The crisis of the euro indicates not only a threat to European integration, but also a crisis of European democracy characterized by a surge in "anti-politics". Many analysts have identified the media as the single most important factor in this development, as the marketization of the media combines with digital technology to create a political order determined by public opinion. In political decision-making, the question whether this opinion is right or wrong becomes secondary to its value as a form of feedback. British journalist Judith Vidal-Hall met Bulgarian cultural anthropologist Ivaylo Ditchev in Sofia to discuss what this means for citizens' trust in the political system and for democracy as such. Moderated by Carl Henrik Fredriksson, editor-in-chief of Eurozine.

Carl Henrik Fredriksson: Everyone seems to agree that the current European crisis is about more than money. European Council President Herman Van Rompuy is not alone when he identifies a European crisis of democracy, characterized by the rise of populism and a surge in "anti-politics". Ivaylo Ditchev, in your article "Democracy 'live'", which is the point of departure for this discussion, you describe "the techno-ideological imperative of immediate feedback" as a threat to democracy. What is this permanent feedback syndrome?

Ivaylo Ditchev: I'm very sceptical concerning the radical form of democracy that has developed in recent years. It is a form of democracy that leads to its opposite. Its fate is similar to that of the revolts of 1968, whose liberation of the individual was used by capitalist forces to form a society characterized by "flexibility" and "fluidity" on the ruins of the social welfare state. What happens now is that a new media system that fosters a culture of constant feedback is actually destroying democracy by radicalizing it. In the world of web 2.0, feedback is everything. We are constantly forced to rate, respond, reply; in fact, it is no longer possible for a reader of newspapers and other media not to react in one way or the other.

This is a general tendency with far-reaching consequences. The development within the sphere of the media combines with the development in the field of politics and opinion polls. We are not only being asked to react to other people's opinions — to articles and blog entries — but we are also constantly being polled. Whenever a minister takes a decision on this or that, this decision is based on the results of an opinion poll — and will immediately be followed by another opinion poll. As a result the time perspective of political action becomes much shorter, with politicians being tempted to instantly react to the stimulus of the population, be it a street demonstration, a comment on the web or an opinion poll.
Previously, a certain time passed between one political decision and the next. Now citizens are exposed to political statements around the clock; there is constantly one crisis or another that calls for immediate reaction. Politics was also made within certain institutions, such as political parties or trade unions. Today, these institutions have been replaced by the individual citizen, who interacts with power directly, via opinion polls or web comments. Political leaders like Berlusconi and Sarkozy address the citizens directly — and get immediate feedback.

Politics is no longer done in portions. Politics is done every day, without waiting for the results. The announcement itself has replaced the result as the basis for evaluating politicians.

**CHF:** Is the debate following WikiLeaks' release of the "Cablegate" files an example of your thesis?

**ID:** What is interesting in the WikiLeaks case is how the archives receive a whole new quality. Archived files used to be opened fifty or so years after the events they recorded took place, now they are opened almost instantly, soon perhaps even in real time. This is yet another example of how shortening the time horizon doesn't necessarily profit democracy as a system, where subjects take responsibility for their actions and are judged on their results.

The current government in Bulgaria is another very good example of this trend: it changes its policies from one day to the next, reacting instantly to stimulus from the population. The result is an ever-changing mix of ideas and opinions, no long-term strategy. At the end of the day one has to ask whether this really benefits society and its citizens. To me it seems as if the only winners in this game are the advocates of various private interests. The losers are the state and the society. Any type of authority is regarded with deep mistrust. The American Tea Party movement illustrates this attitude very well; the only thing uniting it is the lack of trust in government authority.

**CHF:** The concept of trust seems to be central to the discussion about democracy in change, not only in the US but also in Europe. In the UK as well?

**Judith Vidal-Hall:** I'm painfully aware of the fact that the UK is on the fringes of Europe, in a curious way reluctant to commit. But in the case of trust — or mistrust — we are on par with the rest of Europe. Recently, British society has been stunned by the level of corruption running throughout the parliament. People of my age and persuasion found it hard at first to believe the extent of this abuse of trust. Ivaylo talks about the gap between the governing and the governed, which undermines and reduces authority. But while technology has diminished the gap between politicians and citizens, in other ways this gap has widened. At the level of personal integrity, I do not trust our parliamentarians anymore. The gap between voters and their representatives is actually widening.

This is compounded by the fact that we have lost trust in the money as well. They led us to believe that we could borrow to the end of time. Not true. The money is gone. In Britain you can't borrow anymore to pay for your children to go to university — and university fees are going to treble. You can't borrow the money to buy your first little flat — people are living at home until their thirties. The question is if you can have a society at all without trust.
Concerning WikiLeaks, this is an interesting phenomenon in a number of ways, quite apart from the issue of immediacy. This immediacy is in fact something of an illusion. With the latest release, WikiLeaks depended hugely on old-fashioned, traditional newspapers to mediate the documents. Is WikiLeaks any different from an ordinary source? Is it — apart from the sheer volume of the information — anything else than Deep Throat, who in 1972 provided information about the involvement of Richard Nixon's administration in the Watergate scandal to the Washington Post, and destroyed a lot of trust in American politics?

