

## No Demos? Identities and Public Spheres in the Euro Crisis\*

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### Abstract

This article takes issue with the ‘no demos’ thesis about the European Union. Empirically speaking, a ‘demos’ requires a sense of community among the citizens, on the one hand, and a lively public spheres in which political issues are debated, on the other. It is argued in this article, first, that a majority of European citizens has developed dual identities – to their nation-state and to Europe – and this Europeanization of national identities is sufficient to sustain carefully crafted (re-)distributive policies on the European level. Second, the euro crisis has strongly increased the politicization of national public spheres and has also led to their growing Europeanization with regard to issue salience and to the actors represented.

### Introduction

It is often argued that the European Union lacks a demos (for example, Grimm, 1995; Kielmansegg, 1996). The claim rests on the assumption that there are substantial social and cultural prerequisites for democracy to work. The more a polity engages in re-distributive policies, the more it needs to be built on these prerequisites. This is what is usually called a ‘demos’ – a strong sense of community and loyalty among a political group. The EU is unlikely to create such an imagined community and, thus, the pre-political social and cultural prerequisites for a democratic polity are missing beyond the nation-state in the EU. If the ‘no demos’ thesis were true, we would not have to worry any longer about an EU ‘democratic deficit’. At least, democracy at the EU level would not be viable since its cultural and social prerequisites would not exist. As a result, the EU would have to solely rely on ‘output legitimacy’ – that is, its problem-solving capacity would be the only source for legitimating EU institutions and policy-making (Scharpf, 1999; 2009).

Scharpf has developed this argument further with regard to the euro crisis. He argues that the EU can no longer deliver prosperity and the well-being of its citizens, a result of which is that its output legitimacy suffers. At the same time, increasing its legitimacy through input-oriented participation and politicization does not work either because the EU polity cannot handle re-distributive policies and the resulting conflicts (Scharpf, 2013, pp. 6, 27). The reason for the latter is the lack of a demos, of an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson, 1991) among European citizens.

I agree that the euro crisis puts a sense of community among Europeans to a test (see Blauberger *et al.* in this issue). Is there enough ‘solidarity among strangers’ (Habermas,

\* This article builds on arguments further developed in Risse (2010, esp. Chapter 10; 2013; 2014a). I thank two anonymous reviewers, the editors of this symposium as well as the participants of the Salzburg workshop held 3–4 October 2013, for their critical comments.

1996) to allow for majority rule at the EU level? Are European citizens prepared to pay a price for their loyalty and to accept (re-)distributive policies on the European level as they do in their national polities?

These are ultimately empirical questions. Answering them requires two sets of data: one on the evolution of European identities as latent attitudes concerning a sense of community, and another on the manifestation of these identities in the public sphere creating and reinforcing such a sense of community. While I cannot present original new data in this article, I argue nevertheless that:

- a majority of European citizens has developed dual identities – to their nation-state and to Europe – and this Europeanization of national identities is sufficient to sustain carefully crafted (re-)distributive policies on the European level; and
- the euro crisis has strongly increased the politicization of national public spheres and has led to their growing Europeanization with regard to issue salience and to the actors represented.

I conclude with a short discussion of the policy consequences.

