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## Public Service Austerity Broadcasts: Framing the Euro Debt Crisis

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The reassertion of neoliberal public policy in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis was achieved in part through its sufficient recuperation as a hegemonic political and economic “imaginary.” Focusing on a series of episodes of political and economic upheaval in the Eurozone periphery between 2011 and 2013, this article examines the extent to which mediated constructions of crisis in the context of public service broadcasting in the Republic of Ireland reflected and contributed to such a recuperation. An analysis of journalistic crisis framings reveals patterns of crisis definition, judgments of actors and their behaviors, and evaluations of political and economic developments that are strongly congruent with neoliberal crisis and recovery imaginaries. The legitimization of the coercive imposition of disciplinary neoliberalism in Europe’s periphery and the elision of associated negative social and democratic externalities raise questions about public service broadcast journalism’s critical capacities and democratic commitments.

*Keywords: public service broadcasting, Euro debt crisis, Ireland, framing*

It has been widely observed that the crisis *in* neoliberalism represented by the global financial crisis of 2008 and its aftershocks did not straightforwardly engender a crisis *of* neoliberalism (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 435), but rather a policy radicalization to save it (Crouch, 2011). The “new phase of ‘blowback’ neoliberalism” (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 436) was evident first in the system-protective character of the immediate responses, notably through large-scale public interventions to bail out the financial sector, whose sheer enormity triggered fiscal and sovereign debt crises in Ireland (O’Riain, 2014, p. 248). This was also apparent in subsequent longer-term policy responses, which have seen the strict imposition of “disciplinary neoliberalism” (Gill, 1998) in what were deemed aberrant European states, particularly within its periphery (Blyth, 2013, p. 52). In Ireland, this entailed subjection from late 2010 to a three-year bailout program funded by the European Union (EU), the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank involving a strict program of economic supervision.

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Crises entail subjective as well as objective dimensions, threatening, in the case of the global financial crisis, prevailing "economic wisdom and dominant policy paradigms" (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 395); as such, they may lead to either rupture with or reassertion of established ideas and policy frameworks. But crises "do not come pre-interpreted" (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 396), and so in assessing the reasons for neoliberalism's "strange non-death" (Crouch, 2011) and the deepening of its de-democratizing tendencies (Brown, 2015), it is essential to consider the influence of the communicative environments in which competing "imaginaries" of crisis (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 397) are shaped and articulated. Ascertaining the extents to which the crisis opened greater opportunities for counterhegemonic explanations, diagnoses and responses in media institutions of the public sphere are of particular significance given that the political manageability (Streeck, 2011, p. 24) of a radicalized neoliberalism post-2008 would require sufficient hegemonic "repair" to secure at least the quiescence of national populations.

This article examines the discursive dynamics of hegemonic contestation and repair in one country, the Republic of Ireland, and how these were reflected in the crisis imaginaries of one form of media: public service broadcasting. It is apposite to observe a country such as Ireland due to the particularly urgent need for hegemonic repair to secure such quiescence given the impacts of the crisis there. The severity of its exposure to the banking crisis saw the Irish state bear over 42% of the total direct fiscal costs of banking losses in all EU member states over the period from 2007 to 2011 (Eurostat, 2012). It is also pertinent to focus on the journalistic construction of the crisis by the Irish public service broadcaster. The distinctive democratic roles claimed by public service broadcasting institutions as central mediators in national political life (Blumler, 1992) make them particularly relevant objects of study during periods of crisis in political and economic orders. In Ireland, the main English-language public service broadcaster, Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ), commands large audiences for its news and current affairs programming output and plays a strong agenda-setting role in Irish political life.

The article focuses on key aspects of the direct political implications of what has become known as the "Euro debt crisis" (Macartney, 2013) between 2011 and 2013—a conjuncture described by Picard (2015) as "the most significant challenge to European integration in 60 years" (p. 1). The specific topical focus on a series of events in Greece and Italy during that period is justified on the basis of the pronounced exposure of both countries to European crisis management interventions. For Macartney (2013, p. 65), such interventions represented an increasingly coercive "anti-democratic statecraft" that reached deeply into democratic processes in both countries (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 427). This article assesses the extent to which journalistically legitimated crisis imaginaries in Irish public service broadcasting tended to buttress or problematize the neoliberal policy escalation in Europe of which such interventions were a critical part.

Research on representations of the domestic implications of the global financial crisis in the agenda-setting Irish press and broadcast media suggests strong participation in such a project of hegemonic repair, congruent with what Browne (2004) describes as an entrenched tendency of Irish print and broadcast media to sow consent to the hegemony of the governing ideologies of neoliberal capitalism.

McCullagh (2010) posits that the immediate aftermath of the banking sector crisis in Ireland provoked an initial period of disarray among Irish political, banking, and other business elites. This disarray, in turn, created discursive openings in the mass media in Ireland for critical explanations of crisis and attributions of responsibility for the crisis that directly implicated those elites and the policies they had pursued. He suggests, however, that such opportunities had diminished by as early as 2009 as a "discursive fight back" (p. 44) by those implicated had gained purchase in the public sphere, with the successful promulgation of a new and self-serving "crisis commonsense" congruent with their material and ideological interests.

