Crisis Response Strategies in Political Interviews: A European Union Perspective

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Chapter 10
Crisis Response Strategies in Political Interviews: A European Union Perspective

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Abstract This chapter contributes to the study of crisis communication by investigating the argumentative dimension of crisis response strategies in political interviews. As political interviews are accountability practices, crisis responses by political actors are seen as persuasive attempts at (re)enacting reputation and creating citizen trust. In addition to explaining the argumentative nature of political interviews, and how it constrains crisis responses, this chapter analyzes how two European Union political leaders respond to critical questions during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Understanding the EU's response strategies is of special significance, due to its broad role as a crisis management institution. The first case study illustrates the use of potentially effective accommodating strategies, in which mistakes are admitted and lessons are drawn from them. The second case study discusses how defensive strategies employed to avoid blame and deny mistakes is a potentially less effective choice.

10.1 Introduction

We are living in an age of crises. Financial, economic, health, migration, environmental and other crises have become remarkably common, with broad implications for citizens all over the globe. In such circumstances, public crisis communication plays a more fundamental role than ever before. From a practical perspective, the way in which political leaders navigate crisis has become a litmus test, and purposeful communication is key to the way in which public figures in power manage the situation. From a scholarly perspective, understanding crisis communication, and especially crisis responses by political figures, can generate important knowledge about the functioning of social and political institutions, and critically tests their endurance (cf. Salomonsen & 't Hart, 2020).

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This chapter will examine how crisis responses are crafted persuasively in political interviews to convince the public of the acceptability of the envisaged policies. While we know that political interviews are accountability practices, understanding how crisis response strategies are employed to counter criticism in this interactional communicative practice still awaits investigation. It is the purpose of this study to closely examine crisis responses in political interviews and how they are designed persuasively to ensure their effectiveness.

Crisis responses will be analyzed as an argumentative activity (van Eemeren, 2010) in which reasons are communicated to the public to justify and obtain acceptance for policies. This approach builds on previous work demonstrating that political interviews are not merely informative, but develop as accountability practices in which an interviewer advances critical questions to hold a political figure to account, with the politician responding by defending political actions and decisions (Andone, 2013). The main implication of this institutional characteristic is that crisis responses are a persuasive activity in which reasons are communicated to justify and obtain acceptance for policies and in which argumentation plays a crucial role in (re)legitimizing reputation. Taking the argumentative dimension into account regarding the repertoire of response strategies is not only important because it is currently critically under-recognized and under-investigated, but mainly because arguments are the only instruments used to justify action in crisis. The "obvious" role and performance of political leaders in the way they communicate through political interviews in times of crisis is not at all developed within the broader crisis studies field (Kuipers & Welsh, 2017), but nonetheless fundamentally relevant and important (De Clercy & Ferguson, 2016).

In order to be able to understand crisis responses of political figures in interviews, attention will be paid to the macro-context of a political interview as an accountability practice (Sect. 10.2.1). Subsequently, crisis responses will be discussed by examining how the characteristics of political crises impose responses that attempt to restore a potentially tarnished image in order to create and maintain citizen trust (Sect. 10.2.2). Finally, the chapter will analyze how two European Union (EU) political leaders respond to critical questions during the COVID-19 crisis (Sect. 10.3). Understanding the EU's responses is of special significance given its broad role as a *crisis management institution* that is commonly communicating to the public about its policies to tackle crises. The first case study (Sect. 10.3.1), an interview with EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell, will illustrate the use of accommodating strategies, in which mistakes are admitted and lessons are drawn from them. The second case study (Sect. 10.3.2), an interview with the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, will discuss how defensive strategies are employed to deny mistakes. The analysis will demonstrate how such persuasive strategies are employed argumentatively to support an implicit standpoint according to which the EU is managing the crisis well.

10.2 Political Interviews as Argumentative Practices: Implications for Crisis Responses

10.2.1 Argumentation in Political Interviews

Political interviews are more than simple one-to-one informative discussions between an interviewer and a politician. Although conveying information is undoubtedly one of their goals (cf. Martin, 2014), political interviews are primarily aimed at *convincing* the general public of the acceptability of political action as part of an accountability procedure in which journalists raise critical questions and politicians have to respond to such questions (Andone, 2013; Clayman & Heritage, 2002; Eriksson & Eriksson, 2012; Feldman, 2016; Montgomery, 2007). The institutional aim of such interactions is to "preserve a democratic political culture" (van Eemeren, 2010, p. 140) for opinion-formation (cf. Fraser, 1990, pp. 74–75). To do so, an accountability procedure unfolds in which the interviewer acts as representative of the citizens asking for an account, and the politicians clarify and justify their views by giving an account of words and actions (Andone, 2013, p. 35) under "the scrutiny of the citizenry" (Clayman & Heritage, 2002, p. 2).

