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Working Paper

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W.E.P. - Würzburg Economic Papers, No. 97

Provided in Cooperation with:

University of Würzburg, Department of Economics

Suggested Citation: Otto, Kim; Köhler, Andreas (2016) : A European public sphere in coverage of the Greek sovereign debt crisis in the news programmes of ARD and ZDF, W.E.P. - Würzburg Economic Papers, No. 97, University of Würzburg, Department of Economics, Würzburg

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W. E. P.

Würzburg Economic Papers

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June 2016

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A European public sphere in coverage of the Greek sovereign debt crisis in the news programmes of ARD and ZDF

Kim Otto & Andreas Köhler

Summary:

The present study examines news reporting during the Greek national debt crisis in the German television news programmes “Tagesschau” and “heute” and in the special broadcasts “Brennpunkt” on ARD and “ZDF spezial” on ZDF. The aim is to capture the extent to which the national German media are Europeanized within the context of coverage of the Greek national debt crisis, based on the representation of European actors and events. The study’s results show that it is not really possible to speak of a Europeanized national public sphere in Germany as far as the coverage of the Greek national debt crisis is concerned.

1. Introduction

The Greek national debt crisis was one of the main topics of television coverage in Germany in 2015. Apart from the refugee crisis, no other topic received such intense coverage (Krüger/Zapf-Schramm 2016: 85). More than one third of news broadcasts by ARD and ZDF focused on the Greek national debt crisis. The subject was addressed in over 19 hours of news broadcasting in 2015. This shows that the Greek national debt crisis was a highly relevant topic for coverage in German news reporting.

News programmes are considered the centrepiece of current affairs broadcasting on television. They enjoy a high degree of credibility and the greatest attention from the public. Their “semi-official aura” suggests neutral and complete coverage (cf. Faulstich 2008: 78). Television news helps to create a substantial part of the public sphere, through which citizens can become involved in the public discourse and form opinions on relevant issues.

Television news thus fulfils important functions in a democracy. It is governed by the Federal Constitutional Court’s formulation of objectives for public service broadcasters and by legislation. It documents, archives, organises and communicates up-to-the-minute information to its viewers, thereby fulfilling an important duty to provide information to society. Events only become news when they have been selected for reporting from a whole range of incidents. News is therefore the result of a selection process and thus the expression of a social construction of reality (cf. Weischenberg/Scholl 1998). Television news programmes select information, contribute to the formation of opinions and, in doing so, create an orientation framework for society. Television news programmes are thus part of the everyday communication culture (cf. Meckel/Kamps 1998: 11).

The public discourse, conducted via television coverage, is highly relevant for trust in political actors and their capacity to deliver solutions. After all, not only banks have been toppled since the onset of the financial crisis; the European sovereign debt crisis has caused entire states to totter. This period of upheaval has led to great insecurity in Europe. The population is losing its trust in the actors of the economic system – especially those of the financial industry – and the actors of the political system. Citizens feel poorly informed, and their distrust is growing (Mast

2012: 16ff.). In times of global markets and increasingly complex economic systems, competent news reporting is becoming ever more important.

This complexity has been increased by the European sovereign debt crisis. Many governments and institutions are involved in finding solutions to existing problems. Given that more and more political decisions are being taken at a European level and European developments are highly relevant, a public sphere needs to be created at this level. A European public sphere and a European discourse will increase the public's understanding of European decisions, while by contrast the lack of a European public sphere will create distrust among the population and diminish the legitimation of European decisions, institutions and actors (cf. Gerhards 2002). The European population's trust in states, governments and European institutions is thus needed particularly when states are liable for one another with large amounts of tax money.

Against this backdrop, the question arises of whether public discourse on the Greek national debt crisis lives up to these standards of Europeanization. To investigate this question, the present study examines the extent to which the German media's coverage of the Greek national debt crisis in 2015 can be seen as Europeanized, using the example of German television news broadcasts by the channels ARD and ZDF. The intensity of coverage, the events and the actors are captured through quantitative content analysis of news items on the Greek national debt crisis. The project aims to make qualified statements on the European actors mentioned and thus on the Europeanization of the public sphere created.

2. The Greek national debt crisis of 2015

After facing the threat of insolvency in 2009 due to a high level of sovereign debt and a budget deficit of over 12 percent, Greece requested financial assistance from international money lenders in 2010. As a result, loans and guarantees to the value of several hundred billion Euros were granted by the European Central Bank (ECB), the EU and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (also called the Troika or Institutions) in subsequent years. This financial assistance was tied to demands for strict budget cuts.

