

Afterlives of the European Public Sphere

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Attempts to create a European public sphere since the 1990s have clashed with the media's predominantly national focus and the democratic deficit of EU decision-making. Since then, the Europeanisation process has continued and the media landscape has changed dramatically, but the offer of democratic spaces for citizens remains limited. Is a post-national democracy within reach?

The idea of a European public sphere gained some popularity in the 1990s and early 2000s, a time when the EU was more ambitious about the European project. Back then, the formation of a European agora, where every European's voice would count, was seen as a logical step towards meaningful European democracy. Europeans would soon watch European television, read European newspapers, and discuss topics of European relevance. After years of crises and rising nationalism, this idea has almost been forgotten. Can it be revived?

Join me in a thought experiment. Imagine having friends in France, Poland, Estonia, and Portugal. Or in Turkey, Ukraine, Kenya, even in Japan. Imagine that you could converse with them in a common language. Imagine that you could read about recent social and political developments happening hundreds or thousands of kilometres away from home. And imagine that you could learn that many people across Europe – and the world – have the same concerns and values, political goals, and challenges as you do. Wouldn't that be great?

It is great, and it is already reality. At least that's what most – if not all – readers would say. Europe and most of the world are interconnected! Describing all the ways in which we can share information and communicate globally feels so obvious. What, then, is the point of this thought experiment?

It aims to show that yes, the world has become increasingly networked. People are increasingly aware that there is more that unites nations than what divides them. There is even a growing understanding that most challenges facing humanity – climate change, poverty, pollution, war – are global, as are their solutions. Yet discussions about international topics almost exclusively take place at an interpersonal level – between friends and family – or in elite circles. Mainstream debates, which shape political outcomes, revolve around national interests and build on long-standing stereotypes about ourselves and others. Our public spheres are still tied to national media systems and reflect a predominantly Westphalian understanding of the world and the nation-state. When wars break out in other parts of the globe (even in Europe's immediate neighbourhood), our main concern is keeping refugees out of our countries or mitigating any adverse economic effects, even to the detriment of other members of the European community. When forests are burning, we worry it might interfere with our holiday plans; in global pandemics, we discuss how to best hoard vaccines, masks, and toilet paper.

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At the level of politics and public discussions, European countries regard each other as competitors rather than partners. When high-stakes political decisions are made, such as how to manage the pandemic in Europe, the most important details are not discussed in public but – as revealed by The New York Times in 2021 – in private text messages between the EU Commission president and the CEO of a major pharmaceutical company. Attempts to talk about European values and solutions (not to mention a global view of things) in non-exclusionary terms are painfully absent.

Sculpting a European public

The late 20th century and the first decade of the 21st saw prominent discussions being influenced by the idea that Europe was on its way to becoming a post-national democracy, where citizens think of themselves primarily as Europeans and nationality is a mid-level component of identity that says more about where a person comes from than where they are heading. The citizens of Europe were expected to form a European “demos”, a political entity whose members, though they may disagree on almost any issue, accept that they share a common future, which they have to shape together.

Many commentators at that time relied on the work of German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, in particular his theory of the public sphere, in order to figure out how people with different backgrounds could participate in the project of democracy.

For Habermas, the public sphere is the space where people can gather to articulate their needs and discuss issues of common interest – in other words, to discuss politics. For Habermas, access to this public sphere must be unrestricted – every member of society should be able to participate – so that “public opinion” can be formed. This “public opinion” was seen as a precondition of democratic governance. Habermas saw the origins of this sphere in the coffee houses and salons of the 17th and 18th centuries, where lively discussions took place among the bourgeoisie. In the 20th century, the news media – with its capacity to amplify voices in society and shape public opinion – became the venue for such discussions.

This idea of the European public emerged as a possible solution to an emerging problem, as is often the case with utopias. There were concerns, already in the 1990s, about the democratic deficit of the EU institutions. Although citizens became more exposed to and more open towards other European cultures, and the EU started gradually taking over features of states, European election campaigns stubbornly remained at the national level. Political parties remained national, and most citizens had no idea of what was going on in Brussels or Strasbourg. A common public sphere promised to fix this, by enabling European citizens to agree on the issues to be tackled at European level and together identify the means to do so.

Whether the European demos would deliberate as part of one great European public sphere or through many smaller, overlapping ones was not clear. But in fact, public deliberation can happen on many levels simultaneously – including national, regional, and local – as well as in topic-based fora, and all of these can coexist and complement each other.

Around this time, Europe saw major attempts to engage a pan-European public including *Euronews* in 1993 and then *European Voice* and its successor *Politico Europe* in the 2000s. But these publications were elite-focused, with limited reach outside the Brussels bubble. Meanwhile, many Europeans chose British or American media for an international perspective, meaning news reached them through an

Anglo-Saxon filter. Still, some Europeanisation was visible in national news media and has continued since, both in terms of the choice of topics and how they were covered, suggesting that a relatively broad cross-section of society was exposed to at least some European debates.

Why this did not evolve into something closer to a post-national media framework has a lot to do with the political developments of the early 2000s. The failure of a planned EU Constitution led to the signing of the Lisbon Treaty in 2007. While this agreement expanded the EU Parliament's competencies, it failed to promote the deep integration and federalisation intended by Europeanists. Neither the intergovernmental approach nor the calls for a two-speed Europe seemed to provide a favourable context for this, not to mention the eurozone crisis, the rise of the far-right, and the increasing anti-refugee sentiments.

Why aim for a European public sphere?

