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# The Evolution of Crisis Frames in the European Commission's Institutional Communication (2003–2022)

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## Abstract

Historical accounts of the EU recurrently turn to crisis as a periodizing or structuring concept, reflecting the observation made by scholars that crisis has become a permanent feature of the social construction of our social and political reality. The concept of crisis can also be exploited for strategic purposes by political actors pursuing various policy agendas. Our article analyzes the discursive uses of crises by one of the central institutions of the EU, the European Commission, based on a corpus of press releases that referred to crisis ( $N = 4,414$ ) going back two decades (2003–2022). Thus, our article examines crisis as a political language and its discursive uses. We ask: (a) how salient is the topic of “crisis” in the European Commission’s communication; (b) what are the main domains in which the crisis frame has been activated, from geographical scope to policy areas; (c) how did the deployment of crisis frames change in time along major policy areas like economy, migration, or climate change; and (d) in what terms has the crisis-frame been activated, and how does crisis word use vary by region and policy area. Methodologically, we pursue these research questions using text-as-data methods, combining natural language processing tools for identifying geographical scopes, actors, and policy areas with corpus methods for identifying keywords and collocates and manually coding the latter, relying on qualitative and quantitative reasoning. Our research contributes to understanding the dynamics of EU policy framing in times of crisis.

## Keywords

crisis communication; crisis framing; crisis policy framing; European Union; policy areas; policy framing; public communication; public diplomacy

## 1. Introduction

The last two decades in the history of the EU were marked by a series of crises, denoting pivotal moments or periods marked by disruption of the course of events, demanding immediate attention and action. Financial, migration, and health were some of the most salient crises confronting the EU in the last 20 years. Moreover, the climate crisis has been a major topic of discussion in EU member states.

Given that the crises mentioned above transcend geographical boundaries, the crisis communication of EU institutions is a critical subject of research. Thus, a comprehensive analysis of how relevant EU institutions such as the European Commission (EC) developed their communication responses to crises, or presented their policies to the public in terms of crisis helps us understand the multifaceted concept of crisis in the EU context. Responses to crises in the EU are shaped not only by the characteristics of the crises themselves, but also by the complex institutional framework and governance structures of the EU, where supranational governance occurs in complex organizations, adding layers of complexity to crisis management and communication (Olsson & Larsson, 2009). Besides, the EU is a relevant international political actor. Therefore, frequently, official communication encompasses not only communicating on internal affairs but also international topics (Song & Fanoulis, 2023). The present research aims to investigate the public communication employed by the EC as the executive body of the EU in the long term and hence capture the dynamics of navigating and responding to the financial challenges, migration surges, and unprecedented health challenges such as the Covid-19 pandemic, humanitarian crises, and climate emergencies (Butros et al., 2021).

Most of the previous research on crisis communication of the EU institutions focused on a specific crisis such as the financial (e.g., Baden & Springer, 2014; Jessop, 2015; Joris et al., 2014; Michaelides et al., 2014; Pagoulatos, 2020), the refugee and migration (e.g., Dalakoglou, 2016; Dines et al., 2018), and the health crisis (e.g., Butros et al., 2021). Studies investigating how EU institutions communicated about crises from a longitudinal perspective looked at the period before the EU enlargement in 2004 (Krzyżanowski, 2009), and longitudinal studies encompassing the last years are scarce. Moreover, most of the studies focused on the media coverage of the EU crises, and less on the EU institutions as sources of information and policy framing (e.g., Corner, 2016).

Given the complexity of the EU as a transnational organization, this study's theoretical framework combines both internal and external perspectives of crisis communication research. It contributes to crisis communication theory by looking at crisis as a political language and its discursive uses in framing policies. Moreover, when analyzing crisis communication in the EU, we also look at the official communication of the EC about crises that reflect public diplomacy efforts. Press releases are instruments of public communication that reflect the perspective of an organization, in our case of the EC, on specific topics. Apart from enhancing the transparency of the decision-making processes, press releases are public relations instruments and reflect the organization's "picture of the world" and how the organization responds to crises, including its policies (Pieczka, 2002). Hence, our approach maps the way crises were framed in the official communication of the EU.

We rely on the strengths of a computational methodological approach (Guo et al., 2016; Lazer et al., 2020) to analyze the press releases of the EC over the last two eventful decades since the most extensive

enlargement in 2004, which presents an opportunity to address several gaps in the existing research on crisis communication and the EC. While previous studies on the crisis communication of the EU institutions used a qualitative methodological approach, a computational approach allows us to unveil from a large-scale perspective the prevalence and the significance of the term “crisis” as used in the official communication of the EC. Moreover, it allows us to identify crisis communication patterns and track the evolution of crisis communication strategies within the EC by identifying potential shifts over time.

The present article first outlines the historical context in which crisis discourses of the EC were articulated. After offering a brief overview of the crisis events that shaped the past two decades, it outlines the major theories in crisis communication that serve as a foundation of the argument, leading up to research questions referring to crisis as a political language and its discursive uses in policy framing. Section 3 presents the way these were operationalized. Sections 4 and 5 present the salience of crisis, the geographic and policy areas the crisis frame was activated in, and its changes in time and in terms of word use. Section 6 highlights both continuities and changes in crisis discourses.

## 2. Theoretical Background

### 2.1. The Context

Understanding the recent historical backdrop is crucial to comprehend how the EC, as a central institution within the EU, has navigated the terrain of multifaceted crises. The past two decades have been a dynamic and transformative period in the history of the EU. Regarding EU membership, the most extensive enlargement took place in 2004, and included Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia. In 2007, Romania and Bulgaria became EU member states as well. However, in 2020, after a referendum held in 2016, the United Kingdom left the EU.