Irish media research since the crash has provided illustrations of how different parts of such a new crisis commonsense have been both reproduced in media output and journalistically legitimated. Rafter's (2014) source analysis of two major national morning news programs on public service and private radio stations found that the unfolding story of the Irish banking crisis was dominated by business journalists, city and business group representatives, and politicians in favor of the Irish state's bank guarantee in September 2008—a key initial emergency policy response to the banking crisis. Cawley's (2012) analysis of framing contests among institutional sources in prominent Irish newspapers in the two years following the banking crisis found a marked editorial tendency to amplify and legitimate perspectives advocating neoliberal policy responses to the crisis. Mercille's (2014) analysis of agenda-setting Irish print outlets observed substantial editorial support for key planks of the state's crisis management, including the socialization of private banking debts and the implementation of large fiscal consolidation programs. Coulter, Arqueros-Fernández, and Nagle (2017, p. 9) explicitly link the participation of Irish and international media outlets in advancing pro-hegemonic narratives of crisis and later economic recovery in Ireland with a "broader ideological project" at home and abroad. They argue that it was aimed in part at winning sufficient consent to a program of crisis remediation that would see the resolution of the Irish and Eurozone crises in the interests of governing elites at national and supranational levels.

Other research has identified recurrent themes in how the Euro debt crisis was covered in European print media. These include Cross and Ma's (2015) comparative analysis of major international English-language print media, which found that the mediated social construction of multiple crisis junctures in Europe is frequently marked by a tendency to succumb to "integrational panic" in which setbacks to EU integration are framed as "existential crises" to the bloc. In the case of the Euro debt crisis, they point to this as manifesting in part in an observed emphasis on hostility between northern and southern member states and the prominence of national stereotypes that reflected the aggravation of tensions. Other analyses of news media in Germany (Mylonas, 2015) and the United States (Tracy, 2012) found that the Euro debt crisis was framed in a manner that reproduced hegemonic neoliberal crisis rationales, marked by the scapegoating and stigmatization of governments and citizens of the European periphery. Such findings are consistent with the key conclusions of Picard's (2015) study of European newspapers, which found that coverage of the crisis tended to be firmly framed within national narratives, reflecting domestic political exigencies, with the financial and systemic economic implications of crisis responses presented in depoliticized terms. It also found editorial disinterest in the social costs of austerity programs and participation in the shifting of blame and remedial responsibilities to external actors and

nations, extending to support for the ad hoc and disciplinary interventions of the largest nations of the EU's core.

This article's analysis of journalistic framings of critical sequences of political events during the Euro debt crisis directly contributes to the emerging Irish and international literature exploring journalistic narratives of recent economic and political crises. Its key overall finding of editorial legitimization of the deployment of disciplinary neoliberalism in Europe's periphery is illustrative of substantial normative alignment between the crisis and recovery imaginaries (and attendant political strategies) promoted by the Irish state and those legitimated by journalistic framings. In offering evidence of the participation of the main Irish public service broadcaster in contributing to hegemonic repair, the research also contributes to contemporary debates about the political and democratic roles of public service broadcasters in Ireland and beyond in mediating popular understandings of political and economic crisis and crisis recovery.

### **Topical Focus**

The immediate context in the case of Greece involved an escalating political crisis associated with the state's bailout packages. The first, negotiated in 2010 with the EU and the International Monetary Fund, was the largest national bailout in history, entailing a strict multiyear regime of cutbacks and market reforms for the country (Macartney, 2013). A second bailout program was negotiated in October 2011 and intended by Europe and the International Monetary Fund to be the decisive solution to Greece's economic crisis (Blyth, 2013, p. 72). Amid growing domestic dissent, the Greek prime minister, George Papandreou, unexpectedly announced that the plan would be put to a confidence vote and referendum.

The crisis in Italy was also occasioned by a serious public debt problem, the size of which was second only to that of Greece. This became a debt crisis in the context of escalating anxiety about the integrity of the European monetary union, risks of contagion, and the ability of the state and its political leadership to manage mounting debts. Over the course of a few weeks in late 2011 between the end of October and November, both Greece and Italy, under direct pressure by European political elites and financial markets (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 427), saw their governments collapse and replaced by caretaker technocratic administrations compliant with externally demanded policy prescriptions.

Elections were eventually held in both countries; electorates delivered inconclusive results in both cases, with leftist and other nascent oppositional groups generally gaining strength at the expense of traditional parties of power. In Italy, prolonged negotiation led to the eventual formation of a grand coalition in April 2013. In Greece, a second election was called for June 2012, in which the main conservative majority won by a margin just large enough to lead a coalition government.

### **Method**

#### ***Sample Selection***

A sample was drawn from the news and current affairs output of the Irish public service broadcaster RTÉ. Reflecting the structural similarities between events in Greece and Italy, the sample was

divided in a manner that lent itself to a comparative approach. As shown in Table 1, two overall topical foci (technocratic turn and democratic return) pertaining to both Greece and Italy were identified.

**Table 1. Timeline of Key Events and Distribution of Corpus by Topic.**

<b>(1) Technocratic turn</b>	
<b>Greece (1a)</b>	<b>Italy (1b)</b>
<p><b>October 31, 2011</b> Greek prime minister George Papandreou announces referendum on bailout</p> <p><b>November 10, 2011</b> Papandreou resigns</p> <p><b>November 11, 2011</b> Caretaker administration led by new prime minister Lucas Papademos sworn in</p> <p>38 items</p>	<p><b>November 8, 2011</b> Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi loses absolute majority in parliament, announces resignation</p> <p><b>November 12, 2011</b> Berlusconi resigns, Mario Monti asked to lead technocratic administration</p> <p><b>November 16, 2011</b> Monti appointed prime minister</p> <p>37 items</p>
<b>(2) Democratic return</b>	
<b>Greece (2a)</b>	<b>Italy (2b)</b>
<p><b>April 11, 2012</b> Prime minister Papademos calls election for May 6</p> <p><b>May 6, 2012</b> Election results inconclusive</p> <p><b>May 16, 2012</b> Efforts to establish coalition fail, new elections called</p> <p><b>June 17, 2012</b> New Democracy party narrowly wins second election</p> <p><b>June 20, 2012</b> Coalition agreement sees Antonis Samaras appointed prime minister</p> <p>55 items</p>	<p><b>December 6, 2012</b> Berlusconi withdraws support for Monti government</p> <p><b>December 8, 2012</b> Monti announces plan to resign</p> <p><b>December 21, 2012</b> Monti passes budget, resigns</p> <p><b>February 24, 2013</b> Election results inconclusive; coalition negotiations begin</p> <p><b>April 27, 2013</b> Coalition agreed with Enrico Letta as prime minister</p> <p>26 items</p>

