EU Crises and the International Media

Mai'a K. Davis Cross and Xinru Ma

Working papers can be downloaded from the ARENA homepage:
www.arena.uio.no

Abstract

Even a casual look at the history of the European Union (EU) since its inception in 1957 shows that at numerous junctures through its development, the EU (or EEC/EC in its previous incarnations) has been portrayed as being in severe crisis. Of course, the EU continues to exist today, and it is arguably stronger and more integrated than ever. Why do EU crises continually defy popular and media-driven expectations? We focus here on the role of international media coverage in cultivating crises and seek to draw out a pattern across three prominent case studies: the 2003 Iraq crisis, 2005 Constitutional crisis, and 2010–2 Eurozone crisis. Through detailed media content analysis we 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.

Introduction[1]

The evolving European order, which centres on the process of European Union (EU) integration, is characterised by both (1) incremental change and (2) critical junctures of crisis. This paper focuses on the latter. Even a casual look at the history of the EU since its inception in 1957 shows that at numerous junctures through its development, the EU (or EEC/EC in its previous incarnations) has been portrayed as being in severe crisis from the 1965 Empty Chair crisis to the 1999 Commission resignation crisis to the 2011 Schengen and refugee crisis. Whether these crises are internal in origin – such as the 2005 Constitutional crisis – or external in origin – such as the 2003 Iraq crisis – they are typically portrayed in the media with a heavy, negative slant, with journalists and commentators often indulging in 'end of Europe' rhetoric, inspiring predictions about the disintegration of the European project.

Of course, the EU continues to exist today, and it is arguably stronger and more integrated than ever. It is often recognised in hindsight that European actors seem to use crises as opportunities to further shape European order, enhance legitimacy, and increase integration, beyond what can be achieved incrementally. There appears to be a pattern in which major advances in European integration follow in the wake of these crises. The 1986 Single European Act, 2003 European Security Strategy, 2009 Lisbon Treaty, and 2012 Fiscal Compact, among many others, all followed seemingly serious existential crises.[2] Doomsday predictions continually prove to be overblown, and yet these errors in perception are repeated over and over again.

Why do EU crises continually defy popular and media-driven expectations? While it is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into all aspects of the build-up and resolution of EU crises,[3] we focus here on the role of international media coverage in cultivating crises and seek to draw out a pattern across three prominent case studies: the 2003 Iraq crisis, 2005 Constitutional crisis, and 2010-2 Eurozone crisis. Through detailed media content analysis we argue

---

[1] This paper has benefitted from the valuable research assistance of Molly Krasnodebska and Nicolas de Zamaroczy. I am also grateful to Asimina Michailidou, Rebecca Adler-Nissen, and Kamil Zwolski, for their helpful feedback on previous drafts.

[2] These post-crisis steps towards deeper integration also stretch beyond formal policy initiatives to include societal-level integration, such as a strengthening of the European public sphere, increasing Europeanisation of identity, or an enhanced commitment to the European project.

[3] The full story behind these crises, in addition to the processes by which they are resolved, will be the subject of a much larger research project: Mai'a K. Davis Cross, *The Politics of Crisis in Europe,* book manuscript forthcoming.

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.

Almost no research has actually examined EU crises in a comparative framework. There are a number of articles on various EU crises, but they tend to focus only on single case studies.[4] Only one book actually compares the role of crises over time in the EU integration process, but it is exclusively historical and emphasises the role of European founding myths.[5] Arguably, the most important crises to try to understand have been the crises of the 21st century. This is when the stakes have been extraordinarily high in the quest to ensure ongoing legitimacy, order, and integration in the EU.

This paper proceeds as follows. The first section reviews a number of theoretical approaches to crises in international relations, and argues that crises are socially constructed. The second section, which is the bulk of the paper, examines three crisis case studies: the 2003 Iraq crisis, 2005 Constitutional crisis, and 2010-12 Eurozone crisis. In each case, we focus on the role of the media in building up the crisis through a kind of crisis frenzy, the media's neutrality (or lack thereof) in its interpretation of the crisis, and the kinds of tensions stressed in the coverage. Finally, we conclude with consideration of alternative explanations for why these crises became existential threats.

What is in a Crisis?

Several different social science perspectives grapple with crises, and define them in a number of ways.[6] For example, in considering EU crises, Sam-Sung

---

[4] Lewis, Jeffrey (2009) 'EU Policy on Iraq: The collapse and reconstruction of consensus-based foreign policy', *International Politics*, 45 (4): 432–450; Crowe, Brian (2003) 'A Common European Foreign Policy after Iraq?', *International Affairs*, 79(3): 533–546; Gleissner, Martin and de Vreese, Claes H. (2005) 'News about the EU Constitution: Journalistic challenges and media portrayal of the European Union Constitution', *Journalism* 6(2): 221–242; Gamble, Andrew (2006) 'European Disunion', *British Journal of Politics & International Relations,* 8(1): 34–49.

[5] Jo, Sam-Sang (2007) *European myths: resolving the crises in the European Community/European Union,* Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, Inc. Jo's case studies are the 1965-66 Empty Chair Crisis, the 1973-74 monetary and oil crisis, the 1979-84 British budgetary crisis and the 1992 Maastricht Treaty crisis.

[6] Schmitt, Carl (1922/2004) *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty.* Translated by George D. Schwab, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Originaly published as *Politische Theologie: Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveranitat,* 1922, Berlin: Duncker &

Jo takes a so-called *systemic approach*. This approach, which draws upon earlier work by Oran Young,[7] Sydney Verba,[8] and Peter Gourevitch,[9] defines crises as situations in which institutions are de-stabilised and the continuity of the system is threatened.[10] According to Young, crises result from 'unfolding events' that enable 'destabilising forces' in the international system to disturb routine patterns and threaten the nature of the existing system.[11] Thus, this approach assumes that crises are objective phenomena, and that human perceptions do not matter. Events simply occur, and then decision makers must find a way to reinstate stability, even if it requires fundamentally changing the system in place. In comparative politics, organisational theory and historical institutionalism similarly do not problematise the origins of crises and take these critical junctures as given.[12] 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 behavioural perspective, Charles Hermann defines crises as an event that:

> (1) threatens one or more important goals of a state, that is, the group of authoritative policy makers who constitute the state, (2) allows only a short time for decision before the situation is significantly transformed, and (3) occurs as a surprise to the policy makers.[13]

Humblot; Neal, Andrew (2009) *Exceptionalism and the politics of counter-terrorism: liberty, security and the war on terror,* New York, NY: Routledge; Forsberg, Tuomas and Pursiainen, Christer (2006) 'Crisis Decision-Making in Finland: Cognition, Institutions and Rationality', *Cooperation and Conflict,* 41(3): 235–260; Geva, Nehemia, Mayhar, James and Skorick, J. Mark (2000) 'The Cognitive Calculus of Foreign Policy Decision Making: An Experimental Assessment', *Journal of Conflict Resolution,* 44(4): 447–471.

[7] Young, Oran (1968) *The Politics of Force: Bargaining During International Crises,* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

[8] Verba, Sidney (1917) 'Sequences and Development', in Leonard Binder et al. (eds), *Crises and Sequences in Political Development,* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

[9] Gourevitch, Peter (1984) *Politics in Hard Times: Comparative Responses to International Economic Crises,* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

[10] Jo, *European myths: resolving the crises in the European Community/European Union,* chapter 3.

[11] Young, *The Politics of Force,* 6–15.

[12] Capoccia, Giovanni and Kelemen, R. Daniel (2007) 'The Study of Critical Junctures: Theory, Narrative, and Counterfactuals in Historical Institutionalism', *World Politics,* 59(3): 343–369.

[13] Hermann, Charles (1972) 'Threat, time, and surprise: A simulation of international crises', in Hermann, Charles (ed.), *International Crises: Insights from Behavioral Research,* New York, NY: Free Press.

Other scholars from this approach have argued that *time to respond* and *surprise* are ambiguous in Hermann's definition, and that crises are really much more about the *perception of threat*. Robert Billings *et al.* argue that in understanding crises, 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'.[14] 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. Billings *et al.* go on to argue that after the triggering event, there must be a sense of time pressure and stress otherwise the actors involved will not seek to deal with the perceived threat immediately. A sense of urgency goes hand in hand with crises. Ultimately, according to this approach, crises are defined by people's perceptions of it and its potential impact on them. [15] A crisis becomes a crisis when people say it is, and this rests fundamentally on their material calculations of cost.

Behavioralists have not applied this model to EU crises. While the need to take into account human perceptions of crises represents an improvement on the systemic approach –crises are fundamentally *social* processes – the emphasis on cost calculation does not fit well with the pattern of EU crises. In many cases, Europeans 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 be the *idea* of a supranational entity.[16]

From a sociological and post-modern perspective, Colin Hay takes this line of reasoning about perceptions a step further to argue that crises are socially constructed and 'subjectively perceived'.[17] In particular, he argues that shared narratives about crises bring them into existence, not calculations of loss or

---

[14] Billings, Robert, Milburn, Thomas and Schaalman, Mary Lou (1980) 'A Model of Crisis Perception: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 25(2): 300–316.

[15] Billings *et al.,* 'A Model of Crisis Perception: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis', 303–304.

[16] Cross, Mai'a K. Davis (2012) 'Identity Politics and European Integration', *Comparative Politics,* 44(2): 229–246.

[17] Hay, Colin (1999) 'Crisis and the structural transformation of the state: interrogating the process of change', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations,* 1(3): 317–344.

cost. Only an approach that takes human interpretation into account can tell us why some crises become much more serious than others. In some cases, crises are strategically used for political ends,[18] such as for increasing state power or furthering EU integration.[19] Even further down the road of post-modernism, Carl Schmitt argues that sovereign decision makers nearly always create crises to justify certain political actions. As he writes, 'the sovereign is he who decides on the exception'.[20] By exception, Schmitt is referring to crises that stand outside of the normal state of affairs. He argues that only the sovereign can identify these emergencies and determine how to resolve them. Moreover, when a sovereign identifies crises, he can then disregard the natural principles and laws that normally bind his actions, and protect the interests of the people.[21] Similarly, Andrew Neal addresses the question: 'Should liberal states ever act illberally?'[22] When does the exceptionalism of crises give statesmen license to change the existing order? Clearly, Schmitt's and Neal's postmodern approaches bring with them some sinister implications for crisis construction and resolution. From the perspective of EU crises, this argument would imply that EU leaders stir up crises so that they have an excuse to institute new policies that might otherwise be unpopular.

