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Embedding past, present and future crises: time and the political construction of the Covid-19 pandemic in the EU

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the construction of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis by EU elites. It addresses the puzzling relationship between the spread of the new virus with a large-scale reconfiguration of economic governance in the EU which was unimaginable a few months earlier. Drawing from a constructivist approach to political economy, we argue that the discursive construal and framing of this crisis was instrumental to embed the emergency of the pandemic with broader levels of conjunctural, historical, and even civilizational temporal references. Providing a frame analysis of public statements by the heads of the European Commission, the European Council, and European Central Bank during 2020, we show how the sudden outbreak of COVID-19 was framed as a catalyst for tackling the EU's historical crisis of purpose, the socio-economic imbalances left over from the euro crisis, as well as the predicament of the climate crisis.

KEYWORDS

Economic governance;
European Union; framing;
pandemic; time

1. Introduction

For a decade, the experience of the euro crisis and of the enforcement of austerity policies across the EU had been at the centre of substantial political contention. Yet, economic governance in the EU did not undergo substantial reform, as actors 'muddled through' crises (Crespy 2020) and rules were less changed than reinterpreted 'by stealth' (Schmidt 2016). The European Commission pushed for a more 'political' implementation of fiscal rules in the European Semester (Mérand 2021; Miró 2021). The European Central Bank (ECB) reinterpreted its remit and mandate in order to purchase government bonds (Braun 2016). More ambitious plans for a Eurozone budget capable of generating a new 'safe asset' and a 'stabilisation function', as well as a Treasury and a finance minister, failed to materialise given the opposition of the 'Frugals' (Schoeller 2021) as well as Germany (Howarth and Schild 2021).

In a matter of weeks after the outbreak of the pandemic in Europe, however, a series of longstanding 'taboos' were effectively broken. With the support of Germany (Crespy and Schramm 2021), the Commission rapidly proposed a recovery programme, coined Next Generation EU (NGEU), with a financial envelope of 750 billion euros (Buti and Fabbrini

2023; de la Porte and Heins 2022; Wolff and Ladi 2020). The deal, brokered at the European Council of July 2020, largely dropped the imperatives of conditionality that dominated the response to the euro crisis (Ferrera, Miró, and Ronchi 2021; Miró 2022; Schramm and Wessels 2023). The funds would be obtained through the issuance of shared liabilities, widely termed ‘Coronabonds’. The distribution of the funds targeted the most affected countries, hence generating macroeconomic stabilisation through resource redistribution (Armingeon et al. 2022). The programme defined investment in digitalisation and green transition as key priorities for a post-pandemic ‘reconstruction’ (Tesche 2022).

The pandemic response in the EU thus rightly rekindled core debates around processes and paths of EU integration, namely in economic governance. Many have argued that the pandemic crisis was different ‘*by nature*’ and was bound to mean the end of austerity (Buti and Fabbrini 2023) bringing about a ‘learning’ process among decision makers (Ladi and Tsarouhas 2020). Another set of contributions has shed light on the longer roots of the response to the pandemic, looking at how the EU response was shaped by the necessity to answer to ‘voices from the past’ (Armingeon et al. 2022). While some have focused on the opportunistic behaviour of the EU institutions to drive deeper integration forward, especially the European Commission (Kassim 2023; Quaglia and Verdun 2023), many have looked at how the agreement on new governance tools national leaders within the Council (and Germany in particular) had made the turn possible (Crespy and Schramm 2021; de la Porte and Jensen 2021; Schramm and Wessels 2023; Tesche 2022). How all these dimensions could hold together however remains largely in the dark. While scholars have richly investigated the political motivations, on one hand, and the policy outcomes pertaining to the 2020 governance turn, on the other, we still know little about the – indeed discursive – process that connects the two by *making sense* of the ‘crisis’, shaping deliberations among leaders with diverging preferences, and legitimizing the EU response towards national publics. How could EU leaders conceive of and present common debt, investment, and the green transition as the logical and necessary response to a viral pandemic, and therefore, make happen, what seemed impossible just a few months prior?

