

I. Educația civică: dimensiunea politologică

CZU: 321.7:37.017.4:061.1 EU

DOI <https://doi.org/10.59295/eciee26.01>

EDUCAȚIA CIVICĂ CA UN TAMPON ÎMPOTRIVA RUȘINII DISCURSIVE ÎN UNIUNEA EUROPEANĂ

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Rezumat: *Narațiunile contemporane despre Uniunea Europeană sunt din ce în ce mai mult modelate de discursuri moralizatoare care operează prin practici de judecată publică, comparație și sancționare simbolică. Încadrate ca o formă de rușine, acestea acționează ca un factor suplimentar de stres pentru reziliența democratică europeană, transformând modul în care UE este reprezentată și evaluată în sfera publică. În loc să încurajeze responsabilitatea constructivă, narațiunile moralizatoare mută adesea atenția de la performanța instituțională la ierarhiile morale, reconfigurând identitatea europeană de-a lungul unei axe instabile care oscilează între mândrie și îndoială de sine, onoare și rușine.*

Această lucrare susține că astfel de presiuni discursive nu numai că contestă legitimitatea Uniunii Europene, dar testează și capacitatea acesteia de a susține o înțelegere de sine democratică coerentă și încrezătoare. În acest context, educația civică apare ca un mecanism crucial de mediere, capabil să reformuleze discursul moralizator dintr-o sursă de delegitimare într-o oportunitate de reflecție critică și învățare democratică. Prin dotarea cetățenilor cu instrumente interpretative pentru a naviga prin judecata nor-

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mativă și presiunea simbolică, educația civică poate consolida reziliența democratică, mai degrabă decât să o submineze. Bazându-se pe analiza discursului unor narațiuni contemporane selectate despre UE, lucrarea examinează modul în care umilirea remodelează identitatea, legitimitatea și reziliența democratică, subliniind în același timp rolul esențial al educației civice în moderarea acestor efecte în sfera publică europeană.

Cuvinte cheie: umilire discursivă, reziliență democratică europeană, educație civică, legitimitate, narațiuni ale Uniunii Europene, identitate europeană.

CIVIC EDUCATION AS A BUFFER AGAINST DISCURSIVE SHAMING IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Abstract: Contemporary narratives about the European Union are increasingly shaped by moralizing discourses that operate through practices of public judgment, comparison, and symbolic sanctioning. Framed as a form of *shaming*, these discourses act as an additional stress factor for European democratic resilience, transforming the way the EU is represented and evaluated in the public sphere. Rather than fostering constructive accountability, moralizing narratives often shift attention from institutional performance to moral hierarchies, reconfiguring European identity along an unstable axis oscillating between pride and self-doubt, honor and shame.

This paper argues that such discursive pressures not only challenge the legitimacy of the European Union but also test its capacity to sustain a coherent and confident democratic self-understanding. In this context, civic education emerges as a crucial mediating mechanism, capable of reframing moralizing discourse from a source of delegitimation into an opportunity for critical reflection and democratic learning. By equipping citizens with interpretative tools to navigate normative judgment and symbolic pressure, civic education can strengthen democratic resilience rather than undermine it.

Drawing on discourse analysis of selected contemporary narratives about the EU, the paper examines how shaming reshapes identity, legitimacy, and democratic resilience, while highlighting the pivotal role of civic education in moderating these effects within the European public sphere.

Keywords: discursive shaming, European democratic resilience, civic education, legitimacy, European Union narratives, European identity.

Introduction

The European Union is arguably one of the most extensively studied political constructions in the world and is often described as a technocratic project.

However, in contemporary public debates, political analysis is increasingly replaced by moral judgment. Discussions about Europe today sometimes resemble less an evaluation of public policies and more a form of collective moral assessment.

In the public sphere, states are no longer evaluated solely in terms of institutional performance or policy effectiveness, but also in terms of their political virtue. Rather than focusing exclusively on policies and institutions, we increasingly witness symbolic processes of approval, condemnation, or shaming.

In this sense, Europe becomes not only a space of governance, but also a space of continuous moral evaluation. As a result, European debates risk shifting from political analysis toward a symbolic tribunal of virtue and blame. It can therefore be argued that contemporary discourse about the European Union is gradually moving from the realm of political analysis toward a moral and symbolic register, in which actors are not only politically assessed, but also morally judged.

