

## Representations of the Economic Crisis and Austerity Politics

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In the period between the 2009 and 2014 elections to the European Parliament, the international economic recession and related global debt crisis impacted seriously in several European Union (EU) member states. Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Cyprus all required external financial support. The word ‘Troika’ entered the vocabulary in these countries – and was added to the EU’s extensive lexicon – as economic sovereignty was surrendered in return for financial support from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the European Central Bank (ECB) and the European Commission (EC). Similarly, the word ‘austerity’ came, in many countries, to describe the package of taxation increases, expenditures reductions and other economic reforms required as part of a Troika support program. The rights and wrongs of debt fuelled growth and bank bailouts packages shaped political discourse not just in member states seeking sovereign external support but also placed great strain on the European project and raised real questions about the very the future of the eurozone.

Our analysis of posters and broadcast spots confirms that the economic crisis and issues related to austerity played a crucial role in the 2014 campaign. Moreover, the economic crisis was an important theme not just in the campaigns of member states directly impacted by bailout programs – or having to adjust to lower growth rates – but also in countries that more favorably weathered the economic storm. In this chapter, we focus on a number of the bailout member states – Ireland, Greece, Portugal and Cyprus – and several other countries, which experienced significant economic decline – Italy and Malta – to gauge how the economic turmoil impacted on political advertising strategies in the 2014 elections.

The analysis of the representation of the economic crisis and austerity policies in posters and spots in these six countries is preceded by an overview of the economic and political situation prior to the European campaign and an assessment of how this environment impacted upon each member state. Our comparative analysis investigates not just the impact of the economic recession in the 2014 campaign on these six countries but also seeks to determine whether – and by how much – that theme was influenced by local practices and political traditions.

The discussion draws on our content analysis data set generated from the assessment of posters and videos in the 2014 European Parliament election. The subsample in this chapter includes 321 items – 188 posters

and 133 videos – which enables significant comparisons of trends and differences in the six member states under investigation. Moving beyond this core group of countries, in the final section of the chapter we examine how themes such as ‘austerity’ were also evident in other member states and discuss how the economic backdrop to the 2014 elections was evident in posters and broadcast spots produced by parties and candidates across the EU.

## ITALY

The economic crisis and austerity dominated social and political agendas and influenced political and economic life in Italy. The fall of the Berlusconi government in November 2011 – having obtained a strong majority three years previously – was due to the severity of the economic downturn. The crisis in Italy was evident in job losses and an increase in the spread between German and Italian government bond yields. Even the subsequent technocratic government, led by the economist Mario Monti – who had been international advisor at Goldman Sachs and EU Commissioner – and the Enrico Letta-led government (that replaced the Monti government in April 2013), were both formed with the goal of dealing with the economic crisis and honouring the economic parameters imposed on Italy by the EU. The theme of Europe and the economic crisis dominated media coverage of the February 2013 national elections (Belluati and Serricchio 2014).

This heightened focus on European themes, on the one hand, while, on the other hand, increasing scepticism towards the European project was the backdrop to the European elections in Italy – and elsewhere in the EU – in 2014 (Schuck et al. 2011). Indeed, there was a 12 percent decline in the degree of attachment Italians felt towards Europe between 1992 and 2013.<sup>1</sup> It is, therefore, no great surprise that an analysis of posters and spots produced by the main Italian political parties shows the centrality of Europe – not such an obvious phenomenon within second-order electoral campaigns – and the importance of themes such as austerity and the economic crisis (Reif and Schmitt 1980; Van der Brug and Van der Eijk 2007). Only 2 out of the 11 Italian parties did not prioritize these themes, namely the Greens (focusing on environmental and ecological themes) and Scelta Civica per l’Europa, established by former prime minister Monti and

the only openly euro-optimistic party, which presented Europe as an opportunity without referring to the economic crisis or austerity.

The campaigns of all the other parties focused on Europe while also displaying increased scepticism towards Europe although the tone used varied in relation to the particular message or interpretation being offered. The main opposition parties on the right and on the left of the political spectrum directly linked the economic crisis to European economic policies.

The Lega Nord – a party founded in the late 1980s seeking independence for northern Italy and strongly pro-Europe but allied in 2014 with the French National Front – defined their campaign with a proposal to leave the euro. The party went as far as putting a ‘No Euro’ logo next to its electoral symbol. In Lega Nord’s spots, ‘ordinary citizens’ claimed, ‘I am defending my economy. That doesn’t mean I am against Europe. I am against this Europe. That’s why I’m saying “down with the Euro”’; they also claimed that ‘the Euro is a crime against Europe and its people’. The Five Star Movement (M5S), a new party founded by the former comedian Beppe Grillo, which positioned itself outside a traditional right/left axis, also proposed leaving the euro.<sup>2</sup> In one spot, Grillo stated, ‘Let’s change this Europe so that it becomes a real community and not a union of banks, budgets and spread’.

The economic crisis and austerity policies imposed by a Europe dominated by vested interests were the main themes of the left coalition, ‘Another Europe with Tsipras’. As well as the originality of having a list with the name of a candidate from another member state – the only case in the history of European elections – Tsipras List’s political program stood out for its emphasis on economic themes and austerity. ‘Let’s unite the left and the people of Europe against austerity and a Europe of the banks’ were the words on one of Tsipras List’s most prominent posters.