Historical accounts of the EU recurrently turn to “crisis” as a periodizing or structuring concept, reflecting the observation made by several analysts that crisis has increasingly become a permanent feature of the social construction of our social and political reality (Vincze, 2014). At the same time, the concept of crisis can also be exploited for strategic purposes by political actors pursuing various policy agendas. Concerning the EU, literature has claimed that EU actors have increasingly positioned the Union as a “crisis manager,” with member states having transferred authority and capacity to the EU to respond to crises (Boin & Rhinard, 2013; Boin et al., 2014).

An enlarged EU was confronted with a series of crises that tested its resilience and provided critical insights into its capacity to adapt and respond. The financial crisis originated in the United States in 2008 and spread globally, affecting EU member states in areas like banking instability, economic downturns, and rising unemployment. Furthermore, a subsequent crisis in Greece threatened the stability of the Economic and Monetary Union (Touri & Rogers, 2013), determining a reevaluation of the EU financial policies and the establishment of the European Stability Mechanism (Pagoulatos, 2020). However, debates on the limitations of national public debts persisted, given the differences in the opinion mostly between Northern and Central European countries such as Germany and the Netherlands that advocated strict fiscal discipline (Macmillan, 2014), and crisis narratives are still used for the purpose of limiting debts (Kutter, 2020).

In the last decade, the EU faced an unprecedented refugee crisis, with a peak in 2015 driven by conflicts in the Middle East and Africa, challenging the ability of EU institutions and member states to manage humanitarian issues. Mandatory quotas, measures to secure EU external borders effectively, cooperation with countries of origin and transit, and efforts to reform the Common European Asylum System were subjects of discussion within EU institutions and member states. Moreover, populist parties benefited from anti-immigrant sentiments and became part of governmental coalitions in several countries (Stoica, 2017). Scholarship highlighted that the reforms that were discussed amid the financial and refugee crises have yet to be adopted and implemented. For example, some countries with less migratory pressure are reluctant to support a common asylum policy. Thus, a complex institution, such as the EU, faces major challenges in learning from crises (Biermann et al., 2019).

Aiming for international leadership on the issue of climate change, the EU built up consensus and developed a climate strategy (Oberthür & von Homeyer, 2023). Thus, in 2019, the EU launched the European Green Deal to mitigate the climate crisis, aiming for carbon neutrality in a sustainable economy. Concerning the relevance of climate change for public opinion and political actors, previous studies pointed to differences between countries (Tønnesen et al., 2023). While in Western European countries like Germany, environmental policy is prevalent in campaigns for the European Parliament and national elections, in Central Eastern European countries like Hungary, the topic remains marginal. In the case of the financial and refugee crises, country differences might be an obstacle to the consistent implementation of EU public policy regarding climate change.

The ambitious plans of the EC to address environmental issues met a significant challenge due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Čavoški, 2020; Dupont et al., 2020). The global health crisis unfolded between 2020 and 2022, testing EU institutions and governments of member states in unprecedented ways, from the scale of health-related misinformation (Matthes et al., 2022) to the polarization of public opinion (Ares et al., 2021).

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, significantly impacted the common security and defense policy of the EU (Fernández et al., 2023; Genschel et al., 2023). Fiott (2023) highlighted that Russia's invasion of Ukraine determined a security and defense crisis for the EU and its member states. Scholars stressed that the reactions of the EU institutions to this security threat contributed to EU integration and the strength of external projection of geopolitical objectives (Orenstein, 2023). Hence, crises such as the recent health crisis and Russia's invasion of Ukraine showed that the EU is a "sui generis multi-level, multi-faceted actor that can change shape in response to events" (Anghel & Jones, 2023, p. 766).

## 2.2. Crisis Communication

The EC does not provide an official, standalone definition of "crisis" in its documents and addresses specific crises or situations as they occur. Thus, it has no crises-related taxonomy either. Definitions and descriptions are typically embedded within the documents addressing crises and crisis policies (EC, 2022). To understand how the EC communicates about crises, an interdisciplinary approach is needed that encompasses knowledge from both organizational and crisis communication, but also the perspective of public diplomacy.

Crisis communication is a multifaceted field shaped by various theoretical frameworks that help us understand how organizations and institutions respond to and communicate during times of crisis (Bundy

et al., 2017; Marsen, 2020). These theories provide valuable insights into the dynamics of crisis communication, and the strategies and decision-making processes that organizations employ before, during, and after crises. In communication research, a crisis is defined “as an event perceived by managers and stakeholders to be highly salient, unexpected, and potentially disruptive” (Bundy et al., 2017, p. 1663). Since crises are sources of uncertainty, they are considered harmful or threatening to organizations and their stakeholders (Bundy & Pfarrer, 2015; Kahn et al., 2013). As crises unfold, organizations make efforts to prevent crises, efforts to deal with crises, and take post-crisis measures. Moreover, scholars stressed that there are different types of crises, such as preventable versus unpreventable and internal versus external (Marsen, 2020). Morris and Goldsworthy (2012) classify crises into performance, disaster, and attack. However, previous research highlighted that crises should be seen as elements of more extensive processes and not only as events (Bundy et al., 2017; Jaques, 2009; Roux-Dufort, 2007). Crisis communication focuses on how organizations investigate the causes of crises, communicate their knowledge of the events, work to minimize image damage, and communicate their actions to the public (Bundy & Pfarrer, 2015; Kahn et al., 2013; Marsen, 2020), and existing literature on crisis communication distinguished between issue and reputation management.

