**Back to the future. The Political Construction of Time in the European Pandemic Crisis**

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**Abstract**

The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic pushed political institutions to respond in often unprecedented ways. Focusing on the European Union’s experience, this paper assesses how the relation between political action and time was reconfigured in the discourse of the Presidents of the European Commission, Council, and Central Bank. The frame analysis investigating a large corpus demonstrates that multiple temporalities – namely the eventfulness of the pandemic, the broad conjuncture of the socio-economic crisis, and the EU’s historic crisis of purpose – are overlapping to converge in a moment of decisive intervention. Eventually, a metanarrative is constructed in which the EU shall not only solve the crises of the past, but also tackle the crises of the future defined as the Anthropocene. These findings contribute to the burgeoning literature on pandemic politics as well as, more broadly, to scholarship on the role of time in the making and management of crises.

**Introduction**

The pandemic of Covid-19 that afflicted the entire world since 2020 originated a peculiar tension in the collective experience of social and political time. Millions of people were prevented from everyday regularities of work and social interaction, democratic processes were disrupted as simple acts of campaigning or walking to a polling booth were perceived as dangerous, and radical uncertainty about the nature, duration, and management of the pandemic made the constitution of reasonable horizons of expectation for a return to “normalcy” practically impossible. This experience, of course, occurred along, and contrasted with, the great migration to hyperconnected forms of rapid online communication, the agitation of healthcare and pharmaceutical industries to respond to the worst consequences of the disease, and the acceleration of political responses to a crisis that many, from WHO officials to Donald Trump or Emmanuel Macron, equated, in seriousness and consequences, to great wars. These processes unfolded, with minor lags, in striking convergence across societies – to a large extent regardless of their political and economic systems.

Against this backdrop, the “pandemic politics” (Tesche, 2022) of the European Union (EU) constitute a rich empirical terrain to explore how political time is constructed – and crucially how multiple temporalities can coexist and be articulated in a moment of decisive intervention. In a rather distinctive way, the pandemic crisis (or rather *crises*) in Europe were constructed through an intricate web of overlapping temporalities of both diagnostic and response that spanned from the immediate response to viral spread all the way to an existential crisis of the European Union as a polity (Ferrera, Miró and Ronchi, 2021). Condensed in a “moment of decisive intervention” in the early months of 2020, these entangled temporalities paved the way for a deep shift from previous political and institutional routines, namely regarding the economic governance of the Union. This paper empirically assesses how EU actors constructed the pandemic crisis with reference to these distinctive temporalities, with the twofold aim of providing an in-depth analysis of the construction of the pandemic crisis in Europe, but also of contributing to a broader literature on the role of time in the making and management of crises.

The relevance of time and temporality in politics and in the politics of crisis has for a long time been a central axis in both theoretical and empirical work. Institutionalists, particularly of the “historical” persuasion, have consistently argued that “time matters”. Often, this literature aims to identify the causal effects of time in processes of continuity and change. Notions such as “path dependence” (Pierson, 2000) or of more incremental “drift” (Streeck and Thelen, 2005) conceptualize processes in which the simple unfolding of social time leads to the maintenance or the change of established policies. In this linearity (Abbott, 2001), time is an exogenous factor, a causal force that influences political affairs. Other streams of institutionalism, namely those deriving theoretical cues from “constructivist” (Hay, 2016) or “discursive” (Schmidt, 2008) approaches to social phenomena, have proposed yet another manner of integrating temporality in political analysis, namely when focusing on moments of crisis. The socially constructed character of crises implies narrative forms that by default reconstruct sequences of events (Ricoeur, 1991). Through a focus on the social construction of the pandemic crisis in Europe, we argue that time cannot be merely conceived as an exogenous factor, nor as a heuristic for the reconstruction of events through narrative. Rather, we argue that political time is itself constructed in the process of social construction of crises.

Empirically, the paper proposes a frame analysis of the public statements made by three key, top-level actors of the European Union: European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, European Council President Charles Michel, and European Central Bank President Christine Lagarde. The analysis of all the speeches and tweets of these three actors during the first year of the pandemic allows us to establish an analytical grid that identifies three temporal references of crisis discourse. The more immediate crisis has to do with the spread of the virus and the healthcare response. The second, broader temporality spans from the consequences of the euro crisis regarding socio-economic asymmetries and expands beyond the pandemic towards a horizon of greater cohesion. The third, longer time reference establishes the EU’s crisis of purpose, spanning from its initial promises in the aftermath of war, into a distant future of a Union made closer by this new “challenge” and the necessary “reconstruction”. Although intimately entangled in the official discourse of the Union, each temporality has, as we show, its specific forms of diagnostic, of action, but also of relevant actors (or subjects). They run with relative autonomy in the corpus of speeches, but they show how an unexpected, nefarious, and ravaging viral spread was construed as a moment of decisive intervention for the strict healthcare predicament as well as a moment of broader historical significance for the fate of the European Union as a polity.

The paper is structured as follows. In the first section we expand on our theoretical contribution of the role of multiple temporalities in the social construction of crises, and we present the theoretical framework that guides the empirical analysis. After a methodological note, we bracket off the three temporalities, and through recourse to the corpus of text we trace the three overlapping crises. The final section of the paper discusses the results and shows how the three temporalities were discursively entangled, but also how they were mobilized towards a response strategy, anchored in the green transition, that fit these timeframes for crisis construal into an even larger, indeed geological, temporality: the Anthropocene.

