7 National and transnational public spheres: the case of the EU

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While many important social processes cut across national borders and have transnational institutions to regulate them, democratic participation still occurs almost exclusively within individual nation states. Public information and debate are essential ingredients of democracy, and their confinement to the individual national public sphere threatens the democratic aspirations and legitimacy of transnational institutions. Therefore, it is often argued that the European Union can only achieve greater legitimacy if there is a Europeanization of national public spheres. Has public discourse in fact Europeanized in the last decades? Here we present results from a study of major national newspapers from five European countries. Europeanization is defined in three dimensions: Europeanization of contents, Europeanization of public identities, and Europeanization of communication flows. Our results show that national public spheres are, in fact, quite resilient and that change is slow or halting. We discuss several possible explanations for this resilience, and go on to question the assumption that the legitimacy of European institutions depends on Europeanization of public discourse.

The European Union (EU) is the most prominent, albeit in many respects unique, case of the development of a transnational or multilevel political system. Within the institutional framework of the EU, considerable political powers and competencies have been pooled at the transnational level. This has long been done by stealth, as it were, based on a considerable degree of elite consensus and the acquiescence of national voters and publics. This situation has been changing, however. Concerns about a 'democratic deficit' of the EU and a corresponding lack of legitimacy have come to the fore, both in public debates and in the scholarly literature. The question of how EU decision-making could be made more accountable to EU citizens and how democratic control and participation on the EU level could be improved has led to an intense and wide-ranging debate about the social and cultural preconditions for such democratization. Prominent authors have maintained that basic preconditions are lacking. Dieter Grimm, Fritz W.

Scharpf, Peter Graf Kielmansegg and others have pointed to the underdevelopment of a *European public sphere* or a shared space of public communication, as well as to the lack of a common European identity and of intermediary institutions for interest articulation and aggregation.[11,15,23,24] In their view, attempts to make EU decision making more democratic by strengthening the power of the European Parliament or similar measures are bound to fail if the mentioned preconditions are not given. This suggests the possibility that current transformations of the European system of nation states may lead to a primarily administrative political superstructure with fragmented decision powers, a deficient democratic dimension, and chronic problems of legitimacy. In response to these concerns, a field of research has developed that focuses on the development of the mentioned preconditions for a democratic and legitimate political order on the European, transnational level. Is there any evidence that a European public sphere might be developing?

Civic participation and public discourse – two strands of research

Within the recent literature that discusses the legitimacy of EU institutions, the realities and possibilities of public participation and, in particular, the development of a European public sphere, two basic strands can be distinguished. We call them the civic participation and the public discourse approach.

The *civic participation approach* looks at ways in which individuals or groups from civil society try to influence EU decision-making, both by public protest or petitioning, by lobbying or by formal and informal participation in policy making.[3,27] The most important stage for this latter kind of participation is the complex and variegated system of committees or panels in Brussels, set up mostly by the European commission and designed to aid in the preparation of policy proposals or directives (see the essay by Joerges and Godt). Empirical findings on civic participation in EU policy-making are mixed. Cooperation of social movements and movement organizations on the European level remains limited,[21] while the inclusion of experts and civil society representatives in the committee system, as well as the workings of this system, have been evaluated more positively. In particular, the role of policy *deliberation* in these contexts has been interpreted as a means to improve decision-making and make it potentially more legitimate.[12,19]

While this line of research is certainly important for the question of how the 'democratic deficit' of the EU can be reduced and its legitimacy strengthened, it will not be our main topic here. Instead, we will follow what we call a *public discourse approach*. In this approach, the public sphere is interpreted as a field of communication that is accessible to mass publics. In this perspective, civic activities become part of the public sphere to the degree that they are represented in public communication, primarily in the mass media. NGOs or other civil actors

then become public speakers together with politicians, experts, intellectuals, and journalists. *Public discourse*, however, represents only a specific segment of public communication. Research on public discourse focuses not on information, or 'news', but on public commentary, interpretation, and debate.[3,5,6,13,20] The term discourse, then, is similar to Habermas's notion of *Diskurs*, or to recent uses of the term 'deliberation' in theories of 'deliberative democracy'.[2,8,16] Discourse, in this sense, occurs if opinion statements are supported by some kind argumentative backing, or by some presentation of evidence.

If we look for *public* forms of discourse, we find them partly in discussions during informal encounters and in public meetings. In the electronic media, there are forms of news commentary, news magazines, and documentaries with elements of analysis, commentary, and sometimes advocacy, as well as various discussions and talk shows. Both in the electronic and print media, we also find a considerable amount of *reported* opinions with some deliberative content. In the print media, we find much deliberative content in non-fiction books as well as in the periodical press in the form of newspaper commentary, opinion pieces, analytical or advocatory reporting, essays, or other genres of more sustained argument, especially in the *Feuilleton* or in quality journals and magazines. This media discourse is certainly the most important and influential part of public discourse.

