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# ATTRIBUTION OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR ECONOMIC POLICY ISSUES IN THE MAINSTREAM MEDIA, BEFORE (2002–2009) AND AFTER (2011–2016) THE GREAT RECESSION

**Susana Rogeiro Nina** is a PhD Candidate in Comparative Politics and Assistant Researcher at the Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon, within the framework of the ERC Project-MAPLE. She has a MA in Political Science (ISCTE-IUL) and a BA in International Relations and Political (BA). Her research interests comprise the fields of political communication, media and media effects, electoral campaigns, political behaviour, public opinion and the European Union. [susana.nina@ics.ulisboa.pt](mailto:susana.nina@ics.ulisboa.pt)

## ABSTRACT

*The literature widely considers that the attribution of responsibility frame tends to prevail on media coverage of economic news, as attributing responsibility can act as a powerful frame to shape the public understanding of who is responsible for a specific economic issue. However, in a multilevel structure such as the EU, where boundaries between national and supranational levels are often blurred, a phenomenon that tends to be amplified in an economic crisis context and the increasing politicisation of European issues. This paper considers a very specific policy issue, the economic crisis, in three countries: Ireland, Portugal and Spain. Through an in-deep manual content analysis of more than 600 economic articles published in the two daily mainstream newspapers of each country, during 14 national elections held before and after the Great Recession, this paper has two goals. Firstly, to show the politicisation of EU economic issues in Ireland, Portugal and Spain, before and after the crisis. This is important because it focuses concretely on the constitutive policy issue par excellence, which reflects the Eurozone crisis in print media. Secondly, it seeks to understand which actors the national media attribute responsibility to for the economic problem in EU economic articles. The empirical evidence show that the Irish media unequivocally supra-nationalised the responsibility for European economic issues, while in Portugal and Spain the national media presented a trend to nationalise the attribution of responsibility. Moreover,*

*in the southern European countries, national actors tended to prevail on the critical moments of national economy, such as the outbreak of the Eurozone crisis. At the European level, the actors to which the main responsibility was attributed were mainly supranational institutions.*

## INTRODUCTION

Literature widely refers that the attribution of responsibility frame tends to prevail on media coverage of economic news, as attributing responsibility can act as a powerful frame to shape the public understanding of who is responsible for a specific economic issue. However, in a multilevel structure, as the EU, boundaries between national and supranational levels are often blurred, a phenomenon that tends to be amplified in an economic crisis context. This article offers an in-depth look at the attribution of responsibility in national media of Portugal, Spain and Ireland, three debtor countries of the Eurozone crisis. Therefore, this paper aims to answer the following research questions: *to which specific actors do the national media attribute the main responsibility for the economic problem? And To what extent do the mainstream media in Portugal, Spain and Ireland exhibit a convergent pattern?* The presence of specific actors at the expense of others, as well the direction of convergence—*centripetal* or *centrifugal*, may have a substantial impact on the emergence of a European public sphere and helps to overcome the democratic accountability deficit faced by the European Union.

This paper is organised in four main parts. The first presents a brief theoretical introduction on the attribution of responsibility theory in multilevel systems, specifically the role played by national media in the attribution of responsibility and the convergence of European media narratives. Then, the empirical strategy and the codification process used to determine to which actors' mainstream newspapers attributed responsibility for the European economic issues is presented. This section combines the model of clarity of responsibility with the model of communication flows, introduced by the Europeanisation concept. The third part maps in detail the responsibility attribution towards different institutional levels and different actors,

over time and across countries, outlining the opposed and complementary narratives in national mainstream newspapers. Finally, we summarise the main conclusions.

## 1. ATTRIBUTION OF RESPONSIBILITY IN MULTILEVEL SYSTEMS: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Responsibility attribution is a core central feature of modern politics (Weaver, 1986; Gerhards et al. 2007; 2009) and it concerns the attempt to identify what factors give rise to what outcomes (Fiske and Taylor, 2007:134). Besides that, the attribution of responsibility is the act of deciding who or what can be held accountable for certain events (Shaver, 1975,1985; Hobolt and Tilley, 2014a:9). Thus, it is a central component in the study of representative democracy. The classic tradition of democratic accountability is built on the assumption that elections are a sanctioning device in which voters reward or punish incumbents based on past performance (e.g., Key, 1966; Fiorina, 1981; Powell, 2000). Particularly “in periods of economic crisis, as in more normal times, voters have a strong tendency to support any policies that seem to work, and to punish leaders regardless of their ideology when economic growth is slow” (Bartels,2012:50).

The empirical literature on the reward-punishment model has mainly been applied to the performance of the economic arena—the idea of economic voting; this is, voters observe fluctuations in the economy, attribute responsibility for these fluctuations to the incumbent, and vote accordingly. Several studies have shown that economic indicators, objective and subjective, have a significant impact on government support (e.g., Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2007; Bellucci et al., 2012; Lobo and Pannico, 2020). Currently, it is well established that the state of the economy affects voting behaviour: when the government is perceived as being responsible for the economic developments, economic voting is likely to occur (e.g., Powell and Whitten, 1993; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2000; Lewis-Beck, 2006; van der Brug et al. 2007; Duch and Stevenson, 2008; Magalhães, 2014). The argument suggests that the attribution of responsibility is an essential link between economic perceptions and vote choice or governmental approval.

Responsibility attribution has traditionally been structured in domestic politics (Hansson 2017; Weaver 2018); yet, the EU integration and the subsequent political authority exercised at EU-level have introduced new actors to the national public spheres and policymaking arena. Likewise, there is an increase of politicisation of the EU in the arena of mass politics and on national media, as they become more salient and contested (Kriesi et al., 2006; Hooghe and Marks, 2009; Grande and Kriesi, 2016, Silva et al., 2019; MAPLE, 2019).

These changes raise some challenges concerning attribution of responsibility. In short, the problem is the following: when economic developments are attributed to external actors, economic perceptions may matter less for government approval. In turn, voters need to judge which part of economic developments can be attributed to national actors and which part is beyond the government's control. In multilevel government structures and policy areas, in which actors and developments at different levels (regional, national, European and global) can influence economic performance, the act of deciding who or what can be held accountable is complex (Hobolt and Tilley, 2004a). Indeed, in 2012 Lobo and Lewis-Beck showed that the economy has less influence on vote choice when the EU, rather than national actors, is seen as the responsible for the economic situation. Similarly, Bellucci (2014) found that the vote choice in Italy was affected by whether voters attributes the responsibility for the economic crisis to international or domestic actors.

The Eurozone crisis and the subsequent increase of politicisation of European topics created ample opportunities for attribution of responsibility to external EU actors, such as EU institutions or foreign EU member-state governments (Hood, 2011; Gerhards et al., 2013; Rittberger et al., 2017). It also encompassed legitimacy dilemmas for political institutions and actors on both national and European levels. As Habermas (2012:4) wisely argued, during the Eurozone crisis, European governments faced 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 population, on the other.” As result, during the crisis, the political institutions come across with the withdraw of electoral support and the shrinking levels of trust (Braun and Tausendpfund, 2014) and, therefore, the intensification of decision-making scrutiny (Sommer and Roose, 2015).

As aforementioned, accountability requires that voters discern whether governments are acting in their interest and sanction them appropriately (Manin et al., 1990:40). Literature on attribution of responsibility in multilevel systems has shown that the way voters attribute responsibility reflects not merely the institutional divisions of responsibility, but also individual perceptions (Hobolt and Tilley, 2014b). Accordingly, we can distinguish two mechanisms enabling citizens to make sense of who is responsible and properly attribute responsibility.

The first mechanism is *functional responsibility*, and it refers to the obligations that people or institutions are expected to fulfil (Powell and Whitten, 1993). It is related to the institutional context and the way people’s views are shaped by the institutional differences between countries as well by the changing on the economic and political framework. The second mechanism is related to the individual level and concerns the pre-existing attitudes that citizens hold about the institutions and their individual biases. Heider (1958/2013) labelled it *causal responsibility* and one of its main features is the focus on voters’ judgements and how their prior political beliefs, mainly their partisanship, conditioned the causal link of responsibility (Rudolph, 2003). A good illustration of how individual bias might have a strong effect on responsibility judgements was presented by Hobolt and Tilley (2014b) showing that people’s feelings about the EU may act as a cognitive bias in responsibility attribution: individuals who feel closely attached to the EU tend to credit it more when things go well, whereas those who dislike the EU tend to blame it more when things go badly (Hobolt and Tilley, 2014b:54). These two components of attribution of responsibility are closely interrelated, as the attribution of responsibility is the link between institutional actors’ behaviour and the voter’s punishment or rewarding (e.g., Gerhards et al., 2013; Greuter, 2014; Hobolt and Tilley, 2014a; Vassilopoulou et al. 2014).

The way these two mechanisms enable voters to make judgements and attribute responsibility in a multilevel system deeply relies on the information available regarding those actors. The type of information available about the institutions, actors, and policymaking will be employed by the citizens to bring their perceptions about responsibility into line with the actual divisions of institutional government. Therefore, media have the ability to moderate the relationship between the evaluation in actors' performance and the voters' punishment or rewarding. The argument is straightforward. In multilevel systems, the attribution of responsibility relies both on *functional responsibility* (power divisions within institutions and the actors' performance) as well as on *causal responsibility* (individual biases and prior political beliefs). Nevertheless, this relationship should be moderated by the amount and the clarity of the information provided by national media.

### 1.1 The Media as an enabler for a European Media Narrative on Responsibility Attribution

Previous research has suggested that the attribution of responsibility is affected by institutional-level factors, such as the political system or the openness of the economy (Duch and Stevenson, 2008; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2013), and also by individual-level factors, such as personal attitudes and predispositions (de Vries and Giger, 2014). Additionally, it has been shown that the information cues provided by the media—through the amount of media coverage and its clarity—can affect and shape the way responsibility is attributed (Iyengar, 1994; Hobolt et al., 2013; Hobolt and Tilley, 2014b; van Dalen et al., 2019).

When faced with complex economic developments, the media will help citizens assign responsibility, providing shortcuts and cues to the voters' reward and punishing their representatives at the polls, according to their performance. This process occurs in a two-fold

process. On the one hand, media coverage—through the *agenda setting* and *priming*<sup>1</sup>—makes people better informed. This supply of information might lead citizens to attribute responsibility correctly since the individuals are more likely to assign responsibility according to the institutional reality when the higher quality of information about the division of powers is available.

