

<Policy Paper>

Overviewing South Korean Media's EU Representation before and after COVID-19: A Semantic Network Approach

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Summary

This paper aims to revisit the South Korean media representation of the EU during the periods of pre- (2018/2019) and post- (2020/2021) COVID19 crisis. Throughout the monitoring period, the EU's global economic actorness and its regional and global crises were constant major themes in the media. Among these themes, the EU's economic presence was the strongest image. In addition, EU-South Korean political and environmental cooperation were other visible themes. Based on the findings, this paper in a second step provides five suggestions for integrating their bilateral relations: 1. Both sides should deepen their cooperation by looking at the lower level to consolidate the bilateral economic relations. 2. They still have room for improving political/security cooperation by considering the Framework Agreement, but the actual cooperations are not likely to be covered. 3. Environmental cooperation might be a promising area for the two parties. 4. Diplomatic practitioners can explore further helpful agendas which might integrate their closeness such as telecommunication and innovation. and 5. Both could find future-oriented areas of cooperation like culture, education, research and development.

Introduction

The EU and South Korea have established their diplomatic ties since 1963. Up to the 1990s, EU-Korea bilateral relations mainly developed in order to strengthen their trade ties. With the end of the Cold War and the introduction of the European Union, the focus of their bilateral relations was broadened to also encompass political and security cooperation. In 1996, the EU and South Korea signed the EU-Korea Framework Agreement, which defines their further cooperation in covering diverse areas such as economy, trade, culture, science and technology (Embassy of the Republic of Korea to the Kingdom of Belgium and the European Union, 2022).

In May 2010, the EU and South Korea signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement. Since then, their partnership has rapidly developed. For comprehensive bilateral relations, they signed an upgraded Framework Agreement in the same year which entered into force in June 2014. Also,

in October 2010, they signed a Free Trade Agreement, which entered into force in July 2011. In 2016, the two parties joined the crisis management cooperation agreement, which entails further security cooperation (Chung and Lee, 2019). South Korea and the EU see each other as “like-minded partners that share similar values and interests” (EU Delegation to the Republic of Korea, 2020). These three major agreements laid the foundation for more frequent and robust cooperation, which is expected to have a more positive impact on both the people in the EU, South Korea and the globe (EU Delegation to the Republic of Korea, 2020).

At the deeper level of EU-South Korea relations, South Korean perceptions of the EU reflect the development of their bilateral relations. In the 2000s, South Korean perceptions of the EU were about the expectations of positive results after the negotiations of the Free Trade Agreement (Park and Seo, 2007, Chaban and Chung, 2009, Yoon, Chaban and Chung, 2010, Park and Yoon 2015). In the 2010s, South Korean perceptions of the EU were about the concerns about EU crises such as Eurozone Crisis and Brexit (Chung and Park 2016, Park and Chung 2019). In the 2020s, South Korean perceptions of the EU were about Koreans’ concentration on the Union’s economic affairs and crisis management (Chung 2020a and 2020b, Park and Chung 2020).

