Contesting Responsibility in Disaster Governance: Institutional Ambiguity, Crisis Communications and Blame Attribution in Spain´s 2024 DANA catastrophe.

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the dynamics of intergovernmental crisis communications and blame attribution in Spain's decentralized system during the DANA catastrophe of 2024. Drawing from constructivist ontology, employing both Blame Avoidance Theory (Christopher Hood; 2011) and Crisis Exploitation Theory (Boin, A., Hart, P. 't, Stern, E., & Sundelius, B.; 2005) (Boin, 't Hart & McConnell, 2009), this study explores how political actors at the central and regional levels of government framed the crisis in efforts of shielding institutional legitimacy and shifting accountability. Through the analysis of official communications from both the President of the Spanish government Pedro Sánchez, and the President of the Generalitat Valenciana Carlos Mazón, as well as selected media sources and public opinion data, this thesis uncovers a fragmented narrative landscape where solidarity is heavily undermined due to political interests and agendas.

Contrary to the hypothesis that decentralized systems lead to a more effective and timely crisis response, the findings within this thesis illustrate how Spain´s fragmented and polarized governance model contributed to institutional contestations, ultimately leading to a reduction in public trust. The DANA catastrophe, rather than becoming a ground field for collective response, evolved into a narrative battle shaped by blame avoidance, legitimacy reinforcements, and moral positioning. These findings illustrate the role of framing in the shaping of a crisis's outcome, not solely as a reflection of operational actions, but as an element of crisis management, contributing to the existing literature on crisis governance by showcasing how disasters within decentralized nations are managed not solely through administrative and legal responses, but more so through strategic communications and framing battles.

This thesis will too entail a comparative analysis of the 2024 DANA catastrophe and the floods experiences within Germany back in 2021. Such analysis allows for a deeper understanding on crisis governance within decentralized systems, and how, for the better or worse such models of governance impact crisis managements. Both models will too be compared with the EU´s burden of sharing model, leading to insightful conclusions in the matter. All in all this master thesis contributes to the international understandings on crisis governance.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, climate-related disasters have intensified, exposing the strengths and weaknesses of crisis governance. As wildfires, floods and extreme weather conditions continue to frequently emerge, governments are tested not solely in their capacity to respond effectively, but also in their ability to coordinate the different competent institutions while maintaining public trust. This thesis investigates the dynamics of intergovernmental crisis governance and blame attribution in decentralized systems, focusing on the case of Spain´s DANA catastrophe of 2024. Through a qualitative analysis of the official communications and public communications from both the central and regional governments, this thesis aims at understanding if responsibilities were framed, deflected or attributed, and what these reveals about the broader understanding on crisis governance in decentralized systems.

This thesis will utilize theories of blame avoidance (Hood; 2011), crisis exploitation (Boin et al.; 2005) (Boin et al.; 2009) and intergovernmental relations in decentralized models of governance. The DANA catastrophe offers quite an insightful case for the analysis of the dynamic of strategic communications and political incentives during a crisis event, not solely due to the scale of the disaster, but also because of the political contestation and blame attribution that took place between the central government and the regional government of Valencia at the public stage. Through the analyzed data this thesis aims at illustrating if the DANA catastrophe became a site for political contestation and narrative fragmentation, or whether it led to inter-governmental cooperation and narrative unity. By analyzing the case study as both a crisis of governance and a communicative struggle, this thesis offers understandings on crisis management, intergovernmental relations and blame accountability, highlighting the use of strategic communications in times of political pressure and vulnerability, and so offering a broader understanding on how democratic states manage emergencies within complex governmental structures.

My initial hypothesis for this research is that decentralized governance, which is characterized by the division of authority between the central , regional and local authorities, can lead to a more effective crisis response, as well as well-managed intergovernmental cooperation and

communications. However, as the findings will show, decentralization often leads to fertile ground for blame shifting, narrative contestations and fragmented public communications.

Ultimately, this thesis aims at contributing to the literature on crisis management and decentralized governmental systems by looking into crisis responses and whether these are a question of operational or institutional capacity, or rather a question of narrative control and political strategy. It aims at exploring the hypothesized benefits of decentralized governance materializing in practice, as opposed to such a political system enabling blame avoidance behavior, fragmented intervention and contested leadership.

2. Background

2.1 Events leading up to the catastrophe and following the catastrophe

The term ¨DANA¨ which in Spanish is known as ¨ Depresión Aislada de Niveles Altos ¨ can be defined as an isolated atmospheric depression at a high altitude that creates extreme weather conditions. It is important to consider that such extreme weather conditions are common in Spain, being an annual event (Khalip & Landauro; 2024). However, the case of the 2024 DANA was particularly devastating due to the intense rainfall and the vast surface area affected, leading to severely damaged infrastructures, agricultural sites and housing. With over 230 deaths, including 224 of them solely within the Valencian region, and 36,000 people rescued nationwide, the DANA became the deadliest natural disaster registered in Spain in recent history. The economic and social impact were severe, holding an estimated total of 10.7 billion euros in damages, affecting transportation, energy and infrastructure together with electricity and gas services being cut off. An approximate of 100,000 vehicles were destroyed, counting over 116,000 insurance claims filed (France 24; 2025).

In the 24 hours leading up to the catastrophe a series of events took place, such events highlighted the actions or inactions carried out by the different governmental bodies. On the 28th of October of 2024 the State Meteorological Agency (AEMET) published forecasts that predicted heavy rain in the region of Valencia. Despite such forecasts, no prevention measures were introduced by either local, regional or central authorities. On the 29th of October of 2024 at 6.42 am the AEMET issued an orange level weather alert for the southern region of Valencia,

indicating the high chances of severe weather conditions. At 7.00 am the Port of Valencia announced its closing due to the escalating weather conditions. At 7.36 am of the same day such alter was escalated to a red level for the interior part of Valencia, establishing extreme risk of severe weather conditions. Despite such elevation in the alert, no further measures were introduced, nor immediate public warnings were issued by either of the competent governmental bodies. At 10:30 am individuals were already being rescued due to entrapment in their own vehicles in the ¨Ribera¨ region due to rapid water levels rising. At 11.30 am the ¨Ravine¨, a watercourse known as the ¨ Rambla del Poyo ¨ in Chiva (European Europe; 2025) overflowed leading to the immediate flooding of the municipality. It's been stated that Chiva experienced almost 500 mm of rainfall during such a day. This amount of 500 mm is approximately equivalent to half of the average annual rainfall in the region, ranging typically between 500 and 600 mm per year (AEMET; 2021) (EEA; 2019). This shows how severe the event was, with nearly a year's worth of rainfall experiences within 24 hours.

At 12.00 pm the Magro River burst its banks in Utiel, recording 200 mm of rainfall and reaching three meters at its highest water level. This led to individuals being trapped in their homes due to the waterfall and some going missing. At 12.07 the national waterway agency (Confederación Hidrográfica del Júcar) alerted the ¨Centro de Coordinación de Emergencias¨ also known as the Valencian emergency coordination center that the Rambla del Poyo had overflowed, exceeding its maximum threshold and reaching 264 m3/s and was rising. At 13.00 am the Valencian President Carlos Mazón downplayed via ¨X¨ the gravity of the situation, claiming it would dissipate at 18.00 pm. Such post was later deleted from his ¨X¨ account. At 14.00 pm the emergency committee issued a further alert; regional government employees were sent a warning email advising them to suspend their activities due to high weather risk. At 14.30 pm Carlos Mazón went to a restaurant in Valencia for a working lunch with local journalists. At 14.50 pm the emergency committee from the region raised the flooding alert to the highest level, calling for an emergency cabinet meeting at 17.00pm, at which time it started, however it wasn't until 18.00 pm that Carlos Mazón finished his working lunch. By 17.35 emergency services published alerts as the Magro and Júcar rivers had overflowed. The national waterway agency (CHJ) warned that the flow of water in the Rambla del Poyo was at 1,686 cubic meters per second, which can translate to 70% of the flow of the Niagara Falls. By 18.30 pm the Ramble del Poyo had overflowed in Torrent, flooding towards town in the area known as Horta Sud. At 19.25 pm

a bridge in the town of Picanya was destroyed, and it wasn't until 20.12 pm that the government of the Valencian Community issued a mass alert through mobile phone warning and advising residents to remain inside. At 20.36 the Military Emergency Unit, also known as UME, central government's competence, was requested to assist within the Valencian territory. At 21.30 pm the president of the region Carlos Mazón declared the DANA as ¨an unprecedented situation ¨ (elDiario; Sergi Pitarch; 2024) (Sky News; 2024)

Immediately after the devastating events took place, the Spanish central government created a crisis committee for national coordination efforts (REF) which aimed at managing the catastrophe. The so-called UME, which is the Military Emergencies Unit, deployed more than 10,000 troops to help those in need of rescue, making it the largest military operation in Spanish history within peacetime, however such deployment wasn't until a later stage of the catastrophe. Within the first 48 hours of the catastrophe, military services rescued 4800 individuals, providing aid to an additional 30,000 (The Guardian; 2024). On October 31st, 195 royal guards and 50 civil guards were deployed to the affected areas because of King Felipe VI ́s offer of royal household security services to help relief management. A national mourning period from October 31 until November 2nd was declared (elDiario; 2024). Thousands of volunteers went to the affected areas to provide cleanup assistance and supplies. Without clear guidelines from the government, thousands of volunteers nationwide organized themselves to offer support to flood victims. These brought food, water and medical supplies and helped with the cleanup of affected towns such as Catarroja (elDiario; 2024; Martínez & Castelló). It's important to note that on most occasions, and as reported, volunteers arrived at the affected areas before the UME, or any other emergency unit. Such volunteers utilized social media and digital platforms to organize grassroot efforts. As a result, the Valencian government created a platform on November 1st for volunteers, however suffering organizational challenges and so going back to self-organized volunteer coordination. Further tensions arose after the Valencian government-imposed freedom of movement restrictions due to the reported orange level weather alert (El Mundo; Atienza; 2024). However, despite such restrictions volunteers continued to access affected areas through alternative routes, increasing public mistrust of the government. King Felipe VI visited Paiporta on November 3rd, during which protesters greeted him together with Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez and Carlos Mazón with chants of ¨murderer ¨ (France 24; 2024).

On November 4th, Albert Núñez Feijoó, the leader of the ¨Partido Popular¨ and the opposition to the central government, called for the declaration of a national state emergency, requesting the central government to take on direct competency over the disaster situation taking place mainly within the Valencian Community, although also affecting other southern regions of Spain. On November 5th the central government introduced a decree that meant the allocation of € 10.6 Billion for fiscal aid, meaning up to € 60.000 per affected household (Euractiv; 2024). On the 23rd of January of 2025 the Spanish government claimed to fully cover infrastructure costs which were estimated at over 2.2 billion euros (Moncloa; 2025). The Autonomous Government of Valencia was heavily criticized due to the delayed declaration of a ¨catastrophic emergency¨ that could have transferred the management of the crisis to regional authorities. On November 9th a mass demonstration with approximately 130,000 people was organized in Valencia, demanding for Mazón´s resignation, with protesters holding slogans such as ¨You killed us¨; showing public frustration and anger (The Guardian; Boyle;2024).

It's important to note that Spain received several international offers of aid. Numerous governments such as the Argentinian, Chilean, Italian and Greek sent offers of support to the Spanish government. President Nayib Bukele, from El Salvador, offered 300 paramedics and 20 tons of supplies (The European Conservative; Hallet; 2024), as well on the 1st of November, Bruno Retailleau the French Interior Minister, offered French firefighters for support (El Mundo; Villaécija & Peñalosa; 2024). However, none of these offers were accepted by the Spanish Interior Minister Fernando Grande-Marlaska, claiming that the crisis had not yet reached a level of severity sufficient to be escalated to a national emergency level, therefore remaining within the jurisdiction of the Autonomous Community Government of Valencia (El Nacional;2024). Such refusal led to severe criticisms at the international level in terms of delayed central intervention as well as institutional un-flexibility (Sky News;2024).