Even Forza Italia – a party founded by Berlusconi – primarily campaigned on the seriousness of the economic crisis, having previously downplayed and denied the extent of the crisis when in government. One of Forza Italia’s spots observed, ‘The politics of austerity imposed on us by Europe has worsened the lives of Italians, increased the number of unemployed and impoverished the middle class. It’s time we said stop to the bureaucrats of Brussels (. . .) What is needed is a fiscal shock’. This EU-critical position was reinforced by posters, which stated, ‘More Italy in Europe, less Europe in Italy’. If we compare this slogan with one used by Berlusconi in the 2009 European elections – ‘In order to count more in Europe’ – the changed attitude towards the EU is clearly evident.

Defending Italian sovereignty against Europe was the central theme of the electoral campaign of Fratelli d'Italia, a right-wing party previously allied with Berlusconi, until it adopted more radical positions. Even if the themes of the economic crisis and austerity were not explicitly mentioned in posters and spots, the campaign slogan – 'Raise your head in Europe' – expressed criticism towards Brussels. Similar themes featured in the posters of Nuovo Centro Destra – formed after Berlusconi's group fell apart, but unlike Forza Italia and Fratelli d'Italia, now part of the government of national unity with the centre-left Democratic Party – 'In Europe, Italy comes first' and 'Against Europe of the bureaucrats'.

The Democratic Party – the main Italian party, leading the incumbent government and heir of two traditional pro-European parties the Christian Democrats and the Communist Party – also adopted a critical attitude towards Europe. The poster slogan – 'Europe must change direction' – was even further reinforced in commercials: 'Europe has given 1600 billion euro to save the banks. This money must be given to the workers who are paying for the crisis. Italy is changing direction, now it's up to Europe'. A comparison with the Democratic Party's slogan from 2009 clearly shows the change in attitude between the two electoral periods, 'Wake up. Europe takes care of those who lose their jobs. Berlusconi does not'.

What we find in the Italian campaign in 2014 was the strong presence of themes around the economic crisis and austerity. These two themes were, however, treated by the different parties in interlinked subthemes: exit from the euro; opposition to an EU in which banking concerns were too prominent; criticisms of EU institutions and related bureaucracy; promoting greater national sovereignty; the excessive German political dominance; the necessity for development policies; and defending the social state. These subthemes can be positioned at opposite ends of an axis ranging from strongly critical of the EU to EU-sceptic, in favor of a progressive Italian disengagement, to a less negative vision of Europe, but one that needs reform.

In summary, in political advertising in the 2014 elections in Italy there was a profound change in positioning by Italian political parties towards the EU with a profound reorientation of some traditionally pro-European parties to less EU-optimistic stances. Our analysis also shows the emergence of new parties defined by Euro critical outlooks – a new development in Italian politics – as well as the birth of innovative transnational alliances in a

Euro-sceptic sense, in particular between the Northern League and the French National Front and the M5S and UK Independent Party in Britain.

## IRELAND

The European Parliament elections in 2014 came just over three years after the most dramatic national parliament election in the history of the Irish State. The repercussions of Ireland's economic collapse – which necessitated an external bailout program in November 2010 – were felt in the ballot box in 2011 when voters dealt a massive rejection to the incumbent Fianna Fáil-Green Party coalition. Fianna Fáil – which had been the largest party after every parliamentary election since 1932 – saw its vote collapse from 41.6 percent in 2007 to 17.5 percent in 2011 (and a loss of 57 seats) while the Green Party lost all its seats in parliament.

Ireland's economy was badly exposed to the global financial crisis in 2008. The country's banking sector was overly reliant on revenues from property lending while the state had expanded spending and reduced income taxes based on an apparently ever-increasing but ultimately debt-fuelled banking-property boom. A full-scale banking collapse was postponed with the introduction of a €440 billion state-backed scheme guaranteeing the assets and liabilities of the six main financial institutions. Despite significant taxation increases, and reductions in public spending including cuts to public sector wages, by late 2010 the fiscal and banking situation had reached a point where external support was required. A €85 billion bailout deal was agreed in November 2010 with the IMF, the ECB and the EC. Within 3 months, the incumbent coalition was swept from power. The new Fine Gael-Labour coalition, however, followed similar austerity policies as previously agreed with the Troika. By the time the European Parliament elections were held in May 2014, the coalition's honeymoon period was long over. There were nascent signs of economic recovery, but, at that stage, any uplift was still too slight to ease public anger at the economic hardship that had continued for almost 6 years.

The election results in Ireland were dramatic. Smaller left parties and populist non-party/independent candidates – who campaigned against the Troika program and austerity policies with promises of taking their message to Brussels – were the big winners. The establishment (and centrist) parties – Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Labour – all saw their support decline. We might have expected to see this major economic debate reflected in political advertising in the 2014 elections. Yet, not even the

economic crisis altered traditional campaign practices in Ireland where the place of the individual candidate dominates over party or policy message – a factor heavily influenced by Ireland’s proportional representation-single transferable vote electoral system.

