

Games of (de)Legitimization and Images of Collective Subjects at the Management of a Financial Crisis: The Cyprus Memorandum in the German Political Discourse

NEOFYTOS ASPRIADIS, ARISTEIDIS PAPAIOANNOU AND ATHANASSIOS N. SAMARAS

Abstract

The Cypriot financial crisis of February 2013 opened a new chapter in the island's history and changed the perception of the Cyprus Problem. In this sense, the financial crisis was perceived as a continuation of the Greek crisis, which was at its peak, and drew all the negative frames, aspects and stereotypes from it. Germany played a key role in image formation of the island through the attribution of blame in German political discourse. For almost two months, German political parties debated the issue, forming an image of the country through their criticism, rhetoric and blame game. From being a victim of Turkish imperialism, Cyprus became an abuser of the eurozone. The construction of a new image for Cyprus in German political discourse was achieved through the use of contradicting dipoles, image restoration strategies and blame game. The induction of these means of strategic communication in the political discourse marked the parties' campaign mode in the intra-national and the international political levels.

Keywords: Cyprus financial crisis, Germany, strategic communication, image restoration, nation image, crisis management, blame game

1. Introduction

It was a weekend on 13 March 2013 when the newly established government of Cyprus announced the closure of banks and the interruption of capital flow. During the Eurogroup meeting on 15 and 16 March 2013, an agreement was reached by the Member States of the eurozone to grant financial assistance to the Republic of Cyprus (Iordanidou and Samaras, 2014).

The financial crisis of Cyprus, however, had begun in 2011 when the country was cut off from the international markets. The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was agreed between the Cyprus government and the Troika (European Commission, International Monetary Fund and European Central Bank) in November 2012,

whereas the final agreement was reached 271 days after the country applied for assistance (Zenios, 2013).

On 16 March, the government of Cyprus closed down the banks and stopped the flow of capital. A few days later the Cyprus Parliament voted 'No' on the implementation of the agreement. The negotiations continued until a new deal was reached. That deal decided on the reconstruction of the problematic Laiki Bank. Crucially, the new programme spared deposits below €100,000, unlike the previous proposal, which sparked outrage with a 6.75% tax on all bank deposits. Cyprus's second-largest bank, Laiki Bank, would be closed and its €4.2bn in deposits over €100,000 would be placed in a 'bad bank', meaning they could be wiped out entirely. Those with smaller deposits at Laiki would see their accounts transferred to the Bank of Cyprus (Osborne and Moulds, 2013).

Almost one month later (18 April 2013), the German Parliament was called to vote on the new MoU (Memorandum of Understanding). During this period, German political parties debated the issue. Since November 2012, German media had framed Cyprus's economy as a tax heaven for Russian oligarchs (Dettmer and Reiermann, 2012a; 2012b).¹ This framing was used by some German parties to oppose offering any German assistance to Cyprus.

Prior to the Cyprus bailout, Cyprus's image in international news media had been shaped by the vitality of its banking sector and its tourist industry, as well as by the 'Cyprus Issue' as an issue of invasion and occupation (Iordanidou and Samaras, 2014). Cyprus's reputation changed almost overnight, turning from a problematic state and a victim of Turkish occupation to a victimizer and a 'bad' member state.

A central issue for every 'memorandum country' is the way the country is perceived within the political system of the lender countries. The image of the worthy or unworthy victim is critical for the mobilization of support and the legitimating of financial support (Iordanidou and Samaras, 2014).

However, the intensity of the measures that were taken (closure of banks without prior notice, etc.) was considered to be brutal for the people of the island. In this context, the German political parties tried to frame the events and their own position on the issue according to their ideological and political beliefs, with the aim of influencing the debate. Through their political discourse and the blame game that was initiated for the German government's political decisions, images were formed for Cyprus and Germany. The rejection of the new bail-out plan was considered as an

1 Markus Dettmer and Christian Reiermann, 'EU Aid for Cyprus a Political Minefield for Merkel' and 'Aid to Cyprus Could Benefit Russian Oligarchs', 5 Nov. 2012, and *Spiegel Online*. Available at: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/german-intelligence-report-warns-cyprus-not-combating-money-laundering-a-865451.html> and <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/german-spy-agency-says-cyprus-bailout-would-help-russian-oligarchs-a-865291.html>.

implied *kategoria* by Germany. In this context, the political parties tried to answer.

This study examines the strategies the political parties used during the blame game and how their narratives constructed the image of Cyprus. The first section of the theoretical framework focuses on the construction of images through the blame game process, defines the terms and explains the relation between strategic framing and blame game.

The second section examines the image restoration process in strategic communication. In times of political crisis, image restoration is needed not only for someone who is being attacked but also when the public discourse is perceived to include an undercover accountability/*kategoria*. This paper will focus on how the political parties used the image restoration strategies in order to improve their image towards the actual and implied *kategoria* and how state images are being formed through the blame game in public discourse.

