
Blame Shifting and Credit Claiming – Comparing Strategies of Communicative Self-Legitimation in the Eurozone Crisis Debate

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The recent Eurozone crisis has transformed into a dramatic crisis of democratic legitimacy that affects both domestic actors and European Union institutions. The withdrawal of popular support, increasing demands for accountability and a growing public attention put political actors under intensive legitimation pressure that has to be dealt with. In times of crisis, effective performance is an unreliable source of legitimacy; top-down strategies of communicative self-legitimation, such as blame shifting and credit claiming (Weaver 1986) gain importance. The self-portrait of actors in the discursive contest over responsibility attributions is likely to influence their perceived legitimacy. In this sense, the public sphere turns into a central arena for legitimacy contestation. Understanding politics as a discursive struggle between actors over public support we test in how far different degrees of legitimation pressure can explain the communication behavior of core political institutions (European Union institutions, national governments) during the crisis.

This paper draws on empirical data on responsibility attributions in the Eurozone Crisis debate in Greek and German newspapers as well as Reuters news reports. The data stems from a collaborative Greek-German research project (GGCRISI) applying Discursive Actor Attribution Analysis. The analysis of responsibility attributions for the period between 2009 and 2013 allows approaching discursive strategies of self-legitimation via a detailed analysis of public communication patterns.

***** *Not yet revised by a native speaker* *****

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***** *Work in progress; data collection under way. Empirical results may change* *****

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1 THE EUROZONE CRISIS AS A CRISIS OF LEGITIMACY

The recent crisis in the Eurozone constitutes the most severe rupture in the history of the European Union. It shakes the European institutional framework as well as most of its member countries, most severely Greece. This shock is economic, political, cultural and social. A whole system which has been regarded as fixed and taken-for-granted is fundamentally questioned. Regardless of the discussions about its alleged end, the crisis will undoubtedly shape the future course of European integration.

While in academia the *causes* of the crisis are subject of heated discussions, one *consequence* is already too clear: a legitimacy crisis for political institutions and actors on the national as well as the European level. As Habermas (2012: 4) aptly put it, the European governments' situation during the Eurozone crisis was a "dilemma posed by the imperatives of the major banks and rating agencies, on the one side, and their fear of losing legitimacy among their own frustrated populations, on the other". This fear seems well-founded: Between 2009 and 2013 almost all governments in the Eurozone were voted out of power with the exception of the least-affected countries in the north of Europe – most notably, Germany (van Gent et al. 2013).

A crisis is *an unusual situation which is temporarily limited in which societal structures of general impact are perceived to be questioned and unstable* (for details and references, see Roose et al. 2014). Without any doubt, the Eurozone crisis is a crisis in this sense. Old patterns of interpretation are (regarded as) invalid and an intensive public debate evolved on the causes and consequences of the crisis. The future course of European unification has become part of this political controversy. The question of causal responsibility is not only discussed in academia but also in the public and on the streets. The intensity of the crisis and its omnipresence, in particular in the south of Europe, contributed to a growing public awareness for European issues and to increasing levels of public visibility for European Union actors which were put to the center of attention. Massive protests challenged the European policies of austerity cuts and bailouts. And for both, national and European actors, the news media and civil society vigorously demanded public accountability and responsiveness to the demands of the people (Rauh and Zürn 2014). This intensification of conflict about European issues, identity-related *and* distributional, opened up a new wave of what scholars call the politicization of European integration and it let no doubt about the ultimate end of the so-called "permissive consensus" (Lindberg and Scheingold 1970; Hooghe and Marks 2009).

In that sense, the Eurozone crisis and the speeding up of the politicization process have brought to the fore new questions of legitimacy, for both, national political authorities and EU institutions. The withdrawal of electoral support and shrinking levels of trust (*see section 4*; Braun and Tausendpfund 2014) point to a general decline in legitimacy for core political institutions during the crisis. And when - as a general rule - situations of crises put decision makers under scrutiny, this dynamic is intensified by the newly emerging public attention to European matters. In the crisis scenario, political institutions are forced to justify their policies and their role, facing a larger and more critical audience. This interplay of crisis dynamics, public attention and decreasing public support puts national and European institutions under *legitimation pressure*. Legitimacy has declined and depending on the public interpretation of past developments and future actions it will further decline or

it may recover. How do actors cope with this pressure? How do they react to the growing dissatisfaction among the people?

One way to answer these questions is to look at the public sphere. The public sphere, especially the mass media, is the arena where political (and other) actors can put forward their interpretations of past developments. Policy makers legitimate themselves on the public stage and in front of a critical audience (Barker 2001; Hurrelmann et al. 2012; Schneider et al. 2007). This can occur directly through self-portrait and self-justification and indirectly through the demarcation from others (Weaver 1986). The public sphere becomes a central “arena for legitimacy contestation” (Statham and Trenz 2014).

In this paper, we analyze the discursive strategies of political actors in the interpretation of the crisis. In particular, we look at the attribution of responsibility and the question of how actors identify past and current failures or achievements which are crucial for gaining or losing legitimacy. Our guiding assumption is that legitimation pressure leads to communication strategies aiming at a positive self-presentation in the public. The stronger the legitimation pressure, the more pronounced these strategies. Starting from this general assumption, we test more specific hypotheses on the link between legitimation pressure and the attribution of responsibility for political actors from the European and the national level in Greece and Germany.

Greece is certainly the most prominent case among the crisis countries. The country has been hit most severely and the programs in response to the crisis, namely austerity and economic liberalization, provoked heated debates, massive protest and popular resistance. Germany, on the other hand, grants the largest amount of guarantees and has most strongly pressured for strict austerity and reforms. It is the most prominent case on the other side of this European cleavage between north and south, creditors and debtors.

In section 2 we elaborate on our theoretical argument and formulate hypotheses on the relation between legitimation pressure and the public attribution of responsibility. Using survey data to measure the legitimation pressure in more detail allows specifying our expectations in respect to national governments and European institutions (section 3). After introducing the data (section 4), we present our findings (section 5), conclude and present future research agendas (section 6).

2 DEALING WITH LEGITIMATION PRESSURE IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

2.1 Political Communication and Legitimacy in the Public Sphere

The democratic process has been understood as a competition between rational actors (Downs 1957). Actors entering the public stage and articulating their views before a wider audience aim at winning public support. They can do so by convincing others of their achievements and potentials and by pushing a certain opinion or interpretation of reality. In the light of the different and often overlapping strategic interests, the political debate turns into a discursive struggle between actors to set dominant meanings in place and to attain support through the adoption of a variety of communication strategies.

A core dimension of this struggle is the attribution of responsibility (Weaver 1986; Gerhards et al. 2007, 2009). The attribution of responsibility, the link of an actor and her/his action to

a situation or phenomenon, is a social construction. Every situation and phenomenon has multiple necessary conditions, i.e. causes, and involves many different actors. To mark one actor as responsible is therefore always a specific selection which – *in principle* – could have been different. The attribution of responsibility to one actor is one choice among many possible choices.

