

Highlights from PADEMIA Research (2013-2016)
Report of a debate at the Concluding PADEMIA-conference, Brussels, 20 May 2016¹

Debate moderated by Ben Crum and Katjana Gattermann

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At the occasion of the third and final PADEMIA Annual conference, we staged a series of debates on some of the key topics that have been of importance to the functioning of parliaments in Europe over the three years of the project. The six topics selected were:

- 1) What role do we actually want for national parliaments in the EU?
- 2) Parliaments' responses to the Euro crisis
- 3) Communication & networking of national parliaments
- 4) The 2014 European Parliament Elections: a decisive change?
- 5) Parliaments in Foreign Policy
- 6) EU contestation in national referendums and elections

Each of these topics was discussed by prominent members from the PADEMIA-community that were selected to represent contrasting, and at times even opposing, positions. The panellists were asked to reflect on the main findings on their topic in recent years, to point towards important developments and also to identify key questions that remain open and that ask for further research. In the following pages, the outcomes of these debates are summarized for each topic in turn.

¹ This report summarizes the debate and does not necessarily reflect the views of the author(s) or the PADEMIA network.

1) What role do we actually want for national parliaments in the EU?

A fundamental question in contemporary academic research on parliamentary democracy is what role we actually want for national parliaments in the European Union. In the past three years PADEMIA has helped facilitating this research by bringing together scholars from all over Europe. Their research adds to the growing literature on European politics in general and to the debate on citizen representation in particular.

As is illustrated by the discussion between Tapio Raunio (University of Tampere) and Nicola Lupo (LUISS Guido Carli Rome) at the third PADEMIA annual conference, not all PADEMIA scholars agree on the answer to this question. With the Lisbon Treaty, national parliaments have attained more powers in EU politics and, hence, have become a more popular object of study. Two visions on the roles of these parliaments in EU politics have come to the fore.

Supporters of the first vision, including Raunio, are sceptical of the new roles and powers that have been ascribed to national parliaments, and they tend to think that the surge in academic interest in this topic is rather out of proportion. They are reluctant to make too much of the importance of national parliaments for European representative democracy. In this view, the most important role for national parliaments should be to scrutinize laws and to be a forum for public debate. It is the role of the scholars to test whether members of parliament are effective in these primary tasks that are firmly located within the confines of national politics.

On the other hand, supporters of the second vision, like Lupo, claim that the surge in attention for the role of national parliaments in the EU is justified by the qualitatively new nature of the powers that they have been given. These powers are for real and in principle they open up new spaces for transnational action of national parliaments as well as inviting transnational coordination between them. Hence, there is at least a formal legal task in analysing the rules that are developed in different parliaments to give effect to these new practices. A second, more social scientific task is then to analyse the actual use that parliamentarians make of these powers and the impact, if any, they have on EU decision-making. Newly introduced parliament functions since the Lisbon treaty, such as the Early Warning System (EWS), may thus be considered as complementary to scrutinizing the EU involvement of the national government.

Ultimately, the question remains whether something has fundamentally changed after the Lisbon treaty, or whether all attention for national parliaments is merely a hype that was further encouraged by scholars researching it. Participants of the debate asserted that so far there would be only few indications that anything has substantially changed because of the Treaty. If (some) parliamentary roles are changing, it is only in a gradual, incremental fashion.

2) Parliaments' responses to the Euro crisis

Research in the PADEMIA-project has very much proceeded under the shadow of the Euro crisis. One important finding from this research is that the European Parliament as well as national parliaments have only been relegated a marginal role in the EU crisis measures. As Cristina Fasone (LUISS Guido Carli Rome) highlighted, the Six-pact, Fiscal Compact, Two-pact and the Banking Union are examples of crisis measures that were mostly intergovernmental by nature and initiated by the Council with limited involvement of national parliaments. This, in turn, has serious consequences for the democratic legitimacy of Europe.

In addition, findings suggest that national parliaments' budgetary powers have been affected by the Eurozone crisis in a very asymmetric way. Eurozone parliaments face more constraints than non-Eurozone parliaments. But also among Eurozone parliaments, some hold more power than others. For instance, while parliaments in debtor countries saw reform programs imposed upon them, parliaments in creditor countries (most notably the *Bundestag*) got substantial powers over the activation of crisis measures.

