



# How can crises generate a paradigm shift in political discourse on abortion?

A cross-crisis study of political discourse on abortion at the EU level

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## Abstract

Crises and their aftermath effects can have a detrimental impact on gender equality, specifically on Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR), which concerns well-being in all matters related to the reproductive system (United Nations Population Fund, 2022), among which abortion services. Crises can contribute to a change in political discourse by exposing faults in the system which may motivate political actors to advocate for policy changes. The effects of crises have often been studied in relation to public opinion or financial impact. However, little is known about the effects of crises on SRHR and the political discourse surrounding this topic. This is despite the fact that SRHR have been recognised as a crucial policy field by organisations such as the UN (United Nations Sustainable Development Group, 2017). This thesis explores how crises can generate a paradigm shift in the political discourse on abortion by conducting a content analysis of the reports and debates on SRHR in the European Parliament during the post-crisis periods of the Eurocrisis and the COVID-19 crisis. The research finds an increased commitment of the European Parliament to abortion accessibility after the COVID-19 crisis. It also shows that this commitment was less present after the Eurocrisis. These findings indicate that crises can contribute to changes in political discourse on SRHR, yet also show that not all crises are equal: the perception of the severity and impact of the crisis are determining factors in this context and not all crises have the same effects on political discourse.

*Keywords:* abortion, COVID-19, Eurocrisis, European Parliament, crisis exploitation, political discourse

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## Introduction

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On the 20<sup>th</sup> of January 2022 Spanish MEP Iratxe García Pérez opened the European Parliament's plenary discussion by calling for the inclusion of abortion in the Charter of Fundamental Rights. García Pérez argued that access to Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) services was vital and added on the topic of abortion: 'We want this in the Charter of Fundamental Rights. We want this in the European strategy for public health.' (Peseckyte, 2022). The outspoken involvement of the European Parliament in abortion politics seems to mark a new era for the EU and its political discourse on abortion, as it lacks the formal competences to regulate in the area of health policies and formerly attempted to maintain a neutral position when it came to 'contentious topics' such as abortion. What has prompted this change in political discourse within the European Parliament on the topic of abortion?

Political discourse can be influenced by many different factors, such as social movements or media framing (Chilton & Schäffner, 2002; Fetzer & Weizman, 2006). This thesis zooms in on the effects of crises and analyses how they can bring about changes in political discourse. The policy field which is shed light upon here, is that of Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR), which concerns well-being in all matters related to the reproductive system (United Nations Population Fund, 2022), including abortion services. The research adds to the literature on changes in political discourse and crisis exploitation. It forms a contribution to existing literature, as there is little to no research on the impact of crises on SRHR discourses or qualitative data which analyses the existing discourse from a gender perspective. Existing research has shown that crises can bring about changes in political discourse or behaviour. However, the literature also shows that crises generally have a negative effect on women in areas such as employment and health. This thesis analyses whether the effects of crises on political discourse can generate positive effects for women as well, by drawing attention to flaws in existing policies.

The research looks at the political discourse on abortion at the EU level and zooms in on the European Parliament. The effects of the two most recent and impactful crises on political discourse in the EU are analysed: the COVID-19 pandemic and the Eurocrisis. In both cases, the side effects of the crisis and the measures implemented to deal with the effects of the crisis had adverse effects on women and the accessibility of abortion services. During the COVID-19 crisis, the introduction of lockdowns, stay-at-home orders, travel restrictions and curfews

often made it more difficult for women to gain access to abortion services (Jones et al., 2020). Similarly, the negative economic effects of the Eurocrisis decreased abortion accessibility, as it led to the closure of specialised health centres or made it unable for pregnant people with limited means to travel abroad for the procedure, should they be residing in areas where abortion was a contested procedure (Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality, rapporteur: Edite Estrela, 2013). To observe the impact of crisis-induced limitations to SRHR on the political field, this paper analyses the changing political discourse in the European Parliament on the topic of abortion accessibility.

The main objective of this research is to analyse the conditions under which a paradigm shift in political discourse is generated after a crisis situation, for which this research will focus on the specific case of abortion. The research question for this thesis will therefore be: *how can crises generate a paradigm shift in political discourse on abortion?* While extant research mainly focuses on the financial impacts of crises or the effects of crises on public opinion, far less is known about the effects of crises on SRHR. Given how severely SRHR can be impacted by crises, this research hypothesises that the occurrence of crises and their harmful effects on abortion accessibility might contribute to a stronger commitment from the European Parliament to ensuring access to safe abortion services. As the perception of the impact of crises can be very different and therefore generate different responses, the research also posits that the Eurocrisis generated a less strong response from the European Parliament, than the COVID-19 crisis.

This research aims to shed light upon how disruptive events such as crises can lay bare policy problems and therefore contribute to changes in political discourse, as they may motivate politicians to push for policy changes. By comparing the discourse around former impactful crises such as the Eurocrisis and the COVID-19 crisis, this research aims to provide insights in whether political actors are aware of the effects of crises on SRHR, and if it strengthens their commitment to upholding or introducing gender-sensitive policies. Additionally, it analyses whether all crises have the same effects, or if the (perceived) impact of the crisis plays a role.

This research will make use of a content analysis, which focuses on European Parliament reports and debates on SRHR or gender equality from post-crisis periods. It will specifically

go into the 2010 Tarabella report, the 2013 Estrela report and the 2021 Matic report, which are the main reports on gender equality or SRHR published in the periods after the Eurocrisis and COVID-19 crisis. Conducting a content analysis allows for a systematic display of which themes have been particularly prominent during certain periods, and whether a shift in narrative has taken place. Qualitatively analysing the argumentation in both the reports and debates provides a deeper understanding of what motivations are behind supporting or rejecting certain changes in abortion policies.

This thesis is structured as follows: firstly, the state of the art of the academic field is laid down, which zooms in on how crises have been influential in bringing about changes in political discourse and what the role of the EU has been in relation to abortion policies. The chapter concludes by highlighting the argumentation of this paper and the subsequent hypotheses. This is followed up by the research design, where the focus on the European Parliament has been explained, as well as what methods have been applied, which materials have been used, and along which parameters the research has been conducted. The following chapter lays down the results and aims to offer both a systematic overview of the most prominent concepts, and a more in-depth analysis of the argumentation and voting behaviour of MEPs. The last chapters consist of a discussion of the results and any conclusions that follow from these results. These results indicate that crises can play a role in changing political discourse on SRHR, but that the perception of the impact of the crisis is an important factor in determining the effects on political discourse.

## 1. Literature review: crises as a catalyst for change in political discourse

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The following section will provide an overview of the state of the art of research on the effects of crises on political discourse. It will firstly zoom in on the effects of crises on changes in political discourse and how crises can be employed to bring about changes in political discourse. The second section outlines what the developments in political discourse at the EU level have been. The third section sheds light upon the impact of different crises on abortion accessibility. Lastly, resulting from the reviewing of the existing literature, the argumentation of this thesis is laid down, as well as its hypotheses.

### 1.1. The effects of crises on political discourse

Disruptive events, such as crises, can lead to changes in political discourse. According to the crisis definition coined by Birkland (1998) the political landscape is subject to ‘focusing events’, which constitutes a ‘sudden, uncommon event that can be seen as harmful to at least some groups or geographic areas and becomes known to the public and policy makers simultaneously’ (1998, p. 54). Birkland (1997) sees that these focusing events can disrupt even stable policy environments and therefore lead to alternative views gaining an audience. To form a contribution to the existing literature on the effects of crises on changes in political discourse, this research follows the crisis exploitation theory, formulated by Boin, ‘t Hart and McConnell (2009). The authors define crisis exploitation as ‘the purposeful utilisation of crisis-type rhetoric to significantly alter levels of political support for incumbent public office-holders and existing public policies and their alternatives’ (Boin et al., 2009, p. 83). The theory suggests that the disruption of societal routines and expectations can create opportunities in political discourse for the redefinition of issues, policy innovations or organisational reforms (Boin et al., 2009. p. 83). According to the authors, crises can lead to a change in political discourse on topics that would have otherwise not have been as likely to gain traction among the population, or might even have caused more negative attention.

