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EUROSCEPTICISM AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

1. *The construction of the European public sphere and the growing hostility towards the European project*

The idea of Europe, from the Enlightenment onwards¹, is defined by contrasts and different points of view. Consequently, the formation of a European public sphere and of the ways in which the different organised groups, public and private, participate in the construction of its area of influence, has become a highly controversial issue. According to Jürgen Habermas² the search for the roots of European identity should not be seen as the crucial question for the protection of the European project, since in his view developing a common sense of solidarity is more important. European identity will be achievable only when its community, vast and complex by definition, is finally capable of accepting its differences.

In 1993 Jacques Delors, in the “White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness and Employment,” estimated that in the following twenty years 80% of national decisions would be influenced by European institutions. Albeit not as quickly as predicted, and not in every sector, the prophecy is coming true³. This is having a pronounced impact on the processes of governance, with repercussions – for better or worse – for the creation of European identity.

¹ M. Ceretta and B. Curli (eds.), *On Europe. Discourses and Counter-discourses, from the Enlightenment to the EU*, London, Routledge, 2017.

² J. Habermas, *Cittadinanza politica e identità nazionale. Riflessioni sul futuro dell'Europa*, in *Morale, diritto, politica*, Turin, Einaudi, 1992; Id., *Il ruolo dell'intellettuale e la causa dell'Europa*, Bari, Laterza, 2011.

³ S. Brouard, O. Costa and T. König (eds.), *The Europeanization of Domestic Legislatures The Empirical Implications of the Delors' Myth in Nine Countries*, New York, Springer-Verlag, 2012.

The definition of public space, which runs parallel to the formation and growth of democratic processes, is becoming a multilevel interrelationship in which the European Union occupies an increasingly important role⁴. Suffice it to consider the role that the European institutions have played in mitigating the negative effects of the economic and financial crisis and the more current emergency of immigration from the Mediterranean area. This, however, means that the space in which European decisions are taken is no longer neutral and has become more and more conflictual.

Some authors see the growth of constraining dissent within Europe as structural⁵ and consider the rise in critical positions as a sign that its public and political space and its civil society are maturing. They argue that since it is now possible to talk about a public sphere, the dynamics of conflict and forms of dispute are inevitable and their presence gives strength to the common project⁶. Within the public sphere, contentious politics become evidence of robust health and of the dynamism that always stimulates and accompanies the renewal of political and social phases, as Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow⁷ have explained. Seen from this perspective, the growth of Eurosceptic, or Euro-critical, feelings can even be a sign of vitality in the construction of the European project, although it remains difficult to ignore the risks, as the United Kingdom's recent decision to withdraw from the European Union demonstrates.

⁴ I. Volkmer, *The Global Public Sphere: Public Communication in the Age of Reflective Interdependence*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2014.

⁵ I. Down and C.J. Wilson, *From Permissive Consensus to Constraining Dissensus: A Polarizing Union?*, in «ActaPolitica», 43, 2008, pp. 26-49; L. Hooghe and G. Marks, *A Postfunctionalist Theory of European Integration: From Permissive Consensus to Constraining Dissensus*, in «British Journal of Political Science», 39, 2009, pp. 1-23.

⁶ T. Risse and T. Börzel, *Conceptualizing the Domestic Impact of Europe*, in *The Politics of Europeanisation*, in K. Featherstone and C. Radaelli (eds), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. 57-80.

⁷ C. Tilly, and S. Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006.

2. *The precarious European public sphere*

The public sphere is a communicative space of intermediation where collective action and social relations ought to extend beyond those of the individual and facilitate new practices of citizenship⁸. From this point of view, constructing the European public sphere is proving more difficult than expected⁹. After years of permissive consensus¹⁰ and mostly uncritical acceptance of the European integration process by many member states, this favourable inclination is deteriorating due to the present crisis. The first intimation of this came in the early 1990s during the expansion of the European regulative sphere and the launch of a European system of governance when the Single European Act (1987) came into force and, more so, with the adoption of the Maastricht Treaty (1992) and the introduction of the single currency (1999).

All these factors have increased the evidence of a democratic deficit, in other words the sense that the European Union and its institutions suffer from a lack of democratic legitimacy and an excess of complexity that creates a distance between them and citizens. The integration process is made fragile, vulnerable to anti-European attacks, by the inadequate sharing of information¹¹ which gives rise to cognitive problems.

