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Europe's fast- and slow-burning crises

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ABSTRACT


The European Union has been confronted with crises across a range of policy areas. Crises have typically been viewed as providing impetus for further integration but are now straining the European project. This research agenda piece proposes a framework to understand crises and distinguish how they are comprehended as 'fast-burning' and 'slow-burning' phenomena. Those who view crises as fast-burning typically rally material and ideational resources to address issues with high political intensity. When a crisis is perceived as slow-burning, the key concern is with how the issue is framed and how social expectations are changing. Thinking of fast- and slow-burning crises permits analytical distinctions in how authorities and social actors view crises and how they consider actual conditions and future narratives. The framework assists in specifying how authorities and expert and civil society groups develop policy programmes and frames, as well as changes to European societies' experiences and expectations.

KEYWORDS Crisis; temporality; frames; policy programs; social expectations; expertise

Introduction

The people of Europe are facing problems that differ in intensity and tempo. A crisis differs for those experiencing it, ranging from deflated expectations of prosperity to panics over who is fit to lead. A decade since the onset of the global financial crisis, and several years since the European sovereign debt crisis began, crisis talk is part of everyday life. Jean-Claude Juncker recently described Europe's current financial, economic, social, and security crises as a 'polycrisis'.¹ Europe is awash with crisis.

For many Europeans and supporters of the European project, this is not particularly new. Crises have been positive stress tests for the European Union (EU), with its institutions pushing further integration as a solution (Ioannou *et al.* 2015; Jones *et al.* 2016). Such actions relied on a 'permissive consensus' towards European integration that has declined (Bickerton *et al.* 2015;

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Simpson and Loveless 2017). While the European Commission’s role in regional economic governance has been strengthened through the crisis (Bauer and Becker 2014), the days in which the EU’s collective issues could be effectively talked out by technocratic elites through the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) or the Community Method appear long gone or at least dormant (de la Porte and Pochet 2012). Progressive forms of deliberative and consensus-based expert discussions have sustained (Puetter 2016) or emerged (Zeitlin and Vanhercke 2017), but are also overshadowed by new non-democratic and contractual forms of European governance (Matthijs 2017).

In some policy areas, EU institutions have responded to the sovereign debt crisis with what has been called ‘executive supranationalism’ (Coman 2014; Trondal 2010). The amassing of European executive powers with support from the national executives of powerful members has led to crisis management via ‘contractualisation’ on economic management and restructuring. While this dynamic has long been in play, the intensity of the contradictions and conflicts it generates is increasing (Börzel and Schimmelfennig 2017; Laffan 2014).

Figure 1 provides a quick summary of current trends in the EU and how they are perceived by political elites and mass publics. The rise of the political right has been backed by fears that being European entails reducing welfare standards and losing tax monies to support distant or unworthy others. In the rich north-west and the restless east, political elites foresee a Europe that is divided into economic unions or national protectorates (Matthijs and McNamara 2015). In the fragile south, there are also calls for European solidarity and grassroots attempts at social inclusion.

These trends spell trouble for Europe and follow concerns about the EU’s unravelling. These include crisis-driven confusion over who belongs to the European project, as well as concerns that European solidarity has been

	<i>Elites</i>	<i>Masses</i>
<i>North-west</i>	‘Two-track’	Right populism
	Bi-partisan	Welfare chauvinism
<i>South</i>	‘Solidarity’	Left populism
	Partisan	Social citizenship
<i>Eastern</i>	‘Europe of Nations’	Right populism
	Mixed	Identity chauvinism

Figure 1. Europe’s political and regional trends.

stretched to its limit (McNamara 2015). Many commentators point to the euro as entrapped in a technocratic-democratic dilemma (Offe 2014): the reforms needed to save the monetary union project cannot gain popular approval, while the burden of European austerity policies falls disproportionately not only Europe's south but also on states to the east (Ban 2016). For some, the rise of supranational technocracy in Europe has de-democratised Europe's form of capitalism (Streeck 2014). The European Central Bank (ECB) is often targeted for criticism (Schmidt 2016; Woodruff 2016), as is the forward march of the European Semester for including not only economic management but also social policies (Maricut and Puetter 2018).

Vivien Schmidt (2014) has suggested that we focus on how European institutions should have more legitimate 'throughput' processes so that the public can see how governance works. Civil society actors are actively reporting on how European institutions lack transparency and accountability, with the hope of reigniting political interest in the European project. In general, the glimmers of hope fall onto brave politicians to provide new frames for the European project, as they have done in the past (Parsons 2003). Providing clear frames to address Europe's crisis has been difficult to coordinate and articulate, leading to contests over the appropriate course of action (Boin *et al.* 2009).

