



What's in a crisis? Taking contestation seriously in the study of Europe's crisis politics

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Accepted: 4 December 2025
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Abstract

The study of European politics has taken a crisis-oriented turn. Yet despite a proliferation of new empirical research, crisis remains undertheorised as a unit of analysis in European studies. Part of the problem, we suggest, is an over-reliance on realist assumptions that treat crises as manifest threats, underestimating the extent to which they are also contingent political constructions. Systematically placing greater emphasis on the constructedness of crises, via an empirical focus on processes of contestation, would admit the potential for greater outcome-contingency and help European studies to reinterpret puzzling research questions. We make the case for a systematic focus on recurring phases and dimensions of crisis contestation, and outline a general scheme for analysing crisis cases, comprising four phased dimensions that recurrently and significantly determine outcomes: recognition, definition, attribution and remediation. These dimensions are illustrated with diverse examples of commonly-labelled crises from contemporary European politics. Reflecting on crisis as an analytical category, and placing greater emphasis on contestation, can also help structure comparisons across crises, moving beyond the notion of a 'poly-crisis' toward more detailed consideration of the mechanisms linking crises.

Keywords Crisis · Contestation · Constructivism · European union · Polycrisis

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Introduction

In the field of European Studies, the events of the last twenty years have turned most scholars into *de facto* crisis analysts. The post-2008 period is commonly understood to have been defined by a string of existential crises for the European Union, including the Euro crisis, a migration crisis in 2015–16, Brexit, Covid-19, and the Ukraine war (e.g., Bressanelli et al. 2020; Ferrara and Kriesi 2021; Ferrera et al. 2024; Schimelfennig 2024; Zeitlin et al. 2019). While the proliferation of crisis politics might be a general phenomenon, at least across the rich democratic world, for analysts of contemporary European politics a focus on crisis has become almost unavoidable. Authors' analysis of data from Web of Science indicates that the proportion of academic articles mentioning both 'crisis' and 'the EU' somewhere in their titles, abstracts, or keywords has increased from around 1 in 10 in 2000 to approximately 3 in 10 since 2014 (Clarivate Analytics 2024). Yet, a proliferation of crisis analysis runs the risk of proceeding without pausing to examine theoretical priors or ensure empirical rigor in the designation and comparison of cases. As Voltolini et al. (2020: 611) observe, 'there remains much conceptual vagueness in the use of the term "crisis" and little theoretical depth concerning the nature of crises and their relation to processes such as politicisation'. Mudde (2021: 583) complains, 'the concept of 'crisis' remains one of the least clearly defined and theorized in the political science literature'. The EU is said to be 'awash in crisis' (Seabrooke and Tsingou 2019: 468), but in the rush to chart and dissect these events, scholarly attention to meta-theoretical questions of what makes crises distinctive, useful and comparable as objects of analysis appears not to have kept up (Roitman 2014).

This has essential implications, in the EU and beyond. Democracy and crisis have long been critically juxtaposed, and in a world increasingly saturated by popular (often competing) crisis claims, which are then picked up by scholars empirically analysing cases, it is as important as ever for scholarship to proceed with rigor and transparency about its operating theory of crisis, and why crises have been selected and compared. These are necessary foundations on which theories of crisis politics can be developed, but they are not always clearly in evidence.

We are not the first to critically 'question the question' of crisis analysis (Roitman 2014; Kjaer and Olsen 2016), but our intended contribution here is twofold: to offer a critique of the under-theorisation of crisis in contemporary work on Europe's crises, and to proffer a solution in the form of a structured focus on crisis contestation. Taking contestation seriously would, we suggest, allow for more nuanced and open-ended analyses of Europe's crisis politics. Ferrera et al. (2024: 710) have argued that 'the EU's demise has been over-explained while relatively little systematic research effort is spent on the resources and instruments for containing disruptive conflicts in the wake of a series of crises'. Part of the problem, we suggest, is an over-reliance on realist assumptions that treat crises as manifest threats, underestimating the extent to which they are also contingent political constructions. Systematically placing greater emphasis on the constructedness of crises, via an empirical focus on processes of contestation, would admit the potential for greater outcome-contingency, and perhaps help European studies to reinterpret puzzling research questions.



We build here on constructivist theoretical literature on crisis (e.g., Hay 2008; 2016; Widmaier et al. 2007). We suspect that part of the reason recent work on crisis has tended not to internalise the constructivist critique is that it has been critically sophisticated but short on usable models for empirical application. To that end, the central part of this article develops an operationalisable schema with which empiricists may take processes of crisis contestation seriously. Additionally, there is understandable resistance from some scholars to move in a constructivist direction, for fear that it means treating crises as constructions ‘all the way down’ (Wendt 1999). Our framework attempts to address this unease, reckoning with rather than assuming away changing material circumstances, while maintaining that the politics of crisis are necessarily and essentially actor-constructed. We make the case for a systematic focus on recurring phases and dimensions of crisis contestation, illustrated by examples from contemporary EU politics.

The article proceeds in three main sections. First, we review how crisis politics is commonly defined and theorised. We discuss the implicit realist-materialism of leading recent work in European studies, and consider the potential to incorporate constructivist insights that provide the basis for our focus on contestation in crisis politics. Second, we lay out a schematic for the analysis of crisis contestation, interrogating the phases through which actors, and especially political elites, incorporate the material circumstances at hand into politically consequential accounts of crises and their implications. Third, we consider comparative and cumulative manifestations of crisis politics (sometimes called ‘poly-’ or ‘permacrisis’, discussing how crises can interact with one another and how such dynamics can be studied more systematically. We conclude with a summary and a call for further work.

