The Europeanisation of Political Communication: Framing the Online Communication of French Political Parties

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The aim of this article is to examine the process of online Europeanisation of political communication, both theoretically and through empirical analysis. On one hand, the text emphasises the relationship between the public sphere and the legitimacy of the European Union and examines different concepts of the public sphere on a European level. On the other hand, it touches on the significance of the World Wide Web, a relatively new medium, and its propagation to a pan-European public arena. Furthermore, the article stresses the role of political actors, especially political parties, in communication about Europe. It discusses the extent to which national political parties´ arguments and political claims on their official websites contain references to shared values or common EU identity. To illustrate the theoretical framework, seven French political parties have been chosen and the online contents of their official websites will be explored.

Introduction

This article critically investigates the notion of the Europeanisation of political communication and the possible creation and development of a European public sphere which is related to it. The debate loosely

follows the article of Čmakalová and Rolenc that examines the legitimacy deficit of the European Union (EU) and identifies problems of European integration related to the EU's legitimacy which are still to be overcome, for instance on the creation of common public sphere, democratic deficit, citizenship and identification.[1]

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The question of whether to have or to not have a European arena that establishes and broadens communication channels between the European level and the general public is usually answered in the negative, emphasising linguistic and cultural boundaries and the existence of multiple (European, national and subnational) identities. Alternativley, some scholars, notably Habermas, suggests that further advances in the integration process are increasingly dependent on acceptance and legitimacy among the citizenry.[2] They perceive the existence of the European public sphere as 'a precondition for taking up any democratisation project.'[3] Contact between institutions and other administrative bodies and the broad public is also essential in order to avoid the problematic ratifications of EU treaties that occurred in the last decades. Yet, what should the European public sphere look like? Could we apply the concept of a national public sphere to the European one? In response to such an intricate question, the article, in its first part, revises the different concepts of the public sphere on the European level and attempts to indicate the most suitable one—the Europeanisation of the national public spheres—which may have a positive impact on further development of European integration.

The research presented in the second part of the article concentrates on discussing the potential contribution of political actors and their online communication about Europe to the process of gradual Europeanisation of the public spheres. With regards to the negative outcome of the referendum in France in 2005, the theoretical framework is then tested on a sample of French political parties and their communication on official websites relating to three widely-discussed European topics: the Lisbon Treaty, EU enlargement and the Eurozone. The analysis proceeds on three levels: number of references, evaluation of European topics and identification with them through three patterns of interpretation: shared interests, common identity and values. The context gives rise to a few questions: Are the interests of those political parties national or European, and which are preponderant? Can references to shared or universal values and to European (common) identity be found when those three issues are addressed? In short, the results give us an idea of the extent to which political parties in a particular

member state contribute to communication about Europe, and thus indirectly enhance the legitimacy of the European Union.

Is There a European Public Sphere?

Against the background of the legitimacy deficit of the EU, some scholars (van Os, Habermas, van de Steeg et al.)[4] recognise that the process of European integration must be accompanied by the Europeanisation of political communication in order to overcome the lack of popular involvement in the EU by European citizens.[5] The interest in the analysis of legitimacy is due to several factors: on an empirical level it has been caused by the ever decreasing citizen support for EU membership, reflected in, for example, the declining participation in elections to the European Parliament or several failed referenda (e.g. the failure of the Constitutional Treat in 2005 or the original rejection of the Lisbon Treaty in 2008).[6] On a theoretical level, discussion on the legitimacy of the EU is divided into many specific questions; mainly the question of legitimacy in the sense of the democratic character of decision making in the EU, which is dependent on the will of the citizens of the EU (input legitimacy), but also the aspect of sufficient public support for activities of the EU (output legitimacy).[7] Hence, some of the debates concerning the crisis of EU legitimacy revolve around the (non)existence of the European public sphere.

"Public sphere" was, in the past, perceived as 'an arena where citizens come together, exchange opinions regarding public affairs, discuss, deliberate, and eventually form public opinion.'[8] The agora, originally meaning a specific meeting place in Ancient Greek, has in the recent past changed from a location to a communication network within a particular community (e. g. national state) where different actors such as the public, civil society, public officials, the media and private actors come together not only to share information, but especially to debate different topics. Today, the public sphere goes beyond space and includes all channels of communications through which its actors can send and receive information and which facilitate an open discussion of all issues of general concern: 'the public sphere thus presupposes freedoms of speech and assembly, a free press and the right to freely participate in political debate and decision-making.'[9] Habermas, who provided a comprehensive analysis of the nature of the public sphere, highlights the relevance of the public sphere for promoting democracy and political accountability.[10]

