

Interplay between media-related perceptions and perceptions of hostility in international conflicts: Results from a study of German and Greek citizens

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Abstract

During the European debt crisis, German and Greek media frequently reported on the political conflict between the two countries. This article examines to what extent the media coverage in one country about the other is considered by German and Greek citizens to be hostile ('hostile media perception') and influential ('influence of presumed influence'). Data from a comparative survey in Germany ($n = 492$) and Greece ($n = 484$) show that news coverage by foreign media on the European debt crisis is perceived by respondents as hostile against their own country and as influential. Moreover, both media-related perceptions are linked with intensified perceptions of hostility, such as assumptions that an individual's country is not respected in the other country or that the other country's citizens are demanding that the individual's country

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be punished. Based on these results, it is discussed whether media-related perceptions can have a conflict-intensifying effect in international crises.

Keywords

Comparative research, European debt crisis, hostile media perception, perceptions of hostility, presumed media influence, survey

Introduction

An important international crisis of the past decade was the European debt crisis. Greece was particularly affected by this crisis, and Germany played an important role in the negotiations on financial support for Greece and the requirements for that support.

German and Greek media extensively reported on the European debt crisis—especially about the consequences of the crisis for Greece and Germany and about the negotiations (e.g. Capelos and Exadaktylos, 2017; Michailidou, 2017; Otto and Köhler, 2016; Otto et al., 2016). In many cases, this coverage was conflict-oriented and included, for example, stereotypical presentations of the people of the other country (e.g. Bickes et al., 2012, 2014; Lialiouti and Bithymitris, 2017; Michailidou, 2017; Tzogopoulos, 2013).

For the most part, citizens are aware of only the media content published in their own country. However, they also can receive (mostly, rather rudimentary) information about the content of other countries' media coverage. In the present case, this is possible not least because German and Greek media reported on the other country's media coverage criticising their own country. For example, Greek media picked up articles in which German media 'constructed the myth of the corrupt and lazy Greeks' (Bickes et al., 2014: 426) while German media picked up Greek reports in which links were made between today's Germany and the National Socialist period (Bickes et al., 2012, 2014).

Based on this, individuals are able to develop assumptions about how the media of other countries reports on one's own country and about how this coverage might affect the perceptions, attitudes, or behaviour of people in those other countries (Wei et al., 2017). Therefore, it is important to examine how the populations of various nations perceive coverage of foreign media on international conflicts and to examine possible consequences that these perceptions elicit.

Two well-established theoretical approaches can be used to understand this issue: the hostile media effect, which states that individuals tend to perceive media coverage about conflicts as hostile toward their own group and perspective (Vallone et al., 1985), and the 'influence of presumed influence' approach, which states that individuals perceive media coverage to have a strong influence on other people's perceptions, attitudes, or behaviour (Gunther and Storey, 2003). Research

has shown that both perceptions can have significant consequences, such as stronger support for media restriction, increased feelings of social alienation, or radicalization processes (for an overview: Perloff, 2015; Post, 2019; Sun, 2013).

By focusing on the European debt crisis and using data from surveys of German and Greek citizens, the present study examined to what extent the coverage of the other country's media about the own country was judged by German and Greek citizens as hostile against their own country and as having a strong influence on the citizens of the other country. Based on this, the study's aim is to answer the research question of whether these perceptions led to so-called perceptions of hostility. These perceptions of hostility can include an individual assuming that his or her country is not respected in another country, that the other country's citizens are ungrateful, or that the other country's citizens are demanding that the individual's country be punished.

This study is one of the few comparative studies in the field of research on media-related perceptions. It indicates that those perceptions can also emerge and lead to consequences across borders. This is notable particularly in times when due to digitalisation, foreign media has become more accessible. The study sheds light on the interplay between hostile media perceptions and presumed influences. Moreover, it adds perceived hostility to the list of potential consequences of media-related perceptions. From political and societal perspectives, the study is relevant because it investigates how media-related perceptual processes can have a conflict-intensifying effect in international crises.

Media-related perceptions

Hostile media perceptions

Hostile media perceptions, i.e. the hostile media effect, can be described as a tendency for individuals who are involved in a conflict to perceive media coverage about the conflict as biased or relatively biased against their own group or perspective—even if the media report in an objective or balanced way (Vallone et al., 1985). In this context, the term 'conflict' can be understood as a significant public dispute between at least two groups about an issue that is of social or political importance. The perception of hostile media coverage among individuals or groups with strong opinions on a conflict has been confirmed in many studies. In these studies, the respondents should either evaluate specific journalistic reports or evaluate all coverage of a conflict (for an overview: Gunther, 2017; McLeod et al., 2017; Perloff, 2015; Post, 2019).

Presumed media influences

According to the influence of presumed influence approach, the perception that the media strongly influences other people affects individuals' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours (Gunther and Storey, 2003). This idea is similar to the third-person

effect (Davison, 1983), which states that individuals perceive the media's influence on others as being stronger than its influence on themselves and that this so-called third-person perception can elicit consequences. However, presumed influences on others—as described by the influence of presumed influence approach—seem to be a less ambiguous and better predictor of potential effects. There are several reasons for this. If, for example, third-person perceptions serve as the independent variable, it remains unclear if presumed influences on self or presumed influences on others are responsible for potential effects (e.g. Chung and Moon, 2016; Schmierbach et al., 2008).

