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Between Europeanism and Nativism: Exploring a Cleavage Model of European Public Sphere on Social Media

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There is broad agreement among deliberative theorists that formation of a common European public sphere is only possible through "Europeanisation of national public spheres" (Habermas 2009). Inspired by this, media content studies within the deliberative theory tradition postulate that a transnational public sphere is a unified, single communication space that accommodates multiple publics, and that national public spheres will gradually shrink and be supplanted by a Europe-wide public sphere. The current situation indicates quite the opposite. The political crises of extremism, autocracy, and populism that the latest financial crisis triggered in Europe, reveal a strong presence of national public spheres and national publics despite European elites' 60 years of efforts at building a European public sphere (cf. Harrison and Pukallus 2015).

Offering a fundamental critique of the deliberative public sphere model, agonistic theory has underscored deliberative theory's negligence of antagonism in its conceptualisation of public sphere (Mouffe 1999, 2007). Despite its overwhelming focus on the "constitutive" role of conflict, agonistic theory advises eradicating antagonism by transforming it into agonism, turning enemies into adversaries (Mouffe 2000, 2005), and giving due voice to conflicts within the political system (Mouffe 2007, 2012). While inclusion of adversaries and conflicts is to be done by institutions like political parties, transformation from antagonism to agonism, and from enemies to adversaries, is envisioned to be realised, in the case of the post-war Europe, by building institutions like those of the European Union that are capable of such transformation (Mouffe 2012). Because it proposes an institutional architecture of European public sphere that is similar to deliberative theory's, agonistic theory encounters the same challenges as deliberative theory.

Whether agonistic or deliberative, it is evident that Europeanisation of national public spheres is hard to achieve by overlaps, synchronisation of news reporting, diffusion of Europeanist norms, or politicisation along single issues. The European Union's common public sphere project may hence be in danger. This calls for explorations of other modes of public sphere for Europe. Are there traces of other modes of public sphere emerging in Europe than what the deliberative and agonistic theory lenses enable us to perceive? In this article, we

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suggest a model which is based on a cleavage theory of Europeanisation. With a point of departure in Rokkan's cleavage theory (1970, 1975), we define the European public sphere as a composite architecture of communicative networks of ideological groups structured around Europe-wide political cleavages. We explore this mode of European public sphere by utilizing Facebook data and employing tools of social network analysis (Wasserman and Faust 1994).

In the next section, we position the cleavage-model of a public sphere with respect to the deliberative and agonistic models. In the third section, we operationalise transnational networks and cleavages. The fourth section describes the data and methods. The results from our network analysis of Facebook pages are presented in the fifth section. The sixth section discusses the implications of the results for current knowledge.

1. Deliberative, agonistic and cleavage modes of European public sphere

An advanced conceptual apparatus is already in place in public sphere theory, especially regarding the distinctions between the concepts of "public sphere" (Habermas 1989), "transnational public sphere" (Splichal 2012), "global public sphere" (Bohman 2008), "public space" (Mouffe 2007), "publics" (Splichal 2012), "counterpublics" and "weak and strong publics" (Fraser 1990), "networked publics" (Castells 2008), and "relational publics" (Starr 2021). With inspiration from this rich literature, we argue that the cleavage theory provides a perspective of Europeanisation that better captures the structure of the European public sphere. It is thus in place to start by positioning the cleavage model of public sphere in relation to the deliberative and agonistic models.

Three central traits distinguish these models from each other: (i) the public sphere structure they propose (single versus multiple public spaces), (ii) the role they assign to conflict and compromise in the public sphere (conflict as a constitutive element of public sphere versus as a hinder for public sphere), and (iii) their methods for Europeanisation.

1.1. Single versus multiple public spaces

The deliberative model suggests a single, open public sphere shared by a single public or multiple interconnected publics. According to deliberative theory, a fragmented public sphere, which contains multiple public spaces, cannot perform its core functions of empowering citizens, promoting equality, producing public opinion, monitoring powerholders, and upholding popular sovereignty. This axiom rests on two fundaments. The first is the normative principle that a public sphere should be an open, unified space of political communication that gives access to all citizens (Habermas 1989). From a deliberative theory viewpoint, a

fragmented communication space is not a public sphere. The second fundament involves the instrumentalist concern that a public sphere composed of multiple public spaces is inefficient as fragments obstruct public communication, hinder the making of a shared public opinion, and weaken citizens' power vis à vis power holders.

Considering accounts by Chantal Mouffe, also agonistic theory favours a single public sphere shared by multiple publics. Mouffe's argumentation around bringing back "the political" and "politics" (e.g., Mouffe 1999) implies a single, shared public sphere where adversaries relate to each other politically. Mouffe (1987) says to this effect, "[i]t should […] be possible to combine the defense of pluralism and the priority of right characteristic of modern democracy with a revalorization of the political understood as *collective participation in a public sphere* where interests are confronted, conflicts sorted out, divisions exposed, confrontations staged […]" (our emphasis).

Based on cleavage theory, we conceptualise a public sphere as consisting of multiple public spaces and multiple publics that are either interconnected in a variety of ways or that co-exist through contestation and conflict without necessarily being linked or interconnected otherwise. Here, the term "public" is used in the same sense as Habermas' notion, which defines it as citizens "organized as bearer of public opinion" (Habermas et al. 1964). The term "public space" stresses structured, resilient communicative interactions that constitute a communication network that is distinguishable from the surrounding public spaces. Examples are the communication networks of ethnic, religious or ideological groups. In other words, public spaces are sub-components of a fragmented public sphere. They are distinguished from each other with their members' more intense internal communication activity than their communication outwards. Each public space has its own public and discursive orientation, and public spaces are constituent parts of a public sphere.