The interaction between the journalist(s) and the politician(s) takes the form of a question–answer exchange. Trivial as this format might seem, it is highly confrontational, and suggests clearly the roles of the discussion participants. As Martin (2014, p. 142) explains, "politicians and interviewers wrestle, via their arguments […]: the politician through her defense of policy and the journalist in her role as democratic 'advocate,' holding the politician to account." Such an *accountability* process is particularly central in times of crisis when the public is eager to hear more about envisaged policies and obtain responses to controversial situations. While at all times politicians defend their actions as being sufficient by implicitly advancing a standpoint asserting that their words and actions are adequate (cf. Andone, 2013, p. 41), it is all the more vital for them to craft a positive message during the crisis in a way that persuades the public of the acceptability of their decisions and policies, creating an image of trust and reliability. Only in this way can they maintain a positive image that is further reported in the media and positively judged by the audience.

Vital to understanding crisis responses by political figures is the idea that questions condition the answers in many respects. First, matters of newsworthy character and political controversy related to current public policy are always selected by the journalist who at minimum casts doubt on the interviewee's political performance, sometimes going as far as advancing opposite positions criticizing the politician's words and actions (Andone, 2013, pp. 41–42). In such a "mixed difference of opinion" (van Eemeren, 2010), the journalist establishes certain agendas for the responses which can hardly go beyond the imposed boundaries. Second, the journalist oftentimes plays the role of the devil's advocate, asking questions that the public would reasonably expect to hear (Andone, 2013). It is only in this way that the journalist can achieve much sought-after impartiality through a balance of varied questions potentially being asked by the audience. Third, journalistic questions facilitate one answer

over another, particularly when questions are formulated as rhetorical questions to suggest a particular answer. One needs to be aware that political communication, as rightly explained by Salomonsen and 't Hart (2020), is an exercise in "public meaning-making." Extending this idea to political interviews, we can safely assume that journalists attempt to direct the discussion towards obtaining answers explaining what is going on, why something occurs, what are the implications, and how the citizens should think about and act in relation to certain events, the more so when such events involve a crisis situation. As Finlayson (2001, p. 342) convincingly demonstrates, a political interview is a combination of the forensic genre—by looking into past political action—and the deliberative genre aimed at understanding future actions.

10.2.2 Crisis Responses in Political Interviews

A *crisis* is the result of the perception that a situation of threat, urgency and uncertainty occurs (Boin et al., 2005/2017, pp. 5–7) due to "an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes" (Coombs, 2015, p. 3). As Rosenthal et al. (1991, p. 10) explain, "[…] policymakers experience a serious threat to the basic structures or the fundamental values and norms of a system, which under time pressure and highly uncertain circumstances necessitates making vital decisions." Building on this idea, 't Hart (1993, p. 39) explains that non-routine events only become crises to the extent that they trigger "a breakdown of familiar symbolic frameworks legitimating the pre-existing socio-political order." Such crises lead to the erosion of trust and legitimacy in the institutions and elites that govern us (cf. Salomonsen & 't Hart, 2020). They may be the result of a *situational crisis*, such as pandemics or natural disasters, or the consequence of an *institutional crisis*, created by the institution itself, such as institutional fraud or chronic policy failures (cf. 't Hart, 2014, p. 129).

A crisis is "*political*" not necessarily in the traditional sense of the word (such as in the case of an international crisis between two nation states or between two political parties in governments), but rather in the sense that a public crisis has a political dimension (cf. Frandsen & Johansen, 2020, p. 74) or as Boin et al. (2005/2017, p. ix) put it, "crises are political at heart." Public leaders who have to deal with a situation of crisis "have a special responsibility to help safeguard society from the adverse consequences of crisis" (Boin et al., 2005/2017, p. 10) as citizens expect them to eliminate the threat and minimize the damage of the crisis. As noted by Ansell et al. (2014, p. 426), in the context of crisis "[…] people expect their leaders to reduce uncertainty and provide an authoritative account of what is going on, why it is happening and what needs to be done." In the words of Boin et al. (2005/2017, p. 79), crisis leaders attempt to reduce public uncertainty and inspire confidence "by formulating and imposing a convincing narrative."