As Ian Cooper (EUI Florence) pointed out, similar asymmetries are also apparent in the evolution of the inter-parliamentary Article 13 conference that was established by the Fiscal Compact. From its start, parliaments had very different views on the conference's main tasks; whether it should merely be a forum for the exchange of best practices on national budgets, or if its scope should be larger, for instance by positioning it as some kind of Eurozone parliament. Both the German and European Parliament wanted a narrow focus, but for very different reasons. The European Parliament, on the one hand, wanted a narrow focus because of institutional reasons: the narrower the conference, the less likely that the Article 13 Conference it would emerge as a new rival body at the EU level. The Germans, on the other hand, wanted a narrow focus because of ideological reasons: they did not want it to host ideological debates on Keynesianism versus Ordo-Liberalism, but to concentrate on the practical tasks of how national fiscal targets could be met. As a result, the Article 13 conference has never hosted a real debate where the politics of austerity could have been contested and hence has limited the role that Southern European parliaments could play in voicing their concerns on German Ordo-Liberalism.

In sum, the overall assessment in the literature is that Parliaments are still lagging behind other European institutions such as the Council in the EU's post-crisis economic governance. Empirical analysis has highlighted that there were a number of problems regarding the conference, including debates about its size and composition, its focus, and its mandate.

What are the perspectives for the future? The speakers recommend that, first of all, sharing information between parliaments on implementing the different economic measures should be improved. In addition, there is a need for more administrative support for parliaments to build on; more parliamentary oversight, smaller bodies and more regular meetings, are realistic steps that can lead to improvement. Most importantly, a normative change is needed in the supranational appraisal of the role of national parliaments: establish a norm in which the Commissioner is obliged to attend the conference and answer

questions by parliamentarians. Executive oversight is the most vital role of parliaments, but until now it has hardly happened at the Article 13 conference.

3) Communication & networking of national parliaments

The democratic legitimacy – or lack thereof – of European politics is a central theme in PADEMIA research. There is a lot of debate on whether there should, and can, be a European public sphere to close the democratic deficit and to better voice citizens' concerns with European politics. Similar to the public spheres within member states, the idea is that a European public sphere could ensure a smoother interplay between the media, politicians and the citizens they represent. Parliaments can play an important role in contributing to such a public sphere and in incentivizing engagement with European affairs among the public.

Recent empirical findings from PADEMIA research suggest, however, that there remains a considerable misfit between EU affairs and engagement in the public sphere. Rik de Ruiter (University of Leiden) reported on a study on the Dutch parliament which shows that action of parliamentarians on EU affairs is strongly dependent on national media coverage. It appears that members of parliament more often rely on preceding media coverage when addressing the government than vice versa: the majority of EU-related activities in the Dutch parliament between 1995 and 2015 was not picked up by the media.

Moreover, De Ruiter's findings point out that increasing media coverage of EU affairs actually tends to play into the hands of parliamentarians of Eurosceptic political parties, who are happy to communicate to the electorate their opposition against decisions taken in Brussels. In the Dutch case, the majority of written questions on EU affairs was put forward by Eurosceptic parties. Pro-European political parties would have nothing to gain from discussing European issues because they are more likely to be punished by voters. In that respect, more attention in the public sphere for Europe would only benefit anti-EU politicians.

Christine Neuhold (Maastricht University) argued that similar findings apply to inter-parliamentary communication. Although inter-parliamentary cooperation is growing, there is still limited evidence of the use and impact that inter-parliamentary communication has for European politics. Consequently, the question arises what the added value of parliaments' communications is and whether a European public sphere can actually make a difference for the democratic deficit. According to Neuhold, while inter-parliamentary exchange may not reach the public sphere yet, among parliaments it can lead to a process of sharing best-practice. She asserts that scholars may facilitate this exchange of best practices by communicating their research findings with members of parliament. In this regard, scholars from the PADEMIA-network can make useful contributions.

