"Assessing legitimacy in the Southern Eurozone crisis through Discursive Actor Attribution Analysis of media reports, 2009-2013"

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The Eurozone crisis has transformed into a dramatic legitimacy crisis for domestic as well as European political actors. The collapse of public support and increasing levels of public attention and societal conflict put political actors under intensive legitimation pressure that has to be dealt with. In the sense of Alexander (2006) who conceives of politics as a "discursive struggle" between actors over public support we test in how far legitimation pressure can explain communication behavior during the crisis. This paper draws on fresh empirical data on patterns of attributing responsibility during the Eurozone Crisis in Greece and Germany. The data stems from a collaborative Greek-German research project (GGCRISI) applying a novel empirical tool, Discursive Actor Attribution Analysis which allows approaching discursive strategies of self-legitimation via a detailed analysis of public communication patterns. First results from this research show that the crisis is more controversially debated in a country hit stronger by the crisis (Greece), producing a larger number of responsibility attributions and a higher share of causal attributions. Moreover, we show that higher levels of legitimation pressure translate into higher levels of public sphere activity and we can partially confirm that legitimation pressure leads to a greater relevance of positive self-presentation in the public sphere.

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CONTENTS

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 many of its member countries, most severely Greece. This shock is political but also social and cultural, as social problems are exploding while a whole system of what has been regarded as fixed and taken-for-granted is fundamentally questioned. At the same time, it shakes the entire European Union and the currency union. Regardless of the discussions about its alleged end, the crisis will undoubtedly shape all aspects of the future course of European integration.

While in academia the causes of the crisis are subject of heated discussions (e. g. bank crisis, Greek crisis, public debt crisis, Euro crisis etc.), 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) 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-effected 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* (see Roose, Kousis, Sommer 2014 for details and references). Without a doubt the Eurozone crisis is a crisis in this sense. Accordingly, 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 political controversy and the causal responsibility for the crisis and the crisis management strategies are 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 southern Eurozone contributed to both, increasing levels of public awareness for European issues and of public visibility for European level actors that were put to the center of attention. Massive protests challenged the major 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, 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 "permissive consensus" (Lindberg, Scheingold 1970; Hooghe, Marks 2009).

In that sense, the Eurozone crisis and the speeding up of the politicization process have brought to the fore new questions of empirical legitimacy, i.e. public support for national political authorities on the one hand and the EU institutions on the other. The withdrawal of electoral support and shrinking levels of trust (*see section 4;* Braun, Tausendpfund 2014) point to a general decline in empirical legitimacy for core political institutions during the crisis. When in general crises put decision makers under scrutiny, this dynamic is intensified by the newly emerging public attention to European matters – in particular to European crisis politics. Institutions are forced to justify their policies and their role in the crisis before a larger and critical audience. This interplay of crisis dynamics, public attention and decrease in public support puts national and European institutions under *legitimation*

pressure. Empirical legitimacy has declined and depending on the interpretation of past developments and future actions legitimacy will further decline or 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 and propose action. In that sense the public sphere becomes a central "arena for legitimacy contestation" (Statham, Trenz 2014). Policy makers legitimate themselves on the public stage and in front of a critical audience (Barker 2001; Hurrelmann et al. 2012). This can occur directly through self-portrait and self-justification and indirectly through the demarcation from others (Weaver 1986).

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. In respect to causal interpretations we look at how actors identify past and current failures or achievements. Past achievements and failures are one crucial aspect of gaining or loosing empirical legitimacy. In respect to requests, we look at propositions of who should act to improve the situation, to tackle the problems and provide improvements. In this regard, actors are presented as redeemer or at least as competent in achieving some gradual improvements. Our guiding assumption is that legitimacy pressure leads to communication strategies aiming at a positive self presentation in the public and the stronger the legitimacy pressure the more pronounced these strategies. Starting from this general assumption, we test more specific hypothesis on the link between legitimacy pressure and attribution of responsibility by political actors from the national and European level in a comparison between Greece as the country most severely struck by the Eurozone crisis and Germany as the country highly involved but by and large not negatively struck be the crisis.

In section 2 we elaborate our theoretical argument and come to hypotheses on the relation between legitimacy pressure and public attribution strategies. Using survey data to measure the legitimacy pressure in more detail allows us to specify our expectations in respect to political institutions in the two countries (section 3). After introducing the data, stemming from the Greek German collaborative project "The Greeks, the Germans, and the Crisis (GGCRISI)" (section 4), we present our findings (section 5) and come to a short conclusion and future research agendas (section 6).

2   DEALING WITH LEGITIMACY 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). Politicians compete for positions which they can win via public support. Actors entering the public stage and articulating their views before a wider audience aim at winning public support. They can do that by convincing others of their achievements and potentials and by pushing a certain opinion or interpretation of the world. 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 (Phillips et al. 2004) 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 the action of multiple actors is always necessary for these causes. To mark an actor as responsible is therefore always a specific selection which – in principle – could have been done differently with equal factual validity. The attribution of responsibility to actors is therefore always a choice among many possible choices.

