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The European Union and cross-national solidarity: safeguarding 'togetherness' in hard times

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ABSTRACT
The EU is a new form of political organisation which can be defined as an "experimental polity". Its distinctiveness lies in a novel assemblage of the constituent elements of polity (boundaries, binding authority, and bonding ties), and in the constant testing of new combinations of such elelements when facing functional and political challenges. Experimentalism is not always successful and can occasionally trigger off dynamics of polity disruption. The paper illustrates two instances of 'bad experiments' along the bounding and binding dimensions, i.e. Brexit and the euro crisis. It then focuses on the Covid 19 crisis and shows that in this case EU leaders were able not only to launch an ambitious plan of response based on joint action, but also to re-establish an "ethos of togetherness" among the Member States, on which to build for securing both social solidarity and political stability.

Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis and its dramatic consequences have revived the thorny discussion on EU cross-national solidarity which plagued the first half of the 2010s. The shock of the pandemic affected all member states; citizens suffered, lives were lost, and employment and security were jeopardised virtually everywhere. There were, however, differences in terms of timing, sectors, and regions. Some member states proved to be more vulnerable than others, not least because of their limited fiscal capacity for responding to economic damage. Even if differences and vulnerabilities were 'innocent', and therefore not imputable to clear national responsibilities, EU institutions and northern European governments were initially very reluctant to engage in risk sharing. Yet, in July 2020, the European Council adopted the Next Generation EU (NGEU) plan.

Faced with its 'harshest test ever' (to use Angela Merkel's words), the EU polity was eventually able to 'keep together', and make a significant step forwards in terms of organised cross-national solidarity.

The COVID-19 crisis provides an emblematic example of the EU polity's fragility when faced with severe adversity. The question of 'polity maintenance' – namely safeguarding the durability of a territorial community – confronts all types of polities. However, it deserves special attention in a *sui generis* polity like the EU – a novel and relatively undefined form of political organisation, still heavily exposed to the risk of polity disruption, and thus repeatedly forced to creatively respond to such foundational challenge.

The objective of this paper is to pinpoint, precisely, both the sources of fragility of EU polity and the conditions under which they can be overcome, or at least contained. My discussion will unfold in five steps. First, I will briefly present my overall analytic approach, based on a non-normative (descriptive/explanatory) conception of the political sphere (section 1). Second, I will discuss the concept of polity – its nature, functions, and constitutive elements – and highlight the factors which sustain or jeopardise its maintenance. My basic argument will be that polities survive and thrive if they are able to keep a systemic balance between their three constitutive elements, that is to say boundaries, binding authority, and bonding ties. Third, I will gauge the 'polity-ness' of the EU, arguing that it is an 'experimental polity' which is constantly testing new modes of combining its three constitutive elements, in the absence of a pre-defined, clear, and shared telos (section 3). Fourth, I will present three empirical cases which have brought to the fore the question of polity maintenance during the last decade. Brexit and the sovereign-debt crisis provide two emblematic examples of 'bad experiments', involving potentially disruptive changes in the bounding and binding foundations of the EU (sections 4 and 5). The COVID-19 crisis can instead be considered as a successful experiment, centred on the practical and symbolic reconstruction of cross-national solidarity and bonding (section 6). The conclusion will summarise my general argument, highlighting the crucial role that an 'ethos of togetherness', and its deliberate political cultivation, plays in the service of long-term polity stability.

The political sphere and its function

This paper locates itself within the field of non-normative and 'general' political theory, aimed at elaborating comprehensive descriptive/explanatory conceptions of 'the political'. In the twentieth century, political science has produced a multiplicity of such conceptions (Bartolini, 2018).[1] For the purposes of my argument, I will mainly draw on two traditions. The first is Weberian theory,

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[1] Bartolini's overview identifies the axial themes and concepts characterising the main approaches to the non-normative study of politics. A similar exercise had already been undertaken in Gabriel Almond's discussion of 'schools and sects' in political science (1988). Based on the contributions of emblematic

and in particular Weber's concept of political community, in its double connotation. There is *political* community to the extent that coercive resources are centralised in a given power structure that can impose obligations beyond self-interest. There is *community* to the extent that the members of a territorial group share the subjective feeling of 'belonging together'. This feeling is the result of a self-reinforcing process that Weber called *Vergemeinschaftung,* which involves the consolidation of cultural, emotional, ethical, and reciprocal bonds (Ferrera, 2019).[2] The second tradition was inaugurated by Harold Lasswell (1990) who famously defined politics as 'who gets what, and how': the political sphere produces an orderly (organised – *how*) distribution of certain advantages (*what*) among eligible societal actors (*who*) within a territorial community. This perspective was further elaborated by Almond and Powell (1978), who coined the term political production/productivity. The outputs of such production are political goods, which are grouped into two classes. Among *policy* goods, of special importance is the provision of economic and social security: solidarity is in fact crucial because it fosters commonality and togetherness. Among *system* goods, the overall 'maintenance' of the territorial community is key, as it aims at precisely safeguarding the persistence of a stable and predictable frame for social interaction and political production itself.

The 'productivity perspective' has been further developed by Stoppino (2000, 2007) and especially Bartolini (2018), who have traced back the various political outputs to an overarching function: the stabilisation and generalisation of compliance. Territorial authorities produce compliance by exercising political power, which is no longer defined *à la* Weber by virtue of its unique means, specifically coercion, but because of its capacity to distribute guarantees of social conformity throughout the territorial community. Citizenship rights, for example, are a set of guarantees which enable (or confer power on) individual citizens in relation to doing or not doing, getting others to do, or not do the range of 'things' included in the realm of citizenship-based interactions (free expression and association, political participation and voting, claiming welfare benefits, and so on). Political production results from

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'masters' (such as Weber, Schmitt, Schumpeter, Lasswell, Easton, De Jouvenel, Sartori, and Dahl, to mention the key figures) Bartolini suggests grouping the variety of approaches into six main clusters: politics as (1) a set of typical activities (such as voting, party competition, law making and so on); (2) an institutional locus, i.e. a site or arena for interactions (typically, the arena shaping or taking collectively binding decisions); (3) conflicts (especially of the *amicus–hostis* sort) and their management; (4) territorial domination backed by coercive resources; (5) allocation of values (understood as any desired and sought-after state of affairs); (6) aggregation, i.e. the set of processes that, under a framework of rules, aim at reconciling different interests and producing acceptable solutions.

