The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: Stereotypical representations of the Greek Debt Crisis

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Abstract

Our chapter focuses on the presentation of countries, their political actors and institutions in the context of the Greek sovereign debt crisis in Greek media from 2009 to 2012. We examine opinion pieces from journalists, experts and public intellectuals published in Greek newspapers, and identify how they present the debt crisis and the involved political actors and institutions. We employ content and discourse analysis, focusing on the reputation and stereotypical perceptions of Germany, Greece and the European Union (EU). We also identify blame attribution frames, which underpin the public's confidence in domestic and EU actors and institutions. This chapter contributes to the systematic understanding of public opinion, attitudes towards European integration, European identity and citizenship.
Introduction

The ongoing institutional and economic crisis of the EU has created new stereotypes, as well as facilitated the return of old prejudices across the Member States, with important implications for the future of European integration. The crisis has generated broad media coverage challenging the reputations of countries most affected by the recession and those who bear the financial burden of bailouts. Characteristically, Greece has been often described as the ‘sick man of Europe’ (Exadaktylos and Zahariadis, 2014), while references to ‘the sinking Euro’, ‘lazy Greeks’, ‘hard-working Germans’ and ‘detached Brits’ are frequently hosted in headlines, news reports and editorial commentary in newspapers across Europe (e.g. Der Spiegel, 2011; EU Observer, 2011; Forbes, 2011; The Economist, 2011).

Here, we offer a snapshot analysis of public opinion that is complementary to existing media analysis studies and public opinion surveys that focus on the Greek debt crisis. We examine the representations of its protagonists, focusing on how Greece, Germany and the EU have been discussed in opinion pieces published in Greek print media. We focus particularly on Greece and Germany because in recent polls like the one by Pew Research Center in May 2012 (eight EU countries and the United States), Greece and Germany held polar opposite scores on economic performance, leader evaluations, and perceptions of being hard-working.

We draw insights from political psychology and political economy debates involving the processes that explain how elites and citizens reach their judgments in times of crisis. Our content and discourse analysis focuses on how Greece and Germany are stereotyped using old and new characterizations, how economic evaluations of success or failure and also blame are presented/framed in the context of the financial crisis, and how citizens and elites engage with the crisis and its protagonists. We also seek to examine how particular countries, their political leaders, national institutions and citizens are discussed as part of the problem or the solution. We also look at support for the EU and its institutions, and prospective assessments of a common future.

This study is timely for understanding public opinion dynamics within and beyond Greece—what started as a debt crisis in Europe in 2008, transformed into a currency crisis compromising the stability and value of the Euro, and evolved into a crisis of confidence in financial institutions, lack of trust in political organizations and leaders, financial and personal hardship for millions of citizens in (mainly) South Europe and fuelled fears, angry protests and uncertainty that are alive and growing today (Featherstone 2011).
Mediated Representations: Setting the Crisis Agenda

In the context of crises, citizens seek information from the media and their social circle in order to form their opinions, stay updated with current developments, relieve their uncertainty and assuage their fears. As they search for relevant information, they turn to familiar sources for reassurance, use shortcuts like their party identification to narrow their information search, and engage with the opinions of political and media elites and public intellectuals, which gives them a sense of ‘doing something’ (Graber 2009; Graber 2010; Zaller, 1992).

The presentation of crises in the media is often marked by three stages, not always clearly separated, and often with significant overlap. During the first stage, the crisis is announced, the number of news broadcasts on the topic increases, the facts are rehashed again and again, citizens seek to gain as many details as possible, and public officials and experts speculate about the causes. During the second stage, media attempt to place the situation in perspective, damage estimates are more accurate, governments try to shape interpretations and avoid political fallout, and citizens seek to formulate a coherent story of the event. The third stage is marked by attempts by media and public officials to place the issue into a long-term perspective and promote events that sustain morale, like fund-raising concerts or sport events, and citizens seek information on how to cope with the aftermath or the prolonged nature of the crisis (Graber 2010). By looking at how a crisis is presented in the media we should be able to identify quantitative and also qualitative changes in the types of coverage of the story over time.

Here we are interested in representations of the crisis in newspapers’ opinion pieces and here is why. Although regularly the majority of citizens prefer television as a source of political information, (Eurobarometer 76, 2011), research on media use demonstrates that particularly in times of crisis citizens hungry for in-depth analysis turn to newspapers for their interpretations of events into coherent stories (Graber 2001, 2010; Nimmo and Combs, 1985; Singer and Endreny, 1993; Walters, Wilkins and Walters 1989). The study of newspaper content allows us to examine the material citizens rely on as they assess where the fault lies during a crisis.

Newspaper opinion pieces in particular, offer a sense of ‘closer to the public’ view of the events. They host interpretations, explanations, and justifications of particular points of view offered by political personalities, experts, public intellectuals, or engaged citizens and serve multiple functions: they allow average citizens to feel a sense of mutual support, that their fears, worries and, often, suffering is shared. They also raise questions about responsibility, pose inflammatory accusations, or heighten feelings of hate, danger, and gloom, and
growing panic among public audiences. They are also good indicators of the complexity of discussions in which opinion shapers, elites, and public intellectuals engage, respond and reflect on.

