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# How the impossible became possible: evolving frames and narratives on responsibility and responsiveness from the Eurocrisis to NextGenerationEU

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## ABSTRACT



This paper explains how a turn in EU governance which was unthinkable only a few months prior became possible in 2020. Rather than a sudden paradigm shift brought about by the pandemic, we argue that it occurred through successive episodes of reinterpreting the rules and layering on new instruments while fostering investment and fiscal sharing on top of the pre-existing ordoliberal regime. Through a discursive institutionalist lens, the paper supports these claims by studying the frames and narratives of French, German and EU leaders during three rounds of reforms, namely the flexibilization of the European Semester (2014–2016), the adoption of the Budgetary Instrument for Convergence and Competitiveness (BICC) (2017–2019), and the adoption of the Recovery and Resilience Facility (2020–2021). The analysis shows that an increased awareness of a responsiveness imperative, going beyond national constituencies, transformed European elites' conceptions of 'responsible' government thus at least momentarily closing the gap between responsibility and responsiveness.


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**KEYWORDS** European governance; responsibility; responsiveness; discourse; framing; narrative

## Introduction

Since the 2010, EU Economic governance has been tremendously in flux. With the inception of an unprecedented stimulus package funded by common debt, the EU's response to Covid-19 was in sharp contrast with the mantras of fiscal discipline and structural reforms which had prevailed in the aftermath of the Euro crisis. Scholarly assessments have diverged regarding the significance,

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drivers and implications of this turn. In the heat of the Covid-19 pandemic, many saw the EU's economic response as ground-breaking, in sharp contrast with the bloc's Eurozone crisis response (Ladi & Tsarouhas, 2020; Schmidt, 2020b). The about-face in German positions in particular seemed spectacular, as they shifted within a few months from a strong rejection of Eurobonds and any possible *Transfer Union* to embracing Europe's 'Hamiltonian moment' and championing the creation of Recovery bonds together with France (Crespy & Schramm, 2021). Many observers explained this shift by arguing at the time that the pandemic was 'different' from the financial crisis *by nature*, and therefore logically called for a different response (Giles, 2021; Tooze, 2021). Yet, the pandemic was as exogenous as the 2008 US financial crisis; it did not affect all member states symmetrically, and there were attempts, notably from Dutch leaders, to reiterate a narrative pointing to Southern countries' failure to address the pandemic adequately (see Introduction, this issue). Constructivist research has shown that policy responses do not mechanically result from the 'essential nature' of 'crises'. The causes, nature and implication of a 'crisis' result from discursive battles for a dominant narrative in moments of great uncertainty and interpretive ambiguity (Hay, 2016). Besides, a number of academic analyses pointed to elements of continuity, picturing 2020 as a window of opportunity against the background of preceding developments (de la Porte & Heins, 2022), or arguing that Germany's response was in keeping with its identity as a 'status quo power' (Becker, 2022). Some also argued that European leaders had 'learned' from past experience and failures regarding those policies that 'work' or not, (Ladi & Wolff, 2021). Other scholars, though, suggested that the enactment of NextGenerationEU amounted to little more than a new step through which the EU was continuously 'failing forward' (Howarth & Quaglia, 2021) and stressed the limitations in terms of conditionality and limited duration of the recovery package (Schoeller & Heidebrecht, 2023). As a matter of fact, none of the ideas or instruments focussing on fiscal discipline have been eliminated. The revision of the Stability and Growth Pact is the subject of ongoing, arduous, deliberations. Even though loosened, the rules-based regime inherited from Maastricht is here to stay. This suggests that we are facing a reconfiguration which is more ambiguous and hybrid than any outright 'conversion' (Streeck & Thelen, 2005) of the rules or shift in ideas from one paradigm to another (Hall, 1993). It would be highly speculative to make claims in this paper as to the long-lasting effects of this turn, most of which will only be revealed in key upcoming political moments including the completion of the SGP reform, the next European election (both in 2024) and, crucially, in the negotiations to be held in 2025–2027 over the next EU budget and implying decisions on the fate of the NGEU resources. The observed stickiness of the rules-based Maastricht paradigm for EU economic governance makes the pro-debt, pro-investment reform of 2020 even more puzzling from a political standpoint: how could what

seemed impossible just a few months prior become possible? Admitting that the pandemic has been an extraordinary window of opportunity, how can we explain the process leading to its opening?

Adopting a discursive institutionalist approach (Schmidt, 2008), we argue that the turn from 2020 should be seen neither as a sudden event, nor as a complete paradigm change. A careful examination of political interactions over the past decade shows that various episodes of 'reinterpreting' the rules and 'layering' new instruments on top of existing ones have progressively led to a blending of the inherited ordoliberal regime focused on fiscal discipline with new instruments for EU led investment rooted in fiscal sharing. Although these new instruments are arguably conditional and short-lived, a mere return to the pre-pandemic situation (in terms of both the financial resources and the institutional tools available) seems unlikely. Rather, the Janus-faced nature of the regime will probably lead to more conflict calling for new compromises.

The purpose of this paper is to tease out the political drivers and discursive mechanisms which made this outstanding moment of change possible. In tune with the perspective developed in the special issue, which revisits Peter Mair's responsibility vs. responsiveness dilemma from a constructivist angle, we show how the increased awareness of a multi-faceted responsiveness imperative has transformed European elites' conceptions of 'responsible' government. Amid an acute legitimacy crisis, new ideational elements emerging from discursive deliberation and contestation served to incrementally change political actors' conceptions of 'responsibility' so as to make them more responsive to various, diffuse demands for more fiscal sharing and investment. This, as we will see, means that responsiveness in EU politics is going beyond the classical conception focused on national constituencies. The paper supports these claims by studying the discursive dynamics surrounding three rounds of reforms – namely the flexibilization of the European Semester (2014–2016), the adoption of the Budgetary Instrument for Convergence and Competitiveness (BICC) (2017–2019), and the adoption of the Recovery and Resilience Facility (2020–2021). Through a study of the frames and the narratives in the discourse articulated by member state leaders, including the German Chancellor and the French President and their respective Finance Ministers, and by the 'Commission,' encompassing the European Commission President and the Commissioners for Economics and Financial Affairs, we show how reforms were driven by changing conceptions of 'responsibility' and 'responsiveness,' and how what seemed impossible gradually became acceptable and therefore possible.