[2] For Weber, the concepts of 'community' and 'association' are the poles of a continuum; for him the vast majority of relationships have elements of both. Thus, Weber dispelled the rigid contrast between the two posited by Ferdinand Tönnies. Market relationships are often accompanied by emotional values which transcend their basic utilitarian significance. Political relationships, in their turn, are based on communal feelings of togetherness, but are also accompanied by utilitarian considerations.

exchanges between societal actors (interested in a share of guaranteed conformity) and political authorities (interested in a share of support needed to gain and maintain office). This system does not eliminate pluralism and conflicts, but channels them in non-destructive directions.[3] While all the members of a territorial group can engage in political action (whose nucleus is the search for conformity), territorial authorities are not only permanently engaged in such type of action, but they also bear a demanding responsibility; their ultimate imperative is in fact to secure the sustainability and relative autonomy (self-determination) of the polity, as such, and its internal pattern of rationalised cooperation and guaranteed compliance.

The concept of polity plays a key role in the 'productivity' perspective. The existence/survival of the polity container serves a sort of 'transcendental' function; it is the condition of possibility not only for political production, but also for the functioning of many other spheres of interaction (e.g. the economy, or science), as the latter always presupposes a platform of orderly togetherness (*Gemeinsamkeit*). By conceptualising politics as an autonomous sphere characterised by a specific function and by an overarching imperative – safeguarding the polity – the productivity perspective clearly belongs to the tradition of political realism and subscribes to its 'signature argument' (Wohlforth et al. 2008): if human affairs are indeed characterised by pluralism and disagreement, then politics is bound to be inherently conflictual and exposed to the risk of destructive and even violent contrapositions, unless there is some central authority structure which secures compliance.[4]

Political science, and especially historical institutionalist approaches, have extensively investigated empirical processes of polity building, primarily in relation to the long-term process of state formation and nation building (Flora et al., 1999; Bartolini, 2005). The productivity perspective and the concept of polity have attracted increasing attention also within EU studies (Kriesi et al., 2020). Drawing on this literature, in the next two sections I will delve deeper into the concept – with specific attention to the solidarity dimension – gauging its pertinence for characterising the EU as a novel type of political entity.

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[3] I borrow the contrast between 'destructive' and 'constructive' conflict from neo-Weberian theory (Collins, 1975). In the former type, one or more parties tend to see disagreement in zero-sum terms, taking little or no responsibility for the overall direction of the process, and therefore overlooking the wider picture which transcends the issue at stake, however salient and crucial for a single actor. In constructive conflict, instead, actors quarrel about a specific (set of) issue(s), but tend to keep an eye on wider and shared important interests and values, as well as on the long-term preservation of the mutual relationship. In my language, constructive conflict remains 'polity-conscious'; in other words at least implicitly aware of the risks and overall costs of polity disruption (let alone breakup) for all actors.

[4] With its focus on political goods – whose production responds to autonomous dynamics, irreducible to morality, law, the economy or religion – the productivity perspective is also the best suited to open a dialogue with some recent approaches in non-ideal normative theory. These approaches take as their starting point the practices of politics as they empirically unfold. While not denying that morality has a key role to play as a source of political normativity (Sangiovanni, 2008), they argue that the production of political goods has itself an intrinsic and freestanding normativity (Burelli, 2019; Geuss, 2008; Rossi and Sleat, 2014).

The three sides of polity

The various 'polit-' words can be traced back to a Proto-Indo-European root signifying 'a fortified citadel' (Mallory and Adams, 1997). This can be construed as an organised human collectivity that shares a territory and coercive resources (walls are fortified and separate an inside from an outside); Weber's concept of *Politischer Verband* rests on exactly the same connotative elements (Weber, 1978). Starting from here, we can define polity as a *territorially demarcated* field of social interaction endowed with a permanent and legitimate *authoritative hierarchy*, underpinned by a set of social bonds (a modicum of shared *identity* and *solidaristic arrangements)*. The combination of bounding, binding, and bonding (the '3Bs' formula) provides a *structure* of constraints and opportunities which elicits relatively stable patterns of expectation and behaviour, thus promoting and facilitating constructive social interactions within the polity field.

Demarcation serves a direct function, namely territorial closure. From the latter follows an important development which, drawing on Rokkan, has been dubbed as *bounded structuring* (Ferrera, 2005). This expression connotes the mechanism whereby 'bounding' triggers the formation of channels and arenas for the unfolding of conflicts as well as institutions for their intermediation. As they cannot exit, actors manifest their grievances by 'voicing' in the appropriate forms and forums. No contemporary polity envisages the formal right to secession – and *pour cause:* de-bounding is likely to have dangerous de-structuring effects.

Binding decisions are primarily aimed at solving collective problems, but political authorities must also engage in the cultivation of legitimacy, that is a widespread belief in the validity of authoritative commands. In democratic polities, legitimacy is linked to publicly acknowledged reasons regarding who can rule ('authority norms', often referred to as input legitimacy), and the practice of ruling ('evaluative norms', or output legitimacy) (Marquez, 2016). Polity members must hold a generalised belief that the territorial government adheres to such norms, so that the polity can be felt to be a fair community of equals. This is a second prerequisite for containing risks of destructiveness.

Finally, bonding has to do with keeping the polity together as a 'we-space', underpinned by a modicum of shared identity and social sharing. The former attributes cultural significance (a meaning, resting on a common heritage) to the we-space. In its turn, the sharing of practices of organised solidarity attributes a socio-economic significance to belonging. Social sharing rests on a variegated motivational basis, which is typically framed, however, by an implicit internalised 'ethos' regarding the identification of risks and needs which deserve collective support. Such ethos assigns to the polity a normative significance (Wuthnow, 1989). Needless to say, and almost by definition, the

likelihood of destructive conflict is inversely related to the intensity of mutual bonds.

