



**Call for Papers "Geopolitics & Values: what is the real power of the EU?"**

**DEFINING EUROPE DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC: EU'S DISCURSIVE  
CONSTRUCTIONS OF PUBLIC HEALTH AND ECONOMY**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 global pandemic is a crisis of European values as it is a public health emergency with economic implications. Given the existing political architecture of the EU, the lack of EU competence in the public health area affects the EU's exclusive competence in ensuring the functioning of the European Single Market. This research paper contributes to the understanding of how European values are discursively constructed in public health and economic terms by analysing EU official statements and speeches. Arguably, these discursive constructions were conflictual in the beginning of the pandemic due to EU's different competences in these areas; they eventually become consistent in terms of legitimizing more collective actions initiated at the EU level in handling public health crises.

### Short bio

Iverson C. S. NG is a recent graduate of EU-Russia Studies master's programme at Tartu University in Estonia. Prior to his defended Master's thesis on *'The dynamic of the discursive construction of Europeanness and Eastness in the European Union's discourse on Ukraine, 2004-2016'*, he co-authored a published article entitled *'Narrators' perspectives: communicating the EU in Ukraine, Israel and Palestine in times of conflict'*.



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## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 global pandemic is a crisis of the European governance with its embedded values. When the first confirmed COVID-19 case arrived in France on 24<sup>th</sup> January, 2020, there was no official EU-level discussion on possible collective actions such as restriction on non-essential travel to the EU, stockpile of medical equipment, as well as allocation of emergency funding for possible economic impacts, even though China's Health Ministry confirmed that there was human-to-human transmission of the virus four days before the case in France (The Guardian, 2020). The Commission only issued a statement to invite all EU countries to introduce a temporary restriction on non-essential travel to the EU on 16<sup>th</sup> March, 2020, eight days after Italy issued a decree to implement tough public health measures (European Commission, 2020).

In early March, the EU crisis of values was exacerbated as Italy's call for receiving extra supplies of medical equipment (The Guardian, 2020) was ignored by other EU member states at a time when the country had 1,328 patients in intensive care out of more than 17 660 people infected (Financial Times, 2020) with less than a quarter of necessary ventilators (Reuters, 2020) available to help the patients. While China and Russia symbolically sent 'medical aids' to Italy on 18<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> March, 2020 (European Parliament, 2020), the EU created its EU-wide stockpile of medical equipment (European Commission, 2020) on 20<sup>th</sup> March, 2020 and sent medical personnel and equipment to Italy on 7<sup>th</sup> April through the EU Civil Protection Mechanism (European Commission, 2020).

With reference to two research reports conducted by the European Council on Foreign Relations in June, the global pandemic has already changed how EU citizens perceive the world order and their expected coronavirus response from the EU. According to the research article entitled *Europe's pandemic politics: How the virus has changed the public's worldview* (Krastev & Leonard, 2020), most of the correspondents were 'Strategic Sovereignists' who believe that Europe's relevance to the world depends on EU's exclusive competence to act on foreign policy, control of external borders and re-localised production to support Europe's overall sovereignty. However, another research article entitled *Together in trauma: Europeans and the world after covid-19* (Dennison & Zerka, 2020) indicated that most of the correspondents were not satisfied with the EU's coronavirus response.

This paper analyses how 'Europe' was understood within the EU official discourse on coronavirus in terms of solidarity, public health and economy. Considering the establishment of the European



Commission's coronavirus response team as the main political architecture for decision-making process and the limitations of the European Center for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) as the EU main advisory agency on coronavirus, a total of 68 speeches and statements from the Commission within the policy area of COVID-19 from March to October 2020 will be analysed to examine whether there is a discursive change on how 'Europe' was understood during the crisis. Quantitative data will also be used to illustrate the amount of data collected within the timeframe to supplement the discourse analysis on European values in public health and economy.