When discussing the term, we should distinguish between the various forms which a public sphere can take. Habermas defines it as 'a network that gives all citizens an opportunity to take part in encompassing process of focused political communication.'[11] Some authors go beyond this interpretation and define it as 'a forum where public opinion is shaped.'[12] Others even insist on the creation of a '"we" group of insiders whose identity is defined in terms of values or characteristics deemed to be common, as a key prerequisite for the existence of the community of communication.'[13] The study will, however, adopt and further develop a definition of van de Steeg that 'a common public sphere is not merely a media space that just contains a series of news items, but it is a democratic space in which these news items are being debated. A public sphere is a forum of joint discussion in which various speakers and actors relate to each other and refer to each other.'[14]

In debates about the public sphere on the European level, scholars do not agree on either its nature or the elements that such sphere should consist of. This is mainly caused by the crucial divergence in opinion regarding its existence within the EU. Van de Steeg identifies authors such as Grimm (1995), Kielmansegg (1996) and Schlesinger (1995) who have maintained that a European public sphere does not exist because of the relation of such a sphere to key concepts including language, media system and state frontiers: 'since each of these has different boundaries, which moreover, do not coincide with those of the EU, it has been suggested that there cannot be a community of communication.'[15] The concept clearly considers the public sphere, media system, communication and language interchangeably and connects their character with specific national collective identities and national cultures, limited by state borders. Cerruti and Lucarelli's commentary leads to the same conclusion: 'they (communication structures) are still overwhelmingly national, with the EU being a preoccupation or a scapegoat for politicians and journalists (whose political culture remains widely national).'[16]

Contrarily, authors like Habermas or Kanter and Eder—as van de Steeg mentions notes—make several attempts to provide an operational definition of the European public sphere. Those authors perceive the existence of the European public sphere as a precondition for a democratisation process[17] or as a 'remedy for the legitimacy deficit.'[18] According to Habermas, 'the function of the communicational infrastructure of democratic public sphere is to turn relevant societal problems into topics of concern, and allow the general public to relate,

at stand on news and opinions.'[19]

The current shape of the public sphere on the European level, however, does not resemble a single monolithic European arena that can possibly have the familiar design of a nation state. Rather than searching for a Europe-wide public sphere, this article emphasises the process of Europeanisation of national public spheres. In general, Europeanisation is perceived as 'processes of (1) construction, (2) diffusion and (3) institutionalisation of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, ways of doing things and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the making of EU decisions and then incorporated in the logic of domestic discourses, identities, political structures and public policies.'[20] Banchoff and Smith explain the process of Europeanisation of national public spheres by saying that representation within the EU does not require the existence of a single European "people" bound by shared cultural and historical roots. They identify informal policy networks consisting of 'policy-making sites which involve the mediation of the interest of interdependent actors, including European and national officials, technocrats, agency officials, representatives of non-governmental organisations and other interest groups, journalists, media and academics.'[21] The same idea is shared by van de Steeg. Together with her colleagues, she emphasises that despite that there is no common language, no common media and no European nation-state, 'we can still discuss the same topic at the same time using similar criteria of relevance and meaning.'[22] They explain their position on the example of the Haider debate and its analysis of media representation in five EU member states and in the US.[23] Their research leads to the conclusion that 'a European public sphere does not emerge as a by-product of European institution-building and European integration. Rather, the more a particular issue is perceived as a common European one by the participation in a public discourse, the more a transnational European public sphere is actively constructed through social practice.'[24]

The study does not attempt to analyse the entire process of Europeanisation of national public spheres. Due to the complexity of such a process, this article focuses only on a particular element—the Europeanisation of political communication of political parties. National political parties have also begun to address European issues, while following the imperatives of the national political game. Banchoff and Smith emphasise that 'the integration process has induced a nascent reorientation of political party activity towards the European level.'[25]

Accordingly, the 'increasing involvement of national parties in EU governance is rendering Europe less foreign for national politicians, and may counteract their tendency to blame the EU for unpopular or failing policies and thus improve the positive image of the EU.'[26]

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Methodology and Data

For data collection, this research is based on an analysis of political claims, which takes individual instances of claim-making by political parties made on their official websites as the unit of the analysis.[27] Since such a political claim, defined by Berclaz and Giugni, is 'a strategic intervention, either verbal or non-verbal,[28] in the public space (e.g. World Wide Web) made by a given actor on behalf of a group or collectivity and which bears on the interests or rights of other groups or collectivities.'[29] Hence, public claim-making acts are defined as intentional public speech acts which articulate political demands, calls to action, proposals, and criticism, which actually or potentially affect the interests or integrity of claimants or other collective actors in an issue field.[30] Claims can take three main forms: 1. political decisions (law, governmental guideline, implementation measure etc), 2. verbal statements (public speech, press conference, parliamentary intervention etc) or 3. protest actions (demonstration, occupation, violent action etc).[31] The research in this case will mainly focus on verbal statements.

