

CURRENT HISTORY

March 2016

“The EU will not become something like a traditional nation-state anytime soon, and no supranational public sphere is likely to ever replace national public spheres.”

The EU’s Democratic Deficit and the Public Sphere

JAN-WERNER MÜLLER

Is there a European public sphere? A lot rides on the answer to that question. Anything remotely resembling democratic accountability for the European Union depends on opportunities for citizens to form shared political views, and ultimately political demands, through common means of communication.

Public Spheres

Fifth in a series

The dominant view used to be that the EU does not need a homogeneous people—a “European nation,” so to speak—in order to become some sort of democracy; but it does need a common, supranational public sphere. In recent years, the requirements for genuine European democracy have been somewhat relaxed, however. The standard argument now is that national public spheres just need to be more “open” to the EU and to each other. There is some empirical evidence that we are in fact witnessing such an opening.

But the answer to the normative question of what is really needed for democratic accountability might also have changed. The Eurocrisis and the refugee crisis pose unprecedented challenges to the project of European integration. It is far from clear that what ultimately remain segmented national public spheres can generate legitimacy for the decisions necessary to meet these challenges.

At least since the 1990s, debates about the public sphere in the European Union have been

bound up with a highly charged controversy about the EU’s alleged “democratic deficit.” What accounts for this deficit is the fact that, while the Union makes far-reaching policy decisions that touch the lives of around 500 million people (not counting those outside the bloc affected by economic and regulatory policies made in Brussels), there is no way for citizens themselves to choose among different political programs for the EU as a whole.

A democratic mechanism for rewarding and punishing supranational officeholders has yet to be constructed and activated. The European Commission, the EU’s policy-making body, is largely appointed by member state governments (with the approval of the European Parliament). In that sense, EU citizens are at best indirectly represented via their national governments. Their connection to “Europe” is more immediate in the European Parliament, but turnout for elections to that body (which officially divides its time between Brussels and Strasbourg) has steadily declined over the years, and its role is largely reactive. In any case, few people have any real idea of what goes on in the assembly.

FRAYING CONSENSUS

The “democratic deficit”—for many observers the accounting language reveals that even EU democracy can be talked about only in technocratic terms—did not seem to make people lose too much sleep as long as there reigned what scholars have called a “permissive consensus” about European integration. Put simply, when citizens seemed broadly in favor of further integration, they were content to let elites get on with the project.

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Yet that consensus began to fray in the early 1990s. The peoples of Europe woke up to the fact that new procedures adopted in Brussels at that time meant that member state governments no longer had anything like a veto over policies—they could simply be outvoted. Moreover, the introduction of the euro seemed to signal the beginning of a qualitatively different stage of integration. A majority of Danes rejected the common currency in a referendum in 1992 (in retrospect, it is hard to imagine the shock EU elites felt at the rebuff). In France, which combined with Germany as the traditional engine of ever-tighter integration, a mere 51 percent voted Yes to the euro the same year.

Ever since, the EU has struggled with a basic dilemma. It wants to bring Europe “closer to the citizens.” But European elites are also worried, in the face of what is now often called a “constraining dissensus” about the future of European integration, that citizens might not really like the Europe that is being brought closer to them.

In 1999, Luxembourg’s prime minister Jean-Claude Juncker, today the president of the European Commission, frankly explained the modus operandi of the Union’s leaders: “We decide something, put it out there and wait for some time to see what happens. If there is no big brouhaha and no uprisings, because most people have not even understood what was decided, we’ll continue—step by step, until there is no way back.” While the Commission spends much time and money on pan-European campaigns such as “Speak Up Europe,” many citizens suspect that they will only be heard if they say the expected pro-European thing. In short, more communication about the EU could actually be a mixed blessing in the eyes of European elites.

Not so, however, for thinkers who have long called for a democratization of the Union. The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas—still Europe’s most important public intellectual, and, as it happens, the world’s most influential theorist of public spheres in general—has insisted on a democratic vision for Europe in which pan-European solidarity generated in public spheres plays a crucial role. Habermas is adamant that the construction of European democracy does not require one European people. According to Habermas, we no longer live in the classical age of the nation-state, when diverse populations had to be made into one homogeneous national whole (mostly via standardized education, mass media,

and, not least, military conscription for all males). But democracy still requires a public sphere, where arguments can be exchanged and something like a popular political will can be formed. Hence a prerequisite for a more democratic EU appears to be a supranational sphere with Europe-wide media as well as pan-European political parties.