On 25 January 2015, Greece elected a new parliament and a new government. The election was won by left-wing Syriza, headed by party leader Alexis Tsipras. Tsipras wanted to ease the budget cuts imposed by the international money lenders, end the austerity policy, stop privatisation and renegotiate credit agreements (Kotius 2015: 82). However, the government in Athens was forced to agree to budget cuts and reforms as well as to further cooperation with the EU, ECB and the IMF in order to receive further assistance. On 24 February, the Greek government presented the EU with a list of reforms, following which the payment of further loans up until the end of June was agreed. Until then, the Greek government had to persuade the governments of the EU States and the IMF to grant an extension. In the early hours of 27 June 2015, head of government Tsipras broke off negotiations and called for a referendum, inviting the Greek people to vote on whether to accept reforms proposed by the EU, IMF and ECB. With a referendum turnout of 62.5 percent, the bailout proposal was rejected by 61.3 percent of voters. Following the breakdown of negotiations, capital controls were introduced which had a serious negative impact on the economy and people of Greece. On 12 July 2015, government and state leaders in the Eurozone reached agreement on a third bailout programme. However, members of the Syriza party opposed the new package of savings and reforms accepted by Alexis Tsipras and he resigned from office on 20 August 2015. A fresh election was held on 20 September 2015, with the Syriza party led by Tsipras securing victory at the polls.

As the highest lender within the Eurogroup, Germany played a special role in the conflict with Greece. In the second bailout package, 142.7 billion EUR were paid to Greece. Of these, 11.8 billion came from the IMF; the remaining 130.9 billion from the European bailout fund. As Greece, Ireland and Portugal were unable to act as guarantors, the German share rose to around 29 percent – corresponding to almost 38 billion EUR in the second Greek bailout package (German Federal Ministry of Finance 2015).

In the negotiations, the German government took a hard line, demanding that the national debt be reduced through cuts, privatisation and tax increases. At times, Wolfgang Schäuble, the German Minister of Finance, even argued in favour of a temporary exit from the Euro. The majority of European states in the Council of Ministers followed the political line taken by the German government, which focused on austerity policy to resolve the sovereign debt crisis. Both the EU Commission and the French government definitely wanted to keep Greece in the Euro and were thus ready to make greater concessions. The IMF's stance towards the Greek government was tough, demanding extensive structural reforms as the basis for further loans.

5. Research question and research design

Given the significance of European institutions and connections in economic policy, a European perspective is particularly important in news journalism. This applies especially in the Greek national debt crisis, where political decisions on financial support to bail out Greece – support that derives from European citizens' tax monies – are made by European institutions such as the European Commission, the ECB or the Eurogroup. The creation of a European public sphere would contribute significantly to public understanding of European decisions and thus to their legitimacy. Therefore the aim is to examine whether such a European public sphere was created in the German economic-political reporting of the Greek national debt crisis. We specifically ask: what role do European actors and events play in the news coverage?

In order to answer our principal research question, the extent of the coverage of actors and events during the Greek national debt crisis in public discourse in the television news broadcasts of ARD and ZDF will be described and analysed.¹ The aim is to ascertain

- what role European actors take as the *motivation for coverage*,
- what significance European *events* have as the reason for coverage, and
- to what extent European actors have a voice in the form of *quotes* in the news broadcasts.

The investigation period covers the whole of 2015, from 1 January to 31 December 2015. Thus the study consciously focuses on coverage of the Tsipras government, which was elected on 25 January 2015, and its work during the second Greek rescue programme, the negotiations and preparations for the third rescue programme, and implementation by the Greek government of the reforms indicated in the negotiations.

¹ This analysis forms part of a study commissioned by the Otto Brenner Foundation.

The study examines news items in the daily main news programmes of public service broadcasters: “Tagesschau” shown on ARD at 8:00 p.m. and “heute” on ZDF at 7:00 p.m. Together, the two programmes reach an average audience of over 12 million every day. The news programmes are broadcast every day; the study therefore involves 730 programmes from 2015. All programmes were captured completely in terms of length and number of items referring to the Greek national debt crisis. The news items relating to this topic were analysed in depth. The special programmes “Brennpunkt” on ARD and “ZDF spezial” on ZDF about the Greek national debt crisis were also analysed. Of the 43 editions of “Brennpunkt” and 37 editions of “ZDF spezial” broadcast in 2015, 7 editions of “Brennpunkt” and 10 editions of “ZDF spezial” dealt with the Greek national debt crisis. These special programmes were also analysed at programme level in terms of length of the broadcast and the number of items. They were also subsequently analysed in greater depth at item level, as the main news programmes were.

The analysis was conducted through a quantitative content analysis (cf. Kromrey 2009). The Merten system (1995: 88) involves a descriptive content analysis that is focused on television coverage and which examines this with regard to actors and motivations. To a large extent, it uses denotational semantics, i.e. specific terms are assigned to superordinate concepts and categories. The features to be analysed were recorded in a system of categories. The coding was carried out by six trained coders in January and February 2016.

The following sections will present the results of our content analysis concerning the intensity of coverage, the events and the actors identified.

