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# PANDEMIC POLITY-BUILDING

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*How Covid-19 Shaped  
the European Union*

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# Preface and Acknowledgments

This book tells the story of how a virus as small as 50 nanometers deeply affected a body politic of 4.2 million square kilometers. However, this story has a peculiar twist. Despite its size, the European Union (EU) played the role of David, while COVID-19 played Goliath's part. This reversal of roles stems from three reasons: first, the EU emerged conflicted and polarized from more of a decade of crises; second, it had little or limited competences in many policy domains affected by COVID-19; and third, the pandemic was the most disruptive challenge that the world had to face since World War II.

First, in early 2020, the EU was riddled with political conflicts and hangovers from previous, numerous crises. The sovereign debt and Euro area crises were the first of a series of events that would severely strain European politicians and citizens in the wake of the Great Recession of 2008. In 2012, the Euro area almost imploded. The years 2015–16 were particularly testing. Greece nearly left the Euro. A refugee crisis unfolded on the heels of a social crisis that saw unemployment increase, especially among the young. To cap it all, populist forces pulled apart the EU in various directions. In the UK, the Brexit saga severely undermined bonds of trust with the continent at a moment of profound geopolitical reconfigurations with the rise of China and of a belligerent Russia. In the US, a new president challenged a seventy-year-old American commitment to the old continent. Poland joined the ranks of illiberal regimes, which, like Hungary, challenged European democratic norms and its rule of law. These crises compounded conflicts that emerged from attempts at solving complex issues. In the meantime, climate change puts more and more pressure on the ecological and social fabric of the European polity.

Second, the EU faced the pandemic with limited competences that varied according to policy fields. This situation exacerbated horizontal and vertical conflicts within the EU and between member states. In healthcare, the EU needed more supranational instruments to deal with the pandemic because health policy is primarily a national competence. In the case of borders, the EU has some competences regarding the free circulation of people, but ultimately, the governance of borders rests in the hands of member states. In economic policy, competences are very asymmetric: while monetary policy is the preserve of the ECB, budgets and fiscal policies are national. The EU's

limited and varied competences in policies most exposed to the impact of the virus suggest that it was fighting COVID-19 with its hands tied behind its back.

Third, the COVID-19 pandemic proved to be the most disruptive event since World War II. The World Health Organization (WHO) *estimated* 768 million *confirmed* cases worldwide from the outset of the pandemic to July 2023. *The Economist estimated* cumulative excess deaths between 17 and 31 million people. By comparison, HIV claimed between 25 and 35 million people since 1981. In the EU alone, 1.24 million people died, and 184 million people were infected, according to the WHO. In economic terms, 2020 was the deepest recession since the Great Depression, beating the Global Financial Crisis of 2007–8. COVID-19 triggered a financial market crash and spurred an inflationary shock that ended the three-decade-long Great Moderation. The labor market impact of COVID-19 was equivalent to the loss of 195 million full-time workers in the first three months of the pandemic. In January 2022, the IMF calculated that the virus would cost 12.5 trillion dollars worldwide:<sup>1</sup> it is as if COVID-19 had erased 75 percent of the EU's GDP in 2022.

Therefore, when COVID-19 reached the EU's shores, few analysts predicted that the European polity would resist the onslaught of “a once in a lifetime” global pandemic that brought the world to a standstill. The microscopic virus quickly wreaked havoc with the mainstays of the European polity: open borders were closed for almost 500 million people. Calls for solidarity were rebuked by grudges about lack of preparedness. With lockdowns, governments retreated behind their ministries and citizens behind the privacy of their homes. In Brussels, a multifaceted crisis unsettled policy-makers. As COVID-19 cases spread and hospitals reached capacity, trade and GDP levels dropped. Millions of workers fretted about whether they would lose their jobs.

The COVID-19 crisis was thus the least likely case for European polity building. Yet, against all odds, a polity of twenty-seven mature states with a weak center, low competences in crucial policy domains, and which acts as a second-order territorial space, managed to overcome powerful disincentives to coordinate its way out of the pandemic and in some policy domains, create central capacity building. We argue that this puzzling outcome is due to several crisis and polity features of the EU that will be explored in this volume. In short, the symmetric nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and the

<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.reuters.com/business/imf-sees-cost-covid-pandemic-rising-beyond-125-trillion-estimate-2022-01-20/>.

life-threatening aspect of the pandemic coupled with the deeply disruptive economic shocks revealed the potential long-term externalities of a lack of joint action at the European level. The EU coordinated a common vaccine procurement scheme and pooled its fiscal firepower. Our polity perspective shows how the EU overcame conflicts and managed to coordinate and create new capacity in its center while relying on a new geography of solidarity within the EU. The polity approach allows us to show how the EU did not take a federal path to polity formation. Instead, it moved toward a polity that serves as an imperfect but solidaristic safety net for member states. Our polity approach offers a more fine-grained argument than “more or less integration” through a triptych of concepts (*bonding*, i.e., solidarity, *binding*, i.e., capacity building and *bounding*, i.e., bordering) that capture both the supply and demand side of politics. The polity approach thus allows us to get a firm analytical grasp over the complex crisis politics unleashed on the EU’s compound polity by a microscopic virus.

Our argument on the European polity and its crisis politics was elaborated within the ERC Project “SOLID” (ERC-grant 810356—ERC-2018-SyG), generously funded by the European Research Council. We are grateful to Eleonora Scigliano at the Feltrinelli Foundation, who manages the entire SOLID project, Maureen Lechleitner—our administrative assistant at the EUI—and Manuela Corsini—our project manager at the EUI—without whose daily support our study would not have been possible. Finally, while our ERC SOLID group has coded our “policy process analysis” (PPA) dataset in the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, its crucial expansion has been made possible by our coders who sifted through a gargantuan amount of newspaper articles to extract vital information: Maria Adamopoulou, Margherita Bordignon, Federico Bruno, Laura Cabeza Perez, Marco Colleoni, Elisavet Papalexopoulou, Aleksandra Polak, Bas Rensen, Milos Resimic, Maria Salazar, Paulina Salek, Llorenç Soler Buades, Adrian Steinert, Zsofia Suba, and Julian Vierlinger. We also thank Akisato Suzuki for help with data on economic growth.

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# List of Abbreviations

AME	Average Marginal Effects
APP	Asset Purchase Programme of the ECB
CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
CRII	Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative
EC	European Commission
ECB	European Central Bank
ECDC	European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control
EEA	European Economic Area
EHU	European Health Union
EIB	European Investment Bank
EMA	European Medicines Agency
ESM	European Stability Mechanism
EU	European Union
EWRS	Early Warning and Response System of the EU
HERA	European Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority
HSC	Health Security Committee (HSC), an advisory body of the Council convening health ministries' representatives from the member states
ICU	Intensive Care Unit
LTRO	Longer-Term Refinancing Operations
MDS	Multidimensional Scaling
MFF	Multi-annual Financial Framework
MS	Member State of the EU
NGEU	Next Generation EU
NPI	Non-Pharmaceutical Interventions
PELTRO	Pandemic Emergency Longer-Term Refinancing Operations
PEPP	Pandemic Emergency Purchase Programme
PM	Prime Minister
PPA	Policy Process Analysis
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
QE	Quantitative Easing
RRF	Recovery and Resilience Facility
SGP	Stability and Growth Pact
SURE	Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency
TLTRO	Longer-Term Refinancing Operations
US	United States
V4	Visegrád Group of Four countries (Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia)
WHO	World Health Organization

## Companion Website

This book features a companion website that provides material that cannot be made available in a book, namely the Appendix. The reader is encouraged to consult this resource in conjunction with [Chapters 9](#) and [11](#). Examples available online are indicated in the text with Oxford's symbol <http://www.oup.com/PandemicPolity-Building>.



# Introduction

## Explaining EU Polity-Building during Pandemic Times

If you had told Europeans during Christmas 2019 that by next summer, in July 2020, the European Union (EU) would survive a large-scale pandemic-cum-economic crisis and thrive, many respondents would have been highly skeptical. Remember that in late 2019, the EU was still licking its wounds from deep crises and acrimonious reform debates. To name but a few: the refugees' quotas, Greek bailouts, European austerity and the exacerbated social crisis, Brexit and the transatlantic populist challenge, not to mention rising populism and democratic backsliding. EU member states were still bickering about a "budgetary instrument" and the technical details of the banking union. Short-termist bitter politics ruled the day. A consensus emerged among scholars: the EU is in the throes of a "polycrisis" (Juncker 2016; Zeitlin, Nicoli, and Laffan 2019) precluding grand bargains and deep reforms.

Yet, to the great surprise of many, this is precisely what happened. This outcome was also against all odds, given the polity structure of the EU, which gives incentives for passing the buck and "failing forward" (Jones, Kelemen, and Meunier 2016). The EU broke taboos. It raised its own debt on financial markets to back national fiscal stimulus packages. It organized EU-wide procurements for vaccines and vaccinated its population quite efficiently. The EU, however, is poorly equipped to act as a polity, given its second-order territoriality, weak center, and low competences in crucial policy domains concerning the COVID-19 crisis.

The EU's response to the COVID-19 crisis was not perfect, far from it, and we certainly do not see the EU through rose-tinted glasses. A welter of mistakes blemished the EU's initial response: from Lagarde's remarks that "the ECB is not here to close spreads" to export controls of crucial medical equipment, and Woepke Hoekstra's famous words that Southern states should have been more prepared, tensions ran quite high in early spring 2020. For observers of the Euro area and refugee crises, it was "déjà-vu all over again."



This book focuses on the surprising response of the EU polity during the COVID-19 crisis. We start from the puzzle that against all theoretical and empirical odds, the COVID-19 crisis has led to relatively successful policy responses during the pandemic, which have arguably contributed to EU polity-building. Initially, this could not have been expected, as the EU and its member states once again reacted belatedly, and once they reacted, the member states resorted to the unilateral responses that we have known so well from earlier crises. They closed their national borders, imposed travel restrictions within the national territory, and locked down their public spaces, schools, and economy. At first sight, this set of measures made the COVID-19 crisis a least likely case for EU polity-building.

Despite these inauspicious beginnings and despite the intense politicization of the joint responses, the EU nevertheless got its act together in less than five months(!) in both key policy domains concerned by the crisis: the EU achieved a joint economic response (the NGEU fund), it launched a joint vaccination program, issued a joint Green Pass and laid the groundwork for a European Health Union.

This general puzzle hints at a broader question: how did the EU turn policy responses to COVID-19-induced challenges into polity-building? By polity-building, we mean significant institutional innovation and core capacity building through either one of the three “Bs”: bonding, binding, and bounding. By bonding, we mean solidarity building and strengthening of shared identity. By binding, we mean capacity building at the center and rules governing this new institutional layer. By bounding, we mean bordering and territorial politics (e.g., lockdowns, passes).

Indeed, from March to July 2020, the EU did not simply engage in minimal policy coordination, as is its wont. Instead, the EU opted for institutional engineering. The implication is that the European response to COVID-19 made reverting to the status quo ante not so likely. This change in the European modus operandi needs to be explained because it goes against the grain of some established theories of EU politics in crisis: for instance, the “failing forward” hypothesis (Jones, Kelemen, and Meunier 2016; Howarth and Quaglia 2021) would have expected the EU to settle on the lowest common denominator. Similarly, the “joint-decision trap” suggests that the EU is not well prepared to react decisively and fast (Scharpf 2006; Falkner 2011). Likewise, the extraordinary European solidarity underpinning polity-building jars with postfunctionalist accounts and identity-based theories of solidarity (Banting and Kymlicka 2017; Hooghe and Marks 2018): crises may activate constraining dissensus at the national

level due to limited resources, uncertainty, and political cleavages. This favors national solidarity over a European one. The famous words of Dutch finance minister Woepke Hoekstra in the early phase of the pandemic, according to whom Southern Europe should have been better prepared, echo these theories.

This puzzle can be framed in terms of the three aforementioned concepts at the heart of our analytical approach—bounding, binding, and bonding. First, on bounding, the original reaction to the crisis was a member state stampede to unilateral border closures and national lockdown measures. Internal rebordering threatened the very core of the single market—freedom of movement of persons, goods, capital, and services. This original shutdown eventually gave way to a coordinated approach to transborder movements based on a common Green Pass and backed up by a common vaccine policy. How did the EU manage to move on from chaos to action?

These questions are also related to our second key concept, binding: the capacity to make binding decisions. The initial conflicts between member states with contrasting preferences were surmounted and they arrived at joint solutions. This question encompasses the problem of sustaining coordinated action given the joint decision trap and the heterogeneity of conditions faced by the various member states at the beginning of the crisis. We need to explain both the initial botched reactions and the subsequent policy coordination and polity-building. There is nothing natural per se in such a development: as the refugee crisis showed, the EU is very much prone to conflicts that can block reasonable solutions (e.g., the refugee quotas), especially when it comes to national borders. But in the COVID-19 crisis the EU managed to establish complex policies that allowed citizens and goods to cross borders again after national lockdowns, thereby safeguarding the single market.

Third, we ask to what extent capacity building in the crisis relied on bonding or community-building (solidarity, loyalty, identity). And to the extent that such community-building did occur, we ask at which level bonding took place: was it confined to the elite level, or was it also extending to the voters? It is striking that in this crisis, the EU mostly opted for solidarity by choice (transparent EU solidaristic mechanisms, such as insurance mechanisms involving debt at the center) rather than for solidarity by stealth (e.g., during the Euro crisis, back door fiscal stabilization through quantitative easing). The EU could have opted for the latter, but decision makers relied on explicit solidarity this time. Could they rely more on public support than in previous crises?

## The three B's: our conception of the EU as a compound polity

In formulating the puzzle which this study seeks to answer, we have already introduced the three key concepts of our approach—bounding, binding, and bonding. Before delving into the crisis, let us briefly elaborate on these three concepts which are derived from the polity approach (for an overview and further references, see [Ferrera, Kriesi, and Schelkle 2023](#)).

We study the EU as a compound polity ([Bartolini 2005](#); [Ferrera 2005](#); [Hix 2006](#); [Ferrera, Kriesi, and Schelkle 2023](#)). A polity can be a nation-state but also a composite of nation-states, i.e., a (con-)federation or association like the EU. Like every polity, the EU has borders that define it against the outside, authority that binds its constituent parts, and bonds that create loyalty, in the EU's case, based on a thin but consequential layer of transnational rights and the social *acquis*. All this makes it recognizable as a distinctive community in addition to that of the (sub-)national communities of its members. The EU polity is compound since it is a decentralized, often fragmented polity with two sources of sovereignty, the member states and their citizens, which are, however, highly unequal in their capacity to shape collective decisions.

In terms of its *boundaries*, we consider the EU as a second-order territorial space, which embeds the first-order spaces of the member states. EU external boundaries have been expanding because of successive enlargements, a process that is under the exclusive control of the EU. Contrary to federal states, EU member states have the right to exit from the Union (based on Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty). The UK exercised this right in an unprecedented move to leave the EU on January 31, 2020, but continued to participate in many EU institutions during a one-year transition period that covered the first two waves of the COVID-19 pandemic ([Ferrera, Kriesi, and Schelkle 2023](#)). Individual entries and exits to and from the EU territory are mainly controlled by the member states, which can decide how many third-country nationals to admit and under what conditions. There is, however, a central system of rules about the equal treatment of third-country nationals once they become legal residents and about their secondary movements from the state of entry to other EU states. As to internal boundaries between member states, their removal has been a selective and nonlinear process. National boundaries still filter a significant range of intra-polity exits and entries. Nonetheless, the four freedoms and the constitutional nondiscrimination norm increasingly opened them up. Unsurprisingly, the boundary configuration of the EU as regards both external and internal boundaries has been a most sensitive and

contentious terrain, as is illustrated by the Brexit crisis, the refugee crisis, and the latent social crisis (e.g., the posting of workers or company relocations).

In terms of its capacity to make *binding* decisions, the EU constitutes a “loosely coupled multi-level governance structure” (Benz 2010). It combines federal-like structures in the arenas of supranational policymaking, such as competition and monetary policy, and confederal structures in the arenas of intergovernmental cooperation, such as fiscal policy and cross-border policing. In this regard, the EU is a hybrid polity, and similarities with either federal or confederal governance depend on the policy domain. Even so, the EU has proved capable of autonomous and effective political production without an autonomous state-like apparatus, i.e., making collectively binding decisions followed by compliance. This has been achieved through means other than coercive means, such as deploying legal, economic, and symbolic sanctions. The authority of the “weak centre” (Alexander-Shaw, Ganderson, and Schelkle 2023) has been sustained in particular by two mechanisms: (a) the power of a supranational legal order the norms of which have been internalized by national authorities and judiciaries and led to integration by law (Augenstein 2015; Saurugger 2016; Weiler 1994), and (b) the shared, multilevel exercise of authority that has allowed a novel type of political co-production, in which national executives (the addressees of EU demands, i.e., regulations or directives) participate in central policymaking along with relatively weak supranational institution (Scharpf 2006; Jachtenfuchs and Kasack 2017; van Middelaar 2014; 2019; Bickerton, Hodson, and Puetter 2015).

With respect to *bonding*, the construction of the EU polity took place under the least favorable circumstances: mass democracy and the welfare state had greatly enhanced, virtually sealed, the bonds among the citizens of the nation-states and between them and their elected territorial authorities. Against this backdrop, the fundamental question thus became how the formation of the European polity process could overcome the resistance against “system building” (Bartolini 2005: 386), i.e., against cultural standardization, the hollowing out of formal political rights at the level of the member states, and the building of enlarged and possibly shallower loyalty, identities, and social solidarity. With the end of the “permissive consensus,” this kind of resistance has become increasingly politicized (Hooghe and Marks 2018), a process which has been reinforced by two developments (Kuhn 2019): the move of European integration into policy areas of core state powers (which are more salient than technical matters of market integration, and which are more closely linked to collective identity), as well as the highly stratified nature of the European citizens’ participation in transnational interactions (e.g., via tourism, sports, entertainment, or work) and of their exposure to European

socialization. This resistance against European integration is part and parcel of a more encompassing conflict that opposes the “losers of globalization” or the “left behind” to the “winners of globalization” or “cosmopolitan elites” (Kriesi et al. 2006), a conflict which is not only fueled by the opening up of national borders and the shifting of competences within the EU, but also by the immigration of third-country nationals into the member states.

At the EU level, the emerging conflict structure, similar to coming-together federations<sup>1</sup> (Stepan 1999), is dominated by the territorial dimension, which produces two types of conflict—vertical conflicts between the supranational center and the member states, and horizontal conflicts between (coalitions of) member states. In the horizontal dimension, member states form transnational coalitions based on their common preferences, which may become obstacles to joint policymaking. The vertical dimension of conflict is, however, more existential because it is more likely to turn policy crises into polity crises, i.e., into an opposition against the EU polity as such. This should be typically the case when a member state feels dominated, its interests defeated by the center.

Our conceptualization of the EU polity with the 3B’s (bounding, binding, and bonding) and its subsequent operationalization and measurement through “policy process analysis” (see below) offers several key advantages. First, the 3B’s and their combinations offer a finer-grained measure than dichotomies like “more or less integration,” separately and when combined. Second, the 3B’s highlight that we focus on conflicts in the EU on both the vertical and horizontal levels, and on how the tensions around crisis politics build up, are vocalized, and perceived. Third and consequently, we bring together what is all too often kept separate in the literature: the study of the EU and the comparative politics that participate in the production of crises as well as constrain and enable policy solutions. Bridging the gap through the EU polity perspective is, we argue, key to understanding both the fragility and the resilience of the European Union in testing times. Thanks to our data collection efforts, we can thus delve deeper into top-down or bottom-up interactions in the three fields that are bounding, binding, and bonding, and enriches our analytical language beyond dichotomies like “more or less integration.” We can study who initiates “policy uploading” and “policy downloading” (Börzel 2002), as well as the structure of conflicts in the domestic and European arenas.

<sup>1</sup> Stepan distinguished between “coming-together” federations where sovereign units decide to pool sovereignty and resources to reach security and economic goals, and “holding-together” federations where unitary states with minorities decide to devolve power constitutionally to avoid political conflicts.

## The nature of the COVID-19 crisis

Crises are moments when the underlying conflicts that characterize a polity are politicized. The way and the extent to which policymaking in a crisis is politicized crucially depends on the specific circumstances of the crisis situation. Among the many criteria that distinguish a given crisis situation, Ferrara and Kriesi (2022) highlight two, which they expect to be particularly closely related to the politicization of the policymaking processes unleashed by a specific crisis within the EU<sup>2</sup>: (a) the distribution of crisis pressures across the EU—symmetrical vs. asymmetrical shocks, and (b) the actors who are empowered in the process of crisis resolution—EU actors vs. member state governments. To these two criteria, we should add the size of the shock exerted by the crisis—whether it posed an existential threat or not to the polity (Ferrara, Schelkle, and Truchlewski 2023). Based on these criteria, the COVID-19 crisis can be characterized by its three-fold nature: first, the COVID-19 pandemic constituted an external shock on an unprecedented scale which posed an existential threat to the EU polity. Second, the COVID-19 shock was a symmetric shock that hit all the member states, even if the consequences of the shock still varied across them. Third, the COVID-19 crisis was multifaceted and required a complex response across different levels of the EU polity with different policy-specific competences.

First, the COVID-19 crisis was unleashed by an unanticipated, existential shock of unprecedented proportions. This made COVID-19 exceptionally salient, in a class of its own: during its first wave, at least, it was one of the biggest news stories ever (*The Economist*, 19/12/2020). Only the two World Wars rival COVID-19's share of news coverage. It is worthwhile to state this at the outset since the exceptional prominence of the COVID-19 crisis has influenced policymaking throughout the crisis. Thus, the salience and intensity of the problem pressure initially imposed a very high pace of decision-making and required transparent political communication about policymaking.

Second, it is important that this crisis was first a public health crisis that touched upon life-threatening health concerns. Even if its incidence in terms of public health varied between countries, all EU member states were highly concerned by the threat to public health posed by the pandemic. In this sense, it was a symmetrical crisis. Asymmetrical pressures generally constrain

<sup>2</sup> Together with lock-in effects, these two features have also been highlighted as scope conditions for “failing forward” solutions in EU crisis situations (Jones, Kelemen, and Meunier 2021).

community-building at the EU level, which is a precondition for center formation and territorial consolidation in policy domains concerning core state powers. In the case of asymmetrical pressure, the potential for agreement, coordination, and joint action at the intergovernmental level is constrained by the politicization of national identities produced by the uneven distribution of crisis pressures within the EU polity. The tension between the uneven distribution of costs and benefits of crisis resolution at the transnational level and the limited scope of community feelings at the national level will make opposition to EU policy proposals more vocal. Symmetrical pressures, by contrast, facilitate such community-building: joint crisis exposure across the EU makes the activation of national identities less likely and increases the potential for consensus among member states. The common threat makes public opinion and elites more favorable to striking a “federal bargain” for the preservation of the integrity of the EU polity.

Third, it is important to keep in mind that this was a multifaceted crisis with parallel policymaking unfolding on multiple issues and sub-issues involving various policy domains. Thus, the COVID-19 crisis was also an economic crisis that led to the most severe global economic contraction since at least the 1930s (Gopinath 2020). Economic activity broke down across Europe after coronavirus lockdowns. The stock market crashed: the first quarter of 2020 was the second worst quarter, with a 21 percent fall on record. Following up on earlier severe drops on March 9 (Black Monday I) and 12 (Black Thursday), the greatest daily drop since Black Monday 1987 occurred on March 16 (Black Monday II). The crash signaled the beginning of the COVID-19 recession. It came after a decade of economic prosperity and sustained global growth after recovery from the Great Recession. This crisis, however, was not primarily a financial crisis. The pandemic triggered a supply-side shock, as the global supply chains broke down, and production could not continue. This shock was reinforced by a demand shock, as people reduced their consumption, especially their social consumption (going out, entertainment, tourism), and it was accompanied by an oil price collapse, a historically unique combination. Service sector activity crashed across Europe in March 2020, and industrial production in the eurozone plunged by a record 17.1 percent in April, as the pandemic caused disruption to businesses across almost all manufacturing and construction sectors of the European economy (*The Economist*, June 13, 2020).

This multifaceted aspect of the crisis is important because EU competences vary by policy domain. In the case of the COVID-19 crisis, issues from two policy domains dominated the agenda: public health and the economic fallout from nationwide lockdown measures. The public health crisis involved,

among other things, issues of border control, procurement and export bans on medical equipment, research, development, procurement and distribution of vaccines, testing, contact tracing techniques, and related issues of privacy rights. The economic crisis involved issues such as exemptions from single market rules, especially regarding state aid to ailing sectors, monetary and fiscal policy to support the banking sector and the member states, and steps towards longer-term fiscal burden sharing culminating in the July 2020 agreement on the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF).

Conditional on the policy-specific allocation of competences, different types of actors are empowered in the process of crisis resolution. We can distinguish between processes in which supranational institutions play a central and autonomous role and those in which this role is retained by member state governments. Thus, while internal market rules, agriculture, and monetary policy are core competencies of the EU, public health, fiscal policy, and border control mostly fall under the competencies of the member states. Given this competence distribution, it is all the more puzzling that the EU was able to act jointly in domains that mostly fall under national responsibility (health, fiscal policy, and border control).

## **From domain-specific policymaking to polity-building in times of COVID-19**

As we have said before, the EU is poorly equipped to act as a polity, given its second-order territoriality, weak center, and low competences in crucial policy domains concerning the crisis, not to mention the conflictual decade it emerged from. But because of previous integration steps, the interdependence between member states, sunk costs and exit costs have increased, as has the autonomy of supranational actors, in line with the path dependence argument of the neofunctionalists and historical institutionalists more generally. Spillover processes and economies of scale make joint action more likely, even in domains where the EU has little competence. However, as the postfunctionalists have been pointing out, the outcome of such processes is not a foregone conclusion, as they are likely to be highly contested. We will show that the policymaking processes that led to polity-building were all but smooth. Attempts at polity-building brought national heterogeneous preferences forward and led to the politicization of policymaking. Such attempts varied by policy domain (economic and public health policy), and despite the common threat experience, conflictive preferences of policymakers from different member states, resistance in national publics, and initial



policy failures created so many stumbling blocks for polity-building. As policymaking spilled over into polity politics, the outcome in terms of polity-building was highly uncertain. By “polity politics,” we refer to political actions that, intentionally or unintentionally, contribute to building, maintaining, or weakening the polity. It is important to note that such actions do not need to be intentional since policymaking may not only contribute to the solution of policy-specific problems but may unintentionally contribute to polity-building. For example, the lockdown measures by the member states may have reinforced the national identities of the EU citizens to the detriment of their attachments to the EU, while the introduction of the Green Pass, may not only have facilitated their free movement across the EU, but may also have contributed to a sense of loyalty to the EU. The focus of the book is on how polity politics came about during the COVID-19 crisis.

New intergovernmentalist scholars provide evidence that national preference formation in the EU has become an inherently transnational process involving member states’ governments (Kassim, Saurugger, and Puetter 2020; Fontan and Saurugger 2020; Kyriazi 2020). Under crisis situations where uncertainty and urgency prevail, national preference formation and supranational bargaining tend to become simultaneous processes, with policymakers being involved and negotiating at the national and the EU level at the same time (Crespy and Schramm 2021). At this bargaining stage at the European level, transnational coalition formation becomes a crucial part of policymaking (Wasserfallen et al. 2019; Truchlewski and Schelkle 2024). In the COVID-19 crisis, we have various transnational coalitions at work—the Corona 9, the Frugal Four, the Visegrád Four, the Southern Countries, and the Franco-German couple, to name just the most obvious. We shall inquire how these transnational coalitions operated and how they shaped the outcome of the policymaking and the polity-building process.

As we have already noted, conflict may also take on a vertical dimension, turning policy crises into an opposition against the EU polity as such. Thus, in the case of the COVID-19 crisis, the policy-specific negotiations became entangled with the fallout of the rule-of-law crisis involving, above all, Hungary and Poland, which posed a threat to the fundamental values underlying the EU polity. Additionally, the decision-making procedures at the center may create a power hierarchy among member states, which interferes with interest-based coalition-building: some member states turn out to be more equal than others. Such inequality among member states is reinforced by having different vote endowments—depending on size—in the Council, including the European Council. This inequality may serve to block

joint solutions, but it may also facilitate them, especially if the most powerful member states support polity-building processes. Thus, in the COVID-19 crisis, the “embedded bilateralism” of the Franco-German couple (Krotz and Schramm 2022) played once again a particularly important role, which needs to be taken into account.

The conflict structure at the supra- and transnational level is linked to the emerging conflict between cosmopolitans and nationalists at the domestic level of the member states, with the governments typically taking an intermediate position between the two polar positions, to which they have to be responsive without losing sight of the stakeholders at the EU level, for whom they have to be responsible partners (Mair 2009). The position of the governments in this configuration depends on many factors: their composition (their internal cohesion), their relations with the other two poles (represented by the opposition and new challengers), the issue in question and the national interests related to it, the domestic institutional constraints, as well as their own strategies in the two-level game of EU policymaking. We shall inquire whether and how governments articulated the conflict between cosmopolitans and nationalists during the COVID-19 crisis. We shall analyze whether and how this underlying conflict is related to COVID-19-specific grievances concerning restrictions imposed by the national lockdown measures and economic hardship resulting from COVID-19-related measures.

The politicization of the polity itself during the COVID-19 crisis played itself out along all three dimensions—bonding, bounding, and binding. From the point of view of polity-building, bonding is the primary of the three dimensions because collective action cannot get off the ground without bonding. Accordingly, we consider “system-building” to be the necessary condition to explain our puzzle. The question is, however, whether “system-building” during COVID-19 has remained an elite-level process, while the citizen public did not develop new bonds of solidarity with fellow Europeans, or even reverted to the national identities that loomed so large at the time of the lockdowns. As a guiding hypothesis, we would suggest that solidarity by choice, as it was practiced at the level of the policymakers during the COVID-19 crisis, is only possible if there is a modicum of solidarity among the national publics. Without solidarity at the level of the public, policymakers are expected to shy away from solidarity by choice and to opt for solidarity by stealth.

Binding decisions based on solidarity by choice may increase the legitimacy of the collective undertaking, but we do not exclude that solidarity by

choice may also trigger a backlash among segments of the electorate. Negative feedback is particularly likely if the policy outcomes do not bring about the expected advantages.

The three B's suggest that the European polity is very peculiar and can, when a crisis is encompassing and symmetrical, turn its weaknesses into strengths. First, every polity is structured by functional and territorial conflicts, i.e., ideological conflicts and conflicts between subunits and between subunits and the center (Caramani 2015). The EU's weak center deals more with territorial conflicts whilst being relatively insulated from functional ones. Consequently, the EU is relatively shielded from polarized and/or populist politics during crises, especially if those are encompassing (Alexander-Shaw, Ganderson, and Schelkle 2023). Conversely, during COVID-19, territorial and functional conflicts bogged down the United States. Second, we argue that this polity configuration of the EU "muted" the interlinkages between European and domestic conflicts, and this segmentation of transnational and national conflict structures eased the emergence of a solidaristic common response at the European level. The interplay of different levels of policymaking relieved each one and diverted the pressure in favor of collective responsibility (but not without conflicts). Third, we explain variation in capacity building in the European center by combining the concepts of time horizons and levels of externalities. In the short run and when externalities are low, there will be no capacity building at the center of the EU, as was the case of lockdowns, due to the intense political investment required for capacity building. If politicians, however, have to deal with high externalities in the short run, coordinating national measures and/or suspending rules that limit national sovereignty is more likely. However, if time horizons are long (e.g., during COVID-19, the expected divergence between member states due to the economic fallout was perceived to last for a long time), the EU is more likely to build capacity at the center, especially when externalities are high. Vaccine procurement in the EU and the RRF are key examples.

## Design of the study

We basically use three tools for the empirical analysis of the questions raised. The first one is policy process analysis (PPA), an original method we developed to study policymaking in European crises (Bojar et al. 2023). PPA relies on the systematic coding of media data to capture the policymaking process from the stages of agenda-setting through to decision-making and implementation. It combines automated searches for relevant newspaper articles based

on keywords with hand-coding of the articles identified by these searches. We apply this method to COVID-19 policymaking within selected member states and the EU for the period from the beginning of March 2020 to the end of December 2021. For the member states, we rely on national quality newspapers. For the EU we choose a set of English-speaking newspaper sources. We include ten member states—the Franco-German couple, three members of the Frugal Four (the Netherlands, Austria, and Sweden), and the UK (still a member during the first two waves of COVID-19), two Southern European (Italy and Spain) and two Eastern European countries (Poland and Romania). Our limited resources for this coding-intensive exercise pushed us to choose representative countries from the EU: policy leaders (France and Germany), countries perceived as being in general less solidaristic (the Frugals, led by the Netherlands and the UK), countries particularly hard hit by COVID-19 and which shaped the debates on a solidarity mechanism early on (Italy and Spain) and Central European countries that are both solidaristic and recalcitrant members of the European polity. Our coding does not cover specific policy episodes but includes all policies (both in the public health and in the economic policy domain) that relate in one way or another to the pandemic.

PPA captures indicators related to the actors involved in the policy debate, the forms of action they engage in, the arena where the actions take place, the targeted actors, the issues addressed, and the frames used to address them. PPA allows for the measurement of key concepts such as politicization, conflict intensity and conflict structure both statically and over time. At the same time, PPA supplies detailed qualitative data, which allows us to illustrate the systematic quantitative results with narrative accounts of policymaking in times of COVID-19. It has the advantage that it is not focused on a specific institutional arena but covers all policy-related actions that are followed by the quality press.

PPA makes two assumptions: (a) the key policymaking conflicts are, partly at least, playing out in the public sphere, and (b) the public debate about these conflicts reveals key aspects of the underlying policymaking processes. We believe that, under conditions of contemporary democracies, these are reasonable assumptions, especially in the case of highly salient crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. Even if policymaking processes partly evolve backstage and are, therefore, partly hidden from the public eye, under conditions of contemporary democracies, such processes are likely to be publicly politicized and, thus, accessible to the public audience, especially in highly salient policy domains. We do not deny that there are instances of “quiet politics” (Culpepper 2011). But in a highly salient crisis situation like COVID-19,

“quiet politics” are crowded out in contemporary “audience democracies” (Manin 1997), where politicians are exposed to continuous and intense public scrutiny. European policymaking has become more subject to public scrutiny, as part of the postfunctionalist condition it finds itself in. To be sure, as Scharpf observes (2015: 42), “European integration has originally been promoted in a non-political mode . . . in areas, which in spite of their substantive significance have been of low political salience.” However, with the transition from the Community to the Union and the accompanying transition from “rules-based” to “event politics,” “European” and “national” politics are increasingly hard to separate (van Middelaar 2019: 167). European policymaking has generally not only become more eventful but also more subject to public scrutiny.

Our second tool is survey data collected at various points in time during the COVID-19 pandemic and in various forms (observational and experimental). In democracies, policymaking is also constrained by public opinion and the public debate. In the EU, public opinion is still mainly a collection of national opinions, and the public debate is still mainly a national debate. But however national it may be, public opinion is a relevant factor for EU policymaking. As we have argued, bonding is key to understanding the solidarity by choice operated at the level of political decision makers in the EU. Since PPA’s supply-side focus on policymaking neglects features more specifically to the demand side of public opinion and vote intentions, we complement our PPA data set with survey data, providing us with cross-sectional views of public opinion on various aspects of crisis policymaking and crisis politics. We rely mostly on two cross-national surveys. Covering all the main country groups in the EU, the first one was conducted in sixteen member states<sup>3</sup> in June 2021, and the second one was conducted in a subset of eight member states in December 2021.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, our third tool refers to a data set documenting country characteristics on a daily/weekly or yearly basis, depending on the variable involved. These characteristics include indicators for the overall context (population, age structure, GDP, HDI, poverty rates, GINI), public health indicators (capacity of the health system, such as hospital beds, expenditure on health, number of doctors per 100,000 inhabitants), indicators for problem pressure (number of cases, ICU admission rates, hospital admission rates), for policy

<sup>3</sup> The Franco-German couple, the Frugals (the Netherlands, Sweden, Austria, Finland), the UK, Ireland, Central and Eastern European states (Hungary, Poland, Latvia, Romania), as well as Southern ones (Italy, Spain, Greece, Portugal).

<sup>4</sup> The Franco-German couple, two Frugals (the Netherlands and Sweden), two Southern countries (Italy and Spain), and two Central European ones (Hungary and Poland).

responses in public health (e.g., lockdown measures, tests, contact tracing, vaccination rates) and in economic policy (e.g., income support, debt relief, fiscal measures), as well as for policy outcomes (e.g., number of deaths, excess mortality).

## Main findings and overview of the book

Our book is structured in three sections. First, the book mainly exposes our argument and concepts based on the polity perspective, using our concepts of bonding, binding, and bounding (Chapter 2). Then we leverage our PPA data set to give a broad overview of how the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded in Europe (Chapter 3). Chapter 4 further exploits our PPA data set with more advanced techniques to shed light on the supply-side politics of the EU during the COVID-19 pandemic. The main takeaways from the first part of the book address some aspects of our puzzle: the EU reacted surprisingly positively after some teething problems mostly because the EU faced an intense, multifaceted, and symmetric crisis that revealed potential long-term divergences that would undermine the EU polity if they were not addressed. This very much tempered partisan competition and helped overcome transnational conflicts. These transnational conflicts mostly opposed a core coalition made up of EU actors, the Franco-German couple, and Southern member states against two smaller coalitions that exercised veto power and extracted important concessions: the Frugal Four and the Visegrád Four.

The second part asks why the EU managed to act in some policy domains (vaccines, the single market and macroeconomic policies) but not in others (borders and lockdowns, PPE export bans and procurement) by zooming in on the concept of “binding.” Five main policies are analyzed (borders and lockdowns, public health policy, the single market, and macroeconomic policies) in Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8, respectively. Concerning borders and lockdowns (Chapter 5), in the first wave of COVID-19, short-term pressure and low externalities led national governments to decide on their own. In later waves, however, the EU managed to put together a modicum of coordination (e.g., the Green Pass). In policy domains where balancing the level playing field for the longer term was key (e.g., vaccine procurements and economic growth), the EU acted more decisively and more creatively with new capacities. In health policy (Chapter 6), the EU created HERA (European Health Emergency Response Authority) and an EHU (European Health Union) whilst also expanding the mandates of the ECDC (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control) and the EMA (European Medicines Agency).

Chapter 7 shows how short-term pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic meant that national governments became “policymakers of last resort” and thus crafted policies to alleviate the effects of lockdowns (fiscal stimulus packages and bailouts). But this quickly threatened the integrity of the single market. The EU adopted a dual-track policy: on one side, it suspended some key European rules to allow for swift action (Stability and Growth Pact, state aid); on the other, it quickly created mechanisms to level the playing field as much as possible with new instruments such as Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency (SURE) and the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative (CRII). Chapter 8 picks up on the problem of the level playing field and high externalities: with long-term disparities undermining the core rationale of the EU, policymakers stepped in to mobilize both monetary (the Pandemic Emergency Purchase Program—PEPP—of the European Central Bank—ECB) and fiscal (RRF and the Next Generation EU—NGEU) resources. The EU broke a taboo by pooling fiscal resources and issuing debt, while the ECB supported national budgets more transparently. However, this was more a “Milwardian” rescue of the nation-state than a “Hamiltonian” moment laying the groundwork for a federal Europe.

The book’s second part’s main message is that crisis politics stem from the structure of the European polity (with its mature states having the ultimate fiscal power) and the long-term externalities uncovered by a symmetric crisis like the pandemic.

The book’s third part asks whether these forms of EU binding are supported by bonding: was EU policymaking supported by higher preferences for solidarity? Three chapters tackle this question from different angles. Chapter 9 steps into the shoes of EU citizens and asks how much, if at all, they were aware of the policy conflicts and solutions presented in the book’s first part. Our data suggest two answers: on one hand, the level of knowledge is pretty low among respondents, but on the other, respondents who know of these conflict configurations perceive their constellations correctly (similar country preferences, allies, and opponents) at the EU level: Germany is perceived as the key player but is both credited for the EU’s success and blamed for being the most favored country; the Visegrád Four countries against all other members states, and the Frugal Four countries against the solidarity coalition. Despite being relatively uninformed, a minority of citizens has improved their image of the EU during the crisis (especially among Southern and Central European respondents). Next, Chapter 10 maps out a “geography of European solidarity” and shows how EU countries are more solidaristic with each other than with outside countries (Italy excepted), but with strong variation: solidarity feelings are not homogenous between EU



countries. An inner circle—France, Germany, Netherlands, and Sweden—prefers to direct solidarity toward themselves and Southern states, but not Poland and Hungary, likely because of the Rule of Law debate. The upshot is that disrespect for core rules undermines solidarity in European polity. Finally, [Chapter 11](#) asks why, despite high politicization, bonding was high during the pandemic. It unpacks three key mechanisms that set COVID apart from other crises in terms of bonding: identity, satisfaction, and empathy. First, COVID started out with a higher share of individuals identifying with the EU, which set the stage for broader acceptance of solidaristic policy for the more encompassing in-group. Second, satisfaction with EU policy, especially vaccination and economic aid, was high in all countries (apart from Germany). Thirdly, and most importantly, individuals' personal experiences in the pandemic and their views on blame attribution for its costs triggered a strong sense of empathy with other EU citizens, which heavily impacted their demand for solidaristic policy.

To summarize, Part III of the book suggests that COVID-19 policies were supported by higher solidarity feelings in the EU, but these were heterogeneous and reflected conflict structures that were revealed during the policymaking process.



# Why the EU Did Not Fail Forward During COVID-19

## The Polity Perspective

### Introduction

In this chapter, we lay out our theoretical approach and how it differs from other approaches in five steps. First, we introduce our perspective on the EU polity, which constitutes the context for policymaking during the COVID-19 crisis. Next, we proceed to present the building blocks of our explanatory approach, which combines an analysis of the COVID-specific crisis situation with an analysis of the politicization of policymaking during the crisis. Then, we present the conceptualization of the outcome of the crisis in Europe in terms of bounding, binding, and bonding. Finally, we point out how our approach is related to other integration theories.

We shall present a three-layered argument that links the crisis situations to the policymaking process and its possible consequences during the crisis. First, we argue that the extreme problem pressure and the symmetry of the crisis incidence, which characterized the COVID-19 crisis situation, generally facilitated the management of this crisis by the EU and its member states as compared to previous crises. Second, we account for variation across policy domains within the response to the COVID-19 crisis by arguing that the competence distribution between the weak center and the member states, in combination with the time horizon of the policymakers and the externalities of early unilateral responses by the member states, determined the extent to which policy-specific solutions have been forthcoming. Third, we argue that the conflict configurations that emerge in the crisis situation determine the opportunities and constraints of the policymaking process during the crisis in a given policy domain. [Table 2.1](#) provides an overview of our three-layered argument.

**Table 2.1** Our three-layered argument

Dimension	Specificity of	Characteristics
Across crises	COVID-19 crisis	salience, problem pressure, symmetry of crisis incidence
Across policy domains	policy domain	competence distribution, capacity building, time horizon, externalities
Within policy domain	polymaking process in the policy domain	politicization patterns, conflict configurations, power hierarchies, contingent factors

## The crisis situation and the politicization of crisis policymaking

### Problem pressure

The COVID-19 pandemic constituted an *external shock on an unprecedented scale* that posed an existential threat to the people of Europe. Crises are highly salient public events. As we have observed already in the introduction, however, even in this exceptional category of events, the COVID-19 crisis is in a class of its own. The problem pressure in terms of the threat to public health and the survival of the economy was extreme. This exogenous shock was characterized by a high degree of urgency and uncertainty. The time structure of causes (sudden and unexpected) and consequences (immediate) was the one of a “Tornado” (Pierson 2004: 81). The intensity of the crisis, i.e., the extreme problem pressure involved, facilitated joint solutions. Extreme problem pressure increases the salience of the crisis but reduces political pressure in terms of partisan conflicts and leads to a rallying effect. A series of studies have already documented the latter (Altıparmak et al. 2021; Bækgaard et al. 2020; Bol et al. 2021; Esaiasson et al. 2021; Schraff 2021).

Moreover, the COVID-19 shock was a *symmetric*, encompassing shock that hit all the member states, even if the consequences of the shock and the capacity to deal with them still varied across member states. Crucially, all member states were exposed to a common existential threat. Such a common threat enabled bonding across Europe, by creating transnational empathy with the victims of the crisis (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2021), which in turn facilitated joint policy making. An enlarged sense of community constitutes a favorable condition for a “federal bargain” (Ferrara and Kriesi 2022). The public opinion polls taken in spring reflect the large bonding potential that prevailed across Europe in April 2020, in the early stages of the

pandemic. Thus, when asked whether the EU countries should offer financial help to other member states during the pandemic, no less than 70 percent of the Europeans from sixteen countries said yes, their country should provide major help (Cicchi et al. 2020), with some variation across European regions: in North-Western European countries, the average of solidary responses was slightly lower than two-thirds; it reached three-quarters in eastern and almost 80 percent in Southern European countries. At the same time, a majority of Europeans were dissatisfied with the extent of solidarity that had been forthcoming between EU member states (Kantar 2020). Again, the Southern Europeans stick out: in Greece, Spain, and Italy, only 22, 21, and 16 percent, respectively, were satisfied with the extent of solidarity. This dissatisfaction did not go unnoticed by the media and by populist politicians. Thus, at the end of March 2020, the media in Southern Europe were slamming Europe's foot-dragging, and the leader of the main Italian opposition party at the time, the Lega's Matteo Salvini, was exploiting the Italians' dissatisfaction with the EU. The gap between the public's readiness to help and its dissatisfaction with the initial lack of help from the EU and its member states is likely to have provided a strong incentive for the European leaders to come up with joint solutions to the crisis.

Since the EU's center is comparatively weak and the EU is "a club of high-capacity states" (Genschel 2022: 5), its member states tend to have an incentive to act unilaterally and to help themselves in the case of adversity. As Genschel also points out, building up capacity at the EU level is costly and time-consuming, which is why member states tend to rely on their capacity when adversity hits, at least in the short run. As we have already argued, this is certainly what initially happened in the case of the COVID-19 crisis. However, even if they have all been symmetrically hit in this crisis, not all member states were equally prepared for adversity, which raises what Genschel calls the "weakest link problem": even if all member states are equally motivated to contribute to the collective action, it may not be forthcoming because individual states are unable to contribute sufficiently. Thus, in the COVID-19 crisis, the Southern and Eastern European member states, i.e., precisely those member states whose populations were most in favor of reciprocal solidarity, were less capable of coming to terms with the crisis than their North-western counterparts. At the same time, however, the "weakest link problem" provides an incentive for collective action among the more advantaged member states. Confronted with such a problem, the more advantaged member states may understand that they need to come to the rescue of the weakest members in order to preserve the Union as a whole. Thus, in the Eurozone crisis, the solvency problems of Greece and Cyprus sufficed to threaten the survival

of the Eurozone as a whole, and, as we shall see, the economic problems of the weaker member states also threatened the survival of the single market in the COVID-19 crisis. In this particular crisis, however, the incentive for collective action in favor of the weakest member states was reinforced by the symmetry of the crisis incidence and the transnational empathy that transpired from the public opinion polls.

Third, the COVID-19 crisis was a *multifaceted crisis* that required a complex response across different levels of the EU polity with different policy-specific context conditions in terms of competence distributions and the institutionalized decision-making modes that govern the crisis intervention. Above all, the COVID-19 crisis was a double crisis—a public health crisis combined with an economic crisis. The threat to public health led to internal rebordering on a grand scale, not only between member states but also within member states. Europeans were locked down in their countries, their regions, their municipalities, their urban districts, and even in their apartments. As we have already observed, the nation-states reigned supreme; they not only suspended the Schengen regime but also the free movement within the individual member states. The public health crisis triggered an economic response, which was, in the first place, a national response, too: the nation-states shut down the economy and then came to the support of individual firms and ailing sectors, individual employees, the self-employed, and households.

## Competence distribution

To answer the question of why the EU built capacity in some policy domains (economic policy) and not in others (public health), the most straightforward explanation for EU action and inaction refers to the level of *domain-specific EU competence*. Thus, the EU has high competence in economic policy and low competence in public health, making it seemingly easy to explain why it acted in the former but not the latter. However, we quickly run into trouble when we look at policy domains in detail. On the one hand, the EU has some competence when it comes to regulating the free movement of people. Still, it did not comprehensively act to coordinate border closures in the first wave of the pandemic. On the other hand, the EU's low competence in public health did not prevent it from coordinating the purchasing and distribution of vaccines, nor did its limited fiscal power prevent it from adopting the NGEU Recovery Fund. [Table 2.2](#) categorizes policies by the level of EU competence (rows) and whether the EU succeeded in capacity building

**Table 2.2** EU competence distribution and capacity building

	EU capacity building	No EU capacity building
<b>Supranational/shared competence</b>	Macroeconomic policy (NGEU fund) Waves 2–3 border coordination/Green Pass Free movement of goods (green lanes) ECB PEPP (new quality in terms of quantitative easing)	Wave 1 border closure Suspension of fiscal/competition rules
<b>National competence</b>	Vaccine procurement and distribution Fiscal policy/NGEU/SURE	National lockdowns, state aid to businesses/households Coordination of export bans on PPE

during the crisis (columns). We consider capacity building to occur in a policy domain if the EU assumes new roles/competencies or new resources are allocated at the EU level in the policy domain in question. This classification forms the backbone of our empirical puzzle when it comes to pandemic policymaking in the EU. The off-diagonal cells indicate the puzzling exceptions from the general expectation that capacity building depends on the prevailing competence distribution. The exception of border closures (upper right-hand cell) may not be such a serious exception after all since the Schengen regime allows for its temporary suspension by the individual member states if they are under serious pressure. However, the joint vaccination scheme and the adoption of the NGEU recovery fund (lower left-hand cell) are more difficult to reconcile with the existing competence distribution in the EU. Part II of the book explores the reasons for EU capacity building in some domains, such as fiscal policy and vaccine procurement, but not in others, such as national lockdowns and border closures.

In addition to the competence distribution in the multilevel polity, we analyze a number of factors that account for these discrepancies and show that existing EU competence is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the policy outcomes. Among the factors highlighted, we include the level of politicization and conflict structures, time horizons, and level of externalities. While the first two factors are present, to various degrees, in our within-policy-domain explanation (see below), the final two constitute our main instruments for explaining the between-policy puzzle outlined above.

## Time horizons and externalities

**Table 2.3** summarizes the argument for the between-policy puzzle combining *time horizons* and *level of externalities*. Let us start with time horizons. As we have already pointed out, capacity building takes time. We, therefore, do not expect any capacity building when the policymakers face a short time horizon, i.e., when they face high time pressure and events require immediate action, as in the first wave of the pandemic. In the short run, the EU can, at best, coordinate the unilateral measures taken by its member states or contribute to the efforts of its member states by temporarily suspending certain rules that normally constrain their actions. However, longer time horizons allow for the possibility to build capacity even in areas of low EU competence. Whether the EU is capable of doing so depends, we would argue, on a second key factor: the degree of externalities that are generated between member states in the absence of capacity building: the greater the immediate or expected externalities, the greater the incentive for the EU to coordinate and to build capacities.

We can illustrate this scheme with examples of vaccine procurement and export bans of personal protective equipment (PPE) for public health policy and with the NGEU fund for economic policy. Both vaccine procurement and PPE export bans imply massive externalities in the absence of EU coordination. Given that some member states are dependent on others for PPE, bans heavily affect those who require the help of others. Vaccine procurement, if left uncoordinated, is very likely to result in a bidding war where wealthier member states with larger markets may get better deals and more

**Table 2.3** Time horizons and externalities

	Short time horizon	Long time horizon
<b>High externalities</b>	<b>EU-level policy: no change in binding authority</b> <i>Policy failure:</i> NGEU initial failure/coronabonds <i>Centralized coordination:</i> PPE export bans coordination Single market (green lanes) Suspension of fiscal/competition rules, SURE	<b>EU-level policy: change in binding authority</b>  <i>Centralized coordination:</i> Vaccination procurement Green Pass <i>Centralized capacity building:</i> NGEU eventually
<b>Low externalities</b>	<b>National-level policy</b> <i>Fragmented unilateral action</i> Initial border closures Initial lockdowns	<b>National-level policy</b> <i>Fragmented unilateral action</i> Later national lockdowns

vaccines sooner, to the detriment of smaller and/or poorer countries. As for economic policy, the economic consequences of the crisis distorted the level playing field of the internal market, which needed to be compensated by fiscal policy measures of the type adopted by the NGEU recovery fund. By contrast, national lockdowns did not present direct externalities to other countries. On the contrary, such lockdowns contributed to the containment of the common threat by reinforcing social distancing. If some economic versions of the lockdown measures (e.g., the shutdown of tourism) may have selectively hit certain member states (e.g., Southern European countries) more than others, they could not be blamed on the unilateral policies of the other member states since all of them, with the possible exception of Sweden, resorted to analogous lockdown measures to face a common threat. In the short run, economic externalities, such as effects on supply chains, could be solved with centralized coordination policies, such as the green lanes or the suspension of the SGP and competition rules, and did not require capacity building.

## Politicization of policymaking in the crisis

The underlying conflict configuration in EU policymaking combines international and national conflict structures, and we claim that the capacity to solve policy problems at the EU level crucially depends on the specific combination of the conflict structures at the two levels, which results from the crisis situation. As posited by the polity approach, more generally, the integration process is characterized by a master conflict, which opposes EU authorities and member states. European integration as an attempt at forming a supranational authoritative center creates tensions between opening national boundaries through supranational regulatory authority, on the one hand, and the foundations of national political structures, on the other hand. We expect this master conflict to be pervasive, not only in routine policymaking at the EU level but also in policymaking during crises.

In the COVID-19 crisis, however, this master conflict has been attenuated by a number of factors. First of all, it has been reduced by the *extreme and encompassing character of the problem pressure*. As [Freudlsperger and Schimelfennig \(2022\)](#) argue, crises are the modern-day functional equivalent of war: like the war in the past, they can legitimize the buildup of centralized administrative, fiscal, and coercive capacities to deal with external threats. However, not all crises serve to enhance capacity building at the center, and even the same crisis can have centralizing and decentralizing implications at the same time. Arguably, the pandemic's specific public health threat led to

an inversion of the postfunctionalist logic, which, as observed by [Genschel and Jachtenfuchs \(2021\)](#), not only induced all member states to resort to unilateral national lockdowns but also facilitated solidarity in fiscal and public health policy: on the one hand, as the national lockdowns illustrate, scale is not invariably driven by the expansive logic of efficiency. Security threats such as the ones exerted by the pandemic can lead to radical rebordering and a preference for a bounded scale for functional reasons. On the other hand, as we have already observed, the symmetry of the threat expanded the scope of community and solidarity across national borders and to policy-specific coordination and capacity building. As [Genschel and Jachtenfuchs \(2021\)](#) observe, “solidarity is issue-specific rather than identity-specific.”

However, this is not to say that there were no conflicts at the EU level. In general, vertical conflicts between the EU and its member states are complemented by supranational conflicts between EU authorities, transnational conflicts between member states, and conflicts between the EU and third countries. In the case of the COVID-19 crisis, conflicts with third countries were of no importance (except for minor spats with the US concerning the closing down of international travel). There were, however, transnational conflicts between (coalitions of) member states, mainly induced by the politicization of fiscal policymaking. Although the crisis was an encompassing and symmetric crisis that similarly hit all member states, and although solidarity eventually prevailed, dividing lines between member states emerged during the crisis about the appropriate instruments of fiscal support and the extent of fiscal solidarity. As we shall see, the Frugal Four coalition sought to restrict solidarity between member states. In contrast, the Solidarity coalition, composed of Southern European member states, mainly pleaded for a generous approach, and the Sovereigntist coalition of the Visegrád Four aimed at avoiding any link between fiscal measures and the rule-of-law mechanism.

The question is why these transnational conflicts did not prevent collective solidarity at the EU level. We want to suggest that, and this is the second factor that facilitated joint problem-solving at the EU level, the segmentation of international and national conflict structures facilitated the collective solidarity at the EU level in the COVID-19 crisis. In the refugee crisis, cross-level conflicts between the EU and some of its member states and transnational conflicts between member states spilled over into the national conflict structure, where they were exacerbated by partisan conflicts that mobilized national identities ([Kriesi et al. 2024](#)). In the COVID-19 crisis, by contrast, such spillovers of international conflicts into the national arena were largely absent, as we shall show in our empirical analysis (see [Chapter 4](#)). The EU did not attempt to actively intervene in the policymaking process of its member states, nor did member states attempt to upload their



problems to the EU level. Moreover, as we have already observed, there were hardly any policy externalities between member states, which they could mutually blame on each other.

We presuppose that the segmentation of the conflict structures between the two levels, in turn, results partly from the competence distribution and partly from the unstructured partisan conflicts at the national level. As far as the competence distribution is concerned, the separation of competencies in the two main policy domains concerned by the crisis likely contributed to the segmentation of the conflict structures. The interpenetration of international and national conflict structures most likely occurs when competencies are shared between the authorities of the two levels, as is the case with asylum policy and fiscal policy. With regard to the partisan conflicts at the national level, a common public health threat, which universally concerns all members of society, does not lend itself to partisan politicization. Nor does a common public health threat that is shared by all member states lend itself to the mobilization of national identities. Again, this does not mean that the COVID-19 crisis did not give rise to conflicts at the national level. However, we expect fewer partisan conflicts and more regional and societal conflicts. Regional conflicts oppose national and regional political executives. We expect such conflicts, especially in countries with decentralized health systems where the regional authorities have strong competencies. Societal conflicts oppose the national governments to special interest associations that defend the interests of specific societal groups (e.g., businesses, unions, NGOs, experts, and think tanks). While such conflicts may constrain the maneuvering space of national governments, they tend to have a purely national focus and are not concerned with policymaking at the EU level. We shall analyze these conflict configurations in [Chapter 4](#) more generally and in the four chapters of Part II in more policy-specific detail.

Third, not all member states are alike; there are *institutionalized power hierarchies between member states*. Thus, member states have different vote endowments—depending on size—in the Council of the EU and the European Council and different capacities to contribute to the common good. Large member states not only have a stronger position in the policymaking process than smaller member states, but they are also expected to make a larger contribution to the common good, as suggested by the public goods literature ([Thielemann 2018](#)) since they have potentially more to lose (in absolute terms) from the nonprovision of the public good and are also the ones who are able to unilaterally make a significant contribution to the provision of the good. Informally, larger states may also provide leadership for the resolution of the crisis.

The more or less institutionalized power hierarchy may be reinforced but also undermined by the *crisis-induced power relations*. The latter, in turn, depend on the distribution of the crisis incidence. Liberal intergovernmentalism tells us that the states that are hardest hit by the crisis find themselves in a weak bargaining position and are most willing to compromise. In contrast, the fortunate member states are in a strong bargaining position, which makes them least willing to compromise (Moravcsik 1998: 3). Thus, in the Eurozone crisis, Germany's hierarchical position was reinforced since it was the main creditor of other member states. By contrast, the refugee crisis demonstrates how the institutionalized power relations in the EU may be undermined by the EU's limited policy-specific competencies and by the crisis-induced spillover processes between member states. The combination of these two factors goes a long way to explain why Germany, the most powerful member state of the EU, failed to impose its preferred joint solution in the refugee crisis. Indeed, Germany's capacity to play the role of a stabilizing hegemonic power in the EU proved to be limited in this crisis (Webber 2019: 17), which suggests that crisis-induced bargaining positions may trump institutional power relations. In the COVID-19 crisis, by contrast, Germany and France joined forces and took the lead in finding a solution for the NGEU recovery fund (Krotz and Schramm 2022). Germany's government, which had always advocated budgetary discipline in its European policy and had always been opposed to common debt issuance, broke two taboos (Howarth and Schild 2021): it supported grants in addition to loans, and it proposed that these grants should be financed by allowing the Commission to borrow massively on financial markets on behalf of the EU, implying joint liability for debt. The fact that the institutional power relations prevailed in this crisis once again also served to facilitate joint problem-solving.

Arguably, the prevalence of institutional power relations in the COVID-19 crisis depended on *two contingent factors* which enhanced Germany's role in the management of the crisis. On the one hand, at the decisive European Council meeting in July 2020, Germany occupied the role of the rotating Presidency, which allowed it to assume a dominant role in the negotiations of the NGEU fund. On the other hand, in dealing with the COVID-19 crisis, the key decision makers, especially the German ones, were able and ready to build on their experiences with earlier crises. In a crisis situation like the one that characterized the COVID-19 crisis, executive politicians are generally taking over from domain-specific experts, as we have already argued above. It is up to key executives to come up with a response, and they have to do so fast. In such a situation, learning is likely to be heavily mediated by politics. Given the great uncertainty, policy decisions may be based on false

assumptions, and diffusion processes may play an important role as policy-makers cast about for some viable responses. Initially, the high time pressure of the COVID-19 crisis forced key policymakers to rely on what [Radaelli \(2022\)](#) and [Kamkhaji and Radaelli \(2017\)](#) call “inferential learning,” i.e., on “trial-and-error.” There were a number of trials and a fair amount of errors. However, the COVID-19 crisis was not the first crisis that hit the EU more recently, which opens up the possibility that policymakers could rely on their experience with previous crises. We want to argue that they, indeed, did so. In this respect, yet another contingent factor was decisive for the German change of mind in the case of the NGEU fund and vaccination procurement: the fact that Germany was led in the COVID-19 crisis by the most seasoned politician in all the European member states—Angela Merkel, who had already been a key decision maker in the previous crises, the Eurozone crisis and the refugee crisis most notably, and who had arrived in the twilight of her long career at the time she was to preside over the NGEU negotiations. Faced with the pressure in favor of solidary solutions by public opinion in general and by the coalition of member states led by Germany’s traditional ally of France in particular, Merkel’s experience with the policy failures in the previous crises and the likelihood that this was her last chance to make a real difference may have contributed to her support for a fundamental policy shift, the creation of the NGEU Recovery fund and the joint procurement of vaccines—the closest thing to a third-order policy change in the COVID-19 crisis. We cannot be sure about this hunch, and it is impossible to substantiate it convincingly. However, as has been theorized by [Hall \(1993\)](#) with respect to third-order policy change in general, it is politicians and the media, not experts, who do the learning in such instances, and the process does not take place within the confines of the state. Therefore, what we expect and try to substantiate is an intensification of the public debate in relation to the two decisive policy shifts and a politicization of the policymaking process related to them.

## The impact of the COVID-19 crisis on bounding, binding, and bonding

### Bounding

We conceptualize the outcome of the crisis in Europe in terms of the three B’s. In terms of *bounding*, following [Schimmelfennig \(2021\)](#), we can distinguish between internal and external de- and rebordering ([Table 2.4](#)). Effective integration combines internal de-bordering with external rebordering, while

**Table 2.4** Bordering processes and integration outcomes

		External	
		Debordering	Rebordering
Internal	Debordering Rebordering	dilutive integration disintegration	effective integration defensive integration

internal rebordering combined with external de-bordering defines disintegration. Defensive integration corresponds to the combination of internal and external rebordering, and dilutive integration is equivalent to the combination of the two types of de-bordering. In the COVID-19 crisis, the lockdown measures of the member states led to internal and external rebordering, i.e., to a form of *defensive integration*, on a massive scale. These national lockdown measures called into question the internal market and the Schengen regime, i.e., the core elements of the EU. However, they were temporary and, to the extent that they shut down the free movement of goods, services, and people, they were, in fact, functional from the point of view of the containment of the common threat. While crucial in the short run, it is, therefore, likely that the COVID-19 crisis lockdowns have little impact on bounding in the long run.

As is observed by the Lancet Commission's report on lessons for the future from the COVID-19 pandemic (Lancet [Commission 2022](#)), European governments did not pursue a zero-COVID-19 strategy, nor did they aim to suppress the pandemic. Instead, they adopted a mitigation strategy that only attempts to slow the transmission of the virus. In fact, several countries in Western Europe saw large numbers of infections early in the pandemic—notably Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the UK. There was little testing in the first weeks of the outbreak, and a massive surge of cases occurred in March 2020. However, even if the focus was on flattening the curve rather than on ultimately suppressing the pandemic, European countries did adopt tough lockdown measures to lessen the pressure on hospitals early on in the first wave. Then, the decline in the number of cases in summer 2020 induced the governments to relax control measures, which led to another wave of infections across Europe in September 2020. This second wave gave rise to renewed restrictions and partial lockdowns throughout Europe, which again led to a decline in cases by June 2021. Once again, policies were eased in time for vacations in July 2021, setting the basis for a third wave in October 2021—this time due to the new Delta variant.

Binding

In terms of *binding*, we can distinguish between centralized capacity building, centralized coordination, decentralized capacity building, and fragmentation. Centralized capacity building shifts core state power bases—fiscal, administrative, and coercive resources—to the EU level, while decentralized capacity building reinforces these resources at the member state level. Centralized coordination reinforces binding regulation at the EU level, fragmentation reduces EU-level regulation and favors unilateral actions by the member states (Table 2.5). These developments are, in the first place, policy-specific, but they may have spillover effects for the polity as a whole. Note that this classification is deceptively simple. In reality, the different processes may not be mutually exclusive but may occur at the same time, reinforcing each other. Thus, under certain circumstances like the SURE reinsurance scheme during the COVID-19 crisis, capacity building at the center may, at the same time, serve to strengthen national capacities. Or the spillovers of fragmented unilateral action may actually provide the incentives for centralized coordination. Thus, the unilateral export bans on medical equipment induced the EU to intervene and coordinate the procurement of such equipment and, later on, of vaccines.

In the COVID-19 crisis, the member states at first all acted unilaterally and, as just described, put into question core elements of the EU with their lockdown measures. In spite of these early fragmented reactions, the EU was capable of introducing new forms of coordination and centralized capacity building. Thus, new forms of coordination between executive actors have been developed. Ladi and Wolff (2021: 36) argue that a policymaking mode emerged from the EU’s institutional response to the COVID-19 crisis that can best be described as “coordinative Europeanization.” This mode of coordination is neither purely intergovernmental nor exclusively supranational since it involves direct consultation between member states and the Commission for the elaboration of policies that would work for everyone.

Table 2.5 Processes of changing binding authority

	EU level	Member state level
Regulation	centralized coordination	fragmentation
Capacity building	centralized capacity building	decentralized capacity building

Interestingly, similar coordination mechanisms have been applied in the Brexit negotiations (Laffan and Telle 2023), in the joint vaccine procurement during the COVID-19 crisis (Becker and Gehring 2022), and in the capacity building in the public health domain (Ferrera, Kyriazi, and Miró 2024). Ferrera, Kyriazi, and Miró (2024) use the term “expansive unification” to characterize these new coordination mechanisms.

In the public health domain, where the EU hardly had any competencies before the crisis, it proceeded to the joint procurement of vaccines and the issuing of a Green Pass. It has introduced a series of reforms, including the extension of the mandates of the European Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority (HERA) and the regulation of serious cross-border threats to health. These are mainly examples of enhanced centralized coordination. In the economic domain, the EU already had considerable competencies—the integrated market is one of its core competencies, and monetary policy is in the hands of the ECB. In this domain, the crisis induced the EU not only to coordinate centralization measures such as the suspension of SGP and competition rules but also to centralize capacity building in the form of SURE, an instrument for the temporary support to mitigate unemployment risks in an emergency, and above all in the form of the NGEU Recovery fund. It is, however, too early to tell whether this example of centralized capacity building is permanent or only of a temporary nature (Fabbrini 2022). It is possible that capacity building in the short run may undermine capacity building in the long run. This has actually happened during the COVID-19 crisis in the economic policy domain, as we shall show in Chapter 7: the suspension of SGP and competition rules created a permissive context that allowed the member states with more limited fiscal capacity to face up to the economic crisis in the short run. However, by keeping a level playing field in the short run, these measures aggravated the fiscal capacities of the disadvantaged member states in the long term, sowing the seeds for future inequities down the road.

## Bonding

In terms of *bonding*, we need to distinguish between bonding as an enabling precondition of crisis management and bonding as an outcome of crises. Generally, bonding as an enlarged sense of community is an enabling precondition for crisis management. However, in the EU, such a sense of community, a collective identity, is rather limited, as are the means to enhance

such a sense of community. The EU citizens' collective identity remains fragile and shallow (Kuhn 2015; McNamara 2015). As argued by McNamara and Musgrave (2020), this lack of European collective identity is related to the absence of opportunities for political engagement of the Europeans at the EU level. Drawing on the experience of collective identity formation in the United States, they show the important role played by democratic practices and political contestation in the formation of a national identity in the US. They emphasize the role of the ratification process of the new 1787 Constitution in winning over the citizens for the new Union, as well as the subsequent role of the political parties in mobilizing the citizens in the electoral process, which created and reproduced American identity. Similarly, one could argue that the Swiss collective identity has been greatly strengthened by the regular national debates, which were unleashed by the direct-democratic votes on popular referenda and initiatives. As a result of the direct-democratic institutions, the Swiss public, although segmented into different language communities, has regularly debated the same national issues in similar ways (Tresch 2008), which contributed to the creation of a sense of national community across language regions. As already noted, with the end of the permissive consensus, political contestation of the EU has increased, driven by the radical Euroskeptics on the left and, above all, on the right. However, given the prevailing absence of partisan contestation at the EU level, this contestation has mainly been taking place in national politics and, instead of focusing the debate on the shaping of EU policies, risks to put into question the EU polity as such (Mair 2007; Mair 2013).

The fragile sense of community in the EU is mainly empathy-based, whereas bonding as an outcome of crisis policymaking relies on output legitimacy. Empathy-based legitimacy is enhanced by identity-based empathy and interdependence-based sympathy (i.e., "rational compassion," Genschel and Jachtenfuchs (2021: 9)). In contrast, output legitimacy is based on favorable policy outcomes, i.e., on policy feedback. Malet (2022) distinguishes between three mechanisms by which EU policies can affect public support for the EU:

- expansion of supranational competence in a policy field increases people's perceptions of policy interdependence;
- supranational policies are closer to citizens' preferences than the domestic policy output;
- distributive policies funded by supranational authorities provide material benefits to citizens.



We shall call the reinforcement of policy-based support for the EU “policy-based EU bonding” and distinguish it from “empathy-based bonding.” “Full EU-bonding” includes both types of bonding, while the lack of both types of bonding restricts bonding to the level of the nation-state. In the absence of EU bonding, there is no solidarity or identity formation beyond the nation-state. [Table 2.6](#) provides an overview of possible bonding processes in the EU.

Little is known about the bonding processes resulting from the European crises in general and from the COVID-19 crisis in particular. We know, however, that policymaking at the European level is generally not as salient for the citizens as policymaking at the national level. Moreover, even if people can distinguish between policy domains and are in general agreement with experts on the policy domains which the EU is responsible for, they have a hard time assigning responsibility to specific actors at the EU level, given the lack of clarity of responsibility in EU policymaking ([Hobolt and Tilley 2014](#)). Indeed, political conflicts at the European level are generally not as salient to the citizens as conflicts at the national level, and responsibility is more difficult to assign. However, the COVID-19 crisis and its management at the EU level have been unusually salient in the media, at least during the first wave, which means that we may expect the citizens to have become aware of the conflictive policymaking process involved in the management of the crisis (see [Chapter 9](#)). As a result, we expect a greater alignment between elites and the public for these issues than is usually the case for European policies and, therefore, a considerable effect on policy-based bonding. Given the symmetrical nature of the COVID-19 crisis, we also expect empathy-based bonding effects ([Chapter 11](#)). Individuals’ personal experiences during the pandemic are expected to trigger a strong sense of empathy with other EU citizens, which is likely to influence their demand for solidaristic policy strongly. In general, we expect to find signs for EU citizens to form a distinct community of solidarity, in line with the polity approach’s understanding of polity formation (see [Chapter 10](#)).

**Table 2.6** Bonding processes: EU solidarity and identity building

		Output legitimacy	
		Member state	EU
Empathy-based legitimacy	EU	empathy-based EU bonding	full EU-bonding
	Member state	absence of bonding beyond the nation-state	policy-based EU bonding



## The polity perspective and other integration theories

The main integration theories have some difficulties in accounting for the way the European Union has dealt with the series of crises that it has experienced in the more recent past, and more specifically, with the way it dealt with the COVID-19 crisis. Starting with liberal intergovernmentalism, [Schimmelfennig \(2018\)](#) suggests that its three-stage explanation of integration is easily transferable from noncrisis to crisis decision-making,<sup>1</sup> with the proviso that interdependence becomes particularly intense and acute under crisis conditions and that the member states which are hardest hit by the crisis find themselves in a weak bargaining position and prove to be most willing to compromise. Yet, he also points out that liberal intergovernmentalism lacks the tools to examine and explain integration crises as the endogenous results of earlier integration steps and the outcome of earlier crises. The theorizing of these endogenous dynamics has been the preserve of neofunctionalism, which focuses on the feedback processes of integration. “Spillovers” resulting from unanticipated and unintended consequences of integration processes gradually and incrementally reinforced the supranational agencies, which came to have independent binding authority in some policy domains. In those policy domains where the EU has important competencies, the role of EU actors in the policymaking process is generally greater than in domains where the EU has little competence. As argued by [Ferrara and Kriesi \(2022\)](#), in crises that hit domains with greater EU competence, the supranational actors, most notably the European Commission and the European Central Bank (ECB), have both the autonomy and the resources to preserve and expand European integration. In such domains, they can alleviate the pressure on the member states by temporarily suspending the EU rules, and they can use their capacities to come to the rescue of the member states.

The “failing-forward theory” by [Jones, Kelemen, and Meunier \(2016\)](#) links liberal intergovernmentalism and neofunctionalism to provide a coherent account of how the integration process creates crises and of how they are managed: lowest common denominator solutions (as predicted by liberal intergovernmentalism) lead to policy failures, which in turn sow the seeds for future crises, which then propel deeper integration through reformed but

<sup>1</sup> The three stages stipulate that (1) national integration preferences form in a context of international interdependence and domestic interest group conflict; (2) substantive policy agreements result from intergovernmental negotiations shaped by the constellation of issue-specific preferences and bargaining power; and (3) governments establish supranational institutions as instruments designed to secure the integrated policy.

still incomplete policies.<sup>2</sup> More recently, [Jones, Kelemen, and Meunier \(2021\)](#) have specified three conditions under which the failing forward dynamic unfolds. In addition to an all-purpose lock-in effect which, in line with historical institutionalist arguments, favors the preservation of existing institutions, they stipulate two conditions that coincide with those put into evidence by [Ferrara and Kriesi \(2022\)](#): first, the failing-forward dynamic is more likely if the crisis is intense, i.e., encompassing (i.e., symmetric and affecting many member states), unfamiliar and existential. Such a combination of factors may even push the integration process beyond the “failing forward” pattern ([Rhodes 2021](#)). Second, whether or not the dynamic is forthcoming depends on the policy-specific distribution of competencies: where supranational actors have no competence, they may not be in a position to exploit the crisis and push for deeper integration.

While building on the insight that all crises are not alike, there are obvious pitfalls in the failing-forward approach. It has an implicit teleological bent (implied by the notion of the “incompleteness” of policies/institutions/agreements), as well as a doom-loop bias, which does not allow for the possibility of the EU avoiding this critical development altogether or breaking out of it at any stage. Moreover, this approach neglects postfunctionalist insights and does not open the black box of the policymaking process.

Our polity approach is more closely related to historical institutionalism and postfunctionalism. Historical institutionalism shares some of the elements of neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism, but it also takes issue with both of them ([Pierson 1996](#)): like neofunctionalism, it recognizes unintended consequences. The current functioning of institutions cannot be derived from the aspirations of the original designers. However, it crucially differs from neofunctionalism because it does not perceive political control as a zero-sum phenomenon with authority gradually transferred from member states to supranational actors. Instead, it emphasizes “how the evolution of rules and policies along with social adaptations creates an increasingly structured polity that restricts the options available to all political actors,” including the options of member states ([Pierson 1996](#): 147). Like liberal intergovernmentalism, it recognizes the importance of intergovernmental coordination. However, what distinguishes historical institutionalism from liberal intergovernmentalism is that it emphasizes “the need to analyze the

<sup>2</sup> [Jones et al. \(2016\)](#) speak of “incomplete agreements” or “incomplete institutions” that may cause policy failure: what they contribute is an analysis that “combines causal mechanisms associated with grand theories of European integration how the EU sometimes deepens through cycles of policy failure” ([Jones et al. 2021](#): 1523).

consequences of the bargain over time” (p. 148). Among the factors creating unintended consequences of the bargains over time are not only (as mentioned by neofunctionalists) the partial autonomy of EU institutions (the Commission and the ECJ) but also the increasing issue density (leading to geometrically increasing interactions between actors and issues), shifts in government preferences over time (e.g., as a result of changing government composition), and resistance to change as a result of institutional obstacles (e.g. unanimity requirements), resistance of supranational authorities, and sunk costs (which render previously viable alternatives implausible and lead to non-decision-making).

This approach stresses *path dependence*, which implies that history matters, the timing and sequencing of events are crucial, and feedback processes play a key role (Pierson 2000). The most important implication of this approach is, however, “the need to focus on branching points and on the specific factors that reinforce the paths established at those points” (Pierson 2000: 263). These branching points are *critical junctures*, and crises certainly constitute possible critical junctures. Crises are “windows of opportunity” for profound institutional change, third-order change in Hall’s (1993) terminology. Capoccia (2015: 151) describes the logic of critical junctures: A series of exogenous events, such as the COVID-19 shock, lead to a phase of political uncertainty in which different options for radical change become viable. Antecedent conditions—the crisis situation—define the range of options but do not determine the alternative chosen. One option is selected, and this creates a long-lasting institutional legacy. When multiple options are available, political actors become important in determining which coalition forms in support of which option. At critical junctures, the decisions and choices of key actors are more open and more influential in steering political development than in normal times. This is in line with Baumgartner and Jones’s (2002) punctuated equilibrium model of policymaking.

Importantly, we build on this approach by arguing that *crisis situations* create specific conflict configurations combining conflicts at the national and the supranational level of the EU polity, which are critical for the way crises are dealt with in the EU polity and for the policy and polity consequences that result from crisis policymaking. It seems that integration theories generally lack a way to link the crisis situations or crisis origins to the subsequent integration processes. In line with Ferrara and Kriesi (2022), we posit that the missing link may be established by the policy-specific competence distributions and conflict configurations that emerge in the crisis situation and that determine the opportunities and constraints of the policymaking process during the crisis.

We also build on postfunctionalism and its notion that, in the EU integration process, the initial “enabling consensus,” allowing for “integration by stealth,” has been increasingly replaced by a “constraining dissensus.” Depoliticization often is no longer an option (Hooghe and Marks 2009). In the EU, the politicization process had already started before the poly-crisis set in. Moreover, it is not only characteristic of the EU, as is illustrated by the polarization of politics in the U.S. The consequences for policymaking have been very important. Politicization generally creates problems for the collective problem-solving process, as parties may be increasingly locked into a highly salient zero-sum contest for political dominance, and consensus-seeking becomes more difficult. As Hacker and Pierson (2019) point out for the U.S., the increasing polarization of politics and its accompanying changes have brought about a new political world where path-dependency theories need to be updated. Hacker and Pierson (2019: 16) particularly stress the implications for policy feedback on public opinion: a growing body of research demonstrates “that polarization makes it increasingly difficult to win over voters through policy initiatives if they are not aligned with a party. Sadly, this remains even true if the voters might benefit significantly from proposed initiatives.” Party labels and identities play an increasingly important role in how voters interpret even unmistakable realities. Post-functionalists expect this turn of events to put the brakes on the integration process, but Bressanelli, Koop, and Reh (2020: 331) suggest that the contemporary EU has space, too, for an “enabling dissensus.” In any case, it is no longer possible to shut out the public from the integration process, and it is quite necessary to include it in the process in order to complete “the passage to Europe” (van Middelaar 2014: 309).

