

From Europeanisation to EU-ization: The Media Case

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Abstract

It is widely argued that the success of the European Union has delivered more than half a century of peace, stability, and prosperity in Europe, and that this is the outcome of the Europeanization process. In this paper we support the idea that although Europeanization is a fashionable concept, it is also a contested one. We consider, among others, that the main achievement of the European Union as harmonization of the regulatory frameworks among its 27 member states, is the outcome of an *EU-ization* process that has gradually developed in the 30 years at least. We use the case of media regulation initiated by the European Union to show that the case of EU-ization, at least in the communications landscape, seems to be the driver of the incremental engagement of the EU in the sector.

Keywords: communication, digitalization, Europeanisation, EU-ization, media, platforms, regulation

1. Introduction

Although a unified Europe remains primarily a vision, the European Union (EU) is far from the Federation which the most passionate enthusiasts hope for. It is nevertheless more state-like, some of them even have a common currency while the EU member states exhibit both similarities and crucial differences.

This condition makes it possible for the EU to work based on common values and to a certain extent, on common objectives. ‘Europeanization’ is a fashionable but contested concept, it can be understood as a complex process of political and policy ‘transfer’, since it affects all EU member states. Recent developments like the eurozone crisis or Brexit have led the news media at least in the EU countries to start discussing Europe, Europeanization, and the future of the EU. In trying to find an operational definition of Europeanization, we argue that the main and principal goal of the EU is the harmonization of the regulatory aspects in most of the sectors of the economy. Within this context, one can see a narrowed dimension, or a modern variant of Europeanization, the so-called EU-ization.

In this paper, we use the case of media regulation initiated by the EU to show that EU-ization, at least in the communications landscape, seems to be the driver of the incremental engagement of harmonization in the media sector, an engagement that has led to the gradual coordination of the media systems within the EU. While 40 years ago the EU (then European Communities) was seen as an outsider of the media landscape, nowadays the EU has been welcomed in all aspects of the communication domain of the member states (and not only). At the end of the process, it remains unclear whether the Europeanization rhetoric is fading because the goal has been eventually achieved, or it has lost its original attractiveness (Manierskza, 2015, 151).

2. Europeanization or EU-ization?

As Radaelli (2000, 26–27) notes ‘large-scale policy transfer is involved in the so-called *acquis communautaire*, the body of European legislation that candidate countries must accept before joining the Union’. This is because the dynamics of *Europeanization* can be ‘understood in terms of a limited set of ordinary processes of change, well known from other institutionalized systems of governance’ (Olsen 2002, 923). In effect, the *acquis communautaire* has not only been expanded in the last decades, but it has become more complex. As the phenomenon is way more complex, it is both *Europeanity* and Europeanisation that can be envisaged. The concept of Europeanisation is not easily reducible to a single, linear process. Rather, it operates on multiple dimensions, each with its own distinct characteristics and implications. In effect, the “concepts of Europeanity and Europeanisation (E&E) are linked but distinct phenomena” (Carpentier, 2021, 100). Others have summarized this complexity, by pointing out that “European identity exists on

different levels, cultural and political and is contested.” (Delanty and Rumford, 2005, 68). Carpentier et al. (2023, 101) argue that one can construct a taxonomy that encompasses both a culturalist-discursive lens and a structural-material perspective when examining the dynamics of Europeanity and Europeanisation.

Furthermore, according to the classical model defined by Harmsen and Wilson (2000), for instance, at least seven dimensions can be singled out: Europeanization as the emergence of a European governance; as a national adaptation of common standards; as policy isomorphism; as modernization; as the reconstructions of identities; as transnationalism and cultural integration; or as the plain process of ‘joining Europe’. In a similar vein, Olsen (2002) has come to identify five different ideas of Europeanization, which are shortly supposed to be: change in external territorial boundaries; development a proper European governance; penetration of EU rules into local institutional systems; political project aiming at unifying the continent; and finally, exportation of European rules beyond the European territory itself. The very definition of Europeanisation also happens to vary based on the geographical perspective. For what concerns the European Union itself, Europeanisation is mostly a matter of *legitimacy*: how the EU is perceived from the citizens in all member States and to which extent people feel to be represented by their representatives in Brussels.

