# MODELS OF THE EUROPEAN PUBLIC SPHERE

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**Abstract:** *This paper is the result of the recent literature review on the European public sphere which has been conceptualized in six models: the Habermasian model, the model of the interconnection of the national public spheres by media, the model of the transnational public, the model of the three pillars, the model of the publics, the supranational model. The first section of the paper presents and compares these models in the attempt to promote the concept of the transnational European public sphere.*

*The second section of the paper refers to the democratization of the European public sphere, a concept that has two meanings: the citizens' access to it, on one hand and the balance between the member states, on the other hand.*

*To support the theoretical framework, in the third section of this paper, I present the data offered by the Eurobarometer surveys: how the respondents conceive the European public sphere (Eurobarometer 189), what the topics mentioned worth discussing at European level are (the latest Standard Eurobarometers), whether the citizens consider that their voice and their country's voice count in the EU (the latest Standard Eurobarometers).*

Key words: European public sphere, democratization of the European public sphere, Eurobarometers

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Is there a European public sphere? If yes, how is it born and how does it work? I start my presentation with the concept of public sphere defined by

Habermas (2001a, p. 102): "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens."

In order to debate the existence of a functioning European public sphere, the following issues are worth taking into consideration: the emergence of the public opinion on European topics, the multitude of the topics debated at European level, the mechanisms to support the European-wide debates, the European citizens' need and opportunity to be involved in European debates.

More importantly, the issue of the relationship between the national public sphere and the European public sphere is to be adressed in the attempt of designing the model of the European public sphere.


## 2. THEORETICAL MODELS OF THE EUROPEAN PUBLIC SPHERE

The academic literature contains six models of the European public sphere:

1. **The Habermasian model** presents the European public sphere as a communication space whose goal is to promote the common interests in the discourses addressed to the Europeans. The transnational European public sphere hosts simultaneous regional, national, European debates in an osmotic model. The debates at European level legitimate the European Union's policies. The emergence of the public sphere depends on the existence of democracy, participation, free media, and debates. Mass media are the interface of the public sphere, one of its tools (Habermas, 1962/2005). Considered the *locus* of negociation between the civil society and the state, the public sphere involves *a reasoning public* who consume *media*. Habermas (1962/2005, 2001a) insists on the public sphere/state dichotomy, on the citizens' relationship with the public institutions, especially in the case of the Parliament. The functions of the public sphere have modified in time. Since the industrial era, the public sphere has been legimitating the political decision-making process (Habermas, 2001a). The functioning principles of the public sphere comprise the open debate of all topics of general interests. The discoursive argumentation plays for the general interest and the public well-being. Habermas (1962/2005) depicts the transformation of the public sphere, the transition from the liberal public sphere to the contemporary public sphere dominated by mass media, in the context of capitalism and mass democracy. The transformation happens when the debate leaves the elitist space of the rational discussion for the mass culture. The source of legitimizing the decision-making process is the debate in the public sphere (Habermas, 1996). Habermas(1962/2005) distinguishes between two dimensions of the public sphere: political and literary. This distinction settles a new concept developed by McGuigan (2005), the cultural public sphere.

   Debating the European public sphere, Habermas (2001b) compares it to the national public spheres. The European public sphere works as a game betwen institutions (responsible for decision-making and consulting the citizens) and the citizens (whose opinion forming process is facilitated by media). The European public sphere is a communicative space whose aim

is to settle the common interest in discourses so that the citizens are given the chance to know the pros and cons during debates. The European public sphere comes to life when the national public spheres open to one another. Although the debates happen simultaneously at local, regional, national and European level, the respective public spheres do not form a stratified model, but an osmotic one. The European public sphere is transnational, not supranational. (Habermas, 2001b)

2. **The model of interconnection of national public spheres by media** (Brüggemann&Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2009, Volkmer, 2008, Risse, 2003, Risse &Van de Steeg 2003, Trenz, 2004). The European public sphere is born as a result of the restructuring of the national public spheres under the pressure of setting the European perspective on different topics in national discourses. The same topics are discussed in all national public spheres under similar frames of shared meanings.

   Is there a European civil society to unify the citizens of different member states? What are the links of this civil society: democratic ideals, the flux of people, material and cultural goods, symbols, discourses?