2.2 Spanish Decentralized Political System

Spain's transition from a centralized dictatorship to a decentralized democracy can be defined as a multi-stage process that meant the re-defining of the country's governance and political structure. Following the death of General Francisco Franco in 1975, Spain transitioned into a

political democratization, leading to the adoption of the Spanish Constitution in 1978. This legal framework laid the foundation for a decentralized system, where the different

Autonomous Communities were provided with their own governments, legislative and administrative powers (Viver; 2010). The first stage identified by Viver in the transition process to a decentralized system within Spain taking place from 1975 up until 1978. The decentralization process within Spain coincided with the broader process of democratization after the death of General Francisco Franco. Such a democratization process was marked by the legalization of political parties together with constitutional reform. In addition, this first stage meant the introduction of pre-autonomous institutions in response to demands for self- governing regions. Therefore, and particularly within the regions of Catalonia and the Basque Country, provisional pre-autonomous institutions were established. The Spanish Constitution of 1978, recognized the region´s right to self-govern, allowing for the eventual creation of the so-called ¨ Autonomous Communities¨.

The second stage identified by Viver dated from 1978 up until 1983, which was marked by the creation of the Autonomous Communities. Throughout this period the newly recognized Autonomous Communities approved the so-called ¨ Statutes of Autonomy ¨; which are legal documents stating the competences, governance and administrative powers within each one of them. Such decentralization led to the implementation of 17 different Autonomous Communities. Now, it's important to point out that initially the decentralization process followed a bottom-up approach marked by the regional political actor´s actions, however later transitioning to a top-down approach by 1981 where the central government gained a more dominant role in the shaping of the regional statutes. The third and final stage identified by Viver dated from 1979 up until 1983/1987, which meant the full establishment and institutionalization of decentralization in Spain. By 1983 all Autonomous Communities had their own governments and administrations (Viver; 2010).

This decentralization process led to the establishment of one of the most decentralized systems in Europe, however, certain uncertainties or ambiguities remained. The existence of exclusive, shared and overlapping powers within the current system highlights such uncertainties. While certain matters remain of exclusive competence of the central government, such as national

security and foreign policy, others are of shared competence, such as healthcare and education. This structure is however not exclusive to Spain; there are other European nations that have adopted a federal or quasi-federal system such as Germany or Italy which too experience difficulties in the management of overlapping competencies (Börzel; 2005). All in all, Spain operates as a decentralized nation, where regions remain autonomous however with central vigilance. Such a decentralized system often leads to resource allocation and competency disputes, especially in crisis or disaster situations (Moreno; 2002). Now, it's important to introduce one of the most important principles governing the Spanish Constitution. The ¨ Principle of Solidarity ¨ found within Part VIII Chapter 1 Section 138, which has the main purpose of ensuring that the wealthier regions economically contribute to weaker regions, reads as follows:

" The State guarantees the effective implementation of the principle of solidarity proclaimed in section 2 of the Constitution, by endeavoring to establish a fair and adequate economic balance between the different areas of the Spanish territory and taking into special consideration the circumstances pertaining to those which are islands. ¨(Spanish Constitution; 1978)

Whenever a disaster takes place within Spanish territory, the Principle of Solidarity implies that both central and regional governments share responsibilities in times of need. It can also be found within the National Civil Protection System Law (Ley 17/2015), which includes certain mechanisms for intergovernmental coordination in crisis situations. However, in practice, this principle can be regarded as a structural ambiguity, as it can be the case that governmental institutions invoke it to seek avoidance from blame or justify certain responses in crisis situations. Whilst decentralization was implemented within the Spanish system to offer self-governing powers to the different regions, the principle of solidarity implies that the central government must ensure an equal distribution of resources and support among the regions in times of need. It can be the case that regional governments claim autonomy in decision-making whilst expecting central intervention whenever resources are low. The opposite can too be the case, as the central government may blame a delayed response to the crisis due to regional incompetency. Therefore, the DANA catastrophe offers an opportunity to explore whether the fact that Spain is a decentralized nation may in practice allow and facilitate blame avoidance, rather than push for intergovernmental cooperation.

3. Literature Review:

Whenever disaster strikes, questions on who is accountable, what went wrong and what are the potential solutions become the center of political and public communications. This literature review aims at examining key academic contributions on crisis framing, blame attribution in decentralized nations, and the political exploitation of disasters. It also investigates the gaps within such pieces of literature, particularly in areas concerning crisis communications within decentralized nations. A central debate within the literature on decentralized political systems relates to whether such model of governance enhances or deteriorates responsibility attribution. The classical narrative understands decentralization as improving transparency and accountability as such political system brings decision-making close to the citizens. However, others view decentralized models of governance as a fragmentation of authority, leading to the blurring of the lines of accountability between the different levels of government (Eliseo Aja; 2003). Sandra León´s (2010) work on Spain's decentralized model of governance contributes to such debate, arguing that the relationship between decentralization and responsibility attribution follows a U-curve. In other words, she argues that citizens are more likely to assign clear political responsibility whenever the governmental authority is clearly dominated by a specific administration or level of authority. In contrast, when power is shared, as in the case of Spain's autonomous communities, attribution becomes ambiguous. Therefore, her research offers an insight into how institutional ambiguity within decentralized governance creates space for responsibility attribution becoming uncertain. This is quite relevant in Spain as, although the government of the Valencian region does possess major competencies on matters such as education and health, crisis matters remain of shared competence with the central government Galez-Hernandez et al. (2025). León´s work aligns with the aim of this thesis, investigating if the DANA catastrophe became a so-called ¨ window of opportunity ¨ (Boin, 't Hart, Stern, and Sundelius´s ; 2005) (Keeler 1993; Kingdon 2003) for blame shifting due to existing uncertainties on who is to manage the crisis and where the blame truly resides. Her research concludes that decentralization, especially when poorly institutionalized, can weaken responsibility attribution and complicate citizens´ perception of the government's performance in a crisis context. However, it's important to note that her research mainly focuses on the public's perceptions, rather than on political actors' framing of blame. This thesis aims at examining the framing strategies utilized by both levels of government to contest and shift blame during the crisis.

León´s (2010) work is well complimented by Gallego and Subirats (2012) work, who offer a well-rounded analysis of governance cooperation within Spain´s decentralized system. Their work examines how the transfer of competences to the 17 Autonomous Communities within Spain has led to the emergence of differentiates welfare regimes among the different territories. They highlight the coexistence of such differentiation within a broader national framework based on human rights and redistributive policies introduced by the central government. Their analysis emphasizes the fragmentation of authority across the different autonomous communities within Spain, and the need for a clear coordination mechanism to keep coherence in policy implementation, arguing that decentralization without adequate coordination mechanisms in place inevitably leads to tensions among the different levels of governments. Their research´s main domain is healthcare; however, it can be applied to crisis governance and disaster response. They highlight how Spain´s decentralized system often lacks adequate institutionalized channels for crisis resolution and collective action among governments, making blame avoidance a given within political strategy whenever a crisis strikes the nation. They identify the following inconsistencies: although empirical data shows that Spain has kept strong redistributive competencies, citizens increasingly perceive inequalities among the regions. Such gap between the public's perception and the empirical institutional data directly relates to this master thesis, as it allows to argue that, although decentralization may increase responsiveness to regional needs, it also risks the politicization of the crisis. It's important to note that their research lacks the analysis of the framing tools deployed by political actors for the influencing of public perceptions. It's also important to point out that, very much like León´s research, whilst their focus is more so within policy domains such as healthcare, this master thesis focuses on a natural disaster, adding on a dimension of urgency and media pressure that remains unexplored by both authors.

Furthermore, t´Hart and Tindall (2009) argued that emergencies serve as political ground-fields for actors to compete to define the nature of the crisis and potentially shape policy. They explore crisis exploitation, conceptualizing it as follows:

¨the purposeful utilization of crisis-type rhetoric to significantly alter levels of political support for incumbent public office-holders and existing public policies and their alternatives.¨(p 23)

Whenever uncertainty strikes a nation, the ability to construct specific narratives becomes of the utmost importance in politics. Crisis exploitation entails framing contests which involve defining the severity of the situation, identifying the causes, determining who is accountable for it and debating possible policy consequences and implications. The authors suggest that such framing contests are strategic and intentionally aimed at the reshaping of public perception. Now, to conceptualize the ways in which actors engage in the so-called ¨framing contests¨, ́t Hart and Tindall (2009) introduced a typology of frames (p24). They firstly argue that frames are not neutral interpretations but strategic tools; Type-1 ¨Business-as-Usual¨ frame which represents the minimizing of the crisis, denying the systemic nature or long-term implications of it. Here, events are viewed as unprecedented or isolated, moving away from border institutional failures, seeking to gain public trust by reassuring the effectiveness and legitimacy of the current government. In the context of the DANA, frames that treat the flooding because of unprecedented and unpredictable rainfall could be good examples, depoliticizing the event and so moving away from institutional inadequacy.

Type-2 refers to the ¨crisis-as-threat¨ frame which acknowledges the seriousness of the situation however frames it as a temporary danger rather than a policy or institutional failure. Here, political actors present themselves as competent, actively working for the betterment of the situation. This frame portrayed the crisis response as coordinated and efficient, aiming at reinforcing the state ́s legitimacy. In the context of the DANA, it can be the case that both levels of government utilize crisis-as-threat frames to project competency whistle overlooking criticisms. Lastly, ́t Hart and Tindall (2009) introduced as Type-3 frame the so-called crisis-as-opportunity, which aims at portraying the crisis as a symptom of systemic failure and so providing reasoning for policy or institutional change. It often involves blaming political actors directly and it's often utilized by opposition parties or interest groups. In the case of the DANA, this frame can be utilized to highlight delayed emergency responses or institutional coordination failures, leading to a justifiable political replacement. The adopted frame therefore will determine the way the political actor is viewed, as incompetent or as the protector or hero. However, it's important to note that T ́hart and Tindall ́s work remains focused on national level

actors within economic crises, limiting the understanding of multi-level or decentralized governance structures, natural disasters or strategic blame avoidance among central and regional governments.

Porumbescu, Anastasopoulos, Moynihan & Leth Olsen´s (2022) article examined how US political elites utilized framing and scapegoating during the COVID 19 pandemic. They researched ethnic scapegoating, looking into how blame avoidance strategies might involve shifting the blame to ethnic groups. They indicate within the article two key blame avoidance strategies: performance framing which entails the highlighting of the positives, and out group scapegoating which entails the blaming of external actors, in the case of their research ethnic groups. They concluded their research by stating that often blame strategies are not effective, leading to the blaming of the blamer. This reveals the complexities of crisis communications and the potential for certain framing strategies to backfire, which can be related to a negative exploitation of a crisis, developed by Boin et al (2005). Although different from the focus of this research, the underlying mechanisms are just as applicable to intergovernmental dynamics within the DANA catastrophe. This research allows to gain insights into the presence of framing within blame games, however, its focus is mainly on the public's reactions and not so much on political narratives. This gap is addressed within this master thesis, where the political actors´ construction of blame within a decentralized political system during a crisis is researched upon.

