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The Language of Crisis in the 'Virocene'

A Critical Corpus-informed Analysis of Covid-19 and Climate Change Discourse in the EU

Abstract

The article is part of an ongoing research project investigating the climate and health nexus in EU policy-making discourse and communication (Bevitori and Russo 2023). Combining the theoretical and methodological tools of critical discourse analysis and corpus linguistics (inter alia, Baker 2023; Baker and McEnery 2015; Mautner 2015), the research for this study extends its scope by focusing on a specialized corpus, purposefully compiled to represent EU public communication discourse in the pandemic era (2020-2022). It draws on recent work on the politics and management of the Covid-19 virus as the expression of a wider politics and discourse of crisis (Krzyżanowski et al. 2023; Wodak 2022; 2021; Lipscy 2020) to investigate legitimation and consensus-building strategies in the discursive construction of the Covid-19 and climate change crises.

Keywords: *Covid-19 crisis, climate change crisis, EU policy-making and communication discourse, framing, legitimation*

> *The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born;*
> *in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.*
>
> (Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*)

1. Introduction[1]

The link between health and climate change has received scarce attention in EU policy-making across the years (Bevitori and Russo 2023). Yet, the Covid-19 pandemic entailed a change in the evaluation of EU priorities and a great deal of reframing of the health and climate

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[1] Although this chapter is the product of continuous co-operative research and planning, Cinzia Bevitori is responsible for writing parts 3, 4 and 5, and Katherine E. Russo is responsible for parts 1, 2 and 6.

change nexus (Bondi, Cacchiani and Mazzi 2015; Fairclough 2003).[2] Indeed, according to a recent definition coined by Fernando, the Covid-19 pandemic inaugurated the 'Virocene,' a new planetary epoch which has laid bare the limits of humanity's power over nature, exposing the vulnerability of 'normal' ways of living and the existential and social costs of climate change (2020, 636). Recent studies have argued that the Covid-19 pandemic was first and foremost a political crisis which compelled leaders to make high-stakes decisions under conditions of threat, urgency, uncertainty, and time pressure (Rossa-Roccor, Giang and Kershaw 2021; Lipscy 2020; Hulme et al. 2020). The proposition is based on the definition of crisis as a situation that threatens significant harm to a country's population or basic values and requires immediate and unquestioned political measures—an interruption of the present and known political condition. Yet, according to some recent re-readings of Reinhart Koselleck's (2006) interpretation of crisis as a condition of late modernity (Krzyżanowski et al. 2023), the term crisis has recently changed its meaning and function very significantly: it no longer refers to a key moment of social and political transformation but to a pervasive and prolonged combination of simultaneous and overlapping crises whose consequences unfold in a pervasive and cumulative manner across a pass-future continuum. The latter amounts to a 'normalization' of crisis in specific domains (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017) and to a wider tentacular 'polycrisis' (Tooze 2022). Crises may therefore be defined as an imaginary form of reality that functions in several domains as "a discursive and narrative construct which legitimizes re-definitions of social reality" (Krzyżanowski et al. 2023, 423).

Following previous work on the connection between crisis discourse and frames (or *topoi*) as legitimation or rather "pre-legitimation strategies" (Krzyżanowski 2014), legitimation strategies of the recent Covid-19 pandemic crisis discourse have been widely investigated (Krzyżanowski et al. 2023; Wodak 2022; Dias and Deluchey 2020; Vieten 2020). Conversely, climate change crisis discourse has attracted limited attention even though its occurrence entails significant consequences in both discursive and argumentative terms. In the present study, we argue that the Covid-19 and climate change nexus was characterized by the widespread use of 'crises frames,' which resulted in several changes in EU climate change political communication, especially in regard to legitimation and consensus-building strategies. While numerous studies have focused on crisis frames and legitimation strategies in financial, pandemic and migration contexts, an in-depth investigation of climate change discourse during the pandemic has never been attempted. Hence, we believe that a corpus-based analysis of the

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[2] For an overview/discussion on recontextualization in the context of climate change, see Bevitori and Russo 2023.

linguistic, discursive and argumentative realizations of the pandemic and climate change crisis nexus may uncover new context-based 'crises frames' and shed new light on the social and rhetorical functions of crisis as a social and rhetorical construct (Krzyżanowski et al. 2023; Wodak 2022; 2021; Rossa-Roccor, Giang and Kershaw 2021; Lipscy 2020; Hulme et al. 2020; Entman 1993).

The analysis will investigate the discursive construction of the Covid-19 and climate change crises in EU political communication by combining the theoretical and methodological tools of critical discourse studies and corpus linguistics (Baker 2023 [2006]; Partington et al. 2013), starting from the following research questions:

> RQ1) How was the Covid-19 and climate change nexus represented in EU policy communication discourse?
>
> RQ2) What frames and discourses emerged in the legitimation of Climate Change policies?
>
> RQ3) What legitimation strategies were typically used in EU climate change policy communication strategies during the pandemic?

The article is organized as follows. In section 2, it will describe the context and background of the research study. It will then present the theoretical and methodological framework, as well as the composition of our specialized corpus, tools and procedure in sections 3 and 4. In section 5, it will discuss the results of the analysis with the aim of reaching a deeper understanding of Covid-19 and climate change crisis discourse. Conclusions will be provided in the last section.

