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The Communicative Construction of Europe

Cultures of Political Discourse, Public Sphere and the Euro Crisis

Andreas Hepp
Monika Elsler
Swantje Lingenberg
Anne Mollen
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Transformations of the State

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Series Preface

Over the past four centuries, the nation-state has emerged as the world's most effective means of organizing society, but its current status and future are decidedly uncertain. Some scholars predict the total demise of the nation-state as we know it, its powers eroded by a dynamic global economy on the one hand and, on the other, by the transfer of political decision-making to supranational bodies. Other analysts point out the remarkable resilience of the state's core institutions and assert that even in the age of global markets and politics, the state remains the ultimate guarantor of security, democracy, welfare, and the rule of law. Does either of these interpretations describe the future of the OECD world's modern, liberal nation-state? Will the state soon be as obsolete and irrelevant as an outdated computer? Should it be scrapped for some new invention, or can it be overhauled and rejuvenated? Or, is the state actually thriving and still fit to serve, and just in need of a few minor reforms?

In an attempt to address these questions, the analyses in the *Transformations of the State* series separate the complex tangle of tasks and functions that comprise the state into four manageable dimensions:

- the monopolization of the means of force;
- the rule of law, as prescribed and safeguarded by the constitution;
- the guarantee of democratic self-governance; and
- the provision of welfare and the assurance of social cohesion.

In the OECD world of the 1960s and 1970s, these four dimensions formed a synergetic constellation that emerged as the central, defining characteristic of the modern state. Books in the series report the results of both empirical and theoretical studies of the transformations experienced in each of these dimensions over the past few decades.

Transformations of the State? (Stephan Leibfried and Michael Zürn (eds), 2005), *Transforming the Golden-Age National State* (Achim Hurrelmann, Stephan Leibfried, Kerstin Martens and Peter Mayer (eds), Palgrave Macmillan 2007), *State Transformations in OECD Countries: Dimensions, Driving Forces and Trajectories* (Heinz Rothgang and Steffen Schneider (eds), Palgrave Macmillan 2015) and *The Oxford Handbook of Transformations of the State* (Stephan Leibfried, Evelyne Huber, Matthew Lange, Jonah Levy

and Frank Nullmeier (eds), 2015) define the basic concepts of state transformation employed in all of these studies and provide an overview of the issues addressed. Written by political scientists, lawyers, economists, and sociologists, the series tracks the development of the post-World War II OECD state. Here, at last, is an up-to-date series of reports on the state of the state and a crystal-ball glimpse into its future.

1
Introduction

The euro crisis, as it is widely known, has been an important focus for media coverage both within Europe and beyond. Since 2009 we have been confronted with an ongoing discourse dramatising the crisis surrounding the euro in Europe and the EU. In 2003 *The Sun* was already writing about the 'EU in crisis' (12 December 2003) – a discourse that intensified when the financial crisis erupted. On 13 December 2008, for example, the German *Bild* talked of a 'crisis domino-effect', reflecting ongoing problems with the eurozone currency and financial politics in general. In Poland, one could read on 13 December 2008 that the member states of the EU should 'jointly struggle with the crisis' (*Dziennik Zachodni*). And in France, *Ouest France* called upon 'the state to rescue the crisis' (25 March 2008), while *Le Monde* anticipated that 'in Southern Europe, the crisis further weakens confidence in the state' (7 May 2013). More recently, on 4 November 2014 the Polish *Gazeta Wyborcza* agreed with politicians that 'the euro crisis has not been solved', asking what could be done. The German *Spiegel Online* calculated on 6 January 2015 that the euro crisis had 'destroyed 3.8 million jobs'. All in all, this throws up more questions than answers. Is the EU really under so much pressure? Do we risk the derailment of European integration? And is a process of re-nationalising Europe taking place, with the state acting the part of a trouble shooter? How can we interpret the various forms of Euroscepticism?

