

Who gets the blame? How policymakers in the EU shift responsibility when things go wrong



EU membership provides ample opportunities for politicians at the national level to shift blame for unpopular decisions to the EU's institutions, while EU-level actors also have an incentive to blame national politicians when things go wrong. Drawing on a new study, [Tim Heinkelmann-Wild](#) explains how these blame-avoidance processes function in practice.

When EU policies are publicly contested, policymakers try to avoid blame by downplaying their own responsibility and emphasising the responsibility of others. EU member states and EU institutions thus have a strong incentive to engage in multi-level blame games. For example, during the Eurozone crisis, Greek politicians repeatedly blamed the EU for the harsh economic conditions they had to fulfil under the European rescue programmes, while EU officials attributed responsibility for the country's disastrous financial situation to Greek politicians.

Greek politicians also blamed Germany for the severe conditions they had to fulfil under the European rescue programmes, while German politicians highlighted the responsibility of policymakers in Greece. At the same time, the European Court of Auditors strongly criticised the European Commission's failure to notice the warning signs in the run-up to the crisis and the Commission's handling of the subsequent state bailouts. This begs the question: who blames whom in European blame games?

Preferences and opportunities

Existing research on blame-shifting in the EU focuses either on policymakers' preferences or the opportunities offered by institutional structures in which policymakers operate. While this scholarship offers important insights, blame-shifting, like any other social behaviour, is shaped by a combination of the actors' preferences and their opportunities. An explanation of blame-shifting in the EU therefore needs to integrate both policymakers' preferences ('Who do I *want* to blame?') as well as their opportunities to realise them ('Who *can* I blame?').

Firstly, policymakers at each level of the EU's multi-level governance system have a preference for shifting blame onto policymakers at the other level for two mutually reinforcing reasons: loyalty and interdependence. Due to the frequency of their meetings, loyalty among policymakers at the same level is often much stronger than loyalty between policymakers at different levels of government. This mutual loyalty deters them from shifting blame onto one another.

For example, the loyalty among members of the Commission is much stronger than their loyalty to member state representatives. Their frequent meetings create mutual loyalty that deters them from shifting blame onto one another, a deterrence that does not exist to the same extent vis-à-vis national policymakers. At the same time, the loyalty among member states frequently exceeds their loyalty to EU actors. National ministers typically respect each other more than members of the Commission. While this bond tends to deter them from blaming each other for contested EU policies, there is nothing similar to deter them from blaming the EU itself and those representing EU actors.

Moreover, policymakers from the same level often depend on one another more than on policymakers from other levels. For example, as member states depend on each other for decision-making in the Council much more than on the Commission, they have to exercise more caution in blaming each other than in blaming the Commission. By contrast, as Commission bureaucrats depend much more on their standing in Brussels than on their reputation among national governments, they will be more cautious about shifting blame onto other EU institutions than about blaming member states.

Secondly, policymakers can shift blame according to their preferences only in so far as the institutional structure provides them the opportunity to plausibly deny responsibility when shifting blame onto others. At first glance, the complex multi-level governance system of the EU seems to offer policymakers plausible deniability and widespread opportunities for blame-shifting. Yet, blame-shifting opportunities in the EU are not only shaped by policymaking structures, but also by the [structures of policy-implementation](#). If policymakers are responsible for ‘on the ground’ implementation, they are likely to be associated with the contested policy and become a focal point for the public. As a consequence, other policymakers’ attempts to shift blame onto implementing actors are facilitated while blame attributions to non-implementing actors become implausible in the eyes of the public.