1.2. Conflict versus compromise

Deliberative and agonistic theories disagree about the role of conflict and compromise in the public sphere. A contribution of the deliberative approach concerns the essentiality of communicative rationality for a public sphere to be efficient. The deliberative model presupposes open and equal access to public communication and specific individual skills needed to engage in public reason (Habermas 1989). By complying with the normative principles that constitute "the ideal speech situation", public sphere participants are expected to display a cooperative behaviour to arrive at compromises (Habermas 1986). Habermas puts the rational, communicative, and cooperative behaviour as an essential norm for the effective

functioning of a public sphere and excludes the groups who are not capable of rational communication (e.g., Habermas 1992). Consequently, although conflicts are allowed within the deliberative theory's conceptual frame, they are not attributed a constitutive role.

The agonistic model deploys a conceptualisation that considers the inevitability of antagonism and conflict (Mouffe 1999, 2007). It views conflict as one of the foundations of public sphere and politics. Criticizing the deliberative theory for its potential consequence of eradicating politics from public sphere through insistence on compromise, agonistic theory has called for recognizing the presence of antagonism and conflict in the public sphere and the necessity of transforming antagonisms into adversarial relations, and enemies into adversaries (Mouffe 2000, 2002, 2005).

With its roots in Weberian and Marxian traditions, cleavage theory is in tune with the agonistic theory's approach to the constitutive role of conflict.

1.3. Transnationalisation and Europeanisation

Habermas (2009) saw a possibility for the evolution of a European public sphere through Europeanisation of national public spheres. In cross-national media research inspired by deliberative theory, Europeanisation has meant different combinations of several measures: adoption of a thick European collective identity (Eriksen 2005), overlaps between national public spheres (Schlesinger 1999), attention to European themes (Gerhards 2000), reporting the same events at the same time (Eder and Kantner 2000), similar meaning frames and perspectives (Peters et al. 2005), resonance across national borders (Eder and Kantner 2000), and recognition of other Europeans as legitimate speakers in national public debates (Risse 2003). By fusing some of these criteria, Risse (2003, 2010) conceptualised Europeanisation in terms of three indicators: (1) similar levels of attention to the same themes at the same time, (2) similar frames of reference, meaning structures, and patterns of interpretation, and (3) public sphere participants' mutual recognition of each other as legitimate speakers.

In other words, Europeanisation of national public spheres is understood in two ways, which are not mutually exclusive: (1) becoming "European" in terms of values, goals, and perspectives through bottom-up domestication or top-down norm diffusion and (2) synchronised timing in news reporting, attention to similar issues, similar framings of issues, overlaps, and resonance across borders. We call the former normative Europeanisation and the latter structural Europeanisation. Whereas normative Europeanisation calls for an interconnectedness between national public spheres through shared European(ist) norms that view the European Union and all Europeans as the most relevant addressees of public

deliberations, structural Europeanisation emphasises similarities in timing, framing, and attended issues across national public spheres, regardless of whether the common denominator is a European perspective. Both notions of Europeanisation emphasise interconnectedness through similarities.

Deliberative theory's requirement of interconnectedness does not involve recognizing the constitutive role of conflict, fragmentation, and multiple public spaces. Although there are genuine attempts in deliberative theory to come to terms with the variety of arenas, considered opinions, and interests, (e.g., Habermas 2009), these have not yielded an elaboration of the mechanisms through which a fragmented public sphere, with multiple public spaces, can function in terms of political communication. Instead, the deliberative theory's contribution is identifying methods to eradicate fragmentation. Habermas structures the public sphere in terms of centre-periphery relations. The "institutionalized and formally organized" communication happens at the centre of the political system and "the arranged or informal" communication in the civil society in the periphery (Habermas 2009). The public sphere is between these two levels, and it structures and filters the mass communication. In this scheme, in contrast to the cleavage theory, social groups and their lifeworlds are within the civil society sphere and use the shared public sphere, and they do not constitute public spaces.

On the other hand, agonistic theory does not sufficiently elaborate on how a single, unified European public sphere can be achieved. Nor does it consider the possible mechanisms that may enable communication across publics and public spaces. Mouffe (2012) argues any Europeanisation project must recognize the national, regional and trans-national collective identities and diversities. Drawing on Tully (2007), Mouffe foresees a federal institutional basis for European integration. She indicates "politicisation" as a method of realizing a European "demoi-cracy", a term she borrows from Kalypso Nicolaïdis, meaning the democratic system of multiple demoi: "There needs to be a politicization of the European project that would allow the citizens of the various demoi to engage in confrontation and to articulate adversarial perspectives and visions on the future of the EU and its place in the world" (Mouffe 2012). This also implies a common European public sphere where the demoi can meet. Also regarding European integration, Mouffe underlines the necessity of building institutions that transform enemies into adversaries. Through a "conflictual consensus", an agonistic public sphere will be formed in Europe, which takes account of unity, diversity, and collective identities, and the conflicts and affections associated with them.