The common critique is that there is a legitimacy gap between Brussels-focused policy discussions and everyday socio-economic conditions in Europe. As such European policy elites are no longer self-legitimising rule-bearers, and the legitimacy gap has provided political space to right-wing anti-EU parties (Hooghe and Marks 2017). The danger is an unravelling of social and economic policies that have been supported by the European project. To make sense of the impasse, we need some tools to break down types of crisis dynamics.

Fast- and slow-burning crises

Thinking in terms of fast- and slow-burning crises was first introduced by 't Hart and Boin (2001) to typify events for crisis management (also Boin *et al.* 2005). From this perspective, fast-burning crises are instant and abrupt shocks, such as plane hijacks or 'run of the mill' natural disasters communities can cope with (Boin *et al.* 2005: 93–4; 't Hart and Boin 2001: 32). Slow-burning crises are gradual and creeping, such as protracted guerrilla warfare or environmental crises, where there is political and scientific uncertainty about how to resolve the issue (Nohrstedt 2008; 't Hart and Boin 2001: 33–4). The extensive crisis management literature has concentrated on leaders' decision-making strategies when dealing with different crises, including blame games, agenda setting, and policy learning (Birkland 1997; Boin *et al.* 2005), as well as institutional and cultural challenges ('t Hart 2013).

On Europe, recent scholarship on crisis leadership has stressed the micro-foundations of crisis decision-making. Kamkhaji and Radaelli (2017) contend that epistemic communities and EU decision-makers did not provide coherent responses to the surprises of 2009 and that cognitive limitations led to contingency responses rather than more reflective approaches to crisis. More generally, Widmaier (2016) shows how leaders address crises through ‘fast-thinking’ strong emotional reactions to events, as well as ‘slow-thinking’ policy settlements where rationality prevails but ethical concerns can be repressed).

Our thinking on crises is that we need to distinguish not only how leaders respond, but also perceptions from a range of authorities (official and expert) and social actors. While most scholarship on crises is concerned with how leaders control the objects of governance in periods of stress, our interest is in attaining subject positions on how crisis issues will evolve. Our understanding of fast- and slow-burning crises emerged from comparing the treatment of expert knowledge in the areas of post-crisis financial regulation (Seabrooke and Tsingou 2014) and fertility and demographic change (Seabrooke and Tsingou 2016). These cases alerted us to how different actors and audiences perceive and make sense of crises; that crises can be differentiated by their perceived intensity and tempo. Intensity is a combination of the political salience and emotional valence that an issue has for both authorities and social actors (Cox and Béland 2012; Béland and Cox 2016). Tempo is the speed at which policy failures are transmitted between authorities and social actors. The concept of fast-burning and slow-burning crises assists us in thinking through not only the pace of change but also how extreme the perceived and actual effects are for those concerned (see an application in Carstensen and Schmidt 2017). Figure 2 provides examples of issues that can be distinguished by intensity and tempo.

		<i>Tempo</i>	
		<i>Fast</i>	<i>Slow</i>
<i>Intensity</i>	<i>High</i>	Bank bailouts	Health services
	<i>Low</i>	Youth unemployment	Low birth rates

Figure 2. Crisis burning rates.

Fast-burning crises are moments and ongoing events characterised by alarm and a demand for political action. They are the crises that are most obvious to us, such as bank bailouts or the asylum seeker informal migration crisis. Those acting on fast-burning crises view the time they have to act as 'quick-quick' (Pierson 2004). Fast-burning crises can also generate less political action even when the social effects are severe. Developing a coordinated European response to youth unemployment is an example. It attracts attention and the effects are immediate but the policy response brings into relief political tensions identified in Figure 1 (see also Bengtsson *et al.* 2017).

Slow-burning crises extend beyond normal political and business cycles. These crises are more 'everyday' in how they are considered by the public: no immediate action is needed but expectations about how to live may change. They include politically intense issues such as public services provision (Crespy 2016) and declining health access due to imposed or self-imposed austerity measures (Kentikelenis 2015). In slow-burning crises, politicians are less vocal in raising alarm and wish to avoid being responsible for the cost of funding solutions that might take several electoral cycles to be fruitful. On issues that are less politically visible the key point of contestation is what constitutes good science in addressing the issue at hand. Low-birth rates in Europe provide an example. For some experts, demographic pressures are so severe that without raising taxes to provide institutional support for youth employment and productivity, further welfare state decline, and loss of support for European institutions, is inevitable (Demeny 2016). But there is no coordinated European policy response to this issue, with experts debating the merits of market-led vs. interventionist solutions.

The notion of fast- and slow-burning crises also includes a feedback element. If authorities are limited in the amount of attention they can pay to particular issues, this leads to policy 'fire-fighting' on what is considered to be the most pressing issue of the time (see Coman 2018a). Crises not being dealt with can smoulder and re-enter as political problems. Such behaviour is to be expected in Europe given that there are limits to member states' willingness to fund European institutions to solve common problems, as well as different preferences on what problems matter more (Moschella 2017).