Questions like these are also the subject of intellectual debate – and some of Europe's best-known public intellectuals became involved. For example, Anthony Giddens (2012) argued in the *Guardian* that 'stabilising the euro should be a bridge to longer-term change' of Europe and the EU. In his book *Turbulent and Mighty Continent* (2014) Giddens imagines a different kind of Europe. He argues that the EU is a 'community

of fate' (2014: 18), in which the dominance of (German) austerity policy is problematic. Instead of being a centralised top-down polity, the EU should become more devolved, with the initiative being taken at the bottom: 'Citizens must at this point become more deeply involved in the process of European reform – the bottom-up element must be strong and persuasive, not confined to occasional consultations or even elections.' (2014: 46) In parallel, and also as a reaction to the euro crisis and the related politics of the German government, in 2014 Ulrich Beck published *German Europe*. Here he criticises the increasingly dominant position of Germany in the EU and the related 'national view' upon Europe. For him, this perspective weakens the originally transnational and partly cosmopolitan orientation of the European project. Spurred on by his conviction, Beck became politically active in building an initiative for a 'bottom-up Europe' – together with other politicians and intellectuals, such as Zygmunt Bauman, Jacques Delors, and Richard Sennett (cf. Delors et al. 2012). Jürgen Habermas (2012) also published various interviews and articles about the present situation of the EU, many of which were translated into English and as a consequence became part of the wider European debate. His book *On the European Constitution* (Habermas 2011) adds two academic essays to some of these newspaper articles, outlining the possibility of a post- or supranational Europe in a worldwide society. Besides calling for a deepening of European integration, these intellectual statements coincide with two arguments: first, that Europe and the EU should be considered a *transnational* rather than a *national* project and, second, that the euro crisis should stimulate a rethinking of Europe from a *citizens' perspective*.

Our research questions

This is the debate in which we want to position our book. We want to temper the emotionalism surrounding this debate by grounding it in empirical analysis drawn from a 12-year comparative research project that was conducted from 2003 to 2014. The overall project, 'The Transnationalization of Public Spheres in the EU', was part of the Collaborative Research Centre 597 'Transformations of the State' at the University of Bremen. Being funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), we had the opportunity to investigate the media coverage of Europe from 1982 to 2013 in the quality, tabloid, and regional press, studying the practices of journalists producing this media coverage as well as the online activities of citizens and their media appropriation. This allowed us to present the European public realm as a communicative

space. About half way through the project, what is now called the euro crisis blew up. It became an important reference point for our research. We had four principle research questions: First, is there such a thing as a European public sphere and, if so, what is its character? Second, how can we explain the character of such a European public sphere through the production practices of journalists? Third, how do citizens relate to the European public sphere and react to its character? Finally, did the subsequently revealed patterns undergo change in the context of the euro crisis?

In pursuit of answers to these principal questions, we conducted our research in and across six countries: Austria (AT), Denmark (DK), France (F), Germany (GER), United Kingdom (UK) and Poland (PL). We wanted to include the economically strongest founding member states of the EU including two EU-positive members (France and Germany) and one EU-sceptical member (UK), two smaller member states of which one is pro-EU (Austria) and the other EU-sceptical (Denmark), and one of the eastern latecomers to the EU (Poland). Our argument for selecting this sample was to focus our research on a varied selection of the countries that build the economic core of Europe and are main actors in constructing Europe as a society and the EU as its political institution. From today's perspective one might argue that at least one Southern European state is missing, partly because of differences in media systems (Hallin/Mancini 2004: 89–142; Hepp 2015: 51–59) and partly because of the deeper impact of the euro crisis on Southern European states, resulting in a different kind of media coverage and public discourse (Breeze 2014; Kaitatzi-Whitlock 2014). Such a criticism would have been justified if the aim of our study had been to draw comparisons of the Europeanisation of national public spheres in Europe with reference to their differences of media systems or if our research had been occupied with comparing the different consequences of the euro crisis on national public spheres. However, our interest is another one, namely, to investigate the communicative construction of Europe during the course of the euro crisis. Having such a research objective, it is much more appropriate to focus on those countries which are the dominant actors within this process of construction. And the Southern European states are present in our data at least indirectly as a topic of media coverage and online discourse, and thus also reflected in citizens' media appropriation.

