

What's the story?

Media narratives in a polity in the making

Summary

As the European Union approaches the 2024 European Parliament elections, understanding the role of media narratives and their impact on the democratic debate is crucial. This policy brief examines the findings of two research papers from the EU3D project, focusing on the crafting of political narratives and the coverage of European reforms by EU correspondents and business newspapers. The analysis reveals that while journalists play a vital role in translating complex EU governance to the public, their reporting often lacks a cohesive narrative on EU integration. Media coverage of European reforms tends to be cyclical and framed within national contexts, highlighting the need for ongoing public attention and a more robust European public sphere. The brief offers policy recommendations to strengthen public engagement, improve media reporting, and enhance EU correspondents' understanding of the EU's institutional framework. Ensuring a well-informed and engaged public is vital for democratic accountability and transparency within the EU.

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What's at stake?

In 2024, European Union (EU) citizens will be asked to choose their representatives in the European Parliament. While this exercise of procedural democracy is extremely important, the casting of the ballot is only one of the components of a vibrant democratic debate.

The multi-level governance system that characterises the EU, in terms of the division of competences between member states and EU institutions and the differentiated integration process, can be perceived as complex and obscure.

For citizens to be able to make meaningful contributions to the debate about the future of the EU, and to increase the sense of ownership over democratic processes, they need to acquire knowledge about the system and feel a sense of ownership of the crafting of the political narratives around it.

The EU3D project aims at developing a framework for the analysis of whether European differentiation is a sustainable concept. In the classical sociological tradition, differentiation is defined as the combination of territory, function and hierarchy. Differentiation encompasses the concept of integrated differentiation, which refers to 'specific features of the EU integration process, such as multiple speeds, exemptions, opt-outs and opt-ins, and questions of variable geometry' (Fossum, 2019). Moreover, one aim of the project is also to understand the conditions under which differentiation is either linked to the concept of dominance or democracy. Within EU3D, Work Package 4 on Opinions, debates and reforms analysed public opinion and the

discourse on measures decided or proposed by the European Union (EU).

In this framework, European public spheres (EPS) are seen a pre-condition for establishing more democratic decision-making processes, as they promote the discussion of EU decisions across borders, which might lead to widely accepted compromises.

This Policy Brief builds on two research papers by Umit et al. (2022) and Mourlon-Drouot et al., (2022) produced in the framework of Work Package 4 of the EU3D project. Umit et al. (2022) looked at how political narratives are crafted by journalists who have a prominent role in telling the story of the EU, while Mourlon-Drouot et al. (2022) looked at how EU reforms have been reported in selected newspapers in the past twenty years.

We argue that at this critical juncture for the EU polity, high-quality professional journalism has a crucial role to play as a guarantor of democracy in the face of differentiated integration and growing complexity of governance. EU correspondents are best placed to function as translators of EU technocratic and differentiated governance, as they combine insights into Brussels-based policy-making mechanisms with first-hand understanding of national politics and interests. We also argue that the narratives crafted by journalists can be used as an imperfect proxy to understand the sentiment of a European public sphere in the making.

Finally, we will make a set of recommendations to policymakers at EU and national level, with a specific focus on what should be done ahead of the 2024 European elections.

Writing the story: the role of the EU press corps

Every effort to provide an account of the EU is implicitly a contribution to the construction of an EU polity, however underarticulated that may be. If we think of differentiation in that light, journalists face a dual challenge: to explain what EU differentiation entails, and to situate it within a political system (the EU), for which there is no agreement on what it is and what it should be.

Umit et al. (2022) explored whether journalists are best placed to function as translators of EU technocratic and differentiated governance, as they combine insights into the Brussels-based policy-making mechanisms with first-hand understanding of national politics and interests. However, they are also subject to the editorial trade-off between detailed reporting on differentiation and newsworthiness, which implies a simplification of news, or in other words, de-differentiation.

“*The narratives crafted by journalists can be used as an imperfect proxy to understand the sentiment of a European public sphere in the making.*”

To investigate these two complimentary functions, Umit et al. (2022) performed a qualitative content analysis of coverage by EU correspondents in nine news outlets in Denmark, Germany and the United Kingdom. They focused on migration news related to the area of justice and home affairs, as it is a policy area with high level of differentiation within national legislations across member states, while being a common topic at

European level, so it is a good example for the concept of differentiation explored in the EU3D project.

The analysis showed that differentiation appears irregularly and seldom in the correspondents' reporting. It also showed differences in coverage by country. German correspondents appear more in the role of experts; they talk of differentiated integration more often, and they focus mainly on abstract themes, such as law and divisions of competences. On the other hand, British and Danish journalists play the role of general translators by providing easier explanations to their readers. This is also shown by the predominance in their reporting of a general approach to differentiation that focuses on territorial matters.

All in all, the research showed that correspondents succeed in translating EU jargon to the public. However, EU correspondents have a responsibility to provide a critical perspective and stimulate a debate about the EU, but their current reporting style may not be fulfilling this role effectively, lacking a cohesive narrative on EU integration.