In addition, newspaper opinion pieces bridge media and public agendas. According to Rogers and Dearing (1988), media agendas reflect the most extensively covered media content, while public agendas reflect citizens’ perceptions of what is important and set the standards on the basis of which governments are often judged. Opinion pieces contain public agendas as they are produced by citizens than media elites. Media and public agendas are distinct from policy, or political, agendas that reflect decisions and actions of political elites. And while public perceptions of what is important are often determined by media agendas, Wright (1986) notes that they are also affected by conversations with others regarding social and political issues. These conversations often take place in opinion pieces, so effectively opinion pieces can reflect the nature of public discussions on an issue. McLeod, Becker and Byrnes (1974) concur that content presented in mass media has greater effect in shaping perceptions among individuals who engage in interpersonal communication about the topics in the media agenda. Opinion pieces are products of highly engaged citizens so monitoring the content of opinion pieces, we can get a good sense of the heated debates and emotionally arousing interpretations that often surround highly impactful, dramatic, and contested political issues such as the one we examine here—the Greek sovereign debt crisis. Below we review briefly the main characteristics of the Greek sovereign debt crisis, and generate our hypotheses regarding its presentation.

**The timeline of the crisis**

Characteristics of the Greek political system such as clientelism, populism, weak democratic institutions and civil society (Featherstone, 2011; Mitsopoulos and Pelagidis, 2011; Mouzelis and Pagoulatos, 2002; Pappas, 2013) have been seen as paramount determinants of the Greek economic breakdown in the context of the global economic crisis. Moreover, recent IMF admissions that it underestimated the damaging implications of austerity measures on Greece (Stevis and Talley, 2013) raise questions about the impact of austerity on the political and social systems of affected countries. Nonetheless, the advent of the crisis, led to dramatic changes in the dynamics of the Greek political system with the creation of the co-operation government in November 2011 and the resulting coalition government of June 2012 (Vasilopoulou and Halikiopoulou, 2013).

The phases of the Greek debt crisis and the emotionally loaded content of accompanied news headlines in leading newspapers have been extensively
discussed by Davou and Demertzis (2013). In its early stages (December 2009 to May 2010) the Greek crisis is characterized as the worst development in Greek history since the 1949 civil war and was presented in the media by headlines stressing the shock, and traumatic nature of the crisis. In its second phase (June 2010–December 2011), the assimilation of the crisis reflected in anger and frustration in public sentiment was expressed as public demonstration and protests, and also hope and optimism. During its third phase (from early 2012 onwards), Greece experiences a growing recession and demonstrated inability of political system to deal with the crisis, expressed in the media by headlines reflecting lack of hope, sense of helplessness and meaninglessness, but also a sense of gained efficacy after the results of the general elections.

In our study we follow a similar timeline, and also pay particular attention to developments during six critical junctures (December 2009, May 2010, June 2010, November 2011, May 2012 and June 2012). These occasions are important for our study because we also expect them to correlate with an over-exposure of Germany and the EU in the press. The first three instances are pinned upon the unravelling of the crisis in Greece (December 2009) leading to the signing of the first bailout agreement (Memorandum of Understanding) in May 2010 and the protests that followed (June 2010). During this time we expect a concentration of opinion pieces not on the solutions of the problem but rather in making generalizations about corruption, patronage, easy money and non-deserved state benefits. It is our hypothesis that the reported external pressures and the internal debates were focused more on perceptions of the crisis by the public and the political elites. In other words, who’s the good, who’s the bad and who’s the ugly. During this time we also expect to find a strong demarcation of ‘them’ versus ‘us’ in the way media stories discuss the events. It is interesting to seek empirical evidence to test this hypothesis further since the ‘them’ vs. ‘us’ frame could have also penetrated public policy-making and the decision-making processes of political elites across Europe.

The other three occasions (November 2011, May 2012 and June 2012) are important because then we expect to see the coverage of external pressures for reform and an increased presentation of the images of Germany and their political elites. We also expect to identify a confrontational approach to Europe, centered around the “in” or “out” debate, and the targeting of certain EU member states seen as strong (Germany, France), as being systemically opposed or having a strong view against other member states seen as week (Spain, Italy, Ireland). We also expect a strong division between North and South, intense public debates and polemic entering a vicious cycle of who is to blame for the crisis, who owes whom, who rightfully belongs to Europe and who doesn’t. November 2011 coincides with the Greek PM’s intention to hold a referendum over the sovereign debt bailout and scenarios for potential EU exit. May and June 2012 are the periods of the two electoral contests in Greece—this is when we expect
external perceptions of domestic political elites to penetrate the political debate reflecting priorities beyond policy implementation—more towards saving face on international partners. Our last time point is the elections of June 2012, that coincide with the end of a two-party system in Greece and the shrinking of one of the two traditional parties (PASOK) within the political system.

To understand the impact of this crisis on Greek public opinion we examine the determinants of citizens’ political judgments focusing on stereotypes, the salience and frequency of presentation of institutions and political actors, and the dominant frames of blame.

**Stereotypes: how preconceptions influence perceptions of the crisis**

We are interested in the content of stereotypical thinking – the images, metaphors, generalizations used to depict involved countries, their citizens, institutions and political leaders because stereotypes allow us to simplify the complexity of the political and social environment, and focus of particular attributes of a target. Political psychology research demonstrates that stereotypes act as heuristics, carrying easily accessible and affectively laden information about a particular target, and help us reach evaluations and decisions quickly and effortlessly. Committing to particular stereotypical perceptions allows for cognitive and affective biases that bolster the particular interpretation/stereotype, and lead to cognitive closure and discounting of new or challenging information (Janis and Mann, 1997; Kinder, 2013; Ottati and Wyer, 1993; Wyer and Ottati, 1993). In the context of the financial crisis, we often come across characterizations of counties and their people as lazy, hardworking, honest, reliable, ignorant, arrogant, warm or cold-hearted—it is interesting to map the systematic patterns of how Greece and Germany are discussed, which characteristics are attributed to their institutions, leaders and citizens, and how these are internalized by Greek audiences.

