The Importance of Participation Across Transnational Spheres for Democratic Development

A content analysis of the emergence of a European public sphere within the European Economic and Social Committee

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Abstract

The last 15 years has exemplified severe deficiencies in the institutional design of the European Union (EU). The EU suffers from a democratic deficit, which is demonstrated in the neglect of citizens preferences and their influence on decision making processes. This democratic deficit impacts not only the authority and legitimacy of the union but raises concerns about the cooperation between members states and transnational cooperation between the EU and the world. The democratic deficit remains because of the lack of a European public sphere (EPS), an element which Habermas argues is necessary for democracy development. While previous research has found evidence for its existence in social networks and mass-media, this study broadens the field and investigates the potential existence of an EPS in a physical political network, namely the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC). By conducting a quantitative content analysis, the study reveals clear indications of an EPS within the committee in which it is highly engaged in. Their engagement in the sphere is crucial to increase influence and power, as their engagement can decrease the democratic deficit, increase the legitimacy of the EU, and favor smooth cooperation between the member states, and between the EU and the world.

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Abbreviations

CSO – Civil Society Organisation
EESC – European Economic and Social Committee
EPS – European Public Sphere
EU – European Union
IR – International Relations
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1. Introduction

The European Union (EU) is an important actor in global politics, as its unique institutional design has resulted in a position of power making it an actor of significance for global policy making (Smith 2003:109). However, this institutional design seems to come with an inherent democracy deficit, which ultimately may threaten the unions’ credibility, legitimacy, and future authority (Kratochvíl & Sychra 2019:170). The EU’s institutional deficiencies have recently received wider attention due to several crises, e.g., the Eurozone or the migration crisis (Kneuer 2017: 26). These have shed light on one of the main elements of this democratic deficit; the lack of influence from European citizens as their preferences can only have a small and indirect impact on the decisions taken by the EU (Føllesdal & Hix 2006:536).

The democratic deficit issue of the EU is of high relevance to the study of International Relations (IR). The deficit has a significant impact on the unions’ citizens and has caused discontent in recent public discourse. Furthermore, it has given rise to tensions between member states which in turn has affected the international cooperation between them as well as the cooperation between the EU as a whole and the rest of the world. The referendum and consequent exit from the union by the United Kingdom in 2016 serve as a stark reminder, that many citizens were not pleased with the EU. While the full extent of Brexit is still in the making, it exemplifies how the democratic deficit and discontent of EU citizens has caused severe problems for the EU while forming internal and foreign policies (The European Consortium for Political Research 2018). This is troublesome, as the EU is a global actor and economic superpower, therefore its foreign policy decisions have large impacts on other regions, actors, and peoples outside of the union (Pollack 2001: 237). The authority and legitimacy of political constellations is of high relevance to the studies of IR (Hill et al. 2017:4). The democratic deficit does not only impact the union’s citizens perception of the union, but without the support of the public opinion the EU may lose it status and influence in global politics.

The democratic deficit problem has been recognized by the EU and several measures were implemented to increase citizen engagement and influence from civil society organisations (CSOs) as a result. Nevertheless, research has shown that the impact is still minimal, and the democratic deficit remains to this day (Köhler 2018).
According to the Frankfurt school scholar Jürgen Habermas (1991), the democratic deficit and the low impact from CSOs can be explained by the absence of a public sphere on a European level. Habermas (1991) claims that it is crucial for a civil society to engage in a public sphere where language flows freely, opinions are formed, and consensus is created – as this forms the basis of democracy. The creation of a European public sphere (EPS) has therefore been argued to be an important component for democratic development.

Owing to the lack of a common language or culture within the EU, the creation of an EPS is considered by some to be unattainable (e.g., Eriksen 2005). Risse and Van de Steeg (2003) have however provided strong evidence for its existence in mass media, and more recent findings indicate that modern technological advancement has resulted in the development of social media and internet platforms that include social networks in which the EU and its politics are engaged in and discussed (Hennen 2020). These discussions are taking place across social spheres on the internet, and this is argued to provide further evidence for the existence of an EPS (Ibid.). This does not solve the matter of the democracy deficit on its own as for it to decrease the involvement in the EPS needs to include other types of networks other than social.

One such network could be CSOs, although Kröger (2018) argues that the influence of CSOs on the EU level remains unsatisfactory. However, it is worth pointing out, that most of the studies investigating this have focused on the main bodies of the EU (Hönninge & Panke 2013:452). Advisory institutions in which CSOs might hold influence have consequently been neglected. As a result, this study aims to provide insights into this topic by investigating the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC); a consultive committee to the main bodies of the EU. The EESC consists of workers, employers, and interest groups originating from across the EU. The EESC meets nine times a year, which is an opportunity for members to express opinions towards representatives from the European Committee, European Parliament, and ministers from the different member states. These plenary sessions will be discussed in detail in chapter 3.

Not only do consultative EU bodies require more scholarly attention, but they have also been barely investigated in connection to the study of the public sphere. This study aims at expanding and challenging the discussion of transnational public spheres by investigating a political network with face-to-face interaction rather than interactions taking place in social networks on the internet.
This study aims at answering questions in connection to a potential EPS and a political network, European Economic and Social Committee, possible engagement in it. This paper asks the following question: Can a participation in the EPS be made visible in political networks with the example of the EESC? If so, to what extent does the committee engage in an EPS, and what indicators can be identified make the participation visible? Lastly, what can this potential engagement in an EPS imply for democracy development in the EU? In attempt to answer these research questions, the summaries from the EESCs plenary sessions between 2016-2020 were analysed to provide data for a quantitative content analysis. The data will be examined against three criteria, which represent the requirements for EPS that were developed based on Risse and Van de Steeg (2003) in chapter 3.

The following chapter will recapitulate the scholarly debate on the democratic deficit and the involvement of CSOs in the decision-making processes on an EU level as well as expand on the theoretical framework used for this study, namely Habermas’ public sphere concept. The theoretical framework will be followed by a review of the two main academic stands on the concept of an EPS. Based on the research overview and theoretical frameworks considerations, three main criteria for the presence of an EPS are presented. Chapter 3 discusses the research design and the chosen method of quantitative content analysis in the context of the criteria identified and in relation to the textual basis of the research method. This is then followed by the research findings, where the result of the study is discussed in connection to the earlier research. The final chapter provides concluding remarks for the study, and implications to further research based on the findings of this paper.
2. Literature Review

This chapter presents the scholarly debate surrounding the democratic deficit problem in the EU and is followed by a discussion of the importance of civil societies for democratic development, including previous research on the topic. The later part of the chapter introduces the theoretical framework of this thesis; three criteria employed by Risse and Van de Steeg (2003) which is built on Habermas conception of the public sphere. The idea of the public sphere unsurprisingly provides the foundation of the concept of an EPS which is the focus of this study. Given the importance of the theoretical framework, the last part of this chapter considers earlier research in the field and emphasises two strong opposite stances present in the scholarly debate.

The following discussion has influenced the research design and choice of method for this thesis, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

2.1 Democratic Deficit within European Union

The idea of a democratic deficit within the EU has its roots in the 1970s, but it was not until the 1990s that the idea became widely popular in academic discourse (Kratochvíl & Sychra 2019:170) and distinctive camps started to emerge that extensively debated the very definition of the concept.

These different camps are still of high relevance today and one of the main debates among scholars continues to involve the necessary prerequisites for any democratic polity, a notion which is often linked to studies of the European demos. The debate revolves around the conditions for the development of a European demos; however, it mainly consists of followers of the ‘non-demos thesis’, e.g., Weiler (1995:219). The often-cited argument goes, that the non-existence of a pan-Union demos prevents any possibility of democratisation on an EU level. The ‘non-demos thesis’, maintains that there should be a ‘European’ notion of membership, which allows citizens to belong to several different demos. However, the no-demos theory has received criticism by Risse, who argues that if the ‘no demos’ - theory were true, there would not be a need to discuss a democratic deficit of the EU (2014: 1207).
The no-demos theory has been developed further by Nicolaïdis, with the idea of ‘demoicracy’, “(…) as a way to appropriate subvert the non-demos thesis, as a response to proposals for creating the missing ‘demos’” (2012: 250). This notion is also supported by Cheneval and Schimmelfenning (2013), who argue that the EU needs to be considered as a demoicracy and not a democracy, as it is a polity of multiple demos.