At the same time the attribution of responsibility, especially in its discursive form, is an explicit assessment of actors and their action. Evaluating an outcome and attributing this outcome to an actor implies judging the performance of this very actor. In this sense, the attribution of responsibility is central to the discursive struggle over public support. The self-portrait of actors is likely to influence their perceived legitimacy in the public. When, in the public debate, actors achieve linking themselves to successes and when, at the same time, they successfully connect failures and setbacks to others, then their publically perceived legitimacy is likely to profit. This is especially relevant for governments and other directly elected actors; the public perception of responsibility is expected to influence voting behaviour and hence, the chances for re-election (Hobolt and Tilley 2014). In times of crises and in particular in a crisis as complex and difficult to grasp as the current one, effective performance is an unreliable source of legitimacy. Crisis policies have to be perceived as working; whether they actually do is of secondary importance (Jones 2009). In such a situation political actors have strong incentives to look for (discursive) strategies which improve their public image.

In general, people like to be seen positively by others and we can assume that actors have a strategic interest to present themselves in favorable terms when entering the public stage (Gerhards et al. 2009). In terms of responsibility attributions this so-called *self-serving bias* means claiming credit for successes and shifting blame to others, while granting credit to others and especially admitting own mistakes is the less likely option. However, the impulse to attribute responsibility according to this general pattern (*Credit Claiming* and *Blame Shifting*) will vary. The positive self-presentation in the public is not equally important for all kind of actors and in all situations; to explain varying degrees of *Credit Claiming* and *Blame Shifting* earlier studies have referred to the structural position in the political process (Gerhards et al. 2009), the institutional setting (Greuter 2014; Hood 2011) or the policy decisions at stake (theoretically Weaver 1986). Here, we look at legitimation pressure in a situation of crisis as one further predictor of attribution behavior. The extent to which actors are exposed to popular elections serves as an additional mediator of this effect.

While the perspective of rational competitors and their strategies puts responsibility attributions in a purely instrumental context, from the perspective of normative democracy theories one can take another angle. The public sphere plays a central role for the operation of democracy as it connects the public to political authority. Being able to hold office holders accountable for their actions is a crucial prerequisite of democracies (cf. Greuter 2014). The public sphere serves as the central arena to formulate public demands and critique. At the same time, political authorities, too, make use of this arena by justifying their own role before the public. In theories of political representation and in election research, this relationship between political authority and the public is subsumed under the concept of responsiveness. In most abstract terms responsiveness describes the *readiness to respond* to the wishes and concerns of the constituents (Pitkin 1967). This reaction to public opinion can take the form of policy action but it can also take the form of rhetoric and discursive engagement (Hobolt and Klemmensen 2007). Communicative reactions on

behalf of political authorities document that public opinion matters; they invest in convincing people by actively trying to influence the public perception, by justifying their positions and by ‘clarifying’ matters of responsibility distribution. In this sense, engaging in the struggle about responsibility attribution in a situation of crisis and legitimation pressure can be regarded as a form of communicative responsiveness.

This minimal conception of responsiveness should not be confused with a clear-cut indicator of the public sphere’s democratic quality; when faced with public opposition, authorities can choose to ignore the public and its doubts or acknowledge its discontent by justifying their own role. It should be clear, however, that a visible reaction in the communication strategy does not necessarily imply a qualitative improvement in the relationship between the public and the authorities per se.

Despite these caveats we argue that our take at communicative responsiveness contributes to a better understanding of the relationship between the public and political authority in times of crisis. After all, political communication is of increasing importance in an ever more politicized European multi-level system. When authority is no longer passively supported, it has to find new sources of legitimation beyond the ballot box and political communication is one of them. In the following we analyze the extent to which public opinion evokes communicative reactions to collective demands and discontent and how it influences political communication.

2.2 Discursive Legitimation Strategies

Attributions of responsibility are statements which link an issue with an actor. This issue can be manifold, e.g. a policy, a situation, a decision etc. This issue is linked to an actor, who is claimed to be responsible for it. Responsibility in this respect can take different forms. Here, we concentrate on *causal attributions* which establish a causal link between actors’ behavior and a positive or negative outcome. Positive causal attributions or *attributions of credit* refer to successes. That means an actor is praised for an achievement. The statement that the government’s policy has helped to reduce the unemployment rate would be an example. Negative causal attributions or *attributions of blame* focus on the origin of a problem or a failure. For example the government may be blamed for having worsened the situation of pensioners. Both causal attribution types can be separated into diagnostic attributions directed at the past and prognostic attributions directed at the future. The last example could refer to already visible consequences of the government policy (diagnostic), but we can also imagine that the attribution sender refers to a future deterioration of the pensioners’ situation due to current decisions (prognostic).¹ Other attribution types are *request attributions* which call others to action or *competence*

¹ Causal attributions can appear as positive statements (i.e. “is responsible for...”) but they can also appear as rejections of responsibility attributions (i.e. “is not responsible for...”). In our coding procedure, we merged these two forms according to the evaluation of the addressee. That means: attributions of success and rejections of failure are found in one category (*positive causal attributions*), whereas attribution of blame and rejections of success are found in another category (*negative causal attributions*).

attributions which attribute general competence to an actor.² It is important to note that attribution sender and attribution addressee can be identical (*self-attribution*).³

In the debate about the Eurozone crisis, questions of causation, or in other words the questions of blame and success are part and parcel of the public sense making. Who is to blame for the crisis? Which measures to fight it are successful and which policies rather worsen the situation for the population? In the current crisis situation, these questions are of crucial importance and hence, in the following we focus on causal attributions, omitting request and competence attributions.

As already mentioned, there are two basic strategies how an actor can use the attribution of responsibility and in particular causal attributions to present herself/himself positively in the public. The first strategy, the self-attribution of success is directly oriented at the reputation of the speaker. It is the *Credit Claiming* strategy. An actor attributes causal responsibility for a success to herself/himself and thereby puts herself/himself in a positive light.⁴ The second strategy is blame shifting, which means an actor attributes causal responsibility for failures to others. This has a double function as it seeks to avoid negative impacts on one's own reputation while damaging the reputation of others (i.e. discursive competitors). This is *Blame Shifting*. Both strategies serve for enhancing the actor's own reputation.

Self-serving attributions are obviously not the only options. Actors can also attribute responsibility for successes to others. This is the *Credit Granting* strategy. Finally, actors can attribute failures to themselves, i.e. they can *Admit Mistakes*. These two strategies are not directly supportive for the actor.