The literature on practices may reveal an alternative more fruitful approach to understanding EU crises, although it is still relatively new, and has not yet been concretely connected to crises.[23] A practices approach might ask: Given

[18] Ibid.

[19] Sala, Vincent Della (2010) 'Crisis, What Crisis? Narrating Crisis and Decline in the European Union', conference paper for the European Consortium for Political Research fifth pan-European conference on EU politics, June 23–26, 2010, Porto, Portugal.

[20] Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, Translated by George D. Schwab, 5.

[21] Ibid., 8.

[22] Neal, *Exceptionalism and the politics of counter-terrorism: liberty, security and the war on terror*, 1.

[23] Adler, Emanuel (2008) 'The Spread of Security Communities: Communities of Practice, Self-Restraint, and NATO's Post-Cold War Transformation', *European Journal of International Relations*, 14(2): 195–230; Adler, Emanuel (2009) 'Europe as a Civilizational Community of Practice', in Katzenstein, Peter (ed.), *Civilizations in World Politics: Plural and Pluralist Perspectives*, New York and London: Routledge; Pouliot, Vincent (2008) 'The Logic of Practicality: A Theory of Practice of Security Communities', *International Organization*, 62(2): 257–288; Adler, Emanuel and Pouliot, Vincent (2011) 'International Practices', *International Theory*, 3(1):1–36. Some recent practice literature that begins to grapple with crises are: Elliott, Dominic and Macpherson, Allan (2010) 'Policy and Practice: Recursive Learning From Crisis', *Group & Organization Management*, 35(5): 572–605; Seabrooke, Leonard and Tsingou, Eleni (2009) 'Power elites and everyday politics in international financial reform', *International Political Sociology*, 3(4): 457–461; Adkins, Lisa (2011) 'Practice as Temporalisation: Bourdieu and Economic Crisis', in Susen, Simon and Turner, Bryan (eds), *The Legacy of Pierre Bourdieu: Critical Essays*, London/New York, NY: Anthem Press.

the relatively numerous episodes of crises in the development of the EU, has there emerged a kind of 'crisis mode' that constitutes a pattern in the way that Europeans, at various levels, grapple with these tests of political will? Do Europeans tend to argue about crises in similar ways over time? If a crisis mode has developed then it is possible that political learning occurs to some degree. In other words, European leaders become better over time at getting through crisis situations, and realise that more integration will solve them. Given the radically different nature of various EU crises over time, and the fact that they are typically unprecedented, we anticipate that there is not enough in common to hold together a pattern of crisis resolution such that decision makers are able to revert to a crisis mode in dealing with them. Rosecrance suggests that systems that survive repeated crises have a strong variety of regulatory mechanisms in place.[24] However, the nature of EU crises have been so radically different and unprecedented in nature that at least until now the EU has not benefitted from such a structure to deal with crises. It does seem that the legacy of one crisis may spillover into the next one, as we can observe with the 2003 Iraq and 2005 Constitutional crises, but not that EU member states can fall back on regulatory mechanisms that anticipate all crises.

In examining this robust and diverse literature on crises, we argue that the sociological perspective, exemplified by Colin Hay, best accounts for the build-up of EU crises. We define 'crisis build-up' as the period in which social reactions to a potential crisis trigger 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 average events, but only some grow into seeming existential crises for the EU. Various events on the road to EU integration have built-up into crises, while others have not.

The sociology approach is particularly appropriate in examining 21st century EU crises given that the media plays such an important role in constructing crisis narratives. A media-frenzy signals the build-up of a crisis, and this in turn feeds into European and international discourses about crises. It is difficult to generalise about what motivates the media to pick up and amplify one event as compared to another,[25] but it is not enough to say that

---

[24] Rosecrance (1963) *Action and Reaction in World Politics: International Systems in Perspective*, Boston: Little, Brown.

[25] Krzyzanowski, Michael (2009) 'Europe in Crisis? Discourses on Crisis Events in the European press 1956-2006', *Journalism Studies,* 10(1): 18–35; Groeling, Tim and Baum, Matthew (2009) 'Journalists' Incentives and Media Coverage of Elite Foreign Policy Evaluations', *Conflict Management and Peace Science,* 26(5): 437–70; Glesissner, Martin and de

disagreements within Europe lead to crises because there are always disagreements. Thus, some kind of social act or catalyst must define a crisis as such. Specifically, in the next section, we argue that the media is the key social actor that defines when a triggering event becomes a crisis through the exaggerated and negative nature of its coverage, leading to a crisis build-up, and this supports the sociological approach to understanding crises. Of course, the media is not the only actor stirring up crises, but in the 21st century, it has served as a kind of threat multiplier, amplifying negative ideas about events that potentially threaten the onward trajectory of EU integration.

Alexander Wendt's work on social construction is particularly useful in understanding the relationship between triggering events, media frenzies, and the concept of crisis.[26] Wendt famously argues that there is a material reality, but that ideas play a strong role in constituting material causes in the first place. Applying this to recent existential crises for the EU, triggering events have some intrinsic causal power, but the media plays a strong role in constituting these material forces as major crises for the EU, rather than average events or routine obstacles to EU integration.

Three Crisis Cases

In this section, we examine three case studies selected for their high-level of severity. These cases are intended to be hard tests because they are often described as failures in the EU's integration process. Expectations have been that crises of this severity should represent a major setback for EU integration, not a surge forward. However, the selection of these cases is based on the severity of the crises themselves, not their resolution. The first is the 2003 Iraq invasion crisis, which paved the way to agreement on the 2003 European Security Strategy as well as other major security initiatives. The second is the 2005 Constitutional crisis, which culminated in the implementation of the 2009 Lisbon Treaty. The third is the 2010-12 Eurozone crisis, which has resulted in creation of the European Stability Mechanism, new fiscal compact rules, and an eventual banking union, among other things. The fact that these crises did not result in the disintegration of the EU, but to the contrary led to *more* integration, contrasts with the international media's doomsday predictions and provides further evidence of the socially constructed nature of EU crises.

Vreese, Claes (2005) 'News about the EU Constitution: Journalistic challenges and media portrayal of the European Union Constitution', *Journalism*, 6(2): 221–242.

[26] Wendt, Alexander (1999) *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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*. We chose these publications because they are elite-oriented, highly respected among English-language news media, represent a variety of viewpoints, and have a very high circulation globally.[27] 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 we choose here to focus on the role of international English language media, which we 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. We determined the time period for the media content analysis through a multi-step process beginning with hypothesising about the timing of the potential crisis trigger and crisis high-point, and then performing key word searches for 'Iraq,' 'Constitution' and 'Eurozone' to search for all relevant news stories five months before the hypothesised crisis trigger to ten months after the hypothesised height of the crisis.[28] We then determined whether or not our hypotheses of the timing of the crisis were correct, and adjusted the next stage of the analysis accordingly.

Table 1: Total number of articles included in media content analysis for three cases

	Iraq Crisis	Constitutional Crisis	Eurozone Crisis
Period Covered (Crisis-Build-up)	Sep. 2002–Feb. 2003	Oct. 2004–May 2005	May 2011–Nov. 2011
TIME Magazine	31	9	73
The Economist	102	18	184
The Intl. Herald Tribune	89	6	498
The Financial Times	243	233	1314

---

[27] 'The Economist Annual Report: 2011', *The Economist*, retrieved 3 May 2013 from http://www.economistgroup.com/pdfs/annual_report_2011_final_for_websites.pdf; 'The State of the News Media 2012: An Annual Report on American Journalism', *Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism*, Accessible at http://stateofthemedia.org/?src=prc-headline; 'How our readers view The Economist', *The Economist*. Archived from the original on 7 September 2006; Audit Bureau of Circulation, FAS-FAX report for consumer magazines; ADGA, PwC assured, November 2011; 'International Herald Tribune: Reader Profile, 2012', *The New York Times Global*. Retrieved 12 June, 2012.

[28] LexisNexis was the search engine used for the keyword searches.

After this initial stage, the media content analysis for each crisis focused on the volume of coverage, neutrality, and framing (focus of the story and social tension reflected in each story). The neutrality of an article is coded as negative when the depicted outlook for the crisis is negative in terms of anticipated consequences for EU continued viability and integration, rather than simply if the tone is negative. And in terms of media framing of the dominant tension, we 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. Finally, 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. Table 1 summarises the full number (not sample) of articles included in the study based on the keyword searches.

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 (Chart 1) and its lack of neutrality in tone (Chart 2).

We 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. The EU did not even have a common foreign policy as part of its institutional structure until the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, which contained the Common Foreign and Security Policy, 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 major crisis for Europe.