To elucidate this question, this paper engages with processes of crisis construal and framing in EU politics (Hay 2016; Voltolini, Natorski, and Hay 2020) by examining specifically the construction of time in elite discourse. Adopting an abductive approach (Timmermans and Tavory 2012), the empirical analysis focuses on the public statements of three key EU political actors: European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, European Council President Charles Michel, and European Central Bank President Christine Lagarde. We coded frames of problem construction, policy prescription, and actors’ identity in a corpus of speeches ($N = 171$) and tweets ($N = 516$) made public by the three actors during 2020.

The paper shows how EU elites embedded the ‘event’ of the pandemic into overlapping crises of the EU situated not only in the present but also in the past as well as in the future. The immediate response of the pandemic stemming from the typical EU ‘emergency politics’ was discursively articulated into the broader conjunctural problem of socioeconomic imbalances left over from the euro crisis, as well as into a yet larger temporality concerning the purpose of the EU in the face of a climate crisis bound to shape the future. This allows us to make important contributions both at the empirical and analytical levels. Empirically, the paper provides an original, in-depth qualitative

analysis of elite discourse and crisis framing during the pandemic shedding light on how the EU response to the pandemic served to enable and legitimize broader policy programmes and important institutional change. Analytically, it pushes the literature into a more open-ended, and indeed a more sophisticated engagement with the construction of time in political discourses about ‘crises’. Adding to the existing literature on the discursive construction of crises (Hay 2016; Schmidt 2008), we argue that the articulation of time, which is not necessarily a linear, is a crucial aspect of (coordinative as well as communicative) discourses. In our case, the political discourse around COVID-19 emanating from the EU institutions mobilized, from the earliest stages, three overlapping temporalities that, while referring to different logics and historical dynamics, were entangled and articulated in a way that appeared coherent and that could legitimize the solutions foreseen.

The paper is structured as follows. In the first section, we expand on our theoretical contribution of the role of multiple temporalities in the construction of crises, and we present the theoretical framework that guides the empirical analysis. After a methodological note, we bracket off the three temporalities rooted, respectively, in immediacy, conjuncture, and historical purpose; 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.

2. Embedding covid: the puzzles of EU economic governance and the political construction of time in the pandemic

2.1 *The role of crisis construal*

The turn in EU governance ensuing from the COVID-19 pandemic was examined in a wide range of scholarly contributions. They mainly sought to identify the material, institutional and political drivers of change, and tended to focus on one temporal dimension only, namely either condensed decision-making in the heat of the pandemic, or the older roots of the recession. Dealing with the ‘immediate’ negotiation around the recovery plan, a central claim has been that the pandemic was, *by nature*, different from the euro crisis, thus leading to this turn away from austerity (Giles 2021; Buti and Fabbrini 2023). Seeking to elucidate how these decisions came about, scholars have often focused on the formation and reconfiguration of preferences in key Member States, with a strong focus on Germany (Becker 2023; Crespy and Schramm 2021; de la Porte and Jensen 2021; Schoeller and Heidebrecht 2023; Schoeller and Karlsson 2021; Schramm and Wessels 2023; Tesche 2022; Waas and Rittberger 2023). Others, in contrast, showed that the European Commission’s entrepreneurship was crucial in advancing new institutional solutions (Kassim 2023; Quaglia and Verdun 2023).

On the other hand, a longer time perspective led to arguments about ‘learning’ which had taken place among technocrats since the financial crisis (Ladi and Tsarouhas 2020; Ladi and Wolff 2021). From this angle, the pandemic constituted a critical juncture or a window of opportunity for reforms that were overdue (de la Porte and Heins 2022; Schelkle 2021), and policy responses appear as an attempt to address longstanding problems of the ‘slow burning’ crisis of EU economic

governance (Seabrooke and Tsingou 2019). The move towards fiscal sharing instruments and large investments should thus be traced back to longstanding proposals such as those advanced in the famous reports from the top figures of the EU institutions' top figures (e.g. Juncker et al. 2015). They were above all seen as a way for 'the [European] Commission to push forward programmes it had nurtured for some time, notably regarding its own resources and its ambitions for the green and digital transformations' (Armingeon et al. 2022, 145). Furthermore, scholars disagreed as to whether the adoption of Next Generation EU constituted a paradigm change for EU governance or was solely yet another sign of the Union 'failing forward' (Howarth and Quaglia 2021).