Some studies have endorsed this evidence. At EU-level actors, Hobolt and Tilley (2014a) have shown that when individuals are exposed to high-quality news coverage about the EU, their ability to make more competent judgements about the latter's responsibility increases. De Bruycker and Walgrave (2014) found the same mechanism, showing that the Belgian media associate the Eurozone crisis more with the government parties than with the opposition ones, and that the audience, especially that with higher media exposure, perceived the crisis as an issue owned by the national government. Similarly, at the domestic level, van Dalen et al. (2019) suggested that the more citizens are exposed to domesticated coverage, the more national actors are perceived as responsible for the economic developments. In sum, the rationale is the following: when citizens are exposed to news with a domestic focus, they will associate the economic event with national actors and, consequently, hold them responsible (Shehata and Falasca, 2014); conversely, when the media associate the economic performance with foreign actors, such as the EU, the perceived relevance of the economic situation for National actors' decline (Althaus and Kim, 2006; Hobolt and Tilley, 2014a).

On the other hand, the way mainstream media framed economic events shapes the attribution of responsibility. Assigning the responsibility on the news can act as a powerful frame to shape the public understanding of who is responsible for specific economic issues. Iyengar (1994), in his seminal work "Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues,"

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<sup>1</sup> Priming refers to the process in which the media attend to some issues and not others and thereby alter the standards by which people evaluate candidates and political actors. For more see, Iyengar and Kinder, 1982; Goidel et al., 1997; Severin and Tankard, 1997; Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007.

showed that certain types of frames could inhibit the attribution of responsibility to national actors and reinforce existing predispositions. The main argument is that when citizens are exposed to an article that portrays societal level attributions rather individual level attributions, they are more prone to attribute responsibility to the societal level. Additionally, Iyengar distinguished between *Episodic frames* and *Thematic frames*<sup>2</sup>, arguing that the focus on specific events encourages people to think about responsibility at the individual level. In contrast, the focus in a broader context (the so-called thematic framed news) prompts viewers to hold national governments responsible.

Therefore, the ample evidence on literature suggesting that the “Responsibility” frame prevails on media coverage is not surprising (e.g., Iyengar and Kinder, 1987, Iyengar, 1994; Valkenburg et al., 1999; Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000). In 2000, Semetko and Valkenburg analysed the Dutch media coverage of an EU summit in 1997. They found that the use of attribution of responsibility frame was more commonly used than other generic frames (human interest, conflict, morality and economic consequences). An and Gower (2009), after analysing the coverage of financial markets in 2007, also found a prevalence of responsibility frame, mainly attributed to organisations and individuals. Later, in 2014a, Hobolt and Tilley tried to establish the media coverage to the 2009 EP elections. Resorting to the European Elections Studies, *Media Studies* (ESS, 2009), the authors found that fewer than 2% of the news framed the event in order to attribute the credit or blame to governmental institutions. Moreover, among those 2%, the national media rarely attributed the responsibility to the EU level, tending to assign responsibility to the National actors. Concerning the studies on the attribution of media responsibility to multiple levels of government, so far, the only noteworthy research comes from Maestas et al. (2008). In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 in New Orleans, the authors found that national media tend to attribute responsibility for the inadequate response of the US authorities to federal levels of government, instead of the state government.

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<sup>2</sup> *Episodic frames* take the form of a case study or event-oriented report and depict public issues in terms of concrete instances; *Thematic frames* place public issues in some more general abstract context and are directed at general outcomes or conditions (Iyengar, 1991; Entman, 1993)



In view of this theoretical background, why is it relevant to understand the national media narratives in Portugal, Spain and Ireland concerning attribution of responsibility? The answer to this question seems obvious. The task of attributing the responsibility for the economic event is a crucial ingredient for a healthy and functional representative democracy and for democratic accountability.

This assumption applies both to the national level and to multilevel systems. The act of attributing responsibility is the mechanism that citizens use to punish or reward the political actors on the ground of past performances. Bearing that in mind, they need the national media to provide them with information—in quantity and quality—about the actors involved. This supply of information is particularly relevant in the EU context as it allows to overcome the challenges posed by the blurred boundaries between national and supranational actors when it comes to attributing the responsibility for the European economic topics.

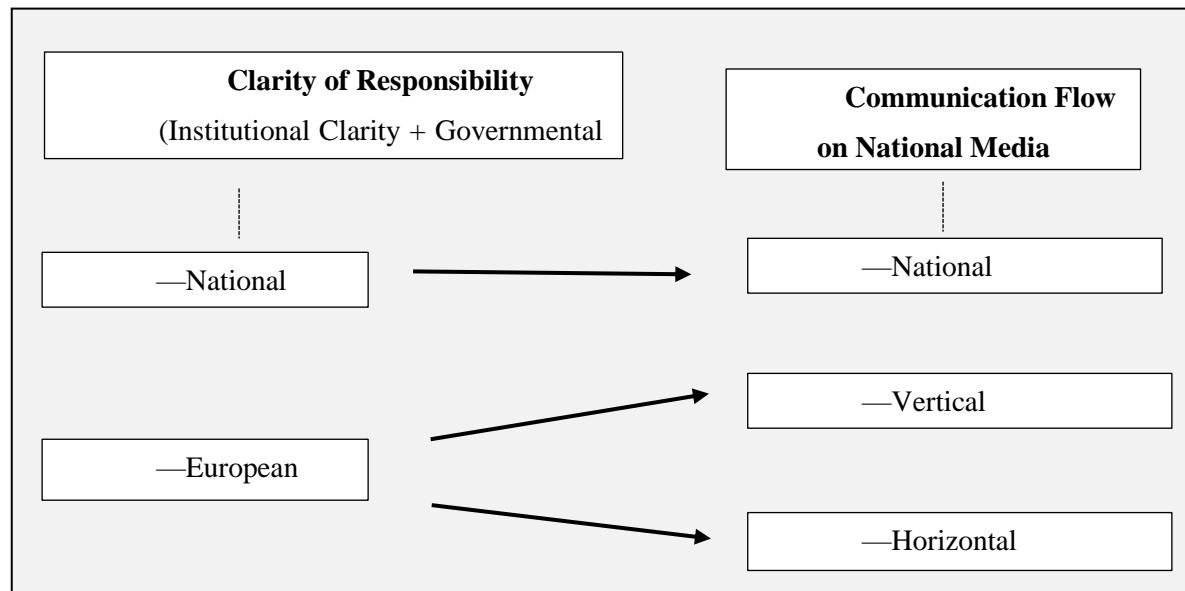
Additionally, in the EU context, there is an extensive debate about the possibility of an emergence of a European public sphere (EPS) and European *demos*. These ambitions tend to clash with critical voices arguing that, given the little public communication on EU topics and the lack of available information on national media to equip individuals to act as competent European citizens, the EU faces a democratic deficit. Herewith, the way national media in Portugal, Spain and Ireland portrays the responsibility for the economic problems, attributing the responsibility to certain actors instead of others, and a possible common view of who is responsible for those problems, might represent a step forward a deepening of European integration.

## 2. ESTABLISHING THE MEDIA NARRATIVE ON ATTRIBUTION OF RESPONSIBILITY: AN EMPIRICAL STRATEGY

Establishing to what extent the mainstream media in Portugal, Spain and Ireland attribute responsibility of the European economic issues to the same actors is not an easy task. In fact, in a multilevel system as the EU context, the boundaries between national and supranational actors are not clearly demarcated, which makes the task to determine who should be attributed the responsibility for the economic event challenging.

This paper tackles this challenge by introducing an empirical framework that seeks to combine the literature on attribution of responsibility and the one on Europeanisation of national public spheres. Hence, firstly we rely on the concept of *functional* responsibility given this study is dealing with an institutional context in which the three debtor countries are embedded. Resorting to the idea of clarity of responsibility, we therefore distinguish between *institutional* and *governmental clarity*. Secondly, we bring to light the Europeanisation concept and the model of communication flow. National public spheres communicate through the national media. The flows of communication among public spheres can assume diverse forms (national, horizontal, vertical) according to the actors addressed and attributed as responsible for the economic problem.

The combination of these two strategies seems the most suitable avenue for the research goal. The clarity of responsibility entails the constellation of actors that operate in a multilevel system, allowing to clarify to which level is the attribution of responsibility. The communication flow stretches this information, giving further evidence about the convergence of narrative in the three debtor countries. Figure 1 illustrates the two inter-complementary avenues chosen for the empirical strategy in this paper. Each of them is further explained in the next sections.

**Figure 1** Empirical Strategy to measure the European Narratives on Attribution of responsibility

Source: Based on Hobolt, Tilley and Banducci (2013) clarity models and Koopmans and Erbe (2004), Statham and Gray (2005), Esser and Pfetsch (2004) and Statham (2007) Europeanisation concept.

## 2.1 Clarity of Responsibility

As established above, to understand the attribution of responsibility, on this paper, we resorted to the *functional* responsibility. By focusing on the institutional context and institutional arrangements (Silva and Whitten, 2017), it intends to establish who should act and “who has the power to alleviate [...] the problem” (Iyengar, 1996:8). In 1993, Powell and Whitten, on their influential work, claimed that in complex institutional set-ups, the responsibility lines are blurred, making it harder to attribute the responsibility for the economic performance. Thus, the concept of clarity of responsibility<sup>3</sup> has a paramount role on the attribution of responsibility theory.

<sup>3</sup> For a systematic literature review of the clarity of responsibility concept, see Silva and Whitten 2017.

In multilevel systems, as federal states or the EU, clarity implies that citizens must be able to distinguish between the responsibilities that pertain to different levels of government, since judging responsibilities becomes “Intrinsically harder as soon as power is divided and authority shared” (Hobolt and Tilley, 2014a: 22). There is a consensus on literature that the institutional design as well the institutions’ boundaries could affect the attribution of responsibility, and thus institutional clarity is required. Powell and Whitten (1993) developed the *clarity of responsibility index*<sup>4</sup> and unveiled that voters easily assign responsibility for the fluctuations in the economy to the incumbent in countries with a single government party, voting accordingly. Afterwards, other authors added various institutional and partisan factors to the index and consubstantiated the need for institutional clarity. Some studies have shown that the formal dispersion of institutional powers makes the attribution of responsibility less prevalent in weak and divided governments—coalitions and minorities—as well in strong legislatures—strong committees and bicameral opposition (e.g., Anderson, 2000; Hellwig and Samuels 2008; Rittberger et al. 2017; Heinkelmann-Wild and Zangl, 2019).

