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The Impact of Mediatization on EU Public Outreach Campaigns

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Abstract. This article addresses the mediatization of the European public sphere(s) and the issues it creates for the implementation of EU-wide public outreach efforts. As applied to the EU context, the concept of mediatization is understood as a relationship between the media and political institutions that causes societal transformation. In this sense, the public sphere is seen as a mediating infrastructure of debates of political legitimacy. In the context of mediatized politics, European public opinion is fragmented and bound to national public spheres. EU public outreach efforts are increasingly filtered and shaped by the media of its member countries. Due to multiple implementation issues, the EU has not been able to offer its members an attractive and unifying identity narrative promoting European values. This article offers some conceptual solutions to the problem.

Keywords: Europeanization, The European Union, mediatization, the public sphere, strategic communication

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Влияние медиатизации на информационные кампании Евросоюза

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Аннотация. В статье обсуждается медиатизация публичной сферы Евросоюза и ее влияние на реализацию информационных кампаний в государствах — членах ЕС. Автор рассматривает медиатизацию в ЕС как отношения между СМИ и другими социальными институтами, ведущие к трансформации общества в соответствии с медийными правилами. Публичная сфера исследуется как медиатизированная инфраструктура для дискуссий о политической легитимности. В контексте медиатизированной политики европейское общественное мнение фрагментировано и привязано к национальным общественным сферам. Усилия ЕС по информированию общественности все больше фильтруются и формируются средствами массовой информации его стран-членов. В итоге ЕС не смог предложить своим членам привлекательный и объединяющий нарратив идентичности, продвигающий европейские ценности. Предлагаются концептуальные решения этих проблем.

Ключевые слова: европеизация, Европейский Союз, медиатизация, публичная сфера, стратегическая коммуникация

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Introduction

Traditionally, the mass media have been considered the providers of social integration and democratization within a political community [1]. Western societies are often referred to as *media democracies* in which democratic functions rely on mass communication infrastructure [2]. The rise of media-driven democracies correlates with the weakening of political parties and the decline of their function of mediating between the people and the government [3].

The European Union's political representation and legitimation occur through a dynamic interaction between multiple audiences representing member states, aspiring nations, and neighboring countries such as Russia and Turkey. Like other political systems, the EU relies on the mass media to publicize its

policies and thereby ensure legitimation and public support. The media are instrumental in helping the EU justify the merits of European identity to various international audiences [4].

The EU Parliament maintains public information offices in the member states that are responsible for media relations and public outreach. Since the Maastricht Treaty (1992), the EU has consistently promoted European integration along with specific political values and Europeanization as a distinctive marker of a new, consolidated public space [5]. In 2002, the European Commission also launched a communications strategy to improve public knowledge of the EU and explain the implications of accession for each country. The creation of new EU symbols (the Flag of Europe, etc.) was intended to promote a sense of identity, peace, and unity. Activities such as the Erasmus program were designed to boost cultural learning and understanding among EU citizens as well as to stimulate their sense of European belonging.

In 2014, the European Parliament and Commission introduced *New Narrative for Europe: The Mind and Body of Europe* to “bring Europe closer to its citizens and reviving a European spirit via the arts and sciences”. Although there have been several public outreach campaigns to promote integrative values among member states, none has been able to establish a unified European community. Moreover, none of these outreach efforts resolved the issue of *communication deficit* [6]. The 2020 withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EU and the European Atomic Energy Community suggests — among other things — that EU institutions and programs have failed to offer European citizens a solid unifying paradigm.

The interchange between the EU and its member states takes place in the public sphere, filtered and shaped by the media environment [7]. The interrelation between media and politics *shapes* the representation of EU governance and its public legitimation. Hence, EU governance and its democracy model are not simply *mediated* but rather *mediatized* or transformed via interactions with media, creating multiple transgressions [8]. The efforts of the EU to enhance Europeanization through public outreach campaigns were impeded by multiple issues associated with the compromised legitimacy of EU institutions and the effects of mediatized politics on the relationship between the EU and its member states.