## **Reinterpreting the rules and layering instruments from the Eurocrisis to Covid-19**

Economic governance has typically been steered by intergovernmental dynamics ever since the origins of the monetary union (Dyson &

Featherstone, 1999). Over time, though, interstate bargaining has transformed itself into more complex politics involving consensus-seeking deliberation among EU leaders (Bickerton et al., 2015), with the European Commission playing the role of an honest broker and consistently pushing for an increased centralisation of the rules, instruments and resources (Kassim, 2023). Against this background, ideational battles for control but also dynamics of legitimation *vis-à-vis* national publics are key to explaining the successive reconfigurations of EU economic governance.

Borrowing the terms of Streeck and Thelen (2005), we argue that new policy instruments were 'layered' on top of existing ones as rules were discursively 'reinterpreted' for new uses. Reinterpretation and layering are evident especially in three respects relating to (a) the relaxing of *fiscal discipline*, (b) the gradual build-up of *fiscal sharing*, (c) the strong rise of *investment* (including social investment) as a central policy objective. This, we argue, does not constitute a radical paradigm shift (or a 'conversion') but tilts the balance of European economic governance further towards a more positive fiscal regime at the EU level.

Beginning in 2012, the gradual *relaxing of fiscal discipline* has been one of the most striking aspects marking the decade from the Eurocrisis to the Covid-19 pandemic. As argued by Schmidt (2020a), the European Commission modified the calculations of deficit and debt levels underpinning the European Semester largely 'by stealth,' with a discourse that reflected difficult and fragile political compromises so as to avoid conflict with Council members. By 2015, however, the European Commission had put forward its new more flexible interpretation of budgetary rules where it recognised the need to shift away from fiscal consolidation toward a more positive fiscal stance, meaning more 'expansionary fiscal policies' (European Commission, 2016, p. 3). Not only France and Italy, but also Spain and Portugal have continuously escaped the sanctions foreseen under the Excessive Deficit procedure due to political disagreements within the Council and the Commission alike (Mérand, 2021). In 2020, moreover, as Covid-19 hit Europe, the Commission almost immediately suspended the rules of the Stability and Growth Pact to give leeway to governments to support their health-care systems and, beyond this, their economies which had come to a standstill. After years of political contention, mainly between the 'frugals' of Northern Europe wanting a return to strict enforcement of the rules versus demands for greater flexibility from Southern member states, especially Italy and France, the Commission submitted its proposal to revise the Stability and Growth Pact in November 2022. Although still contentious, this proposal is a sign that the incremental reinterpretation of the rules and layering on of new instruments is now mature enough to be institutionalised or codified in writing. This is a further step in mitigating the rules-based regime conceived at Maastricht.

The relaxing of fiscal discipline has gone hand in hand with a *progressive build-up of fiscal sharing*. In the aftermath of the Eurocrisis, contention over the possible creation of eurobonds became ‘toxic’ (Matthijs & McNamara, 2015) with regard to the public debate in ‘frugal’ member states as well as among EU leaders themselves. The arrival of Emmanuel Macron as French president in 2017 and his call for a Eurozone budget led to the adoption of the BICC in 2019, as a first attempt to pool common resources to help the weakest member states tackle pressing social issues causing inequality and unrest. Far from a large redistributive instrument, it is a rather small fund designed to provide financial incentives fostering the adoption of structural reforms in Eurozone member states. While a French-German agreement could have led to a larger instrument, the Netherlands was particularly adamant about limiting the fund to 17 billion euros (Schoeller, 2021). In parallel, the logic of insurance helped overcome political disagreements over risk sharing (Schelkle, 2021), as exemplified for instance by the European Stability Mechanism, relying on loans. The response to the Covid-19 pandemic then triggered a real push to resuscitate ‘eurobonds’ in the altered form of ‘corona-bonds’, financed by a novel mechanism whereby the European Commission can borrow money on the financial markets. This constitutes a form of common debt which was unthinkable just a few months prior to the pandemic.

Finally, the *rise of investment* in EU governance has been particularly visible over the past decade. The launch of the Juncker Plan in 2015, an instrument involving the European Investment Bank and aiming to leverage above all private money, reflected the recognition that fiscal consolidation alone could not reboot the European economy. As mentioned above, the BICC was then conceived to further encourage public investment in specific reforms. Moreover, the launch of a European Pillar of Social Rights in 2017 epitomised a (relative) consensus on the need to turn away from austerity. While the previous decade had focussed on ‘recalibration’ (and often outright retrenchment of e.g., pensions or healthcare systems), the renewed social agenda of the EU is rooted in the logic of social investment (Hemerijck & Huguenot-Noël, 2022). The Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) adopted in 2021 brings the EU’s investment capacity to a new, much larger level with money explicitly earmarked for policies supporting greening, digitalisation, and social investment. Reform is now conceived of as part of a multi-level investment state that addresses pressing new social risks including better education or (child) poverty (Crespy, 2022).

To conclude, the Covid-19 pandemic has not brought about a new model or paradigm of EU governance. Rather, an investment-oriented Union relying on common debt has taken shape alongside the existing ordoliberal regime, meaning that the EU regime is more Janus-faced than ever. The following section argues that the gradual reinterpretation of rules and the layering of new policy instruments can be analysed through a discursive institutionalist

lens focussing on the changing meanings of responsibility and responsiveness in EU policy making.

### **A discursive institutionalist approach to changing conceptions of responsibility and responsiveness**

The notions of responsibility and responsiveness coined by Peter Mair offer a powerful intellectual framework to understand the tensions at stake in EU multi-level politics, especially as far as socio-economic governance is concerned. In his seminal work Mair (2009) submitted that, in the era of globalisation and accelerating EU integration, European governments have been increasingly prone to comply with the logic of responsibility, stemming from the technocratic rules enacted by supranational institutions and financial markets, rather than with that of responsiveness, that is, the need to address the demands expressed by their electorate. According to him, this was inexorably leading to the ‘hollowing out’ of representative democracy (Mair, 2013). The primacy of responsibility has been especially emphasised by Mair’s followers in analyses of responses to the Eurocrisis (Bardi et al., 2014; Laffan, 2014). At the same time, dynamic approaches later suggested that the relation between responsibility and responsiveness, and the existence of a dilemma, are less straightforward than it may seem. Jonas Linde and Yvette Peters, for instance, argue that when governments act responsively toward voters, they generate a ‘reservoir of goodwill’ that allows them to subsequently implement (unpopular) ‘responsible’ decisions that are, in turn, more easily accepted by citizens’ (Karremans & Lefkofridi, 2020, p. 276). On the other hand, Karremans shows that from 2014 onwards, the logic of responsiveness to social demands superseded that of responsibility in France, Germany and Spain alike (Karremans, 2021), thus casting doubt on the inevitability of a dilemma between the two even in ‘hard times’.