In a systematic literature review on crisis communication, Bundy et al. (2017) highlighted two major theoretical perspectives in crisis communication: internal and external. The first focuses more on the within-organization dynamics, while the second focuses more on the organization’s interaction with external stakeholders. Both approaches see the crisis stages as pre-crisis prevention, crisis management, and post-crisis outcomes. (Bundy et al., 2017).

Given the complexity of the EU as a supranational institution, internal and external perspectives toward understanding crisis communication must be employed to map implications for organizations and stakeholders. Internal dynamics in this complex environment, such as organization governance, is a major factor that influences crisis communication (Haunschild et al., 2015; Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2015), given the constant efforts invested in the decision-making processes. Hence, crisis communication by the EC frequently involves close coordination with member states. Regarding financial, migration, and health crises, the EC fosters cooperation among EU countries, seeking a unified response. This coordination is often articulated in its communication efforts, emphasizing the collective nature of EU actions. However, there are internal challenges for crisis communication, such as complex decision-making that leads to delays and difficulties in conveying a cohesive and timely response.

Coombs (2007) introduced the Situation Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), one of the pivotal theories of the field, employing an external perspective. SCCT focuses on stakeholders and emphasizes the importance of aligning communication strategies with the nature and severity of a crisis and organizational responses. Communication is crucial in crisis, and crisis communication is the way to achieve specific outcomes and prevent reputational damages (Coombs, 2021). According to SCCT, factors such as attributions of crisis responsibility, crisis history, and organizational reputation must be considered for crisis management. Hence, Coombs (2015) sees four perspectives in crisis communication: denial, diminishment, rebuilding, and consolidation.

Previous studies also stressed that high-reliability organizations are more capable of preventing crises as they stand for accountability and transparency (Bundy et al., 2017). The EC also often emphasizes transparency as

a critical communication strategy to keep the public informed (Kelbel et al., 2021) about an unfolding crisis, the EU's response, and measures to mitigate the impact. This transparency is critical for maintaining public trust (Marx & Van der Loo, 2021). These efforts are, however, compounded by what has been recurrently referred to as the EU's communication deficit (Touri & Rogers, 2013), and the low visibility of EU actors and policies in national public spheres. Furthermore, disinformation and misinformation often flourish during crises, the latest prominent example being the Covid-19 pandemic (Matthes et al., 2022). This challenge underscores the need for effective communication to counter false narratives.

Besides rapid and appropriate responses, attention to diversity and local cultures are crucial crisis communication response elements (Marsen, 2020). The official communication of the EC is also part of the EU's public diplomacy, defined as the favorable opinion of foreign audiences (Cull, 2009; Dolea, 2018). Moreover, the official communication of the EC reflects the EU's efforts to build self-image and normative liberal values in the international arena to inform and influence (Song & Fanoulis, 2023). For example, during the Covid-19 crisis, the EU contributed to vaccination efforts in African countries (Langan, 2023).

### **2.3. Policy Frames in Times of Crisis**

Over the last decades, framing has been one of the prevalent theories in political communication (Cacciatore et al., 2016). The role of frames in shaping public opinion is crucial (Entman, 1993). Thus, "framing is the process by which a communication source constructs and defines a social or political issue to its audiences" (Nelson et al., 1997, p. 221). Political frames often evolve in time, suffering sense changes at the ideational level (Olivas Osuna et al., 2023). In crisis communication, narratives are relevant in influencing people's interpretation of crises that are often complex and multifaceted. Framing contributes to simplifying complex situations (Entman, 1993). Framing a crisis in a political context not only sets the narrative surrounding events but also contributes to policy responses.

Press releases of the EC represent the official communication of the EU, reflect the decision-making processes in times of crisis, and carry specific perspectives on crisis-related issues and policies. Therefore, we asked the following research questions:

**RQ1:** How does the salience of crisis change in time (2003–2022) in the discourse of the EC as articulated in the press releases?

**RQ2:** What are the main domains in which the crisis frame has been activated, from geographical scope to policy areas?

**RQ3:** How did the deployment of crisis frames change in time along the above dimensions, including some major policy areas like finance, migration, or climate change?

**RQ4:** In what terms has the crisis frame been activated, and how does the crisis word use vary by region and policy area?

### 3. Method

Our article analyses the discursive use of crisis by one of the central EU institutions, the EC, based on a corpus of press releases ( $N = 27,272$ ) going back two decades (2003–2022), accessible at the EC’s Press Corner website (EC, n.d.-a). The site contains various types of documents: weekly activities, weekly meetings, country insights, daily news, factsheets, infringement decisions, news, press releases, questions and answers, read-outs, speeches, and statements. These texts represent different genres belonging to different “fields of action” in discourse-analytical terms, understood as different functions of discursive practices (Reisigl & Wodak, 2015), like, for example, expressing dissent, legislation, or self-presentation. Of the different types of texts made available to the public on the website, we chose press releases to concentrate on the self-presentation of the EC as a field of discursive action.

We searched the corpus of press releases for references to crises by searching for the terms “crisis” and “crises,” resulting in a corpus of  $N = 4,414$  items spanning the two decades investigated. For this research, these represent the crisis corpus. This corpus was processed using text-as-data methods, combining natural language processing tools for the identification of geographical scopes and actors with corpus methods for identifying patterns of usage of the term crisis, as well as manual coding to identify policy areas and types of crisis word use. Thus, we relied on both qualitative and quantitative reasoning.