Posters of the main parties in the national parliament – Fine Gael and Labour in government; Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin in opposition – strongly promoted individual candidates. The posters featured the candidate photograph and party logo – and in some cases, the logo of the party’s European Parliament group. Occasionally, these posters included a generic but passive slogan shared by all the party candidates. Posters in 2014 were similar to those in previous European campaigns in Ireland. Interestingly, despite Sinn Féin’s strident anti-austerity language in media debates, the party’s view of the crisis did not feature in campaign posters. In that regard, Sinn Féin was no different to the traditional parties in promoting personality over policy or political positioning on campaign posters. In a similar vein, two successful independent candidates – Míng Flanagan and Nessa Childers – both vocal opponents of austerity policies – also followed this established pattern. Childers did, however, include a slogan on her poster – ‘Standing up for you in Europe’ – but its passive tone left ambiguous her stance on the EU. The one major exception in 2014 was Paul Murphy, an outgoing Socialist Party (PS) Member of European Parliament (MEP). Murphy’s posters were also heavily personalized, but unlike other candidates he gave prominence to policy issues, in particular, opposition to measures such as new water charges and expenditure reductions required as part of the Troika program. Murphy’s posters included words such as ‘resist’ and slogans such as ‘After six years, enough is enough’ and ‘We live to live, not just exist’.

Scope for political advertising on television and radio is limited in Ireland on account of a long-standing legislative prohibition on paid broadcast advertising of a political nature. RTÉ, the state-owned public broadcaster, made transmission time available during the campaign through a system of free party political broadcasts (PPBs). In these PPBs, all the parties referenced the backdrop of the economic crisis while also majoring on a more positive future, as at the time of the election in 2014 there were some initial signs of an economic upturn.

There was generally more active negative advertising in the PPBs than found in the passive nature of Irish poster advertising. For example, an attempt to remind voters of the past deeds of the previous government was evident in the Fine Gael spot which opened with text on screen offering a

timeline reminder of events since the onset of the economic crisis in 2008 including the arrival of the Troika prior to the party's election to government. Seeking to create a bridge between pre- and post-2011 the spot opened with black and white footage of Troika officials arriving at government buildings in Dublin. The spot also included a familiar technique from past PPBs in Irish elections with interview clips from a representative young person, a pensioner and a small business owner, all referencing progress achieved by the Fine Gael-led coalition. Party leader and Taoiseach (prime minister) Enda Kenny summed up the approach in his contribution: 'When this government was elected three years ago Ireland was in a very bad place. Our reputation internationally was in shreds . . . [ . . . ] Thanks to the sacrifices made by the Irish people there is a light at the end of the tunnel . . .' Overall, there were no major surprises in the political advertising strategies of Irish parties and candidates – personality was still prominent with posters largely policy and ideology free zones while the limited number of PPBs were somewhat more negative and dominated by the themes of economic crisis, austerity and a better future.

## PORTUGAL

European politics was a dominant issue in the European elections in Portugal in 2014, influenced by the post-2008 economic and social crisis. The position of parties towards European topics and the role of the EU in the Portuguese financial assistance program were the most prominent issues both in the political agenda as well as in party competition (Lisi 2014). After nearly 3 years in power – and having implemented the austerity measures that derived from the intervention of the Troika – it was generally expected that voters would punish the Social Democrat/Christian Democratic People's Party (PSD/CDS-PP) coalition government (Almeida 2014). In the end, the media generally voiced surprise at the electoral results for these two mainstream parties, as the governing right-wing coalition was not strongly penalized by voters. In fact, the PS won a minor victory, taking eight seats in comparison to seven in the previous election, while the 'Portugal Alliance' coalition – made up of the right-wing government parties – lost three seats (from 10 to 7), but at 27.7 percent was actually only 4 percent less than the vote of the main opposition party (Comissão Nacional de Eleições 2014).

Portugal had sought financial support from the Troika in 2011, but the economic crisis had been on the national agenda since legislative elections



in 2009, won by the Socialists and characterised by polarization between the PS and the PSD, with the former emphasising the importance of implementing Keynesian demand-side measures to stimulate growth and the latter defending fiscal discipline and economic containment policies (Pequito Teixeira et al. 2014: 3). Following fresh elections in June 2011 – against the backdrop of the Troika bailout – the PSD performed strongly but was unable to secure a parliamentary majority. As a result, the PSD formed a coalition with the right-wing CDS-PP; and with 132 of the 230 seats in parliament the new government set about implementing the austerity measures agreed with the Troika (Pequito Teixeira et al. 2014: 4).

The 2014 campaign was defined by fierce attacks against both the incumbent right-wing coalition – for going beyond the austerity measures imposed by the Troika – and the main opposition party, the PS, for leading Portugal to a situation requiring an external bailout in the first place. As such, the crisis theme dominated the campaign: at the national level, by blaming the parties associated with the Troika and austerity politics; and at the international level, reflections on sovereignty and the pros and cons of the European project.

The most recurrent themes in the discussion of the EU, framed against the background of the crisis, were jobs and unemployment, European funds and policies, and the euro. In approximately one-third of posters, Europe was negatively represented, with the euro and the Troika being depicted as a threat to sovereignty and citizens' rights, and the EU as a place where Portugal is not adequately represented.