Territory is a key dimension of Europeanisation. Carpentier et al. (2023, 111) hold that European territory is a geographical (therefore very material) space occupied by those people considered Europeans. The geography of the European territory is the landmass of the European continent, even though its Eastern boundaries have never been clearly set (Barreneche, 2021). Europeanisation, as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, possesses the potential to instigate significant transformations in the organization of territorial entities within the European continent. At its core, Europe comprises sovereign nation-states, each occupying a distinct and defined geographical space. Nevertheless, Europeanisation extends beyond the traditional boundaries of nation-states, encompassing horizontal interactions among various actors, including national, subnational, supranational, and transnational entities, as well as non-European Union (EU) states and organizations (see Carpentier et al., 2023, 111-112).

In Western Europe, the Europeanization process somehow rhymes with that of globalization, it having to do with the *post-national* organization of contemporary economics and society – as in Castells’ juxtaposition between the space of flows and the space of places (Castells 1996). A main difference emerges in the case of Central Europe, where the – so to speak – pan-European project is also perceived as an actual *realization of the ultimate national values* (Habermas, 2012). Values here refer to essential values that are said to characterize Europe, although more relationist approaches, for example those studying representations of Europe (as shown on this map) “would argue that these European values have been hegemonized”. (Carpentier et al., 2023, 109). As posed by Hasan (2021) European values are seen as enlightenment values, defined as fundamental (human) rights that have been expressed in several key European Union documents (and translated into legal frameworks), such as the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2000), or the Treaty of Lisbon (2007). In the context of this document (Article 2), it is asserted that these principles are evident within a society characterized by the prevalence of pluralism, the absence of discrimination, the presence of tolerance, the implementation of justice, the demonstration of solidarity, and the achievement of gender equality. Institutional communication strategies play a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions and promoting societal values. For example, the European Commission's official Instagram account serves as an exemplary case study of how a supranational institution utilizes this platform to convey its commitment to democracy, transparency, human rights, solidarity, and sustainability (Barreneche 2021). However, various variations of institutional communication, including contested versions, inevitably feature on media content circulating on global media platforms.

Territory and values are connected to media systems. In fact, there are no clear boundaries between Western, Central and Eastern countries - or media systems, as pointed out by Mancini and Zielonka (2012). According to some scholars, in Eastern Europe, the Europeanization process is finally one with the *modernization* process, it being perceived as the right occasion for getting rid of old habits, social roles and the more (Dobek-Ostrowska & Glowacki, 2021). In this specific respect, a similarity can be found with some analysis of Italian, Greek and Turkish cases and therefore with the Mediterranean media system.

In other words, Europeanization is an incremental process (Ladrech, 1994, 70). One facet of Europeanisation centers on the E&E political-institutional aspect of European governance. This dimension encompasses the establishment of supranational political institutions, such as those associated with the EU. Additionally, it pertains to special partnerships and cooperative arrangements among national entities, such as institutions responsible for national welfare states. Certain scholars consider this dimension to be the central element within Europeanisation processes, playing a pivotal role in shaping the concept of Europeanity and contributing to its development (Carpentier et al., 2023).

Another but similar procedure takes place for the EU to achieve its main and principal goal, i.e., the Europeanisation and harmonization of the regulatory aspects in most of the sectors of the economy. In this respect, one has to take into consideration a narrowed dimension (or even the normative approach) of the Europeanisation, the so-called EU-ization

(Flockhart, 2010). EU-ization differs from Europeanization due to its:

focus on the EU and because it is predominantly concerned with ‘political encounters’, where specific political entities such as the EU and Member State representatives engage in the transfer of institutional and organizational practices and policies. EU-ization is a small, but important part of the much broader and longer-term process of Europeanization, which is predominantly concerned with ‘cultural encounters’ (Flockhart, 2010, 790-91).