Moralizing discourse is not a new phenomenon; it can be traced back to antiquity. However, its contemporary form, closely associated with public shaming and the construction of normative hierarchies among states or political actors, is relatively recent and has intensified significantly in recent decades. First, in its classical origins, moral evaluation was already central to political thought in ancient Greek philosophy and Roman civic rhetoric. In the works of Aristotle and Cicero, politics was closely linked to the notion of civic virtue, and both citizens and rulers were assessed not only in terms of effectiveness but also in terms of moral character. Public discourse thus included moral judgments, appeals to virtue, and the condemnation of corruption or civic decline. However, these evaluations were primarily directed toward individuals or internal political communities rather than toward supranational political systems.

Second, in the modern period, particularly with the emergence of nation-states, moralizing discourse began to be applied to entire political communities. Nations were increasingly described in normative terms, such as civilized or barbaric, democratic or authoritarian, progressive or backward. Following World War II, the moralization of politics intensified around key normative principles such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. International institutions, including the Council of Europe and later the European Union, developed mechanisms through which states could be evaluated and compared according to these standards.

Third, the contemporary form of moralizing discourse, often described as “discursive shaming” or “naming and shaming,” has become more visible since the 1990s. This development is closely linked to the expansion of the European Union, the globalization of political communication, and the rise of digital media. In recent scholarship, these processes are analyzed within studies of European governance, political communication, and political emotions. In the European context, moralizing discourse frequently emerges in debates concerning the rule of law, migration, solidarity, and democratic standards.

This shift toward the moralization of political discourse has been noted in recent scholarship, which highlights the increasing tendency to frame political disagreements in normative and ethical terms rather than in terms of policy performance or institutional effectiveness [1,2] As Chantal Mouffe argues, “when politics is reduced to morality, the opponent cannot be seen as an adversary but as an enemy,” a transformation that undermines the agonistic nature of democratic contestation.

From a deliberative perspective, Jürgen Habermas [2] also emphasizes the importance of rational-critical debate in the public sphere, warning that distortions of communication can shift political discourse away from reasoned argument toward normative imposition. In such contexts, political disagreement risks being reinterpreted not as a legitimate expression of pluralism, but as a deviation from shared moral standards.

Consequently, the boundary between critique and moral condemnation becomes increasingly blurred, opening the way for forms of discursive exclusion that challenge the conditions of democratic dialogue.

This historical perspective allows for a better understanding of the specificity of contemporary forms of discursive shaming within the European public sphere.

Moralizing discourse operates through a set of symbolic mechanisms that go beyond mere political critique [1,3]. First, it involves public judgment, through which certain states or political actors are exposed to collective evaluation within the European public sphere. Second, it entails symbolic comparison, whereby states are implicitly positioned within a normative hierarchy, some being presented as models of compliance, while others are framed as cases of deviation.

This process is accompanied by normative evaluations that shift the focus from the analysis of public policies to the moral assessment of political behavior. In this context, what the literature describes as *discursive shaming* [4,5] emerges, referring to forms of symbolic sanction through which actors are subjected to moral criticism in the public sphere. Practices of “naming and shaming” function as mechanisms of public accountability, exposing the gap between states’ formal commitments and their actual behavior [4]. At the same time, such practices can be understood not merely as criticism, but as forms of moral suasion [5], capable of inducing normative internalization and behavioral change.

However, the effects of such practices are not unambiguously positive. As reflected in the relevant literature [4], public shaming may produce improvements at the level of formal commitments or legal frameworks, while simultaneously leading to unintended consequences. In some cases, governments may respond strategically by complying “on paper” with international norms, while intensifying repression or shifting violations to less visible domains.

This paradox highlights the ambivalent nature of discursive shaming: while it can reinforce accountability and normative pressure, it may also generate adaptive behaviors that undermine its intended effects.

This dynamic is also observable in the context of the European Union. Member states subject to discursive shaming, particularly in debates on the rule of law, may adopt formal reforms that signal compliance with European standards, while maintaining political control through alternative mechanisms. Such responses may involve the strategic use of administrative procedures, legal reinterpretations, or discursive reframing, allowing governments to preserve authority while outwardly adhering to normative expectations. In this regard, compliance becomes partially performative,

reflecting an adaptation to external pressure rather than a substantive transformation of governance practices.

As a result, political disagreements are no longer interpreted solely as differences in positions or interests, but increasingly transformed into moral hierarchies between actors perceived as responsible or irresponsible, virtuous or deficient - or, in more simplified terms, between what public discourse comes to label as “good Europeans” and “problematic Europeans” [6,7], because European identity is not a fixed construct, but one that is continuously shaped and reshaped through symbolic and discursive processes. Accordingly, moralizing narratives and practices of discursive shaming may play a significant role in redefining how political actors and communities position themselves in relation to the European project. “Europe” itself is constructed through language and political discourse, often through processes of inclusion and exclusion. Consequently, the emergence of moral hierarchies, such as distinctions between “good” and “problematic” Europeans [7], can be understood as part of broader discursive struggles over the meaning and boundaries of Europe.

