

## **When the European Constitution ‘Went National’ - A Plea for a European Public Sphere**

Sebastian Kurpas, Research Fellow, Centre for European Policy Studies

Europe’s political leaders are growing increasingly nervous about the European Constitution. All governments have signed the document and put their reputation on the line. But since March 2005, French public opinion polls have shown a stable majority in the ‘no’ camp and speculations about an alternative ‘Plan B’ are on the rise. With all the political capital invested in this project, an ultimate rejection of the text could lead European integration into unprecedented crisis. However, while the situation is certainly serious and alternative scenarios have to be discussed, it would make sense to take a closer look at the present debates and learn from what has gone wrong so far.

The referendum campaigns reveal a disturbing development: What had initially been a common European subject has now become entirely dominated by the rationale of national politics. One might say that this is nothing really new, since the EU election campaigns have also rarely been about European politics. However, these referenda are different, because the consequences are touching the very foundation of the European project. If one country says ‘no’ – at least from a legal point of view – the Constitution cannot enter into force. And depending on which or how many member states will not be able to ratify, this legal problem is also likely to translate into political reality. A Slovene, Greek or Pole would thus be just as affected by a French ‘no’ as the French themselves – with little possibility to participate in the French debate, let alone influence French public opinion.

Of course, some common themes related to the EU can be identified in most countries, but even those – often just very remotely related to the Constitution itself – are immediately framed in a national context, thus giving the subject a different twist. For example, when it comes to the common market, the French complain about a lack of ‘social Europe’ and the British about too much ‘red tape’; when it comes to solidarity, the Spanish extol the benefits of the structural funds and the Dutch grumble about their cost. And yet, this is as good as it gets, because in many countries people prefer to seize the opportunity to express their (dis)satisfaction with their national governments, rather than deal with the real question at hand. If satisfaction happens to be very low, as is currently the case in France, non-ratification quickly becomes a realistic scenario.

The current referenda debates show the need for a common European ‘space of communication’ in which actors from different national backgrounds can participate on an equally legitimate footing. The European Convention was a serious attempt to create such a forum, but as we can now see in hindsight, it was too limited in scope and impact. These limitations are also now evident in the fact that the Constitutional debate has ‘gone national’. One almost never reads that the initial text was drafted by an assembly that consisted to a large extent of national and European parliamentarians who deliberated in a forum open to all citizens – and *not* by an opaque committee of bureaucrats in smoke-filled backrooms. And nor is there any mention that the ultimate outcome of this process

could not possibly have been anything other than a compromise between different positions shaped by various national and political perspectives and preferences.

Because this awareness of the European dimension has largely been lost in the process of shifting the debate to the national level, it is now all too easy for any opposition politician to dismiss the Constitution as unacceptable. An assessment that one or two provisions fall short of initial national demands provides sufficient grounds for rejection. A maximalist national position often serves as a benchmark for evaluating the Constitution, rather than what has to be seen as the only realistic short-term alternative: the status quo of the Treaty of Nice. Anyone who has followed the European debate in the Convention and the subsequent IGC knows how difficult it was to reach agreement on the present text and therefore how unrealistic it is to now demand any substantive renegotiation without unraveling the entire 'package' – including those elements that one finds positive.

However, if one concludes that the Convention had too little impact and did not reach far enough beyond the 'usual (Europhile) suspects', then a larger and more decentralised model for a common 'European public sphere' has to be given consideration. It would be a major misconception to imagine a European public sphere simply as a national one writ large. As we know, political parties and their traditional views are very diverse across the European Union, and the same holds true for the media and other important actors. A 'one-size-fits-all' approach is neither realistic (most attempts at pan-European media have failed so far) nor necessarily desirable. Most people want to be informed and communicate in their own mother tongue and remain loyal to their customary sources of information, e.g. the local newspaper or television news broadcast.

The national public spheres should therefore not be viewed as obstacles to be overcome, but rather as the building blocks of a European public sphere. In political science and communications disciplines today, there is an growing consensus that the only realistic way to reach a better mutual understanding among Europeans is through the increasing linkage of the different national public arenas among each other and with the EU-level. This process has essentially two dimensions: a vertical dimension representing the connection between the EU and the respective national levels, and a horizontal one that stands for the connection between the different national publics themselves.

The vertical flow of information between the EU and the member states has improved in recent years, but there is still an important lack of consistency. European developments usually only make the headlines when national leaders are meeting in Brussels or when a moment of celebration (enlargement, launch of the euro) or crisis (fall of the Santer Commission, possible failure of referenda) can be reported. Coverage of the EU thus remains extremely 'event-oriented' with very short periods of preparation or follow-up. In order to endure, the European level would need to offer up more 'faces' with whom the public could associate clear positions and responsibilities.

The horizontal connection of the different national publics has also made some progress, but Europeans still discuss things too often in 'splendid national isolation'. Although they face many of the same problems, they often don't compare each others' solutions in the broader public debate, let alone discuss them with each other.

However, it is important to keep in mind that ‘quick-fix solutions’ like centralised campaigns or big public-relations events would not offer a promising way to achieve this goal. Past experience shows that any kind of ‘top-down’ campaigning has not made a notable difference. Instead, a more sustainable and low-profile approach should be given preference. What is needed is the inclusion of a European dimension in vocational training for multipliers at the national and regional level as well as in school curricula. In order to promote a European public sphere that would ‘link’ national publics to one another, many more politicians, journalists, teachers and other ‘multipliers’ would have to foster an awareness and knowledge about other member states and the European Union. In a longer perspective, that would entail Europeans not just talk *about* each other, but *with* each other, because they would better understand the different underlying rationales of their national discourses as well as the common politics at the EU level.

Undoubtedly, this process will take time, but – as the current debate about the Constitution clearly shows – it is badly needed and lags much behind the progress of European integration. One can only hope that the latter will not become the victim of a lack of the former.