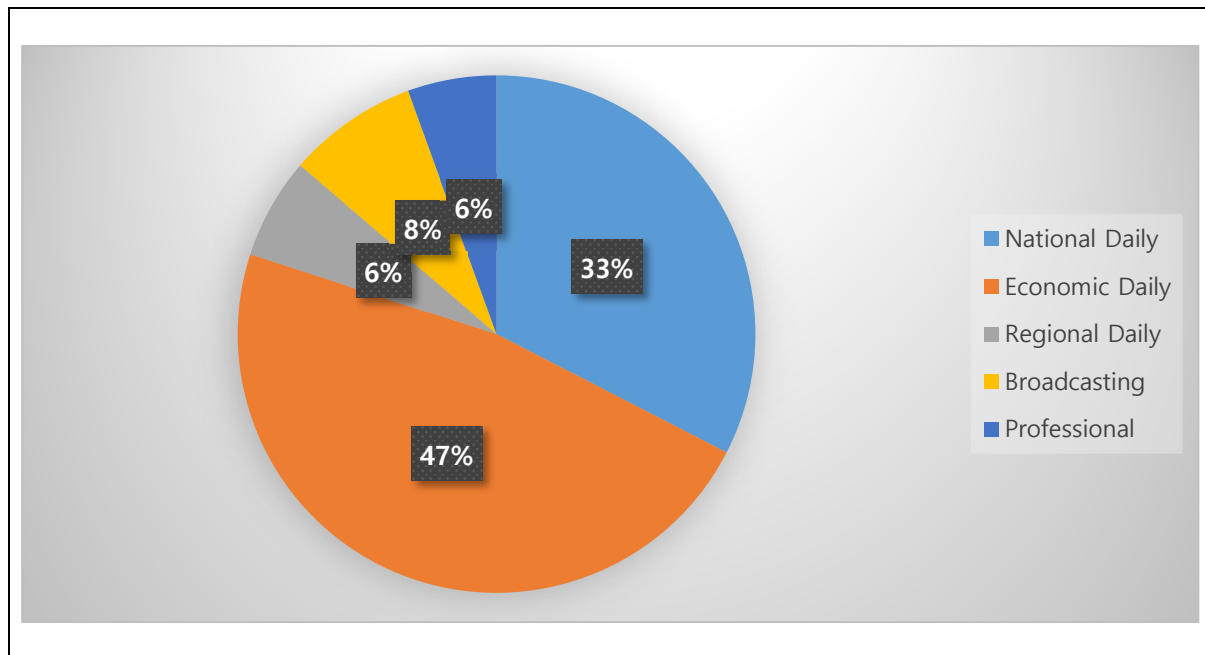
Since 2020, COVID-19 is a major ongoing global health crisis. Due to its massive impact, it is worth investigating how South Koreans’ EU perceptions have changed before and after this crisis. This attempt could be the novelty of this study. This paper attempts to show the snapshots of such EU perceptions before and after the COVID-19 crisis by focusing on South Korean media coverage of the EU. For the data collection, I employed BIG KINDS, which is a database containing news articles from 54 different media companies. In this database, the media companies consist of five major groupings—national daily, economic daily, regional daily, broadcasting and professional media. This study consists of two major time frames—before COVID-19 (2018-2019) and after COVID-19 outbreak (2020-2021). The total number of EU-related articles for this study was 93,968—47,917 articles were collected during the first period (before COVID-19) and 46,051 were collected during the subsequent period (after COVID-19). For handling a large amount of data, semantic network analysis, one of the automated text mining techniques, was adopted for effective and efficient data analysis. For the data analysis, NodeXL was utilised for establishing text networks and visualizing these networks. In the subsequent sections, more illustrations will be offered according to the research methodology.

Data Profile

In order to establish the dataset, I collected the news articles related to the EU via keyword search (the EU was keyword here) in Big Data portal called BigKINDS (bigkinds.or.kr). For the whole period, South Korean economic dailies are more inclined to cover EU affairs, consisting of almost half of the dataset (Figure 1). After that, national dailies are the subsequent major media outlets covering EU issues. Other than these two groups of newspapers, the share