Consequences of hostile media perceptions and presumed media influences

Research has shown that hostile media perceptions and presumed influences on others can have consequences (for an overview: McLeod et al., 2017; Perloff, 2015; Post, 2019; Sun, 2013; Tsfati and Cohen, 2013). Hostile media perceptions, for example, lead to intensified negative emotional reactions to media (Hwang et al., 2008); are related to mistrust of the media and, indirectly, to mistrust of democracy (Newman and Fletcher, 2017; Tsfati and Cohen, 2005a); and are associated with political activism (e.g. Feldman et al., 2017). The perception of strong media influences on others can lead, for example, to stronger support for media restrictions (Baek et al., 2019; Dohle et al., 2017), strategic voting (Cohen and Tsfati, 2009), and strategic social media communication, such as calling attention to political issues (Bernhard and Dohle, 2015, 2018).

Moreover, an increasing number of studies have demonstrated that consequences are caused by the interplay of hostile media perceptions and presumed media influences on others (for an overview: Post, 2019; Tsfati and Cohen, 2013). In some of these studies, presumed influences on others are conceptualised as a mediator between hostile media perceptions and specific consequences: the more media coverage is perceived to be hostile, the more this coverage is perceived to be influential on others. This interplay of media-related perceptions can evoke increased feelings of social alienation among group members (Tsfati, 2007) or even stronger intentions to use force to resist others in conflicts (Tsfati and Cohen, 2005b). Both media-related perceptions also contribute to radicalisation processes among religious groups (Neumann et al., 2018), provoke a higher acceptance of incivility in controversies (Post, 2017), and lead to intensified activities such as political talks with others intended to correct supposedly unwelcome media content (Barnidge and Rojas, 2014; Rojas, 2010).

Hostile media perceptions and presumed media influences in international contexts

Although large numbers of studies have examined hostile media perceptions and presumed influences, very few studies in this research field have used cross-country and comparative designs and/or investigated cross-national media-related

perceptions (exceptions: Cho and Han, 2004; Müller, 2013; Wei et al., 2017; Willnat et al., 2002). These studies show that individuals can form differentiated perceptions about media coverage and its influence in other countries. According to Müller (2013), media coverage can be important for ingroup–outgroup distinctions and for processes of building national identity (see also: Hall, 2000): the media often present the citizens of their home country more positively than those of other countries—for example, as less influenceable by unwelcome media content. This may lead to self-enhancement, a stronger identification with the nation, and a greater cohesion of the nation.

Particularly noteworthy is the study conducted by Wei et al. (2017), which demonstrated that perceptions of the media's influence in another country can elicit consequences. In this study, the stronger the people living in China perceived unwelcome influence from US news about China to be on Americans, the more these Chinese people supported the Chinese government's global public relations campaigns, hoping that these campaigns would correct the assumed influences from US media coverage.

The study presented in this article addresses such cross-national perceptions of media coverage and its consequences in the context of the European debt crisis.

Media-related perceptions and European debt crisis: The case of Germany and Greece

Germany, Greece, and the European debt crisis

The European debt crisis started in 2009. An essential element of this crisis was the fact that several countries in the European Monetary Union faced serious financial problems or were unable to repay their government debts. The country probably most affected by the crisis was Greece. Since 2010, Greece has needed, at different times, urgent financial help from the Eurogroup, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund (the so-called Troika). These institutions combined their financial support with requirements that Greece had to fulfil, including that, for example, Greece's government must enact several tax increases and spending cuts. This led to social problems and anger among Greek citizens.

As the largest financier within the Eurogroup, Germany played a leading role in the negotiations on financial support and requirements for Greece. German politicians criticised Greek politics, and further financial support (which included German public money) was called into question in some parts of the German population. In contrast, Greek politicians and citizens lamented the harsh requirements that accompanied the debt relief. In 2015, the situation escalated, as the Greek government broke off negotiations and conducted a referendum, in which the majority of Greek citizens rejected the Troika's requirements. Later negotiations resulted in a compromise (for more information: Agridopoulos and Papagiannopoulos, 2016; Karyotis and Gerodimos, 2015).

German and Greek media coverage of the debt crisis

Studies show that German media (Bickes et al., 2012, 2014; Heft, 2017; Joris et al., 2018; Otto and Köhler, 2016; Otto et al., 2016; Schlosser, 2013; Tzogopoulos, 2013) and Greek media (Bickes et al., 2012; Capelos and Exadaktylos, 2017; Doudaki et al., 2016; Lialiouti and Bithymitris, 2017; Michailidou, 2017; Pohlkamp, 2013) reported extensively on the financial situation in Greece, the consequences for Greece and Germany, and the negotiations. Some of these studies focused on media coverage during the first years of the crisis, while others analysed coverage in later periods. Their results indicate that German and Greek media often discussed negative scenarios, such as a deterioration of Greece's social situation and a possible Eurozone breakdown (e.g. Bickes et al. 2014; Otto et al., 2016; Schlosser, 2013). Both countries' media self-critically dealt with the politics and situations at home and expressed an understanding of the demands of each other's countries and its populations (e.g. Bickes et al., 2012; Capelos and Exadaktylos, 2017; Doudaki et al., 2016; Otto and Köhler, 2016; Pohlkamp, 2013).

However, results also show that (despite considerable differences between media outlets within the countries) German and Greek media created conflict-oriented coverage. A content analysis of German newspapers, for example, indicates that in about a third of all articles, the crisis was presented as clash, battle, or fight between the involved players (Joris et al., 2018; see also Bickes et al., 2014; Capelos and Exadaktylos, 2017; Lialiouti and Bithymitris, 2017; Otto and Köhler, 2016; Schlosser, 2013; Tzogopoulos, 2013). The Greek media saw the financiers' requirements as an important reason for the worsening crisis in Greece and complained about a lack of solidarity within Europe; it also emphasised Germany's leading role in decision-making processes, partly in combination with criticism of Germany and, particularly, Chancellor Angela Merkel (e.g. Lialiouti and Bithymitris, 2017; Michailidou, 2017). According to systematic content analyses, the majority of German media criticised Greece, rated Greek politics negatively, and neglected to examine specific causes of the crisis (e.g. Otto and Köhler, 2016; Schlosser, 2013).