   How is the European public sphere born? Beck (2007) considers that the mechanism of its emergence works when the perspective from which the national issues are seen becomes European. The European public sphere is a social construct (Risse, 2003, p.3): "It does not fall from heaven and does not pre-exist outside social and political discourses. Rather, it is being constructed through social and discursive practices creating a common horizon of reference and, at the same time, a transnational community of communication over issues that concern <us as Europeans> rather than British, French, Germans, or Dutch." The same author designs the ideal model of the European public sphere:
   -the same European topics are debated simultaneously and at similar levels in several national public spheres and in the mass media;
   -the same referential, the same contract of communication is shared by all national public spheres and by mass-media;
   -there is a transnational community of communication where the participants consider each other legitimate partner in a shared discourse (Risse, 2003, p.2).
   In conclusion, the pre-condition of the emergence of the European public sphere is for the mass media to use the same relevance criteria and similar reference frames in all national public spheres when the European topics are being debated (Risse, 2003, p. 4).

3. **The model of the transnational public** (Grundmann, Smith& Wright, 2000, Rumford, 2003)**.** The transnational discourse based on the same topics in media in all member states aims at the transnational public who are unified by their European citizenship awareness. The pre-condition of the functioning of the homogeneous European public sphere is the synchronization of the public attention on a European topic (Grundmann, Smith& Wright, 2000). In this model, where the European awareness is

very important, mass media stand as the link between the citizens and the decision-makers (Grundmann, 1999).

4. **The model of the three pillars** (Firmstone, 2008, Koopmans, Neidhardt&Pfetsch, 2000)**.** The three pillars of the European public sphere are European, not national: media, political actors and the general public. The first mentioned pillar comprises national and transnational media which function in a parallel way supported by the shared media culture. Media represent the central pillar of the model as they attract a sufficient number of the public and connect them to the political actors seen as speakers in the European public sphere and translators between European and national perspectives on debated issues (Koopmans, Neidhardt&Pfetsch, 2000). Moreover, media create the communicative space to host the transnational activities of the other two pillars. Media consumers are an important pillar of the European public sphere as they are the target to whom media communicate the EU affairs. Transnational media address less and less to a niche public and more and more to the general public (Firmstone, 2008) which used to be characteristic to national media. Both national and transnational media in the EU share the aim of "bridging the gap in communications between EU institutions and their citizens" (Firmstone, 2008, p. 439).

5. **The model of the publics** (Eriksen, 2005) comprises three types of public spheres: the general public, the strong public (decision-makers) and the transnational segmented public (a network of actors sharing the same intersts in different member states) (table 1). The technical support of the network formed by the three types of publics is (national, European, transnational) media. Every type of publics has its own function and features, as seen in Table 1. Eriksen (2005) considers that the most salient publics are the segmented transnational ones evolving around policy networks, as well as legally institutionalized discourses of the strong publics. The three-fold conceptualization of the European public sphere makes it more democratic as there are better chances for ordinary citizens to join at least one of the spheres.

Table 1. The typology of public spheres

| Type of public | Participation | Legitimacy basis | Function |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| General | Open | A sovereign demos | Opinion formation |
| Segmented | Restricted | Shared interests | Problem-solving |
| Strong | Specialized | Delegated authority | Will-formation |

 (source: Eriksen, 2005, p. 349)

6. **The supranational model** (Schlesinger, 2007) in which an overarching public sphere appears to parallel the national public spheres as European media parallel national media. Every level of the public spheres is assigned a type of mass media: national media and European media. Schlesinger's (2007) premise is that there are supranational institutions as well as transnational political and cultural spaces and cross-border communicative

flows in the EU. Meanwhile, both national and supranational discourses and institutions coexist. Therefore, the European public sphere develops in the interaction between EU institutions and the transnational networks. Only an overarching public sphere born at European level can host European debate.