Polity is the overarching term for different variants of territorially dominant political organisation: city states, empires, states, federations, and so on. Historically, polity building has followed many different trajectories. In some cases, it resulted from the deliberate bottom-up aggregation of pre-existing units, such as the cantons in Switzerland, and the former colonies in the USA and Canada. The EU was born in a similar way. While the federation/confederation blueprints are often taken as implicit benchmarks for the EU's supposedly incomplete union (Fossum and Jachtenfuchs, 2017; O'Leary, 2020), it is more fruitful to conceptualise the EU as something novel and unprecedented; an 'experimental' polity, testing new ways and modes for combining the classical triad of boundaries, authority, and social bonds.[5]

Compared to other compound polities born from historical, bottom-up aggregation, the Eu has had to bring together the heaviest and most cumbersome type of political organisations that have ever existed, namely democratic nation-states. Polity building in Switzerland, the USA, and Canada had to integrate much leaner units. Even so, federalisation was punctuated by bitter conflicts, which unfolded in the shadow of coercion and were often resolved by force. Having been born as a project of peace and prosperity, EU polity building has programmatically kept aloof of any form of coercion. It has also proceeded in the absence of a constitution defining the institutional form of the new entity, whose telos has always been summed up in the rather indefinite expression of 'an ever-closer union'. Since its beginnings, EU building was therefore forced to grope its way along, evolving through an experimental, trial-and-error selection of both ends and means, seeking new types of combination between bounding, binding, and bonding.[6] And it does so through those modes of political interaction and policy selection that characterise contemporary democracies – disjointed incrementalism, muddling through, and adaptive learning, especially from failures.

Experimentalism can be a blessing for stimulating creative problem solving, but not all experiments are successful. Thus, while testing different mixes of its own constitutive pillars, the EU plays with fire. The balance between bounding, binding, and bonding is very delicate, and not all the possible combinations are equally sustainable; some may well trigger destabilising and disintegrative dynamics. How can sustainable combinations be identified *ex ante*? Given the difference in starting conditions, it is risky to rely on historical benchmarks. The criterion must therefore be 'theoretical'. The success of experiments hinges on the plausibility and robustness of the theories and hypotheses that inspire

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[5] For a review of definitions and approaches see Fichera (2018) and Wiesner (2019).
[6] Like the mouse in the famous 'Skinner box' experiment (where the mouse is compelled to seek food by pressing the levers placed on the box walls at random), EU leaders must search for what works by means of 'operant conditioning', i.e. learning through trial and error, especially the latter (Slater, 2013).

them. Politics is not science, but it is not a random walk either – to use Hugh Heclo's metaphor – as it is ultimately guided by the (realist) imperative of keeping the polity together (Heclo, 2010). Thus, in EU building, polity experiments must rest on a correct understanding by political leaders of the function discharged by each of the three 'Bs', the logic which connects them, and its contribution to polity sustainability.

The three 'Bs' can assume a variety of forms, both hard and soft. However, in abstract terms, there are minimum requirements and thresholds which can be theoretically derived from their interplay; beyond such thresholds, developments in one dimension generate negative externalities in the others, endangering the latters' capacity to play their key function. A full theorisation would exceed the scope of this paper. Some examples can be proposed, however, at least in respect of compound polities. For example, based on the Rokkan–Hirschman model, (Flora et al, 1999) one can expect that shifting back from membership closure to voluntary association will untwist the established channels of voice, and weaken, as mentioned, the centripetal direction of grievances, thus destabilising legitimacy and bonding. Likewise, violations of the principle of equal rights in binding decisions undermines bonding and may delegitimise bounding. In their turn, endogenous ideational dynamics within the normative ethos of the polity can undermine the legitimacy of authoritative binding.

Sometimes, if negative externalities are produced in one dimension, the other two may be able to absorb the damage and rebalance the system; at other times, rebalancing is not possible or does not succeed – the polity becomes unsustainable and even risks breaking apart. In order to illustrate these mechanisms, I must now discuss each constituent element of polity, and identify its dynamic implications for the polity as a whole, and the EU in particular. Inevitably, this discussion will make use of historical examples, but without prejudice towards the EU's experimental profile and its distinctive, open-ended evolution.

The polity-ness of the EU

Bounding

External exclusion and internal confinement are constitutive of polity for the obvious reason that they bring it into existence as a recognisable space, with distinctive features. A polity's *outer* spatial demarcations are especially important. They serve as instruments for filtering exits and entries from/into the polity, according to certain criteria. These filters are targeted at spatial movements. In compound polities, the notions of entry (accession) and exit (secession) can also be applied to collective constituent units. Stable and universally recognised boundaries are systemically important because they orient polity

members towards the inside. Disagreements and conflicts are settled through the channels provided by the internal authoritative hierarchy.

In terms of outer boundaries, the EU has a peculiar configuration. Individual entries into the EU territory are mainly controlled by the member states (e.g. they can freely decide how many third country nationals to admit, and under what conditions). There is, however, a central system of rules on the equal treatment of third country nationals and on their secondary movements (from the state of entry to other EU states). Collective entries (enlargements) are instead under the exclusive control of the EU. The Rome Treaty did not envisage the option of exit. After accession, membership became compulsory and irrevocable. Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty has instead introduced the right of withdrawal from the Union. This reform has opened a breach in the Union's demarcating capacity, with systemic implications, as we shall see, in terms of centrifugal rather than centripetal and integrative political dynamics.

As to internal boundaries, the EU was founded with the explicit mission of weakening or removing those around its member states, especially as regards market integration (Bartolini, 2005). But this process has been selective and nonlinear. National boundaries still filter a significant range of intra-polity exits and entries – for instance, with regard to the provision of services. Nonetheless, the four freedoms and non-discrimination regimes have introduced increasingly stringent regulatory constraints, and in some domains the EU has become the main (and even ultimate) gatekeeper (e.g. in the case of the cross-border movement of workers) (Ferrera, 2005). While free movement was a necessary condition for building the single market and fully exploiting its growth potential, selective and asymmetric de-bounding has generated politically destabilising externalities within the bonding dimension (see below).

