

# Europe, a continent of media diversity

## European election 2004: Topics and protagonists in TV news

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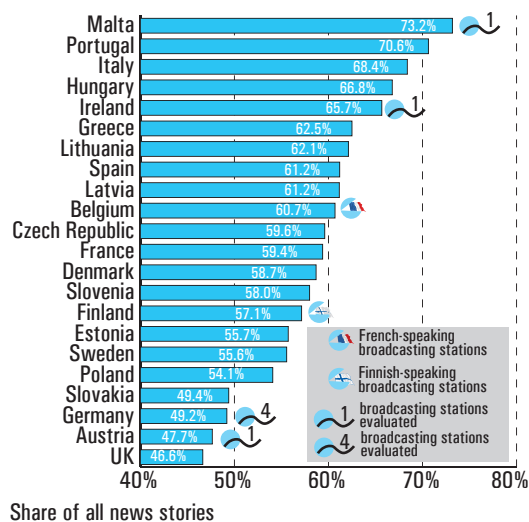
Television is supposed to be window to the world. Nevertheless, European news continues to be dominated by national protagonists. Among EU countries, only Germany, Austria, Great Britain and Slovakia are an exception, but even here the share of non-national protagonists barely exceeds 50%. This is the result of an analysis on television news in 22 old and new EU countries, which **Media Tenor** conducted in collaboration with the Universities of Amsterdam and Twente, Texas Tech University in Lubbock and Emory University in Atlanta on the occasion of the 2004 European election. The analysis has shown that, with regard to a common media image, the European Union still finds itself at the beginning of its common history. Despite some political declarations to the contrary, a truly common European outlook on the world is still far from reality.

### Europe is often far and away

When television news reported from foreign countries, the old and new partners in the European Union only played a secondary role – in stark contrast to political and economic reality, which is strongly influenced by European cooperation and confrontation. Of the foreign news coverage in the programs analyzed – defined as coverage that

Maltese and Portuguese television stations do some navel

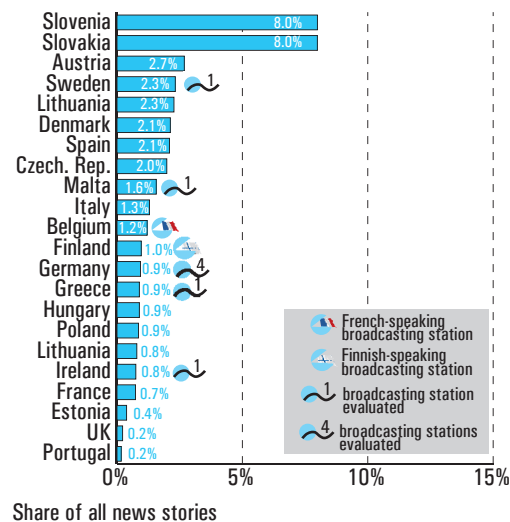
## 1 Share of national protagonists in TV news before EU election



Source: Media Tenor 05/29 – 06/14/2004

Basis: 9,560 stories in 47 European TV news

## 2 Presence of genuine EU protagonists in TV news



Source: Media Tenor 05/29 – 06/14/2004

Basis: 9,560 stories in 47 European TV news

focuses on foreign protagonists – only a quarter of all news stories related to European protagonists in a broader sense. It ranged from 44.5% in Portugal down to 10.9% in Great Britain. The political distance of the island to the continent was therefore reflected in the news selection of opinion forming television journalists.

EU protagonists in a more narrow sense, that is the European Commission and its constituent bodies, the European Council and the European Parliament, played an even more fleeting role in television news. And this is despite the fact that the analysis was conducted at the time of the European election and, in addition to that, less than one month after the EU enlargement to the East. Still, with shares between 0.2% in Portugal and 2.7% in Austria, EU protagonists appeared in the shadow of those that journalists considered to be really important. Only in the two new EU member states Slovenia and Slovakia, EU protagonists raised a comparatively high level of interest with a share of 8%.