2. Covid-19 and climate change crises in the EU context

Climate change-induced health crisis frames are not new in health science and policy discourse. Most notably, in 2017, the Lancet Commission on Health and Climate Change published *The Lancet Countdown Report* which framed climate change as both a public health threat and an opportunity: "anthropogenic climate change threatens to undermine the past 50 years of gains in public health […] a comprehensive response to climate change could be 'the greatest global health opportunity of the 21st century" (Watts et al. 2018, 591). Among implications for our well-being, livelihoods, and the structure of organized society, it listed the following direct and mediated effects of climate change on health:

> Its direct effects result from rising temperatures and changes in the frequency and strength of storms, floods, droughts, and heat waves—with physical and mental health consequences. The impacts of climate change will also be mediated through less direct pathways, including changes in crop yields, the burden and distribution of infectious disease, and climate-induced population displacement and violent conflict. (2018, 582)

Just a few years later, one of the listed effects, i.e. "the burden and distribution of infectious disease," came to the fore of global political decision-making as the Covid-19 pandemic rampaged across the world.

The correlation between health and climate change had similarly been drawn in EU policy-making discourse as early as 2009. The *European Climate Adaptation Strategy White Paper* (2009) pointed to it to promote adaptation as a management and prevention strategy together with surveillance and control activities, such as epidemiological surveillance, the control of communicable diseases and the effect of extreme events such as animal health-related diseases. It suggested measures to be taken by member states and the EU to prevent catastrophic future scenarios:

> The EU […] should explore ways of ensuring adequate surveillance and control of the impact of climate change on health, such as epidemiological surveillance, the control of communicable diseases and the effect of extreme events. […] The impact on animal health will need to be addressed […]. The Community Animal Health Strategy21 aims to prioritise disease control, improve data gathering and step up existing animal disease surveillance. It focuses on disease prevention such as bio-security rather than reactive measures and will consider how climate change affects the occurrence of diseases. (White Paper 2009)

A few years later, the *General Union Environment Action Programme to 2020* foregrounded environmental health as its third priority objective: "[t]o safeguard the Union's citizens from environment-related pressures and risks to health and well-being" (2014). However, it promoted environmental health as an important policy orientation encompassing 'well-being.' The nexus was, therefore, an attempt to frame 'environmental health' in a positive way, i.e. as a way of developing a connection with the environment, promoting physical and psychological well-being as part of an ethics of care whereby individuals are protected and at the same time feel a responsibility to care for, or protect, 'the environment' (Gray and Birrell 2015).

The term crisis appeared in EU discourse only twelve years after the aforementioned *European Climate Adaptation Strategy* (2009) and in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic. It tellingly occurred as part of the European Commission's attempt to engage the public in the ambitious and revolutionary goals of the *European Green Deal* (2019): the *European Climate Pact* (2020). The latter was defined "as a European Commission initiative to engage with different

stakeholders and civil society with the aim of committing them to climate action" and "a lively space to share information, debate and act on the climate crisis." Hence, it interestingly called the public to unite by participating in the construction of the 'crisis frame':

> The climate crisis is not a future problem—we, humans, have already changed the Earth's climate and degraded the majority of its ecosystems. […] For this, we have to speed up our efforts to repair the way we interact with nature, protect people's health and well-being from climate-related risks. (European Climate Pact 2020)

Subsequently, it appeared for the first time in the amended and final version of the *European Climate Adaptation Strategy* (2021). Its first appearance in a policy-document is therefore related to the context of financial insurance measures:

> The climate protection gap is the share of non-insured economic losses caused by climate-related disasters. […] Using insurance as a risk-transfer mechanism to absorb financial losses related to climate risks can be a first step from crisis reaction towards risk management and anticipation. (European Climate Adaptation Strategy 2021)

While it demonstrates its highly limited use in EU policy discourse, its occurrence may be regarded as an important shift since climate change had never been framed as a crisis in EU policy-making discourse and political communication (Bevitori and Russo 2023). Moreover, its appearance in the final version of the *European Climate Adaptation Strategy* demonstrates how the process of deliberation and decision-making in situations characterized by uncertainty, risk, and persistent disagreements is primarily rooted in the socially constructed interpretation of meaning in context (Fairclough and Fairclough 2012, 17).

The process of making decisions concerning uncertain and future risks based on the recontextualization of scientific insights is an integral aspect of deliberation and policy-making. However, since it is rooted in discourse, it does not merely react to external and tangible threats but, rather, it plays a role in defining them as risks, problems, or crises. All deliberations and decision-making occur within a social context and are influenced by the way different frames are emphasized or downplayed while considering the same components: options, outcomes, and uncertainties (Russo 2018).

Discussions in the realm of politics, deliberative actions, and political communication are subject to the framing and limitations imposed by context-specific values, norms, and conventions associated with in-groups and out-groups. These conventions serve as the foundation for political genres, which can be described as patterns of communication that are standardized and foreseeable, resulting from the demands of ever-changing socio-cultural

circumstances (Cap and Okulska 2013, 2). Most importantly, policy-making genres are interconnected with political communication genres like speeches, press releases, press statements, and conferences. The latter genres support the institutional and organizational structure of the EU Commission by conveying and legitimizing its continually evolving objectives and values. As a matter of fact, EU political communication discourse produced during the years 2020-2022 has been the space of a political rearticulation of ideas about climate change and as such, it may be regarded as a socio-political site of struggle over meanings, which take years to be approved. By adapting and encompassing opposing ideas in order to construct shared meanings about common problems, it paves the way for their use in policy-making (Fairclough and Fairclough 2012; Laclau and Mouffe 2001). In the present study, we will therefore focus on political communication genres bearing in mind that the framing of the climate change and pandemic nexus as crisis was affected by generic and contextual factors (Bacchi 2016), but also by their role in the legitimation of policy-making decisions and management (Wodak 2022; Van Leeuwen 2008; 2007; 1996; Van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999).

