Buck-Passing in Times of a Pandemic: The Swiss Government's Blame Avoidance Strategies During the First Year of the COVID-19 Crisis

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Abstract

Existing research reveals that multi-level governance systems allow officeholders to diffuse blame, and that they might even deliberately create fuzzy governance structures. However, the current COVID-19 pandemic challenges the idea of governance and accountability vacuums since national governments become the face of crisis management and they need to consolidate responsibility during a state of emergency. In this context, experts and the citizens become part of the blame game and complement traditional scapegoats such as the lower level. With an actor-centered institutional (ACI) approach and by analyzing official media conferences by the Swiss Federal Council, this article answers the following research question: *How does the blame avoidance behavior of the Swiss national government change when the state of emergency forces them to assume responsibility in the face of the COVID-19 crisis?* The results show that even during the state of emergency, the Swiss national government uses various scapegoats to deflect blame.

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1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is a highly complex and demanding problem that puts governments under high media and public pressure: what is reasonable from a public health perspective might be bad for the economy and what is good for the economy might have severe effects on people's health and life. This situation ultimately leads to policy controversies. No matter what decisions the government takes, one or the other side criticizes them. This zero-sum game thus inevitably leads to blame targeting the Federal Council. To protect their integrity, incumbents use different blame avoidance strategies (Hinterleitner & Sager, 2015). Which strategies they can use, however, depends on institutional factors. Within the Swiss federal system, cantons traditionally have a high degree of autonomy that usually allows the national government to pass the buck to the lower state level. Some scholars argue that politicians also shift blame to their citizens (Dowding, 2020), to experts (Flinders & Dimova, 2020) or that governments simply contract responsibility out (Leland et al., 2021). Such fuzzy network structures create governance vacuums, and it becomes difficult to make officeholders responsible for their decisions. In normal times, such policy arrangements are desirable for officeholders because it helps them to deflect blame. However, during the COVID-19 crisis, the Federal Council filled the *governance* and *accountability vacuum* (Bache et al., 2015) by applying emergency law and leaving cantons and parliament with less competencies. This makes the decision-making process faster and harmonizes measures within the country, which is crucial in times of a major crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, the involvement of experts has been exceptionally high worldwide. In this rather particular surrounding of a transboundary *creeping crisis* (Boin et al., 2020) the following research question arises: *How does the blame avoidance behavior of the Swiss national government change when the state of emergency forces them to assume responsibility in the face of the COVID-19 crisis?*

To answer the research question, the article begins with an overview of literature on blame avoidance within the political arena (Hinterleitner, 2017; Hinterleitner & Sager, 2017; Hood, 2002, 2007, 2011; Weaver, 1986) and how institutional context can impede or boost blame-shifting opportunities (Bache et al., 2015; Heinkelmann-Wild & Zangl, 2020; Hinterleitner & Sager, 2015). Secondly, analyzing empirical studies allows to identify the potential blame-shifting directions (Bache et al., 2015; Dowding, 2020; Flinders, 2020; Heinkelmann-Wild & Zangl, 2020; Maestas et al., 2008). After the literature review, I derive an analytical framework and apply it to the case of COVID-19 in Switzerland by introducing data and method. I present

the findings of the empirical analysis, discuss them and finally summarize the results. By introducing an analytical framework that incorporates blame generation, institutional and actor-centered factors as well as potential blame-shifting directions, I do not only answer the research question but also close the gap between theory and empirics of blame avoidance. This approach is new, since research about blame avoidance rarely focuses on a wider range of blame-shiftees.

2 Literature Review

Blame avoidance is not a new phenomenon. Already Niccolò Machiavelli's famous dictum that "princes should delegate to others the enactment of unpopular measures and keep in their own hands the distribution of favours" illustrates the importance of avoiding blame. A more distinct and conceptual approach, however, only came with Weaver's (1986) work *The Politics of Blame Avoidance.* Since then, a vast amount of literature has been published, targeting the phenomenon of blame avoidance in the political sphere and in fuzzy multi-level governance structures. With the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, literature about COVID-19 crisis management (e.g. Blondin & Boin, 2020; Christensen & Lægreid, 2020; Downey & Myers, 2020) and blame avoidance in the context of the pandemic (e.g. Ran & Jian, 2021; Zahariadis et al., 2020; Maor, 2021) has emerged. The following chapter gives an overview of current blame avoidance and COVID-19 crisis management literature and identifies the research gap.

2.1 Policy Controversies and Blame Avoidance

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the vulnerability of humanity. At the same time, public demand for protection urges governments to respond with arbitrary policies (Hinterleitner, 2020). This protective role of modern states is at the heart of an implicit social contract between the government and society and hence, citizens expect to be protected by the state (Ansell, 2019). However, with the vast amount of policies also come controversies about their configuration, performance, and distribution of benefits, all of which ultimately lead to blame games (Hinterleitner, 2020). Hood (2011) defines blame games as a series of interactions between blame makers and blame takers on the occasion of a controversial political issue. Recent empirical studies identify such policy controversies and blame games in the context of the COVID-19 crisis around the world (Carter & May, 2020; Flinders, 2020; Flinders & Dimova, 2020; Maor, 2021; Ran & Jian, 2021; Zahariadis et al., 2020).

Not only during crisis but also in normal times, officeholders tend to avoid blame for unpopular actions rather than they claim credit for popular ones (Weaver, 1986). The reasons for this behavior can be found in voter's *negativity bias:* their tendency to be more sensitive to losses than they are to gains (Kahneman & Tversky, 1984). There are at least two main elements that lead to blame: perceived avoidable harm or loss and perceived responsibility or agency (Hood, 2011). To deflect blame, officeholders can either work on the time dimension or on the agency and loss dimensions. Therefore, incumbents use different blame avoidance strategies to keep citizens' confidence high: some officeholders try to limit the agenda to their favor, redefine the issue or reframe the problem, throw good money after bad, pass the buck or find a scapegoat (Weaver, 1986). Hood (2002) categorizes blame avoidance behavior into three kinds of strategies: *agency strategies*, *policy strategies,* and *presentational strategies*. While *policy strategies* intend to limit formal responsibility and liability*, agency strategies* intend to actively shift responsibility to others*. Presentational strategies* aim at avoiding blame by denying the existence of a problem, offering excuses, or shaping public opinion (Hood, 2002, 2007).

