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Does the Watchdog Bark? The European Union, the Greek Debt Crisis and the Press

Cristina Marconi
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Introduction

Is it possible that the European press, in covering the Greek debt crisis, has been too soft a touch? Could it be that it has failed to observe one of the main obligations of good journalism - to develop a thorough criticism in the interests of democracy and its citizens? Journalism is one of the main ways in which a democracy watches over its leaders and, in doing so, is inspired by the principles of equality, justice and efficiency. The task of journalists is therefore more complex the more layers of power there are. In the European context, journalists have not only to mediate between the public and the political sphere, or act as a watchdog over powerful elites, but have also to report on how three supranational institutions (the EU Commission, the Parliament and the Council) act and use the powers they have received from the member States. In addition, journalists assigned to Brussels must report on a political entity which is still very much under construction and whose functioning is both very structured and very fluid. That is why it is particularly important for them to keep a sharp critical eye on the working of the institutions, whose representatives, it is worth recalling, are not always elected¹. And while the function of the press in Brussels is to act as a guardian of democratic values and of transparent decision-making, its role is also vital in guaranteeing the long-term viability of the European Union; and thus in preventing it from becoming unwieldy, obscure and too far removed from citizens.

The present debt crisis, which remains unresolved, has elicited two peculiar reactions among a number of observers and, in particular, among a large section of the press. The first was to consider “profligate” countries as the source of all the problems - without ever questioning the role played by the European institutions, either as a supervisor or as a broker of national interests. The second was to handle the whole situation as if it were an emergency, one in which the legitimacy of remedial actions taken were not to be doubted as long as these actions produced tangible results in sedating the markets. This is the same approach the press had taken during the financial turmoil affecting banks in the wake of the American subprime crisis, with the main difference that EU institutions were not then so completely overcome as they are with Greece and debt issue. What’s more, at the time of the previous crisis, the banks, and not the brainchild of the EU leaders - the European single currency and its lack of a common economic policy – had been at the eye of the storm. It was not therefore a political crisis and it did not have the same direct consequences on citizens and voters as the

¹ The EU Commission is formed by 27 commissioners representing member States. They are appointed by their national governments and they can be non-elected. In the EU Parliament seat 736 MEPs (Member of the European Parliament) elected in the European elections that take place in each member State. The representation of each nationality varies according to the population of each Member State. The EU Council is composed by the competent ministers of each member State, ie the Energy ministers for the Energy Council and the ministers of Economy and of Finances for the Ecofin. The Eurogroup is not a EU institution, but just an informal gathering of the Finance ministers of the Eurozone that takes place, usually, before the Ecofin.

nervousness that took hold of the markets on the announcement of the abominable state of the Greek public finances in October 2009. In less than two years, other countries like Ireland and Portugal were dragged into the mire, and yet others looked to be heading the same way as four national governments² collapsed and had to be replaced. However I would like in this paper to concentrate on the Greek case, as it is here that the theme of democracy in the EU is put most sharply into focus. I will analyse in particular what happened between the Greek elections, in the end of 2009, and May 2010, when a fund worth 750 bn. euros was agreed upon to protect the Eurozone.

With the notable exception of the British press, where the European institutions are more frequently subject to criticism, the European Commission's role in creating the Greek crisis has not been discussed; an institution, it is worth remembering, that releases a bill of health on the economies of each member State four times a year at least. While it is true that Eurostat, the European statistical office, did not have the authority to question the veracity of the figures published by national organs, it is also the case that by 2004 figures released by the Greek government were already under the spotlight³. Responsible and independent authorities should have increased the supervision of the Hellenic Republic's public finances, notwithstanding the opposition of Germany and France, who were themselves in breach of the fiscal rules at the time and were therefore protecting the Greeks. What's more, the fragility of its industrial sector and the extremely high levels of tax evasion in the country were easily detectable. The Commission chose nevertheless to ignore these strong warning signs⁴, and even the EU finance ministers, who meet every month, never thought to point out the underlying problem. Maybe they were just too polite, as an experienced connoisseur of Brussels, Mario Monti⁵, observed. Or maybe, as some less forgiving observers have stated, there are some unredeemable democratic flaws in the whole European project.

Greece, a small country, has triggered a monumental credibility issue for the Eurozone as a whole but raises also, in my view, some serious questions concerning the way the press reports from Brussels. I have been a correspondent in the EU capital since January 2006 and have been troubled by the idea that the elephants in the room – the Hellenic fault lines and the lack of credible economic governance of the single EU currency - had not been noticed for so many years despite the huge amount of press coverage that, in continental Europe at least, the EU enjoys. The press room of the EU Commission caters for a larger number of accredited international journalists than any other press room in the

2 This happened in Ireland, Portugal, Greece and Italy, whereas in Spain the former prime minister José Luis Zapatero called early elections and announced what he would not run for a third term in office.

3 In the documents concerning Greece, Eurostat has always specified its "reservation on the quality of the data" and systematically refused to approve the figures provided by the Greek statistical office.

4 J.Kanter, "Past Clouds Future of Europe's New Antitrust Chief", *International Herald Tribune*, February 18th 2010.

5 M. Monti, "Europe's Problem – Too Deferential And Too Polite", *Financial Times*, The A-List, June 20th 2011.

world⁶ but despite that, from the beginning of the Greek crisis, something in its atmosphere has changed radically: the idealistic stance of the press towards the European project, always focused, either in a critical or in an appreciative way, on its structure and institutional architecture, has been replaced by a more instrumental view, in which the ability of Brussels to deliver in an emergency situation is seen as a priority. For the first time, the communitarian ideal has been eclipsed by a race to appease the markets, focusing on the need for an urgent response to the crisis, and not on the *quality* of EU intervention. And, surprisingly, what has been lacking is a call for more *accountability* on the part of the European institutions themselves.

Crisis struck at a moment when the EU's new institutional architecture was still fragile and was initially seen, at least by optimistic europhiles, as a way of accelerating European integration. Tough decisions were made almost immediately after the Greek crisis flared up, and since then the call for cohesion and integration, by the international community, and also by the press, has grown steadily louder. Even so, the EU's profile in the press changed pretty quickly: the EU Commission progressively disappeared off the radar and in a few months the EU institutions were replaced, in the headlines, by references to the 'Paris-Berlin axis' or to the ubiquitous 'Merkozy' catchphrase, a hybrid form made up of the French and of the German leaders' names. This is not at all what hardliners pro-Europeans had wished for, with two dominating countries taking all the important decisions, little or no space for the other governments, weak EU institutions and a cultural gap wider than ever between southern and northern citizens.

I would like to analyse this very delicate metamorphosis, an evolution in which technocracy has gained the upper hand over the democratic process and has become the main concern of observers; and in which economic stability has become - and remains - the main focus. This distinction between technocracy and democracy in Europe has often been made by scholars. However one contemporary philosopher, Juergen Habermas⁷, has sought fit to challenge this dichotomy, stating that "the supposedly technical decisions at the European level are decidedly political in nature. For they limit the ability of the nation-States and their citizens to regulate the conditions under which external costs of free market exchanges are generated which are then shuffled off onto the national level"⁸. At the same time, as Larry Siedentop pointed out, "if the language in which the European Union identifies and creates itself becomes overwhelmingly economic, then the prospects of self-government in Europe are

⁶ In October 2011, according to the figures of the EU Commission, there were 1.032 journalists accredited to the EU institutions. This is the highest number ever reached. Twelve months earlier, they were 951. Since 2003 the number has always been well above 900. In Washington the overall number of accredited journalists is naturally increased by the strong presence of American reporters.

⁷ J. Habermas, "European Politics at an Impasse: A Plea for a Policy of Graduated Integration", in *Europe, The Faltering Project*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2009.

⁸ Habermas, *ibid*, p. 84.

grim indeed”⁹. Economic integration alone is not enough to provide a sound basis for EU progress and, in my opinion, it can be dangerous for the press to select it as its main concern, and to give it an importance surpassing even democracy itself. In the newspapers I have analysed there are frequent complaints about the often poor state of democratic representation in the EU, but no one has called for more accountability from the EU institutions.

What seems to have almost completely vanished, in the last two years, is the attempt to keep on building the European public sphere that Juergen Habermas has invoked so many times¹⁰. According to the German philosopher, the public sphere “mediates between the institutionalized discourses and negotiations in the state arenas on the one hand, and the episodic and informal everyday conversations of potential voters on the other”¹¹. Therefore the public sphere makes its contribution “to the democratic legitimization of the action of the State by choosing the politically relevant objects on which to decide, elaborating them on a problematic level and, through opinions more or less informed and founded, linking them to public opinions competing among them”¹². This aim is clearly not top of the list for many current EU leaders. However, without an effort to create a ‘public sphere’ in which the aims of the Union coincide with the aims of its citizens, the European project is doomed to failure.

In the first chapter, I will give a rough sketch of the history of Greece in the European Union and explain the mechanisms governing the European Union in what concerns public finances. I would also like to highlight briefly the ‘classic’ democratic issues raised by the EU’s existence as a transnational political entity and the new problems that have surfaced since the outbreak of the Greek case.

In the second chapter I will try to ‘psychoanalyse’ the attitudes of three countries during the crisis by discussing what was written in their newspapers during the period in question. This analysis focus on three countries: Italy, epitomising the traditional continental pro-European point of view; France, where the debate about Europe had been particularly lively in 2005, during the referendum, but whose attention seemed now to focus on the topic of competition with Germany; and the UK, whose less dogmatic point of view on European affairs completes the picture.

In the third chapter, I will give an account of interviews conducted with Brussels-based correspondents

⁹ L. Siedentop, *Democracy in Europe*, p. 32.

⁹ In *Mapping the European public sphere*, the authors suggest a distinction between the ‘strong public sphere’, ie the actors from the European elites, who have a privileged relationship with Brussels, the ‘transnational public sphere’, comprising who interact with Brussels and have a privileged relationship with the EU capital and a ‘weak public sphere’ made of individuals or groups who do not interact directly with Brussels but who generate debate and form public opinion in other ways.

¹¹ J.Habermas, “Media, Markets and Consumers: The Quality Press as the backbone of the Political Public Sphere”, in *Europe, The Faltering Project*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2008, p. 61.