There is significant value in examining these stereotypes closely. Asch (1952) showed that perceptions of others as ‘cold’, ‘warm’, ‘smart’ or ‘lazy’ affect meaning attached to their remaining features or attributed behaviors. Boulding (1959) noted that seeing other countries as ‘strong’ or ‘weak’, ‘hostile’ or ‘friendly’ had significant implications in determining behaviors towards these countries; Scott (1965) highlighted how such perceptions provoke particular emotions; Cottam (1977) expanded on the perceived threats and opportunities generated by stereotypical characterizations; and Haslam (2006) discussed the frequent demonization of the ‘powerful’ and dehumanization of those perceived as ‘unable to solve their own problems’.
Stereotypes can alter the human basis of the other (Herrmann, 2013). When civility and rationality are removed, others start resembling animals or barbarians; and when warmth and openness are erased by stereotypical thinking, the other is thought of as a machine (Alexander, Brewer, and Herrmann, 1999). Herrmann and Fischerkeller (1995) linked stereotypical judgments with perceptions of trustworthiness, and perceived likelihood that agreements would be honored in times of war or conflict. A number of studies also demonstrate that schematic thinking promoted by stereotypes and preconceptions shape how cues from the environment are interpreted, affect the search for new information (Fiske and Taylor, 1991; Sherman, Judd, and Park, 1989) and shape policy support at the public level (Herrmann, 1986; Peffley and Hurwitz, 1992; Tetlock, 1999).

**Salience of institutions and political actors in the blame game**

Political, economic and social institutions that facilitate or constrain political action (elections, parliamentary procedures, central banks and credit agencies or courts) are at heart of important political developments. In addition, political actors such as ministers, MPs, and political leaders play a crucial role in describing political events, and shape discourses of blame. The interaction between institutions and political actors becomes the focal point of media and public discourses. Monitoring the frequency and tone of their presentation, one can identify the focus of the debate at different points in time.

In the context of the crisis it is also valuable to examine perceptions of the EU. Analysis of press coverage in particular member states uncovers important information on how citizens see the future of the EU, national economies and prospective evaluations of economic performance of the country and its EU neighbors (De Vreese, 2001; Peter, Semetko and De Vreese, 2003). Financial markets rely significantly on citizens’ and experts’ expectations; hence examining this influence of the news is undeniable, particularly in times of crisis. Questions of EU identity and membership become part of this debate. Besides the economic pressures imposed on EU member states, the symbolic representations of being a ‘member of the European family’ carry significant weight in understanding how citizens perceive the future of the EU and their future within the EU.

Blame, particularly during crises and other negative events like scandals or natural catastrophes is not static—multiple actors, including political and media elites are active participants in the blame attribution game. They often promote different interpretations and attempt to deflect blame (Kinder and Sanders, 1990; Weaver, 1986). For example, research on institutional scandals indicates
that when blame is shifted to endemic characteristics of an institution, the institution absorbs the negative impact of the scandal and the culpability of individuals is discounted (Capelos and Wurzer, 2009). Lasorsa and Reese (1990) provide an interesting example of blame spreading by the media during the October 1987 stock market crash, and here, we are interested in identifying the dominant blame frames during the Greek debt crisis.

Vasilopoulou, Halikiopoulou and Exadaktylos (2014) provide a valuable reference point. They conducted a framing analysis of Greek party leaders’ speeches and identified six categories that were frequently used as blame shifting strategies from different actors (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007). The blame for the crisis was placed on different targets depending on the position of the party in the party system. The most frequent targets were the party of government (PASOK) prime minister and its ministers; the main opposition party (ND), its leader and MPs; both parties (PASOK and ND); external elites and actors such as the EU, the USA, IMF, or specific EU member states; domestic and external, mentioning all of the above; specific interest groups, specific to Greece or external, such as banks, industries, corporations, or rating agencies. In our analysis, we adopt their typology to examine whether the political blame-shifting strategies match the blame frames that appear in opinion pieces over the same period.

Methodology and data

Our data was collected by a content analysis of opinion pieces published in the online edition of the Greek newspaper To Vima. The online edition index is available at the newspaper website (www.tovima.gr). We considered the online edition of the newspaper as complementary to the print version as there is a strict editorial process in place. To Vima has a center-left affiliation, and this may be seen as a limitation. However, the newspaper hosts opinions and experts from the wider political ideological spectrum, our sample of opinion pieces is of good size, demonstrates a variance of opinions, and provides a solid starting point for further analysis of opinion pieces in additional sources.

A search of the online index using the keyword ‘German*’ (‘Γερμαν*’) between December 2009 and July 2012 yielded a large number of hits which were then assessed for relevance to the Greek debt crisis. We excluded irrelevant items as well as permanent editorial columns and reproduction of articles that appeared elsewhere or in foreign sources. We then ordered the retrieved pieces chronologically around the six time points (December 2009, May 2010, June 2010, November 2011, May 2012 and June 2012). For each of the selected time points, we used all the relevant pieces appearing in the first and third week starting from Monday to the following Monday. The count of articles per time
point is available in the last column of Table 1. The final coded sample contains 69 opinion pieces (44,388 words in total). Our coding accounts for variables capturing presentation of actors and institutions, and also related stereotypes and blame attributions.