EU-ization, therefore, can be considered as a modern variant of Europeanization and provides us with a contemporary condition within which the Europeanization process operates (Mannin, 2013, 19-20). One could add that EU-ization is an EU-centric perspective and at the same time is situated in time and space (Smith, 2013). In effect, it entails the gradual dissemination and assimilation of cultural norms, values, and beliefs across geographical and temporal dimensions within European nation-states, encompassing both the European Union and the populace residing therein.

EU-ization could be understood as a multifaceted process characterized by the exchange and adoption of organizational, institutional, and policy practices within the EU or through direct engagement with the EU. This phenomenon particularly pertains to regulatory aspects and aligns with the historical context of states seeking accession to the EU. Importantly, EU-ization is closely intertwined with prior stages of Europeanization, and in contemporary times, it is challenging to envision Europeanization occurring without some level of influence from EU-driven processes.

3. Media Systems and EU-ization

In the case of media and telecommunications policy, in most cases, if not all, ‘member states have sought to retain primary responsibility for communication policy, with the EU relegated to a supportive role. The Commission, on the other hand, acting as a ‘policy entrepreneur’ has sought ‘both to expand its competences and to coordinate a European response to the new international market and technological challenges’ (Humphreys, 2006).

The outcomes of these interactions and interplays have obviously varied from one sector to another. Whilst the processes of EU-ization have modified public policies, political agendas, and governing styles of national political actors, they have also had to meet the challenges to those changes from within member states (Papathanassopoulos and Negrine, 2011).

EU-ization could be also used as a smokescreen for domestic political strategies and as a powerful domestic political resource for driving through. A controversial example here would be the way in which a particular construction of Europe can be used as a means of blocking or encouraging change in candidate member states. For instance, the EU asks that candidate countries align with their media systems in general, and broadcasting, in particular, to the EU Directives (Rosenbaum, 2003). Former Eastern European countries also had prerequisites for EU membership including, for example, adjusting their broadcasting systems to the old *Television Without Frontiers* Directive and transforming their state television companies to Western-style public service broadcasters (Papathanassopoulos, 2018). In effect, the aim of the then European Community to harmonize and eventually to ‘Europeanize’ the audio-visual sector began in 1983 with the publication of the ‘Realities and tendencies of European television’ report which led to a much-discussed Green Paper (in 1984) and then to the well-known Directive for a *Television without Frontiers*, which became the *Audiovisual Media Services* Directive in 2007 with its subsequent revisions (Papathanassopoulos, 2018).

One can also envisage ‘EU-ization’ as a *two-stage process*: one from above, written from Brussels and confined to members states (for instance, all EU legislation on the communications sector); and one from below, the EU responds to ‘desires’ of the member-states to deal, for instance, with the Tech Giants or when larger European countries created pressure for change and therefore asked for new policies in the 1980s (Papathanassopoulos and Negrine, 2011).

However, EU-ization, especially in a media narrative, may also cause *Euroscepticism* too. As Segesten and Bossetta (2019, 1052) note: ‘Although Euroscepticism implies an opposition to the EU and European integration, a Europeanized media discourse on Euroscepticism may facilitate mutual understanding and foster cross-border dialogue among Europeans’. The latest eurozone crisis and its implications for the European project were sound examples where the media discourse about the laden debt-countries was a major issue. In effect, that media discourse was both Europeanized and narrated in a similar manner across national contexts, media outlets and public opinion (Papathanassopoulos, 2015). In other words, while in the past news on European issues had a small presence in the European media (de Vreese 2002), during the eurozone crisis most, if not all, topics like Europe, the EU, eurozone and its future were almost daily in the media of the EU countries at least (Picard, 2015).

