

PERCEPTIONS OF EU AND MEMBER STATE LEGITIMACY IN TIMES OF CRISIS

A CITIZENS' PERSPECTIVE

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Culminating more than a decade of crisis in Europe, the Covid-19 pandemic has opened an important window of opportunity for institutional and policy change, not only at the “reactive” level of emergency responses, but also to tackle more broadly the many socio-political challenges caused or exacerbated by Covid-19. Building on this premise, the Horizon Europe project REGROUP (*Rebuilding governance and resilience out of the pandemic*) aims to: 1) provide the European Union with a body of actionable advice on how to rebuild post-pandemic governance and public policies in an effective and democratic way; anchored to 2) a map of the socio-political dynamics and consequences of Covid-19; and 3) an empirically-informed normative evaluation of the pandemic.



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Abstract

This study investigates citizens' perceptions of the European Union's (EU's) and member states' legitimacy in two major crises over the last 15 years: the eurozone and debt crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. By collecting and analysing letters to the editor from the German daily newspaper Sueddeutsche Zeitung (SZ) in the period 2010 to 2021, we examine responsibility attribution to political actors, the overall tone of the letters and whether these letters are focused on the polity or the policy dimension. The results of our study show how these perceptions of legitimacy of the EU and national executives that are expressed in the letters to the editor were debated differently in the two crises studied. Additionally, we find that there was a clear focus on the national executive during the pandemic. Furthermore, the crises provide a public opportunity to criticise how the political system works, thus contesting the legitimacy of EU or national polity extending beyond concrete policy measures.

Keywords: EU legitimacy; citizens' perception; euro and debt crisis; COVID-19 pandemic.

Introduction¹

The European Union (EU) faced a number of economic, political and, in the broadest sense, social crises in recent years. Even if the roots of these diverse crises, or what some call a ‘polycrisis’ (Zeitlin, Nicoli, & Laffan 2019), often do not lie in the policies of the EU (e.g. for the case of the coronavirus pandemic or the global financial and economic crisis), the political institutions of the EU were confronted in all these crisis situations with the expectation of providing effective and problem-adequate solutions within the framework of their standing procedures and policy instruments. This expectation of the EU’s ability to act and to enhance its policies by ‘policy learning’ (Ladi and Tsarouhas 2020) has always been linked to questions of legitimacy insofar as the ability or inability of an EU institution to solve the problems that arise in crises always presupposes special requirements in terms of civic approval and trust in EU policy (Nußbaum 2019; Persson, Parker, & Widmalm 2017; Roth 2009). This is because crisis policy is usually characterized by short-term but, simultaneously, far-reaching action by a political administration. Consequently, trust in and legitimacy of political procedures must exist, more than ever, in advance (Kotzur 2024).

There is a research gap in this context in two respects: *On one hand*, the legitimacy of political measures, or lack thereof, is often investigated based on surveys (Hobolt 2014, Stoeckel et al. 2024), which generally leave out the reasons and arguments of citizens for or against certain measures. How and on what basis citizens support or reject the actions of policy-makers in times of crisis, however, has scarcely been investigated to date (for an exception, see Hurrelmann et al. 2015). *On the other hand*, many studies focus on citizens’ perceptions of specific crises, such as migration, the eurozone crisis or the COVID-19 crisis. However, comparative analyses are also needed to examine the changes in the perception of the legitimacy of the (more or less responsive) national and EU executives over time and in different crises (Egner et al. 2024).

Against this background, this study addresses the following research question: How do citizens perceive the legitimacy of national executives and EU institutions’ actions in times of crisis and how far do legitimacy perspectives differ in ordinary times and times of crises? We assume that crises offer a relevant and condensed testing ground here insofar as crises and crisis reactions are always a litmus test of citizens’ trust (Streuber 2024) in political institutions and attributed responsibility in solving the crisis. Especially in times when effective and often rapid and efficient political responses are required

1. We would like to thank Jannis Beckermann for his great dedication and support in coding the data analysed in this study. Moreover, we would like to thank Piero Tortola and John Erik Fossum for their many helpful comments and remarks on an earlier version of this paper.

Please note that the data from 2010 to 2019 from *Sueddeutsche Zeitung (SZ)* was collected in the collaboration cluster SOLDISK at the University of Hildesheim and made available for this research study. SOLDISK was funded by the state of Lower Saxony from 2019 to 2022. The other data was collected separately.

to meet the acute challenges of a crisis (understood here as an escalation of a problem situation in time), citizens must have a leap of faith toward political authority to the extent that the time for deliberative processes is normally much more limited than it is during non-crisis periods. In short, during crises, politics is legitimized through output rather than input.

In this study, we empirically investigate citizens' perceptions reflected in letters to the editor during two major EU crises over the last 15 years: (1.) the eurozone crisis and (2.) the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, we collect and examine letters to the editor of a major German daily centre-left newspaper - *Sueddeutsche Zeitung (SZ)* - in the period between 2010 and 2021. From a deliberative perspective, this kind of citizen participation in the public is a special but crucial source of legitimacy because, most often, this input legitimacy is only mitigated through collective and institutionalised actors (Habermas 2022).

Although selecting only one newspaper is a clear data limitation, we follow previous studies which have also collected letters to the editor from only one daily newspaper (Kinloch 2003, Hayek et al. 2020). The first reason for this approach is that we are not interested in the news coverage of the newspaper per se but only in the letters written by the citizens which might be less biased than actual newspaper coverage. Another reason is that other daily quality newspapers in Germany, such as *Die Welt* or *taz*, publish way fewer letters in their print version than does *SZ*. This unbalanced data corpus would consequently make a comparative analysis rather problematic (see the Appendix for data on other German daily newspapers).

Our text analysis relies on previous studies of responsibility attribution in media articles that investigate who is made responsible for crisis solutions, how crisis measures are perceived by citizens, and whether this perception is related to policy or polity outcomes (Roose et al. 2020, Gerhards et al. 2007, Nienstedt et al. 2015). Based on the established codebook, two trained coders manually annotate letters concerning the two crises. In total, we annotate 793 letters (380 on the pandemic and 413 on the eurozone crisis).

Two concepts of legitimacy provide the basis for this study: bottom-up legitimacy and output legitimacy.² Bottom-up legitimacy is understood here generally as the possibil-

2. The term 'bottom-up legitimacy' is preferred here to the closely related term 'input legitimacy' because the former emphasizes the active role of citizens in the political process and in the process of monitoring political measures, especially in times of crisis. This aspect is central to our study, which aims to investigate the active perception of legitimacy on the part of citizens in letters to the editor. Notwithstanding wider definitions of 'input,' we assume that the views expressed in the letters we examine in our study do not represent an institutional form of participation (such as elections) but a spontaneous and ad-hoc evaluation of political measures by citizens in the public discourse. The distinction between 'bottom-up' and 'output' legitimacy is thus particularly relevant concerning the data analysed here as these letters are more or less spontaneous feedback from citizens and not a direct contribution to the overall policymaking process.

ities of civic participation in and approval of political decision-making processes and as an expression of the ‘principle of popular sovereignty, and its assumption that the only valid source of political authority lies with the people’ (Beetham and Lord 2013, p. 6). In contrast, the concept of output legitimacy focuses on the possibilities of legitimization through effective and problem-appropriate political solutions by decisions of politically legitimized actors aiming at ‘effectively promot(ing) the common welfare of the constituency in question’ (Scharpf 2002, p. 6; Strebel 2019, p. 489; Schmidt 2020). It is assumed here that both legitimacy mechanisms are capable of creating trust because political actors empowered by the people through their participative input will become particularly credible if they are aware of and respond to the people’s ideas, needs, concerns, anxieties, expectations, hopes and fears. Rousseau’s concept of popular sovereignty and the promise of democracy of deliberative responsiveness (Landwehr and Schäfer 2023; cf. Disch 2011) are rather complementary than exclusive modes of legitimation. Simultaneously, bottom-up and output legitimization must always be two sides of the same democratic coin in which participation and governance (or governing capacity) go hand in hand and are mutually dependent.