1. **Crisis and political time**

Few concepts are as pervasive in common parlance as well as in academic investigation as the notion of “crisis”. From its ancient origins tied with the medical judgement of the fate of the ill, the concept of crisis has become a referential in all spheres of human conduct. From climate, geopolitical, energy, or economic crises, all the way to so-called “personal” crises, the notion seems to structure in many respects the very experience of modern time (d’Allonnes, 2016). Yet, across all of these usages, the idea of crisis retains its central character: crises are moments in which social regularities are seen as unsustainable (Habermas, 1988) and that require decisive intervention. Not about the appropriate medicine to apply to an affliction, but about the forms of political action that should be adopted by groups, societies, and political systems. Indeed, the fundamental relevance of this experience of time through crises is the intimate relationship between crisis and intervention. Crises matter because they structure what is to be done. The pervasiveness of crises in contemporary political life has nevertheless altered the original (etymological) meaning of the notion. The repeated experience of moments qualified as crises in the public sphere has contributed to make them less exceptional and more banal. In many ways, crises have become a permanent reality, the “new normal” milieu of political and social life. Political responses, in turn, have been ambivalent, oscillating between a certain inability to decide (d’Allonnes, 2016) to new forms of emergency politics displacing the boundaries of legitimate action (Honig, 2009).

Precisely because crises are determinant for political action, their character is the object of political contention. Referring specifically to the economic field, Blyth has argued that “what constitutes an economic crisis *as a crisis* is not a self-apparent phenomenon” (Blyth, 2002, p. 9). Rather, it is the result of ideational and discursive struggles that mobilize scientific, technical, and normative principles to give sense to sets of events or phenomena that are perceived as critical to varying degrees (Schmidt, 2008; Hay, 2016). The social analysis of crises thus benefits from an approach that, rather than exploring a putative objective “etiology” (Dobry, 1986), focuses on the ways in which actors intersubjectively construct and contend about the appropriate definition of what the problem is and what should be done (Mégie and Vauchez, 2014).

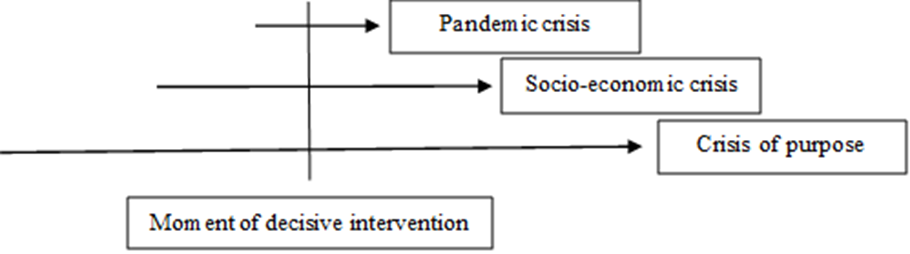
This definition takes, in all cases, a narrative character (Hay, 1996): actors look at events and arrange them in ways that purport to provide an adequate, if simplified, sequence of what brought the crisis about – with the aim of addressing the source of the problem. This narration naturally implies a process of construal of political time (Ricoeur, 1991). Is the crisis an immediate, unanticipated shock? Was the crisis in the making for a long period of time? Does the crisis – whatever its character – constitute a problematization of minor measures of short duration, of broader policies with longer legacies, or of the very long-term purpose and goals of social, political, and economic organization (Hall, 1993)?

The literature on the role of time in politics has developed useful ways to incorporate this dimension in both theoretical and empirical work. There is no doubt that social research is to a large extent concerned with the effect of time. Statistical analysis and causal inference focus recurringly not only on how past events shape current and future ones, but also on how the mere passage of (linear) time is causally efficient (Abbott, 2001). Historical institutionalists (HI) have attempted to conceptualize the role of time for the study of often more qualitative forms of social enquiry. Time, this stream of institutionalism posits, “matters”. The way it matters, however, is as an exogenous variable in the explanation of institutional continuity or change. Pierson’s seminal reading of early works in the HI tradition has led the notions of “path dependency” and “feedback effects”, namely regarding public policies, to become widespread (Pierson, 2000). More recent contributions in the “incrementalist turn” of HI scholarship have developed a larger toolkit to analyze processes in which the simple passage of time seems to matter for policy and institutional outcomes. The use that this literature makes of a linear model of exogenous time prevents it, however, from fully incorporating the ways in which time (or the experience of time) is itself politically constructed. In this sense, constructivist institutionalists go a step further as their narrative frameworks of analysis inherently incorporate a notion of constructed time. However, this literature often retains the idea of a singular, linear causal chain of events. Crises, this literature argues, are constructed through conflicting narratives, but these narratives – to varying degrees of sophistication – tell an often simple or *simplified* story (Goodin and Tilly, 2006).

We argue that the process of social construction of crises potentially incorporates a more complex process of construction of political time. Rather than a linear narrative presenting events in a causal chain, moments of crisis can occur in and through the constitution of multiple, overlapping, entangled (yet relatively autonomous) temporalities. A moment of crisis can be constructed, as this article shows through an analysis of the European pandemic crisis, as a condensation of multiple, concomitant temporalities that require an integrated moment of decisive intervention. From an analytical standpoint, this insight constitutes an extension, more than a revision, of relatively established principles of discursive institutionalism. Crucially, however, we sustain that the analysis of the social construction of crises should search beyond the construal of single narratives, and look into (1) how a wider range of narratives can coexist and be discursively expressed with reference to different temporal levels and (2) how these temporalities are themselves articulated through discourse. This analytical agenda brings us to a focus on narrative constructions through overlapping, yet distinctive frames that cohabit in political discourse. We expand further on this in the methodological section, after indicating our analytical grid for the construction of time in the European pandemic crisis.

The European experience of handling the pandemic followed that of most regions afflicted by the virus. Uncertainty about the nature and consequences of the disease for humans, calculation about the capacity of the healthcare system to cope, and a broader muddling through the evolving scientific and political consensus on the appropriate response were not exceptional to European countries or to the European Union. Even the way in which the crisis was perceived as a “big reveal” (McNamara and Newman, 2020) of looming fragilities was aligned with the unfolding of the pandemic in other political communities. A central dimension differentiates the crisis as it was experienced in the EU from others: the perceived threat to the EU as a political entity, as a polity. The sovereigntist reflex (Benoît and Hay, 2022) that rapidly operated through the closing down of European borders, through the lack of multilateral support, and the dramatic effects of the early stages of the pandemic in Italy and Spain led to a deep questioning across societies of the promise and purpose of the EU as a whole. This can be illustrated in several ways, but French President Emmanuel Macron, renowned for his pro-EU credentials, made the case succinctly in April 2020 when stating that Europe was at a “moment of truth”, further suggesting that “if at this point in history we don’t do it [common debt], there will no longer be any shared adventure” (Mallet and Khalaf, 2020a, 2020b). The coronavirus was, in this reasoning, a catalyst for a substantial rethinking of the EU as a polity and of the value of the “adventure”.