Overall, we end up with four basic types of attribution strategies:

- *Credit Claiming* – the self-attribution of success
- *Credit Granting* – the attribution of success to others
- *Admitting Mistakes* – the self-attribution of failure
- *Blame Shifting* – the attribution of failure to others

The strategies differ according to how directly the intended impact is linked to the sender. In the case of the *Credit Claiming* the sender directly evaluates himself/herself positively. We regard this as a stronger form of self-supporting attribution behavior compared to *Blame Shifting* where the blaming of others is only indirectly self-supporting. The same logic applies to attributions which have in their tendency non-supportive implications for the sender. *Admitting Mistakes* is directly linked to public *self*-presentation but it underlines the negative consequences. In comparison *Credit Granting* is an evaluation of another actor and has only an indirect but nevertheless non-supportive implication on the reputation of the sender. We consider these direct versus indirect implications by weighing these different types of attributions (*see section 5.2 for details*).

² For further details refer to Roose et al. 2014 and to the codebook (available in spring 2015 on the project website www.ggcrisi.org).

³ Amongst many other variables, we code the 'time reference' of attribution sender and attribution addressee. This allows distinguishing, for instance, between attributions directed at the recent government or directed at earlier or future governments. In this logic, self-attributions imply not only identical actor codes for attribution sender and attribution addressee but the identity of the actual (collective) actor.

⁴ We include in these groups also attributions which reject negative causal attributions because these also aim at a (more) positive presentation of the actor.

2.3 Attributing Responsibility under Legitimation Pressure

Our expectations for the patterns of responsibility attribution build on three assumptions: firstly, an interest in positive self-presentation; secondly, legitimation pressure as a consequence of the crisis situation and the politicization of European integration; thirdly, a strategic focus on the national constituency for directly elected actors which mediates the influence of legitimation pressure.

The first element is our background assumption. We assume a strategic interest in positive self-presentation for all actors on the public stage. While psychological research on attribution pointed out the importance of character traits (cf. Kelley and Michela 1980), we assume a different mechanism for public communication. We assume that exposure to the public enhances the rational calculation of communication and enforces a tendency for positive self-presentation.⁵ Therefore it comes to no surprise, that other studies have shown a strong tendency towards this “self-serving bias” (Gerhards et al. 2009).

In reaction to the crisis and the debates about perceived causes and real consequences, public support for several political actors on the national and European level decreased. Political actors are faced with legitimation pressure. We expect this pressure to influence the patterns of responsibility attribution. One way, to look at this influence would be a comparison between attribution patterns before the crisis and during the crisis. However, there is no such data available. Instead, we compare the responsibility attributions sent by different actors under differing degrees of legitimation pressure.

Legitimation pressure in this sense can be expected to have multiple effects. Firstly, we turn to the communicative *activity* of political actors. We assume that legitimation pressure will force these actors to go public. The pressure forces the respective actors to become active and to intensify their attempts to shape the public discourse. Regardless of the actual content of attributions, to which we refer later, we first assume an increase in attribution activity as a consequence of legitimation pressure.

H1: The stronger the legitimation pressure for a political actor, the more this political actor will engage in the public debate and state causal attributions of responsibility.

While this participation in the debate is a necessary precondition, the core of our interest is the *pattern* of responsibility attribution types. Which types of causal attributions are stated in the public, directed at whom and how do actors make use of these attributions to draw a positive public image? Since the loss in public support urges actors to improve their reputation in the public, we expect legitimation pressure to be a central driver.

H2: The stronger the legitimation pressure for a political actor, the more this political actor will engage in strategies of self-legitimation, i.e. will engage in more Credit Claiming and more Blame Shifting when compared to other, less affected actors.

The third assumption serves as a mediator for both hypotheses; while all kinds of actors have to deal with legitimation pressure, elected actors have a stronger incentive to invest in a positive self-image than non-elected or indirectly elected actors. Elected actors are directly dependent on public support and therefore should react more sensitive to changes in their public reputation.

⁵ This is particularly plausible for the actors whose professional profile includes public presentation such as politicians, spokespeople etc. This kind of actors makes up the majority of senders in our data.

H3: The effect of legitimation pressure on the increase of attribution frequency and the self-serving tendency of the attribution strategy is stronger for directly elected actors than for non-elected or not directly elected actors.

3 DISCURSIVE ACTOR ATTRIBUTION ANALYSIS

This paper focuses on the discursive attribution of responsibility. In the past different perspectives and research tools were used to grasp content and structure in public controversies, e.g. protest event analysis (Koopmans and Rucht 2002), political claims analysis (Koopmans and Statham 1999) and frame analysis (Chong and Druckman 2007; Snow et al. 2014). Recently, the analysis of responsibility attribution has been suggested (Gerhards et al. 2007) and applied (e.g. Gerhards et al. 2009; Greuter 2014). This approach has been further developed into what we call the Discursive Actor Attribution Analysis (DAAA).

The DAAA aims at a standardized content analysis focusing on public interpretation processes in which actors relate phenomena to other actors in the sense of attributions of responsibility. The unit of analysis is the discursive actor attribution. This is the reconstructed answer to the question: “*Who is made publically responsible by whom for what (based on what reasons?)*”

While statements of factual causation are made constantly, this method focuses on the discursive side of responsibility attribution. The approach ignores routine statements of causation which reflect mere taken-for-granted assumptions. Rather the analysis focuses on those attributions which are contested, debated and taken to a wider audience. In these cases, making explicit claims to indicate matters of responsibility distribution seems necessary. Being part of a public debate, these attributions become discursive, explicitly evaluating the linked outcomes and actors. Only these discursive attributions are object of our analysis.

The actor attributions are reconstructed in newspaper reporting on the Eurozone crisis. Based on this material, we identified actors who attribute responsibility to others, in direct or indirect quotes. Actors are not necessarily individuals; also collective actors like institutions and organizations can be senders or addressees. Journalists are only regarded as senders when they abandon their neutral observer position and get involved in the debate by explicitly evaluating others. For each attribution of responsibility, we coded a case with information on the sender and addressee, the issue at stake, the attribution type and some further information.

The sample is taken from quality newspapers between September 2009 and September 2013. The data for this chapter stems from the German *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* as well as the Greek *Kathimerini*, *Eleftherotypia* and *Ta Nea* (for 2012, the year that *Eleftherotypia* stopped operating). Moreover, we covered *Reuters* press releases in order to add a source with a transnational orientation which is not selective according to national criteria. We sampled every seventh publication issue resulting in a rotating week design with changing week days. The selected days are covered by each newspaper in turn. Until now, we coded a total of 2155 articles resulting in 6346 attributions. For this paper we focused on 3570 causal attributions. The analysis is restricted

to only those articles and only those attributions containing relevant information connected to the Eurozone crisis.⁶

As the project is still in the coding phase in this paper we refer to data which covers a large part of our sample but is still incomplete. Therefore, all findings have to be regarded as preliminary.