Incumbents can use some of these strategies before they are blamed (anticipatory blame avoidance) and some of the strategies after they have already been blamed (reactive blame avoidance) (Hinterleitner & Sager, 2017). By passing the buck for example, the responsibility is shifted to another actor and accountability eventually becomes blurry. To find a scapegoat means that another actor is made responsible for a failed policy or missing implementation. At the same time, blame avoidance behavior leads to important policy effects. Weaver (1986) argues that "[…] the government will be fearful of trying to maximize net social welfare when doing so forces losses on some interests" (p. 395). Consequently, blame avoidance behavior ultimately affects governments' policy decisions.

2.2 Institutional Context

As blame avoidance literature shows, officeholders try to shift responsibility to others so that they can avoid blame for actions and events for which they are politically responsible. Opportunities to shift responsibility and blame, however, depend on the institutional context. One of the first who argued that institutional factors are relevant in the context of blame avoidance behavior was Weaver (1986) under the umbrella term of *political system*. It encompasses institutional factors that primarily influence arenas in which blame avoidance occurs, the distribution of power between actors, and the effectiveness of certain strategies

(Hinterleitner & Sager, 2015). Weaver (1986) argues that the degree of centralization in a political system influences the opportunity to delegate or diffuse blame: more blame-shifting opportunities exist in decentralized systems with a wide variety of actors involved in the political process than in comparatively centralized systems. Therefore, for blame-averse national politicians, "the ideal design for a regulatory system is one in which standards are set by international experts, monitored by autonomous agencies and enforced by local authorities – leaving those [national] politicians in the happy position of being able to blame everyone else rather than being blamed themselves when things go wrong" (Hood 2002, p. 20).

Several empirical studies analyze blame games in such multi-level governance systems (MLG). Within these network-like structures, national states remain central actors but their capacity for direct control and interventions decreases when facing long chains of delegation (Bache et al., 2015). Moreover, political arenas are interconnected, and subnational actors gain power within MLGs. With the rise of such complex governance structures, shifting responsibility and blame becomes a lot easier. National governments not only shift responsibility to implement their policies to lower levels, but also scapegoats can easily be found by drawing upon science and experts. The delegation of power, roles and responsibilities involves both horizontal and vertical dimensions and is hence inevitably linked to concerns regarding democratic accountability (Bache et al., 2015). Within such fuzzy governance structures which lack accountability mechanisms, it is easy to pass the buck, and complex networks offer a broad selection of scapegoats. The following part gives an overview of potential blame-shiftees in the context of smaller and bigger crises.

2.3 Blame-Shifting Directions

Different empirical studies have identified to whom national governments shift blame in fuzzy MLG arrangement during crises and policy controversies. This article focuses on three potential blame-shiftees: the lower government level, experts, and citizens.

Shifting Blame in Federal Systems

In federal systems, assigning responsibility for political outcomes is difficult because power is diffused across multiple levels of government and often shared among actors at different levels (Maestas et al., 2008). In this situation, assigning blame to the appropriate target becomes difficult. In this context, Heinkelmann-Wild & Zangl (2020) find for EU migration policies

that actors involved in MLG tend to shift blame to actors on different levels because they have more loyalty and interdependence within their own level than across levels.

In the context of climate change, Bache et al. (2015) argue that, despite the existence of a high-profile statutory target at the national level and a top-down delegation of responsibility for transport-emissions management to local authorities, there are no bottom-up systems of accountability anywhere in the United Kingdom for interventions in transport governance that are explicitly connected to a national target. At the same time, they reveal a complex architecture of *fuzzy governance* and *fuzzy accountability*. This fact suggests that politicians tolerate – if not create – increasingly complex and fluid governance structures as a rational self-defense mechanism when facing socio-political challenges. This situation leads to an accountability vacuum and ultimately impedes meaningful policy change (Bache et al., 2015).

For the case of the U.S. COVID-19 pandemic response Carter & May (2020) argue that similar to past crises power struggles and blame games have at times jeopardized federal-state relationships and a patchwork of policies, from voluntary social distancing to mandatory stay-at-home orders, have emerged across states and localities. This example also shows that shifting responsibility to the lower level leads to institutional inconsistencies and invites spillover effects, where weak policies in one area threaten those with stronger ones.

As these examples show, the temptation to diffuse responsibility and to shift blame to other levels of government is strong. This assumption leads to the following hypothesis:

H1: National governments shift responsibility and blame to the lower level during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While the national government can usually shift blame towards the lower state level in federal systems during most crises, there are less opportunities to blame the lower level during an international creeping crisis. The reason is that countries are more effective in dealing with such a large-scale crises when they have integrated emergency response systems which are activated when local governments – usually being the most under-resourced and least powerful in federal systems – are overwhelmed (Downey & Myers, 2020). In this way, responsibility is consolidated at the top and the national government becomes accountable for dealing with the crisis. For the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, the institutional context of the emergency

response system impedes shifting responsibility and blame towards the lower level of government. I therefore derive the following hypothesis:

H2: Since there are less buck-passing opportunities during a state of emergency, less blame-shifting to the lower level occurs during that time period.

Since the national government needs to deflect blame in order to keep public's confidence high but less blame-shifting opportunities to the lower level exist during the state of emergency, the national government needs to find other scapegoats.

Individualism, Responsibilization and Blaming Citizens

The ideology of individualism and personal responsibility adopted by governments has allowed to push the idea that citizens must take responsibility for their own lives and that they are responsible for their own decisions, and hence for their consequences (Dowding, 2020). While the origin of the term *individualism* dates back to philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville (Bellah et al., 2008), the idea of *responsibilization* was proposed by Michel Foucault (1980) and has been popularised by Nikolas Rose (1990). They argue that there are specific *technologies of the self* at work to make up the modern individual, complete with the sense of *choice* and *self-determination* that is at the heart of neoliberal politics (Brown, 2021). Key to this *responsibilization* is the process of giving people knowledge or information and at the same time locating causes of failure within the individual (Brown & Baker, 2012). Bauman (2002) describes the state of these *new citizens* as follows: "If they fall ill, it is because they were not resolute or industrious in following a health regime" (Bauman, 2002, p. xvi). In this sense, *responsibilization* of citizens is aligned with governmentality, a notion originating in Foucault's (1991) writing. Hereby, the state acts on the manner in which individuals regulate their own behavior (Hindess, 1996). In this context, Dowding (2020) argues, that governments in the UK and the US have developed a convenient practice of blaming social problems on their citizens by placing emphasis on personal responsibility instead of taking responsibility themselves. For the case of Switzerland's COVID-19 response, Sager & Mavrot (2020) find that the national government repeatedly highlights Switzerland's ability to reach excellent outcomes through voluntary compliance instead of coercive instruments. Using persuasive instead of coercive instruments puts responsibility on the public and makes them a potential blame-shiftee if things go wrong. Hence, when the institutional context impedes blame-shifting to the lower level, citizens become an alternative scapegoat. These assumptions lead to the following hypothesis:

H3: National governments shift responsibility and blame to their citizens more often when there are less blame-shifting opportunities to the lower level during a state of emergency.

