The Politics of Crisis in Europe: Integrational Panic & The Role of the Media

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(This paper is drawn from a particular aspect of my current book project, which is still a work-in-progress.)

Introduction

What role does the media play in building up and amplifying crises in international relations? While some crises are very real, like natural disasters and the outbreak of war, other crises are socially constructed, with the international media playing a significant role in this process. When crises have their origins in societal perception, rather than in tangible disasters, media coverage has often served to amplify pre-existing social tensions and solidify a kind of societal panic. An otherwise common event or occurrence is portrayed as potentially shaking the very foundations of society. Given the growing 24-hour presence of the media, and the scramble among news providers to be the first with “breaking news,” the importance of the media in shaping international tensions is arguably stronger than ever. Without the negative spin and media frenzy, certain crisis triggers may not have gained the perception of a full-blown crisis.

This paper examines the case of the European Union (EU or EEC/EC in its previous incarnations) as a region that has been perceived to be in severe crisis numerous times since its inception in 1957. In recent years, this region most clearly demonstrates the powerful role the international media plays in encouraging the social construction of crises. Recent prominent examples include: the 2003 Iraq crisis, 2005 Constitutional crisis, and 2010-12 Eurozone crisis – each of which has been portrayed in the media with a heavy, negative slant, and will be the

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specific case studies examined here. As will be shown, in each of these cases, journalists and commentators indulged in “end of Europe” rhetoric, inspiring predictions about the disintegration of the European project. Of course, the EU continues to exist today, and is arguably stronger and more integrated than ever.

Why do EU crises continually defy popular and media-driven expectations? Through detailed media content analysis I argue that the media was not just reporting on crises, it was amplifying negative perceptions and portraying relatively average obstacles to EU integration as causing seemingly existential crises for Europe, defined as the perception that the EU would cease to exist. I introduce the theoretical concept of *integrational panic* as a Europe-specific kind of societal panic, and an adaptation of the widely-cited sociological theory of *moral panic*. I argue that in the build-up to these episodes of crisis, the international media incites a feeling among Europeans, and wider audiences, that the current European social order (characterized by ongoing integration of member-state sovereignty from the national to supranational levels) cannot continue. The argument advanced here is that the more the media taps into “us” vs. “them” undercurrents in European society – whatever these may be in a given time period – the more *integrational panic* sets in, leading to the build-up in the perception that the EU is in existential crisis. I argue that this approach, which focuses on how the media can cause a sense of societal panic disproportionate to actual events, is generalizable to other regions and crisis events around the world.

The next section reviews a number of theoretical approaches to crises in international relations, and lays out the framework of analysis. The second section examines three crisis case studies in turn, focusing on the role of the media in building up the crisis through a kind of crisis

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2 A full account of the build-up and resolution of these crises will be the subject of a much larger research project: Mai’a K. Davis Cross, *The Politics of Crisis in Europe*, book manuscript forthcoming.
frenzy, the media’s neutrality (or lack thereof) in its interpretation of the crisis, and the kinds of tensions stressed in the coverage. Finally, I conclude with consideration of alternative explanations, and how the study of the media effect on crises has applicability more generally.

**What’s in a crisis?**

Several different social science perspectives grapple with crises, and define them in a number of ways (Geva, Mayhar, and Skorick 2000:447-471; see also Schmitt 2004; Gamble 2006; Neal 2009). For example, in considering EU crises, Sam-Sung Jo takes a so-called *systemic approach*. This approach, which draws upon earlier work by Oran Young (1968), Sydney Verba (1971), and Peter Gourevitch (1984), defines crises as situations in which institutions are de-stabilized and the continuity of the system is threatened (Jo 2007). According to Young, crises result from “unfolding events” that enable “destabilizing forces” in the international system to disturb routine patterns and threaten the nature of the existing system (Young 1968:6-15). Thus, this approach assumes that crises are objective phenomena, and that human perceptions do not matter. Crises simply occur and decision makers must find a way to reinstate stability, even if it requires fundamentally changing the system in place. This approach encounters potentially serious difficulty in that there are numerous instances in which potential triggering events and even systemic change are neither seen as crises nor treated that way. In other words, the systemic approach cannot account for cases in which the “dog didn’t bark”.

From a behavioral perspective, Charles Hermann defines a crisis as an event that threatens key goals of a state, provides only a short time to respond, and comes as a surprise (Hermann 1972:187). Other behavioralists have argued that *time to respond* and *surprise* are ambiguous in Hermann’s definition, and that crises are really much more about *perception of*
Robert Billings et al. contend that we must first identify a *triggering event* that is perceived as leading to a crisis. The threshold for whether or not an event triggers a crisis varies depending on the type of event, but Billings et al. argue that in general this threshold depends on “the perceived value of possible loss, probability of loss, and time pressure” (Billings, Milburn, and Schaalman 1980:303-4). Loss is defined as the difference in one’s state of being before and after the triggering event. Thus, it is largely a matter of subjective judgment of the event, and how one values certain things, but nonetheless, there is a measurable threshold that is determined through calculation of the costs involved. Ultimately, a crisis becomes a crisis when people say it is, and this rests fundamentally on their material calculations of cost (Billings et al. 1980:300-316).

While the need to take into account human perceptions of crises represents an improvement on the systemic approach, crises are often *social* processes. The causal emphasis on rational cost calculation does not fit well with many types of crises, including the case of the EU examined here. For example, investors and speculators took advantage of market fluctuations during the Eurozone crisis, which in turn aggravated the crisis, but this should not be confused with rational behavior. They acted based on perceptions about the viability of the Euro and the media-driven belief that the Union might fall apart. Moreover, Europeans often willingly take on *more* cost during and after crises to keep integration moving forward, as they did with the repeated bailouts during the Eurozone crisis. To understand cost or loss calculation, it is necessary to investigate what people value, which in the case of the EU may also be the *idea* of a supranational entity (Cross 2012:229-46).

