

Europe Facing New Challenges of Contestation and Communication: Conclusion

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Where We Are Coming From

We started working on this volume after a symposium held in Vienna in April 2015, where we examined the concept of Euroscepticism and the nature of opposition to EU integration, while studying the relationship between the media and European democracy. In particular, we addressed the role of 'traditional media', as well as 'new media', and whether these can be facilitator or obstacle to both European democracy

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12 and the development of European citizens, or *demos*, as suggested in the
 13 last chapter of this book. AU2

14 After the symposium, we started discussing moving beyond the cur-
 15 rent use of the concept of Euroscepticism, as mainly applied to political
 16 parties, and exploring opposition and critical attitudes, and the role of
 17 the media in this debate. We started from the reflection, that, although
 18 many empirical analyses, definitions and classifications of the phenom-
 19 enon have been offered by political science and sociological research in
 20 the last two decades, today there are new challenges ahead that scholars
 21 interested in the topic have to deal with. On the one hand, looking
 22 at substantive aspects of EU opposition, with the Eurozone economic,
 23 political and even cultural crises, Euroscepticism is becoming a main-
 24 stream phenomenon, not anymore related to (and to be interpreted
 25 as) ‘peripheral’ political parties or portion of society. On the other, the
 26 increasing importance of the media, and especially new media, in poli-
 27 tics (with related phenomena that have introduced new concepts and
 28 analytical lens in many branches of political science and political com-
 29 munication, for example, ‘personalisation’, ‘disintermediation’, ‘news
 30 values’, ‘cascades effects’), makes it often inevitable for scholars to con-
 31 sider the definition, representation and communication of opposition
 32 to the EU, as it made on and through the media. As well as to consider
 33 the use of, and impact on, different types of political actors (citizens,
 34 movements, etc.). AU3

35 From the point of view of communication spaces and tools, in the con-
 36 text of contested legitimacy of the European democracy, the media are
 37 crucial as an arena for political actors where to get informed, expressing
 38 their discontent, and, eventually, to contest the EU. Moreover, with the
 39 increasing relevance of political communication in social media, social sci-
 40 ence studies had to adapt to another big change, with the realm of medi-
 41 ated politics, previously mainly dominated by journalists, institutional
 42 actors and political elites, opening up to new actors (Chadwick 2006).

43 Meanwhile, the EU has been challenged by the Greek referendum, in
 44 July 2015, and the refugees’ crisis, fuelling domestic debates across the
 45 EU member states. We worked on the final draft of the volume in the
 46 days of the British referendum, between June and July 2016.

The underlying questions of the book, addressing the emergence of Euroscepticism at this critical time and the role of the media between European democracy and the citizens find in the everyday experience of the EU and in this volume a wealth of theoretical and empirical evidence and answers.

What Is Old and What Is New: The Authors' Contribution

The Brexit referendum, in Paul Taggart's words, has represented the 'culmination' of the relationship of the EU and the UK, but, as we stress in this volume, it has also signalled that Euroalternativism, as pro-systemic opposition, is widespread and increasing its salience. The necessity to build a supranational level of governance is often debated, as suggested by della Porta and colleagues in their contribution, however, the absence of transparency and accountability of the European institutions is denounced, while also underlying the weakness of social policies. As it has been noticed already some years ago by studies focusing on the first 'euro-critical' protests of social movements, these actors do not call for a return to the nation-state, but for a process of Europeanisation from below (della Porta and Caiani 2009). As such, we can interpret (part of) the current Euroscepticism, also confirmed by our book, adopting the suggestion of della Porta, Kouki and Fernandez in this volume, that the positions towards the EU have to be located within a crisis of legitimacy that affect also EU institutions.