*** Please insert Table 1 here ***

To assess presentation we coded for size (count of words per piece), overall tone (positive, negative, neutral) and complexity of argument (simple, complex). Complexity involves the ‘why, how, who, what, and where’. As ‘simple’ we classified items including generalizations and descriptions of facts or comments from others. As ‘complex’ we coded items that contained reasoning that went beyond the simple presentation of facts. A complex statement offers a variety of points of view, makes comparisons, connects several points, or discusses consequences, as indication of in-depth reasoning.

To account for content we tallied the frequency of mentions of Greece, Germany other countries, the amount and type of coverage received by political actors and specific domestic and international personalities, as well the frequency of references to specific institutions. Stereotype words like hardworking, lazy, corrupt, honest, were identified per article and were then tallied by country and time point to identify over-time patterns. We also coded whether the pieces were in favor or against EU membership, and whether they adopted particular blame frames (government, opposition, the political system in general, external actors only, domestic and external actors, and interest groups) to draw comparisons with Vasilopoulou, et al. (2014).

**Analysis and findings**

The pieces we coded ranged from 272 to 1759 words and were on average about 652 words long. The most frequent size was about 437 words, which is long enough to allow for comprehensive discussions of the crisis. Shorter pieces were targeted on specific news items rather than a fully-fledged analysis of facts. While the majority of pieces had mixed tone (61%), containing both positive and negative references and arguments, about 30% were pessimistic and a small number (9%) were optimistic that the crisis would be favorably resolved. This finding is in line with the findings of Davou and Demertzis (2013) which highlight emotional reactions to the crisis in media and public opinion reflecting the overall sentiment of fear, uncertainty, and anger. Appreciating that emotions condition the way citizens think and act about politics (Capelos 2010a; Capelos 2010b; Capelos 2013) we also coded the emotional content of opinion pieces in our study. Results of our analysis will be presented in our future research.
Focusing on the types of arguments put forward, the details provided, and the factors considered in opinion pieces, we classified them as simple vs. complex. Interestingly, opinion shapers in their majority provide audiences with simple opinions about 58% of the time. Complex articles were featured less prominently, about 42% of the time. Simple articles were also on average shorter in size (550 words) compared to complex articles (791 words), and this difference is statistically significant (p <= .05). This difference is size is also reflected in the range of simple articles from 272 to 969 words, and complex articles from 362 to 1759 words and demonstrates that sophisticated accounts of the crisis require more elaborate presentations than simplified, shorter reactions.

The distribution of complexity over time is also noteworthy. While 60% of opinion pieces provide simple reviews in December 2009, complexity of presentation increases as the crisis unfolds. By May 2010, 63% of opinion pieces provide a complex discussion increasing to 77% by June 2010. This is not surprising given the complexity of the proposed solution to the crisis offered by the government and the EU. It reflects the efforts of opinion shapers to explain links and interactions within negotiations. In November 2011, about 57% of the articles provide complex arguments, with simple opinion pieces gaining more ground (43%), showing an interesting division between those who consider the solution simple (e.g. a new government) or more complex (e.g. potential exit and its implications). The balance of complexity shifts again in May and June 2012, where above 85% of the articles provide simple arguments, in an effort perhaps to assist voters in their choices and political orientation during the national elections.

References to particular countries

The discussion of the Greek debt crisis does not hold a Greek-only focus. Characteristically, only 9% of the cases examine the Greek debt crisis as a national-only matter. Germany featured prominently, and appeared in about 80% of the 69 reviewed articles, while France came second in mentions populating about 32% of the articles. The discussion regarding the financial crisis also expanded to other crisis-stricken countries, such as Spain and Italy (each at 19%), and Portugal and Ireland (9%) particularly in later points of the timeline. The US was mentioned ad hoc (25%), but always in conjunction with references to Germany.

The focus on Germany was particularly strong. In about 16% of the opinion prices the discussion focused entirely on the Greek debt crisis in relation to Germany. Germany was also mentioned about 31% of the time in conjunction with one other country, in most cases France, and in 24% a third country was
mentioned. Several EU members are part of the crisis conversation, and as we will note later on, very often are considered to also be part of the problem.

Another interesting finding is how the discussion of relevant countries developed over time. References to Germany were few in December 2009 (5%), doubled in May 2010 (9%) and topped in June 2010 and November 2011. These are periods of extreme unrest and instability in Greece and public attention was on Germany as the power that moved things in Europe. Our data, as well as other studies on media coverage of this period (Bee and Chrona, 2013) concur that the bailout agreement was perceived as a German-style occupation in Greece and the protests of June 2010 placed Germany in center-stage for the Greek predicament. Following what many saw as the dictation of policy-making and the interference of German politicians in the decision of Prime Minister Papandreou in November 2011 to hold a referendum for the new bailout package, Germany found itself again in the forefront of the discussions. Since November 2011, Germany was established as a key actor to the crisis, and opinion pieces ensured it was mentioned from then onwards.

References to France appeared later, especially during the French Presidency of the EU and the Cannes European Council (November 2011), when the Greek Prime Minister announced his intention to hold a referendum. Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy agreed to tell Greece not to hold a referendum and threatened a Greek exit from the EU. That joint decision tied France and Germany together in the eyes of opinion shapers. Most interestingly, France re-emerged in May and June 2012, during the Greek elections. This is mostly due to the election of the new French President, Francois Hollande, a socialist, who was perceived as someone who could control the advent of German austerity in Europe, thus renewing hope to the EU and adding value to an alternative solution to the crisis.