¹² Habermas, *Ibid*, p. 61

writing for prominent newspapers, including *La Repubblica*, *Il Sole-24 Ore*, *Le Monde*, *Libération*, *Financial Times*, *Daily Telegraph* and *The Economist*, paying particular attention to the way in which these journalists covered the story, with an attempt to understand the kinds of reporting they prioritized.

The conclusions will discuss the risks that - in my opinion - the European Union is facing in the current situation. This will lead to some considerations about the role of the press in reporting from a structured and complex environment like Brussels and I will try to answer to the following questions: Has the press fulfilled its role in providing constructive criticism of the EU institutions? Has it defended democracy by helping EU citizens to fully grasp the present crisis? Has the narrative of the European Union changed? If not, does it need to change following the fallout from the Greek crisis? Could some of the arguments offered by eurosceptics be of benefit to the European Union?

I – The European Union: Democracy ‘plus’, or no democracy at all?

Problems in Athens arose at a time when the European Union (EU) was still struggling to come to terms with the reforms introduced by the new Lisbon Treaty, signed in 2007. The EU had chosen, after seemingly endless negotiations, to introduce a new figure, the president of the EU Council, to solve once and for all Harry Kissinger’s old dilemma: “Europe? Give me a name and a phone number!” The appointment of a low-profile personality like Herman Van Rompuy failed to meet the expectation of those who longed for someone to counteract the powers of the EU governments and to provide Europe with a ‘single voice’. It contributed, instead, to creating what we could call the current ‘bipolar syndrome’ of the European institutions: on one hand the national governments, in particular the German and the French ones, whose will was represented by Van Rompuy, and on the other hand the president of the Commission, José Manuel Barroso with his army of eurocrats. No wonder that in such a confused landscape the outbreak of the economic crisis was particularly painful.

A/ Greece, the cradle of democratic deficit

Strangely enough, it was the entry of Greece into the European Union that provided the occasion for the Brussels institutions to trumpet their claim to be uncompromisingly democratic. When, in 1967, Greece had fallen under the rule of the Colonels, initiating a 7-year dictatorship, Jean Rey, president of the EU Commission at that time, decided to freeze negotiations on EU Community membership with Athens, notwithstanding the opposition of many countries. This stance, held with a certain consistency, led the public opinion of three countries (Greece, Spain and Portugal) to identify Europe with democracy, according to the memoirs of the former European mandarin, Riccardo Perissich¹³. When the country finally entered the EU - on the 1st of January 1981 - the state of its economy was already a source of concern, but the European Union was more centered on trade and internal market issues than on public finances at the time, i.e. before the introduction of its EU single currency. “Europe opened its doors to Greece as a symbol: to have among its members the country where democracy was born”, recollected *Le Monde* in February 2010, adding that “countries like Germany were not so eager to see their exemplary behaviour threatened by the arrival of some shaky Mediterranean economies.”¹⁴

Subsequently, it was decided that the country was respecting the rules and, in 2000, it entered the

¹³R. Perissich, *L’Unione europea, Una storia non ufficiale*, Longanesi, Milano 2008, p. 199.

¹⁴C. Fourest, “Une salade grecque très européenne”, *Le Monde*, February 13th 2010.

Eurozone¹⁵. But, from the very beginning, the union between Greece and the single currency looked like a mismatch and, indeed, a couple of years later, in 2004, the first scandal emerged: Athens had been cooking the books regarding its public finance figures and this, for a certain period of time, led to some speculation about the possibility of its expulsion from the Eurozone¹⁶.

Nevertheless, in the following years the Commission continued to give a reassuring account of the state of the Greek public finances, praising its efforts to keep its deficit under control and pointing out timidly that the country's competitiveness was deteriorating. Even if Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Union, kept on expressing reservation about Greece 'due to significant uncertainties over the figures notified by the Greek statistical authorities', Greece was considered a 'normal' country by the EU institutions and this contributed to building a condition of mutual trust among the member states of the Eurozone that lasted for almost five years. It collapsed abruptly when, on October 4th 2009, a coalition led by the socialist George Papandreou won the elections. Shortly afterwards, the new government announced that the actual economic and financial figures of the country were dramatically different from those released by the former government led by Costas Karamanlis¹⁷. This happened during a very delicate phase for the EU, which was only starting to recover from the harsh financial crisis of 2008 and from the subsequent economic recession. Its response to the banking system's troubles had met with relative success, and indeed compared favourably to the approach taken, for instance, by the United States. It appeared then that the recent economic downturn hitting most European countries was coming to an end; and indeed the general mood was one of moderate optimism about the robustness of the EU.

But the markets, which at this stage were already extremely nervous about a possible default in Dubai, reacted very badly to the Greek news. So, what at the beginning was perceived as a medium sized irritation for the European institutions, evolved rapidly into a major problem for the Eurozone and the European Union as a whole. Greece was deemed the 'bad pupil' of the EU and few people questioned the role of those of its supervisors.

¹⁵ "Greece broke into the euro, in 2000. At the time, the internet boom is so huge that nobody cared about the respect of the Maastricht criteria. In 2004 comes the first alarm: the authorities notice the trend of the Greek deficit and its unreliable public figures". A. Leparmentier – M. Van Renterghem, "Dette grecque: l'Allemagne paiera tout compte fait", *Le Monde*, May 9th 2010.

¹⁶ "A European Union investigation revealed that Greece had broken the eurozone's critical deficit ceiling every year since 1998, contrary to its claim that it stuck to the rules. But the European Commission said yesterday there was no legal basis for throwing Greece out of the single currency, which it joined in 2001 on the back of the grossly misleading deficit data. However, Greece could face EU penalties in the wake of the most serious statistical irregularities since the launch of the euro." G. Parker – R. Atkins – K. Hope, "Greece escapes expulsion from single currency", *FT*, November 16th 2004.

¹⁷ On the 20th of October, the new government announces that the deficit reached 12.7%, instead of the 6% previously forecast.

B/Those who were in the know

In the years following the creation of the euro, supervision of the public finances of member States was one of the main tasks of the European Commission and of the Eurogroup, the finance and economic ministers from the countries sharing the single currency. Their bible was the Stability and Growth Pact, revised and weakened in 2005 under pressure from Germany and France, supported by Italy. This led to a situation in which it was not possible to apply sanctions to the States in breach of the rules, but where an entire Directorate general, DG Ecfm, with a staff of about 550 units was dedicated to “raising the economic welfare of the citizens in the European Union and beyond, notably by developing and promoting policies that ensure sustainable economic growth, a high level of employment, stable public finances and financial stability”¹⁸.

This, of course, was not happening behind the doors and far from the public scrutiny. At the time, there were around 1,000 journalists accredited in Brussels; since the inception of the Eurozone, the press in all EU countries has always given considerable attention to the many periodical reports published by DG Ecfm on member States’ public finances. Moreover, on a Monday evening once a month, the press community covers a meeting of the Eurogroup, and on a Tuesday attends a meeting of the council of all economic and finance ministers of the EU, the Ecofin. Those gatherings, in which every current topic concerning member States’ economies is discussed and decided upon, are always attentively covered by the press, even when they drag on into the early hours of the morning. Despite this habitual attention, some important issues concerning the state of health of the member States have never been raised, possibly because the focus of the press was often on what concerned their own country, and not the others. The present, tragic situation is also a direct result of this lack of supervision from both sides – the EU authorities and the press. According to some EU officials, the pressures coming from national governments to water down or even withdraw some of the Commission’s economic reports – reporting, for example, an estate bubble in Spain or the shortcomings of Italian competitiveness – were extremely strong. The economic weaknesses of member States were diplomatically evoked in the quarterly reports of the Commission and the main narrative, at the time, was that there was enough time to sort things out and painlessly reach an economic convergence¹⁹.

¹⁸ Mission statement of the DG Ecfm,

http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/economy_finance/organisation/mission_en.pdf

¹⁹ The economic forecasts concerning Greece had been rather reassuring between 2005 and 2009, when most EU countries were facing a dire recession. In the spring report 2005, the EU Commission wrote that “although slowing from the previous year, economic growth remained robust in 2004 buttressed by healthy domestic demand” (p. 51). In the autumn, it says that “following two years of strong economic activity, with GDP growing at 4.7%, high growth continued in the first quarter of 2005” (p.53). The following year, the EU Commission states that “in Greece, current policies are expected to halve the deficit this year from 5.2% of GDP in 2005 and to keep it below the 3%-of-GDP threshold over the forecast horizon.” (p.8) In the autumn of 2007 the title of the chapter dedicated to Greece was “Solid growth driven by domestic demand”

The former Economic Affairs commissioner, the Spanish socialist Joaquín Almunia, asked many times for the ‘good times’ to be used as an opportunity to achieve some necessary economic reforms, but he himself failed to promote greater economic integration, which was desirable even before it became a matter of great urgency in the wake of the debt crisis. The political pressures to keep things quiet were apparently so strong that no one took the responsibility to say that the Eurozone was not as sound as it seemed. If there was a ban on speaking out, Commissioner Almunia ought to have resigned as a protest. If he failed to detect the underlying problems, he should have been forced to step down. It is therefore a questionable choice to appoint Almunia – a nice and decent man with some very good communication skills – as responsible for the most important portfolio in the second Commission led by José Manuel Barroso, and appointed antitrust commissioner, with hardly a whimper from the public or from the press. One hardly needs to be a eurosceptic to think that the Commission ought, at the very least, to have apologized.

C/ Case reopened

Some would say that when the Greek crisis erupted, it was so overwhelming that - of course - it was not at all the right time for a serene reconsideration of the mistakes that were made. The new EU Commission was taking office, and finding no need of explanation or apologies for having been superficial and ineffective in tackling a problem that had already occurred²⁰, it hastily asked for more powers of supervision to prevent another crisis like the Greek one from re-emerging. Nevertheless, whenever an institution calls for new powers, one would expect, almost as a rule, the press and public opinion in general to scrutinize its accountability and the quality of its past interventions. This is necessary to ensure that the future will be built on a sound basis, but it is also vital in explaining to citizens who is taking charge, partially at least, of their public finances.