Moreover, media coverage in both countries was characterised by stereotypical and discrediting presentations (e.g. Bickes et al., 2012, 2014; Michailidou, 2017; Schlosser, 2013; Tzogopoulos, 2013). In some German media outlets, Greeks were bashed as unregenerate and lazy, in contrast to the hard-working people of Germany (e.g. Bickes et al., 2012, 2014; Schlosser, 2013; Tzogopoulos, 2013). Greek media coverage included negative portrayals of Germany, including individual reports, which presented 'contemporary German culture as still being under the influence of Adolf Hitler's spirit' (Bickes et al., 2014: 426; see also Bickes et al. 2012; Lialiouti and Bithymitris, 2017; Michailidou, 2017). Compared with the overall coverage of the debt crisis, such fierce and abusive reports were rather rare in both countries.

However, these reports in particular were addressed and criticised by media in the targeted country (Bickes et al., 2012, 2014): Greek media picked up the reports from German media in which Greek people were presented as self-indulgent, worthy of blame for their own situation, and ungrateful for the help received, which they were said not to deserve if they do not accept the requirements. German media picked up reports from the Greek media in which Germans were portrayed as callous and greedy for power and in which links were made between today's Germany and the era of National Socialism.

Perceptions of German and Greek media coverage of the debt crisis in each country

Since the debt crisis was one of the most significant issues in Europe in the past decade, Germans and Greeks likely noticed the topic-specific coverage *in their own country's media outlets*. This can have consequences: research has shown that exposure to media coverage affects individuals' evaluation of other countries (Brewer et al., 2003). More specifically, exposure to media coverage of the Euro crisis, for example, due to conflict-emphasising frames, leads individuals to perceive the crisis as an international conflict (Joris et al., 2019).¹

However, most people in Germany and Greece were unable to follow coverage of the debt crisis *in each other's countries* directly, if for no other reason but language barriers. Nevertheless, as already mentioned, it is plausible that Germans and Greeks were aware of the media coverage of the debt crisis in each other's countries because critical reports by other country's media were emphasised by media in the own country (Bickes et al., 2012, 2014). Such coverage can be a starting point for individuals' perceptions of hostile and influential media coverage in another country (Wei et al., 2017).

Moreover, studies that applied social-identity theory or self-categorisation theory to hostile media perceptions and presumed media influences showed that partisans tend to assume hostile and influential reporting from outgroup media sources (e.g. Gunther et al., 2017; Hartmann and Tanis, 2013; Reid, 2012; Reid et al., 2007). This also could explain why participants make assumptions about the other country's media coverage and why, in the case at hand, Germans and Greeks might tend to assume that each other country's media coverage is hostile and influential in the other country, even when they do not actually view most of that media coverage.

Perceptions of hostility as a potential consequence of media-related perceptions

As described, perceptions of hostile and influential media coverage can have conflict-intensifying effects, such as stronger intentions to use force or a higher acceptance of uncivility (for an overview: Post, 2019).

Opinion polls show that many Germans and Greeks perceived the debt crisis and its consequences as a conflict between their countries (Michailidou, 2017; Otto and Köhler, 2016). The present study is based on the assumption that individuals' perceptions of hostile and influential media coverage in the other country are a reason for this conflict-intensifying view, as these media-related perceptions lead to individuals' perceptions of hostility between Germans and Greeks.

Perceptions of hostility can include group members' views that the opposing party in a conflictual situation dislikes or does not respect their group and its ideas, that the opposing party does not notice the concessions or friendly actions of their group, or that the opposing party approves certain measures precisely because they could harm their group. In the case at hand, German citizens may think, for example, that Greeks would be glad if Germany found itself in a similar situation as Greece. In turn, Greeks may think that Germans want even stricter punishments for Greece (see the Methods sections for more indicators). These perceptions of hostility are relevant because, for example, an individual's perception that the opposing party does not respect the individual's group can lead to an intensification of conflict—or to a weakening of the view that both groups are involved in a common problem to solve.

The idea of hostility between groups is quite similar to the concept of affective polarisation, which can be described as a process in which one group shows an *increasing* dislike for the other group, and vice versa (e.g. Druckman and Levendusky, 2019; Hobolt et al., 2020; Iyengar et al., 2012, 2019; Iyengar and Westwood, 2015; Webster and Abramowitz, 2017). This is why perceived affective polarisation should be regarded as an increasing perception of dislike between groups involved in a conflict. However, since no longitudinal study was conducted within the present case, a process of perceived *growing* dislike could not be measured. Instead, perceptions of hostility were examined to capture perceptions at one particular point in time, which is after the climax of the political disputes.

The present study examines perceived hostility in the context of the European debt crisis, focusing on German and Greek citizens. It seems plausible that perceptions of hostility might result from an individual's perception that members of another group are often confronted with media coverage that is hostile and influential from the individual's perspective. Thus, we propose:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): The more (a) German and (b) Greek individuals perceive other country's media coverage about their country to be hostile, the more intense their perception of hostility between Germans and Greeks will be.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): The stronger (a) German and (b) Greek individuals perceive the influence of other country's media coverage about their country to be, the more intense their perception of hostility between Germans and Greeks will be.

