Building a Public Sphere: a Comparative Case Study of Yugoslavia and the European Union

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BUILDING A PUBLIC SPHERE

A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY OF YUGOSLAVIA AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

Sandra Banjac and Kseniya Oksamytna*

INTRODUCTION

Efforts by the EU, the media and the public to construct a multinational European public sphere in recent years have been interesting to observe on many levels. It is even more fascinating to evaluate current attempts by comparing them to previous developments in another, now collapsed, multinational public sphere: Yugoslavia. Such a comparison will be a valuable contribution to understanding the practicalities involved in the creation of a public sphere.

In order to present the clearest comparison of the two supranational entities — Yugoslavia and the EU — we will explore four aspects of public sphere construction. In the first section we will provide a brief theoretical overview of the theories of a public sphere as introduced by Jürgen Habermas, specifically the notion of a mediated public sphere, where

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mass media play an integral role in formulating and disseminating public opinion and discourse. Also key to this discussion are Benedict Anderson’s imagined community and Stuart Hall’s theories on identity building. In the second section we will look closely at the elements and processes that were employed in Yugoslavia to create a public sphere and common identity with a focus on media, education and national symbols. In the third section we will explore aspects of public sphere building in the context of the EU and highlight comparable elements to those outlined in the section on Yugoslavia. Specifically, we will discuss theoretical and empirical evidence that points towards the existence or absence of a European public sphere and identity. Lastly, in order to highlight the similarities and differences between the two cases we will compare the findings on both Yugoslav and EU public spheres in the concluding section.

While it may not be possible to present a direct, mirror-image comparison of the two spheres on all counts, or to say one was more successful or functional, observations drawn from this work can serve to acknowledge successes and failures in both Yugoslavia’s and EU’s efforts in fostering a public sphere and common identity and outline the challenges supranational entities face in constructing a public sphere. Furthermore, as there has been more research devoted to the study of the European public sphere than to Yugoslavia’s, we will give more weight to the discussion of the EU public sphere, with Yugoslavia serving as a historical example with regard to specific elements. In this paper we will explore the question of how successfully the media facilitated the construction of a public sphere in Yugoslavia, and more importantly the role they currently play in the fostering of a European public sphere.

THEORY OF PUBLIC SPHERE, IMAGINED COMMUNITY AND IDENTITY

PUBLIC SPHERE

Rather than focusing on Jürgen Habermas’ earlier definitions of the eighteenth century bourgeois public sphere (Habermas 1989; Curran 2000) we will concentrate on more recent and relevant conceptualisation of public sphere as a “domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed”; a space which should be open for all
citizens to discuss “matter of general interest” (Habermas 2000: 92). A large and multifaceted public requires channels of communication that can disseminate information to a diverse and widespread citizenry and today this is accomplished via newspapers, television and radio (ibid.).

Furthermore, and relevant to the discussion of the relationship between the European citizen and the EU political realm, public debate on political figures and institutions is a major component of what happens and should happen within a public sphere (ibid.). Research shows that within the European Union there exists a ‘democratic deficit’ limiting the interaction between the political sphere and the public sphere. We will explore this further within the context of media and its role in narrowing this communicative gap. The closure of this gap will allow a European public sphere to effectively fulfil its functions, such as the transparency function, validating function, orientation function, legitimating function, responsive function, accountability function, and participatory function (De Vreese 2007).

