The politics of crisis management in the Netherlands

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CHAPTER 35

THE POLITICS OF CRISIS MANAGEMENT IN THE NETHERLANDS

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C35S1

Crises and Crisification in the Netherlands

C35P1 In 2022, *Financial Times* columnist Adam Tooze (2022) introduced the concept of 'polycrisis'. Tooze argued that the world is enmeshed in a variety of crises that are entangled and strengthen each other. Dutch pundits quickly adopted the concept as the perfect descriptor of Dutch politics and society. Newspapers and television shows seemed to agree that the Netherlands, one of the richest countries in the world, was besieged by a bewildering variety of crises. There were, indeed, quite a few pressing societal problems, including deep societal polarization, climate-related issues, a lingering scandal in the social security sector, and the long-term damage in areas ravaged by the exploitation of natural gas. Despite these complex problems, however, the Netherlands remained one of the safest and richest places on the planet.

C35P2 Like most countries, the Netherlands has experienced a range of crises and disasters over the decades. In 1953, winter storms and high tides caused major breaches in the dike system in the south-west of the country, resulting in 1,836 deaths and wreaking widespread devastation. A spate of protracted terrorist hostage takings (in the second half of the 1970s,) a series of large-scale riots in Amsterdam (during the first half of the 1980s), major air crashes (in 1992 and 1996), a fireworks factory explosion in the middle of a city (2000), two political assassinations (in 2002 and 2004), the financial crisis and a near collapse of major financial institutions (2009), and the Covid-19 pandemic (2020–2021) are other examples of ruptures etched in the collective memory.

C35P3 However, it is not at all clear whether there has been an increase in the number and severity of crises over time. In fact, it is impossible to establish whether we are really dealing with 'more' crises than, say, two decades ago. It is impossible to establish whether objective risks, such as the risk of a nuclear accident or a terrorist attack, have risen or dwindled. The bigger problem, however, is that crises are subjective in nature. We speak of a crisis when a group of people collectively perceive a threat that must be urgently addressed (while it is not clear how to do that) (Rosenthal et al., 1989). But we do not have a reliable way of telling whether a significant number of people are framing a certain problem in terms of crisis. In some cases it is obvious (the country stops functioning after a massive earthquake), but in many other cases collective experiences are hard to measure with any kind of precision.

C35P4 When people define social problems in terms of crisis, we speak of the 'crisification' of the problem agenda (Rhinard, 2019).[1] We may be seeing more crisification, which has an effect on the political agenda. When a crisis surges onto the political agenda, politicians tend to act (Edelman, 1977). Crisification leads to politicization. We can then ask whether the increased politicization of crisis has consequences. We see two types of potential consequences that we will explore in this chapter.

C35P5 First, a sense of crisis may affect the perception of governmental performance. If people feel that crises keep occurring—regardless of whether they actually do or not—they may well begin to doubt the government's capacity to keep them safe, which over time has become an integral part of the 'social contract' between the Dutch state and its citizens (see De Graaf, *this volume*). In other words, the legitimacy of government policies and institutions may become an issue (Boin & 't Hart, 2000). Secondly, a sense of increased crisis risk may lead to efforts to beef up the government's crisis management capacity. This can be done in various ways (better training, more budget), but we are particularly concerned with the centralization reflex ('t Hart et al., 1993): the idea that a crisis is better managed when powers are concentrated at the top.

C35P6 Enhanced centralization in response to collective perceptions of crisis (rather than objectifiable risks) can be highly problematic from a democratic point of view. Most countries have legal arrangements to shift crisis decision-making powers towards national governments and to a limited number of key office holders. The Netherlands is no exception. Yet, it means that an increase in the number of perceived crises—real or not—may thus lead to an empowered executive. Vice versa, executives keen on such empowerment may be more likely to label situations as crises or wait long enough with policy interventions for a wicked political problem to acquire crisis proportions. As Edelman (1977, p. 47) put it, 'any regime that prides itself on its capacity to manage crises will find crises to manage'.

C35P7 In this chapter, we explore whether perceptions of crisis have changed in the Netherlands and how such changes may have caused changes in the arrangements of executive crisis powers. To be sure, this is not an exact science. It is impossible to directly

[1] The author uses the term 'crisisification' in the original.

measure the collective perception of crisis over the years. It is also impossible, then, to establish an evidence-based causal relation between 'crisification' and growing executive crisis powers. So what we present here is an interpretation of the Dutch world of crisis and crisis research.