Based on this assumption and to this end, this study will proceed as follows: in the *first step*, a theoretical framework will be outlined by discussing both the concept of legitimacy (bottom-up legitimacy and output legitimacy) and its relationship to democracy in the EU. In the *second step*, the significance of the EU’s ‘decade of crises’ is outlined and the selected two crises examined here are described. This is followed in the *third step* by a presentation of the study’s conception and an explication of the methodological approach. Finally, in the *fourth step*, the empirical results are presented, discussed and summarised.

Legitimization of Policy Measures in Times of Crisis

When thinking about the legitimacy of political action in modern democracies, this usually involves different theoretical approaches that focus on different types of legitimizations (e.g. see Mahlmann 2021, pp. 82). Thus, emphasis is placed, for instance, on societal procedures (Luhmann 1978); input, output and throughput (Schmidt and Wood 2019); institutional architecture and interplay (Moravcsik 2002), the relationship between representation and participation (Deligiaouri and Suiter 2023), different uses of the concept of legitimacy in practice (Mulligan 2006) or the connections that the concept of legitimacy has to other central concepts (Kratochwil 2006).

Thus, the question of what legitimacy is and how it arises is not only answered in highly diverse ways across political science, sociology, law and philosophy, but also within the social science discourse itself. Even if these different focal points suggest the co-existence of rather different understandings of legitimacy, there is a consensus that the concept of legitimacy can be seen as a cornerstone of both constitutionalism and democracy - no matter how it is defined. As a specific form of government, (constitutional) democracy is therefore dependent on the continuous recognition and perception of governmental politics as being legitimate. Tautologically speaking, democracy legitimizes itself through the notion of legitimacy. An essential element of democracy, however, is legitimization through the attribution of legitimacy to governing institutions (the *pouvoir constitué*) by those who are affected by the governing institutions, namely, the citizens (the *pouvoir constituant*). The fundamental importance of this connection between civic society and democratic governance has been discussed by social science theorists specifically concerning the concept of 'constituent power' and its ability to shape and legitimize post-national order (Krisch 2016; Niesen 2023) in general and EU democracy in particular (Patberg 2017). This attribution of legitimacy creates, firstly, a bottom-up connection to those institutions acting politically on behalf of the common good. At the same time, and regardless of the central importance of bottom-up legitimization processes, democratic political institutions and their decision-makers also have to meet the expectations placed on them by citizens, for example, by providing appropriate policy programs, *viz.*, by generating certain outputs. Furthermore, as Vivian Schmidt points out, the 'communicative discourse' between political actors and the population, which is largely conducted via the media (and increasingly through social media too), is of the utmost importance for democratic legitimacy in the public sphere (Schmidt 2024, p. 9-10). The media, therefore, plays a key role in allowing for bottom-up legitimization via citizens' perception and (dis)approval of political measures, that is, political output.

In the EU, the two elements of legitimacy, namely, the possibility of civic participation in transparent political processes and the provision of effective political decisions, are of particular significance. On one hand, the EU has been criticized since its foundation for suffering from a 'democratic deficit' (e.g. see Follesdal and Hix 2006), that is, not allowing for sufficient participation, being excessively functionalist in its nature, overly influenced by either national executives or transnational elites or simply not sparking citizens' interest in its political programmes and the political decisions it takes. On the other hand, the EU has had to legitimize itself for many years - in the absence of a 'classic' democratic constitution and the European people as constituents - primarily through what it was capable of achieving and not so much through the legitimacy it was granted through a civic-based 'constituent power'. Particularly on the part of the EU member states, but also in European integration theory, the EU is often regarded as

nothing more than a delegation or ‘pooling’ of national preferences (Moravcsik 1995, p. 612; Moravcsik 2018, pp. 1654-1656) and a cooperation project that legitimizes itself primarily through the economic successes of the internal market and other benefits of delegation of power by the member states. In short, bottom-up legitimacy *and* output legitimacy have played and continue to play decisive roles in the EU (see also Schmidt 2024; Strebel et al. 2019; Nettesheim 2005, p. 176).

Consequently, it could be concluded that bottom-up legitimacy and output legitimacy are mutually exclusive, that is, they are distinct modes of legitimization. However, this view would fall short, especially since political outputs are also essentially subject to processes of democratic observation by citizens via the public sphere (again, see Nettesheim 2005). After all, the success or failure of a policy program is not only measured by whether there are political or economic benefits but also, crucially, by whether these benefits are perceived as such on the part of the public and communicated as such as public opinion (Gerhards 1998). In other words, output legitimization ultimately takes place in the mirror of civic perception and is, therefore, from the outset, always a bottom-up process in which it is reflected on whether a certain political decision or a new policy program meets the expectations in the political system (e.g. in terms of effectiveness, efficiency and transparency) on the part of citizens. This interconnection - respectively reciprocal interplay - of these two legitimacy aspects becomes particularly important in times of crisis, especially since it is in these situations that executive measures usually get into the spotlight, while they are simultaneously closely followed by the civic public. For example, the lockdown measures during the coronavirus pandemic were not inherently legitimizing policy outputs (cf. Schmidt 2022) although some observers have come to rather positive conclusions concerning the speedy decision-making within the framework of EU policy instruments (Ondarza 2023). Rather, these measures were received very differently in various parts of the public - ranging from complete approval to complete rejection. The same applies, for example, to the financial rescue packages and protection mechanisms implemented by the EU during the eurozone crisis.

Crises are interesting as a test case for empirical studies in the social sciences insofar as they are generally times when an existing or emerging problem situation escalates, with the result that a rapid response is required and widely demanded by the public (Svenbro and Wester 2023; Christensen and Lægreid 2020; Fossum and Lord 2023). During the coronavirus pandemic in particular, but also in many other crises, it was often stated that ‘crises are the hour of the executive’ (e.g. Merkel 2022; see also Kneuer and Wallaschek 2023). In the context of what has just been said, this statement is not to be contested, but it must not be overlooked that crises are also the time for special monitoring of the executive response. So even if political decision-makers are expected

to act swiftly, their action is monitored and evaluated with particular scrutiny.

Because crises cause a predominance of executive action, against the background of what has just been described, citizens are expected to take a leap of faith, which thus becomes a prerequisite for crisis policy. For if rapid action and immediate answers are required, so that the normal deliberative democratic procedures (see also Fishkin 1991) cannot be applied in the usual way, (responsive) political institutions must be able to rely on a buffer of trust and confidence regarding the continued legitimacy of their actions even after the crisis has abated and the crisis measures have ended to ensure that - notwithstanding the unavoidable disappointments - their legitimacy continues to exist and democracy is safeguarded.

In summary, the possibility of democratic legitimacy of executive crisis measures presupposes the long-term trust of citizens within the framework of bottom-up monitoring processes - which also entails surviving potential short-term disappointments. This mutual conditionality of legitimacy (bottom-up and output) via citizens' perception of policy measures, on the one hand, and trust, or rather the advance of trust, on the other, can be seen in all the crises of recent years which have confronted both the EU and its member states.

The 'Decade of Crises' in the EU

It is debatable whether the period of the eurozone crisis was the first time the EU entered a period of sustained crises, heralding something similar to a 'decade of EU crises' (Lausberg et al. 2024), or whether the EU has experienced (major and minor) crises from the very beginning. At its core, Jean Monnet summed up a functionalist assumption through the much-quoted phrase: 'Europe will be forged in crises and will be the sum of the solutions adopted for these crises'. This idea of a potential 'productive crisis' (Kaelble 2013) has met with general agreement (Jones et al. 2016) and opposition (Parsons and Matthijs 2015; Schelkle 2017) in academic debate and can be summarized through the following formula: the EU has been incomplete from the beginning and will always remain so (i.e. 'integration as an enduring process' with an open finality), which not only implies a certain tendency towards crises, but also a constant need for political solutions when problems arise. Even if these political solutions remain incomplete, they always form the condensation point for new crises and further EU decisions (Wallaschek and Eigmüller 2020).

Irrespective of the question of whether there is a dialectical automatism (see also Corbey 1995) of crisis, crisis reaction and integration, or rather a ‘reflective chance’ to think about different trajectories of integration (Grimmel 2018), it is essential to consider the historical context in which this assumption was made by Monnet. The early forerunners of the EU - the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), European Economic Community (EEC) and European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM) - to which Monnet referred, were characterized above all by the fact that they largely neglected the European citizen, or at least did not regard the citizen as the primary addressee of political decisions. The early crises of integration were thus essentially intergovernmental. The crises of the 2010s differ from this early situation at least to the extent that with the growing influence of the EU on the lives of its citizens, not only has increasing politicization been experienced (Hooghe and Marks 2009, Hutter et al. 2016), but the legitimacy of EU crisis policies has also increasingly depended on the expectations, consent and trust of EU citizens. This situation is also evident in the two major crises of the 2010s: the eurozone and debt crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, examined in detail below.

