



We Need to Talk about Europe

How Parliaments Communicate EU Affairs to their Citizens

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Policy Recommendations

1. National parliaments need to focus more on their communication function to exploit their full potential to legitimise (national) EU politics.
2. This needs to include both politicised communication, mainly through plenary debates, and the provision of accessible information, for example through more integrated and effective EU websites.
3. In both cases, parliaments need to focus on 'ordinary' EU policy areas and make sure that they cater not only to the information needs of specialised audiences, but also to those of the general public.

Abstract

Democratic legitimacy depends on a vibrant public debate on political solutions and alternatives to allow citizens to make informed political (electoral) choices and to exercise democratic control. Within the multilevel polity of the EU, it is precisely the opacity of policy-making processes and the lack of public discourse that have been defined as core problems of democratic legitimacy. The paper therefore analyses if and to what extent national

parliaments tap into their potential to connect their citizens to 'Europe' by communicating EU affairs. Based on comparative quantitative and qualitative data on parliamentary communication in Austria, Finland, France, Germany, Poland, Spain, and the United Kingdom, the paper discusses whether national parliaments play their part in legitimising EU politics or whether the EU's democratic deficit is not at least partly 'homemade'.



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Introduction

The role of national parliaments in EU matters has become an important subject in the debate over the democratic legitimacy of European Union (EU) decision-making. Strengthening parliamentary scrutiny and participation rights is often seen as an effective measure to address the perceived democratic deficit of the EU by bringing 'Europe' closer to the people. Yet the potential of national parliaments to contribute to 'the good functioning of the Union' - as postulated in Article 12 of the Lisbon Treaty - and thus to the democratic legitimacy of the EU depends not only on effective parliamentary scrutiny but also on parliamentary communication of EU politics. Communication and transparency, vital in every political system that aspires to be democratic, are of particular relevance in the EU, where the opacity of policy-making processes and the lack of accountability have long been defined as core problems of democratic legitimacy. Here, national parliaments are crucial as arenas for the communication of important EU issues and their national implications.

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This legitimising role of national parliaments has become even more important given the growing salience and contestation of EU issues in public opinion. The impact of EU decisions has, especially in the context of the eurozone crisis, become increasingly (and painfully) evident for the citizens in the EU (Hurrelmann 2014). By communicating and debating European issues in public, parliaments can thus effectively contribute to making policy processes more transparent and offer citizens 'a

remedy to the otherwise opaque procedures, the overwhelming complexity, and the difficult attribution of political responsibility in decision-making beyond the nation state' (Rauh 2015: 118). Such communication should not be misunderstood as 'advertising EU politics' or 'doing PR work for the EU'. Communication rather relates to providing political debate and thus different views on policy issues and decisions that are made at the EU level, but nonetheless affect citizens at home. The following will therefore analyse how well national parliaments fulfil this task by comparing communication activities in EU affairs of the national parliaments of Austria, Finland, France, Germany, Poland, Spain and the UK from 2010 to 2013.¹

Talking about Europe

Parliaments have different means of communicating EU issues to their citizens, but plenary activities as well as the provision of information via their websites are arguably the most important. The plenary is the most visible parliamentary arena, and plenary debates and oral questions are key mechanisms to hold the government publicly accountable and to communicate political positions to the citizens. Parliamentary websites, in turn, allow national parliaments to provide extensive information to a broad public - provided that the information is easy to find and presented in an accessible way. The following therefore focuses on plenary debates and oral questions before proceeding to an analysis of the provision of EU-related information via the parliamentary websites.

¹) Data on the parliamentary activities (lower houses only) was collected in the context of the PACE research project www.ihs.ac.at/pace funded by the Austrian Science Fund FWF. In addition, we draw on data collected in the context of the OPAL research network (see Auel et al. 2015).



Communication in the Plenaries: Debates and Oral Questions

As table 1 shows, the overall plenary communication activity of the seven national parliaments, with over seventeen thousand hours of debate and over sixty thousand oral questions, is quite impressive.