From a sociological perspective, Colin Hay takes this line of reasoning about perceptions a step further to argue that crises are socially constructed and “subjectively perceived” (1999:...
Hay argues that shared narratives about crises are what bring them into existence, not calculations of loss or cost. Similarly, Carroll L. Estes argues that social construction “does not deny or ignore the existence of objective phenomena….Social action, however, is inseparable from the socially constructed ideas that define and interpret these phenomena” (1983: 446). These arguments support Alexander Wendt’s classic work on the social construction of IR (1999), which argues that there is a material reality, but that ideas play a strong role in constituting material causes in the first place. This sociological approach, which takes human interpretation into account, has valuable explanatory power because it can tell us why various events have built up into crises, while others have not.

I define crisis build-up as the period in which social reactions to a potential crisis grow from being relatively average events into a sense of threat to the continuation of the system. Potential crisis triggers (defined as events) such as disagreement over foreign policy, questions over whether a new treaty will be approved, or a debt problem in a small member state occur frequently and are relatively routine events, but only some grow into serious crises. A media frenzy signals the build-up of a crisis, and this in turn feeds into narratives about crises. It is difficult to generalize about what motivates the media to pick up and amplify one event as compared to another (Glesissner and Vreese 2005:221-42; see also Groeling and Baum 2009; Krzyzanowski 2009), but some kind of social act must define a crisis as such since there are always disagreements and obstacles to consensus, particularly in the EU context.

I introduce the theoretical concept of integrational panic – as one type of societal panic specific to the case of Europe – and draw upon the sociological theory of moral panic, as a tool for understanding the social construction of these EU existential crises.3 The theory of moral

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3 As Cohen (1972) argues, “panic” is not to be taken literally, but as a metaphor for the overall social reaction to an episode or event.
panic, developed in the 1960s, is a “sociological concept that seeks to explain a particular type of overreaction to a perceived social problem” (Rohloff and Wright 2010, 404). The purpose of the theory is to show how and why influential societal actors, especially the mass media, construct concern over a social issue that goes well beyond the reality of the problem (Cohen 1972). This concern builds up to such an extent that it can change the rules and laws within society, and result in a perceived threat to the existing social order. Even though the theory of moral panic was developed to explain how some actors within society come to be defined as threats to dominant social values (for example, witches in the middle ages), an adaptation of the framework is valuable in understanding how the media can create societal panic that leads to crisis construction more generally. Integrational panic, a specific type of societal panic, is defined here as an overreaction to a perceived problem with EU integration (the transfer of sovereignty from the national to supranational level).  

If media coverage of EU events contains exaggeration of some kind of social tension that might block integration from going forward there is more likely to be a crisis build-up that could eventually display existential qualities. As with the theory of moral panic, there is a dominant social order in Europe today, which is the continuation of the process of European integration. Unlike the theory of moral panic, however, the societal concern that arises from the social construction of crisis is not about a threat to morality or shared values, but instead about a threat to the common European project of integration. Moral panics typically deal with taboo issues that trigger moral indignation (cases include pornography, the Red Scare, anti-Semitism, and human trafficking), while integrational panics occur in more neutral, political territory. The central question that arises repeatedly during times of integrational panic is: Will EU integration

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4 In the language of moral panic theory, EU integration itself is repeatedly defined as the scapegoat, or ‘the “folk devil” onto whom public fears and fantasies are projected’ (Hunt 1997: 631).
continue, or will it collapse? Thus, while just like in situations of moral panic, various societal tensions such as East-West, North-South, elite-public, old-new become exaggerated in media coverage, in these cases there is less reason for outright moral indignation. In both types of situation, an “us” vs. “them” dynamic indicates a media-driven crisis build-up, but in the case of integrational panic, it is the specific issue of EU integration that is at stake, rather than more amorphous questions of human morality. The concept of integrational panic is also different from moral panic in its magnitude, as it repeatedly escalates to the point of existential crisis for the EU itself. This is at least partially because the media that tends to ratchet up the crisis rhetoric is external, i.e. the Anglo-American media, and it does not have a clear understanding of what the unique institution of the EU really represents. As the evidence shows, the Anglo-American media leans heavily towards Euroskepticism, and displays a lack of understanding of the basis of the EU. To them, the EU cannot be easily understood, and even seems to possess an improbable structure from their position on the outside.\(^5\)

Finally, the theory of integrational panic anticipates that the perception of existential crisis ends as quickly as it appears, even if some of the practical consequences may remain, as in the case of the Eurozone crisis. Since these episodes are socially constructed all that is necessary is for the public to lose interest or for media coverage to shift its attention to other issues. Indeed, moral panic theory similarly predicts that these types of episodes of social upheaval will dissipate as quickly as they appear as there is little real basis for them to continue once the media becomes occupied elsewhere (Critcher 2003). At the same time, integrational panic is different in that it carries with it the possibility of a self-fulfilling prophecy, especially when the crisis

\(^5\) Indeed, the EU spends millions of euros trying to explain itself to journalists and the general public, but somehow the message is not fully getting across. There are popular meta-narratives that the EU is somehow inherently difficult to understand, unwieldy, and always on the verge of failure. It is all too easy for journalists to fall back on this.
trigger involves financial markets, which are highly susceptible to external perception or misperception.