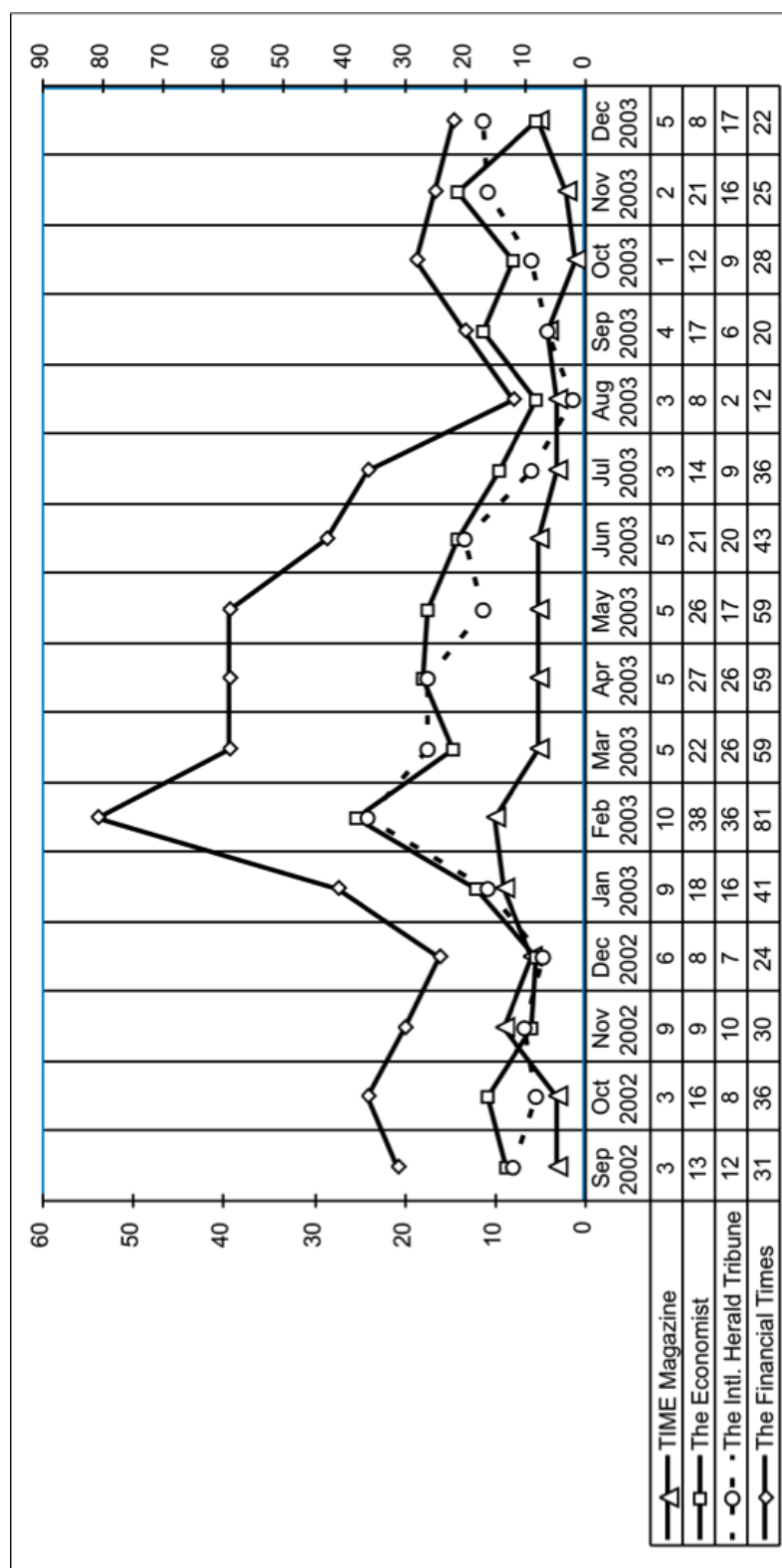|	Sep 2002	Oct 2002	Nov 2002	Dec 2002	Jan 2003	Feb 2003	Mar 2003	Apr 2003	May 2003	Jun 2003	Jul 2003	Aug 2003	Sep 2003	Oct 2003	Nov 2003	Dec 2003
TIME Magazine	3	3	9	6	9	10	5	5	5	5	3	3	4	1	2	5
The Economist	13	16	9	8	18	38	22	27	26	21	14	8	17	12	21	8
The Intl. Herald Tribune	12	8	10	7	16	36	26	26	17	20	9	2	6	9	16	17
The Financial Times	31	36	30	24	41	81	59	59	59	43	36	12	20	28	25	22

Chart 1: Iraq Crisis, Volume of News Coverage, Sep 1, 2002 – Dec 30, 2003

Note
The Y-axis on the right represents just *Financial Times* coverage since the volume is much higher than with the other three publications. The Y-axis on the left indicates the volume for *Time Magazine, International Herald Tribune,* and *The Economist.*
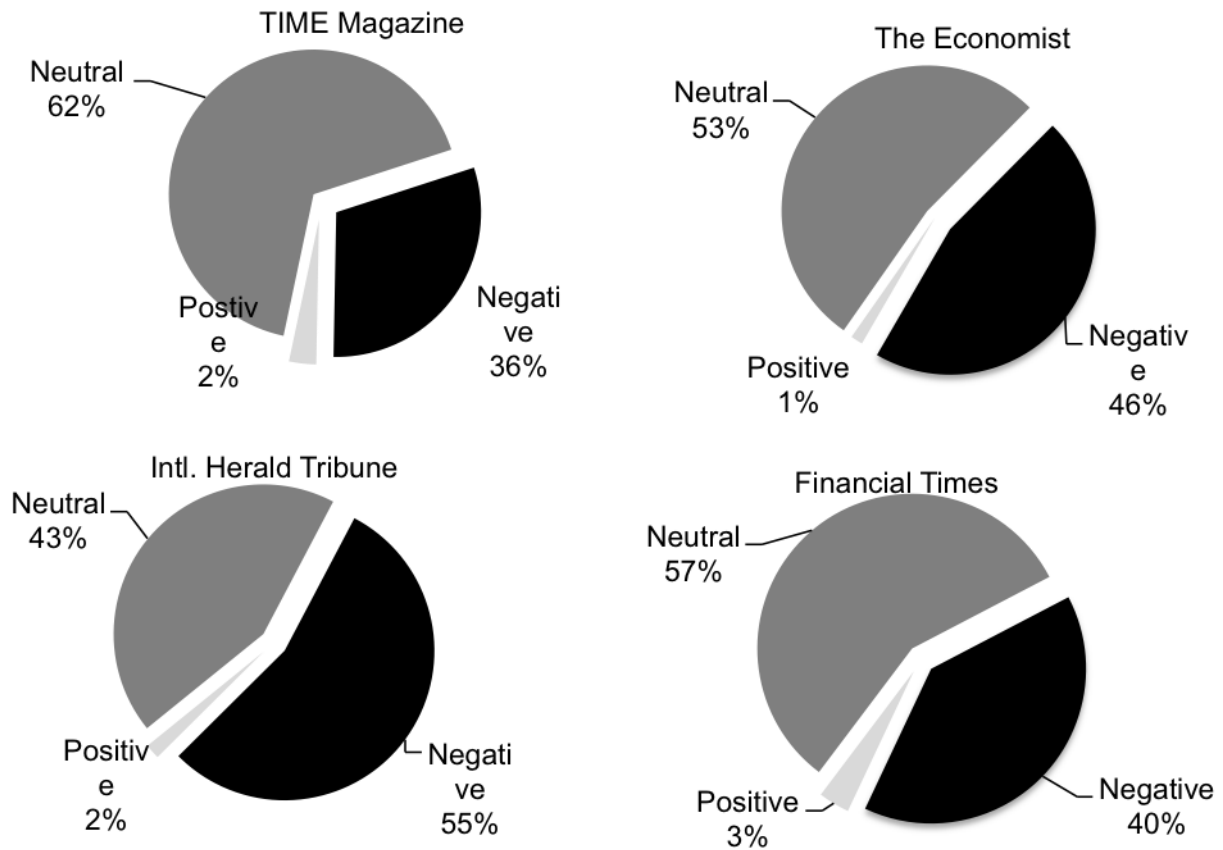
Chart 2: Iraq Crisis Neutrality of Coverage, 12 Sep 2002 - 15 Feb 2003

Moreover, the dominant crisis narrative emphasised in this media coverage (Charts 3 and 4) was mainly about member-state tensions, in particular the so-called East-West divide over Iraq, and competition among the 'Big Three' (United Kingdom (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) (see Table 2). Meanwhile, numerous other countries vehemently opposed the invasion, such as Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Luxembourg and Sweden. Significantly, the Western member states were just as significantly divided among themselves as the new member states were with them.

TIME Magazine

Non-tension Story 10 31 %

US-EU Tension 28 %

Brussels-Member State Tension 0 %

Tension Among Member States 41 %

The Economist

Non-tension Story 16 22 %

US-EU Tension 17 %

Brussels-Member State Tension 0 %

Tension Among Member States 61 %

Intl. Herald Tribune

Non-tension Story 9 14 %

US-EU Tension 27 %

Brussels-Member State Tension 1 %

Tension Among Member States 58 %

Financial Times

Non-tension Story 54 33 %

US-EU Tension 25 %

Brussels-Member State Tension 3 %

Tension Among Member States 39 %

Chart 3: Iraq Crisis Nature of Tensions in News Coverage Sep 12, 2002 to Feb 15, 2003

Others 37 %

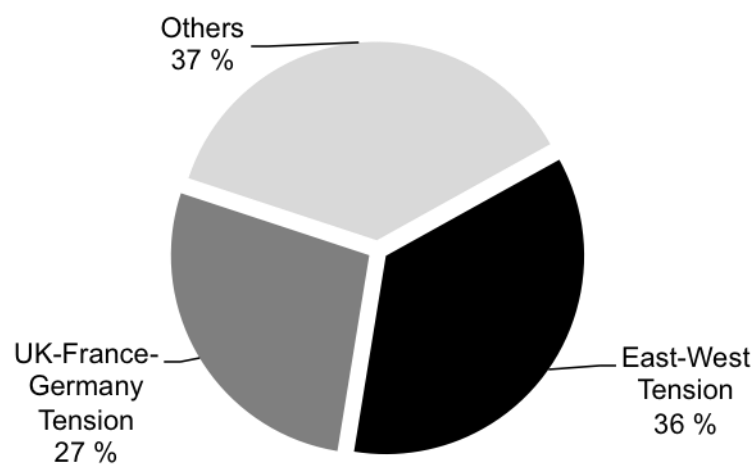UK-France-Germany Tension 27 %

East-West Tension 36 %

Chart 4: Iraq Crisis Member-State Sub-Tensions Sep. 12th, 2002 to Feb. 15th, 2003

Table 2. European Involvement in the Iraq War Coalition

	Original member states	New member states
Contributors	Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, the UK	Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia
Non-Contributors	Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, German, Greece, Ireland, Luxembourg, Sweden	Cyprus, Malta, Slovenia

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, emphasising that German leaders did not like the French determination to build up the EU to balance against the US. [29] 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. In January 2003, US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld created more momentum behind the East-West narrative when he said:

> Germany has been a problem and France has been a problem. But you look at vast numbers of other countries in Europe, they're not with France and Germany [...] they're with the US […] You're thinking of Europe as Germany and France. I don't. I think that's old Europe […] If you look at the entire NATO Europe today, the centre of gravity is shifting to the east.[30]

Newspapers all over the world printed this famous 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

---

[29] Vinocur, John 'In EU, France now leads and Germany follows', *International Herald Tribune*, December 18, 2002.

[30] 'Outrage at "Old Europe" Remarks', BBC News, World Edition, 23 January, 2003.

that they had 'missed a great opportunity to shut up'.[31] In response, Vladimir Lastuvka, chairman of the Czech parliamentary Committee for Foreign Affairs compared Chirac's remarks to Rumsfeld's and complained that 'such a tone is not customary in Europe'. [32] Latvian President Vaira Vike-Freiberga said 'Nowhere in the Copenhagen criteria does it say we cannot speak our minds'.[33] 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'.[34] They agreed in principal 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'.[35] *Time Magazine* further added to the negative bias describing it as 'Europe's Family Feud'.[36]

By this time, media coverage had significantly contributed to transforming relatively normal disagreement on foreign policy into a clear argument that the Iraq crisis could mean the failure of Europe's historic enlargement to include the CEECs.[37] Indeed, influential commentators questioned whether the plans for enlargement to the East could continue given the serious divide over Iraq. Alain Duhamel, a Europhile 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'.[38] Such a failure was equated with a more general inability for the EU to move forward according to its own goals and values.