⁸ McKee 2005; R. Wodak and V.Koller (eds), *Handbook of Communication in the Public Sphere*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2008.

⁹ R. Koopmans and P. Statham, *The Making of a European Public Sphere: Media Discourse and Political Contention*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

¹⁰ P. Bréchon, B. Cautres, and B. Denni, *L'évolution des attitudes à l'égard de l'Europe*, in *Le vote des Douze. Les élections européennes de juin 1994*, P. Perrineau and C. Ysmal (eds.), Paris, Presses de Sciences, pp. 203-228.

¹¹ P. Norris, *Representation and the democratic deficit*, in «European Journal of Political Research», n. 32, 1997, pp. 273-282; P. Golding, in *Eurocrats, Technocrats and Democrats*, in «European Societies», n. 9 [5], 2007, pp. 719-734; A. Triandafyllidou, R. Wodak and M. Krzyzanowski (eds.), *The European Public: Sphere and the Media Europe in Crisis*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009; L. Morganti and L. Bekemans (eds), *The European Public Sphere: From Critical Thinking to Responsible Action*, Brussels, Peter Lang, 2012.

In this perspective, globalisation¹², multiculturalism and the pluralisation of the public sphere¹³ constitute the most serious challenges of the integration process. In terms of communicative action, these are challenges that raise the point of the multiplication of opportunities and arenas of discussion for European subjects as a development factor of European civil society.

In this respect the traditional media and the new media play a crucial role in defining the semantic field in which institutions, political forces and organised citizens form and reinforce their ideas. There is no doubt that the media and politics are currently contributing to a negative impression of Europe, even though there are indicators that seem more positive. This obliges us to distinguish between two apparent structural and cultural tendencies: the Europeanisation of the public sphere¹⁴ and the Euro-peanised national public sphere¹⁵.

The Europeanisation of the public sphere is based on the understanding that a supranational dimension – not only economic and financial – is emerging in which Europe and its institutional actors take part in so far as they take political decisions and outline scenarios that are able to influence the public agenda of the Union¹⁶. This is a position firmly supported by European intellectuals¹⁷, that has received institutional approval. The need for member states to reform their bureaucracies and update their policies is creating in practice a kind

¹² I. Volkmer, *op. cit.*

¹³ R. Marini, *Concentrazione e distrazione: come i giornalismo nazionali rappresentano l'Unione Europea*, in «Annali di Sociologia 2010-2012», 18, 2015, pp. 197-219.

¹⁴ D. Della Porta and M. Caiani, *Quale Europa? Europeizzazione, identità e conflitti*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2006.

¹⁵ C. Marletti and J. Mouchon (eds), *La costruzione mediatica dell'Europa*, Milan, Franco Angeli, 2005.

¹⁶ R. Ladrech, *Europeanization and National Politics*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, ch. 1.

¹⁷ J. Habermas, *Il ruolo dell'intellettuale e la causa dell'Europa*, *cit.*; E. Morin, *Penser l'Europe*, Paris, Gallimard, 1987; A. Cavalli and A. Martinelli, *La società Europea*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2016.

of institutional isomorphism that draws them ever more closely together¹⁸.

Nevertheless, there still persists a tendency to speak of Europe in a way that connects its actions to domestic issues, to use the decisions of Brussels as a smokescreen behind which to hide internal problems¹⁹. Thus Europe becomes a scapegoat that provides national governments with excuses and justifications, particularly when adopting austerity measures that require sacrifice: «Europe demands it»²⁰.

Building on this theoretical picture, this essay investigates the Europeanisation process of the Italian public sphere, making use of findings of research on the visibility of the Union during elections, when the debate on Europe is at its most dense and political orientations emerge with clarity.

The aim is to analyse the presence of Europe as a social and political horizon and to reflect on how the media and communication systems either aid or hinder the construction of the European public sphere. The main hypothesis is that there is widespread disengagement and a lack of political professionalism in questions related to Europe, and that remains an obstacle to the development of a European common sense, leaving the field open to those with contrary inclinations.