Finally, the literature dealing with crises *of* and *in* the EU has flourished over the past ten years. A central tenet is that 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). More recent events such as the war in Ukraine or the ensuing soaring in energy prices and inflation have largely been interpreted as new 'crises'. This prompted comparative studies seeking to explain differences and similarities across crises in the history of the EU (Schramm and Krotz 2023). More importantly perhaps, 'crises' have been theorized as moments of intense politicization of European matters, reflecting a deeper restructuring of cleavages (Hutter and Kriesi 2019; Zeitlin, Nicoli, and Laffan 2019). This, in turn, begged the question as to whether politicization and de-politicization in crises were conducive of deeper integration or, on the contrary, were obstructing change (Börzel and Risse 2018). The notion of 'emergency politics' (White 2015) was coined to critically shed light on how exceptionalism could allow to displace the boundaries of legitimate action. Eventually, crises have been grasped by virtually all theoretical schools relevant to the study of the EU (Brack and Gürkan 2020). Taken together, these works form a type of 'European crisology' (Mégie and Vauchez 2014) aiming to dissect the causes, manifestations and consequences of various events featuring and demand for rapid political response against the background heightened conflicts and politicization.

Despite the prolific literature two major aspects at the crossroads of the literature on crises, and on the pandemic, remain under investigated empirically. First, while framing has been identified as key factor explaining preference reconfiguration in Germany (Crespy and Schramm 2021; Waas and Rittberger 2023), a fully fledged analysis of the deliberative and discursive drivers of pandemic politics is still missing. How were pressures understood? How were problems and solutions framed in a way that made sense to all EU Member States and their publics? Second, the different strands of the literature somehow deal – indeed separately – with the different temporal aspects underpinning the EU response to the pandemic. But no analysis has yet analysed the connection of these temporal dimensions, not only as an analytical reconstruction put forward by researchers but in actual political deliberations and legitimizing discourses. Why did, according to political leaders, COVID-19 matter regarding Europe's past, present and future, thus requiring a major response going way beyond stopping the virus and fighting the ensuing recession?

2.2 Crisis construal and the discursive construction of time

In order to address these questions, we mobilize the literature on ‘crisis exploitation’ (Boin, Hart, and McConnell 2009), and on ‘constructivist institutionalism’ (Hay 2016). These approaches have long argued that ‘the essential narrativity of crisis’ (Hay 1999, 317) was key to understand ‘moments of decisive intervention’ and the deep transformation these bring about in polities (see also Hay 1996). Anchored into an ontology stressing the contingency of institutional change and the ideational and discursive mediation between agents and institutions (Hay 2016, 526), constructivist institutionalism leads to an investigation of the discursive underpinnings of change rather than assume the positive ‘nature’ crises, or to assume any logical or inevitable relationships between certain events and policy responses. A consistent, operational way to conceive of this approach is to think of crises as ‘framing contests’ (Boin, Hart, and McConnell 2009; Hart 1993; Hay 2016). In the concise formulation proposed by Boin et al. (2009):

Crises typically generate a contest between frames and counter-frames concerning the nature and severity of a crisis, its causes, the responsibility for its occurrence or escalation, and implications for the future. Contestants manipulate, strategize and fight to have their frame accepted as the dominant narrative.

This approach was recently applied to crises in EU politics (Voltolini, Natorski, and Hay 2020), but recent contributions have not yet dealt with the role of time in the discursive construction of the pandemic. While tapping into this line of research, our analysis thus seeks to contribute to a more sophisticated understanding of the role of time in crisis framing (Goetz and Meyer-Sahling 2009, 2009).

