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## Politics of Symbolization Across Central and Eastern Europe

# Studies in Sociology: Symbols, Theory and Society

Edited by Elżbieta Halas and Paolo Terenzi

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**PETER LANG**

Elżbieta Hałas / Nicolas Maslowski (eds.)

# **Politics of Symbolization Across Central and Eastern Europe**



**PETER LANG**

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Peeter Selg

## A Political-Semiotic Explanation of Wicked Problems

**Abstract:** In this chapter the focus is on political semiotics as a form of relational political analysis that the author has developed in numerous publications over the past decade. Political semiotics' potential for explaining wicked problems of governance is analyzed. Wicked problems are distinguished from simple and complex problems on the one hand and from de-problematized problems on the other. The notion of political semiotic explanation with its concrete categories for conducting such explanation is developed and its application illustrated by analyzing the constitution of wickedness of the European Migrant Crisis that started in 2015.

**Keywords:** governance, political semiotics, power, relational political analysis, wicked problems

### Introduction

This chapter uses the notion of political semiotics I have developed within the framework of relational social science in a book *Introducing Relational Political Analysis: Political Semiotics as a Theory and Method* (Selg and Ventsel 2020). Among other topics wicked problems and their governance is analyzed in the book (see especially chapters 3, 8 and 9). In this chapter I will make the connection between wicked problems and political semiotics more explicit than in the book. Before I proceed, a brief explication is needed on why we characterize the approach to political analysis in our work as “relational.”

For semioticians, “relational” approach is something to be presumed by default: the very notions of sign, semiosis, semiosphere, etc. refer to networks of dynamic relations that constitute the very elements they are composed of. Sign, for instance, in the Saussurean outlook is a relation between the signifier and the signified. And even more so: this relation is constitutive, meaning that the signifier *as* signifier and the signified *as* signified are not pre-given outside this relation. Thus, “relational” approach has informed semiotics since its inception in the works of Saussure and Peirce. In the social sciences, however, the usual research strategy has been “the art of separation” (Selg and Ventsel 2020,



chapter 7): elements and their relations are analyzed in a piecemeal manner as separate units. What we propose, following the tradition of relational sociology (Emirbayer 1997; Dépelteau 2008; 2018) and our earlier attempts at bringing it to bear on political analysis (Selg 2016a; 2016b; 2018; 2019; Selg and Peiker 2019) is the dictum originating from Norbert Elias, a relational sociologist par excellence. The dictum states that elements and their relations should be “considered *separately*, but *not as being separate*” (1978: 85). This is the core of relational social sciences. The details and the relevance of relational and non-relational approaches cannot be untangled here. For that, the reader should consult the book in total, but especially chapters 2 and 7 where both the ontological foundations and the methodological consequences of both of the approaches are analyzed. In this chapter I focus mostly on political semiotics, a more specific version of relational political analysis, and open its potential for explaining the wickedness of problems of governance. I start with a brief characterization of the later, by distinguishing them from simple and complex problems and from what we call de-problematized problems. Then I move straight on to the notion of political semiotic explanation and offer concrete categories for conducting such explanation. Finally, I offer an illustration of a political semiotic explanation by analyzing the constitution of wickedness of the European migrant crisis that started in 2015.

## What are wicked problems of governance?

Wicked problems have features that Peters (2017: 388) has put in an abbreviated mode, based on one of the foundational texts on the notion (Rittel and Webber 1973):

- (1) Wicked problems are difficult to define. There is no definite formulation.
- (2) Wicked problems have no stopping rule.
- (3) Solutions to wicked problems are not true or false but good or bad.
- (4) There is no immediate or ultimate test for solutions.
- (5) All attempts to solutions have effects that may not be reversible or forgettable.
- (6) These problems have no clear solution, and perhaps not even a set of possible solutions.
- (7) Every wicked problem is essentially unique.
- (8) Every wicked problem may be a symptom of another problem.
- (9) There are multiple explanations for the wicked problem.
- (10) The planner (policymaker) has no right to be wrong.

Following various eminent treatments of the topic (e. g. Roberts 2000; Turnbull and Hoppe 2018; Van Bueren et al., 2003) we can initially classify all problems of governance into three categories: simple, complex and wicked problems. Later we will add the fourth type (de-problematized problem), which is usually ignored in governance literature.

Many, if not most of the problems of governance are simple and technical. In their case, both the problem as well as its possible solution is clear for the affected parties. Solving simple problems requires specialists. All the routine activities of executive power ranging from delivering pensions to regular activities of border control are simple problems.

Complex problems differ from simple problems by the following aspect: although there is an agreement among the affected parties on the meaning and definition of the problem, there is a substantial disagreement over its possible solutions. This could be a considerable hindrance to reaching a successful solution to the problem. Nevertheless, we can say that complex problems are by their nature solvable and their difference from simple problems is quantitative, not qualitative. Solving complex problems requires cooperation among specialist. Implementing the priorities of educational policy could be an example of a complex problem. Although the government, the opposition, the educational researchers, parents, teachers and other affected parties, might agree that the quality of education needs to be increased, there could be huge disagreements over how to achieve this goal.

Wicked problems differ from both simple and complex problems qualitatively: there is no agreement among the affected parties on neither the definition of the problem at hand nor about its possible solutions. There cannot be any experts or specialists in the strict sense here, and often rigorous method-based approach to their solution can be futile. Wicked problems have constantly changing background conditions; they are often comprehended retroactively after a particular solution has been implemented; they bring along other problems (often wicked too) whenever there is an attempt to solve them. Consequently, we could say that although wicked problems are not solvable, they might be governable.

There is an additional possibility: a situation where there is a *disagreement* about the nature of the *problem* but at the same time an *agreement* about its *solution*. Although never discussed in governance literature it is a potentially fruitful research topic. Drawing parallels with various discussions on “depoliticization” (see Hay 2007) “as the set of processes (including varied tactics, strategies, and tools) that remove or displace the potential for choice, collective agency, and deliberation around a particular political issue” (Fawcett et al.,

2017: 5) we can call them “deproblematized” problems that are “solved” by *displacing* them through ready-made ideological responses that are presented as universal solutions to whatever social issues. Often the tactics of this *displacement* means treating wicked problems as basically simple, solvable problems. Besides, various techniques to “cover up” or “spin” unsolved societal problems might turn them into wicked problems. This form of governance has certain semiotic form. In fact, what we call “political semiotics” presumes “the political” and its dimensions of power, governance and democracy to have all certain semiotic forms whose relational constitution is an important part of political analysis. I move next to these issues.