The special issue to which this paper contributes proposes therefore to revisit Mair’s framework from a constructivist perspective (see Crespi, Moreira Ramalho, Schmidt this issue). This has three theoretical implications which guide our empirical investigation. First, the meaning and policy substance of ‘responsibility’ is contingent in ways related not only to context (Lefkofridi & Nezi, 2020, p. 335) but also to ideational and discursive battles. Second, when taking the multilevel standpoint of EU politics, the notion of responsiveness goes beyond the classic definition focussed on national electorates. Though a non-majoritarian institution, the European Commission has, for instance, turned away from austerity to embrace more responsive policies when facing an acute legitimacy crisis (Schmidt, 2020a) and a multifaceted popular revolt against the kind of ‘responsible’ policy-making embodied by the Troika (Hopkin, 2020). Furthermore, Kinski (2018, p. 348) provides evidence that ‘MPs claim to represent other EU citizens if they share responsibility for

system maintenance with other EU partners,' thereby showing that elite construal of responsiveness may take new diffuse and transnational forms. Third, the relation between responsibility and responsiveness has been reconfigured, accounting less for a dilemma than for a logic of 'responsive responsibility' (see Crespy, Moreira Ramalho, Schmidt this issue) whereby the latter has become part and parcel of the former. This reconfiguration, we argue, sheds light on 'how the impossible became possible'.

Discursive institutionalism offers useful insights to explain how such reconfigurations happen gradually over time *between* crises as well as *during* crises rather than as an immediate response to unexpected events. We situate our analysis in the specific institutional setting of EU deliberations, a hybrid arena involving both supranational and intergovernmental institutions. To capture this reality, we focus on discourse emanating from the European Commission, two French Presidents, the German Chancellor, and their respective Finance Ministers. While concentrating on the French-German tandem admittedly provides a limited view of the diversity of interactions within the European Council, it offers a satisfactory proxy to broadly capture the dynamics of conflict and compromise between two opposing views of EU governance. Whereas France was consistently voicing the concerns of those advocating less fiscal discipline and more fiscal sharing, the so-called new Hanseatic league spearheaded by the Netherlands defended more orthodox ordoliberal views, and was supported by Germany especially in the beginning of the Merkel era.

Recent contributions have strongly focussed on preference formation in Germany (Crespy & Schramm, 2021; Howarth & Schild, 2021; Krotz & Schramm, 2022; Waas & Rittberger, 2023). Far from making EU governance reform dependent on the country's supposedly fixed, endogenous preferences alone, these contributions show, on the contrary, the importance of political and discursive dynamics as well as of cooperation or bilateralism as an institutionalised norm. This means that, while pivotal, the (re)configuration of Germany's preferences cannot be seen in isolation from the political interactions with others. These include in particular – but not only – France, coalitions among member states, and EU institutions, namely the Council as a peculiar deliberative arena and the European Commission as a 'broker' steering deliberations. This is in tune with previous discursive institutionalist accounts of EU governance reform showing that French-German deliberations could not be reduced to a classic 'two-level game' but should rather be seen as a 'simultaneous double game' whereby decision-making on policy solutions is embedded in multi-level discursive justification (Crespy & Schmidt, 2014).

Building on this, our argument is that, from 2014 to 2020, the meaning of responsibility and responsiveness for French, German and EU leaders has gradually taken novel and changing forms going beyond Mair's notions of



technocratic rule centred on fiscal discipline vs. response to separate national electorates' demands. The increased awareness of diffuse yet tangible popular revolt against 'muddling through', continuous demands from certain social groups and governments for more fiscal sharing, the need for 'system maintenance' (Kinski, 2018) and the existential threats looming over the EU (posed by an acute legitimacy crisis, territorial disintegration epitomised by Brexit, later the impact of the pandemic on the single market), all tapped into a renewed construal of 'responsible' EU governance, allowing for gradual change and, in the light of the pandemic, a larger window of institutional change. We also broaden the definition of responsiveness by distinguishing the classical notion of vertical responsiveness, whereby decision makers address citizens' expectations, from what we term horizontal responsiveness, namely decision makers willingness to consider the demands made by another EU government, representing its own constituency.

## Data and methods

In order to substantiate these claims, this paper investigates legitimising discourses surrounding the three main rounds of reforms of EU economic governance in the decade 2010–2020. The first episode leads to the flexibilization of the SGP in the framework of the European Semester under the Juncker Commission (2014–2016). As the Commission sought to mediate between conflicting demands for strict austerity from countries advocating fiscal discipline and for more fiscal sharing from countries pushing for solidarity, and despite strong internal disagreements, the Commission reinterpreted the rules for fiscal discipline in an increasingly more flexible way, sparing several countries (notably France, Italy, Spain and Portugal) the sanctions foreseen under the excessive deficit procedure. The second reconfiguration period covers all debates around the Eurozone budget (2017–2019). Unlike the repeated French demands aimed at a major overhaul of the EMU, the deliberations were constrained by the objections of the creditors (later dubbed 'Frugals') and resulted in the layering of a new, small-scale budget for the euro area (dubbed BICC) serving to promote investments and structural reforms in Eurozone members in dire socio-economic straits. The final reconfiguration period covers the debates and discussions about the creation of the RRF during the Covid-19 pandemic (2020).

Our analysis relies on 179 texts in total, retrieved from various sources on the web (see Table 1) on the basis of essentially six keywords (Eurozone, European Semester, Stability and Growth Pact, Recovery Fund, NextGenerationEU, Pandemic) in French, German and English. The search engines provided by the relevant websites ensure that we have a quasi-exhaustive body of public communication from the selected actors on the reforms of EU economic governance for the period covered.

