



EUROPEAN  
COMMISSION

European  
Research Area

Social sciences  
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# EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF



## LIVEWHAT

### Living with Hard Times

How Citizens React to Economic Crises and  
Their Social and Political Consequences

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**Policy implications of LIVEWHAT, an EU-funded research project examining citizens' resilience in times of crisis across nine countries.**

**Ongoing project**

**October 2016**

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## INTRODUCTION

This policy brief draws on cross-country research related to how European citizens have reacted to the economic crisis by intervening as organized collective actors through claims making in the public sphere. LIVEWHAT researchers examined national public debates about the economic crisis in nine European countries namely, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the UK. Methodologically, the researchers relied on political claims analysis as this approach has enabled them to cover a broader set of actors, forms of action and issues than that are

usually covered within studies of social movements and protest. In particular, claims were coded by random sampling of about 1,000 claims per country selected from five newspapers in each country and covering the period from 2005 to 2014. All articles containing any of the three words '*crisis*', '*recession*', or '*austerity*' were selected and coded, to the extent that they referred to the recent economic crisis. Moreover, LIVEWHAT researchers identified claims made by, or targeted at, the European Union (EU) or a European actor/addressee in order to capture the visibility of the EU in the national public spheres of the nine countries

over the course of the economic crisis (2008-2014).

The articles were sampled from all newspaper sections, excluding editorials, through key words search. Below we present some of the main findings of the political claims analysis concerning: the actor-subject who makes the claim; the form of the claim; the issue addressed; the actor-object; the actors blamed, and the frames used, in claims about the economic crisis.

The findings are presented on the basis of a continuum of countries and the degree to which they have been affected by the economic crisis. That is, the countries of the sample used in the analysis were classified into three groups: those severely hit by the economic crisis i.e. Greece, Italy, and Spain (strong impact); those moderately hit i.e. France and the UK (moderate impact); and those countries which have been less or not affected by the crisis i.e. Germany, Poland, Sweden, and Switzerland. This is admittedly a rough classification, but was effected to see more clearly whether the severity of the crisis has had an impact on the structuring of the discursive field around the issue of the economic crisis.

The full findings of the research are available on the project website at: [www.livewhat.unige.ch](http://www.livewhat.unige.ch).

**They are also presented on Politics & Policy Special Issue: *Citizens' Responses to the European Economic Crisis in the Public Domain* (June 2016). Check out the Special Issue here: <http://bit.ly/1UsfsSF>**

*The views expressed in this document are the sole responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Commission.*

## KEY FINDINGS

### Actors of claims

LIVWHAT research has focused on ‘Who makes the claim?’ Figures are shaped so as to distinguish the main actors of decision-making in the policy domain (actors who make use of claim-making as a complement of their less-public role of policy-makers) from civil society actors who primarily intervene in the public domain (most likely to have an influence on processes decision-making), while at the same time singling out the intermediate position of economic actors in their role of major stakeholders of crisis. Data shows an interesting pattern when distinguishing countries according to the intensity of the economic crisis (along the *continuum* ‘weak’ to ‘strong’). Hence, results suggest that the economic crisis reduces the space available for economic actors in the public domain to voice their concerns. Based on the findings, in contexts of strong crisis, the percentage of claims by economic actors is three times lower than it is in contexts of low economic crisis.

When examining the situation of individual countries, we find the presence of specific national dynamics of claim-making that do not show up when only looks at the weak-to-strong *continuum*. Germany stands out for its elites-based and state-centric nature of claim-making. In this country, the public domain is especially shaped by policy actors, with only some minor interventions of economic interests and civil society. By contrast, Italy stands out for the stronger bottom-up dynamics taking place in the public domain. Accordingly, we find the presence of a much more vociferous civil society which stands against the more silent state actors and economic interests. Poland also shows an extensive presence of civil society actors in the public domain. Yet the most noticeable

figure refers in this case to the outstanding visibility of professional organizations (which is unequalled in any other country). This figure is thus consistent with the high visibility of economic actors in the Polish case.

Yet, only the Swedish case is characterized by a strong prevalence of economic interests on the one hand vis-à-vis both policy actors and civil society on the other. The visibility of economic actors is also evident for both Switzerland and the UK, with a stronger role for civil society actors in the UK and a stronger role of state actors in Switzerland. Lastly, France provides an interesting case for seizing the specific role of labor representatives, group-specific organizations, and welfare NGOs of a different kind as the highest proportion of claims by civil society actors.

### Issues of claims

LIVEWHAT researchers also examined the issues of claims – or content – to answer the question ‘What is to be undertaken?’ The analysis shows that claim-making over macroeconomics, labor and unemployment, social policy, as well as economic activities and domestic commerce, have dominated national debates across all countries and irrespective of variations of intensity of the economic crisis (Table 1). The fact that in all countries claim-making has focused on just a limited number of issues accounts for the minor variations along the weak to strong crisis *continuum*. Yet, the figures also show an interesting *crescendo* over labor and employment between countries of weak and strong crisis respectively. It is also noticeable that a comparable pattern can be detected for other less debated issues, and in particular international affairs. It would be informative to single out some national specificities which do not show up in the figures of Table 1. Spain

and the UK stand out as the two opposite poles with highest and lowest claim-making over macroeconomic issues. Italy is the country where discussion over labor and employment is the most intense, while France stands out for its unparalleled claim-making over economic activities and domestic commerce. Lastly, German actors pay no attention whatsoever vis-à-vis issues of social policy.

### Objects of claims

Concurrently, the analysis focused on the distribution of claims when looking at their main objects (Table 2). In this case, the analysis has identified answers to the question ‘Who is the main actor whose interests are at stake?’ The comparison of countries according to the intensity of the economic crisis confirms previous results obtained when asked who makes the claim. So, growing intensity may contribute to reduce the role of economic actors within the public domain, while at the same time increasing the visibility of civil society actors vis-à-vis policy-makers and the state. Examining national specificities outside Table 2, one also finds some crucial cross-national variations that fit established knowledge of comparative politics, sociology, and economics. In particular, the pattern of claims focused on policy-makers and the state as the main actor-objects shows that the two countries characterized by a Continental welfare state - France and Germany - stand together on a same pole that is made of extensive claim-making over institutional actors. Poland confirms its strong liberal-residual developments by standing, side by side with Switzerland, on the opposite pole of scarce claim-making.

The countries following the Southern model - Greece, Italy, and Spain - are also similar.

The UK is the only country left out from conventional knowledge, since it shows more similarities with the Southern countries than with the liberal-residual pole (as one may expect). Yet, national specific figures referring to economic actors and civil society do not fit the same comparative pattern. Thus, economic actors have extensively been taken as the object of claims in Germany, Italy, Sweden, and the UK, while civil society actors bring Poland together with Greece and Italy. Another underlying finding is that in some countries, claim-making has still focused on the old cleavage between work and capital (Greece and Italy), while in others it has been rooted in a post-capitalist context (UK, and Spain to a minor extent).

Moreover, LIVEWHAT researchers examined the visibility of the EU in the claims set in the national debates during 2008-2014. The analysis shows that the claims that convey European visibility represent 14 percent of the sample against the remaining 86 percent of non-European claims (Figure 1). The analysis reveals differentiated levels of visibility of the EU across the nine countries examined. The differentiated pattern of German debates stands out: European claims steeply ascended between 2008 (nine percent) and 2013 (66 percent), surpassing non-European claims and remaining stable at high levels from that year onwards. Greek (10 percent in 2008 up to 30 percent in 2013) and Swiss (three percent in 2008 up to 20 percent in 2014) European claims show steadily ascending trends.

The findings also show peaks of European claims in Sweden in 2012 (30 percent) and to a lesser extent in France (22 percent) and the UK in 2011 (11 percent). For the rest, Italy, Poland and Spain present no significant variations in the low trends of European visibility. Altogether, European visibility is somehow higher in the Italian debates

(fluctuating between its lowest 11 percent in 2009 and its highest 18 percent in 2014) than in Polish (lowest five percent in 2010 and highest 12 percent in 2011), or Spanish (lowest 5 percent in 2008 and 2009, and highest 13 percent in 2012) debates.

### Frames and blamed actors

To better understand the visibility of economic actors within the public domain (both as actor-subjects and actor-objects), it is important to delve into the economic frames used in claims vis-à-vis other types of legal and political frames. Thus, the research focused on the main diagnostic frames, that is, which causes are seen as having led to a particular aspect of the economic crisis (Table 3). Once again, the analysis confirms the idea that the intensity of economic crisis waters down the economic substance of claim-making. Thus, economic frames have prevailed especially in contexts of weak crisis, with political causes standing out in contexts of strong crisis.

Regarding national specificities, the analysis suggests that in this case economic causes are singled out across the entire set of countries. The major exception to this trend is Italy, where legal, administrative, and regulatory causes have taken the lion's share. Greece also provides some discordant voices within the group owing to the important presence of political causes among the diagnostic frames.

In addition, the research analyzed the distribution of claims when looking at the blamed actor, that is, the actor who may explicitly identified as bearing the main responsibility of crisis (Table 4). The country comparison according to the weak-to-strong *continuum* strengthens findings referring to 'Who makes the claim?' and 'Who is the main actor whose interests are at stake?' Thus, stronger intensity has gone together with decreasing blaming of economic actors

and increasing blame against civil society and institutional actors. When looking at national specificities that may lie behind the weak-to-strong *continuum*, one finds only few cross-national variations that fit the established knowledge of comparative politics, sociology, and economics. France and Germany show some similarities owing to the important percentage of blame against economic actors. Yet, the same cannot be said about other expected combinations. So Greece, Italy, and Spain are quite dissimilar from each other (with the economic actors taking a crucial share of blaming only in Italy), while the situation of the UK is now closer to that of France and Germany. Most crucially, Switzerland stands out for the highest percentage of blaming against economic actors: for every two claims reaching the public domain there has been an economic actor being blamed.

contentious dynamics that link political insiders and outsiders within a same field of intervention. Thus, the politics of the economic crisis has been most salient when it was brought at the core of neoliberal readjustments of the labor market dividing workers on the one hand and capital on the other.

Particularly in countries less affected by the economic crisis such as in Germany and Switzerland, the political contention over the crisis has been generally pacified. This has left a crucial space of political intervention for economic actors and groups (despite their low grievance). In this case, it is noticeable that policy-makers and the state have dominated debates about the economic crisis. Sometimes this has happened in addition to specific professional organizations and experts who, most likely, have supplied policy-makers and the state with expertise on the crisis. As a result, the voice of technocrats and policy-makers sharing arguments with economic groups has gained prominence in the public domain at the expense of labor and civil society organizations as well as ordinary citizens. Even the labor organizations have had little to say over major policy ‘reforms’ that have been pushed forward in the labor market as a way of reacting to the (low intensity of) crisis.

Overall, the process of pacification in the public domain has been politically driven, embedded in the weakness of labor movements and other civil society organizations vis-à-vis stronger political entrepreneurs such as the economic organizations. Such an erosion of the contribution of labor and civil society actors and of ordinary citizens to public debates seems problematic from the normative point of view of democratic inclusion and also from the point of view of the democratic quality of public debates. In this respect, a more

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

► The analysis of collective responses in the public sphere suggests that during the period 2005-2014, national public debates in almost all the nine countries examined have largely been dominated by a discourse focused on macro-economic issues. The analysis also shows that national discourses have been highly competitive environments in which actors compete for public visibility, resonance, and legitimacy. The economic crisis has provided a political arena where the classic performance of contentious politics was delivered between powerful political insiders on the one hand, and different types of outsider ‘publics’ on the other.

The lack of a straightforward vector linking the grievance to the grievant is far from being a bizarre result of the analysis. The existence of any grievance, even when consisting of the economic crisis, has been grounded in the

inclusive approach opening up more channels of communication and representation for the 'silent publics' would be necessary. Policy and media actors should give more space to these unheard publics to voice their claims and positions on various aspects of the economic crisis. By so doing, they could turn public discourse from a de facto exclusive practice kept only for insiders into a more democratic and less top-down process.

► Far from being a simple economic type of crisis to be seized through usual economic measures, the economic crisis has stood out for its eminently political character. The findings clearly indicate that the economic crisis has emerged as a political resource for some entrepreneurs who have made use of the idea of the economic crisis, even when basic economic indicators do not show a context of economic crisis. It seems, thus, that public discourses in times of crisis have been a space for a struggle of access and positioning by old and new actors, that is, a process of claims-making innovation. This has generated new arenas of communication and mobilization that however remain nationally confined.

In particular, all the nine countries examined show very low levels of European visibility in their national debates – with some variations. Some of these variations appear puzzling at first sight; yet they may reveal important insights if seen from another angle: for example, the low presence of the EU in the national debates in the UK may be due to the high levels of Euroscepticism that exist in the country; or the low presence of the EU in the national debates in Switzerland may be due to the country's broader global financial interdependence.

Other findings however, are difficult to decipher: for instance, national debates in Spain and Italy (countries highly affected by the crisis) display lower degrees of European

presence than those in Sweden (a country not significantly affected by the crisis).

In any case, the visibility of the EU and European issues in the national debates does not seem to be *directly* related to the severity of the economic crisis nor to the harshness of public policy retrenchment in the different European countries. Particularly, it may be argued that the higher levels of EU presence in the national debates in Germany might well be linked to the country's leading role in the EU during the economic crisis, to its position as creditor in the debt crisis, and to the 'internal use' that German national actors have made of the country's leading role in the EU. In this respect, it should also be inquired whether the moderate levels of European visibility in France reflect its difficulties in co-leading the European project during crisis years.

All in all, it seems that the recent crisis has had no significant effect in terms of advancing the presence of the EU and European issues in national debates. Quite importantly, the results confirm also the uncontested primacy of national communicative flows in every country, leaving limited visibility for the EU or European protagonists and subjects. Hence, a Europeanized political communication in which national actors make claims within a European frame of reference transcending geographical boundaries has proved rather weak during the period 2008-2014 that is, when the economic crisis reached its peak. Apart from the limited presence of the EU and European actors, it seems also that issues of representation of a clear-cut European public in the politics of dealing with the crisis have largely been neglected. This is part and parcel of the broader EU democratic deficit that has become more acute during the crisis years. The latter is related to a lack of responsiveness of the EU and accountability

in the wider context of how the EU has responded to the economic crisis.

A swift and radical democratization of European affairs may very well speed up the rise of a vital EU public sphere which will give access to those publics that have been affected by the crisis and clarity and legitimacy to the ways in which the EU has shaped its responses. At the end of the day, a *European* response to the crisis can only be the outcome of a more or less democratic interplay between the integration of governments and actors across boundaries and the integration of peoples and public spheres. Therefore, establishing a more visible dialogue with the citizens on the impacts of the economic crisis may have a tangible effect in the long term; this could be accomplished for instance by developing better communication on how the EU has dealt with, and is still dealing, with the economic crisis, by organizing public ‘deliberation’ events and by forging strong transnational partnerships for EU communication and exchanges between European citizens and policy actors and stakeholders.

groups particularly at risk in situations of economic crisis;

c) To improve the problem-solving capacity of policy-makers and practitioners by providing policy recommendations and a catalogue of good practices;

d) To help develop a more comprehensive and concerted problem-solving approach within Member States and the European Union by promoting knowledge-transfer and policy-learning.

### Scientific approach and methodology

LIVEWHAT’s theoretical approach allows for studying resilience along the analytical continuum between the individual level of single citizens who learn how to ‘bounce back’ and downplay the costs of crises, and the far-reaching forms of collective resilience aimed at entering the public domain so as to challenge inequities and foster common empowerment.

The project conceives of resilience as the capacity of European citizens to stand against economic hardship through an active process of contestation and empowerment. Going beyond previous studies that have studied the impact of economic crises on specific groups such as children, youth, and families treated as passive categories, LIVEWHAT puts citizens engaged in alternative forms of resilience at center stage. Alternative forms of resilience include the strengthening of social and family networks and community practices to foster solidarity in the face of crises, change of lifestyles toward more sustainable forms of consumption and production, developing new artistic expressions.

## THE PROJECT

### Objectives

LIVEWHAT is an EU-funded research project on policy responses and citizens’ resilience in times of crisis. The project has four main objectives:

a) To advance knowledge regarding the ways in which citizens respond to economic crises and their social and political consequences;

b) To contribute to placing citizens’ responses to economic crises and their negative consequences on the political agenda by raising awareness about the situation of

Although these transformations in citizen practices (from adapted to alternative) are decisive for citizens' resilience in times of austerity, they have not yet been thoroughly studied.