CHF: Staying for a while with the question of the role of the media for democracy. Ivaylo, if I interpret you correctly, you are saying that the media contributes to a negative development not, as most media critics would have it, by perverting and misinterpreting journalism, but by default. By fulfilling their task, the media force politicians into a situation where they can no longer govern and thus undermine the very democracy that they are supposed to safeguard.

ID: The media give us what we want. We want stimulation and excitement, and this is what we get. Tony Blair once complained that it had become a common practice for UK journalists to intercept him on his way to government meetings and ask him to make a statement about decisions yet to be taken, because they needed to break the news before the meeting was over. This is a parody of democracy.

It’s not that we as citizens are oppressed or manipulated. We get what we want. What sets the model for this feedback culture is more than anything else the TV reality shows. In A Tale of Two Houses, Stephen Coleman has compared the Big Brother house with the House of Commons, the UK Parliament. He comes to the conclusion that the Big Brother house is more interesting to people in the UK because it gives them what one normally would expect from politics: the possibility to participate, to vote, to change the course of events. The parliament, on the other hand, is dull. The problem is that that we have come to believe in this “utopian” model. Everything should be exciting and accessible. We should get everything at once. Again, WikiLeaks is a good example. There are good reasons to be critical about this model of instant gratification.

CHF: Couldn’t your description of politics as a field where the distance between the governing and the governed is shrinking, leaving no space for the development of authority, also be applied to the media itself? One way to define “authority” is as “trust in advance”. Could the loss of trust in the media be the result not of people’s belief that journalists are liars and manipulators, but because the distance between the producer and the consumer has disappeared, and with it the authority, the “trust in advance”? With the introduction of digital media, the journalist is no longer a distant professional writing in the newspaper, but someone figuring in the same space as the reader, who is at the same time a commentator. The opinion of the former is not necessarily regarded as more valid than that of the latter.

ID: Yes, exactly! Just as the distinction between high culture and popular culture has collapsed, so has the distinction between the professional journalist and the amateur blogger. This levelling is problematic and I don’t know how we should deal with it. The principle prevailing on the Internet is that quantity produces quality. The more clicks or ratings someone gets, the more interesting he or she is. Instead of a critic telling you what you should read,
you have a list of the most read articles; instead of "Read this article because it is interesting", you have "Many people have read this, therefore you should do so as well".

What is being undermined is the principle of representation in general, not only in politics, but also in culture and journalism. Direct democracy might be possible in small communities, such as a Swiss canton. In a larger context, where you don't know your neighbour, it is not. Direct democracy is utopian and its principles are not clear.

JVH: What we see is fragmentation. It looks as if we are all connected, but we all just talk to our group, within our network. In theory, web 2.0 unites, but in reality this great global society is fragments of society.

It seems to me that the crucial question is how we can restructure a post-democratic world? It's a dangerous term, but somehow inevitable. How do we begin to redefine our institutions? If there is no trust in the media and there is no trust in the government or politics in general, and if there is no trust in the economy or the banks that are now denying you money but were the ones creating your problem with debt, then where is society? How do we organize society? Are the institutions we are talking about here — media, politics, democracy — still fit for purpose? I'm not sure that they are. We might be concerned about democracy at the moment, but we still refer to it as though it was the way to conduct things. Shouldn't we be trying to find new ways of participation and representation that are something else than conventional democracy?

CHF: Both of you seem to be describing a dystopia — and it's not something that might await us in the future, it's already here. This fragmentation of the public sphere seems to suggest that the model that we have all used for a long time to describe the importance of media in a democratic system is no longer valid. If Habermas' description of the public sphere as a space were everyone discusses the same thing at the same time no longer matches the reality, what does then remain of the media's function as a deliberative pillar of democracy?

JVH: It is not that it's not relevant anymore, but we keep on talking as though the traditional media were of ultimate importance to a system that may be past its prime. I've been brought up with the idea that the media is the fourth estate, the watchdog on power and the guardian of the people's interest. I'm not entirely sure that that exists anymore.

I come from a small town in the Midlands in England where one of the first newspapers in Europe was published in 1695. It is a tiny market town, but it had a lot of money. The educated farmers were doing well up there, they had land and they had money — but they didn't have the vote. So the newspaper they founded was very much about reform, it was radical.

This radical theme continued through the eighteenth century with people like Addison, Steele and Swift. But in the nineteenth century, urbanization and industrialization set in, and the men who owned the mills wanted a press that supported the status quo. Forget reform! They wanted a press that watched on democracy only to make sure that it didn't do them any harm.

So, in the nineteenth century media became something that is part of the establishment, and I think that we delude ourselves if we believe that the huge media conglomerates today are any different. In every opinion poll asking who
people trust in society, journalists come bottom; they are least liked and least trusted. If the media is not trusted, why does it matter what it says?