To some extent, the “existential” character of this crisis is not too dissonant from the discourse that could be observed in previous predicaments. Indeed, it is an old adage in the EU, borrowed from Jean Monnet: integration will occur through crises. In the decade that mediates the Global Financial Crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic, Europe went through a series of crises often presented as existential: the euro crisis, the migration crisis, and Brexit forming a “polycrisis” tryptic that was seen to put time and again the fate of integration in question (Zeitlin, Nicoli and Laffan, 2019). These logics form a type of “European crisology” (Morin, 1976; Mégie and Vauchez, 2014) that at its core is structured by the idea of “emergency politics” (Kreuder-Sonnen and White, 2021). Put simply, “European crisis decision-making typically involves exceptionalism” (Kreuder-Sonnen and White, 2021, p. 4). Through this type of process, “moments of truth” in times of perceived “emergency” are often embedded in broader political projects of change in the rules, practices, and larger interpretations of the integration process. The pandemic was no exception.



**Figure 1.** A model of three overlapping temporalities in the European response to the pandemic.

We argue that the pandemic crisis in Europe was, in line with previous crises, embedded in a more substantial debate about the polity and the path of integration. This embeddedness, however, unfolded through the political construction of three main temporal references for the “moment of decisive intervention” in the spring of 2020 (Figure 1). These were not merely considerations structured by a linear understanding of time – a view of the past, of the present, and of the future. Rather, these temporalities coexisted in the political discourse of European elites, and each one of these crises was discursively articulated as requiring integrated resolution. Adopting with relative freedom Braudel’s notions of historical time (Braudel, 1958), we can speak of events, conjunctures, and *longue durée*. At the first level, we argue that EU actors constructed a discourse of an exogenous shock requiring urgent, coordinated action to prevent the spread of the virus. Despite uncertainties, this temporality was construed as contained in a relatively short time span. At a second level, the response to the pandemic was construed with reference to a reappraisal of the successes and failures of cohesion, especially in the aftermath of the austerity politics of the euro crisis. The temporality of this crisis spanned from prior to the pandemic and was projected onto a longer horizon of expectations. At a third level, we see the crisis of purpose that Macron’s quote illustrates. An historical arc spanning between the origins of the Union in response to great wars, with a spirit of solidarity and peaceful cooperation, and the project of an “ever closer union” was mobilized to give special historical significance to the pandemic response. Here, we see the presentation of long-term projects of “reconstruction” through green transition, digitalization, and structural reforms of European economic governance towards debt pooling.

Regardless of the virtue of these policies, which is not the focus of our analysis, a logical sequence between a viral pandemic and a plan for common debt is hardly self-apparent. These crises were, as all crises are, politically constructed. Crucially, as we show in this paper, this crisis construction involved a construction of multiple, overlapping, and discursively articulated temporalities.

1. **A framing approach to EU elites’ crisis discourse**

The empirical strategy of the paper is grounded in a frame analysis applied systematically across the three orders of temporality identified in the previous section. Inits basic form,framing can be understood as, on the one hand, an ideational and discursive device that structures reality and guides action (Goffman, 1974, pp. 10–11) and, on the other, as a communicative device which unveils “the concrete ways from which information migrates from one place to another” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Applying it to policy making, Schon and Rein (1994) have suggested that frames serve as deliberative tools to overcome conflict and create consensus. In EU politics, consensus seeking through framing is key because conflicts over policy issues as such - more often than not - intersect with institutional conflicts over competences (Daviter, 2007). In moments constructed as *crises,* frame analysis illuminates the ways in which actors construe and respond to the urge to take a particular course of action, and how they convey meaning to the public. Here, we build on the literature in political sociology (Benford and Snow, 2000) to deconstruct crisis discourse through three types of frames serving to articulate a) diagnosis: *What is the problem?*, b) prognosis: *What should be done?* and c) identity: *Who are we?*

Table 1 summarizes the analytical three-by-three matrix that guided the analysis of the corpus. The three generic types of frames cut across the three conceptions of crisis temporality depicted in the previous section. At the level of *problem construction* (or diagnosis), the pandemic is framed as an unexpected natural catastrophe, an exogenous symmetric shock affecting Europeans as well as people around the globe. This sanitary crisis unfolds through a historic recession emerges under highly uncertain auspices. In turn, the recession occurs against the backdrop of structural, long-term socio-economic imbalances both within and across European countries. Considering *what should be done* (or prognosis) framing is similarly embedded into three temporalities. The sudden breakout and rapid spread of the pandemic requires an immediate response in the form of European coordinated action as opposed to erratic national measures. Soon enough, EU elites must activate existing and new common policy tools to support societies and economies struggling in the face of repeated lockdowns. But short-term policy responses are depicted as insufficient. The recovery agenda is construed as addressing deep-seated problems of the past – inequalities and political divisions – *and as* shaping the future by mastering climate change, digitalization, and geopolitical challenges. Finally, *identity and motivational frames*, too, cover three nested crisis temporalities. In the immediate sanitary crisis, Europeans are depicted as vulnerable humans: suffering victims showing empathy towards one another. To address the immediate but also the latent socio-economic crises, citizens and decision makers alike have turned into learning sapiens: reflective individuals able to draw lessons from experiences (past and present) and constantly adapt. Regarding the long-term crisis, an imperative of European unity, solidarity, and responsibility towards each other is mobilized. Only united, so goes the framing, will Europeans be able to face the dangers threatening not only Europe but also humanity in the future.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Three crises** | **The immediate sanitary crisis** | **The persisting socio-economic crisis** | **The Union’s crisis of purpose** |
| **Three frames** |
| **What is the problem?** | An exogenous symmetric shock | Uncertain consequences | Structural socio-economic imbalances |
| **What should be done?** | Contain the virus through coordinated action | Support the economy through common tools | Recovery agenda for the future |
| **Who are we?** | Vulnerable humans | Learning sapiens | United Europeans |