**Table 1.** Corpus.

	Actor	# Speeches	# Coded References	Sources
Flexibilization of the European Semester (2014-2016)	European Commission	29	374	European Commission website – press corner
	France	11	81	Collection of public speeches (Vie-publique.fr)
	Germany	14	121	Bundesregierung and Bundestag's websites
Adoption of the BICC (2017-2020)	European Commission	11	151	European Commission website – press corner
	France	29	315	Collection of public speeches (Vie-publique.fr)
	Germany	20	264	Bundesregierung and Bundestag's websites
Adoption of NextGenerationEU (2020)	European Commission	13	139	European Commission website – press corner
	France	31	145	Collection of public speeches (Vie-publique.fr)
	Germany	21	98	Bundesregierung and Bundestag's websites
Total		179	1688	

The texts analysed are transcripts of press conferences before and after meetings of the European Council, speeches pronounced in front of national parliaments or the European Parliament, or interviews with the press. As such, they constitute essentially a form of legitimising communicative discourse relying heavily on norms and values directed at national journalists and publics. At the operational level, we use an original approach combining two methodologies, namely frame analysis and the study of narratives. It therefore proceeds in two steps. The first step applies a qualitative frame analysis on the entire corpus using N-Vivo software, with frames understood as a communicative device which unveils 'the concrete ways from which information migrates from one place to another' (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Applied to policy making, Schön and Rein (1994) have suggested that frames serve as deliberative tools to overcome conflict and create consensus. In moments constructed as *crises*, frame analysis illuminates the ways in which actors construe and respond to the urge to take a particular course of action, and how they convey meaning to the public (Boin et al., 2009). To detect relevant frames, we adopt a methodology using 'concept coding' and 'nested coding' (Saldaña, 2016). In a deductive fashion, we take responsibility and responsiveness as generic/conceptual frames and look for how their meaning is constructed through more specific, nested issue frames. Coding entire paragraphs allowed identification of various and changing meanings given to notions such as 'investment' or 'structural reforms',

'confidence', 'solidarity' or 'stability'. Our data is constituted by nine distinct corpora (one for each actor and each round of reform) in order to capture change over time and across actors (see Tables 2, 3 and 4).<sup>1</sup>

The second step consists in teasing out how the frames identified are used to construct distinct narratives that make sense of the reforms. In this way, descriptive theme-based frame analysis is complemented by a dynamic analysis focusing on storytelling, a powerful linguistic tool used in political discourse to mix cognitive arguments about 'what is going on' with normative considerations about benevolent or threatening protagonists and their respective moral values. Narratives establish causal connections of events transformed into a story with a beginning, middle and end (Haste et al., 2015). They lend insight into the speakers' canonical view of what is 'ordinary' and 'right' from both a cognitive and a moral point of view (Patterson & Monroe, 1998). The study of narratives focusses essentially on identifying and deconstructing their essential components, namely a setting (context in which policy problem is situated), characters (heroes, villains and victims), a plot (causal linkage between events or actions), and the moral of the story (policy solution). Frames and narratives are close – yet distinct – tools: while frames shape actors' perceptions, the narratives result from frames and provide the connections that further help generate meaning (Aukes et al., 2020). While often used interchangeably, these two analytical tools are rarely consistently operationalised in a complementary fashion.

Based on the coding of 23 sub-frames nested in three more generic frames (responsibility, horizontal responsiveness and vertical responsiveness) (see entire codebook in Appendix), the following section unpacks the framing dynamics and corresponding narratives across actors and over the three reforms rounds of the past decade.

### **Flexibilization of the European Semester (2014–2016)**

Between 2014 and 2016, the reinterpretation of the rules and the layering on of new policy instruments consecrated the slow ideational and discursive changes that had preceded. Major shifts occurred in the midst of conflict as German leaders, although both on the side of responsibility, differed in their discourses about it. While Finance Minister Schäuble was adamant about maintaining fiscal discipline, Chancellor Merkel was somewhat more open to French leaders' pleas for flexibility and calls for responsiveness. At the same time, the Commission openly declared itself to be responsive to the citizens through its greater flexibility in applying the rules, shifted itself approach to structural reform, and created an investment fund. These differences are outlined in Table 2, and elaborated in the following discussions of Germany, France, and the Commission.

**Table 2.** Frames by actor for the flexibilization of the European semester period (2014–2016).

	Responsibility	#Coded references <sup>3</sup>	Horizontal (HR) & vertical (VR) Responsiveness	#Coded references
Germany	Fiscal discipline	33/80 41,3%	Economic coordination (HR)	15/59 25,4%
	Structural reform	21/80 26,3%	Continuity & reinterpretation (HR) OHIO (HR)	11/59 18,6% 8/59 13,6%
	Confidence from financial markets	9/80 11,6%		
France	Fiscal discipline	22/106 20,8%	Continuity & reinterpretation (HR)	9/45 20%
	Flexibility of fiscal rules	17/106 16%	Confidence in government-Europe (VR)	7/45 15,6%
	Structural reform	15/106 14,2%	Social issues (VR) Conflict (HR)	6/45 13,3% 5/45 11,1%
	National investment	12/106 11,3%		
	European investment	12/106 11,3%		
	Fiscal discipline	74/298 24,8%	Social issues (VR)	20/76 26,3%
European Commission	Structural reform	58/298 19,5%	Continuity and reinterpretation of the rules (HR)	15/76 19,7%
	European investment	56/298 18,8%	Confidence in government-Europe (VR)	11/76 14,5%
	National Investment	41/298 13,8%	Confidence (HR)	10/76 13,2%

### Germany

Unsurprisingly, the framing of responsible government by both Angela Merkel and Wolfgang Schäuble was heavily centred on fiscal discipline and structural reforms, which gather the bulk of the references coded under 'responsibility'. Interestingly, the third most salient topic emerging is about the necessity of European leaders across the board to ensure the confidence of the financial markets. In terms of responsiveness, both leaders advocated a much more stringent coordination of member states' policy making supervised by the European Commission in a top-down fashion, while stressing their member states' individual responsibility for putting their 'own house in order' (known as the OHIO doctrine). The Merkelian framing emphasised that fiscal rules could be reinterpreted without being changed in a move to address the concerns of Southern debtors demanding more flexibility, thus embracing 'change by stealth'. In contrast, Schäuble envisaged a treaty change to ensure a greater democratic accountability of EU governance in the medium run in the form of a full parliamentarization of the Euro-area.