It is worth noticing that all six models of the European public sphere emphasize the function of mass media and its diverse public. The most salient issue to be researched is the relationship between the national public spheres and the European public sphere. The models presented above envisage two types of mechanisms of the formation of the European public sphere: on one hand, the interconnection of the national public spheres by mass media, transnational public and political actors (models1-5); on the other hand, the European public sphere parallels the national public spheres (model 6). There are other researches who disagree with the above presented models. Calhoun (1992, p. 37) claims that the European public sphere is not the result of the interconnection of the national public spheres. He suggests another concept to use when depicting the interconnection of the national public spheres: clusters of communication. They are organized by several criteria: community, nation, topic, people under the frame of the power relations, the networks of communication, the topography of issues, and the structure of influence of the public sphere, which open the public sphere to a larger public beyond the elites (Calhoun, 1992). Eley (1992) emphasizes the hystorical context in which the national  public spheres become European: the societal transition (from the national governance to the supranational, European governance) mediated by the new institutional structures of  both the European and national public spheres whose norms are negociation, compromise, understanding that others have power and ways of viewing the world different from their own.

## 3. HOW DEMOCRATIC IS THE EUROPEAN PUBLIC SPHERE?

Once the European public sphere is born, there comes the question of its democratic features (Heikkilä & Kunelius, 2008), while considering its dimension and its heterogeinity. How can the European public sphere be democratized?

By democratizing the European public sphere, I understand two processes. On one hand, facilitating the citizens' access to the European public sphere, involving them in the process of the decision-making at European level by European-wide referenda, by voting for the European Parliament, by opening  media of consulting the citizens (forums on [www.europa.eu](www.europa.eu)), for example. On the other hand, I consider that the European public sphere becomes democratic if there is a balance of the participation of the EU member states. In other words, the European public sphere is democratic as long as there is no member state in the position of dominating the debate and the European citizens are aware and making use of their opportunity of participating in the debate on European topics in diverse forms.

When the European officials speak about "Europe's single voice", they refer to both dimensions of democratization of the public sphere: on one hand, guaranteeing the citizens' access to it  and taking every member state's interests into account.

According to the recent standard Eurbarometers, more than 60% of the Europeans consider that their country's voice are heard in the EU (table 2). According to the data in table 2, the European citizens think the second dimension of the democratizing process of the European public sphere is already accomplished, while every citizen's access to the European public sphere is not a reality yet.

Table 2. Answers "I agree" to questions related to the European public sphere

|  | SE 67 | SE 68 | SE 69 | SE 70 | SE 71 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| The voice of my country counts in the EU. | 66% | 61% | 61% | 60% | 61% |
| My country's interests are taken into consideration in the EU. | 45% | 38% | 46% | 43% | 44% |
| My voice counts in the EU. | 43% | 30% | 31% | 30% | 38% |

(source: Standard Eurobarometres -SE- 67-71)

Are there proofs that the European public sphere functions? Numerous academics do research on national mass media in order to find out: whether and when the press in the EU member states articulates a common European position, speaking on behalf of a collective identity (Negrine & al., 2008), whether mass media lead to change or, on the contrary, they are conservative, in other words, whether they highlight the EU or the nation state (Mc Quail, 2001), whether there is an equilibrium between Europeanism and nationalism in mass media production, what is the percentage of cosmopolitan/multicultural news in national media (Puppis&al., 2009, Steimaurer, 2009), which are the similarities of the European media discourses in different EU member states (Raik, 2004). CE (2008) supports the radio and television programmes dealing with cultural diversity and European topics.

In the next section of this paper, I intend to interpret the data offered by the Eurobarometers related to some aspects of all models of the European public sphere presented in the first section of this paper: the quantity of the citizens'participation (McCarthy, 1992, Calhoun, 1992), the function of the media in the European public sphere, new media and traditional media as pillars of the European public sphere (Calhoun, 1992, Habermas, 1992).

## 4. THE EUROPEAN PUBLIC SPHERE IN EUROBAROMETERS

The public sphere hosts the public opinion-formation process. The Eurobarometers regularly survey the European citizens'opinion. Therefore, I intend to use the data which they provide and which offer major advantages for any research: the trust in the professional work of the surveyers and the large number of

respondents from a large geographical area surveyed simultaneously forming a representative sample.