Theorising crisis as analytical object: materiality and construction

Defining crisis

The concept of crisis has a dizzying history of different applications, making it a difficult analytical object to pin down (Koselleck 2006). Still, in much recent scholarship, definitions have tended to operate at the level of mid-range concepts, highlighting three common, recurrent features of crises: *threat*, *urgency*, and *uncertainty* (see Boin et al. 2013; Hupkens et al. 2023). For example, Lipsky (2020; E99) defines crisis as ‘a situation that threatens significant harm to a country’s population or basic values and compels a political response under time pressure and uncertainty’. Ferrara and Kriesi (2021: 4) argue similarly that a crisis is an ‘extraordinary moment of urgency and uncertainty that poses an immediate threat’.

The distinctiveness of crisis times, as opposed to their implied opposite of normal, or ‘non-crisis’ times, lies in the combination of these three elements, each of which on their own would not yet constitute a crisis. The threat of negative outcomes is present in ordinary policy problems, making it a necessary but insufficient condition for a crisis. A crisis situation is also one that is (or will at some point be) deteriorating faster than in normal times, necessitating a more-than-usually rapid policy response. Such urgency can be present in different ways, since not all crises have the same tem-



poral profile (Seabrooke and Tsingou 2019). The category of crisis thus incorporates both fast-moving episodes in which the external conditions are changing rapidly (as in the early weeks of Covid-19) and slower-moving crises of deterioration in previously stable systems (the climate crisis), with a perceived risk of acceleration towards a future collapse. Finally, in contrast to normal policy problems, uncertainty is a key component of crisis politics; a defining feature of crisis is that the status quo has been disrupted enough that the outcome is now highly contingent, while extant policy frameworks may not be well-equipped to handle the situation, leading to an unpredictable outcome (Knight 1921). This uncertainty generates the possibility of path-breaking change, making crises moments of both heightened risk and an expanded set of options in the policy field (Hall 1993). Given this distinctive combination of threat, urgency and uncertainty, crises become moments in which path-breaking change becomes more-than-usually possible, and the status quo less likely to hold.

Definitions based on threat, urgency and uncertainty have the advantage of being intuitive and operationalisable in different contexts, capturing the key differences between crises and normal times. However, such conceptualisations quickly run into ontological questions about the extent to which the three properties of crisis are objectively observable facts, or politically constructed by social actors. Threat can appear to be the most self-evidently material feature of a crisis: the spread of a disease, the mass migration of people from a warzone - these are fast-paced trigger events whose existence is not a purely discursive matter. But the threshold at which this amounts to a crisis, as opposed to a regular problem (if a problem at all), is less clear-cut, necessarily requiring some degree of interpretation.

The urgency of crisis politics, meanwhile, always depends on the interpretative capacities of actors. Fast-moving events may appear to generate an undeniable sense of urgency, but the social mediation of their speed remains critical; to say that a threat will manifest imminently is to advance a claim that a response must be mounted before it does so. Urgency is a property of the response, not just the stimulus. Because of this, urgency may be a key component of discursive battles around putative crises which are not yet universally acknowledged. For example, when activists talk about the climate crisis, or climate emergency, they are attempting to inject urgency into a policymaking process they perceive as moving too slowly. The language of urgency is not simply descriptive, but constitutive, of climate change as a crisis. Finally, the uncertainty generated by crises, meanwhile, is 'a perceptual variable' (McNamara 2002: 61), which depends on the extent to which events are understood to contradict actors' and institutions' prior frameworks of understanding.

European studies, implicit materialism and the necessity of construction

That crises contain a political component, and that the concept of crisis does political as well as descriptive work, is a claim that has been well discussed elsewhere, both in popular journalism and widely in social science (White 2019; Brubaker 2017). With few exceptions however (Kjaer and Olsen 2016), such debates about the politics of crisis definition are remarkably absent from the growing comparative literature on Europe's recent crises. This tends either to proceed on the basis of broadly (if implicitly) materialist assumptions, or else to put such questions explicitly beyond



the scope of their exercise. For example, Schimmelfennig's (2018) influential paper on integration theory and crisis treats Europe's crises as originating in either exogenous shocks or endogenous policy failures, both of which are assumed to be manifestly present. Similarly, Ferrara and Kriesi (2021) begin with the concept of 'crisis situation'; an actually-existing problem that places heightened 'problem pressure' on a system and which, combined with context such as policy and institutional legacies, constitutes the 'decision-making scenario' for actors. Ferrara and Kriesi (2021: 1369) explicitly state their agnosticism on the question of social construction. However, the materialist thrust of the argument to that point renders this disclaimer moot. These are but two examples. Similar starting points exist across a crisis literature in which it has become standard form to open articles with a short list of Europe's recent crises, implying that their status *as* crises is an objective matter that may be taken for granted (see, for example, Bressanelli et al. 2020; Jones et al. 2016; 2021; Schimmelfennig 2024; Zeitlin et al. 2019; Ferrera et al. 2024).

The tendency of European studies to approach crisis in this way is perhaps not surprising given that its canonical theories—neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism rest on broadly realist underpinnings (see Jupille et al. 2003). While European studies, like the rest of international relations and political science, was involved in debating the possibilities for a constructivist turn at the end of the last century (Checkel 1999; Christiansen et al. 1999; Hay and Rosamond 2002), that debate was largely exhausted before the global financial crisis, with even constructivism-oriented scholars sensing that in the early 2000s 'the metatheoretical debate about institutions [had] run its course' (Jupille et al. 2003: 8). Elsewhere, in political economy, the 2008 crash prompted a return to these questions, as authors sought to highlight the contingency of emerging policy responses (Abdelal 2009; Abdelal et al. 2010; Blyth 2013; Hay 2011). However, in European studies in particular the materialist approach to crisis remained dominant, and the post-2008 turn toward crisis scholarship did not generally reactivate ontological discussions within the subfield.