## **2. Discourse and Discourse Analysis**

The global pandemic began as the outbreak of novel coronavirus which has no available vaccine to cure the infected patients, giving ground to policy changes in different fields. To examine how the meanings of European values were materialised to become new policies during the pandemic, a constructivist approach to discourse analysis will be applied in this research.

Within this context, a discourse is defined as 'a system producing a set of statements and practices that, by entering into institutions and appearing like normal, construct the reality of its subjects and maintain a certain degree of regularity in a set of social relations' (Dunn & Neumann, 2016). Considering the collected EU official statements and speeches as part of the sign system, discourses of European solidarity produce meanings through representational practices at the EU level, including the functioning of the European Single Market, the EU's new financial instrument for temporary Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency (SURE) and economic recovery instrument 'Next Generation EU'.

The study of EU official discourses during the pandemic allows an effective assessment on how these policies are legitimized through making similar statements and speeches to construct the reality of EU policies. The assumption of conducting this mode of discourse analysis is that language itself is effective to be a point of reference to understand how speaking and acting are equivalent (Epstein, 2010); pre-existing official discourses prior to the pandemic regulate the EU policies as those discourses are the pre-conditions for the EU to act.

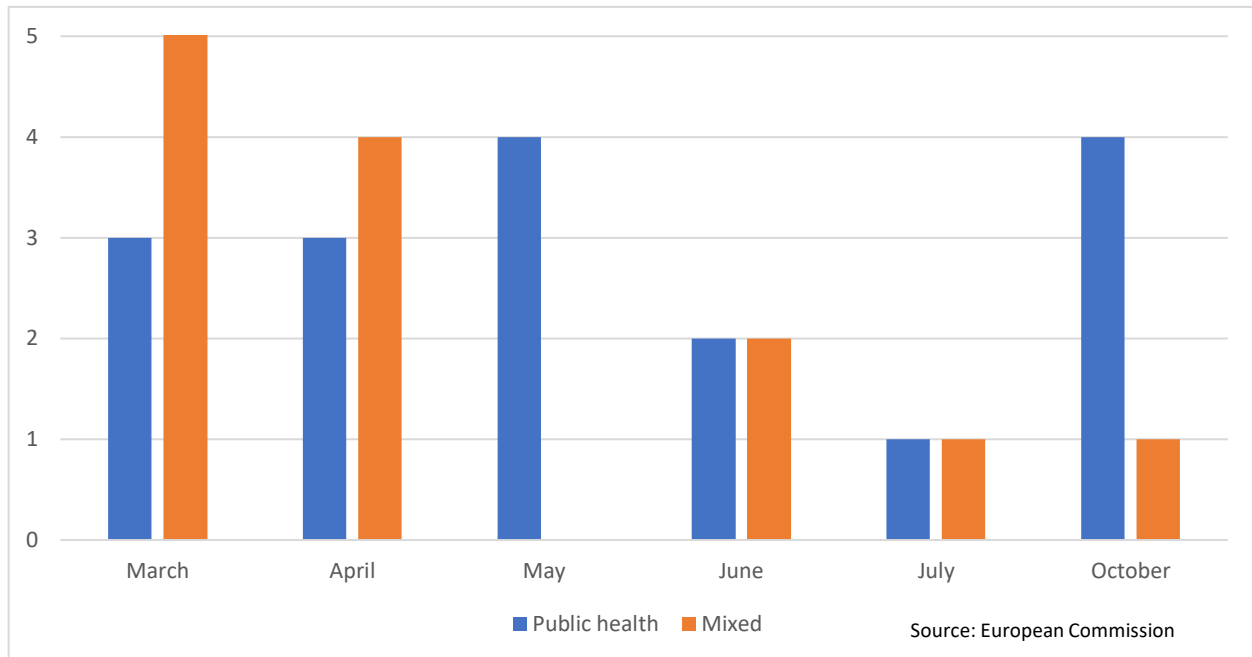
To analyse different EU discourses of Europe within the context of coronavirus, Willig (2001) suggests that such analysis concerns how discourses, practices and the material world are related. This version of discourse analysis involves two stages. The first stage is to identify how European solidarity is constructed in different ways, followed by examining how these discursive constructions function and legitimize the EU's actions.





