

Democratising the EU from below?

As a public sphere rooted in civil society is essential to democracy, it is important to investigate what kind of civil society and public sphere is emerging in Europe and how this contributes to the EU's democratic character and legitimacy. To shed light on this, RECON has asked the following questions: How is European democracy practiced? Why is it contested? To what extent is there communication across different types of public spheres?

In addition to the enlargement in 2004, adding ten countries mainly from Central and Eastern Europe to the EU, the union also experienced a deepening through treaty reforms in the following years. This offered new opportunities for studying the democratisation of the EU 'from below' and for taking a closer look on how the public engages with the EU. RECON has studied European election campaigns and how print media cover EU treaty reforms as well as parliamentary debates on EU treaty ratification. RECON has also examined the extent to which media debates contribute to increasing the contestation about European integration, EU politics and EU policy-making throughout Europe, and how 'Euroscepticism' is expressed in different forms across the continent.

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Selected findings

- Euro scepticism is forcefully amplified through media debates
- Citizens' disconnect from the EU is strengthened by EP election campaigns, which are dominated by *national* politics and interests
- Mass media not only inform readers about EU issues but also enable readers to evaluate the EU in democratic terms
- Civil society actors increasingly identify themselves as representatives of a 'European civil society', questioning decisions made at the European level
- Mainstream political parties do not oppose the European integration process itself, as radical parties do, but rather discuss how to mend the EU's democratic deficit
- Intellectuals tell very different stories about what defines Europe and what it means to be European



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Read more on the findings in the following pages

More details and publications from the research field 'Civil Society and the Public Sphere', including all RECON reports and working papers mentioned in the below, are available at:
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Euroskepticism – a dominant voice in online media debates

Citizens overwhelmingly oppose the current functioning of the EU and justify this criticism with concerns for democracy. Yet, it remains unclear how citizens' discontent could be alleviated.

RECON has analysed Euroskepticism as an umbrella term that includes varieties of contestations of the EU as a political system or of the process of European integration. The contestation over the EU's legitimacy has been examined as this unfolded on popular mainstream news media websites, and independent political blogs in 12 member states and transnational websites during the European Parliament elections in 2009.

Findings show that EU elections were presented largely as a matter of *national* politics and interests. The national framing of EU issues reinforces the citizens' disconnect from the EU. At



Read more

'Contesting EU legitimacy', Pieter de Wilde/Asimina Michailidou/Hans-Jörg Trenz, *RECON Online Working Paper* 2010/22

Online Euroscepticism, Pieter de Wilde/Asimina Michailidou/Hans-Jörg Trenz (eds), ECPR Press, 2012

the same time, online mass media facilitates public debate on the EU's legitimacy. Whereas most of the contributors to online debates agree that EU member states need to cooperate to solve common policy problems, the institutional design of the EU is heavily criticised. Some argue in favour of more integration to solve the current problems, whereas others see less integration as a solution. Moreover, RECON finds that citizens play a major role in debates on EU legitimacy, besides actors such as government officials, civil society and political parties. Citizens overwhelmingly oppose the current functioning of the EU and justify this criticism with concerns for democracy.

Key actors strengthening democracy in the EU

The increased politicisation of the EU - meaning that politics, policy making and the EU polity itself have become issues of public contention - has proved to be not the main cause, but rather part of the cure for the EU's ills.

RECON researchers find that European and national parliaments, courts and public spheres are pivotal keys for the democratisation of European governance. National parliaments represent the national people, and they hold national governments to account for their EU policies, and link these to domestic will formation and legislation. National parliamentary debates also enhance the transparency of EU politics and policies, inform citizens about EU issues and help to form public opinion. Yet, further keys are required to strengthen EU democracy: The European Parliament, the European Court of Justice and transnational civil society expose and represent European public interests in decision making that otherwise remain behind closed doors.

Further studies show that the EU's democratic legitimacy is contested among political parties. Mainstream parties tend to contest the institutional set-up of the EU or its democratic deficit, whereas radical left- or right-wing parties are opposed to the European integration process itself.

Read more

Strengthening representative democracy in the European political union: Parliaments, courts and the public sphere, Tatjana Evas, Ulrike Liebert, Christopher Lord (eds), Nomos, 2012.

'Between an intergovernmental and a polycentric European Union', Aleksandra Maatsch, *RECON Online Working Paper* 2010/18

'Civil society, public sphere and democracy in the EU', Ulrike Liebert in *Rethinking democracy and the European Union*, Eriksen/Fossum (eds), Routledge, 2011

Media contribute to EU democratisation

RECON findings suggest that media have become a driving force of the democratisation of the EU by increasingly framing EU issues in democratic terms.

Mass media give EU issues a prominent place on national public agendas and also promote communication across national borders. The media not only inform readers about EU issues, but crucially also provide the necessary interpretations that enable readers to evaluate issues, such as EU treaty reforms or elections, by established democratic practices or normative ideals. There is, however, considerable variation in the quantity and quality of news media coverage of EU issues across member states. This is due to the diverse national media structures and how these are connected to the national political systems and cultures.

Read more

'Mass media and contested meanings', Ulrike Liebert/Hans-Jörg Trenz, *RSCAS Working Papers 2008/28*
'Civil society, public sphere and democracy in the EU', Ulrike Liebert in *Rethinking democracy and the European Union*, Eriksen/Fossum (eds), Routledge, 2011



A European civil society

Social actors such as civic associations, NGOs, trade unions and stakeholders, increasingly identify themselves as representatives of a 'European civil society'.

Findings suggest that these actors question EU decisions that do not comply with the universal criteria of justice, democracy and the rule of law, and that they favour a form of democracy that reaches beyond the nation state and encompasses global concerns. They support the European Commission and the allocation of decision-making power at the supranational level in areas such as social policy, anti-discrimination and environment.

Read more

The new politics of European civil society, Ulrike Liebert/Hans-Jörg Trenz (eds), Routledge, 2010

Intellectual ideas and European stories

Public intellectuals tell very different stories about what defines Europe and what it means to be European.

A comparative study focuses on the visions and interpretations of European integration proposed since the early 1990s by so-called public intellectuals; political philosophers, scholars, editors or writers, whose opinions continue to frame public attitudes. Four groups of countries were analysed: founders (Germany, France, Italy), joiners (Ireland, UK, Greece, Spain), returners (Poland, Romania, Czech Republic) and outliers (Norway, Turkey). Although the European stories are very different across these countries, common traits are visible when it comes to ideas of democracy, and they cluster around three visions of a democratic EU.

The first view criticises the EU by insisting that the nation state is the cradle of the modern democracy and welfare state, and that this cannot be reproduced at the EU level. Many prominent thinkers from Norway, the UK, France and the Czech Republic offer variants of this vision. The second 'supranational school', equates more Europe with progress and sees the building of a European federal state as the only way to rescue the achievements of the national welfare state. Among the many intellectuals who advocate such a view is Jürgen Habermas. The third 'transnational school' considers Europe as a laboratory of some kind of cosmopolitanism. According to this view, the EU is understood as some form of voluntary legal integration of free states based on regular and organised deliberation. The European polity should give birth to a confederation of states and peoples.

Read more

European stories: Intellectual debates on Europe in national contexts, Justine Lacroix/Kalypso Nicolaïdis (eds), Oxford University Press, 2010