Some recent crisis scholarship incorporates some of these critiques, as in Brubaker's (2017: 374, italics added) observation that in asserting the existence of a crisis, political actors are making 'a *claim* that extraordinary times require extraordinary measures'—a recognisably constructivist position. Yet Brubaker (2017: 374) is quick to attach a materialist caveat, that 'this does not mean, of course, that [political actors] can construct crisis *ex nihilo*; they must have favourable materials to work with'. This is both true and an analytic impasse. What counts as favourable materials, and who decides? Brubaker's dilemma highlights the difficulty of translating constructivist treatments into empirically tractable propositions: once we have suggested that crisis interpretation matters, where next? If materialist accounts may be criticised as insufficiently reflective on their concepts, constructivist accounts run the risk of being unresponsive to variation in real cases, using empirical analyses to illustrate an unfalsifiable proposition ('crises are constructed') rather than mobilising theory to gain explanatory insights about patterns in crisis politics.

Another reason EU scholars may have been unwilling to incorporate constructivist insights is the fear of sliding into postmodern treatments of crises as text without context' (Schmidt 2008). While some theorists have argued that constructivism can represent an ontological middle ground between rational-choice materialism, on the



one hand, and interpretivism and poststructuralism, on the other (Adler 1997; Jupille et al. 2003), we do not attempt such a move. We agree with Hay (2016) that the value of constructivism is precisely that it is distinct from a realist-materialist perspective: its insistence on the indeterminacy of social situations, and the indispensability of the processes of interpretation through which actors stabilise their understandings the social world, are core points of departure from a materialist world view. However, we find it noteworthy that even Hay (2016: 520, italics added) speaks as much about constructivism’s ‘characteristic *emphasis*’ on social rather than brute facts; on ideational mediation of contextual conditions over the conditions themselves; and on contingency over determinacy, as he does about ontological absolutes. To be a practicing constructivist is, for the most part, not to endlessly rehash debates about pure theory, but to insist on emphasising the politically contingent ways in which social actors understand their reality, and act upon those understandings. Hay (2016: 531) notes, ‘whilst the facts of the matter place limits on credible crisis narratives, the relevant facts here are social facts and social facts are social constructs’. We place rather more emphasis than Hay does on the first half of this sentence, while agreeing that the politics of crisis are irredeemably social, contested through institutions whose very facticity is itself a social construct. That is we seek to shift the emphasis in the study of Europe’s crises from material constraint to political agency and contingency, taking more seriously the processes of contestation that are the essence of crisis politics.

Reckoning with materiality and construction in crises

Figure 1, below, simplifies our argument on the materiality and constructedness of crises, as follows. First, there is a material component in the events that trigger a crisis. Elements of these stimuli have an existence prior to politics and to human cognition: for example Covid-19 is a disease, not a discourse; the 2015–16 refugee crisis began with a measurable and larger-than-usual number of people entering Europe. The shape of the triggering events will, through a combination of material stimulus and extant social facts, enable or constrain the narratives that come to shape politics and policy in that crisis. Acknowledging the presence of these material com-

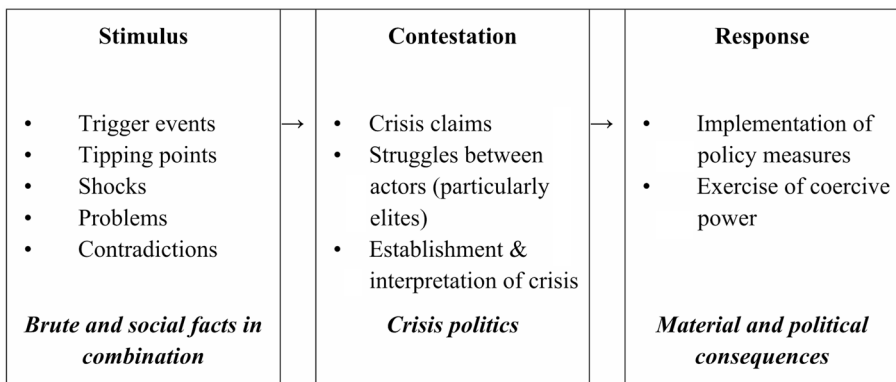


Fig. 1 Materiality and constructedness in crises



ponents does not fix their meaning or political significance (Walby 2022), but it does acknowledge that some brute facts—and some social facts that are so firmly institutionalised as to be acting as-brute—are likely to be in play.

Furthermore, it should be uncontroversial to note that outcomes of crisis politics have material *consequences*. Crisis politics does not only shape our common understandings of problems, it also enacts those understandings as policies which involve the exercise of material power over people's lives, from Covid-19 lockdowns to refugee resettlement schemes and post-Brexit trade rules. That these policies can be considered social rather than brute facts does not render their impact on citizens any more negotiable; when power is exercised its manifestations are 'as real' for most people.

However, per Fig. 1, we argue that there is no route from materially-real stimulus to materially-consequential policy outcome that does not pass through many processes of interpretation by agents. Crises must first be constructed as such for the threat present in the triggering events to be converted into the urgency that is characteristic of crisis politics, and for a problem to be elevated to the status of crisis. Then, for policy action to become plausible and legitimate, actors must converge on a dominant understanding of the nature of the crisis that can overcome uncertainty. In this we follow Widmaier et al.'s (2007: 748) contention that 'neither states nor societal agents can react to material changes until they have interpreted them'. While we do not see these processes of construction as limitless, we do consider them indispensable, since it is always through processes of assertion and contestation that agents arbitrate between different interpretive possibilities, and so shape and delimit policy responses (Hay and Rosamond 2002). Crisis contestation matters not because it makes *any* outcome possible, but because it constitutes the crisis in a way that makes *some* outcomes possible.

Over-emphasising materiality, and under-emphasising the essential constructedness of crises can lead us to produce seriously over-determined accounts of crisis politics. As such, we suggest that European crisis scholarship would gain by zooming in on the central box in Fig. 1, and taking crisis contestation more seriously. We believe it is possible to tilt the empirical project in that direction without tumbling into a poststructuralist vortex, since while the specific *outcomes* of crisis contestation may be indeterminate, the *dimensions* on which crises are contested are observable regularities that can be used to structure and clarify empirical strategies. It is in that spirit that our next section presents a schema in which crisis contestation may be approached systematically.