In continuation, Majone argues that the democratic deficit should be considered a logical consequence, given that it was caused by the will of the European people through voting. Consequently, the democratic deficit can be democratically legitimated, as the deficit is the price voters and citizens of the EU are willing to pay to ensure the preservation of the essential elements of their national sovereignty (Majone 2006: 608). Dahl (1999: 431-432) suggests that the EU’s role and focus is firmly grounded in it being an international regulatory regime, and as such not directly accountable to the voters, nor controllable by national parliaments in an easy way (Majone 1998).

Andrew Moravcsik takes this argument a step further than Majone when he argues that the EU is a legitimate institution in its design. This view considered the EU to not lack any democratic legitimacy at all and that the “(…) EU decision-making procedures, including those that insulate or delegate certain decisions, are very much in line with the general practice of most modern democracies (…)” (Moravcsik 2002:622). According to Moravscik, critics of the EU’s democratic deficit overlook that a comparison of any political community with the idealized deliberative democracy brings on a conclusion claiming that the community is not strong enough by default (Ibid. 2002:606).

In opposition and in continuation of the ideas developed by Weiler et al. (1995), a well-recognized position by Føllesdal and Hix, published in 2006, questions whether a democratic polity requires contention for political leadership and over policy (2006:533). Føllesdal and Hix provide an intermediary position that has been used and acknowledged by many contemporary scholars, e.g., Kratochvíl & Sychra (2019) and Murdoch et al. (2018:390). With their work Føllesdal and Hix provide an understanding of democratic legitimacy with a multifaceted set of criteria, which can be used to assess democracy at the EU level. Their criteria characterise the potential democratic deficit in the following way:
1. The Council of the EU and the European Commission increase their power, which is impossible for national parliaments to control (Føllesdal & Hix 2006:534-535).

2. In comparison to the Council and the Commission, the European parliament remains a weak institution (Ibid. 2006: 535).

3. The EU-wide public sphere is missing; real EU-wide elections are absent, as well as proper pan-EU parties and EU-wide topics in the election campaigns (Ibid. 2006:535- 536).

4. The EU is removed from the citizens of the union, both psychologically and institutionally (Ibid 2006: 536-537).

5. The decisions made by the EU significantly contrasts from what most of the EU citizens want and their preferences (Ibid. 2006: 537).

2.2 Civil Society’s Importance for Democracy

Numbers three, four and five in Føllesdal and Hix (2006) criteria list for democracy deficit support the argument that a civil society is important for the democracy deficit to decline. The civil society and its organisations are therefore considered to possess an important and complementary role to the traditional actors of democratic representation.

Consequently, CSOs can be identified as non-state actors which have a direct and formal relationship with the EU. The power of CSOs has expanded significantly in the EU, given that the institution’s power is separated in different governance structures which are independent from state sovereignty (Bee & Guerrina 2014:35). This development is argued to create two competing spheres, one where there are profoundly institutionalized CSOs that work within formal structures and networks, and the other sphere concerned with CSOs which actively protest such practices and produce counter-narratives and alternatives to institutional practices (Ibid.). In the continued discussion, it is the former sphere that will be debated.

CSOs perform a similar role in the EU to member states (Kröger 2018:41), and substantial amounts of research have focused on CSOs from a democratic theory perspective, which is of high relevance to this thesis. Previous research on the Europeanization of CSOs was situated as a part of the solution to the democracy deficit (Ibid. 2018:43). These studies have shown that a political community can be developed outside of the traditional nation-state, e.g., Eriksen (2020) and Habermas (2015).
These approaches are in line with Putnam who argues, that while a political community is in the making there is a need for a shared identity that constitutes a mutual benefit of the rule-abiding behaviour among all as well as mutual solidarity (1993:182-283). While Putnam’s argument was originally developed in an Italian context, the argument nonetheless holds true for the EU and the importance of the civil society in democratisation processes as “(...) democratic government is strengthened, not weakened, when it faces a vigorous civil society” (Putnam 1993: 182).

Kröger (2018) emphasised how CSOs can contribute to the creation of the required trust through the creation of a public sphere. The results imply that this trust functions as a transmission belt that brings the values and preferences of the union’s citizens into the EU. Following a similar line of thought, Rumford argues that CSOs also function as mediators between the national and the supernational, as they are “(...) connecting national society to transnational governance” (Rumford 2003: 32). This is contrasted by a contemporary study by Albareda (2018) which dissected this idea and showed that few CSO’s have the actual capacity to function as transmission belts and as such contribute little to policymaking. Kröger’s is that “(...) the research findings as regards the fulfilment of these high expectations are rather sobering” (2018:43). The conclusion drawn here seems to be, that there are significant deficiencies in both the inclusion of CSOs in EU policymaking and the organisation of their domestic communities for EU matters (Ibid.).

Kohler-Koch (2012:820) works further supports the picture. Her work shows that there has been an increased interest in increase participatory governance from the EU, and active work processes have been made to increase CSOs influence and participation in EU governance, Kohler-Koch claims that despite these efforts, it did not make the EU a more democratic institution (Ibid.).

Civil society does not seem to make a big contribution to the democratic legitimacy of the EU and rather indicates that democratic participation and increasing legitimacy is possible through citizens’ initiatives (Ibid. 2012: 288) Kohler-Koch’s conclusion can be questioned as Kröger (2013) has shown that certain umbrella organisations of CSOs are more likely to contribute to the construction of the European polity then others, which highlight the importance of the representativeness within the umbrella organisations.
A considerable amount of research on civil society’s engagement on the EU level has been centred around the EU’s main institutions, e.g. European Commission. For a more nuanced and profound debate on the civil society’s involvement on a transregional level, it is important to consider the EU’s consultative bodies. One of these consultative bodies is the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) which was founded for the civil society and designed to be a forum where CSOs can promote and discuss their views, standpoints, and opinions in front of the EU Commission and by these means directly affect decision-making (Hönninge & Panke 2013:452).

The EESC can be considered a political network, which is a type of network which is argued to have been neglected by scholars who study networks influence in transforming processes in societies (Rivas-de-Roca and García-Gordillo 2021:3-4). Research have shown how social networks have transformed societies. Given that earlier research has been focused on social networks and not political networks – such as CSOs, a look at these political networks seems worth investigating. While social networks are already argued to be important for transformation in societies; the influence of political networks for transformations are still to be discovered (Ibid.).

As earlier shown, Føllesdal and Hix (2006) argue that a reason behind the democratic deficit is the lack of European wide public sphere. The influence political networks may have on societies can be connected to their level of engagement in an EPS. Before reviewing the literature on the EPS, the theory behind it will be briefly discussed. The idea of an EPS is based upon Habermas notion of the public sphere which is the base of the theoretical framework developed by Risse and Van de Steeg (2003), used in this study.

2.3 Theoretical Framework: Risse & Van de Steeg’s Interpretation of Habermas

Rumford (2003: 35) claims that for a democratically sustainable Europe to work, it requires a public sphere to be independent of both the market and the state. The concept of the public sphere is in many ways connected to Jürgen Habermas and his theory of democracy. His concept has altered over time (Aubert 2020:2), however, the fundamental characteristics of the public sphere have remained mostly unchanged, which is “(…) of the issue of social inclusion that lies behind the objective of political participation” (Aubert 2020:2).
According to Habermas, the public sphere is a constant process of consensus and opinion formation which exists within civil society. The existence of a public sphere functions as a sphere in which the opposite to the current politics is put to the test. This process of opinion and consensus formation is claimed to give rise to the establishment of a general will and a public opinion, which demonstrated ‘procedural sovereignty’ (Habermas 1991:208). Habermas refers to the spatial implication of the public sphere as a communicative space, which is found in communication between actors who come forward from their private environments to deliberate on matters of common interests. In addition, Habermas sees the concept as not referring to either the functions or to the content of daily communication, but instead to the social space which is constituted into communicative action (Conrad 2014:42).