In cleavage theory, the condition for a fragmented public sphere to be functional is that its fragments are parts of an interactive system of networks that constitute a whole (Sicakkan

2016a). This is in accord with Star's (2021) relational notion of publics as "open-ended networks of actors (i.e., without a closed or fixed membership) linked together through flows of communication, shared stories, and civic or other concerns". On the other hand, it diverges from it because it doesn't require all the networks to be linked with each other and allows agonistic disconnectedness as well. Thus, we propose deploying a notion of Europeanisation that is based on Europe-wide transnational "cleavage formation" (Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Rokkan 1970, 1975). Political cleavages enable and empower different actors to position themselves in relation to each other in a common political space, thus generating a European level politics linking publics and public spaces across a variety of boundaries. Building on the deliberative and agonistic models and adding the cleavage theory, we conceptualise the European public sphere in terms of *structural interconnectedness* and *agonistic disconnectedness* between sub-European public spaces and publics. Agonistic disconnectedness means a detached co-existence of some sub-European public spaces whose inhabiting publics are in conflict and contestation with each other. Detachment is characterised by a lack of direct communication between the respective publics. Being party on different sides of transnational conflicts, such isolated sub-European public spaces' meaningful existence can only be possible in a transnational political cleavage system that accommodates the conflicts and contestations that they are involved in. That is, sub-European public spaces emerge and exist because they make each other's presence necessary and meaningful in the overall transnational political cleavage system, regardless of whether they are otherwise interconnected or disconnected.

2. Data, method and indicators of a cleavage-model of European public sphere

We use the European public sphere as the least likely case of a well-functioning "fragmented" public sphere. If the model works in such a difficult case as the European Union, it is expected to work better in less difficult cases like national states. The European public sphere is defined as a composite architecture of *networks of communication* that are structured around *political cleavages*. This means that we investigate *structural interconnectedness* by measuring transnational communication through shared members and messages across pages and *agonistic disconnectedness* by measuring the relational ideological positions of groups within a transnational cleavage system.

Applying a network analysis to communication and page-membership data collected from Facebook, we identify how a wide variety of non-state organisations, political parties, individual citizens, political institutions, and other actors are, either directly or through what

we call *connectors,* linked with the European Union's political institutions and each other while some are separated from each other by shared cleavages. The first step of our analysis shows the existence of a common European political space of communicative networks. Further, by detecting inductively the connected and disconnected communities across a set of Facebook networks, we identify the conflicts that constitute the *transnational political cleavage system* that these networks are part of.

2.1. Why social media?

We want to demonstrate the presence of a common European political cleavage system in Facebook, a relatively more boundary-free communication space where the structuring force of national politics does not dominate in the same way as in national print and broadcast media. The cleavage model of public sphere was earlier tested with multiple types of data derived from nation-level sources (e.g., Sicakkan 2012; 2016a; 2016b). The structuring potency of national contexts is high in media's news framing, national elites' attitudes, and national organizations' views. Consequently, the political cleavages found in such data are more likely to reflect conflicts and contestations in national contexts. Is it possible to observe similar or new cleavages in social media, where political communication is colored considerably less by national politics?

2.2. Case selection

Our data is messages posted to Facebook pages. The selected Facebook pages are rich in content, and their followers are numerous. Their contents comprise declarations of stances rather than upfront discussions. In other words, Facebook is not a place of deliberations but rather assertive statements that are barely commented by others beyond "likes", "shares" and "emojis". In one of the pages studied, for example, when a page owner attempted to start a discussion about European values, a page member responded by writing that the European Union is a neoliberal entity that only serves the interests of the rich and undermines the poor and that there are no true European values that can be talked about.[2] Such stance declarations characterize the communication in Facebook pages more than deliberations do. However, although one cannot research deliberative processes with Facebook data, such *declarations of stances* are suitable data to identify political cleavages and political communities.

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[2] This statement of the user has been rephrased in order to protect the privacy of the Facebook member. For the same purpose, the name of the page owner is not revealed either.

2.3. Snowballing and search by keywords

At the time of data collection, Facebook had restricted automated mass downloading of data. However, it was still allowed to download data from Facebook pages one by one by using the Nettviz application that was made available by Facebook. Due to this restriction, the Facebook pages used in this research were identified by two complementary page selection methods: Snowballing and keyword search. While page-selection with snowballing enabled us to find a set of institutions, groups and communities that were already interconnected with each other through "likes", "shared members" and "topics of interest", page selection with key search words of theoretical interest facilitated inclusion of other actors and their pages that were not necessarily linked with the first group or with each other. Thus, a combination of these two procedures made it possible to take account of both *structural connectedness* and *agonistic disconnectedness*.

To begin with, a new Facebook-account was created and registered for the purpose of data collection. The account was used to access public groups and to "like" the pages of organizations, groups, and communities.

Our snowballing included three steps: In the first stage, we searched for pages that could be used as a point of departure for snowballing. We used the keyword "European citizens" in this search. The most relevant page that was found was "European Citizens Initiative (ECI)". That is, the search for related pages took its starting point from a particular Facebook page. In the second step, we "liked" this page. Once a page is "liked", Facebook unfolds a scrollable row with "More Pages You May Like" from which pages were considered for evaluation. In a third step, pages listed under "Pages liked by this page" were considered and evaluated accordingly.

Regarding the search with keywords, a list of search terms was prepared and updated continuously and was used once the search for pages based on the above-mentioned search- and retrieval features Facebook provides was finished. The following search words were used:

Pan-Europeanism, Pan-European identity, Paneuropa, Anti-EU, Anti-Europa, Pro-Europeanism, awakening europe, Trans… , Eurosceptics, failing Europe, falling Europe, Anti-EU, Euromaidan, pro-active European, pro-EU, civil society, shared sovereignty, non-partisan, international citizen, new Europe, European grassroots, European movement, euro reform, eurozone, European republic, European actors, euro alter/alter europe, open europe, one Europe, Euroscope, European haters, Europe is [not] dead, Euregio, European perspective, eutopia, Eurobubble, EU horizon, Euroscene, EU discourse, change Europe.