This activity, referred to by Boin et al., (2005/2017) as meaning making in crises, is performed in a triangular relationship (Boin et al., 2005/2017, p. 81) between political actors (governmental and nongovernmental), the mass media (news producers: journalist and news organizations), and the citizenry (a pluralistic aggregate of all kinds of individuals, groups, and subcultures). It is within this particular context of crisis that communication as a goal-directed activity is aimed at preserving a positive image, repairing reputation, reducing negative effects and preventing more negative consequences (Benoit, 1995). The main goal is to change the perception of the public by pursuing a specific persuasive goal to convince them that the right things are being done (Kim & Park, 2017; Olsson, 2014).

The essence of crisis communication consists in a *well-crafted response strategy* (Lee & Atkinson, 2019) to alleviate the situation for the intended audience addressed within the rhetorical arena. Over time, scholars concerned with these strategies have come to characterize them as image restoration (Benoit, 1995), blame management (McGraw, 1991), situational crisis communication (Coombs, 2007), and image repair (Benoit & Pang, 2008). Particularly Benoit's image repair theory and Coombs' situational approach have become dominant paradigms for crisis communication research, sharing a focus on communication to restore and maintain a positive image. The image repair theory (Benoit, 1995) is message-oriented and focuses on the options a political leader can choose from when their character or reputation is under attack. The situational crisis communication theory (Coombs, 2007) is context-oriented and focuses on how the crisis type, crisis intensity, crisis history, and prior reputation play a role in the choice of response strategy for it to be more convincing. In all cases, the main observation made by the scholars is that communication has the power to affect the citizens' perception of the leaders and the crisis, and that such communication consists of image repair responses to correct a tarnished image.

Whether one chooses *defensive strategies*, like blaming others or denying responsibility, or *accommodating strategies*, such as the claim of good intentions, bolstering, differentiating, apologizing or corrective action (such as offering compensation), crisis managers need to ensure that the repertoire of response strategies that they employ has a reasonable chance of success. Defensive strategies are most likely to convince when the responsibility of the organization responding to crisis is particularly low, with some researchers even maintaining that accommodating strategies are the only viable means to effectively restore reputation (cf. Choi & Chung, 2013; Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Kiambi & Shafer, 2016; Kim & Park, 2017; Arendt et al., 2017). Such responses are seen as *persuasive attempts* to reshape the citizens' perception by changing or creating new beliefs about the political leader's responsibility for an act.

As public opinion and reputation are closely related (van Riel, 2013), crisis response strategies can only be argumentatively aimed at influencing public opinion to benefit the leader's reputation. Political leaders shape their responses to journalists' questions to their reputational benefit in such a way that an account is provided of their words and actions in response to the critical questions raised by the journalist on behalf of the audience. As Palmieri and Musi (2020) show in the case of crisis responses by companies, crisis response strategies constitute the arguments which are

advanced to obtain and reinforce *trust*. Political leaders, while trying to suggest that their words and actions are adequate, argue that they acted/will act legitimately in the public interest, and that citizens can therefore trust them. It goes without saying that just as account-giving can be a matter of degree, reputation can be slightly, partially or mostly reinforced.

10.3   Cases Studies: A European Union Perspective

In order to explain how politicians seek to defend their image during a crisis, and why their persuasive strategies work the way they do, two case studies[1] were selected concerning the European Union (EU) response to the COVID-19 crisis. These are particularly complex cases because they concern a situational crisis due to the pandemic, as well as an institutional crisis resulting from the longstanding bad image from which the EU suffers.