Wide-scale comparative research confirms that the attention towards the EU peaks in occurrence of the most critical moments, including the negotiations over public debt, the bailout debate, and the financial downturn (see Sarikakis, Kouku and Winter, 2018; Hänska and Bauchowitz, 2019; Bee and Crona, 2020). It is undeniable, in our perspective, that such attention comes at the price of an unprecedented unpopularity of European institutions: in the aftermath of

2008 crisis, in fact, the EU has moved from being considered beneficial to the population of its Members States, to being held responsible for the “economic situation” and for “not supporting more fiscal solidarity” across the countries (Bouin 2018, 29-31). In effect, this media coverage reflects the three criteria mentioned by Schlesinger’s (1999) to determine the extent to which we can speak of a European public sphere: (a) a distinctly European news agenda, (b) European news that is consumed daily, and (c) a recognition of EU citizenship beyond the nation state and an affective orientation toward Europe. We don’t argue that these criteria have been fulfilled due to EU-ization, but EU’s responses (legislation, fiscal measures) have played a role.

One has also to consider how influence is reconstituted into some form of impact, be it a *new structure of governance or rules*, a new way of implementing directives or perhaps even stalling on these. Additionally, we need also to consider whether the influence and transfer into some measurable impact is positive or negative.

The communication sector is a field in which one can clearly see this incremental intervention of the EU. It is a part of a negotiation process that results in most of cases in a compromise of competing local interests and policies, as well as a careful but precarious balance between the implementation of fair competition policies—for instance, in the telecommunication and commercial broadcasting sectors—and protection of public services and state support, such as public service broadcasting or support for film productions (Papathanassopoulos and Negrine, 2011). Most importantly, the process of incremental intervention involves coming out with precise (and renewable) EU laws aiming at the EU-ization (or harmonization) of the sector. This is also evident in the recent initiatives of the EU regarding the Digital Service Act (DSA) and the Digital Markets Act (DMA) (European Commission 2020a; 2020b) aiming to provide a comprehensive framework for the EU regulation of online platforms. One can trace this process in respect of the EU’s involvement in the media and the broader communications sector, initially in the television system, then in telecommunications, later in new media–related policy issues, such as net neutrality, or for stricter protections of Europeans online privacy, protections against risks, and extent of surveillance to protect copyright.

4. Concluding Remarks

While the question of the EU's competence in these matters has continued to fascinate many commentators and scholars, there is now no doubt that the EU has fully embraced the entire communication sector – from the old ‘audio-visual’ media sector right through to the ‘global information society’ (see also Papathanassopoulos 2018). The EU has intervened in all aspects of the communications sector, and the European Commission considers itself the initiator as well as the watchdog of a harmonized European communication landscape. In effect, the EU through the European Commission has not only been a policy initiator, but also the stimulator for providing a harmonized European communications landscape and for launching European media in the platformization era. There are several initiatives in this regard. The Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act aim to create a safer digital space where the fundamental rights of users are protected and to establish a level playing field for businesses (European Commission 2020b); The European Media Freedom Act (2022), a new set of rules to protect media pluralism and independence in the EU that seek to ensure that media – public and private – can operate more easily across borders in the EU internal market, without undue pressure and taking into account the digital transformation of the media space or the Artificial Intelligence Act that attempts to regulate the ethical and fair use of AI.

These policy initiatives indicate, if not prove, that at least in the communication sector, the harmonization (or EU-ization) of media systems could not be advanced without the intervention of the EU. New initiatives are on the pipeline such as the ‘European Media Data Space’, support for media that serve the public interest, in ‘Creative Europe’, or even a permanent ‘News Media Fund’. All these policies and initiatives confirm that the EU remains an exemplary laboratory of comprehending harmonization in practice, an *Heracleian* task, and are more effective for a Europeanized communications landscape compared to vague notions of Europeanisation, and the EU, at least, in the media field, has entered the phase of the EU-ization. In the platformization era, this has become more important. As media and communication systems converge in Europe at least, and as new, mostly US, tech giants enter the field, it seems certain that isolated member states cannot deal with issues and factors that have a European dimension, transecting and at the same time accepting national borders and EU citizens.

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Authors contributions

Dr. Papathanassopoulos was responsible for the original draft preparation, conceptualization, and analysis. All authors were responsible for writing-review, data curation, and contributing to analysis. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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