As we already indicated, we expect partisan conflicts to be comparatively contained in the COVID-19 crisis, which is, in our view, one of the main reasons why problem-solving in this crisis was more enabled in this crisis than in preceding ones. This does not mean that problem-solving in this crisis did not give rise to specific conflict configurations, nor does it mean that the policymaking process has again become depoliticized during the crises that hit the EU.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have introduced our explanatory strategy, which crucially relies on the combination of an analysis of the crisis situation with an analysis of policymaking during the crisis. As we have argued, integration

theories generally lack a way to link the crisis situations or crisis origins to the subsequent integration processes. We have presented a three-layered argument that provides links between crisis situations and policymaking during crises and their possible consequences. First, we argued that the extreme problem pressure and the symmetry of the crisis incidence, which characterized the COVID-19 crisis situation, generally facilitated policymaking during this crisis by the EU and its member states as compared to previous crises. Second, we put into evidence the multifaceted character of the COVID-19 crisis, which was, above all, a dual crisis of public health and the economy. To account for variation across policy domains within the response to the COVID-19 crisis, we argued that the competence distribution between the weak center and the member states, in combination with the time horizon of the policymakers and the externalities of unilateral responses by the member states, determined the extent to which policy-specific joint solutions have been forthcoming. By determining the relevant policy domains and the possible externalities per domain, the crisis situation again exerts a determining influence on the possible domain-specific policy responses. Third, in line with the polity approach (Ferrera, Kriesi, and Schelkle 2023), we argued that the conflict configurations that emerge in the crisis situation determine the opportunities and constraints of the policymaking process during the crisis in a given policy domain. Even if, in the case of the COVID-19 crisis, the crisis situation did attenuate the master conflict between the weak center and the member states, it did not prevent the politicization of crisis-related conflicts during the policymaking in response to the crisis. However, given the characteristics of the crisis situation in the case of the COVID-19 crisis, the segmentation of international and national conflicts that derived from it, and the (contingent) restoration of the institutionalized power hierarchies in the course of the crisis, we expect that the politicization of these conflicts was more manageable than in other crises.

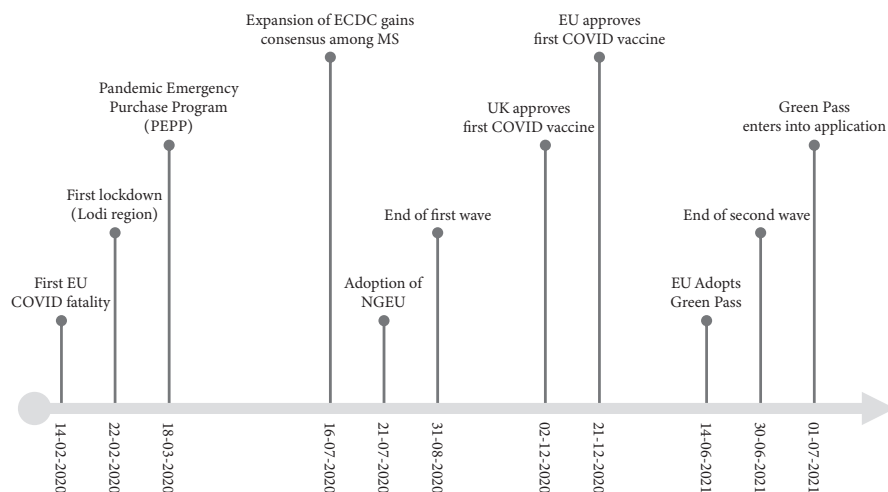
## Context and Methods

### Introduction

We started our book by highlighting that the COVID-19 crisis was an external shock of an unprecedented scale which, against all odds, resulted in a relatively successful demonstration of multilevel governance. In this chapter, we aim to provide an overview of how the pandemic unfolded against an unfavorable background and from an initially bungled start that stacked the odds against successful domain-specific policymaking and, eventually, polity-building.

We detail the timeline of the pandemic by splitting it into three waves corresponding to major policymaking turnarounds in the multifaceted policy domains that the crisis required solutions to. As [Figures 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3](#) show, all EU countries experienced three broad waves of infections, which can be characterized by different phases of policymaking. The first wave (March to August 2020) was marked by a high degree of uncertainty and ad hoc policymaking but also the landmark passing of the NGEU. The second wave (September 2020 to June 2021) was characterized by high infection and fatality rates in the lead-up to mass vaccination. The third wave (July 2021 to December 2021) saw the advent of mass vaccination and the Green Pass. We go into more detail on the three waves below when we highlight the peculiarities of policymaking in each. [Figure 3.1](#) shows major events and policy milestones in the two years of the pandemic covered by this book.

While any splitting of the two years of the pandemic into discrete episodes will inadvertently have an element of arbitrariness, we argue that such splitting adds greatly to our understanding of pandemic politics and the dynamics of polity-building. The deep uncertainty and short time horizon for action in the first wave were directly related to the inability of the EU to coordinate comprehensively member states on internal and external closures and restrictions (see [Chapter 5](#)). The second wave saw a crystallizing of conflict structures between and within member states over public health measures



**Figure 3.1** A timeline of the COVID-19 crisis in the EU.

Source: Author's elaboration.

and economic policy. Wave three, in turn, was characterized by a restructuring of these conflicts, primarily at the domestic level, due to the advent of vaccines and the new differential restrictions on the unvaccinated.

This chapter is structured into two main parts. In the next section, we detail the timeline of COVID-19 in the EU, as it was relevant for polity-building. We highlight the main actions that we go on to analyze in subsequent chapters. In the second part of the chapter, we describe the main data sources used in our analyses. The second section describes the data we use for the supply side of politics: policy process analysis (PPA). We describe the data collection process and present descriptive statistics of the public debates surrounding COVID-19 policy at the EU and national levels. The third section briefly describes the survey data we use to analyze the demand side of politics and public opinion. In the conclusion, we outline the use of the various data sources in subsequent chapters.

## Broader context and the breakout of the crisis

When COVID-19 hit Europe at the beginning of 2020, the odds were stacked against successful policymaking in the two key policy domains concerned by the crisis: economic policy and public health.

In what regards the economic domain, EU member states were still recovering after a long decade of crises that shook the union, from the great recession to the Euro area and refugee crises. Discussions of cross-national economic solidarity, debt mutualization, and cross-national economic were bound to open old wounds in the foundational controversy over “who owes what to whom” (Ferrera, Miró, and Ronchi 2021) and bring again to the fore the divide between Northern and Southern member states. While the EU had extensive competencies in economic matters, including internal market rules, agriculture, and monetary policy, fiscal policy mostly fell under the competencies of the member states, and before the crisis hit, there was little incentive for making changes in this domain as member states failed to find a common ground for solutions.

The EU had even more limited competencies on health matters. Health threat management at the EU level was limited to coordinating national responses rather than managing risks, while member states were the ones responsible for adopting measures related to containment or treatment (Deruelle and Engeli 2021). This limited coordination role was left in the hands of intergovernmental bodies such as the Health Security Committee (HSC) (the Council formation convening health ministries’ representatives) and to a limited extent the European Center for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC). The latter is of particular interest to us as, after its creation in 2003 as a result of the SARS outbreak, its mandate remained very limited, specifically excluding risk management (Greer and Mätzke 2012), which was left in the hands of member states and the HSC. The ECDC’s main function was, therefore, surveillance and the issuing of “guidance” (not “guidelines”) to member states, depriving it of any management role (Deruelle and Engeli 2021). As we shall see, COVID-19 brought important changes to the competencies of the ECDC.

Against this unfavorable background, in February 2020, what was hoped to remain a Chinese problem reached Europe. Cases started appearing in several European countries, with the disease not being taken seriously at the beginning and infections spreading silently in the absence of testing capacities and contact tracing infrastructure. February 14th marked the first European COVID-19 fatality registered in France, while February 15th marked the beginning of the first significant outbreak in Italy. Without much interest or support from other member states or the EU, the Italian governments scrambled and decided to place the Lodi region under quarantine on February 22nd. Two days later, Austria and Switzerland announced border restrictions.



## From chaos to action—first wave (March 2020—August 2020)

This first wave of the COVID-19 crisis marks the period from the first pandemic outbreaks to the EU's unprecedented agreement in the economic domain on the Recovery and Resilience Facility and to an expansion of its public health capacities (March–August 2020). The unprecedented proportions of the external shock hitting EU member states threw the union into a state of chaos characterized by belated and unilateral responses. However, once the symmetry of the crisis became apparent, and against the background of exceptional salience and politicization, the EU managed to get its act together. It was during this first wave that the puzzle of cooperative policies, despite a failed start and an unlikely background, became most pronounced.

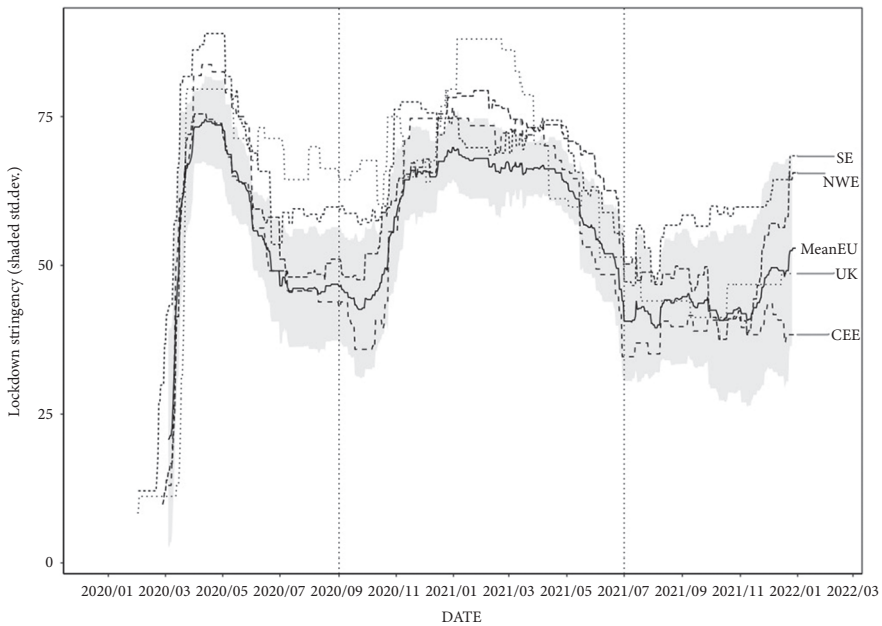
As COVID-19 reached Europe, March 2020 was defined, in the economic domain, by a wave of nonsolidaristic responses on the part of both member states and the EU, as many initially thought that it could remain largely an Italian problem. In the health domain, as the virus quickly started spreading to other countries, with each member state scrambling to contain the spread of the infections via stringent lockdowns and border closures a process of unilateral, internal bordering without a coordinated approach set in.

As Lombardy was suffering the worst outbreak in the world at the time, on March 3rd, France announced a ban on the export of personal protective equipment, triggering panic in Europe over supply.<sup>1</sup> Germany announced a similar ban, all unilaterally without EU coordination. The EU's initial response to Italy's cry for help came on March 12th as the European Central Bank's head, Christine Lagarde, made it clear that the ECB did not have an interest in providing economic relief for Italy ("We are not here to close spreads"). Following sharp market reactions, this decision was quickly backtracked, the ECB assuring that it would use 120 billion euros to help Italy and announcing the Pandemic Emergency Purchase Program (PEPP) for buying 750 billion EUR government and corporate debt on March 18<sup>th</sup>.<sup>2</sup> On March 25th, nine countries led by Italy, France, Spain, and Portugal called for a common debt instrument, "coronabonds," which Germany and the Netherlands vehemently opposed. At this point in time, the debates opened again the old wounds of cross-national solidarity and the North–South divide.

In the health domain, what was initially an Italian problem, quickly became a Europe-wide problem as the virus spread. As [Figure 3.2](#) shows, most member states scrambled, independently of how hard they were hit by the virus

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/coronavirus-european-solidarity-sidelined-as-french-interests-take-priority-1.4216184>.

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.ecb.europa.eu/press/pr/date/2020/html/ecb.pr200318\\_1~3949d6f266.en.html](https://www.ecb.europa.eu/press/pr/date/2020/html/ecb.pr200318_1~3949d6f266.en.html).

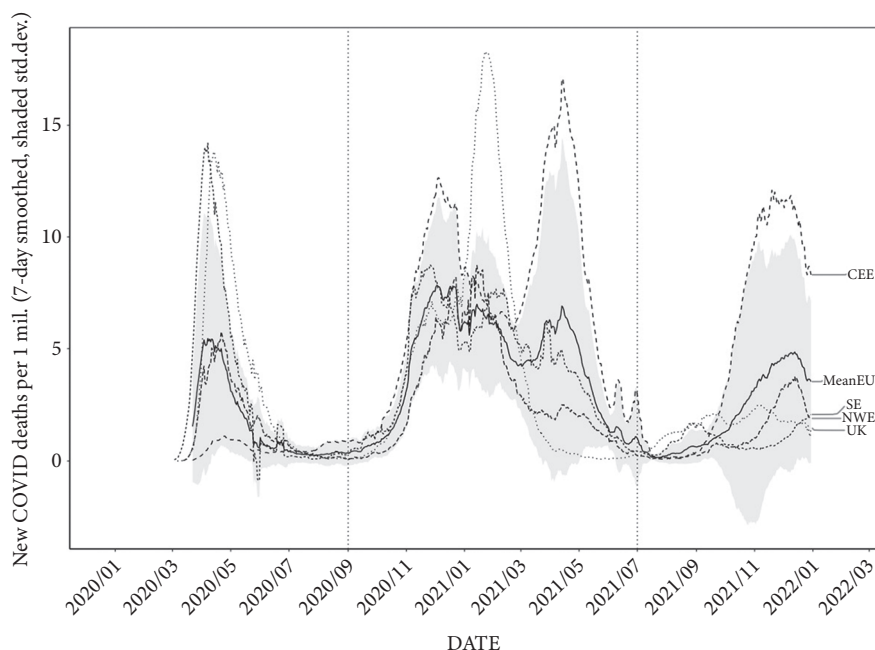


**Figure 3.2** Lockdown stringency across Europe.

*Note:* MeanEU—mean for EU countries included in the analysis (Germany, France, Poland, Hungary, Romania, Austria, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, UK); SE—Southern Europe; NWE—North-Western Europe; CEE—Central and Eastern Europe; UK—United Kingdom. Created using data from the Oxford Covid-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT).

and adopted lockdowns and border closures through a process of emulation. While the incidence of the problem pressure in terms of public health varied by countries (see Figure 3.3 on COVID-19 deaths), the public health threat was salient throughout (see Figure 3.4 in terms of salience in Google Trends and Figures 3.6 and 3.8 in terms of salience and politicization in the public debates), bringing about an exceptionally symmetric aspect to the crisis.

These measures were in place in most countries until the beginning of May, as infections and deaths subsided slightly. The consequences of these lockdowns were immediately felt across Europe leading to a drop in production and consumption, job losses, business failures, and calls for state intervention. By April 10th, the global GDP had fallen by 20 percent since January 2020, marking the biggest peacetime economic contraction experienced across the globe. However, Europe was experiencing this contraction unevenly/asymmetrically, which provided fertile ground for an initial lack of solidarity. While Italy and Spain experienced a 17.3 and 22 percent of GDP contraction, respectively, in the second quarter of 2020 compared to the same quarter in the preceding year, Germany and the Netherlands were fairing



**Figure 3.3** New COVID-19 deaths across Europe.

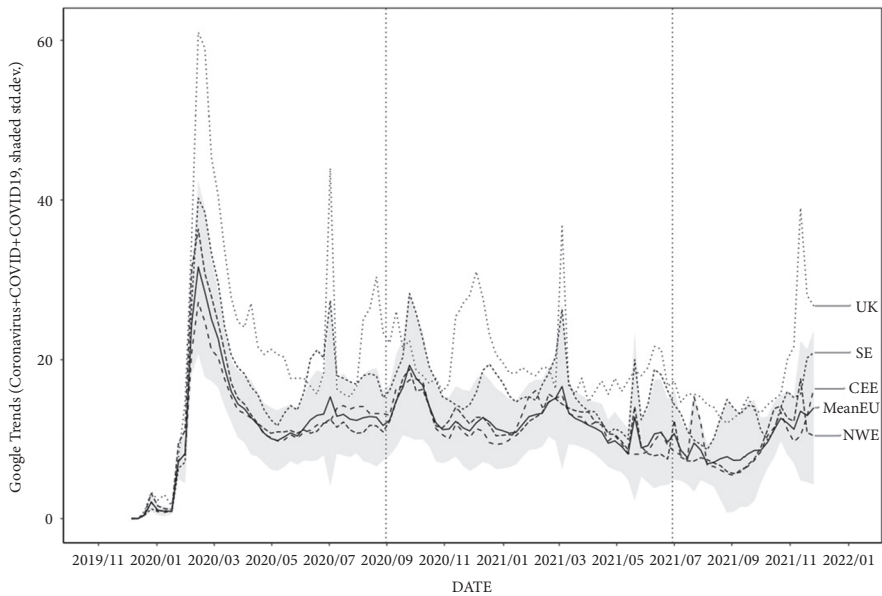
*Note:* MeanEU—mean for EU countries included in the analysis (Germany, France, Poland, Hungary, Romania, Austria, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, UK); SE—Southern Europe; NWE—North-Western Europe; CEE—Central and Eastern Europe; UK—United Kingdom. Negative rates appear as corrections in earlier declared rates.

*Source:* Created using data from The Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center (CRC).

relatively well with a contraction of “only” 11 and 9 percent, respectively.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, if the early spring brought about an impression of asymmetry in the economic domain, making it a least likely case for solidarity, by the beginning of the summer, it became clear that most member states would be heavily hit.

At this point, we would like to stress that this symmetry in both policy domains, even if to an extent subjective in terms of threat perceptions, gave rise not only to increased salience and politicization throughout Europe but also to an exceptional “rally-round-the-flag” phenomenon (Schraff 2021; Altiparmakis et al. 2021; Kritzinger et al. 2021). Public opinion across member states, irrespective of ideological leanings or political affiliations, was largely supportive of the respective governments and in favor of decisive action to combat the effects of the pandemic, as threat perceptions ran high.

<sup>3</sup> Source: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/10545332/2-14082020-AP-EN.pdf/7f30c3cf-b2c9-98ad-3451-17fed0230b57>.



**Figure 3.4** Public salience of COVID-19 in Google Trends (vertical lines separate the waves).

*Note:* MeanEU—mean for EU countries included in the analysis (Germany, France, Poland, Hungary, Romania, Austria, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, UK); SE—Southern Europe; NWE—North-Western Europe; CEE—Central and Eastern Europe; UK—United Kingdom.

*Source:* Created using data from Google Trends.

This created favorable conditions for enhanced bonding on the demand side both horizontally (between member states) and vertically (toward the EU), while setting the tone for capacity building in both domains.

In the economic domain, EU leaders began working on a recovery fund on April 23rd. On May 18th, Merkel announced, together with Macron, their support for a large reconstruction and resilience fund of 750 billion EUR. While they met with initial resistance from the Frugal Four group (Austria, Netherlands, Denmark, and Sweden) and after lengthy negotiations on the shape it would take, on July 21st, the adoption of the recovery fund was announced consisting of 750 billion EUR, 390 as grants and 360 as loans, issued with joint debt. This marks a moment of capacity building not by what was previously described as “failing forward” or solidarity by stealth but a binding moment of solidarity by choice through a transparent EU solidaristic mechanism with debt at the center rather than simply back-door quantitative easing or reinsurance mechanisms.

At the same time, in the health domain, the summer also saw a process of conversion of the ECDC, indicating an increased role of the EU in the

management of health threats (Deruelle and Engeli 2021). On June 10th, Denmark, France, Germany, Spain, Belgium, and Poland launched a plea to widen the ECDC's mandate and create a future EU health task force (Momtaz, Deutsch, and Bayer 2020), a plea which gained consensus among member states on July 16th. The ECDC also produced a paper for a COVID-19 vaccination plan, which was quickly taken up by the Commission, which presented a draft blueprint of this plan on June 12th.

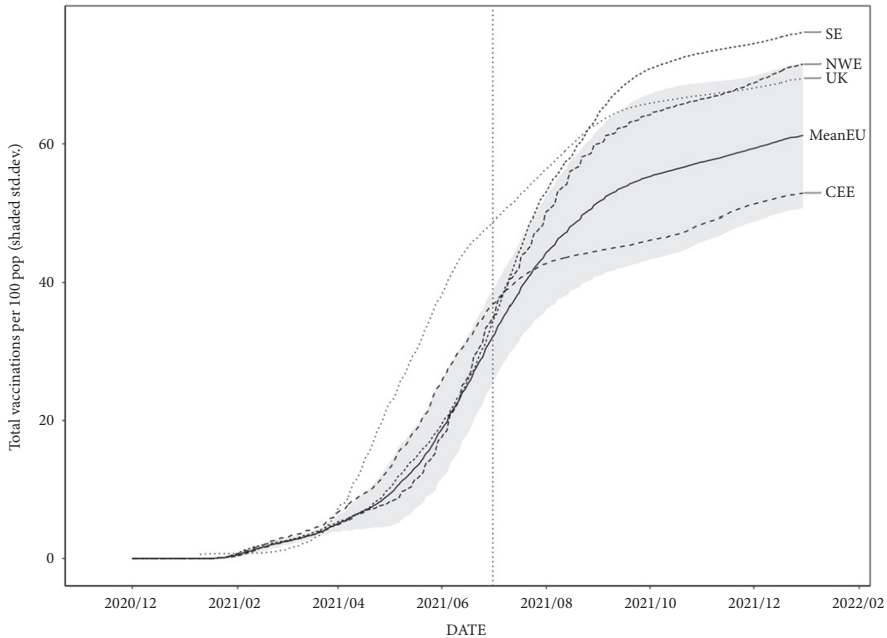
## The vaccination race—second wave (September 2020—June 2021)

If the first wave marked an exceptional moment of capacity building in the economic domain as a response to a symmetric shock that favored a common response against the background of increasing bonding, the second wave of the COVID-19 crisis brought about equally bold advances in the public health domain, where the EU clearly had more limited competences.

After the summer break, which meant a loosening of restrictions due to subsiding health problem pressures, infections and fatalities started rising again in September (see Figure 3.3). Following in each other's footsteps, most European member states adopted lockdowns again at the beginning of the autumn. This second wave of the pandemic made it clear that until the vaccination roll-out started, it would be hard to catch a break.

Following a similar pattern of initial stumbling and then getting its act together as in the first wave, the EU was initially lagging behind the US and the UK in its common vaccine procurement strategy. The US invested much more heavily than the EU and had more favorable guarantees for companies (it would buy the vaccine even if not effective and would not hold companies liable for side effects). In comparison, the EU tried to bargain and had stricter requirements regarding the effectiveness of the vaccines. This set the stage for the EU to start the vaccine administration late and with delays in supply, further amplified by a conflict with AstraZeneca, which prioritized its supply to the UK over the EU. As a result, while the US and UK started vaccination already in December, the EU started its roll-out only in January (see Figure 3.5).

However, the EU quickly managed to catch up in the spring and summer of 2021. The vaccination rollout starkly contrasts the conflicts over protective equipment in the first wave of the crisis. EU member states managed to coordinate in pooling funds for access to vaccines (apart from Hungary and Slovakia that unilaterally relied also on Chinese and Russian vaccines).



**Figure 3.5** Cumulative COVID-19 vaccinations across Europe (fully vaccinated people per 100).

*Note:* MeanEU—mean for EU countries included in the analysis (Germany, France, Poland, Hungary, Romania, Austria, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, UK); SE—Southern Europe; NWE—North-Western Europe; CEE—Central and Eastern Europe; UK—United Kingdom.

*Source:* Created using data from The Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center (CRC).

Additionally, in a process of emulation, member states decided on vaccine prioritization domestically according to age and occupation (emergency workers, health workers, educational workers, etc.).

Nevertheless, while the hallmark of 2020 was increased capacity building in both the economic and public health domains, toward the end of the year and the beginning of 2021, it became clear that this moment of solidarity and unity was rather exceptional. Economically, the exceptional moment of the announcement of the Recovery and Resilience Facility was quickly followed by further debates: in November 2020, Hungary and Poland attempted to block the approval of the EU's seven-year budget and the recovery fund. Both countries opposed a new rule of law mechanism attached to the EU funds, which would allow for the suspension of EU funds in case of mishandling European money or breaching EU principles. In terms of public health, while benefiting from an equal start in the European vaccination race, the Eastern European countries started lagging behind. Finally, more generally across European regions, an anti-vaccination and anti-restrictions minority became more vocal, leading to increased protest and contestation.

While these patterns signaled trouble for coordinated policymaking, the EU remained steady in its tracks in both domains. Two factors may serve as an explanation. On the one hand, opposition to the pandemic response in both domains was coming only from a small minority in contrast to other crisis where conflict was more widespread. Furthermore, as shown in [Chapter 4](#), while salience was high initially at the EU level, in the later stages of the crises, it dropped, with more salience being observed at the domestic, within member states level. On the other hand, the heterogeneity between EU member states was markedly smaller than that experienced within other polities which required interstate coordination, such as the US or even within Germany.

### **Bounding coordination and the Green Pass—third wave (July 2021–December 2021)**

The first two waves of the COVID-19 crisis represented extraordinary moments of bonding—community-building—and binding—capacity building. The most important characteristic of the crisis' third wave from our polity perspective is the advances in establishing a coordinated approach to bounding (i.e., border politics, travel restrictions) based on a common vaccination Green Pass.

As vaccination rates in the EU (except for Eastern European countries—see [Chapter 6](#) for a case study and explanation of this trajectory) started exceeding the UK and US rates, member states set out to introduce Green Pass requirements. Various levels of restrictions and lockdowns for the unvaccinated were introduced, such as vaccination requirements for work or for the elderly. If the first two waves of the pandemic experienced unilateral internal bordering, coordinated internal debordering took place in this third wave. This change was not based simply on unilateral decisions by member states but on a common EU Digital COVID-19 Certificate Regulation, adopted on June 14th at the union level for the interoperable acceptance of COVID-19 vaccination, test, and recovery certificates to facilitate free movement (Regulation (EU) 2021/953).

At the same time, countries started to experience unequal vaccination rates due to varying rates of compliance with vaccination regulations, and hence they also started having highly unequal pandemic pressure (see [Figure 3.3](#)) from the new Delta variant. The emulation process in terms of lockdowns also subsided as countries adopted very different strategies in dealing with

the new variant that did not necessarily follow the intensity of the pandemic pressure but were also due to political domestic factors (see the fanning out in [Figure 3.2](#) and [3.5](#)).

## Using Policy Process Analysis for the study of the COVID-19 crisis

### Applying PPA to the COVID-19 crisis

In this section, we provide a more detailed timeline for the policymaking during the COVID-19 crisis, based on our own indicators, which we introduce here. These indicators form the basis for the analysis of [Chapter 4](#) and of binding in Part II of the book.

One of the main methods we rely on for studying the evolution of the 3B's throughout the COVID-19 crisis in this book is Policy Process Analysis (PPA) ([Bojar et al. 2023](#)). PPA intends to be a comprehensive method for the data collection and analysis of policymaking debates. As such, PPA aims at capturing the public face of policymaking, that is, the subset of actions in a policymaking process that are presented to the general public through the mass media. The method relies on analyzing media data based on systematic hand-coding of indicators related to the actors involved in the policy debate, the forms of action they engage in, the arena where the actions take place, the issues addressed, and the frames used to address these issues. The resulting data set allows for the construction of more aggregate indicators at different levels of analysis (at the episode level, the actor level, at different time units) for studying the policymaking debate and the political dynamics surrounding it from multiple angles, both statically and over time.

In its design, PPA draws upon political claims analysis (PCA) ([Koopmans and Statham 1999](#)) but has essentially a supply-side focus on policymaking rather than contention. Additionally, it also builds upon other methods previously employed to study protest events (Protest Event Analysis (PEA), see [Hutter 2014](#); [Kriesi et al. 2024](#)) or contentious politics (Contentious Episodes Analysis (CEA), see [Bojar et al. 2021](#); [Bojar and Kriesi 2021](#)) by making use of the systematic coding of media data. Like these other methods, at its core, PPA is an event-based methodology that focuses on identifying distinct *actions*, undertaken by a variety of *actors*, addressing particular *issues*, and how they unfold over time. However, while PEA and CEA are usually limited to identifying either actions in the form of protest events, or actions



initiated by a limited set of actors (government vs. challengers) to study mostly contentious politics, PPA enlarges the empirical scope to the study of the entire policy debates.

PPA is also related to another approach to the study of policymaking processes—the Comparative Policy Agendas (CPA) project (Baumgartner, Green-Pedersen, and Jones 2006). However, rather than focusing particularly on the agenda-setting phase of policymaking as the CPA, PPA systematically incorporates into a single framework information about all the major components of a policy debate, ranging from formal steps in the policymaking process to administrative and nonstate actions but also protest events and even single verbal claims. Due to its goal of studying both the politics and the policymaking surrounding a particular episode, the actors documented in PPA are also not restricted to governments only but include all actors involved in the debate—political parties, civil society actors, supranational actors, and third-country actors.

Given these characteristics, PPA offers unique advantages in the study of the 3B's. First, PPA allows for the analysis of the evolution of binding, that is, capacity building and regulation at the EU and member state levels, given its broad empirical scope in systematically reconstructing the various policy debates at the two levels. Additionally, given its aim at the middle ground between quantitative and qualitative approaches, PPA allows to combine systematic, comparative indicators of the various aspects of policymaking (i.e., the extent of executive decision-making, the involvement of various types of actors at the two levels and in various policy domains) with the reconstruction of the narrative chronology of these policy debates by the use of a rich body of qualitative evidence that allows us to draw conclusions on the extent and nature of capacity building during the COVID-19 crisis. Second, given its systematic approach to integrating a wide variety of actors involved in these debates, PPA is also well suited to capturing bonding at the supply side by allowing us to capture the positions of actors toward issues and toward one another, as well as the evolution of their coalitions over time.

## The collection and scope of our COVID-19 PPA data

Given our perspective of the EU as a multilevel, compound polity involving both dynamics at the EU level and asymmetrical and interdependent relations between member states, and domestic dynamics, our PPA data documents the policy debates during the COVID-19 crisis at both the EU level and in selected member states. Aiming to cover a wide diversity of cases in

terms of the crisis situation (the level of problem pressure in the public health and economic domains) and region within the EU, we focused our data collection on ten member states: the Franco-German couple, three members of the Frugal Four (Austria, the Netherlands, and Sweden), the UK (during the first two waves of COVID, until December 2020, the UK and EU were still negotiating their Trade and Cooperation Agreement), two Southern European (Italy and Spain) and two Eastern European countries (Poland and Romania).

Temporally, as mentioned above, we coded all policy actions (irrespective of policy domain) related to COVID-19 taking place in the period March 2020 to December 2021. Following the epidemiological waves of the crisis, but also corresponding to major policymaking phases, we split this period into three waves: Wave 1 (March 2020–August 2020), Wave 2 (September 2020–June 2021), and Wave 3 (July 2021–December 2021). While in Wave 1 we analyze all the ten countries mentioned above, in subsequent waves, given resource limitations, we focused on six of them, representative of regional variety and problem pressure incidence: Germany, France, Spain, Italy, Poland, and the UK.

Having set the scope of our data collection, the first step in constructing our PPA data set consisted of defining and gathering the media corpus to be analyzed. Depending on the level of policymaking, we selected either international news sources (for the EU level) or, respectively, national news sources (for the level of the member states). We used the news aggregator platform Factiva for document retrieval as it provided us access to many media outlets allowing for systematic multicountry comparison together with transparent and replicable selection criteria on the source. Following good practice in working with media data from methods such as Protest Event Analysis (Hutter 2014; Kriesi et al. 2024), we also tried to engage with issues of *selection bias* (e.g., Earl et al. 2004; Ortiz et al. 2006), that is, with the biases associated with news source selection and their coverage of debates, actions, or events. In order to mitigate such biases, we adopted several strategies. First, we relied on a wide variety of media sources, rather than a single source, to be able to capture as many aspects of the policy debates as possible. Second, as just mentioned, in order to mitigate biases related to newsworthiness and proximity, we selected news sources that are proximate to the level of analysis: for EU debates, we focused on large new agencies (Agence France-Presse, The Associated Press, Reuters, Financial Times, Euronews, ANSA, BBC, MTI), while for national debates we relied on national media. Third, in order to mitigate biases related to the political motives of the various sources and their potential impact on news coverage, we selected news sources on different sides

of the political spectrum. Consequently, for each of country, we aimed to select one major newspaper left of center and one right of center in terms of ideological leaning (with some minor exceptions related to data availability).

After selecting the news sources, the second decision related to corpus construction consisted of the identification of the keywords used for the retrieval of articles. One of the main considerations at this step was achieving a balanced relevance ratio—the ratio between false positives (irrelevant articles that the keyword combination retrieved as positive hits) and false negatives (relevant articles that the keyword combination filtered out as negative hits). Since our data is manually coded, we aimed for a relatively slim but robust corpus. That is, our corpus ought to be manageable in terms of the number of articles identified in order not to make the coding process too cumbersome and resource intensive but should still allow us to capture the full range of actions in a given country without missing relevant articles filtered out by a too restrictive keyword combination. In practical terms, the selection of keywords was performed by the authors of the book in close collaboration with a team of native-language-speaking coders (mostly comprising political science PhD students also knowledgeable about the subject at hand).<sup>4</sup> At this stage, we took advantage of the capabilities of the news aggregator Factiva, which allowed us to construct complex search strings using Boolean algebra and its standard logical operators.

After having constructed the corpus, the last step in the PPA coding process consisted of action coding. As already mentioned, PPA is an event-based methodology, and hence, the unit of observation at the level of which the data is collected is an action. An action in our framework is defined as “an act, or a claim by an actor with a prominent role in the political world that has a direct or indirect relevance for the policy debate” (Bojar et al. 2023). Therefore, within our framework, actions can be steps in the policymaking process, verbal claims, protest events, and other types of actions that we describe throughout the subsequent chapters. In order to measure the various features of actions, action coding is based on a common core of variables that are coded for each of the actions in each episode: the arena where the action takes place, its (procedural) form, its (substantive) type of engagement with the policy, its overall direction vis-à-vis the policy, its direction vis-à-vis target actors, the organizational characteristics of the actor undertaking them, the organizational characteristics of the target actor, the issues it engages with, and the normative frames used by actors to present their

<sup>4</sup> The keyword selection consisted of translated versions of the following string: (coronavirus or covid) and (law\* or measure\* or decree\* or decision\*) and (European Union\*), where the European Union was replaced with member state names for the coding of policy actions at the member state level.

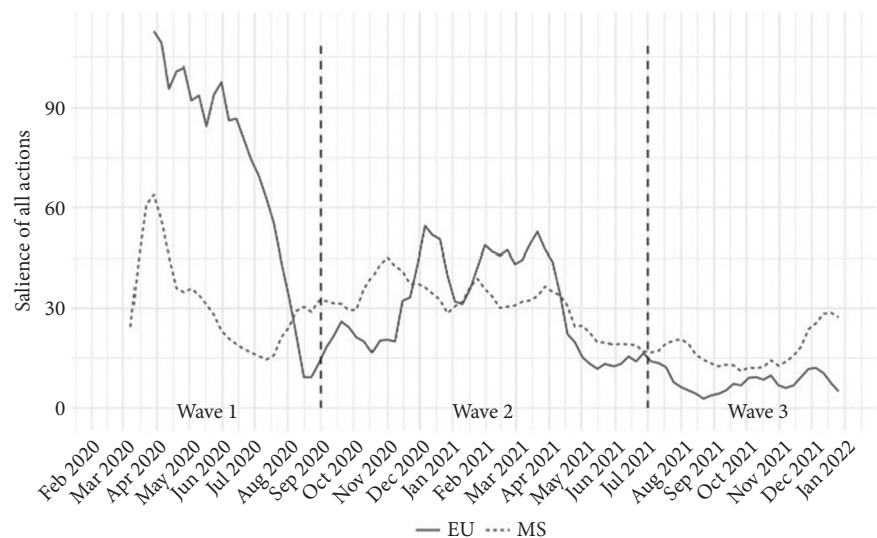
positions to the public (Bojar et al. 2023). Note that while the lowest level of observation is an action, the unit of analysis at which we draw conclusions can be pitched at any level of aggregation (actor types, issue categories, types of countries, etc.) as needed in the subsequent chapters.

Using this procedure, our team has identified a total of 21,245 codable actions. Out of these, 3,355 actions were coded at the EU level, and 17,890 at the member state level. We had 8,785 actions coded in Wave 1 for ten countries and the EU, 9,420 actions coded in Wave 2 for six countries and the EU, and 3,040 actions coded in Wave 3 for six countries and the EU. In what follows we present some basic descriptives of our PPA data with the aim of further illustrating its scope.

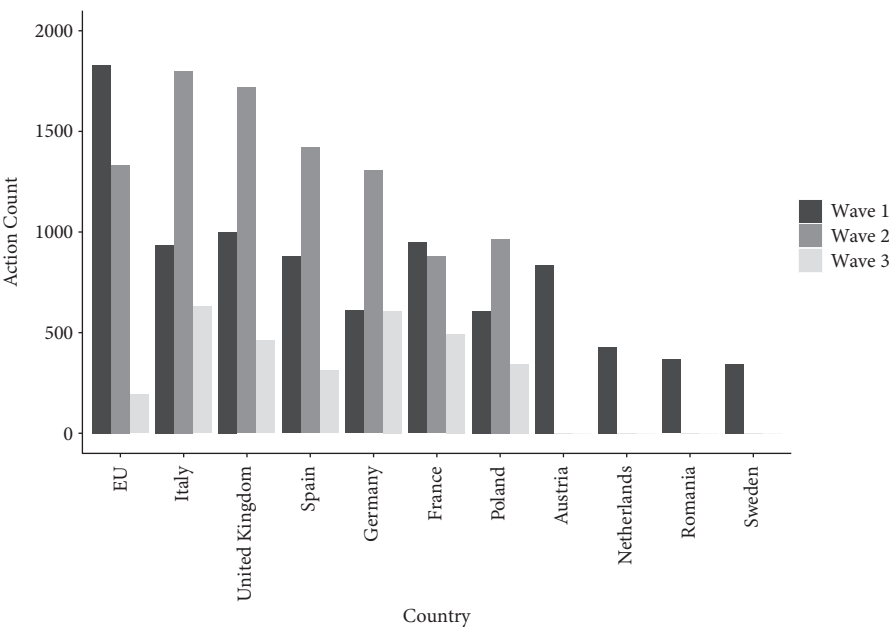
## Outline of the public debate in the COVID-19 crisis

Figure 3.6 reports the weekly salience of the policy debates in the COVID-19 crisis, that is the number of coded actions by level. We see a very similar distribution to the Google trends data in Figure 3.3. The beginning of the crisis saw a peak of salience amid the novelty and uncertainty of the situation. The second wave saw the brunt of actions as member states and the EU attempted to contain the long-term economic and health fallout of the crisis, while the third wave shows lower salience. Whereas for Google trends, we could look at the average of the EU member states (and individual member states) only, our PPA data allows us to look directly at the EU level and distinguish it from the national one.

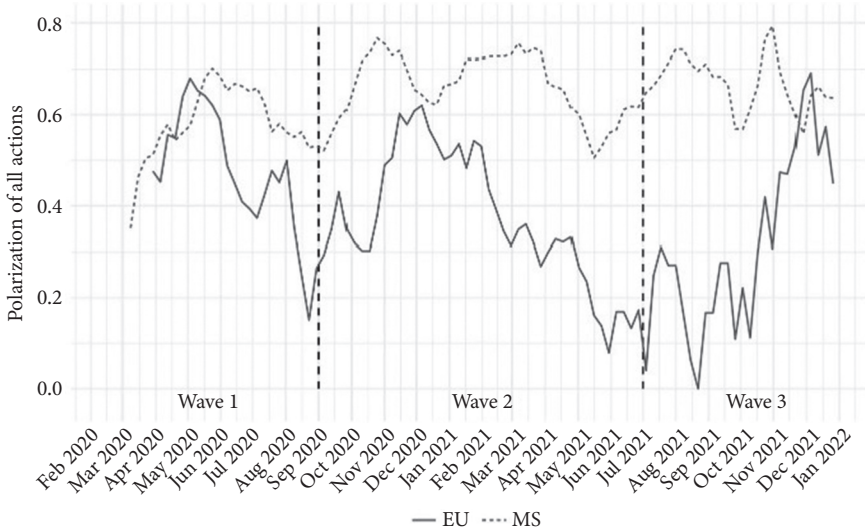
At the EU level, we see that the lion's share of actions, and hence the salience of the COVID-19 policymaking debates, were taken in the first two waves, with a big drop in actions in Wave 3. At the average member state level, while Wave 1 experienced a high salience peak at the onset of the crisis in March and April 2020, the bulk of the actions were concentrated in Wave 2. As we will see in the subsequent chapters, in Wave 1, most countries adopted lockdowns without much debate, in a process of regulatory emulation. Economic measures were still in their incipient phase. It was in Wave 2 that public health measures came under more scrutiny and most of the economic measures were adopted. Figure 3.7 reports the salience of the policy debates in the COVID-19 crisis broken down by each member state and by wave. Southern countries and the UK, the countries facing the most severe problem pressure, also had the most active policy debates, while North-Western and Central-Eastern countries had relatively fewer actions in all three waves.



**Figure 3.6** Weekly salience during the COVID-19 crisis.  
*Source:* Created using data from the ERC SOLID COVID PPA data set.



**Figure 3.7** Number of coded actions by level, country, and wave in the PPA data.  
*Source:* Created using data from the ERC SOLID COVID PPA data set.



**Figure 3.8** Weekly polarization during the COVID-19 crisis.

Source: Created using data from the ERC SOLID COVID PPA data set.

In terms of how polarizing<sup>5</sup> these debates were, we can see that domestic debates within the member states were generally more polarizing than the EU-level debates (see Figure 3.8), being almost constantly polarizing throughout the three waves. At the EU level, polarization experienced more ebbs and flows. In Wave 1, polarization at the EU level peaked in May 2020, corresponding to the ongoing discussions surrounding “coronabonds.” In Wave 2, polarization peaks in December 2020, just as the initial vaccination rollout failure and rows with AstraZeneca play out. Finally, Wave 3, in spite of the fact that it was characterized by the lowest salience (the lowest number of actions in Figure 3.7), still experienced high polarization, peaking in December 2021.

## The demand side: survey data

While PPA serves as the basis for Part II, our analyses of bonding in Part III will be based on surveys, which we briefly introduce in this section. We rely on four main surveys in our analysis. The first three are standalone surveys

<sup>5</sup> The polarization measure used here is based on the issue direction variable in our PPA data. This variable marks each action undertaken by an actor as positive, negative, or neutral depending on its position towards the issue involved. Polarization is measured using the formula  $(\text{no. of positive actions} / \text{no. of actions}) * (\text{no. of negative actions} / \text{no. of actions}) / 0.25$ .

conducted within the scope of the SOLID ERC project, while the final was part of a collaborative effort led by a team at Sciences Po.

## COVID-19 Survey 1

The first survey was conducted in seven countries (France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom). Interviews were administered between the 5th and the 22nd of June 2020 on national samples obtained using a quota design based on gender, age classes, macro-area of residence (NUTS-1), and education. The total sample size for the survey was 7,579, with national sample sizes varying between 1,033 and 1,169.

## Crisis Comparison Survey

The second was fielded in sixteen EU member states between June and July 2021, at the beginning of the third wave of the pandemic. The national samples, consisting of more than 2,000 respondents, were obtained using a quota design based on gender, age, area of residence, and education. The total sample size is 34,200 respondents.

## COVID-19 Survey 2

The third survey was conducted in eight EU countries (Germany, Netherlands, Spain, Italy, France, Sweden, Poland, and Hungary). Interviews were administered between the 20th and the 30th of December 2021 on national samples obtained using a quota design based on gender, age classes, macro-area of residence (NUTS-1), and education. The total sample size for the survey was 8,916, with national sample sizes varying between 1,067 and 1,304.

## CAUCP Survey (SPO data)

The fourth survey consists of a panel data set collected in the ‘Comparative Attitudes Under Covid19 Project’ (CAUCP), which looked at attitudes to the pandemic in eleven advanced democracies during 2020 and 2021 (Brouard *et al.* 2022). Of the eleven countries included, we focus on the EU countries present, namely Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, and Sweden.

The survey consists of a five-wave panel conducted using Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) on a quota sample, stratified by age, gender, occupation, and region. The five waves were fielded in mid-March 2020, mid-April 2020, end of June 2020, early December of 2020, and late June–early July 2021. The total sample size available to us was 37,000. Panel data collected at these key points during the first two waves of the pandemic allow us to see the temporal dynamics of support and satisfaction with specific policies at the EU level.

In addition to these data sources, we use a wide variety of contextual data as well as other publicly available survey data, which we introduce in each respective chapter.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have detailed the timeline of actions during the two years of the COVID-19 pandemic that make up the study period of our book. We have seen that COVID-19 was a crisis of extremely high salience, visible across our data sources. Salience tracked the severity of the pandemic, but also policymaking at the EU and national levels.

We then introduced our supply-side data tracking the debate around policymaking at the EU and national levels (PPA). This systematic data forms the basis for the analysis of politicization in the following chapter. In Part II of the book, we break down the data by each major policy field in order to investigate why the EU built capacity or coordination mechanisms in some areas and not in others. We therefore look at border closures and lockdowns (Chapter 5), public health (Chapter 6), economic support for businesses and households (Chapter 7), and EU-level macroeconomic policy (Chapter 8).

Finally, we briefly outlined the original survey data that we use to analyze the demand side of policymaking. This forms the basis of our analysis in Part III of the book. We first consider how individuals perceive transnational conflict (Chapter 9). We then use original experimental data in order to test the bounds of solidarity in the EU (Chapter 10). Finally, we use all three data sources for a systematic exploration of mechanisms behind bonding in the EU during COVID-19 (Chapter 11).



# The Politicization of Policymaking During the COVID-19 Crisis

## Introduction

Crises are highly salient public events. As we have observed already in the introduction, even in this exceptional category of events, the COVID-19 crisis is in a class of its own. It was one of the biggest news stories ever (The Economist, 19/12/2020). Only the world wars rival COVID-19's share of news coverage. The exceptional character of the COVID-19 crisis bears repeating since its extraordinary salience influences any result about policymaking processes that we report in this and subsequent chapters. In the present chapter, we begin by documenting this extraordinary character of the crisis at the aggregate level based on our PPA data. Then, we move on to introduce the key protagonists of the policymaking process at the two levels of the EU polity during the crisis. In the third step, we present the issues the policymaking was all about, and finally, we describe the configuration of conflict at the EU level and the level of the member states.

In this chapter, we rely on the concept of politicization for the overall characterization of policymaking at the two levels of EU polity. As has been observed by [Hutter and Grande \(2014: 1002\)](#), politicization has become a key concept in European integration studies, since [Hooghe and Marks \(2009\)](#) put it at the center of their postfunctionalist theory. Integration theory, in turn, reacted to the transformation of the EU polity: if the EU institutions have operated as an “anticipatory de-politicization machine” in the past ([Schimmelfennig 2020: 345–7](#)), with the transition from the Community to the Union and the accompanying transition from “rules-based” to “event politics,” from the common market to a system of interweaving in which “European” and “national” politics are increasingly hard to separate (van [Middelaar 2019: 167](#)), European policymaking has generally not only become more eventful, but also more subject to public scrutiny. In other words, with the expansion of the scope of conflict in European policymaking, as [Schattschneider \(1975\)](#) would have argued, it became more publicly

salient. We characterize the politicization of policymaking processes as the expansion of the scope of conflict in terms of salience and polarization of a given policymaking process. More specifically, we define it as the product of salience and polarization, which means that we speak of the politicization of a policymaking process to the extent that it involves both public visibility and polarization of the actors' issue-specific positions.<sup>1</sup>

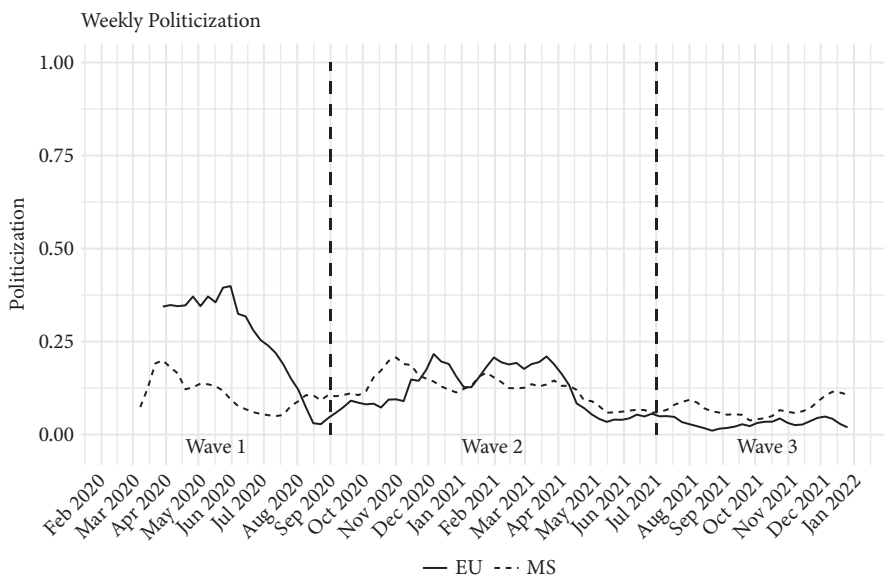
As argued by [Grande and Kriesi \(2016\)](#), the overall pattern of politicization of the European integration process can best be understood as a process of “punctuated politicization” in which a significant but limited number of singular events produce high levels of political conflict for shorter periods. These authors argue that the politicization hypothesis, as advanced by post-functionalists, needs substantial revision since there has neither been a single uniform process of politicization nor has there been a clear trend over time. For our purposes, however, it is important that crises constitute such singular events when the politicization of policymaking is enhanced, with potentially important consequences for the European integration process in terms of the three B's.

## The COVID-19 crisis, a crisis in a class of its own

With hindsight, we can see that the global pandemic began in earnest in the third week of February 2020. Starting on February 15, outbreaks were registered in Italy, South Korea (which reacted with exceptional promptness and achieved suppression through mass testing and quarantine, catching the epidemic in its early stages), and Iran ([Tooze 2021](#): 71). In Italy, Lodi, a small town in Lombardy, was put under quarantine on February 22. On February 25, Italy asked its European partners for help, but the fellow member states first looked after themselves with no time to come to the aid of Italy. Thus, on March 3, France banned exports of personal protective equipment (PPE), triggering a European race to secure equipment. On the same day, the EU leadership focused on the pressure of refugees seeking to enter the EU in Greece, at the instigation of Turkish President Erdoğan: visiting Greece's border with Turkey, European Commission President van der Leyen, European Council President Charles Michel, and European Parliament President David Sassoli declared their solidarity with Greece, but on an entirely different issue.

<sup>1</sup> This conceptualization is broadly in line with the understanding of the concept of politicization in the literature (e.g., de Wilde, Leupold, and Schmidtke 2016; Hoeglenger 2016; Hutter and Grande 2014;

Europe, indeed, reacted belatedly to the pandemic. But it was not alone in coming late; the pandemic struck most governments by surprise, not only in Europe. As is observed by [Tooze \(2021: 91\)](#), the reaction in Europe and elsewhere was triggered in an ad hoc fashion, country by country, city by city, one organization and business at a time. However, following the market panic of March 9 and the WHO announcement of March 11, global momentum was built, and the EU subsequently responded with surprising speed. [Figure 4.1](#) presents the development of the politicization of crisis-related policymaking at the two levels of the EU polity. For the member states, we present the average politicization in six countries—France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Poland, and the UK. The vertical dashed lines in the figure separate the three waves of the pandemic in Europe—the first wave, lasting from March to August 2020; the second wave, from September 2020 to June 2021; and the third wave, from July 2021 to the end of 2021. If anything, in early March, the politicization



**Figure 4.1** The politicization of the COVID-19 crisis at the two levels of the EU polity, weekly data (three-weekly running averages).

*Note:* The politicization index ranges from 0 to 1. Both of its components take on values between 0 and 1. The maximum salience and polarization are calculated per week, and since the two maximum values are not reached in the same week, the empirical maximum of the product of the two components (smoothed) is 0.45.

*Source:* Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set.

Rauh 2016; Statham and Trenz 2013), except for the fact that other authors also add a third element to the combination of salience and polarization—the expansion of the range of actors involved.

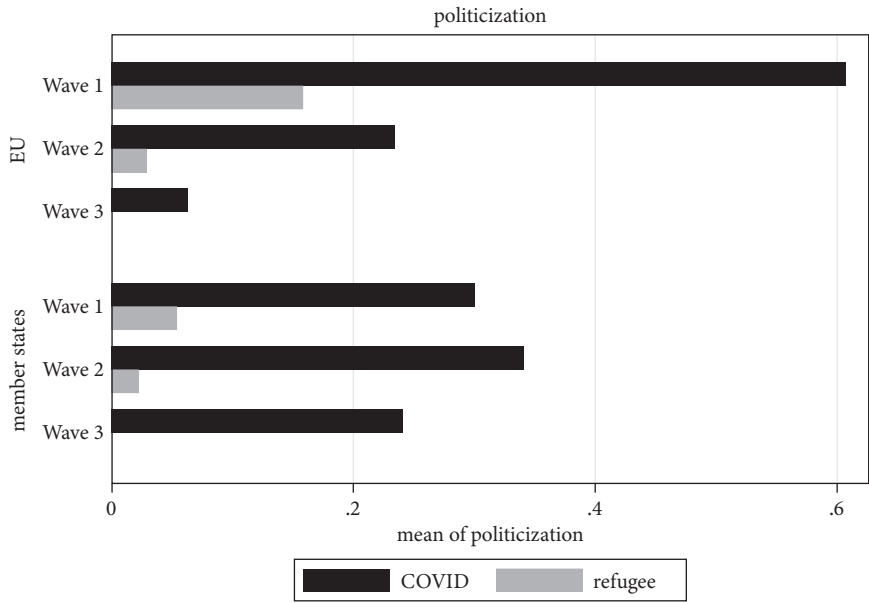
of the crisis started at the EU level rather than in the member states, and it was considerably more intense. At both levels, the peak of politicization was reached right at the outset of the crisis, when policymakers scrambled to respond to the catastrophic turn of events.

In the summer of 2020, the politicization of policymaking declined at both levels, only to pick up again in the second wave, first in the member states and then at the level of the EU. In the member states, politicization reached its peak intensity in early March and once again in the fall of 2020; at the EU level, it peaked at the time of the EU summit in December 2020, which definitely adopted the Recovery Fund and the Multi-annual Financial Framework (MFF). Throughout the third phase, politicization stabilized at a lower level, especially as far as the EU is concerned.

The extraordinary character of the politicization of the COVID-19 crisis comes out very clearly if we compare it with the politicization of the refugee crisis 2015–16, another highly salient recent EU crisis. For this comparison, we aggregate the politicization index at each polity level for the two phases of the refugee crisis—the initial peak of the crisis and its long, drawn-out aftermath and for each one of the three waves of the COVID-19 crisis. For the member states, we present an average for four selected countries—France, Germany, Italy, and the UK, for which we have comparable data for both crises. Figure 4.2 compares the politicization of the two crises based on our PPA data.

As the figure makes abundantly clear, the COVID-19 policymaking is in a class of its own. The extraordinary threat that the pandemic exerted on the daily life of Europeans and on the economy of all member states and the very high uncertainty among policymakers about how to deal with this threat focused the public attention on the crisis and the measures taken by policymakers to come to terms with it. At the same time, the figure confirms the contrast between the decreasing politicization of EU policymaking and the more stable development of domestic policymaking across the three waves during the COVID-19 crisis.

Turning to a comparison of the two components of politicization processes—salience and polarization, Figure 4.3 clarifies that it was, above all, the much greater salience that was responsible for the substantially more pronounced politicization of the COVID-19 crisis. The overall development of the politicization index proves to be mainly shaped by its salience component. As a matter of fact, concerning polarization, its second component, the two crises do not differ that much. At the EU level, the refugee crisis polarized more during its peak phase than the COVID-19 pandemic during its first wave. However, polarization proved to be comparatively stable across



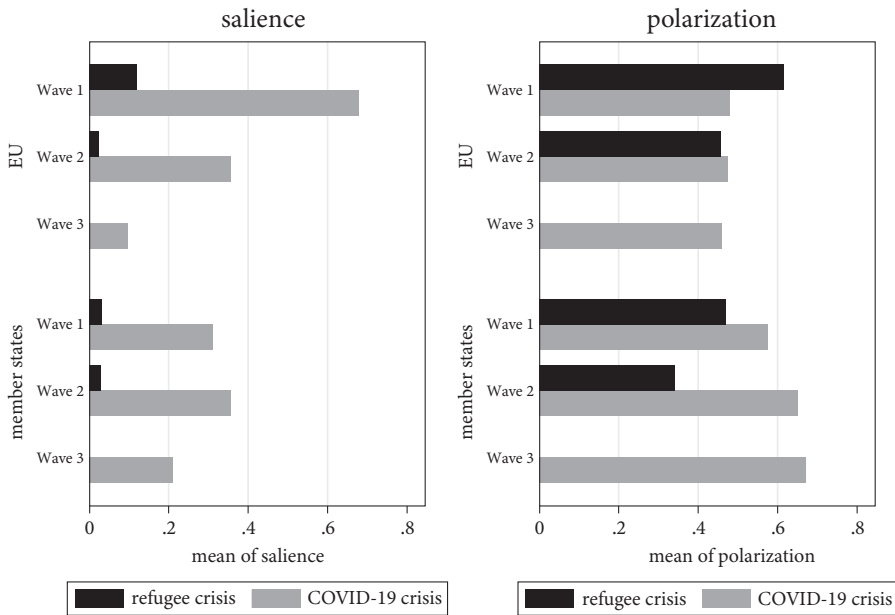
**Figure 4.2** The politicization of the COVID-19 crisis and the refugee crisis 2015–16, by the level of EU polity and waves/phases of crises (monthly average politicization values).

*Note:* There are only two waves in the refugee crisis. The politicization index ranges from 0 to 1. Both of its components take on values between 0 and 1. The maximum salience and polarization are calculated per month. Since the two maximum values are not reached in the same month, the empirical maximum of the product of the two components is 0.60.

*Source:* Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set.

waves in the COVID-19 pandemic—it even increased somewhat across the waves at the domestic level. By contrast, it decreased somewhat after the peak phase of the refugee crisis. This result is unexpected, given that the COVID-19 pandemic was a symmetric crisis that similarly hit all the member states. Following [Ferrara and Kriesi \(2022\)](#), we would have expected a greater conflict intensity, i.e., polarization in an asymmetric crisis like the refugee crisis, than in a symmetric crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. Apparently, in spite of the common shock, the preferences about how to deal with the COVID-19 crisis clashed among the member states and led to contested policymaking processes. However, even if the common shock apparently did not significantly reduce the level of conflict among the policymakers, it still contributed to the readiness among the key actors to overcome these conflicts.

The overall characterization of policymaking at the two levels conceals considerable variation of politicization from one member state to the other. This is shown in [Figure 4.4](#), which refers exclusively to the first wave during

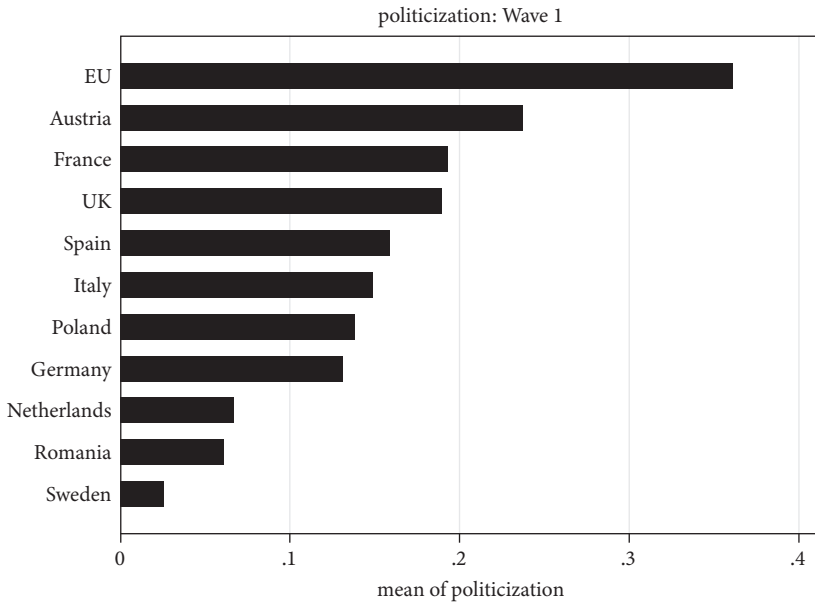


**Figure 4.3** Salience and polarization of policymaking by wave/phase and polity level, the COVID-19 crisis and the refugee crisis 2015–16 compared (monthly average salience and polarization values).

Source: Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set.

the COVID-19 crisis. The figure allows for the comparison between ten member states. As it makes clear, during the first wave, in none of the ten member states, the pandemic politicized policymaking as much as it did at the EU level. Austria, France, and the UK are the countries where the pandemic politicized the most, while in Sweden, the Netherlands, and Romania, it politicized least. The Southern European countries and Germany are situated in between. It is not easy to account for these differences systematically, but presumably, the perceived appropriateness, the timing, and the success of the COVID-19 responses of the respective governments may go a long way in explaining the differences in question.

If we consider the two components of politicization separately, we get a first idea of the factors that might be involved here. Figure 4.5 presents these two components, and the countries are separately ordered according to their magnitude. The ordering of the member states according to the overall politicization of policymaking is largely similar to the ordering according to salience. In contrast, the ordering according to polarization deviates considerably from the overall ordering—with one exception. The exception

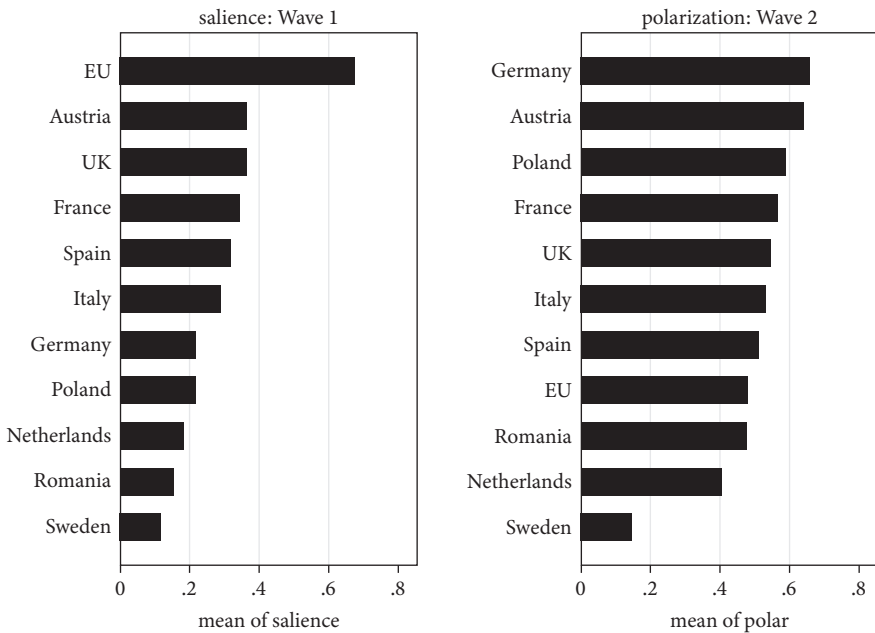


**Figure 4.4** Politicization of policymaking in ten member states and the EU during the first wave of the pandemic (average monthly politicization values).

*Source:* Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set.

concerns the three least politicized countries—Romania, the Netherlands, and Sweden, where both salience and polarization are lower than in all the other countries. Sweden, in particular, sticks out: there was hardly any polarization at all, which means that the low-key Swedish approach to the pandemic (see below) was largely consensual in the country. Interestingly, the position of the EU in the two orderings varies a great deal: while the EU is clearly on top with respect to the salience of policymaking, in terms of polarization, it turns out to be less polarized than all member states except the least politicized ones. Thus, in relative terms, the polarization at the EU level was still rather limited during the first wave of the COVID-19 crisis, which was certainly instrumental to the search for joint solutions.

The policymaking during the first wave of the pandemic was most contested in the two German-speaking countries—Austria and Germany. Still, in Germany, the salience of COVID-19 policymaking was much lower than in Austria. The high level of politicization in Austria is somewhat surprising, given that it is considered a success story in the way its government handled the crisis in the first wave (Mätzke 2021). After a bumpy start, when the government did not even attempt to contain the spread of the disease in one of the country’s skiing resorts in late February 2020, the strategy was revised promptly, and the available resources coordinated effectively



**Figure 4.5** Salience and polarization of policymaking in ten member states and the EU during the first wave of the pandemic (average monthly politicization values).

Source: Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set.

during the first wave. Mätzke attributes this to the consensus-democratic procedures of the country's policymaking. However, after an initial rallying around the flag effect, conflicts started to intensify by the end of April. The first notable peak of discontent occurred in May 2020 (Fallend and Miklin 2023: 401): prominent representatives of the culture and events sector criticized the government's failure to deal with the existential threats many faced in this field due to the lockdowns. Discontent also manifested itself in the streets. It started in April 2020, gained momentum in the coming months, and peaked with about 10,000 citizens calling on the government to withdraw its containment measures in Vienna in early January 2021. Moreover, the government's leeway became more and more restricted by fears about electoral losses due to an increasingly dissatisfied and divided electorate, as well as conflicts between the government and opposition parties and regional governments, and even conflicts within the government. Criticism was strongest among the populist radical right (FPÖ). As a result of these conflicts, in the second and third waves, actions to fight the pandemic were taken belatedly, and Austria fared much less well than during the first wave in terms of infection rates and deaths. As a matter of fact, in November 2020, Austria had the highest infection rates worldwide.



The strong politicization of the government's early COVID-19 response in France coincided with the municipal elections and led to the replacement of the prime minister (Hassenteufel 2020). The French state's numerous shortcomings in tackling the pandemic—lack of intensive care provisions, lack of masks, and medical equipment—led to strong criticism of the government and the president. As Hassenteufel (2020: 175) notes, centralized crisis management concentrated the political blame. Criticism of the government's crisis management was fueled by the widespread political distrust, which largely predated the crisis. In the UK, the belated introduction of lockdown measures and the government's original plan to tackle the pandemic by obtaining herd immunity led to the second highest death rate in Europe (next to Spain) and to an intensive debate about the appropriate approach to the crisis (Colfer 2020).

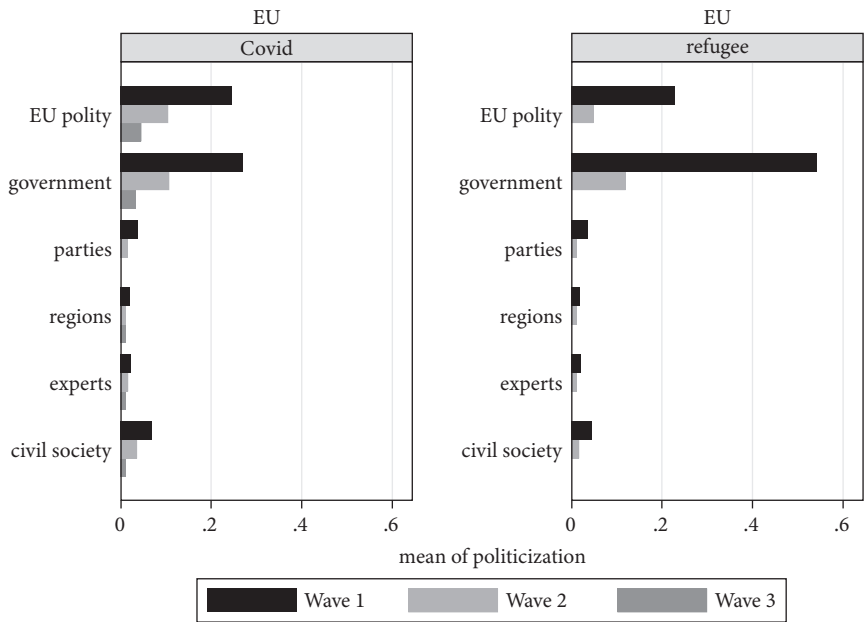
As already mentioned, Sweden sticks out, which is not so surprising if we remind ourselves of the highly distinctive approach to the pandemic that was chosen by the Swedish authorities. They initially imposed only very limited lockdown measures, relying mainly on recommendations, which the citizens followed without being obliged to do so. The far-reaching autonomy of the Swedish public administration and the constitutionally imposed impossibility of declaring a state of emergency combined with the high trust in the state led to this very specific approach (Petridou 2020; Kuhlmann et al. 2021). The Swedish politicians took a back seat and left the field to the administrators and experts (Engström, Luesink, and Boin 2021). However, public trust in the authorities still increased in the course of the first wave (Petridou 2020: 154), suggesting that the public considered the government's approach to the crisis appropriate. In the Netherlands, the government also heavily relied on recommendations and self-discipline (Kuiper et al. 2020), but in this particular case, the politicians took the lead, even if they also closely followed expert advice (Engström, Luesink, and Boin 2021; Helsloot and Heijndijk 2023). Romania, by contrast, declared a state of emergency and imposed tight lockdown measures early on (Dascalu 2020). As in other Eastern European countries, the poor state of the country's health system led the government to adopt such measures even before the number of cases increased in the first wave (Popic and Moise 2022). The success of these measures might explain the low level of politicization, in this case, during the first wave. Later on, however, the country had many deaths, high infection rates, and a poor vaccination campaign. The disempowerment of experts can explain these apparent contradictions, inconsistent action, and limited predictability of policies in Romania throughout the pandemic (Gherghina and Ilinca 2023).

## The key protagonists

We first present the key protagonists at the EU level before turning to the member states. At the EU level, two types of actors are above all involved in the policymaking process during crises—EU actors and the governments of the member states. As we have already observed, territorial conflicts dominate in the EU—horizontal conflicts between member states and vertical conflicts between supranational agencies and member states. In the two-level EU polity, the national governments constitute the pivot that links the national and EU policymaking processes in general, and especially in crisis situations. Domestically, the governments become the key crisis managers. At the EU level, they represent the national interests in the key decision-making bodies—the European Council and the Council of Ministers, which become particularly important during a crisis. At both levels, what we have called “executive decision-making” is reinforced during a crisis, which in turn reinforces the position of the national governments (see [Chapter 3](#)).

In addition to these two types of actors, we also distinguish between national parties, regional and local actors (chief executives and governments), experts, and societal actors (including business interest associations and individual firms, unions, and NGOs). [Figure 4.6](#), which once again compares COVID-19 and the refugee crisis, presents the results. To make the contributions of the different types of actors to the politicization of the crisis more comparable, we recoded the salience to the 0–1 range for each crisis separately. The results confirm the preponderance of the two types of actors—EU actors and the national governments—in EU policymaking during the crises. Moreover, in line with the overall trend of decreasing politicization across the waves at the EU level, which we have observed above, all actor types politicize less across the waves in both crises. The two crises differ only to the extent that national governments are even more prominent in the refugee crisis. At the same time, EU actors contribute more to the politicization of the COVID-19 crisis. This is at least in part the result of the competence distribution in the relevant policy domains: in asylum policy, the EU and the member states share the competencies. By contrast, in some policy domains that became relevant in the COVID-19 crisis, such as economic policy, the EU disposes of strong competencies. As we shall show below, EU actors are, indeed, contributing to politicization, especially in the domains where they have a lot of competencies.

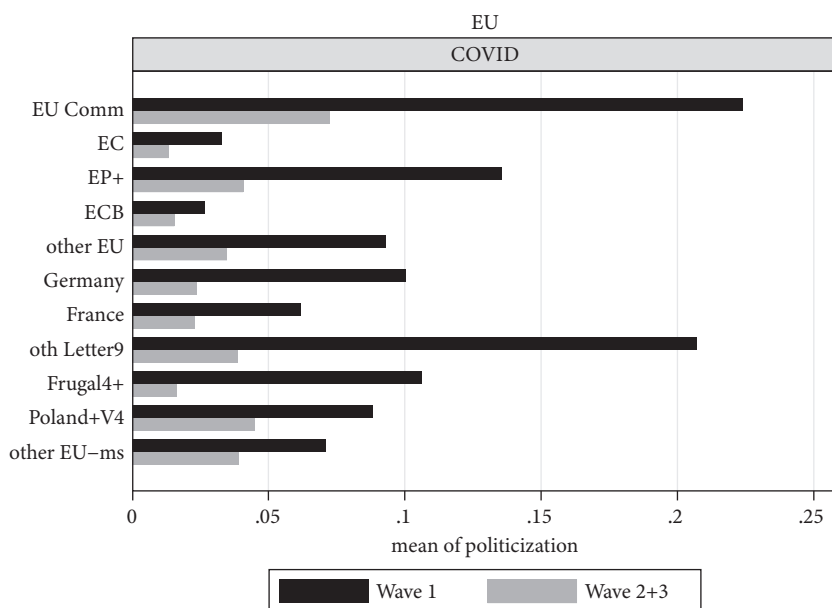
[Figure 4.7](#) allows us to take a closer look at the two key actor types at the EU level during the COVID-19 crisis. To simplify the patterns, we have combined



**Figure 4.6** Actor-specific politicization at the EU level during the COVID-19 pandemic and the refugee crisis 2015–16.

*Source:* Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set.

the second and the third waves in this figure. Considering first the EU actors, we observe that the EU Commission dominates in all waves, especially in the later ones. It was the Commission that elaborated the proposals for the crisis response, which set the agenda, coordinated the policy measures, and was responsible for their implementation. The European Parliament also plays a considerable role in all waves. It was responsible for the ratification of the key economic decisions. Other EU actors also played a role, such as specialized agencies like the European Medicines Agency, which became important in the later waves of the procurement and approval of vaccines. The ECB and the European Council, however, hardly contributed to the politicization of policymaking, even if they were responsible for the most important decisions in the economic policy domain (see [Chapter 8](#)). As far as the ECB is concerned, this is explained by the fact that it takes its decisions independently and does not have to negotiate with other actors. In the case of the European Council, it is the individual member states and their governments that are responsible for politicizing the policymaking process. In this respect, we note that, in the first wave, the member states that pleaded for more solidarity stick out. These include the nine countries that sent a letter to Council President

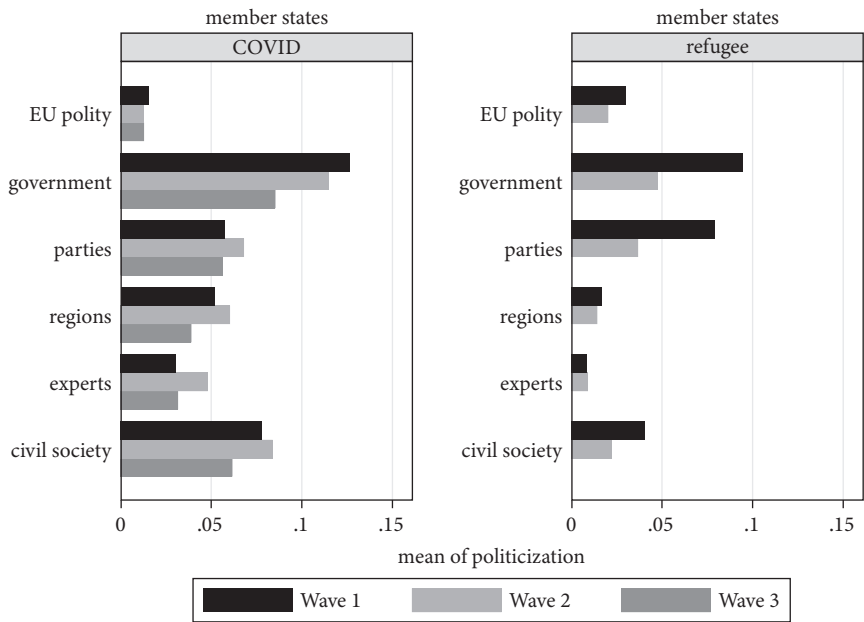


**Figure 4.7** Actor-specific politicization at the EU level during the COVID-19 pandemic: EU actors and member state governments.

*Source:* Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set.

Charles Michel on March 25, 2020, calling for the creation of a common debt instrument to fight the devastating impact the coronavirus crisis is threatening to wreak on Europe's economy. The nine—France, Italy, Spain, Greece, Portugal, Belgium, Ireland, Slovenia, and Luxemburg—asked for a euro bond “to raise funds on the market on the same basis and to the benefits of all member states.” In later waves, the Visegrád Four (V4)—Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia—politicized the policymaking process the most. In addition, the Frugal Four—the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, and Austria (plus Finland)—and Germany and France also contributed to the politicization. The latter two assumed a leading role in fiscal policy and the procurement of vaccines, and they formed a core coalition with the EU Commission.

At the level of the member states, in both crises, the national governments were the key actors, as we can see in Figure 4.8. EU polity actors—EU actors, other member states, and international organizations such as UNHCR—also played a considerable role in the refugee crisis, but less so in the COVID-19 crisis. This difference is remarkable. It is attributable to issues of border control, which were highly politicized in the refugee but not in the COVID-19 crisis. In the refugee crisis, the unilateral actions of some member



**Figure 4.8** Actor-specific politicization at the national level during the COVID-19 pandemic and the refugee crisis.

*Source:* Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set.

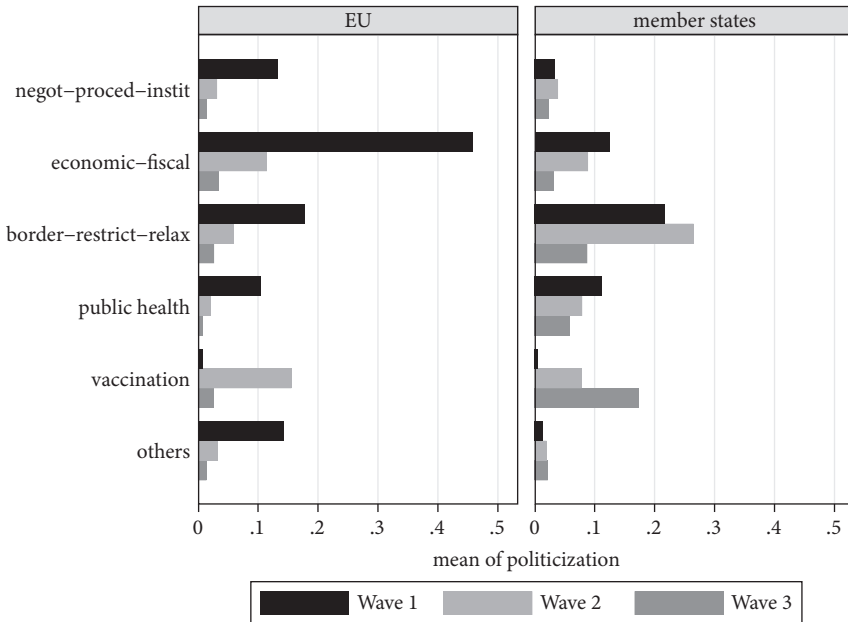
states—closing or opening borders for asylum seekers—led to externalities for other member states, which triggered transnational and vertical conflicts: the member states who suffered from the externalities tried to protect themselves, and the EU intervened in the domestic politics to alleviate/stop these externalities. In the COVID-19 crisis, by contrast, all member states closed their borders in similar ways, and they were also all concerned about the border closures of their fellow member states. Moreover, border closures were even imposed between regions and localities within member states. It was apparent to all policymakers that such closures imposed themselves in the struggle to overcome the pandemic.

The two crises also differ with respect to the politicization by political parties. They were more important in the refugee crisis, especially in its early stages, than in the COVID-19 crisis, even if they became somewhat more prominent in the later waves of the latter. The refugee crisis provided a golden opportunity for the radical right to mobilize against immigration, one of its preferred terrains. By contrast, as we have argued in [Chapter 2](#), the COVID-19 crisis did not lend itself to the same extent for partisan mobilization. To the extent that the parties politicized the crisis in later waves, they largely framed

it in traditional left–right terms: the right rather promoted the opening up of the economy and the self-reliance of the citizens, while the left defended tighter lockdown measures (Rovny et al. 2022). Regions, experts, and civil society organizations also played a considerable role in the COVID-19 crisis, as we shall see in more detail in later chapters. In the refugee crisis, regions and experts were of lesser importance, but societal organizations, above all humanitarian NGOs, also played an important role.