3. Theoretical and methodological frameworks

In this study, we adopt a mixed methods approach by drawing upon theories and methodologies of corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis (e.g., Baker 2023, Baker and McEnery 2015, Mautner 2015), combining the quantitative analysis with two major interpretative tools to guide our understanding of the pandemic and climate change crises in this institutional domain. These are: framing theory (e.g., Lakoff 2010; Entman 1993; Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Goffman 1974), and legitimation theory (Wodak 2022; Van Leeuwen 2008; 2007; 1996; Van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999) and are briefly outlined in the following sub-sections.

3.1 Framing analysis

Frames are complex interpretative tools, representing "socially shared fragments of world knowledge" (Wodak 2021, 335), and having major implications for political communication. The notion of framing lies in the field of sociology. In Goffman's seminal work (1974), frames are defined as "schemata of interpretation" enabling individuals to "locate, perceive, identify, and label" (1974, 21) views of the world, while according to Gamson and Modigliani they are a "central organizing idea for making sense of relevant events" (Gamson and Modigliani 1989, 3). According to Entman (1993), framing can be best defined as a "process" that has the capacity to shape people's interpretation of events, by defining a problem, its causes, and consequences, in the attempt to propose a solution. More importantly, framing entails "*selection* and *salience*"

(Entman 1993, 52, emphasis in the original), i.e. it implies: "select[ing] aspects of a perceived reality […] mak[ing] them more salient in a communicating text" (1993, 52). This is particularly relevant to this study: the presence (or absence) of specific 'keywords' may be revealing of dominant/marginal discourse(s).[3] Moving from the assumption that how environmental issues are framed does "matter" (Lakoff 2010), the identification of frames and the values activated through them is of utmost importance. As will be explained in more detail in Section 4, framing will be operationalized through different methodological tools and techniques provided by a corpus-assisted approach. The procedure allows us not only to detect keywords based on the degree of their statistical salience in the corpus but also, and perhaps more importantly, to empirically trace associations of patterns and meaning.

3.2 Legitimation strategies

Legitimation is a powerful discursive and argumentative tool playing a pivotal role in the present study. It broadly refers to the process through which speakers justify a behaviour to gain support and approval. Legitimation of political discourse has been researched and discussed by many scholars from a critical discourse perspective (e.g., Reyes 2011; Cap 2008; Chilton 2004; Martín Rojo and van Dijk 1997; van Leeuwen 1996; van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999). In the present article, we build on van Leeuwen's (1998) and van Leeuwen and Wodak's model (1999), and more recent work on legitimation and crisis (Krzyżanowski et al. 2023; Wodak 2022) to investigate the ideological import of 'crisis frames' and correlated legitimation strategies in this specific domain of analysis.

According to van Leeuwen (2008, 105), the legitimation of social practices answers the 'unspoken' questions "Why should we do this?" or "Why should we do this in this way." It thus subsumes an ability to explain, justify, or legitimize a course of action according to specific interests, norms, and principles. This is not dissimilar to what, in Habermasian terms, is defined as public reason-giving (Habermas 1993). Similarly, according to Reyes (2011) the process of legitimation happens through argumentation; i.e., speakers form arguments that

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[3] It should be noted that the notion of 'salience' as the "quality of being noticeable, prominent, or important" is used in different disciplinary contexts with slight differences in meaning. In the context of political science, 'salience' in framing is related to what is emphasized and/or stands out as significant on an issue, which, in turn, is more likely to influence political decisions, and government policies in democratic systems (e.g., Soroka and Wlezien 2010). On the other hand, statistical 'salience,' or the use of statistical methods to identify and prioritize linguistic features or patterns that stand out as significant within a corpus of language data is more commonly applied in corpus-based and/or assisted studies of discourse (see Brezina 2018; Baker and McEnery 2015; McEnery, Xiao, and Tono 2006).

explain their actions, opinions, or ideas to achieve the goal of receiving their interlocutor's acceptance and support. Yet, as argued elsewhere, legitimation strategies also function rhetorically to align different addressees with that vision (Bevitori and Russo 2003, 337). In this light, events in the public sphere are thematized and/or framed and given meaning with the aim to not only legitimize action but also to prevent unwanted responses and propose a way forward.

In this study, we consider a set of four macro-functional categories proposed by van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999) to address legitimation in discourse. These are: *authorization, rationalization*, *moral evaluation*, and *mythopoesis. Authorization* concerns legitimation by reference to the personal authority, and/or expertise of social actors, and/or by reference to laws and traditions; *rationalization* is legitimation based on utilitarian goals, means and outcomes; *moral evaluation* involves legitimating strategies grounded in moral values, such as religion, human rights, justice, etc.; *mythopoesis* concerns narratives sanctioning the behaviour of a subject or cautioning against negative outcomes deriving from illegitimate actions.

These categories, which can be traced in stretches of text of varying lengths, tend to be frequently interwoven and are rarely used discreetly. Thus, a synergic combination of methodological top-down and bottom-up approaches, involving both quantitative and qualitative dimensions of analysis, informs our investigation with the aim to detect and identify linguistic and discursive resources through which EU leaders tend to justify/legitimize the course of action.