The corpus was first processed using spaCy’s English language model to extract geographic entities and organizations (spaCy, 2022). The extracted geographic entities were manually categorized into the following regions: Africa, Asia, Caribbean, EU, non-EU Middle East, North America, Central America, South America, and Oceania. The non-EU category includes Russia and other non-EU member European countries. The geographic entities were also used to build a dictionary for these categories used in Wordstat 8.0 (2018) to code the regions referenced by the press releases.

Our codebook for policy areas was based on the “Areas of EU action” listed as such on the EC website (EC, n.d.-b). The EC groups significant areas of action based on its level of competence in the specific fields, i.e., whether it can legislate independently, legislate along with the countries, or complement national-level action. For our research, we grouped these into policy areas as presented in Table 1.

To operationalize our questions regarding the framing of policy areas in terms of crisis, we identified the collocates of the “crisis” lemma using SketchEngine, a corpus linguistic software (Kilgarriff et al., 2014). Collocates are words that co-occur with a node, in our case, the lemma “crisis,” with a frequency that is higher than what can be expected based on their individual frequencies, and thus “can provide a helpful sketch of the meaning/function of the node within the particular discourse” (Baker et al., 2008, p. 278). Such collocates included modifiers like “financial and economic crisis,” “the current crisis,” “the refugee crisis,” nouns modified by crisis like “crisis management” or “crisis situation,” verbs with crisis as object like “manage the crisis” or “fight the crisis,” verbs with crisis as subject like “crisis has hit” or “crisis has shown,” and further grammatical structures. We have analyzed the collocates that functioned as modifiers of crisis, e.g., “economic” or “current,” grouping them into more significant categories and using them again to build a Wordstat dictionary to code their presence in the documents of the corpus automatically. For this research, these collocation patterns are also indicators of and activate crisis frames. Our approach, combining natural language processing and corpus linguistic methods with computer-based content analysis tools, allowed us



**Table 1.** Areas of EU action as defined by the EC and their corresponding policy categories in the codebook.

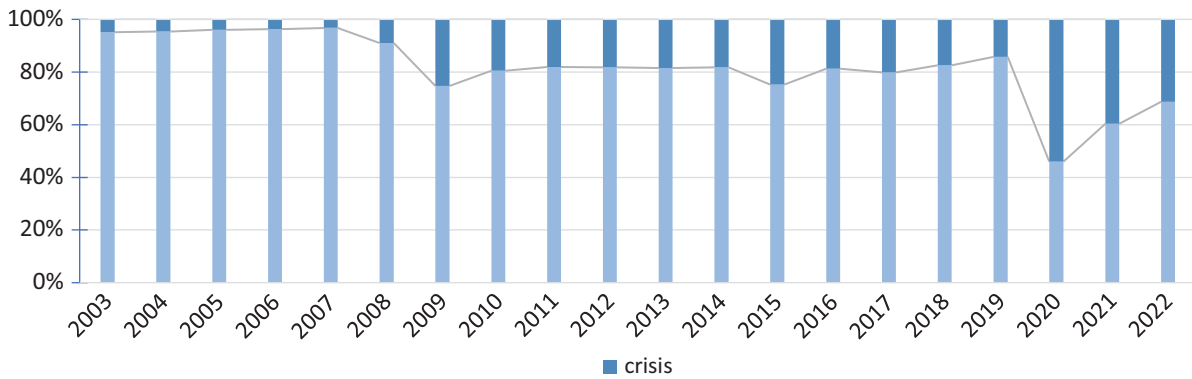
Areas of EU action (as defined by the EC)	Coded as
Administrative cooperation	Administrative
Agriculture	Economy
Civil protection	Safety and security
Competition rules	Economy
Consumer protection	Justice and rights
Culture	Culture
Customs union	Economy
Development cooperation and humanitarian aid	Development and humanitarian aid
Economic and employment policies	Economy
Economic, social, and territorial cohesion	Social
Education and training, youth and sport	Education
Employment and social affairs	Social
Energy	Energy
Environment	Environment
Fisheries	Economy
Foreign and security policy	Foreign relations
Industry	Economy
Justice and fundamental rights	Justice and rights
Marine plants and animals	Environment
Migration and home affairs	Migration
Monetary policy for the eurozone	Economy
Public health	Health
Research and space	Research
Single market	Economy
Tourism	Tourism
Trade and international agreements	Economy
Trans-European networks	Transport
Transport	Transport
—	General EU affairs (added after the first round of coding)

to maintain the data structure of the corpus, including the temporal sequence of the documents, which is often lost in text-as-data methods.

## 4. Results

To respond to our RQ1, in the time frame we analyzed, the salience of crisis in press releases of the EC increased continually. As indicated in Section 3, out of 27,272 press releases published between 2003–2022,  $N = 4,414$  mentioned the term “crisis.” Moreover, we observed an increase in the EC’s official communication on the topic of crisis. The frequency of press releases referencing crisis started at 4.8% of

overall communication in 2003, and hovered between 3.2% and 4.8% until 2007. From late 2008, this ratio increased to at least triple, reaching 25% in 2009 and again 24.8% in 2015, but stayed above 14% until 2019. In 2020, more than half of the press releases mentioned crisis (54%), and the ratio remained above 30% in the next two years. Figure 1 shows the salience of crisis over the years.