6. Europe as the location of events

During the investigation period, i.e. the whole of 2015, 747 news programmes were analysed. Of these programmes, 365 were “Tagesschau”, 365 were “heute”, 7 were “Brennpunkt” on ARD and 10 were “ZDF spezial”. “Brennpunkt” and “ZDF spezial” were special programmes which focused on the Greek national debt crisis. In total, more than 206 hours of material were viewed in order to ascertain whether any news items concerned the Greek national debt crisis.

Some 459 news programmes contained no news items about the Greek national debt crisis. 282 programmes had one or more items about the Greek national debt crisis. Of these, 139 were editions of “Tagesschau”, which corresponds to 38.1 percent of all “Tagesschau” programmes in 2015. The Greek national debt crisis was addressed in 126 editions of the “heute” news programme. This equates to 34.5 percent of all “heute” programmes in 2015. The Greek national debt crisis was thus addressed in more than one third of news programmes on ARD and ZDF. In total, 615 items on the Greek national debt crisis were captured, with a total length of over 19 hours.

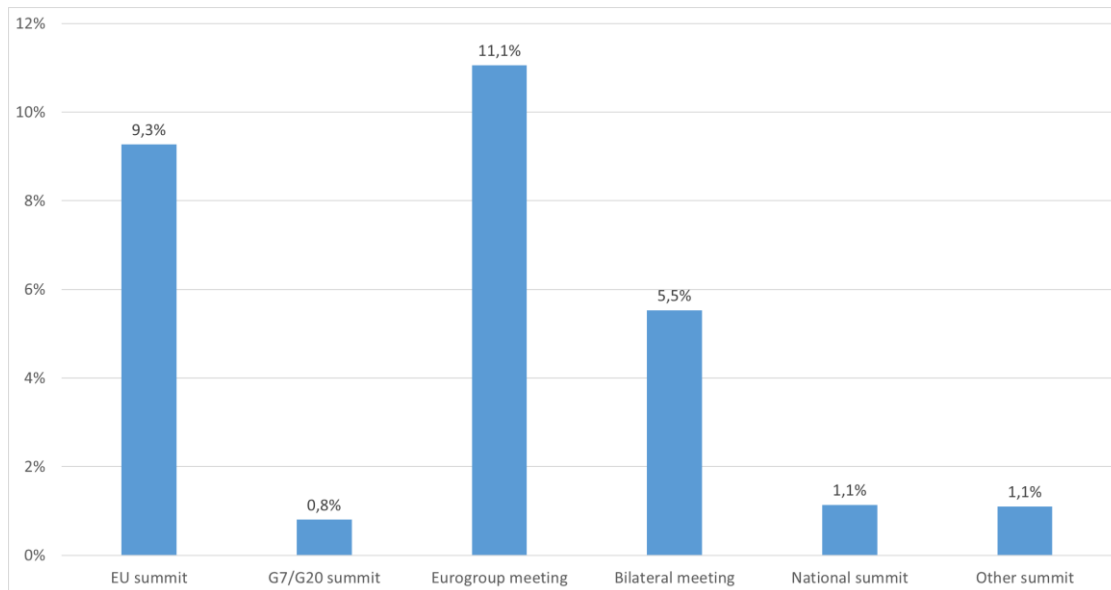


Diagram 1: *Summits as motivation for news coverage 2015 (n=615)*

In the study, we identified whether specific summits were key motivating events for coverage. This was the case in 28.9 percent of all the news items on the Greek national debt crisis. Most frequently, meetings of the Eurogroup provided the reason for coverage, with 11.1 percent of all items relating to these meetings. The Eurogroup is a body of the European Union where representatives from Eurozone member states coordinate taxation and economic policies. Each Eurozone member state is represented by a minister with responsibility for the economy or finance and a senior official. Jeroen Dijsselbloem of the Netherlands has been the President of the Eurogroup since 2013.

In 9.3 percent of all news items, EU summits involving heads of state and government were the motivation for coverage. It was primarily European summits that prompted coverage; they accounted for 20.4 percent of the total coverage of the Greek national debt crisis. This was followed by bilateral meetings, with 5.5 percent. These included, for example, meetings between the German and Greek governments or between the German and French governments. Items on national summit meetings (1.1 percent) and the G7 and G20 summits in June 2015 (0.9 percent) occasionally also made an appearance. National summit meetings included, for example, meetings of the coalition government party leaders at the Federal Chancellor's Office to discuss policies concerning Greece.

