

Project 1: Understanding Institutions of Accountability: What Drives Account-holders' Focus and Interest in Accountability?

PhD Project Outline, EU_RICA Grant, "Reputation Matters in the Regulatory State" ERC project

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Most of the literature on accountability is focused on the *account-giver* (or "actor", in accountability terminology). Investigating the behaviour of a host of account-givers (bodies such as ministerial departments or arm's length regulatory bodies/agencies), and the extent to which these comply with their formal accountability obligations, has been a central concern in the literature. *Account-holders* on the other hand, - those who hold to account¹ - are taken for granted however, assumed to be by default "invested" in accountability processes and to diligently carry out their account-holding roles (Busuioc 2013; Schillemans and Busuioc 2015; Busuioc and Lodge 2016). The behaviour and motivations of account-holders (also called "forums" in accountability literature) in discharging their accountability roles are completely under-studied and under-theorised as a result.

A host of empirical studies are reporting considerable variation however, in the extent to which account-holders make use of their formal powers in practice. Account-holders' "appetite" for accountability can vary significantly it seems. While some forums are found to be industrious in enacting their accountability duties, widespread underuse of existing accountability arrangements by various account-holders is also reported empirically (e.g. Hogwood et al. 2000; Romzek and Johnston 2005; Pollitt 2006; Verhoest et al. 2010; Dubnick and Frederickson 2010; Schillemans 2011; Busuioc 2012; 2013; Brandsma 2013; Schillemans and Busuioc 2015). Instances of so-called "*forum drift*" (Schillemans and Busuioc 2015) are prevalent, with a variety of political or bureaucratic account-holders (such as MPs, MEPs, bureaucratic superiors or management board representatives) failing to take interest in accountability processes, to scrutinise the performance of their agents, or to sanction agent misbehaviour despite explicit responsibilities in this regard. In other words, whereas the central problem in the literature is preventing agency drift, empirical insights suggest that account-holders, too, can reportedly

¹ Account-holders (or so-called "accountability forums") refers to actors such as parliaments, bureaucratic superiors, courts, auditors, ombudsmen, media, audit offices, etc. See Bovens 2007.

become sources of drift.

This indicates the inadequacy of forum *taken-for-grantedness* in the literature and points at a fundamental omission and blind spot of existing theory. More refined understandings as to the role of forums, what motivations drive forum behaviour in accountability, and when account-holders are more likely to discharge their duties or not, are acutely needed.

Project Aim:

To address this important lapse in the literature, this PhD project would investigate, in a comparative fashion—by systematically examining and comparing the accountability practices of a variety of different types of account-holders (e.g. bureaucratic, political, legal, professional) in different jurisdictions (national and the EU context)— what drives account-holders’ propensity to hold to account or to the contrary, to neglect accountability processes and their oversight duties. In other words: *How can we explain observed variations in forum interest in oversight? When do we observe “forum drift” versus intensive oversight? Are some types of accountability forums more predisposed to drift than others? What type of considerations direct the organisational attention of account-holders leading them to prioritise or to the contrary, to neglect their accountability duties and/or to focus on particular actors over others? Or to put it simply: What drives account-holders’ behaviour in accountability?* Building upon a rich accountability literature and recent theoretical work of the project leader (Busuioc and Lodge 2016; 2017; Schillemans and Busuioc 2015), this project will also explicitly investigate, to what extent reputational² considerations play an important role in this respect.

In tackling these questions, the project aims to: gain an in-depth understanding of forum incentives and motivations, explain variations in forum interest and intensity of oversight and to develop more accurate theoretical expectations with respect to account-holders’ behaviour in accountability.

Beyond its contribution to theory and existing scholarship, the project aims to have important practical implications for the institutional design of accountability structures: a more nuanced understanding of forum behaviour in accountability would allow us to design accountability structures that are better fit for purpose.

The project is embedded in a broader group of PhD and postdoc projects that are being undertaken as part of the ERC program “Reputation Matters in the Regulatory State” (EU_RICA).

² See more broadly, Carpenter and Krause 2012.

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