Generally speaking, the press has been pretty tolerant of the Commission even though, in the end, the Commission had endured a long battle with the EU capitals to gain some additional powers. The plan was not at all endorsed by Germany and by France, which were against the idea of ‘technocrats’ controlling Europe, preferring to take the lead themselves in monitoring the situation. This move lends weight to the arguments of those who think that the EU Commission is strong just as long as the national governments give it the leeway to act decisively. On the other hand, the rescue plan for Greece

and in the same period of 2008 the report states that “in 2009, all euro-area countries except Greece, Malta and Slovakia are set to see a (further) worsening in their budgetary positions” (p.52), even though “the shortcomings as regards the Greek public finance statistics remain a recurrent issue” and “the general government deficit for 2007 has been revised upwards from 2.8% to 3.5% of GDP” (p. 74).

²⁰At the beginning of 2004, it emerged that Greece was cheating about its public figures. This led to an attempt to reform Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Union, but the project was watered down by Germany. There were talks about the possible exit of Greece from the Eurozone, but this was also ruled out.

needed to be set up by the national governments and has therefore been the first important inter-governmental initiative in EU history. As a veteran Brussels correspondent, Adriana Cerretelli, sharply observed, “everybody thinks that the Commission was strong thanks to Delors, but the real reason is that Mitterrand and Kohl were behind him and wanted him to be strong”. This proves as well, of course, that the Commission cannot be said to be the only authority responsible for the lack of supervision of the public finances of Greece and other countries. But some mistakes were clearly made, if the result is that the very survival of Euro is still currently under threat, that many citizens are suffering under bad economic conditions, and that anti-European movements are gaining ground everywhere.

The debate on the rescue of Greece paved the way for an unwelcome outcome: both the ‘saved’, i.e. the Greeks who had to undergo harsh austerity measures, and the ‘saviours’ – i.e. the Germans who had to contribute to the rescue fund, felt cheated and claimed that their democratic rights had been violated. In both countries, some of the media played on those sentiments with some very unpleasant campaigns based on national stereotypes – the Greeks being supposedly lazy and profligate – and also on memories of war – the German occupation of the Hellenic islands.

In the first year, the Greek crisis brought to light two issues concerning the functioning of the European Union: the first concerns the past and has to do with the role of the European institutions during the crisis, while the second regards the legitimacy of the measures imposed by the Commission and by the Council on the member States and the way they were to be accepted by EU citizens. As Habermas did put it, “the particular challenge for the EU is that it has to improve both effectiveness and democracy at the same time. Whether both can be achieved simultaneously is problematic. In the national systems, which are both more democratic and more efficient at the outset, politicians are usually confronted with only one of these two problems at any moment. The solution can then allow for some sacrifices on the one dimension to achieve better results on the other at least for a period of time²¹.”

This, of course, was a serious emergency but, at the same time, there was yet another lingering threat to which the EU should have paid more attention: the risk that the financial emergency could upset the delicate balance that allows the EU to assume part of the sovereignty of the member States without raising citizens’ protests. One of the consequences of neglecting this aspect is that the ghost of the democratic deficit that has haunted the EU from its very outset has never been so present.

²¹*The European Union, How democratic is it?*, edited by Svein S Andersen and Kjell A Eliassen, Sage, London 1996.

II – The evolution of the crisis from three national perspectives

Without question, the Greek crisis triggered a steep increase in the number of articles dedicated to the European Union and has represented, therefore, an opportunity as well as a challenge for the press. Reading the journalistic production of that period is illuminating, because it set the standards for a narrative that lasted until very recently. To highlight the main tendencies of the European press during the observation period, it is useful to see what was written the days immediately following the crucial EU summits of the 9 February 2010, 25 and 26 of March and 9 May of the same year. I have chosen to look only at the editorials, comments and features entirely dedicated to our subject, as for example the articles about Greece or the profiles of EU decision-makers. For each of the three countries analysed – Italy, France and the UK - I have selected two prominent newspapers, trying to pick the ones that are at the same time influential, with a large circulation and that represent different sides of the public opinion. The left-leaning *La Repubblica* and *Libération* and the more centrist *Corriere della Sera* and *Le Monde* illustrate the debate in Italy and France, whereas the *FT* and the *Daily Telegraph* show the two sides of the British attitude towards Europe: the pro-European one and the fiercely euroskeptic stance. As we shall see, in all these newspapers there are four topics which recur more often than others: the call for a stronger European intervention, the role of the International Monetary Fund, the ghost of financial speculation and what can be seen as the obsession with the role of Germany and its Chancellor, Angela Merkel.

A – Unquestionably European: the Italian press

Of the many accounts of Brussels found in the national presses, it is in Italy more than anywhere else that the highly institutional profile of the European project has been celebrated most, and criticised least. One of the main reasons for this, one could argue, is that the European institutions have been seen in Italy as a tool to counteract the shortcomings of national politics. At the time the crisis broke out, Silvio Berlusconi was prime minister and the Italian elites were nostalgic for the days when Italy had been in the frontline of EU decision-making, with a legendary founding father like Altiero Spinelli and some high-profile EU officials like Romano Prodi²². Therefore Europe was been seen both as a ennobling project for the country, where the best of Italy had been given the possibility to shine, and as a safeguard against the lack of credibility of its political class, a feeling that had reached new lows in

²² Prodi was president of the Commission from 1999 to 2005.

2009²³. Anti-European movements were linked to the far right or to the Northern League secessionist movement and were seen, not long ago, as almost heretical; every other party had its own reasons in adhering to the EU project.

The Italian media never had to fight to defend the European Union and there had never been a true public debate on the subject. In addition, the more stable incarnation of power in Italy, the president of the Republic Giorgio Napolitano, is a former member of the European Parliament and a committed pro-European. His views are very influential, in particular in the main Italian newspaper, *Il Corriere della Sera*, in which his editorials – always published on the first page and signed – are usually dedicated to issues concerning the European Union. The EU, in Italy, belongs to the cultural *acquis* of the elites and is not perceived as something that has to be explained in detail to the wider public, as it is the case in other countries. An example of this tendency is an article written in March 2010 by Alberto Quadrio Curzio, a prominent commentator of the *Corriere*, in which he explains the importance of completing the Eurozone with “tools of economic and fiscal policy”, but, referring to the EU institution, he says that “the institutional subjects don’t seem to be up to the task”²⁴. For the first and only time such an issue is raised in the newspapers we are analyzing, but surprisingly enough the interesting comment of Quadrio Curzio is expressed in a hasty way and in an obscure style, without further explanations. On the 14th of February, a short article of about three lines is published by the *Corriere* with the title “Juncker: in the Greek case Brussels made some mistakes”, but no further attention is given to the subject. A first attempt to deal with the issue of sovereignty in Greece is made by a former Italian finance minister, the late Tommaso Padoa-Schioppa²⁵. “Greece is no longer the sole sovereign in its home; the European sovereign has entered its territory and will also rule”, he writes, adding: “Democracy forces Papandreou to impose austerity to the same sovereign people that, months ago, he coaxed with impossible promises”. This, again, is a complicated thesis that does not lead to further consideration.

The situation slightly improves in May, when the emergency is at its peak and there is a lot of talk about the possible failure of the Eurozone. Francesco Giavazzi notes, opportunely, that “the real problem are the perspectives of the real economy, not of finance”²⁶, while a couple of days later Mario Monti²⁷ insists that the missing part of Europe is the single market and that “one cannot have a monetary

²³ “Membership of the EU is perceived as having a vital role in bringing order to the national system. The demand for supranational structures is, in fact, a demand for repairing the inefficiencies of the Italian system itself”. Federiga Maria Bindi, “Italy in need of more EU democracy?”, in K. Eliassen – S. Andersen, *The European Union: How Democratic is it?*, Sage, London 1996.

²⁴ Alberto Quadrio Curzio, “Un insuccesso mascherato”, *Corriere della sera*, March 26th 2010.

²⁵ Tommaso Padoa-Schioppa, “La sovranità in movimento”, *Corriere della sera*, February 15th 2010.

²⁶ Francesco Giavazzi, “Il passo giusto, ma non basta”, *Corriere della sera*, May 10th 2010.

²⁷ Mario Monti, “Rifondare l’Europa per salvare l’euro”, *Corriere della sera*, May 12th 2010.

union without a robust economic union”. Using a metaphor of the dissident soviet physicist Andrej Sakharov, Franco Venturini writes in May that Europe, like “a cart, cannot be stationary for long time on a slope without moving backwards”, and that the new powers given to the Commission are necessary to fix the “ambiguity that has accompanied the euro from its creation”²⁸. Along the same lines, Mario Monti highlights that the European Union has shown itself capable once again to take forward steps “only under the pressure of emergency”, and notes wisely that “after the crisis it will be necessary to redefine, at a European level, the tasks of the markets and of public powers”.

The first and most recurrent issue that worries the Italian newspapers is the nature of the crisis. In 2009-2010 the Finance minister, Giulio Tremonti, insisted many times on the fact that speculation on the markets was still as strong as it was during the financial crisis of 2007-2008 and was therefore the main reason behind the turmoil triggered by Greece’s weaknesses. This idea was in line with the stance held by the prominent left-wing anti-governmental newspaper *La Repubblica*. In February Brussels’ correspondent for the paper Andrea Bonanni talked about a ‘Game of poker with the markets’ and highlighted that the strategy used by the EU institutions is to “play the card of discussion with the markets and of trust towards Athens, keeping possible future financial support far from public opinion’s spotlight”²⁹. In May, the former editor and founder of the newspaper, Eugenio Scalfari, wrote that the real target of the markets was not Greece, but “the euro, the single European currency, the resilience of the EU fabric and its necessary political evolution”, and stated that “the crisis has the advantage” of making it impossible to delay “the topic of a European federal State”. The debate about federalism had also an Italian angle, as the Northern League was pushing for a law on tax federalisation. Federico Rampini described, in his article “The eurosceptical markets”³⁰, how the street protests in Athens and Madrid led the markets to the conclusion that “Europe is not able to absorb austerity anymore”. For *Repubblica* the formula is that behind the crisis there are speculators and that the only solution is more integration. “Thus speculation has not been stopped yet and will not be if Europe does not take the right steps towards a complete federal State equipped with an economic and fiscal policy, and also with a foreign affairs and military policy”, summarizes Scalfari³¹. The *Corriere della Sera* has a different stance on the issue of the markets. “It is silly to think that those who sell the bonds of Greece, Spain and Portugal are just speculators”, writes Francesco Giavazzi, adding, “investors who are selling the European titles are genuine sellers, not speculators. They want to know whether those economies will start to grow again or if they are doomed to have a long period of stagnation”. Under any circumstances, the solution suggested by the two newspapers is the same: more Europe.

