

# Democratisation through critique? The Euro Crisis and the prospects of the European Public Sphere

*¿La crítica como medio para la democratización? La crisis del Euro y las perspectivas para la Esfera Pública Europea*

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## Abstract

This paper suggests that the euro has crisis signalled a significant political moment in the European public sphere. Analysing the crisis as a conflict between the European decision-making elite and European civil society, I propose that the concentration of decision-making in the euro crisis at the European level, and the growing public critique aimed at the supranational centres of power, may lead to the politicisation of European integration and contribute to strengthening the European public sphere.

## Resumen

*Este artículo parte de la siguiente idea: la crisis del euro representa un momento político importante en la esfera pública europea. Si analizamos la crisis, entendida como un conflicto entre la elite y la sociedad civil europea, encontramos que por un lado se está centralizando la toma de decisiones a nivel europeo para la superación de la crisis del euro, hecho que, por otro lado, está provocando un aumento de la crítica pública dirigida hacia los centros supranacionales del poder. El presente texto explora si esta realidad en proceso puede favorecer una integración europea política y contribuir al fortalecimiento de la esfera pública europea.*

## Keywords

European public sphere, euro crisis, democracy, civil society, critique

## Palabras clave

*Esfera pública europea, crisis del euro, democracia, sociedad civil, crítica*

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## 1. Introduction

**The public** sphere serves an elementary role in the operation of democracy. In Enlightenment thought, the public sphere forms a social domain between the ruling authority and the civil society of private citizens. As a space for the formation of public opinion and collective will, the public sphere allows citizens to take part in the definition of social goals and enables them to control, or hold accountable, the decision-making elite. Conversely, political rule legitimises itself by responding to demands and critique formulated in the public sphere. In this way, the public sphere becomes essential for the democratic legitimacy of political authority in the European social imaginary (Habermas, 1989; Koselleck, 1988; Taylor, 2009).

Although such debates on European culture and its central values, including democracy, have continued at least since the Enlightenment (Delanty and Rumford, 2005; Kaelble, 2002), the European Union (EU) as a political system has been built on an explicitly non-democratic basis (Hobsbawm, 1997, p. 268). Claims that the EU itself should be democratically governed have become more widespread only with the advancing political integration and accumulation of new competencies by EU institutions (Marks, 1997, pp. 31–3). Hagen Schulz-Forberg and Bo Stråth (2010) locate these claims in the particular political discourse that accompanied the new wave of European market integration in the 1980s (p. 4). Sketched by the Delors Committee in the late 1980s, and crystallised in the Maastricht Treaty, this project put forward a particular understanding of politics and democracy. According to its vision, a democratic EU would result from market integration: with the development of an internal market, the interests of European citizens would also automatically be channelled into decision-making. This is what Schulz-Forberg and Stråth (ibid.) critically label *the hypocrisy of democracy-through-market*.

Observing the contemporary crisis in Europe from such a political historical perspective, we might argue that the market-driven project of European integration has not only run into an economic *cul-de-sac* but has also fuelled a deepening sense of illegitimacy of EU institutions. The decision-making practices during the present euro crisis have only strengthened the perception among European publics that, despite the rhetoric of the treaties, European economic and political integration has been taken forward without concurrent democratisation. The widespread critique voiced by civil society suggests that, not only the neoliberal integration project, but also the associated European vision of *democracy-through-market*, is in crisis. Who better to summarise this sense of a loss in legitimacy than Jürgen Habermas, who, in a 2011 interview, claimed that Europe is at a *crossroads* with regard to the future of democracy:

Some time after 2008, I understood that the process of expansion, integration and democratization doesn't automatically move forward of its own accord, that it's reversible, that for the

first time in the history of the EU, we are actually experiencing a dismantling of democracy. I didn't think this was possible. We've reached a crossroads. (Cited in Diez, 2011).

Considering the blatant side-lining of democratic institutions and procedures in much of the decision-making during the euro crisis, and the erection of new disabling restrictions on the finance policy sovereignty of national governments, the perspectives for welfare and democracy in Europe are indeed grave. However, from the standpoint of European democratisation, this crisis may prove to be not just a negative event. The euro crisis can be viewed as a conflict between the European policy-making elite and European civil society,<sup>1</sup> with the European news media forming the mediating element in the public sphere in which these contesting groups potentially meet and (re)negotiate the future of European integration. If strengthened, the European public sphere may bring forward this conflict between the European power centres and European citizens and help to solve it. It depends on whether the European elite, which hold key decision-making powers in the euro crisis, can be made accountable and whether European political institutions can channel the political demands emerging from civil society into the decision-making.