**Domestic and External Actors featured in the Greek Debt Crisis: density of coverage and over-time analysis.**

First, we looked at the presentation density for the actors featured as relevant in the conversations about the Greek debt crisis. About 22% of opinion pieces were targeted towards one actor. However, the majority of pieces (55.1%) involved between 2 and 4 actors, and these considered the causes and/or consequences of the crisis. Characteristically, pieces categorized as complex mentioned on average 3 actors, in contrast to 2 actors mentioned on average in simple pieces, and this difference is statistically significant at $p \leq .05$. This is an important result as it demonstrates the complexity not only of the Greek debt crisis in terms of political and economic interactions, but also the complexity of the arguments put forward by public discourse.
To identify the focus of the discussions involving political actors we coded them into two categories: domestic and external. Opinion pieces focused on domestic-only actors about 31% of the time, and external-only actors by 33%. The majority of opinion pieces (36%) included references to both domestic and external actors, again pointing to the crisis being seen as a development that implicates Greece as well as its European counterparts.

Looking at over-time trends, we noted an interesting shift in the selection of actors. In December 2009, 20% of mentions involved domestic actors while 80% involved both domestic and external. By May 2010 the focus on domestic actors intensified (50%), external only references moved from 0 to 13%, while about 38% of the articles highlighted both domestic and external actors. Following the intense demonstrations in Athens, by June 2010 there was a shift from domestic (17%) to external only actors (33%), while mentions on the combination of external and domestic actors peaked at 50%. By the prime ministerial resignation and the new cooperation government in November 2011, the focus turned on domestic-only actors (46%) and less on external-only (15%). Combined references were featured again in about 39% of the cases. By the electoral contests of May and June 2012, we noted a strong polarization in the presentation of actors in the comment pieces. In May 2012, 40% focused on domestic-only actors, while 47% identified external-only actors. Combined references dropped to 13%. The above can be seen as an indicator of the pressures posed by the European Union for a solution to the political deadlock. Following the electoral contest of June 2012, when a clear mandate was given to the pro-European ‘camp’ we observed a strong shift towards external-only references (75%). This can be attributed to the rhetoric applied by the leading party in the coalition government for renegotiation of the bailout terms, in its efforts to counter the accusations posed by the left for collaboration with external actors. About 25% of the opinion pieces held references to domestic actors, but always in conjunction with external.

Specific Actors and their perceived role in the crisis

Further to the domestic/external distinction, we classified specifically mentioned actors using seven dominant categories: Domestic Political Leaders (38%), Domestic Political Parties (28%), National Government (20%), EU Actors (17%), Political Elites (as a group or as ‘politicians’) (16%), Foreign Investors and Markets (12%), Press and Media (16%), and Interest and Social groups (17%). Our over-time analysis highlighted some particularly interesting patterns that deserve mention.

The majority of references to domestic political leaders can be found during June 2010 and November 2011 (both at 28%). Both periods were marked by a
heightened call for the leaders of the two major parties in Greek parliament (PASOK and ND) to reach some sort of compromise regarding the implementation of the bailout measures (June 2010) and the consolidation of a cooperation government in November 2011. This does not mean, as we will see later, that other political leaders of parliamentary parties are left out of the conversation.

Parties are dominant actors in the Greek political scene. Mentions to political parties and their role in the crisis were evident in May 2010 (21%) when the bailout agreement was ratified and party whips came out. References increased to 32% by November 2011 when opinion shapers called for political parties to step away from ideological fault-lines and find a shared solution in the form of a cooperation government. References to parties peaked in May 2012, by 37%. This is when the first round of national elections took place and opinion polls and results demonstrated the fragmentation of the electorate across a number of less traditional parties, and the emergence of new ones, especially on the extreme right of the political spectrum.

We also witnessed increased references to Government in December 2009 and November 2011 (both by 29%). It is also important to note that 21% of references to national government appeared in June 2010, after the height of the violent protests against the bailout agreement, highlighting the perceived responsibility of this actor for responding to social unrest.

Emphasis on EU actors was also mainly present during December 2009 and November 2011, where about 25% of the EU mentions appeared in each of these two months. This is not a surprise since public and media attention was placed on the efforts of the EU to resolve the Greek debt crisis by agreeing on a bailout (December 2009) and then dealing with the prospect of a referendum for the second bailout agreement during the Cannes European Council meeting (November 2011).

While general references to political elites were absent in the early stages of the crisis (December 2009) they rose to 18% by November 2011, when opinion shapers called for cooperation between all political elites in the country. References to political elites peaked in May and June 2012 (both at 27%) reflecting the deliberations to form a coalition government following the results of the two elections.

The majority of mentions to foreign investors and markets were in December 2009 (50%) and then November 2011 (25%). This reflects the attention paid by opinion shapers to the lack of confidence in the Greek program and/or proposed European resolution. While the focus during the early stages of the crisis was on the financial details of the story, it evolved to include more complicated
discussions, diffusing the conversation away from financial to other types of political actors.

The role of the media is also discussed in the first phase of the crisis. In December 2009 and May 2010, references to press and media organizations reached 27%. In subsequent months they dropped to 18%, and 9% by June 2012. Opinion pieces reacted to the representations of the Greek crisis internationally, but also to the reporting style of media organizations (both domestic and international), underlining their responsibility in framing the crisis, and providing balanced assessments of the situation on the ground. As we will see further below, this is important as it affects the way public discourse was shaped in the latter part of the period we examine, with the reproduction of particular stereotypes that originated in imported discourses.

