

Democratizing the European Union through communication

The national level perspective



LUND
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Abstract

Tightly knit to the debate about a democratic deficit to the European Union (EU) is that of a communication deficit, meaning that the legitimacy a political entity gain through the communicative processes that ensure insight into politics is flawed. Ideas on how to overcome the communication deficit often revolve around transnationalizing communication between Member States or improving the communicative performance of EU institutions. This study shifts focus to the communicative processes on national level, and the importance of national politicians and journalists to pick up on information about EU processes and make them visible and relevant to their publics.

An in-depth interview study, backed up by previous studies about communication regarding the EU in Sweden, is carried out with Swedish politicians and journalists to learn more about their own thoughts on the matter, as the main agents of ensuring the communicative legitimacy. With the theoretical ideas of political communication underpinning the study, the interaction between the two actors is central. We learn that the majority of interviewees are self-critical about their neglect of the EU level of the political system, and conclusions about how to overcome the democratic deficit through communicating at the national level are drawn.

Key words: the European Union, communication deficit, democratic deficit, political communication, national level

Words: 19 980

Table of contents

1	Introduction	1
1.1	Case and research question	2
1.2	Structure of the thesis.....	3
2	Communication and the European Union	4
3	Research design	7
3.1	Theoretical background	7
3.1.1	Political communication	7
3.1.2	Using political communication in this study	8
3.2	Methodological choices	9
3.2.1	Case selection and observation period	9
3.2.2	Constructing and conducting interviews.....	10
3.2.3	Transcription and analysis	13
4	Previous findings and interview questions	15
4.1	Politicians/political parties.....	15
4.1.1	Parliamentary elections.....	15
4.1.2	Opposition.....	16
4.1.3	Party programs	17
4.2	Media	18
4.2.1	Changes over times	18
4.2.2	Quantitative reporting	20
4.2.3	The image of the European Union	21
4.3	The public	22
4.3.1	Knowledge deficit.....	22
5	Interview results and analysis	25
5.1	Assessment of actors' performance	25
5.2	EU in the public debate and the legitimization process	28
5.3	Perceived obstacles	30
5.4	Possible solutions.....	33
6	Concluding discussion.....	36
6.1	Future research.....	38
7	References	39
8	Appendix	43
8.1	Appendix A: Interview guide.....	43
8.2	Appendix B: Codes and sub-codes	47

1 Introduction¹

The European Union (EU) has been the object of discussions about a democratic deficit for a long time. Such discussions have revolved around: the distance between Brussels and the Member States; citizens' lacking sense of being able to influence; the absence of a European 'demos', a self-recognizing political community; and institutional set-ups, e.g. the division of power between the Council of Ministers (the Council) and the European Parliament (EP) (e.g. Fetherstone 1994; Vaubel 1993; Weiler 1997).

Christoph Meyer (1999) wrote a much-cited article in 1999, which directed attention from the 'democratic deficit' debate to a parallel debate on a 'communication deficit' of the EU. The article addresses how political communication comes into play in providing legitimacy to a political entity. It paints a picture of the interplay between mass media and politicians, where the media continually report on political processes and in such a way make them transparent to the public. According to Meyer, this process is one of the central elements of a democratic society, as it creates political debates and opinion formation which increases citizens' insight and influence on policy formation and allow for politicians to be held accountable in between elections. Meyer states that such a deliberative mediated process does not exist on a European level, and claims that this is an essential aspect of the assumed democratic deficit. Through the lens of political communication; participation and accountability is ensured when issues are visible before decisions are made, that the decision-making process and its political conflicts are made transparent and that political actors are visible as agents (1999: 618, 621-623).

A European public sphere, or Europeanized national public spheres, has been presented by some researchers as a solution to the communicative, and at length democratic, deficit of the EU (e.g. Habermas 2009). This would entail a transnationalisation of reporting about public debates, where citizens of one Member State are made aware of ongoing political conflicts in other Member States (e.g. Statham & Trenz 2015). These ideas seem to take for granted that citizens are already made aware of relevant processes regarding all the political levels in their own Member State, including processes at EU level. Meaning, for example, the work of national Members of the European Parliament (MEPs); debates about EU level decisions in national parliaments; and national ministers participation in Council of Ministers' meetings. In relation to political communication and legitimization of elected politicians and their decisions, these are the processes that should be in focus; as they are carried out by those persons a voter give their mandate to through national elections.

While the EU's institutions have received criticism for creating the communication deficit, many have also claimed that the institutions found in Brussels are in fact more transparent than those at home in the Member States (Bijsmans & Altides 2007: 326). If no one picks it up and makes engaging news stories about it, it does not matter how much information the Commission presents. Thus, the discussions about a communication deficit should shift toward national agents of political communication; the media and politicians at national level.

¹ This thesis would not have been possible without the participation of the interviewees. I would not have been able to obtain the unique results without their openness and willingness to answer the questions on the topic. My biggest gratitude goes out to them.

This study departs from the idea that discussions about a democratic or communicative deficit in the EU first has to address the same deficits at national level.

Studies from Sweden indicate that at present, the legitimization process of such communication does not seem to exist (e.g. Strömvik 2018; Liljeqvist & Blomgren 2019). Aiming to find a clue to the riddle of the communicative and democratic deficits of the EU, this study will search at depth for reasons why communication about political processes in the EU do not become more visible in national public debates. The case chosen is Sweden, and as one of twenty-seven member states, the findings can be used as a start to generalize about the issues more broadly in the rest of the Union.

Previous studies on communication and the EU have mainly been conducted through quantitative content or data analysis, while this study instead goes directly to the main actors involved; the national politicians and journalists who are driving the political communication in the national public debate. As data exists which shows that there is a missing piece of the puzzle regarding EU level processes' visibility in the public debate, this study wants to know *why*, and aims to find out by asking politicians and journalists directly through in-depth interviews.

Finally, while the focus has been on politicians and journalists in other studies on communication and the EU, they have mainly been studied one by one. There are studies on politicians' and political parties' communication on EU level processes, and there are studies analysing journalists' and media's performance on the matter. Here, both group of actors are studied at the same time. More importantly, their interplay and the way they communicate together, in their mutual creating of a public debate, is examined.

1.1 Case and research question

A more lively public debate, more than anything else, would improve democratic conditions for access to and participation concerning issues decided at EU level. If political parties and the media to a greater extent helped to introduce the EU into the public debate, the knowledge deficit would decrease and opportunities for participation and influence would increase (SOU 2016:10: 20)

Sweden has been a member of the European Union (EU) since 1995. With the membership, a fourth layer was added to the Swedish democratic system, which since then consists of the municipality level, the regional level, the national level and the EU level. Twenty-five years after the political system was altered and some of the decision-making power was moved to Brussels and Strasbourg, the EU level is still blatantly absent from the public debate in Sweden.

Research show that more than a third of new Swedish legislation are directly linked to decisions taken on the EU level (Truedson 2020: 8); in municipalities half of all decisions are directly linked to EU decisions (SKR); opposition between political parties in parliament on EU level politics has increased in the past eight years (Karlsson et. al. 2019: 42); and citizens have become more positive towards the Swedish EU membership (Berg et. al. 2019: 362). At the same time, the extent to which political parties mention the EU in their party programs have decreased (Liljeqvist & Blomgren 2019: 24-25); parties barely present any information ahead of parliamentary elections on what their positions are on issues that are decided at EU level (Strömvik 2018); and the EU is absent in day-to-day political reporting in Swedish media (Strömvik 2020: 22-23).

Twenty-five years after becoming members to the European Union the lack of knowledge on this 'new' part of our political system is worrisome not only among citizens, but among

teachers, university professors in political science, journalists, public servants as well as elected politicians (SOU 2016:10: 45). One of the most important ways to increase knowledge on, and participation in, political processes is for them to have a natural place in the public debate. The forum of public debate that is created through communication on political processes, is where most citizens get their knowledge and insights about current political processes, and analyse and decide which political party or politician they want to give their vote.

To understand how the EU level can be integrated into the public debate in Sweden, it is important to understand why it is not integrated already. There is research showing that the lack of presence of the EU level in political communication in Sweden is an issue. There is however no research addressing the issue directly to the main agents of political communication; politicians and journalists. The aim of this research is to do so, and by learning about which obstacles they believe exist for the integration of the EU level to the process of communication, learn how they can be overcome. As such, the research question is the following:

Why are the EU level political processes not sufficiently visible in the communication from (and between) politicians and journalists?

To find out, an in-depth interview study with Swedish politicians and journalists are carried out to learn about how they assess their own and the other actors' performance on communicating about EU level process; which aspects of the EU processes that are legitimized and not; which obstacles they perceive in including the EU level in their communication; and what solutions to the deficit they envisage.

1.2 Structure of the thesis

First, an introduction to the literature on communication and the European Union is given. Next, the research design is introduced by first describing of the theoretical perspective of political communication which is underpinning the study. The methodological choices are described, and the design and execution of the interview-study is explained thoroughly. In the following section, results from previous case-specific studies are presented together with the interview questions they informed. Next, results from the interviews are presented. An analysis is conducted of the interview responses, and a discussion on their implications on the broader issue of the EU's communication deficit are held in the next section of the thesis. Lastly, some recommendations for future research are presented.

2 Communication and the European Union

There is a broad debate on communication and legitimacy in relation to the European Union. As introduced above, Christoph Meyer (1999) wrote an article in 1999, which directed attention from the ‘democratic deficit’ debate to a focus on a ‘communication deficit’ of the EU. The article addresses the importance of political communication in making executive decisions transparent and holding elected politicians accountable. Politicians and the media together form this process, which according to Meyer is an essential cog in the democratic wheel (1999: 618, 621-623). Meyer studies political communication from the EU institutions’ side, and finds faults in the communication from the Commission, but also states that the information is accessible if journalists wish to access it. Further, national politicians tend to use the EU and its complex decision-making processes as a scapegoat and a reason to avoid the tough discussions at home (1999: 630, 633).

Similar conclusions are reached by Lodge (1994) before him, who argues that the discussions at the time about lack of transparency from the Commission’s side was misleading. He claims that the lack of communication would not be solved by providing more technocratic and unpolitical informative material from EU institutions, but by an approach that creates party political conflicts and engagements in public debates (1994: 361). Other researchers have also concluded that the lack of transparency is not situated within the EU institutions, as especially the European Parliament and the Commission are often regarded as more open than national institutions (Bijmans & Altides 2007: 326; Baisnée 2004: 137).

Important conclusions to draw here is, that even though there may be communicative deficiencies from the EU’s side, it is as much the responsibility of national politicians to communicate transparently about the political processes, and of journalists to ensure scrutiny of the decisions that are taken in Brussels as well as on national level. While the correct technological information is available, it is up to those driving public debates to pick it up and bring it forward in interesting ways. Further, as information from EU institutions will be quite generic and there are 27 member states with varying types of national debates, it is for national communicative agents to make the information from the EU relevant to their national publics (Bijmans & Altides 2007: 326).

Three main groups of actors can be identified in the scholarly discussions on political communication and legitimacy of the EU; the mass media and politicians, in their interplay as explained above, as well as the public (Semetko et. al. 2007: 122). Arguments have been made that the EU, to achieve complete democratic legitimacy, has to make sure that its decisions are anchored in an informed consent from the European public (Clark 2014: 445). Further, media exposure has been proven to positively increase the knowledge and participation in political processes among citizens (de Vreese & Boomgarden 2006). Nicholas Clark (2014) investigates the European public’s knowledge about the EU system, as it is important that citizens in a multi-level political system are able to understand the purpose and processes of each level. The study finds that the public appears to understand the EU system to a much lesser extent than their national ones; implicating that since EU citizens must comprehend a bigger system of political

instances, and the additional knowledge burden may be too large for many, accountability is more difficult to ensure in a complex system as the EU (Clark 2014: 458).

Oya Dursun-Ozkanca (2014) compares national public opinion with political decisions made at EU level, using the case of EU enlargement and Great Britain. Although the legitimacy of political actions relies on public feedback and support, the study finds that the British public was not only to a large extent against enlargements before it happened; 30% did not know about the enlargements at all. The more people were aware of the aspects of enlargement, the more prone they were to support it (2014: 73, 76). This illustration of how political developments on EU level are materializing without the informed consent of the public is especially relevant in light of Brexit; as the enlargement-critics were largely against it for similar reasons that were visible in the pro-Brexit campaign years later (ibid). The implications show that the democratic deficit created by a lack of political communication can visibly damage the political entity in question.

Scholarly discussions on political communication, involving the public, mass media and politicians, are tightly knit to those on a European public sphere, a concept coined by Jürgen Habermas (Habermas 1989). The dynamics of the public sphere involve a legitimization process, much like the one explained above, where mass media drive a public feedback process to political decisions, allowing the public to have insight and provide input to ongoing decision-making processes (Statham & Trenz 2015: 290-293).

Scholars agree that as EU policy increases its impact on member states, a more regular discussion is required in the public sphere (e.g. Bijsmans & Altides 2007). To enhance legitimacy at the European level, two options are available according to the existing literature; an encompassing pan-European public sphere existing independently of the member states, or the Europeanization of national public spheres (Machill et. al. 2006: 61). However, the pan-European public sphere is rather seen as a utopia and scholars agree that it does not exist (ibid). The idea of a Europeanization of national public spheres in the member states of the EU are largely focused on a transnationalisation of the public spheres. That would involve that national public spheres include European issues as well as information about the political debates occurring in other member states (e.g. Van de Steeg 2002; Statham & Trenz 2015; Kovar & Kovar 2013; Habermas 2009).