This paper explores the prospects of the European public sphere in light of the recent developments in the euro crisis. I begin by reviewing some of the traditional problems cited when discussing the failures of the European public sphere in creating democratic legitimacy for European integration. The two subsequent sections outline some of the recent political developments in the ongoing euro crisis and reflect on their implications for the operation of European decision-making and its interaction with civil society critique. I suggest that we can interpret the euro crisis as an event in which both civil society and the European news media acknowledge the concentration of power at a European level, address the European decision-making elite and demand increasing public accountability of the European power centres. Together, the widespread anti-austerity protests, demands for expansionary economic policies and critique of EU's democratic deficit amount to a growing questioning of the neoliberal integration project. In this context, I discuss the implications of the euro crisis for the *strengthening* of the European public sphere and whether the crisis could indicate a shift from the *democracy-through-markets* hypocrisy to a new phase of *democratisation-through-critique*.

**1** In this paper, European civil society is understood as the assemblage of associations, organisations and movements that bring social problems into public discourse and address the general, as opposed to private, interest (see Habermas, 1996, p. 367; Kohler-Koch and Quittkat, 2009).

## 2. The weak European public sphere

**Of course,** the euro crisis does not mark the first time an event or controversy has brought the European institutional elite, the news media and their audiences together into a shared debate across the continent, thus making

Europe a *public issue*. In fact, the EU, especially the regular summits of European political leaders, has become part of the routine news agenda for quality European news media, even if it tends to spark little discussion among European citizens in normal circumstances. More substantial debates on European matters have been connected to events deemed historically significant, such as the introduction of the euro (de Vreese *et al.*, 2001), or the (failed) ratification of the Constitutional Treaty (Fossum and Trenz, 2007; Oberhuber *et al.*, 2005). Moreover, the EU institutions and politicians themselves have at times become the focus of simultaneous attention in all parts of Europe, particularly when a scandal has gained, or has been granted, a European dimension. For instance, the controversy over the EU's sanctions on Austria after Jörg Haider's election win in 2000 and the corruption scandals in the European Commission have triggered transnational debates on the significance and legitimacy of the EU as a political entity and on the meaning of European values (Schmidt-Gernig, 2002, p. 70; van de Steeg, 2006).

These shared news events have been of interest in a number of cross-national comparative analyses on European political communication and the public sphere (see Machill *et al.*, 2006; Peters *et al.*, 2005). Many of these studies have indeed indicated a certain "Europeanisation" of public spheres, referring to a phenomenon in which European issues increasingly become discussed in the national media and within national political debates (e.g. Brüggemann and Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2009; della Porta, 2003; Erbe, 2005; Kevin, 2003). In addition to providing common international topics of discussion, European news events often involve more substantial dimensions of concurrence: shared discourses, frames, values, and constructions of European history and identity (Díez Medrano, 2003; Eide *et al.*, 2008; Olausson, 2010; Pfetsch *et al.*, 2004; Trenz, 2007; Triandafyllidou, 2009; Triandafyllidou *et al.*, 2009). Not only do news media share a similar international news agenda, but they also often tend to look at European issues from much the same angles. However, given the primacy of the national media systems in Europe, the most widely shared perspective is, somewhat paradoxically, the one that adopts a national framework to coverage of European issues (Heikkilä and Kunelius, 2008; Preston, 2009).

The most notable feature of the European public sphere is its fragmentation into a multitude of local, regional, national and transnational publics. This fragmentation is reflected in the plurality of media outlets each gathering their own audiences, thus creating rather exclusive, specialised and limited spaces of public communication on European matters (Kevin, 2003; Corcoran and Fahy, 2009). The news media operate according to their own logic, remain rather separate from each other, and largely fail to mediate the debates between the European elite, national elite and civil society publics. In other words, the media are not capable of bringing together the transnational and national political elites and European civil society into a common European discussion (Eriksen, 2007; Schulz-Forberg and Stråth, 2010). Indeed, European public communication has

remained so fragmented that, for many critical observers, it does not even make sense to speak of a European public sphere. For instance, Erik Eriksen (2005) has instead preferred to discuss specialised elite transnational networks and the *communicative spaces* they create as part of European policy-coordination and decision-making practices.