2.4. Relevance criteria for page selection

The above procedure provided a long list of potential Facebook pages for inclusion. A fine selection was done to eliminate the irrelevant pages. The aim was to provide an overview of all existing transnational communities and organisations that maintain a Facebook-presence .

The criteria for inclusion were being operative at the European scale, being a public interest organisation and using English as one of the languages of communication. Not only transnational organisations but also international, national, and local actors were included if they communicated transnationally. The choice for inclusion was primarily based on the descriptions provided on each individual Facebook-page. Pages that explicitly invited Facebook-users to debate and express one's opinion on political issues were included. Note that the selected pages are both pro- and anti-European integration. As an example of a pro-integration page, see the description of the page "EU Neighbourhood & Enlargement".[3]

> If you are interested in EU neighbourhood & enlargement and/or in the countries involved, this is a space for you. We'll be happy to share with you the latest news and events. This page is open to hosting debate and you are welcome to voice your opinions as long as they are on the subject, are not offensive in themselves or to other users.

2.5. Data

We identified 287 Facebook pages by using relevance criteria and the above-mentioned theory-driven thematic search words. The number of the pages selected by snowballing is 72. We ended up with a dataset containing 359 Facebook pages with roughly 4.6 million Facebook entries posted by more than 223 thousand unique users for the period 2007-2015. The data were downloaded separately from each Facebook page by using the Netvizz app made available on Facebook at the time of data collection. Pages with little or no content were removed. The unique users are all Facebook users who appear in the selected pages as page members, message posters, or commentators.

2.6. Method

From these data, we constructed the overall networks. First, all networks were constructed that exist on each page between all users. From that, we derive our main network, a network between the Facebook pages that are connected and represent interconnectedness if they share at least

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[3] https://www.facebook.com/EUnear/info?tab=page_info:

one common contributor. Such edges both indicate interest in organisations and represent structural interconnectedness. The number of shared members varies greatly and is represented as weights in the networks, i.e., the strength of an edge or connection. Considering the weight and number of connections gives us the total number of connectors assigned to a node (weighted degree) and results in a hierarchy of Facebook pages.

In addition to hierarchical properties, our paper tries to detect communities within the network. Those groups consist of pages in which connections are unusually dense (i.e., more than would be expected) and have only loose connections to other subgroups (Girvan and Newman 2002). To detect them, we applied the modularity approach of Clauset et al. (2004) by using the algorithm of Blondel et al. (2008). For weighted networks it is defined as:

$$Q = \frac{1}{2m} \sum_{i,j} \left[w_{ij} - \frac{d_i d_j}{2m} \right] f(c_i, c_j),$$

where $m = \frac{1}{2} \sum_{ij} w_{ij}$, and c_i is the community of node i and j, respectively. The function is 1 if $c_i = c_j$ and 0 otherwise. It calculates the difference between realised and expected connections between two nodes.

## 3. Searching for the cleavage mode of European public sphere

Our two indicators – *structural connectedness* and *agonistic disconnectedness* – will in combination reveal the European political cleavage structure observed on Facebook.

3.1. The communicative network of actors in the European public sphere

The nodes (circles) in Figure 1 represent the 359 organisations included in this research. The colour of each node shows the organisation type. The size of each node indicates the size of the community that is active on the respective page, measured by the number of posts sent within the respective page. The nodes have an edge (connecting line) between them if they share at least one common member, thus someone active on both pages. The number of "shared" members is the weight (thickness) of each edge. For example, the node representing the European Commission is orange, which means it is a government organisation. It is the largest node in Figure 1. This means it has the largest level of posting activity. The network density of the Figure is 0.373. This means 37,3% of all the posts are connecting posts between the pages. 10% of the users function as "connectors" between networks through active memberships in

multiple pages. Thus, the data material shows a high degree of communication intensity around the network of European Union institutions through connectors and connecting messages.