The Eurozone and debt crisis

The eurozone and debt crisis that unfolded in December 2009 is a prime example of the previously diagnosed mutual conditionality of bottom-up and output legitimacy. On the one hand, it quickly became clear that the EU (and especially the eurozone members) had to work towards a prompt and common solution as the financial and economic crisis and the accompanying austerity measures led to a drastic and far-reaching loss of public support for the EU (Teney 2016). However, fiscal and monetary policy remains one of the most complex policy areas in the EU. Therefore, it has been difficult to communicate the crisis measures (such as the ‘European Stability Mechanism’, the ‘Six-Pack’ and the ‘Two-Pack’) to the general public. However, the use of the euro as a common currency was a core project of the 1980s and 1990s and is aimed at bringing the EU closer to its citizens by enabling direct exchange via a common currency (McNamara 2017). In this respect, the euro was a highly politicized policy area. Moreover, the crisis discourse was highly controversial insofar as it called into question the validity of the EU’s common citizen-based values, especially solidarity (see Grimmel 2021; also, Giang and Grimmel 2017, Wallaschek 2020) as a result of the crisis measures. Expectations of EU institutions, but also individual member states, were correspondingly high in terms of their willingness to find an appropriate solution to the crisis and thus legitimize themselves through concrete political output.

The COVID-19 Crisis

In the case of the Corona crisis, expectations of a joint European solution to the crisis were initially much less pronounced than they were during the eurozone and debt crisis. This changed, however, especially later in the course of the coronavirus pandemic and as the economic impact of the crisis became increasingly clear (Ferrera et al. 2021). With the so-called Recovery Fund, the EU was able to present a significant political-economic output that countered a largely disorganized acute crisis policy (especially concerning the closure of some borders in the Schengen area and the procurement of vaccines and other health goods) (Smeets and Beach 2023). Consequently, the EU, in contrast to national governments, was hardly perceived as a decisive actor during the main phase of the crisis (Verbalyte and Eigmüller 2022). Against this backdrop, the EU had to legitimize itself from a much lower level than it had to in other crises simply because of the lack of political decisions (Council of Europe 2020b). Unlike the situation during the eurozone crisis, the EU and its institutions had a significant coordinating role during the COVID-19 crisis, with coercive measures being implemented by the member states (Lord, Fossum and Väisänen 2023).

Data and Methods

This study examines the perception of legitimacy under different crisis measures through an analysis of letters to the editor published in the quality, centre-left newspaper *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ). The SZ is one of the leading newspapers in Germany, with one of the largest readerships among daily newspapers (IVW 2021). Letters to the editor are a unique data source for studying the beliefs, motifs and perceptions of citizens (Cavangh and Steel 2019). While these letters are usually pre-selected and, if deemed necessary, shortened by the newspaper (Wahl-Jorgensen 2002), they are a well-established public forum for citizens to comment and react to day-to-day politics, culture or economic affairs in most newspapers and magazines in Europe and North America (Wahl-Jorgensen 2001). Although previous studies have analysed these letters to examine the stance on immigration in Nordic countries (Hovden and Mjelde 2022) or the framing of Brexit in British newspapers (Blanco and Bennett 2022), to the best of our knowledge, this data has not been used to investigate the perceptions of legitimacy in different crises.

We collected letters to the editor from the database Factiva, covering the period between 2010 and 2021, using the query string 'rst=sddz and ns=NLET'. This collection yielded a total of 14,304 texts. Subsequently, we used Geist Text Tools (Kliche 2021) to clean and structure the text data into an easy format to read and annotate, while ensuring comprehensiveness. Then, we applied multiple keywords to the dataset to identify the most relevant letters for each crisis (see the appendix for additional information).

Whenever a keyword appeared in a text, it was marked and the letter was manually inspected. If the text was relevant to our purpose because it touched upon the crisis and conveyed a codable statement (see below), we annotated the letter based on a pre-established codebook (see the appendix for the full codebook).

This study relies on well-established research methods that investigate responsibility attribution in media texts (Gerhards et al. 2007, Nienstedt et al. 2015, Zangl et al. 2024). These studies look at media texts that are produced by journalists and thus feature different actors who speak about and refer to various actor groups. In our case, however, we have the same source of responsibility attribution because rather than being interested in the individual citizen, we are interested in the citizenry. Therefore, it is of particular interest to us to examine who is perceived to have responsibility for solving the crisis and who is perceived as being unable to solve the crisis, based on the citizen's perspective. Additionally, we investigate the tone of citizens' assessment of the actor's responsibility (positive, negative or neutral) (see also Hayek et al. 2020). Thus, our measure of legitimacy perception is based on two indicators: First, the responsibility attribution to actors and, second, the tone through which the citizens assess the perceived responsible actor. Therefore, we can measure *which* actors (either the EU and its institutions, or specific member state executives) are perceived by citizens as relevant, responsible actors in times of crisis and *how* these actors are evaluated by the citizens in these crises. This approach enables us to analyse how citizens rate policy outputs of specific actors during crises and thus demonstrate how bottom-up legitimacy through citizen participation and perception influences output legitimacy. Besides, a methodologically relevant distinction concerns whether the crisis solution is perceived as impacting the constitutive aspect and thus the fundamentals of politics (polity dimension) or as impacting ordinary, daily decision-making in a policy area (policy dimension) (Braun et al. 2016, Santos and Nina 2023).

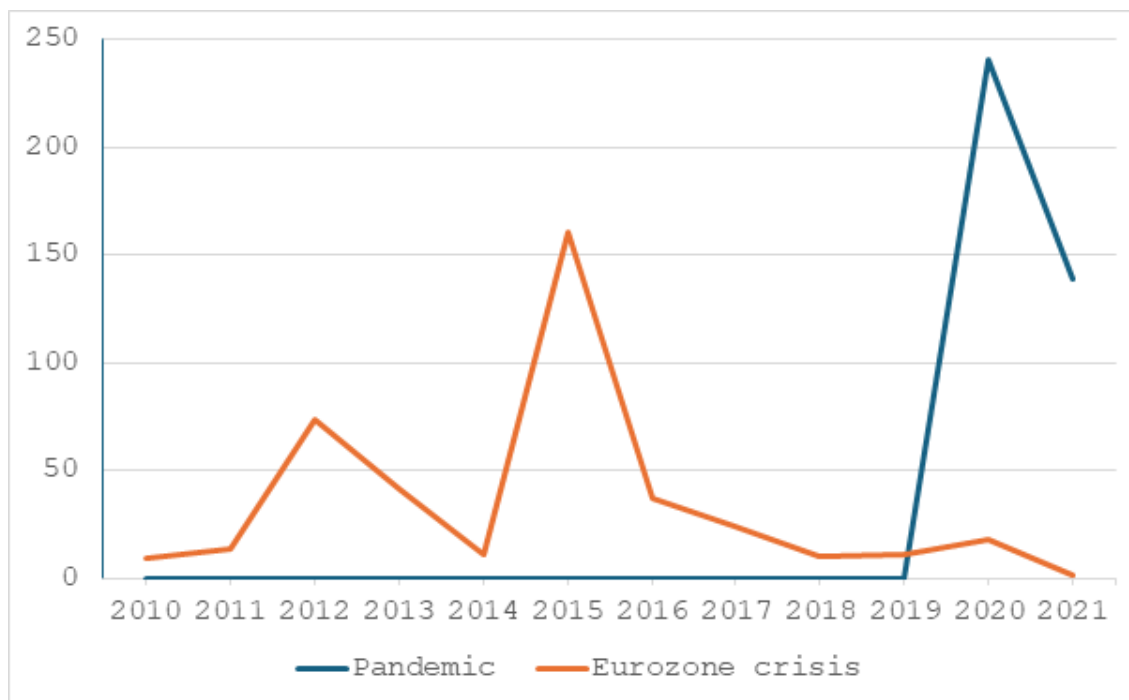
The unit of analysis in our text material is the individual letter to the editor. Thus, every code category is annotated only once per letter. Given the relatively short text length of these letters and the assumed focus of these letters on a specific aspect that seemed important to the citizen, this methodological decision is justified (see Caviedes 2015).