The participants of the debate concluded that greater clarity is needed about what and how we exactly expect the European Parliament and national parliaments to contribute to the public debate on EU affairs. Although the empirics give reason to set realistic expectations, from a normative point of view inter-parliamentary communication and media coverage are essential to the functioning of representatives at both levels and for members of parliament to be informed about what happens in other parliaments. Hence these remain important topics to study.

4) The 2014 European Parliament Elections: a decisive change?

As one of the PADEMIA researchers, Stefano Braghiroli (University of Tartu) analyses voting behaviour in the European Parliament, and he is particularly interested in the impact of external events on these voting patterns. Thus, he has also researched whether the 2014 European Parliament election outcomes brought about a substantial change in voting behaviour. One recent finding suggests that while voting along national lines in the European Parliament has recently increased in the most Europeanized policy areas, it seems to have decreased in the most nationally-sensitive ones.

One reason for this change is that the 2014 European Parliament elections have brought additional diversity to the parliament and are thus likely to have decreased the party-group cohesion, especially among the mainstream party groups. However, rather than isolating the 2014 elections, Braghiroli rather tends to see them as a catalyst to an already existing trend. What is more, he actually thinks it is quite likely that more fundamental shifts will only take place after the 2019 parliament elections. While anti-EU and more extreme political parties in the European Parliament have grown in recent years and received increased media attention, these parties have not yet been able to successfully mobilise this momentum in pursuing their own political agendas in the European Parliament. Looking ahead at 2019, Braghiroli claims it especially the fate of the mainstream party groups that will be critical if there is to be a decisive transformation of the European Parliament's voting behaviour.

Another part of Braghiroli's research is dedicated to studying voting behaviour of individual members of European Parliament (MEPs). Especially important in his research are MEPs' role perceptions, or how they believe they are supposed to behave. These perceptions emerge as key predictors of MEPs' degree of activism in the European Parliament. It also appears as a crucial factor when it comes to individual democratic accountability and parliamentary scrutiny of legislators' activity.

The level of activity of MEPs can be measured by way of quantitative indicators like attendance, proposing amendments, involvement in parliamentary reports and written declarations, number of questions asked, et cetera. Underlying these scores, four different categories of specific behaviour (roles) can be distinguished. First, there are 'baby politicians', for whom the European Parliament serves as a training ground for the arts of politics. Secondly, 'consolidated politicians' who come to the European Parliament with a specific, national agenda. Thirdly, 'core Euro-politicians', who mainly promote policies at the European level, but risk losing touch with national constituencies. Fourthly, the 'Euro-pensioner politicians', who are generally politicians who have earned prominence at the national level in the past and come to the EP to conclude their career but with little likelihood of all too much activity.

These different roles also reflect on individual democratic accountability of MEPs and their level of parliamentary scrutiny. For instance, the core Euro-politicians are generally from countries in which the parties enjoy a very strong position in the national electoral system. In these parties, European parliamentarians compete to keep their position and to keep the blessing of the party. Hence, when it comes to highly sensitive votes, despite their very strong commitment to promote policies at the European

level, these core parliamentarians are still more likely to vote along party lines, even if this voting behaviour is not what the electorate asked for. This behaviour potentially hurts democratic accountability at the EU level.

Thus, it is also the kinds of MEPs that will be elected in 2019 that will be essential in determining whether the European Parliament is in for a major transformation at that time.

5) Parliaments in Foreign Policy

Foreign Policy is not a domain in which historically parliaments can claim a big role. Yet it is a topic for which there is ever more attention. Parliamentarians increasingly want to have a say in, for instance, military intervention. But what are the consequences of the trend towards parliamentary approval of military intervention for security issues?

Julie Smith (University of Cambridge) outlined that one view in the debate states that the highly technical character of modern warfare requires suggestions on military operations to be based on considerable information and security intelligence, which is only available to specialists. What is more, Smith submitted, even if (some) parliamentarians are well-informed, the nature of military operations precludes them from sharing and using this expertise in public.

Yet, in many policy areas there are pressures towards increased inclusion of citizens in decision making. Whereas traditionally politicians mostly relied on their own devices in positioning themselves and representing their citizens, these days parliamentarians increasingly revert back to their citizens through referendums and social media. However, Smith considers it a major question whether such practices and the opinions of the electorate at large are appropriately put to use for foreign policy decisions.