Within this corpus, several parties supported an exit from the eurozone. The Communist Party of Portuguese Workers (for instance, promoted leaving the euro and returning to a national currency. 'We won't pay!' was the poster's slogan, implying that Portuguese workers would not pay for the sovereign debt crisis. The irreducibility of citizens' rights to the economist logics of the Troika was implied in the poster slogan of the leftist Bloco de Esquerda (BE), which said, 'WE ARE NOT DEBT'. Despite being on the opposite end of the political spectrum, the right-wing extremist National Renovator Party (PNR) shared with the left this opposition to the EU. The PNR exhibited a crossed out EU flag on one of its posters, accompanied by a message defending national sovereignty: 'With us, Portugal is sovereign; Portugal to the Portuguese'.

Several posters and spots appealed to the values of the Portuguese 25 April 1974 Revolution – the military coup organized by the Armed Forces Movement to oust the right-wing regime in place since 1933. This historical linkage was achieved by reproducing the traditional icon of the

carnation and including textual references to the ‘ideals of April’, namely respect for the value of freedom. In this instance, freedom may be read metonymically both as equated with ‘sovereignty’ within the context of a bailout program, but also representing the non-instrumental ideals of a more noble form of politics. The Socialist Alternative Movement, for example, called, in two posters, for a new ‘25 April’, firstly to end ‘politicians’ privileges’ and secondly to ‘block the Troika’. All spots for the opposition PS included archive images of then Prime Minister Pedro Passos Coelho making promises with regard to salaries, taxes, austerity renunciation – none of which were ultimately kept by his coalition government. Following this ‘attack’ strategy, the PS attempted to affirm itself as the guarantor of Obama-style ‘change’, positioning itself as the only party able to lead ‘Portugal and Europe onto a new path’.

The incumbent coalition opted for a less hostile tone, focusing on its economic recovery program and the political achievements, as well as Portugal’s attainments from EU membership in areas such as health, education, industry and agriculture. Having opted not to use posters in the 2014 elections – in order to save €700,000 in campaign expenditure – the governing coalition focused its spots on promoting the importance of the EU as a place of opportunity for Portugal. The radical left-wing and right-wing parties, with the exception of the BE, criticized EU integration and assumed a clearly nationalist position. The leftist Earth Party (*Partido da Terra*) was one of the big surprises in 2014 winning a historic 7 percent national vote. The Earth Party concentrated its virulence on those who take advantage of politics for their own benefit and called for an end to corruption in other more established parties. Generally, however, the prevalent discontent against austerity measures did not lead to significant success for alternative ‘anti-establishment’ political movements, with the government essentially continuing to alternate between the PS, PSD or the PSD and CDS-PP coalition. In fact, amongst the eurozone countries subject to a bailout program, Portugal has been one of the least permeable to political fluctuations between the elections held before and after the crisis (Pequito Teixeira et al. 2014).

## GREECE

The Greek economic crisis, part of the wider European debt crisis, has been amongst other things the result of a malfunctioning public sector, large fiscal deficits, tax evasion, corruption and an enormous increase in public

debt over the previous three decades (Triandafyllidou et al. 2013). On 6 May 2010, the Greek parliament voted to support a bailout deal funded by the IMF, the ECB and the EC. The crisis and the subsequent harsh economic policies brought about significant transformation in the Greek political sphere (Triandafyllidou et al. 2013). The two main political parties New Democracy (conservative) and PASOK (social democratic) both suffered significant losses and new political parties emerged. In this new environment, SYRIZA (radical left-wing) dramatically increased its support: it won 4.6 percent in the 2009 general elections but gained 26.6 percent in the 2014 European elections (in January 2015, the party became the first left-wing party to win a general election in Greece).

The ongoing economic crisis profoundly influenced the 2014 campaign in Greece. The vast majority of political messages concentrated on the crisis and related austerity measures, connecting the domestic situation in Greece mostly in a secondary level to its future in the EU. In both videos and posters, the narratives dealt with the crisis and the country's future, having a mainly domestic character, with 32 of the 40 posters and 21 of the 37 spots focusing on national issues. Two dominant narratives were evident in the political advertisement strategies.

First, New Democracy and PASOK (the latter represented through the 'Olive, Democratic Coalition') sought to emphasize positives for Greece's economy and society in the EU. This positivism was more than evident in the main slogan of ND- 'Steady steps ahead'. The positive stance of these two parties was influenced by their pro-European political ideology and also the fact that they were members of the incumbent coalition at the time of the 2014 elections. Second, in our analysis we found a conflicting narration from the other parties, namely SYRIZA (Coalition of Radical Left), KKE (Communist Party), ADARSYA (Anti-Capitalist Left Coalition for Overthrow), DIMAR (Democratic Left), covering the centre-left/left political spectrum and AN. ELL. (Independent Greeks), Golden Dawn covering the far-right spectrum.

The common denominator in the message of these parties was an emphasis on the problems that Greek society faced due to the implementation of severe austerity measures. This negative narrative was evident in the majority of videos (19/37). It was either connected with a pro-European stance (in the cases of SYRIZA, DIMAR, AN. ELL.) or with an anti-European stance (KKE, ADARSYA, GD). An exception was 'To Potami' (The River), a newly established party, which had a clear pro-EU attitude and a rather neutral stance towards its regional political adversaries. Overall, 18 out of 37 spots

refer to the EU in a positive way; only eight spots had a negative towards the EU and nine were of a neutral nature. On the other hand, with posters, which had a significantly more domestic rationale, there were only seven references to the EU, six of them negative and only one positive.