In addition, claims are, by definition, politically and strategically oriented; they relate to collective problems and solutions to them, and not to purely individual strategies of coping with problems.[32] This means that purely factual information is excluded. Moreover, an article can report several claims. The whole article must therefore be read so as to code all the claims reported.[33]

In the text, three different and widespread topics related to European integration have been selected for further analysis of the official websites: the issue of the Lisbon Treaty, enlargement of the EU and the Eurozone. The main goal of the study is to investigate the political claims that are communicated. The starting point will be the analysis of 1. the visibility of the political claims on the official websites and 2. the parties' evaluation (negative/positive) of European integration. The text will primarily observe how and why they are communicated, and thus deal with the interpretative context. Yet, 3. the frame in which the chosen European topics are discussed on the websites will be the most salient issue. In order to analyse the character of the communi-

cation, the patterns of interpretation are pre-defined: whether and to what extent interests, common EU identity (demos) and shared values (shared among member states) are present in the political claims of French political parties.

This work firstly examines their political claims through the interpretative pattern of 1. European identity ("we" group) searching for evidence of a sense of belonging to the same community. Secondly, the claims are evaluated in relation to 2. shared values. They are understood as universal values and refer to acknowledged moral principles. Statements concerning an issue may constitute an explicit relation with general normative principles that are considered valid for the institutional context of the EU. Finally, they are evaluated through the prism of 3. common interests; they are analysed in relation to the particular issue, rational arguments and motivations that are put forward.

Framing Online Communication

This article develops a few ideas from the works of van Os (2005, 2008), especially those related to the role of the World Wide Web in communication about Europe. According to van Os, the internet is often said to have potential to provide a public forum where everyone is able to obtain and maintain a virtual presence.[34] It serves as a space where information can be shared, issues discussed and where the interested can engage in political action. These elements are often considered important components of the political process and accordingly of the public sphere. This article argues that, as with other mass media, it is possible to investigate the notion of Europeanisation of communication about Europe on the websites of political actors. Moreover, I believe that political actors express particular perspectives when discussing European issues and events on their web pages, and that in doing so, these online documents provide indicators for the Europe envisioned.

Indeed, '(d)uring recent years, more and more websites, produced by a variety of political actors have become available to citizens of European countries for political communication about European issues.'[35] The importance of online communication as a means of communication has increased. Habermas commented that 'the use of the internet has both broadened and fragmented the contexts of communication.'[36] Foot and Schneider stress the importance of independent websites developed by national and state advocacy groups, civic organisations and mainstream alternative press.[37] Also, Norris[38] highlights the existence

of websites run by minor and fringe parties, and considers these an asset for democracy, enabling citizens to learn more about the range of electorate choices than was previously possible.[39]

European issues are generally less discussed than national issues in the mass-media. It is via their websites that political actors can offer a particular perspective on European issues, suggesting whether and why issues concerning Europe are socially and politically relevant. Furthermore, political actors themselves determine the nature of communication about Europe and the manner in which European issues are addressed. This text will evaluate information that has appeared on official websites, such as articles, news, and programmes of political parties, in the period between October 2010 and January 2011.

The study investigates only those online texts produced by a political party that expressed its positions and arguments on European issues, institutions and policies such as news, articles produced by the party, party programmes, press releases or other more informal deliberations on particular events or issues related to European integration. Articles prepared by the media and press agents that are in some cases included on the websites are not relevant for the analysis, and neither are weblogs maintained by party members.

Objects of Investigation

As Poguntke indicates, the process of integration of the EU influences national political parties to a certain extent.[40] He shows two basic aspects: the first represents the inclusion of European affairs in current issues of political parties. In the 1970s, parties began to discuss European questions in the context of the elections to the European parliament. They were, however, more engaged during the period of the two referendums, the first one being linked to the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 and the second one to the Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe in May 2005.[41]

Seven political parties were selected for the purpose of the empirical study. Together they represent a sample that shapes the national political spectrum in France. In the text I distinguish between six families: three traditional party families which have representatives in all western European countries: 1. social democrats, 2. liberals and 3. conservatives; and more recent competitors: 4. the greens, 5. the radical right, and finally 6. the radical left.[42] The analysis consists of representatives of each family.

