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Article

One Crisis Is not Like Another: Exploring Different Shades of Crisis in the EU

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Abstract

Against the background of more than a decade of crises in the EU and an increasing inflationary use of the term, this article contributes to the crisis literature in two ways. First, by presenting the state of the art in broader academic research on crises and crisis management, it explores how the more recent EU literature can benefit from this earlier work. At the same time, it also pays attention to the EU specificities and the implications in terms of research, especially with regard to studying actors and perceived threats. Here the unpacking of the well-established crisis definition of Boin et al. (2013), which builds on the work of Rosenthal et al. (1989), serves as a helpful starting point. Second, the contribution argues that one crisis is not like another and that crises can take different gradations. By distinguishing between mild, severe, and existential crises, it makes a first attempt to propose the key analytical dimensions that impact the gradation of a crisis. Building on the findings in EU crisis research, it distils the dimensions of severity, symmetry, and speed as defining characteristics. Depending on the crisis, the gradation of each of these dimensions ranges along a spectrum. In other words, there are different shades of crises. By being more explicit about the gradation, scholars can identify what type of crisis is at stake (i.e., whether the crisis under study is mild, severe, or existential in nature). This in turn has implications for questions such as by whom, how, and when a crisis needs to be addressed. As a final step, the article also identifies a series of avenues for further research.

Keywords

EU; crisis management; gradations of crisis; multi-level governance

1. Introduction

It has become commonplace to state that the EU has become caught up in a polycrisis (Zeitlin et al., 2019). The Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine are but the latest among a long range of crises that have confronted the EU over the past 15 years. As a result, the terms crisis and crisis management have become household terms in the EU academic literature. While in the 1990s and early 2000s, the term crisis management was primarily associated with the emerging Common Security and Defence Policy, today it refers to how the EU and its member states are dealing with or "governing" this almost permanent state of crisis.

Rather than probing into a particular crisis, this article aims to make a more general contribution to the EU crisis literature. It tries to do so in two different ways. Starting from the observation that the EU crisis literature has developed in relative isolation (Boin & Rhinard, 2023), it explores how these contributions could benefit from the broader and far-reaching debate on crises and crisis management, which especially in the US has led to interesting contributions. In addition to giving a brief state of the art, it also reflects on how its core questions

can speak to the studies conducted in an EU context. While taking the position that EU scholars can undeniably learn from this broader and more long-standing research strand, a simple "cut and paste" approach will not suffice. The EU polity is much newer than the traditional Westphalian state and, as a system of multi-level governance, it faces particular challenges that may require specific approaches and raise additional questions. To get better insight into these specificities, the article takes as a starting point the definition of a crisis by Boin et al. (2013). They characterise a crisis as "a situation where political-administrative elites perceive a threat to the core values of a society and/or life-sustaining systems in that society, that must be addressed urgently under conditions of deep uncertainty" (Boin et al., 2013, p. 6) This definition, in turn, builds on the work of Hermann (1969, 1972, p. 13) and Rosenthal et al. (1989), who posit that threat, time, and surprise are key traits of crises. We then successively apply the core elements of this definition to an EU context.

A second observation that has inspired this contribution is that one crisis is not like another. Crises appear in different gradations. This applies to crises in the EU, as well as to those occurring in a local, regional, national, or international context. Building on the literature on the fundamental characteristics of crises, the article, therefore, introduces three key analytical dimensions of crisis (severity, speed, and symmetry) which can all differ in gradation. These analytical dimensions help distinguish what is considered a crisis (and what is not), therefore allowing researchers to be more precise and explicit about the type of crisis they are examining and apply more conceptual nuances when comparing crises. This endeavour takes place against the backdrop of a lively scholarly debate that has focused on comparing and explaining (divergent) outcomes of recent EU crises, showing that the EU can (temporarily) disintegrate as well as integrate into an ever-closer Union (e.g., Brack & Gürkan, 2021; Dinan et al., 2017; Riddervold et al., 2021; Schimmelfennig, 2018; Schramm, 2023).