**Figure 1.** Yearly percentage of EC press releases referencing crises.

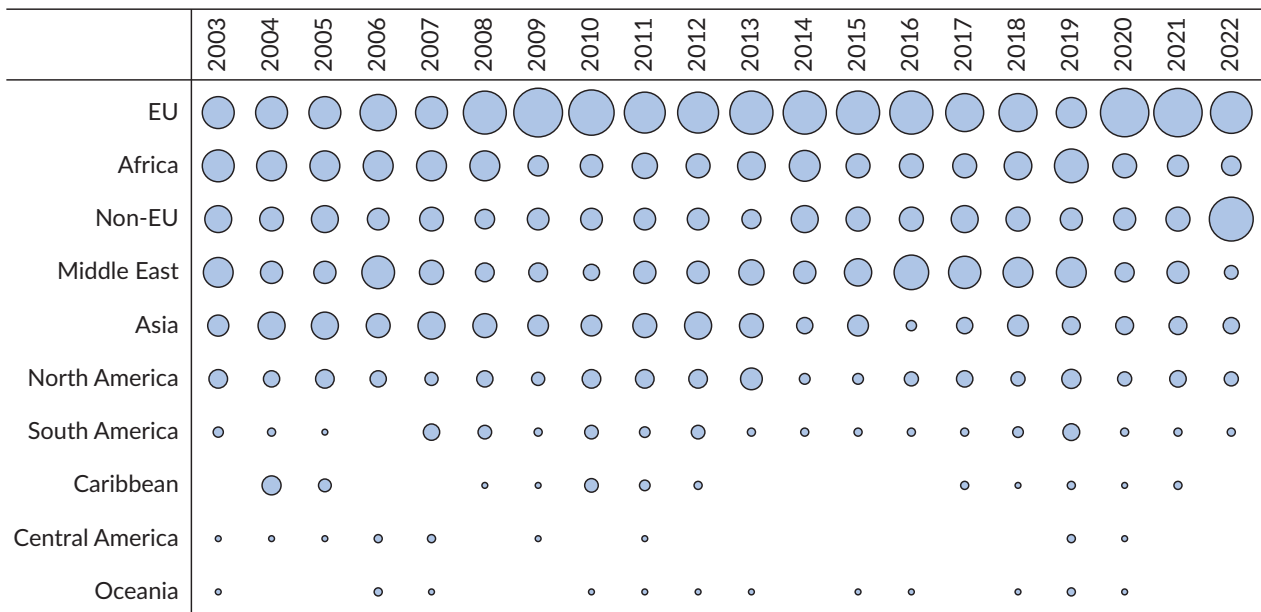
These dates correspond with significant events of the recent past: the financial and economic crisis (2008–2011), the refugee crisis (2015–2016), the health crisis generated by the Covid-19 pandemic (2019–2022), and the Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022). However, we also observe that once crisis becomes a salient concept, its salience tends to stabilize at higher than previous levels.

To investigate the geopolitical focus of the EC’s crisis discourses (RQ2), we divided the corpus along the lines defined by the changes in the frequency of references to crises identified above. We calculated the term frequency-inverse document frequency (TF-IDF) values of the geopolitical entities (GPE) coded based on the named entity recognition performed in the data processing steps described above, a measure used in information extraction to express the relevance of a term in a collection of documents by weighting frequencies against the number of documents in which it occurs. Table 2 shows the prevalence of GPE in the EC press releases.

**Table 2.** Top GPE and their TF-IDF values.

2003--2007		2008--2014		2015--2019		2020--2022	
GPE	TF-IDF	GPE	TF-IDF	GPE	TF-IDF	GPE	TF-IDF
Darfur	169.6	Spain	636.1	Turkey	906.8	Ukraine	1,178.7
Russia	162.1	Syria	623.5	Greece	671.1	Russia	562.3
Sudan	125.6	Italy	565.8	Jordan	472.3	Moldova	362.8
Lebanon	125.6	Greece	555.3	Ukraine	432	France	347.6
Gaza	125.4	Ireland	519.3	Italy	429.4	Germany	342.7
Iraq	119.8	China	514.3	Syria	342.6	Italy	318.9
Chechnya	105.2	Germany	510.4	Tunisia	326.8	Spain	282
Myanmar	103	France	506	Iraq	264.9	Greece	269
France	96.3	UK	502.2	Lebanon	262.7	Croatia	268.4
Canada	94.5	Portugal	496.3	Georgia	257.9	Syria	258.5

As we expected, the changes in the geopolitical gaze reflect the main crises defining the periods under investigation: while in 2003–2007 the most salient GPE were located in the Middle East and Russia–Chechnya, after 2008, the countries of the EU took center stage, along with Syria, and China. From 2015, the attention turned towards Turkey and Greece, whereas from 2020, in particular in 2022, Ukraine, Russia, and the major EU countries are the most emphatically present. Despite these changes in the importance of particular areas, we also observed that the regional geopolitical gaze is relatively constant in time, as shown in Figure 2.