2. Methodology

Towards this direction, the analysis focused on the press releases issued by the German political parties that participated in the Parliament (Bundestag) during the period of 18.02.2013 – 18.04.2013. Although the timeframe of the analysis seems relatively short, the objective of the research is to record the strategies used by the parties during the peak of the crisis. By aligning the research on the press releases with the same period as the parliamentary discourse, we extract better conclusions on the strategic communication and the image attributes used by the political parties inside and outside the parliamentary debate. The paper is part of a more extensive research project which examines also the parliamentary discourse of the same political parties during the same period (Aspriadis, Magira and Samaras, 2013).

The unit of analysis is ‘Cyprus economic crisis’ and ‘Cyprus Memorandum’. The methodology chosen is qualitative content analysis for two main reasons. First, qualitative content analysis is more appropriate for close reading a relatively small amount of textual matter (Krippendorff, 2004; Van Evera, 1997). Secondly, qualitative content analysis allows one the liberty of viewing the case from the inside out and being able to see it from the perspective of those involved (Gillham, 2000). Rhetorical analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) would also help, with the only restriction that the analysis does not focus on building an argument but is broader on rhetorical strategies through the examination under specific rhetorical tools.

The rhetorical tools used for the analysis are image restoration strategies according to Benoit’s typology (Benoit, 1995), the attribution of blame theory, and as a side – analysis framing theory. Since the analysis focused on the heated discussions in the

German political system, the campaign mode is considered central to this process.

It is considered that the political actors operate under the 'campaign mode', which expresses their strategic thinking and is motivated by their will to prevail in the elections. For the analysis of political discourse, the 'black box' theory is used as a means of instrumentalizing the campaign mode in terms of use and production of strategic thinking (Takas and Samaras, 2016). According to Burton and Shea (2002, p. 4), the rationale of the campaign mode is realized on the basis of two important conditions: First, the desire to win the elections and second, the use of strategic thinking. Regarding winning the elections, it is considered that the mental energy invested in running for elected office pinpoints the commitment of the candidates and their staff to a specific objective: victory (Burton and Shea, 2002, pp. 4-5).

Although the political parties in Germany were not campaigning at that point, it is noteworthy that the debate was perceived as a pre-election test. This conclusion can be drawn from the rhetorical strategies they use and the blame game that was initiated.

Taking into consideration all the above, the following research questions arise:

RQ1: What is the image of Cyprus in German partisan discourse during the period of voting on the Cyprus memorandum?

RQ2: How is the image of Germany being formed through the political blame game?

RQ3: How do the strategic choices of the political parties comply with their ideology during the blame game?

RQ4: Do German political parties consider their stance towards Cyprus as an attack against their image and do they use image restoration strategies in order to restore their image?

RQ5: How do the political parties differ in their use of image restoration strategies? How is accountability being perceived according to the political spectrum of the parties?

3. Image Construction through Blame Games

Blaming is a social explanation of usually negative events, which subsequently bring the creation of a game for the search of responsibility: the blame game (Jennings, 2005, p. 2; Knobloch-Westerwick and Taylor, 2008, p. 724). It can be described also as an 'epistemic search' for causation and responsibility. Attribution theory asserts that causal reasoning is a prerequisite of blame allocation. Blaming is an active intentional and expressive connection between events, causation and responsibility (Jennings, 2005, p. 2). The systematic and intentional attribution of blame or responsibility constructs the blame game which in turn produces accountability (kategoria). The blame game

is a process in which agents associated with negative events typically aim to deflect or downplay their own responsibility (Knobloch-Westerwick and Taylor, 2008, p. 723).

According to the Oxford Dictionary, the term 'blame' is defined as (to) 'consider or say that somebody is responsible for something done (badly or wrongly) or not done'; be responsible for something bad; This definition points out two elements in the notion of blame. First, it has to do with 'something bad' or 'wrong'. And second, it links the 'bad thing' to the responsibility of 'somebody'. Blame is the act of attributing a 'bad' or 'wrong' thing to a particular person or entity (Sulitzeanu-Kenan and Hood, 2005, p. 1).

Attribution of blame is a procedure that is embedded in political practice usually during a crisis or when negative events occur. In crisis situations, the blame game is the procedure where the search for responsibility takes place. As soon as a political crisis arises, questions on responsibility are asked. Usually the media initiates the blame game, trying to find the responsibility among the actors. Such blame attributions play a significant role and have great influence in public opinion (Sniderman et al., 1991).

However, not all crises initiate a blame game from the beginning. Usually, a crisis event that is provoked by external factors, such as foreign policy crises or interstate conflicts, actions of war or even natural disasters, are more likely to produce rallying effects than blame games (Aspriadis et al., 2014).

On the other hand, crises that are prolonged or directly affect the political system produce internal causal attribution and initiate blame games for the evasion or attribution of responsibility. Such crises, as research has shown, are economic crises (Takas and Samaras, 2015). During economic crises responsibility is usually attributed to internal factors, such as the political system or specific politicians. This kind of attribution leads to polarization of public opinion. Although this is due to the fact that economic crises usually last long and initiate oppositional framing that builds conflicting narratives, it is a matter of perception and of attribution of blame on how a crisis will be perceived by the public.