In addition, the article works to counter the increasing tendency of an inflationary use of the term crisis (Kelder, 2022; Kraak, 2022). This tendency is not without risk, as it may divert scarce resources from real crises and lead to missed opportunities in terms of building more resilient structures and drawing lessons. The conclusion reflects on further avenues for EU crisis research.

2. State of the Art

Crisis has been such a persistent feature in recent years that Collins Dictionary coined "permacrisis" as 2022's word of the year, defining it as "an extended period of instability and insecurity" (Shariatmadari, 2022). In both academia and the media, the term crisis also seems to be used almost constantly, especially since the global financial crisis of 2008.

When probing into the vast debate on crisis it becomes apparent that it can be grouped into four main clusters, each dealing with specific questions of what, who, when, and how (the four Ws):

1. What constitutes a crisis? What are its main features/characteristics and how can it be defined?
2. Who is empowered to act/who needs to act in times of crisis?
3. When does one need to act; i.e., at what speed does one need to intervene?
4. How does one "solve" a crisis and what type of input and instruments are needed for such a solution?

We will now focus on each of these clusters in turn. The first and most prominent feature of the debate is what actually constitutes a crisis. The academic debate on crisis originated in North America and gave an important place to the definition of crisis (e.g., Brecher, 1979; Hermann, 1969, 1972). Most authors agree on the main facets that make up a crisis: A crisis causes "serious disruption, upheaval, and collective stress" that can have a disordering effect on daily life. These issues have to be addressed urgently and are characterized by "deep uncertainty" (Rosenthal et al., 2001, p. 7). Crises differ according to the object of the basic threat they pose. On the one hand, a crisis can pose a threat to immaterial/ideational issues and "core values" such as the rule of law. Crises can also affect material aspects of a system, such as the destruction of critical (urban) infrastructures that are "essential for the normal functioning of day-to-day life in a country" (Krill & Clifford, 2022, p. 3)—e.g., by earthquakes, floods, forest fires, and hurricanes (Rosenthal & Kouzmin, 1997). These "known unknowns" occur with some regularity (Turner, 1994). Along with the "known unknowns," material aspects of a system can also be deliberately targeted, for example by terrorist attacks.

Beyond questions of definition, another important scholarly debate relates to how we can disentangle a crisis from a non-crisis situation and to what extent a crisis can objectively be determined and understood (Voss & Lorenz, 2016). Those taking a so-called objectivist perspective consider that one can identify a crisis based on objective criteria and arguments. In other words, the threat exists independently of how it is perceived (Voss & Lorenz, 2016). Constructivists on the contrary see crises primarily as a socially constructed process. They argue that whether a crisis is considered a crisis is only in the eye of its beholders (Gigliotti, 2020; Hermann, 1972); if certain individuals (and the media) define a situation as a crisis, it is then a "crisis in its consequences" (Crelinsten, 1994). This implies that "political actors do not just respond to a crisis, but crucially identify and define it through framing a crisis narrative and discourse" (Laffan, 2014, p. 267). Framing through language is a crucial part of crisis management because

"those who are able to define what the crisis is also hold the key to defining the appropriate strategies for resolution" ('t Hart, 1993, as cited in Laffan, 2014, p. 267). At the same time, beyond framing, leaders may seek to "mask" the negative repercussions of a crisis, by keeping (crucial) elements off the public agenda ('t Hart, 1993, as cited in Laffan, 2014, p. 267). This article takes the position that the dichotomy between objectivist and constructivist perspectives is not as clear-cut as it is presented in these two strands of literature. Both facts and evidence, as well as perceptions, play an important role in the process of acknowledging a crisis and often mutually interact. The article therefore adopts what Voss and Lorenz (2016) have called an integrative concept of crisis, which takes the position that both objective and constructivist criteria are at play when leaders and stakeholders are trying to make sense of a crisis and both mutually interact.