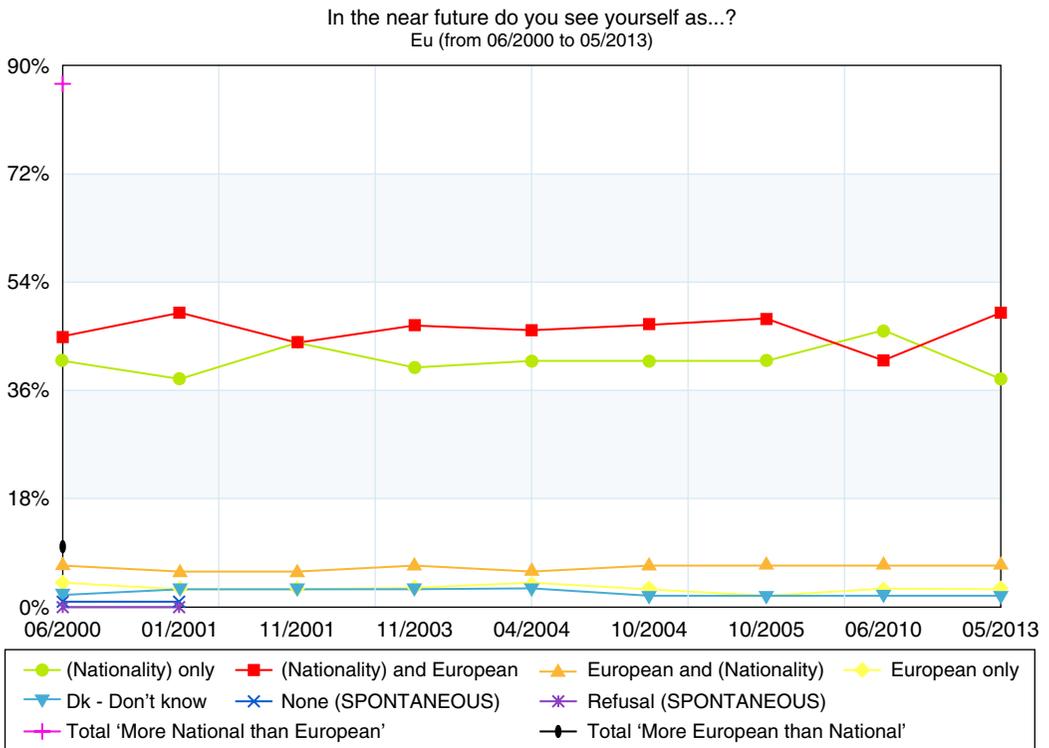
## I. Solidarity among Strangers in the Euro Crisis?

To begin with, identification levels with the EU have increased during the euro crisis rather than decreased. Figure 1 depicts answers to a question regularly asked by Eurobarometer polls which has served as a strong indicator for European identity in the literature (see, for example, Hooghe and Marks, 2005; Fligstein *et al.*, 2012; and the overview in Risse, 2010, Chapter 2). In spring 2013, 59 per cent of the polled citizens showed at least some degree of identification with the EU compared to only 38 per cent who identified exclusively with their nation-state. Large majorities of EU citizens, thus, hold dual identities. They have developed Europeanized national identities. The main dividing line is between the minority of those who identify exclusively with their nation-state (—●— in Figure 1), on the one hand, and those who add Europe as a secondary identity (—■— in Figure 1), on the other.

While the number of those with a secondary European identity took a dip in 2010, it had reached the pre-crisis levels of the 2000s again in 2013. More importantly, higher numbers of German, French, Italian, Spanish, Greek and Polish citizens identify with Europe than the EU average, while Great Britain remains the outlier with 60 per cent 'exclusive nationalists'. A closer look at the eurozone countries does not reveal divisions between 'creditor' and 'debtor' countries with regard to identification levels.<sup>1</sup> German identification with Europe, which has increased gradually over the past decade, reached an all-time high in 2013 with 69 per cent showing some degree of European identity. With regard to the major countries in crisis, the results are interesting too: A majority of Italian and Spanish citizens had always identified themselves with Europe (at least as a secondary identity), but there had been some decline in both countries. By 2013, the identification levels had reached pre-crisis levels again. The case of Greece is also significant as it has always been a country with lower than average identification levels with Europe.

<sup>1</sup> The following is based on calculations from the EU Eurobarometer website: <[http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/cf/showchart\\_line.cfm?keyID=266&nationID=16,6,3,4,8,24,5,15,&startdate=1992.04&enddate=2013.05](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/cf/showchart_line.cfm?keyID=266&nationID=16,6,3,4,8,24,5,15,&startdate=1992.04&enddate=2013.05)>.

Figure 1: Identification with the EU (EU Average, 2000–13)



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Source: [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/cf/showchart\\_line.cfm?keyID=266&nationID=16,&startdate=2000.06&enddate=2013.05](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/cf/showchart_line.cfm?keyID=266&nationID=16,&startdate=2000.06&enddate=2013.05).

This trend reversed itself in 2013 with 55 per cent showing some degree of identification with Europe.