### 3. Public Health as Discursive Construction of European Values

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*'European solidarity is of course in the self-interest of us all.'* (Kyriakides, 06.03.20)

European solidarity was driven by individual interests of EU countries as the joint procurement of personal protective equipment (PPE) was a voluntary mechanism which allowed individual EU countries to purchase necessary medical equipment collectively. Such solidarity was based on EU countries, not the EU as a whole. As the Commissioner for Health and Food Safety Stella Kyriakides highlighted, the pandemic was seen as a 'severe public health emergency' (Kyriakides, 10.03.20) which required pan-European solutions to protect the European citizens.

*'Without solidarity or Europe-wide solutions we will not be able to effectively manage this public health emergency. We need solidarity between countries, regions, cities, and between our cities.'* (Kyriakides, 10.03.20)

The demonstration of European solidarity did not necessarily involve the centralisation of power to the EU institutions, nor did the Commission call for an EU public health agency with exclusive power to manage the global pandemic. Instead, European solidarity was identified as sharing human and material resources between EU countries so that it was up to each EU country to help other EU members during the crisis. The coordinated efforts made by the EU were constructed as 'added values' (Kyriakides, 10.03.20) and 'assistance' (Lenarčič, 19.03.20) to the EU countries but not the core contributor of European public health. The official discourse of European solidarity placed individual EU countries as the core of solidarity, highlighting the lack of legitimacy of the EU to speak and act on behalf of all EU countries when it comes to the public health crisis caused by the outbreak of coronavirus.





*'When Europe really needed to be there for each other, too many initially looked out for themselves. When Europe really needed an "all for one" spirit, too many initially gave an "only for me" response...' (von der Leyen, 26.03.20)*

The President of the Commission von der Leyen's speech at the European Parliament on 26<sup>th</sup> March, 2020 highlighted the contestation of understanding European 'solidarity' and 'unity'. On the one hand, the Commission accepted the EU countries to prioritise their self-interests and called for 'coherent political response' (Kyriakides, 06.03.20) while facing a 'cross-border health threat' (ibid.), on the other hand, the understanding of individual interest-driven 'solidarity' was overridden by the EU's urge for unity. The discursive change came into practice as several EU countries deployed medical equipment and staff to Italy on 7<sup>th</sup> April, 2020, as the European medical staff who saved as many lives as possible were constructed as 'the true symbol of European solidarity' (Lenarčič, 07.04.20).

*'...Europe has now become the world's beating heart of solidarity. The true Europe is standing up, the one that is there for each other when it is needed the most.'* (von der Leyen, 16.04.20)

RescEU, a strategic stockpile of medical equipment created under the EU Civil Protection Mechanism (European Commission, 2020), was mobilised to deliver masks to Spain, Italy and Croatia on 2<sup>nd</sup> May, 2020 and had its ventilators delivered to Czechia on 22<sup>nd</sup> October, 2020. With over one million confirmed COVID-19 cases confirmed on 23<sup>rd</sup> April in the EU/EAA and the United Kingdom, the worsening situation of coronavirus legitimized more actions initiated by the Commission, including its EU vaccines strategy (European Commission, 2020) announced on 16<sup>th</sup> June, 2020. As the common understanding of European public health was established, the Commission moved on preparing for an EU-wide vaccination in the future. The discourse on vaccination is a case in point showing European solidarity. As the Commission emphasised, the world is connected to an extent to which all countries should fight the virus together by making the vaccine affordable (von der Leyen, 27.06.20).