Early on, scholars hypothesizing about a European public sphere recognized that a common European news agenda would be ‘domesticated’ in each member state, but claimed that national audiences could still be interested in a common European frame of reference (e.g. Schlesinger 1999). Schlesinger (1999) gives a useful distinction of the presence of the EU in national public spheres, as he notes that there are two different ‘European discourses’. First, the EU is part of the domestic agenda and the national political and economic processes and as such *inside* the nation state. But the EU decision-making processes are also carried out at another political level, together with other member states, and as such exist *outside* the nation state as well, on a transnational level (1999: 265-266). He further notes that a precondition for a common European frame of reference to exist is a broad transnational public engagement for European affairs (1999: 276). It is my belief that the EU processes existing within the own Member State must be visible in the national public sphere, before an engagement for issues in other Member State’s national debates can be built.

The importance of reaching a common frame of reference is discussed elsewhere as well, with conditions set-up as to what this entails; that issues must be discussed simultaneously in different national spheres, and that citizens should be familiar with different frames of interpretation of issues in other member states (Gerhard & Hans 2014: 671). To me, it is not evident why this is of importance. First, EU level processes and its connection to the national, regional and local level should be made visible in the national public sphere, so that citizens are kept informed about the relevance and presence of EU policies in their everyday lives. If that

condition is not met, it is completely irrelevant, from a legitimization perspective, that the same citizen is aware of the debate around said issue in a member state far away from their own reality. Therefore, it is not surprising that the same study finds that 90 percent of EU citizens had not even glanced at a foreign newspaper in the last twelve months (ibid: 686).

Due to above-made argument, I believe there is a general misdirection of focus in much of the literature on political communication in the EU and a European public sphere. In discussions on the type of communication that exists from the EU's institutions, or on how to transnationalise the national public sphere of the EU's member states, many scholars seem to take for granted that national actors do pick up on information about EU level processes and make sure to integrate them in the national public sphere. Studies made in Sweden show that this is far from the case. As the public's informed consent is necessary to ensure legitimacy of a political system, the information about ongoing decision-making processes should be easily available in mainstream media at national level, and its connection to the citizen's 'own' political system should be clear to make visible its relevance and create incentives for political engagement. Therefore, in an attempt to understand an aspect of the communicative deficit of the European Union that has received undeservedly little attention, this study will not move above the level of the national political communication and will not look for evidence of a transnationalisation of the national public sphere; but will simply try to find out why politicians and journalists in the national level of political communication talk so little about the EU level of the political system.

With that said, there are some studies with a similar perspective, accepting the reality that a transnational public sphere does not exist and instead investigate to what extent national public spheres have absorbed EU information (e.g. Bijsmans & Altides 2007; Kovar & Kovar 2013). They have found that some information reaches EU citizens, but that the varying logics of the politically neutral European Commission and media logic results in a far from comprehensive view of the policy processes (Bijsmans & Altides 2007: 335-337) and that even during European Parliament election campaigns, as a most likely case, there is a lack of visibility of EU related stories in national public spheres (Kovar & Kovar 2013: 713).

Literature seeing the lack of political communication as a democratic deficit are mainly studying two group of actors; politicians and journalists. Studies have investigated the important role for politicians on making European governance relevant to people (e.g. Hellström & Blomgren 2015), as well as on the media's responsibility to provide visibility to EU issues (e.g. Statham 2008; Gleissner & de Vreese 2005). It is my view that both groups of actors need to be studied at the same time, otherwise half of the picture might be lost. In the interplay between politicians and the media, important clues on where the interest of the EU disappears might be found.

Finally, most of the above-mentioned studies have used content analysis or other quantitative methods to investigate to what extent various aspects are present in the communicative context at EU or national level. This study will instead go directly to the agents of communication themselves, the politicians and journalists at national level, to find out *why* the communication deficit exists.

3 Research design

3.1 Theoretical background

3.1.1 Political communication

This thesis will not test a theoretically grounded hypothesis or develop theory, but rather use theory as a lens which guides the research process and through which the analysis will be conducted (Marsh et. al. 2018: 197).

The theoretical lens of this study is that of political communication and its possibility to enhance legitimacy of a political system. Political communication are the processes carried out by politicians and journalists, creating a public debate. Politicians and an independent mass-media are the driving forces in political communication, as the media is dependent on politicians for information and news material while politicians are dependent on the media to get their messages across and gather support and acceptance from the audience; the public. Through this process, decision-making processes, political decision as well as political actors are made visible. As such, transparency of processes and decisions, and accountability of elected politicians are ensured. Making decision-making processes visible, before decisions are taken, enables opinion formation and debate. This allows the public, the electorate, to achieve informed participation in elections based on the insight they have gathered through the communication given. Further, by providing transparency to policy formation, allowing opinion formation, and illuminating access points; citizens are given the possibility to influence the outcomes of politics (Meyer 1999: 620-623). A high quality public debate is in fact democratizing, by enhancing the legitimacy to executive decisions by making them transparent and channelling feedback to them from various groups in society.

This theoretical underpinning shows the importance of communication around democratic processes, as one of the core aspects of democracy itself. A huge responsibility lies on those actors whose mission it is to keep this process going; politicians and journalists. While elections themselves provide the procedural and institutional aspects of democracy, political communication ensures the possibility for the public to participate in between elections and for political actors to be held accountable for their actions (ibid).

For the democratizing function of communication to be fulfilled, both actors must perform their duty. The media in selecting the information and news that are crucial to illuminate political processes at all levels, and politicians in providing information on all processes. Meyer sets up three dimensions that need to be communicated for the performance to be adequate; 1) an *issue-dimension* making visible the actual political issue areas that are under deliberation as well as arguments from all sides, 2) a *procedural-dimension* showing at which stage of the decision-making process the issue lies and which access points are available to influence the outcome of the process, and 3) an *accountability-dimension* where actors are presented, showing who is advocating for what and who is responsible for a decision that is being taken (ibid).

As the Swedish political system consists of four layers, municipality, region, national and EU, all four layers should be represented in the political communication, as decisions on all

four layers must be legitimized. The EU level processes in the Swedish democratic system involves those processes where *elected national politicians participate in or contribute to decision-making at the EU level*. Meaning, the debates carried out in the Swedish parliament, e.g. in the EU committee where mandates are given to ministers ahead of Council of Ministers meetings; Swedish ministers in the Council of Ministers meetings; and Swedish Members of the European Parliament and their work. These are processes where politicians who have gotten their mandate by the Swedish electorate are being part of decision-making processes which in the end will affect the Swedish electorate. Thus, said electorate has an interest in knowing what is happening in those processes and which decisions the politicians are being part of taking.

The two main actors in political communication are politicians and journalists. Politicians who are taking the executive decisions and communicate about them, and journalists who, as part of the self-steering mass media, picks up on the communication and channel feedback to the decisions and allow debate. Politicians and journalists are thus both creating the political communication.

3.1.2. Using political communication in this study

The qualitative analysis of the data gathered will be guided by elements of political communication. Mechanisms of political communication, as explained above, will inform the questions to the interviews, and as such the research will cumulatively add to this theoretical field of research. As the interaction between actors are at the core of the legitimizing process of political communication, the interaction between journalists and politicians will be in focus in the interview questions. By asking questions about interactions with the other population, important gaps will be filled in the analysis. As such, the study will search for aspects of political communication, and insights into how the main actors of the processes reflect about it in relation to the EU level.

In the interviews, the interaction with the other population will continuously be addressed, to form a picture of where the cracks in the legitimization process exists and what the obstacles are to overcome them. If interviews would be held with solely one of the populations, there is a risk that they would solely blame the other. In this way, instead, the population can address each other's shortcomings and the conclusions reached will have a firmer ground.

As will be made clear below, the interview questions are formed through 1) existing studies on the EU level of political communication in Sweden, 2) the theoretical concept of political communication. Thus, if a finding shows that the EU level is unrepresented in the media, this finding will be addressed both to politicians and journalists in interviews, and questions will be asked in a way that they address the issue as well as the issue in relation to the own and the other population.

Examples of theoretically informed interview questions include:

- In your everyday interaction with journalists; do you get questions about your position on issues that are going to be decided on at the EU level?
- Do you try to include the EU level of Swedish politics in debates and questionings? If yes, do you get satisfactory answers from politicians?
- As a political reporter, do you ever try to report on opposition among parties on decisions to be taken in the EU?
- As an opposition politician, do you express your opposition on decisions that will be taken in the EU, to the same extent as decisions taken nationally?

3.2 Methodological choices

In order to answer the research question, several steps were taken. First, relevant previous studies were analysed to paint a picture of the current situation, and some main problems regarding the EU level in Swedish political communication were identified. Second, interview questions based on these findings were constructed. Two interview guides were constructed, one for politicians and one for journalists. Third, interviews were conducted with politicians and journalists. Forth, interviews were transcribed. Fifth, the transcripts were coded in NVivo where patterns appeared. Each step is described in further detail below.

Although this exact interview study with the same persons, saying the same things cannot be done again; through a detailed description of each step of the process and a presentation of the interview guides as well as the codes for analysis (see *Appendix A & B*), the study can be replicable in other contexts (Krippendorff 2004: 18; King et. al. 1994: 8).

3.2.1 Case selection and observation period

The case selected is the political communication of Swedish politicians and journalists in relation to the EU level. Studying this in depth will allow for valid conclusions to be drawn to the case in question. Further, Sweden is one of 27 Member States of the European Union, and as such inferences drawn can also be relevant to the remaining 26 Member States. All Member States are different regarding length of membership, size of population and territory, institutional set-ups and other characteristics that may influence the context of political communication of the EU level in various ways. As the literature review shows however, it does seem like a lack of communication on EU level processes exists throughout the Union. Therefore, an in-depth case study in one of the Member States is a starting point to draw conclusions and form recommendations to address this issue more widely (Halperin & Heath 2017: 214).

The observation period is between the years 2016-2019. The observation period is chosen as it includes some time before the preceding national election; the preceding national election campaign; an EU election; as well as some time after the preceding national and EU election. As such it includes time periods when the EU has more likelihood of being on the agenda (EU election); when it arguably should have been more on the agenda than it was (national election); times when political parties make clear their stances in different policy issues (election campaigns); as well as time in between when executive decision are being made both on the national as well as the EU level, that ought to be legitimized.

The chosen observation period is not longer, as in this way interviewees will probably have been actively working during the whole period, which provides the research with consistency. As the interviewees will be asked to think back to the whole observation period when they answer the questions, there is also a higher chance that they remember how they have acted during a shorter period.

The material used to inform the interview questions, were all produced between the years 2016-2020. As such, an overall picture of the current state of affairs of the political communication on the EU level in the Sweden can be painted.

3.2.2 Constructing and conducting interviews

The purpose of this study is to find deep-rooted answers to the stated research question. Therefore, the choice to conduct in-depth interviews with key players felt obvious (Halperin & Heath 2017: 286). Previous studies have found the facts and numbers; through interviews we can get closer to understand *why* the situation is as it is, by asking questions directly to the actors involved. Conducting interviews allow us to learn more about the intentions and actions of the actors, and as such help us understand in a deeper manner than less intrusive methods (ibid; Shoemaker & Reese 1996: 28). However, there are some risks related to this method: not obtaining enough responses to deliver generalizable findings, and that interviewees do not tell the whole truth (Halperin & Heath 2017: 290; Aberbach & Rockman 2002: 673). These risks are mitigated by a triangulation of data and by offering anonymity to the respondents.

Thus, the study is an interview-study, strengthened by a triangulation of data. Although the strength of interviews is in going directly to the source to get an understanding of why actors do what they do, they need to be backed-up to mitigate the risk of respondents not giving the whole picture. Therefore, the interview questions are made based on a review of previous studies on politicians' and journalists' communication about the EU level in Sweden. The interviews will build on the existing data and through the process of data triangulation the reliability of the study increases (Halperin & Heath 2017: 298; Roulston 2010: 84-85). Another risk of an interview study is to not get enough responses (Pierce 2008: 119). This risk was mainly mitigated through giving anonymity to the respondents, which increased the response rate. Offering anonymity was also expected to get the respondents to speak more freely.

The interviewees can be considered elites, according to the definition 'people who exercise disproportionately high influence on the outcome of events or policies in your research area', therefore some specific considerations have been taken (Pierce 2008: 119). The semi-structured approach with open-ended questions fits elite interview subjects well, as the literature suggests that elites prefer to speak more freely, while the structure mitigates the risk that respondents who are highly invested in a topic spin off and only talk about what they want to talk about instead of sticking to the interview question. Further, having a time limit to the length of the interview is fitting as the respondents often have busy schedules (Harvey 2011: 434; Aberbach & Rockman 2002: 674). Finally, as the interview subjects are public figures in Sweden, it is my expectation that offering anonymity is useful in obtaining information they may not share otherwise. Elite interviews are especially useful in this regard, as the interviewees hold information that would be difficult to obtain elsewhere and thus contribute with a valued addition to the existing information (Halperin & Heath 2017: 298).

Thus, the answer to the research question is found through these two steps:

1. How is the EU level being present or not in political communication in Sweden today?
– *using previous studies to formulate interview questions*
2. Based on this, ask questions to journalists and politicians on why they think this is, and what they believe are potential obstacles and solutions – *conducting interviews*

1) Analysing previous findings

The studies that are used to construct interview questions are case-specific and thus solely focuses on Sweden. This will make the questions asked as context-relevant as possible. There are a number of existing studies that have, directly or indirectly, investigated the presence of the EU level in political communication in Sweden. These include studies of how the EU is reported on in the media; the presence of the EU in political parties' party programs; the knowledge about the EU among politicians and journalists, etc. The studies are used both as data to illustrate the current situation, as well as to inform the construction of interview guides

with the politicians and journalists. The data give a background to the problem and provides a reason as to why questions are asked. The interview study and the responses given will build on the existing research and take one step further in understanding the whole context.