The authors continue by stating that the impact of the crisis on changes in political discourse depends on the nature and severity of the crisis. More importantly, the public perception and interpretation of the crisis are essential determinants in assessing the impact of the crisis on political discourse. In addition to the definition of focusing events by Birkland, Boin et al. define crises as ‘events or developments widely perceived by members of relevant

communities to constitute urgent threats to core community values and structures' (2009, pp. 83-84). They add to this that the perception of a crisis can depend on differences within communities, biases, values, positions and responsibilities (2009, pp. 83-84). This leads to the distinction between three types of crisis perception: (1) the denial that the crisis is anything more than an unfortunate incident, making it unnecessary to justify any policy changes, (2) seeing the crisis as a critical threat to the status quo, therefore wanting to protect the status quo, (3) seeing the crisis as a critical opportunity to uncover flaws in the status quo, therefore creating an opportunity to change dysfunctional policies and organisations (2009, p. 84). Following the definition of Boin et al., these definitions of crisis perception can thus lead political actors to either deny the necessity for change in general, endorse the existing political discourse on a topic, or argue for the need for changes in current policies, therefore altering political discourse.

## 1.2. Political discourse at the EU level

When looking at the developments in political discourse at the EU level, the scholarly literature puts forward that a shift has taken place, causing the EU to become more involved in topics that were formerly considered to be within the realm of the Member States. Foret & Littoz (2014) and Mondo & Close (2018) note that the EU has been creeping competences into new policy fields and find that engaging in 'morality topics' (e.g. abortion, sex education, same-sex marriage, etc.) at the EU level is most noticeable within the European Parliament. In the research performed by Mondo & Close (2018), the authors aimed to analyse how member of the European Parliaments (MEPs) explain their voting behaviour when voting on legislation that touches upon morality topics. The researchers interviewed MEPs to analyse their voting behaviour on the issues of abortion and/or human embryonic stem cell research, and consider what role national culture, political affiliation, and personal convictions play in this regard. This research opted for a qualitative approach, therefore going beyond quantifiable observable voting data, as this has already been studied more extensively. At the national level the authors found a link between the voting behaviour of MEPs and their national cultures (often connected Christian values), the presence of morality topics in the national debate and electoral considerations (e.g. whether national elections are coming up). Another explanation for voting behaviour was attributed to a liberal ideology, which was said to allow for more individual freedom when it came to voting on morality topics. The European Party Group in some cases allowed for the construction of group cohesion on the topic. In other cases it was found to create pressure to maintain a common position, therefore



hindering MEPs in expressing their personal convictions (Mondo & Close, 2018, pp. 1013-1014).

There seems to be a scholarly consensus that the EU, which started out as an organisation mostly concerned with economic cooperation, has gotten increasingly more involved in value and morality topics. This is despite the fact that the EU is bound to the principle of subsidiarity, laid down in article 5.3 TEU, which is regarded as one of the ‘single most characteristic elements of the EU ethics’, as it intends to prevent the EU from engaging with policy areas that could be dealt with on the national level (Tallacchini, 2009, p. 293). This principle forms the most common argument against the increasing presence of morality topics in EU politics. According to Foret & Litzo-Monnet (2014) the topics of values and morality have gained a more prominent place on the European agenda since the end of the 1990s. The authors observe that, as can be seen from a stronger commitment to fighting issues such as racism and xenophobia and the mainstreaming of human rights into EU policies, the EU has ventured into policy areas that deal with an ethical dimension and has started to speak out on morality issues, such as abortion and sex education, despite formally not having the competences to regulate in these areas.

Although the EU, and the European Parliament in particular, does seem to gradually play a more active role in speaking out on morality issues, this is generally not directly observable in voting behaviour or the adoption of resolutions. Redolfi (2014) observes a discrepancy between how the EU presents itself in relation to this topic when dealing with external actors, in comparison to dealing with internal actors. When looking at SRHR specifically, the author argues that the EU shows a strong commitment to SRHR abroad through, for example, its commitment to the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) organised by the United Nations. The states attending the ICPD committed to “ensuring access to reproductive and sexual health services including family planning”. The programme was adopted by both the Member States independently, and by the EU as a whole. Upholding the programme of this conference indicated a certain commitment to SRHR. Redolfi argues that this commitment was less noticeable within EU affairs. The author puts forward the rejection of the 2013 Estrela report in the European Parliament as an example. The Estrela report called on the European Parliament to vote in favour of a resolution to form a comprehensive approach towards sexuality and reproduction. The report focused, amongst other things, on unwanted pregnancies and the access to contraception and safe abortion. It

also emphasised that SRHR should be considered fundamental rights. The report was heavily debated and eventually rejected. The resolution that was passed instead was reduced to one page, and reaffirmed that SRHR were a competence of the Member States and that the EU's position in these matters should be limited to promoting 'best practices' among its members. Redolfi argues that the rejection of the Estrela report and the reaffirmation that the EU cannot get involved in morality topics indicates that the EU is willing to support SRHR in the international context, but is less inclined to do so within the Union itself to avoid conflict between Member States.

### 1.3. The impact of crises on abortion

This thesis analyses how crises can form a catalyst in the political discourse on SRHR and generate changes in the discourse on abortion. It is therefore important to outline how crises can impact abortion accessibility as this can contribute to a change in political discourse. Abortion has generally become more accessible over the last decades, but remains a stigmatised policy area. In many countries, abortion is only allowed under certain exceptional circumstances, and through the compliance with many procedural requirements which are often not scientifically supported (Moreau et al., 2020, p. 2). The contested nature of the procedure causes an ongoing chance of regression on abortion rights. Political actors opposed to the procedure increasingly often attempt to introduce more restrictive legislation or more procedural requirements to limit the access to abortion (Kreitzer, 2015, p. 1). Abortion is thus a dynamic policy field in which many changes are occurring to both limit and liberalise the procedure, which makes it a good case study to see how political discourse on this topic is affected through the introduction of a crisis.

What effect crises have on political discourse partially depends on the nature of the crisis. Crises often have negative gendered effects in terms of employment, financial losses and increases in gender-based violence. Gálvez and Rodríguez-Modroño (2016, p. 134) observe that (recovery from) crises often leads to governments backtracking on previously acquired equality policies. This indicates that during a period of (recovery of) crisis, equality policies can be harmed, as these are perceived to be 'dispensable' (2016, p. 134). The analysis by Gálvez and Rodríguez-Modroño (2016) mostly bases itself on the gendered effects of the 2009 Eurocrisis and the subsequent austerity measures. The authors conclude that the enforced austerity measures demonstrated a regression in commitment to gender equality and a return to more traditional gender norms (2016, p. 136).

This view is supported by Lombardo (2016). The author focuses on countries that were specifically affected by the Eurocrisis and therefore subjected to strict austerity measures. Lombardo (2016, p. 24) argues that one of the reasons that countries which were severely impacted by the crisis moved away from gender mainstreaming in their politics was due to the enforced austerity measures. Lombardo argues that these measures often had a negative impact on women, as they were forced upon crisis-stricken countries by EU institutions, which failed to include the necessary gendered lens in their suggested reforms (2016, p. 24).

Governments thus generally demonstrate less support for gender equality policies during crisis times, as their importance is not sufficiently recognised. When looking at abortion more specifically, a gendered impact of crises can be perceived as well. Through an ethnographic approach, Ostrach (2017) demonstrates that in Catalunya abortion policies suffered under the impact of the Eurocrisis, even though the procedure initially was relatively well accessible. The ethnographic methodology employed in this study provides insights in how the effects of crises are felt, and whether women are aware of the fact that their rights were limited during and after the crisis. This seems to be the case as Ostrach (2017, p. 48) notes that the participants of the study refer to *La Crisis* (the Eurocrisis) and the implemented austerity measures that impacted the health system as the excuse put forward by the government to undo abortion regulation reforms.

The effects of an economic crisis on abortion provision mostly come to the surface in the shape of limitations to healthcare services and decreased commitment to upholding gender equality policies. It is, however, not only economic crises that can have these gendered effects. Health crises often have similar effects in terms of the implications for women's participation in the work force and the commitment to upholding gendered policies (Todd-Gher & Shah, 2020, p. 1). Hussein (2020, p. 2) observes that when the Ebola crisis hit West Africa during 2014 – 2016, women were more prone to be infected due to their prominent presence in roles such as family caregivers or frontline healthcare workers. Additionally, resources originally meant for SRH were employed to aid the emergency response against the Ebola virus (Wenham et al., 2020, p. 847). A similar trend could be observed during the outbreak of the Zika virus in Latin America in 2015. Infection with the Zika virus could lead to pregnancy complications or foetal deformities. The crisis mainly took place in countries where abortion was already contested, or could even lead to incarceration, such as Brazil and

El Salvador. These countries saw a rise in pregnant people requesting medical abortion medication to terminate their pregnancy, but often failed to adequately respond by allowing women to undergo the necessary procedure or by providing the necessary healthcare (Wenham et al., 2019, p. 2).