4 INSTITUTIONS UNDER LEGITIMATION PRESSURE

A core concept of our analysis is legitimation pressure. We want to grasp the loss of legitimacy for political institutions in the course of the crisis. Rather than in absolute levels, we are interested in the relative changes of empirical legitimacy as an indicator of the legitimation pressure actors feel exposed to during the crisis. The argument is based on the logic of relative deprivation (Runciman 1966). We assume that it is not the absolute, long term levels of support but rather short to medium term *changes* in support levels which will trigger communicative responsiveness and which will influence the communication behavior.

One primary expression of empirical legitimacy is the level of trust. Political trust is “the glue that keeps the system together and [...] the oil that lubricates the policy machine” (van der Meer 2010: 76). Moreover, the level of trust political actors experience is crucial “to solve collective action problems and to reduce the transaction costs of public policy” (Harteveld et al. 2013: 543). Trust levels include both diffuse support for the institution itself and specific support for the office holders (ibid.). For our analysis of legitimation pressure and its influence on political communication, this latter dimension of diffuse support is crucial.

To assess the changes in trust levels we use the Eurobarometer survey.⁷ Conducted at least two times a year, it provides recent, consistent and comparable data on trust levels for political actors in Greece and Germany as well as European Union institutions.

Table 1: Relative change in trust levels, pre-crisis average (2006-2009) / crisis average (2010-2013), in %

	GRC	DEU	EU
Domestic Government	<u>-68.1</u>	<u>-4.3</u>	
European Commission	-57.5	-18.2	<u>-18.5</u>
European Parliament	-48.8	-15.7	<u>-17.3</u>
European Central Bank	-57.1	-28.5	<u>-22.1</u>

The results in table 1 show the crisis effects on trust levels quite clearly. For our analysis here and in the following parts we concentrate on the German government, the Greek

⁶ A detailed description of the sampling procedure, the crisis definition and the coding instruction can be found in our codebook which is online on www.ggerisi.info. See also Roose et al. (2014).

⁷ See ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/index_en.html [last visit 19.10.2014]. Eurobarometer Waves 65 – 71 (*pre-crisis*) and 73 – 8 (*crisis*). Question: *I would like to ask you a question about how much trust you have in certain institutions.* a) *Tend to trust*, b) *Tend not to trust*, c) *Do not know*. Answers in table 1 refer to answer a) *Tend to trust*. Calculation example of relative change in trust levels: In the pre-crisis period from 2006 to 2009, the Greek government experienced a trust level of 36.3% on average; in the crisis period from 2010 to 2013 the average score dropped to 11.6%. The drop is 24.7 percentage points. This is a loss of 68.1% of the pre-crisis level.

government and the main European institutions involved in the crisis management, namely the European Commission, the European Parliament and the European Central Bank (ECB). The primary reference populations for these institutions are not identical. For national governments the factual and potential electorate is the respective national population. Hence their primary reference population is national. For European institutions this is different. Though not all of them are (directly) elected, we can still identify the European population rather than a specific national population as the primary reference group. Accordingly, to assess the legitimation pressure for the national governments we refer to the respective national population while for European institutions we refer to the European population (*numbers are underlined*).

Unsurprisingly, the numbers display huge differences between the actors under scrutiny. Comparing pre-crisis and crisis levels, the Greek government experiences the largest loss among all actors (-68.1%), whereas the German government hardly loses trust at all among its own population (-4.3%). The European Union institutions take a middle position with a loss of 19.3% on average among the European population. Next to these general differences between national governments and the European level institutions, the changes of trust *among* European institutions differ to a certain extent, too. On a European scale, the decline is most severe for the European Central Bank (22.1%) and the European Commission (18.5%) while it is slightly less for the European Parliament (17.3%).⁸

The dramatic decline in trust for all actors in Greece, national government and European institutions, is a clear indicator for a fundamental legitimacy crisis which affects both the European and the domestic level. Still, changes in trust levels differ considerably between the national government and the European actors. The crisis impact on the national government is significantly higher than the impact for European institutions. In Germany the pattern is reversed with a considerable loss of trust in European actors and only very minor losses for the national government.

This data on trust levels serves as a proxy for our concept of legitimation pressure and it allows specifying our expectations for the two central hypotheses. Legitimation pressure is expected to have an influence on the number of responsibility attributions stated by an actor (H1) and on the intensity of positive self-presentation (H2). Overall, we expect legitimation pressure to be strongest for the Greek government and to be weakest for the German government. European institutions take a middle position. Legitimation pressure on the European Central Bank is slightly higher than on the other two institutions. The mediating effect of directly elected versus not directly elected institutions (H3) leads to the assumption of stronger effects for the Greek government, the German government and European Parliament, while the European Commission and the European Central Bank are only indirectly dependent on popular support and should react less to legitimation pressure. In combination, we find the by far strongest legitimation pressure for the Greek government, medium pressure for the European Central Bank and due to the relevance of the electorate

⁸ It is disputable whether the European Parliament can be regarded as a single collective actor. In our analysis we refer to the parliament in this way. This is due to the available data from the survey but also a theoretical consideration justifies this decision: From conflict sociology we know that when under pressure collectivities tend to reduce internal conflict and stand together against external threat. The European Parliament has practiced this internal solidarity time and again to safeguard its own position (Judge and Earnshaw 2008). Moreover, the European Parliament and its members are less interwoven with other European or national institutions than national parliaments with groups forming a government coalition and an opposition. Finally, the locality in Brussels and the common socialization seem to have positive effects on a collective identification with the institution (e.g. Beauvallet and Michon 2010) enhancing communicative activity to legitimate the institution as such.

also for the European Parliament. The pressure on the European Commission is lower and it is lowest on the German national government. Table 2 summarizes these expectations.

Table 2: Expectations for effects of legitimation pressure on attribution activity (H1) and attribution patterns (H2)

	<i>Legitimation Pressure</i>
Greek government	++++
German government	0
European Commission	+
European Parliament	++
European Central Bank	++

5 EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

Overall, we coded 3570 causal attributions; 1212 for the German crisis debate (representing 56.6% of all attributions in the German newspapers), 1819 for the Greek debate (62.1%) and a further 539 for Reuters (42.3%). Comparing Greece and Germany, the crisis topic is more salient in the Greek newspapers and the high number of causal attributions per sampling day (14.3 vs. 7.1 in Germany; Reuters: 13.5) shows that the need for public interpretation is more pressing. Moreover, among these causal attributions, the dominant types differ between the three media outlets. In Greek newspapers, attributions of blame make up 81.1% of all causal attributions. In the German press (72.9%) and Reuters (59.7%) blames are also widespread but the share is considerably lower. This dominance of blame attributions illustrates the public demand to identify culprits and to clarify matters of causal responsibility for failures. These basic insights can be seen as an indicator that the Greek crisis debate is more heated and more controversial compared to the German debate and especially compared to Reuters reporting. We should keep this in mind when now turning to the attribution activity (5.1) and the attribution patterns (5.2) of the actors under scrutiny. As said, in the following we only focus on causal attributions which form the core of the crisis debate and the public sense making.