Imagined Community
Aside from Habermas’ concept of a public sphere, it is also possible to conceive of a European public sphere through the concept of ‘imagined community’ developed by Anderson (1991). He defines this ‘imagined community’ as a sphere in which individuals identify themselves as part of a shared community connected by a “deep, horizontal comradeship” (ibid. 7). While Anderson talks of this imagined community within the national context, it serves as a basis on which transnational entities, such as the EU, can model a European public sphere. In Yugoslavia this imagined community existed, albeit via suppression of national and religious diversity (Volcic 2007b). One of the ways in which this membership and identification is established is through the simultaneity in national (or transnational) communication, like the act of reading a newspaper available to all willing in the imagined community (Anderson 1991). He illustrates this by arguing that such activities occur “at the same clocked, calendrical time, but by actors who may be largely unaware of one another show[ing] the novelty of this imagined world conjured up by the author in his readers’ mind” (ibid. 26). In a similar vein, Gillespie (1995) and Morley (2000) highlight the power of broadcast
media to establish a sense of community through symbolism of a ‘collective consciousness’, which media transmits simultaneously to its public.

IDENTITY
In such a nationally and culturally diverse place as the EU, one may wonder how can identity, which is so often tied to the national, be recreated in the context of Europe as a transnational community? Identity, as an indicator of ‘belonging’ to an imagined community, and something constructed through individual/group membership and participation within a public sphere (Fraser 1990), needs to be discussed. According to Hall (1990: 224), identity is complex and should not be viewed as static and accomplished but rather as an ongoing process — a production — “not grounded in the archaeology but in the re-telling of the past”. He suggests two ways of conceptualising cultural identity. The first relies on the notions of shared culture and a “collective one true self” held commonly by those who have similar historical experiences; this provides “continuous frames of reference and meaning” (ibid. 223). The second definition shifts from similarities that culturally bind us to the construction of who we really are based on the “critical points of deep and significant difference”, constructed in the past and resting in the continuously transformative hands of the future (ibid. 225). Another layer of identity is social identity, which Kuzmanic (2008) defines as “an individual’s self-concept, which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel quoted in Kuzmanic 2008: 8).

Since identity is an ongoing transformative process, the question is how does it adjust to new social realities, and can it indicate a shift towards awareness and acceptance of a larger imagined community? In the context of national vs. European public spheres, can the process of negotiation between an identity’s history and future ensure that with time, an individual adopts a larger European identity over or alongside a national identity?

YUGOSLAVIA AND THE EUROPEAN UNION: A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY
In this section we will look individually at Yugoslavia and the European
Union as two supranational entities and compare their efforts in creating a public sphere. Particularly with regard to Yugoslavia’s active communication of historical and cultural commonalities through social relics such as monuments, historical symbols, and unified mass media, and the EU’s efforts to broadcast images of a “common” sense of Europe, this comparison becomes salient. Before this comparison is made, we must acknowledge the obvious difference between Yugoslavia’s and the EU’s political systems, Yugoslavia, an autocratic socialist federation ruled by a Communist party, and the EU, a democratic pluralist entity ruled by a fluctuating group of differing political parties, and representing individual member states. In comparing the following sections we will highlight that the construction of a public sphere in both Yugoslavia and the European Union revolves around common factors such as language, shared social and cultural values, currency, media, historical events, and other elements.

**What we will show** are the media systems of both entities, highlighting their similarities and differences. It will become evident that one of the similarities Yugoslavia and the EU share is their utilisation of media to raise awareness of a public sphere, through news and programming that focus(ed) on binding themes, common and relevant to its populations. The differences between the two are most evident in their approaches towards the building of this common identity and public sphere, namely Yugoslavia’s suppression of its diverse citizenry, and the EU’s acknowledgment of theirs. We will discuss historical shortfalls experienced by Yugoslavia and those currently present in the EU, while highlighting possible solutions.