Overall, the prevailing German narrative in the mid-2010s was grounded on the premise that the French-German duo committed an original sin back in 2003–2005 by violating the fiscal rules they had subscribed to, resulting in a loss of confidence. Whether the Union would succeed in generating compliance with fiscal discipline or whether it would give in to calls for changing the rules constituted the key plot in 2014–2015. Profligate member states were depicted as villains who betrayed the confidence of financial markets and citizens and therefore threatened the stability of the Union's whole economy. Germany embodied, in contrast, a role model of fiscal virtue. From Schäuble's angle, the moral of the story was that if all complied with the rules, confidence and prosperity would be restored (Box 1).

**Box 1. Illustrative quotes for the German narrative (2014–2016).**

DE 1.1: Europe needs to take the same path: to win back confidence by sticking to the Stability and Growth Pact and strengthening investment through a more efficient use of EU funds (...) We should focus on that, instead of having discussions that feed a suspicion that we will repeat the mistakes of the past. We made a big mistake when we did not comply with the rules. We should not repeat that mistake. (Schäuble, 2014)

DE 1.2: Our contribution is to show the other countries that these rules are right and that it serves the population to abide by them, because the result of this policy is a better economic situation and a stronger labour market. There is no better alternative. (Schäuble, 2015)

In sum, the framing of German leaders in 2014–2015 overlapped, to some extent, with the notions of responsibility and responsiveness as theorised by Mair, whereby responsible government is one that centres on the need to ensure fiscal discipline and conduct structural reforms. While this is seen as in line with citizens' expectations domestically, the need for showing responsiveness *vis-à-vis* other EU partners eventually led the Chancellor to discretely reject the approach of her orthodox Finance Minister in an attempt to reconcile continuity of the rules and change in their interpretation.

**France**

Much as in the German corpus for this episode, the most salient frames substantiating the notion of responsible governance point to the notions of discipline and structural reforms. A main difference, though, is that the flexibility frame (regarding fiscal rules) emerged as the second most salient. French leaders' discourse suggested that only more flexibility would allow indebted countries to comply with the rules and conduct reforms and was therefore the price for upholding the rules. Hence the insistence on the determination to honour past commitments by the French President in several speeches.

The frames substantiating the idea of responsiveness are less numerous but more diverse. In line with the desire for flexibility in exchange for compliance with the rules, French leaders nevertheless emphasised the continuity

with existing rules. At the same time, ministers insisted on the latent conflict between countries, with Arnaud Montebourg, for instance, speaking in 2014 of ‘accountants and moralists’ to justify the French resistance to a dogmatic application of fiscal rules. A substantial aspect of the French framing consisted in pointing to legitimacy issues and a lack of responsiveness in EU governance fuelling Euroscepticism, the low confidence in Europe among citizens, as well as to the social problems resulting from austerity policies.

Overall, the French narrative insisted on the need for greater fiscal flexibility in a context marked by low growth which, according to French governing elites, was caused by the choice for austerity (see quote FR1.1). The central plot was about whether fiscal rules could be reinterpreted to be made more flexible, without upsetting the antagonists in Germany and other creditor countries. Whereas President Hollande and Finance Minister Sapin showed deference towards the vision of EU governance promoted by Germany and its allies, President Emmanuel Macron emphasised change over continuity by insisting on the need for a broader European response, even suggesting the need for more fiscal transfers at a time when such ideas were still largely taboo (see quote FR1.2). Thus, France’s self-interest and the common good of the Union, so goes the moral of the story, overlap: creditor states had to respond to the demands of France and its allies; and a more flexible fiscal framework at EU level would also enable governments to better respond to the needs of the population (Box 2).

### **Box 2. Illustrative quotes for the French narrative (2014–2016).**

FR 1.1: The policy of reducing public accounts everywhere in Europe and in France therefore deprives us of growth because it weighs on it. (De Montebourg, 2014)

FR 1.2: We need a common regulation, we need elements of solidarity and transfers: it is not just openness and the state of nature. (Macron, 2014)

### ***The European Commission***

Overall, the discourse emanating from the Commission focused mainly on responsibility. In what appears to be a break with the austerity rhetoric of the eurozone crisis, the Commission was very concerned about investment, whether national or European, at a time where it seemed to be a concern neither for France nor for Germany. This said, allegiance to the fiscal discipline framework remained the most prominent dimension constitutive of responsible governance. The mention of structural reforms as counterparts to flexibilization completed the triptych for the main message of the Juncker Commission: ‘reform, investment and discipline’. At the same time, speeches clearly featured the internal tension between Commissioner

Dombrovskis, known as the ‘fiscal hawk’ of the Berlaymont, and Commissioner Moscovici, aligned with the French stance, over the degree of flexibility to be granted, as documented by Mérand (2021). A striking peculiarity in this corpus in terms of framing responsiveness is the early and strong rise of the social frame. The need to address social inequality in consequence of past policies was discussed much more often than the need to restore citizens’ confidence in the EU or to enhance the direct link between citizens and EU institutions.

The Commission’s narrative sets the scene of by depicting Europe undermined by low growth and against the background of increasing social tensions and the rise of Euroscepticism (see CE 1.1). Seeing itself as the ‘the Commission of the last chance’, it moved quickly from reinterpreting the rules to more flexibility allowing for reforms and investment. This moderate, ambivalent stance allowed the Commission to remain unified internally, but also to forge consensus between the key protagonists, namely the proponents and critiques of fiscal discipline. In Juncker’s words, the moral of this story required ‘responsible politicians’ (Juncker, 2016) to drop ‘dogmas’ and learn how to apply to rules while taking political and social realities into account (see CE 1.2) (Box 3).

### **Box 3. Illustrative quotes for the European Commission’s narrative (2014–2016).**

CE 1.1: The stability of our single currency and the solidity of public finances are as important to me as social fairness in implementing necessary structural reforms. (Juncker, 2014)

CE 1.2: And we will continue to apply the Pact not in a dogmatic manner, but with common sense and with the flexibility that we wisely built into the rules. (Juncker, 2014)

### **Adoption of the BICC (2017–2019)**

By the time of the discussions related to the adoption of the BICC from 2017 to 2019, the framing of responsibility had changed markedly in the direction of greater responsiveness, with discussion of adding new instruments centred on investment legitimised by a new discourse focused on insuring against risks (see Table 3). A new coalition government in Germany was somewhat more responsive to the French, and expressed social concerns for the first time, albeit only the minority leader in the government. France under a new President was more ambitious in terms of EU level investment proposals and committed to building a compromise around them. The Commission, itself in transition between two Presidents, was supportive of the investment focus and added climate change to its on-going concern with social issues.

