PARLIAMENTARISATION AND POLITISATION OF THE EUROPEAN UNION IN THE LIGHT OF THE RISE OF EUROSCEPTICISM

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Abstract

Over the last decade, two concepts have gradually come into focus of the European integration studies. The first is related to the 'politicisation of the EU' - a complex theory that aims to link a number of political and public issues underlying the growing contradictions of multi-level decision-making in the EU. The second line of analysis concerns the 'parliamentarisation' of the EU, referring to the changing institutional role of the European Parliament and its interaction with member state legislatures.

The main thesis of this paper is that we need to consider parliamentarisation as a salient but yet insufficient component of a broader process of politicisation. This goes far beyond the standard theoretical concepts and urges a new reading of the consequences, connected to this reality, contributing to a more complete understanding of the EU decision-making process and increasing its legitimacy and transparency in the context of crises, the new role of the European Parliament and growing Euroscepticism.

Keywords: European Union, European Parliament, parliamentarisation, politisation, euroscepticism

1. Introduction

Central place in the debate on the political system of the European Union is undoubtedly „occupied" by the capacity of European Union to deal with crises of different nature. For the past 20 years, the EU has indeed been in a constant state of crisis and crisis management. This we must not forget in any way, as the crisis are usually the ones that modify the structure of the EU on many levels.

First - as with the national level of government - they tend to favour the executive power, as they require quick, decisive and often unpopular decisions. The need for urgent actions is not favourable for the legislative body - therefore for the parliaments - as well as for adequate, timely and constructive inter-institutional interaction.

Second, at the EU level the phenomenon is even more obvious, since the European Council is the only institution capable of acting, even when the EU lacks clear

competences, by developing ad hoc intergovernmental instruments. Crises have an impact on the functioning of institutions, as was the case with the Covid-19 pandemic. All institutions had to urgently agree on new ways of organising remote work and perfect the necessary digital tools.

Even here, the effect has been rather asymmetric, as the pandemic posed a greater challenge to the 705-member European Parliament than to the College of Commissioners, the Council of the European Union or the European Council, all made up of a limited number of key players.

The need to make urgent decisions in a very restrictive context seriously challenges the democratic legitimacy of policy-making processes. This not only gives a kind of superiority to the executive bodies (the European Commission and the Council) over the legislative ones (the Parliament, together with the Council)[1]; but it profoundly affects the functioning of institutions.

Decision-making becomes much more centralised and opaque, neglecting to some extent the principles of openness, transparency, deliberation and accountability. The Conference on the Future of Europe precisely highlighted these challenges and discussed ways to improve the EU's capacity to act quickly and efficiently in its areas of competence - and even in others - as well as to increase the democratic legitimacy of EU decision-making procedures, especially by improving citizens' participation.

This key task implies clarifying the current 'state of affairs' within the EU, which is guided by three different decision-making logics: the community method, the intergovernmental and the parliamentary approach.

Currently, the EU's institutional system is still based on the one created by the Treaty of Paris in 1951. It is 'sui generis' in that it is the only one of its kind, and does not in any way reproduce an already existing model.

Determining the EU's overall action, developing, and maintaining its policies involves three main institutions: The Commission, the EP and the Council. The Commission is the EU's executive branch. It must act in the European „common interest" and be completely independent of the member states, but accountable to the parliament. Parliament has a leading role in adopting EU legislation. It also adopts and manages the EU budget and ensures that EU law is properly applied.

2. Parliamentarisation of the EU as a factor of stability

Parliamentarisation is a concept that is increasingly influencing EU decision-making and the Community approach. Initially, in the early 1970s, it was the result of growing concerns about the democratic deficit and legitimacy of the European project. In 1976, the leaders of the member states agreed on direct elections of parliament - as the members of the EP requested this since the beginning of the 1960s of the last century. After the first direct elections in 1979, the EP quite naturally sought new powers, as the only institution that is constituted by the direct will of the citizens.

[1] In the institutional structure of the EU the Council has both legislative and executive functions

In reality, the reforms of the founding treaties never intended to completely transform the institutional model of the European Communities. They are rather focused on overcoming the democratic deficit by streamlining the institutional system and clarifying its underlying goals and values. However, there is a cumulative effect over time that we can define as gradual and continuous „parliamentarisation": increased powers and influence of Parliament; European citizenship; strengthening European political parties; tying the composition of the Commission to the results of the EP elections, etc.

Since the 1980s, the parliamentary model has been an implicit reference to treaty reforms. The Treaty of Lisbon confirms this trend by providing that the functioning of the Union be based on representative democracy and establishing the concept of dual representation of citizens within the Parliament, on the one hand, and the Council and the European Council, on the other.