The relatively low importance of EU protagonists in the news supports the assumption that national perspectives continues to dominate coverage on the European Union and questions related to European politics. The **Media Tenor** long-term analysis of coverage on Europe in Germany drew a similar conclusion. Over several years, opinion forming German newspapers, weeklies and television news mentioned EU protagonists in an average 9.7% of all news stories in relevant detail,

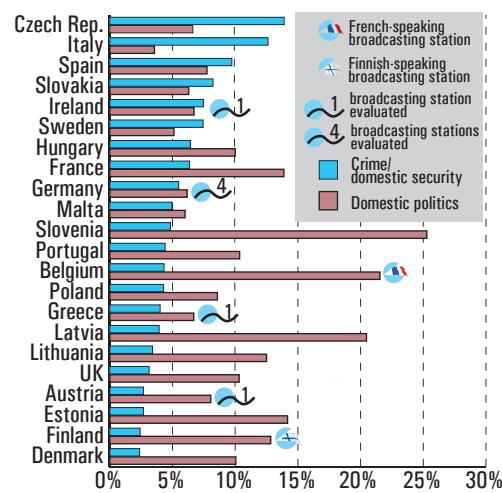
that is dedicating at least five lines to them. Even before the EU enlargement this share rose to just above 15% in the daily newspapers.

**Primacy of domestic politics?**

The dominance of national protagonists does not necessarily mean that domestic politics shaped the media agenda. The lion's share of news programs was dedicated to general interest stories, ranging from accidents and natural disasters to sports and human interest. 12.8% of coverage related to those topics, followed by 11.4% on domestic politics and 10.6% on party politics. However, the numbers differed significantly across countries: The share of news stories solely on domestic politics ranged from 3.6% in Italy to 25.3% in Slovenia. On the other hand, party politics played a more important role in Italian television. Still, with 6.8%, its share turns out to be average, contrary to what might have been expected and also in opposition to the news selection in the Italian press, which focuses strongly on parties. Across the board, the importance of coverage on party politics ranged from 3.8% in the Czech Republic to 18.9% in Lithuania.

This reflects totally different outlooks on the world. The importance of foreign politics confirms that: International politics, excluding the European election and European politics, made up an average 15.6% of the total coverage of the programs analyzed. In the run-up to the European Soccer Championships in Portugal, Portuguese

**3 Importance of crime and domestic politics in TV news**

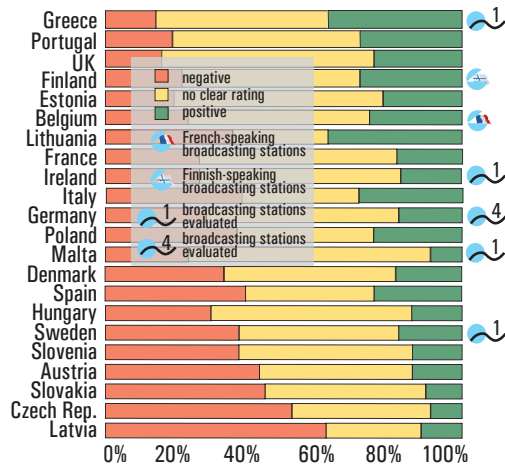


Share of all news stories

Source: Media Tenor 05/29 - 06/14/2004

Basis: 9,560 stories in 47 European TV news

**4 Assessment of national protagonists in TV news coverage**



Share of all news stories

Source: Media Tenor 05/29 - 06/14/2004

Basis: 5,671 stories in 47 European TV news

In 16 countries, criticism in the portrayal of national protagonists predominates.

news programs showed very little interest in world politics, while it made up more than a quarter of all news coverage in Italy and Poland.

As to world events, the war in Iraq dominated in all EU countries in May and June, supplying television stations with footage from the insurgent areas and ongoing reports on bombing attacks and the critical situation of the occupying forces. An average 9.8% of all foreign news stories reported from Iraq, another 12.2% from the US.

**No need for negativism**

The national perspective of television news thus did not necessarily parallel a predominance of domestic protagonists and topics. The countries analyzed also differed significantly in how they portrayed their own national protagonists. It is true that in a majority of the programs negative reporting predominated, but in seven of the 22 countries positive assessments on domestic protagonists prevailed. In the run-up to the Olympic Games in Athens and the European Soccer Championships, Greek and Portuguese television reported particularly positively on the main protagonists from their own countries.

In most cases, however, strongly polarized assessments seem to be the norm in television news across all national borders. Only in Greece, Great Britain and Estonia, did the share of critical assessments drop below 20%; in extreme cases, such as Latvia, it reached more than 60%. As to positive portrayals, there were strong variations between

countries as well: While in Lithuania almost 40% of all news stories were positively slanted towards national protagonists, the same was true for Malta and the Czech Republic in only 10% of stories.

**Crime leads**

The rules of coverage obviously differed significantly across countries. When editorial teams focused primarily on bad news, the result was often an overall negative image. Journalists were thus responsible for the extent to which they conveyed a somber outlook on the world to their audience.