THE BRUSSELS BEAT

In the 1990s, much money (and intellectual energy) was poured into creating such a supranational public sphere, with English mostly serving as the default common language (Habermas once called English Europeans’ potential “second first language”). Media tycoon Robert Maxwell started the *European* as Europe’s “first national newspaper” in 1990; the television channel Euronews, a kind of European CNN headquartered in Lyons and broadcasting in 13 languages, began operations in 1993. (Euronews said it presented “world news from a European perspective,” a rather peculiar self-description with an air of Euro-nationalism; after all, CNN does not officially claim to look at “world news from an American perspective.”)

By the end of the nineties, however, the *European* had folded (today there is an online magazine with the same title, unrelated to Maxwell’s project, that appears in English and German). Euronews remains notoriously underfunded, despite substantial subsidies from the European Commission. Recently, the channel received a large cash injection from an Egyptian businessman who became the majority shareholder. As a consequence, European politicians are worried that the new de facto owner might endanger the station’s independence, while British Euroskeptics have complained all along that taxpayers’ money should not be wasted on “news from a European perspective,” which they think amounts to pro-EU public relations. The European Parliament’s television channel, EuroparlTV, which was started in 2008, struggles to attract viewers (being similar to the US cable channel C-SPAN in its unglamorous broadcasts of legislative business).

It is clear that the real pan-European media all happen to be British, with no official claim to be particularly European in perspective: the *Financial Times*, the *Economist*, and the BBC (though not the *Guardian*, let alone the *Daily Mail* or other papers that are hugely important in shaping views on Europe inside Britain). The recent launch of a European version of *Politico* has received mixed

reviews: Some see it as emulating the success of the original Washington version, and in a recent survey of “EU insiders” (such as members of the European Parliament and lobbyists) it more or less tied with the BBC for the top spot as the source of information on which insiders rely. Critics think it offers little real news, but plenty of human interest stories that may or may not contribute to bringing Europe closer to the people (one of the website’s very first posts dealt at length with Juncker’s kidney stones).

In certain ways, this tabloidization of EU politics might well be what the European Commission secretly or not so secretly would like to see. For years, Brussels correspondents of major European newspapers and magazines used to complain that getting space for their stories was unusually difficult because EU politics was so bureaucratic and remote. Readers, they thought, wanted drama and the EU just didn’t do drama—except for the occasional late-night summit, though even on those occasions political conflict among national leaders was largely kept behind closed doors. When bleary-eyed politicians eventually emerged in front of the press, they would emphasize compromise and consensus.

In 2010, then-EU Commissioner Viviane Reding, a one-time president of the Luxembourg Union of Journalists, announced a “revolution” in Brussels’ communications strategy. Henceforth, personalization—in the sense of conscious efforts to direct all political attention to one central European actor—was supposed to raise the profile of the Union and make its actions more comprehensible. Concretely, this meant that the spotlight should always be on Commission President José Manuel Barroso, a figure generally considered *simpatico*, but also somewhat colorless.

Unfortunately, 2010 also was the year when the Eurocrisis started in earnest. Barroso and the European Commission as a whole were completely sidelined during the following years. German Chancellor Angela Merkel (with French President Nicolas Sarkozy as her sometime sidekick) became what Reding thought Barroso should have been: the leader who sees the whole European picture and decides accordingly. And even when Merkel was not at the center of attention, it was other national actors who took leading roles on the

European stage. Politics has hardly ever been as “personalized” as in the case of Yanis Varoufakis during his brief and turbulent turn as Greek finance minister in the first half of 2015, especially in his epic battle with his German counterpart Wolfgang Schäuble.

TWO-WAY STREET

It is rather ironic that just as the Eurocrisis was concentrating citizens’ minds on common European matters, academics were steadily lowering their expectations of what a European public sphere had to be like in order for pan-European politics to become more democratic. Instead of one supranational public sphere, many scholars now argue, national public spheres increasingly sensitive to European affairs are sufficient. What matters is not the existence of something like a uniform supranational stage for discussions in English, but the fact that citizens debate the same issues at the same time (as they do in Switzerland, for instance, despite the country having no fewer than four official languages).