A crisis diagnosis kit

Our heuristic tool of fast- and slow-burning seeks to understand change from the perspective of the subjects involved, helping us to zoom in on political and social tensions. These tensions exist between and within authorities (European institutions, political leaders, experts) and social actors (citizens, civil society groups), and follow what is happening at the time (actualities), as well as being informed by established narratives on how crisis issues will be treated. Following this logic, we end up with the matrix in Figure 3.

	<i>Actualities</i>	<i>Narratives</i>
<i>Authorities</i>	Programmes	Frames
<i>Society</i>	Experience	Expectations

Figure 3. Crisis diagnosis tools.

Programmes

In the first cell, the *authorities/actualities* combination can be understood as articulations of existing policy programmes. Following Campbell's work (2004: 98), such *Programmes* contain theories and concepts that are cognitively embedded in the minds of policymakers and facilitate decision-making. The articulated content of concepts and theories in programmes is important because when the policy fire-fighting begins political leaders wish to signal to society what is being done about the problem at hand. When politicians and policymakers perceive an issue as *fast-burning*, they are impelled to engage in sense-making and provide a solution that integrates European authorities and member states, depending on how intense and politically salient it is. For example, we know that the rise of executive supranationalism in European governance occurred at the same time as an economic consensus around the need to use austerity policies to reform countries into sound economic management (Blyth 2013). The role of the Eurogroup acting as an informal body overseeing programme conditionalities in European sovereign debt crisis states provides a stark example. In general, these policies were strongly informed by ordoliberal ideas that determined how to deal with errant economic behaviour during an economic shock (Ryner 2015). Such programmes are also politically salient given concerns over German reluctance to support more federalist 'bail out' solutions (Matthijs 2016) and its perception of 'negative interdependence' in Europe (Schimmelfennig 2015).

When authorities perceive an issue to be a *slow-burning* crisis, they have fewer incentives to articulate a clear line on how the issue should be resolved through a *Programme*. An example can be seen in delays in implementing a common European Deposit Insurance Scheme, despite the availability of expert and technical knowledge. The obvious concern for politicians has been fiscal support for potential banking union problems (Gros and

Schoenmaker 2014). In response, the European Fiscal Board has been established to provide analysis of Europe's fiscal situation that can then develop *Frames* with a potential to inform *Programmes*. *Programmes* also have implications for *Experience* and *Expectations*, especially if authorities ignore issues perceived as in crisis by social actors. As the distance between *Programmes* from European institutions and *Expectations* from the European public widens, we can expect greater input, throughput, and output legitimacy problems (Schmidt 2016).

Frames

In the second cell, we locate *Frames* as a combination of *authorities/narratives*. *Programmes* and *Frames* are connected by 'framing contests' that mediate current political circumstances and imagined policy directions (Boin *et al.* 2009). The content of *Programmes* is strongly informed by narratives available in *Frames*. *Frames* are established over a long period of time and are articulations of what policies to aim for based on good science and best practice. While we know that expert consensus does not necessarily change the minds of those in power, *Frames* are important for those seeking to legitimate their choices. Politicians, policymakers, and civil society actors can assert power through ideas that are the content of *Frames* and use them to communicate to the public and coordinate with other policy elites (see also Carstensen and Schmidt 2016; Seabrooke and Wigan 2016).

For what are perceived as *fast-burning* crises, *Frames* can offer new ideas and evidence for policy change, or affirm the content of *Programmes* as appropriate, with professional and policy networks legitimating current policy actions with scientific theories and academic credibility (Helgadóttir 2016). Experts can locate themselves in these networks to occupy the discussion space to advocate or block change in accordance with political motivations and their own professional interests (Coman 2018b; Seabrooke and Tsingou 2014). The ECB's justifications for the development of Outright Monetary Transactions, quantitative easing, and 'forward guidance' monetary policy intentions are examples. Here, economic ideas were transformed, with haste, by technocrats into informal programmes despite ongoing concerns about the ECB's accountability and legitimacy (Braun 2015; Scicluna 2017).

For what are understood as *slow-burning* crises, *Frames* are particularly important, given that no action will be taken unless there is a significant body of knowledge to support a change in *Programmes*. In some cases, this knowledge develops in response to changes from the population. Health issues provide a good example, such as the EU's dithering on whether it should treat electronic cigarettes as medically beneficially or harmful (Hasselbalch 2016). Debates on the adequacy of elderly care provision provide another example (Cangiano 2014), an issue that is directly informed – and

financed and staffed – by the tensions identified in [Figure 1](#). *Frames* should correspond to concerns in *Experience* and *Expectations* if they are to provide a basis for the legitimization of *Programmes*.