The EU has *significant crisis management capacities*, and although member states are oftentimes reluctant to transfer more authority to it, they have routinely called on the EU to coordinate and integrate national response capacities (cf. Boin et al., 2013). *Trans-boundary crises* which unfold across borders and have widespread consequences, such as pandemics, migration, environment, finance, can hardly be dealt with within the geographical and functional boundaries of member states. As Boin et al. (2013, pp. 100–101) explain, "their cascading nature and the insidious knock-on effects typically outstrip local coping capacity and resist unilateral responses." Such crises impose a joint response to a common and urgent threat. However, although the EU has dealt with many trans-boundary crises to date, it has also been unable to produce quick and efficient coordinated responses (Boin et al., 2013, pp. 104–105), partly explaining why the EU continues to have difficulty with handling new crises, in addition to the fact that its role as a crisis manager and communicator is not always clear, let alone put to good use.

This is more so in the case of a health crisis such as COVID-19, due to reduced EU competencies in the area of public health. With the exception of common safety concerns in public health matters for the aspects defined in the Treaty (Art. 168 (4) TFEU) that are included in the field of shared competencies (Art. 4(2)k TFEU), public health is an area in which the EU retains only light supporting competencies (Art. 6(a) TFEU). EU action "shall complement" member states' actions through

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[1] The two selected interviews appeared in print. The first case study is an online interview, the second case one from the newspaper *Die Zeit*. It is not clear whether the interviews were "live" and subsequently transcribed online. For the purpose of analyzing the crisis response strategies from an argumentative perspective their readable transcription is sufficient because prosodic and other conversational phenomena are irrelevant to the interpretation of the political actors' standpoints and justificatory reasons. It goes without saying that such aspects can play a role in the strategic design of the political responses, particularly when the interaction between the interviewer and the political actor is live. This chapter concerns itself exclusively with interpreting the argumentative content of the crisis responses.

incentive measures meant to protect and improve human health, but "excluding any harmonization of the laws and regulations of the member states" (Art. 168 (5) TFEU) in combatting "major cross-border health scourges" and "serious cross-border threats to health" (cf. Andone & Coman-Kund, 2022). It is against this legal and political background that we need to understand EU responses to the pandemic crisis.

10.3.1   Case Study 1: Accommodating Strategies

In an online interview with Torreblanca (2020)[2] from the European Council on Foreign Relations (May 6, 2020), EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell assesses the European response to the COVID-19 crisis, its geopolitical consequences, and its effects on conflicts in Europe's neighborhood. Speaking several months after the start of the pandemic and at a time when many countries were in lockdown, Borrell touches mainly upon the economic crisis in Europe and the international dimension of the crisis. As the EU feels responsible for dealing with the trans-boundary crisis at issue, Borrell employs a number of *accommodating response strategies* aimed at increasing reputational benefits in the eyes of the citizens. He underlines that "the response to the coronavirus crisis has preoccupied, and occupied, us a great deal" especially because "this crisis is going to speed up, reinforce, exacerbate [ongoing issues regarding the functioning of the European Union]—and we will surely find that tomorrow's world will be like today's, only worse."

Drawing on the institutional convention of putting newsworthy matters of political controversy on the table, the journalist inquires into the policy issues that the European Commission needs to deal with urgently and efficiently. Subsequently, Borrell gives an account of the Commission's current preoccupations as follows:

> […] The first is trying to find answers to what is now an economic crisis erupting in Europe (…). The second front is the international dimension of the crisis, on how to help our neighbors, our partners – […] – and try to bring back those 500,000 European tourists stranded around the world who have suddenly found their journeys cancelled. This was an arduous task of coordination with all member states, which has paid off and seems to be coming to an end.
>
> […] what is going to take up most of our time from now on is the economic response: to see how we can organize solidarity among Europeans. […] so far, it is being considered along the same lines as in the euro crisis. […] This is a symmetrical shock in origin in that it affects everyone, but it does not affect everyone alike in its consequences. [...] it is symmetrical in its causes but asymmetrical in its consequences. […]
>
> we have to see how we will organize our solidarity. Up to now, European solidarity has been applied in terms of helping someone get into debt. If you have a problem, you have to become indebted, and we'll help you to do so, acting as an intermediary in the financial market, as does the Stability Mechanism, the ESM, or MEDE – or as the SURE mechanism. […] Now, what is being considered is not giving loans, but rather providing aid at a sunk cost. The phrase […] is "from loans to grants."

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[2] The full link to the interview can be found in the reference list.

