

## Boundaries of Public Sphere Ideals

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## **Introduction**

This paper analyses two opposite approaches to the possibility of European public sphere and compares their premises to the Jürgen Habermas's original ideals of public sphere. It seems quite obvious that the ideals that are imagined for totally different kinds of circumstances are not applicable to present context of European Union.

## **Core ideas of Habermas**

The core idea of public sphere in Jürgen Habermas's 1962 book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* was the assembly of private persons discussing matters of public concern of common interest. These publics aimed to mediate between society and state and in that manner holding the state accountable to society. At first this meant requiring that information about state's activities be made accessible so that state activities would be subject to critical scrutiny and the force of "public opinion". Later, it meant transmitting the considered "general interest" of society to the state by means of legally guaranteed freedoms and eventually through the parliamentary institutions of representative government.

Thus, at one level, the idea of public sphere provided an institutional mechanism to make states accountable to the citizenry, and at another level, it designated ideals of discursive interaction. Discussions were to be unrestricted, rational, and accessible to all. Merely private interests were to be excluded, inequalities of status and power were to be bracketed, and discussants were to deliberate as peers. The result of such discussion would be "public opinion" in the sense of a rational consensus about the common good.<sup>1</sup>

The actual development of public sphere is linked to social, political, and economical changes in urban life in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe, at the time when print technology became important. Early practices of criticism and writing created new communicative space where the practice of participatory debate and development of a critical political discourse outside the state could be developed.<sup>2</sup> The ideals presented by Habermas were never realized in practice in early modern Europe. At least the access was limited since only bourgeois males took part in the discussions. Realization of the ideas became ever more difficult in modern nation states when the participatory debate gave ground to debates in media.

How applicable, then, are Habermasian ideals in the context of European Union? There have been lively political and academic debates about viability of European public sphere (EPS) recent years. The main stream of the debates seems to be theoretical and normative, but there are also empirical enquiries about the possibility of some sort of European public sphere. It is possible to distinguish two opposite ends in relating oneself to the existence of a EPS: 1) it's impossible, 2) it's already there. I present some of the main arguments of these two approaches.

## **It's impossible**

The “impossibility school” approach tend to emphasize the lack of common language among European citizens, lack of pan-European media, lack of genuine European civil society, and the lack of European identity which are seen as preconditions for democratic public sphere.<sup>3</sup> At present EU recognizes 20 official and about 60 other indigenous and non-indigenous languages spoken over the geographical area. Almost every second citizen (44%) of the EU does not know any other language than her/his own mother tongue. (Special Eurobarometer, February 2006). In addition, language skills are unevenly spread: in some member states almost everyone is bilingual, while, for example, two-thirds of the British cannot speak another language. Inside the member states young people and managers tend to display greatest competence.<sup>4</sup>

Even the people who can speak the same language, may have difficulties in communicating with each other, because for historical and political reasons the same terms may have completely different meanings. As one of the Brussels correspondents I interviewed for my study said: “When I say ‘federal’, I talk about a totally other thing than a British does. For British people federalization means centralization. For me, the same word means quite the opposite. A pan-European debate, or pan-European public opinion is simply not possible.”

The problem with the lack of common language is not only a lack of shared medium for meaningful communication. There is also a strong connection between languages, cultures, collective identities and, in the end, ways of perceiving reality. Is it meaningful to speak about truly democratic public sphere based on rational and critical discussion when majority of the “members” don’t even understand each others talk, ask the skeptics.

The second argument of impossibility school is that there is no genuine pan-European press, and consequently, no common European forum for debates and discussions. Attempts to create transnational European media (for example The European, Voice of Europe, Euro News) have not been successful in terms of reaching large audiences or creating pan-European debate. Some papers and magazines with European emphasis like the Financial Times and the Economist are read all over the Union but the readers consist mostly of economical and political elites. Moreover, the content of them is not exactly what the ideals of free public participation and citizen involvement would require. As Eriksen (2004) put it: “Common communicative systems of mass-media facilitating real public debates conducive to collective will-formation are to a large degree lacking at the European level.”

Whether we are thinking print media, radio or television (commercial and public service), the relations to their audiences have been built on some form of understanding of cultural tradition and social responsibility within the national frame of reference. Media markets are still understood as culturally and linguistically separated, national markets.<sup>5</sup> In spite of the fact that the ownership of media industry has become more multinational, there are

no signs that the national media order based national cultural traditions, local language and regional focus would be replaced by pan-European let alone global media order.

Moreover, empirical cross-national studies indicate that media attention to European issues is low in comparison with global, national, regional or local issues.<sup>6</sup> There is also a quite low public awareness about EU issues and low interest in EU-level decision making among the citizens. Obviously the public demand for EU issues in journalism is not very high, either. There seems to be classical chicken-egg situation here.

In principle internet could provide technical means to have pan-European debates but so far attendance have been low and activities have touched mostly limited sub groups and particular issues. Here, too, the lack of common language excludes majority of people from the discussions.

To conclude: there is no common language or perspective for Europeans which makes it difficult to talk about European identity or European civil society the way they are perceived in nation states. Media do not report much about EU issues and citizens seem not know and seem not be very interested to know what's going in the EU. Shouldn't we rather talk about European non-public sphere or put ironical quotation marks around "European" and "public"?

### **It's already there**

Risse (2003) agrees with many of the observations presented above but he makes quite opposite conclusions. He labels many of the arguments against the possibility of European public sphere "conventional wisdom" which he wants to challenge. Risse defines the conditions under which democratic European public sphere would emerge:

1. If and when the same (European) themes are discussed at the same time at similar levels of attention across national public spheres and media;
2. if and when similar frames of reference, meaning structures, and patterns of interpretation are used across national public spheres and media;
3. if and when a transnational community of communication emerges in which speakers and listeners recognize each other as legitimate participants in a common discourse.