The selected French political parties are namely: *Le Front national* (FN), the far-right, nationalist political party, founded in 1972 by Jean-Marie Le Pen; *Le Mouvement pour la France* (MPF), a conservative and Eurosceptic political party, founded in 1994 and led by Philippe de Villiers; *Le Mouvement populaire* (UMP), a political party that represents centre-right wing of the French political spectrum; *Le Mouvement démocratique* (MoDem), a centrist, social liberal and pro-European French political party founded by centrist politician François Bayrou to succeed his Union for French Democracy (UDF) in 2007; *Le Parti socialiste* (PS), the largest centre-left political party in France; *Les Verts*, a Green political party to the centre-left of the political spectrum founded in 1984; and finally *Le Nouveau parti anticapitaliste* (NPA), a party closely associated with Olivier Besancenot.

Apart from their political orientation, the second criterion by which the political parties were chosen for analysis was their results in the European elections in 2009. All seven political parties were placed among the first ten in the European elections. All of them except for the NPA also received at least one seat in the European Parliament.

Analysis and Results: French Political Parties, An Empirical Study

As previously described, in order to determine the degree of Europeanisation of online political communication, the study looks at three different topics that are firmly linked to frequently discussed European issues and analysed: first, the language used, second references to actors and information provided on the site, and third actors that become visible as claimants on the site. Using the method that examines the public dimension of politics on parties' websites, in contrast to media contents, this method filters out journalists' own claims and takes news as a source for reported claims by collective actors, in this case political parties.

The exploratory study aims to resolve following questions: To what extent do the political parties in France frame Europe in the context of the chosen European topics? Are their interests strictly national or can we find a European dimension? Is there any evidence of a common or, in this case, European identity and of universal values when European issues are addressed? Or does the identity remain strictly national or regional? Answers to such questions may help the author unravel the current development of Europeanisation of national public spheres.

Visibility of Online Communication

The first level essentially shows the visibility of three topics, i.e. the Lisbon Treaty, EU enlargement and the Eurozone, on the official websites of the seven selected political parties. The results of the coverage are illustrated in Table 1 (Analyzed websites).

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Political party	Official websites	Lisbon Treaty (number of references)	EU enlarge-ment	Euro-zone, EU Monetary policy
UMP	lemouvementpopulaire.fr	11	2	3
PS	parti-socialiste.fr	151	202	200
MoDem	mouvementdemocrate.fr	166	82	25
Les Verts	lesverts.fr	84	160	47
FN	frontnational.com	79	65	122
NPA	npa2009.org	77	31	70
MPF	pourlafrance.fr	136	8	19

Table 1: Analyzed websites

The data in Table 1 comes from the period 2000 - 2010. All three topics are mostly written about by members of the parties, especially by their leaders or spokespersons. In the case of the Lisbon Treaty and the Eurozone, the members of the European Parliament are also often active (especially the members of the FN). The parties renew the content of their websites weekly and sometimes daily if there are special occasions or politically urgent issues.

The party that covers the selected European issues less is the UMP, even though the party currently has a majority in the government. In this case, visibility is low, especially with regards to the topics of EU enlargement and the Eurozone. These two topics are not mentioned much on the website of the MPF either. On the contrary, the number of references is substantially high for the PS and is also important for the MoDem (regarding the Lisbon treaty), Les Verts (regarding EU enlargement), and the FN (the Eurozone), where it reaches over a hundred references.

As a partial conclusion, we can assume that there is no clear relationship between the number of references and the parties whose position is closer to the political centre and those that are further, or between the parties on the left or the right wing of the political spectrum.

Evaluation of the EU

The second level of the analysis deals with political parties and their evaluation of the European integration. In general as Statham and Koopmans argue,

> for debates over European partisanship is common observation of an inverted U pattern of support for Europe; parties' stances cross-cut left/right divisions, so that the centre parties are largely pro European, with opposition to Europe confined to the marginal poles of extreme left and right [...] Theories are advanced for how European issues constitute an ideological basis for party contention that cross-cuts the traditional left/right cleavage. This transformation of the ideological space leads to new opportunities for mobilization and alignments among parties. European contestations are absorbed into their left/right contestation, whereas others are not. This is partly because EU competences relative to nation-states do not penetrate all policy fields equally.[43]

Diverse political, economic or cultural aspects may influence the arguments of political parties. The contestation over European issues may thus have different forms. Some political parties fight over the issues of regulated capitalism and neo-liberalism, some share the green-alternative-libertarian ideas, while others share the traditional-authoritarian-nationalist visions. In response to globalisation, the strong cleavage may also appear between the defenders of national sovereignty and advocates of supra-national authority.

