
Alina Bârgăoanu, *Examenul Schengen. În căutarea sferei publice europene [The Schengen Exam. In Search of the European Public Sphere]*, București: Comunicare.ro, 2011

Book Review by Flavia Durach*

Abstract: *“The Schengen Exam. In Search of the European Public Sphere” focuses on the Romanian public sphere and its connectivity to European issues. The public sphere is interconnected to other essential processes, such as establishing legitimacy, public opinion formation, ensuring representation of all positions and opinions, collective identity formation, and deliberation processes. The author tests the viability of the concept of “Europeanized public spheres” in the particular context of the negotiations for Romania’s accession to the Schengen area of free movement. As result of a research project carried out between 10th of January and 22nd of March 2011 by The Centre of Research in Communication, at the Faculty of Communication and Public Relations (The National School of Administrative and Political Studies, Bucharest), the book addresses the following areas: the coverage of the Schengen subject in foreign mass-media, media coverage and framing in Romania, the public perception on the matter and the opinion of Romanian high profile actors involved in European affairs. Overall, the entire research indicates a predominantly local, national perspective when dealing with the Schengen affair, thus suggesting that the Romanian public sphere is largely disconnected, even isolated from EU trends.*

Keywords: *Schengen, Europeanization, Romania, public sphere, communication, democratic deficit*

In its document “Communicating Europe in Partnership”¹ (2007), the European Commission admitted that many political decisions with significant impact on European citizens’ lives are made in Brussels. As a direct consequence, communication about those policies must transcend national borders. The main goal of the Communication Policy of the European Union, as described in official documents (such as the one cited above), is to promote debate and dialogue on issues of common concern reflecting the European agenda, to strengthen an informed and genuine debate on European issues and to contribute the development of a “European public sphere”.

The emergence of a European public sphere represents not only a concern for the Commission, but also a new and challenging area of research at the crossroads of many fields: political sciences, communication, European integration and others. Alina Bârgăoanu’s latest book, *“The Schengen Exam. In Search of the European Public Sphere”* focuses on the Romanian public sphere and its connectivity to European

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¹ http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/site/en/com/2007/com2007_0568en01.pdf

issues. The relevance of such a subject lies in the role played by the public sphere in a supranational entity, such as the European Union. The public sphere is interconnected to other essential processes, such as establishing legitimacy, public opinion formation, ensuring representation of all positions and opinions, collective identity formation, and deliberation processes. Scholars suggest that the emergence of a European public sphere is essential for the European identity formation, with an emphasis on the role played by mass media in setting the agenda of discussions in the public sphere, as well as in organizing, selecting, publishing and providing interpretation of the pieces of information presented to the public.

Alina Bârgăoanu's approach is both inspired and pragmatic: testing the viability of the concept of "Europeanized public spheres" in a particular context, that of the negotiations for Romania's accession to the Schengen area of free movement. This was a hot issue for journalists, members of the government and the general public between the end of 2010 and the beginning of 2011, due to the letter signed and given to publicity on the 21st of December by the French and German Ministers of Internal Affairs. The two officials requested to the European Commission and the Belgian and Hungarian presidencies of the European Union a delay in Romania's and Bulgaria's accession to the Schengen area, which was intended for the year 2011.

The book "*The Schengen Exam. In Search of the European Public Sphere*" focuses on that particular moment and is the result of a research project carried out between 10th of January and 22nd of March 2011 by The Centre of Research in Communication, at the Faculty of Communication and Public Relations (The National School of Administrative and Political Studies, Bucharest). The research project addressed the following areas: the coverage of the Schengen subject in the mass-media from France, Germany, Great Britain, Bulgaria and Hungary, media coverage and framing in Romania (TV news, TV talk-shows and online articles published by the major news portals and news websites), the public perception on the matter and the opinion of ten Romanian high profile actors involved in European affairs.

The first section of the book creates the theoretical background against which to discuss the current state of the Romanian public sphere. The first chapter offers a thorough analysis of the various crises currently affecting the European Union at the moment. The author pays attention to the "Euro crisis", which is considered to be not so much a crisis of the single currency as the most visible part of a series of weaknesses underlying the EU – be they economic, political or financial in nature. The second chapter addresses the subject of the European public sphere and the way in which it is influenced by the EU crisis. The concept of public sphere, as introduced by Jürgen Habermas, and its extension to the EU public sphere are presented in detail so as to create the premises for discussing other relevant phenomena at the EU level, such as public communication, communication deficit, democratic deficit, opinion formation, legitimacy and identity creation. Three theoretical models proposed in relation to the topic of public sphere are presented – the pan-European public sphere, the Europeanized national public spheres, and the European public sphere *ad hoc*, arising from common themes or concerns.