Discursive Shaming in the European Public Sphere

At this point, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by the concept of *discursive shaming*. By this term, we refer to a set of discursive practices through which individuals, institutions, or even states are exposed to forms of moral judgment within the public sphere. Rather than relying on formal legal or institutional sanctions, these practices operate through symbolic mechanisms that attribute collective responsibility, blame, or guilt [4, 5].

Discursive shaming functions through language, through formulations that signal deviation from established norms, through negative labeling, and through the construction of narratives in which certain behaviors are presented as incompatible with the values of a given political community and it reflects broader dynamics of discursive power, whereby language not only describing reality but actively constituting it [3, 7].

In the context of the European Union, such practices are particularly visible in debates concerning the rule of law, migration policies, economic governance, or democratic standards. In these situations, political critique is frequently articulated in a moral register, transforming policy disagreements into symbolic judgments about the legitimacy or credibility of the

actors involved. As Mouffe [1] suggests, this shift risks turning political contestation into a form of moral confrontation, in which opponents are no longer treated as legitimate adversaries but as actors deviating from shared normative expectations.

Discursive shaming can be understood as referring to communicative practices that expose actors to public moral judgment, attributing collective responsibility or guilt, and generating symbolic forms of sanction. In the European Union, these dynamics are especially visible across central areas of political contestation, where political disagreements are frequently recast in moral terms, emphasizing compliance or deviation from shared norms and often reframed as a matter of moral compliance or deviation.

To understand how moralizing discourse operates in practice, it is essential to examine the role of the media in constructing and disseminating such narratives. Media actors do not merely report political events or decisions; they actively participate in shaping their symbolic meaning through processes of framing and interpretation [8], electing certain aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in communication, thereby promoting particular problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and treatment recommendations. Applied to the European context, such mechanisms help explain how technical or institutional processes can be reinterpreted as moral issues, reinforcing perceptions of responsibility, blame, or deviation from shared norms.

One key mechanism through which this occurs is the judicial framing of European Union authority. Media narratives often portray EU institutions as actors endowed with strong punitive powers, even though many of their procedures are primarily technical or administrative in nature. As a result, technical mechanisms are frequently reframed as acts of punishment or sanction. A notable example is the infringement procedure, which is often presented in public discourse not as a legal and procedural instrument, but as a threat or penalty imposed on non-compliant states.

This process contributes to the moralization of legal procedures, transforming institutional practices into narratives of responsibility, blame, and deviation from shared norms. In this way, political disagreements or administrative processes are recast as moral judgments about the conduct of states or political actors.

At the same time, journalists can function as opinion leaders, influencing how such situations are interpreted by the public. Through opinion pieces, commentary, and editorial framing, media actors may reinforce normative evaluations and contribute to the construction of moral hierarchies within the European public sphere.

Consequently, media discourse is instrumental in transforming complex political and institutional processes into simplified narratives of virtue and failure, thereby amplifying the dynamics of discursive shaming in contemporary debates about the European Union.

Discursive Shaming Beyond Europe: Transatlantic and Symbolic Dimensions

Moralizing discourse about the European Union does not emerge exclusively within the European public sphere; it is also present in transatlantic debates. In recent years, political discourse in the United States has frequently framed relations with Europe in explicitly moralizing terms, particularly in discussions on security and economic policy. Such narratives often articulate criticism not only in strategic or economic terms, but also in terms of responsibility, fairness, and loyalty among allies. Public statements frequently emphasize that Europe should assume greater responsibility for its own security, that some European states benefit from collective arrangements without contributing their fair share, or that allies must demonstrate consistency between the values they proclaim and the policies they pursue.

In this context, policy disagreements are reframed as questions of moral obligation and normative commitment. As a result, transatlantic political discourse introduces evaluative frameworks in which actors are judged not only in terms of interests or performance, but also in terms of their perceived responsibility and credibility.

These dynamics reveal that mechanisms similar to what has been described as *discursive shaming* are not confined to the European context. Rather, they operate at the international level, where political disagreements are increasingly transformed into judgments about the moral standing of actors within a shared normative framework.