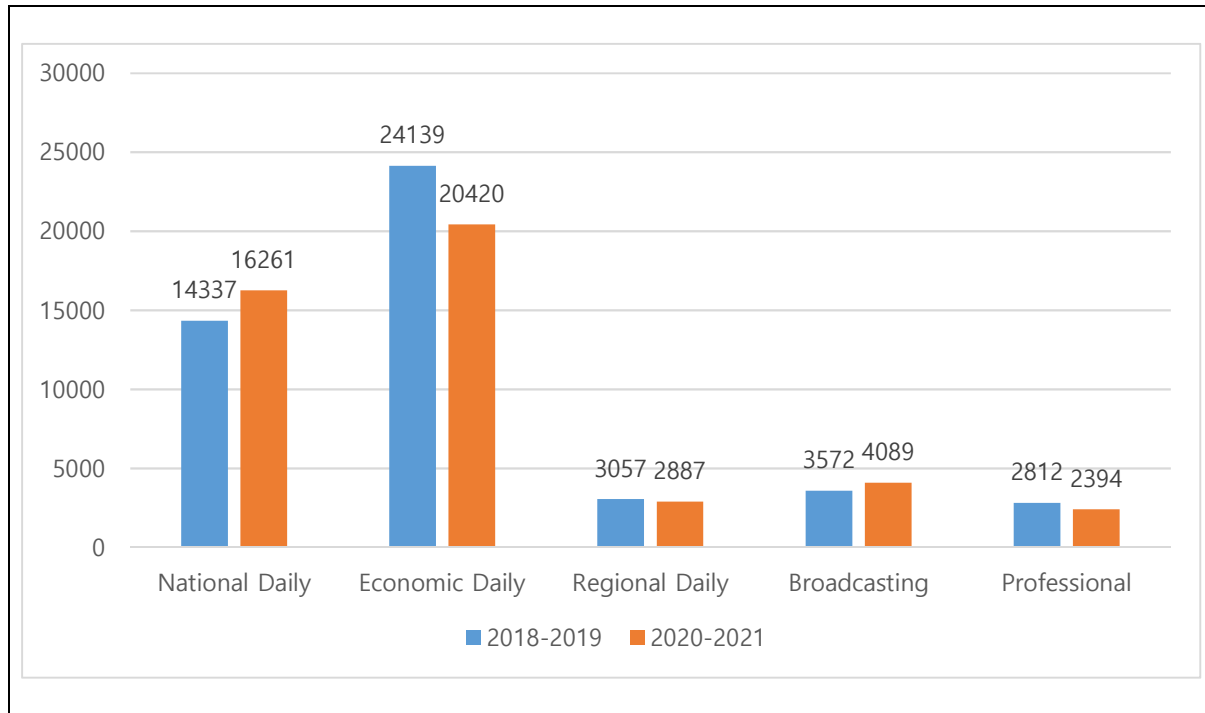
of the rest of the media types (regional daily, broadcasting services and professional media) was small (20%) (Figure 1). Such concentration implies that Korean economic dailies are the media outlets paying significant attention to EU issues, which are quite relevant to the South Korean economy and trade. Considering the significant share of national dailies (33%) for the EU coverage in South Korea, EU coverage has the potential to be disseminated to the South Korean public, which depends on South Korean readers' interests.