Habermas’ political philosophy attempts to show the conditions that make citizen participation feasible, notably by looking for methods to include everyone in the public sphere (Michailidou 2010:70). While this intention has been well received and many aspects of Habermas theory have been agreed upon, theorists have criticized his ideas as they fail to achieve the goal of social and political inclusion (Aubert 2020: 6). Nancy Fraser e.g., brings criticism to the liberal conception of the bourgeois public sphere, which is outlined by Habermas, as he idealizes the liberal public sphere but “(…) fails to examine other, nonliberal, non-bourgeois, competing public spheres” (Fraser 1990: 60-61). In continuation, she argues that it is because he fails to examine other public spheres that permits Habermas to idealize the liberal public sphere (Fraser 1990:61). Hammond (2019) also argues, that as a critical theorist Habermas idea of democracy are not critical enough given the lack of identification of oppressive forces.

Despite this criticism, his theories have nonetheless attracted widespread attention and he is still considered a highly influential scholar. His idea of the public sphere provides the foundation for the academic debate to which this paper aims at contributing. However, due to the time constraints of this study, it has not been feasible to consider all works produced by Habermas and this short outlook needs to be sufficient as background for the framework proposed. It is of note however, that Habermas has addressed the question of a European political public sphere in 1995 when he remarked, that there will not be any democratic Europe “(…) unless a European-wide, integrated public sphere developed in the ambit of a common political culture (…)” (Habermas 1995:306).
His ideas are still relevant, as the aim of this thesis is to investigate an emerging EPS. To do so this analysis will be based on a conceptualization of the EPS which includes three main criteria and is based on Risse & Van de Steeg (2003:16), which is in turn built on Habermas work on public spheres. According to Risse and Van de Steeg’s it is possible to localise an EPS as a transnational space if the following components exist:

- “high degree of salience of European issues” (Risse & Van de Steeg 2003:16)
- “similar frames of reference and meaning structures across national public spheres” (Ibid.)
- “mutual awareness of each other in a transnational space” (Ibid.)

Before outlining how these three conceptual criteria have been made operational for the research design (see page 17), the scholarly debate on the EPS needs to be considered, as it provides important insides into the items above and how their conceptualisation in this paper needs to be approached.

2.4 European Public Sphere

As previously discussed, for civil society to function there must be a public sphere – a process in which among others CSO’s can engage in. There is reasonable consensus that the democratic deficit exists due to the lack of a public sphere on a European level. Conrad (2014: 43-44) clarifies that the lack of an EPS is a lack of a shared space, in which European-wide opinion formation can take place, rather than a lack of transnational or national public where European politics can be discussed.

The discussion on the existence of the EPS is contested and a communitarian approach is identifiable in the scholarly debate on its emergence. This approach considers the public sphere to be highly conditional and it can only emergence if there is already a strong sense of community. The communitarian idea of community is described as pre-political in the sense that communities are built of collectives that people are born into (Conrad 2014:46). As Eriksen (2005:343) points out, the perspective by communitarians on the public sphere considers it as something which is just possible within a homogeneous culture and a united people.
For that reason, the likelihood of an EPS emerging is argued to be small due to the lack of common interests, different languages, and cultures in the union. It is these distinctions that make the creation of a common sphere unlikely (Eriksen 2005; Greenwood & Tuokko 2017). The argument being that the democratic deficit will remain for so long as there is no common EPS in which all Europeans, and especially the civil society, can engage in (Eriksen 2005: 343-344.). The communitarian approach also sees no distinction between deliberation and decision-making and does not capture the way the modern public sphere is institutionalized in opposition to government (Ibid.). It has recently received more resistance, as advocates for an EPS argue that a common sphere is not only plausible and possible but already observable (e.g., Risse & van de Steeg 2003). The weakness of the arguments discussed above is to a high extent the lack of empirical evidence for the non-existence of the EPS, as arguments for the non-existence of the EPS have only been applied theoretically (Rivas-de-Roca & García-Gordillo 2021:5).

Earlier research has localised the EPS in mass media and according to Conrad (2014:43), it holds a space in which the process of opinion formation takes place as experts debate in newspapers. Van de Steeg (2006:610) maintains that if there is an EPS and that the mass media are the current and main forum for it. Mass media’s characteristics, such as the usage of a particular written language and a delimited public constraint for the outlet of the mass media to a particular geographical location. The public sphere is therefore argued to be limited to the same constraints. However, it has been proposed that the EU would therefore consist of a series of national public spheres (Ibid.). In a recent study, this claim was supported by Rivas-de-Roca and García-Gordillo (2021:3) as the media is considered to not be the public sphere, but the media rather acts as a key factor in defining the limits of the sphere, as it is argued to have an important mediator role between institutions, politicians, and citizens.

Advocates of an EPS share a communicative perspective where the processes of communication are considered possible even across differences, such as geographical ones. They are rather more restricted to the communicator’s capacity for reason. Greenwood and Tuokko (2017:167) argue that certain national boundaries do not prevent citizens from communicating with one another for a common purpose as there are new forms of media and technology making this happen. It is possible to consider the technological advancements as one key reason for the future development of an EPS, as it allows for delocalised and non-temporal debates of controversial issues, which is still in line with Van de Steeg's argument, that “(…) public spheres emerge through the public debate (…)” (2010:39).
The extensive amount of previous research on EPS has focused on media, recognized by e.g., Rivas-de-Roca and García-Gordillo (2021:4). Hennen (2020) even claims that the only main forum for an EPS is in the mass media. Recent investigations into the EPS indicate that it is present in social media and in social networks, where citizens in the whole EU can engage in conversations and discussions (Ibid.). However, Risse (2015:10) strongly advocates for the importance of not dismissing other public spheres, as there is not one but rather several public spheres that need to be investigated further. These public spheres also overlap and interconnect transnationally but can also be issue specific. This reminds us that while most empirical work on the EPS uses media analysis, we cannot neglect that there are more open spheres, including public face-to-face interactions, which take place not only in public but also in political spheres and where social mobilization occurs and social movements are organised (Risse 2015:10).

As a final note to the concept, Van de Steeg and Risse (2003:19) talk about the importance of a common public sphere for a democratic community they also emphasise that a democratic community consist of communities of communication. In a community of communication, citizens should be encouraged to use reason and engage in debates. Debates require citizens to listen to each other’s arguments and use reason to convince and persuade one another. Hence in a community of communication citizens engage in the public sphere but are also required to acknowledge their counterparts in the spheres as rightful participants in the discussions. It is therefore suggested that accepting fellow Europeans as legitimate participants in a collective public sphere, indicates that the “(...) “we” in whose name actors speak and to whom they relate, extend beyond national boundaries” (Risse & van de Steeg 2003:19). For a community of communication to work in Europe, it is necessary to have a certain degree of collective identification among Europeans, as such other participants from other countries will be considered legitimate voices in one’s national public sphere.
2.5 Concluding Remarks of Chapter 2

This chapter has shown that there is a moderate agreement of the existence of a democratic deficit in the EU which in the view of many can be decreased through the inclusion of the civil society. However, research has exposed that CSOs often have only a limited impact on decision-making in the union (e.g., Kohler-Koch 2010). The need for an EPS continues to be discussed, especially in regard to where and how it can be found and identified. Consequently, this study considers it important to be more experimental when it comes to ways in which the EPS is considered, and how it is possible to localise it. The research design in the following chapter will outline the rationale of the conduct of this study and the data it is based upon.
3. Research Design

The following chapter introduces the EESC (object of study) and provides a grounded description and rationale for the method adopted in this paper. The choice of method, (quantitative content analysis) is based on decisions and implications from earlier research that have been discussed in the previous chapter. This is followed by the choice of material from the EESC in conjunction with the reasoning behind the recording unit. Lastly, the strength and limitations of the method will be considered before presenting the results.