**Three Crisis Cases**

This study is based on content analysis of the news and op-ed articles for each case in four prominent English-language print media: *TIME Magazine, The Economist, International Herald Tribune*, and *Financial Times*.⁶ These are elite-oriented, highly respected among English-language news media, represent a variety of viewpoints, and have a very high circulation globally.⁷ While it would also be valuable to include local and other language media coverage within member states, this is beyond the scope of a single paper, and so I choose here to focus on the role of the international English-language media, which I argue gives the strongest indication of the impact of media on crises. It is reasonable to assume that elite decision-makers and opinion leaders within Europe also read these major news sources, and this does feed in to domestic narratives about crises.

The analysis for each crisis focuses on the volume of coverage, neutrality, and framing. The neutrality of an article is counted as negative when the depicted outlook for the crisis is negative in terms of anticipated consequences for the EU’s continued viability, rather than simply if the tone is negative. And in terms of media framing of the dominant tension, I focus specifically on: 1) scope – whether European or domestic; 2) players involved – whether among member states, between Brussels and member states, or within a particular member state; 3)
nature – the substantive quality of the tension; and 4) sub-tensions within the dominant tension – the various reasons contributing to the major tension. The analysis is restricted to the period of crisis build-up, with an aim to better illustrate the role of the international media in determining the dynamics of a crisis. The fact that these crises did not result in the disintegration of the EU, but to the contrary led to more integration, contrasts rather dramatically with the international media’s doomsday predictions and provides further evidence of the socially constructed nature of crises.

While these three case studies are diverse in their characteristics, there are enough common elements in the trajectory of these crises to support the presence of a pattern, consisting of (1) a crisis trigger, (2) crisis build-up with the media playing an important role in inciting integrational panic, (3) crisis height with perceptions of existential threat to the EU, and then finally (4) perceptions of the end of crisis and emergence of renewed will for integration.

**Iraq Crisis 2003**

The decision that eventually led to the US invasion of Iraq on March 19, 2003 stemmed from a number of issues of supposed US concern such as retaliation for 9/11, access to oil, alleged weapons of mass destruction, democracy promotion, and so on. How then did the Iraq invasion become an existential crisis for the EU? The crisis trigger for Europe was President George W. Bush’s address to the United Nations on September 12, 2002, calling for the international community to support an invasion of Iraq. After this speech, the international media played a significant role in construing European disagreement over Iraq as a major crisis for the EU through its sheer volume of coverage (Figure 1) and its lack of neutrality in tone (Figure 2).
FIG 1. Iraq Crisis, Volume of News Coverage, September 1, 2002 – December 30, 2003

TIME Magazine
- Neutral: 62%
- Negative: 36%
- Positive: 2%

The Economist
- Neutral: 53%
- Negative: 46%
- Positive: 1%

Intl. Herald Tribune
- Neutral: 43%
- Negative: 55%
- Positive: 2%

Financial Times
- Neutral: 57%
- Negative: 40%
- Positive: 3%
I argue that neither the US invasion in Iraq nor the subsequent disagreement within Europe necessarily had to develop into a full-blown existential crisis for Europe. If anything, this was ultimately more about a crisis of Europe’s relations with the US. The EU did not even have a common foreign policy as part of its institutional structure until the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, and had not been particularly successful at speaking with one voice in the past. The reaction to this crisis might have played out in far milder terms. But a constant barrage of negative media coverage clearly defined this as a period of integrational panic, and eventually, a major crisis for Europe.

Moreover, the dominant crisis narrative emphasized in this media coverage (Figures 3 & 4) was mainly about member-state tensions, in particular the so-called East-West divide over Iraq, and competition among the “Big Three” (UK, France, and Germany) over leadership of the EU. With respect to the former, the socially constructed nature of the narrative is apparent because the real dividing lines were not so clear-cut as East versus West. The leaders in several major, Western European member states, such as the UK, Spain, and Italy supported US action, along with many Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs). Meanwhile, numerous other countries – such as Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Luxembourg, and Sweden – vehemently opposed the invasion. Significantly, the Western member states were just as significantly divided among themselves as the new member states were supposedly from them.

**TIME Magazine**
- Non-tension Story 31%
- US-EU Tension 28%
- Brussels-Member State Tension 0%
- Tension Among Member States 41%

**The Economist**
- US-EU Tension 18%
- Non-tension Story 22%
- Brussels-Member State Tension 0%
- Tension Among Member States 61%

**Intl. Herald Tribune**
- US-EU Tension 27%
- Brussels-Member State Tension 2%
- Tension Among Member States 58%
- Non-tension Story 14%

**Financial Times**
- US-EU Tension 25%
- Brussels-Member State Tension 2%
- Tension Among Member States 39%
- Non-tension Story 33%

With respect to the narrative about the Big Three, this was intimately tied to the coverage of East-West division, and somewhat secondary to it. The EU was on the eve of welcoming the ten CEECs into its fold, and the question of whether France, the UK, or Germany would lead this newly enlarged EU was paramount. Obviously, France and Germany were opposed to the Iraq war, while the UK was not. But even though France and Germany were on the same “side” over Iraq, their differences in approach to security policy were also amplified in the media, emphasizing that German leaders did not like the French determination to build up the EU to balance against the US (Vinocur 2002). Thus, the larger category of member-state tensions, conveyed through media narratives, was comprised of two main sub-tensions surrounding the so-called East-West divide.