To test the code categories in the codebook, two coders are trained using a random sample of 24 letters. The intercoder reliability scores are very good overall and for each code category (overall: 94% agreement; 0.89 Krippendorff's alpha; more information in the appendix). We subsequently code the identified material. In cases where the coders are undecided on how to code, they discuss the text or code category and come to a common understanding of the problem.

In total, we annotated 793 letters to the editor for the two crises - 380 for the pandemic and 413 for the eurozone crisis. Figure 1 provides an overview of the annotated text

data for each crisis over time.

Figure 1. Number of letters to the editor of SZ during the Eurozone crisis and pandemic (2010-2021)



The main difference is the time span since the eurozone crisis peaked between 2010 and 2015 while the pandemic started in the beginning of 2020 in China and reached Europe in February. Given the varying nature of the crises, the structure and public focus also differed. The eurozone crisis had two main peaks - 2012 and 2015. Conversely, public attention was chiefly turned to the pandemic throughout 2020. This also influenced the number of letters addressing the crises. However, with the decreasing number of infections, hospitalizations and death rates and new developments regarding vaccines, debate among the citizens regarding responsibility attribution in the coronavirus crisis slowed down. These public health-related developments are quite different from the prolonging of the eurozone crisis which started as a banking crisis, followed by the sovereign debt crisis and then partially spilled over to a crisis of the Eurozone, thus making prominent the incompleteness of the banking and monetary union in the EU. These institutional aspects have not been fully solved until today, which can explain why there are still a few citizens commenting on the crisis even beyond 2016, raising awareness and revealing scepticism about the future or the next EU crisis.

Results

We present the results in two steps. In the first step, we present quantitative descriptive outcomes about the main code categories across the two crises. In the second

step, we focus on the specific framing of responsibility and point out similarities and differences between how citizens articulate statements on legitimacy (or lack thereof) during these crises.

Figures 2a and 2b show the relative responsibility attribution to political actors. The main responsibility in both crises is attributed to German executive bodies. The German government and, to some extent, state governments (e.g. Bavaria) are held accountable by the citizens for taking appropriate action and establishing crisis-solving measures. In contrast, other actors who are regarded as being responsible for solving one or the other crisis are far less relevant.

Generally, the EU, and, specifically, EU institutions such as the European Central Bank (ECB), more prominently appear in letters during the eurozone crisis than they do during the two years of the pandemic. The citizens' comments hardly mention other EU member state governments during the pandemic (see Figure 2b). In contrast, the Greek government is perceived as being responsible during the peaks of the eurozone crisis in 2010, 2012 and 2015 (see Figure 2a). Thus, citizens attribute greater relevance to the EU in solving the eurozone crisis than they attribute to the EU in addressing the pandemic. In the public health crisis, the nation-state, in particular, the German national executive body, is perceived as being most responsible in acting appropriately (see also Figure A1 in the appendix).

Figure 2a. Responsibility attribution to political actors during the eurozone crisis

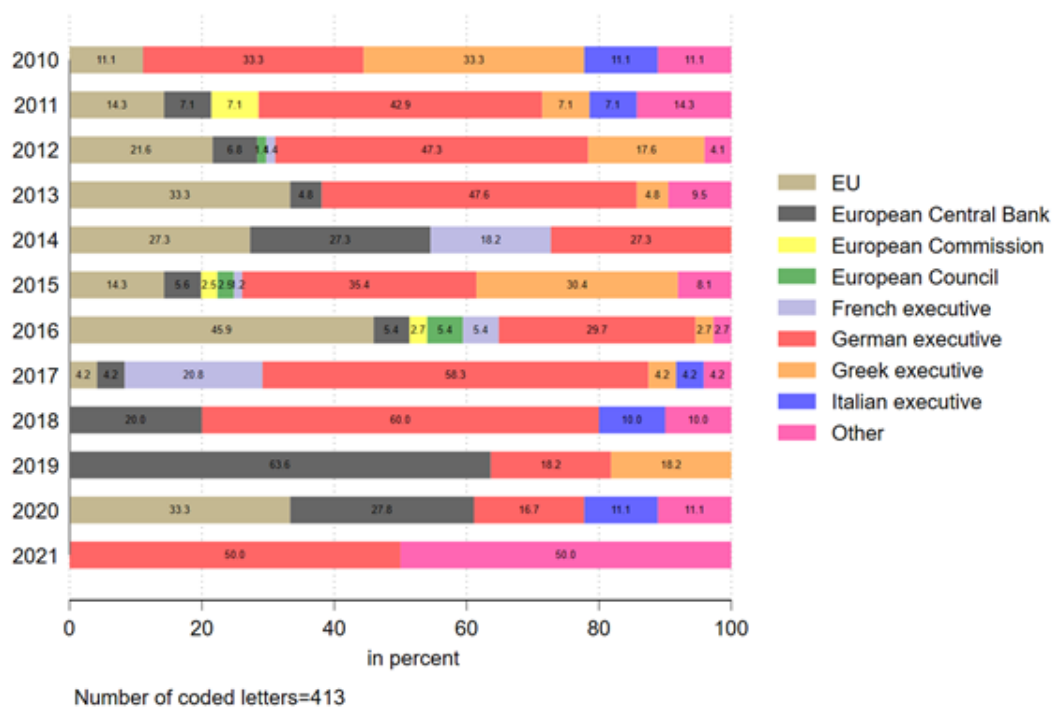
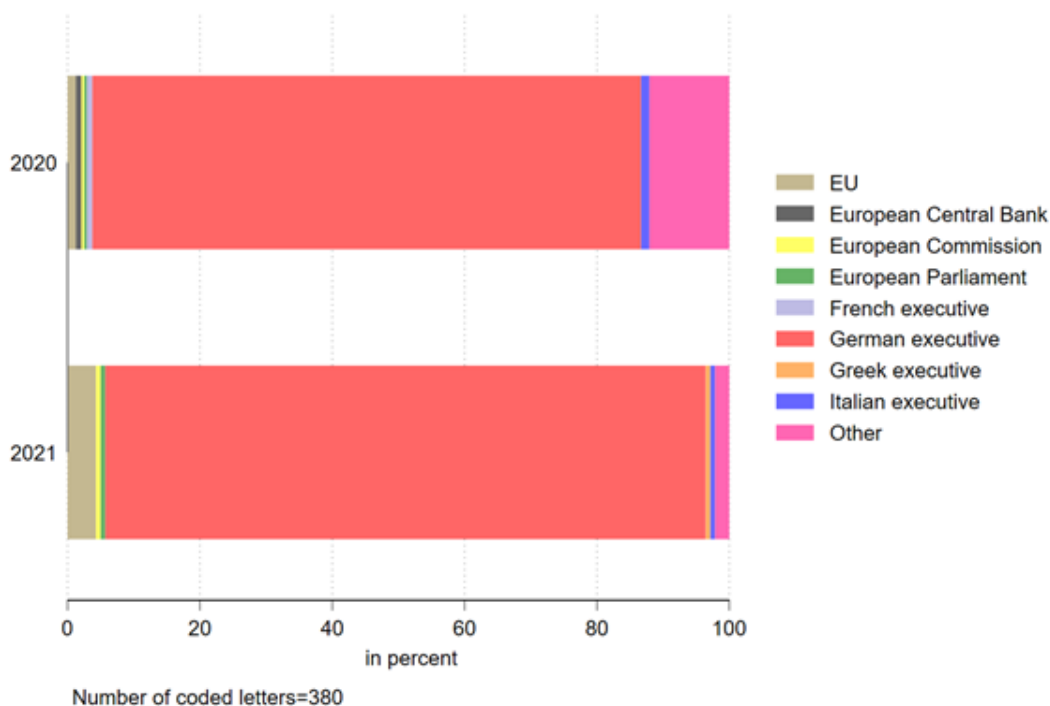


Figure 2b. Responsibility attribution to political actors during the COVID-19 pandemic



While the responsibility attribution is relatively different, the overall tone towards these actors has great similarity. Essentially, most of the published letters in the SZ criticise actors for what they are doing: that the actors do not act appropriately to solve the crisis, they implement the wrong policy measures or overlook crucial aspects. This negative tone in the majority of the annotated letters is persistent regardless of the actor: the German government, EU bodies or other governments (61% during the pandemic and 71% during the eurozone crisis). This does not change over time and is relatively consistent in both crises (see appendix figures A3-A5).

