

Chapter 9

The Hidden Hand of the European Union and the Silent Europeanization of Public Debates on Unemployment: The Case of the European Employment Strategy

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Introduction

Unemployment holds a prominent position in public debates, since access to the labour market is an essential factor determining life chances and life forms in modern societies. Hence, fighting unemployment has been given high priority in the government programmes of most member states of the European Union (EU). At the same time, the EU has adopted a more active employment policy since 1997, above all through the European Employment Strategy (EES), which strives to coordinate and upgrade national policies by the member states by means of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC). The EES is thus a ‘soft’ governance tool that puts particular emphasis on political dialogue and policy learning amongst the European institutions and member states, and trusts in the ability of institutionalized policy deliberations and pan-European public debates to commit national governments voluntarily to a more coordinated and effective approach to problem solving. These policy initiatives thus raise questions as to the dynamics inherent in public debates on unemployment. Do public debates respond differently to European issues and policy initiatives and evolve separately within the various member states? Or can we witness European-wide discourses, which subject public debates in the member states to a process of denationalization and/or Europeanization?

These questions have been widely discussed by commentators and scholars because the emergence of mass-mediated public debates is considered as an integral precondition for the success of the OMC/EES in particular (e.g. de la Porte and Pochet 2004), and for a more transparent and democratically accountable form of European governance in general (Meyer 2005), given the need to inform the European citizenry about European politics, monitor and control EU institutions and contribute eventually to European governance through pan-European deliberations. While theoretical and normative reasoning on these issues is abundant, we still lack sufficient evidence to answer these questions empirically. In fact, both scenarios

seem to be equally plausible, and this applies in particular to public debates on unemployment issues. On the one hand, we might expect that public debates on unemployment remain strongly embedded in nationally segmented public arenas, that they resonate quite differently to common policy initiatives and that they are thus badly equipped to play the functional role accorded to them. These limitations are probable, given the fact that unemployment and remedial public policies differ significantly between European countries, and that the EES is a purely voluntary process without hard sanctions that would allow the generation of public awareness for good or bad government performance in all European countries alike. Finally, the linguistic diversity of Europe and the national containment of the mass media (e.g. print, TV) speak for nationally distinct public debates.

While these observations are true, there is, on the other hand, a growing potential for the Europeanization of public debates on unemployment, because EU institutions and national governments agree and publicly proclaim that unemployment is a common, pan-European problem awaiting coordinated solutions. In particular, the European Commission has pushed towards more integrated employment and social policies since Jacques Delors's White Book on 'Growth, Competitiveness and Employment' of 1993 (Ferrera, Hemerijck and Rhodes 2000). Also, national governments have committed themselves to economic growth, more and better jobs and greater social cohesion at the European Council meetings of Essen (1993), Luxembourg (1997) and Lisbon (2000). They actively participate in the European Employment Strategy, which is a voluntary, yet orderly, procedure of benchmarking (de la Porte and Pochot 2004) that builds on constant monitoring, regular national action plans and recommendations by the EU institutions (Mosher and Trubek 2003, Zeitlin and Pochet 2005). It gears towards regulatory competition and thus towards the diffusion of problem definitions and solution strategies across the European continent. Consequently, denationalization and Europeanization of political agendas and public debates is actually intended as a means of developing a coordinated strategy amongst the European member states.

In view of these diverging scenarios and propositions, it is necessary to empirically analyse and validate the assumption of an Europeanization of public debates. For this purpose, I will focus and assess the impact of the European Employment Strategy on mass-mediated public discussions on unemployment issues during its first term (1997–2002). Data will be drawn from a comparative research project,¹ which conducted a content analysis of newspapers in France,

1 This paper uses data from a comparative project ('The Contentious Politics of Unemployment in Europe: Political Claim-making, Policy Deliberation and Exclusion from the Labour Market') that consisted of the following national research teams: UK (Paul Statham, project coordinator, University of Leeds), Germany (Christian Lahusen, University of Bamberg), France (Didier Chabanet, University of Lyon), Italy (Donatella della Porta, University of Florence), Sweden (Anna Linders, University of Cincinnati and University of Karlstad) and Switzerland (Marco Giugni, University of Geneva). Research was funded by the Swiss Federal Office for Education and Science and by the Commission

Germany, the UK, Italy, Sweden and Switzerland and provides interesting insights into the question under analysis. It needs to be recalled that the purpose of this paper is primarily a descriptive one. Moreover, our evidence does not constitute proof for or against Europeanization in a strict sense, given the limitations of quantitative content analysis of newspaper data (see below). However, based on plausibility considerations, we will be able to expose a certain agenda-setting power of the EU in the case under analysis. For this purpose, the argument will evolve in three major steps. I will first address the primary research questions and assumptions to be dealt with and describe the data used and the methods applied. In a second step, I will present the main descriptive findings. Finally, I will conclude the paper with a discussion of the evidence gathered and its main implications for an understanding of the Europeanization of public debates.

Research Questions and Data

Research within the social sciences has addressed the issue of Europeanization of public debates quite prominently for more than one decade. For our purpose, we can refer to two strands of research, which focus on the Europeanization of public debates and of public policies respectively, and which provide valuable conceptual and empirical insights. On the one hand, scholarly debate has centred on the general question of whether public spheres and debates within the various member states are becoming more 'European' in regard to actors and arenas, issues and arguments, values and symbols. These studies centre predominantly on the mass media as an institutionalized arena of public (i.e. publicized) debates. In this context, a controversy emerged as to whether a European public sphere and European public debates are being formed. On the one side, we have a sceptical position supposing that there is only a very weak Europeanization of public debates underway (Downey and Koenig 2006, Gerhards 2000, in part Meyer 2005). These scholars validate their judgment by empirically demonstrating the poor presence of the European institutions and member states, and European issues and policies in national media coverage. Moreover, longitudinal analysis unveils no heightened attention to Europe over time, nor a convergence of national discussions. This weak Europeanization is attributed to the variety of languages, political cultures and traditions of public reasoning, the persistent importance of the nation state and the lack of pan-European mass media. The ongoing process of European integration and enlargement reduces even the potentials of a European public sphere by increasing internal heterogeneity and potential conflicts (Gerhards 2007).

of the EU (5th Framework Programme). I thank all members of the UNEMPOL-consortium for their contribution to the overarching project and for the allocation of the data. Further information is available at: <http://ics.leeds.ac.uk/eurpolcom/unempol/>.