According to Wenham et al. (2019), the Zika virus outbreak demonstrated that health emergencies can have strong gendered effects and can impact decision-making or the agenda-setting. The authors argue that the crisis exposed a 'systematic gap in women's health promotion and provision' (2019, p. 4), and that governments mainly put the responsibility on women not to get pregnant, rather than providing them with sufficient means for prevention or dealing with the consequences (2019, p. 4). Hussein (2020), in turn, observes that health crises can contribute to shaping the broader discourse for topics such as abortion. The author stresses that crises often expose the flaws in existing legislation and societal debates, and highlights the example of the Zika virus which, in Latin America, led to a reevaluation and a call for expansion of existing abortion legislation to ensure the safeguarding of women's rights (Hussein, 2020, p. 2).

Even though the Eurocrisis, Zika virus and Ebola virus all had relatively large scale effects, these effects were all regional. In contrast, the COVID-19 crisis was declared a global health crisis and virtually affected the entire world equally. During the crisis, SRHR were not always safeguarded, as abortion was for example marked as a 'non-essential' health procedure by governments, severely inhibiting access to the procedure (Cousins, 2020, p. 301).

Additionally, the closure or overburdening of health care facilities, economic hardship and gender-based violence, increased the amount of unwanted pregnancies, often without governments offering sufficient means to deal with these effects. With the imposed travel restrictions, pregnant people which already had to travel abroad to undergo abortion were often unable to do so (2020, p. 301). Caruana-Finkel (2020, p. 55) argues that the COVID-19 crisis exposed the flaws in existing abortion regulation, such as the fact that many pregnant people have to travel to even have access to the procedure, or the fact that many of the regulatory boundaries are not (clinically) necessary, and pose an extra burden.

As can be seen from the literature on the Eurocrisis and health crises such as the Zika and Ebola virus, crises can thus have stronger negative effects on women and lead to the limitation of essential services, such as abortion. There seems to be an academic consensus

that crises produce negative effects for women across almost all policy areas. This view fails to take into account that crises can also generate positive policy responses, by contributing to a change in political discourse on gender equality topics. As can be seen from the case of the Zika virus, crises can influence political discourse, and contribute to a call for change. What currently remains understudied is whether all crises have the same influence on changing political discourse, or if there are certain factors which make certain types of crisis more likely to influence political discourse than others. Additionally, it can be argued that the actual effects of the crisis are not the sole determinants of changes in political discourse on abortion. The public perception of the severity of the crisis and its impact on abortion should also be taken into account. Considering whether a crisis can affect the political discourse on a topic such as abortion also depends on whether a crisis is perceived as disruptive enough to justify policy changes.

#### 1.4. Hypotheses

Having laid down what is known in the literature on the effects of crises on changes in political discourse, a gap in the literature emerges around what impact crises can have on topics relating to SRHR, and whether all crises have the same impact on political discourse on SRHR. On the basis of this gap, the following argument can be formulated: the introduction of a crisis which impacts SRHR can lead to renewed attention for the issue of abortion, and can expose flaws in existing abortion regulation. The European Parliament has shown attempts over the years to strengthen the right to abortion within the EU, but as the EU has no competences in this area, their efforts have often been met with resistance. The rejection of the 2013 Estrela report demonstrated that the progressive stance towards gender policies and the recognition of abortion as a human right, was a step too far for many MEPs. A similar trend could be observed after the Eurocrisis, as the EU-recommended austerity policies indicated a lack in commitment to gender mainstreaming, and were often harmful to women's rights.

The COVID-19 crisis has, however, exacerbated faults within the abortion system to such an extent, that it seems to have led to more willingness within the European Parliament to commit to speaking out in favour of abortion accessibility. This became evident when the European Parliament voted to accept the Matic report, which included statements in which the institution urges Member States to ensure safe and legal access to abortion and reminds

them of their responsibility to ensure that women have access to their rights (European Parliament, 2021).

Based on this argument, the first hypothesis can be formulated as follows:

H1: I would expect that the COVID-19 crisis has prompted a further engagement of the European Parliament on SRH issues and in particular on ensuring the accessibility of abortion.

This will occur because, according to the crisis exploitation theory, if crises are perceived as severe enough they can be perceived as a critical opportunity for political actors to uncover flaws in existing policies and push for policies that otherwise would not have gained support or would have been met with more resistance.

Additionally, based on the same theory, the second hypothesis can be formulated:

H2: I would expect the European Parliament to be much less committed to the defence of abortion accessibility after the Eurocrisis than it was after the COVID-19 crisis.

The perception of the impact of the Eurocrisis was different than that of the COVID-19 crisis. Therefore, although both crises had negative gendered effects, the effects of the Eurocrisis were not perceived as considerable enough to justify far-reaching policy change or change in political discourse.

## 2. Research Design

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The following chapter lays down the research design of this thesis and includes the case selection, data collection, methodology and along which parameters the research has been conducted. The objective of this research is to analyse how crises can generate a paradigm shift in political discourse on abortion. To this end, a single case study of the European Parliament is conducted, to see how this institution responds to the events of a crisis, and whether a disruptive crisis influences how it positions itself on a contentious topic such as abortion. Conducting a small-N design has proven to be particularly beneficial to study political processes and developments in particular fields, as the focus is on a small number of cases, allowing for the development of deeper knowledge (Gerring, 2004, p. 347).

The selection of the European Parliament for this research, is an instance of a ‘critical case’ as defined by Yin (2017, p. 84) as ‘the theory should have specified a clear set of circumstances within which the propositions are believed to be true’. The theory predicts that crises can generate changes in political discourse, which is in this case tested in the context of the European Parliament. According to Yin, studying critical cases can help to determine whether the expectations are correct, or if alternative explanations might be more relevant (2017, p. 84). The single case study of a critical case matches the envisioned objectives, as it allows for the study of an institution which seems to deviate from its normal practices by taking up a more vocal position on abortion policies, but herein follows the crisis exploitation theory as laid down in the previous chapter.

### 2.1. Case Selection

The selection of the European Parliament as a single case, within the larger framework of the EU, is based on multiple factors. One of which is the fact that, over the years, the European Parliament has made various efforts to consolidate the right to abortion. Rapporteurs, brought forward by the parliamentary FEMM committee (Women’s Rights and Gender Equality), have been pushing for a more progressive position on abortion on several occasions, with different levels of success (Mondo & Close, 2018, p. 1004).

As the EU has no competences to regulate on topics such as SRHR, the reports brought forward by the European Parliament mostly have symbolic or agenda-setting functions. Nevertheless, as it is one of the biggest EU institutions speaking out on these topics, this can pressure Member States to act accordingly. The European Parliament demonstrated its

collective action when Poland introduced a near-total abortion ban in January 2021. After the introduction of the ban, the country faced a lot of backlash. The European Parliament spoke out against this limitation of abortion accessibility through a resolution, which was adopted with 455 votes to 145 (with 71 abstentions), in which they condemned the decision of the Polish court for ‘putting women’s health and lives at risk’ (European Parliament, 2020).

In addition, the European Parliament forms a compelling case for this study, as it directly represents EU citizens, therefore forming the institution that might also be the most closely linked to national sentiments. This can affect MEPs’ voting behaviour, especially when it comes to more sensitive topics, as they do not want to alienate voters. On the other hand, in terms of the effects of crisis, MEPs might be more aware of what the effects of crises are on SRHR, as they are confronted with these effects on the national level. This can, in turn, influence their stance at the European level (Mondo & Close, 2018, p. 1006).

## 2.2. Data Collection

To analyse how crises influence the European Parliament’s political discourse on abortion accessibility, this research analyses official documentation the European Parliament has released on the topic in post-crisis periods. For the Eurocrisis, this consists of the 2010 Tarabella report on gender equality and the 2013 Estrela report on SRHR and the subsequent debates in which the reports were discussed, taking place on 8 February 2010 for the Tarabella report and 21 October 2013 for the Estrela report. For the COVID-19 crisis, the 2021 Matic report will be analysed, as well as the debate that followed on 23 June 2021.