²⁸Franco Venturini, “Europa, quel carro fermo in salita”, *Corriere della Sera*, May 13th 2010.

²⁹ Andrea Bonanni, “Partita a poker con i mercati”, *La Repubblica*, February 12th 2010.

³⁰Federico Rampini, “I mercati euroscettici”, *La Repubblica*, May 15th 2010.

³¹Eugenio Scalfari, “Il dramma del federalismo in Italia e in Europa”, *La Repubblica*, May 16th 2010.

In February Giavazzi published nevertheless an editorial in the *Corriere* with the title “The illusion of acting alone”³², and introduces one of the main topics discussed during the winter of 2009 and 2010: the possible intervention of the International Monetary Fund in the Greek rescue plan, as happened in some non-Eurozone countries like Latvia and Hungary. The possibility of the European Union acting alone would be an enormous risk, according to Giavazzi. “Not accepting these truth means to put the euro in danger for the sake of mere vanity and prestige”, he writes.

Already in February Franco Venturini, writing in the *Corriere*, explained the new rules of power holding sway in Brussels. “With the British out of the game, given that they don’t have the euro, Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy have simply occupied the space that was their due. They have done it without even trying to conceal their power, which could irritate those who still (rightly) wish for a more communitarian Europe. But at the same time it would be shortsighted to ignore the fact that yesterday, with Berlin and Paris protecting a very guilty Greece, something important has happened in Europe.”³³ The Italian press, at the time, was also obsessed by the role of Germany and by its unwillingness to intervene in favour of Greece³⁴. This article nevertheless shows first and foremost one of the major trends of the Italian press during the Berlusconi years: presenting an Italy excluded from the European decision-making process and Europe as a nostalgic ideal. Silvio Berlusconi, as a prime minister, did not give much attention to the European sphere and it is not a secret that his controversial public image isolated him amongst the EU leaders. In addition, before the appointment of the former Italian central banker, Mario Draghi, as the president of the European Central Bank, the public opinion in the country had the impression that Italy was not as well represented in Europe as, for example, France and UK. Even the fact that Italian language is not and has never been among the official working languages of the EU was seen as a weakness, as shows the impressive press campaign against the EU patent system that was discussed at the time. In short, Italy was experiencing a moment of very low self-esteem and was not in the right position to promote a debate on Europe. As soon as Mario Monti replaced Berlusconi, in November 2011, this attitude changed considerably.

From the samples we have chosen, we can clearly see that the Italian newspapers did not feel the urgency to justify or explain Europe. Democratic concerns, at the time of the Greek crisis, were not raised seriously and the problems of the Greek people were seen as something distant, even though the call for more ‘solidarity’ is always present. Led by *Il Corriere della Sera* and *La Repubblica*, the Italian press is so pro-European that it does seldom questions the role and the ability of the Commission and of the

³²Francesco Giavazzi, “L’illusione di fare da soli”, *Corriere della sera*, February 11th 2010.

³³ Franco Venturini, “Il sostegno europeo alla Grecia: un salvagente che convince poco”, *ibid.*, February 12th 2010.

³⁴ A conservative commentator of the *Corriere della Sera*, Angelo Panebianco, observed on the 12th of March, “on first glance, many problems seem to be triggered by the attitudes of Germany, emancipated from the legacies of the past and from the guidelines laid down by its modern founders, from Adenauer to Kohl”.

other EU institutions when they ask for 'More Europe' and for an economic government of the Eurozone. The main topics it discusses are speculation, the current weaknessess of Europe and the increasing influence of Germany, which, in any case, is never something that affects Italy. At the time Italy was very busy in coping with its own political situation and, more than ever, looked towards the EU as a solution to its problems.

B -The French: European pride and competition with Germany

In 2005 the fiercely pro-European history of France was tarnished by the 'no' at the referendum on the EU Constitution. Such a wave of popular skepticism was unexpected and the press had a hard time dealing with it. That is probably the reason why French newspapers seem more prone to explaining what the challenges are and what the consequences of each new EU policy would be for French citizens. This happens always in a very pro-European way, which is both idealistic and proud. This is especially true of the two newspapers that we are analyzing, the institutional center-left *Le Monde* and the more radical left-leaning *Libération*. Nevertheless, there are two themes that seem to have marked the way French journalists covered the Greek crisis: the possible involvement of the IMF in the rescue of Athens, which is seen almost as a personal offense, and a revamping of the historic competition with Germany, which very often has become a true obsession for what Chancellor Merkel says and does.

The Frencher the better - The economic government of the Eurozone had been a French obsession for a long time before the outset of the Greek debt crisis. Already in February, *Libération* and *Le Monde* hosted many editorials in which the crisis was described as an opportunity to step up the coordination among the countries that share the single currency. In "The bill of 10 years of monetary union without economic government", Arnaud Leparmentier³⁵ writes that the EU Commission and Finance ministers never assured any follow-up of the criticisms that were made regarding the state of member States' public finances. "Greece has already been caught red-handed in 2004 for cheating on its public figures", but in Brussels nobody did more than ask to keep the deficit below the 3% threshold. *Libération* is even harsher, saying that there is "a crisis of confidence in the ability of the Eurozone to coordinate the economic policies required to avoid the situation in which a country (like Greece) behaves like a 'stowaway passenger' and does whatever it wants thereby damaging its partners"³⁶. The editor of the left wing newspaper, Laurent Joffrin, writes on the same day that "without any democratic legitimacy, the ECB was sailing its liberal ship without anyone in control, imposing its iron rule of monetary orthodoxy on the whole continent". The solution is to "improvise in the midst of the chaos a

³⁵ A Leparmentier, "The bill of 10 years of monetary union without economic government", *Le Monde*, February 10th 2010.

³⁶ Editorial, "Crise grecque. Pourquoi l'Europe est nulle", *Libération*, February 11th 2010.

coordination that was already possible a decade ago”, showing solidarity and political will towards Greece and the political will to assist her³⁷. The same request comes from *Le Monde* which says that “the Greek crisis raises two questions: one about the solidarity of the Eurozone countries and the other about the regulation of the financial sector”. Solidarity is the central issue for the EU summit of the 13th of February, the very day on which a political message is released in favour of Greece. “Paradoxically, history will reveal tell that it was a good day for Europe”, writes optimistically *Le Monde*³⁸. The call for solidarity is made again and again in the French press, and there is more optimism on the possibility to achieve it than, for instance, in the Italian press. “Caught by reality, the EU is reinventing itself, becoming more political and more supportive”, writes *Libération* on the 31st of March³⁹. But when, in May, a deal was reached for the creation of a rescue fund for the Eurozone, the assessment of *Le Monde* is negative: “This plan does not provide even the smallest means of fixing the structural shortcomings of the monetary union, as they have emerged during the crisis: lack of economic governance and of fiscal solidarity, a gap of competitiveness between countries, medium-term growth and solvency issues for the southern European countries. The emergency plan will reduce the fever, but won’t heal the illness”⁴⁰.

The Franco-German couple - The crisis brought forth, as previously mentioned, the Franco-German couple as the leading decision makers, a union “perceived as a pole of stability”, according to *Le Monde*, that states that “the eurozone being affected, the United Kingdom is out of the game, just like the majority of the Eastern countries and Scandinavia. The small countries don’t have any economic power and the Mediterranean countries, like Spain and Italy, have to maintain their reserves to defend themselves”. This is the first way in which the French press feels the need to justify its alliance with Germany. The second one is summarized by *Libération*’s editor, Laurent Joffrin, as follows: “Nobody suspects Germany of having hegemonic ambitions, but everybody is scared by its temptation to be solitary; this would be lethal for Europe”⁴¹. The same day, an article written by its Brussels correspondent, Jean Quatremer, is titled “Germany, the bad player of the Union”, and the day after an article tells the story of how Berlin has turned from being the experimental and edgy capital where utopias were forged after the fall of the wall into the inflexible capital of rationality⁴². Not only Germany, but also its *Kanzlerin* Angela Merkel is the target of much of French attention. “The paymaster Chancellor of Europe” is the title of a long article where Merkel’s portrait is painted in not very flattering terms. “Mrs Merkel’s Europe is run week by week”, says Marion Van Renterghem, making a hackneyed comparison with

³⁷ L. Joffrin, “Improvisé”, *Libération*, February 11th 2010.

³⁸ Editorial, “Bon pour l’Union”, *Le Monde*, February 13th 2010.

³⁹ B. Guetta, “De Bruxelles à Washington, changements à bas bruit”, *Libération*, March 31st 2010.

⁴⁰ Editorial, “Un traitement de choc qui ne guérit pas tout”, *Le Monde*, May 11th 2010.

⁴¹ L. Joffrin, “Tentation solitaire”, *Libération*, March 26th 2010.

⁴² B. Vallaeys, “Utopiques solidarités?”, *Libération*, March 27th 2010.

Margaret Thatcher and describing the lack of political vision of the German leader. The conclusion is bleak: “Uniting German rigour and French laxity, the threat of the IMF and the support of the Union, the agreement on Greece has come back to the starting point, to what Europe is made of: eternal compromise”⁴³. On the 1st of April, *Libération* adds to this⁴⁴, saying that she “has not stopped disappointing since the beginning of the banking and financial crisis in 2008”, when finally “the Merkel myth cracked”, even though “it has been partially mended when, in partnership with Nicolas Sarkozy, the chancellor took the lead in the battle in favour of new regulations”.