To attain as focused a sample as possible of RTÉ's news and current affairs audiovisual broadcast output that directly concerns the technocratic turn and democratic return topics, the broadcaster's online program archives and website search functions were used to manually identify a total of 156 discrete program segments on both television and radio. Only items identified through the search functions whose titles included explicit reference to Greece and/or Italy and that manifestly pertained to the identified topics were included.<sup>2</sup> The dates of key events shown in Table 1 form the temporal parameters of sample selection (October 2011 to April 2013), which also shows the breakdown of the volume of segments

<sup>2</sup> The search terms used were "Italy," "Italian," "Greece," and "Greek."

identified for each topical unit. Qualifying program segments were sought for key events, with archives searched on the day of each event and at least two days before and after. For reference, items are numbered and listed with accompanying URLs in [this online appendix](#).

### ***Framing***

To explore journalistic constructions of crisis, a framing approach to textual analysis was adopted. A frame is a structure of interpretation, described by Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, and Sasson (1992) as "a central organizing principle that holds together and gives coherence and meaning to a diverse array of symbols" (p. 384). Frames "diagnose, evaluate and prescribe" (Entman, 1993, p. 52) aspects of perceived reality, aligning messages with particular ways of looking at the world and guiding the interpretation of information to come. Its usefulness in unearthing the "deep structure" of ideological formations (Van Dijk, 2011, p. 393) underlines the suitability of the framing paradigm for the task of discerning ideological meanings in ostensibly nonideological discourses such as public service broadcast journalism in Ireland, where formal value neutrality is inscribed in the professional canon of journalism and institutionalized in broadcasting law.

### ***Analytical Approach***

The approach to frame definition, frame scope, and frame identification taken here is informed by the primary goal of the study, which is to examine the extent to which observable crisis construals in journalistic texts pertaining to each of the main selected topical and spatial foci either buttress and legitimize or problematize and critique neoliberal crisis diagnoses and responses.

The analysis takes as its starting point a set of deductively generated "generic" framing functions (de Vreese, 2005) that act as useful indicators of overall ideological affinity and that facilitate a comparative approach to the analysis of different parts of the corpus. The approach focuses on dimensions of media discourses that pertain to the "justifications, causes and consequences" (Van Gorp, 2007, p. 64) of particular events and processes. To capture the key structural aspects of journalistic crisis construals, it focuses on identifying two main types of frame: *diagnostic* frame elements, which involve the "identification of a problem and the attribution of blame or causality" (Snow & Benford, 1988, p. 200), and *evaluative* frame elements, in which the behaviors and actions of actors and outcomes are assessed (Gerhards, 1995). Analysis of the chosen generic framing functions of (issue) problematization, (actor and action) legitimation, and (outcome) evaluation may collectively indicate the extent of congruence or noncongruence with an overall crisis imaginary.

It is proposed that, in the context of the aspects of the Euro debt crisis under analysis, an affinity with a neoliberal crisis imaginary and political rationality (Brown, 2015) would be suggested in part by general patterns of issue problematization that privilege a diagnosis of aberrant European nations whose insufficiently reformed economic and political systems threaten the stability and prosperity of the bloc as a whole and its single currency. This would also be indicated by patterns of actor and action legitimation that endorse "new constitutionalist" (Gill, 1998) pro-market solutions to problems of political governability engendered by the crisis—imposed on national populations externally if necessary. Further, a neoliberal

crisis imaginary would be likely to assess outcomes principally in terms of the extent of achievement of systemic stability, placing a low valuation on the moral, ethical, democratic, and social implications of crisis management measures.

To facilitate a comparative approach, analysis of the first set of topics focuses on (1) representations of the prime ministers of Italy and Greece in the period leading up to their resignations and interpretations of the implications of their actions; (2) representations of the (external) pressure applied to both leaders and governments, in addition to their subsequent resignations; and (3) representations of their replacement by technocratic caretaker governments. The second set of topics focuses on (1) the representation of the political choices facing Greek and Italian electorates and (2) the assessment of the implications of electoral outcomes, both actual and hypothetical. The analysis is restricted solely to *journalistic* framings by RTÉ reporters and presenters, excluding those of contributors and other commentators.

### **Coding Data**

An inductive analysis was undertaken on all 156 texts to identify the ways in which the framing functions were operationalized. Following transcription of the entire corpus by an external service, all journalistic speech acts were extracted from the transcripts and imported into the NVivo QDA software package. Excerpts (sentences and paragraphs) corresponding to relevant framing functions and on the basis of the thematic areas outlined above were then identified for each topical subunit using the manual coding functionality of NVivo, subdivided into a series of 18 thematic codes generated from the texts, shown in Table 2.