At the same time the attribution of responsibility, especially in discourses, is an evaluation of actors and their action. Evaluating an outcome and attributing this outcome to an actor results directly in an evaluation of the actor. Therefore, the attribution of responsibility is central to what Alexander (2006) described as a "discursive struggle" between actors over public support. The self-portrait of actors in the attribution contest is likely to influence their perceived legitimacy in the public. When, in the public perception, actors achieve linking themselves to successes and when, at the same time, they successfully connect failures and setbacks to others, their publically perceived legitimacy is likely to profit.

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 attribution of responsibility this 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 of the actors in respect to elections (Gerhards et al.: 553), the institutional setting (Greuter 2014, Hood 2011) or the policy decisions at stake (theoretically Weaver 1986). Here, we look at a crisis situation and legitimacy pressure as crucial influences on attribution behavior.

Effective performance or "output legitimation" is an unreliable source of legitimacy in times of crisis. This is even more the case in a crisis as complex and difficult to grasp as the current one. Crisis policies have to be perceived as working; whether they actually do is of secondary importance (Jones 2009). In such a situation political actors will have a strong incentive to look for strategies to improve their empirical legitimacy.

While the perspective of rational competitors and their strategies puts attribution of responsibility 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 democracy (cf. Greuter 2014). Not only do civil society actors formulate their expectations and their critique towards political institutions, these actors, too, make use of this tie by justifying their role before the public. This is what Schmidt (2014) calls the "communicative discourse to 'the people'". It goes without saying that the two directions are closely entangled. In the following we provide a further perspective on this connection by looking at the extent to which public opinion influences the political communication and evokes communicative reactions to collective demands and discontent.

In theories of political representation and in election research, one core dimension of the relationship between the public and political authority is subsumed under the concept of responsiveness. In most abstract terms responsiveness describes the "readiness to respond" (Pitkin 1967) to the wishes and concerns of the constituents. This reaction to public opinion can take the form of policy action and it can take the form of rhetoric and discursive engagement (Hobolt, Klemmensen 2007). Communicative reactions document, that the loss of support matters to political actors and they invest more in convincing people as they actively try to influence the public perception by justifying their positions and 'clarifying' matters of responsibility distribution. Engaging in the struggle about attribution of responsibility in a situation of crisis and legitimacy 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 democratic quality of the public sphere; 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 imply a qualitative improvement in the relationship of the public and the authorities per se. Much rather, in our approach justification is mainly measured in terms of blame shifting and credit claiming, self-interested and ultimately populist strategies (Vasilopoulou et al. 2013), which cannot be likened to substantial deliberations about the good and bad of certain policies.

Despite these caveats we argue that our approach to "communicative responsiveness" still contributes to a better understanding of the relationship between the public and political authority in times of crisis. After all, these forms of political communication and indications of "communicative responsiveness" are 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.

2.2   Discursive Legitimation Strategies

There are three basic strategies how an actor can use the attribution of responsibility to present herself/himself positively in the public or counter a negative presentation respectively. The first strategy, the self-attribution of success is directly oriented at the reputation of the speaker. It is the *Credit Claiming Strategy*. The second strategy, blame shifting, has a double impact as it tries to avoid or repair one's own reputation while damaging the reputation of someone else who is possibly a competitor. This is the *Blame Shifting Strategy*. A third strategy can work indirectly by avoiding an involvement in the debate on blame by pointing attention to the future and calling for action (cf. Weaver 1986: 384ff.). Thereby, attention is distracted from responsibility questions and blaming might be avoided. This is the *Requesting Strategy*.

The difference between strategy one and two versus strategy three is grounded in a fundamental difference of responsibility attribution. Attribution of responsibility can refer to a) the attribution of causation of something by an actor (causal attribution) or b) at the attribution of request to an actor who should act in a specific way (request attribution) or c) the attribution of competence to an actor who should be in charge of acting in respect to an

issue area (competence attribution).[1] Causal attribution can be separated into diagnostic attributions directed to the past and prognostic attributions directed to the future.[2] These attributions focus on the origin of a problem, i.e. a negative causal attribution which we label as *attribution of blame*, regardless whether the attribution refers to the past or the future. Or the attribution refers to a success, i.e. a positive causal attribution which we label as *attribution of credit*. The strategies of Credit Claiming and Blame Shifting operate with causal attributions. The third strategy, the Requesting Strategy takes a different approach. It utilizes *attribution of request*, i.e. calls for action addressed to others, in order to shift attention from causation to prospective problem solving.[3]

The strategy of Credit Claiming is a form of self-praise. An actor attributes causal responsibility for a success to oneself and thereby puts herself/himself in a positive light.[4] The strategy of Blaming and Blame Shifting attributes causal responsibility for a failure to others. Possible (and empirically existent) are also the other possibilities. It does occur that actors attribute responsibility for success to others, i.e. Credit Granting. And it also happens that actors Admit Mistakes, i.e. they attribute causal responsibility for failures to themselves.