The failure of the mainstream media to integrate European publics in a common Europe-wide debate can partly be explained by their dependence on public authorities and decision-makers as their primary news sources. This news media *elite bias* has been indicated in many studies on political communication and media-state relations (e.g. Bennett, 1990; Robinson, 2001), as well as in studies on European political communication (e.g. Koopmans, 2004; Statham, 2007). However, in the case of the European public sphere, a better term for the phenomenon might be a *double elite bias*. This is created when the news media primarily follow the European authorities' agenda in the coverage of European matters, while balancing this focus with another elite bias, namely, by giving voice to the national elite's views on the issues. In this way, the mainstream news media tend to adopt elite discourses and definitions of European political questions and their solutions while largely excluding civil society voices and the alternative definitions emerging from social movements and voluntary associations.

The double elite bias in the mainstream news media coverage of European issues threatens to narrow down publicly available political discourses. On the one side are the European decision-making elite, who are in charge of the EU's policy formation, while on the other are the national political elite, which typically play into populist anti-EU sentiments and present the union as a threat to sovereignty, democracy, national economy and social welfare. While partly understandable, the habitual concentration on this clear-cut conflict between the EU and the national institutions by the mainstream media results in a simplistic representation of the European political division as being one between the pro-European internationalists and the anti-European nationalists (cf. Linden-Retek, 2012). With the exclusion of European civil society voices from political debates, the news media effectively limit the discourse on Europe and frame it within the lines of *more integration versus disintegration*, without giving space to discussions on *what kind of integration*. Consequently, news journalism is in danger of promoting an image of the EU as an intergovernmental body, instead of a polity with internal ideological struggles over its political direction.

Of course, the news media are not the only institutions to blame for the problems in the European public sphere. Many other factors in the political system can explain why public communication on European matters has not resulted in a more coherent Europe-wide political debate or in the formation of a European public opinion in any meaningful sense. Scholars of European

politics often make general acknowledgements regarding the non-existence of a shared European identity, a European polity, a European public opinion, or, indeed, a European democracy (Mörä, 2009). Thus, the European public sphere cannot be analysed by examining the European media alone, but must be assessed against its political and institutional background. The capacity of the European public sphere to strengthen the democratic processes on the European level depends not only on the news media, but also on the capacity of the European political system to integrate into its decision-making critiques and demands formulated in civil society.

A major impediment to a functioning European public sphere is the EU itself as a political system. Relationships of accountability, representativeness and responsibility are vague in EU's political system that occupies a place somewhere between a federal state and a federation of independent states. Moreover, the uneven integration process has led to a union that has a high concentration of power in some areas (as in monetary policy), but almost no power in others (as in fiscal policy). In the absence of a truly *political union*, as called for by Habermas (2001), the EU is in many ways ill-equipped to respond to public critique and to channel political demands emanating from civil society (Kohler-Koch, 2009). Unable to operate either democratically or effectively, the EU suffers from the lack of both *input-oriented* and *output-oriented* legitimacy (Scharpf, 2011): on the one hand, the decisions made on the European level do not result from democratic deliberation among citizens and the channelling of their demands through the European political system, and, on the other, the EU seems increasingly unable to provide the citizens with solutions to the problems the polity is facing.

Therefore, from the perspective of the public sphere the institutional problem in Europe is not so much the lack of Europe-wide media or platforms of debate. The more acute problem is the absence of political institutions that could be referred to by European civil society. There is no political centre for the European public sphere with which citizens and their critique can be connected, and the decision-making elite public and the counter-public of civil society have remained separated. As a consequence, the European public sphere remains decidedly *weak* (Eriksen, 2007; Fraser, 2007): the public protests and critique are lost in the fragmented public sphere, and there are no real ways of channelling them into institutional political processes. Of course, the weakness of the public sphere only adds to the legitimacy problem of the EU and contributes to the rise of anti-systemic, or *anti-European*, political forces (cf. Karppinen, 2009). The ascent of nationalist populism in Europe, and particularly the rise of Golden Dawn in Greece, may partly be seen as an alarming indication of how the current management of the euro crisis is further increasing the sense of illegitimacy of European decision-making (van Gent *et al.*, 2013).