### **What is political semiotic explanation?**

The main task of semiotics is studying meaning in terms of translation as the main mechanism of communication through which meaning systems or discourses are constituted. The notion of translation in terms of discrete/continuous coding from the Tartu-Moscow school and the notion of hegemony in terms of the logic of difference and equivalence of the Essex school form the basis for the theory of political semiotics outlined in my writings on political semiotics (besides Selg and Ventsel 2020, see Selg and Ventsel 2008; 2010; 2012; 2019; Selg 2010; 2011; 2013; Selg and Ruutsoo 2014). In other words, the ways through which discrete elements are translated into a more or less continuous whole (system) of meaning is the research object of semiotic explanation as I understand it. It is important that the mechanism of the constitution of meaning is *rhetorical* translation that works at the foundation of every meaning-system. This is because the coding systems – the discrete and the continuous – are *not directly* translatable, but are so only *figuratively*. That, in turn, entails that studying rhetorical figures or tropes that are present in our surrounding world is not just a matter of studying how the world is “expressed” through meanings (in speeches, literature, art and the like) – it is studying the *constitution* of the surrounding world *itself* (tacitly I, of course, presume this world to be what is usually referred to as *social* world or reality). The world cannot be made sense of outside some rhetorically constituted system of meanings. That is why the political, which I propose to analyze as hegemony with its dimensions of power, governance, and democracy (Selg and Ventsel 2020, chapter 3) is first and foremost an issue of different rhetorical translation strategies that are realized in communication (*public* communication as I specify below).

Since the dawn of rhetorical studies, there is a distinction between metaphor and metonymy as two opposing rhetorical strategies: the first is presenting

constituent elements of meaning as belonging together based on their similarity; the second is doing the same based on their contiguity. The more *metaphoric* a system of meaning is the more it is prevailed by the logic of *equivalence* (Laclau 1996) or *continuous* coding (Lotman 2001). The more *metonymic* a system of meaning is, the more it is prevailed by the logic of *difference* (Laclau 1996) or *discrete* coding (Lotman 2001). In actual meaning making there cannot be final victory of metaphoric or metonymic principles, but there is always a tendency towards either of them. We could still imagine two opposite world views where either the principle of metaphor or that of metonymy is stretched to its extreme. A “purely” metaphoric world view would be akin to what in cultural semiotics has been described as pre-literate mythological consciousness: “The main feature of such a world is universal resemblance of everything to everything; the main organizing structural relation that of homomorphism” (Lotman 2004: 570). This worldview “makes one see manifestations of the One phenomenon in the various phenomena of the real world and observe the One Object behind the diversity of objects of the same type” (Ibid, 571). Although origins of such a world view go back to pre-literate period, as a cultural layer it is still with us in various forms of stereotypes, myths and conspiracy theories that guide our thinking. A “purely” metonymic worldview would be the one in which everything belongs together with everything as different singular or unique entities. Now, but what lies between those (theoretically imaginable) extremes? Can we even provide some methods for identifying different configurations of meaning between metaphoric and metonymic rhetorical translations? And how are these related to the political, that is, power, governance and democracy? In the next section we take up these issues.

### **The semiotic logic of power, governance and democracy**

An important link for moving from general emphasis of the constitutive role played by rhetorical figures or tropes in meaning-making to concrete framework of analysis is Roman Jakobson’s model of communication. Bringing in Jakobson is a useful step for at least two reasons. First, as is a common knowledge among semioticians, Jakobson (1971: 239–259) explicitly identified *metaphoric*, and *metonymic* poles of language. This helps us to bring Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of democracy into a substantial dialogue with semiotics. To recap what I have argued elsewhere, Laclau and Mouffe see democratic discourses as articulated between the tension towards metaphoric and metonymic tendencies (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; 1987; Laclau 2001). The issue here is roughly this: in one extreme we could imagine democracy as articulated

in purely metaphoric terms where basically the mythological consciousness in Lotman's sense with its perception of universal resemblance of everything with everything prevails. There is a total unity and homogeneity in society and, simply put, people act as one. This is a totalitarian extreme of democratic logic. The other extreme would be a totally metonymic discourse where plurality and difference prevails, and the contingency of each link between elements constituting the discourse is actively acknowledged. But what types of democracy are there between the purely theoretical extremes of totalitarian social order and the order that is completely aware of its contingency and the differences constitutive of it? In Lotman's terms: what forms of democracy are there between completely continuous-mythological and completely discrete-analytic democratic texts or semiospheres? Jakobson's view of language functions combined with general insights from political scientific research on different public communication could provide us with a coherent response. The guiding insight about the "extremes" of democratic discourse in terms of *plurality* and *homogeneity* is well captured by Laclau:

the attempts at *homogenizing* the social space within which democracy operates (the universal class in Marx, the dissolution of social diversity in a unified public sphere in Jacobinism) necessarily produce a *democratic deficit*. Democracy faces the challenge of having to unify collective wills in political spaces of universal representation, while making such universality compatible with a *plurality of social spaces* dominated by particularism and difference (Laclau 2001: 13, italics added).

Jakobson, as is well known, has distinguished six dimensions of communication that are articulated in meaning-making process: addresser, addressee, contact, context, message, and code. Depending on different orientations of communication we could say that in their "pure" form there could be a communication oriented to each of those dimensions. He also refers to those orientations as "language functions."

The *emotive* function, an orientation toward the ADDRESSER is discernable in the "direct expression of the speaker's attitude toward what he is speaking about" (Jakobson 1960: 354). The *phatic* function is a "set for CONTACT" that "may be displayed by a profuse exchange of ritualized formulas" (ibid, 355) like appeals to common places or stereotypes. The *metalingual* function, orientation toward the CODE (Ibid, 356), is exemplified most clearly in definitions or question about the language/code being used like in "*Mare is the female of horse*" (Ibid, 358) answered to the metalingual question: "What is *mare*?" The *poetic* function, "promoting the palpability of signs," is first an orientation "toward the MESSAGE as such" (Ibid, 356). Second, it is the primary verbal