Hugging the Experts

Not only are the coordination between levels of government and personal responsibility important during a transboundary creeping crisis, but also do experts take on a vital role in crisis management. For the case of the UK government's crisis management during the COVID-19 pandemic, Flinders (2020) argues that there is a very clear strategy around the adoption of a technocratic, science-based and evidence-led approach that ensures that no government statement has been made without explicitly following the advice of experts. *Hugging the experts* may not be a common form of blame avoidance behavior, but it has arguably become important within the politics of COVID-19 (Flinders, 2020). Reasons for that phenomenon might be found in high levels of political frustration and anti-political sentiment (ibid.). According to the 2020 Edelman Trust Barometer Spring Update: *Trust and the Coronavirus*, 79 percent of those surveyed trust scientists to tell the truth, compared to only 57 percent trusting the leader of the country (Edelman, 2020). Enjoying high levels of trust, experts become suitable blame-shiftees within COVID-19 blame games.

Zahariadis et al. (2020) conclude for the case of COVID-19 management in Turkey and Greece that the pandemic allows responsibility sharing and accountability diffusing because officeholders can present experts as policy makers. In short: since there are less buck-passing opportunities to the lower state level during a state of emergency, experts become popular scapegoats within the global health crisis. These assumptions lead to the following hypothesis:
H4: National governments shift responsibility and blame to health experts more often when there are less blame-shifting opportunities to the lower level during a state of emergency.

Figure 1 gives an overview of the hypotheses derived from existing blame avoidance theory and empirical studies.

institutional context
(emergency law)

Policy controversies → Blame targeting the national government → Blame shifting anticipatory/reactive
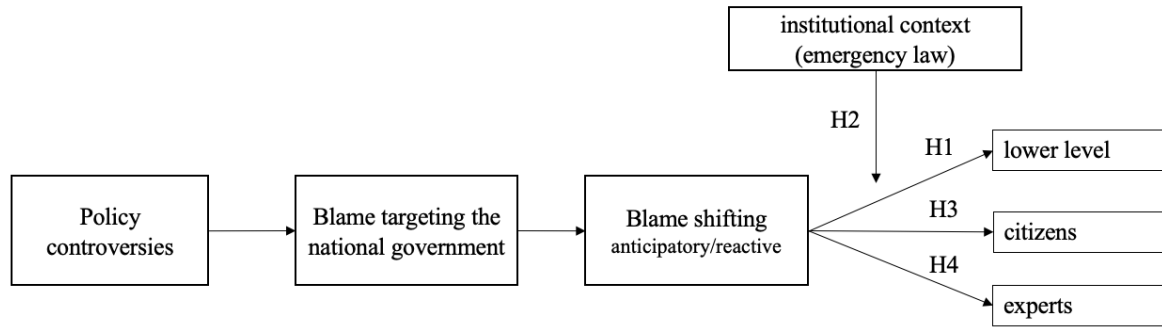
H2

H1 → lower level
H3 → citizens
H4 → experts

Figure 1: analytical framework

Policy controversies lead to blame games that represent a more conflictual form of problem processing. Therefore, officeholders' behavior in such situations cannot simply be derived from a country's conventional policy style (Hinterleitner, 2020). Being a highly complex and demanding problem that puts national governments under high media and public attention the COVID-19 pandemic certainly demands more than conventional policies. Boin et al. (2020) call the COVID-19 pandemic a creeping crisis which they define as "[…] a threat to widely shared societal values or life-sustaining systems that evolves over time and space, is foreshadowed by precursor events, subject to varying degrees of political and/or societal attention, and impartially or insufficiently addressed by authorities" (p. 122). In the context of such a global large-scale crisis, national governments become the face of crisis management and thus the target for blame. The analytical framework also shows that even if the institutional context (e.g. state of emergency) hinders passing the buck to the lower level, incumbents find other blame-shiftees such as citizens or experts (Dowding, 2020; Flinders, 2020; Flinders & Dimova, 2020). This approach is new, since research about blame avoidance rarely focuses on the whole blame-game process from policy controversies to the final blame receiver and a wider range of blame-shifting directions. Moreover, the case of the COVID-19 pandemic and the corresponding state of emergency – where the national government consolidates responsibility at the top – allows to compare different institutional contexts within the same case.

3 Case Selection and Research Design

Switzerland does not only represent an example for strong federalism, but it is also one of very few cases of direct democracy where the people decide on certain policies directly. Moreover, Switzerland is a power-sharing consociational democracy with extensive neo-corporatist features (Sager & Mavrot, 2020). Since the Federal Council acts as a collective executive,

statements by its members strictly follow a script. This makes the analysis of the Swiss Federal Council's blame management particularly interesting as it is highly strategic and not just the result of a member's individual mood.

According to the literature introduced above, actors involved in multi-level governance (MLG) tend to shift blame to actors on different levels because they have more loyalty and interdependence within their own level than across levels. However, on 16 March 2020, the Swiss government enacted a state of emergency defined under national epidemic law. This *extraordinary situation* in terms of the Epidemics Act "[…] allows the Federal Council to order the introduction of uniform measures in all cantons" (FOPH, 2020). This epidemic act gives the Federal Council a high degree of responsibility in times of a pandemic and makes them inevitably more accountable for measures they take. Hence, the Federal Council centralizes important decision rights to manage the COVID-19 crisis. After easing restrictions on 16 April 2020, they declared a *special situation* (Federal Office of Public Health FOPH, 2020a) on 19 June 2020. In this way, parliament and cantons regained many of their competencies in policy making and implementation. The institutional context given by the enactment of emergency law in the case of COVID-19 in Switzerland challenges the idea of multi-level governance because the Federal Council consciously centralizes power to cope with the crisis. At the same time, enacting a state of emergency leaves Federal Councilors with less blame-shifting opportunities because policy responsibility moves from parliament and cantons to the national government. Acting as an intervening variable, the institutional context can boost, or in this case, impede blame-shifting opportunities to the lower state level. Hence, the Federal Council needs to find other scapegoats.