References to interest and other social groups gradually increased as the crisis unfolded, from 8% in December 2009 and May 2010, to 17% in June 2010, to 25% in November 2011, peaking in May 2012 at 33%. This incremental attention to this political actor coincides with measures to tackle the fiscal deficit and the implementation of actions to restructure the public sector and reform pensions and the welfare state (Exadaktylos and Zahariadis, 2014). It is also aligned with the number of protests that took place in Athens and other major cities across the country, and the attempts of political parties to capitalize on the vulnerability of citizens affected by the crisis (Davou and Demertzis, 2013).

**Political Personalities: the protagonists of the crisis**

Turning to specific domestic and international political personalities we found that about 26% of opinion pieces hosted references only to domestic personalities, 30% focused on international ones, and 32% attempted a link between domestic and international actors. About 22% of simple pieces included references to domestic personalities only, 41% provided references to only external actors, and 38% mentioned both internal and external actors. As we will see later, this focus on external actors in simple pieces can be related to the presence of more stereotype terms used. Turning to complex pieces, we see a reversal in focus, with 40% of pieces highlighting the role of domestic actors, and 25% discussing only external actors. About 36% included references to both domestic and external actors. The consistently high presence of references to both domestic and external actors in simple and complex pieces can be seen as an overall indication of the complex nature of the debates taking place.

The focus on the domestic and international personalities was not equally distributed over time. In December 2009 we noticed a strong presence of domestic personalities being named in the opinion pieces (75%), in contrast with 0 articles holding references exclusively to international personalities. In
May 2010 references to domestic persons remained high (63%) but we also see pieces that focus exclusively on specific international personalities (25%). This continued in June 2010, with exclusive references to international personalities overtaking references to domestic personalities (40% to 20% respectively). Following the intense deliberations at the European level between the Greek government and its creditors, opinion pieces reflected the entanglement of domestic personalities with specific international counterparts in 50% of the cases. During the elections of May and June 2012, we observed mentions to international personalities (36% and 58% respectively), while exclusive focus on domestic personalities dropped to 29% and then disappeared.

Opinion pieces contained references to a number of political persons. We did not identify significant differences between simple and complex articles in the average number of persons mentioned (both around 2.5) but we did note interesting over-time patterns. In December 2009, about 60% of articles focused on single persons, while as the crisis unfolded links between two and five persons were drawn. The key domestic personalities were Prime Minister Papandreou (19%), ND leader Samaras (13%) and SYRIZA leader Tsipras (13%). From the international scene, highly featured personalities included German Chancellor Merkel (39%), French Presidents Sarkozy (13%) and Hollande (12%), and managing director of the IMF, Lagarde (4%).

Of all references to Prime Minister Papandreou, about 23% appeared in December 2009. References peaked in November 2011 reaching 31%, and disappeared by June 2012. The peak can be attributed to his resignation during that month, whereas the decline in references reflects his exit from the party leadership of PASOK. On the other hand, ND leader Samaras emerged prominently after November 2011 (33%) as serious contender of the PM office, and continued to be featured in May and June 2012 (33% and 22% respectively) due to the performance of his party in the national elections. Along the same lines, Tsipras, the leader of SYRIZA, was hosted prominently in opinion pieces published between May and June 2012 (56% and 33% respectively) reflecting the strong performance of SYRIZA in the electoral contests of 2012.

Merkel was the most prominent figure among international personalities. While she maintained a steadily increasing rate of appearance between December 2009 and May 2012, references to her reached 33% by June 2012. According to the opinion pieces we examined, Merkel was frequently discussed as the person that controlled decision making and the future of the Eurozone. French president Sarkozy also showed a steady rise in references starting in December 2009 (11%) to June 2010 (22%) through to November 2011 (33%) and then slowly faded in May and June 2012 when he no longer held his presidential position (22% and 11% respectively). His successor Francois Hollande took his place
effectively in May and June 2012, and Lagarde appeared as a key person, reflecting the high involvement of the IMF in the Greek case.

**Political institutions: domestic and international**

We counted the number of institution-related mentions in the opinion pieces between December 2009 and June 2012, and noted their presence in 65% of the total cases. International institutions were featured more prominently than domestic ones at every time point we examined, and in total 58% vs. 29%. The most balanced time points were June 2010 and November 2011 where mentions to domestic institutions rose significantly in comparison to previous and later months. We also noted that external institutions was prominently featured in the majority of simple (65%) and complex (52%) pieces, while complex pieces included also more combined mentions of internal and external institutions (20%) in comparison to simple pieces (5%) that took a one-sided approach most of the time. The over-exposure of international institutions reflects a general perception among opinion shapers of their prominent role in the crisis. The rise of domestic institution references between June 2010 and November 2011 is an indicator of opinion shapers' disillusionment with the Greek program, the heightened public attention placed on the Greek parliament, and the call for elections.

**Emerging Stereotypes: the good, the bad and the ugly**

The central focus of our chapter involves the presentation stereotypes. A number of colorful references for Greece, Germany and the EU make their appearance in the opinion pieces, and more prominently in simple (58%) than complex pieces (42%). Stereotypes involving Greece and Germany were mentioned in about 32% of the pieces, while stereotypes about the EU appeared in 13% of the articles. An overtime analysis of stereotype presentations is also interesting. In December 2009, Greece was mentioned as ‘small,’ and ‘undisciplined’ and Germany was presented as ‘the European giant’ and ‘powerful’. In May 2010, Greece was seen as ‘the weakest link of the Eurozone’ whereas Germany was described as ‘blooming’, ‘hostile’ and promoting a ‘German logic’. The EU also appeared this month, presented as ‘heartless’.