Borrell's response in the above extract is fully in line with his accounting role. As the EU foreign policy chief, his words cannot be interpreted as simply providing new information about EU's future actions. By referring to the two main preoccupations for the "economic crisis erupting in Europe" and "the international dimension of the crisis," Borrell's main goal is to indirectly provide arguments for an *implicit standpoint* that "the EU is highly preoccupied with managing the crisis well." This reconstruction of Borrell's words is supported by the concrete actions he is mentioning, such as bringing back the stranded European tourists and helping countries in economic need. These concrete actions constitute *arguments* in support of his efforts to protect EU's reputation by pointing at actions with obvious positive consequences for the citizens. In order to take away any potential critical question about whether these actions are likely to be achieved, Borrell underlines that the "arduous task" of bringing back 500,000 Europeans is in fact "coming to an end" due to "coordination with all member states," thus suggesting that all EU countries agree with EU action. This is a likely effective way of dealing with the *situational crisis*: harmonization of actions by all countries has had a positive effect that is immediately felt by the public.

When turning to the thorny issue of economic response, Borrell is mainly preoccupied with dealing with the *institutional crisis*. His main concern is to restore and reinforce a positive image of the EU. To this end, the first strategy consists of *claiming good intentions*. Just as in the case of the situational crisis, his arguments support the implicit viewpoint according to which the EU is concerned with the good management of the crisis. This time the focus is on the issue of solidarity, which is repeated three times in the above extract: "how we can organize solidarity among Europeans" and "how we will organize our solidarity," "European solidarity." The argument concerning solidarity is further justified by pointing at the EU's efforts to support all EU economies, especially those in utter need, and argues indirectly that the proposed "from loans to grants" mechanism is an appropriate solution. As Benoit (2015, p. 22) observes, "people who do bad while trying to do good are usually not blamed as much as those who intend to do bad." In other words, even if the mechanism later turns out not to work as currently claimed, EU's good intentions remain to its benefit.

The strategy of good intentions does not work on its own. Aware of the fact that intentions are not sufficient to convince, Borrell supplements this strategy with *bolstering*, employed to strengthen the audience's positive perception towards organizations and political leaders and offset negative feelings (Coombs, 2015). To do so, Borrell resorts to presenting positive aspects of the current policy proposals. Most striking is the subtlety with which this strategy is employed. He explicitly mentions the mistakes that the EU made in other past crises, such as the euro crisis, yet he does so only to suggest that they have learned from mistakes and that they can now counterbalance these by offering more realistic and effective solutions in which there is a specific concern for solidarity among all member states. This way, Borrell attempts to relatively improve the EU's reputation and ideally the positive aspects will become the focal point, with past mistakes minimized. Without denying having acted wrongly in other crises and without attempting to reduce responsibility

for past actions, Borrell maximizes the citizens' positive perception of the EU as a crisis manager.

The strategies of good intentions and bolstering are strengthened further by the strategy of *differentiation.* Borrell resorts to redefining the crisis as a more favorable event, by differentiating the current solution (based on grants rather than loans) from other solutions that proved inappropriate in the past (such as the Stability Mechanism, the ESM, or MEDE). To ensure the maximal chance of convincing the citizens, he also resorts to *corrective action* by suggesting that the new solution is not only better than past solutions, but also that such bad policy solutions are unlikely to recur. The commitment to find a suitable solution to the economic problem of poor countries, along with explicit plans to do so, are central to image restoration. As Benoit (2015, p. 29) notes, "we often think better of people who clean up messes they created." By promising corrective action, Borrell attempts to produce new beliefs in the European citizenry to remedy the situational problem and, by extension, the institutional problem.

By employing the four strategies just presented, Borrell turns the constraints imposed by the conventions of political interviews—i.e., to accept blame for past actions and recognize mistakes—into an opportunity. To counter the weakness inherent in such a crisis response, he resorts to an *argument from analogy* in which he compares the current economic crisis with the euro crisis. By drawing on similarities between the two situations, he points out that they are comparable as they both share the features of crises. Yet Borrell is quick to underline that, although comparable, the two crises are not identical in all respects: "This is a symmetrical shock in origin in that it affects everyone, but it does not affect everyone alike in its consequences. In other words, it is symmetrical in its causes but asymmetrical in its consequences."