Sager & Mavrot (2020) argue that Switzerland responded fairly successfully to the first COVID-19 wave by employing a mix of public health and economic measures. However, the Swiss government did not only issue compulsory directives (e.g. the closure of non-essential businesses and restrictions of border crossings) but also more persuasive instruments to handle the COVID-19 pandemic. This means that they tried to get from the public what they wanted by influence rather than coercion (Nye, 2008). According to Sager & Mavrot (2020), the national government repeatedly highlighted Switzerland's ability to reach excellent outcomes through voluntary compliance. This strong reliance on a shared national common sense is typical for the country's consociational features and is highly representative of Swiss political narratives and culture. Sager & Mavrot (2020) also find that the Federal Council relied heavily

on health experts during the lockdown, whereas the reopening strategy showed clear features of neo-corporatism.

This study focuses on the political management of policy controversies that is driven by actors' preferences to avoid blame and to keep the public's confidence high as well as shaped by the institutional context (blame-shifting opportunities). According to blame avoidance literature, officeholders try to avoid blame by shifting responsibility to other actors while the institutional context simplifies or impedes blame-shifting towards the lower government level. Hence, *blame-shifting direction* is the dependent variable. *Blame-shifting preference* (actor centered) is the independent variable and *blame-shifting opportunities* (institutional context) is the intervening variable.

Blame-shifting belongs to Hood's (2002; 2007) category of *agency strategy* because officeholders try to change the element of perceived responsibility (Sulitzeanu-Kenan & Hood, 2005). Literature about blame avoidance behavior also uses the terms *buck-passing* and *finding a scapegoat* in the context of deflecting blame. In this way, officeholders shift responsibility towards so-called blame-shiftees. In short: the national government becomes part of the blame game about conflictual COVID-19 policies, tries to avoid blame in order to keep public's confidence high and hence shifts responsibility to other actors (cantons, citizens, experts) before blame even emerges or after being blamed for a certain policy.

A longitudinal within-case design for Switzerland allows to identify blame-shifting directions in the context of different policy controversies and to analyze how the blame avoidance behavior of the Federal Council changes over time. The COVID-19 pandemic also offers a rare opportunity for a quasi-experimental design and allows to test if the frequency of blame-shifting moves is different before, during and after the declaration of emergency law. By using an actor-centered institutionalism (ACI) approach, I can close the research gap between blame avoidance literature and institutionally driven studies about Switzerland's COVID-19 management. This is possible since the analysis does not only focus on institutional reasons but also on Federal Council's blame avoidance strategies to find explanations for Switzerland's COVID-19 policy response. While blame avoidance behavior has been mostly studied in the context of smaller crises, this case study highlights blame avoidance behavior within a global creeping crisis.

4 Data and Method

In the center of analysis stands the Federal Council and their blame avoidance behavior throughout the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. To examine to whom the Federal Councilors shift blame before, during and after the declaration of the *extraordinary situation*, the analysis includes selected media conferences between 11 March 2020 (when WHO first called COVID-19 a pandemic) and December 2020. The state of emergency in Switzerland lasted from 16 March to 19 June 2020. The coding selection of media conferences is given by the time period (one before, two during the extraordinary situation, two during the first easing of restrictions, and two after the termination of the extraordinary situation) and the number of Federal Councilors (at least three members) to select media conferences with a certain importance. Since the national government in Switzerland decides collegially and communicates with one voice, I analyze the blame avoidance behavior for the Federal Council as one entity and not the members' individual behavior. Moreover, I focus on media conferences in which the Federal Council introduces new policies and the subsequent media conference. In this way, it is possible to catch journalists' first reactions and the blame that occurs shortly after the implementation.

The coding primarily includes statements and reactions to questions that concern cantons, citizens, and experts. However, by using a holistic approach, results remain open to inductive insights, which also allows to eventually identify other blame-shifting directions. By using a qualitative content analysis of a total of seven media conferences and 209 statements, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding about the nature of the Federal Council's blame avoidance behavior and to carefully contrast blame-shifting directions before, during and after the extraordinary situation. In addition, I analyze the frequency of blame-shifting moves towards the distinct blame-shiftees to test if it changes over time. Blame-shifting moves incorporate anticipatory and reactive blame avoidance behavior (responsibility and blame-shifting).

5 Results

While the literature review shows that officeholder's preference is to shift responsibility and blame to different actors to keep confidence high (independent variable), the following empirical findings identify blame-shifting directions (dependent variable) in different institutional contexts (intervening variable). By separating the results into three categories of blame-shiftees (cantons, citizens, and experts) it is possible to analyze each of them over time (see table 1, 2 and 3 in the annex) and in the context of different policy controversies. Moreover, quantitative results give insights about the frequency of blame-shifting moves before, during and after emergency law.

Shifting Responsibility and Blame to Cantons

Media conferences by the Federal Council between March 2020 and December 2020 have revealed various policy controversies in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Switzerland. One of the first discussions is the closing of schools and the question of the availability of childcare. Here, the Federal Council makes clear that the question of schools and nurseries is part of the cantons' responsibility. In this context, Federal Councilor Alain Berset states: "Cantons must provide childcare offers for cases in which children cannot be taken care of in another way and nurseries can only be closed if other childcare offers can be provided[1]" (Berset, 16.3.2020). And he reiterates one month later: "we have never closed nurseries, but we have asked the cantons to provide solutions for childcare during the whole period[2]" (Berset, 16.4.2020). In this way, the Federal Council passes the buck to the cantons and avoids blame by shifting responsibility to the lower level.

Also, when it comes to the implementation of the *50-people limitation* in restaurants, bars and night clubs, the Federal Council shifts the responsibility to the cantons: "…cantons are responsible to implement these measures[3]" (Berset, 13.3.2020). Later in the blame game, the matter of contact tracing arises. When asked why the contact tracing was not working well, the national government shifts the blame towards the cantons: "not all cantons are equal; some have never introduced contact tracing, some can still handle it, others cannot[4]" (Berset, 22.4.2020). Berset thus uses reactive blame avoidance within the policy controversy about contract tracing capacity. A policy controversy that appears towards the end of the year is whether ski resorts should remain open. Here, the Federal Council uses the framing that cantons needed to decide if they could afford to keep ski resorts open or not – depending on their

hospital capacities. Berset for example evades the Federal Council's responsibility in this matter in the following way:

> "We have set out the conditions under which ski resorts can stay open. However, we find that some cantons might already have crossed the lines especially when it comes to capacities in the hospitals – but it is the cantons' responsibility to implement the rules[5]" (Berset, 18.12.2020).