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

- *Credit Claiming – self-attribution of success*

- *Credit Granting – attribution of success to others*

- *Admitting Mistakes – self-attribution of failure*

- *Blame Shifting (and Blaming) – attribution of failure to others*

- *Requesting – request attributions to others.*

2.3   Attributing Responsibility under Legitimacy Pressure in times of crisis

Our expectations for the patterns of responsibility attribution build on four elements: an interest in positive self-presentation, the crisis situation, legitimation pressure and audience orientation.

The first element is our background assumption. We assume a strategic interest in positive self-presentation. Other studies have shown a strong tendency towards positive self-attribution (see also Gerhards et al. 2009).

The crisis situation has a twofold impact. First, as stated above, a crisis is a situation, i*n which societal structures of general impact are perceived to be questioned and unstable*. This characteristic of a crisis directly implies the need to engage in sense making. As usual interpretation frames seem inadequate, new or modified interpretations have to be proposed. Part of this sense making will be attributions of responsibility of any kind. Therefore, in a

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[1] For further details refer to Roose et al. 2014 (available on the project website www.ggcrisi.org) and to the codebook (available in winter 2014 on the project website www.ggcrisis.org).

Causal attributions can be found as statements (i.e. attributing responsibility) but also as a rejection of an attribution of responsibility (i.e. "is not responsible for…"). In our coding procedure, we merged these two forms according to the evaluation of the addressee. That means: attribution of success and rejection of failure are found in one category, whereas attribution of blame and rejections of success is found in another category.

[3] For this analysis we exclude the small number of competence attributions which call not for a specific action but for a general competence allocation for the handling of an issue area in general. This kind of attribution will be included in later analysis.

[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.

crisis situation we should find more attributions of responsibility than in a non-crisis situation or put in gradual terms as our first hypothesis:

H 1: The more a country is confronted with a situation of crisis the more attributions of responsibility will appear in the public sphere.

The degree of a crisis impact in a country is expected to have an effect on the types of attributions we will find. In a highly politicized situation in a country severely hit by the crisis we can expect a more heated and controversial debate. In such a situation the distraction of attention will be harder than under conditions of a less severe crisis, less politicization and a less focused public attention. As the strategy of Requesting is built on the assumption to distract public attention from uncomfortable question about causal responsibility, we would expect this strategy to be less promising in a highly politicized debate. Therefore our second hypothesis is:

H2: The more a country is confronted with a situation of crisis, the more the public debate is dominated by causal attributions (Credit and Blame) rather than Requests.

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 considerably. Political actors are faced with legitimation pressure. We expect this legitimation pressure to influence the patterns of responsibility attribution. One way, to look at this influence would be a comparison between responsibility attribution patterns before the crisis and in the crisis. However, there is no such data available. Also this comparison would allow for the interpretation that the issues at stake, the crisis and the adjacent policies, are the reason for the changed patterns. Alternatively, we can compare the attributions by different actors who are to differing extent under legitimation pressure.

Our first assumption refers to the communicative *activity* of political actors. Legitimation pressure will force these actors to react in order to legitimate themselves in front of the public, to justify their role and to show that they care about the concerns of the people; they will become communicatively responsive. This communication responsiveness can take various forms, but attribution of responsibility will be a crucial aspect of this.

H3: The stronger the legitimation pressure for a political actor, the more this political actor will state attributions of responsibility in the public.

At the core of our interest is the pattern of attribution forms. Which kinds of attributions are stated in the public? Again we expect legitimation pressure to be crucial as the loss in public support urges actors to improve their reputation in the public. Therefore we expect:

H4: 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.

Finally, we expect a selective audience orientation. Research on the European public sphere has shown time and again that reporting has a clear national leaning (Machill et al. 2006 for an overview). Selection criteria by the media will be influential but also the orientation of political actors. Political actors have to guard their reputation in front of their domestic audience while reputation abroad is a secondary importance. The democratic system sets for national political actors a strong incentive for self-legitimation in respect to the national audience as this is their potential electorate. This assumption is a moderator for hypotheses three and four:

H5: Legitimation pressure is only influential for political actor's communicative behavior in

respect to their relevant (domestic) audience.

3   D ISCURSIVE A CTOR A TTRIBUTION A NALYSIS

This analysis focuses on the 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/Rucht 2002), political claims analysis (Koopmans/Statham 1999) and frame analysis (Chong/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). The first approach has been further developed to the approach of discursive actor attribution analysis (*DAAA*).[5]

The DAAA aims at a standardized content analysis focusing on public interpretation processes in which actors relate phenomena to actors in the sense of attribution. 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 or established competence are made constantly, this method focuses on the discursive side of responsibility attribution. Therefore, the approach ignores routine statements of causation and competence which only reflect taken-for-granted assumptions. Rather at the core of the analysis are evaluated attributions, as this evaluation indicates the importance of the link as well as its potentially contested nature.