The following analysis is largely structured on three different dimensions of comparison: Firstly, the Greek government vs. the German government. Secondly, the respective national governments vs. the European institutions. And thirdly, the European institutions among each other. For the two national governments, we (mainly) refer to the respective national media. In order to bypass the national reporting bias of the national media, we also refer to Reuters reporting for the European Union institutions.

Finally, it is important to note one further restriction of the analysis. Whereas in the time period under scrutiny from autumn 2009 to autumn 2013, neither the German government nor the European Commission or the European Parliament experienced any significant changes in their personnel, the situation for the European Central Bank and the Greek Government is different. For the ECB, Mario Draghi followed Jean Claude Trichet in November 2011. In Greece, the PASOK cabinet Papandreou lasted from October 2009 until November 2011. It was followed by the technocratic cabinet Papadimos until May 2012.

Beyond the end of the analysed time span (September 2013), the ND-PASOK cabinet Samaras was in power.⁹

5.1 Legitimation Pressure and Attribution Activity

Legitimation pressure, measured as the relative loss in trust during the crisis, is expected to motivate actors to publically articulate their crisis interpretation. Becoming active in the debate is a pre-condition for justifying their role before the public. Accordingly, actors under stronger legitimation pressure should be more actively involved in the public debate about responsibility attributions than others (H1).

Table 3: Causal Attributions Senders, in %

	GRC	DEU	Reuters
Domestic Government	<u>11.6</u>	<u>6.6</u>	
Domestic Parties	18.8	6.8	
Domestic politics, other	8.6	6.9	
Domestic media	24.9	29.1	
Domestic, other	9.7	8.2	
EU Member States	11.4	24.5	56.2
European Commission	2.5	2.8	<u>5.4</u>
European Parliament	0.9	1.0	<u>0.4</u>
European Central Bank	0.7	2.4	<u>10.4</u>
Troika	0.7	0.9	0.2
Eurogroup	0.7	1.1	1.3
EU, other	0.7	0.5	0.6
IMF	0.8	1.5	4.1
transnational., other	3.3	3.3	12.6
Other	4.7	4.49	8.9
N	1819	1225	539

Table 3 shows the discursive activity of national governments as well as that of the European Commission, the European Parliament and the European Central Bank in Greek and German media and in Reuters reporting. We included other national, European and transnational actors in order to draw a coherent picture of the debate and to embed the results into the entire scope of participating actors. Discursive activity refers to actors' total share of causal attributions in the crisis debate. Before we turn to the specific hypothesis testing, the comparison of the general sender structure in Greece, Germany and in Reuters reporting is helpful to get a better grasp of the crisis debate in each sample.

In the Greek media, the debate about causal responsibility in the crisis shows a strong national bias on the sender dimension. Almost three quarters of the actors who actively raise their voices are located in the national arena. Apart from journalists¹⁰ (24.9%), party actors (18.8%) and government actors (11.6%) are strongly involved. Another 11.4% stem from other EU member states, especially Germany. Only 6.2% of all causal attributions in the

⁹ Unfortunately, the period of this last government is not entirely covered in our preliminary dataset. In this draft, we therefore do not distinguish between the different time periods. Moreover, since none of the governments managed to reverse the loss of trust in the institution (*not displayed in table 2*), we do not expect that changes in the government constellation result in significant changes in the attribution patterns. The same applies to the ECB.

¹⁰ Journalists are only regarded as senders when they abandon their neutral observer position and get actively involved in the debate by explicitly evaluating others.

Greek media are sent by European Union institutions with the European Commission (2.5%) being most actively involved. This predominantly national actor pattern indicates that the dramatic crisis situation in the country brings a wide range of domestic actors to the scene in order to push their crisis interpretation. In this highly politicized national environment there is only limited room for European level actors to shape the debate. Apart from some voices within the European Commission such as Olli Rehn, the Commissioner for Economic and Monetary affairs at that time, European Union actors fail to prevail against the government, the national parties and other domestic actors.

In Germany, we see a remarkably different picture. Domestic actors are still the largest category with about 57.6% of all attributions but especially the parties (6.8%) and the domestic government (6.6%) are much less active than their Greek counterparts. The comparison shows that the share of domestic political actors is only half as big as the respective share in Greece. As opposed to that, the share of senders from other European member states (24.5%) is more than twice as big as in Greece. European Union institutions are only slightly more active in relative terms. We have to keep in mind, however, that these are relative numbers and the total numbers for European institutions in Greece are, if anything, slightly higher than in Germany (112 attributions vs. 105 attributions). One of the European Union institutions stands out: in absolute and even more so in relative terms (2.4% in Germany vs. 0.7% in Greece) the ECB is more often covered in the German newspapers when compared to the Greek ones.

In Reuters, 56.2% of all causal responsibility attributions stem from national EU Member State actors. Among those, the German government (8.2%, *not displayed in the table*) and to a lesser extent governments from ‘crisis countries’ stand out. One main reason for including Reuters reporting in our sample was to bypass the national bias of the Greek and German newspapers. Indeed, national peculiarities such as the intense activity of party actors in the Greek media (see also Sommer et al. forthcoming) are not mirrored in Reuters reporting. Moreover, the results show that European Union institutions seem to have a better access to Reuters’ ‘transnational’ reporting perspective. European Union institutions account for 18.8% of all causal attributions. The share for the European Commission (5.4%) doubles the share in the Greek and German media and the extraordinarily high share for the ECB is striking (10.4%). Given that the ECB plays only a very minor role in the Greek media and no dominant role in the German media, either, this is remarkable. The economic orientation of Reuters can only partially explain this outcome.¹¹ The third institution under scrutiny, the European Parliament is almost completely absent in the debate with even lower shares when compared to the national media. Other studies on the European public sphere confirm this marginal role of the European parliament in the recent crisis debate (Koopmans 2014).

How does this general picture fit with our expectations? The Greek government is most strongly exposed to legitimation pressure and indeed the Greek government is actively involved in the Greek crisis debate. Between 2009 and 2013 it was the most active single attribution sender. Government actors intensively used the public stage to participate in the legitimation contest to influence perceptions of causal responsibility. Especially, when compared to the German government’s role in the German media, the difference is striking. Despite Berlin’s factual importance in the crisis management and despite the outstanding

¹¹ Again we should keep the comparatively small sample size in mind.

role of Chancellor Merkel and Finance Minister Schäuble, the German government is much less involved in the public debate in both, relative and absolute terms. The much higher levels of legitimation pressure for the Greek government are one explanation for this discrepancy. This is in line with our expectation of hypothesis 1.

For the EU institutions, we expected a middle position with slightly more pressure on and hence more attribution activity from the European Central Bank and the European Parliament compared to the European Commission. The three outlets differ according to this criterion. The relative frequency of attributions for each EU institution is lower than the activity of the Greek government (in Greek media) but also lower than the German government's activity in German media. The appearance of the European Central Bank differs significantly among the sources. The middle position of EU institutions is rather not supported by the findings.