Reading the story: European reform narratives over the years

The tension between the complexity of EU reporting, and the translation of the debate in Brussels to national capitals is also a theme in the analysis by Mourlon-Druol et al. (2022). They focused specifically on media narratives related to European reforms, as possible indicators of the sentiment in the public debate about the future of Europe.

They analysed the discourse around European reforms in three business newspapers: Handelsblatt (Germany), Il Sole (Italy) and Les Echos (France). By using topic modelling on a sample of articles related to Europe and European reforms published between January 2001 and March 2022, the authors identified three main results.

First, and as expected, the focus on European reforms in the newspapers follows a cyclical pattern around the main events linked to the news cycle. When a crisis hits, the media coverage increases, but fades quickly afterwards. In this context, Germany and Italy show traits of commonalities in news reporting on the same issues that pertain EU reforms, more strongly than France.

Second, when it comes to the pattern of media coverage, there have been some events, such as the Greek debt crisis and, to a lesser extent, the banking sector reforms in the wake of the financial crisis, which have triggered simultaneous media coverage of these events in the three considered outlets.

Third, European reforms are mostly framed in relation to the national level. That is, European issues are covered in the context of domestic political or economic matters. However, in the 2010s, as a response to the financial and euro crises, the need for reforms at the European level clearly emerged as a common topic in the newspapers.

While this may lead to a certain level of synchronisation in reporting patterns in different member states, it also highlights the need for more consistent and ongoing public attention to be paid to European issues, in order to increase the involvement of citizens in the public debate. Moreover, the fact that European

reforms are mostly framed in relation to the national level indicates the existence of national differences in reporting, which can be seen as aspects of differentiation. However, the findings of Mourlon-Drouot et al. (2022) also suggest the presence of an intersectional dimension of a European public sphere in the making, in which media in different member states report on the same topic at the same time.

“Every effort to provide an account of the EU is implicitly a contribution to the construction of an EU polity.”

Overall, the analysis highlights the importance of more consistent and ongoing public attention to European reforms, to increase citizen involvement and build a more robust European public sphere, which is fundamental for the democratic debate.

Policy recommendations

The European Union is a complex and evolving political system that requires ongoing attention and engagement from the public, media and policymakers. Differentiated integration is a key feature of the EU, but it can pose challenges for journalists, who must navigate the complex institutional set-up and explain it to the public in a way that is both accurate and accessible.

EU correspondents play an important role in translating EU governance and policymaking mechanisms to the public, but they face challenges in balancing the need for detailed reporting with the pressure to simplify news and make it newsworthy.

Media coverage of EU reforms follows a cyclical pattern, with peaks during times of crisis, and a tendency to frame European issues within the context of domestic politics and economic matters. This points towards the process of a European public sphere in the making, but ongoing and consistent public attention is necessary for EU reforms to be followed through, and to increase the involvement of citizens in the public debate.

Based on the analysis of media narratives about European reforms, and their coverage in different member states, the following policy recommendations could be made:

- Increase public attention on European issues: the analyses in Umit et al. (2022) and Murlon-Druol et al. (2022) suggest that European reforms are often covered in the context of domestic political or economic matters, leading to national differences in reporting. One of the opportunities to address this would be a joint and coordinated effort by the EU institutions to organise, in the run up to the European elections in 2024, public awareness campaigns to increase public attention on European issues, and to encourage more consistent reporting across member states.
- Foster a more robust European public sphere: the presence of an intersectional dimension of a European public sphere in the making is a positive development, but more needs to be done to strengthen it. The EU should strengthen the financial support it provides to initiatives that facilitate cross-border communication and exchange of information, including joint media projects, cross-border journalism training programmes and pan-European media outlets.
- Provide training for EU correspondents: policymakers should provide training for EU correspondents to help them understand the complex institutional set-up of the EU, as well as the different forms of differentiation that exist within the EU. This will enable correspondents to act as effective mediators between EU technocratic and differentiated governance and the general public.
- Address the cyclical nature of media coverage: the analysis shows that media coverage of European reforms follows a cyclical pattern, mainly triggered by crises or major events. This highlights the need for more consistent reporting and ongoing public attention to European issues. Policymakers should invest in initiatives that promote regular reporting and public engagement on European reforms, such as dedicated media campaigns, public debates and citizen consultations.
- Foster collaboration between EU correspondents from different member states: the research shows that country differences emerge in the reporting of EU correspondents. Dedicated programmes should foster collaboration between EU correspondents from different member states to promote a more cohesive narrative around EU differentiated integration, and to facilitate a more critical discourse on this topic.

Overall, a strong and engaged media is essential to ensure democratic accountability and transparency within the EU. Policymakers must continue to support efforts to strengthen the European public sphere and to ensure that EU policies and decisions are understood and debated by the public.

References

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EU Differentiation Dominance and Democracy (EU3D)

The EU has expanded in depth and breadth across a range of member states with greatly different makeups, making the European integration process more differentiated. EU3D is a research project that specifies the conditions under which differentiation is politically acceptable, institutionally sustainable, and democratically legitimate; and singles out those forms of differentiation that engender dominance. EU3D brings together around 50 researchers in 10 European countries and is coordinated by ARENA Centre for European Studies, University of Oslo.

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