While this position tends to pay attention to ‘vertical’ Europeanization or denationalization (Beck and Grande 2007), arguing that national debates do not open towards or merge into an overarching, pan-European arena of public reasoning, there is a second position, which basically agrees with this observation, but sees more potential for a ‘horizontal’ Europeanization of public debates (Eder 2000, Eder and Trenz 2002, van de Steeg et al. 2003, Trenz 2004). The fact that public spheres are still primarily structured and organized institutionally along national borders does not, in Eder’s view, necessarily exclude the Europeanization of public debates. He considers it absolutely possible for common pan-European discourses to emerge on the basis of nationally segmented – and thematically pluralized – publics. What matters in this context is a discursive entanglement of the existing publics, as soon as the various national actors react to common events, address common issues and ponder similar facts or arguments. The European Union is not dependant on producing an independent public space and maintaining it against the established national publics. It is sufficient for the EU to provide a common stock of themes, communication events and deliberative processes, which create a common communication space on the grounds of institutionally separate, but discursively interrelated, national debates.

This assumption has been validated by a number of case studies, e.g. with regard to public debates on security policies and campaigns against racism (Trenz, 2002: 63–144) and on the Euro (Risse 2003), bio-technology (Seifert 2006) or the Haider debate (van de Steeg et al. 2003, Berkel 2006). These case studies illustrate that Europeanization operates as a diffusion of issues and problem definitions, ideas and norms, which effectively synchronize national public debates (Seifert 2006). However, this does not mean convergence or fusion of national public spheres, because overarching problems and issues, ideas and arguments resonate quite differently in the various countries and are thus processed differently, as exemplified by the national debates on the Euro (Risse 2003).

A second strand of research devotes its attention to the Europeanization of public policies. While these studies focus on a different research object, namely institutionalized policy-making and implementation, they do pay some attention to mass-mediated public debates, particularly because the latter are functionally tied into soft governance instruments. These scholars argue that policy change within member states can be attributed to the ‘vertical’ transfer of sovereignty to the EU. However, in a multi-level system of governance, within which nation states remain an important player and level of decision-making and implementation, policy change needs to be associated also with the ‘horizontal’ diffusion of ideas, norms, rules and practices (Radaelli 2000). This process is fuelled by common negotiations and deliberations within European institutions and policy networks, an observation that has been corroborated in a number of policy fields (Radaelli and Schmidt 2004), primarily in those where the Open Method of Coordination is used, given its emphasis on benchmarking and policy learning (de la Porte and Pochet 2004). However, even in these cases Europeanization is limited and not directed at convergence (Radaelli 2005). Moreover, it is not a top-down process of

‘downloading’ European policy concepts and approaches, because it also builds on the attempts of member states to ‘upload’ national policies to the European level (Börzel 2002, Schmidt and Radaelli 2004), leading into interactive processes of regulatory competition and/or hybridization. Finally, it has been demonstrated that ‘European’ influences are less marked the more we move from policy deliberation and formulation to decision-making and implementation. More specifically, it is argued that the EES has had an impact on national politics in a cognitive dimension, rather than on the level of legal provisions, administrative structures and public policies (Zeitlin 2005, Heidenreich and Bischoff 2008). All these arguments underline the persistent importance of the nation state as policy player and as a filter of diffusion processes, given the specific institutional and legal structures, policy-processes and actor-constellations within each member state (Radaelli 2000). Cross-national diffusion processes are strong when policy ideas are coherent, yet well adaptable to the various discursive contexts of the member states, when transnational policy communities take ownership of the underlying policy ideas and when favourable institutional rules with clear goals, procedures and sanctions are in place (Radaelli and Schmidt 2004, Zeitlin 2005).

These findings and propositions advise us to be cautious when assuming a Europeanization of public debates on unemployment. In fact, Meyer (2005) has demonstrated that press coverage on employment policy coordination is virtually absent, and that the higher attention to European Monetary Union is determined by the higher policy priority of this policy field, the unambiguous objectives defined and the harder sanctions negotiated in the Maastricht Treaty. However, Meyer’s study measures only literal and direct references to the European Employment Strategy, leaving it unclear whether a diffusion of underlying policy ideas, norms and rules has taken place. Some Europeanization of this sort should be expected, even though we are dealing with a voluntary process of cooperation (de la Porte and Pochet 2004). Indeed, it has been shown that the OMC is strong with regard to policy learning in a cognitive dimension: the iterative structure of the OMC has gradual and lasting effects on national policy deliberations due to the repetitive rhythm of constant monitoring, regular national plans and EU recommendations (Heidenreich and Bischoff 2008, Mosher and Trubek 2003). Can these learning processes be observed in the realm of mass-mediated public debates about unemployment issues? And on what kind of Europeanization do these possible effects reside?

In order to answer these empirical questions, we need to specify our assumed scenarios. With regard to the research described above, I propose to distinguish between two possible processes. On the one hand, we might speak of a ‘vertical’ denationalization of public debates on unemployment, in the sense that national debates are less dominated by purely national actors and issues. This process should be traceable by demonstrating that more ‘European’ actors participate within publicized national debates, and that issues and policies discussed in the newspapers are framed more often in their ‘European’ dimension, i.e. by referring either to the supranational level of the EU or to the situation in other European

member states. On the other hand, there might be a 'horizontal' Europeanization of public debates underway, which resides on the diffusion of issues, ideas and norms across the European member states. This scenario is analytically distinct from the first one, because in this case we would assume that public debates might even remain entirely committed to a national arena and frame of reference (e.g. with regard to participating actors, debated problems and issues, and proposed political measures), while becoming increasingly synchronized at the same time, owing to the spread of common themes, ideas and positions throughout the EU. In this sense, national debates would tend to reorient and restructure themselves in the light of European agendas without paying attention to (or being aware of) the European origin or authorship of the issues, ideas or arguments discussed.

In a move to assess these assumptions, I shall use the claims-making data gathered by an international comparative research project that analysed the news coverage of national newspapers between 1995 and 2002. The research included one newspaper per country: in France *Le Monde*, in Germany the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, in the UK the *Guardian*, in Italy *La Repubblica*, in Sweden the *Dagens Nyheter* and in Switzerland the *Neue Züricher Zeitung*. These print media were treated as an institutionalized public sphere or arena of policy-related debates, and thus as an archive of public claims and actions by policy-relevant actors (Franzosi 1987, Müller 1996).² Following the approach of claims-making analysis (Koopmans and Statham 1999a), the unit of analysis was not the newspaper article, but the individual statements by the actors covered. News coverage was thus disaggregated into actor-specific claims, which were then coded and analysed according to the method of quantitative content analysis (see also Krippendorff 1980, Weber 1990). This standardized, quantitative approach had two important advantages for the research question under scrutiny. On the one hand, this claims-making analysis used a common coding book with a set of common variables (e.g. who said what, how, when, where, to whom and in reference to whom), which guarantee the comparability of the data across countries. On the other hand, the analysis of Europeanization processes requires a longitudinal approach based on quantifiable units of analysis. Our data set allows for such a longitudinal analysis, because it resides on the standardized retrieval of claims across time.