While the media was the primary social actor involved in construing the Iraq invasion as an existential crisis for Europe, other actors’ tone-setting statements contributed to this, and were again exaggerated in the media, setting off the integrational panic. In January 2003, US Defense
Secretary Donald Rumsfeld created more momentum behind the East-West narrative when he referred to “old Europe,” and argued that “the center of gravity is shifting to the east” in Europe.\(^8\) Newspapers all over the world printed the famous Old Europe, New Europe quote, as well as French President Jacques Chirac’s statement in February 2003 openly accusing the EU candidate countries of being, “not very well behaved and rather reckless,” and that they had “missed a great opportunity to shut up.”\(^9\) In response, Latvian President Vaira Vike-Freiberga said, “Nowhere in the Copenhagen criteria does it say we cannot speak our minds” (Graff 2003). The international media used these remarks as further fuel in the narrative about member states at loggerheads.

The crisis reached its high point on February 15, 2003, the day when major anti-war protests broke out across Europe. In the immediate wake of this, EU leaders held a summit in Brussels on February 17, 2003 to try to craft a common reaction to the US stance on Iraq. They left the meeting with a joint statement that “Iraq has a final opportunity to resolve the crisis peacefully” and that “inspections cannot continue indefinitely.”\(^10\) They agreed in principle that use of force could come into play as a last resort. In sharp contrast to this common stance, *The Economist*’s verdict on the summit was that Europeans were “United in theory, divided in practice.”\(^11\) *Time Magazine* further added to the negative bias, describing it as “Europe’s Family Feud” (Graff 2003).

By this time, media coverage had significantly contributed to transforming relatively normal disagreement over foreign policy into a clear argument that the Iraq crisis could mean the failure of Europe’s historic enlargement to include the CEECs (Fray 2003). Indeed, influential

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\(^11\) Ibid.
commentators questioned whether the plans for enlargement to the East could continue given the serious divide over Iraq. Alain Duhamel, a Europhilic opinion leader, wrote in an article that the goal of “European Europe” was seriously threatened by the prospects of enlargement given that the new member states would encircle Brussels with the “Europe of Washington.” Such a failure was equated with a more general inability for the EU to move forward according to its own goals and values.

However, by May 2003 media coverage of the crisis was declining precipitously and the tone of the coverage had softened. On May 8, 2003, German foreign minister Joshka Fischer said, “The Iraq War is the past…There is no point to continue discussions from yesterday” (Hofmann 2003). The European Security Strategy (ESS) was signed on 12 December 2003. The ESS represented a major step forward in EU integration, indicating Europeans’ strong common resolve for a “European Europe,” and great steps forward in other areas of common security, such as the establishment of the European Defense Agency in July 2004. It also explicitly made the connection between internal and external security integration and the importance of a multilateral approach. Europe was still standing, and it had a membership of 25. Moreover, it went on to develop surprisingly quickly a real Common Security and Defence Policy, launching 28 EU missions and operations across three continents in the span of a decade. This flies in the face of the media’s frenzy, negative bias, and narrative about the end of integration and enlargement, and thus emphasizes the socially constructed nature of the crisis. Importantly, there was a clear gap between the media’s narrative about the crisis and the reality of the situation.

On 29 October 2004, all 25 heads of state had signed the new Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe, which was designed to streamline and simplify the legal basis of the EU, make some institutional adjustments in light of enlarged membership, and codify new areas of cooperation, particularly in the foreign policy area. The next stage was for each member state to follow its own ratification procedures, which had to result in unanimous approval. A few months before, on 20 April 2004, British Prime Minister Tony Blair had unexpectedly promised a referendum on the Constitutional Treaty (a procedure he had previously rejected), which would make it much more difficult to approve. Then, another seven member states – Denmark, France, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Spain, and Portugal – also announced that they would hold referenda on the Constitution. Thus, once the heads of government had signed the Constitutional Treaty the stakes were high for the subsequent ratification period.

The media played an important role in turning this potential crisis trigger into a real one through its negative and exaggerated coverage of the upcoming ratification process, leading to another period of integrational panic (Figures 5 & 6). At this stage, the possibility of a failed Treaty was viewed as a setback in the minds of many, but it should not have necessarily escalated into a full-scale existential crisis for the EU. Literally every major EU/EC treaty that had come before, except for the founding Treaties of Rome, had resulted in initial negative referenda, including the 1986 Single European Act, the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, and the 2001 Nice Treaty.

Why did a relatively typical treaty ratification process lead to societal panic and then an existential crisis for Europe? Again, I argue that the volume of media coverage (Figure 5) and negative spin (Figure 6) were significant factors in turning this episode into a crisis for the EU’s
very survival. The media’s frenzy over the ratification process built it up to exaggerated proportions. Indeed, the four major media outlets in this study each had high predictions of failure before the French referendum had even taken place - 89% for Time Magazine, 79% for The Economist, 100% for the International Herald Tribune, and 68% for the Financial Times.\textsuperscript{13} Thus, the media played a significant role in precipitating the rapid build-up of the crisis, focusing almost exclusively on what would happen if the treaty failed.

\textsuperscript{13} This data reflects the crisis build-up period from October 29, 2004 to May 28, 2005. The remaining percentage of articles for Time Magazine and The Economist were not positive predictions, but simply offered no predictions. For the Financial Times, 10% of the articles had positive predictions, while 22% offered no predictions.

The Financial Times
FIG 6. Constitutional Crisis Neutrality of Coverage during the crisis build-up, October 29, 2004 – May 28, 2005

Representative of the media rhetoric during this period is a 25 September 2004 *Economist* article stating, “Gentlemen, you are trying to negotiate something you will never be able to negotiate. But if negotiated, it will not be ratified. And if ratified, it will not work.”
Similarly, Wolfgang Munchau, a regular Financial Times columnist, wrote on 3 October 2004, “The bandwagon against the European constitutional treaty is rolling...it is worth asking whether there is such a thing as a Plan B. The answer is no, at least not officially” (Munchau 2004). This not only shows oft-repeated negative predictions about the prospects of the treaty, but also a strong belief that the EU would not be able to find a way forward after its failure. And this was more than seven months before the actual negative referenda occurred.