**Table 3.** Frames by actor for the BICC period (2017–2020).

	Responsibility	#Coded references	Horizontal (HR) & vertical (VR) Responsiveness	#Coded references
Germany	Common insurance	28/78 35,9%	FR-DE tandem (HR)	19/67 28,4%
	Competitiveness	20/78 25,6%	Compromise (HR)	11/67 16,4%
	Fiscal discipline	12/78 15,4%	Social issues (VR)	11/67 16,4%
France	European investment	62/171 36,3%	FR-DE tandem (HR)	36/144 25%
	Learning from past crises-policies	23/171 13,5%	Conflict (HR)	23/144 16%
	Common insurance	22/171 12,9%	Compromise (HR)	19/144 13%
	Structural reform	19/171 11,1%	Solidarity (HR)	17/315 11,8%
	European investment	15/58 25,9%	Direct connection EU citizens (VR)	
European Commission	9/23 39,1%			
	Common insurance	12/58 20,7%	Economic coordination (HR)	3/23 13%
	Structural reform	9/58 15,5%	Confidence in government-Europe (VR)	3/23 13%
	Fiscal Discipline	7/58 12,1%	Social issues (VR)	3/23 13%
	National Investment	7/58 12,1%		

### Germany

Following the 2017 Bundestag election, leading to the Social Democrat Olaf Scholz replacing Wolfgang Schäuble as a Finance Minister, the framing of responsibility in German discourse changed in important ways. While fiscal discipline remained one of the main topics, the idea of responsible government was refocused on the stabilisation of the Euro area in the long run. New instruments were no longer framed in terms of ‘transfers’ but rather as *insurance* mechanisms protecting the Union against future possible shocks. Presented as a tool allowing all member states to improve their competitiveness, the BICC served as a bridge to the theme of necessary structural reforms. Repeated diptychs formed the mantra of a balanced approach: ‘Solidarity and individual responsibility are always the two sides of the same coin’ (Press conference 29/06/2019); ‘Stability and competitiveness’ (Press conference on 17/10/2018); and the very specific formula ‘liability and control’ (*Haftung und Kontrolle*) was repeated by the Chancellor across four different speeches.

Two novel elements emerged regarding responsiveness. On one hand, agreement on the BICC was clearly presented as a matter of responding to French demands and therefore to ensure collegial management of EU governance by the French-German tandem (and refute suspicions of



hegemonic behaviour).<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the social inequality theme also came to prominence, detailed by Olaf Scholz in terms not only of the need for massive social investment in Germany to prevent the rise of populism but also to address social issues at European scale, especially unemployment.

Overall, the German narrative underpinning agreement to the BICC held that Europe's stability was still jeopardised by possible crises to come, with the euro crisis showing that national economies were increasingly interdependent (DE 2.2). It also emphasised that while each state remained responsible for ensuring its own competitiveness, France and Germany needed to take the lead to make the Union safe from risks of instability (DE 2.1). As for the moral of the story, Germany conceptualised its interest ensuring that all countries could engage with reforms and investment policy to counter threats on democracy. Self-interest therefore went together with European solidarity (DE 2.2) (Box 4).

#### **Box 4. Illustrative quotes for the German narrative (2017–2019).**

DE 2.1: You know that for months, the question was: how will Germany and France come together? (...) We want to strengthen the competitiveness and convergence within the Eurozone; because we know that a monetary union can only stay if we can ensure convergence and the same strike power in the long run. (Merkel, 2018)

DE 2.2: As the most populated and most powerful exporting economy in the middle of the continent, we are bound to a successful European Union. Everything that happens in Europe is important for us, and everything that we do or do not do in Germany has effects on our European partners. We must deal smartly and reasonably with this responsibility. (Scholz, 2018)

### **France**

The year 2017 coincides with the election of Emmanuel Macron to the French Presidency on a markedly pro-European platform. In a speech held at La Sorbonne in September 2017, the new President set out his vision for a 're-foundation' of the EU. A key proposal was the creation of a eurozone budget based on joint borrowing to encourage investment and stabilise economies in the event of a shock. Embraced by the Commission, this proposal was subsequently the subject of debates stretching over several years. The corpus for the period contains speeches from Macron and Finance Minister Le Maire.

As in the previous period, the framing of responsibility displayed both overlap and major differences compared with that of the German establishment. On the one hand, Le Maire invoked many times the logic of common insurance and called for setting up a stabilisation mechanism. On the other, we see the investment frame strongly emerging here (while being still very secondary in the German discourse). Interestingly, the learning

frame, which emphasised the experience acquired from the Eurozone crisis was also salient, as illustrated by Le Maire's claim (2018): 'we can't go on as before'. Concerning the horizontal dimension of responsiveness, insistence on the French-German relationship was combined with highly salient references to 'conflict' and 'compromise', accounting for the sensitive nature of the deliberations about the envisioned 'budgetary instrument' reinforcing the logic of fiscal sharing in the Union. Financial solidarity and the need to strengthen citizens' confidence in EU governance – two topics which were emerging but significant in the corresponding German corpus – constituted the most salient frames regarding respectively horizontal and vertical responsiveness.

The French narrative surrounding the creation of the BICC can be summarised by the statement made by President Macron in 2019 (see FR2.1). The main protagonist character of the plot is the country, personified by its young, voluntarist President fighting to find a remedy against 'nationalist retrenchment' (Macron, 2019) and the rise of hostile Eurosceptic forces. In this regard, though, a renewal of the French-German relation seems key (see FR2.2). The moral of the story was that, as conflicts and tensions arose over the Eurozone budget, a compromise on an undersized instrument was temporarily preferable to no agreement at all. The adoption of the BICC was seen as only a first step prefiguring a future of larger mechanisms for fiscal sharing (Box 5).

### **Box 5. Illustrative quotes for the French narrative (2017–2019).**

FR2.1: The Europe of the seated, the Europe of the sleepy is over, a battle is being waged to determine the project for the future of Europe. (Macron, 2019)

FR2.2: From this point of view, both Emmanuel Macron and Angela Merkel have set a clear course: we cannot continue as before. (Le Maire, 2018)

### ***The European Commission***

In this corpus, the creation of a common budget for the euro area was mainly dealt with by Commissioners Dombrovskis and Moscovici in a limited number of communications, again indicating that the member states, not the Commission had the upper hand on this type of reforms. Furthermore, the period 2017–2020 was also marked by the transition between two Commissions.