Our study includes five EU members and Switzerland. The latter country provides us with an interesting case, because Switzerland is not a member of the EU, while it cooperated with the EU, Norway and Iceland in the context of the European Free Trade Association with regard to employment issues and is a member

2 The selectivity of news coverage, which is attributed to its gate-keeping role and the exigencies of news values, does not constitute a problem to our inquiry, because we are precisely interested in reconstructing national debates, which are structured in modern society predominantly by the mass media (Habermas, 1990, Luhmann, 1995). It was merely necessary to choose national newspapers in the six countries that represent a comparable spectrum of publicized debates. According to our opinion, the selected newspapers guarantee comparability, in spite of differences in styles and traditions of news reporting.

of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which has played an important role as agenda-setter in the debates about policy reforms with regard to the labour market (OECD 1994). If it turns out that Switzerland is less clearly seized by trends of Europeanization than the other countries, this can be seen as evidence of the fact that EU membership matters. In particular, it would show that the 'soft' governance tools of the OMC/EES establish an institutionalized arena of communication and learning that has sensitive repercussions on public debates in its member states, more than institutionally unstructured and unguided diffusion processes such as globalization.

In spite of the strengths of our data, we need to recall several limitations. First, our analysis is based on a non-random sample,³ which prohibits statistical testing. For this reason, the following analysis will be based primarily on explorative and descriptive statistics. Second, Europeanization is normally conceived of as a linear process, while mass-mediated public debates on specific issues usually follow a cyclical rhythm. The only way of uncovering an overall development across issue cycles is to analyse longer time frames, and thus to increase the work load substantially. However, even when analysing eight years of new coverage, as in our case, 'Europeanization' remains exposed to cycles of public attention, which complicates data interpretation. Finally, content analysis of public debates resides on 'positive' entries, i.e. on what is being said, although it might be as important to consider what is not being said. In fact, as we will show, debates on employability are stronger, for instance, in the UK than in Sweden, which does not imply that related policies are of minor importance in the latter case. A lower level of public debate might be also a sign of an implicit consensus about the importance of employability policies. Hence, what we measure is rather the degree of explicitness of public issues across countries and across news coverage cycles, in disregard of issue latency. In spite of these limitations, however, a quantitative content analysis remains a valuable (albeit restricted) instrument for empirically describing Europeanization processes. In fact, the objective of this chapter is to uncover whether the EU is able to set public agendas, i.e. whether it is able to influence across time what national actors speak explicitly about, and how they assess related policy measures publicly – even if we cannot determine the latent baseline from which these public debates depart.

3 The sampling strategy used by our research reflects our attempt to reconstruct public debates as systematically as possible from a claims-making perspective. For this reason, we opted to analyse only one newspaper per country, while raising the number of claims to be considered to a very high level. In fact, our sample consisted of all claims from articles dealing with unemployment in a direct or indirect way during January 1995 and December 2002. We considered all Monday, Wednesday and Friday issues, though restricting our data retrieval to those sections of relevance for national debates on unemployment, here, above all the first page, political and economic sections. For a general discussion of sampling strategies with regard to newspaper data see Baur and Lahusen (2005) and Lerg and Schmolke (1995).

Europe – Talked about Everywhere? On the Assumption of Denationalization

As a first step, we will deal with the assumption of a denationalization of public debates, with particular emphasis on what has been called ‘vertical’ Europeanization. This process can be examined with a view to actors, themes and addressees. This process should become evident, in the first instance, at the level of actors involved: we would expect an increasing number of statements from European actors (i.e. EU institutions and organizations from the other member states) within national debates. This would speak for an opening of public discourse arenas towards an extended, transnational public sphere. Second, we should be able to observe a thematic denationalization measured by the growing share of claims addressing the themes in question in a European dimension, for instance, when speaking of unemployment as a problem shared with other European countries and/or the EU at large. This would indicate a gradual European reevaluation of previously nationally defined contents (i.e. problems of, reasons for and/or solutions to unemployment). Third, we might expect statements to refer more often to transnational or supranational responsibilities, measured by the number of European actors that are mentioned in the statement as the party responsible for the problem and its removal.⁴

Table 9.1 summarizes the results of these three items.⁵ It shows that mass mediated debates on unemployment are committed to a national frame of reference. Generally speaking, there are hardly any signs of a denationalization of public discourses, since nine out of ten statements are located in the national, regional or local context. If we look at the three variables separately, this picture is confirmed in each case. In regard to actors, for instance, we see that ‘global players’ are only rarely mentioned in national printed media (e.g. multinational companies or international organizations like the OECD). This goes for European actors as well; the significance of the EU itself is even lower, since only two-thirds of all claims being coded as European refer to EU institutions and state/non-state actors from member states.

4 Our data also includes two other indicators: the reference to the object of the statement (here seen as the group of persons on whose behalf the actors give their statement in the newspaper), and the actor criticized in the statement. Denationalization should be recognizable on both levels as well. Since these variables do not deviate from the picture portrayed by the three above-stated indicators, we forego a representation here.

5 The last row of the table exhibits quite different case numbers for the countries under analysis. This is due to the fact that the number of articles dealing with unemployment in each newspaper issue differed considerably between the countries – a fact that is well known in comparative print media analysis and can be attributed to the different traditions and formats of news coverage. These differences also generated variations in the number of claims: 1,461 (CH), 3,851 (D), 789 (F), 950 (I), 581 (S) and 743 (UK). The case numbers also differ between the three variables, because claims, for instance, enunciated more issues than addressees.