Methodologically, we worked according to what we call a 'transcultural perspective' (Hepp 2009; Hepp/Couldry 2009). By this we understand an approach that does not take the 'nation state' and its 'national culture' as the unquestioned unit of comparison, structuring all the

data from the very beginning in 'national containers' – something that has been widely criticised (cf. Beck 2000; Wimmer/Glick Schiller 2002). Instead, we analysed the data set in total, looking for transcultural patterns of similarity and difference across all the researched countries, including national differences where they are significant. At the level of newspaper coverage, our data in all six states is based on a quantitative content analysis of the media coverage during two artificial weeks of the years 1982, 1989, 1996, 2003, 2008, and 2013, including quality, tabloid, and regional newspapers. At the level of journalists, in the autumn of 2008 we conducted 216 interviews with EU and foreign news editors, chief editors, and foreign correspondents of 23 quality, tabloid, and regional papers. We also undertook participatory observations in two newsrooms per country and documented this in research diaries. This data was analysed according to the standards of grounded theory research (Glaser/Strauss 1967).

The same analytical approach was applied to our data gathered at the level of audiences: We carried out 182 in-depth interviews, qualitative network maps (interviewees' drawings of their communicative networks), and media diaries (interviewees' documentations of their media use over a period of one week). This fieldwork was undertaken from September to December 2011, a period when discourses surrounding the euro crisis initially peaked associated with a possible withdrawal of Greece from the Eurozone.

Finally, we completed a WebCrawler analysis of hyperlink networks for each of our research countries as well as on a transnational European level, and conducted an interaction analysis of 125 comment threads from 28 online comment forums, encompassing European as well as national forums. These comment forums were selected from blogs, mainstream news media, and the Facebook pages of political news media. The comments for the analysis were then sampled from these forums during a week of the so-called European Crisis Summit – the summit of the European Council – in June 2012.

All in all, these data offer a deep insight into what we have chosen to call the 'communicative construction of Europe'. The European public sphere is first of all a communicative space in which the joint transnational construction of Europe takes place. Of course, there are also further issues related to the social construction of Europe, for example, institution-building as it takes place in Brussels or policies like the Erasmus programme which motivate and facilitate European mobility. These are means of social construction familiar from the advent of the nation state (cf. Anderson 1983). However, the joint *communicative* construction is

as important as are these other means, because it is through communication that we build our *understanding* of what the 'European society' (Vobruba 2012) is or might be. As this European society is still emerging, and as its communicative construction is an ongoing process, all research faces the problem of determining what already can be identified as European, and what cannot. In the ensuing process, we must reconstruct this specific European character through careful empirical analysis (cf. Neverla/Schoon 2008: 20). Our analysis will show that the euro crisis cannot be seen as causing a collapse of this communicative construction. Nonetheless, it might be a 'tipping point' (Eder 2014: 221), or at least a point of increased 'politicisation' (Risse 2015b: 12). Maybe Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens are right: The euro crisis has unleashed a clear desire for a 'Europe from below' (Beck 2014: 7), in which citizens' uncertainty, anxiety, and indignation should become a prime point of reference for politics.

Some basic concepts

For our analysis we need to clarify some interrelated but nevertheless distinct concepts. First, there is the difference between Europe and the European Union (or EU). When we use the term 'Europe', it refers to Europe as a society that is still in emergence, and that has borders less clear than those of the EU. Here we are rather at the beginning than at the end of a long-term process of social construction (cf. Vobruba 2012). Europe as a society is more than institutionalised politics. It has very much to do with everyday social relations, with partly conflicting understandings of what Europe is (or might be), and with varying attitudes towards it. In a certain sense Europe as a society is the everyday dimension of this unfinished project. In contrast, we reserve the term 'European Union' or 'EU' for the evolving political institutions of a European society. In this sense, the term is more specific and focused, not covering all aspects of the (communicative) construction of Europe, but only those related to political institutions. As Peter Golding (2008: 25f.) points out, this terminological distinction 'between the EU and Europe as objects of perception and aspiration' is of great help for any empirical analysis.

For both Europe and the EU, the European public sphere is a fundamental communicative space. The next chapter discusses in detail our understanding of the public sphere. However, at this point we need to provide at least a rough outline. In our view, a public sphere is best understood as a 'thickened space of political communication' (Hepp et al. 2012: 25).

