SOLID Workshop

Rebuilding the ship at sea: crisis politics and EU polity formation

9-10 December 2024 – Fondazione Feltrinelli (viale Pasubio, 5, Milano)

Scientific coordinators:

Kate Alexander-Shaw (LSE), Marcello Natili (University of Milan), Ioana-Elena Oana (EUI), Waltraud Schelkle (EUI), Zbigniew Truchlewski (University of Amsterdam, EUI)

Introduction

How has the EU not only survived the damage from a series of serious crises but actually created policy capacities and stabilising institutions? The theoretical starting point of this workshop is that we gain insights into both the EU's vulnerability to crises and its resilience if we analyse the EU as a compound polity (Ferrera, Kriesi and Schelkle 2024). This is an innovative research programme informed in substance and methods by comparative politics and political economy, rather than the grand integration theories derived from International Relations. The contributions to this workshop, undertaken in the context of the ERC Synergy Project SOLID, have this vantage point. They compare crises, or episodes within a major EU crisis, with a view to how elements of the EU polity evolve across these crises (episodes), the features that contribute to repeated crises and to explaining how the polity was maintained even when profoundly threatened.

EU polity formation is no longer happening by stealth but has become a salient and polarising affair. This is not necessarily bad: it is an opportunity for voters to engage with questions such as what the EU means for them and what kind of EU they would like their country to be a member of. But politicisation of the EU can also lead to paralysis in decision-making and the perception that the EU itself is the cause for repeated crises. The normal contestation of policy measures can then escalate into the contestation of the polity itself.

The resilience of the EU over the long crisis decade since 2008 had to be achieved, it was not a given case of institutional inertia. The contributions demonstrate that the union may remain inherently unstable, at the mercy of third parties to whom the underlying problem has been shifted or unsettled by festering Euroscepticism. Our innovation compared to most EU crisis research is to grasp the outcome in terms of how crises affect territorial and functional boundaries, binding authority and bonds of loyalty, i.e. the reconfiguration of competences and membership entailed, with uncertain consequences for transnational solidarity between member states.

In the long run, the communicative and material supply of crisis responses and how they resonate with the wider public will decide whether EU polity formation has made it more robust when facing adversity. Is policy feedback of crisis measures on public opinion and their political representatives positive and can the cueing by politicians influence the public's attitudes towards more transnational solidarity in the EU? This is ultimately the crucial question for EU polity formation, whether stealthy or salient, if it wants to escape Monnet's curse.

Format of the workshop

Each paper: 15 min's presentation, 15 min's comments, 30 min's Q&A.

9 December 2024 10:00 – 19:00. Sala lettura

10:00 – 13:30 Session I

- 10:00 – 11:00 Welcome and introduction. Rebuilding the ship at sea: crisis politics and EU polity formation – SI editors

    Comment by Jonathan Zeitlin (SNS and EUI)

11:00 – 11:30 *coffee break*

- 11:30 – 12:30 Good Crises, Bad Crises: explaining EU resilience in a polity perspective – Kate Alexander-Shaw, Daniel Kovarek and Waltraud Schelkle

    Comment by Claudio Redaelli (EUI)

- 12:30 – 13:30 Polity resilience: conceptualization and empirical assessment – Argyrios Altiparmakis

    Comment by Francesco Nicoli (Politecnico di Torino)

13:30 – 14:30 *lunch break*

14:30 – 19:00 Session II

- 14:30 – 15:30 The EU social crisis and political structuring – Maurizio Ferrera, Beatrice Carella and Davide Caprioglio

    Comment by Jonathan Zeitlin (SNS and EUI)

- 15:30 – 16:30 Bonding through crises: the role of EU social policy as a driver and response to EU politicization – Marcello Natili and Anna Kyriazi

    Comment by Alexandre Afonso (Leiden University)

16:30 – 17:00 *coffee break*

- 17:00 – 18:00 From Flight to Fight: Membership Crisis and the Development of the European Union – Joseph Ganderson

  Comment by Daphne Halikiopoulou (York University)

- 18:00 – 19:00 Words or deeds? EU crisis responses and public opinion – Alexandru Moise, Ioana Elena Oana, Zbigniew Truchlewski

  Comment by Giorgio Malet (ETH Zurich)

19:30 dinner in location TBC

10 December 2024 9:00 – 18:00. Sala lettura

09:00 – 13:30 Session III

- 09:00 – 10:00 – Supply creating its own demand? Crisis policy feedback in the EU – Waltraud Schelkle and Ann-Kathrin Reinl

  Comment by Giorgio Malet (ETH Zurich)

- 10:00 – 11:00 How the EU connects its crises: policy learning, lesson-drawing and the idea of technocratic progress – Kate Alexander-Shaw