Table 1: Parliamentary Communication Activities 2010 - 2013

	Number of debates ²	Hours of debates	Oral questions
All issues		17156 (2451)	60771 (8682)
EU issues	598 (85)	1231.5 (176)	1012 (145)
Domestic issues		15925 (2275)	59810 (8544)
% EU out of all issues		7.2%	1.67%

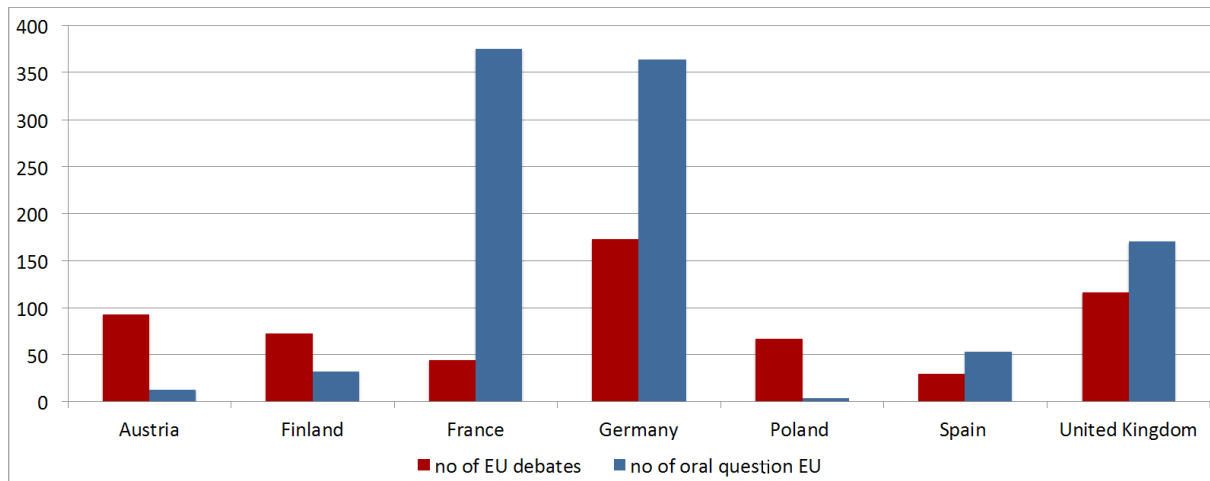
Note: The table provides the total for all seven parliaments with the average in parentheses.

However the balance sheet is somewhat less impressive when it comes to EU affairs. Only around 7 per cent of the overall debating time is spent on EU issues, and the percentage for oral questions is far lower. As figure 1 shows, the ag-

gregate numbers do, of course, obscure vast differences between the seven parliaments. ²

2) Unfortunately, we were unable to obtain information on the overall number of debates on all issues. We can therefore only compare the time spent on debates.

Figure 1: Number of EU debates and oral questions (2010 – 2013)