Moreover, studies have shown that the presumed media influence on others is a mediator between hostile media perceptions and specific consequences. The more

hostile media coverage is perceived to be, the more it is suspected of influencing others. This, again, leads to consequences (e.g. Tsfati, 2007; Tsfati and Cohen, 2005b). Thus, we propose:

Hypothesis 3 (H3): The perception that other country's media coverage is hostile will increase (a) German and (b) Greek individuals' perception of strong influence of this media coverage in the respective other country, which then leads to perception of hostility between Germans and Greeks.

Method

Data collection and sample

Two online surveys were conducted in September/October 2016—one for the German population and one for the Greek population. By this time, the political disputes and media coverage on the debt crisis had diminished. Thus, no specific events or reports should have distorted participants' responses.

The respondents were chosen with the help of online access panels. This was done in cooperation with a professional operator of online access panels. Out of these panels, the samples of participants were drawn via random sampling. The goal was that a total of 500 Germans and 500 Greeks participate in the survey. Quotas were imposed concerning gender, age, and education level to ensure that the sample distribution regarding these key sociodemographic variables was similar to the German and Greek population (see Hellenic Statistical Authority, 2014; Statistisches Bundesamt, 2016).

As some respondents finished the survey in a very short time, we had to assume that these respondents did not carefully consider the questions. These cases were excluded from the data. Thus, the sample sizes were reduced to 492 Germans and 484 Greeks.

Overall, 51.2% of the German respondents (German population: 50.9%) and 52.1% of the Greeks (Greek population: 51.0%) were female. The respondents' ages in the German sample ranged from 18 to 68 years ($M = 45.79$; $SD = 14.50$; average age of German population: 44.3 years). In the Greek sample, respondents' ages ranged from 16 to 68 years ($M = 38.25$; $SD = 12.98$; average age of Greek population: 41.9 years). However, both samples were biased regarding education, as 48.0% of German respondents and 46.1% of Greek respondents had more than 12 years of education. This is higher than the average education level in both countries. Thus, the samples are not representative of both countries' populations, at least regarding this variable.

Both questionnaires were created and written in German. The questionnaire for the Greek population was translated into Greek by a native speaker and back-translated by another native speaker (both social scientists), as suggested by Brislin

(1970). As the original and back-translated questionnaires did not differ with respect to the relevant variables, the translated questionnaire was used.

Measures

Hostile media perception. Respondents were asked whether they believed that in the context of the debt crisis, the media in the other country reported in a more critical way about their home country (German respondents evaluated Greek media; Greek respondents evaluated German media; see Table 1). Thus, the items provide information as to whether the people in one country perceive other country's media coverage as biased or unfair toward their own country.²

Presumed influence on others. Respondents were asked whether they believed that in the context of the debt crisis, the media in the other country strongly influenced the respondents' country's image in the other country (see Table 1). Using a single item like this proved to be a valid measurement in studies dealing with presumed influence (e.g. Rojas, 2010; Tsfati and Cohen, 2005b).

Perceptions of hostility. In the German survey, five items were used to measure perceptions of hostility (see Table 1): German respondents were asked whether they believed that (1) Greeks would be glad if Germany found itself in a similar situation as Greece, (2) Greeks are ungrateful for the help they received, (3) Greeks want political countermeasures against Germany, (4) Germany is not respected in Greece, and (5) Greeks evaluate German policy negatively. In the Greek survey, perceptions of hostility were measured with three items: Greek respondents were asked whether they believed that (1) Germans want even stricter punishments for Greece, (2) Greece is not respected in Germany, and (3) Germans evaluate Greek policy negatively. The items were developed specifically for the present study, mainly based on aspects that were presented and discussed in media coverage about the topic (e.g. Bickes et al., 2012, 2014; Michailidou, 2017; Otto and Köhler, 2016). The aim was that the items correspond with the particular topic and cover different dimensions of perceived hostility. For each country, separate items were developed because different potential perceptions of hostility were possible in Germany and Greece (which is also a reason why the number of items is not identical). Data analyses indicate that it is not appropriate to create an index comprising the items used in the German or Greek survey.

Covariates. In addition to sex, age, and education level, respondents' interest in politics and political position on a left–right spectrum were measured. Moreover, internal political efficacy ('I can understand and assess important political issues') and external political efficacy ('Politicians care about what people think') were measured (see Beierlein et al., 2012). Respondents were asked whether they were interested in the debt crisis and whether they themselves or someone they know personally had been affected by the crisis. In addition, the respondents were

Table 1. Independent and dependent variables: means and standard deviations.

Variables	Germans (n = 487–492)		Greeks (n = 477–484)		Scale
	M	SD	M	SD	
HMP: German media reported in a more critical way about Greece			4.07	1.10	1 = do not agree at all to 5 = agree very strongly
HMP: Greek media reported in a more critical way about Germany	3.78	.97			
PI: German media strongly influenced the image of Greece in Germany			4.23	.97	
PI: Greek media strongly influenced the image of Germany in Greece	3.72	.96			
Perceptions of hostility:					
Greeks would be glad if Germany found itself in a similar situation as Greece	3.30	1.21			
Greeks are ungrateful for the help they received	3.31	1.15			
Greeks want political countermeasures against Germany	3.37	1.01			
Germany is not respected in Greece	3.45	.99			
Greece is not respected in Germany			4.21	.92	
Greeks evaluate German policy negatively	3.80	.97			
Germans evaluate Greek policy negatively			4.38	.84	
Germans want even stricter punishments for Greece			3.86	1.09	

Notes: HMP = Hostile media perception; PI: Presumed influence; t-tests indicate significant differences between the HMP of German and Greek citizens, between the PI of German and Greek citizens, and between the perceptions of hostility (items: 'is not respected' and 'evaluate ... policy negatively') of German and Greek citizens ($p < .001$).

asked to evaluate whether the German and Greek governments' actions during the crisis were correct. Respondents stated how often they were exposed to journalistic and social media content dealing with the debt crisis. Finally, German respondents were asked to estimate how often Greek people were exposed to media content dealing with the crisis, and Greek respondents were asked to estimate how often German people were exposed to topic-specific media content (see Table 4 in Appendix 1).