**CHF:** What could then be the basis of a future democratic society?

**ID:** I’m not sure that the fragmentation is such a big problem. You still have considerable trans-media effects. To take the WikiLeaks example again, their latest release has been at the centre of attention in almost every country around the world, an excitement that runs through many different media outlets at the same time. Global warming is another issue that is discussed everywhere, not only in certain niches of society — and it arouses a lot of passion. The problem is that these are emotional rather than rational discussions; both the basis for them and the outcome of them are emotions — indignation, distrust, surprise. This is the main reason why Habermas’ description is no longer adequate: discourse has been replaced with a system of images focusing mainly on personalities.

I don’t think that we can return to the old institutions that were the pillars of the democratic system. Instead we need to find a new model of democracy that can address these flows of global passion and excitement and account for a mixture of different considerations and opinions.

**CHF:** But who will be the actors in such a society that has moved beyond our current system of democracy? Will it be big new media networks? Will it be the citizens — individually or in communities — sitting at home with access to all possible information? If it’s not the political parties, not the trade unions, not the media as we know it today, then who is it?

**JVH:** Let’s get away from the word democracy and concentrate instead on concepts such as participation and representation. How can one structure and inform a system based on this? Shifting and, indeed, fragmented interest groups formed by citizens could be one alternative. It will not be tidy, it will not be neat. Democracy is terribly neat; you vote every four years or so for your representative in your constituency. That was good when Britain had a population of 20 million and an homogenous population. Today, London alone is almost 10 million and the population is utterly diverse. As it is now, huge interests groups remain without representation. So, a multitude of interest groups might better reflect society than do the present institutions.

**ID:** One could call it the privatization of public space. Stable collective contracts have been replaced with individual contracts. One person works full time, the other part time, a third travels abroad... This goes for the whole society and it’s a completely new situation. There is no need for the concept of class anymore, no big collectives such as the trade unions. At certain times, moved by some passion, prompted by some problem, individuals and smaller interest groups can come together in bigger collectives. In case of a major crisis — an environmental catastrophe for example — they can unite. But the normal way to conduct politics would be within a framework of moving constellations of interest. The organization of contextual eruptions of common passion, to bring together otherwise distinct interest groups around issues that create strong emotions, will be a key challenge for a future democratic system.

**CHF:** Have citizens lost trust in the old institutions — media, political parties, trades unions — and therefore withdrawn from society, creating their own isolated communities? Or have citizens simply withdrawn from society due to other developments, for example technological change, and for that reason the
traditional institutions have lost legitimacy? What is the hen and what is the egg?

**JVH:** Again, if you have lost trust in the institutions that frame and uphold your society, do you then have a society at all? In the Soviet Union and its satellite states there was fear of government and its institutions. People then retreated into what Milan Simecka at the time described as a very special type of social contract: your discourse was with your family, with your friends, with the people you trusted. You chose very carefully those people with whom you felt you could have discourse, with whom you could share comment. It seems that the lack of trust in institutions drives one away from society.

**ID:** The withdrawal from society is part of a process of de-modernization. We have all criticized the follies of modernity, the excesses of bureaucracy and regulation. Now we have arrived at the opposite pole: no society, no public sphere, no government. The only thing you can trust is the small, private circle, above all your family. Here you see again this trend of privatization.

Zygmunt Bauman connects the notion of trust with the notion of predictability: you can only trust an institution if you can foresee what will happen in the future. Today, the world changes so quickly that this isn't possible. In 1989, all institutions in eastern Europe crumbled overnight; we lost trust not only in governments, but in teachers, philosophers, writers. Similar shifts have taken place several times in the course of the twentieth century. Now technological change opens up another gap between generations. Young people flee into the digital world — a whole new culture — leaving behind older generations, who are totally at a loss. Trust is not possible when everything around us changes so rapidly.

**CHF:** Looking at the media landscape that has developed in eastern Europe in the last twenty years, one can identify several problems there that are more prominent than in western Europe: external influence on individual media outlets, censorship, the dominance of populist newspapers and television channels. However, it seems to me that the situation that you describe is not an eastern European phenomenon, but rather a general development. Or is it worse in the new member states?

**ID:** Of course what I describe is especially visible in eastern Europe. This has to do with the unrestrained privatization that has taken place here. It has to do with the fact that often you don't know the origin of investments in the media, like when an offshore company starts a Bulgarian television channel. It also has to do with the absence of a political culture of responsibility, the absence of a tradition of sensible regulation and self-regulation. In addition, competition between private media outlets becomes more ferocious the smaller the markets are.

**CHF:** Are you saying that the tendency is the same in eastern and western Europe, but the consequences are worse in eastern Europe because the alternatives are weaker?

**ID:** Yes. And again you have the process of de-modernization. In this part of the world, modernity is linked to communism. If you talk about regulation in Bulgaria, people will immediately associate that with communist rule.

**JVH:** The Czech dissident Ivan Klíma once wrote: "we asked for freedom, but you gave us the market". That still seems to be a good summary of the
situation.

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