What is often conceptualized as crisis *narratives* tends to assume the form of simplified sequences (Hay 2016) that adopt – and are expected to adopt – linear temporal sequences (Abbott 2001). Here, our object hits, as it were, a theoretical bump in the road. An important part of the problems and political contests that NGEU seemed to resolve largely preceded the pandemic (Armingeon et al. 2022). Hence, a discourse linking the pandemic to the substantial reconfiguration that was observed in the Spring of 2020 can hardly be grasped through the lens of temporal linearity. Furthermore, an (apparent) paradox emerges from this eclectic body of work. On one hand, a strong emphasis has been placed on the political effects of ‘emergency’ politics (White 2015, 2019) and the ‘condensed temporality’ that characterizes crises (Hay 1999). On the other hand, as typical features of crisis discourse become recurrent (including emergency, the lack of alternative, the role of expertise, the need for structural reforms, etc.), this conveys a sense of ‘permanent crisis’ (Voltolini, Natorski, and Hay 2020). While it used to be exceptional, crisis decision-making seems to have become the ‘new normal’ milieu of political and social life (d’Allonnes 2016).

This, we argue, is because the social construction of crises potentially incorporates a more complex process of construction of political time. As suggested by Goetz and Meyer-Sahling, constructivist approaches tend to ‘emphasize the social embeddedness of temporal structures’ (Goetz and Meyer-Sahling 2009, 194). This means actors can articulate and embed multiple, overlapping, and entangled (yet relatively autonomous) temporalities. A moment of crisis can be constructed, as this article shows through an analysis of the European pandemic, as a condensation of multiple, concomitant temporalities that require an integrated ‘moment of decisive intervention’ (Hay 2016; Voltolini, Natorski, and

Hay 2020). From an analytical standpoint, this insight constitutes an extension, more than a revision, of relatively established principles of constructivist institutionalism. But, it is useful to specify how a wider range of frames can coexist and be discursively expressed with reference to different temporal dimensions, and how they can be articulated to support policy and political programmes.

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 (see Figure 1). These were not structured around a linear story in which the pandemic caused a crisis needing to be resolved. 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*. Scholars in their analyses of the EU response to the pandemic mainly focused on the immediate (1) and on the medium-term socio-economic crises (2).

This article proposes an analysis focusing on the construction of the COVID-19 crisis by EU actors, which encompasses three entangled temporalities. 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 with Macron 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 2020). 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.

To sum up, we make two central analytical contributions that can be summarized as follows. Firstly, we can only make sense of moments of decisive intervention if we

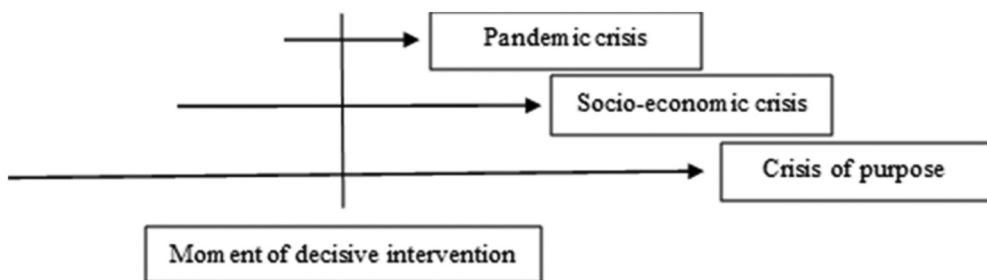


Figure 1. A model of three overlapping temporalities in the European response to the pandemic.

incorporate a constructivist analysis of how structures are interpreted and interests are formed, which leads us to an analysis of framing processes involving top EU institutions. Secondly, we build on this framing analysis and propose a more sophisticated framework to grasp how crisis construal involved a construction of multiple, overlapping, and discursively articulated temporalities.