4. Corpus, methods and procedure

To carry out the analysis, a specialized corpus was built and compiled by gathering texts from the EU Press Corner database of the EU Commission.[4] The freely available archive provides an advanced search tool that allows one to filter texts by policy areas, date, and text type. First, a double cross-search method was adopted in order to retrieve all texts dealing with both Covid-19 and climate change within selected policy areas and across three distinct genres; i.e. press releases, speeches, and statements, in the time frame between January 2020 and October 2022.[5] A manual cross-checking process was then performed with the aim of eliminating all duplicates. The purpose-built, specialized corpus includes 71 texts amounting to 99,166 tokens. Table 1

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[4] https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/home/en. Last visited 30/08/2023.
[5] The criteria for building the corpus are consistent with those used in previous research; see Bevitori and Russo 2023.

provides the breakdown per number of tokens, their respective proportions expressed in percentage, and the number of texts in each subcorpus.

Subcorpus	Tokens	%	Texts
Speeches	50,481	50.906	28
Press Releases	41,486	41.835	37
Statements	7,199	7.26	6
Overall	**99,166**	**100**	**71**

Tab 1: EU Climate&Covid-19 (2020-2022) corpus

As an initial step into our dataset, the analysis of keywords was used as a heuristic tool providing empirical indicators which measure the statistical salience of words (and multiword) in a given corpus in comparison to a reference corpus "of some suitable kind" (Scott and Tribble 2006, 73). The retrieval of keywords reflects the 'aboutness' of the text and provides a statistical method to determine which frames tend to dominate within each text in the corpus. While a number of corpus-based studies in a wide range of contexts have largely made use of keywords as points of entry into discourse (e.g., *inter alia* Bondi and Scott 2010; Baker 2004), scant attention has been given to its use in detecting frames (but see Touri and Koteyko 2015; Koteyko et al. 2008).

As a second step, concordance lines of selected lexical items were extracted and their collocational behaviour was examined. As in much corpus-assisted work, this procedure implies a constant back and forth movement, or 'shunting' (Halliday 2002, 45) between concordance lines, texts, and context. While the collocation analysis provides empirical evidence for lexical and phrasal patterns of co-occurrence/co-selection deserving attention, for closer qualitative analysis of legitimation devices, the traditional 80 characters window needed to be considerably expanded. Automated analysis was then abandoned and carried out manually. This clearly posed some caveats as manual coding of extended concordance lines is not only very labour-intensive but it also unavoidably involves some degree of arbitrariness. However, in an attempt to overcome that potential hurdle, we developed rigorous shared coding practices to ensure the consistency of our classification as a measure of inter-reliability.[6] We thus down-sampled the dataset to reduce it to a size more manageable for the in-depth qualitative analysis by focusing

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[6] Inter-rater reliability, or agreement refers to the degree of consistency between two (or more) analysts in their categorization and/or evaluation of the same coding practices (Brezina 2018, 87).

on the co-deployment of legitimation strategies and (macro)framing in the Speeches sub-corpus. This choice is partly motivated by the fact that speech communication is instrumental in delivering institutional communication, thus enhancing engagement with a wider audience. According to Wodak and Weiss (2004, 235-42), institutional speeches are, in fact, 'visionary or speculative' sub-genres of consensus-oriented political communication. Indeed, as Figure 1 illustrates, a cursory look at the quantitative distribution of the lemma CRISIS across text types, shows that its frequency is higher in the Speeches sub-corpus: 96 occurrences, corresponding to a normalized frequency of 1.901 per thousand words, compared to 1.494 in the Press Briefings, and 0.972 in the Statements.
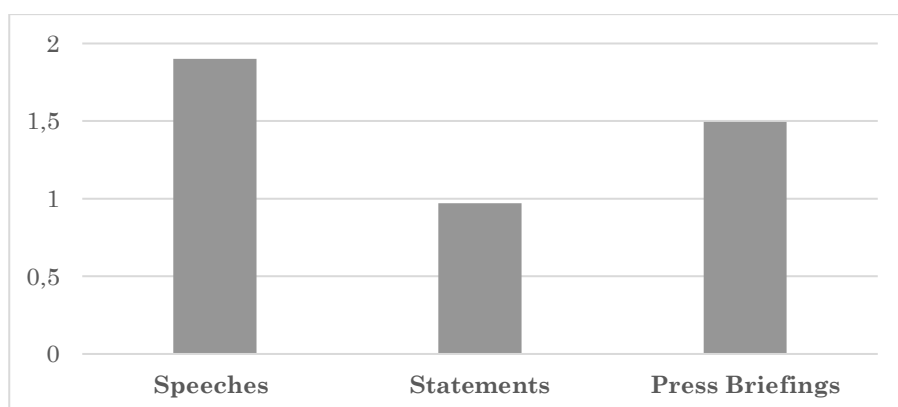
Fig. 1: Breakdown of *crisis* across sub-types

The main findings are reported and discussed in the following section.

5. Analysis and discussion

5.1 Identifying 'frames': keywords as a first step

For the purpose of the study, we first generated a list of keywords using a specialized diachronic corpus of EU policy documents and communication as a reference corpus (Bevitori and Russo 2023). The corpus covers the span of time between 2010 and 2019 and amounts to over 105,000 running words. The keywords list returned 50 keywords by combining statistical significance, dispersion, and effect size. Table 2 shows the 15 top keywords ordered by keyness (simple-math-log-L).