**What is interesting** to note, before we explore the two separately, are the slogans that Yugoslavia and the EU employ(ed) to foster a public sphere and common identity; Yugoslavia’s ‘brotherhood and unity’ and EU’s ‘unity in diversity’. They both appear to have in common the aspiration to achieve unity among the people they embody, whether Croats, Serbs, Macedonians etc. in Yugoslavia, or Germans, French, Italians, Polish etc. in the EU. Where they differ is in the connotations of the terms ‘brotherhood’ and ‘diversity’. While the first, arguably, exemplifies notions of togetherness through assimilation, suppression of national identity and promotion of commonality (Denich 1994), the other establishes diversity as an essential
element of the EU’s unity. Whereas methods of suppression of national affiliations may have led to the rejection of Yugoslavia’s authority and the conflict of the 1990s, the EU’s celebration of diversity could be seen as a step in the right direction of peaceful coexistence. The main question we raise in this article is: Did Yugoslavia succeed in creating a public sphere that thrived on a common Yugoslav identity, and how effectively is the EU doing the same now? In the following section we will explore the distinctiveness of the Yugoslav case and some of the methods used to unite six different nations and create a Yugoslav public sphere.

YUGOSLAVIA

Yugoslavia, founded in 1946 by Josip Broz Tito, was a federation of six republics within a “system that prevented domination by any single national group” (Volcic 2007a: 22). Tito ruled Yugoslavia until his death in 1980, after which it collapsed into an ethnic war in 1991 and fragmented into independent countries. The construction of a Yugoslav public sphere depended on the use of symbols and practices to forge a common identity; elements present in the minds of Yugoslav people enabling a Croat Yugoslav to feel connected across space and ‘national borders’ to a Serb Yugoslav. Volcic (2007b) highlights some of the elements that carried this ability to connect the various Yugoslav nationalities and religions. These were: education, rituals, music, film, sport, consumer products, currency, language and the media. Looking at these elements closely reveals the ways in which they were able to create an awareness of a Yugoslav public sphere.

Public sphere elements – the Yugoslav context

Yugoslav education focused on teaching about Yugoslav geography and history, the Yugoslav flag, important dates, socialist heroes and patriotic songs which all pointed to the idea of one Yugoslavia (ibid.). One of the notable events aimed at bringing the Yugoslav people together was the Youth Day (25th of May); the birthday of Tito. Celebrations of this holiday across the federation made it “impossible to be a Yugoslav and to be unaware of this day” (ibid. 78). This exemplifies Anderson’s notion of the “confidence that the members of a community should have in each other’s continued existence” and their ability to “imagine and connect themselves back to the envisioned common cultural history and across the space” reaffirming
“their membership of the Yugoslav imagined community” (ibid. 78).

Along with film and theatre, another element that created a cultural bond was Yugoslav music, with multiethnic bands that reflected the Yugoslav population. Sport, and ethnically mixed teams, made it impossible to support national entities over Yugoslavia in international competitions. Likewise, the availability of identical consumer products across Yugoslavia pointed to a common public sphere. Monuments and streets named after Yugoslav places and figures provided spatial and geographical markers of Yugoslavia. Furthermore, Yugoslavia had a single currency, the Dinar. Finally, the pan-Yugoslav media such as the daily newspaper *Borba* (Struggle), the news agency Tanjug and Radio Yugoslavia all played a role in furthering the awareness of Yugoslavia as a single public sphere by focusing on commonalities of all who lived in it, and in that way constructing an “attachment to a common Yugoslav space” (ibid. 79).

These elements point to the existence of a Yugoslav public sphere. However, the centrality of media to a public sphere warrants closer examination of its role in creating ‘one Yugoslavia’. That is: Was the Yugoslav media indeed as homogenous as it seems or diverse? What was particular about it, what methods did it employ, and therefore, how significant and successful was the media in mediating a Yugoslav public sphere?

Yugoslav media

While pan-Yugoslav media was clearly more visible and dominant, national media existed as well. Volcic (2006) argues that processes of identity building and formation of a public sphere is contingent upon structure of a country’s communication system. The media across Yugoslavia, while controlled by the central communist party, was diverse; each republic had their own national television stations and newspapers “targeted towards national audiences” (ibid. 316-317). Still, while a fraction of the national media focused on national issues, a larger portion of the media reflected the whole of the Yugoslav populace and covered events from the perspective of their
connection to the Yugoslav identity and public sphere. The Yugoslav media played a particular role as a “social media engineering project” whose main aim was to “form the solidarity of collective (working-class) consciousness” and create a feeling of belonging to the Yugoslav community (ibid. 316). However, in her research she finds that, while most Yugoslav citizens had an awareness of a Yugoslav public sphere via their exposure to the media, it was not as strong as one might expect in a communist state (ibid. 317).