C35S2

Crises and Governmental Crisis Management: An Overview

C35P8 The Dutch political scientist Uriel Rosenthal was one of the first to systematically study post-war crises in the Netherlands. For his groundbreaking study *Rampen, Rellen, Gijzelingen*, Rosenthal (1984; see also Rosenthal, 1986) selected one disaster (the 1953 floods), two urban conflicts (both in Amsterdam, 1966 and 1974–1975), two high-profile crises within educational and psychiatric institutions, and a set of protracted hostage takings in 1975 and 1977. The latter crises, together with the 1953 floods, were at the time widely viewed as singular events in post-war Holland. Apart from a train disaster in 1962 (93 deaths), a few industrial accidents, the 1973 Arab oil embargo (studied in Scholten & Rosenthal, 1977), and the Amsterdam riots during the crowning of Queen Beatrix (1980), there were few other crises that Rosenthal could have selected for his book (see also Post & 't Hart, 1990).

C35P9 Rosenthal defined a crisis in terms of a threatening situation that must be urgently addressed under conditions of deep uncertainty (cf. Rosenthal et al., 1989). He was especially interested in the reaction of political elites. He showed that their task is anything but easy. When large sections of the populace perceive a threat that they feel requires immediate attention, even if no sound information is available that suggests the threat is real or imminent, governments are pressed into action. Government leaders are then expected to organize a response that mitigates the perceived threat. They must do so at very short notice and with very little information (Rosenthal et al., 1989).

C35P10 The crises and disasters documented by Rosenthal did not lead to intense accountability processes. That is not to say that these crises had no consequences. The 1953 floods prompted the construction of the now famous Delta works. The Moluccan hostage takings and the deaths that were caused (both Dutch hostages and Moluccan hostage takers) left deep marks on Dutch and Moluccan society that lasted for decades. But apart from causing societal trauma and functional reforms, the *political* ramifications were rather limited. Crisis management, in other words, was not politicized at the time.

C35P11 In the 1980s, technological disasters that unfolded abroad were causing a sense of trepidation in Dutch society. The Seveso disaster, Three Mile Island, and Bhopal reminded the Dutch of their own chemical industries and the risks that these posed (cf. Perrow, 1984). The Chernobyl nuclear disaster (1986) spurred those fears when the nuclear fallout reached all the way from near Kyiv to the North Sea. The price of modernity, as Ulrich Beck (1992) had prophesied, was deep uncertainty about potential and

rather frightsome consequences that were undetectable by non-experts. In hindsight, we might hypothesize that the roots of crisification can be located in this era: new risks were discovered and labelled as crises waiting to happen.

C35P12 In October 1992, an Israeli cargo plane crashed in an Amsterdam low-income neighbourhood, causing 43 deaths (Rosenthal et al., 1994). It was the biggest crisis that Dutch political leaders, at both the national and local levels, had faced in years. The disaster commanded the attention of the nation for weeks, as Amsterdam firefighters worked feverishly to search for the dead under the rubble of the destroyed apartment buildings. The Amsterdam mayor, Ed van Thijn, symbolized the determined effort of Dutch politicians to maintain a front of solidarity in the face of a nation in shock.

C35P13 In hindsight, the Amsterdam disaster marked the end of 'political innocence' in the Dutch crisis realm (Bos & Rosenthal, 2001). The aviation disaster gave rise to the politicization of airport safety and the presence of unregistered foreigners in Amsterdam. The politicization around the disaster took a new turn when a parliamentary inquiry was set up in 1998 to investigate nagging concerns about the health impacts of the intense fires and possibly toxic fumes generated by the crash and speculations about a cover-up of the plane's contents. The inquiry's harsh findings focused on the role of the cabinet and nearly forced the resignations of both the ministers of economic affairs and public health in 1999 (Van der Braak, 2022).

C35P14 This inquiry was preceded by a parliamentary inquiry into the functioning of the Dutch police, which started in 1994 and focused on the role of undercover teams that were employed to take down crime syndicates. The high-profile public hearings commanded the attention of the nation (Bovens et al., 1998). The committee published its shattering conclusions—a 'triple crisis in Dutch crime fighting'—in 1996. The conclusions of the inquiry committee were a turning point as they fuelled the crisification tendency whereby all sorts of complex problems receive the crisis label.

