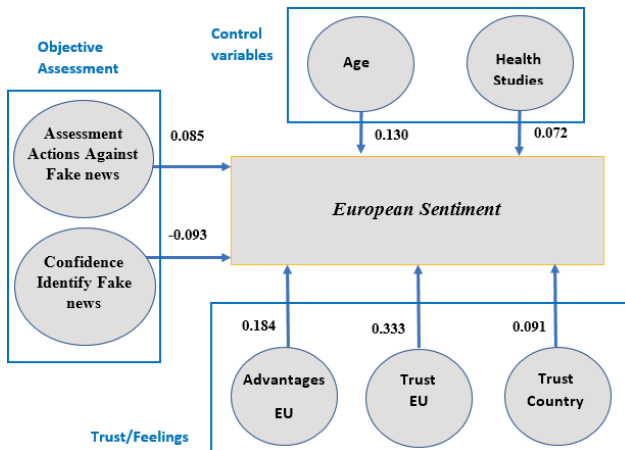


Figure 1. Explanatory model EU sentiment.

The following figure shows the significant variables of the model, at different levels of significance, with their corresponding standardized regression coefficients:

The explanatory variables that exert a greater influence on the variation in European sentiment are Trust EU and Advantages EU. Regarding the indicators of these latent variables, those with the greatest weight in the construction of their respective constructs are, for Trust EU, V13 (*Trust in the EU institutions*), and for Advantages EU, V12 (*Perceived Collective Advantages of EU Membership - Democracy, peace, safety, economic prosperity...*). And regarding the endogenous variable, the indicator with the greatest weight is EU2 (*Feeling of greater strength for belonging to the EU*). In particular, the variables more strongly associated with evaluative and affective components of collective European identity (Van Mol 2019; Mitchell 2015; Cram 2012), instead of functional or instrumental elements describe the assessment of how significant being European among young people.

DISCUSSION

The study allows us to examine the factors that impact on “European sentiment (EUS)” and “nationalist sentiment (NS)”, considering the Covid-19 crisis as a relevant triggering event. Taking into account the theoretical model highlighted above, we analyse the level of significance of the responses related to: some sociodemographic characteristics, including age and level of education (control variables); feelings of usefulness and trust in institutions; the ability to discern fake news and evaluation of EU communication actions to counter disinformation. A first result to underline is the clear difference between the latent variables EUS and NS: in the

first case, the proposed theoretical model has a moderate explanatory capacity, although only some of the explanatory variables have a significant relationship with EUS; in the second case, the proposed theoretical model does not have a minimum explanatory power, so it cannot be validated. So the first stage of the pandemic seems to affect only European sentiment. These results are the same for Italian and Spanish students; in fact, the variable Spanish / Italian nationality is not significant in the regression model, which shows a strong similarity between the young Italians and Spaniards surveyed.

The prevalence of some sociodemographic characteristics seems to play an important role in explaining EUS. Even if there is a short range of ages among the students in our sample, the variable “age” impacts EUS. So we can assume that the most educated students, without any relevant gender difference, are also the most Europeanized or the best able to understand the impact of Covid-19 and the need to manage it in the supranational dimension. This trend also seems to be suggested by the positive and significant relationship of EUS with belonging to the group of studies of health areas, a group that seems to have a greater implication with the consequences of the pandemic and with actions to minimize its effects. In this regard, university students appear an interesting group in exploring the European sentiment during the Covid pandemic. As other empirical studies point out (Recchi 2015; Van Mol 2018; 2019) the higher education students are more likely to have a positive attitude to European integration. Moreover, our findings show that the European exchange programmes as Erasmus don’t impact on European sentiment: the coefficient is not significant. This data is also supported by the fact that the ‘experiential’ component related to a social conceptualisation of Europe (Van Mol 2019: 3) understood as an individual experience of transnational mobility for studying, working or traveling does not have a significant impact on European sentiment.

Instead, the students’ perception of Europe as an important collective opportunity for peace, security and democracy is significant in sustaining European sentiment and building more inclusive and sustainable societies. We can assume, considering other studies (OECD 2020), that the new challenges that affect democratic values and human rights (such as gender inequalities, racism) are perceived by the new generation as a priority to preserve the sense of belonging to the EU. In this sense, the European sentiment of the students appears linked to a Europhile attitude founded on principles and values rather than on functional or instrumental concerns (Cotta *et al.* 2005).

Trust in European and national institutions is another element which impacts on EUS. The positive attitude towards the capability of the institutions in managing the effects of the pandemic is high among young people; they remain optimistic about the benefits that EU membership brings. Our data point out that more than 50% of Italian and Spanish students didn't change their confidence during the pandemic crisis, indeed they trust in EU institutions more than national ones. Most of the Spanish respondents (over 70%) declare low confidence in the capability of the national parliament and government in safeguarding democracy and strengthening trust. However, it is interesting to underline that trust in national institutions affect EUS but do not impact on NS, confirming the positive relation between the high level of trust in national government and the more inclined attitude toward Europe (Muñoz *et al.* 2011; Hartevelde *et al.* 2013).

The results of our analysis are coherent with recent data of the European Parliament. In the context of minimizing the effects of the pandemic also encouraged by the Recovery Plan, the EU, and the European Parliament, specifically, are seen as playing an important role in building trust: in particular, young people are more positive about the future of the EU (European Parliament 2021).