From a progressive, pro-European point of view, it is hard to object to the idea of a European public sphere. Yet it is important to mention some of its early critiques as they can help us identify some of the key challenges ahead related to both the feasibility and the desirability of this utopia.

One problem highlighted was that of the chicken or the egg. If post-national politics needed a post-national public sphere, it was also true the other way; it was hard to form a proper European public sphere when EU decisions seemed opaque and the main political actors still framed their messages and policy proposals with national audiences in mind. The counter to this, of course, is that every democracy has roots in autocracy, oppression, or flight from terror – most of them still managed to build up a public sphere alongside their democratic institutions.

Another objection was that Europeanising debates might impact EU political habits. Communications researcher Silke Adam¹ points out that the lack of interest in EU politics allowed politicians in Brussels to seek compromises. A European public, however, might require them to elaborate on their positions to the public, thereby making deviations from their initial stance look like defeat.

In practice, however, there were already signs that this old habit of elitist decision-making would not withstand the test of time – or populist attacks. In many cases, the gulf between the EU level and the national level allowed national politicians to pretend that external constraints were responsible for most – if not all – unpopular developments, be it economic crises, austerity, or migration. The Brexit campaign may be the best example, but it is far from the only one. The European project cannot go on without better involving citizens.

Economic policy and the distribution of funds are particularly important topics in national public debates that have both European and national components; a proper debate could only take place at the European level. To a lesser extent, this was the case when anti-austerity movements were calling for significant policy reform during the eurozone crisis and when the EU's Dublin rules on migration risked paving the way to a humanitarian disaster. If we want to disentangle the complex system of EU treaties, national constitutions, laws, and policies, we need to foster meaningful European debates.

Finally, a great body of research has already pointed out that this ideal of the Habermasian public sphere was already exclusionary as it failed to involve women and minorities in the discussion, not to mention that the way in which public opinion was formed in the 20th and 21st centuries was a far cry from the discussions in 17th-century cafes, with discourse often manipulated and top-down. With that in mind, simply upscaling national media to the European level will not create a common communicative

space.

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This is an important point. But building a European public was never going to be a simple exercise – and certainly not one replicating the struggling model of national news media. Europeanisation should instead be seen as an opportunity to create something new and resilient, something unplagued by the shortcomings of national media. It may even be that breaking loose from its national shackles is the only way to revive news media.

The next steps

While this description of today's national public spheres may sound bleak, it is important to highlight that Europe's population has become more open towards other people and cultures. Millennials and Gen-Z are more likely to speak other European languages and have international experience than their parents. Young people are more likely to consider living and working in foreign countries and gradually get immersed in their politics. Solidarity demonstrations for Ukraine or Fridays for Future climate protests take place simultaneously across countries, as do demonstrations against Fortress Europe. In many online communities, one's nationality is rarely mentioned: all that matters is the shared interest.

If Europe's citizens have indeed been evolving in a post-national direction, maybe the problem lies in the limited opportunities to participate in post-national politics. Perhaps it is not the quality but rather the lack of diversity and limited choice. Brussels-focused news, old-school news media, and cultural television channels are valuable but speak only to a small section of the European audience. The same applies to newer projects that include cross-border investigations, pan-European journalistic endeavours, or documentary film projects as well as future platforms planned to translate content of public interest and syndicate the creation of trustworthy news. Their value is clear, and the newer efforts especially are doing a great job at including different national narratives – instead of speaking from a Western European position disguised as an objective view from nowhere.

Still, there are few of these projects, and they are underfunded and have limited impact. While an increasing share of the content is offered in more than one European language, English is still the lingua franca and the source of most of the original content. As the most commonly spoken language in the EU, this is a practical choice to reach the largest possible audience, but it risks excluding significant parts of the population and overrepresenting the views of anglophile elites. To improve the offering, it is time to increase the support, scale up projects, and raise interest among citizens.

What better time than now? At least that is what Franco-German politician Daniel Cohn-Bendit and German public intellectual [Claus Leggewie recently wrote in *Eurozine*](#). They argued that the current geopolitical reality, chiefly Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine, has created momentum for a sort of post-nationalism that might even transcend the borders of the EU. The ever more tangible threats to our shared values and the erratic prospects for our shared future – not to mention the proximity of human suffering – have already triggered unprecedented gestures of solidarity in European societies. It is now time to use that energy to build a strong basis for what could become a European public.

But what exactly should the components of such a European public be, if a television news channel is not enough? For starters, we need to take into account that the media landscape has thoroughly

changed since the discussion about the European public sphere abruptly ended in the 2000s.

For many people, newspapers and television stations have become irrelevant. Social media has become the dominant source of information, not only as a gateway between traditional media and audiences but also increasingly where new information is shared. These platforms are now the shared information infrastructure of people the world over. Due to their inherent logic of profit maximisation, they are, however, more likely to radicalise and pit people against each other than to enable constructive discussion. Reflecting on this problem, digital policy expert Francesca Bria recently called for a European “[tech ecosystem for the public interest](#)”, which would enable public discussions without being captured by dominant online platforms. A first step to achieving this, argued Bria, could be a “European alternative to Twitter”, which is “independent and public, able to manage data [while] preserving the digital sovereignty of citizens and to create high-quality content and journalism”.

But “Euro-Twitter” (or “Euro-X”) is just the beginning. The infrastructure of the public sphere must rest on many pillars, incorporating the fragmented efforts that already exist, upscaling what works on the national level, encouraging cooperation, and fostering investment in useful or innovative new projects and technologies. And as we are working on making this a reality, we should not forget that the EU institutions and politicians need to play along. A public sphere needs not only debates but also a promise that what is discussed can have an actual impact.



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