Europe versus the markets - Some interesting questions were raised in the article “A very European Greek salad”, published in *Le Monde* on the 13th of February: “The Lisbon Treaty has not solved the leadership issues in Europe. In part because they are far beyond the problem of its institutions”. The author, Caroline Fouquet, writes that “European taxpayers will hardly accept paying for other countries’ debt, unless they are persuaded that pooling the losses is better for everybody. Even if chaotic, this simulacrum of political Europe should prove that the economy can be protected from the predators of finance”. Nevertheless, more than one month after, the same newspaper takes stock of the (poor) progress made and points out the “identity crisis” in the EU, in which “Christine Lagarde stresses the egoism of the German economic policies, the Germans treat the Greeks as lazy swindlers and the Greeks point to the dark past of the Germans to explain the stubbornness of Berlin”. The conclusion is bitter: “What keeps the euro alive today is the technical complexity that would be necessary in undoing it and reverting to the national currencies”⁴⁵. Two months afterwards, the newspaper’s view is far gloomier. “If the euro is agonizing, what is already dead is the principle behind its very creation. The idea, that we can now call an illusion, that sharing a single currency will make countries converge economically”⁴⁶. The structural shortcomings of the EU emerge in particular, according to the French press, when it comes to the inability to deal with the disruptive force of the markets. The French newspapers’ demonization of the markets is, indeed, stronger than anywhere else. In an editorial published in February with the title “The revenge of the markets”⁴⁷, *Le Monde* explains that Europe “is still politically divided and hasn’t got any credible decision-making system, as it can be seen from the multiplication of heads without leadership and power coming from the Lisbon Treaty”. The overall judgment is trenchant: “The principles and the institutions that have contributed to the creation of the euro make a ‘Ligne Maginot’ anachronistic and impotent”. An interesting point of view is expressed by Bernard Kouchner, the founder of Médecins sans Frontières and former French foreign minister. “The inspiration of the founding fathers has to find a replacement. It does not talk anymore in the same way

⁴³ M. Van Renterghem, “La chancelière comptable de l’Europe”, *Le Monde*, April 1st 2010.

⁴⁴ A. Duhamel, “Les deux fautes de Angela Merkel”, *Libération*, April 1st 2010.

⁴⁵ “L’euro made in Usa”, *Le Monde*, March 28th 2010.

⁴⁶ P.-A. Delhommais, “Un d’mi? Ben ça f’ra 15 francs, m’sieur!”, *Le Monde*, May 9th 2010.

⁴⁷ Editorial, “La revanche des marchés”, *Le Monde*, February 16th 2010.

to the new generations. The word ‘peace’ does not awake the same dreams if one has – or has not – had to fight for it. And the context, first and foremost, has changed: the Cold war has been replaced by an ebullient globalisation that has to be organized”⁴⁸.

Solidarity, economic governance, the role of the International Monetary Fund and close scrutiny of the German attitude were the priorities of the French press. *Le Monde* and *Libération* also gave some attention to the possible social impact of the measures. On the 15th of May, the former wrote: “The Greek scenario resounds as a fiscal crisis that people will have to pay out of their own pockets. The film is on in Greek. Europeans, in the room, hold their breath”.

C – The UK Press: just a partial observer?

For some British newspapers, the debt crisis provided an opportunity to extend the coverage of EU affairs beyond the usual topics, from the ‘straight bananas’ to the recurring MEP expenses scandals. *The Daily Telegraph* reflected this trend perfectly. To its credit, in its pages it has given more space than the other newspapers I have analysed to what the citizens of Greece, but also those of Germany, think about the devolution of powers to Brussels. Unfortunately, this has not improved the quality of many of its articles and commentary, where economic figures are seldom reliable even if the opinions given are, nevertheless, very sharp. The coverage provided by the *Financial Times* could not be more different from that of the *Telegraph* and is, in general, a more comprehensive description of the crisis, both for what concerns the variety of points of view hosted and of the amount of articles dedicated to the issue. The FT is the first compulsory reading of every Brussels journalist and official, but many are wary in doing so: they consider the newspaper has a role in the attack on the Eurozone.

During the three weeks under consideration, the primary concerns of the *Financial Times* can be summarized as follows: the political shift resulting from the crisis and the need to build up fiscal interdependence to complete the monetary union; the role of the IMF, which is important because it would provide the necessary expertise and to avoid a threat to democracy within the EU; the relation with the markets; and, finally, the democratic issues and the call for clarity of purpose from the authorities.

“The crisis is a result of failed policies, but it presents an opportunity for setting them right”, writes the Leader column in February⁴⁹, adding, a couple of days later, that “peer pressure was a puny weapon” to force the Eurozone countries into fiscal discipline and that “over the past decade, the market has been

⁴⁸ B. Kouchner, “Pour la Grèce, pour l’Europe”, *Libération*, May 10th 2010.

⁴⁹ Leader, “Europe decides what union means”, *Financial Times*, February 10th 2010.

a lax disciplinarian”⁵⁰. All the commentators agree that “if the Eurozone is to survive and prosper” it has to “take irrevocable steps to closer fiscal integration”⁵¹, because “at stake is the confidence that has turned the euro into the world’s second most widely held reserve currency behind the dollar”⁵². But, according to the newspaper, in organizing the rescue of Greece, the EU would “cross a political Rubicon” because it will have to make “demands on how Greece is run”⁵³. This step would be a mistake, because “the EU suffers from a lack of popular legitimacy” and even the Lisbon Treaty was passed in an “unedifying manner”, giving “the impression that the EU is a stitch-up by a small elite”. FT is the only newspaper in saying that “if Europe, or just the Eurozone, is to become more deeply joined, it should be a deliberate and honest process, not an accidental and covert one”⁵⁴. That is why it would be better to have the savvy and experienced IMF intervene in rescuing Greece. “The IMF is forcing Greece to press through reforms that the EU unforgivably failed to demand before it joined the euro”⁵⁵, writes the Lex column in May, when the first rescue package for Greece had been already made, pointing out that “the need to encourage growth is the strongest reason to hold on to the IMF anchor”. The point is that “the euro rules were always ill-designed” and what matters now is “rescue their purpose: growth and stability”. When the big Eurozone rescue fund was agreed upon, FT remarked: “The conditions in the loan programmes must be crystal clear and rock-hard: a government that is truly unable or unwilling to pay must have its lifeline removed. Pooling more sovereignty than it ever planned, the Eurozone is now at the mercy of its most indebted members’ sovereign decisions”⁵⁶. Other articles stress this aspect: “The Germans were austere; the periphery enjoyed the boom. Now we have moved past the boom, and someone in Greece, Portugal, Spain, Ireland and perhaps Italy has to repay something – or at least stop borrowing without constraint”⁵⁷.

For the sake of Europe, the French newspapers and the FT reach the opposite conclusion on the IMF issue. Of course it would dent “European prestige” and “highlight one of the eurozone’s biggest flaws: its lack of a credible budget enforcer”⁵⁸, but it is necessary to have the IMF move “into the olive belt to enforce budget discipline and structural reforms that Brussels never could”. And, if that was inevitable, it could pave the way for the country to fail. “Restructuring must not be unthinkable, but inevitable and, despite its evident social, economic and political costs, even desirable”, writes another Leader column in March 2010⁵⁹.

⁵⁰ Leader, “Europe stumbles upon closer union”, *Financial Times*, February 13th 2010.

⁵¹ T. Barber, “Trust is wearing thin in Europe’s union of opposites”, *Financial Times*, February 13th 2010.

⁵² P. Garnham, “Euro project tested by Greek crisis”, *Financial Times*, February 13th 2010.

⁵³ Leader, “Europe stumbles upon closer union”, *ibid*.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*.

⁵⁵ Lex, “Time for Athens to join Europe”, *Financial Times*, May 10th 2010.

⁵⁶ Leader, “EU’s bold step into treacherous waters”, *Financial Times*, May 11th 2010.

⁵⁷ P. Boone – S. Johnson, “How the Eurozone encouraged a race to the bottom”, *Financial Times*, May 11th 2010.

⁵⁸ Lex, “Eur’in trouble”, *Financial Times*, March 26th 2010.

⁵⁹ Leader, “Europe manages a wise compromise”, *Financial Times*, March 27th 2010.

The debate on the role played by the IMF this does not alter the need for Europe to defend and to reform itself. “The European Union has acknowledged, for the first time, that the Eurozone has a political dimension”, writes Wolfgang Muenchau on the 15th of February, adding that the reduction of imbalances and public sector debt must “have priority for this decade”, requiring “tough choices from political leaders who ran away from those choices in the last decade”, because “the worst that could happen now is a leap into the imaginary world of soft options”⁶⁰.

The call, as we can see, is for ‘more reaction’ and not, as in the French and in the Italian case, for ‘more Europe’. Germany and Angela Merkel are under the scrutiny of the FT as well and even if the leader of Berlin is accused of “myopia”, Philip Stephens, in an article⁶¹, states: “Why should Germany play the part of the altruist? We cannot expect Germans to be forever paying reparations. No one would ask Mr Sarkozy, or for the matter Britain’s Gordon Brown, to elevate the European ahead of national interests”. In his view, Germany is now a “normal country” and “the second half of the 20th century was the exception”. Analysis of Germany’s position gives Gideon Rachman the opportunity to stress how “the designers of the single currency were hoping for a third form of convergence, between elite and popular opinion”, because they knew that “in certain crucial countries, in particular Germany, the public did not share the political elite’s enthusiasm for the creation of the euro” and they hoped this would come with time. But this convergence, in Germany, “failed to take place” and citizens are scared that “they will be called upon to maintain feckless Greek politicians and pensioners in the style to which they have become accustomed.”⁶²

In the FT the attention to what the markets think and how the markets react is, naturally, very high. “Who said markets hate uncertainty? Speculators love it,” the Lex column states bluntly, saying that Merkel and José Manuel Barroso are free to dislike the markets, but “they have no excuses for not understanding them”⁶³. This, in particular, translated into a call for clarity from the EU institutions. “The politics of smoke and mirrors cannot fool all the people all of the time”, writes Muenchau⁶⁴. “The more highly evolved euro-policy clans understand that obfuscation and confusion are not just tools, but the desired end point”, observes John Dizard, adding: “After all, if the public knew what was going on, what use would they have for this rather expensive, and not very amusing, ‘elite’?”⁶⁵ In his view the reforms that Greece has to undergo would be easier to implement “if the decisions are not

⁶⁰ W. Muenchau, “The political constraints of the eurozone”, *Financial Times*, February 15th 2010.