Figure 1. Communicative Networks in the European Public Sphere
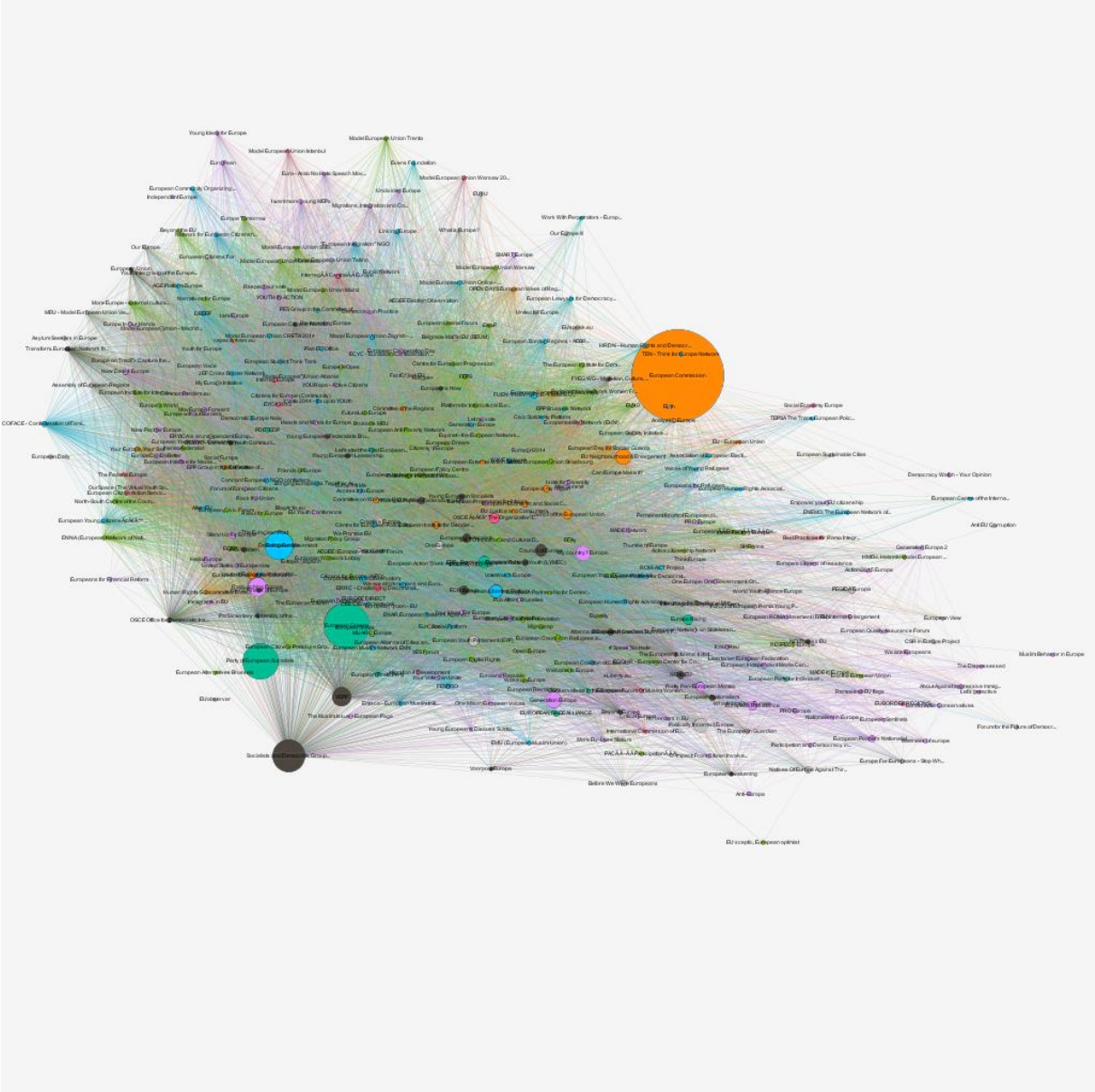
The organisations that are classified by Facebook as "community" (purple), "non-governmental organisation" (blue), "non-profit organisation" (green), "political organisation" (black), and "organisation" (pink) constitute more than 80% of the actors actively involved in EU related issues in Facebook. These can be considered as the online civil society of the European Union. 5,3% of the nodes, including the European Commission, are categorised as "government organisation" whereas 3,34% are "political parties". "Media actors" that are active on these Facebook pages constitute approximately 4% of the nodes. This means that all types

of actors that are supposed to be visible in a public sphere are active on Facebook as page owners and posters. Different types of actors are also well-linked with each other. When the network is partitioned along the actor type variable, modularity is 0,223, a modest value, which means that organisations are not only linked with actors of their own type but also other types.

Table 1. The top 20 actors (by weighted degree)

Organisation name	Type	Degree
European Commission	Government	96755
Debating Europe	Civil society	63523
Socialists and Democrats Group	Political party	57237
Party of European Socialists	Political party	52902
Relaunching Europe	Civil society	38065
European Greens	Political Party	31857
Council of Europe	Government	29352
European Liberties Platform	Civil society	28863
EU Neighbourhood & Enlargement	Government	27434
Youth of the European People's Party	Political Party	22470
Council of the European Union	Government	18976
European Reformists and Conservatives Group	Political Party	18403
European Federalists	Civil society	14712
European Economic and Social Committee	Government	14510
Young European Federalists	Civil Society	13902
Europe in my region	Government	13746
OneEurope	Civil Society	13298
European People's Party	Political Party	12988
European Youth Parliament	Civil Society	11061
Generation Europa	Civil Society	10344

Table 1 illustrates that the important ingredients of a public sphere, except media, are also represented among the top 20 organisations that have the most activity in their Facebook pages. The European Commission's Facebook page contains most communication activity. It has the largest number of shared members – that is, the number of people who are active in this page and at least one additional page. Also, message exchanges (connecting messages) between the European Commission's page and the other organisations' pages are the highest. Indeed, the European Commission is functioning as a network centre that the other organisations are trying to address with their messages. The communication is happening towards and around the European Commission. In a public sphere, this is how it is supposed to be: all actors communicate with other actors and seek to influence the political centre by addressing it.

Theoretically, these are very interesting results. Organisations' pages share members who post messages in multiple pages, and some of their members are communicating with each other across pages. Roughly 10 percent of all users have at least one post in at least two different

Facebook pages. However, the numbers follow a rather steep power law distribution. This means that there are few unique users that have a lot of postings on multiple sites, with a maximum of 3403. The count represents the realisation of all potentially possible combinations between all sites. We can conclude from this that many users are active on some pages and few users are highly active on many different pages. This means that there are some users who function as "connectors" between the pages.