A somewhat contrasting position was adopted by Geoffrey Edwards (University of Cambridge), who argued that new social media and increased internet access have led to the availability of an abundance of information, which makes it possible for citizens to educate themselves on a variety of subjects. This has fundamentally changed the way citizens regard certain policy decisions and the way parliaments can voice citizens' concerns. In this respect, parliaments can build on their citizen's knowledge to serve as watchdogs to ensure that the executive does not become too powerful, while at the same time closing the democratic deficit. The invasion in Iraq is exemplary for the way in which governments acted based on a lack of knowledge and were not properly scrutinized by their parliaments, which could have been prevented if parliaments had had more power over foreign policy decision-making.

Besides military interventions, another aspect of EU foreign policy is the relationships with neighbouring countries. As Alexander Strelkov (Maastricht University) highlighted, one trend in PADEMIA research suggests that the European Commission has finally started to address the functioning of parliamentary institutions in candidate and partner states. For instance, if one wants to secure implementation of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) and other reforms in Ukraine, it is essential to understand how the Ukrainian parliament, the Rada, functions.

The historical view that post-Soviet areas are controlled by corrupt presidents and oligarchs, as some suggest, does not take away the fact that the EU needs information on their functioning in order to control its back garden. Strelkov argues that scepticism about the capacities of external institutions is useful, but that engagement and understanding are equally necessary to make sure European investments in the stabilization of institutions and a mutual beneficial relationship are effective and worthwhile.

Should EU parliaments thus help parliaments across its borders? At least offered one paper presented at the 3rd Annual PADEMIA Conference by Sergiu Gherghina (Goethe University Frankfurt) answers that question affirmatively as he underlines the importance of reinforcing external parliaments by means of inter-parliamentary communication and support. Future research should assess more closely whether and what kind of inter-parliamentary communication actually takes place in foreign affairs, both within the EU as well as with external parliaments.

6) EU contestation in national referendums and elections

A very topical issue in European politics is the use of national referendums on European issues. Recent, salient examples include the 2014 Greek referendum on European austerity measures, the 2016 Dutch referendum on the European association treaty with Ukraine, and the British referendum on their membership of the European Union. Sofia Vasilopoulou (University of York) argued that research on these topics highlights the conflicting interests that pro-European and anti-European parties have in this. By putting EU topics on the public agenda, national referendums have for instance systematically benefited opposition parties who are critical of the EU. While the opposition's power to put EU issues on the agenda means that mainstream parties are forced to debate the issues, these themselves have little to gain in terms of votes by talking about Europe.

Vasilopoulou agreed with co-panelist Flemming Juul Christiansen (Roskilde University) in the observation that the fear of defeat in national referendums forces pro-EU parties to stand together in pacts and to downplay their internal differences, even though this process by itself weakens their popular appeal to their respective electorates. When studying the electoral map in countries across the EU, it becomes visible that the pro-EU parties are punished for working together.

That does not mean, however, that a national referendum can never be successful for pro-EU parties. The outcome tends to depend on the campaign before the referendum and how the debate is framed. According to Vasilopoulou, two questions stand out the most in determining the outcome of a national referendum on European issues. Firstly, have the citizens in the country in question benefitted from EU policies, and secondly – in the case of the UK referendum – do they support freedom of movement and migration? The latter point on migration is decisive because it taps into a wide variety of concerns that relate to security, culture, demographic change and economics. Thus, it is also effectively used by anti-EU parties.

Christiansen added that national referendums on the European Union are fought on EU specific rather than domestic issues. The belief that referendums are only used as second order measures to control the government no longer holds.

In sum, referendums are becoming more important in European politics, especially when considering the far-reaching impact a referendum like the UK referendum on EU membership can have on both the United Kingdom and the European Union. The question that remains is of course whether there should be referendums on such huge topics in the first place. That is in the end also a deeply normative question. However, regardless of one's position, Christiansen argues that the difficulties in communicating EU issues in the established representative institutions give good reason for calling referendums and therefore should not be automatically rejected.