## What were the conflicts all about?

In the next step, we now turn to the politicization of the various policy domains. Figure 4.9 shows which policy domains have been most politicized at the two levels of the EU polity during the COVID-19 crisis. As we have already seen, politicization at the EU level has been especially intense in the first wave. The left-hand graph of Figure 4.9 clarifies that, with one exception, this applies to all policy domains. Vaccination is exceptional because it was politicized only once the vaccines had become available, i.e., above all, in the second wave. In the first wave, economic questions dominated at the EU level,



**Figure 4.9** Politicization of policy domains by level and wave.

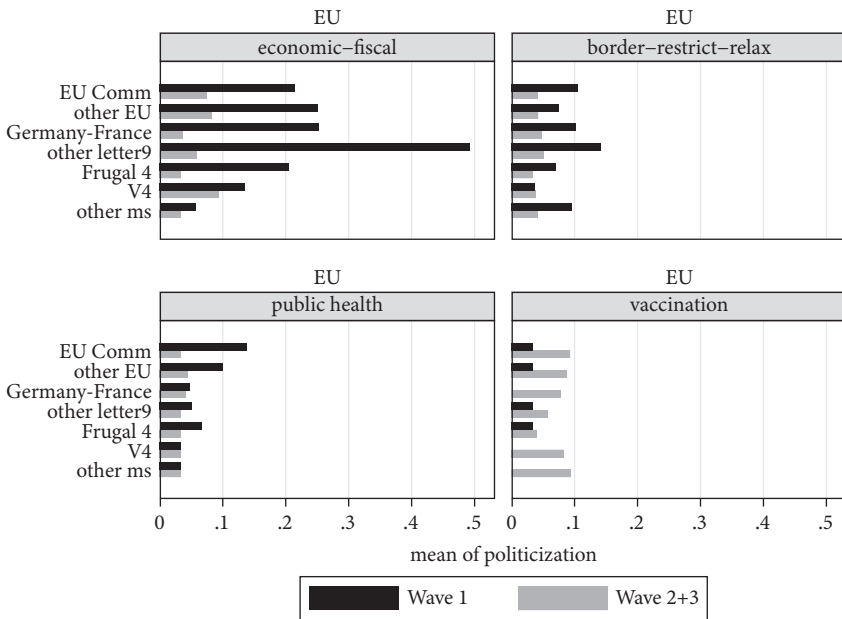
Source: Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set.

especially fiscal issues. Lockdowns (border control, restrictions, relaxations) and public health measures only follow in second and third place.

Compared to the EU level, economic and fiscal questions were of lesser importance in the member states. At this level, lockdown measures predominated, especially in the first two waves. They were highly contested, above all in the second wave. In the third wave, vaccination became the most politicized issue domestically: most hotly debated was the question of compulsory vaccination for access to particular localities (e.g., schools, restaurants, workplaces), for particular groups (e.g., hospital or care home personnel) or for the population at large. Compared to health-related measures, economic policies have a rather limited politicizing effect at the national level.

Focusing on the various policy domains at the EU level, the crucial fiscal measure was the Resilience and Recovery Fund (RRF or NGEU), which was adopted at the July 2020 summit at the end of the first wave. The other economic issues include the monetary measures taken by the ECB (see [Chapter 8](#)) and the suspension of single market rules adopted by the Commission, which allowed for targeted measures by member states to support and save individual sectors and firms (e.g., agriculture, banks, or airlines) (see [Chapter 7](#)). The creation of the RRF was the single most important measure of the EU during the COVID-19 crisis, which is why it is not surprising that it was exceptionally prominent and contested. Although all member states were hit hard by the pandemic, not all of them disposed of the fiscal maneuvering space to alleviate the pain for domestic firms and workers. The pandemic, in fact, threatened to aggravate the economic imbalance within the EU, especially within the Eurozone, and it was the goal of the Recovery Fund to rebalance not only the EU's economic policy tools but also its national economies.

[Figure 4.10](#) presents the politicization of different policy domains at the EU level by EU actors and member states. All types of EU actors and member state governments contributed to the politicization of the economic and fiscal policies that predominated during the first wave of the crisis at the EU level. Still, the Letter 9 governments (solidarity coalition) stick out as the by far most politicizing actors. More detailed analyses show that while the EU actors attempted to facilitate the economic recovery of the member states in the general economic policy domain (see [Chapter 7](#)), the member state governments tried to arrive at a solidary solution for their fiscal capacity to come to terms with the crisis (see [Chapter 8](#)). Among the member states, the Franco-German couple took the lead in finding a solution for the Recovery Fund ([Krotz and Schramm 2022](#)), and the solidarity coalition, which pushed for such a solution, contributed most to the politicization



**Figure 4.10** The politicization of specific policy domains by EU actors and member state governments, EU level.

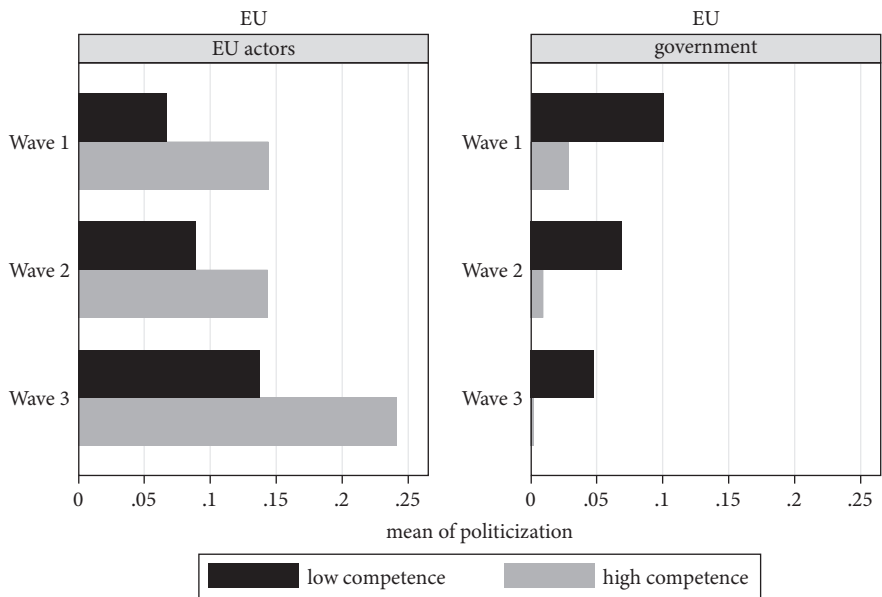
Source: Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set.

of the fiscal policy. In later waves, the Commission became relatively more prominent in the fiscal policy domain, as did the V4 countries. Their prominence is linked to the struggle around the rule-of-law mechanism in the ratification phase of the RRF in November–December 2020. The figure also shows that in the health-related policy domains, no particular actor sticks out; they were all more involved in lockdown and public health measures during the first wave and in the domain of vaccination during the later waves (see Chapters 5 and 6).

As already suggested, the role of the EU actors is, to a considerable extent, determined by the competence distribution in a given policy domain, as illustrated by Figure 4.11. In economic policy, where the EU disposes of important competencies, it contributes a lot more to the politicization of the policymaking processes than in all the other policy domains, where its competencies are more limited. On the other hand, it is the member states' governments that contribute comparatively more to the politicization of policymaking at the EU level in domains where the EU has fewer competencies. The difference is statistically significant and visible in all waves.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> We have tested this with an Anova analysis. The direct effect of the actor types is significant at the 1% level ( $F=7.81, 1, 66$ ), the interaction effect between actor types and competence is significant at the





**Figure 4.11** Politicization of policymaking at the EU level, by EU competence in the policy domain, wave, and actor type.

Source: Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set.

In the domain of public health, the EU disposes of only limited competencies. Therefore, with respect to the lockdown measures, it did not proceed to a centralized regulation of borders. In the first wave, the EU Commission only tried to limit the negative consequences of the national lockdown measures with low-threshold measures of its own. It attempted to regulate export bans for medical equipment (e.g., ventilators) and called for better coordination of the national measures. In addition, it has put some money into the development of vaccines. In the second wave, the centralized procurement, approval, and distribution of vaccines became the key health-related measure at the EU level. The common procurement replaced an earlier vaccine alliance, which included four member states—France, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands, which all had a powerful pharmaceutical industry (Becker and Gehring 2022: 10ff.). The goal was to prevent the pharma industry from playing off the member states against each other and to achieve scale effects. As we can see in Figure 4.10, EU actors dominated the vaccine domain in later waves. However, the member states kept control over the procurement

5% level ( $F=4.18, 1, 66$ ). The other direct effects (of wave and competence) and interaction effects are not significant.

process, which resulted in a considerably delayed process. Two factors were responsible for these delays: the different preferences of the member states with regard to the shares of different vaccines in the common portfolio—the Western European states with powerful pharma industries opposed the price-conscious Eastern European states, and the insistence of the member states on price reductions and the assumption of liability risks by the industry. In addition, the European medicine agency's approval process also contributed to the delays. However, in the course of the third wave, it turned out that the European vaccination campaign was actually more successful than the American and British campaigns (see [Chapter 6](#)). In addition, the EU succeeded in introducing a joint COVID-19 certificate, the Green Pass, just in time for the summer 2021 vacation season, which allowed Europeans to travel across Europe without any difficulties (see [Chapter 5](#)).

## Conflict configurations: coalitions

As we have seen, at the EU level, policymaking during the COVID-19 crisis has, indeed, been crucially shaped by transnational coalitions of member states. These coalitions could rely on a legacy of reciprocal past cooperation. In the highly contested fiscal policy domain during the first phase of the COVID-19 crisis, the solidarity coalition of nine member states led by France, which asked for a joint debt instrument, was opposed by the Frugal Four coalition, led by the Netherlands. Unable to prevent the option of grants, the Frugal Four attempted to limit the funds attributed to grants and to keep the overall fund smaller than proposed by the Commission. They also insisted on stricter conditionality in terms of the rule of law and economic reforms. Finally, they softened their stance and accepted the compromise hammered out at the European Council meeting at the end of July, mainly as a result of the combined pressure from France and Germany. The sovereignty coalition of the V4 countries, led by Hungary and Poland, did welcome the Commission's proposal but had a series of objections, which made them the least supportive group of member states apart from the Frugal Four. In early June, they arrived at a joint position which stipulated that the future fund should not favor larger, richer countries at the expense of smaller ones. The V4 was also generally opposed to the Frugal Four, whom they considered, in the words of Poland's PM Mateusz Morawiecki, "a group of stingy, egoistic states." As already observed, the V4 became the main obstacle when the July agreement among the member states had to be turned into legal decisions in November–December 2020. They objected to linking the attribution

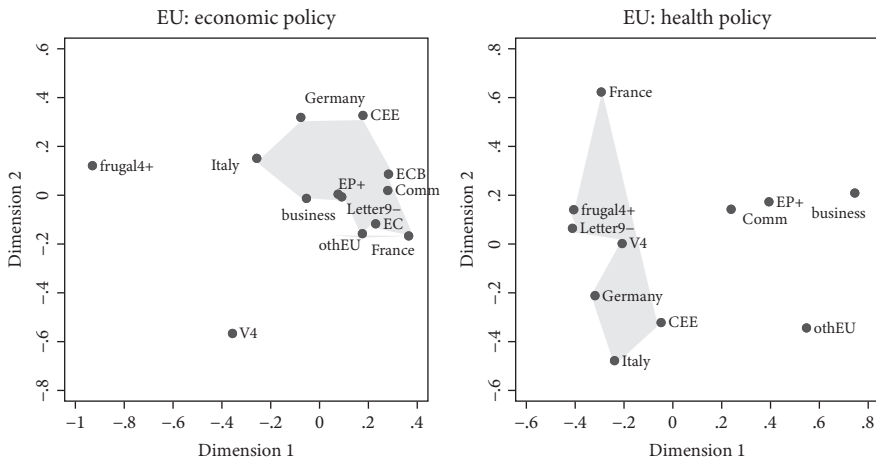
of grants and loans in the framework of the NGEU fund to the rule-of-law mechanism, a link that was proposed by the Commission and supported by a majority of member states and the EP.

Opposition to fiscal policy initiatives was not only voiced by coalitions of member states but also by civil society and opposition parties in the member states, but in a much more marginal role. The latter attempted to politicize national identities in the case of the COVID-19 crisis, too, even if the crisis did not lend itself to such politicization. Thus, at the time of the letter of the nine member states calling for a common debt instrument (March 25, 2020), the media in Southern Europe were slamming Europe's foot-dragging. The leader of the main Italian opposition party at the time, the Lega's Matteo Salvini, declared that any deal using ESM funding would be "an attack on our country." Once the German government had changed sides and joined France to support a common proposal for EU debt (instead of joint member states' debt), it was the turn of the German and French radical right opposition to criticize the proposals.

To grasp the complex conflict configuration that results from the multiple oppositions, we apply multidimensional scaling techniques. For each actor–issue pair, we calculated the average distance between the actors' positions on the issue in question.<sup>3</sup> We then analyzed the resulting matrix of dissimilarities with a multidimensional scaling procedure (MDS). Such a procedure allows us to represent the overall actor configuration in a low-dimensional space, in our case, a two-dimensional space. Actors who take similar positions in the crisis policymaking are placed close to each other in the resulting space, while actors who oppose each other in substantive terms are located at some distance from each other. Figure 4.12 presents the conflict configurations at the EU level during the entire period of the COVID-19 crisis, Figures 4.13–14 below refer to the member states. For this presentation, we distinguish between economic policies (which include fiscal policies) and health policies (which include lockdowns, relaxations, public health measures, and vaccinations).

In economic policy, we find the Frugal Four+ and the V4 opposing all the other member states and EU actors, who form a more or less coherent core coalition. In addition to Germany and France, this core coalition also includes the members of the solidarity coalition and the remaining Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries. In health policy, the main dividing line refers to the horizontal dimension, which opposes the member states, on the one hand, to the EU actors and business, on the other hand. The former

<sup>3</sup> We only included actors in the analysis who had a minimal amount of actions on each issue category.

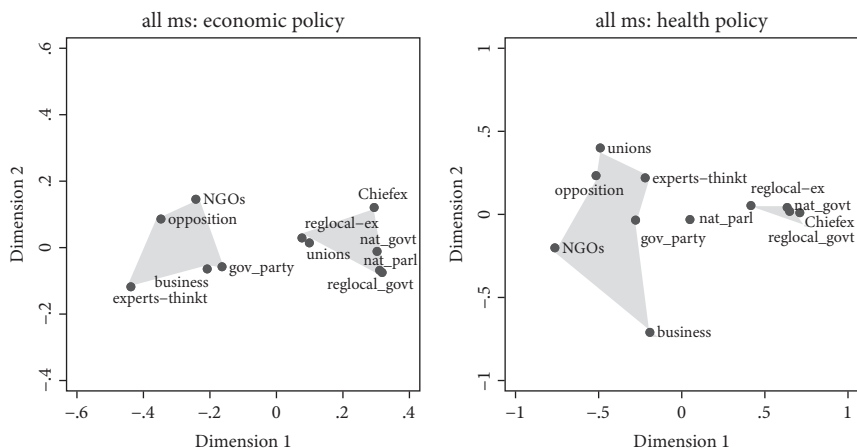


**Figure 4.12** Conflict configuration at the EU level for economic and health policy: result of separate MDS analyses.

Source: Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set.

were pushing for lockdowns, while the latter were opposing or seeking to alleviate the consequences of these lockdown measures. The second dimension distinguishes the member states in the same regard: At the European level, France was more opposed to restrictions and in favor of further reaching relaxations, and also less favorable to public health measures than all the other member states, especially less favorable than Italy, the CEE countries not belonging to the V4 coalition or Germany.

To provide a summary of the complex conflict structure in the member states, we also present the results of multidimensional scaling analyses at the national level. Figure 4.13 provides the resulting configurations, including all six member states for which we have data for the three waves. Again, we distinguish between economic policy and health policy. If we do not consider country-specific differences but take into account the average configuration in all six countries together, the common denominator of the configuration in both policy domains is the opposition between, on the one side, the executive actors at all levels and, on the other side, the partisan and societal actors as well as the experts. As we have seen, the executive actors have dominated the politicization of the crisis at the domestic level, as they were the ones who had to make the decisions to face the pandemic under very high uncertainty. As they struggled to come to terms with the pandemic, we now see they came under the scrutiny and critique of all the other participants in domestic politics.

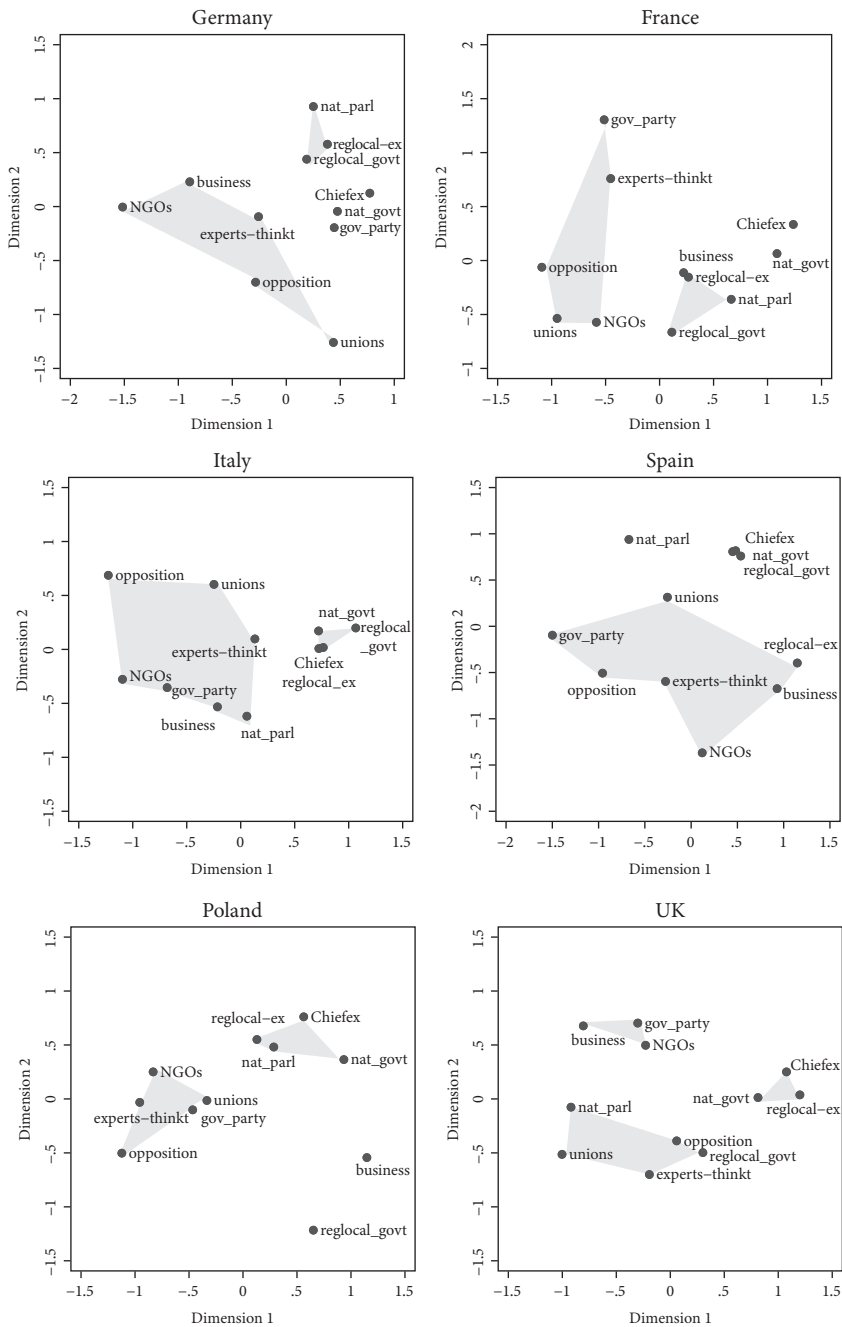


**Figure 4.13** Conflict configuration at the member state level for economic and health policy: result of separate MDS analyses.

Source: Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set.

In terms of economic policy, the configuration is almost reduced to one dimension as the variation of the various actors on the second dimension is rather negligible. The specificity here is that the unions are the societal actors who sided with the executive. Together, the executive camp was all in favor of special measures to support the economy, firms, households, and workers. On the other hand, there is an assortment of oppositional forces, including both opposition and governing parties, experts, NGOs, and business organizations, which were critical of these measures in one way or another. In terms of health policy, the configuration is rather similar, except for the fact that the unions have now joined the opposition, and the national parliament is also somewhat removed from the executive actors, even if it does not go as far as abandoning them completely. Also, in health policy, the opposition is more divided, with the unions, experts, and opposition parties on the one side pleading for more restrictions. In comparison, the business community calls for fewer restrictions and more relaxation of the lockdown measures.

The overall pattern, however, again covers important country differences. Figure 4.14 presents the details for the six countries for which we have data for all three waves. In this figure, to facilitate presentation, we no longer distinguish between economic and health policy since the overall pattern in both domains is rather similar. In all the countries, we find analogous configurations with the executive actors opposing the partisan and societal actors. In addition, however, there are also regional/local governments/chief executives who join the opposition. The exception is Italy, where all the executive actors form a joint coalition.



**Figure 4.14** National conflict configuration in six member states for economic and health policy: result of separate MDS analyses.

Source: Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set.

Thus, in Germany, the national executive is joined by the governing parties but separate from the regional/local executives who are close to the national parliament. The distance between the two types of executives is comparatively limited but still noticeable. During the rise of the second wave, in the Fall of 2020, Chancellor Merkel had to negotiate lockdown measures with the Conference of Prime Ministers of the German Länder—an informal agency that became highly influential at this point of the crisis. The rotating Presidency of this Conference was in the hands of Markus Söder, the Prime Minister of Bavaria, which was the German region most hit by the first wave. Söder became Merkel's closest ally. Together with her, he pleaded for tough restrictions, but the two of them had a hard time convincing a majority of their colleagues at the Conference. Just before Christmas 2020, they succeeded in having them accept another lockdown, but it proved to be Merkel's last victory in the fight against the Coronavirus (Alexander 2021, 312–35). In the third wave, the differences between the federal government and some Länder governments, as well as those between and within parties, regarding the relaxation of the strict German COVID-19 regime continued, especially in the debate about the new Infection Protection Act, which Parliament adopted in April 2021.

Similarly, even in centralized France, the regional/local executives formed a separate opposition to the national executive, again together with the national parliament. In Spain, too, the centralized strategy of the national government to fight the pandemic met with resistance in the regions (Vampa 2021: 611): while regional/local chief executives abandoned the national government, regional/local governments seem to have remained part of the national executive coalition, and the national parliament also remained rather close to the national executive. In Poland and the UK, by contrast, it is the regional/local chief executives who remained allied to the national government, while regional/local governments joined the opposition. In Poland, the latter group of actors is, however, responsible for only a limited number of actions, which may also explain their marginal location.

Except in Germany, both government and opposition parties are part of the oppositional clusters, which serves to illustrate the unstructured dynamics of partisan politics during the COVID-19 crisis. Even in Germany, however, the partisan dynamics were very unstructured, as the following more detailed discussion illustrates. In economic policy, partisan conflicts aligned to some extent with the traditional left–right opposition. Parties from the right (whether part of the government (CDU-CSU) or not (FDP)) pleaded for fiscal rigor, at least in the longer term, which means that they opposed an

extension of the suspension of the debt brake and an extension of VAT reductions, and generally wanted to return to normalcy as fast as possible. Parties from the left (whether in government (SPD) or not (Linke, Greens)), by contrast, pleaded for continued protection of the weak (e.g., reform of Hartz IV), asked for more transparency in the case of companies that demanded state aid, and opposed privatization plans and support for billionaires and Russian oligarchs (e.g. in the case of TUI). This contrast also played out in the German coalition government, where the positions of the Minister of the Economy (CDU) and the Minister of Labour (SPD) clashed quite a bit. In addition, the opposition (FDP) also accused some government programs of inefficiency (e.g., Corona emergency aid, given a large number of fraudulent applications). However, there are also exceptions to this general pattern: thus, at the outset of the crisis in March 2020, Bavarian Prime Minister Söder (CSU) pleaded for the government to aid the economy, while the parliamentary group leader of the CDU in the Bundestag, Brinkhaus, was reticent to support such aid.

With regard to lockdown measures, the German partisan fault lines were even more complex. Restrictive measures tended to be criticized by representatives of all parties (except the Green opposition) at one time or another, in a pattern that was complicated by the federal structure. Thus, the SPD, as a regional opposition party, voted against the extension of restrictions in the Bavarian parliament. In February 2021, even the Bavarian MPs from the CSU started to revolt against the restrictive Corona course of their own prime minister. The CDU/CSU parliamentary group in the Bundestag, in turn, was sharply critical of the disparate measures taken by the different states. Thorsten Frei, vice chairman of the CDU parliamentary group, called for “coordinated, simple rules” between the states. “It is comprehensible that the mosaic of rules confuses and overwhelms many citizens.” More specifically, the federal Minister of Health, Spahn (CDU), rejected the quarantine requirements that Schleswig-Holstein imposed on entrants from four Berlin districts. Conversely, the parliamentary group leader of the CDU in Brandenburg criticized the calculation of incidence rates by the federal government. A former CDU Minister of Family Affairs in the federal government criticized the government for neglecting the consequences of insufficient childcare and schooling during the lockdown, joining similar critiques by the Greens. The critique of the lockdown measures was most severe on the radical right. Thus, the head of the AfD parliamentary group in the Bundestag, Alice Weidel, did not mince her words when the government extended lockdown measures before Christmas 2020: “What you are imposing on the citizens is



inconsistent, contradictory, of dubious benefit and imbued with the undemocratic spirit of authoritarian paternalism.” The AfD parliamentary group leader Katrin Ebner-Steiner of the Bavarian parliament, in turn, was speaking of a “policy of mercilessness” and “totalitarian bans.” In her view, the current policy was more harmful than the virus. In her reaction to the Infection Protection Act, Weidel called the curfew, a key element of the Act, disproportionate and claimed that the government distrusts the citizens and wants “to bully them during the day and lock them up at night.” On the same occasion, AfD parliamentary group leader Alexander Gauland spoke of an “attack on civil liberties, federalism, and common sense.” In September 2020, AfD budget expert Peter Boehringer said the current economic crisis was not caused by the novel Coronavirus but by the “government’s overreaction” to it. Boehringer, therefore, called for an immediate exit “from what has become nothing but insane Corona lockdown measures.” Note, however, that this sharp rhetoric did not in any sense have Euroskeptical undertones; its focus was purely national and had rather populist connotations.

## Conclusion

The extraordinary impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the daily lives of European citizens and the economy of all European countries can explain the exceptional salience of COVID-19 crisis policymaking at the EU level and the level of the member states. If European politicians reacted belatedly to the pandemic, once they had taken in its enormous impact, they scrambled to make amends at all levels. This is reflected in the peaking of crisis-specific politicization in March 2020. The exceptional threat of the crisis did not, however, prevent established conflicts from re-emerging during the policymaking at the EU level in the first wave, when a coalition of member states—the solidarity coalition—appealed to the EU for support of national rescue policies. Contrary to the expectations of [Ferrara and Kriesi \(2022\)](#) that the symmetric incidence of the crisis in all member states would subdue conflicts between member states, we found a high level of polarization across all waves at the EU level. Nevertheless, as we have argued in the theory chapter, several factors facilitated policymaking at the EU level, especially in the early stages of the pandemic:

- the extraordinary pressure exerted by the crisis;
- the rather unstructured partisan contestation in the member states, which resulted from the absence of any relationship of the crisis with

the integration–demarcation cleavage and from the difficulty in relating public health issues to the left–right divide;

- the broad consensus among the executive decision makers at both levels of the polity with respect to most (although not all) relevant issues;
- the strong position of the EU in economic policymaking; and
- contingent factors such as the German presidency in the summer and fall of 2020 and the coincidence of the negotiations of the Recovery Fund with those of the multiannual fiscal framework.

Arguably, as a result of the joint solutions adopted early on—the NGEU fund and the joint vaccination procurement schemes, politicization decreased at the EU level during later waves. At the level of the member states, by contrast, we observed the inverse development—from comparatively low to high politicization, as restrictions, institutional and other measures became increasingly contested as a result of the attenuation of the original rallying effect and the resumption of partisan politics in later waves.

The COVID-19 crisis was a multifaceted crisis that concerned diverse policy domains, most importantly economic policies, public health (including lockdowns and vaccination) policies, and border control policies. The pattern of politicization was, at least in part, determined by the policy-specific competence distributions at the EU level. In policy domains where the EU has a lot of competence, such as economic policy, EU actors played a more prominent role. At the same time, member state governments were comparatively more important in the policy domains where the EU has little competence: fiscal policy, health policy, and border control.

The linchpin between the national and the EU level of policymaking in this crisis was the national governments and, in particular, their chief executives, whose pivotal role in the two-level game of EU policymaking also facilitated the adoption of joint solutions during the crisis. The cooperation between national leaders and their governments, on the one hand, and the leaders and representatives of the EU agencies, on the other hand, arguably benefited from the key position of the former in the management of the crisis at the national level, which led to the marginalization of parties, parliaments, economic interest associations, and NGOs. At the same time, it reinforced the role of the executives' expert advisors. The result was, however, at best, a temporary depoliticization of policymaking at the national level. In later phases of the crisis, partisan contestation resumed in national politics, even if in a rather unstructured pattern, which made the politics during the crisis complex and hard to read.

As our analysis showed, support for the policies was strongest among those who were directly responsible for them: the executive actors—chief executives and government actors. At both levels, there was widespread consensus among key policymakers with regard to the government's policy responses to the crisis, both in the economic and health domains. We interpret this as a direct consequence of the enormous pressure exerted by the pandemic and its rather symmetric incidence. At the EU level, opposition was mainly articulated by transnational coalitions. In economic and fiscal policy, the conflict structure at the EU level is characterized by the conflicts between two transnational coalitions (horizontal dimension) and between these coalitions and the core coalition, which includes both the majority of member states and the EU agencies (vertical dimension). The twofold opposition from the Frugal Four and the V4 in this domain documents to what extent minority coalitions threaten to paralyze policymaking in the EU. The EU remains a polity with very high consensus requirements, which provides minority coalitions with an inordinate veto power. In health policy, the member states all faced the EU actors, allied with business, given their unilateral actions and the limited competencies of the EU actors in this domain. Although they ceded some competencies to the EU in the area of vaccination, the member states kept control over the relevant procedures.

In the member states, the core coalition consists of the national government and the chief executive. Opposition mainly came from a variable assortment of parties, including both opposition and governing parties, societal actors (business, unions, and NGOs), and experts. In a less than systematic pattern, regional/local executives and governments sometimes sided with the national executives and sometimes with the opposition. In spite of the fact that the management of the crisis has given rise to partisan conflicts in all the countries, the variable and, at times, unexpected composition of the partisan coalitions suggests that the COVID-19-crisis has not been politicized along conventional conflict lines at the national level. The traditional left–right conflict has, to some extent, structured the partisan opposition on the economic side of the crisis. Still, even this pattern has been less systematic than it has traditionally been in the economic policy domain. Moreover, the conflict between nationalists and cosmopolitans (and the concomitant Euroskepticism) has hardly been articulated at all in the context of this crisis. The debate about the ESM in Italy is a rare exception from this general result. If anything, the populists from the radical right have tried to oppose the government's restrictive measures with anti-elitist appeals, which resonated with libertarian anti-statism but less so with nationalism, as is illustrated by our discussion of the German partisan debate.

Finally, the absence of EU and transnational interventions in national policymaking during the COVID-19 crisis is striking. Much more than in previous crises afflicting the EU, the nation-state reigned supreme during the COVID-19 crisis. To state the obvious, the unilateral lockdown measures adopted by all member state governments early on in the crisis, which prevented the free movement of European citizens in every respect, did not, to put it mildly, contribute to opening up the minds of Europeans for the European integration project. Locked up at home or in one's locality, everybody's horizon was likely to shrink. And since it was the nation-state that imposed the lockdown measures, everybody experienced once again its awesome and irresistible presence, compared to which the EU and the integration process were far removed.

# The EU's Bind When It Came to Borders and Lockdowns

## Introduction

Our book aims to answer a broad question, namely, why the EU managed to pull its act together during the COVID crisis and develop new competences. To truly understand the “success” cases of EU polity maintenance and polity-building, we need to also look at the “failures,” policy areas where the EU did not manage to coordinate, leading to suboptimal outcomes. Looking at negative cases is crucial in order to understand whether our conditions (externalities and time horizon) are indeed necessary for the outcome, and to avoid the pitfalls of selecting cases on the dependent variable (Geddes 1990). This chapter, therefore, looks at two policy domains where the EU did not act comprehensively, or at least did not do so initially: border closures and lockdowns. In doing so, we aim to use these negative cases to shed further light as to the reasons why the EU did act in other domains and reject alternative hypotheses.

We begin with the simplest of possible explanations for EU action and inaction, namely the level of EU competence in a given domain. At first, this might seem to explain some of the variation in EU action. The EU has high competence in the economic domain<sup>1</sup> and low competence in public health, making it easy to explain why it acted in the former but not the latter. However, we quickly run into trouble when we look at other policy domains. The EU has some competence when it comes to regulating the free movement of people but nonetheless did not comprehensively act to coordinate border closures in the first wave of the pandemic. The EU's low competence in public health did not prevent it from coordinating the purchasing and distribution of vaccines. Table 5.1 builds on Table 2.2 of Chapter 2 to highlight our puzzle and argument. It shows policies by the level of EU competence, whether a policy was

<sup>1</sup> EU competence also varies within the economic domain, with higher competencies in monetary and competition policy, lower but increasing competence in the fiscal domain, and little competence in welfare, labor, and product markets.

**Table 5.1** Categorizing expectations and reality of EU action

	EU capacity building	No EU capacity building
Supranational/shared competence	Macro-economic policy <b>Waves 2-3 border coordination/Green Pass</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low externalities</li> <li>• <i>Long time horizon</i></li> </ul> Free movement of goods (green lanes) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High externalities</li> <li>• <i>Short time horizon</i></li> </ul> ECB PEPP (new quality in terms of quantitative easing)	<b>Wave 1 border closure</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low externalities</li> <li>• <i>Short time horizon</i></li> </ul> Suspension of fiscal/competition rules
National competence	Vaccine procurement and distribution (Waves 2-3) Fiscal policy/NGEU	<b>National lockdowns</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low externalities</li> <li>• <i>Short (Wave 1) and Long (Waves 2-3) time horizon</i></li> </ul> Coordination of export bans of PPE (Wave 1)

previously a national or EU-level competence (rows), and whether there was capacity building during COVID (columns). It forms the backbone of our empirical puzzle when it comes to pandemic policymaking in the EU. The policies that we examine in this chapter are highlighted in bold and black font. For these policies, we add whether the EU faced high or low externalities in the policy field and whether it had a long or short time horizon to act.

We look at two typical cases of EU coordination where the EU has high competence (top left quadrant), namely the coordination of border policies with the introduction of the Green Pass in Waves 2 and 3 and establishing free movement of goods in the initial phase of the pandemic (green lanes). We also look at one typical case that falls under national competence and the EU did not act (bottom right quadrant), namely in national lockdowns. We also look at a deviant case of EU inaction in an area of high competence (top right quadrant), namely the lack of coordination over border closures in the first wave.

Starting from these cases, this chapter addresses the following two questions. First, *why did the EU not comprehensively act in the first wave*

*when countries unilaterally decided to suspend Schengen and close borders but managed to act in Waves 2 and 3 by setting up the EU-level Green Pass?* While the Green Pass is a policy specifically tied to vaccination, the question more broadly asks why the EU engaged in comprehensive coordination with new instruments in later phases while only maintaining existing policies (i.e., free movement of goods) in the beginning. A sub-question here is why the unilateral decisions by member states did not become politicized. Second, *why did the EU not attempt to coordinate standards for lockdowns between member states?* A sub-question here is how, despite this lack of coordination, the EU managed to maintain the single market.

The chapter is structured along these two broad questions. The main questions regard our between-policy puzzle, why the EU acted in some policies but not others. The sub-questions regard our within-policy puzzle, namely why policies were not contentious at the national or EU level. We first develop the puzzle by showing the degree of action and contention of borders and lockdowns at the EU and national levels. We then present our argument for the between-policy puzzle, highlighting two factors we consider most important: externalities and time horizon. We then consider the within-policy puzzle and focus on salience and polarization.

## Argument

We start with the time horizon. We know that the EU is much more adept at rules-based rather than event-based politics (van Middelaar 2021). Rules-based politics require the normal working of institutions to reach decisions, often through iterative processes of negotiations and compromise between member states and within EU institutions. Rules-based politics take time. We, therefore, expect no capacity building when the EU faces a short time horizon, when events require immediate action, as in the first wave of the pandemic.<sup>2</sup> Longer time horizons allow the EU the possibility to build capacity or new instruments for coordination even in areas of low competence. For contentious policy areas, such as economic policy, the EU needs time to coordinate between member states in order to build consensus and achieve necessary compromises. Put differently, in the long run,

<sup>2</sup> One complication to considering the time horizon of actions is that the problem being faced may also have a short time horizon. Indeed, many expected the COVID pandemic to be short-lived and the emergency measures to be temporary. However, even in such a scenario, the EU would have benefited from coordinating emergency measures. Thus, we consider the time horizon of EU actions as the crucial factor.

the problem pressure faced by the EU requires capacity building to solve coordination problems among member states and result in overall better outcomes (Schimmelfennig and Winzen 2019). However, in the short term, a crisis requires fast reactions, and thus policy gets deferred to existing structures, most often back in the hands of member states, even though suboptimal outcomes are achieved due to a lack of coordination (Moise, Truchlewski, and Oana 2024). We argue that the time horizon difference explains why the EU coordinated border policy in Waves 2 and 3 but not in Wave 1.

Even with time, why does the EU build capacity in one area and not another? We argue that the second key factor is the degree of externalities that would be generated between member states in the absence of coordination. Both vaccine procurement and banning exports of personal protective equipment (PPE hereafter) present massive externalities in the absence of EU coordination. Given that some member states (e.g., Italy and Belgium) are dependent on others (e.g., France and Germany) for PPE, bans heavily affect those dependent. Thus, coordination is needed to prevent uneven outcomes that can threaten the polity. Coordination is often explicitly invoked by political actors, such as when the German Health Minister Spahn said that Germany would allow exports of PPE to EU countries if the EU coordinated to ban exports to non-EU countries (Guarascio and Blenkinsop 2020), thus solving the collective problem of low supply. Vaccine procurement, if left uncoordinated, would have resulted in a bidding war wherein wealthier countries with larger markets could get better deals and more vaccines sooner, to the detriment of smaller and/or poorer countries. National lockdowns, on the other hand, do not present direct externalities to other countries. In fact, they may provide positive externalities, by limiting the spread of the virus domestically and then internationally. The indirect externalities, such as effects on supply chains, can be solved with patchwork coordination policies (such as the green lanes) and do not require massive coordination or capacity building. We therefore expect capacity building in the former but not the latter.

Capacity building or new instruments for coordination, however, require rules-based politics and, therefore, longer time horizons. For immediate problems, we still expect only EU coordination using existing instruments. Table 5.1 shows the main argument for our between-policy puzzle. The policies under investigation in this chapter are highlighted in bold with black font.

Border closures in the first wave of the pandemic (top right) follow the pattern of low externalities and short time horizons. Member states had to act

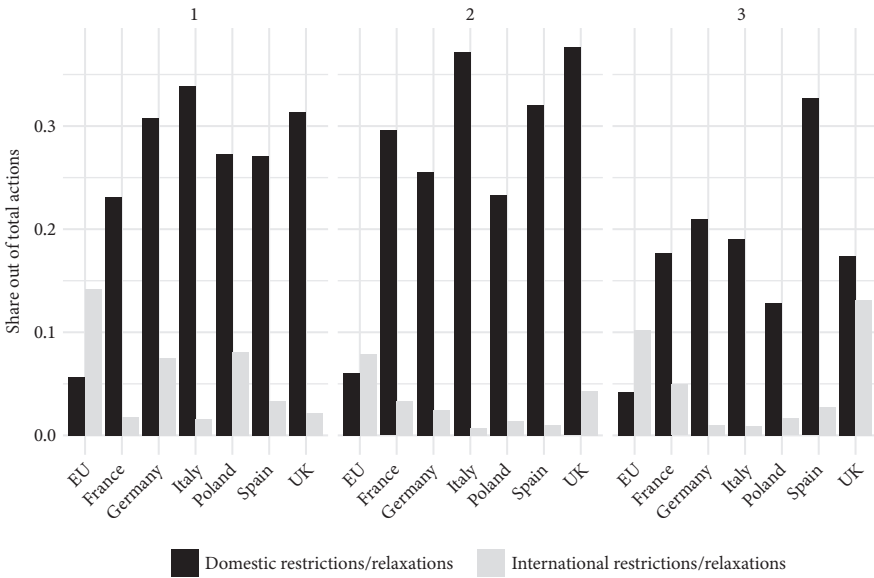


fast to contain the new and uncertain threat and the EU did not have time to react. As the next section details, these border closures had only limited externalities for other member states. By the time of the border closures in the second and third waves (top left), the EU had time to prepare. The advent of vaccination had also changed the epidemiological situation. While externalities in the absence of coordination continued to be low (see next section), the benefits of coordination increased. With vaccination, an EU-level policy coordinating border policy and travel, i.e., the Green Pass, could allow consistency between member states and a reinstating of free movement, at least for those vaccinated.

Under circumstances of high externalities but a short time horizon, we expect coordination with existing instruments, our case being the EU maintaining the free movement of goods through the green lanes policy (top left). Note the inherent problem of using existing instruments for novel problems: the EU ends up doing the bare minimum (failing forward) while leaving other problems and inefficiencies open, which we discuss further in the next section. High externalities and longer time horizons allow the EU to act more comprehensively to solve collective action problems. Thus, by the time of the possibility of vaccinations the EU had built a new instrument, the Green Pass, to allow the free movement of individuals. Finally, we consider the case of national lockdowns (bottom right), a case of low externalities, and both short (Wave 1) and long (Waves 2 and 3) time horizons. As we detail in the third section, national lockdowns, while having costs to the country that imposed them, had limited externalities to other member states. In addition, we explore the role of national polarization over the lockdowns as a constraining factor on EU intervention.

The remainder of this chapter investigates these policies in more detail, looking particularly at the salience and polarization of each policy to answer our within-policy puzzle of low conflict. We group the policies under investigation into two categories: international restrictions (and relaxations), namely border closure issues, and domestic restrictions (and relaxations), namely lockdowns.

Figure 5.1 uses our PPA data to show the relative share of actions concerning domestic and international restrictions and relaxations compared to all actions, across the three waves of COVID. What we see is a high salience of domestic restrictions as a share of all actions, particularly in the first two waves, when lockdowns dominated public discussions. National lockdowns are not salient at the EU level. However, the EU level shows higher salience in international restrictions, particularly in the chaos of the first wave. The UK also has a relatively high share of actions on border restrictions since



**Figure 5.1** Share of actions, domestic, and international restrictions/relaxations by wave.

Source: Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set.

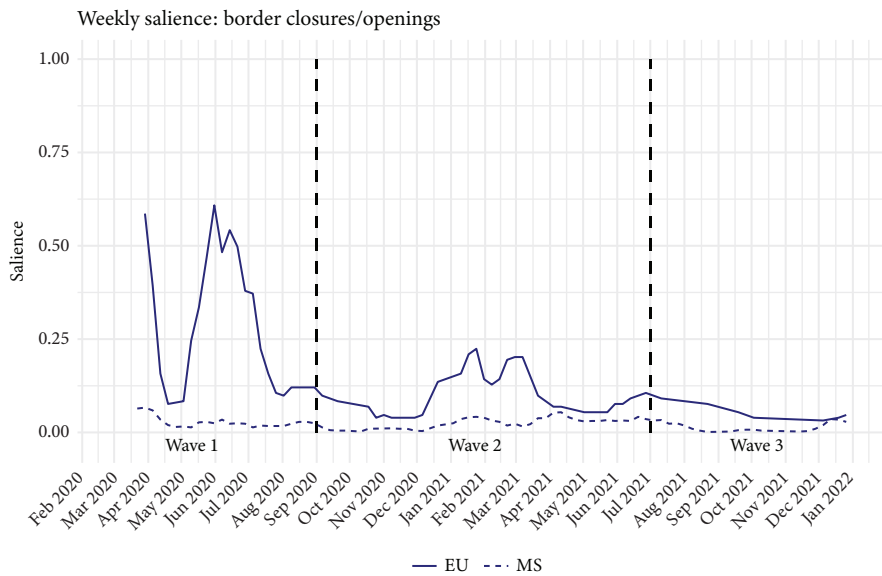
it was also juggling border issues surrounding Brexit, which came into effect in the middle of the second wave (January 1, 2021).

## Borders and other travel restrictions

### Wave 1: Border closures and limited EU coordination

On the matter of borders, in the first wave, EU actions fell far short of capacity building or creating new instruments. Instead, the EU undertook several types of coordination using existing instruments to stabilize the single market and harmonize MS policies.

Figure 5.2 shows the weekly salience of border closures and openings at the EU and member state levels. The vertical dashed lines represent the cut-off points for the different waves of COVID that we look at. The member state level shows the average of the six member states that are in our sample from beginning to end. We see that salience is primarily driven by the EU level, with low salience, on average, for member states. Secondly, we see that salience was highest in the first wave and within the first wave, highest in the first weeks of March when most member states started closing borders.



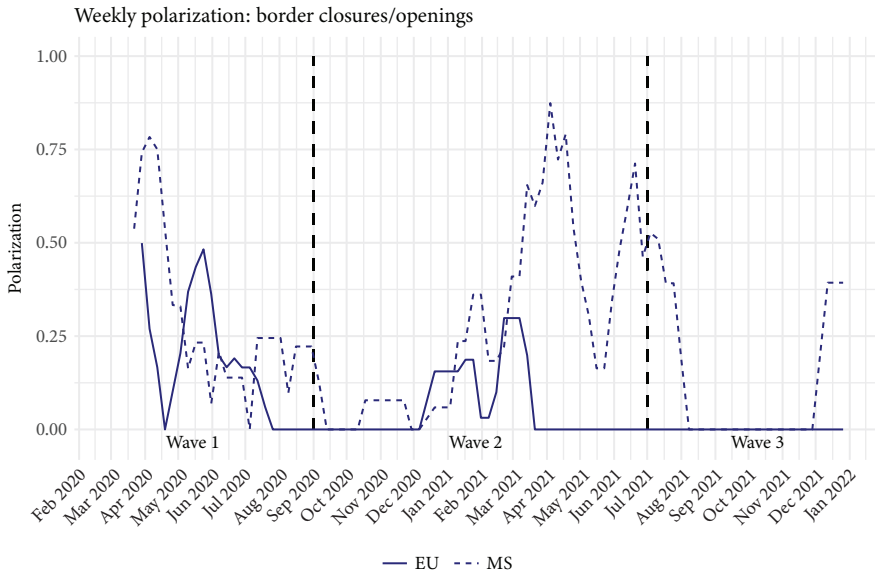
**Figure 5.2** Salience in the EU and member states (average) for border closures and openings.

*Note:* Four-week moving average used.

*Source:* Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set.

The second peak in the first wave is in the summer months which captures openings. After the summer of 2020, member states rarely returned to full border closures, instead relying on a mix of checks, testing, and quarantine requirements, and in later waves, vaccine certificates. We see a second smaller peak in the second wave during the peak of the wave in the winter months. By the third wave, and after the advent of vaccines and the Green Pass, the need for border closures disappeared completely.

Figure 5.3 shows the polarization regarding international restrictions and relaxations at the EU and MS levels. We see that despite low salience for the average MS, polarization is rather high at the MS level at the beginning of the first wave and the end of the second wave. Polarization at the EU level peaks, to a lower degree, around the same two time points. For the MS level, polarization in the first wave has mostly to do with the chaos that ensued from the unilateral, uncoordinated, closure of borders. Some of the hardest affected were cross-border workers. Poland, for example, in late March 2020, banned its cross-border workers from leaving the country, to Germany. Likewise, around the same time, Czechia refused to let its doctors, who were working in Germany, return home across the border. Our PPA data shows countless examples such as this, of countries complaining to one another regarding the



**Figure 5.3** Polarization in the EU and member states for border closures and openings.

*Note:* Four-week moving average used. Weeks with fewer than five actions were set to polarization of 0.

*Source:* Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set.

disruptive effects on their population of other countries' restrictions. French President Macron warned on March 26th that unilateral border restrictions could risk “the death of Schengen” ([Reuters 2020b](#)).

The increased polarization at the end of the second wave coincides with the last wave of border restrictions as the Delta variant was sweeping through Europe. At the same time, the vaccination campaign had only just begun and was proceeding more slowly in the EU than in the UK and US. Leaders of EU countries explicitly called for continuing all types of restrictions in order to contain the damage of Delta, until vaccination would pick up ([Reuters 2021](#)). At the same time, talks were picking up for a possible “vaccine passport” which would become the Green Pass by the summer of 2021. Reinstating border restrictions at the time was seen as necessary not only due to high infection rates, which were present in the fall of 2020 as well but also due to the fear raised by the possibility of new variants entering the block. Once again, the lack of coordination at the EU level led to disparate reactions from member states and high polarization.

Free movement of people is one of the fundamental rights enshrined in European treaties. However, free movement does not depend solely on the

EU safeguarding open borders, but on MS competences in borders, welfare, and health, in order to ensure that there are no barriers to freedom of movement, particularly for workers (Blauberger, Grabbe, and Ripoll Servent 2023). Regulations regarding who is responsible for welfare benefits for cross-border workers can determine the feasibility of their movement. Likewise, opening borders but instating quarantine or other requirements hampers the ability of workers to commute. Ensuring freedom of movement, therefore, requires coordination in several different policy domains during times of crisis. As we will see, this coordination, particularly in the first wave, occurred almost exclusively in an ad hoc fashion between member states.

We first take a closer look at measures (not) taken by the EU. The uncoordinated suspension of Schengen in March of 2020 was unprecedented. Prior to the refugee crisis of 2015, exceptions to the free movement of people and goods were almost never invoked. Even compared to the refugee crises, the speed and scale of internal border closures during the first phase of COVID were of a different class, with fourteen member states notifying the Commission in a two-week timespan and 120 notifications in total during the crisis (Wolff, Ripoll Servent, and Piquet 2020). The sporadic, uncoordinated nature of border closures led to profound uncertainty at the beginning of the crisis (Wave 1), and to a lesser degree in Waves 2 and 3. The costs were great: uncertainty for individuals, vulnerability for migrant/seasonal as well as cross-border EU workers, as well as medical workers, and damage to the main ideas of Schengen free movement and EU identity. The EU could have ameliorated some of these costs by coordinating the policy and ensuring a degree of transparency and predictability.

While the costs were great, it is important to note that the benefits of uncoordinated border closures were unclear. By the time countries closed borders there was already local transmission, rendering the policy ineffective (Sachs et al. 2022: 1235).<sup>3</sup> At that point, the most beneficial policy would have been containment at the local level, identifying localities and regions with high levels of contagion. If the EU had intervened properly, it could have created a situation of controlled local contagion while leaving freedom of movement intact, furthering the importance of European identity. Indeed it seems that some of the EU efforts to close the external borders were made in the hope that member states would open the internal EU borders (McGee 2020). However, in the absence of any EU capacity building in this domain and no

<sup>3</sup> The policy could have been effective, had it been implemented in a coordinated fashion before local transmission started in EU countries (Koopmans 2020).

enforcement mechanism, MS continued on their own paths. We therefore consider this a missed opportunity for the EU. We can imagine several policies the EU could have undertaken. At the far end of EU capacity building would have been a new system of border controls where the EU would decide which countries were required to close their borders to which other countries based on their epidemiological conditions. A less centralized policy could have involved a coordination mechanism agreed on by member states regarding when the epidemiological data of a country justified closing borders with that country. In the absence of such a mechanism, what resulted was a patchwork system where each country decided arbitrarily with respect to which other countries its borders were to be shut and for which other countries it would require tests and quarantine. One illustrative example is provided by Italy, which in July 2020 imposed quarantine requirements on travelers from Romania and Bulgaria, despite the fact that the two countries had one of the lowest rates of COVID transmission among member states (Reuters 2020a). In the absence of EU coordination, member states were left to rely on existing bilateral coordination mechanisms, resulting again in differential treatment of different EU citizens. Germany, for example, relied on existing horizontal networks with Switzerland, Denmark, and France in order to allow cross-border movement, while no such coordination existed with Czechia and Poland (Blauberger, Grabbe, and Ripoll Servent 2023). This was despite the fact that Czech and Polish cross-border workers were more likely to work in industries that required physical presence and, therefore, were in greater need of such coordination. Such arbitrary decisions may have important implications for European unity, as citizens from targeted countries might have felt discriminated against.

We have now covered what the EU could have done but did not. Let us now look at what the EU did. The EU attempted to coordinate external border closures, for example, the March 2020 attempt to close the EU's borders to all outside travelers (Hardingham-Gill 2020). The proposal from the Commission to completely close down the external border, however, was not legally binding. Member states could decide whether to implement it, and most of them did (Bayer and Cokelaere 2020). The EU also acted by approving all requests by member states for suspension of Schengen. The Commission chose not to confront member states wishing to impose border restrictions and instead limited itself to issuing nonbinding guidelines, which member states only loosely followed (Blauberger, Grabbe, and Ripoll Servent 2023).

In order to maintain the single market and clear the immediate pressure of goods and trucks being stuck at national borders, the EU instated the *green lanes* policy in March 2020. This set of recommendations ensured that goods

transporters would not be held at borders for too long and not face excessive checks. The policy proved successful as the EU did not face supply issues beyond the very first weeks of March (Linden 2022).

Lastly, we consider the “Re-open EU” platform, launched by the Commission in July 2020 (five months after the initial border closures). The platform aimed to coordinate and centralize knowledge and decisions around border closures utilizing a “traffic light” system with recommended measures based on a country’s epidemiological situation. The goal was to accelerate the opening up of countries, particularly for tourism, based on epidemiological data. However, with no enforcement mechanism, countries continued on their previous path of uncoordinated border closures. The EU again showed no capacity building and no ability to enforce recommendations. Additionally, at this point, the policy had already lost some relevance as countries shifted away from border closures. The EU could not act fast when the policy was relevant in the first few months.

Later, in the second and third waves of the pandemic, with the start of vaccination, the EU established the Green Pass to coordinate the free movement of people in the block. Ultimately, in the first wave of the pandemic, the EU did not implement anything as comprehensive to fully coordinate the actions of member states. The actions it undertook sought to stabilize the single market and offer guidelines for MS to follow. These actions, therefore, fall short of capacity building or creating new instruments to deal with new challenges.

In the absence of EU coordination, MS imposed measures unilaterally and, when necessary, coordinated with each other bilaterally. This was done through horizontal and vertical transgovernmental networks, for example, the “Task Force Corona,” set up between the Netherlands, Germany, and Belgium (Blauberger, Grabbe, and Ripoll Servent 2023). These networks addressed some of the policy voids left by the EU in order to ensure cross-border workers and other citizens the ability to move freely between select MS, without risk to their employment or welfare benefits. However, the fact that such networks were sporadic and concentrated geographically among Northern and Western EU MS meant that different EU citizens were subjected to different rules based on where they were coming from and where they were going.

Given all of these costs, why did member states impose border controls unilaterally? One answer is that it was a legacy of the 2015 refugee crisis (Kriesi et al. 2024). Decisions were perceived to be made on legitimate grounds, namely in the interest of protecting citizens of member states. This can be seen as a type of “performative governance” (Ding 2020), whereby

governments at least create the appearance of tackling a problem, in this case also by blaming infections on outsiders. Given that member states perceive border control to be a part of national sovereignty, it was difficult for it to be contested by the Commission (Wolff, Ripoll Servent, and Piquet 2020). Importantly, the Commission could have likely easily been blamed for outbreaks if it had attempted to deny MS the possibility to close borders.

A second reason was the level of uncertainty at the beginning of the crisis. Governments thought they could buy time by closing borders to slow the spread of the virus in the first wave (Bayer and Cokelaere 2020), and the spread of new variants in the second. Governments did not have contact tracing and testing systems in place in the first wave. The fear and panic generated by the images coming from Italy sent shockwaves throughout the Union. Important was also the relatively low level of externalities generated by the policy. While the costs were high for certain individuals, such as cross-border workers, these costs were not passed from one country to another but rather shared by all to some degree. At the time, the high uncertainty and fear meant that few individuals wanted to travel. Importantly, the policy was also at least perceived to solve the issue of spillover of infections, another externality. By comparison, during the refugee crisis, border closures implied high costs for other countries that had to manage the refugees. It meant leaving frontline states stuck with a disproportionate number of refugees (Kriesi et al. 2024). Closing the borders then meant rejecting EU solidarity. It was an anti-EU move. But not in this case. We can also contrast this with the case of vaccine procurement. Lack of coordination at the EU level of vaccines would have meant competition among states, leaving small states and states with low fiscal capacity at a severe disadvantage. This would have spelled disaster for solidarity. Coordination, therefore, was necessary due to externalities.

In sum, the timing of the policy explains the inaction of the EU. Panic and lack of planning led to uncoordinated unilateral action from member states. Policymakers at least perceived externalities due to contagion spreading from the free movement of people, which could be fixed by closing borders. At the same time, the costs created by the policy were shared by all countries, given their similar actions, resulting in a high-cost but low-externality scenario. Even though there was symmetry of actions—almost all closed borders—there was asymmetry of outcomes. Countries like Germany needed migrant workers whereas sending countries feared infections of returning workers, for example, Romanian seasonal workers whose presence in Germany during the height of restrictions proved contentious (AFP 2020; Ban, Bohle, and Naczyk 2022).



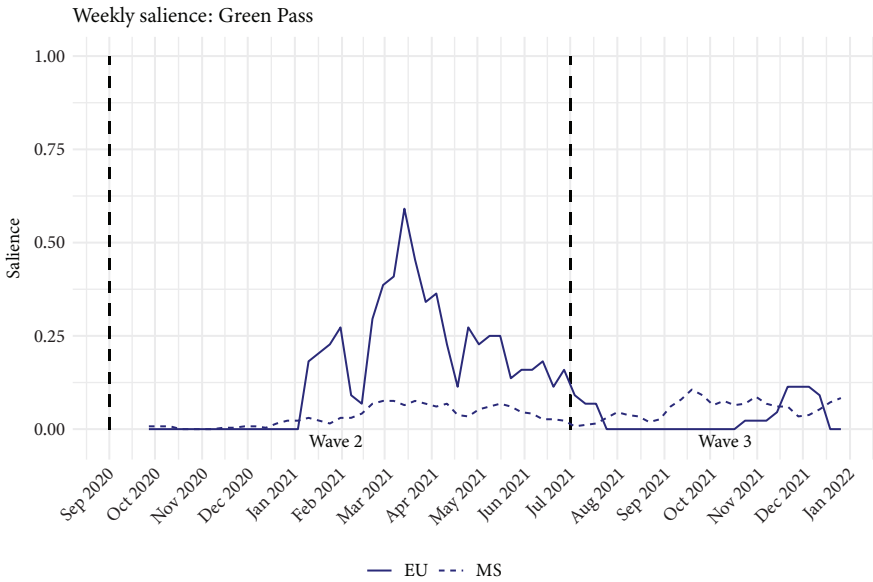
Unilateral action over borders, while not signifying any increase in EU integration, is also not necessarily a sign of disintegration either. A shifting of border controls to member states during emergencies can be seen as “cooperative but defensive integration” (Pettersson Fürst 2023). However, given what the EU could have done to better coordinate border closures and ensure transparency, predictability, and fairness, we consider this a missed opportunity for integration. This stands in stark contrast to what the EU was, in fact, able to do after the start of vaccinations, with the Green Pass, to which we now turn.

## Waves 2–3: EU Coordination and Green Pass

The lack of EU action when it came to border closures comes in contrast with its involvement in the coordination of The EU Digital COVID Certificate, the Green Pass, during the second and third waves of COVID. The EU Green Pass was approved by the European Parliament on June 14th, 2021. The policy aimed to coordinate and standardize existing requirements for travel between member states, following the start of the vaccination campaign in early 2021. Initial proposals came from Southern EU member states, which were concerned about tourism during the summer and who had already started accepting vaccination certificates (Vergallo et al. 2021). Unlike previous policies on borders, which were simply recommendations, the Green Pass was binding and entered into force on July 1st, 2021. The policy was specifically designed to prevent uneven and discriminatory border measures (Article 1), which were prevalent before July 2021. It also limited the ability of states to impose post-entry requirements on pass holders, such as quarantines and testing.

Figure 5.4 shows the weekly salience of the Green Pass at the EU and average member state level. Following the start of the vaccination campaign in January 2021, the salience of the Green Pass rose sharply and continued until its eventual implementation in the summer of 2021. During this time there was high salience at the EU level. Salience continued at the member state level into the fall of 2021 when the Green Pass was used in some countries as a way of avoiding lockdowns by allowing only vaccinated individuals to participate in public life.

We see that the high salience of the Green Pass at the EU level was not accompanied by very high levels of polarization. Figure 5.5 shows a single peak of polarization at the EU level as leaders of MS discussed the details of the policy during the initial stages of the vaccination campaign, from



**Figure 5.4** Weekly salience of Green Pass at EU and average member state level.

*Note:* Four-week moving average used.

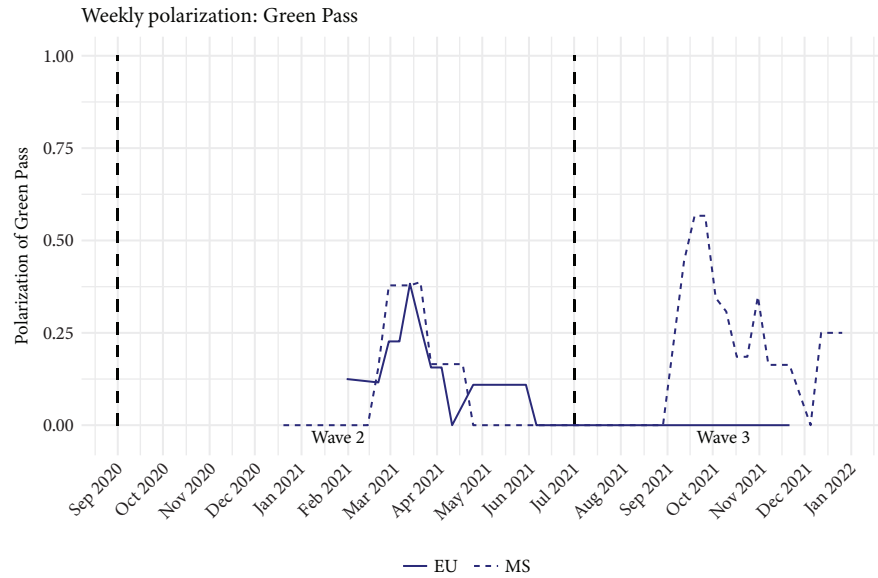
*Source:* Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set.

February to May. By summer, the actual rates of vaccination had increased to a point where the policy could be implemented at the EU level and discussions ceased.

At the member state level, however, we see a peak of polarization in the third wave, starting in the fall of 2021. Restrictions imposed by individual countries on unvaccinated individuals became one of the most contentious public health policies of the pandemic, as nonvaccinated individuals and far-right parties vehemently opposed these policies.

While the policy caused domestic contention in MS, at the supranational level it was hailed as a success, having allowed a re-establishment of free movement of individuals. It brought transparency and predictability to travelers and cross-border workers and allowed tourism-dependent countries to open their borders.

Why was the EU able to implement this policy where it had previously failed to coordinate border closures between member states? What allowed it to enact binding requirements that put an end to uncoordinated and, at times, discriminatory actions by member states? The immediate explanation seems to be that the context had changed. With the advent of vaccination, it became easier for states to verify that travelers wouldn't bring contagion



**Figure 5.5** Polarization around the Green Pass weekly for EU and MS.

*Note:* Four-week moving average used. Weeks with fewer than five actions were set to polarization of 0.

*Source:* Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set.

with them. National policies for accepting vaccine certificates were already taking shape, thus creating space for the EU to act and coordinate. However, this explanation does not capture the whole picture. Member states had also previously designed national policies for allowing cross-regional and cross-national travel. Testing and immunity certificates were already in use. The EU could just have easily built coordination mechanisms around those policies as it did with the vaccine certificates. Why didn't it?

One answer, we argue, is the longer time horizon. By the second wave, the Commission had ample time to analyze the deficiencies created by the unilateral MS responses. Evidence had built up regarding the effectiveness, or lack thereof, of certain types of cross-border restrictions. More importantly, the EU needed time to build consensus and compromise around the policy to satisfy member states that it would not create additional epidemiological risks while satisfying the need of tourism-dependent countries for reopening. While the externalities, which would have continued had the policy not been introduced, were still low, the benefits of coordination increased. Previous coordination measures would have resulted in clearer standards, more transparency, and greater equality among EU citizens for travel. With the advent of

vaccination, a coordination policy could further provide the benefit of truly opening up borders for travel, at least for vaccinated (or immune or tested) individuals.

## Lockdowns and other restrictions and relaxations

While the EU was involved to some degree with border closures, when it came to domestic restrictions, the nation-state took center stage. At first, this does not seem puzzling. The EU is a compound polity with strong states and a weak center (Ferrera, Kriesi, and Schelkle 2023). When looking back at our two-dimensional Table 5.1, we see that national lockdowns are a typical case of no EU action in a domain of low EU competence. Table 5.2 shows a breakdown of domestic restrictions and relaxations as a share of total actions in this field. The most prevalent measures are social distancing measures and curfews. Social distancing measures include requirements on the physical distance needed between individuals, restrictions on large gatherings (with large variations across time and country for the number of individuals allowed to gather indoors and outdoors), and masking requirements. Curfews cover a broad range of policies with many differences across countries in terms of the duration of the curfew, exempted groups, and penalties. Opening/closing of venues includes measures on churches, sports, entertainment and hospitality venues, parks, beaches, as well as many other types of public and private venues. We treat the closure of schools and universities separately, due to the more contentious nature of policy around school closures and reopenings, particularly in later waves of the pandemic. Indeed, as Table 5.2 shows, school openings account for a much larger share of actions on relaxations than other policies.<sup>4</sup> The “Restrictions/Relaxation other” category includes other forms of movement restrictions or relaxations (such as specific regulations regarding protests or nursing homes), public transport restrictions, and police enforcement measures (such as issuing fines).

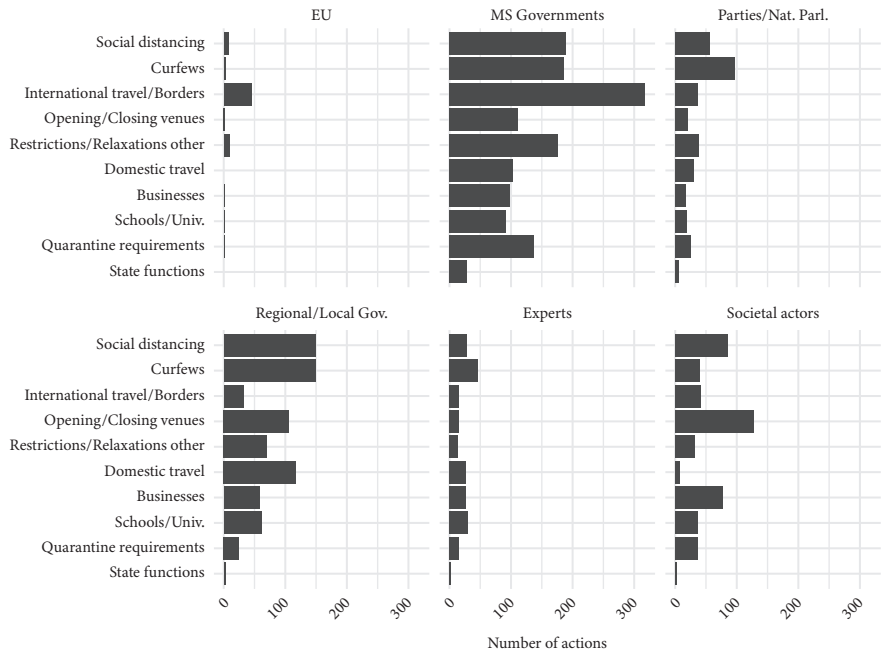
Figure 5.6 shows the breakdown of these measures by type of actor. What can be seen is that MS governments are primarily responsible for actions in this domain. Regional and local governments follow in terms of importance,

<sup>4</sup> We note that our unit of analysis in the PPA data is an individual action initiated by any given actor, and not a formal policy. Thus, the different relative shares of restrictions and relaxations for each policy can be viewed as the relative salience of different types of policies. However, there would not be a symmetry between restrictions and relaxations for formal policies either. This is because it may take ten individual decisions to set and modify the various regulations on curfews, for example, while it may take a single decision to reverse them all.

**Table 5.2** Summary statistics for type of restrictions and relaxations

	Restrictions	Relaxations
Social distancing	15.5	9.7
Curfews	15.4	9.0
International travel/Borders	14.6	15.8
Opening/Closing venues	11.7	18.5
Restrictions/Relaxations other	10.0	3.4
Domestic travel	8.3	5.1
Businesses	8.2	13.3
Schools/Univ.	7.8	23.8
Quarantine requirements	7.1	0.1
State functions	1.3	1.3
Total	100.0%	100.0%
N	3467	1904

Source: Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set



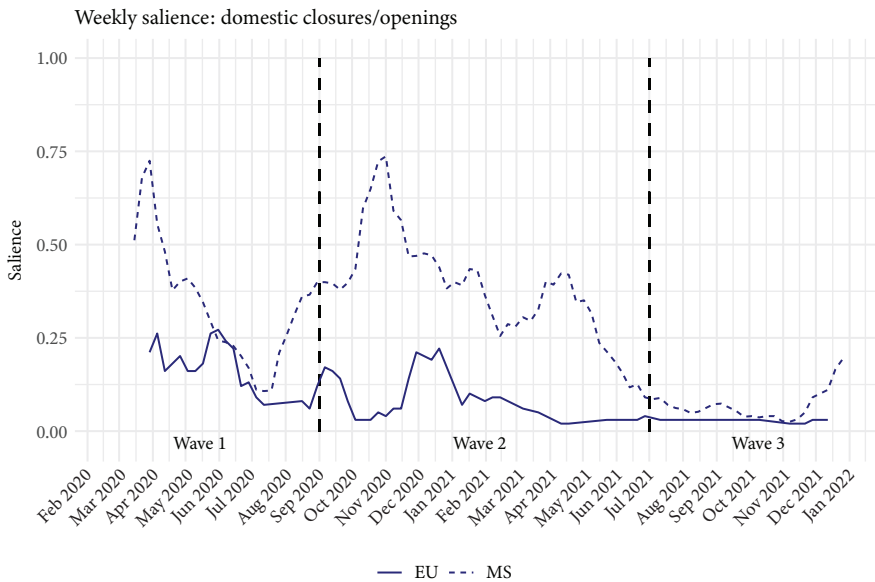
**Figure 5.6** Restrictions measures by actor.

Source: Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set.

followed by societal actors (e.g., businesses, unions, civil society, and individuals), with the EU playing almost no role. Importantly, political parties and experts have also played a limited role in the public debate surrounding restrictions. This does not necessarily mean that these actors were not relevant for policymaking. Epidemiological and other health experts were crucial for designing policies and advising governments and other key decision makers. However, in our sample of countries, they did not contribute independently to a large degree to public discussions around these issues.

Figure 5.7 shows the salience of lockdowns at the EU and average MS level. What can be seen is that lockdowns are primarily salient at the national level, with salience peaking at the same time as the major waves of infection, when MS had to implement such policies. We see a comparatively lower salience at the EU level. Given that the EU does not have competence in this domain, why do we still find this lack of action by the EU puzzling?

The first is that coordination can still bring benefits. Let's consider the national and subnational levels. It makes sense for regions to have different approaches based on their public health capacity and the severity of the outbreak. We don't expect the whole of Spain to lock down because of spiking infections in Madrid. Therefore, we also don't expect the EU to lock down



**Figure 5.7** Weekly salience of lockdown measures.

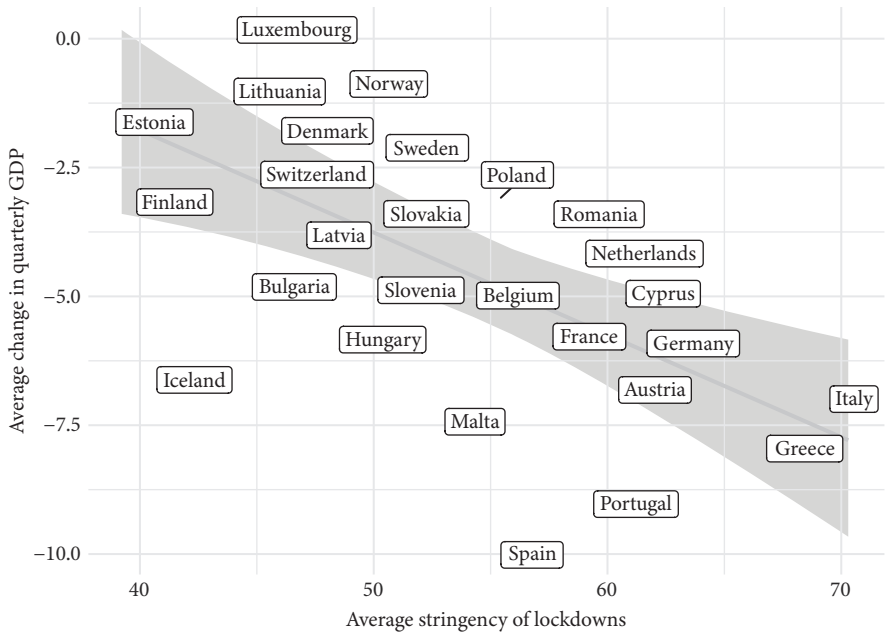
*Note:* Four-week moving average used.

*Source:* Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set.

due to infections in Romania. However, standards at the upper level are very important for managing policy at the lower level. Turning back to Spain, it is important for Madrid and Catalonia to have clear standards to maintain predictable flows of goods and people. Standards diminish uncertainty and allow economic and other types of coordination. Indeed, some EU countries in fact centralized pandemic-related policy (Vampa 2021).

The second reason we might have expected EU action is that national lockdowns can create costs and increase inequalities between countries. Note that costs do not necessarily equal externalities. One country’s lockdown does not shift costs to other countries, it may actually be perceived to lower externalities by controlling infections. Nonetheless, restrictions do imply some economic costs for the country that implements them.

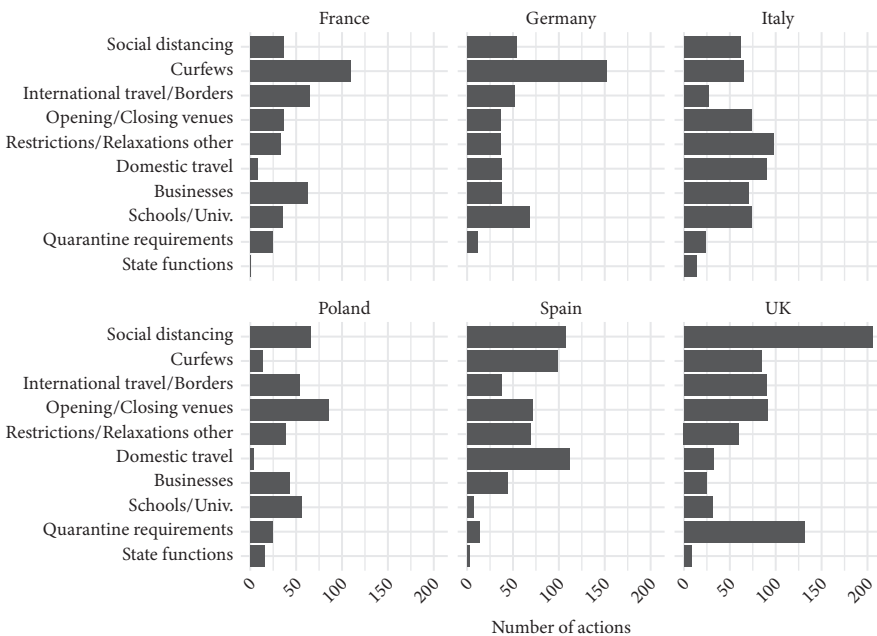
Lockdowns shut economic and public life at the national level. Figure 5.8 shows a simple linear fit between the average stringency of lockdowns and the average change in GDP over the period. What can be seen is a relatively strong relationship between lockdown severity and loss of economic output. More important for our argument is the vastly different experience of member states. At the extremes, we have Luxembourg, which managed to recuperate all its economic losses by the end of the period, having imposed



**Figure 5.8** Average stringency and change in GDP during the period of study.  
Source: Created using data from the World Bank Development Indicators and the Oxford Covid-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT).

mild restrictions, and at the other, we have Spain, Portugal, Italy, and Greece, with tight lockdowns and high economic costs. Spain, Portugal, Malta, and Iceland, among others, actually fared worse than would be predicted by the severity of their lockdowns, likely due to their dependence on tourism. Importantly, average stringency over the period masks tremendous variation in policy. While overall restrictive policies were similar, their timing and intensity varied strongly among EU member states (Popic and Moise 2022). Importantly, both lockdown policy as well as loss of economic output were affected by the severity of the outbreak in each country, as well as their ability to cope, in terms of hospital and public health infrastructure.

Costs were generated not just by the intensity of the policy but also by discrete policy choices. Figure 5.9 shows the different mix of choices among the categories in Table 5.2 that countries made. We see that the UK relied primarily on social distancing and quarantines. Italy, on the other hand, relied on a broader mix of policies, including restrictions on movement and domestic travel, and closing down public spaces. Spain focused the most on social distancing and domestic travel, with almost no mention of closing schools and universities. Poland, on the other hand, focused on closing down public spaces including schools and venues, and enforcing social distancing.



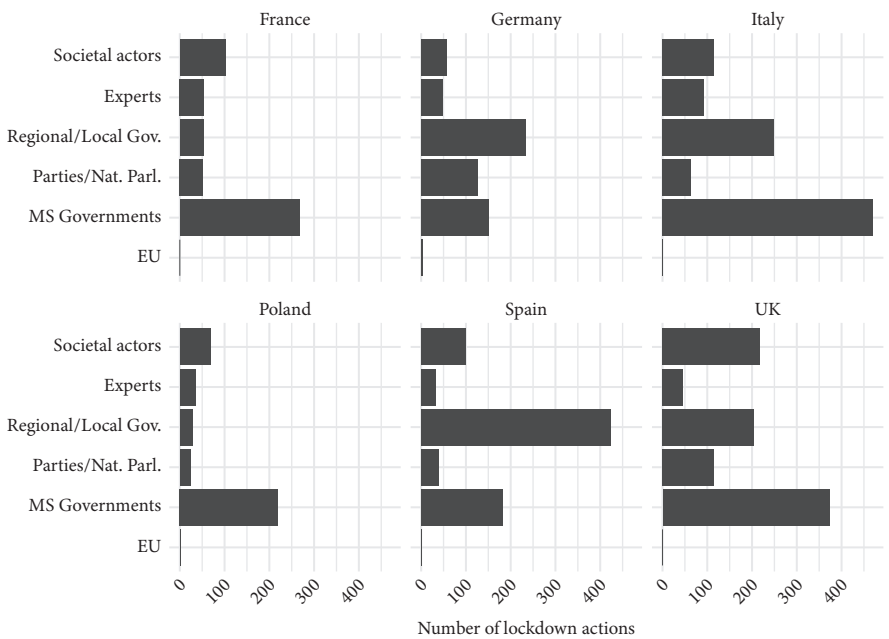
**Figure 5.9** Restrictions actions by country.