Indeed, this depiction is in line with how the public sphere functions in other platforms – except the fact that there is less deliberation and more stance declarations on Facebook. In this sense, Facebook accommodates what Fraser (1990) calls "weak publics". Although the public sphere is open to all citizens and groups in principle, only a small percentage of the members of each group choose to speak in the public sphere. As Habermas (2009) touches on, public sphere in advanced democracies is primarily a space of institutionalised politics. The most active participants in political communication are representatives or members of political organisations, civil society organisations and government organisations. Despite the small size of their number, these speakers function as "connectors" between groups and communities of different kinds by carrying issues, viewpoints, and arguments between the multiple public spaces that they are habitually active in.

The above discussion illustrates the presence of a communicative network on Facebook around the European Union institutions. Its structure with "networks", "connectors" and "connecting messages" between different organisations' Facebook pages are similar to how the public sphere functions on more traditional platforms such as broadcast and print media. In order to confirm that this structural connectedness constitutes a cleavage model of European public sphere, we need to examine whether the networks, connectors and their connecting messages construct political communities that contest and conflict with each other.

3.2. Political communities in the European public sphere

The inductive modularity detection approach resulted in identification of five communities. To depict these communities' ideological profiles in more detail than what is provided here, it is necessary to analyse the content of the postings in their Facebook as well as their pronounced political goals in their profile pages in more depth. However, already at this stage it is possible to state with a high level of certainty that the organisations cluster into political groups that are similar to the groups that were found earlier by using content data from traditional print and broadcast media, interviews with European elites, and citizen attitude data (cf. Sicakkan 2016b, 2016c).

In Figure 2, the five communities are illustrated with different colours. The node labels (i.e., the names of the organisations) are not included here to depict the architecture of the European political cleavage system clearly. The organisations among which there is a lot of postings form a community. In the middle, there is a large purple community around the largest node. Then, we observe a green community in the lower right corner of the cloud, and a blue community to its left. In the bottom of the middle, there is an orange community. At the top of the cloud, we see a yellow community.

**Figure 2. Political Communities of Transnational European Organisations**
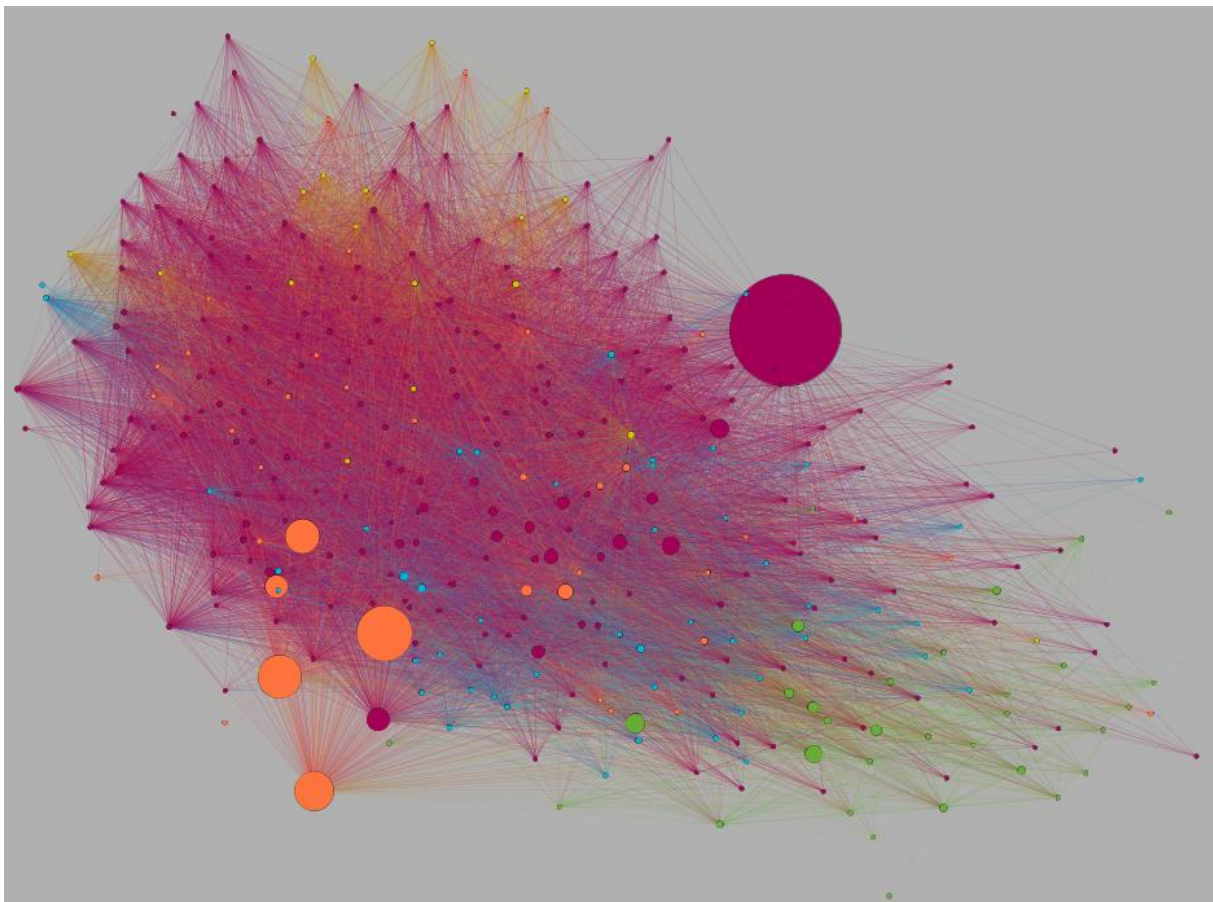
Networks with high modularity have dense connections between the nodes within modules but scant connections between nodes in different modules. In this analysis, we used a resolution of 1.0. The overall modularity (0.239) is between low and modest. This means that the communities are not very sharply separated from each other; however, the members of each network communicate more with each other than with the members of other communities. This means that, in the European public sphere on Facebook, there are five interconnected

communities, which nicely fits with our definition of a cleavage-model of transnational public sphere.