In fact, politicians were not even the main targets of negativism. The lion's share of negative portrayals related to criminals and their victims, whether with explicit value judgements or simply reports on negative circumstances and developments. In Germany, Belgium, France, Ireland, Italy, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, the largest share of negative portrayals referred to those protagonists.

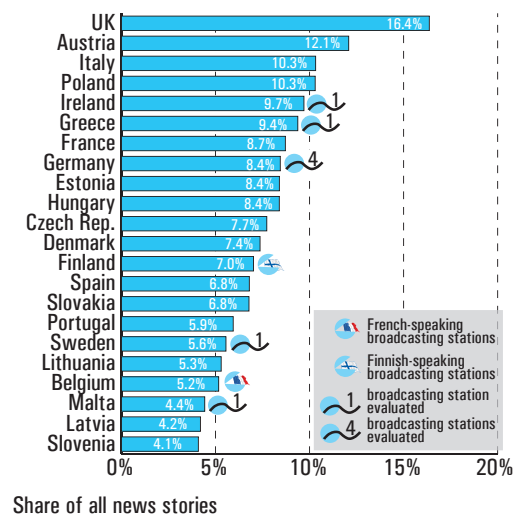
The share of negative portrayals on companies was similarly high. In Denmark, Finland, Greece, Great Britain, Malta, Austria, Poland, Slovenia and Estonia, business people led the ranks of the criticized. Only in Portugal was criticism concentrated on political protagonists.

**Politicians in the pillory**

However, this does not mean that top politicians, governments and parties were showered with praise in most EU countries. Interest in the gov-

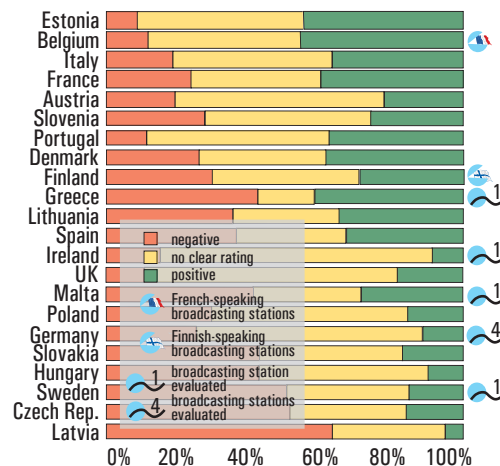
**5 Importance of US protagonists in the TV news coverage**

More than anything, Ronald Reagan's funeral raised interest in Britain.



Source: Media Tenor 05/29 - 06/14/2004 Basis: 9,560 stories in 47 European TV news shows

**6 Assessment of US protagonists in TV news coverage**



Share of all news stories

Source: Media Tenor 05/29 - 06/14/2004 Basis: 714 stories in 47 European TV news shows

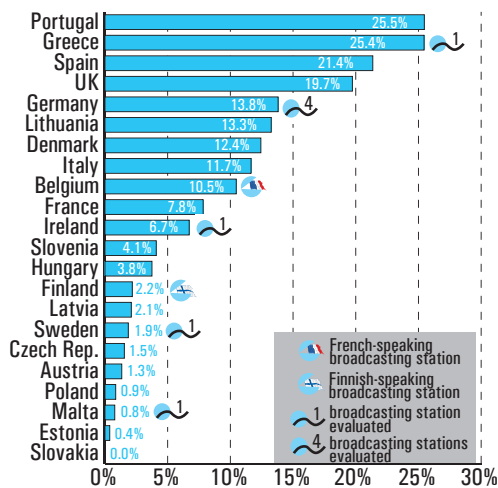
ernment and political parties turned out to be quite different across Europe. On average, politicians made up 26% of national protagonists covered in the 22 countries analyzed. Belgium, Finland, Greece, Malta, Austria, Portugal, Sweden, Slovakia, Hungary and Lithuania ended up above the average, with politicization being the most pronounced in Malta and Greece, and the lowest in Slovenia and Italy. Television news in Italy hardly reflected the considerable diversity of parties in that country.

The assessment of government and parties was nearly balanced on average. But criticism prevailed in 14 of the 22 countries analyzed. The image of political protagonists was most positive in Belgium, Finland and Greece. In Belgium, 36% of news stories were positive and only 8.7% criticized politicians and parties. In Portugal, Spain, France and Lithuania positive news stories predominated, as well.