Within his work, Hood (2011) outlines the mechanisms utilized by political actors to avoid blame within crisis situations, arguing that these often deploy a series of strategies to do so. Now, it's essential to introduce that Blame Avoidance Theory has been heavily influenced by multiple disciplines, particularly within the social sciences. Authors such as Morris Fiorina (1982), Murray Horn (1995) and Daniel Kahneman & Amos Tversky (1979) highlighted the idea of¨risk asymmetry ¨(Hood; 2011; p15) entailing the prioritization of blame avoidance by political figures and institutions over the claiming of credit form successes due to the harsher manner in which voters react to negative outcomes versus positive ones (Hood; 2011). Risk asymmetry has its roots in behavioral psychology and mainly refers to the idea that politicians and institutions perceive the potential consequences from administrative or governmental failures as more damaging than the potential benefits from successes (Hood; 2011). It was observed by Kahneman and Tversky (1979) that people often fear failures more so than they value whatever

equivalent gains may bring, leading to the taking of greater risks for the avoidance of blame rather than for the achievement of credit. Furthermore, Morris Fiorina (1982) applied risk asymmetry to democratic politics, arguing that political figures are often more concerned with the avoiding of negative perception from the public rather than the promotion of policy changes regarded as ambitious and so potentially beneficial. Therefore, the connection between the term risk asymmetry and decision-making within politics allows to argue that blame avoidance is a much stronger motivator than the gaining of credit for successes, political decision are heavily influenced by the fear of potential backlash rather than by potential political wins and the political responses to a crisis are characterized by the prioritization of blame shifting. What's important to note here is that Hood´s theory doesn't account for strategic blame avoidance dynamics among different levels of government. This thesis aims at showcasing how overlapping responsibilities and institutional uncertainties may intensify the use of blame avoidance strategies among the different levels of government.

Entman´s (1993) framing theory offers an understanding on how actors construct meaning during crisis situations. He argues that framing involves four essential elements which guide the portrayal of a crisis, leading to the shaping of how the public perceives the legitimacy of the competent political actors involved. Within his work ¨Projections of Power¨ (2004), Entman argues that framing is at the core of all political communications, particularly in scenarios of public criticism towards the government. Although quite useful, Entman´s work lacks application when it comes to crisis communications within decentralized political systems. This thesis aims at bridging such a gap, utilizing Entman's framing theory to analyze how the central and regional governments within Spain constructed blame narratives during the DANA disaster, aiming at investigating how both levels of governance constructed, contested and deflected accountability in the public eye.

All in all, the literature on crisis governance, blame avoidance and the exploitation of crisis situations offers useful insights into how institutional structure intersects within disaster situations. It allows for the understanding of how uncertainty makes crises perfect scenarios for narrative control and blame deflection. However, there are notable gaps within the literature. Much of it overlooks the construction of blame within decentralized models of governance or fails to make the connection between framing strategies and real-time political contestations.

This thesis will address such gaps through the application of Entman´s framing framework, analyzing how the central and regional governments constructed competing frames to navigate responsibility, retain legitimacy and manage public perceptions in a fragmented governmental system, and how the decentralized model of governance within Spain may have created space for such framing contests to take place.

4. Theoretical Framework

4.1 Blame Avoidance Theory

This thesis takes on a constructivist ontological perspective, viewing political reality as socially constructed. Although constructivism provides a well-rounded philosophical foundation, the empirical analysis of this thesis will entail the utilization of Blame Avoidance Theory (Christopher Hood; 2011) and Crisis Exploitation Theory (Boin, 't Hart, Stern, and Sundelius´s; 2005) (Boin,´t Hart and McConnell´s work; 2009). Both these theories are complementary to the chosen ontological standpoint as they focus on how political actors strategically communicate crisis narratives with the aim of blame deflecting, as well as how crisis narratives are utilized to manage public perceptions. Blame avoidance theory (BAT) aims at understanding how political figures navigate certain crisis situations for the minimization of personal and or institutional blame or responsibility. The theory in essence suggests that politicians and public institutions give importance to the minimization of blame over claiming credit for their positive actions, involving the use of strategic behaviors aimed at the minimization of reputational damage when political actors face harsh outcomes. The reason being, as the theory suggests, is the idea that voters and the public often punish failures more critically than rewards success (Hood; 2011). This theory has its origins in the 1980s due to Kent Weaver´s (1986) work on blame avoidance being a main concern for political figures. He argues that negative bias leads to an increase in voter´s sensitivity to losses rather than to wins (Hood; 2011).

Christopher Hood ´s (2011) typology of blame avoidance remains foundational for the understanding of how public officials and institutions attempt to shield themselves from reputational damage in crisis times. He identifies three core strategies, presentational, agency and policy strategies, each one targeting different dimensions of the perceived blame and so offering different mechanisms of deflection. Presentational strategies (Hood; 2011; p17) rely on rhetorical

or communication framing to shape the public's perceptions. These strategies often focus on the minimization of perceived losses or harm and often lead to the emphasizing of positive narratives, downplaying or overlooking failures or using diversion tactics to shift the attention away from the issue. Hood (2011) argues that often governments shape narratives surrounding the crisis in ways that lower their own responsibility while highlighting external factors or failures done by other actors. External factors that are often highlighted are natural causes, such as climate change or the unpredictability or unstop ability of the situation. Hood continues by stating that such selective or strategic communication often involves the re- framing of responsibility and so influencing the public´s opinion through social media communications or press releases that are carefully crafted. In the age of social media and ̈Spinocracy ̈ (Hood; 2011; p 19), where the management of an image has become more and more personalized and polarized, presentational strategies become quite prominent in times of crisis. Politicians may attempt at framing unavoidable setbacks as necessary or crafting messages to highlight competence and responsiveness, even in the face of institutional or systemic failures.

The second strategy introduced by Hood is the so-called ̈Agency Strategy ̈ which involves the shifting of responsibility to other governmental agencies such as regional governments or other public institutions (Hood 2011; p19)

¨Princes should delegate to others the enactment of unpopular measures and keep in their own hands the distribution of favors. ¨(Niccolò Machiavelli 1961: p 106)

Agency strategies, differently from presentational strategies, focus on the distribution of responsibility. The author argues that by delegating high-risk decisions to third parties, politicians often attempt to isolate themselves from blame or accountability. This strategy may include the creation of certain partnerships or the intentional creation of complex institutional structures to defuse accountability. Hood argues that agency strategies often diffuse accountability and often exploit organizational ambiguities, making it hard for the public and media to trace responsibility back to a single actor or administration. This is particularly relevant in the case of Spain's decentralized political system, where regional and central actors often share overlapping responsibilities.

Lastly, he identified the so-called ¨Policy Strategies¨(Hood; 2011; p19) as the third strategy to define blame avoidance within governance. This strategy involves the designation of decision-making processes in specific ways to make blame attribution difficult. Policy strategies entail the selection of procedures or rules that inherently reduce the exposure to accountability or blame. These can include automatic decision-making, protocolizations, or a strict adherence to policies for the avoidance of being accountable for unpopular or negative outcomes. These strategies are regarded by the author as the default whenever presentational or agency strategies fail, particularly for lower-level actors that cannot delegate risk any further. Practical examples of this strategy involve vague accountability frameworks within the political system, such as generalizations¨there were delays¨(Hood; 2011).

What's quite interesting to consider is Hood´s (2011) argument that political actors don't simply choose one strategy, however, they shift between them and combine them depending on the evolution of the crisis and the level of threat towards their reputation. Hood notes that certain combinations are more compatible, whilst others are less. He exemplifies how a leader may simultaneously combine the denial of responsibility with an apology, which can become quite a challenge to credibility. He continues by arguing that while presentational strategies usually dominate during the peak of a crisis, agency and policy strategies tend to emerge once the outbreak of the disaster is over. Therefore, Hood cautions that these strategies are not mutually exclusive, and so often overlap, some tactics such as the utilization of ambiguous policies blur the line between presentation and agency. The author too highlights the fact that each strategy has limits; presentational strategies might backfire, and agency strategies might be deemed untrustworthy. However, their utilization, especially in crisis scenarios, offers a useful lens for this thesis. Through the application of Blame Avoidance Theory to the crisis communications of Pedro Sánchez and Carlos Mazón during the DANA catastrophe, this thesis aims at unpacking how the different levels of the government navigated blame, reframed narratives and shaped legitimacy in the absence of a coordinated crisis governance. All in all, Hood (2011) contributes to a nuanced understanding of how crisis communications are strategically constructed and adjusted over time, highlighting the constraints inherent to crisis management.

4.2 Crisis Exploitation Theory

Boin, A., Hart, P. 't, Stern, E., & Sundelius, B. (2005) work provides a foundational account on how crises create space for political actors to compete based on who is to be blamed. In moments of crisis, they argue, uncertainties often lead to competitions among actors to define the event, who is to be accountable for it and the possible solutions. The authors suggest that crises are not simply operational, but moments of ¨dislocation¨, leading to fertile grounds for political narrative control and contestation (Boin et al; 2009; p81). Within the 11th chapter of Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell (2008) work, the authors argue that crises create a temporary suspension of normality, creating political space for the redefinition of the issue, blame shifting, introduction of reforms and the reinforcing of the status quo. They define such scenarios as ¨framing contests¨ (p285) where political actors aim at establishing a dominant narrative on the causes, severity, morality and solutions for the crisis. Importantly, Boin et al (2008) identify the aftermath of crises as phases of meaning making and blame attribution, where the political actors and challengers attempt at utilizing such a volatile situation for their own political gain. They argue that political actors often aim at framing the crisis in ways that reinforce their own legitimacy, while the opposition often attempt at discrediting the current leadership and so push for policy reforms. Ultimately, they suggest that crises are just as operational, which is essential for the understanding of the framing competitions that took place between the central and regional governments amidst the DANA catastrophe.

As defined by Arjen Boin, Paul 't Hart, and Allan McConnell (2009) crisis exploitation:
¨ *the purposeful utilization by actors of the institutional 'dislocation' generated by crisis, to significantly affect political processes of sense making, judgement and choice.* ¨ *(p 83).*

Crises create a disturbance in the status quo, inviting contestation over the nature of the event, the causes of it, the morality of it and the proposed solutions for it. Boin et al (2009) introduce two parallel, but interconnected, ¨ game ¨ (p88) within which framing contests occur: political game and policy game. The former one focuses on the assignment of blame and the seeking of reputational survival, whilst the latter one focuses on the utilization of crises for the justification of certain reforms at the institutional level. The authors argue that within political game, political actors must either accept, deflect or diffuse the blame, whilst the opposition must decide on

either demanding resignations or leveraging the crisis to weaken the leadership´s legitimacy. This dimension entails actors aiming at the protection of their own political legitimacy. The highlighting of fast responses or the calling for resignations of specific political actors allows for the detention of this dimension. It implies the utilization of a crisis to present themselves as competent, caring, and trustworthy. The aim of these games is to gain public trust by emphasizing their own actions as well as competency. It allows for the political actors to frame themselves as protectors or saviors. Within policy game, the authors argue, those who defend the status quo must decide on whether to resist reforms or accommodate small or limited ones, whilst those who challenge the status quo must decide on whether to push for slow adjustments or institutional change. The announcements of new strategies of reforms post- crisis can be regarded as a symptom of this dimension. This is as during such harsh times often a sense of emergency may allow political actors to bypass political resistance which in normal circumstances would have interfered with. This allows political actors to pass reforms they might have otherwise struggled to pass under normal circumstances as well as portray such new reforms and policies as urgent measures that are necessary.

Whether a crisis might lead to reforms, status quo prevalence or blame accountability depends not solely on the event, however on the ability of the actors to construct a persuasive enough narrative and so mobilize support. Boin et al (2009) exemplify this through the case of Gerhard Schröder who successfully leveraged crisis events to consolidate power during the 2002 floods in Germany, others aren't as successful, like in the case of Spain's José María Aznar during the 2004 Madrid train bombings, who suffered steep electoral losses (Boin et al; 2005)(´t Hart & Tindall; 2009). Crisis exploitation therefore offers an insight into the potential of political actors manipulating crisis narratives to shift public perceptions; however, crisis exploitation is not always a success. This resonated with the previously mentioned article by Porumbescu et al (2022), which concluded their research by stating that in certain cases narrative control is not effective, leading to the blaming of the blamer. Although the acknowledgement of fault may allow a political actor to regain credibility, it can too be the case that those who diverts the blame risk becoming the target of public outrage. Furthermore, Boin et al (2009) offer great emphasis on media coverage when it comes to a crisis. They argue that if the media highlights the government's mismanagement of the situation, the likelihood of a damaged political actor´s reputation is higher. Conversely, if the media portrays the event as unpredictable or

unprecedented, therefore externalizing the blame, the chances are higher that the reputation of the political actors will become undamaged.