---

[31] 'Chirac lashes out at "New Europe"', CNN World, 18 February, 2003.

[32] Graff, James 'Europe's Family Feud', *Time Magazine,* February 14, 2003.

[33] Ibid.

[34] 'European diplomacy over Iraq: United in theory, divided in practice', *The Economist,* February 22, 2003, 41.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Graff, 'Europe's Family Feud'.

[37] Fray, Peter 'With friends like these, who needs Saddam?; Winds of War', *Sydney Morning Herald,* February 22, 2003, 32.

[38] Charlemagne, 'France's high-risk diplomacy is in danger of hurting France itself', *The Economist,* February 22, 2003, 45.

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'.[39] 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 27 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, emphasising the socially constructed nature of the crisis.

Constitutional Crisis 2005

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. Agreement on EU treaties must be unanimous before they can be adopted, and such unanimity is naturally easier to achieve through parliamentary votes rather than through referenda. 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. 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 turned this potential crisis trigger into a real one through its negative and exaggerated coverage of the upcoming ratification process (Chart 5 and 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

---

[39] 'Europa ist eine echte Macht', interview with Joschka Fischer, *Die Zeit*, May 8, 2003. Translatied by Molly Krasnodebska.

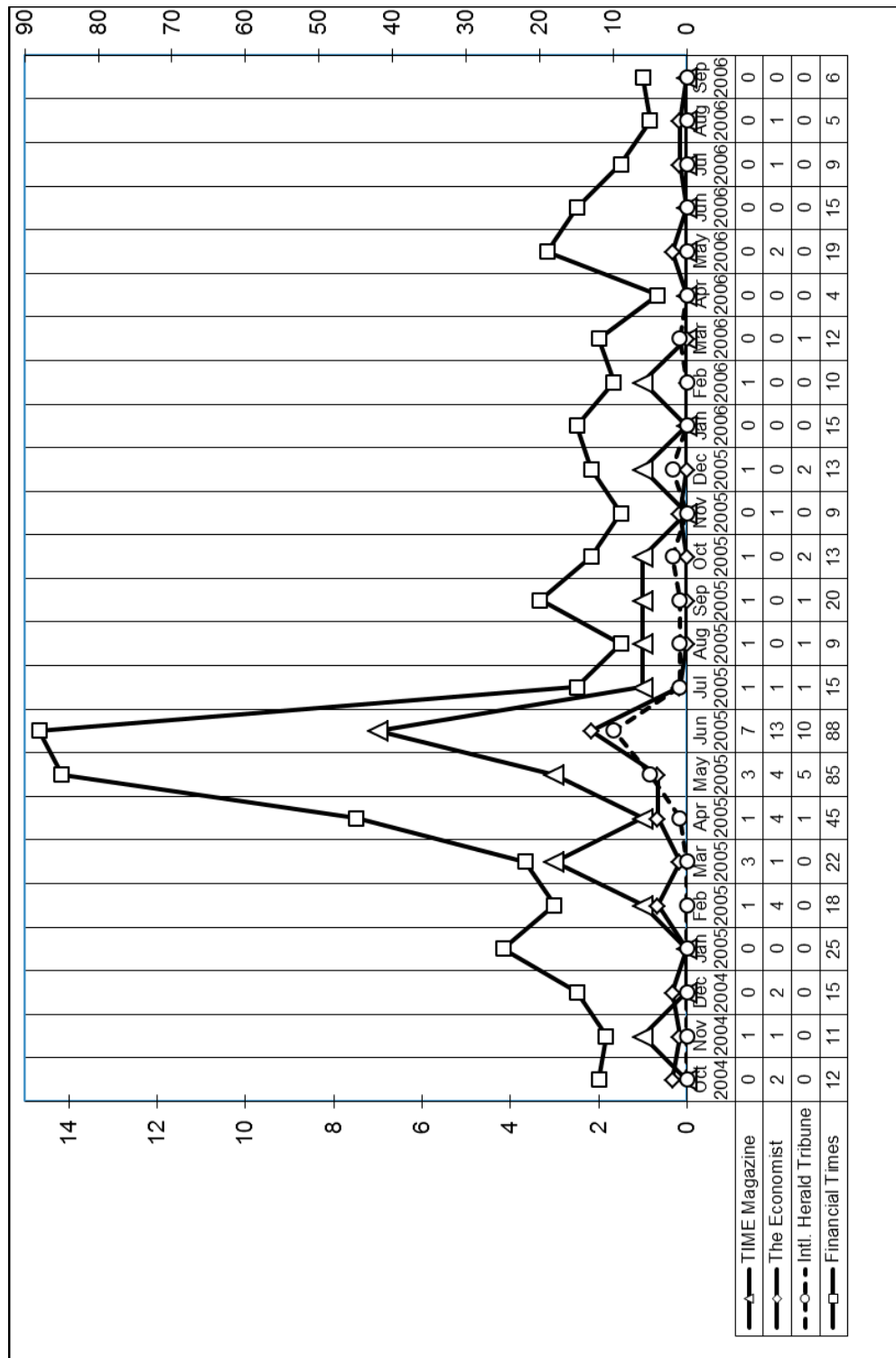|	Oct 2004	Nov 2004	Dec 2004	Jan 2005	Feb 2005	Mar 2005	Apr 2005	May 2005	Jun 2005	Jul 2005	Aug 2005	Sep 2005	Oct 2005	Nov 2005	Dec 2005	Jan 2006	Feb 2006	Mar 2006	Apr 2006	May 2006	Jun 2006	Jul 2006	Aug 2006	Sep 2006
TIME Magazine	0	1	0	0	1	3	1	3	7	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
The Economist	2	1	2	0	4	1	4	4	13	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
Intl. Herald Tribune	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	5	10	1	1	2	2	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Financial Times	12	11	15	25	18	22	45	85	88	15	9	20	13	9	13	15	10	12	4	19	15	9	5	6

Chart 5: Constitutional Crisis Volume of News Coverage, Oct 1, 2004 – Sep 30, 2006

Note

Again, the Y-axis on the right represents just *Financial Times* coverage since the volume is much higher than with the other three publications.

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, 1992 Maastricht Treaty and 2001 Nice Treaty.

TIME Magazine

Neutral
22%

Negative
78%

The Economist

Neutral
13%

Postive
6%

Negative
81%

Intl. Herald Tribune

Negative
100%

Financial Times

Neutral
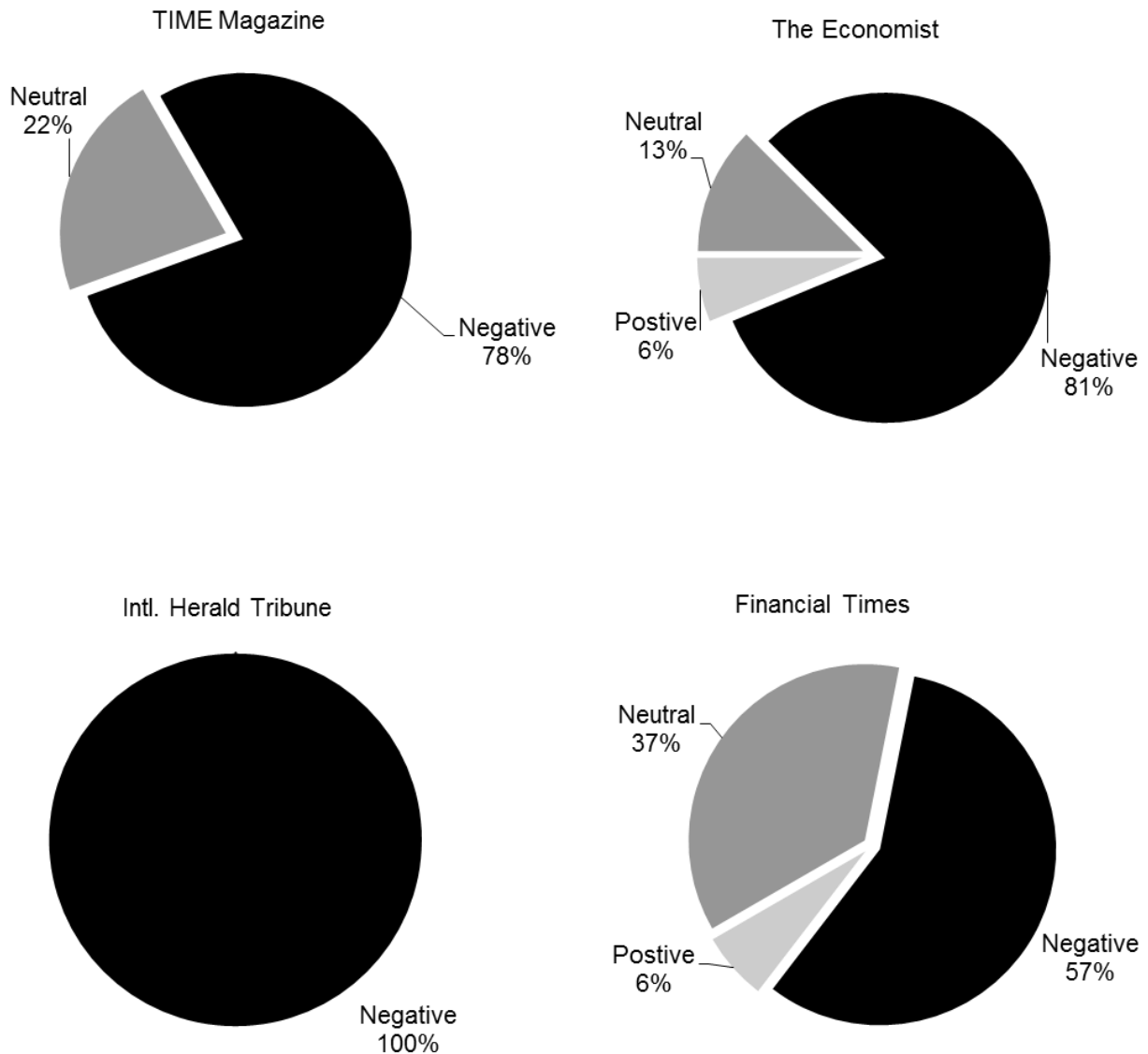37%

Postive
6%

Negative
57%

Chart 6: Constitutional Crisis Neutrality of Coverage during the crisis build-up, Oct 29, 2004 – May 28, 2005

Why did a relatively typical treaty ratification process become an existential crisis for Europe? Again, we argue that the volume of coverage (Chart 5) and negative spin (Chart 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 per cent for *Time Magazine*, 79 per cent for *The Economist,* 100 per cent for the *International Herald Tribune* and 68 per cent for the *Financial Times.*[40] 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.