In the case of French political parties, the evaluation mostly corresponds with the general cleavages. Starting with the FN, all of its evaluative claim-making is against Europe. The FN´s claims build a coherent and consistently mobilised critique that characterises the party as committed Eurosceptics.[44] According to the FN, 'the EU is bad for France.'[45] The party defines itself as France's defender against the loss of sovereign national autonomy imposed by the EU. It opposes EU enlargement, calling for treaty renegotiations. Likewise, the Euro is criticised for being against national, economic, social, and politi-

cal independence: the 'Euro is by all means a mistake,'[46] depicted as potentially weak, leading to a doomsday scenario of inflation, unemployment, social crisis and national identity problems. In other words, in response to globalisation the FN defends national sovereignty and fights against the consequences of globalisation in politics, economics and culture, emphasising the national identity. The party compares the nature of the EU to 'an infernal machine.'[47] The negative evaluation is also visible in the way the FN visualises the EU officers and high representatives as 'the European ruling class, blinded by the ideology of the Euro, who refuses to watch this reality, and who is desperate to save the single currency, the sacred cow of the system.'[48]

The MPF seems less aggressive, but still remains very critical of European integration. Blaming the EU that 'Lisbon kills France!'[49] its members also defend national autonomy. They make several references to de Gaulle, Jeanne d´ Arc and Churchill who, according to them, were excellent examples of supporters of national identity.[50] With the same attitude, they condemn the existence of the Euro and suggest that the 'Euro penalises the creation of jobs'[51] and is only another factor aggravating the economic crisis. Therefore, they consider the EU to be unable to protect French citizens, their jobs or identity.

The situation is different in the case of moderate parties situated in the centre or right/left-centre of the political spectrum (Les Verts, UMP, PS and MoDem). Those parties generally have positive attitudes towards European integration. The most pro-European parties are the MoDem and Les Verts. For the MoDem, 'the European integration is not a problem, but a solution.'[52] On the other hand, les Verts sometimes displays more radical attitudes advocating social, political and federal Europe to replace the current form of the EU. The party rejects nation-states' dominance over the EU through a commitment to federalism. Its members accuse the current elite of the EU for not proceeding faster with the integration process.[53]

The left/right-centre of the spectrum also contains a group of parties that remain roughly divided. This is particularly true in the case of the UMP and the PS, the largest political parties seated in the National Assembly. Their members are not united in their views on Europe and do not share the same opinion on the direction of the integration. In general, however, their members believe that the EU, still under construction, provides several benefits. The UMP, on its websites, emphasises the advantages of the integration process, such as the free movement of the Euro, goods and people. Both parties also decided

to support the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty. According to the PS, 'the Lisbon treaty opens the way for more efficient intervention of the EU in matters such as international affairs and globalization.'[54] The party considers the ratification as a possible solution how to escape the constitutional crisis. Furthermore, it believes that ratification may help us focus on affairs important in the daily life of European citizens: employment, high social protection and quality of public services and environmental norms: 'Europe has had the treaty she needed. Now it is applying and moving on to more important tasks that Europe has to accomplish.'[55] However, the PS and the UMP emphasise different values. The PS considers the defence of interests of European citizens to be the key factor while the UMP highlights the benefits and interests of specifically French citizens.

The NPA on the left wing of the spectrum represents (as a far-left political party) more Eurosceptic vision. It mostly emphasises the EU's social deficits and defends national social welfare and labour interests against the EU's perceived neo-liberalism. According to the NPA, it may lead to a failure of the European social model and to unsustainable support of markets. Its critical view is weaker than the views of the far right-wing political parties (the FN and the MPF). Its negative assessment stems from the deficiencies of the current system of decision-making since '(c)itizens can change, by universal suffrage, their mayor, their deputy or government, but they are totally helpless against the European Commission.'[56] The NPA also opposes the Lisbon treaty, claiming that 'it will have negative consequences on daily lives of people in the EU.'[57] The party favours a unified Europe, but not in the present form and its members feel that today's problems result from uncritical support of large-capitalist groups which dominate over the interests of EU citizens, especially workers.

Analysis of Communication through Interpretative Patterns

As van Os argues, 'it is through their websites that parties (as any other political actor) offer particular perspective on European news, issues and events, suggesting whether and why discrete issues broadly concerning Europe are (or should be) socially and politically relevant.'[58]

This study describes selected European issues in the context of particular interests, identities and values of French political parties. Whereas the analysis in the previous two parts dealt with the visibility of the explored topics and the evaluation of the parties' orienta-

tion towards European integration, the last part examines the nature of their communication with the public and their voters, identifying their frame of reference. Does the frame of reference remain national or does it become European? This indicator provides more of a qualitative measure of whether actors communicate from a Europeanized perspective and reflect a sense of belonging to Europe. The degree to which French political parties portray the EU as a single entity varies substantially. Whether the emphasis is on European or national interests mostly depends on the evaluation of their attitude towards European integration as specified in the previous part.