Figure 1 Overall distribution of EU-related news in Korean Media



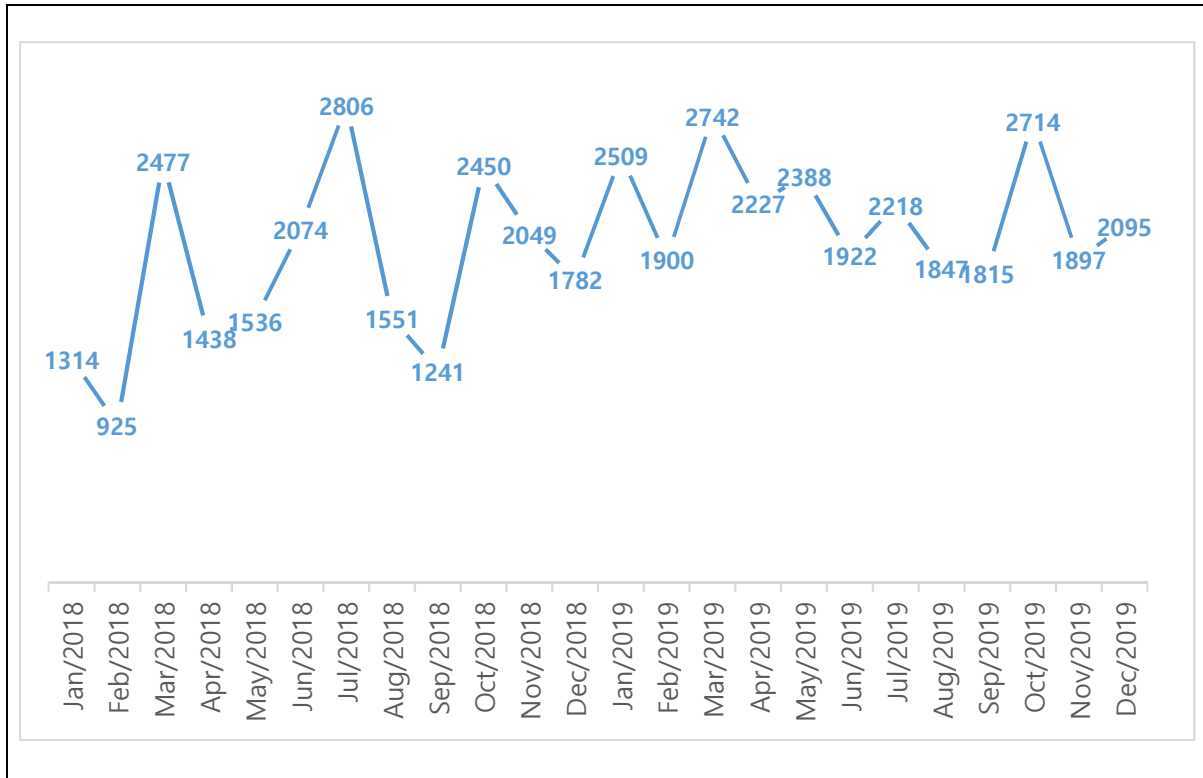
Over the research period, South Korean coverage of the EU has decreased (Figure 2). Economic dailies (from 24,319 to 20,420), Regional dailies (from 3,057 to 2,887), and professional media (2,812 to 2,394) decreased about 10 to 20 per cent of their coverages of the EU. In contrast, national dailies (14,337 to 16,261) and broadcasting (3,572 to 4,089) increased approximately 10 per cent of their coverages of EU affairs. Summing up the numbers of all EU-related news items by the research period, there was a 2.47% (2,046 items) decrease in the 2020-2021 period (2018-2019: 47,917 items, 2020-2021: 45,871 items). To conclude, the South Korean media has presented a constant level of interest in the EU-affairs.

Figure 2 Chronological Distribution of EU-related news in the South Korean Media (by media type)