This article discusses the impact of *mediatization* on EU public outreach campaigns. It addresses the mediatization of the European public sphere(s) and the issues it creates for the implementation of EU-wide public outreach efforts. The essay outlines several issues with EU public communication campaigns and offers some alternative solutions to the problem.

The EU as an assembly of public spheres

Initially, scholars nurtured the idea of the EU as a homogenous public sphere at the supra-national level, represented by EU citizens sharing the values and norms of Europeanness [9]. According to Habermas (1962), the public sphere

refers to a space of civic communication where citizens come together to deliberate on state affairs. The quality of this public forum is crucial: the stronger the public sphere, the better public opinion can resist the state's abuse of power.

The concept of Europeanization refers to interactions between the EU and its members. This notion is largely based on Europeaness or the sense of personal identification with European cultural and political views and values. The idea of the integrative European identity is often referred to as “the European Dream.” Jeremy Rifkin, in his 2004 book *The European Dream: How Europe's Vision of the Future Is Quietly Eclipsing the American Dream*, saw it as a unifying power that helped to produce economic stability, peace, and employment. However, low turnout in the European elections and a persistent lack of identification by nation-states' citizens with EU institutions demonstrate that the integrative European identity has yet to become a new unifying paradigm for Europe.

While early scholars predicted the future of Europe as a homogenous public sphere, an alternative perspective dismisses the traditional view of the EU as idealized and unattainable. These scholars argue that in pluralistic and diverse societies, multiple publics jointly construct relationships with permeable boundaries. Such societies allow for plural *public spheres* in which even minority publics are able to cocreate public events, intervene in ongoing events, and produce new social arrangements. In other words, the political integration of the Europe of states has advanced at a more rapid pace than the social and cultural integration of the Europe of citizens. As a result, the EU still remains “a case of system integration and not a case of the social integration of citizens” [4. P. 40].

Today, the EU is extremely diverse and represented by a variety of opinions on policies and issues contributed by governments and citizens in its member states, ranging from the Nordic to Mediterranean and Central/Eastern European countries. The European media landscape is diverse. Some media outlets serve as carriers of dominant frames; others promote alternative opinions. There are three categories of media in Europe in terms of media freedom, ranging from the most developed countries (Scandinavian countries, Germany, etc.) to the countries ranked low (Hungary, Poland, etc.), where there are growing attacks on media [10].

This assembly of public spheres poses a significant challenge for the EU that has to adapt to the new realities and create a strategic vision that would promote democratic deliberation and encourage participatory engagement on the part of EU citizens.

The mediatization of the EU public spheres

There is a body of media scholarship arguing that the media should no longer be considered a neutral mediator between citizens and government institutions. Instead, the media is an active player that transforms politics by acting in accordance with its own judgments and rules [11].

A relationship between the media and other social institutions that leads to societal transformation is often referred to as *mediatization* [8]. Research suggests

there is a system is considered legitimate when citizens accept stories praising its merits and social order within an organized narrative framework. In this sense, “the mediated reality becomes more important than the actual reality, in the sense that it is mediated reality that people have access to and react to” [12. P. 238].

Thus, mediatization is often discussed as referring to the increased intrusion of media logic on the operations of other social institutions via new rules imposed by the media. The adoption of media logic by a political system produces a hybrid of *mediatized politics* or “politics that has lost its autonomy [...] and is continuously shaped by interactions with mass media” [11. P. 250]. Some scholars even refer to “new social condition” created by mediatization when the “media increasingly transgress the whole culture and society” so that “everything gets mediated” [13. P. 224].

As applied to the EU context, the concept of mediatization helps us understand the public sphere as a mediating infrastructure of debates of political legitimacy [4]. Hence, mediatization should not be studied “in the narrow sense as the impact of media on the operational modes of the EU political system, but, in more general terms, to capture the transformation of the public sphere and the changing conditions for the generation of political legitimacy both at national and at European level” [4. P. 47]. As a result, the mediatized public sphere should not be perceived as “the infrastructure for the mediation of EU representative politics but as the place where the representative claims-making of the new transnational elites resonates, meets with national (or other) counter claimants and informs public opinion and will formation” [4. P. 40].