3. A framing approach to EU elites' crisis discourse

Empirically, the paper provides a frame analysis applied systematically across the three orders of temporality identified in the previous section. The study of narratives – as operational tool – focusses on causal stories featuring characters (protagonists, antagonists, publics) through a codified sequence of events including setting the scene, identifying a plot, and providing a 'moral' of the story (Jones and McBeth 2020). Adopting a framing perspective helps to depart from such a linear conception (and operationalization) of time in discourse. In its basic form, framing can be understood as, on the one hand, an ideational and discursive device that structures reality and guides action (Goffman 1974, 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, 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 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. Building on the literature of framing contests during crises (Boin, Hart, and McConnell 2009) as well as on a central framework in the framing literature (Benford and Snow 2000; De Ville and Gheyle 2022) we analyse 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?* Taken together, these three types of frames constitute the essential building blocks of an actor's discourse about a given issue.

The methodology used for coding and interpreting the data can be described as abductive (Timmermans and Tavory 2012). Simply put, abductive reasoning seeks to provide the most likely explanation of empirically observed facts, informed by theoretical thinking. Because it is not strictly speaking deductive only, this methodological approach led us to be agnostic as to whether we would detect counter-frames and heterogeneity in discourse across institutions. Departing from established analytical categories (three types of frames), we operated a first reading of the corpus of speeches and tweets of the three actors. From that first reading, it became clear that recurrent frames emerged in striking consistency across actors' discourse and in no specific temporal sequence. In other words, reference to the three crisis temporalities was found from the early stages of the pandemic. Data coding was operated manually in the software N-Vivo consisted in identifying the specific thematic frames corresponding to the three categories of generic 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). Therefore, the threefold crisis construal around immediacy, broader conjuncture, and *longue durée*, was not hypothesized and deductively 'tested'. Rather, the systematic framing methodology – relying on problems,

Table 1. Analytical framework and codebook.

Three crises Three frames	The immediate health crisis	The persisting socio-economic crisis	The Union's crisis of purpose	N
What is the problem?	An exogenous symmetric shock (N = 87)	Uncertain consequences (N = 87)	Structural socio-economic imbalances (N = 114)	288
What should be done?	Contain the virus through coordinated action (N = 303)	Support the economy through common tools (N = 433)	Recovery agenda for the future (N = 804)	1540
Who are we?	Vulnerable humans (N = 236)	Learning sapiens (N = 217)	United Europeans (N = 443)	896
N	626	737	1361	2724

solutions, and identities – proved fruitful to identify (inductively) this meaning pattern focused on different coexisting temporalities in elite discourse.

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. As COVID-19 spreads, 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 addressing climate change, digitalization, and geopolitical challenges.

Finally, *identity and motivational frames*, too, cover three nested crisis temporalities. In the immediate health 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, the actors present themselves as *learning sapiens*, that is 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.

The frame analysis is operationalized through computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). The corpus consists of speeches pronounced by Ursula Von der Leyen, Charles Michel, and Christine Lagarde, as well as their tweets published in the period from March to December 2020 (see Table 2). This timeframe allows for a critical mass of speeches describing how these actors construed the pandemic crisis. It covers namely the negotiation and ultimate decision to adopt the NGEU in the summer of 2020.

Table 2. Corpus and coded references.

	Speeches	Coded references	Tweets	Coded references
C. Lagarde	36	569	62	85
C. Michel	52	545	190	224
U. von der Leyen	83	928	264	373
Total	171	2042	516	682

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, and in line with theoretical expectations sketched above, the exploratory analysis of the documents revealed striking consistency in the way the three institutional leaders framed the response to the pandemic. This motivated our decision to constitute a single corpus reflecting the relatively homogenous EU elite discourse. Combining speeches and tweets has allowed us to focus heavily on the communicative discourse towards the wider public – as opposed to the coordinative discourse among decision makers (Schmidt 2008).

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 31 December 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. For the tweets, we used an academic search access to the Twitter application programming interface (API version 2). Only tweets strictly related to the pandemic were selected. Moreover, tweets that were identical, merely congratulatory, or ‘get-well’, and tweets announcing press conferences or events were removed. Table 2 summarizes the main metrics of the corpus and of the coding.