Representative of the media rhetoric during this period is a 25 September 2004 *Economist* article stating: 'Gentleman, 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'.[41] Similarly, Wolfgang Munchau, a regular *Financial Times* columnist, wrote on 3 October 2004:

> The bandwagon against the European constitutional treaty is rolling [...] The chances that the constitutional treaty will be ratified in all 25 EU countries are not high [...] Given the realistic prospect of a No vote in France and the Netherlands, it is worth asking whether there is such a thing as a Plan B. The answer is no, at least not officially. In fact, the European Commission never had a coherent Plan A.[42]

This passage not only shows oft-repeated negative predictions about the prospects of the treaty,[43] 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 emphasised in media coverage was public-elite tensions (Chart 7), nearly all of which had nothing to do with the contents of the Constitutional Treaty. For example, a *Time Magazine* article stated:

---

[40] 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 per cent of the articles had positive predictions, while 22 per cent offered no predictions.

[41] 'Survey: Europe a la carte', *The Economist*, September 25, 2004.

[42] Munchau, Wolfgang, 'Europe is likely to split', *Financial Times*, October 3, 2004.

[43] For another example see: 'The European Union constitution: Vote early, vote often', *The Economist*, February 24, 2005.

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'.[44]
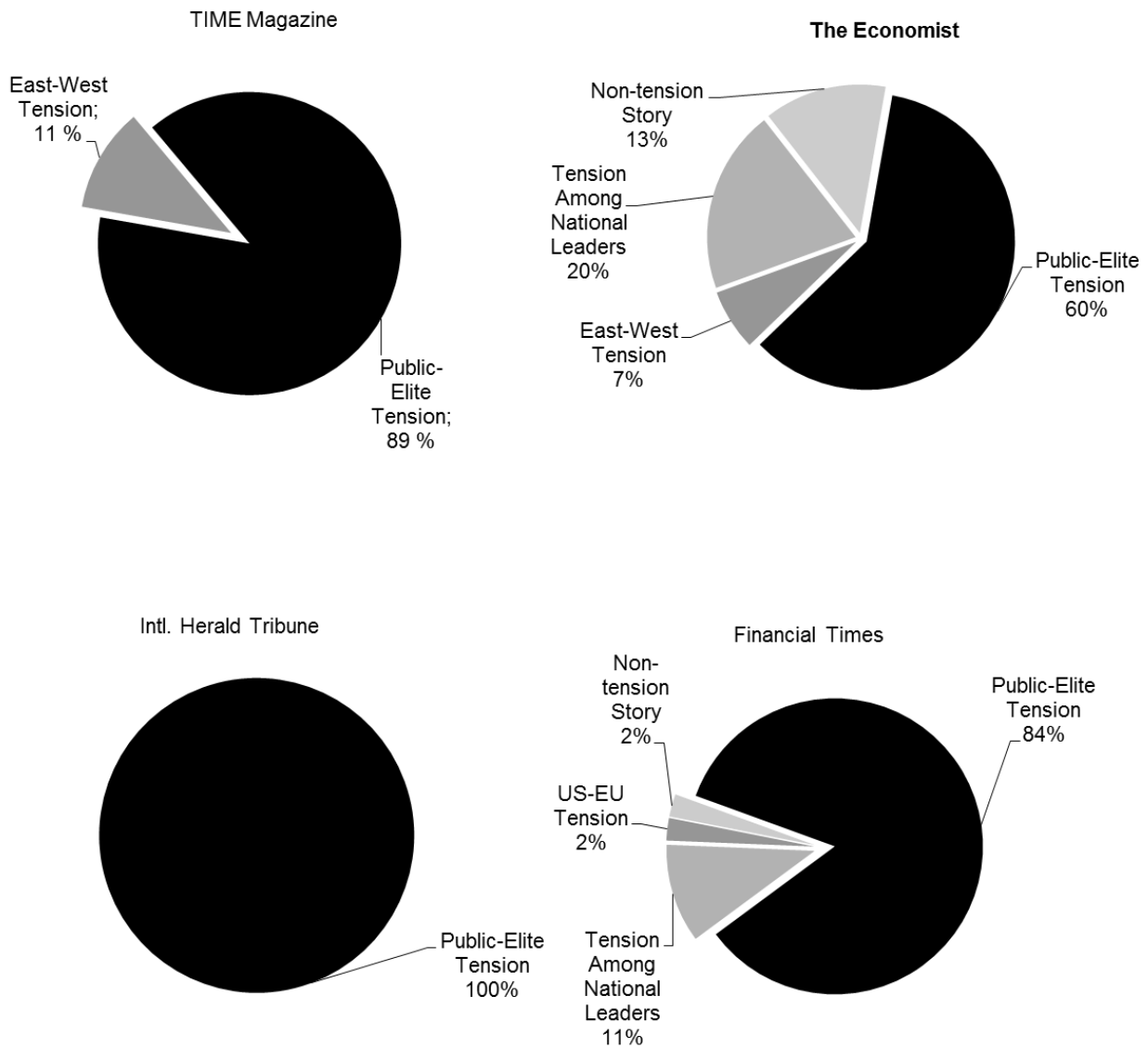
TIME Magazine

East-West Tension; 11 %

Public-Elite Tension; 89 %

The Economist

Non-tension Story 13%

Tension Among National Leaders 20%

East-West Tension 7%

Public-Elite Tension 60%

Intl. Herald Tribune

Public-Elite Tension 100%

Financial Times

Non-tension Story 2%

US-EU Tension 2%

Tension Among National Leaders 11%

Public-Elite Tension 84%

Chart 7: Constitutional Crisis Nature of Tensions in News Coverage, Oct 29, 2004 – May 28, 2005

---

[44] Graff, James, 'Reality Check', *Time Magazine*, May 22, 2005.

A *Financial Times* article was also representative of this general sentiment conveyed in the international media:

> Mass unemployment, deficits, the public debt, the lack of innovation, the slowdown in productivity gains, offshoring, the rise of social fragmentation, senseless violence, the crumbling of social protection, as well as the loss of cultural landmarks, all highlight a profound crisis of society which is transforming itself into an immense crisis of confidence... It is little wonder that many French voters have been misled into thinking the EU is part of the problem rather than the solution.[45]

The nature of this narrative demonstrates the socially constructed nature of the crisis, which had little to do with the terms of the new treaty. A *Time Magazine* article captured it well in March 2005: 'There's 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'.[46] Like in the Iraq case, as the crisis grew, the media picked up and amplified societal sentiment about the events at hand 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 (Chart 8). 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 per cent 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 per cent opposed and 45 per cent in favour, despite a high voter turn out of 70 per cent. Three days later, 61 per cent of Dutch voters said 'no', compared to 39 per cent who voted 'yes'. They also had a good voter turnout with 62 per cent of the population participating in the referendum. In the words of one

---

[45] 'France's fears: Voters should blame Paris, not Brussels', *Financial Times*, April 18, 2005.

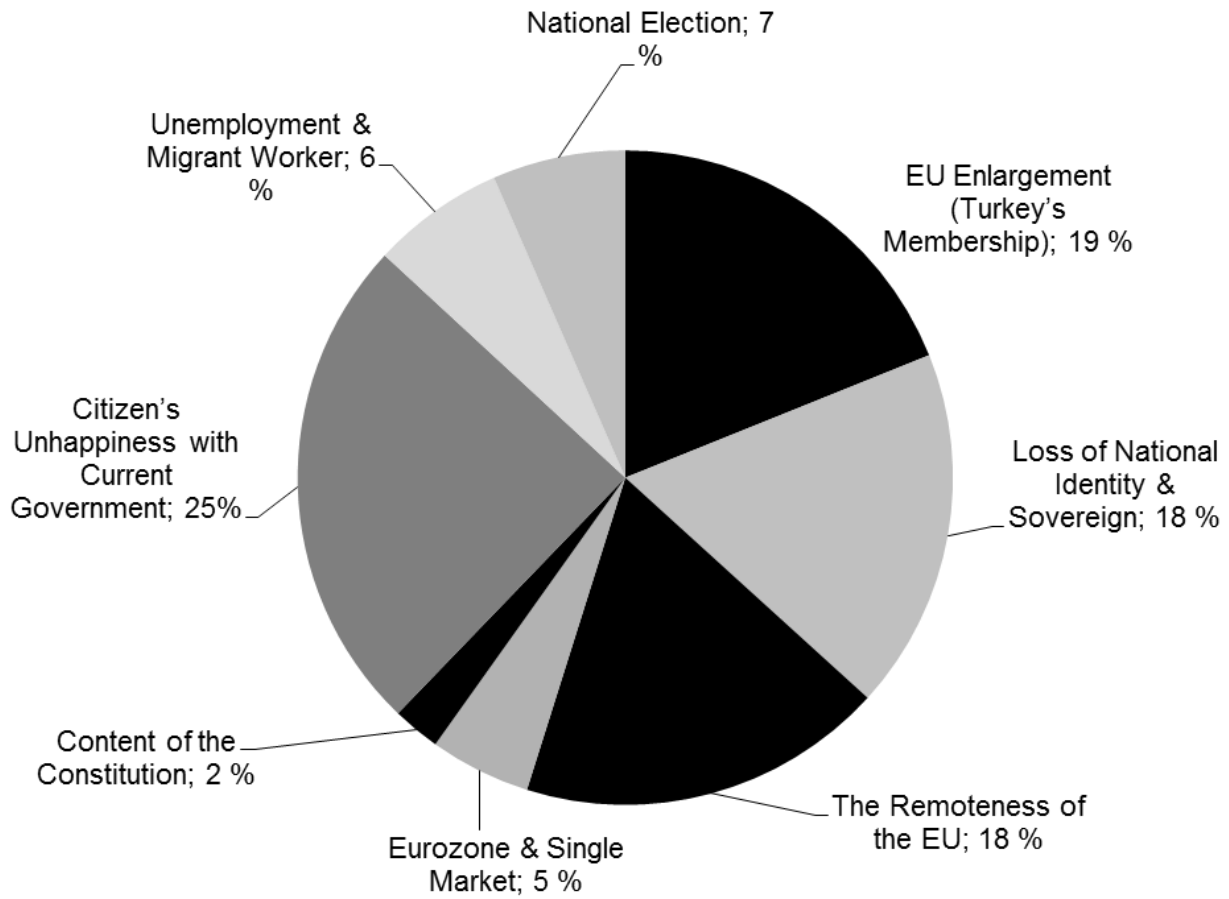[46] Crumley, Bruce 'Switching Sides?', Time Magazine, March 20, 2005.