**Table 1**. Analytical framework and codebook

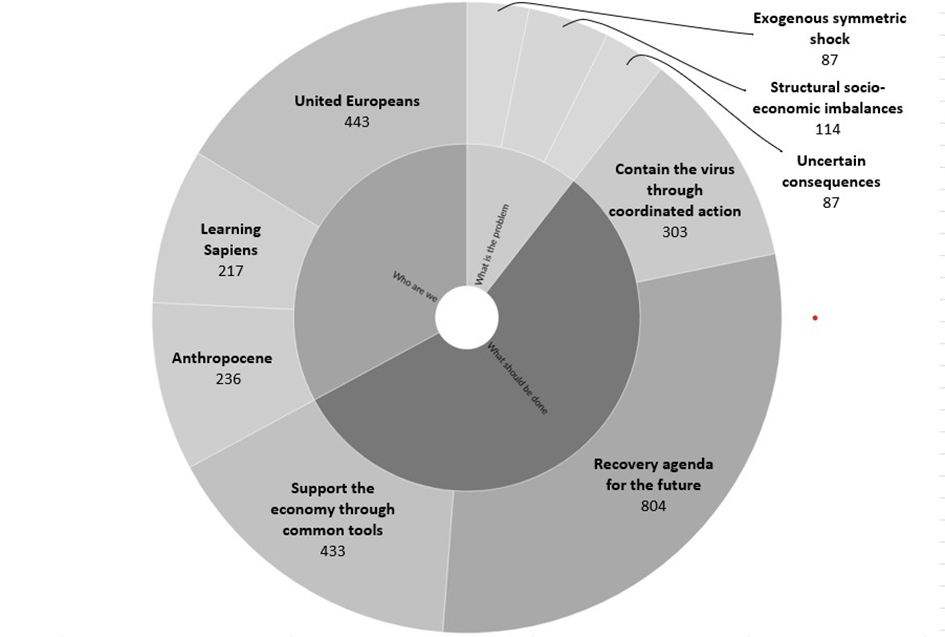
The frame analysis is operationalized through computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). It relies on a relatively large corpus of data (see Table 2), constituted of, on the one hand, speeches pronounced by Ursula Von der Leyen, the President of the European Council Charles Michel and Christine Lagarde, and of their tweets, on the other hand, in the period from March to December 2020. Ursula Von der Leyen played alongside the European Council headed by Charles Michel a crucial role in shaping the necessary coordination to find and implement emergency solutions. The role of the European Central Bank was also decisive in the monetary response to the economic downturn with the implementation of its Pandemic Emergency Purchase Program (PEPP). Notwithstanding thematic variation due to their different institutional roles, our assumption - confirmed by the exploratory phase of the analysis - has been that there had been no significant difference in the way the three institutional leaders framed the response to the pandemic. This motivated our decision to constitute only one corpus (instead of three) reflecting the relatively homogenous EU elite discourse. Combining speeches and tweets has allowed us to focus heavily on the communicative discoursetowards the wider public – as opposed to the coordinative discourse among decision makers (Schmidt, 2008).

Using an academic search access to the Twitter application programming interface (API version 2), we were able to assemble a corpus of tweets by Ursula Von der Leyen, Charles Michel and Christine Lagarde. After the collection of the tweets, a first selection took place with the objective of keeping discourse strictly related to the pandemic. Moreover, identical tweets as well as tweets announcing meetings or press conferences without additional information were removed. Similarly, congratulatory and get-well tweets that did not contain additional information about the pandemic were not included. For the corpus of speeches of the three leaders, we selected press conferences and speeches listed in the online databases of each institution (Commission, European Council, and European Central Bank) for the period from March 1 to December 31, 2020. The corpus is formed by all speeches in which the three actors refer to “Covid”, “coronavirus” or “pandemic”. In the case of Christine Lagarde, whose corpus was less substantial than the remaining ones, we also incorporated interviews conducted with major media outlets. Table 2 summarizes the main metrics of the corpus and of the coding.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Speeches | Coded references | Tweets | Coded references |
| C. Lagarde | 40 | 1140 | 62 | 170 |
| C. Michel | 52 | 1090 | 190 | 454 |
| U. von der Leyen | 96 | 1856 | 264 | 760 |
| Total | 188 | 4086 | 516 | 1384 |

**Table 2.** Corpus and coded references

The methodology used for coding and interpreting the data can be described as abductive. Rooted in the work of the philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, abductive reasoning seeks to provide the most likely explanation of empirically observed facts, informed by theoretical thinking. Departing from established analytical categories (three types of frames), data coding operated in the software N-Vivo consisted in identifying the corresponding specific thematic frames. The abductive approach has meant that those codes remained themselves open to interpretation and readjustments as a potentially different meaning was emerging out of the coding process (Vila-Henninger *et al.*, 2022). We coded whole sentences (i.e., all those including a verb), regardless of their length, as they function as basic units of meaning. We did not code each and every sentence in the corpus, but only those whose meaning related to identified thematic frames. Simultaneous coding was used whenever a single sentence referred to more than one frame. Table 2 shows that, while de corpus of speeches for Ursula von der Leyen is much longer than that of Michel and Lagarde, the proportion of references coded is relatively similar. Figures 2 and 3 show the relative proportion of each frame in the corpus. The online appendix provides a complete list of the quotes cited throughout the paper.