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 the corpus of speeches for Ursula von der Leyen is much larger than that of Michel and Lagarde, the proportion of references codes is relatively similar. The online appendix provides a complete list of the quotes cited throughout the paper.

4. Tackling eventfulness and the immediate health crisis

We begin the empirical analysis with an account of how EU elites construed the ‘event’ of the pandemic. We describe this as a first temporality, related to the immediate response to the breakout of the pandemic (626 references). This short-term event is essentially associated to crisis management requiring ‘emergency politics’ (White 2015). Our frame analysis shows three main aspects of this crisis construal. First, the health crisis was

perceived as an exogenous and symmetric shock, with the new coronavirus emerging outside Europe before spreading to the continent. Second, in view of this unprecedented shock, and against the backdrop of emerging 'sovereigntist reflexes' (Benoît and Hay 2022) the European response (prognosis) was promoted by EU leaders as requiring coordinated action to save lives. Thirdly, the identity of the actors at the centre of this crisis was discursively constructed on an image of vulnerable human beings in need of immediate support.

4.1 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). In the discourse of the three actors, this has an immediate translation regarding socioeconomic consequences – and the politics of responsibility and blame. 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). An explicit comparison is established to contrast this with the asymmetric nature of the euro crisis ten years earlier (SCL 35–36). This time it is 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).

4.2 Containing the virus through coordinated action

Crisis management is discursively grounded in the frame of *coordination*, described as the only way to effectively contain the virus (TCL 5a, SCM 3, SUVDL 6). 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, what Schelkle (2021) termed 'inauspicious start' of pandemic response, were enormous challenges 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 der 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.

4.3 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 (see 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 (Oprysko and Luthi 2020).

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 healthcare 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 framed as a shock laying bare the vulnerability of Europeans and placing everyone on an equal footing, namely as suffering humans. Strikingly, the nature of the shock is presented as having an economic reading, whose relevance will become apparent in the following sections. Immediate and coordinated policy action are presented as required. Yet, a key aspect is that the pandemic is also humbling, calling for empathy and care vis-à-vis 'the living'. The general message pushes not only Europeans but all struggling humans need to join forces in a global effort, especially by stopping the spread of the virus and developing vaccines.

5. Addressing the conjuncture of a persisting socio-economic crisis

As shown in recent literature, the short-term health crisis was deeply entangled with a conjunctural crisis linked to the socio-economic consequences of the euro crisis (737 references). The analysis of the corpus shows that this relation was established by EU elites

from the early stages. The EU leaders situate the ‘event’ of the pandemic against this backdrop, evoking *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, health and geopolitical crises are perceived as unpredictable. The remedy advocated by the three actors was to use and create common tools to mitigate the economic shock as well as to ensure convergence between countries, thus entangling the economic response to the pandemic and the unresolved problems of the euro crisis. This is argued as a form of ‘learning’ from previously inadequate responses, a claim shared by all three actors.

5.1 Uncertain consequences

Beyond the health crisis, the spread of COVID-19 was rapidly perceived as leading to a historic recession and to social distress. The key concern is that, especially in the early stages of the pandemic, 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 in multiple forms (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. 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, referring to the multiple viral variants, Christine Lagarde deplores that ‘I’m not sure exactly what letter of our alphabet our forecast would correspond to’ (SCL 82). Charles Michel, on the other hand, recognized in a fatalist tweet ‘#COVID19 has shown that we can’t always control what happens to us’ (TCM 13).

5.2 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 when the EU has been ‘muddling through’ for 10 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 especially through the set-up of a new temporary asset purchase program of private and public sector securities dubbed Pandemic Emergency Purchase Programme (PEPP). 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 fact that ‘the internal market has been damaged’ and all three actors stress the need to protect the internal market. 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 state aid prohibition, as well as of the Stability 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 one hundred billion euros in guaranteed loans to help finance national temporary unemployment schemes.