In line with the framing established in the previous reform round, responsibility was mostly defined as a capacity to boost investment, with 'European investment' being the most salient dimension, as opposed to merely national investment following the OHIO doctrine. The investment frame was

associated with a concern for the building up of a ‘common insurance’ mechanism in case of a future economic shock.

The need to reform was also present in the discourse about the European Stability Mechanism, with talks on financial ‘backstop’ or even the need to make it ‘more transparent and democratically accountable’ (Dombrovskis, 2017).

The Commission’s key narrative in this period started from the fallout from the Five Presidents’ report (2015) in steering a significant EMU reform (CE 2.1). Whether disagreeing member states (the main characters) would succeed in finding a consensus to reform EU economic governance therefore constituted the key plot. Following the 2017 French presidential election, President Macron emerged as an important protagonist to push that agenda forward by, among other things, promoting the set-up of a Eurozone budget. The moral of the story is that the change in tone and the push by the institution to reform economic governance was rooted in a broader objective, namely, climate change. Concerns about climate became central under the Von der Leyen Commission and coincided with the need for long-term investment (see CE 2.2) (Box 6).

### **Box 6. Illustrative quotes for the European Commission’s narrative (2017–2019).**

CE 2.1: What is at stake is above all the creation of a true economic and budgetary union, and this is what we must pursue if we want sustainable convergence. (Moscovici, 2017)

CE 2.2: Our historic task is for Europe to lead the world in transforming itself into a climate-neutral and digital economy, and to ensure this transition is socially fair. (Dombrovskis, 2019)

## **Adoption of NextGenerationEU (2020)**

In 2020, with the adoption of NextGenerationEU, the framing of responsibility was transformed by reinterpretations that brought close proximity to responsiveness. Major new debt instruments were added while the new investment fund was justified in terms of the need to rise to the challenges of greening the economy, digitalising society, and addressing social inequalities and legitimised by a discourse focused on solidarity (see Table 4).

### **Germany**

With the outbreak of Covid-19, the framing of ‘responsible government’ at the EU level in German discourse appeared more multifaceted. After a short delay, the stress was out on preserving the unity of the Union in the sense of expressing solidarity towards those who had been most affected

**Table 4.** Frames by actor during for the NextGenerationEU period (2020).

	Responsibility	#Coded references	Horizontal (HR) & vertical (VR) Responsiveness	#Coded references	
Germany	Preserving unity	7/31	FR-DE tandem (HR)	16/67	
		22,6%		23,9%	
	Common insurance	6/31	Compromise (HR)	13/67	
		19,4%		19,4%	
	European investment	5/31	Conflict (HR)	11/67	
		16,1%		16,4%	
Flexibility of fiscal rules	5/31	Solidarity (HR)	10/67		
	16,1%		14,9%		
Fiscal Discipline	4/31	12,9%	Parliamentary legitimacy (VR)	7/67	
			Social issues (VR)	7/67	
France	European investment	67/153	FR-DE tandem (HR)	28/111	
		43,8%		25,2%	
	Preserving unity	31/153	Conflict (HR)	24/111	
		20,3%		21,6%	
				Solidarity (HR)	20/111
				18%	
			Compromise (HR)	16/111	
European Commission	European investment	28/99	Solidarity (HR)	4/22	
		28,2%		18,2%	
	Structural reform	18/99	Direct connection EU citizens (VR)	4/22	
		18,2%		18,2%	
	Preserving unity	14/99	Economic coordination (HR)	3/22	
		14,1%		13,6%	
Learning from past crises-policies	11/99	Social issues (VR)	3/22		
	11,1%		13,6%		

by the virus as well as – from a more functional angle – to preserve the integrity of the Single Market in times where containing the spread of the virus had required the closing of borders and the interruption of supply chains. The flexibility on fiscal rules was explicitly embraced, as the Chancellor engineered yet another reinterpretation of the fiscal discipline theme: in the face of the pandemic, the adoption of national stimulus packages was bound to excessively weigh on the public finances of many member states, which required the EU to step in with common resources to tackle the ‘crisis’. Responsible governance therefore demanded new instruments to ensure stability and address the needs for investment. In sum: in order to avoid excessive national debt, there was a need to allow the unprecedented creation of European debt (!).

Discourse over responsiveness was much more substantial than in previous episodes. The ‘OHIO’ doctrine disappeared and was replaced by the invocation of (financial) solidarity – among all member states. Vertical responsiveness was framed in two ways. First, the need to obtain the parliamentary validation of the new EU instruments for fiscal sharing, ensuring democratic legitimacy; second, the need to address the pressing social issues

exacerbated by the pandemic. Interestingly here, the Chancellor embraced the social theme which had only been used by Olaf Scholz in the preceding episode.

While Angela Merkel's decision to embrace fiscal sharing in the Spring 2020 seemed, in various respects, to be a U-turn, a more thorough discursive analysis shows that the German narrative in this period was essentially an escalation – rather than a radical change – to the one forged in 2015–2016. In the face of the pandemic, it was not only the potential destabilisation but the actual fragmentation of the Union (and the Single Market) which was at stake. Once again, France and Germany were the central protagonists of a drama revolving around the existence of vivid conflicts eventually solved by the search for compromise. The moral of the German story, then, was that only collective action could help address the great economic and social challenges accentuated by the pandemic, and preserve European democracy from the populist contestation (cf DE 3.1) (Box 7).

### **Box 7. Illustrative quote for the German narrative (2020).**

DE 3.1: The recovery fund will not solve all of Europe's problems. But not having it would exacerbate the problems. For the health of the European economy decides so much: very high unemployment in one country can become politically explosive. The danger for democracy would therefore increase. In order for Europe to be viable, its economy must be viable. (Merkel, 27 June 2020)

## **France**

When the pandemic hit Europe, France was barely recovering from the multiple waves of protest known as the Yellow Vests movement. To diffuse the contestation, which originated in a green tax on petrol which was deemed socially unfair by inhabitants of peripheral areas highly dependent on the use of cars, the government had to give in to a range of costly measures supporting the affected social groups financially. This tense social context and the impact of the pandemic made France an even stronger advocate of a stimulus-oriented EU policy relying on greater fiscal sharing.