I choose to discuss Eurobarometer 189[2] (EU Communication and the Citizens) due to its relevance for the topic of this paper, although the data it contains refer to EU25. It is a flash Eurobarometer, a survey based on *ad hoc* thematical telephone interviews conducted at the request of any service of the European Commission. I extracted from the Eurobarometer 189 the topics considered worth debating at European level (table 3). In the standard Eurobarometers, the topics mentioned by the respondents as better debated at European level than at national or local level are: environment protection, terrorism, social and health benefits, economy, energy supply, transportation, crime, immigration policy, consumers' protection, defence and foreign policy, taxes, unemployment, agriculture and fishing, supporting less developed regions, competition, research, education, cultural policies, internal market, housing, pensions, inflation, poverty, climate change, army conflicts, financial crisis, infectious diseases spread, nuclear weapons, demographic raise, European citizens' rights, health and social policies, how the other Europeans deal with the difficulties they encounter, EU enlargement, youth policies, cultural and educational policies, UE's global role, the mechanisms of the European institutions, immigration in another EU member state.

Table 3. What topics do you consider proper to be discussed at European level?

| Topics | % of the respondents who chose this answer |
|---|---|
| Environment protection | 89 |
| Fight against terrorism and organized crime | 89 |
| Providing energy supply | 84 |
| How to create jobs in Europe | 84 |
| Religious tolerance/ Protection of the human rights | 84 |
| The European currency | 76 |
| Immigration from non-EU countries | 72 |
| The European Constitutional Treaty | 71 |
| The danger of bird flu in Europe | 67 |
| Ethical problems (stem celles, abortion, homosexual marriages) | 65 |
| Turkey's accession to the EU | 60 |
| How to economically compete with China and India | 60 |

(source: Eurobarometer 189a)

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[2] http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/flash/fl_189a_en.pdf

Secondly, the Eurobarometer 189 tells us what forms of civic participation are considered to belong to the  European public sphere: voting in the European Parliament election, contacting an European politician, addressing a European politician/organization rather than a national one on EU related topics, consuming media from another EU country, consuming European media  (table 4). The results of the survey presented in  table 4 show that media occupy the central place in  the European debate.

Table 4. Forms of  participation in the European public sphere

| Forms of participation | "YES" answers (%) |
|---|---|
| Voting in the European Parliament election. | 65.3 |
| Addressing a European politician/organization rather than a national one on EU related topics. | 16.4 |
| Watching TV from other EU countries. | 37 |
| Intention of watching a EU TV channel. | 75.7 |

(source: Eurobarometer 189a)

Although these data do not offer enough proofs that the European public sphere functions, they form a detailed picture of the citizens' civic participation in European debate and their confidence in the European public sphere.


CONCLUSIONS

The recent academic literature and research do not agree on the model of the European public sphere. Therefore, this paper intended to present different theoretical designs and to compare them with the data offered by the topic-related Eurobarometers. The majority of the authors interested in the European public sphere conceptualize it as a transnational one (not supranational) based on three pillars: the public (interested in EU related information), the political actors and mass media (national, transnational, European). The European public sphere is born as an interconnection of the national public spheres.

The issue of the level of democracy of the European public sphere has two dimensions: every citizen's voice and every member state's voice being taken into account at European level.

According to the Eurobarometers, the majority of the European citizens consider that there are many topics worth debating in the European public sphere rather that at national level: environment protection, terrorism, social and health benefits, economy, energy supply, transportation, crime, immigration policy, consumers' protection, defence and foreign policy, taxes, unemployment, agriculture and fishing, supporting less developed regions, competition, research, education, cultural policies, internal market, housing, pensions, inflation, poverty, climate

change, army conflicts, financial crisis, infectious diseases spread, nuclear weapons, demographic raise, European citizens' rights, health and social policies, how the other Europeans deal with the difficulties they encounter, EU enlargement, youth policies, cultural and educational policies,  UE's global role, the mechanisms of the European institutions, immigration in another EU member state.

Some citizens make use of different forms of participation in the public sphere: voting in the European Parliament election, contacting a European politician, addressing a European politician/organization rather than a national one on EU related topics, using media from another EU country, using European media.

Further research is needed in order to understand the mechanisms of the emergence and of the functioning of the European public sphere, but the proofs that this paper contains are able to fight against Euroskepticism based on the lack of the European public sphere.

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