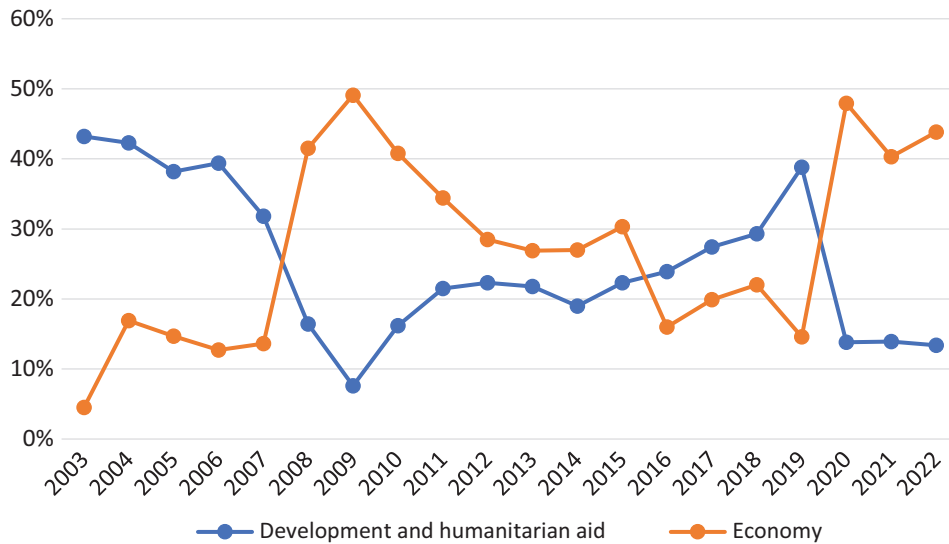
**Figure 2.** Regional references in the crisis corpus: percentage of case occurrence by years.

These results show that even though the nature of the crises facing the EU, along with their particular locations, change in time, the main regions covered by these discourses are constant. The frequencies of GPE designate the following main areas where crisis discourses and policies are focused: the EU, Africa, the Middle East, and Non-EU countries from the continent.

Policy areas were coded as the domains in which actions were taken by the EC or other EU actors, according to the titles of the press releases, which index the primary or most emphatic domain, in line with the purposes of the self-presentation on the EC. Policy action can also originate in one domain and impact another, for example an economic measure meant to tackle unemployment. In such cases, we coded the domain where the impact was indexed, in this case, the social domain.

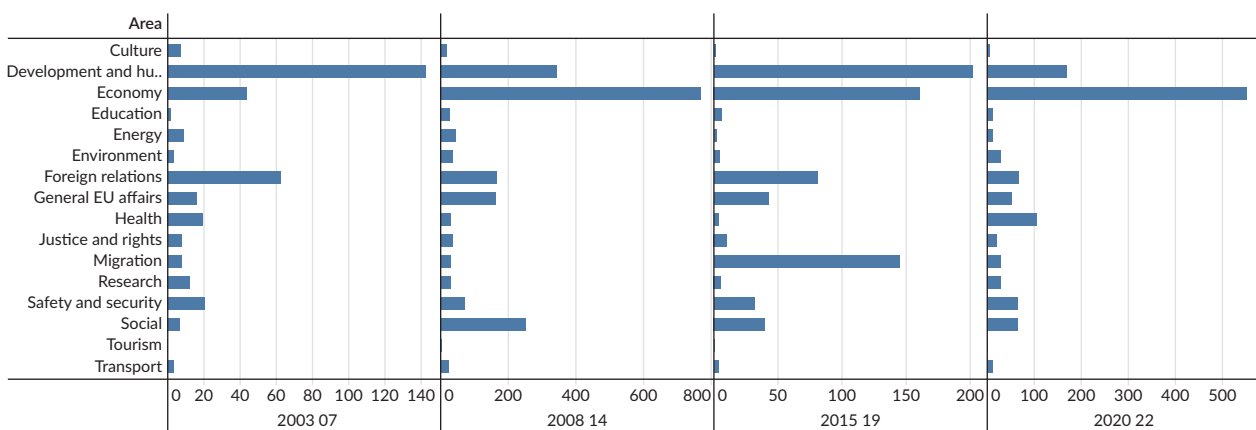
The areas where the EU crisis discourses offered interventions were the economy (34% of cases), development and humanitarian aid (19.4%), foreign relations (8.6%), social (8.2%), general EU affairs (6.3%), migration (4.8), safety and security (4.3%), health (3.7%), environment (1.8%), justice and rights (1.8%), research (1.8%), energy (1.6%), education (1.1%), transport (1%), culture (0.7%), and tourism (0.2%). We note that there is no direct correspondence between the crises in our introductory periodization, i.e., the economic crisis, the refugee crisis, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and these domains of action. Instead, the economy's weight as a crisis intervention domain has been constant throughout the two decades. In crisis discourses, press releases

of the EC primarily posit the EU as an economic actor. Figure 3 shows the evolution of the weight (percentage of cases by year) of the two main crisis policy areas: economy and development and humanitarian aid.



**Figure 3.** Evolution of the policy areas of development and humanitarian aid and economy (percentage of cases by years).

Regarding the changes in time of domains in which the crisis frame was activated (RQ3), we did not find compelling evidence that these became more varied over time. Instead, the crisis frames were activated in all the policy areas coded based on the areas of action claimed by the EC throughout the investigated period studied, as shown in Figure 4.



**Figure 4.** Policy areas by periods (case frequencies).

To answer our RQ4, the term “crisis” occurred in recurrent linguistic patterns made up of “crisis” as a node and words that co-occurred with it, like nouns modified by it, as in “crisis management,” or verbs having “crisis” as an object, as in “trigger a crisis.” For our analysis, we categorized the collocates of “crisis” that function as its modifiers, thus narrowing, complementing, and specifying its meaning. The main such collocates of “crisis,” with a frequency of at least five occurrences in a two-word window in our corpus, are summarized in Table 3. Grouping them into geopolitical, temporal, scale, and manifestation categories was developed inductively.