One might argue, though, that adding Europe as a secondary identity amounts to nothing more than ‘European identity light’. Interestingly enough, however, citizens with a ‘European identity light’ hold vastly different attitudes toward the EU and European integration as compared to ‘exclusive nationalists’. Statistical analyses have shown time and again that even a rather low degree of identification with Europe correlates with strong support levels for EU membership and for further European integration (for example, Citrin and Sides, 2004; Fuchs *et al.*, 2009; Hooghe and Marks, 2005; McLaren, 2006; 2007). Feeling attached to Europe also reduces the ambivalent feelings about EU policies in favour of higher support levels (Stoeckel, 2012).

But how strong are these Europeanized identities? Are citizens prepared to pay a price for their identification with Europe and the EU? Here, the euro crisis serves as a hard test. For the first time in the history of the EU, citizens have to be prepared to incur some cost for their support. Preparedness to bail out debtor countries in the eurozone requires at least some degree of solidarity.

The data mostly demonstrate that citizens are indeed prepared to pay a price for their European identity. Kuhn and Stoeckel (2014) find that the distinction between those identifying exclusively with their nation-state and those adding Europe as a secondary identity is salient with regard to support for economic governance in the EU, even though the state of the national economy has a conditioning effect here. The more people identify with Europe, the more they are prepared to support economic governance with redistributive consequences. As to the eurozone, majorities of citizens support giving financial help to another EU Member State facing economic and financial difficulties (European Parliament, 2011, p. 20). Interestingly enough, there are no differences between northern and southern Europeans (except for the United Kingdom, once again), while east Europeans are less prepared to show solidarity.

More detailed studies show, however, that solidarity is not unconditional. Surveys among German citizens show that their solidarity with southern Europe depends on whether measures are taken to insure budgetary discipline (Bechtel *et al.*, 2012a, b; Lengfeld *et al.*, 2012). Moreover, Germans are more inclined to help the Irish, the Italians and the Spanish than to bail out Portugal or Greece.

Gerhards and Lengfeld (2013) have shown that social integration in the EU is on the rise. Times-series data from Poland, Germany and Spain demonstrate that EU citizens grant each other equal political and social rights, including access to social benefits and the welfare state. The majorities supporting social citizenship do not disappear when people are asked to respond to concrete scenarios rather than expressing abstract values.

In sum, these data show that European identity has not taken a beating during the euro crisis and that a majority of Europeans is prepared to pay at least some price for their European identity and to show solidarity with their fellow EU citizens. These data challenge the ‘no demos’ argument. The European polity is more mature than many scholars assume. A sense of community does exist among Europeans and this community might even be prepared to accept re-distributive consequences (within limits, however).

So far, I have reported data from public opinion polls expressing attitudes among citizens. But how has the EU been presented in the public sphere during the euro crisis? Have we seen a ‘European community’ at work or a return to nationalism, as many fear?

## II. Toward a Community of Communication? The Politicization of EU Affairs

At first glance, the euro crisis has brought out the worst stereotypes in the public sphere that Europeans might imagine about each other. Greek street posters depict German Chancellor Angela Merkel in Nazi uniform with the EU stars around the swastika. A German news magazine portrayed Aphrodite giving the finger and used titles like ‘Crooks in the Euro-Family’ when referring to Greece.<sup>2</sup> Europeans appear to fall back into nationalism and to advocate nationalist responses to the worst crisis the EU has ever faced.

However, these nationalist representations are only part of a much larger picture in the various public spheres. Over the past 15 years, more and more empirical studies have demonstrated that we are witnessing the gradual Europeanization of public spheres (see,

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2054406/Furious-Greeks-lampoon-German-overlords-Nazis-picture-Merkel-dressed-SS-guard.html?ITO=1490>; and [http://p4.focus.de/img/gen/Z/r/HBZrzUeA\\_Pxgen\\_r\\_Ax480.jpg?http://p4.focus.de/img/gen/Z/r/HBZrzUeA\\_Pxgen\\_r\\_Ax480.jpg](http://p4.focus.de/img/gen/Z/r/HBZrzUeA_Pxgen_r_Ax480.jpg?http://p4.focus.de/img/gen/Z/r/HBZrzUeA_Pxgen_r_Ax480.jpg) and [http://p4.focus.de/img/gen/Z/r/HBZrzUeA\\_Pxgen\\_r\\_Ax480.jpg](http://p4.focus.de/img/gen/Z/r/HBZrzUeA_Pxgen_r_Ax480.jpg).

for example, Koopmans and Statham, 2010; Wessler *et al.*, 2008; Risse, 2014a, b). While there are no significant European-wide media, we can observe the Europeanization of national media measured through three indicators:

- visibility and salience of European and EU issues, policies and actors in the various public spheres;
- presence of other Europeans in the various national and issue-specific public spheres (both as speakers and as audiences); and
- similarity of frames of reference (Eder and Kantner, 2000) or claims-making across borders (Koopmans and Statham, 2010) with regard to European issues and themes.