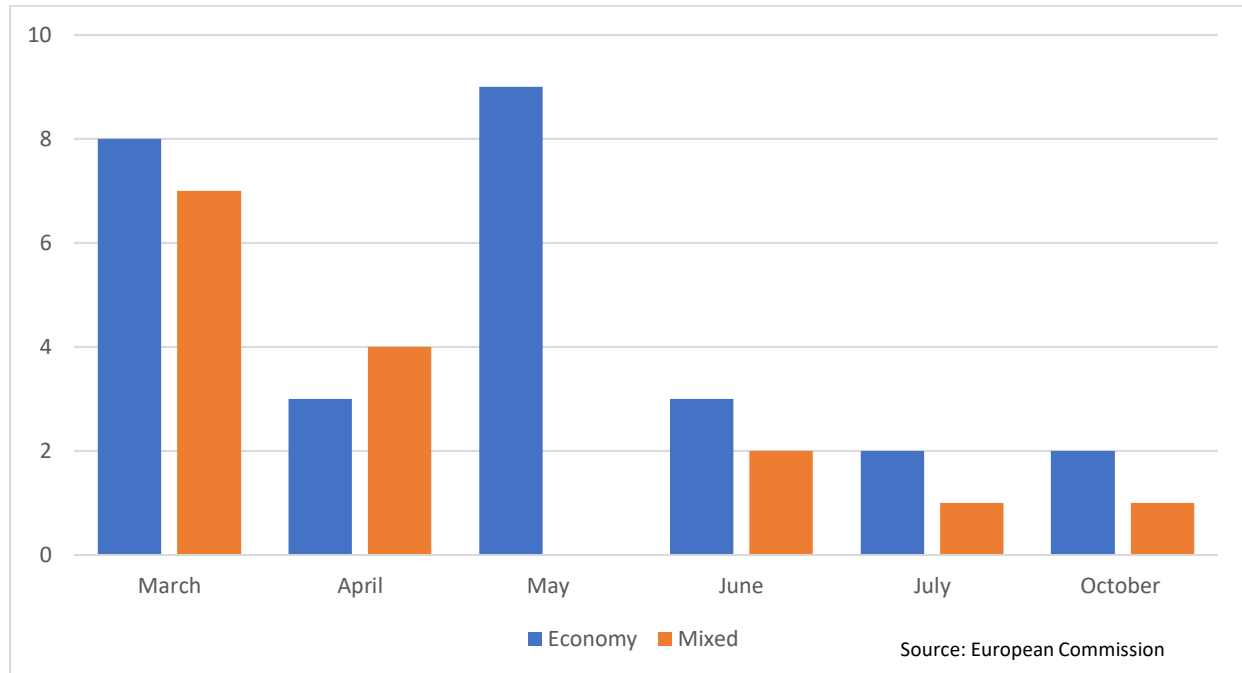
*'If the European Union...had not acted swiftly and decisively, to protect EU lives and livelihoods, the tragedy would have been much greater...the crisis has shown European solidarity at its best.'* (Schinas, 15.10.20)

The drastic discursive change of European values was seen from the emphasis of individual EU countries' capacities to supporting other EU members through EU Civil Protection Mechanism to the essence of EU institutions' own capacity to create an EU-wide vaccination strategy to manage the public health emergency at the EU level. The understanding of 'solidarity' appears to have merged with European unity which requires collective actions for a crisis faced by all EU countries.



#### 4. Economy as Discursive Construction of European Values

**Figure 2: number of statements/speeches per month by theme**



*'...we have no stronger asset for this than our unique Single Market...it makes no sense that some countries unilaterally decided to stop exports to others in the Internal Market.'* (von der Leyen, 26.03.20)

The European solidarity in economic terms was identified as the functioning of the Single Market, including the 'four freedoms'-movements of goods, capital, services and people. The emphasis on protecting EU citizens' health and livelihood extends to the pledge of the Commission's President to 'do whatever is necessary to support the Europeans and the European economy' (von der Leyen, 13.03.20). The creation of EU's financial instrument SURE (European Commission, 2020) aims at protecting EU citizens' jobs by offering financial assistance to EU countries up to EUR 100 billion. Solidarity, in this case, is constructed as EU financial assistance to its members which suffer financially due to the pandemic. As the Single Market connects with the EU citizens regarding working and living in another EU country, it symbolises the notion of European solidarity.