From a technical perspective, recent U.S. political discourse, particularly in statements associated with Donald Trump and J. D. Vance, illus-

trates a recurrent pattern of framing transatlantic relations in terms of burden-sharing and normative compliance. Such formulations rely on evaluative distinctions that position actors along a continuum of responsibility, thereby contributing to the moralization of policy discourse.

Recent U.S. political discourse has increasingly framed transatlantic relations in moralizing terms, particularly in debates on security and broader geopolitical responsibility. For instance, statements associated with J. D. Vance at the Munich Security Conference 2024 emphasized that Europe should “finally take a bigger role in assuring its own security,” framing the issue not merely as a strategic concern but as a matter of responsibility and burden-sharing.

Similarly, narratives associated with the administration of Donald Trump have, at times, described Europe as facing “civilisational erasure”. This framing is also reflected at the level of official policy discourse. In the U.S. National Security Strategy (2025), European decline has been linked to structural factors such as migration and the regulatory orientation of the European Union, situating these issues within a broader narrative of civilizational vulnerability and strategic imbalance.

Such formulations shift the discourse from policy-based critique toward a more symbolic and evaluative register, in which political actors are judged not only in terms of strategic performance, but also in relation to perceived responsibility, resilience, and alignment with shared civilizational values. In this way, transatlantic political discourse illustrates how policy disagreements can be reframed as questions of moral responsibility and normative credibility, reinforcing dynamics similar to those identified in practices of discursive shaming.

To illustrate these recurring patterns, the above Table summarizes the main discursive expressions and their underlying normative frames in recent transatlantic political discourse.

Discursive Expression	Underlying Frame	Moral Dimension
“Europe must assume greater responsibility for its own security”	Burden-sharing	Responsibility
“Allies must contribute their fair share”	Reciprocity	Fairness

“The U.S. should not bear disproportionate costs”	Distribution of obligations	Justice
“Some countries benefit without adequate contribution”	Free-riding	Moral failure
“Policies must align with declared values”	Norm compliance	Credibility

The table highlights a consistent pattern in which strategic or economic disagreements are systematically reframed in moral terms, emphasizing responsibility, fairness, and normative compliance. This supports the argument that transatlantic discourse increasingly relies on moralizing frames that contribute to the dynamics of discursive shaming. It also provides an analytical summary of recurring discursive patterns identified in transatlantic political rhetoric. The expressions are illustrative and reflect commonly used formulations in debates on burden-sharing, reciprocity, and normative compliance [8, 4, 5].

A relevant illustration of this dynamic can be observed in recent U.S. foreign policy discourse associated with Donald Trump’s “America First” approach. Policy statements emphasizing national interest and strategic autonomy have, at times, been accompanied by increasingly critical references to European allies, particularly in areas such as defense spending and economic relations. While such critiques may originate in legitimate policy disagreements, their discursive framing can contribute to a gradual shift toward more generalized and evaluative narratives about Europe. In this process, specific policy issues, such as burden-sharing or regulatory divergence, are reframed in broader terms that question the reliability, commitment, or fairness of European partners.

As a result, political critique may evolve into a form of rhetorical positioning that implicitly constructs Europe as a problematic or insufficiently compliant actor within the transatlantic relationship. In this sense, the boundary between policy-based criticism and broader anti-European rhetoric becomes increasingly blurred, as evaluative language extends beyond specific issues to characterize the behavior of European actors more generally.

A particularly relevant illustration of the role of symbolic language in moralizing discourse can be found in the very Romanian public sphere,

where journalistic narratives frequently rely on metaphor and personification to render European Union affairs more accessible to the public. As shown in previous analyses of Romanian media discourse, the complexity of EU legal and institutional mechanisms often leads journalists to simplify and reinterpret them through symbolic representations.

One recurrent strategy is the use of medical metaphors, which frame political or economic difficulties as pathologies affecting the “European body.” Expressions such as “the sick man of Europe,” “Eurosclerosis,” or “Eurososis” transform structural or policy-related challenges into symptoms of collective dysfunction. While such metaphors enhance communicative clarity, they also contribute to the stigmatization of specific states or of the European project as a whole by associating political issues with images of illness and decay.