**Figure 2.** Coded frames

**Figure 3.** Proportion of references coded for each crisis temporality

1. **Tackling eventfulness and the immediate sanitary crisis**

As stylized in table 1, a first crisis temporality emerging from the speeches and tweets relates to the immediate response to the breakout of the pandemic (626 references). The unexpected sanitary crisis is located in the immediate present of political time. This short-term event is essentially associated to crisis management requiring “emergency politics” (White, 2015). The diagnosis of the health crisis was construed as an exogenous shock, with the new coronavirus emerging outside Europe before spreading to the continent. Then, in view of this unprecedented shock, the European response (prognosis) was promoted by EU leaders as requiring coordinated action to save lives. Finally, the identity of the actors at the center of this crisis was discursively constructed on an image of vulnerable human beings in need of immediate support.

***An exogenous shock***

From a problem construction point of view, the pandemic was framed not only as an *exogenous shock*, but also as a *symmetric* one which affects all Europeans, and beyond, the entire globe (SCL 34, SCM 31, SUVDL 22; TCM 5, 10). Christine Lagarde is the most prone to this type of economic argumentation, she emphasizes that “the shock is huge, unprecedented in peace time” (SCL 33). Immediately, an explicit comparison is established to contrast this with the asymmetric nature of the euro crisis ten years earlier: This time it’s not a question of a crisis stemming from the financial and real estate sectors which then spreads to the entire economy, nor of one country diverging completely from the others as a result of a bad combination of economic policies. This is a symmetrical shock which is hitting all economies at the same time” (SCL 35, 36).

***Containing the virus through coordinated action***

The key idea underlying crisis management here is the frame of *coordination*, described as the only way to contain effectively the virus (TCL 5a, SCM 3, SUVDL 6). Here, important differences emerge in the use of this frame, which are explained by the different institutional roles of the three speakers. For the European Council and the European Commission alike, the first sequence of erratic national measures resulting in uncoordinated lockdowns, border closures (and *de facto* suspension of Schengen rules) and bans on exports of medical equipment was an enormous challenge to be overcome. At the end of February 2020, the failure to activate the EU Civil Protection Mechanism to respond to Italy’s call for additional protective equipment reflected a disastrous picture of a useless, disunited Europe (Herszenhorn, Paun and Deutsch, 2020). In response, both Michel and even more so von de Leyen framed the EU action as an enormous effort to overcome this situation. A special emphasis was put on the fact that, although containing the virus required an exceptional suspension of free movement, the responsibility of the EU institutions was to preserve the existence of the single market, including free circulation of goods and persons against protectionist national measures. The Commission president proved especially keen to pit the Commission as the essential engineer of European coordination struggling against sovereigntist instincts, claiming for instance that “when Member States closed borders, we created green lanes for goods” (SUVDL 226, 511) and, of course, presenting its action in the realm of vaccines – from common procurement to authorization by the European Medicine Agency and blueprints for vaccination campaigns – as pioneering.

***Vulnerable humans***

In this picture dominated by a sudden shock hitting Europe and the world, collective identities were mostly framed around the idea of vulnerability (TCL 2, SCM 79, SUVDL 139a). Identity framing is especially important in von der Leyen’s speeches and even more so in her tweets. This is not surprising given that the European Commission has asserted itself as the driver of Europeanness investing discursive and political resources in the realm of symbolic politics (Calligaro, 2013). In relationship with the pandemic, though, a novel aspect of EU elite discourse lies in the fact that citizens are not primarily framed as Europeans, but as *vulnerable humans*. While the pandemic is on a few occasions described as the result of human activity (e.g., SCL 3), people are primarily pictured as suffering victims. In the face of this “human tragedy” (SCL 3), EU elites proved clearly hesitant to adopt the security frame to profile themselves as wartime leaders, as several national politicians have done, especially Donald Trump or Emmanuel Macron.

While referring occasionally to Covid-19 as an “invisible enemy” (SCL 1; SUVDL 43), two themes emerge as especially present. The first is that of fragility which is associated with individuals, societies, economies and the environment alike (TCM 12, 21; SUVDL 32, 36, 37, 40, 51, 62) – in brief, the “fragility of life” (SUVDL 13). Fragility is associated to a second theme, namely that of empathy as a link between human beings. They, as leaders, are showing empathy towards the sick, the suffering families. Grassroots citizens are similarly depicted as exhibiting empathy towards one another, especially those working in the health care sector and in the most affected countries. From there ensue further themes with a string of moral undertones. Charles Michel in particular calls for the flourishing of “a caring society” (SCM 58, 71, 72, 75, 77, 80, 123; TCM 32, 44) meaning “caring for people and for nature” (TCM 44). Moral undertones are further accentuated as empathy takes the more radical form of “sacrifice” either by recognizing that “as individuals, we have all sacrificed a piece of our personal liberty for the safety of others” (SUVDL 147) or that “Italy’s sacriﬁce probably indirectly saved lives in the rest of Europe” (SUVDL 95).

In a nutshell, a first crisis temporality is therefore framed as a shock laying bare the vulnerability of Europeans and placing everyone on an equal footing, namely as suffering humans. If immediate coordinated policy action is required, a key aspect is that the pandemic is humbling, calling for empathy and care vis-à-vis “the living”. Not only Europeans, but all struggling humans need to join forces to ensure their survival, especially by stopping the spread of the virus and developing vaccines.

1. **Addressing the conjuncture of a persisting socio-economic crisis**

The short-term health crisis is deeply entangled with a conjuncture crisis linked to the socio-economic situation of EU Member States since the 2008 financial crisis (737 references). The EU leaders' diagnosis of the crisis lies in its uncertain economic consequences, as Europe has entered a recession caused by successive blockages. Uncertainty has also been constructed as inherent in the nature of this era in which financial and health crises are perceived as unpredictable. The remedy advocated by the three leaders was to use and create common tools to mitigate the economic shock as well as to ensure convergence between countries (prognosis). The leaders perceived this common response as coming from human knowledge and expertise. Indeed, human beings were presented as learning sapiens who acquire knowledge from past and present experiences (financial crisis, pandemic management, scientific work).