Figure 3. Positions of Transnational European Organisations within the Cleavage Structure

The names of the organisations in the community figure indicate that these are ideological or political communities. The orange community, for example, contains organisations with pro-integration left-wing orientations. The green community comprises the nation-statist, ethno-nationalist, and nativist organisations. The purple community encompasses top-down Europeanists, i.e., the Europeanist and federalist organisations that are working for a united Europe. The blue community is constituted by organisations that are EU, minority, diversity, and human rights-friendly and working for an alternative Europe to be constructed

bottom up. The yellow community is formed by local branches of *Model European Union.* Thus, this group can be considered a part of "top-down Europeanists". These political communities, except the yellow one, correspond to the four communities observed in more traditional public sphere platforms: *top-down Europeanists* (purple and yellow communities), *bottom-up Europeanists* (blue and orange communities), and *nation-statists* and *nativists* that we find separately in the national media are here merged into one group (green community).

Figure 4. Groups in Cleavages
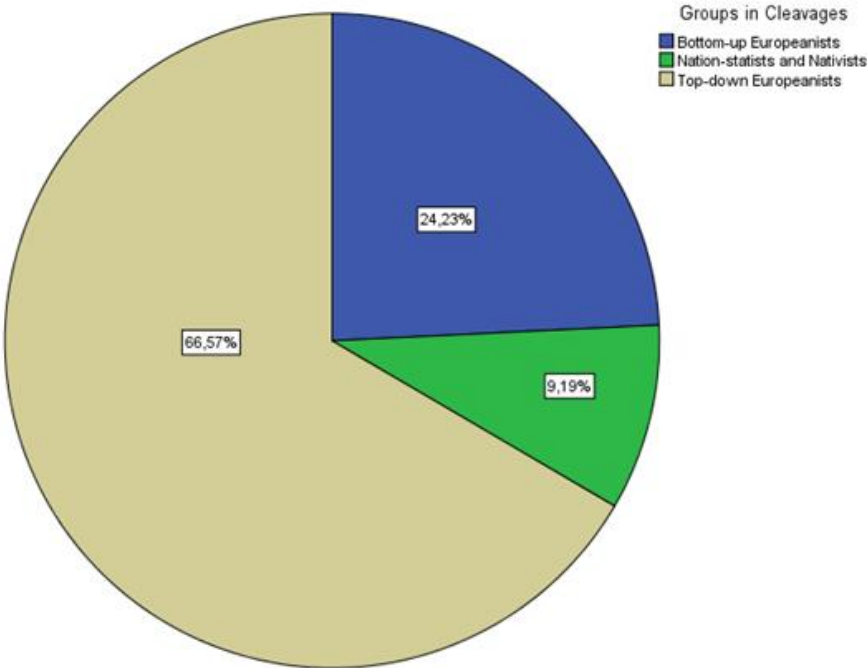
These groups are parts of a transnational political cleavage system. Vertical, centre-periphery cleavages between top-down Europeanists and other groups were identified in earlier research (Sicakkan 2016b), and they may help us to interpret these communities in a more meaningful way: "Bottom-up Europeanists", "nation-statists" and "nativists" are critical towards the European Union and against "top-down Europeanists". This forms three vertical centre-periphery cleavages. The political cleavage between top-down Europeanists who want a "unified Europe" and nation-statists who advocate a "Europe of nation states" is the classical struggle between intergovernmentalists and supranationalists. This cleavage links national publics and public spaces of Europe with top-down Europeanists through contestation on the status of the member states in the emerging European public sphere. The vertical political cleavage between top-down Europeanists and bottom-up Europeanists is about democratisation of the European Union, disempowerment of supranational elites, and choice of bottom-up or

top-down strategies of European integration. This cleavage puts the transnational publics and public spaces of Europe into a relationship of contestation about the power of supranational elites. The third vertical political cleavage is between top-down Europeanists and nativists advocating "a Europe of natives". The point of contestation linking this public with top-down Europeanists is about diversity, immigration, and the status of migrant minorities. In addition to the publics mentioned above, there are regional ("Europe of the regions") and minority ("Europe of diversity") publics. These two publics are relatively well incorporated into "top-down Europeanists" through the political opportunity structures provided for them, adding new dimensions to the transnational political cleavage system in the European Union.

Before proceeding further, it is important to compare these cleavages briefly with the original cleavages in the Rokkanian theory (cf. Rokkan 1970, 1975). Firstly, Rokkan's cleavage theory was developed to explain the development of mass democracy and political party systems in European nation states (Kuhnle and Flora 1999; cf. Allardt 1964). It identified the political cleavages deriving from the conflicts and tensions between different political groups, leading to party formations (cf. Lipset and Rokkan 1967). The cleavages and cleavage structures varied from country to country. However, there were some common patterns as well. Examples to the cleavages Rokkan identified were territorial cleavages (centre-periphery), economic cleavages (class, worker-employer, urban-farmer), cultural cleavages (state-church, secularism-religion, language groups) (Rokkan 1970, 1975). This is a structuralist approach, and it expects variation in cleavages across countries and change over time. The above-mentioned European level political cleavages are peculiar to the transnational nature of the European public sphere, but they resemble the Rokkanian cleavage systems in terms of their structures.