Source: Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set.



At the same time, Poland has an overall lower share of actions, indicating a lower salience of restrictions. France and Germany follow similar trajectories, with the public debate primarily focused on curfews and the closure of schools and businesses. In the case of Spain and Germany, we note that there was much wider regional variation in measures due to the federal nature of the governments.

Figure 5.10 shows the variation at the national level in terms of actors. What can be seen is a much higher devolution to local authorities in federal Germany and Spain, than in other countries. Indeed, most actions in the two countries were taken at the regional or local level, followed by the central government. In Germany, the federal government focused mainly on economic and fiscal policy, leaving public health interventions to the *Länder*. However, in contrast with Spain, there was ample cooperation and coordination between the federal and local level, leading to a more successful policy response in Germany, while in Spain delayed and uncoordinated policies left it with one of the highest excess mortality rates (Greer et al. 2023). The experience of these two federal states shows that there are important benefits to coordinating policy responses between regions, which are likely to translate also to the member state level in the EU.



**Figure 5.10** Restrictions actions by country and actor.

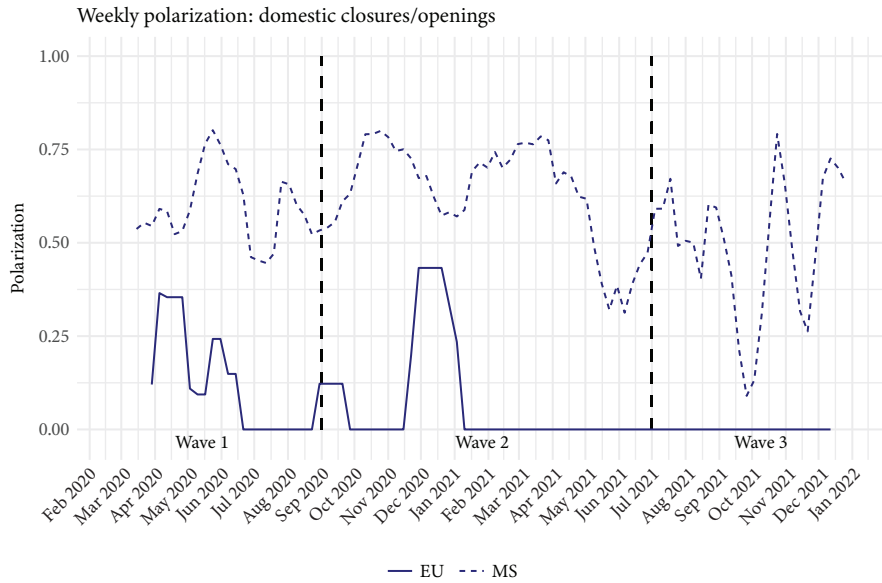
Source: Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set.

France and Poland are at the opposite end of the spectrum, with a highly centralized policymaking approach, with virtually all decisions taken by the government. Italy and the UK are in-between cases. Most decisions are still taken by the central government. However, in both cases, many policy decisions were delegated to regional and local leaders. In the case of the UK societal actors, in particular unions and businesses, played an important role in the national discussion.

Thus both the policy mix as well as the policymaking style of different member states saw large variation during the pandemic. Coordination at the EU level could have meant that countries followed more similar standards in terms of which policies to adopt at any given time, which could have eased the degree of economic inequality and ensuing need for compensation. In the long term, these differences can exacerbate inequalities between member states, be they in terms of GDP, public debt, or other measures. This leads to demand for rescue for businesses and individuals at the national and EU levels. Given the high contentiousness of the NGEU fund and its failed initial version of coronabonds, it is puzzling why the EU did not try to intervene in the causes of the need for the fund. In other words, the EU had to save the single market but did not interfere with the measures putting the single market to the test. Domestic policy, therefore, makes the playing field uneven. It can generate inequalities which make future cooperation harder.

A third reason to expect EU involvement has to do with possible benefits to EU identity. Coordination at the EU level would have been important for creating a shared feeling of belonging among EU citizens. As [Chapter 11](#) shows, high empathy with other EU citizens was a driving force for bonding at the EU level. Lastly, a comparison with the Green Pass shows that some type of coordination mechanism would have been possible, and likely brought benefits in terms of predictability and security for citizens.

So why didn't the EU attempt to coordinate national lockdowns? The first answer is that it is not an EU competence. But, as we saw, that is not enough to answer the puzzle because the EU has acted on policy areas with low competence when the costs of inaction or the benefits of coordination were high enough. The second answer is that the externalities from national lockdowns toward other countries were minor or would only be felt in the long term (the uneven playing field). Moreover, whatever externalities did initially emerge, such as disruptions in trade, could be fixed with lower level policies such as the green lanes. Other economic externalities, such as failing businesses in one country affecting business in another country, were resolved either by domestic governments or, in the long term, by the NGEU.



**Figure 5.11** Polarization weekly—national and EU.

*Note:* Four-week moving average used. Weeks with fewer than five actions were set to polarization of 0.

*Source:* Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set.

Another possible explanation is that the EU could not interfere in national affairs regarding lockdowns because of the very high politicization of restrictions at the national level. [Figure 5.11](#) shows the weekly polarization at the EU and national levels for lockdowns. What can be seen is a consistently high level of polarization at the national level. Such contestations at the national level, between government and opposition, as well as societal and other actors, meant that any EU involvement would have been perceived as the EU taking one or another side. As such, the EU could not frame involvement in this policy as a neutral intervention meant to increase efficiency and predictability, as there was no consensus at the national level. This contrasts with EU involvement with other policies that had more consensus at the national level (fiscal policy) and with policies with high externalities despite high polarization (refugee policy). In the case of lockdowns the EU did the bare minimum.

## Conclusion

Borders and lockdowns show the importance but also the limits of the role of problem pressure in spurring EU integration. Akin to how common economic policy creates the need for fiscal integration, the free movement of

people and goods creates pressures to resolve certain externalities at the EU level. Free movement during a pandemic requires common standards and procedures for ensuring that travelers and workers do not spread disease. This logic is not deterministic, however. We have seen that in the absence of EU coordination, problem pressure encourages MS to act unilaterally to suspend freedom of movement. Moreover, problem pressure seems less present when it comes to national lockdowns. While lockdowns generate some inter-state externalities, such as endangering supply chains and logistics, it does not seem to be enough to push the EU to act.

The EU's current competence structure is not a sufficient explanation for EU capacity building in specific areas. While it does constrain the EU to some degree, the polity has proven time and again that in times of crisis, it can reach beyond its existing competences. We have argued in favor of two factors that have an important impact during times of crisis. The degree of externalities that countries would face in the crisis in the absence of coordination pushes the EU to act in areas where it previously had a limited role. Member states themselves seek coordination at the EU level in such cases, in what we call attempts at "polity maintenance," that is, preserving the polity in the face of possible shocks. The second key factor is the time horizon faced by the EU. Long time horizons allow the EU time to engage in the types of politics it does best, namely rules-based politics. Time allows the EU to build consensus and coordination among member states. It thus seems to be a prerequisite for effective capacity building. During the COVID crisis this meant that the EU was slow to act, but then managed to effectively coordinate member states.

There is reason to believe that our argument travels beyond the COVID crisis. Recently, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has pushed new levels of coordination by the EU into areas of low competence. The joint gas purchase agreement appears to follow our two factors. Externalities due to possible competition for gas among member states, and a long time horizon as the EU had time to prepare for the winters following the start of the war, appear to have been crucial for the policy (Tani and Dubois 2023). Future research can fully test this argument in the context of the war in Ukraine.

## Public Health Policy

### Timing and Policymaking at the EU and Member States Level

#### Introduction

In February 2020, cases started appearing in several European countries, with infections spreading silently in the absence of testing capacities and contact tracing infrastructure. February 14th marked the first European COVID-19 fatality registered in France, while February 15th marked the beginning of the first significant outbreak in Italy. Without much interest or support from other member States or the EU, the Italian government took the decision to place the Lodi region under quarantine on February 22nd. Two days later, Austria and Switzerland announced border restrictions. COVID-19 represented, first and foremost, a catastrophic public health threat that needed to be contained, while the economic effects and measures adopted during the crisis were mostly a result of the restrictions imposed for containing the virus. This chapter focuses on the measures adopted in the public health domain at the EU and at the member states level in the three waves of the pandemic. While the strict lockdowns and border closures that member states adopted one after the other in spring 2020 and continued to be adopted throughout the pandemic were justified for public health reasons, following our three B's framework, we have considered those measures separately in [Chapter 5](#) as bounding measures. Consequently, we focus here on public health measures and vaccination, covering about 33 percent of the actions in our dataset (see [Table 6.1](#)). The public health measures we focus on here include capacity building in the health domain, sanitation measures, testing, and tracing (about 18.8 percent of the actions), to which we add the vaccination research, procurement, and roll-out (about 14.9 percent of the actions).

To begin with, in terms of the competence distribution between the member states and the EU at the onset of the pandemic, public health measures

**Table 6.1** Public health measures overview (including only member states for which we have coded all three waves): percentages

	EU	Member states	Total
Public health (e.g., PPE production, sanitation, test and trace)	9.2	19.4	18.8
Vaccination	20.3	15.1	14.9
Other	70.5	65.4	66.3
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
n	3,355	15,916	21,245

Created using the ERC SOLID PPA dataset.

were mainly a national competence, with the EU having limited competence in these matters. In terms of health threat management, the EU's responsibilities were limited to coordinating national responses rather than managing risks. By contrast, it is the member states that are the ones responsible for adopting measures related to containment or treatment (Deruelle and Engeli 2021). As detailed below, going into the COVID-19 crisis, the EU had some institutional basis to operate, however, with a very limited mandate. This limited mandate makes it an interesting case for analyzing novel forms of capacity building rather than just EU policymaking under established circumstances (Brooks et al. 2023).

The EU's coordination role in health matters was mainly exercised through intergovernmental bodies such as the Health Security Committee (HSC), an advisory body of the Council convening health ministries' representatives from the member states. This intergovernmental body was set up in 2001 (in the aftermath of the 2001 terrorist attacks in the US) at the request of EU Health Ministers as an informal advisory group on health security at European level.<sup>1</sup> The HSC's role was further formalized and strengthened in 2013 (Decision 1082/2013/). The 2013 Decision on serious cross-border health gave the HSC the ability to decide, with the endorsement of the Council, on the coordination of national measures in response to human health threats from communicable diseases and outbreaks of unknown origin.<sup>2</sup> Beyond the HSC, the EU's capacity also fell to a limited extent in the hands of two independent EU agencies and two bodies in the Commission. First, the European

<sup>1</sup> Source: [https://health.ec.europa.eu/health-security-and-infectious-diseases/preparedness-and-response/health-security-committee-hsc\\_en](https://health.ec.europa.eu/health-security-and-infectious-diseases/preparedness-and-response/health-security-committee-hsc_en).

<sup>2</sup> Source: [https://health.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2016-11/decision\\_serious\\_crossborder\\_threats\\_22102013\\_en\\_0.pdf](https://health.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2016-11/decision_serious_crossborder_threats_22102013_en_0.pdf).

Center for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) was created in 2004 in the aftermath of the 2002 SARS outbreak (Greer 2012). The agency had a very limited mandate, specifically excluding risk management (Greer and Mätzke 2012), which was left in the hands of member states and the HSC. Second, the European Medicine Agency (EMA) was founded in 1995 with the purpose of harmonizing the work of existing national medicine regulatory bodies and monitoring and enforcing the Union’s regulatory framework on procedures for the marketing authorization of medicines in the EU.<sup>3</sup> Third, the Directorate-General for Health and Food Safety (DG-SANTE) had a broad scope in implementing EU policy on food safety and health. Fourth, the Directorate-General for Research and Innovation (DG-RTD) coordinated and allocated funding toward health research and innovation. Finally, the EU has various early warning and rapid alert systems in place, specifically the Early Warning and Response System (EWRS) for communicating disease outbreaks (Boin and Rhinard 2023).

This chapter has four goals corresponding to the subsequent sections. First, we aim to provide a chronological account of the public health developments throughout the three waves of the pandemic at the EU level. Given the policy heritage described above, all the public health measures discussed in this chapter reflect a limited EU competence, hence falling in the bottom cells of Table 6.2. Nevertheless, as discussed in Chapter 2, existing EU competence is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the policy outcomes in terms

**Table 6.2**    Categorizing Expectations and Reality of EU Action

	EU Capacity building	No EU capacity building
Supranational/Shared Competence	Economic Policy Waves 2-3 border coordination/Green Pass Free movement of goods (Green lanes) ECB PEPP (new quality in terms of quantitative easing)	Wave 1 border closure
National Competence	Vaccine Procurement and Distribution (waves 2–3) <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• High externalities</li><li>• Long time horizon</li></ul> Fiscal policy/NGEU	Coordination of export bans of PPE (wave 1) <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• High externalities</li><li>• Short time horizon</li></ul> National Lockdowns

<sup>3</sup> Source: <https://www.ema.europa.eu/en/about-us/history-ema>.

of EU capacity building. We show that while the EU had low competence in public health measures and, hence, it theoretically would not be expected to act in this domain, the dangers of a lack of coordination in the first wave of the pandemic became apparent and spurred institutional innovation and capacity building in later phases. While other recent accounts of EU health policy during COVID-19 point at a neofunctionalist explanation for capacity building (Brooks et al. 2023), indicating that the level of integration within the EU meant that member state governments had no disintegrating option and hence built EU public health capacity, we argue that high externalities need to be coupled with a longer time horizon allowing the EU to build coordination and capacity.

Second, as public health measures were mainly a national prerogative, we zoom into the public health management of the crisis in selected member states (Italy, Germany, Sweden, and Poland) across different European regions, with different institutional architectures and levels of preparedness in facing the pandemic. These cases highlight that while lockdown policies converged to a large extent across these member states in the first wave (with the notable exception of Sweden), the differences in their institutional structures and levels of preparedness resulted in different levels of effectiveness of these measures in terms of infection and mortality rates.

Third, we examine the characteristics of policymaking at the EU and member state levels, the issues and actors involved, and the extent to which the EU played a role in these decision-making processes. We show that given the unequal competence distribution between the member states and the EU, the salience and polarization at the two levels showed different trends. While vaccination-related issues were the most salient at the EU level, the debates at the MS level were more varied, especially at the beginning of the pandemic, hence following our time-horizon hypothesis. Furthermore, this also translated into a higher polarization of public health issues at the MS level than at the EU level, reflecting competence distributions. In terms of actors, both levels were characterized by emergency politics involving mostly executive decision-making. Given the advisory role of most of the EU's public health institutions, the debates heavily involved member state governments, while the domestic debates included a wider variety of actors, especially in terms of claims-making, but a notable absence of EU actors.

Finally, in the last section of the chapter, we aim to take stock of the changes brought about by the pandemic in the institutional framework of the EU in public health matters. We argue that while the pandemic spurred capacity building and an extension of the EU's competencies (most visible in the joint vaccine procurement, but also in the reformulation of the mandates



of various EU institutions), this mostly strengthened the EU's coordination role, constituting an example of centralized coordination, rather than centralization of resources.

## **A chronological account of the public health developments across the EU**

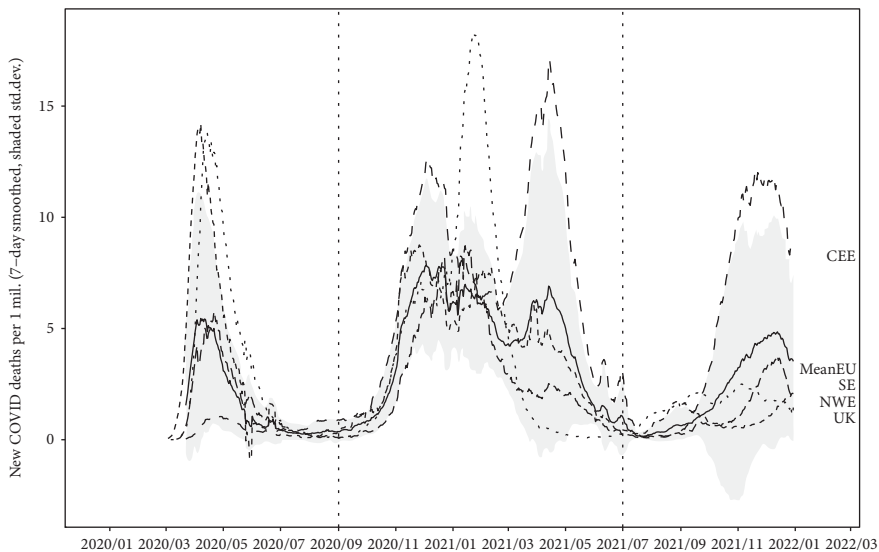
### **First wave (March 2020–September 2020)**

In late January 2020, two months before Europe became the epicenter of the pandemic, the EWRS and ECDC arguably failed to sound the alarm bell for member states on the scale of the danger. On January 17th, following a virtual meeting of the Health Security Committee it reported: “There is a low likelihood of importation of cases in EU/EEA countries, due to the less extensive traffic of people with Wuhan” (Scholz 2020), while on January 25th, after French health authorities confirmed three cases, it reassessed that “[e]ven if there are still many things unknown about 2019-nCoV, European countries have the necessary capacities to prevent and control an outbreak as soon as cases are detected.”<sup>4</sup> While the ECDC increased its risk warning through February, including reports on the need for personal protective equipment (PPE) in healthcare settings and releasing guidelines for non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) to delay and mitigate spread (Forman and Mossialos 2021), its limited advisory mandate did not push member states leaders to consider the threat of the virus as serious enough. More generally, while the early warning systems and teams of scientific experts communicated the threat, these warnings were downplayed without resulting in immediate action. Part of the reason for this downplay was due to other issues that were seen as more of a threat at the time, such as the Turkish President Erdoğan threatening to tear up the EU deal on refugee resettlement and rising Euroskepticism related to Migration (Boin and Rhinard 2023).

As cases started to spread across Europe at the end of February, member states found themselves caught by surprise and scrambled to contain the spread of infections. With a few controversial outliers, notably Sweden (and the Netherlands at the very beginning of the pandemic), member states adopted widespread lockdowns through a process of regulatory convergence under uncertainty and required various forms of social distancing, independent of how hard they were hit by the virus. If measures might have

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/news-events/novel-coronavirus-three-cases-reported-france>.

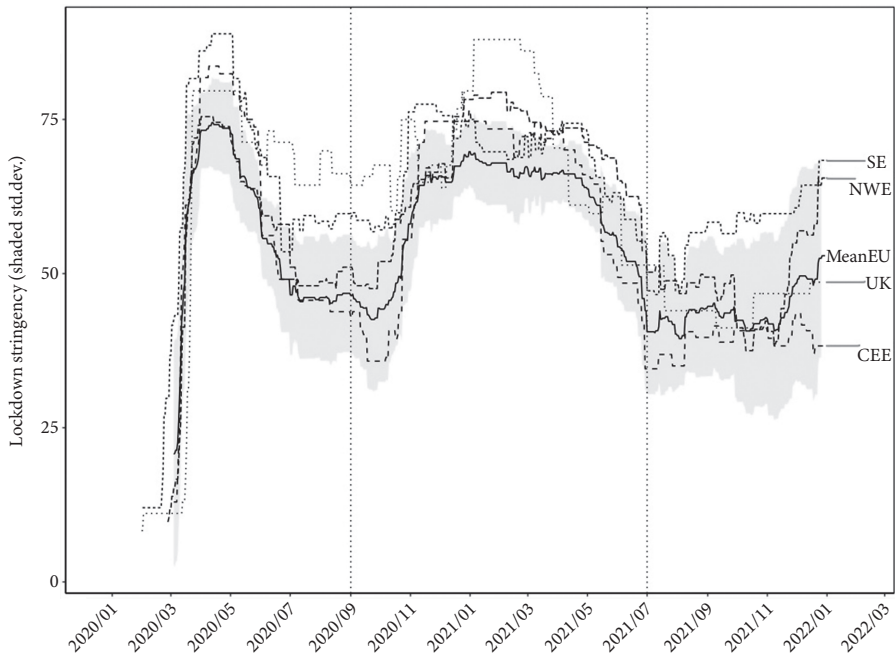
differed marginally across member states, social distancing was embraced as the preferred nonpharmaceutical approach for attaining this goal virtually everywhere (Alemanno 2020). Member states quickly adopted high-cost policies such as work and school closures, while practices that were later deemed to be relatively low-cost and highly effective at reducing the spread of the virus, such as screening and contact tracing, were comparatively slower to be implemented (Mistur, Givens, and Matisoff 2022). While, as highlighted in the next section, the state of public health systems varied greatly across EU member states, as did the problem pressure (see Wave 1 in Figure 6.1), the lockdown stringency showed comparatively more limited variation (see Wave 1 in Figure 6.2). Accordingly, several studies underscore that the interventions adopted by member states were only weakly predicted by standard epidemiological indicators (infections, deaths, intensive care capacity) but strongly predicted by diffusion (number of countries adopting the same policy; in particular, the number of proximate countries) (Mistur, Givens, and Matisoff 2022; Sebhathu et al. 2020). Providing a full explanation for this policy convergence goes beyond the scope of our analysis in this chapter, but the literature suggests that the novel character of the threat produced a period of



**Figure 6.1** New COVID-19 deaths across Europe.

*Notes:* MeanEU—mean for EU countries included in the analysis (Germany, France, Poland, Hungary, Romania, Austria, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, UK); SE—Southern Europe; NWE—North-Western Europe; CEE—Central and Eastern Europe; UK—United Kingdom. Negative rates might appear as corrections in earlier declared rates.

*Source:* Created using data from The Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center (CRC).



**Figure 6.2** Lockdown stringency across Europe.

*Note:* MeanEU—mean for EU countries included in the analysis (Germany, France, Poland, Hungary, Romania, Austria, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, UK); SE—Southern Europe; NWE—North-Western Europe; CEE—Central and Eastern Europe; UK—United Kingdom.

*Source:* Created using data from the Oxford Covid-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT).

maximum policy uncertainty, which incentivized political actors to converge on a common set of policies to minimize their exposure to electoral punishment (Sayers et al. 2023). What is important for us to note here, though, is that this regulatory convergence, dubbed “copycat coronavirus policies” (Krastev 2020), occurred spontaneously as a decision of the individual member states rather than as a consequence of the EU and its cross-border health emergency coordination mechanisms (Alemanno 2020). These measures were held in place in most countries until the beginning of May, as infections and deaths slightly subsided as summer approached (see Figure 6.1).

While member states converged on social distancing measures, they also adopted protectionist decisions to secure scarce resources for their own populations rather than sharing these across Europe based on need (Anderson, Mckee, and Mossialos 2020). Thus, on March 3rd, France announced a ban on the export of personal protective equipment, triggering panic in Europe over supply. Germany and other countries quickly followed up with similar bans, all unilaterally without EU coordination. A virtual European Council

meeting on March 10th stressed the need for solidarity and cooperation and identified the provision of medical equipment as a priority, but little was done in terms of a common response. Given the short time horizon, most countries individually contacted Chinese manufacturers and created additional competition for PPE (Forman and Mossialos 2021). In response to these rows over PPE, the Commission decided on March 19th to create a strategic stockpile of medical equipment, such as ventilators and protective masks.<sup>5</sup> However, it wasn't until June 8th that the first delivery of masks under the scheme was provided.<sup>6</sup> In spite of the high externalities, as many countries were exceeding their health system's capacity, the EU's limited capacity in this domain, coupled with the short time horizon to act, resulted in a very limited contribution of the EU to these challenges.

As the spring of 2020 exposed the dangers of lack of coordination, the beginning of the summer saw negotiations for extended capacities at the EU level through the ECDC. On June 10th, Denmark, France, Germany, Spain, Belgium, and Poland launched a plea to widen the ECDC's mandate and create a future EU health task force called for the bloc to improve its pandemic preparedness, a call which gained consensus among member states on July 16th.<sup>7</sup> Simultaneously, the summer brought progress in the development of vaccines. The ECDC produced a paper for a COVID-19 vaccination plan. This plan was quickly taken up by the Commission, which presented a draft blueprint on June 12th. The member states approved the European Commission Vaccine Plan, including a joint procurement mechanism, on June 17th, hoping this would avoid the competition and lack of solidarity seen with PPE.<sup>8</sup> The vaccination procurement and distribution plan marked a moment of exceptional solidarity in Europe, standing in stark contrast with the conflicts over PPE in the first wave of the crisis as EU member states pool funds and access vaccines equally (with the exception of Hungary and Slovakia that also unilaterally took Chinese and Russian vaccines). With limited competencies in both domains and high externalities but a longer time horizon, the EU managed to build capacity and centralize coordination.

While a vaccine joint procurement mechanism was certainly progress in what regards EU public health coordination, the Commission was inexperienced with such a process, opting for lower prices over speedy deliveries

<sup>5</sup> <https://clustercollaboration.eu/news/european-commission-creates-first-ever-resceu-stockpile-medical-equipment>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/15/revealed-the-inside-story-of-europes-divided-coronavirus-response>.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-national-capitals-question-coronavirus-pandemic-preparedness/>.

<sup>8</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_20\\_1103](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1103).

(Forman and Mossialos 2021). Consequently, while by mid-May, both the UK and the US had secured contracts to vaccinate their entire populations fully, it took the Commission until mid-August to secure its first vaccine agreement. The details of these agreements and the prioritization of prices over delivery would have consequences in the winter of 2021.

## Second wave (September 2020–December 2021)

To address the lack of coordination and preparedness in the spring of 2020 in fighting the pandemic, the Commission introduced several initiatives to strengthen its health capacities throughout the autumn of 2020. On November 11th, it published a communication entitled “Building a European Health Union: Reinforcing the EU’s resilience for cross-border health threats” emphasizing the EU’s lack of access to relevant medical countermeasure stockpiles and two weeks later, announced the creation of a new EU Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority (HERA).<sup>9</sup> The creation of HERA was coupled with a series of other initiatives aimed at rounding up the European Health Union proposal, such as strengthening the mandate of the ECDC, extending the role of the EMA, and upgrading Decision 1082/2013/EU on serious cross-border threats to health (Ferrera, Kyriazi, and Miró (2024), see Table 6.3). Finally, the creation of the EHU was also underscored by the adoption of the EU4Health program, which allocates a €5.3 billion budget during the 2021–27 period as one of the main instruments to pave the way to a European Health Union by investing in urgent health priorities: response to COVID-19, Europe’s Beating Cancer Plan, and the Pharmaceutical Strategy for Europe. EU4Health is to be steered by a group bringing together the Commission and the member states to finance both EU-level actions (such as stockpiles) and offer funding to the member states.

These initiatives can certainly be seen as important forms of capacity building at the EU level in the public health domain. Nevertheless, the mode of integration they represent is by no means monopolizing authority at the center. By contrast, we describe this process of changing binding authority in the EHU as centralized coordination (similar to the concept of “expansive unification” in Ferrera, Kyriazi, and Miró (2024) or to the concept of “coordinative Europeanization” in Ladi and Wolff (2021)), whereby the role of the member state governments is not weakened, but rather strengthened by their inclusion in the steering of new common policies at the center.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-promoting-our-european-way-of-life/file-european-biomedical-research-and-development-agency>.

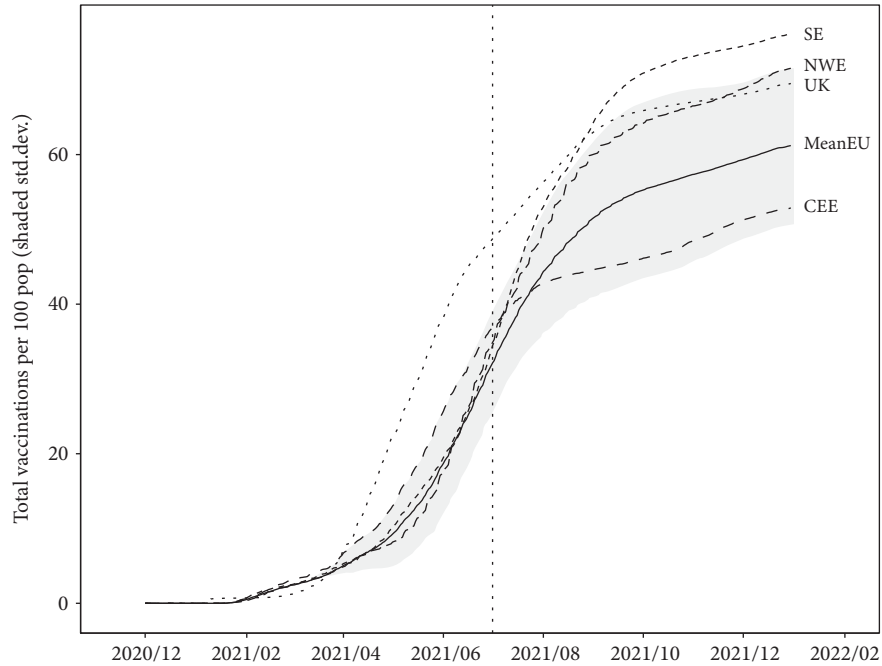
**Table 6.3** Table adapted from [Ferrera, Kyriazi, and Miró \(2024\)](#) on the proposals of the EC for the EHU

ECDC	European Commission—Proposal for a regulation amending Regulation (EC) No 851/2004 establishing a European Center for disease prevention and control, COM(2020)726, 11/11/2020
HERA	Commission Decision of 16.9.2021 establishing the Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority, C(2021)6772 General Secretariat of the Council—Council Regulation on the emergency framework regarding medical counter-measures, 15132/21
EMA	Regulation (EU) 2022/123 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 January 2022 on a reinforced role for the EMA in crisis preparedness and management for medical products and medical devices, OJL 20 31.1.2022
SCBTH Regulation	European Commission—Proposal for a regulation on serious cross-border threats to health and repealing Decision No. 1082/2013/EU, COM(2020)727

In spite of the institutional innovations that autumn brought about, the early vaccination procurement efforts proved to be marked by several issues. While the EU had insisted on strict financial conditions with vaccine companies, these manufacturers faced delays and shortages, which made them prioritize their supply to countries that had negotiated stricter delivery conditions in their contracts ([Forman and Mossialos 2021](#)). Additionally, the EU had stricter requirements regarding the effectiveness of the vaccines. When the UK approved the first COVID-19 vaccine (Pfizer/BioNTech) on December 2nd, 2020 (becoming the first Western country to approve the use of any COVID-19 vaccine), the EMA criticized the decision as hasty, only to arrive at the same set of guidelines three weeks later ([Forman and Mossialos 2021](#)). Furthermore, while the procurement of vaccines marked a moment of exceptional solidarity, the domestic administration of vaccines was still marked by moments of lack of coordination. As the EMA's mandate was advisory and decisions on vaccine administration were a national prerogative, divergences appeared across member states with regard to what vaccines were available, the timing of administration, and prioritization with regard to age and occupation. These divergences arguably further fueled vaccine hesitancy ([Forman, Jit, and Mossialos 2021](#); [Gillespie 2021](#)). Taken together, these factors resulted in a slower start of the vaccination drive in Europe, as shown in [Figure 6.3](#), where the Southern and North-Western European countries are shown to lag behind the UK until the end of the summer of 2021.

### Third Wave (July 2021–December 2021)

By the end of the summer of 2021, average vaccination rates in the EU started exceeding those in the UK, and the EU started coordinating a common Green Pass strategy (see [Chapter 5](#)). Regarding public health measures, the summer also brought highly unequal vaccination rates (see the widening standard deviation in [Figure 6.3](#)) due to increased vaccine hesitancy, with Eastern European member states lagging behind their Southern and North-Western European counterparts. Due to these unequal vaccination rates, member states also started experiencing highly unequal pandemic pressure from the new Delta variant. The coupling of unequal vaccination rates and subsequent unequal pandemic pressure also marks the end of the regulatory convergence in terms of social distancing measures that member states adopted, each following very different strategies in dealing with the new variant that do not necessarily follow the size of the pandemic pressure (see [Figure 6.1](#)).



**Figure 6.3** Cumulative COVID-19 vaccinations across Europe (fully vaccinated people per 100).

*Note:* MeanEU—mean for EU countries included in the analysis (Germany, France, Poland, Hungary, Romania, Austria, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, UK); SE—Southern Europe; NWE—North-Western Europe; CEE—Central and Eastern Europe; UK—United Kingdom.

*Source:* Created using data from The Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center (CRC).

## Zooming into the measures taken by selected member states

While the timeline above highlights mainly the measures adopted in the public health domain at the EU level, the public health management of the pandemic remained mainly a national prerogative beyond the success of the centralized coordination exhibited in the vaccination procurement strategy. As highlighted above, most countries (with the notable exception of Sweden) eventually adopted widespread lockdowns through a process of regulatory convergence in the face of uncertainty. Nevertheless, the member states' institutional architecture, levels of preparedness, and eventual effectiveness in managing the pandemic still varied greatly. Table 6.4 shows the variation in terms of public health capacity at the onset of the pandemic in four selected member states. In this section, we zoom into the COVID-19 public health management trajectories in these selected member states, further referring to the data in this table, but also embedding it in the institutional architecture, context, and eventual outcomes of each case. We focus first on Italy and Germany, highlighting their different levels of centralization in the management of the pandemic and their different levels of preparedness. We then take a look at Sweden's exceptional response to the pandemic and highlight some of the explanations put forward in the literature for this divergence. Finally, we showcase a Central-Eastern European case, Poland, as a typical example of regulatory convergence in the first wave of the pandemic.

**Table 6.4** Hospital beds per 1,000 people in 2018 (or nearest available year), ICU beds per 100,000 people, and daily number of tests per 100,000 people 60 days after the country recorded 10 deaths per million population (averaged over a week)<sup>a, b, c</sup>

Country	Hospital beds/1000	ICU beds/100000	Average tests/100000
Italy	3.1	12.5	81.2
Germany	8.0	38.7	88.9
Sweden	2.1	5.8	36.6
Poland	6.5	6.9	32.7

<sup>a</sup> Source on hospital beds: OECD Health Statistics 2020; Eurostat Database.

<sup>b</sup> Source on testing: Roser et al. (2020), "Our World in Data," <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus>.

<sup>c</sup> Source on ICU beds: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_countries\\_by\\_hospital\\_beds](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_hospital_beds). Created using data from OECD Health Statistics 2020, Eurostat Database, Mathieu et al. (2020), "Our World in Data," and Wikipedia ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_countries\\_by\\_hospital\\_beds](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_hospital_beds))



## Italy—European Patient Zero

### The measures and who was in charge

After the confirmation of the first imported case from Wuhan to Italy came on the 31st of January, a state of national emergency was called.<sup>10</sup> Three weeks later, on the 21st of February, mobility restrictions were immediately imposed in the ten affected municipalities in Lombardy.<sup>11</sup> While the government was initially divided between the Minister of Health (Roberto Speranza), who favored a hard lockdown, and PM Conte and others, who were more concerned with the economic impact of a lockdown (Bull 2021), the outbreaks spread to the Veneto region. On the 23rd of February, red zones in Lombardy and Veneto were established with the closure of schools, public venues, all nonessential commercial activities, and the prohibition of public and private meetings. The decision caught security forces by surprise and made it hard to establish controls for the traffic into and out of these areas, with the outbreaks spreading rapidly. Between the end of February and the 11th of March, red, orange, and yellow zones<sup>12</sup> were gradually extended, while schools and universities were closed across the country.

While healthcare in Italy is a shared competence between the state and the regions, the constitution allows the government in case of severe danger to supersede them (Kuhn and Morlino 2022). Initially, regional governments found themselves at the forefront of the response to the outbreak, with the central government acting cautiously and incrementally (Vampa 2021). As it became clearer that regional closures were difficult to sustain and as the capacity of intensive care units started to be pushed to their limits, a nationwide lockdown was imposed on March 11th. Nevertheless, regional disparities still prevailed, with presidents of the regions adopting legal measures that overlapped and contradicted policies put forward at the center and with the central government struggling to coordinate and harmonize these policies and having to renegotiate with the regions after passing the lockdown decrees (Vampa 2021).

The lockdown was gradually extended until May 4th when relaxations began due to a decline in cases. The easing of restrictions brought about a new focus on wearing personal protective equipment and social distancing. In autumn 2020, a new wave of infections brought about a new wave of restrictions. If, at the beginning, these were implemented uniformly at the

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSR1N282044/>.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.france24.com/en/20200520-learning-to-live-again-in-italy-s-first-virus-red-zone>.

<sup>12</sup> Regions were divided into three zones—red for the highest risk, then orange and yellow.

national level, starting on November 6th, these began to be adopted according to a region-based policy in order to take account of heterogeneities in healthcare systems and infection rates ([Merkaj and Santolini 2022](#)).

### **Preparedness and effectiveness**

Italy, as the European member state hit first by the pandemic, can arguably be considered as trailblazing in terms of the measures adopted, but Italy was unprepared to handle the pandemic as the austerity measures implemented as a result of the Eurozone crisis had taken a toll on its national healthcare system. Cuts in the public health sector had decreased pneumological beds from 4,414 in 2010 to 3,573 in 2018 and while Germany had eight curative hospital beds per 1,000 inhabitants in 2018, Italy had only 3.14 (see [Table 6.4](#)). The situation was equally dire in terms of the number of ICU beds, where Italy had less than a third of the number of ICU beds per 100,000 inhabitants in Germany. These deficits arguably took a toll on Italy's pandemic response. Nevertheless, a number of public health measures were adopted to correct this during the pandemic. On the one hand, the government requisitioned health and medical facilities from private healthcare providers and allowed prefects to requisition hotels and other buildings to provide rooms for patients. On the other hand, it allocated resources to strengthen the health sector, including €3.2 billion for hospitals and care structures, 3,553 new ICU beds, and the recruitment of 9,000 nurses ([Giraud et al. 2021](#)). Nevertheless, implementation problems prevailed as less than a third of the planned ICU beds were acquired, and recruitment of medical personnel proved problematic. What arguably functioned well was Italy's testing strategy, with an average of more than eighty tests per 100,000 performed each day.

## **Germany—decentralization, a robust healthcare system, and testing**

### **The measures and who was in charge**

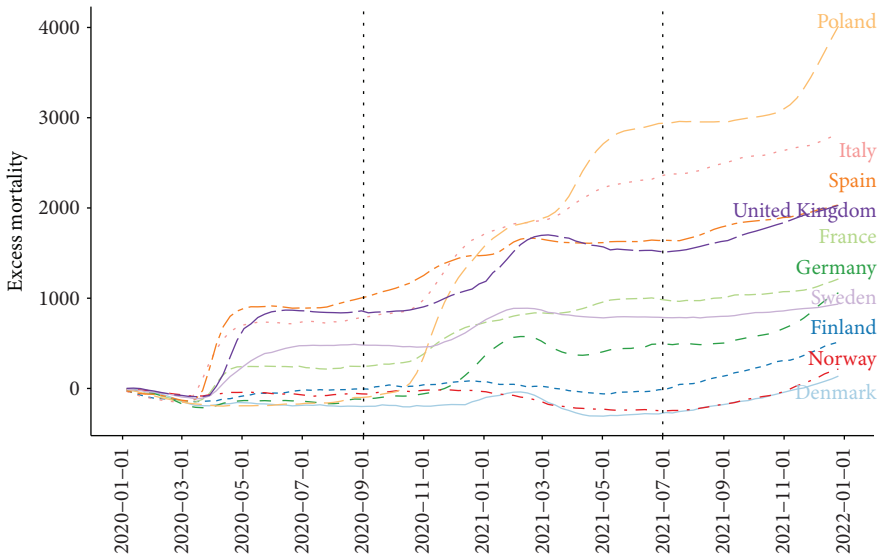
In contrast to Italy, the German Basic Law does not provide for the centralization of authority in the case of an emergency which remains in the competency of the *Länder*. The COVID-19 pandemic did not impact this state of affairs and the separation of legal competencies between the two levels, with the federal level providing the legislative framework and the states adopting their own measures ([Kuhn and Morlino 2022](#)). A first joint consultation on pandemic management was held on March 12th, 2020 between Chancellor Merkel and the prime ministers of the *Länder* agreeing to a

close cooperation in handling the situation. Following this, the Bundestag declared a nationwide pandemic on March 25th. In spite of the high level of competence of the Länder, the response in the first wave of the pandemic was still marked by high levels of centralization and centralization achieved through joint coordination (Kuhn and Morlino 2022). As there were no binding nationwide policies regarding specific public protection orders, states adopted measures along different timelines, with heavily impacted states such as Bavaria implementing policies that were different from those in the rest of the country (Desson et al. 2020).

Most of these restrictions were lifted in May, and divergences in the Länder pandemic management strategies appeared during the summer after an agreement on infection thresholds which was interpreted as a symbolic delegation of responsibility from the federal to the state level and due to the prospect of elections. Nevertheless, coordination still prevailed as the Länder wanted to centralize the political risks of decision-making (Kuhn and Morlino 2022). On October 28th, given a new surge of infections, Chancellor Merkel, along with state leaders, announced a new tightening of social distancing requirements, with additional guidelines announced on November 16th and a strict lockdown being announced one month later, after which the vaccination campaign began.

### Preparedness and effectiveness

With more than double the hospital beds per capita of Italy and with a testing intensive strategy of pandemic management, the German pandemic response is widely viewed as a success story. Since 1991, Germany had increased the number of intensive care beds by 36 percent, reaching a total of 498,192 hospital beds and 27,500 ICU beds at the time when the pandemic hit. However, these numbers hide considerable regional variation ranging from Thuringia and Bremen with 7.4 beds per 1000 inhabitants to Baden-Wuerttemberg with only five (Giraud et al. 2021). Additionally, the German healthcare system was marked by a trend of privatization, resulting in higher workloads for medical personnel, more precarious contracts, and a shortage of nursing personnel in particular. Faced with these challenges, the German government enacted the COVID-19 Hospital Relief Law in March 2020 offering financial compensation for COVID-19 occupied beds and for testing. Finally, a major role in the containment of the pandemic in Germany was played by its testing strategy. Given a dense network of technologically advanced companies, tests were brought to the market in a very quick fashion, overcoming long supply chains (Giraud et al. 2021). As shown in Table 6.4, the daily number of tests per 100,000 people that Germany performed on average was also the highest



**Figure 6.4** Excess mortality: Cumulative number of deaths from all causes compared to projection based on previous years, per million people.

Source: Created using data from “Our World in Data.” <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/cumulative-excess-deaths-per-million-covid?tab=chart&time=2020-01-25..2021-12-26&country=SWE~DEU~ITA~FRA~POL~GBR~ESP~FIN~DNK~NOR>.

among our selected countries. The combination of a prepared healthcare system with a testing-intensive strategy made Germany perform relatively well across all three stages of the pandemic (see Figure 6.4).

## The Swedish exceptionalism—trust, experts, and constitutional restraints

### The measures and who was in charge

The Swedish response to the COVID-19 pandemic stood out when compared to the rest of Europe. While other European member states imposed strict lockdowns with their measures emulating each other in the face of uncertainty, Sweden’s strategy was mostly centered around individual responsibility privileging voluntary measures (Giritli Nygren and Olofsson 2021). While public gatherings of more than fifty people were eventually banned at the end of March, most schools for young children were not closed (Petridou 2020).

Beyond the unorthodox expert advice it received, Sweden’s exceptionalism has been explained by a combination of factors including its institutional architecture, but also its population’s high levels of trust. First, in terms of

institutional architecture, Swedish municipalities are autonomous when it comes to healthcare, including disease prevention and control. Furthermore, the constitution gives a lot of power to independent bodies, such as the Public Health Agency (Folkhälsomyndigheten). This agency, led by the State Epidemiologist Anders Tegnell during the pandemic, released nonbinding recommendations that, while in principle could be rejected by the government or by the regions, were followed closely during the pandemic. Coupled with the character of the crisis as necessitating science-based solutions and with the weak political position of the minority government led by the Social Democrats and the Greens, who wanted to take little political risks, this facilitated the response being led mostly by the public health experts, rather than politicians enacting extraordinary legislation (Petridou 2020). Not only did the advice of Anders Tegnell not emulate the approach adopted by other member states, but the Swedish institutional structure imposed another hurdle in that the constitution does not allow for the imposition of a state of emergency during public health crises, but only in times of war. In principle, there was little to no room for imposing a lockdown as the executive had no option to suspend rights and freedoms (Rice 2022). Secondly, another part of the explanation behind Sweden's exceptionalism put forward in the literature (Petridou 2020) lies in the high levels of institutional and interpersonal trust of its population. As the government issued voluntary recommendations centered on individual responsibility, the high levels of trust were thought to ensure compliance in the absence of fines and coercive measures.

### Preparedness and effectiveness

Sweden's low number of ICU beds added fire to the flame. In the years prior to the pandemic, Sweden reduced the number of hospital beds and ICU beds, having the lowest number of hospital beds in Europe (two hospital beds per 1,000 citizens, and 5.8 ICU beds per 100,000 citizens) (Rosenbäck, Lantz, and Rosén 2022). This made for a need to increase capacity immediately in the first wave. While the rate of increase in capacity was among the highest in Europe (Sweden almost doubled its national capacity compared to pre-COVID-19 levels), the absolute levels still remained below those of Germany, for example. Additionally, as shown in Table 6.4, this was also coupled with low rates of testing, more similar to those in Eastern Europe than to its North-Western European counterparts (thirty-six daily tests per 100,000, compared to eighty-nine in Germany and thirty-two in Poland). In spite of this combination of factors, we can see in Figure 6.4 that relative to most of the countries in our sample, Sweden did not perform exceptionally badly. Nevertheless, when compared to other Scandinavian countries, which are similar in terms of levels of trust and development, Sweden stood out as a negative example.

## Poland—a change of fortunes from harsh measures to low adherence

### The measures and who was in charge

Similar to other Central-Eastern European countries introducing restrictions early in correlation to their low health capacities (Popic and Moise 2022), Poland implemented harsh measures at the beginning of the pandemic managing to largely avoid the first wave of infections. As Figure 6.1 reflects, CEE countries had the lowest COVID-19 mortality rates in Europe in the first wave of the pandemic. Poland reacted quickly by introducing a state of epidemic emergency on March 14th, followed by the declaration of the “state of epidemic” on March 20th. The response to the pandemic was also highly centralized, being led by the central government with the support of dedicated crisis management bodies and following scientific advice, but only from national agencies, rather than independent scientific experts or community stakeholders (Sagan et al. 2022). A full lockdown was introduced by March 27th, within eighteen days from the first diagnosed case, and when there were only 890 cases and ten deaths. In comparison, Spain’s lockdown was declared when the country already had 46,652 diagnosed cases and 196 deaths, while France’s lockdown was declared when the country had 6953 cases and 175 deaths (Gruszczyński, Zatoński, and Mckee 2021).

Largely avoiding the first wave of infections, the harsh measures were relaxed by the beginning of the summer, which brought about a subsequent surge in cases (see Figure 6.1). Worsening economic forecasts and diminished trust in the government resulted in lowered public support for the restrictions, with economic considerations taking precedence across all CEE countries (Sagan et al. 2022). Beyond economic reasons, the relaxation of measures in Poland also followed electoral reasons. A presidential election was initially planned for May 2020 and eventually held in July 2020, which rallied the people to go out and vote despite the risks posed by the pandemic, giving a sense of false optimism as an attempt by PiS to showcase a “return to normality” that would increase the incumbent’s popularity (Gruszczyński, Zatoński, and Mckee 2021). As autumn brought a new surge in cases, new restrictions were eventually introduced, but slower than in other EU countries (only on October 8th, while infections had been surging since September), and such measures were also marked by deteriorated adherence.

Finally, beyond public health measures, it is worth noting here that the centralization and emergency powers that CEE governments bestowed upon themselves to this end during the pandemic also gave way to abuses of power and further democratic backsliding. In October 2020, the Polish Constitutional Court, staffed with pro-PiS judges, issued a de-facto abortion ban, thus

pushing legislation that, under normal circumstances, would be subjected to more public scrutiny than when rights of assembly are limited (Bohle et al. 2022; Guasti and Bustikova 2022).

### Preparedness and effectiveness

While for many years seen as a source of inefficiency, the relatively high number of hospital beds in CEE and Poland in particular (see Table 6.4) became an asset at the beginning of the pandemic (Sagan et al. 2022). Additionally, Poland took quick measures to secure additional bed capacity in the first wave of the pandemic by designating entire hospitals for sole use by COVID-19 patients and repurposing existing facilities. While the availability of ventilators and PPE was initially limited, the central government was quick in building up stocks by centralized procurement from abroad (though often nontransparently and marked by corruption) (Sagan et al. 2022). Staff shortages represented the biggest challenge, but a variety of measures were taken in this respect, from longer work hours to the prohibition of leaving the country or allowing final-year medical and nursing students to perform support roles.

While Poland fared relatively well in terms of hospital capacity in the first wave, it failed to develop adequate testing and tracing protocols over the summer to prepare for the expected surges in infection rates. Given the initially favorable epidemiological situation, contact tracing capacity was deemed adequate in spring 2020, and was not increased over the summer (Sagan et al. 2022). Testing rates were, therefore, among the lowest in Europe (32.7 daily tests per 100,000 people compared to 88.9 daily tests in Germany, see Table 6.4), while the use of contact tracing apps remained minimal (about 2 percent of the population having downloaded the contact tracing app by autumn 2020, Sagan et al. 2022). These factors, combined with low adherence rates and the relaxation of measures, arguably resulted in exceptionally high infection and death rates in the second and third waves of the pandemic, as showcased by Figure 6.1 for CEE.

## Policymaking in the public health domain at the two levels

Following our qualitative timelines in the previous sections that aimed to highlight the major public health developments focusing first on the EU's reaction to the pandemic and then highlighting some key differences across selected countries, in this section, we aim to examine more systematically



the features of the policymaking processes in the public health domain at the two levels. In doing so, we analyze policy actions within our PPA dataset (see [Chapter 3](#)) and show the evolution of issue salience over time, the actors involved in policy debates, and the types of actions they initiate.

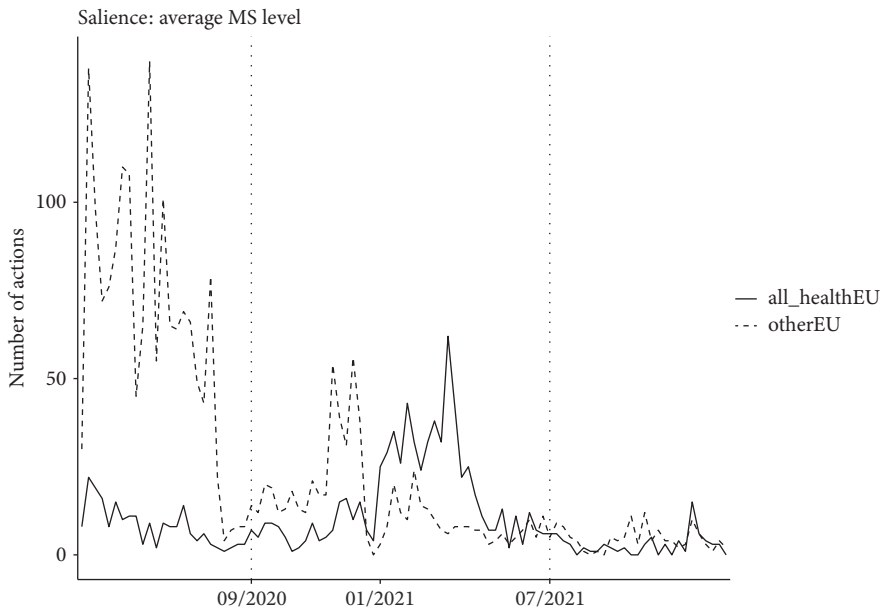
## Issue salience and polarization across the three waves

[Figure 6.5a](#) presents the issue salience across the public health domain and across all other domains at the EU level. As the figure shows, issue salience across all domains reduces over time. This is unsurprising given that the initial shock of the pandemic spurred a media frenzy involving a lot of claims from a variety of actors. Nevertheless, while the pandemic was first and foremost a public health emergency, other nonhealth-related issues were more salient than public health issues in the first wave of the pandemic. As seen in the previous section, the main reasons behind this lie both in the lack of competence of the EU in the public health domain, but also in the regulatory convergence over lockdowns and movement restrictions as the single, largest strategy to contain the virus (and its economic consequences). EU coordination in regards to testing, tracing, PPE production, and sharing were of a secondary nature. By contrast, public health issues start being the most salient in Wave 2, and more specifically in the winter of 2021 with the start of the vaccination drives. Interestingly enough, the EU's capacity building attempts throughout the summer and autumn of 2020 were not marked by exceptionally high salience, perhaps because they came as a rather too late solution to the hurdles experienced by the member states in the first wave. [Figure 6.5b](#) presents the broad issue composition of the public health debates over time, splitting them between vaccine-related debates and all other debates. The figure shows that in the first wave of the pandemic, health-related debates were dominated by general public health discussions over medical equipment, testing and tracing, and other sanitary measures. However, by the middle of Wave 2, the debate was dominated by the vaccination topic, which proved to be the most salient public health issue at the EU level.

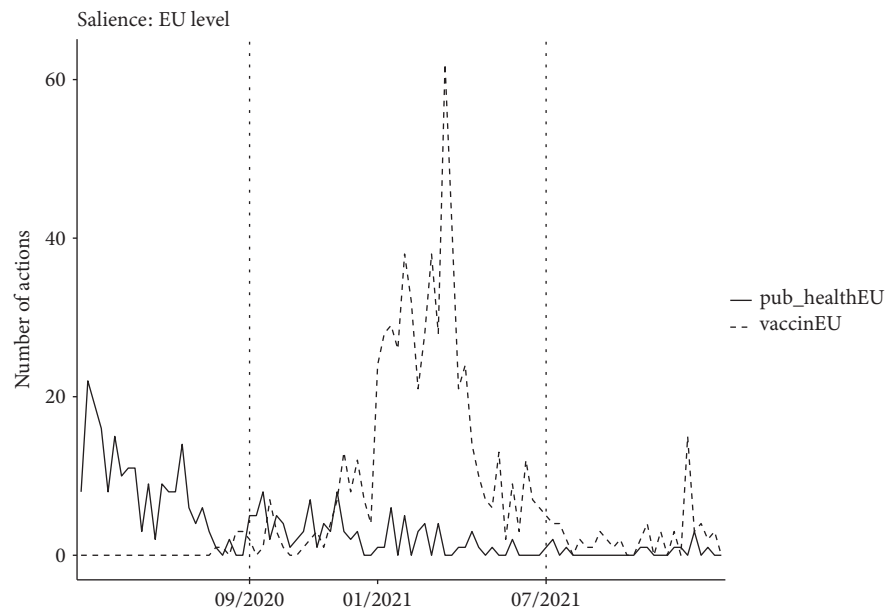
[Figure 6.6](#) looks at more specific issues under the general public health heading at the EU level. We see here that, indeed, the lion's share of actions taken at the EU level concerned the vaccination debate. Nevertheless, these debates also involved discussions about public health measures related to sanitation (such as hygiene promotion or disinfection requirement), use of PPE such as masks, and quarantine measures for those infected (`quarantine_sanitation_ppe`), the coordination of measures across member states



(a) Saliency of health issues vs. all other issues

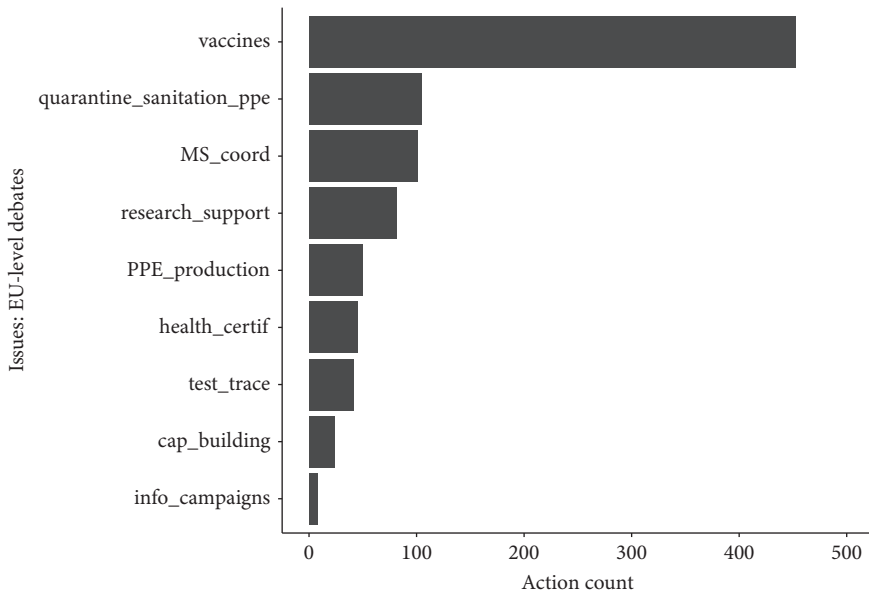


(b) Saliency of public health vs. vaccination issues



**Figure 6.5** Issue saliency over time (weekly action counts) at the EU level: (a) saliency of health issues vs. all other issues; (b) saliency of public health issues vs. vaccination issues.

Source: Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set.



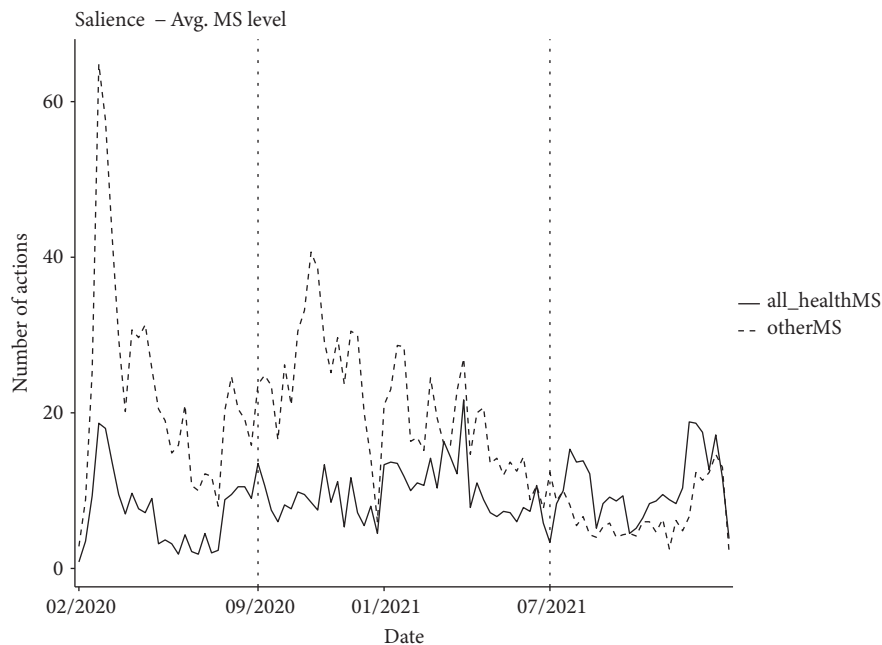
**Figure 6.6** Specific issues addressed in EU-level public health debates.

Source: Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set.

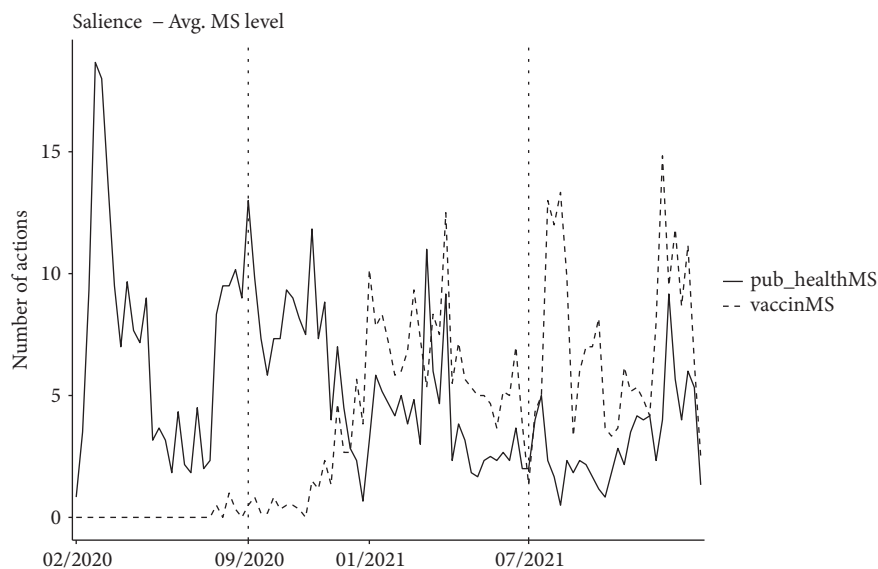
(MS\_coord), as well as discussions over research support and PPE production. Debates targeting EU capacity building explicitly are rare. Coupling this finding with the qualitative timeline above, we can conclude that while institutional innovations were certainly put forward and competencies were extended, these measures had relatively little salience in the debates that were taking place.

Moving to the member state level, [Figure 6.7](#) explores issue salience—the average number of actions over the six countries for which we gathered data in all three waves. In terms of how the salience of public health issues compares to other issues, we see here ([Figure 6.7a](#)) a similar trend as at the EU level, insofar as all COVID-19 issues lose salience over time and the debate becomes dominated by other issues (particularly lockdowns and economic measures—see [Chapters 6, 8, and 9](#)). However, when exploring the broad issue salience within the public health domain ([Figure 6.7b](#)), we see that at the MS levels, the all-time-high salient issues are rather those related to medical equipment, testing and tracing, and other sanitary measures, than vaccination. Vaccination issues really start surpassing other public health in terms of salience only in Wave 3 as member states start implementing diverging vaccination administration strategies and discussing immunity certificates.

(a) Saliency of health issues vs. all other issues



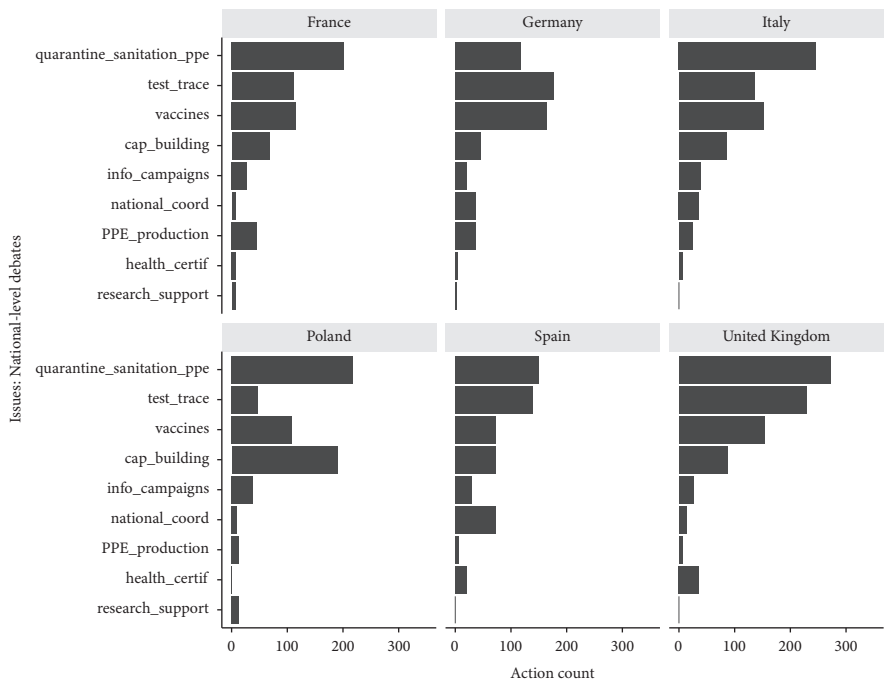
(b) Saliency of public health issues vs. all other issues



**Figure 6.7** Issue saliency over time (weekly action counts) at the MS level: (a) saliency of health issues vs. all other issues; (b) saliency of public health issues vs. vaccination issues.

Source: Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set.

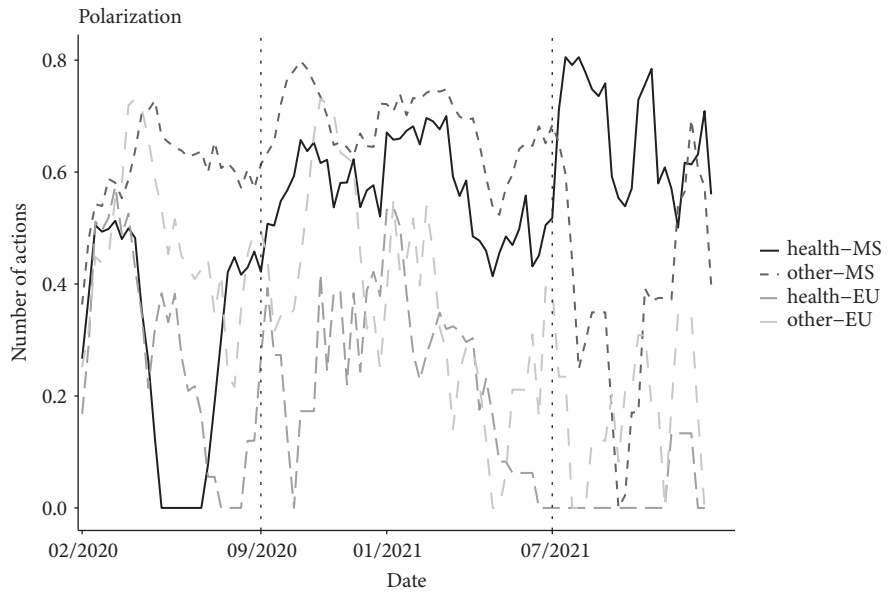
Figure 6.8 further stresses the diversity of debates at the member states level. We see here that public health measures related to sanitation, use of PPE and quarantine for those infected (quarantine\_sanitation\_ppe), or testing and tracing are as salient, or even more salient than vaccination debates. One interesting regional dynamic highlighted by the figure is the high salience of capacity building in Central Eastern Europe (exemplified by Poland), as these member states entered the pandemic with highly underprepared health systems. Another interesting highlight from Figure 6.8 concerns Germany's considerably lower share of actions related to sanitation, quarantine, and use of PPE as compared to the other countries and its relatively higher share of actions dedicated to testing and tracing (with the exception of the United Kingdom). As mentioned in the brief country report above, Germany represents a case of high decentralization of the public health response, especially in regard to quarantine measures, which probably meant that many of the more specific measures were announced and discussed in local media rather than the national sources we use here. Additionally, Germany was praised in



**Figure 6.8** Specific issues addressed in national-level public health debates.  
*Source:* Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set.

the first waves of the pandemic for its high testing capacity and rates, which were heavily discussed in international media.<sup>13</sup>

Figure 6.9 compares the polarization in the public health domain with the polarization in the other domains at the two levels across the three waves of the pandemic. At the member state level, the polarization of the public health domain was similar to that of the other domains, if not slightly lower in the first two waves of the pandemic. However, during the third wave, which was characterized by heightened vaccine hesitancy, we see that the polarization of health issues surpassed that of other issues. At the EU level, the polarization in the public health domain remains constantly lower than the average polarization across other issues throughout the three waves. The reason behind this might stand again in the lower level of competency in the EU on public health matters and its mostly advisory role. Beyond this, polarization peaks twice: first during March 2020, corresponding to the lack of coordination



**Figure 6.9** Polarization of public health and other issues at the two levels (four-week rolling averages, weeks with fewer than five actions were set to polarization 0).

Source: Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/18/world/europe/with-broad-random-tests-for-antibodies-germany-seeks-path-out-of-lockdown.html>; <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/how-germany-has-managed-to-perform-so-many-Covid-19-tests/>; <https://www.ft.com/content/0a7bc361-6fcc-406d-89a0-96c684912e46>.

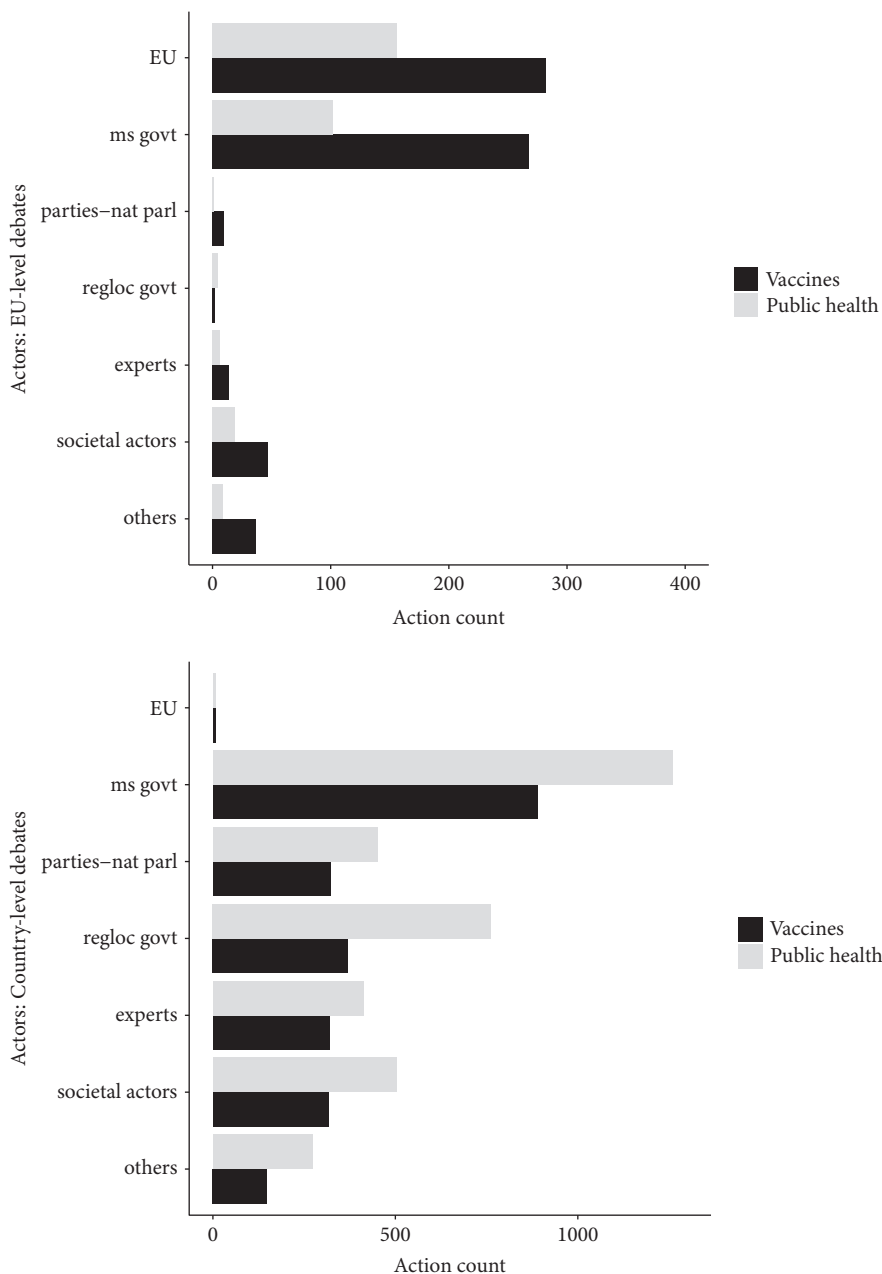
between member states over protective equipment and the EU's inability to step in, and second in January 2021, corresponding to the delayed start of the vaccination rollout.

## The actors involved

In terms of the actors involved at the EU level (upper graph in [Figure 6.10](#)), the debate was dominated by EU actors and member states' governments. Given the EU's low level of competencies in the public health domain, MS governments were as equally present as EU actors. This stands in stark contrast to economic debates at the EU level, where EU actors took the lead given their high competence (see [Chapter 8](#)). While there were hardly any partisan debates at the EU level, experts, societal actors, and other actors such as international organizations and businesses also played minimal roles.

At the member state level (lower graph in [Figure 6.10](#)), the national governments followed by regional and local governments were center stage. Additionally, we can see that political parties play a relatively small role in public health debates compared to national and local governments. On the one hand, this highlights the high level of executive decision-making during the crisis, with the national governments taking the lead on policymaking. On the other hand, the lack of involvement of political parties in the first waves of the pandemic could also be explained by a "rally-around-the-flag" effect, especially in the initial phases of the pandemic ([Altıparmak et al. 2021](#); [Bol et al. 2021](#)), as political forces across the ideological spectrum rallied behind the government's actions and decisions.

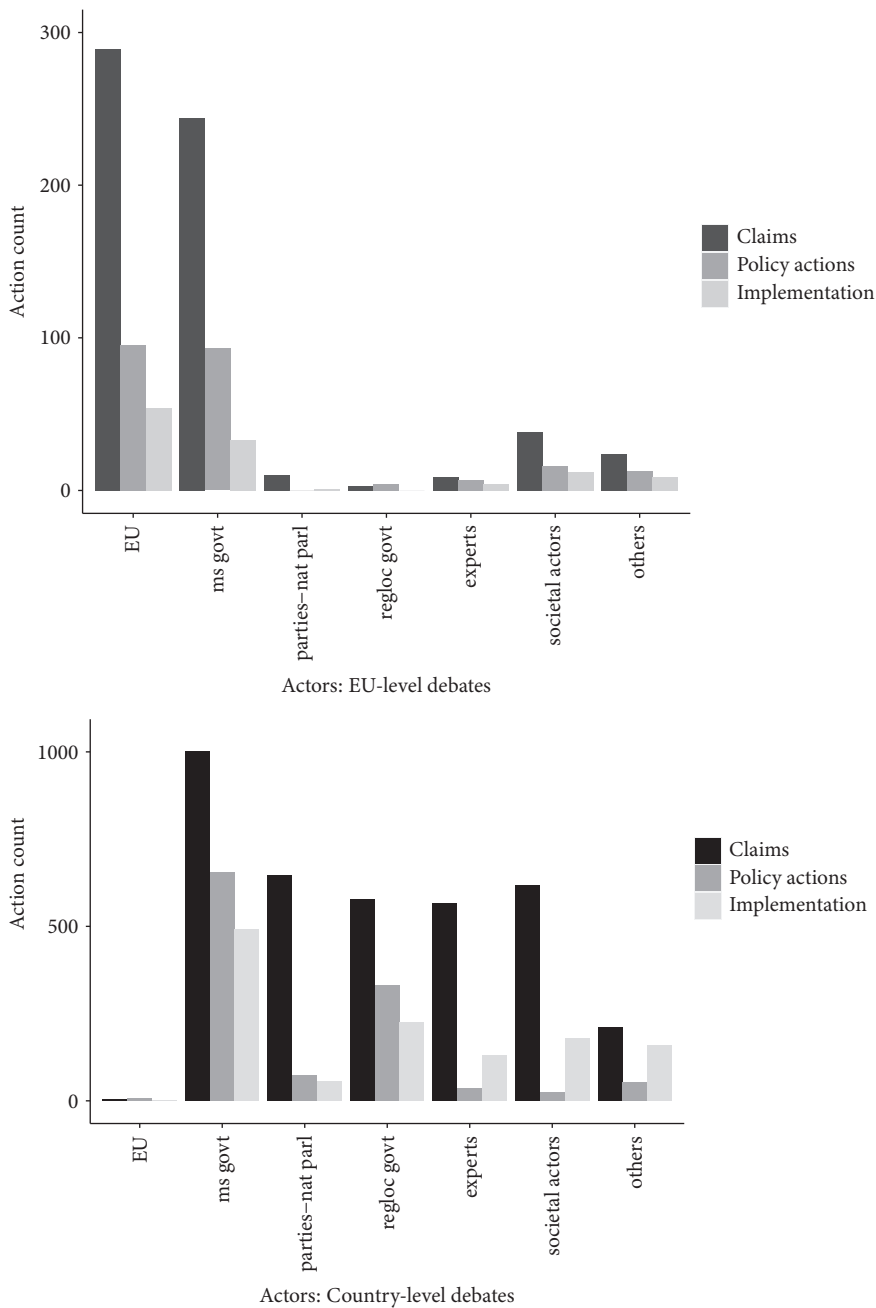
By contrast, experts, societal actors, and other actors (businesses, media) were as present, or more, than political parties in public health debates. Finally, one interesting finding in [Figure 6.10](#) relates to the minimal role that EU actors played in the member states' policymaking processes. This minimal role extends also to the vaccination topic, where we see that the fact that the EU launched a joint procurement strategy, does not translate into its playing a role in the debates surrounding the vaccination roll-out within the member states. As seen in the qualitative timeline above, given EMA's advisory-only role with regard to vaccine administration, this is unsurprising. Generally, as shown in the other chapters in this section, this corroborates the finding that capacity building at the EU level is mostly aimed at strengthening the EU's coordination role, while the EU does not appear to step into the national arenas in regards to implementation.



**Figure 6.10** Actors involved in public health debates.

Source: Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set.

Figure 6.11 explores the involvement of actors in policymaking steps at the two levels. As the crisis was characterized by emergency politics with executive decision-making prevailing (Ganderson, Schelkle, and



**Figure 6.11** Involvement of actors in policymaking steps.  
Source: Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set.



Truchlewski 2023), we expect EU actors and member states governments at the EU level and national and regional governments at the MS level to be the ones undertaking most of the policy actions, such as proposing policies, negotiating and adopting them. By contrast, we expect most of the other actors to be involved in the claims-making (verbal claims related to the policy, such as demanding policy changes). Figure 6.11 largely confirms this. At the EU level (upper graph), indeed, the EU actors and MS governments are virtually the only ones involved in policy actions. In addition, they are also the only ones doing most of the claims-making. As detailed in Chapter 2, given the weakness of the party system at the European level, political parties mainly mobilize at the national level of the member states in order to influence the position-taking of their respective national governments in the European policymaking process. At the member state level (lower graph), it is indeed the governments, national and regional, that are involved in most policymaking steps/policy actions. However, in contrast to the EU, the claimants are more diverse. Political parties, experts, and societal actors initiate quite a large share of the claims, surpassing those made by the national government when taken together.

## Discussion: capacity building in the health domain and outcomes in the member states

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the EU entered the pandemic with limited capacities in terms of public health matters. Theoretically, this lowers our expectations in terms of its potential for capacity building in this domain. However, as COVID-19 represented, first and foremost, a catastrophic public health threat that needed to be contained, the public health domain was characterized by exceptionally high externalities (such as imbalances in the import need of PPE between member states or bidding wars in the vaccine procurement) increasing the need for such capacity. The first wave of the pandemic was marked by rows over PPE in which member states made nationalistic decisions by adopting export bans and following unilateral purchasing strategies. In spite of the high externalities, the EU's limited capacity to act in this domain, coupled with the short time horizon, resulted in a very limited response of the EU to these challenges in the first wave of the pandemic.

The dangers of a lack of coordination became apparent after the initial phases of the pandemic, and member states launched calls for greater unity and capacity building. This ultimately resulted in both the joint vaccination

procurement strategy and the new design of an EHU. We argue that the main difference between the first waves and the subsequent ones lies in the longer time horizon as the EU does not have a mechanism to act quickly, and it needs time to build capacity and coordination, especially in domains of low competency.

The joint vaccination procurement constituted the most visible emergency measure, which was, however, of a temporary nature. Nevertheless, the pandemic also spurred more long-term institutional innovation. In the summer of 2020, the EC announced the creation of an EHU, created HERA, and expanded the mandates of the ECDC and the EMA. Furthermore, these capacity-building measures were neither very salient nor very polarizing. One reason behind this might lie in the fact that these measures hardly represented a transfer of authority in the multilevel polity. The general outcome was capacity building that expanded the EU's mandate in health measures through mostly strengthening its coordination role and, hence, marking a form of capacity building best described as "centralized coordination." The measures do not necessarily give way for the EU to act independently in health measures but are meant to strengthen MS responses.

The question that remains is whether these measures, in particular the joint vaccination procurement, managed to level the playing field in terms of public health outcomes. Arguably, given the difficulties faced by the EC itself in terms of procurement, several member states, in particular Southern and Central-Eastern European ones, would have had a hard time securing procurement contracts for their entire populations in due time, facing competition from their wealthier counterparts. However, while the playing field was leveled in terms of access to the vaccines, territorial disparities still prevailed due to domestic political factors (low levels of trust, vaccine hesitancy), making for variable success of the vaccination roll-out, which was mainly in the hands of the member states (as showcased by [Figure 6.3](#)), with CEE countries as the notable outlier.