means for *building* metaphoric chains of equivalences between disparate linguistic elements and this way it is in a diametrical opposition to metalingual function: “in metalanguage the sequence is used to build an equation, whereas in poetry the equation is used to build a sequence” (ibid, 358). The *conative* function “the orientation toward ADRESSEE. . . finds its purest grammatical expression in the vocative and imperative” (Ibid, 355). Finally, the *referential* function is “an orientation toward the CONTEXT” (Ibid, 353), exemplified most clearly in descriptive sentences, discussions of matters of fact, and logical arguments. It is important to stress that the “verbal structure of a message depends primarily on the *predominant* function” (Jakobson 1960: 353, italics added), and hence those “pure” forms never exist in actual communication. But we can speak of different hierarchies of those orientations or prevalence of certain orientations, making each communicative act, and in turn, each meaningful whole thoroughly relational. When translated into the problematic of studying the political, we should first point to Jakobson’s general remark that those functions of communication are not restricted to verbal language only but “must lead mutatis mutandis to an analogous study of the other semiotic systems” (1998: 703). Semiotics is thus a general study of communication. (Jakobson 1998: 666). But if our aim is to delineate possibilities for *political* semiotics then our focus is not on *general*, but *political* communication, that is, *public* communication in relation to *power, governance, and democracy* as different dimensions or moments of the political as *hegemony* (Selg and Ventsel 2020, chapter 3). Political semiotic model proposed below deals with conceptualizing different types of hegemony established in public communication. As we have insisted via Laclau and Mouffe, the practico-political continuum of democratic institution of the social lies in between those two extremes that they characterize as “totalitarian” and “radical democratic” imaginary: “while the radical democratic imaginary presupposes openness and pluralism and processes of argumentation which never lead to an ultimate foundation, totalitarian societies are constituted through their claim to master the foundation” (Laclau and Mouffe 1987: 105–106). By connecting the insights of democratic hegemony and Jakobson’s six-fold model of communication we could provide a model of the political by distinguishing different forms of political communication depending on which language function prevails in the system of meaning (ranging from a singular micro-level communicative act to, in principle, macro-level configurations of political culture, period, or era). This would entail semiotic redefinition of power, governance and democracy in terms of six functions of language (or semiotic system more generally).

As already mentioned, Jakobson never deemed the language functions he distinguished as possible in their *pure* form. So, when I speak of phatic and metalingual communication, we could in practice intelligibly speak of tendencies only. Nevertheless, analytically speaking, we could say that the constitution of the political can have tendencies ranging from phatic, emotive, poetic, conative, referential and metalingual form as proposed by Jakobson.

In what follows, I will propose six ideal types for conceptualizing power, governance and democracy in terms of prevalent language function in *public* communication, and the respective forms of power and governance.

### **Semiotic categories for explaining the political**

In each of the categories outlined below the general label (like “authoritarian populism” or “authoritarian deproblematization”) refers to an ideal type in which a certain logic of translation or articulation is overwhelmingly prevalent. A crucial notion for me especially for conceptualizing democracy is “public communication.” Of course, there is an important strand of research lining up under the banner “Personal is political.” But we restrict the following presentation to more traditional understanding of power, governance and democracy – or the political more generally – that views these as public phenomena.<sup>1</sup> The stress on *public* communication should not be overlooked, since I would not want to claim below that *phatic* communication, for instance, necessarily implies authoritarian personality. Phatic dialogues between lovers for example, are not signs of authoritarianism *per se*. What I do want to insist, however, is that the *publics* among which there is an overwhelming tendency to address issues only for the sake of contact (the phatic function of language) itself – in terms of stereotypes or “common places” – renders a good ground for suspecting deficiency in effective democratic participation in the corresponding social formation, as it is characteristic of authoritarian societies.

All the adjective markers in the following exposition (“totalitarian,” “authoritarian,” “democratic,” “clientelist,” “deliberative,” “radical”) point to the *form* of political *articulation*, not their (ideological) content (like, liberal, socialist etc.). Thus, one can be “deliberative” about “fascist” contents as well as “totalitarian” about “liberal” contents. Political semiotic explanation is none other than explaining how certain political forms are constituted within relations to

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1 We discuss this in more detail at the end of chapter 3 of Selg and Ventsel 2020, referring to the historical extensions of these terms.

other forms and how they in turn constitute political contents. Both form and content are, of course relational. That is why we call this explanation “political form analysis” (Selg and Ventsel 2020, chapter 8). In practice, there is in principle infinite array of variations on the *content* level, which, of course can be analyzed separately, but not as being separate from the *form*, since both form and content are relational phenomena.

### **Radical/agonistic democracy, power and governance (metalingual public communication)**

Laclau and Mouffe defend what they call “radical plural democracy” conceived “in a form of politics which is founded not upon dogmatic postulation of any ‘essence of the social,’ but, on the contrary, on affirmation of the contingency and ambiguity of every ‘essence’” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 193). We could interpret this ideal of **democracy** in terms of prevalence of metalingual messages in the public discourse, characterized by questioning and explicating the public *code* of, for instance, the underlying values and aims of the political community as a whole.

It is no coincidence that the form of **governance** that can be associated with the prevalence of metalingual public communication is termed “metagovernance” in the governance studies literature. Metagovernance or “governance of governance” as it is sometimes described is often associated exactly with questioning and specifying not even the underlying rules or norms of governance, but the very values from which those norms are derived (Kooiman 2003; Kooiman and Jentoft 2009). The principles of “requisite variety,” “reflexive orientation,” and “self-reflexive irony” that Jessop (2011) discusses in relation to a suitable ethos of metagovernance all boil down to questioning the foundations of governance practices, including why they and not others have become dominant, hegemonic or just taken-for-granted.

The metalingual notion of **power** could be associated with Giddens’ (1984: 41–45) differentiation between practical and discursive consciousness knowledge. Practical consciousness knowledge according to Giddens is the tacit knowledge that is not put into question and usually not even realized: it is the taken-for-granted knowledge based on which everyday conduct is carried out more or less automatically. Discursive consciousness knowledge is the knowledge that is put into explicit reflective form: into words, arguments and questions. Metalingual power is present in the transformation of practical consciousness knowledge into discursive consciousness knowledge.



### **Deliberative power, governance and democracy (referential public communication)**

If we presume the public code to be given, unquestioned and fixed, but have the focus on the *context* of its realization we could link this form of public discourse to the ideal of “deliberative **democracy**” originating from different works of Habermas (1996a; 1996b) and famously summarized by Cohen (2005: 347–348). Crucial here is the view that the ideal of “deliberative procedure” ought to be 1) *free*; 2) *reasoned*, roughly in the sense that “no force except that of the better argument is exercised” (Habermas 1975: 108, quoted in Cohen 2005: 347); 3) the parties involved are *equal* both formally and substantially in a sense that no distribution of power affects the deliberation; 4) the ideal deliberation “aims to arrive at a rationally motivated *consensus*” (Ibid, 348). We could interpret this in terms of prevalence of *referential* messages in the public discourse.

Deliberative form of **governance** is usually associated with networks or the so-called “heterarchy” – it is a form of governance that lies between the anarchy of the market and the hierarchy of the state. The form of communication in network governance is dialogue which “depends on continuing commitment to generate and share information (thereby reducing, without ever eliminating, the problem of bounded rationality)” (Jessop 2016: 169). This is what we can conceptualize as the constitution of public through referential communication.