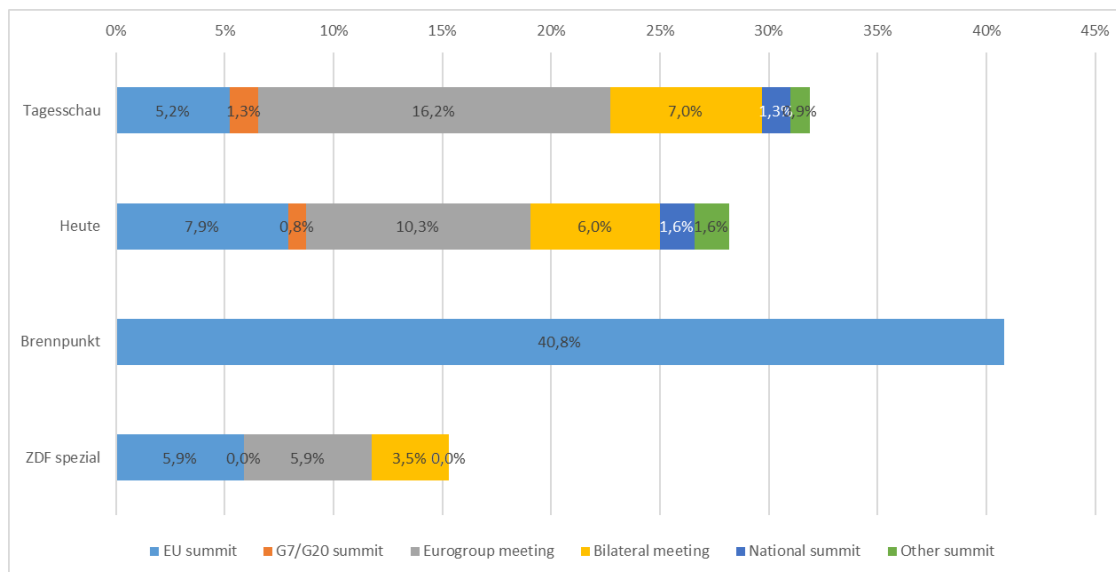


Diagram 2: Summits as motivation for news reporting in 2015 comparing the programmes analysed (Tagesschau: n=229, heute: n=252, Brennpunkt: n=49, ZDF spezial: n=85)

When comparing the programmes examined in the study, it is noticeable that the intensity of coverage of various summits as motivators is largely congruent between the main news programmes “Tagesschau” and “heute”. Overall, summits – particularly Eurogroup meetings – play a greater role in “Tagesschau” than in “heute”. While 16.2 percent of “Tagesschau” news items relating to the the Greek national debt crisis concerned Eurogroup meetings, only 10.3 percent of “heute” items did so.

In the special programmes, there was a stronger focus on individual events: in “Brennpunkt”, an EU summit prompted coverage in 40.8 percent of all items. Other summits were not included in the reporting. The “ZDF spezial” programmes referred to Eurogroup meetings in addition to EU summits, and bilateral meetings were also reported. Meanwhile, national meetings did not play a role in “ZDF spezial”.

In summary, it can be said that the importance of summits as motivation for reporting was high overall. Three in ten news items had a summit meeting as the motivating event. Coverage of the Greek national debt crisis was thus strongly event-oriented. In particular, the importance of European summit meetings, EU summits and Eurogroup meetings as motivation for coverage shows that the European level as the location of events is crucial for reporting.

7. European actors as motivators of coverage

Activities and statements by political actors often provided motivation for coverage; thus, they also played a key role with regard to the Greek national debt crisis. In 55.5 percent of all the programmes analysed, the motivation for coverage could be clearly traced to key political figures and their proposals, initiatives, activities and opinions.