While the COVID-19 crisis spurred limited EU capacity building in the public health domain, this chapter further stressed that public health remained largely a member states' competency. In the first wave of the pandemic, countries adopted strict public health measures in a process of regulatory convergence, oftentimes disconnected from the actual problem pressure they were facing, which represented a relatively leveled initial policy response. However, MS also varied greatly in their institutional structures, levels of preparedness, and public health management strategies, which ultimately resulted in wide disparities in terms of the public health outcomes these countries faced (see [Figure 6.1](#) on COVID-19 deaths across the three

waves of the pandemic). The four cases we highlighted in this chapter are representative of this diversity. Italy, as European Patient Zero, adopted a centralized response and strict measures but entered the pandemic with an underprepared health system, which resulted in catastrophic public health outcomes in the first wave of the pandemic. Germany's federal system allowed for a more flexible, decentralized response, which, coupled with a resilient public health system and high capacity in terms of testing and tracing, resulted in its ability to avoid such catastrophic outcomes. Sweden marked an example of exceptionalism in avoiding the strict lockdowns imposed by the other European member states and in focusing on individual responsibility, a strategy which eventually backfired, especially on the background of low preparedness in terms of hospital beds and testing. Finally, Poland is representative of the pandemic strategy adopted in CEE countries. Harsh measures were adopted early on which made these countries largely avoid the first wave of infections. However, coupled with low levels of trust in the government, this resulted in low levels of support for restrictions in later waves and, eventually, in high levels of vaccine hesitancy.

# Economic Measures

## Business and Household Support

### Introduction

Faced with the economic catastrophe we have briefly described in [Chapter 1](#), the first to react were again the national governments. However, the crisis was a truly global crisis that could be managed only with global cooperation. If solidarity was the word of the hour, it was solidarity within the nation-states. Across Europe, member state governments opened the fiscal spigots. “When COVID-19 arrived, bailouts moved from the financial economy to the real one” (*The Economist*, September 25, 2022). Fiscal activism replaced austerity. President Emmanuel Macron did not speak only for France when he vowed that no firm would “face the risk of bankruptcy” as a result of the pandemic. Moreover, this time would be different, as Boris Johnson, UK prime minister, declared: this time, governments would look after the people who really suffered (*The Economist*, 26 March 2020). Member state governments of the EU massively supported businesses and households. The policy response was on an unprecedented scale for peacetime. Immediately, Western governments mounted a multi-trillion dollar fightback to limit the economic fallout from the pandemic (*Financial Times*, March 18, 2020).<sup>1</sup> In the process, governments became more important, as they tend to do in big crises,<sup>2</sup> but, importantly, it was the governments of the member states that became increasingly important. At the beginning of the crisis, the nation-state also made a comeback in economic terms.

For the European Union, the swift unilateral responses of the member states to save their national economies put into question the very fundamentals of the single market, i.e., of the EU’s core domain, where it had become the dominant actor. In the COVID-19 crisis, at first, the EU proved to be weak in the very policy domain where it disposes of extensive political power and

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/98fa56cc-6877-11ea-800d-da70cff6e4d3?emailId=5e719fcf0d0f1300041ea0f7&segmentId=22011ee7-896a-8c4c-22a0-7603348b7f22>.

<sup>2</sup> Wolf (2020) observed that “big crises tend to cause a step change in the role of government.”.

binding authority. The swift responses of the member states required rapid and decisive measures to protect and preserve the EU's core domain. The EU essentially did so by relaxing the fiscal and state aid rules and by coordinating the national emergency measures. As we have seen in [Chapter 2](#), a new policymaking mode emerged from the EU's institutional response to the COVID-19 crisis which some call "coordinative Europeanization" ([Ladi and Wolf 2021](#)) and others "expansive unification" ([Ferrera, Kyriazi, and Miró 2024](#)): neither purely intergovernmental nor exclusively supranational, it involves direct consultation between member states and the Commission for the elaboration of policies that would work for everyone.

It is important to keep in mind that the measures the EU and its member states adopted to come to terms with the economic catastrophe were *temporary emergency measures*. When the emergency subsided, they were phased out, only to be renewed, extended, and adjusted as the pandemic struck once again in subsequent waves. At the end of the first wave, short-term recovery came sooner and has been far faster than expected originally. As lockdowns ended and economies recovered, it became essential to shift policies toward promoting recovery and to prevent the mistake of the 2008 financial crisis of switching too soon from support toward fiscal consolidation and monetary tightening. In the end, one needed to move from recovery to long-term expansion.

With the second wave, the European economy sank into a double-dip recession: The Eurozone's economy was increasingly out of kilter. In manufacturing hotspots, such as Germany, activity levels were surging. But the region's services sector, which accounted for the bulk of output, went into reverse once again. At the national level, the impact was most striking in Spain, which faced the most aggressive second wave of coronavirus in the fall of 2020. Activity levels in France, another member state that was hit hard by a resurgence in cases, were also falling strikingly (*Financial Times*, October 7, 2020). By spring 2021, European economies finally adapted to lockdowns with the help of stimuli and vaccines. The recovery was strong in 2021. But this time, Germany did not prove to be Europe's locomotive as greater exposure to supply chain bottlenecks hit its manufacturing, and household spending was slow to recover. After several extensions, the economic measures adopted by the EU and its member states were slowly phased out by the end of 2021.

This chapter focuses on the economic emergency measures that have been taken by the member states and the EU, which were focused on the survival of the single market. These measures do not include monetary policy (by the

ECB for the Eurozone or by national central banks for the other member states) and longer-term EU fiscal measures to restore a level playing field between the member states (MFF, NGEU, ESM, coronabonds, and new EU taxes (e.g., plastic tax)). Monetary policy and long-term fiscal measures will be the object of the next chapter. The EU emergency measures covered in this chapter essentially include measures that suspend EU competition and fiscal rules in order to allow member states to come to the aid of their national economy, as well as the mobilization of structural funds for the most pressing needs (Corona Response Investment Initiative: CRII and CRII+) and SURE (temporary Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency), an instrument to mitigate unemployment risks in the emergency. The member states' emergency measures include both *business support* (state aid for companies in various forms—liquidity support, credits, grants, bailouts, tax deferrals, exemptions from social contributions, etc.) and *household support* (wage guarantees (furlough schemes), self-employment income support, tax deferrals for individuals, extensions of social insurances), as well as local government support and regulatory interventions.

The two types of measures covered in this chapter—business support and household support—have been addressed very differently by the EU and its member states, as is shown in Table 7.1, which provides the distribution of the actions we have recorded in our policy analysis over the various types of measures at the two levels of the EU polity. While the EU is fully focused on business support, member states also provide household support and support for local governments and are involved in regulatory interventions. The

**Table 7.1** Economic measures covered in this chapter: overview (including only member states for which we have coded all three waves, percentages)

	EU	MS*	Total
Business support	96.5	51.7	56.2
Household support	2.3	33.3	30.2
Local government support	0.0	7.7	6.9
Regulatory intervention	1.2	7.4	6.7
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
n	258	2,311	2,569

\*Source: Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set

latter constitute an incoherent category, which proved to be especially important for the case of Germany, where regulatory interventions account for 15.7 percent of all relevant economic measures and refer to discussions about the debt brake, i.e., about whether or not this general fiscal rule, designed to limit spending, should be enforced or suspended during the pandemic. Regulatory interventions were also important in Italy, where they account for 13.2 percent of economic measures and refer, among other issues, to discussions about the regularization of illegal immigrant workers and the provision of vouchers for the hiring of temporary workers from Eastern Europe in the agricultural sector (e.g., grape pickers or workers in German meat factories), who were missing during COVID-19 times.

Contrary to the national lockdown measures, economic state aid measures of the member states potentially came with high externalities since they posed great risks for the level playing field in the single market. This is why the suspension of the fiscal and competition rules by the EU Commission became crucial to overcome this potential risk. Table 7.2 situates the measures to be discussed in this chapter in the overall scheme of policy-domain-specific measures presented in Tables 2.5 and 2.6. As we shall show, while the permissive short-term measures taken by the EU Commission allowed to preserve the level playing field in the short run, they aggravated the disequilibrium between the member states’ fiscal capacity in the long run, with potentially detrimental consequences for solidarity among the member states.

**Table 7.2** EU competence distribution and capacity building

	EU capacity building	No EU capacity building
Supranational/shared competence	Macroeconomic policy Waves 2–3 border coordination/Green Pass Free movement of goods (green lanes) ECB PEPP (new quality in terms of quantitative easing)	Wave 1 border closure <b>Suspension of fiscal/competition rules/SURE</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High externalities</li> <li>• Short-time horizon</li> </ul>
National competence	Vaccine procurement and distribution Fiscal policy/NGEU	<b>National lockdowns, state aid to businesses/households</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High externalities</li> <li>• Short-time horizon</li> </ul> <b>Coordination of export bans on PPE</b>

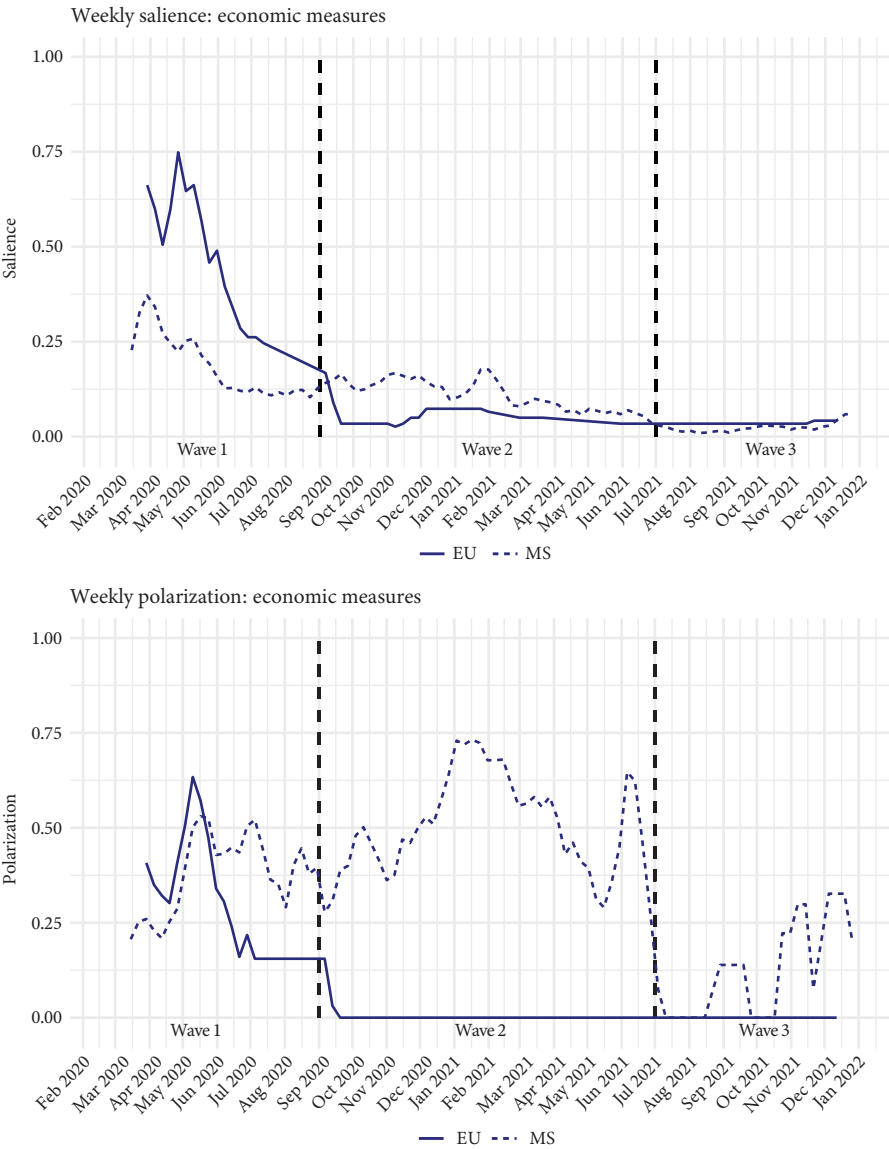
## The policymaking process

### Timeline: salience and polarization

Given that the focus of this chapter is on emergency measures to preserve the single market, it is no surprise that they are concentrated at the beginning of the first phase (see [Figure 7.1](#)). This applies especially to the measures at the EU level, where hardly any actions were taken anymore in 2021. At the member state level, the economic measures also peaked early in the first wave. Still, the actions continued during the second wave, when the original schemes had to be extended, adapted, and recalibrated. The national measures petered out in the third wave. Polarization was also greatest very early on at the EU level, while it increased more or less steadily at the national level to reach its peak during the second wave at the beginning of 2021 when the debt brake became highly contested in Germany, and business associations and unions contested the government's interventions in Spain.

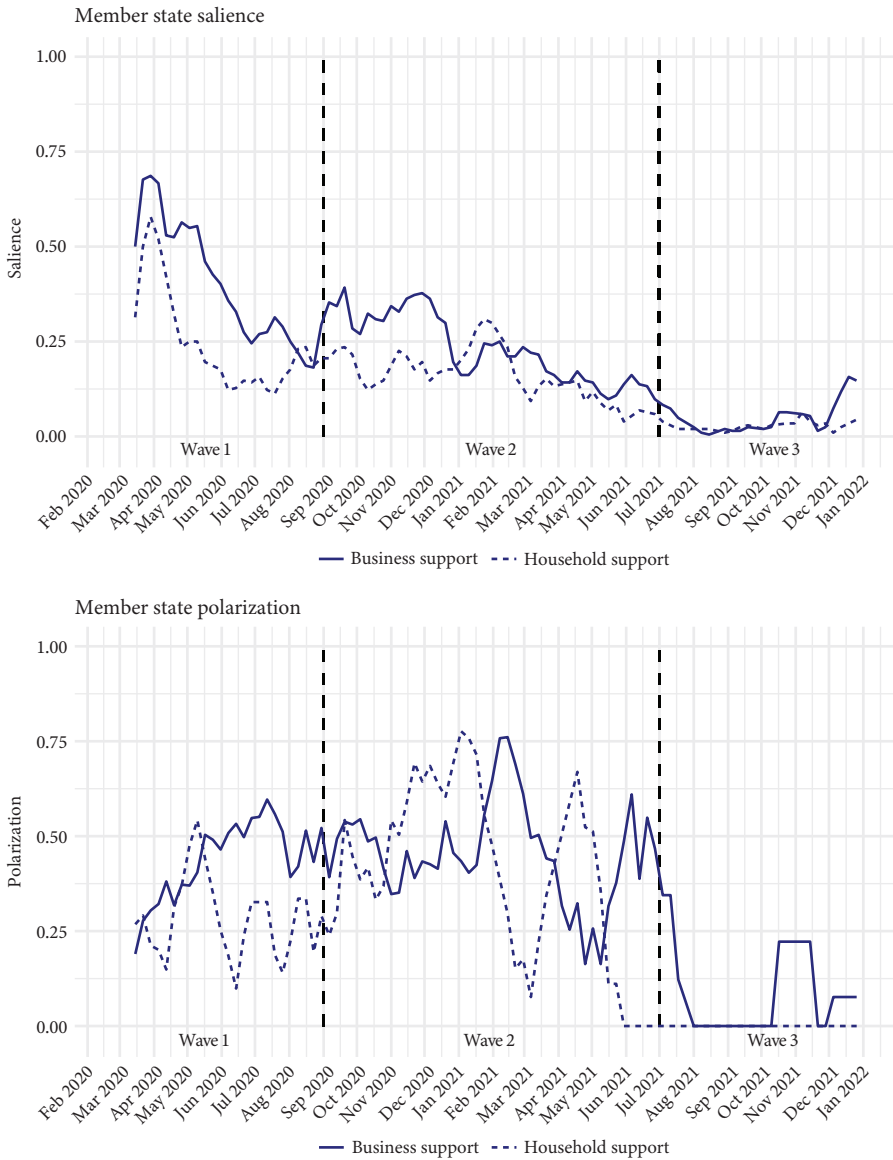
At the EU level, the most contested measures concern state aid in general, as well as support for the farming sector and tourism. As far as state aid in general is concerned, a clash between the Commission and some national governments arose when polarization peaked at the end of April 2020 over the further relaxation of the rules ([Fleming and Espinoza 2020](#)). Some member states, like the Netherlands and Austria, wanted these rules to be further relaxed, while Spain, a member state with less maneuvering space to come to the aid of its business firms, had been urging the Commission to retain limits on the scope and timescale of state aid relaxation to avoid undermining the single market. At the same time, some governments—France, Italy, Belgium, Poland, and Romania—clashed with the Commission over the support of tourism: they had adopted measures, or were going to adopt them, which allowed travel firms to issue vouchers for canceled holiday deals without giving customers the option of cash refunds as required by EU law ([Strauss 2020](#)). The tourism ministers of Bulgaria, Cyprus, France, Greece, Malta, Italy, Portugal, Romania, and Spain called in a joint statement for “homogeneous measures at the European level” to be taken in all member states to restart travel and tourism in a safe way as coronavirus lockdowns were being eased. The stakes were high since tourism represents a crucial element of the Southern European growth models. In Greece, the extreme case, it contributed roughly 20 percent to the domestic GDP and made up more than 25 percent of its employment before the COVID-19 crisis ([Bürgisser and Di Carlo 2023](#): Figure 7, p. 250). Overall, however, polarization at the EU level was remarkably limited in this policy domain.





**Figure 7.1** Weekly salience and polarization of economic measures at the two levels, smoothed index values.  
*Note:* For polarization: only weeks with more than five actions.  
*Source:* Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set.

At the member state level, the salience of business and household support measures move more or less in lockstep (Figure 7.2). However, business measures are always more prominent. Both types of support tend to be similarly



**Figure 7.2** Weekly salience and polarization of economic measures at the member state level.

Source: Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set.

polarized, and their polarization increases similarly from the first wave to the second wave. As time went on, the indiscriminating support of all companies and professions came under closer scrutiny, and critics of business support became more vocal at the national level.

The actors involved

Table 7.3 presents the distribution of the actors involved in economic measures as compared to all other types of action. At the EU level, as the guardian of the single market, the Commission was the key actor. It played a crucial role in suspending the rules, in interacting with the executives of the member states, and with businesses. As the table shows, its role in the emergency measures in the economic policy domain was much more prominent than its role in all the other domains. Correspondingly, member state governments were much less prominent in economic policy. At both levels, societal actors, in this case, business actors, were also relatively important. At the national level, it is only the prominent role of business that distinguishes economic policy from all the other domains.

However, not all actors focus on the same type of economic support. This is shown in Table 7.4. The Commission, business, and experts are mostly concerned with business support, while unions, NGOs, and other actors are mainly involved in policymaking concerning household support. The involvement of member state governments reflects the overall distribution of support types rather faithfully. However, governments in different member states put different emphasis on the two types of support. Thus, as illustrated

**Table 7.3** Actors by level and type of measures (economic vs. all together, percentages)

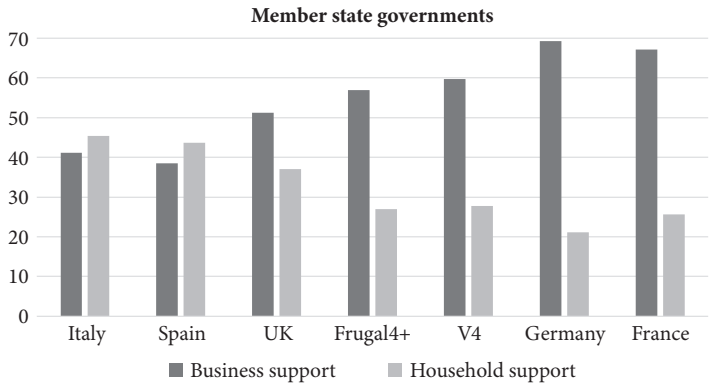
Actors	EU economic	All	MS economic	All
Commission	60.2	40.7	0.5	0.3
ECB	0.4	2.5	0.0	0.0
MS governments	22.4	41.4	38.2	36.7
National parliamentary parties	0.4	2.8	16.0	14.5
Regional–local	0.4	0.7	11.5	19.7
Experts	1.2	2.2	5.7	9.5
Societal	14.6	6.6	26.7	14.8
Others	0.4	3.23	1.3	4.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
n	254	3003	2,309	13,561

Source: Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA dataset

**Table 7.4** Type of economic measures by actors (percentages)

	Comm	National government	National parliament	Regional– local	Experts	Business	Unions	NGOs	Others	All
Business support	95.9	54.6	49.3	34.7	64.3	73.4	46.9	37.0	55.0	56.6
Household support	1.8	32.8	36.3	27.8	29.2	19.7	41.5	55.6	40.0	30.2
Local government support	0.0	6.4	6.8	33.3	1.2	0.0	2.2	4.9	0.0	7.0
regulatory intervention	2.3	6.2	7.7	4.2	5.3	6.9	9.4	2.5	5.0	6.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
n	171	1,109	444	288	171	447	224	81	40	2,976

Source: Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set

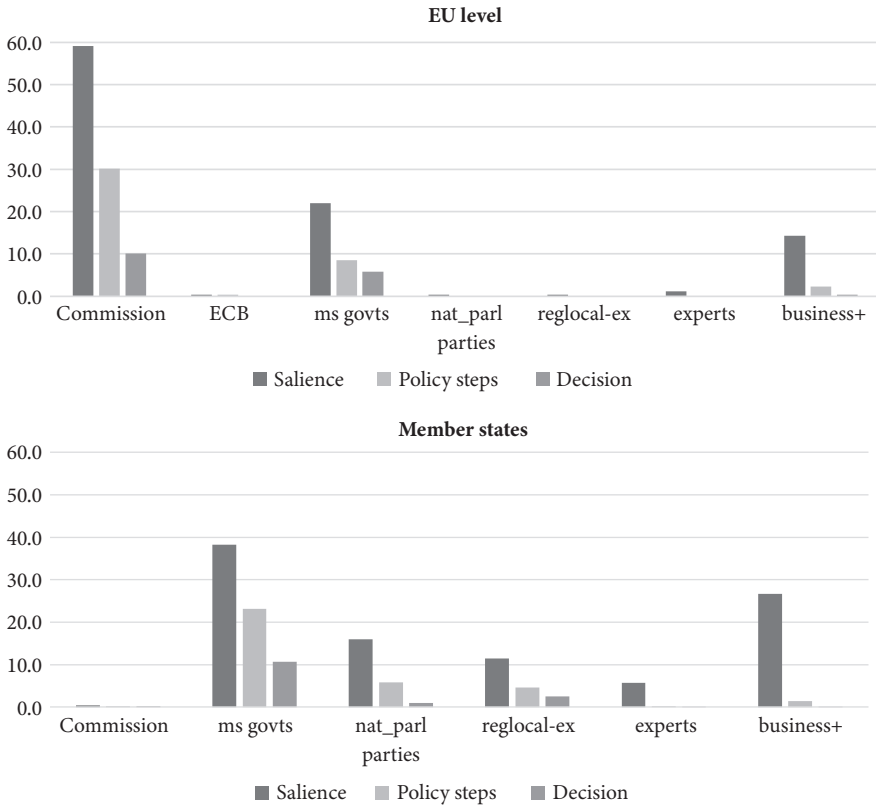


**Figure 7.3** Type of economic measures by member state governments, policymaking (percentages).  
*Source:* Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set.

by [Figure 7.3](#), the Southern European members of the solidarity coalition focused more on household support, as did the UK government. At the same time, the Frugal Four, V4 (i.e., Poland), Germany, and France were more concerned with business support. These differences are likely related to the greater difficulties experienced by households in Southern European member states and the UK. The economy in these countries suffered the greatest blows of all in 2020. However, this cannot be the only explanation since the French government focused more on business support, although its economy was also disproportionately hit. An alternative explanation could refer to the capacity of the respective welfare states: Southern European (Italy, Spain) and liberal (UK) welfare states most likely have been less well prepared to cushion the economic shock of the pandemic for households than continental and Nordic welfare states (Germany, France, and the Frugal Four). However, this explanation cannot account for the comparatively low share of household support in the V4 countries either.

### Decision-making and actor expansion

Executive decision-making prevails in economic policymaking. The role of executives is accentuated once we distinguish between policymaking at large, which also includes policy claims, policy steps (proposals, negotiations, etc.), in addition to decisions. As we move from policymaking at large to decisions, we expect the scope of actors to contract: many actors are involved in claims-making, but few decide. [Figure 7.4](#) presents the involvement of the various types of actors in these three forms of participation in policymaking at the



**Figure 7.4** Involvement of actors in policymaking, policy steps, and decisions.

*Source:* Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set.

two levels of the polity. At the EU level, the Commission and member state executives are virtually the only actors involved in policymaking steps and decisions. Business participates in the process, but its role is most prominent in claims-making, while it is reduced in policymaking steps and insignificant for decisions.<sup>3</sup> At the national level, business has an even larger voice, but it is hardly involved in policy steps and not at all in decision-making. The governments did their best to save business and to accommodate its claims, but business was hardly part of the policymaking process itself, at least not as publicly reported. Experts were also reduced to advisory interventions but absent from policymaking steps. The national government and its chief executives dominated policymaking steps in the member states, but parliaments-cum-parties, and regional-local governments had a say as well.

<sup>3</sup> We should, of course, keep in mind that our analysis is based on published material, which means that the influence wielded by actors behind the scenes escapes our attention.

To illustrate the forces involved, the recovery package, which Germany adopted in June 2020, was a result of twenty-one hours of often tough negotiations between the three members of Germany's grand coalition government—Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union, the CSU, and the Social Democrats.<sup>4</sup> Each partner was forced to make painful concessions. Mr. Scholz, the leader of the SPD, had gone into the talks wanting the federal government to take on the legacy debts of Germany's most cash-strapped municipalities. Markus Söder, the CSU leader and prime minister of Bavaria, wanted to see cash incentives for buyers of petrol and diesel cars. In the end, both proposals fell by the wayside. Instead, the partners agreed to the VAT reduction—an idea that had been championed by CDU leader Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer and Helge Braun, Ms. Merkel's chief of staff. The German car industry condemned Angela Merkel's government for excluding subsidies for new petrol and diesel vehicles from its stimulus package as record-low sales and exports hit the sector. The EUR 130 billion package included a EUR 6,000 subsidy for electric vehicles. However, ignoring pleas from the powerful car lobby and top executives, the government refused to reinstate a EUR 5 billion scrappage scheme that had helped boost demand in the aftermath of the Eurozone crisis. By contrast, the package was well received by several German business associations, the Peak Union, and many German economists. Opposition parties like the Linke and the AfD criticized the package, with the AfD calling it “clueless activism.”

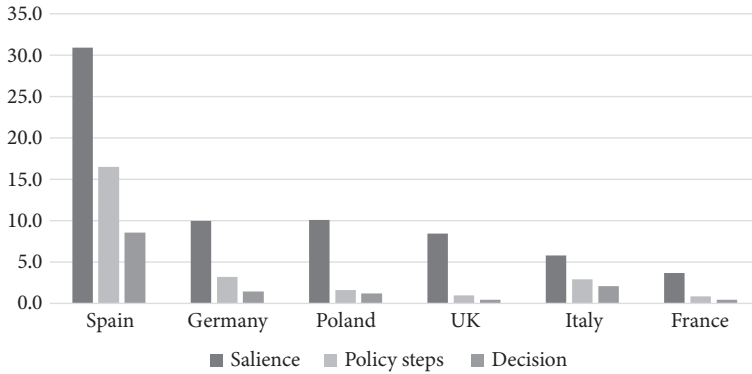
The role of regional and local actors varies considerably by member state, as shown in [Figure 7.5](#). It has been exceptionally large in Spain, where regional–local actors, like the regional administrations of Madrid or Catalonia, have taken issue with policy steps and decisions of the central government. Especially at the beginning of Wave 2, Spain had a governance problem, which consisted of the refusal of regions governed by the PP to support the renewal of the state of emergency under which the government could restrict activity.<sup>5</sup> Thus, Isabel Díaz Ayuso, Madrid's regional president, opposed stricter measures that would hurt the economy. On October 9, 2020, it came to a showdown between the PM and Díaz Ayuso when the PM's ultimatum expired, which threatened to renew the state of emergency if she did not introduce new mobility restrictions for the 6.6 million residents of the region.<sup>6</sup> She backed down at the last minute but did not refrain from attacking the socialist government by the day.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> NZZ e-paper, June 5, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> *The Economist*, October 3, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> NZZ, October 10, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> NZZ, October 24, 2020.



**Figure 7.5** Involvement of regional–local executive actors in policymaking, policy steps, and decisions, by country.

Source: Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set.

By contrast, regional governments were important in complementing the national government's efforts to come to the rescue of households and businesses in Germany. Thus, on March 20, 2020, shortly after the announcement of the federal emergency package, Germany's most populous state, North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), launched the largest aid program in the state's history. No healthy company should fail due to a lack of liquid funds due to Corona, said Prime Minister Armin Laschet (CDU). The NRW rescue package amounted to EUR 25 billion. Hessen decided on a EUR 7.5 billion package with emergency aid, guarantees, and informal tax deferrals. Baden-Württemberg's Prime Minister Winfried Kretschmann (Greens) launched a billion-dollar program. Hamburg, Berlin, Brandenburg, and Bavaria had already submitted programs of their own. Later on, individual states launched more specific programs. For example, in late October 2020, the Bavarian cabinet approved a new aid program for artists, for which the Free State was providing around 370 million euros.

## The measures taken by the EU

The EU attempted to facilitate the economic responses of the member states by relaxing its rules and coordinating them. It did so by essentially three measures. First, it activated the general escape clause under the Stability and Growth Pact. Second, it allowed the member states to use the full flexibility under the state aid rules. Third, it introduced a reinsurance scheme, SURE,



to facilitate the introduction of short-term work schemes in member states that struggled with their crisis response.

The Commission proposed the activation of the general escape clause under the SGP on March 20th, an initiative that was welcomed by the Eurogroup and the national leaders. It was obvious that the public health and economic measures already taken by the member states, in combination with the fall in economic activity, were going to increase their public deficits. Specifically, as the Commission perceived the COVID-19 crisis as an event “outside of the control of governments with a major impact on public finances,” it considered that the unusual event provision of the Pact applied. This implied that the budgetary impact of the fiscal measures taken by the member states to come to terms with the crisis was to be excluded when the Commission was going to assess compliance with the SGP.<sup>8</sup> This provided the member states with the necessary flexibility to react to the crisis. Similarly, the measures taken by the Commission with respect to state aid also contributed to facilitating the policy responses of the member states, as did the adoption of SURE.

## State aid

After some initial hesitations, the EU’s policy response in terms of state aid has been swift and decisive. On March 19th, the Commission adopted one of the most important measures of the EU to protect the single market: a temporary framework to enable member states to use the full flexibility foreseen under state aid rules to support their economy.<sup>9</sup> The temporary framework (SATF) was to allow member states to rush through support to companies during the crisis while preserving the integrity of the internal market and ensuring a level playing field. The Commission’s balancing of these two goals was not always easy.

Only two days after having adopted the temporary framework, on March 21st, the Commission approved a proposal by France to guarantee up to 300 billion euros in state aid to ease the economic burden of the coronavirus,<sup>10</sup> and on March 22nd and 24th, it approved two German state aid schemes.<sup>11</sup> In April, the Commission planned to relax its rules on state aid

<sup>8</sup> European Commission (2020b), Communication “on the activation of the general escape clause of the Stability and Growth Pact” (COM(2020)123, 20 March 2020).

<sup>9</sup> [https://competition-policy.ec.europa.eu/state-aid/coronavirus/temporary-framework\\_en](https://competition-policy.ec.europa.eu/state-aid/coronavirus/temporary-framework_en).

<sup>10</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_20\\_503](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_503).

<sup>11</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_20\\_504](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_504); [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_20\\_517](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_517).

further, but, as already observed, these plans got caught in “an increasingly hard-fought pan-European debate over whether deeper pocketed member states are gaining an unfair advantage” (Fleming and Espinoza 2020). Up to this point, Germany had accounted for half of state aid approved by the Commission during the COVID-19 crisis, prompting calls from less well-off countries such as Spain that the level-playing field was in danger. The EU’s competition commissioner Vestager argued instead that Germany’s extensive bailouts of coronavirus-hit companies could work as a locomotive for Europe, but she also expressed concern about the “huge differences” in coronavirus state aid among member states, conceding that they were starting to distort the bloc’s single market. Subsequently, these early trepidations proved to be considerably overdrawn: the approved measures were not all implemented, as we shall see. The temporary framework rules were amended seven times between April 3rd, 2020, and November 2021. Eventually, in November 2021, the framework was extended until the end of 2022 to enable member states to provide investment support with the aim of facilitating the development of economic activities required for the return to sustainable long-term growth.

Between March 2020 and March 2022, the Commission took more than 1,200 decisions and amendment decisions, approving around 900 national measures notified by twenty-seven member states, worth a total estimated budget of around EUR 3.17 trillion, representing 22.8 percent of the EU pre-crisis GDP.<sup>12</sup> In practice, the fast-track procedure for screening notified aids under SATF, the unprecedented volume of such measures, and the high stakes of the crisis may not always have allowed for a thorough review by the Commission. Critiques have been formulated against a too lax regime and the lack of transparency in the implementation of the SATF (National Board of Trade Sweden 2022).

We lack data on the beneficiaries of the state aid. However, there are some high-profile cases that concern airlines and the car industry. Airlines fought for their survival. On March 16th, major airline alliances—Star Alliance, SkyTeam, and Oneworld—jointly called on governments to extend extraordinary support to the industry to alleviate pressure caused by the coronavirus outbreak. On March 18th, the Commission already took a first step to alleviate the catastrophic situation of the airlines: It agreed to suspend requirements that oblige airlines to use at least 80 percent of their takeoff and landing slots to keep them the following year until October 24th. As air traffic

<sup>12</sup> [https://competition-policy.ec.europa.eu/state-aid/coronavirus\\_en](https://competition-policy.ec.europa.eu/state-aid/coronavirus_en); <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/e77c8009-9460-11ec-b4e4-01aa75ed71a1>.

collapsed, the airlines experienced record deficits, and the member states had to save their airlines from bankruptcy. Thus, to save Lufthansa, on May 25th, 2020, the German government approved a nine billion-euro aid package. The case illustrates that, even under relaxed crisis circumstances, the EU's state aid scheme was not toothless: the Commission, which had to accept this bailout, was ready to do so, but not without conditions. To maintain a level playing field, the carrier was required to give up some airport slots at two of its major hubs—Munich and Frankfurt airports. After having first refused to accept these conditions, the board of Lufthansa agreed with them, as did its shareholders. Other national carriers, such as Air France, KLM, and Austrian Air, were equally bailed out by their respective member states.

The car industry was also heavily hit by the crisis and saved by the national governments. Car factories shut down in reaction to the breakdown of supply chains, collapsing demand (e.g., Renault faced a drop of 47 percent) and to protect their employees. Thus, on May 26th, French President Emmanuel Macron announced a plan worth 8 billion euros to revive France's car industry by making it the European leader in electric cars. In other words, Macron attempted to use the crisis support for the modernization of the French car industry. Among other measures, the plan proposed included bonuses of up to EUR 7,000 for private customers buying an electro or hybrid car. In addition, car owners who exchanged their gas or diesel cars for a more ecological model were to receive EUR 3,000 from the state for the first 200,000 cars.

Meunier and Mickus (2020) argue that the COVID-19 shock has brought more long-term structural shifts of the EU's competition policy to the fore, which had already been underway as a result of digitization, geopolitization of competition policy, and Brexit. They speculate about how the COVID-19 shock created space for greater promotion and protection of European industry in the internal market and for reinforcing supranational competition regulation. In terms of state aid, they point out that the Commission had already started to revise this policy regime before COVID-19 struck (p. 1087). The COVID-19 crisis, however, reinforced these steps in three ways (p. 1089): based on the COVID-19 experience, Germany and France aimed at reducing the reliance on foreign suppliers (e.g., for medical equipment); the Commission became acutely aware of the differences in national capabilities, which might create permanent regional imbalances; and the vulnerability of many European firms intensified fears that foreign firms, particularly Chinese ones, would increase their presence in the single market.

## Short-term work

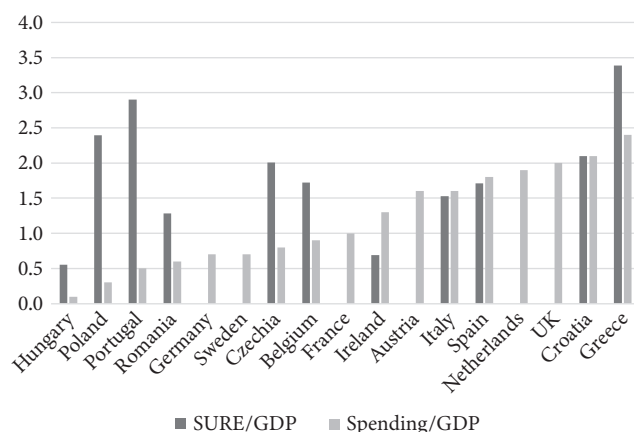
During the pandemic, Europe was counting on short-term paid leave schemes to shield its workers from a US-style surge in unemployment. The goal was to keep European companies on life-support by helping them put workers on short-term leave, with most of their wages paid by the state. The scale of such furlough schemes was unprecedented: in Germany, at the peak of the financial crisis in May 2009, just under 1.5 million German workers were furloughed, but 7.3 million employees were on short-term work in May 2020 (*The Economist*, June 21, 2020). Over 30 million workers in Europe turned to the state for wage support. A fifth of the workforce applied across Germany, France, the UK, Italy, and Spain. Overall, the number of Europeans who had applied to join the subsidized schemes was higher than the 26 million people who have filed for unemployment benefits in the US in the five weeks since the lockdowns began. The policy was one of the most expensive measures introduced by European governments in response to the pandemic. Many of the European schemes were modeled on Germany's "Kurzarbeit" program, which was widely credited with having shielded the country from a big jump in unemployment in the Eurozone crisis (*Financial Times*, April 28, 2020).

However, the pandemic threatened to widen the gap between strong labor markets in the North and weak ones in the South. Thus, Germany's "Kurzarbeit" system was more generous than its Spanish equivalent. Although Spain had adapted its ERTE system to cover 70 percent of salaries when the crisis hit a company, some observers criticized it as too tightly defined for many to qualify (*Financial Times* April 12, 2020). In response to this threat, in April 2020, the European Council endorsed a new instrument, SURE, to mitigate unemployment risks in an emergency. It provided up to EUR 100 billion in loans granted on favorable terms to member states to address sudden increases in public expenditure needed to protect employment and workers' income:<sup>13</sup> to finance the instrument, the Commission issued social bonds with an average maturity of 14.5 years. These bonds were underpinned by a system of irrevocable, unconditional, and on-call guarantees provided voluntarily by all EU member states, even those that did not request financial assistance under SURE. The bonds offered member states lower interest rates than they would have paid if they had issued sovereign

<sup>13</sup> COM(2023) 291 final: Report on the European instrument for Temporary Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency (SURE) following the COVID-19 outbreak pursuant to Article 14 of Council Regulation (EU) 2020/672.

debt themselves. The estimated savings amount to 9.4 billion.<sup>14</sup> The SURE instrument helped member states finance the short-time work schemes. It also funded similar schemes providing income replacement, in particular for the self-employed. SURE could also support, as an ancillary aid, the financing of some health-related measures, particularly in the workplace. Importantly, the instrument did not impose any conditions on the design of short-time work schemes or similar measures, as these remain the prerogative of each member state. These guarantees embody the spirit of solidarity between member states coordinated by the EU. Member states could request financial assistance under SURE only during the COVID-19 crisis with a sunset clause of December 31st, 2022.

SURE has proven very popular, providing a total of EUR 98.4 billion allocated to nineteen member states by December 2022.<sup>15</sup> The member states requesting the three largest loans (Italy, Spain, and Poland) reached a maximum total of EUR 60 billion. Figure 7.6 presents an overview of the funds expended as a percentage of GDP for employment protection schemes—by national schemes and by SURE.<sup>16</sup> As can be seen from this figure, SURE has been very important for some selected member states, such as Greece, Italy,



**Figure 7.6** Employment protection schemes, SURE, and national schemes (March–December 2020, percentage of 2019 GDP).

Sources: SURE: [https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/eu-financial-assistance/sure\\_en](https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/eu-financial-assistance/sure_en); spending on job retention schemes (March–December 2020): etui: <https://www.etui.org/publications/job-retention-schemes-europe>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., Table 4, p. 33.

<sup>15</sup> [https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/eu-financial-assistance/sure\\_en](https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/eu-financial-assistance/sure_en).

<sup>16</sup> In some countries, the funds disbursed by SURE are higher than the funds for the employment protection scheme, which may be explained by the fact that SURE could also be used to finance other measures.

Portugal, and Spain in Southern Europe; Croatia, Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Romania in Eastern Europe; and Belgium and Ireland in North-Western Europe. Most North-Western European countries, however, did not benefit from SURE at all, which does not mean that they did not spend a considerable amount on employment protection schemes. As a matter of fact, the UK, the Netherlands, Austria, and France are among the biggest spenders on such schemes.

## Measures taken by member states

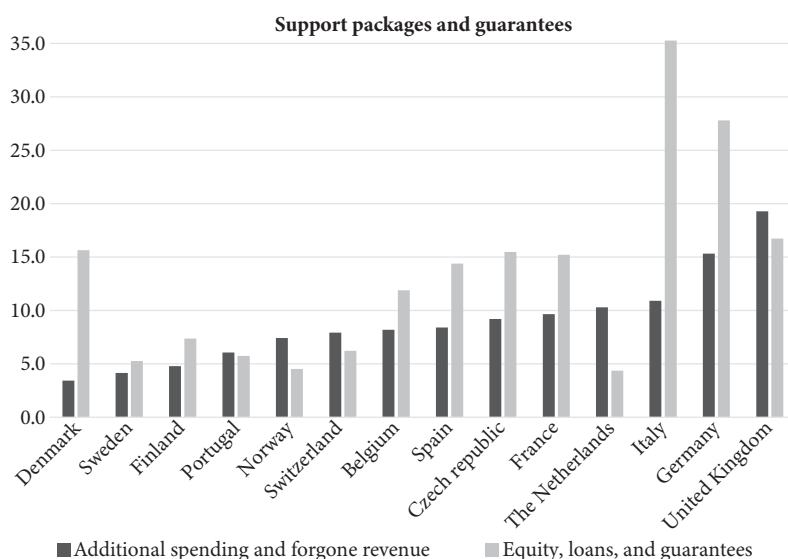
In the initial phase of the pandemic, the member states acted swiftly by taking emergency measures. These measures were mostly temporary and designed to support the health sector and to keep households and businesses afloat, with a positive impact on the economy. When the emergency did not subside, the duration of the original measures had to be extended and adjusted.<sup>17</sup> There were basically three sets of measures: (1) the original short-term emergency measures, introduced in March–April 2020; (2) recovery packages, typically introduced in summer/early fall 2020, which had a longer time horizon and attempted to set the economy on the rails again; and (3) supplementary measures to extend and phase out the original emergency packages, which were introduced in the course of the second and third wave.

The member states all tried to provide emergency support and, subsequently, macroeconomic stimuli for the recovery, but they did not all have the same capacity to do so. Member states with stronger fiscal positions provided more direct budgetary support, while those with weaker fiscal positions tended to rely more on liquidity support.<sup>18</sup> If Germany had been able to use Keynesian support measures to an extraordinary extent, Spain would not have had the means to do the same. In the case of Germany, the mobilization of Keynesian support measures (the “bazooka” of Finance Minister Olaf Scholz) marked a new era in German fiscal policy and an abrupt departure from the government’s long-held commitment to balanced budgets. In the case of France, the move was in the opposite direction. France steered away from stimulating consumption directly. Instead, the French government was pursuing a structural reform agenda under the guise of a stimulus (Hall 2020).

<sup>17</sup> The European Commission provides an overview over the measures taken by the member states (European Commission 2021).

<sup>18</sup> European Commission. Report on Public Finances 2020. Institutional paper 147, February 2021, p. 18. [https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/economic-and-financial-affairs-publications\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/economic-and-financial-affairs-publications_en).

Figure 7.7 provides an overview of the fiscal measures announced in the different member states. This overview, established by the IMF in September 2021, focuses on government discretionary measures that supplement existing automatic stabilizers. These figures constitute an upper ceiling of the actual spending since the take-up of the various measures often turned out to be considerably lower than the amounts announced (see Figure 7.8). It still provides a general idea of the overall size of the measures proposed—roughly 11 percent of GDP on average—and the variation between the countries. On the one hand, the UK has announced the most far-reaching measures, amounting to up to almost 20 percent of GDP for additional spending and forgone revenue and 16.7 percent for equity, loans, and guarantees. Among the EU's remaining member states, Germany has announced the most far-reaching measures, followed by Italy. Both of these countries have announced huge guarantee schemes. France and Spain also appear among the countries with the largest sums announced. On the other hand, there are the frugal Scandinavian countries, which envisaged spending much less to come to terms with the economic consequences of the pandemic.



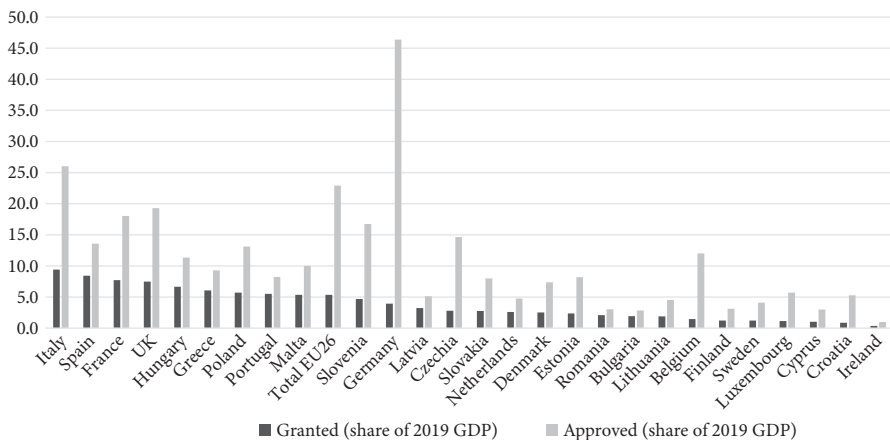
**Figure 7.7** Country fiscal measures announced (by September 2021) in response to the COVID-19 pandemic: additional spending-forgone revenue, and guarantee schemes (percentages of 2019 GDP).

*Note:* Estimates as of September 27, 2021. Numbers in percent of GDP are based on the July 2021 World Economic Outlook Update unless otherwise stated. It includes COVID-19-related measures since January 2020 and covers measures for implementation in 2020, 2021, and beyond.

*Source:* IMF Fiscal Affairs Department (2021).

Figure 7.8 presents the same type of information as Figure 7.7. It allows us to distinguish between measures approved and implemented, but it no longer distinguishes between additional spending and liquidity guarantees. As the figure shows, the uptake of the approved measures has been only very partial (corresponding to about one-fifth of the approved sums). For the larger EU member states (Germany, France, Italy, Spain) and the UK, but also some smaller states (Belgium, Czech Republic, Slovenia), the differences are very large, i.e., larger than 10 percent of GDP. Amounting to more than 40 percent of GDP, the difference is most spectacular for Germany. Judging from the amounts actually spent, Italy (9.4 percent of GDP), Spain (8.4 percent), France (7.7 percent), and the UK (7.5 percent) have been the biggest spenders, followed by Hungary (6.7 percent), Greece (6.1 percent), Poland (5.7 percent), and Portugal (5.5 percent). In terms of actual money spent, with 3.9 percent of 2019 GDP, Germany is below the EU average (5.4 percent).

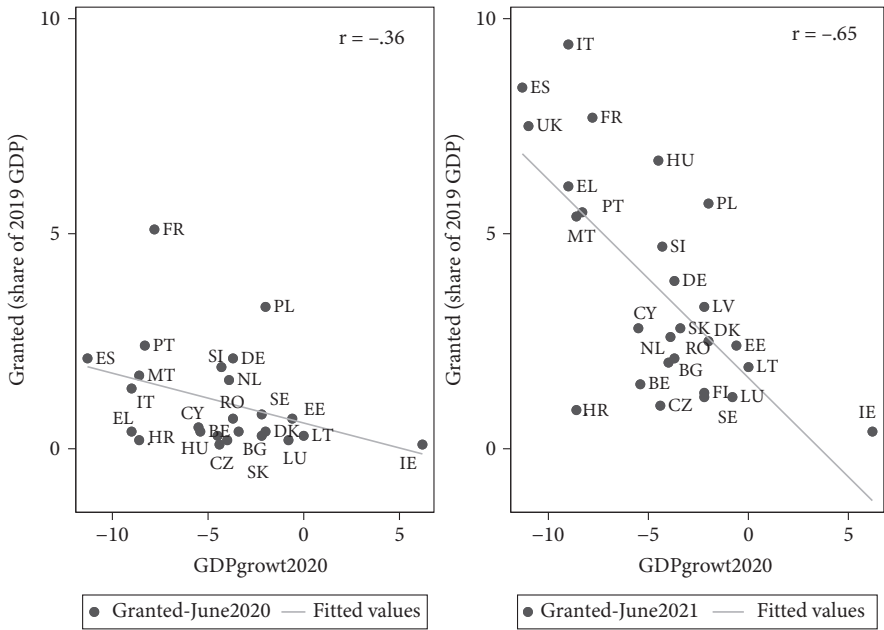
To maintain a level playing field and avoid fiscal fragmentation, the EU had to come to the support of the less fortunate member states: it did so in direct ways, by the introduction of SURE, but, above all, by establishing the NGEU fund (see next chapter). However, it appears that the EU has also *indirectly* supported the fiscal measures taken by the member states. Its monetary policy (see next chapter) and the relaxation of its fiscal (SGP) and competition (state aid) rules have provided maneuvering room for the more severely hit



**Figure 7.8** Granted and approved support for EU member states and the UK (percentages of 2019 GDP).

Source: Generaldirektion Wettbewerb (Europäische Kommission) et al. (2022).





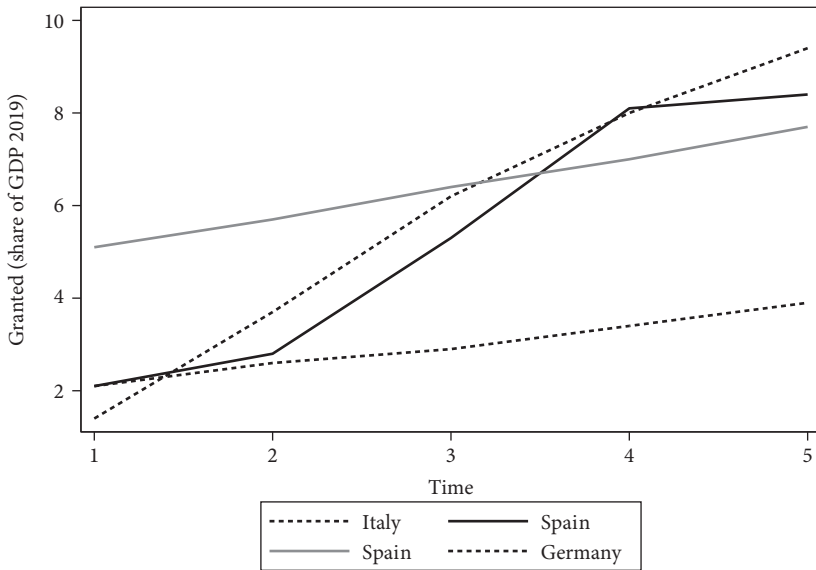
**Figure 7.9** Grants disbursed by June 2020 and by June 2021 by country, as a function of GDP growth (share of 2019 GDP).

Source: Generaldirektion Wettbewerb (Europäische Kommission) et al. (2022).

member states to come to support their economy. The next two figures suggest this. Figure 7.9 presents the relationship between the severity of the hit taken by the national economy in 2020 and the fiscal measures adopted by the member states' governments in support of their economy. This information is presented for the cumulative measures granted up to and including two time points—June 2020 (on the left) and June 2021 (on the right).

As Figure 7.9 makes clear, the relationship between the economic hit (loss in GDP) and the fiscal measures taken to support the national economy tightens throughout the pandemic: the longer the pandemic lasts, the more the economies hit most severely benefit from corresponding fiscal measures from their governments. The correlation coefficients between GDP growth and fiscal support increased from  $r = -.36$  in June 2020 to  $r = -.65$  in June 2021.

Figure 7.10, which compares the development of fiscal support in the four largest member states—Germany, France, Italy, and Spain, shows how fiscal support massively increased throughout the pandemic from a rather low level in Italy and Spain while it increased at a much slower pace in France (where it was already high in June 2020) and in Germany (where it stayed at

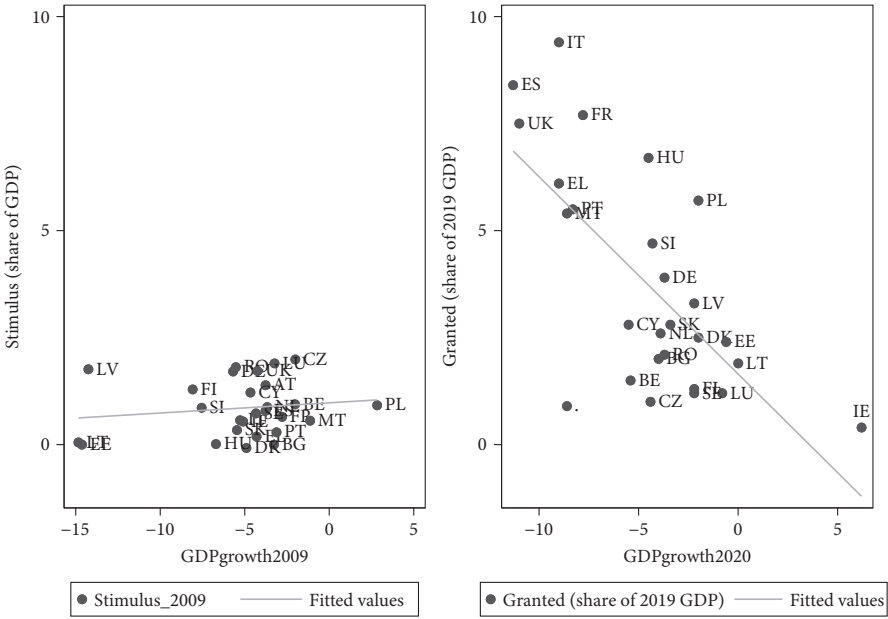


**Figure 7.10** Grants disbursed over time by country: June 2020–June 2021.

Source: Generaldirektion Wettbewerb (Europäische Kommission) et al. (2022).

a low level). In other words, in the course of the pandemic, the permissive context of the EU macroeconomic policy allowed Italy and Spain to come up with as much support for their economy as France or the UK, which were also hit very hard but enjoyed a better fiscal position at the outset of the crisis. The German economy, by contrast, which ended up suffering less from the pandemic, also ended up receiving less support, even if the measures adopted early on in the pandemic would have allowed for much greater support. Quite unexpectedly, and contrary to previous claims (e.g., [Ceron and Palermo 2022](#)), the level playing field appears to have been preserved in the final analysis during the COVID-19 crisis.

A comparison with the situation in the Eurozone crisis confirms this conclusion. The contrast between the two crises is striking. As is shown in [Figure 7.11](#), the national fiscal support for the economies in the Eurozone crisis was not only much weaker than in the COVID-19 pandemic, but it also hardly depended on the severity of the crisis. To the extent that it did vary between member states, it was rather the less hit among them that disbursed the larger stimuli. The Baltic states, which were particularly severely hit, did not benefit from particularly large stimuli at all. The context was clearly more permissive for national fiscal support in 2020–21 than in 2009.



**Figure 7.11** Stimulus in 2009 and in grants disbursed in 2020–21, share of 2009 GDP and 2019 GDP, respectively.

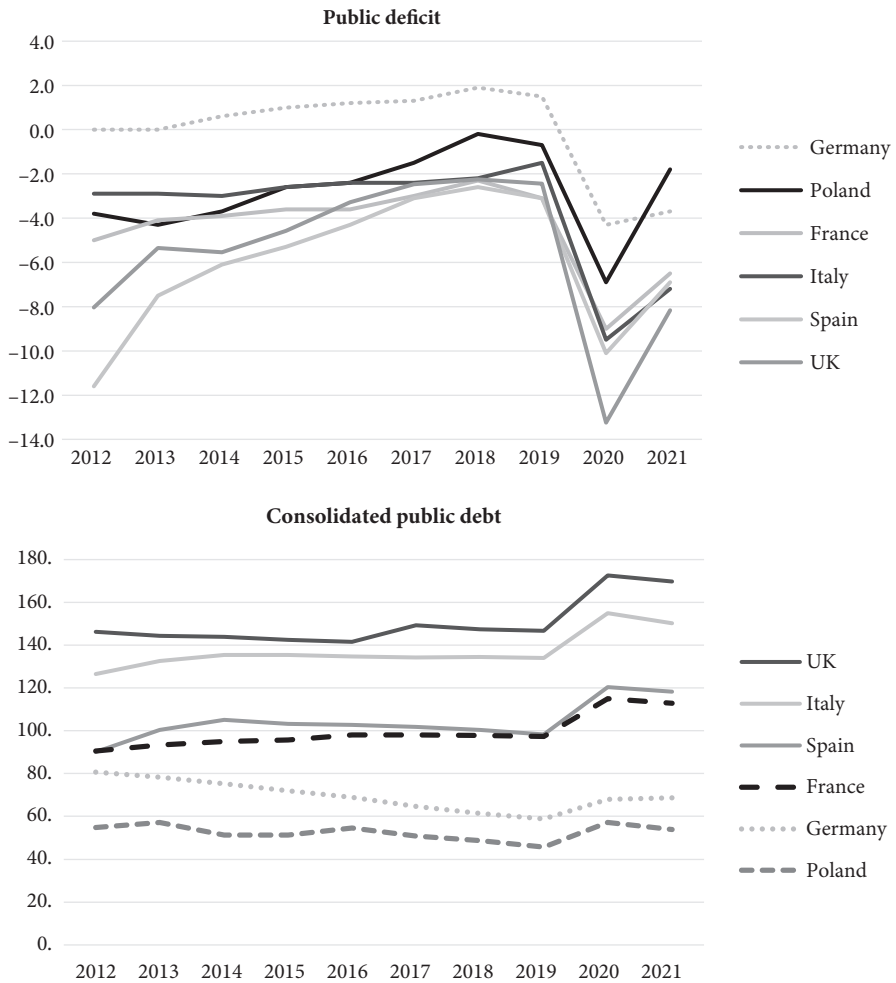
Source: Created using Generaldirektion Wettbewerb (Europäische Kommission) et al. (2022).

## Outcomes

Fiscal emergency measures proved to be very effective in buffering the impact of the crisis.<sup>19</sup> However, they had a negative impact on the public finances in the hardest-hit member states. The outcome of the pandemic in fiscal terms can be gauged by two indicators—the fiscal deficit and the consolidated government debt. Assessed in these terms, the differences between the member states are, indeed, stark. Figures 7.12 and 7.13 document these differences. The first part of Figure 7.12 illustrates the development of the public deficit in the six countries on which our study is focusing, and the second part presents the corresponding development of the consolidated public debt.

Measured in terms of public debt from 2019 to 2021, we note the biggest increases in the countries that provided the largest fiscal support—the UK, the two large Southern European member states, and France. In the UK, public debt increased by almost 25 percent. Arguably, in the UK, the impact of

<sup>19</sup> European Commission. France, 2022 Country Report.



**Figure 7.12** Public deficit and consolidated public debt (percentage of GDP).

Source: OECD: Government at a glance, available at [https://data-explorer.oecd.org/vis?lc=en&fc=Measure&snb=5&vw=tb&df\[ds\]=dsDisseminateFinalDMZ&df\[id\]=DSD\\_GOV%40DF\\_GOV\\_PF\\_YU&df\[ag\]=OECD.GOV.GIP&df\[vs\]=&pd=2019%2C2021&dq=A.IRL%2BSWE%2BDNK%2BNLD%2BPOL%2BDEU%2BHUN%2BAUT%2BCZE%2BROU%2BFRA%2BITA%2BESP%2BGBR.GGD.PT\\_B1GQ&to\[TIME\\_PERIOD\]=false](https://data-explorer.oecd.org/vis?lc=en&fc=Measure&snb=5&vw=tb&df[ds]=dsDisseminateFinalDMZ&df[id]=DSD_GOV%40DF_GOV_PF_YU&df[ag]=OECD.GOV.GIP&df[vs]=&pd=2019%2C2021&dq=A.IRL%2BSWE%2BDNK%2BNLD%2BPOL%2BDEU%2BHUN%2BAUT%2BCZE%2BROU%2BFRA%2BITA%2BESP%2BGBR.GGD.PT_B1GQ&to[TIME_PERIOD]=false)

the pandemic was aggravated by the Brexit process, which reached its completion during the pandemic. On January 31st, 2020, with the adoption of the withdrawal agreement, Britain entered a transition period, which lasted until the end of 2020, when the final trade agreement was signed. However, the poor record of the UK may also be due to the institutional specificities of the British economy. Thus, although the UK government adopted a furlough policy that was very similar to Germany's, the two policy schemes worked out

very differently in the two countries. As is argued by Hancké, Overbeke, and Voss (2022), institutional complementarities enhanced the success of the policy in Germany, while the absence of such complementarities is at the origin of the much more limited success of these measures in the UK.

Among the remaining EU member states Spain fared the worst. As the hardest hit of all the EU countries, it paid a high price for the COVID-19 crisis. Before the pandemic, government debt in relation to GDP had decreased from 100.7 percent in 2014 to 95.5 percent in 2019. Due to favorable financing conditions, borrowing costs also fell sharply; the government deficit was brought down to below 3 percent of GDP before the COVID-19 crisis. However, the combination of the fall in economic activity and the decisive policy response to support businesses and households brought the deficit to 10.3 percent of GDP in 2020. As crisis-related measures were progressively phased out and the economic recovery consolidated, the deficit, which decreased to 6.9 percent in 2021, and it narrowed further to 3.5 percent in 2023, and public debt to decrease to 115.1 percent of GDP in 2023.<sup>20</sup>

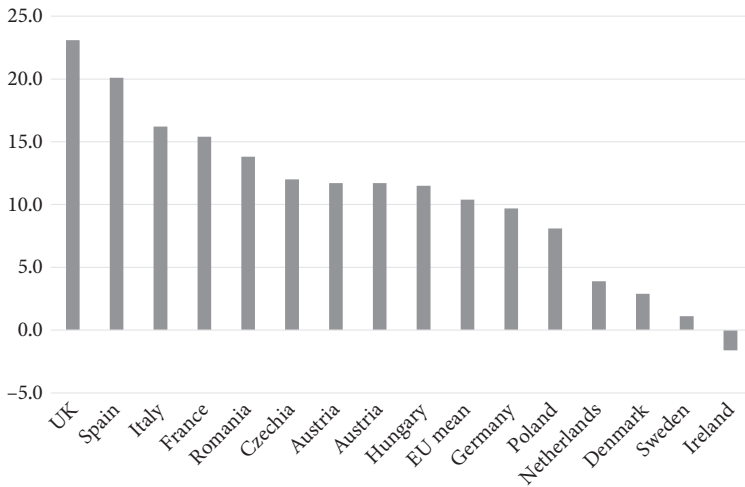
Italy's budget deficit also widened considerably in 2020 and 2021 after reaching a deficit of 1.5 percent of GDP and a primary surplus in 2019. Although it narrowed a bit, it was still at 7.2 percent of GDP in 2023 due also to the cost of nontemporary measures adopted in recent years, which equivalent financing measures have not offset.<sup>21</sup>

As for France, public debt was already high (97.4 percent of GDP in 2019) before the pandemic due to prolonged high structural deficits and a lack of sufficient fiscal consolidation in previous years. The sharp fall in economic activity following the pandemic led to a decrease in tax revenues. In combination with the significant fiscal measures deployed by the government, it pushed the general government deficit to 8.9 percent of GDP. In comparison, public debt rose by almost 20 percent to 114.6 percent of GDP in 2020. Even if debt was reduced to 112.8 percent in 2021, it remains higher than before the pandemic. Overall, as is shown in [Figure 7.13](#), Ireland is the only country that improved its fiscal position during the pandemic.

We can conclude that by allowing the member states to support their national economies commensurately and thereby preserve the level playing field during the COVID-19 crisis, the EU aggravated the long-term tilting of the playing field by allowing the gap between the member states' fiscal maneuvering space to increase.

<sup>20</sup> European Commission. Spain, 2022 Country Report.

<sup>21</sup> European Commission. Italy, 2022 Country Report.



**Figure 7.13** Increase in public debt, 2019 to 2021, selected member states (percentage of GDP).

Source: OECD: Government at a glance, available at [https://data-explorer.oecd.org/vis?lc=en&fc=Measure&snb=5&vw=tb&df\[ds\]=dsDisseminateFinalDMZ&df\[id\]=DSD\\_GOV%40DF\\_GOV\\_PF\\_YU&df\[ag\]=OECD.GOV.GIP&df\[vs\]=&pd=2019%2C2021&dq=A.IRL%2BSWE%2BDNK%2BNLD%2BPOL%2BDEU%2BHUN%2BAUT%2BCZE%2BROU%2BFRA%2BITA%2BESP%2BGBR.GGD.PT\\_B1GQ&to\[TIME\\_PERIOD\]=false](https://data-explorer.oecd.org/vis?lc=en&fc=Measure&snb=5&vw=tb&df[ds]=dsDisseminateFinalDMZ&df[id]=DSD_GOV%40DF_GOV_PF_YU&df[ag]=OECD.GOV.GIP&df[vs]=&pd=2019%2C2021&dq=A.IRL%2BSWE%2BDNK%2BNLD%2BPOL%2BDEU%2BHUN%2BAUT%2BCZE%2BROU%2BFRA%2BITA%2BESP%2BGBR.GGD.PT_B1GQ&to[TIME_PERIOD]=false)

## Conclusion

Economic policymaking operated in the executive decision-making mode at both levels: the Commission and member state governments (plus regional–local executives in the member states) prevailed, and business and experts were consulted/asked for advice but were little involved in policymaking steps. Political parties were also largely reduced to claims-making and hardly involved in the policymaking steps and decision-making, even at the national level.

The national measures taken to combat the economic fallout of the public health measures to contain the pandemic have been of three types: emergency measures, which have been swiftly adopted and implemented after the first lockdowns early on in the crisis; macroeconomic stimuli to support the economic recovery from the crisis and extensions and amendments of the early measures to face the lockdowns in later waves. The member states unilaterally took the early emergency measures. The national lockdowns asked for national compensation measures. These national interventions into the economy put into question the very operation of the single market. Moreover, if the member states all took similar emergency measures and

macroeconomic stimulus measures to support their households and businesses, they originally varied in the extent to which they came to support their economy because they did not all have the same capacity to do so.

The EU authorities, above all the Commission, did their best to preserve the single market by suspending fiscal (SGP) and competition (above all state aid) rules and by supporting the weaker member states with SURE and CRIL. These measures were designed to allow the member states to respond to the crisis flexibly and, at the same time, to preserve a level playing field among the EU member states. The permissiveness of the fiscal and competition rules allowed the preservation of the level playing field during the crisis: the more severely hit member states did, indeed, use the fiscal permissiveness to support their economies appropriately. However, measured in fiscal terms, the long-term outcome is not a level playing field. In the longer term, the southern member states (including France), which were hardest hit by the crisis, ended up in a worse position than North-Western and Eastern member states since their fiscal maneuvering space has been further reduced as a result of the increasing public debt they incurred because of the compensatory economic measures adopted during the crisis. In spite of the effort made by the Commission, the fiscal disparities between the Southern member states and the rest of the EU deepened during the COVID-19 crisis, requiring more long-term measures to restore the gap in the fiscal capacities between member states. The introduction of the NGEU Recovery Fund, which will be the object of the next chapter, is supposed to contribute to the accomplishment of this task.

In the short run, the economic policy measures taken by the EU, as discussed in this chapter, increased the *de facto* solidarity among its member states in two ways. First, SURE provided direct fiscal support for the member states, which had a more limited capacity to deal with the economic shock of the pandemic. Second, the fiscal permissiveness of the EU indirectly also increased the capacity of these member states to come to terms with the economic shock. In the long run, however, the increasing fiscal disparities between the member states are likely to undermine the solidarity among them.

# European Macroeconomic Policies During COVID-19

## Introduction: tilting or balancing the level playing field?

This chapter asks whether the EU-level response to COVID-19 helped to avoid further divergence between member states, which could threaten the European polity itself. The previous chapter explained that the member states' economic response to COVID-19 has “tilted” the European level playing field toward countries with more fiscal firepower. This happened despite indirect reinsurance mechanisms that allowed most affected member states to use their fiscal leeway without the financial constraints of the Euro area crisis: back then, higher interest rates restricted highly indebted countries within the Euro area (De Grauwe and Ji 2012).

For observers of the European Union, the problem of the tilted level playing field is not new: in general, coordination problems mar a unified European fiscal response. Each country stimulates its economy as a function of its political-economic needs and in proportion to its fiscal firepower—which varies with the levels of debt, deficits, and interest rates. This was already the case during the Great Recession in 2008–2009 (Cameron 2012).

This problem is compounded by monetary policy, which impacts national budgets differently depending on the level of national debt. Countries with high (e.g., Italy) and low debt (e.g., the Netherlands) are impacted differently by increases in interest rates, as in 2011 or 2022.<sup>1</sup> Higher interest rates fragilize indebted governments and create incentive structures for austerity, which constrains automatic stabilizers just when citizens need them most. Additionally, flights to safety make borrowing cheaper in countries with sounder finances and enable them to deploy stronger fiscal shields over their citizens. These different dynamics further fragilize the European polity. There is thus a double macroeconomic coordination problem in Europe: coordination

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, the reactions of Italian cabinet ministers to ECB rate rises: <https://www.ft.com/content/ba4bc5be-d0cd-4e87-bb3d-ce6d89f8e2c2>.



between countries to maximize fiscal firepower, and between fiscal and monetary policies (i.e., avoiding as much as possible increasing interest rates when fiscal policy needs to be used). Any European policy response in hard times needs to address this twin challenge.

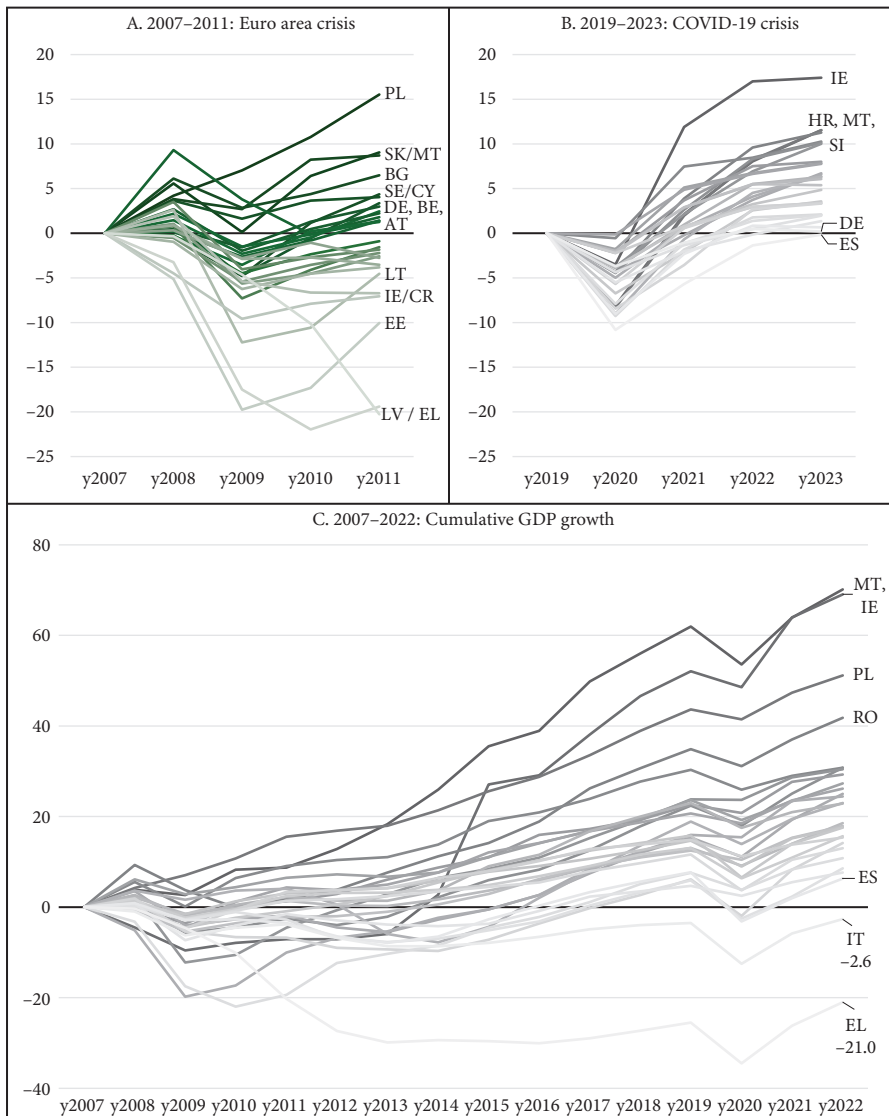
The key question that this chapter addresses, therefore, is whether and how the European Union dealt with macroeconomic policies during the COVID-19 crisis. However, the aim is *not to* describe and analyze every macroeconomic decision that happened at the EU level—this would be beyond the scope of this chapter. Rather, our objective is to analyze the development of macroeconomic policies from a *polity perspective*. The chapter proceeds as follows. First, we explain the tenets, debates, and broad political patterns behind EU macroeconomic binding during COVID-19, laying the analytical groundwork of the chapter. Second and third, we successively analyze fiscal (NGEU) and monetary policies (ECB and PEPP). For each of these policies, we offer a succinct chronological overview, then an analysis of the policymaking (who were the main actors and conflicts), and finally an analysis of the outcomes in the light of the main *problématique* of the chapter: are European macroeconomic policies further tilting or balancing the level playing field?

## EU macroeconomic policies in the wake of COVID-19

Uncoordinated macroeconomic reactions are dangerous for the European polity: they can quickly transform a symmetric crisis into an asymmetric one or further exacerbate an already asymmetric crisis. This can turn crises into permanent scars: some countries are left behind while others power ahead. The result is potential political acrimony between member states, as the COVID-19 crisis has shown with the North–South dust-up between the prime ministers of Portugal and Spain and the Dutch Finance Minister.<sup>2</sup>

Figure 8.1 shows how asymmetric crises can turn into scars, comparing the cumulative growth trajectories of EU countries in the Euro area and COVID-19 crises. On the left-hand side, one can see that during the Euro area crisis, EU members fared differently four years into the crisis (some having much lower GDP levels than before the crisis, like Greece, Latvia, Estonia, Ireland, Croatia and Lithuania, some, like Poland, Slovakia, Malta, Bulgaria and Sweden, having higher levels), while after the COVID-19 crisis all countries grew, albeit at a different pace (with the top performer being Ireland followed by

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.politico.eu/article/wopke-hoekstra-netherlands-italy-corona-bonds-fight/>



**Figure 8.1** Cumulative GDP growth in the Euro area and COVID-19 crises.

Source: Eurostat. For Ireland, we used the modified GNI (Irish Government Department of Finance 2021; 2022). For his kind and precious help, we wish to thank Dr. Akisato Suzuki, Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service (IGEES) policy analyst in the Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO), Houses of the Oireachtas.

Croatia, Malta, Slovenia, Estonia, Hungary, and Romania and the worst performers being Spain, Germany, and Italy). All in all, panel C of Figure 8.1 shows that Greece's and Italy's GDPs are still below their 2007 level (-20.9 percent and -2.6 percent), some countries are barely above (Portugal, Spain,

and Finland), while others are far ahead (Ireland, Poland, Malta, Romania, Slovakia).

Importantly, long asymmetric crises can undermine loyalty in the European polity and create incentives for leaving. For instance, further austerity in Italy could have triggered an Italexit, as experimental evidence suggests (Baccaro, Bremer, and Neimanns 2021). If monetary policy is not supportive either, for instance, by increasing interest rates at a moment when fragile countries add public debt to cushion economic shocks, the policies of member states with heavier debt burdens are undermined, and their citizens are put at a disadvantage.

The key question, therefore, is whether the EU response can balance back the tilted level playing field during crises. There are, broadly speaking, two macroeconomic tools that the EU put in place to balance the level playing field during COVID: the fiscal tool is the “Next Generation EU” common budgetary instrument; the monetary policy tools are the various instruments (such as quantitative easing) of the European Central Bank. We will examine each in turn considering a debate that emerged among EU scholars in the wake of COVID: did the capacity building that happened during COVID-19 amount to a qualitative shift, a quantum leap? If not, how can we define it, and what are the implications? And how did it deal with the problem of crisis responses tilting the level playing field and putting polity maintenance at risk? Did the EU fall into the trap of confederalism again (Bruszt, Medve-Bálint, and Piroska 2022)? The “confederal trap” reproduces market-generated inequalities and the core–periphery development gap, which feeds the fragmentation of the single market and contributes to the conservation of the economic and political problems that EU policies were supposed to alleviate.

There are three camps in this debate. The first camp is the pessimistic. The failing forward literature (Jones, Kelemen, and Meunier 2021) claims that the EU’s macroeconomic response to COVID-19 was unsuccessful (Howarth and Quaglia 2021; Donnelly 2021), because European policymakers settled on the lowest common denominator and thus failed to implement pathbreaking reforms. The European macroeconomic response was just a “sticking plaster” designed to “stop the bleeding” and did not address the underlining (and aforementioned) pathologies of European macroeconomic management. The incomplete and asymmetric Euro area transformed a symmetric shock (the pandemic) into an asymmetric crisis (the economic one), thus creating a dual-speed crisis (Truchlewski, Schelkle, and Ganderson 2021). The asymmetric crisis triggered divergent preferences from Member States, while the preponderance of repayable loans (as opposed to grants) in NGEU

failed to dampen the divergence between North and South. The pessimistic view implicitly rests on a counterfactual comparison with the US, which is better equipped to provide countercyclical fiscal firepower. By contrast, Europe has its hands allegedly tied by “ordoliberal” Germany and the Frugals (Netherlands, Finland, Austria, Denmark, Sweden, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia).

The second camp is the optimists (among whom the former German Chancellor Olaf Scholz). They claim that Europe’s macroeconomic response to COVID-19 was the EU’s “Hamiltonian moment”: Europe created enough fiscal capacity to balance the level playing field and to relieve the pressure on the Member States (de la Porte and Jensen 2021). This camp was criticized for stretching the concept of a “Hamiltonian moment” (Georgiou 2022; Issing 2020) but the fact remains that they see Europe’s response—mostly NGEU—as a quantum leap that deals with the issues illustrated in the previous chapter and puts Europe on a path toward fiscal federalism, where a strong central budget balances the level playing field and where “the main EU institutions engaged in a cooperative positive-sum game” (Quaglia and Verdun 2023b).