  Comment by Claudio Redaelli (EUI)

11:00 – 11:30 coffee break

- 11:30 – 12:30 Drawing the lines: crisis strategies on the movable boundaries of the EU's compound polity – Kate Alexander-Shaw, Hanspeter Kriesi and Waltraud Schelkle

  Comment by Sandra Lavenex (University of Geneva)

12:30 – 13:30 lunch break

13:30 – 18:00 Session IV

- o 13:30 – 14:30 Tackling social crises: EU responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis compared – Beatrice Carella

  Comment by Alexandre Afonso (Leiden University)

- o 14:30 – 15:30 The EU's rule of law crisis in a comparative perspective – Anna Kyriazi

  Comment by Sandra Lavenex (University of Geneva)

15:30 – 16:00 *coffee break*

- o 16:00 – 17:00 Episodes of urgency: politicization dynamics in the EU's refugee crisis management – Chendi Wang

  Comment by Daphne Halikiopoulou (York University)

  17:00 – 18:00 The dynamics of crisis: EU policymaking in the Covid-19 crisis – Hanspeter Kriesi

  Comment by Francesco Nicoli (Politecnico di Torino)

18:00 – 19:00 *Aperitivo*

*** end of the workshop ***

Abstracts (as of June 2024, in alphabetical order of first author):

How the EU connects its crises: policy learning and lesson-drawing in EU crisis politics

Kate Alexander-Shaw (LSE, European Institute)

The EU's many crises since 2008 are not distinct episodes but are situated in temporal relationships to one another. Conceptualising the connections between crises is therefore an important step in assessing how the polity responds to crisis. The policy learning literature presumes a degree of (or at least the potential for) technocratic progress between crises, as the lessons learned from the past inform better policy in the present (e.g. Radaelli 2022). Sociological and discursive institutionalist accounts, by contrast, emphasise selective processes of framing and lesson-drawing in which present crises may be an opportunity to revisit the distributive politics of past crisis episodes. The paper weighs these competing theories via an analysis of communications by European and member state leaders, focused specifically on the invocation of past crises in relation to present policy. The analysis is structured around two crisis pairs: the Euro area and Covid-19 crises, and the 2015 Mediterranean refugee crisis versus the 2022 Ukrainian refugee crisis.

Good Crises, Bad Crises: explaining EU resilience in a polity perspective

Kate Alexander-Shaw (LSE, European Institute), Daniel Kovarek (EUI, Robert Schuman Centre) and Waltraud Schelkle (EUI, SPS Department and Robert Schuman Centre)

Periods of crisis provide information about the resilience of institutions when placed under stress, which may support or contradict extant theories of institutional development. The long decade of crisis in the EU post-2008 has posed challenges to integration theory as eminent scholars themselves conceded. Our paper returns to the theoretical drawing board in three steps. Based on expert surveys, we document an emerging consensus that the refugee crisis of 2015-16 and the Euro area crisis have been bad for the EU, while the Covid pandemic and Brexit have not. Second, we argue that the consensus emerging on 'good' and 'bad' crises cannot easily be explained in terms of more or less integration as the outcome, but is better captured in terms of polity formation. In this perspective, finally, resilience is located in dynamic processes of crisis policymaking. In 'good' crises, institutional weaknesses are revealed and addressed as such, while 'bad' crises are resolved using functional but regressive policy responses that remain politically fragile.

Drawing the lines: crisis strategies on the movable boundaries of the EU's compound polity

Kate Alexander-Shaw (LSE, European Institute), Hanspeter Kriesi (EUI, SPS Department) and Waltraud Schelkle (EUI, SPS Department and Robert Schuman Centre)

The EU is a compound polity in which the shape, and significance, of territorial and political-functional boundaries varies across policy domains. Severe crises may be resolved by strategies which make use of these movable boundaries, whether by externalising a problem or by excluding problem members. But we hypothesize that this form of polity maintenance is a second-best solution, when internalisation of the problem through burden sharing is politically foreclosed. We provide illustrations via three crises (the Mediterranean refugee crisis of 2015-onwards, the third Greek bailout in 2015, and Brexit). We show that if the EU pursues externalisation or exclusion, short-term crisis stabilisation comes at a cost, for two reasons. First, these strategies generate a longer-term legacy of peripheralisation, which preserves a latent potential for re-politicisation of the crisis. Second, externalisation creates dependence on the cooperation of third countries whose positions may change.