The growing salience of the European integration issue in the public discourse, which has been demonstrated by different types of data of this volume, does not imply in fact increasing consensus on the EU polity or policies. The Eurobarometer 84, published in December 2015, shows that 38 per cent of citizens have a neutral image of the EU and the share of those citizens who see the EU negatively is still increasing. About 24 member states view decreasing trends and these are highest in Estonia (-13 per cent), Germany (-11 per cent) and the Czech Republic (-10 per cent), a founding member state and two new post-communist

79 member states. Although opposition towards the EU had been viewed
80 as a temporary phenomenon, as seen, it has now moved to the main-
81 stream and become a distinctive characteristic of the European integra-
82 tion process. More specifically, some of the contributions of this volume
83 have confirmed what recent analyses on citizens' attitudes towards the
84 EU underline: that a rational utilitarian dimension is at stake when look-
85 ing at citizens' position towards the current Europe (Conti and Memoli
86 2015; Guerra 2013). EU attachment is affected by expectations towards
87 future life expectations. In fact, what we often witness recently is that
88 well-educated young people, generally the most positive towards the EU,
89 perceive that their hopes towards the future are kicked back by the old
90 generation, opportunities may not be met, and can turn towards more
91 Eurosceptic attitudes. Against this background it is not surprising that
92 a number of scholars from different background (law, political science,
93 political theory, sociology) are starting to study current Euroscepticism
94 through the lens of a crisis of solidarity (Grimmel 2017 forthcoming;
95 Trenz 2017 forthcoming). As they claim, the European Union, although
96 widely considered to be the world's most successful and influential
97 regional integration project, never before in its history has been con-
98 fronted with such numerous challenges, among which: the increasing
99 terroristic attacks, the financial crisis, the refugees emergency and the
100 consolidation of nationalist and separatist movements in many European
101 countries. 'The gravity of the current state of affairs has reached a point
102 where even leading Europeanists no longer consider it impossible for
103 the EU to fall apart. It is in this time of crisis that the EU reveals a "
104 fault line" that goes deeper than the well-known shortcomings in the
105 EU's construction and its problem solving capacities: a crisis of solidar-
106 ity' (Grimmel 2017 forthcoming). Paradoxically, as showed by Pavan
107 and Caiani in their contribution, also the populist right-wing groups are
108 criticising the EU for a lack of transparency, and they call for 'solidarity'
109 among the European people(s), although they have an ethnic- based con-
110 ception of 'the people' and are sympathetic of welfare chauvinism, which
111 is in contradiction with transnational solidarity across European states.

112 Moving from this substantive reflection on current forms of
113 Euroscepticism, to the related theoretical and methodological conse-
114 quences for scholars which deal with it, this means that, as such, research

can and should move beyond the study of party-based Euroscepticism. 115
 Public opinion, civil society and movements and groups can provide 116
 new avenues of research that the literature has just started exploring 117
 (integrating qualitative and quantitative data and mixed methods for 118
 further disentangling the phenomenon). In fact, as some chapters have 119
 illustrated (see Pavan and Caiani), research in the field could profit from 120
 going beyond the observation of a growing scepticism, distinguishing 121
 instead the images of Europe around, which consensus and/or dissent 122
 emerges (even within 'morally' contested communities, as the right-wing 123
 populist nationalistic ones, which are growing in popularity all across 124
 Europe). For instance, the specificity of a 'critical consensus' of the radical 125
 left, exemplified in this book with the cases of Syriza and Podemos, 126
 can be explained by the characteristics of the European construction 127
 process and its inherent tension between an instrumental and identitarian 128
 vision of the EU, prevailing, the latter among actors from below 129
 (social movements, civil society, new party-movements) (della Porta 130
 et al. in this volume). 131

There are pressing questions on the strategies, the actors, the 132
 institutions and the articulation of Euroscepticism that we have 133
 here offered and explored, by providing the first answers within an 134
 interdisciplinary analysis, bringing together comparative politics, 135
 European studies, international relations, media studies and social 136
 movements research. 137

As Patrick Bijsmans addresses, we may need to refer to a more 138
 nuanced study of Euroscepticism, although the more fine grained the 139
 concept, the more challenging the measurement and definition. Yet, 140
 supporting that critical attitudes predominantly pertain alternative 141
 ideas of Europe that are pro-EU, as a system and institutional organ- 142
 isation, he finds that Eurosceptic claims generally refers to the policy 143
 and not to the polity, with reference to Euroalternativism. As such, 144
 this volume would invite to an in-depth analysis of the qualification 145
 of Euroscepticism, as also when it becomes more salient in the public 146
 debates, it is likely to represent qualified opposition to policies, less 147
 opposition towards the EU itself. As also supported by Leruth (et al., 148
 in this volume), we should remain attentive in order to understand the 149
 critical voices towards the EU. 150