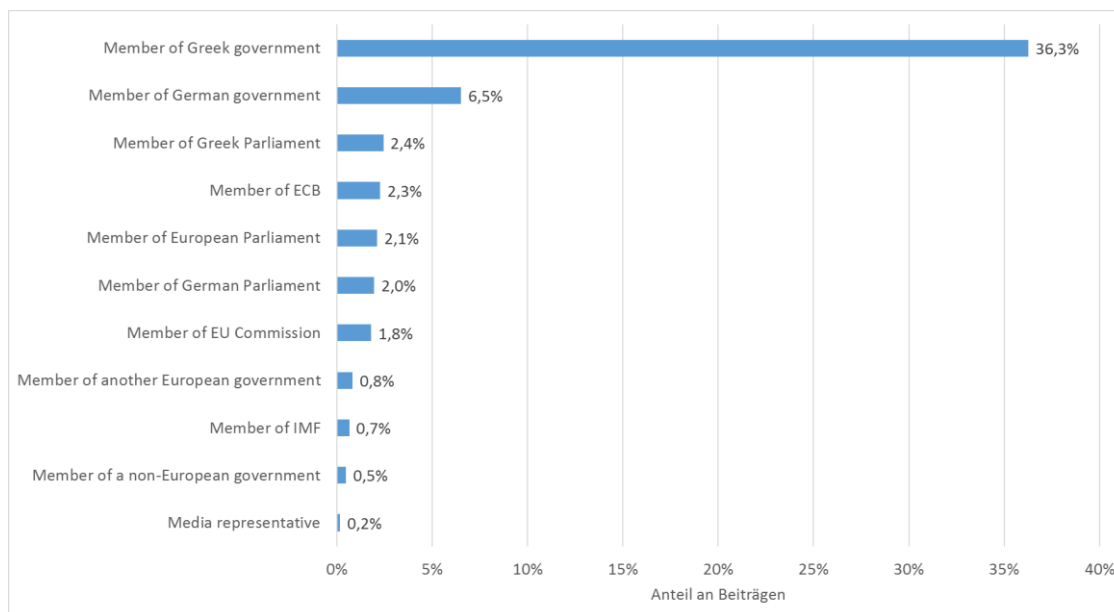


Diagram 3: *Actors as motivation for news reporting 2015 (n=615)*

Among the political actors, the Greek government was by far the main motivator of coverage. Some 36.3 percent of all the news items examined referred to the Greek government's statements, activities and initiatives. By contrast, other political actors were much less likely to prompt coverage. The German government was the reason for reporting in just 6.5 percent of the news items. The key political actors of the EU Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund were strongly underrepresented as motivators, despite their significance for the Greek national debt crisis. The European Central Bank was motivation for coverage in only 2.3 percent of the news items on the Greek national debt crisis, the EU Commission in 1.8 percent and the International Monetary Fund in just 0.7 percent of the news items.

European actors therefore played hardly any role as motivators in the news coverage. Only 6.4 percent of the items related to statements, activities or initiatives of the EU Commission, European Parliament or ECB. At 2.3 percent, the ECB was the European actor referred to most often, followed by the European Parliament and, in third place, the EU Commission. News reporting tended to focus much more upon national actors such as the Greek and German governments.

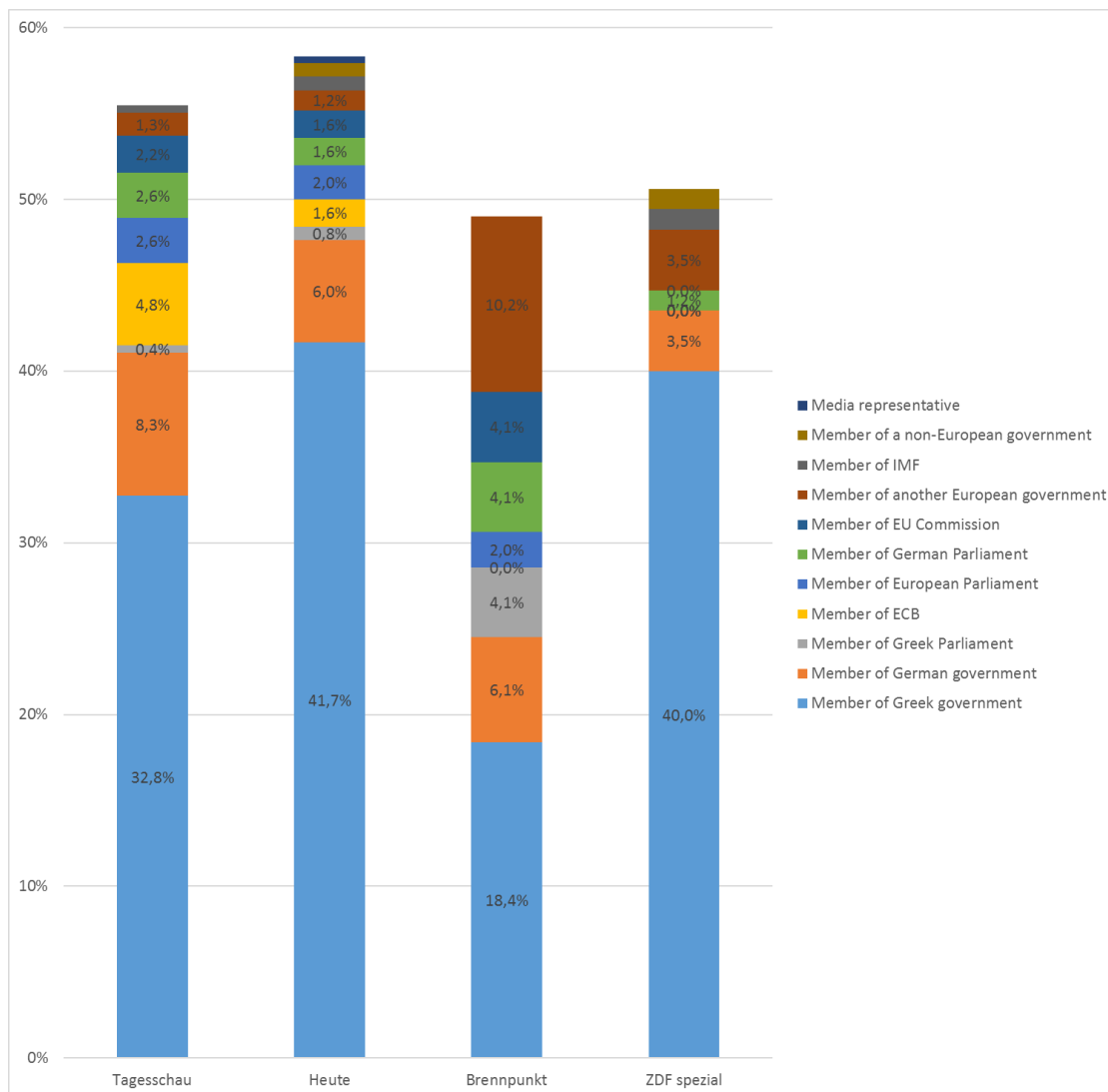


Diagram 4: Actors as motivators for news coverage in 2015 comparing the analysed programmes “Tagesschau”: n=229, “heute”: n=252, “Brennpunkt”: n=49, “ZDF spezial”: n=85