The framing functions of (issue) problematization, (actor and action) legitimation, and (outcome) evaluation were identified by selecting excerpts that represented *contextualizing* elements (language that plays a localizing, spatializing role), *responsibilizing* elements (language that makes attributions of responsibility), and *action evaluative* elements (language that conveys positions on actor legitimacy, intentionality, action justification, action consequences, and outcomes). A total of 843 individual excerpts were coded. All textual material coded for each topical area was collated, facilitating the qualitative analysis of each block of coded text; analysis was conducted holistically to identify and assess the substance and relative prevalence of overall framing tendencies. Due to variable transcription quality, close reference was made to the source audiovisual broadcasts during analysis.

This account of the analytical approach and coding procedures adopted reflects an effort to mitigate the well-known challenges for data validity and reliability in frame analysis (Matthes & Kohring, 2008). To further ameliorate the inherent challenges associated with researcher subjectivity in the inescapably interpretive nature of the frame analytical enterprise (Gerhards, 1995), the NVivo file containing textual transcripts and coding decisions in context is accessible via [this link](#). The findings of the analysis are now considered.



**Table 2. Thematic Codes and Coded Excerpts.**

<b>Subtopic</b>	<b>Thematic code</b>	<b>Number of coded excerpts</b>
Greece (1a)	Papandreou	68
	European role	21
	Implications and consequences	74
	Assessing technocracy	31
Italy (1b)	Berlusconi	72
	European role	76
	Implications and consequences	69
	Assessing technocracy	54
Greece (2a)	First election—potential implications	7
	Second election—potential implications	75
	Political choices in elections	93
	Assessing first election outcome	67
	Assessing second election outcome	22
	Assessing technocracy	1
Italy (2b)	Assessing technocracy	14
	Election—potential implications	38
	Election—political choices	27
	Assessing election outcome	34

## Findings

### *Turn to Technocracy: Greece (1a)*

The unambiguous description of the announcement of a referendum on the Greek bailout as having “triggered” a “crisis” (29) is illustrative of a tendency to problematize the very holding of a referendum—an irreducibly democratic process.<sup>3</sup> The likely implications of the referendum are portrayed in unremittingly negative terms, generally with reference to deleterious impacts on financial markets (3, 28, 8, 19, 25, 13, 7, 11). Audiences are told how the “Greek decision smashed market confidence” (3), that the “financial system has shattered as a result of the Greek referendum” (19), “triggering financial chaos” (28) and instigating a “firestorm across the financial world” (19).

The broader implications of the Greek decision are presented as victimizing Italy in particular, which “has taken the bullet” (3), and raising the prospect that Italy “could go under” (19). The possibility that “the whole of the Eurozone begins to shatter” (19) is raised, with global economic implications (27). Imagery of contagion presents the idea of “whole countries . . . turning toxic” (25), as Greece is identified as having “multiple chronic diseases” (25) to the extent it is considered “damaged goods” (11) and Europe is described as tainted by mere association (7, 11).

<sup>3</sup> Numbers in parentheses in this section specify the text in the corpus from which extracts are drawn.

The implications of the referendum resulting in a rejection of the bailout agreement are discussed in overwhelmingly negative terms. It is suggested that "[a] no vote will plunge the Eurozone into an even greater crisis" (29), likely triggering a "messy bankruptcy" (29, see also 114) and even an exit from the single currency (13, 6). Several items speculate on ways of averting a bailout rejection (1), including whether creative phrasing of the referendum question focusing on Eurozone membership might elicit from the electorate "a more positive answer" (29).

The Irish government is advised to "avoid . . . as much blame as you possibly can" and "make sure that you look after yourself" (27). Elsewhere, it is queried why Ireland was not being offered a similarly favorable deal to Greece given its compliant behavior as "the best boys in the class" (25).

Journalistic framings closely link the immediate problems facing Greece with the personage of Prime Minister George Papandreou. His announcement of a referendum on the bailout agreement is met with journalistic reactions that frequently emphasized its surprising and dramatic nature (13, 19, 28) and how the decision represented a personal risk of some enormity (6, 8, 14). A number of items deployed macabre, even violent, imagery to describe the decision, including how Papandreou, "the most critical patient in the Euro's isolation ward" (25), had "hurled his referendum rocket" (25) and "pulled the trigger" (3) on a "political bombshell" (4) or threw a "hand grenade" (27).

Focus is placed on divining Papandreou's rationale for calling a referendum (12, 6), with one item speculating about the "talk" on whether Papandreou had "cracked? Has he lost it?" (7). The suggestion made in an interview question that "your political masters got you into this position in the first place" (26) buttresses the responsabilizing emphasis on Greek political failures.

Greece is frequently presented as a problem nation requiring disciplinary action from Europe. Audiences are told that, just at the point when "it looked like Europe had started to get ahead of the problems . . . suddenly things are starting to unravel again" (7, see also 27) as plans have "all gone up in smoke" (19). The referendum decision is described as "extremely disruptive" (5) to Europe's plans, stating that "we are all back to square one" (27). Viewers are invited to adopt the perspective of EU figures and consider how to "deal with" and "put out that blaze" in Athens, so "things can be restored" (25).

Journalistic assessments of the resignation of George Papandreou in November 2011 and his swift replacement by Lucas Papademos display an acknowledgement that Papandreou's ouster was largely attributable to external pressure from European institutions (60, 31, 26). This was problematized in only a single item, which described the intervention in terms of German prime minister Angela Merkel and French president Nicolas Sarkozy engineering "almost . . . a non-military coup" (26) in Greece. Overall, however, external demands made on Greece to swiftly appoint a new administration amenable to the bailout agreement in the wake of Papandreou's resignation are presented uncritically (33) and even in desirable terms (34).