These patterns point to a longer-standing tradition of constructing Europe as an embodied and personified entity, a tendency that has been readily taken up and amplified within national media, including in the Romanian public sphere. A prominent mechanism is the personification of the European Union, particularly through figures such as “Coana Europa,” frequently encountered in Romanian media and political discourse. This form of representation attributes human traits, often negative, to EU institutions, portraying them as self-interested, hypocritical, or intrusive actors. Such personifications facilitate moral evaluation by transforming abstract institutional processes into narratives centered on intention, character, and blame [9]. This tendency is particularly visible in the Romanian public sphere, where the personification of the European Union through the figure of “Coana Europa” has become a recurrent discursive pattern across political and media contexts. Such representations appear in parliamentary discourse, journalistic commentary, and opinion writing, where the European Union is portrayed as a human-like actor, often attributed with traits such as opportunism, hypocrisy, or moral inconsistency. These personalized constructions frequently rely on familiar cultural registers, drawing on colloquial or ironic expressions that frame Europe as a calculating or self-interested figure. By doing so, complex institutional dynamics are translated into accessible narratives centered on intention, character, and blame.

Rather than being isolated instances, these recurring formulations suggest the consolidation of a broader symbolic repertoire in which Europe is

not only personified, but also morally evaluated through culturally embedded frames. This reinforces the argument that discursive shaming operates not only through explicit political critique, but also through informal and culturally resonant modes of representation that shape public perception in subtle yet persistent ways.

These discursive strategies are not merely stylistic devices. They actively shape public perception by constructing simplified and emotionally charged representations of the European Union, which may reinforce skepticism, mistrust, or perceptions of external imposition. In this way, metaphor and personification contribute to the emergence of negative symbolic representations, amplifying the dynamics of discursive shaming within national public spheres.

From a communicative perspective, such metaphors are highly effective, as they simplify complex realities and render them more accessible to broader audiences [10]. At the same time, however, they contribute to processes of symbolic stigmatization by framing certain states or policies as inherently deficient or problematic. As Sara Ahmed [11] suggests, emotions are not merely personal experiences, but circulate within public discourse, shaping collective identities and political boundaries. Personification, exemplified by figures such as “Lady Europe” or “Coana Europa” [9], contributes to framing EU institutions in moral and emotional terms.

Taken together, these discursive strategies contribute to the transformation of political disagreements into moral judgments and symbolic hierarchies between states. In doing so, they shape how legitimacy and political responsibility are perceived within the European public sphere.

When such forms of discourse become dominant, their effects extend beyond rhetoric. They begin to generate emotional responses and influence how political communities perceive themselves, thereby linking discursive practices to broader dynamics of identity formation and political legitimacy.

The Emotional Dimension of Politics and Its Effects on European Identity

Political discourse is deeply shaped by emotional dynamics, which should not be understood merely as private or individual experiences. Rather, they circulate within the public sphere and contribute to the formation of collective identities, as “declarations of shame can bring ‘the nation’ into existence as a felt community” [11:101].

To fully understand the impact of discursive shaming, it is therefore necessary to consider the emotional dimension of political life. Shame is often perceived as an individual emotion; however, it can also operate at a collective level. Political communities, including states and international organizations, can become the object of public moral evaluation, generating forms of symbolic vulnerability.

Here, emotions operate as boundary-making mechanisms, shaping the very distinction between political “insiders” and “outsiders” [11:9]. They contribute to the construction of collective surfaces of nations, communities, or political entities, by aligning individuals with a shared identity while simultaneously defining what lies beyond it.

Political discourse thus functions not only through argumentation, but also through affective alignment, positioning subjects in relation to a collective “we” and attributing emotional significance to perceived others. Collective identity emerges through these processes of differentiation, as political communities define themselves in relation to what is constructed as external, unfamiliar, or threatening.

Within this framework, metaphors of vulnerability play a crucial role. Political communities, whether nations or supranational entities such as the European Union, may be represented as fragile or exposed bodies, whose boundaries are perceived as porous and susceptible to external pressure. Such representations often generate calls for protection, resilience, or “hardening” of borders, reinforcing narratives in which external actors are framed as sources of risk or instability.

These dynamics can be further understood through what has been described as affective economies, in which emotions such as fear, anxiety, or hostility circulate between signs, narratives, and political actors. Rather than residing in individuals, these emotions accumulate through repetition and become attached to particular figures, such as migrants, external actors, or non-compliant states, transforming them into “sticky” objects of concern or suspicion. In this way, political discourse contributes to the stabilization of collective identity by associating difference with emotional intensity.

At the same time, affective mechanisms are not limited to exclusion. Discourses of inclusion, such as those associated with multiculturalism or European values, often rely on emotional imperatives, including the ex-

pectation of attachment, loyalty, or even “love” toward the political community. However, such inclusion is frequently conditional: belonging depends on the perceived ability of actors to align with shared norms and to reciprocate the values they are expected to embrace. Failure to do so may reinforce narratives of deviation or non-belonging.