Strategic Framing and Blame Games

When things go wrong, policymakers use framing strategies in order to (re)allocate blame (Braendstroem et al., 2005, p. 3). Actors can depict the crisis as a stand-alone, ad-hoc disturbance in an otherwise well-functioning system, or as an embedded incident, epitomizing a much larger systemic failure. The dominant diagnosis of events depends very much on the temporal perspective adopted by participants framing the anatomy of the crisis (Braendstroem et al., 2005, p. 4).

Framing

According to Entman (2004), framing is the selection and highlighting of some facets of events or issues and making connections between them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation and/or solution. Cappella and Jamieson (1997, p. 39) defined news frames as ‘those rhetorical and stylistic choices, reliably identified in news, that alter the interpretations of the topic treated and are a consistent part of the news environment.’

Price et al. (1995) argue that any news event can be categorized according to one of the following frames: (a) conflict frame, which organizes the story in terms of the conflict between opposing interest groups; (b) human interest frame, which organizes the story by focusing on the victims; or (c) consequence frame, where the story is organized in terms of its consequence for some group. By using framing strategically during the blame game, the political subjects may shape perceptions or reallocate the blame by changing the view of things in their favour.

Blame Games and Image Construction

Through the blame game, images can be constructed by the political parties who attribute blame and responsibility by making use of stereotypes, framing of events and/or building certain images based on behaviour. Images of foreign countries are domesticated within party political discourse since they are rhetorically employed in domestic political games (Iordanidou and Samaras, 2014).

Although the blame game is a process in which agents associated with negative events aim to deflect or downplay their own responsibility (Knobloch-Westerwick and Taylor, 2008, p. 724), the attribution of responsibility has the power to build images through the depiction of events a) as a violation of fundamental public values, b) as operational coincidences or as a result of systemic problems and c) as a result that was caused by an actor or group of people (Brändström, et al., 2005, p. 3).

Throughout the blame game, images play a crucial role in the construction of ethos and credibility. In order for someone to be able to blame somebody else for the outcome of an event or for the handling of a crisis, s/he needs to build her/his own positive image and credibility (ethos) in order to avoid the backfiring effect. Images of the other are also presented in order to destroy her/his credibility and overcome her/his own evading strategies.

The same procedure is followed by countries; internal players such as political parties, political candidates or organizations may construct or deconstruct the image of another country by using attribution of blame, negative attitudes or stereotypes in front of an audience during the blame game. This procedure can be strategically mobilized (through strategic communication efforts) or as a consequence of a heated

campaign (Aspriadis, 2013). In this case, the victim of such an attack (either state, party or person) will need to restore its image in front of an international audience.

4. Surviving an Attack: Image Restoration in Strategic Communication

Blame games produce attacks against individuals and collective subjects (countries, political parties, organizations, etc.). It is important to know how to defend a person, organization or country that is being attacked. An image attack is usually a very negative outcome in politics. Peoples' and countries' reputation may be destroyed by an attack, which has negative consequences on their everyday transactions. Image restoration strategies are very effective in reputation management.

Benoit (1995) first formed a complete typology of image restoration strategies. Image restoration in the framework of strategic communication gains a strategic orientation, becoming part of a planned answer to accusations. The blame game, as presented in the previous section, constructs accountability and causes reputational damage to the political actors. The attacker aims at attributing responsibility to factors other than himself, and the defender must answer and restore his good image.

Often, an attack can occur against the good image of a company or a political entity (politician, government, state), which leads to an image crisis or a more general crisis, which requires effective communication management. In such cases, image restoration should be employed (Benoit, 1995; Hearit, 2006).

Even a simple attack can become an image crisis for the one who receives it. A crisis may include accusations of responsibility on an issue or the crisis itself; or an accusation may initiate a crisis. According to Ryan (1982), an accusation can be established against a person's character or against his political positions. In both cases, the restoration of the image is necessary to maintain the reputation of the persons or organizations under attack.

Benoit's (1995) typology offers a concrete way of rhetorically and strategically managing a severe image crisis, an attack against the character of a person or the reputation of a country. The five main strategies are:

- A. Denial
- B. Evasion of responsibility
- C. Reducing offensiveness
- D. Corrective action
- E. Mortification

A. Denial

A first, perhaps instinctive reaction to an attack is simply to deny the event. Denial is mainly for offenses for which there is insufficient information that the person or entity is responsible (Hearit, 2006, p. 15). The strategy of denial consists of simply denying any relation with the events (Ware and Linkugel, 1973, p. 276). The fact is that distancing from *kategoria* can help restore the image of the defender. Example of using this strategy is Nixon's speech (Checkers Speech) in which he denied that he benefited from bribes (Benoit, 1995, p. 12). The strategy has two sub-categories:

1. Simple denial
2. Shifting the blame, victimization or scapegoating

Based on these subcategories the defender has the option either to refuse the wrong-doing or simply refuse to admit guilt (e.g. acknowledges the act but denies responsibility). This choice mobilizes the blame game. The use of the second subcategory shows the obvious question: 'If it's not you then who is to blame?' (Benoit, 1995, p. 75). This question leads us to the second subcategory. If the defender shifts the blame he transfers responsibility victimizing someone else who may be unable to react becoming a scapegoat (scapegoating).