During this period of crisis build-up, the dominant crisis narrative emphasized in media coverage was public-elite tensions (Figure 7), an indicator of a period of integrational panic. For example, a Time Magazine article stated, “There’s no trust in the future, no capacity for risk taking...The French just aren’t happy about the way the world turns right now, and the referendum gives them a chance to say no to many things: to Turkey in the E.U., to Chirac, to enlargement, to offshoring of jobs, to globalization.” (Graff 2005) A Financial Times article describing French unemployment, debt, economic slowdown, and decline in social protection as “a profound crisis of society which is transforming itself into an immense crisis of confidence,”14 was also representative of the tone in the international media, which had little to do with the terms of the new treaty. A Time Magazine article captured it well in March 2005: “There's a growing desire to punish leaders, and blame Paris and Brussels alike for everything going wrong...Most people are basing how they'll vote on anything but the constitution itself” (Crumley 2005). Like in the Iraq case, as the crisis grew, the media picked up and amplified pre-existing societal tensions, and drew strong connections between the fate of the new Treaty and the future viability of the EU.

This media-focus on a growing problem between publics and elites was comprised of several strains of tensions, depending on whether the focus was on EU elites or national elites.
At the national level, tensions often involved the fear of losing national identity and sovereignty, citizens’ unhappiness with the current government, unemployment, and the role of migrant workers. At the European level, tensions reflected a feeling that the EU was remote, and that the Eurozone and single market would take precedence over citizens’ rights, and the fear of what future enlargements would bring. Significantly, only 2% of the news coverage actually dealt with the substantive terms of the Constitutional Treaty itself.


Naturally, the crisis reached its height with the failed referenda votes in France and the Netherlands. The French voted “no” on 29 May 2005, with 55% opposed and 45% in favor (voter turnout was 70%). Three days later, 61% of Dutch voters said “no”, compared to 39% who voted “yes” (voter turnout was 62%). In the words of one former EU official, with decades
of experience in Brussels, the negative referenda resulted in immediate “seismic shocks” to the system, and represented “without a shadow of a doubt, a turning point in European integration” (Sutton 2005:2).

In the wake of this blow to the Treaty ratification process, The Economist intensified its “end of Europe” rhetoric. “The Europe that died” was on the cover of the June 4-10, 2005 issue, and the article itself stated, “The EU should move in the direction of being a looser, less federalist and more decentralized club…the club must pass more powers back to its members.”15 Later that month, The Economist published a cover image of a garbage can with the title, “Where to file Europe’s new constitution.”16 In the US, the cover of the June 2005 issue of Time Magazine described the constitutional crisis, as “The Great Crackup,” and the article stated, “In Brussels, there is still a reluctance to admit the obvious: that the constitution is dead.”17

Instead of recognizing that this treaty would have to be put to another round of ratification, like nearly all of the EU’s past treaties, journalists and commentators argued that the EU had reached the end of the road for integration and enlargement, even possibly leading to departures of some member states. They insisted that the EU must become looser, member states would take back power from Brussels, and there would not be a more integrated core, as some federalists had suggested. There was a sense that the “no” votes were a sign that the EU should focus more on economic liberalization and growth, not social or political Europe.18 The societal panic over the future of integration had set in.

It is important to recognize the socially constructed nature of this crisis, especially at its height. The constitution did not fail because of anything inherent about its terms, nor did it fail

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because of widespread agreement that more Europe was a bad thing. French voters were worried about a wide variety of issues – the economy, jobs, and national politics – when they went to the polls to decide the fate of the Constitutional Treaty. Many saw this as a referendum on French President Jacques Chirac’s government. As one *Economist* article describes it: “What might have been an arcane question about constitutional arrangements has morphed into a battle over the future of France.” Of course, the media itself had played a significant role in turning the treaty’s ratification process into greater questions of existentialism in the crisis build-up phase, with its overwhelming emphasis on public-elite tensions, and with very little actual information on the contents of the treaty. To the extent that French voters did see the referendum as having to do with Europe, they voted based on fears that Turkey would join the EU, that they would lose their national identity, and that the Constitution would somehow mean fewer jobs for them. As one expert puts it, “Few if any of the electorate could indicate with any degree of precision the precise way in which the Constitution itself caused, contributed to or aggravated any of these phenomena” (Sutton 2005:6).

Similarly, the Dutch also voted based on unhappiness with their current government, and out of fear of a threat to national identity. Some cited the economic cost of the EU and the Euro. A majority felt that the Netherlands was paying too much to the EU, even though national contributions to the EU budget amount to less than 1% of GDP. To add to this, Dutch Prime Minister Balkenende was so confident that the outcome of the referendum would be positive that he did not make any effort to explain the treaty to the public and garner their support. In both France and the Netherlands, those who campaigned against the Constitutional Treaty devoted far

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more time and resources to dissuading the population from voting in favor of it. Again, in both cases, the “no” votes had little to do with the treaty itself.