4. Fragmentation, politicisation and transnational political cleavages in the EU

This calls for a discussion of the implications of our findings with respect to two strands of scholarship: the fragmentation literature within internet public sphere research and the politicisation literature within European integration research. Below, we briefly highlight the relevance of our findings for these.

Fragmentation research was sparked by a concern raised about the echo chambers (Sunstein 2001). Early empirical research showed a high degree of fragmentation in the internet (e.g. Hill & Hughes 1998, Downey & Fenton 2003), which was interpreted by public sphere researchers as a trait making the digital sphere an inadequate platform for the public sphere communication. While Dahlgren (2005) argued that fragmentation is the negative side of the

internet concerning the functioning of public sphere, Dahlberg (2007) contended fragmentation is primarily a concern for deliberative theory and the deliberative model of public sphere. Accordingly, when public sphere is understood as a space constituted by discursive contestation, reservations against fragmentation into "like-minded" groups should be re-thought (Dahlberg 2007). More recent research within the deliberative paradigm is less concerned about fragmentation and maintains "Facebook expands the flow of information to other networks and enables more symmetrical conversations among users" (Halpern and Gibbs 2012). Bruns (2019) has found that the impact of echo chambers and filter bubbles is exaggerated whereas Benkler (2015) summarized previous literature as "[t]he most important and consistent finding was not in fact fragmentation but rather concentration".

The findings of this paper also show that fragmentation along political cleavages constitutes the public sphere rather than weaken it. Indeed, some degree of fragmentation (disconnectedness) along common political cleavages is necessary for the public sphere to exist. Our network analysis shows that there is both fragmentation and unification. The 359 European communicative networks (pages) that look like isolated fragments or segments are linked through cross-network communication (*connectors* and *connecting messages*) in five European political communities. Furthermore, there is a considerable communication between the five detected political communities, which means that the parties to conflicts do relate to each other. Therefore, in the social media platform, what may seem like fragments and segments are actually communicative networks and political communities that are in contestation and conflict with each other, which is a necessary condition for a public sphere to exist. They are both united and divided by Europe-wide political cleavages. When discussing the consequences of fragmentation for the public sphere, it is important to determine what kind of fragmentation is the subject matter. This brings us to the constitutive role of political cleavages.

Our analysis detected five political communities in Facebook pages. Earlier research also identified some of these groups, though without assessing whether they constitute a transnational *cleavage system* (e.g., Koopmans 2010; Klicperova-Baker and Kostal 2012, 2016; Risse 2010; Zürn and de Wilde 2016). Indeed, in recent years, there has been a politicisation-turn in European integration research. A recurrent question is whether politicisation of European integration and the increasing power of supranational institutions lead to further integration (e.g., Zürn 2018; de Wilde and Zürn 2012). Some researchers go beyond this and assess whether a certain conflict about a policy issue is an isolated conflict or part of a cleavage (e.g., de Wilde 2017). Most remarkably, Hooghe and Marks (2018) describe "the emergence of a transnational cleavage, which has as its core a political reaction against European integration

and immigration"; whereas Sicakkan (2016b, 2016c) identifies a *transnational cleavage system* comprising multiple cleavages that are represented by party groups in the European Parliament and on which the European Union politics is built. This paper finds that a very similar transnational cleavage system is discernible also on Facebook. Thus, while confirming the existence of politicisation, we take a step further and demonstrate that the much-debated politicisation contributes to the making of a *transnational cleavage system*.

5. Concluding remarks

Disagreements about how to address Europe's complex diversity and the future of the European Union and its Member States have spilled over a long range of policy areas. These spillovers are systematic, enduring, and comprehensive enough to be labelled as Europe-wide political cleavages. They also have created a range of interactions, tensions, and communication between European and national elites, between citizens and elites at all levels, and between different transnational and national groups. And this is the basis of the cleavage mode of European public sphere.

Our data enables us to discern a cleavage-model of European public sphere. We observe a balanced mix of *structural connectedness* between the participating actors and communities and *agonistic disconnectedness* between them – a configuration which allows the emergence of transnational political cleavages that constitute a public sphere. We introduced the terms "connectors", "structural interconnectedness", "agonistic disconnectedness", and "political cleavages" as part of the cleavage-model of public sphere, which proved useful in overcoming the conceptual challenges brought by the fragmentation and politicisation literature and their tense relationship with the deliberative and agonistic theories.

Conclusively, cleavages structure the public sphere by generating connectedness and disconnectedness between publics and public spaces. The notion of cleavage helps us to recognize complex public sphere structures. It depicts the political context in which communication, deliberation, and contestation happens. It also enables us to observe and predict how this structure alters over time and re-assembles itself in new ways, while articulating a political capital to respond to such alteration. As an alternative to the deliberative and agonistic methods to create a European public sphere – respectively, "structural or normative Europeanization of national public sphere" and "multilevel and transregional politicisation of the European Union" – we offer the idea of operationalizing the European public sphere in terms of the transnational political cleavages that it accommodates.

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