In the context of mediatized politics, European public opinion remains fragmented and bound to national public spheres. Most EU-related information is filtered through national and regional agendas and framed according to local perspectives in privately owned news outlets. EU institutions often become the easy scapegoat for poor decisions made by local governments in the national media, thus helping them avoid public criticism.

While the EU uses social media for public engagement, its critics and social activists use them to challenge the EU’s legitimacy. Scholars have observed the potential of social media to alienate publics in modern societies and to incite “EU contestation processes” [7]. Social media enable citizens to produce memetic content reframing the original meaning of complex issues promoted by EU institutions and agencies and turning political actors into targets of hate and condemnation.

Issues with EU public outreach campaigns

Essentially, many EU public outreach campaigns lack properly designed and executed communication strategies based on what Botan [14] defines as strategic communication: understanding what various publics think and want rather than focusing on message production. Below, I list several reasons why the EU’s efforts to promote European integration and identity have proved unsuccessful.

First, the EU has not been able to offer its members an attractive and unifying *identity narrative promoting European values*. The European Commission supported the “unity paradigm,” which often produced conflicting messages because it “promoted unity and diversity at the same time” [15. P. 112].

Second, European integration has been driven by bureaucratic and political elites who have monopolized the power to define what it means “to be fully ‘European’” [16]. Most elite argumentation is based on understanding Europe as a public space with universal values. From this perspective, the advantages are obvious and axiomatic, the shortcomings are often overlooked, and controversial issues are rarely examined and addressed in public debate.

Third, the EU has failed to *communicate its policies and ideas in a consistent manner*. Audiences in member states are often confused about the long-term vision and goals of the European Parliament and other EU institutions. The EU has repeatedly used several hegemonic narratives in its discourse (e.g., the Nobel narrative, green Europe, etc.). None of them has been able to produce a solid core message across Europe because of their narrow focus.

Finally, the EU institutions *have failed to fully embrace the notion of mediatized politics and adapt their communication campaigns to new mediatized realities*. The EU system of governance has yet to be fully integrated into the ecosystem of the European media. For example, Trenz [4] argues that the European Commission is reluctant to adapt to media logic and interlink its policies and issues with the discussion items on media and public agendas. The EU establishment chooses to communicate with journalists in a reactive way. This reactive communication is often caused by preexisting mutual mistrust. For example, instead of seeking a dialogue with journalists, the Commission often looks for opportunities to criticize them for inaccuracies and negativity in their reporting of EU activities.

Conclusions and future research

In the context of European mediatized politics, the idea of an integrative European identity is unlikely to become a unifying power for the fragmented citizenry in transitional societies, as it still appears foreign in terms of norms and values. EU initiatives and programs often produce inconsistent and sketchy messages that confuse local audiences and appear insincere. This article supports Valentini’s (2006) observation that the EU’s inability to tailor its message to different audiences mainly results from inadequate planning and coordination among the EU institutions.

In addition, most EU-sponsored programs promoting democracy are filtered and shaped by the media of nation-states. Fragmented media and audience segmentation lead to multiple *transgressions* including the formation of new public spheres, and growing ideological polarization. For example, in 2021, national elections in Hungary, Poland and other European countries support anti-immigrant views promoted by populist politicians.

To respond to the challenges outlined in this article, the EU needs a new strategic outlook. The *cocreative* paradigm of strategic communication is a well-suited conceptual framework that ascribes primary power to the public in the relationship with institutions in the context of mediatised politics [14]. Scholars suggest a distinction between *the basic mediatisation* and *the reflexive mediatisation* of political institutions [4]. In the case of basic mediatisation, EU political actors and institutions follow the agenda proposed by the media and link media items to their own topics and issues. In the reflexive mode, the EU mobilizes its internal resources to generate content for publicity and social media users.

When applied to the European scenario, this article suggests that publics within EU member states become the main reference point and the largest interpretive community of EU messages. Following the model of reflexive mediatisation, the EU should become reflexive on the processes taking place in the media environment and strategically inserts topics relevant to media and public discussions. In addition, the cocreative approach prescribes that the content of future EU programs should be determined through ongoing communication with core and aspiring EU members. This involves providing full information concerning EU programs and initiatives for timely public evaluation and debate.

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