So which was prevalent in its attempt to construct or deconstruct a common identity and public sphere: the pan-Yugoslav media, or the national media? Census statistics show that the percentage of Yugoslav citizens who identified themselves as primarily Yugoslav fluctuated over the years but remained very low. As far back as 1961, only 1.7 percent of the Yugoslav population identified themselves as Yugoslavs, with 1.3 percent in 1971. In 1981 this number rose to 5.4 percent, which is still considered too low to confirm the existence of a Yugoslav identity or public sphere (Volcic 2007b). If identity is one of the indicators of the awareness and acceptance of a public sphere, then these statistics would show that, despite the construction of a Yugoslav public sphere through the outlined elements and structure of the media, primacy of national identities is a sign of greater acceptance of the national community as their most familiar public sphere.

When Yugoslavia’s existence came to a violent end in the 1990s, the public sphere it strived to build was fragmented by a four-year-long civil war, fuelled by suppressed national and religious feelings on the part of people that once constituted it. The same media that once acted as the supporter of a Yugoslav identity and public sphere began to be “reformulated, shaped, re-imagined, and articulated mostly in nationalistic terms” (Volcic 2006: 317). This became prominent as “the same events in different former Yugoslav countries were reported in completely different ways by the media of different republics, replicating the viewpoint of the nationalistic leaders” (ibid. 317). Risse (2003) formulates three important conditions for the existence of a supranational public sphere: 1) same themes are discussed at similar levels of attention across national media; 2) same frames of reference, meaning structures, and patterns of interpretation are deployed; and 3) transnational community of communication is formed. When Yugoslav
media ceased to discuss same themes using same frames of reference, the transnational community of communication disintegrated, and so did the Yugoslav public sphere.

THE EUROPEAN UNION is another supranational entity concerned with establishing a common public sphere. In the next section we will discuss some of the ways in which the EU has been constructing a public sphere, focusing primarily on the role of the media in this process.

THE EUROPEAN UNION
In this section we will refer to some of the aforementioned requisites for a public sphere and present the closest EU equivalents with the aim of building a coherent contrast between the two supranational entities. This cross-comparison might paint a clearer picture of the elements involved in the construction of a European public sphere. By discussing these in relation to the media we will show that there is a disconnect between the general public and the function of the EU as a supranational government, resulting in a public’s identity still tied to its national public sphere, rather than the European one.

Before presenting the comparison, it is necessary to note that different scholars rely on different definitions of a European public sphere. According to Schlesinger and Fossum (2007), the conceptualisation of a European public sphere, in turn, depends on the approach to the EU as a political community or as a regulatory framework for transnational governance. The first school of thought, referred to as ‘federalist’, envisions a possibility of an overarching European public sphere. In the second paradigm, referred to as ‘regulatory’, the existence of narrowly confined issue communities cannot generate a pan-European public sphere. De Vreese (2007), who distinguishes between the utopian, the elitist, and the realist strands of research, expands this classification.