### 3. Elite decision-making and civil society critique in the euro crisis

**Overall, the** potential for the European public sphere to function as a platform for democratic deliberation and civil society supervision over political decision-making is severely hampered by its structural fragmentation, elite-driven information flows and the lack of clear institutional relationships of responsibility and accountability in the EU. As Aeron Davis (2010) has pointed out, a possible consequence of the inability of the public sphere to connect citizens with decision-making processes is the isolation and insulation of the specialist elite public from wider social and political debates in society (pp. 132–4). In light of the discussion above, it is not difficult to find arguments for an existence of this kind of disconnect between the decision-making elite and civil society in Europe.

Since the spring of 2010, European authorities have designed and implemented a wide range of policies to specifically address the euro crisis. The crisis itself has primarily been presented in terms of market turmoil, particularly as one that is hampering the operation of banks and their lending practices by diminishing trust in the financial markets. This dominant elite interpretation of the nature of the euro crisis can be evinced in the way that many European bureaucrats and decision-makers, including Olli Rehn, Commissioner for Economic and Monetary Affairs, have habitually justified the policy measures with the stated intention of calming and stabilising the markets and restoring financial market confidence in the overall economy (e.g. Rehn, 2012, 2013b).

Some of the policy measures have directly addressed the perceived *liquidity crisis* in the banks of the eurozone. Thus the European Central Bank (ECB) has not only lowered interest rates, but has also engaged in *non-standard monetary policy responses* and injected new money into the banking system in order to encourage banks to increase their lending to businesses and consumers and to kick-start growth again (Traynor, 2012; Cour-Thimann and Winkler, 2013). Other measures have been more indirect in nature. Building confidence among banks in the soundness of the overall financial system has been the primary motive behind the 2010 and 2011 stress tests of the eurozone banks, conducted by the European Banking Authority, and behind the agreement on the Single Supervisory Mechanism (EBA, 2011a, 2011b; ECB, 2013). Similarly, the famous public pledge by ECB President Mario Draghi to do “whatever it takes” to secure the stability of the financial markets and to prevent the break-up of the eurozone was made with the aim of convincing banks of positive future prospects and persuading them to increase credit flows to the real economy (Draghi, 2012a, 2012b).

Another primary interpretation of the euro crisis has been one of a *sovereign debt crisis*, referring to the rapid acceleration of interest rates on government debt to *unsustainable levels* in some of the eurozone countries. Of course, the interest rate hikes are directly linked to the broader financial market

turmoil, and are simply one of its manifestations: lenders have become to feel insecure about the capability of governments to pay back their accumulated debt, which has led to the rise of the interest rates on new credit (Patomäki, 2013, pp. 75–76; Wray, 2012, p. 182). One part of the policy response to these fears have been the so-called bail-out loans to Greece, Ireland, Portugal, Spain and Cyprus, as well as the creation of the European Financial Stability Facility, the European Financial Stabilisation Mechanism and the European Stability Mechanism to handle these bail-outs (CESifo, 2012; EEAG, 2012). In the meantime, the ECB has engaged in operations to purchase bonds issued by troubled governments from secondary markets in order to bring down the interest rates and thus alleviate the perceived risk of the break-up of the eurozone (Cœuré, 2013). The other part of the policy response has consisted of imposing strict austerity programs to reduce public spending, as well as reaching eurozone-wide agreements on the Fiscal Compact, and on the so-called six-pack and two-pack regulatory reforms. They have purportedly been designed to improve market confidence in the longer-term growth prospects and competitiveness of eurozone economies (Rehn, 2013a).

Regardless of the success of these various policy measures and the soundness of the economic rationales behind them, this brief and incomplete account serves to illustrate how active the European policy elite have been during the euro crisis. A great deal of the essential decision-making in the crisis has been taken at the supranational level in key EU institutions, and the crisis has intensified policy formulation by, and coordination between, the European Council, the Euro Group of finance ministers, the Commission and the ECB. The execution of monetary operations, creation of finance mechanisms, imposition of economic policies and structural reforms on debtor governments, as well as the formulation of new eurozone-wide regulatory measures, are, in turn, decisions that greatly affect and delimit parliamentary policy-making independence at the national level (Patomäki, 2013, pp. 94–95). The euro crisis has also witnessed the formation of new transnational coordinative and decision-making cliques, such as the Troika, which has organised the bail-out loans and overseen the accompanying structural reforms in debtor countries, and the Frankfurt Group, consisting of the leaders of Germany and France, as well as the heads of the Euro Group, the ECB, the European Commission and the International Monetary Fund. These unelected bodies have used considerable power over national parliaments during the crisis (Scharpf, 2011; *The Economist*, 2011). At the same time, the six-pack and two-pack regulatory reforms to the Stability and Growth Pact have bestowed new supervisory and regulatory powers on the EU Commission and Parliament (EC, 2013; Lemangnen, 2013).

The assumption of new responsibilities by the European institutions and the increased execution of power at the supranational level have not gone unnoticed by European civil society. As a response to the eurozone elite's crisis policies, popular resistance has carried a substantial European dimension. Civil



society organisations (CSOs), political movements and public demonstrators across the eurozone, particularly in the worst-hit countries, have held the supranational bodies responsible for the social and economic crises and the crippling policies imposed on the public and private sectors (e.g. Kington *et al.*, 2012; Phillips, 2011; Teevs, 2013; van Gent *et al.*, 2013). Not only have there been many expressions of transnational solidarity among protesters in different eurozone countries, but demonstrators have also posited themselves directly against the European power elite (e.g. Durkin, 2013; McMahon, 2012; RT, 2013).

In the public mobilisation sparked by the euro crisis, the constructed political divides have partly run along national lines. This can be observed, for instance, in the anti-German demonstrations in Greece and Cyprus and in the way ethnocentric discourses about the *profligate southern Europeans* have been mobilised with considerable success in some of the creditor countries (e.g. Kollewe, 2012; Pop and Kidner, 2012; Savaricas, 2013). The tendency of the mainstream media to nationalise issues has undoubtedly contributed to such discourses and to a focus on national politics in much of the euro crisis debate. However, despite these limitations posed by the media systems and journalistic practices, the public debate has also witnessed an unmistakably European frame, which has been evident in the critiques against austerity measures, European bank bailouts and other official crisis responses, as well as against the economic policy orthodoxy underlying these decisions. In this opposition directed at the European power centres, street protesters, social movements and CSOs have received public support from economists and political analysts who have grown increasingly disillusioned with the economic policy doctrines established by the eurozone elite and with their impact on the European economy. With highly visible interventions by influential economists, such as Paul Krugman and Paul de Grauwe, the questioning of the dominant crisis policy has entered the mainstream news agenda, and even in such elite media platforms as the *Financial Times* explicit denouncements have been repeatedly aimed at the eurozone decision-makers by prominent opinion leaders (e.g. Krugman, 2012; Münchau, 2013; Pérez, 2011; Wolf, 2011, 2013).

These developments point to a growing concentration of the public debate and political action on the European level, something that Habermas (2001) expected would follow from the gradual shift of power from national to European institutions (p. 17). It is now not only lobbyists and business organisations in Brussels that are involved in European politics, but also, increasingly, political parties, labour unions, CSOs, social movements and street demonstrators. As a consequence, the economic crisis in the eurozone has become deeply politicised; that is, it has been translated into an issue of political and social controversy all over Europe. The clearest indication of this politicisation is the way the EU has become a hot topic in a number of national elections since 2010 (Chryssogelos, 2013). One of the earliest member states to witness the political impact of the

euro crisis was Finland, where the heated debate on the bail-out loans to Greece and Portugal significantly contributed to unprecedented gains for the *Eurosceptic* Finns Party in the 2011 parliamentary elections (Perna and Railo, 2012). Perhaps the most successful political mobilisation against the eurozone elite has thus far been the Syriza coalition, which established itself as a major political force in the Greek parliamentary elections of 2012 (Callinicos, 2012).

That the public critique and popular resistance against the dominant euro crisis policies have thus far impacted politics mostly at the national level is testament to the superior ability of national institutions to offer conduits for political change. At the European level, the corresponding channels are weaker, and changes are more difficult both to achieve and to discern. Admittedly, the growing popularity of anti-elite parties in many member states, and the deepening public controversy around the crisis policies, have caused some unease and tension among the EU elite (e.g. Neuger, 2013; Spiegel, 2013). Still, overall, and despite the public politicisation of the euro crisis, the European elite has been capable of manufacturing agreements and loan programmes and of selling, or imposing, their public sector cut prescriptions and other measures of *internal devaluation* on national parliaments and labour markets without facing a significant challenge or political alternative (Ruparel, 2012). As Davis' (2010) warning concerning the isolation of specialist elites from more democratic and inclusive spaces of debate suggests, the European elite discourse has largely been insulated from any relevant criticism of the adopted policies.

The actual policies pursued by the eurozone elite can be viewed in the context of this relative isolation and insulation: the highly unpopular bank bail-outs, publicly funded credit mechanisms, the devolution of parliamentary sovereignty over national budgets by supranationally supervised fiscal pacts and the paralysing austerity measures have all been pushed through regardless of the protests and critique voiced not only by civil society movements and organisations, but also by many mainstream economists regarding the immorality, undemocratic nature, economic counter-productiveness and outright harmfulness of such measures. As the European elite has disconnected from civil society, so has it lost its grasp of the real social crisis that is crippling Europe.

## 4. Implications of the crisis for the European public sphere

**The question** to be asked is whether the euro crisis might, over time, change the situation in ways that could bridge the gap between the European civil society and the decision-making elite, and strengthen the European public sphere in the process. In some ways, the euro crisis arguably differs quite significantly from any previous event or issue in the European public sphere.

This prolonged crisis has meant that European citizens have, within their partly interconnected public spheres, already discussed the European debt issue for over three years. The debate has been atypically intensive, with the news media reporting new political and market developments practically every week, and the extensive time-span has made possible the introduction of new actors and ideas into the debate, as well as the elaboration of critiques and political alternatives.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the crisis has been significant in the way it has brought together political, economic and social dimensions, which have all become part of the same discussion.

In other words, the euro crisis has provided just the kind of continuous issue that Habermas (2001) deemed a prerequisite for the EU becoming a *sphere of publics* in which the citizens, albeit divided along national and other audience-specific lines, converge around a common topic and follow the relevant controversies in other countries and publics (pp. 18–19). It could therefore be argued that the euro crisis is unprecedented, not only economically, but also as a phenomenon of the European public sphere. As a result, awareness of the interconnected fates of not only European economies, but also the people(s) themselves, may have never been stronger and more widespread among European citizens than it is now.

The significance of this growing public awareness of Europe's economic and social importance for the lives of its citizens may become clearer when highlighted against the long history of European communication. Tracing the history of the European public sphere since the late 18th century, Hartmut Kaelble (2002) argues that, while European communication has traditionally been highly elite-centred, the debates on European issues have considerably intensified over the last decades, involving a wider range of groups in society on par with the region's economic and political integration. Since the 1980s in particular, both expert communication and media attention have increasingly focused on European matters. As the EU's political power has extended from common market regulation to other social fields, issues such as security, environment and immigration have also gained a European dimension in political and public communication. Moreover, with the increased presence of, and intervention in, the everyday life of its citizens, the EU has become a controversial issue in national public spheres.

The euro crisis fits neatly into Kaelble's historical narrative of intensifying European communication, and seems to advance many of the developments that point to the gradual strengthening of the European public sphere. As argued in the preceding section, the euro crisis has evidenced a degree of concentration of decision-making and authority on supranational institutions, as well as a growing recognition of these European power centres among the European public. Discussion of European problems has consequently extended from the exclusive elite and expert spheres to civil society groups and

**2** The press coverage of the euro crisis is being studied from a cross-national comparative perspective in a project coordinated by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Some early reports on the national data are available online and offer indications of the breadth of the euro crisis coverage across Europe. Reports are available at: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/research/research-focus-areas/business-and-financial-reporting/the-euro-crisis-media-coverage-and-perceptions-of-europe-within-the-eu.html> [Consulted: 11 October 2013].

has involved even the general public, thanks to the intensive attention paid to the crisis by the national news media. Moreover, the Europe-wide debate on the merits of *austerity* indicates how the European public sphere has been capable of formulating shared vocabularies and mediating them across different language communities (cf. Blichner, 2007).

Most importantly, in addition to its impact on domestic politics, the euro crisis has been significant in reinvigorating public debates on the direction and nature of European integration. As a consequence, the neoliberal market-led project of integration has been challenged from two sides. As the rise of *Eurosceptic* forces suggests, the crisis has given greater visibility to those demanding an overturn of the integration project and a return to national monetary and budgetary sovereignty in the form of a break-up of the euro. However, it has also given new impetus to calls for the democratisation of EU institutions, including the ECB, in order to make them better serve the EU-wide needs for employment and social security: overturning the neoliberal, market-led integration in favour of the more progressive and social democratic policies of Keynesian demand management, full employment programmes, balance of trade imbalances and greater regulation of financial markets (Patomäki, 2013).