C35P15 The next big crisis—the Enschede fireworks factory explosion (2000)—was instantly politicized. The cataclysmic explosion in the middle of a residential neighbourhood in the city of Enschede killed 23 people (including four firefighters), injured about 950 citizens, and destroyed 200 houses. The disaster gave rise to a parliamentary inquiry, which took aim at multiple ministries. The inquiry findings exposed the inability of governments to protect their citizens in the face of a 'knowable' and 'foreseeable' threat. The committee noted that the disaster had completely overwhelmed local emergency service capacity and underlined the necessity of regional cooperation and coordination (Commissie Evaluatie Wet Veiligheidsregio's, 2020, pp. 27–28).

C35P16 Six months after the Enschede disaster, a New Year's Eve party in the fishing village of Volendam ended in tragedy. A raging fire trapped hundreds of teenagers in an overcrowded bar, where emergency exits were blocked with storage. Over 200 teenagers were seriously injured and 14 youngsters lost their lives. The post-crisis investigations revealed that governmental authorities had inadequately prioritized the oversight and enforcement of existing safety regulations. It noted a need for surge capacity and enhanced coordination between different local and regional emergency services (Commissie Evaluatie Wet Veiligheidsregio's, 2020, p. 28).

C35P17 These two disasters formed the impetus for a large-scale reform of crisis preparation and response policies in the Netherlands. No longer would firefighting and health emergency services be organized at the municipal level (Commissie Evaluatie Wet Veiligheidsregio's, 2020, p. 28). The national government formed 25 so-called safety regions to pool local resources and leverage scale advantages in emergency preparation and response. In 2010, the Safety Regions Act came into force, which set the scene for crisis centralization at the local level. In times of crisis, the mayor of the largest city in the region would direct the response. During the Covid-19 pandemic, these regional crisis managers would assume a dominant position in the execution of the national response.

C35P18 The centralization tendency was greatly enhanced by two acts of political violence. In 2002, the politician Pim Fortuyn was murdered, just days before a national election. His murder instigated political unrest and mass protests, affecting the national elections and the political party landscape (Boin et al., 2018). The brutal killing in 2004 of film maker Theo van Gogh (who had made the Islam-critical movie *Submission*) fuelled the emergent polarization in Dutch society. Coming on the heels of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States and the Madrid bombings in 2004, the murders seemed to augur an era of terrorism.

C35P19 In reaction to both '9/11' and the two domestic assassinations, the government produced a raft of counterterrorism policies. Most importantly, it created the position of the national coordinator on counterterrorism, *Nationale Coordinator Terrorisme Bestrijding*, within the Ministry of Justice to coordinate all national counterterrorism-related efforts (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 2011, 29754, no. 203). In subsequent years, the mandate was quickly expanded to include public order, but also issues related to safety and security.[2] A sizeable organization was created that now accommodates the national crisis centre, where ministers convene for interdepartmental crisis decision making. The national crisis handbook grants this centre considerable power in times of crisis. What started with a reaction to the fear of terrorism gave rise to a frantic period of formalization and standardization of crisis procedures, stepped-up interdepartmental crisis coordination, uniformity of training, development of expertise at the national crisis centre, and annual cabinet-level crisis response exercises.

C35P20 Another notable development was the creation of the Dutch Safety Board (*Onderzoeksraad voor Veiligheid*, DSB) in 2005. The DSB was endowed with a sweeping statutory mandate to investigate independently any domestic safety or security incident. In 2014, the DSB made international headlines when it led the investigation into the downing of Malaysia Airlines flight MH-17 near Donetsk (Ukraine) soon after its departure from Amsterdam airport, killing all 298 passengers on board, 196 of whom were Dutch citizens (Kuipers et al., 2020).

C35P21 From its inception, the DSB adopted a remarkably wide interpretation of safety. Its first investigation report focused on a fire in a detention centre for asylum seekers

[2] This also became evident in the renaming of the position to *Nationale Coordinator Terrorisme en Veiligheid*.

at Schiphol airport that claimed 11 lives. In addition to 'traditional' safety cases, such as plane accidents and chemical fires, the DSB investigated a national cyber hack (Diginotar, 2011), a monster truck driving into the audience at a local fair (in Haaksbergen, 2014), military accidents (at Ossendrecht and Mali, both in 2016), fires in pig farms, and a festive bonfire at Scheveningen beach that caused a 'near accident'. While the DSB's legal statute is explicit in stating that the organization should be focused on learning lessons (and not blaming officials), its reports have left a trail of political casualties. This willingness to investigate a variety of 'safety events' and the (feared) political consequences of its findings can be seen as a strengthening of two trends: politicization and crisification.