The second strand of the debate focuses on the actors that need to act and are empowered to act: Who makes the difference in times of crisis? Here objectivist and constructivist perspectives also present different answers. Seeing the crisis as an objective reality, objectivists tend to emphasise the role of experts who through their scientific knowledge are best placed to formulate possible solutions. Social constructivists pay more attention to the different perceptions of the stakeholders whose views are not based on evidence-based facts but are heavily influenced by factors such as their socio-economic and cultural background (Voss & Lorenz, 2016)

According to Kingdon (1984), attention to (crisis) issues develops in different streams that are not tightly coupled: the public stream (what the public worries about), the policy stream (what policymakers think is important), and the political stream (what politicians want to decide on). Actions or non-actions in one stream may prompt a reaction in another. In crises, the different streams need to overlap for crisis measures to be carried out by a larger public. Without labelling a crisis as such, far-reaching crisis measures that comprehensively tackle the root causes of the particular crisis at stake may thus not be considered necessary or politically feasible. Political elites, media, and the public thus need to agree that there is a crisis. Citizens then in turn count on and expect something from the political elite. Governments have the responsibility to protect their citizens. Crisis management then is centralized in the hands of a small empowered elite that has to prioritize their agenda and work for the common good (Crozier, 1964).

Politicians can, however, "exploit" a crisis, as they resort to measures that would otherwise be seen as unthinkable (Boin et al., 2008). We see an empowerment of the executive that can rely on far-reaching powers during crises. Parliaments and other accountability fora are often sidelined. A very salient example is the Covid-19 pandemic, where in many democratic countries parliaments met irregularly or were even closed.

Crisis can then—under certain conditions—become a playing field to boost political careers, and crisis agencies can seize this moment as their right to exist. Decision-makers are thus not only concerned with crisis management as such but aim to influence the public perception that they have handled the crisis "well" (Rosenthal & 't Hart, 1991).

It has already become apparent that speed, urgency, and time pressure are key factors in crisis management. It is crucial when decisions are taken (or not). Time pressure might be so intense that instinctive responses supersede rational choices in decision-making (Rosenthal & Kouzmin, 1997). In this context, the element of perception again plays a crucial role: Decision-makers need to share the sense of urgency that immediate action is needed. This in turn facilitates the coordination of large-scale operations. The factor of urgency poses an additional challenge for crisis decision-making. As previously mentioned, democratic institutions and systems have been designed with the rationale to consult, to deliberate, and to hold others to account, rather than to make quick decisions (Rosenthal & Kouzmin, 1997, p. 293).

Crisis managers face two additional risks when it comes to the timing of crisis management: On the one hand, they might end crisis operations too early, which may result in a vacuum in decision-making when in fact massive efforts are still needed. The alternative risk is that of overextending the crisis if decision-makers become so focused on the crisis that they lose sight of the bigger picture, a phenomenon that is referred to as "bunker syndrome" (Boin et al., 2016).

Last, but by no means least, the fourth element in the debate focuses on how to approach/"solve" a crisis and considers what information these decisions are based on. Leaders who are seen as excellent crisis managers are those who adopt a pragmatic approach. Uncertainty is seen as a key feature of a crisis. It is something that needs to be tackled and managed rather than something that can be brought fully under control. To come to terms with the crisis, actors then need to make decisions based on scarce information and only partial insight into the situation. They need to "figure out what to do while figuring out what they can do" (Ansell & Boin, 2019, p. 1100).

If policymakers are new to crisis management and all that it entails, they might have to make swift and risky decisions (Herek et al., 1987). Trust is an important ingredient here that boosts the relationship between decision-makers, employees, and the public.