3.1 European Economic and Social Committee

In the previous chapter (see page 7-8), the lack of inclusion of political networks in consultative bodies within the EU was discussed. The unfamiliarity among scholars in this field gives reason for the foundation for this study, as the chosen object of study is to investigate the emergence of an EPS inside the EESC, a committee that is a political network and a consultative body within the EU. The EESC itself consists of members representing a variety of CSOs across Europe. All members belong to one of the following groups: employers, workers, and other interests’ groups (e.g., farmers and consumers). In comparison to the European Parliament or other main bodies of the EU, the EESC does not have the power to vote. The committee however has access to the rooms of decision-making, in which the EESC performs their consultative role by giving their opinions, standpoints and criticism towards representatives of the European Parliament, the Council of the EU and the European Commission (European Union 2021).

To reiterate, as the main aim of the study is to assess how an EPS can be made visible in a political network, like the EESC, and to what extent the committee engages in the public sphere on a European level. By assessing the EESC engagement, this study wants to make apparent how political communities can engage in a public sphere, as it is an important element for democratic development (Habermas 1992).

3.2 Choice of Method: Content Analysis

In chapter 2, a discussion was provided on how the civil society engages, influences, and performs within the EU and on a transnational level in Europe. A common approach to evaluate CSOs engagement on EU level is to combine several different research methods. This applies to e.g., Hönninge and Panke (2013) and Kröger (2018).
The combination of methods for data collection, such as through surveys together with unstructured / semi-structured interviews, is a valuable approach as it provides first-hand data and makes triangulation possible which in turn increases the validity of the study.

In Conrad’s study (2014) to evaluate the emergence of an EPS, a similar approach was taken to increase the holistically of the study. In EPS studies, a common approach is to include combi-research methods with content analysis, which in several cases have been used in combination with surveys. Users of the approach argue that it the most appropriate approach for investigating the EPS, as it is mainly found in mass or social media (van de Steeg 2006). The data collection for the content analysis is then usually based on newspapers, journals, and written narratives (e.g., Rivas-de-Roca & García-Gordillo 2021; Conrad 2014; Risse & van de Steeg 2003).

The reasoning behind the method choice is valid, as the common hypothesis is to find an EPS within media where written language is used, and enough data can support the existence of EPS. By applying content analysis valuable information can be found that helps at identifying the EPS. As a result, the focus of this study is exclusively on language usage which constitutes the independent variable of this study. However, this analysis is based exclusively on data collected from the content of the plenary sessions and does not adopt a combi-method approach. The choice to adopt content analysis exclusively is based on this study’s focus on the EESC as a political network. Earlier research has either used a combi-method approach or also exclusive content analysis to investigate the EPS. This paper argues that by changing the focus in the analysis from social networks to political networks, such as the EESC, it is possible to generate and provide new insights which can open and broaden the discourse on the EPS.

3.3 Source of Data: EESC Plenary Sessions

The analysis is based on textual sources and aims to discover latent content which can support the existence of an EPS within the EESC to answer the research questions outlined already. It is based on 15 textual sources, that in total constitute 15 summaries from plenary sessions by the EESC. The reasoning behind the choice of data source relies on three factors outlined in more detail below.
First, the plenary session summaries were chosen as they consist of statements and opinions given by members of the EESC. These documents are a good source of data as members of EESC are from different EU states and furthermore represent different groups within the committee, which provides the opportunity to discover indicators for an EPS and not only a public sphere.

Second, the plenary sessions are attended not only by members of the committee but also by representatives from other EU bodies with voting power. As the members of the EESC aim to influence these representatives it is feasible to consider the EESC to be in opposition to the decision-makers, which Habermas (1991) consider a cornerstone for a public sphere to develop. Furthermore, the summaries of the plenary sessions were chosen as they represent direct communication, where the opposition openly speaks. To analyse the documents in which the EESC express themselves as the opposition is a valuable source of information to evaluate the potential existence of EPS within the committee.

Thirdly, plenary sessions are regular events that take place in regular intervals nine times a year (EESC 2021). This type of day-to-day activity has been argued to be ignored by scholars as regular activities, such as plenary sessions, are not enough of a common space for debate to take place (Rivas-de-Roca & García-Gordillo 2021:9). Due to the neglect of day-to-day activities among scholars, the plenary session summaries are important data to use to expand the understanding of an EPS.

3.4 Collection of Data

Given that the EESC plenary sessions take place 9 times a year (EESC 2021), this creates a big body of summaries for investigation. For a comprehensive analysis, it is necessary to select a representative sample of material (Halperin & Heath 2017: 347). To assess an emerging EPS in the EESC semi-random data has been collected from 2016-2020, which represents a five-year period. By examining material over time, it may be possible to identify changes and patterns, which would function as an indicator for the EPS within the EESC. The five-year period between 2016 and 2020 was further chosen because of the lack of attention given to physical interaction among political networks in recent studies, as most of it has focused on the EPS emerging in a digital setting.
The representative sample of material consists of three summaries from plenary sessions from each year between 2016-2020, which creates a total of 15 plenary session summaries which makes up the representative sample of this paper. For the study to be consistent, summaries from plenary sessions in February, July and December were chosen, to reflect a constant temporal distance to each other.

During the collection process a problem occurred, as the summary from the plenary session in July 2018 is not available in English, which creates an error for the study’s reliability. It was not possible to find an explanation as to why there was no summary of the plenary session available, which in turn would threaten the credibility of the particular source. Therefore, the plenary session summary from September 2018, was randomly chosen to replace the intended summary from July the same year to be able to make a suitable evaluation of the EPS within the EESC, as it is necessary to have sufficient data.

The collection of data was downloaded from the EESC’s webpage in March 2021 (EESC 2021). To provide clarification on which plenary sessions summaries were used, a table (cf. Table 1 in the appendix) was created that encompasses the oldest summary used (February 2016) as Text 1, second to oldest (July 2016) Text 2, etc. The documents used in the analysis are outlined in are further supplemented with information about the documents used, such as the dates of the events, the number in the line of all plenary session numbers and the total number of words used in the documents.

The documents reviewed were analysed through manual coding and the search function of the software Microsoft Word, which was counted the number of words. More detail on the manual coding is outlined in the next section. The results of the coding were later imported into the software Microsoft Excel, which operated the data for the analysis and later produced the diagrams. The diagrams are presented in the chapter 4 together with an analysis of the data.

3.5 Methodology

As previously presented (see page 9) the conceptualization of the EPS is based on research criteria. Its conceptualization consists of three different segments, therefore the data gathered is analysed and discussed corresponding to the different segments as well. Each criterion is analysed differently and, as a content analysis requires defined categories (Halperin & Heath 2017:347), the different criteria were analysed through different categories (as outlined below).
The categories were developed after an initial assessment of the data sources and later modified according to findings.

The first segment of which an EPS should consist of is a “high degree of salience of European issues” (Risse & Van de Steeg 2003:16). For this segment, the data sources will be evaluated on the frequency of the following phrases:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High Degree of Salience</th>
<th>Low Degree of Salience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• European issues</td>
<td>• National issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• European problems</td>
<td>• National problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• European concerns</td>
<td>• National concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• European interests</td>
<td>• National interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• European level</td>
<td>• National level</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The rationale here being, that many issues are discussed during the plenary sessions, and if there is a discourse that describes the diverse issues as *European* to a higher extent, the salience will be considered to be high. On the contrary, if the issues covered are rather described as *national*, and the issues are more considered of national concern, a low degree of salience of European issues will be considered as present.

In the case of a lack of results, where non or only a low frequency of most of the words are found, the summaries will be additionally examined for the frequency of the phrases *European* and *national*, as self-standing adjectives without connection to another word. If the usage of *European* has increased throughout the investigation, it will be judged as an indicator of a high degree of salience of European issues. On the opposite, if there is an increased usage of the phrase *national* over the years, in comparison to a stagnated or decreased usage of *European*, it will be considered to support a low degree of salience of European issues where national issues are favoured.