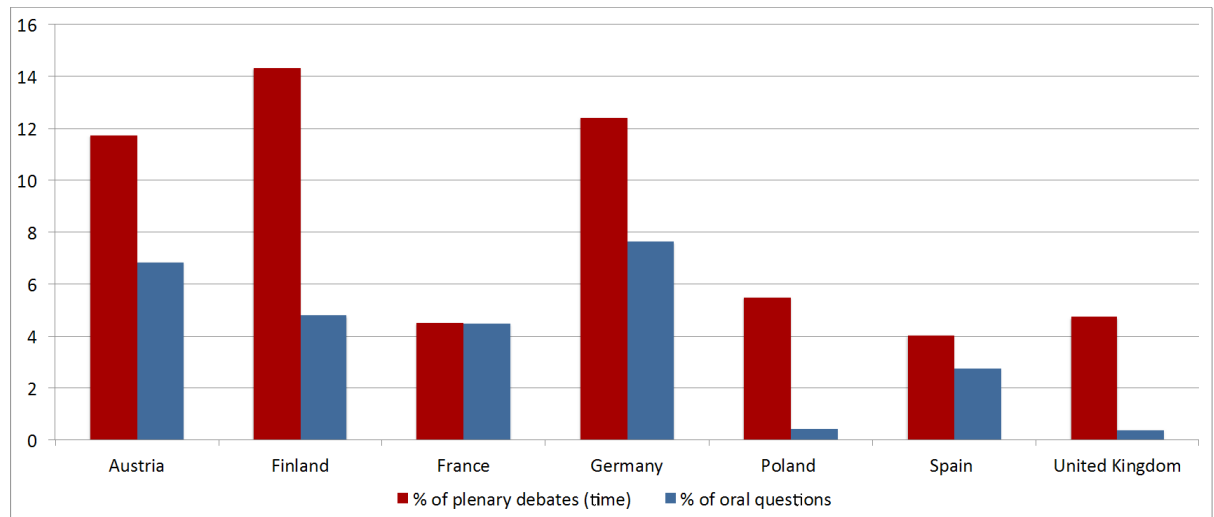




We also need to take into account that parliaments differ very much in size, which can make a difference with regard to the number of questions asked, for example. In addition, they follow different traditions and routines. In the UK, for example, oral questions are a much more often used parliamentary instrument than in the Austrian Nationalrat. Similarly, the number and hours of parliamentary debates vary depending on whether parliaments are more 'debating' or 'working legislatures'. The number of hours spent on overall plenary debates

per year ranges from around three hundred hours in the Austrian Nationalrat to around one thousand hours in the UK House of Commons. The picture therefore rather changes once we look at the share of the communication activities in EU matters out of all (figure 2): the Austrian, the Finnish and the German parliament not only have the highest share of oral questions on EU issues (together with the French Assemblée Nationale), debates on EU issues also play a much more important role in the plenary, while the other parliaments trail rather far behind.

Figure 2: Share of debates and oral questions on EU matters (in per cent)



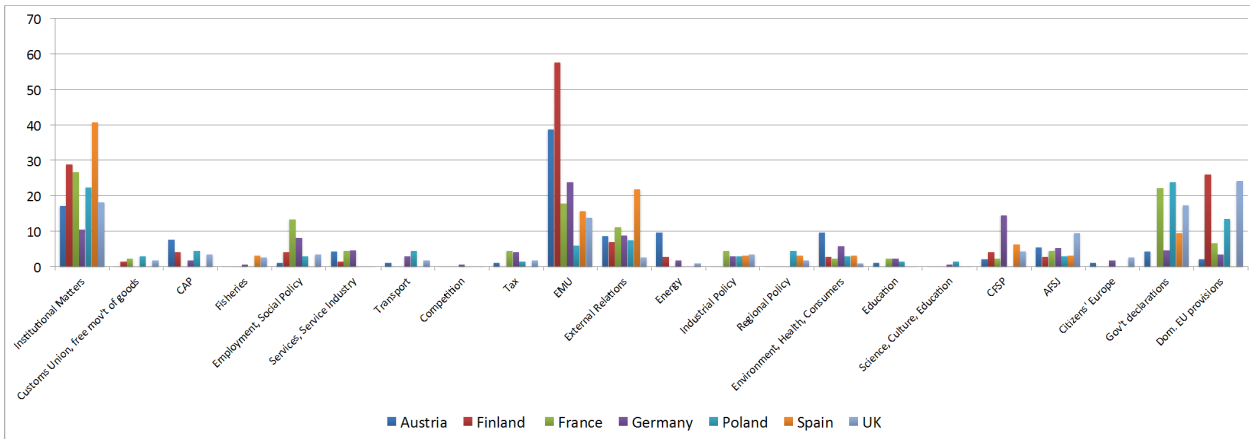
What were the most important EU topics when it comes to plenary debates? Figure 3 provides the distribution of parliamentary debates across the EU's policy areas (by EUR-Lex classification), to which we added two categories, debates on government declarations covering a multitude of dif-

ferent EU topics³, and debates on domestic provisions for EU politics, mostly debates on parliamentary scrutiny rights or general EU referendums (UK).

3) This also includes declarations on meetings of the European Council unless the Council meetings focused mainly on the eurozone crisis.