**Project coordinator**

Marco Giugni, [Marco.Giugni@unige.ch](mailto:Marco.Giugni@unige.ch)

Université de Genève

**Consortium**

- Lorenzo Bosi  
European University Institute
- Manlio Cinalli  
Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques
- Maria Kousis  
University of Crete
- Eva Anduiza  
Autonomous University of Barcelona
- Maria Grasso  
University of Sheffield
- Christian Lahusen  
University of Siegen
- Maria Theiss  
University of Warsaw
- Katrin Uba  
Uppsala University

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**Project website:** [www.livewhat.unige.ch](http://www.livewhat.unige.ch)

## ANNEX

**Table 1: Issues of claims about the economic crisis by strength of crisis (percentages)**

	<b>Strong</b>	<b>Intermediate</b>	<b>Weak</b>
<b>Socioeconomic issues</b>	<b>29.16</b>	<b>18.68</b>	<b>16.35</b>
Macroeconomics	41.82	54.62	51.07
Labor and employment	9.97	9.70	6.85
Social policy	3.74	2.39	2.69
Economic activities and domestic commerce	15.31	14.62	23.03
<b>Other issues</b>	<b>70.84</b>	<b>81.32</b>	<b>83.65</b>
Rights, civil liberties, and discrimination	1.03	1.47	0.50
Health	1.39	0.71	0.70
Agriculture	1.03	1.32	0.35
Education, culture, and sports	4.77	1.17	2.19
Environment	0.83	0.76	0.62
Energy	0.83	0.30	0.57
Immigration and integration	0.40	0.51	0.55
Transportation	2.15	0.36	1.15
Law and order	1.33	1.37	0.67
Urban and regional policies	1.76	4.01	1.52
Defense	0.17	0.36	0.17
Science	0.27	0.15	0.32
Foreign trade	0.93	0.25	1.69
International affairs	1.69	2.34	2.57
Government and public administration	9.64	1.78	2.02
Public lands and water management	0.07	0.05	0.10
Other fields	0.89	1.78	0.65
<b>Total N</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>
	<b>3018</b>	<b>1970</b>	<b>4012</b>

(Pearson  $\chi^2(40) = 1.1e+03$ , Pr = 0.000, Cramer's V = 0.2533; Pearson  $\chi^2(2) = 170.5644$ , Pr = 0.000, Cramer's V = 0.1419)

**Table 2: Objects of claims about the economic crisis by strength of crisis (percentages)**

	Strong	Intermediate	Weak
<b>State and party actors</b>	<b>13.68</b>	<b>23.91</b>	<b>14.31</b>
State actors	12.33	21.47	13.33
Political parties and politicians	1.36	2.44	0.97
<b>Economic actors</b>	<b>27.44</b>	<b>39.59</b>	<b>42.32</b>
<b>Civil society actors</b>	<b>27.24</b>	<b>15.58</b>	<b>17.95</b>
Other professional organizations	4.27	2.44	2.82
Labor organizations	16.70	9.59	12.04
Group-specific organizations	5.57	2.49	2.44
Solidarity, human rights, and welfare organizations	0.17	0.76	0.17
Other civil society organizations	0.53	0.30	0.47
<b>Othe actors</b>	<b>9.05</b>	<b>14.57</b>	<b>21.78</b>
People/citizens	22.43	5.58	2.67
The elites	0.17	0.76	0.97
<b>Total N</b>	100% 3018	100% 1970	100% 4012

(Pearson  $\chi^2(16) = 394.7893$ , Pr = 0.000, Cramer's V = 0.1504; Pearson  $\chi^2(6) = 344.0756$ , Pr = 0.000, Cramer's V = 0.140)

**Table 3: Diagnostic frames of claims about the economic crisis by strength of crisis (percentages)**

	Strong	Intermediate	Weak
<b>Economic causes</b>	39.53	58.59	61.57
<b>Legal, administrative, and regulatory causes</b>	34.01	22.70	13.66
<b>Political causes</b>	18.02	7.74	11.46
<b>Other diagnostic frames</b>	8.43	10.98	13.31
<b>Total N</b>	100% 1032	100% 1357	100% 1413

(Pearson  $\chi^2(6) = 237.3373$ , Pr = 0.000, Cramer's V = 0.1801)

**Table 4: Blamed actors in claims about the economic crisis by strength of crisis (percentages)**

	Strong	Intermediate	Weak
<b>State and party actors</b>	75.65	59.24	53.02
<b>Economic actors</b>	16.08	33.30	41.46
<b>Civil society actors</b>	7.35	5.51	2.51
<b>Unknown/unspecified actors</b>	0.92	1.95	3.02
<b>Total N</b>	100% 653	100% 925	100% 398

(Pearson  $\chi^2(6) = 153.4421$ , Pr = 0.000, Cramer's V = 0.1935)

Figure 1. European Visibility in the Debates of the National Public Spheres by Country, 2008-2014