THE UTOPIAN SCHOOL has voiced hopes for the development of a monolithic,
Approaches to a European Public Sphere

Schlesinger & Fossum (2007) Federalist Regulatory

De Vreese (2007) Utopian Realist Elitist

Koopmans & Erbe (2004) Vertical Horizontal

Top-down Bottom-up Strong Variant Weak Variant

Van de Steeg (2002) Virtual discursive interaction Direct discursive interaction

Overarching European Public Sphere Europeanized Public Spheres Transnational Segmented Publics

Figure 1. Public sphere elements – the EU context
singular, supra-national public sphere on the basis of a common language, collective identity and pan-European media (De Vreese 2007). This notion is close to the ‘federalist’ perspective; however, it has proven to be of little empirical viability. The elitist school associates a European public sphere with segmented transnational publics dominated by political and economic elites (Eder quoted in De Vreese 2007) and is in accord with the ‘regulatory’ perspective. The third strand of research, the realist, speaks of Europeanized national public spheres, or Europeanized regional public spheres, as suggested by De Miguel and Tresch (2003) in light of fragmented public discourses in countries like Switzerland and Spain. For this school of thought, a European public sphere is a “network of Europeanized public spheres connected by information flows” (Brüggemann 2005: 58).

Koopmans and Erbe (2004) suggest a model of vertical and horizontal Europeanization of public spheres. Within vertical Europeanization, they distinguish between a bottom-up variant (when national actors address European institutions) and top-down variant (when European actors address national actors). Within horizontal Europeanization, they distinguish between a weak variant (when media in one member state cover debates in another EU country) and strong variant (when actors from one EU country directly address actors in another member state).

The two variants of horizontal Europeanization mirror different forms of discursive interaction between public spheres as explored by Van de Steeg (2002). The weak variant can be equated with direct contact, or “transplantation of public opinion” (ibid. 513), – e.g. when a newspaper translates a foreign article, – and the strong variant resembles virtual contact or “inclusion of the other on the demarcation of the polity” (ibid. 513), – e.g. when a newspaper meaningfully engages with public debates in other countries. Europeanization of a public sphere is moderated by several factors, for instance, media system and patterns of political discourse (Della Porta 2003). For graphical representation please see Figure 1.

Many social scientists have argued “a pan-European public sphere involving the average citizen is unrealistic” (Pfetsch et al. 2008: 466). Recently a German sociologist, Ulrich Beck argued that an emergence of a European
public sphere beyond nation borders was a “quantum leap now desperately needed” (Kunelius 2008: 371). He recognized that varied political systems of nation states that constitute the EU act as a barrier to the strong presence of a supranational polity but was criticised for a “theoretical dream out of touch with political realities” (ibid. 371). One could say the same about the Yugoslav project, yet it survived for many decades.

If to follow the logic of suggesting that the existence of a common European identity leads to a greater awareness and acceptance of a European public sphere (Pfetsch et al. 2008: 78), then based on the following figures it is possible to say that, as in the case with Yugoslavia, this is lacking. In 2004 only 7 percent of the European public considered themselves both European and nationals of their country, while 41 percent considered themselves only national citizens (Golding 2007: 31). More recent research in 2007 showed 87 percent of Europeans feel more attachment to their village/town and 91 percent to their country than to the European Union (Eurobarometer 2007). In this context, Golding (2007) raises four questions: is there a European public, without which there cannot be a public sphere; is there a European media; is there a linguistic or thematic commonality among the European public; and lastly what opportunities exist for everyday citizen interaction?

Utopian scholars hold a common media system and a collective identity as necessary conditions for the existence of an overarching European public sphere (De Vreese 2007). However, more recent theorising has dismissed this claim. Van de Steeg (2002) argues that it is too simplistic to equate language with public communication. Even within borders of one nation-state, citizens may speak different languages; Risse (2003) opportunely brings the example of Switzerland.

It is interesting that, rather than trying to overcome the linguistic barrier by imposing a ‘one language’ policy (as in the case of Yugoslavia), the EU encourages learning many languages. One of the EU’s goals is to promote the ability to speak at least two languages on top of the mother tongue, and
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in that way make cross-cultural and cross-national communication easier and more probable (Eurobarometer 2005). However, many Europeans remain guarded about this policy. In 2006, only 28 percent of Europeans could speak two languages on top of their mother tongue, while support for this proposal stands at 50 percent agreeing and 44 percent disagreeing (Eurobarometer 2004; 2005).