Cummings (2015) convincingly demonstrates in her extensive study on reasoning in public health that analogy arguments are particularly suitable in cases of uncertainty, such as situations of crisis, and can lead to significant gains when complete knowledge is missing. The extent to which there is a clear relationship between the two compared situations, the argument from analogy is strong or "rationally warranted." Knowing that the similarity between the current crisis and the euro crisis is tenuous, and the argument from analogy therefore weak, Borrell makes the differences between the two crises explicit. On the one hand, the argument from analogy has an *epistemic function* by providing the public with knowledge through an explanation of the characteristics of the two situations. The analogy implicitly suggests a requirement for urgent or at least prompt practical action on the part of the EU, similar to what was done in the past. On the other hand, the similarity between the two situations is a weak basis upon which to build a policy. Just because this crisis is similar to the euro crisis in some respects, it does not mean that they will also be similar in relation to all features, such as the consequences mentioned by Borrell. Therefore, the two crises are considered similar, but not the same, and it is this crucial aspect that gives a *presumptive status* to the analogy. This means that the analogy is defeated by pointing at some important aspect that renders the two crises different and the current EU proposal likely to be better than past action. It is only in

this way that Borrell can maintain a reassuring position that things are under control by the EU.

By employing a combination of strategies in which past actions are discussed critically and new actions are proposed that offer appropriate help to the citizens, Borrell is likely to increase trust in the proposed actions by giving the impression of objectivity, fairness, consistency, as well as openness and honesty, concern and care. These dimensions are fundamental facets for creating trust (cf. Cummings, 2014, p. 1048; Garland, 2021, pp. 123–138), with the citizens no longer perceiving the crisis as a real risk. Once trust is achieved, risky situations tend to no longer be perceived as such, but rather as solvable.

10.3.2   Case Study 2: Defensive Strategies

In an interview by *Die Zeit*[3] on February 17, 2021 (European Commission, 2021), the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen responds to critical questions about the EU's mistakes and the deeper causes of the pandemic crisis. The interview takes place at a time when the EU, and the European Commission in particular, are much criticized for having taken the wrong approach in combatting the health crisis. At the time, the criticisms pertained mainly to the slow vaccination campaign in Europe. The fragment below concerns these issues:

> **Die Zeit**: […] What have been the EU's greatest errors, and your own?
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> **Von der Leyen**: […] (…) I would like to stress first of all what has gone well. All 27 Member States, large or small, have access to a safe vaccine. […] We bet on the right vaccines and invested massively in them. […]. we ensured through our international vaccination initiative Covax that poorer countries will also be supplied with vaccines. […].
>
> **Die Zeit**: And now to the mistakes!
>
> **Von der Leyen**: We were very thorough when it came to approval of the vaccines, which cost us time. […] The same applies to the delay in administering the second vaccine dose […]. Together with the Member States, we took a more cautious approach, because we don't cut corners when it comes to health.
>
> **Die Zeit**: Too little, too late is the accusation…
>
> **Von der Leyen**: We all underestimated the difficulty for the industry of ramping up a complex mass vaccine production program from nothing. […].
>
> **Die Zeit**: […] Is it possible that, over the past year, the EU didn't quite make the mental jump from "frugality on everything" to "money is no object" and that it was a little too cautious with its ordering?
>
> **Von der Leyen**: No. I don't agree. In the summer, it was impossible to tell which company would make it over the finish line. […].
>
> **Die Zeit**: Were there also reservations within the EU over the new technology that BioNTech was using i.e., the modified messenger RNA?
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> **Von der Leyen**: Last summer many questions were indeed being asked by Member States. […] there were questions. But ultimately, everyone took the decisions together. […].

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[3] The full link to the interview can be found in the reference list.

In this interview, the accountability process is quite explicit: the journalist questions and criticizes the political leader and the latter is expected to clarify and justify EU words and actions. The journalist advances various accusations, such as "EU made mistakes," "EU acted too little, too late," and "EU was too cautious." Formulated as critical questions suggesting a negative evaluation of the EU, they do not just raise doubts about the EU's approach, but also constitute standpoints opposing EU's positive stance, thus making the difference of opinion between the two interlocutors much more explicit than in the previous case study. The journalist's critical remarks are aimed at constraining von der Leyen's answers concerning the issues that can be discussed, in the direction of problematic aspects regarding the handling of the crisis.

