

# With national politics so choked off by the crisis, the rise of reasonable technocrats to dominate the leadership of Europe is actually a small ray of hope. But long-term prospects for Europe really rest with the ‘subterranean politics’ of protestors and intellectuals

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*The displacement of elected leaders by technocrats has been seen by many commentators as a worrying symptom of the erosion of democracy in EU countries. Key decisions are being made at multi-national summits, while European voters often have little say in the process. Yet given the seeming failure of our national-level politicians, **Mary Kaldor** argues that a pan-European debate about the very nature of the European Union and the Euro is now needed – starting with the ‘subterranean politics’ of groups ranging from the Occupy movement to public intellectuals.*



The current crisis in Europe is not an economic crisis but a political crisis; money is always an expression of power relations. Member governments of the European Union created a common currency, but did not create a common political community. The functioning of the Euro depends on decisions taken by national politicians meeting at periodic summits, usually on the basis of behind the scenes negotiations.

Despite the fact that formal democracy is national, many of the decisions that affect our lives are not taken at that level – they are taken in Brussels, Washington DC, and Beijing, or in New York or Berlin or London, or in the headquarters of multinational companies. In the technocratic world in which we now live, no one is quite sure whether or where decisions are taken. Everyone is the prisoner of a certain set of assumptions, a dominant culture about the way that things have to be. Perhaps there are no real decisions? We vote, and yet apparently we have no say in how society develops.



Italian Prime Minister  
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something to do with reducing the size of the public sector, now seen as the electoral constituency of the left. I do not understand the pervasive commitment to austerity in Germany- it serves Germany's privileged economic position but clearly is so widely held that it must have deeper societal roots.

### Choked-off national politics

Why is it so difficult to challenge all this? The obstacles to a genuine deliberative democracy are twofold. One is that nation-states still dominate decision-making, but national politicians do not act for Europe as a whole. The other is that politics at a national level has been over institutionalised and bureaucratised. In many countries politics has been frozen into a nexus of patronage involving the media as well as corporate and financial interests. National politicians seem somehow wooden and constrained and obsessed with short-term political gain compared, paradoxically visionless compared to the technocrats or indeed to local or European politicians.

Ideas and arguments about what matters seem to have no place at a national level – hence the widespread frustration expressed in growing protest movements, reflecting the sense of being utterly blocked at the national level. Yet our future is in the hands of these same national political leaders who lack genuine legitimacy and trust. Oddly enough the replacement of political leaders by those who are called technocrats, which is clearly undemocratic, nevertheless appears as a ray of hope.

So how do we get out of the political crisis? There is a need to construct a political community, but not on the model of a nation-state. Europe could be understood as a model of global governance – a mechanism for enabling nation-states to cope with globalisation. It does require a fiscal union. But rather than replacing national taxes with European level taxes, the role of the EU should be to tax global public bads like financial transactions, for example (using a Tobin tax); the EU could be funded by a carbon tax or a wider resource tax, while nation-states continue to be responsible for classic national taxes like income taxes. By the same token, the European Union should spend on global public goods – an EU-wide social justice, investment in resource saving technologies, a European Marshall Plan for youth, for example.

Take the example of security policy. The European Union should not develop a European army to defend its borders on a nation-state model. Rather it should make a contribution to peace and human rights worldwide. It should develop security capabilities that can contribute to global security capabilities, for example, a United Nations Emergency Peace Force. Of course, the EU itself needs democratic procedures. There needs to be an elected President, and a more effective European Parliament (see [Simon Hix on this blog](#)). Yet such steps will be only be meaningful if something like a pan-European debate about the very nature of the European Union and the Euro generates public interest and pressure.

### The alternatives from 'subterranean politics'

At the LSE's [Civil Society and Human Security Research Unit](#), we have a research project on 'subterranean politics' in Europe. We chose this term so as not be confined by existing terms, like civil society or social movements. We are interested in a range of embryonic political stirrings and how they become visible. We have already developed a few tentative findings.



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First of all, the protests in the squares and elsewhere are actually less joined up, more heterogeneous than many of the protests our unit has documented over the last decade, and even not as large as earlier episodes. What has changed is that current phenomena are striking a chord in the mainstream – among intellectuals, in the media, among students, journalists, and opinion-makers. Some of the protesters at Occupy London, for example, were invited to write a comment piece for the *Financial Times*.

Second, what the protests have in common is this sense of being politically blocked at a national level – the protestors call themselves indignant, angry or disappointed.

Third, along with opposition to austerity and banks, a big preoccupation is transparency and accountability. For young people in the squares, the Internet is not just a method of communication; it is part of their every day life. The success of Pirate parties in Berlin and Sweden is an expression of this preoccupation.

Finally, there has been a wave of initiatives for European alternatives largely from intellectuals, especially economists. (We are collecting these initiatives and they can be found [here](#)). These proposals are not very present among the protestors, but this does not mean that the protestors are anti-European. On the contrary there is an important generational dimension, like the way that Internet is experienced. Unlike the older generation, young people take Europe for granted. Only in England (not Scotland or Wales) are there explicitly anti-European sentiments. Elsewhere there are objections to the current European Union, but not to being part of Europe. 'It is because we are European' one respondent told us 'that we can criticise Europe'.

I remember E.P. Thompson saying in the 1980s that 'Europe is thinking –it only happens every 30-40 years'. Europe does seem to be thinking now. This is a moment of discursive openings. Is there a way to bring all these phenomena together in a shared conversation about how to construct a common political community and overcome the impasse at national levels?

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*This article is based on a talk, 'Taking on the technocrats: paths towards another Europe' given at LSE on February 17 2012 by Trevor Evans and Mary Kaldor.*

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Mary Kaldor is Professor of Global Governance and Director of the Civil Society and Human Security Research Unit at the LSE. She has researched and written extensively about security and civil society. Her latest books include [Human security: reflections on globalization and intervention](#) (Polity, 2007) and [New & Old Wars](#) (Polity, 2006).



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