The media frenzy had amplified these societal reactions, leading to a sense of real threat to the very existence of the EU. Andrew Gamble captures the essence of the dominant narrative in Europe at the time, questioning “whether further integration… enlargement would proceed and even whether the EU could survive in the long term, or would lapse into a condition of increasing disunion” (Gamble 2006: 35). The narrative about the cause of the treaty’s failure continued to focus on public-elite tensions. One particularly poignant cover of Der Spiegel had the title, “Dictatorship of Bureaucrats,” with an image of the European Parliament in the background, and the mythological woman, Europa, holding the EU flag with a red X painted across it.20

By this highpoint in the crisis, societal narratives became intertwined with media rhetoric. Leaders across the EU were shocked by this negative outcome, especially because it came from two founding-member countries. They were also serious about addressing the root cause of this unexpected outcome. In many EU member-states, but especially Germany, France, and the Netherlands, there was a tendency to turn inward and to reflect on the problems within, such as the economy, the aging population, the decline of the welfare state, and the negative effects of globalization. These social ills had remained more or less under the surface prior to the no votes, but they became the central narrative in the wake of failure.

There was much discussion among Europeans about what went wrong, and always at the heart of this was the gap between the elites and the public. This was reflected and amplified in the tensions conveyed through news coverage. From the perspective of the public, the narrative was that “it would be fatal if the leaders went on in the same way as of now” (Klingst 2005).

20 Der Spiegel, June 6, 2005.
The ratification process continued for some time after the French and Dutch referenda, and the crisis period began to reach resolution. In total, 18 member states actually ratified the treaty. But following the negative referenda in France and the Netherlands, European leaders decided to hold a “reflection period” on what to do next. They resolved to craft a new plan for a Treaty that would be very similar to the failed constitution, but would not replace all existing treaties. This decision is significant because if the media had been right in its interpretation of these events as an existential crisis, it would have been easy and understandable for European leaders to simply abandon the ideas put forth in the Constitutional Treaty. However, Europeans used this failure and subsequent crisis to find a way to move the EU towards more integration. This determination to move forward also reflects the fact that the negative referenda were not based on any significant or real problems with the treaty itself.

The result was the Reform Treaty, later renamed the Lisbon Treaty, which was signed in December 2007 and implemented in December 2009. The innovations of the Lisbon Treaty were nearly identical to those of the Constitutional Treaty, including the creation of the posts equivalent to EU foreign minister and “permanent president” of the European Council, the advent of a substantial diplomatic service with 140 embassies, agreement on the mutual defense solidarity clauses, a formalized a Charter of Fundamental Rights, among many other provisions. In the end, there was no real reason for this rather routine process of ratifying a new treaty that clearly served to improve the functioning of the enlarged EU to become a crisis of such proportions.
Like in the Iraq case, the crisis trigger for this third case was again external in origin. The sub-prime mortgage crisis that brought down Wall Street in 2008 served as a kind of pre-crisis trigger, but did not yet signify the beginning of Europe’s third existential crisis of the 21st century. However, prior to the impact of the Wall Street crash, the Eurozone was actually doing well, having maintained a steady growth rate since the introduction of the Euro. Indeed, it took around two years for the Wall Street crash to really be interpreted as a full-blown existential crisis for the EU and its currency. Eurozone growth overall was negative in 2009, as the entire global economy contracted, but talk of the possible break up or end of the Eurozone did not really reach a serious level until 2011. Many economists and public commentators have argued that the Eurozone was headed for crisis no matter what (Ash 2012:2). But it is important to recognize that it took a massive destabilization of the global economy – caused by US deregulation under President Bush and prior administrations – for the weaknesses in the structure of the Eurozone to rise to the surface. Besides the real solvency problem in Greece, the weaknesses in the Eurozone were all in some way or another caused by a lack of full fiscal integration, something that was gradually being achieved, but not quickly enough to handle the unexpected problems brewing on Wall Street.

Thus, a more immediate event was the realization of the sheer scale of Greece’s debt, which had been hidden for several years, with the help of Goldman Sachs’s underhanded accounting. Specifically, May 2011 marked the point at which the media turned this potential crisis trigger into a reason for societal panic, leading to the build-up of the EU’s existential crisis. This was the month when people began to perceive that Eurozone problems would not just be confined to Greece. Indeed, it became apparent that Portugal required a bailout, and that Greece
would need a second bailout to avoid default. Still, even at this point, these two countries only represented 3-4% of the whole Eurozone economy (Greece alone represented around 2% of the Eurozone economy and Portugal an even smaller portion). Nonetheless, news coverage shifted from debate over what to do to help Greece to fears that the European project itself was in jeopardy. The crisis reached its peak in November 2011 with Greek Prime Minister George Papandreou’s announcement that he would put austerity to a popular referendum.

Why did the Greek debt crisis turn into a full-blown EU crisis in early 2011, complete with “end of Europe” rhetoric? Again, a media-frenzy signaled the buildup of the crisis from May to October 2011 (Figure 9). The socially constructed dynamic of crises is especially hard felt in the case of an economic or financial crisis because markets are fundamentally shaped and affected by perceptions and investors’ confidence in the economy. Thus, while the structure of the Eurozone did have some elements of weakness – all economies do – it was the shift in perception amplified by the media (Figure 10) that not only constructed a feeling of Eurozone-wide crisis, but caused international markets to react sharply against the future of the Eurozone. Journalists played a significant role in turning the Greek debt crisis into a crisis for all of Europe, and in turn, investors started betting against other countries in the Eurozone, creating a contagion effect.
FIG 10. Eurozone Crisis Neutrality of Coverage during the crisis build-up, May 1, 2011 - November 30, 2011