Chart 8: Constitutional Crisis Public-Elite Sub-Tensions, Oct 29 – 2004 – May 28, 2005

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'.[47]

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'.[48] Later that month, *The Economist* published a cover image of a garbage can with the title 'Where to file Europe's new constitution'.[49] In the US, the cover of the June

---

[47] Sutton, Alastair (2005) 'Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe: Impact of negative votes in the French and Dutch referenda', *White Paper,* White & Case LLP, June 3, 2005, 2.

[48] 'The Europe that died: And the one that should live on', *The Economist,* June 2, 2005.

[49] *The Economist,* June 19, 2003.

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'.[50]

Instead of recognising 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. They wrote that the EU was at an impasse and would become a lot less effective, even possibly leading to departures of some member states. They insisted that the EU must become looser and that there would not be a more integrated core, as some federalists had suggested. They talked about ceding back some of the sovereignty pooled in Brussels to the member states. There was a sense that the 'no' votes were a sign that the EU should focus more on economic liberalisation and growth, not social or political Europe.[51]

It is important to recognise 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 because of widespread agreement that more Europe was a bad thing. French voters were worried about a wide variety of issues 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. There are three elements. The first is about France's place in the world. The second is about the failure of its economy to create jobs. And the third is about the nature of its political elite.[52]

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

---

[50] *Time Magazine,* June 13, 2005.

[51] 'The Europe that died and the one that should live on', *The Economist,* 2 June 2005.

[52] 'France and the EU: A Severe crisis d'identité', *The Economist,* May 26, 2005.

with any degree of precision the precise way in which the Constitution itself caused, contributed to or aggravated any of these phenomena'.[53]

Similarly, the Dutch also voted based on unhappiness with their current government and 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 per cent 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 more time and resources to dissuading the population from voting in favour of it. Again, in both cases, the 'no' votes had little to do with the treaty itself.

The media frenzy had amplified 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:

> The failure of the Constitutional Treaty prompted much questioning about the future of the EU – whether further integration would now be possible, whether enlargement would proceed and even whether the EU could survive in the long term, or would lapse into a condition of increasing disunion. It was widely seen as a watershed moment in the development of the EU. There had always been tension between two different bases of EU legitimacy – one deriving from treaties between states and the other deriving from democracy and citizenship – but never before had the collision between them been so serious.[54]

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.[55]

David Brooks of the *International Herald Tribune* captured the essence of this narrative well:

---

[53] Sutton, 'Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe', 6.

[54] Gamble, Andrew (2006) 'The European Disunion', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 8(1): 35–49.

[55] *Der Spiegel,* June 6, 2005.

> Western Europeans seem to be suffering a crisis of confidence. Election results, whether in North Rhine-Westphalia or across France and the Netherlands, reveal electorates who have lost faith in their leaders, who are anxious about declining quality of life, who feel extraordinarily vulnerable to foreign competition - from the Chinese, the Americans, the Turks, even the Polish plumbers. Right now, Europeans seem to look to the future with more fear than hope [...] It wasn't mostly the constitution itself voters were rejecting. Polls reveal they were articulating a broader malaise. The highest 'no' votes came from the most vulnerable, from workers and the industrial north [...][56]

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 globalisation. These social ills had remained more or less under the surface prior to the no votes, but they became the clear, 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'.[57] From an elite perspective, in the words of one *Die Zeit* article:

> In all this Poles, Slovaks and Baltics push into our job market, while the old EU states, such as Germany, France and the Netherlands have not even managed to integrate their long residing minorities form North Africa and Turkey [...] In Berlin, Amsterdam and Marseille a big dispute is taking place whether Muslim immigrants are even willing or able to adapt European values and live the European every-day life.[58]

---

[56] Brooks, David 'Fear and Rejection', *International Herald Tribune*, June 2, 2005.

[57] Klingst, Martin 'Wer auf das Volk nicht hört', *Die Zeit*, June 2, 2005, Translated by Molly Krasnodebska.

[58] Ibid.

A kind of identity crisis was palpable in this narrative. Leaders and commentators asked themselves: what is Europe? Who is Europe? Where is Europe going? Admitting to a sense of helplessness was part of this discourse.[59]

For some time, the ratification process continued 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. It created the post equivalent to EU foreign minister and endowed this new post with a substantial diplomatic service that would have 140 embassies around the world. It scrapped the system of the rotating presidency in favour of a 'permanent president' of the European Council with a five-year term. It contained a mutual defence clause and solidarity clause, and enabled groups of member states that desired even more integration to engage in permanent structured cooperation. It got rid of the old pillar system of the Maastricht and brought Justice and Home Affairs fully into the area of supranationalism. In terms of internal issues, the treaty formalised a Charter of Fundamental Rights, guaranteed European citizenship and created a Citizen's Initiative, which allows one million citizens to bring policy proposals to the Commission. 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. The EU's will to continue on the path of more integration provides testimony to this.

---

[59] Schmit, Helmut 'Wir Brauchen Mut', *Die Zeit*, June 9 2005.

Eurozone Crisis 2010-2012[60]

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. After all, the crisis did not hit Europe immediately in the way it would so intensively two years later. Many economists and public commentators have argued that the Eurozone was headed for crisis no matter what.[61] But it is important to recognise that it took a massive destabilisation 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 clearly not quickly enough. It was not widely known that problems on Wall Street were brewing. 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, the European common market was so strong that 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.

Thus, a more immediate event was the realisation 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 real trigger for the build-up of the EU's existential crisis. This was the month when people perceived 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 represent 3-4 per cent of the whole Eurozone economy (Greece alone represents around 2 per cent of the Eurozone economy and Portugal is an even smaller portion). Nonetheless, news coverage shifted from debate over what to do to help Greece to fears that the European project itself

---

[60] Although there may still be some ambiguity about the timeframe of the Eurozone crisis, it is clear that the end of 2012 marked a general consensus that the worst of the Eurozone crisis was over.

[61] See for example, Ash, Timothy Garton 'The Crisis of Europe: How the Union Came Together and Why It's Falling Apart', *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2012, 91(5): 2–15.

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 2010, complete with 'end of Europe' rhetoric? Again, a media-frenzy signalled the build-up of the crisis from May to October 2011 (Chart 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 (Chart 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.

The covers of *The Economist* were particularly striking:

> 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 recognised this largely disproportional 'ratcheting up of crisis'-rhetoric. 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'.[62] Similarly, former French President Valery 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.[63]

---

[62] Miliband, David 'Don't split Europe; make it stronger', *The Financial Times,* November 14, 2011.

[63] Rettman, Andrew 'EU Institutions hit back at markets, rating agencies', *EUObserver.com,* October 20, 2011, http://euobserver.com/economic/113999

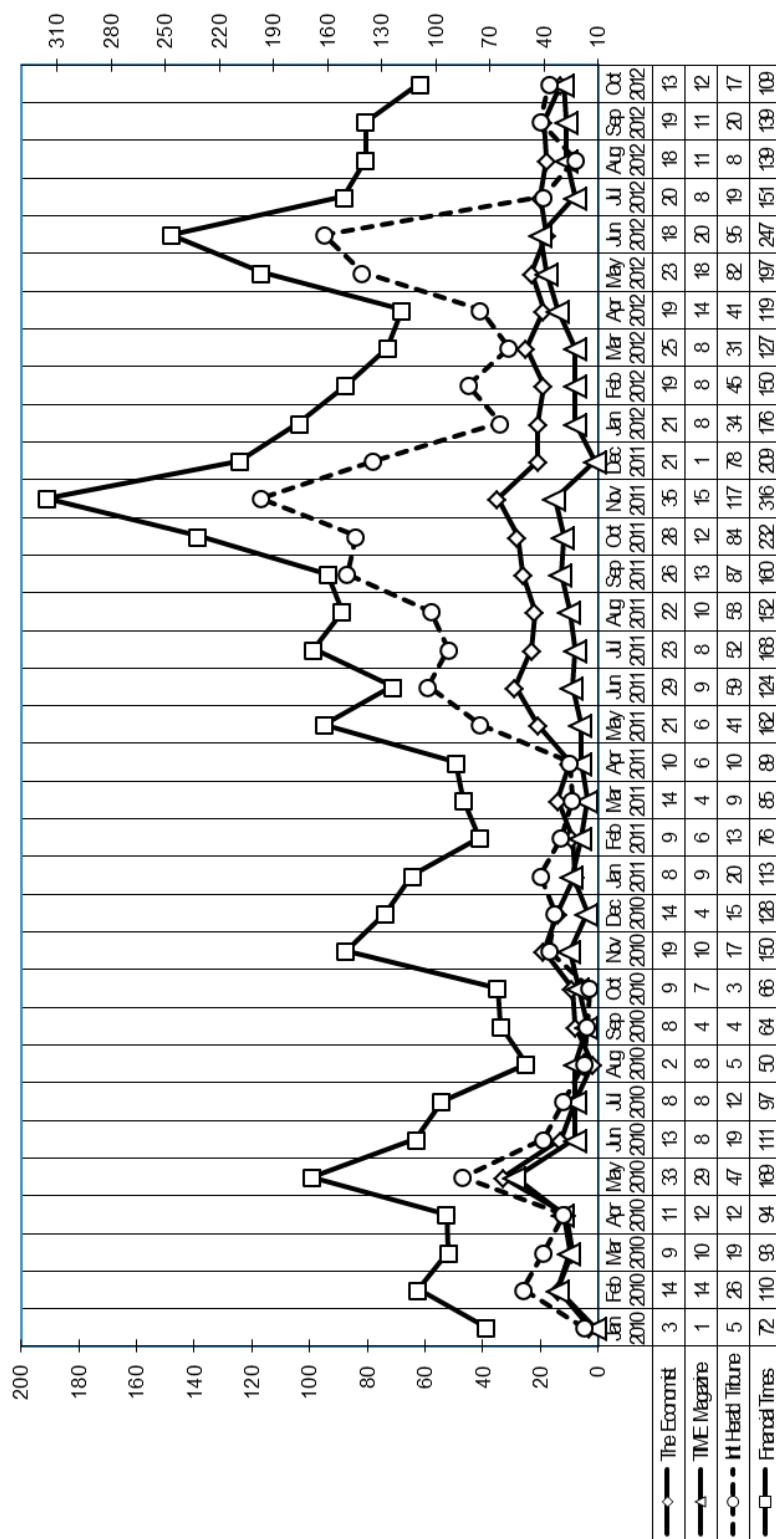| Month	The Economist	TIME Magazine	Int'l Herald Tribune	Financial Times
Jan 2010	3	1	5	72
Feb 2010	14	14	26	110
Mar 2010	9	10	19	98
Apr 2010	11	12	12	94
May 2010	33	29	47	189
Jun 2010	13	8	19	111
Jul 2010	8	8	12	97
Aug 2010	2	8	5	50
Sep 2010	8	4	4	64
Oct 2010	9	7	3	66
Nov 2010	19	10	17	150
Dec 2010	14	4	15	128
Jan 2011	8	9	20	113
Feb 2011	9	6	13	76
Mar 2011	14	4	9	85
Apr 2011	10	6	10	89
May 2011	21	6	41	162
Jun 2011	29	9	59	124
Jul 2011	23	8	52	168
Aug 2011	22	10	58	152
Sep 2011	26	13	87	160
Oct 2011	28	12	84	222
Nov 2011	35	15	117	316
Dec 2011	21	1	78	209
Jan 2012	21	8	34	176
Feb 2012	19	8	45	150
Mar 2012	25	8	31	127
Apr 2012	19	14	41	119
May 2012	23	18	82	197
Jun 2012	18	20	95	247
Jul 2012	20	8	19	151
Aug 2012	18	11	8	139
Sep 2012	19	11	20	139
Oct 2012	13	12	17	109