The appointment of Lucas Papademos as head of the new technical government is met with a series of explicitly positive evaluations. His appointment is described as "positive news" (36), and his lack of electoral mandate is heralded as a "strength" (37) because of his capacity to "push through unpopular

measures and save the Euro from collapse" (38). Full compliance with external demands is established as the key criterion of success for the new administration through descriptions of an initial failure by New Democracy leader Antonis Samaras to sign an EU letter committing to the bailout agreement as "an inauspicious start for the new technical government" (38) and positive affirmations of the government's need to sign the bailout agreement and implement austerity packages (32, 54, 38). These include the assertion that Papademos "has to convince Greeks to accept more painful reforms" (38).

### ***Italy (1b)***

Journalistic framings of the implications of events in Italy similarly focus on immediate market reaction and systemic economic impacts. A range of items directly link the "political instability" (66, 64) of Silvio Berlusconi's uncertain future as prime minister with deleterious financial consequences for Italy (64–66, 40). Repeated references to the upward trajectory of Italy's bond yields pervade discussion of the systemic implications of Italy's political and economic difficulties, with the "critical seven percent barrier" (49) (denoting the level at which Italy may become unable to fund government spending) referred to in 20 items.

Bond yield hikes were presented as threatening the "survival of the Euro" (46, see also 64, 66, 56). The looming threat of an Italian default, which could "tear apart" the Euro and "send Europe and the US into new recessions" (56, see also 72) is underlined by repeated reminders of the country's status as "simply too big to rescue" (29, see also 60, 67, 66, 62, 39, 40).

The implications for Ireland were raised in a handful of items (67, 46, 68, 59) and tended to be discussed in terms of national economic self-interest. One contrasts Ireland's nascent "recovery" with the "quagmire of bureaucracy and political instability" into which countries like Italy are "sinking" (68). Ireland's status as a model bailout state is suggested again in one item that states, "Angela Merkel has been singing Ireland's praises" (59). The same item goes on to suggest that Merkel might be willing to ease the bailout terms on Ireland, given that "we were after all first into the breach trying to stem the contagion" in Europe. The consequences of austerity for the Italian public are raised just once (57).

Prior to Berlusconi's resignation, several items focus on the frustration of financial markets with the incumbent prime minister. Audiences are told that "he is very much seen as the problem" (65, see also 39, 61) and that his resignation is something "investors have long sought" (49). Such sentiments are legitimized by comments such as, "until there's someone running Italy who is going to implement those reforms . . . the situation will only get worse" (65, see also 39). Following his resignation, Berlusconi's legacy is assessed thoroughly negatively (53, 57, 55, 50, 69). Several items nonetheless suggest that Italy's problems went beyond one individual (71, 48, 66, 60), including an item that asks whether "sacrificing Silvio" would really "change anything" (60).

As in the case of Greece, the role of external pressure from financial markets and European politicians (as well as domestic political pressure) is acknowledged in Berlusconi's departure (56, 72, 50, 51, 69, 55). One item explains that "Europe wanted to solve this financial crisis that was spreading across Italy and the first step was removing its leader" (60), later speculating on who could "claim credit" for his

ouster. On several occasions, journalistic problematization of the role of forces external to Italian democracy in Berlusconi's resignation is observed (60, 71, 55, 60, 76). These include the recognition of a "democratic deficit where you have the ECB [European Central Bank] essentially deciding who's going to run Italy" (60), a reference to a change in the Italian government "essentially on the orders of France and Germany" (55, see also 60) and the suggestion that Berlusconi had been "finally booted from office not by popular vote but through the will of the markets" (76).

Even before Berlusconi's resignation, attention turned toward the "interesting" possibility of "two former Eurocrats heading governments in Italy and Greece" (43). That such an arrangement might be desirable came in the form of the evaluation of Mario Monti's appointment as "senator for life" as "one faint glimmer of anything positive" and "kind of a bright spot" (47, see also 72). Monti, in terms starkly opposed to those ascribed to Berlusconi, is described as the "precise opposite" (23) of Berlusconi and as a "technocrat, low profile but with the reputation of getting results" (23). His appointment is viewed as setting Italy "on the path to political stability" (74), heralding "a new beginning for Italy" (56, see also 72). The purpose of Monti's administration is portrayed in a wide range of items in the clear terms of its "sole aim of managing Italy's austerity drive" (69) and to persuade European political leaders and markets of Italy's economic viability (52-57, 60, 69, 70, 72, 76).

Several items legitimize European institutions and politicians as agents of crisis resolution and issuers of demands on Italy. Audiences are told of Europe's efforts to "righten the ship" (42); that Italy, not Greece, now "tops the agenda of Eurozone finance ministers" (61); and that Monti's "first task" would be to "implement urgent reforms demanded by Eurozone leaders" (76). Although it is recognized on several occasions that Monti had no "democratic mandate as such" (57, see also 52, 55), the positives of his technocratic status are explicitly conveyed in one item (75), in which it suggested that, although likely to "put a few noses out of joint," it is "probably better that a technocrat, somebody who isn't afraid to take unpopular measures" is in place and able to push through "pro-growth measures." The verdict of "so far so good" (75) on the Italian reform package further conveys journalistic support for Monti's agenda.

### ***Return to Democracy: Greece (2a)***

The limited coverage in the run-up to the Greek parliamentary election of May 2012 was marked by a pessimistic view of the possibilities of positive political change (111, 79, 78). One item negatively assessed political agency in Greece in the context of the strictures of European crisis management, suggesting that "whoever is chosen faces a difficult choice, implementing more austerity with very little power" and that the key challenge for the new government is "to keep the country from erupting into more civil disturbance" (78).