It is understandably hard to conceptualize deliberative **power**, since as we already saw, in an ideal deliberative procedure no power relation should affect the deliberation. Nevertheless, the genealogy of the referential notion of power might be traced back to at least Weber’s conception of legal-rational *domination* (1978: 217–226), that is, rationally legitimate *power over*. However, as it is argued in several normative models, this form of power might also be considered as *power to* in the sense of springing from people’s ability to act in concert (Arendt 1970: 52) or as “the formation of *common* will in a communication directed to reaching agreement (Habermas 1986: 76). Consequently, in its ideal-typical form, this is the power in the form of the (unforced) force of a better argument (Habermas 1975: 108).

### **Clientelism in power, governance and democracy (conative public communication)**

When moving to a form of *conative* language function and imagining a public discourse in which it is prevalent, we could relate this picture of **democracy** with what is described as “clientelism.” This is the form of politics characterized by a “non-horizontal,” “particularistic” and “asymmetric” communication,

which, among other things “places a premium on public demonstrations of loyalty to the patron” (Hallin and Papathanassopoulos 2002: 185–189). Thus, we conceive it as a form of politics in which the patron (the political elite) is the active addresser and focuses directly to the people, a passive addressee who receives an order or is being called to order.

**Governance** that manifests itself mainly through vocative and imperative – that is through the conative function of language – is referred to as hierarchy in governance literature. The main mechanism of hierarchy is command in the broadest sense, including bureaucratic directives, performance measurements, and direct orders in rank-based branches of executive power. Command in general “involves *ex ante* imperative coordination in pursuit of substantive collective goals set from above (hierarchical command in the firm, organization, or state). It prioritizes the ‘effective’ pursuit of successive policy goals” (Jessop 2016: 167).

Of course, this is related to the most classical understanding of **power**. And its roots lead back to at least Hobbes’s *Leviathan*. From more contemporary times, it is again Weber who lies behind this view when he distinguishes “two diametrically contrasting types of domination, viz., domination by virtue of a constellation of interests (in particular: by virtue of a position of monopoly), and domination by virtue of authority, i.e. power to command and duty to obey” (1978: 943). The former is “based upon influence derived exclusively from the possession of goods or marketable skills guaranteed in some way and acting upon the conduct of those dominated, who remain, however, formally free and are motivated simply by the pursuit of their own interests” (Ibid.). This could be conceptualized as a pure form of conative power. The classical pluralist (Dahl 1957) and elitist (Mills 1956) views of power that inform the bulk of mainstream political science are also relevant here since they revolve around either actual decision-making or the potential to force through decisions.

### **Democratic populism in power, governance and democracy (poetic public communication)**

The prevalence of *poetic* language in public communication, indicates to form of **democracy** that could be called “democratic populism” or “petty demagogy” in Laclau’s (2005: 191) sense. This is the populist rhetoric in a “highly institutionalized society” (Ibid). Western countries are familiar with this, since it is provided in abundance during party campaigns characterized by attempts to construct through disrupting metaphors the poetic chains of equivalences opposing “us” and “them” or “right” and “wrong” policies. Due to firm

institutional framework of these societies the “equivalential logics have less terrain on which to operate” (Ibid) and this way these constructed oppositions rarely succeed in “equivalentially dividing the social field into two *antagonistic camps*” (Ibid, 189, italics added).

When it comes to **governance**, democratic populism is a form of deproblematization of policy problems (see Selg and Ventsel 2020, chapter 3). It is not widely discussed in governance literature. Jessop discusses “cynicism” as a reaction to governance failure: “Cynicism is the realm of symbolic politics, accelerated policy churning (to give the impression of doing something about intractable problems), and the ‘spin doctor’ – the realm of ‘words that work and policies that fail.’ This is particularly evident in the highly mediatised world of contemporary politics” (2011: 118). This is basically governance that displaces policy issues without addressing them by constructing them as problems for which a readymade solution is at hand.

In terms of **power**, Bourdieu points out that “there are always, in any society, conflicts between symbolic powers that aim at imposing the vision of legitimate divisions, that is, at *constructing* groups. Symbolic power, in this sense, is a power of “world-making” (1989: 22, italics added). Referring to Nelson Goodman (1978) he specifies that this “‘world-making’ consists ‘in separating and reuniting, often in the same operation,’ in carrying out a decomposition, an analysis, and a composition, a synthesis, often by the use of labels” (Ibid.). That is why creating poetic equivalences is often key to this type of power strategy.

### **Authoritarian populism in power, governance and democracy (phatic public communication)**

The form of **democracy** I label “authoritarian populism” is characterized by the prevalence of *phatic* messages in the public discourse resulting in public appeals to stereotypes and common places. In practice the latter’s function is akin to *myths* in Barthes’ sense. A myth “abolishes the complexity of human acts” and “gives them simplicity of essences” (Barthes 1993: 143). In political psychology Lifton used the term “thought-terminating cliché” for characterizing “the language of the totalist environment:” “the most far-reaching and complex of human problems are compressed into brief, highly reductive, definitive-sounding phrases, easily memorized and easily expressed” (Lifton 1989: 429). The prevalence of myth and thought-terminating cliché lead to phatic communication characterized by Baudrillard as follows: “Contact for contact’s sake becomes the empty form with which language seduces itself when it no longer has anything to say” (Baudrillard 1991: 164). Thus, the prevalence of appealing

to perceived common places, stereotypes or other ritualized formulas in the public discourse is characteristic of “authoritarian populism” in our framework.

In terms of **governance**, this “authoritarian populism” would include various strategies of deproblematization of policy issues (Selg and Ventsel 2020, chapter 3). In fact, in the governance literature, this phatic form of communication is not discussed very much as a form of governance in its own right. What we can, of course, point to is a form of reactions to governance failure that Jessop discusses: “stoicism” that “rests on passive resignation in the pursuit of familiar routines” (2011: 118). This is basically an appeal to commonplaces that would take the problematic issues off the agenda.

More than in governance literature, the topic of agenda-setting which always involves taking issues *off* the agenda, is discussed in the literature on **power**. The founding arguments for *phatic* power could be found already in Weber’s notion of traditional domination (1978: 216), Marx’s notion of fetishism (1982: 163–177) developed into a more general framework by Lukacs’ notion of “reification” (1971: 83–110). Contemporary conceptualizations of *phatic* power include the theories that relate power with the reproduction of tacit social knowledge: Bourdieu’s habitus (1998: 7–8; 1989: 18–19), Giddens’ “practical consciousness knowledge” (1984: 41–45), Foucault’s episteme (2002) (applied not only to scientific but everyday discourses as well) and disciplinary power (1978; 1979), Lukes’ “false consciousness” (2005), Bachrach and Baratz’s “mobilization of bias” (1962: 949–952) or Clegg’s (1997: 207) and Haugaard’s reification (2006: 60) in the form of “appeal to nature” (Ibid.) could be conceptualized in terms of Jakobson’s phatic communication. In general: authoritarian populism with a prevalence of phatic communication is oriented to presenting given social reality as fixed, unproblematic and uncontested.