The findings will be presented below, under 4. *Previous findings and interview questions*, where it will be made clear which findings informed which type of questions.

2) Interviews

Interviews guides and preparation

Two interview guides were constructed; one for the population of journalists and one for the population of politicians. The interview questions are informed by the results of the previous studies, as well as the theoretical concept of political communication. Since the questions are theoretically grounded inferences will be theoretically cumulative (Halperin & Heath 2017: 289). As the aim of this research is to understand the interaction between politicians and journalists, the interview guides include questions that are relating to the other population. To get the respondents to reflect upon the topic and get an in-depth understanding, while at the same time draw generalizable conclusions, the interviews were semi-structured. Hence, a number of pre-decided and open-ended questions guided all interviews, but follow-up questions varied and each respondent were able to bring up anything they came to think of relevant to the topic (Roulston 2010: 18).

The sampling strategy used was purposive sampling, meaning the selection from a population based on characteristics deemed relevant for the analysis, yielding a relatively 'representative' sample of the populations (Lynch 2013: 41). The respondents have varying roles, giving varying perspectives and allowing for a broad picture to be painted. Interviewing a sample from these populations, who hold key insights and information to the issue, allows me to draw inferences about a wider group of politicians and journalists in Sweden (Aberbach & Rockman 2002; Halperin & Heath 2017: 298).

The selection of politicians was made from active Swedish politicians for parties in parliament, which were eight (8) during the observation period. Requests were sent to relevant representatives of these political parties. Party leaders were not approached, as a high shortfall was expected. The first selection was the party secretaries of each political party, as they have an important role in the party and have a wide overview of the party's everyday work. For those parties where the party secretary declined to participate or did not respond, the group leader for the party in parliament was approached, who possess a similar overview of the party's work. For those parties where the group leader declined or did not respond, a parliamentarian from the EU committee in the parliament was approached, to gain the perspective of politicians working more closely with the EU level. For one of the parties, I was directed to a respondent in another position and thus interviewed them. As such, the interviewed representatives for the political parties do have different roles in their parties, but this is not seen as a weakness. Instead, a variety of perspectives are giving width to the results.

Journalists were selected from the main news channels and magazines in Sweden, including the public service channels. These were *Dagens Nyheter*, *Svenska Dagbladet*, *Aftonbladet*, *Dagens Industri*, *Expressen*, *TV4*, *Sveriges Radio*, and *Sveriges Television*. These were selected as they have a large outreach and as such have the possibility to greatly affect which topics that are in focus, and play a big role in the legitimating process of executive decisions. The public service channels, *Sveriges Radio* and *Sveriges Television*, further have a specific mandate to broadcast and report to the service of the public, and should as such consider the democratizing aspects of reporting especially. Reporters and news reporters, mainly focusing on politics, were selected. Some EU journalists were selected. Editors-in-chief and program directors were selected as well. The reason for selecting reporters that are not specifically focusing on the EU is to hear how they view their task of reporting on Swedish

politics and whether they see the EU as an inherent part of that or not. The reason for selecting EU reporters is to hear how journalists focusing on the EU view the problem. The reason for selecting editors-in-chief and program directors is to get the perspective of those who have the possibility to choose which type of news get room or not, and how they prioritize news on decision-making on the EU level.

Requests for interviews were sent to the respondents' emails, and they included an introduction of the researcher and the research topic; a statement of why they were selected and why their competence was useful to the study; an explanation of how, when and where the interviews would be held and how long they would take; and an invitation to ask questions if they wondered anything about the study. If no responses were received after one to two weeks, a reminder was sent. Another reminder was sent in another week. In those cases, it was regarded as a non-response and another respondent in a similar role was approached when that was an option.

Conducting interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives from the media and political parties. Two interview guides were constructed, one for each population, with general questions to ask all interviewees as well as some possible follow-up questions. Some questions were only relevant to people in certain positions, e.g. editors-in-chief or politicians in opposition, and thus only asked to them. As the goal was to get a deep insight into the thoughts and ideas of the interviewees, each interview could take its own turn, outside of the general questions, as the interviewee developed their answers. The interviews were held between 23rd March 2020 and 6th April 2020.

Six interviews were held with politicians, as two parties represented in parliament did not respond to any of the interview requests; Vänsterpartiet and Liberalerna. Out of the selected media channels, no interviews were held with journalists at Tv4, Expressen or Svenska Dagbladet, due to lack of responses. Eight interviews were conducted with journalists. Out of the journalists, one was an editor-in-chief of a section of a magazine, and this is the only one with a position in that capacity who accepted. The material from the one interview was not deemed enough to draw conclusions about editors in general, in the same way as cautious generalizations are made about politicians and reporters.

Interviews were conducted with: two party secretaries; one group leader in parliament; two members of the EU committee in the Swedish parliament; one politician in a senior advisory position; two Brussels correspondents; one EU journalist based in Stockholm; two journalists working at Sveriges Television; one journalist working at Sveriges Radio; one editor-in-chief of a section of a magazine; one reporter at Dagens Industri. The respondents gave a variety of perspectives, those from politicians and journalists working directly with the EU, politicians in opposition and in governmental positions, those not working directly with the EU, EU journalists working from Brussels and EU journalists working from Stockholm, one editor-in-chief, etc. This is fruitful in giving the analysis a width, at the same time as the method itself, in-depth interviews, gives a depth.

The interviews were between 30-60 minutes long. As such there was enough time to delve deeply into the topic and allow the interviewee to develop their thoughts fully (Harvey 2011). The interviews were planned to be held in-person, but the unprecedented events of spring 2020 made me reschedule to Skype and phone interviews, due to restrictions in travelling and physical meetings. Although face-to-face interviewing could have an additional value, using Skype and phone interviewing was in some ways more efficient and made those interviews possible that would otherwise not have been due to geographical distance or time constraints (Holt 2010: 116-117). As Skype was used as the first-hand option, I was often still able to see the interviewee and as such it did not differ greatly from holding them in person.

The interviews started with an introduction to the topic and some information about the studies they are based on; explaining that there were pre-decided questions but that the interviewee was encouraged to speak freely and develop any thoughts they had; and asking if they agreed to the interview being recorded. At the end of the interview, all interviewees were asked if they had anything they wanted to add.

All interviews were recorded, as all interviewees agreed to be recorded. This contributed to creating a relaxed atmosphere, where I could be present in the conversation without having to focus on taking notes. It also minimized the risk of losing out on information (Aberbach & Rockman 2002: 10). After the interviews, they were transcribed to later be imported into the analysis program NVivo.

The interview guides are presented in *Appendix A*.

3.2.3 Transcription and analysis

Fourteen interviews were transcribed and analysed. The transcriptions were imported to NVivo, and coded. The inductive analysis involved a coding process focused on exploring and discovering patterns and explanations (Rouston 2010: 150).

The codes were both pre-decided and created as patterns appeared. For example, a pre-decided category was 'Obstacles' and by going through the transcripts it was clear that one obstacle perceived by several respondents were 'Lack of resources', thus this sub-code was created. The analysis was as such based on previously stated concepts, such as political communication and legitimization, but this form of analysis also allowed for codes to be created based on what respondents said. The analytical process was repetitive and meant going through the transcripts several times, to check if codes that emerged in other transcripts are present in earlier-coded transcripts, and making sure that codes had correct and relevant material assigned to them (ibid: 153-156).

Concretely, the coding process involved going through the transcriptions one by one, highlighting relevant pieces of the text and selecting which code (in NVivo called 'node') or sub-code the piece belonged to. For example, the interviewee was talking about what they believe are the reason for a lack of interest toward EU related news, and mentions a lack of European identity. This quote would belong to the code 'Obstacles' and the sub-codes 'Lack of interest' and 'Identity'. After going through all the transcripts, they were reviewed one more time as some codes were created along the way. In the end, the codes and sub-codes are gathered, and the number of references and sources for each code and sub-code are visible. The number of 'Sources' are the number of interviewees who mentioned something relevant for the code or sub-code, and the number of 'References' are the number of times something relevant for the code or sub-code was mentioned. This gives a quantitative indication of the results, while the text extracts under each code is the basis of the qualitative analysis.

The qualitative aspect of the analysis is the most relevant here, as the codes themselves do not say that much about their implication. For example, all the interviewees mentioned something that became coded as 'Solution', and it has 31 references, but that alone does not tell me anything about the type of solutions that were offered. However, the difference between the amount of references being 'Positive' toward the other actor compared to 'Negative' gives an indication that can be interesting in a quantitative manner. See below for a list of all codes and sub-codes, and their number of sources and references; in Swedish as the transcripts were in Swedish.

The English translations of the codes and sub-codes are as follows:

- Perception of the other actor; Knowledge, Negative, Positive

- Perception of one's own work; EU information, Not present, Continuous decision-making, Knowledge, Present, Desirable, Parliamentary election
- Perception of the EU level in the public debate; The image of the EU, Demand, Not present, Legitimization, Solution, Present, Desirable
- Perceived obstacles; Distance, Decision-making process, Lack of interest, Lack of resources, Identity, Complicated, Conflict lines, Personalities, Relevance

For a detailed description of what each code and sub-code entail, see *Appendix B*.

Name	Sources	Refere...
▼ ● Uppfattning andra aktören	14	48
● Kunskap	8	15
● Negativ	9	21
● Positiv	2	2
▼ ● Uppfattning eget arbete	14	85
● EU-information	2	2
● Inte närvarande	11	27
● Kontinuerligt beslutsfa...	10	22
● Kunskap	10	12
● Närvarande	4	6
● Önskvärt	5	5
● Riksdagsval	11	22
▼ ● Uppfattning EU-nivån i d...	14	143
● Bilden av EU	12	26
● Efterfrågan	9	15
● Inte närvarande	11	20
● Legitimering	14	49
● Lösning	14	31
● Närvarande	3	3
● Önskvärt	7	16
▼ ● Upplevda hinder	14	128
● Avstånd	8	16
● Beslutsprocess	5	8
● Brist på intresse	12	31
● Brist på resurser	8	15
● Identitet	4	9
● Komplicerat	11	20
● Konfliktlinjer	9	16
● Kunskapsbrist	9	14
● Personligheter	3	7
● Relevans	10	23

4 Previous findings and interview questions

Below are results from previous studies, and the interview questions they informed. Findings are presented actor wise; first studies on politicians/political parties and the information they communicate about the EU level, then media/journalists and their performance on the matter and lastly some findings regarding the public and their knowledge on the EU.

4.1 Politicians/political parties

Politicians, acting through political parties, are one of the two most important actors in the perspective of political communication. Political parties are organizing interests and presenting alternatives to voters on political processes and issues. They are the fundamental link between citizens and political leaders and decision-making in a representative democracy (Liljeqvist & Blomgren 2019: 20). How representatives for political parties communicate about decision-processes or political alternatives on the EU level is essential both for the voter to understand their options, and for the media to pick up on cues.

4.1.1 Parliamentary elections

In 2018, ahead of the parliamentary election, a study was made on the presence of the EU level on political parties' websites (Strömviik 2018). A parliamentary election is also an EU election, as the parties that form a government will have decision-making power through the Council of Ministers and the Head of Government will be represented in the European Council. Further, the parliament has an important role in formulating the mandate of the government ahead of Council meetings. Thus, voters should be able to know about the parties' positions on issues at EU level as well. The party that represent a voter in parliament will be the same party that represent them in the Council, and their elected parliamentarian will drive EU politics in the parliament.

The study looked at 52 issues that would be decided in the Council during the upcoming mandate, and searched parties' websites to find information about their positions on these issues. The results show that in none of the 52 decisions, all eight parties reported a clear opinion; in three of the 52 decisions, a clear opinion was reported from one of the eight parties; for almost half of the decisions no opinion was reported from any of the parties; and for around half of the decisions only a vague suggestion was given around the broader issue area of the decision, but nothing about the specific decision (ibid). The results show that as a voter ahead of the parliamentary elections, there is no way to consider the EU level when deciding on which party to vote for.

A study from 2014 show that declarations related to the EU in the media given by party representatives ahead of parliamentary elections between 1995 and 2010, consists of 1 percent

of all relevant declarations. The number of declarations was higher in the 1990s than in the 2000s (Hellström 2014). Another study from 2014 show similar results. The analysis of parliamentary elections from 1991 to 2010 show an increase in presence of the EU in parties' agendas from 1991, with a peak in 1994 and then steadily decreasing until it is completely lacking in the elections in 2006 and 2010 (SOU 2016:10: 157-158). The study does not include the elections of 2014 or 2018, but as the study on the parliamentary election in 2018 above shows, nothing suggests that any major increases would have happened in recent elections.

The above results show that the EU level does not have a natural place on the information political parties' give ahead of national parliamentary elections. It seems that, while political parties are prioritizing on which issues to present to voters, EU related issues are not part of that.

Interview questions (politicians):

- Do you get questions from journalists during national election campaigns about your position on decisions that will be taken in the EU?
- It seems that EU level issues are not on parties' agendas during election campaigns, why do you think that is? Are there discussions about this in your party?
- Is it a problem that the EU level is not present in the national election campaigns, according to you?