A third camp offers a more nuanced view of the EU’s macroeconomic response (Rhodes 2021; Schelkle 2021). We call them the realists. Rhodes (2021) and others argue that the EU fared as well, if not better than the United States during the pandemic (Alexander-Shaw, Ganderson, and Schelkle 2023): even though Europe’s federalism is less developed than in the US, it fared better at coordination, implementation, and innovation. Schelkle (2021) stresses that the legacy of failures of the Euro area crisis “spurred attempts by major protagonists to break with a path that they saw as politically disastrous for the EU polity as a whole.” In fact, the main role of NGEU is not only to dampen the impact of the crisis and balance the level playing field in the long run but also to make sure that the promise of mutual support can cancel any financial panic before it spreads. In other words, the objective is to prevent the transformation of a symmetric crisis into an asymmetric one. Perhaps more importantly, this third perspective acknowledges that contrary to the US, the EU is built atop strong welfare states that provide countercyclical stabilization. An American-style heavy-duty federal budget may, therefore, not be necessary. Contrary to Europe, US fiscal policy always needs to be large. First, state-level spending is strongly constrained by balanced budget rules. Second, the American welfare state is comparatively weak (Tooze 2021). Consequently, it may be easier for the EU to avoid the costly route—in terms of negotiations and time—of a macroeconomic response in the shape of a strong and centralized federal budget

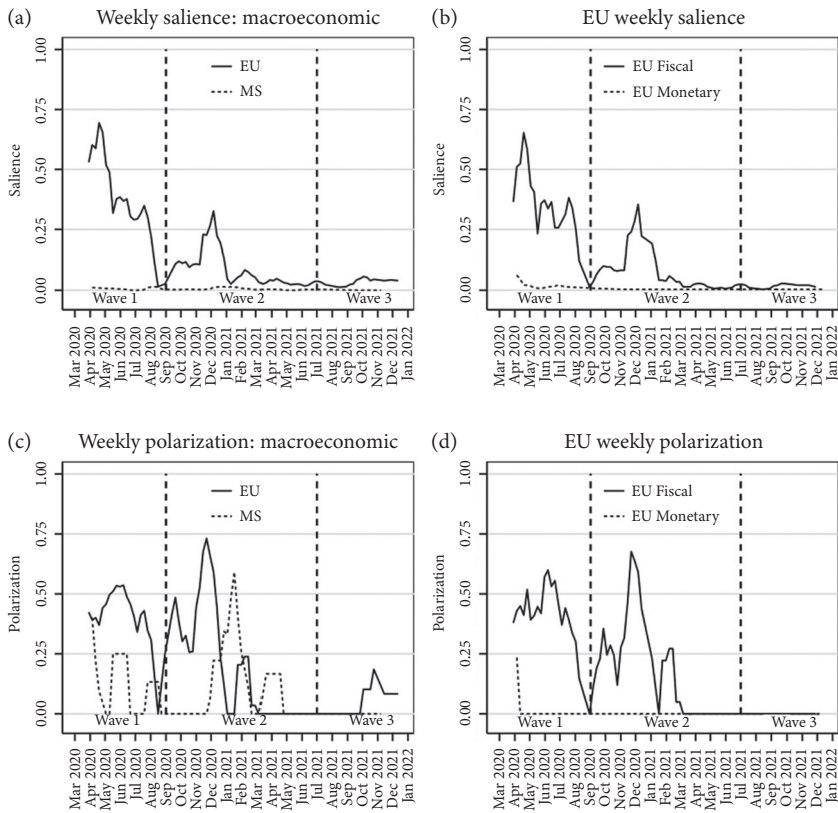
and rather follow the way of creating a European response that balances national capacities (Schelkle 2022).

Given these debates, we can offer some preliminary evidence from a bird's eye view of the EU's response to COVID-19 on the likely outcome. Our policy process analysis data (PPA for short) may help shed some light on these questions (Bojar et al. 2023). These three aforementioned approaches do not offer hard and fast hypotheses and readily observable empirical implications regarding the policy process in terms of salience and polarization. However, we can surmise that while more salience will favor a Hamiltonian moment and the third type of solution over failing forward, greater polarization will favor either failing forward or the third option and decrease the probability of a Hamiltonian scenario. That is, we expect to see a Hamiltonian moment happening when the salience of the crisis is high and polarization is low. Failing forward is most likely to happen when both salience and polarization are high. Finally the third outcome is most likely when salience is high and polarization is neither high nor low: actors have different positions in a crisis situation but not so opposed as not to find a solution that accommodates the political economy of Europe.

Figure 8.2 shows salience and polarization. Starting with the salience of macroeconomic issues in panels A and B of Figure 8.2, we see that it is much higher at the EU level than in the member states: this is not surprising since most of the action happened during European negotiations. Moreover, salience is driven much more by fiscal policy at EU and Member state levels than by monetary policy, mainly in the first wave of the pandemic and to some extent in the second wave. This makes sense: lots of discussions occurred on many economic topics at the EU level (coronabonds, SGP rules, ESM, NGEU, conditionality). By contrast, the ECB is independent and can decide about its own instruments. There is, however, still some salience on monetary policy coming from the member states at the beginning of 2020. This is due to the comments of Christine Lagarde, who argued that the ECB “was not [t]here to close spreads” (see Chapter 4). Some countries like Italy reacted vehemently to such comments due to the endogenous mechanisms that transform a symmetric crisis into an asymmetric one. Lagarde's comment alone increased dramatically Italian bond yields and send the Milan stock exchange down by 17 percent.<sup>3</sup> Clearly, allowing the European level playing field to tilt was not an option.

Polarization is high in the first two waves of the crisis (panels C and D of Figure 8.2), with a peak at the end of 2020 for the EU level and in early 2021

<sup>3</sup> For example, see: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ecb-policy-italy-minister-idUSKBN20Z3DW>



**Figure 8.2** Salience and polarization of macroeconomic policies.

Source: Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set.

for the member state level. The second half of 2021 was pretty unpolarized. At the EU level, the polarization of the EU's macroeconomic response is mostly driven by the fiscal debates on NGEU until July 2020 and then by the democratic conditionality of NGEU in the second half of 2020. Monetary policy debates are polarized mostly in 2020, triggered by different episodes: first by the remarks of ECB President Lagarde on the institutions not being there "to close spreads" and the strong reaction by member states; second, by the conflict between the German Constitutional Court and the ECB on the legality of the ECB's bond-buying program. At the national level, polarization is mostly driven by interactions about fiscal measures. There is also some polarization concerning the ECB despite its independence. This is due to actors arguing about the best option for the ECB to cushion the impact of the pandemic.

The PPA data seem to suggest that for fiscal policy, both salience and polarization were high, and this seems to be evidence for the pessimistic

and realistic camps. The Hamiltonian moment appears to be undermined by polarization (see [Chapter 4](#)). Monetary policy seems less salient and less polarized. To distinguish the pessimists and the realists, we now turn to a more fine-grained analysis of the EU's fiscal and monetary policies during COVID-19.

## Europe's fiscal policies: the case of NGEU

We now analyze European the macroeconomic response in detail, zooming in first on the fiscal aspect. This section will examine, first, the context of fiscal policy (what were the issues discussed, what was the timeline of NGEU), second, we look into policymaking politics (who were the main actors and conflicts) and, third and finally, we analyze the outcome of fiscal policy in Europe: is NGEU a tool to balance the level playing field in Europe?

### Context and chronological structure

Our PPA data sheds light on the issues and conflicts at the center of fiscal policymaking during COVID-19. The main issues revolved around the Stability and Growth Pact [SGP], the European Stability Mechanism [ESM], the Multinannual Financial Framework [MFF], lending from the European Investment Bank [EIB], structural funds [SF], Next Generation EU [NGEU], coronabonds, new EU taxes, and the EU Green Deal.

Our PPA data set ([Table 8.1](#)) suggests that there was a division of labor between the EU and its member states. On all the controversial issues that either require the use of contested or doomed instruments (like the MFF or the ESM) or spur institutional innovation (either coronabonds or NGEU), member states are in the driver's seat. By contrast, the EU dominates where it has policy initiative and competences. Examples include the suspension of SGP rules, the EU Green Deal (it was presented in December 2019, before COVID, and then later subsumed in the NGEU), and new EU taxes to finance new European fiscal expenses. The first phase of institutional innovation seems thus to be driven by member states, who argued about which instruments to use and whether new ones were needed, while the implementation phase of the innovation is mostly dominated by the EU. The most important issues at each polity level (EU or member state) confirm this intuition: for both levels, most of the action concerned the NGEU (more than 54 percent of all actions), while at the EU level other dominant issues were the MFF

**Table 8.1** PPA data on fiscal issues (percentages)

Issue: fiscal	Polity level		
	EU	MS	Total
Macroeconomic stimulus in general	<b>8.3</b>	2.5	4.4
Coronabonds	5.1	<b>9.1</b>	7.8
ESM loans	3.7	<b>11.6</b>	8.9
EU Recovery Fund	45.1	<b>59.2</b>	54.4
EU budget	<b>13.3</b>	9.8	11.0
SURE	1.9	<b>1.1</b>	1.4
European unemployment insurance	<b>0.3</b>	0.0	0.1
EU minimum income	0.0	<b>0.1</b>	0.1
EIB lending capacity increase	<b>1.3</b>	0.3	0.6
Emergency support instrument	<b>2.7</b>	0.7	1.4
Relaxation of SGP rules	<b>5.1</b>	1.8	2.9
Compensation measures for businesses	<b>1.3</b>	0.3	0.6
Support measures for agri-food sector	<b>7.2</b>	2.3	4.0
Structural funds for COVID	<b>1.1</b>	0.3	0.5
New EU taxes	<b>3.2</b>	1.0	1.7
EU Green Deal	<b>0.5</b>	0.1	0.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
n	375	735	1100

Source: Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set

(with the issue of relocating unspent funds) and the EU Green Deal—a signature policy by Commission President von der Leyen. Member states focused more on the NGEU and macroeconomic stimulus in general: as we will see in the chronological discussion, the issues mainly revolved on how to fund common fiscal policy—whether through the contested ESM or through institutional innovations like coronabonds or NGEU.

Since the main issue of fiscal policy revolved around the NGEU, this section focuses on the chronology of establishing NGEU, which can be temporalized into three sequences. Many studies have now researched NGEU (Schelkle 2021; Schramm, Krotz, and De Witte 2022; de la Porte and Jensen 2021; Buti and Fabbrini 2022), therefore we will mostly focus on the key debates and articulate the key moments.

The first sequence spans the early months of the crisis in 2020 (March–April). Policymakers were facing a dual crisis in the shape of a fast health



crisis and still fast but somewhat slower economic crisis at two polity levels (Truchlewski, Schelkle, and Ganderson 2021): while EU policymakers could mobilize small amounts of money quite rapidly (e.g., on January 31st the Commission dedicated €10 million of through Horizon 2020 and then scaled up this amount to €48.5 million for researching the virus), it was neither enough to implement a real intervention in the health sector (e.g., funding for an eventual vaccine—the US government alone spent around \$20 billion according to the US Congressional Budget Office<sup>4</sup>) nor could it stem the consequences of the economic recession.

Consequently, finance ministers met on March 9th (Khan 2020b)<sup>5</sup> to discuss the first fiscal response of the EU. Commission President von der Leyen promised to unlock €7.5 billion and a further €25 billion with unclear funding. Despite these efforts, collective action failed. Trying to remedy these shortcomings, the Eurogroup met on March 16th to coordinate a common fiscal response. Member states committed to discretionary measures of 1 percent of EU GDP and loan guarantees amounting to 10 percent of EU GDP. By comparison, the total US fiscal stimulus was estimated to be around 11.5 percent of GDP (the cumulative response to the COVID-19 pandemic would amount to 25 percent of GDP between 2020 and 2021<sup>6</sup>)—a significant amount, given that Republicans both denied COVID-19 and doubted the effectiveness of big government.

Given the health and economic situation on the ground and the impressive response of the US, the last weeks of March saw a flurry of initiatives emerging from both the EU and its member states: state aid rules and the SGP (of which the “escape clause” was activated for the first time until 2022) were suspended and now governments could use direct government grants, guarantees and loans to the private sector (see Chapter 7). As these rules were relaxed, however, it became quickly clear that some countries were more equal than others (see chapter 7). Such a situation was problematic for several reasons (Teschke 2022; De Angelis 2022). First, the ESM has a certain stigma attached to it due to its role in the previous Euro area crisis and the conditionality that its programs imply. The interventions of Olaf Scholz, Germany’s social democratic finance minister, did not alleviate this problem, as even lighter conditionality would still mean that the funds would have to be spent on healthcare and would be monitored. Second, using the ESM would not decrease the cost of debt, and it would also increase the debt stock of

<sup>4</sup> See: <https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/2021-04/57025-Rx-RnD.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> See also: <https://www.ft.com/content/e43c864e-6356-11ea-a6cd-df28cc3c6a68>

<sup>6</sup> <https://gardner.utah.edu/wp-content/uploads/Fiscal-Stimulus-May2022.pdf?x71849>

countries that had the least fiscal space. These two reasons polarized governments in countries like Italy and the ESM was not used during the pandemic.<sup>7</sup> All in all, the EU's initial reaction in the first wave of the pandemic was mostly symbolic. This situation led nine countries to promote coronabonds and debt mutualization on March 25th (Wilmès et al. 2020; Truchlewski and Schelkle 2024) but Northern countries opposed fiscal solidarity at the EU level.

The second phase of the EU's COVID-19 response resulted in partial solutions. After the acrimonious meetings at the end of March, the Eurogroup met on April 8–9th for a fourteen-hour-long all-night teleconference (Khan 2020a) and delivered a package of €540 billion (including an ESM precautionary credit line with minimal conditionality called the ESM Pandemic Crisis Support) and asked the Commission to come up with a European recovery fund (Schelkle 2021). The price to pay for this package was to let coronabonds die and to soften ESM conditionality. Macron and Merkel pressured the ministers to arrive at an agreement (Chazan et al. 2020), and on April 23rd, the heads of state and governments concurred to back an “EU Recovery Fund,” which had still to be worked out in terms of financing, size, and governance. By then, member states had committed to discretionary measures of 3 percent and loan guarantees of 16 percent of EU GDP.

A taboo was broken with the EU recovery fund, and institutional engineering would be born out of this ambiguous formulation. Clearly, the battle lines had shifted. Once this breakthrough had happened, the third phase of the crisis response (May–July) was focusing on spelling out the specifics of what would become the NGEU. This was done in four steps. First, on May 18th, French and German leaders introduced the idea of a recovery fund, under the aegis of the Commission and backed by guarantees from member states, which could raise up to €500 billion to provide grants to most affected regions of the EU. The trick, however, was to sell this as an exceptional but *temporary* instrument warranted by exceptional circumstances. This was the condition for getting Northern countries on board. Second, the Commission put forward a proposal on May 27th called “Next Generation EU” which added €250 billion in loans on top of the Franco-German proposal. Crucially for the Commission, the recovery fund should be financed by new “own resources” because decreasing spending in times of crisis is too difficult politically (Papadia and Truchlewski 2022). Increasing member states contributions was politically difficult at a moment when Brexit created a budgetary shortfall in Brussels’ purse and COVID-19 a black hole in national budgets.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.esm.europa.eu/financial-assistance/programme-database/programme-overview>

This was a problem that the EU had been working on since 2018 and thus Brussels proposed several new taxes targeting new tax bases: climate and environmental externalities, the realm of internet and finance (carbon tax on imports, an improved emission trading scheme, a tax on plastics, a digital tax and the evergreen financial transactions tax).<sup>8</sup> New taxes at the EU level are key to fiscal policy insofar as they decouple the EU from national contributions and thus liberate the Commission from certain political constraints. The third step culminated in the negotiations and the Council meeting that led to the dramatic agreement of July 21st: a €750 billion package (“Next Generation EU” or NGEU) was announced to be combined with the EU budget’s Multiannual Financial Framework.

The fourth and final step was the intercameral package deal agreed upon by the European Parliament and Council in the autumn of 2020. This deal not only exceeded the “lowest common denominator” on which the failing forward thesis is focused and thus exceeded expectations (Rhodes 2021), it also produced tighter conditionality under the pressure of the European Parliament (Schramm and Wessels 2022): given that for many years structural funds were exploited by illiberal regimes to buttress their power at home—which creates an equilibrium undermining the European polity (Kelemen 2020)—MEPs wanted to punish member states that did not comply with the common EU rule of law principles. Hungary and Poland, not surprisingly, demurred vehemently and exploited the threat of veto on EU’s own resources to block the whole package. National leaders had to intervene at the European Council of December 10–11th and proposed a creative reading of the Regulation on conditionality that the European Parliament contested (Bohle, Greskovits, and Naczyk 2023).

Finally, the main actors in the policymaking process of NGEU (see Table 8.2) were the Commission and national executives. As a result, it seems that, in the words of one European observer, “this ‘confederal’ structure is closer to the US and Switzerland than to an imaginary federation that the European teleology and theology presupposes” (van Middelaar 2019). This speaks to recent findings on “executive dominance” in the EU during crises (Ferreira, Kriesi, and Schelkle 2023; Vanhercke and Verdun 2022). The ECB is conspicuously absent given its historical calls for more fiscal capacity (Vits and Thesing 2011) to remedy its “loneliness” in crisis-fighting (Mabbett and Schelkle 2019). At the national level, other actors also participated in the actions on fiscal policy: national parliaments and business actors.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/business/eu-commission-proposes-three-new-eu-taxes-repay-recovery-fund-borrowing-2021-12-22/>

**Table 8.2** PPA data on actor distribution (percentages)

Actors	Fiscal		
	EU	MS	Total
Commission	<b>88.5</b>	0.0	36.6
ECB	<b>11.0</b>	0.0	4.5
PM-chiefex	0.0	<b>64.7</b>	37.9
nat_parl	0.0	<b>14.0</b>	8.2
reglocal-ex	0.0	2.9	1.7
experts	0.0	6.0	3.5
business	0.3	<b>11.1</b>	6.6
others	0.2	1.4	0.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
n	593	841	1434

Source: Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set

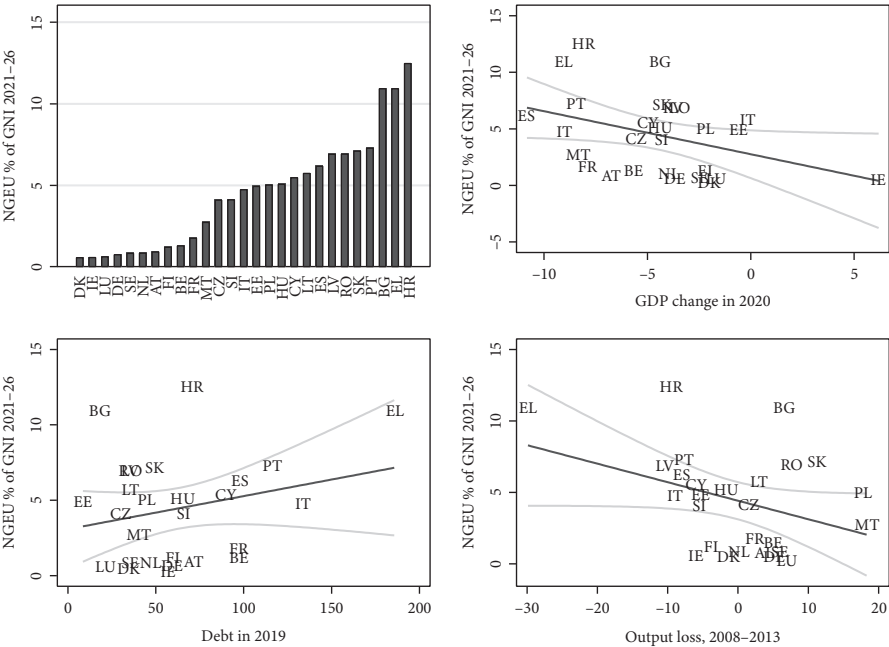
## Outcomes: Next Generation EU

NGEU is undoubtedly the biggest step in the direction toward a common European countercyclical fiscal policy. It amounts to €750 billion in 2018 prices. However, these headline numbers do not make sense without some yardsticks. NGEU amounts to 6 percent of the EU's GDP and increases the total EU stimulus to around 11.27 percent of GDP. Compared to 2009, the US stimulus reached 5.6 percent of GDP, Germany 2.8 percent, Canada 2 percent, Spain 0.8 percent, and Switzerland 0.3 percent. Compared to COVID-19 stimulus packages, the EU's own stimulus appears more modest (the US put 26.5 percent, Canada 19.7 percent, Brazil 12.0 percent, but nothing compares to Japan's 53.7 percent), though it should be noted that this comes on top of national fiscal responses (see previous chapter). The most important battle revolved around creating grants for member states instead of loans. The result is that 46.7 percent of NGEU is made up of grants amounting to around 3 percent of the EU's GDP.

Prima facie, this looks indeed like a quantum leap in terms of fiscal policy at the European level. NGEU data in [Figure 8.3](#) below suggest that the biggest beneficiaries are Croatia, Bulgaria, Greece, Slovakia, and Portugal. Countries that will benefit least from NGEU are Ireland, Luxembourg, and Denmark. This evidence suggests that NGEU is a real attempt at balancing the level playing field: the countries that received the most grants are also the most fragile countries, not only during the COVID-19 pandemic but also those which suffered most from previous crises. The northeastern graph in

Figure 8.3 shows that there is a negative relationship between the size of the recession in 2020 and the allocation of NGEU grants.

This was a conscious change introduced between the proposal of the Commission on May 27th and the final negotiation in July 2020: the idea is not necessarily to favor low-income countries as structural funds do but to help in proportion to the shock incurred. In the words of prominent Bruegel economist Zolt Darvas, NGEU “thus became closer to an insurance system.”<sup>9</sup> Concerning our argument, however, it is important to notice that NGEU allocations also tried to correct for vulnerabilities that tilted the level playing field. The southwest graph in Figure 8.3 indicates that there is also a positive correlation between the size of public debt in 2019 and the size of NGEU allocations. This is beneficial for countries like Greece, Spain, and Portugal, which still suffer from debt overhang after the Euro area crisis.



**Figure 8.3** Allocation of NGEU in relation to economic fundamentals.

*Note:* For Ireland, we used the modified GNI (Irish Government Department of Finance 2021; 2022). GNI: Gross National Income. Contrary to GDP, GNI measures net amount of incomes received or sent from abroad, which can distort the perception of economies like that of Ireland.  
*Source:* Created using data from Eurostat and Bruegel.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.bruegel.org/blog-post/having-cake-slicing-it-differently-how-grand-eu-recovery-fund-allocated>

Finally, NGEU implicitly also tries to mend past scars. The southeast graph shows that there is a correlation between output loss during the Euro area crisis (2008–2013) and the size of NGEU allocations.

Additionally, NGEU achieved another goal in terms of polity building: it generated loyalty. Comparing the share of people who think that the image of the EU got worse between spring and fall 2020, one can see that citizens in countries that received the lion's share of NGEU actually improved their view of Europe—especially in Greece, Spain, and Italy ([Armingeon et al. 2022](#)). These vulnerable countries reduced their share of negative views of Europe from 50–70 percent to 30–40 percent. Conversely, in resilient countries like Finland, Denmark, Germany, and the Netherlands—the backbone of the Frugals—the share of respondents who think that the image of the EU got worse did not increase ([Buti and Fabbri 2022](#)). In this sense, NGEU had a positive political impact in terms of the legitimacy of the polity.

## Europe's monetary policy

As the sheer scale of the shock unfolded, the ECB was once again the “only game in town” ([El-Erian 2016](#)), capable of offering swift and decisive action, and underlined by the lack of a common EU budget. Such a situation forced the ECB to test again the boundaries of policymaking and open its flanks to criticism ([Mabbett and Schelke 2019](#)). Fortunately, the innovations that the ECB used to fight the Euro area crisis (e.g., quantitative easing) were in place and had established both a precedent and a template for action ([Quaglia and Verdun 2022](#)). The dilemma was for the ECB to focus on monetary issues (inflation, deflation) while at the same time supporting the economic policies of the EU (e.g., avoiding increasing interest rates exactly when a lot of public debt was issued to deal with the crisis) and prevent fragmentation (country spreads and different national interest rates in the banking sector). This section, therefore, focuses first on the timeline of action and the policymaking of the ECB, showing how initial mistakes were quickly reversed. Second, we focus on the outcomes of these policymaking steps, asking whether the ECB helped balance the level playing field and maintain the polity.

Our PPA data suggests first a paradox. As [Table 8.3](#) suggests, the number of actions we coded for monetary policy is remarkably low, amounting to sixty-five (vs. 1,110 for fiscal policy), and yet perhaps the ECB's monetary policy was the most powerful tool keeping the EU together. Second, most of the action took place around quantitative easing for the public sector—the Pandemic Emergency Purchase Programme or PEPP—and the private

**Table 8.3** PPA data on monetary policy during COVID-19

Issue: monetary	Polity level		
	EU	MS	Total
ECB: PEPP	60.0	50.0	55.4
ECB: interest rate cuts	11.4	0.0	6.2
ECB: LTRO	11.4	23.3	16.9
ECB: QE	17.1	26.7	21.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
n	35	30	65

*Source:* Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA data set

sector—the Targeted Longer-term Refinancing Operations or TLTRO, aimed at the banks—which together represent 88.5 percent of the ECB’s actions or 47 percent of all the EU’s action on the monetary front. Third, member states remained silent on interest rate cuts. Most of their actions are about quantitative easing; this is due to the conflict between Germany, the Netherlands (to a lesser extent), Italy, and the ECB over quantitative easing (more on this below). Italy wanted the ECB to use quantitative easing to close the spreads on its sovereign bonds, the Netherlands wanted PEPP to be both temporary and not used fully, and Germany’s top court challenged the legality of quantitative easing.

## Context and chronological structure

The most intense phase of ECB policymaking lasted from March to May 2020. On the one hand, the ECB was still under some stress from the Euro area crisis. The problems of deflation and of the zero lower bound (when a central bank cannot lower further interest rates and thus it is hard to loosen financial conditions further) persisted. For instance, just a few months before the pandemic started, in September 2019, the ECB took further action to lift the Euro area out of the deflationary trap by lowering the deposit facility rate to minus 0.5 percent and resuming net asset purchases (to the tune of €20 billion per month) within the baseline asset purchase program (APP).

On the other hand, as it became quickly obvious, the impact of the pandemic would be deep and costly for member states, especially highly indebted and tourist-dependent countries like Italy, Greece, Portugal, and Spain. Ghostly memories of the Euro area crisis resurfaced as sovereign bond

spreads started diverging. While a consensus started forming that something had to be done this time to avoid spillover effects and panic in financial markets (Quaglia and Verdun 2022), ECB President Christine Lagarde poured oil onto the fire. On March 12th, during a press conference, she seemed to revoke the promise that the ECB was a key actor in polity maintenance when she stated boldly that “The ECB is not here to close spreads.”

Italian bond spreads increased by 0.65 percent and stock markets fell by 17 percent. Indicators of financial stress almost reached levels last seen in the fall of 2008.<sup>10</sup> The whole episode seemed to be a misunderstanding: the formal statement made by the head of the ECB that usually opens the press conference implied the opposite of Lagarde’s response to journalists. Indeed, it had just been announced that the baseline asset purchase program would step up its bond-buying from 20 billion to 120 billion euros a month. This announcement notwithstanding, the negative reaction of markets was compounded by anger in Italian government circles directed at Lagarde’s comments.

The Frankfurt-based institution responded with a strategy that would support both the public (the governments of the Member States) and the private sectors (mostly banks, which were still reeling from the Euro area crisis). On March 18th, the ECB announced the PEPP (the Pandemic Emergency Purchase Programme) amounting to €750 billion. It was boosted to €1.35 trillion in June 2020. The aim was to create some fiscal breathing space for the countries hit hardest by the pandemic and to avoid further financial fragmentation of the Euro. The PEPP built on previous programs launched during the Euro area crisis, which allowed the buying of government debt on secondary markets and thus bypassed the prohibition of monetary financing of governments. Importantly, PEPP was more flexible than previous bond-buying programs. The ECB could distribute bond purchases over time and across jurisdictions. The ECB also leveraged some innovations it had put in place in the previous crisis: banks were helped through operations like TLTROs (Longer-Term Refinancing Operations) and the PELTROs (Pandemic Emergency Longer-Term Refinancing Operations).

Although economists saluted the action of the ECB, it spurred some backlash. In May 2020, the German constitutional court ruled that the bond-buying programs of the ECB could be legal under German law only if the ECB could prove that they were justified. Thus, the German Bundesbank had to stop buying bonds until this justification came forward. This decision was announced despite a previous ruling of the European Court of Justice (ECJ) confirming the legality operations of the ECB’s operations. Although a

<sup>10</sup> Source: <https://www.ecb.europa.eu/press/key/date/2021/html/ecb.sp210218~d8857e8daf.en.pdf>



highly technical matter, the essence of this confrontation was that a national court took the legal step to challenge the decision of the EU court. Many observers fretted that this would encourage other countries (read: especially the illiberal ones like Poland and Hungary) to follow in the footsteps of the German Constitutional Court. Other observers also noted the irony of the ruling: in 1992, the German court had accepted the Maastricht treaty provided that the future ECB would be fully independent. This legal saga was resolved in the summer of 2021. While the Bundesbank provided the German government with the rationale for the bond-buying programs, in June 2021 the Commission started to take legal steps against Germany for challenging the supremacy of EU law. Two months later, Germany renounced these steps and, in August, fully acknowledged the supremacy of EU law over national law, also in the meantime reinforcing the role of the ECJ by underlining that only the ECJ can assess the legality of actions carried by EU institutions. This judicial skirmish ended with the Commission withdrawing its case against Germany.

In March 2022, the ECB ended the PEPP bond-buying program, which begs the question: did the ECB help avoid the confederal trap with this instrument, and if so, to what extent? In terms of aggregates, the response of the ECB was in line with the actions of other central banks that are usually perceived as being more forceful and decisive: the expansion of the balance sheet of the ECB was slightly larger than that of the Federal Reserve and the Bank of England (30 percent of GDP in December 2021, vs. 20 and around 27 percent respectively).<sup>11</sup>

From the perspective of wider polity maintenance, the ECB clearly rose to the occasion. What is less clear is whether this forceful response tilted or leveled the playing field.

## Outcomes: did the ECB help level the playing field?

The actions of the ECB were a clear break with orthodoxy. The Euro was set up to avoid monetary government financing and to constrain government debt. After the Keynesian era of post-WWII, governments were perceived as too keen on spending their way out of recessions which, it was argued, fueled inflation in the 1970s and undermined economic growth (McNamara 1998). Consequently, the Euro area implemented the Stability and Growth Pact, while the ECB relied on markets to enforce its collateral policy: for instance,

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.ecb.europa.eu/press/key/date/2022/html/ecb.sp220331~b11d74f249.en.html>

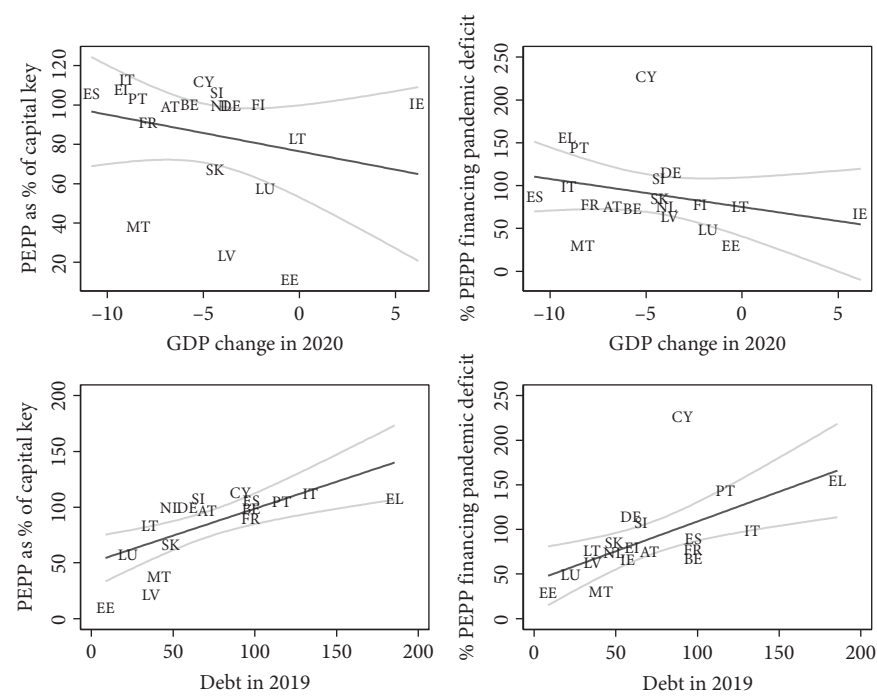
in 2005, the ECB made eligibility of sovereign bonds conditional on the credit ratings decided by private agencies (e.g., Fitch, Moody's).

However, since 2008 it became clear that governments could spend too little and unequally in a compound polity. The political situation in the Euro area was such that governments that could afford to stimulate their economy were bent on fiscal prudence, while governments that needed countercyclical fiscal measures were highly indebted. With a weak budgetary center in the European polity, the ECB was forced to cross the fiscal Rubicon and take into consideration the fiscal situations of European governments. This was even more crucial because, contrary to the pre-2008 wisdom, monetary policy was severely constrained and because fiscal policy, it appeared, had more power than assumed. Broadly speaking, “fiscal multipliers” (i.e., how much bang governments get for their bucks) are actually higher when monetary policy is constrained (Blanchard and Leigh 2013). As a result, a small revolution happened in the governance of the Euro area: while before 2008 fiscal policies were subsumed under the broader goal of monetary stability (i.e., avoiding big deficits and debt to keep inflation in check), after the Euro area crisis monetary policies were subsumed under the goal of maximizing the impact of fiscal policies.

The PEPP embodies this revolution in the roles between monetary and fiscal policy in Europe during times of crisis. Previous programs during the Euro area crisis, like the Securities Market Program (SMP), the Outright Monetary Transactions (OMT), and the Public Sector Purchase Programme (PSPP), prefigured this change by supporting fiscal policies, but the justifications of these programs were always couched in terms of monetary and financial policies: closing spreads, avoiding financial fragmentation and ensuring that monetary policy transmission works. PEPP, by contrast, stated its goal of supporting government budgets openly (van 't Klooster 2022). PEPP is much more flexible than its predecessor programs: the ECB requires no credit rating anymore (which implies that Greece could be added to the program), no issuer limit, and no strict allocation of purchases (not dependent on a country being part of an ESM program) or proportional to the capital key (share of the ECB's capital owned by each national central bank).<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> According to the German central bank, “to safeguard the ECB's independence from political influence, it has its own capital, subscribed by the national central banks. The total subscribed capital currently amounts to 10.83 billion euro. Each national central bank accounts for a fixed percentage of this—the capital key. The key is calculated according to the size of a member state in relation to the European Union as a whole, size being measured by population and gross domestic product in equal parts. In this way, each national central bank has a fair share in the ECB's total capital.” <https://www.bundesbank.de/en/tasks/topics/understanding-the-capital-key-666388>

This has important implications. If the ECB allocates bond-buying according to needs rather than in proportion to the country’s capital key, then we should see a correlation between the economic situation and the allocation of bond-buying. [Figure 8.4](#) suggests that there is indeed a polity maintenance pattern of PEPP by design: the figure shows there is a correlation between debt levels and PEPP purchases (higher debt levels leading to more purchases) and between the size of the recession and PEPP purchases (the deeper, the more PEPP purchases). This suggests that, in 2020, at the outset of the pandemic, the ECB bought more bonds from more indebted countries to avoid financial panic and give those countries more financial breathing space. For instance, the ECB purchased smaller amounts of debt from countries with low debt levels: 11 percent of Estonia’s capital key and 38 percent of Latvia’s. Conversely, the ECB bought higher proportions of bonds of more indebted countries: 113 percent of Italy’s, 112 percent of Cyprus’s, 108 percent of Greece’s, and 104 percent of Spain’s. However, these correlations disappear if we take into account the whole period of PEPP (March 2020–March 2022): while the ECB could flexibly use PEPP in the depths of the



**Figure 8.4** Allocation of PEPP in relation to economic fundamentals in 2019–20.  
*Source:* Created using data from Eurostat and the ECB.

pandemic, over the medium run, it had to go back to market and political neutrality (the total amount of bonds purchases should be proportional to each countries' capital key).<sup>13</sup> The ECB thus exploited the inbuilt flexibility of PEPP and frontloaded the purchase of bonds of countries with a fragile fiscal position (high debt) within the European polity. Ironically, this is the flexibility that Lagarde spoke about in March but which was overshadowed by the end of her sentence: "I can assure you on that page that first of all we will make use of all the flexibilities that are embedded in the framework of the asset purchase program, . . . but we are not here to close spreads."

This suggests that PEPP was an instrument that the ECB used to get out of the confederal trap. Indeed, this was the openly stated goal of the ECB: the press conference of March 18th stipulated that "the ECB will ensure that all sectors of the economy can benefit from supportive financing conditions that enable them to absorb this shock. This applies equally to families, firms, banks and governments." One word in this statement would not have been possible to be uttered just a few years earlier: "governments." What is interesting to note is whose bonds the ECB did not buy in proportion to its capital key: small countries with low debt levels (Malta, Latvia, Estonia, Slovakia, Lithuania) and one key country (France). The ECB bought 100 percent of the capital key of the countries that were the most vocal against bond-buying: Germany (recall the conflict with the German constitutional courts), the Netherlands, and Finland.

A similar but weaker relationship exists between GDP change in 2020 and the amount of monetary deficit financing that the ECB engaged in (share of government bonds issued in 2020 bought by the PEPP program): again, the ECB clearly favored countries like Greece and Portugal at the expense of smaller countries like Luxembourg, Estonia, Latvia and Malta, and France.

This was the direct way the ECB used PEPP to "reinsure" the finances of its member states. There is also an indirect reinsurance mechanism that is deeply linked with the direct way: by buying bonds of its member states, the ECB lowers their interest rates and thus the cost of borrowing. Evidence suggests that before the announcement of Lagarde on March 12th and before the announcement of the PEPP program on March 18th, spreads were increasing above German ones in proportion to new COVID-19 cases appearing in each country. After the watershed moment of mid-March 2020, when the ECB stepped in, the impact of new COVID-19 cases on sovereign bond spreads was nil (Ortmans and Tripier 2021). This strong effect of PEPP enabled

<sup>13</sup> Source: <https://www.ecb.europa.eu/press/key/date/2022/html/ecb.sp220331~b11d74f249.en.html>

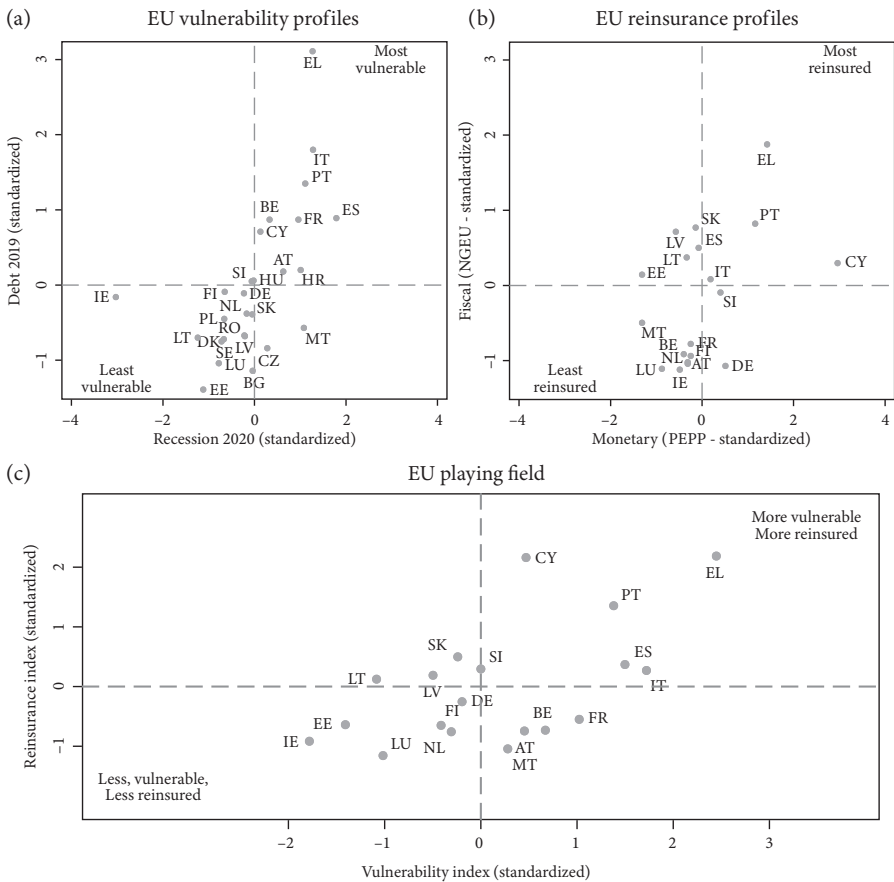
further indirect interventions of the ECB to balance the level playing field: for instance, in April 2020, collateral standards were also lowered, together with a decrease in collateral haircuts and increasing the eligibility of assets. Such initiatives favor countries with weaker fiscal regimes.

## Conclusion: balancing the European macroeconomic level playing field

This chapter asked whether European macroeconomic binding during the COVID-19 pandemic tilted or balanced the level playing field. Did the EU manage to get out of the confederal trap? The literature offers three schools on this question: the pessimists (mostly the failing forward approach—see [Jones, Kelemen, and Meunier 2021](#); [Howarth and Quaglia 2021](#); [Donnelly 2021](#)), the optimists (the European response being hailed as a “Hamiltonian” moment—see [de la Porte and Jensen 2021](#)) and the realists who tried to compare the EU’s response to other polities to have a benchmark ([Rhodes 2021](#); [Alexander-Shaw, Ganderson, and Schelkle 2023](#)).

Our evidence points to a positive outcome aligned with the third school of thought. There was no big bang, quantum jump to a new reality, a kind of federal Europe that many imply as a counterfactual in their assessment of crisis politics. Neither did Europe fail forward into another Euro area type of crisis that further polarized European member states. Instead, Europe’s reaction to COVID-19 paints a different picture. On the fiscal front, EU member states pooled resources in the form of NGEU. On the monetary front, the ECB did not hesitate to prop up government budgets. During the COVID-19 crisis, binding at the European level did not necessarily generate centralized state capacity (implying a sort of federal Europe) but a joint form of pooling resources that is aimed at reinsuring its constituent members ([Schelkle 2022](#); [2023](#)).

[Figure 8.5](#) summarizes how the European macroeconomic response tried to address the issue of the level playing field. The top-left graph shows vulnerability profiles of EU states during the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, mapping them onto two dimensions: the size of the recession in 2020 and the level of debt in 2019 (i.e., how much fiscal firepower states had on the eve of the crisis). We can thus see which countries were the worst and best placed to deal with the COVID-19 crisis: in the bottom south-west corner are the least vulnerable countries (Ireland, Estonia, Luxembourg, Lithuania), while in the north-east corner are the most vulnerable countries (Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain, France). The second graph in the top-right of [Figure 8.5](#) shows



**Figure 8.5** Vulnerability and reinsurance profiles in the EU during COVID-19 (2020).

Source: Created using data from Eurostat, the ECB, and Bruegel.

reinsurance profiles, i.e., how much countries benefited from NGEU and the ECB's PEPP. Countries in the northeast corner benefit mostly from both, and here we find vulnerable countries like Greece, Portugal, and, to a lesser extent, Italy. The least reinsured countries (but which still benefit a modicum) are Malta, Luxembourg, Ireland, Belgium, and France. In the intermediate categories, we find countries that benefit either from NGEU but not from PEPP (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) or those whose share of NGEU is not so prominent but which benefited from PEPP (Germany and Slovenia). The third, lower graph of Figure 8.5 combines the vulnerability and reinsurance profiles<sup>14</sup> to see whether there is a correlation. The answer is that there is a

<sup>14</sup> For the vulnerability and reinsurance profiles, we added both dimensions and standardized them.

positive and statistically significant correlation of 0.57. In general, more vulnerable countries have also been the most reinsured during the COVID-19 pandemic (Greece, Portugal, Spain, and Italy, which were the biggest losers also from the Euro area crisis). The least vulnerable and least reinsured countries include Luxembourg, Ireland, Estonia, the Netherlands, Finland, and Germany. In the intermediate categories, we find less vulnerable countries that were more reinsured (the relative but not so big winners: Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, and Slovenia—i.e., the up-and-coming stars of the post-communist transformation). But some countries were also relatively more vulnerable and less reinsured: France, Austria, Belgium, and Malta. Clearly, in the European polity that emerged in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the new reinsurance regime that is rooted in the previous crises (Schelkle 2022) is a force that tries to balance the macroeconomic level playing field and get the EU out of the confederal trap.

# The Perception of Transnational Conflict Structures by EU Citizens and Its Consequences for Bonding Among Citizens

## Introduction

Since the “permissive consensus” came to an end and was replaced by a “constraining dissensus” in the 1990s (Hooghe and Marks 2009), the mobilization of European citizens has come to matter for European decision-making. The series of European crises has reinforced the role of the citizens as a result of the increasingly sharp transnational conflicts between coalitions of member states. National leaders have mobilized their citizens to reinforce their position in these transnational conflicts, leaving a legacy of transnational conflict perceptions among them. While we have argued that European and domestic conflicts have been largely segmented from each other during the COVID-19 crisis, we still believe that the legacy of past transnational conflicts resulting from previous crises—most notably the Eurozone crisis and the refugee crisis—has been lurking in the background of the COVID-19 crisis and has not only influenced the positioning of the policymakers but has also imposed constraints for the possible bonding effects of the measures adopted during the COVID-19 crisis.

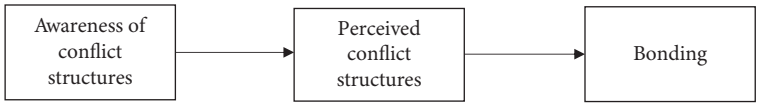
Our starting point for an analysis of the perceptions of transnational conflicts in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis among the citizens is the complexity of the EU polity, which makes it hard for the EU citizens to follow the policymaking process at the EU level. They need to find a way to observe or participate in this process directly. For relevant information, they have to rely entirely on their national media, which typically are mostly focused on policymaking at the national level. Except for some highly mediatized events like EU summits or EU scandals, reporting on EU policymaking is not as intense as it is on national policymaking. In this chapter, we ask whether,



to what extent, under which conditions, and with what kind of consequences for EU bonding citizens of the European member states perceive the transnational conflicts that exist at the EU-level and have been shaping the EU policymaking process and its outcomes during the COVID-19 crisis.

Our key assumption for the argument in the chapter is that policymaking and policy outcomes, indeed, provide both informational cues and substantive information for the citizens’ opinion formation. In the COVID-19 crisis, policymaking at the EU level became unusually salient. Moreover, the COVID-19 crisis was not the first crisis the EU had to face but was preceded by a series of other highly conflictive crises—the Eurozone crisis, the refugee crisis, the Brexit crisis, the rule-of-law crisis, which all contributed to the visibility of the EU’s crisis management and the territorial conflicts involved. The “focusing events,” which rendered the crisis-specific policymaking and its outcomes more visible and traceable, were the summits of the European Council in particular. [Van Middelaar \(2014: 304\)](#) has pointed out that European Council meetings are characterized by high public attention (high visibility, dramatization, and media pressure). News reports on these summits have been shown to have an impact on the citizens’ assessments of the EU and its policies ([Marquart et al. 2019](#)). In the COVID-19 crisis, an exceptional series of summits took place, online and offline, with the crucial events being the summits of July and December 2020, which dealt with the creation of the NGEU fund. The question we ask in this chapter is how the COVID-19 crisis management influenced the conflict perceptions and, across these conflict perceptions, the image of the EU among its citizens. [Figure 9.1](#) summarizes the general argument of this chapter.

We begin the chapter with the presentation of our theoretical considerations. Then our analysis proceeds in four steps. First, we clarify to what extent the European public was at all aware of the conflicts involved in the policymaking process at the European level in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. Next, we analyze the way the COVID-19 crisis management influenced the perceived transnational conflict configuration and the factors that are associated with this perception. We present this analysis in two steps, first based on perceived alliances and oppositions and then based on the perceptions of EU favoritism. In the last step, we briefly show to what extent these conflict



**Figure 9.1** Analytical framework for the empirical analysis.

perceptions, in turn, have shaped the bonds linking EU citizens to the EU polity beyond the usual suspects among the determinants of bonding in the EU polity.

## Theoretical considerations

In support of the assumption that policymaking and policy outcomes provide both informational cues and substantive information for the citizens' opinion formation, we turn to general research on the nature and origin of public opinion. In general terms, as Zaller (1992) observed some time ago, the issue-specific configurations of the political elites are highly consequential for the opinion formation of the general public. If the elites are in agreement, the most sophisticated, who receive the most political information, tend to accept this information and follow the consensual elites. If, however, the political elites are polarized, as in the case of the key policies adopted at the EU level during the COVID-19 pandemic, then public opinion polarizes as well, with the most sophisticated citizens polarizing the most. The experimental studies of Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus (2013) and Bisgaard and Slothuus (2018) have confirmed that when elites polarize, citizens follow and polarize as well, both in the US and in Europe. More specifically, studies of the effects of party cues on support of the EU have demonstrated that information received from parties strongly influences citizens' opinions about the European Union (Steenbergen, Edwards, and de Vries 2007; Stoeckel and Kuhn 2018; Maier, Adam, and Maier 2012). Given the low availability of information about the EU and the high complexity of the debated issues at the EU level, parties are largely able to shape citizens' attitudes about the EU (Pannico 2020). Party cues also increase the public's competence in the EU. These effects are stronger than those of cues on domestic politics (Torcal, Martini, and Orriols 2018).

In these studies, cue-taking occurs along partisan lines. However, at the European level, as we have already seen, polarization primarily occurs along *territorial* lines. This suggests that we need to focus on cues not only or not even in the first place from parties, but in particular from national government representatives who are the pivotal actors in EU policymaking. Cue-taking in the EU is complicated by the two-level structure of the polity and by the need for more clarity of responsibility at the EU level (Hobolt and Tilley 2014). However, national governments are clearly responsible to their national public, and they provide the crucial link between national politics and EU policymaking. Moreover, it is national governments that drive the

transnational conflicts between the member states and the conflicts between the member states and the supranational EU agencies. [Ares, Ceka, and Kriesi \(2017\)](#) have shown that cues from national governments influence support for the EU among the national public. Such government cues are especially relevant in critical moments, such as the Eurozone crisis, when the role of the national government in the integration process becomes exceptionally salient. [Hobolt, Tilley, and Wittrock \(2013\)](#) provide experimental evidence to show that people are not only able to make reasonable assessments of where the responsibility for specific policies (economic vs. health policy in their case) lies in the EU polity but that they are also likely to take their cues from the national government and not from EU officials. Relatedly, [Dellmuth and Tallberg \(2021\)](#) confirm that communication by national governments (and civil society organizations) has stronger effects on legitimacy perceptions of international organizations than communication by these organizations themselves. Given the prevalence of territorial conflicts in the EU, we expect citizens to follow their national governments not only in their support but also in their opposition to the EU and the governments of other member states.

Whether the citizens are aware of their government's cues depends on several factors, including both individual and context characteristics. Existing studies of political knowledge (awareness) have mainly looked at the effect of individual characteristics and shown that capability (level of education) and motivation (political interest) are crucial correlates of political knowledge ([Luskin 1990](#); [Bennett 1995](#); [Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996](#); [Althaus 2003](#)). In addition, we expect people who trust the government to be more likely to follow their government's cues. Political communication studies have shown that the credibility of the source—its expertise and trustworthiness—conditions the extent to which elites can influence public opinion ([Druckman 2001a](#); [Druckman 2001b](#)): people are likely to reject information from a nontrustworthy source. Moreover, we expect people with pro-European attitudes to be more aware of European policymaking than people with anti-European attitudes. Pro-Europeans are likely to be more motivated to inform themselves about EU policymaking.

The effect of context characteristics on political awareness has been less frequently studied. In general, information-rich environments increase political awareness and, at the same time, mediate the effect of individual characteristics ([Zaller 1992](#)). Thus, based on comparative data covering twenty-seven European countries from the European election study 2009, [Fraile \(2013\)](#) shows that information-rich contexts, indeed, increase the citizens' knowledge about the EU. Moreover, she shows an interaction effect between

context characteristics and educational differences: information-rich contexts reduce existing education-related differences in political knowledge. We argue that *public issue salience* is a crucial factor in determining political knowledge: the greater the salience of EU-related issues, the greater the information on the issue and the greater the motivation and capacity of the public to acquire relevant information on the issue. Following Fraile, we expect the effects of education and political interest to be more limited in information-rich member states. H1a and H1b summarize our expectations regarding awareness of transnational conflicts in EU policymaking among the European public:

- H1a: At the individual level, awareness of transnational conflicts depends above all on capacity (education), motivation (political interest), trust in a credible source of cues (trust in government), and a pro-integration attitude: it is higher among the educated, politically interested, among people who trust the government and who have pro-integration attitudes.
- H1b: At the country level, awareness of transnational conflicts is higher if the issue is publicly salient, and the effect of individual characteristics (e.g., political interest) on awareness is lower if the issue is publicly salient.

If governments are the key providers of cues, the government's positions in the EU policymaking process ought to shape the citizens' transnational conflict perceptions. Thus, the citizens' perceptions should reflect the configuration of their governments' alliance partners and adversaries. The composition of the government may, of course, change over time: an integrationist government may be replaced by an EU-skeptical government or the other way around. However, the positions of member state governments with regard to EU policies are rather path-dependent and do not necessarily change as the government changes. Thus, over the decade of the crisis, coalitions between member states have been shaping up, and these coalitions tend to persist and even be reinforced over time (Fabbrini 2023). On the integrationist side, the Franco-German couple has been the driving force of the integration process (Krotz and Schramm 2022). On the Euroskeptical side, the sovereigntist Visegrád 4 (V4) coalition has been shaping up as an increasingly stable coalition over time. Let us recall that this coalition was decisive in preventing internal burden-sharing in the refugee crisis, that it was at the origin of the intensifying rule-of-law crisis, and that, in the COVID-19 crisis, Hungary was the main protagonist in the conflict around the ratification of

the NGEU fund, which was dominated by the rule-of-law debate. Poland was its closest ally, and the rest of the member states opposed both countries.

Two additional coalitions have been emerging as a result of persistent tensions between Northern and Southern European member states, which have their origin in the Eurozone crisis when the Northern creditor states imposed harsh conditionalities on Southern debtor states (Matthijs and McNamara 2015): the Southern-European solidarity coalition, and the North-Western European Frugal Four coalition. The tensions between North and South were reinforced during the refugee crisis, when the Southern member states, as frontline states, were directly hit by the inflow of refugees across the Mediterranean. In contrast, the Northern member states found themselves as the ultimate destination states as a result of secondary movements of refugees within the EU. In the COVID-19 crisis, because of their more limited fiscal capacities, the Southern member states (letter-9 countries) were in a weaker position to deal with the common crisis (see Chapter 7). They demanded solidarity from the Northern states, which were equally hit by the pandemic but were better able to deal with it and were not willing to share funds with the Southern member states. Let us recall that Italy clashed with the Commission and other member states early on when the latter refused to come to its aid by providing medical equipment (see Chapter 6). Italy initially was also highly critical of the economic policy proposals to come to the aid of Southern member states (e.g., proposals to use the ESM) (Zagermann 2024). On the other hand, the Frugal Four coalition stuck to the positions of the so-called “creditor” countries in the Eurozone crisis (see Chapter 8). To summarize, in the COVID-19 crisis, the Southern European solidarity coalition and the Frugal Four coalition opposed each other above all with respect to how generous the NGEU fund ought to be, while the sovereignty coalition was opposed to all the other member states, especially in the crucial ratification phase of the NGEU fund and beyond for reasons of rule-of-law conditioning.

Overall, the perceptions of citizens who have become aware of transnational conflicts in the EU are expected to reflect the conflict configurations that have been shaping up during the series of crises the EU had to face in the last decades. As an upshot of these path-dependent processes of coalition formation, the citizens have received rather consistent cues from their governments over time—integrationist cues in Germany and France, sovereigntist cues in Hungary and Poland, and mixed cues in Italy and Spain, the two Southern European member states included in our study, and mixed cues, too, in the Netherlands and Sweden, the two members of the Frugal Four coalition in our study. In Italy and Spain, the cues were rather mixed

since their appeals to solidarity during the COVID-19 crisis originally met with resistance from the other member states, even if they eventually found strong support from the core coalition. Similarly, the cues were mixed in the member states of the Frugal Four: even if they were originally strongly opposed to solidarity with the Southern member states in the COVID-19 crisis, they eventually signed up to the compromise imposed by the core coalition.

- H2: The stable coalitions between member states influence the perceptions of transnational conflict configurations by citizens in the EU: members of the same coalition are perceived as allies, and members of opposed coalitions are perceived as opponents and as benefiting from EU favoritism.

Trust in government is expected to enhance cue-taking, given the already noted general importance of source credibility for this mechanism: the greater the trust in government, the more one follows the cues of the government. The impact of these cues on the perception of conflict configurations is, however, expected to depend on the integrationist/sovereigntist position of the target government. If the target government shares the position of the respondents' government, then citizens who trust their government are more likely to perceive the target government as an ally/less likely to perceive it as benefiting from EU favoritism; if the two governments do not share the same integrationist position, then citizens trusting their government are more likely to perceive the target government as opponent/more likely to perceive it as benefiting from EU favoritism:

- H3a: Citizens who trust their government are more likely to follow its cues than citizens who do not trust it.
- H3b: The impact of trust in one's government on perceptions of target governments depends on whether they share the same integrationist position.

Even if cue-taking from political elites is very important in the EU polity, citizens are unlikely to rely exclusively on cues when assessing transnational conflicts. In addition to cue-taking, three additional factors are likely to influence the citizens' conflict perceptions as well: general EU attitudes, policy information, and more deep-rooted political experiences. First, a pro-EU attitude ought to generally reduce the perception of transnational conflicts, while an anti-EU attitude is likely to increase it. Second, policy information, when

presented alongside party cues, generally has a nontrivial impact on attitudes and evaluations (Ciuk and Yost 2016). Thus, Bullock (2011) concludes that policy information is at least as influential as party cues in attitude formation. Boudreau and MacKenzie (2014) find that people shift their attitudes away from their party's platform when relevant policy information compels them to do so. More specifically, in a study of border closures between the US and Canada during the COVID-19 crisis, Williams, Gravelle, and Klar (2022) found that, across both countries, respondents appear to base their policy view on the content of the policy itself (with conservatives favoring border closures and liberals opposing them), even if they also follow the leaders' cues (Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's endorsements increase support for the policy among US citizen, while US President Donald Trump's endorsements make Canadians more opposed). For our purposes, we shall rely on the impact of performance assessments regarding EU crisis management by the citizens as a proxy for the extent to which they rely on substantive information. To be sure, this is a less-than-perfect indicator for the impact of policy information since government cues may also influence the citizens' policy assessments.

We expect that people who are satisfied with the EU's crisis management are more likely to perceive other member states as allies. The dissatisfied, in turn, are more likely to perceive other member states as opponents and/or as unfairly favored by the EU, especially if the target member states do not share their own government's integrationist positions. Moreover, as a result of "negativity bias" (Dellmuth and Tallberg 2021), we expect the effects of dissatisfaction to be more pronounced than the effects of satisfaction.

Third, the citizens' conflict perceptions are also likely to rely on more deep-rooted past political experiences related to the countries' histories. Thus, the German–Polish relationship, in particular, has been fraught by history, as is illustrated by the fact that, in September 2022, the current Polish government claimed reparation payments from Germany for damages done during WWII to the tune of some €1,300 billion. The devastations of the German occupation have not been forgotten, in spite of half a century-long reconciliation (Mijnssen 2022). In this most prominent case, the cumulative historical experience is likely to accentuate the perceptions based on cues, given that Germany and Poland have belonged to opposed coalitions in the past crisis decade.

H4: The citizens' conflict perceptions also depend on:

- a) general EU attitudes: pro-EU attitudes attenuate conflict perceptions, anti-EU attitudes exacerbate them;

- b) political information (satisfaction with the way the EU managed the crisis): the satisfied are more likely to perceive other member states as allies, and the dissatisfied are more likely to perceive them as opponents. Dissatisfaction has a stronger impact than satisfaction with EU performance, and the effect is generally expected to be stronger for target countries with different integrationist positions;
- c) deep-rooted past political experiences, which the countries' bilateral histories have shaped.

For the final step of our analysis, the impact of transnational conflict perceptions on bonding, we have some straightforward expectations. On the one hand, we expect that utilitarian considerations drive citizens. If they perceive that the EU has favored their own country, their perception of the EU is expected to improve. On the other hand, perceived conflict is generally expected to be detrimental to the citizens' perception of the EU. Thus, the perception that some other countries have been favored is expected to decrease the probability of bonding. Given the importance of Germany and France, this effect should be most important if these two core countries are perceived as having been favored. The perception of transnational conflicts should also reduce the probability of bonding: the more member states are perceived to be opponents of one's own country, the less one is likely to have improved sentiments toward the EU. Even the perception of alliances may make bonding less likely: if the allies are opposed to EU policymaking, as is the case with the V4 and the Frugal Four countries, then perceiving these countries as allies is also likely to reduce the probability of bonding.

H5a: Utilitarian considerations improve the citizens' image of the EU,

H5b: Conflict perceptions worsen their image of the EU.

We now turn to the analysis of our empirical results. These are based on a survey that was conducted in eight EU countries (see [Chapter 3](#)). The eight countries were selected to represent the two leading states—Germany and France; the sovereignty coalition (V4 countries)—Hungary and Poland; the solidarity coalition (letter9 countries)—Italy and Spain; and the Frugal Four coalition—the Netherlands and Sweden. Interviews were administered between December 20th and 30th of 2021. The total sample size for the survey was 8,916, with national sample sizes varying between 1,067 and 1,304.



## **The awareness of EU conflict structures among the citizen public**

### **The limits of awareness of European policymaking among the European public**

Has the European national public, indeed, been aware of transnational conflicts during the COVID-19 crisis? Among the questions included in our survey, two asked the respondents in an open format and without any reference to the COVID-19 crisis about the “closest ally” of their country and the “country most opposed” to their country among the EU member states. The respondents were provided with a list of the twenty-seven member states from which to choose. A second set of questions asked more specifically about the conflicts during the COVID-19 policymaking process. One question asked whether the EU treated all member states fairly and with equal respect or whether it favored some countries over others. Those who saw the EU favoring some countries over others were asked a follow-up question about the two most favored countries among the list of the twenty-seven member states.

These proved to be very hard questions for the respondents, as can be seen from the large number among them who did not respond or who chose the middle category (5) of the closed question, i.e., did not explicitly position themselves with regard to the two opposite ends of the scale. Most revealing is the number of people who don’t know about the open questions about allies (30.8 percent), opponents (40.9 percent), and member states that were favored (33.4 percent among the respondents who perceived some favoritism). In our view, these results confirm that EU policymaking, even under extreme conditions like the COVID-19 pandemic, is far from visible and transparent for the general public in the member states.

One might object that some respondents did not answer these questions because they do not think that their country has any allies or opponents among the other member states or because they do not think in these terms to begin with. In other words, the questions we asked might be interpreted as attitudinal questions rather than as questions about knowledge. We believe, however, that this is rather unlikely: the share of respondents who do not answer or who place themselves in the middle of the scale is also very high for other questions in the questionnaire, which we do not use here. Moreover, the fact that, as we shall show below, political interest is the main determinant of our measure of awareness suggests that it, indeed, measures what we intend to measure.

## How to account for these limits

For our empirical analysis of the determinants of awareness, we use an indicator for awareness, which corresponds to the sum of the knowledgeable responses to the three open questions about allies, opponents, and favored countries, and which ranges from 0 (no answers to these three open questions) to 3 (answers to each one of these open questions). For the operationalization of political interest, we rely on a conventional indicator ranging from 0, “not at all interested,” to 3, “very interested.” Education is measured at three levels (low, medium, and high). We measure the respondents’ attitude to European integration with the often-used scale, which ranges from 0 “European integration has already gone too far” to 10 “European integration should be pushed further.” Similarly, trust in government is measured with a ten-point scale ranging from 0 “do not trust at all” to 10 “trust completely.” Finally, we include a set of control variables—three socio-demographic characteristics (age, gender, and an indicator for whether one struggles to meet ends in life (coping)) and three dummies for one’s general political orientation (left, right, or neither left nor right).

Our all-purpose indicator for context is country dummies. Following Fraile’s lead, we also include the terms of interaction between country dummies and political interests, integration attitudes, and trust in government to measure country-specific variation in the effects of these variables. To measure the salience of the information about EU policymaking in a given country more precisely, we use Google trend data covering the period from the start of the pandemic in March 2020 to the end of 2021, when our survey has been in the field. For this salience measure, we use the sum of three keywords—RRF, NGEU, and “rule of law,” which refer to the key economic episode in this crisis, the Recovery and Resilience Facility, which we discussed in [Chapter 8](#).

We estimated the effects of the determinants of awareness of EU policymaking by straight-forward OLS regression, with standard errors clustered by country. For the analysis, we have rescaled all independent variables to the 0–1 range so that their effects are comparable. Overall, the set of determinants explains roughly one-fifth (18 percent) of the variance in the awareness indicator.

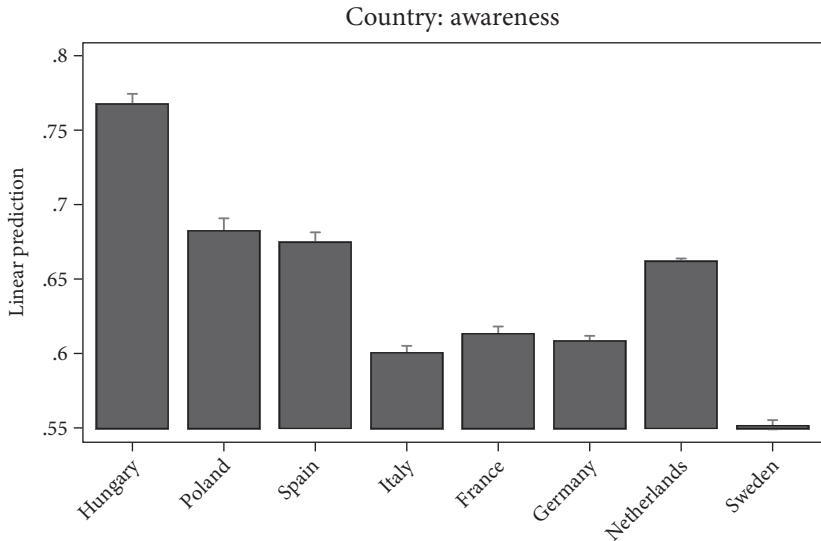
[Figures 9.2–9.4](#) present the results in graphical format.<sup>1</sup> Let us first have a brief look at individual controls (not presented in the graphs). Socio-demographics generally have rather weak effects. Surprisingly, this also

<sup>1</sup> Table A9.1 in the Appendix contains the detailed effects.

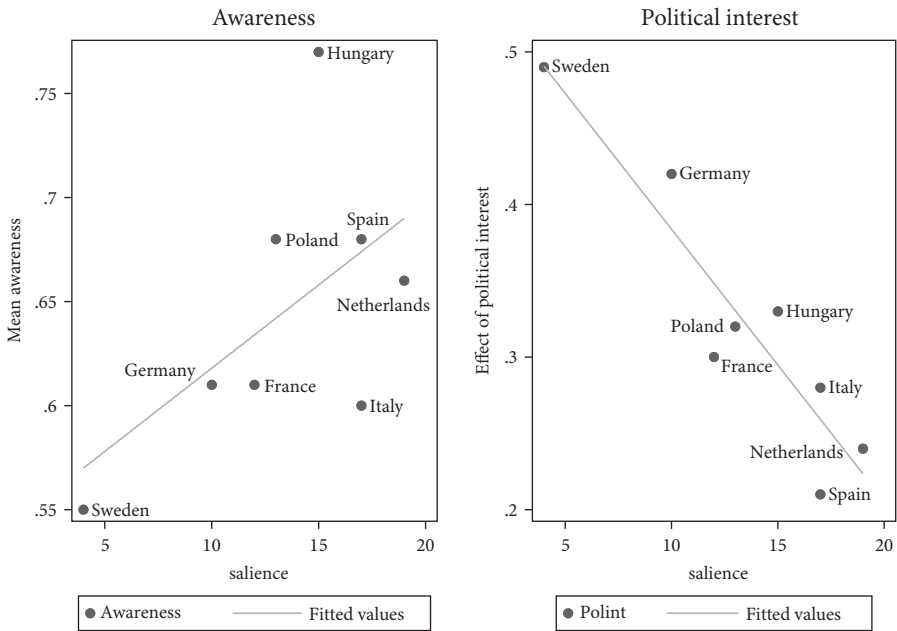
includes the level of education, which has a highly significant but small effect on the awareness of transnational conflicts in the EU. Political attitudes turn out to be much more relevant. Thus, people with a political orientation, whether left or right, are more aware of transnational conflicts than people without such an orientation. As expected, people who trust the government and who support EU integration are also generally more aware than people who do not trust the government and are opposed to EU integration. Most importantly, however, political interest makes a large difference: politically interested people are much more aware than those not interested (H1a). As already suggested, we take this as strong confirmation that our indicator for awareness, indeed, measures what we intend to measure—knowledgeability about the EU policymaking process.

In addition to the individual-level effects, there are also strong country effects. Figure 9.2 presents the country-specific levels of awareness (0 = no awareness; 1 = maximum awareness) in terms of predicted probabilities. Hungary turns out to be the country where the public is most aware of transnational conflicts, while Sweden is the country where the public is least aware.

Can these country differences be accounted for in terms of the salience of the political debate in the respective countries? The left-hand graph of Figure 9.3 provides a tentative answer to this question. It shows the relationship



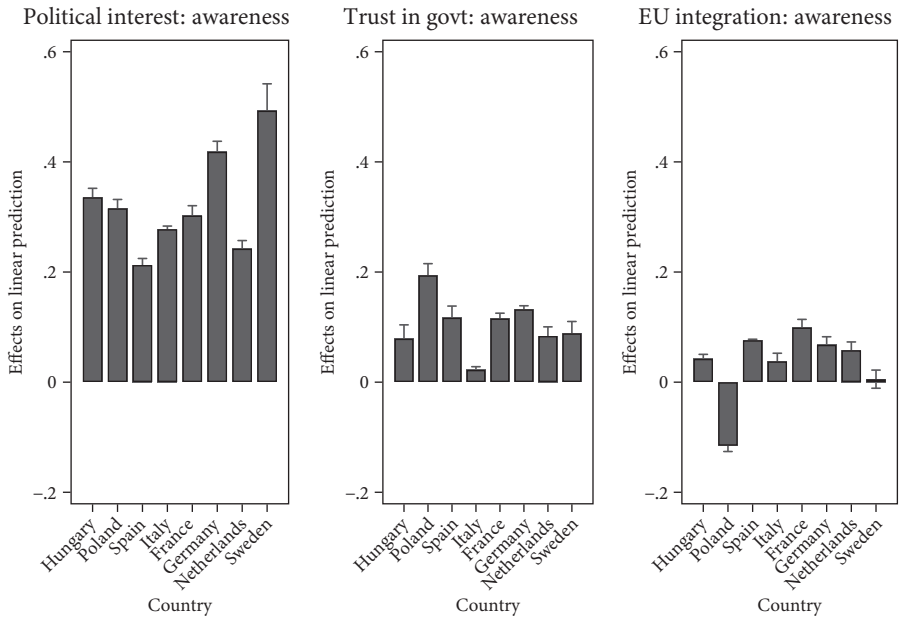
**Figure 9.2** Awareness of EU policymaking by country: predicted probabilities.  
*Source:* Created using data from the ERC SOLID surveys.



**Figure 9.3** The relationship between the salience of the public debate and predicted awareness and effect of political interest.

Source: Created using data from the ERC SOLID surveys.

between the average country-level awareness and the public salience of the COVID-19 crisis as measured by Google trends. The answer is tentative because we have data points for only eight countries. The graph shows that the average level of awareness in a given country is, indeed, positively associated with the domestic salience of the public debate about EU policymaking during the COVID-19 crisis. Still, the correlation ( $r = .57$ ), represented by the fitted values line, is not very strong. Thus, the Hungarian and Italian public clearly deviate from the general trend, with Hungary situated far above and Italy far below the trendline. The Hungarian deviation probably results from the extraordinary intensity of the public debate around EU policymaking in previous crises, which left a legacy of public attention to issues related to the EU. Thus, in the refugee crisis of 2015–16, Hungary organized a referendum over the relocation quota on October 3, 2016, which was preceded by the largest-ever advertising campaign under the slogan “Save the Country!” The Italian deviation may be related to the mixed signals that the Italian government provided in the different crises—signals highly critical of the EU and other member states in the Eurozone, refugee and early COVID-19 crisis, and much more positive signals later on in the COVID-19 crisis.



**Figure 9.4** Awareness of EU policymaking: the interaction effects of political interest, trust in government, and attitude about EU integration per country (AMEs and 95 percent confidence intervals).  
*Note:* AME: average marginal effect.  
*Source:* Created using data from the ERC SOLID surveys.

Importantly, there are also interaction effects between individual and context characteristics, as is shown in [Figure 9.4](#). Thus, the effect of political interest on awareness varies considerably from one country to the other. The right-hand graph of [Figure 9.3](#), which presents the country-specific marginal effects of political interest on awareness as a result of the domestic public salience of EU policymaking during the COVID-19 crisis, confirms that this variation is very closely associated with the salience of the public debate ( $r = .93$ ). As expected (H1b), political interest is more important for awareness in countries, where the debate is less salient than in countries, where it is more salient, i.e., where even those not interested in politics cannot avoid getting information on EU policymaking.

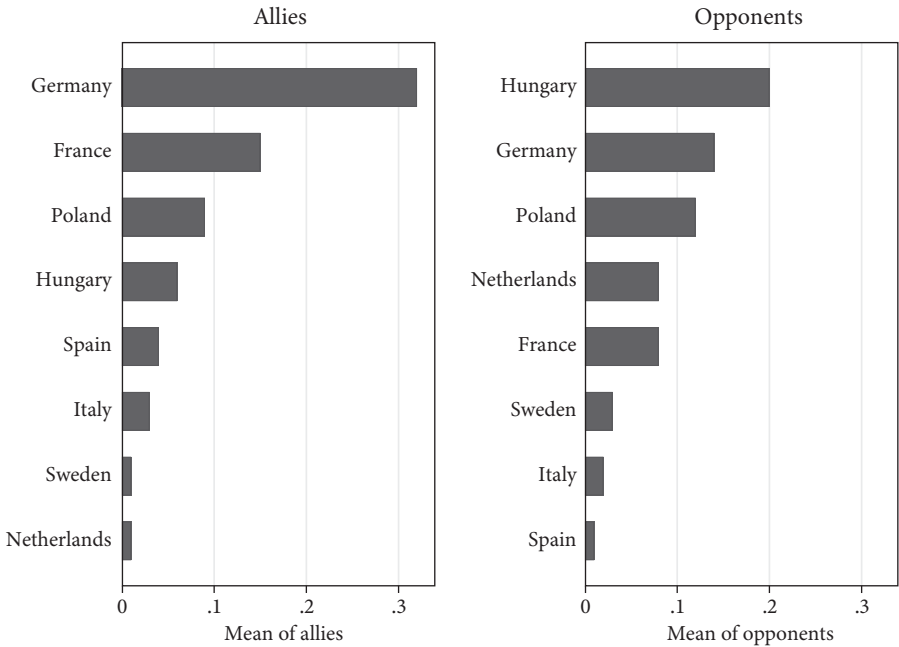
For trust in government and EU integration attitudes, the effects are less strong (see the center and right-hand graph in [Figure 9.4](#)). As expected (H1a), trust in government and EU support enhances awareness, but to a varying degree, depending on the country. Poland stands out. In Poland, trust in government enhances awareness of EU policymaking much more than in the

other countries, and, contrary to the other countries, awareness is associated with opposition to the EU, not EU support. This reflects the fact that the Polish government has been heavily involved in conflicts with the EU because of the reform of its legal system. Cue-taking from the EU-critical Polish government may explain why the Euroskeptics among the Poles are particularly aware of EU policymaking. An analogous situation also occurs in Hungary, with the Hungarian government involved in acute conflicts with the EU because of its illiberal reforms of the media, the legal system, and electoral laws. However, we are still looking for similar differences in Hungary. The very high salience of earlier crisis management may account for this absent relationship. Overall we conclude that the awareness of transnational conflicts is strongly shaped by individual political interest and context characteristics—among which the public salience of European policymaking and government cues moderate the impact of individual characteristics such as political interest, trust in government, and EU support.

## **Allies and opponents among member states as perceived by the citizens**

In the second step of our analysis, we now turn to the perceived conflict configurations. We asked the two already mentioned questions about the “closest ally” and the “country most opposed.” Since the whole interview dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic and its management by the EU, the COVID-specific context likely primed the answers to these more general questions. However, given that these questions were formulated in general terms, it is likely that they elicited responses that were, even if informed by the COVID-specific context, also taking into account experiences with earlier crises (such as the Eurozone or the refugee crisis 2015–16). The responses to these two questions allow us to reconstruct the transnational conflict configurations.

Figure 9.5 presents the shares who perceive other member states as allies or opponents. We restrict ourselves to the eight countries covered by the survey. Germany is the member state that is most often mentioned as an ally by the citizens of the other seven countries, followed at some distance by France, Poland, and Hungary. However, together with Hungary (and, to some extent, Poland), Germany is also most often mentioned as the member state most opposed to the other countries. These perceptions of Germany do not only reflect the key role Germany has played in both the economic (NGEU-funds)



**Figure 9.5** The shares of other member states perceived as allies and opponents, by member state.

*Source:* Created using data from the ERC SOLID surveys.

and the public health (vaccination procurement) policy at the EU level during the pandemic but also the key position of the largest EU member state in the EU policymaking during the more recent crises more generally. The relatively frequent mentions of France, Hungary, and Poland, on the other hand, suggest that, together with Germany, the European citizens perceived these countries as the main protagonists in the drama of European policymaking during the pandemic.

Considering more closely which countries are perceived as allies and opponents we, indeed, find traces of the coalitions that have been facing each other during the COVID-19 crisis, confirming H2. Thus, the analysis shows that Hungarians and Poles mutually perceive their countries as allies, and so do, to an even greater extent, the French and the Germans. The mutual links between the latter two are the strongest in the alliance configuration. The Dutch also strongly perceived Germany as an ally of their country, but the Germans did not reciprocate this perception. From the Germans' point of view, the Netherlands is neither an ally nor an opponent. The two countries of the solidarity coalition, Italy and Spain, are also mutually perceived as

allies, but to a lesser extent than applies to the other two pairs. Finally, the citizens of the two members of the Frugal Four coalition, the Netherlands and Sweden, neither perceive each other as allies nor as opponents. The Swedes perceive themselves as close to the other Scandinavian members of the EU—Denmark and Finland, more so than to the other members of the Frugal Four coalition. In terms of perceived opposition, there is a clear division between France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden on the one hand and Hungary, Poland, Spain, and Italy on the other. While the former oppose Hungary and Poland (but not Italy and Spain), the latter oppose the former (but not Sweden).