Boin et al (2008) distinguish different types of post-crisis learning: fine-turning, policy reforms and parading shifting (p295). These are quite relevant for the evaluation of the aftermath of the DANA, mainly when it comes to the assessment of how political actors utilized the crisis to propose genuine reforms, or merely to consolidate and reinforce their own power and legitimacy. What's quite relevant within their work is their emphasis on the timing and context of the crisis, and how it potentially shapes the political impact. For example, they argue that elections happening soon after the crisis, or the existence of ongoing political pressures and controversies may lead to the crisis becoming more politicized. Such insight is quite applicable to this thesis as it highlights the importance of interpreting both levels of governance, not just as reactive communicators, but more so as strategic moves with specific political aims. At the time of the event, the President was under great political pressure due to his association with the former Minister of Transport José Luis Ábalos´ corruption scandal, together with Sánchez´s wife facing legal scrutiny. The corruption scandal involving Ábalos and his former advisor, Koldo García, centers around allegations of issuing public contracts for medical supplies during the COVID 19 pandemic in exchange for so-called kickbacks. Particularly, the company known as ¨Soluciones de Gestión y Apoyo a Empresas ¨reportedly received over 50 million euros in contracts for mask supplies, with Koldo García allegedly allowing such deals and receiving payments for it (Reuters; 27th of February 2024). Further accusations of Ábalos using his influence to secure employment for close associates within public companies as well as acceptance further complicated the matter. The Supreme Court opened an investigation into Ábalos for possible crimes of bribery, embezzlement and influence peddling (Cadena SER; 2024). Begoña Gómez, Pedro Sánchez´s wife, faced legal scrutiny over allegations of influence peddling and corruption. The organization called ¨ Manos Limpias ¨accused her of leveraging her position as the wife of the President to secure sponsorships for a university master's degree that she directed. She has since denied all wrongdoings (Financial Times; 2025).

Now, it's important to consider that this theory does not solely presume the outcome of a crisis as a conflict, but rather it offers the idea of a crisis being the catalyst for institutional reform (Boin et al; 2005). As included within their work, Boin et al (2005) view crises as a window of

opportunity where the political status quo can become destabilized, offering space for actors to implement reforms. They argue that political leaders may attempt to exploit a crisis in either a reformist or conservative manner. The former refers to actors pushing for policy changes, whilst the latter one refers to the emphasis given by such actors to stability when facing political backlash. Therefore, they include the possibility of leaders fostering a sense of unity within the nation, just as much as them possibly resorting to defensive blame avoidance. In other words, Boin et al (2005) argue that crisis exploitation can entail an opportunity for intergovernmental solidarity and institutional strengthening, just as much as the opportunity to increase fragmentation and political contestations.

All in all, crisis exploitation theory entails the following key ideas; political actors competing to define the crisis (what the response should have been and who's responsible for the outcome), political actors striving to gain narrative control (here narrative control is viewed as the determinant to identify who is to be blamed) and the principle of strategic meaning-making, where the different relevant actors actively manipulate the narrative within a crisis in order to fulfill their own interests.

5. Methodology
5.1 Ontology and Epistemology

To achieve an effective understanding on the subject matter for this project, constructivism is the chosen ontological standpoint. It finds its roots in the belief that reality is socially constructed rather than being an objective truth (Jackson R, Sørensen G, Møller Jl; 2022), allowing for an understanding on how narratives at governmental level have the potential to shape public perceptions. Applied to this master thesis, political reality can be viewed as shaped through social interactions (Onuf; 1997). Onuf´s work highlights the idea that rules emerge from power relations, therefore, viewing governmental rules as subjective or not neutral. Therefore, political and social realities are constructed through the way actors talk about crises, governance or responsibility, and so language is regarded as a construction force. In other words, the way governments, institutions and media posts disseminate information shapes how public perceptions of it, particularly how political legitimacy is understood. This argument aligns the

case of the 2024 DANA catastrophe as it allows for a deep dive into the potential of political actors to utilize narrative control for a strategic framing of the crisis.

Furthermore, this master thesis takes on an interpretivist approach from its epistemological standpoint. This entails an in-depth understanding of the role of the researcher in interpreting the way actors construct certain meanings (Jackson et al; 2022). As Bryman ́s (2016; p28) concept of ̈ *double interpretation ̈* suggests, this study aims at examining the Spanish government ́s framing of blame and responsibility. This approach allows for an in-depth understanding on the way political communication is framed by the different levels of governance within Spain, particularly when it comes to disaster situations. It's important to note that this research does not seek an objective truth but rather analyze the way the relevant political actors within the Spanish government constructed, disseminated and framed narratives of blame and responsibility in response to the DANA catastrophe. In doing so, this master thesis aims at contributing to a broader understanding of crisis blame shifting and intergovernmental relations within Spain ́s decentralized political system.

5.2 Entman ́s framing

This thesis takes a qualitative methodological approach rooted in the analysis of communications, particularly taking a specific focus on Entman ́s (1993) framing. The way the different competent governments constructed, contested and disseminated the DANA catastrophe is essential when analyzing blame avoidance and crisis exploitation dynamics. To achieve this, Robert Entman ́s (1993, 2004) model of framing will be utilized, it offers a structured approach for the dissection of how the relevant political actors contested responsibility in a crisis. Framing analysis offers a powerful tool to further understand how crises are not solely material events, but rather political struggles over who is to be blamed, what is the meaning of the situation, and who has authority. How powerful is framing when it comes to the shaping of political responsibility?

Framing has been defined by Entman as: *"(...) to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a*

particular problem definition, casual interpretation, moral evaluation and/ or treatment recommendation for the item described'' (Entman; 1993; p 54)

It has also been defined by Nelson, Oxley and Clawson (1997; p 221) as:

"(...) the *process by which a given actor or communication source (academics, politicians, policy documents and legislative texts) defines and constructs a political issue or public controversy* "

Therefore, it is important to note that frames can be texts of all types, official documents, media articles, letters, speeches, social movements and manifestos among others. Framing can therefore be regarded as a critical tool in political communications, especially useful in scenarios where actors with competing interests attempt at creating meaning, assign responsibility and propose solutions. As claimed by Entman (1993), framing is strategic as it aims at justifying and defending institutional actions or inactions. Entman ́s framework is made from four core elements (p52): 1. Problem definition which refer to the way the problem is being presented. It's the idea that frames draw direct attention to specific aspects while leaving others out, this can be seen within Entman ́s previous definition *¨(...) promote a particular problem definition (...)* ¨ In this regard, critical questions will be asked throughout the analysis: How was the DANA presented? Was it constructed as a natural event, institutional failure or poor coordination? 2. Casual interpretation or attribution, this element includes who or what caused the problematic situation. This refers to responsibility attribution and so the identification of actors to be blamed for the issue. This element also entails the exclusion of the blame from certain actors. All in all, it results in frames shifting the public's perception of who is to be accountable for the crisis, helping blame avoidance and so creating ambiguities in the situation. Applied to the DANA catastrophe, certain critical questions will be asked: Who or what was blamed for the catastrophe and for the failure to respond? Was it attributed to the delayed response from the regional government? Or rather on insufficient state resource allocation? Or was the crisis identified more so because of climate change? 3.¨Moral evaluation¨which refers to the morality of the actions or inactions taken by the actors. It's more about legitimizing certain actions while delegitimizing others. This element mainly aims at the justification of certain actors and their responses, adding ethical weight to the frame. It often entails the utilization of specific terminologies such as irresponsible or heroic. Applied to the DANA, certain critical questions will be asked such as:

How are certain actions portrayed? Is responsible, neglectful, irresponsible or heroic? 4. ¨ Treatment recommendation ¨ which refers to the following actions that shall be carried out. What are the proposed solutions to the crisis? This element includes the proposal of specific actions, undermines certain proposals and reflects where the power lies, who has the legitimacy to decide what's to be done? Lastly, its important to point out that Entman´s framing theory considers that framing operates not solely on what's being included within the communication, however also on what's being deliberately excluded.

Entman´s work ¨Projections of Power¨ (2004) highlights the identification of the so-called master frames and counter-narratives. His work develops the idea of political communications often involving so-called framing competitions, meaning actors aiming at imposing their preferred interpretations of the situation on the public and media. Master frames refer to the more dominant and recurring frames that create the structure of the overall understanding of the event, in this case the DANA catastrophe. It integrates the four framing elements identified within Entman´s (1993) work, therefore the problem, attribution, morality and potential solutions are identified. Entman (2004) argues that these master frames are constantly being repeated and reinforced. Counter-frames or counter-narratives refer to those attempts by the political opposition to challenge or shift the official framing of the blame and responsibility. In other words, it aims at re-defining the problem, shifting the blame, changing the moral understanding of the situation, or even proposing other potential solutions. Therefore, these master and counter frames operationalized within this master thesis in the following manner: for master frames indicators will include such as the the use of certain terminologies, emotive phrases or slogans, and for counter-frames indicators will include such as communications that re-define the problem, shift blame and propose alternative solutions such as resignations or centralization. This analysis will allow for the understanding of how frames were disseminated, what was amplified by the actors as well as overlooked, and how such frame contests shaped public perceptions and shifting blame.

Now, Entman´s framing theory serves as a tool to understand how actors define problems, attribute blame, create moral evaluations and propose solutions to deflect accountability. Blame avoidance and crisis exploitation theories presume that political actors actively shape the public's perceptions in disaster situations to avoid accountability or push further their own interests

(Hood; 2011, Boin et al.; 2005; 2009). In this regard, through frames political actors push further or omit certain information to promote their own interpretations for their strategic interests. Blame avoidance theory (Hood; 2011) presumes that politicians utilize certain strategies to reduce their own accountability. In this regard, Entman's (1993) framing framework provides tools to detect such strategies. When it comes to presentational strategies, problem definition and moral evaluation can be utilized for its operationalization. Actors may define the disaster as a natural disaster or unpredictable circumstance rather than an institutional failure and so portray their actions as competent. About the so-called agency strategies, causal attribution can be applied through the shifting of blame or a slow response that's externally attributed, such as other levels of government or climate change. Lastly, regarding the so-called policy strategies, these might appear within treatment recommendations as proposals for better emergency systems or an increase in funding. Shifting the blame from the need for institutional reforms and addressing the crisis without acknowledging personal or political failure. Therefore, framing theory can be utilized to identify how political communications were used by actors to shift blame during the DANA catastrophe.

Entman's framing theory illustrates the way narrative choices are embedded within survival and opportunity seeking strategies carried out by political actors, as theorized within blame avoidance theory and crisis exploitation theory. This methodological framework will allow for the uncovering of the way in which responsibility was framed by the different levels of governance competent in the DANA catastrophe, as well as deconstructing the governments´ narratives in relation to blame avoidance. All in all, this methodological framework provides a well-rounded structure for the analysis of blame attribution and crisis response narratives because of the 2024 DANA catastrophe.