Latvian television reported most negatively on political protagonists. Two thirds of all its reports on political protagonists had a negative tendency; in Austria and Poland the criticism exceeded approval by more than 30 percentage points.

The dynamics of domestic policy conflicts and debates did not necessarily contribute to a higher share of critical portrayals. In theory, the journalistic routine of trying to listen and give a voice to both sides in a given debate should automatically raise the number of critical portrayals, since governments and oppositions tend to criticize one

## 7 Importance of sports in TV news programs



Share of all news stories

Source: Media Tenor  
05/29 – 06/14/2004

Basis: 9,560 stories in 47 European  
TV news shows

another. The analysis suggests that some editors were oblivious to that duty.

### Old and New Europe

One touchstone for a common European identity is the attitude towards the powerful ally on the other side of the Atlantic. Naturally, content analysis that was conducted over a two-week period can only provide a glimpse of long-term coverage patterns. The coverage on US protagonists was especially affected by current events during the period of analysis. The actual importance of US protagonists offered little opportunities to point to differences between the “Old” and “New” Europe in television news coverage. The share of US protagonists was highest in the British news. At first glance, this seems to be a natural consequence of their “special relationship”. A closer look, however, shows that the state funeral for Ronald Reagan, who had in fact had a special relationship with Great Britain and its former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, as well as human interest stories on US celebrities shaped the news selection in England at that time. It is therefore not surprising that British news programs neither included much criticism, nor much positive on the Americans.

America polarizes the media in Europe: The analysis gives an ambiguous picture, because although positive coverage predominated in twelve of the 22 countries analyzed, the US image varied considerably. George W. Bush was the focus of 32.7% of news stories on US political protagon-

nists, and Ronald Reagan of 52.2%. While Reagan, with 33.3% positive coverage, probably received more posthumous praise than during his lifetime, 30.2% of news stories assessed the current president critically. Only in Austria, Estonia and Lithuania did George W. Bush meet more approval than opposition. If it were not for the US dominance in sports and culture, the picture would have been even duller, as 53.6% of the coverage on US stars was predominantly positive.

When it comes to sports, the countries analyzed seemed to have diverse approaches: On average, sports made up 10% of the news. Aside from the hosts of the Olympic Games and European Soccer Championships, Germany also appears to be among the sports crazy nations, who attributed much greater attention to sports events than the EU elections and enlargement. Diversity instead of unity – this is the bottom line of this first inter-European comparative content analysis of prime time television news.

### Open questions:

Can the triumph of crime, war and disaster coverage still be stopped?

How can Europe and European neighbors attract more attention in television news?

Does the EU even have a chance of overcoming its democratic deficit through communication?

### Basis:

**Media – Germany:** RTL Aktuell, Sat.1 NEWS, ARD Tagesschau, ZDF heute; **Belgium:** VRT Het Journaal, La Une JT Meteo, RTL Le Journal; **Denmark:** DR 1 TV-avisen, TV 2 Nyhederne, **Finland:** YLE Finnish news and Swedish News, MTV 3 News, Ruutu 4 News; **France:** TF 1 Le Journal, F2 Le Journal; **Greece:** ET1 News; **United Kingdom:** BBC Nine o’ Clock News; ITV News at Ten; **Ireland:** RTE1 1 News; **Italy:** RAI 1 Nachrichten, Canale 5 Nachrichten; **Malta:** PBS TVM, Super 1 T.V.; **Austria:** ORF Zeit im Bild; **Portugal:** RTP 1 News, SIC News; **Sweden:** TV 2 Rapport; TV 4 Nyheterna; **Spain:** TVE 1 Telediario; Antena 3 Noticias; Telecinco Nachrichten; **Poland:** TVP SA Nachrichten, Polsat TV Nachrichten; **Slovakia:** STV 1 Nachrichten; Markiza Nachrichten; **Czech Republic:** Czech TV Udalosti, TVNOVA televizni noviny; **Hungary:** MTV Nachrichten, TV2 Nachrichten; **Slovenia:** RTV Nachrichten, TV POP Nachrichten; **Estonia:** ETV Nachrichten, Kanal 2 Nachrichten; **Latvia:** Latvian Television Nachrichten, LNT Nachrichten; **Lithuania:** LRTV Nachrichten, TV3 Nachrichten

**Time:** 05/29 – 06/14/2004 (respectively two weeks before each day of the election of the European Parliament)

**Analysis:** all stories

In Germany, Belgium, France, Greece, Great Britain, Italy, Portugal, Spain and Lithuania, sports was more important than the EU.