Dimensions of crisis contestation

This section focuses on the central 'contestation' box in the centre of Fig. 1, breaking it down into four defining dimensions identifiable across all crisis cases (Fig. 2): recognition, definition, attribution and remediation. Recognition is marked as distinct in that it must necessarily be a prior site of contestation to the other three, which are subject to a more dynamic interplay. No matter their material predicates, not all potential crises clear the hurdle of recognition; unrecognised crises remain ordinary



Dimension of Contestation	Recognition	Definition	Attribution	Remediation
Contested Question	<i>Is it a crisis?</i>	<i>A crisis of what?</i>	<i>Who/what is responsible?</i>	<i>What to do?</i>
Contested Terrain	Non-Appeals Contested Appeals Consensus Appeals	Agonistic (nature of the crisis) Concentric (scale and scope)	Natural Causes vs. Political Choices Exogeneity vs endogeneity Actors responsible / in charge	Containment vs. Reform Prevention vs. Mitigation

Fig. 2 Four dimensions of crisis contestation

policy problems, subject to the politics of ‘normal times’, which may contain little to no contestation or attention. Even once recognised, crises remain subject to contestation on the three further dimensions we identify, which are interconnected and often iterative fields of debate. Of course, the recognition of a crisis can also be revisited and retrospectively contested, but for now our purpose is to systematise the episodic politics of crisis events as they happen. As such, it is important to note that some crises ‘catch’, creating a qualitatively different politics, while others do not. In the discussion that follows, each dimension of contestation is explored in more depth, based on real-world examples from the contemporary EU.

It should also be noted at this point that we treat crisis contestation as being primarily an elite actor-centred process, following Widmaier et al. (2007). Through interpretive and persuasive practices, elites give meaning to systemic, state, and societal incentives, shaping how crises are understood and how collective interests are (re-)defined. This is not to say that elites’ discretion is limitless or that mass publics or other societal groups are irrelevant. On the one hand, as Vivien Schmidt’s (2008) work on discursive institutionalism emphasises, actors are constrained by institutions that shape the ideas and discourses through which elites can construct, legitimise, and transform policy and political orders. On the other, crisis resonance with mass publics matters too, since the success or failure of elite narratives ultimately depends on their capacity to align with ordinary people’s lived experiences (Widmaier et al. 2007). Contestation at elite level is often stimulated and influenced by contestation among social actors.

Nonetheless, since we are concerned with the ways in which crisis contestation is a process of narration and contestation, and how it influences policy outcomes and so becomes materially consequential, we are most interested in contestation that happens close to the levers of power. Contestation occurs to different degrees in different crises, but always in the context of prior power distributions which ensure that not all voices are equal (Lukes 1974). Elites’ favoured crisis constructions are always important, while challenger discourses and alternative constructions enter the picture insofar as they provoke an elite response. Critically, however, we suggest that an actor’s ability to contest a crisis on each of the four dimensions that follow is influenced by material characteristics present in the ‘stimulus’ box in Fig. 1. In short, those who shape crisis politics must work with (or against) their materially-existing contexts. Recognising this allows us to map regular dimensions along which crises



are contested. It also allows for critical theorisation and comparisons of crises that sit at either end of a sliding scale: paying attention to the political contingency of even generally recognised crises, and to the materiality of partially-recognised crises, and to processes of non-construction and crisis denial.

Dimensions of contestation: examples from contemporary European studies

Recognition: from material stimuli to crisis

This section works through the phases of our framework with reference to hyper-salient, generally-agreed crisis events that have animated European politics (and sometimes beyond) since 2008. First, there is the question of whether a crisis is recognised. Initial crisis alarms need not be sounded by policymakers, but for a 'crisis appeal' to enter a mode of further political contestation beyond this phase there must be an evident appeal at least on the part of a critical mass of elite policy actors, including those at the highest level of government and opposition in a democracy.

If crisis claims are not sufficient to reach this level of political salience, forcing any kind of sustained, qualitatively heightened debate or response, then we can classify them as *non-appeals*. At any point, material contradictions may be accumulating in a policy (sub-)system, reaching levels of threat that could potentially qualify as crisis, and yet fail to attract a critical mass of attention from policymakers.

'Non-appeals', instead, indicate a state of policy stress which does not achieve the required salience among policy elites to activate crisis politics, with its associated further phased contestations, despite being diagnosed by at least some actors. The concept of 'creeping crisis' (Boin et al. 2021), is well-placed to capture potential crises that could attract sufficient attention from policymakers, but have not yet and may never do so. For example, scholars have long diagnosed a crisis of the welfare state in West European democracies (Esping-Andersen 1996). More recently, scholars argue the EU has experienced an erosive 'social crisis', which highlights regional, generational, labour market and welfare inequalities as core sites of systemic or polity stress (Ferrera and Burelli 2019). Though its material bases might be said by some expert communities or policy entrepreneurs to constitute an EU crisis, the social crisis can be understood in relative comparative terms as a non-appeal. The climate crisis is an example that made the successful passage from isolated and/or sporadic appeals to a widely recognised crisis, with a critical mass arguably being reached in 2018–2019, although this may be relitigated by opponents seeking to downplay its crisis status (Kyriazi and Miró 2022).

Even when the existence of a crisis event is uncontroversial to most observers, recognition remains a key initial step in the politics of a policy response. Here we can distinguish between *consensus appeals* and *contested appeals* (see Fig. 2). An entrepreneurial policymaker might decide to claim that a policy problem is worthy of 'crisis' status. Powerful executive actors can initiate a crisis appeal and put the apparatus of government on a crisis-footing, and this might be essentially contested or broadly accepted by their political opponents. In many countries, this is how the Covid-19 crisis came to be rapidly, uncontroversially understood as such, based on a broad consensus appeal.