The materials for this study thus consist of existing data. The 2010 Tarabella report, the 2013 Estrela report, and the 2021 Matic report, as well as all of the subsequent debates, have been retrieved from the Legislative Observatory of the European Parliament, where all official documentation has been made available. They have been selected on the basis of topic (SRHR or gender equality) and timeframe (post-Eurocrisis and post-COVID-19 crisis). The debates are directly linked to the reports, as they discuss the report in question.

## 2.3. Methodology

The research has taken a qualitative approach, and both categorises the frequency of the impact of crisis in relation to abortion accessibility, while also gaining more in-depth knowledge of what arguments MEPs put forward to justify their voting behaviour on these topics, and whether they link the effects of the crisis to the accessibility of abortion. To this end, the research makes use of a content analysis as defined by Berelson (1971, p. 18) which describes content analysis as ‘a research technique for the objective, systematic and



quantitative description of the manifest content of communication' and Holsti (1969, p. 14) 'a technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages'. Applied to the research at hand, it means that this thesis will be analysing the communication from the European Parliament in the form of reports and debates for changes in political discourse through the objective and systematic approach of the content of the texts.

The use of a content analysis provides an answer to the posed research question, as the systematic and quantitative analysis of the materials provides an overview of the salience of certain concepts in different contexts, while the deeper analysis of the text goes beyond the observable presence of certain topics to answer why MEPs support or oppose certain policies and how they justify this support or opposition. By looking at different periods, this research analyses whether there has been a change in rhetoric within the European Parliament.

In previous research, common methods in this research area have been the quantifying of voting behaviour of MEPs (Bailer et al. 2009; Faas 2003; Hix 2002; Hix, Noury, and Roland 2005) or qualitative research on the stance of MEPs on morality topics (Mondo & Close, 2018). Quantitative research on this topic can be beneficial as it provides insight in the systematic connections between the voting behaviour of MEPs and background factors such as their nationality, party affiliation, religious background, etc. However, qualitative research facilitates a more in-depth exploration of values and beliefs that are the drivers for pushing for or advocating against certain policies. To this end, alternatively for this research, interviews could have provided more in-depth insights in the motivations of MEPs to either support or oppose certain abortion policies, but this method would fail to provide an overview of relevant concepts over time. Additionally, for the reports of 2010 and 2013, it would have been more difficult to gain access to the MEPs that were responsible at the time, and their recollection of events at this point in time might no longer be representable. By opting for a content analysis, it can be analysed what position the European Parliament assumed at different points in time, and what the effects of the circumstances at that point were to support certain policies. Additionally, the method allows for information to be generated on an institution which can otherwise be difficult to gain access to, as it concerns an elite group (Bryman & Bell, 2012, p. 305).

The content analysis has been conducted through the programme Atlas.ti. Through this programme, a conceptual analysis with open coding has been applied. The texts have been analysed on the basis of frequency of concepts, which have then been coded accordingly. To

include more implicit references to the topic, the level of analysis was expanded to the occurrence of themes in the text, rather than only specific words or phrases. The codes were pre-determined as they were based on the provided literature and theoretical framework. Nevertheless, a flexible approach was taken, which allowed for the addition of codes throughout the process of analysis. The decision to do so stemmed from the fact that there might be variations in what type of concepts were most frequent in the different reports, due to the different periods in which these reports have been published. The documentation has been coded for frequency, to not only determine the existence of concepts, but also analyse whether certain concepts were more present during certain periods of time. The reliability of the research is guaranteed by applying the same codes to the different documents and analysing the same type of documents in different contexts. The coding process has been the result of thorough research of the literature and theory. The codes reflect an objective observation of the materials, therefore avoiding any personal bias from the researcher. Different choices in terms of coding (e.g. coding for existence rather than frequency, or words rather than themes) can potentially lead to slight deviations in the eventual results, but should not lead to a fundamentally different interpretation of the data. For the coding process, several coding rules have been formulated (what qualifies as falling under the specific codes, what excludes certain concepts, etc.), which could be applied by another researcher as well. The validity of the research has been guaranteed by applying these rules consistently and coherently.

The coding rules and definitions that have been applied in this thesis can be found in Figure 8 in the appendix. In total 9 concepts were categorised in the Tarabella report and 56 in the debate on the Tarabella report. In the Estrela report, 35 concepts were categorised and in the debate this was 39. Lastly, for the Matić report, 48 concepts have been coded, and 37 concepts were coded in the debate. The reason for the lower amount of coded concepts in the Tarabella report in comparison to the other reports is the fact that this report was not specifically focused on SRHR, but on gender equality in general. The report therefore also addressed many other topics which are not of direct relevance for this thesis. If concepts represented several themes at once, they have been coded double. As the coding was thematically done, the concepts generally consisted of several phrases. The debates consisted of statements made by the MEPs, often directly addressing the contents of the report rather than statements made by other MEPs. As the MEPs were generally not responding to each other in the debates, all the statements are from different MEPs but can be from MEPs within

the same European Party Group. Some statements include multiple codes, if the statement of the MEP in question addressed several different relevant themes.

In conclusion, through the coding process laid down above, the data has been quantified to reveal patterns in the European Parliament's stance on abortion policies. In addition to these patterns, qualitatively analysing specific coded concepts provides deeper insight in the arguments put forward to justify differing stances on abortion accessibility.

### 3. Results

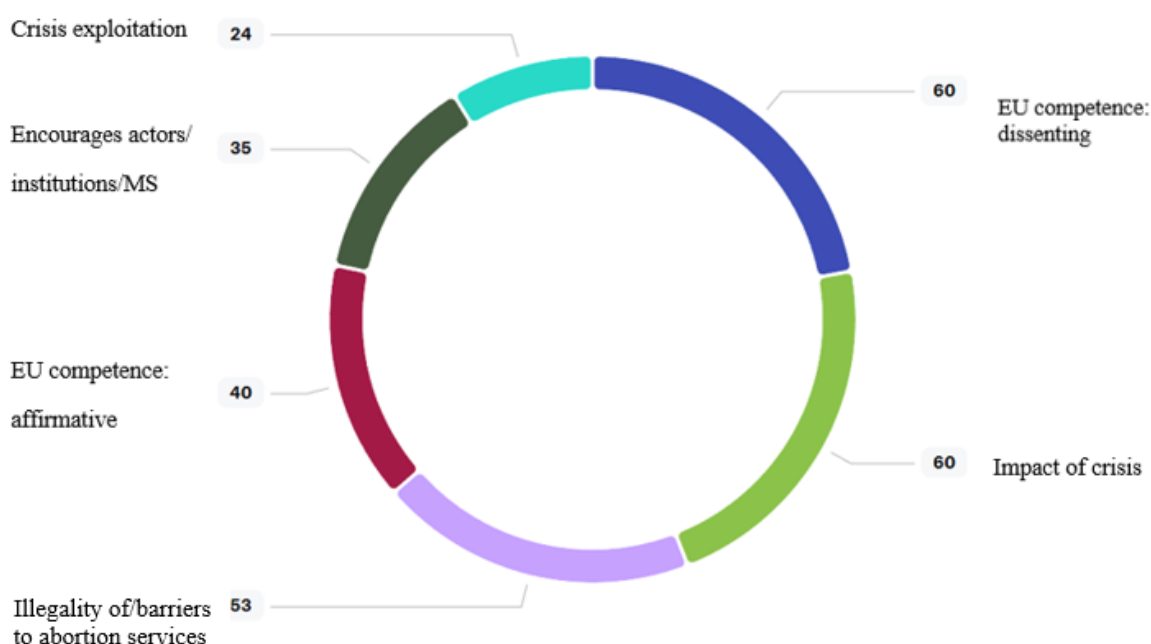
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This chapter provides an overview of the results of the research, conducted through the methods laid down in the previous chapter. Through the analysis of the reports and debates, certain patterns can be observed. The results are grouped according to the themes that have been identified in the data and separated to demonstrate the relevant themes in the reports and the debates respectively.