Chart 9: Eurozone Crisis Volume of Coverage, Jan 1, 2010 – Oct 31, 2012

Note
The Y-axis on the right represents just *Financial Times* coverage since the volume is much higher than with the other three publications.

TIME Magazine

Neutral
20%

Postive
3%

Negative
77%

The Economist

Neutral
22%

Negative
78%

Intl. Herald Tribune

Neutral
27%

Postive
7%

Negative
66%

Financial Times
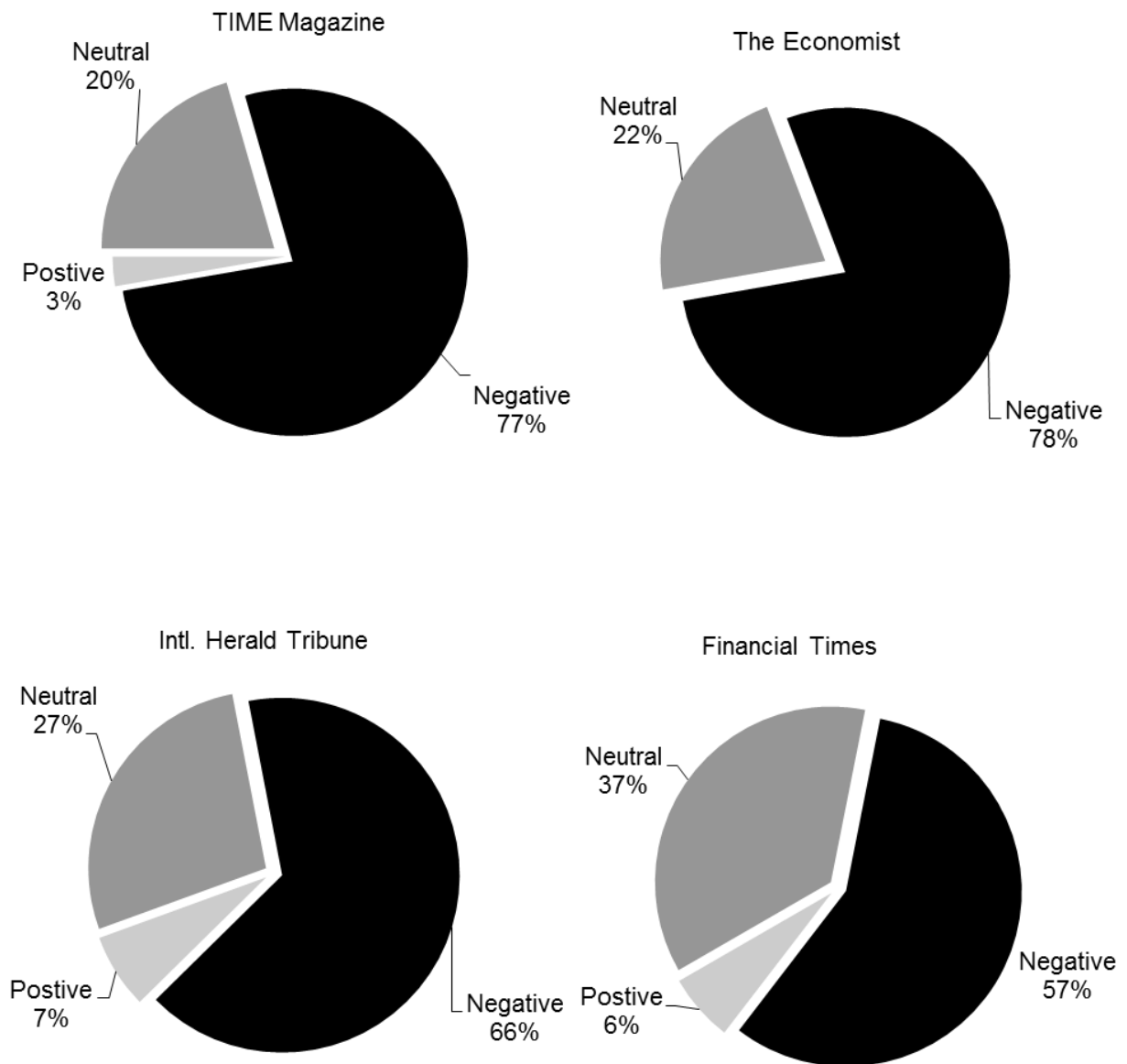
Neutral
37%

Postive
6%

Negative
57%

Chart 10: Eurozone Crisis Neutrality of Coverage during the crisis build-up, May 1, 2011 - Nov 30, 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'.[64] He described the atmosphere of the time as psychopathic, and emphasised 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

---

[64] Ibid.

stories like 'It's Time to Admit the Euro has Failed' and '10 Reasons the Euro was a Dumb Idea', became commonplace.[65] 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-build-up, 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 (Chart 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'.[66] 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:

---

[65] Sivy, Michael 'It's Time to Admit the Euro has Failed', *TIME Magazine,* September 12, 2011; Gersemann, Olaf '10 Reasons the Euro was a Dumb Idea', *TIME Magazine,* November 25, 2011.

[66] Mahony, Honor 'National stereotyping – the eurozone's other story', *EUObserver.com,* February 22, 2012, http://euobserver.com/political/115340

The Economist

- North-South Tension; 36 %
- Member State Domestic Tension; 19 %
- Brussels-Member-State Tension; 14 %
- US-EU Tension; 0 %
- Other Tensions; 26 %
- Non-Tension Story; 5%

Financial Times

- North-South Tension; 24 %
- Member State Domestic Tension; 10 %
- Brussels-Member-State Tension; 9 %
- US-EU Tension; 2 %
- Other Tensions; 25 %
- Non-Tension Story; 30%

TIME Magazine

- North-South Tension 41%
- Member State Domestic Tension; 10 %
- Brussels-Member-State Tension; 16 %
- US-EU Tension; 9 %
- Other Tensions; 0 %
- Non-Tension Story; 25%

Intl. Herald Tribune

- North-South Tension; 38 %
- Member State Domestic Tension; 14 %
- Brussels-Member-State Tension; 18 %
- US-EU Tension; 2 %
- Other Tensions; 5 %
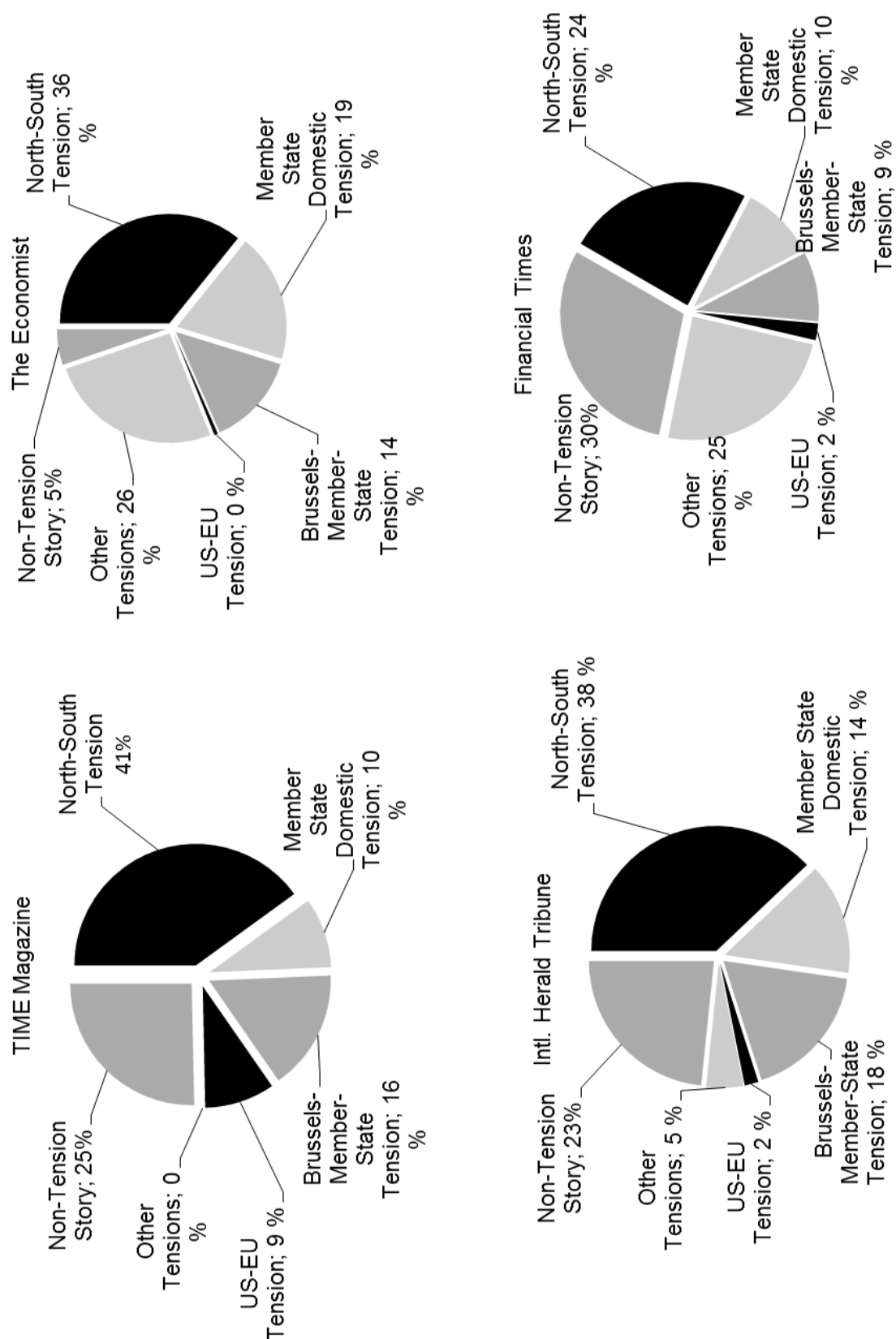- Non-Tension Story; 23%