Comparing the European Union institutions among each other in Reuters reporting, the high share of attributions by the European Central Bank corresponds to its comparatively high losses in public trust all over Europe during the crisis. The expectation, however, to find it on level with the European Parliament is not confirmed. The European Parliament is clearly the least active attribution sender among the compared senders in all sources. It is rather the European Commission which is more active in making attributions than the parliament though the Commission is not dependent on voters' consent. In the national media the attribution activity of the European Central Bank is on level with the European Commission's activity.

Summarizing these findings, we find support for the influence of legitimation pressure on attribution activity (H1) for national governments. The finding for European institutions in comparison with national governments is inconclusive due to differences in the sources but we find a tendency which is not consistent with the assumption. For the comparison among EU institutions especially the assumption of a stronger impact of legitimation pressure for the elected European Parliament is clearly not supported.

Apart from this general assessment, the data point to at least one further inference for the impact of legitimation pressure on attribution activity; among the German population, the European Central Bank experienced the most dramatic loss of support and indeed, compared to other European actors and compared to its share in the Greek media, it is relatively active in the German crisis debate, even though its overall share is still quite low (2.4%). This might be due to a specific orientation of the European Central Bank towards the German rather than the Greek audience as Germany's support is crucial for the Bank's policy. However, a different interpretation would rather refer to an effect of the media outlet's selection criteria. Actors do not freely choose to appear in the media with their attributions of responsibility. Much rather, communication research has shown that national newspapers have complex selection criteria (Shoemaker and Cohen 2006), inter alia a strong national reporting bias and in particular, national executives seem to systematically profit from this logic (Koopmans 2007). The large differences among the sources clearly point in this direction. Whether the findings are due to a differentiated orientation towards national audiences or due to differences in selection criteria cannot be answered on the basis of our analysis at this point.

5.2 Legitimation Pressure and Attribution Patterns

Our second hypothesis connects legitimation pressure to patterns of attributing causal responsibility in the crisis debate; the stronger the legitimation pressure for political actors, the stronger the incentive to engage in strategies of self-legitimation, i.e. to engage in strategies of positive self-presentation; *Credit Claiming* and *Blame Shifting* (H2).

In order to facilitate the comparison, we calculated a SPI-Index (*Self-Presentation-Index*) which relates the share of *Credit Claiming* and *Blame Shifting* to the share of *Credit Granting* and *Admitting Mistakes*. In order to reflect the share of direct, hence stronger forms of positive self-presentation (*Credit Claiming*) in relation to the more indirect self-serving attribution (*Blame Shifting*) and the respective more indirect form of non-supportive attribution (*Credit Granting*) versus the stronger, more direct form (*Admitting Mistakes*), we weight the direct forms with a factor of 1.25. The index is calculated as the sum of all attributions stated by an actor with *Credit Claiming* counting +1.25, *Blame Shifting* counting +1, *Credit Granting* counting -1 and *Admitting Mistakes* counting with -1.25. The sum of all attributions is divided by the number of all attributions by this sender multiplied with 1.25.¹² Accordingly, the index can have values from +1 to -1 with +1 being the most positive self-presentation possible and -1 for the worst possible self-presentation. It is important to note that the extreme values can only be reached if no indirect forms of attribution are included. The indirect forms reduce the absolute value of the index. An index score of +1 points to a purely positive and a purely direct self-serving attribution pattern (100% *Credit Claiming*), an index score of -1 indicates an exclusive inclination to *Admit Mistakes*.¹³

Table 4 and table 5 display the attribution patterns for the Greek and for the German government. Again, the primary levels of comparison are marked in bold.

Table 4: Causal Attribution Patterns, Greek government, in %

	<i>Credit Claiming</i>	<i>Credit Granting</i>	<i>Admitting Mistakes</i>	<i>Blame Shifting</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>SPI-Index</i>
Greek media	28.5	15.0	11.1	45.4	207	0.417
German media	32.3	16.1	3.2	48.4	31	0.548
Reuters	25.0	16.7	8.3	50.0	12	0.433
Total	28.8	15.2	10.0	46.0	250	0.434

For the Greek government (Table 4), the two central strategies of positive self-presentation are by far the most important communication types: *Blame Shifting* accounts for almost half of all attributions (45.4%). The second strategy, the self-directed *Credit Claiming* plays a significant role, too (28.5%). It seems paradoxical to talk about successes during the most severe crisis any European society has experienced in recent years but we have to keep in mind that also debates about measures to tackle or manage the crisis and predictions about their success are included in our data. The high share confirms our assumption that positive self-presentation and particularly *Credit Claiming* is a central strategy of discursive self-legitimation. In another 15.0% of the causal attributions the government grants credit to

¹² Calculation: $SPI-Index(x, A) = ((g * Credit\ Claiming, A + Blame\ Shifting, A) - (g * Admitting\ Mistakes, A + Credit\ Granting, A)) / (g * N, A)$. $g=1.25$; $-1 \leq x \leq 1$.

¹³ In this same logic, 100% *Blame Shifting* results in a score of 0.8 and 100% *Credit Granting* in a score of -0.8. A score of 0 indicates a 'neutral', equally spread attribution pattern.

others. Interestingly, a considerable 11.1% of the causal attributions are admitted mistakes. This unusually high percentage can mainly be traced back to inner-governmental quarrel and it mirrors the fierce controversies about the austerity measures in the country. Prime Minister Papandreou and finance Minister Venizelos, for instance, were not prone to attacks from their own ranks. But yet, *Admitting Mistakes* is the least frequent category and despite this internal opposition the SPI-Index score of 0.417 points to a very positive self-presentation in the Greek media.

Table 5: Causal Attribution Patterns, German government, in %

	<i>Credit Claiming</i>	<i>Credit Granting</i>	<i>Admitting Mistakes</i>	<i>Blame Shifting</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>SPI-Index</i>
Greek media	3.2	47.6	4.8	44.4	63	-0.041
German media	25.0	29.2	2.8	43.1	72	0.333
Reuters	2.3	54.5	0.0	43.2	44	-0.068
Total	11.7	41.9	2.8	43.6	179	0.103

The picture for the German government in the German press (Table 5) is slightly different. First of all, the German government is less actively involved in the debate (*see section 5.1*). Apart from that, the general attribution pattern is less positively biased when compared to the results for the Greek government; the SPI-Index score of 0.333 also points to a predominantly positive self-presentation but the shares of *Blame Shifting* (43.1%) and *Credit Claiming* (25.0%) are lower. Interestingly, applauding others for successes is the German government's second choice: it grants more credit to others (29.2%) than it claims for itself. *Admitting Mistakes*, however, is not an option (2.8%).