Data for this paper stems from the research project *"The Greeks, the Germans and the Crisis (GGCRISI)"*, a joint Greek German project, funded by the General Secretariat for Research and Technology (GSRT) of the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, Culture and Sports of Greece and the German Federal Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF). The project analyses the political debate about the Eurozone Crisis in Greece and Germany using DAAA. To get an accurate sample of this debate we focus on quality newspaper reporting in the two countries between 2009 and 2013. Quality newspapers constitute a particularly rich source of information because they function as a transmission belt between the political sphere and the public (Gerhards et al. 2007). While we plan to cover further sources, the data for this paper is taken from the German *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and the Greek *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. As the project is still in its early coding phase we can rely only to limited data. The data of this paper stem from a first sample of 30 publication days evenly spread throughout the crisis years under investigation (Reuters 18 publication days). For this initial sample we included all articles of a selected day that appeared in the main political and economic sections of the newspaper and that deal with the Eurozone crisis, its causes or consequences. We include only those attributions that deal with the Eurozone crisis. As we covered up to now only roughly 15 % of our sample, findings have to be regarded as preliminary and the number of cases is often unsatisfactorily. Sampling details as well as the coding procedure are described in the codebook which will be published on the project website www.ggcrisi.org in winter 2014.

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[5] See Roose et al. 2014 for a more detailed presentation and discussion of this tool. See also the project website www.ggcrisi.org.

4   INSTITUTIONS UNDER LEGITIMATION PRESSURE

A core concept of our analysis is legitimation pressure. We want to grasp the loss of public support for political institutions in the course of the crisis. Rather than in absolute levels of public support we are interested in changes of public support as an indicator of the legitimation pressure actors feel exposed to. While levels of support at any level, experienced over a long time, will have no effect on communicative strategies, it is the short to medium term changes in support levels which will trigger communicative responsiveness.

To assess the changes in public support before the crisis and during crisis times we can utilize the Eurobarometer survey.[6] Conducted at least two times every year, it provides recent, consistent and comparable data on trust levels for various political actors in Greece and Germany.

The results from the Eurobarometer data show the effects of crisis on trust levels quite clearly. In the EU, all core political institutions under scrutiny experience a significant loss in trust relative to pre-crisis times (spring 2006 – summer 2009). A loss of roughly 20% of the pre-crisis level on average is a clear indicator of a European wide legitimacy crisis which affects both European and domestic actors. Unsurprisingly, the loss of trust is significantly higher in Greece and, at least for domestic institutions, inexistent in Germany. In both countries, changes in trust levels differ considerably between national and European actors. In Greece the loss of trust in national actors is much higher than in European actors. In Germany the pattern is reversed with a considerable loss of trust in European actors and only minor changes for national political actors. While differences in changes of trust levels among national actors are small in both countries, the changes of trust in European institutions differ.

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

	GR	DE	EU
Government	-68.1%	-4.3%	-21.0%
Parliament	-71.1%	+6.5%	-20.5%
Political Parties	-70.8%	+4.9%	-16.0%
European Com.	-57.5%	-18.2%	-18.5%
European Parl.	-48.8%	-15.7%	-17.3%
ECB	-57.1%	-28.5%	-22.1%
EU general	-55.8%	-26.5%	-26.8%

Source: Eurobarometer, own calculations

The relative loss of trust in Greece is most severe for the European Central Bank and the European Commission while it is slightly less for the European Parliament. Accordingly, the legitimation pressure in Greece is stronger for the European Commission and the European Central Bank than for the European Parliament. In Germany it is primarily the European Central Bank which lost trust while the relative loss of trust in the European Commission is lower and even more so for the European Parliament.

The strongest legitimation pressure we find for the Greek national actors, the Greek

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[6] See ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/index_en.htm
[last visit 19.8.2014] and www.gesis.org/en/eurobarometer/ [last visit 19.8.2014].

parliament, the Greek parties[7] and the Greek government in turn. For the German parliament, the German parties and the German government legitimation pressure is by and large inexistent as they gained trust (parliament and parties) or lost only marginally (government).

This information on legitimation pressure allows furthering specifying our expectations in respect to countries and actors for each hypothesis. Firstly, Greece is most severely hit by the crisis while Germany has, up to now, not suffered from the crisis. Accordingly, the amount of responsibility attributions (H1) should be highest in Greek media and lowest in German media. As this hypothesis refers to absolute numbers of attributions, it is impossible to apply for the news agency Reuters because the number of articles sent out by a news agency is much higher than the number of articles in a newspaper.

The domination of causal attributions (credit and blame) over request attributions (H2) should again be strongest in Greece and weakest (if at all existent) in Germany. For Reuters we expect a middle position.

Legitimation pressure is expected to have an influence on the number of responsibility attributions stated by an actor (H3) and the intensity of self-legitimation (H4). However, these two effects are only expected for the respective relevant audience (H5). Table 2 summarizes the expectations for H3, H4 and H5 together.