With an inconclusive result between pro- and anti-bailout political forces the main outcome, the election's implications are framed immediately in terms of their negative reception by the financial markets (116, 114, 116, 115, 119). A stronger emphasis still is placed on the undesirable consequence of protracted political instability in Greece, linked to the electoral polarization (83-85, 112, 113, 116, 109, 117). With the country's bailout described in the favorable terms of "keeping the country afloat" (109) and

on "life support" (86), several items discuss the possibilities of a pro-bailout coalition being formed to continue its implementation (116, 89, 117, 94, 85, 110).

The authority of European institutions and policy makers to resolve the crisis is again validated by statements about how Greece, "the acute problem" (89) in Europe, would again test the policies of the Franco-German alliance "underpinning the European project" (109, see also 85, 94, 129). The inter-election period is dominated by a torrent of warnings and ultimatums issued by mostly European political figures emphasizing the dire necessity of Greece to respect the terms of the bailout agreements. This is exemplified by one item's warning of "a chorus of voices saying no funds will be released until a stable and compliant government is in place in Athens" (115, see also 85, 86, 88, 95, 110, 112, 119-121, 123, 126, 128, 129). Commentary that asks "to what extent if at all is that message [from Berlin] getting through" (88) tends to legitimize the idea of Greece as properly subject to discipline from the European core. The sole Irish voice—Minister for Finance Michael Noonan—is paraphrased issuing a warning to Greece to "stick to EU and IMF [International Monetary Fund] commitments" (119), but it is described in the warm terms of "Ireland . . . offering the hand of friendship to Greece."

As well as a voluminous number of cited negative economic impacts of an unfavorable election outcome (94-96, 121, 125, 122), many items go on to provide journalistic credence to a concrete link between the democratic election of a leftist government and a Greek default and Eurozone or EU ejection (120, 88, 109, 90, 110, 128, 102, 100, 129, 99, 94)—and even civil war in Greece (125). References to how the Greek electorate might be persuaded to vote for pro-austerity parties (110, 97) further reinforce the desirability of such an outcome.

Whereas the "center-right" (81, 111, 83, 113) New Democracy is described as wanting "to stay in the Euro" (102) and as a more "pro-European" party (129), its ascendant opponent, Syriza, is described in terms of being part of a "far-left coalition" (85, 113) or the "hard left" (109, 129) and as presenting "a substantial threat to Greece's continued existence in the Eurozone" (102), owing to its "fairly uncompromising" (97) policy platform. Repeated references are made to the strongly negative reaction to Syriza by European leaders (93, 97, 118). Although reference is made to its supporters (85) and party spokesperson articulating a position of remaining within the EU and the Eurozone, doubt is directly cast on the credibility of this position (127, 96). While acknowledging the popularity of Syriza party leader Alexis Tsipras (118), several items problematize Syriza's resonance with the national mood. Syriza's anti-bailout but pro-Euro position is described in terms of "seductive promises," which voters might "prefer" to believe rather than "the economic calamity that a Euro exit could entail" (96, see also 127). Several items describe a public "fatalism" (97) that plays into the hands of Syriza: "life is simply so hopeless that they feel that they can be seduced if you like or confident enough to vote for the radical left" (102).

As it became clear that the election would result in Greece having "pro-bailout rulers" (103) led by New Democracy, PASOK's and Syriza's refusal to participate in coalition with New Democracy is negatively assessed as "the kind of brinkmanship the single currency could surely do without" (100). References to the election receiving a "broad welcome across Europe" (105, see also 100, 106) validate the election result as positive. Journalistic suggestions that "a disorderly exit from the single currency has

been averted" (106) and the statement that "Greeks awoke to find their cash machines still working and the country was still a member of the single currency" (106) go further still in this vein.

Following the election, it is suggested that the hard line taken by "Berlin and Brussels" in advance of the election was aimed at damaging Syriza, because "they didn't want to lend legitimacy" or "comfort to that particular party" (103). Speculating on what kind of response the new Greek government "should get, deserves to get from the rest of Europe" (107), a disciplinary approach is validated by the idea that Greece "doesn't have much of a hand to play here" (104).

### ***Italy (2b)***

The withdrawal of support for Mario Monti's caretaker government in Italy by Silvio Berlusconi's party in November 2012 precipitated the holding of elections the following spring, occasioning journalistic assessments on Monti's period of rule. Monti is personally lauded for bringing Italy "back from the brink" (155, 148), for leading a government that had succeeded in "saving Italy from the crisis" (150), and for having "restored Italy's international credibility" (137, see also 133) in the eyes of markets and EU leaders (150).

Of the four main candidates discussed in the run-up to the general election in early 2013, coverage focused on the incumbent prime minister, Mario Monti; the center-right People of Freedom party led by Silvio Berlusconi; and the Five Star Movement led by Beppe Grillo.

Monti's poor skills as a campaigner are noted on several occasions (136, 150). As "the man voters appear to blame" (151) for austerity, it is hinted that Monti should be considered an unfortunate fall guy given that he was only implementing measures "that many people feel Italy was forced to take at the time" (136).

Berlusconi is portrayed negatively, described as a "76-year-old political schmoozer" (146), a "populist" (152), and the man responsible for bringing "the Eurozone debt crisis to a crescendo" (146). Frequently mentioned are Berlusconi's long history of involvement in scandals as well as his ability to avoid justice for his role in them (149, 147, 152, 146, 136).