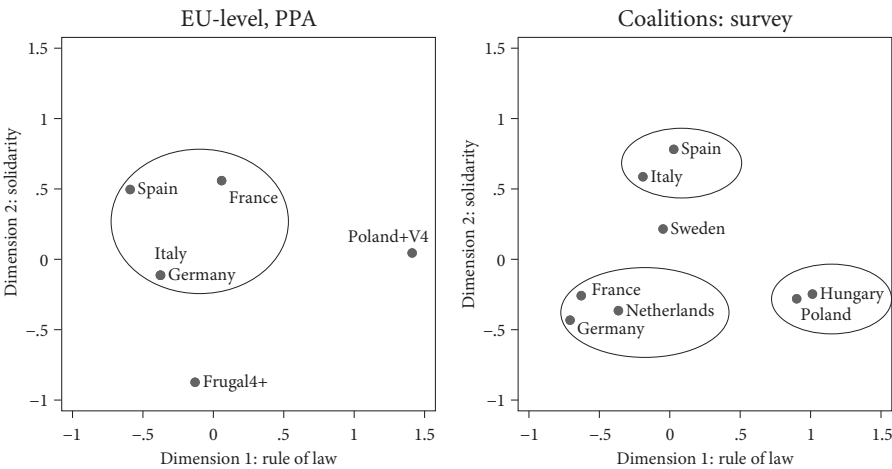
An MDS analysis allows us to synthesize the alliances and adversarial relationships between member states in a single configuration, which we can compare with the configuration we have observed in our analyses of the policymaking processes (see Chapter 4). Figure 9.6 presents the synthetic empirical configuration based on the citizens' perceptions (right-hand graph) in comparison with the configuration between the eight countries in question, which we find based on the PPA analysis of the policymaking process at the EU level during the COVID-19 crisis (left-hand graph). The configuration based on the policymaking process (including both economic and public health policies) among the elites clearly shows the opposition between the French-German couple and the members of the solidarity coalition (Italy and Spain), on the one hand, and the sovereignty coalition (Poland+V4) and the Frugal Four coalition on the other hand.<sup>2</sup> In the configuration based on the citizens' perceptions, the key antagonism between the core member states and the sovereignty coalition also comes out quite clearly. Germany and France oppose Hungary and Poland. However, although Germany changed its position in the first wave of the pandemic, moving away from the frugal coalition and teaming up with the solidarity coalition when it came to the elaboration of the NGEU fund, the citizen public still perceives it as rather close to the frugal coalition. Thus, the Netherlands is part of the Franco-German core (because the Dutch public perceives it as such). The solidarity coalition is clearly perceived as distinct from the other two, even if it got a lot of support from the Franco-German leadership during the COVID-19 crisis. Moreover, Sweden's position in the configuration is not quite in line with expectations, which is a result of the fact that the Swedes

<sup>2</sup> Hungary was not one of the countries we especially focused on in the PPA analysis, which is why we merged it together with the other V4 countries—Czech Republic and Slovakia—with Poland in the PPA configuration. We also merged all the members of the Frugal Four coalition, because there were not enough actions for each one of them separately.



have avoided being perceived as opponents by the Southern European members of the solidarity coalition. Overall, however, even if the citizens have not quite understood the intricacies of the realignment among the member states during the negotiations of the NGEU fund and are still under the impression of the alliances that have been shaping up during the previous crises, the correspondence we find between the elite-level and citizen-level configurations in [Figure 9.6](#) supports our H2 and the role of cue-taking.

As we have seen, Germany is the member state most frequently perceived as an ally and as an opponent. Moreover, we have also seen that Germany is perceived as both an ally and an opponent in countries of Eastern and Southern Europe. The question then is under which conditions Germany is either perceived as an ally or as an opponent. To clarify this question, we have estimated the probability that Germany is perceived as an ally or opponent with logit regressions. Our key independent determinants are EU attitude, trust in government, and satisfaction with the way the EU managed the crisis. We use the same indicators for trust in government and EU attitudes, which we have already introduced in the last section on awareness. In addition, for the satisfaction with the EU’s performance during the crisis, we rely on a set of questions related to how the EU has handled the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>3</sup> In addition to these three determinants, the analysis



**Figure 9.6** Patterns of trust and coalitions between member states, results of MDS analyses.

*Source:* Created using data from the ERC SOLID PPA dataset and surveys.

<sup>3</sup> “Generally speaking, how satisfied are you with the way the European Union has handled the following aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic?” The aspects mentioned were public health and the economy,

includes the same set of control variables as the previous analysis of political awareness.

The results of this analysis<sup>4</sup> confirm the expectations most clearly for Poland, where the effects of all three determinants are strong and in the expected direction: in Poland, pro-Europeans, people who distrust the government and who are satisfied with the way the EU managed the crisis, perceive Germany as their ally, while anti-Europeans, people who trust the government and are dissatisfied with the way the EU managed the crisis perceive Germany as their opponent. For the other countries, the effects are much weaker or insignificant, which is why we do not report them in detail. That Poland fits the expectations best is likely to be related to the fact that, in Poland, cue-taking from the government and historical memories reinforce each other. Overall, however, it is hard to explain the perception of Germany as an ally or opponent, not to speak of the way the other countries are perceived.

## **The countries most favored by the EU during the COVID-19 crisis**

### **The countries perceived as most favored**

In the next step, we analyze how the COVID-19 crisis management has influenced the perception of whether some countries have been unfairly favored by the EU. For this purpose, we asked the respondents whether the EU treated all member states fairly and with equal respect or whether it favored some countries over others. Almost one-fifth (18.2 percent) of the respondents were not able to answer this question. Among those who did answer it, another fifth (18.5 percent) placed themselves in the middle of the scale, i.e., did not take sides. Roughly two-fifths (40.4 percent) indicated that the EU had, indeed, favored some countries. We asked this subgroup which two countries were most favored.

As we have seen in the previous chapters, the way the EU managed the COVID-19 crisis favored the Southern and Eastern European member states

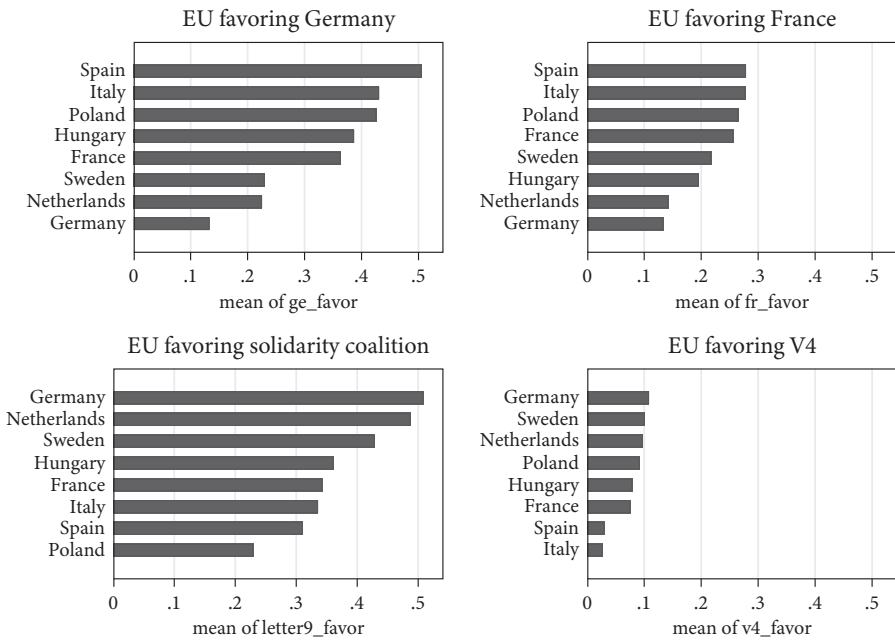
and the response categories reached from 0 ("completely dissatisfied") to 10 ("completely satisfied"). This question was followed up by another one asking for more specific evaluations with respect to the "vaccine purchasing agreement," "economic support for all EU countries," "border controls and travel rules," and "sharing of medical equipment (e.g., masks and ventilators)." These six items form a strong factor, with factor loadings ranging from 0.71 to 0.82, depending on the country. We use the factor for the subsequent analyses.

<sup>4</sup> For details, see Table A9.2 in the Appendix

in different ways. Thus, the economic measures taken by the EU allowed the Southern Europeans who were particularly hard hit by the crisis to benefit from the reinsurance scheme for unemployment insurance (SURE) and from the preferred treatment they got in the allocation of grants and loans by the NGEU fund. The public health measures, especially the joint vaccination procurement scheme, also benefited the Southern and Eastern European countries most since it avoided costly competition between them and the more resourceful North-Western countries, which would have driven prices up for everybody. Finally, the introduction of the Green Pass just before the summer vacation season in 2021 was especially helpful for the Southern European tourist destination countries. It is, therefore, surprising that among those who believed that the EU, indeed, did favor some member states and mentioned at least one favored country, roughly two-thirds (60.4 percent) mentioned Germany, while roughly one-third (38.8 percent) referred to France. Italy, the greatest beneficiary of the NGEU fund, only comes in third, with roughly one-sixth (16.8 percent) mentioning it as a favored country. The other countries receive only a few mentions (between 0.7 (Slovenia, Cyprus) and 9.0 percent (Netherlands)).

It appears that the respondents' answers to this question have been less influenced by the substantive content of the policies adopted by the EU during the crisis and more by the policymaking process itself. Indeed, Germany, France, and Italy, as the largest EU member states, as we have seen in the previous chapter, played a key role in the management of the COVID-19 crisis at the European level.

The impression that the EU has favored the core countries varies considerably from one member state to the other, as is shown in [Figure 9.7](#). The upper-left-hand subgraph shows that the impression that Germany benefited from an unfair advantage is strongest among the citizens of the two Southern European and Eastern European countries, respectively. Still, a large share of the French perceive Germany as the favored country, too. Together with the Germans themselves, citizens from the two Frugal Four countries share this impression much less. The impression of the Eastern and Southern Europeans related to favoritism on behalf of Germany is all the more surprising, given that Germany broke two of its biggest taboos with the creation of the NGEU fund ([Howarth and Schild 2021](#)), and went out of its way to come up with a joint procurement scheme for the vaccination campaign ([Alexander 2021](#): 293–311). It seems that this impression, which sharply contrasts with the perceptions of the Frugal Four countries, reflects both cue-taking as well



**Figure 9.7** The impression that the EU has been favoring Germany, France, the solidarity or the V4 coalition, by country: percentages of those who think that the EU has been favoring some countries.

*Source:* Created using data from the ERC SOLID surveys.

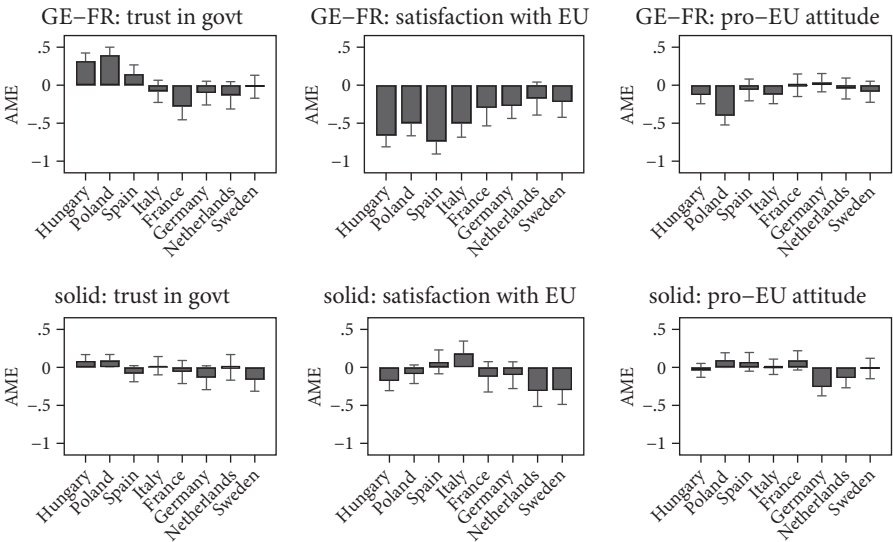
as deep-seated resentments (in line with H4c), which have not much to do with the crisis management during the COVID-19 crisis.

The perception of preferred treatment concerning France varies in a less clear-cut way. It is least shared by the Germans and the citizens of Frugal Four countries, but the French themselves rather frequently believe that they have been favored (which is in line with the fact that France was among the nine member states that asked for more solidarity). The Germans, in turn, mostly and correctly think that the members of the solidarity coalition (without France) have been most favored, a belief they share with the Frugal Four countries. In addition, together with the latter, they also rather frequently perceive the EU as favoring V4 countries. By contrast, the citizens of Italy and Spain, the two solidarity coalition countries in our sample, rarely perceive their own countries or the V4 countries as favored by the EU during the pandemic, even if they have arguably been favored most.

The determinants of perceived favoritism

We expect the perception of country-specific favoritism to depend on the same three political attitudes that we already used for the analysis of the conflict configuration of allies and opponents: trust in one’s government, satisfaction with the performance of the EU during the crisis, pro-European attitudes more generally, and possibly more deep-rooted historical experiences. Figure 9.8<sup>5</sup> presents the results of a logit regression for the effects of the three determinants on the perception of EU bias in favor of the leading couple of member states, Germany and France (first row), or in favor of the solidarity coalition countries (second row). The emerging pattern of determinants is clearer for Germany and France, which is reflected in the R<sup>2</sup>’s (0.14 for Germany and France, 0.06 for the solidarity coalition countries).

The results go in the expected direction, with dissatisfaction with the EU’s crisis management having the strongest effects, which confirms H4b. Dissatisfaction with the way the EU handled the crisis increases the impression



**Figure 9.8** Determinants of perception of member states as most favored by the EU: Germany, France, and the solidarity coalition countries (AMEs and 95 percent confidence intervals).

Note: AME: average marginal effect.  
Source: Created using data from the ERC SOLID surveys.

<sup>5</sup> For details, see Table A9.3 in the Appendix.

that Germany and France have benefited unfairly from EU favoritism in all the countries except the Netherlands. As expected, these effects are particularly strong among Southern and Eastern European countries. By contrast, in the Frugal Four countries, dissatisfaction with the EU's crisis management increases the impression that the countries of the solidarity coalition have been favored. Satisfaction with the EU's crisis management has an effect only in Italy, where the people who are satisfied correctly believe that their own country has been favored. Also, partially in line with expectations (H3a–b), trust in government strongly increases the perception of favoritism benefiting Germany and France in Hungary and Poland, and to some extent also in Spain, but not in Italy or any of the other countries. The highly EU-critical governments of Hungary and Poland, supported by deep-rooted historical resentments (H4c), may have instilled in their followers the misperception that Germany and France have behaved in a self-serving way in the management of the COVID-19 crisis. In France, trust in government reduces the perception of EU favoritism benefiting Germany, as we would have expected based on our cue-taking hypotheses. Pro-European attitudes generally have weak effects. To the extent that they exist, these effects confirm expectations: in Poland, they reduce the perception of favoritism for Germany and France, while in Germany and the Netherlands, they reduce the perception of favoritism for the solidarity coalition.

Overall, these results reveal some measure of cue-taking (as indicated by effects of trust in government) and systematic processing of information (as indicated by dissatisfaction effects) accounting for the perceptions of transnational conflict configurations among the European public. The results are rather mixed, however, since only part of the effects reach conventional levels of significance. More deep-seated predispositions toward other member states, particularly toward Germany, also seem to influence these assessments.

## **The effect of transnational conflicts on bonding**

### **The improved image of the EU**

In the last step, we inquire how the assessment of the policymaking process by the citizens contributes to the bonding among them across the EU. We have two indicators for increased bonding during the COVID-19 crisis. The first is based on a question that asks the respondents whether, as a consequence of the pandemic, they feel closer to citizens in other European countries.

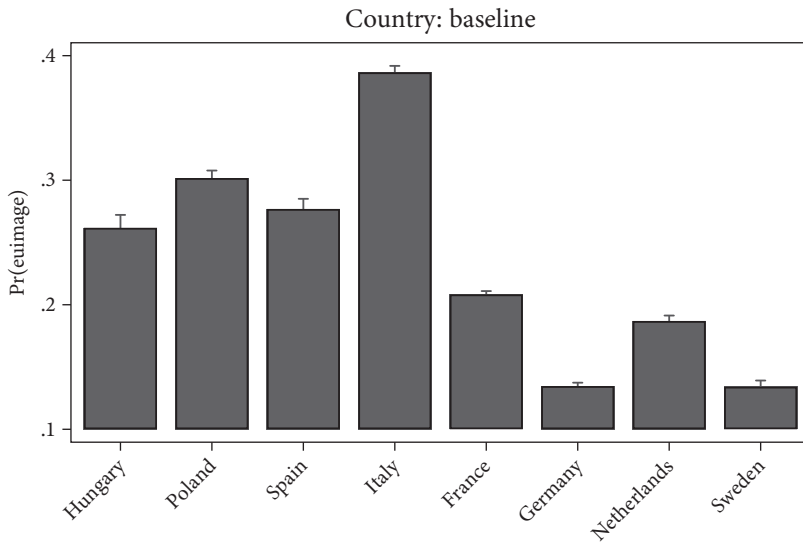
The second is based on a similar question of whether, as a consequence of the pandemic, their image of the EU has improved overall. The respondents could disagree or agree with these questions on a 0–10 scale, where 0 indicates “disagree completely” and 10 “agree.” Note that, as a result of the way these questions have been asked, the maximum value indicates a maximum increase in sympathy for other European citizens and a maximally improved EU image. At the same time, the minimum implicitly refers to the status quo. In other words, the answers only measure possible improvements since the questions do not leave room for deterioration of the status quo. For our analysis, we dichotomized these variables to distinguish those who clearly indicate an improvement of the EU’s image/an increase in sympathy (answers 6–10) from those who do not experience such a clear change (answers 0–5).

Overall, roughly one-quarter of the respondents (23.7 percent for the image; 25.3 percent for citizens) experience an increase in bonding. These shares vary as a function of awareness and political interest: the more knowledgeable and more politically interested Europeans are, the greater the experienced increase in bonding. For awareness, the share of those who experience an improvement in the EU’s image increases roughly threefold, from 11.8 percent among the least aware to 31.3 percent among the most aware. Similarly, for political interest, we note an increase from 13.1 percent among the least interested to 32.3 percent among the most interested. The results are largely the same, although somewhat weaker, for the second indicator referring to feeling closer to other EU citizens, which is why we pursue the subsequent analyses only for the improvement of the EU’s image. It is reassuring that the EU’s image and the closeness to citizens of other EU countries have improved most among the voters who are most aware of EU policymaking and most interested in politics. This means that bonding can be improved by providing more information on the policymaking process in the EU. On the other hand, we concede that there is a lot of room for improvement.

## Determinants of the improved image

We observe considerable differences in countries with respect to the improvement of EU bonding, as illustrated in [Figure 9.9](#). The results for this figure have been obtained by a logit regression with the dichotomized indicator for EU’s improved image as the dependent variable and country dummies, as well as our indicators for awareness and political interest in interaction with country dummies as independent variables.<sup>6</sup> The results

<sup>6</sup> For details, see Table A9.4 in the Appendix.



**Figure 9.9** Predicted probabilities of improved EU images, by country.

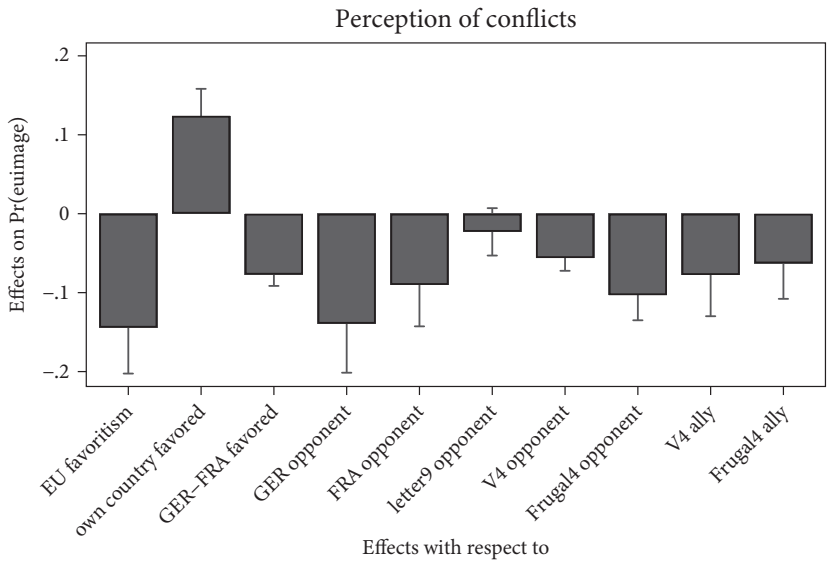
*Source:* Created using data from the ERC SOLID surveys.

show that the share of voters for whom the EU's image has improved, independently of political interest and awareness, has been larger in the Eastern and Southern European countries than in the North-Western member states, and it turns out to be largest in Italy. The Eastern and Southern European countries are the ones that benefited more from the EU's management of the crisis than the North-Western European countries, and Italy, arguably, has been the member state that has benefited most. This result confirms H5a about the utilitarian motivation of bonding, and it is again somewhat reassuring. However, the fact that Germany and France have been driving for European solidarity and that the Frugal Four have ended up consenting to it is only weakly reflected in their citizens' sentiments for Europe. It seems that the actual benefits weigh more for the citizens' image of the EU than the solidarity professed by their elites.

To what extent do the transnational conflict perceptions contribute to bonding? This is the question to which we finally turn. [Figure 9.10](#) presents the results for the most important effects of conflict perceptions on the improvement of the EU's image.<sup>7</sup> These results confirm the expectations, with some nuances. First, there is a strong negative effect of the perception that the EU has been favoring some member states. The perception of unfair treatment is generally limiting EU bonding, even if it is, as we have shown,

<sup>7</sup> For details, see again Table A9.4 in the Appendix.





**Figure 9.10** Conflict perceptions as determinants of improving the image of EU (AMEs and 95 percent confidence intervals).

*Note:* AME: average marginal effect.

*Source:* Created using data from the ERC SOLID surveys.

based on dubious grounds. In line with the importance of utilitarian considerations (H5a), the perception that one’s own country has been favored, by contrast, has a strong positive effect. More specifically, there is an additional (small) negative effect for favoring Germany and France, the two countries most often, but not necessarily correctly, perceived as having been unfairly favored by EU policymaking. Favoring other member states does not have a significant effect, however. Also, as expected, perceiving countries as opponents exerts a negative effect on EU bonding (H5b). This applies to all countries, with the exception of the solidarity coalition (letter9) countries, opposition to which does not make any difference. Finally, having V4 or Frugal Four countries among one’s perceived allies decreases bonding, too. The conflictive transnational relationships, indeed, serve as a constraint for EU bonding.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we presented our argument in four steps. First, we showed that, despite the crisis’ salience and the importance of the policies adopted

at the EU level for the EU member states, a large part of European citizens remained unaware of some important aspects of transnational conflicts during the COVID-19 crisis. Despite the extraordinarily salient policymaking by the EU during this crisis, between one-third and two-fifths of the Europeans have hardly any idea at all of the kind of conflicts that operated in European politics during the crisis. This widespread ignorance tempers optimism about the increasing awareness of foreign policy and international relations among the European public and imposes important restrictions on the accountability of EU decision-making. It also constrains the effect of the EU's crisis management on bonding.

Political interest, political attitudes, and characteristics of the political context in the member states mainly determine awareness of EU policymaking. Thus, people who trust their government are more aware of European politics than people who do not trust it, presumably because it is the leaders of the countries' governments who intervene at the European level. Moreover, pro-Europeans are more likely to be aware of transnational conflicts than Euroskeptics, except in Poland, where the opposite holds. In addition, awareness varies by member state, with the Swedes being the least and the Hungarians most aware of transnational conflicts. We found some support for the idea that awareness depends on the politicization of EU policymaking in each member state: not only does the average awareness increase with the domestic salience of EU policymaking, but the effect of political interest is, on average, almost perfectly inversely related to the salience of EU policymaking in a given country. As the EU policymaking gets politicized domestically, even the politically uninterested become aware of transnational conflicts.

In the next two steps, we presented the citizens' assessments of two specific aspects of transnational conflicts during the COVID-19 crisis: their perceptions of transnational alliances and oppositions and of EU favoritism toward some member states. In line with the notion of cue-taking, the conflict configuration that emerged from the analysis of allies and opponents largely reflects the configuration as it is increasingly crystallizing in European policymaking, except that Sweden appears to be hard to situate for the European public, and except that the citizens' perceptions were more heavily shaped by the legacy of conflicts from past crises than by the intricacies of the realignments that took place during the COVID-19 crisis. Based on the perceived alliances and oppositions, we are able to recover the main contrasts between the Eastern European V4 coalition and all the other member states and between the Frugal Four and the Southern European solidarity coalition. It is reassuring to see that, to the extent that it is aware of transnational conflicts, the

European public seems to be quite conscious of the conflict configurations as they actually obtain in EU policymaking.

Beyond a general confirmation of cue-taking, it was rather difficult to explain the perceptions of alliances and oppositions in EU policymaking. What the analysis of the factors determining these perceptions showed, however, is that Germany seems to be perceived by the citizens in Eastern and Southern European member states as the leading force in the EU and is, therefore, treated as *pars pro toto*, i.e., praised for perceived EU success and blamed for perceived EU shortcomings: those who are pro-European in these countries (except in Italy) perceive Germany as an ally. In contrast, those who are anti-European perceive it as an opponent (except in Spain).

Surprisingly, the analysis of EU favoritism showed that the two core countries, France and Germany, but Germany in particular, are perceived as the countries most favored by EU policymaking, in spite of the fact that, arguably, the Eastern and, above all, the Southern European member states have been the main beneficiaries of the EU's crisis management during the pandemic. The citizens' perceptions of unfair advantages benefiting Germany and France during the crisis seem to have been shaped more by policymaking at the EU level than by its outcome. The detailed analysis has shown that it is rather dissatisfaction with the way the EU has managed the crisis which, in Southern and Eastern European member states, is responsible for the perception of undue advantage for Germany and France. Dissatisfaction with EU crisis management is, however, primarily an indicator for policy information and less for cue-taking, which may actually be of only secondary importance for perceived unfair favoritism. Rather than cue-taking, this result may reflect the impact of both utilitarian considerations and deep-rooted historical legacies, such as the enmity between Poland and Germany.

In the last step, we showed to what extent these assessments of EU policymaking have shaped the bonds linking EU citizens to the EU polity. In general, as a result of the EU's crisis management, its image has improved among a minority of roughly one-quarter of Europeans. It has improved most among Eastern and Southern Europeans, who have benefited the most from the EU's crisis management. Italy, arguably the member state that has benefited most, is also the country where the EU's image has improved the most. Again, these results are somewhat reassuring since they indicate that the benefits of being a member of the EU during the COVID-19 pandemic have not gone entirely unnoticed. However, the fact that Germany and France have been driving for European solidarity and that the Frugal Four have ended up consenting to it is only weakly reflected in their citizens' sentiments for Europe. It seems that the actual benefits weigh more in the citizens' image of

the EU than the professed solidarity by their elites. Moreover, even if there are country differences, in all countries, the share of citizens for whom bonding has improved constitutes a minority. In all countries, too, this minority is more sizeable among the highly aware than among the less aware citizens (least pronounced in Poland) and the more politically interested than among the less interested (most pronounced in Poland).

Finally, we showed that transnational conflicts serve as a constraint on EU bonding. The EU's crisis management has accentuated territorial conflicts between member states and between member states and EU agencies, which have been shaping up already before the COVID-19 pandemic. And these conflicts have a negative impact on the EU's image among its citizens.

# The Bonding-Bounding Dynamic

## Benchmarking Cross-National Solidarity in the EU

### Introduction

The European crises of 2008–22 have created conflicts but may have also spurred polity-building at the EU level by increasing solidarity and strengthening common identities.<sup>1</sup> If, on the one hand, crises can tilt the playing field of EU member states by posing asymmetric problem pressures and creating divergent policy preferences, they can also constitute windows of opportunity for further strengthening the EU polity by activating solidarity mechanisms between people and countries. Such mechanisms can be dubbed “bonding” mechanisms (Ferrera 2005; Bartolini 2005; Flora, Kuhnle, and Urwin 1999): they “bond” the European polity together and create a “we-space” (Ferrera 2023) through an increased willingness to help, social risk sharing, and, eventually, a more pronounced shared identity. Arguably, such bonding mechanisms happened on the supply side of European politics during COVID-19. After many acrimonious exchanges in March 2020, European leaders bonded together to create a complex and previously unthinkable policy response called Next Generation EU (NGEU). Policymakers stressed the common identity and “community of fate” (to use the words of Angela Merkel—in Ferrera, Miró, and Ronchi 2021: 1346) to resolve deep conflicts over crisis solutions. This bonding of policymakers on the *supply side* of politics has been analyzed extensively in the literature (Schelkle 2021; Truchlewski, Schelkle, and Ganderson 2021; Truchlewski and Schelkle 2024; Ferrera, Miró, and Ronchi 2021).

By contrast, we aim to explore the relationship between the perceptions of a “we-space” (a shared identity, “bounding”) and support for solidarity in Europe (“bonding”) on the *demand side* of politics, i.e., among European publics. Was European solidarity during COVID-19 “bounded” in the

<sup>1</sup> A first version of this chapter was published in the *European Journal of Political Research* <https://ejpr.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1475-6765.12636> (Oana and Truchlewski 2024).

Hirschmanian-Rokkanian sense that boundaries create higher solidarity for in-group members than for out-group members? This question has important implications for EU polity-building. If European solidarity has a territorial basis rather than being cosmopolitan and universal, this could further facilitate institution-building, burden-sharing, or debt-financing, all implying a shared political destiny. By analyzing the politics of bounding–bonding on the demand side, we contribute to a burgeoning literature measuring levels of European solidarity in general (Gerhards et al. 2019, Lahusen and Grasso 2018), but also inquiring into its levels and determinants during the COVID-19 crisis in particular (Katsanidou 2022; Bauhr and Charron 2022).

We expand this theoretical and empirical agenda in several ways. First, we argue that European solidarity is bounded and differentiates between EU insiders and outsiders. We test this by empirically benchmarking our measures of solidarity to a non-EU member. This is important because studies analyzing European solidarity rarely use a non-EU benchmark, and thus, we rarely know whether increasing solidarity in Europe is destined for other Europeans (“bounded solidarity”) or whether this is a universal and cosmopolitan feeling (“cumulative solidarity”—the more solidaristic I am with you, the more solidaristic I am also likely to be with a foreigner, Kiess, Lahusen, and Zschache 2018). Different political bases for cumulative and bounded solidarity imply different bases for institutional development: while the former is universalistic, the latter is based on a feeling of shared political destiny. Furthermore, once this logic of bounded solidarity takes hold, it begs the question of whether the “bounding–bonding” mechanism is homogeneous or not (i.e., whether it applies to citizens across all member states and sociopolitical groups or only to some). A differentiated “bounding–bonding” mechanism can result in “circles of bonding”: while all citizens agree that they should be more solidaristic with European peers than with non-European ones, it can be that they are more solidaristic with some countries than others *within the EU*.

Second, we argue that if this “bounding–bonding” mechanism materializes, the nature of such bounded solidarity can also have deep implications for building the European polity through the *channels* (EU level vs. member state level), *policy dimensions* of the crisis (health vs. economy), and *instruments* (loans, grants, medical equipment, vaccines) of solidarity. First, contrary to bilateral, one-off aid, solidarity transmitted through the EU channel is likely to strengthen the EU polity via institution-building and socialization of European publics and elites around common goals. This could further contribute to the elaboration of a solidaristic “we-space” in a positive

feedback loop. Next, we inquire whether bonding varies across the policy dimensions of the COVID-19 crisis (health vs. economic) because they can have different implications for polity-building through the bounding–bonding mechanism. If solidarity only develops related to the health aspect of the crisis—which is most characteristic of the COVID-19 crisis and less common to crises in general than the economic aspect, then solidarity is more likely to remain temporary/exceptional. If solidarity is high and includes the economic dimension, it may imply a long-term willingness to deal with deeper, structural problems and create a precedent for future crises on the economic dimension. Finally, we explore differences in solidarity when it comes to instruments within each policy domain. Within the economic domain, we take into account differences in preferences for repayable vs. non-repayable instruments (loans vs. grants), which the literature (Cicchi et al. 2020) has put into evidence previously, and which were hotly debated during the five months that led to the NGEU package (de la Porte and Jensen 2021). Within the health domain, we explore preferences for aid in the form of medical equipment and vaccines.

Using an original vignette survey experiment put into the field in eight European countries in December 2021 we find that, except for respondents in Italy, solidarity in most countries is bounded (though we find a strong variation of effect size). We show that whatever the measure, the recipient, or supplier, Spain and Italy are most likely to be solidaristic, while Sweden, Netherlands, and France are the least likely. Germans are more solidaristic than their government appears to be, which gives the German government some room for maneuver in EU negotiations. We also find that circles of bonding emerge within Europe: there is a significant interaction between the respondent's country and the country receiving help. An inner circle including France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden mostly want to help themselves and the Southern member states, but not the Central European members. Such lack of solidarity with Central European member states has also been previously shown at the elite level during the Euro area crisis (Schilin 2024; Spielberg 2023). Nevertheless, when it comes to public opinion in the COVID-19 crisis, our evidence shows that this division is likely driven by the rule-of-law debate and Poland and Hungary's obstructionist European politics. This is complementary to our finding in Chapter 9, which also underscores the antagonism between citizens in the core member states and the sovereignty coalition (Hungary–Poland). When inquiring into the type of help Europeans want, medical help is preferred to economic help. On the economic side, respondents preferred loans rather than grants. Finally, we ask at which level bonding should take place: respondents usually prefer the

European level to national bilateral solidarity. While our evidence suggests that a freeriding mechanism might be behind this preference, we consider this result still promising insofar as EU-level solutions are widely accepted. Summarizing, we find that EU citizens do form a distinct community of solidarity which, in line with a Rokkanian understanding of polity formation, plays a key role in political development and consolidation.

This chapter proceeds as follows. First, we theoretically develop the idea of European solidarity resting on the nexus of *bounding* and *bonding* and propose hypotheses based on the insider–outsider heuristic, but also regarding preferences across policy fields and regarding ways of implementing help. Second, we explain our experimental approach and describe the data we gathered. The third section discusses our results, while the fourth concludes by drawing the implications for European solidarity politics and institutional building in times of crisis.

## **Bounding–bonding: insider/outsider demarcation and European solidarity during COVID-19**

Numerous studies on the determinants of European solidarity followed in the wake of the poly-crisis (Ferrera 2023; Pellegata and Visconti 2022; Cicchi, Genschel et al. 2020; Bremer et al. 2021), indicating that Europeans do tend to be generally more solidaristic in times of crisis. We argue, however, that while this effort is welcome, it is important to elaborate and empirically examine the various conceptual dimensions falling under the umbrella term of solidarity. Sangiovanni (2015) offers a useful triptych to summarize various definitions of solidarity as shared experience, shared action, and shared identity. While we recognize the three can be highly interrelated (for example, solidarity by shared action could be based on solidarity anchored in identity) and feed into each other, the relationship between these three definitions of solidarity exceeds the purpose of this chapter. We resume here in contending that our conception of solidarity in this chapter tends toward a shared identity but might also involve experience and action. In Sangiovanni's words, "solidarity is anchored in shared identification with an 'imagined community' where membership is defined not in terms of class, or social position, or family, or joint action or struggle, but in terms of an underlying identity, often based on ethnicity, language, and/or social 'origin'" (p. 342). It also comes close to Bayertz's (1999) second definition of solidarity ("solidarity as the inner cement holding together a society," p. 9) and T.H. Marshall's remark that solidarity rests on "a direct sense of community membership based on loyalty to a



civilization that is a common possession” (1950: 96). This approach has been further developed theoretically and empirically in recent studies (Harell et al. 2022; Kymlicka 2015). The “we-ness” at the basis of Kymlicka’s definition of solidarity is the precondition for inclusive solidarity mechanisms in diverse societies—a description that is particularly fitting for the European polity—which once implemented strengthen the ties that bind further, thus being a strong basis for institution building (Banting and Kymlicka 2017). We shall call this type of solidarity “bounded solidarity.” Bounded solidarity is different from charity and altruism: neither presupposes a shared identity. By contrast, according to Komter (2005), for whom—in the tradition of Mauss and Durkheim—solidarity is defined through a gift, i.e., a first step that creates a mutual obligation. There is nothing “bounded” in this definition in the sense that Komter’s definition implies that anyone could receive a gift. This is a kind of disinterested altruism that we label charity or cumulative solidarity (in other words, universal solidarity) throughout the rest of the chapter on the basis of Table 10.1 below. There are, of course, criteria of deservingness (Heermann, Koos, and Leuffen 2023), and we look at how some actors may not be deserving of being included in the “we-ness” of the European polity, such as some obstructionist countries undermining the European polity by not respecting its rules (e.g., Poland and Hungary in our sample).

We argue that solidarity can be preferential and that some countries may be more favored than others as recipients of solidarity. The question is how EU citizens would like European solidarity to be implemented at the macro level: should the emerging European solidarity regime distinguish between EU and non-EU members? Or should it rather keep a universal nature where any country in crisis deserves equal solidarity? Recent literature has underlined that identity plays a big role in European solidarity (Bremer, Genschel,

**Table 10.1** The bounding–bonding nexus in the emerging European polity

		European bonding (solidarity)	
		Strong	Weak
European bounding (closure)	Strong	(4) <b>Bounded solidarity</b> (high levels for EU insiders only—e.g., NGEU, structural funds)	(3) <b>Residual European solidarity</b> (one-off and conditional—e.g., the ESM)
	Weak	(2) <b>Cumulative solidarity</b> (high levels of solidarity extended to anybody—e.g., development aid)	(4) <b>Residual solidarity</b> (residual development or crisis help or no solidarity)

and Jachtenfuchs 2020) and that more identity-based solidarity may “re-border” Europe and strengthen the willingness of individuals to contribute to the public good, which constitutes a strong basis for institutional building (Schimmelfennig 2021).

Our argument is that while many studies seek to estimate *how much* solidarity there is in Europe, they also do not always provide a *benchmark* (for exceptions, see: Heermann, Koos, and Leuffen 2023; Gerhards et al. 2019): how much solidarity is there in the EU, *compared* to countries outside the Union? Without knowing this, we can never be sure of whether European solidarity is universal or targeted at European insiders and thus qualitatively different for the EU polity. The findings of the literature so far are mixed: while Gerhards et al. (2019) show that fiscal solidarity during crises is more pronounced for other European than for non-EU countries (using a survey encompassing thirteen countries), Heermann, Koos, and Leuffen (2023) find that this difference is not so pronounced (however, their sample is restricted to Germany). Others find that solidarity is more pronounced at the national and universal level but weakest at the European level (Lahusen and Grasso 2018). These findings are complemented by a broad literature on the determinants of foreign aid, which suggests that interests and cosmopolitanism play a major role (Prather 2020). We aim to bring further empirical evidence to this debate.

Even if European solidarity is bounded, its level and nature can vary greatly. First, similar identities and proximity can drive this differentiation. Cicchi et al. (2020) provide descriptive survey evidence on regional European solidarity: respondents are mostly willing to help their neighbors. Other studies confirm this finding and stress the role of past crises in shaping solidarity (Afonso and Negash 2024; Reinl, Eder, and Katsanidou 2022). Second, “partial exits” can severely erode solidarity: if some actors undermine common norms but continue to benefit from EU public goods, they are perceived as freeriders (Bartolini 2005: 7–10; Fenger 2009). Europeans might be less solidaristic with countries that are seen as obstructionist and not playing by the rules, such as those involved in the current rule-of-law crisis and the upheaval about the conditionality of Next Generation EU (Hungary and Poland). Therefore, solidarity in Europe can be bounded from *without* (differentiating EU and non-EU members) and from *within* (differentiating between compliers and non-compliers of the EU polity).

Table 10.1 offers an overview of the analytical space that is opened by our two concepts: “bounding”—i.e., the differentiation between outsiders and insiders, when crossed with the concept of “bonding” on the EU polity yields four types of European solidarity. The first quadrant defines “bounded”

solidarity: strong solidarity is only geared toward members of a spatially bounded space, the European one in our case. Should a crisis happen, insiders will help each other out more than outsiders. Bounded solidarity has deep political implications for polity-building. For instance, national welfare states are built on such a type of bounded solidarity, differentiating between citizens and noncitizens, those who have rights, and those who do not. For a polity, this is a powerful loyalty mechanism that “bonds” a society together and can sustain institution-building through the legitimacy that bounded solidarity confers. Bonding with closure (bounding) is like loyalty without exit: it creates pressure for a common voice on common solidarity and thus participates in the strengthening of a multilevel polity. By contrast, the second type of solidarity, cumulative solidarity, is “universal” in the sense that givers do not differentiate between the receivers of such solidarity: countries inside or outside the EU can benefit equally in hard times from generous solidarity mechanisms. Since solidarity does not depend on membership, there are no incentives to join or stay in the group, which implies a weak loyalty mechanism and undermines voice. In this case, the ties that bind are weaker and generate little loyalty/legitimacy for the European polity. An example could be the EU offering structural or NGEU funds to countries from the Neighborhood Policy (e.g., Moldova, Ukraine, Tunisia): such strong solidarity mechanisms would not be based on bounded membership but on belonging to a wider, more diffuse territorial basis (e.g., De Gaulle’s Europe from the “Atlantic to the Urals”). The third quadrant of solidarity combines weak European bonding and strong bounding: this weak European solidarity is perhaps best epitomized by the European Stability Mechanism, which was bounded to EU members but was weak in terms of bonding. Such solidarity happens rarely, perhaps only during crises that justify one-off help between member states because they are beyond the control of member states (Bremer, Genschel, and Jachtenfuchs 2020; Ferrara, Schelkle, and Truchlewski 2023) or to prevent spillover effects like in the Euro area crisis and to ensure tail risks of economic integration (Schelkle 2022). If citizens prefer such solidarity, mechanisms bounding the citizens to the polity are weak at the EU level and thus do not constitute a firm basis for polity-building. For instance, Italy was extremely reluctant to use the ESM during COVID-19 because it could spur Euroskepticism (Baccaro, Bremer, and Neimanns 2021). Finally, in the fourth quadrant we have weak European bonding and bounding: residual solidarity is akin to charity, a small and occasional help which is not offered on a continuous basis like cumulative solidarity. Europeans might show solidarity to each other and to outsider countries depending on needs and occasionally, but this type of solidarity is not conducive to polity-building. While for reasons of simplicity, we put

these ideal types into a table, they can also be seen as a continuum that goes from the most bounded and most solidaristic type of solidarity to the least bounded and least solidaristic regime in the EU.

Given that the Rokkanian polity perspective to the EU does not have precise empirical expectations as a system-level theory that is amenable to hypothesis testing, our attempt to bring this down to the empirical, individual level follows the spirit of a theory-building exercise, rather than that of precise testing. Nevertheless, as shown below, we do guide our empirical choices by a wide body of literature on solidarity and polity-building, and consequently, we elaborate a series of considerations and expectations to guide our data analysis in terms of the factors included in the analyses and their potential effects. We argue that an external “benchmark” that helps us differentiate between cumulative and bounded solidarity has deep implications for European solidarity. For reasons of tractability and because we are focused on European solidarity, we focus on a third country not belonging to the European Union, Peru, for two reasons. First, in terms of proximity, it was important to select a country that was distant enough not to trigger specific solidaristic dynamics that might differ widely across the countries in our sample. We wanted to avoid countries to which specific member states might have strong bonds, such as those neighboring the EU (e.g., Central European countries being more solidaristic with countries in the EU’s eastern neighborhood due to proximity). Second, in terms of crisis performance, given that our study is focused on solidarity during the COVID-19 crisis, it was also important to avoid countries that were featured heavily in the media as examples of their crisis (mis-)management in order not to introduce unwarranted deservingness dynamics or that had prominent populist governments at their helm (e.g., Brazil for mismanagement, or South Korea for good management). Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that in our understanding, no country would have perfectly fit the two criteria and, hence, we do acknowledge that the choice of Peru comes with its own problems as well as some countries in our sample (e.g., Spain, Italy) might have larger Peruvian diasporas than others.

## **Bounding the bonds, the creation of a “we-space,” and cross-national constellations**

The “bounding–bonding” dynamic has already been investigated before the COVID-19 crisis, with the literature asking whether European solidarity is “cumulative” or “bounded.” For instance, [Gerhards et al. \(2019\)](#) investigate European solidarity systematically across four domains: fiscal

(i.e., willingness to support indebted countries), welfare (i.e., willingness to support weaker EU citizens irrespective of their residence), territorial (i.e., willingness to reduce inequalities between rich and poor countries) and refugees (i.e., willingness to grant asylum and willingness to support burden-sharing within the EU). For each of these dimensions, the authors probe whether European solidarity goes beyond the national “containers” and whether the EU is “a specific space of solidarity distinguishable from both global and national solidarity” (p. 4). In pre-COVID-19 times (their data were fielded in 2016), one would have expected that after the mismanaged Euro area crisis, preferences for European bonding would be weak and certainly weakly bounded, especially amongst respondents of creditor countries. Surprisingly, they find that, more often than not, solidarity is indeed more bounded at the EU level. For instance, European fiscal, territorial and welfare solidarity is higher than for non-EU members. Gerhards et al. summarize their findings by saying that “Europe is thus undoubtedly a distinct space of solidarity” compared to non-EU countries and is increasingly overlapping with the national space of solidarity (little differences across the dimensions). They find that the national and European spaces of solidarity are not seen as competing with each other but rather as being complementary: European solidarity can be seen as compensation for the weaknesses of national solidarity. To echo Alan Milward, European solidarity is a rescue of national solidarity (Milward 2000), a kind of reinsurance of national insurance systems (Schelke 2022). On the eve of the COVID-19 crisis, this was good news indeed: our empirical study seeks to find out whether these bonding-bounding dynamics can also be observed during COVID-19.

We aim to build on this pioneering line of research in three ways. First, many things have changed since 2016. Brexit, the trans-Atlantic populist crisis, and the rise of strategic challengers (Russia and China)—not to mention climate change—may have brought Europeans closer to each other and sharpened the “bounding–bonding” mechanism due to strained resources and a need for tighter solidarity mechanisms. Second, the bounding–bonding mechanism can rest on a variable geometry, which we aim to also probe in this chapter. We want to see not only whether all countries have a bounding–bonding mechanism between the EU and non-EU countries but also whether there are territorial demarcations of solidarity *within the EU*. Due to various political conflicts, past crisis experiences, and currently unfolding phenomena like democratic backsliding and the rule-of-law crisis, we expect the bounding–bonding mechanism to create *circles of solidarity*. While most EU countries may prefer to redistribute more to EU countries than to non-EU ones, they may also prefer to show more solidarity with some than others.

Third, we take issue Gerhards et al.'s conclusion that "the EU should refrain from developing supranational institutions warranting European solidarity and should look for alternative solutions" (p. 10). If the recent literature on European solidarity during COVID-19 has highlighted anything, it is that instruments of solidarity matter as much as their content (Beetsma et al. 2022; Bremer et al. 2021; Ferrara, Schelkle, and Truchlewski 2023). Third, we seek to go beyond the generic "fiscal" solidarity field and ask whether preferences implied by the bounding–bonding mechanism can vary by policy dimension. It could be that the demarcation of the solidarity space works for economic issues but not for the health aspect of the crisis, which can trigger a cumulative logic of solidarity rather than a bounded one.

Probing the territorial bases of European solidarity is important because citizens from different European countries might express similar solidaristic preferences that can enable not only European-level solutions but also give rise to divergent national coalitions. These "elective affinities" of the European electorates can constrain governments at the European level during negotiations. Polarized preferences make polity-building at the European level harder, while closer preferences enable engineering institutional innovations for bonding. Along the same lines, bonding at the EU level may vary across citizens of different countries and enable coalitional games.

For instance, richer, north-western countries may prefer being solidaristic with each other rather than with the "underserving" and eternally underprepared South, as Wopke Hoekstra's bluntness suggests. That is, citizens from richer countries may not want to commit to solidarity because they may sense that this implies a long-term costly burden if the beneficiaries of the solidaristic bargain are perceived to be always the same. By contrast, North-Westerners may be more willing to support Central and Eastern European countries given the costs that these countries paid to reform themselves in the past and given their need to catch up. Conversely, the rule-of-law crisis and the divergence of preferences on social norms may undermine the feeling of solidarity that they have toward Central European countries, and they may thus be reluctant to help them more than Peru. Voters from poorer countries like Central and Eastern Europe would prefer to help each other out due to shared historical experiences (war, fascism, communism, and neoliberal transformation). They may be less willing to offer help to comparatively richer Southern countries with which they are catching up and which are not perceived as reforming as much as they themselves did in the post-communist period. This was precisely the reason why the Slovak government collapsed in 2011 over its refusal to contribute to the bailout of Greece (Schelkle 2017: 168). Additionally, Central and Eastern Europeans

may be less willing to help richer North-Western citizens because they are perceived as being wealthy and resilient enough to manage the crisis on their own. Conversely, if some actors undermine common norms and political orders but continue to benefit from EU public goods, they are perceived as freeriders (Bartolini 2005: 7–10; Fenger 2009) and might be less likely recipients of solidarity.

In sum, circles of bonding may emerge within the European polity itself: *respondents will prefer to help Europeans rather than outsiders, but they will also prefer to help some Europeans more than others.* Such a basis for European solidarity could trigger political problems: indeed, the constituents of a polity should be treated equally for a polity to be sustainable in the long run. *We expect ingroup solidarity to be dependent on various factors such as geopolitical proximity, crisis experience, and deservingness. Generally, we expect bonding to exist between more similar members of the community;* that is, Westerners have more of a preference to help Westerners than (in order) Peruvians, Southerners, Easterners, and so forth. Additionally, we hypothesize that, given the current rule-of-law crisis and the upheaval about the conditionality of Next Generation EU, Europeans will be less solidaristic with countries that are seen as obstructionist and not playing by the rules (e.g., Poland and Hungary).

## The nature of bounded solidarity

Our chapter builds on a large literature on European solidarity during crises (Gerhards et al. 2019) like the Euro area (Bechtel, Hainmueller, and Margalit 2014; Franchino and Segatti 2019), immigration, refugees, inequality and welfare state (Finseraas 2008; Burgoon 2009; 2014), and COVID-19 (Beetsma et al. 2022; Cicchi, Genschel et al. 2020; Ferrara, Schelkle, and Truchlewski 2023), to name but a few. We aim to explore further whether the design of solidarity has an impact on preferences for redistribution. We single out three such dimensions: the channels, the policy dimensions of the crisis, and the instruments.

### Channels: transnational versus bilateral

First, it is important to know whether solidarity should be channeled through the European level of the polity—thus participating in the elaboration of a new layer of risk-sharing—or whether European solidarity should be



channeled through bilateral help. National bilateral solutions can be seen as more temporary, made on an ad hoc basis, not unlike helping outside countries hit by a crisis or extreme natural event. Conversely, channeling solidarity through the European level implies institutional innovation, sets precedents for the future, and creates long-term iterations between constituent members of a polity. However, channeling solutions through the EU level could also constitute a form of freeriding, as respondents might prefer to shift (even if temporarily) the burden from their national systems. We test such a freeriding mechanism using questions on European identity and views on European integration. Generally, preferences for European-level solutions should be particularly preferred by those respondents with more pro-European views. Consequently, *we consider as evidence for freeriding if preferences for channeling solutions at the EU level do not vary by European identity and views on European integration.*

## Bonding across policy dimensions in the COVID-19 crisis

Second, the multi-faceted aspect of the COVID-19 crisis allows us to inquire into how bonding is triggered across different policy dimensions. In the scenarios we propose we differentiate between health and economic issues, following the most up-to-date literature (Heermann, Koos, and Leuffen 2023),<sup>2</sup> which finds that, in general, respondents are more keen on providing medical than financial help. Our study, being focused on the COVID-19 crisis, does not aim to compare across different crises hitting different policy domains and acknowledges that the economic and public health aspects of the crisis are deeply intertwined. Nevertheless, we argue that differentiating between the economic and health policy dimensions of the COVID-19 crisis is important not only given the relative salience of these two dimensions in the public discourse related to COVID-19 but also given the fact that solidarity instruments usually vary widely across these dimensions. First, health-based solidarity is much more temporary than economic-based solidarity. Health issues are very much related to a single and extraordinary situation, while economic solidarity implies commitment over the long run and sets a precedent for future recessions. Second, the different nature of economic threats and health threats trigger different emotional and blame-attribution dynamics. The exogenous health threat of the COVID-19 crisis touched upon universal health concerns experienced symmetrically across

<sup>2</sup> The sample is, however, confined to Germany.



member states. The economic threat of the crisis was much more bound to open old wounds from previous crises, highlighting North–South divides and triggering arguments blaming the various preparedness levels of the national systems. Given these differences between the two policy dimensions, *we expect respondents to show much higher levels of solidarity in the health dimension than in the economic one.*

## Instruments of solidarity within policy dimensions

Finally, the re-combinations of the “bonding-bounding” mechanism can vary with the type of implemented solidarity in each specific policy domain. We consider differences in preferences for repayable vs. nonrepayable instruments (loans vs. grants) previously pointed out as consequential in the literature (Cicchi et al. 2020). The difference between loans and grants was hotly debated during the five months that led to the NGEU package (de la Porte and Jensen 2021). Grants emerged as a solution to a symmetric crisis that followed bitter debates on austerity and conditional bailouts. Loans were, therefore, politically toxic. However, at the same time, as richer European countries acknowledged that they needed to be solidaristic with other EU members, they also underlined that they were equally affected by the crisis, therefore requiring a certain balance between loans and grants (Schelkle 2021). Generally, we expect the difference between the two to be driven by the simple reason that the first are repayable, i.e., conditional. Within the health dimension, we explore preferences for aid in the form of medical equipment and vaccines. While the sharing of medical equipment within EU member states led to heated debates at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, with countries withholding such equipment, the organization of the vaccination drive was generally considered a success story (even if after an initial slow start as detailed in Chapter 6). Given these differences, *we expect respondents to be more solidaristic when it comes to the sharing of vaccines, as such a type of help is less likely to open old wounds.*

## Experimental design and data

We use an experimental design that leverages factorial vignettes which enables us to examine respondents’ preference for and evaluations of various hypothetical scenarios (so-called vignettes) in which combinations of factors/characteristics are varied randomly. In comparison to classic survey

experiments, a factorial design allows us to estimate the causal effects of multiple treatment components rather than a single treatment and assess several causal hypotheses simultaneously (Hainmueller et al. 2014). For the factorial vignettes used here, participants were presented with mock descriptions of various countries (FACTOR 1) being affected by a new severe increase in the number of COVID-19 infections that has overburdened the healthcare system and has stalled economic activities. Given these scenarios, either the national government or the EU (FACTOR 2) offers various types of financial and medical aid (FACTOR 3). It is important to note here that our experiment is focused on the positive, territorial dimension of solidarity within the COVID-19 crisis rather than aiming to gauge normative aspects, such as deservingness, or aspects that might vary across different types of crises, such as symmetry. Our choice of factors, hence, follows the three dimensions (channel, policy dimension, and instruments) identified in the section above. Table 10.2 presents the various factor-levels and complete formulations given to the respondents. Manipulating these three factors resulted in thirty-two ( $4 \times 2 \times 4$ ) possible policy scenarios. Each survey respondent was randomly assigned three such scenarios and was instructed to give a numerical rating representing their degree of agreement with the decision to help on an eleven-point scale. Note that as opposed to conjoint experiments, respondents were not made to choose between these scenarios but just to rate each.

The data for this study was collected as part of a survey conducted in eight EU countries (Germany, Netherlands, Spain, Italy, France, Sweden, Poland, and Hungary) in the framework of the SOLID research project.<sup>3</sup> Interviews were administered between the 20th and the 30th of December 2021 on national samples obtained using a quota design based on gender, age classes, macro-area of residence (NUTS-1), and education. The total sample size for the survey was 8,916, with national sample sizes varying between 1,067 and 1,304.

Figure 10.1 presents the means of the various factor-level combinations in our experiment. Concerning forms of help (F3, differentiated by the four graphs), the two health measures included in the experiment (vaccines and medical equipment) appear to be most preferred across respondents, followed by loans, while grants appear to be the least supported measure. Regarding the recipients of this help (F1, differentiated vertically within each box), Southern and North-Western European countries are the ones

<sup>3</sup> The survey was conducted via computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI) methodology using the YouGov proprietary panel in all countries to recruit participants.

**Table 10.2** Experimental design

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Imagine the following scenario taking place in the near future.

<b>Factor 1:</b>	<i>Level 1</i>	<i>Level 2</i>	<i>Level 3</i>	<i>Level 4</i>
<b>Receiving country<sup>4</sup></b>	<i>Netherlands/ Germany</i>	<i>Spain/Italy</i>	<i>Poland/Hungary</i>	<i>Peru</i>

[...] is facing a new severe increase in the number of COVID-19 infections that has overburdened the healthcare system and has stalled economic activities. To help FACTOR 1 tackle the crisis, [...]

<b>Factor 2:</b>	<i>Level 1</i>	<i>Level 2</i>
<b>Sender</b>	<i>the [NATIONALITY] government</i>	<i>the EU</i>

[...] has decided to provide [...]

<b>Factor 3:</b>	<i>Level 1</i>	<i>Level 2</i>	<i>Level 3</i>	<i>Level 4</i>
<b>Type of help</b>	<i>Financial help in the form of a repayable loan</i>	<i>Financial help in the form of a nonrepayable grant</i>	<i>Help in the form of additional medical equipment</i>	<i>Help in the form of additional vaccine doses</i>

**Example vignette:** Imagine the following scenario taking place in the near future. **Italy** is facing a new severe increase in the number of COVID-19 infections that has overburdened the healthcare system and has stalled economic activities. To help **Italy** tackle the crisis, **the Dutch government** has decided to provide **financial help in the form of a nonrepayable grant**.

*Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with this decision. (0–10 scale)*

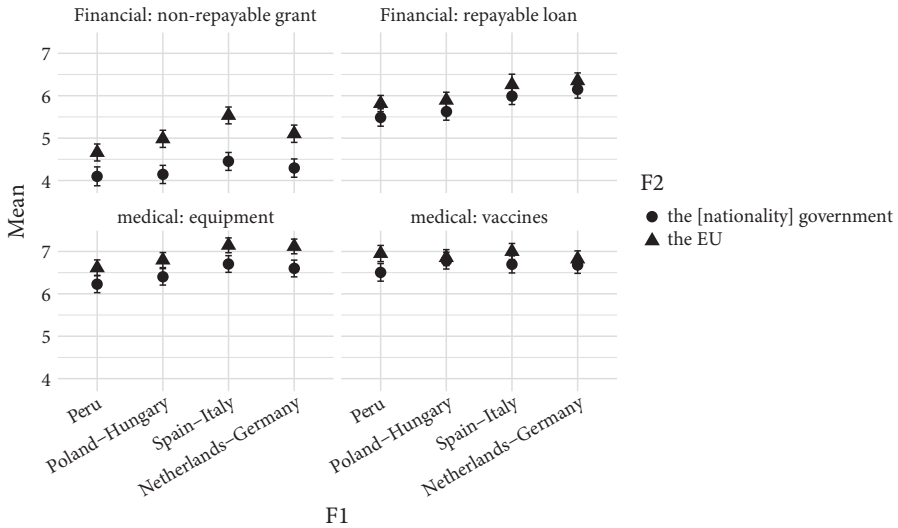
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receiving the greatest level of support across all measures. This is surprising given that several countries in this group are part of the Frugal Four coalition (Netherlands and Sweden, and their initial ally, Germany). We further explore this result below. Finally, when it comes to the provider of help (F2, differentiated by shape within each graph), while respondents seem, on average, to prefer the EU to grant all forms of help, economic or health-related, their preference for the EU is highest when it comes to grants.

**Results**

Our main goal is to estimate what characteristic of a scenario increases or decreases the appeal of that scenario, when varied independently of the other attributes included in the design, but also the interactions between these attributes. Since we are repeating measurements across respondents (three

<sup>4</sup> For the European member states, two country options were introduced in order for respondents in one region to not get their own country. For example, respondents in the Netherlands who randomly get assigned Level 1 of Factor 1 will receive Germany in this scenario.



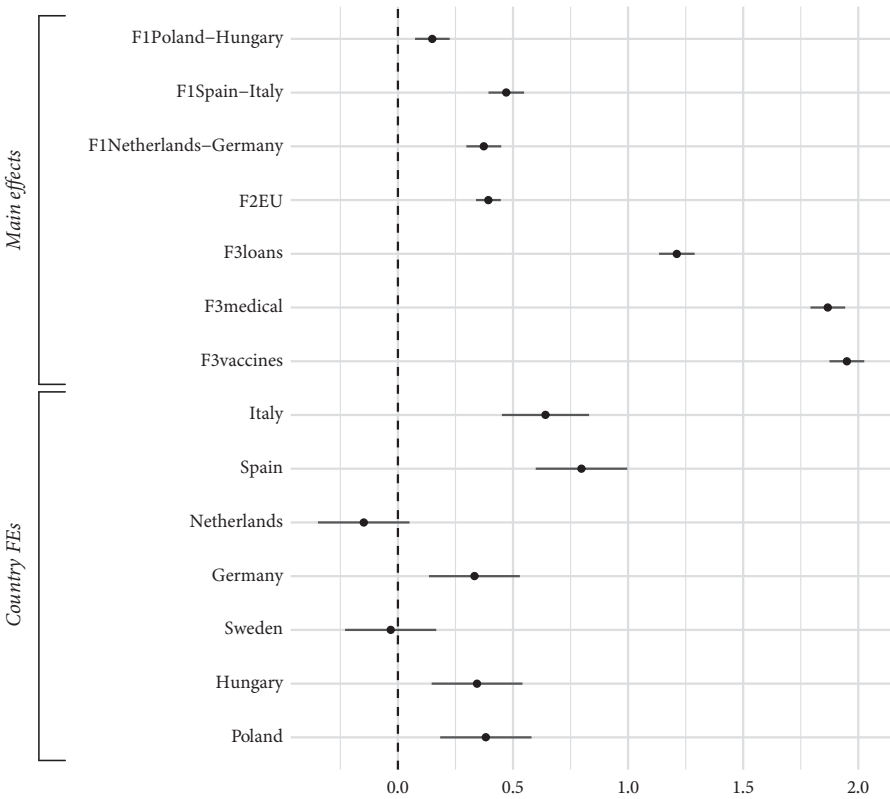
**Figure 10.1** Means and confidence intervals (95 percent) across factor-level combinations.

Source: Created using data from the ERC SOLID surveys.

vignettes per respondent), we resort here to using linear mixed-effect models, with three-way interactions, a random intercept for respondent, and country fixed effects.

## Circles of bonding

Figure 10.2 presents the result of our main models without interactions for studying average main effects. For Factor 1, we observe that, indeed, Europeans are more willing to be solidaristic with other EU members rather than with our baseline country—Peru, with effect sizes up to 0.5 on the eleven-point scale measuring the dependent variable. This result strongly underlines that, on average, bonding is bounded in the EU, and there is a European territorial basis of solidarity. Regarding the channel of solidarity, respondents prefer, on average, the EU: scenarios with solidarity organized at the EU level are rated on average 0.4 points higher. We further explore below whether there might be freeriding behind this preference. Finally, as expected, respondents are more solidaristic with health measures than economic measures, with the highest effect sizes out of our three factors (close to 2.0 points on the eleven-point scale measuring the dependent variable). Furthermore, they prefer, on average, loans to grants, likely because of their repayable nature.



**Figure 10.2** Main models with a random intercept for participant, and country fixed effects.

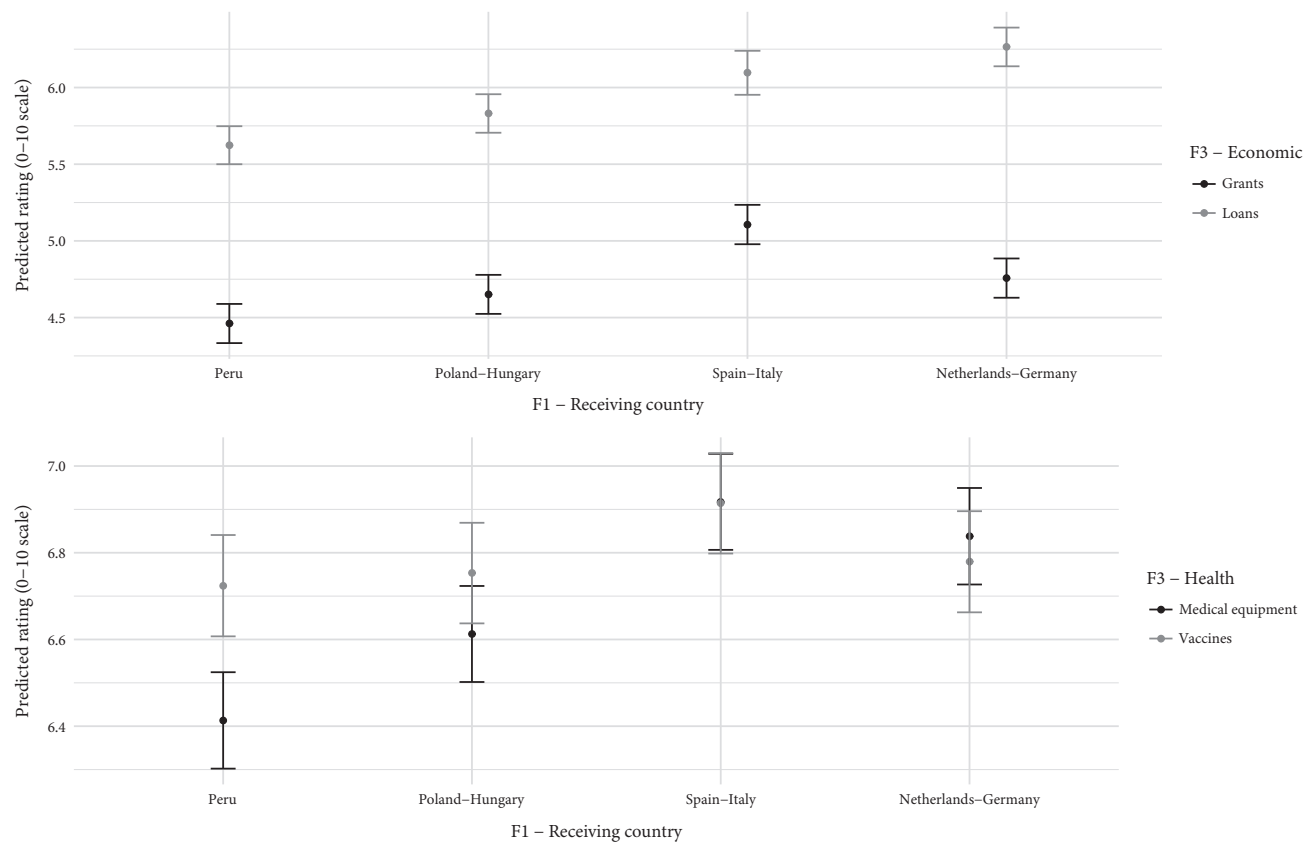
*Note:* x-axis measures effect sizes of each factor-level compared to a baseline level (France—baseline for country FEs; Peru—baseline for F1; the government—baseline for F2; grants—baseline for F) on scenario rating measured on an eleven-point scale.

*Source:* Created using data from the ERC SOLID surveys.

Given the expected variation regarding preferences for solidarity, the country fixed effects (the effects plotted at the bottom left of the figure) are also of interest to us. The findings indicate that, irrespective of the measure (economic or health-related; institutionalized or not), the recipient country, or provider of help (EU or national governments), Spain and Italy are most likely to be solidaristic, while Sweden, Netherlands, France are the least likely (keeping in mind that France is the baseline category). This aligns with our expectations of these countries' positions guided by their respective policy positions during the COVID-19 crisis (Italy and Spain as vocal members of the COVID-19 Letter9 group, and Netherlands and Sweden as members of the Frugal Four). While we cannot show whether respondents have been cued by their national elites, their positions are remarkably similar to the policies pursued by their respective governments which we detailed

in [Chapter 9](#). Perhaps more surprising is Germany's position as relatively solidaristic, even in comparison to France. This indicates that, contrary to discourses on Germany's ordoliberalism in the supply side of politics ([Hien and Joerges 2017](#)), there is a lot of leeway for solidarity on the demand side. The same cannot be said about France, whose average position aligns with the Frugals, despite the French government's historical preference for more redistribution ([Brunnermeier et al. 2016](#)). Establishing the direction of causality between elite cueing and public preferences is beyond the scope of this chapter and book (though see [Chapter 9](#)), but previous research shows mixed evidence, with some studies proposing a dual-process model in which party elites both respond and shape public views ([Steenbergen, Edwards, and de Vries 2007](#)).

To explore interactions, we follow up on our main model with an analysis of simple main effects. In [Figure 10.3](#), we analyze the interaction between types of help (F3) and receiving countries (F1). In terms of economic measures (top plot), our results indicate a strong preference for repayable loans across the board. Nevertheless, the intensity of this preference varies across recipient countries. Spain or Italy are generally the preferred recipients of grant measures. Conversely, Northern European countries are significantly preferred for receiving loans. Given the scars of the Eurozone crisis and the levels of distrust toward Southern European member states (including the reluctance surrounding NGEU in spring 2020), this result is unsurprising. What is more surprising is the fact that while solidarity toward North-Western and Southern EU member states is significantly higher than our non-EU control country (Peru), the same cannot be said about Central-Eastern Europe. Poland and Hungary appears to be left outside this core circle of bonding. At this point, it is unclear whether this lack of solidarity toward these member states is due to their newcomer status or due to their role in the "rule-of-law" debate. Given this, we further explore below ([Figure 10.7](#)) whether this effect is tied to respondents' views of these countries as obstructing the EU in reaching the best response to the COVID-19 crisis, with results strongly pointing to the role played by the rule-of-law debate. Nevertheless, [Figure 10.3](#) generally suggests that the EU polity is bounded within. We obtain similar results on the outsider status of CEE countries regarding health measures such as medical equipment. Finally, it is only vaccines where we do not see European solidarity prevailing, as there is no significant difference when it comes to recipients. Again, as explained before, given that by December 2021, the European population was vaccinated to a high degree (or at least they were not facing vaccine shortages), this result is aligned with our expectations.



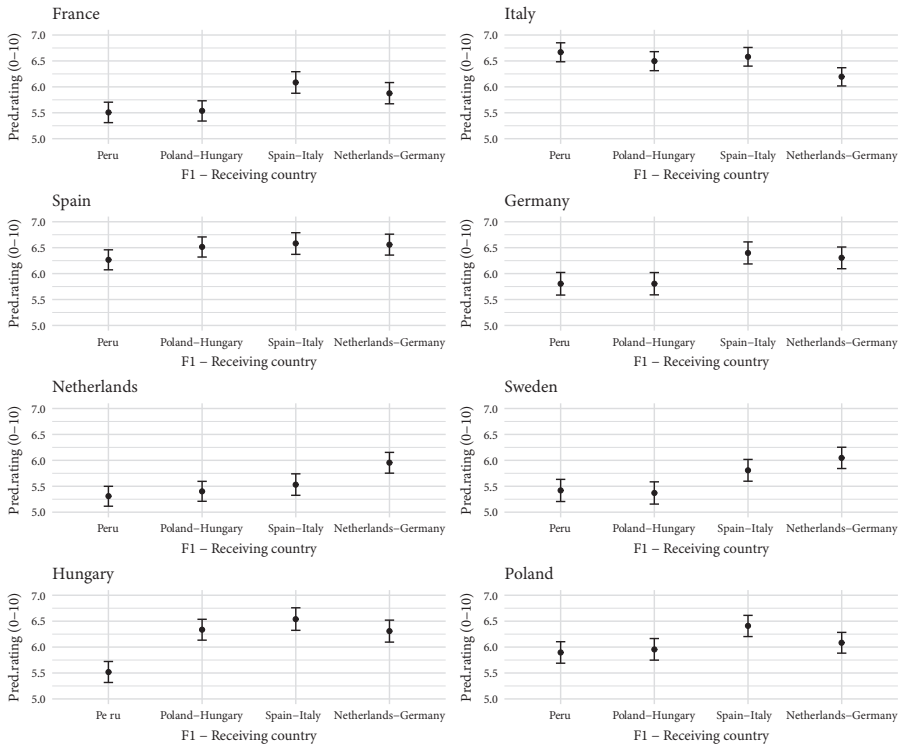
**Figure 10.3** Predicted rating for the effect of receiving country by type of help.

Source: Created using data from the ERC SOLID surveys.

Given the differences between preferences for certain recipients of help found above, our next set of results explores coalitional dynamics and possible inner circles of bounding by analyzing an interaction effect between the respondent's country and the country receiving help in the scenarios given: this is exactly what we plot in [Figure 10.4](#). One first finding highlighted by the figure is that respondents in France, Germany, Netherlands, and Sweden seem to coalesce into an inner circle of solidarity. Despite small effect sizes, respondents in these countries significantly prefer to help other countries in this inner circle and Southern European member states (though the two frugal members of the group do so to a lesser extent), but not member states in Central-Eastern Europe. When it comes to Southern and Central-Eastern European member states, we can see that these hardly have affinities with each other in their respective groups. On the one hand, Spain appears to gravitate toward the inner core in wanting to help EU member states more than the baseline country of Peru, but it is less frugal than the inner core as Spaniards also want to extend help to Central-Eastern Europeans.

On the other hand, Italy appears the least frugal, but we can now see that Italian solidarity varies across receiving countries. Italians seem to apply a need-based criterion of help as they prefer to support poorer countries within and outside the EU in comparison to the Netherlands or Germany. In this respect, Italy appears as an outlier in comparison to all countries in our sample, as Italians do not want to help any member state more than the control country of Peru. Given that Italy was the first and, arguably, worst hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is understandable that the Italians' criteria for help might be more need-based than affinity-based compared to the other countries. Additionally, given the austerity wounds Italy had from the Eurozone crisis and the blunt response they received from the EU (and especially Netherlands and Germany) in the initial phases of the pandemic, it is not counterintuitive that they want to help Netherlands or Germany the least out of all other options. Moving to Central-Eastern Europe, we see that Hungary draws the strongest difference between EU member states and the outsider in terms of willingness to help (up to one point lower predicted rating when Peru is part of the scenario). One reason behind this marked difference resides in Hungary's very Europe-centric discourse, focused on anti-immigration from outside Europe and on protecting European (Christian) values. By contrast, Poland does not seem to differentiate between most EU member states and outsider, except for Southern Europe (the most hit by the COVID-19 pandemic).

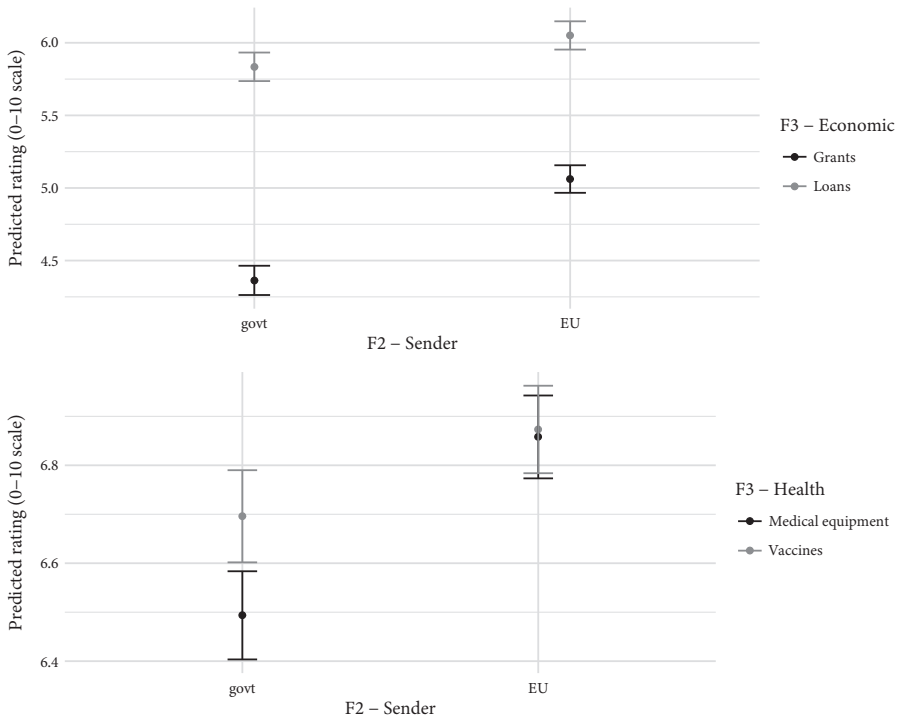




**Figure 10.4** Predicted rating for the effect of receiving country by respondent country.  
*Source:* Created using data from the ERC SOLID surveys.

### The nature of solidarity: channels, instruments, and policy domains

For interpreting the effect of F2 and F3 regarding the type of help and the channel preferred by respondents, in [Figure 10.5](#) we report the effect of F2 (channel) by each level of F3 (sender of help). In terms of the channel of help, [Figure 10.5](#) shows that the EU is generally significantly preferred as the provider of solidaristic measures across all four types of measures included in our vignettes. Nevertheless, there is a significant interaction between the type of help and preference for the EU as the provider. Respondents seem to prefer the EU more as a provider when it comes to grants (with a 0.7 difference in predicted rating) than loans (with a 0.2 difference in predicted rating), and more in medical equipment than vaccines. Concerning health measures, this difference is partly explained by the fact that the vaccination rollout was already well under way in December 2021, with countries not experiencing significant vaccine shortages (quite the contrary) and perhaps being more “giving” in this respect since this wouldn’t imply a high cost.

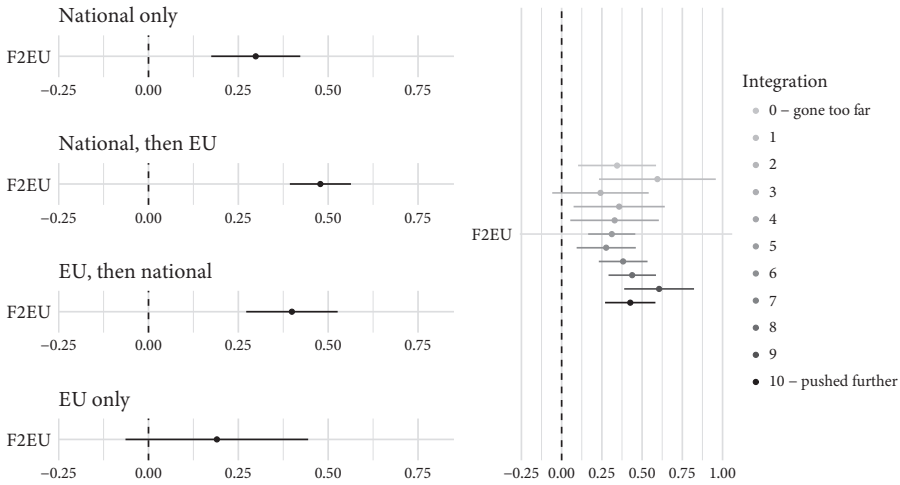


**Figure 10.5** Predicted rating for the effects of sender (government vs. EU) by type of help.

Source: Created using data from the ERC SOLID surveys.

In terms of policy domains, health-related forms of help are generally rated higher, irrespective of the sender (the predicted rating on the y-scale for health measures varies between 6.5 and 6.9, whereas for economic measures, it varies between 4.4 and 6.1). Moreover, vaccines are the preferred type of help. Given the saliency of the health dimension and the fact that this dimension appeared as the highest perceived threat of the COVID-19 crisis (Oana et al. 2021), these results are unsurprising. Additionally, given that by the end of 2021, when our survey was fielded, medical supplies and vaccines were no longer in short supply, the acceptance of these forms of help was also not hindered by national shortage threats. Beyond the health dimension of help, when it comes to economic help, perhaps the most striking result is the significant and large difference between preferences for loans and for grants, with loans being the preferred form of help likely because of their repayable nature.

As we previously argued, channeling solutions through the EU level could also constitute a form of freeriding, as respondents might prefer to



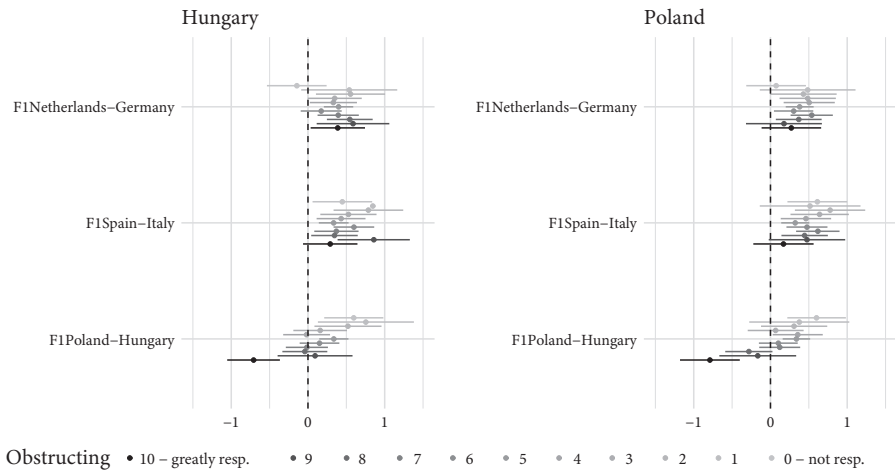
**Figure 10.6** Effect heterogeneity of support for the EU as sender by identity and views on integration.