During the first stage of the pandemic crisis, an 'infodemic' also emerged together with a series of risks connected to misinformation and disinformation flows, mainly spread in the digital media. So, our research considered a selection of variables regarding the public sector communication. In particular, we paid attention to the strategies and actions promoted by European institutions to tackle the information disorder. A previous research (D'Ambrosi *et al.* 2021) showed that students consider EU communicative action a key factor in building trust. The PLS-SEM model reveals coherent outcomes. Our analysis shows this target of young people attributes different meanings to European sentiment, which are primarily based on the need to prevent and combat the spread of mis/disinformation and inform decisions made about vaccination and other health problems. As has been pointed out in other studies, the effects of the information environment can influence adherence to the EU (Brosius *et al.* 2019; van Der Bles *et al.* 2020). Furthermore, clear and transparent information can strengthen the relationship between trust in the national government and trust in the EU (*Ibidem*).

From this perspective, Italian and Spanish respondents consider the greater visibility of Covid-19 information from European institutions as one of the main indicators to increase the level of trust in the EU. In particu-

lar, our data highlight a significant correlation between the positive evaluation of EU communication actions to combat disinformation and EUS among young people.

Most of the students surveyed reached relevant news or content through social networks, declaring that they have some confidence in reading messages and in recognizing fake news in the media. However, although they trust digital and social media, traditional ones are considered the main cognitive resource through which to search for reliable information. More specifically, a positive association emerges between the higher frequency of use of traditional media and EUS. We can assume that the integrated use of traditional and social media, together with the higher educational level, can allow young people to better manage the information overload and develop a greater critical capacity towards the Euro-sceptic and populist debate.

At the same time, we found that the overconfidence of the respondents in their competence to discern fake news may erode the trust in EU institutions: we can suppose the estimation of one's own knowledge can lead young to less credibility in public authorities. In particular, the misinformation on Covid-19 in the first months of the pandemic, exacerbated by uncoordinated response at European level, could have influenced the perception of students regarding the transparency and clearness of information provided, determining an impact on the level of trust (Bennet, Linvigston 2020; Roozenbeek *et al.* 2020).

CONCLUSIONS

The study investigated the impact of the Covid-19 outbreak in southern Europe. Specifically, it has considered the point of view of young Italian and Spanish citizens. Starting from the hypothesis that the Covid-19 crisis, in the European scenario already hit by multiple crises, acts as a relevant triggering event, we explore the responses of students to the crisis.

The PLS-SEM model, used to analyse the responses of university students to a survey, allowed us to develop a quantitative and empirical indicator of the sense of belonging to the European project and an indicator of the nationalist reaction. Thus, we were able to explore the variables that determine "European sentiment" and "nationalist sentiment".

The quantitative and exploratory empirical design is based on a consolidated theoretical foundation on the social construction of European integration. The determinants for EUS and NS were defined based on previous studies and research, with the aim of verifying whether

the latest and unpredictable crisis affecting the EU has changed the perception of the collective national and European identity, the sentiment of belonging to the supranational European project and trust in national and European institutions.

An interesting result of the PLS-SEM model is the clear difference of the two latent variables EUS and NS. Following our hypothesis (H1 and H2), the first stage of the pandemic impacts on EUS and does not show explanatory effects with respect to NS. Sociodemographic factors play an important role in the European perception of students. Analysis of the data shows that the pandemic crisis seems to have forced young people, particularly the most educated, to recognize a common space of problems and an interconnected social reality. These results are the same for Italian and Spanish students, without significant gender differences. In fact, the Spanish/Italian nationality variable is not significant in the PLS-SEM model, revealing a strong similarity between young Italian and Spanish respondents.

Considering the last hypothesis (H3), the greater European sentiment is associated with greater confidence in public authorities. Trust, both in the EU and in national institutions, is a relevant dimension, together with the perception that institutions act on issues that citizens consider relevant (for example, fake news in the EU is considered relevant and so is the EU action against fake news). At the same time, we found that the overconfidence of young students to detect fake news influences the level of trust in public authorities and in particular EUS.

Some limitations of the study should be noted. First, the collection of data in a restricted period of time, focused on the first and the beginning of the second epidemic wave. Second, the responses to the web survey were limited to two countries. It would be interesting to carry out more research to examine whether students, on the one hand in southern Europe and, on the other hand, in the other member states, show the same homogeneous trend. Also, a different sample of young people with different levels of education could provide additional understanding. In fact, various results of our analysis suggest that education is a relevant factor that explains a positive attitude towards European integration.

Despite these limitations, the results of our research offer a critical analytical approach to studying the pro-European sentiment of young people in southern Europe. The empirical evidence presented in this study highlights how the new categories and interpretive tools are, today, useful to study the perceptions of young people about European integration. A new panorama of Europe is emerging, changed by the pandemic

crisis, more reconfigured through the discursive and horizontal flow of (dis)information and characterized by new social and economic challenges. In this uncertain scenario the European sentiment seems the result of different and intertwined elements: trust, values, awareness, ability to use different sources of information and communication. Through these processes and elements, young people tend to construct new meanings of Europe, mainly based on the idea of recognizing a common space of interaction to counter global threats and challenges and support the principles and values of peace, security, and democracy.

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