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## ***1. Introduction***

As a wide-reaching and shared experience, a crisis may have different shapes and affect different aspects and members of society. During a crisis, norms are suspended, and the current system of rules is modified such in a way that normality is not anymore normal: everything is open to reconsideration under a new, different light. However, what constitutes a crisis, what is addressed as a crisis, is not an ideologically neutral question. Crises are both directly experienced and discursively constructed phenomena.

The papers in this special issue came out of the Approaches to Migration, Language and Identity conference hosted at the University of Sussex, UK, in 2021. As the conference took place online under the restrictions of Covid-19, crisis was foregrounded throughout. Over the past twenty years, even from a limited European perspective, we have experienced several major political, economic and environmental crises. Starting with the global financial crisis of 2007-2008 and the subsequent European debt crisis; the ‘migration crisis’ of 2015, which played a major role in the political upheaval of Brexit in the UK and in the resurgence of populist parties across Europe; the Covid-19 pandemic crisis; the Russian invasion of Ukraine; in addition to a greater focus on the climate crisis (to which the awareness campaigns of movements such as Extinction Rebellion and Friday for Futures have given great resonance), it has become commonplace to say that we are going through an acute period of crisis. Some of these events were shared across the globe while other events which have shaken some countries and even continents have barely registered outside those confines. (Indeed, in a very small-scale sign of this, two of the papers submitted for this special issue, documenting crisis responses outside the European sphere, could not be concluded).

Within this context, this special issue emerges from the urgency of reflecting on the impact of different kinds of crisis on migration discourses. The main objective is to contextualize the study of migration discourses within the general crisis discourse framework. Particularly, the focus is to study the language used in crisis and highlight the ways in which specific groups of people or social classes become instrumentalized in crisis discourse to fulfil political or other strategic aims.

## ***2. Aims for the special issue***

As indicated above, one of the theoretical principles underlying this special issue relates to the notion that, in line with Hay (1996) and Agamben (2005), a crisis can be a subjective reality where the distinction between its beginning and end is difficult, and a sense of perpetual emergency persists. Consequently, it becomes challenging to differentiate between a state of emergency and a state of normalcy. Agamben's work, particularly his book 'State of Exception' (2005), delves into the examination of how the suspension of laws during a crisis can potentially transform into an enduring condition. According to Agamben's analysis, this 'state of exception', as a governmental paradigm, ultimately undermines individuals' citizenship rights, as the constant reliance on exceptional measures erodes the very concept of exception itself.

### **2.1 Discursive Conceptualization of Crisis**

As emphasised by De Rycker and Mohd Don (2013, p. 5), 'the concept of crisis carves out a complex, dynamic and widely researched field of multi-disciplinary enquiry.' Defining crisis is problematic<sup>1</sup> and there is little general agreement since a crisis is a kind of commonly shared experience which can be interpreted according to different perspectives (Coombs, 2010). Across disciplines and traditions, crisis has been understood as a dynamic process where leadership, rapid adaptations and communication among social groups and individuals can play key roles in reducing risk and responding to danger (Huang, 2020, p. 3).

The crisis-related research can be broadly divided into groups according to the perspective on the crisis which is adopted. On the one hand, there are works on the decision-making processes in relation to crisis management. In these cases, crisis is mainly studied as an objective material process and the focus is on its predictability and control. On the other hand, there are works on crisis conceptualizations, which reflect on how a crisis is conceptualized through different means and here crisis is mainly intended as a semiotic process. In these cases, crisis is understood as a subjective experience. Regarding this special issue, we will pay particular attention to the concept of crisis as a socio-semiotic construct. Our interest lies in exploring the relationship between a broader critical context and the specific topic of human migration.