***Uncertain consequences***

Beyond the sanitary situation *stricto sensu*, the “crisis” is rapidly constructed as one conducive to a historic recession and social distress. What is more, the key concern is that, at the time of speaking, the sheer scale of the socio-economic damage remains hard to predict given that the economic activity is constrained by the spread of the virus. Here, the uncertainty frame appears albeit to various extents (SCL 59a; SCM 18; SUVDL 10). In the discourse of Christine Lagarde, the repeated emphasis on uncertainty relates to the fact that uncertainty is especially disruptive for the activity of the ECB, which is asked to provide projections of the unfolding economic situation and scenarios provided by the ECB. As time passes by, the second wave of Covid infections in the fall of 2020 implies that no linear upward trajectory of recovery can be envisaged (SCL 34, 41, 48). With a sense of self-irony, Christine Lagarde is even taking distance with pseudo-scientific assessments by for instance deploring: “I'm not sure exactly what letter of our alphabet our forecast would correspond to” (SCL 82). As for Michel, he for instance recognized in a fatalist tweet “#COVID19 has shown that we can't always control what happens to us” (TCM 13).

***Supporting the economy through common tools***

Against the background of such high uncertainty, the response to the question *what should be done?* is one which locates the crisis in a broader temporality by connecting the unfolding recession to the previous triggered by the financial and debt crisis of 2008-2010. This expanded temporality emerges from the concern that the recession due to the pandemic occurs at a time where the EU has been “muddling through” for ten years (Crespy, 2020). The EU’s response is here framed as one *supporting the economy through common tools* (SCL 164; SCM 39; TUVDL 2), with the two supranational institutions (namely the EC and ECB) especially keen to express the effectiveness of supranational policy solutions. Both existing and novel policy tools are activated in a way which creates a strong yet ambivalent resonance with the response to the euro crisis a decade earlier.

Christine Lagarde is very keen to show that the ECB has the ability to innovate to maintain the effectiveness of monetary policy instruments through the additional longer-term refinancing operations first, and then with the set-up of a new a new temporary asset purchase program of private and public sector securities dubbed Pandemic Emergency Purchase Programme (PEPP), extended its initial deadline at the end of 2020. Lagarde’s framing is therefore one picturing an unlimited power to respond to the socio-economic challenge, both in scope and in time as summarized in a tweet “There are no limits to our commitment to the euro” from March 2020 (TCL 1). Michel and von der Leyen are mainly focused on the tension between the rebordering of Europe combined with a de-bordering of financial solidarity (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs, 2021). The fact that “the internal market has been damaged” appears as a central concern early on. Beyond, though, there is a recognition that the EU must intervene to complement state support to people in need. This has implied an immediate suspension of most market-oriented EU policies such as rules prohibiting state aid and the Stability and Growth Pact constraining public expenditure. Furthermore, the EC has ventured new policy interventionist territories by setting up its Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency (SURE) providing 100 billion euros in guaranteed loans to help finance national temporary unemployment schemes (*Kurzarbeit)*.

Eventually, we see a set of new tools including SURE, RescEU, EU4Health layering on old ones such as the existing agencies in the field of health policy, the Banking Union, the Digital Single Market, the European Pillar of Social Rights and above all the Multi-Annual Financial Framework presented as early as April as a springboard for the response to the pandemic. Overall, all three leaders align on a common mantra reiterating the famous performative commitment made by Mario Draghi back in 2012, namely that the ECB would do “whatever it takes” to save the Monetary Union. Now expanding to the whole scope of EU action - as illustrated in this Tweet by Michel: “We will do #WhateverItTakes to save jobs” (TCM 17) the formula #WhateverItTakes has even become a popular hashtag on Twitter. The leitmotiv has been also echoing French President Macron who had first mimicked Draghi’s pledge by claiming that the French government would do everything to dampen the impact of the pandemic “whatever the cost” in a TV appearance on 12 March 2020 (SCM 135). In the face of the pandemic, the EU’s action is framed as one which contrasts with the austeritarian response to the 2010 debt crisis and, at the same time, builds on existing policies to expand its “toolbox” to new more interventionist and supranational instruments.

***Learning sapiens***

In the same vein, motivational and identity frames serve to establish a link between the past, the present and the future, by describing both citizens and decision makers as *learning sapiens* (SCL 64, 65, 88, 113; SCM 112, 175; SUVDL 46, 224). Three broad themes underlie the learning frames. First, the idea that policy making should be guided by science and expertise, actualized on a daily basis: “We are learning by the day, by the week, and also science is learning how to deal with this disease” (SUVDL 224). This goes hand in hand with strong support for supporting the development of research in the medical field, starting with vaccines. The frame also for socio-economic governance, implying that we have to learn what the right policies are but also to learn to cooperate more effectively (e.g. SCM 112, 114, 146a). Christine Lagarde is especially keen on references to scientific knowledge, given that the ECB is itself a key provider of expertise through its assessments and forecasts. Interestingly, the learning dimension is one which connects policy makers to the mass of citizens, all involved in this grand scale learning experience: “Whether that be people sensibly staying at home, or others doing their utmost in hospitals, or people trying to invent new policies, everyone must be on the front line” (SCL 25). Second, the idea that “Europe has shown that it has learnt is lessons from the past” is pervasive throughout the corpus (SCL 113) with explicit references to the Eurocrisis in a promise “to avoid the reflexes and mistakes of the past” (SUVDL 125). Eventually, learning the lessons will propel Europeans towards a brighter future. Linking lessons from the past and for the future, Michel for example claimed:

“There is, in my view, one other fundamental lesson to be drawn from this extraordinary crisis. While the ﬁnancial crisis pushed us to put consolidating fragile public ﬁnances at the top of our agenda, this crisis has brought home what’s most important: personal and collective well-being, embodied by a compassionate and caring society which, I believe, should be Europe’s new horizon” (SCM 122, 123).