The second element of which an EPS needs to consist of are “similar frames of reference and meaning structures across national public spheres” (Risse & Van de Steeg 2003:16). To evaluate this segment, it is necessary to examine to which extent certain ways of expressions are used by the EESC’s members. The words analysed are adjectives that are used to emphasize an approach or attitudes towards decisions taken by the EU or/and other actors present at the plenary sessions. Therefore, the ways of expression are divided into three different categories of judgement.
If the coding produces sufficient data where trends of usage are visible, for example, a gradual decrease or total absence of certain words, it will be assessed as an indicator as a similar frame of reference. In addition, similar frames of references will be assessed as present if the data shows a strong persistence and frequency throughout the years, which this study aims at covering.

To evaluate meaning structures similar across national public spheres is a harder undertaking. Nevertheless, the members of the EESC at the plenary sessions are from a variety of nationalities, backgrounds, and cultures, which may impact frames of reference and meaning structures. It should therefore be possible to make an evaluation across national public spheres, due to the different backgrounds present at the plenary sessions. If the result shows that the examined words are constantly employed across the various summaries, it can indicate a resemblance among the different national public spheres.

The third segment of which an EPS needs to consist of is “mutual awareness of each other in a transnational space” (Risse & Van de Steeg 2003). To assess this segment, it is important to consider three different spaces: national, regional, and international, whereas each can function as an indicator to which extent the third segment is fulfilled.
If the result indicates a high usage of words from the first category, *national*, it is possible to conclude that the needs and wants of others in the transnational space are neglected, as the importance of the national is bigger than that of the other members in the same space. Such results would therefore be interpreted as a low degree of mutual awareness of each other in a transnational space. If there is a substantial usage of the words from the second category, *regional* it may rather indicate how certain states are neglected, and the importance of individuality overlooked and therefore would not reach the criteria for the third segment for an EPS, as their awareness of each other is low if only the community is regarded as important.

The last category, *international*, was included due to the words transnational space in the criterion. The transnational space does arguably include aspects outside of a European setting. Given the focus of the study, it was decided to limit the term transnational to the aspect of *international* as otherwise, the aspect that were to be included would have proven too numerous for the scope of the study while simultaneously being unsuitable for the research questions discussed. Albeit if this study concerns a European issue, it is important to consider how the debate situates itself takes place in a transnational context and if there is a discourse including that context.

For the third criterion of EPS to be fulfilled, there must be an even and frequent usage of words from the first two categories discussed. The discourse needs to show segments of *international* to highlight the awareness of the other outside of the national and regional setting. Nevertheless, the findings are anticipated to yield more results for the categories *national* and *regional* than for words for *international* due to the context of the study.

3.6 Strengths and Shortcomings of Content Analysis

Adopting a content analysis approach for the investigation seemed to be the most suitable option, given that physical access to the plenary sessions of the EESC is difficult as it is not an easily accessible avenue. Therefore, a content analysis still allowed the author to get access to material otherwise hard to access (Halperin & Heath 2017:346) and was deemed suitable for this study.
The method of content analysis was also chosen for this study as one main advantage is its likelihood of reducing the risk of centring the produced data on unreliable answers and sources. The data used in the study was published and accessed long after the plenary sessions took place. Therefore, there was no contact between the author and the participants of the sessions, and no influence from the participants onto the researcher was possible. The lack of human interaction decreases the chances of creating a bias, and subjectivity (Halperin & Heath 2017: 354), as there is no interference from personal opinions or views from the representatives which could influence the results. In comparison to other methodological approaches in political science, content analysis is a very solid approach to create reliable data where the chance of bias is satisfactorily low (Ibid.).

Despite the several advantages, a quantitative content analysis has limitations which need to be addressed as well. The data consists only of documents which the EESC has chosen to make available for the public and which are in nature summaries of the plenary sessions and not the whole transcripts of what have been said. Since the documents are only summaries, there is a considerable loss of valuable insights into how the discussion progressed. Since the collection of data consists of textual records, there are e.g., certain aspects of the social interaction which took place during the plenary sessions which are not visible in the texts (Lamot 2015:82). There will be aspects of the social interaction in the EESC that is not examined and accessed due to the chosen methodology and as such possible indicators of EPS will be not made visible (Ibid.). However, as this study aims at examining changes of the EPS over time, it remains impossible to physically go back in time and attend the meetings and make observations.

Given the time constraints, a bigger study including several methods was not reasonable. The content analysis however generates usable and equally valuable material (Halperin & Heath 2017:245) that can serve as material or a source of information for other research projects, e.g., as a corpus of data. If this were to be done, the knowledge generated could be combined with other results in the form of mixed methods, further preventing the potential bias that may arise and decrease the reliability (Halperin & Heath 2017:308). Additionally, it is feasible that the result of this study may be used to validate other findings. Given this study aim to examine the development of the EESC’s engagement in an EPS, the implementation of content analysis continues to a solid and appropriate approach that is valuable for further research endeavours.
3.7 Concluding Remarks for Chapter 3

This chapter presented the chosen methodological approach for the study, and arguments were provided to support its usefulness and appropriateness in regard to the research questions. The source of data collection was evaluated and discussed together with the criteria upon which the following analysis is based upon. In addition, the advantages and disadvantages of the chosen method have been critically examined and will be taken up later in the discussion of the impact of this paper's findings.
4. Analysis

Chapter 4 presents the findings from the data collected. The results are presented independently for each criterion in chronological order and additionally displayed through diagrams to make the data more understandable. The second part provides a discussion of the findings in relation to one another and connects them to earlier debates and arguments outlined in the research literature concerned with the existence of an EPS.

4.1 Criteria 1: Salience of European Issues

To assess the potential emergence of an EPS within the EESC, an important factor to consider is how the issues discussed are addressed. As visible in figure 1, the issues that were raised at the plenary session were to an unexpectedly low degree described to be a common European matter. The only description used was *European level* (see figure 1), which indicates a discourse where it is important to stress on which level or sphere a problem is accumulating, needs to be solved, or addressed.

![Usage of words combined with European](image)

*Figure 1: Usage of words combined with European*

For reasons of comparison, the texts were then counted on the frequency of words in their combination with *national*. As figure 2 shows, the data is notable like figure 1, as the only phrase that has been used to describe a problem is *national level*. 
In conclusion, the initial data shows a low number of phrases that were used to describe an issue or topic of discussion. As figure 1 and 2 show, the compounds *national level* and *European level* were used only to a minor extend when compared to the total amount of words of which the plenary session document consists (see table 1 in appendix). Both figures illustrate a similar pattern of an increase of the phrase *national level* and *European level*, and later a slow decrease in a similar way. Arguably, the identified pattern may suggest that there is no strong evidence for a high degree of salience on European issues per se. The pattern identified above could imply that there is a high salience among members of the EESC to put locational labels on issues, to describe or inscribe a concern on a certain level.

Figures 1 and 2 do not show evidence for a clear usage of descriptive terms or labels. In chapter 2, it was stated that if there was a lack of data from the analysis designed for the first criteria, the texts would be counted for *European* and *National*, to evaluate their respective frequency and to discover potential correlation. The results are shown in figure 3.

Figure 3 shows that the frequency of the usage of *national* and *European*, follow a similar pattern between 2016-2020. There was an increase in the usage of both words until 2018, but in 2019 there was a drastic decrease, which was followed by a small increase in 2020.
Figure 3 does not indicate in which way the words have been used but can still present valuable information to examine the first criteria of a potential emerging European public sphere. Figure 3 provides the joint data from figure 1 and 2, which shows how the usage of national level and European level follow a similar pattern.

![Usage of European vs. National](image)

*Figure 3: Usage of European vs. National labels*

The low usage of descriptive terms can indicate a degree of salience of European issues. The usage of labels, categorizations or descriptions are low and as such the idea of the salience of European issues can instead be seen to be in connection to a discourse among the EESC, where the labels and categorisations may or may not be considered as needed. Rather, the problems issued are all considered to be of interests to all participants and the organisations they represent, and therefore European. Even if some data may indicate a degree of salience of European issues, it is not enough to fulfil criterion 1 as the discourse is irregular and the level of usage is highly irregular.