The 2008 financial crisis rapidly reached consensus when Lehman Brothers' collapse in September 2008 prompted a widespread shared sense of threat and urgency, but this happened after a longer fermentation period dating back at least a year earlier. By 2007, a subset of financial experts had already begun labelling the increasing nonperformance of the US subprime market as the 'subprime crisis' (Crouhy et al. 2008), but it was only after Lehman that the global financial crisis definitively moved from non-appeal to consensus appeal status, capturing the attention of governing and opposition policy elites (Tooze 2018). Appeals for the Euro, migrant and Ukraine crises have all unfolded in a similar, largely consensus manner.

Vice-versa, interested policymakers often also have a strong incentive to distance themselves from the acknowledgement of a crisis, especially if it implies some level of political culpability, or if they are seeking to signal calm to mass publics or financial markets (Boin et al. 2016). There are both ideological and strategic reasons why incumbent policymakers might reject labelling a problem as a crisis. However, when a crisis appeal is salient and resonant with a critical mass of actors in a polity, it will generate some level of scrutiny and discussion beyond basic recognition.

Finally, some cases might be identified as *contested appeals*. Brexit followed the opposite trajectory to the financial crisis. For the European Commission, it started out with a shock rupture of the Leave vote, which generated a degree of crisis politics anchored in threat, uncertainty and urgency. Over time, however, Brexit became increasingly normalised, and as its cascading potential was contained, it was eventually downgraded to a problem short of a crisis (Schelkle et al. 2024). Meanwhile the EU's Rule of Law crisis, characterised by the substantive deterioration of democratic institutions in Hungary and Poland, has followed a similar pattern to the early stages of the climate crisis: it was met with increasing claims of its systemic weight from a class of experts, but its acceptance and recognition by political elites was initially limited and remains contested (Kelemen 2019).

Further contestation: Definition, attribution and remediation

Once the basic binary question of crisis or no crisis has been resolved in the positive, several concerns follow: a crisis of what, caused by whom, what is to be done? Though displayed sequentially in Fig. 2, we discuss these dimensions together because they are closely related existing in a typical dynamic interplay.

Assuming that a crisis has been generally accepted, the definition contest—a crisis of what?—begins (Voltolini et al. 2020). Here, there may be significant contestation over scope and substance. The global financial crisis, while almost universally acknowledged, could be variously defined as a narrower 'banking crisis' attributable to faulty national regulatory regimes (Borio 2014); a crisis of a particular, cyclical pattern in financial markets (Aliber and Kindleberger 2015); or a crisis of capitalism (Harvey 2010). This is *concentric* contestation, in which actors differ on how widely they draw their account of consensus crises. In other crises, definitional debates are less about the scope of the crisis than its fundamental nature. Accepting the material surge of persons entering in Europe in 2015–16 constituted a crisis, this may be prefixed with 'humanitarian', '(illegal) migration' or 'refugee' (Cinalli et al. 2021). This



is *agonistic* contestation, in which alternative renderings of the crisis point toward substantively different priorities and policy responses.

Relatedly, actors must engage in a process of ‘framing and blaming’ events (Boin et al. 2009). Blame games are processes preceded by society working through contested understandings of an event and then probing for causes and culpability (Resodihardjo 2020). Here, a key distinction is whether a crisis is attributed to political decision-making, or whether it is a naturally-occurring phenomenon beyond the rubric of regular democratic politics. If political actors or institutions are implicated, contestation may occur around their responsibility, debating whether a policy subsystem might be directly responsible for the emergence of a harm (a flawed financial regulatory regime), or if its unpreparedness exacerbates or fails to contain a crisis that exists beyond it (a public health system unready for a pandemic). Contestation around whether a crisis is exogenous or endogenous has implications not just for describing the crisis but for attributing responsibility (Stone 1989). More specifically, crisis narratives do not only attribute blame, but also agency. In the EU, where authority is fragile and dispersed, elites typically need to provide some justification as to why EU interventions are legitimate and necessary (Ferrera et al. 2024).

To the extent that some human (political) blame can be attributed, the key question is: to whom? When blame is attributed nationally, it can be located within system parties (established opposition parties attacking incumbents) or between system parties and outlying anti-system challengers (Hopkin 2020). Both the financial crisis and Covid-19 crises elicited rapid remedial solutions such as bailouts and lockdowns which were broadly supported across the mainstream political spectrum, before inquest-type debates about preparation and culpability emerged. The climate crisis is generally accepted by mainstream political parties, but anti-system parties challenge the crisis consensus, returning the debate to the recognition phase (Krange et al. 2021).

The final dimension of crisis contestation relates to remediation—what must be done, and by whom? The recognition, definition and attribution of a crisis implies a concomitant response, certainly on the part of policymakers, informed by actors’ positions over the three prior levels. Indeed, for scholars who see crises as potentially constructed for political ends, a judgment on remediation may precede and shape contestation on the other dimensions (Hay 1996; White 2019). In such cases, policymakers may start out with a set of actions in mind and construct a narrative of the crisis in which such actions may be legitimised. However, it is also the case that given some stimuli, policymakers appear blindsided or else must formulate a policy response after the event (Boin et al. 2016).

A recurring pattern in the EU’s recent crises is the debate over prioritising containment or reform. Containment seeks to ease crisis pressures and prevent spillover, while reform aims to overhaul institutions to avoid recurrence. In cases like the refugee crisis and Brexit, containment prevailed; instead of institutional reform, the EU externalised threats to preserve the status quo—seen in the migrant deal with Turkey and resistance to the UK’s ‘polity attacks’ (Schimmelfennig 2024). While crises can amplify calls for change, they also empower actors focused on maintaining existing arrangements (Jabko and Sheingate 2018). Yet, some crises, such as the financial crisis, have driven significant institutional reforms, particularly in EU regulatory frame-



works (Burns et al. 2018). Euro area stability concerns spurred new institutions like the European Stability Mechanism, later complemented by the Next Generation EU grant-loan facility in response to COVID-19 and broader macroeconomic contestation. While some view this funding as a one-off containment tool, others see it as a step-change, marking the first collective bond issuance tied to the EU budget.