6. Collected Data, Limitations and Ethical Issues

To gain an in-depth understanding of the research topic, it's important to point out that this master thesis entails the employment of a qualitative methodological approach throughout the analysis of the collected data. Qualitative research focuses on understanding complex social and human interactions, giving importance to how individuals and institutions construct certain

meanings (Merriam & Tisdell; 2016). This aligns well with the constructivist model as qualitative research aims at interpreting political and governmental narratives and framings rather than simply relying on numerical data (Porta & Keating; 2008). As a result, a comprehensive exploration of political framing will be carried out using such a qualitative approach, particularly within the context of political blame shifting and crisis situations). Due to the qualitative nature of this research, it is important to acknowledge the role of the researcher in the interpretation of the data collected. Aligning with interpretivism, the findings within this thesis are not absolute truths, but rather interpretations of the Spanish governments´ published responsibility attribution within a specific context. As a researcher, I recognize my positionality within this research. While full objectivity is quite hard to obtain throughout qualitative research, a conscious effort into critically engaging with multiple perspectives has been made, together with the insurance of transparency while interpreting the collected data. Such effort involves a broader reflection on the framing strategies utilized by the different levels of government for influencing political narratives regarding the DANA catastrophe.

Now, it's important that due to the utilization of framing for the analysis of the collected data, this research remains interpretative. Entman´s framing framework will be applied to the specific case study of the DANA through the focusing on the following types of frames published during the event; social media posts within the platform known as ¨X¨ by key political figures such as Pedro Sánchez with a total of 66 tweets and Carlos Mazón with a total of 88 tweets between the 29th of October and the 30th of November of 2024, as well as both their published tweets on the 29th of April of 2025, 6 months after the event. This timeframe encompasses the peak of public communications, institutional actions, and blame avoidance dynamics related to floods. Both political figures offer critical insight due to their institutional roles during the crisis. The analysis of Sánchez and Mazón´s tweets allow for the examination of real time framing, offering crucial insights into how political actors responded to the political pressure and attempted to re-reshape the public´s perception. Also, publications that amplify or contest frames by institutional actors have been analyzed: YouGov, The Diplomat, and Sky News. Each chosen text offers a unique perspective on the event, allowing for the application of Entman's framing theory to the political actor´s framing of the DANA as well as its perception by the public. All together, these sources

enhance the analysis, bridging the gap between institutional communications, media framing, and the public's understanding of the crisis.

It's important to note that this research is constrained by a set timeframe, requiring the collection and analysis of a sufficient range of official statements, social media posts, and publications within a limited amount of time. The strict deadline for the submission of this paper means that while a well-researched thesis can be achieved, the ability to continuously obtain and analyze new data is restricted. In addition, this research is carried out by a single researcher, which naturally entails a limitation in the scope of analysis in terms of the volume of data processed and interpreted within the time frame. For such a reason, and regarding the formatting of my bibliography, i employed AI tools to assist me in this regard. AI´s assistance increased the efficiency of my formatting and allowed for more time to invest in theoretical and analytical developments within my thesis. Overall, while many efforts have been introduced to ensure well-rounded research, the potential for new developments within the political narratives as well as the possibility for additional sources emerging after the submission of this paper remains a limitation.

7. Analysis

7.1 Media Posts form Spanish President Pedro Sanchez and President of the Autonomous Community of Valencia Carlos Mazón

7.1.1 Carlos Mazón official X account (@carlos_mazon_)

7.1.1.a) Agency strategy and Due diligence

Carlos Mazón´s tweets from the 29th of October up until the 30th of November of 2024 offer quite a comprehensive understanding of how the regional leadership aimed at framing the DANA catastrophe. Mazón, for the most part, attributed blame on the central government, evident on his November 6th tweet where he argued that the emergency alerts were issued in coordination with national protocols ¨*I gave the same report issued by AEMET, just like the Government Delegate did, we all saw it. And then that report became obsolete[1]* ¨: This tweet

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[1] https://x.com/carlos_mazon_/status/1854094481991032929 Last Accessed: 14/05/2025

constructs a narrative of effective action and due diligence, where the regional administration acted according to the protocol from the AEMET and so shifting the blame to the incompetence of the central authorities. On November 15th he tweeted ¨*The Júcar Hydrographic Confederation is obligated to notify emergency services whenever a ravine exceeds a flow of 150 m3/s. In the case of the Barranco del Poyo, the information received was fragmented, inaccurate and delayed* [2]. The early warning failures are attributed to the central government, redirecting responsibility from the autonomous government and so a clear example of Hood´s (2011) agency strategy. The language used within the tweet ¨ *fragmented, inaccurate and delayed* ¨ frames the central government as inefficient and morally negligent. In his November 16th tweet, he publicly contradicted claims issued by Minister Teresa Ribera on the timing and coordination of the emergency warnings. He stated ¨*The central government, via its seat on the CECOPI emergency coordination committee, knew as early as 17:30 that a dam could collapse, endangering 80,000 people and yet took no action for three hours* [3]. Framing such incompetent action from the executive as either a serious failure to respond or a deliberate refusal to respond, depending on which interpretation one wishes to take. Here, Mazón rejects any kind of responsibility on his administration, arguing that he had no decision-making abilities within the CECOPI and so had no way of managing the situation, framing the executive as the legal and operational body in charge of acting. Once again, his framing of the DANA response closely relates to Hood´s (2011) agency strategy, meaning that the blame is redirected elsewhere.

Mazón details logistical advancements such as the operation of 97 wastewater plants, reopening of roads, public housing availability, and the deployment of alternative means of transport such as buses and shuttles. These operational reinforcements function as treatment recommendations within Entman´s framework, creating the narrative of an active government who aims at restoring the problem areas as soon as possible. This narrative is reinforced by the creation of the so-called "Consell de la Recuperación ¨, a body implemented for the reconstruction of affected regions. However, what must be noted is the limited exploitation of the crisis for institutional and political reform. Mazón prioritized the consolidation of regional legitimacy over the strengthening of intergovernmental cooperation or the re-definition of the nation´s decentralized

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[2] https://x.com/carlos_mazon_/status/1857434850568880507 Last Accessed: 14/05/2025

[3] https://x.com/carlos_mazon_/status/1857860315720917131 Last Accessed: 12/05/2025

crisis governance. This is evident within his November 17th tweet, where he proposes the introduction of a commission of inquiry *We propose creating a commission of inquiry to examine all the issue that have arisen or may arise regarding the response to the worst tragedy in our recent history* [4] Which serves as a tool to scrutinize national decision making and positions the regional government as transparent and reactive. Rather than using the proposal to build on intergovernmental unity, Mazón´s framing suggests that the commission will be assigning blame and highlighting mismanagement from the central government. In this regard, such a proposal reinforces the framing contest in which the regional government aims at dominating the narrative by creating the terms of public debate. Such a proposal suggests a defensive strategy of damage control and an offensive strategy of institutional differentiation.

7.1.1.b) Solidarity and Morality

Applying Entman´s framework, moral evaluation can be identified within Mazón´s communications as he appeals to the public´s emotions by emphasizing the scale of the risk *the lives of 80,000 people*; and the failure of the government to issue a dated warning despite holding full legal capacity to do so. Here, traits of crisis exploitation theory can too be identified, being that Mazón exploits the failure of the executive to take immediate action, whilst the executive attempts to project the narrative of coordinated and well managed response, as it will be shown later within Pedro Sánchez´s analyzed tweets. This marks the shift from cooperative crisis framing to an intense framing contest, where the crisis becomes the battlefield for autonomous and central competence. Mazón´s tweets, similarly to Sachez's, greatly emphasize grief and emotional solidarity towards the victims, this is evident within his November 2nd tweet where he states *We are crying for the loss of our people (...) but never will a catastrophe blind the sacrificial character of the Valencian citizenship* [5] Such use of emotive language functions within Entman´s (1993) moral evaluation element, appealing to humanize the administration and so re-establishing trust through shared loss. By invoking grief, Mazón constructs a narrative where the autonomous government is portrayed as part of the collective, reclaiming legitimacy in the face of public frustration and redirecting attention from institutional responsibility to emotional solidarity. During the early stages of the disaster, Mazón encountered a great amount

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[4] https://x.com/carlos_mazon_/status/1858088116059246666 Last Accessed: 09/05/2025

[5] https://x.com/carlos_mazon_/status/1852778532587348262 Last Accessed: 09/05/2025

of criticism from the public, it can therefore be argued that such narrative´s aim is to shift the understandings towards shared pain, re-establishment trust through the projection of moral integrity and compassion.

7.1.1.c) Abandonment by the executive and counter-frames

On November 27th Mazón targeted the executive´s mechanisms for financial recovery ¨*It's surprising that Sánchez´s government disguises interest-bearing loans as aid for those affected by the DANA* ¨[6]. The Spanish government introduced a 5 billion euros aid package that included interest-bearing loans, aimed at assisting affected individuals and businesses, however, was met with criticisms as it was regarded as insufficient given the urgent situation. Whilst these interest-bearing loans have remained within the aid package, they were supplemented by interest free financing for industrial companies in affected areas (La Moncloa; 2024) as well as several Spanish banks offers a three month loan moratorium for those holding mortgages, self- employed and small business impacted by the floods (Reuters; 5th November 2024). The previously mentioned tweet criticized the executive's decision to offer interest bearing loans instead of unconditional aid to the victims. This aligns with causal interpretations and moral evaluations by Entman (1993), where the financial aid issued by the central government is framed as exploitative, opportunist and inadequate, reinforcing the counter-frame of abandonment by the executive, and so positioning the autonomous government close to the people.

On November 11th he tweeted ¨ *We´ve been requesting sewer-unclogging trucks from the Government of Spain for three days to avoid serious public health problems. They haven't arrived* ¨[7] which suggests that the worsening of the sanitary conditions is due to the central government's failure to respond to urgent requests. Within Hood´s (2011) blame avoidance theory, it reflects agency strategy as the autonomous government is deemed efficient in anticipating risks and making necessary requests, whilst the national government is framed as unresponsive. The reference to ¨*serious public health problems*¨ introduces a moral undertone to the frame where the delay from the central government potentially puts people's lives at risk.

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[6] https://x.com/carlos_mazon_/status/1861748509671555257 Last Accessed: 21/05/2025

[7] https://x.com/carlos_mazon_/status/1855883590627709073 Last Accessed: 12/05/2025

This tweet reinforces the previous frame in central governmental abandonment, building counter-frames where the regional government is the active authority constrained by central negligence.

Overall, Mazón´s tweets reveal quite a comprehensive deployment of crisis communication tactics, where the regional government is portrayed as responsive and compassionate, while framing the central government as negligent and slow. Ultimately, his communications reinforce the notion that in highly politicized crises, managing perception is as critical as managing the crisis itself.

7.1.2 President of Spain Pedro Sanchez official tweets (@sanchezcastejon)

7.1.2.a) Presentational and Agency Strategies

Pedro Sánchez´ crisis communication strategy during the DANA disaster can be understood through the lenses of Hood´s (2011) Blame Avoidance Theory and Boin et al´ (2009) Crisis Exploitation Theory. Across his tweets from the 29th of October up until the 30th of November of 2024, the President concisely used presentational and agency strategies to manage the blame and preserve legitimacy.

On October 29th he tweeted the following ¨ *All emergency services, @proteccioncivil, @UMEgob and agents of @policia and @guardiacivil are deployed in response to the storm (...)* [8] Here, the crisis is framed as a technical and operational matter, regarded as an external causality. Within Entman´s (1993) framework, this reflects a well thought out frame where responsibility is shifted away from the central government decision making and moved towards a natural and unpredictable disaster. This framing continues the following days, where his communications mainly emphasize resource allocation (November 2nd), tax relief (November 5th) and information platforms for the public @InfoDanaGob, closely mirroring treatment recommendation frames developed by Entman (1993), aimed at the portrayal of the central government as the savior or provider of solutions.