### **Totalitarian populism in power, dovernance and democracy (emotive public communication)**

Finally, when there is what Laclau described as “the *Jacobin* conception of democracy, with its concomitant ideal of a transparent community unified – if necessary – by terror” (Laclau 2001: 250), then the appeal to emotions through exacerbating the antagonism between “us” and “them” in the public discourse is inevitable. Hence, I label “totalitarian populism” the form of **democracy** articulated prevalingly through *emotive* messages in public communication.

In terms of **governance**, this is a form of deproblematization of policy problems that appeals to general and often abstract threats to the public, through depicting the enemy that is identifiable but not containable and hinders through

its vicious activities the very foundation of the public (be it embodied in a nation, state or group). The view that “totalitarianism” should not be conflated with ancient form of governance usually referred to as despotism or tyranny, since it is a specifically modern and “democratic” phenomenon or even one emerging not until the 20th century “mass society,” has gained much support since Arendt (see Arendt 1962; cf Sartori 1987: 193–203; Marchart 2007: 101; Lefort 1988).

Drawing on Lefort we could characterize totalitarian populist governance as one in which “social division, in all its modes, is denied, and at the same time all signs of differences of opinion, belief or mores are condemned” (1988: 13). This might point to phatic communication that we attributed to “authoritarian populism.” Yet, as Marchart is quick to explain:

since that division can never be completely erased as an ontological dimension and will continue to surface in the form of disturbances of the imaginary concealment, it has to be displaced. In order for the ‘People-as-One’ to be presented as a totality, as full identity, a relation to some sort of *outside* is inevitable. What acts as the new outside is a series of internal substitutes representing the ‘enemy within:’ the kulaks, the bourgeoisie, the Jews, spies, and saboteurs (2007: 102).

The paradox of totalitarianism is thus the following: “division is denied . . . and, at the same time as this denial, a division is being affirmed, on the level of phantasy, between the People-as-One and the Other” (Lefort 1988: 298). This points to the fact that “totalitarianism needs the enemy as a reference point and thus relies on division at the very moment when the latter is decried” (Marchart 2007: 103). And the role of it is a populist cohesion: “Precisely because totalitarianism presents itself as an entirely rational order, it has to adopt the form of an uncontaminated purity, and that which is excluded has, conversely, to be essentially impure” (Laclau 1990: 90).

The roots of what could be called emotive **power** are, again, pretty traditional. It was among the central concerns of Machiavelli’s *Prince* in its discussions on the role of fear and love as instruments of *power over* especially in the phase of nascent rule. We can also see them in Weber’s notion of charismatic authority (1978: 241–245) in the sense of *power to*. All the models of power that conceptualize the latter in terms of, for instance, manipulating emotions or the need to “constantly short-circuit all thought and decision” (Ellul 1973: 27) could be articulated into the emotive notion of power. Of course, the appeal to emotive power is present at least latently in all the conceptions that grasp it in terms of “*threat* of violence” in the roughly Weberian sense. Of course, as the purely “emotive communication” would amount to non-communication (in the form

of unarticulated interjections), the pure “*threat* of violence” could be conceived to fuse into the very “violence” itself. And this is the moment when, for many significant theorists – both normative (Arendt 1970) and analytical (Foucault 1982; Luhmann 1979; Haugaard 2010: 434–5) – power ceases to function. Thus “physical power is not the ultimate form of power. Quite the contrary, its use represents the failure of social power” (Haugaard 2003: 108). The point, however, is that “in most complex social orders violence is blended with social power and then we get coercion” (Ibid.). Similarly, the purely emotive power is, in practice, usually blended with other forms of power – and this, of course, in a way, holds regarding all the six forms of power discussed here

We have now covered the six categories for semiotic explanation of the political. Table 1 summarizes these categories in a discrete/deductive manner.

But as we argue the categories in fact are not meant to be readymade deductive categories under which we can subsume reality. Political semiotic explanation as a form of constitutive not causal explanation is *abductive* in principle (Selg and Ventsel 2020, chapter 7), meaning that the categories used do not come off without a remainder: what counts as phatic message, for instance, is dependent on the network of relations with other messages in the discourse, text or semiosphere under scrutiny. Therefore, a more accurate depiction of these categories would be something along the lines of Figure 1.

This should be taken into account when we analyze the constitution of wickedness in the next section through the categories just outlined.

### **An example: European migrant crisis and the constitution of wickedness**

The example considers the European Migrant Crisis.<sup>2</sup> On August 31, 2015, German Chancellor Angela Merkel uttered the words: “Wir haben so vieles geschafft – wir schaffen das,” which could be translated roughly as “We have managed so many things – we can manage this too.” Given that the words were spoken after the chancellor’s visit to a German refugee camp near Dresden where she was met with hostile reactions by anti-refugee activists we could say that at this very communicative context Merkel’s words constituted a *metalingual* communication: it addressed the rising sentiment of being unable to manage the flow of migrants and refugees from the third world countries and it was also

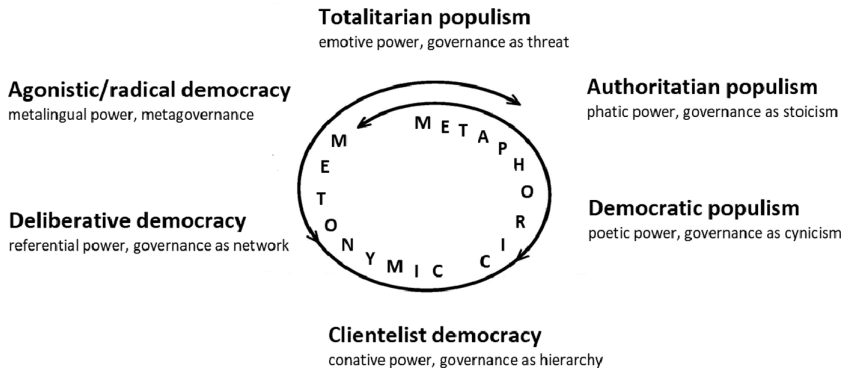
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2 The example is partly based on Selg and Ventsel 2020, chapter 8, and Klasche and Selg 2020.