*'This is not about conditionality and intrusion from Brussels...it is about Member States taking ownership of strengthening their own growth...making it coherent with our priorities...'* (Gentiloni, 28.05.20)

The discourse of European solidarity changed from emphasising collective European interests to stressing the individual interests of EU countries. The protection of the Single Market (von der Leyen, 27.05.20) was identified as part of the essence of European economy as the Commission's President highlighted that the four freedoms needed to be restored in order to ensure economic



recovery. A ‘collective recovery’ and a ‘common future’ were constructed as the EU countries’ interests in terms of economic, fiscal and social fall-out (ibid.). These interests constitute an ‘European approach’ to facilitate economic recovery involving EU countries to carry out their own fiscal and national budget reforms (Dombroskis, 28.05.20).

*‘...the Union has passed an important threshold, overcoming a decade of crippling divisions...this has been possible not only because of a feeling of solidarity...there has been a common interest...’ (Gentiloni, 13.06.20)*

The discourse of European solidarity has shifted again from individual EU countries’ interests back to the European common interest in the case of Italy’s situation of coronavirus outbreak in June. Not only did the EU identify the value of European solidarity as an ethical value, but it was also constructed as the opposite of ‘divergences and disparities among different parts of Europe’ (von der Leyen, 13.06.20). The approval of the ‘Next Generation EU’, a financial instrument to help recover European economy, was identified as the economic dimension of European solidarity as the Commission stated that all EU countries agreed with it. European solidarity was understood as sharing economic burdens through the EU institutions to address common interest of EU countries. (von der Leyen, 21.07.20)

*‘...a recovery plan we call NextGenerationEU...this was a moment of remarkable unity, beyond political and geographical boundaries. We all focus on one thing only: Europe’s collective recovery, our collective interest.’ (von der Leyen, 26.10.20)*

The discursive construction of European solidarity as collective economic recovery has been consolidated as it is now consistent with the public health discourse. European solidarity is constructed as the EU’s exclusive competence to act in more areas on behalf of EU countries. (von der Leyen, 28.10.20) Given the EU’s claim to be the guardian of the Single Market’s integrity, the Single Market is constructed as a product of EU’s efforts in defending European values, highlighting the actions taken by the EU to protect the collective interest of Europe.

## 5. Policy recommendations

- i) **Develop an EU-wide COVID-19 expert team under the Commission’s coronavirus response team** to facilitate the decision-making process for the Commission to issue recommendations to the EU countries and propose new protocols on slowing down the outbreak of COVID-19. The expert team needs to be represented by all EU countries to ensure national interests of all EU members are considered, so that the EU would have more mandate to act on the policies that address collective European interests, including bans on all non-essential travels to the Schengen Area, guidelines to lift travel restrictions and guidelines on coronavirus testing methodologies (European Commission, 2020). The proposed expert team has taken into consideration that the current Commission’s advisory panel on COVID-19 (European Commission, 2020) is a temporary group under the Directorate-General Health and Food Safety without formal representations from all EU countries. The existing panel’s limited scope of



advisory would significantly weaken the effectiveness of coordinating cross-sector issues arising from the resurgence of coronavirus as well as the social and economic impacts brought by national lockdowns and physical distancing measures. An EU-wide COVID-19 expert team would, therefore, represent the interests of all EU countries and better coordinate a collective response against the resurgence of coronavirus on the basis of European solidarity and unity.