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[8] https://x.com/sanchezcastejon/status/1851334094535131602 Last accessed: 07/05/2025

Agency strategies are especially evident within the tweet responding to Carlos Mazón request for motor military support on November 2nd ¨*I welcome President Mazón´s decision to increase his request from 500 to 5,000 military personnel (...)* ⁹ Here, Sanchez doesn't solely deflect responsibility by framing the deployment as a regional initiative, but reinforces the central government´s reactivity and cooperative posture. Applied to Hood´s (2011) theory, delegation is a dissociative tactic in case of potential failure. It aligns with Boin et al´s (2009) understanding that political actors who are under political pressure or risk tend to frame their roles more so as supportive, not directive and so protecting themselves from potential accountability. In addition, Sanchez´s refusal to escalate the emergency level to a 3 goes unmentioned throughout all his communications within X, evidencing a policy strategy of avoidance, where the omission of decisions that are greatly relevant to the situation function to hide institutional responsibility. This is supported by Entman´s (1993) claim that farming is not solely about what is being said, but also about what is being excluded.

7.1.2.b) Moral Authority and Solidarity

A master frame within Sánchez´s communications is morality heavily rooted in solidarity, empathy and collective unity. Entman (1993) includes the so-called moral evaluations within his framing theory, which in essence refers to the techniques used for the construction of the state not just as competent, but as compassionate and trustworthy. Statement like ¨*we will help for as long as it takes* ¨¹⁰ and ¨*Spain is more supported today than ever* ¨¹¹ reinforces the moral authority of the central government. Boin et al (2009) argue that symbolic leadership regarding crisis communications is central to the political game of crisis exploitation, where leaders seek to manage public understandings and protect themselves from potential repetitional harm. Sánchez ´s tweet on November 27th confronting Albert Nuñez Feijoó ¨ *You, Mr Feijoó, give more credibility to the lies of a confessed criminal than to science. No lessons from you. This government is going to focus on what matters: responding to the DANA crisis, economic growth,*

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⁹ https://x.com/sanchezcastejon/status/1852673409810878960 Last Accessed: 13/05/2025

¹⁰ https://x.com/sanchezcastejon/status/1851960178406543563 Last accessed: 08/05/2025

¹¹ https://x.com/sanchezcastejon/status/1851697273484222649 Last accessed: 12/05/2025

social policies (...) [12]*,* and his tweet from the 11th of November ¨*More science. Fewer climate change deniers* [13] *exemplify* this. Both tweets deflect all criticisms by reframing the narrative in terms of morality and ideology, shifting the public's focus from operational failures by the executive and towards societal conflict, reinforcing a sense of moral authority and superiority. Focusing on the latter tweet, it highlights a rivalry between public policy and misinformation, situating the government as the main rational and ethical actor, while those who are opposed to it are delegitimate.

7.1.2.c) Diverting Attention

Although most tweets published by Sánchez within the chosen timeframe directly relate to the DANA, he too posted unrelated messages, offering condolences to victims of genre-based violence or mentioning foreign affairs. Although those can be interpreted as part of his presidential role, Hood´s (2011) presentational strategies on how such diversions may help a political actor to control their reputation. On November 24th, Sanchez tweeted his condolences for a worker who killed while carrying out the clean-up efforts on the flood, describing such individuals' efforts as heroic [14]. While relevant to the DANA, the tweet personalized the crisis, highlighting an individual's efforts rather than mentioning a potential institutional failure. Like this, on November 25th, the President addressed a gender-based crime, stating ¨*Every woman killed (...) is a defeat for democracy* [15] Positioning Sánchez as a protector of values within society, subtly diverting attention from the contested management of the crisis. In doing so, the President cultivates more of a progressive and empathetic image, protecting his administration from critiques of mismanagement by showing unrelated but morally heavy commitments. Overall, Pedro Sanchez´s tweets illustrate quite a calculated deployment of presentational, agency and policy blame avoidance strategies. Offering an emphasis on governmental effectiveness, solidarity and morality, however sidestepping institutional accountability for potential coordination failures. Rather than utilizing crisis for reform and unity, the President´s crisis communications reflect quite a defensive use of crisis exploitation, aimed at preserving his

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[12] https://x.com/sanchezcastejon/status/1861778822632206794 Last accessed: 12/05/2025

[13] https://x.com/sanchezcastejon/status/1855975769173905444 Last accessed: 12/05/2025

[14] https://x.com/sanchezcastejon/status/1860668246405402763 Last accessed: 12/05/2025

[15] https://x.com/sanchezcastejon/status/1861023400891650441 Last accessed: 12/05/2025

political legitimacy and reframing the government's role through emotive appeal. In doing so, it can be argues that the central government maintained control over the public's perceptions, while deflecting responsibility, ultimately prioritizing the executives own interests over institutional reform. Entman´s (1993,2004) framing tools showcase how selective importance, moral cues and overlooking of certain issues collectively aim at shaping the public's perceptions. Other than being a catalyst for intergovernmental transformation, the DANA solely became the state for political actors to aim at the reinforcement of their own legitimacy.

7.1.2.d) DANA within the broader political climate

It is important to introduce the so-called ¨Presupuestos Generales del Estado¨ also known as the General State Budget, which include the national government's annual financial plan and it´s passed by the Spanish Parliament. Outside of Pedro Sánchez´s communications within X, he utilized other public platforms to frame the DANA disaster as not solely a humanitarian crisis, but also to justify broader institutional and fiscal reforms. He declared the following ¨*Of Course, we will need new general state budgets* ¨ *(La Vanguardia; 2024),* which offers a clear example of Boin et al´s (2009) policy game, which refer to the attempts made by political leaders at utilizing the momentum created by the crisis to advance their policy agendas that might otherwise face resistance. By linking the national budgets with the moral imperative of the DANA recovery, the President effectively reframes fiscal policy reforms as a response to the disaster, and so de-politicized negotiations on the budget and so protects it from criticisms. Though not tweeted, this statement resonates with Sánchez´s overall communicative strategy throughout the crisis, giving importance to national strength and unity, while strategically introducing political reform disguised as a post-crisis necessity.

During the DANA catastrophe, the Spanish Congress of Deputies was holding a " Sesión de control" (control session). These sessions are hosted for the opposition to ask questions to the President of the Government and the Ministers. Although control session was suspended due to the severity of the flooding (RTVE; 2024), the Congress proceeded with a plenary session to debate on a decree on the renewal of the RTVE (Spanish Radio and Television Corporation) Board of Directors. Such a decision created an additional layer of public and political tension. While the government framed the DANA´s response as a national priority, such action was

interpreted by the opposition as politically tone-deaf (Ortiz; El Diario; 2024). This moment exemplifies, once again, Boin et al (2009) policy game. Here, political actors exploit the moment of crisis to introduce new reforms or changes. The decision to proceed with the RTVE board vote during the catastrophe allowed the government to advance with such reform under conditions of reduced parliamentary contestation. This exemplifies how crises serve as opportunities for institutional change, even when those changes aren't concerning the emergency at hand.

7.1.3 Six months after the catastrophe

What's quite interesting to note is that the communications from Mazón and Sánchez in the days and weeks following the floods were characterized by urgency, there are no communications on the matter 6 months later. During the power outage that affected Spain, Portugal and some parts of France on the 28th of April of 2025, both leaders issued public communications addressing the situation, however no mention on the DANA, not even as a crisis memory. Such absence might suggest that both leaders had little to gain from resurfacing such an event, and a lot to lose. Such silence might function as blame avoidance, representing a presentation strategy (Hood; 2011) that seeks to avoid the reopening of contentious debates or inviting retrospective accountability. It can therefore be argued that it allows political actors to move towards new events or more politically advantageous settings without contradicting past statements. It can therefore be argued that the 28th of Apriĺs blackout offers the opportunity to display competence in a new emergency context, unburdened by the unresolved past crisis.

7.2 Publications:

The following sources offer a way to triangulate the findings from the political communications and provide a broader understanding of public and media perceptions. Sky News (2024) offers an international perspective on the catastrophe and the institutional response from the Spanish government. Ruiźs (2024) work offers a domestic and critical analysis of the situation, shedding lights on how public blame unfolded on the Spanish media and so serving as a key interpretive lens. YouGov (2024) poll captures the public's sentiment on the matter. It helps assess where the government's narrative resonated with the public, illustrating how blame attribution was interpreted by the public.

7.2.1 Article ¨DANA Valencia: why the Government is reluctant to upgrade emergency to Level 3¨Author: Óscar Ruiz

This article offers quite a nuanced account of the reluctance of the Spanish central government to escalate the DANA catastrophe to a level 3 emergency. This article shows how political actors framed the crisis not solely to manage the outcome of the crisis, but also to protect their own legitimacy. The article introduces the idea that the central government portrayed the problem not as an institutional failure, but rather as a complex and regional natural disaster. This becomes clear through the statement issued by President Pedro Sanchez stating that ¨ *It is not now a question of the General State Administration replacing the autonomous administration. Now we must support the autonomous community, help it with resources and technical guidance. That is the only thing that should concern us now"* (Ruiz; 2024). This can be seen as the most prominent master frame employed by the central government. Sanchez frames the event as a regional catastrophe manageable under autonomous control and so diverting the blame and assigning it to the regional government, once again, employing agency strategy. This narrative allows the central government to avoid accountability and reinforce their support towards the regional government, positioning itself as responsive, however not a direct partner.

Ruiz (2024) suggests that the central government avoided in a deliberate manner the escalation of the emergency to a level 3, stating as its the reasons: 1. The failure of the regional government to respond potentially leads to the harming of the Valencian government politically 2. The escalation would involve the need for greater central efforts and particularly accountability 3. It would lead to media and opposition criticism, potentially harming Sanchez´s politics and its administration. By keeping the emergency level 2, the central government kept the appearance that the situation could be handled by the autonomous government of Valencia, despite Ruiz´s claims of the disaster being¨*catastrophic floods unprecedented in Europe so far this century* ¨and he also claimed *¨211 dead¨* (Ruiz;2024). Now, the escalation to level 3 of emergency would have implied that the severity of the disaster is such that it exceeds the capacity of the autonomous region to respond, meaning that an intervention from the central government is necessary. Such a disconnect between the magnitude of the disaster and the central institutional framing of it can be viewed as the strategic downscaling of the crisis to limit their own accountability and so avoid public backlash. As previously stated within the theoretical framework section (4.1), Hood

(2011) introduced three strategies utilized by political actors for the deflection of responsibility: 1) presentational, 2) agency, and 3) policy strategies. Here, agency strategy applies as the responsibility remains within autonomous competence, making it so that the central government is regarded as reactive, as it did dispatch military assistance, while moving away from their own responsibility.

Furthermore, Ruiz offers an insight into the discrepancies between institutional and public perceptions, and the emergence of counter-frames. On the one hand, the Spanish central government claimed its response as adequate in support of the regional government's actions for emergency relief, being that the military was available as stated by the president Sánchez from ¨ *minute one* ¨(Ruiz; 2024). Ruiz also includes within his article the fact that Sánchez, during a press conference, claimed that Carlos Mazón, the president of the government of the region of Valencia, should simply ¨*requested more resources* ¨. On the contrary, as claimed by the author, the general public's perception was that of a slow and insufficient response by the central government ¨ *(...) trying to minimize the shock wave of the tragedy and that not all possible resources are being used, and those that are used, too slowly* ¨. In addition, the main opposition party ¨ Partido Popular ¨ claimed the DANA as an ¨*(...) emergency of national interest and so should have been declared by the Government in the evening of Tuesday, October 29th* ¨(Nuñez Feijoó ; 2024). The article also highlights the central executive ́s ¨ *hesitations and partisan interests* ¨. This shows a clear framing contest among both levels of government, being that whilst the central government justified the delayed response with procedural language, the opposition emphasized the insufficient and incompetent response. It can therefore be argued that the central government strategically framed the crisis as a regional issue, once again framing itself as merely reactive, reducing its own accountability. Lastly, the article includes warnings for disinformation and political manipulation regarding the crisis, calling for ¨ *critical thinking* ¨. This can be understood as Ruiz implicitly being aware of framing contests not being strictly limited to formal politics but extending over to social media sources and public communications.