What do these challenges to European integration imply for the public sphere? The entire problem of the European public sphere, both as an academic and political concern, is closely connected to the overall process and politics of European integration. As Schulz-Forberg and Stråth (2010) point out, the idea of the European public sphere has primarily been raised in academic and political debates concerning the nature and direction of European integration towards a democratic EU. However, the actual dynamics behind the emergence and consolidation of the public sphere as part of overall democratisation have often been neglected in these debates.

Since the early 1990s, the EU's political and institutional rhetoric on the European public sphere has primarily addressed the problem of democracy in terms of common identities and symbols. The official discourse has concentrated on the ways in which the European public sphere could create a sense of belonging and feelings of togetherness among European people (Horvat, 2013; Shore, 2000). Much of the academic research has followed suit, transferring to the European level a particular interpretation of the formation of national democracies, popularised by Benedict Anderson's (1991) coinage of the notion of *imagined communities*, which emphasises the active invention of nations as an essential part of the construction of common identity and solidarity among citizens. For Schulz-Forberg and Stråth (2010), this model for European democracy manifests an ahistorical misunderstanding of the processes that led to the formation of nations (p. 16). Far from being a discursive invention *from above*, democratisation historically advanced through a complex process of social struggles and conflicts. Correspondingly, the public sphere should not

be viewed so much in Habermasian terms of rational consensus-promoting debate, but as a sphere for the expression of social conflict and critique.

As opposed to the Andersonian perspective of discursive imaginations and Habermasian notions of rational deliberation and consensus, Schulz-Forberg and Stråth (2010) depart from Reinhart Koselleck's (1988) ideas of democracy, politics and the public domain. In this argument, the public domain is used to formulate social critique and to address political authority, demanding its attention (Koselleck 1988, p. 53). Critique does not so much delegitimise political rule as recognise the existence of a sovereign and its rights to rule (*ibid.*, pp. 118–119), but, if successful, the critique is capable of creating a widespread experience of a crisis in society, which the power centre must address in one way or another (Schulz-Forberg and Stråth, 2010, pp. 14–15). Thus a crisis, or public sense of a crisis, is an important moment in politics and democracy.

Schulz-Forberg and Stråth are, of course, not the only scholars to concentrate on conflict and critique in contrast with rational deliberation and formation of shared opinions as the basic dynamic of the democratic process. In particular, Chantal Mouffe (2005) has emphasised the importance of the agonistic struggles of suppressed groups in opening up the public sphere for new issues introducing them to the political domain. Without such continuous articulation of differences and conflicts in the public sphere, the political system is in danger of becoming de-politicised and losing its legitimacy. The public sphere, then, is a form of contention and conflict; it is concerned with the formulation of critique that forces the political power centre to respond to it.

As regards the dynamics of European politics and democracy, the present Europe-wide debate on the euro *crisis* suggests that the European public sphere is at least capable of facilitating opinion formation and critique. However, to become consequential the critique must have a clear political addressee; it must be directed at a sovereign authority that has the power to respond to the demands made in the public sphere (Schulz-Forberg and Stråth, 2010, p. 15; Fraser, 2007). As suggested by previous discussion, European CSOs are to some extent fulfilling their task and formulating such critique that identifies and addresses European power centres (*cf.* Kohler-Koch, 2009, pp. 51–52). The European media, in turn, are mediating these critiques among the general public in order for the shared crisis consciousness to grow. However, only when the domination of the economic crisis frame preferred by the European elite turns into a widespread sense of a social and political crisis can the elite be forced to truly address the euro crisis as a social crisis, instead of focusing on the interests of the banks and the financial sector. The euro crisis can mark a *political moment* in European history and serve its Koselleckian function in the democratic process only to the extent that power in the EU becomes both (self-) identified and responsive to civil society critique.

## 5. Conclusion

**This paper** has reviewed some elements of the *weak* European public sphere and reasons for its historical inability to connect the counter-publics of civil society with the elite public of the decision-makers into a democratic public process of conflict and critique. This disconnect not only intensifies the sense of illegitimacy of the political order in Europe, but also affects the capability of the political system to formulate policies that would get Europe out of the current economic and social crisis. However, it is also possible to draw more optimistic interpretations from the euro crisis and recognise some positive future prospects for the European public sphere and democracy.