Overall, at this general level, the hypothesis can be confirmed for this part of the comparison. The Greek government is slightly more inclined to present itself positively in front of its national audience. At first sight this should be a surprise considering the devastating situation in Greece. The reference to the stronger legitimation pressure is needed to explain this result. However, the gap to the German government is not as big as the huge gap in the loss of trust suggested. Even though, the German government did not experience significant levels of legitimation pressure during the crisis, the accountability to the German voters seemed to contribute to a largely positive self-presentation in the public. Hence, in respect to the pattern of attribution types the influence of electoral dependence (H3) seems to be stronger than the influence of legitimation pressure (H2).

Apart from this general assessment, the results allow one further interesting aside when comparing the reported attribution structures outside of the respective national media. The reported image of the Greek government is fairly consistent in all three media outlets, even though the small N for Reuters does not allow strong inferences. The SPI-Index scores of 0.417 (Greek media), 0.548 (German media) and 0.433 (Reuters) point to a very positive self-presentation in all three media arenas. The German government's image, on the other hand, strongly varies across the media outlets: Whereas the attributions of blame (*Admitting Mistakes* and *Blame Shifting*) do not change all that much, the pattern for the positive causal attributions do: In both, the Greek media and Reuters, the German government's discursive involvement is primarily characterized by *Credit Granting* (Greece: 47.6%, Reuters, 54.5%: German media: 29.2%). *Credit Claiming*, on the other hand, almost disappears in foreign media (Greece: 3.2%, Reuters: 2.3%, German media: 25.0%). Overall, the reported

attribution behavior in foreign media even shows a slightly ‘negative’ bias (SPI-Index score in Greece: -0.041 and in Reuters: -0.068). This is a surprising outcome: The reported attribution behavior of the German government in the Greek media is not as ‘complacent’ and blame-oriented as one might have expected. Instead, *Credit Granting* to others is even the most important attribution type.

Again, we consider two different explanations as equally plausible. One explanation would be a media selection bias. According to this argument *Credit Claiming* is the least newsworthy attribution kind as it is the most predictable one. Accordingly, only strong prominence can overrule this rather unsurprising attribution behavior and prominence is granted to the national government only domestically. Another explanation assumes a more active role of the attribution senders and refers to a specific audience selection and different dimensions of legitimation pressure: The German government is merely accountable to the German population and it seems to have limited concerns about a positive self-presentation or any sort of self-legitimation outside of the German media. The Greek government, on the other hand, seems not only to react to the legitimation pressure at home; the similarity of the attribution pattern in other media outlets suggests a need to justify itself in the larger European arena, in front of European Union actors as well as in front of the creditor countries and their critical publics. This interpretation would suggest a broader definition of legitimation pressure extending beyond the focus on the national public and the national constituency.

Table 6: Causal Attribution Patterns, European Commission, in %

	<i>Credit Claiming</i>	<i>Credit Granting</i>	<i>Admitting Mistakes</i>	<i>Blame Shifting</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>SPI-Index</i>
Greek media	6.7	42.2	0.0	51.1	45	0.138
German media	11.8	41.2	5.9	41.2	34	0.059
Reuters	6.9	51.7	6.9	34.5	29	-0.138
Total	8.3	44.4	3.7	43.5	108	0.039

The attribution pattern of the European Commission is rather balanced between a positive and a ‘negative’ self-presentation (table 6). The SPI-Index score of 0.039 for the total number of coded attributions points to a merely weak inclination to push a positive self-presentation in the crisis debate. The European Commission uses more *Credit Claiming* (8.3%) than it admits mistakes (3.7%) but overall, it only barely talks about itself. Almost 90% of all responsibility attributions are directed to others. The share of *Credit Granting* (44.4%) and *Blame Shifting* (43.5%) is almost identical. Among these responsibility attributions to others, other European Union institutions are predominantly connected to successes rather than failures (75.0%, *not displayed in the table*). The European Commission is often portrayed as the European Union’s primary executive power which suggests a general interest to present other European Union institutions in a favorable manner (see also Gerhards et al. 2009). This seems to be the case in the crisis debate.

Table 7: Causal Attribution Patterns, European Parliament, in %

	<i>Credit Claiming</i>	<i>Credit Granting</i>	<i>Admitting Mistakes</i>	<i>Blame Shifting</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>SPI-Index</i>
Greek media	0.0	26.3	5.3	68.4	19	0.284
German media	0.0	16.7	0.0	83.3	12	0.533
Reuters	0.0	50.0	0.0	50.0	2	0.000
Total	0.0	24.2	3.0	72.7	33	0.358

Given the small N, the numbers for the European Parliament have to be taken with caution. Taken all attributions in our sample, the SPI-Index score of 0.358 points to a rather positive self-presentation in the crisis debate. This is due to the high share of *Blame Shifting* (72.7%) which exceeds the share of all other actors. The alternative strategy of *Credit Claiming* is completely absent. Overall, direct self-attributions are even less frequent than for the Commission (3.0% *Admitting Mistakes*). Contrary to the Commission, attributions directed to other European Union actors are predominantly negative (90% of all cases, *not displayed in the table*). This outcome could be interpreted as a sign of discontent with the marginalization of the Parliament in the European crisis politics.

Table 8: Causal Attribution Patterns, European Central Bank, in %

	<i>Credit Claiming</i>	<i>Credit Granting</i>	<i>Admitting Mistakes</i>	<i>Blame Shifting</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>SPI-Index</i>
Greek media	8.3	41.7	0.0	50.0	12	0.150
German media	35.7	35.7	7.1	21.4	28	0.171
Reuters	21.8	49.1	3.6	25.5	55	-0.007
Total	24.2	44.2	4.2	27.4	95	0.065

Finally, the attribution structure of the European Central Bank points to a weak tendency to put itself in a favorable light. Self-serving communication strategies (*Credit Claiming* and *Blame Shifting*) and less favorable communication types (*Credit Granting* and *Admitting Mistakes*) balance each other. The overall impression is similar to the pattern of attributions sent by the European Commission. However, the emphasis on the specific strategies is different: For both institutions, *Credit Granting* is equally important and in fact it is their first choice. But whereas the European Commission shows a strong inclination to blame others and rarely talks about itself, the European Central Bank claims successes in 24.2% of all cases. With ‘only’ 27.4% the European Central Bank shows the weakest motivation to blame others among all actors under scrutiny. It seems that while the ECB claims the credit, it leaves large parts of the blaming activity to the Troika as a kind of specialized sub-unit. In fact, Troika representatives engage in *Blame Shifting* in 64.0% of all cases (*numbers not displayed in the tables*). Again similar to the Commission, other EU institutions are predominantly portrayed in favorable terms (67.0% *Credit Granting*, *not displayed in the table*).

Overall, the results in this section show that in line with the self-serving bias assumption all national and European actors tend to present themselves in a favorable manner. Especially when it comes to negative causal attributions, all actors rather attribute mistakes to others than to themselves. The picture for positive causal attributions or attributions of success is less straight-forward; only the Greek government claims more credit for itself than it grants

credit to others. In general, the Greek government speaks about itself far more often than any other actor. Here we see both, legitimation pressure and dependence on the electorate at work. The weaker positive self-presentation of the German government is also in line with our hypotheses. As legitimation pressure is weaker for the German government the self-presentation is less positive (H2) but still favorable due to the dependence on the electorate (H3).