Notwithstanding, the clarity of responsibility index introduced by Powell and Whitten has become very influential and widely used, Hobolt et al. (2013) draw to attention to a shortcoming, arguing that those variables did not capture the dynamic characteristics of the different governments that inhabit the unchanging formal institutions. Thus—to enable citizens to make a clear decision on which level of government is responsible for the outcome and which political actors should be rewarded or punished—the authors argued that besides institutional clarity, clarity of responsibility should also encompass government clarity. Their basic argument is that formal institutions are not the voters’ primary concern, but rather the constitution of governments themselves (Hobolt et al. 2013). So, while the institutional clarity suggests a clear

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<sup>4</sup> The clarity of responsibility index consists of five political variables that capture low clarity of responsibility: opposition control of committee chairs, weak party cohesion, politically significant bicameral opposition, minority governments and number of parties in government. Based on this index, the authors divided countries into less clear responsibility systems (e.g., Germany and Italy) and clear responsibility systems (Britain and the United States). For further information, see Powell and Whitman (1993), and also Hobolt, Tilley and Banducci (2013).

division of powers across levels of government, government clarity implies the ability of voters to identify a political actor to whom they can assign the responsibility and sanction.

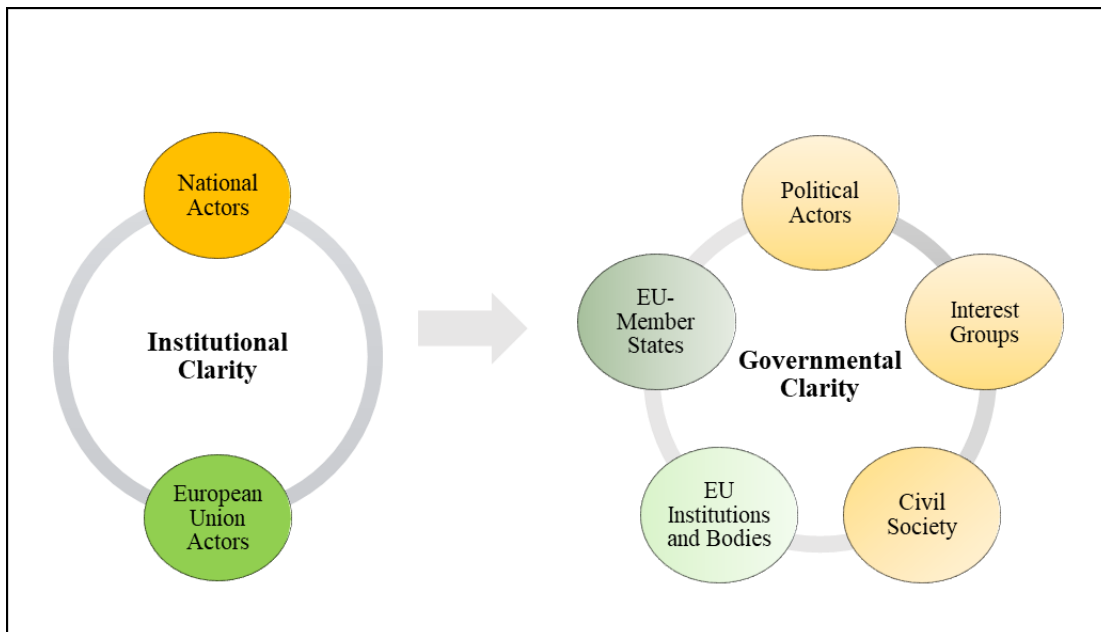
The introduction of the distinction between institutional and government clarity within the clarity of responsibility is particularly relevant in multilevel systems. Hobolt and Tilley (2014a:12) stated that the “attributing responsibility in multilevel systems is a daunting task” since institutional clarity is often blurred, making harder to citizens disentangling which level of government is responsible for the outcome (Anderson, 2006). This awareness is particularly accurate in the EU’s context, as the responsibility for some policy outcomes is shared between national and EU institutions, which may lead to policy outcomes being attributed to either level.

Therefore, to assess the attribution of responsibility on European economic news, we must tackle the complexity of the EU and the institutional arrangements between and within EU institutions and EU member states. Horizontally the executive powers within the EU are shared between the European Commission (supranational body) and the European Council (heads of state and government). In turn, legislative powers are shared between the Council of the EU (national ministers) and the European Parliament (directly elected members). Vertically the divisions of power between the EU and the EU member states are often unclear since most competences overlap between national institutions and EU level (Craig, 2011). This differentiation becomes even harder with the EU’s Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) which, in 1999, established the Eurozone, and later with the economic crisis, when the countries that received bailout funds from the EU transferred higher powers to the EU in some economic areas such as fiscal policy.

Against this background, our empirical framework to establish the media narrative on attribution of responsibility has as a starting point the concept of clarity of responsibility embracing the distinction advanced by Hobolt et al. (2013). Figure 2 illustrates how we combine institutional and governmental clarity on actors’ attribution of responsibility as well as how these

two features are connected. First, we distinguished between national actors and EU actors, in order to differentiate the level of government that is responsible for the economic problem (the *institutional clarity*). Then, we extricated national actors, as well EU actors, both horizontally as vertically, to allow to determine the attribution of responsibility to a specific actor (*governmental clarity*).

**Figure 2** Institutional and governmental clarity on actors' attribution of responsibility



Source: Based on Hobolt, Tilley and Banducci (2013) clarity of responsibility's model

## 2.2 Communication Flow

Besides the clarity of responsibility, the empirical framework of this paper also relies on the conceptual model of Europeanisation of the national public spheres. This model distinguished four underlying communicative flows: the *vertical* communication, the *horizontal* communication, the *national* communication and the *supranational* communication (Koopmans and Erbe 2004; Statham and Gray, 2005; Statham, 2007; Esser and Pfetsch 2004; Koopmans and Pfetsch 2007). In a nutshell, each of these communication flow reflects a different degree of

Europeanization. The vertical communication refers to the communication flow between actors from two different political levels—national and supranational—either top-down (from the EU to national level) or bottom-up (from national level to the EU level). It is an open communication because it transcends the national boundaries of the national public sphere and conveys visibility to EU topics and actors. The horizontal communication also transcends the national boundaries. However, it comprises the communication flow at the same political level as it happens when a national actor—European country—refers to its counterpart from another European country. The national communication only occurs within its own country, but national actors should discuss a European issue or address a European actor. The supranational communication takes place within the EU level—communications—i.e., two European actors discussing a European topic in a European media.

For the purpose of this paper, we circumscribe the conceptual model of the Europeanisation process to the three flows of communication described above, disregarding supranational communication. This decision lies in two main reasons. First, our sample consists of all European economic news published by national newspapers and, thus, the presence of both national and European actors is expected. Second, we are dealing with national media that operate on national public spheres. In this context, there are no purely supranational communications.

Consequently, and connecting with the clarity of responsibility framework, we divided the responsible actors in two main groups: National actors and European actors. Within European actors, we differentiated between EU Institutions and Bodies from EU member states. This division reflects the three levels of Europeanisation - 1) *national communication*; 2) *vertical communication*; 3) *horizontal communication*—and provides us with complementary information regarding not only the attribution of responsibility but also the degree of the Europeanisation process. Additionally, it allows to capture, on the one hand, the national or European communication flow, establishing to what extent the national media assign the

responsibility for the European economic problems to national or European actors. On the other hand, disentangling the European Institutions and Bodies from the European Countries proved to be necessary. A primary responsibility addressed to the European institutional level might indicate the devotion to the idea of Europe as a community of solidarity among members. In contrast, holding the individual European countries responsible for the European economic issues could be a step backwards on European integration and the emergence of an EPS. Table 1 exemplifies the different types of communication flows that can be identified in national newspapers of Portugal, Spain and Ireland concerning the attribution of responsibility.



**Table 1** Example of the type of communication flow and the attribution of responsibility

Communication Flow	Main Attribution of Responsibility	Example
National Communication	National media assign responsibility for the European economic issue to <b>national actors</b> .	<i>Las entidades españolas conceden los tipos de interés hipotecarios más bajos de Europa. Pero no así en el caso de los préstamos al consumo o de los descubiertos en cuenta que aplican a sus clientes.</i> (El Mundo 2004)
Vertical Communication	National media assign responsibility for the European economic issue to the <b>EU Institutions and Bodies</b> .	<i>The ECB is making a good first of a bad job (one size fits all), and the exploding money supply is a real inflation threat TODAY will contain quite a little symbolism, as the European Central Bank announces a rise in interest rates in Dublin, two weeks before an Irish general election.</i> (Irish Independent 2007)
Horizontal Communication	National media assign responsibility for the European economic issue to the <b>other EU member</b> .	<i>Crise da dívida volta a ameaçar maiores economias da periferia da zona euro. As incertezas que pesam sobre a capacidade da Grécia cumprir as medidas de austeridade e as privatizações previstas do seu programa de assistência financeira, a par da cacofonia europeia sobre o que fazer da sua dívida, correm o risco de voltar a agravar a crise do euro e contagiar a Espanha, a Bélgica e a Itália.</i> (Público 2011)

### 2.3 Coding Scheme

A sample of 670 European economic articles was taken from two mainstream newspapers of each country (Público, Diário de Notícias, El Mundo, El País, The Irish Independent and The Irish Times) published during the electoral campaign to 14 national elections in Portugal, Spain and Ireland, before

and after the Eurozone crisis, to further understanding the actors who were considered the main responsible for the European economic issues.

In 2000, Semetko and Valkenburg introduced a new framing measurement on the attribution of responsibility that aimed to capture if a specific issue or problem was framed in such way to assign responsibility to the government or an individual or group. Notwithstanding, this being a widely mentioned study and having set the ground for a new research agenda on framing responsibility analysis, the items used by the authors to measure the attribution of responsibility were too broad. The authors' understanding of the concept of attribution of responsibility comprises not only who was responsible for the problem but also who is responsible for a solution. Given that our empirical framework is only concerned with the attribution of responsibility the typology proposed by the authors is not suitable for our research goal. Besides, the focus of the items introduced by Valkenburg and Semetko were circumscribed to the national level, disregarding the supranational dimension. Consequently, at the domestic level, we adopted a typology from previous studies, which analyses the relationship between interest groups and media (Thrall, 2006; Tresch and Fischer, 2015; Hanggli, 2012; Koopmans and Pfetsch, 2007; Binderkrantz, 2012) as well as from the LIVEWHAT EU-FP7 (2013–2016) project and the Monza (2019) research on dominant discourse in media during the Eurozone crisis. At the European level, we partially resorted to “The Euro Crisis, Media Coverage, and Perception of Europe within the EU” (2015) project, especially the codebook concerning which actors should bear the primary responsibility to solve the problem, and also Kepplinger, Kohler and Post's (2015) study on the dominant views regarding responses to the crisis.