Contestation in a comparative politics of crises

The four dimensions of contestation identified above can be observed in any single crisis case. However, we suggest that they also provide a useful basis on which cross-crisis comparisons may be structured. By considering the patterns of contestation that are observed in different crises, we may begin to explore the role of other variables in shaping (though not determining) crisis politics. We propose to focus on two such variables that can move us beyond the view that crises are made up of indeterminate combinations of ‘semiosis and materiality’ (Jessop 2015: 245): (1) temporality, where crises marked by sudden rupture tend to be perceived as more ‘real’ or pressing than slow or cumulative ones, and (2) actor constellations, where the distribution of interpretive authority and institutional power among agents shapes how crises are recognised and stabilised.

First, we argue that patterns of contestation will vary with the crises’ temporal structure, and specifically whether they surface as a sudden shock or through erosive deterioration (Pierson 2011). Others have highlighted the causal relevance of key attributes of crises, such as their symmetric/asymmetric or exogenous/endogenous character (Ferrara and Kriesi 2021; Cicchi et al. 2020). Much like claims of urgency and uncertainty, these purportedly ‘objective’ characteristics are mutable through a phase of political contestation. This is not to say that such material attributes are irrelevant, but ultimately, in analytical terms they return us to the matter of crises comprising material inputs and socially constructed and contested politics. We prefer to highlight the causal role of the initial emergence of crisis as the most relevant factor in driving contestation through the four dimensions (see also Seabrooke and Tsingou (2019), who draw attention to the significance of the tempo of an unfolding crisis, whether it is ‘fast or slow burning’).

Suddenly erupting problems are easily recognisable as crises, such that the first phase of contestation, recognition, tends to be accelerated. They may present initially as exogenous shocks, while any endogenous failures that have contributed to them may not be immediately clear. Fast-moving events tend to burst into public consciousness as self-evident crises that are swiftly, even universally, recognised. In such cases contestation is then focused on definition, attribution and remediation (Fig. 2). However, non-controversy about the existence of a crisis may itself be a political outcome. For example, Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine was a fast-moving and widely-recognised political shock. Its recognition as a crisis for the EU, however, depended partly on the European Commission’s willingness to claim it as such (Bosse 2023), and contestation around the EU’s role in this crisis has since increased. And while shock-type crises tend to gain recognition swiftly, they may be discursively downgraded later, as in the case of Brexit (Schelkle et al. 2024). In contrast, erosion-type crises tend to be subject to more first-level contestation around recognition, and



must assertively appeal their existence as crises to claim political resources. Erosive problems then remain at a higher risk of being deprioritised even once they have been constructed as crises. The endogenous failures that lead to such crises could be more obvious, however, their wide politicisation is only possible when certain thresholds or tipping points are reached, in the context of focusing events and/or extraordinary efforts of mobilisation by groups of actors (as in the case of the climate crisis).

A focus on contestation is crucial here because it allows us to include in our analyses processes of crisis non-construction or denial, and their relationship to the temporality of the crisis. It permits us to ask what features may prevent activation of crisis politics, and how this may block the adoption of radical solutions or innovations. An erosion-type crisis which occurs gradually obstructs linking apparently disparate processes into an overarching crisis narrative (cf. Hay 1996). It also provides 'deniability' to interested political actors, as was the case with the EU's rule of law crisis. As scholars of democratic backsliding have noted, gradual deterioration of democratic quality poses both analytical and political problems, precisely because it proceeds in a piecemeal fashion and ranges across several policy domains, presenting plausible deniability for those who induce the deterioration (Bermeo 2016).

The second set of factors relevant for crisis contestation are agents. Agents exercise a degree of bounded discretion to produce and frame crises. Problems and contradictions are interpreted differently, depending on one's ideology and theoretical perspective. Still, not all voices are equal: 'typically, claims of urgency emanate from leaders' (Spector 2020: 304). In plural democracies, opinion leaders such as experts are positioned to detect and report failures that can potentially qualify as crises. Even though there may be a degree of awareness of some of these conditions, they can fail to be broadly and universally articulated as crises. Examples include the climate crisis until not very long ago, as for example, the Assessment Reports of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warning about catastrophic consequences gathered some attention, but fell short of mobilising publics and policymakers against climate change *as* a crisis, given the presence of countervailing interests that sought to downplay the issue (Mildenberger 2020). Other interest groups, professional organisations, and businesses can propose interpretations of certain sectoral failures as crises, even though, again, this is unlikely to be sufficient to constitute a consensus appeal.

Opposition populist actors, on the other hand, are said to 'thrive on crisis' (Brubaker 2017: 374). Moffitt (2016) has shown a two-way causal symbiosis: crisis does not just trigger populism, but that populism also attempts to act as a trigger for crisis and that populists' success depends on their ability to detect and 'perform' crises. The material threat element of crises construed by opposition-populists may be relatively thin, despite their forceful articulation, lowering the chances of the 'crisis' being picked up by a critical and diffusing beyond a non-appeal status, confined to a narrow group of partisan supporters.

It is, then, mainstream political elites who are strategically positioned to offer meaningful crisis interpretations: like experts (though not to the same extent), they have insight into some of the material indicators of underlying failures but are also equipped with material and symbolic resources allowing them to offer resonant crisis narratives driving the construction of phenomena *as* crises. This is not to suggest that



the crises constructed by mainstream political elites are always ‘real’ or that their interpretations the ‘true’ interpretations of crises, but only that they are potentially the most powerful, and the most likely to generate the consequential policy actions we highlight in Fig. 1. At the extremes this may enable powerful actors to evade or degrade the democratic process to push through private or institutional agendas that would receive more scrutiny in normal times (Rhinar [2019](#); White [2019](#)).