Such a “Europeanization” of national public spheres is supposed to have both a vertical and a horizontal aspect. The first refers to EU issues and EU actors being

visible and audible in national public spheres; the second to the notion that Europeans should have a voice outside their own nation-state and that, ideally, they will start to debate the same issues in somewhat similar terms (or, in the jargon of political science, using similar “frames”). As Habermas has argued, “The transnationalization of the existing national publics does not require any different news media, but instead a different practice on the part of the existing media. They must not only thematize and address European issues as such, but must at the same time report on the political positions and controversies evoked by the same topics in other member states.”

Clearly, it is important that communication in all these scenarios is a two-way street. The EU is very visible in British tabloids, but EU actors hardly ever have meaningful opportunities to get their own points of view across. The obsession of, for instance, the *Daily Mail* with the supposed loss of British sovereignty does not automatically signal the Europeanization of the British public sphere.

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There is some evidence that both vertical and horizontal openings of national public spheres are in fact happening. Scholars like Ruud Koopmans of the Berlin Social Sciences Center have argued that the situation, as far as communication across boundaries is concerned, is not obviously worse in the EU than it is in federal states like Germany. Others have pointed out that the idea of a uniform, centralized public sphere (with everyone watching the same evening news produced by a public broadcaster, for instance) might always have been somewhat of a fiction; or at least it's a thing of the past in a world with much more fragmented public spheres, featuring many information providers and many semi-private publics. (One might call these hashtag publics, which form around very particular issues and people—at the time of writing, Varoufakis's Twitter account has around 700,000 followers, Juncker's barely a third as many).

Even before any major impact of the Internet could be discerned, Habermas had come to describe public spheres as being rooted in “networks for the wild flow of messages, news, reports, commentaries, talks, scenes and images, and shows and movies with an informative, polemical, educational, or entertaining content.” In other words, Humpty-Dumpty will not be put together again; highly fragmented public spheres are a new normal both nationally and supranationally.

NOISY POLITICS

Some commentators still link a Europeanization of communications to the quest for a “common European identity,” without really addressing the question of whether some sense of common identity—or at the very least a feeling of being similarly affected by EU decisions—is not in fact the precondition, as opposed to the result, of a common European debate. But especially after the failure of the EU Constitutional Treaty in the middle of the last decade (both France and the Netherlands voted No in popular referenda in 2005), the emphasis even among strongly pro-European intellectuals has been on seeing European diversity as an asset, not as a challenge to be overcome. Habermas has recently shifted to the position that Europeans should retain, and indeed positively value, their nation-states as con-

tainers of distinct democratic achievements; after all, they first ensured the protection of basic rights and enabled democratic decision making.

It is clear that Europeanization does not equal politicization and that politicization, in turn, does not necessarily translate into citizens' support for further European integration. In theory, one could always learn more about the EU and about debates in other member states without ever considering any of the issues being debated as terribly contentious. However, the Eurocrisis and, perhaps even more so, the refugee crisis have led to an unprecedented politicization of the EU. The conflicts between Berlin and Athens have no precedent in postwar European history. Before the destabilization of the common currency, one simply did not see pictures of German chancellors made to look like Hitler or German tabloids stigmatizing entire nations as lazy. (Britain might be the exception here; its tabloids have long warned of a “Fourth Reich.”)

For some observers, politicization is a precondition of genuine legitimacy: Only if citizens feel that there is a choice and that they can influence the choice will institutions making collectively binding decisions be acceptable. Habermas has

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even spoken of the “cunning of economic reason,” hinting that the Eurocrisis, as bad as it has been, could turn out to lead to more European integration. He suggests that “the cunning of economic reason has . . . at least initiated communication across national borders,” only to insist one more time that “this can condense into a communicative *network* only as the national public spheres *open themselves to each other.*”

The crisis has certainly raised awareness of European interdependence. In the past one might have thought that Brussels was a political side-show, regulating the proverbial shapes of cucumbers and bananas, but that real decisions were still made in national capitals. Nobody will think that after the Eurocrisis. Hence it is hardly surprising that there has been a vertical opening of national public spheres to the EU—how could there not have been, in the face of the disastrous consequences of what virtually everyone now agrees was a badly designed currency union?