National actors were organised in three main groups: 1) *National Political Actor* 2) *Interest Groups* and 3) *Civil Society*. This classification criterion might seem rather simplistic; however, it illustrates the main branches of National actors that play a crucial role in the national public sphere. Adopting this typology is pertinent to this research because it reveals the responsibility that different types of national actors have for national media, according to their role in society. The first group represents the core of the political system and consists of state and party actors; the second group includes interest groups that have a crucial role on economic questions and tend to be mentioned by media; lastly, the third group corresponds to civil society actors, mainly at a micro-level, such as national citizens (Table 2).

**Table 2** Typology of National actors

<b>Political Actors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>—State Actors</li> <li>—Political Parties</li> </ul>	Executive, legislative, judiciary economic
<b>Interest Groups</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>—Market and Finances</li> <li>—Companies</li> <li>—Labour</li> </ul>	Market, banks, and credit agencies  Private Companies and Employers  Unions, Workers and other work-related
<b>Civil Society</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>—National Citizens</li> <li>—Social Movements</li> </ul>	Anti-austerity and occupy movements, reclaim initiatives, right-wing extremist, radical left-wing

Source: Adapted from LIVEWHAT EU-FP7 (2013–2016) project and Monza (2019)

In turn, European actors were divided into *EU Institutions and Bodies* and *EU member states*. The European Institutions and Bodies were organised according to information provided in the official EU website<sup>5</sup> and included a total of 14 official agencies. However, the codification process unveiled that solely eight were mentioned on national media: 1) *European Parliament (EP)* 2) *European Council* 3) *Council of the EU* 4) *European Commission (EC)* 5) *European Central Bank (ECB)* 6) *Court of Justice of the EU* 7) *European Investment Bank*; 8) *European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)*. Therefore, our analysis only comprises these institutions and European bodies. Additionally, we added a ninth variable, the so-called 9) *TROIKA*, as after the crisis it was particularly dominant on the national public sphere of the three debtor countries.

However, the EU is a peculiar and complex political organization with an institutional system that operates through supranational and intergovernmental institutions. Actually, it is often recognized that the EU is a unique political system with mixed characteristics of an international organization, state, superstate and federation of states (Heywood, 2011) and, thus, known by the complex interactions between multiple actors occurring within various levels of governance—the so-called multi-level governance. In this sense, the dimension of the EU's Institutions and Bodies is also divided into 1) *intergovernmental institutions* and 2) *supranational institutions* (Table .3)

<sup>5</sup> [https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/institutions-bodies\\_en](https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/institutions-bodies_en)

Regarding European members—states, the codebook includes all EU member states, however, once again, during the codification only six countries were referred as responsible for the economic problem: 1) *Germany* 2) *Greece* 3) *France* 4) *Spain* 5) *Italy* 6) *Portugal*. Respecting the theoretical model of Europeanisation, the codification of EU member states occurs when national media referred another country has been responsible for the European economic issue<sup>6</sup>.

**Table 3** Typology of EU actors

<b>European Institutions</b>	<b><i>Supranational Institutions</i></b>	<b>European bodies</b>	<b>Other*</b>		
	—European Parliament			—European Investment Bank	—TROIKA (European Commission, European Central Bank, IMF)
	—European Commission			—European Economic and Social Committee	
	—Court of Justice of the EU				
	—European Central Bank				
	<b><i>Intergovernmental Institutions</i></b>				
	—European Council				
	—Council of the EU				

*\*TROIKA is only present from 2011 onwards. It encompasses the IMF, the ECB and the European Commission.*  
*Source: Adapted from “The Euro Crisis, Media Coverage, and Perception of Europe within the EU” (2015) project and Keppinger, Kohler and Post (2015)*

The coding scheme adopted was straightforward. To each dimension—National, EU Institutions and Bodies and EU member states—a dichotomous code (“yes” = 1 or “no” =0) was given to answer the following questions, “Does the article suggest that National actors are responsible for the economic question?”, “Does the article suggest that European Institutions and Bodies are the main responsible for

<sup>6</sup> When national media assign responsibility to their own countries, the responsibility must have to be coded has been assigned to national actors.

*the economic question?*” “*Does the article suggest that European countries are the main responsible for the economic question?*” The items were mutually exclusive, given that only one definite answer was allowed in order to capture the main actor that national media made accountable for economic issues. If the answer was “yes,” a list of the specific actors of that dimension was provided, and the actor responsible was coded.

To test the methodological reliability of our data, we conducted an intra-rated reliability test and, thus, a random 10% subsample was recoded two months after the initial coding. Besides that, an instructed research assistant was recruited in order to ensure the inter-coder reliability of another 10% random sample. Overall, both reliability tests showed a satisfactory Krippendorff score ranging from  $\alpha = 0.83$  to  $\alpha = 1.00$ . The Krippendorff’s alpha was low in only one case- the inter-code of national actors— with 0.78. This is a modest, but still acceptable degree of reliability that does not jeopardise the validity of the results, especially because the intra-code reliability of national actors was 0.89<sup>7</sup>.

### 3. MAPPING THE ATTRIBUTION OF RESPONSIBILITY

The analysis of the following data should always keep two elements—one methodological and one substantive. From a methodological point, we did not differentiate the six mainstream newspapers. Instead of analysing and presenting the results by newspaper, we decided to aggregate the two newspapers in each country. This methodological decision emerges a result of our research goal: our main interest is to understand how national media attributed responsibility for the European economic issues— which level and which actors are held responsible—rather than establishing which differences can be found within newspapers. From a substantive perspective, the attribution of responsibility to specific actors refers to a European economic problem and not only to the economic crisis, recession or austerity. We might, however, expect a European bias in the period after the crisis, given the strengthening role of supranational actors on national public spheres in the most critically affected countries (e.g., Hobolt and Tilley, 2014b; Kepplinger et al., 2015; Monza, 2019; Sommer, 2020; Heinkelmann-Wild et al., 2020). This assumption does not mean that the remaining actors must be disregarded. Effectively, national actors

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<sup>7</sup> Detailed information is given on Appendix E.

were also critical amid the economic crisis context, by assuming a leading role on the implementation of austerity measures and being responsible for the social, political and economic issues addressed within European economic articles (e.g., Nienstedt, et al. 2015; Hubé, Salgado and Puustinen, 2015; Monza and Anduiza, 2016; Monza 2019).

The following analysis maps the attribution of responsibility to different institutional levels and different actors, tracing opposed and complementary narratives in the mainstream newspapers of Portugal, Spain and Ireland. First, we present an overview of the two periods analysed—before and after the Eurozone crisis. Then, we trace the attribution of responsibility in detail and over time by looking at each national election from 2002 to 2016 in Portugal, Spain and Ireland; finally, we highlight the analysis of the year 2011, which is particularly relevant to our analysis since it was the outbreak of the Eurozone crisis in the three debtor countries selected. Furthermore, 2011 is the only year in which there were *simultaneous* national elections in Portugal, Spain and Ireland<sup>8</sup>.

### 3.1 Who was considered the main responsible, before and after the crisis?

Regarding the actors' composition, both before and after the crisis, EU Institutions and Bodies are undoubtedly the majority type throughout the two periods (Table 4).

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<sup>8</sup> In this case, simultaneous does not mean that national elections were held at the same time, rather than Portugal, Spain and Ireland faced a legislative election in the same year.

**Table 4** Share correspondent to types of actors in national media by country, before and after the Eurozone crisis

		Actors																				
		Before the Eurozone Crisis (2002–2009)																				
		<i>Political Actors</i>	<i>Interest Groups</i>	<i>Civil Society</i>	<b><i>National</i></b>	<i>European Parliament</i>	<i>European Council</i>	<i>Council of the EU</i>	<i>European Commission</i>	<i>ECB</i>	<i>Court of Justice of the</i>	<i>European Investment</i>	<i>EESC</i>	<b><i>EU Institutions and</i></b>	<b><i>Rodries</i></b>	<i>Germany</i>	<i>Greece</i>	<i>France</i>	<i>Spain</i>	<i>Portugal</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<b><i>EU Countries</i></b>
<b>Portugal</b>		9	8	3	<b>0</b>	1			6	2			<b>8</b>		7				3			
<b>Spain</b>		0	9	1	<b>8</b>				5	7			<b>4</b>		7		3					
<b>Ireland</b>		0	8	2	<b>1</b>	3			3	9			<b>2</b>		0		0			0		
<b>Total%</b>		3	4	3	<b>8</b>	0			5	7			<b>3</b>		7		9					

Actors

After the Eurozone Crisis (2011–2016)

	<i>Political Actors</i>	<i>Interest Groups</i>	<i>Civil Society</i>	<b>National</b>	<i>European Parliament</i>	<i>European Council</i>	<i>Council of the EU</i>	<i>European Commission</i>	<i>ECB</i>	<i>Court of Justice of the</i>	<i>European Investment</i>	<i>EESC</i>	<i>TROIKA</i>	<b><i>EU Institutions and</i></b>	<i>Germany</i>	<i>Greece</i>	<i>France</i>	<i>Spain</i>	<i>Portugal</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<b><i>EU Countries</i></b>
<b>Portugal</b>	3	3		<b>4</b>			1	6					3	<b>3</b>	8	5	7				<b>3</b>
<b>Spain</b>	8	6	6	<b>8</b>			5	2					6	<b>2</b>	4	9	6		4		<b>0</b>
<b>Ireland</b>	2	1		<b>3</b>			3	2					8	<b>6</b>	3	9	4		9		<b>1</b>
<b>Total %</b>	5	5	0	<b>8</b>			7	1					4	<b>1</b>	4	6	5		7	5	<b>1</b>

*Values in Percentages*



Given that our sample is the economic news in which the EU was present, these results are not surprising. If we narrow the analysis, we can observe that, before the crisis, the EC (45%) as well as the ECB (37%) is the European actors with more attributed responsibility for the European economic problem. These results are entirely justified. On the one hand, we are dealing with economic issues; on the other hand, these two institutions assumed the role of economic policymakers in the EMU context (Von Hagen and Mundschenk, 2002; Kaltenthaler, 2006; Schmidt, 2016). Nevertheless, after the crisis, both institutions exhibit a decrease on responsibility attribution as a result of TROIKA's presence (44%). In sum, both before as after the crisis, from the constellation of the available European actors, the national media tend to assign the responsibility of the European economic issues to actors playing a fundamental role in EU monetary decision-making process, disregarding those directly chosen by European citizens. In fact, the EP presents a residual value, particularly after the crisis (2%), having decreased 8 percent points compared to the previous period. Although we can validate these results through our timeframe—the electoral campaign to the national election in each country—the low responsibility attributed to the EP (the only European institution directly elected by the European citizens) expands the arguments that claim the EU faces a democratic deficit (e.g., Norris, 1997). By strengthening the gap between the EU decision-making elites and citizens, it reinforces the idea that the European citizens do not feel adequately represented by the European members of Parliament (Hänggi, 2017; Crum, 2018; Kratochvíl and Sychra, 2019).