Furthermore, Lauristin (2007) argues that common values, trust, and motivation are more important for the formation of a public sphere than language. A 2008 Eurobarometer shows evidence of some pan-European commonality in that over half of EU27 citizens feel that they share similar values (such as peace, human rights, democracy), indicating an awareness of shared values is “gaining ground among European citizens” (Eurobarometer 2008: 6). In the area of education the European Commission has established an elaborate and creative way of promoting cultural and educational exchange through its programs such as Erasmus student exchange program. In the 2008 Eurobarometer almost half of Europeans stated that “the European Union represents above all the freedom to travel, study and work anywhere in the twenty seven Member States” encouraging exploration and familiarisation of EU’s cultural and linguistic diversity (ibid. 7). Sixty-one percent of EU citizens support the presence of a common currency, the Euro, and consider it one of the elements that “best represent the European Union” (ibid. 7) and along with that raises an awareness of a European public sphere (Eurobarometer 2007).

Aside from the positive indicators of a growing awareness of a European public sphere, a more troubling aspect of the EU project is the democratic deficit which has been attributed to lack of understanding, knowledge and trust of EU citizens towards EU institutions (Gleissner and De Vreese 2005: 223). Arguably, this has a counter-constructive effect on the European public sphere. This deficiency has been discussed by various scholars (Golding 2007, Kunelius 2008, Pfetsch et al. 2008) who have highlighted the responsibility of media in clarifying institutional functions to the public, so political participation can be encouraged and the deficit narrowed.

Golding (2007: 35) describes the EU’s democratic deficit as a “rejection of
[and] indifference to the EU as a project” and suggests this is due to the public’s lack of trust and knowledge of EU institutions and their practices. In autumn 2003, almost 80 percent of EU citizens (at that time EU15) said there was a “need for more political activity” and participation by the citizens themselves (Eurobarometer 2004: 26).

While support for the EU remains positive, and countries feel they have benefited from their membership, perceptions of its institutions — such as the European Commission (EC) and European Parliament (EP) — are not as positive and have declined (Eurobarometer 2008). Most recent polls show that trust in the EC stands at 47 percent and EP at 51 percent, while some respondents either do not trust or they do not know how they feel, which raises questions of public knowledge about EU institutions and their functions (ibid.). Though high percentages (ranging 60-90) indicate that Europeans have an awareness of the EU’s institutional presence, only 44 percent have an understanding of how the EU works, and at the end of 2007 only two out of ten Europeans felt citizens of their country were sufficiently informed about European political affairs. All of this has consequences for the public’s willingness to be politically active. Overall the image of the European Union at the end of 2008 has declined (ibid.).

Of those who can be politically active only 22 percent of EU27 citizens feel that their voice is heard by the European Commission, while the rest either ‘do not know’ or they presumably feel their voice is lost somewhere in the democratic abyss (ibid.). These statistics raise the question whether the media, as the conveyor of information between citizens and the political elite (Peter and De Vreese 2004), is failing the public by not fulfilling its functions. Media impact on opinions and attitudes can be especially powerful given little prior knowledge and interest in European issues coupled with remote and distant nature of EU politics (De Vreese 2007, Peter and De Vreese 2004). Provided that citizens tend to have no direct experience with EU politics, and EU issues do not provoke interpersonal discussions unless prompted by the news, “media are important locations for manifestations of the public sphere” (De Vreese 2007: 6).
European Media