The concepts which have been coded for are the impact of crisis (light green), crisis exploitation (turquoise), encourages actors/institutions/Member States to take action (dark green), illegality of/barriers to abortion services (lilac), competences of the EU: dissenting (dark blue), competences of the EU: affirmative (burgundy). These concepts and their coding rules have been more explicitly outlined in Figure 8, which can be found in the appendix. An overview of all the concepts found, is provided below in Figure 1:

**Figure 1**

*Overview concepts Tarabella, Estrela and Matic reports and debates*



In Figure 1, an overview of all the concepts present in both the debates and reports is provided. It can be seen that with 60 codes, both the impact of crisis and the dissenting

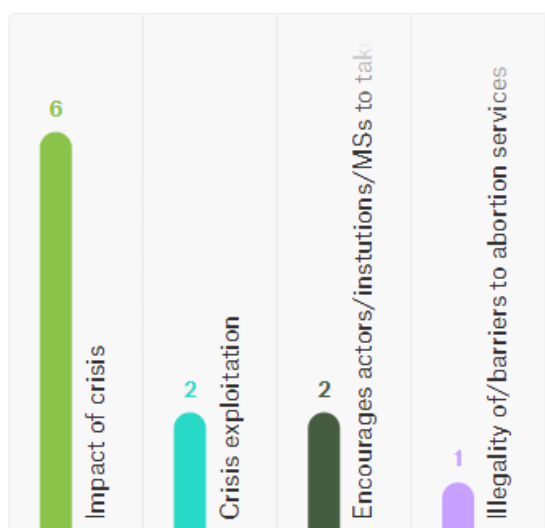
opinion on EU competence are the most frequent concepts. This is closely followed by the mention of the illegality of/barriers to abortion (53 codes). Next are the affirmative opinion on EU competence (40 codes) and the encouragement of relevant actors/institutions/Member States to take action (35 codes). With 24 codes, the least frequently mentioned is crisis exploitation.

### 3.1. Reports

This section will give an overview of the most frequent concepts in the reports. It will also highlight several direct quotes from the reports which are illustrative for a change in political discourse, or indicate that the crisis has brought about unique circumstances which impact abortion accessibility.

**Figure 2**

*Overview concepts Tarabella report*



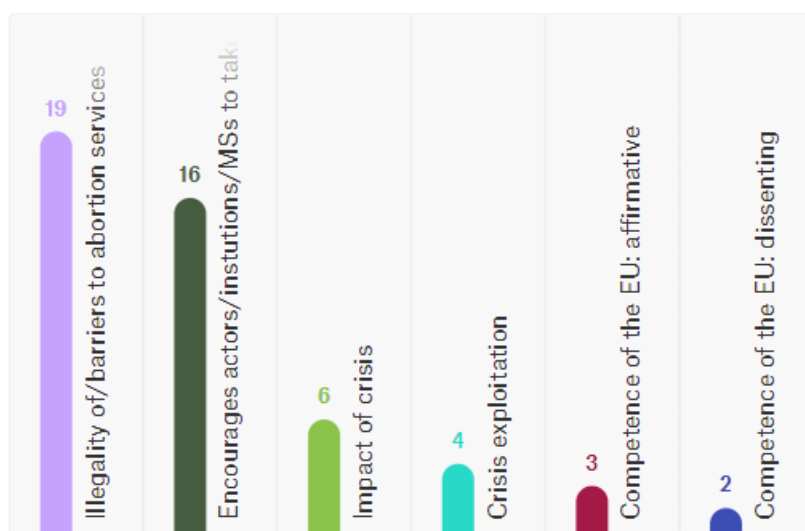
As the Tarabella report concerns itself with gender equality as a whole, rather than SRHR specifically (such as the Matic and Estrela reports), the report is less explicit on abortion services. With only fifteen pages, the Tarabella report is also much shorter than the later Estrela and Matic reports. Mention of barriers to abortion is made, but only in one paragraph. As is shown below, the report shows commitment to ensuring abortion accessibility, but does not classify this as something resulting from increased limitations to abortion accessibility due to the Eurocrisis.

‘Emphasises that women must have control over their SRHR, notably through easy access to contraception and abortion; emphasises that women must have access free of charge to consultation on abortion; supports, therefore [...] measures and actions to improve women’s access to SRH services and to raise their awareness of their rights and of available services.’ (Committee on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality, rapporteur: Marc Tarabella, 2010, p. 12)

As can be seen in Figure 2, the Tarabella report does, however, show a strong awareness of the impact of crisis on women, as it makes several references to the gendered effects of the crisis. The report does not explicitly connect the impact of the crisis to increased hinder in accessing abortion services.

### Figure 3

*Overview concepts Estrela report*



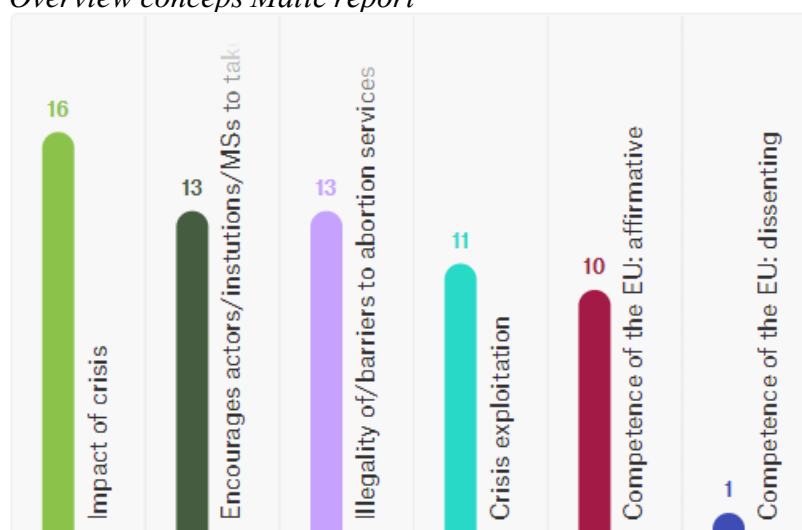
With 32 pages, the Estrela report is twice as long as the Tarabella report, which contributes to the identification of a higher number of relevant concepts in the Estrela report. As can be seen in Figure 3, the illegality of/barriers to abortion services, which is mentioned 19 times, is most prominent in the Estrela report. This is accompanied by a relatively strong call for relevant actors, institutions and Member States to take action. The impact of crisis is less prominent in this report, in comparison to what can be observed in the Matić and Tarabella report. This can be attributed to the fact that the Estrela report was published several years after the crisis. However, the Estrela report does demonstrate awareness of the link between crises and the impact on abortion services. It links the impact of austerity measures to decreased availability of abortion, as can be seen in the following excerpt:

‘Stresses that the current austerity measures have a detrimental impact, particularly for women, in terms of quality, affordability and accessibility on public health services, information and programmes related to sexual and reproductive health, and in terms of quality and accessibility, as well as on family planning and support organisations, on NGO service providers, and on women’s economic independence; points out that the Member States should take the necessary steps to ensure that access to sexual and reproductive health services is not jeopardised;’ (Committee on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality, rapporteur: Edite Estrela, 2013, p. 11)

This quote emphasises the ‘detrimental impact’ of the austerity measures on SRHR and also shows the report’s strong emphasis on encouraging relevant actors to take action as can be noted in the phrase ‘Member States should take the necessary steps to ensure that access to sexual and reproductive health services is not jeopardised’. Even though the crisis is thus not the strongest theme in this report, the Estrela report does show awareness of the crisis and its limiting effects on SRHR.

**Figure 4**

*Overview concepts Matić report*



With 39 pages, the Matić report is the longest report of the three analysed in this thesis. The most prominent concept is the impact of crisis, which is mentioned 16 times in the 2021 Matić report, 6 times in the 2013 Estrela report and 6 times in the 2010 Tarabella report. The fact that the highest mention of the impact of crisis is in the Matić report is likely due to the fact that this report was published during the crisis, after the strongest effects of the crisis already

became visible. As can be seen in Figure 4, the Matić report also demonstrates a strong link between the impact of crisis and the barriers to abortion. The report makes 7 references in which it directly links the impact of the crisis to the limitation of abortion services. Two of these references are provided here.

‘Regrets that access to safe and legal abortion continues to be limited during the COVID-19 pandemic, with examples of efforts to completely ban it under the pretence of its being a lower priority service.’ (Committee on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality, rapporteur: Predrag Fred Matić, 2021, p. 19)

This statement indicates that there is an awareness of the effects of the COVID-19 crisis on abortion accessibility and address that this is partially the result of government inaction or conscious attempts at limiting the access to the procedure.