It has become clear that there is a broad range of literature on crisis (management), dealing with a variety of questions related to actorness, the impact of crises on accountability, legitimacy, and governance processes. These questions are also questions that are relevant in an EU context and have been studied mainly through case studies, such as on the migration crisis (e.g., Collett & Le Coz, 2018), the euro crisis (e.g., Pisani-Ferry, 2011), Brexit (e.g., Martill & Staiger, 2018), and the Covid-19

crisis (e.g., Maior & Camisão, 2022; Sønstevold et al., 2023). In addition, several over-arching studies have explored how the idea of "permacrisis" has impacted the overall process of European integration, EU institutions, and decision-making (Brack & Gürkan, 2021; Dinan et al., 2017; Riddervold et al., 2021; van Middelaar, 2019; Webber, 2018).

3. Conceptualising the Term Crisis in the EU

While the generic character of the term crisis allows this article to build on the existing crisis literature, "exporting" the term to an EU context nevertheless requires some further reflection on what a crisis means in the particular setting of the EU polity, which is not a state and operates in a multi-national and multi-level context (Hooghe & Marks, 2001). The starting point for this section is the aforementioned baseline definition of crisis introduced by Boin et al. (2013).

We have opted for this definition, as it contains all the core elements of (a) actors (political-administrative elites), (b) perceived threat to material and ideational matters, (c) uncertainty, and (d) urgency identified in the earlier-described crisis literature. While the degree of uncertainty and urgency depends on the crisis itself, the actors and the perceived material and ideational threat invite further reflection on the EU-specific context.

Firstly, in terms of political-administrative elites, it is important to note that in an EU context, these elites are operating at different levels of governance. In the EU's system of multi-level governance, there is a close interaction and mutual dependency between the domestic and EU arena (Hooghe & Marks, 2009; Stephenson, 2013). In fact, the EU has been labelled as a "new type of political order" (European University Institute, 2017, p. 1), with features of both an interstate and a supra-state (Fabbrini, 2005, 2010, p. 3). Although beyond the scope of this article, various studies (e.g., Caporaso et al., 1997; Laffan, 2010, as cited in Phelan, 2012; Wallace et al., 2010) have analysed the specific, often labelled sui generis, nature of the EU polity. This includes the (constraining) impact of public opinion on EU decision-makers (e.g., Hooghe & Marks, 2009; Ioannou et al., 2016; Tosun et al., 2014) and the practices of "blame-shifting" among different levels of governance (Heinkelmann-Wild & Zangl, 2019; Ladi & Wolff, 2021).

Although the delegation of sovereignty differs according to the policy field, today there are hardly any areas where the EU has "no say." Most policy decisions are taken according to the Ordinary Legislative Procedure, whereby the Council and the European Parliament act as co-legislators and the European Council defines the strategic direction. The European Commission has the exclusive right of initiative. In addition, for reasons of democratic legitimacy, stakeholder involvement (especially by interest groups) is high and institutionalised (Greenwood, 2017). Executive responsibilities are shared between the Commission, the Council,

and its member states (Hix & Høyland, 2022). In other words, power is much more dispersed than in national governmental systems.

However, when a threat must be addressed urgently under conditions of deep uncertainty, this is generally seen as "Chefsache," with the heads of state of the EU member states taking the lead (Culley et al., 2022; Puetter, 2012; Schramm & Wessels, 2022; van Middelaar, 2019). When it comes to issues such as the survival of the euro or addressing the pandemic, these heads of state have the sole legitimacy to (dis)agree on far-reaching crisis response measures (Culley et al., 2022; Puetter, 2012; Schramm & Wessels, 2022; van Middelaar, 2019). At the same time, all recent crises have shown that the European Commission remains crucial, as it is the body that has the expertise and the operational capacity to develop the required policy measures (Kassim, 2022; Ladi & Wolff, 2021; Smeets & Beach, 2021). While we see a similarity with national political systems, where in crisis moments the government/the executive is strengthened, there are clearly also differences. As there is no single government and the EU and its member states have both independent and shared competencies, there is no "apex of authority" (Eriksen, 2005, p. 3). Decisions will thus be taken at different levels and within different loci of EU governance, depending on the crisis at stake. Furthermore, the EU is still very much a polity in the making, with regular turf battles about "who and which level should do what." This means that at times of crises, the Brussels-based institutional players may especially try to use this window of opportunity to strengthen their position.