**Table 9.1 The spatial frame of reference of public debates (1995–2002)
– Multiple answers: Percentage of claims**

| Levels | Actors | Themes | Addressees |
|----------------|-----------|------------|------------|
| Non-EU/global | 4.4 | 1.5 | 2.1 |
| Germany | 6.3 | 1.7 | 3.3 |
| France | 1.3 | 1.3 | 1.6 |
| UK | 7.6 | 3.1 | 5.9 |
| Italy | 2.7 | 0.2 | 0.0 |
| Sweden | 1.2 | 0.9 | 0.2 |
| Switzerland | 2.3 | 1.1 | 1.6 |
| European | 3.1 | 4.7 | 5.6 |
| Germany | 2.5 | 3.6 | 2.9 |
| France | 5.3 | 9.8 | 6.3 |
| UK | 4.7 | 6.0 | 7.0 |
| Italy | 3.5 | 8.3 | 10.4 |
| Sweden | 4.5 | 4.8 | 5.1 |
| Switzerland | 1.7 | 1.7 | 4.0 |
| National | 79.9 | 77.0 | 85.6 |
| Germany | 80.1 | 79.8 | 89.4 |
| France | 88.2 | 84.8 | 89.0 |
| UK | 78.6 | 66.6 | 80.6 |
| Italy | 84.3 | 71.8 | 83.3 |
| Sweden | 79.1 | 83.0 | 87.0 |
| Switzerland | 73.3 | 72.4 | 67.3 |
| Regional/local | 12.6 | 16.8 | 6.7 |
| Germany | 11.1 | 14.9 | 4.4 |
| France | 5.2 | 4.1 | 3.1 |
| UK | 9.1 | 24.3 | 6.5 |
| Italy | 9.5 | 19.7 | 6.3 |
| Sweden | 15.2 | 11.3 | 7.7 |
| Switzerland | 22.7 | 24.8 | 27.1 |
| Percentage/N | 100/9,721 | 100/1,2315 | 100/3,560 |
| Germany | 4,245 | 5,768 | 859 |
| France | 1,043 | 1,189 | 1,018 |
| UK | 889 | 1,444 | 443 |
| Italy | 1,017 | 1,081 | 366 |
| Sweden | 683 | 787 | 623 |
| Switzerland | 1,844 | 2,046 | 251 |

The data on issues and addressees does not deviate from this insight. It is true that the European dimension of the themes discussed is slightly more emphasized than the global level. Likewise, there is a weak trend towards locating responsibility at the European level. Nevertheless, the national level still remains prominent for themes and addressees alike. Moreover, Europe is also insignificant when compared with discussions on regional and local problems, reasons for and possible solutions to unemployment.

Consequently, our data clearly contradicts the assumption of a denationalization of public debates. As the time course does not show any sign of the supposed development either, we omit a longitudinal tabular breakdown of the data. In fact, a glance at the data shows that no trend towards a upvaluation of the European frame of reference is recognizable over the time period, and it is even less possible to speak of a parallel development in all countries at the same time. The only striking feature is that European actors, themes and addressees inch into the focus of public interest more strongly between 1997 and 1999 – in the UK, France and Sweden this concerns more than every tenth statement per year. This heightened presence is linked with European political debates covering the launch of the Euro, the establishing of a coordinated economic policy and the efforts concerning the joint European Employment Strategy. Yet these debates had no lasting impact on the sustained denationalization of public discussions on unemployment.

If we finally look at the variance between the countries, we see that Switzerland is the least exposed to the denationalization and ‘vertical’ Europeanization of public debates on unemployment, which coincides with our expectation that membership in the EU and the participation in institutionalized learning processes, such as the OMC/EES, make a difference and thus have measurable effects on publicized debates within the nation states. However, differences between Switzerland and the EU member states are small, and in many instances also smaller than the variance amongst the EU countries. Moreover, the various levels (European, national and regional/local) seem to be interrelated conversely. For instance, we perceive that the least denationalized countries (Germany, Switzerland, and in part Sweden) are also those enunciating more often regional or local actors and addressees. This suggests that the institutional structure of a nation state has a structuring impact on public debates, given the federal structure of the German and Swiss state and the strong decentralization of labour market policies in Sweden. Interestingly enough, the regionalist orientation of federalist and/or decentralized states detracts public attention from the EU, which is different from unitarian countries, where this is not the case.

In sum, little evidence of a denationalization can be unveiled. The small variations in time seem to indicate that the heightened presence of European actors, themes and addressees during 1997–1998 is a situational or cyclical phenomenon rather than a sign of a structured and sustained European reorganization of national debates. On the contrary, discussions on unemployment are still dominated by a highly institutionalized national public sphere that is strongly restricted to national actors and frames the debates in a primarily national or regional manner.

National Debates – Basically European? On the Assumption of Europeanization

Our data suggests no significant ‘vertical’ denationalization of national debates on unemployment. However, this does not principally rule out the possibility of arriving at a ‘horizontal’ Europeanization of national discourses. In fact, we can assume that institutionalized benchmarking and mutual learning processes established by the OMC/EES promote a cross-national diffusion of ideas, approaches and practices, which are adopted by national actors and (re-)introduced into public debates as part of their oratory. This diffusion would be particularly successful when paralleled by an adoption and internalization of the respective policy ideas and approaches, i.e. when national debates take ‘ownership’ of European inputs, possibly omitting or forgetting their European origin or authorship. Hence, if we want to measure Europeanization, we cannot just count public statements explicitly referring to the European institutions, the OMC and EES, and more specific European benchmarks and policy recommendations. This option is used by many studies of mass-mediated public debates (e.g. Gerhards 2000, Meyer 2005), but omits a substantial share of public statements by national actors, who promote policy ideas, approaches and practices as their own that they have adopted and adapted directly or indirectly from others, e.g. from common policy deliberations within the EU institutions and/or role-model member states. If we want to empirically validate the cross-national diffusion of policy ideas, approaches and practices in this more encompassing manner, then we have to focus rather on the agenda setting capacity of the EES on national debates on unemployment.

Yet how can we empirically measure this? On the one hand, we can validate whether there is an adjustment of the issue agendas of national debates to the EU’s theme priorities. We would expect that national actors will address themes more frequently in the course of time that are set by European documents and policies. On the other hand, Europeanization presumes that national debates take up the recommendations and guidelines of European policy. Hence, it would also be underway if national actors faced the themes and measures promoted by the EU more positively in the course of time. In the following, the European Employment Strategy will be used as a reference point for retrieving and assessing both agenda-setting processes. We will restrict our attention to the first five-year term of the EES (1997–2002), because our objective is to trace back effects of the iterative structure of the EES on national public debates. During its first term, changes within these national discussions might be more pronounced and more clearly related to the EES. Our data allows for such an analysis, because it includes public statements made in the years between 1995 and 2002.

The European Agenda: The European Employment Strategy

The EES defines common European objectives and guidelines, and establishes them as a yardstick for the assessment of national policies and action plans. Next

to the European Monetary Union, the EES is one of the most prominent fields of action for the Open Method of Coordination (Hodson and Maher 2001, de la Porte and Pochet 2004). The OMC/EES is not a 'hard' governance tool geared to implement policy directives in a top-down manner, given the fact that the EU does not have strict competences in the field of labour market and employment policies. It is rather a 'soft' instrument that depends on the voluntary participation of member states. According to the EES, the EU Commission and the Council of Ministers agree on broad goals (e.g. to raise employment rates in all countries to 70 per cent), they define common indicators that allow comparison of the performance of national governments, and they design a common monitoring and evaluation process that has the potential to name and shame (good or bad) performance. National governments still have to decide on how they are going to reach the set goals and what action plans they are going to submit to the EES assessment procedures, leaving them a wide area of discretion in the choice of policy instrument. Yet, the EES establishes a benchmarking process determined to identify 'best practices', thus bringing about a quite pronounced regulatory competition between the member states (Zeitlin 2005).