As communicative spaces, public spheres are not exclusive phenomena in the sense that involvement in one precludes involvement in another. Rather, various public spheres 'overlap and interconnect' (Risse 2015b: 9) – and they are partly articulated through each other. The latter is especially the case for the European public sphere, which is a thickened communicative space articulated mainly through certain patterns of transnationalisation within local, regional, issue-related, and especially national public spheres (Koopmans/Statham 2010b; Wessler et al. 2008). Based on our previous distinction between Europe (the European society) and the EU (its political institutions) we can say that the European public sphere is the space in which a dual communicative construction takes place: On the one hand, it is the space in which the European society is communicatively constructed in its political dimension; on the other hand, it is the space in which the communicative construction of the legitimacy of EU politics takes place.

By means of such a definition of the public sphere we indicate that not every form of public communication – understood as generally accessible mediated communication – should be considered as constitutive for a public sphere. In parallel to recent reflections by others (cf. Lunt/Livingstone 2013), we argue that public communication becomes constitutive for a public sphere when it is related to common issues and related decision-making – in the case of the European public sphere, the common issues of an emerging European society. Hence, from the perspective of audience and user studies, the issue of to what extent everyday people have a 'public connection' (Couldry et al. 2007b: 5) to the European public sphere becomes an important question – how far they are involved in common European issues, and how controversial those issues might be. Only through an involvement with these issues do the various 'media audiences' in different European states become a European 'citizen audience' (Lingenberg 2010b: 45), and thus part of the European public sphere.

If we follow the present public discussion, one of the most-used words in relation to Europe is 'crisis'. Again, some analytical precision is necessary here if we are to avoid misinterpretation. In general, discourse about crises seems to be a constitutive moment of Europe and the European public sphere (cf. Triandafyllidou et al. 2009). This is not a new phenomenon, but an ongoing European narrative. To recall other recent crises: At the beginning of the 1990s there was a crisis of European foreign and security policy during the so-called Balkan conflict. In general, the eastern enlargement of the EU was understood as a process of ongoing smaller crises. And there was a crisis when the constitution for

a pan-European institution was rejected in 2005 through referenda in France and the Netherlands. When in the following sections we talk in general about crises as one moment of the communicative construction of Europe, we point to the various crisis events which were and are a reference point of communicative construction within the EU. In a narrower sense, we use the term 'euro crisis'. By this, we understand the crisis we have witnessed since 2008 in the eurozone, an outcome of the financial crisis of 2007 caused by the breakdown of the US housing market and the consequent collapse of Lehmann Brothers. The euro crisis is not one single crisis but a multilevel phenomenon, including at least a banking crisis, a sovereign debt crisis, and a market crisis (Vobruba 2014b). That's why the euro crisis has no single meaning; it is – as our analyses will show – a signifier for various financial and economy-related phenomena, and open to different interpretations. As a signifier, the euro crisis is an important point of reference for the present communicative construction of Europe, and of the EU within the European public sphere.

An overview

Based on these fundamental analytical considerations, we develop the argument of this book in eight chapters. Chapter 2 outlines what we call a communicative constructivist perspective on Europe and the EU. Such a perspective does not mean that we want to reduce Europe and the EU to a semiotic phenomenon. European integration is a complex, multilevel social, cultural, economic, and political process that has to be theorised as such. Instead, the idea of communicative constructivism argues that the everyday meaning of such processes of integration becomes articulated in an ongoing process of communication, resulting in further processes of institutionalisation and social objectivation. To understand this communicative construction of Europe, we have to analyse both the European public sphere in which this process takes place and the different cultures of political discourse that are the fundament of this process of communicative construction, explaining its multi-segmentation. In the same way, the public discourse surrounding the euro crisis has to be understood as a phenomenon of communicative construction.

Chapter 3 presents the results of our newsroom studies of cultures of political discourse. Through our qualitative newsroom research, first, we demonstrate the stability of national cultures of political discourse as they are re-articulated in journalists' practices; second, we determine

that transnational cultures of political discourse are related to certain modes of addressing audiences and reflect at least in part a stratification-related segmentation of Europe; and third, we decipher the emergence of a European discourse culture, which manifests itself in the way transcultural European references and patterns of European coverage become a daily routine within the journalists' practices.