In June 2010, stereotype words appeared more frequently. ‘Tax-evading’, ‘cheating’, ‘unstable’, and ‘dangerous’ accompanied references to Greece, which was seen as the ‘necessary evil’ and the ‘black sheep of Europe’. The ‘Greek financial drama’ and the ‘detestable Greeks’ became part of the prominent discourse that was generated abroad and filtered down to the domestic public fora. On the other hand, Germany was seen as ‘bad’ and ‘cunning’, ‘hegemonic’
and aggressive' seeking to establish a ‘new German order’ in political and economic terms.

In November 2011, the ‘Greek tragedy’ continued: the imported discourse of Greece as the ‘naughty child’ and the ‘laughing stock’ of Europe was challenged by domestic characterizations of Greece as the ‘scapegoat’. In addition, the imported stereotypes of ‘lazy’ and ‘cheating’ Greeks were countered by self-perceptions of being ‘hard-working’ and ‘honest’. Germany maintained its ‘ethnocentric’ and ‘aggressive’ image, being ‘strong’ and ‘dictatorial’. At the same time, perceptions of the EU carried the stigma of a ‘German-Europe’, overseen by a ‘silly Brussels elite’ which succumbed to ‘German domination’. This reaction can be linked to the stark threats coming from the EU about a potential Greek exit from the Eurozone, alongside additional pressures due to the pending referendum proposals put forward by the Greek Prime Minister. European counterparts were asking for guarantees on the Greek bailout and the sustainability of the Greek debt, frequently attacking the Greek tax-collection mechanisms and the disarray that was present in the Greek government’s actions regarding the implementation of the austerity program.

May 2012 found Greek opinion shapers defending ‘the common soul’ of their country, countering imported stereotypes that marked Greeks as ‘beggars’, ‘perpetual time wasters’, ‘lazy’ and ‘greedy’ with German stereotypes of ‘hegemony’, ‘totalitarianism’ and ‘German world domination’. This again came as a reaction to international pressures (mostly from the EU) on the potential electoral victory of the so-called ‘anti-memorandum’ camp, which threatened the termination of payments servicing the sovereign debt, the declaration of bankruptcy and the return to the drachma—obviously with unforeseen consequences for the future of the Eurozone and the EU.

In June 2012, a similar discourse war continued, with Greece as ‘a patient in comma’, ‘the victim’ and ‘experimental subject’ standing against ‘the engine of Europe’, the ‘aggressor’, the ‘inflexible’, ‘autocratic’ and ‘selfish’ Germany. The EU was presented as the ‘ugly foreigners’ of an ‘almost-dead’ Europe. The results of the Greek elections demonstrated the will of the voters to remain in the EU calling, at the same time, for a renegotiation of the bailout terms or at least the easing of the austerity measures (Vasilopoulou and Halikiopoulou, 2013).

Responsibility attributions: who is to blame

An analysis of the discussions around the Greek debt crisis cannot omit a review of blame attribution and accountability. We coded blame attributions towards government, opposition, the political system in general, external actors, a
combination of external and domestic actors, and finally interest groups. The first interesting finding is that most pieces adopt a single blame frame (48%) and only 3% of the pieces spread responsibility across four or more categories. In addition, simple pieces adopt predominantly single blame frames in 63% of the cases, while the majority of complex articles (48%) assign blame to 3 groups of actors.

We also see that the blame spread across the categories is balanced. The political system is blamed 35% of the time, external actors about 34%, while the government, interest groups, and domestic and external institutions as a pair receive blame in about 32% of the opinion pieces each. The opposition is less prominently featured in the blame game, with references about 20% of the time, showing that even challengers are not perceived to be innocent bystanders in the Greek debt crisis. At first, this might appear going against the results by Vasilopoulou et al. (2014) who found that in the formal political discourses within parliament, the Government, the Opposition and the external elites were blamed by political leaders as perpetrators of the crisis. We see our findings as an interesting juxtaposition, which demonstrates a disillusionment of political discourses with media and public discourses and corroborates the presence of what is often described as a perceived gap between official political rhetoric and perceptions of opinion shapers and the public.

Comparing patterns of blame frames featured in simple and complex articles, we identified that arguments attributing blame to the political system, the government, and the opposition were featured predominantly in complex articles (58%, 64% and 79% respectively), in contrast to simple articles (42%, 36% and 21%). External actors or a combination of domestic and external were predominantly blamed in simple pieces (61% and 59%) in contrast to complex pieces (39% and 41%), and blame on interest groups was equally featured in simple and complex pieces (50% each).

Peaks’ and ‘troughs’ of accountability are visible in our overtime analysis. The government received most blame references in December 2009, June 2010 and November 2011. Each of these months hosts about 23% of the total government blame references, which reflect time periods when the ball was in the government’s hands (e.g. requesting the bailout, responding to the protests and negotiating a referendum). Blame references to the opposition peaked in May 2010 and November 2011 with about 29% of the total references appearing in each of these two months. This reflects the unwillingness to take responsibility for the bailout ratification and negotiating the terms of participating in a cooperation government respectively. The political system received 21% of its blame references in May 2010, 25% in June 2010, and 29% in May 2012, with much lower percentages in the other months. This reflects key moments when
the political system was not prepared to undertake responsibility for the crisis (May 2010) or was too fragmented to react (during the two elections).