As Table 2 shows, the word *crisis* emerges as the top 3rd ranking word with a keyness of 192.11. Other words in the list relate mostly to the semantic domain of Covid-19 include: *virus, pandemic, coronavirus, vaccines,* (alongside other terms such as *dose, wave*—further down the list) as well as to policy areas of recovery interventions. For example, the terms *recovery* and

resilience refer to the *Recovery and Resilience Facility*—the flagship of the newborn provisional economic tool through which the EU addressed the socio-political bearing of the crisis, such as *NextGenerationEU*.[7] All of them relate to the response designed to mitigate the economic and social impact of the crisis. Although at first sight these findings may not appear particularly surprising due to the timeframe considered, it is indeed worth noting that items related to the semantic domain of 'climate' (or, more broadly the 'environment') are almost completely absent.[8] The 4th ranking term *green*, in fact, refers exclusively to the *Green Deal*. This seems to suggest that climate and/or environmental issues are sidelined from the European policy-making communication process.

Rank	Keyword	Log_L	Freq (target)%
1	RECOVERY	251.80	0.19
2	PANDEMIC	220.59	0.16
3	CRISIS	192.11	0.17
4	GREEN	155.37	0.36
5	COVID	150.19	0.11
6	NEXTGENERATIONEU	118.90	0.09
7	HYDROGEN	111.10	0.13
8	DIGITAL	109.20	0.10
9	JUST	99.35	0.20
10	CORONAVIRUS	90.74	0.07
11	SOUTH	89.64	0.08
12	VACCINES	71.97	0.05
13	DEAL	71.05	0.18
14	STOCKS	64.14	0.05
15	BECAUSE	63.53	0.12

Tab. 2: Top 15 Keywords in the EU_CLI-COV-19 (2020-2022) compared with EU Env&Health 2010-2019

Other key items pointing to features of discourse are instead indicative of the distinctive ways through which courses of action are legitimized in this domain of analysis; for instance, the

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[7] *NextGenerationEu* was set up in 2020 as a provisional instrument to address the socio-economic impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic; see https://next-generation-eu.europa.eu/index_en. Last visited 30/08/2023.

[8] For an investigation into the critical role of absence from different theoretical and methodological perspectives, see Bevitori and Johnson 2024, Schröter and Taylor 2018, Partington 2014.

connector *because*, ranking 15th, is one of the ways to express logical reason, or a cause of an event/action, pointing to possible avenues worth exploring further. Although the analysis of keywords is interesting in itself, it just provides a first, albeit useful, starting point. Therefore, we now move on to further investigation by using different tools of analysis.

5.2 Framing and legitimizing the crisis

The analysis of the word *crisis* provided our initial entry point into dominant frames and legitimation strategies in our specialized corpus. The Wordsketch function on Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff et al. 2004) yielding statistically significant collocates of the search term was first used. While a simple list of collocates provides a useful analytical method that can reveal information about the meanings of the lexical item by "the company it keeps" (Firth 1957, 11), the Wordsketch visualization offers a detailed and, indeed, a wider spectrum of its grammatical relations hinting at different potential framings.

The investigation of the modifiers of the term *crisis* revealed that, perhaps unsurprisingly, terms such as Covid-19, and other related terms (*Corona, Coronavirus, virus, pandemic*) constitute the largest semantic set with 68% of occurrences, while climate (change) and related words appear as modifiers of *crisis* in less than 20% of all instances. This finding is particularly striking due to the focus and relevance of our specialized corpus. Moreover, adjectives such as *economic* and *financial* (7%) emerge as frequent collocates, alongside *security*, exclusively referring to *food* (i.e. food security crisis) occurring in 3% of all instances. On the other hand, the most frequent patterns modified by the word *crisis*, mostly relate to the notion of 'preparedness.' This refers to the development and/or consolidation of forms of knowledge and practices from different areas, including crisis management, capability, capacity building, and resilience, i.e., as the capacity to bounce back in face of adversity.

This preliminary empirical exploration suggests that in the time period under investigation, the dominant frames through which the crisis was construed by the European Commission fell into two major interrelated semantic sets: 1) Crisis as a 'response,' and 2) Crisis as a 'transformative agent.' This is very much in line with more classical interpretations of crisis: on the one hand, the crisis represents an exceptional event of grand proportions, interrupting the present and requiring assertive, unquestioned, and swift political measures to safeguard the future. On the other hand, it is also an opportunity—a moment of renewal for the European Union which, according to some scholars in the field, has been increasingly perceived as a fragmented political actor in the global arena (for a recent discussion of the different positions, see Jones, Kelemen and Meunier 2021).

Table 3 summarizes the dominant frames emerging from our corpus in each semantic domain.

Macro-framing	Dominant frames (*topoi*)
Crisis as 'response'	preparedness/recovery/(resilience) acting assertively urgency exceptionality *Europe's leadership*
Crisis as 'transformative agent'	Lesson opportunity rebirth/renewal togetherness/solidarity unifying agent *Europe's leadership*

Tab 3: Semantic domains and dominant frames

While preparedness/recovery and resilience, are the dominant frames in 'crisis as a response,' involving the topoi of urgency, exceptionality, and acting with assertiveness, in 'crisis as transformative agent,' topoi of rebirth, togetherness, and solidarity seem to prevail. In both, however, the leadership of the EU is emphasized, intersecting at multiple levels, as will be explained later. To probe whether and how frames tend to be more typically associated with legitimation strategies in this specialized domain of analysis, we took a step further by manually coding the dataset according to van Leeuwen and Wodak's (1999) categories of legitimation.