In light of the focus of this thematic issue on crisis governance, we observe that during crises both the level of governance and the mechanisms to address the situation change. For example, under (severe) time pressure, the Ordinary Legislative Procedure is often deemed too slow and too open due to involving too many actors. It is in turn often replaced by intergovernmental decision-making, which is supported by a small circle of direct information channels and ad-hoc intergovernmental configurations (e.g., the Eurogroup Working Group or the Committee of Permanent Representatives) that are flanked by mini-summits outside of the normal chain of command to find out member states true "red lines" (Culley et al., 2022). In addition, instruments such as the Integrated Political Crisis Response mechanism bring together key actors swiftly to exchange information on operational matters.

Secondly, in their definition of crisis, Boin et al. (2013) distinguish between threats to both ideational ("core values of a society") as well as material factors ("life-sustaining systems"). As is the case for nation-states, also the EU draws its legitimacy from a combination of functional outputs as well as common values. When it comes to life-sustaining systems, both scholars and practitioners alike underline that the "core of the core" or "Europe's crown jewel" (European Commission, 2023) is

the European single market (Pelkmans, 2019). Both the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine illustrate well how crises can lead to new obstacles to free movement and how they can create shortages in crisis-relevant goods (European Commission, 2022).

Other core policies include the European Monetary Union and Schengen (Schramm & Krotz, 2023). A breakup of the euro, which was seen as a real possibility during the euro crisis, would not only lead to a serious drop in economic growth but also trigger increased unemployment, bank failures, and huge macroeconomic disruptions well beyond the eurozone (Dullien, 2012). The Schengen area of borderless travel has come under pressure both during the migration crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic. Free mobility of persons is not only a highly appreciated benefit of European integration (Schramm & Krotz, 2023) but also an important condition for a well-functioning European single market (Dullien, 2012).

While EU "core values" have played a role throughout the process of European integration, they have gained in importance in the context of eastern enlargement and increasing geopolitical pressures against the background of a changing world order (Foret & Calligaro, 2018). These core values, as enshrined in the Treaty on European Union (2016, Art. 2) include human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and human rights. Any country joining the EU needs to subscribe to these values, and they are also at the core of the EU's foreign policy identity. Priding itself as a normative power, the EU likes to project its norms also on its neighbours and other parts of the world (Manners, 2002).

Compared to the traditional nation-state, the EU is still very much in the process of forging a political identity. Against the background of a little-developed European public sphere, the debate about its political and social values is far from consolidated. The less developed normative foundations of the EU may also have implications for the management of a crisis. Measures invoked in the case of major threats may be seen as less legitimate, as there may be a lack of consensus on the hierarchical order of conflicting values and their translation into policy measures (Lucarelli & Manners, 2006). Additionally, because the EU core values are still in flux (as opposed to traditional nation-states), some policymakers may exploit the crisis to either discard or strengthen certain values.

To summarise, although the crisis definition of Boin et al. (2013) is very helpful and a good starting point for the study of EU crises, it is at the same time important for researchers to pay attention to the particularities of the EU context. Firstly, to understand who is empowered to act, it is important to take into account the multi-level nature of the EU polity with its two-chamber legislature and dual executive as well as the role of its different institutions and plethora of different stakeholders (Coen & Richardson, 2009). An exploration of the complex interaction between the sub-national, national, and European levels is indispensable to grasp how the crisis impacts power distributions and the regular modes of governance. Secondly, one cannot understand the EU's intervention in times of crisis without having an insight into its core values and material interests. The fact that the EU's political identity is still very much in the making requires particular attention to be paid to how the crisis impacts this process.