Moving to the National actors' level, the percentage of responsibility attributed at the national level remains stable across periods (38%), with an unquestionable prevalence of political actors, far ahead of the interest groups and the civil society. However, after the crisis, the responsibility attributed to core political actors is amplified 12 percent points and, concurrently, the responsibility towards the interest groups decreases around 9 percent points. These patterns can be interpreted according to three premises.

First, we are looking at the national campaign to the national elections. As a result, political actors tend to be more salient in national media and, therefore, blamed more widely for the European economic issues than other national actors. Second, political actors, in particular national governments, were in charge of negotiating and imposing austerity measures in each country. Thus, during the electoral campaign, the national media tend to assign responsibility for the economic performance to national

political actors. Third, the decrease of responsibility towards interest groups lies on the fact that the private companies have suffered, along with citizens, the economic cuts and the austerity measures. It is also relevant to stress that the civil society displays quite low percentage of responsibility for the economic problem in both periods (13% before and 10% after). Moreover, it seems to be a longitudinal agreement in national media that national citizens or social movements have a residual impact on national economy, whereby it does not make sense to make them responsible for the economic problem.

We gain a new perspective by looking at the share of responsibility granted to EU member states. Before the crisis, data mirror the power relations within the EU, reproducing the narrative that Germany and France dictated the European economic policy (Becker et al., 2016). As a consequence of the arrangement between Merkel and Sarkozy for the sustainability of the Barroso's Commission, in the face of the great enlargement<sup>9</sup>, the narrative of the Franco-German axis as one of the pillars of the European integration was widespread by the national media (Schon-Quinlivan and Scipioni, 2017). More recently, despite the divergent economic trajectories concerning France and Germany, the election of Macron as President in May 2017 increased the likelihood of restoration of a greater political unity between these two countries (Parker and Tsarouhas, 2018).

Notwithstanding, in the after-crisis period, responsibility attributed to the EU countries by the national media is no longer restricted to Germany and France, exhibiting the data a more considerable variation. The new pattern reflects the context of the economic crisis that the Eurozone faced but also the increase of polarisation on the national media (Silva et al., 2019). Therefore, the responsibility of the European economic issues is mainly orientated for the two main protagonists of the crisis: on the one hand, we have the leading creditor country—Germany (24%), and on the other hand, the infamous debtor country—Greece (26%). It should be noted that of the three countries analysed (Portugal, Spain and Ireland), only Portugal has a significant percentage of responsibility attributed by the mainstream media of the other countries (17% against 2% of Spain and 0% of Ireland). Additionally, 15% of responsibility attributed to Italy may reflect not only the growing pressure of the Italian markets experienced since November 2011 (Italia had to pay 10-year bonds with an interest of 6.7%), but also the resignation of

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<sup>9</sup> In just three years (2004–2007), 12 new member states joined the European Union.

Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi in November, after losing a vote in Parliament (Magalhães, 2014; Bellucci, 2014).

The analysis of each country provides us with valuable information on how the mainstream newspapers of Portugal, Spain and Ireland attributed responsibility to the different actors, and some relevant differences are worth being signalised.

Irish newspapers tend to assign responsibility in a remarkably different fashion when compared with media of the two southern European countries. Both before and after the crisis, the proportion of responsibility assigned to national actors by the Irish media is significantly lower (around 20% in the two periods) than the one exhibited by the Portuguese and Spanish media. In turn, the responsibility attributed by Irish newspapers to European institutions and bodies exhibits the highest value of our sample in both periods (72% before and 66% after the crisis). Despite the decrease of 8 percent points on responsibility attributed in the after-crisis period, data shows an increase of the responsibility credited to the EU countries, which strengthens the trend of Irish media to contempt the responsibility at the national level and place the accountability of European economic issues mainly at the supranational level.

Regarding the specific actors of EU Institutions and Bodies, before the crisis the three countries tend to converge in assigning responsibility to the European Commission and the ECB: yet, after the crisis, this pattern change, exhibiting some variation among countries. The mainstream newspapers in Portugal and Ireland undoubtedly primarily attribute the responsibility to TROIKA (63% in Portuguese newspapers and 48% in Irish newspapers) and then to the ECB and to the European Commission. In contrast, the Spanish media present the lowest value of responsibility attributed to TROIKA (26%), which can be justified by the way the Spanish government presented the austerity measures. Unlike Portugal and Ireland, Spain never officially received a bailout. The rescue package granted to Spain was earmarked for a bank recapitalisation fund and did not include financial support for the government itself (Buendía, 2018b). Therefore, the leading actor on Spanish financial crisis is the ECB itself (32%) and not TROIKA.

The responsibility attributed to EU countries also displays differences over time and across national media. Data exhibit a convergence between the Portuguese, Spanish and Irish media in what concerns blaming Germany for the European economic issues before the crisis. However, after the crisis, only Ireland keeps the same pattern: the two southern European countries tend to assign more responsibility for the economic problem to Greece—a debtor country (29% in Spain and 55% in Portugal)—then to Germany a creditor country (14% in Spain and 18% in Portugal). Additionally, when we look at the responsibility attributed to the three countries under analysis, some pieces of evidence are worth to note. First, before the crisis, Spain is the country to which the responsibility is mostly attributed, particularly by the Portuguese media (around 33%). Second, both before as after, the Irish media attribute most of the responsibility to Portugal. Furthermore, taking the two periods together, Portugal appears as the country with the highest attribution of responsibility—around 63% against 38% of Spain. Third, neither Portuguese nor Spanish national newspapers tend to assign responsibility to Ireland for any European economic issue.

At the national level, the patterns exposed previously remain: the national media of Portugal, Spain and Ireland overtly attribute more responsibility to political actors and less to civil society, and this trend is consistent both before and after the crisis.

### 3.2 The Elections Matters

The data presented in this initial overview delivered us an excellent snapshot of how the national media in the three debtor countries attributed responsibility for the European economic issues, by capturing the different dynamics that underlie national newspapers before and after the crisis and establishing the main actors responsible for the economic problem. Nevertheless, results are compartmented in the two periods under analysis and, therefore, several unsettled questions concerning the attribution of responsibility remain unanswered.

As explained at the beginning of this paper, the literature on the attribution of responsibility states that the attribution of responsibility for an economic event is a shortcut for citizens so as to be able to

punish or reward political parties in upcoming elections (e.g., Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2007; Bellucci, Lobo and Lewis-Beck, 2012). Moreover, it states that in times of crisis, and in multilevel context, it is even harder to distinguish between who has the credit or who is to blame for the economic issue (e.g., Hobolt and Tilley, 2014b; Heinkelmann-Wild and Rittberger, 2020). Therefore, we must answer questions such as “Does the responsibility attributed to certain actors by mainstream media varies according to the election year?” or “Does the mainstream media presents cross-country differences in the convergence direction over the years? ‘

To address these questions, we map in detail how national newspapers attributed the responsibility for European economic issues in each national election from 2002 to 2016, in Portugal, Spain and Ireland.

It is pertinent to reinforce, however, that our timeframe includes national elections in each country. This implies that the years of elections analysed are not synchronous given they did not happen at the same time in all three countries. Nevertheless, this should not be seen as a shortcoming of this study, but rather as a novelty. Although the election years are not simultaneous in the three countries, the choice for the period under analysis represents the same political time, since we analysed the economic news published in fifteen days before each national election, in all six newspapers.

Regarding the first question—*Does the responsibility attributed to certain actors by mainstream media vary according to the election year?*— a close-up picture of the attribution of responsibility to different actors by-election year (Figure 3) reveals that the degree of responsibility granted to specific actors varied according to the election year, even though Portugal, Spain and Ireland presented different paths. The longitudinal patterns drawn by the data illustrate how distant the national media in three countries are in assigning responsibility for European economic issues.

In Portugal, from 2005 onwards, the responsibility attributed to EU Institutions and Bodies traced a downward trend, particularly in contrast to the 2002 national elections. The 88% responsibility reached in 2002 by EU Institutions and Bodies is not unexpected as 2002 represents the Euro introduction as

common currency in 12 EU countries, including Portugal. It is also not surprising that this trend is concomitant by an upward trend of the responsibility attributed to national actors, which peaked in 2011 (69%), when the crisis fully hit Portuguese economy and austerity measures were imposed. However, the low percentage of responsibility attributed to EU Institutions and Bodies in 2011 is unexpected. The data shows that 2011 was the election year displaying the lowest responsibility to these actors (25%) from our entire sample concerning Portuguese newspapers.

Given it was a foreign actor—TROIKA—that imposed the austerity measures, we could expect a shared responsibility between national actors and European Institutions and Bodies. However, only in 2015, in the aftermath of the crisis, the national media tended to more equally share responsibility for economic issues between the national and European actors. We must also stress that from 2011 onwards, the responsibility attributed to the other EU countries tended to grow, being especially notable the 10% of 2011 and 18% of 2015, especially when compared with the absence of responsibility attributed in the previous election year.

By contrast, Spanish newspapers are not as consistent as the Portuguese ones in assigning responsibility for the economic issues to a specific actor, exhibiting a greater variation over time. In fact, in 2008 there is a peak of responsibility attributed to EU actors (around 76%). It is not entirely clear what can justify this peak. Nevertheless, our hint is this proportion of responsibility attributed to actors of EU Institutions and Bodies might be linked to the beginning of the European sovereign debt crisis and the collapse of Iceland's banking system.