Results

The survey results show that German respondents thought that Greek media were rather critical in their reporting on Germany, while the Greeks strongly thought that the German media reported in a more critical way toward Greece (see Table 1).

Moreover, Greek respondents in particular suspected that the German media's coverage exerted a noticeable influence on German citizens (see Table 1).

To test H1 and H2 for each country, two-level hierarchical regression analyses were conducted in which the items measuring perceptions of hostility were used as dependent variables. In the first step of the analyses, the covariates described in the Methods section were considered. In the second step, the items measuring hostile media perceptions and presumed influences were introduced (see Tables 2 and 3).

The results of the German study largely support H1. Almost all regressions show that the perception that Greek media reported in a more critical way about Germany led to stronger perceptions of hostility. Only the perception that Greeks are ungrateful for help they received was not significantly influenced by hostile media perceptions ($\beta = .09$; $p = .08$). The German study's results support H2: the more the German respondents thought that the Greek media affected Greek people's image of Germany, the stronger their perception of hostility. This applies to all five items, which were used to measure perceptions of hostility among the German respondents (see Table 2).

The Greek study's results also largely support H1: the more the Greek respondents thought that the German media were reporting about Greece in a more critical way, the more intense their perception that people in Germany do not respect Greece ($\beta = .15$; $p < .01$) and their perception that Germans evaluate Greek policy negatively ($\beta = .11$; $p < .05$). However, the influence of hostile media perceptions on the assumption that Germans want even stricter punishments for Greece is not significant ($\beta = .06$; $p = .26$). Moreover, the results of the regressions with the data of the Greek sample support H2: the more the Greek respondents perceived the German media coverage as strongly affecting the image of Greece in Germany, the more intense Greeks' perception of hostility (see Table 3).

Hostile media perceptions should increase perceptions of hostility both directly and—according to H3—indirectly through the mediation of presumed strong media influences on others. To test the hypothesis, mediation analyses were conducted for each item used to measure perceptions of hostility (PROCESS

Table 2. Hierarchical regressions—influences on the intensity of perceptions of hostility (German sample).

	Greeks would be glad if Germany found itself in a similar situation as Greece (n = 454)	Greeks are ungrateful for the help they received (n = 454)	Greeks want political countermeasures against Germany (n = 452)	Germany is not respected in Greece (n = 457)	Greeks evaluate German policy negatively (n = 457)
Block 1					
Sex (1 = female)	-.01	.10*	.06	.02	-.04
Age	-.01	-.11*	-.06	-.17**	.04
Education (1 = high school or higher)	-.12**	-.05	-.05	.03	-.02
Debt crisis: Media exposure	.03	.05	.12	-.05	.02
(journalistic content)					
Debt crisis: Media exposure (social media)	.08	.00	-.15**	-.02	-.01
Interest in Politics	.00	.01	.03	-.07	-.07
Political ideology (left . . . right)	.16***	.29***	.03	.08#	.01
Internal efficacy	.10#	.01	-.01	-.03	.08
External efficacy	-.05	-.08#	-.04	-.03	-.04
Debt crisis: personal interest	-.08	.01	.00	.12	.07
Debt crisis: personal concern	-.01	.01	.00	-.03	-.04
Debt crisis: evaluation of Greek government's action	-.06	-.11*	.04	-.08	-.15***
Debt crisis: evaluation of German government's action	-.15***	.05	-.13**	-.08	-.07
Debt crisis: perceived media exposure in Greece (journalistic content)	-.05	.02	-.03	.09	.05
Debt crisis: perceived media exposure in Greece (social media)	.07	-.01	.15**	-.04	-.04
R ²	.13***	.18***	.08**	.09***	.15***

(continued)

Table 2. Continued.

	Greeks would be glad if Germany found itself in a similar situation as Greece (n = 454)	Greeks are ungrateful for the help they received (n = 454)	Greeks want political countermeasures against Germany (n = 452)	Germany is not respected in Greece (n = 457)	Greeks evaluate German policy negatively (n = 457)
Block 2					
HMP: Greek media reported in a more critical way about Germany	.14**	.09	.25***	.18***	.18***
PI: Greek media strongly influenced image of Germany in Greece	.24***	.17**	.15**	.20***	.29***
R ²	.09***	.04***	.10***	.09***	.14***
Total R ²	.23***	.22***	.19***	.18***	.29***

Note: Final standardized beta coefficients. Sample: approximately representative of the German population with Internet access. Date of the survey: September/October 2016. HMP = hostile media perception; PI = presumed influence. #p < .10; *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

Table 3. Hierarchical regressions—influences on the intensity of hostility (Greek sample).