Audiences are told that Grillo's "wildcard" (136) Five Star Movement is a populist and "anti-politics movement" (137, see also 154) and is "really designed to capitalize on peak cynicism within the Italian public" (136, see also 137). Concerns are raised about Grillo's lack of political experience and insufficiently detailed political program (140).

A warning issued by European Commission president José Manuel Barroso referred to the need for continued austerity "irrespective of who is prime minister" (148, see also 132, 149), a position setting the tone for the journalistic framing of the election's imagined implications. A pronounced emphasis on political instability and its undesirability to European elites and markets is again evident in a number of items in the pre-election period (148, 150, 146, 136). The prospect of the elections bringing to an end "respite from the darkest days of the Eurozone crisis" (146) is raised and, should the "wrong result" (146)

emerge, "maybe even reignite the EU debt crisis" (136). This "wrong" potential result is linked to the likelihood of a "significant protest vote against painful austerity measures" (139, see also 140, 151). The possibility of a "confused and disillusioned electorate" (137) delivering an "inconclusive result" (140) is described as "damaging for Italy's credibility" (140), representing "possibly the worst outcome" (146). On the one occasion where the implications of the election for Ireland are discussed, it is suggested that a hung parliament or coalition inimical to Monti's policies would be "exactly and precisely the thing that Ireland does not want" (150).

A glimpse into what might constitute a desirable election outcome is offered in several items. The views of "most external observers" are cited who "feel a Bersani-Monti alliance is what Italy needs" (151) (contingent on the center-left Democratic Party leader Pier Luigi Bersani having "reconciled" the "far-left" (136) elements within his coalition), because this would "probably keep Italy's credibility intact" (136) and keep Italy moving "along the path of reform" (136). The pro-business nature of the "deep-seated reforms" (137) legitimated as necessary are implied by a diagnosis of the Italian's economic problems as involving "a chronic lack of competitiveness and an overly bureaucratic business climate" (137, see also 143, 141, 153).

The election's inconclusive outcome is described on several occasions as the "worst possible" result (155, 144). The immediate market implications are again foregrounded (154, 141-144). The possibility of a hung parliament and the attendant political instability (142, 144, 154) threatens to shatter the pause in the Euro's crisis, which had been "somewhat dealt with in recent months" (141) thanks to the electoral performances of political groups "intrinsically antithetical towards reforms and austerity measures" (155) despite the "clear diagnosis about Italy's economic problems" (155).

Bersani's "failure to win" is described as a "bitter disappointment" (154), while Mario Monti's "dismal fourth" is attributed to the fact that he was "installed at the behest of the EU to impose austerity" (142, see also 143). Berlusconi's strong performance is described as "shocking news" whose scale "could disrupt hopes for the kind of stable and reforming government that Eurozone capitals so desperately want" (153). Journalistic disapproval at the similarly strong result for Grillo's "comedian-led protest movement" (143) is conveyed by the suggestion that support for the Five Star Movement was motivated by nihilism—a "protest vote" was delivered in the knowledge that it was not going to "help things" (143). A prior interview with European Commissioner Olli Rehn is cited as a "reminder" that "to some extent it doesn't matter how electorates feel about austerity, there is only one plan in place for Europe" (143).

### **Conclusions and Discussion**

The analysis of the coded data set reveals several recurrent framing tendencies in RTÉ journalism that show a clear overall congruence with and legitimation of the neoliberal crisis and recovery imaginaries animating crisis management in Europe during the periods in question.

The dominant modes of issue problematization as they pertain to both Italy and Greece are closely linked to political failures to fully cooperate with the policy responses desired and demanded by European leaders, institutions, and financial markets. Democratic processes, whether in the form of the

proposed referendum on Greece's second bailout or the series of elections in Greece and Italy, are unambiguously thematized as threats to European economic stability. Increasing political polarization in both countries is problematized principally in terms of the potential for ungovernability and the disruption of the implementation of externally demanded policy prescriptions, the details and social consequences of which remained largely unproblematized. A sustained preoccupation with financial market reaction as the key interpretive lens through which political developments are viewed is additionally evident in the manner in which the implications of events in both countries are made relevant to Ireland. Here, attention is focused almost exclusively on the potential for instability on the Continent to undermine a nascent Irish economic recovery, linking Greek and Italian compliance with external demands with the Irish national interest.

In both Italy and Greece, dominant issue problematizations are closely linked to modes of actor legitimation that demonstrate in the first instance a recurrent delegitimization of democratically elected political incumbents and later opposition figures in both countries. The immediate problems facing both countries are inextricably linked to the principal actors of the respective prime ministers, both of whom are the subject of sustained and sometimes personalized pathologization and stigmatized as causal agents of crisis.

In the context of later elections in both countries, journalistically legitimated concerns about the potential inability of compliant governments to emerge from electoral processes significantly color the assessment of the political choices open to electorates. In Italy, the emphasis is placed on the threat to Mario Monti's favorably represented pro-business reform agenda represented by competing populisms in the form of a knave (Berlusconi) and a clown (Grillo). In the run-up to Greece's second parliamentary election in 2012, framings of the electoral contest negatively foreground the hair-raising implications of the radical left coalition Syriza's insistence on seeking a break with the bailout in contrast to the responsible compliance of the main conservative party, New Democracy. The public resonances of oppositional groupings in both countries are encoded as threats to domestic and European order in part because of their success in harnessing what is negatively represented as populist anger and counterproductive fatalism.