**Tab. 1.** Deductive presentation of the semiotic categories for explaining the political.  
Source: Selg and Ventsel 2020, chapter 6

Form of democracy	Form of power	Form of governance	Dominant orientation in public communication	
Totalitarian populism	Emotive power (threat, fear, charisma, agitative propaganda)	Governance as de-problematization through constructing threats (securitization, war, apocalypse)	Emotive: orientation toward addresser	DE-DEMOCRATIZATION DE-PROBLEMATIZATION NON-DISCRETE METAPHORIC
Authoritarian populism	Phatic power (reification, mobilization of bias, tacit knowledge, rituals, myths, stereotypes)	Governance as de-problematization through stoicism (passive resignation, familiar routines)	Phatic: orientation toward contact	
Democratic populism	Poetic power ("world-making")	Governance as de-problematization through cynicism ('spin doctor', displacement)	Poetic: orientation toward message	
Clientelist democracy	Conative power (command, directive, order)	Governance as hierarchy (administration, bureaucracy)	Conative: orientation toward addressee	DEMOCRATIZATION PROBLEMATIZATION DISCRETE METONYMIC
Deliberative democracy	Referential-rational power ('force of a better argument')	Governance as network	Referential: orientation toward context	
Agonistic/radical democracy	Metalingual power (power to make practical knowledge into discursive knowledge)	Metagovernance ('self-reflective irony')	Metalingual: orientation toward code.	

questioning the increasingly influential anti-immigration movement. However, the initially metalingual communication ended up being an *emotive* common place. The reason for that could partly be seen in that taken out of context, the second part of Merkel's statement – "wir schaffen das" – could also be translated as just "we can do it." This part of her utterance became a slogan (essentially *emotive/phatic* form of communication). It became a slogan for those positively minded about the welcoming of refugees from East Asia and Africa – resonated by Merkel herself by repeating it – as well as for those who vehemently opposed it – the latter using it in an ironic or disdainful sense. Consequently, a year later, in September 2016, Merkel reflecting in an interview to a financial



**Fig. 1.** Abductive presentation of the semiotic categories for constitutive explanation of the political. *Note:* metaphoric or non-discrete pole is also the de-problematization and de-democratization pole; metonymic or discrete pole is also the problematization and democratization pole. Source: Selg and Ventsel 2020, chapter 7.

newspaper *Wirtschaftswoche* said: “I sometimes think this phrase was a little overstated, that too much store was set by it — to the extent that I’d prefer not to repeat it,” and adding: “It’s become a simple slogan, an almost meaningless formula.” (quoted in Livingstone 2016). “Wir schaffen das” was said in the latter part of 2015, a year when we saw movement upwards of 28 million people displaced due to conflict, violence and disaster, joining the 244 million international migrants already moving throughout the globe (Kaundert and Masys 2018: 73). During 2015 the major referent object regarding the European Migrant Crisis among top politicians in the EU was that the crisis is first and foremost about an issue of an overflow of migrants to Europe and the humanitarian crisis related to that. Representing the crisis as a humanitarian crisis meant *referential-deliberative* communication – “sticking to the point,” talking of facts and figures and organizing means for dealing with concrete people and their problems. There is, however, a catch in this representation.

Already more than 3 years ago it was conceptualized as a “wicked problem” – one characterized by: (1) multiple, potentially conflicting values, (2) strong political passions on different sides of the issue, (3) substantive uncertainty on how best to solve the problem, and (4) multiple independent arenas for social deliberation and action” (Geuijen et al., 2017: 622). The quoted publication, in a leading academic journal *Public Management Review*, which was made available online already in 2016, is telling in many ways. Given the time academic



publishing takes (with its rounds of reviews and lingering editorial decisions and production), it can be presumed to be composed roughly around 2015, the year of “Wir schaffen das.” According to the authors the “wickedness” of the European Migrant Crisis is related to the multiplicity of interdependent and mutually constitutive crises, conflicts and threats both at the local and global level.

In the following, I want to demonstrate the usefulness of political semiotic explanation when analyzing this wickedness of the crisis. I start with the actions taken by Germany during the European Migrant Crisis. My focus at this moment will be put on the apparent shift in governance to address the crisis in 2015–2016. In terms of the above-proposed methodology, one should say that the dominant form of communication has been replaced with another one. Even though my aim here is not to conduct a fully developed empirical study, but to illustrate the methodology of political semiotics, I use the Jakobsonian categories outlined above to understand the initial discourse (2015) and the workings of the superseding one (since 2016).

Initially, one can track an overarching *metalingual* discourse that leads to the original offer of support to arriving refugees (see Lichtenstein et al., 2017: 108). It is metalingual in the sense of appealing to empathy – ability to perceive the contingency of social positions, including one’s own. From the semiotic point of view, it is appealing to the contingency of the code that defines “us” and “them” as being in a “natural,” “fixed” position. This relates the initial metalingual discourse to the ideas of radical democracy and metagovernance. At the center of radical democracy, as we argued in chapter 3 of Selg and Ventsel 2020 lies “the ethos of contingency” (see also Selg 2012). And above I explicitly tied the idea of radical democracy to the prevalence of metalingual public communication. In 2015, the support to help the refugees had also been expressed by the media, the government and even the opposition in Germany. Why such a metalingual discourse? The constitution of such a discourse can be traced down to the so-called “*Willkommenskultur*” (*welcoming culture*) which finds its historical roots in the events in and after the Second World War, such as Germany’s collective memory of the crimes performed in the War, and the fact that many Germans were refugees themselves after the war had ended (Holmes and Castañeda 2016: 14–16) – pointing again to the contingency of social positions. In Germany, specifically, we can find some more historical junctures that strengthened this discourse. The cruelties of the Second World War have been mostly concealed in the direct aftermath of the War and have been only introduced into the public discourse once the following generation asked the question of collective guilt of the German people. This public debate erupted anew in the mid-1980s

when a sense of collective memory, centering around the holocaust, started to affect political outcomes in the German Federal Republic and has been for instance used as an argument for expanding the EU eastwards (Langenbacher 2003: 46–47). A debate of the historians (*Historikerstreit*) about the Nazi regime was held for years in the leading German news outlets and actively followed by many Germans. The continuous recapturing of the attention and recall of the past kept the discourse in its dominant position and in a way buttressed the welcoming culture. Up until this day, it is part of Germany's identity to carry the guilt and the responsibilities (remembering and preventing) deriving from it. Additionally, migration waves of the last 50 years emanating from Southern Europe but also the Muslim World (Caglar and Soysal 2003) created a multi-ethnic society that has sensitized the population to accept the arrival of people with different cultural backgrounds.