	Germans want even stricter pun- ishments for Greece (n = 429)	Greece is not respected in Germany (n = 435)	Germans evaluate Greek policy nega- tively (n = 435)
Block 1			
Sex (1 = female)	-.07	.07	.09
Age	.03	.00	-.07
Education (1 = high school or higher)	.03	-.01	-.08
Debt crisis: Media exposure (journalistic content)	.03	-.02	.04
Debt crisis: Media exposure (social media)	.03	.04	-.04
Interest in Politics	-.07	-.03	-.01
Political ideology (left . . . right)	.03	.07	.02
Internal efficacy	.00	.04	.08
External efficacy	-.05	-.05	-.09
Debt crisis: personal interest	.15**	.11*	.12*
Debt crisis: personal concern	.11*	.13**	.10*
Debt crisis: evaluation of Greek government's action	-.02	-.06	-.09
Debt crisis: evaluation of German government's action	-.12*	-.13**	-.06
Debt crisis: perceived media exposure in Germany (journalistic content)	-.10*	-.01	.03
Debt crisis: perceived media exposure in Germany (social media)	-.04	.00	-.02
R ²	.13***	.17***	.17***
Block 2			
HMP: German media reported in a more critical way about Greece	.06	.15**	.11*
PI: German media strongly influenced image of Greece in Germany	.17**	.22***	.24***
R ²	.03***	.08***	.07***
Total R ²	.16***	.25***	.24***

Note: Final standardized beta coefficients. Sample: approximately representative of the Greek population with Internet access. Date of the survey: September/October 2016. HMP = hostile media perception; PI = presumed influence.
 *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

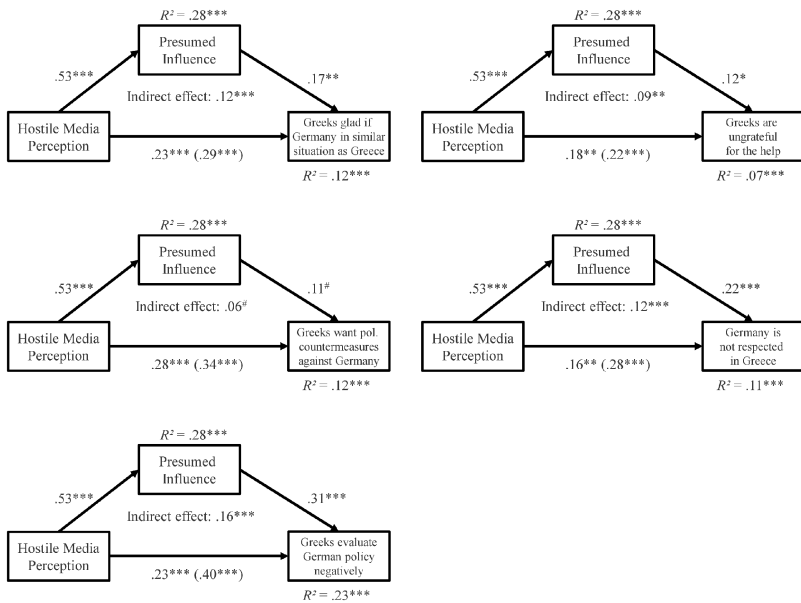


Figure 1. Mediation models—connections between hostile media perceptions, presumed influences, and items measuring perceptions of hostility (German sample). Standardized regression coefficients β . Number in parentheses reflects the regression coefficient in the absence of the mediating variables (total effect); $n = 480\text{--}485$; # $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

modelling tool; number of bootstrap samples: 10,000; Hayes, 2017; see Figures 1 and 2). The results are in line with H3: in seven out of eight analyses, the presumed influences on others proved to be a significant mediator (one exception: mediation model including ‘Greeks want political countermeasures against Germany’ as a dependent variable; indirect effects: $\beta = .06$; $p = .07$; see Figure 1). The more the respondents perceived that the other country’s media were reporting critically about the respondents’ country, the more they thought that it was strongly influencing the image that the other country’s respondents held. In addition, the more strongly these media influences are perceived to be, the more strongly the respondents’ perceptions of hostility (one exception: mediation model that included ‘Greeks want political countermeasures against Germany’ as a dependent variable: $\beta = .11$; $p = .07$; see Figure 1). When controlled for the mediator, the direct influence of hostile media perceptions on perceptions of hostility (total effect) becomes weaker but remains significant (one exception: mediation model including ‘Germans want even stricter punishments for Greece’ as a dependent variable; total effect: $\beta = .21$; $p < .001$; controlled for the mediator: $\beta = .10$; $p = .09$; see Figure 2).

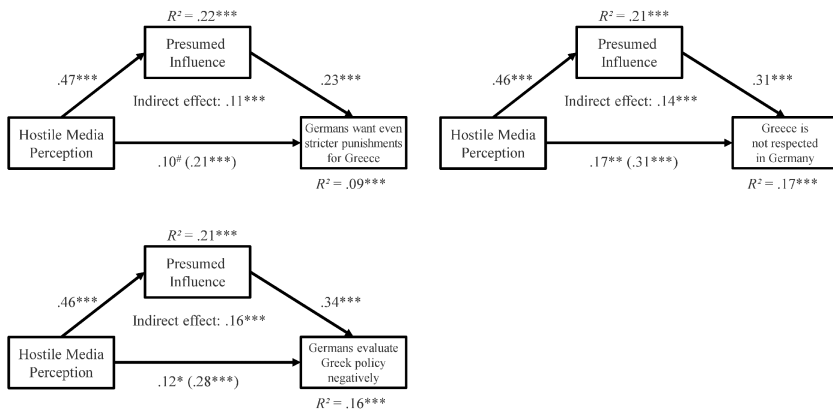


Figure 2. Mediation models—connections between hostile media perceptions, presumed influences, and items measuring perceptions of hostility (Greek sample). Standardized regression coefficients β . Number in parentheses reflects the regression coefficient in the absence of the mediating variables (total effect); $n = 470\text{--}476$; # $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Discussion

This study deals with the European debt crisis, particularly the relationship between Germany and Greece. Greece suffered significantly from the crisis and relied on financial aid from institutions such as the Eurogroup. Germany played an important role in this crisis, particularly as the largest financier within the Eurogroup. In negotiations on providing financial support for Greece and the requirements for that support, politicians from both countries tried to find solutions for the crisis. However, many people in both countries perceived the debt crisis to be a conflict between Germany and Greece, rather than a common challenge (e.g. Michailidou, 2017; Otto and Köhler, 2016). This article focuses on one possible reason for this conflict-oriented view: it was assumed that people in Germany and Greece perceived topic-specific other country’s media coverage about their country as being both hostile and influential. By analysing data from the German and Greek surveys, this study tested whether such media-related perceptions are related to intensified perceptions of hostility among people in Germany and Greece.