Chapter 4 links the newsroom studies with our content analysis of political news coverage in the press. Here we take a long-term perspective and look back at the way this coverage has been transformed from 1982 to 2013. We demonstrate that a European public sphere emerged across all the nation states studied: The European public sphere manifests itself as an increasingly transnational coverage of EU political activities and an increased discussion that takes place across national borders. European identity references are sparse, but visible. However, this European public sphere remains quite segmented. On the one hand, it is grounded in national cultures of political discourse in which countries differ in their news coverage, thereby creating national segmentation. On the other hand, we see transnational segmentation by types of newspapers. In general, our research demonstrates that the euro crisis did not result in a breakdown of the European public sphere. Considering the entire timeframe of our analysis, it became obvious that while the euro crisis year 2008 has gained special prominence for political institutions, trends towards Europeanisation that were already apparent had been consolidated, there being only a small degree of instability, if any.

In chapter 5, we present our research on the way in which citizens take part in the discussion of the euro crisis in online comment forums, taking one euro crisis summit of the European Council in 2012 as an example. Overall, we analysed 125 comment threads from 28 political online forums from mainstream news media, political blogs, and political news media's Facebook accounts, four from each country in our sample, as well as four from the transnational European level. By first analysing hyperlink structures, we isolated main online forums where citizens can discuss political matters. From forums isolated in this way, we then selected 125 articles and posts that dealt with European issues during a week of a so-called European crisis summit and conducted an interaction analysis of citizens' online comments in reaction to these articles and posts. In this way we could identify different forms of interaction in citizens' online activities. Overall, our research demonstrates that the euro crisis creates a context for citizens' online engagement in a process of common European communicative construction. Discussion of the euro crisis can, for example, trigger conflict in citizens'

interaction, but it can just as well evolve into expressions of mutual solidarity. Transnational forums provide a central context for the expression of conflict and solidarity in terms of national belonging. But at the same time, we see lines of conflict in the user bases of national forums.

Chapter 6 presents the qualitative audience research undertaken in late 2011. This research is based on 182 in-depth interviews on media appropriation, the EU, and its legitimation, on media diaries kept by the interviewees, and on a qualitative analysis of the interviewees' communicative networks. We can demonstrate that having a public connection to Europe is a common ground: Through their media use, but also everyday interaction, almost all interviewed persons have access to current events in Europe, especially in relation to the euro crisis. Across all countries, this chapter shows different forms of European public connections characteristic for particular types of people. These different forms of public connections cannot simply be understood as national patterns; they intersect with other factors (age, class, education, mobility, biography, etc.) and provide a more complex picture that goes beyond a simple causal model. This can be shown across the patterns, and also in how the euro crisis activates the public connection of European citizens.

Chapter 7, the final empirical chapter, focuses on one particular aspect of our qualitative audience research: How do European citizens construct the euro crisis differently? We undertake a dual-level analysis: First, we identify the constructions of the euro crisis and how citizens make sense of 'what's going on in Europe'. This process of making sense is marked by perplexity, anxiety, and speculation. These patterns relate to concerns about how it all began and what is now going on, worrying about possible effects on both personal lives and the future of Europe and, finally, speculating about the complex nature of the euro crisis. Then we analyse different solutions that citizens propose for solving the euro crisis. These solutions point to citizens' constructions of what a future EU, both legitimate and capable of overcoming the euro crisis, might look like. Here we can distinguish four anticipated solutions, or 'legitimation constructions': Firstly, an EU made up of national cultures, involving national solutions for the euro crisis that treat the different European nation states as the main agents for overcoming the euro crisis. Accordingly, each national government should first of all solve its own financial problems. Secondly, an EU of economic cooperation, highlighting the need for intensified economic cooperation between the EU member states in order to prevent and overcome economic crises such as the euro crisis. Thirdly, an EU of welfare and solidarity, pointing to European solutions for the euro crisis. Here the

euro crisis itself is understood mainly as a European problem, and can therefore only be resolved through European action and solidarity. And fourthly, the United States of Europe, promoting the idea that it is only by fostering a European integration process corresponding to the US model that the EU can become a real Union of Europeans and solve its current and future economic problems. In sum, this chapter shows what a legitimate EU might look like from a citizens' perspective. The euro crisis represents an activating moment in citizens' communicative constructions, so that citizens begin questioning and renegotiating the legitimacy of the EU.