Binding

A bounded space requires an authority framework. In fact, 'the control of entry/exit choices via the setting of boundaries *presupposes* the existence of some central hierarchy' (Bartolini, 2005, p. 24). In addition to external defence, the central hierarchy maintains internal order, and secures generalised and stabilised compliance by producing rights and duties. Democratic polities rest on the principle of the political equality of all citizens. In compound polities, individual political citizenship is paralleled by the political equality of constituent units: a sort of collective citizenship, or 'member unit-ship', which confers equal status to each of the member units. Equal unit-ship and its institutional safeguard accompanied the early stages of federations that came together (such as the US or Switzerland), and still finds an institutional expression in the latter's higher chambers, based on the principle of 'one unit-one vote[7] (more

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[7] The US Senate and the Swiss Council of States attribute two seats to each state/canton.

often, two)'. Just like individual political citizenship, the political equality of constituent units has important systemic implications. It significantly tempers those horizontal or vertical asymmetries of power among units, linked to non-political resources (e.g. size), which would keep the polity under the permanent threat of deep territorial conflicts. Equal unit-ship also encourages and underpins a fair consideration and treatment of the material and ideal interests of all polity units.

Supervening in a pre-existing system of robust and compact nation-states, the EU could not certainly aspire to gaining a comprehensive and free-standing command monopolisation at the centre, let alone a coercive one. Even without an autonomous state-like apparatus, the EU has proved capable of autonomous and effective political production, specifically the making of collectivised binding decisions followed by compliance, for instance through directives and regulations. This has been achieved through softer (relative to coercion) instruments of constriction, by deploying legal, economic, and symbolic sanctions (e.g. through 'naming and shaming').

The EU pattern of political domination is weak in terms of bottom-up individual political participation. Voice channels are selective and do not reach all the way up, as it were. The arena of direct representation based on the 'one head, one vote'– the European Parliament – is poorly capable of transmitting popular demands and has asymmetric competences and powers vis-à-vis Commission and Council. The overall system of co-production is not entirely detached from the chain of representation (executives represent their member states, after all). But the latter's presence and influence is hard to perceive by ordinary citizens.

It must also be noted that, in contrast to historical federations, and despite the emphasis that the Treaties put on the equal political status of member states, the latter have different vote endowments in the Council, depending on size. After the unification of Germany, this country gained the largest number of votes, a fact that confers on it a significant surplus of institutional power. The practice of differential voting rights is not uncommon within international organisations, where there is no formal transfer of sovereignty (Miglio, 2019). But it violates a basic tenet – as mentioned – of coming-together federations where higher (territorial) chambers rigorously comply with the principle of equal unit-ship. Both in the US Senate and in the Swiss Council of States, states and cantons have two seats/votes each, and all bills need the approval of both chambers.

Bonding

Bonding comes from the same etymological root as bounding and binding, but it does not evoke coercion, rather social closeness, something that 'ties parties together in mutual dependence', to secure their togetherness

(Mallory and Adams, 1997). In the political domain, bonding is the 'warm' and caring dimension of both spatial closure and vertical authority (remember Hobbes' maxim *obligo ergo protego*). Fraternisation allows the tempering of social heterogeneity and the spurring of loyalty: 'my country, right or wrong'. Drawing on the 'exit, voice, and loyalty' model (Hirschman, 1970), Stein Rokkan extensively used the concept of loyalty in his analysis of state formation (Flora et al., 1999). For him, the latter primarily connoted adherence to cultural norms prevailing in the polity, the strengthening of trust, and of diffuse support. Loyalty is key for 'system building', understood as both growing integration among social groups, and building interdependence and complementarity among the various parts of the territorial system, specifically its constituent units, membership groups and functional domains. In combination, loyalty and togetherness generate a reservoir of mutual 'credit' which smoothes horizontal and vertical interactions, and which can be mobilised in critical situations.

Macro-historical comparative research on the formation of democratic nation states in Europe has empirically demonstrated the key role played by the tight coupling of identities and organised solidarity in upholding diffuse support and loyalty, vis-à-vis the polity (Ferrera, 2005; Flora and Heidenheimer, 1981). Since everybody inside the bounded space has symbolic and material stakes, the fact of togetherness is internalised as a meta-norm (Gaus 1999, pp. 117–196); it becomes a moral order, serving as glue that keeps the polity together, and which prevents it from disintegrating (Banting and Kymlicka, 2017). The robustness and effectiveness of the moral order is all the more effective and robust, the more the internal authoritative structure is based on the principles and practices of equal citizenship (Bauböck, 2017).

In compound polities, the institutions and ethos of centralised solidarity developed at a much slower pace (Obinger et al., 2005). The bonding structure of the historical federations remains to this day weaker and more contested than in unitary polities. More or less explicitly, the principle of subsidiarity has operated as a powerful brake. The size and strength of the federal welfare state has increased over time, but with significant programmatic and temporal variations compared to unitary polities.[8] The EU polity contains a variegated kaleidoscope of relatively crystallised national identities and organised nation-based social protection systems. Thus, the margins for the emergence of a free-standing or superordinate EU identity have remained low from the start. Even if born with the name of 'community', the original EEC was little more than an association (*Gesellschaft*) for market making and policy coordination. As shown by the academic debate – and in line with Weber's theory – membership of a partnership sharing forward-looking objectives and modes of

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[8] In general, federal bonding accelerated in the wake of great economic and social shocks (such as the Great Depression in the US, or the Second World War in Switzerland) during which common vulnerabilities became evident to all the constituent units. In these moments, cross-territorial conflicts were bypassed through partisan or corporate mediations.