The descriptive results illustrate that the German respondents accused the Greek media of reporting negatively about Germany, while the Greek respondents indicated even stronger perceptions that German media have been hostile toward Greece. Thus, the data confirm the findings of hostile media research, according to which media coverage is perceived as hostile toward one’s own group and its positions (Vallone et al., 1985)—especially if the coverage comes from outgroup media sources (e.g. Reid, 2012). In the present case, respondents had to assess media coverage in another country. The respondents possibly perceived the other country’s media not only to be more or less hostile toward the respondents’

country but also to be supportive of the interests of the media's own country and politicians. They may have assumed a rally-round-the-flag effect (e.g. Baum and Potter, 2008).

Compared with the Germans, the Greek respondents indicated stronger perceptions that the other countries' media were hostile toward them. This could be the outcome of actual coverage—it is possible that German media, overall, were more negative about Greece than Greek media about Germany. However, this might also be a result of perceived ingroup status: Greek respondents may have felt that Greece had a comparatively low status because it was relying on other countries' financial help. Previous studies have shown that the perception of low ingroup status increases hostile media perceptions (Hartmann and Tanis, 2013).

The descriptive results also show that respondents in both countries—the Greeks more than the Germans—assumed a strong influence from media coverage on people in the other country.

Finally, the descriptive data indicate a notable level of perceived hostility among respondents—especially among Greek respondents—when these respondents assessed the attitudes of the other country's inhabitants. For example, the respondents more or less perceived that their country was not respected in the other country or perceived that the other country's citizens were ungrateful, demanded that the respondents' country be punished, and wished that the other country was in an equally bad situation as their own. Thus, the data coincide with previous findings that the relationship between Germany and Greece, in terms of the European debt crisis, was marked by differences and conflict (e.g. Michailidou, 2017; Otto and Köhler, 2016).

Research has proven that media coverage in users' own country about other countries affects how users perceive or evaluate those other countries (e.g. Brewer et al., 2003). In contrast, the present study focuses on the effects of individuals' awareness of another country's media coverage about the individuals' country. Wei et al. (2017) identified one possible consequence: individuals support government campaigns to correct the presumed negative and strong influence of coverage by foreign media about their country. In the present study, regression analyses demonstrate that assumptions of hostile and influential reporting about an individual's country by foreign media are linked with intensified perceptions that people in the other country hold negative attitudes toward that individual's own country.

In both Germany and Greece, the perception of strong media influences proved to be a significant predictor of perceived hostility (H2). This was only slightly different regarding hostile media perceptions (H1): according to the present study's regression analyses, the perception that Greek media reported in a more critical way about Germany exerted, in four out of five cases, significant influence on German respondents' perceptions of hostility. Likewise, the perception that German media reported in a more critical way about Greece exerted, in two out of three cases, significant influence on Greek respondents' perceptions of hostility. It can only be speculated why two items measuring perceptions of hostility were

not affected by hostile media perceptions. One possible reason is that the German respondents' feeling that Greeks are ungrateful for the help they received does not—unlike the other items—clearly include the perception of a bad public mood toward Germany, which, in turn, could be result of an unfriendly coverage about Germany in Greek media.

In addition, the results shed light on the interplay between hostile media perceptions and presumed influences. The more the coverage was believed to be hostile, the more it was considered influential—this confirms research indicating that undesirable content is usually perceived to have strong effects (Sun et al., 2008). Furthermore, hostile media perceptions indirectly affect perceptions of hostility through the mediation of perceived strong media influences on others (H3). This is in line with results of other studies (e.g. Tsftati, 2007; Tsftati and Cohen, 2005b), indicating the potential to integrate different perceptual processes to get an idea of their resulting effects.

From a theoretical perspective, the results are remarkable, as they indicate that deeply theoretically embedded perceptions of hostile media coverage and the media's influence can emerge and yield consequences in an international context—even when individuals are unable to follow media coverage from other countries directly. Moreover, perceptions of hostility could be identified as a variable, which is correlated with hostile media perceptions and presumed influences. Thus, the list of potential consequences of media-related perceptions (e.g. Perloff, 2015; Sun, 2013) can be extended through perceived hostility.

However, it is one limitation of this study that, due to its methodological approach, it does not provide evidence about the causal direction of the detected variable relationships. One could argue that it is also possible that people who perceive hostility between both countries (or perceive themselves as being hostile toward the other country) are going to perceive more hostile media or stronger media influences on citizens in the other country. However, based on existing theoretical work and empirical investigations, it seems more plausible to assume that other people are developing stronger hostile attitudes or conflictual behaviour based on media coverage that is thought to be simultaneously critical of one's own group and highly influential on others (e.g. Choi et al., 2009; Post, 2017; Tsftati, 2007; Tsftati and Cohen, 2005b). Moreover, panel or experimental studies have shown that media-related perceptions, indeed, affect other perceptions or attitudes (and not vice versa, e.g. Dohle et al., 2017; Paek et al., 2011; Tal-Or et al., 2010), thereby indirectly supporting the interpretation that media-related perceptions affect perceptions of hostility. Such panel analyses or experimental studies could be the next step toward proving causal relationships in the case at hand as well. These future studies need to examine whether hostile media perceptions and presumed influences on others may also cause perceived hostility—or even actual dislike and hostility—between different groups to increase over time. By doing this, research on perceptual processes could be linked with research on affective polarisation (e.g. Hobolt et al., 2020; Iyengar et al., 2012, 2019).