This statement makes clear that cantons are a suitable blame-shiftee especially when it comes to implementing the rules set on the national level. Notwithstanding the institutional context (ordinary vs. emergency law), cantons are frequently chosen scapegoats within the COVID-19 crisis management in Switzerland. These results support H1: The Federal Council shifts responsibility and blame to the cantons during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1 shows that the frequency of blame-shifting moves towards cantons is slightly higher before and after the state of emergency. These results support H2. However, cantons remain a blame-shiftee during the period of emergency law and the national government also makes them responsible for decision making: "I repeat here that the cantons or cities have the possibility to close the parks and squares if they consider it necessary[6]" (Berset, 20.3.2020). Although, there are less opportunities to pass the buck to the lower level during the state of emergency, the Federal Council still shifts responsibility and blame to the cantons.

	Before emergency law	During strong emergency law		During first easings		After emergency law	
date / direction	13.3.2021	16.3.2021	20.3.2021	16.4.2021	22.4.2021	1.7.2021	18.12.2021
cantons	14	11	8	11	10	17	17
citizens	9	19	10	10	2	6	9
experts	4	2	1	5	3	0	-1

Table 1: frequency of blame-shifting moves

In conclusion, the Federal Council frequently choses to pass the buck to the cantons before, during and after the emergency law even though the institutional context sets blame-shifting barriers.

Blaming Citizens

Another very popular blame-shiftee during the entire analyzed period are the citizens. In all seven analyzed media conferences, the Federal Council appeals to the public's individual responsibility. From the very first moment of the pandemic, Federal Councilor and President Simonetta Sommaruga makes clear: "This situation challenges each and every one of us. We can help to slow the spread of the virus with the precautions that are already known and the measures that the Federal Council has decided today[7]" (Sommaruga, 13.3.2020). And only one week later, Berset encourages:

> "It's the behavior [of citizens] that's going to make the difference, it's not the political decisions – you can make big announcements, make big statements – that's not going to change the reality, the reality is how people behave to stop the spread of the virus[8]" (Berset, 20.3.2020).

The Federal Council does not only shift responsibility to the public but after an analysis of their measures, Berset also blames the citizens for non-compliance by using reactive blame avoidance strategy:

> "We have noticed that these measures were sometimes difficult to interpret, uneven and insufficiently followed and today we want to call the entire population, all the generations, all the regions of the country to comply and apply the decisions taken by the Federal Council (...)[9]" (Berset, 16.3.2020).

Evident is also that the national government repeatedly reminds the public to comply with the voluntary measures (distance, hygiene): "this is an appeal from the Federal Council to the entire population: keep your distance and maintain hygiene, take these measures seriously[10]" (Sommaruga, 16.3.2020) and Berset one month later: "It is very important, in order to guarantee the success of this entire operation, that we all continue to respect systematically the rules of social distance and hygiene[11]" (Berset, 16.4.2020). And in the context of celebrating Christmas, Sommaruga says: "Our country is strong when we stand in solidarity, our country is strong when everyone gets involved, and our country is strong when we act together[12]" (Sommaruga, 18.12.2020).

Citizens thus remain a scapegoat throughout the entire time period and in the context of different policy controversies. In general, the discourse is strongly characterized by individual responsibility, self-discipline and solidarity instead of strict regulations on the national level. Hence, instead of implementing coercive rules, the Federal Council counts on "individual responsibility and common sense[13]" (Berset, 18.12.2020). As table 1 shows, the frequency of blame-shifting moves to citizens is especially high on 16 March 2020 when the government enacts the emergency law. The results therefore underpin Dowding's (2020) and Sager & Mavrot's (2020) findings and further support H3: The Swiss national government shifts responsibility and blame to their citizens more often when there are less blame-shifting opportunities to the lower level during the state of emergency. In conclusion, blaming the citizens has been a popular strategy for the Federal Council before, during and after emergency law. Especially when it becomes harder to shift blame toward the lower level because of institutional reasons, citizens become an alternative scapegoat.

Hugging the Experts

The analysis also shows that the Federal Council frequently uses the *hugging the expert* strategy to avoid blame. In the very beginning of the COVID-19 crisis Sommaruga states: "It is good to know that we can count on so many competent, highly committed professionals who care about our well-being, our health and our economy[14]" (Sommaruga, 13.3.2020). Later on, when it comes to the discourse about why masks have not been recommended earlier by the Federal Council, Berset answers:

> "I know that the matter of masks is a question that interests many, and I must tell you that since the beginning, the Federal Council relies – for all the questions that concern this epidemic – on the work of experts, relies on the latest scientific knowledge[15]" (Berset, 16.4.2020).

And he reminds some days later: "We rely on experts in everything we do. We do this for all areas including masks[16]" (Berset, 22.4.2020).

These results support Flinders (2020) findings that hugging the expert is a convenient blame avoidance strategy in times of COVID-19. Moreover, the results support Sager & Mavrot's (2020) findings that the Federal Council relies on health experts. However, table 1 shows that

experts are not as important as citizens and cantons when it comes to find a scapegoat. At the end of the year Berset even says:

> "It is also a matter of political feasibility and in the decisions that we take, we have to make the synthesis with opinions of the experts. But the experts don't decide on measures, we do, and we did it because of this situation, which seems to us today to be a decision that is really adapted to this situation[17]" (Berset, 18.12.2020).

This statement makes clear that experts do not decide on measures, but the Federal Council does. In this way, the possibility to shift blame to health experts wanes. In addition, table 1 shows that the national government does not shift more responsibility and blame to experts during emergency law. Therefore, the results do not support H4: The Swiss national government does not shift responsibility and blame to health experts more often when there are less blame-shifting opportunities to the lower level during the state of emergency. In conclusion, the Federal Council generally uses experts to deflect blame and justify measures during COVID-19, however they do not particularly use them as a scapegoat, during emergency law as an alternative to cantons.

Creating Fuzzy MLG

What also becomes evident at the very end of 2020 is that the Federal Council consciously chooses fuzzy governance structures when it comes to deciding on COVID-19 policies: "the recommendations that are made from a public health point of view are obviously based on the reflections of experts, also at the international level and in particular on the reflections of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control[18]" (Berset, 22.4.2020) and Guy Parmelin at the end of the year:

> "The Federal Council decides collectively, it discusses at length, it weighs the different interests, it assesses the situation in terms of health, in terms of economic consequences, it discusses with social partners, with the cantons; it is advised by specialists and in the end, it decides in a collegial way and carries the decision unitedly[19]"
> (Parmelin, 18.12.2020).