When comparing the analysed news programmes, it was noticeable that the ZDF programmes “heute” and “ZDF spezial” contained more items in which statements or activities of the Greek government had motivated an item than the ARD programmes. The relative share for “heute” was 41.7 percent of the programme’s news items, compared with only 32.8 percent for “Tagesschau”. In “ZDF spezial” 40 percent of the items could be traced back to the Greek government, while in “Brennpunkt” on ARD this figure was only 18.4 percent.

European actors played only a minor role in all four programmes. In total, 6.1 percent of the “Tagesschau” items, 4.4 percent of the “heute” items, 18.4 percent of the “Brennpunkt” items and 4.7 percent of the “ZDF spezial” items related to the European actors of the EU Commission, ECB and the European Parliament. Particularly striking is the high percentage for “Brennpunkt”. This can be attributed to a high proportion of items (10.2 percent) focusing on the European Central Bank as a motivation for reporting. The discussion and decision of the European Central Bank to grant further emergency loans after negotiations on the rescue package broke down on 28 June was picked up on 28 June and 6 July in nine items of the two special programmes broadcast. In the form of so-called Emergency Liquidity Assistance (ELA), the European Central Bank provided support to Greek banks via the Greek National Bank in order to

prevent the collapse of the Greek banking system. This programme is one of the European Central Bank's emergency instruments and is directed at banks that are temporarily facing an exceptional situation. For Greece, assistance became more and more important in 2015 as increasing numbers of anxious citizens withdrew cash from their banks.

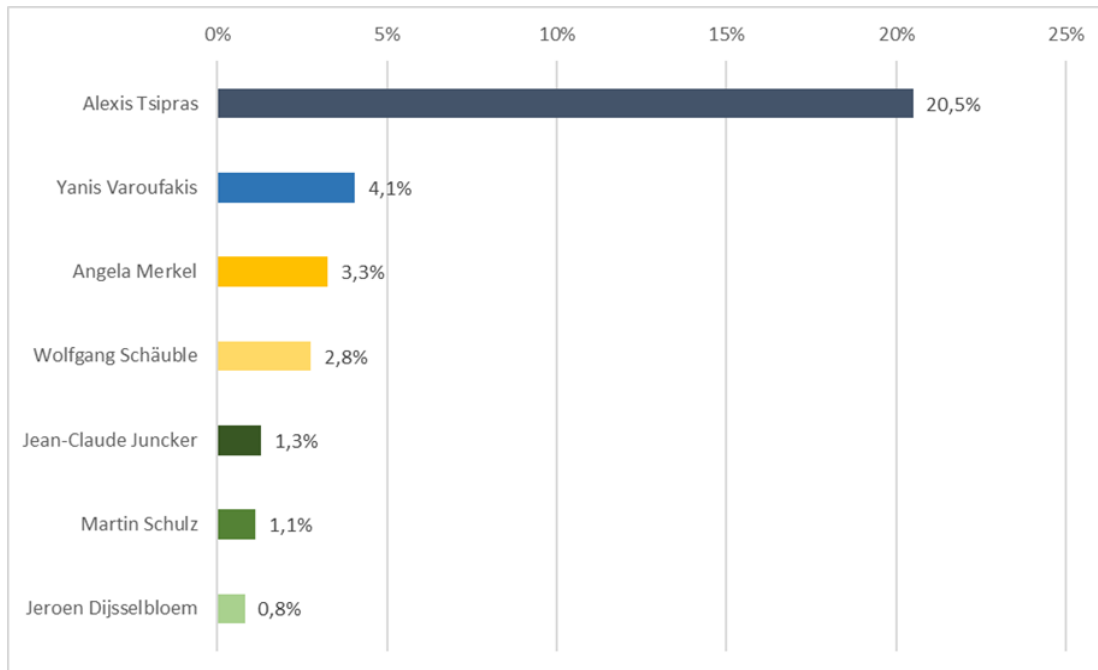


Diagram 5: *Individuals as motivators for coverage of the Greek national debt crisis 2015 (n=615)*

In 24.6 percent of the items, coverage not only related to the Greek government as a collective political actor, but also specifically to activities and statements of the two main figures in the Greek government: Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras and Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis. In 20.5 percent of the news items, the Greek Prime Minister was the motivator, while the Greek Finance Minister was the motivator in 4.1 percent of the news items. With regard to the German government, Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel was the main motivator of coverage (3.3 percent). At 2.8 percent, Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble motivated coverage only slightly less frequently (cf. Diagram 16).