B. Evasion of Responsibility

This strategy admits the wrong-doing and attempts to reduce the importance of the act. This can be done with four sub-strategies:

1. Provocations
2. Defeasibility
3. Accident
4. Good intentions

Provocation refers to acts that were caused by other actors, and the perpetrator is forced by circumstances to react. Here, the perpetrator may shift the main responsibility to the 'provocateur' (Benoit, 1995, p. 76) thereby reducing its own culpability. The second sub-strategy is defeasibility (Scott and Lyman, 1968; Benoit, 1995). With this strategy, the defender alleges lack of adequate information or control of important factors affecting the situation so the responsibility is not fully its own.

The next strategy is when the defender shifts the blame to random circumstances such as accidents or coincidence (Scott and Lyman, 1968; Tedeschi and Reiss, 1981; Semin and Manstead, 1983; Benoit, 1995). This is because guilt is most obvious only when someone is responsible for an act and has full control of the situation (Benoit, 1995, p. 76). Otherwise such an accusation is not valid. Finally, the fourth strategy aims at highlighting the good intention of the defender and ignores the negative result.

C. Reduce Offensiveness

In order to reduce the offensiveness of an act, the defender does not intend to deny the wrong-doing but tries to minimize the effect it had on the audience. In order to achieve that, six sub-strategies are used:

1. Bolstering
2. Minimization
3. Differentiation
4. Transcendence
5. Counter-attack / attacking the accuser
6. Compensation

The first sub-strategy refers to the defender's intention to bolster his/her image and his/her credibility towards the public by highlighting previous positive images and attitudes (Len-Rios, 2010, p. 271). This strategy may prove more effective if the positive experiences outlined show a relevance to the present situation (Benoit, 1995, p. 77).

With minimization, the defender seeks to convince the victims of the act that the results were not as painful as originally thought (Benoit, 1995, p. 77). Consequently, it is an attempt to control the negative effects of the act, by reducing the importance of events.

The third strategy in this category is differentiation. With this strategy the defender has the ability to separate certain aspects of the issue from others that have more negative effects (*ibid*). With this separation less negative aspects arise against the very negative ones (e.g., the act was the result of an accident or a good intention) thereby reducing the relative value of the negative act as a whole.

Consequently, this process can change the victims' negative feelings towards the act and the wrong-doer (*ibid*). At the differentiation stage, the perpetrator has the ability to yield responsibility to another actor (e.g., a company to an employee) in order to reduce the extent of the problem (Hearit, 2006, p. 16).

The strategy of transcendence can reframe the perception of an act presenting it in a different more positive context. Specifically, the strategy is part of the reframing process and aims to give a new interpretation to the negative act with a view to give more broad and positive regulatory framework.

Another strategy is the counter-attack/ attacking the accuser, in which the attack aims at the accuser's credibility. In ancient Greece, rhetors sought to damage the positive image of their rival. In particular, this can be achieved if the accuser (and not a third party) is a victim of the wrongful act so when the accuser apologizes, he/she can create the impression that the victim deserved what happened (Benoit, 1995, p. 78).

In other words, the attack on the credibility of the accuser increases the credibility

of the defender while questioning that of the first. On the other hand, it is likely that this tactic diverts public opinion from the main issue and the initial accusations, reducing the damage caused to the image of the defender (Benoit, 1995, p. 8). The defender can use the counter-attack strategy either on its own or in combination with denial, placing substantial fault on the opponent or accuser (Hearit, 2006, p. 16).

Compensation is the last strategy in the 'reducing offensiveness' category. In this case, the perpetrator has to resolve the dispute by offering compensation to the victim for the damage suffered. This compensation may be either financial or something else. In essence, the defender seeks to bribe the victim; however, if the latter accepts the offer, the wrong-doing can be balanced and the offender's reputation is restored (Benoit, 1995, p. 78).

Finally, at this point it should be noted that the strategies of evading responsibility and reducing offensiveness, together with their subcategories, do not deny the act itself but focus on factors that could potentially improve the defender's image and reduce the negative effects of the act (Benoit, 1995, p. 78).

D. Corrective Action

Corrective action seeks to restore the offender's image through remedy. Specifically, the perpetrator tries to solve the problem by making all necessary changes to return to the previous situation and assuring that there will be no similar acts in the future. Although according to Goffman (1971), this strategy may be a part of the real apology, the difference lies in the fact that someone can proceed to take corrective action without necessarily accepting his/her guilt. Finally, there is a noticeable difference between this strategy and compensation. While compensation is attempted to balance the situation between victim and offender, this remedy focuses on the heart of the problem and seeks to repair such damage per se (Benoit, 1995, p. 79).

E. Mortification

Last but not least, mortification belongs in the sphere of real or ethical apology. It is in a sense the last stage of contrition for the wrongdoings. Consequently, it refers to the wrongdoer fully acknowledging responsibility and asking the victims for forgiveness. Once given the apology, victims have to judge the honesty of the act and if they conclude it is true and sincere they will decide to forgive the perpetrator.

The real or moral apology helps to restore relations and can turn an enemy into a friend or even to reduce the hostility a victim feels towards the offender (Hearit, 2006, p. 49). It is very difficult for victims to accept an apology that lacks remedy, humility and shame as they want to know that the offender suffers because of his actions (Lazare, 2004).

5. Case Study: Image Restoration in the German Political Discourse

The political debate in Germany regarding the Cyprus issue initiated an informal election campaign putting the political parties into campaign mode. German elections were scheduled to take place in September 2013 and the Cyprus financial crisis became a good testing ground. The debate turned into a blame game between the political parties, criticizing the governmental decisions and Cyprus political practices that lead to the economic crisis. In this context, image restoration strategies were used by all parties in order to answer for the attacks and accusations.

The formation of German attitudes towards the Cyprus crisis was influenced by the Greek financial crisis and the already implemented schemata for that, as well as by the German media which, from November 2012, presented Cyprus as a tax heaven for Russian money laundering. The German political parties used these schemata to frame the Cypriot problem and explain their stance towards Cyprus.

The political parties formed their rhetoric in terms of their interests and their political gains. The blame game in Germany formed an image of the Cyprus Republic and its political and economic situation. The strategies used influenced German public perceptions about the Cypriot financial crisis. As a consequence, the financial crisis in Cyprus was seen as a continuation of the Greek crisis, which was at its peak, drawing all the negative frames, aspects and stereotypes from it (Iordanidou and Samaras, 2014). According to German opinions, unlike the other European countries that needed assistance, Cyprus needed to be treated in a very strict way.

The Cypriot financial crisis opened a new chapter in the history of the island and changed at least for a moment the perception of the Cyprus Problem. In the blame game, stereotypes along with the projection of the images of the Greek financial crisis put together a new image of the country. From a victim of Turkish imperialism, Cyprus became an abuser of the eurozone.

Blame Games and Accusation in the German Political Debate

Chancellor Angela Merkel's ruling party, the CDU/CSU, which was the primary decision-maker of German policy towards Cyprus, needed to respond to the direct or implied attacks and accusations from the other parties. The CDU/CSU party wanted to win the contest by framing the crisis first and shifting the blame in the desired direction before the opposition would give another explanation and perspective of the events.

According to Mueller (1970; 2003), public opinion has no or little interest in foreign policy issues. In Germany, the Cyprus crisis would be considered a foreign policy crisis unless the political parties made the issue locally relevant for political reasons and used it to gain support for the upcoming elections. German financial

assistance to Cyprus and the terms of such assistance were debated by the political parties, which tried to build their own image throughout this process.

German partisan discourse attributed the responsibility for the crisis to seven main factors: Cyprus as a state, the Cypriot parliament, the Cypriot banking/ financial system, the Russian mafia, the Greek crisis, the EU in general and Chancellor Angela Merkel. The German parties aimed at building their ethos by enhancing their patriotic and European image. This is why they attributed blame usually to factors outside or external to their sphere of responsibility.

However, this attempt formed an image not only of Cyprus as a country but also of the German political parties themselves, whose image and position had been shaped by their stance towards the crisis. In other words, the critics against Cyprus and the blame game inside the political system of Germany formed the partisan agenda and positions of the parties.

The governing party (CDU/CSU), in particular, blamed the state of Cyprus for bad management that led to the financial and banking crises. For that reason Merkel's party asked Cyprus to agree on the measures to be taken. In addition, CDU (Christian Democratic Union) blamed the Cypriot Parliament for not voting in favour of the Memorandum and the Cypriot banking system of being a tax haven for money laundering and black money. In order to rectify the situation, the CDU proposed that Cyprus fully comply with European standards.

Accordingly, the Free Democratic Party (FDP), as part of the governmental coalition, complied with the initial interpretation of the crisis, in that it also accused the financial system of Cyprus for being a tax haven and the Cypriot parliament for voting against the Memorandum. The FDP also maintained that the Cyprus government must comply with European standards and that the Cyprus parliament should vote for a new deal. However, the FDP attributed responsibility to the Russian mafia for money laundering in Cyprus. Finally, the Greek crisis was blamed for influencing the Cypriot financial markets and causing the crisis.

Comparing how the various factions of the German governing coalition attributed responsibility, it can be observed that the focus was mainly on Cyprus, its financial system and the politico-economic management. As a result, the financial crisis was seen as an embedded problem of the Cypriot financial system. Furthermore, the stance of Angela Merkel's CDU/CSU was more country oriented, restricting the responsibility for the crisis to Cyprus. On the other hand, although the FDP agreed with the main framing of the crisis, it differentiated itself in the accusation of money laundering, blaming the Russian mafia and proposing punishment. In effect, the FDP introduced new actors that seemed to be responsible for the financial crisis. This shows that the FDP tried to be more objective about the crisis.

In contrast, the main opposition party, the Social Democratic Party (SPD), mainly blamed the Russian mafia for money laundering, particularly before the Cypriot parliament rejected the Memorandum of Understanding (18 February to 18 March 2013). Besides that, the SPD blamed Cyprus for its system and the EU for economic liberalism, which could be fixed through social policy. At the same time, there were some accusations against Chancellor Merkel, as she was blamed for not reacting quickly to the crisis and for ineffective management, but these charges were very superficial. Finally, they asked the German government to make more effective decisions in order to solve the crisis.

This attribution of blame changed, however, a little later (19 March – 18 April 2013) when it turned to focus mainly on Chancellor Merkel. In particular, the government was accused of bad management and political mistakes. According to the Socialist Party, the European economic model adopted by the European Union is the reason for the difficult economic position of countries like Cyprus. Consequently, the economic liberalism is being identified with the bad banking and financial sector of Cyprus, and shares the responsibility for the situation.

The other parliament parties did not participate too actively in the debate on Cyprus. Die Linke, the leftist party of the parliament, focused mainly on the crisis management procedure rather than on the causes of the crisis. In particular, it is the first party to blame the Troika (EC, IMF and ECB) directly for following hegemonic policy. In addition, it blamed the German government for using European institutions to blackmail Cyprus. Finally, the EU was blamed for letting the German government exercise hegemonic power within the Union. For that reason the party asked for more political independence for the EU and the member-states.

Finally, the Bündnis 90/ Die Grünen did not participate very actively in the blame game. They mainly accused the German government for mishandling the crisis. The parties proposed to change course to the ‘right direction’. However, the criticisms against the government were made in a positive context and covered only a small extent of their public discourse.

Image Restoration Strategies in the Political Public Discourse of German Parties

Image restoration strategies (IR strategies) were implemented by the political parties in order to maintain their positive image during the blame game process. The ongoing crisis in Cyprus not only affected the German political parties’ reputations domestically but also internationally, in the eyes of their European counterparts and in other EU countries’ public opinion. This implies that the German political parties needed to form an image in accordance to their belief system, their domestic image and their

image within the EU. The blame game affected this image not only as a result of the accusations of the other parties but also as a result of their own accusations.

Keeping that in mind, the intention of the government was to frame the crisis in a way that Germany and the coalition government would not be affected internationally by Cyprus or German opposition. To this end, the governing party shifted blame to the domestic financial policy of Cyprus: 'Cyprus was not ready until now to do what is needed for their own household' (CDU/CSU press release, *Zypern – Hilfe zur Selbsthilfe*, 26 March 2013).

The strategy of bolstering was used by Germany's finance minister, Wolfgang Schäuble, who said: 'Help is a just solution' (*ibid.*). By using the phrase 'a just solution' in describing the bailout programme, he promoted a positive notion that the party looks after justice. The idea of using the justice frame made the party's rhetoric more credible and reassured the public of its noble intentions. In addition, the Secretary General of the party, Herman Gröhe, pointed out '...the success of Ireland that has returned successfully with the help of the European Union to the financial markets' (CDU press release, *Zypern – Hilfe Solidaritaet fuer Europa*, 18 March 2013).

Transcendence was another strategy that was used. With transcendence, the government achieved to reframe the terms that defined the economic crisis. In particular, with this strategy, it showed that the basic event was not the economic burden of the citizens, as the media presented it, but the salvation of the state itself: 'A collapse of the state is more dramatic than the burden of the small depositors' (*ibid.*)

Finally, the CDU used the strategy of good intentions in order to project a more positive attitude, showing the good face of the government and pointing towards a different and more positive direction: 'The deal is a European solidarity solution. It will protect the small depositors and reconstruct the economy. This effort has as its basic objective to guarantee all the pensions' (CDU press release, *Zypern – Hilfe Solidaritaet fuer Europa*, 18 March 2013).

Through this press release, the Secretary General of the CDU/CSU party indirectly answered possible accounts concerning the new programme that Cyprus and the Troika had agreed upon. He highlighted the good intentions behind the government's planning and decision-making on the Cyprus crisis.

Likewise, the coalition partner, the FDP, used bolstering in order to show Germany's good face and present it as a government that was willing to help. This strengthened the profile of Germany, its political ethos and credibility. This practice, coming from another party, enhanced the accuracy of the message by showing that the government elites were unified.

Germany in cooperation with the partners of the eurozone is available to help. We are trying in every way to save the savers since Cyprus is a special case. Germany

has shown exemplary responsibility towards Cyprus. (FDP, *Zypren: Reformbereitschaft zeigen*, 25 February 2013)

Through the use of bolstering, the FDP tried to create more credibility for the government and to highlight the ethical aspect of German help and decision-making process. In addition, like the governing party, the Free Democratic Party blamed Cyprus for their situation.

It is not the Europeans to blame for the solidarity of Cyprus regarding the reforms, for it is a matter of its own. The responsibility for the failure of the dialogue between the investors of Cyprus and the ECB does not emanate from the EU but from both participants of the dialogue. (FDP, *Vereinbarung nicht aufweichen*, 20 March 2013)

Once again, the party tried to highlight the good intentions behind the decisions. It gave a positive image to the practice that was being followed to enhance the positive image of the government. Germany was being identified with the ideals of the European Union, and the FDP stated, '[Germany] offers a responsible position towards Cyprus as a state. This (the measures) is something unpleasant and it is not an easy moment but it is the only solution' (FDP, *Vereinbarung nicht aufweichen*, 20 March 2013).

Furthermore, the party was criticising Cyprus for voting against the Memorandum. Cyprus' rejection of the MOU was considered an implied *kategoria* against the Europeans' practices and decisions and eventually against the German government. This was also obvious in some public discourse in Cyprus which presented a negative image of Germany. For that reason the coalition party tried to answer to this indirect accusation.

It is unbelievable for German standards that at the same time when the head of state negotiates a solution in Brussels, the Cypriot parliament rejects it without any vote in favour. Solidarity produces responsibility and not irresponsibility to the member-states. Europe can only proceed if the rules are being followed.' (*ibid.*)

However, as soon as the parliament in Cyprus voted in favour of the new deal, the FDP slightly changed its attitude towards the island. Without abandoning its basic position of blaming Cyprus for its economic crisis, the FDP faulted the financial system of Cyprus together with the 'bad' creditors and banks for the mismanagement that lead to failure. It supported Germany's handling of the crisis ('Germany showed an exemplar responsibility towards Cyprus.' (FDP, *Vertretbare Loesong Gefunden*, 25 March 2013).

Oppositional Discourse

The main opposition, the Socialist Party (SPD), tried to present Germany and the German taxpayers as victims of Cyprus' financial system, showing greater concern for the German public. However, at the same time it did not blame Cyprus for the

situation it was facing. IR strategies in this case were used evade the accusations that might have formed against the party vis-à-vis the Cyprus crisis.

The SPD followed a slight consensual policy towards the government because it considered the Cyprus issue a foreign policy problem. Therefore it did not want to polarize the interior. That is the reason the SPD did not differentiate totally from the political position of the government. 'It is a good tradition in Germany, in foreign policy matters, the government and the opposition do not dig deep ditches' (SPD press release, *Wir brauchen wieder ein soziales Gleichgewicht*, 18 February 2013).

In this context, SPD presented an image of the government as a victim in order to show how it supported the public. It also portrayed the threat posed to the German taxpayers from the economic system ('...systemic dangerous (the Cyprus Economic System) because of money laundering and tax haven...')(SPD press release, *Wir brauchen wieder ein soziales Gleichgewicht*, 18 February 2013).

In addition, the SPD issued a press release on the 16 March 2013, in which they attacked the accuser, who in that case was Merkel and the coalition government, for taking decisions that harmed the rights and the interests of the German public ('They (CDU/DSU) are against the interests and the rights of the German people.'). The Socialist Party also focused on the ideological perspective of the debate: '...the liberal politics in the economy have to be diminished and a more social approach should be followed.' (SPD Press Release, *SPD prueft Zustimmung*, 18 March 2013). This highlights the different aspects and solutions the parties had for the problem of Europe and Cyprus.

Another strategy used was shifting blame away from Cyprus to the Russian mafia. This way, the party could accomplish support from the interior and at the same time differentiate itself from government rhetoric by offering a third way. In addition, it bolstered its international image, since it appeared to bring things to a normal and pragmatic level, which would be recognized by European counterparts. ('We will not let German taxpayers be exposed to Russian money laundering.' (SPD press release, 16 March 2013)).

The SPD party used a good intentions strategy by showing a positive attitude towards Cyprus and its people. This way, SPD bolstered its social profile and presented a different face to the German people ('[A] socially acceptable solution should be implemented for the Cypriot people and that will protect the small depositors.' (SPD press release, *Union muss bei Muetterente Naegel mit Koepfen Machen*, 23 March 2013)).

Die Linke, the left-wing opposition party mainly used the strategies of transcendence and attacked the government. The party proposed new solutions with new perspectives to the Cypriot problem which focused on the solution and not on the domestic blame game. At the same time, it blamed other actors, like the Troika ('Dictatorship of Troika') and the German government ('government of blackmailing')

in order to enhance its left-wing image.

Finally, the rest of the opposition, Bundins 90 / Die Gruenen, did not participate much in the blame game and did not feel the need to restore its image. Its position was between neutral and slightly positive towards the government. The party supported the agreement and the Memorandum, reframing (transcend) the problem: 'Cyprus not only remains in the axis of the European Union but also its small depositors were protected'.

6. Conclusion – Discussion

The Cyprus parliament's rejection of the first bail-out plan was considered an implied and indirect disapproval of the German political system and the political decisions on the plan. In Germany this was seen as an indirect accusation, and the political parties considered the need to answer to the direct or indirect accusations.

The fact that the accusations were made by another government lead the German parties to perceive the discussion of the Cyprus issue in term of interstate conflict. This event, together with the German elections that were scheduled for September 2013, put the parties into a strange position. Therefore, blame was attributed to several factors and the blame game of the parties played on both the interstate and the domestic levels.

At the international level, the public was used in order to enable the patriotic emotions to the German public. This shows that the crisis in Cyprus was being perceived as a foreign policy crisis. In that case the parties adopted a more consensual rhetoric (as was the case of SPD) for the domestic audience and a more aggressive rhetoric for the exterior enhancing the interstate conflict frame. When the parties used the domestic level they either tried to show a more pro-European image or to enhance the debate internally and get more electoral support.