C35P22 Over the years, the Dutch parliament had strengthened its own organization to conduct crisis investigations.[3] In addition to those inquiries mentioned earlier, parliament organized hearings on the failure of Dutch intervention troops to protect the Bosnian Muslim population in Srebrenica in 1995 (the inquiry was held in 2003), the 2008–2009 banking crisis (inquiry report in 2012), the risks of gas exploitation in Groningen, and the handling of childcare allowances and prosecution of alleged misconduct by the tax office (the latter are ongoing at the time of writing).

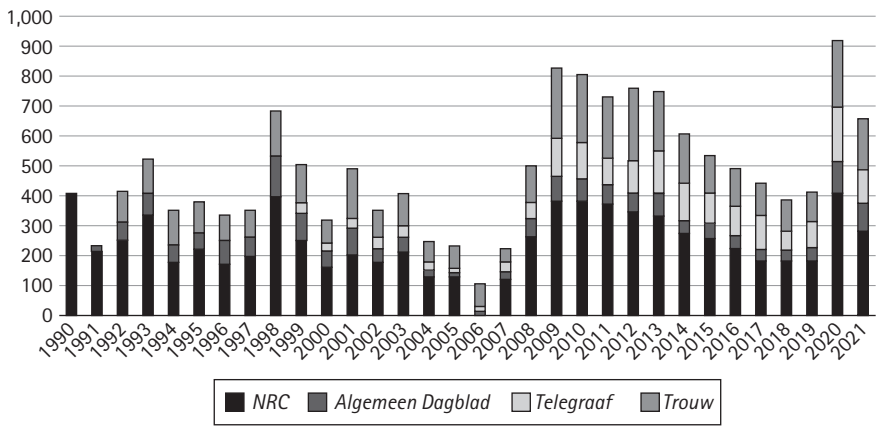
C35P23 These inquiries had political consequences (the entire cabinet resigned after the Srebrenica report, in 2003). It is therefore understandable that the organization of inquiries (negotiations about the scope of the inquiry, members of the committee, duration of the project, etc.) has itself become quite politicized. This became most evident when parliament launched inquiries into the national Covid-19 response (on which the DSB meanwhile published three reports). Negotiations between the political parties broke down and the inquiry was halted for an indefinite period.

C35P24 In conclusion, we see evidence of several trends. First, we see clear demonstrations of crisification. Over the years, the term 'crisis' has increasingly been used in reference to a variety of events or conditions deemed undesirable, unacceptable, or uncomfortable. While these problems undoubtedly pose serious headaches for politicians, they do not necessarily fall within the classic definition. Many of these situations or conditions are probably better thought of as 'wicked problems' (Head, 2022; Rittel & Webber, 1973) or *creeping* crises (Boin et al., 2020).

C35P25 This trend finds support in the media's use of the term 'crisis' in relation to government policy and government responsibility (Figure 35.1). A LexisNexis Boolean search (in Dutch) shows an increase in the use of the word 'crisis' combined with 'policy' from 2006 onwards.

C35P26 The growing use of the word 'crisis' does not correspond to a notable rise in the number of 'traditional' crisis events, such as explosions, accidents, or terrorist attacks. Table 35.1 provides an overview of crisis cases that triggered an escalated emergency

[3] We see no evidence of an increase in the number of inquiries over the years: the pre-2000 decades after 1977 when the current parliamentary mandate for inquiries was established show similar numbers and frequency of inquiries to the post-2000 decades.



C35F1 **FIGURE 35.1** 'Crisis' and 'policy' frequency counts in newspaper articles, 1990–2021

Source: authors

response *and* resulted in parliamentary scrutiny and/or a safety investigation *and* made newspaper headlines for days on end *and* resurfaced as a reference in newspaper articles at least two to five years later. In order to capture the subjectivity of crises, we listed incidents that combined all of these elements that indicated their crisis 'content': the incidents listed in the table were listed on the inventory of major crises in the Netherlands as identified by experts (Broekema et al., 2018) and/or were the subject of investigation by at least two independent/official inquiries, and all the events listed were mentioned in the newspapers at least two to five years later, indicating their persistence in public debate and collective memory.