In other words: by creating fuzzy COVID-19 governance structures, accountability gets blurry, and responsibility can be shifted to a number of actors – even in times of centralized power during a state of emergency.

6 Discussion

To avoid blame, the Swiss Federal Council uses several blame-shifting strategies facing the COVID-19 pandemic: from stressing the cantons' responsibility to take decisions and implement national measures, to emphasizing the role of experts and science and calling for individual responsibility – Switzerland's national government uses the whole range of blame-shifting directions.

It is not surprising that, in the long tradition of Switzerland's federalism, cantons are a very popular scapegoat when it comes to managing the pandemic. Moreover, Flinders (2020) argues that the strategy of hugging the experts becomes endemic within the politics of COVID-19. The results from this study support these findings for the case of Switzerland and indicate that experts are suitable scapegoats within the blame games of a health crisis. However, the Federal Council does not pass the buck to experts more frequently during emergency law. Instead, they emphasize individual responsibility, common-sense and solidarity. Shifting responsibility and blame to citizens is also a well-known strategy as Dowding (2020) argues for different social crisis policies in the UK and the US. The results from this study show that this is also true for the case of the global creeping COVID-19 crisis and support Sager & Mavrot's (2020) findings that the national government repeatedly highlights Switzerland's ability to reach excellent outcomes through voluntary compliance. This is typical for the country's consociational features and is highly representative for Swiss politics. Some statements by the Federal Council also illustrate that in the context of a neo-corporatist surrounding and within a system of direct democracy, decisions taken by the national government need to be accepted by the majority of people and interest groups. The quasi-experimental design comparing different institutional contexts (ordinary vs. emergency law) within the same case reveals that the Federal Council rather chooses citizens than experts as an alternative scapegoat during the state of emergency when the opportunities to shift blame and responsibility towards the lower level are limited.

In the context of a power-sharing consociational democracy and by creating fuzzy COVID-19 governance structure, no single Federal Councilor can be taken responsible. They can usually share responsibility with cantons, and they can cover their back by referring to experts. The findings thus support that for blame-averse national politicians, "[…] the ideal design for a regulatory system is one in which standards are set by international experts, monitored by autonomous agencies and enforced by local authorities – leaving those [national] politicians in

the happy position of being able to blame everyone else rather than being blamed themselves when things go wrong" (Hood 2002, p. 20).

The findings of this study outline Switzerland's Federal Council's COVID-19 crisis response between 13 March and 18 December 2020. These findings give key insights about national government's blame avoidance strategies in times of a health crisis and within different institutional settings. The COVID-19 pandemic also allows to discover government's preferential blame-shifting directions and to test earlier empirical findings. However, with the choice of a case study come some limitations. The findings are not generalizable, and the quantitative results do not imply causal relationships. Further case studies in different political systems and cultures would enrich the analysis of blame avoidance in the context of COVID-19. Extending this case study or comparing Switzerland with other countries might even allow to find implications for policy change. Further research should also focus on the relationship between blame-shifting and citizens' trust in government and whether taking responsibility makes the national government more or less trustworthy for society. One could also enrich the analytical framework by adding further potential blame-shiftees or different blame avoidance strategies (e.g. policy strategies and presentational strategies) or by refining the categories (e.g. anticipatory vs. reactive blame avoidance).

When it comes to taking risky decisions within a global creeping crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, where outcomes are uncertain and time pressure is high – it might be helpful to spread responsibility if otherwise, officeholders do not take any decisions at all. Hence, although blame avoidance can lead to non-action, fuzzy governance structures can help to take action precisely because responsibility can be shared. Particularly in times of a pandemic, governments have other tasks to fulfill than having to deal with blame avoidance. Here, creating shared responsibilities can make officeholders take action because they are not held responsible for decisions they make. In other words: in today's democratic MLG systems there is always a convenient scapegoat to be found. If this is good or bad, however, remains an open chapter.

7 Conclusion

By using an ACI approach, the article investigates the blame-shifting behavior of the Swiss national government before, during and after the state of emergency. The results show that the Federal Council shifts responsibility and blame to cantons, citizens and experts during media conferences concerning the pandemic between March 2020 and December 2020. Even with institutional barriers to shift blame towards cantons during the state of emergency, the Federal Council stresses the lower level's responsibility to implement the rules set on the national level and to take some decisions themselves. In this way, cantons become blame-shiftees within different policy controversies (e.g. childcare, contact tracing, ski resorts). There is also evidence that the national government shifts blame to citizens by stressing individual responsibility, solidarity and common sense (e.g. persuasive hygienic measures and voluntary staying at home) and that they are a popular scapegoat during emergency law. Last but not least, the results show that the Federal Council brings experts into the blame game to support their COVID-19 policy response (e.g. mask usage). The wide range of potential blame-shiftees allows the Federal Council to pass the buck and find a scapegoat even during the state of emergency which actually forces the national government to consolidate responsibility. How blame avoidance strategies affect policy change and public's opinion remains unclear. However, the findings reveal that even during global creeping crises, officeholders like to play the blame game.

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Annex: Selected Statements by the Federal Council