Table 2: Expectations for effects from H3, H4 and H5.

	Greek public sphere	German public sphere	Reuters
Greek national government	+++	0	+
Greek national parliament	+++	0	+
Greek political parties	+++	0	+
German national government	0	(+)	0
German national parliament	0	(+)	0
German political parties	0	(+)	0
European Commission	++	+	+
European Parliament	++	+	+
European Central Bank	++	+(+)	++

Reading example for up left cell: The Greek national government will in the Greek public sphere state the highest number of responsibility attributions (H3) and will most strongly engage in self-legitimation (H4), i.e. frequent credit claiming and blame shifting.

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[7] It is disputable whether parties can be regarded as one actor. The Eurobarometer survey asks for trust in parties in general but trust in different parties would surely show heterogeneous results. In our analysis we refer to parties as one actor. This is firstly due to the available data from the survey but also a theoretical consideration justifies this decision. From conflict sociology we know that under pressure collectivities tend to reduce internal conflict and stand together against external threat. Then European Parliament has practiced this internal solidarity to safeguard its own position time and again. The massive legitimation pressure raises the question whether we find a similar reaction among the Greek parties.

5   RESULTS

Due to the limited data available until now, the following findings should be understood as preliminary trends rather than final results.

5.1   Responsibility Attribution in the Crisis

According to our first hypothesis, a strong crisis situation should increase the attribution activity in the public sphere overall. This hypothesis can be confirmed because the number of attributions we found in the 30 newspaper issues coded up to now is three times higher in Greece than in Germany. For Greece we coded 897 attributions, for Germany we coded 287. Interestingly, the number of attributions per article is nearly identical in the two countries with 2.79 attributions per article in Greece and 3.06 attributions per article in Germany. However, the number of articles with crisis related content is much higher in Greece which again documents the more pressing need for sense making in the country hit harder by the crisis.

5.2   Causal Attributions versus Request Attributions in the Crisis

Our second hypothesis assumes a more heated debate and an increasing dominance of causal attributions over request attributions with increasing severity of the crisis. Table 3 compares the kind of attributions found in Greece, Germany and Reuters respectively.

Table 3: Attribution Patterns

	GR	DE	Reuters
Causal	65.6%	54.0%	47.2%
Request	28.7%	31.0%	41.4%
other	5.8%	15.0%	10.4%
N	897	287	415

In respect to Greece and Germany, also hypothesis 2 can be confirmed. The importance of the blame game in Greece confirms the expectation that the Greek debate is more heated and more controversial: questions of causal responsibility *("Who is to blame for the crisis?")* are at the core of the debate and dominate all other attribution types. In Germany, too, blames are central but much less frequently stated. In comparison to the Greek debate, questions of problem solving are almost as important as questions of causal responsibility. Next to the higher share of positive request attributions in Germany (*"What is to be done by whom?"*), a more detailed look at the attribution types further underlines the difference between the two countries. Firstly, among those 15.0% of "other" attributions in Germany, positive competence attributions (*"Who should be in charge?"*) account for 7.3% of all attributions (compared to 2.1% in Greece). Secondly, the temporal focus of the blame game strongly differs; while almost all blames in the Greek public sphere refer to *past* errors and policy failures (92.8% vs. 7.2% prognostic attributions), the German debate is to a higher extent characterized by discussions about *future* policy outcomes (30.8% prognostic attributions).

Contrary to the expectations, Reuters is not in a middle position. Request attributions are roughly as often as causal attributions. Reuters reporting seems to be less involved in the blame game where as proposals for specific action (request attributions) or general institutional configurations (competence attribution) are more important. Possibly, the transnational news agency is less directly addressed by national politicians (from any country) because it is considered less relevant in the national interpretation struggle.

5.3   Legitimation Pressure and Attribution Activity

Legitimation pressure, measured as the relative loss in trust, is expected to motivate actors to present their interpretation in the respective national mass media, to legitimate themselves and to justify their role before a critical audience. Accordingly actors under stronger legitimation pressure should be more active in attributing responsibility (H3 combined with H5). Sending attributions is the central way to disseminate justification and to send signals of communicative responsiveness.

Table 3: Sending activity of core political institutions

	GR	DE	Reuters
Executive DE	8.1%	38.1%	33.1%
Legislative DE	1.6%	13.1%	10.4%
Parties DE	2.5%	7.1%	1.9%
Executive GR	24.4%	8.3%	7.1%
Legislative GR	16.3%	0.0%	0.0%
Parties GR	31.2%	1.2%	2.6%
EU Commission	6.6%	8.3%	7.1%
European Parliament	2.9%	1.2%	0.0%
Eurogroup	1.8%	7.1%	5.8%
ECB	0.5%	3.6%	27.3%
"Crisis institutions"	0.7%	0.0%	1.9%
"Troika"	3.4%	11.9%	2.6%
N	442	84	154

Again, the results show significant differences in the German and the Greek public sphere. As for the German debate, the first data signal the discursive dominance of the German executive when compared to other national political institutions. The absence of parties and legislative actors shows that the Eurozone Crisis has not become part of the day-to-day political struggle. At the same time, European Union actors appear quite often (in relative terms) and account for almost one third of the attributions sent. Given the absence of European level actors in earlier debates (Machill et al. 2006, Brüggemann et al. 2006), this is a remarkable share. While the dominance of the national government runs contrary to our assumption of communicative responsiveness, the EU institutions seem to react to the legitimation pressure in Germany.