Negativism is another important point worth emphasising – 19 out of 37 videos and 22 out of 40 posters can be characterised as negative. It is worth noting that the financial crisis and the austerity policies were the source of most of these negative attacks. From the 37 videos, only nine are mere presentations of a party's political program. The main recipients of this negativism were the Greek government (12 times), opposition political parties (10 times) and the EU institutions (eight times). Negativism was also found in posters – 22 of the 40 posters were focused on negative advertising. The main recipients of the posters' negativism were the Greek national government (13 times) and the EU institutions/government (10 times). These results demonstrate the existence of a rather intense domestic political 'battle' as well as a significant sceptical stances by the anti-EU parties, mentioned previously.

In our analysis of the issues in political advertising in Greece in 2014, we found that the economic crisis had an overwhelmingly dominant presence in television spots. Our analysis found that the main issues were the economic crisis (13 times), the need for development (13 times) and unemployment (8 times). As these issues were among the most important negative repercussions of the crisis in socio-economic terms, they became the focal point of the television spots. Several other issues have been mentioned including the EU – in terms of its present and future – banks, taxation and social services. With their use of posters as a form of political advertising, the parties also adopted a rather similar approach with a slightly wider variety of themes. SYRIZA's ideological references to the 'left' (16 times) was found in almost every party poster with the slogan, 'first time left'. The other widely used themes in posters were the economic crisis (seven times), the EU (six times), labour (five times), unemployment (five times), European policies (five times) and salaries (four times).

Within this political communication environment, Greek voters preferred the anti-austerity, pro-European political discourse in the 2014 elections (and in subsequent national elections in 2015), mainly represented by SYRIZA, followed by AN. ELL. Due to their associations with austerity measures, ND and PASOK lost heavily (e.g. PASOK, having won the 2009 national elections with 44 percent, collapsed to 8 percent in the 2014 European elections). The old bi-partisanship was replaced by a new one in

the form of SYRIZA and New Democracy, signifying the importance of the pro-austerity/anti-austerity rationale and the pro-European rhetoric.

## CYPRUS

A few weeks after national elections in February 2011 the new President of Cyprus, Nicos Anastasiades, and his coalition government [DISY (conservative) and DIKO (centre)], was faced with an unprecedented Troika bailout. As in other EU member states impacted by the post-2008 economic downturn, the crisis in Cyprus had knock-on effects on the political system, with increased distrust in political parties and heightened political alienation (see Katsourides 2014, 2013; Christophorou 2012). The issue of Europe became central to national discourse and was a source of politicization (Katsourides 2013). The latter was structured on two issues: (a) the unsuccessful role of the EU in Cyprus' national problem and (b) the EU's inability to deal with crisis issues beyond the imposition of austerity policies (Katsourides 2013).

The expectation in Cyprus was that the European elections in 2014 would offer voters an opportunity to express their discontent at the economic situation in the country. Nevertheless, the campaign actually started rather late reflecting a lack of interest on behalf of the political parties, which treated these elections as 'second-order' affair, as well as the citizens, who showed indifference throughout the campaign. These attitudes were seen in the results and the extremely high rate of abstention. Turnout was almost 44 percent, a historical low for elections in the island. According to post-election surveys, voters abstained not just because of a lack of interest but also to protest against the political class and to send a clear political message regarding the need to punish politicians for the economic collapse and the related decline in quality of life.<sup>3</sup> In addition, despite the fact that the financial crisis provided the opportunity for the emergence of new parties (e.g. the Citizens' Alliance<sup>4</sup>) and the reinvigoration of others (e.g. the extreme right-wing party of ELAM<sup>5</sup>), these new entrants did not gain significant popular support. More specifically, the distribution of seats did not change from 2009, with the conservative DISY holding two seats while increasing its vote share by 1.8 percent (37.7 percent); and the opposition, the communist AKEL, also maintaining two seats despite a drop of 8.4 percent in its vote share (27 percent). The other two parties, DIKO and Movement for Social Democracy (EDEK), each

held a single seat while their vote share declined by 1.5 percent and 3.8 percent, respectively. The new parties did not win any seats.

The most remarkable finding regarding the role of crisis and austerity in the Cypriot campaign was the low degree of attention paid to it by political parties, based on the content of the campaign posters and commercials analyzed. Regarding posters, the main issues raised most frequently related to candidacies ( $n = 20$ ), other values<sup>6</sup> ( $n = 10$ ) and honesty ( $n = 7$ ). If we look at the second and third most salient issues, one further issue emerges: political parties ( $n = 20$  among the second most salient issue and  $n = 12$  among the third most salient issue). Two issues explicitly related to the crisis ('crisis' and 'unemployment') were present only in three posters, all created by the Communist Party (AKEL), which was the main opposition party at the time. These posters refer to high youth and female unemployment rates as well as the worsening economic situation for retirees. All three posters follow the same design pattern, namely the poster is divided into two parts: in the first half, a dully coloured image represents the problem, namely the effects of the crisis in Cyprus, accompanied by text that clarifies the overall message (e.g. 'One in five women experiences unemployment in countries that signed a memorandum'). The second half of each poster depicts the solution to the problem (which is the Communist Party) with phrases such as 'enough!' or 'equality' (as opposed to 'austerity') and the party's main campaign slogan ('Resistance – Dignity – Prospect'). These three posters are among the small number ( $n = 6$ ) characterised by negativity. More implicit references to the crisis were also scarce and either too vague (e.g. the motto 'Together. Collectively. Fight the establishment' by the independent party, Citizens' Alliance) or supportive of the memorandum policies (e.g. the main slogan of the governing party Democratic Rally (DISY), 'We work for the changes that Cyprus needs').