Why should one focus on the *discursive* part of public communication? There might be normative and empirical reasons. Normative conceptions of public discourse or deliberation play an import role in recent theories of democracy and legitimacy. Empirically, it might be interesting to examine the degree to which the reality of public discourse deviates from the normative model, or what conditions would support or hinder the realization of the normative model. Apart from that, it seems plausible to assume that public discourse is the primary medium for the development of public knowledge, values, interpretations, and self-understandings, and for change and innovation as well as reproduction or transmission over time in the inventory of ideas and arguments that are available in a given public sphere. To put it more generally, public discourse can be regarded as a primary mechanism for cultural reproduction and change. Public discourse in this sense has historically developed in *national* public spaces. Can we observe the development of a common *European* discursive space, a common sphere of opinion formation and public debate?

Dimensions of transnationalization or Europeanization of public discourse

Researchers who study the development of a European public sphere have long agreed that the existence of such a sphere is not a yes or no question. In fact we

are dealing with processes of Europeanization that are both gradual and multidimensional.[30] There are several forms or aspects in which public discourse can become Europeanized. There is no complete agreement, however, about the relevant dimension, their delineation and their relationship and respective importance. In an attempt at conceptual synthesis, we focus on three broadly defined dimensions, which subsume some more specific aspects that play a role in the literature:

- *Europeanization of contents*. This dimension includes all ways in which the *topics* addressed in public discourse, and the *manner* in which they are discussed, can become more European (or more transnational in other ways). Indicators for a Europeanization of contents would be growing numbers of references to the EU as such and to EU institutions and policies, but also to the affairs of other EU member states, as well as an increasing similarity of public agendas and frames of reference within the public spheres of EU countries.
- *Europeanization of public identities*. Here we talk about the basic *orientation* of public conversation and debate. Do the contributions take a national or a European perspective? Are they addressed to a national or to a European public? Who is the community among which public discourse, debate or contestation is taking place? Whose affairs are the participants talking about?
- *Europeanization of communication flows*. An emerging European public sphere is integrated horizontally to the degree that communicative exchanges cross national borders, to the degree that there is a real exchange of opinions and ideas originating in different places, in short: that public discourse flows across a European (or other transnational) space of public communication. This can occur in several direct or indirect ways, as we will see later.

We will next discuss these dimensions in more detail, report some findings concerning their development from the literature and from our own research, and discuss the importance of these findings and the relevance of the three dimensions for the constitution of a European pubic sphere. As yet, there is no truly longitudinal study on developments in several European countries over a more extended time period. Our empirical study seeks to fill this gap. So far, we have analysed the political sections of quality newspapers from five EU member states: Germany (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*), France (*Le Monde*), Great Britain (*The Times*), Denmark (*Politiken*), and Austria (*Die Presse*). We have analysed press articles for two constructed weeks in the years 1982, 1989, 1996 and 2003. Because we are primarily interested in public *debates*, we have sampled articles with a recognizable opinion component and have excluded mere 'news'.
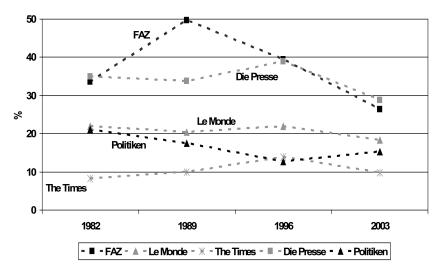
Following that, we will briefly take up two additional aspects: we will ask about possible *causes* for the development or non-development of a European public sphere and briefly look at possible *consequences* – especially the likely effects for the legitimacy of the European Union.

Europeanization of contents

The first way in which the contents of national public discourse can become more transnational or European is by including more and more international or European *topics*. Reports, analysis, and comments on 'foreign affairs' are a very common and elementary way in which national public spheres can become international in outlook. These foreign affairs can include relations between governments (i.e. matters of foreign policy), but also all other kinds of relations or exchanges with other countries, as well as 'internal affairs' (political, economic, social, cultural) of those countries. One might also think of reports about international organizations or transnational political bodies like the EU, or of references not to particular countries, but to world regions, e.g. 'the West'. If we look at Europeanization, references to the EU or EU institutions but possibly also to 'Europe' and to other EU member states and their 'external' and 'internal' affairs would be of special interest, especially in comparison with references to other international organizations (e.g. NATO) or transnational bodies, to other (non-EU) countries or other regions (again, 'the West').