In Greece we see a remarkably different picture. The most significant difference is the strong participation of party actors and legislative actors. Party actors appear most often as attributions senders and even outnumber government actors. However, due to the volatility of the Greek party systems this may be due not only to communicative responsiveness but also to the rise of new parties which are not in danger of being accused for former wrong doings. Overall, we interpret this enormous attribution activity by non-government actors as a sign of the controversial character of the debate and as a sign of a high degree of domestic politicization in Greece.

Also some European institutions are comparatively active. Although they only parallel roughly the German percentage numbers one has to keep in mind that the overall attribution activity in Greece is much higher. In absolute numbers of attributions Troika representatives send more attributions in Greece than in Germany.[8] The same applies to the Eurogroup. Most other European institutions are even more active. Also this attribution activity of European institutions can be regarded as communicative responsiveness and it is also in line with our assumption that the national Greek institutions send more attributions than the European institutions.

Two European institutions deserve special attention. Members of the European parliament

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[8] The Troika is a group formed by European Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund, to control the reforms initiated by the governments of crisis states, among them Greece.

are particularly active in Greece compared to Germany. This is surprising as the legitimation pressure for the European Parliament is slightly less than for other European institutions, namely the Commission and the European Central Bank. The pattern for the ECB is furthermore remarkable as it is particularly inactive in respect to attributions. In absolute and even more so in relative terms the ECB sends less attributions in Greece than in Germany. Taking these preliminary results, possibly either the ECB leaves the communication work in respect to Greece to the Troika as a kind of specialized subunit on this matter or it regards the German public as the more important audience with Germany being most important for financially guaranteeing the ECB policy.

In line with our assumption (H5) the national political actors from one country are much less active in the respective other country. Besides this very rough finding there are interesting additional results, though we have to be cautious due to small N. In general, the reporting from the other country is focused on the respective government. However, representatives of German parties appear in absolute terms more often in the Greek than in the German public.

In Reuters we expected a middle position for the actors. However, results are considerably different. Reuters reporting is focused on national government actors for German as well as Greek political actors. The intensive activity of party actors found in the Greek media is not mirrored in the Reuters reporting. Additionally, Germany gets much more attention than Greece which might look self explaining considering the size of the two countries. However, considering the focus on the Eurozone crisis and the major importance of Greece in this discourse, it comes as a surprise. On the European level reporting is overly focused on the ECB. This is even more remarkable as the ECB plays only a minor role in the German as well as the Greek public sphere. The economic orientation of Reuters may contribute to an explanation, but can only partly explain this extraordinary finding.[9]

Overall, the results partially confirm our hypothesis. Domestic political actors are those faced with the highest level of legitimation pressure in Greece and indeed, it is those actors dominating the debate. The levels of legitimation pressure are similar and if we consider that party representatives and representatives of the legislative often overlap, the debate seems quite balanced vis-à-vis the government. All Greek domestic actors actively use the public stage to participate in the legitimation contest, to influence perceptions of causal responsibility and to justify their role in the crisis. European Union actors, too, become active in Greece to react against the negative image but fail to prevail against the government, the legislative and in particular the political parties.

The Eurozone Crisis did not affect the publically perceived legitimacy of parties and the legislative in Germany and in line with our expectations, these institutions seem to have few incentives to actively shape the crisis debate. Here, it is the European Union institutions that lost trust during the crisis and indeed, European level actors are, in relative terms to Greece and in comparison to earlier debates, quite active (see Grande and Kriesi 2014, in Risse 2014). While in Greece, the Eurozone crisis is highly politicized in domestic terms, the high degree of vertical Europeanization (Koopmans, Erbe 2004) and the crucial role of the German government in the German sphere and in Reuters reporting indicates that outside of the crisis countries, the crisis discussion is dominated by EU actors and national executives.

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[9] However, again we should keep the comparatively small sample size in mind and maybe this outlier will disappear to some extent after finishing our whole data collection.

At these general levels our hypotheses are supported by these preliminary data. The level of legitimation pressure partially explains public sphere activity. However, the assumptions do not hold when looking at the differences between specific European Union institutions. While the ECB, for instance, is the institution with the most dramatic loss in trust in Germany, it is almost absent in the German debate, accounting for only 3.6% of the attributions sent in this sample and only 1% of the overall attributions. In Greece where the legitimation pressure for the ECB is even stronger, the ECB abstains also by and large from attributing.