External actors (and mainly Germany) received about 9% of their blame references in December 2009, blame increased in May 2010 (17%) and topped in June 2010 at 30% of references, demonstrating responses from external actors on the crisis. November 2011 and May 2012 were quieter months for external actors, but June 2012 saw a flare-up of blame comments reaching 27%. This can be linked to the polarized discourse prevalent during election time.

‘Domestic and external actors combined’ were targeted more prominently starting in November 2011 (36%) and in May 2012 (32%). By June 2012, blame attributions to domestic and external actors combined dropped to 23%. Finally, blame to interest groups was steady and frequent throughout. About 23% of references appeared in December 2009, and a similar percentage continued in May 2010. References decreased in June 2010 and November 2011 when focus was shifted to other actors. In May 2012 we noted an additional increase to 23%, but focus was shifted again away from international organizations by June 2012. The above are graphically represented in Graph 1.

*** Please insert Graph 1 here ***

Conclusions

Our analysis of opinion pieces aimed at gaining insights on how the political debate around the financial crisis was structured by opinion shapers, public intellectuals and citizens, drawing parallels with recent studies that have examined media messages and political rhetoric.

The majority of opinion pieces we examined promoted a simple and mostly negative account of the crisis. Whereas newspaper articles might offer a more balanced and in-depth analysis of the determinants and implications of the phenomenon, opinion pieces offered heated commentary of the sequence of events as they unfolded. This is in line with Neuman, Just and Cligler (1992) who showed that journalists focus more on the determinants and implications of conflict while audiences spend more time discussing human impact and the moral implications of the events.

We also saw that attributions of responsibility and blame rested overall more heavily on government and prominent international actors rather than the opposition, contrasting what Vasilopoulou et al. (2014) found in their analyses of parliament-generated rhetoric. We argue this is because the focus of public attention and appetite for justice naturally concentrates around the incumbent
and international political actors that feature prominently at the center of the media stage. Judgments regarding the opposition are secondary, reserved for times when opposition parties assume power.

Our analysis expands on the findings of Vasilopoulou et al. (2014). We saw that responsibility for ‘making things good again’ shifted differently in simple and complex pieces, with the later highlighting internal blame to domestic political elites and the government. Simple pieces featured frequent shifting of the blame to international and EU counterparts. This, in conjunction with the stereotypical characterizations of Germany and Merkel, the ambivalent stance towards France and its leaders, and the adopted self-victimization discourse that expanded to south European neighbors, allows us to put into context public attitudes towards the proposed and implemented strategies and measures to tackle the crisis. Because media and public agendas have implications for formal political actions by political elites, these findings can complement studies that examine governmental responses to the crisis over time.

Media representations are often related to rise of populism and the increase of a discourse based on the ‘we are better than them’ argument or ‘we can do things better ourselves’. In turn, this can fuel sentiments of nationalism as it demarcates ‘them’ and ‘us’; it can create a certain version of conspiracy politics; it can lower political trust to formal and informal political institutions both at the domestic and the European level; and at the end it can contribute to creating an inward-looking society with increased internal social divisions. Our study of opinion pieces allowed us to make distinctions between simple and complex representations of public opinion regarding the financial crisis. As long as the crisis remains a reality for many European countries, threatening to solidify the revived North-South divisions in Europe, it is important to keep monitoring public attitudes expressed in media and interpersonal communications.
### Appendix

**Table 1: Timeline of newspaper headlines and count of opinion pieces in the sample**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Headlines</th>
<th>Number of Opinion Pieces</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>December 2009</td>
<td>'Nightmarish Report on Social Security' (Typos tis Kiriakis) &lt;br&gt;</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(phase A)</td>
<td>'The market suffocates' (I Chora)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2010</td>
<td>'Hunger and misery for salaried employees and pensioners' (Avriani) &lt;br&gt;</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(phase A)</td>
<td>'People at the Guillotine' (24 Hours) &lt;br&gt;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'In vain Sacrifice' (I Vradyni) &lt;br&gt;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'Suffocation for five stony years' (Ethnos)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2011</td>
<td>'Blood and Tears for 100 bns' (Ta Nea) &lt;br&gt;</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(phase B)</td>
<td>'Four-year Tax Nightmare' (Eleftherotypia)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'Coup de Grace to Salaried Employees and Pensioners' (I Vradyni) &lt;br&gt;</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'Massacre against the Greek People' (Rizospastis) &lt;br&gt;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Panic (Democratia)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2011</td>
<td>'Gate of Hell' (Democratia)</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Phase B)</td>
<td>'Prince of Chaos' (Eleftherotypia)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'Political Thriller' (Aggelioforos)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'Earthquake in Europe' (Avriani)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'Blackmail' (Eleftheros Typos)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2012</td>
<td>'People’s Rage: Change the Memorandum' (Eleftheros Typos)</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Phase B)</td>
<td>'Thriller’ (I Vradyni)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'Black Dawn’ (Ethnos)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2012</td>
<td>'The Collaborators of Troika Kill Cancer-Patients’ (Avriani)</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Phase B)</td>
<td>'Drama’ (Democratia)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Selection of Headlines from Davou and Demertzis (2013).
Graph 1: Map of Blame Attributions during the Greek Debt Crisis

Note: Cross-tabulation analysis. Data points represent % of blame references towards particular actors, present in each month

References