Risse argues that there is no reason why all Europeans should speak the same language and use the same media in order to communicate across national borders in a meaningful way. If citizens attach similar meanings to what they observe in Europe, they should be able to communicate across borders irrespective of languages and in the absence of pan-European media. He compares Europe in this sense to multilingual Switzerland. For him it is questionable to claim the absence of a public sphere only because people read different newspapers in different languages. In fact the opposite is true, he maintains. A lively public sphere should actually be based on pluralistic supply of media competing for citizens' attention. As long as media report about the same issues at the same time, there is no need for pan-European media based on common language.

Secondly, Risse argues, the conventional wisdom seems to be based on an idealized picture of homogenous national public sphere which is then transferred to the European level. Many national public spheres, however, are fragmented, “but few would argue that, therefore, people are unable to meaningfully communicate with each other.” Similar frames of reference or meaning structures don’t mean agreements or consensus on issues. Risse argues that heated debates over political issues are a way to raise the attention level of European issues. “The more we debate issues, the more we engage each other in our public discourses, the more we actually create political communities”.

However, this is not enough, Risse continues. Social mobilization and contestation of European politics is a necessary pre-condition for a European public sphere, but it is not sufficient. ‘Community of communication’ is also needed which means that speakers actually discuss with each other instead of just voicing utterances. “It requires reasoning and arguing rather than simply mobilizing one’s particular constituency for a common cause. Engaging in a debate requires listening to each other’s arguments and trying to persuade each other.” This means, in a minimum, that speakers recognize each other as legitimate partners in a debate. It also requires a certain degree of collective identification with Europe (and EU) and denies nationalist reactions.

In Risse’s view ‘community of communication’ already exists in Europe. As an example he uses the so-called Haider case in Austria. Jörg Haider’s party FPÖ arrived second in Austrian national elections in 1999. Afterwards the Christian democratic ÖVP entered into a coalition with ministers from the FPÖ. There was a general outcry because of the slogans by FPÖ which were considered racist. Before the official presentation of the new government 14 EU states demanded Austria to refrain from taking this step and threatened with sanctions.

One could agree or disagree with threats against Austrian government but to consider sanctions as illegitimate interferences in Austria’s national affairs would constrain the community of communications to nation-state and establish a boundary against ‘foreigners’ in the EU, Risse argues. Media content analysis showed, however, that not even the Austrian press treated the other member states and interventions of EU as ‘foreign’ or ‘illegitimate’. In Risse’s view there actually was a transnational community of communication in this case and he sees it as a kind of litmus test of emerging European public sphere.

Risse’s arguments raise several questions. Firstly, his definition of European public sphere seems to be very media centric. When he talks about debate or ‘community of communication’, he is actually talking about media attention and discussions in newspapers in which arguments are presented mostly by elites and journalists. Citizen participation, which is considered to be a fundamental element of public sphere is not really an issue in his writing. Quite contrary, he sees citizens as kind of passive attendants of media based public sphere. As he puts it: “A lively public sphere in liberal democracy should actually be based on pluralistic supply of media competing for citizens’ attention.”

Secondly, Risse's perception of the workings of public sphere in nation states seems to be rather optimistic and uncritical. He presumes that healthy public sphere in national level exists already and when he finds features of national discussions in European level he concludes that also European public sphere is emerging. In his view "very few people would argue that Switzerland lacks a national public sphere because of its three language communities". I'm not aware of the particular situation in Switzerland, but there is a whole legion of scholars inspired by the thoughts of Habermas who are quite critical about the workings of public spheres in modern nation states and societies in general. I think that many of them would not use the situation in nation states as an ideal against which to compare the situation in transnational level.

### **New ideals needed?**

There seem to be two quite opposite definitions of situation here, one arguing that European public sphere is not possible at all and another one maintaining that it already exists (and certainly several others between those two extremes). Distinction between the two is not so much about different perceptions of existing reality but rather about different definitions of necessary and sufficient conditions for perceiving the existence of EPS.<sup>7</sup> If you use the original ideas of Habermas as a yard stick, the conclusion is quite obvious: European public sphere is sheer utopia. As far as I can imagine, there is no way to have unrestricted discussions in European level which are accessible to everybody. Exclusion of power in interaction also seems to be quite distant goal.

If, on the other hand, Risse's criteria of European public sphere will suffice, there possibly will be cases that could be said to manifest the emergence of European public sphere. The same themes can certainly be discussed at the same time at similar levels of attention across national public spheres and media. The demand for similar frames of reference, meaning structures, and patterns of interpretation is more problematic but may be possible, at least with a free minded operationalization of concepts. The same goes with the demand of speakers and listeners recognizing each other as legitimate participants in a common discourse.

The problem here is that Risse and "impossible school" are using the same concept "public sphere", but, by using Risse's words, frames of reference and patterns of interpretation seem to be different.

The two approaches presented here illustrate that it is quite obvious that the possible existence of European public sphere is dependent on how one defines the concept and the ideals behind it. It's also quite obvious that all the original ideals of Habermas are not applicable in the context of the European Union. "Impossible" ideals may work as goals, as organizing ideas, and as sort of references against which to compare the undesirable realities. But on the other hand sticking to the ideals that are imagined for totally different kinds of circumstances may even suppress the discussion aimed to improve the current communication and democracy deficits of European Union.

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<sup>1</sup> The summary here follows the interpretation of Fraser (1997)

<sup>2</sup> Slaatta 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Brüggemann 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Schlesinger 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Slaatta 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Risse 2003.

<sup>7</sup> See also Brüggemann 2005.