This notion of shrewd, calculating leadership contrasts with the expectation that crises, as moments of profound uncertainty, destabilize interests. The core ontological question is whether interests remain stable amid disrupted power balances, or whether they are themselves problematised and reconfigured. Even without viewing interests as social constructions (Hay [2008](#): 64), it is reasonable to assume that clear interests become destabilised during crises (Blyth [2002](#)). The 2008 crash disrupted both the financial order in Western economies and the ideas underpinning it among policymakers and experts (Drezner and McNamara [2013](#)). Crises in the EU have often triggered institutional change by opening opportunities to realign member states’ interests and overcome territorial vetoes (Miró et al. [2023](#)). In stable times, governments freely pursue their goals and contest issues, but existential threats remind them that the EU’s survival is not guaranteed, prompting collaboration to preserve the polity (Ferrera et al. [2024](#); Alexander-Shaw et al. [2023](#)).

Cumulative crisis politics: theorising the age of permanent crisis

Critical conjunctures: when crises interact

Returning to this article’s initial motivations, we observed that Europe (and the rich democratic world more broadly) appears to have been in era of near-permanent crisis, roughly since 2008. In such a context, crisis scholarship must find ways to not only interrogate individual crises, but to probe the intersections between them. The way crises interact with one other is poorly understood as a research object. The literature sometimes assumes an additive relationship between crises, whereby each new crisis compounds the effects of the previous one and deepens the overall malaise. For instance, Virdee and McGeever ([2018](#)) argue that the overlap between the refugee crisis and the Brexit referendum campaign enabled the Leave camp to frame humanitarian migration—mediated through EU membership—as an existential threat to Britain. Yet this dynamic itself built on an earlier crisis sequence: Cameron’s decision to call the referendum was partly shaped by the Eurozone crisis and the UK’s (self-inflicted) marginalisation in its management (Thompson [2017](#)). Meanwhile the alternative possibility, that crises may relate to each other in less negative ways—which we will return to shortly—has received little attention.

Some authors have referred to the critical conjuncture of the 2010 decade as a ‘polycrisis’ (Zeitlin et al. [2019](#); Tooze [2022](#)), a term which in the contemporary European context, originated with a speech by former Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker ([2016](#)). Tooze ([2022](#)) defines this as a spiraling gestalt, ‘where the whole is even more dangerous than the sum of the parts’. Zeitlin et al. ([2019](#)) use polycrisis as a way to capture a multiplicity of overlapping crises in the EU—crises in different domains that occur concurrently and interact, producing fractures across the EU



political system. Yet, in academic research the challenges plaguing the use of the concept of 'crisis' apply equally or even more so to that of the 'polycrisis'. The first note concerns the heterogeneity in how scholars define and sequence Europe's crises: different authors include different episodes, often without specifying their criteria for inclusion. This diversity undermines the assumption that Europe's crises, or the broader critical conjuncture, are self-evident and need no prior conceptual definition. Polycrisis claims typically bundle multiple crises together, implying that they are naturally interconnected rather than politically and discursively linked, while leaving both their relative significance and points of connection largely unspecified. Tooze's (2022) statement that polycrisis is 'a cognitive shock, rather than a well-specified model' suggests some fundamental ambiguity in the extent to which polycrises exist in the world, or in the extra uncertainty perceived by actors confronting multiple crises at once.

Given our emphasis on crisis contestation, we note that the label 'polycrisis', is meant to do political as well as analytical work, but there is some room for scepticism about what kind of work, exactly. Juncker's invocation of the term was a rhetorical move intended to convey a sense of high stakes for the European polity: if a crisis requires an urgent political reaction, a polycrisis must be even more serious. The effectiveness of such rhetorics, however, can be blunted by the impression that a polycrisis is difficult on so many fronts as to be beyond meaningful intervention (Murphy 2024). We see value in analysing *polycrisis* as a discourse (asking who deploys the term, in what contexts, and with what effects) but find it to be of limited usefulness in disentangling how different crises become linked. The latter aim may be better served through a focus on critical conjunctures, an analytical term that allows the cumulative impact of overlapping crises to be empirically investigated and demonstrated rather than asserted a priori. Here again, a focus on contestation can be helpful. Just as the politics of single crises are the product of interpretive struggles between actors, the overlapping dynamics of multiple crises are also fields of contestation, which can be obscured by the use of polycrisis as an analytical catch-all.

Mechanisms linking crises

While it is intuitive to think one crisis exacerbates another, crises may also counter-balance each other. One way to unpack these dynamics is by isolating specific linking mechanisms. We briefly highlight four, starting with bandwidth: the limited capacity, resources, and political attention available to address crises. Normally, policymaking occurs in parallel subsystems, but crises force a shift to serial processing, where one issue dominates the agenda (Baumgartner and Jones 1991). If another crisis strikes before the first subsides, leaders and institutions face bandwidth constraints, often neglecting one issue in favour of another. Media and public attention are similarly limited, as seen when the hyper-salient COVID-19 pandemic (Kriesi and Bojár 2023) overshadowed Brexit. Likewise, the EU's climate agenda was delayed when COVID-19 hit; the Commission 'reordered its priorities' (Euractiv 2020b), and Czech PM Andrej Babiš even suggested abandoning the European Green Deal (Euractiv 2020a). This highlights how cumulative crises particularly threaten the resolution of slower-moving, erosive ones, which risk being deprioritised when new shocks emerge.