In this context, shame emerges as a particularly significant political emotion. It operates as a relational mechanism that highlights discrepancies between declared values and perceived behavior, exposing actors to moral evaluation within the public sphere. In the European Union, practices of discursive shaming can activate such emotional dynamics, influencing how states and citizens perceive their position within the European project.

More broadly, emotional dynamics such as shame, fear, or attachment play a constitutive role in shaping European identity. They do not merely reflect political realities, but actively participate in their construction by defining the boundaries of belonging and by structuring the ways in which political communities understand themselves. This suggests that European identity is not only a legal or institutional construct, but also an affective one, continuously negotiated through emotional investments in shared norms and through shifting orientations toward perceived others.

Also, from this perspective, shame can be understood as a relational emotion, as it depends on how actors are perceived and judged by others. It emerges when there is a perceived discrepancy between the values a political community claims to uphold and behaviors that are interpreted as deviations from those values.

With regards to the European Union, practices of discursive shaming can activate such emotional mechanisms, influencing how both states and citizens perceive their belonging to the European project. Public discourse, therefore, does not merely shape political opinions; it also contributes to the construction of collective identity and self-perception within political communities. Analyzing discursive mechanisms of moral judgment becomes therefore essential for understanding how European identity is continuously negotiated and redefined within the public sphere.

Discursive shaming does not only generate emotional reactions; it also plays a significant role in shaping how European identity is constructed and perceived [7]. The political identity of the European Union is ground-

ed in a shared set of normative principles [6], including democracy, the rule of law, and the protection of fundamental rights. When public discourse emphasizes deviations from these values, it introduces a symbolic tension between the idealized image of Europe and the perception of inconsistency or failure.

For this purpose, European identity tends to oscillate between two symbolic registers. On the one hand, it is associated with a sense of pride rooted in democratic achievements and in the EU's self-understanding as a normative power [12]. This oscillation between pride and doubt reflects the affective dynamics of political identity formation. European identity is not only constructed through discourse and emotional investment, but is also closely tied to the Union's normative self-understanding. The international role of the European Union is defined not simply by what it does or says, but by what it *is*: a "hybrid political entity" [12: 240] that predisposes the international system toward normative action.

On this point of view, the EU's identity as a normative power reinforces expectations of coherence between declared values and political practice. When such coherence is perceived to be lacking, discursive shaming gains traction, amplifying tensions between the EU's normative aspirations and its empirical realities.

On the other hand, moralizing discourses, particularly those grounded in practices of discursive shaming, perceived may generate doubt, critique, or even forms of collective self-reflection, especially when certain states or policies are portrayed as deviating from shared standards.

This oscillation between pride and doubt reflects the affective dynamics of political identity formation. As suggested by Sara Ahmed, emotions do not simply express identity, but actively participate in its construction by orienting subjects toward particular values and by shaping their sense of belonging. In this sense, discursive shaming contributes to the continuous renegotiation of what it means to be "European," by reinforcing normative expectations while simultaneously exposing their limits.

When such tensions become persistent, they may affect the coherence of the European narrative and influence how citizens relate to the European project. More importantly, they can have implications for the perceived legitimacy of the European Union [13], as identity-based tensions may translate into questions regarding credibility, consistency, and trust in European institutions.

Democratic Legitimacy, Resilience, and the Role of Civic Education

When political debates are predominantly framed in moralizing terms, the evaluation of institutions is no longer centered primarily on performance or efficiency, but on symbolic judgments concerning conformity with specific values or norms. In such contexts, political actors are assessed less in terms of policy outcomes and more in relation to their perceived adherence to shared standards.

This shift has important implications for the democratic legitimacy of the European Union. While political critique is an essential component of any functioning democracy, its transformation into a form of moral stigmatization may contribute to the polarization of public debate. Rather than fostering deliberation, such discursive dynamics risk reinforcing antagonistic perceptions between states, as well as between different segments of the European public sphere.

As a result, public trust in institutions may be eroded, and political disagreement may increasingly take the form of moral opposition rather than constructive contestation. The issue, therefore, is not the existence of critique itself, but the way in which it is articulated and interpreted within the public sphere. When political discourse becomes dominated by moral judgments, institutional legitimacy may be perceived as contested or vulnerable.

Against this background, the concept of democratic resilience becomes particularly relevant. Democratic resilience refers to the capacity of political systems to absorb disturbances, adapt to changing conditions, and maintain their core functions and values despite external or internal pressures [14]. Rather than being limited to stability, resilience implies a dynamic process of adjustment, learning, and institutional continuity in the face of uncertainty.

Importantly, resilience is not only an institutional property but also a function of public perception and trust. As research on administrative resilience suggests, there may exist a gap between institutional performance and public opinion, particularly when citizens interpret political processes through pre-existing narratives or symbolic frames. In such cases, even effective institutional responses may fail to generate legitimacy if they are not accompanied by coherent communication and sustained public engagement.

This dynamic is particularly relevant in the context of moralizing discourse, where symbolic judgments can overshadow empirical performance. When institutions are persistently framed as deviant, ineffective, or non-compliant, these representations may become recurrent and resistant to change, reinforcing cycles of distrust and skepticism. As a result, legitimacy is shaped not only by what institutions do, but also by how they are perceived and narrated within the public sphere. [14] This suggests that the problem is not simply discursive intensity, but the absence of interpretive filters at the level of the audience.

So, democratic resilience depends not only on institutional capacity, but also on the ability to sustain trust, transparency, and meaningful communication. Adaptability, openness, and accountability become key elements in maintaining legitimacy, particularly in contexts marked by discursive polarization and moral evaluation. This highlights the need to examine legitimacy not only as an institutional attribute, but also as a discursive and affective construct shaped by public narratives, symbolic representations, and moral expectations.

In this context, democratic resilience can be understood as the capacity of a political system to withstand tensions, crises, or critical scrutiny without undermining its institutional stability or core values. And in the particular case of the European Union, this resilience does not depend solely on institutional arrangements or legal mechanisms of integration. It is also shaped by how citizens interpret and make sense of political debates within the public sphere. In other words, democratic resilience involves the capacity of a political community to absorb critique, reflect upon it, and integrate it into processes of democratic learning, without allowing such tensions to translate into delegitimization of the European project.

This implies that resilience is not merely a structural attribute, but also a cognitive and interpretive capacity distributed across society. The way in which citizens distinguish between critique and moral condemnation, or between disagreement and stigmatization, becomes central to the stability of democratic systems.

Consequently, strengthening democratic resilience requires not only institutional robustness, but also the cultivation of critical interpretive skills at the societal level. This raises a central question: what mechanisms

can support citizens in navigating moralizing discourse without reinforcing polarization or distrust?

Accordingly, civic education emerges as a key mechanism for mediating between public discourse and citizens' capacity to interpret and evaluate political narratives. Civic education should not be understood merely as the transmission of factual knowledge about European institutions or political processes. Rather, it involves the development of competencies that enable citizens to critically engage with the complexities of the public sphere. [16].

This perspective is consistent with John Dewey's understanding of civic education as the cultivation of "civic efficiency," understood as the ability to "judge men and measures wisely and to take a determining part in making as well as obeying laws" [15: 140]. Importantly, this conception emphasizes that democratic competence is not abstract, but relational—rooted in individuals' capacity to act, deliberate, and engage with others within a shared political community.

More specifically, civic education can equip individuals with the analytical tools necessary to distinguish between legitimate democratic critique [2], an essential feature of pluralistic political systems, and forms of moral stigmatization that may distort public debate and contribute to polarization.

This distinction is particularly important in contexts where political discourse is increasingly shaped by moralizing frames and practices of discursive shaming. In this context, civic education functions as a balancing mechanism, allowing citizens to transform exposure to moral pressure or stigmatizing discourse into opportunities for critical reflection and democratic learning. Rather than reinforcing emotional reactions or antagonistic divisions, it can foster more nuanced forms of political judgment and engagement. As a result, citizens are not positioned merely as passive recipients of political discourse, but as active participants capable of interpreting, questioning, and contributing to public debate in a responsible manner. From this perspective, civic education supports the development of democratic competencies that enable individuals to engage critically and constructively with debates about Europe.

Ultimately, strengthening civic education contributes to democratic resilience by enhancing society's capacity to navigate moralizing discourse

without succumbing to polarization or distrust. It reinforces the ability of political communities to sustain deliberation, maintain legitimacy, and adapt to the challenges posed by increasingly complex and emotionally charged public debates.

This broader understanding of civic education [15] emphasizes the need to cultivate not only knowledge, but also the capacity for adaptation to changing social and political conditions. In this sense, the ability to engage with contemporary problems and to exercise a capacity for readaptation can be understood as a key driver of social intelligence, enabling individuals to respond to evolving circumstances in a reflective and context-sensitive manner.

With respect to the European Union, this insight is particularly relevant, as citizens are increasingly exposed to complex and rapidly changing political narratives, including moralizing forms of discourse. Civic education, therefore, functions as a key enabler for individuals, allowing them not only to understand such dynamics, but also to respond critically and constructively, rather than being passively shaped by them.

Importantly, civic education should not be understood merely as the transmission of factual knowledge about institutions or political processes. Rather, it involves the development of democratic competencies that enable individuals to critically engage with public debates and to navigate complex and often polarized discursive environments. In this sense, democracy is not only a set of formal procedures, but a lived practice grounded in everyday attitudes, behaviors, and interactions.

These competencies encompass a broad range of elements, including commitment to democratic values, openness to dialogue, critical and analytical thinking, empathy, and the ability to understand and evaluate political and social realities [16]. By fostering such capacities, civic education enables citizens to distinguish between legitimate democratic critique and forms of moral stigmatization that may distort public discourse.

From this perspective, civic education contributes directly to democratic resilience. By strengthening critical thinking and interpretive capacities, it enables citizens to engage more reflectively with moralizing discourse and to avoid reproducing patterns of polarization or discursive stigmatization within the public sphere.

In the contemporary “post-truth” context, the role of civic education

becomes even more significant. The increasing circulation of misinformation and disinformation within digital environments creates conditions in which public debate may be shaped by emotionally charged narratives rather than evidence-based reasoning. [17, 18, 19].

In such contexts, younger generations are particularly vulnerable, as they are often exposed to high volumes of unverified or misleading information. This informational fragility underscores the need for robust civic competencies, including critical thinking, media literacy [16], and the ability to evaluate sources and distinguish between factual claims and manipulative narratives.

This suggests that civic education provides individuals with the tools required to navigate complex and often distorted information environments. By fostering analytical judgment and reflective engagement, it enables citizens not only to resist disinformation, but also to participate more responsibly in democratic life. In this way, civic education contributes not only to democratic participation, but also to the resilience of the public sphere itself, by supporting the development of informed, critical, and engaged citizens capable of sustaining meaningful and evidence-based public debate.

Taken together, these dynamics can be synthesized in a conceptual framework that captures the relationship between discursive shaming, its effects on the European public sphere, and the mediating role of civic education.

Moralizing discourse generates forms of symbolic pressure directed at political actors and member states, contributing to the construction of normative hierarchies and to the emergence of identity tensions. These dynamics influence how legitimacy is perceived within the European Union and, when not critically interpreted, may reinforce polarization and erode trust in the European project.

At the same time, civic education functions as a key mediating mechanism. By equipping citizens with critical thinking skills and democratic competencies, it enables individuals to engage more reflexively with moralizing discourse. In this way, symbolic pressure can be transformed into a process of democratic learning rather than reproduced as polarization.

Ultimately, democratic resilience rests not only on institutional capacity, but also on citizens' ability to interpret and navigate morally charged public debates.

This perspective also highlights the orientational function of political discourse, through which societies identify and respond to perceived risks, articulating forms of “survival strategy” [20: 10], aimed at preserving stability, continuity, and collective identity in contexts of uncertainty.

Conclusions

In conclusion, moralizing discourse has become an increasingly visible component of contemporary political communication about the European Union. Political debates are often framed not only in terms of policies or institutional performance, but also through normative judgments concerning responsibility, culpability, and deviation from shared values.

The issue is not the existence of critique itself, as critique remains a fundamental element of any functioning democracy. The challenge arises when political critique is transformed into moral stigmatization, a process that may intensify polarization and undermine the perceived legitimacy of institutions.

In this context, civic education becomes a key condition for democratic resilience. By strengthening critical thinking and, more importantly, citizens’ ability to interpret political discourse, it enables them to engage more reflexively within public sphere and to interpret symbolic pressures in a more nuanced manner. Rather than reproducing polarization, citizens can transform such pressures into opportunities for democratic learning and reflection.

From this perspective, civic education does not merely inform citizens about democratic processes, but enhances society’s capacity to engage critically and responsibly with debates about Europe. It functions not only as a pedagogical tool, but as a key mechanism for sustaining the coherence and resilience of the European democratic project.

This also invites a broader reflection on a fundamental distinction for democratic life: the difference between critique and critical thinking. Critique may emerge as an immediate and sometimes emotionally driven reaction that labels or stigmatizes political actors. Critical thinking, by contrast, involves the capacity to analyze arguments, contextualize information, and engage with the complexity of political processes.

One of the central challenges facing contemporary democracies is therefore not the absence of critique, but the cultivation of critical thinking

as a condition for responsible and constructive public debate about the future of the European project. Ultimately, the future of European democracy depends not on limiting critique, but on sustaining forms of critical reflection capable of preventing disagreement from hardening into moral exclusion.

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