governance prompted a process of gradual 'familialisation' (Therborn, 1993). Free movement promoted transnational practices and experiences at the individual level (Kuhn, 2015), accompanied by top-down 'people-making' initiatives by central authorities (Eder, 2014; McNamara, 2017) and horizontal, cross-national dynamics of Europeanisation (Heidenreich, 2020). In addition to market unification and societal interpenetration, integration thus came to gradually involve *Vergemeischaftung* (communalisation) as well. Using Weber's vocabulary, in dropping the adjective (economic) from its official denomination (1992), we can say that the EC/EU acknowledged its transformation from a mere *Wirtschaftsgesellaschaft* (economic association) into a *Wirtschaftende Gemeinschaft* (a community engaged in economic activity) (Weber 1978, ch. 1). In Weberian theory, association and community are mere ideal types; whereas social relationships are always characterised by a mix of both, and they can move from one pole to the other. A modicum of non calculative togetherness is however a necessary condition for the durability of a polity – and this justifies the relevance of community 'talk' in discussing the nature of the EU. We should also note that survey research shows that EU citizens have come, through time, to internalise a modicum of shared *identity* – a key element of communalisation. After a decline of pro-EU feeling in the aftermath of the euro-crisis, the *decennium horribile* closed with comforting signs. In a ten-country survey conducted in 2019 (Visconti and Pellegata, 2019) 53% of respondents declared themselves as 'national and European', 10% as 'European and national', and 2% as 'European only'. The 'national only' amounted to 29%. The vast majority of respondents declared that they are 'proud to be a European citizen'. According to the same survey (but also to Eurobarometers) trust levels are on average higher in relation to the EU than national governments.

The weight and stickiness of national welfare states, and the much debated 'institutional asymmetry' of the Treaties (Scharpf, 2009) between economic and social goals, has tended to pre-empt the strengthening of the EU's 'bonding structure' (what is normally called its 'social dimension') beyond regulation. A closer look reveals, however, that there is more to this than meets the eye. The EU regulatory *social acquis* is vast, and a sizeable part of 'regulations' consists, in fact, of directives which have obliged member states to introduce new social rights and standards or enhance an existing one, for example in relation to parental leave, health and safety, equal opportunities, and non-discrimination. In such cases, the effect of EU regulations has been higher social spending by domestic governments. As to the budget, it is true that its size is low (ca. 1% of GDP), but the additionality principle amplifies the magnitude of resources available for social cohesion and inclusion at the regional or local levels. Not all citizens are aware of EU co-funded initiatives, which target a variegated array of social categories. Empirical data show, however, that those citizens who are indeed aware of the latter tend to display much higher levels of support for the

EU.[9] In other words, if the EU's concrete social activism is visible, it does tend to generate loyalty.

In the last decade, the Union has been forced into a tight march. The sequence of crises has severely tested the EU polity in all three of its constitutive dimensions. Increasing migration and internal mobility flows have challenged the boundary configuration, as well as the EU's capacity for boundary management. The euro-crisis caused a huge recession, and the austerity responses taken by the EMU authorities provided ammunition to Eurosceptic formations, and pushed some of them towards outright sovereigntist positions (Kriesi et al., 2012). In addition, they also generated a deep North–South fracture, freezing the solidarity-oriented dispositions of northern member states and prompting a 'voice for exit' in the South, especially in Italy. More generally, in the public sphere European togetherness has been explicitly put in question. Then came the COVID-19 crisis. As mentioned, the pandemic initially risked plunging the EU into another existential crisis. This time around, however, EU leaders were able to deploy a swift and successful strategy of polity maintenance, promoting a significant step forwards in terms of organised cross-national solidarity.

Since the 'long' 2010s were marked by deliberate manipulations of the '3Bs' formula, in the EU, they provide a suitable context for observing polity experimentalism in action, and capture the dynamics of both failure and success. The next three sections will thus engage in a closer exploration of Brexit, the euro-crisis, and the COVID pandemic.

Brexit

The UK had always been a reluctant member state, more interested in expanding the single market than in deepening political integration. British governments often raised their voice, and placed vetoes or tough conditions on common decisions. However, over the years, the Union had found a way to accommodate British diversity: by means of opt-out clauses. The role of the UK, on the other hand, was decisive in the process of removing the barriers to the four freedoms of the internal market, as well as in the admission of the post-socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

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[9] Except for Hungary and Poland, in the other eight member states surveyed by REScEU (a European Research Council project: Reconciling Economic and Social Europe), the majority of respondents have not 'heard about any EU co-financed projects to improve the area where you live and cater the needs of people like you'. However, for those who have heard about such projects (30% on average) EU support tends to be significantly higher, along with general perceptions about the 'fairness' of the EU and the benefits of membership. Curiously, knowledge of EU projects is lower among their more 'natural' beneficiaries, i.e. less educated and/or unemployed people, and those from rural and/or underdeveloped areas (Visconti and Pellegata, 2019)

The introduction of art. fifty TEU bears a significant responsibility for weakening the systemic coherence of the EU polity.[10] As predicted by the Hirschman model, the possibility of exit increases the cost of voice – thus discouraging it – especially if a dissatisfied 'insider' has low levels of system loyalty. Voice is the key mechanism for polity building and its effective internal structuring. If exit is not foreclosed, a polity may be unable to develop the level of political production which is necessary for stabilising and generalising compliance; in fact it may not be able to consolidate a stable field of interactions. International organisations/regimes are constantly exposed to the risk of defection and field-destructuring. If there is no exit option, actors tend instead to develop both affectual and rational dispositions towards forms of mutual adjustment and compromises, which in turn increase the functional advantages of cooperation. Internal conflict is 'sociologically productive'; as long as it finds proper channels of expression (and therefore does not lead to destruction), conflict preserves 'vitality' in mutual relationships, allowing for institutional changes, with integrative effects overall (Simmel, 1904). Brexit has been a peaceful secession, but it has caused a developmental bifurcation whose full implications are still difficult to gauge for both the UK and the EU. In this light, the introduction of the exit option was a 'bad experiment', guided by flawed assumptions and expectation. This view is not only justified based on the general, realist criteria about polity maintenance discussed above, but also in the light of the very goals which EU authorities were pursuing during the Treaty revision process.

