

Transparency:
A transformative value to reform a crisis-shaken EU?

Transparency relates primarily to the access to information. In public discourses however, a wider definition has been increasingly used as a motive for reforms and changes within administrations or governments.

The paradigm of “good governance” and the “participatory turn” have put forward the virtue of openness as a democratic value against the conception of “politics behind closed doors”. The rationale is as follows: openness allows discussions, and debates bring better democracy; the suppression of secrecy prevents the stronghold of private interests on public decision and maximizes the common good. In this sense, transparency is not only a good practice but becomes a transformative force able to reshape the relationship between governments and citizens. As such, it offers a political resource for the EU in search for legitimation and struggling with the usual patterns of representative democracy. Its inscription in the successive treaties (Maastricht, Amsterdam and Lisbon) illustrates the strategic importance of the notion of “transparency”.

The term is however not consensual and is the object of inter-institutional struggles over its legitimate meaning and implementation. According to the actors who use it, “transparency” can mean a mere open access to information; the possibility for citizens to participate to the decisional process; that institutions are accountable for the outcomes of their policies. Supranational bodies like the European Commission, the European Central Bank or the European Court of Justice insist on their necessary autonomy and require a certain level of secrecy to reach and implement decisions for the common good, to act as impartial guardians of the treaties, and/or to play the honest brokers to strike fair and sustainable deals between member states and interest groups. This autonomy may contradict the requirement to publish immediately the details of decision-making and to justify the reasons behind the decisions. Conversely, other actors advocate more open discussion and contradictory argumentation (national parliaments, civil society bodies). Intergovernmental settings promote a selective understanding of transparency. National governments have to dramatize their sovereignty and their attention to the social demands of their electorates while complying with the necessity of compromises and mutual concessions.

Overall, the definition and implementation of transparency as a value is both a technocratic norm and a structure of opportunity for the re-politicization of EU affairs. It paves the way for power games and conflicts on its very meaning as well as through the introduction of new actors and claims.

Under the pressure of economic and financial crises since 2008, intergovernmental decisions have predominated on behalf of emergency, while “independent” experts played an important role in the fabrication of economic solutions and their implementation. Secrecy and technocracy have prevailed as ruling principles of the EU’s crisis regulation. Transparency is therefore challenged as a self-claimed value and may become an issue likely to backfire against European institutions.

The panel will explore the following questions: How do actors compete for the definition of transparency as a stake and/or a political resource? How does transparency co-exist and interact with other potentially contradictory European values such as accountability and participatory democracy, or with principles of autonomy and rationality of technocratic agents? Which instruments are promoted to enact transparency in European decision- and policy-making?

1. The academic panel will discuss more specifically the efforts of the EU to increase “throughput legitimacy” – a legitimacy not based on inputs by citizens but on the quality of decision-making processes. Transparency can be analysed through the political instruments developed to foster it in combination with the increasing reliance on bureaucratic and scientific expertise. Transparency is also part of a broader moral discourse on “best practices”, conceived not only in functional but also in ethical terms.

2. The practitioners will be invited to present their own views on transparency as a European value, and on the tools to enact it. They will discuss the balance between independence, democratic accountability and transparency, as well as recent evolutions within the European political sphere.

Academic panel

Marylou Hamm – *IEP de Strasbourg, ULB / IEE Bruxelles*

David Heald – *University of Glasgow*

Jana Vargovčíková – *Université Paris Ouest Nanterre - La Défense, Charles University, Prague*

Practitioners’ panel

Leo Hoffmann-Axthelm – *Transparency International*

Ludovic Lamant – *Journalist, Mediapart*

Philippe Lamberts – *MEP European Parliament*