C35P27 We can thus conclude that the rise of the word 'crisis' in the media is not accompanied by a rise in the number of actual crisis events. This suggests a discrepancy between societal perceptions and objective conditions (cf. Wildavsky, 1997). Our fears appear to outpace the risks. Such a shift in perception has real effects, as it prompts efforts towards professionalization, expansion, and centralization of crisis management structures and processes.

C35P28 When we contrast the largest crises in the Netherlands since the Second World War—the 1953 floods and the Covid-19 pandemic—we can see that the world of crisis has changed in fundamental ways. Both disasters triggered a sense of national unity, which translated into societal trust in national leaders. Prime Minister Mark Rutte emerged from the first Covid-19 wave with extremely high approval ratings. However, as new waves followed and key aspects of the response drew fire from an array of critics, the nation's trust in national politicians all but evaporated (Krouwel et al., 2021). This rapid decline in legitimacy has created fundamental questions about the future performance and legitimacy of national crisis response structures (Louwerse et al., 2021). Having noted this, we should remember that the Netherlands still ranks highly as a safe, secure, and stable country.

C35T1

Table 35.1 Overview of major crises in the Netherlands, 2000–2022

Year	Event (English)	Event (Dutch)	Location/impact
2000	Fireworks factory explosion	*Vuurwerkramp*	Enschede
2001	Bar fire	*Cafebrand*	Volendam
2001	Foot-and-mouth disease	*Mond en Klauwzeer*	[nationwide]
2002	Assassination of Pim Fortuijn	*Aanslag Pim Fortuijn*	Hilversum
2004	Assassination of Theo van Gogh	*Aanslag Theo van Gogh*	Amsterdam
2005	Detention centre fire	*Brand Detentiecentrum*	Schiphol
2005	Local/regional power outage	*Stroomstoring Haaksbergen*	Haaksbergen
2007	Q-fever outbreak	*Q-koorts*	Brabant
2009	Plane crash	*Poldercrash*	Schiphol
2009	H1N1A swine flu pandemic	*Mexicaanse griep*	[nationwide]
2009	Assault on royal family	*Aanslag (koninklijk huis) Apeldoorn*	Apeldoorn
2009	Sex crime, swimming teacher	*Zedenzaak zwemleraar Benno L*	Den Bosch
2010	Sex crime, daycare centre	*Zedenzaak kinderdagverblijf Hofnarretje*	Amsterdam
2011	Fire in a chemical factory	*Brand Chemie-Pack*	Moerdijk
2011	Active shooter in a shopping mall	*Schietincident winkelcentrum Ridderhof*	Alphen ad Rijn
2011	Cyber security hack, Diginotar	*Diginotar*	[nationwide]
2012	Project X Facebook riots	*Project-X*	Haren
2014	Downing of passenger plane flying over war zone	*MH-17*	[nationwide]/ Donetsk, Ukraine
2014	Monster truck driving into audience	*Monstertruck Haaksbergen*	Haaksbergen
2017	Hurricane disaster on former Dutch Caribbean island	*Orkaan Irma St Maarten*	St Maarten
2017	Criminal assault by detainee	*Anne Faber*	Den Dolder
2019	Terrorist attack on tram	*Tramaanslag Utrecht*	Utrecht
2021	Covid-19 pandemic	*Aanpak Covid-19*	[nationwide]

C35S3

Trends in Dutch Crisis Research

C35P29

Before Rosenthal began studying crises in the Netherlands, the Dutch social sciences had traditionally been focusing on 'the normal, the predictable, and the parts of society regulated' (Rosenthal, 1984, p. 10). Rosenthal created the Leiden University Crisis Research Center (CRC) in the late 1980s to study how governments deal with crisis.

Dutch crisis research has since become quite prominent internationally (Wolbers et al., 2021).[4]

C35P30 Rosenthal and his group built on the insights from social science subfields such as organizational studies, disaster sociology, political science, psychology, and international relations (Rosenthal, 1984, p. 16, referring to Hermann, 1969; Williams, 1976; and Young, 1968). Using a structural-functionalist systems perspective as a means to integrate these disparate strands, Rosenthal conceptualized crises as a threat to the existing social system which demands an urgent response from that system, which in turn requires that its elites make critical decisions without having sufficient information.