Chart 11: Eurozone Crisis Nature of Tensions in News Coverage, May 1, 2011 – Nov 30, 2011

> 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.[67]

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.

Our 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 (3) tension between Euro and non-Euro member states (Chart 12). But when the crisis reached its height in November 2011, the dominant narrative expressed in the media was the problem with Germany's behaviour. 45 per cent of the coverage in *TIME Magazine*, 54 per cent in *The Economist*, 48 per cent in the *IHT* and 39 per cent 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 destabilising the Euro directly. But again, it points to the socially constructed nature of crises: 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.

The implication was that no country should obstruct the ability for Europe to move forward and save itself from the crisis. No one should begrudge the sacrifice required to support the common good of European solidarity and recovery, especially Germany. 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.

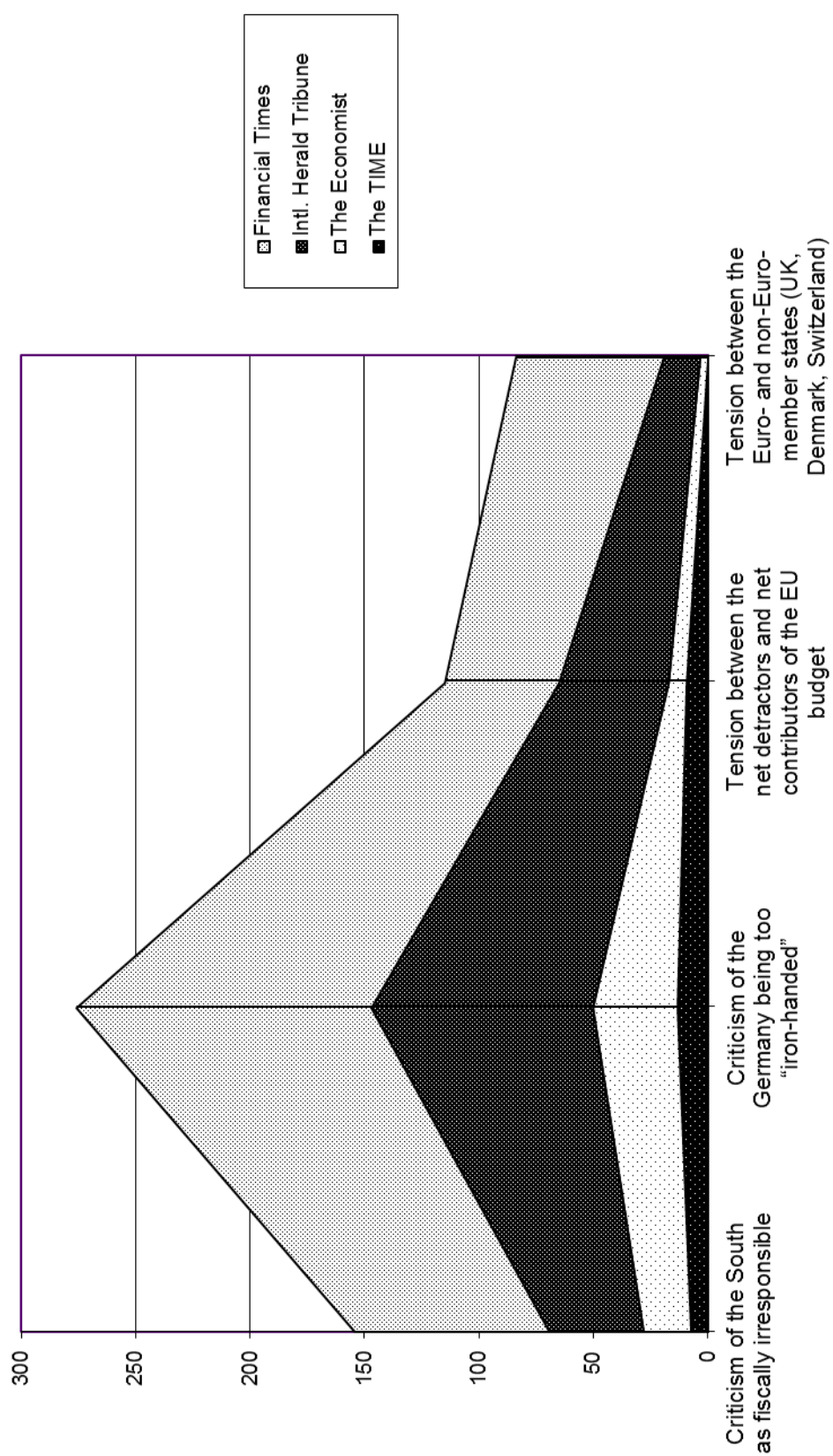[67] Rachman, Gideon 'Germany faces a machine from hell', *Financial Times,* February 14, 2012, 9.

Chart 12: Eurozone Crisis North-South Sub-Tensions, May 1, 2011 – Nov 30, 2011

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. The 'end of Europe' rhetoric had quickly disappeared and the focus returned to the real core of the problem, which is Greek sovereign debt and the aftermath of detrimental austerity strategies in other peripheral states.

With the end of Europe's legitimacy crisis came a number of big steps forward in terms of fiscal integration, including: a European fiscal compact to maintain balanced budgets[68], transparency rules that allow Brussels to monitor national budgets, a permanent European Stability Mechanism[69], 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 characterised 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 per cent more than the dollar, and it is still the largest trading partner of the both the US and China, as well as the largest foreign direct investor.

In sum, the Greek sovereign debt crisis did not have to escalate into an existential crisis for the EU. Even during the height of the crisis, when the media and commentators were advising businessmen and speculators to face the reality of the demise of the Euro, EU leaders quietly debated long-term

---

[68] The Commission will have the authority to require spending cuts of member states, or impose large fines if they are found to be in violation of the rules. It will go into effect once at least 12 member states have ratified it. The Czech Republic and UK have opted out, but have not ruled out eventually joining.

[69] To replace the European Financial Stabilization Facility and European Financial Stabilization Mechanism in July 2012. This 500 billion euro rescue fund can be spent without the approval of national parliaments.

solutions. They knew that the creation of a fiscal union would not immediately calm markets. Nonetheless, they set aside the lure of short-term fixes, and held numerous meetings behind closed doors to craft a range of ground-breaking agreements, even while the storms raged outside.

Conclusion

It is often easy to forget just how serious crises were perceived to be a few years after the fact. It always seems that the current crisis is the worst, and unprecedented in its severity. And because of this, there is almost no research that seeks to compare EU crises to each other across time. This paper represents a first step in attempting to show that there is a pattern in the media's role in building up crises, and constructing narratives about them. Any crisis is a highly complicated event that must be analysed at multiple levels of analysis and in specific contexts to be fully understood. We have endeavoured to highlight one aspect – the role of the international media - across several major crises affecting the European Union in the 21st century. We argue that the media has played a significant role in turning what might have been ordinary stumbling blocks in the on-going process of EU integration into existential crises that seemingly threaten to derail the European project entirely.

In brief, we argue first that 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 socially constructed nature of these crises.

There are two main alternative interpretations of this pattern in EU crises. 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?

We 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 threatening 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 the Greek debt crisis representing only 2 per cent of the Eurozone economy, as threatening the survival of the Euro for all of the EU. 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 pro-active role in building up each crisis.

A second counter-argument would come from those who regard crises as objective, systemic phenomena, rather than socially constructed. This approach, which is also favoured by many Euro-sceptics, 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 our evidence shows, the dominant tensions that characterise 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). 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 we 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.

Clearly, this study also raises a number of important questions that are beyond the scope of a single paper. What drives the international media to spin their news coverage of the EU in a negative direction? Is it simply that 'bad news sells' or is there a fundamental lack of understanding about the nature of the EU and its staying power? And, in turn, what drives the international media to loosen its grip on crisis coverage? As argued above, the media continually predicts the demise of the EU, and yet this has never actually happened. Additionally, how can we separate out the real tensions in the European public sphere from the media coverage of these tensions? Are they simply self-reinforcing or is the media somehow playing a valuable role, opening up a pressure valve to enable a new level of transnational, European dialogue? Most importantly, what is the specific process at the public, elite, and Brussels levels that lead to major steps forward in integration in the wake of EU crises? Further field research would help shed light on these various questions.

Finally, the pattern evident in past European crises should offer lessons for the future. The international media tends to exaggerate the seriousness of EU crises, while underplaying successes. Although we point out some of the positive effects of crises, this research certainly does not lead to the conclusion that leaders should instigate crises to gain positive effects. So far, the EU has not been destroyed by crises, but there is a very real danger in self-fulfilling prophecies. The recent Eurozone crisis came closest to this. These crises are like playing with fire, and the EU's track record with a more gradual approach to integration has been highly successful. This gradualism is preferable. A better understanding of the nature of EU crises should help dispel widespread doubts about the viability of the European project itself.