In particular, the governmental party CDU/CSU focused its attacks on the Cypriot parliament, state and banking system. The intention was to attack the ethos of these institutions and the country for deconstructing the credibility and the power of the nation especially after the negative outcome of the voting procedure in the Cyprus parliament.

In order to achieve that, the government identifies itself with the country (Germany) and produces several conflicting dipoles against its targets. The dipoles function as measures of identity employed to mobilize the public to choose sides.

The German government by implementing this strategy wanted to change the image of victim for Cyprus. By raising the national frame and blaming Cyprus for their management, it achieved to stabilize their position inside the country. The campaign mode was in this case acting at an interstate level to raise nationalism and faith within the governmental party.

In the governmental public discourse, Cyprus is the main party to blame for the crisis. The image projected is that of the worthy victim that deserves all that happened. The Greek financial crisis, the stereotypes and the negative frames it produced helped to justify this to the public perception. The German government produced the international political conflicting dipoles of 'Cyprus solution vs. German tax payer' and 'Cyprus bad management vs. German economic organization'.

This strategy was supported and followed by the coalition party FDP. However, a slight differentiation that was employed helped to bridge the gap between empathy and reality in the governmental rhetoric. The FDP attack focused additionally on the Russian Mafia and the Greek crisis. The dipoles they used tried to enhance the nationalist frame and rally the public around the government.

On the contrary, the German opposition differentiated itself a little more from the government but did not change the main line. The attack focused again on the ethos (character – credibility) of the government, but the target was diverted to the Russian mafia, the European Union, Merkel and the government. This strategic differentiation presented a better understanding of Cyprus and built an international image for the party and the island. The target audience was the European public and the internal audience in order to take record for the position of the German opposition.

The conflicting dipoles used included mainly the opposition – government dipole, SPD – EU and Germany – Russian mafia. The party's campaign mode included also the domestic level (opposition – government dipole), which is usually used during election campaigns.

The opposition forces attributed the blame to the Russian mafia, the Chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, for not gotten involved in the European Crisis sooner and Cyprus for its inefficient system. After Cyprus failed to vote for the memorandum, the main opposition (SPD) blamed Chancellor Merkel and the government for ineffective management and political failure.

The main opposition plays at the intrastate level and attributes blame to the government in order to produce an interparty political conflict for winning support by polarization and the creation of election climate. The SPD tries to balance between the upcoming elections and its own framing of the Cyprus crisis as a foreign policy crisis.

The other opposition parties, like Die Linke, focused their attacks against the government, the Troika and the European Union. The Troika was blamed for their hegemonic policy, the EU for being under German manipulation and the government for bad crisis management capabilities. The objective was to deconstruct the image of the latter through bolstering the party's ethos. The conflicting dipoles used were mainly political but moving between domestic and international level, enhancing the nationalist frame (Left wing-Right wing, Left-Government, Left-EU and Troika).

The minor opposition tried to reframe the attribution of blame and to initiate

the interparty political conflict frame with the aim of achieving political support. The oppositional narrative constructs Cyprus's image as the unworthy victim, since the responsibility returns to the German government.

Finally, Die Buendnis 90/Die Gruenen focused their attacks only against the government with a more positive and neutral attitude. They did not make excessive use of conflicting dipoles and frames during their rhetoric due to the fact that they chose a neutral reaction.

The Greek financial crisis helped the German public better understand negative aspects and frames of corruption and bad management. The interstate conflict frame was better perceived by the domestic audiences and turned into a rallying effect against Cyprus. The oppositional narrative was not so strong making reframing less effective. The interparty conflict frame did not work well at that time because of the consensual attitude of the oppositional parties. Under this context, the image of Cyprus changed from a victim of the Turkish occupation to a corrupted European member that was worthy suffering. The image constructed for domestic use in the German political scene affected Cyprus and Europe in general in terms of perception and negotiations.

In conclusion, the image of Cyprus was constructed through the political blame game of the political parties in Germany. The most common strategy used was the strategy of blame shifting that shifts the responsibility for the situation to Cyprus. Inside Germany, however, the government aimed at constructing a narrative of Cyprus being unworthy of help by making strong connections of the governmental, political and financial institutions with the economic failure of the country.

At the same time, it was observed that when the use of the strategy of counterattack increased, the strategy of minimization decreased. This is explaining the change between the positive and negative image formation, respectively. When the signing of the memorandum was pending, the strategy of counterattack dominated the political discourse, projecting a negative image for Cyprus. In contrast, when Cyprus complied with the terms and signed the deal, the strategy of minimization rose projecting a more positive image.

Germany, on the other hand, was presented as a victim, because it had to give money for something that it was not responsible for. The political party discourse produced positive images for itself and Germany through bolstering presenting itself as moral, just and credible. The parties highlighted the pro-European orientation for Germany. Due to the fact that all the parties make use of the interstate conflict frame an internal rallying effect took place, leading to external projections of power. Although there are different opinions, there was no severe polarization in the political discourse. In contrast, there is an observable consistency and unity.

Consequently, this leads to the conclusion that the political elites of Germany perceived the Cypriot crisis as an international crisis and the political system functioned

in terms of internal consensus, which means that it functioned as hegemony and in conflicting terms towards Cyprus.

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