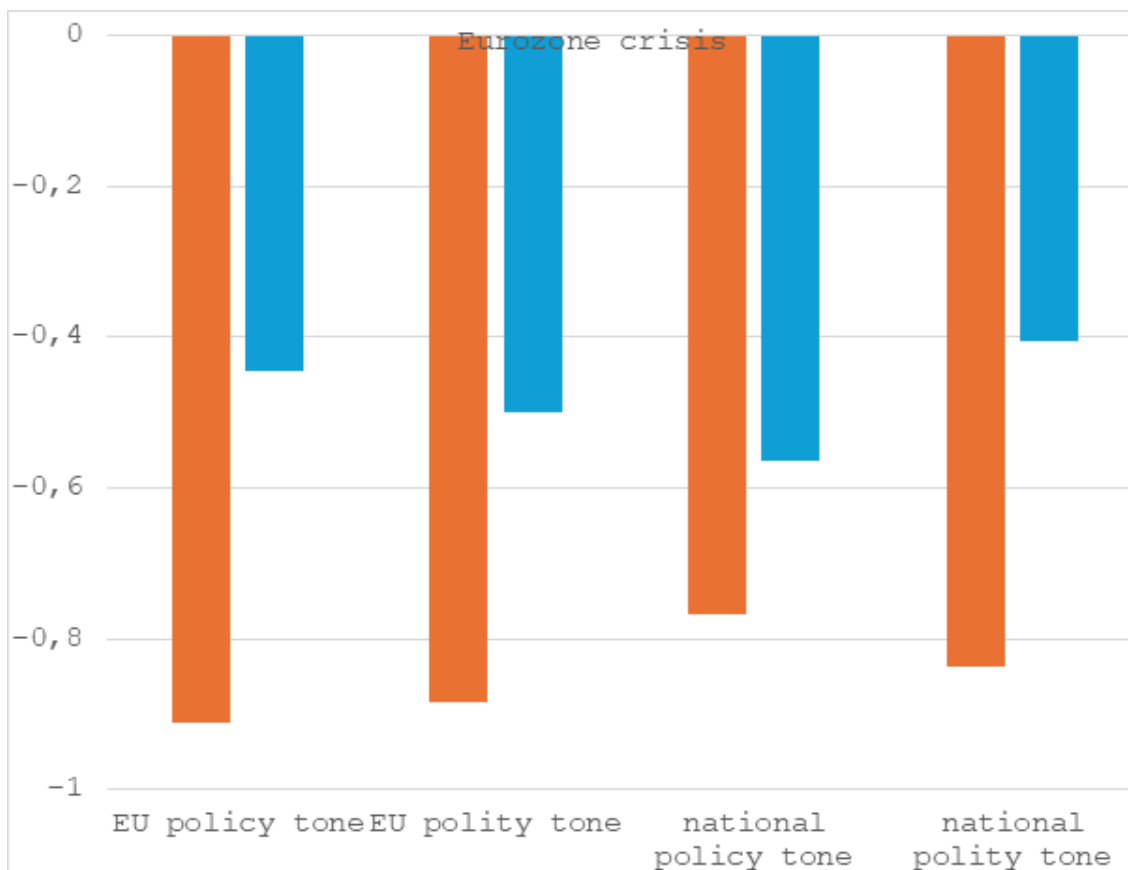
There are also letters which appreciate government policies, articulate respect and express support for certain measures (such as wearing masks or helping a crisis-hit country such as Greece). However, these letters are in the minority. Moreover, there are letters which are balanced or are neutral in tone and support certain measures but criticise some political actions (approximately 25% for the pandemic and 23% for the eurozone crisis).

In summary, responsibility attribution in times of crisis occurs in a rather critical way, questioning the legitimacy of certain political measures enacted by political actors (national governments or EU institutions). The legitimacy discourse tends not to be pro-government and pro-EU in crisis periods, where policy measures are supported and these actors gain a legitimacy boost from the letters of the citizens. Rather, these commentators raise concerns, articulate their lack of comprehension about the decisions

made and urge political actors to pursue different approaches to solve the crises.

Figure 3 illustrates this overall negative tone towards the EU and the national governments and distinguishes between policy and polity dimensions in the two crises. Not only is the general tone negative, no matter what level or political area, it is also highly critical towards the EU level during the eurozone crisis (see also Figure A2 in the appendix). In the pandemic, the letters are most critical towards national policy measures. However, we have to take into account that the EU and EU institutions hardly appeared as actors to whom was attributed responsibility during the pandemic (see Figure 2b above).

Figure 3. Perceptions towards polity and policy dimensions during the Eurozone crisis and COVID-19 pandemic



Note: We subtracted the relative number of negative tone letters from the relative number of positive tone letters. The scale is from -1 to +1. A score of -1 means a completely negative tone towards a dimension while +1 means a completely positive tone towards a dimension.

Interestingly, while most letters deal with concrete policy measures (62% during the pandemic and 69% during the eurozone crisis) and mainly criticise the political mea-

asures taken (such as closing schools or enforcing lockdowns during the pandemic or imposing excessively strict or lax austerity packages during the eurozone crisis) (40% during the pandemic), many letters also address the polity dimension in their comments (38% in the pandemic and 31% in the eurozone crisis). Hence, the letter writers use this public forum to fundamentally question the political and social order. The crisis moment provides a public opportunity to criticise how the political system works, identify who has the power to influence decision-making, who is powerless, how a society should work and what should be changed. This theme was more present during the pandemic debate than it was during the eurozone crisis because the former crisis also focused public attention on several related topics. For instance, citizens expressed concerns about the functioning of global labour relations, the spread of the virus through global transport and logistics networks, the vulnerabilities of interdependent global production chains and the sustainability of current consumption and living patterns, given how quickly these aspects came to a standstill during the lockdown. Moreover, letter writers raised concerns about the future of the EU in light of the eurozone crisis and whether a common currency or unequal economic development in the EU might endanger the European project. To provide further descriptive evidence, we delve into the textual level and show how citizens articulate their criticisms and question the legitimacy of political actions taken by responsible actors.

One crucial aspect in the letters is the strong criticism of German executive bodies during both crises. Given that we analyse letters from a German newspaper, it is unsurprising that Germany is at the centre of attention. The nation-state still seems to be the main reference point when talking about politics and articulating an opinion on what is perceived as positive or negative action in times of crisis. Moreover, most letters have to be understood as a reaction to a published article in the SZ. Furthermore, the letters are either about a newspaper article or certain parts of it. Hence, citizens' perceptions are based on media coverage of a subject that is related to one of the two crises. As mentioned before, this perception seems to be often negative, which is why readers write to SZ to articulate their views and arguments about a topic. A rather typical assessment of the crisis management is contained in the following statement made in Summer 2020: 'Arrogant and negligent chaos - coupled with bureaucratic incompetence and overconfidence. This is how I would describe the behaviour of Minister President Söder in connection with the corona mass tests.'

The letter below criticises the state government and, in particular, Bavarian Prime Minister Markus Söder for his mismanagement of the crisis regarding capacities to test in Bavaria. The letter does not shy away from directly mentioning what is perceived as wrong and thus also questions the ability of Söder to correctly handle the pandemic. Such criticism, which was raised during the first months of the pandemic, was not limited to the regional level. Similar criticism was also often directed at national measures

in the second year of the pandemic, as the following statement reveals: ‘There are a number of failures on the part of the government (protection concept for retirement/nursing homes, rapid tests and structured tests, masks earlier, vaccination chaos, et cetera), which means that the state has not done its homework here. But citizens are constantly being asked to accept restrictions and inconveniences. In the long term, this leads to a stealthy boycott of some measures [...]’