5.4   Legitimation Pressure and Attribution Patterns

Our last hypothesis (H4 in connection with H5) assumes for the domestic public that political actors justify and legitimate themselves increasingly when they are under stronger legitimation pressure. Due to the few cases for some European actors, we take the European Commission, the ECB and core representatives of the Eurogroup together in one overall European Union category.[10]

Table 4: Attribution Patterns, Greece

	Credit Claiming	Credit Granting	Admitting mistakes	Blame Shifting	N
Executive DE	5.6%	44.4%	16.7%	33.3%	18
Legislative DE	0.0%	40.0%	0.0%	60.0%	5
Parties DE	0.0%	16.7%	0.0%	83.3%	6
Executive GR	29.5%	24.6%	8.2%	37.7%	61
Legislative GR	0.0%	13.5%	3.9%	82.7%	52
Parties GR	1.0%	1.0%	11.2%	86.7%	98
EU	7.7%	26.9%	0.0%	65.4%	26
Total	8.3%	15.4%	7.9%	68.4%	266

N = all positive and negative causal attributions sent by core political institutions in Greece

Let us first turn to the Greek public sphere (table 4). Overall we find a clear dominance of blame attributions. Two thirds of all causal attributions are statements that another actor has caused or will cause a problem in the future. Especially, actors from the Greek parliament and from Greek parties blame others for wrong doings in more than 80% of their causal attributions. Due to the legitimation pressure we expected these actors to engage heavily in blaming others in front of the respective national audience and that is what they do. Things look a bit different for the government, which is under a similar legitimation pressure. Government actors blame others only in 37.7% of their causal attributions, which is comparatively seldom considering the massive legitimation pressure. The Greek government uses more than any other actor the alternative option for positive self-presentation; an additional 29.5% of the government's causal attributions are credit claims. It seems paradoxical to talk about successes during the most severe crisis any European society has experienced in recent years but it confirms our assumption that credit-claiming is a central strategy of self-legitimation in the public sphere. However, in sum the government's causal attributions are "only" in 67.2% of the cases supportive for their own position (either credit claiming or blame shifting). A quarter of the government's causal attributions are credit granting to other actors than the government. A considerable 8.2% of the causal attributions are

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[10] Actors are only coded as belonging to European actor institutions when in the text material these actors are primarily associated to their European function. For instance, in our data Jean Claude Junker could appear as president of the Eurogroup or as prime-minister of Luxemburg depending on the way he is portrayed in the reporting.

admitted mistakes. Overall, the attribution activity of the Greek government is less focused on the two central strategies of self-legitimation than the attribution patterns of the other national political actors.

The European actors also engage in blaming others though to a lesser extent. Still two thirds of the EU actors' causal attributions are blames to others. At the same time credit claiming is not one of the prime concerns of the EU. Only 7.7% of the causal attributions are credit claims. Rather, the EU actors grant credit to others (26.9%) while admitting mistakes is inexistent.

A quick look at the few causal attributions of the German government shows a considerable share of credit granting, even more than blaming. However, the Greek public sphere is not of major concern for the German government as their electorate is in Germany.[11]

These figures confirm our assumptions by and large as the Greek parliament and Greek parties, which are under the strongest legitimation pressure, use blaming most often. The Greek government also uses credit claiming. However, the positive self-presentation or in other words credit claiming and blame shifting, is less emphasized than by other actors. Less blaming and credit claiming by EU actors corresponds with less legitimation pressure for EU actors.

The real test for our hypothesis is the comparison with the attribution patterns we find in Germany (table 5). However, the comparison currently suffers from small numbers of causal attributions on the German side. Overall, we find less blame shifting but more credit claiming. The German government's causal attributions are in less than half of the cases blames directed at others. Rather the German government claims credit. In total this results again in a remarkable positive self-presentation of in to total

Table 5: Attribution patterns, Germany

	Credit Claiming	Credit Granting	Admitting mistakes	Blame Shifting	N
Executive DE	26.7%	26.7%	0.0%	46.7%	15
Legislative DE	0.0%	40.0%	0.0%	60.0%	5
Parties DE	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	3
Executive GR	50.0%	0.0%	0.0%	50.0%	6
Legislative GR	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0
Parties GR	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	1
EU	0.0%	21.4%	21.4%	57.1%	14
Total	15.9%	20.5%	6.8%	56.8%	44

N = all positive and negative causal attributions sent by core political institutions in Germany

73.4% if we take the direct credit claiming and the indirect blame shifting together. In sum the positive self attributions of the German government in the German public sphere is roughly identical to the self presentation of the Greek government in the Greek public sphere. This comparison is contrary to our assumption of legitimation pressure. In the German public sphere the EU actors also blame others in more than half of their causal attributions. However, this figure is lower than in the Greek public sphere and there are no credit claims to be added to that level. The EU actors seem also to be communicatively responsive to the legitimation pressure in Germany but in line with the lower legitimation pressure their self-presentation is less positively biased. However, while discussing these findings one needs to keep in mind that the German government as well as the EU actors

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[11] We refrain from interpreting results for German parliament and parties due to small numbers.

are more active in request and competence attributions and concentrated less on causal attributions compared to the Greek actors. This might be the stronger indication that legitimation pressure is less for EU and German political actors than for the Greek actors and suggests a more holistic approach to communication strategies under legitimation pressure for future research[12].