To conclude, Ruiz offers an understanding of how crisis narratives operate at the intersection between legitimacy and institutional strategy. It can be therefore argued that through the utilization of minimizing the blame and deflecting responsibility, the Spanish central government attempted at managing the catastrophe while reducing its own blame. However, as stated within

the article, such strategies lead to the cost of public criticism. The public perception of the delayed response and the growing pressures from the opposition reveal the limits of blame avoidance and crisis exploitation within Spain ́s decentralized model, where overlapping responsibilities create opportunities for blame shifting. What's interesting to point out is that, the framing contests included within Ruiz ́s article showcases how, rather than using the DANA as an opportunity for intergovernmental unity and reinforcing legitimacy, the central government appeared to prioritize blame avoidance, missing the chance to project unity and cohesion and so moving away from the exploitation of the crisis in a unifying manner. The analytical tools utilized within the analysis of this document provide a nuanced understanding of such dynamics, showing that crisis governance and communications are not just about the operationalization of it but more so about the control of the narrative. Ruiz ́s publication is quite critical of the central government's response to the disaster, highlighting public frustration and political tensions that resulted from it. It also offers an insight into Pedro Sánchez ́s attempts at controlling the narrative within his tweets, as well as highlighting the central regional tensions, situating the tweets within the broader national political framing.

7.2.2 Sky News: ¨A timeline of the Spanish flood disaster ¨ Reporting: Simone Baglivo, Europe producer, and Sophie Garratt, Europe news editor

This article provides quite an emotional and visually rich account of the DANA catastrophe, including survivor testimonies, political responses, and institutional reactions. Firstly, the article starts by staring ¨ *A year ́s worth of rain fell in just a few hours in Valencia, eastern Spain, causing floods in which more than 220 people died ¨ (*Simone Baglivo & Sophie Garratt; 2024) . The narrative within the article centers on the destruction; however, it mainly breaks down the institutional response by highlighting the delays, negligence, and institutional incompetence in its management. Entman's framing framework includes the so-called problem definition element (1993); here, the problem is presented not so much as a natural catastrophe, but more so as a moral institutional failure. It includes phrases like ¨*we ́ve been treated worse than animals ¨ *and ¨ *two whole days without seeing a single official ¨ (* Baglivo & Garratt; 2024) *which show*s how the real crisis wasn't about the flooding disaster, but more so about the feeling of abandonment of those affected.

Entman´s causal attribution is driven within the article´s documentation of blame shifting and institutional confusion. President Pedro Sanchez as well as Carlos Mazón both claimed an appropriate response to the disaster. Mazón, as previously stated, alleged he was not properly informed by the national central authorities, while the national waterway agency (CHJ) refused such allegations claiming that sufficient warnings had been issued *¨(...) there was already enough information to warn the citizens when Mazón was at lunch¨* (CHJ; 2024; Sky news;2024) This reflects Hood´s (2011) agency strategy, where leaders deflect accountability based on technicalities. Such accusations among both levels of governance further demonstrates how institutional fragmentation and ambiguity in Spain´s decentralized system allowed for blame avoidance. On that note, the article makes quite clear the fact that political uncertainties delayed the full deployment of the emergency units, exemplified by Lieutenant General Javier Marcos´, who claimed that they were ready to act *¨well before receiving official orders¨* (2024). This can be regarded as a failed treatment recommendation element by Entman, where political actors should have ideally presented clear solutions, however instead presenting quite a fragmented response to the disaster. Meanwhile, volunteers were the ones who filled the gaps of institutional failure and organized a grassroot operation to provide aid and emergency relief.

Entman´s third element, known as moral evaluations, is the most prominent framing tool regarding the public unrest. Protesters calling politicians *¨murderers¨* and chanting *¨our hands are stained with mud, and yours are stained with blood¨* (Baglivo & Garratt; 2024) symbolizes their rejection towards the authority, constructing the frame that the moral judgement belongs to the victims and not to the political authorities. This is reinforced by Environment Minister Teresa Ribera who claimed that the proposed additional flood defenses in Valencia *¨would have been insufficient to contain that torrent of floodwater¨* (2024). This aligns with the so- called presentational strategy within blame avoidance, where political actors aim at lowering their own responsibilities by highlighting external and unstoppable factors. The article introduces quite a strong narrative on emergency alert systems, the region´s Emergencies Minister Salomé Pradas admitted on TV that she was unaware of the emergency text system, ultimately leading to her dismissal. Like Tourism Minister Nuria Montes, who apologized for her lack of empathy after telling the victim's families that they would be *¨unable to reach the morgue holding their loved one´s bodies¨* (2024). Such dismissals illustrate quite a clear case of blame avoidance through the dismissal of personnel (Hood; 2011).

The article includes counter-narratives where personal testimonies challenge institutional narratives. For example, Bernardo claimed ¨We´ve been left without water and electricity in many places and lacking basic food¨ and ¨I'm ashamed to be Spanish because of the helplessness of our authorities ¨ (Baglivo & Garratt; 2024). Here, the government is portrayed as incompetent and inefficient, morally discontented by the victims. It can therefore be argued that, where neither the central nor regional levels of government establish a firm narrative on the disaster situation, space for a grass-root crisis as opportunity frame can be created, where the public takes controls morality to demand reforms and resignations. The crisis moves away from being solely a natural disaster and creates momentum for system change.

All in all, this article shows how the DANA catastrophe was not solely about the floods themselves and the deaths and damages they provoked, but more so about legitimacy reinforcement and the framing of the event. It becomes clear that both levels of governance failed to establish a coherent problem definition, effective causal attribution and moral evaluation and treatment recommendation strategies. Instead, the central and regional governments resorted to blame avoidance tactics, leading to the loss of public trust. This publication aligns with the regional criticisms echoed within Carlos Mazón´s tweets, mainly those that refer to the central government's incompetency and slow response.

7.2.3 YouGov ¨ Impacto de la DANA en Valencia y Albacete ¨ (Impact of the DANA in Valencia and Albacete) Author: Maria Sánchez

This public survey, conducted in the immediate aftermath of the 2024 DANA floods within the regions of Valencia and Albacete, offers empirical insight that directly speaks to the frames within the crisis communications by political actors and media. The data within the document illustrates how citizens perceive the causes of the disaster, the division of accountability and responsibility among the different levels of governance and the effectiveness of governmental response to it. The document suggests that the Spanish public largely interpreted the DANA not merely as an unpredictable natural event, but as the result of structural vulnerabilities and institutional incompetency. Its empirical data shows that most respondents identified climate change as the principal culprit of the flood (59%), poor infrastructures (59%) and poor

maintenance of the drainage systems (56%). This evidence shows that the public's perception of the disaster is not an unavoidable natural disaster, but a combination of environmental catastrophe and state incompetency.

Entman´s causal attribution element of framing closely aligns with YouGov´s findings. This element refers to the identification of who or what is to be blamed. When asked who should have issued the warning alerts, 71% of respondents pointed to regional authorities, while 46% of them pointed at the central government and 44% blamed the local authorities. However, when asked who should prevent future disasters, 79% of respondents claimed that the central government should be responsible for it. It can therefore be understood that the master frames promoted by political actors are quite limited. This is as, even though both Sánchez and Mazón tried to assert frames of effectiveness and competency, the survey clearly demonstrates that the public didn't trust either, instead demanding a centralized preventive mechanism in case of future disasters.

Entman´s third element known as moral evaluations can be applied to the data within the document where respondents were asked whether they believed that Spain was prepared to face the floods. They found that 67% of them didn't believe so, suggesting dissatisfaction with the government's response as well as a reduction in the perceived legitimacy of the institutions. This perception of institutional unpreparedness doesn't align with the institutional narratives of effectiveness that both levels of government tried to portray. From the lens of Boin et al.´s (2009) crisis exploitation theory, the case of the DANA can be regarded as a lost opportunity to build on institutional trust and build intergovernmental cooperation, instead it led to the public's distrust of governmental institutions. Moreover, the survey indicated that 61% of the Spanish population reported making donations to victims or participating in volunteer efforts. This highlights a counter-frame where public resilience pushes against the political actors' claims of an effective response. This can be regarded as quite a pivotal element to this thesis´s findings as frame adoption or narrative control doesn´t always resonate with the public´s experience. While the political leaders attempted to shape the narrative, the ownership of the frame remained within the public's perception as trust collapsed.

Overall, this survey offers quite an important empirical window into the understanding of the citizens in a moment of deep institutional mistrust. It helps understand how the Spanish public perceived and interpreted the DANA disaster not as solely a natural disaster, but as a perceived institutional failure to prepare, respond and manage the crisis. From the theoretical standpoint that encompasses this thesis, it confirms the role of blame avoidance whilst evidencing a missed crisis exploitation opportunity. María Sánchez´s work acts as a barometer of frame effectiveness: clearly measuring how the different levels of governance within Spain failed to secure legitimacy through narrative control. Overall, it reveals how a significant portion of the population believes that Spain was unprepared, which contrasts with the narrative found within Mazón and Sánchez´s tweets of a competent and effective response. It serves to understand how effective framing strategies were in the shaping of the public's opinion, showcasing that the government's crisis framing didn't fully resonate with the public.

8. Discussion

The principle of solidarity, as mentioned within the background section of this thesis (2.2), is enshrined within the Spanish Constitution´s article 138. It means to guide intergovernmental cooperation during times of crisis, implying mutual responsibility, coordination, and unity among the central and regional governments. However, the findings of this thesis suggest otherwise, highlighting a significant gap between such constitutional principles and the political realities observed during the catastrophe. Although Pedro Sánchez and Carlos Mazón emphasize unity and institutional effectiveness, the findings within this master thesis show how crisis communications were shaped more so by blame avoidance and framing contests, than by a commitment to a cooperative crisis response. Both Pedro Sánchez and Carlos Mazón invoked solidarity rhetorically, but in manners that serve their own interests. While Sánchez highlighted unity and institutional strength, Mazón emphasized regional sacrifice. The dissonance between the commitment to solidarity and the fragmented crisis narratives found in both tweets and media narrative showcases a much larger challenge within Spain´s decentralized governance model. These dynamics can be better understood though political personalization, where leaders become more central to politics than the political parties or institutions in themselves. Very much as Hood´s (2011; p19) argument on Spinocracy, where social media has led to personalization of crisis situations and politicians craft messaging with strategic aims. In such crisis narratives are

not solely operational, but actively constructed to serve certain individual political interests, often intensifying blame attribution rather than enhancing multilevel coordination. This idea of political personalization can too be identified within the case of Germany, where severe floodings took place back in 2021, leading to a similar situation to the Spanish DANA, this case will later be developed within this section.

A clear set of patterns emerged from the analysis within this master thesis. One of the most dominant trends being the consistent efforts by both political actors to frame the crisis to protect their own legitimacy. Pedro Sánchez heavily relied on presentational strategy through the emphasis of solidarity, collective unity and state capacity. Carlos Mazón, on the other hand, framed his administration as committed and proactive, responding under pressure and with insufficient central support. The analysis shows that crisis communications were not solely shaped by the urgency of the disaster and its operationalization, however, by political strategy and interests. Although solidarity is frequently invoked, it is less frequently practiced. Instead of creating a coordinated framing of the event, it led to political fragmentation and legitimacy-seeking. This has broader implications, not solely for understanding the Spanish response to the DANA, but also for border debates about crisis governance, intergovernmental cooperation and public accountability within decentralized political systems. Whilst the Spanish Constitution promotes cohesion, the reality of the DANA response suggests that solidarity is often slaved by strategic interests. As a result, this thesis argues that solidarity, although within the constitutional framework, remains at risk when crisis framing becomes a tool to compete rather than collaborate.