Besides these delegitimizing statements on concrete policy measures that national executives have taken, letter writers also raise questions about the current economic order and societal structure. On the one hand, these questions target the national level and whether capitalist societies can change anything to avoid future crises. On the other hand, the questions also query the stability of the political order at the national and EU levels. In particular, during the eurozone crisis, the role of the EU as a stabilising system that aims to create social cohesion, prosperity and freedom is questioned. Several ideas of a Europe running at two different speeds or a reduction of the EU to a ‘core Europe’ are then discussed in these letters. The following statement illustrates these concerns in the letters to the SZ:

The EU is an economic project, an economic union that is failing to take the hoped-for step towards a social union. Would not it be time to change the strategy, to build on the ‘two-speed Europe’ with the founding members of the EU and to create new impetus with a ‘core Europe’? The pure economic union does not need so much bureaucracy or a budget with the current volume.

What becomes clear here is notable in many letters to the editor, namely the coupling of criticism of inadequate crisis management with a systemic appraisal of the future structure of the EU. Even if this is arguably a common pattern of criticism in the public discourse, the linking of crisis and criticism of the political system is less common in the national context than it is concerning EU polity, as Figure 3 shows.

Discussion and Conclusions

In this study, we analysed the perception of legitimacy in the framework of citizens’ views (bottom-up dimension of legitimacy) on political measures (output dimension of legitimacy) and their either supportive or disapproving responses in a sample of letters to the editor in the German newspaper *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ). Using our data, we were able to show how this perceived legitimacy of EU and national executives was debated differently in the two crises studied. Our research further shows that in some cases, the perception was limited to policy decisions (policy dimension), while in others, responses even questioned or supported the social and political order (polity dimension) at the national or EU level.

Firstly, we identified a similar perception of the two crises because, in both crises, the policy dimension dominates in the letters (citizens react to concrete policies or policy changes), but the polity dimension is also emphasized. Crises and political crisis measures sometimes ‘trigger’ an assessment of citizens about what a good political system should be or how a just social order should look like and, in particular, how a system and society should deal with shortcomings and challenges (notably, citizens tend to be sceptical about the resilience and vitality of the system overcoming the crisis). The difference here lies more in the attribution of responsibility and which political level is seen as relevant for overcoming a crisis. For example, the polity dimension perceived as responsible in the pandemic is mainly national, whereas the attribution of responsibility in the eurozone crisis equally encompasses the political system of the EU.

One striking feature is that both crises are shaped by a negative tone in the letters. This tone might come as no surprise insofar as it can be assumed that the motivation to write letters to the editor often arises from a feeling of indignation and less from a feeling of approval. However, a comparison of the two crises shows that the tone is more negative in the eurozone crisis than it is in the pandemic. Here the ‘blame game’ against the Greek government in light of the newly established ‘rescue packages’ for Greece emerged in 2012/13 and 2015 and dominated not only the public debate but also found expression in letters to the editor, which is especially interesting in light of the protest dynamics in both crises. While there were massive protests in the debtor countries (Greece and Spain), there were only minor protest movements in the creditor states (Germany and Netherlands) during the eurozone crisis (Roose et al. 2018). Although this outcome can be explained by the rather mild effects or partial positive effects of this crisis in Germany (given the high/positive market evaluation of German state bonds), the minor protest stands in contrast to the overall negative tone in the letters. The political elite consensus was for some sort of austerity program linked to conditional EU solidarity in the debtor states (Wallaschek 2020). However, this consensus is questioned by the letter writers in two ways. *On the one hand*, some citizens even question this ‘rescue package’ and would like to dissolve the monetary union or split the EU into north and south. *On the other hand*, others criticise these austerity programs for their technocratic, undemocratic and economically false orientation that would not solve the problems of the eurozone but instead punish people in debtor states.

In comparison, the pandemic outbreak was marked by anti-COVID protests which occurred in many European countries, criticising the political measures or fundamentally questioning the existence and relevance of COVID-19. Under such circumstances, it is then not surprising that the letters to the editors are also negative concerning the responsible political actors, namely national executives. But again, we also identified criticism directed at political mismanagement for failing to act swiftly and transparently and engaging in technocratic decision-making.

The descriptive findings and the quotes from the letters to the editor indicate that both crises act as magnifying lenses for pre-existing problems such as mistrust in political institutions and, criticism of existing monetary and financial policies. The pandemic and the sovereign debt and eurozone crisis and their potential crisis-solving measures are judged through this magnifying lens. However, the reverse is also true: where there is approval and trust in politics, science and other such institutions, the measures taken are interpreted as sensible and necessary.

The results of our study show that, firstly, a comparison of the eurozone crisis and the pandemic suggests that the discourses and the perceptions of citizens are more Europe-anized in the case of the eurozone crisis than they are in the case of the pandemic. This outcome means that great responsibility is attributed to EU actors and, particularly, to an 'opaque' version of 'the EU'. A comparison of the two crises thus shows that the EU (and its institutions, such as the ECB) is perceived very differently by citizens who, together with member states, are its constituents in different crises.

While the EU was seen as a key player in the global financial crisis and was confronted with corresponding expectations of its ability to respond to crises, that is, to act and shape policies, only a few citizens considered it relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this outcome does not necessarily reflect actual competencies (especially since not all citizens have the same knowledge base) but rather reflects the competencies that were attributed to the EU by some well-informed and less well-informed persons through public discourses.

We found a clear focus on the national (in this case, mainly German) executive during the pandemic. The EU and its institutions hardly played a significant role. This is unsurprising because making the national government primarily responsible for the pandemic not only has to do with the question of direct responsibility in the (public) health policy area (after all, the measures were also coordinated between EU member states, and the EU set up an emergency fund with a budget of billions of euros). Furthermore, during the pandemic, there was strong reference to the nation-state and national actors (also referred to in research as the 'rally-around-the-flag' effect, e.g. Kritzinger et al. 2021) and significantly high visibility of the measures taken in the nation-states. Nevertheless, it can be stated that if the EU is not perceived as an actor and its corresponding actions (whether as success or failure) is therefore not attributed to it, the actions cannot have either a legitimizing or delegitimizing effect on citizens' perceptions.

In line with Chapter 2, the concept of output legitimization depends not only on what has been achieved but also on the perception in the eyes of those who provide legitimacy (the citizens), that is, bottom-up legitimization. If the corresponding attribution of responsibility and the respective perception is thus missing, the actual output of the actor, in our case the EU, will remain neutral concerning legitimization and it can-

not - for this reason alone - have either a legitimizing or a delegitimizing effect. This outcome may give rise to a double dilemma about the question of the legitimacy of EU action. Insofar as (a) the EU is not perceived as an actor, bottom-up legitimacy is irrelevant in the eyes of the citizens. Insofar as (b) the output success or failure of the EU is not attributed to it, it cannot have any positive or negative effects on future legitimacy achievements either.

Our study has limitations. Firstly, we only analyse data from one EU member state and one particular media outlet. This approach can be justified because we are not interested in the media coverage of the two studied crises in the newspaper and have assumed, based on previous studies (Wahl-Jorgensen 2002, Hayek et al. 2020, Hovden and Mjelde 2022) that political orientation does not strongly bias our results. Additionally, and given our long span of 12 years, we would have overstretched our analytical focus by looking at several EU member states. Nonetheless, we have to be cautious in the interpretation of our results - they are not generalizable and should not be seen as representative of other EU member states. Our study can thus be seen as a preliminary step towards a broad investigation of citizens' perceptions that are articulated in the common 'public forum' section in newspapers (Wahl-Jorgensen 2001) and thus offers a glimpse of how citizens perceive and react to crisis measures by political elites in different crises. Secondly, the selected text medium - letters to the editor - is rather specific, and, especially in the digital era, might be seen as outdated. There are also no reliable sources on the socio-demographics of the writers of these letters and no knowledge of who gets eventually published and which letters are directly rejected. Thus, the data source is highly selective, but there was no way of getting access to the full data corpus of approximately 50,000 letters that the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* receives annually.

Future studies could extend our data collection by looking at more additional newspapers and other EU member states in these crises to further investigate how citizens perceive output legitimacy in times of crisis and under which circumstances similar or different citizen discourses are identifiable. Furthermore, it would be highly relevant to compare the media and citizen discourse on these crises to further explore whether they build upon each other or represent two different debates on legitimacy in times of crisis.