For the comparison between European actors and the two national governments, we expected a middle position. Again, the results partially confirm our hypothesis. The Greek government experiences the highest loss of legitimacy during the crisis by far and indeed, the Greek government shows the most pronounced inclination to appear in a favorable light (consistently in all media arenas). European Union institutions, too, invest in a positive self-presentation but only the European Parliament reaches the German government's level of positive self-presentation (as measured in the German media). Despite their high losses in public trust, the European Commission's and the European Central Bank's attribution pattern is less positively biased.

For the comparison between European institutions, we expected a higher incentive to invest in a positive image for the European Central Bank and the European parliament than for the European Commission; in the case of the ECB due to the higher legitimation pressure, for the European parliament due to its dependence on the electorate. Indeed, the ECB uses *Credit Claiming* more than any other of the European institutions. The self-presentation is more positive than that of the European Commission. The European Parliament scores highest on the SPI-Index. However, we have to keep in mind that, in terms of attribution activity, the European Parliament is very inactive or at least, very weakly covered.

Differences between the media outlets are small and not very reliable due to small numbers. For Greek media we find a slight tendency towards *Blame Shifting* with less *Credit Claiming* for the European Commission and the ECB. In the German media, *Credit Claiming* and *Admitting Mistakes* by European institutions appear more frequently, though for the latter at a very low level. These differences are in line with the general structure of the reporting by these outlets (see section 5). Therefore an influence of media selection criteria is a plausible explanation. However, above (section 5.1) we argued that possibly the ECB is especially targeting the German population to find support for its audience in the most important donor country. This assumption is further supported by the fact that we find a higher proportion of *Credit Claiming* by the ECB in the German media compared to the other sources.

All in all, legitimation pressure helps to understand the attribution patterns of national governments and European Union institutions in the crisis debate. Moreover, the results suggest that voter orientation for directly elected actors serves as an important mediator of this effect: The directly elected institutions, the Greek and the German governments as well as the European Parliament show the strongest tendency to present themselves in a favorable light.

6 CONCLUSION

Crises call for interpretation because established action and usual patterns of interpretation are regarded as inadequate. This is why interpretation in times of crisis is so widespread, so controversial – and so interesting for social science. In this paper we took a close look at a core aspect of sense making: the attribution of responsibility. Who is to blame and who is responsible for positive developments in the crisis management? These are crucial questions for sense making in general and for the political process in particular. Political actors have to defend their reputation or gain new reputation in this interpretive struggle. The support for political actors, their empirical legitimacy is influenced by the perception of causes and consequences and media reporting is likely to play a role in the formation of these perceptions.

In this paper we presented some (preliminary) findings of a Greek German collaborative project on discursive actor attributions in the debate on the Eurozone crisis. With regard to the intensity of the crisis and the closely connected legitimation pressure for political actors we proposed two central hypotheses on how these actors will state attributions of responsibility in the public. By comparing media outlets from Greece, the country most severely hit by the crisis, and Germany, largely untouched by its social and political consequences but highly involved in the measures to handle the crisis, we were able to refer to two very different crisis debates. Moreover, we included Reuters in an attempt to bypass national selection biases and in order to add a further, transnational reporting perspective.

In our first hypothesis, we expected more attribution activity by those actors under stronger legitimation pressure. This assumption is mainly confirmed, especially in respect to the Greek government vis-à-vis the German government. The case of the European Union institutions is more ambiguous, with the European Parliament being less active than expected.

The second hypothesis expected legitimation pressure to increase the tendency towards positive self-presentation, i.e. *Blame Shifting* and particularly *Credit Claiming*. This was by and large confirmed. Actors under legitimation pressure use the public arena to legitimate themselves. In this context, *Blame Shifting* and *Credit Claiming* are crucial strategies to present oneself in a favorable light. Both claiming credit for oneself and shifting blame to others, the Greek government which experienced the highest legitimation pressure also shows the strongest tendency to present itself in a favorable manner. The overall positive bias is even more striking as, at the same time, the Greek government ‘admits mistakes’ more than any other actor. Contrary to our hypothesis, the German government, too, shows a strong will to appear in a positive manner despite that it barely lost support at all. Apart from the general legitimation pressure as measured in the loss of trust, voter orientation plays an important mediator role. Actors who are dependent on electoral support have a stronger incentive to present themselves positively in the public. This third hypothesis is clearly supported.

Beyond these single findings, our analysis supports a more general point. Sense making in a crisis situation is crucial and attribution of responsibility is a core part of this. The Discursive Actor Attribution Analysis allows a standardized, closer inspection of attribution behavior. Our assumptions to explain attribution behavior by a few core actors in the crisis constellation are intentionally restricted to a very small number of core assumptions. One could easily add further considerations. E.g. it may be disputable whether *Admitting*

Mistakes is really non-supportive for legitimacy as it might be regarded as a way to successfully make concessions to public opinion and to see reason. However, conditions for such a situation are more complex and usually not given in our data as *Admitting Mistakes* is usually due to an actor's internal quarrel. Much rather, this method intentionally goes beyond single statements and discussions to grasp the general pattern of the debate. And in fact, the attribution patterns we find seem to be in line with expectations derived from the structural position of actors in combination with their particular situation in the crisis. Legitimation pressure is a strong trigger for communicative responsiveness in respect to attribution activity and enhancement of positive self-presentation. Actors do react to their loss of public support and they react with strategies of attributing responsibility. Together with the importance of dependence on an electorate, which applies to directly elected institutions, we were able to explain a great deal of the variation in attribution patterns.

What remained mainly untouched is the question which actors are addressed in the discursive struggle. This opens another dimension in the attribution constellation which needs close investigation. Moreover, the operationalization of self-legitimation through patterns of responsibility attributions can be taken to other arenas and specifically to the field of International Relations and the question in how far legitimation pressure for International Organizations influences their attribution patterns in public debates. Finally, another topic for further investigation is the differential targeting of various audiences or the multidimensionality of legitimation pressure. For the Greek government and the ECB we suspected strategies of specifically targeting selected national audiences and whereas the Greek government's attribution pattern is consistently positive in all public arenas, the German government's profile is much less supportive when it appears outside of the German media. Having the limited data basis and the possibility of mere selection bias in mind, we suspect different dimensions of legitimation pressure at play: The Greek government seems not only to react to the legitimation pressure at home, the data suggest an inclination to justify itself in the larger European debate, in front of European Union actors as well as in front of the creditor countries and their critical publics. When it comes to its image outside of the German crisis debate, the German government instead does not seem to be too concerned about a positive image. These questions need further investigation to better understand how the crisis constellation and legitimation pressure shapes communicative responsiveness.

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