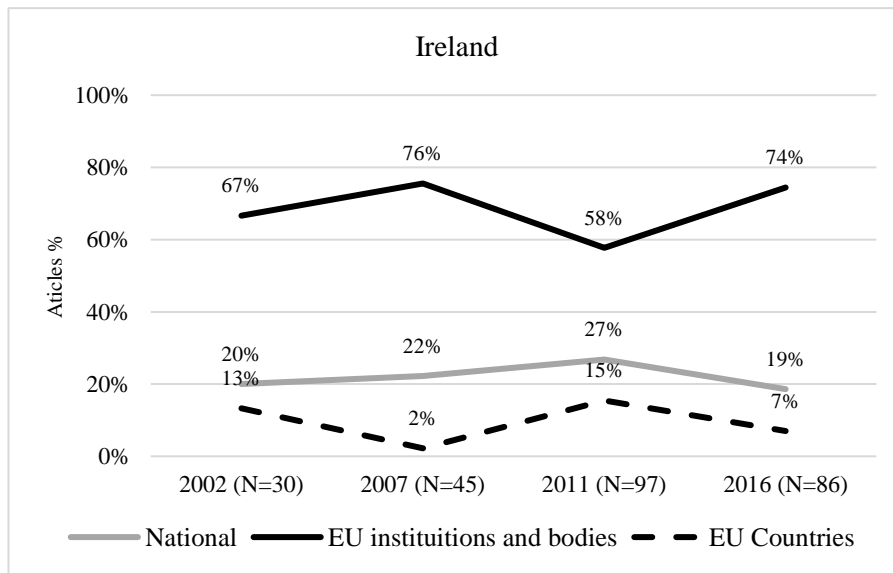
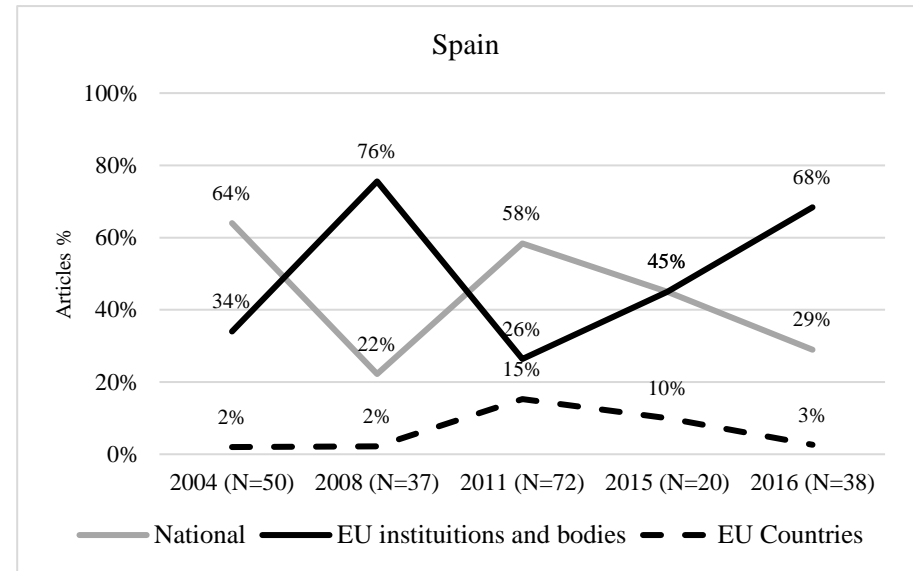
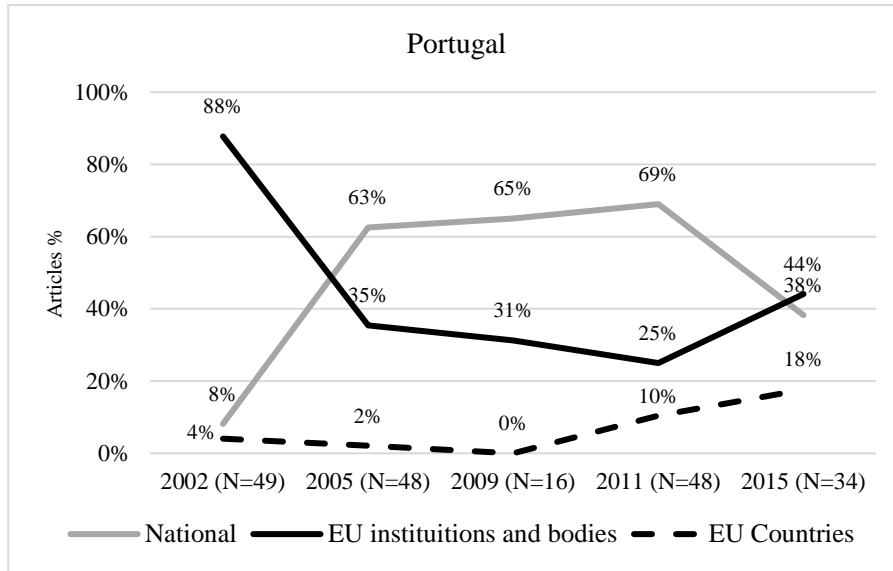
However, the results illustrate a different scenario in 2015. There is an undeniable share of responsibility between EU Institutions and Bodies and National actors, both presenting 45% of the responsibility for the European economic issues. Only six months after, the picture changes again. In 2016 the percentage of responsibility attributed to national actors decreased, exhibiting a difference of 15 percent points, while the responsibility granted to EU Institutions and Bodies tend to upward almost 25 percent points. Concomitant with the Portuguese pattern, the 2011 election in Spain was marked by the lowest percentage of responsibility attributed to EU Institutions and Bodies. Although the responsibility attributed to national actors in 2011 display the most notable increase of the whole period in analysis, the

values concerning responsibility remain too far from those obtained in 2004, year in which national actors were held responsible for 64% of European economic news. Alike the Portuguese case, the 2011 election in Spain also revealed the most significant percentage of responsibility attributed to EU countries by national newspapers. Yet, from 2011 onwards, a pattern of downward of responsibility attributed to EU member-states remains stable and constant in the subsequent elections.

From the three debtor countries analysed, the way Irish national newspapers attributed responsibility is by far the most distinctive. Portugal and Spain, to a greater or lesser degree, presented some variation over the election year, on which actors should be held responsible for the economic issue. Ireland does not present a variation between the different actors, but one on the percentage of responsibility attributed to each specific level.

This evidence means that actors from EU Institutions and Bodies were, undoubtedly, the ones to whom responsibility was attributed in greater length, regardless the election year (ranging from 67% in 2002 and 74% in 2016). In turn, the amount of responsibility granted to national actors was systematically low, only slightly faded in 2011, year in which the EU Institutions and Bodies exhibited their lowest value of responsibility attributed (58%), and national actors the highest percentage of responsibility (27%). Likewise, in 2011, EU countries presented the peak proportion of responsibility attributed by Irish newspapers, even though they recorded a difference of almost 10 percent points in 2016. In fact, in 2016, Irish newspapers return to the previous pattern, assigning responsibility for the European economic issues to EU Institutions and Bodies in more than 70% of the articles, while the responsibility attributed to national actors recorded the lowest number of the whole election years (19%).

**Figure 2** Attribution of Responsibility Over an Election Year and Country



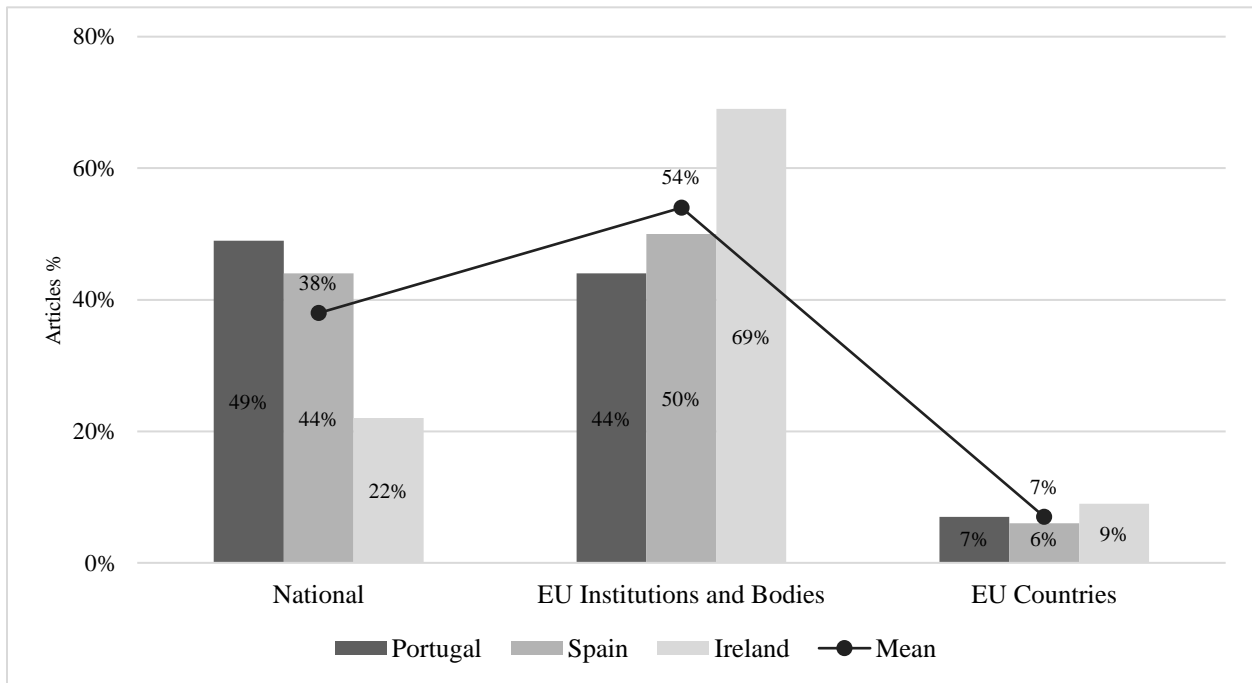


Concerning the second question—*Does mainstream media present cross-country differences in the convergence direction over the years?*—the evidence presented seems to point to a not clear convergent narrative regarding the attribution of responsibility for European economic issues concerning the national media from Portugal, Spain and Ireland. Nevertheless, the year 2011 appears as an exception to this trend. The aggregated data from the Portuguese, Spanish and Irish media show that national newspapers tended to, notoriously, assign more responsibility to national actors than to supranational actors, whether considering EU Institutions and Bodies or EU member countries, even though the latter had exhibited a slight increase of responsibility in 2011. Therefore, to better understand the exceptionality of 2011, we present, in the next section, a further analysis. However, before that, we must look at the direction of the convergence.

An aggregate analysis of the average value of the attribution of responsibility in national media across countries (Figure 4) shows evidence that newspapers from the two southern European countries—Portugal and Spain—present a much more similar narrative in assigning responsibility than Irish newspapers. Two main results substantiate this statement. First, in Portugal and Spain, there is clear domestication of the attribution of responsibility. National actors are the most targeted ones when newspapers attributed responsibility: both countries (Portugal 49% and Spain 44%) present values way above the average percentage of national actors (38%). Second, in Ireland, the data illustrates that the attribution of responsibility is unequivocally supranationalised, as *around* 69% of the economic articles attribute responsibility to actors from EU Institutions and Bodies, and 9% to the EU countries. In both cases, the values presented by Irish newspapers are higher than the average value of each actor and significantly higher than those given by Portuguese and Spanish national media.

Additionally, Ireland distances itself from the two southern European countries as it presents an attribution of responsibility less poised. Regardless the tendency exhibited by mainstream media in Portugal and Spain to domesticate the responsibility for economic issues, the values displayed by them (Portugal, 44% and Spain 50%) on EU Institutions and Bodies' attribution of responsibility are close to the average (54%). Contrariwise, the values shown by Ireland concerning the responsibility of national actors (22%) are relatively low, especially when compared to Portugal and Spain, and, furthermore, are very apart from the overall percentage of this actor (38%).