This question of bandwidth is particularly relevant in a period of apparently perpetual crisis. The sense of permanent emergency has recently been labelled the ‘permacrisis’ in everyday discourse (Turnbull 2022), a concept that appears superficially similar to ‘polycrisis’. However, we suggest it should be kept analytically separate in that the critical conjuncture of a polycrisis retains an assumption that normal times and crisis times can be separated, whereas the concept of the ‘permacrisis’ collapses this distinction. The analytical challenge is then that a proliferation of crisis claims may indicate that ‘crisis’ has become the primary interpretive frame for any problem requiring some sort of intervention, and that the overuse of the label may in fact deaden the urgency that is characteristic of crisis politics.

The second mechanism is ambiguity, which is increased by the co-occurrence of multiple crises. Here the proximity in time of separate crises can make it difficult to disentangle their effects, increasing the space for crisis contestation. For example, because of its timing, Covid-19 initiated EU-UK policy competition over vaccine response times. The UK’s apparently rapid vaccination rollout was contrasted to the problems around the EU’s joint procurement and instrumentalised by Eurosceptic actors in the EU to demonstrate the advantages of the UK having gained back ‘control’. At the same time, the economic downturn in the wake of Covid-19 also contributed to concealing adverse economic effects of Brexit, which were already complex and difficult to define. For the EU, the effect was the reverse: struggling to handle Covid-19 it also needed to present a united front in the wake of Brexit, something that it had done arguably well during negotiations (Kyriazi et al. 2023).

A third potential linking mechanism is learning by elite actors, drawing inferences from experience with previous crises (Radaelli 2022). Learning can be potent, especially at the issue definition phase of a crisis (*Is this a crisis? A crisis of what?*), when, while it is recognised that radical and urgent responses may be needed, it is unclear what exact form these responses should take. In these contexts, policymakers may reflexively turn to the past in search of effective responses. Geddes (2021) shows through interview material how former crises are used as informational shortcuts to make sense of ongoing events: the response to the 2015–2016 refugee crisis fell back on a repertoire of migration governance that had developed in relation to previous instances of large-scale flows to the EU and that created ideational path dependencies, such as viewing migration predominantly as a security concern. But lessons can be learned across different crises in a way that past experiences lead to a rejection of old ideas and ways of doing things rather than their reproduction. An example would be the handling of the Euro crisis and the economic aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this case, the sovereign debt response in the form of the Next Generation EU was arguably a result of leaders learning from and therefore not repeating the destructive failures of the past (Ladi and Tsarouhas 2020). What lessons should be drawn from a crisis is not often a simple process of assimilating new information, and may itself be a subject of political contestation.

A final, related mechanism concerns policy legacies and feedback. How a previous crisis was resolved in a polity can influence responses to the next, and the nature of a crisis event might determine its legacies (Jones et al. 2016; 2021). Crises can also create narratives, such as portraying the EU as a ‘failing project’, that erode legitimacy and hinder future crisis resolution. Conversely, solutions from one crisis can be



repurposed for another. The rule of law conditionality attached to the Resilience and Recovery Fund, though not without issues, illustrates how the EU linked pandemic recovery funds to rule of law compliance (Fromont and van Waeyenberge 2021). At a more abstract level, crises may disrupt the system itself, revealing alternative futures through institutional rupture rather than learning.

Concluding remarks

In a context of proliferating scholarly research about crisis events and a cacophony of crisis claims in democratic polities, this article defends the value of the concept of crisis while advancing frameworks for rigorous single and multi-case crisis-centred analyses. Motivated and illustrated by a review of European studies, a field proliferating empirical work on crisis but evolving from an intellectual lineage which has left it largely untouched by constructivism, we have cautioned against the uncritical assertion of crisis events that can lead to ad hoc theorising in empirical analysis. Our argument is for more explicit, rigorous and theoretically-grounded definitions of crisis events that take seriously the constructedness, and contestedness, of crises. Far from being a debilitating theoretical dead-end, we have argued that such an approach can improve our empirical work, enabling clearer case selection, conceptual boundary-drawing, and comparative leverage for crisis research. To highlight this potential, we developed a phased framework centred on crisis construction through elite-actor contestation. This construction-contestation process is both constrained by but also feeds back into the material world of brute facts, via (non-)remediation and policy responses.

Establishing the parameters of this framework in theory, we sketched out its phases with reference to real, canonical events from Europe's post-2008 crisis era. This showed how a parsimonious set of questions can help break down and juxtapose canonical crisis events in European politics over the past decade. Yet, we also suggest that paying attention to contestation in crisis politics can aid the analysis of comparative, cumulative and variable features of crisis events (for example, their temporality and actor constellations), and need not be limited to treating each case as discrete. This allows for a deeper, more rigorous treatment of crisis politics than considering them static objects with stable material features that can be assumed to be manifestly threatening, urgent and uncertain.

While we offer a framework here, we do not claim to have resolved deep-seated, complex ontological debates about the respective weight of materiality and construction in crisis. Our primary audience is scholars working on empirical comparative crisis politics. We agree with their intuition that crisis generates a mode of *politics* that is distinctive and materially consequential. Since the assertion of crisis is both an analytical designation and a highly consequential political act, contests over crises matter wherever they occur. However, we do not claim to have incorporated all variables that might matter for crisis contestation. Readers may find the absence of detailed reflection on the role of the institutional context, policy heritage or public opinion glaring, but they are beyond our scope here. We welcome much-needed further research in these areas that challenges or refines the underlying theory and



conceptual building blocks of our own framework, while building on its premise of explicitly theorising and operationalising the role of contestation in crisis politics.

Word Count: 8,702 (including abstract, excluding references).

Acknowledgements The authors would like to thank Waltraud Schelkle, Maurizio Ferrera, Hanspeter Kriesi, Zbigniew Truchlewski and Arjen Boin for their helpful comments and encouragement.

Author contributions The three authors contributed equally to all sections of the manuscript.

Data availability No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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