Interview questions (journalists):

- Do you see the relevance of asking politicians about issues at EU level during election campaigns to the Swedish parliament?
- It seems that EU level issues are not on parties' agendas during election campaigns, why do you think that is? Do you as a journalist try to give the EU level more space in election campaigns?
- Is it a problem that the EU level is not present in the national election campaigns, according to you?

4.1.2 Opposition

An argument sometimes given to explain the reason why reporting about the EU level of Swedish politics is scarce, is that there are no interesting conflict lines or opposition to report about. A study from 2019 show that this is not the case. The study coded statements made in the Swedish parliament's EU committee, where the ministers are given their mandate ahead of Council meetings (Karlsson et. al. 2019).

6 215 statements from 1995-2016 were coded. Statements were coded as 'support' for the government's position, as 'opposition' or as 'other'. Other includes neutral statements such as questions or clarifications. Opposition was further divided into 'critique', through which a party show that they are against the position of the government, or 'alternative', through which a party suggests another possible way to deal with the issue (ibid: 39).

During the whole observation period, 48,5% of the statements were expressions of opposition, 11,1% as support, and 40,4% as other. Furthermore, opposition within Swedish EU politics has increased in recent years. Since 2010 the amount of opposition has increased, and was at its highest level during the last government, 2014-2018, at 57% (ibid: 42). When separated between critique and alternative, the study shows that as time has gone by since

Sweden became an EU member, the amount of critique and alternative have evened out, while the amount of critique was dominating during the first years of EU membership (ibid: 45).

The results of this study entail that there is in fact a lively debate among political parties in parliament about Swedish EU politics, and that the debate about it has become more nuanced with time, as alternatives given have caught up with mere critique. This is a reasonable evolution, expected to come with the Swedish membership becoming more and more mature. It makes the absence of the EU level in the Swedish political communication even more puzzling however. How come this lively debate has not moved from the EU committee in the Swedish parliament to the public?

Interview questions (politicians):

- As an opposition politician, do you express your opposition on decisions that will be taken in the EU, to the same extent as decisions taken nationally?
- Would it be positive if conflict lines in the Swedish EU level politics were made clearer? Why/why not?
- As a member of the EU committee, do you perceive that there is a debate in there that does not reach the rest of the public debate? Are journalists interested in that debate?

Interview questions (journalists):

- As a political reporter, do you ever try to report on opposition among parties on decisions to be taken in the EU? If you cover the parliament, do you cover the EU committee as well? If not, why is that?
- Would it be beneficial to make conflict lines of Swedish EU level politics visible in the public debate? If not, how come? Why do you think these conflict lines are largely absent in the Swedish public debate?

4.1.3 Party programs

An important source of information for a voter to decipher which party they prefer is a political party's party program. The programs show a party's priorities and their positions on different issue areas. A study from 2019 investigated whether the increased influence of EU decisions over Swedish legislation has resulted in the same increase of mentions of the EU in party programs.

The results show that the number of mentions of the EU in party programs does not follow the increase of influence of the EU on Swedish legislation. The mentions of the EU in party programs has instead seen a decrease since 1994, the year when the referendum on EU membership was held, when the amount of mentions was at its peak (8,1%). In the 1998, 2002 and 2006 parliamentary elections, the mentions of the EU decreased for each election. In the 2010 election a slight increase was seen and mentions were up to 3,5% from 3,2% in 2006 (Liljeqvist & Blomgren 2019: 24-25).

An analysis of those instances when the EU is mentioned shows that the mentions do not completely correspond with the issue areas where the EU has influenced Swedish legislation the most. The issue area with the most mentions is foreign trade, which has influenced Swedish legislation a lot, but is disproportionately mentioned in party programs in relation to other areas

such as energy, finance or transport where EU decisions has greatly influenced Swedish legislation but are barely mentioned in party programs (ibid: 26). The most discouraging result is that political parties often continue to mention the EU in terms of being positive or negative toward the membership as such, instead of mentioning what their position is on actual issues where decisions will be taken (ibid).

Interview questions (politicians):

- Do you believe that voters are interested to know about your positions on issues at EU level?
- According to research, what political parties wish to accomplish at the EU level is rarely mentioned in their party programs. Is this a problem, according to you? Why/why not?

Interview questions (journalists):

- How do you assess the communication from politicians about EU level issues, e.g. in party programs or through other information they provide? Is it satisfactory or are there any issues?
- According to research, what political parties wish to accomplish at the EU level is rarely mentioned in their party programs. Is this a problem, according to you? Why/why not?

4.2 Media

The media is where most voters gain their knowledge about political processes, and where most go first if they actively want to find information about a certain decision-making process (SOU 2016:10: 151). Although the landscape of the media has gone through large transformations for the past two decades, 75% of the Swedish public still get their news from national television or radio, 38% from the morning paper in print, 33% from the morning paper online and 44% from the evening paper online (Andersson 2019: 273). There are positive correlations between media exposure and knowledge about the EU system (de Vreese & Boomgarden 2006). Journalists thus have a vital role to convey political processes and alternatives in an understandable way to the public. They are the communicative bridge between politicians and the public.

4.2.1 Changes over times

There are many indications that the quantity and quality of media reporting of the EU level of Swedish politics has decreased since the 1990s.

A study of the years 2001, 2004, 2006, 2009 and 2010 show a decrease in the quantitative number of EU related articles in three of the biggest newspapers in Sweden from year to year (SOU 2016:10: 152). Another study, show that on the media's agenda in relation to elections there has been a decrease as well. From 16 percent EU related issues on the media's agenda in the election 1994 to a steady decrease each election-year until they were completely absent in 2010 (ibid: 152-153). This, together with the findings above, illustrate the symbiosis of political

parties and the media in the public debate, and how difficult it can be to pin-point the exact instance where the interest is lost.

The number of accredited correspondents from Swedish media in Brussels has been in clear decline during the past twenty-five years. When Sweden became a member, 26 journalists were based in Brussels. Since then the number has steadily decreased and in 2019 the number was down to 10 (Melchior 2020: 50). The ambitions of covering EU news from Brussels seem to have decreased, and relative to size in population, Sweden is doing worse than the other Nordic EU countries, Finland and Denmark (ibid: 58).

Changes in the media industry and its economy can explain some of the decrease in correspondents, but this explanation excludes the matter of priorities. While 10 correspondents are present in Brussels, a total of 34 correspondents for Swedish media were at the same time covering the United States (US) (ibid: 49).

The experienced EU journalist Annika Ström Melin tell a personal story about the media's coverage of EU politics and how it has evolved. She explains that Swedish media had high ambitions when the membership was new, which was enacted through educating journalists, sending them to Brussels, and dedicating space in newspapers and broadcasting to EU related news. There was a high demand from editors to hear stories from Brussels. After a while, the EU-dedicated spaces started to be removed at newspapers around the country, and EU related news had to compete with all other news. This seem to have resulted in a scarcer reporting of EU news, as the competition was hard (Ström-Melin 2020: 62-64).

In an interview study with the most experienced EU journalists, the summarized assessment of Swedish EU reporting is that it is immature (Skoog 2020: 76). The few EU reporters that exist are supposed to report on all news related to the EU, while their editorial teams lack knowledge about the EU, and editors-in-chief lack interest. As only a few journalists produce quality reports from the EU, the reporting is sporadic and the threshold to understand is high for the media consumer (ibid: 80, 84).

The above results need to be assessed with the fact that simultaneous to these developments in the media reporting, the influence of the EU over Swedish legislation has steadily increased. Again, we see a contradictory picture. Why is the media not following the increase in power from Brussels with an increase in reporting? Why has Swedish media not managed to integrate the fourth layer of the political system during those twenty-five years that Sweden has been a member of the EU, and made it a natural part of their political reporting to also report on decision-making processes in Brussels?

Interview questions (politicians):

- Do you perceive a lack of interest from the media regarding EU level processes?
- Do you perceive any obstacles for the EU level processes to be more visible in the media?

Interview questions (journalists):

- As an editor, how do you prioritize among news that get space and not? Where is EU related news on your agenda?
- What are your ambitions regarding reporting on EU level politics? Do you try to, but there are some obstacles making it difficult?
- On your place of work, how integrated is the EU coverage? Does everyone keep track of the EU level of their area of reporting?

4.2.2 Quantitative reporting

The EU is mostly visible in the media during European Parliament election campaigns or major crises. A study from 2020 investigated the extent to which media reports on ongoing decision-making processes in the EU. It is especially important that issues become visible during the decision-making process and not when they are about to be implemented. That way, citizens become aware of an issue while they can still influence.

The study showed that among EU initiatives that the government informed the parliament about during 2016-2019, 26% of them were reported on in one or more newspaper or website. Broken down per news forum, the most surprising result is that one of the biggest newspapers, Dagens Nyheter, only reported on 6% of the initiatives, and on the websites of the public service channels, excluding their broadcasts, only 6% (Sveriges Radio) and 4% (Sveriges Television) of the initiatives were mentioned (Strömvik 2020: 23-24). The other big national newspaper, Svenska Dagbladet, did relatively good with 19% of the initiatives reported. A comparison was also made with national initiatives, where 39% were mentioned in one or more newspaper or website. The difference of the amount of EU and national initiatives reported on is quite big, where the Sveriges Television website report on 15% of the national initiatives, Sveriges Radio website on 18% and Dagens Nyheter on 21% (ibid: 26). As these are many people's main information channels, the results show that the information they get about EU level processes are quite limited.

The investigative journalism has not focused on the EU level either. A quantitative study of two investigative programs, one on Sveriges Television and one on Sveriges Radio, show that 2,3% and 1,5% respectively of the programs have investigated EU processes and institutions (Karlsson 2020: 33).

Interview questions (politicians):

- What influences if you/your party decide to make a declaration about a new political initiative in the media? Why do you think issues at national level get more attention than those at EU level?
- Do you wish that the EU level decision-processes were more visible in the media? Why/why not?
- In your everyday interaction with journalists, do you get questions about EU level processes? E.g. when a new Commission-proposal is presented?

Interview questions (journalists):

- How do you measure the news-worthiness of a political initiative/decision-making process at national and EU level? What influences which new initiative you decide to report on? Why do you think national initiatives get more attention than those at EU level?
- Do you continuously look for information about EU level processes, through EU institutions or the Swedish government or parliament? How would you measure the information given by politicians on EU level processes?
- Do you ever contact political parties to hear their opinions on new EU initiatives or ongoing processes? Compared to those on national level?

4.2.3 The image of the European Union

The overall assessment of Swedish EU reporting seems to be similar among all who have analysed it: those journalists who are covering the EU are very competent and the quality is high, but those covering it are too few and the space it takes up in the media is too little (Skoog 2020: 77). Furthermore, there are several qualitative issues with Swedish EU reporting, and often the EU is portrayed in ways that are misleading.

The EU is often placed under foreign policy-reporting (Skoog 2020: 77). This is problematic as the politics carried out in the EU is just as much domestic politics as what happens in Stockholm, as decisions on EU level are taken by Swedish politicians jointly with politicians from the rest of the member states that will affect Sweden and its citizens. There are even indicators that there has been a shift in the way media report about the EU over time, from using a domestic perspective to increasingly use a foreign politics perspective (SOU 2016:10: 154). This finding is interesting in the light of the inside/outside discourses presented above. It seems the outside perspective, that revolving the transnational issues of the EU level, are predominant in media's reporting. When the inside perspective is missing, which illuminates how the EU is a part of the domestic political agenda, it is not portrayed to media consumers that the EU is part of a system where they can influence ongoing processes.

Studies indeed indicate that the inside perspective of Swedish EU politics often is absent in media reporting. The EU correspondents do a good job at reporting from Brussels, but there are few journalists who are based in Stockholm and can complement reports about potential lines of conflict in the Council with lines of conflict in the Swedish parliament on an issue (Skoog 2020: 93-94). As mentioned above, the burden of all forms of EU reporting is placed on the correspondents and specialized EU journalists, instead of being integrated into the work of all national reporters (ibid: 92). Hence, the problem does not lie with EU journalists not having enough knowledge, or there being too few EU journalists. It is rather the national reporters who should include the EU level of Swedish politics in their work, so this is naturally covered and continuously referred to, in relation to a variety of issue areas.

A common image of the EU is that it is too complicated and bureaucratic, and thus difficult for the receiving public to understand. Due to the EU system being so complicated and hard to understand, the public are not requesting to hear news about it and therefore news channels do not provide that news (Melchior 2020: 61; Ström-Melin 2020: 73). There is a sort of 'chicken or the egg'-situation in this problem description. If the knowledge about the EU is very low among the public, as we know it is, and the media reporting about the EU is very scarce, as we know it is, how can we expect the public to have an interest in hearing about EU related news? And is it not part of a journalist's job to make complicated processes and events understandable and relatable to their audience?

Again, comparisons are sometimes drawn to media reporting from the US. Long-time EU journalist Sigrid Melchior claim that in articles about American politics, complicated concepts are being mentioned naturally, while journalists feel a need to explain every procedure of the EU in every article, as they believe they are too complicated (Skoog 2020: 81). It is a peculiar situation if a political system across the Atlantic is more understandable to the public than one level of their own political system. If the media easily can explain complicated processes in the US, where Swedish citizens cannot influence the outcome, there is no reason for them not to be able to explain complicated processes in a system where their public do have the possibility to influence.

Another misleading aspect of Swedish EU reporting is how conflict lines are portrayed. Often conflicts between 'Sweden' against 'the EU' or 'Sweden' against other member states are presented. Very rarely the conflict lines that go through the Swedish parliament or the Swedish society are clear, and EU issues are 'de-politicised' when the viewer is not presented

with different political options (SOU 2016:10: 155). This risks giving citizens the idea that they cannot take a stand on specific issues, but rather just have to wait for the decision to be taken and accept what is imposed from the EU. It separates ‘the EU’ from Sweden and its political system and gives the idea that Swedish politicians are not a part of the political processes that lead up to decisions from the EU.