The research – whose results are presented in the second section of the book – is premised on the second theoretical model, that of Europeanised public spheres. The first research interest was to explore how visible the Schengen topic was in the international

press. 101 articles published between 21st December 2010 to 21st January 2011 in the French, German, British, Hungarian, and Bulgarian press were analysed, out of which 40 which were exclusively dedicated to the Schengen case. The analysis of the media sources in other member states has revealed a low interest in the Schengen affair. This topic was constantly placed in a modest position among the priorities of the international press. Most articles avoided supporting the point of view of one or another of the parties involved, and generally limited to display and frame the facts. Research into the coverage of the Schengen topic in Romanian mass media focused on issues such as visibility, prominence, and actors, using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. All prime-time news broadcast on the public television channel, TVR1, and on two private channels, Pro TV and Antena 1 (meaning 2,408 TV news) and all news dealing with the Schengen topic published on the news portals hotnews.ro and ziare.com and on gandul.info and adevarul.ro during the period 21st of December 2010 to 21st of January 2011 were content analysed, showing that the Schengen topic enjoyed little visibility on the media, with more visibility in the online media. The problem raised by postponing Romania's accession to the Schengen Area was covered by the media in a national perspective, as an internal, rather than an EU affair. The European Union was seen both in the online news and the TV talk-shows as an instance punishing Romania. Both sources generally deployed a pessimistic tone, stating that Romania was guilty for its isolation in Europe, and that things were not going to improve for the Romanian population.

The public perception on Schengen's accession was measured in a poll carried out from 14th to 19th of January 2011. Research has shown that the Schengen topic was perceived as a "remote" and rather "technical" topic, "something having to do with borders and free movement". The problem of euro scepticism is further investigated in the book, resulting a standard description of euro sceptic trends. Alina Bârgăoanu makes an important amendment: the new found euro sceptic feelings are not necessarily the result of a disappointment, but could be the result of abandoning the initial euphoria which deemed the EU as "our saviour".

Finally, the research included a series of interviews with 10 Romanian high-profile figures: Teodor Baconschi, (then) Minister of Foreign Affairs, Vasile Blaga, former Minister of Internal Affairs, Daniel Dăianu, former MEP, Gyorgy Frunda, president of the Juridical Commission of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Teodor Meleşcanu, former Minister of External Affairs, Norica Nicolai, MEP, Leonard Orban, (then) Presidential Advisor on EU Affairs, Ioan Mircea Paşcu, MEP, Vasile Puşcaş, former negotiator for Romania's accession to the European Union. Different from the opinion of the general public, the ten personalities interviewed considered the accession to the Schengen Area a measure for the "real" and deep integration within the EU. The reaction of the Romanian officials to the proposal to postpone the accession is deemed fair and justified by the representatives of the government, and emotional or utterly wrong by the representatives of opposition. There is a common point in the interviews – the solidarity that a major European affair such as the Schengen case asks for.

Overall, the entire research indicates a predominantly local, national perspective when dealing with the Schengen affair, thus suggesting that the Romanian public sphere is largely disconnected, even isolated from EU trends. The author underlines that, if we consider Romania's accession to Schengen to be the most important exam since the

accession to the EU as such, it is a failed examen, at least in terms of Europeanization. The Schengen affair was merely a rhetoric reference, against which to debate strictly internal affairs.

“The Schengen Exam. In Search of the European Public Sphere” is a challenging work not only for scholars in the fields of political studies, European affairs and communication sciences, but also for the general public. Alina Bârgăoanu’s book represents a thought-provoking case study, depicting the Romanian perspective on the European Union., but it does not provide ultimate answers. It is up to the vigilant reader to meditate on the emergence of a European public sphere (or of the Europeanized national public spheres) and to imagine the future of the European Union in a global world.

About the author of the book:

Alina Bârgăoanu is a professor and PhD advisor at the National School for Political Studies and Public Administration, Faculty of Communication and Public Relations. Her areas of interest and expertise are EU Communication, EU Public Sphere, EU Regional and Cohesion Policy, management of EU-funded projects. She has authored, co-authored or edited 9 books and has written more than 30 articles on the European public sphere, EU communication and the euro zone crisis, the communication campaigns for the EU-funded projects, mass media and society, EU Regional and Cohesion Policy.