The conclusion reintegrates our various research results in an overarching understanding of the communicative construction of Europe. While this process is rooted in different cultures of political discourse as they take shape in journalists' practices, communicative construction as such takes place as public political communication orientated to common issues, political decision-making, and its legitimation – in short, within the multi-segmented European public sphere and the public connection that citizens have. As our research shows, the euro crisis continues to challenge this process of communicative construction. But it does not signify its end; rather, the euro crisis has a catalysing influence.

In addition, this book has an appendix with further information on our methodology. While each chapter includes sufficient guidance for a critical reading of our empirical analysis, we provide further details about our newsroom research, content analysis, online interaction analysis, and audience studies in this appendix. We wish our work to be as transparent as possible, without interrupting the argumentative flow of the chapters.

Acknowledgement

This book is the outcome of joint research and as a consequence we share intellectual responsibility jointly. However, each chapter had different lead authors who wrote first drafts which were then discussed and revised several times. The lead author of the introduction, chapter 2, and the conclusion was Andreas Hepp, and the lead author of chapter 3 was Swantje Lingenberg, supported by Johanna Möller. Chapter 4 was written under the lead of Anke Offerhaus. Anne Mollen was the main author of chapter 5. The principal responsibility for chapter 6 was with Johanna Möller, Swantje Lingenberg, and Monika Elsler and for chapter 7 with Swantje Lingenberg, Monika Elsler, and Johanna Möller.

However, while certain persons were responsible as lead authors, the whole book is based on the common research of our team, and each chapter is rooted in this common research. Thus, the overall argument of the book is a shared intellectual outcome of our team.

It would have not been possible to realise such a project without support and help from several sources. First of all, we would like to thank the DFG for having funded our project over 12 years until its third and final phase, and our committed reviewers who critically supported the project over such a long time. We are especially grateful to Stephan Leibfried and his tireless commitment to the Collaborative Research Centre, as well as to Dieter Wolf for his constant support, help, and cooperation. Without Bernhard Peters' essential work (Forst 2015; Peters 2008) in having initiated this research and that of Hartmut Wessler in continuing and further conceptualising Bernhard Peters's, the project would have never been realised. Furthermore, we profited from a mutual and ongoing exchange with our sister project, 'Legitimating States, International Regimes, and Economic Orders', especially in conversation with Frank Nullmeier, Dominika Biegon, Jennifer Gronau, Sebastian Haunss, Falk Lenke, Tanja Pritzlaff, Henning Schmidtke, and Steffen Schneider.

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2

Approaching the Communicative Construction of Europe: Cultures of Political Discourse, European Public Sphere and the Euro Crisis

In this chapter, we outline a communicative constructivist perspective on the European public sphere, Europe and the EU. As already emphasised in the introduction, this perspective does not mean that we reduce Europe and the EU to a semiotic phenomenon. Other processes of social construction are also taking place and are of great importance. Beyond any reductionism, the idea of communicative constructivism proposes that the everyday meaning of a European society is articulated in ongoing processes of communication. These communication processes are increasingly mediatised: mediated by and related to the institutions and technologies of the media, and also moulded by them. Furthermore, communication processes such as these are rooted in different cultures of political discourse: the culture producing a certain kind of political discourse, both national and transnational. The latter involves the various transnational cultural patterns of media communication which mark the transnational stratification of an emerging European society. We also suggest that something like a European culture of political discourse emerges. Considered in a long-term perspective, the euro crisis seems to be not so much a collapse of the communicative construction of Europe, but a potential 'tipping point' (Eder 2014: 221) in the practice of communicative construction. It has been observed that the euro crisis has brought about a 'politicisation' (Risse 2015b: 3) of the European public sphere: a general shift to a public sphere in which more citizens find their voice.