Interview questions (politicians):

- How do you assess the way media portray the EU and EU processes?
- How do you assess the way you/your party communicate about the EU and EU processes?
- Which image of the EU do you see being portrayed in the public debate?
- Is there any actor, according to you, that is more responsible to make sure that a correct image of the EU system is portrayed? Do you try to do something about it yourself?

Interview questions (journalists):

- As an EU journalist, is it part of your job to cover EU political conflict lines at national level? Who, if anyone, is tasked with this at the editorial team?
- As an EU journalist, is it difficult to get space on the news you want to report on? Is there an interest among your editor-in-chief or your colleagues?
- How do you assess the way politicians portray the EU and EU processes?
- Which image of the EU do you see being portrayed in the public debate and in the media?
- Is there any actor, according to you, that is more responsible to make sure that a correct image of the EU system is portrayed? Do you try to do something about it yourself?

4.3 The public

Although the public is not one of the populations with which interviews will be conducted in this study, they are in fact also one of the most important actors in the context of political communication and the public debate. The importance of politicians and journalists to be open and clear in their communication, is to create the opportunity for the public to get an insight into and knowledge about political processes, as well as being able to learn about ways to influence and participate. This is what makes political communication crucial in a democratic system. Therefore, some important findings about the public with regards to the EU level of the Swedish public sphere will be presented below, as well as inform questions for the interviews.

4.3.1 Knowledge deficit

There is a clear knowledge deficit on how the EU system works, in many parts of the Swedish society. A governmental investigation about opportunities for insight, participation and influence for actors in Sweden on decisions that are taken in the EU from 2016 summarized

several studies on knowledge about the EU among the Swedish public. It showed that a majority does not feel that they know how the EU system works to a high degree; a majority does not feel that they have enough knowledge to discuss EU decisions; and a majority feel uninformed about decisions that have been made on the EU level and how they are connected to Swedish politics (SOU 2016:10: 50).

Among people who can be expected to have a higher interest in the political system, political science university students, 71% could not name the two legislative institutions in the EU on their first semester of political science, and 60,5% could not name them when they were on their master's studies in political science. Their knowledge on how the American system works was significantly higher than on the EU system (ibid: 56), which shows the same tendencies as, or is a result of, the media's comparative reporting on the EU and the US.

Interestingly, and worryingly, enough, younger people are both less interested in discussing EU issues and have a lower level of knowledge about the EU than older generations (ibid: 52). Arguments that the EU has to mature in Member States before it finds a natural place in the public debate, through new generations growing up with integrated knowledge about the EU, does not seem to hold true (Skoog 2020: 96).

Among those who educate the new generation of knowledgeable citizens, teachers, the knowledge levels are too low. They claim that they find it difficult to teach the EU system as they do not assess their own knowledge level to be sufficient (ibid: 62). Among university professors in political science, who educate many teachers, journalists and future politicians, the knowledge is astonishingly low as well. A small study show that 66% cannot name the two legislative institutions, only 16% can name the four freedoms and only 43% knew that the European Parliament can dismiss the European Commission (ibid: 74).

Finally, the two main actors of political communication do not possess a sufficient level of knowledge about the EU either. Except for the few highly competent EU journalists, the knowledge among most journalists and editors are too low for them to continually and naturally report on developments at EU level and on how those developments influence Sweden, according to the governmental investigation. There are no studies on knowledge about the EU among political parties or among members of parliament, but in a small study a majority of politicians at municipality level assessed their knowledge to be too small to discuss the EU with their voters (ibid: 70).

As the correlation between knowledge and participation is very strong (ibid: 47; de Vreese & Boomgaarden 2006), the knowledge deficit is an obvious problem. It is especially troublesome among those who spread knowledge in education institutions, teachers and professors, as well as among those who are most people's source of information in their daily life; politicians and journalists and their interaction through political communication.

Interview questions (politicians):

- Do you assess your knowledge about the EU as sufficient? Is it enough for you to discuss EU level issues with your voters?
- How would you assess the knowledge level about the EU in your party?
- How do you view your role as a link between decision-making and your voters, and your role in informing voters about ongoing or upcoming democratic processes? In relation to the EU, do you feel that you can fulfill that role?
- How do you assess the knowledge among journalists on the EU system?

Interview questions (journalists):

- Do you assess your knowledge of the EU to be enough to report about EU level processes? Do your colleagues and your editor-in-chief have that knowledge?
- How do you view your role as a journalist in providing important information about political processes to the public? Can you fulfill that role in relation to the EU?
- How do you assess knowledge about the EU among politicians?
- Do you feel that there is a demand from your readers/listeners/viewers to hear more about EU news?

5 Interview results and analysis

In this section, the results of the 14 conducted interviews will be presented. The first, somewhat un-official, result of the interview study came before any interview had been held. Almost all the politicians and journalists who do not explicitly work with the EU, either declined with the reason that they do not work with the EU and recommended me to speak to someone in their party or media channel that did specifically work with the EU; or accepted with the caveat that it might be more interesting to speak to someone focusing more on the EU. This is a first testament to how un-integrated the EU level of the political system is to people who work with either forming or reporting on Swedish politics.

Nevertheless, interviews were held with both politicians and journalists, both working specifically with the EU and not. Below, the results of the interviews are presented in those themes that most naturally appeared in the coding-phase. First, a group of findings about the interviewees assessment of their own work and the work of the other actor are presented; secondly, findings about the EU level in the public debate in general as well as on the legitimization process are discussed; next, the obstacles mentioned regarding integrating the EU level are given; lastly, possible solutions are presented. Intertwined with the results are the analysis of them.

All excerpts are my own translation from Swedish to English.

5.1 Assessment of actors' performance

A first set of questions were related to how the interviewee perceive the presence of the EU level in their own work, as well as how they assess the work of the other actor in relation to communicating about the EU level.

Both populations were rather negative toward how the other population includes the EU level in their work (12/14 interviews). Several politicians saw a disinterest from the media to write about decision-making processes at EU level. A few politicians, who had been working specifically with the EU level, mentioned instances when they had approached journalists with information on important instances of a decision-making process, and gotten the response that it was uninteresting and not relevant to publish (Interview 10; 13; 14). A member of the EU committee in the Swedish parliament, who is also a former Member of the European Parliament, had negotiated an issue in the European Parliament and heard from journalists that it was not interesting to write about the issue, while at the same time many articles were published on the same topic but with conflict lines from the Swedish parliament. According to the interviewee, this shows that lack of interest in the issues is not the reason for too little reporting, but rather lack of knowledge among journalists as to how to report on it (Interview 10). Similar anecdotes were mentioned in the interviews, which indicates that journalists who are not covering the EU have difficulties in pin-pointing when something has a news value.

From the journalists point of view, the negativity was mostly directed toward politicians communicating in an un-justified way about processes at EU level, and hiding behind the EU. Namely, taking credit for things achieved at EU level when they are popular and criticizing EU

decisions when it does not suit them to stand up for being part of taking the decisions (Interview 1; 3; 4; 9). Further, journalists perceive politicians to make EU politics out of national politics and the other way around, in misleading ways (Interview 1; 8; 12). However, some journalists see an improvement over time in politicians' way of communicating about the EU (Interview 1; 6). Again, several politicians argue that the disinterest from the media on these processes are the reason why such communication is possible:

when you say something is to be dealt with on the EU level, it's almost like saying 'the interview is over' – *Interview 2 (Senior political advisor)*

we very rarely get questions while the issue is being handled on the EU level. The questions come when the Swedish parliament and government are going to implement it at home, after the decision is made. That's pretty common, and then it's the easiest thing in the world to say, 'this is a decision that has gone too far, but there's nothing we can do about it because it's an EU directive' – *Ibid*

An opposition politician in the EU committee is disappointed with her political colleagues as well as the media for not putting the EU level higher on the agenda. She compares it to the national level, and comments on whether it is reasonable that the national level always has precedence when it comes to the public debate:

yes, I agree that it is like that and I don't think it's reasonable. Because later, when the decision is made, we have to adjust [...] and then you blame the EU and I think that's wrong. Because you can't blame the EU, because when we've given away some of our power it's also our responsibility to push the politics in the direction we want – *Interview 13 (Member of the EU-committee)*

If questions about EU legislation were asked in the initiation phase, for example when a Commission proposal is presented, politicians would not get away with 'blaming it on the EU'. Each party would have to be clear about their viewpoint on the matter, and debates could be held. As such the dimensions of political communication would be made visible; the specific issue, the procedure and entry points for influence, as well as parties' different arguments. This rarely happens. Journalists said they very rarely contacted politicians to ask about a new Commission proposal, and the same was true for how often politicians felt they were asked questions about new EU initiatives (e.g. interview 2; 7; 12).

One Brussels correspondent has often been trying to get issues on the agenda while they are still open for influence, before decisions have been taken. She mentions the much-disputed *Directive on Copyright in the Digital Single Market*, which she knew would be a big deal and alter conditions for many industries. She tried to sell stories about the directive to a number of magazines and news channels while it was still being processed, but no one was interested in publishing it. One year later, when the directive was already approved in the Council and it was too late to influence the Swedish government, there was a big debate about the directive (Interview 3).

Another journalist comments this phenomenon, and compares it to which coverage processes on national level get:

there's almost a bit of a feeling like 'oh well, they can carry on with what they're doing down there and when it's really important we'll find out anyway, but with the rest it's not so important to know exactly what they're voting'. And we would never let things go by like that on the national level; there the coverage is constantly meticulous – *Interview 11 (Reporter at Dagens Industri)*

The majority from both populations claimed that the EU level is largely not present in their daily work; with EU journalists and EU committee members being the obvious exception. For journalists who are not covering the EU, it is present during European Parliament election campaigns; during large crises; and when it comes to the issue areas of migration and climate (Interview 6; 8; 12). For politicians, it is present in committee work in the Swedish parliament, but not in any outward-communicative way except for during the same instances as for journalists (Interview 5; 7; 14). In relation to the continuous decision-making processes; to the work of the Swedish parliament; and in national election campaigns, the EU is generally not present in the work of national journalists or politicians (e.g. interview 1; 7; 11; 12). Further, those journalists who do have EU expertise are not working with the connection between the national and the EU, but are mainly focusing on the *outside* discourse of EU politics; the transnational questions and debates. Their expertise is not used during national election campaigns, which would be a way to integrate the EU level there (Interview 1; 3; 9).

Journalists are more critical toward their own population regarding knowledge on the EU system, as many claimed that they themselves as well as their colleagues have big knowledge gaps (Interview 6; 8; 11). Politicians mention that the EU level is integrated in the parliamentary work and that therefore many in the party keep track on developments at the EU level, but probably not to the same extent as those on national level (Interview 5; 7; 10). There were some instances where interviewees expressed that they believed the other actor had a lack of knowledge on the EU. Politicians who have worked specifically with the EU level claim they see a lot of knowledge deficiencies among journalists (Interview 10; 13). Some politicians instead say that what may seem as a knowledge gap could also be a lack of information, a lack of interest or lack of knowing how they can report on something so that it seems relevant to the media consumer (Interview 5; 14). Some journalists perceive that national politicians have a lack of knowledge of the EU system, but also that they do not communicate about it fairly for strategic reasons (Interview 3; 8; 12).

Several journalists, especially at the public service channels, mention discussions and thoughts that appear after European Parliament election campaigns, about trying to integrate the EU level in reporting afterwards:

I have been given the opportunity to sometimes dig into the EU level and the EU processes much more, and every time I've done that I think 'God, we should cover this much more, this should be much more present in the public debate in Sweden, why is this level - when it comes to legislation and decision-making - so incredibly invisible in the Swedish public debate?' – *Interview 6 (Journalist at Sveriges Television)*

During national election campaigns, both populations say that the EU level is not present, except for during the one in 2018 when the issues of migration and climate were on the agenda (Interview 5). Several of the interviewees, both politicians and journalists, did not seem to acknowledge the relevance of discussing EU level questions in national election campaigns (Interview 2; 4; 12). All journalists working at the public service channels say that they have had discussions ahead of national elections about including the EU level in some capacity, but that the discussions rarely result in anything (Interview 6; 8; 12). Some, from both populations, do believe it would be beneficial to include the EU level more during national election campaigns (Interview 8; 10; 14). Many also suggested that the reason for why the EU level is rarely visible, is because national election campaigns often revolve around issues with largely national competence; such as welfare, education and healthcare (Interview 2; 4; 5; 13).

5.2 EU in the public debate and the legitimization process

The next set of questions revolved around the EU level in the public debate in general; about which image of the EU that is portrayed; to which extent political processes on the EU level are legitimized or not; and what the interviewees deem desirable in this regard. The main finding is that there indeed is a crack in the legitimization process when it comes to decision-making processes at the EU level, and that almost all interviewees agree that it is a problem.

As the findings above illustrate, the connection between Sweden and the EU is largely invisible, when it comes to continuous decision-making. It is the processes that are part of the domestic political agenda that are not being visible in the public debate, such as the work of the EU committee in the Swedish parliament, a closer coverage of the Council of Ministers or of the Swedish Members of the European Parliament (e.g. interview 1; 6; 7).