Just as in the previous case study, von der Leyen advances an *implicit standpoint* that "the EU is highly preoccupied with managing the crisis well." But whereas Borrell admitted EU mistakes and drew lessons from them, von der Leyen is not inclined to accept mistakes, at some point in the discussion making this fully explicit: "No. I don't agree." Unlike the previous case in which accommodating strategies entailing some degree of blame acceptance were central, von der Leyen employs *defensive strategies* that seek to disconnect the EU from the problems related to the crisis. She refutes the accusation of blame (Hansson, 2018) and even denies that there is an issue to begin with, as the EU has done lots of good things. As Claeys and Cauberghe (2014) argue, such defensive strategies involve a low attribution of organizational responsibility for the crisis.

By arguing this way, von der Leyen is much more preoccupied with the *institutional crisis*—related to the image of the institution she is leading—rather than with the situational crisis on which the interviewer's questions actually focus. The journalist's first question, related to the EU mistakes and her own mistakes, is dealt with by mentioning "first of all what has gone well" by pointing at full access to vaccines within all EU and the Covax program ensuring supplies to poor countries. Even when the journalist reminds her that the question pertained to mistakes ("and now to the mistakes!"), von der Leyen is quick to avoid the blame again and mention positive aspects, such as being "very thorough when it came to approval of the vaccines." In this way, the fact that the whole approval procedure of vaccines took longer is not a real problem, but an unavoidable complication resulting from fully appropriate actions. Being reminded by the journalist that the EU has been far too cautious, von der Leyen points at the uncertainty that existed at the time when vaccines had to be ordered, mentions again positive actions (such as the wide range of vaccines working to EU's benefit in the medium-term), and finally mentions collective decision-making ("we all underestimated," "everyone took the decisions together"), suggesting that there were no one-sided EU deliberations.

In line with empirical studies that have consistently pointed to the reputational benefits of taking a conciliatory approach over a combative stance (cf. Arendt et. al., 2017), it is unlikely that von der Leyen's approach could be effective in the current context. Such strategies could work to reduce reputational damage when there is no possible association between the organization and the problems occurring during the crisis (Kim & Park, 2017), although even in such a case it is disputable

whether improving the image would occur. While denying the existence of the issues mentioned by the journalist and by denying that even when such issues existed the EU could be blamed for them, von der Leyen does not provide unequivocal evidence that the EU has not made mistakes. It is only in such cases that the defensive strategy based on denial could potentially work (van der Meer, 2014). And even then, it is not a recommended strategy (Dutta & Pullig, 2011), given that citizens are not inclined to accept denial in the absence of clear evidence, and negative reputational outcomes are most likely to remain or even increase.

10.4 Conclusion

This chapter has contributed to the study of *crisis communication* by investigating the argumentative dimension of crisis response strategies in political interviews. It has demonstrated that the argumentative nature of political interviews, imposed by the accountability process at their core, constrains the way in which political leaders respond in times of crisis. They attempt to support a positive standpoint according to which they are managing the situation well, and resort to strategies that solve the situational crisis in which they are involved and/or the institutional crisis most closely affecting their public image.

The analysis of some of the responses provided by two prominent EU political leaders brought to light the use of potentially effective accommodating strategies in which the recognition of mistakes and lessons drawn from them is central. The analysis has also shown the consequences of the likely less effective choice in which defensive strategies are put to work to deny that mistakes have been made, and that even when such mistakes might be at issue, politicians do not bear the blame for it. While in the first case a situational and an institutional crisis are dealt with, in the second case the situational crisis is left aside, and the institutional crisis is the politician's sole preoccupation.

Moreover, the analysis of the image repair strategies employed by the political actors has made it clear that no one single strategy seems to guarantee effectiveness. In one case study, the combination of multiple strategies, including having good intentions, bolstering, differentiating, and analogical arguments, contributes to providing knowledge to the audience, and by recognizing the inherent weaknesses of these strategies, trust and legitimacy are also achieved. In the other case study, the combination of denial and blame avoidance are less likely to be convincing.

From a scholarly perspective, this study highlights the need to devote closer attention to the workings of crisis response strategies in political interviews, with particular focus on their argumentative potential. Ultimately, this kind of research can be extended to more case studies to develop a strong empirical basis for developing a taxonomy of crisis response argumentative strategies that facilitate or hinder the construction of a positive image. From a practical perspective, the research offers essential suggestions for political actors as crisis communicators regarding the management of such situations in practice.

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