TIME Magazine
- Neutral: 20%
- Positive: 3%
- Negative: 77%

The Economist
- Neutral: 22%
- Negative: 78%

Intl. Herald Tribune
- Neutral: 27%
- Positive: 7%
- Negative: 66%

Financial Times
- Neutral: 37%
- Positive: 6%
- Negative: 57%
May 1, 2010, *Acropolis Now: Europe’s Debt Crisis Spins out of Control*  
January 15, 2011, *The Euro Crisis: Time for Plan B*  
July 16, 2011, *On the edge: Why the euro crisis has just got a lot worse*  
November 26, 2011, *Is this Really the End?* (with image of a Euro coin going down in flames)

Very few public figures recognized this largely disproportional ratcheting up of crisis rhetoric, the launch of a period of integrational panic. There were a few exceptions coming from former political leaders who must have felt more freedom to point out the obvious. Former British foreign secretary David Miliband wrote in an op-ed, “I don’t know whether to weep or laugh. Eurozone leaders have turned a €50bn Greek solvency problem into a €1,000bn existential crisis for the European Union” (Miliband 2011). Similarly, former French President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing said in a speech:

> Greece is a great culture but a small country in our financial sphere and there is no basis for it rocking the euro at this point, had it not been constantly prodded by speculators and by banks from outside the euro area (Rettman 2011).

And former German chancellor Helmut Schmidt added to this, stating, “This talk of a crisis of the euro is merely hot air emanated by journalists and politicians” (Rettman 2011). He described the atmosphere of the time as psychopathic, and emphasized that it was really the Anglo-Saxon media that was to blame.

By contrast, many media reports and op-eds argued that either Greece would have to leave the EU, or it would bring the rest of Europe down with it. News stories like, “It’s Time to Admit the Euro has Failed,” and “10 Reasons the Euro was a Dumb Idea,” became commonplace (Sivy 2011; see also Gersemann 2011). Others predicted that the only way Greece could repair its own economy and save itself was to leave the EU. Despite this media-driven crisis-buildup, leading to a keen sense of integrational panic, at no point in this period did the European
Commission or any EU head of state suggest that Greece (or any other country) might have to leave the EU. The media rhetoric about the Eurozone crisis had gone far beyond the reality, and market reactions were turning this into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

As with all crises, there are multiple tensions at stake, but the one that stood out in the international media was that of hostility between northern and southern member states (Figure 11). Europeans (except for those in the South) had long talked about these tensions through the language of stereotypes. Northern Europeans were assumed to be “hard-working, law-abiding people who live within their means,” while Southern Europeans were “work-shy, rule-bending, and profligate” (Mahony 2012). The media played a major role in spreading and sharpening these stereotypes through its focus on this as the dominant tension underlying the growing problems in the Eurozone. Other tensions about the crisis that arguably would have made much more sense in this context were: blame for US neglect in upholding financial regulation, criticism of Wall Street, criticism of the global banking sector for greed and corruption, questioning of capitalism in general, or complaining of growing inequality between the rich and the poor. However, these were either far less prominent or non-existent in media coverage, again demonstrating the socially constructed nature of the crisis during the build-up phase.
As the crisis continued, France and Germany took the lead in trying to find a solution. This was a natural development given that they have the biggest of the Eurozone economies, and have been traditional leaders throughout the evolution of the EU. In reaction to their leadership...
during the Eurozone crisis, however, many southern Europeans were highly critical, especially when it came to German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s role. As media rhetoric and societal narratives within Europe became increasingly intertwined, southern member states’ reactions added fuel to the fire of the media’s coverage. For example, op-ed columnist Gideon Rachman wrote,

Any taboos about references to the Nazi occupation of Greece have been dropped long ago. Across southern Europe, the ‘ugly German’ is back – accused of driving other nations into penury, deposing governments and generally barking orders at all and sundry (Rachman 2012).

At various points in the crisis, the backlash from some southern member states became so severe that for the first time since the founding of the ECSC there was open talk of “the German problem” again, and various other forms of highly controversial German-bashing.

This analysis of international media coverage shows that these North-South tensions had four main aspects to them: (1) criticism of the South for being fiscally irresponsible, (2) criticism of Germany for being too iron-fisted, (3) tension between net detractors and net contributors to the EU budget, and (4) tension between Euro and non-Euro member states (Figure 12). But when the crisis reached its height in November 2011, the dominant narrative expressed in the media was the problem with Germany’s behavior. 45% of the coverage in TIME Magazine, 54% in The Economist, 48% in the IHT, and 39% in the FT focused on this. There was a shift from blaming the South for being fiscally irresponsible to blaming the North for not offering its support, and in particular, blaming Germany for being too iron-fisted.
This emphasis on Germany as the main problem may be somewhat surprising, given that the German economy itself was not suffering directly in light of the Eurozone crisis, nor were Germans destabilizing the Euro directly. But again, it points to the socially constructed nature of crises and the sorts of difficulties that arise once integrational panic sets in: the story was that the real source of the crisis was not so much the financial hardships experienced by countries in the South, but Germany’s unwillingness to act quickly enough, the austerity measures it required, and the control from Brussels that was a condition for any bailout.

Because recovery from this crisis, more than the other two, was at the whim of volatile external markets, international speculators, and the pain of austerity (which clearly backfired), the crisis had a resurgence in mid-2012 before the existential threat was finally put to rest. As the crisis began to weaken, there was growing talk of the greater importance of Europe for
preserving peace, and enabling all European countries to prosper. The overarching narrative featured less talk of the North-South divide, and started showing more signs of solidarity. Leaders made explicit ties between the survival of the Euro and the survival of Europe, among other things. Consensus is growing that the worst of the Eurozone crisis came to a close by the end of 2012, although a full recovery will take several years. As the theory of integrational panic anticipates, the “end of Europe” rhetoric had quickly disappeared, and the focus returned to the real core of the problem, which was Greek sovereign debt and the aftermath of detrimental austerity strategies in other peripheral states.