This evolution is defined by two theories. The first is post-functionalism: it aims to integrate recent developments in European integration and strive to combat growing Euroscepticism[2]. It highlights the growing tension that exists between the need for deepening European integration declared by the EU and national leaders and the concerns that integration raises among citizens. This is especially because of the austerity policies that is increasingly imposed in the future.[3]

Political integration brings together a number of sensitive issues - such as defence, justice, migration, health care and taxation. The debates they spawn address fundamental issues such as religion, culture, sovereignty and identity. In this way, the EU's actions create strong political divisions both domestically and at the European level.

To make sense of the relationship between European integration and national political systems, the concept of „Europeanisation" is often used, defined as „a gradual process changing the direction and form of politics to the extent that the political and economic dynamics of the EU become part of the organisational logic of national politics and policymaking"[4].

When the object of Europeanisation is the national parliamentary system, some authors argue about the degree of „parliamentarisation" of the EU. It often defines parliamentarisation as the more active participation of parliaments in controlling and shaping regional and global governance. In this case, 'more active participation' refers to the institutional capacity to participate in the shaping and control of governance) as well as to the actual practice of shaping policy, in terms of control, coordination or communication. These „institutional" reactions, on the one hand, and „attitudinal" and „behavioural" reactions on the other, are elements of the Europeanisation of national parliaments.

Some authors comment on the opposite process - deparliamentarisation of the EU: a diminishing and eroding role of national parliaments, which are increasingly unable to carry out European governance[5].

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[2] Hooghe & Marks, 2018

[3] Hobolt, De Vries, 2016

[4] Rozenberg, Hefftler, 2016

[5] Raunio, 2009

The main argument is that national parliaments are either not interested in dealing with EU issues or do not know how to do it effectively. However, other studies argue that national parliaments are actively beginning to „fight back" by adapting institutionally to meet the challenges of European integration.[6]

One approach is to form special committees on European affairs so that they are in a better position to monitor their governments. A consensus is emerging on the issue that national institutions have made significant efforts to cope with the Union's requirements. National parliaments are now, at least most of them, in a much stronger position to control their governments than they were in the 1990s. Several provisions in the Treaty of Lisbon regarding national parliaments (such as the creation of the so-called „early warning system") further reinforce this development of institutional parliamentarisation.

Therefore, the more important question is whether national parliaments actually use these provisions to entrench themselves in the EU's multi-level system[7]. In fact, institutional possibilities remain hypothetical. In order to analyse the parliamentarisation of the EU, it is necessary to take into consideration:

- the attitudes and roles of members of parliament
- their EU-related behaviour and activities over an extended period of time.

Changes in attitudes and conceptions of MPs' roles may lead to an increased willingness to actively participate in 'policymaking' at the EU level or to seek accountability from government.

It is logical to turn to traditional parliamentary functions to see how they have developed in the European context: electing governments, passing legislation, controlling the executive, communication with citizens. The focus falls on the control functions of parliaments, and increasingly on the communication function. There can be little doubt that effective democracy increasingly depends on effective communication with voters. When it comes to parliamentary control and oversight, the main conclusion is about time and country differentiation.

The communication function has come into focus in the last ten years. The quality of democracy depends on an active and focused public debate in which citizens are given political alternatives in order to make the most informed choice. That is why national parliaments are in a unique position to 'translate' EU policies, to 'bring the EU home' and explain in accessible language its aims, values and tasks.

National parliaments can significantly contribute to the democratic legitimacy of the EU and the European political system as a whole. However, while it is theoretically true that „national parliaments provide a large space for public debate and are therefore ideal arenas for discussing important European issues"[8], we do not have enough empirical knowledge about whether they really do. National parliaments can play this role in different ways: informing citizens, asking parliamentary questions or making transcripts of meetings publicly available.

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[6] Raunio, Hix, 2000

[7] Gheyle, 2019

[8] Auel, Kinski, 2018

However, a major role is meant for the plenary debates. The plenary hall is a very good forum for defending specific positions on various European issues. The role of the media is also key here, to direct the attention of citizens to these debates and make them visible.

In a special study devoted to the communication role of national parliaments, Auel and Raunio (2014) summarise that, generally speaking, national parliaments „do not seem to be up to the task of bringing 'Europe' closer to citizens or enabling them to make an informed political choice and exercise democratic control over EU affairs'. Especially in the plenary debates, the EU remains a „rare guest". Although some institutional indicators seem important (such as the protection of fundamental rights, or the existence of a „working" rather than a „speaking" parliament), intra-party struggles and efforts to attract voters take centre stage in the debates. Often the criterion of „public significance" reappears in analyses of the communication function, „disguised" in a variety of topics. The process of institutional parliamentarisation of the EU is definitely happening, while raising a number of questions related to the existence of different models of this concept.