‘Urges the Member States to decriminalise abortion, as well as to remove and combat obstacles to legal abortion, and recalls that they have a responsibility to ensure that women have access to the rights conferred on them by law; urges the Member States to enhance the existing methods and examine new methods in delivering SRHR-related care and ways of addressing gaps in the provision of services that have come to light through COVID-19.’ (Committee on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality, rapporteur: Predrag Fred Matić, 2021, p. 17)

This second statement addresses the fact that new gaps have emerged in abortion accessibility due to the COVID-19 crisis, and urges the Member States to adjust existing regulation and abortion provision to fill these gaps. This thus does not only indicate an awareness of the effects of the crisis on abortion accessibility, but also signals an attempt to use the element of crisis to call for the expansion of existing abortion legislation, which falls under crisis exploitation. What is notable in the Matić report, when comparing it to the Tarabella and Estrela report, is the higher frequency of the crisis exploitation concept. This demonstrates that the Matić report makes a more active effort of employing the unique circumstances of the crisis to bring about changes in the current political discourse on abortion. This can be perceived in the following quote:



‘Whereas the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that there is a need to strengthen the resilience of health systems to such crises, to ensure that services related to SRHR continue to be fully available and are provided in a timely manner;’ (Committee on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality, rapporteur: Predrag Fred Matic, 2021, p. 12)

This quote, taken from the report, demonstrates that the impact of the COVID-19 crisis is mentioned as a warning and therefore an opportunity to improve current health systems and the availability of SRH services. This thus shows that the report uses the context of the crisis to advocate for changes.

A qualitative comparison of the discourse in the reports shows that the role of the crisis has become increasingly more important in supporting the accessibility of abortion. Whereas the Tarabella report does show support for abortion accessibility, it does not directly link the impact of the crisis to abortion limitation, nor does it argue for better abortion accessibility due to the effects of the crisis. This discourse changes with the Estrela report, which does link the aftermath of the Eurocrisis to decreased abortion accessibility and argues that Member States should take action to maintain access to SRH services. The Matic report does not only show awareness of the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the accessibility of abortion services, but also puts the crisis forward as an opportunity to improve existing regulation, as the report ‘urges the Member States to enhance the existing methods and examine new methods in delivering SRHR-related care and ways of addressing gaps in the provision of services that have come to light through COVID-19’ (Committee on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality, rapporteur: Predrag Fred Matic, 2021, p. 17). The link between the impact of the crisis and the limitation to abortion services is thus not only more frequent in the Matic report, but this report also seems to employ the crisis more as an opportunity to bring about changes in existing regulation.

### 3.2. Debates

This second section provides an overview of the most frequent concepts in the debates. It also highlights direct quotes from the MEPs made in the debate and qualitatively analyses these to see whether a change in political discourse can be observed in the context of different crises.

#### **Figure 5**

*Overview concepts Tarabella debate*

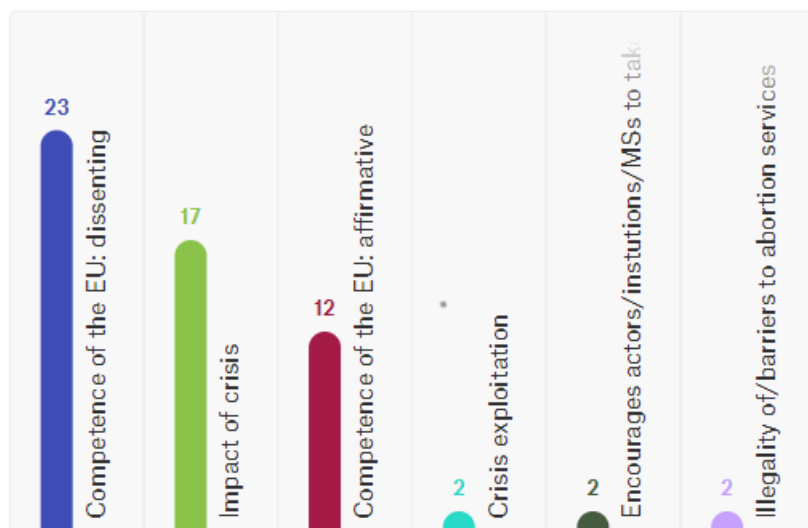


Figure 5 demonstrates that the MEPs involved in the debate on the Tarabella report show a strong awareness of the impact of crisis on women, which correlates with the prevalence of the mention of crisis in the report itself. Similar to the report itself, the MEPs do not directly link the effects of the Eurocrisis to the limitations of abortion accessibility and do therefore not argue for ensuring abortion accessibility due to increased limitations. Reasons that are mentioned for supporting abortion accessibility are, for example, to increase the socio-economic development of women, or because of a regression in rights due to restrictive regulation, as was made clear by Polish MEP Joanna Senyszyn through the following statement:

‘It is good that the resolution under discussion includes item 38, which stipulates that women must have control over their sexual and reproductive rights, notably through easy access to contraception and abortion, and the possibility of a safe abortion. This is significant, especially for citizens of countries which have restrictive anti-abortion laws and in which deceptive pro-life propaganda is being spread. In my country – Poland – the political Right, which is under the thumb of the clergy, does not allow proper sex education, and restricts contraception and legal abortion.’ - Joanna Senyszyn (S&D), Poland, February 2010

This quote, which discusses Polish abortion regulation, shows that the reasons to support abortion availability also stem from other motivations, such as restrictive state regulation on abortion.

Similar to both the debate on the Matić report and the debate on the Estrela report, the affirmative opinion on the competences of the EU on abortion policies is less strongly voiced in the Tarabella debate than the highly frequent dissenting opinion on the competences of the EU in SRHR. What stands out in the Tarabella debate is that the dissenting and affirmative opinion on the competences of the EU in abortion policies constitute the most prominent themes of the debate, while these are not featured in the report itself. Additionally, the accessibility of abortion services is only mentioned in one paragraph of the actual report, which makes the strong presence of dissenting and affirmative opinions on the competences of the EU in SRHR noteworthy.

**Figure 6**

*Overview concepts Estrela debate*



Similarly to the Tarabella report, most prominent in the debate on the Estrela report is the mention of the fact that abortion regulation does not fall within the scope of the EU, and that therefore the EU should not get involved. This is shown in Figure 6. Less strongly proclaimed in this debate is the affirmation that SRHR should be a competence of the EU. The debate on the Estrela report demonstrates more awareness of the effects of crises on women and the illegality of/barriers to abortion. Several MEPs directly link the (after-)effects of the crisis to the limitation of abortion services, as can be seen in the following statements:

‘It pointed out the negative effects of austerity measures on gender equality, and those of budgetary restrictions on the quality, accessibility and cost of public health services, sexual information, family planning, support to NGOs, the consequences on women's

economic independence.’ - Marie-Christine Vergiat (GUE/NGL), France, October 2013

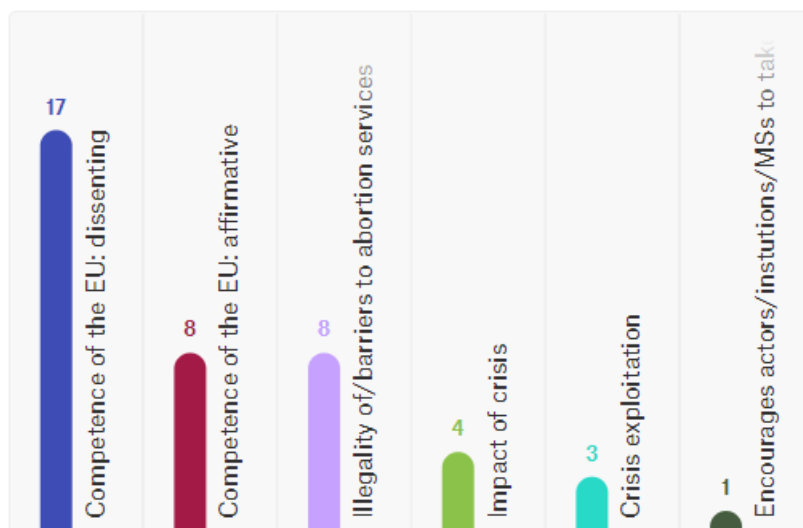
Vergiat here explicitly mentions the impact of the budgetary restrictions on the accessibility of health services necessary for abortion procedures. Romanian MEP Enciu, voices a similar opinion:

‘The current political and economic context poses a threat to the rights of Europeans, and calls for continued vigilance. The financial and economic crisis has created a trend within Member States towards a weakening of the quality and accessibility of health services dedicated to sexual and reproductive rights.’ - Ioan Enciu (S&D), Romania, October 2013

It is shown here that Enciu directly links the impact of the financial and economic crisis to an overall weakening of health services, therefore limiting the quality and accessibility of SRHR and thus abortion services.