A fourth indicator measures the degree to which European issues are politicized in the various public spheres – that is, the degree of conflict and polarization (De Wilde, 2011; De Wilde and Zürn, 2012). Note that politicization is orthogonal to Europeanization except for the issue salience dimension. In other words, European issues can be politicized without other European speakers visible and with nationalist frames of reference in the various public spheres.

As to the first indicator, there is general agreement in the scholarly literature that coverage of EU issues in national media has increased substantially since at least the mid-1990s (for example, Trenz, 2006; Koopmans and Statham, 2010; Wessler *et al.*, 2008; Kantner, 2014; Grande and Kriesi, 2014). As to the actor dimension (the second indicator), Ruud Koopmans distinguishes between *vertical* and *horizontal* Europeanization. The former refers to the degree to which EU actors are present in the various public spheres, while the latter concerns the presence of actors from other EU Member States (Koopmans *et al.*, 2010; Koopmans, 2014). Political demands or claims are Europeanized when they are directed across borders or involve EU-related issues.

Available data on the euro crisis show the extraordinary presence of supranational EU actors as well as executive actors from other countries in the various debates (Grande and Kriesi, 2014; Kriesi and Grande, 2012; Koopmans, 2014; Hechinger, 2013). However, it is Germany and Chancellor Merkel who dominate ‘horizontal Europeanization’ – that is, the contribution of foreign actors to national debates in the various public spheres. Grande and Kriesi demonstrate that the politicization of the euro crisis is dominated by executive actors – be they national or European.<sup>3</sup>

As to the substantive content of debates (the third indicator), Europeanization means that similar frames are used in the various public arenas so as to allow cross-border understanding and communication (Risse, 2010, Chapter 6). This includes cross-border contestation and controversies over which frame is the most appropriate to tackle a particular policy issue.

Unfortunately, we still lack systematic data about the framing of the euro crisis in the various national public spheres. Conventional wisdom has it that the crisis has led to a re-nationalization of public spheres pitting, say, the ‘lazy Greeks’ against ‘German Nazis’ dictating austerity policies to the rest of Europe. Some data confirm this view. Hechinger (2013) argues, for example, that the framing of the crisis in 2010–11 employed distinct

<sup>3</sup> One should note, though, that the Grande/Kriesi data are confined to ‘creditor’ countries in the euro crisis. The picture would probably change, if ‘debtor’ countries such as Portugal, Spain, Italy or Greece are included in the analysis, given the degree of domestic politicization of the crisis in these countries.

national perspectives in the four countries she studied (Germany, Austria, France, Ireland). However, her dataset only includes conservative business newspapers.

In contrast, Kriesi and Grande argue that executive actors – both national and European – tend to frame the euro crisis predominantly in economic terms, while parties – again both national and in the EU – also use cultural frames (Kriesi and Grande, 2012, p. 35; also Grande and Kriesi, 2014). They also argue that the crisis pitched the German-French ‘couple’ (Chancellor Merkel and President Sarkozy in this case) against the rest of Europe, both EU institutions and national governments, particularly in southern Europe (Kriesi and Grande, 2012, pp. 18, 34). Thus, the conflict lines in the euro crisis would be Europeanized. Puntser Riekman and Wydra (2013) analyzed public debates on the euro crisis in the German and Austrian parliaments and confirm this point. They also show that parliamentarians support solidarity with the ‘debtor’ countries, but that this solidarity is strictly conditional and framed in terms of economic and political self-interest.