Figure 2 shows the relative percentages and compares proportions of each of the main four categories appearing in the two macro-framings identified above. Moreover, since some degree of 'permeability' between categories was frequently the case, hybrid instances were also coded/classified as such in order to account for their inherent fuzziness and, therefore, complexity.

Our analysis reveals that while the 'crisis as response' macro-frame tends to be characterized by strategies of rationalization and moralization, authorization is more frequent in comparison to the transformative frame. Mythopoesis and moralization tend instead to prevail in the 'crisis as a transformative agent' macro-frame. This is also evident when looking at proportions in some of the hybrid categories: although the intertwined categories of mythopoesis and moralization play a substantial role in the 'transformative' macro-framing, they are completely absent in the 'response' one.
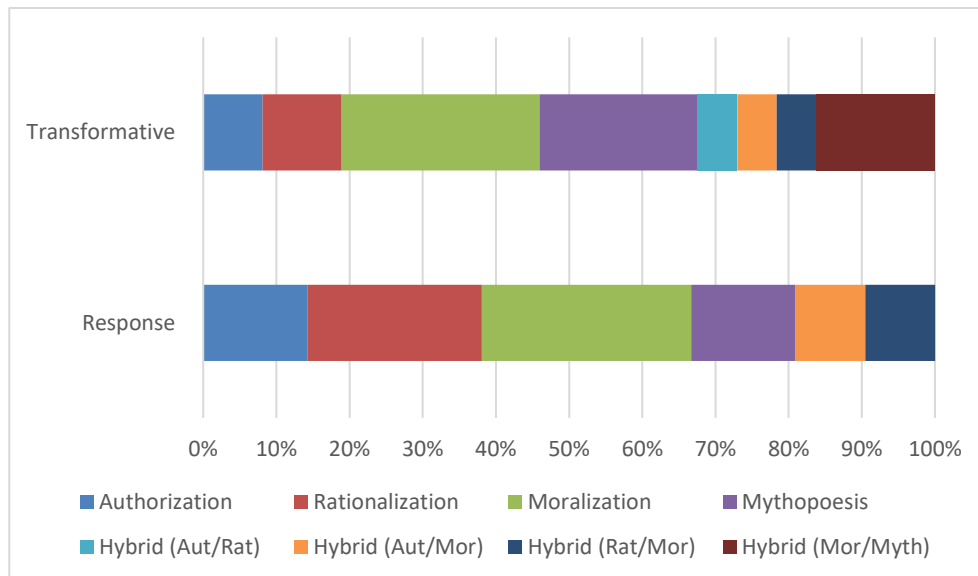
Fig. 2 Legitimation strategies across macro-framings

In the 'crisis as response' frame, not only strategies of rationalization are frequent, but they are frequently associated with evaluative resources, which play a key role in the framing processes. The *crisis* is in fact typically construed through language resources expressing negative evaluation (*deep, bad, horrible, looming*), resources pointing to exceptionalism, unpredictability, and proportions (*extraordinary, exceptional, scale*) as well as urgency and time (*current, past, previous future*). Example 1 provides an illustration:

(1)   Together **we must** lay the foundations for **our future**. And **we must** make sure that **our response** lives up to this *clearly defined, accidental and truly extraordinary* **crisis.** […] **This is** an *urgent and exceptiona*l **necessity** for an *urgent and exceptional* crisis. **This is why** Next Generation EU **will:** Invest in repairing our social fabric, Protect our Single Market. Help rebalance balance sheets across Europe. And while we are doing this, we need to press fast-forward towards a **green, digital and resilient future**. (SP 27/05/2020)

The analysis uncovers attitudinal resources foregrounding modal meanings of necessity (e.g., the repetition of the verbal phrase 'we must,' the modal noun 'necessity,' as well as the three-word cluster 'we need to'), are typically co-selected with the language resources described above, all functioning rhetorically to justify and legitimize the course of action and, at the same time, to foster the EU's ambition towards a green future.

Other discursive features are also revealing of the ways in which frames and legitimation strategies are co-deployed. For example, the grammatical phrase [*This / That*] *is why* in Example

1 above acts to naturalize action through strategies of rationalization. Interestingly, at closer inspection, the phrase is very frequent in the corpus and can thus be regarded as a key rhetorical device. It occurs 54 times in the Speeches subcorpus, making it the first most frequent three-word gram, excluding content n-grams, e.g., *European Green Deal*. Looking at the concordance lines (Figure 3) we can observe that the phrase is frequently co-selected with the first person plural pronoun 'we,' which functions as an exclusive we (i.e., the EU Commission), followed by the auxiliary 'will' and by material processes such as *mobilize, prioritize, propose, strengthen.*

Fig. 3: Random Sample Concordance of *This is why* in the corpus

As a strategy of rational justification, the phrase is also often instrumental in promoting the dialectical relationship between the past, the present, and the projected hypothetical future. Interestingly, this is where the two macro-framings seem to converge as may be observed in example 2:

(2)   Climate research has made the **grim—yes, grim**—reality clear: <u>Time is running out</u>. **This is why we have set** our sights high, even more so since the Coronavirus **crisis**. The **crisis** has *unfortunately* meant that today we are unable to meet in person, *but* it has of course also given us the **opportunity** to **rethink the old**, and come up with **new ways forward**. (SP 01/12/2020)

If on the one hand, the crisis is seen as a response in which time summons (e.g. 'Time is running out') are frequent and may be interpreted as an obligation legitimized through personal authority (van Leeuwen 2008, 106), on the other, it becomes a 'transformative agent'—an

opportunity for change through which the negatively appraised present (e.g. *grim, grim* reality) is contrasted by a projected positive future (*new ways forward*).