⁶¹ Ph. Stephens, “Merkel’s myopia reopens Europe’s German question”, *Financial Times*, March 26th 2010.

⁶² G. Rachman, “The euro’s big fat failed wedding”, *Financial Times*, March 30th 2010.

⁶³ Lex, “Reality bites”, *Financial Times*, May 10th 2010.

⁶⁴ W. Muenchau, “Europe has resolved nothing over Greece”, *Financial Times*, March 30th 2010.

⁶⁵ J. Dizard, “Policy tribe’s placebo for Europe’s ills will have little healing effect”, *Financial Times*, April 3rd 2010.

seen to be imposed by a gaggle of foreign officials”. According to Wolfgang Muenchau, “Europe’s leaders are not solving the problem, they are fighting a public relations war”⁶⁶ and “their populism has spun out of control”, in particular when it comes to Angela Merkel’s proposal “to deprive deficit countries of their voting rights”, which is “unbelievably extreme in the pursuit of a fiscal goal”. Muenchau observes that “it is not as though the EU was suffering from an excess of democratic accountability”.

The prevalent tone used by *The Daily Telegraph* in covering the first months of the Greek debt crisis is the one of a prophet commenting, not without a hint of smugness, on an event which could be seen as a fulfillment of one of its predictions. “Who in their right mind will bail out the poor relations of Europe?”⁶⁷, reads the title of an article on Greece. The content is, unfortunately, inaccurate. There are some evident mistakes (“Italy has less debt but has structural problems in its economy”⁶⁸ and some frequent confusions between the Lisbon Treaty and the Maastricht Treaty) and the tone is always very opinionated and harsh: “How can the fantasy political union to which Eurocrats are committed, and for which we have paid so dearly with our sovereignty and our independence, be remotely sustained if the individual members cannot even maintain a successful currency union?”. Sometimes it becomes openly offensive, as when the entire case is described as “the biggest pig-rescue mission in history” and the newspaper is not embarrassed of talking about “Greece and its porcine neighbours”⁶⁹

But the dignity of EU citizens becomes almost sacred when it comes to the alleged violation of their democratic rights: “In time-honoured fashion, the discussions, which concern the fate of hundreds of millions of Europeans, are all going on behind closed doors”⁷⁰. And the variety of criticism is always wide: “The European project was forged in the post-war years, when the public was willing to do anything to prevent a repeat of those atrocities. But the majority of Europeans were born well after the war. If Brussels expects to be able to push through closer economic integration over their heads, it maybe in for a rude awakening. Even in Brussels, pigs can’t fly”. Commenting on the first requests made to Athens by the EU, the *Telegraph* writes in an editorial that “this act of economic imperialism – how else to describe the supervision of a country’s economy by an outside authority? – will have sweeping ramifications”⁷¹, and argues that it will probably trigger bad reactions both from the Greeks and the Germans. “The EU has issued a political pledge to rescue Greece – and by precedent, all Club Med – without first securing a mandate from the parliaments of creditor nations”⁷², notes Ambrose

⁶⁶ W. Muenchau, “The Eurozone must take responsibility or it will split”, *Financial Times*, May 10th 2010.

⁶⁷ S. Heffner, “Who in their right mind will bail out the poor relations of Europe”, *The Daily Telegraph*, February 10th 2010.

⁶⁸ Italian economy has always had the highest debt rate in Europe, following Greece.

⁶⁹ E. Conway, “Greece could bring Euroland to its knees”, *The Daily Telegraph*, February 11th 2010.

⁷⁰ E. Conway, “Greece could bring Euroland to its knees”, *The Daily Telegraph*, February 11th 2010.

⁷¹ Editorial, “Germany gets to call the shots in Greece”, *The Daily Telegraph*, February 13th 2010.

⁷² A. Evans-Pritchard, “Greece and its debt have exposed the original sin of monetary union”, *The Daily Telegraph*, February

Evans-Pritchard, while, on the same day, the mayor of London Boris Johnson writes that “the economic government of Europe” will mean “diluting the ability of Greek politicians to set tax and spending priorities” and “at a time of growing electoral disillusion, it means a further erosion of democracy”⁷³. Such a delicate issue is raised without further explanations.

Sometimes *The Daily Telegraph* tries to fuel the euroscepticism of its readers with false news, too. “The European Union has shown its righteous wrath by stripping Greece of its vote at a crucial meeting next month, the worst humiliation ever suffered by an EU member state”, writes Evans-Pritchard without mentioning the fact that not only had the German proposal has raised a strong outcry in Brussels, but was far from having been approved. The role of Germany is seen more as a narrative tool to spice up the articles through some hackneyed stereotypes than as a serious source of concern. “However you dress it, the Greek package agreed by EU leaders is a capitulation to German-Dutch demands”, writes Evans-Pritchard, adding that “There will be no European debt union as long as Angela Merkel remains Iron Chancellor of Germany”.

Along with democracy, the accountability of the EU institutions is the most cherished topic of the *Telegraph*. “It is the EU’s fault for allowing such flagrant breaches of the rules, not just by Greece, but by other Club Med countries”⁷⁴, writes the paper in February. The issue of the IMF is present, as well. “The sooner it is recognized that the initial sticking plaster should be applied not by Germany and France, but by the global economy’s traditional lender of last resort, the International Monetary Fund, the better it will be for all”⁷⁵ and this, according to the *Telegraph*, “because of the geo-politics of the Eurozone”. The Germans will not accept their money being used to rescue the Greeks and the Greeks would resent the measures, “reviving memories of devastating famine under Germany’s wartime occupation of Greece”. This leads to quite a wise conclusion: “Austerity imposed through fiscal and monetary subjugation would risk the very opposite of what the euro is meant to achieve: international friction would fast replace economic cooperation and harmony”.

Every possible weapon is used to express contempt for what happens in Brussels. Boris Johnson describes the meetings as “the Belgian orgies of tedium and paralysis”⁷⁶ and Evans-Pritchard becomes philosophical when he explains that the euro is a “late-20th century version of the same Hegelian reflex of imposing ideas from above - making facts fit the theory - that has so cursed Europe. Schopenhauer said Hegel had ‘completely disorganised and ruined the minds of a whole generation’. Little did he

15th 2010.

⁷³ B. Johnson, “The Greeks must be rueing the day they wacked the drachma”, *The Daily Telegraph*, February 15th 2010.

⁷⁴ S. Heffer, “The Eurozone is a Greek tragedy”, *The Daily Telegraph*, February 13th 2010.

⁷⁵ J. Warner, “The euro needs more than a quick fix”, *The Daily Telegraph*, February 15th 2010.

⁷⁶ B. Johnson, “Get Gordon out of the bathroom and deal with the real problems”, *The Daily Telegraph*, May 10th 2010.

know how long the spell would last⁷⁷.” In May 2010, obviously, the European issue was particularly sensitive because of the elections in the UK and the fact that it was still the Labour government that went to Brussels to negotiate. To stir up public indignation the titles are, of course, crucial - “Don't come here for help if you hit financial trouble, EU tells Britain”⁷⁸ and the news is often exaggerated, just by eliminating the nuances that are always present in Brussels's documents. “The draft text, expected to be agreed at a meeting of the 16 "Eurozone" countries, raised fears of another power-grab by Europe in the wake of the Lisbon Treaty and said the European Council "should become the economic government of the EU”⁷⁹, writes Bruno Waterfield. “Brussels is bracing itself for a battle with the Conservatives over plans to create a European "economic government””⁸⁰, he overstates in another occasion.

One of the few assertions that can be made by comparing two diametrically different newspapers like the *FT* and the *Telegraph* is that they both write about Europe in a country which is not predominantly Europhile, making their criticisms and observations more challenging than the ones that can be found in the continental press. The *FT*'s approach is less prejudiced, and the observations, admittedly sometimes very harsh, made by *the Daily Telegraph* are often worth some consideration, even though they are not often meant to be constructive. On the other hand, the Italian and French press didn't question the role of the EU institutions, or their accountability, maintaining their high opinion of the EU. The *Financial Times*, which many on the Continent suspect of being a player in the great game of speculation⁸¹, has hosted the best articles on Greece *because* of its non-ideological attitude. Even if the newspaper is seen as very pro-European in the British contest, it cannot rely on the europhile received wisdom of its readership and has, therefore, to be more explicit and accurate in explaining its opinions. The extremely 'protective' attitudes of other media have not been, in the end, beneficial to the EU and one could argue that the EU, to survive and enter into a new, more mature phase, needs a less dogmatic approach; one in which the press is not scared to talk about democratic issues within the EU or to ask for more accountability from the institutions, so that people will not be so ready to believe that the sovereignty of their State is being devolved and put into the hands of faceless bureaucrats, just to please the markets.

⁷⁷ A. Evans-Pritchard, “Europe to go for the nuclear response to salvage the EMU”, *The Daily Telegraph*, May 10th 2010.

⁷⁸ B. Waterfield, “Don't come here for help if you hit financial trouble, EU tells Britain”, *The Daily Telegraph*, May 12th 2010.

⁷⁹ B. Waterfield, “EU bid to run economy”, *The Daily Telegraph*, March 26th 2010.

⁸⁰ B. Waterfield, “Brussels ready to fight Tories in economic power-grab”, *The Daily Telegraph*, March 27th 2010.

⁸¹ In the next chapter this point of view will be expressed by some of the EU correspondents interviewed.