- ii) **Create a European Health Response Mechanism** (European Parliament, 2020) **to function as a EU-wide emergency response team** which is capable of taking actions at the EU level to deliver ventilators, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and medical staff to EU countries lacking sufficient material and human resources while experiencing outbreak of infectious diseases. The current EU Civil Protection Mechanism relies heavily on the willingness of individual EU countries or other Participating States to supply vital equipment or medical staff to the countries requesting for help. However, in the case of Italy, it did not receive timely assistance when the country was out of PPE and medical staff in combating coronavirus in the hospitals. To ensure there will be sufficient ventilators, PPE and medical staff to be mobilized to any EU country in need, the European Health Response Mechanism would be a long-term guarantee to secure European public health systems by reserving adequate resources at the EU level.
- iii) **Allocate funds to support EU-wide public health education** to strengthen European civil societies' response against coronavirus. Imposing strict social distancing measures and national lockdown can only be temporary as these policies are detrimental to the Schengen Area as well as the European Single Market. Instead of containing the outbreak of coronavirus through institutional means, the EU can allocate part of its 'Next Generation EU' financial instrument to fund an EU-wide public health education programme to strengthen the resilience of local communities against the spread of the virus. To raise public awareness on personal hygiene and the nature of coronavirus, the EU can finance national public broadcasters to produce educational TV programmes for children and adults. The intended results of these public health education TV programmes are to build up the same goal to slow down the spread of coronavirus at the local level.

## 6. Conclusion

The discursive constructions of European values as public health and economy were inconsistent with each other as there were occasional contradictory practices of European solidarity due to EU's limited competence on public health, whilst the Single Market remains the EU's exclusive competence. The discourse of European public health was first identified as the individual EU countries' efforts to protect the lives of EU citizens on a voluntary basis as materialized by RescEU, a joint procurement of medical stockpile coordinated by the EU; the public health discourse dominates the policy area of COVID-19 as the EU vaccines strategy signifies European solidarity in terms of securing the production of vaccines for all EU citizens. On the other hand, the discourse of European economy was mostly identified as the functioning of the Single Market



which the EU can act exclusively; the essence of European solidarity was based on EU countries' trust towards the EU to act on their behalf as some EU countries unilaterally imposed unilateral restrictions on internal borders. With the creation of SURE Social Bond Framework and Next Generation EU Recovery Fund, the understanding of European solidarity in economic and public health terms becomes consistent. A case in point is the EU countries' agreement to coordinate with the Commission when it comes to solidarity funds with the EU budget and the integrity of the Single Market. To conclude, the discourses of public health and economy legitimize the EU to act more exclusively to tackle the global pandemic in different dimensions, thereby consolidating European solidarity through more collective actions initiated by the Commission.