C35P31 Emulating two Canadian examples (Joseph Scanlon's Emergency Communications Research Unit at Carleton University, and Michael Brecher's International Crisis Behavior Project at McGill University), the Leiden-based CRC set out to study a wide range of contemporary crisis episodes. Using Brecher's hypothesis-driven focused comparative case study methods (which in turn were inspired by the pioneering work of Stanford's Alexander George) and Scanlon's rapid response field observations, the CRC took Rosenthal's (1984) analytical framework about crisis decision making as its point of departure. Over time, the group gradually both refined the original hypotheses (e.g. Rosenthal et al., 1991; 't Hart & Rosenthal, 1990) and expanded its analytical scope to focus on, for example, the role of the media in crisis communication ('t Hart et al., 1997) and post-acute stages of crisis management (e.g. Muller, 1994; Van Duin, 1992).

C35P32 The original hypotheses were grouped around themes such as structural changes to policymaking processes, information flows, and communication patterns both within government and vis-à-vis the public, the effects of stress on policymakers and the small groups in which crisis decision making tends to take place, and the dynamics of post-response inquiry and accountability. The upshot of the CRC's findings was that crisis leaders tend to focus on the short term (taking away the threat) and that crisis decision making does not appear to follow prescribed mantras of rational decision making. But the research also showed ample improvisation, bureaucratic tensions, and decentralized decision making (Rosenthal & 't Hart, 1991; Rosenthal et al., 1991; 't Hart et al., 1993).

C35P33 Much of the original research was characterized by a preoccupation with crisis preparedness and response, with a strong focus on single case studies and exploratory research (Wolbers et al., 2021). It initially paid relatively little attention to the political dimension of crisis management ('t Hart, 1993).

C35P34 Starting in the mid-1990s, Dutch crisis research gradually began incorporating both the subjective nature and the political consequences of crisis decision making. The

[4] In the *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management* (*JCCM*, Wiley), co-founded by Rosenthal in 1993, over 11% of the articles were (co-)produced by Dutch authors. If we search in Web of Science for author affiliations to Dutch universities and research institutes (e.g. the Institute for Applied Sciences or the Institute of Public Health), we see a similar overrepresentation of 'Dutch' authors: in total, 66 (or 13%) of the 499 articles in *JCCM* (in Web of Science since 2011), 22 (or 8%) of the 288 articles in *Risk, Hazards and Crisis in Public Policy* since its inception in 2010, and 36 (or only 1.4%) of the articles in the journal *Disasters* (since 1977), which is probably more in line with the share of Dutch universities in terms of employed staff worldwide.

relation between crises and policy and/or institutional reforms also garnered attention (Boin & 't Hart, 2000; Boin et al., 2000; see also Alink, 2006; Kuipers, 2004; Noll, 2005; Resodihardjo, 2006). This emerging body of research focused on the relation between societal disruption and political reaction, prompting the question whether and how political systems learn and change in response to crisis experiences—and by means of, for example, crisis inquiries and crisis-induced accountability processes.

C35P35 Three themes gained prominence. First, researchers emphasized the importance of legitimacy. The performance of political crisis managers was linked to public and political trust. As the eyes of the general public set on their leaders in times of fearful uncertainty, their actions are scrutinized for their intentions vis-à-vis the public. Do they care? Do they make the decisions that seem right for the public? Are they primarily concerned with protecting their reputations and avoiding blame? Or do they seek to exploit the crisis for political advantage? Research showed that some leaders take political advantage of the temporary momentum generated by crisis to push through policy priorities that otherwise would be hard to achieve (Boin & Otten, 1996).

C35P36 Secondly, the subjective nature of crisis performance was increasingly recognized (Bovens & 't Hart, 1996). Political crisis leadership could not be objectively assessed, as researchers with a social constructivist bent argued. Crisis performance should be seen as the outcome of sensemaking and framing contests (Wolbers, 2022). While crisis leaders enjoyed the advantage of the media stage, at least in the early beginnings of a crisis, researchers pointed out that crises unfold over time. As the public stopped rallying around the flag, political foes and crisis victims would emerge to formulate counternarratives that threatened any perception of national unity.

C35P37 A third research theme focused on developments that might threaten the safety and security of a modern democracy like the Netherlands. Crisis researchers identified long-term trends that appeared to make modern societies more vulnerable to disruptions and their effects (Rosenthal, Boin, & Comfort, 2001; 't Hart et al., 2002). This research connected with international scholars such as Charles Perrow (1984) and Todd LaPorte (2018) who pointed to the risks of increasingly complex systems that affected other complex systems and stretched across geographical and policy borders.