Firstly, as the crisis develops, the inconsistencies in the elite narratives of it are likely becoming more and more pronounced, both with the help of, and despite the obstruction of, the mainstream media still hampered by its *double-elite bias*. Secondly, the prolonged crisis should offer increasing opportunities for CSOs and critical civil society voices to get their message through to the general public. The way in which the spring 2013 debates over the soundness of the economic theory behind the austerity policies, promoted by the European Commission in particular, were widely covered in the mainstream media offers a promising example (e.g. Brinkmann, 2013; Doncel, 2013; Hewitt, 2013; Steinbock, 2013). Thirdly, the crisis also encourages the construction of alternative European political projects that could be shared transnationally. Both CSOs and political parties can develop new forms of transnational connections and integration. The European leftwing parties are already attempting to devise shared programmes and construct political alternatives to the current neoliberal crisis policies (Dimitrakopoulos, 2012; Palmer, 2012).

As a consequence, it may be that the critique formulated in civil society and presented in the public sphere does eventually get channelled through EU institutions. If we consider the recent moves by the eurozone elite, some indeed seem to address issues that have been promoted by European CSOs for many years. Good examples are the steps taken towards the introduction of the financial transaction tax and some of the agreed measures on tax havens, even if these have remained rather modest (EC, 2012; Patomäki, 2013, pp. 89–94; Rettman, 2013). In the domain of macroeconomic policy, the ECB has adopted several measures, including bond-purchase operations to keep the governments' borrowing costs within a tolerable limit, which many post-Keynesian and neo-Keynesian economists alike have been advocating for quite some time (see, e.g., Wray, 2012). In addition, the debates between austerity and growth-stimulating policies in the Council and the Euro Group signal the influence that growing public pressures, caused by the lack of growth and rising unemployment in the eurozone, have on the political agenda of the European power centres (Simon *et al.*, 2013).



Insofar as such dynamics of conflict and critique between the European elite and civil society become reinforced in the euro crisis, the subsequent politicisation of the EU could even see us moving from a *weak* to a *strong* form of the European public sphere. The notion of a *strong* public sphere refers to an “institutionalised public sphere with a power centre as a point of reference and with institutionalised forms of representation, negotiation and deliberation” (Schulz-Forberg and Stråth 2010, p. 92). The strengthening of the European public sphere would mean that it no longer remains disconnected from European political decision-making. Rather, the public debate on European issues among civil society groups would be increasingly reflected in the political process and would have real consequences for the exercise of power.

Although these kinds of institutional arrangements could result from further political integration and centralisation of power at the European level, it is important to recognise that supranational authorities and powers already exist in Europe. Further consolidation of this power in the hands of particular institutions is not essential for the strengthening of the public sphere. What is needed now is to integrate the democratic element with the already existing institutions, organisations and practices of European politics. It requires *public* exercise of power: institutionalised ways of presenting critique, public arenas of political conflict and institutions responsible for channelling these debates into decision-making (cf. Habermas, 2001). The construction of democratic legitimacy through a functional transnational public sphere would also mean a move from informal *governance* to institutionalised *government* (cf. Schulz-Forberg and Stråth, 2010, pp. 105–112).

A central question in this paper has been whether the euro crisis indicates a move towards a more politically viable or *stronger* European public sphere, and whether the crisis can lead to improved European democracy. Inevitably, the answer to such questions remains decidedly vague as there are contradicting indications. The European public sphere continues to suffer from the elite disconnect and from the institutional deficiencies of the EU. However, if the European elite remain committed to *stay the course* of budgetary discipline, which will most likely lead the continent to prolonged economic hardships with consistently high unemployment rates, we may see that a more democratic and social European integration project starts to gain strength. It is dependent on the European civil society's ability to voice a united protest and to formulate a viable economic policy as an alternative to the dominant austerity orthodoxy, as well as on the ability of European parties, particularly on the left, to adopt these visions into a shared policy programme and to gain public support for such a project. Only in this way could we see a move from *the hypocrisy of democracy-through-market* of the past two decades towards a new phase of *democratisation-through-integration*.

The future of the European public sphere and democracy is decisively open at the moment. This is what a *crisis*, after all, is all about: it is a decisive

moment, a turning point – or, in Habermas’ words, a *crossroads* – in which the future direction is still unclear. Some involved in the euro crisis debate doubt that Europe could work as a democratic political entity and argue that the sovereign nation-states are the only spaces in which democracy can realistically be expected to function. We might ask, however, whether turning back the integration process and a return towards the rule of sovereign nation-states are viable alternatives. Are national institutions capable of dealing with global problems, or do we need supranational forms of governance? If the answer is that transnational institutions of decision-making are in the European public interest, then the issue of the democratic legitimacy of such powers will not go away.

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