Another way in which the contents of national pubic discourse could become more European would be a convergence of *public agendas* in different countries. Public debates could converge with respect to the selection of topics that are under debate within the same period. Different publics in different public spheres would thus deliberate in parallel, as it were. They could also come to debate over common affairs. Publics in different EU member states could debate EU policies or institutional developments of the European Union in this parallel fashion.

A third, more profound convergence of discursive contents would consist in a growing similarity of *discourse constellations* in different countries. By this we mean the ways in which issues are framed by the various parties that are involved in public debates, as well as the constellation of parties or the patterns of cleavages over certain issues. Debates on abortion, for example, were based on different discourse constellations in different countries – different cleavages and alignments of warring parties, and different frames as used by these parties.[7] As such, specific debates in different countries can be compared with respect to the greater or lesser similarity of these configurations. Again, we could look for convergence over time within a specific set of countries and consider this another dimension of transnationalization or, if we find the phenomenon among European countries and their public spheres, as a case of Europeanization. Not only would the
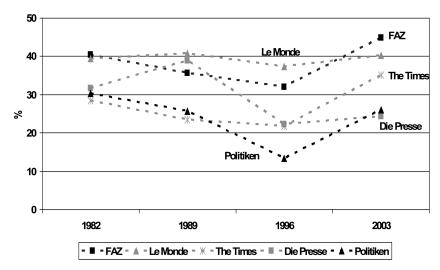
Note: N (all discursive articles – including press reviews, i.e. 'press roundups' – in the sample) = 3,059

Figure 1. Share of articles on European countries by newspaper (in percent).

same topics be debated in different national spheres at the same time, but also by roughly the same set of differing camps and on the basis of similar problem definitions or frames.

Let us now look at some findings. There are some studies that have looked at the similarity or dissimilarity of newspaper agendas in European countries as well as similarities or dissimilarities of frames of reference.[14,25,26,28] These studies, however, lack longer time frames. So the results are somewhat inconclusive with respect to *changes* in these aspects. It has not been systematically analysed so far whether agendas, framing and cleavage patterns are really converging over time or not. Our own study has a longer time frame, but concentrates on European topics in newspaper articles and their relative importance in different EU countries over time.

In our quantitative content analysis, we have coded all articles focusing on *foreign countries*. The main geographical focus of the article was determined on the basis of the countries referred to in the headline and lead paragraph. Figure 1 shows to what extent other *European countries* have appeared in the formation of opinions in each country. First of all, the data show that there is generally no positive trend towards Europeanization. All five national newspapers demonstrate either no clear pattern or even a slight decline over time in their attention to other European countries. Figure 2 illustrates the extent to which the articles discuss *non-European countries*. As we can see, four out of five national newspapers report more on non-European countries than European ones. European countries appear more often only in *Die Presse*, which is the result of its elaborate
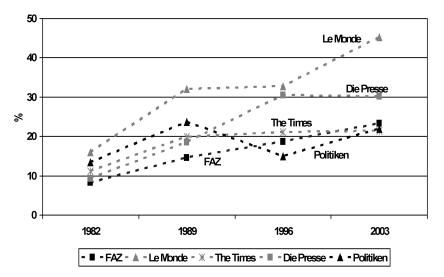
Note: N (all discursive articles, including press reviews, in the sample) = 3,059

Figure 2. Share of articles on non-European countries by newspaper (in percent).

commentary on German affairs. Overall, the United States appears most frequently, followed by Russia or the Soviet Union. As in the case of the European countries, no continuous trend of internationalization can be observed.

Another sort of international content consists of references to international institutions. Here we have coded any *European or international institution* referred to in the entire article (not just the headline or lead paragraph). We have distinguished between EU institutions – such as the European Commission, the Council of Ministers, and the European Parliament – and other international institutions, for example, NATO, the OECD, and UN institutions in order to establish a standard of comparison. Figure 3 demonstrates the extent to which *European institutions* have entered public discourse. In most cases the European Union (EU) is mentioned without further specification of its political institutions. Among the different European institutions, the European Commission plays the largest role, only in Denmark is the European Parliament referred to almost as frequently. Comparing across time, we can observe a clear trend of Europeaniza-tion, as the percentage of articles referring to European institutions increases up to at least 20% in four out of five newspapers. Overall, the appearances of the European Union, in general, and of the European Commission increased more than three times from 1982 to 2003, while the European Parliament has remained at a relatively low level since 1989. Compared with the trend towards an increasing discussion of EU institutions, our data do not reveal a similar trend towards a growing visibility of other *international institutions*. Neither the UN nor NATO
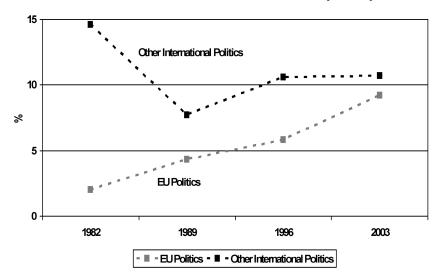
Note: N (all discursive articles in the sample) = 2,964

Figure 3. Share of articles on European institutions by newspaper (in percent).

is, on average, mentioned as often as the EU, nor do references to international institutions consistently increase over time.