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Expression of common identity may be portrayed in different ways, and again it occurs mostly in the case of parties with positive attitude towards the EU. Some refer to the EU using terms such as "we" or "us." This strong affection is visible in the articles and references of the MoDem and of Les Verts.[59] The others remain more cautious (the UMP, the PS and the NPA), referring to mixed identities—national and European—at the same time. They make references to common future development and measures that should be taken in order to improve the EU economically and socially; 'a great step forward for Europe,'[60] 'Europe, if we can unblock it, will be better than nothing,'[61] 'Europe, it is not a foreign policy issue for me!'[62] On the contrary, in the online contents of the FN and the MPF, there are no signs of belonging to the common entity; they only emphasise the national one. They perceive the EU as a community, but only as 'Europe of Brussels'[63] or 'Europe of failure,'[64] and they are extremely reluctant to consider France part of it and suggest that '(w) e must abandon this Europe: the one which compels us to accept all the misery of the world.'[65]

Contrary to shared identity, references to common values are present in the online content of all analysed parties. This is especially true in references related to democracy, such as human rights and equality. On the websites of the left-wing parties the principles of 'citoyenneté' or of multicultural diversity might be identified. All analysed political parties perceive democracy and freedom to be the basic and key factor of the functional community. The far-right parties, especially the FN, repeatedly refer to the lack of democracy in the integration process. Members of the FN use the expression 'the totalitarian spirit of the EU'[66] or blame the EU that 'it betrayed its people and democracy.'[67]

Finally, national/European interests have been examined. In the case of the FN, there are no references to European interests. Its members only speak in terms of national identity. The authors of the texts men-

tion the need for democracy, or for social improvements for French citizens. As in the previous analysis, this extreme right party framed the EU as disadvantageous, stressing national interests and values and denouncing 'the ultraliberal orders'[68] of the European leaders and the common currency ('Euro represents a failure at all levels'[69]). Almost the same view may be identified in articles on the website of the MPF. Its members try to convince the public that discussions about the Lisbon Treaty, the Euro or EU enlargement have no positive aspects.

Contrarily, the UMP seems to portray Europe as a single entity with shared interests. The party supports the current process of integration, but claims that the defence of French identity remains a key factor, and thus emphasises the interests of French citizens; interests that may be considered common or European are sometimes present in the on-line contents of the party: 'The aim is obviously to reassure the markets about the financial and political strength of the EU and to avoid a domino effect in the Eurozone.'[70] Yet, France is perceived as the key player and the main goal is to restore its prominent position in European integration; 'to restore its influence throughout the EU and the world, to become a locomotive of Europe once again.'[71] Moreover, the UMP emphasises the role of the French president (the UMP leader) and his merits: 'Nicolas Sarkozy has fought to revive the European process and to ratify the Treaty of Lisbon,'[72] 'Nicolas Sarkozy has managed to make the EU a key player in resolving conflicts.'[73]

The PS focuses more on the defence of interests of European citizens in general, speaking about their social and political rights. However, the party remains sceptical of some activities and actions of the EU, and portrays Europe as still being under construction. Its members stress democracy as the most important universal value (including citizens' rights), as well as solidarity and cultural diversity. For them, the only real Europe is 'Europe which is more social-democratic.'[74] In that regard, they also support the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty. Furthermore, they do not reject the Eurozone at all levels as the far-right political parties do, instead they criticise it from their leftist perspective since 'it opens a new page for the Eurozone, in which a real dialogue between the monetary policy (ECB) and economy (governments) should be established.'[75]

Les Verts, in contrast, almost fully embraces the current process of integration and refer to European identity often. For them, the only action that may improve the current situation of European states is based on coordination of the common project. Their interests are

strongly attached to European ones. Finally, the MoDem considers that 'the Lisbon Treaty is not useless but not sufficient; we need Europe of will and not just Europe of common territory.'[76] They emphasise the existence of 'particularly strong and independent authorities that act in the interest of Europeans.'[77] Therefore, its members articulate interests related to the European integration process and to European citizens more than the other political parties (except Les Verts): 'Europe should really learn how to be more attentive today, closer to our fellow citizens in the difficulties they are experiencing. It should further assist those affected by the crisis. From this point of view, it is urgent!'[78]