Why was art. 50 introduced? Interpretative reconstructions agree that the process which led to this outcome involved a dense web of different interests and viewpoints (Berglund 2006; Harbo, 2008; Wyrozumska et al., 2012). Political debates shared the worry about the rise of Euroscepticism and the need to contain it. But some supported a positive 'crowding out' view: the right of secession would 'rob euro sceptics of the argument that the [EU] bloc was a prison from which there was no escape' (Harbo, 2008, p. 142). Others held the opposite view: the withdrawal clause would serve as a trigger for Eurosceptics to challenge membership. UK representatives in the Presidium were the main spokesmen of the first line of reasoning. In the end, this line prevailed. At the time, the majority of the Presidium (including its president, Giscard d'Estaing) came to the conclusion that the costs of exit – especially economic and political ones – would discourage its use. German representatives warned against the possible dangers that the right of secession might pose for the stability of the EU, especially by undermining loyalty in respect to the solidarity required by membership. However, this warning was not taken into consideration, and so the withdrawal clause was eventually included in the Constitutional Treaty and then the Lisbon Treaty.

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[10] The article had already been included in the Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe, which was adopted in 2005 but never enacted. In the consolidated version of the Lisbon Treaty, it became art. 50 TEU.

UK developments after 2009 show that the 'trigger view' thesis was well taken (Fabbrini, 2017). The euroskeptic wing of the Conservative party immediately became much more vocal, also in order to contain competition from UKIP at the 2010 national elections. Nigel Farage started to explicitly incite British voters 'to say no to Europe'. In 2013, David Cameron, the UK prime minister, pledged to hold a referendum on the exit option as a strategy to keep the Conservative party together. When the pledge had to be honoured, in 2015, mainstream Conservatives acted as expected by Giscard d'Estaing, namely they warned voters of the costs of exit (this became known as 'project fear'). Cameron also raised his voice in Brussels and succeeded in obtaining substantial concessions (especially on the thornier domestic issues, e.g. immigration).[11] This was to no avail, however, as is well known. Counterfactuals are always difficult. However, it is safe to say that in the absence of art. 50, Brexit had low chances of becoming a yes or no referendum issue. In the economy of my argument, the key point is, however, that the irreversibility of membership would have programmatically prevented a defection whose long-term consequences are still hard to assess.

Introducing the exit option in the EU polity was a badly thought-out experiment, based on faulty political reasoning. In a metaphor already coined by Samuel Finer in the seventies, for political systems, exit is a 'demon', capable of defeating the 'angel' of voice and the 'dove' of loyalty (Finer, 1974). The demon of exit does not engage in cost/benefit analyses (the naive expectation of the Presidium), but may unleash the primitive impulses of the political struggle, imbued with those unstoppable passions that divide the world between friends and enemies. With all its limits, the EU is a compound democratic polity with a weak centre; its developmental challenge is to make room for the angel of voice and the dove of loyalty, and not to concede to the demon of exit.

The euro-crisis

The single currency was born without a backstop: a safety net capable of defending the euro from systemic crises. When the first systemic crisis did arise, at the end of the 2000s, no one was able (or had the courage) to define it precisely as systemic, and to draw the consequences in terms of common decisions (Schelkle, 2017). Angela Merkel and Wolfgang Schäuble (together with the governments of the other Northern European countries) were convinced

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[11] British euro-scepticism was heavily fed by the rapid and huge influx of Eastern European workers in the wake of the 2004 and 2007 enlargements. The UK governments forfeited its right to postpone the entry into force of workers' mobility from these countries, based on an economic rationale. The decision produced however increasing political externalities: a clear example of boundary opening exceeding the absorption capacity of the national community in terms of tolerance and bonding.

that the crisis was caused by the fiscal irresponsibility of the southern European countries.[12] In the midst of the sovereign debt crisis, Merkel grudgingly consented – in July 2012 – to the ECB monetary 'shield', well summarised by Draghi's 'whatever it takes' declaration. This was however a sort of compensation for the tough fiscal measures which had been introduced during the preceding year. In 2011, Merkel had demanded a drastic strengthening of the Eurozone macroeconomic regime. The so-called Six-pack (2011) and the Fiscal Compact (2012) suggested a disciplinarian turn in the surveillance of national public budgets. The Six-pack also changed the decision-making rules, granting to Germany and her northern partners much greater power than they had had hitherto, in blocking any attempt to temper fiscal constraints (Miglio, 2019). Rather unobtrusively, the reverse qualified majority voting system introduced by the Six-pack conferred on Germany a quasi-veto power in fiscal matters (Bruno, 2020). I have already mentioned above that the EU rests on weak bottom-up options in terms of political participation and on asymmetric political unit-ship rights. The 2011/2012 reforms exacerbated both features, further weakening the role of the European parliament and tilting EU binding procedures – in the crucial area of fiscal surveillance – in favour of the larger member states. The argument that the EU has no 'hegemon' (e.g. O'Leary, 2020) is thus misguided not only as regards de facto, but also institutional power.

At the end of the 2010s, according to the abovementioned survey, the belief that 'the EU treats all member states fairly and with equal respect without favouring some countries over the others' only persuaded the minority of voters in all ten member states included in the investigation; on a scale from 0 (fairness) to 10 (unfairness), the average value was 7.35. Not surprisingly, the member state which was indicated as the most favoured country was Germany.[13]

By my line of reasoning, the sharp tightening of fiscal discipline – in substantive and procedural terms – adopted in 2011/2013 dealt a heavy blow to the EU polity structure in its binding dimension, and generated a number of systemic imbalances. The austerity agenda gained an absolute primacy, regardless of its potential negative effects in terms of unemployment, inequality, poverty, or growth; the EU lost its 'caring' face; a surveillance regime centred on asymmetric intergovernmental relationships revived the old image of the EU as an association of national states with diverging and, at times, irreconcilable interests and priorities; the principle of political equality was blatantly violated

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[12] There is no question that the Southern member states had been fiscally lax and that Greece had even cheated on her public accounts. However, the fallacy of the German government was to excessively focus on the issue of fiscal profligacy, while disregarding design flaws (Jones, 2015).

[13] This holds for all member states except for Germany and the Netherlands. For Germans, the most favoured country was Greece (19% against 16% who indicated Germany itself). For the Dutch, the most favoured country was France (18% against 16% who indicated Germany and another 16% who indicated Greece).

not only in formal, but also in symbolic terms (as aptly highlighted by Habermas [2015], Offe [2015], and Viehoff [2018]). In other words, the 2011/2012 reforms had serious negative implications on the binding, but especially on the bonding dimension.