**Figure 3** Average values of attribution of responsibility in national media, in Portugal Spain and Ireland’s national media

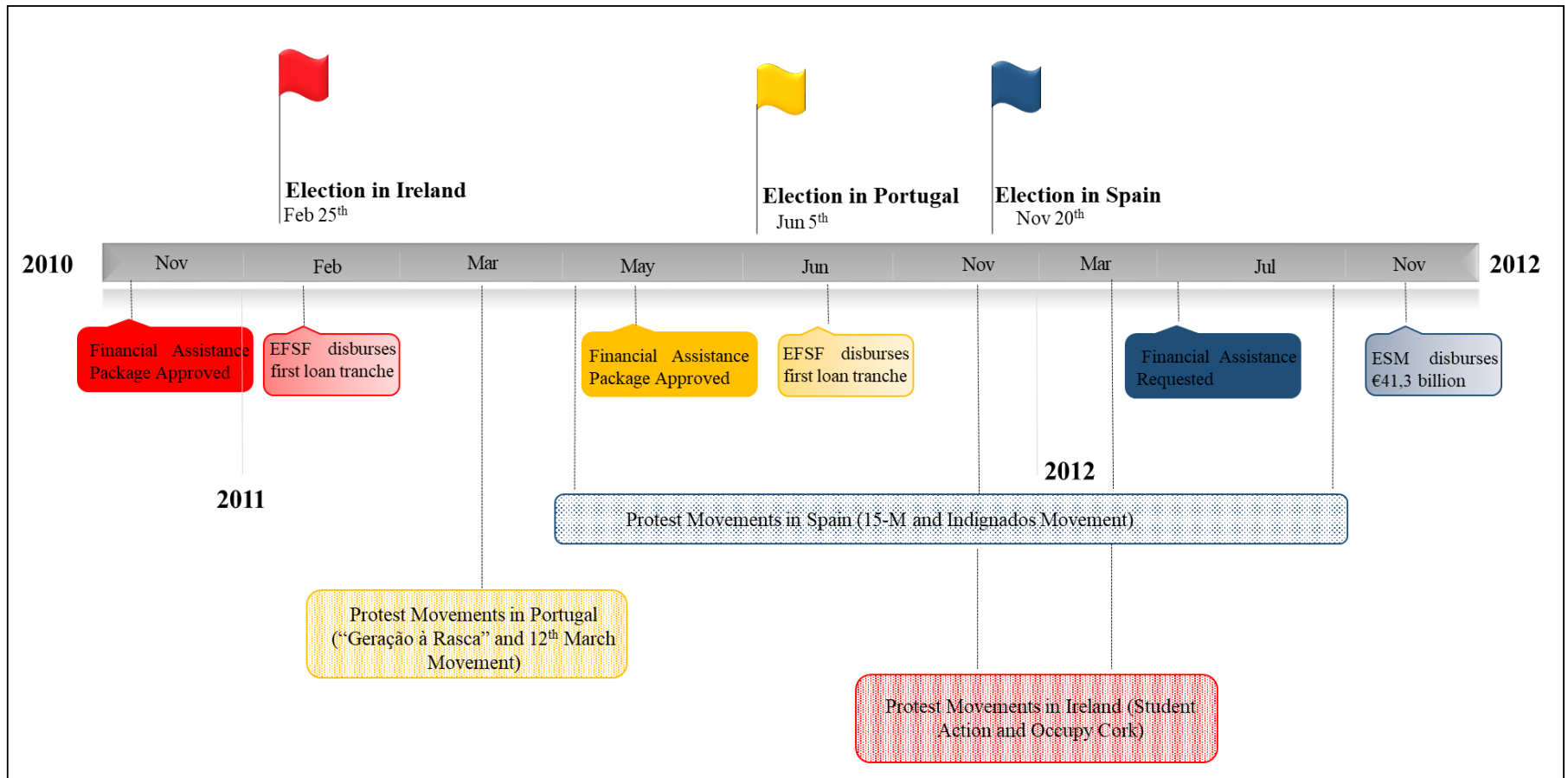


### 3.3 2011: The eye of the storm

The last part of the attribution of responsibility’s analysis illustrates which specific actors were considered the responsible for the economic issues in 2011. As illustrated in Figure 5, an in-depth analysis of this year is pertinent for three main reasons. First, 2011 represents the only year in which national elections were held in the same period in Portugal, Spain and Ireland. Even though they did not take place at the same time, the gap between each election does not surpass the five months—in Ireland, the election took place on February 25th, in Portugal on June 5th and in Spain on November 20th. Second, in 2011 the three debtor countries were, to a lesser or greater extent, hit by the Eurozone crisis. Although the austerity measures vary from country to country and the moment in which each country started the external assistance program is not the same, 2011 represents the axis that connects the economic storm that affected Portugal, Spain and Ireland. Third, and as aforementioned, 2011 was the only year in which the three countries presented a similar pattern on the attribution of responsibility for European economic issues: a significant increase among national actors and a substantial downward on EU Institutions and

Bodies' actors. Therefore, it becomes relevant to extricate which specific actors in each level were attributed as responsible.

Figure 4 Chronology of the key moments that surrounded the 2011 elections in Portugal, Spain and Ireland



Following the pattern mentioned on section 3.1, the results drawn from our 2011 data show that within the National actors, the civil society gained minimal attribution of responsibility in national newspapers. Nevertheless, as Figure 6 highlights, there are some cross-country differences.

In Spain, the portion of responsibility attributed to civil society by mainstream media is 10 percent points higher than in Portugal or Ireland. In turn, in the Irish media, the interest groups exhibit a proportion of responsibility close to that displayed by core political actors. A plausible justification for these values might lie, on the one hand, in anti-austerity movements in Spain (referred as 15-M and Indignados Movement), in which a series of protests, demonstrations and occupations against austerity policies took place in May 2011 and lasted until the summer of 2012. Even though Portugal and Ireland had experienced similar social movements in 2011 and 2012, they did not have same impact as the Spanish ones<sup>10</sup>. On the other hand, the responsibility attributed to the Interest Groups—which encompasses private companies, banks, rating agencies, unions—by the Irish newspapers could be related with the primary source of the Irish crisis. Ireland's financial problems started in private companies and affected the banking system profoundly. By 2007, the real estate prices had increased fourfold. The banks that had fuelled a real estate boom by providing accessible and reckless mortgages started to collapse, forcing the government to support them with taxpayer money.

Despite these cross-country differences, there is a similar pattern among mainstream media of the debtor countries in 2011, which stands out: political actors are the ones to whom most of the responsibility is addressed. Overall, evidence suggests that political actors are portrayed in national newspapers as the main responsible by the economic issue: both in Portugal and Spain they represent almost 70% of responsibility within national actors, and, in Ireland, the attribution of responsibility is above 50%.

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<sup>10</sup> For more information on protest movements in Spain, Portugal and Ireland, see Morell (2012), Baumgarten (2013); Chabanet and Royall (2015).

A detailed decomposition of actors from EU Institutions and Bodies show that TROIKA and ECB are the actors to whom the responsibility for European economic issues is attributed more extensively by national newspapers.

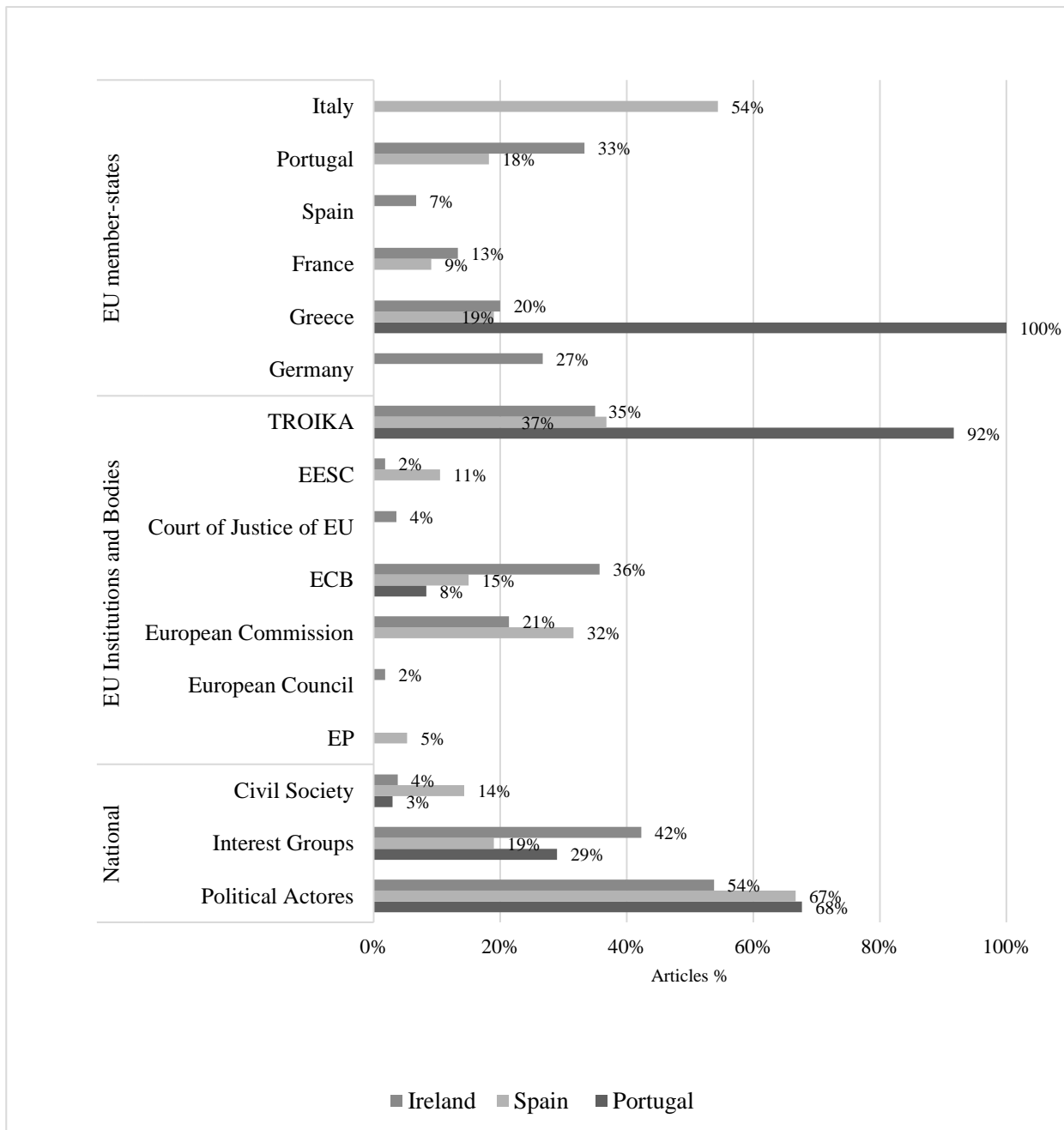
Portugal illustrates this pattern plainly: 92% of the responsibility was granted to TROIKA and 8% to ECB. In Spain and Ireland, this is also evident; however, the responsibility of these actors is not so prominent as in Portuguese media: both devoted 37% (Spain) and 35% (Ireland) of responsibility to TROIKA and 15% (Spain) and 36% (Ireland) to ECB. The amount of responsibility devoted to these actors is not unexpected. In the context of the Eurozone crisis, ECB and TROIKA played a leading role in the national economy: ECB because it is in charge of managing the euro and implement the EU's economic and monetary policies; and TROIKA as it was the Consortium of the European Commission, the ECB and IMF, which provided a bailout to Ireland and Portugal, settling down financial measures that states had to fulfil.