What we do not know is whether similar meaning structures have emerged during the crises, particularly between the ‘creditor’ and the ‘debtor’ countries. For example, is the crisis perceived in Spain, Italy or Greece as a fundamental attack of northern Europeans on their way of life, while Germans, Dutch or Fins blame southern European laziness or incompetence for it? Or is the crisis framed as an issue of common European concern, as a conflict between those favouring balanced budgets and austerity, on the one hand, and those promoting economic growth and measures to boost employment, on the other?

The fourth indicator concerns the polarization of debates as a measure to grasp the domestic politicization of EU affairs in the public spheres. There are only few longitudinal studies available measuring whether we can indeed observe increased politicization of EU affairs. Grande and Kriesi have traced the politicization over European issues in various national public spheres since the 1970s (covering Austria, Britain, France, Germany and Switzerland; for details, see Hutter and Grande, 2012; Grande and Kriesi, 2014). A longitudinal study investigated the six original EU Member States (Germany, France, Italy, and the Benelux countries) covering 1990–2012 (Rauh, 2013).

These studies use different measurements to assess polarization. However, both conclude that the politicization of EU-related issues has intensified. The politicization of EU affairs is still unevenly distributed among the Member States. It seems to be most pronounced in the eurozone and, thus, in Continental Europe, while we can only speculate about Scandinavia and eastern Europe for lack of data. Great Britain is a special case. On the one hand, EU affairs have been politicized in the British public sphere for a very long time. On the other hand, the British public sphere is also the least Europeanized with few transnational linkages (Koopmans and Statham, 2010).

To summarize this section, we are witnessing the politicization of EU affairs across the board and, thus, a turning point in the history of the EU (see also Corbett in this issue). Moreover, most indicators suggest that the politicization of EU-related questions takes place in Europeanized public spheres – at least with regard to the actor dimension (data on framing are still missing).

## Conclusions

I have argued in this article that we can observe the gradual Europeanization of identities and public spheres leading to increased politicization of debates about the EU. The

question is no longer whether politicization should be promoted or not, but how it will evolve and what the likely consequences are for the European polity (Zürn, 2012).

Two positions can be discerned in this context: On the one hand, there are those who have argued that the politicization of the EU and its policies will lead to more gridlock in the EU given the consensus requirements of European policy-making (Bartolini, 2006; Scharpf, 2009; Risse, 2010, Chapter 10). Grande and Kriesi (2014) also point to negative consequences of politicization in the euro crisis. According to them, the politicization of EU issues takes place along a cultural 'cosmopolitan-nationalist' cleavage and has been driven primarily by actors located on the 'nationalist' end of this cleavage – for example, right-wing populist parties promoting principled Euroscepticism. Grande and Kriesi argue that the cleavage coalitions at the 'cosmopolitan' end of the cultural cleavage are too weak or too divided to put forward a viable alternative to the nationalist politicization in the public sphere. They suggest that politicization will lead to a nationalist backlash and the strengthening of Euroscepticism across the board.

On the other hand, there is a more positive evaluation of the likely consequences of politicization. From a normative point of view, politicization is a necessary ingredient of a viable democracy (Follesdal, 2014). If lively public spheres are constitutive parts of a democratic polity, politicization would almost inevitably strengthen European democracy and the emerging demos. Moreover, politicization of Europeanized public spheres would go a long way to remedy the incongruence in the EU multilevel governance system between where decisions are made (in Brussels) and where politics plays itself out (in the national capitals (see Schmidt, 2006).

There is also a more analytical version of this view (see, for example, Zürn, 2012). It crucially depends on whether politicization and Europeanization of public spheres go together or not in the euro crisis. In short, issue framing is crucial for whether politicization, Europeanization of public spheres and the emergence of collective European identities are linked in a virtuous or in a vicious circle. Politicization can lead to a transnational community of communication, but it can also bring about de-Europeanization of public spheres and their re-nationalization.

In sum, there is an emerging demos in the European polity and it has been strengthened during the euro crisis. Whether or not the growing politicization of EU affairs in the various national public spheres increases the sense of community among Europeans crucially depends on issue framing. It is then up to political leaders in Europe whether they leave the communicative space to Eurosceptical parties on the fringes of the political spectrum or whether they actively fight for their visions and try to persuade sceptical publics. This much is certain: Silencing debates and controversies will no longer suffice.

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