The analysis has led to several preliminary conclusions. First, I have not found a clear relationship between the level of visibility of European issues on each website and the evaluation of the European integration. Second, there is an apparent connection between the attitude of the political parties towards the EU and the third level of analysis. In other words, the hard Euro-critic parties such as the FN and the MPF do not refer to any benefits that the French electorate may gain from European integration. At the same time, there are no signs of a European dimension in their online communications and when communicating European issues, they therefore concentrate purely on national interests and identity. The parties with moderate attitude classified as soft Euro-critics, i.e. the NPA, the UMP or the PS, developed a different approach. In their online communications, they emphasise European interests and identity to some degree; however, they usually combine it with French preferences that prevail. In some cases, in particular with parties such as the PS or the NPA, a shared ideological identity was mentioned, putting the accent on workers identity or European citizens. Only the Euro-optimist parties, i.e. les Verts and the MoDem, addressed European issues using "we" or "us" when referring to Europe and expressed shared beliefs, interests and a common identity. Third, the study has showed that all political parties referred to common (European) values; especially to the democratic principles and human rights.

Conclusion

The study endeavoured to connect the democratisation of the European integration process with the emergence of the community of communication. The aim of the text was not only to discuss the term 'European public sphere,' but to demonstrate its consequences empiri-

cally. I focused mainly on the Europeanisation of public spheres, as one of the approaches which defines the shape of the European community of communication. The object of the analysis is then narrowed and focuses on the Europeanisation of public communication of French political actors.

In the first part of the article, the existence of the European public sphere was addressed. Opinions about its existence vary substantially. It is therefore difficult to establish only one definition of such community of communication. Many authors prefer to speak about the process of Europeanisation of national public spheres which may be described as a discursive community that emerges from debating specific issues and '(a) European public sphere does not fall from heaven, does not preexist outside social and political discourse. Rather, it is being constructed through social and discursive practices creating common horizon of references and, at the same time, a transnational community of communication over issues that concerns us as European, rather than British, French or Germans.'[79]

The concept was then applied to the political communication of seven French political parties and three different European issues. Three levels of analysis were investigated: the visibility of online communication, the evaluation of the EU and the analysis of communication through different interpretative patterns. I studied how national political parties communicate about Europe, or in other words, how Europe is framed within online content available on their official websites.

In the light of the preliminary conclusions of the previous chapter, the empirical study has shown the need of national parties to communicate about various European topics no matter where the political parties are placed in the political spectrum. Political communication about Europe has proved to be viable not only during important European events as investigated in the article of van Os (2005) on the European elections in France, but also on a regular basis. Some of the parties even identify themselves with the European community, stressing common interests and values. The others have not reached yet this level of identification and in some cases will never. Nevertheless, the analysis clearly showed that the Europeanisation of the political communication of national political parties in France is still in the making and may be strengthened in the upcoming years. The analysis thus encourages to some extent the development of the Europeanisation of public spheres, a process that enables promotion of the democratisation of the European integration and creation of broad networks

between European institutions and citizens, which (networks) seem nowadays neglected and weak. Consequently, European identity will have a chance to put down roots only if political parties, as well as other actors in the public spheres of member states will not remain conceptually stuck to national patterns, but will continue to legitimise the authority of the Union.

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On the other hand, much additional research is required to draw more substantiated conclusions. Firstly, a more comprehensive analysis is needed, including research in other member states in order to obtain cross-national data which may be compared. Secondly, it would be more than exigent to repeat the research in few years' time in order to see whether the process of Europeanization continues. And finally, it would be helpful to conduct the study in relation to the communication of other actors of the public sphere, such as mass media or non-governmental actors, which may broaden the research and lead to more general conclusions.

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Notes

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2   See Jürgen Habermas (2001), 'Why Europe needs a Constitution,' *New Left Review* 11, p. 5-26.
3   Marianne van de Steeg (et al) (2003), 'The EU as a Political Community: A Media Analysis of the Haider Debate in the EU,' Nashville TN: Annual Meeting of the EU Studies Associations, p. 2.
4   See Renée van Os, Renée (2008), *Communicating Europe Online: An Exploratory Investigation of the Europeanised Political Communication on theWeb*, Nijmegen: Print Partners Ipskamp; Habermas (2001) and Marianne van de Steeg (et al) (2003).
5   Renée van Os, Renée and Nicholas W. Jankowski (2005), 'A European Public Sphere: How Much of it Do We Have and How Much So We Need?' *University of Amsterdam*, Workshop organiedd by the Network of Excellence

CONNEX, p. 2.

6   Čmakalová and Rolenc (forthcoming), p. 10.