This bad experiment was significantly shaped by ordoliberal ideas, according to which the EU should have limited itself to providing the *Ordnungspolitik* (basic legal framework) which allows for institutional (or 'jurisdictional') competition among the member states (Ferrera and Burelli, 2019; Matthijs, 2016). According to Germany's ordoliberal elites at the time of the euro-crisis, the principles underpinning the EMU – neutral monetary policy and fiscal discipline – were analytically correct, and fiscal adjustments were essentially a matter of doing the homework at home. (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 2016; Schäuble, 2014; Bruno, 2020). If adjustment is essentially seen as a matter of homework and rule compliance, then solidarity is not needed, and it can in fact be harmful as an incentive for moral hazard behaviours. The derogatory connotation attributed to the idea of a *Transfer Union* in Brussels and in various northern capitals testifies to this anti-solidarity-oriented drift of the EU value framework, especially for the Eurozone. It is clear that German elites acted with a poor understanding of polity maintenance requirement and the need to cultivate legitimacy, not only rigidly defined functional objectives.

The ordoliberal paradigm also affected the very idea of what democracy is, or ought to be. Let us think of the notion of 'market conforming democracy' (explicitly and repeatedly advocated in public by Merkel and Schäuble in the midst of the euro-crisis which gives lexicographic priority to the market sphere, with no consideration for social and political externalities (Hien, 2016), or just assumes that externalities are positive and desirable to enhance system competitiveness. This notion runs against the understanding of democracy which has taken root (supported by a host of compelling justifications) in the second half of the twentieth century in Europe. In this understanding, it is democracy which tames the market with a concern about fair distribution and the welfare state, not the market that tames democracy and welfare through the imperative of competitiveness (Van Middelaar and Van Parijs, 2015). The key role assigned to moral hazard in decision-making, as well as in public arenas, was an explicit challenge to the traditional bonding ethos linked to integration and its cohesion policies, not to mention the general principles of the Lisbon Treaty. A new ethos was in fact generated in the public sphere – especially in Germany – based on the 'myth of the beggar': the idea that the core countries should not provide financial assistance to peripheral countries because otherwise market pressure would disappear, and peripheral countries would undertake morally hazardous behaviour (Nicoli, 2015). This myth rapidly resurrected what Jacques Delors had dubbed in the late 1980s the ghost of *la non Europe*: the clash between ('deserving') richer and ('undeserving') poorer member states, saints and sinners, industrious ants and indolent grasshoppers

(Dyson, 2014; Offe, 2015; Scharpf et al., 2016). The bottom line of all this was a rapid erosion of the capital of togetherness, mutual trust, and social bonds which had been laboriously accumulated in previous decades.

It can be argued that the management of the euro-crisis and the reform of the EMU governance was another 'bad experiment' within the binding dimension. The literature has highlighted that this reform took place in the midst of a 'battle of ideas' regarding the nature of the sovereign debt crisis (Ferrara, 2020). In the crucial 2010–2012 phase, the wrong ideas prevailed, provoking not only severe economic damages, but also new deep and destabilising political fractures. Re-establishing minimum conditions of political stability required a laborious strategy of symbolic reconstruction and 'socialisation' of the governance framework during the second half of the decade. The Juncker Commission engaged, for example, in an explicit communicative strategy emphasising communal values, and reclaiming the EU's legitimacy based on the presence of shared belief and a collective identity (Pansardi and Battegazzorre, 2018). At the policy level, deliberate efforts were made, in turn, to strengthen and make more visible the social dimension of the European Semester (Zeitlin and Vanhercke, 2018).

The COVID-19 crisis

We now come to the third and most serious crisis. The pandemic re-opened – with a vengeance – the foundational controversy over 'who owes what to whom' when members states are hit by severe adversity. The divisive imagery of saints and sinners and good and bad pupils reappeared in Europe's public sphere, often formulated in the same crude language of the early 2010s. This time, however, building on past negative experiences and worried about the prospect of a new 'existential crisis', some EU leaders (in particular Von der Leyen, Macron, and Merkel) became involved in a deliberate strategy of political containment. By March 2020, the rules of the Stability and Growth Pact had already been suspended, thus creating immediate room for adequate fiscal responses, also by the most indebted member states. Behind the scenes, technical negotiations were initiated to search for acceptable common solutions to the economic emergency. Principled disagreements and policy disputes did not subside, but leaders started to converge on the basic logic of the Next Generation EU plan outlined by the Commission, specifically the proposal of addressing the crisis by 'walking the road together', without 'leaving countries, people and regions behind' (Ferrera et al., 2021).

Seen from the perspective of this paper, the COVID-19 crisis prompted the adoption of a two-pronged polity maintenance logic, implicitly aimed at remedying the disruptive effects of the euro-crisis' 'bad experiment'. The first prong was the rapid construction of an ambitious experiment of cross-national solidarity through a package of initiatives for the recovery and resilience of the

member states – a package which also included non-repayable grants for those which were economically more fragile. The second prong was a communications campaign aimed at re-activating a sense of community among the domestic public, especially those of core member states. Germany was the main protagonist. After decades of absolute opposition to any form of debt mutualisation and cross-national transfers, this country not only accepted, but resolutely promoted the activation of the most morally demanding type of solidarity for a compound polity, implicitly based on the following principle: from each constituent unit according to its fiscal capacity, to each according to its fiscal need (for investments and reforms).

An abundant literature has already analysed the dynamics which led to the Next Generation EU agreement (Goetz and Martinsen, 2021). Thus, let me elaborate on the communications efforts made to re-build the EU's solidaristic ethos. *Gemeinsamkeit* is a precious system good, which territorial authorities mainly produce through symbolic action: for instance, the infusion of value in common belongingness. Togetherness must be discursively constructed, and must address different publics: political and social elites (especially the media), ordinary voters – 'the people' – international observers, the markets, and so on. How can this discursive construction – and, crucially, its polity maintenance motivation – be empirically observed?