The findings are in line with the assumptions presented earlier (see page 17) that the usage of the term European is frequently used in the plenary session summaries to refer to other institutions, committees, and bodies of the EU. They are consequently more dominant than a national focus vocabulary. While therefore the data is not surprising, it is nonetheless indicative of a consensus formation.
4.2 Criteria 2: Frames of References

To reiterate, the second necessary element for an EPS to exist is a “similar frames of reference and meaning structures across national public spheres” (Risse & Van de Steeg 2003:16). The texts were first checked for positive loaded descriptive words. The result (see figure 4), show tendencies of patterns in the diagram which indicate similar frames of references. In 2017, the usage of effective, significant, and appropriate was on approximately the same level, whereas the usage of vital and relevant did not occur to the same extent. Because of the similar level of usage of three out of six of the tested words, it is therefore argued that in 2017 there was a distinct frame of reference among members of the EESC, as they used similarly positive value-words while addressing an issue in plenary.

By comparing data from 2017 and 2018, it is possible to see how the usage of positive phrases changed and so did the frame of reference. Figure 4 shows that in 2018 it was the usage of vital, significant, and relevant that was used the most. The usage of positive wordings in 2019 was low in general, compared to the other years examined. Notwithstanding figure 4 shows tendencies of similar frames of references between 2017-2018, as half of the descriptive words are used to a similar amount.

The usage of positive value words illustrated in figure 4 between the years 2019 and 2020 shows that all words the texts were examined for were used to a lower extent. Recent years show a bigger variation of word usage, which makes it harder to identify a similar frame of reference.
To further evaluate these similar frames of reference the usage of negative descriptive words was assessed. Figure 5 supports the trend identified in figure 4, that a similar frame of reference emerged in 2017. Figure 5 shows that in 2017 the most common phrases used while referring to an issue in negative terms were crucial, unfair, and critical. These phrases were used to the same amount, while urgent and insufficient did not occur, even if it is possible to consider critical and urgent to have the same meaning. The data indicates a preference of expression among the EESC and could support the formation of similar frames of references.
In 2018, the usage of negative words to describe pressing issues at the plenary session declined, and the frames of references did change, as presented in the data in figure 4. The phrases that make a frame of reference consist of crucial, urgent, insufficient. The low usage of negative-loaded words emerged in 2018 and continued throughout the remaining years examined which might indicate that the frame of reference changed in another dimension as well.

The shift of frame of reference may include a change in the general usage of negative phrases. It may be included to only refer to issues in negative phrasing when it is an acute and pressing matter that is considered necessary by the rapporteur to highlight a standpoint. As figure 5 shows, the word crucial was used to a much higher extent than any other examined word, which could imply a frame of reference. The frame of reference for negative loaded phrases can consist of only one word, given that the usage of crucial is considerable higher. Due to its greater frequency crucial can be considered the most beneficial word to stress the importance of an issue by the EESC members and therefore the word becomes a similar frame of reference.

Additionally, figure 5 illustrates a similar result as figure 4. All words examined in figure 5 appeared in 2019-2020, but in a low extent. Besides the identified word crucial and its dominant position recent years have shown a more varied word usage. Identifying a larger frame of reference is as a result a more complex undertaking.

To find evidence for similar frames of references it is not only important to evaluate how members of the EESC address issues in positive and negative ways but in addition through phrases that express the middle ground. This middle ground, the indifferent phrases, are argued to be used when positive words provide too much support and when negative provide too little support for approval.

Figure 6 illustrates the usage of indifferent phrases. Unlike figure 4 and 5, figure 6 shows a pattern of a similar frame of reference already in 2016, where the usage of acceptable, sufficient, and proportionate indicate a reference point of common value. In the following years, there is a change as it is mainly two words of expressions, fair and sufficient that create the frame of reference, as convenient, acceptable, and proportionate are not frequently used. The usage of fair and sufficient is substantially higher. As sufficient and fair are used on that high level throughout the whole time investigated in this study, this is an indicator of a clear frame of reference among members.
Sufficient and fair follow the same pattern in terms of number frequency, which indicates that regardless of the length of the plenary sessions, these phrases are the most popular words to use while referring to a neutral standpoint. In comparison to figure 5, where crucial was identified as the main word to represent a similar frame of reference, in figure 6 two words stand out similarly. The frame of reference for indifferent words consists of sufficient and fair, due to the frequent and regular usage in addition to the low usage of convenient and acceptable. Since these words are not used or considered appropriate by rapporteurs to use while referring to an issue to a high extent, the usage documented could also indicate one or two rapporteurs frame of reference, and therefore may not be enough to contradict the pattern revealed.
Figure 7 illustrates the patterns discussed between 2016-2019 in their total usage of positive, negative and words of indifference. Figure 7 is a summary of the data that was presented in figure 4, 5 and 6. The usage of positive phrases is viewable to a much higher degree than negative and indifferent words. As the usage is substantially higher, it indicates a discourse among the EESC favouring positive wordings more than negative ones, especially to address an issue in front of commissioners, ministers, and other representatives from the EU’s bodies. The reason behind the choice of addressing issues in positive phrases, rather than negative or indifferent, is beyond the possibilities of this paper. The data further illustrates how the usage of indifferent phrases are higher than negative ones and can indicate a discourse as well as a frame of references within the EESC, where critical formulations are discouraged. The identified trend does not continue throughout 2020. Data shows that the usage of negative words is almost as high as positive ones, and usage of indifferent phrases are much lower than the negative ones compared to previous years.
4.3 Criteria 3: Awareness of Each Other

The third criteria used to evaluate a potential emergence of an EPS within the EESC is concerned with the awareness of each other in transnational spaces. Figure 8 illustrates the frequency of the usage of words connected to a national setting, and that the most used phrase is national, which is the constant dominant word throughout the period of the study. Country is another phrase that has been used often. The third phrase which partially occurs is domestic. In the previous chapter (see page 19), it was argued that if there is a high usage of national phrases, it could indicate a low level of awareness.

Autonomy, sovereign and intrastate did scarcely occur in the documents analysed. These words could be less neutral than other words examined in this segment of the study. Even if there is a high usage of certain national phrases, they are not considered to generate a strong opposition to another. Therefore, the high usage is not considered to be evidence enough to argue for a low degree of awareness. Based on figure 7 it could be assumed that the frequent usage of words could indicate self-centred ideas and proposals, however the words used are too neutral to separate between different levels, spheres, or interests.
It is further important to consider the frequency of words referring to the regional setting. Figure 9 illustrates that the most used word to symbolize the regional was Member State, which seemingly refers to a state which is a member of the EU and a participant in the European regional cooperation. The usage of Member State has been consistently high over the years, the only word to attain this status.

In the early years of the study, figure 9 shows a higher frequency of words that resemble togetherness, such as community or solidarity. The latter half of the period studied shows a clear decrease as the usage of words such as solidarity not occurring at all. Between 2016-2019 all words analysed in the study except intrastate, do recur annually which indicates an increase of only using neutral phrases to refer to issues concerning the union. The usage of solidarity and collective is surprisingly low, as the data was anticipated to reveal more pleasant and firm phrases to describe and address issues facing the region. The findings are surprising as the EESC has shown a tendency of using positive phrases to address issues and it was expected to follow a similar pattern here.

Before comparing the usage of national and regional phrases to international phases, one should note that within the last 5 years there has been a change within the EESC in terms of how to address each other and others in different spheres. There has been a clear increase of different phrases addressing the national, including a substantive decrease of various phrases addressing the regional.
The data illustrated in figure 8 and 9 needs to be put in relation to the data illustrating phrases of the international setting in the EESC. Figure 10 shows several points of interest. First, it is noticeably within the last 5 years that there has been a significant increase in the usage of global and international. There has been an increase of over 50% between 2016-2020 for the two earlier mentioned phrases. The massive increase in usage and inclusion of these phrases indicate a growing awareness among the EESC when it comes to the connection between the EU, civil society, and its connection to the globalized world. Although the usage of universal is sparse.

