

The Missing Crisis – European citizens, the media and communication about the crisis

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Eurocrisis in the
Press

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If one takes into account media coverage on the various European crises, one could easily assume that citizens' trust in the European project is being severely eroded. The news media do not only routinely present a scene of constant threat to and destruction of national economies, but also provide citizens with an overwhelming amount of coverage on the various crises. This coverage contains large amounts of irritating, contradicting and not least highly specialised information. It is thus not surprising that questions about what exactly is at stake, how to understand and overcome the crisis blur into the image of one constant crisis. At the same time citizens may now identify less with the European project, as the common currency, a core symbol of a shared Europe, threatens to breakdown.

But how does the cacophonous and doom- saying media coverage of the crisis really affect European citizens, and how do they engage with this media content? Rather than hypothesise, it is worth asking European citizens, those who fear for an uncertain future for their families, themselves? A [recently published empirical study](#) does exactly that. We conducted interviews with citizens from Austria, Denmark, Germany, France, Poland and the United Kingdom to better understand how they make use of the media in approaching the crisis. We found that citizens were less fatigued by the coverage, and less despondent about the European project than one may suspect. Our results also indicate that citizens are more critical in their reading of the news, and consequentially that the media is not as powerful in shaping their views as is sometimes suggested.



How citizens understand the crisis

Many interviewees expressed their overall impression that the crisis confronts them with a complex and irritating situation that is hard to grasp. From their point of view there is no end in sight and any upcoming news on economic mega-crashes merge into the impression of an all-encompassing crisis that surrounds and affects people in their everyday lives in myriad ways.

In trying to make sense of the current situation citizens rely not only on the media. Crucial information received through the media is sorted and interpreted with the help of those among friends and family consider to be 'experts'. Meanwhile they acknowledge that understanding the complexity of the crisis is proving to be almost impossible – even for those with specialized financial knowledge and even “governments are just incapable of knowing what to do about it”, as one interviewee puts it. While people struggle to understand what is going on, no one seems to be expecting reliable and trustworthy information from politicians or the media—instead they turn to their personal network for reliable information and trustworthy interpretations.

In this context people also show their deep worries about the crisis. The crisis, one interviewee says, is “the big, our big worry.” On a personal level this includes fears concerning jobs and financial security, inflation or threats to personal savings. And people expressed their concerns about the future of the European project. While only some expect that the current situation of instability will bring xenophobic or conflictual political attitudes to the fore, many

others are afraid other European countries could follow Greece into fiscal chaos.

When it comes to the complex causes of the crisis, interviewees' explanations range from intrinsic economic, to national misgovernment and structural problems in the EU. All of these, however, are permeated by the suspicion that the problems could have been predicted and, therefore could have at least partly, been avoided. Here it is worth remarking that interviewees find fault with incomplete European economic integration: "We don't have a European government", one French interviewee mourns, "and that is the catastrophe".

How do citizens think the crisis can be overcome?

The latter quote points to an important insight. While anxiety and worries accompany people's perceptions of the crisis to a considerable extent, this does not appear to lead to withdrawing support from the European project. In contrast, European solutions to the European crisis continue to play an important role in people's understanding. On the one hand there is the call to renegotiate the relationship of national governments and the EU with regard to handling the current crisis. Here, it becomes apparent that European citizens are open for solutions in which the nation states or Europe do play a role, but not necessarily the role currently sketched out by national or European politicians. It is thus a more creative use of political opportunities to take action that citizens seek.

One strong suggestion for overcoming the crisis is fostering national, for example Greek, responsibilities. Some interviewees considered it a rational consequence to let the irresponsible party solve their problems on their own. One interviewee compares Greece to a child who always spends all his pocket money and should therefore not be given any more: "You have five kids, and one guy saves [...] but one guy is a big spender [...] you say, okay, have some more. So it's not gonna fix his problem." From this viewpoint excluding Greece from the European community may be considered a harsh, but nevertheless legitimate consequence.

While some interviewees drew on the analogy of good and bad kids, other interviewees rejected it, emphasising bonds and obligations of solidarity. For example a Polish cleaning lady backed the idea of offering financial support to Greece, even if the consequences of this decision remain opaque or might threaten her personal wellbeing. Irrespective of whether suggested solutions are European or national, it is obvious that they refer to underlying ideas of solidarity, or at least interdependence of the European member states.

Communicative challenge of coping with the crisis

It is worth highlighting that our study does *not* indicate a decline or fatiguing of communication on the crisis or the European project. Both anxiety and prolonged contingency that the crisis brings with it, thus, do not appear to result in significant communicative frustration or a complete disengagement from public discourse. In other words, European citizens manage the communicative challenges of making sense of the crisis. There appears to be no causal relationship between the perceived complex and overtaxing nature of the crisis and a decline in communication about it.

Those interviewed for our study give interesting insights into the way people cope with communicative cacophony, the excesses of opinions and views. Clearly people can hardly avoid information and opinions concerning the crisis; it is part of their everyday media saturated environment. Interviewees report to be confronted with it on TV, in newspapers, on online news sites, but also to be kept updated in family conversations and in small-talk with colleagues. It is particularly these personal networks that play a crucial role in making sense of the crisis. Many interviewees reported to turn to 'experts' within their social network to cope with the challenge of communicative overload and the task of sense-making. A young woman, for example, reports that she uses her boyfriend as a 'filter' to identify relevant information. Another interviewee calls her friend who works in a large bank in order to obtain reliable information and explanations.

Clearly people struggle to make sense of the crisis based on information provided through the news media, and so turn to their everyday networks. What audience researchers have known for a long time holds true also in the euro

crisis. European citizens do not passively 'consume' media messages about the potential deconstruction of the European project, or the causes of the crisis. They use their mediated social environment and trusted persons in their social network to organise and understand the meaning of the crisis, to explain it, and find their own way through economic and political uncertainty. For many interviewees Europe also remained a constructive force in resolving these uncertainties.

The missing crisis

The euro crisis does not appear to lead to a legitimisation crisis of Europe itself, at least as far as our evidence goes. Nor does the communicative saturation about the crisis result in communicative disengagement by European citizens' from the European project. Though people are affected by media cacophony on the crisis they continue communicating about it. The expected crisis of engagement among the European citizens is not to be found.

At the same time it is worth noting that 'media power' turns out to be contested by unpredictable communication strategies in the everyday practices of European citizens. 'Personal experts' seem to carry far more weight than any quality newspaper or TV documentary.

Thus the crisis and its media coverage did not lead people to disconnect from Europe. There is a more complex story to be told. In the eyes of the citizens Europe continues being an open-ended project.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Euro Crisis in the Press blog, nor of the London School of Economics.