7   See Marcus Höreth (1999), 'No Way Out for the Beast? The Unsolved Legitimacy Problem of European Governance,' *Journal of European Public Policy* 6:2, pp. 249-268; Christopher Lord and Paul Magnette (2004), 'E Pluribus Unum? Creative Disagreement about Legitimacy in the EU,' *Journal of Common Market Studies* 42:1, pp. 183-202.

8   The Public Sphere, World Bank, Communication for Governance and Accountability Programme at: <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXT-GOVACC/Resources/PubSphereweb.pdf> (accessed 01 February 2013).

9   David Keller (2000), 'Habermas, the Public Sphere, and Democracy: A Critical Intervention,' in Lewis E. Hahn (eds) (2000), *Perspectives on Habermas*, Peru, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, p. 264.

10 Habermas (2001), p. 17.

11 Ibid. p. 17.

12 Kasun Ubayasiri (2006), 'Internet and the Public Sphere: A glimpse of YouTube,' *Central Queensland University*, available at: <http://ejournalist.com.au/v6n2/ubayasiri622.pdf> (accessed 29 October 2012), p. 2.

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14 van de Steeg (et al) (2003), p. 2.

15 Ibid. p. 2.

16 Furio Cerutti and Sonia Lucarelli (2008), *The Search for a European Identity*, New York: Routledge, p. 29.

17 van de Steeg (et al) (2003), p. 2.

18 Habermas (2001), p. 17.

19 Ibid. p. 18.

20 Claudio Radaelli (2000), 'Whither Europeanisation? Concept Stretching and Substantive Change,' *European Integration Online Papers* (EIoP), 4:8 at: <http://eiop.or.at/eiop/texte/2000-008a.htm>, p. 4.

21 Thomas F. Banchoff and Mitchell P. Smith (1999), *Legitimacy and the EU: The Contested Polity*. London: Routledge, p. 12, 15.

22 van de Steeg (et al) (2003), p. 2.

23 After Austrian elections in October 1999, Haider's right wing Populist Party FPO formed a coalition with the centre-right party OVP. This action led to many protests all over Europe, as a result the Presidency of the European Council of Ministers decided in favour of so the called 'bilateral sanctions' of EU member states against the Austrian government.

24 Banchoff and Smith (1999), p. 15.

25 Ibid, p. 15.

26 Ibid. p. 15.

27 Ruud Koopmans and Paul Statham (2009), 'Political Party Contestation over Europe in the Mass Media: Who Criticises Europe, How, and Why?' *European Political Science Review*, 1:3, p. 437.

28 In this case, the political claim would be rather verbal in its nature due to the fact that the research is done on the internet.

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Mobilisation of the Unemployed: Insights from Switzerland,' Marburg: ECPR Conference, p. 8. This work is available at: <www.unige.ch/ses/resop/greca/reports/marburg03.pdf>.

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31 Berclaz and Giugni (2003), p. 8.
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34 Renée van Os (2005), 'Framing Europe Online: French Political Parties and the European Election of 2004,' *Information Polity*, 10:3,4, p. 57.
35 van Os (2008), p. 27.
36 Ubayasiri (2006), p. 8.
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41 Ibid. p. 749.
42 See Hanspeter Kriesi (2005), 'How National Political Parties Mobilise the Political Potentials Linked to European Integration,' Unpublished manuscript, University of Zurich.
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45 Les roumains viennent en France, notre production industrielle part en Roumanie!, at: <www.frontnational.com> (accessed 03 December 2010).
46 All French quotations in the article are translated by the author.
47 Révision du Traité de Lisbonne : l'oligarchie européenne choisit les marchés financiers contre les peuples, <www.frontnational.com> (accessed 03 December 2010).
48 Le peuple irlandais saigné et l'argent des Français dilapidé pour sauver l'euro ! at: <www.frontnational.com> (accessed 03 December 2010).
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50 Declan Ganley (2010), 'Mister No' en Vendée, <http://www.pourlafrance.fr> (accessed 20 December 2010).
51 Intervention de Philippe de Villiers devant le Président Sarkozy au Parlement européen; <http://www.pourlafrance.fr> (accessed 20 December 2010).
52 Traité de Lisbonne: "l'urgence est de répondre à la crise économique et

sociale", pour Marielle de Sarnez, <www.mouvementdemocrate.fr/> (accessed 13 November 2010).

53 La construction d'une Europe politique plus cohérente et plus démocratique, <http://lesverts.fr/> (accessed 15 December 2010).

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56 Traité de Lisbonne: UN BOND VERS L'EUROPE DES INÉGALITÉS, <www.npa2009.org> (accessed 05 December 2010).

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59 Emploi, retraites, Grèce: quelles positions pour Europe Ecologie? <http://lesverts.fr> (accessed 15 December 2010).

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