The EU committee in the Swedish parliament, is somewhat covered, but mainly because ministers participate, which provides an opportunity to ask them questions in an informal setting. However, those questions are seldom EU related, according to members of the EU committee, and reporting about which mandate the minister got with them, or asking about debates within the committee are rare. One opposition politician who is a member of the EU committee mention that she tries to get journalists to ask EU related questions, but that it seems difficult to get them to be interested. When asked if there is indeed a lively debate inside the EU committee that does not reach the public, she says that there are conflicts but no party prioritizes the EU politics and therefore do not make a big deal out of it. Further, she is disappointed that the success of the opposition in relation to EU politics is not more visible and she believes that there is space in the public debate where especially opposition parties could be better at creating debates about EU level processes (Interview 13).

Two journalists were surprised about the study on increasing opposition in Swedish EU politics, but said that if that is the case, it would be very interesting to cover it more (Interviews 8; 4). One EU journalist said she believed that the study could not be true because “they just agree with each other all the time” (Interview 1). When asked about their coverage of the parliamentary work connected to the EU level and the EU committee in the Swedish parliament, a reporter at Sveriges Radio, expressed it as such:

we probably don't have that much with the connection between the national and the EU level. It's like you're looking for a layer in the reporting that is missing, right? – *Interview 12 (Journalist at Sveriges Radio)*

Sveriges Radio did have a reporter focusing on the EU committee in the Swedish parliament, who retired a couple of years ago (ibid). This was mentioned as an explanation to why the coverage of the Swedish EU politics is less present now, but it's a testament to a very weak coverage if it is dependent on one journalist.

One politician and two journalists mentioned how they perceive that the EU level, and communication regarding the EU level, is not taken seriously in the public debate (Interview 1; 2; 12). The journalists mentioned instances when politicians claim things about processes at EU level that are untrue, but that they “hope no-one knows” and gets away with it. A politician mentioned that some things said in relation to the EU level are accepted by journalists and others in the public debate, while the same would never be true if it revolved the national level:

but you can say things like this in that context because it's not really taken seriously. And because we don't have a relationship to what the EU debate is about from the start, it becomes something that's sort of outside our democratic conversation and our political debate – *Interview 2 (Senior political advisor)*

Many politicians mention that they perceive Swedish Members of the European Parliament (MEP), and the everyday work that they do, to generally be invisible. Politicians in Brussels depend largely on being active on social media to get some form of outreach (Interview 7; 10; 13; 14). As the study did not involve any MEPs, their perspective cannot be presented. However, many party representatives said they really wished for their parliamentarians to be more covered in the media (ibid). One of the politicians was a former MEP and confirmed that she experiences considerable lack of interest from journalists when she tried to reach out with information about the work she did in the EP. She recognizes this as a democratic problem:

I think the biggest problem is that you as a voter don't have a chance to know if those you voted for did what they promised or not. The possibility of scrutiny both from voters and journalists is... especially from voters, it's just not possible. I think it's a big democratic problem – *Interview 10 (Member of the EU-committee)*

The big news channels and magazines have reporting of good quality from Brussels and on those EU issues that are transnational, for example; Brexit, the Hungary and Poland debacles, and discussions and developments about migration and the EU's borders. The same high quality reporting does not exist about the work of the Swedish MEPs, on debates between Swedish political parties on issue areas on the EU level, or on the Council of Minister's meetings (e.g. interview 9; 11; 12; 13). As such, the legitimization of the decision-making carried out by Swedish politicians at the EU level is largely missing, possibilities to influence them are lost, and accountability of those politicians who were given their mandate by Swedish voters is difficult to ensure.

Instead, decisions become visible once they are taken, and it is time to implement a new directive or regulation. Several interviewees agree that media reporting is often simplifying and using phrases such as 'the EU has decided ...' (e.g. interview 2; 3; 4; 6). This contributes to an image of the EU, that facilitates misleading communication about the EU level from politicians. As mentioned above, it is simple for a Swedish politician to put the blame on the EU if the image of the EU is as something external and beyond the power of said politician to influence. If instead the conversation held about EU related issues in the media make evident the role of Swedish politicians, that type of blaming becomes more difficult. As stated by one of the journalists:

Of course it is a problem when Swedish politicians exert power and we don't have any idea about how it happens or how they are acting – *Interview 11 (Reporter at Dagens Industri)*

Surely, the possibility to reach decisions that completely correspond with the vision of a political party will be more difficult in a Union of 27 member states, than in a government coalition at home. Nevertheless, a lessened possibility to influence should not be a valid reason not to comment on the processes and to be clear about which decision one wishes to see.

This type of debate regarding the EU level is present at times, as mentioned above, especially concerning big crises or the issue areas of migration and climate. Further, those with an explicit interest in EU affairs can find thorough reporting on specialized news sites; and when new EU legislation applies to a certain industry, industry-specific magazines are competent in reporting in-depth about it (Interview 8; 13). Moreover, several interviewees perceive that the image of the EU in the public debate has become more accurate over time

(Interview 5; 6; 8). Finally, Sveriges Television do air more EU related programs than they might be given credit for, and the reporters from Sveriges Television mention the programs from 'SVT Forum' which relatively often are EU related (Interview 6; 8). However, those programs rarely reach a broad public, and although they could be considered doing their duty as a public service company by covering such shows, the amount of people consuming the shows are most likely quite low (ibid). It is in the everyday-reporting of news programs and magazines with big audiences that the EU level is largely absent, and where the connection between the EU and Sweden is often invisible (Interview 1; 2; 6; 8; 12).

Eleven out of the fourteen interviewees agree that the state of affairs regarding the EU level in the Swedish public debate is problematic and that this comprises a democratic problem. Three do not see that it is problematic and perceive the amount of reporting done as sufficient (Interview 4; 12; 14). Those who are not satisfied with the current condition claim that it is the legislative procedures and those concrete ways in which the EU affect Swedish citizens that has to be made more visible (e.g. interview 3; 6; 10). Politicians request their parliamentarians in Brussels and the work they do to be more visible, and for media to have more interest in it (Interview 2; 7; 13). One of the politicians wish that it would be more common with general debates about on which level of decision-making an issue should belong (Interview 2).

These results show how the three aspects of political communication that enables its democratizing function are not present in the Swedish case, when the continuous decision-making processes are not constantly referred to, and debates are not held before decisions are taken. This means that the issue-dimension is missing, as arguments from all sides on issues are not heard; the procedural-dimension is missing, as neither the decision-making process or access-point for influencing are evident; and that the accountability-dimension is missing when politicians are out of sight and it is not made discernible who is advocating for what and who is responsible for a decision taken.

Four interviewees states that they believe the amount of reporting about the EU level and the interest in the issues has increased with time (Interview 2; 4; 5; 14). If this is the case, it is positive and hopefully that will continue. It is contradictory to some of the findings from previous studies, and even though there has been some increase it may not be in proportion to how much the increase of influence from EU decisions has been on Swedish legislation. Additionally, one journalist claim that the increased interest that can be seen is mostly on the transnational aspects of the EU, and not on learning more about Swedish politicians' work in the EU (Interview 3).

5.3 Perceived obstacles

Below, obstacles that interviewees perceive as hindering the EU level to be more present in the public debate in general as well as in the actors' own work are presented. The obstacles include: lack of interest; lack of knowledge; lack of resources; lack of personalities; lack of relevance; distance; being complicated; long decision-making processes; identity; as well as differing lines of conflict.

The most often-mentioned obstacle was lack of interest among the public to be informed about the EU level (12/14 interviews). The lack of interest mentioned were related to: politicians' interest in communicating about the issues; from readers/listeners/viewers and voters; and from the media to report on it. The question, as with several of the mentioned obstacles, is of course; what is the chicken and what is the egg? When there is no continuous reporting about EU level processes, and when the knowledge is often low, it is not so surprising

that there is no clear demand from voters and media consumers about the EU level. Journalists who mention lack of resources as an obstacle to cover the EU more, connect it with the lack of interest from their viewers/readers/listeners, and claim that when there is no clear interest, it is not prioritized (Interview 9; 12). One could however argue that it is the other way around; since it has not been prioritized, no interests in the issues have been created.

That type of vicious cycle is commented on in relation to other obstacles, such as lack of knowledge and the EU system being too complicated. Journalists feel that they should explain the whole system every time they write an article about the EU level, instead of focusing on the actual news (Interview 6; 4; 8; 9). This would probably not be an issue if the reporting on the EU level was continuous, so it felt natural for media consumers to read about this level of the political system. Therefore, lack of knowledge of the recipient should not be viewed as an obstacle but rather as an incentive to write more about it. As an example, this comparison with the American system was given by a Brussels correspondent:

that people think it's complicated is a vicious cycle, because you write too little about it. Every Swedish person is an expert on the American primary elections and that's because they've read twenty articles on it. If everyone read the same amount of articles about the European Parliament, they would know what for example a rapporteur was – *Interview 3 (Brussels correspondent)*

Further, the same correspondent argues that it is sloppy for journalists to use the system's complexity as an argument not to report on it more:

no, that's an excuse. You wouldn't say that about anything else. Would you say that the collective agreement negotiations were complicated and thus not write about it? If I was thrown in to writing about that I would also say it was difficult, but I would just have to learn – *Ibid*

As illustrated above, the obstacles 'lack of interest', 'lack of knowledge' and 'complicated' tie into each other, and it's difficult to discern what comes before the other. Even though one might not accept the complexity of the EU system as a reason not to report on it, it is true that the decision-making processes are lengthy and span over long periods of time. Journalists say it can be difficult to decipher when in that process, it would be relevant to report on the issue (Interview 6; 9). One politician refers to the decision-making processes as complicating the effort to create a debate about an issue; as one could write an op-ed when a Commission-proposal is presented, but it would not be possible to keep the debate alive during the several years of the decision-making process that follow (Interview 14). Another politician illustrates the difficulty of discerning when something is a news story or not, in EU decision making:

one thing about the EU process is that it's difficult to see when it's a news story. Is it when the Commission puts forward the proposal or even before that, or when the Parliament votes or when the Council votes or when the negotiations are finished, and when are they finished? And sometimes there are even more steps. So, it's difficult to decipher when it's interesting to bring attention to the issue – *Interview 10 (Member of the EU-committee)*

Another group of obstacles are more emotional. Three interviewees mention the lack of a European identity as something hindering the EU level to be naturally integrated into the public debate, as this results in a lacking interest to those processes (Interview 2; 4; 5). They claim that the Swedish public has not got the same emotional connection to the EU as some other member states do, and that reaching that connection will take a lot of time:

this is the big obstacle, I would say, that there is no known deep interest, no emotional connection between people and the EU. And this results in us not having a lot of reporting. It doesn't mean that the work in the EU stops, but that it continues but without the usual control that public opinion and the media exerts, and that's a huge problem. And this is the democratic deficit of the EU; it's not that people in power over there try to hide things. On the contrary, a lot of EU politicians feel frustrated that they get as little space in the media as they do – *Interview 2 (Senior political advisor)*

Similarly, ten of the interviewees mention that a lacking sense of relevance to the EU level is an obstacle. News from the EU can be difficult to portray in a way that makes people feel like it is relevant to them in their everyday lives, as it may seem too abstract and difficult to take in (e.g. Interview 4; 6; 14).

The physical distance to Brussels is mentioned in relation to the perceived lack of relevance. When journalists value news, national ones competing with those on the EU level will always win due to it being physically closer to the receiving public (e.g. interview 4; 6; 8). Same goes for politicians, who say they will always choose to open a debate about the health care in Sweden before starting a debate about a new EU directive (e.g. interview 2; 7).

Ironically, it seems like the level missing in the EU reporting, the connection between Sweden and the EU, is the type of reporting that *would* make news from the EU feel relevant and close to people. Learning about a new directive through hearing what the Swedish parties think about it, and hearing how it would influence your immediate surroundings, seems like a type of reporting that could interest those who might perceive news about negotiations in Brussels as too abstract and far away.

Even though it may be true that the Swedish public do not have a strong emotional connection to the EU and that could be a reason for limited amount of interest expressed toward the Union, one could also argue that people do not have to have a strong emotional connection to each political decision that influences them. The point of political communication, the communication that has to be carried out to legitimize politics, is not to adhere to the public's personal connection to issues. That communication is part of media reporting as well, of course, when it comes to many other topics and world politics. Ensuring democratic functions in between elections is communication with another purpose, and that should be carried out anyway. For citizens to know about decision-making processes and new legislation that may influence their lives in some way, is about showing how their elected politicians are acting and the decisions they are taking. Therefore, when a lack of emotional connection to the EU is presented as a reason for limited media attention, it seems as though the EU level is not completely recognized as an inherent part of the Swedish democracy; as a part where these legitimizations have to be made no matter what.

Three interviewees argued that there is a lack of colourful personalities at the EU level, and that this is an obstacle for interesting media coverage to be made. News stories are better when they are connected to persons, and the EU system needs personalities to make it interesting (Interview 2; 4; 9). Notwithstanding that there are plenty intriguing persons represented in the EU institutions and in the other member states and that it would be interesting to hear more about; if the solution is to bring EU reporting closer to the Swedish public, it does not really matter if there are no colourful people at the EU level or not. People already know about Swedish ministers and to some degree Swedish parliamentarians or MEPs. Making the EU aspects of their work be more present is a first step to integrate the EU level to the public debate.

Finally, differing conflict lines are seen as an obstacle. As issues at EU level do not always have the left-right dimension as many issues in national politics do, it may be difficult to discuss the issues in the same way; for example, in national election campaigns (Interview 4). Further, there are sometimes no conflict lines among the Swedish political parties. In some issue areas,

the political parties agree among themselves, and see a strength in keeping ‘the Swedish line’ the same over time; thus, not differing depending on which party is in government (Interview 2; 5; 13; 10). This would decrease the incentives and possibilities to have dynamic debates within Sweden, according to some interviewees (Interview 1; 8; 14).