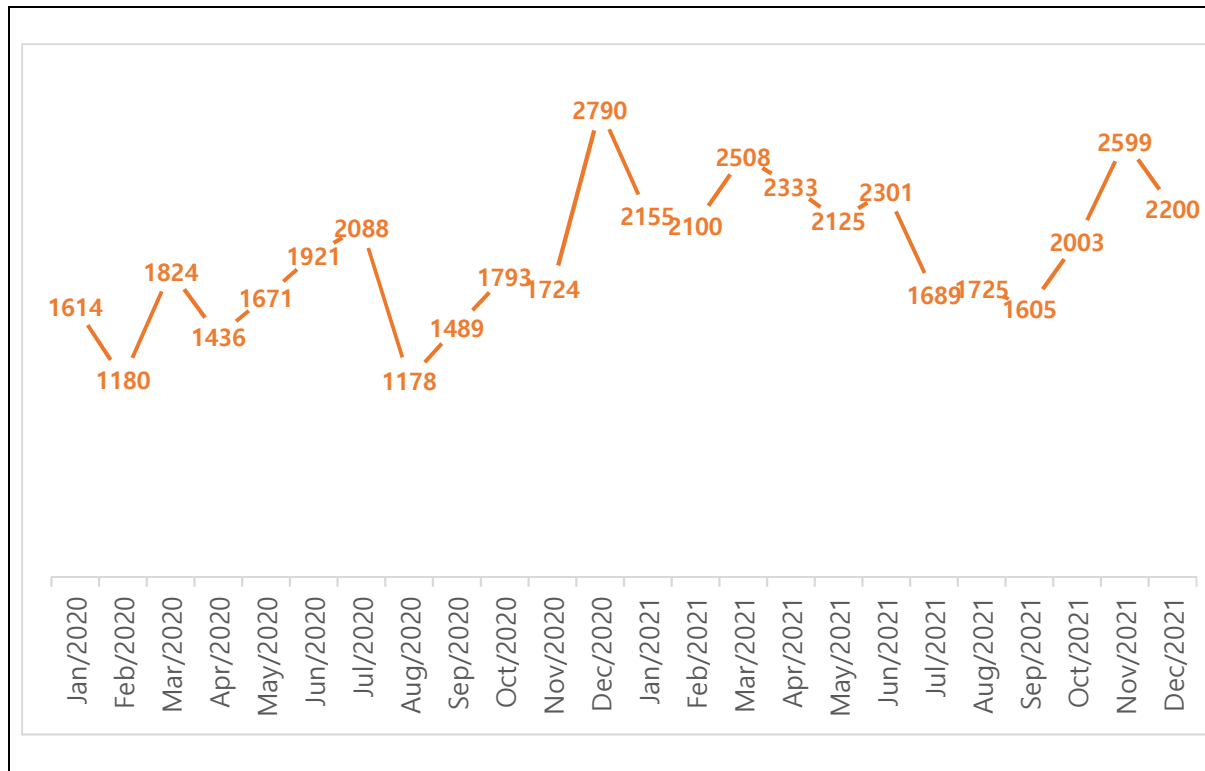
Over the pre-COVID-19 period (2018-2019), 1,996.5 articles were published on a monthly average (Figure 3). There were top-three peak months during this period—July 2018 (2,806 articles), March 2019 (2,742 articles) and October 2019 (2,714 articles). The main triggering event of July 2018 was Trump’s trade conflicts with the EU and China. The major event which causes the peaks in March and October 2019 was the Brexit negotiation. In March 2019, the 19th was the initial deadline for triggering Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty. During the period, South Korean media mainly covered the possibility of the success or the failures of the negotiations, the British Prime Minister’s extension request for Brexit until October 2019 and the diverse scenarios of a no-deal Brexit. In October 2019, Britain requested the EU for further Brexit extension till January 2020. Before COVID-19, Brexit was the biggest crisis which drew South Korean media’s attention to the EU. Other than that, economic issue (Trump’s trade war with China and the EU) was still an important factor which drew the attention of South Korean media.

Figure 3 Monthly Distribution of EU-related news in South Korea (2018-2019)



During the post-COVID-19 period (2020-2021), 1,918.8 was the monthly average (Figure 4). December 2020 was the peak month for this period (2,790 articles) and followed by November 2021 (2,599) and March 2021 (2,508). COVID-19 was the main crisis during this period. In December 2020, the confirmed cases of the variants of COVID-19 in Europe were the main issue. In November 2021, the EU's positioning within the US-China trade war regarding the global supply chain was the main triggering issue. In March 2021, the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines was the main event. Compared to the previous period, Brexit seems not to be likely to be covered throughout the period. However, in the context of the crisis, the South Korean media paid attention to how the EU handled either its domestic or global crisis. Traditionally, the South Korean media paid constant attention to the EU's economic issues.

Figure 4 Monthly Distribution of EU-related news in South Korea (2020-2021)



The monthly distribution of EU-related news items in the South Korean media indicates that the EU’s economic/trade issues and crisis were the triggering factors for raising monthly coverage. Despite there being a small decrease during the post-COVID-19 period, South Korean news media constantly paid attention to EU issues. Comparing the results in these two periods, the contents of the crisis issue were the only change (from Brexit to COVID-19). Except for these, the overall results did not significantly change. In the next section, this study employed semantic network analysis to present more prominent issues in South Korean media representations of the EU.

