

Book Review

Patrick Bijsmans, *Maastricht University*

POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN EUROPE: THE CULTURAL AND STRUCTURAL LIMITS OF THE EUROPEAN PUBLIC SPHERE

by Francisco Seoane Pérez

Palgrave Macmillan, ISBN: 9781137305121 (hb)

Scholars and politicians have regularly identified the issue of the democratic deficit as one of the main challenges for the European Union (EU). The body of literature on this matter has steadily grown, addressing several important topics, such as the paradoxical situation of an increasingly powerful European Parliament that attracts ever fewer citizens to the ballot box. Meanwhile, the perceived gap between citizens and the European level of governance has been highlighted in several referenda, as well as by the current economic crisis, which, some have argued, has resulted in an upsurge of Euroscepticism. Commentators predict that this may lead to major gains for Eurosceptic parties in the 2014 European elections.

A related topic that has gained prominence concerns the European public sphere and the apparent communication deficit. Here, the focus is usually on media coverage of EU affairs or the communication strategies of supranational and national institutions and political actors. However, in his book *Political Communication in Europe: The Cultural and Structural Limits of the European Public Sphere* Francisco Seoane Pérez argues that the problem is not one of deficient media coverage of EU affairs or poor communication, but rather of cultural and structural limitations. Seoane Pérez, assistant professor in Political Communication at the University of Castilla-La Mancha, calls the EU 'distant and apolitical' (p.3). This, he argues, cannot be solved by lofty press releases, twitter accounts and increased media coverage.

Seoane Pérez builds his arguments on the work of Jürgen Habermas, Carl Schmitt, and Chantal Mouffe. He contends that the Habermasian idea of a refeudalisation of the public sphere, i.e. when public and private merge, media are commercialised and democracy is dominated by interest group representation instead of citizen participation, applies to the EU. From Schmitt he borrows the ideas that democracy needs identification and that the advent of liberalism leads to technocratic government. Instead of refuting democracy altogether, as Schmitt ultimately did, Seoane Pérez argues that the EU requires agnostic politics along left-right divisions. Here, he refers to Mouffe's distinction between antagonistic (hostile) and agonistic (moderate) political contest. Pulling these different theoretical strands together, Seoane Pérez contends that the virtually absent identification between those who govern and those who are governed (the lack of a European demos), on the one hand, and a tendency towards consensus, corporatism and technocratic arrangements, on the other hand, prevent the EU from becoming truly democratic. In other words, the EU suffers from two deficits, a lack of 'domesticisation' and a lack of 'politicisation' respectively; deficits, Seoane Pérez maintains, that are not sufficiently addressed by the main integration theories.

Seoane Pérez illustrates his arguments with a substantial body of empirical data, based on the analysis of newspaper articles, interviews and 'observation sessions'. This empirical work is backed up by a 50-page long methodological annex. The focus of his research was on two regions, the mostly pro-European Galicia and largely Eurosceptic Yorkshire. Newspaper articles from two regional newspapers were coded based on the concepts 'domesticisation' and 'politicisation' and, hence, were used to present an insight into how the EU is approached at the regional level. In addition, the newspapers were also used to determine the key players in the debates. The latter were approached for interviews – interviewees themselves were also asked for other potentially interesting interview partners. Seoane Pérez particularly refers to these interviews, conducted at the regional, national and European level, in chapter 5 on the lack of domesticisation and chapter 6 on the lack of politicisation. He concludes that the EU is, to some extent, domesticised in Galicia, yet there is still no politicisation. In contrast, politicisation does occur in Yorkshire, but is of the antagonistic kind, and domesticisation is virtually absent.

All in all, Seoane Pérez's account of the EU's democratic deficit and the related communication challenges is an interesting and thought-provoking read. Yet, there are also a few shortcomings. As far as analysis is concerned, Seoane Pérez has a point when he stresses the importance of community for democratic debate and the public sphere, just as he has when reminding his readers about the impact of the EU's institutional design and practices in this respect. However, sometimes he seems all too easily to disregard work by scholars who discuss the possibility of and present evidence for EU democracy and a European public sphere based on Europeanised national public spheres and a post-national community. Tellingly, Seoane Pérez calls Thomas Risse's work 'the main exception to [the] "no-demos" trend' (p. 100). In addition, considering Seoane Pérez's emphasis on a perceived lack of politicisation, and despite references to the Hix-Bartolini debate, recent literature on politicisation is strangely largely absent from this book. What's more, Seoane Pérez regularly refers to the ongoing Eurozone crisis, but does not really discuss its possible consequences for the politicisation of EU affairs. Even though most of the empirical work was done in the years preceding the crisis, more reflection on this matter would have been welcome, especially now that some scholars have argued that the financial crisis may lead to increased politicisation.

When turning to methodology, it is once again worth noting the substantial body of data gathered by the author. However, there are some issues that would have benefited from a more thorough explanation. One concerns the focus on regions. While valid in itself, the reasons Seoane Pérez puts forward – the importance of cohesion policies, the democratic potential of regions and their importance in implementing EU policies – could have been developed better. In addition, while the arguments put forward for opting for *La Voz de Galicia* and *The Yorkshire Post* make sense, the actual selection of articles as described in the methodological annex raises a question. Namely, is it really possible that within the set period of research (10 June 2004 – 9 June 2009) the keyword search for *The Yorkshire Post* yielded 127 documents, as compared to 245,364 for *La Voz de Galicia*? The latter comes down to more than 49,000 articles per year – or more than 940 per week. That seems a rather unlikely amount of articles, yet Seoane Pérez does not present a clear explanation of these widely divergent figures. Lastly, one wonders why part of the methodical framework *and* some of the empirical results (including a number of interesting figures) are only presented in the methodological annex. This, unfortunately, also leads to certain limitations being addressed in a somewhat unsatisfactory manner.

Despite these shortcomings, Seoane Pérez presents his readers with an interesting and quite original account of the EU's democratic deficit and the related communication challenges, focussing on the regional level of European governance and based on the analysis of a substantial body of empirical data. *Political Communication in Europe: The Cultural and Structural Limits of the European Public Sphere* may appeal to readers who are interested in the EU's democratic deficit, in general, and the European public sphere, in particular. More work in these fields is certainly still needed and Seoane

Pérez raises some important questions that may help us to understand better the challenges the EU would have to overcome to decrease the feelings of distance and misunderstanding among its citizens.