Experience

The third cell is *Experience*, which combines *society/actualities* and involves what the public perceive as politically salient, and what can act as rallying points for civil society to actively campaign to change *Programmes* and *Frames*. The concern here is identifying what is happening on the ground in European society, including experiences of crisis in everyday life. ‘Ordinary’ people facing poverty and relying on charity has ushered in forms of political, social, and economic reliance and resilience. This is particularly acute in situations considered by those involved as a *fast-burning* crisis. Kentikelenis’ (2017) study of survival strategies in a working-class community in Athens experiencing social and economic collapse provides an excellent example of how crisis sense-making leads to immediate action.

The experience of *slow-burning* crises is also important to account for. The legitimacy, value, and integrity of the European project are linked to everyday stresses on a range of issues, including austerity-linked cuts to public services, barriers to labour mobility (Galgóczi and Leschke 2015), and increased financial stress. At a basic level, those who perceive that the EU cannot provide for them during crises become more interested in their national identities and are more likely to reject the EU (Polyakova and Fligstein 2016). Such rejections are particularly prominent among lower income groups, who increasingly see European institutions as wasteful, inefficient, and representing elites (Dotti Sani and Magistro 2016). Tracing such attitudes and perceptions allows us to also connect how changes in *Experience* are feeding *Expectations* about who is to blame and why right-wing anti-EU parties are credible alternatives.

Expectations

Our final cell is occupied by *Expectations* where *society/narratives* intersect. What the European public expect to happen has important ramifications for *Frames* and *Programmes* from European authorities and ultimately changes *Experience*. Expectations of *fast-burning* change include further waves of informal migratory flows (Börzel and Risse 2018), financial crashes, housing price hikes or collapses (Bohle 2018), and immediate political threats to the EU from national policy backsliding (Schlipphak and Treib 2017). *Programmes* from European authorities address these issues poorly, and there is little confidence that *Frames* are being developed to tackle these problems in accordance with national democratic ideals (Matthijs 2017).

European citizens' perception of *slow-burning* crises includes expectations about what kind of jobs they will have and the adequacy of pensions, how many children they can house and afford (Flynn 2017), and expected trade-offs between austerity and social investment in areas like education (Busemeyer and Garritzmman 2017). Such sense-making includes judgements on whether or not they can rely on the welfare state and on European institutions. Concerns about growing income inequality and diminishing intergenerational equity in Europe have been described as creating 'scarring effects' among the young as their expected income and lifestyle fails to meet the standards of their parents' generation, leading to changed political attitudes (for a French example, see Chauvel 2010).

Policymakers could address public perception of longer-term slow-burning issues by encouraging different actors to provide alternative *Frames*; that is challenging when there is political resistance to treat these issues as European concerns. Without *Frames* it is difficult to legitimate – or even cognitively prioritise – *Programmes* to face them. And without doing that, the concern is that neglecting these issues will change *Experience* so much that *Expectations* about who can solve these issues will empower right-wing anti-EU parties. We have already seen housing issues become suddenly politically salient in Hungary and the United Kingdom, mixed with politically hot issues such as asylum seeker informal migration flows. Right-wing parties have campaigned that they can address issues with high public valence but low political salience for the European project. And where the Left is active in informing the public that they should organise to pragmatically disrupt a neoliberal capitalist Europe, the role of EU institutions as a mechanism for doing so is unclear, or often unwanted (Bailey *et al.* 2017).

Conclusion

The purpose of this research agenda piece is to think through a framework to assist us in understanding Europe's 'polycrisis'. While it has been argued in the past that crises are normally good for the European project, the depth and number of crises in recent times has led to a hardened Europe rather than an emboldened one. To understand what is happening, and the best avenues for action, it is important to distinguish the elements of crisis and analytically separate them by actors and types.

We suggest that crises can be understood by their tempo and their intensity. Crises can be perceived as fast-burning and slow-burning by authorities and social actors. Those who perceive crises as fast-burning often seek to handle them by mobilising political, ideational, and material resources to address the issue or at least keep it at bay. For those who make sense of crises as slow-burning, the issue for authorities is to develop narratives and frames via expert consensus, while social actors will change their expectations

of what authorities and institutions can provide for them. Both fast- and slow-burning crises have important implications for the legitimacy and sustainability of the European project. We provide an analytical framework based on *Programmes*, *Frames*, *Experience*, and *Expectations* to analyse how European authorities' and social actors' perceptions of crises can help us identify policy issues and current and future political and social tensions. Our aim is to provide tools to help us make connections on what needs to be addressed by policymakers, experts, activists, and the public to support progressive social and economic policies.

Note

1. Speech by President Jean-Claude Juncker at the Annual General Meeting of the Hellenic Federation of Enterprises, Athens, 21 June 2016, available at http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-16-2293_en.htm.

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