3. *Against Europe: the paradox of political discourse*

It should be noted that in Italy a large sector of politics has long been strongly pro-European, first as a result of the

¹⁸ C. Radaelli, *The Politics of Corporate Taxation in the European Union: Knowledge and International Policy Agendas*, London, Routledge, 1997; Id., *L'analisi di impatto della regolazione in prospettiva comparata [Editor]*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2001.

¹⁹ D. Della Porta and M. Caiani, *op. cit.*

²⁰ P. Taggart, *A Touchstone of Dissent: Euroscepticism in Contemporary Western European Party Systems*, in «European Journal of Political Research», 33, 1998, pp. 363-388; A. Cole and H. Drake, *The Europeanization of the French polity: continuity, change and adaptation*, in «Journal of European Public Policy», 7 [1], 2000, pp. 26-43.

North Atlantic Treaty and then in response to perceived opportunities for globalisation and progress²¹. The Italians' strong support for Europe can moreover be explained in terms of the country's weak sense of national identity and thus its largely xenophile mentality²². Whatever the explanation, things began to change with the new millennium. Aided and abetted by an unstable political and economic situation, a hesitant, incoherent Europeanism on the part of politicians and public opinion²³ has marked the past twenty years.

But enthusiasm for Europe has been in decline almost everywhere since Italy's entry into the Single Market and the introduction of the euro, and the global economic crisis has made things worse by strengthening the Eurosceptic front²⁴. In spite of what the political debate seems to say, the situation is anything but clear.

Taking up the results of research by the University of Turin's Observatory on Public and Political Communication, this chapter points to some indicators intended to explain the interpretative instability with regard to Europe.

Let us begin by outlining and analysing a long-term view of the situation obtained by crossing some data streams of attitudes towards Europe²⁵. Over the past thirty years, the most significant in the history of European integration, two

²¹ T. Ammendola and P. Isernia, *L'Europa vista dagli italiani: i primi vent'anni*, in M. Cotta, P. Isernia and L. Verzichelli (eds.), *L'Europa in Italia: élite, opinione pubblica e decisioni*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2005, pp. 117-170.

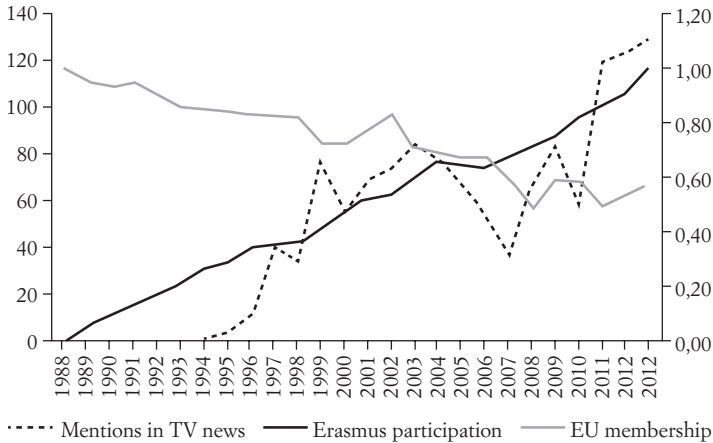
²² P. Segatti, *Quale idea di nazione hanno gli italiani? Alcune riflessioni sull'idea italiana di nazione in una prospettiva comparata*, in *Giovani e democrazia in Europa*, G. Bettin (ed.), Padova, Cedam, 2000, pp. 451-483.

²³ F. Bindi, *Italy and the European Union*, Washington, Brookings Institution Press, 2011.

²⁴ F. Serricchio, M. Tsakatika and L. Quaglia, *Euroscepticism and the Global Financial Crisis*, in «Journal of Common Market Studies», 51, 1, 2013, pp. 51-64.

²⁵ M. Belluati, *Europa Liquida. Contraddizioni e ri-orientamenti del processo di costruzione della sfera pubblica in Italia*, in *L'Unione Europea tra istituzioni e opinione pubblica*, M. Belluati and P. Caraffini (eds.), Rome, Carocci, 2015, pp. 179-192.

FIGURE 1. *The phases of Europeanism in Italy*



Source: Belluati 2015, p. 186.

crucial events have had to be confronted, namely the introduction of the euro (1999) and the start of the economic crisis (2008). A comparison of the data reveals that the overall picture is rather complex. The proxy data chosen were: a) institutional trust in Europe²⁶; b) the increased movement of citizens²⁷ to show levels of internal mobility; c) the public visibility of news about Europe.²⁸ In a descriptive sense the situation represented in this way appears more fluid and pronounced than might be suggested by public debate narratives.