In Reuters again absolute numbers are rather small because the reporting mostly concentrates on request attributions and competence attributions (see 5.2). For the German government in this transnational source more credit granting is reported than blame shifting (table 6). This applies even more to the EU. In Reuters EU actors appear as judges beyond the day to day political struggle; they grant credit to others while only seldom blaming others or engaging in the other kinds of causal attributions.

Table 6: Attribution patterns, Reuters

	Credit Claiming	Credit Granting	Admitting mistakes	Blame Shifting	N
Executive DE	0.00%	53.3%	0.0%	46.7%	15
Legislative DE	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	5
Parties DE	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0
Executive GR	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.00%	1
Legislative GR	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0
Parties GR	0.0%	33.3%	0.0%	66.7%	3
EU	4.0%	68.0%	12.0%	16.0%	25
Total	4.1%	53.1%	6.1%	36.7%	49

N = all positive and negative causal attributions sent by core political institutions in Reuters

6 CONCLUSION

Crises call for interpretation because established action and interpretation patterns are regarded as inadequate. This is why interpretation in times of crisis is so widespread, so controversial – and so interesting for social science. Here, we took a close look at a core aspect of sense making: the attribution of responsibility. What were the reasons for the crisis and who has caused it? Who should act in which way to lower the burden or contribute to the solution? 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 will be probably considerably influenced by the debate of causes and requests, responsible actors and potential problem solvers.

In this paper we presented some preliminary findings of a Greek German collaborative project on discursive actor attribution in the debate on the Eurozone crisis. With regard to the intensity of the crisis, legitimation pressure and audience orientation we proposed some hypotheses on how political actors will state attributions of responsibility in the public. The comparison of Greece, a country most severely hit by the crisis, and Germany, by and large untouched by the problems the crisis caused, we were able to compare very different situations in which the debate on the Eurozone crisis takes place.

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[12]   In fact, a first look at the data shows that among all attribution sent in Greece, the Greek Executives sends only 25.0% request attributions compared to 43.8% that the German executive sends in Germany.

In line with our expectations we found that the crisis is more controversially debated in a country hit stronger by the crisis (Greece), producing a larger number of responsibility attributions. Also a strong crisis increases the need for new sense making resulting in higher numbers of causal attributions compared to request attributions and competence attributions.

We expected more attribution activity by those actors under stronger legitimation pressure. This assumption is partly confirmed, especially in respect to Greek political institutions, mostly also in respect to European institutions though with some deviations, especially in respect to the ECB. Among the German political actors, which did not experience legitimation pressure, the government had a dominant role in the debate.

Finally, we expected legitimation pressure increasing the tendency towards positive self-presentation, i.e. credit claiming and blame shifting. This was by and large confirmed. The Greek parliament and Greek parties show the strongest tendency of blame shifting. The Greek government partly deviates from the pattern as it also admits mistakes and grant credits to others despite its massive legitimation pressure. Here, we obviously see the structural role of the government as being in charge of political action. Credit granting probably also mirrors the close cooperation between Greek government and other, especially European actors. EU actors tend to blame others and credit themselves to a slightly lesser extent. In the Greek public sphere we find a more positive self presentation than in the German public sphere which is again in line with the argument. Finally, the German government does not seem to be very concerned with a positive self-presentation as far as we can see in our preliminary data, which is again in line with the inexistent legitimation pressure for the German government.

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. 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. That means that the crisis is producing a particular constellation of attributing responsibility. This constellation is new in several dimensions. It is Europeanized to a degree unforeseen before. It is highly politicized and controversial. And we can see that political actors are communicatively responsive to the withdrawal of public support.

At the same time the crisis constellation raises several new questions. In this paper we looked at some patterns of communication strategies. Future research will further look at these strategies beyond the national public sphere and with reference to different legitimation concerns. Tentative results show that the Greek government applies a rather consistent communication strategy in all public arenas it enters whereas the German changes its strategy to a less self-focused approach when it appears outside of its national public sphere. This can be explained by different dimensions of legitimation pressure: The Greek government seems not only to react to the legitimation pressure at home, the use of similar strategies in the overall debate suggests that it feels the need 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. The German government instead does not seem to feel any particular need to legitimate itself in front of the Greek public or within the larger transnational debate.

Apart from this additional focus on the attribution senders, the question, who is blamed, remained untouched, but is of crucial importance for the relations within the political system and within the EU. Further research will also follow up these questions.

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