As has been mentioned, strategies of mythopoesis play a quite prominent role in the 'crisis as transformative agent' macro-framing. The use of storytelling for the past is typically used "to legitimate social practices and restore the legitimate order" (van Leeuwen 2008, 118). For example, in the following extract (3), the "Renaissance," commonly known as the era of transition between the Middle Ages and Modernity, stands out as a metaphor evoking an idea of rebirth through historical lineage, which functions rhetorically as a discursive mechanism appealing to European common values and, ultimately, a common identity:

(3)   […] from Florence, the spirit of the Renaissance spread to the rest of Europe, too. La storia d'Europa è una **storia di Rinascimenti**. Europe is a **story of new beginnings**. After every **crisis** came a **European Renaissance**. And this is what Europe needs in our day and age. This is our responsibility: to **end the pandemic** and to **shape a new beginning** for Europe. Europe is able to overcome **crises** and to deliver for the **future of** its citizens. And this is what I would like to talk about today on the basis of two exemplary topics. The **pandemic and climate change**. (SP 06/05/2021)

The use of metaphors is indeed quite frequent in the 'crisis as transformation' macro-framing. As examples 4 and 5 illustrate, the metaphorical expressions of *re-opening doors* and *healing wounds* provide a bridge between the past and the present, fostering a renewed sense of responsibility and burden-sharing between member states in the complex process of reunification. Hence, within the macro-framing of transformation, the role of the crisis as a unifying agent, whereby a lost sense of community may be restored, Europe is also metaphorically construed as a victim—a sick, wounded, and fragmented body, in need of a cure:

(4)   We now have **the opportunity** to **achieve something historic for Europe together**. The pressure of the **crisis** has **opened doors** that for a very long time **were locked shut**. As sad as the occasion may be, it is also a **new opportunity for Europe**, for **our community**. (SP 23/07/2020)

(5)   We must boldly use this opportunity to build a modern, clean and healthy economy, which secures the livelihoods of the next generation. The European Union alone **cannot heal all the wounds left by the crisis**. But we will **shoulder our share** of the **responsibility,** by **evenly distributing the burden between Member States** right now—whilst ensuring that younger generations also reap the rewards of incredible effort. This task now lies before us, and I am convinced that a **united Europe** can rise to it. **Long live Europe!** (SP 13/05/2020)

While references to burden-sharing, common responsibility, and 'solidarity' between the Member States as set out by the Lisbon Treaty (Art. 3)[9] are at the heart of EU policy-making, part of the rhetorical thrust of the 'crisis as a transformative agent' lies in the lesson-learning frame. In fact, the crisis is frequently represented as a lesson to be learned; a lesson of resilience as example 6 illustrates; i.e. an attempt to bounce back in face of adversity where taking action is typically construed through language resources expressing intensification: *decisively,* but also *ambitiously* and *boldly*:

(6)   Today's **crisis is a lesson** of resilience to us all: when facing challenges, we need to be prepared, to **get ahead** of issues, and to ***act decisively*** to ensure that we protect our citizens and our economy. (SP 29/06/2020)

Framing the crisis as a lesson is certainly not new in this domain of investigation (see, for example Radaelli 2022; Matthijs 2020). Yet, our analysis suggests that in the EU policy communication, this is strictly intertwined with the power structure and ideology of the EU, which functions not only as a powerful rhetorical tool of consensus-building and legitimization strategy of moralization but is also instrumental to the self-promotion and ambition of the EU in taking the lead in the global arena:

(7)   […] there is a long tradition of the world working together. *But* a new impetus is needed and **Europe** is ready **to lead** the way. Next year I will co-host a global health summit at G20 level, with Prime Minister Conte of Italy, to draw the **lessons from the crisis**. Europe is also ready **to lead** efforts to reform and strengthen the WHO. (SP 19/10/2020)

As noted earlier, and consistent with previous research (Bevitori and Russo 2023, 338; Krzyżanowski 2015), our findings suggest that the crisis functions as a key rhetorical construct in the self-promoting agenda of the EU as a global leader, intersecting framings and legitimation strategies at multiple levels. Yet, in spite of the fact that Covid-19 crisis, and the unprecedented recovery plan could be seen as a "potential critical juncture in EU climate policy" (Dupont et al. 2020), the climate crisis was a mere backdrop to the more urgent Covid-19 crisis.

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[9] See Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union, Official Journal of the European Communities, C326/5, 26/10/2012 at https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140 bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0023.02/DOC_1&format=PDF. Last visited 15/09/2023.

6. Conclusions

The basic premise of the present study is that policy discourse may be regarded as a space for "discursive struggle" (Fischer and Forester 1993, 1-2): a record of the antagonism between discourses that often compete and seek to legitimize and/ or delegitimize each other (Fairclough and Fairclough 2012). Discursive struggle lies at the basis of the EU's plural, intergovernmental and inter-institutional debate on climate change as a consequence of the multilateral participation of all representatives in policymaking and it may take years to reach a final agreement on policy documents. Crises also lead to "framing contests" in which rival political actors compete to interpret the crises in ways that suit their preferred policy agenda (Jones et al. 2021), but the decision-making process is accelerated due to the 'urgent' and 'exceptional' nature of crises. On the other side, political communication about crises offers an opportunity to engage the public and discursively legitimize the sociopolitical issues that are at stake in policymaking. Political communication genres such as speeches, press releases, press statements and conferences support EU policy-making by sharing its continuously evolving identity, goals and values.