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Appendix

Codebook

This study aims to analyse citizens' views about different crises. Therefore, we ask how citizens address the output legitimacy of the crisis solutions from the German government and EU institutions. To examine this question, we study published letters to the editor in the German newspaper *Sueddeutsche Zeitung (SZ)* in the period 2010 to 2021, enabling us to study citizens' reactions to two different crises, namely the eurozone and debt crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Output legitimacy is defined as the product of the decision-making process by the political actors in a political system, incorporating laws, directives, and decisions about political personnel (such as new ministers) (Scharpf 2002) or, as Vivien Schmidt recently stated, output legitimacy is the 'acceptance of the coercive powers of government so long as their exercise is seen to serve the common good of the polity and is constrained by the norms of the community' (Schmidt 2020, 31). Thus, the focus of the coding is how citizens perceive the actions undertaken by national executives or the EU (institutions) in tackling and solving the crisis under investigation (eurozone and pandemic) and who is made responsible for these actions.

Before the manual annotation of letters, we applied several keywords to each crisis to reduce the data corpus. The following table lists the original keywords used for each crisis.

Table A1. Keywords used for the eurozone crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic

	Eurozone crisis	pandemic
Keywords	Griechenland, Griechen, Finanzkrise, Troika, Schuldenkrise, Eurokrise, Staatsschuldenkrise	Pandemie, Corona, Covid-19, Covid

Each letter which is marked because it includes one of the keywords is inspected by trained coders. The unit of analysis is the single letter. Thus, the code categories can only be applied once to each letter. Therefore, the coder has to decide which of the sub-codes is most relevant. The coder never codes a code category (type of issue, responsibility attribution or tone). Instead, only the sub-codes in the letters to the editor are coded.

If one of the following codes cannot be coded, then the letter is not coded at all. If in doubt as to whether or not a comment can be coded, then the comment is not coded. This approach reduces the variation and interpretability of the coding process and leads to semi-standardized coding procedures.

Regarding responsibility attribution, the following decision-tree coding rules apply:

1. Is responsibility attributed to an actor? -> Yes, then code actor X. If multiple actors are attributed, then apply rule 2.
2. To whom is primary responsibility attributed? -> Unambiguous, then code actor X. Ambiguous, apply rule 3.
3. Code the first-named actor in an enumeration (e.g.: The Netherlands and France should improve their financial assistance to Greece in the crisis). First-named actor: Netherlands. Please code 'Other' (for the specific code, see the code categories below).

In the following table, we present the different code categories for the manual coding of the comments in the newspaper in Table 1. Afterwards, we briefly describe each code category.

Table A2. Code categories

Meta data	Type of issue	Responsibility attribution	Tone
Year	Policy	German executive	Positive
Newspaper	Polity	Greek executive	Neutral
Type of crisis	Unclear	Italian executive	Negative
		French executive	
		EU	
		European Commission	
		European Council	
		European Parliament	
		European Central Bank	
		Other	

Meta data

1. Year - in which year the letter to the editor was published
2. Newspaper - in which newspaper the letter was published
3. Type of crisis - which crisis is addressed in the comment. This category is already

given due to the semi-automatic pre-coding via keywords. Whether the crisis is the eurozone crisis, migration crisis or pandemic does not have to be coded manually.

Type of issue - about what kind of issue the comment is about. Based on the study by Braun et al. (2016), we distinguish between polity-related issues and policy-related issues. It is irrelevant which actual polity or policy issue is addressed - only the broader categorisation into polity or policy is relevant.

Policy - certain areas of political decision-making and their 'content' (i.e. monetary policy, migration and health policy)

Polity - about constitutional matters, fundamentals of European integration or Germany's political system or constitution

Unclear - code if the type of issue is not directly identifiable

Responsibility attribution - who or which level is addressed in the comment. Attributing responsibility to a certain level indicates who should be trusted and seems (to the citizens) capable of solving the crisis (or not) (Gerhards, Offerhaus, and Roose 2007; 2009). The responsibility attribution could also be articulated negatively by saying that, for instance, the EU is not capable of solving the migration crisis or has made wrong decisions. Therefore, the EU is addressed and coded in this comment.

German executive - includes a mention of Germany, as in 'Germany should do this...' or 'Berlin has to act now...'. Moreover, this category includes German state governments

Greek executive - same as for German executives, including a mention of 'Greece should do this' or 'Athens has to act now'

Italian executive - same as for the German executives, including a mention of 'Italy should do this' or 'Rome has to act now'

French executive - same as for the German executives, including a mention of 'France should do this' or 'Paris (or Macron) has to act now'

EU - includes a mention of 'Brussels should do this'

European Commission - code the specific institutions if they are named, including the president of the European Commission or the different commissioners

European Council - same applies here and includes the president of the European Council

European Parliament - same applies here and includes a mention of individual MEPs or party fractions such as EVP or S&D

European Central Bank - same applies here, including a mention of individual directors of the ECB Board or the president of the ECB

Other - other actors such as the WHO (during the pandemic), Turkey or Spain (concerning the migration crisis) or the IMF (during the eurozone crisis)

Tone - how is the comment framed? It is about the general tone of the whole comment towards the political actor to whom is responsibility attributed

Positive

neutral

negative

To test our predefined codebook, we randomly selected 24 texts from the corpus. Two trained coders separately annotated the letters to the editor. In this test, the type of crisis was not previously given to the coders to test whether they could identify a crisis. Afterward, intercoder reliability for each code category was calculated. In the following table, we present the results for percentage agreement - Cohen's Kappa and Krippendorff's Alpha - which are standard measures in content analysis, ranging from 0 to 1. The closer the score is to 1, the more reliable is the coding process of the two coders (Krippendorff 2004). As shown, the test results for each category are very good and indicate high intercoder reliability.

Table A3. Overview of intercoder reliability scores

Code Category	Percentage Agreement	Cohen's Kappa	Krippendorff's Alpha
Year	100%	1	1
Type of crisis	96%	0.94	0.94
Type of issue	92%	0.83	0.83
Responsibility attribution	92%	0.86	0.86
Tone	92%	0.82	0.82

Additional Graphs

Figure A1. Total number of responsibility attributions for the eurozone crisis and pandemic

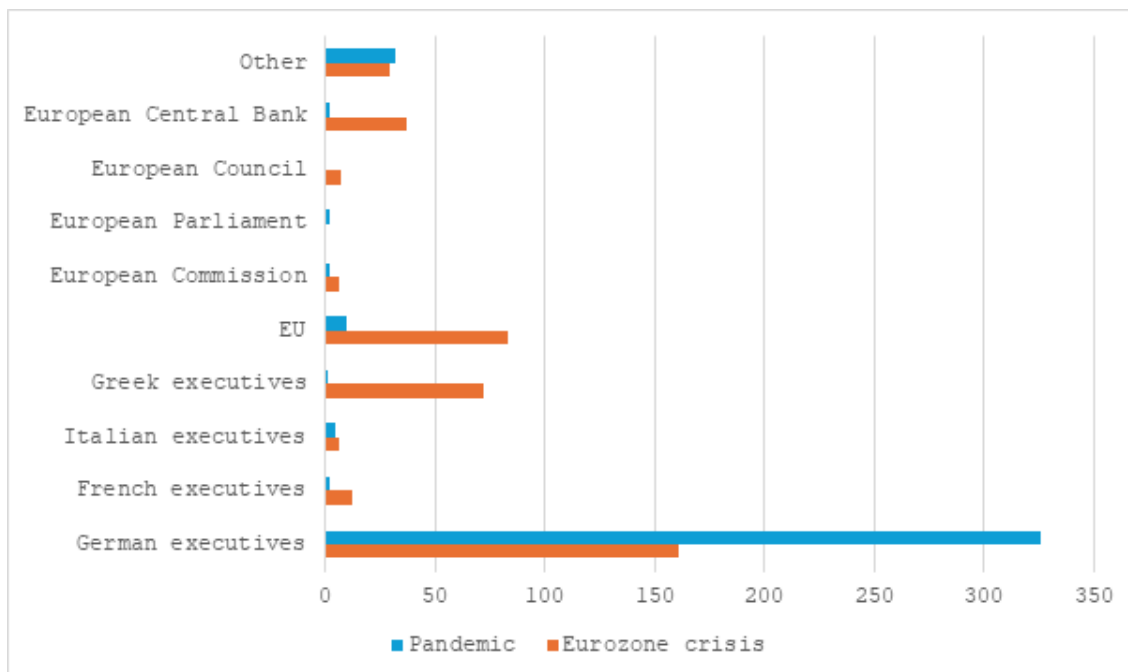


Figure A2. Number of letters on policy and polity dimensions (EU or national level)