One could argue that differing conflict lines are not a reason not to open debates about issues. Whenever there is a conflict, it is possible to have a debate and illuminate to the public which options they have. Moreover, where Sweden has a wish to stick together against other EU member states, it is still relevant for the Swedish public to know about the Swedish opinion and what it stands against. Here, the distinction between inside- and outside perspectives of Swedish EU politics are relevant again. That there are two discourses should not hinder the possibility to make engaging reporting and communication about both, whenever they are relevant.

A couple of the interviewees mentioned that they are firm believers that a large group of the public do have an interest in politics in general and that this applies to the EU level as well, and that the public indeed has the ability to grasp complicated systems and processes (Interview 13; 14). As such, the arguments about lack of interest and knowledge are not valid, and neither would those about differing conflict lines standing in the way of integrating the EU level be. Many would probably find it very intriguing to hear how alliances can vary depending on which level it lies at, and learn more about in which way Sweden differs from other EU member states in varying policy areas.

5.4 Possible solutions

The interviewees were also asked to comment on how the EU level could become more naturally integrated in the public debate, and if any specific actors bear more responsibility. A group of solutions revolve around the media and the work of journalists; another group about politicians; and some are focused on the system itself and other external factors.

The solution most mentioned relating to journalists’ work is that there has to be a more continuous reporting, and more journalists who have sufficient knowledge of the EU system (Interview 1; 3; 6; 8; 12). That does not have to entail a larger number of EU- or Brussels correspondents, but a bigger number who integrate the EU level to their coverage areas (Interview 1; 3). This goes for political reporters and news reporters, but the same goes for issue-specific reporters as well. If reporters covering finance, climate, migration or technology make sure to keep track of relevant processes at EU level, there is less of a burden on the EU experts and the likelihood of more issues being covered would increase. This would not involve too much extra work of these reporters, according to the interviewees. If a reporter is covering technology, there may be two relevant decision-making processes ongoing to follow per year, and to report on. At the moment, if EU journalists has to keep track of all processes in all issue areas, there is no way to cover everything comprehensively. As it is now, legislative processes may be unnoticed for months or years, and not be picked-up on until the decision is made, as there are not enough reporters covering all issue areas. As stated by one of the Brussels correspondents:

there are no obstacles except that you have to prioritize it, there is not other way. It's all that has to be done, and it has to be done through those being experts on topics knowing what is happening on the EU level [...] it's enough just to be on the email list from the right directorate. You don't miss it by two days but during two years – *Interview 3 (Brussels correspondent)*

Journalists who do not usually cover the EU, but have had the chance of doing so, state that they are often left with a feeling that they should continue to cover the EU more. The more they learn about the system, the more possible angles they find and ways to make reporting about the EU level interesting (Interview 6; 8). For some reason, the intense EU reporting around EP election campaigns are not followed by continuous reporting in-between elections. The more journalists who get these insights, and the more those priorities reaches the editorial level, there may be progress in the amount of EU coverage:

when I have had to read up more I realize how many angles there are and how much journalism you could do on it, so if journalists would learn more about the EU and have the time to do that we would be able to find a lot of interesting angles on the EU that would be interesting to our audience – *Interview 8 (Journalist at Sveriges Television)*

Another media related solution that was brought up a couple of times was that the media has to figure out how to report on EU related news in a way that seems relevant and interesting to people (Interview 7; 9; 14; 13). As mentioned above, it is reasonable to believe that if the layer lacking in the EU reporting would become increasingly present, that could become a ‘bridge’ of EU related reporting that brings the EU closer to the Swedish public. If distance and a lacking sense of relevance is the issue; bring EU reporting closer by showing how Swedish politicians are a part of the EU and how the EU is present in Sweden. Finally, and although only one interviewee mentioned this specifically it seems that a big part of the solutions would lie here; editors and publishers must prioritize EU related reporting (Interview 8).

The responsibility given to politicians regarding integrating the EU level to the public debate revolves around their way of communicating. First, several interviewees mention that politicians should communicate about the EU in an accurate manner. Meaning, not make the EU’s role seem less important than it is when something positive has come out of it, and vice versa (Interview 2; 9). Further, politicians should, for example ahead of elections, communicate in a way that makes voters feel like it matters which party or which politician that represents them in the EU; and that they feel like they should care about which politics is being driven there (Interview 3; 14). Finally, politicians in Brussels must become better at communication about the work they are doing there (Interview 8; 10; 11).

Two interviewees mentioned that politicians and journalists should believe in the democratic importance of their jobs and take it more seriously, and believe that people are interested in knowing more about political process. There lies an important responsibility on these two professions in educating and informing the public on politics and decision-making, that is not fulfilled as it is:

but if you're going to change it, both journalists and politicians have to feel that they have a responsibility to educate the public more around these issues. And actually believe that people can find it interesting, I believe that people are more interested in politics than many think – *Interview 13 (Member of the EU-committee)*

democratically we just have to demand that politicians are more clear; we vote for them and they represent us and then I don't think you should be able to get away with saying that it's complicated, you should be able to demand this in a democracy. But we journalists, if we think of journalism as not just entertainment but as a part of democracy and that we have a mission to make some things clear so that people can ensure accountability and show how politicians have acted on the EU level [...] then it's really important to get better at reporting on the EU level. Because a lot of the democracy is there now – *Interview 3 (Brussels correspondent)*

Solutions that are beyond the control of those interviewed are related to the school curriculum, the EU system itself and the public's emotional connection to it.

Two interviewees mentioned the responsibility of the school system (Interview 9; 13). As we know, the knowledge about the EU system and its' relation to the Swedish democracy is low among students, teachers, journalists as well as local politicians. The vicious cycles of feeling that the complexity of the EU system stands in the way of reporting about it, lack of interest and lack of knowledge among journalists could all be derived from the EU not being sufficiently covered in the school curriculum. If citizens do not learn sufficiently in school about how the EU is part of our political system, and rarely read news that illustrate that, since journalists have the same knowledge gaps; it's no surprise that politicians do not feel like their voters are interested to hear about their stance on EU level issues or that journalists notice that their articles or TV-shows about the EU are less read and watched.

In relation to the long decision-making process and the complexity of the EU system, some argued that the system itself has to change before the EU level can be naturally integrated in the Swedish public sphere:

the EU has to look themselves in the mirror and think about what it is that makes it difficult for people to grasp what the EU is doing and understand where issues are in the process and understand what's happening within the EU – *Interview 6 (Journalist at Sveriges Television)*

Finally, those who mentioned a lack of identity as an obstacle, claimed that there is no way of pushing solutions about integrating the EU level to the public debate; but that it rather has to be allowed to take more time in order for people to slowly get the emotional connection to the EU needed (Interview 2; 4).

6 Concluding discussion

The results given through the interviews were largely in line with the findings from previous case-specific studies as well as with literature about communication and the EU, but also gave a more encompassing image of the problem: it showed that national political parties and the media underperform in their role of legitimizing decision-making processes at the EU level, and in which specific ways. Further, the purpose of this study was to build on that and get closer to understanding *why* there is a communicative deficit in the European Union. There is no single answer to the question, but below are some reflections that can build on what we already know, and on which future studies can continue to add.

As this study went directly to actors who have a significant amount of power to influence the way in which political communication about the EU level is being carried out, it is interesting to reflect about their share of responsibility of the problem. There are evidently major issues regarding a lack of interest among many national politicians and journalists on recognizing the EU level as an integral part of the Swedish democracy, and to carry out the same democratizing functions there as they do on the other levels. Many claim that a lack of interest from the public is the reason for that, but as stated by some of the interviewees; they would not get away with saying that about any other layer of the political system.

Where does this lack of interest come from? Although the research design acknowledges the fact that interviewees may try to sugar-coat their own role, it did seem that many were honest about their own inadequacies and recognized that they should try to do more to ensure legitimization. When journalists get to report about the EU for the first time, they are amazed with how interesting and relevant it *does* seem. Some of the interviewees had not reflected upon how the EU could be relevant regarding parliamentary election campaigns or covering the Swedish parliament's ongoing processes. Obstacles mentioned were lack of resources to cover the EU level; knowledge-gaps on many fronts; and missing emotional connections. Why are resources not given to EU reporting, why are there such huge knowledge-gaps and why does the EU not seem relevant?

When Sweden became an EU member state 25 years ago, and when any country became a member state, the political and democratic system was altered in major ways. Some of the power of the parliament and the government were transferred to Brussels and Strasbourg. Since then, Sweden takes decisions together with 26 other countries, and the decisions become legislation that applies in all countries. Considering the widespread lack of knowledge, even among students, teachers, professors and journalists that have been educated after Sweden became a member; it seems that the profound changes in the democratic infrastructure were not sufficiently acknowledged and has not been sufficiently acknowledged since then. 12 out of 14 interviewed politicians and journalists, those actors creating the very communicative processes that build bridges between decision-making and voters and that is supposed to scrutinize the power wherever it is being exerted, agree that it is a serious democratic problem that the EU level is not integrated in the public debate. This is a testament to how the crucial components of the legitimization process of politics have not managed to integrate the new level of power. It is also a testament to that the full responsibility does not lie with them, some of it is out of their hands.

When Sweden became a member, the interest was big from media and some educative campaigns were launched, but it did not stick. When the institutional and political frames changed the way they did, it should have been directly incorporated to school and university curriculums, information on various websites, and in the way political parties and the media work. It is beyond the scope of this study to decipher in which ways this happened and not, but if it would have been done thoroughly; would the everyday political work of Swedish politicians at the EU level be as invisible as it is?

It is true that the EU is something very different from the nation state; and therefore, the public will probably never have a similar connection to the EU as they do their state. Some are against the whole project, wish for the cooperation to look differently, or wish the EU would not have as much influence over national legislation as they do today. However, that cannot be a reason for why the legitimization of politicians stops. As long as the decision-making is carried out by elected politicians, it is for politicians to communicate about it and for the media to scrutinize and open up for debate.

Connecting back to Schlesinger's (1999) idea of two national discourses in relation to EU Member States; one revolving around the domestic political agenda and as such existing *inside* the nation state, and one revolving those transnational issues of the EU existing on a level *outside* the nation state. The inside aspects are those that resulted in an altering of the political system, and it is largely this discourse that is missing in the Swedish public debate. Those processes and decisions are not being legitimized and this is a democratic deficit. The outside aspects are those transnational issues; democracy in other EU Member States, the EU's borders, and Brexit, that do receive a lot of attention but that have less to do with the legitimization of Swedish politicians.

In the discussions of a European public sphere many scholars picture a transnationalisation of national public spheres, and believe the communication deficit would be solved if European citizens were aware of the frames of reference existing in other Member States. This may be interesting to learn more about, but whether it would be one's priority in solving the democratic deficit depends on the view one has of what democracy in the EU entails. I would argue that first and foremost, a citizen and voter in a political entity should be able to hold those politicians accountable that they themselves vote for, and should get insight into the processes those politicians are taking part in. In relation to the EU, it is therefore important that Swedish citizens know what Swedish ministers do in the Council of Ministers, which discussions are carried out in the Swedish parliament in relation to EU level processes, and the work of Swedish Members of the European Parliament. Knowing about the issues, processes, and politicians and their differing arguments would diminish the democratic deficit of the EU existing at the national level, which according to this viewpoint is the gravest one.

Being a citizen of an EU Member State entails being an EU citizen as well. The European Union is not solely an economic or political cooperation, it has other aspects than that, and citizens in some EU Member States may feel a closer connection to the transnational project than others. Gaining an identity as an EU citizen, or feeling culturally close to the rest of the EU, would probably demand a transnationalisation of the public debate. If one were to know about the political debates being carried out in Croatia, Estonia and Portugal on a regular basis, another sense of connection to those countries and the rest of the EU would probably come with time. There may be a value to that, that is not the purpose of this study to establish, but this type of awareness about the political climate of other Member States does not have to do with the possibility to hold elected politicians accountable. It is therefore not related to the democratic or communicative deficit. It is perhaps related to a cultural, or identity, deficit; but that does not have to do with the political communicative processes that are crucial in ensuring that democratic processes are visible and open to its democratic base.

Democratic deficit arguments have been related to a lack of a common demos, a sort of self-recognized community of people, in the EU and that the lack of demos is static and therefore the democratic deficit cannot be overcome. But each Member State has a form of demos, and politicians taking decisions in EU processes are elected by their national public. If a lack of demos is a democratic problem, that does not really matter, as long as European elections are not carried out where all EU citizens vote in the same constituency. If democratic accountability is ensured at the national level, the transnational communicative deficit is of less importance. The lack of a European demos is rather related to a lacking sense of common identity, and that may evolve or not, but focusing on that in relation to the lack of legitimacy to the EU averts focus from what indeed matters for a democracy to be strong: decision-making processes and elected politicians' decisions to be visible and open to those who elect them.

Most aspects of the democratic and communicative deficit can be overcome if national politicians and journalists do what they are supposed to and follow the power even when it is being exerted in Brussels. If Brussels seems too far away, if citizens feel that they cannot influence the processes in Brussels, and if the communication from EU institutions does not reach the public in EU Member States: national politicians have to show how they are part of the processes and how they are a bridge between their citizens and the EU, and national media has to pick up on information from EU institutions and illuminate how it is relevant to their national publics. This is the type of communication that will raise the knowledge among the public and enable informed participation, as a precondition to ensure democratic legitimacy.