In broadcast spots, the issue of crisis/austerity is more salient. In five out of the 12 commercials, the crisis is the first or second most important issue. Three of these commercials were produced by the new party Citizens' Alliance, the Communist Party (AKEL) and by the coalition of the Movement for Social Democracy (EDEK) and the Green Party. All commercials are negative advertisements, targeting mainly national actors (parties, government, politicians), European political parties or politicians and economic institutions (such as banks). The emotional appeal, focused on anger, is very strong in three of these commercials, which are produced by the smaller parties (Citizens' Alliance and EDEK/Greens). All three commercials invite citizens to 'convert rage and disappointment' into a

'punishment vote'. The crisis is represented not only as a 'misfortune' for the people but also as 'theft' and even 'rape', where the nation is signified as victim through the metaphor of a teenage girl having been raped. With respect to the latter, among the many reactions raised, the most prominent was by the Socialist Women Movement (part of the EDEK party), which argued that presenting the crisis as a rape of a teenage girl in a commercial was 'an unacceptable and immoral act'. The reactions led to the decision by the Cyprus Radiotelevision Authority to block the transmission of the respective commercial. As expected, the leader of the Citizens' Alliance characterised the decision as an act of censorship targeting the popularity of his party. The other two commercials are built on rationality (reliability) and the core message is constructed on a set of antitheses between the official rhetoric of political leaders and the lived reality of citizens: a rhetoric about a successful Europe and a recovering Cyprus versus the reality of unemployment, homelessness, rage and neo-Nazism; Europe as a peaceful force versus Europe's militarism; large corporations' wealth accumulation versus citizens' poverty. AKEL's commercial, in particular, connects citizens' struggles throughout Europe with the Communist Party, which is presented as the people's designated destination and their natural defender.

Despite the vigour of these particular messages, in the campaign itself the themes of crisis and austerity hardly became a focal point of political parties' communication repertoires (at least not in their posters and commercials). The lack of crisis themes can be traced to the role played by the main political parties in Cyprus from the onset of the crisis to the subsequent Troika bailout. The main opposition party, AKEL, lost the 2013 Presidential Elections and suffered a significant blow after being depicted as responsible for the worsening economic situation from 2009 onwards that led to the bailout agreement and the Troika memorandum in 2013. Given that role, an explicit anti-austerity campaign could have backfired on the party. The governing party (DISY) meticulously avoided issues related to the crisis and austerity. It followed a broader rhetoric about the imminent exit from the crisis and the end of austerity, as well as the positive effects of the memorandum on the Cypriot state and economy. Overall, this omission ensured that the issue of the financial crisis did not play a major role in political discourse. This outcome is rather striking, especially for the smaller parties that did not seize the opportunity to make an anti-austerity theme central to their campaigns. A tentative assumption may be that the perception that 'the worst is over' has diffused so widely, that even the opposition political forces hesitated to disrupt this tacit

consensus and upset the delicate balance that has been struck (a feature also of political advertising in the Irish campaign as noted previously).

## MALTA

The state of the economy was an important issue in Malta in 2014, although the campaign could not be defined as being depressingly gloomy. The elections in 2014 followed a general election in March 2013 that brought the Labour Party (PL) to power. Since 1987 its main rival the Nationalist Party (PN) had become the natural party in government before it suffered these two humiliating defeats.<sup>7</sup> Both elections shared similar strategies where PL sustained a celebratory mood aiming at reinforcing the strong support enjoyed by its leader Joseph Muscat, a former MEP. The embattled PN was still trying to reassert itself with a new leader at the helm, Simon Busuttil, who had also served as MEP. The PN also faced financial difficulties and had meagre resources while it tried to regroup its decimated foot soldiers going into the 2014 elections.

In our analysis of political advertising in 2014, we must point out particular traits of the Maltese media system. As observed by Hallin and Mancini, Maltese media are ‘pluralist and polarized’ (2004). Deregulation of the broadcasting sector has also allowed the main parties to privately own radio and television stations (Sammut 2007). More recently, although significant disruptions were observed with the diffusion of the social media, people still form virtual communities that share similar perspectives on politics and lifestyle. Hence, the poster and video advertising in this analysis were merely one aspect in a range of political communication tactics that were employed, where party media and the traditional interpersonal element still had a significant role.

The two main parties were sympathetic to the European project – Malta had joined the eurozone in January 2008 – but their campaigns in 2014 were focused primarily on the national agenda. The small Green Party *Alternattiva Demokratika* (AD) was most EU-focused. Well-known professionals appeared in testimonials to support its slogan, ‘Better Europe, Vote AD’. Yet, while AD has consistently remained an important political voice over the past 25 years, the party had never won seats in national or European elections. The party consistently presents itself as an alternative to the main parties and in the 2014 campaign the young well-known figures pointed out that people who want political change ‘must be ready to vote for it’.