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. Above all, the Multi-Annual Financial Framework is presented as a springboard for the response to the pandemic as early as April 2020. 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. In the face of the pandemic, the EU’s action is framed as one which contrasts with the austere 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.

5.3 *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 frame. 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 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 its lessons from the past’ is pervasive throughout the corpus (SCL 113) with explicit references to the euro crisis in a promise ‘to avoid the reflexes and mistakes of the past’ (SUVDL 125). 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).

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 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 been endemic in Europe's socio-economic situation.

6. 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. All three presidents emphasized the recovery program and the related steps towards economic integration as the only way to solve the crisis and bring a sustainable future to Europe, both economically and environmentally. Eventually, the political response to the crisis is presented as one which should allow Europeans to exit the vicious circle of recurring crises (what the literature has called 'failing forward'), or the never ending 'polycrisis' the EU has been facing since at least 2008. With reference to this broader historical purpose, the three actors mobilize identity frames around more *united Europeans*.

6.1 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'. The immediate predicament of the pandemic and the related medium-term economic impacts are articulated in a broader context of 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). 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 (Armingeon et al. 2022). 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 Achilles' 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).

6.2 *Shaping the future through the recovery agenda*

The bulk of all references (804) is dedicated to presenting Next Generation EU 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'. 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. This is directly translated in the instruments that are adopted. 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 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 – and their relation to the pandemic – was self-explanatory, green, and digital objectives are construed as 'twin' pillars of the recovery (SUVDL132, 139b, 181, 190). Addressing criticism about the boundaries of the ECB's mandate, Christine Lagarde identifies climate change as a major disruptor of inflation in the future thus grounding the legitimacy of the ECB 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 reacting to crises.

6.3 United Europeans

The framing of collective identities underpinning the recovery agenda consistently emphasizes the idea of *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 subtheme 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 predicament. 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: ‘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). As bluntly put 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.

7. Conclusion

As many commentaries have suggested, ‘this crisis is different’ and the response to it was unprecedented in important ways. But it was also puzzling, as the link between a global pandemic and an agenda for investment in digitalisation and climate action can hardly be seen as self-evident. A key dimension in which this crisis is indeed

'different', we argue, is in the way in which top-level actors in the EU discursively attempted to reconfigure the relation between time and political action, purporting an exit of a seemingly never-ending crisis of purpose of the Union. In other words, the response to the pandemic can only be grasped through an analysis of the way in which the crisis was construed. More specifically, the uniqueness of the pandemic resides in the way in EU political elites embedded the pandemic into different temporal spans in a pledge to address the EU's polycrisis.

This has meant not only dealing with the crises of the past and the present but also to define a new broader purpose for the future, effectively tying the response to the pandemic to an agenda for recovery (or 'reconstruction') through deeper fiscal integration and long-term programmes of digital and green transition. In the long-lasting framing contests over how to govern the European economy, the pandemic emerged as an event capable of being mobilized to tip the scale of political conflict against the previous logic of 'lowest common denominator'. Alternative scenarios might have led to a Europeanization of healthcare, to a rethinking of norms regarding trade and travel, or even to a fuller expression of the 'sovereignist reflex' (Benoît and Hay 2022) of which we had a glimpse in the earlier stages of the pandemic. These, as we know, did not materialize.

This leads us to two extensions that can nourish further research. First, the centrality of the climate agenda further shows how the pathway out of a crisis discursively constructed as condensing these different, overlapping temporalities is itself presented in a much wider, indeed geological time frame. Ultimately, the response to the pandemic turmoil was articulated as a response to the ongoing climate crisis and the predicament of the Anthropocene – which is likely to be an increasingly important timeframe for EU policy-making. Second, unlike other EU policies, the banner 'Next Generation EU' does not refer to any concrete, substantive political project. It merely refers to a temporal category (the future), as the EU presents itself as breaking with reform (Crespy, Moreira Ramalho, and Schmidt 2024). The significance of the pandemic response to future EU economic integration remains necessarily inscrutable. It is, however, hard to imagine it will not leave a lasting mark.

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