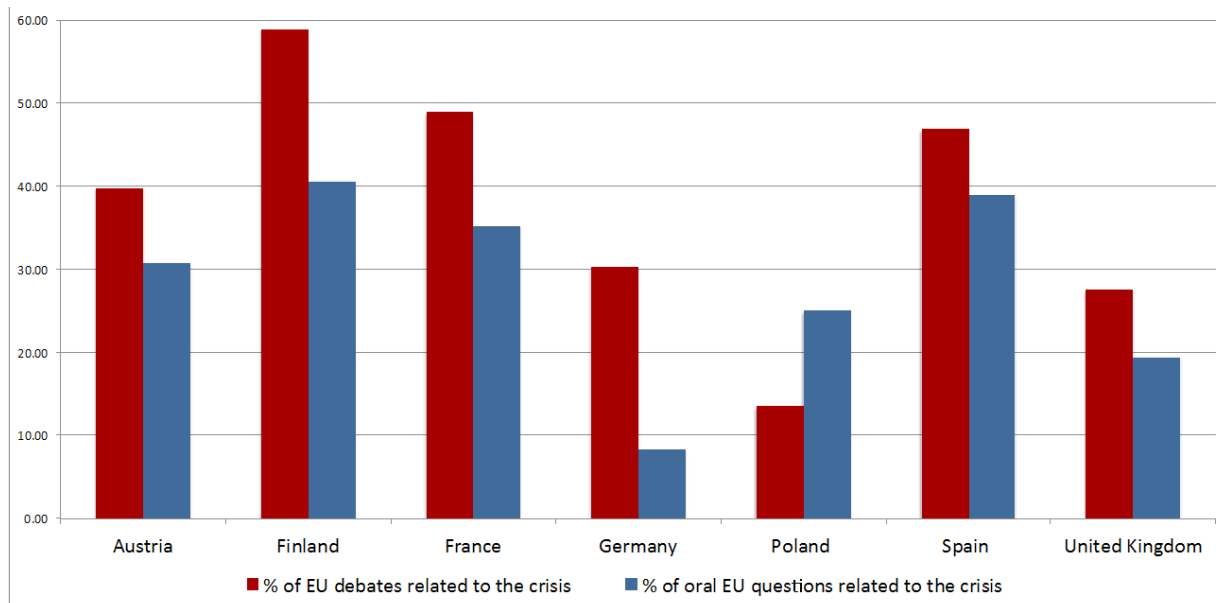
Figure 3: Distribution of Parliamentary Debates Across EU Policies (in per cent)



Overall, institutional and financial matters (which includes EU treaties, enlargement, the EU budget or the Multiannual Financial Framework), economic and monetary policy, EU external relations (including international agreements or development policy) as well as topics related to domestic EU provisions received most of the attention in the plenaries. All seven parliaments also debated, albeit with varying regularity, government declarations on general

EU politics. The distribution of debate topics also illustrates that the four years have not exactly been business as usual for the EU due to the eurozone crisis. Given the number of economic governance reforms at the EU level to manage and overcome the crisis, it is hardly surprising that economic and monetary issues played a fairly important role in all seven national parliaments (figure 4).

Figure 4: Share of EU debates and oral questions related to the eurozone crisis (in per cent)





Informing the Citizens: Parliamentary Websites

Regarding parliamentary websites, the good news is that all seven parliaments provide access to all parliamentary documents and most activities regarding EU affairs. There are, however, still differences with regard to the transparency of European Affairs Committee (EAC) meetings and, especially, regarding the way EU information is presented and can be accessed.

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First, most EACs provide full minutes, web streams or summaries outlining the main issues and lines of argument online. Here, the detailed summaries of committee meetings in the Nationalrat are especially helpful, presenting much more accessible information than long minutes. In contrast, EAC proceedings remain fairly opaque in Finland and, partly, Germany. The Bundestag's EAC meets in private, but can decide to open meetings to the public. It does so fairly frequently and will in that case also provide a web stream of the meeting, but minutes are not available, only the agendas. In Finland, EAC meetings are firmly closed, and the summaries on the web provide rather minimal information on who attended, and on the documents or issues discussed and final parliamentary positions taken.