In terms of political actors at European level, only 1.3 percent of the news items were attributable to the President of the EU Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, 1.1 percent to the President of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz, and 0.8 percent to Eurogroup President Jeroen Dijsselbloem.

This clearly shows that, with regard to individual persons as motivators for coverage, national political actors motivated coverage more frequently than European actors.

In summary, it can be concluded that the proportion of European actors motivating news coverage was, however, very small. Only 6.4 percent of the items related to European actors. Despite their importance in this crisis, little attention was given to their statements, activities and initiatives. Coverage was much more strongly focused upon national actors such as the Greek and German governments. Europe is clearly the location of events in the news coverage of the

Greek national debt crisis. However, the European stage was largely used for coverage relating to national actors.

8. European actors as the subject of news coverage

In the news items in the coverage analysed, political actors also broadcast statements in the form of verbatim quotes. The question is whether the various actors made their voices heard equally in the coverage of the Greek national debt crisis.

Overall, actors were quoted in 390 items, which equates to 63.4 percent of all the items. In total, 5 hours and 36 minutes of direct quotes were broadcast during the period covered by the study.

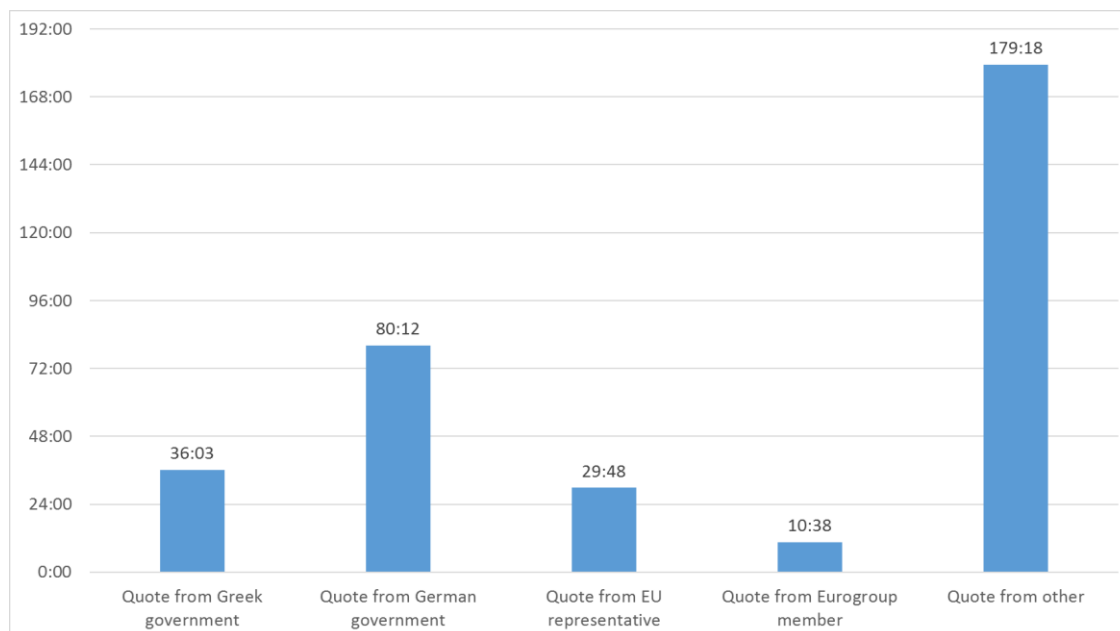


Diagram 6: Providers of direct quotes in news coverage in 2015 (in minutes, n=615)

This “speaking time” was divided very differently between the individual political actors, however: only 36 minutes and 3 seconds of quoted material was attributed to the Greek government, while direct quotes from the German government took up 80 minutes and 12 seconds of the analysed news coverage on the Greek national debt crisis. Quotes from representatives of the EU, including the EU Commission, the European Parliament and the President of the European Council, e.g. Jean-Claude Juncker, Martin Schulz and Donald Tusk, accounted for 29 minutes and 48 seconds of material; quotes from representatives of the Eurogroup accounted for 10 minutes and 38 seconds of material. Quotes from all other actors, e.g. parliamentarians and experts, totalled 179 minutes and 18 seconds.

European actors therefore had more chance to speak than the Greek government. Their share of total quoted material in the programmes analysed was minimal, at approximately 12 percent. In percentage terms, European actors were thus more likely to provide direct quotes than be motivators of coverage, but nevertheless were responsible for only approximately one tenth of the quotes in the news reporting on the Greek national debt crisis.