4. A Gradation of Crises: The Three S's

The (rapid) increase in the use of the word crisis in the academic and public debate, in particular since the advent of the "decade of EU crises" (Dinan et al., 2017) in the late 2000s, has brought about inflation of its meaning (Kelder, 2022; Kraak, 2022), both in the EU and beyond. Not applying clear nuance when using the term crisis carries the risk that if everything is called a crisis, nothing is a crisis anymore (Langan-Riekhof et al., 2017). In that light, this article proposes to examine the concept of crisis as a continuum of different gradations ranging from mild to severe and to existential. By making the heterogeneity between crises more explicit and suggesting conceptual distinctions between different gradations, we aim to further fine-tune the answers to the aforementioned questions of who, when, and how to address a crisis.

By applying the general crisis management literature to the EU and combining it with the literature focused on the EU's role in multiple crises since 2008, we have distilled what we see as the three most important defining dimensions of a crisis in the EU: severity, symmetry, and speed. We do this by creating a link to the four W's mentioned above (who, what, when, and how) and as such relate these to the crisis literature outside the EU context. At the same time, we also take into account the specifics of the EU multi-level system. For instance, the feature of symmetry amongst member states is EU specific, as who/which member states are affected could have implications for whether a crisis is labelled as an EU crisis and for which level/in which fora decisions are made (e.g., Schimmelfennig, 2015).

We thus propose three analytical dimensions, that take into account the severity (what type of crisis is it), the symmetry (who is affected, who needs to act, and how can these actors solve the crisis), as well as the speed of the crisis (when do decisions need to be taken). One can see these three dimensions, or the so-called three S's, as constituting "different shades of crises."

The element of severity refers to the intensity of the crisis (the height of the "fire") and is related to the degree to which values and life-sustaining systems are affected. As a crisis by definition implies a genuine disruption of the latter, it goes beyond turbulence (Ansell & Trondal, 2017). Symmetry is about the extent to which a few or many states are affected (the spread of the "fire"), as well as about the range of policy areas that are affected. Thirdly, speed is about the pace of the crisis (or the tempo at which the "fire" is spreading). This third

dimension is related to the degree of urgency in the definition of a crisis and impacts on the scope to postpone crucial decisions.

Whereas, previous works focusing on the EU have presented the dimension of symmetry (inter alia; Ferrara & Kriesi, 2021; Lefkofridi & Schmitter, 2015; Riddervold et al., 2021; Schimmelfennig, 2015, 2018; Schramm & Wessels, 2022), limited work has been done on the dimensions of speed (with the exceptions of Kamkhaji & Radaelli, 2016; Seabrooke & Tsingou, 2018) and severity (with the exceptions of Dinan et al., 2017; Otjes & Katsanidou, 2016). This article tries to bring these dimensions together but first elucidates each feature separately.

4.1. Severity

Severity refers to the extent of the negative impact of the crisis on life-sustaining functions and the values of the EU system. This encompasses threats to core EU policies and values and the functioning and survival of the EU polity as such (i.e., systemic threat; Jones et al., 2021). This also corresponds to the definition of crisis in the founding document of the Integrated Political Crisis Response mechanism as "a situation of such a wide-ranging impact or political significance that it requires timely policy coordination and response at Union political level" (Council Implementing Decision of 11 December 2018, 2018, p. 1).

4.2. Symmetry

Symmetry, also referred to as symmetrical interdependence, first relates to similar exposure to crisis pressures among EU member states (Ferrara & Kriesi, 2021; Schramm, 2023). It refers to the extent to which multiple EU member states in a joint territorial polity are (significantly) affected by a crisis and benefit from cooperation. Symmetry in a crisis situation is important because a policy issue becomes a common problem (Puetter, 2012). It triggers cohesion in preferences (Schütte, 2022), thereby limiting the "sovereignty reflex" of member states (Wessels, 2015) and the joint decision-making trap (Falkner, 2011). Especially when combined with important EU supranational competencies, earlier research has shown that there will be more scope for addressing a crisis through a joint approach that has an important role for the EU-level institutions (Ferrara & Kriesi, 2021; Jones et al., 2021; Schimmelfennig, 2015, 2018). Second, symmetry also refers to the policy scope of the crisis. Generally, a crisis starts in one particular area but often (though not always) spills over to other policy areas (Riddervold et al., 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic started off as a health crisis but rapidly escalated into a crisis presenting an existential threat to the EU is a good illustration. As such, the pandemic triggered, inter alia, an economic crisis that once again exposed the (financial) interdependence of the EU. Strong policy coordination across member states and central measures were crucial in order to prevent another sovereign debt crisis (Caetano et al., 2021).