Second, parliaments also differ very much regarding the presentation of EU issues on their websites more generally. All parliaments have websites explaining parliamentary procedures and scrutiny rights in EU affairs, but only the French Assemblée Nationale, the Polish Sejm and, to a lesser degree,

the Finnish Eduskunta have genuine EU websites that provide comprehensive information on and direct links to (almost all) parliamentary activities and documents, including parliamentary resolutions and reports on EU affairs or EU plenary debates, links to other EU related websites such as those of the EU institutions, the current EU presidency, COSAC⁴ and IPEX⁵, the national government or the Upper Chamber. The Polish Sejm also provides extensive background information on all EU policy areas as well as lists of online newspapers dealing with EU affairs, links to research centres on EU studies and even a list of recent academic publications on national parliaments in the EU. In all other parliaments, EU affairs are mainly treated in a similar way as other policy areas, i.e. information on EU issues is dispersed across the website with no direct and comprehensive access page for EU affairs. The website of the Austrian Nationalrat is an especially illustrative example of this. While the information that can be accessed on the entire website is vast, finding the information is not always easy as documents or information are distributed across different pages. Surprisingly, for example, the main rubric 'Parliament active' features a link to the (otherwise excellent and extensive) database of EU documents (with further links to the specific committee meeting dealing with the document). The website 'Parliament and the European Union' can be found under 'Parliament explained' and provides information on the European Union and the role of the Nationalrat on EU politics. The webpages of the EAC and its sub-committee can only be accessed indirectly, albeit from various pages, and plenary debates (other than the four 'Europe hours' per year) as well as oral questions on EU matters have to be searched through the main search engine.

4) Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs of Parliaments of the European Union

5) InterParliamentary EU information eXchange



Discussion and Conclusion

All seven parliaments make, albeit varying, efforts to ensure the transparency of their EU scrutiny by opening up EAC meetings, providing minutes and web streams or at least summaries of the meetings, and by providing access to a wide range of parliamentary as well as external (EU and government) documents to citizens. This is, of course, all very good news. Yet it remains rather questionable whether mere access to documents, highly relevant for specialist audiences, actually reaches the general public - especially if the documents and background information are not easily accessible on a dedicated parliamentary EU affairs website. As laudable these efforts are, searching for and reading often highly technical documents on EU politics is not the most exciting activity and not one many citizens will spend considerable time on. Still, to make their internet presence in EU affairs more effective and accessible, national parliaments should set up dedicated EU affairs websites that bring together EU related parliamentary information for both general and specialised audiences. Here, the websites of the Polish Sejm or the French Assemblée Nationale can serve as best practice examples.

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When it comes to parliamentary communication activities in the plenary, such as EU debates or oral questions on EU affairs, the efforts of the seven parliaments to bring ‘Europe’ closer to the citizens vary considerably – both across chambers and across policy areas. The share of plenary debating time devoted to EU issues is greatest in Austria, Finland

and Germany with roughly 12 to 14 per cent, but far lower with around 4 to 5 per cent in the others. With regard to oral questions, the share related to EU issues is even lower in each parliament. Parliaments have thus clearly made an effort to ensure transparency by providing access to documents and background information on EU policies, but they need to emphasise more politicised communication through plenary debates to provide citizens with different (party political) viewpoints and to give them greater ownership over EU politics.⁶ In addition, parliaments should also focus more on ‘ordinary’ EU policy areas and make sure that they cater not only to the information needs of specialised audiences, but also to those of the general public. Here, the detailed summaries of the Nationalrat committee meetings are a very good example.

“Where EU issues are not the regular focus of controversial parliamentary debates and party competition, however, we can hardly expect much attention from the media or the broader public.”

National parliamentarians tend to lament the apathy of citizens for EU issues as well as the lack of media interest in parliamentary EU activities (e.g. Pollak und Slominski 2014 for Austria). Where EU issues are not the regular focus of controversial parliamentary debates and party competition, however, we can hardly expect much attention from the media or the broader public. ‘Politics is ultimately a glorified “soap opera”, with weekly instalments of confrontations and intrigues between vibrant (or sometimes dull!) personalities’ (Hix 2006: 10), and the plenary is the main stage for this opera.

6) Interesting in this context is the new, albeit clearly restricted, right for Members of the European Parliament to speak before the Nationalrat. Whether this right, in force since August 2015, will indeed lead to a closer link between European and national politics or a greater visibility of EU issues in Austria as hoped, however, remains to be seen.



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The Austrian Society for European Politics (Österreichische Gesellschaft für Europapolitik, ÖGfE) is a nongovernmental and non-partisan platform mainly constituted by the Austrian Social Partners. We inform about European integration and stand for an open dialogue about topical issues of European politics and policies and their relevance for Austria. ÖGfE has long-standing experience of promoting a European debate and acts as a catalyst for disseminating information on European affairs.

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