The present study found that during the years 2020-2022, wording the 'crisis' was prominent in EU political communication genres, while being nearly absent in EU climate policy-discourse. This may be regarded as a proof of its use as a rhetorical construct in light of a discrepancy "between discursive construction and prescription of action (within policy discourse)" and "interpretations of its importance and social, political and economic salience of those actions (within policy-communication discourse)" (Krzyżanowski 2013, 101-102).

While 'crisis' has become a pervasive rhetorical device in recent political communication discourse (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017), the present study has argued that in-depth corpus-based investigations may uncover its material existence and embodiment. Hence, we proceeded through a corpus-based analysis of the linguistic, discursive and argumentative realizations of the pandemic and climate change crisis nexus in order to shed some light on the targets of intervention and how priorities were set in the EU political agenda (Krzyżanowski et al. 2023; Wodak 2022; 2021; Rossa-Roccor, Giang and Kershaw 2021; Hulme et al. 2020; Lipscy 2020; Entman 1993).

By way of conclusion, *crisis* was notably the third-ranking keyword in our corpus with a keyness of 192.11. Moreover, most of the keywords were related to the semantic domain of Covid-19, such as *virus*, *pandemic*, *coronavirus*, *vaccines,* and *dose*. Therefore, the absence of keywords related to climate or environmental issues is noteworthy. The term *green* is ranked fourth but it exclusively referred to the Green Deal. This suggests that climate and environmental concerns

were marginalized in European political communication. The investigation of modifiers of *crisis* also showed that terms related to Covid-19 constituted the largest semantic set, while climate-related terms were much less common.

Other noteworthy keywords indicate how actions were legitimized in this domain of analysis. For example, the conjunction *because* is the 15th-ranked term and is used to express logical reasons or causes for events/actions, indicating potential areas for further exploration. Another correlated feature is the lexical phrase *this is why*, which frequently occurs in the corpus. As the analysis demonstrated, this phrase was used as a key rhetorical device to naturalize actions through strategies of legitimization. It was often paired with the first-person plural pronoun *we,* implying the EU Commission, followed by verbs such as *mobilize, prioritize,* and *strengthen.* This phrase was also seen to play a role in connecting the past, the present, and the projected future, contributing to a dialectical relationship between these timeframes. Interestingly, it is where frames identified in the corpus converged. For example, it was used to emphasize the urgency of taking action through time summons due to the running out of time, and it also portrayed the crisis as an opportunity for change and renewal.

Two overarching semantic sets for framing the crisis were identified and further investigated: 'Crisis as a response' and 'Crisis as a transformative agent.' The former emphasized preparedness, recovery, urgency, exceptionality, and the assertive action required, while the latter involved opportunity, rebirth, togetherness, and solidarity. The analysis also revealed that the 'Crisis as response' frame tended to be associated with strategies of rationalization and authorization. Rationalization strategies were often coupled with evaluative resources expressing exceptionalism and urgency. For instance, phrases like "urgent and exceptional necessity for an urgent and exceptional crisis" were used to justify and legitimize the course of action. Attitudinal resources were also identified, mostly highlighting the modal meanings of necessity, which were co-selected with the aforementioned language resources.

The 'Crisis as transformative agent' frame tended to involve mythopoesis and moralization. It was employed for storytelling about the past to legitimize social practices and restore a legitimate order. Metaphorical expressions, such as 're-opening door' and 'healing wounds,' served to bridge past and present, emphasizing a renewed sense of responsibility and burden-sharing among member states in the process of reunification. The EU was also metaphorically depicted as a victim—a sick, wounded, and fragmented body in need of a cure. Within this macro-framing of transformation, the role of crisis is emphasized as a unifying agent, where a sense of community can be restored. Remarkably, the crisis-as-lesson frame was intertwined with the power structure and ideology of the EU. It served as a rhetorical tool for consensus-

building and moralization, as well as self-promotion and ambition for the EU to take a leading role in the global arena. The analysis made it evident that strategic linguistic and discursive devices typically endorsed the traditional agenda supporting the EU as the leading institution, self-acclaiming its institutional progress.

Political communication about the pandemic and climate change was characterized by a diverse use of crisis frames as a tool of intense discursive construction aimed at consensus-building and legitimizing policy-making decisions and measures. Overall, the use of crisis frames was connected to the exploitation and inducement of a sense of urgency and exceptionality serving the core purpose of simplifying the political space and requiring bold action. It rested on the strategic role of crisis frames to justify and legitimate policy measures. While the climate crisis remained in the background of EU political communication, the pandemic may nevertheless be regarded as a critical juncture in EU climate policy. For instance, on the occasion of the Munich Security Conference, the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen gave a speech calling for a US-EU alliance based on what she defined as the climate change crisis 'looming behind' Covid-19:

> Let me give you two examples for what could be driving our new global agenda. The first example is climate change. Climate change is the looming crisis behind Covid-19. And the loss of biodiversity is a main driver of today's and potentially future pandemics. (SP 19/02/2021)

If crisis may be regarded as a rhetorical construct which exists in discourse as public reason-giving (Habermas 1993), it may be argued that it was employed to justify policy measures about Covid-19 on the basis of the EU's mission for a green future. Hence, while immediate intervention and measures were asked for the Covid-19 crisis, climate change also started to be framed according to epistemic modality features, lexical sets and metaphors related to crisis.

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