The EES goes back to the White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness and Employment, launched by Jacques Delors in 1993. As early as in 1994, at the Essen Summit, a first attempt was made to commit member states to a coordinated employment strategy. While this first endeavour failed, a permanent commission for employment and labour market policy was established, which helped to push the initiatives further down. Three years later, the EES was finally put into action at the Amsterdam summit in 1997 for a five year period, at the end of which the first comprehensive evaluation was to be carried out. The benchmarking system of the EES was then launched stepwise from 1997 onwards. At the Luxembourg summit in 1998 common employment guidelines were formulated and a monitoring system was established. In 1999 the benchmarking process was introduced, and in 2000 the first retrospective assessment was carried out. At the same time, the annual country recommendations were agreed upon at the Lisbon summit, which were designed to commit member states to policy objectives and best practices. In 2002, a systematic stocktaking of results gathered during the five years of EES was carried out, in which both the Commission and the member states took part. Since then, the EES has gone into a second round and is now being coordinated with other OMC processes (e.g. in the realm of social exclusion).

In sum, the EES/OMC is an open procedure promoting the self-commitment of member states through the competition of national action plans. Although it was started as a process leaving wide scope for the determination of their policies by the member states, the first EES process puts a focus on a regulative approach, including four central guidelines:

- improving employability (qualification and reinsertion, active/activating measures);

- developing entrepreneurship (reduction of tax load, deregulation, simplification of the tax system);
- encouraging adaptability in businesses and their employees (modernization of work organization, liberalization and flexibilization of working hours and forms of employment);
- strengthening the policies for equal opportunities (anti-discrimination, harmonization of family and job, integration of disabled persons).

On the level of priorities we can observe that the first EES process supported above all a rising employment quota and the liberalization of labour markets. The struggle against poverty and social exclusion, which had gained in significance in the EU's programmatic statements since the end of the 1980s (Abrahamson 1997, Atkinson and Davoudi 2000), only played a secondary role in this context, insofar as the priority was not to ameliorate the situation of the excluded directly, but to put all efforts into getting the marginalized into work again. In view of the favoured good practices, we can see that the EES was certainly a mixture of the various regulatory paradigms represented throughout Europe (Barbier 2005, Heidenreich and Bischoff 2008). Yet, neoliberal concepts of liberalization and activation had acquired particular importance, especially in view of the guidelines of employability and entrepreneurship. According to Conter (2004), the EES was therefore in reality more normative than cooperative. Consequently, we should be able to trace back the 'agenda-setting' effects of the first EES process on national debates on unemployment.

European Agenda Setting: Issue Agendas in the Course of Time

Our data allows observation of the first five-year term of the EES (1997–2002) and the accompanying developments on the national level. Did the EES have any effect on national debates? Can we speak of a 'horizontal' Europeanization in this case? In line with the EES's dynamics, diffusion processes should have accentuated above all towards the end of that period, since the iterative benchmarking process gained in momentum from 2000, thus leading to an increasing attention on specific objectives and country recommendations.

In order to respond to the above questions, it is necessary to examine the national debates with regard to their possible adaptation to the EES agenda. To this end, I shall exclusively deal with nationally 'framed' debates in the following, i.e. I shall only take those claims from our data into account that refer to nationally or regionally defined themes. By excluding all statements on European or global themes I want to avoid the (admittedly low) number of supranational references interfering with the results, given the fact that I want to validate the assumption of a 'horizontal' Europeanization of 'national' debates.

Before unfolding developments over time, it seems advisable to provide a rough picture of the prominence of EES-related topics within national news coverage first. Table 9.2 mirrors the proportion of statements to be assigned to the

Table 9.2 Themes of the EES in national debates (1995–2002) as a percentage of claims

| | Germany | France | UK | Italy | Sweden | Switzerland |
|--|----------------|---------------|-----------|--------------|---------------|--------------------|
| Employability | 6.0 | 8.5 | 13.0 | 2.8 | 8.2 | 5.7 |
| Development of entrepreneurship | 11.8 | 15.3 | 6.7 | 9.0 | 7.8 | 13.1 |
| Adaptability in business and their employees | 5.7 | 12.0 | 0.6 | 7.5 | 2.6 | 8.5 |
| Equal opportunities | 1.4 | 1.9 | 3.8 | 0.0 | 2.9 | 0.1 |
| Other themes | 75.1 | 62.3 | 75.9 | 80.7 | 78.5 | 72.7 |
| Percentage/N | 100/5,467 | 100/1,062 | 100/1,326 | 100/991 | 100/1,626 | 100/1,986 |

four guidelines of the European Employment Strategy.⁶ We can observe that 20–35 per cent of all statements deal with issues to be associated with the EES. We need to point out, however, that discussions on unemployment are subdivided into a wealth of individual debates covering different aspects, causes, consequences and/or solutions. In percentage terms, therefore, the individual theme groups that can

6 In order to calculate this table, I grouped all issues named by the actors in the newspapers according to the four guidelines of the EES. The following claims were assigned to the first guideline on employability: active reinsertion measures for the unemployed, workfare, administrative help, placing procedures, other group-specific (re)insertion measures, training and formation, vocational training, in-service training, education and life-long learning. The following theme groups were, amongst others, allocated to the second guideline on the development of entrepreneurship: taxation and social expenses, employment costs, unemployment insurance and social assistance (access to, duration and amount of benefits), the financing of insurance and assistance schemes, self-employment. As far as the promotion of the adaptability of companies and staff is concerned, the following claims were taken into account: liberalization and flexibilization, part-time employment, job-sharing and reduction of collective labor time, retirement, work conditions and working hours. Finally, in the field of equal opportunities, statements on policies against discrimination and on equal opportunities for women, disabled and foreign workers were considered.

be allocated to the EES represent as many claims as other central national debates, e.g. those on economic development and weekly working hours, company specific dismissals or relocations, investment programmes or moonlighting. Hence, issues related to the EES do play a considerable role within the national public spheres.

Regarding theme priorities, we can also recognize that the ‘development of entrepreneurship’, the ‘promotion of the adaptability in business and their employees’ and the ‘improvement of employability’ assume far greater importance than ‘equal opportunities’. The latter is considered a merely marginal theme. Hence, Table 9.2 demonstrates that not all issues dealt with in the EES resonate alike on the national level. Moreover, even the three more prominent guidelines are not publicized and debated to the same extent in all the countries under analysis; neither does the importance accorded by national debates to each of the four guidelines mirror the EU’s proper agenda, here the policy recommendations enunciated by the EU institutions in the course of the EES-process. These observations point to the important ‘filtering’ role of nationally structured public debates, predicated already by the scholarly writing presented previously.