Despite the wider European debate about the economic crisis – and the way it influenced election themes in political advertising in other member states – it is not surprising that the main parties in Malta did not dwell on the crisis, austerity policies or related issues such as the euro currency, banks or taxes. The Maltese economy only briefly entered recession in 2012. When the EU reopened an excessive deficit procedure in 2013, measures to curb public spending were announced and deficit was forecast to shrink to less than two percent by 2016. Expenditure on pensions, welfare and education was not touched. While Europe experienced high unemployment, the government cited official figures that Malta had lower rates (6.3 percent during the national campaign in 2013 and 5.9 percent during the European campaign in 2014). The PL's campaign exuded energy and optimism and the themes in its communications were job creation, foreign investment, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and good governance. PL's extensive campaign was driven by a common slogan 'Malta: Positive Energy' where visual images conveyed dynamism and positivity.

PN rebutted that Labour had not delivered in terms of job creation, health and transparency. Its slogan 'Better Malta' communicated an underlying resentment that it had lost power and a sense that Malta had fared better under PN. The campaign kindled fear that a string of bad decisions by the new government would crush the economy. PN interpreted official national employment figures pessimistically: 'PN always worked to create more job opportunities. One year ago, Joseph Muscat [the current Prime Minister] promised to increase work opportunities. Instead unemployment has risen to 8,000 jobless people', stated one of the television adverts.

Unlike other EU member states, which had experienced economic downturns in the post-2008 period, none of the main political parties in Malta blamed Brussels for national difficulties and they tactfully avoided the contentious issue of immigration. Immigration was a main concern for voters and by far it surpassed concerns on the economy and employment. Although polls revealed that before the European elections 90 percent of voters said they had a positive outlook (40 percent expected life to improve), 57 percent of the respondents were worried about immigration.<sup>8</sup> At EU level, both main Maltese parties had lobbied unsuccessfully to amend the Dublin II Regulation which puts excessive pressures on receiving countries on the periphery of Europe, particularly Malta, an island state that cannot process asylum claims on the European mainland.<sup>9</sup>

The state of public opinion on immigration did leave some room for fringe parties to promote a populist agenda. The far-right party Imperium Europa (IE) campaigned to extradite illegal or irregular immigrants and it engaged in radical racist discourse. The party portrayed Europe as the rightful homeland of white people. ‘We are the only movement that promises you migrant repatriation and pushbacks’ was the key message as it accused the main parties of impotence in the face of Brussels. The IE leader Normal Lowell had previously received a suspended prison sentence when found him guilty of spreading racial hatred. At one point, the Broadcasting Authority, which is the national regulator, censored the original IE electoral video because it clearly fuelled racism and xenophobia. In spite of its populist message, like other Maltese fringe parties, IE won little public support.

*Alleanza Bidla* (Change Alliance) was a two-man effort that advocated Euroscepticism and also expressed concern about immigration. ‘We want to reclaim our national sovereignty so that Malta will regain its independence’ was the main electoral message of this party. It targeted anxious working-class individuals who were not in step with economic restructuring and who feared that traditional life was slowly disappearing. Like all parties they obtained free airtime on Public Broadcasting Services but still their spot was amateurish in presentation and style. It is interesting to note that in this spot women featured in their role as housewives struggling to make ends meet.

## DISCUSSION

It has been argued that in our postmodern society ‘crisis’ is not an exceptional condition but a normal status also involving politics, the economy and society; and in that respect we live in a world in crisis, without future horizons or prospects of overcoming (Revault d’Allonnes 2012). Accepting this thesis, it is, therefore, probably not surprising that the issue of the crisis – as it impacted on the European economy – was at the heart of the 2014 European Parliament election campaign. In terms of political advertising, we have seen how the post-2008 global economic crisis impacted on campaigns in all member states, from North to South, from East to West, with very few exceptions. There were, however, different reactions to the crisis in political advertising not just across different member states but also between

different political parties within the same member state. In this chapter, we have focused on member states, which required Troika support as well as countries such as Italy and Malta where the downturn had a significant economic impact (although the recovery was quicker to take hold in Malta than in other nations). Our analysis highlights how the representation of the economic crisis and austerity policies in the six different electoral campaigns examined in detail was conditioned by several factors. Firstly, the economic situation of the different countries at the time of the election was a factor (better in Malta and Ireland; worst in Italy and Greece). Secondly, the political and ideological position of main national parties towards the EU and their involvement in government at the time of the crisis. Thirdly, political and electoral traditions specific to individual countries.

Broadening our view to other member countries, a wider analysis of political advertising campaigns confirms the influence of the economic crisis in the 2014 elections. For example, in Germany – which weathered the crisis comparatively, well – economic issues were present in the campaigns of all parties. Indeed, the posters of the two mainstream parties, both pro-European parties – the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) – showed certain dissatisfaction with the EU, particularly in the context of economic management (Rafter et al. 2016). One CDU poster noted, ‘Good work and a strong economy. This is how I want Europe’, while one SPD poster had the slogan: ‘A Europe for humans, not a monetary Europe’. With a very different tone the extreme right, the National Democratic Party (NPD), and a new anti-European party, Alternative for Germany (AfD), adopted more strident anti-austerity and anti-EU establishment stances. The NPD produced posters with the text, ‘Save us from the €U bankruptcy’ while AfD’s electoral campaign poster had the message, ‘Stable currency instead of EURO-debts!’