Finally, we can look at newspaper content that refers not to countries or institutions as such, but to *policies* concerning foreign affairs or to the policymaking of international institutions themselves, in particular the EU. Figure 4 compares the share of discursive articles that discuss European politics with those that concern other international politics. The light-shaded line shows the relative share of references to EU institutions, while the heavy-shaded line represents the contributions related to non-EU issues of foreign policy and international relations. A trend of increasing 'EU'-ization can be observed, although at a relatively low level. While the share of articles concerning European politics was around 2% in 1982, it has climbed during the 1980s and 1990s and has now almost reached the 10% level. The figure also makes clear that the level of debate over European politics has in no way 'exceeded the level of coverage characteristic of normal foreign politics', as suggested by Eder and Kantner.[29] In fact, coverage of European politics remains at a lower level than coverage of international affairs. Furthermore, it never challenges the dominance of debates about domestic politics.

To sum up these findings: we do find increasing attention to EU institutions and their activities as well as to national policy making concerning the EU. However, attention to EU policy making has not surpassed attention to 'classical' foreign policy issues. In addition, there is no increase in mutual attention between national
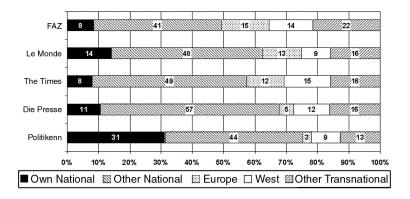
Note: N (all discursive articles in the sample) = 2,964

Figure 4. EU and international politics as the articles' main themes (in percent).

publics in the EU – and attention to countries outside the EU, in particular the US, is stronger than attention to EU neighbours. So we find some degree of *vertical, segmented Europeanization*, where national publics pay attention to EU policies and institutional affairs, but not necessarily to each other. Apart from that, our data do not indicate that national publics are integrated into some kind of overarching European public sphere.

Europeanization of public identities

In national public debates we not only find references to one's own national political entity and political institutions, but also implicit or explicit self-identifications as national publics – as national communities of discourse whose members discuss certain topics among each other. In these processes of identification, certain forms of common cultural characteristics, collective identities, or shared historical experiences are referred to as a shared background. This is frequently accompanied by demarcation from other groups. A milestone for the transnationalization of public debates would be the extension of the imagined collective 'We' beyond national borders, for example, if speakers referred to themselves as part of 'Europe' or 'the Western community', and if corresponding disassociations, such as those against the 'East' or 'South,' or possibly against 'America' and others, became more important.
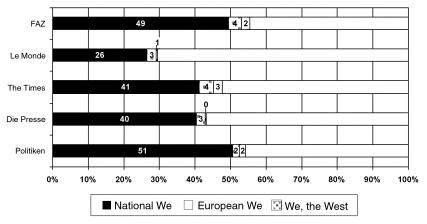
Note: N (all collective identity labels in the sample) = 2,092

Figure 5. Collective identity labels by newspaper (in percent).

Do we actually find the development of such a common European identity in public discourse within the European Union? Are EU affairs treated as genuinely common affairs of all EU members and are solutions to problems and conflicts debated within such a European frame of reference? Or are the issues on the political agenda still debated solely from the respective national viewpoints?[a] There is much conceptual debate as well as some empirical research on the development of a European collective identity. But this research is primarily based on survey research and does not tell us much about the collective identifications that play a role in public discourse. An exception is research directed by Thomas Risse that looks at identity projections in public debates – and in some cases finds a distinctive European perspective.[20] But because of the very short time frames in this study, inferences to processes of change are not possible.

Let us therefore look at some indicators for the development of a supranational, European public identity from our own research. Certainly, the expression of identity by speakers is usually rather implicit, and, therefore, can be analysed more meaningfully with qualitative methods. Yet we have developed two indicators that have proven reliable for quantitative content analysis: 'We' references (operationalized as 'we', 'us', etc.) and references to national or transnational collective identities such as 'the Italians' or 'the West' (collective identity labels). Despite the narrow operationalization of these variables, we were able to identify 1,510 'We'-references referring to national or transnational collective identities and 2,092 collective identity labels.