Before emergency law Media conference: 13.3.2020	During strong emergency law Media conferences: 16.3.2020/20.3.2020	During first easings Media conferences: 16.4.2020/22.4.2020	After emergency law Media conferences: 1.7.2020/18.12.2020
Policy controversy: schools "Dans ce cadre-là (enseignement à dsitance dans les écoles obligatoires) **les cantons peuvent prévoir des solutions d'acceuil, les cantons sont fortement invités à prévoir des solutions d'acceuil**." (Berset, 13.3.2020) "(...) die **Kantone dafür zuständig** und können auch viel mitreden und das regeln, wie es vernünftig erscheint und Rücksicht nehmen auf die kantonale Situation." (Berset, 13.3.2020) **Policy controversy:** limitation of people [3] "Restaurants, Bars, Discos können offen bleiben, aber es dürfen sich nicht mehr als 50 Personen gleichzeitig darin aufhalten, Personal inbegriffen. Ausserdem müssen wiederum dieselben Empfehlungen des BAG eingehalten werden können: Abstand halten und Hygiene. **Und die Kantone sind, wie es bekannt ist, zuständig, um die Massnahmen umzusetzen.**" (Berset, 13.3.2020)	**Policy controversy:** childcare [1] "Concernant le chrèces, les cantons doivent prévoir des offres d'accueil nécessaires pour les enfants qui ne peuvent être gardés d'une autre manière et les crèches peuvent être uniquement fermées si les autorités ont prévu d'autres offres d'accueil." (Berset, 16.3.2020) **Policy controversy:** voluntary measures "Ich denke, wichtig ist für uns, auch wenn wir jetzt diese außerordentliche Lage heute erklärt haben, die dem Bundesrat ein Durchgriffsrecht gibt auf die Kantone, auf die Gemeinden, dass wir diese Arbeit weiterhin intensiv in enger Zusammenarbeit mit den Kantonen machen, **weil die Kantone bleiben weiterhin für den Vollzug dieser Maßnahmen zuständig.**" (Sommaruga, 16.3.2020) **Policy controversy:** "police state" "Die Armee ist nur subsidiär im Einsatz, als Unterstützung und Hilfe der zivilen Behörden. **Die Sicherheit ist nach wie vor in erster Linie Aufgabe der Kantone** und die Armee unterstützt nur dort, wo eine Anfrage kommt und wo es notwendig ist." (Amherd, 16.3.2020) **Policy controversy:** closing of public places [6] "Je rappelle ici que les **cantons ou les villes ont la possibilité de fermer les parcs et les places** s'il estiment nécessaire." (Berset, 20.3.2020)	**Policy controversy:** childcare [2] "Je vous rappelle ici que nous n'avons jamais fermé les crèches, nous avons même dans le fond, **demandé aux cantons de garder des solutions d'accueil ouvertes** durant toute cette phase." (Berset, 16.4.2020) "Wir haben einfach gesagt, wir empfehlen, **wir verlangen von den Kantonen**, wir erwarten von den Kantonen, das Betreuungsangebote erhalten bleiben während dieser Situation (...). Aber klar ist auch in **föderalistischen Strukturen**, dass die Kantone sicher auch ab und zu es ein bisschen **anders umgesetzt haben**." (Berset, 22.4.2020) **Policy controversy:** retirement homes "Zu den Besuchsverboten in Altersheimen und in Spitälern gibt es **kein direkter Entscheid des Bundesrates**, es ist einfach in unserer Verordnung fixiert. Es war nur eine **Empfehlung des Bundesrates an die Kantone**, wirklich zu schauen, wie man die Leute auch schützen kann in Altersheimen und auch in Spitälern, weil es gab eine sehr unterschiedliche Umsetzung dieser Situation mit Besuchen in Gesundheitseinrichtungen **und da sind die Kantone zuständig**." (Berset, 16.4.2020) **Policy controversy:** contact tracing [4] "**Es sind nicht alle Kantone am gleichen Ort im Moment.** Es gibt Kantone, die das nie veranlasst haben in den letzten Wochen. Bei gewissen war es möglich nach wie vor so zu arbeiten, bei anderen nicht mehr." (Berset, 22.4.2020)	**Policy controversy:** contact tracing "Die **Kantone sind zuständig** für das Contact Tracing, die sind dafür zuständig für die Begleitung und die Epidemie unter dem Deckel zu halten und die müssen auch mal alle Maßnahmen treffen können, die helfen." (Berset, 1.7.2020) **Policy controversy:** ski resorts "Les stations de ski **ça reste de la responsabilité des cantons d'ouvrir ou pas les remontées mécaniques** avec les restrictions qui ont été prévues. Mais il faut leur dire ici clairement: réfléchissez bien, parce que les hôpitaux sont pleins et de mettre beaucoup de monde sur les pistes de ski peut faire courir le risque de voir de manière assez évidente augmenter les accidents et là il faut être très prudent. C'est une responsabilité très importante pour les cantons." (Berset, 18.12.2020) [5] "Wir haben klar fixiert mit der Verordnung, welche Bedingungen erfüllt sein müssen, damit es möglich ist, auch Skigebiete offen zu haben. Und wir stellen fest, dass es sehr wahrscheinlich Kantone gibt, die wirklich an der Grenze – oder sogar nicht mehr in der Umsetzung der Verordnung sind, wenn es insbesondere um die Kapazitäten in Spitälern geht. **Dann aber liegt es in der Verantwortung dieser Kantone, diese Regelung umzusetzen** und diese Kriterien beinhalten insbesondere – nicht nur, aber insbesondere – auch Kapazitäten für das [Contact] Tracing und auch Kapazitäten in den Spitälern." (Berset, 18.12.2020)