## 7. Annex

**Figure 3: percentage of statements/speeches collected by theme**

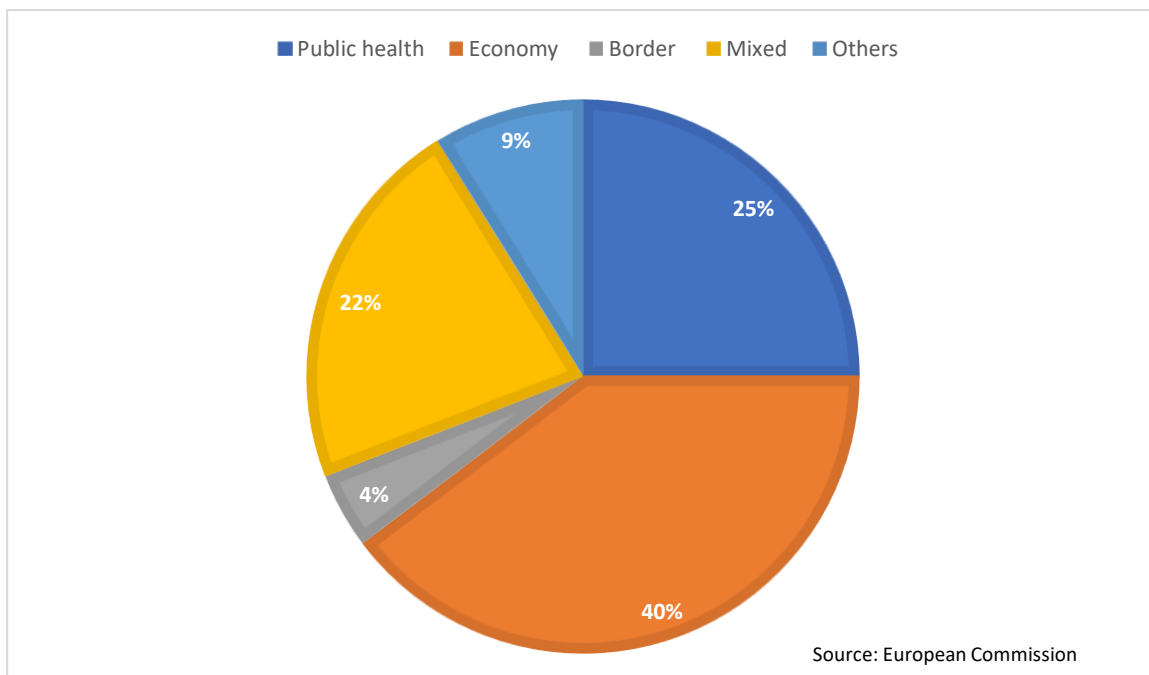
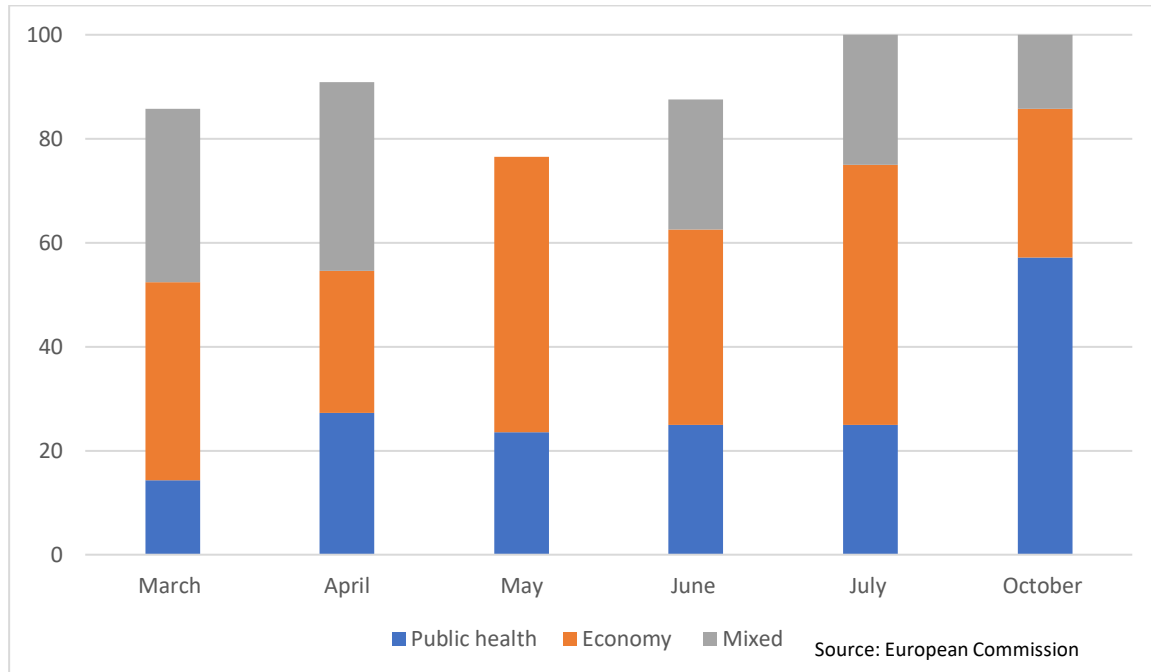




Figure 4: frequency of statements/speeches by theme (%)



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