Thus, the *metalingual* welcoming culture could lie behind the initial open-door governance of migrants. However, this also plays a crucial role in the constitution of “wickedness” of the problems to come. By autumn 2016 the open border had been suspended and completely turned around. Germany, like many of its neighboring countries, shut down the unconstrained flow of migrants and installed border controls to control the flow. It appears that the *metalingual* discourse has lost its dominant position and taken a back seat. A discourse that considers refugees and migration a security issue has taken hold. Securitization is a dominantly *emotive* discourse, which entails certain hierarchical action (*conative* communication) (Selg and Ventsel 2020, chapter 6). *Security* discourse emerged in the post-Cold War world which saw a change in the security paradigm from simple military threats to a broad definition of threats to human security. (Paris 2001) In this new paradigm, refugees were seen as a potential threat to international and domestic stability and therefore, states grew reluctant to host them. This led to the eventual state in which the Global North viewed asylum as a problem of South from which most refugees emanated. (Betts 2011) The discourse was already active in the 1990s when the dissolution of Yugoslavia created masses of refugees to EU countries and the paths to asylum have been narrowed. (Suhrke 1998: 406) However, at least in Germany, it went in and out of the dominant position. This frame is very attractive for political use since avoiding the short-term costs of hosting asylum-seekers by making them stay in the region was easily politicized. With this, the discourse focused on the economic, social and terrorist threats that could originate from asylum-seekers, not on their human needs. Most parts of the Western World swiftly felt comfortable in this new discourse, adopted this way of thinking and viewed the flow of migrants immediately as a threat.

This was not directly the case in Germany where, due to the strong presence of the *metalingual* discourse for several generations, the crisis was viewed dominantly as a humanitarian and not a political one. Politicizing the humanitarian issue through *emotive* discourse of security was noticeable in other European countries. These countries have seen the awakening and rise of mostly right-wing populist parties or rhetoric after the recession of 2010 and the resulting austerity politics. (Taggart 2017: 256) Later populists would also willingly connect migration with questions of security. Germany had proven to be somewhat immune to the populist movement by stigmatizing every new right-wing party as heirs of National Socialism. This turned with the events around the Cologne Central Station at New Year's Eve 2015–2016 and the growing number of terrorist attacks in Europe like in Nice, Reutlingen, and Berlin—that were partly committed by individuals getting into Europe seeking for protection (Trauner and Turton 2017: 39) – which has captured the attention of the Germans. This gave the AfD (Alternative for Germany) – Germany's right-wing populist party – and the PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident) protest movement new breeding ground which they used to penetrate the public discourse with their ideas on migration. The receptivity of the German people to this type of *emotive* discourse derives from the electoral success similar parties had in other Western European countries – most notably Austria, France, and the United Kingdom – which molded it into an acceptable opinion to have. Given these developments, the *emotive* discourse was eventually picked up and propagated by the German mainstream parties (Trauner and Turton 2017: 40). The change in the public discourse, together with the attention that the terror attacks demand, sedimented the new *emotive security* discourse.

We have seen the shift in Germany from *metalingual* metagovernance to a form of *emotive* de-problematization of the humanitarian crisis: in essence there is a movement from empathy-based perception of the contingency of social positions of “us” and “them” to an antagonistic fear-based *emotive* discourse that constitutes “them” as a “natural” enemy. But what makes European Migrant Crisis a wicked problem from the political semiotic point of view? A simple answer would be: miscommunication. It is the miscommunication between problematization and de-problematization, democratic and authoritarian discourses – or in most general terms: between metonymic and metaphoric coding. Miscommunication from the political semiotic point of view is none other than extreme untranslatability between coding systems. The latter are none other than political *forms*. It is crucial to stress that again: the conflict is not so much about the contents of the issue – which would be central if

conflicting parties would have a metalingual or, more generally, metonymic form of communication. It is exactly the untranslatability of *political forms* that constitutes the wickedness of the issue: the untranslatability of metonymic and metaphoric discourses. We can only touch very general contours of this constitution of wickedness here.

Wicked problems are often symptoms of other problems and attempted solutions can never be right or wrong but only *good* or *bad* (Rittel and Webber 1973; Peters 2017). On top of that, solution attempts will have consequences that may not be reversible. We can see all those aspects here. Various attempts at solution created other crises: *metalingual-democratic* “wir schaffen das” became essentially *emotive-totalitarian* “wir schaffen das,” for instance. These might have even more drastic impact on the European population and the decision-makers themselves. In other words, “[m]any wicked problems seem to lurch from crisis to crisis” (Head 2019: 189). To show this we will point out the different crises of which the European Migrant Crisis is comprised of and how they constitute each other. In more detail we will look at the *humanitarian*, the *political/legitimacy* and the *geopolitical* crisis which interdependently ground the wicked problem we call European Migrant Crisis.

**Humanitarian Crisis.** The humanitarian issues lay within a complex system which makes successful intervention especially problematic. In fact, approaching a problem in such a complex system with “a linear mindset can lead to interventions that result in unintended consequences” (Kauert and Masys 2018: 81) and “the failure to understand or . . . acknowledge the non-linear and highly complex nature of global linkages on every level of governance leads to growing weakness and can paralyze decision-making” (Goldin and Mariathasan 2014: 3). In a sense the initial *metalingual* addressing of the very crisis as “merely” a humanitarian crisis can be considered a source of this paralysis of decision-making constituting among other things the political crisis the EU and many of the national governments of its member states face, and mostly in the form of *emotive* discourse of right-wing populism.

**Political Crisis.** Analytically we can discern two mutually constitutive processes of the political crisis in the EU. One of them is a *crisis of democracy* as a result of which we can trace a demise of general democratic tendencies in Europe allowing for anti-democratic and anti-establishment parties to gain confidence. The other part must be considered a *legitimacy crisis* which is leading to growing mistrust in the EU institutions, the idea of the EU itself or even the nation-state. This got expressed by voters in national and European elections in which anti-establishment and anti-EU parties recorded great results, but also by national governments and politicians who actively seek

more (economic) freedom and independence for their states, with Brexit being the most significant example. When the Commission's majority decisions to relocate 120.000 refugees in 2015 was objected and ignored by Poland, Hungary and Czech Republic (European Commission 2017) it indicates for many a clear lack of resonance of the EU's values (Murray and Longo 2018: 575). Murray and Longo conclude that this "rebellion by member states . . . is unprecedented in its breadth and depth, given that i[t] constitutes not only contestation but direct opposition to the EU's authority and legal framework" (2018: 575). There seems to be a mistrust by national governments that EU-wide solutions can govern the problem. Nicola Phillips goes even a step further and states that the "migration crisis represents one of the most notable and consequential episodes of political failure in the history of European cooperation, which, many worry, retains the capacity to challenge the core of the European project" (2018: 62).

