

# Rather than abandoning integration, the Greek crisis should be the impetus for improving European democracy

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*Does the Greek crisis prove the limitations of European integration? [Cristina Ares Castro-Conde](#) writes that the real question facing Europe is not whether integration should be rolled back, but how European democracy can be improved. She suggests that a first step could be to create a parallel European Parliament composed of MEPs from Eurozone states which has the power to subject the decisions of the Eurogroup and the European Central Bank to proper democratic scrutiny.*



Alexis Tsipras, first as the Party of the European Left nominee for President of the European Commission and later as the Syriza candidate for Prime Minister of Greece, has succeeded in eliminating the fear of politicising European Union decision-making and, from a favourable stance on the European project, elaborating and defending a discourse that is contrary to austerity policies. This accomplishment put him ahead of his social democrat counterparts.

But Tsipras has committed an (almost) unforgivable mistake in Europe: shattering the confidence which sustains what, from Luuk van Middelaar's essential book *The Passage to Europe*, we call the 'intermediate sphere' or the 'circle' of the Member States. The Greek Prime Minister acted without knowing that European Union countries not only assume individual roles but also a collective one, and, indeed for a state suffering from hard conditionality provisions, conflict between national and European interests can only be handled through reciprocal loyalty.

In another recent work, *European Integration. From Nation-States to Member States*, Christopher Bickerton defends the notion that policy-making on a European scale is the national governments' instrument of defence against the increasingly complex demands and public expectations of societies, to which they were not able to respond in a context of growing interdependence. For Bickerton, the Member State that succeeds the Nation State is part of a new political system characterised by the opposition between society and state, built on the demise during the 70s and 80s of the Keynesian [post-war consensus](#).

His most controversial argument is that encouraging the process of European integration in the 80s and 90s was the underlying cause of the current distance between citizens and institutions. This is due to the fact that on many occasions the European loyalty of national governments is stronger than the pressure received from their societies, even when citizens articulate their discontent. In Bickerton's analysis there is no room for recognising the virtues of the joint role of Member States from the point of view of national interests, nor is there room for hope.

This reading of the integration process is a perverse version of the classic thesis by Alan Milward, who had previously [interpreted](#) the European project as the rescue of nation states: the final resource found to satisfy new social demands. And even Giandomenico Majone in *Regulating Europe* predicted that the challenges of the European Union (that could not circumvent the redistributive elements of its policies) would increase political conflict and (with the lack of a strong enough European identity) would reduce its legitimacy.

But Bickerton goes further, stating that the European integration process necessarily limits the margin of political decisions, and that this reduction is the only viable solution in a globalised world. Following this line of argument, the crisis of representative democracy in Europe is not one that can be solved. Moreover, the principle of left-right competition loses its meaning and is replaced with a new political division that pits the defenders of the European Union (who would applaud the contribution of the European institutions in reducing the size of the public sector across the continent) against those who oppose technocratic actors surrendering to the markets.

However Bickerton overlooks the fact that the Union's institutional design facilitates the adoption of policy decisions which benefit the majority of European citizens, in contrast with the greater dependence of national governments on their clientele and interest groups. Innumerable examples could be found to illustrate the positive societal effects of moving a wide-array of decisions to the European level; but, Bickerton does not see them. At no moment does he ask why the process of European integration, and especially monetary integration, is not welcomed by the so-called markets. Nor does he consider that in a globalised world the only possibility for maintaining the European social model may be to accelerate political union and establish a new social contract at the supranational level.



François Hollande and Alexis Tsipras in July 2015, Credit: European Council President (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

Since 23 April, 2010, when Greece sent its first application for financial aid, funds have been mobilised to support countries with difficulties through successive mechanisms of stability from the Greek

Loan Facility (GLF) to the current European Stability Mechanism (ESM) – a more permanent solution with more potential. Closer co-ordination of economic governance has been pursued through the “six-pack”, the Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance (TSCG) and the “two-pack”. Meanwhile banking union has been facilitated through the Single Supervisory Mechanism (SSM), Single Resolution Mechanism and Fund (SRM and SRF) and Directives on deposit guarantee schemes. In a nutshell, as might be expected, the process of integration in the Eurozone was accelerated and the gap separating the countries of the euro from the rest of the Member States continues to grow.

This greater integration could be read through the lenses of Professor Bickerton, placing the focus on the conditionality of aids and how the new framework of economic governance was fixed. But, if Tsipras had read Bickerton with a healthy dose of scepticism, perhaps he would have already flipped his argument and considered the most relevant question: how can democracy in the EU actually be improved?

In early July the Greek Prime Minister came to present his petition for financial assistance to the European Parliament, and we had the opportunity to listen to the speakers establishing the position of the political groups. Tsipras said that his country had been the laboratory of austerity over the last five years, and that this had failed. The European People's Party accused him of dividing Europe; the Socialist Party asked him for responsibility and a constructive attitude to save Greece and Europe; the Liberals challenged him to demonstrate that he is truly a revolutionary leader who can drive the necessary reforms in Greece rather than just an “electoral accident” and a “false prophet” who will end up impoverishing the Greek people; and the British Conservatives reminded him that he had damaged Europe's trust. The Left Party, the Green Party and even Marine Le Pen sided with Tsipras against austerity policies.

The European Parliament was noticeably empowered by the Treaty of Lisbon in many policy domains. Does its role in the management of the last Greek crisis in particular and in economic and monetary affairs more generally not seem strange to us? A first step to improving democracy would be the constitution of a mini Parliament composed of the European parliamentarians of the countries of the Eurozone, that (while waiting for a new reform of the Treaties that could enhance the role of the Assembly in co-deciding and controlling economic and monetary issues) at least publicly debates the topics of the Eurogroup agenda and the political decisions of the European Central Bank.

Returning to *The Passage to Europe*, fortunately Europe has succeeded in leaving the “hell” of the Nation-States; it

does not make sense to turn back to nowhere nor to burn the only bridge (the intermediate sphere of the Member States) that leads to the “paradise” of a united Europe, even if the final destination is far from view and the weather is bad. However this is not the moment to provide warnings, but rather to demonstrate generosity, just as there is much left to do, especially for European social democracy, to prove that there are promising alternatives to current economic policies – and that Bickerton was mistaken.



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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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