The beginning of the century was characterised by the end of the phase of permissive consensus, that is, a period

²⁶ Following the model developed by Simon Hix (*The Political System of the European Union*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), we have used the trend of responses to the Eurobarometro's question: «Taking everything into consideration, would you say that [your country] has on balance benefited or not from being a member of the European Union?» available for Italy only until 2011.

²⁷ Data on the Erasmus programme were chosen as indicators of European internal mobility.

²⁸ The data are based on relevant reports in Italy's main TV news bulletins (TG1).

in which approval for the euro represented a superficial and fairly unproblematic attitude that coincided, in Italy, with the long wave of political instability, still unresolved, that allowed Euroscepticism to spread. During this time of uncertain trends in the data the situation was fluid. The economic crisis and the adoption of the Treaty of Lisbon, however, led to a new period characterised by the growth of a Euro-critical attitude, although judging by the ebbs and flows of the data this seems to have been more qualified for being better informed and more mobile²⁹.

The political-electoral context serves as a vantage point from which to observe the trends of ongoing Europeanisation. From the 1990s onwards, the moment of definitive integration, attention paid to Europe in Italian elections has remained a constant. The first political programme to officially highlight the importance of the European Government in the heart of its manifesto was that of Romano Prodi in 1996. From then on, to a greater or lesser degree, Europe has been part of the national political picture. Indeed, since 2008 it has been a consistent and important aspect of the manifestos of all parties³⁰, albeit with differences of orientation. In this uncertain climate shared by opposing forces, many factors have contributed to guiding public debate on European issues.

The growing presence of Europe in public decisions and narratives is now self-evident, and to have an overall idea of this it was deemed useful to take elections as a point of reference. Data collected by the Observatory on Public and Political Communication have analysed an electoral cycle, focusing mainly on the past three European elections, of 2004³¹, 2009³², and 2014³³ and the general election of 2013,

²⁹ F. Serricchio, *Perché gli italiani diventano euroscettici*, Pisa, Plus-Pisa University Press, 2011.

³⁰ F. Bindi, *op. cit.*

³¹ C. Marletti and J. Mouchon (eds), *op. cit.*

³² M. Belluati and G. Bobba, *European elections in Italian media: between second order campaign and the construction of a European public sphere*, in «CEU Political Science Journal», 5[2], 2010, pp. 160-186.

³³ M. Belluati, *Europa Liquidata*, *cit.*; Id., *Un'Europa, tante Europe*,

in which Europe was important³⁴.

An analysis of the European electoral cycle demonstrates that the public debate on European issues has been changing for some time, and that a process of transformation is taking place. Despite being less important³⁵, the European elections of 2004 witnessed a growth of organised forms of political communication and increased media visibility. At that time, at least in Italy, the theme of anti-Europeanism went largely unnoticed by the national political system, whereas considerable attention was paid to the process of European integration and to relations with other member states. The quality and quantity of debate on European issues consolidated at that time have made it possible to verify the presence in Italy of a national public sphere increasingly Europeanised in terms of its agenda, which at the time was seen as a positive sign towards integration³⁶.

However, the 2009 elections revealed more signs of change. On a political level, scant attention was paid to

nessuna Europa, in «Comunicazione politica», “Meno Europa, altra Europa. La definizione dell’Europa in un frame controverso”, special issue [guest editor], XVI[3], 2015, pp. 289-298; Id., *Elezioni Europee 2014. Verso l’Europeizzazione dello spazio pubblico?*, in «Lingue Culture Mediazioni – Languages Cultures Mediation», 2/2015, pp. 23-42; Id., *Signs of Europeanization? The 2014 EU election in European newspapers*, in «Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica», 46, 2016, pp. 131-150; M. Belluati and C. Cepernich, 2017, *Europe in the Media Space: The construction of the EU public sphere in Italy*, in M. Ceretta and B. Curli (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 189-214.

³⁴ M. Belluati and F. Serricchio, *Quale e quanta Europa in campagna elettorale e nel voto degli italiani*, in ITANES, Voto amaro. Disincanto e crisi economica nelle elezioni del 2013, Bologna, il Mulino, 2013, pp. 181-192.