C35P38 A fourth research theme (flowing from the third) merged the public administration angle and the focus on political consequences by emphasizing the transboundary nature of modern crises (Ansell et al., 2010). This research built on the common observation in public administration research that coordination between policy organizations is often lacking (Comfort, 2007). The Covid-19 pandemic played out in multiple geographic jurisdictions and across many policy domains, making it hard to conceive and build support for coherent responses. The research points out that crises do not respect borders (regardless of whether they are geographical or national) and boundaries (between organizations, policies, cultures, institutions, or professions). The consequence is that crisis leaders must make different organizations coordinate in challenging circumstances in which traversing these boundaries and reaching integration is not always feasible (Wolbers et al., 2018).

C35P39 Another cross-fertilization, this time between crisis research and political science theories, is found in the fifth research theme. The Covid-19 crisis showed that even large-scale crises unfold over time and change shape, from the initial health crisis to an economic, social, and eventually a deeply political crisis. The changing faces of crises always prompt the question why political leaders did not act decisively in the earliest phase of the crisis before the crisis became uncontainable. Political scientists recognize that choices are not that easy in the so-called incubation phase of a 'creeping crisis' (Boin et al, 2020; 't Hart & Boin, 2001; Turner, 1978).

C35P40 During this early phase of the crisis, political leaders must decide whether they want to intervene in the face of emerging risks that may or may not develop into crises. There may be all sorts of reasons that explain why crisis leaders do not want to, or cannot, make a decision to intervene (cf. McConnell & 't Hart, 2019). As it is never certain that a lingering threat will really turn into an acute crisis, leaders must weigh the pros of inaction (no costs, no problems) against the potential of expensive yet unnecessary interventions. The political damage resulting from unnecessary but high-consequence interventions typically weighs heavier than the unlikely prospect of public recognition for preventing a crisis from materializing (who would know?).

C35P41 Together, this body of 'political' research sketched the impossible dimensions of political crisis management. The 'technocratic' research on crisis management had begun to explain why it is hard to collect and analyse information, and why certain administrative structures might be less amenable to the dynamics of crisis. Increasingly, crisis researchers began to document how crises could create a vortex of media frenzy and intense politicization that could demolish the career of political leaders seemingly overnight (Boin et al., 2008).

C35P42 All these research themes proved relevant in the study of the Dutch reaction to the Covid-19 pandemic. Researchers pointed out that policymakers were surprised by a conventional and foreseeable threat (a new virus) that emerged from 'outside' (Boersma et al., 2023). They pointed out that political leaders wrestled with the dilemma between proactive decisiveness and opportunistic hope ('this time the virus will behave differently'). The transboundary effects of the pandemic—on health, economy, education, finance—have been duly noted (Boin et al., 2021). Endless debates about leadership performance were related to a steep decline in trust. Closing the circle, we were reminded of the plight of political leaders in times of crisis. When Prime Minister Rutte sighed that he had to make all the decisions with only 50% of the required information, we could feel the burden experienced by crisis leaders that Rosenthal (1984) described so well in his pioneering work.

C35S4

Conclusions and New Avenues

C35P43 Like any other country, the Netherlands has experienced its share of crisis events. While it does not appear that the number of crises and disasters has increased spectacularly,

there has been considerable institutionalization of crisis preparedness activities (Kuipers et al., 2015). There is a clear trend towards increased professionalization, enhanced coordination, formalization, and centralization of decision-making structures. Whether this trend translates into better crisis management performance is, again, hard to say.

C35P44 Meanwhile, as noted in the introduction, the *term* 'crisis' has seen increasing use in Dutch politics and journalism. Its increasingly common use reflects the catch-all qualities of the concept: it can be used as a label to denote (and deplore) a wide range of unwanted situations, ranging from entrenched inequality to family violence, economic downturns, violent conflicts, humanitarian catastrophes, stock market collapses, diplomatic predicaments, medical trauma, corporate misadventures, public policy failures, and the performance of the political system as a whole. That is what made the term attractive to crisis researchers (as they could compare very different types of events that evoke similar challenges and contexts for decision makers). Yet this versatility of the concept has now come back to haunt the field: if just about everything is claimed to be 'a' or 'in' crisis, we may ask what the term really entails.