6.1 Future research

First, researchers are encouraged to build on this study through conducting similar case studies, or comparative studies, in other Member States, focusing on the national level of political communication in relation to the EU level. The qualitative interview was fitting here, but surveys could also be beneficial in getting a bigger sample of respondents, allowing for wider generalizations. As a first step in broadening the picture, it would be fruitful for a comparative study between the Nordic Member States to be made, who share many historical and cultural characteristics but vary in other ways. For example, as Finland and Sweden became members at the same time, while Denmark has been an EU Member State since 1973, the importance of length of membership could be assessed. In Sweden, a similar study as this can be conducted in a couple of years to reach a comparison over time.

In this study, one editor-in-chief was interviewed but this did not give enough material to draw any firm conclusions about editors-in-chief or editors in general. Several obstacles mentioned in this study related to the distribution of resources and priorities in media channels. Therefore, I would also recommend, to getting even closer to why the EU level is rather absent from the public debate, to conduct an interview study with editors-in-chief and program directors and other actors with an even more concrete influence over which issues are given visibility in the public debate and not.

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8 Appendix

8.1 Appendix A: Interview guide

Interview guide – Politicians

Introduction:

- Start by saying I'm very grateful for their participation
- Introductory remarks about the study:
 - My research topic is based on a number of existing studies which shows that the EU level of Swedish politics is rather absent in the public debate, both regarding media reporting and in communication from political parties. To understand more about this and get a clearer idea of why that is; to learn if politicians and journalists agree or not; and if they perceive any obstacles to integrating the EU level in their communication, I decided to do this interview study with politicians and journalists to ask about and understand your thoughts on the matter.
 - The point of departure is the idea that the communication about this level, as with all the levels of the political system, and the processes is a matter of democracy, as the public debate is the space where decisions and political processes are made transparent and are being legitimized through an open discussion.
- I have prepared some topics/topic areas and questions, and will ask follow-up questions based on the answers. I would like to encourage you to speak freely and reflect on the topic however you like; I am merely interested in hearing your thoughts on the issue.
- Is it okay if I record the interview, or do you prefer me to take notes? The recording is only for my own benefit and will not be used in any other way.

Start with lighter questions to get into the topic, e.g. general questions about the presence of the EU level in one's work or questions about the interplay with the other actor.

Main interview part: the prepared questions take makes most sense to each interviewee + follow-up questions

Finish: ask if the interviewee would like to add something; anything I should have asked about or any thoughts that came up during the interview.

The interplay with journalists

- In your everyday interaction with journalists; do you get questions about your position on issues that are going to be decided on at the EU level? Compared to issues that are handled at the national level
- How do you perceive the interest among journalists regarding EU related issues?

- If there is a new Commission proposal, do you get questions from journalists about your party's position?
- It seems like the EU isn't on media agenda during parliamentary election campaigns, why do you think that is?
- Do you wish that EU level processes were more visible in the media? Why/why not?
- How do you assess the level of knowledge about the EU level is among journalists?
- Do you get questions from journalists during election campaigns about your position on decisions that will be taken in the EU?
- Do you perceive any obstacles for the EU level processes to be more visible in the media?
- How do you assess the way media portray the EU and EU processes?

Parliamentary elections

- According to a study from 2018, it is difficult to get information about parties' opinions on matters that are going to be decided on in the EU during the forthcoming mandate, in parliamentary election campaigns. How do you and your party reason about this ahead of parliamentary elections? Does your party choose to not include clear information about your position in issues that are decided on the EU level? Do you try to include it but perceive any obstacles to do so?
- In debates and questionings ahead of parliamentary elections, are you/your party prepared to speak about issues at EU level, if those questions would come up? Do you get questions from journalists about EU level issues during national election campaigns?
- Do you perceive that voters are interested to know about your party's position on questions at EU level during parliamentary election campaigns?
- According to research, what political parties which to accomplish at the EU level is rarely mentioned in their party programs. Is this a problem, according to you? Why/why not?
- Research show that the presence of the EU level in parliamentary election campaigns and party programs have decreased over time, why do you think that is? What are the thoughts about this in your party?
- Is it a problem that the EU level is not present in the national election campaigns, according to you?

Continuous decision-making in the EU

- As a politician in opposition, do you have an interest to express your opposition openly regarding issues that are decided on the EU level? To the same extent as those decided on the national level? If not, is there a reason why you would be less open about your critique in relation to processes at EU level?
 - Is it desirable that the conflict lines that exist regarding EU level politics were more visible in the public debate?
 - As a member of the EU committee, do you perceive that there is a debate in there that does not reach the rest of the public debate? Are journalists interested in that debate?
- How is the level of knowledge on the EU system and EU level processes in your party? Is it integrated, so that everyone is up to speed on those processes?
- How do you assess the way you/your party communicate about the EU and EU processes?
- How is your knowledge on the EU system and its processes? Is it enough for you to discuss EU politics with your voters?

- What impacts whether you wish to bring an issue to light in the public debate? What do you think makes EU level issues less visible?
- Researcher mean that there is a democratic deficit when the EU level is not as visible as the other levels in the public debate, as those processes don't become visible to the public and the decisions aren't legitimized. Do you agree? Should the EU-level be more visible? Why/why not?

EU in the public debate

- There are studies showing that the EU is absent both from parties' and media's agendas and that there is little reporting on the decision-making processes in the EU. If you agree, why do you think that is? What are the obstacles to make it more present? Is there a lack of interest from journalists and politicians regarding Swedish EU politics?
- There are also studies implicating that the EU is presented more as foreign politics than national politics, for example that the conflict lines presented are between 'Sweden' and 'the EU' rather than showing how Swedish politicians may have differing opinions on processes in the EU. Is there a misleading image of the EU in the public debate?
- How do you view your role as a link between decision-making and your voters, and your role in informing your voters about ongoing and upcoming decision-making processes? In relation to the EU, do you feel that you can fulfil that role? If not, are there any specific obstacles?
- If you agree that the EU level is underrepresented in the public debate and that there is a misguided image of the EU, do you see that any specific actor has a bigger responsibility to improve the situation? Where should one start? Do you try to do anything about it but perceive any obstacles?

Interview guide – Journalists

Introduction:

- Start by saying I'm very grateful for their participation
- Introductory remarks about the study:
 - My research topic is based on a number of existing studies which shows that the EU level of Swedish politics is rather absent in the public debate, both regarding media reporting and in communication from political parties. To understand more about this and get a clearer idea of why that is; to learn if politicians and journalists agree or not; and if they perceive any obstacles to integrating the EU level in their communication, I decided to do this interview study with politicians and journalists to ask about and understand your thoughts on the matter.
 - The point of departure is the idea that the communication about this level, as with all the levels of the political system, and the processes is a matter of democracy, as the public debate is the space where decisions and political processes are made transparent and are being legitimized through an open discussion.
- I have prepared some topics/topic areas and questions, and will ask follow-up questions based on the answers. I would like to encourage you to speak freely and reflect on the topic however you like; I am merely interested in hearing your thoughts on the issue.
- Is it okay if I record the interview, or do you prefer me to take notes? The recording is only for my own benefit and will not be used in any other way.

Start with lighter questions to get into the topic, e.g. general questions about the presence of the EU level in one's work or questions about the interplay with the other actor.

Main interview part: the prepared questions take makes most sense to each interviewee + follow-up questions

Finish: ask if the interviewee would like to add something; anything I should have asked about or any thoughts that came up during the interview.

The interplay with politicians

- How do you perceive the knowledge level about the EU level and its processes to be among politicians? Is it ever an obstacle that you ask them about processes at the EU level but that they don't have enough knowledge to give a satisfactory answer?
- Do you continuously look for information about EU level processes, through EU institutions or the Swedish government or parliament? How would you measure the information given by politicians on EU level processes?
- How do you assess the way politicians portray the EU and EU processes?
- Do you try to include the EU level of Swedish politics in debates and questionings but get unsatisfactory/insufficient answers from politicians?
- How do you assess the way in which politicians communicate about EU level processes? E.g. through party programs or other information they provide. Is it done in a satisfactory way or are there any issues?

Parliamentary elections

- According to research the EU level is missing from parties' agenda during parliamentary election campaigns, why do you think that is? Do you as a journalist try to give the EU level more space during national election campaigns?
- According to research, what political parties which to accomplish at the EU level is rarely mentioned in their party programs. Is this a problem, according to you? Why/why not?
- Do you see the relevance of asking politicians questions about decisions that are going to be taken at the EU level during the forthcoming mandate, during parliamentary election campaigns, or during other debates regarding domestic politics?
- Is it a problem that the EU level is not present in national election campaigns, according to you?
- Are you as an EU journalist involved at all in preparing for debates or questionings during parliamentary elections?

The continuous decision-making in the EU

- How present do you perceive the EU level to be in your everyday work? How integrated is it on your editorial team?
- Do you try to report about the opposition that exists between parties on issues that will be decided on at the EU level? If you report about the parliament, does that include the EU committee?
 - Why do you think conflict lines regarding Swedish EU politics are not so visible? Do you think they should be more present in the public debate?
- When a new Commission proposal is presented, do you ask parties about their position on it?

- How do you value which processes and political initiatives are relevant to report about? Comparing EU level initiatives with national ones.
- What are your ambitions to report about Swedish EU politics? Do you try to but see any obstacles to do so?
- Are EU institutions or the Swedish government's EU information sources where you repeatedly search for information? Is there a lack of available information for you as a journalist to write about EU level processes? Comparing to processes at national level.
- As an editor, how do you prioritize between news and decide which get space or not? How do you prioritize EU related topics? Compared to e.g. the US.
- As an EU journalist, is it part of your job to report on EU political conflicts and events at the Swedish level? Who, if anyone, does this at your editorial team?
- How do you feel that your level of knowledge on EU level processes are? Is it enough to decipher which instances should be reported on? How is the level of knowledge among your colleagues and your editors?
- As an EU journalist, is it difficult to get EU related news through? Is there a lack of interest from your editor or colleagues?
- Do you feel that there is an interest from your viewers/readers/listeners to hear more about the EU level? Is there an interest from your editor?

EU in the public debate

- There are studies showing that the EU is absent both from parties' and media's agendas and that there is little reporting on the decision-making processes in the EU. If you agree, why do you think that is? What are the obstacles to make it more present? Is there a lack of interest from journalists and politicians regarding Swedish EU politics?
- There are also studies implicating that the EU is presented more as foreign politics than national politics, for example that the conflict lines presented are between 'Sweden' and 'the EU' rather than showing how Swedish politicians may have differing opinions on processes in the EU. Is there a misleading image of the EU in the public debate?
- How do you view your role as a journalist in providing important information about political processes to the public? In relation to the EU, do you feel that you can fulfil that role? If not, are there any specific obstacles?
- If you agree that the EU level is underrepresented in the public debate and that there is a misguided image of the EU, do you see that any specific actor has a bigger responsibility to improve the situation? Where should one start? Do you try to do anything about it but perceive any obstacles?

8.2 Appendix B: Codes and sub-codes

Codes and sub-codes

Perception of the other actor

Perception of how the other actor works/communicates in relation to the EU level (journalist-politicians and vice versa)

Knowledge: Perception of the other actor's knowledge level regarding the EU level

Negative: Negative perceptions of how the other actor works/communicates in relation to the EU level

Positive: Positive perception of how the other actor works/communicates in relation to the EU level

Perception of one's own work

The interviewee's perception of the EU level in their own work

EU information: Perception of how useful/available information about the EU/from EU institutions are

Not present: Perception that the EU level is not present in one's own work

Continuous decision-making: Perception of how integrated the EU level is in one's own work regarding continuous decision-making processes

Knowledge: Perception of one's own/one's colleagues/party's level of knowledge in relation to the EU level

Present: Perception that the EU level is present in one's own work

Desirable: Thoughts about if it is desirable that the EU level is more present in one's everyday work

Parliamentary election: Perception of how integrated the EU level is in one's work during parliamentary elections

Perception of the EU level in the public debate

Perception of to which degree/how the EU level is present/represented/integrated to the public debate

The image of the EU: Perception of which image of the EU is presented in the public debate

Demand: Perception of the degree of demand from the public/voters/viewers/listeners/readers/editors to hear more about the EU level

Not present: Perception that the EU level is not present in the public debate

Legitimization: The interviewee says something that is relevant regarding to which degree decisions that are taken on the EU level are being legitimized or not in the public debate

Solutions: What should be done to improve the lacking legitimization of the EU level in the public debate

Present: Perception that the EU level is present in the public debate

Desirable: Perception about what would be desirable regarding the EU level's presence/integration/representation in the public debate

Perceived obstacles

The interviewee's perceived obstacles to integrate the EU level more naturally in political communication/the public debate

Distance: The EU is perceived as being too far away to be naturally integrated

Decision-making process: The decision-making processes are too long and complicated to be adequately presented in political communication

Lack of interest: Lack of interest from the public/voters/viewers/readers/listeners/editors to know more about the EU level and its processes

Lack of resources: Lack of resources are an obstacle to report more about the EU level and its processes (mainly in relation to the media)

Identity: Lack of identity as 'an EU country' or as 'Europeans' are an obstacle

Complicated: The EU system is too complicated to be naturally integrated in political communication

Conflict lines: Lack of conflicts/other type of conflict lines among the Swedish parties makes it more difficult to communicate about them

Lack of knowledge: Lack of knowledge about the EU system and its processes among the public/politicians/journalists/editors are an obstacle

Personalities: Lack of interesting and colourful personalities makes it less interesting to report about the EU

Relevance: The EU is not perceived as relevant to the public/voters/viewers/readers/listeners and this is an obstacle to communicate about it