³⁵ The lesser importance of European elections is such that for a long time they have been considered true “second order elections” (K. Reif and H. Schmitt, *Nine second-order national elections: A conceptual frame-work for the analysis of European election results*, in «European Journal of Political Research», 8[1], 1980, pp. 3-45) inferior to general or presidential elections of the first level (S. Hix, *op. cit.*; S. Banducci, H. Boomgaarden, H. Semetko and C. De Vreese, 2006, *The news coverage of the 2004 European Parliamentary Election Campaign in 25 countries*, in «European Union Politics», 7[4], 2006, pp. 477-504.

³⁶ C. Marletti and J. Mouchon (eds), *op. cit.*

what was at stake in the election. Rather than concentrating on selecting a qualified leadership to send to Europe, the political parties turned the European elections into an opportunity for assessing the internal political balance³⁷. On the other hand, the monitoring of the election coverage showed other results, primarily in the form of a continued rise in “European” news, and, secondly, of greater time and interest being dedicated to the electoral campaign by Brussels.

To counter the negative effects of the initial rejection of the Treaty of Lisbon by France and the Netherlands in 2005, and the risk of a repeat in Ireland in 2007, in the European elections of 2009 the organisation of electoral campaigns was, for the first time, not only left to the national parties, basically not very involved, but in addition the European Parliament’s Directorate-General for Communication developed a unified and supranational election campaign strategy. The election, then, saw the experimental use of pan-European political communication strategies and, although these did not have a very positive impact in 2009³⁸, they set in motion a process that was more successful in the 2014 elections, the first to be held after the Lisbon Treaty. The declared intention of this effort was to combat the growing trend of voter abstention that had strengthened the anti-European movements, identified as a serious problem for Europe.

The most institutionally important fact was that for the first time the groups of European parties were asked to choose a coalition leader who, in the event of victory, would become president of the European Commission. The national parties affiliated to the groups were asked to campaign individually, each on the behalf of its own leader.

³⁷ Elections of secondary importance play a different function in relation to political goals, but are more useful for political evaluations of perspective, to measure popular sentiments and imagine possible scenarios (C. Lord and E. Harris, *Democracy in the new Europe*, Basingstoke, Palgrave/Macmillan, 2006; M. Belluati and G. Bobba, *op. cit.*).

³⁸ M. Belluati, *Use your vote. La strategia d’informazione europea per le Elezioni 2009*, in «Comunicazione politica», 11[1], 2010, pp. 81-87.

In 2014 the organisation of institutional communication was coordinated by the European Parliament Download Centre, which planned news releases, produced campaign material in various languages, created adverts and promotional posters, and organised the most important campaign events, including, for the first time, face-to-face TV debates between candidates for the presidency of the Commission. The bulk of the electoral investment was, however, concentrated on the social media, each country could make use of community managers and be supported by good web investment policies³⁹.

Despite these efforts, the prominence of Eurosceptic political forces grew slightly in every country due in the main to the visibility of certain parties such the UK Independence Party (UKIP), the French Front National (FN), and the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV). The phenomenon of Euroscepticism, recognised for some time by political science, became an overriding concern for the European institutions and a key theme of the media for the first time in 2014, notwithstanding the fact that the political constellation of nationalist-populist movements against Europe is extremely diverse⁴⁰.

Comparative research into the coverage of the 2014 electoral campaign in six national newspapers in different countries has measured the 'Euroscepticism Index'⁴¹.

As Table 1 shows, newspaper coverage of Euroscepticism was particularly high in the United Kingdom and France,

³⁹ R. De Marte, *The European Institution on Social Media*, in *Communicating Europe in Italy. Shortcomings and opportunities*, A. Maresi and L. D'Ambrosi (eds.), Macerata, Edizioni Università di Macerata, 2013, pp. 119-131.

⁴⁰ A. Martinelli, *Mal di nazione. Contro la deriva populista*, Milan, Egea, 2013. For a review of this argument I refer the reader to a selection of references from a by now extensive literature: P. Taggart, *op. cit.*; A. Szczerbiak and P. Taggart, *Opposing Europe? The Comparative Party Politics of Euroscepticism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008; Bellucci and Sanders 2011; F. Serricchio, *Perché gli italiani diventano euroscettici*, *cit.*

⁴¹ The Euroscepticism Index measures the visibility of Eurosceptic news and leaders (M. Belluati, *Signs of Europeanization?*, *cit.*).