Finally, these indications advise us not to take the proportions of claims indicated by Table 9.2 at face-value. If ‘employability’, for instance, is being discussed in Sweden less frequently than in the UK and almost as often as in France, then this should not be misunderstood as a sign of the weaker importance of employability policies in Sweden. Given the fact that Scandinavian countries are generally at the forefront of active policy measures, moderately weaker proportions of public claims might indicate merely that there is less need to debate publicly this policy approach, e.g. due to a stronger public consent. This observation will prevent us from comparing levels of issue intensity across countries, and undertaking that is in any case not the objective of this analysis. I am rather interested in tracing back ‘horizontal’ Europeanization, that is, in measuring whether the EU has had an effect on national policy debates, by promoting EES-relevant debates and/or by impinging on policy assessments by leading policy actors. For this purpose, it is sufficient to grasp and compare changes in national discussions across time, disregarding the baseline intensity of public debates across countries.

To this end, I am going to focus on one of the four guidelines in order to trace the denationalization in a more systematic way: improving ‘employability’. Focussing on this topic is justified in as far as the EES’s first term most strongly propagated this theme and has therefore been most clearly associated with this concept. Furthermore – compared with the two other important guidelines – we face a more consistent debate as regards contents so that the course of the discussions can be categorized and traced more clearly in empirical terms.

Figure 9.1 shows that employability issues have been more the focus of public interest in Germany, France and Sweden since 1999. While at the beginning of the research period only every twentieth statement covered employability, this number rose across issue cycles to every seventh or eighth claim in the countries mentioned above. In France, a debate in this respect was held as early as in 1995, although this was mainly due to a general concern about the necessity of integrating the

jobless. This early and very general debate has, therefore, little in common with the subsequent discussions on concrete employability measures. Consequently, for these countries a turn towards questions of employability can be discerned, which seems to be influenced by the development of the EES. In Switzerland, debates on this issue – apart from a climax in 1999 – abated continually, which lives up to the expectations of the differing situation in a non-EU member state. Italy, in contrast, contradicts this assumption, since there are hardly any statements dealing with this theme, but more importantly, no change can be discerned during the period under review.

Last but not least, the UK case is rather interesting. Public discussions were prominent as early as in 1995, and especially in 1997, and gained a new momentum only in 2002. This is doubtless connected with the politics of New Labour, above all with Tony Blair's electoral victory in 1997, which made the Third Way and thus an activating policy the official guideline of the UK government. We may therefore assume that the UK contributed actively to fixing themes to which the

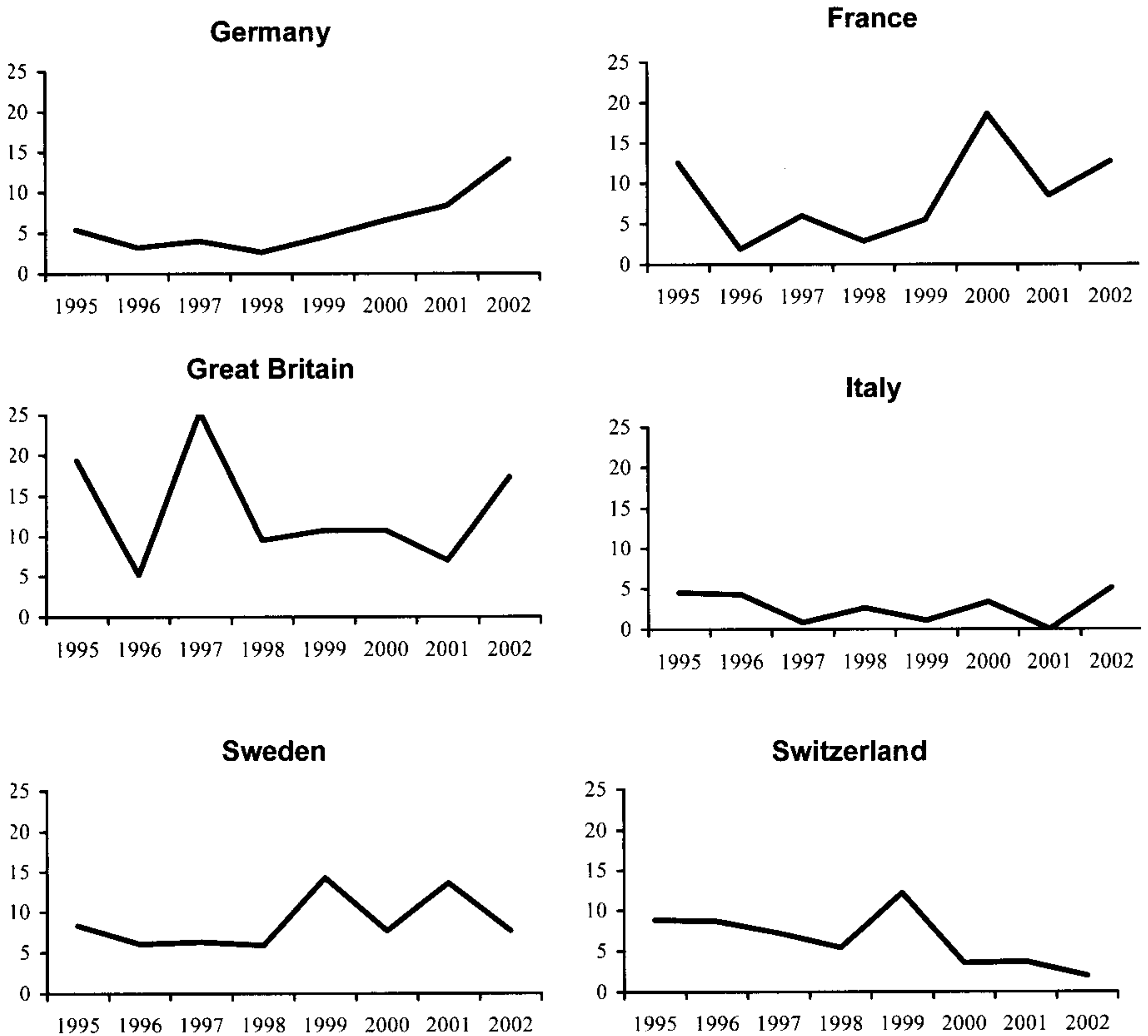


Figure 9.1 Proportion of claims on employability issues per year (in %)

EES turned from 1997 onwards. It is feasible that the UK took over a certain leadership in opinion-making within the EU as regards the debates about the integration of the unemployed into the labour market, concerning both the dominant concepts (employability) and the procedures (best practices). Hence, when the figure reconstructs thematic diffusion processes within the EU, this is also done in the sense that agenda setting does not only occur in a vertical direction, namely from the supranational level of EU institutions to the member states, but also in a horizontal direction between the different countries. In this sense, we can speak of a diffusion loop that acquired momentum in the UK and in Brussels and then seized the other member states. It is to be assumed that Sweden played a supportive role in this pan-European debate, although it did not stamp this development in a quantitatively traceable way. This diffusion, however, is no automatism, as is underlined by the Italian case, for here debates diverge from the developments to be expected.