To substantiate this overall approach – which is the theoretical frame of our subsequent analysis – we argue as follows. First we outline a concept of the European public sphere which goes beyond its understanding as a space of functional legitimation. In contrast, we regard the European public sphere as 'a complex, thickened space of

communicative construction'. In studying this social space we have to consider how people – the citizens of an emerging European society – become involved in this European public sphere and hence in the process of constructing Europe communicatively. However, the European public sphere remains 'multi-segmented' in various ways. Following on, we secondly discuss how far the European public sphere is rooted in different cultures of political discourse. This idea offers the chance of explaining the multi-segmented character of the European public sphere. Finally, we discuss to what extent the euro crisis as a 'mediatised conflict' might mark a kind of tipping point in the process of communicatively constructing Europe and the EU – a tipping point which possibly does not result in the breakdown of this process, but in its change of character. Here increasing political activity might alter the manner in which the legitimation of Europe and the EU is constructed.

2.1 Theorising the European public sphere: from functional legitimation to communicative construction

Today the discussion surrounding media, communication and Europe is greatly influenced by Jürgen Habermas' idea of the public sphere as *Öffentlichkeit*, an understanding which has a normative dimension. Habermas was originally interested in the transformation of the 'bourgeois public sphere' (Habermas 1989; cf. for a critical discussion Calhoun 1992; Fraser 1993), but later refined the concept of the public sphere into one of a communicative space that 'can best be described as a network of communicating information and points of view' (Habermas 1996: 360). Within this public sphere the 'streams of communication are, in the process, filtered and synthesised in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified *public* opinions' (1996: 360, italics as in the original). The public sphere is 'reproduced through communicative action' and it is 'tailored to the general comprehensibility of everyday communicative practice' (1996: 360). This concept of the public sphere has an obviously normative dimension; it is not just any space of communication. It is a space of political communication which is plural, contested and sustained by various institutions (Lunt/Livingstone 2013: 92). At the same time, this space of communication remains oriented towards certain ethics of deliberative communication and, in consequence, towards the production of a legitimate and therefore legitimating public opinion (Fraser 2007).

This understanding of the public sphere builds on democratic theory (Habermas 1996: 356; Peters 2008: 33–67; Risse 2010: 107–120): Public spheres are integral parts of late-modern liberal democracies. In these democracies there are legal and political institutions that ensure the deliberative quality of public political discourse (Kantner 2004: 46). These institutionally secured procedures of deliberation serve to ensure 'at least two normative requirements for a public sphere in liberal democracies' (Risse 2010: 115): first, openness to participation; and second, the possibility of demanding that public authorities legitimise their decisions.

This sense of the public sphere represents how the general understanding governing discussion about the European public sphere was (and is) positioned. Work on this started in the 1990s, with the fundamental question: Would the constitution of the EU as a supranational political institution be accompanied by the emergence of a European public sphere that would fulfil democratic functions at a European level (Meyer 1999)? To a certain degree, this work was stimulated by various media policies on the part of the EU which aimed at the 'production' of this public sphere in order to avoid any possible 'democracy deficit' in the EU (Brüggemann 2008; Lodge/Sarikakis 2013; Sarikakis 2007). In particular, there were three sceptical arguments against the existence of a European public sphere that might perform this function (Gerhards 1993, 2000). First, due to the absence of European media, a European public sphere would have no institutional foundation. Second, the lack of a common European language would make common understanding and reasoning impossible. And third, even if there were such an understanding, the dominance of national perspectives on Europe and the EU would work against any shared deliberation.

Criticism of this kind involves a normatively framed 'national ideal' of the public sphere which is then more or less applied directly to Europe and the EU (cf. Gerhards 2000: 288–292; Schlesinger/Deirdre 2002). This ideal falls short, however, when we consider multilingual nation states in Europe. Switzerland, for example, has no common native language (Kantner 2015: 86). This ideal applies even less at the European level (Mihelj 2007). Research has demonstrated that a European public sphere – understood as a thickened transnational space of political communication (Hepp et al. 2012: 22) – emerges through the transnationalisation of national public spheres that were formerly more strictly separated. Therefore, we cannot describe the European public sphere by employing criteria relating to a national ideal. Instead, we have to find criteria by which it becomes possible to describe the European public

sphere through processes of transnationalisation. At this point, it is possible to distinguish analytically at least four dimensions of European transnationalisation (cf. Wessler et al. 2008: 11). While these criteria were originally developed with mass media – and especially newspapers – in mind, they can also be applied to other kinds of mediated communication, as, for example, in public internet forums (Bennett et al. 2015: 115). The four dimensions are:

1. *Europeanisation by vertical transnational connectivity:* The vertical dimension of transnationalisation means a Europeanisation of national public spheres through intensified 'communicative linkages between the national and the European level' (Koopmans/Erbe 2004: 101; Koopmans/Statham 2010a: 38). Transnationalisation takes place through a shared intensified 'monitoring of governance' (Wessler et al. 2008: 11) from Brussels. As political decision-making at the level of the EU gains in relevance in the various nation states, this results in intensified coverage and discussion about European politics across the nation states. This takes place in mass media coverage, for example, newspapers. But today there are other kinds of media – increasingly, online media and the various ways in which people are involved in online communication.
2. *Europeanisation by horizontal transnational connectivity:* Together with the vertical axis, horizontal transnationalisation means intensified 'communicative linkages between different member states' (Koopmans/Erbe 2004: 101; Koopmans/Statham 2010a: 38). Across the different national public spheres there is an increasing amount of mutual observation and mutual discursive exchange. In addition, we might also notice increasing references between different national actors (other members of the EU), resulting in intensified mutual recognition as part of the EU – the horizontal dimension of Europeanisation. Again, this is currently not just a matter of media coverage – it is also a matter of communicative connectivity of the internet, as, for example, in online forums.
3. *Europeanisation by transnationally converging discourse:* A third dimension of transnationalisation is 'discourse convergence' (Wessler et al. 2008: 11, 15f.). This means that there is not only vertical and horizontal connectivity of the different national public spheres; in addition, we notice a certain rapprochement in the discourse that constitutes these public spheres. This happens, for example, through shared 'frames' of media coverage (Kantner 2015: 97–105); 'not only [. . .] the same themes are discussed at the same time transnationally

but [. . .] the same frames of reference are available and in use in the various public spheres in Europe' (Risse 2010: 119; cf. also critical Downey/Koenig 2006). But it also occurs, for example, through converging forms of interaction, converging constructions of Europe in online forums, or even converging constructions of Europe, the EU and its legitimacy in everyday talk. Therefore, transnationally converging discourse implies that, hand-in-hand with increasing horizontal and vertical connections, the character of this discourse converges upon Europe and the EU.

4. *Europeanisation by transnational collective belonging:* A fourth dimension of transnationalisation is the expression of a sense of European collective belonging. In media coverage and online discourse, this means, for example, shared references to 'us as Europeans' or other expressions of a shared European identity. With regard to audiences and media users, this means that they understand themselves to be members of Europe, define the consequences of EU politics as meaningful for them, and through that become 'citizen audiences' (Lingenberg 2010b: 45). At its best, this results in what Thomas Risse calls the emerging 'European community of communication': 'when "foreigners" are no longer treated as such, but actively participate in debates about issues of common concern' (Risse 2010: 157).

Across these four dimensions, research demonstrates that there is a Europe-wide process of transnationalising public spheres, i.e. Europeanisation. This process has brought about a multilingual and transmedial European public sphere: a thickened space of political communication layered across other public spheres – national, regional, local or thematic – which is at the same time centred on European politics and European political decision-making. This is demonstrated by studies which can only be briefly reviewed. They cover such different areas as media coverage (for example Adam 2007; AIM 2006; Gripsrud 2007; Kantner 2015; Koopmans et al. 2010; Pfetsch/Heft 2015; Wessler et al. 2008), media events (for example Bolin 2006; Eder 2000; Hahn et al. 2008), citizens' communication through the digital platforms (for example Bennett et al. 2015; Rasmussen 2013; Trenz 2009; Wodak/Wright 2006), the manner in which journalists are involved in the transnationalisation of the public sphere (for example Heikkilä/Kunelius 2006; Offerhaus 2011; Raeymaeckers et al. 2007; Sarrica et al. 2010; Statham 2010a), as well as the related audiences (for example Lingenberg 2010b; Scharkow/Vogelgesang 2010).

In our own research, we call the resulting public sphere a 'multi-segmented European public sphere' (cf. Hepp et al. 2012). 'Multi-segmented' for the