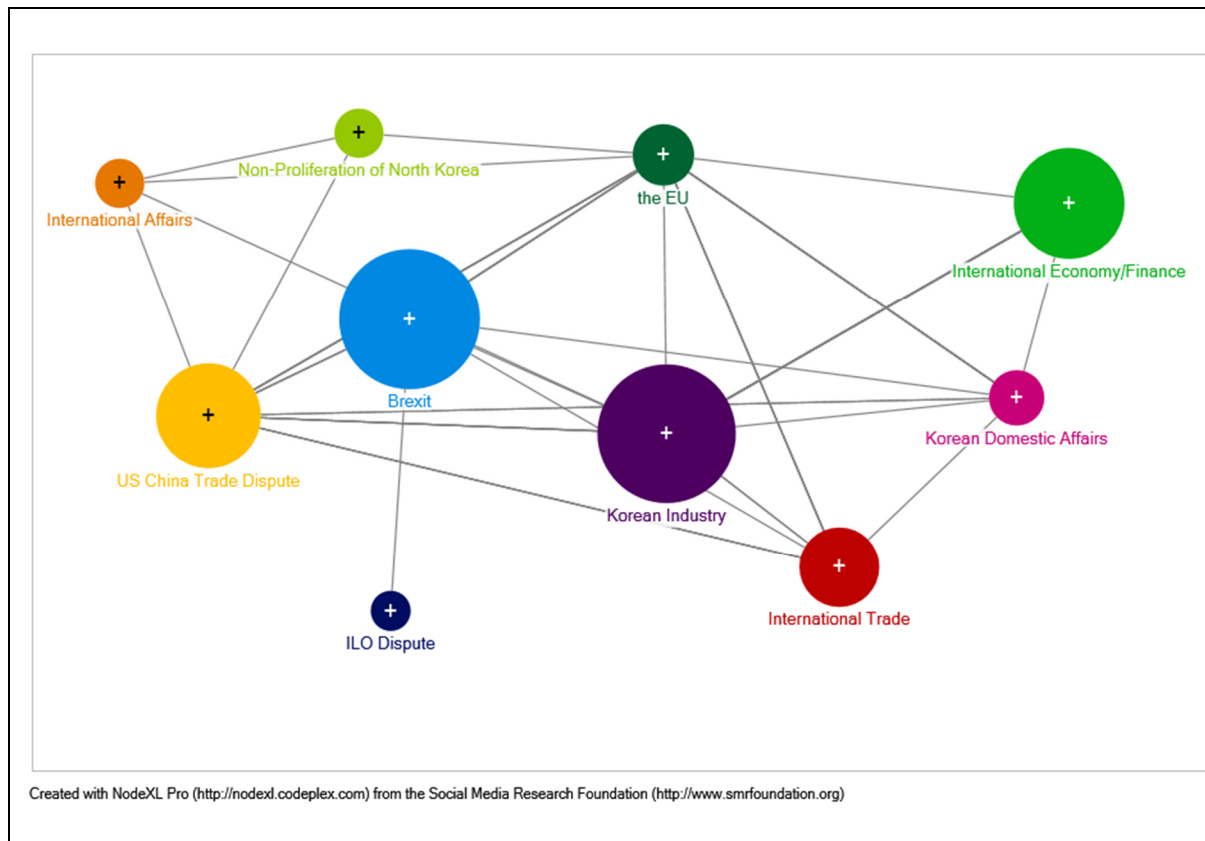
Results

A semantic network is “a graph structure for representing knowledge in patterns of interconnected nodes (dots) and vertices (lines)” (Sowa, 2015, para 2). Semantic network analysis is a helpful method for analysing large texts, identifying the main prevalent themes and topics, for mapping the concepts embedded in the texts (Segev, 2021). By looking at the semantic networks, we can explore the basic notable concepts in one simple visualised map.