Risse (2003) distinguishes between two approaches to measuring a European public sphere, namely quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative approach implies counting the frequency of occurrence of words and phrases like “Europe,” “European institutions,” or “European affairs” in national media; such studies mostly conclude that there is no European public sphere. In a study of horizontal Europeanization of national public spheres, Groothues (2004) discovered that even on public broadcasting channels, the share of news from other European countries varied from 2 to 8 percent, lagging far behind domestic and international news. In a meta-analysis of vertical Europeanization, Machill, Beiler and Fischer (2006) discovered that EU topics constitute a small proportion of national news, and EU actors feature in minor roles. Furthermore, the news selection process, even in case of EU specific news, is still dictated by relevance to the national context (Kunelius 2008). This is evident in television, where pan-European channels and networks have to localise their content to the tastes of local audiences (Chalaby 2005). Only 45 percent of Europeans feel that the press gives it enough coverage, with those numbers falling for television, radio and Internet (Eurobarometer 2007). Furthermore, trust in media is low at 44 percent (ibid.). Yet some positive developments have been documented. A comparative study of the coverage of 1999 and 2004 European parliamentary elections (De Vreese et al. 2006) affirmed that both in terms of visibility and share of EU actors, the trend was one of increase. While domestic actors dominated the coverage of both EP elections, more attention to EU actors was devoted in 2004 than 1999.

Qualitative studies analyse media framing of particular European issues in different countries, and they usually conclude that many European issues are reported in a similar fashion (Risse 2003). An oft-cited example is the so-called “Haider debate”, the Europe-wide discussion on how to react to the election of Jörg Haider’s far-right party to Austrian parliament in 2006 (Van de Steeg 2006; Risse 2002 quoted in Kantner 2002). Similar trends were evident in the debate surrounding the 2004 enlargement (Van de Steeg 2002). However, contrary evidence exists. In the analysis of a corruption scandal involving a Spanish representative to the European Commission, Trenz (as quoted in Risse 2003) reports different framing by Spanish press
(ad hominem attack on the poor Commissioner) and German press (the supremacy of law). The Berlusconi-Schulz affair (when Berlusconi referred to a German MP as kapo, a concentration camp guard) was also framed as a clash of national interest rather than a common European debate (Downey and Koenig 2006). Meyer (2005) argues that nature of an issue can produce a moderating effect on Europeanization of its coverage: for instance, media discourse on fiscal policy co-ordination employed more coherent frames of reference across countries as compared to the soft-governance issue of employment policy.

To be consumed by Europeans on a daily basis the media need to ensure the “dissemination of a European news agenda” (Golding 2007). At the same time, it is important to acknowledge a number of constraints on the role media can play in advancing a European public sphere, such as “privatization and commercial pressures on journalism” (Trenz 2008: 306). De Vreese (2007) argues that the EU politics should become more relevant itself in order to attract greater visibility and more favourable coverage.

The relationship between the EU and journalism is also considered problematic due to reasons such as varied national history, nation-bound journalistic practices and traditions and a focus on national angles over European ones (Golding 2007; Pfetsch et al 2008; Hallin and Mancini 2004). These factors have prevented a true European journalism from having an impact on the formation of a European identity or public sphere, indicating a need for journalism to adapt to its new European ‘environment’ (Kunelius 2008). If part of the construction of a public sphere depends on the public’s political participation, transnational European journalism has so far failed to address its various national audiences as a European polity, and likewise failed to reduce the democratic deficit (ibid.). De Vreese et al. (2006: 479) argue that “a European public sphere should reflect national media reporting on the same topic using common sources, including EU sources and sources from other EU countries”. Yet ambiguity exists with regard to whether such common
media system is absolutely necessary for the existence of an overarching public sphere, since even in one country citizens consume different media (Van de Steeg 2002). In fact, a “lively public sphere in a liberal democracy should actually be based on a pluralistic supply of media competing for the citizens’ attention” (Risse 2003: 4).

Even if a common media system is viewed as a precondition for a European public sphere, there have been certain positive developments. As Eriksen (2005) points out, a host of transnational media is reporting on European issues, including EuroNews, Financial Times, International Herald Tribune, The Economist, as well as various websites. However, Calhoun (2004) notes that most transnational media in Europe remains either national (i.e. British) or global in nature.