Our analysis in this chapter has shown the economic crisis impacting on political communication strategies with political advertising messages in 2014 that were more questioning of, and frequently more hostile towards, the EU. It is worth noting that our study found a sharp increase in the use of negative campaigning (see Chap. 6). Indeed, in the 2009 election negativity was found in 10 percent of the posters (Mosca and Novelli 2010) whereas by 2014 that figure had increased to 20 percent. In terms of the target of this negative advertising, the findings show that in 2014 greatest hostility was directed at EU institutions followed by other economic institutions. In the

previous elections in 2009, the main targets of negative campaigning were major political rivals, other political parties or the incumbent government. So in this respect the outcome in 2014 is a point of departure and one influenced by the wider economic environment.

What we find in this chapter is a situation in 2014 where parties that tended to be more pro-European adopted a position that was less positive and less enthusiastic about the European project although noticeably without radical changes in their overall attitude towards the EU itself. These attitudes may also have been influenced by the presence of far-left and far-right parties – and more populist parties – all of which adopted more hostile campaign positions and, in general, political advertising strategies towards the EU in 2014 based on their responses to the economic crisis and austerity policies. In particular, the populist parties in different member states – traditionally focused on national themes – found a new unity in their opposition to the EU's response to the economic crisis and related austerity policies.

Interestingly, in their posters and spots these populist parties used the same slogans and rhetorical devices that, although without any central coordination, recur with only minor variations in different countries and among parties from competing political groupings. If the criticisms of Europe have different motivations from member state to member state, then the simplification of the election campaign unifies their forms and message. In this respect, the city of Brussels was regularly used in the 2014 campaign not only as a synonym of the EU via straightforward metonymy but also – quite commonly if, perhaps, a little unexpectedly – with strongly negative connotations. Brussels thus became one of the emblems of the economic crisis in political advertising messages in 2014. We find the same poster slogan produced in several countries with only slight variation in wording: 'First Italy then Europe', 'Austria at first, then Europe', 'No to Brussel, yes to France', 'Prague first, then Brussels', 'Better Malta', 'Portugal to the Portuguese' and so on.

In the European Parliament election campaign in 2014, the attack on the EU based on economic rationale was a common theme. This theme united right-wing and left-wing political parties, as well as the so-called populist parties. Overall, when comparing the European campaign in 2014 with previous contests to the assembly with its homes in Brussels and Strasbourg we find that ideological issues and national themes that played in the past an important role (Reif and Schmitt 1980) were replaced by economic issues. It is possible to conclude that the economy and the crisis have become the new

battlegrounds among parties, even bypassing the traditional distinction between right and left. In this respect, one of the indirect consequences of the economic crisis in the 2014 European Parliament campaign allows us to talk of the existence of a ‘European anti-European’ campaign, which may well be a feature of EU politics beyond the economic crisis itself.

## NOTES

1. Taken from Eurobarometer surveys.
2. A new party that obtained 25 percent in the 2013 general election.
3. Available at: <http://www.antliwo.com/news/cyprus/article/71539/ereyna-toy-akel-gia-thn-apoxh-stis-eklog/> (accessed June 12, 2015).
4. The party opposed the austerity policies proposed by the Troika agreement but it favored certain reforms and adopted a hard nationalist line regarding the ‘Cyprus issue’, namely the ethnic division of the island in two entities: the Republic of Cyprus, where Greek-Cypriots reside, and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (recognized only by Turkey), inhabited by the Turkish-Cypriot community.
5. The Greek Cypriot extreme right ELAM (National Popular Front (Εθνικό Λαϊκό Μέτωπο)), closely related with its parent party, the Greek Golden Dawn (see Katsourides 2013) appeared for the first time in the parliamentary elections of May 2011 receiving 1.08 percent (4,354 votes). According to ELAM’s presidential candidate Charalambous (2013), regarding previous elections the party aimed to increase visibility in order to elect at least one MP in subsequent parliamentary elections.
6. The category ‘other values’ contains posters that refer to values such as resistance, dignity, knowledge, responsibility, passion, fighting spirit and struggle for rights.
7. Since Malta’s Independence from Britain in 1964, these two parties have dominated the highly polarized political landscape. At this point, neither party makes significant reference to past ideologies while they adopt centrist positions on most issues.
8. ‘National Report of the latest Eurobarometer Survey published’ (2014) *EC Representation in Malta*. Available online [http://ec.europa.eu/malta/news/2015/24.02.2015\\_eurobarometer\\_report\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/malta/news/2015/24.02.2015_eurobarometer_report_en.htm). [Accessed 23 July 2015].
9. This is a 2003 EU Regulation that determines which EU member state is responsible to process an application for those seeking international protection under the Geneva Convention and the EU Qualification Directive. It states that asylum seekers should remain in the country that first receives them, until their asylum papers are processed.

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