Regarding responsibility, calls to invest on a European scale constituted the main and almost only relevant frame, showing up far more often than any other frame. Expenditure, rather than discipline, was framed as 'responsible' government to address pressing problems. As in the German corpus, the need to preserve unity was also perceived as a key responsibility. Regarding the responsiveness dimension, frames related to 'conflict' and the need to find a 'compromise' acceptable for all again emerged in relation to the deliberations over the recovery plan. The topic related to the Franco-German relation featured prominently. In contrast with previous episodes, though,

the conflict no longer opposed German and French views. Instead, French-German proposals were opposed by the coalition of the ‘frugal’ member states. Continuing the framing initiated in previous rounds of reform, ‘solidarity’ and the stress on ‘social issues’ caused by the crisis were also prominent themes.

The French narrative surrounding the adoption of NextGenerationEU was set against the background of the economic problems generated by the pandemic and the shared need to reboot the economy through investment. Again, France and Germany featured as the key protagonists (see FR3.1). France was also leading by example: it called for an investment plan at European level and implemented it first at the national level, thus reversing years of budget restraint (plot). The moral of the story was that only unprecedented policy responses could be adequate to tackle unprecedented challenges (see FR3.2). This was to catalyze Macron’s European agenda for more fiscal sharing; for he insisted that only unity and solidarity would allow the Union to escape economic and political crises (Box 8).

### **Box 8. Illustrative quote for the French narrative (2020).**

FR 3.1: When Germany and France get together, they can’t do everything, but if they don’t get together, nothing is possible (Macron, 2020).

FR 3.2: I am convinced that this plan, this budget, are likely to respond to the health, economic and social challenges that we face today in each of our countries, and that deciding not to respond would have meant deciding to spend much more in a few months or a few years. (Macron, 2020)

### ***The European Commission***

When the pandemic hit Europe, the Von der Leyen Commission already initiated reforms surrounding economic governance, including the proposed Eurozone budget (BICC), the strengthening of the banking sector, and not least the European Green deal conceived as a new growth model for Europe.

Amid the recession ensuing from the pandemic, the investment frame (encompassing the notion that only common debt would allow for a suitable amount of investment) dominated the framing of responsibility, and structural reforms were reinterpreted as tools to foster the green transition and social investment. The learning frame was also relatively salient, thus articulating the idea of reflexive and responsive elites in contrast with the image of dogmatic ‘Ayatollahs of austerity’ (Schmidt, 2020a). Regarding the responsiveness dimension, the Commission insisted on solidarity, both in its functional (financial) and symbolic (as a value) dimensions. While more secondary, accountability and the social impact frames were also present.

The setting for the Commission's narrative in the last reform round of 2020 was strongly marked by the existential challenges of climate change and the need for a successful digital transformation. This increased attention to new challenges was reflected in the speeches of the commissioners (CE 3.1). Adding a stronger sense of immediacy and emergency, the Covid-19 pandemic provided an opportunity to quickly end austerity (notably by suspending the application of the SGP) and push for more investment financed via fiscal sharing and joint debt. The plot of the story shows the Commission as an entrepreneur working alongside the French-German tandem, and as a broker pushing the 'frugals' (characters) to accept this major turn along with the creation of new policy instruments to be layered on to the existing ones (CE 3.2). The moral of the story is about learning from (the mistakes of) the past, and making responsible, ambitious policy choices in the interest of future generations (Box 9).

**Box 9. Illustrative quotes for the European Commission's narrative (2020).**

EC 3.1: Europe should bounce back from this shock, but also leap ahead in terms of driving forward much-needed reforms and accelerating the twin transitions – green and digital. (Dombrovskis, 2020)

EC 3.2: Let me conclude with a call to all Member States to show a strong sense of responsibility to their own citizens and all Europeans at this crucial moment to get this recovery plan over the line. (Gentiloni, 2020)

## Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to provide novel insights about the recent transformation of EU economic governance from the angle of the relationship between responsibility and responsiveness. The central argument is that the tension between the two has progressively given way to the emergence of 'responsive responsibility', whereby the responsiveness imperative has progressively become an important component of what it meant for decision makers to be responsible. We have first shown that the transformation in question had taken shape long before the breakout of the pandemic, and is best depicted as a process of rule reinterpretation and layering on of policy instruments rather than paradigm change, starting with the flexibilization of the European Semester, followed by the adoption of a small-scale Eurozone budget and climaxing with the adoption of NextGenerationEU.

To further shed light on the political drivers of this transformation, a discursive institutionalist approach was operationalised through an analysis of framing and narratives articulated by the leaders of France, Germany and the European Commission during the three rounds of reforms mentioned above. Over time, responsible policy making is less and less centred on fiscal

discipline and increasingly framed in terms of investment, common insurance and solidarity mechanisms as well as on the need to preserve the unity of the 'system'. The reframing of responsibility goes hand in hand with the expression of a responsiveness imperative expressed above all in terms of horizontal responsiveness *vis-à-vis* unlike-minded states and the necessity to reach compromise despite multiple conflicts. While less important, the rise of frames relating to social issues, the need to restore citizens' confidence in EU governance, and similar issues provides a more vertical dimension of responsiveness in the shadow of the ongoing popular (and populist) contestation of technocratic governance. At the time of writing, contentious deliberations on the revision of the Stability and Growth Pact are ongoing, accounting for the fact that Economic Governance remains in flux, torn between two different conceptions of 'responsible governance' for the EU.

These findings have interesting analytical implications and point to further research avenues. Claiming that the relation between responsibility and responsiveness is contingent nevertheless means that the gap between the two may re-open owing to, for instance, rampant inflation or security issues. Contention surrounding the revision of the SGP epitomises a conflict over which type of responsibility – fiscal discipline or investment in the green transition – should prevail. On the other hand, our findings point to emerging novel forms of (horizontal or transnational) responsiveness beyond (vertical) responsiveness *vis-à-vis* national electorates. These phenomena have attracted little attention so far and could tap into a relatively novel research agenda.

## Notes

1. Because each corpus has a different length, the number of occurrences indicated in the tables only offer a rough substantiation of the salience of given frames and should be considered in relative rather than absolute terms.
2. The corpus includes three joint conferences with French President Macron in March 2018 and then in June 2018 when both countries issues the Meseberg declaration on EU governance.
3. Only frames whose distribution is greater than 10% of the total coded by overarching frame are included in this table. A detailed table can be found in the appendix.

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