C35P45 The ambiguity of crisis has consequences. It creates openings for crisification and politicization. With a touch of exaggeration, we might argue that everything can be turned into a crisis and every crisis may give rise to political contention. This observation is fully in line with crisis scholars who have argued that the study of crisis management is almost by definition a study of crisis politics (Boin et al., 2016; 't Hart, 1993). When we study a crisis, we always encounter questions about power, legitimacy, accountability, and values (Strolovitch, 2023).

C35P46 The Covid-19 experience has brought home to a large audience that crisis management is not easy. In a way, this observation is a vindication of the earliest research efforts on crisis management that were not taken very seriously by political scientists in the 1990s. The Covid-19 crisis showed how difficult crisis management is and how consequential crisis decisions are (Boin et al., 2021). At the same time, the Covid-19 experience has demonstrated the need for new research that may help policymaking elites to fulfil their crisis management tasks.

C35P47 Most importantly, the relation between trust and crisis management performance is in need of further research. In other words, we need to know more about the determinants of crisis management legitimacy. The Covid-19 pandemic underlined that trust is essential for the effectiveness of pandemic crisis management (Kuipers et al., 2022). If citizens don't trust their government, they will be less inclined to follow the guidance it provides and the measures it imposes. A lack of trust can cost lives (think of all those who refused to get vaccinated). If governments fail to deliver, however, trust in their crisis management abilities will likely decline (Krouwel et al., 2021).

C35P48 Paradoxically, trust may also work *against* crisis management effectiveness. Governments in high-trust societies such as the Netherlands and Sweden were at times hesitant to impose measures, as they relied on good sense and self-regulation. But voluntary distancing did not prove very effective (Six et al., 2023; Toshkov et al., 2020, 2022). This suggests that leaders sometimes overestimate the level and effectiveness of trust on which they may rely.

C35P49 Another important research theme would be early crisis detection. It is, of course, impossible to predict which crises will emerge in the future, and which challenges these crises may pose. But it may be possible to detect emerging risks in time, even if they develop in different policy domains that are located in far-away regions. A small country such as the Netherlands must invest in early detection as it cannot shield itself from the world. The Netherlands depends on open borders and connections with international markets. It will therefore remain vulnerable to transboundary threats. These transboundary threats cannot be prevented, but timely detection may prevent them from developing into full-blown crises. This type of research will have to be interdisciplinary, combining technical expertise with regard to logistical chains with economic and societal impact analyses, and psychological research into cue and pattern recognition.

C35P50 Early detection research should be combined with research on political risk assessments. Crises with long incubation periods provide crisis leaders with the opportunity to kick the proverbial can down the road. This may work until it doesn't any longer, which is usually too late for a prudent and effective intervention. We have seen this type of feet dragging in the context of climate change and the risks of gas exploitation; we can see it today with regard to microbial drug resistance, the increasing scarcity of vital resources (fuels, minerals, drinking water), and the risks of artificial intelligence. At the same time, we know that a precautionary approach is not always a good default for political decision makers (Wildavsky, 1988). Research may help to make more informed (political) risk calculations.

C35P51 Yet another avenue for future research pertains to multilevel crisis governance. At what level should we organize decision-making powers? The rise of transboundary risks and crises may seem to require deep investments in crisis management capacities at the international level (Backman & Rhinard, 2017). But it has become increasingly difficult for political leaders to invest in international solutions, which typically demand some loss of sovereignty, however small. It is also true that, for many types of crises, it would be better to centre crisis management powers at the local or regional level. In short, it all adds up to a question of institutional design of crisis management structures and processes (Kuipers & Wolbers, 2021).

C35P52 Finally, we think it would be wise to invest in resilience research. The Covid-19 crisis demonstrated the importance of solidarity and a societal willingness to comply with an eye on the common good. It also showed how quickly solidarity can turn into polarization. It is therefore critical to investigate how resilience can be enhanced and preserved under pressure.

C35P53 The prospect of future crises—including climate change, energy and migration crises, and technology crises—should strengthen our resolve to understand the causes, directions, dynamics, and consequences of crises. It should focus our attention on identifying successful crisis management cases, which can provide political leaders with strategies and insights that make them better crisis leaders. Political scientists have the theoretical and methodological tools to make an impact in this field of study. It would be great to have them continue to join the search for better understanding and promising strategies.

C35S5

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