III – With the benefit of hindsight: Brussels correspondents talk about the debt crisis

In the Brussels press room, everybody agrees: the debt crisis has radically changed the way journalists report about the European Union. The times of the long phone calls in which every correspondent had to persuade their editor that a EU story was worth publishing are over, at least for now. In the current situation, newsrooms are likely call their people in Brussels and ask them for one, two or even three articles every day. This is an evolution that possibly has not changed one of the enduring cornerstones of the EU correspondents' mentality, as described by the French journalists Yves Clarisse and Jean Quatremer⁸²: "The feeling of taking part in an historical project," they write, "that is fragile, threatened and misunderstood by public opinion could have helped to minimize the problems of the communitarian construction. Some of them may have succumbed to a kind of 'European reason of State' where the drifts of a bureaucracy which is sometimes blind are dealt with understanding, or even deliberately ignored⁸³." This, for example, could be the reason behind the strategy of the *Financial Times* to frequently change its Brussels correspondent. The other risk is that a reporter becomes too accustomed to the complexities of the operations and language of the EU institutions and forgets the reflex of explaining them to the wider public, which is mainly illiterate on European matters. Those are old challenges that now, more than ever, have to be tackled: the debt crisis is forcing the press to express an infinite series of extremely technical and often byzantine policies that directly affect to an unprecedented scale the lives of EU citizens. This sea-change calls for an overhaul of the narrative about Europe, as some Brussels correspondents point out. Peter Spiegel, Bruno Waterfield, Andrea Bonanni, Luigi Offeddu, Adriana Cerretelli and Philippe Ricard are in the frontline in reporting every day from Brussels. Their point of view, expressed in the newspapers we have analysed before (with the sole exception of Cerretelli, who writes for the Italian business paper *Il Sole-24 Ore*), provides a wide range of thoughtful opinions about the impact of the debt crisis on journalism in Brussels.

A/ A turning point for the European Union or a step backwards?

In the middle of the last decade, it was not uncommon to hear people talking in different languages or

⁸² Y. Clarisse – J. Quatremer, *Les maîtres de l'Europe*, Grasset, Paris 2005.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

in a plain Euro-English about Europe in the restaurants and the cafés of the gloomy European quarter in Brussels. The same debate was reflected in the press. “The kind of writing we had before was much more lofty and theoretical, with quotes from Schuman⁸⁴ and Monnet⁸⁵ and a perpetual attention at the role of the EU”, sighs Luigi Offeddu, correspondent of the *Corriere della sera* since 2007, stating: “The debt crisis brought us down to earth and it was painful”. The same point of view is shared by Philippe Ricard, for 9 years the correspondent of *Le Monde*. “The agenda is dictated by reality and not by the institutions anymore”, he says, adding that the crisis has “certainly completely modified the way we cover Europe”. This is true both on a national level, ie the way the coverage of national politics take into account the EU policies, and on a European level, ie the way the reports are made from Brussels. “Undoubtedly, in what concerns Italy, the reading is different. The dominant filter has changed, also because the survival of Europe is linked to the debt crisis”, says Adriana Cerretelli, who has been reporting for the Italian financial paper *Sole-24 Ore* for decades now. This evolution has been obviously perceived also by the UK eurosceptical press, like the *Daily Telegraph*. “The debt crisis has triggered much more coverage of the summits, more discussions, more pieces on how the EU works,” according to Bruno Waterfield, the *Telegraph*’s man in Brussels. “Some subjects we used to write about have been upstaged by the crisis, which is overwhelming”, notes Andrea Bonnani from *La Repubblica*.

This would look like good news for Europe but often the focus is not on the EU institutions, as we have seen in the previous chapter. “The European institutions have been neglected, not without reason, also because the institutional situation of the new EU is quite different and the decisions have been taken much more by the governments”, says Cerretelli, adding that “the president of the Commission, José Manuel Barroso, tried hard to emerge, but he does not exist anymore”. A further explanation comes from Philippe Ricard, who agrees that the Commission “hardly exists” in the current landscape. “The press is indifferent towards what is not in the frontline, and that is the harshest possible criticism”, he states. Peter Spiegel arrived in Brussels as the bureau chief for the *Financial Times* in June 2010, when “the crisis had already started, and this has an impact on my view”, he explains. From his point of view “the Commission has been very proactive” in suggesting possible solutions, but Germany and France responded in a “very critical” way, showing a striking “lack of interplay” among the different actors. According to Bonanni, “the EU Commission is no more than a secretariat now” and “France and Germany have been more dominating than ever”. This did not happen without raising some perplexities in the press, as we have seen in the previous chapter.

⁸⁴ Robert Schuman (1886-1963) was twice prime minister of France, a reformist minister of Finance and a Foreign minister. He was instrumental in building post-war European and trans-Atlantic institutions and is regarded as one of the founders of the European Union, the Council of Europe and NATO.

⁸⁵ Jean Monnet (1888 –1979) was a French political economist and diplomat. He is regarded by many as a chief architect of European Unity and is regarded as one of its founding fathers. Never elected to public office, Monnet worked behind the scenes of American and European governments.

“We criticised the Commission before and we still do it, denouncing the fact that all the decisions were taken in Berlin”, says Bonanni, adding that the EU institutions have “enormous responsibilities, given that they raised the alarm with such a delay that, for Greece, it was too late to act. They had no vision and no strength.” Ricard partly agrees: “The shortcomings in supervision are not just due to the Commission, but also to France and Germany. The Commission was not put in a condition to monitor”.

B/ Taming the eurosceptical beast

The exchange of points of view between the eurosceptical front and the pro-European continental press has always been problematic. The two parties tend to ignore one another and there are seldom serious debates between them. “Very often, when we think of euroscepticism we think of the UK, but now it is everywhere, in France, in Spain”, points out Spiegel, warning that “in the long term it might have an impact” and that “one ignores it is at his own peril.” Some like to see their arguments challenged, while some others think that nothing good can come from those who don’t believe in Europe. “I never agree with eurosceptics”, states Andrea Bonanni, and he explains that some British newspapers “act defending vested interests and not by belief. Their interest is almost a speculative one and they rely on some sources only, the ones that endorse the market trends”. This, according to Bonanni, is often the case with the *Wall Street Journal*. “They have spent the last 10 years saying the euro will not survive, but they never wrote a single article explaining that some lobbies were fighting for this outcome. This is not only ideologically wrong, but also unethical and unprofessional”, he argues. Adriana Cerretelli observes the same trend in the Financial Times, “which is rowing against the Eurozone”. In her opinion, this is not a reason against considering their arguments. “Unfortunately I very much agree with many of the things that the eurosceptic press writes and I think it is necessary to read it to become more critical and to understand that Europe has to do better than it is if it wants to survive. Europhiles should read it more often”, she says. According to Luigi Offeddu, in the eurosceptic press there are often “easy, seductive arguments”, in particular when it comes to eurocrats’ salaries and expenses issues. “But then I always think that the EU does not come from outer space, but is made of what every member state puts in it”, he observes.

C/ Mistakes were made

One could even feel embarrassed reading what the newspapers wrote two years ago, in a situation of deep turmoil, trying to understand quickly what was going on. Journalists are no prophets, and should

not be. But with hindsight, the main problems occur when the report is too ideological, too dogmatic. This might age quickly, whereas an accurate analysis that tries to consider all the different aspects without using any ideological 'lens' will probably stay and survive over time.

Therefore two years are a fair amount of time to begin drawing conclusions on the coverage of a story like the Greek and the subsequent debt crises. Peter Spiegel confesses that he has regrets concerning the way the newspaper has reported it. "We should have covered the human impact of the crisis much more", he says. "*The Wall Street Journal*, for instance, had this terrific article on the rise of the suicide rates in Greece in the wake of the crisis. We were too focused on the leaders. We should have been ahead of the *indignados* movement by covering the impact of the austerity measures on the average EU citizens," he adds, pointing out an attitude which has always been very widespread: to talk about the Europeans and Europe as if the two things were separate. This paved the way for some movements, like the *indignados*, where euroscepticism does not come from the conservative side but from young people, usually well-read and well-travelled, often multilingual, who see Europe as something distant and not helpful at all.

Bonnani regrets that the width of the crisis was not understood sooner. "We did not catch on quickly enough that in the line of fire there was not just Greece, but the entire Eurozone and its cohesion mechanisms, and we trusted Merkel when she said that Greece would have been never allowed to fail". Oddly enough, Waterfield from *The Telegraph* uses the same words: "I think that early on during the crisis I should have been more alert that Greece was a symptom, and not the cause. But no surprise that most of the UK were behind the curve, since they did not have a correspondent in Frankfurt". According to Ricard, in the debt crisis there are questions that seem taboo when they first appear and which soon become the main topic. "For instance, the restructuring of the Greek debt was no more than an academic debate at the beginning, and then turned into a political issue and I feel that I have somehow missed this transition", he says. "It is hard to catch to the right trend at the right moment, because there is always a tension between self-fulfilling prophecies and things as they are. At *Le Monde* we decided to tell it like it is, even though the dissolution of the euro is not at all the newspaper's stance. But we cannot do any self-censorship, or the risk is that we will be a war too late", he states.

Adriana Cerretelli believes that the press has suffered one of its biggest failures in recent times. "The international press has been divided, just like in a stadium, by making a distinction between good northern people and bad southerners, by using old stereotypes like the Nazi Germans or the lazy Greeks", she stresses. Looking at what the European newspapers wrote in the wake of the Greek crisis, a reader might have the impression that everybody saw what he wanted to see in the Greek case: the

failures of left wing governments⁸⁶, the evil speculation on the markets, the resurgence of a German superpower, even US imperialism. Surprisingly, from the very beginning of the case, Greece became like a guinea-pig for the survival of the Eurozone, in what seemed to be an attempt to construct a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The divide between eurosceptics and europhiles is not a debate. The two fronts are stubbornly entrenched and their lack of dialogue is perfectly illustrated by the following two episodes. *The Daily Telegraph* was the first written media to interview Herman Van Rompuy, the president of the EU Council, and, apart from the very unflattering title – “Will the grey mouse roar?”⁸⁷ – the tone and the questions are surprisingly benevolent and the answers of Van Rompuy placid and conciliatory towards the British point of view. In fact, it is not an interview at all, but more a mutual recognition of an impossible dialogue. Not even the usual sore point came up for discussion, as if, in the end, there was nothing that could change the reality of a newspaper who doesn’t want to be persuaded and of a EU which does not even bother to use some rhetorical weapons to defend itself. But the recognition of this gap sometimes takes an unpleasant turn, as happened on the evening of September 28th 2011 on BBC's 'Newsnight', with the fierce anti-European commentator Peter Osborne and the spokesperson of EU Economic commissioner Olli Rehn, Amadeu Altafaj-Tardiu, among the guests. Answering a question on whether he thought it necessary for the EU to apologise for the lack of leadership shown in the debt crisis, the spokesperson – a smart and competent person that has to face every day an infinite series of questions at the Midday briefing of the EU Commission - repeated the mantra that 'we need to have a strong European response' and that 'European leaders are taking hard political decisions'. This answer induced Osborne to repeatedly call Altafaj 'that idiot from Brussels'. The presenter, Jeremy Paxman, for once acted unprofessionally and did not ask Osborne to stop. The unpleasant episode ended with the EU spokesperson leaving the room. Many European commentators focused, inevitably, on the rudeness of Osborne and Paxman, which is indisputable, but none of them questioned the EU Commission’s imprudence in sending on air a spokesperson, and not for example an EU official, who had to stick to the message and could therefore just say platitudes. This was imprudent, even more so in front of an unfriendly British audience.