Secondly, figure 10 shows that the EESC is using the same point of reference when referring to societies and states outside of well-developed places in the world. It shows that these places are referred to as Third Country / Countries, and not Third World. Arguably, the agreed point of reference among members of the EESC indicates an awareness of the other, and counterparts outside of the European setting. To refer to developing places as Third Country / Countries is arguably a recognition that the concerned place of discussion is a part of the global society and not a separate Third World.

Furthermore, as figure 10 shows the usage of the word foreign is low. It only occurred in two out of five years, which suggests that populations, people, states, organisations, etc. from other geographical locations than Europe are at the least not described as foreign.
4.4 The Findings’ Relevance to the Scholarly Debate

In the following section the findings are discussed in connection to the previous research presented in chapter 2. Firstly, the importance of consensus formation according to Habermas (1991) criteria is considered in relation to the low number of results which was found for the first criteria. Secondly, a shared identity within the EESC has been identified and will be discussed in connection to Putnam (1993). The findings are reviewed in connection to the importance of acknowledgement and recognition in a community of communication, presented by Risse and Van de Steeg (2003). Lastly, the findings of this study support the earlier presented notion of co-existing public spheres, as identified by Risse (2015).

4.4.1 Consensus Formation

At the beginning of this chapter, the first criterion for an EPS was analysed. The first criterion is not considered to be fulfilled as there is not sufficient evidence to support the emergence of an EPS. However, the data indicates a consensus formation within the EESC. This consensus regards the usage of European and national and follows a similar pattern in terms of frequency of usage. The consensus relates to members of the EESC, and their common perception of when it is important to differentiate between the European and the national.
The data shows that between 2016-2018 two phrases were used more frequently, than in the later years 2019-2020. The more regular usage of the different phrases could indicate a discourse among the members and rapporteurs of the EESC. The usage of national level and European level changed in 2019, as the data shows a significant reduction in usage of both phrases. This provides evidence for a consensus within the EESC in regard to when differentiation is needed. It suggests a step away from external categorizations when addressing issues viewing the problems present at the plenary sessions as common challenges instead.

This consensus formation supports the presence of an EPS in connection to Jürgen Habermas’ public sphere idea (1991), as when civil society engages in discussion to form opinions and create consensus they instinctively also engage in a public sphere. Arguably the EESC also engages in discussions outside and during the plenary sessions where opinions are formed and created that are then also transported to the plenary sessions. These discussions then turn into consensus, which can at least partly be considered opinions adopted at plenary sessions, but also the way members, participants and rapporteurs express themselves.

It is further possible to identify consensus formation in the data used to examine criterion 2. Figure 7 shows how rapporteurs use positive-value words to an extensively higher amount than negative or indifferent ones. Figure 7 is also indicative of a consensus among the EESC members to mostly use encouraging phrases while acting as the opposition and speaking in front of the decisive forces within the EU. In comparison to the earlier consensus identified and discussed above, the second one can rather harm the processes and impact which the EESC aims to achieve. If there is a consensus among the EESC to not use phrases or words that may reveal critique or disagreement of representatives from other bodies in the EU, it may rather counter-develop the EPS due to no genuine opinions and viewpoints being expressed.

4.4.2 Shared Identity Within the Political Community

Putnam (1993: 182) claims political communities must have a shared identity to be able to influence decision-making processes. It is further possible to consider two aspects by which a shared identity among the EESC becomes visible.
Evidence for the shared identity among members of the EESC is found in the data for criteria 3. Figure 8 and 9 shows that between 2016 and 2019 it was common to use a variety of words to describe the regional setting but only a low variety of words are attributed to the national setting. This supports a shared identity symbolized through a common discourse. However, the sense of shared identity may have been more common in the early year than in the most recent ones. Data from figure 2 and 3 supports that a shared identity among the EESC members was more apparent at the time of writing, possible due to implications of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As earlier discussed, the communitarian approach argues that an emergence of EPS is not possible to due to the lack of a common language and a shared identity throughout Europe (Conrad 2014:46). This approach is misleading, as data presented earlier show that there is a high degree of cohesion among the members, as they use similar ways of expression and categorisations. Figures 4 and 5 illustrate that the usage of positive and negative descriptive words which occur on a regular and consistent level are of similar value for the rapporteurs and members of the EESC. This thesis claims that the phrases used in plenary sessions have a shared value basis and are rated similarly across the EESC members. The data gathered rather indicates a feeling of community within the EESC and a shared identity, which in turn increases their chances to influence decision-making processes.

The second approach to identify the shared identity among members of the EESC is through evaluating data illustrating the frames of references. The presented figures (see subheading 2.3) indicate that between 2016-2019 there is evidence for similar frames of reference among members of the EESC. The criterion is therefore considered fulfilled. The similar frames of reference are an indicator for the idea of shared identity, which Putnam argues to be necessary for political communities to influence decision-making processes (1993:182).

Consequently, this thesis argues that the usage of similar phrases shows similar ways of expression. In situations where the EESC express their standpoints with similar ways of expression, it generates less room for confusion among spectators and the opposition. Through the usage of language with a high degree of resemblance the messages and issues are likely to become clearer, stronger and have more impact on the decision-making processes. A sense of shared identity within the committee is visible.
One important divergence was discovered while analysing the data illustrating similar frames of reference. In 2020, the earlier identified similar frames of reference started to deviate which may have been caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The deviance can be a sign of the distress and crisis that emerged from the pandemic (United Nations Development Programme (2021) as it spread across the world which had major impacts on societies within and outside of Europe (Ibid.), including the EU institutions. Due to the ongoing crisis, it seems that the frames of references changed as a result of the stress and insecurity caused. It is possible to consider the change originating in the belief among members of the EESC that it was important to increase their own usage of negative and critical phrases while addressing issues in the plenary session as otherwise their voices might not have been heard during this crisis.

Two reasons for why the frame of references changed are proposed in this paper. First, as discussed above, it was necessary to change the discourse to be paid attention to during a time of crisis. Second, the setting of the plenary sessions changed itself. This study aimed at discovering the emergence of an EPS with political communities which engage in discussion on a face-to-face basis in a physical meeting space. However, the pandemic forced the world’s population to a new way of living where social distancing and home office have become common (World Health Organisation 2021). The new way of living also includes the EESC which in 2020 changed its settings for the plenary sessions into digital venues. Due to the absence of physical interaction among members, it may have affected the extent to which members use similar frames of references.

In continuation, due to smaller possibilities to obtain similar word usage it is further possible to consider how it may affect the sense of shared identity among the members. During 2020 the similar ways of expression decreased. It is too early to consider divergence as a constant change. At the time of writing, the pandemic is just as relevant as in 2020, as it still affects daily life in Europe, including the possibilities of meeting other people regularly. How the frames of reference with the EESC develop and change and its implications on shared identities is yet to be revealed. The data show that there have been similar frames of references within the EESC in recent years which provides the opportunity for a shared identity to be created, but the frames of references formations seem to be fragile to massive changes or crisis.
4.4.3 Recognition & Acknowledgement

In chapter 3 (see page 12), the notion of a community of communication was presented, and such a community has to a certain extent been identified in this study. For a democratic community like the EU, there needs to be a community of communication if a public sphere is to be possible. For it to be successful, recognizing other participants and acknowledging different standpoints is of the highest importance (Risse & Van de Steeg 2003).

Data showed that in recent years a discourse has developed among members of the EESC, which includes a higher frequency of phrases that refers to spaces, spheres, and settings outside of Europe or the context of the EU compared to earlier studied years. The change of discourse may imply that the members of the EESC have to a larger degree recognized their connections to regions outside of Europe and further acknowledged that the connections and ties cannot be ignored. This recognition is important for a community of communication to flourish and it is a vital component of an EPS.