Polity resilience: conceptualization and empirical assessment

Argyrios Altiparmakis (Fondazione Feltrinelli)

This article aims to delineate the concept of EU resilience. Treating the EU as a compound polity supported unevenly by citizens and member-states, we examine the potential mechanisms operating within this institutional configuration that might render the EU more fragile or resilient. First, we identify and theorise resilience, seeking a definition that captures the EU's survival through a series of crises in the past decade. This is followed by a qualitative assessment of the mechanisms and factors that empirically sustained EU resilience at specific critical junctures throughout its recent crises, such as the Brexit and Greek referenda and the summer of the large refugee influx in 2015. Examining both the specific episodes and their aftermath, factors such as inertia, elite consensus/dissensus and the quality of institutional functions will be assessed in each case as mechanisms that structured EU polity resilience.

Tackling social crises: EU responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis compared

Beatrice Carella (University of Milan, Department of Social and Political Sciences

Two years after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Europe was faced with the social consequences of rapidly rising inflation, which turned into a cost-of-living crisis over the course of 2022. While the crisis situation was in many ways similar to the pandemic context (a common crisis that originated exogenously and had a widespread social impact), the EU did not coordinate a supranational fiscal response. Policy interventions took largely place at the national level, in stark contrast with the COVID-19 pandemic (most notably the interventions of SURE and NGEU). The aim of the paper is to explain the different policy outcomes that emerged from an apparently similar social crisis situation, by analyzing and comparing three crisis dimensions: problem pressure, institutional legacies and political bottom-up pressure. The paper uses a mixed-method research design that combines content analysis of policy documents and speeches, public opinion survey data, and semi-structured interviews.

The EU social crisis and political structuring

Maurizio Ferrera (University of Milan, Department of Social and Political Sciences), Beatrice Carella (University of Milan, Department of Social and Political Sciences), and Davide Caprioglio (Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli)

Social crises have played a key role in state-building processes, by triggering "internal structuring". Stein Rokkan defined this as the emergence and consolidation of interaction channels between key polity actors allowing for the expression of voice and for political exchanges. In this paper, we look through the lens of political structuring and polity maintenance at the social crisis that Europe went through since the early 2010s and the EU social policy advancements soon after. Based on document analysis and semi-structured interviews, we study European political parties and social partners as organized actors conveying "intense policy demands". The paper illustrates the practices of interaction activated among organized actors (horizontal structuring) and between organized actors and EU institutions (vertical structuring), as well as the functionalization of conflicts around social Europe, arguably constituting a "social turn" (mid-2010s-2023). The analysis shows how political structuring and conflict functionalization contributed to social policy advancements and to EU maintenance as a polity.

From Flight to Fight: Membership Crisis and the Contested Development of the European Union

Joseph Ganderson (University of Milan, Department of Social and Political Sciences, LSE)

This article compares and collates the impact of three regularly-cited crises of the contemporary European Union: Brexit, Rule of Law and democratic backsliding concerns in Visegrád states, and the war in Ukraine. Focusing in each case on interplay and policy responses between the EU's comparatively weak central policymaking institutions, the European Commission and Council, the article makes a controlled qualitative comparison of threats presented to EU cohesion, and what the centre's strategic response signifies. Drawing on Rokkanian developmental theory, it suggests that Brexit and Ukraine are examples of binding crises, amplifying the value of cohesion and integration. However, Rule of Law concerns have fostered an alternative dynamic, demonstrating the continued possibility of an unbound, transactional, overtly nationalist model of EU membership. The article concludes that the overall effect of these 'membership crises' is to foreclose exit, channelling distinct voices and competing developmental priorities towards the EU's weak centre.

The dynamics of EU policymaking in the Covid-19 and refugee crises

Hanspeter Kriesi (EUI, SPS Department)

Ferrera et al. (2024) argue that in the compound EU polity, the escalation potential of policy politicization into polity politicization is high, but that this very constellation induces key actors to focus their attention on polity maintenance. Based on PPA data, this paper studies the dynamics of policy politicization and depoliticization at the EU and member state level during the COVID-19 and the refugee crisis. During the COVID-19 crisis, policymaking was rather consensual, which facilitated the containment of escalation dynamics. However, there were still escalation dynamics at the EU level. During the refugee crisis, policymaking was much more conflictual, but escalation dynamics at the EU level could also be contained. In both crises, policy politicization and depoliticization varied considerably, depending on the policy domain (COVID-19 crisis), the policy episode (refugee crisis), the conflict configuration, and the polity level (EU vs. member states). I argue that in both crises, escalation dynamics were contained by the adoption of policy-specific solutions, the segmentation, sequencing, and decentralization of politicization, and the delegation of conflict management to the European Court of Justice (ECJ).