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[a] A 'European perspective' in public discourse should not be confused with a positive attitude towards the EU as an institutional framework or a political project. Nor does it necessarily mean an orientation to a European 'common good' or common interest. The existence of a European orientation only means that the EU is taken as the relevant frame of reference, that political controversies are seen as controversies within the membership of the EU, where legitimate demands of other EU members have to be taken into account.

Figure 6. 'We'-references by newspaper (in percent).

Note: N (all 'We'-references in the sample) = 1,510

The data have been analysed with three questions in mind. First, how self-referential in character is national public discourse? Is there a trend to mention one's own collective identity ('we Germans' or 'the Germans') more or less often than before? Are there differences between countries? Figure 5 shows that almost every third mention of a collective identity label in *Politiken* refers to its own nation (31%). The other newspapers follow far behind, led by *Le Monde*, with barely over 14%. In contrast, only 8% of all cases of collective references in *FAZ* are to its own nation. In the long term, we see no clear trends, neither across nor within countries. Comparing the number of collective labels with the number of 'We'-references also produces interesting distinctions (see Figure 6). When the conservative *FAZ* refers to 'we', half of the time it is referring to 'we, Germans,' as does *Politiken*. This shows that although Germans are supposed to have Europeanized their nation-state identity, at least *FAZ* still strongly identifies with its own national identity, as do *The Times* and *Die Presse* (41%; 40%), while somewhat less so *Le Monde* (26%).

Secondly, we consider the question of Europeanization: how has the collective identity 'Europe' developed in public debates? 'The Europeans' as a collective identity label barely appears in the national discussions. While roughly one out of every tenth reference to a collective identity refers to Europe, only *FAZ* displays a somewhat higher affinity to the collective identity of Europe (15%). Concerning 'We'-references, our data similarly do not reveal a general trend towards explicit identification with Europe. Although the percentage is increasing from 1% in 1982 to 6% in 2003, due to the low absolute numbers and broad variations over time, this does not create a significant trend.

The third question considers whether other collective identities such as the US ('the Americans') or 'the West,' appear more often than 'the Europeans'. The

usage of the term 'the West' reaches its peak at the end of the 1980s and wanes in 2003, which may be connected to the end of the East–West conflict and to an increasing alienation from America during the war in Iraq in 2003. 'We' references to the Western world occur even less often than references to Europe (consistently less than 3%).
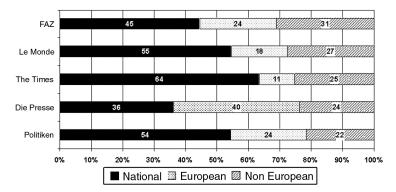
Thus, a structural change towards transnationalization, Europeanization, or the development of an entire Western public sphere is not detectable in our data on collective identities.

Europeanization of communication flows

Flows of communication across national borders are the most obvious way in which national publics and public spheres can become internationalized. An elementary form of transnational circulation of contributions or arguments is the reception of such products in another country and the reference to it in one's own contributions, be it by quotations or other references, by agreement or opposition. Another elementary form of communication beyond national borders is the import and export of cultural products or contributions *in toto*. These communication processes are evident if books, press products (periodicals or single articles), films, and TV comments are imported or exported (original or translated version). Contributions by foreign authors in print or electronic media can also be a sort of cultural export and transnational communication. Such flows of communication are more hidden, however, if the diffusion of ideas or other cultural elements takes place in personal contacts or by individual observation of other countries' public spheres, e.g. by reading periodicals or books. Such encounters or observations might influence authors or other cultural producers, but they may not explicitly refer to them either. Of further interest is coverage of supporting or critical comments in deliberative contributions from other national contexts, ranging from simple quotations to foreign press reviews to explicit discussion.

In order to analyse transnational communication flows we distinguish between transnational discursive contributions and discursive references. Discursive contributions are articles written by authors from abroad or interviews. Discursive references are direct or indirect quotations of more than one sentence. This length offers speakers the chance not only to express opinions but also to give at least some kind of justification.

Discursive contributions form a substantive share of our sample with every fourth discursive article being an interview or a guest contribution. Particularly in *Le Monde* and *Politiken*, intellectual and political elites as well as ordinary citizens (*Politiken*) contribute to political debates. However, *transnational* discursive contributions are rare: about 90% of all guest contributions are of

Note: N (all discursive references in the sample) = 2,640

Figure 7. Origin of discursive references by newspaper (in percent).

national origin. *Le Monde* stands out in that it has a stronger tendency of inviting foreign authors from outside of Europe.