**Table 3.** Categorized collocates of the node “crisis” in the crisis-corpus.

Category	Crisis collocates
Geopolitical	Syrian, global, geopolitical, Rohingya, Sahel, Darfur, regional, Middle East, Libyan, Lebanon, Burundi, Mali, Afghan, Sudan
Temporality	current, ongoing, protracted, future, immediate, present, first, last, continuing, month, long
Scale	unprecedented, bad, exceptional, severe, major, serious, biggest, complex, acute, large, chronic, deep, systemic, massive, large-scale, dire, dramatic
Manifestation	Gas, security, politics, debt, energy, climate, migration, nutrition, public health, social, supply, banking, waste, Ebola, economy, market, bird flu, hunger, E-coli, volcanic ash, BSE, displacement, oil, avian influenza, dairy, food price, migratory, biodiversity, bank, liquidity, Covid-19, Coronavirus, budgetary, credit, fiscal

Collocates in the geopolitical category indicate the regions that are prone to be framed in terms of crisis, even though, as we have seen, not all of these are among the most frequent GPE present in the crisis corpus, and there are other regions, including EU-member states, where crises have been prominent: “EU announces €78 million for South Sudan crisis,” “Darfur crisis: Commissioner Michel visits refugee camps in Chad,” “EU regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian crisis.”

Collocates in the temporality, scale, and manifestation categories have been used to build a dictionary to code the corpus automatically and explore relationships with the geographic and policy areas discussed above.

Regarding frequencies, the most salient crisis types, as indexed by the collocation patterns, are economic, financial, Covid-19, refugee, and humanitarian crises. The various crisis types were addressed in different policy areas, as summarized in Table 4. The table presents the most salient crisis collocates in each policy area, which cover at least 10% of the cases in the respective area.

The above-presented collocation patterns showed that the economic crisis was addressed in almost all policy areas and that the defining crises of entire domains like social or tourism were the economic ones. At the same time, the climate crisis only appeared to be salient in environmental policy. In contrast, for example, the refugee crisis appears salient in the respective policy domain and in foreign relations, education or safety, and security.

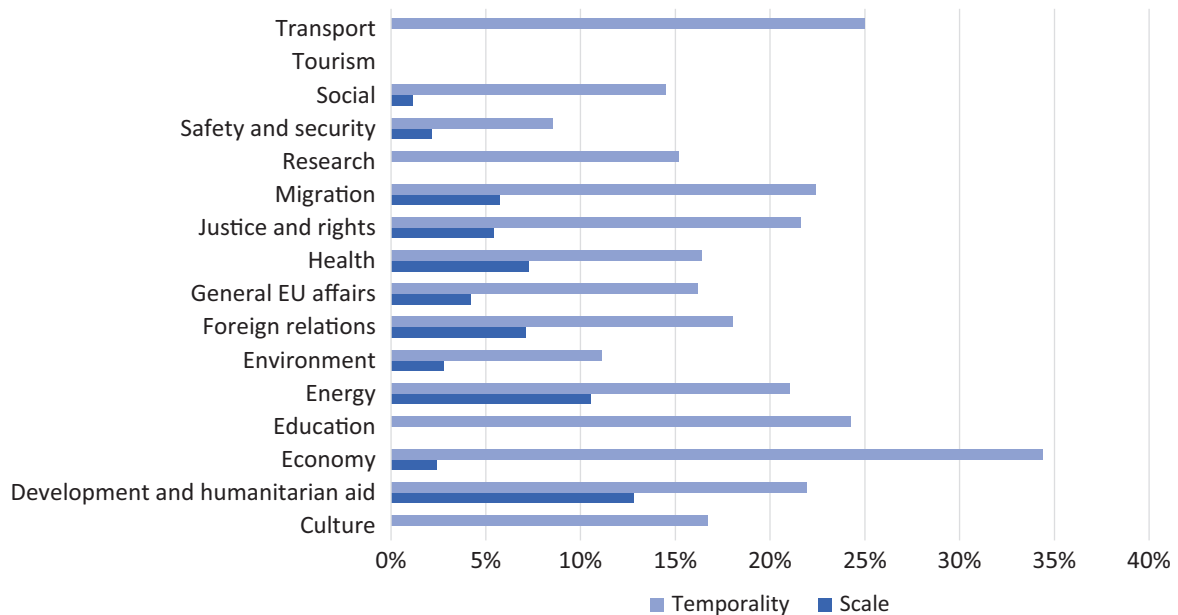
Crisis framing also differed by policy areas in terms of temporality and scale. Mapping our crisis word use dictionary built from the modifier collocates over the cases coded by policy areas showed that the scale of the crisis is predominantly indexed in the development and humanitarian aid and energy areas, with a particularly low salience in the economy, where temporality is more prominent, as shown in Figure 5.

Framing patterns also differed in terms of geography: The scale of the crisis is indexed most prominently in Africa, whereas temporality is indexed most prominently in the EU, as shown in Table 5.

In the policy frames employed by the EC, crises in Africa tended to be “unprecedented,” “forgotten,” “major,” “complex,” and “severe:” “Democratic Republic of Congo: Commissioner Georgieva announces increased humanitarian aid for ‘forgotten crisis,’” “Somalia is going through a severe humanitarian crisis,” “This unprecedented crisis in the Horn of Africa calls for an unprecedented response.” Crises in Europe, on the

**Table 4.** The most salient crisis collocates by policy areas (modifiers present in at least 10% of the cases, manifestations only).