### **2.2 Crisis and Migration Discourse**

Over the last thirty years, migration has been perceived, especially within Western culture, in terms of its potential to generate social and economic challenges (Cantat et al., 2023). When it happens outside regulated and

controlled pathways, it has been primarily represented and conceptualized as a ‘crisis’ – ‘as an abnormal event that disrupts the ordinary course of social and economic activity’ (Martin et al., 2014, in Sahin-Mencutek et al., 2022, p. 1). This correlation has brought a conflation between the concept of crisis and those of migratory movements and ‘migration crisis discourses have become pervasive as if they pointed to a global phenomenon which manifests itself differently across world regions’ (Cantat et al., 2023, p. 3).

Migration refers to the movement of people to establish either permanent or temporary residence in a new location. While it is not inherently tied to crisis, the connection between crisis and migration is not recent (see for example Lucassen, 2018 and Cantat et al., 2023, p. 7-13 for a historical review): there are certain interactions between the occurrence of a crisis and migratory movements.

First, a crisis can act as a trigger for migratory movements. It is worth noting that the choice to depart from one’s homeland can be influenced by economic, political, or environmental upheavals, such as wars, famine, or natural disasters. Secondly, migration also entails an identity crisis (Sayad, 2002): on the one hand, the identity of the migrant, who endeavours to be accepted in the new society, is challenged in a state of limbo, caught between the identity of their home country and that of the host society. On the other hand, ‘discourses about immigration are also always attempts at reconstructing the threatened “home identity” of the respective host society’ (Musolff & Viola, 2019, p. 3). Especially in relation to immigration debates, the host country identity is discursively re-defined by isolating and delimiting the immigrant’s identity. In other words, the encounter with the Other serves as a pivotal moment that shapes the in-group self-definition.

Given these potential links which may be made between ‘crisis’ and ‘migration’, it is crucial to distinguish between a) contexts in which migration is the crisis or is perceived as such (as discussed in Cantat et al., 2023), exemplified by the 2015 Migration crisis in the Mediterranean Sea or the migratory phenomenon subsequent the Ukrainian conflicts, and b) situations where migratory phenomena occur during a crisis but lack a direct cause-effect relationship with the crisis, such as the Covid-19 crisis.

The aim of this special issue is to adopt a critical discursive approach to the representation of migration, in these particularly in situations where the migrant crisis is intertwined with other crisis circumstances.

### **2.2.1 Migration as crisis**

As discussed by Cantat et al. (2023, p. 3), framing migration as a crisis ‘requires an interaction between “objective” migration dynamics and the “subjective” ways in which these dynamics are perceived and constructed.’ According to Sahin-Mencutek et al. (2022, p. 15), ‘the “crisis governance” of migration is not simply a narrative or a representation that guides policy choices but is emerging as a mode of governance with specific characteristics.’ In this context, migration should not be understood merely as the phenomenon itself (with an objective nature), but rather as the outcome of a process ‘assemblage of events, discourses/representations, and practices’ (Cantat et al., 2023), which also involves political interactions. Within this framework, the research interest lies with how a migratory phenomenon is perceived, represented and regulated in relation to the notion of crisis