151 ... **And the Role of the Media**

152 Media choices as noted by Bijsmans, Galpin and Trenz, and others in this
 153 volume, play a role in this context. Our volume has showed that:

- 154 (i) first, there is likely a different pattern between traditional media [AU6]
 155 (that would influence more positively citizens attitudes towards the
 156 EU process) and Internet (which would tend instead to forge more [AU7]
 157 pessimistic opinions about the EU process (Conti and Memoli;
 158 Mosca and Quaranta, this volume);
- 159 (ii) second, beyond endogenous factors (e.g. media-driven factors in the
 160 words of Galpin and Trenz), media negativity or negative feelings
 161 towards the EU formed by and on the media, also may depend on
 162 external factors, such the political actors that mobilise them or the
 163 audience towards the news about the EU are addressed;
- 164 (iii) third, beyond media and the meso-level of political actors, also the
 165 country context matter in shaping the relation between the media
 166 (old and new) and Euroscepticism. In particular, consistently with
 167 long-term cultural differences, the same type of media provides dif-
 168 ferent images of the EU in diverse countries and domestic political
 169 cultures. For example, as Mosca and Quaranta show, users of tradi-
 170 tional media are associated with more EU trust in Italy, traditionally
 171 one of the most European member states and where there is tradi-
 172 tional media have been fund more supportive of the EU, less so in
 173 other countries (as in Germany or in the UK). [AU8]

174 The research on politics and the media, and especially the new media,
 175 has often been divided between two different and contrasting paradigms:
 176 the ‘technological determinism’, looking at new technologies (as well as
 177 the same can be said for traditional media and journalistic factors) as
 178 autonomous forces able to drive the social and political change and the
 179 ‘social determinism’, which instead, believes that social forces and politi-
 180 cal actors transform and adapt technologies (Mosca and Vaccari 2012,
 181 p. 207). For instance, with specific reference to the topic of this book
 182 (media and Euroscepticism), Fanoulis and Anasol Peña-Ríos suggest

that the EU democracy problem would be solved relying on current 183
 technology and IT services that can remedy problems of time and space, 184
 the biggest obstacles for active civic involvement in EU governance; more 185
 citizens' participation in EU policy-making would be enhanced by ubiq- 186
 uitous computing, mixed reality technology and virtual spaces. 187

If we cannot conclude, with this volume, that old and new media are 188
 per se sufficient stimulus for a positive versus negative political activation of 189
 collective actors and citizens towards the EU and the European integration 190
 process, however the findings coming from all the contributions confirm the 191
 importance to look at, beyond, and together with, the general political and 192
 cultural opportunities, and types of actors mobilising, more specific 'media' 193
 factors for the explanation of Euroscepticism, either offline and online. Future 194
 research would be needed to integrate this aspect in the theoretical models for 195
 rethinking Euroscepticism and its articulation, and for understanding politi- 196
 cal participation and the EU in the era of mediated politics and the Internet. 197

Against this background, the media (old and new) may have to make 198
 choices and may pay more attention to Eurosceptic parties and actors, and 199
 insights from studies in the European public sphere and European stud- 200
 ies with a focus on Euroscepticism can help explain how Euroscepticism 201
 emerges and remains embedded (Usherwood and Startin 2013) in the pro- 202
 cess of EU integration. Further avenue for research that some of the contri- 203
 butions of this book suggest (in particular Heft et al., but see also Pavan and 204
 Caiani) would address the relation between specific media use (in particular 205
 websites and social media) and the formation of transnational coalition of 206
 Eurosceptic versus Europhile actors. This may have an important impact 207
 in the future, in the light of increasing politicisation of EU politics, grow- 208
 ing Euroscepticism and the emergence of a contested EU cleavage, around 209
 which cross-national (pro or contra) coalitions (e.g. the populist right-wing 210
 parties around Europe) establish more synergies with each other. First stud- 211
 ies in this directions, as the chapter of Heft et al. in this volume, have 212
 demonstrated, for instance, that, as far as Twitter and its networking func- 213
 tion is concerned, there are traces of transnational and cross-ideological 214
 interactions between the networks of Europhile and Eurosceptical parties 215
 in Europe. However, although Eurosceptical parties have become a salient 216
 political power in many European countries, they are quite self-centred and 217
 do not form (not yet?) solid transnational networks of Euroscepticism. 218