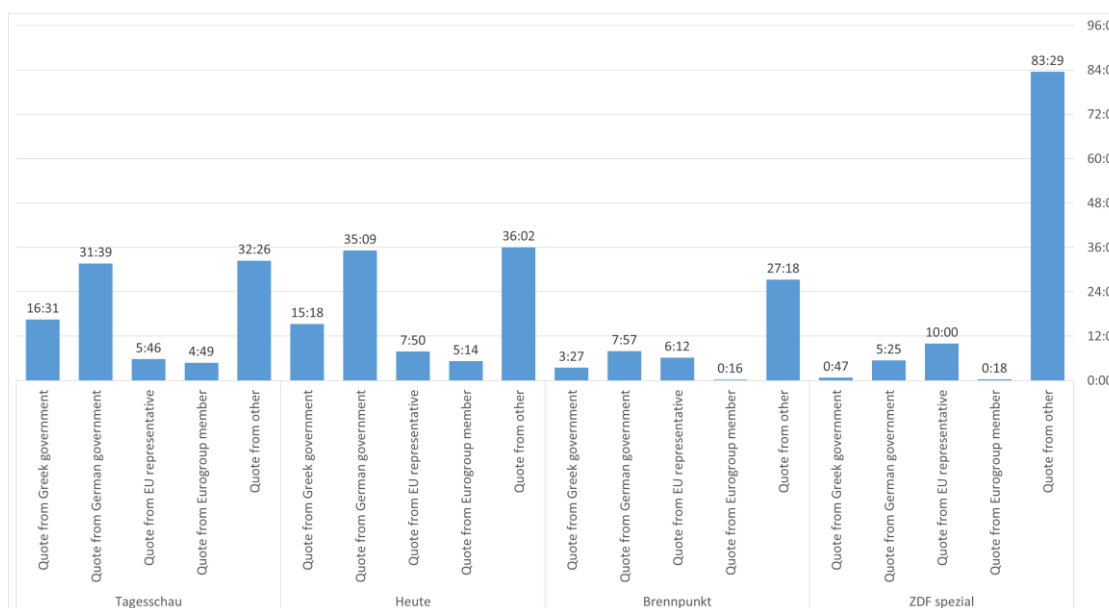


Diagram 7: Providers of quotes in news coverage in 2015 comparing the programmes analysed (in minutes, $n=615$)

Comparing the analysed news programmes reveals few differences. European actors spoke for longer in “heute” than in “Tagesschau”. Representatives of the EU (EU Commission, European Parliament and President of the Council) spoke for longest in “ZDF spezial”.

Overall, we can state that European actors were included in the coverage as providers of direct quotes, even if they were not motivators of the coverage. However, they had less of a presence than Greek or German actors. Approximately one tenth of the total time used for quoted material was attributable to European actors. Representatives of the EU spoke more often than representatives of the Eurogroup.

9. Conclusion

The example of the Greek national debt crisis reveals a high number of national, European and international actors who are affected by the crisis and involved in its solution. It thus also serves as a good illustration of a complex economic and political crisis at a European level. Decisions made at European level involve billions of Euros that come from the European population’s taxes. It is the task of news coverage to establish a European public sphere through the creation of a European perspective so that the complex relations, results and developments can be portrayed appropriately. This is necessary in order to prevent a sense of insecurity arising within the population, exacerbating this crisis and conflicts between the actors. While the majority of the population was in favour of Greece remaining in the Euro at the beginning of the year, in June 2015 the majority was against Greece remaining in the Euro and a clear majority was against further concessions to Greece. The German population’s necessary trust in the Greek government shrank noticeably during the first half of 2015, and insecurity increased.

Thus the present study investigated the key question: does German news coverage of the Greek national debt crisis create a European public sphere?

In total, 615 news items in the television programmes “Tagesschau”, “heute”, “ZDF spezial” and “Brennpunkt” reported on the Greek national debt crisis in 2015. Coverage of the Greek national debt crisis was therefore highly intense, but dependent upon particular events. Key events took place at a European level: EU summits and Eurogroup meetings were held. These events frequently motivated coverage.

However, the focus was seldom on the European actors. European actors, especially the EU Commission, the European Parliament and the European Central Bank, rarely prompted the coverage. National actors, particularly the Greek and German governments, were the focus of coverage and were most frequently the motivation for reporting in the news programmes analysed. The European stage was thus largely used for coverage relating to national actors.

Statements from European actors were only seldom reported in the news coverage. Representatives of the EU and the Eurogroup accounted for only around one tenth of the direct quotes in the news coverage examined. National actors were much more in evidence here; they had a greater presence in the news items on the Greek national debt crisis in 2015.

The study’s results show that it is not really possible to speak of a Europeanized national public sphere in Germany as far as the coverage of the Greek national debt crisis is concerned. In the German media, the European conflict became a national conflict. While European events, such as crisis summits or meetings of the finance ministers, motivated coverage, the European actors were rarely the subject matter covered. Thus reporting on this European sovereign debt crisis also shows that the German media are still far from Europeanized. The identified lack of a European public sphere creates distrust among the population and threatens to diminish the legitimation of European decisions, institutions and actors.