To conclude, EU elites have inscribed the policy response to the pandemic in the longer time frame where the EU has been struggling with economic recessions and its social impact for a at least a decade, if not longer as slow growth, high unemployment and the constraints of the Monetary Union have affected large parts of Europe since the 1990s. As such, the idea starts emerging that the response is not only to solve a sudden pandemic but to address problems which had, on the contrary, been endemic in Europe’s socio-economic situation. In this temporality, citizens and decision makers are joined in a community of learning sapiens, individuals their behavior on scientific knowledge and able to draw lessons from past experiences in order to shape their future.

1. **Exiting the Union’s never-ending crisis of purpose**

In addition to the short and medium-term crises, there is a more structural one, namely the EU’s crisis of purpose. As indicated in Table 1, about half of our data (1361 references out of 2724) relate to this much broader construction of the crisis in time. The diagnosis provided by EU leaders is based on the observation of structural and endless socio-economic imbalances (or divergence) between Member States. An incomplete institutional architecture, such as an asymmetric EMU, is deeply embedded in this diagnosis. All three presidents emphasized the recovery program as the only way to solve the crisis and bring a bright future to Europe (prognosis). Eventually, the political response to the crisis is one which should allow Europeans to exit the vicious circle of recurring crises, or the never ending “polycrisis” the EU has been facing since at least 2008. For EU leaders, only united Europeans will emerge strong from this crisis. They are the only ones who can carry on the legacy of the founding fathers and revive the European project.

***Structural socio-economic imbalances***

In that sense, the aim is to re-enter a time of decisiveness (over inability to decide) to shape a long-term vision and “move on”. Here, the key problem is not the pandemic as such or even the uncertainty of the recession’s magnitude, but it goes back to the entrenched *socio-economic imbalances* which have been dividing the Union since the relatively homogenous “club of the six” has started enlarging to contrasted territories (SCL 41; SCM: 31; SUVDL 42). Interestingly, the initial diagnosis is rapidly tweaked facing the realization that “the pandemic represents a symmetric shock with asymmetric consequences across the Union” (SUVDL 48) in the sense that “the countries with the weakest economies, which in some cases are those that have been hit hardest by the virus, do not have the fiscal headroom to do what is needed to restart their economies” (SCL 39). This refers, once again, not only to the fact that the Southern and Eastern periphery were considerably weakened by the euro crisis, but also to much more deep-seated structural differences in their political economies. Because it impedes mobility, the pandemic will for instance have a greater impact on the Southern economies which rely heavily on the tourism sector. The problem is therefore, in the long run, that the pandemic could further hit the EMU’s Achille’s ill by “widening asymmetries and exiting this crisis with greater economic divergence” (SCL 31) therefore making the socio-economic convergence desired for a long time even more elusive. Finally, the problems of imbalances also translate to societies and inequality among individuals, as illustrated by von der Leyen’s questioning “Will this virus permanently divide us into rich and poor? Into the haves and the have-nots?” (SUVDL 10) or Lagarde’s Tweet (TCL 5b): “we need to be attentive to those likely to be affected more by the crisis: the poor in all countries, the poorest countries, young people and women”.

***Shape the future through the recovery agenda***

The bulk of all references in speeches (235) and Tweets (170) is dedicated on presenting NextGenerationEU as the solution to the long-term fragilities of the EU and as a way to *shape the future*. As advertised in the name of the recovery plan, the redirection of political action from the immediate present to the future is claimed as a deliberate strategy: “We shifted the focus from immediate, short-term crisis measures to longer-term recovery and the rebuilding of our economies and societies” (TCM 62). A strong discursive marker is the pervasive notion of “resilience” which, in psychology, refers to an ability to look differently at a trauma in the past in order to endure the present and envision the future positively. As a policy response, NGEU unfolds in concentric circles, to the most central elements of the recovery plan, to the most peripheral – and indeed barely related – policy concerns. Fiscal sharing constitutes the core of the recovery agenda, and it stems directly from the established diagnosis about imbalances, namely the recognition that financial help must benefit primarily to the regions and countries with the most difficulties. Beyond the RRF, fiscal sharing is reflected in a revamped multi-annual budget and opens the door to new common fiscal resources taxing plastic waste, imported carbon, and digital activities (e.g., SUVDL 171, 172). These propositions therefore connect the second circle constituting the EU response to the “crisis”, namely the European Green Deal and promotion of digitalisation: “Our next multi-year budget & Recovery Fund will lay the foundation for our post-COVID world: greener, more digital, more modern” (TCM 115). The time dimension is here crucial because NGEU is construed as propelling – at last – the EU into the “new world” (SUVDL 122). As if the compatibility of the two was self-explanatory, green and digital objectives are construed as “twin” pillars of the recovery (SUVDL132, 139b, 181, 190). For Lagarde, the use of “green” monetary instruments raises questions about the boundaries of the ECB’s mandate. In response, the ECB’s President identifies climate change as a major disruptor of inflation in the future thus grounding the legitimacy of the ECB’s to act on that terrain. A third circle of policy issues finally comes to coalesce to the promotion of NGEU pertaining to more existential questions, namely the theme of strategic autonomy, on the one hand, and that of values, on the other. Regarding the former, we observe variation across speakers. For Lagarde, greater autonomy will come from the shortening of once global supply chains at the relocation of production in Europe. While von der Leyen puts the emphasis on “digital sovereignty”, Michel speaks of autonomy in relation with defence and foreign policy issues. All three themes connect to the idea that the EU must defend its values vis-à-vis internal as well as external challenges (SCL 58, 59b; SCM 125, 146 b, 194, 201, 213, 259, 260, 273 TCM 95; SUVDL 271, 321), which justifies introducing rule of law conditionality for the distribution of common resources. Ultimately, by claiming that “#NextGenerationEU is our opportunity to make change happen by design – not by disaster or by diktat from others.” von der Leyen (TUVDL 108) frames political action in time: for them to master their destiny, Europeans need to be acting instead of continuously reactingto crises.