3. Politisation of European integration

Over the past 10 years, the so-called „permissive consensus" regarding European integration has finally ended. Both declining approval and growing Euroscepticism are gradually becoming inseparable components of contemporary social and political life. This has profound consequences for European integration and its democratic functioning. On the one hand, the fact that the public is already „watching more closely" the actions of elites and that the EU has become an integral part of politics has a limiting effect on further integration.

On the other hand, this same process has serious democratising potential, because debates on European topics provide citizens with alternatives, different points of view and opportunities - all being elements of good governance[9].

The politicisation of European integration undoubtedly has a profound impact on further European (dis)integration, making it a key research topic for years to come. From an academic point of view, the first tasks are therefore to conceptualise the phenomenon of politicisation and its relation to 'politics', as well as to analyse its various manifestations. From a conceptual point of view, politicisation implies „turning an issue into politics", combining the visible and contested aspects of the „political"[10].

The main idea is that the EU, its policies and decisions, are discussed and no longer escape the attention of the wider public. This means that the usually executive-led process of European integration is no longer taken for granted and is often the victim of heated and public debate. De Wilde (2014) in turn defines politicisation as „increasing the polarisation of opinions, interests or values and the extent to which they are publicly advanced towards the policy formulation process within the EU".

[9] Statham, Trenz, 2015

[10] Palonen, Wiesner, Selk, Kauppi, 2019

The broad scope of this definition gives rise to a debate about how to „measure" and make sense of politicisation, particularly in terms of the manifestations it entails. It is about the ways in which the phenomenon becomes visible to researchers to study its existence and degree of development.

Some authors argue that politicisation consists of three main elements: salience of the specific topic, influence of the holder of executive powers and degree of polarisation of opinions[11]. Nevertheless, the different interpretations that can arise from these terms lead to two leading approaches to analysing politicisation: as a purely (or primarily) discursive concept, or as a much more comprehensive phenomenon.

In the first, widespread approach, politicisation is as an essentially discursive phenomenon, based on political communication. With this approach, it is not enough for the participants to be aware or to be able to form opinions, but the topic must become a leading one for political communication and influence the making of one or another decision. The focus is on „communicative processes that lead to the increasing intensity and contradictions of debates"[12].

When we talk about politicisation from this point of view, we have to keep in mind the existence of two main prerequisites:

- executive agents are present and they raise issues
- questions are public and become public knowledge.

Politicisation does not happen automatically but is based on public or political actors seeking publicity and interaction with a wider audience. The place where these discursive interventions can take place - and therefore, we can see evidence of politicisation - is in these spaces of public debate in which it can actively unfold. Parliaments, the media, 'the streets', assemblies or scientific conferences fit this description. This is also the reason why some researchers classify three types of spaces in which we can find and study politicisation: institutional, mediating and civil environments[13].

The institutional environment consists mainly of the parliaments of the member states, where the people's representatives participate in political debate on issues on the EU agenda. Therefore, the length and dynamics of parliamentary debates or the polarisation between different parties on EU main policies are sometimes used as indicators of politicisation. The second so-called an intermediary environment serves as a link between political decision-making and representatives of civil society. With their ever-widening reach and centrality in modern democracies, mass media and social networks serve as a site for studying politicisation[14]. This is due to the structural barriers, such as language differences or nationally structured media systems, still hinder pan-European debates. For this reason, it is argued that multiple institutional variables lead to a „differentiated politicisation of European governance, where patterns vary widely"[15].

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[11] De Wilde, 2023

[12] Schmidtke, 2014

[13] Baglioni, Hurrelmann, 2016

[14] Gheyle, 2019

[15] De Wilde, Lord, 2016

According to another approach, politicisation implies much more than public debate or political communication[16]. Changing attitudes and perceptions about the EU and its policies, various activities such as lobbying, coalition formation, voting trends, parliamentary control over European issues in this sense are also evidence of its deepening politicisation.

The parliamentary communication function logically overlaps with political communication in the institutional environment. Increased parliamentary scrutiny of the EU is less visible to the general public, but it is a political activity anyway. Even MPs' growing awareness of their role in multi-level policymaking or of the importance of a particular EU policy can be seen as evidence of politicisation (in the broader approach).

In summary, the different types of EU parliamentarisation can be conceptualised as necessary but insufficient components of a broader politicisation dynamic. This means that choosing a narrow or broad approach to politicisation is important for assessing the relationship between parliamentarisation and politicisation.