Furthermore, the findings within this thesis allows for the argument that the case of the DANA catastrophe quite closely mirrors the patterns observed by Boin et al (2009) crisis exploitation theory, where the effort to strategically manage blame and claim credit do not always result in political gain or maintenance of legitimacy. Like the case of former Spanish President Aznar, who faces electoral loss after the Madrid bombings despite his attempt to frame the crisis in his government's favor, the response to the DANA did not create a positive shift in public trust. As evidenced within the survey of YouGov, most citizens perceived Spain´s government as unprepared for the floods, revealing a great disconnect between the official narrative of competence and the public's perception. This reinforces the argument that crisis exploitation is

quite risky, and that its success depends not solely on the framing but also on institutional coherence and credibility performance.

This thesis focuses on the Spanish nation´s response to the DANA catastrophe of 2024: the main findings carry much broader implications when it comes to crisis governance in multilevel and decentralized political systems. The framing battles and blame shifting dynamics found between the central and regional governments mirror quite closely the tensions identified in other EU member states, such as the 2021 floods in Germany. In July of 2021 Germany experienced one of the most catastrophic natural disasters in modern history when floods struck large parts of the nation´s western regions, mainly North Rhine-Westphalia and Rhineland- Palatinate. Rivers such as Ahr Valley and Erft overflew due to a slow-moving low-pressure system named Bernd which brought unprecedented amounts of rainfall to western and central Europe, resulting in over 189 deaths, 135 fatalities in Rhineland-Palatinate and 49 in North Rhine-Westphalia. Between July 12 and 15th some regions recorded over 150 mm of rain in 24 hours, surpassing the monthly average. Just as in the case of Spain´s DANA, such severity quickly led to questions regarding the effectiveness of the response from both levels of governance (Thieken, A. H., Bubeck, P., Heidenreich, A., von Keyserlingk, J., Dillenardt, L., and Otto, A; 2023). Germany has a federal governance model, where the central government grants significant autonomy to the different regions of the country, mainly in matters regarding disaster management and emergency response. Each region has the competency of responding based on preparedness for risk, civil protection, and first respondents. Meanwhile, the central government possesses limited competences in this regard, mainly based on coordination and international assistance. Such a governmental model, although providing the different regions with autonomy, complicates coordination and especially the allocation of accountability or responsibility for the management of disasters (Thieken et al., 2023). It can therefore be argued that, very much like in Spain, the distribution of powers often leads to the blurring of the lines of accountability when a disaster strikes the nation.

Soon enough, the German floods became more of a political matter than an operational one, particularly due to the proximity to the federal elections in September of 2021. Firstly, although the European Flood Awareness System (EFAS) had predicted the flooding days in advance, local authorities failed to act adequately despite such warnings. It was estimated that 35% of citizens

in Rhine-Westphalia and 29% in Rhineland-Palatinate didn't receive any kind of warning alert (Thieken et al., 2023). The disaster led to vast criticisms of the existing warning systems, as well as doubts about the accountability or responsibility of regional authorities in the management of the disaster. While warnings were available, evacuation plans and warning alerts weren't properly carried out, which fell within the jurisdiction of local authorities (Karl Mathiesen & Hanne Cokelaere ; 2021). Criticisms towards Armin Lachet, who then was the Minister-President of North Rhine-Westphalia and candidate for Chancellor of the center-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU) took place, particularly since he was caught laughing during his visit to the affected area ̈Erftstadt ̈. Such a video prompted criticisms towards his crisis management (Joshua Posaner, Laurenz Gehrke and Emily Schultheis; 2021). In Rhineland-Palatinate, Malu Dreyer, the Minister-President of the Social Democrat Party (SPD) was also heavily criticized. It was reported that authorities within the region failed to issue alerts and in combination with a perceived lack of coordination with the federal authorities, the disaster raised broader concerns about local preparedness and the potential ambiguities within the assignment of responsibilities within a federal system. At the federal level, then Chancellor Angela Merkel ́s administration framed the disaster as mainly a consequence of climate change, highlighting the need for infrastructure modernization, avoiding direct blame for delayed responses and so portraying the federal government's role as supportive rather than operational (DW News; 2021). In addition, Germany ́s Minister of Interior at the time explicitly rejected blame, deflecting accountability onto regional authorities and so portraying his administration as merely reactive (Al Jazeera; 2021).

For the case of Germany ́s floods, whilst the federal government framed the floods as an unprecedented natural disaster, attributing blame to climate change and regional authorities, regional actors framed the disaster as poor local coordination which led to delayed alerts, institutional unpreparedness and so preventable disaster. While Germany has strong technical protection agencies in place, like the BBK (Federal Office for Civil Protection), it heavily lacks binding hierarchical crisis management structures in case of disaster situations. Civil protection mechanisms are spread across 16 states, having the local authorities leading their implementation (ScienceDirect; 2023). Like Spain's Sistema Nacional de Protection Civil, although they exist, they heavily rely on coordination among the different levels of governance. The analysis published by ScienceDirect (2023) concluded that the absence of cohesive and institutionalized

mechanisms for collaboration among the different levels of governance hindered an effective response. Therefore, both cases showcase how federal and decentralized systems, without binding institutional frameworks or coordination mechanisms, can heavily struggle during major disasters. This idea supports Sandra Leon´s (2010) point regarding the U-shaped clarity of responsibility within decentralized systems. The case of Germany reinforces the claim that within multilevel governance systems, the absence of binding and integrated coordination mechanisms creates fertile ground for blame avoidance and politicization of the crisis response. It further supports the argument that Spain´s crisis governance could benefit from reforms that closely mirror the EU ´s burden-sharing model, where protocols are standardized and accountability is shared, resulting in the reduction of narrative fragmentation and operational mismanagement.

Now, the European Union´s approach to crisis management will be further discussed, being quite differently from Spain and Germany. Although the EU doesn't replace national systems in cases of disaster response, it facilitates join action, resource sharing and information dissemination. The Union's Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM) offers a structured model of burden-sharing. It was established in 2001 with the task of facilitating coordinated assistance among member states during disasters that exceed national capacity response. This mechanism allows for a fast mobilization of resources through a centralized platform managed by the so- called Emergency Response Coordination Center (European Commission; 2001). The UCPM reflects the Union´s commitment to collective action and shared responsibility. A well-known example of the deployment of this mechanism was during the Greece wildfires in 2024. In response to such events the UCPM was activated leading to the deployment of firefighting planes and helicopters from various EU countries. This collective action was crucial in controlling the fires and offering relief efforts to the affected regions Directed-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO; 2024). In contrast, the DANA catastrophe highlighted Spain´s vulnerability about its decentralized model of governance. While Spain does have a national civil protection framework known as ¨ Sistema Nacional de Protección Civil ¨ (Law 17/2015, of 9 July, on the National Civil Protection System), which includes specific protocols like CENEM (Ley 17/2015, de 9 de julio, del Sistema Nacional de Protección Civil), which are activated whenever flooding take place within Spanish territory, these are ultimately dependent on an effective coordination between the central and regional authorities. Differently from the

UCPM, which entails the institutionalization within the Union, allowing for a fast response via united operational action, Spain lacks any kind of binding coordination mechanisms. The absence of centralized coordination mechanisms to deal with disasters taking place in specific regions of the country quickly leads to the fragmentation of responses and political narratives between the central and regional authorities. Such divergence showcasing the limitations of decentralized systems in crisis situations. On the contrast, the EU model illustrates how embedding solidarity and the institutionalization of emergency mechanisms (even if the institutional authority is differentiated) can mitigate response fragmentations, promoting its unity. Overall, and despite the EU being a multi-level system, it has managed to develop and implement effective institutional mechanisms such as the UCPM that coordinate crisis responses more effectively than Spain´s intergovernmental system, where political tensions and blame games undermine unity and coherence. Therefore, it can be argued that the institutionalization of coordination mechanisms can help depoliticize crisis governance, even in systems where authority is fragmented among different levels of governance. In other words, embedding a system of united accountability and shared operational management could therefore be a meaningful step towards de-politicizing Spain´s disaster governance.

Overall, Spain and Germnay´s cases allow to argue a shared challenge within EU democracies: how to keep effective and coordinated crisis response in systems where power and authority is both territorial and politically fragmented. By looking into the interplay between narrative control, blame shifting and intergovernmental relations, this master thesis contributes to the international literature on crisis politics in decentralized democracies.

9. Conclusion

Overall, the combination of the analyzed tweets and media allows one to understand the importance of examining crisis governance not solely through the operational aspect, but through narrative tools as crisis exploitation theory suggests. It can be argued that the corruption controversies surrounding the government at the time of the event, alongside the polarizing debate over the state budget created a politically volatile ground that significantly shaped the President´s communications. Both political figures utilized the catastrophe for the protection of

their own legitimacy, yet in doing so, exposed the faults within the Spanish decentralized crisis governance. The DANA became not only a test of crisis governance, but a narrative battlefield for the deflection of political criticisms as well as the preservation of legitimacy. In other words, this thesis highlights how crisis framing becomes a multi-level, multi-actor contest where political leaders aim at shaping the narrative around their competency management; however, such efforts colliding rather than unifying the response. Such a clash leads to an inevitable fragmentation of public communications and so worsening the already complex situation. Furthermore, and as reflected within Boin et al (2009) crisis exploitation, whilst both political figures sought to project competence through their crisis narratives, most of the respondents within the YouGov data expressed the belief that Spain was fundamentally unprepared for the floods. This gap shows the limitations of constructing narrative strategies when they aren't backed by actual governmental preparedness. Such public skepticism illustrated that framing alone cannot compensate for governance failures, and that the narrative exploitation of a crisis doesn't necessarily lead to political success.

Reflecting on my initial hypothesis that decentralized governance could foster a more effective crisis management and intergovernmental relations, the findings suggest quite the opposite. It can be argued that decentralization allowed for blame shifting, narrative fragmentation, and poor coordination among the different competent authorities. Rather than facilitating a cooperative response, the decentralized model of governance within Spain contributed to a narrative fragmentation that set back a cohesive crisis communication. Differently, the EU´s Civil Protection Mechanism illustrates how institutionalizing burden-sharing, rather than relying on multi-level political negotiations, can produce more coherent responses. Though the EU is structurally decentralized, it achieves quite a unified crisis response through the institutionalization of cooperation mechanisms. Differently to Spain, which has formal civil protection frameworks, however these lacking binding coordination mechanisms. Such a comparison reveals that fragmentation alone doesn't lead to an ineffective or dysfunction state response, but rather the absence of embedded cooperation mechanisms and shared accountability. By contrasting this with the EU´s institutionalized burden-sharing model, this thesis highlights the need to truly and practically embed joint accountability in national disaster situations within the Spain's governmental framework. While Spain's decentralized model of governance offers autonomy to the regions, it also creates vulnerabilities when

intergovernmental mechanisms of coordination are ambiguous. Therefore, a structure that has a formal and binding central-regional crisis governance framework, that is characterized by clearly defined protocols and shared responsibilities could help depoliticize emergency responses and improve information sharing across territorial levels. Like this, reducing narrative control during crisis and enhancing public trust through a more unified institutional framework. Ultimately, as demonstrated by the DANA catastrophe, solidarity cannot just be invoked within the Constitution; it must be structurally included and embedded to ensure an effective implementation of it.

All in all, this thesis contributes to the literature on crisis governance by showcasing how disasters within decentralized nations are managed not solely through administrative and legal responses, but more so through strategic communications, framing battles and legitimacy protection. This entails the inevitable connection between governance crisis and the politics of crisis within decentralized models of governance.

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