Convergence of issue-specific coverage, coupled with low salience of European matters in national media, suggests revisiting the federalist/regulatory and utopian/elitist distinctions. Researchers acknowledge the existence of transnational, segmented publics but not overarching general publics (Calhoun 2004; Schulz-Forberg 2005; Eriksen 2005). It corroborates the findings by Peter and De Vreese (2004), who claim that international elite media contain traces of a European public sphere, but mainstream television-programming features no indication of it. Koopmans, Neidhardt and Petsch (2000: 4) believe that transnational-segmented publics suffice for a European public sphere, since they “act as ‘translators’ carrying national discourses onto the European level and, vice versa, may introduce European perspectives into national public spheres”. These ‘transnational citizens’ should possess competence to communicate efficiently, have access to different communication tools, and enough interest and knowledge of the EU’s political work (Golding 2007). Conclusion offered by Risse (2003: 1) suggests “overall salience of European themes is still low, but that similar meaning structures and frames of reference prevail in media reporting about Europe”. Similarly, De Vreese (2007: 9) concludes that “the contours of a European public sphere can be sketched”, despite the fact that citizens of Europe have a strong preference for national news media.

In their research, Pfetsch et al. (2008) highlight several layers of change
needed within media and journalism for a European public sphere to prosper, including: willingness of national media to allow EU issues and actors to enter their communicative sphere; increased visibility of debates concerning issues of transnational importance so that citizens can become aware of their relevance to their everyday life; synchronisation of debates across Europe giving citizens a sense of a unified decision making process; and finally, greater attribution of salience to topics concerning the EU over national ones. What they conclude is that, while there is evidence that press contributes to the formation of a public sphere, journalism alone should not carry the burden of achieving this. Other factors (stage of membership accession, depth of integration) need to be acknowledged as obstacles in the realisation of a European public sphere.

The conclusion from this section is that journalism plays a role (along with other factors) in promoting the construction of a European public sphere. For whatever progress has been made, much more remains to be done if the democratic deficit is to be narrowed and if Europeans are to become more aware and accepting of a European public sphere beyond their national borders.

CONCLUSION

Our aim in this article was to outline the elements that have contributed to the formation of a common identity and public sphere in the cases of Yugoslavia and the European Union. We analysed identity and public sphere elements such as shared values, education, language and common currency comparatively. In both cases these elements play/ed a role in fostering a common identity and awareness of a public sphere.

Speaking of media, both Yugoslavia and the EU shared similarities and differences in that both employed methods that have resulted in advancements as well as drawbacks. Yugoslavia’s media system (while allowing individual national media to exist) drew the collective audience’s attention to the Yugoslav public sphere by addressing the population as Yugoslav and focusing on matters that were of importance to all Yugoslav citizens. On the other hand, Yugoslavia in many ways suppressed its ethnically, religiously and culturally diverse citizenry, which arguably led to
the rejection of its identity and collapse of its public sphere.

The EU’s effort in building a public sphere and European media is significantly different in that it has from the start acknowledged its diversity. Because of this understanding, the EU has not imposed demands on national media to restructure their systems, heavily embedded in national practices. However, due to national media’s reluctance to include EU news as a significant part of their programming content, disconnectedness between the public and the EU’s political institution has led to what many scholars call a ‘democratic deficit’ — public’s lack of knowledge about political affairs and consequent lack of political participation. Without a democratic debate and exchange of opinion between the public and political sphere, facilitated by the media, there cannot exist an overarching public sphere.

Although Europe should not, and might never, become a single, borderless body with one dominant identity, it will have to rely on the readiness of nation states to allow the EU to become a significant part of citizens’ everyday life. Either via national media willingness to be less guarded and more open to content on European affairs, or by continuing projects that encourage appreciation of Europe as a diverse but united arena, a more active negotiation between the national and supranational will lead towards construction of a European identity and European public sphere.

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Building a Public Sphere