Political communication studies have identified the basic features of crisis management discourse and its typical repertoire of expressive elements aimed at mobilising favourable group dispositions (Bull, 2007). Leaders interested in polity maintenance can be expected to apply such a repertoire in order to generate sympathy and affection towards the community, by stressing (dramatising, even) the seriousness of the crisis, evoking symbols of togetherness and solidarity which underlie the latter's key role in overcoming the crisis and defeating the polity's alleged enemies. While she was not the only leader engaged in the symbolic valorisation of the EU as a community, Merkel did play a decisive role. Furthermore, a close investigation of the sequence of speeches pronounced by the Chancellor between April and July 2020 reveals all the typical traits of community-oriented (*Vergemeinschaftend*) communication. At the beginning of the crisis, Merkel mainly used a 'public health' frame (the crisis as pandemic) and an economic frame (the crisis causing a huge threat of recession). With the intensification of inter-state conflict, she switched however to a 'political–ethical' frame (the crisis as a polity challenge), pinpointing the EU's political enemies: 'the anti-democratic forces, the radical, authoritarian movements, [who] are just waiting for economic crises to be politically abused'. More importantly, she emphasised that the challenge could only be overcome through joint action: 'We must make bold proposals, otherwise we just let things happen … Europe must act together, the nation state alone has no future'. Acting together meant reviving and bolstering the spirit of solidarity: 'I am convinced that the social dimension is just as decisive as the economic

one. A socially and economically just Europe is crucial for democratic cohesion. It is the best way to counter all those who seek to weaken our democracies and question all that binds us together' (Ferrera et al., 2021).

In order to fully appreciate the significance of the German shift, we must interpret it against the backdrop of two factors: (1) the rise of the so-called constraining dissensus about integration from the point of view of public opinion, and the ensuing difficulties that domestic leaders encounter in promoting EU building without jeopardising their domestic support and risking dangerous forms of politicisation (Kriesi, 2016; Wonka, 2016); (2) the self-inflicted, anti-solidaristic 'rhetorical trap' built over the years by Germany's ordoliberal intelligentsia. After all, the COVID-19 crisis directly affected the situation of German voters and their economic interests; why transfer resources to other member states? Angela Merkel was well aware of such obstacles, and made systematic endeavours to reconcile the logic of EU building with the logic of national interest at the symbolic level. This was achieved mainly by using a political-ethical rationale, according to which supporting Europe and promoting its integration is in the interest of the German state, and even represents its historical 'destiny'. In the speech delivered at the Bundestag on 23 April 2020, the Chancellor explicitly raised the question of Germany's role in Europe: 'The commitment to European unification has become an integral part of national 'reason of state' … The European Union is a community of destiny … At this juncture, Europe is not Europe if it does not stand alongside each country, starting with the most indebted ones. What is good for Europe is always very important for Germany'.

The literature has long debated Germany's capacity for European leadership, and her willingness to shift from a reluctant hegemon (Pedersen, 1998) to a more active 'polity builder', in concert with France (Maull, 2018; Tömmel and Verdun, 2017; Wendler, 2017; Helms et al., 2019). As result of her communication and discourse during the COVID-19 crisis, Merkel must be acknowledged for her visible change of attitude and activism as an EU leader. She not only restored the backbone of German policy (the Europeanisation of Germany), which she had allegedly broken ten years earlier, but also redefined it as, no less, a matter of 'fate', resting on explicit normative commitments and historical justifications.[14] One must also consider that Merkel chose the most difficult type of investment within the '3Bs' formula: an investment in bonding, even involving a sacrifice of German money, on the one hand, and 'giving something for nothing' (the NGEU grants) on the other.[15]

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[14] In her speech on June 18, Merkel did not hesitate to explicitly acknowledge Germany's historical responsibilities for the 'devastation of Europe' and 'the breach of civilisation' by the Shoah, caused by Nazi tyranny.

[15] Germany forfeited the contribution rebate to which she would have been entitled and that was conceded to the 'frugals', and declared herself ready to increase German contributions to the EU budget.

It is more than plausible to interpret developments during 2020 not only as a short-term, pandemic-specific type of policy experimentalism, but as the result of a longer-term process of experimental learning through operational conditioning. In other words, the main actors (Germany most prominently) were able and willing, to reflexively build on previous failures at the polity level, and therefore to calibrate their choices based on the 'meta-goal' of holding the polity together. Chancellor Merkel, in particular, achieved such a goal, by deploying a very demanding political strategy. Again, a Weberian metaphor comes to mind: the leader as a 'ferryman of possibilities' and therefore as an innovator in historical paths, with a long gaze and a responsible heart.

Conclusion

Bonding is a key dimension of polity. Compared to bounding and binding, this third constitutive pillar and engine for polity-building tends to proceed at a lower speed; it results from a slow-moving process of affective and calculated fraternisation among different individuals, groups, and territorial collectivities. Bonding needs institutional grounding, especially for the organisation of social sharing. It also needs a cultural/normative grounding, a set of beliefs and orientations supporting and favouring a preference for togetherness. Once sufficiently widespread and internalised as a meta-norm throughout the population and its leaders, the ethos of bonding acquires an inertial, self-sustaining character, which at least partly immunises it from external shocks and destabilising developments within the bounding and binding dimensions. Liberal and democratic polities thrive on policy conflicts driven by material and ideal interests. But they break apart without a constant cultivation of their bounding, binding, and bonding foundations, with a view to reconciling conflicts with togetherness, authority with loyalty, competition with solidarity. The foundations of bonding are less visible and less sensitive to punctual policy decisions. But this does not make them less important than either bounding or binding. And it does not detract from their 'necessity' as pre-conditions of polity stability.

Bringing together a group of already developed and consolidated national communities, the EU has launched a novel and experimental process of polity-building which rests on a fluid and evolving configuration of the '3Bs' template, and that strives to keep it in sufficient balance. After the 'bad experiments' of the previous decade, during the pandemic EU leaders have been able to re-establish an internal equilibrium by engaging in a new, and this time successful, experiment within the bonding dimension, centred on the very divisive issue of cross-national solidarity through financial transfers. If the need for pan-European solidarity in responding to the new post pandemic challenges is the lesson which the EU has laboriously drawn from the poly-crisis of the 2010s, this

will make the sacrifices of so many Europeans during the *decennium horribile* and the pandemic emergency a bit less grievous.

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