TABLE 1. *Index of Euroscepticism in European newspapers during the campaign for the European parliamentary elections of 2014*

	<i>La Stampa</i>	<i>El País</i>	<i>Le Monde</i>	<i>The Irish Times</i>	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>Süd-deutsche Zeitung</i>	TOTAL
Euroscepticism [Index]	0.38	0.32	0.64	0.49	0.75	0.59	0.47

partly due to the presence of their main anti-European leaders, Nigel Farage and Marine Le Pen. However, despite a generally critical approach to Europe, an analysis of the reportage shows that the Eurosceptic front is not a politically cohesive bloc. Not only were the FN and UKIP not allies during the campaign, but there were even moments in which they disagreed on how to manage the immigration issue. In Germany, on the other hand, in spite of the fact that the Eurosceptic party *Alternative für Deutschland* won seven seats in the European Parliament, most references to Euroscepticism and its proponents in the press focused on the fear of Germany losing its leadership position in Europe.

In Italy, the newspapers have associated Eurosceptic arguments with the *Movimento Cinque Stelle* (M5S) more than the *Lega Nord* (LN), a political party openly allied with the FN. Towards the end of the campaign the leader of the M5S, Beppe Grillo, signed a pact with UKIP, but rather than being based on common aims the alliance appeared to have been pragmatic. In Spain, however, references to Euroscepticism were very low in number and the argument was utilised by Catalan independence parties in opposition to the pro-European parties in government. The criticism of Europe, while on the increase, does not appear particularly cohesive.

Finally, reference must be made to the Italian general elections of 2013, a decidedly more important event in the electoral cycle⁴². Another round of research conducted by

⁴² G. Legnante, *Il voto locale e la politica nazionale*, in «Il Mulino», 5, 2004, pp. 857-867.

TABLE 2. *The Euro-frames of news articles during the Italian general election of 2013*

	Front page stories [Total: 163]		TV news reports [Total: 359]	
General frame				
Context of negative news	129	79%	199	55%
Negative effects of the economic crisis	55	34%	195	54%
Increase in German power	45	28%	38	11%
Strategic frame				
European support for Monti	32	20%	16	4%
European opposition to Berlusconi	25	15%	0	0%

the Observatory on Public and Political Communication in Turin measured the increase of visibility and importance of Europe in the electoral debate⁴³ due to the European institutions attempting to influence voters by openly endorsing the candidacy of Mario Monti. The analysis of the interpretative frames of newspaper articles⁴⁴ has helped to focus on the general structure of the debate on Europe. As Table 2 shows, in general during the electoral campaign the negative interpretative formulas – linked to accounts of the economic crisis and Germany’s excessive power – prevailed. More specifically, the European debate was deemed to be biased towards Mario Monti and against the centre-right leader Silvio Berlusconi. The election results, however, did not reward the position taken by the European Union, which

⁴³ M. Belluati and F. Serricchio, *Quale e quanta Europa in campagna elettorale e nel voto degli italiani*, cit.

⁴⁴ E. Goffman, *Frame Analysis. An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, New York, Harper & Row, 1974; W.L. Bennett and R. Entman (eds), *Mediated Politics. Communication in the future of democracy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

have reinforced the Eurosceptic front and, paradoxically, also the Europeanisation of public sphere.

4. *Conclusion*

The conclusion we might reach after examining the public debate on Europe is that signs of Europeanisation are present, but are not always complete and linear. One sees efforts that confirm the rise of a European public space in which arguments and topics merge and influence the public agenda. On a general level, the European public sphere is more integrated than ever, but is still too small compared the force of anti-European arguments that prevail in public discourse and ultimately influence the widespread view. There are clear signs that populist anti-European positions in Italy are hardening because the national parties straddle the issue in the hope of garnering public support. On the other hand, it should be recognised that Brussels appears unable to deal effectively with the current trends.

Paradoxically, however, it should also be recognised that Euroscepticism may in itself be a form of the Europeanisation of public debate, a sign of the contentious politics that confirms the ongoing formation of the European public sphere.