This study's results are also relevant from political and societal perspectives, as they offer information about the influence of media-related perceptions on public opinion in an international context. The findings suggest that perceptions of media coverage and influence can have conflict-intensifying effects—or, at least, that individuals' media-related perceptions and conflict-focused viewpoints are related. Problems such as the European debt crisis are not viewed as common challenges that all involved parties are working together to address but rather as conflicts in which rival countries oppose each other. This could lead to more far-reaching consequences. For example, in the case at hand, it could lead to weaker feelings of transnational solidarity or to an increase in Eurosceptic attitudes (Katsanidou and Reinl, 2018).

Nevertheless, in addition to the already-mentioned problem of causal interpretation, the present study has other limitations. First, both samples are relatively small and biased regarding respondents' levels of education. Second, the study focused on the populations of only two countries in the context of one specific international conflict: the European debt crisis. The results might have been different if other international conflicts—such as the so-called European refugee crisis or the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union—were included. However, media-related perceptions have proven to be relevant influencing factors in other conflicts, such as the highly controversial Middle East Conflict (Tsftati and Cohen, 2005a, 2005b) or the less controversial conflict about aircraft noise (Post, 2017). Thus, from a theoretical point of view, it is not implausible that similar results will be found in future studies on conflicts in which different countries are in opposition to each other. Third, the surveys were conducted after the peak in media coverage on the debt crisis to avoid any influence from specific events or reports on participants' responses. It remains unclear whether the results would have been different if the surveys had been carried out earlier (or later). Fourth, the measurement of hostile media perceptions and presumed media influence was broad. Thus, it is unclear which media the respondents had in mind when answering the survey questions. Fifth, the items measuring perceptions of hostility were developed specifically for this study, as they should be in accordance with the specific topic. However, other items might be available to measure perceived hostility or to differentiate among certain dimensions of such a construct. Sixth, a number of control variables were included, but future studies could consider more of these variables, e.g. nationalism or patriotism. This could also help to understand how closely perceptions of news coverage of foreign media about one's own country and perceptions of a national identity or an imagined national community are interrelated (Müller, 2013). In this context, it would be also desirable that future content analyses of media coverage about international affairs would consider whether and how other countries' media coverage is presented.

Despite these limitations, the present study can be regarded as a starting point for subsequent research on media-related perceptions across borders, as well as for research on consequences of these perceptions. Because digitalisation has made coverage of foreign media more accessible, cross-national perceptions of news

coverage by foreign media are likely to proliferate in the future, holding the potential not only to disrupt international relations but also to energise them.

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Notes

1. Furthermore, media coverage can affect political decision-makers in international conflicts. Media often report about such conflicts in a dramatic way, for example by showing pictures of suffering people. According to the so-called CNN effect, this can increase the population’s will ‘that their leaders “do something” to alleviate the problem’ (Baum and Potter, 2008: 52), which in turn can put pressure on politicians to take conflict-intensifying actions (such as military intervention) that they otherwise would not have considered (for a critical discussion of these assumptions: Gilboa, 2005).
2. To contrast this, respondents also were asked whether they believe that the media in the other country reported about the media’s home country in a critical way, a statement that mostly was rejected (Germans: $M = 2.68$; $SD = .93$; Greeks: $M = 2.40$; $SD = 1.01$; 1 = do not agree at all to 5 = agree very strongly).

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Appendix I

Table 4. Covariates: means and standard deviations.

Variables	Germans (n = 485–492)		Greeks (n = 471–484)		Scales
	M	SD	M	SD	
Interest in politics	3.59	1.07	3.66	1.07	1 = not interested at all to 5 = very interested
Political ideology	5.55	2.10	5.62	2.44	1 = far left to 11 = far right

(continued)

Table 4. Continued.

Variables	Germans (<i>n</i> = 485–492)		Greeks (<i>n</i> = 471–484)		Scales
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Internal efficacy	3.52	1.04	4.02	.95	1 = <i>don't agree at all</i> to 5 = <i>agree very strongly</i>
External efficacy	1.87	.99	1.48	.87	
Debt crisis					
Personal interest ^a	3.06	1.05	3.84	.84	1 = <i>don't agree at all</i> to 5 = <i>agree very strongly</i>
Personal concern ^b	1.63	1.06	4.56	.74	
Evaluation of German government's action	2.99	1.10	1.95	.98	5 = <i>agree very strongly</i>
Evaluation of Greek government's action	2.45	.97	1.82	1.00	
Media exposure (journalistic content) ^c	3.21	.97	3.34	.95	1 = <i>never/rarely</i> to 5 = <i>very frequently</i>
Media exposure (social media)	2.29	1.40	3.81	1.27	
Perceived media exposure in the respective other country (journalistic content)	4.10	1.02	4.30	.84	
Perceived media exposure in the respective other country (social media)	3.34	1.21	4.13	.91	

^aThree items (Germans: $\alpha = .89$; Greeks: $\alpha = .79$).

^bTwo items (Germans: $\alpha = .81$; Greeks: $\alpha = .82$).

^cFour items (Germans: $\alpha = .73$; Greeks: $\alpha = .68$).