Existing research suggests that a discursive representation of migration bonded with the notion of crisis is used to promote a disapproving rhetoric towards migration through news media and to justify anti-immigrant political decision-making at the institutional level. Among the different contributions, an important precedent is represented by Viola and Musolff (2019) (though see also Menjívar et al., 2019) which offers varied contributions which interpret discourses about immigration as ‘attempts at reconstructing the threatened “home identity” of the respective host society’ (Musolff & Viola, 2019, p.3). Among the various works that adopt a discourse-historical approach method (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009), there are several corpus-based contributions that explore migration as a crisis. For example, Koca-Helvaci explores how language resources reflect changing media attitudes towards immigrants during the 2015 ‘migrant crisis’, examining two cases which might show a connection to migration, the death of Alan Kurdi, and the Cologne Sexual Assaults in the British press. This work highlights how, regardless of the news content, there are dominant ethnic stereotypes which heavily impact the resulting representation of immigrants, who are associated ‘with numbers showing large quantities, natural disaster metaphors, and violation of law and order’ (Koca-Helvaci, 2019, p. 109). Furthermore, the (verbal) images conveyed contradictory associations: immigrants were depicted as needy and defenseless war victims following the death of Alan Kurdi but were subsequently presented as uncivilized young Muslim males. This change is justified by how the ‘migration crisis’ is perceived, and by the distinction between ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ migrants. In line with the proximation theory (Cap, 2014), Koca-Helvaci shows that the negative image of immigration as a threat which might result in a crisis depends on how close the threat is perceived to be. Silaški and Đurović (2019) and Saric and Felber (2019) focus on verbal and multimodal migration discourse in the Balkan area in 2015, respectively in Serbian media and in Croatian and Serbian public broadcasters. In line with Koca-Helvaci’s findings, Silaški and Đurović (2019) study the specific crisis rhetoric in news media where the wall metaphor acts as a trigger for two metaphor scenarios – the Fortress Europe and Berlin Wall – which act as instruments in promoting marginalisation and non-belongingness of migrants to EU space politics. Whilst Šarić and Felber (2019) show that migrants are not always negatively represented in crisis discourse and demonstrate how the discursive image of migration as crisis is strongly dependent on the political and rhetorical needs. In both the Croatian and Serbian context, migrants become framed as people needing help, since they are fleeing from a war or because they are seeking a life improvement, due to the political elites’ positions. Considering that Croatia has only recently become a member of EU and that Serbia is an aspiring member, this rhetoric serves to align them with the EU position. The authors argue that both countries promote themselves as helping migrants whilst denigrating other countries’ positions in the crisis context. However, when the emergency ended, ‘these countries also shifted to a securitization approach after the “crisis”’ (Šelo Šabić, 2017; Župarić-Iljić and Valenta, 2019, in Saric and Felber, 2019, p. 230). Olmo-Alcaraz (2023) investigates the political communication of the Vox party on Twitter during the 2021 Ceuta migrant ‘crisis.’ In this case, the crisis is used to establish at a discursive level a war-like situation of threat where populist discourse fosters anti-immigrant propaganda.

In terms of comprehending migratory movements through the lens of crisis, Sachseder et al. (2022) analyse Frontex’s Annual Risk Analysis Reports (2010-

2020). They reveal how the concept and framework of migration as a crisis are actively promoted at the institutional level by the agency responsible for border control. The authors identify four recurring themes (threat perception, the portrayal of migrants as unknown entities, the hierarchical creation of (non-)European spaces, and humanitarian concerns for vulnerable migrants). These themes contribute to labeling migration as a crisis based on gendered and racialized stereotypes. In this manner, institutional narratives shape the perception of migration as a crisis, and, as Sachseder et al. (2022, p. 4687) argue, ‘gendered and racialized crisis narratives become progressively inscribed into risk analysis and give legitimacy to Frontex’s institutional claims, particularly in the wake of intensified crisis rhetoric from 2015 onwards.’

### **3. Overview of Contents**

The papers in this special issue build on the body of work set out above and examine migration discourses in times of crisis. These corpus-based studies focus on migrant representations in the British media and Twitter (X) from different angles. They address the developments of migrant representation around the EU referendum (Isentyeva), fear and hate speech in the discursive construction of migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis (Russo), and Lucchesi and Cerase focus on criminalization of NGOs as a means to mask migrants’ concerns. Each of the papers draws out how migration is framed and operationalised in times of crisis.

Isentyeva’s paper ‘*British Media Representations of EU Migrants Before and After the EU Referendum*’ analyses the discursive representation of EU migrants in the British press around the key Brexit period. This period constituted a crisis for the UK on many levels from weakening of the bonds holding the four countries together, to a crisis of democracy with the proroguing of parliament and a social crisis engendered by the divisive campaigns. It also constituted a crisis for migrants as EU citizens were suddenly re-positioned in society and the Leave campaign leveraged xenophobia against migrants particularly from Eastern Europe and Turkey. The paper combines corpus-assisted analysis with discourse analytical methods to investigate news corpora from five mainstream British newspapers. Isentyeva shows how, post-crisis, a socio-economic distinction characterises the framing of deserving/underserving migrants as the patterns *migrants as a threat* and *migrants as a burden* are mainly employed to describe unskilled/low-skilled migrants in the right-wing press. Furthermore, the discourse generally shifts to a *migrants as economic resource frame* after the crisis with the left-wing press emphasizing socio-economic benefits of migration.