Concerning institutions with executive and legislative powers, our data reveal that actors with executive powers prevailed in two out of three national media. While in Spain the attribution of responsibility to executive powers is confined to the EC (32%), in Ireland national newspapers tend to assign responsibility not only to the EC (21%) but also to the European Council (2%). Regarding actors with legislative powers, solely Spanish newspapers consider them responsible, assigning 5% of responsibility to the EP. Additionally, Spain holds 11% of responsibility to the EESC, and Ireland 4% to the Court of Justice of the EU.

As aforementioned, the responsibility attributed to EU countries, it is residual, though it exhibits an increase in 2011. The responsibility attributed to the other EU countries covers six member states in 2011—Italy, Portugal, Spain, France, Greece and Germany.

In Figure 7, four pieces of evidence are worth being mentioned. First, Irish newspapers are the ones who assign responsibility to five European countries (Portugal, Spain, France, Greece and Germany); besides that, they are the only ones that attribute responsibility to the leading creditor country—Germany. Second, Greece appears as the only EU country responsible in Portugal, while in Spain it appears as responsible in 19% of the articles, and in Ireland in 20%. Third, solely Spain seems to assign responsibility for European economic issues to Italy. Besides that, Italy appears in Spanish newspapers as the main responsible, exhibiting a percentage above 50%. Forth, within the three countries being analysed, Ireland stands out as the only country to which no responsibility is addressed. It is also the only country in which national newspapers attributed responsibility to the two debtor counterparts—Portugal and Spain. By contrast, Portugal is attributed as responsible both by Spanish (18%) and Irish newspapers (33%) being the country to which Irish media pointed the most significant proportion of responsibility.

Figure 5 Attribution of responsibility on national media, by country, in 2011





#### 4. SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

The main aim of this paper is to present an in-depth examination of the use of “Responsibility” frame in the six mainstream newspapers from Portugal, Spain and Ireland. Therefore, this paper has devoted time to understand to which specific actors the national media attributed the primary responsibility for the European economic issues and to what extent the national media in the three debtor countries exhibit a convergent narrative on this regard.

It is fair to ask why to devote time to assessing the attribution of responsibility in debtor countries. The EU has been accused of having a democratic deficit and the process of assigning responsibility for the economic developments to specific actors is crucial when we consider democratic accountability. For that reason, unveiling to which specific actors the responsibility is addressed is relevant. The way national media assign responsibility can shape the public understanding of who is responsible for specific issues. Even though this paper does not dive into the demand side (voters), the presence of a convergent narrative in Portuguese, Spanish and Irish mainstream media regarding the attribution of responsibility, might help European citizens to develop a shared sense of belonging to the same European project.

Overall, there is a convergence on national media, mainly visible in the two southern European countries—Portugal and Spain. However, this conclusion needs to be nuanced as it presents some variations over time and across communication flows. Therefore, to better systematise this tenuity, we can sum up this paper in four main pieces of evidence.

First, our results highlight *a dialectic between a notorious supra-nationalisation and a propensity to the nationalisation of attribution of responsibility among debtor countries.*

As this paper has demonstrated, it is unequivocal that Irish national media supranationalised the responsibility for European economic issues, and this is visible both in vertical as in horizontal communication. In a significant and stable way, results indicate that

actors from European Institutions and Bodies were the ones considered most responsible. Moreover, they also indicate that for the Irish media, EU member states are essential players in what concerns European economic problems, as five out of the six countries covered by our sample were attributed as responsible. This paper did not dive into the “blame game” (Hansson, 2017; Weaver, 2018) and, therefore, we cannot establish the direction of the responsibility. Consequently, we do not have enough information to infer whether supranational institutions are credited or blamed for the economic performance (Heinkelmann-Wild and Zangl, 2019). Nevertheless, the prevalence of European Institutions and Bodies and the visibility granted to other EU countries are symptomatic of the relevance that the EU has on the Irish public sphere, and ultimately, the Europhilia that has characterised Ireland over the years.

In turn, in Portugal and Spain, the national media present a trend to nationalise the attribution of responsibility. However, while in Ireland the pattern is undisputed, in the media of the two southern European countries there is some variation according to the election year. In both countries, national actors tended to prevail mostly on the critical moments of national economy, which leads us to our second main evidence: *the increase of the nationalisation of attribution of responsibility in the outbreak of the Eurozone crisis*. These findings are not completely novel. In 2017, Moury and Standring had found no evidence of blame-shifting in Portugal towards the international level. In fact, during the crisis, Portuguese policy makers assumed the responsibility not only for the MoU but also for the austerity reforms implemented “Sócrates frequently expressed the belief that the bailout was unnecessary but, after having asked for a loan, he (rightly) stressed the government’s role in the drafting of the MoU. Passos Coelho repeatedly, and in front of different audiences, acknowledged his ownership of the reforms and his desire to go further than was originally agreed” (Moury and Standring, 2014 :674).

From 2008 onwards, the Eurozone was hit by the Great Recession While Spain managed to request financial assistance solely in 2012, Ireland was forced to do that at the end of 2010 and Portugal in the middle of 2011. However, in 2011, Portugal, Spain and Ireland experienced harsh austerity measures, while national elections were held in the three countries. Even though

national governments oversaw the implementation of austerity measures, those were introduced and imposed by EU institutions. Consequently, regarding the attribution of responsibility, we could expect, at least, a sharing of responsibility between EU and national levels.

Nevertheless, the evidence found exhibit the opposite scenario. Not only could we verify a substantial increase of responsibility attributed to national actors, particularly to core political actors such as political parties and government, but also the responsibility grated to the EU decreased. Even Ireland, where the national media systematically presented high levels of responsibility attributed to the EU, exhibited an increase of responsibility to national actors at expenses of a decline of EU Institutions and Bodies.

This convergence among debtor countries in 2011 suggests that in an economic crisis context, national media take much more into consideration national actors than European ones, when it comes to assign responsibility. Three plausible explanations can be advanced. First, it seems reasonable to assume that mainstream media did not perceive that the EU had actual leverage on national economy and the decision-making process; on the other hand, they may have perceived that, but chose to believe that those National actors could choose the best way to manage the crisis. Second, the time frame selected in this paper concerns national elections in each country. In this sense, the national media might have faced a constrained towards the coverage of national government and national actors rather than the EU Institutions and Bodies or EU member states, and consequently, the attribution of responsibility to these actors. Finally, the analysis only covers European economic articles on national mainstream newspapers. Previous evidence has suggested that quality newspapers tend to be more pro-European Union than tabloid newspapers (e.g., Pfetsch et al. 2008; Koopmans and Pfetsch, 2007), which might have dissuaded a more critical view towards the responsibility of the EU during the crisis. Moreover, the six newspapers selected are close to the two mainstream parties in each country, and regardless of their political alignment, all of them share a Europhilic view and advocate the European project.

The third main evidence of this paper concerns the *unbalanced distribution of responsibility among European actors with executive powers and legislative powers*, especially in 2011. At the European level, actors to which the responsibility for the economic issues was attributed were mainly actors with executive powers, such as the European Commission. This is also true for those cases in which the most significant proportion of responsibility is attributed to the so-called TROIKA, as it encompasses the IMF, the ECB and the EC. Likewise, this paper also demonstrated that actors with financial leadership decisions, such as the ECB, received a large share of responsibility from national media. One of the messages that we can take from these results is the awareness of national media about which actors played a fundamental role in the EU monetary decision-making process. Portuguese, Spanish and Irish mainstream media are highly convergent on this matter, despite a minor variation in Spain, which reflects more the nature of the economic crisis than a disagreement on who should be held responsible.

Moreover, the residual responsibility attributed to institutions with legislative powers, namely the EP, displays some of the challenges that the EU faces. The PE— the representative institution of the EU—does not seem to be part of the national media agenda when it comes to assigning responsibility. This absence contributes to expanding the argument that the EU suffers from a democratic deficit. On the core of attribution of responsibility, the mechanism is the representative democracy and the fact that elections are a device used to punish or reward the elected members. So, if the national media disregard the only European institution whose members were directly elected by national citizens, the accountability process in the EU is compromised. Assigning responsibility to the institutions with executive powers is relevant as it might work as a “watchdog” of the decision-making process; nevertheless, it is not enough. In fact, those institutions were not directly elected by European citizens and therefore cannot be punished or rewarded in upcoming European parliamentary elections.

Finally, the last evidence of this paper demonstrates the *divergence of attribution of responsibility towards EU countries*. As aforementioned, the Irish national media tended to distribute the responsibility for the economic issues among the remaining European countries more sharply. This is particularly inquisitive given that Ireland was the only one of the three

countries under analysis to which the national media of Portugal and Spain did not assign any responsibility. By contrast, Portugal appears as the country to which the Spanish and Irish national media attributed more responsibility for the European economic issues.

Furthermore, in 2011—the peak of the Eurozone crisis—the Irish mainstream newspapers emerge as the only national media assigning a share of responsibility to the leading creditor country—Germany. Both in Portugal as in Spain, the national media privileged the most affected country by the crisis—Greece.

This divergent ways of assigning responsibility to EU member-states pose a few challenges to the emergence of an EPS. It is a fact that the overall low share of responsibility attributed to EU countries is a good omen for the sacrosanct ideal of European solidarity. It unveils that national media of the three debtors tended to focus on the responsibility of the EU decision-making elites and agree that the other Eurozone countries are subject to the same constraint. Nevertheless, the dissonant responsibility attribution to the remaining EU countries, might indicate that the national media perceived the responsibility for the crisis in different manners. Moreover, this will undoubtedly impact the way national citizens also comprehend and build their sense of belonging to the EU.

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