European Opinion-making: Employability in the Verdict of National Debates

While the data features some ‘horizontal’ Europeanization of national debates – though not for all countries – it only does so with a view to thematic agendas. It consequently shows that employability is talked about more often. However, we do not know how the actors judge it. In a further and final step we therefore have to ask whether the countries not only discuss these issues more frequently, but also whether the acceptance of the related goals and measures rises. In this way, we could not only speak of Europeanization of public agendas, but also of a ‘horizontal’ Europeanization of policy ideas and regulatory approaches. Our data provides pertinent information in this respect, since we not only coded claims in view of the themes covered, but also with regard to the actors’ assessments: We differentiated between statements that rejected the goal or measure they were speaking about (–1), those that welcomed it (+1) and those that assessed it in a neutral way (0). Owing to these indications, we can compute and compare the average position of the countries and actors with regard to employability guidelines and measures.⁷

Table 9.3 shows the change in acceptance by comparing two time periods, the time before and after the Luxembourg summit in 1998. In the first row for each country, the changes of the overall debates on employability are indicated, measured by the average position of all national claims. We observe that the employability issues have been assessed more positively in the UK, Germany and Sweden after 1998 than before that date. Switzerland deviates from the picture of the other countries, since the debate on this group of issues not only declines in importance,

7 I calculated and compared means, in spite of the fact that this variable is not based on a metric scale; however, findings can be presented more concisely and clearly in this way. Statistical testing (e.g. standard deviations) was omitted, owing to the fact that our data results from a non-random sample.

but also in acceptance in the course of time, thus conforming to our expectation. However, France does not comply with the trend of the other three member states, which is undoubtedly related to the massive protests of the unemployed and those in precarious employment, which have clearly spawned mass-mediated debates since 1997 (e.g. Maurer 2001, Chabanet 2002). It is also important to note in this context that the French discussions focus on the goals and measures of employability (i.e. vocational training and activation) ever more concretely over time. As a result, the initial agreement with the general goal of employability is dwindling, as actors deal with the specific measures and goals of activation policies. In Italy, finally, no reliable quantitative statement is possible in view of the low number of cases. Moreover, the considerably more positive assessment is attributable to the fact that the Italian debates refer primarily to the necessity of integration without concretely discussing the contested aspects of activation.

If we move to governments and/or executive actors, we see that their opinion is far more uniform. The table shows that governments face employability more positively than the average of all statements. Moreover, acceptance increases more

Table 9.3 Acceptance of employability (means)

| | 1995–1998 | 1999–2002 | N |
|----------------------|-----------|-----------|---------|
| Germany | 0.38 | 0.53 | 116/214 |
| Executive/Government | 0.48 | 0.67 | 56/102 |
| SPD | 0.38 | 0.59 | 13/41 |
| France | 0.50 | 0.06 | 36/54 |
| Executive/Government | 0.53 | 0.50 | 17/26 |
| PS | (0.50) | 0.60 | 2/20 |
| UK | 0.51 | 0.61 | 92/80 |
| Executive/Government | 0.65 | 0.85 | 48/68 |
| Labour | 0.90 | 0.86 | 42/49 |
| Italy | 0.87 | 1.00 | 16/12 |
| Executive/Government | (0.60) | (1.00) | 7/7 |
| l'Ulivo | 0.54 | (0.25) | 13/4 |
| Sweden | 0.14 | 0.39 | 64/69 |
| Executive/Government | 0.17 | 0.48 | 35/46 |
| SAP | 0.24 | 0.64 | 17/11 |
| Switzerland | 0.86 | 0.73 | 72/41 |
| Executive/Government | 0.82 | 0.69 | 27/21 |
| SPS | (1.0) | (1.0) | 7/5 |

Note: -1 = negative, +1 = positive.

clearly. Consequently, the governments and their administrations assume the role of supporters or sponsors most obviously within national debates. Switzerland is the only country to contradict this trend, living up to our expectations. France deviates somewhat from the general picture, although it is striking to note that the government remains loyal to the theme in the second period of time, in spite of the strikingly more negative public attitude and the extensive mobilizations since 1997.

It is also interesting to note that the position of major political parties has changed in the course of time, i.e. when speaking about the assessment by social-democratic parties. This is significant as the establishment of the EES went hand in hand with a period of social-democratic governments. Interestingly enough, these parties became more evidently the supporters of employability across time. Indeed, after 1999 social democrats considered the guidelines and measures of employability far more positively than before, with the UK Labour Party being the strong leader, and the Swedish, French and German social democrats the followers. Italy and Switzerland deviate from this picture, although no clear statements can be made due to the low number of claims.

Discussion

The empirical data does not supply a univocal picture regarding the Europeanization of national debates on unemployment. It has been shown that public discourses are still primarily structured and framed in national terms. Under these circumstances, no Europeanization of national discussions is to be expected, especially if we look for a 'vertical' denationalization of public debates. In fact, our data has shown that there is a low – possibly even negligible – thematization of Europe (e.g. European actors, themes, addressees) within mass-mediated discussions. This argues for a weak denationalization of national discourse arenas, thus consolidating the sceptical scholars' position (e.g. Downey and Koenig 2006, Gerhards 2000). However, the data seems to indicate that this is not the full truth. Indeed, there is evidence supporting the assumption of a 'horizontal' Europeanization of national debates – even in regard to a clearly nationally 'controlled' policy field. As is underlined by the example of the guidelines and measures of employability, issues pertaining to the European Employment Strategy have been more frequently discussed within national discussions since 1997–1998, without the European stamp or origin being thematized or reflected by the national actors themselves. It was also shown that national actors have faced employability issues more positively since 1999. Consequently, it can be assumed that there was a diffusion of issues, problem definitions and policy ideas across Europe. Apparently, this diffusion was fuelled by the UK discussions under New Labour and by the programmatic ideas of the European Employment Strategy. Data seems to point out that this process is in no way a merely vertical diffusion where the member states – and here mainly governments led by social-democratic parties – took over the positions of supranational actors. In view of the more intensive UK discussions

on employability issues since the mid-1990s, it can rather be assumed that the UK government – i.e. New Labour – demanded a leadership for itself within the pan-European debates. In this way, it has possibly gained influence on the formation of the EES and has thus assisted in coining the national debates in the other member states both directly and indirectly. Sweden, which is a strong proponent of many of the issues debated within the EES and a country that was assessed positively year by year throughout the benchmarking process, was seemingly less involved as public opinion leader, thus apparently playing more the role of a supportive bystander.