Russo’s paper ‘*Fear Appeals, Migration and Sinophobia in COVID-19 News and Twitter Discourse: A Corpus-based Critical Analysis*’ investigates xenophobic and racist hate speech against migrant communities in March 2020. The paper shows how fear appeals are used within a crisis and to legitimate responses to crisis. The study focusses on interactions on social media (Twitter/X) and applies Corpus-based Critical Discourse Studies and Appraisal analysis. This combination of big data and nuanced analysis shows that the correlation between the discursive representation of migrants and fear appeals in news discourse triggered a wave of hate speech against migrants. In documenting the discursive strategies of hate speech against migrants the

paper provides a basis for understanding the phenomenon and contributes to spreading awareness of the importance of discourse and communication strategies in epidemic crises.

Lucchesi & Cerase's paper '*The Criminalization of NGOs: Shifting the Blame (and the Gaze) from Immigrants to Rescuers*' also examines Twitter/X data using a Critical Discourse Studies framework and draws out the discursive practices involved in Otherisation. However, here the focus is on how NGOs operating in the southern Mediterranean are framed with regard to their role in helping migrants and how this in turn fosters the normalization of anti-immigration rhetoric, thus creating room for populist and sovereigntist ideologies. As they argue, the responses both solidify the existing anti-immigration stance and extend this to those who try and offer humanitarian aid. Thus, both the imagined protagonists of the 'crisis' and those involved in the response to the 'crisis' are delegitimated.

#### **4. Future Directions for Work on Migration Discourses in Times of Crisis**

This special issue draws together work on migration discourses and crisis discourse with the intention of highlighting the interaction between these and stimulating further research. We envisage a range of directions for future research in this area. First, we could consider new contexts, both in the sense of unfolding crises, as highlighted in Islentyeva's conclusion, and more diverse geographical contexts. Second, we might consider *whose* discourses of migration we examine. In this special issue, we have drawn attention to the powerful discourses constructed in public spaces from legacy media to social media. Future research can address how crises are understood and construed in migration discourses (and vice-versa) from the perspective of people who move. As Russo concluded, 'the right to self-representation and to one's own voice may indeed be one of the few repositories of humanity. The silence and absence of self-narratives impacts on the representation of Chinese people and migrants just as much as the other- verbal and visual representations'. Similarly, we see relatively little work at present on crisis and migration discourses from the perspective of departure countries and this too would enhance our overall picture of how crises are constructed. Future work into these perspectives on the migration cycle would also re-focus attention on crises that may trigger migratory movements. We know that in much (Western) mainstream political and media discourse the so-called 'pull' factors are emphasised in migration discourses. As analysts we could re-balance this by a) bringing in those additional perspectives and looking at the representation from the perspective of countries of departure where the 'push' factors might be more present, and b) noting the *absence* of discussion in those mainstream spaces of what triggered movement where many people are making the same journey. Third, as noted in Lucchesi and Cerase, visual representations play an important role and we anticipate more multimodal analysis of images and gestures, as in the recent paper by Barbici-Wagner et al. (2023) in this journal. Fourth, we look forward to future work taking a historical and longitudinal analytic approach because this may start to answer questions about how crises are constructed and cumulatively associated with migration discourses, and

about how migration discourses are re-shaped by the crisis in both the immediate aftermath (e.g., Parker et al., 2018) and longer term.

## Notes

\* The Introduction to this Special Issue is the result of the close collaborations between the authors. For academic purposes, Dario Del Fante is responsible for Sections 1 and 2, while Charlotte Taylor wrote Sections 3 and 4.

1. For an overview of different definitions of crisis, see Coombs (2010: 8) and De Rycker and Mohd Don (2013, p. 6-8).

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