With the end of Europe’s crisis of confidence came a number of big steps forward in terms of fiscal integration, including: a European fiscal compact to maintain balanced budgets, transparency rules that allow Brussels to monitor national budgets, a permanent European Stability Mechanism, the eventual creation of a fiscal union, and increased powers to the European Central Bank. Some even more far-reaching initiatives that would have never been discussed seriously before the crisis are also on the table, such as: a financial transaction tax, a European finance minister, Eurobonds, a mechanism to temporarily ban speculative trading, a ban on rating agencies addressing sovereign debt, a European monetary fund, and an EU rating agency. Even though some of these ideas are still a long way from reaching fruition, it is significant that such a far-ranging level of fiscal integration is even being discussed, when the media had only recently characterized the crisis as leading to the downfall of Europe. Now, more and more people are beginning to remember that the EU still constitutes the largest economy in the world, its currency is still worth around 30% more than the dollar, and it is still the largest trading partner and largest foreign direct investor for both the US and China.
Conclusion

I have argued that certain crises are socially constructed, and that the international media plays a significant role in this. This paper’s empirical findings show that there is indeed a pattern of this that has affected the European region. In each of the three case studies, the media ratchets up a climate of crisis disproportionate to reality, and this is reflected in the volume of coverage as the crisis builds from its initial starting point. Second, the media continually puts a negative spin on this coverage, even if there is no basis for this. Third, there are specific dominant tensions reflected in the narratives about the crises in international news coverage that do not line up with the core problems associated with the crises, revealing the integrational panic dynamic. Ultimately, I find that the media has played a significant role in turning what might have been ordinary stumbling blocks in the ongoing process of EU integration into existential crises that seemingly threaten to derail the European project entirely.

There are two main alternative interpretations. One argument would be that the media is simply reactive – dutifully reporting the news – and not proactively contributing to the ratcheting up of crises. After all, in each of the crisis cases discussed here, at some point in the crisis build-up phase, social dialogue becomes entangled with the tensions expressed in the media. It is inherently difficult to separate the causal effect of the media versus the European social narratives at work. Could the media simply be doing its job and covering the major issues at stake in each crisis?

I have shown that the timing in crisis trajectories is crucial. The key phase in which the media clearly has an independent role is immediately after the crisis trigger, when coverage disproportionately turns something relatively average into something that threatens the very existence of the EU. In the Iraq case, the media construed disagreement over foreign policy –
which often occurs – as something novel that threatened the possibility of enlargement to the Central and Eastern European countries. In the case of the Constitutional Treaty, the media construed even the possibility of a negative referendum as the end of the road for integration even though nearly every treaty before had at first experienced negative referenda. And in the case of the Eurozone crisis, the media portrayed a Greek debt crisis that represented only 2% of the Eurozone economy, as a threat to the very survival of the entire Euro, and possibly even the EU itself. Thus, there is a clear point at which the media closes the gap between reality and worst-case scenario thinking through its volume of coverage and negative spin, playing a proactive role in building up each crisis as my integrational panic framework anticipates.

A second counter-argument would come from those who regard crises as objective, systemic phenomena, rather than socially constructed. This approach, which is also favored by many Euroskeptics, would regard the media as only peripheral to the very real problems that EU integration continually faces. In other words, they would argue that the EU really has been on the verge of dissolution on multiple occasions because it is deeply flawed. This counter-argument would also presumably ignore the socially constructed nature of the EU itself, which contains growing loyalty and closer identification of its citizens with the idea of Europe, as well as the political will to make it work because of a belief in the shared values of peace, the rule of law, multilateralism, cooperation, diplomacy, and so on.

Moreover, as the evidence demonstrates, the dominant tensions that characterize crisis narratives do not reflect the actual cause of each crisis. Indeed, a systemic approach would anticipate that serious tensions within European society would be the cause of the crisis because they are at the core of what constitutes the structural flaws in the European project (for example, national interest and competition). And this is precisely why the concept of integrational panic is
so useful. In the case of the Iraq crisis, the dominant East-West tension did not reflect the reality of how member states were actually divided vis-à-vis participation in the Iraq invasion. Similarly, public-elite tensions did not cause the Constitutional crisis. The systemic approach would assume that this crisis began with the negative referenda, but I have shown that the end of Europe rhetoric emerged at the start of the ratification process. Even then, the negative referenda in France and the Netherlands were not related to the actual substance of the Constitution. And if the Eurozone crisis were so inevitable, as a systemic approach would argue, then what explains the timing of it? Greece was the only country with a solvency problem, and North-South tensions in Europe did not cause the Wall Street sub-prime mortgage crash. Thus, these crises were socially constructed in meaningful ways, and as such, could have just as easily not become existential crises for the EU.

Of course, integrational panic is just one kind of societal panic that the media can incite and amplify. To recognize such cases more generally, there should be (1) evidence of disproportionate rhetoric about events – primarily in the international media – that exaggerate the implications or severity of a potential crisis trigger; (2) an emphasis on social tensions and the presence of sharp divisions (us vs. them); and (3) growth in the perception that societal or political breakdown of some kind is imminent. The severity of these factors can vary, but the more distressing they become, the more likely they can result in a self-fulfilling prophecy. In this increasingly fast-paced, media-centric international environment, the recognition of the media’s role in the social construction of crises is an important dimension to consider in understanding the greater implications of crises for international relations.
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