Habermas has vocally criticized what he calls “the reluctance of the political elites to replace

the established mode of pursuing the European project behind closed doors with the shirt-sleeved mode of a noisy, argumentative conflict of opinions in the public arena.” But the noisy, argumentative conflicts are already here; depoliticization is no longer a real option. The problem, however, is with the precise forms which politicization has taken so far. Many of the new conflicts have been framed as nation against nation—the very thing European integration was meant to prevent. At the same time, Brussels also gets the blame for everything that is going wrong, because both the Eurozone and the Schengen zone of open borders are inevitably associated with it. So, rather than having a meaningful debate about a future course that the EU might take, Europeans are getting upset with decisions made in national capitals and in Brussels itself.

As the German sociologist Claus Offe has pointed out, this very framing of the issues tends to decrease support for what might well be the most plausible solutions to the various crises, as conflicts among nations fatally weaken any existing sentiments of solidarity across borders. In particular, while it is certainly not the case that “more Europe” must always be the answer, it’s

hard to deny that *one* money and *one* passport-free travel zone necessitate *one* coordinated set of fiscal policies and *one* common protection of external borders. Yet in recent years national egotisms have dominated. Few are willing to grant the European Commission the decision-making power and the resources (through a financial transactions tax, for instance) to address major imbalances in the Eurozone; and few can imagine Europeanizing the control of the EU’s borders completely.

SEGMENTED SPHERES

One might be less sanguine, then, about the Europeanization of segmented public spheres than many contemporary observers of the EU who tend to abandon their role as social scientists in favor of becoming cheerleaders for “European identity.” Within these spheres an ever-decreasing number of citizens read the high-quality press or watch the public television that is most likely to feature real analyses of what is happening in other European countries and the EU as a whole. (A related worry is that the high-quality press is steadily losing not just readers but also editorial independence, as investors with substantial political interests take over in countries like France and Spain.)

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While it is also true that more and more people are adopting what scholars call a “transnational outlook,” it is usually the well-educated and well-off who do so. The latter see themselves as benefiting from European integration in all kinds of ways; but in highly open economies like those of Austria and the Netherlands, the not-so-well-off have become particularly hostile to European integration. As the University of Amsterdam political scientist Theresa Kuhn has demonstrated in an important study, this dynamic can only change if people have positive direct experiences of encountering other Europeans. Put differently, those who develop non-instrumental relationships across national borders are likely to take a more optimistic view of European integration (and this, interestingly, is the case irrespective of socioeconomic status). Former European Commission President Jacques Delors once said that one cannot fall in love with a common market. But one can fall in love with another European.

Clearly, though, the problems the EU faces in 2016 will not be solved by just waiting for the long-term effects of a romantically united Europe. Nor, in all likelihood, will they be addressed successfully with institutions that were expressly designed to enable more “bottom-up” engagement with Europe, such as the “European Citizens Initiative” (whereby a petition signed by one million citizens, as long as they are from seven different member states, can put an issue on the

official agenda of the European Commission). New communications strategies proposed by the Commission—which tend to have titles like “Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue, and Debate”—will have a marginal impact at best.

Civil society’s influence on the Brussels institutions remains weak. And it is not very probable that more involvement by national parliaments in European decision making will help much—although this possibility is regularly promoted by proponents of a more democratic EU who do not wish to give further powers to the European Parliament. After all, national parliaments tend to vote however national executives want them to vote, and the latter already play a crucial role in determining the future course of the EU.

The sheer magnitude of the challenges the European Union faces should make those who wish to save the Union recognize the importance of a common public sphere, as opposed to thinking that segmented national public spheres will do. The worries about loss of diversity, homogenization, and so forth are not very credible: The EU will not become something like a traditional nation-state anytime soon, and no supranational public sphere is likely to ever replace national public spheres. But for anything resembling democratic legitimacy we might need something more than weakly Europeanized national public spheres. Alas, it remains very unclear how we can get it. ■