Policy area	Crisis collocates (manifestations)
Culture	economic, financial
Development and humanitarian aid	economic, food, humanitarian
Economy	covid19, economic, financial, health
Education	covid19, economic, financial, refugee
Energy	economic, energy, gas, supply
Environment	climate, financial
Foreign relations	economic, financial, food, humanitarian, refugee
General EU affairs	coronavirus, economic, financial, refugee
Health	avian flu, covid19, health
Justice and rights	covid19, economic, financial, volcanic ash
Migration	migration, refugee
Research	covid19, economic, financial
Safety and Security	covid19, economic, humanitarian, political, refugee
Social	economic, financial
Tourism	economic, financial
Transport	economic, financial, volcanic ash



**Figure 5.** References to temporality and scale of crisis in policy areas (percentage of cases).

**Table 5.** Frequencies of scale and temporality collocates by regions.

	Africa	Asia	Caribbean	Central America	EU	Middle East	Non-EU	North America	Oceania	South America
Scale	68	8	0	0	30	19	22	4	0	0
Temporality	135	30	5	0	360	38	140	20	0	1

other hand, were “current,” “ongoing,” “recent,” “new,” and with a less frequency “severe”: “The drive for greater efficiency began long before the current crisis,” “The recent crisis and the severe turbulences in world trade have drawn the attention to the role of the external sector in propagating shocks,” “We continue to work closely together with Member States to mitigate the economic effects of the ongoing crisis and enable the European economy to bounce back.”

## 5. Discussion

Our findings show that the salience of crisis in the EU official communication observed by previous research conducted before the time frame of our analysis (Krzyżanowski, 2009) continued in the past decades. Findings also aligned with previous studies that highlighted the preoccupation of the EC to deal with the financial (Joris et al., 2014; Michaelides et al., 2014), migration (Dalakoglou, 2016; Dines et al., 2018), and health crises (Ares et al., 2021). Peaks in crisis references in 2009, 2015, and 2020 correspond to the financial, refugee, and health crises emerging at these times. At the same time, our findings also show an increase in the salience of crisis, and also that after each peak, its salience stabilized at higher levels than previously. That the EC increasingly framed its discursive self-presentation (Reisigl & Wodak, 2015) in terms of crisis provides further evidence to the claim that the EU is increasingly being positioned as a “crisis manager” (Boin & Rhinard, 2013; Boin et al., 2014).

In times of crisis, the EU communicated predominantly regarding the economy, followed by development and humanitarian aid. Over time, these two crisis narratives showed an opposite dynamic. From 2009–2015, the main domains where EU policies were framed in terms of crisis were the economy, development, and humanitarian aid; the latter gained momentum between 2015–2020. During the Covid-19 pandemic and following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the topic of the economy was again prevalent.

The language in which crises were addressed and crisis policies framed differ by region and policy area. Some regions like Syria, the Middle East, Libya, Lebanon, Afghanistan, or Sudan appear as salient collocates of “crisis,” i.e., they are mostly discussed in terms of crisis, even when they are not the most frequent geopolitical references in the corpus. Crises were also framed in terms of temporality and scale, with geographically differentiated patterns: References to scale like “unprecedented” or “severe” co-occurred most frequently with Africa, while references to the temporality of crisis co-occurred most frequently with EU countries. Similarly, when looking at policy areas, we note that two major crisis collocates can function as framing terms for almost all policy areas: “economic” and “financial,” whereas humanitarian crises were mainly addressed in the fields of foreign relations and safety and security.

## 6. Conclusion

Our study is a data-driven analysis of the EC’s crisis communication, contributing to a deeper understanding of how a supranational institution such as the EU communicated on the topic of crisis over the last two decades. Hence, our research contributes to a better understanding of policy framing in times of crisis. The main takeaways of our study are as follows. First, we observed that the topic of crisis has become increasingly salient over the last two decades. Second, from the geographical perspective, we observed that despite the changes in the salience of particular geographical areas related to particular crises, the regional geopolitical gaze is relatively constant in time. However, the EC’s communication on the topic of crisis

focused more on areas outside the EU in the first decade of our analysis and shifted toward the EU member states in the last decade. Geographical areas from the Middle East, Africa, and Ukraine were the focus of the EC communication. Third, economic, development, and humanitarian aid were the main crisis-related policy areas. The climate crisis was not salient compared to other crises and was mentioned only in recent years. Finally, the language of the “crises” differed by region, with reference to EU member states or African countries.

Our study comes with limitations. We identified patterns of EU official communication about crises in the past two decades. Thus, our findings are limited to this time frame. Hence, EU responses to the defense and security crisis posed by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine are only partially covered, as the war in Ukraine was an unfolding event at the end of 2022. Therefore, our sample reflected only briefly this crisis compared to others (e.g., the financial and health crises).

Computational approaches are limited in capturing the nuanced contextual elements that contribute to framing crisis communication. Hence, future research must consider the use of different methodologies, such as manual content analysis, to validate and complement our findings. Moreover, our analysis focused on the official communication of the EU in the form of press releases that usually frame the perspective of the institution in a curated and concise way. Therefore, our sample does not reflect the complexity of the decision-making process in the EU. Future research should also investigate the official communication of the EU and its reflection in the media from an integrative perspective, so that that policymakers and communication experts involved in crisis communication in the EU could optimize communication strategies during crises based on collaborative work between researchers and practitioners (Jin et al., 2020). Analyzing wider public discourses on the crises the EU faced in the last decades could show the effectiveness of crisis communication strategies, and allow for setting out practical implications for communications specialists and policy makers.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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