The legitimacy crisis of the EU is born out of the latter's responses towards the humanitarian crisis, which has "witnessed contestation by the government of states, by opposition parties and by citizens" (Murray and Longo 2018: 571). At its ground, the issues relate to the governing of the humanitarian crisis and the differences in practices that various actors are promoting (Murray and Longo 2018: 571). Here, we can start to see the constitutive relations among the crises. The political crisis is beginning to be inextricably linked with the humanitarian crisis, being part of its very identity. The intense politicization through emotive de-problematization of the (initially) referential – or even technical – issue of handling the flows of refugees and other migrants – makes it an issue that cannot be contained safely in the sphere of expert knowledge anymore: it has become a "people's" issue, that mostly but not exclusively have been put on the table by right-wing populist parties all over Europe. Therefore, it makes little sense to claim that the Migrant Crisis is over, even though the flows of migrants at the borders of the EU are (relatively) under control. It has become a wicked problem that is constantly fluctuating between different crises, political being one of them. Responses to one crisis – especially attempts to "solve" it in isolation – will inevitably affect the others, since, in case of constitutive relations, the crises are interdependent and cannot be considered as being separate from one another. One literally cannot comprehend or even access the *referential* handling requiring humanitarian crisis without the lens of the *emotive* discourses around threats to nation-states and European national cultures, terrorism, etc. that the populist parties and politicians resonate throughout Europe. Not only does the humanitarian crisis – and more generally the flows of migrants in Europe – constitute a political crisis, but the opposite is true as well: the political crisis frames how it is conceivable to handle the

humanitarian crisis. Further, it is unlikely that large migration waves will stop in the future as living conditions in many parts of the world will get worse and migration is for many the answer to this (Castelli 2018). The political crisis is not only a result of the humanitarian crisis. They are intrinsically intertwined. They cannot be seen independent from each other, but as mutually constituting each other. Approaches to govern one of them will have to take into account the consequences of governing another. However, from the semiotic point of view, this would entail reconciling highly metonymic (metalingual, referential) discourse with highly metaphoric (emotive) discourse. Such a situation of extreme untranslatability is a major part of the “wickedness” of the problem. And this has ramifications to the geopolitical level as well.

**Geopolitical Crisis.** The geopolitical crisis gets fueled by the lack of unity among European countries, but its earliest realization started in 2008 with Russia re-claiming their physical influence on the continent via the Georgian-Russian war and later with the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Wivel and Wæver 2018: 318). This new security environment upset also the geo-economic constellations the EU and its Eastern neighbors were a part of (Youngs 2017). The geopolitical power of the EU is expressed in its unity and it has clearly suffered during the last five years. The dissonance between political camps in most European states has led to unstable societies throughout the continent. This situation is clearly favored by the Russian Federation that feasts on the instability of its competition. Evidence for this type of “Hybrid Warfare” – a subtler approach than plain military one to gain political objectives and retain a certain degree of “plausible deniability” – have been identified in the Crimean Crisis (Lanoszka 2016) and it must be assumed that these methods were executed in other contexts. The tactics include the use of propaganda to initiate insurgencies and divide societies. Germany offers an ideal playing field for the Kremlin’s tactics that have already worked during the previous German election (Aaltola 2017) and increased the divide between right and left. This divide is reached through the manipulation of the political discourse that decides on the blame for the situation (political-economic structures, the displaced persons themselves), demarcates the “deserving” migrant from the “undeserving” refugee and generally activates the fear of cultural, religious, and ethnic differences (Holmes and Castañeda 2016: 12).

Taking this brief outline of the constitution of wickedness of the European Migrant Crisis towards some conclusions, we should quote at length the paper we already quoted above. According to the authors, the European Migrant Crisis is

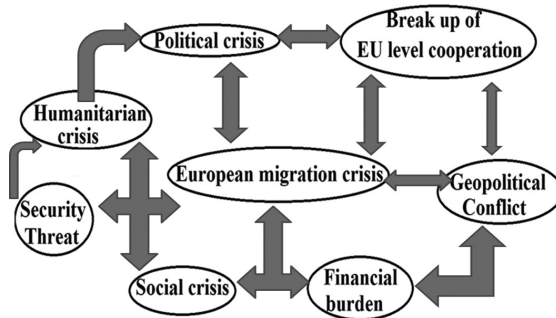


Fig. 2. The “wickedness” of European Migrant Crisis

a problem that could be seen *simultaneously* as: a *humanitarian crisis* based in the suffering of individuals who had abandoned their homes; a *geopolitical conflict* ranging across countries and continents; a *security threat* for both receiving and transit countries; a potentially heavy *financial burden* on already overtaxed states; and the *breakdown of collaboration* in the network of EU member states. Furthermore, the problem would not be addressed in a single political forum where all those with stakes and capacities could together devise a solution, then rely on their common assets to deal with the issue effectively and fairly. The response, instead, would emerge from a disjointed discourse spanning many different polities, government jurisdictions, and even private organizations, who exercised only to lose control over the assets that could help solve the problem (Geuijen et al., 2017: 622, italics added).

All the crises and conflicts mentioned here are in a constitutive relationship and it is not possible to view them as independent entities (see Selg and Ventsel 2020, chapter 8 for more detailed elaboration). They can be viewed “separately, but not as being separate” from both the viewpoint of research and governance. Schematically we can depict the wickedness of the European Migrant Crisis as in Figure 2

Of course, as with static figures on the pages of books, the processual and constantly changing configurations of elements through which the meaning of elements themselves are constituted and reconstituted is somewhat lost. But if we are to conceptualize the crisis as a wicked problem then we have to imagine this scheme in a moving diachronic fashion rather than only as a synchronic snapshot.

## Conclusion

Let us recap what makes a governance problem wicked from the political semiotic point of view. Putting it somewhat vernacularly: the main constitutive mechanism of wickedness is the miscommunication between unreconcilable *forms* of communication: problematization and de-problematization, the clash between democratic and authoritarian texts, discourses or semiospheres – or in most general terms: between metonymic and metaphoric coding. Miscommunication from the political semiotic point of view is none other than extreme untranslatability between coding systems. The latter are none other than political *forms*. It is crucial to stress that again: the conflict is not so much about the contents of the issue – which would be central if conflicting parties would have a metalingual-referential or, more generally, metonymic form of communication. It is exactly the untranslatability of *political forms* that constitutes the wickedness of the issue: the untranslatability of metonymic and metaphoric discourses. In this chapter I have articulated the political semiotic categories for explaining the political based on semiotic theory of communication and the conceptualizations of power, governance and democracy found in political theory, political science and political psychology. I have also highlighted that political semiotics is not merely a (re)description of political phenomena, but a constitutive *explanation* of them. Therefore, political semiotics can be considered an important supplement for political analysis in general, especially to those approaches that take seriously the “relational turn” in the social sciences. Bringing out its potential for explaining wicked problems needs, of course, much further conceptual as well as empirical work.

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