Testing EU Resilience: Why Brexit Was Managed and the Rule of Law Crisis Persists

Anna Kyriazi (University of Milan, Department of Social and Political Sciences)

The rule of law crisis (ROLC) originates in the Hungarian and Polish governments' assault on domestic liberal democratic checks and balances after 2010. The extensive literature on the EU's evident difficulty to tackle this protracted crisis takes, with few exceptions, a single-case perspective. By comparing the EU's membership crises, the ROLC and Brexit, I put existing explanations to the test, while also providing insights into the labour of an EU polity-in-the-making. I trace the intractability of membership crises back to the EU's defining polity features, which create space for opportunistic behaviour of political entrepreneurs with possibly damaging consequences. In the case of Brexit, the EU's politics of containment succeeded in turning the polity's weaknesses into strength, though only after the breaking point of the referendum. In the case of the ROLC, conversely, weaknesses cumulated, aggravated by the slow-moving progression of the crisis, which explains why the EU has yet to find an adequate response.

Words or deeds? Cueing and Policy Feedback in EU crisis responses

Alexandru D. Moise (European University Institute, SPS Department), Ioana-Elena Oana (European University Institute, SPS Department), Zbigniew Truchlewski (University of Amsterdam, Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences)

Through which channels can elites influence public support for EU crisis policies? We identify two channels: cueing ("words", i.e. how politicians talk about the EU influences citizens' policy attitudes) and policy feedback ("deeds", i.e. repeated and highly visible interventions of the EU influences such policy attitudes). In a pre-registered experiment, our paper asks whether cueing and policy feedback may be alternative mechanisms or, on the contrary, have to complement each other in the EU in order to modify citizens' positions on policy. We look at two policies which may have contrasting feedback effects: NGEU during COVID, and refugee policy during the 2015-16 Refugee crisis. We operationalize policy feedback with past policy satisfaction and by priming individuals with information about the beneficial effects of the policy. We operationalize cues by randomly assigning individuals to conditions where they are exposed to messages from their national government or the EU about these policies.

Bonding through crises. The EU's social dimension as a driver and response to EU politicization

Marcello Natili (University of Milan, Department of Social and Political Sciences) and Anna Kyriazi (University of Milan, Department of Social and Political Sciences)

In this article, we argue that the relevance of the EU's social dimension for both the politicization and the maintenance of the EU polity has been overlooked. We do this by examining how EU challengers, i.e. Eurosceptic parties on the right and on the left, have capitalized on the weaknesses of its social dimension. They have used these vulnerabilities to attack the EU polity in the euro, Brexit, refugee, Covid and Ukraine crises. We then evaluate the extent to which the EU's crisis response was attuned to this social critique. By analyzing the rhetorical strategies of Eurosceptic parties, we argue that their attacks on the EU are particularly powerful not only because they address concerns about national sovereignty but also because they can portray the EU as an 'uncaring' entity. EU polity building thus hinges on the ability of EU elites to safeguard and reinforce its social dimension.

Supply creating its own demand? Crisis policy feedback in the EU

Waltraud Schelkle (EUI, SPS Department and Robert Schuman Centre) and Ann-Kathrin Reinl (EUI, Robert Schuman Centre)

Since 2008, EU governments repeatedly pooled their means of fighting crises. Legislators empowered EU bodies to provide re-insurance to domestic welfare states. We ask whether in this process, the EU has matured to a polity through positive policy feedback, a mechanism we know from Pierson's historical-institutionalist account of the welfare state. Since the role of the EU in national policy-making tends to be invisible to citizens, we rely on elite-level policy feedback. We use instances of a social crisis, notably the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living surge in its aftermath, to analyse parliamentary debates in a selection of five heterogenous member states and thus capture how support and opposition to EU measures refer back to previous EU crisis involvement. On top of that, a qualitative study of randomly selected speeches probe the findings of our automated text analysis and ultimately the hypothesis that EU crisis policies have feedback effects in member states.

Episodes of Urgency: Politicization Dynamics in the EU's Refugee Crisis Management

Chendi Wang (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Department of Political Science and Public Administration)

This paper investigates the dynamics of politicization in the EU's response to the refugee crisis, focusing on both EU-level and national-level responses. Using a dataset that allows for Policy Process Analysis (PPA), the study examines key policy episodes from 2015-2019 and explores how varying levels of problem pressure and political pressure influenced politicization across different phases of the crisis. The analysis reveals that both crisis-specific factors and the institutional context of the EU polity shaped the degree of politicization, highlighting the asymmetric impacts on frontline and destination states. EU initiatives often faced the challenges of divergent national interests, while national responses varied widely, reflecting domestic political landscapes and public opinion dynamics. The study also finds that politicization fluctuated across different crisis phases. This research contributes to understanding EU governance under crisis conditions by detailing the mechanisms of politicization and the complex interplay between different levels of governance.