Still, while the usage of international has increased in recent years, the opposite development has become evident for the usage of national phrases. This development may additionally support the increased recognition process in the committee as more emphasis is put on the recognition outside of the European context. However, it may influence the holistic view of how the recognition processes within the EESC has developed throughout the analysed years.

Previously (see page 19), a hypothesis for the findings for the third criterion was given. It was expected that the usage of national and regional would be higher than international phrases, due to the context in which the EESC is situated. It was expected that the level of usage of national and regional phrases would be relatively similar, and international phrases to occur to a lower degree. Figure 11 showed that this hypothesis can only be confirmed for 2016 and 2017. Even if the EESC has increased its awareness for international connections, the diminished frequency of national phrases may have an impact on the holistic recognition process. Figure 11 illustrates how the members of EESC have increased their usage of phrases which can imply more acknowledgement of international connections. Simultaneously, it is possible to assume due to the recent year’s low usage of national phrases, that the EESC has paid less attention to the individuality of each member state.
The arguable replacement that has been made can potentially have a major effect on the aspects of EPS development within the EESC. The increased practice of including *international* phrases in the EESC’s discourse is most likely a positive development, but if it is done through a trade-off where the *national* connections and influence are not recognized to the same degree. This will likely affect the EPS within the EESC. If the EESC does continue to not acknowledge the connections to all three spaces, national, regional, and international, it may influence the extent on which the EESC can engage in an EPS and in continuation affect decision-making process and reduce the democratic deficit.

**4.4.5 Co-existing Multiple Public Spheres**

As previously argued, 2 out of 3 criteria for the study can be seen as having been fulfilled. These are criterion 2 and 3. As not all three criteria considered for this study were fulfilled it does not provide substantial evidence to claim that a constant EPS is present within the EESC. Nevertheless, the data produced implies that an EPS is possible outside of the spheres of social networks, mass media or social media, where it was often localised (e.g., Van de Steeg 2006, 2010; Hennen 2020; Rivas-de-Roca & García-Gordillo 2021).

In an earlier chapter (see page 11), Risse’s (2015) notion of co-existing multiple public spheres was presented. This study provides support for Risse’s notion, as the data support the possibility for an EPS to develop under the influence of face-to-face interactions at physical meetings. The type of emerging EPS which is found in this study indicates that there is more than one type of EPS existing at the same time. The EPS within the EESC is a political network rather than a social one and has mostly emerged in real-life settings rather than online ones, which supports the notion of co-existing multiple spheres.

The EESC is a political network where the members are privileged participants of society. Due to their privilege, it may affect the result of the study as the participants have privileges to engage in the EPS which most European citizens do not have. However, the author wishes to stress that the study was conducted to see the possibilities of a pure emergence of EPS within a political network, however, close the setting might be. This may further produce a result that may be misleading, as Risse (2015:10) argues that an EPS can be issue specific. The result of the study may therefore support that within the EESC there is a high prospect for an EPS to be present, and consequently no argument will not be made claiming that the result indicates an EPS existence in every political network in the union.
Findings discussed earlier connected to the current pandemic suggest a decrease in sense of shared identity, as the members’ ways of expression became less similar when the plenary sessions were held online. This may further indicate that for an EPS to emerge within the EESC is not only issue-specific due to its members, but also because they met in person. Scholars who claim the existence of EPS in social media, mass media and social networks do consider the emergence originating in the technical advancements made in the last 20 years, e.g., the internet (e.g., Hennen 2020).

It is a solid and valuable argument, but in connection to the findings of this study, it is important to point out that it is not the only process of interaction in which an EPS can emerge. Again, this study is in line with notions presented by Risse (2015), who argues that it is possible to establish an EPS through the process of face-to-face interactions. Therefore, this study shows that plenary sessions are such a way of interaction, which have made the emergence of EPS possible. Therefore, this study not only provided indications for how various forms of an EPS can exist simultaneously but in addition showed which differently public spheres on a European level can emerge.
5. Conclusion

This study has examined the potential emergence of an EPS within one of the EU’s consultive bodies, the EESC. By examining the language used by members of the committee in plenary sessions during a five-year period, the study has found evidence for a public sphere to exist on a European level within the political networks.

Evidence was found that fulfils two out of the three criteria that were outlined for the evaluation of a potential emerging EPS. The first criterion was not satisfied in this study but may imply a process of consensus formation among the EESC’s members which is of general importance for democracy development. It should also be pointed out, that the methodological approach chosen to evaluate criterion 1 seems unsuitable to significantly confirm the requirements outlined. Consequently, this criterion needs to be investigated with another research approach that looks at different identity markers for an EPS in this context.

Most of the data indicated that there has been a stronger EPS present in the EESC during the first years of the studied period. Many of the trends discovered changed in 2019-2020, while the most drastic changes occurred in 2020. One of the main reasons causing the change may be the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has forced people across the world to change their behaviour. The results might reveal how the COVID crisis has had an impact on the EESC’s members language usage, especially in terms of how the usage of frames of references changed. In 2020, the members used negative phrases to a much higher degree than before, almost to the same extent as positive phrases, which is a behaviour not noted before.

The sudden shifts in language usage could also indicate that the EPS found earlier seems to be a rather fragile structure. The variety of the results supports the need for future research on the EPS, especially regarding ways to investigate how the EESC, or another transnational political network, behave before, during and after the pandemic. This can provide important insight into the emergence of transnational public spheres.

The aftermath of the pandemic may impact the possibility for the EESC to return to the promising emergence of an EPS within their political network. This study found how the EPS within the EESC developed through face-to-face interactions on a daily and recurrent basis, which happened simultaneously to other networks formed in the EPS but mostly digital setting. This finding provides support for Risse’s notion of multiple co-existing spheres.
Nevertheless, to what extent the EESC, and other transnational political networks, return to constant physical interaction and take the step back to the physical meeting rooms remains to be seen. It is arguably important for the EESC to meet in person, which not only increases the likelihood for the EPS to continue to develop but may contribute to the expansions of the EPS from digital social networks to also increasing more physical interactions which can produce several, and co-existing, public spheres which in the long run decrease the democracy deficit within the EU.

The findings have shown that over the years 2016-2020 there has been a significant increase in international recognition, as the discussions at the plenary sessions have evenly increased as part of a discourse of a non-European focus. This implies the increased awareness among EESC’s members that most actions can be connected to the international sphere. It is a positive development as an increased acknowledgement of a given position is a useful tool. However, it may bring with it problems if the EESC focuses solely on the international and gives barely attention to the national, as both the data used for criteria 1 and 3 showed a lower usage of these terms. Neglect of the national will revoke earlier made signs of progress and may have implications on the perception of the EU, and civil society working with them.

In conclusion, the fulfilment of two out of three research criteria in this study presents a strong indication of the existence of an EPS within the political network, EESC. The fulfilment of two criteria provides a clear confirmative answer to the asked research question. The participation was indicated through the usage of language among the members, and the result show that within the EESC there is a sense of similar perception of their position, which is an important element for civil society to create a solid opposition to the voting bodies of the EU. This study was able to answer to which extent the political network engaged in the EPS, as 2 out of 3 criteria for engagement were fulfilled, and therefore possible to assume that this political work engages in an EPS to a high extent.

This study was designed to provide further insights for democratic development in the EU. The emerging EPS within the EESC is fragile and effort need to be taken so opportunities for physical interaction become possible again. The results of this study imply that for a strong, solid and united opposition it may be necessary to interact in person so discussions can flow. Engagements by the civil society on the internet, or through other technical solutions, may contribute to the democratic development. However, as earlier research has shown, the previous attempts made by the EU have not been successful to increase the influence of civil societies.
If the EU creates possibilities for the citizens to physically engage in an EPS, the opposition may be stronger and can have more influence and by such limit the discontent in member states and ultimately decrease the democratic deficit which may have big importance for international cooperation worldwide.
6. Bibliography


Fraser, Nancy (1990) Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy. Social Text. (25/26), pp. 56-80.


## 7. Appendix

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*Table 1: Plenary Sessions Table with additional information*