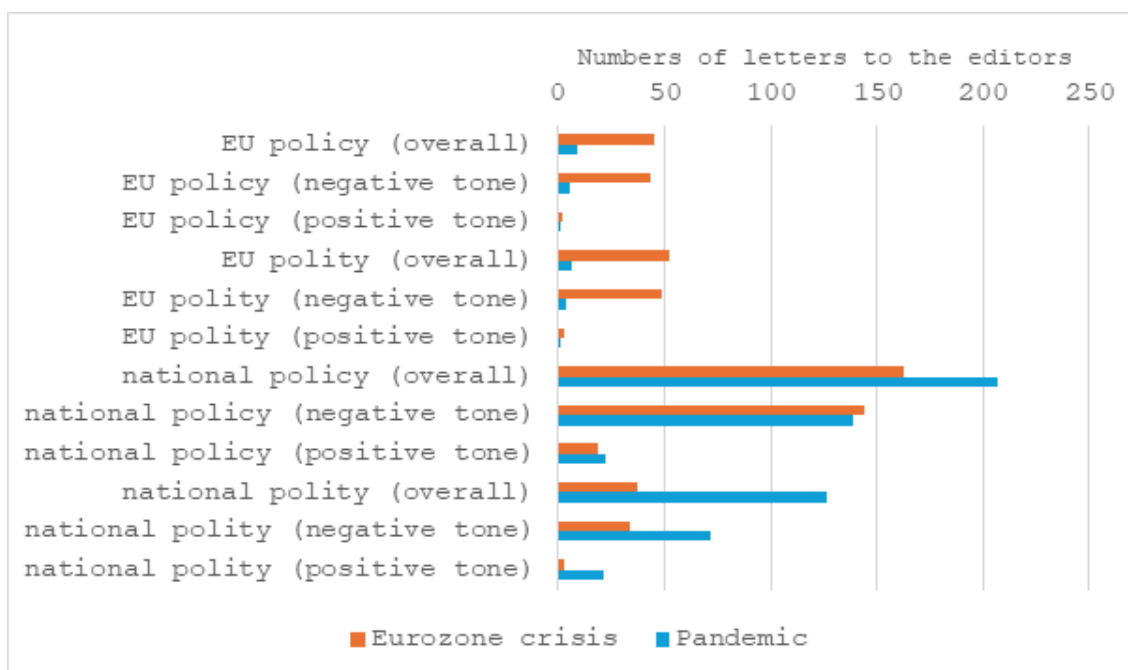


Table A4. Number of letters to the editors in selected German daily newspapers

National daily newspaper	Political orientation	Circulation (fourth quarter 2021)	Number of letters 2010–2021
Sueddeutsche Zeitung	Centre–left	320,991	14,304
taz.die tageszeitung	Left	51,861	5,854
Die Welt (incl. Welt am Sonntag/WAMS)	Right	439,734	5,535

Source: IVW 04/2021, <https://www.ivw.de/aw/print/qa> (last accessed on 30.05.2024)

Figure A3. Relative tone frequency per year during the eurozone crisis



N=413

Figure A4. Relative tone frequency per year during the COVID-19 pandemic

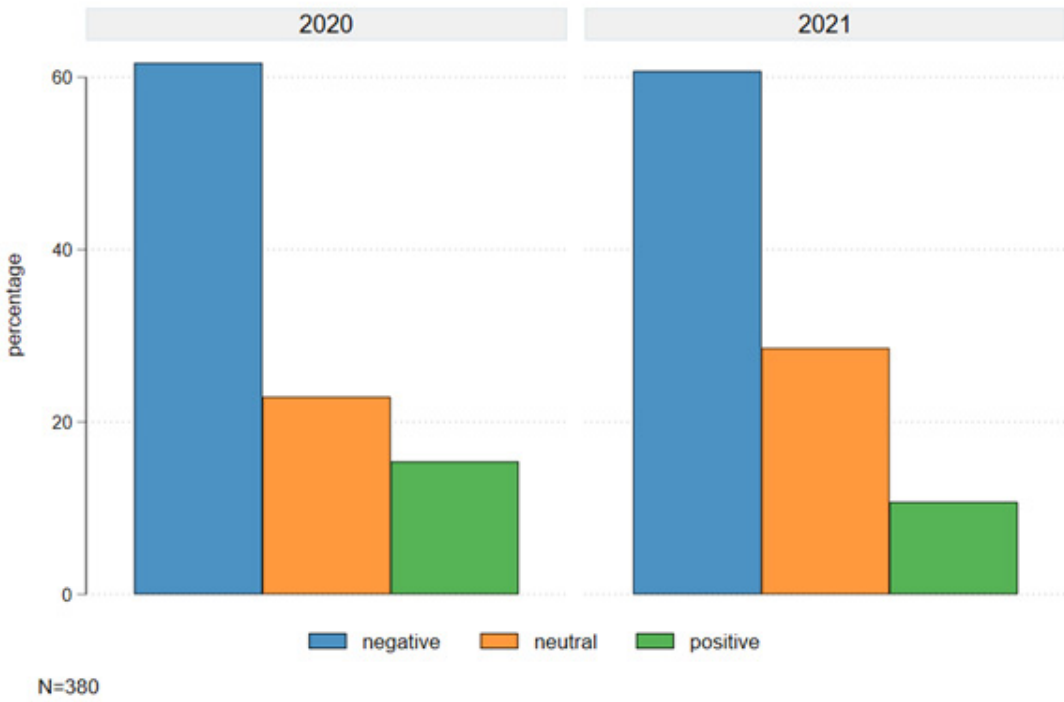
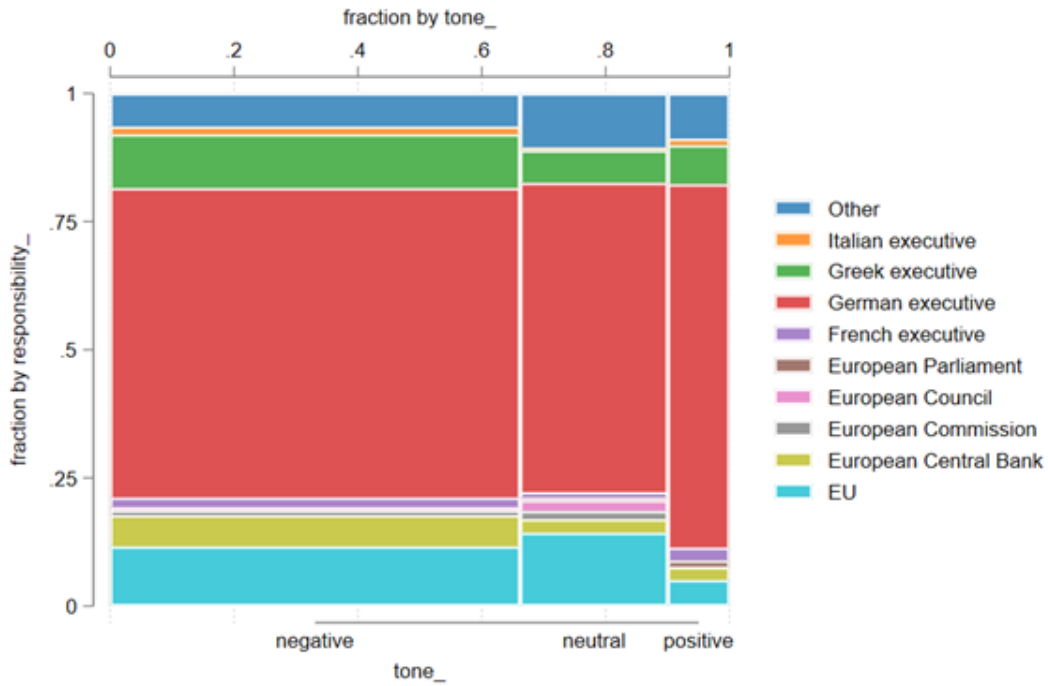


Figure A5. Relative tone frequency per responsibility attribution to actors in both crises



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