The journalistic delegitimization of incumbent political leaders and oppositional groups proceeded alongside the legitimization of the drift to technocracy in both countries—occasionally in fulsome terms. Overwhelmingly positive assessments of Papademos in Greece and Monti in Italy at both the beginning and end of their tenures contrasted sharply with the framing of eventual elections in both countries as threatening a return to crisis, serving to normalize the solution of externally imposed technical governments to the problem of recalcitrant domestic prime ministers and electorates. Later, favorable journalistic framings of the prospect of a Monti-Bersani coalition in Italy and a national unity government in Greece further demonstrates the journalistic affinity for governmental arrangements designed for maximum executive stability in implementing externally demanded policy prescriptions. This is supported by the assumption, pervasive in the corpus, that Italy and Greece are problems to be solved by, if necessary, European fiat rather than by domestic electorates.



Such patterns are reinforced by the analysis of modes of outcome evaluation. The onset of technocratic governance in both countries is framed positively and assessed similarly positively afterward, particularly in Italy's case. While the resignation of both leaders was broadly attributed to nondemocratic pressures from financial markets and European decision makers, this remained largely unproblematized. The appointments of Papademos in Greece and Monti in Italy as technocratic heads of interim administrations are framed as nothing less than the *sine qua non* of Eurozone integrity, with journalistic discourse assessing the new technocratic governance in both countries tending to evince an explicit relief at the potential of the new technocrats to do what their elected counterparts would not or could not do.

The celebration of technocracy contrasts with the thoroughly negative assessments of the inconclusive electoral outcomes in Italy and the first Greek parliamentary election of 2013. The negative market reaction they elicited in both countries and the problems the results created for European crisis management are strongly foregrounded, with ensuing political uncertainty explicitly linked in Italy and Greece with the strong likelihood of provoking a full-fledged reassertion of crisis in the Eurozone.

On the whole, RTÉ's construction of crisis imaginaries assessed here may be seen as subjectively promoting an understanding of events in Europe as entailing a mere crisis *in* rather than *of* neoliberal crisis management. In so doing, the counter-hegemonic discursive possibilities arising from the objective aspects of the crisis juncture were elided, with journalistic crisis framings instead intervening in the social construction of crisis in a manner that contributed to rather than complicated the political manageability of the crisis on behalf of the Irish state and European authorities. This is significant because of the power of dominant frames in news texts to meaningfully shape audience understandings of issues and to influence public support for policy responses (de Vreese, 2005, p. 60)—a power in this instance amplified by the prominence and prestige of RTÉ's news and current affairs output in the Irish public sphere.

That the ideological work accomplished by dominant framings of the Euro debt crisis discussed in this article originated from the journalistic output of a European public service broadcaster raises several additional implications about that media-institutional form. These include questions of the sufficiency of the editorial distinctiveness of public service journalism and the depth of its democratic commitments raised by the congruence of dominant framings observed in this analysis with the construction of crisis in commercial print media as documented in recent European media research (Cross & Ma, 2015; Picard, 2015). These congruences included similar tendencies to succumb to a discursively foreclosing "integrational panic" around threats to European cohesion, encouraging the legitimization of de-democratizing, disciplinary, nationalistic, and stigmatizing policy responses to capitalist crisis and intra-European tensions. They also include the amplification of elite anxieties about the political manageability of disciplinary programs of crisis remediation and elision of the substantial ethical and democratic dimensions of such programs and of hierarchical dominance in the European Union.

Such framings were observed as dominant within Irish public service journalism despite the existence of legal-regulatory mandates of objectivity and impartiality in news and current affairs output and the traditional place claimed by European public service broadcasters as important watchdogs of democratic life and promoters of democratic values. They were also observed despite the existence of significant political and civil society opposition in Ireland (Dunphy, 2017) and on the Continent

(Lapavitsas, 2012) to the chosen paths of domestic and European-level crisis remediation and their reliance on forcefully imposed austerity programs. These observations indicate that the discursive legitimation of Irish and European crisis management observed in this analysis cannot be explained as a result of a lack of alternative readings of the crisis.

Such discrepancies can be explained with reference to the ultimate structuring role of the state on the democratic imagination of public service broadcasters. The exigencies of domestic and European crisis were always likely to strongly activate the hegemonic tendencies of public service broadcasters, whose close proximity to the state renders them subject to normative regulation and even direct state instrumentalization (Mills, 2016). This promotes a close institutional alignment with prevailing official political and economic-developmental ideologies that may, as illustrated here, become more rather than less pronounced during periods of national crisis. This susceptibility to co-option by national projects is illustrative of the substantial barriers impeding the development of a transnational European public sphere (Triandafyllidou, Wodak, & Krzyzanowski, 2009).

For public service broadcasters such as RTÉ that face a range of interlinked threats to their institutional reproduction as a result of challenges of legitimacy and relevance arising from contemporary developments in politics and technology (in addition to deepening financial and competitive challenges), the findings here problematize the charting of a path through which the post-crisis indispensability of public service broadcasting may be credibly justified on democratic grounds. The framing tendencies observed here—the blocking of learning potentials arising from the crisis, the endorsement of “post-democratic” (Crouch, 2011) policy responses, and complicity in a “return to the national”—do not, if generalizable across journalistic output in different issue domains, indicate a strong normative basis for a media system capable of nurturing a democratizing response to either the communicative or structural economic aspects of the ongoing crisis of democratic capitalism (Streeck, 2011) in Ireland, Europe, and beyond. Rather, such findings suggest the extent to which public service broadcasting is itself implicated in such a crisis and its mediation. These observations indicate the need for a new wave of critical scholarship exploring the discharge and adequacy of public service broadcasting organizations’ democratic functions and mission in the contexts of present political exigencies and the broader changes in the political and economic governance and communication orders that underpin them.

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