### Figure 7

*Overview concepts Matić debate*



As can be seen in Figure 7, most prominent in the debate on the Matić report is the claim that the topic of abortion does not lie within in the competences of the EU to regulate on, and should be left within the national legislation of the Member States. As was the case for the other debates, the frequency of the call to respect the principle of subsidiarity shows that there is a strong opposition to the proposed report, as many MEPs express that they do not feel that this report, or certain topics within this report, should be discussed at the EU level. One of these opinions is provided below:

‘It is a step backwards in the defence of human rights and a serious precedent that calls into question the legitimacy of this institution. The Union is overstepping its bounds by meddling in matters that fall within the competence of the States.’ - Margarita de la Pisa Carrión (ECR), Spain, June 2021

De la Pisa Carrión indicates here that she believes EU involvement in SRHR is a matter of overstepping, and that regulation on these rights should be up to the Member States only. Contrary to this, the Matic debate demonstrates that several MEPs do believe this either falls within the scope of the EU, or should fall within the scope of the EU. This is, however, less strongly expressed than the dissenting opinion on EU involvement in SRHR. In contrast to what is expressed in the Matic report itself, its debate is less concerned with the impact of crisis. The effects of the crisis are less frequently mentioned or connected to the barriers to abortion. The FEMM committee responsible for drafting the Matic report might thus show a strong awareness of the effects of the crisis on abortion availability, this is not as strongly reflected in the debate between the MEPs. Several MEPs, however, do demonstrate awareness of the link between the crisis and its effects on the accessibility of abortion services:

‘During this health crisis, we have seen a worrying regression in women's rights. The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions have negatively impacted on women's access to health care, including SRH services, and have exacerbated already existing structural gender inequalities.’ Pierette Herzberger-Fofana (Greens/EFA), Germany, June 2021

Herzberger-Fofana here indicates that the COVID-19 crisis has had negative impacts on women’s rights, and has specifically led to a decreased availability of SRH services.

Even though the Matic report itself strongly links the effects of the COVID-19 crisis to increased barriers to abortion, this connection is less present in the debate. This shows that change in political discourse on abortion cannot be solely attributed to the catalyst effects of the crisis. While it might be that the FEMM committee is more inclined to take a stronger stance on the necessity of abortion accessibility due to the influence of the crisis they have perceived, this does not necessarily mean that the rest of MEPs follow suit.

Even though the Matic debate did not necessarily directly reflect a strong commitment to upholding abortion accessibility due to the effects of the crisis, the report was voted in favour of, indicating that other factors have been of influence here as well in changing the political discourse on abortion accessibility. One of these factors could be that the European

Parliament is more frequently dealing with a stronger opposition to themes related to SRHR. The Matic report reiterates the perception of a regression in the availability of abortion services and increased opposition to pro-choice policies. The European Parliament has been confronted with a clash of values earlier, when it voted on a resolution condemning the near-total abortion ban which was introduced by Poland in January 2021 (European Parliament, 2020). It might be due to the noticeable stronger opposition to ensuring SRHR as well that some of the MEPs have been prompted to show a stronger commitment to ensuring the accessibility of abortion services. Slovenian MEP Milan Brglez indicates that both the COVID-19 crisis and the increased opposition towards SRHR call for a stronger commitment of the European Parliament to ensure the accessibility of SRHR:

‘At a time when attacks on fundamental European values are intensifying in the EU, led by gender equality, which was left out of the leaders' declaration at the Porto Social Summit under pressure from Poland and Hungary, and at a time when access to health services in this area has been severely restricted due to the pandemic, it is crucial for the European Parliament to debate and take a clear stance in support of the right to sexual and reproductive health.’ – Milan Brglez (S&D), Slovenia, June 2021

### 3.3. Conclusions

The central question for this research is how crises can generate a paradigm shift in political discourse on abortion. By looking at the effects of both the Eurocrisis and the COVID-19 crisis on accessibility of abortion services, it seems that crises can expose and exacerbate flaws in existing legislation. Despite the fact that abortion regulation lies within the competences of the EU Member States, the European Parliament has become increasingly more outspoken on the topic. The results of the analysis seem to support the posed hypotheses. The expectation was that the COVID-19 crisis would prompt a further engagement of the European Parliament on gender equality issues and on particular on ensuring the accessibility of abortion. The Matic report, which was published shortly after the first major impact of the COVID-19 crisis, entails the strong presence of three themes: the impact of crisis, the illegality of/barriers to abortion and the encouragement of actors/institutions/Member States to take action. Also, in comparison to the other reports, the Matic report shows a higher frequency of the crisis exploitation theme, indicating that the crisis was argued to constitute a unique situation in which abortion accessibility was limited, but which could also pose as an opportunity to bring about changes in abortion regulation.

The strong presence of these themes seems to support the first hypothesis, added to this is the fact that the Matic report is the first and most extensive report on SRHR that was voted in favour of by the European Parliament since the Van Lancker report of 2002. It should, however, be mentioned here that the data indicates that not only the COVID-19 crisis functioned as a catalyst for stronger commitment to abortion accessibility. As can be observed in the debate, the perceived increased opposition to SRHR in Europe can have contributed to some MEPs taking a stronger stance in relation to abortion accessibility as well.

For the second hypothesis, the expectation was that the European Parliament would be much less committed to the defence of abortion accessibility after the Eurocrisis than it was after the COVID-19 crisis. As can be seen from the data, the impact of the crisis was a strongly present in the Tarabella report, but this was not yet explicitly linked to the limitation of abortion services. The Tarabella report was accepted, but the accessibility of abortion services constituted a minor part of the actual report. The Estrela report mentioned the impact of the crisis less often, but where it did mention the crisis, the report made the connection between the crisis and its subsequent austerity measures and its effects on the accessibility of abortion services. In addition, the report showed a strong commitment to upholding the accessibility of abortion services, as one of the most present themes is the encouragement of relevant actors/institutions/Member States to take action. The low frequency of the crisis exploitation concept in the Estrela debate, however, indicates that the crisis was barely perceived as a critical opportunity to bring about changes in abortion accessibility. Added to this, is the fact that the report was heavily debated, amended and eventually rejected altogether, which seems to support the expectations of the second hypothesis and indicate that the Eurocrisis did not generate as much commitment for upholding abortion accessibility, as did the COVID-19 crisis.

## 4. Discussion

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This chapter contains a discussion of the results as provided in the previous chapter. It will first provide an interpretation of the results of the research and an answer to the research question. Secondly, the academic and practical relevance of the results are highlighted, followed by a discussion of the limitations of the research at hand, and recommendations for further research on the topic.

### 4.1. Interpretations

The results align with the crisis exploitation theory outlined by Boin et al. (2009), this theory suggests that if crises are perceived as impactful enough, they can be regarded as a critical opportunity to bring about change. This seems to be the case for the COVID-19 crisis, as the Matić report linked the effects of the crisis to the increased limitations of abortion accessibility and strongly urged relevant actors/institutions/Member States to take action to ensure abortion accessibility. The fact that the crisis was perceived as a critical opportunity was reflected in higher presence of the crisis exploitation concept in comparison to the preceding reports. This demonstrates that the crisis was perceived as a unique opportunity to bring about changes in the existing abortion regulation, therefore using the crisis context to advocate for changes.

In contrast, even though the Eurocrisis impacted the accessibility of abortion services as well, there seemed to be less of an urgency to ensure continued accessibility of abortion. This could partially be due to the perception that the impact of the Eurocrisis on abortion accessibility was not disruptive enough, which would make the response to the Eurocrisis fall under the first type of crisis perception as defined by Boin et al. (2009): ‘the denial that the crisis is anything more than an unfortunate incident, making it unnecessary to justify any policy changes’. This would therefore not bring about significant changes in the political discourse on abortion accessibility. Nevertheless, it should be taken into account that more factors are at play when it comes to changes in political discourse. Other factors that could have led to a different political discourse on abortion after the COVID-19 crisis in comparison to the Eurocrisis can be a change in composition of the European Parliament in the period between 2013 and 2021 (e.g. the presence of more progressive, pro-choice MEPs), a change in the public discourse on abortion in general or a (perceived) regression of SRHR in the EU.