⁸⁶ At the time Papandreou was among the few socialists leaders in a EU dominated by center-to-right governments.

⁸⁷ B. Waterfield – A. Michaels, “Will the grey mouse roar?”, *The Daily Telegraph*, April 3rd 2010.

Conclusions

The crisis triggered by the underreported mischief of the Greek authorities has been huge and changed the face of reporting from Brussels, and of the EU itself. It proved, first and foremost, the importance of always keeping a sharp eye on the activities of every institution, even those which are apparently more trustworthy, like the EU Commission and the EU Parliament. This would suggest, once and for all, that the EU project has entered a more mature phase, one in which its institutions are considered strong enough and worthy of serious criticism. Not that there has not been any criticism, so far: the newspapers that I have analysed are full of clever remarks and the hard work of EU reporters deserves much respect. Still, the variety of points of view and the lack of dialogue between the different fronts raise some questions that have to do first and foremost with objectivity. With the sole exception of the *Financial Times*, a newspaper whose readership is mainly international and has, as main common interest, the events on the financial markets, all the newspapers have proven to be biased by national interests. On the europhile side, reporters tend to reflect in the EU the image of their own countries and they rarely observe what happens in Brussels without looking through the lens of their national political debate. It is true in the case of France, where Europe is often a projection of their own ideal, and it is true for Italy, where the EU is often used to play the ‘bad cop’ in the national political landscape, either by imposing austerity measures or by taking a stance on some sensitive internal issues. The criticisms regarding Europe are often the same - too bureaucratic, too obscure, too expensive – but their dose never trespasses a certain threshold: the EU has to stay the way it is because it has become a participant in the national dialogue. Often, it is the steadiest and most immutable one.

On the other hand, the eurosceptic front which is, it is worth recalling, not only British but also Scandinavian, German, French and by now also Greek, indulges in the opposite manipulation: by minimizing the beneficial contributions of the EU and their impact on people’s everyday life, they do not give their readership the tools to make their own judgment on an entity that deeply affects their lives. This sometimes goes as far as denying reality, preventing every possible contribution to a positive evolution of the EU, a project in which every country, even the more reluctant ones, is deeply entangled. The UK has opted out of many EU policies, but is nevertheless more dependent on the EU than the *Daily Telegraph* would wish. Explaining the benefits of the EU would probably lead some readers to change their view, or maybe not. But to fuel their hatred towards Brussels instead of accepting a reality and trying to improve it is not only wrong, it is also irresponsible. If the EU is going to survive, it has to change its shape and become much more transparent and closer to its citizens - not only through some dull and rhetorical communication campaigns, but through a genuine demonstration

of its willingness to act in a transparent way, with the ability and readiness to react to the requests of its citizens. This can happen only if the press, which plays a truly pivotal role, gets rid of its prejudices – first of all the uncritical ones – and starts questioning in a tougher way the behaviour of the EU institutions. EU reporting has to enter a new phase, one in which it is not just expenses and corruption scandals that intermittently fall under the spotlight, but where some more fundamental questions are raised irrespective of the received wisdom on Europe, both on the eurosceptic and on the europhile side. The national bias, which is understandable and will hardly disappear, has to leave some space to the scrutiny of the EU in itself. The risks of not doing so have been clearly shown in the Greek case.

As a smart observer noted, the problem with EU communication is that it has very often to communicate a compromise. And a compromise, by definition, does not belong to anybody. “Nobody falls in love with the internal market”, as Jacques Delors used to say. That is why the press has now more than ever to take the lead in performing, to quote Juergen Habermas, “the dual function hitherto performed by the quality press, namely that of satisfying the demand for information and for education while generating a profit”⁸⁸. Europe has always been a delicate object for the press, a difficult one to sell to the wider public. It is also one in which the press, in Brussels, has some very challenging tasks, which can be summarized in the following way. Firstly, as we have already mentioned, it has to guarantee transparency and act as a watchdog for three institutions (the European Commission, the European Parliament and the EU Council) that have received a share of the member States’ sovereignty and that are, in the case of the Commission, unelected. The second one would be to help understanding an entity, the European Union, which is still in part under construction and whose functioning is at the same time very technical and structured and, as it is the case at present, very fluid. This role is particularly hard to fulfill, but it is also vital in the interests of the EU itself, which ought to be prevented from becoming too unbalanced. The third task is to communicate, i.e. to explain to the wider public the decision that are being taken in Brussels and that are, most of the time, compromises. To make the EU comprehensible and to make citizens part of the project is, probably, the most challenging task of all and needs sheer intellectual honesty and a deep personal commitment towards objectivity⁸⁹. There is a fourth aspect, one that has to do with the creation of the EU as an identity and of an EU citizenship, or public sphere. Old recipes will prove useless if one does not take into consideration the new identity of Europeans. The fact that the EU project greatly benefited in the past from the visionary idea of “exorcising history”, to use the words of Jean Monnet in his *Mémoires*, and that its supporters always stressed the risk of going back to the pre-war divisions, proved to be an insufficient reason to defend it under any circumstance. And “exorcising the markets” cannot be a

⁸⁸ J. Habermas, “Media, Markets and Consumers”, in *Europe: The Faltering Project*, p. 132.

⁸⁹ A high-level EU diplomat, who spoke on condition of anonymity, underlined that one of the issues with a sophisticated system like the EU is that “the subjects – countries, institutions, officials – are judged not only for what they are, but also for what they could become if a virtuous circle is triggered”.

permanent replacement. If one cares about the markets, which some hardliners think should not be a priority in a democracy, one would discover that a structured and credible political system is more likely to respond effectively to them than a messy and incoherent set of policies. In addition, the decision-making at European level has immensely evolved since the times of post-war and its communication has become even more arduous. That might explain the reason why Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy have been so easily replacing the EU institutions as the ‘face of Europe’: their message, though incoherent at times, was one of a duo and not, as it would be if the different EU stakeholders were talking, the rather messy one of a bad orchestra. They have simplified the message and, winning the battle of communication, they have also gained a winning edge on the political front.

Europe belongs to those who are able to communicate it. Of course, Merkel and Sarkozy are the leaders of the two largest EU economies and are therefore entitled to take game-changing decisions, in particular when those decisions entail the disbursement of large amount of taxpayers’ money. But they took the easy option of filling the vacuum left by the EU Commission that they themselves contributed to weakening and, trumpeting their commitment to the EU ideal, they changed the face of the EU in a way that will be hard to mend. The second consequence of the communication deficit of the EU institutions and of the lack of clarity of the EU functioning is that it gives leeway to the more destructive fringes of the eurosceptical side. As we have clearly seen, the *Daily Telegraph* can seduce its readership with easy arguments, often brilliantly assembled, that give the impression of a seamless reasoning. Decisions too complicated to be easily defended are constantly bashed with razor-sharp titles that are appealing even to those who appreciate the decisions taken. This appeal comes from the fact that those opinions are simple, that they often play with the conservative instinct of the readers and that they do not come from a compromise. Therefore they are extremely communicable. On the pro-European front, there are just two ideas that can prove to have the same power: the preservation of peace within the EU after the Second World War and the almost uninterrupted economic and social progress and improvement of the life of EU citizens. The first, as was said before, does not have the same impact on the new generations of Europeans, whereas the second has simply been proven to be impossible in the long term. The benefits brought by the EU are, nevertheless, numerous, but they are not of the kind one “falls in love” with, as Delors would say. From the increased competition in many sectors to the lower tariffs for international phone roaming and from the safety standards for food and products to the effective and generous EU funding for regions and companies, European citizens are surrounded by inputs coming from Brussels and that can have a beneficial impact on their life. But with the debt crisis the old all-encompassing project has been debased and replaced by a completely different and arduous task: winning over the financial markets.

At the beginning of 2012, the results are mixed. The bankruptcy of Greece seems to be just a matter of time and other countries have been dragged into the mire. The single currency is weaker than it was two years ago and Europe has never been so divided, with public opinion in different countries becoming increasingly touchy about EU affairs. The UK has used its veto on financial services and the debate in Europe is still dominated by Germany and France, even though the appointment of Mario Monti as a prime minister in Italy and his innovative EU agenda has slightly changed the balance. Compared to two years ago, the crisis has become notably a social one, with protesters all over the EU accusing the Brussels institutions of many wrongdoings. To be an EU correspondent is probably harder than ever, because their work has become increasingly focused on explaining the technicalities of the rescue mechanisms. But in doing so, they should avoid every complacent attitude, that could prove costly in the future. Journalism has, among the other tasks, the one of preventing the system from collapsing under the weight of its own flaws. That is why it should never become organic to the system and always keep the necessary distance. The relatively recent rejections of the EU Constitution by the Netherlands and France in 2005 and of the EU Treaty by Ireland in June 2008 are there to remind us that European citizens may not always regard the EU in as positive a light as hoped for by the officials in Brussels. The press can act as a bridge between Brussels and EU citizens, by contributing to the strengthening of the EU and opening the way for people to benefit from a fully democratic project.

There is a third all-encompassing ideal that could replace post-war narrative as the main *raison d'être* of the European project and that has probably already started doing so. To cope effectively with globalization, small countries do not have enough strength to act alone and the risk for them is to be submerged by the tide of emerging economies. If the EU did not already exist, it would probably be created now to tackle this issue. But to face this task, the EU has to put order in its own house and try to gain the support of as many citizens as possible. Otherwise, it might become just an empty box.

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