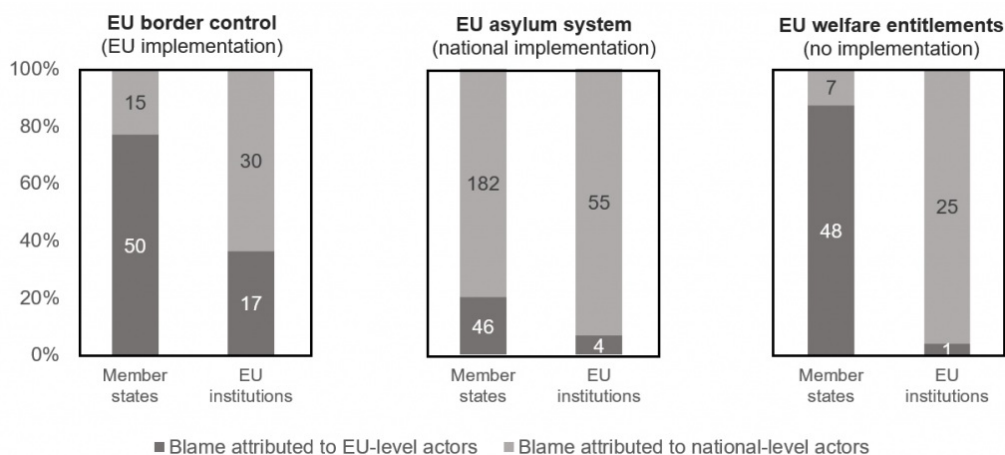
Who blames whom?

The combination of policymakers’ preferences and their opportunities thus shapes European blame games. Firstly, the share of blame attributions targeting the EU is high when the institutional structures of policy-implementation allow member states to follow their preference for shifting blame onto the EU. This is the case when policies are either implemented by EU-level authorities or do not require active implementation.

Secondly, the share of blame attributions targeting the EU is moderate when either national-level actors or EU actors are heavily constrained by the institutional structures to pursue their preferences. This is the case for member states when policies are implemented by member state authorities and for EU institutions when policies are enacted by EU-level authorities. Finally, the share of blame attributions targeting the EU will be low when the structures of policy-implementation allow EU institutions to follow their preference for shifting blame onto member states. This will be the case when the policy is either implemented by national-level authorities or does not require active implementation.

The blame games accompanying three contested migration policies are illustrative in this regard. Figure 1 shows blame attributions by EU member states and EU institutions for EU border controls, the EU asylum system, and the welfare entitlements for EU citizens at their country of residence.

Figure 1: Shares of blame attributions targeting the EU



Note: For more information, see the author’s accompanying paper (co-authored with Bernhard Zangl) in [Governance](#).

Firstly, the share of blame attributions targeting the EU is high when the institutional structures of policy-implementation allow member states to follow their preference for shifting blame onto the EU. Member states attributed the bulk of blame to the EU in the border control case (77 per cent), where the policy was implemented by the EU agency Frontex. Member states also assigned the vast majority of their blame to the EU in the welfare entitlement case (87 per cent), where the policy does not require active implementation.

Secondly, the share of blame attributions targeting the EU is moderate when policies are implemented by actors located at the same level of government as the blame sender. EU institutions attributed 36 per cent of their blame in the border control case to EU-level actors, while 20 per cent of member states’ blame attributions were directed at EU actors in the asylum system case.

Finally, the share of blame attributions targeting the EU is low when the institutional structures of policy-implementation allow EU institutions to follow their preference for shifting blame onto member states. Only a few blame attributions by EU institutions targeted other EU-level actors in the asylum system case (7 per cent), where the policy is implemented by national-level authorities, as well as in the welfare entitlements case (4 per cent), where the policy does not require active implementation.

To sum up, European blame games are shaped by a combination of policymakers' preferences and their opportunities. Due to their loyalty and interdependence, policymakers located at the same level of government tend to share a preference for shifting blame onto actors at the other level. Policymakers' opportunities to shift blame according to this preference are constrained by the prevalent structures of policy-implementation.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

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Tim Heinkelmann-Wild is a Researcher and Doctoral Candidate at LMU Munich. His research interests include the causes and consequences of the contestation of multilateral institutions at both the international and domestic level. He is part of the research project "[Public Responsibility Attribution in the European Union](#)" which is funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG).