

**The Transformation of Political Mobilisation and  
Communication in European Public Spheres  
EUROPUB.COM**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

(abbreviated version)

The Europub.com project investigates the discrepancy between the European Union's institutional development, on the one hand, and the continuing predominance of the national political space as the arena for public debates and the source for collective identification and notions of citizenship, on the other. **We believe that this “public sphere deficit” is a core aspect of Europe’s “democratic deficit”.** Even more than on the national level, the communication flow between Europe and the public depends on the mass media. The mass media fulfil four crucial functions in the European policy process. First, in the absence of direct communicative links, European actors, issues, and policies have to be made visible by the mass media, and it is in this public forum that they may gain public resonance and legitimacy (**legitimation function**). Second, European policy makers depend for their information about the desires and concerns of the citizenry to a large extent on the mass media (**responsiveness function**). Third and conversely, the public can build its opinion about the distant European institutions and the complexities of multi-level policies only to a very small extent on direct personal experience and therefore must also rely on how Europe becomes visible in the mass media (**accountability function**). Finally, participation of citizens in the European policy process usually requires access to the mass media. Although a small number of resourceful and well-organized actors may gain access to European policy-makers directly (e.g., in the context of the Brussels lobbying circuit), most forms of citizens’ participation through NGOs, civic initiatives, and social movements can only influence policy-makers by way of the visibility, resonance, and legitimacy they are able to mobilize in the mass media (**participation function**).

Our **research design** includes **three comparative dimensions**. Cross-nationally, we include seven countries: **Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands and Switzerland**. Along the time dimension, we cover the **period from 1990 to 2002**. Thirdly, the study focuses on **seven different policy domains**:

- Common market policies: **agriculture: subsidies, livestock and dairy quotas, animal disease control** (e.g., BSE, EU quota regulations, GATT negotiations);
- Common market policies: **monetary politics** (e.g., Euro, interest rate adjustments);
- Foreign and defence policies: **troop deployment, for both military and humanitarian purposes** (e.g., ex-Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq);
- Justice and internal policies: **immigration politics** (e.g., Schengen, asylum policies);
- Co-operation outside the pillar, socio-economic: **retirement and pensions** (e.g., retirement age, pension funds);
- Co-operation outside the pillar structure, culture and identity: **education** (e.g., the Bologna and Lisbon processes).
- **European integration** (e.g., enlargement, the “Haider debate”, institutional reform, constitutional discussions)

We used a **variety of methods**: content analyses of public statements and demands made by a variety of collective actors, as well as of newspaper editorials; keyword searches on the Internet, as well as a network analyses of links among websites; and finally interviews with key representatives of collective actors and with media professionals. The data gathering effort deserves some emphasis. We content coded tens of thousands of newspaper articles, analysed the websites of thousands of collective actors and the network links among them, and interviewed about five hundred representatives of policy actors, interest groups, and news media. We are confident that no other project has ever gathered data on the Europeanisation of public debates that approaches this effort in its size, and qualitative scope.

We offer here some **main conclusions** that can be drawn from our data and analyses:

- The primary result of the Europeanisation of public contestation has thus far been a strengthening of the influence of state and executive actors who have almost exclusive hegemony in debates over European issues. **Civil society actors**, to the contrary, **have hardly gained any foothold on the European level** and are much better represented in debates that remain within the national political arena. **Legislative actors** – both national parliamentarians and members of the European Parliament – **are also less strongly represented in debates on European issues than in national public debates**. In other words, **Europeanisation of public spheres has so far tended to make public debates less inclusive and less egalitarian**.
- The differential access of actors to European public debates is strongly related to actors' evaluation of the European integration process and their assessment of European institutions. Civil society actors, who find themselves on the losing side of Europeanisation, are also most critical about European integration and institutions, whereas the state and executive actors who dominate European public debates display the strongest support for European integration (legislative actors take an intermediate position). This suggests that the **unequal access to European public debates has negative repercussions on support for European integration and European institutions, especially among civil society actors**.
- In spite of what is sometimes said about its deficient communication strategies, **the European Commission is by far the most often cited European-level organisation**. Across the twenty-eight newspapers in seven countries that are included in our sample, **Commission President Romano Prodi is cited more often than any national politician** (the closest runner up is German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder). While this may be considered positive news by supporters of European integration, the **European public sphere deficit is illustrated by the fact that Prodi alone appears in the media almost three times more often than all European-level civil society actors taken together**.
- Contrary to previous assumptions, there is a **remarkable level of Europeanised debate in the print media**. Moreover, the evaluations of European issues and actors show that European integration is supported by most newspapers. **The media tend to hold more positive or at least less negative attitudes about EU political actors than about actors from their own country**. While this general conclusion is true for six of our seven countries under study, there is one exception. **The British press deviates in almost all dimensions from the general picture**. The British media are by far the most self-referential, they oppose the political project of Europe and the attitudes of journalists towards European integration are overwhelmingly negative. The UK press is also one out of only two countries in the sample in which national actors are more positively portrayed than EU actors. The contrast is strongest with the French press. In French editorials there is strong support for the enlargement of EU political competences and for EU integration in general.
- Our study of patterns of **political communication on the Internet** shows that **national, institutional actors and traditional mass media organisations are also the dominant actors on the web**. Given the hopes that have been attached to the democratic potential of the internet, this is a sobering conclusion. In spite of the technological possibilities, **multi-lingual websites turned out to be excessively rare** and therefore the average web user is

confronted primarily with websites of actors from the own country or the same linguistic area. Our investigation of web links among sites of organisations likewise reveals strong linkages among websites within the same country, but also **strong connections from the national level to the European level**. Confirming its prominent position in our newspaper data, we find that also on the Internet, **the European Commission website turns out to be the most frequent receiver of weblinks**: almost half of the organization websites across our seven countries provided links to the Commission's official website. Common opinion, however, tends to emphasise the Internet's potential for stimulating **transnational linkages**, i.e. link connections between websites in different countries. Our results show that these horizontal forms of Europeanisation **are very underdeveloped**. We conclude therefore that the Internet facilitates access to and exchange with the supranational level, but it does not nearly to the same extent fulfill its promise of being a transnational communicative space.

- Our interview data with representatives of political institutions, political parties, news media, interest groups, and NGO's in the seven countries and on the EU level, confirm many of the findings from our media and Internet analyses. **In all countries, the action repertoire of all types of actors is still predominantly focused on the national level**. Partly, this is a result of a division of labour, which induces national-level actors to delegate the representation of their interests to European federations or to partner organizations. Partly, this is also a result of the fact that national governments constitute the members of the most important legislative body at the EU-level – the Council of Ministers. We further find that precisely the **weak actors who most depend on public-related strategies have the greatest problems with getting access to the media**.
- As in our media analyses, we found that the **state actors interviewed were particularly positive about European integration**, the exception being the UK, where state and party actors were the most negative of any type of actor regarding European integration. **NGOs were typically less positive than other actors. Many interviewees mentioned the need for enhanced citizen participation in European integration, and the need to address the gap between elites and citizens**. This issue was brought up by actors in all member states as well as those on the EU level, suggesting a Europe-wide consensus on the importance of these questions, if not on how to address them.
- Summing up, **we find evidence of a clear democratic deficit in Europeanised public communication**. However, the nature of this deficit is not – as is often supposed – that the media give us little information about Europe or that such information is particularly negative. Neither is it true that European institutions – and particularly the European Commission – receive little attention in the media. **The true nature of the democratic deficit of Europeanised political communication lies in the difficulties that less powerful civil society groups face in getting access to this emerging Europeanised public arena**. While civil society actors are also underrepresented in national public debates, their position is much more marginal still in debates on European issues. Our results suggest that the **solution to the deficits of the European public sphere must not be sought primarily in the media themselves**, but in the way in which the European policy process is structured, which strongly privileges executive actors compared to the legislative, and even more so compared to interest groups, NGO's, and other civil society actors. Mass media coverage merely mirrors and reproduces these structural inequalities. **Without political reforms that improve the accessibility of the European policy process, the stark inequalities in access to European public debates will continue to reinforce the elite bias of the European policy process, with the risk of further undercutting public support for European integration and European institutions**.