Doctor of Media en Communication Studies

The Politicisation of the EU and the Europeanisation of National Public Spheres: The case of the spitzenkandidat process

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Abstract

Focusing on the notion of public spheres and politicisation, this study explores to what extent the lead candidates' process for the European Commission's Presidency (*Spitzenkandidaten*) increased the politicisation of the EU, Europeanised national public spheres, and rendered the emergence of a European Twittersphere plausible. The research, which falls within the communication science, consists of two main parts: the conceptual framework and the empirical analysis.

First, it takes neo-functionalism as a starting point, considering the lead candidates, the European political parties, and the MEPs important actors of European integration. Second, it is based on the core premise of social constructivism, when conceptualising public spheres. With extant scholarly analyses stressing that, it is only through meaning-making that objects of the "real world" become knowable and real to us, public spheres are perceived as social constructions. Third, it shares the view that media hold a pivotal role in disseminating information, spreading knowledge, constructing representations, and shaping ideologies, as well as exerting influence over contemporary societies. Thus, the research focuses on the media-related public spheres. Politicisation is defined as the process through

which European issues have become subjects of public discussion and contestation. At the same time, national public spheres are likely to be Europeanised when simultaneous discussions of the same topics take place across (media outlets of) member states and under the same criteria of relevance.

The empirical analysis provided here, entails quantitative and qualitative elements on the *Spitzenkandidaten* process during the 2014 and 2019 European parliamentary elections. I examine a sample of newspaper articles that were published from 7 March to 31 May 2014 and 2019 in seven member states and the United Kingdom, applying a quantitative content analysis and qualitative frame and claim-making analysis. To what extent the *Spitzenkandidaten* process was *salient* in the national public spheres (Q1)? To what extent did the process receive attention from different national actors – *actor expansion* (Q2)? Which were the lead candidates' main claims and to what extent did they generate political contestation across the member states of the sample and the UK – *polarisation* (Q3)? To what extent it generated a simultaneous discussion across member states (Q4) and under the same criteria of relevance (Q5)? To what extent did the *Spitzenkandidaten* process become a trend on Twitter (*salience*) during the elections? (Q6) On which issues did Twitter users focus during the campaign? (Q7) To what extent did they generate political contestation across member states? (Q8) Which was the geographical distribution of Twitter users and tweets related to the process? (Q9) Through which language did Twitter users mostly communicate? (Q10)

Except for the media related approach, the internal structure of the campaigns of the European political parties is analysed in an effort to demonstrate that the *Spitzenkandidaten* process may reinforce the politicisation of the EU. Which was the role of the European political parties ahead of the elections? (Q11) To what extent did the Spitzenkandidaten process alter the European political parties' role itself? (Q12) To what extent their campaign practices reinforce the EU politicisation? (Q13) The data are collected on the basis of qualitative, semi-structured and structured live interviews, conducted with key campaign actors.

While in 2014, the salience of the *Spitzenkandidaten* process was relevantly high, despite certain country- and media-specific variations, in 2019, the press coverage dropped off by almost half. Pertinent reporting referred more to national actors' argumentation than

quoting the *Spitzenkandidaten*. A broader range of actors is involved in 2019 than in 2014. Yet, one should avert of saying that the coverage reflects a wide number of societal actors. Meanwhile, in both election contests, there seem to be instant cases of polarisation, in particular when it comes to the negotiations around the nomination of the Commission's president. Not least, most of the selected newspapers reported on the issue using the same criteria of relevance, namely, similar frames and meaning structures.

On Twitter, the monitoring and analysis of the *Spitzenkandidaten* related Twittersphere in 2014 and 2019 showed that the process did not manage to attract the interest of large online communities. Yet, one may see that there was an issue convergence, regarding Twittersphere users' discussions. The wide majority of neutral posts lead us to the assumption that the *Spitzenkandidaten* related Twittersphere seems closer to an echo chamber rather than an open forum. Although there were instances of polarisation, in particular when tracing the negative evaluations, these should be seen as rather limited. The results have indicated that in some countries social media users' interest to the *Spitzenkandidaten* process was relevantly vivid. In principle, the lead candidates were more identifiable by their fellow citizens who seemed more willing to be involved in the process than users from member states of different origin with the lead candidates. Even though most of the relevant posts were conducted in English, other languages appeared as well.

In the meantime, the role of the European political parties seem to be strengthened from that of being service providers to being proactive campaigners. The *Spitzenkandidaten* process is likely to foster their political aim.

In the context of the the Conference on the Future of Europe, in which the fate of the *Spitzenkandidaten* process is expected to be discussed among other issues, this cross-national research seeks to feed the public discussion on the democratisation of the EU's political system. It provides a fruitful approach on the EU's democracy, the establishment of a European public sphere, and the future prospect of the *Spitzenkandidaten* process itself. With relevant debates concentrating on how to increase citizens' participation to EU's decision-making, some pundits stress the need for expanding EU competences and cure its democratic deficit. Others express their scepticism towards giving more competences to Brussels. Considering the importance of traditional media outlets or social media in formulating public opinion, this mutli-media research, for the first time, combines and

analyses data related to the *Spitzenkandidaten* process from twenty-nine daily newspapers and Twitter. This occurs in conjunction with displaying different insights about the campaign activities of the European political parties, including their internal structure and their daily activities.

According to the scholars who advocate that the EU suffers from a democratic deficit, one of the bloc's biggest weakness is that there is no link between the election results and the composition of the Commission. The main research hypothesis mentioned at the beginning is tested as a response to the so-called lack of democratic legitimation and responsiveness on EU's side.