In contrast to foreign contributions, *discursive references* made by foreign speakers are often present in public debates. First, foreign speakers have been cited continuously for at least 20 years among the considered newspaper sources. In *Die Presse, FAZ* and *Politiken*, foreign speakers appear more often than national ones (64%; 56%; 55%, see Figure 7). *The Times* comes in last with only about one third of all discursive references coming from speakers from outside the United Kingdom (37%). There is movement over time, but no clear tendency in one direction or another. The highest number of international references was recorded for 1989 (except in *Politiken*). This can be easily explained by the end of the socialist regimes in Eastern Europe. References by speakers from the former East Germany have been coded as foreign, which would explain the sudden increase in foreign references in *Die Presse* and *FAZ*. The United States is the most common source of foreign discursive references. The only exception here is *Die Presse*, which prefers to cite Germans.

Can we now conclude that there has been a structural change in the public sphere through the transnational circulation of contributions? The answer is a clear no. There are no clear trends towards more contributions by European or other foreign speakers or more discursive references from foreign sources. The high number of American voices also leads us to conclude that the national public spheres in Europe show a consistent and strong degree of Americanization.

Interpretation: do we see an emerging European public sphere?

To put these findings in perspective, it is useful to consider the importance of each of the three principal dimensions of Europeanization for the emergence of a common European sphere of public discourse. To recapitulate: the first dimension refers to the degree that national discourses pay attention to European affairs and that national public debates become synchronized and more similar with respect to thematic frames and cleavage patterns. The second dimension refers to the emergence of a European outlook in national public debates. And the third dimension is about actual communicative interchanges between national publics. While we find a partial increase in the first dimension, primarily a growing attention to EU affairs, both the development of a European outlook or public identity and the development of cross-border flows of communication within Europe are weak or non-existent.[b]

Can we nevertheless conclude that a positive development in the first dimension is enough to speak of an emerging European public sphere and suffices as a precondition for the further democratization of the European Union? Some authors seem to assume as much.[4] The plausibility of this assumption depends upon the way one understands the basic features and functions of a public sphere. If one only looks to the *informational* function of public communication, increasing attention to EU affairs might be regarded as sufficient. In this view, public communication has to provide citizens with information about common, public affairs, to enable them to make informed political decisions and hold political authorities accountable. In addition, public officials should be informed about citizen's opinions. This is certainly an important aspect of public communication in democratic political systems.

However, there are important limits to such an understanding of public discourse. Public discourse is not just about the dissemination of information, but also about collective opinion building through open discussion, about a collective search for solutions to common problems, about the generation of new public ideas, interpretations and collective self-understandings. For this to happen on a European level, a growing attention to EU affairs and a convergence of national public discourses, a growing similarity of agendas and discussion frames alone is not enough. A search for common solutions on the European level requires the adoption of some kind of European perspective, instead of merely national ones. And the formation of public opinion and the production and dissemination of new ideas and self-understandings on the European level should be based on communicative interchanges across national boundaries. *Parallel* public debates

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[b] In addition, we found rising attention to EU affairs without much increase in attention toward the affairs of other EU countries. This might be a sign that every national public looks at EU affairs from its own point of view without much interest and regard for other countries, their interests, opinions and more general conditions.

in different countries (separate but equal, as it were) do not really constitute a *common* public space. If two groups of people deliberate in separate rooms on the same questions, they do not constitute a common public sphere. Accordingly, we can speak of a shared, European universe of discourse only if there are communication flows, flows of ideas and arguments across national borders, criss-crossing the whole European sphere. In our view, then, the density of cross-border communication flows of various sorts, as described above, and the distributive pattern of these flows are the most important single measure for the emergence of a transnational or, more specifically, a European public sphere. The empirical findings are negative so far; the grid of transnational or European cross-border flows of communication currently seems to be rather weak.[c]

Concluding thoughts: causes and consequences

So far, we have only been concerned with the detection and description of possible patterns or trends of Europeanization.[d] As we have seen, genuine Europeanization of public discourse seems to be very limited so far, and national public spheres remain by far the most important fora for public debate. This observation leads to the question of what causes or constraints lead to the staying power of national public spheres and what consequences this predominance of national public spheres might have for transnational or multilevel political systems like the EU.

As to what causes the apparent 'underdevelopment' of a transnational, European public sphere, or conversely, the staying power of the national, several explanatory hypotheses have been proposed. Apart from the rather obvious problem of language barriers, it has been pointed out that EU policy-making is lacking institutional features that could further public debate on a European level; in particular, a clear-cut confrontation between a governing and an oppositional political camp.[9] It has also been argued that a primary cause for low public interest in EU policies lies in the character of EU policy-making itself: Most of it occurs in policy areas *that do not attract much public attention at the national level either.* Andrew Moravcsik has argued for this proposition in a recent article: 'Of the five most salient issues in most West European democracies – health care provision, education, law and order, pension and social security policy, and taxation – none

[c] Does this mean that we put more stringent conditions on the realization of a European public sphere than are in fact realized in *national* public spheres? We do not think so. National public discourses are certainly segmented and stratified in many ways. However, there exists a common national agenda of debate and contestation. National politics, national governments, parties, intermediary organizations, and associations provide topics and input. National mass media function as channels or carriers of public discourse. In the background, there is something like a public culture, a repertoire or reservoir of symbols, meanings, knowledge, and values that are relevant to the public. Public debates implicitly assume the existence of a debating 'we' or 'us', a community of discourse that includes both friends (members of one's own camp in a debate) and adversaries.