For the semantic mapping of the pre-COVID period (Figure 5), two major central themes were *Brexit* and *US-China trade dispute*. The first refers to the EU’s crisis and the second does to one of the EU’s challenges to its global economic leadership. Other major semantic themes reflect either the EU’s global economic actorness, such as the Union’s presence in the

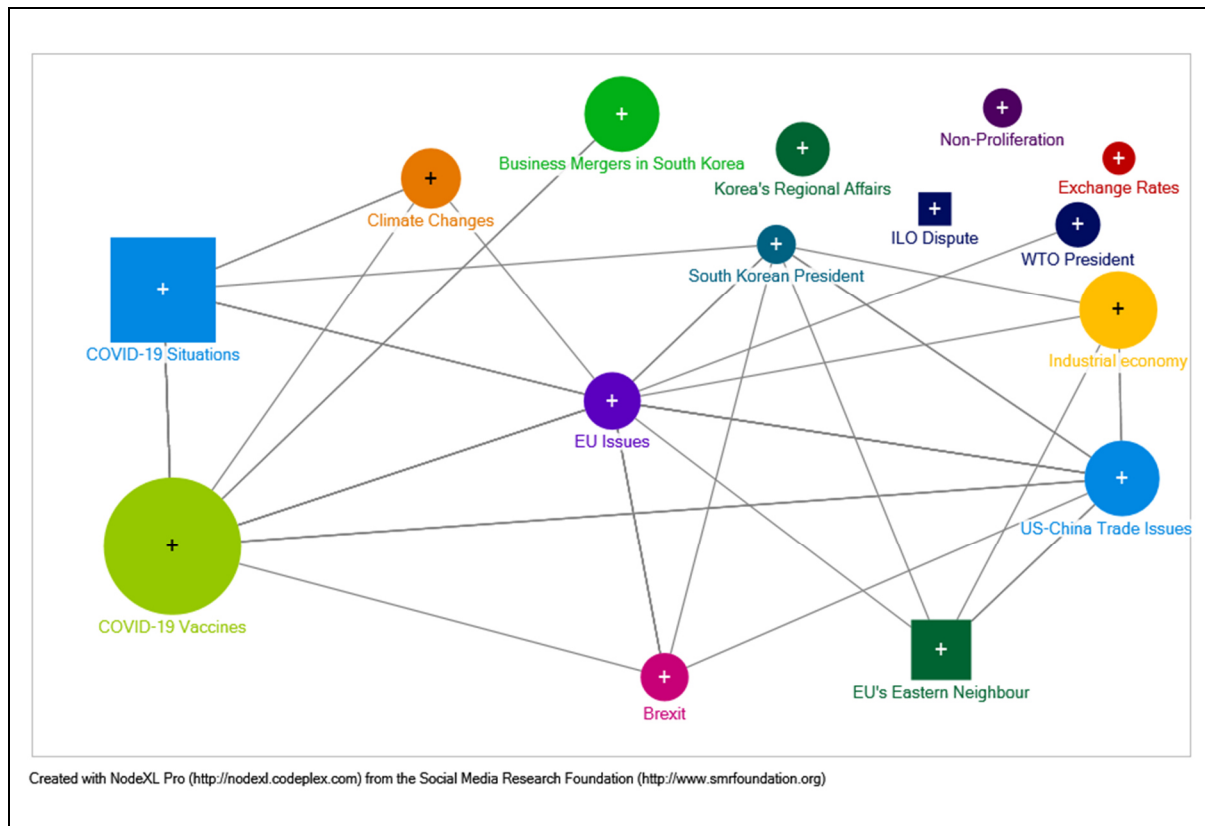
international economy, finance and trade, or the EU's possible impact on Korean industry. Other minor thematic framings were about EU-Korea relations in the areas of diplomatic/political cooperation (*international affairs, non-proliferation of North Korea, Korean domestic affairs*) and economic issues (*ILO dispute*).