4.3. Speed

Speed refers to the "acuteness" of the threat (Schütte, 2022), based on a temporal scale of crises (Science Advice for Policy by European Academies, 2022; Seabrooke & Tsingou, 2022). One can distinguish between abrupt rapid onset crises that require immediate action by those in charge, often also labelled as fast-burning crises, and crises in which action can be postponed because they lack pressing critical elements and resemble more day-to-day problems (Science Advice for Policy by European Academies, 2022; Seabrooke & Tsingou, 2022), such as "slow-burning" and "creeping crises" (Boin et al., 2021). Slower crises simmer in the background and only manifest at certain times, at which point they can be tackled via a traditional crisis response. Yet even within fast-burning crises, different levels of tempo exist. The higher the speed of the onset of a crisis, the less time there is for deliberation and establishing the facts. Very acute crises therefore are more likely to result in extraordinary behavior (Schütte, 2022). Generally, financial crises, pandemics, and military actions are urgent crises that demand an immediate response (Jones et al., 2021, p. 8).

Adopting an integrative concept of crisis (see Section 2), we consider that while perception plays an important role in the shape of the crisis, objective criteria are also helpful in identifying the place of the crisis across the spectrum. While empirical research is necessary to further operationalise the analytical dimensions, possible indicators that measure perception are opinion polls, speeches by leaders, media, and stakeholder analysis. Objective indicators that come to mind are the number of crisis casualties and the impact on GDP and economic growth (severity), the number of member states and policy areas affected by the crisis (symmetry), and particular deadlines that need to be met or the time span in which immediate measures need to be taken (speed).

The continuum from a rather mild (code yellow) to a severe (code orange) and to an existential (code red) crisis is, however, not static. At some point, a crisis can switch into a severe crisis or even an existential crisis, or vice versa, i.e., moving back and forth on the "crisis scale." This is not always clear-cut and can depend on perception. For example, one could count the withdrawal of a member state from the EU (as seen in the case of Brexit) as a threat to the life-sustaining systems of the EU (see also Schimmelfennig, 2022). Others (Bujard & Wessels, 2023; Phoenix, 2016), however, argue that such withdrawal does not pose an existential threat, as the process for voluntary withdrawal from and accession to the EU is formally included in the EU treaties (i.e., Treaty on European Union, 2016, Art. 50). This is therefore recognized as part and parcel of the process of EU integration.

In addition, the scale can vary for each of the three dimensions (see also Hermann, 1972). While a crisis might be existential according to one of the three dimensions (for example, speed), it might be mild or severe according to the other dimensions (for example, symmetry). Further research is necessary to understand how the "different shades" of the three dimensions interact with and affect each other. In addition, the analytical dimensions are an invitation to explore how the shades of crises impact the aforementioned core questions of agency (who), timing of the response (when), and type of input and governance of the crisis (how to solve and what level/which fora).

Table 1 summarises the main characteristics of the different types of crises. All three analytical dimensions of severity, symmetry, and speed are factors driving the political elite in nation-states to act. In the EU's multi-level political system, however, it is the element of symmetry that is often indispensable to triggering a coordinated EU crisis response due to the interdependence of the EU.