[d] This is true for virtually the whole research literature on the Europeanization of public spheres.

is primarily an EU competence'.[18] Such an argument calls the diagnosis of a *lag* in the Europeanization of public spheres into question, of course. It refers, however, only to the low salience of *EU politics* and cannot explain why transnationalization of public spheres seems to progress very slowly, if at all, in other, non-EU issue areas or dimensions. Given the assumed trends of globalization or denationalization in many economic, social and cultural areas, this might still be seen as an anomaly.

Here, we would like to sketch another, more general kind of explanation. It will be much harder to confirm or disconfirm, but that should not render such conjectures entirely useless. National public spheres are characterized by specific communication infrastructures as well as by cultural features that manifest themselves in interpretation patterns, relevancy structures, collective memories and other cultural resources. However, these differences do not exist independently from other features of the respective national societies. In many cases, they are linked to social practices and institutional structures that impact the character of the public sphere and the mode of cultural reproduction. Put differently, public spheres have a *social and cultural foundation* that extends well beyond the framework of media markets and media organizations. Many other structures affect intellectual production and its reception, collective interests, and problem definition and hence play a role here. They include educational and research facilities, journalism and other professions, networks (and cliques) of producers of cultural and intellectual property, structures for interest articulation and aggregation, such as political parties, interest groups, and social organizations and milieus. All of these interlocking infrastructural conditions are not easily reproduced on a European level. Of course, this is no argument against cultural exchange or against efforts to increase cultural exchange, dialogue and cooperation. It just means that it is unlikely that we will get a comparatively tightly integrated public sphere on the European level any time soon.

If we now look at the *effects* that the staying power of the national and the weak development of a transnational, European public sphere have on the *legitimacy* of a transnational, multilevel political system like the EU, we first have to note that most statements about the legitimacy problems of the EU are not really empirical statements about some *cause* of illegitimacy. Instead, they are mostly normative *evaluations* of EU realities: the EU has a 'legitimacy problem' or 'legitimacy deficit' because it does not have the *normatively* required features of democracy and a public sphere.[1,22] Such statements can be contested on normative or empirical grounds. It could be argued, for instance, that the underlying picture about the powers of the EU is inaccurate and that EU policy-making is of a kind that is just not very suitable for public debate and democratic decision-making, but can safely be left to various kinds of independent agencies with some kind of democratic mandate and some degree of accountability to democratic

bodies.[17,18] Such arguments can by disputed by questioning the veracity of the empirical picture it gives of the EU, and by criticizing the applied normative standards. However, we will not pursue this line of argument here.

Let us look instead at possible *empirical* relationships between the development of a European public sphere, on the one hand, and the empirical legitimacy, either acceptance or support for the EU, on the other. Does the EU suffer from a lack of legitimacy that is caused by the underdevelopment of a common European public sphere? There is no credible answer to this question yet. Of course, we have data on limited or diminishing support for EU institutions and policies in some countries. However, it is far from clear that this has to do with a demand for more democratic participation or a perceived lack of public discourse *on the EU level*. Maybe people just are not in favour of more political centralization on a European level and are loath to give up their national democracies – and public spheres, for that matter – or to see them weakened further? Do we have theoretical reasons to suppose that the development of a stronger European public sphere will increase support for the European Union? We could say that public deliberation is necessary to produce a high degree of reasoned acceptance about basic features or actual policy decisions within a political system. To put it differently, a higher level of public deliberation will, on average, produce more reasoned and stable agreement on contested political matters than it will at a lower level.

Now this is a somewhat problematic empirical conjecture. Although the very idea of public deliberation includes the consideration that participants try to convince each other and thereby strive toward consensus by moving through dissidence, it is doubtful that such a result is in fact often achieved.[10,31] There are many constraints restricting the possibility of arriving at rational consensus in public controversies. Typically, public controversies, especially in the mass media, have a triadic structure: The adversaries address a public to gain endorsement. Seldom do the adversaries address each other directly. There is also a lack of social constraints that would press for an agreement. This is different from many other situations in which practical decisions have to be reached out of necessity, as well as from close social relationships or milieus where unresolved dissidence may create a disturbance. Quite to the contrary, public actors live on controversy and dissidence. Not only the struggle for public attention, but also the struggle for intellectual and moral leadership in their own camp often puts a premium on intransigence and the demonstration of particular sensitivities. The speakers present themselves as honourable and committed protagonists of the group values they represent. They also seek to demonstrate profound diagnostic capabilities and powers of observation. This often leads to a somewhat dramatized or accusatory style. Sometimes this may not prove very supportive for gaining agreement or endorsement beyond the boundaries of one's own camp.