Table 1: blame-shifting to the cantons

Before emergency law Media conference: 13.3.2020	During strong emergency law Media conferences: 16.3.2020/20.3.2020	During first easings Media conferences: 16.4.2020/22.4.2020	After emergency law Media conferences: 1.7.2020/18.12.2020
Policy controversy: voluntary measures [7] "Meine Damen und Herren, **wir sind alle gefordert, jede und jeder einzelne**. Wir können dazu beitragen, dass sich die Ausbreitung des Virus verlangsamt, mit den **Vorsichtsmassnahmen** die bereits bekannt sind und den Massnahmen, die der Bundesrat heute beschlossen hat." (Sommaruga, 13.3.2020) "Les mesures que nous avons décidées ce matin, ne seront efficaces que si tout le monde les applique. Nous appelons véritablement à la **résponsabilité individuelle de chacune et chacun**. Nous devons nous habituer à ce ralentissement de la vie sociale pour freiner l'évolution du virus. Nous devons renoncer à certaines habitudes, à certains de nos loisirs parce que nous souhaitons ensemble de pouvoir protéger les personnes les plus vulnérables (...) donc **c'est une question de solidarité**." (Berset, 13.3.2020)	**Policy controversy:** voluntary measures [10] "Meine Damen und Herren, das ist ein **Appell des Bundesrates an die ganze Bevölkerung**. Nehmt diese Maßnahmen, Distanz halten und Hygiene einhalten, **nehmt diese Maßnahmen ernst**." (Sommaruga, 16.3.2020) [9] "Nous avons dû constater que ces mesures étaient parfois peut-être difficiles à interpréter, **inégalement et insuffisamment suivis** et nous souhaitons aujourd'hui **appeler toute la population, toutes les générations, toutes les régions du pays à se conformer et à appliquer les décisions** prises par le Conseil fédéral." (Berset, 16.3.2020) [8] "**C'est le comportement qui va faire la différence**, ce n'est pas les décisions politiques – on peut faire des grands effets d'annonce, faire des grandes déclarations – ce n'est pas ça qui va changer la réalité, la réalité c'est comment est-ce que les gens se comportent en général pour freiner la propagation du virus." (Berset, 20.3.2020) "Die Maßnahmen, die wir getroffen haben, sind nur wirksam, wenn jede und jeder sie umsetzt. Wenn jede und jeder Abstand hält. Und der Bundesrat zählt auf die **Eigenverantwortung**. Abstand halten, kann Leben retten. Das ist eine Frage der **Solidarität**, Solidarität zwischen den Generationen und mit den kranken Menschen." (Berset, 16.3.2020) "Wir haben die Wirkung der Maßnahmen vom letzten Freitag gestern Abend analysiert. **Wir sind zum Schluss gekommen, dass die Maßnahmen zum Teil ungenügend eingehalten werden**." (Sommaruga, 16.3.2020) **Policy controversy:** economic consequences "Und **wir bitten die Bevölkerung, diese Maßnahmen mit zu tragen,** um noch weitergehende Maßnahmen nicht ergreifen zu müssen." (Sommaruga, 16.3.2020) **Policy controversy:** social distancing fee "Wir müssen das **mit den Leuten machen und nicht gegen** – das ist wirklich die Hauptmaxime, die wir verfolgen. Bis jetzt funktioniert es gut und andere Länder haben andere Wege gesucht und gefunden. Das hat auch mit **Kultur** zu tun wahrscheinlich, aber ich glaube es funktioniert nicht so schlecht." (Berset, 20.3.2020)	**Policy controversy:** voluntary measures [11] "Il est très important pour garantir le succès de toute cette opération qu'on continue toutes et tous de respecter systématiquement les règles d'éloignement social et d'hygiène." (Berset, 16.4.2020)	**Policy controversy:** voluntary measures "Ich habe das sehr viel erwähnt, aber bitte sehr wichtig seit dem Anfang wissen wir, was uns sehr stark geholfen hat, es ist, dass wir wirklich alle zusammen, mit der ganzen Bevölkerung diese Situation bis jetzt nicht so schlecht bewältigen konnten – es muss so weitergehen: Abstandhalten, Hygiene der Hände, keine Hände schütteln, das ist wirklich wichtig in dieser heutigen Situation, auch im Sommer, das merken wir jetzt und wir müssen das weiterhin zusammen tun: Abstand, Hygiene, Maske tragen, wenn der Abstand nicht eingehalten werden kann." (Berset, 1.7.2020) **Policy controversy:** Christmas [13] "Tout d'abord je crois que depuis le début dans cette pandémie on a été toujours en contact avec la population pour essayer de trouver comment traverser le mieux cette situation et ça se fait avec beaucoup de **responsabilité individuelle, avec beaucoup de bon sens**." (Berset, 18.12.2020) [12] "Ich wünsche mir daher – gerade im Blick auf die Festtage – dass wir zueinander schauen, dass wir füreinander da sind. Die Pandemie hat gezeigt, wie verletzlich wir sind und darum müssen wir Sorge tragen zueinander. Unser Land ist stark, wenn wir **solidarisch** sind, unser Land ist stark, wenn sich **alle einbringen** und unser Land ist stark, wenn wir **gemeinsam handeln**. **Es braucht jetzt die ganze Schweiz**." (Sommaruga, 18.12.2020)

Table 2: blame-shifting to the citizens

Before emergency law Media conference: 13.3.2020	During strong emergency law Media conferences: 16.3.2020/20.3.2020	During first easings Media conferences: 16.4.2020/22.4.2020	After emergency law Media conferences: 1.7.2020/18.12.2020
[14] "**Es ist gut zu wissen, dass wir auf so viele kompetente, höchstengagierte Fachpersonen zählen können**, die sich um unser Wohl, unsere Gesundheit und unsere Wirtschaft kümmern." (Sommaruga, 13.3.2020). **Policy controversy:** childcare "(...) das ist genau die **Empfehlung des ECDC** (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control): Schulen womöglich zu schließen, aber nicht die Kinder bei den Großeltern für die Betreuung." (Berset, 13.3.2020)		**Policy controversy:** masks [15] "Je sais que la question des masques est une question qui intéresse beaucoup, qui questionne également beaucoup et je dois vous dire que depuis le début **le Conseil fédéral pour toutes les questions qui touchent à cette épidémie s'appuie sur les travaux des experts, qui s'appuient sur les dernières connaissances scientifiques**." (Berset, 16.4.2020) [16] "On s'appuie pour tout ce qu'on fait **sur les experts**. On le fait pour tous les domaines y compris pour les masques." (Berset, 22.4.2020) [18] "Les recommandations qui sont faites du point de vue de la santé publique on s'appuie évidemment sur les **réflexions des experts**, aussi sur le **plan international et notamment sur les réflexions du centre européen pour la prévention et le contrôle des maladies infectieuses** qui suit cela naturellement de manière très régulière." (Berset, 22.4.2020)	**Policy controversy:** stronger measures [17] "Es ist auch eine Frage der politischen Machbarkeit und bei den Entscheidungen, die wir treffen, müssen wir die **Synthese mit diesen Meinungen der Experten** machen. Aber die **Experten beschließen keine Maßnahmen**, wir machen das und wir haben das gemacht aufgrund dieser Situation, die uns heute als eine Entscheidung erscheint, die wirklich angepasst an diese Situation ist." (Berset, 18.12.2020)

Table 3: blame-shifting to experts

Fuzzy MLG:

[19] "Le Conseil fédéral décide **collégialement**, il discute longuement, il pèse les différents intérêts, il fait une appréciation de la situation en matière de santé, en matière de conséquences économiques, il discute avec les **partenaires sociaux**, avec les **cantons**; il se fait conseiller par des **spécialistes** et à la fin il décide **collégialement** et l'ensemble du collège porte la décision" (Parmelin, 18.12.2020).

Selbstständigkeitserklärung

Ich erkläre hiermit, dass ich diese Arbeit selbstständig verfasst und keine anderen als die angegebenen Hilfsmittel benutzt habe. Alle Stellen, die wörtlich oder sinngemäss aus Quellen entnommen wurden, habe ich als solche kenntlich gemacht. Mir ist bekannt, dass andernfalls der Senat gemäss dem Gesetz über die Universität zum Entzug des auf Grund dieser Arbeit verliehenen Titels berechtigt ist.

Bern, 19. Juli 2021   Céline Honegger

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