In the broad approach, parliamentarisation of attitudes and the control aspect of behavioural parliamentarisation can be defined as concrete manifestations of EU politicisation. While this clearly has its advantages for analysing longer-term dynamics in the multi-level EU polity, it can also lead to contradictory trends.

Institutional parliamentarisation and related control functions may also lead to increased bureaucratisation and depoliticisation, as tighter control practices might favour bureaucrats at the expense of more visible and active policy discussions in the plenary. For this and other reasons, it is more useful to think of politicisation in the narrow view set out above, as a primarily discursive concept. This limited approach is also better suited to dealing with short-term politicisation concepts, as is the case when we focus on EU policy analysis. It also clarifies the relationship between (the communicative aspect of) behavioural parliamentarisation and politicisation. It is visible, polarised, parliamentary communication (most often observed in plenary debates) that is considered a component of the wider (discursive) politicisation of an EU issue.

In addition to theoretical and analytical reasons, there are also purely normative considerations that justify the closer relationship between behavioural parliamentarisation and politicisation. Both politicisation and parliamentarisation imply a normative, democratic component: widespread public debate and the concrete translation of this in parliament are considered a constitutive force of democratisation. Here again, however, it seems insufficiently justified to suppose that these far-reaching beneficial results are the result of only their partial manifestations. For national parliamentary debates, this is relatively clear: if parliamentary debates do not resonate beyond the legislature, it is quite difficult for the public to even realise that they have taken place.

As Auel succinctly puts it: „Despite the remarkable increase in parliamentary involvement in EU affairs, the added value in terms of democratic legitimacy will remain limited if citizens are not aware of these activities"[17]. Social media may play

[16] Hooghe, Marks, 2009

[17] Auel, Eisele, Kinski, 2018

an important role, but mainstream media remains the main channel for promoting these debates to the wider public.

What deliberative, normative implications might debates have for and between foreign or European actors, making EU topics seem distant, or as if they are played out between others rather than concerning us? Arguably, what matters is the relationship between the deliberative process of opinion-making and the decision-making level.[18]

MEPs and the Parliament as a whole play a fundamental role in increasing the resonance of this public debate, as well as in making the implementers more accountable. External debates (as European issues are often perceived) need internal translation or they could sink into the already complex public sphere. What is lacking is not democracy at the EU level, but a sufficiently sustainable connection between the European and national level.

However, normalisation means discussion of alternative EU policies by non-Eurosceptic parties, in line with their characteristic ideological commitments. It is necessary to analyse parliamentarisation and politicisation together because it helps us to achieve a more adequate understanding of the two complex processes. This means, first of all, identifying the conditions under which a spillover from broader public to parliamentary debates occurs (or vice versa).

Several variables have already been mentioned but not put into a common framework due to the separate development of these strands in the literature. When it comes to the conditions generally considered necessary for political parties to openly communicate on EU issues, four variables stand out:

- the problem must be important and salient;
- the party's position must be in line with the voters;
- the party must be internally united on the subject;
- debaters must take alternative positions[19] (Miklin, 2014: 84)

Interestingly, the transition from parliamentary to wider public discussions (eg. mass media) is based on precisely such considerations.

The media is certainly interested in parliamentary debates on EU issues, but first of all such events must actually take place. Therefore, political parties and people's representatives are key players in this process. However, there are a range of trade-offs before MPs that influence their decisions to bring European issues to the fore, take opposing positions and try to influence the outcomes of the Union's policies.

It is important to pay attention not only to whether plenary debates are held or there is political communication on European issues, but also what is the main motivation to do so and when MPs tend to abstain. The reasons can be diverse - party specifics, ideology, whether they are in power or opposition, but also with perceptions of the division of roles with the European Parliament or issue-specific variables such as distinctions between distributive, regulatory or foreign policy issues. Parties can, of course, react to socially relevant topics, which means that we also

[18] Papadopoulos, 2013

[19] Miklin, 2014

need to consider how public debate expands from initial discursive interventions to its entry into legislatures.

4. Conclusion

Parliamentarisation and politicisation of the EU are two related processes. The key point is that we should see parliamentarisation as a necessary but still insufficient component of a broader concept of politicisation, rather than as separate processes that influence each other.

The dynamics between these different levels is complex, even without questioning how a multi-level politicisation would look like. Civil society is also a key factor in the unfolding of politicisation. Topics of social and political life, which are discussed simultaneously in the parliament and in the mass media, quite logically fall into the focus of attention of the voters. The integration of citizens' attitudes, along with the media and debates in the legislative body, not only helps to understand the depth of politicisation, but also shows that these processes have their own specifics in every EU member state.

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