Empirical evidence, thus, seems to indicate that public discourse very seldom leads to the harmonious solution of real conflicts. Argumentative processes of persuasion may not even lead to reciprocal and explicitly confessed definitive changes in the opinions of the participating protagonists. One, therefore, cannot expect any automatic increase in acceptance (or empirical legitimacy) of controversial political decisions.[e] A lively discursive public sphere would, first, appear to multiply questions and uncertainties and increase dissidence. Insofar as it produced innovative ideas and proposals, it would probably bring about an increase in the variety of opinions rather than their reduction. This variation may be reduced in the course of the development of public controversies by virtue of polarization, simplification, generalization, and camp building – initially leading to a consolidation of dissent.

On the other hand, however, debates that do not lead to generally accepted solutions or general accord may still clarify the difficulties and different aspects of the topic under debate, at the very least discrediting some of the bad arguments and clarifying some other aspects. Under favourable circumstances, such debates may not end up exerting such a polarizing effect, but perhaps may lead to a certain mutual recognition of the differences between, or the seriousness of, respective positions. This, in turn, may facilitate the search for institutional compromise or the acceptance of such compromise.

Above all, though, one should imagine the effect of public discourse – with regard to the influence of ideas or convictions held by the public – more as a *shift* of the opinion spectrum, rather than as a *contraction* of this spectrum. Certain positions or arguments will eventually become implausible, lose influence, or disappear altogether from the public stock of argumentation. Others will gain influence within the spectrum. At the same time, new ideas, new problems or problematizations, and new controversies will appear. Nevertheless, this process may contain elements of convergence or of reaching consensus in a very general sense. Certain ideas, convictions, normative principles, and stocks of knowledge become more or less settled as generally – if not universally – acceptable, proven, and convincing without consensus necessarily being explicitly declared.

Some cultural processes of change that have taken place or are in the process of taking place in the West over the past decades provide us with plausible examples. Just think of the changed attitudes toward gender or familial relations, of environmental issues or minority rights, or, more specifically, the development of the public view of Nazi history in Germany.[f] These more gradual and diffuse

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[e] This may be different in the case of local, transparent public spheres or in the case of advisory panels that are under great pressure to arrive at solutions and that, by means of repeated co-presence, exert great reciprocal pressure for persuasion and accommodation.

[f] Case studies of the abortion debate and of the public discussion of surrounding narcotics policy did not, however, reveal any change in the balance of argumentation during the periods investigated. But it remains rather unclear just how typical these two examples are.[31]

changes in the cultural repertoire, changes in the stock of public argumentation, developments in the interpretation of central principles or values, and changes in specific collective self-interpretations should be perceived as the primary potential effects of public discourse, rather than short-term agreement on specific controversial political issues.

To return to the relation between public discourse and legitimacy: following the account of public discourse just given, it seems likely that public discourse influences above all the general normative expectations and criteria by which people judge political orders. Consensus or convergence in this respect is a long-time process, and the resulting convergence in normative standards may provide one condition of political legitimacy. A decent and lively public discourse may also generate, in the long term, some general mutual respect and tolerance despite continuing disagreements over many of the questions being debated. Nevertheless, this effect seems to be more contingent and dependent on the specific qualities of public discourse and the nature of the disagreements.

Thus, any expectations about a short- or medium-term increase in the empirical legitimacy of the EU that would be a result of increased Europeanization of public discourse does not look very plausible. In the long run, the development of a unified European public space might very well bring about cultural changes that are broadly supportive of political integration. However, this is very hard to know, and even in the medium term such a cultural, discursive integration of Europe does not seem to be very likely.

This leaves us with somewhat paradoxical results concerning the relations between public discourse and legitimacy in the EU. One the one hand, there is no clear indication that the EU is suffering from a deficit of empirical legitimacy *because* of a deficient European public sphere. There are even plausible arguments to the effect that the demands of EU policy-making on legitimacy and publicity are not all that strong. On the other hand, it seems rather less than certain that a stronger European public sphere will lead to more legitimacy for the EU, at least in the short run. In any case, relations between legitimacy, democratic participation and public discourse need to be analysed more thoroughly on both the theoretical and the empirical level.

Acknowledgement

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