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Future Research Ahead: (Some) Final Remarks

220 A cross fertilisation between communication and European studies seems
221 critical at this stage, when the EU seems fallen in a stalemate caused
222 by multiple crises, and low salience of the more technical EU issues
223 (although important for the daily life of Europeans such as for instance
224 the current TTIP and CETA agreements), may not create any news,
225 while ‘the negativity bias of political news’ (see Galpin and Trenz in this
226 volume) can partly explain opposition to the EU. A preliminary analy-
227 sis on data collected after the British referendum (Guerrina et al. 2016)
228 shows that the feelings emerged after the vote are mostly negative, with
229 uncertainty apprehension, anger and anxiety on top of the list among
230 not just young people. Young people have often emerged in the analyses
231 of the volume. The perception that the EU is not delivering benefits and
232 the rising social costs of the financial and economic crisis, and austerity
233 programmes have characterised the 2015 Polish general elections. Nicolò
234 Conti and Vincenzo Memoli (this volume) addressed the role of infor-
235 mation and the web in this context. As opinion makers tend to create
236 and raise the salience of an antagonistic debate opposing the EU, they
237 underlined the need to offer an alternative voice from the EU itself, or at
238 least for a neutral information. The web is likely to represent a channel
239 of Euroscepticism (de Wilde et al. 2013), and young people are gener-
240 ally the users of this type of information. Social media and forums can
241 absorb frustration and discontent and magnify them through the repeti-
242 tion or articulation of some messages. At the same time, critical seeds
243 of contestation can also help develop a more politicised public sphere,
244 supporting more awareness across civil society. Nonetheless, as observed,
245 bias across the media address the systemic constraints on EU legitimacy,
246 where, as previously noted, the more the EU is debated, the less legiti-
247 macy. Is therefore the debate on the relationship between the media and
248 European democracy entered a conundrum?

249 Definitely, as we suggest in this book, we need to pay attention to the
250 context where Euroscepticism arises, we need to address its quality, and
251 the form that it takes. The lack of leadership or a vision for the EU at this
252 time has made the Spinelli Group to launch a call for a new Convention

for a political Europe,¹ which would partly answer this challenging stage 253
of the EU integration process. As underlined by Leruth (et al., in this vol- 254
ume) ‘there is no doubt that the EU is becoming increasingly contested in 255
media circles across the EU’. This can further feed political parties and the 256
media. Research can examine when Euroscepticism emerges, what it actu- 257
ally represents and how this is linked to lack of knowledge of what the EU 258
is (see della Porta et al. in this volume), what the drivers are (see Taggart 259
and Szczerbiak 2014), and when enduring, whether it changes its narra- 260
tive or remains within the same frames, strategies and refers to the same 261
actors. Conti and Memoli (this volume) also stress that this critical debate 262
(that may be negative) cannot be necessarily ‘detrimental’ for the EU, but 263
it may support a more aware public sphere, as auspicated by Bijsmans, in 264
his chapter. Yet, as also invoked by Galpin and Trenz, we may need to pay 265
attention to what kind of impact the media can play in future perspective. 266

As the Brexit referendum has shown (Guerra, in this volume), social 267
interaction, networks and the role of the media are likely to influence 268
people’s choices and their cognitive thinking. Citizens are often guided 269
by a generalised overview of the situation that is closer to them and know 270
better (local vs national; national vs European) and subjective evaluations 271
and the role of affect can determine their vote. Data shows, also in the 272
open answers provided (see Guerra, this volume), that the Leave cam- 273
paign was able to stir people emotions, constraining the Remain cam- 274
paign to perpetuate the same narrative. Uncertainty is quite widespread, 275
but UKIP voters feel more hopeful and are happy, while young people feel 276
disappointed, afraid, sceptical and anxious. Rationalist perspectives may 277
not offer the only possible explanation behind the rise of Euroscepticism 278
and a focus on the everyday practice of EU integration beyond political 279
parties and through citizens’ perceptions on the EU can show how public 280
discourse is constructed, in its positive or negative, anxious, angry, or 281
uncertain, characterisations of the EU. 282

Note

1. Available at: <http://www.spinelligroup.eu/article/time-prepare-convention-reform-eu-true-political-union>. 284
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