The Swiss case makes us aware of the fact that membership in the EU tends to have a positive effect on the Europeanization of national discussions, since the Swiss discussions did not only stay farther away from the emergence of European employability debates, but developed in part even anti-cyclical features. It should be added, however, that Italy feels less affected by the developments traced in the study. Finally, we do not see that all European guidelines – such as the one on equal opportunities – influence national agendas in a similar way. Consequently we need to underline that Europeanization of national debates does not occur automatically, as soon as the EU institutions (particularly Commission and Council of Ministers) decide to develop common positions or programmes. Public discourses in the field of employment and labour market policies unfold far too clearly in firmly established and institutionalized national discourse arenas. However, European agendas such as the EES can be understood as important stimuli for a readjustment of national debates. This will not necessarily lead to a conversion – or even a convergence – of national debates, as is proven by the case of Italy. However, the probability of such a development is rising the more clearly national actors participate actively within debates promoted and channelled by the European institutions. In fact, within the different countries there are more obvious trends towards Europeanization among governments and/or social-democratic parties that participated actively in developing the EES. With regard to countries, a core group formed by the UK, Germany, France and Sweden breaks away from Italy on the one hand and Switzerland on the other. This seems to suggest that Italian policy actors participated less actively in the EES process and thus exposed themselves less intensively to its agenda-setting influences.

Conclusion

Results suggest that the Europeanization thesis has to be assessed in a differentiated way. We can see, on the one hand, that national differences still exist in regard to public agendas. At the same time, there is no ‘vertical’ denationalization of public debates, because mass-media discussions within the member states do not tend to open themselves for European actors and do not frame problems and solutions in a ‘European’ way. A different picture is painted, on the other hand, when we change to the content level. Here, there seems to be a diffusion of

problem definitions, regulatory approaches and policy ideas. The case of the EES, and above all the guideline on employability, was illuminating, since it could be shown that national debates in most countries under review increasingly turned towards the targets, guidelines and measures propagated, although these debates presented themselves as genuinely national or regional discourses. In this case, there was a persistence of national discourse arenas and a simultaneous partial European revaluation of the contents of the discourses, or in other words, there is no 'vertical' denationalization, but evidence for a 'horizontal' Europeanization (or even synchronization) of public debates across national borders.

In principle, this development has not necessarily to be interpreted as Europeanization (Downey and Koenig 2006). Other international organizations (above all the Organisation for Development and Cooperation in Europe) strongly supported policies that eventually were subsumed to employability from the early 1990s. Prior to this, policies of liberalization and activation had been pursued in the Anglo-Saxon region (Australia, the United States and the UK) since the 1980s, and the same is true for many Scandinavian countries as well. It can thus be assumed that the themes and concepts of employability came from different sources and simultaneously affected the debates of the countries under scrutiny. It would therefore be simplistic to regard the EU as the only source, and it would be far more appropriate to understand it as an 'institutional broker or booster' that takes up existing policy ideas, ties them up into its own programmatic concept and feeds it into cross-national discussions. This role must not be underestimated, since the cohesive pressures of the EU institutions are far stronger than those of other international regimes. The fact that discussions in the member states took a different course – compared with Switzerland – shows that the EU played its role as a supranational and intergovernmental space of policy deliberations rather efficiently. It was thus also responsible for the gradual changes in national debates that were interpreted as 'horizontal' Europeanization here. Individual member states may well have taken over the role of interfaces, as can be supposed in view of the UK's role within the EU, the OECD and/or the Commonwealth.

All this provokes a whole series of conclusions. I would like to take up two of these in the following. On the one hand, we can see that institutions such as the EU create discursive spaces (Eder 2000, van de Steeg et al. 2003, Berkel 2006) and thus promote stimuli and arenas for collective learning processes. The European Employment Strategy above all has been designed explicitly according to this pattern. It was intended to establish a benchmarking process, leading to regulatory competition and thus directly to a diffusion of situation definitions and policy ideas throughout Europe. We are confronted with institutionally structured learning processes, which are intertwined on a horizontal and vertical level, since direct influences between the member states can be traced that are also channelled through the intergovernmental and supranational bodies of the EU institutions. Data proves, however, that these are in no way deterministic processes, since the European positions and recommendations have to be translated into national debates. This is not done – or even envisioned – everywhere (i.e. Italy) and by

every actor to the same extent. It is indeed instructive to note that governments represent the European concept of employability in a much more proactive way than non-state actors. This speaks in favour of the effectiveness of institutionalized learning processes, since (social-democratic) governments were far more obviously involved in the formulation and realization of the EES. Indeed, the very logic of the OMC encouraged governments to actively participate in the process, and these European policy debates had lasting effects on the position of participating governments and governing parties, because public statements by the participating social-democratic governments changed visibly also within the national discourse arenas, namely in favour of employability guidelines and measures.

On the other hand, these institutionalized learning processes generated perverse effects, when assessed from a critical angle. Within the EU, the European institutions assumed an important role as catalysers and agenda setters. In the case of the EES, they acquired symbolic power by influencing and redefining basic parameters of the national debates on unemployment. This symbolic power was particularly effective because the national actors clung to the illusion of institutional sovereignty and discursive autonomy, thus no longer addressing the European authorship of the positions defended. In doing so, they withdrew these influences from public reasoning. Moreover, 'horizontal' Europeanization went hand in hand with a process of depolitization of public debates on employment and labour market policies, since the EES operated as a benchmarking process, which detached policy deliberations from political contentions about differing options or choices and committed them to a technocratic search for best practices. National governments, above all, became the advocates of this European 'common sense', which they promoted also within the national arena against the contentiousness of political struggles. The fact that some countries and actors withdrew from these influences more strongly than others may, as our data suggested, serve as a consolation – though a rather weak one.

Our findings thus unveil a hidden hand of the EU. The European influences on national debates might be beneficial for the success of the EES's concerted approach towards problem-solving. However, it is to be expected that this hidden hand – and the streamlining of national governments related to it – might be responsible for the rather pronounced unease of citizens about the course of European integration and the shrinking autonomy of national policy-making. The effectiveness of the EES thus goes hand in hand with a dwindling of its public legitimacy and support, endangering European governance in a central area, as the fate of the European Constitution has demonstrated.