## 4.2. Implications

Previous research on the effects of crises on gender equality generally concludes that crises have negative effects on gender equality, as they can lead to decreased participation in the workforce, increased unpaid care duties, larger wage gaps, increased gender-based violence and domestic violence. When looking at the government response to the gendered effects of crises, there is often a decreased commitment to upholding gender-sensitive policies or the introduction of gender mainstreaming in new policies. The results of the research at hand seem to go against the expectations of the existing research. By applying the crisis exploitation theory to the COVID-19 crisis and the Eurocrisis, it can be perceived that, at least at the EU level, crises can actually also contribute to a new commitment to upholding or introducing gender-sensitive policies. The nature and severity of the crisis, however, can be of influence in determining how strong this commitment turns out to be. As can be seen from the results, even though the European Parliament was aware of the influence of impact of the Eurocrisis on the accessibility of abortion services, the impact of the crisis was likely not perceived as severe enough to increase the European Parliament's commitment to ensuring the availability of abortion policies. This can be seen through the lack of recognising the crisis as a critical opportunity to bring about changes, the strong opposition voiced in the debate and the fact that the report was rejected. The Matic report in turn shows a strong awareness of the relation between the COVID-19 crisis and the limitation of abortion services and an attempt to employ the context of the crisis to bring about changes in abortion accessibility. This is accompanied by a high frequency of claims urging relevant actors to take the necessary steps to ensure abortion accessibility.

The research results have some practical implications as well. The change in discourse of the European Parliament could signal a move at the EU level to more commitment on ensuring the accessibility of abortion services. It has to be observed whether this could lead to a snowball effect increasing commitment to upholding abortion availability in other EU institutions as well. However, the change in discourse at the EU level does not necessarily have to be reflected at the national level, as the state response to ensuring abortion accessibility during crises periods has varied widely within the EU. Whether this increased commitment of the European Parliament to ensuring abortion accessibility will result in any practical implications is dependent on many factors and thus debatable. Nevertheless, the approval of the Matic report in a time during which abortion services were severely limited,

sends a signal to the Member States that the European Parliament is willing to take a stronger stance on the topic of SRHR.

#### 4.3. Limitations

Limitations of the research can be found in the fact that it only analyses the effects of one variable on changes in political discourse. It should be taken into account that change in political discourse is subject to many other variables as well. As aforementioned, a change in the composition of the European Parliament in the period between the reports could have contributed to a change in political discourse, as well as an overall change of the public discourse on abortion. When regarding the results of this research, it is thus important to consider that other variables might have contributed as well to the change in discourse between the earlier Tarabella and Estrela reports and the later Matic report. Added to this, is the fact that it cannot be ruled out that the change in political discourse was something that was already set in motion. However, as can be seen from the results, the crisis can still have played the role of catalyst in this case. The Matic report points out how the COVID-19 crisis has negatively impacted abortion accessibility and has presented an opportunity to improve existing abortion regulation. The report also reiterates that the gaps that have been caused in abortion accessibility by the COVID-19 crisis is what necessitated an EU response. This demonstrates that, even if the change in political discourse on abortion was already an ongoing process, it has been accelerated due to the effects of the crisis.

#### 4.4. Recommendations

To complement and expand the research at hand, there are several additions that can be made. Strengthening of the current research could for example be done through complementing the content analysis with interviews with MEPs or other relevant actors. Through the content analysis of the reports and debates it can be analysed what formal position the European Parliament takes on the topic of abortion. By complementing this with interviews, a deeper understanding can be achieved of whether the MEPs actively connect the impact of crisis on the limitation of abortion services and whether this influences political discourse on the topic.

In addition, to address the limitations mentioned in the previous paragraph, further research could take other variables of influence on changes in political discourse on abortion into account. Within the context of the European Parliament this would mean regarding the political background, nationality, gender and European Party Group of the MEPs involved in

the voting, as well as whether there has been a change in the overall composition of the European Parliament, for example leading to the representation of more conservative or more progressive voices.

Further research can also be done by expanding the period of observation. Currently, the research focuses on two major crises. To draw stronger conclusions on the impact of crises on the political discourse on SRHR, more crises as well as different types over a longer period of time could be analysed. What can be explored here as well is whether political institutions such as the European Parliament would learn from previous crises and recognise that these crises can potentially be harmful to gender equality as a whole, and abortion accessibility in particular. It can be observed whether this in turn would lead to increased commitment to ensuring abortion accessibility over time. Lastly, future research could be conducted in parliaments at the national level to see whether crises have a similar impact in this context and whether countries in which a crisis has been more impactful demonstrate a stronger change in political discourse than countries where the crisis had less severe effects.

## 5. Conclusion

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By analysing the effects of the Eurocrisis and the COVID-19 crisis on the political discourse in the European Parliament, this thesis has shown how crises can generate a paradigm shift in political discourse on abortion. It has highlighted how crises can bring about changes in political discourse, as the effects of the crisis can reveal flaws in existing policies and move political actors to employ the crisis by advocating for policy alternatives that would otherwise not have gained as much support. This thesis forms a contribution to existing academic knowledge as it explores how crises can lead to larger paradigm shifts in the political discourse in a supranational institution such as the European Parliament and on more contentious topics such as SRHR. Additionally, the research adds to the literature on crisis exploitation, as it demonstrates that the perception of the impact and severity of the crisis is important in determining the political relevance of the crisis and whether and how the crisis can be employed to push for a change in political discourse.

Through the analysis of European Parliament resolutions from post-crisis periods (respectively, the 2010 Tarabella report, 2013 Estrela report and 2021 Matić report) it has become clear that a stronger awareness of the influence of crises on abortion accessibility and the commitment to ensuring the access to these services only emerged after the COVID-19 crisis. Whereas the reports and debates published after the Eurocrisis show awareness of the link between the crisis and the limitation of abortion services, they demonstrate less commitment to upholding the access to abortion services and a lower willingness to have the European Parliament play a role in this. This has resulted in the rejection of the Estrela report. The stronger commitment to ensuring abortion accessibility after the COVID-19 crisis can arguably partially be contributed to the perception of the crisis as more impactful in comparison to the Eurocrisis. This is reflected in the fact that the Matić report and debate contain a stronger emphasis on the link between the impact of the crisis and the limitations to abortion. Additionally, the report and debate emphasise that the crisis should be regarded as a warning and an opportunity to improve existing abortion regulation, which was not present in the Tarabella and Estrela reports.

The Matić report also observes a growing opposition to all ‘gender’ related matters within Europe, including SRHR. The introduction of a near-total abortion ban in Poland caused tangible tensions within the EU, and moved the European Parliament to passing a resolution

in which it condemned the Polish law (European Parliament, 2020). In the run up to the publication of the Matic report, there has been a strong opposition from MEPs and citizens alike which did not want the report published and tried to hinder its publication by setting up a petition, spreading disinformation and sending plastic foetuses to MEPs (Hutchinson, 2021). This noticeable stronger opposition to SRHR-related matters could have contributed to the change in political discourse on abortion within the European Parliament as well. A strengthening of the findings of this research could be found in the exploration of other factors which could have played a role in the stronger position of the European Parliament on ensuring abortion accessibility, which might have become more pronounced due to the effects of the crisis as well. Among these could for example be the changing composition of the European Parliament, or the vocality of the growing 'anti-gender' movement. Additionally, the application of different methodologies, such as conducting interviews, could provide a deeper understanding of how crises contribute to changes in political discourse. Lastly, areas for further research could be the application of the analysis in different contexts such as at the national level rather than the EU level, or in different institutions or policy fields. The accessibility of abortion services remains a much disputed topic. The effects of crises have highlighted the importance of abortion accessibility and generated a change in the political climate. Whether this is a lasting change remains to be seen.

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## Appendix

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### Figure 8

*List of codes with definitions employed in the content analysis*

EU competence: affirmative	The EU has no competence in the area of SRHR, but should have it.
EU competence: dissenting	The EU has no competence in the area of SRHR and should therefore not engage with the topic.
Crisis exploitation	Occurrences in which actors/institutions/Member States are (said to be) making use of the crisis to bring about a change.
Encourage actors/institutions/Member States	Encourages actors/institutions/Member States to take action to ensure or improve the access to SRHR.
Illegality of/barriers to abortion	Mentions the illegality of or (potential) barriers to abortion which were already existing, or have recently emerged.
Impact of crisis	Explicitly or implicitly mentions the negative effects of crises on women.