5. Conclusion and Outlook

After more than a decade of "permacrisis" in the EU, we aimed to contribute to the crisis literature in two ways. First, we tried to build a bridge between the broader academic debate on crises and crisis management and link these to the debate and the specificities of the EU institutional context. Second, by building on the findings of EU crisis research so far, we have distinguished between mild, severe, and existential crises and proposed three analytical dimensions of crises, which are not only relevant to EU scholars but also to the broader crisis management literature.

As concerns the first issue, it has been clear that the four predominant questions in the overall crisis management literature of "what, who, when, and how" are also relevant for those studying the EU. An increased cross-fertilisation between the EU and the overall crisis literature is therefore worthwhile. The unpacking of the well-established crisis definition of Boin et al. (2013) reveals that the key building blocks are also the defining features of crises in the EU. At the same time, we have also seen that the multi-level and transnational character of the EU may bring particular challenges, especially in terms of actors and perceived threats.

As a second step, we have, against the background of an increasing inflationary use of the term "crisis," proposed to look at the concept of crisis as a continuum of different gradations ranging from mild to severe to existential. In addition, we have made a first attempt to propose three analytical dimensions of crises. As such, we have disentangled crises to reveal their main analytical dimensions: severity, symmetry, and speed. It is clear from the case studies of various EU crises that there is quite a lot of variation concerning the severity of the threats, the speed with which they arise, and, hence, their urgency. We have seen that in an EU context, the dimension of symmetry does not only relate to the scope of affected policy areas but is also related to the range of member states that are affected. A crisis hitting a large number of member states or all member states becomes a crisis of the EU and not only within the EU. Initially, the Covid-19 crisis was primarily Italian but this rapidly changed once the virus spread all over the EU.

These three analytical dimensions of severity, speed, and symmetry are important, as they may have an impact on the three questions that are at the centre of the debate on crisis management—namely, the actors

Table 1. Different shades of crises in the EU: Main features.

Defining dimensions of a crisis	A mild EU crisis (code yellow)	A severe EU crisis (code orange)	An existential EU crisis (code red)
Severity of crisis	Light to medium impact on life-sustaining functions and/or core values	Medium to severe impact on life-sustaining functions and/or core values, possibly resulting in the disruption of core EU policies	Very severe impact on life-sustaining functions and/or core values (possibly) resulting in the collapse of EU core policies or even the EU as such
Symmetry of crisis	One or some member states are affected. Contagion of other policy areas is limited	Several member states are affected; National policy options are available but only effective in combination with EU coordination (increased involvement of EU institutions) The crisis is affecting several policy areas	All member states are affected, need for intense EU coordination and involvement of EU institutions The crisis is affecting a whole range of important policy areas
Speed of crisis	Medium pace of the crisis spreading	Medium-high pace of the crisis spreading	High pace of the crisis spreading

that have the legitimacy to act (who), the timing of the action (when), and how to address it. It is also noteworthy that for a crisis to be an existential crisis for the EU, the severity of the crisis must have a special connotation in the EU context. On the one hand, a crisis can have a very severe impact on life-sustaining functions within the EU (just like crises outside the EU arena). On the other hand, core values are key for the EU to function. A threat to these values could (possibly) result in the collapse of EU core policies or even the EU as such. Our observations thus lead us to three main avenues for future research within the realm of EU studies:

1. Further theoretical work is needed to conceptualise the term crisis within the EU.
2. Further empirical studies could be conducted on how the three key analytical dimensions of crisis—severity, symmetry, and speed—can be further operationalised, and how they relate to each other. One could also examine to what extent they reinforce each other. It would also be interesting to explore how the different types of crises (mild, severe, and existential) may affect the questions of who, when, and how.
3. We also need further research on the impact of the different types of crises on the mechanisms of EU governance, the legitimacy of decision-making, and whether the EU has applied crisis learning after each crisis (and, if they have, how they have done so).

While no crisis is exactly like another, disentangling some of the main dimensions of the term crisis not only enhances conceptual clarity but might prevent the inflationary use of the term.

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Conflict of Interests

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