***United Europeans***

Finally, the framing of collective identities underpinning the recovery agenda through the questions *who are we? And why should we act together?* Brings about a logical and univocal response: *united Europeans* (SCL 107, SCM 11, 82, 153; SUVDL 107). Lyrical formulas and catch lines referring to United Europeans are especially well suited to communication on Twitter as this frame category receives the largest number of references in proportion (166 out of 443 coded in total). In an implicit reference to the recent past, namely the conflicts opposing creditors and debtors in the euro crisis, the idea that Europeans need to overcome divisions of the past “the moment to put behind us the old divisions, disputes and recriminations” appears as a starting point for envisioning the future. References to the historical past of the EU, and indeed its origins, are equally present in the corpus. Not only references to the hardship due to World War 2 (SCL 91; TCL 31 SCM 62, 84; SUVDL 39, 40) but also the post-war roots of European integration, especially Jean Monnet and its promise that “Europe should be forged in crises” (SCM 148; SUVDL 39, 254). Echoing the then German Finance Minister Olaf Scholz claiming that Europe was experiencing its “Hamiltonian moment”, Lagarde preferred a reference to Europe’s own mythology of the ever-closer Union by stating that “the pandemic we now face can be our “Schuman moment” (SCL 38) and she rephrased the Union’s motto to make it “United in adversity”.

The most pervasive subthemes within the unity frame is that of solidarity which is interestingly construed in a twofold fashion. The first is a moral understanding of solidarity as altruism among human beings who are sharing the same suffering. By tweeting for instance “We saw Polish doctors traveling to Italy to help where help is needed” (TUVDL 32), the stress here is put on the idea that this type of solidarity belongs to humanity and therefore transcends borders. Within humanity at large, a European identity nevertheless emerges as distinctively strong tie, compared to family (TUVDL 45) or marriage (TCM 69). The notion of help and the idea that the EU is there to “help the people of Europe” (TCM 19) serves to assign a clear purpose to the Union. What is striking though, is that a second understanding of solidarity is much more present in the EU elite discourse, namely a functional one depicting solidarity as a necessity resulting from interdependency, as reflected in a statement from the Commission President: “Solidarity is not just the most ethical choice. It is the only effective way to deal with a crisis of this magnitude” (SUVDL 97). Therefore, fiscal sharing does not rely on pure altruism, but “Strengthening Italy strengthens Europe, too”. (TCM 45). Put bluntly by the President of the ECB and referring once again to a famous claim by Robert Schuman: “solidarity is in fact self-interest” (TCL 10). Solidarity is therefore oftentimes associated with responsibility. Here, a parallel is established between individual citizens who have learnt to behave responsibly to contain the spread of the virus, on one hand, and the responsibility that the EU Member States have vis-à-vis on another in order to ensure the viability of the Union in the future as well as people’s livelihood (TUVDL 176, 177). Going full circle, the unity frame builds on the vulnerability and the context of the Anthropocene to definitively give the EU a strong sense of purpose.

1. **Conclusion. The pandemic that saved Europe?**

By looking at the European response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the aim of our study has been to show how political actors frame events construed as crises in order to reconfigure the relation between time and political action. While most academic accounts focus on time as an exogenous factor shaping the pace of political and academic change, or on the discursive construction of crises *in* time, we have examined how the construction *of time* was entangled with three embedded crises of Europe: an immediate sanitary crisis situated in the eventfulness of political and social life, and persisting socio-economic crises which had constituted the broad conjuncture of Europe for at least two decades, and a historic crisis of purpose which goes back to the origins of regional integration in Europe. What do these findings tell us about time and political action in the EU? A first level of constructivist analysis suggests that the three-pronged crisis discourse serves to legitimize the policy response by diagnosis frames of problem construction, to prognosis frames pertaining to policy solutions, underpinned by identity and motivational frames. What we show is that this political construction of time can – and effectively does – go beyond the linearity of a unified crisis narrative. Pushing the intellectual instruments of constructivist approaches to the study of crises, we argue that the construction of temporality (or rather *temporalities*) through discourse is an essential element of crisis construal processes.

Beyond the widespread use of the past for legitimizing purposes, our findings suggest a second level interpretation of the specificity of the EU as a supranational polity. As many commentaries have suggested, “this crisis is different”. But the difference does not primarily stem from EU leaders having agreed on a policy program marking a critical juncture with regard to institutional developments. As a matter of fact, scholars have argued that even the NGEU is yet another way for the EU to be “failing forward” (Howarth and Quaglia, 2021). Rather, it is different because it marks an attempt to reconfigure the relation between time and political action whereby EU leaders’ discourse purports a structural exit of the indeterminacy of a never-ending crisis. In other words, the structural crisis of the EU can be addressed as the supranational polity defines a new broader purpose. In this way, the inward-looking existential and legitimacy crisis of the EU is nested and hopefully dissolving into the broader civilizational and ecological crisis.

The three identified temporalities of political time are thus embedded in a yet broader, geological time frame. Not only shall the response to the immediate crisis serve to solve the crises of the past, but it shall also serve to address the crises of the future, namely climate change and the coming “crises” it will bring about. The in-depth analysis of the nine identified frames support this argument as they converge to form a metanarrative including all the components of political action put into stories. Beyond Europe’s own persisting problems, the pandemic breaks out in a setting where all humans are more vulnerable than ever, experiencing natural disasters from an ecosystem on the verge of collapse. Protagonists are suffering victims, often sacrificing their well-being to save others, but also scientists and decision makers joining forces to conceive of effective policies. The plot of the story features an EU acting to salvage citizens and states: will it succeed to overcome centrifugal forces of disunion and disintegration? In the greater fight for the preservation of “livelihoods” and, ultimately, survival, the *raison d’être* of the EU in the 21st century, so goes the moral of the story, is to convince at home as well as globally of the moral and practical superiority of multilateralism over sovereigntism - of solidarity over egoism.

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