

The Politics of Blame

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When things go wrong someone is blamed. Throughout the current crisis there have been several convenient scapegoats: the EU itself, southern European countries and Germany, among others. Passing the buck is an all too familiar rhetorical strategy, but it is not constructive. It is not conducive to the diplomacy that a collective response requires, nor does it elevate the public's understanding of the challenges faced.

During the first act of the sovereign debt crisis in 2010, the German news magazine *Focus* famously titled that the Greeks were “[Cheats in the Euro Family](#).” The *Bild Zeitung* reproduced the discourse of Greeks as dishonest and feckless people, by coining the neologism ‘*Pleite-Griechen*’ (bankrupt Greeks). *Bild* went on to [demand](#) that president Samaras issues his guarantee ‘that Greece will repay all its debt’ in writing. The subtext was unmistakable: they cheated once, that’s what caused the mess, we should never trust them again.

The EU itself has also been blamed time and again for imposing harsh measures on debtor states. Reading some of the press in the UK one would believe the EU is responsible for everything, from sluggish economies, unwelcome immigration as well as the inability to deal adequately with people wanted on terrorism charges. In a recent [article](#) Martin Schulz, president of the European Parliament, lamented what he called a ‘blame game’: a state of affairs in which problems or unpopular issues are presented as European failures, and policies that are popular and successful are presented as the success of national governments (even if they were developed by European institutions).

He recounts a familiar policy with less well known origin. The [financial transaction tax](#), which as a Europe wide tax had its origins in the European Commission and the European Parliament, was [implemented](#) by 11 countries in January 2013. When it was implemented it was presented as a Franco-German success, the success of national governments in implementing popular policies. Little mention was made of the fact that European institutions significantly contributed to these policies.

Indeed, an earlier attempt to agree on such a tax, during the Sarkozy government, had failed because Germany and France could not agree its terms. This setback, Schulz writes, was presented then as a European failure, rather than a failure on the part of member states. Schulz argues that this pattern is repeated elsewhere. Successful European policies are often usurped by national government who claim them as their own success. Successes belong to nations, failures to Europe.

This is ironic because areas of European competence, the common market for instance, seem to be doing remarkably well through the crisis. Notably many of the challenges faced across Europe, say in areas of economic policy, financial regulation, or the structure of the banking sector, fall into the remit of national governments.

Scapegoating is a familiar political strategy in electoral politics: blaming someone else to distract from your own failures. Germany too has been blamed. In 2012 the *New Statesman* called Angela Merkel “[Europe’s Most Dangerous Leader](#).” This anti-German narrative is familiar, as more [recent reactions](#) across the European press seem to name Merkel and Schäuble as primary culprits for a bailout characterised by some as ‘[robbery, plain and simple](#).’ Notwithstanding that it appears to have been the Cypriot government itself that [chose to spread the levy across small and large depositors](#) in order to limit damage to its status as an offshore financial centre. The political imperative is to blame someone else and deflect blame from oneself. Enforcing the narrative that brutish Germans are selfishly punishing other European states remains politically more convenient in the short term.

The examples picked above are clearly a small selection, and anyone could come up with dozens more. The

narrative of blame in public discourse is hard to miss. Particularly the EU and Germany might one day become the Scylla and Charybdis of popular imagination, threats to be avoided and monsters to be overcome. As politicians everywhere clamour for re-election, politics becomes more about scapegoating and blame avoidance than building alliances and implementing good policies.

The rhetorical strategy of blaming others, might be convenient in the short term and take a government through the next electoral cycle, but it is certainly not constructive. The blame game carried out in much of the press is not conducive to a collective and rational discourse on the crises' causes and solutions; in fact, it probably does little more than erecting political obstacles that will have to be overcome in one way or another at some point in the future. If the *Bild* convinces Germans that [Greeks are lazy](#), and the *New Statesman* convinces people that Germany is a [problem to be solved](#), they are contributing nothing to solving the crisis, all they do is build up prejudices that make the kind of cooperation needed politically ever more difficult to achieve.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Euro Crisis in the Press blog, nor of the London School of Economics.