Figure 5 Semantic Network of EU-related News Items (2018-2019)



During the post-COVID-19 period (Figure 6), the prevalent themes were about COVID-19 (*Situations* and *Vaccines*). Within the semantic network, connected central themes addressed the diverse issues between the EU and South Korea. *Industrial economy, US-China trade issues, and WTO president* reflect the EU's global economic actorness. In addition to these themes, the EU was depicted as an important economic partner for South Korean business (The EU's approval of *Business merger in South Korea*). *EU issues, Brexit* and *EU's Eastern neighbour* indicate the EU as a regional actor. EU-South Korea diplomatic cooperation was reflected by the *South Korean President* (EU-Korea virtual summit on 30th June 2021). The EU's global environmental actorness was reflected by *climate changes* theme on the map. Unconnected themes addressed the EU's possible cooperation with South Korea in its regional issues like *Korea's regional affairs* and *non-proliferation*, and the cooperation in its economic issues like *ILO dispute* and *exchange rates*.

Figure 6 Semantic Network of EU-related News Items (2020-2021)



Concluding Remarks

South Korea and the EU have established and significantly developed their relationship into a future-oriented strategic partnership. Despite the EU's multiple crises, both parties established the institutional frameworks (Framework Agreement, Free Trade Agreement and Crisis Management Agreement), which are the platform for further integrated cooperation. In terms of media representation, economic-related themes are salient topics in South Korean newspapers. Also, the global- and EU-level crises were another constant theme which triggered the media coverage in the South Korean media. Primarily, the EU's global economic actorness was the prevalent image within the South Korean media text. Partially, the EU as South Korea's partner was another theme that was reflected in the Korean media.

As a concluding remark of this paper, I would like to give five suggestions worth further contemplating. First, in the area of economics and business, the Korean media are inclined to cover the EU's global presence or its bilateral cooperation at the global level. Consequently, both parties could put more effort into finding out additional areas of cooperation at the micro-level like a people-to-people exchange, business cooperation between small and medium enterprises (SME) on both sides including start-ups, and research and development (R&D)

cooperation for enhancing the EU's positive coverage and Korean perceptions of EU. Second, in diplomatic, political and security cooperation, the South Korean media seemed to have a dire expectation for strengthening the security cooperation in the regional context. It implies that both parties can find more productive ways of deepening bilateral relations. The events of the EU defence chiefs' visit to Korea and the German frigate Bayern's visits to Busan in 2021 can be good examples supporting the further consequences of security cooperation for tackling North Korea. Third, in spite of their small appearance, the EU and South Korea could strengthen their bilateral environmental cooperation. To increase the visibility of such cooperation, they could invent further agendas which might yield economic surpluses such as sustainable energy sources like hydrogen and biomass. Fourth, diplomatic practitioners of both sides can hold the forum to search for further helpful agendas to upgrade the closeness. Both parties could think about drawing strategies for mutual benefit (tackling global crisis), more in-depth consultations and information sharing (policy contents more in detail for both sides) and strengthening the people-to-people network. Finally, both sides could further strengthen their relationship by examining the promising areas of cooperation like culture (movie, K-pop, fine arts and so on), travel (in Korea and EU Member States) and education (studying abroad and scholarships).

To conclude, despite their distance, the EU and South Korea have been reciprocal and important strategic partners to each other. Also, they have the potential to upgrade their partnerships in the future based on their like-mindedness. This progress can only be guaranteed by continuing their willingness to maintain and upgrade the partnership. Foremost, exploring helpful agendas for reciprocal benefits could be a vital first step in integrating bilateral relations. In this regard, both sides could put more effort into establishing a more prosperous future.

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