Source: Created using data from the ERC SOLID surveys.

shift (even if temporarily) the burden from their national systems. We test such a freeriding mechanism in Figure 10.6, expecting that preferences for European-level solutions are more strongly preferred by respondents with more pro-European views. Our results do not confirm this hunch: there is little variation in preferences for the EU channel across both types of national or European identity and views on European integration, which is evidence for freeriding. Nevertheless, one could argue that the end justifies the means, as our findings still strongly underline that citizens generally prefer solidarity to go through the EU level rather than the national level. Whether this is a form of freeriding or not, the results show that European citizens do not fear/oppose EU-level solutions in the bonding preferences, which could lead to positive reinforcement effects as such a preference could enable further polity-building.

Finally, given our previous finding of Poland and Hungary as being left outside the core circle of EU bonding, in Figure 10.7 we explore whether this lack of solidarity is related to views of these countries as obstructing the EU in reaching the best response to the COVID-19 crisis. The results indicate that the more one views these countries as obstructionist, the less solidaristic one is with them.<sup>5</sup> This strong effect heterogeneity indicates that the lack of

<sup>5</sup> We measure this by asking the following question separately for several member states (including Hungary and Poland): “During the COVID-19 pandemic, EU member states had various disagreements



**Figure 10.7** Effect heterogeneity of receiving country by considering Poland and Hungary as responsible for obstructing the EU in reaching the best response to the COVID-19 crisis.

Source: Created using data from the ERC SOLID surveys.

solidarity with Hungary and Poland is likely driven by the rule-of-law and conditionality debate, rather than simply by dynamics between new and old member states. This result makes sense: as underlined in the theory on EU polity formation and the welfare state, “partial exits” like the Polish and Hungarian ones—rejection of common norms and political orders but continued consumption of EU public goods—are perceived as a freerider problem and undermine solidarity in a bounded community between those who accept the polity and those who retreat into partial exit (Vollaard 2014; Genschel and Hemerijck 2018).

## Conclusions: bounded solidarity in times of COVID-19

Contrary to previous European crises, COVID-19 has arguably been characterized by a rather solidaristic response from the supply side of European politics. In this chapter, we aim to inquire whether the pandemic had a similar effect on the demand side in activating “bonding” mechanisms between people and countries (Ferrera 2005; Bartolini 2005; Flora, Kuhnle, and Urwin 1999).

on the best EU response in dealing with the crisis. To what extent, if at all, do you think the following countries are responsible for making it more difficult for the EU to reach the best possible outcome?”

The question of solidarity has been at the forefront of European theoretical, empirical, and political debates since its inception but particularly so since the eruption of the poly-crisis in 2008. From the broader theoretical approach to the EU as a polity (or for any polity for that matter), bounded solidarity plays a key role in polity maintenance and political structuring. Seen through Rokkanian eyes, loyalty is built upon the identity and solidarity that exists between members of a polity (Flora, Kuhnle, and Urwin 1999). Polity theorists from Rokkan to Bartolini were very skeptical that such a bounded solidarity could arise in Europe and underpin a centripetal political system through the channel of loyalty-building. This skepticism arose mostly from the relative destructuring of the national welfare states through market integration without a corrective European safety net (Bartolini 2005, 304). In Bartolini's own words, "the complex problem of fostering collective identification and solidarity across lingual, cultural, and institutional national diversities remains, and these internal differences have resulted in a paradoxical imbalance between considerable organization-building efforts and poor collective action in the market and the polity" (p. 291).

This chapter sought to shed empirical light on this key issue and to update prior research. The findings of the literature so far are mixed: while Gerhards et al. (2019) show that fiscal solidarity during crises is more pronounced for other European countries than for non-EU countries (using a survey encompassing thirteen countries), Heermann, Koos, and Leuffen (2023) find that this difference is actually not so pronounced (however, their sample is restricted to Germany), whereas other researchers find that solidarity is more pronounced at the national and universal level, but weakest at the European level (Lahusen and Grasso 2018). These findings are complemented by a broad literature on determinants of foreign aid, which suggests that interests and cosmopolitanism—which are important in the EU context—play a major role (Prather 2020).

Our results suggest that in times of COVID-19, bounded solidarity is a reality. We find that, Italy excepted, most countries are more solidaristic with EU countries than an outsider, baseline state (Peru in our case). Nevertheless, on the one hand, we find a strong heterogeneity regarding the size of this effect: Spain and Italy are most likely to be solidaristic, while Sweden, Netherlands, and France are the least likely, with Germany being less frugal than expected. On the other hand, solidarity is bounded within Europe itself, with an inner circle—France, Germany, Netherlands, and Sweden—mostly wanting to help themselves and the Southern member states, but not Poland and Hungary, likely because of the rule-of-law debate. Regarding channels of solidarity, our results show that respondents do prefer help, irrespective of its kind, to go

through the EU level rather than their national governments. Our evidence indicates that part of the reason for this preference might be a form of freeriding as citizens would like to shift the burden from their national systems or a misunderstanding of the functioning of the EU budget as they would think this does not incur national costs. Nevertheless, such preferences can still be consequential as they can enable polity-building through a permissive public opinion environment. Additionally, on the economic side, respondents preferred repayable loans rather than grants. While on the one hand, the loans' repayable nature could be interpreted as indicative of lower solidarity, we do consider this preference as having important implications for EU polity-building, as it stands to show that public opinion is generally not opposed to a further institutionalization of solidarity instruments across member states.

Our approach and findings have limitations and important implications for further research. First, our results need to be replicated in the medium and long run because bounded solidarity could be the result of the COVID-19 crisis. The confounding factor is that COVID-19 was a substantial and, arguably, relatively symmetric crisis that came on the heels of fragilizing events like the Euro area crisis, austerity, populism, transatlantic tensions, and the rise or return of geopolitical challengers. Thus, the demand for common solidarity may have been higher both due to temporal reasons and due to the peculiarities of the crisis itself. While transboundary crises like COVID-19 or war can spur bounded solidarity (Freudlsperger and Schimmelfennig 2022), asymmetric crises do not necessarily do so (Ferrara, Schelkle, and Truchlewski 2023; Bremer, Genschel, and Jachtenfuchs 2020). It is also possible that bounded solidarity dissipates over time, and thus, repeated measurements are important.

Second, as our results suggest, bounded solidarity can vary within the EU. Why this is the case is a research question that needs to be further explored. Is this due to national "deservingness factors" or rather to the fact that countries respect common European rules (Heermann, Koos, and Leuffen 2023; Afonso and Negash 2024; Harell et al. 2022)? The answer to this question can also vary by country: for instance, creditor countries may look closely at whether recipient countries respect the Stability and Growth Pact and democratic standards, while, for instance, poorer EU countries may be more solidaristic with richer EU countries if their crisis was not self-inflicted.

Third, the geography of bounded solidarity needs to be explored over time. If our results are replicated in the future and patterns of bounded solidarity do not change, this may be the sign of profound territorial divisions underpinning the European polity. If, however, these patterns vary over time with events, this would be an indication that national respondents pay attention

to how other member states fare and what their place should be within the new solidarity regime of the EU. This could prove crucial for the future of NGEU, which is temporary.

Finally, our results have profound implications for policymaking within the EU. We show that European solidarity is indeed territorially demarcated, with bonding being bounded to the EU community. Public opinion constitutes a highly enabling environment for channeling solidarity through the European level through solutions that might imply repeated interactions and, thus, spur institutional innovation and EU polity-building rather than more ad hoc national bilateral solutions. Nevertheless, we find that there are important dynamics *between* EU member states that can hardly be overlooked, creating unequal bonding preferences and circles of solidarity. Whereas an inner circle of Southern and North-Western Europe is rather willing to be solidaristic with itself, this is hardly extended to Hungary or Poland, given views on these countries as obstructing the EU in reaching the best response to the COVID-19 crisis. Partial exits thus come with a real cost in solidaristic attitudes.

# The Impact of Identity, Satisfaction, and Empathy on Bonding

## Introduction

The main question driving this volume is: “What made COVID-19 a different type of crisis?” Why did the EU manage to engage in polity-building during a crisis, coming out stronger at the other end? What makes COVID-19 different from previous crises that led to more negative attitudes toward the EU and tensions between member states (such as the refugee crisis or the Eurozone crisis)?

What we have seen is that despite the more symmetric nature of the crisis, politicization at the EU level was high during the COVID-19 crisis, particularly in the beginning (Chapter 4). Later during the pandemic, common EU policies dampened politicization, which increased at the national level. Therefore, the question remains as to why countries with divergent interests managed to overcome their differences and reach policy consensus, in an environment of high politicization.

One possible answer is changing individual attitudes. National elites are responsive to their voters when it comes to European integration. Favorable attitudes of EU citizens toward the EU and other EU citizens (bonding) are necessary as enabling factors for national and European elites to build solidaristic policies, such as the NGEU fund and common vaccination procurement. We have looked at how politicization and conflict structures, as perceived by individuals, negatively affected bonding (Chapter 9). Nonetheless, we saw that bonding was strong during the pandemic, as shown by the experimental evidence in Chapter 10. Why was bonding strong despite high politicization and conflict?

This chapter shows that bonding remained strong and even increased during the COVID-19 crisis. It focuses on three mechanisms to explain this unexpected outcome: identity, satisfaction, and empathy. Identity, a form of diffuse support for the polity, is crucial for polity-building. Identities define the space of “us versus them” and, therefore, delimit how widely citizens



accept the redistribution of resources and political authority. Satisfaction with EU policy during the pandemic, a form of specific support for the polity, impacts the willingness of citizens to allow decision-making power to be delegated to the EU. A satisfactory performance by the EU gives individuals confidence that policy areas can be managed at the EU level. Lastly, empathy, a form of support for the community, impacts the degree to which individuals see other EU citizens as deserving. This mechanism is currently understudied in the field of EU polity-building. We show that it has a strong impact on individual willingness to support solidaristic policy. We operationalize solidaristic policy support through a survey question asking respondents whether they would make the NGEU fund permanent.

The chapter is structured along these three mechanisms, first exploring their determinants, before looking at their joint impact on bonding through solidaristic EU policy. The following section develops the theoretical concepts and expectations for the chapter. The next one explores the recent historical trends of European identity. The third section looks at satisfaction with the EU as well as satisfaction with EU policy during the pandemic and considers its main drivers. The fourth section studies the determinants of empathy during the pandemic, while the final section brings all three mechanisms together into an analysis investigating the support for solidaristic policy.

## **The drivers of bonding during COVID: identity, satisfaction, and empathy**

The shift from economic to political integration that started with the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 fundamentally altered the role of citizens in European integration. Developing a political community engaged communal identities, which put limits on elite-led integration, leading to a constraining dissensus (Hooghe and Marks 2019). Elites had to become responsive to public opinion and to the demands and backlash from EU policy. Common EU policy requires a degree of public support. It requires that individuals look not only at the national benefits of a policy but consider the common goods that can accrue to the EU polity, and to other EU citizens. Common policy requires bonding, i.e., solidarity toward other member states (Ferrara, Schelkle, and Truchlewski 2023). We focus on three mechanisms that led to higher bonding during the COVID-19 pandemic. We start by distinguishing between diffuse versus specific support (Easton 1975), as well as between attitudes toward the regime and the community (Boomgaarden et al. 2011; Easton 1965).

First, for diffuse support of the regime, we focus on European identity, the degree to which individuals identify with the polity. The European polity comes on top of already mature nation-states with strong national identities. However, identities need not be exclusionary, as a supranational identity can complement existing national or regional identities. Identities are strongly entrenched in individuals and can withstand periods of crisis. Postfunctionalists view identity as the driver of backlash to further integration, as those with exclusively national identity do not support a jurisdiction that encompasses outgroups (Hooghe and Marks 2009). Given the human tendency toward ethnocentricity, that is, to favor the in-group (Citrin and Sides 2006), it is surprising at all that Europeans show solidarity toward other member states. The key lies precisely in extending the definition of the in-group, to a more encompassing European identity. The less an individual identifies exclusively with their national identity, the more they can be open to sharing resources and authority beyond the bounds of the nation-state. Shared identity is one of the main foundations of shared solidarity (Banting and Kymlicka 2017).

Identity, however, is not easily malleable. We do not expect it to change drastically during a crisis. Identity, therefore, is not a COVID-specific factor but rather a background factor in our analysis. The first part of this chapter thus takes a long-term view to see whether the EU entered the COVID-19 crisis on favorable grounds (more individuals with a strong EU identity). Importantly, since identity is deeply entrenched and affects views on the EU, identity is likely to also have an impact on our other two factors, satisfaction and empathy. Although EU identity is shallow (Kuhn 2015), an increasing number of EU citizens have identified with the EU since the late 2000s (Pryke 2020), even though identity was stable in the decades before (Fligstein 2009). A stronger EU identity should directly imply that EU citizens are willing to help other EU citizens (Chapter 10). *Therefore, individuals with a strong EU identity should be more likely to show bonding and support solidaristic policy.* To the degree that there are more individuals with EU identity going into the COVID-19 crisis, their greater number can explain the overall higher level of bonding in this crisis compared to previous ones. Identity may also act as a possible buffer for politicization. Experimental evidence shows that individuals with identities that are not exclusively national are less amenable to negative elite cues on EU integration (Vössing 2015).

Second, we focus on specific support for the polity, which is based on its political and economic performance (Easton 1975). We thus consider satisfaction with the EU during the pandemic. In this part of the analysis, we, therefore, do not consider the cross-crisis variation but only the within-crisis

variation across time and policies. As we detailed in the theory of [Chapter 2](#), satisfaction with the EU is based on output legitimacy, i.e., policy performance. Direct satisfaction with EU policymaking during COVID-19 is more weakly tied to identity and views of the EU as a whole, and more directly tied to evaluations of competence. A satisfactory performance of the EU during the pandemic is likely to increase the confidence of EU citizens that they can delegate policymaking to the EU level and pool resources together. We show how satisfaction varies at different points in time during the pandemic and across different policies. Importantly, different phases of the pandemic represented different challenges (related to border control and the economy in the first wave, and to vaccinations and coordination during the second and third waves). Likewise, the EU has different competences in different domains and showed varying levels of ability to manage different aspects of the pandemic. We, therefore, expect varying levels of satisfaction according to the policy domain and period of the pandemic. *Specifically, we expect lower satisfaction with the EU during the first wave of the pandemic when the EU struggled to react quickly.* In this period, countries unilaterally closed borders and some restricted exports of medical equipment. Proposals to raise common debt (coronabonds) were struck down, with the NGEU fund coming only five months later, in July. Although the EU was most active in the first phase of the pandemic (see [Chapter 4](#)), the slow initial response leads us to expect public opinion to shift only later. *We, therefore, expect satisfaction to be higher in later waves after the EU managed to pass effective policies.* The timing of satisfaction is tied to specific policy areas. *Policies areas where the EU managed to coordinate and build capacity, such as economic aid and vaccinations, should have higher satisfaction than policy areas where the EU did not manage to coordinate, such as border management and sharing of medical equipment.*

The performance of the EU itself should influence citizens' satisfaction. However, we know from a wide literature that EU citizens are strongly affected by their domestic institutions and elites when it comes to views of the EU. Trust in national parliaments contributes to satisfaction with democracy in the EU ([Hobolt 2012](#)), while support for the EU has also been linked to satisfaction with national policy ([Armingeon and Ceka 2014](#)). Hartevelt et al. call this the logic of extrapolation, as individuals extrapolate trust in national institutions to the European level ([Hartevelt, Meer, and Vries 2013](#)). One of the main mechanisms for this effect is cueing by national elites, who have a particularly strong effect on public opinion regarding the European Union ([Gabel and Scheve 2007](#); [Stoeckel and Kuhn 2018](#)).

An additional reason to expect spillovers, in our case, has to do with the multilevel governance structure of the EU. Thus, several policies, most notably vaccination, and green pass policies were conducted at both the EU and the national level. In vaccination, the EU managed the common procurement of vaccines, while national governments managed domestic distribution and rollout. National governments managed domestic policies with respect to restrictions for unvaccinated individuals (green pass policies) while the EU coordinated the policy at the between-member state level, allowing for freedom of movement for vaccinated individuals. Given the highly technical nature of these policies, *we expect that individuals imperfectly distinguish the EU from national-level competencies and that, therefore, satisfaction with the national government will spill over into satisfaction with the EU and vice versa*. We expect the spillover from the national to the EU level to happen through cueing by national elites. Elite cues are normally expected to follow partisan lines. However, EU polarization happens along territorial lines, as citizens listen to cues from national governments in addition to the parties they identify with (Ares, Ceka, and Kriesi 2017).

Cues are particularly important for EU integration because voters lack knowledge, and therefore turn to elites (Hobolt 2007). This is particularly true for highly technical and low-salience policies. However, we know from Chapter 4 that COVID-19 was one of the most salient events at both the EU and the national level. In addition, individuals have knowledge based on personal experience with COVID-19 policy, which affected most EU citizens directly, either through vaccination, movement restrictions, or other policies. We expect these experiences to have an independent effect on individuals' evaluation of the EU's performance. We, therefore, following dual-process models (Steenbergen, Edwards, and de Vries 2007), expect feedback effects as elites not only cue but also need to listen to their voters.

Third, and lastly, we focus on a form of diffuse support for the community. We look at empathy and, in particular, the pandemic-specific sources of empathy among EU citizens. Individuals are more empathetic with others when it comes to health issues (or life course risks in general) compared to unemployment (or labor market risks in general) (Jensen and Petersen 2017). The reason for this is that health risks are less correlated with social class and are (at least perceived to be) random and outside an individual's control (Jensen 2012). Simply put, people don't usually blame other people for their bad health, which in turn increases their support for health policies that help the disadvantaged. The root cause is a health risk, but the outcome is support for policies that end up being redistributive (granting access to health irrespective of ability to pay). The question is whether such a mechanism

could be at play transnationally for the COVID-19 crisis (Ferrara, Schelkle, and Truchlewski 2023). European citizens might perceive the COVID-19 crisis to have hit countries indiscriminately, thus creating a basis for solidarity. At the individual level, the risk posed by COVID-19 to one's health and financial livelihood is also likely to be perceived as exogenous and outside the person's control. *We, therefore, expect a large share of individuals to believe that the COVID-19 crisis was outside the control of national governments. We expect these individuals to be more supportive of solidaristic policy.*

Increased empathy for European citizens may also be based on personal experience with COVID. Importantly, the COVID-19 pandemic affected all European citizens to some degree, directly affecting either their health, their income, or their individual freedoms and ability to carry on their normal lives. However, some individuals were hit harder than others. This greater impact likely made the more directly hit citizens more aware of the policy discussions surrounding health and economic relief, since they were going to be more directly affected by these policies. Their personal struggle should increase their support for these policies as these issues were more salient to them. Moreover, individuals who were more severely impacted by COVID, either in terms of their health or their finances, should have increased empathy for fellow Europeans who lost their jobs, loved ones, or their health. *This empathy, in turn, should translate into greater support for solidaristic policy at the EU level.*

Figure 11.1 summarizes the main argument of the chapter. The right-hand box shows our outcome of interest, namely support for solidaristic policy at the EU level. The middle box includes the three proximate determinants of increased support for solidaristic policy during the COVID-19 crisis: EU identity, satisfaction with the EU, and empathy. The left-hand box then refers to the main determinants of these mechanisms, namely political attitudes (ideology and satisfaction with the national government), EU policies during the pandemic and their perceived success, and the impact of the pandemic on individuals directly. While the relationships between all of these factors are complex, we summarize our theoretical expectations in a directed

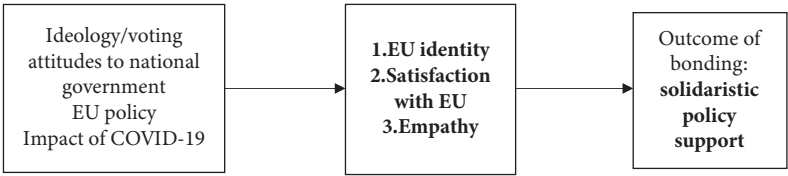


Figure 11.1 Theoretical framework.

acyclic graph (DAG) in Figure A11.1 in the online Appendix.<sup>1</sup> DAGs allow for the transparent coding of theoretical assumptions (Truchlewski, Suzuki, and Moise 2023) which can guide analysis, avoid contradictions and the inclusion of “bad controls” (Cinelli, Forney, and Pearl 2022).

## European identity

Identity is both an outcome of European integration as well as a potential driver of further integration. This dynamic is also at play in shorter time horizons, as bonding is both a precursor and later an outcome of successful policymaking at the EU level. This section explores the long-term trends in European identity. Here we focus on two interrelated indicators of identity. First, we look at whether Europeans feel that they are European citizens. Second, we take a more diffuse measure, namely feelings toward the EU.

Figure 11.2 presents data from the Eurobarometer asking respondents from twenty-six EU member states whether they feel like EU citizens from 2011 until 2021. It shows a slow gradual positive trend, with more respondents agreeing that they feel like citizens of the EU. We can see a small decline around 2013, an outcome of the fallout from the Eurozone crisis. However, there is no such decline during or after the 2015 refugee crisis. Instead, we observe a steady increase from 2013 onward, with small year-to-year variation. The trend appears stable during the first two years of the pandemic, in 2020 and 2021, yet it may be too soon to see any effects the pandemic may have had.

We also look at a more remote measure of identity, namely how Europeans feel about the EU. Figure 11.3 presents the time trend for the same set of EU countries. Similar to their feelings toward EU citizenship, respondents in EU countries display a generally positive trend in their feelings toward the EU, despite the fact that the EU was undergoing several crises at the time. In fact, we can see small reversals in the overall trend that likely correspond to the timing of crises where the EU fared badly. Thus, there was an increase in negative feelings during the Eurozone crisis in 2012–13 and another increase around the refugee crisis of 2015–16.

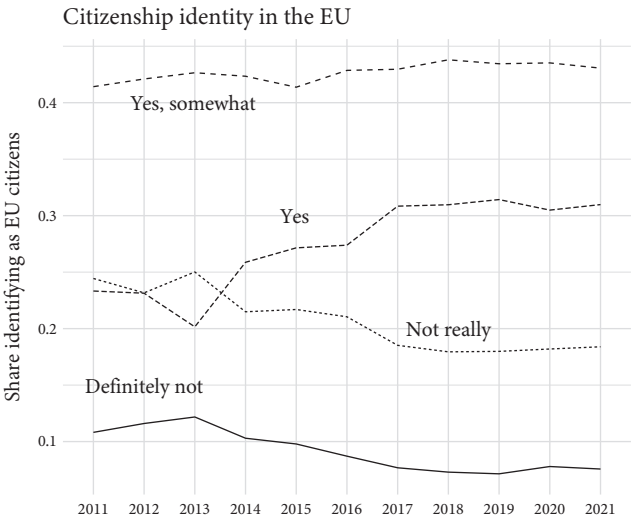
Overall, there are few respondents with very positive or very negative views of the EU, and a plurality of respondents have neutral feelings. This suggests that the EU is not a very polarizing subject for most Europeans. Changes are at the margins, of views that are fairly positive and fairly negative.

<sup>1</sup> The Appendix to the chapter is available online at <https://github.com/zgtruchlewski/PandemicPolity>.

The overall trend in these views is positive, with a further small improvement in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Identity and feelings toward the EU show great stability over time. They are moved by particularly salient events, but in the 2010s they follow a gradual increase over time. Considering the period from 2011 onward, among the different crises that have hit the EU, COVID-19 appears to have hit at a high point of diffuse support for the EU.

We, therefore, find some plausibility for our expectations that a stronger EU identity contributed to the higher bonding we saw during the COVID-19 crisis compared to earlier crises. Since identities are rather stable over time, we cannot directly quantify the effect of changes in identity during the pandemic on solidarity. Nor do we expect the pandemic to have significantly altered EU identity. Instead, we expect the relatively higher levels of identification with the EU leading up to the pandemic to have been a precursor for stronger bonding. In the final substantive section of this chapter, we look at the cross-individual impact of identity on bonding, showing that individuals with higher identification with the EU are more likely to support making the recovery fund permanent. Given the strong connection between EU identity and support for solidaristic policy, an increased share of individuals with EU identity implies a stronger support for solidaristic policy in this



**Figure 11.2** Eurobarometer data: EU citizenship feeling EU 26.

*Note:* Data shown for EU 26 (excluding Croatia which joined in 2013, and the UK, which voted to leave in 2016). Question asked respondents whether they feel to be EU citizens. Response categories: “Yes, Yes somewhat, Not Really, Definitely not.”

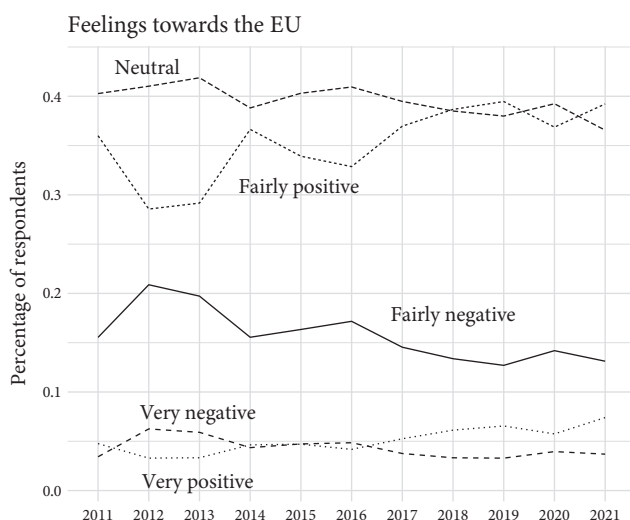


crisis, compared to previous ones. Of course, there may be many other factors that vary across crises, which could imply overall lower solidarity during COVID. The chapter limits itself to discussing the within-crisis dynamics of solidarity.

The EU, while being more politicized by national parties, and in particular populist and Euroskeptic parties, does not evoke strong feelings among citizens. Attitudes toward the EU are favorable, and they have been increasing in positivity over time. The next section confirms these insights by showing that the EU was not heavily politicized in the COVID-19 pandemic, except for Poland and Hungary.

## Satisfaction with the EU during the pandemic

While identity is more deeply entrenched, evaluations of the EU's performance during the crisis should more closely follow the actions of the EU. Such evaluations constitute its output legitimacy (F. Scharpf 1999). We now turn to more specific evaluations by respondents of the EU during the COVID-19 crisis. For this purpose, we use a panel study consisting of four rounds in six EU countries (Brouard et al. 2022). The survey asked respondents whether they were satisfied with the way the EU handled the pandemic. This reflects



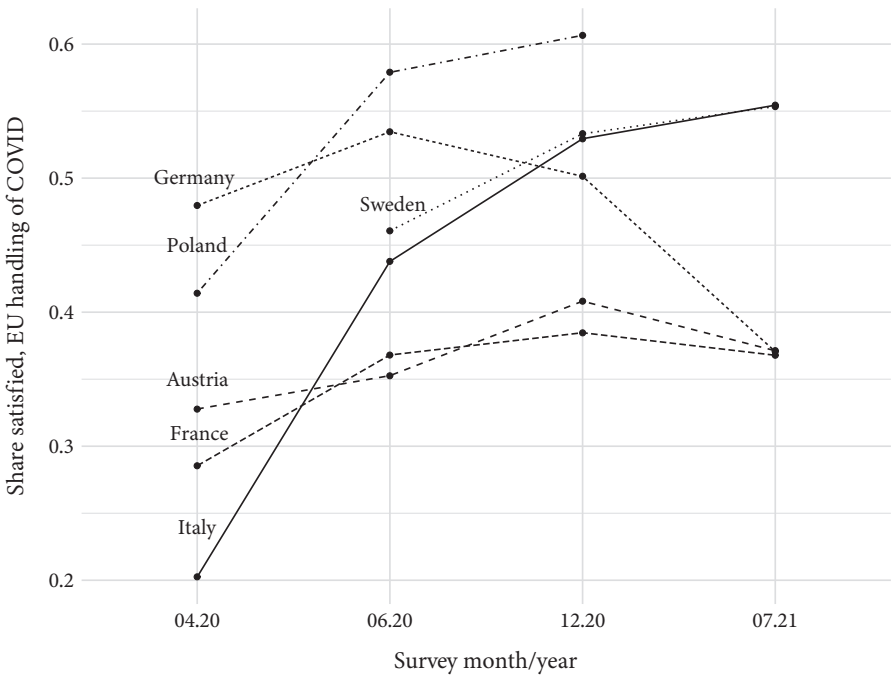
**Figure 11.3** Eurobarometer data: feelings toward EU in EU 26.

*Note:* Data shown for EU 26 (excluding Croatia which joined in 2013, and the UK, which voted to leave in 2016). Question asked respondents how they feel about the EU. Response categories: “Very positive, fairly positive, neutral, fairly negative, very negative.”



the specific satisfaction with policy, which is likely to have a more direct and immediate impact on bonding. Figure 11.4 plots the share of respondents who were satisfied in each period of the survey.

For all countries, and particularly for Italy and Poland, satisfaction with the EU increased after the first round of the survey in the early phase of the pandemic.<sup>2</sup> This reflects the improved performance of the EU in later parts of the pandemic after scrambling to respond in the first wave. Around the time of the second round of the survey is when the EU announced the recovery fund (see Chapter 8), while during the final two surveys, the EU announced and then carried out the coordinated procurement and distribution of vaccines (see Chapter 6). The fact that Poland and Italy have the highest improvements in satisfaction suggests that it is the recovery fund that is responsible for most



**Figure 11.4** Satisfaction with EU handling of COVID.

*Note:* Calculated as share satisfied versus unsatisfied. Sweden and Poland were only asked this question in three out of the five rounds, all other countries were asked in four out of the five.

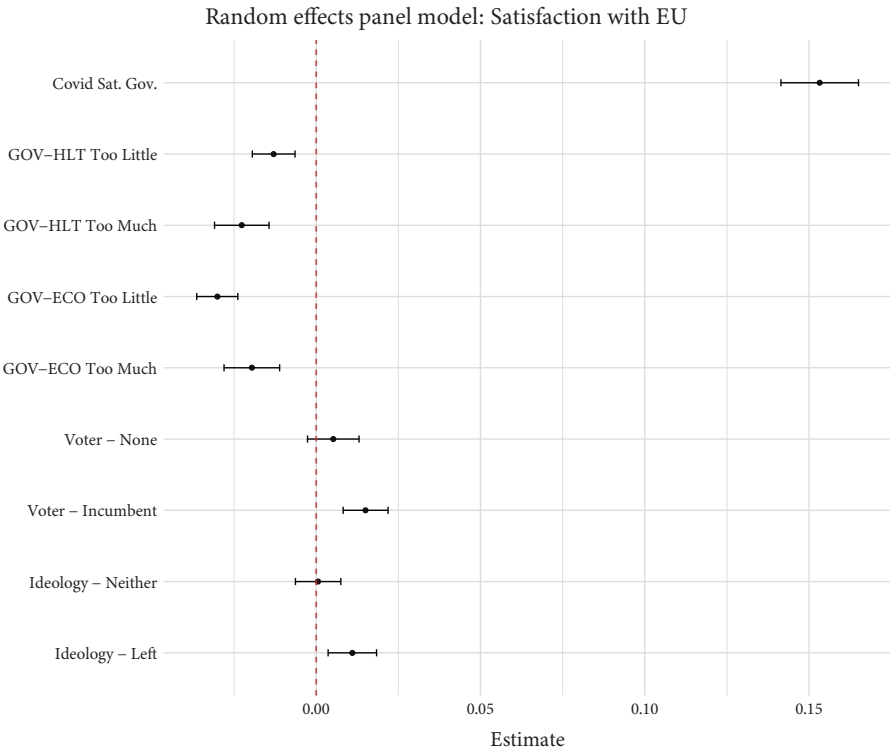
<sup>2</sup> Figure A11.3 in the online Appendix shows the same period for satisfaction with the national government. The trend goes the other way, starting from very high satisfaction, which then goes down. This reflects strong actions by national governments in the beginning of the pandemic, and a (fading) rally-around-the-flag effect in the face of a major disruptive event (Altiparmakis et al. 2021).

of the improvement, as both countries are some of the largest (potential) beneficiaries of the fund (see [Chapter 8](#)). A more detailed analysis, performed later in this section, confirms that it was the EU's handling of the economy that drove satisfaction with the EU.

By contrast, there are smaller improvements in Austria and France and decreasing satisfaction among Germans. This can be explained by three factors: satisfaction with the national government, with EU economic policy, and with EU vaccination policy. We elaborate on all of these in the subsequent analysis. All three countries show lower, or decreasing, satisfaction with the national government's handling of COVID-19 (Figure A11.3 in the online Appendix). The steep decrease in satisfaction with the national government in Germany is linked to EU-level economic policy and the vaccine purchasing agreements ([Figure 11.9](#)). Germany is one of the few EU countries which felt that it could have been more efficient to negotiate and roll out vaccinations on its own. Indeed, the German government at the time was severely criticized for the vaccination procurement, with the opposition effectively attacking Merkel and blaming the deficiencies at both the German and EU levels on her decisions ([Alexander 2021](#)). This would lead us to expect that opposition voters in Germany would grow more dissatisfied over time than government voters. Figure A11.2 of the online Appendix supports this hypothesis. It shows that the trend of satisfaction decreases faster for German opposition voters than for government voters. Germans are also the least satisfied with the EU vaccine procurement and EU economic support ([Figure 11.7](#)).

We further investigate the nature of satisfaction with the EU with several models. [Figure 11.5](#) shows the coefficient plot for a random effects panel model<sup>3</sup> (see Table A11.1 in the online Appendix for full details). Our main predictors of interest are satisfaction with the government's handling of COVID, ideology, and voting intention. In addition to satisfaction with the government, we also include evaluations of government policy on health and economic interventions, whether individuals considered that interventions were too limited, too far-reaching, or just right (reference category). We control for gender, age (older individuals, more heavily hit by the pandemic, may have different evaluations), general attitudes including satisfaction with life and interpersonal trust, as well as several measures of attitudes toward COVID-19 (belief in conspiracy theories and measures of feelings toward the pandemic in the respondent's country: anger, fear, and hope). We omit

<sup>3</sup> Results were substantively identical when using an individual fixed effects model.



**Figure 11.5** Coefficient plot: satisfaction with EU COVID-19 handling, random effects.

control variables from the figure. Full results can be seen in the online Appendix.

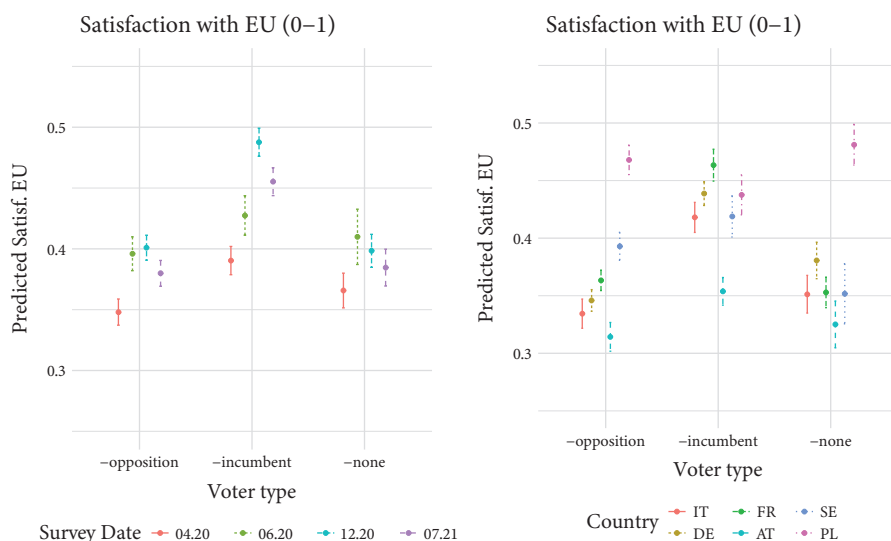
All coefficients are rescaled from 0 to 1, including the dependent variable. Therefore, all effects correspond to the maximum effect of each variable. The strongest predictor is satisfaction with the national government’s handling of COVID. Going from the minimum to the maximum satisfaction with the government’s handling of COVID-19 increases satisfaction with the way the EU handled the crisis by 15 percent. We, therefore, see evidence of a spillover effect whereby satisfaction with the national government is associated with greater satisfaction with the EU.<sup>4</sup> This effect has been observed in other analyses (such as in [Chapter 9](#)). However, it is likely that a part of it is specifically due to the nature of COVID-19 whereby the division between EU competency and national competency (particularly when it comes to vaccination

<sup>4</sup> Plausibly, this effect could run both ways, as satisfaction with the EU could spill over to the national government. However, there are strong reasons to believe that cuing by national elites forms the main mechanism (Ares, Ceka, and Kriesi 2017).

and the green pass) may not have been clear to respondents. This is further corroborated by the following four coefficients, which show that when respondents do not agree with the public health or economic policy of the national government (too much or too little, compared to just right), they are also less satisfied with the EU.

This effect is also visible, yet smaller,<sup>5</sup> when we consider the effect of voters for incumbent parties, who are also more satisfied with the EU's handling of COVID. Lastly, we also notice a small but significant effect of ideology,<sup>6</sup> as left-wing respondents are more satisfied with the EU. We attribute these effects to the multilevel policymaking structure of the EU, where competencies are shared between the EU and member states.

Figure 11.6 further breaks down the effect of types of voters (incumbents, opposition, and non-voters) by country and by panel rounds.<sup>7</sup> The left-hand



**Figure 11.6** Predicted values for voter type by survey and country.

*Note:* Dates and countries are ordered left to right in both figure and legend.

<sup>5</sup> Given that satisfaction with government handling of COVID is descendent of voting intention (i.e., those who intend to vote for the government are likely more satisfied with it), the effect of voting intention cannot be interpreted as a total effect. We re-estimate the model excluding satisfaction with government, and the effect increases in size to 0.05, remaining substantively small compared to satisfaction to government.

<sup>6</sup> Ideology is a parent, meaning that it causally precedes, of both voting intention and satisfaction with government. We therefore re-estimate the model excluding these variables. We obtain substantively identical results.

<sup>7</sup> For ease of presenting results interaction models were built using pooled OLS with country and wave dummies. Results are nearly identical using random panel models. For reasons elaborated in footnotes

side shows the effect by panel round. What we can see is that across all voter types, satisfaction with the EU improved after the first round. Importantly, the difference among voter types in the first round is substantively small. This suggests that politicization had not yet reached voters by that point. In the later waves of the pandemic, satisfaction increased for all groups but improved the most for voters of incumbent parties, thus supporting findings from the cueing literature.

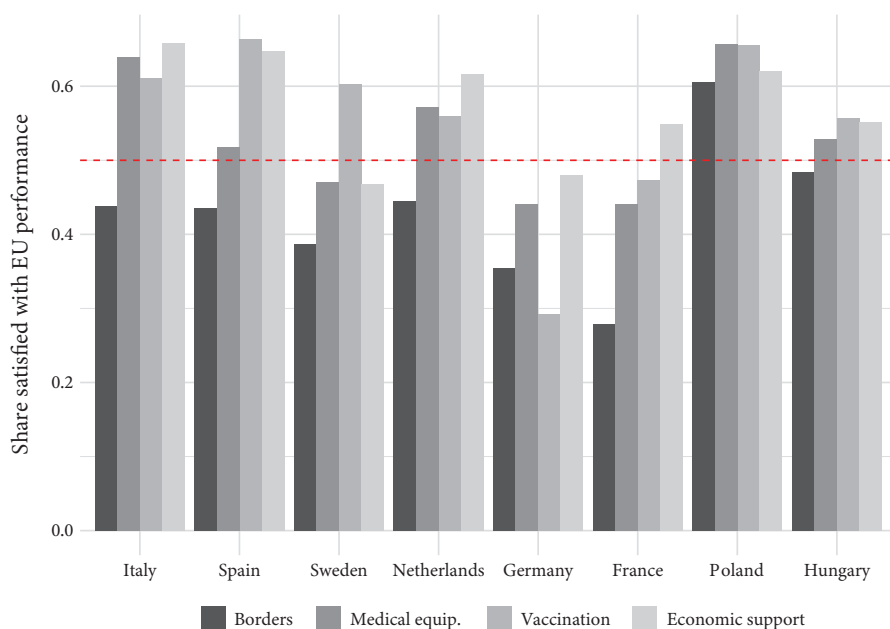
The right-hand side of the figure shows the breakdown by country. The effect is driven by Italy, France, and Germany, with Austria and Sweden showing small effects and Poland showing the opposite effect. The effect in Poland is driven by voters for the opposition and non-voters, who are similarly satisfied. Voters for incumbents are less satisfied. The likely mechanism is again cueing by political elites (see [Chapter 9](#) in this volume, also [Ares, Ceka, and Kriesi 2017](#); [Bartels, 2023](#)). In Poland, government elites are intensely critical of the EU. Therefore, it makes sense that their supporters are less satisfied with the EU. In Italy, France, and Germany, on the other hand, mainstream political elites give positive cues about the EU. National elites in these countries also play an important role in EU policymaking.<sup>8</sup>

To further test our other expectations about the nature of satisfaction with EU COVID-19 policy, we use a more recent survey, fielded in December of 2021 where we ask more specific questions about satisfaction with different policy areas. We use the same survey to test all three mechanisms for bonding and their effect on support for making the NGEU fund permanent in the final section. [Figure 11.7](#) shows the share of respondents approving (compared to disapproving) different EU COVID-19 policies by country.

We find support for our expectations that across countries, respondents are less satisfied with how the EU managed border controls and travel rules, given the lack of EU response at the beginning of the pandemic. Satisfaction with the sharing of medical equipment is also, on average, lower, although it is country-specific. Respondents show the highest satisfaction with vaccine purchase agreements. The important exception here is Germany. As we have previously discussed, Germany was one of the few EU countries which may have been more effective at procuring vaccines by itself, given their vaccine production capacity as well as their higher fiscal capacity and population size which would have resulted in high bargaining power. Germans, therefore, felt they were held back by the general EU vaccination effort, which proved slower than the UK and US. Indeed, the German government was heavily

5 and 6, following our DAG in [Figure A11.1](#) in the online Appendix, we exclude satisfaction with government to obtain the total effect of voting.

<sup>8</sup> [Figure A11.2](#) in the online Appendix shows the breakdown by country and survey panel together.



**Figure 11.7** Satisfaction with different aspects of EU COVID-19 policy—December 2021.

Source: Created using data from the ERC SOLID surveys.

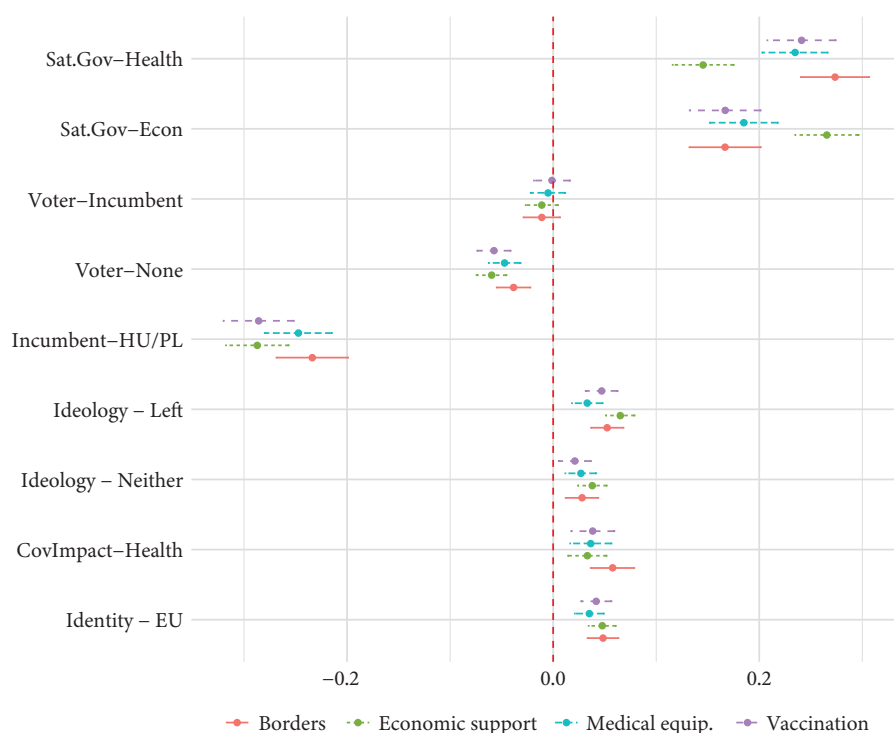
criticized by the opposition specifically for its handling of vaccination, as Germany redistributed vaccines to Central and Eastern European countries (Alexander 2021). Our data show that Germans are overall more dissatisfied with the performance of the EU during the pandemic. However, it is their dissatisfaction with vaccines and economic aid that sets them apart from other countries and explains the overall dissatisfaction shown in our panel data. German dissatisfaction contrasts with the opinion of respondents from other countries regarding Germany. In Chapter 9 we noted that most other respondents think that Germany has benefited the most from pandemic-related EU policy.

The second main policy area that shows very high satisfaction, similar to vaccines, is economic policy. In Spain, Italy, Poland, and surprisingly the Netherlands, and to a slightly lesser degree in Hungary and France, respondents show high satisfaction with economic support given to all member states. Swedes display the expected dissatisfaction associated with their government's stances on EU economic policy. Dutch respondents, however, show a surprising trend given that their government is the most important member of the "frugal" coalition and opposes most redistributive EU funds. This suggests that the decision of Dutch politicians to accept the

NGEU fund is related to public opinion in the country. We cannot disentangle with our data whether elites follow the public or the other way around, but our other analyses in this chapter suggest that there are independent factors that contribute to individual-level support for solidaristic policy (attitudes toward the pandemic, empathy with other EU citizens, and EU identity, among others), thus suggesting a possible independent effect of public opinion. However, we also know from [Chapter 9](#) that Dutch respondents perceive Germany, which was crucial for passing the NGEU fund, as their closest ally. Poles and, to a lesser degree, Hungarians are surprisingly satisfied across all policy domains, despite their government's anti-EU stance. As we demonstrated, this is driven by opposition and non-aligned voters, as incumbent voters take stronger cues from their Euroskeptic elites. Another explanation for the overall high satisfaction is the crisis situation, its symmetry, and the ensuing lower salience of national identities and cross-country conflict, which impacts both elites and public opinion ([Ferrara and Kriesi 2022](#)).

[Figure 11.8](#) shows the coefficient plot for pooled models using all four satisfaction questions as dependent variables. We look again primarily at satisfaction with government handling of the pandemic in the health and economic domains ("Sat.Gov Health" and "Sat.Gov Econ") and political ideology and voting intention (incumbents, opposition, or none, where we also include a dummy for incumbents for Hungary and Poland which behave differently). We also consider more direct pandemic-related attitudes: whether the pandemic had a health ("CovImpact Health") or financial ("CovImpact Financial") impact on them, as well as the impact of European identity. We control for several factors, including gender, age, vaccination status, subjective difficulty with living on present income, interest in politics, and education (omitted from the figure together with country fixed effects, see [Table A11.2](#) in the online Appendix).

Despite the large variation across policy domains, satisfaction with all policies follows similar dynamics, with almost equal coefficients. There is a strong positive effect of being satisfied with the national government both with public health and economic policy (both predictors show a stronger effect for their respective policies at the EU level). [Figure 11.9](#) shows the predicted values for each country by satisfaction with national government, for vaccination policy. For ease of showing results, we remove all other countries except Poland, Hungary, and Germany. All other countries follow the same trend as Germany, showing a strong positive effect. For Poland, the effect is absent, while for Hungary, it is strongly negative. Germans who are dissatisfied with the national handling of COVID-19 are particularly



**Figure 11.8** Predictors for satisfaction with different aspects of EU COVID-19 policy.

*Note:* Controls and country fixed effects not shown. See Table A11.2 in Appendix.

dissatisfied with the EU vaccination policy. Indeed, Germans are more dissatisfied than other respondents across the board, for all levels of satisfaction with government (not shown).

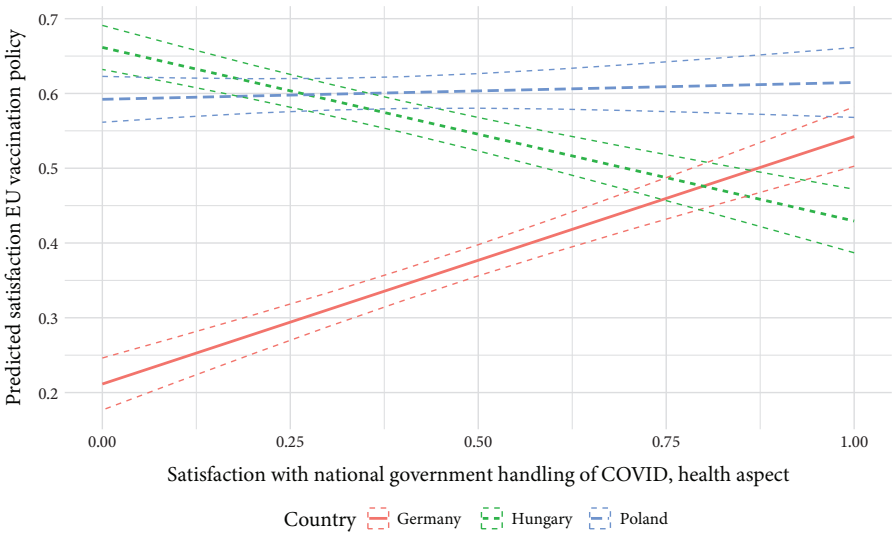
Voting for incumbents shows no effect compared to voting for the opposition, while non-voters are less satisfied.<sup>9</sup> Incumbents in Hungary and Poland are much less satisfied with the EU, confirming our previous findings. Again, we note the importance of cueing while also noting that it is not the only factor that influences satisfaction with the EU. In fact, as Figures 11.7 and 9.10 (Chapter 9) show, Hungarians and Poles are overall quite satisfied with the EU. What the strong effect of voting intentions in Hungary and Poland tells us is that the EU is much more politicized across government–opposition lines in these countries compared to others in our sample. Interestingly, when we break down the effect of voting intention by country (not shown), we see no

<sup>9</sup> Following our DAG (Figure A11.2), to correctly identify the effect of voting for incumbents, we exclude satisfaction with government, which is a descendent. The effect becomes statistically significant but remains substantively trivial for all countries except Hungary and Poland.



effect for Germany when it comes to vaccination policy but a strong effect when it comes to borders and economic policy. Given that Germans have negative views about the vaccine procurement across the board, it may be that successful criticism by the opposition persuaded government voters as well. Considering the strong effect of satisfaction with government (Figure 11.9) we conclude that this dynamic is driven by dissatisfied incumbent voters.<sup>10</sup>

We further investigate these dynamics by looking at which policy dimensions determine overall satisfaction with the EU during the Pandemic. Figure 11.10 shows the coefficient plot with the effect of the four categories of satisfaction with the EU, as well as the two categories of satisfaction with government, on overall satisfaction with the EU in the pandemic by country.<sup>11</sup> For reasons of ease of showing results, we remove all other countries except Hungary, Poland, and Germany. All other countries show similar effects to Germany.

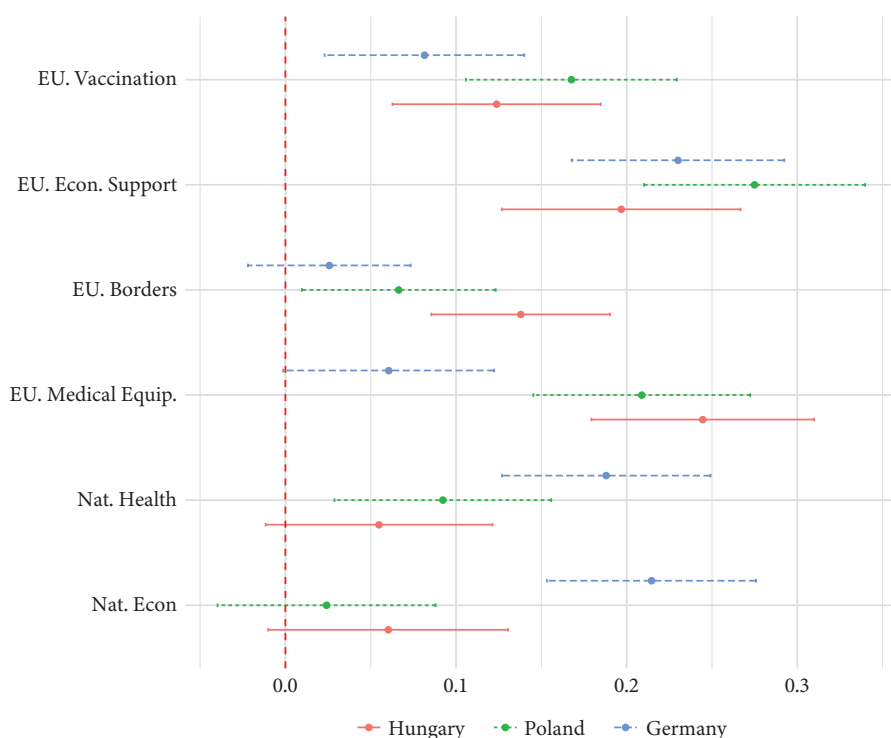


**Figure 11.9** Satisfaction with national government, by country.

*Note:* Other countries removed from figure for reasons of ease of showing results. All other countries follow the trend of Germany.

<sup>10</sup> When we look at differences in satisfaction with government between incumbent and opposition voters, we see that Germans have the smallest gap (not considering Hungary and Poland, which show a different dynamic). While German opposition voters are as dissatisfied as French opposition voters, German incumbent voters are considerably less satisfied than French incumbent voters.

<sup>11</sup> For the outcome variable, we combine the answers to two broad questions on satisfaction with the EU, for health, and economic policy. We use the same controls as before (not shown).



**Figure 11.10** Drivers of satisfaction with the EU's handling of COVID.

*Note:* Other countries removed from figure for reasons of ease of showing results. All other countries follow the trend of Germany.

We confirm our results that dissatisfaction for German voters is primarily driven by three factors: satisfaction with the national government (showing one of the strongest effects between countries), EU vaccination, and EU economic policy. As we saw, Germans stand out for being particularly dissatisfied with both policies (Figure 11.7), as well as with their government. Satisfaction with EU economic policy is a strong predictor for all countries, demonstrating that it is the main factor standing behind the overall satisfaction in other countries. Satisfaction with border policy is trivially related to overall satisfaction, telling us that EU citizens do not hold the EU accountable for initial border closures.

We therefore see that satisfaction with EU COVID-19 policies follows similar patterns to general satisfaction and approval of the EU. It is therefore not surprising that countries with individuals who are more satisfied with policy also show higher rates of improved view of the EU. Figure 9.10 of Chapter 9, which plots the share of individuals for each country who agree that their

view of the EU had improved following the pandemic response, illustrates a similar pattern to the satisfaction with the EU's performance, with countries in the South and East having higher shares of respondents who say that their view of the EU has improved.<sup>12</sup>

We, therefore, find evidence that EU citizens were overall satisfied with the EU's pandemic response, at least after the initial wave. We also find evidence that this satisfaction has led to them improving their view of the EU. We, therefore, expect satisfaction to be one of the mechanisms for increased bonding at the EU level during the pandemic.

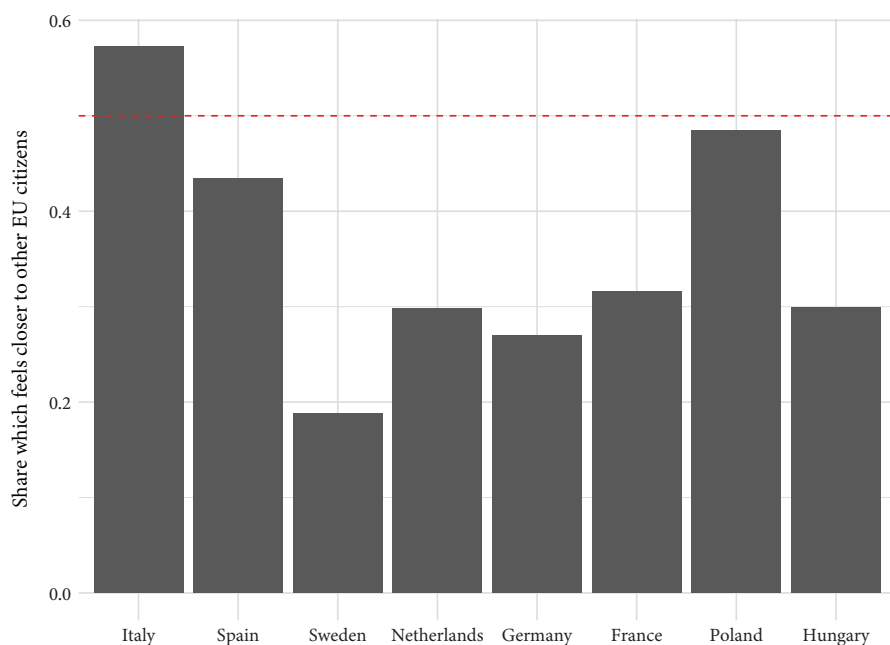
We further conclude that EU citizens follow cues from their national elites when it comes to EU policy. However, apart from Hungary and Poland, we find that the EU pandemic response is not strongly politicized at the national level. We further find that there are pandemic-specific factors, besides national cues, that impact satisfaction with the EU.

## The drivers of empathy

The final mechanism we investigate is increased empathy between EU citizens. The common shock of the pandemic, coupled with the fact that COVID-19 was felt in one way or another by all EU citizens (either directly through infection or indirectly through the disruption of their economic and social lives), may have resulted in higher levels of empathy between EU citizens. Psychological research has shown that common difficulties bring individuals together and result in stronger individual bonds (Bastian, Jetten, and Ferris 2014). This effect has also been experimentally demonstrated for the COVID-19 pandemic, as individuals became more generous toward outsiders when primed with fear about the pandemic (Han et al. 2021).

We operationalize empathy with a question in our December 2021 survey asking individuals if they feel closer to other EU citizens because of the pandemic (see Chapter 9). Figure 11.11 shows the share of individuals in each country who agreed with the statement. The highest share is in Italy, with almost 60 percent agreeing to the statement, and the lowest in Sweden, with less than 20 percent agreeing. This offers initial support for our hypothesis that empathy is related to the degree to which individuals were affected by

<sup>12</sup> Note that this is the share who report to have improved their view of the EU and not their overall approval. We do not have a measure of respondents' overall view of the EU to construct a baseline. However, we can use views on EU integration as a proxy. Figure A11.4 of the online Appendix shows a scatterplot of our baseline proxy and the share who improved their view of the EU. What can be seen is that respondents in countries which already had a favorable view of the EU integration improved their views the most.



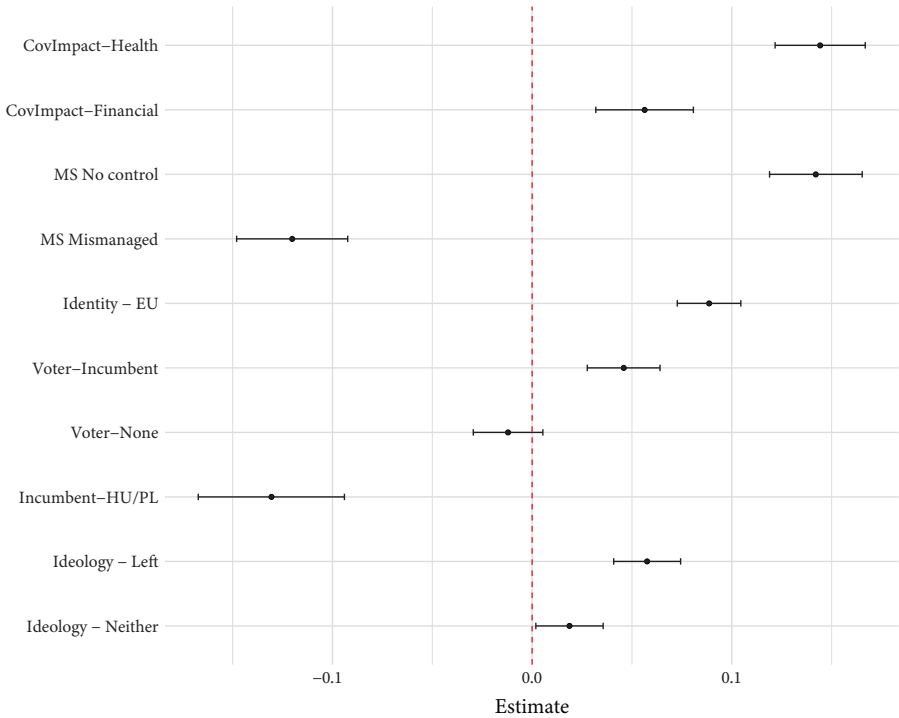
**Figure 11.11** Empathy due to the pandemic.

Source: Created using data from the ERC SOLID surveys.

the pandemic. Italy was one of the hardest-hit countries and the first in Europe to have a massive outbreak in March 2020. The country then underwent one of the tightest lockdowns in the EU, continuing to lock down in the face of subsequent waves. Sweden, on the other hand, had a milder first wave and chose to limit its use of lockdowns, therefore imposing fewer restrictions on individuals.

We test this expectation more formally by looking at the determinants of empathy in a pooled OLS model with country fixed effects. Figure 11.12 shows the coefficient plot. Country fixed effects and controls are not shown in the figure but can be seen in Table A11.3 in the online Appendix. Our results show that respondents who report that COVID-19 had a strong impact on their finances have higher empathy, with the effect being stronger for the health impact of the pandemic. Empathy thus has a direct link to individuals' experiences during the pandemic. In the next section, we show that empathy has a strong effect on support for solidaristic policy. Together, these findings suggest that COVID-19 was indeed particular as a crisis hitting the EU.

Second, we also find support that empathy is related to the exogenous shock of the pandemic. Respondents who perceived that member



**Figure 11.12** Explanatory model for empathy following the pandemic.

*Note:* Controls and country fixed effects not shown. See Table A11.3 in Appendix.

states did not have control over the impact of COVID-19 show higher empathy. This supports the literature finding that empathy is linked with views on deservingness, as circumstances outside an individual’s control make them deserving of solidarity (Jensen and Petersen 2017). The deservingness heuristics appears to hold at the cross-national level as well. EU citizens show more empathy when they believe the event was not under the control of member states. Conversely, respondents who believe that member states mismanaged the pandemic are less likely to show empathy.

We find a positive association between European identity and empathy. This lends support to the idea that EU identity acts as a delimiter of the space between “us” and “them.” Shared suffering is more likely to lead to feeling closer to other EU citizens if individuals are already willing to identify to some degree with other EU citizens. We see smaller associations with voting intention (apart from Hungary and Poland), and ideology. This suggests that

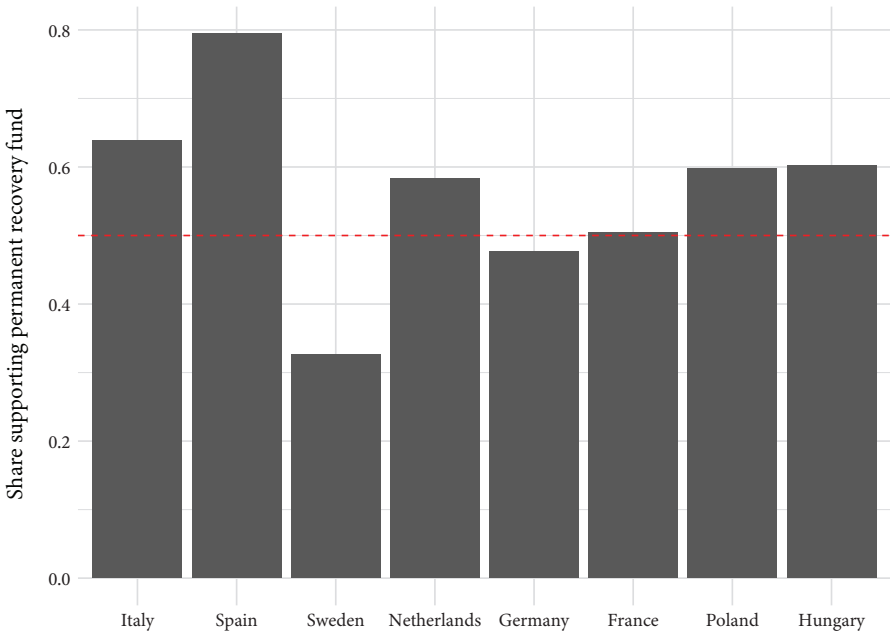
empathy itself may be conditioned by elite cues and ideological predispositions, but to a lesser degree than direct experience with the pandemic.

We conclude from both our descriptive as well as our OLS analysis that the shared trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic increased empathy among EU citizens. This feeling varies by country and varies by individual experience in the pandemic. Respondents in countries that were more badly affected and individuals who were more impacted by the pandemic were more likely to show empathy. In the final section, we explore the effect of empathy, together with our other two mechanisms, on solidaristic policy support.

## **Identity, satisfaction, and empathy as predictors for bonding**

One of the most important policies enacted by the EU during the COVID-19 pandemic was the recovery fund (see [Chapter 8](#)). After initial failures to issue common debt (corona bonds), member states agreed on the Union's largest financial package to date. Crucially, the fund uses borrowing at the EU level and a large part of the funds are given as grants. The fund also allows for the first time for taxes to be raised at the EU level. The NGEU fund is, therefore, the clearest policy that can show the effect of bonding, as it implies redistribution at the EU level. Our survey asks respondents whether they would support making the temporary fund permanent, which would be a form of capacity building at the center.

[Figure 11.13](#) shows the share who agrees with making the fund permanent, with a horizontal line at 0.5 which indicates majority agreement in a country. As expected, Southern and Eastern countries are supportive of making the fund permanent, given that they are net beneficiaries. However, the differences with the frugal countries (the Netherlands and, to a lesser extent, Sweden) and Germany and France are not as large as expected. In particular, Dutch respondents show similar levels of support for making the fund permanent as the Eastern countries and Italy. This might suggest that there is something different about the COVID-19 recovery fund compared to other similar policies that the EU attempted in the past. It might also suggest that one of the reasons why the Netherlands eventually agreed to the fund is bottom up. Politicians were better able to be responsible toward the needs of the Union while being responsive to their electorates.



**Figure 11.13** Support for making recovery fund permanent.

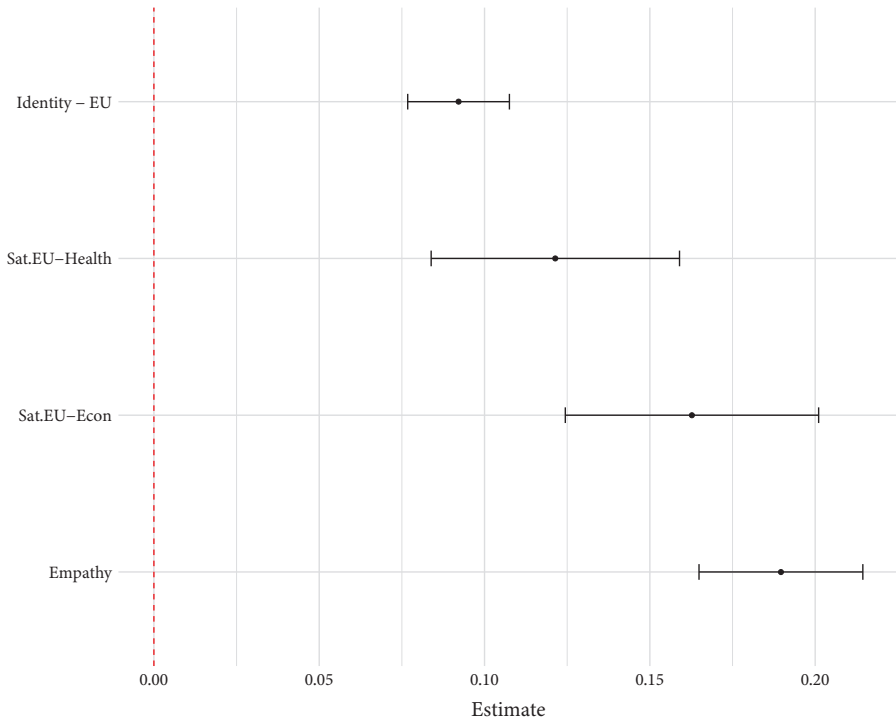
Source: Created using data from the ERC SOLID surveys.

Figure 11.14 shows the coefficient plot for the model combining the three main mechanisms, identity, satisfaction, and empathy.<sup>13</sup> As usual, we omit country fixed effects and all other controls from the figure. Details are available in Table A11.4 in the online Appendix. We include the political factors we previously studied (satisfaction with government, voting for incumbents, and ideology), COVID-19-specific factors (vaccination status, perceived personal impact on health and finances, view that the pandemic was an external shock outside the control of member states, and view that member states mis-managed the crisis). Lastly, we include a series of demographic controls and country fixed effects.

We first note that all three mechanisms have a substantive impact on support for solidaristic policy. Table A11.4 shows that the three mechanisms have the largest effect sizes of all factors by a wide margin.<sup>14</sup> Empathy has the

<sup>13</sup> The figure combines estimates from two models. The effect of European identity was estimated in a separate model that excluded satisfaction and empathy, in order to obtain the total effect. Since European identity is a parent of both other mechanisms, including them would have underestimated the total effect. All other controls are identical, as none would introduce bias according to our theoretical assumptions, and may increase precision.

<sup>14</sup> We ran separate models to correctly estimate the total effects of our political variables, ideology and voting. Ideology comes close, but still below the total effect size of European identity.



**Figure 11.14** Identity, empathy, and satisfaction: support for permanent recovery fund.

strongest effect of the three mechanisms, followed by satisfaction with EU economic policy, satisfaction with EU health policy, and finally EU identity.

First, individuals who identify with the EU only or with the EU first and nationality second are associated with an increase of 0.09 support on the 0–1 scale, one of the strongest effects in the overall model.<sup>15</sup> This relationship, coupled with the fact that we have noted that the start of the pandemic saw the highest share of respondents identifying as European in a decade, lends support to the idea that this was an important mechanism for bonding in the COVID-19 crisis.

Second, as expected, satisfaction with EU COVID-19 policy (both health and economic) predicts higher support for making the fund permanent, showing some of the largest effects (between 0.1 and 0.2 points on the 0–1 scale). Given the relatively high rates of satisfaction with policy, we take this

<sup>15</sup> When we include the category of nationality first and then European, the effect increases to 0.11. When we consider all differences separately, we find a 0.2 difference between those with exclusively European and exclusively national identities, while controlling for other factors.



as evidence that satisfaction is another important mechanism for bonding. Simply put, for reasons elaborated in the section on satisfaction, Europeans were overall quite satisfied with the EU's handling of COVID, which led them to support more policy control at the center.

We now turn to the pandemic-specific mechanism of empathy. Direct empathy (feeling closer to other EU citizens because of the pandemic) shows the strongest effect in the analysis (about 0.2 on the 0–1 scale). This strong total effect suggests a diffuse effect of generalized empathy which was likely determined by the salient nature of the pandemic, as well as its symmetric effect on EU citizens. We take this to be yet another particularity of COVID, generating high empathy across EU citizens. This has so far been a neglected aspect of the pandemic and its impact on European politics. It remains to be seen whether empathy during the pandemic will have long-term effects on European identity and EU polity-building.

We also note the effects of other pandemic-related attitudes which are related to empathy. Views on the responsibility of each member state show a significant effect comparable to political ideology. Those who think the pandemic was an external shock outside the control of member states are more likely to be solidaristic. This is in line with our expectations that empathy is higher when individuals are not perceived to be responsible for their circumstances (a *deservingness mechanism*, as with health and life course risks in general). We also see a similar coefficient for the impact of COVID-19 on respondents' health, but not the impact on their finances. This again lends support to the view that health risks are particular. Individuals view the health risks of others as random and are more willing to be solidaristic with them.

## Conclusion

This chapter started with the puzzle of why, despite high levels of conflict and failures in previous crises to pass solidaristic EU-level policy, EU citizens showed high levels of bonding during the pandemic. We explored three mechanisms for stronger bonding during the pandemic. The first mechanism, diffuse support for the polity, was higher identification with the EU at the start of COVID-19 compared to other crisis periods. While EU identity did not (yet) increase as a consequence of the pandemic, its higher starting level can partly explain why there is stronger bonding in COVID compared to other crises. Our analysis showed that individuals with a stronger EU identity were more likely to support making the recovery fund permanent.

It is, therefore, a plausible mechanism for the higher levels of bonding and a possible demand-side pull factor for passing the NGEU fund.

Second, we looked at specific support for the polity, namely satisfaction with EU policy. While satisfaction was low in the beginning, likely due to the slow and ineffectual EU policy response, it picked up toward the end of the first wave, and in later waves, following the passing of the NGEU fund and vaccination procurement, resulting in high levels of satisfaction in most countries. We note, however, the lower satisfaction of Germans, which could bode trouble for future solidaristic policymaking. We saw also that voters do hold the EU accountable according not just to strong cues from national elites (positive for most countries, negative for Hungary and Poland) but also from their own direct experience in the pandemic. EU citizens expect policy responses from the EU and evaluate such policies, which then impact their support for solidaristic policy. Satisfaction with EU policymaking was high especially for vaccination and economic policy, with views of the EU having improved in many countries.

Lastly, we investigated the mechanism of empathy, a form of support for the community. We theorized that the symmetric external shock of the pandemic generated higher levels of empathy among EU citizens. We saw that such empathy is the strongest predictor of bonding. We also showed that our measure of empathy has several strong predictors, including an individual's own experience in the pandemic and views on responsibility for the national responses to the pandemic. Empathy has so far been an understudied mechanism for bonding at the EU level. It deserves more attention. Bonding implies a shared sense of identity, broadening the scope of the in-group. Shared experiences, particularly negative ones, increase the sense of belonging to a single community. Identifying with other people's hardships is an important way to identify with them more broadly. Empathy can be the first step toward enlarging the circle of "us." It remains to be seen whether shared experiences during the pandemic will bring Europeans together in the long term.

## Conclusion

### The European Union, Polity-Building and the COVID-19 Crisis

#### Introduction

This book assessed the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the European polity between 2020 and 2022. Three empirical and theoretical puzzles guided our inquiry where we established a link between crisis characteristics, policymaking processes, conflict configurations, public preferences, and polity consequences.

First, why was the European management of the COVID-19 crisis relatively successful compared to the conflictual and suboptimal outcomes of other crises, like the refugee and Euro area crises? We ask what was so specific about the COVID-19 crisis, compared to other crises, which facilitated a joint response of the European Union. Contrary to the refugee crisis with its asymmetric problem pressures and low EU competences ([Ferrara and Kriesi 2022](#); [Kriesi et al. 2024](#)), the COVID-19 crisis was symmetric and fell onto varied levels of EU competences whilst also underlining the need for greater coordination and burden-sharing.

Second, why do we see variation in responses across the health and economic policy domains in the multifaceted COVID-19 crisis? We show how a combination of competence distribution between the EU and its members, along with the externalities of decision-making and the time horizon of policymakers, influenced the type of policy solutions and polity-building resulting from crisis politics.

Third, we ask how conflict configurations played out during the COVID-19 crisis within each policy domain. Among other things, we show that European domestic conflicts were circumscribed to their respective arenas, with limited spillovers—a few exceptions being linked to the rule of law crisis in Poland and Hungary and the disbursement of the NGEU. Contrary to the refugee crisis, where Central European populism has proved to

be a powerful brake on the common quota solution, few domestic conflicts were uploaded to the EU level. We argue that the conflict configurations that emerge in the crisis situation determine the opportunities and constraints of the policymaking process during the crisis in a given policy domain. In general, we find that on the one hand, the extreme and encompassing problem pressure of COVID-19 “muted” the interlinkages between European and domestic conflict configurations; on the other, this segmentation of transnational and national conflict structures facilitated the emergence of a solidaristic common response at the European level.

From the theoretical point of view, the EU fared better during the COVID-19 pandemic than one could have expected: for instance, the failing forward literature (Howarth and Quaglia 2021; Jones, Kelemen, and Meunier 2016; 2021) underlines that during crisis times the “lowest common denominator” and the “joint decision trap” block swift and resolute policy solutions, thus creating a breeding ground for future crises (Benz 2011; Scharpf 1988; 2006).

Empirically and somewhat counterintuitively, the EU pulled its act together on the supply side of politics (Schelkle 2021) despite a decade of recurrent and poorly managed crises that polarized EU member state governments and amplified domestic conflicts—e.g., with the acceleration of the rise of the far right after the Euro area and refugee crises (Kriesi et al. 2024: 492). On top of these, the EU broke some long-held taboos by creating new capacities and competences in policy domains that were most unlikely before the crisis (fiscal in the form of NGEU, health in the form of common vaccine procurement and the creation of the EHU and EU4Health), which formal models predicted would probably never happen (Beramendi 2012; Beramendi and Stegmueller 2020; Rehm 2016) due to the heterogenous geography of the EU and its different national-level growth strategies. These formal models lent strength to arguments claiming that the EU was poorly positioned to act in times of crisis as a polity, given its second-order territoriality, weak center (Alexander-Shaw, Ganderson, and Schelkle 2023), and low competences in crisis-related policy domains, not to mention the conflictual decade it emerged from—as embodied by the acrimonious debates on refugee quotas and budgetary instruments.

On the demand side of politics, EU citizens displayed astonishing preferences for risk-sharing, which were not seen during the Euro area crisis (Bechtel, Hainmueller, and Margalit 2014). Our arguments and findings (see below) shed light on what explains the support for the solidaristic response of the EU, which goes against identity-based accounts of solidarity (Banting

and Kymlicka 2017; Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2021; Hooghe and Marks 2018).

Why and how did the EU turn these policy responses into polity-building? This is the core question of our book, and in the following, we first summarize how we mobilized the European polity perspective to give an innovative answer to this question that goes beyond the usual “more or less integration” approach thanks to a more precise set of concepts (binding, bonding, and bounding). Next, we give a bird’s-eye view of the main findings of our book. In the last two sections of the conclusion, we spell out the theoretical and policy implications of our findings.

## **The argument: the EU polity perspective, crises and polity-building**

To shed light on these puzzles, our argument leverages the polity approach to the EU (Bartolini 2005; Ferrera 2005; Ferrera, Kriesi, and Schelkle 2023; Rokkan 1974) by using three key concepts: binding, bonding, and bounding.

First, binding refers to political decision rules and capacity building at the center as well as rules for crisis governance. In the book (Chapter 2 and especially Table 2.5), the outcomes in terms of binding can be subsumed under either regulation or capacity building at two levels (EU or member states), which yields four possibilities: centralized coordination, centralized capacity building, decentralized capacity building, and fragmentation. In crises like COVID-19, it is not at all preordained that crises will lead to centralized capacity building. For one thing, the EU has a weak center (Alexander-Shaw, Ganderson, and Schelkle 2023) dominated by member state executives. This can disincentivize capacity building in the center of the European polity. These national executives may rather opt for decentralized capacity building. Central capacity building and collective action in the EU can also be undermined by problems like the weakest link, i.e., weaker members cannot contribute to stabilization and thus push stronger members to renege on solidarity commitments because they foresee perpetual contributions without benefits. The EU’s master tension (Ferrera, Kriesi, and Schelkle 2023)—i.e., when national politics are destructured but EU politics are not necessarily restructured—can exacerbate conflicts over binding, especially because domestic conflict structures can shape EU-level conflicts. The more destructuring takes place at the domestic level, the smaller the potential winsets of respective governments (Putnam 1988). The worst case happens when Euroskeptical parties enter government, as in Hungary, Poland, Italy,

and Greece: it can be that the winsets of these governments are so small that they basically block the policymaking machinery (Kelemen 2020). Consequently, transnational conflicts can become more polarized with new groups emerging.

Second, bonding encompasses both solidarity and identity. Like binding, bonding in Europe does not predetermine strong solidarity and identity at the European level. First, welfare states built since the late nineteenth century at the national level represent a powerful path-dependent force: the provision of welfare and its underpinning legitimacy and identity is located at the national level, not at the European one. Therefore, transferring solidarity to the European level can be difficult (Ferrera 2005). It is thus hard to see the European polity constructing new redistributive and welfare mechanisms. Second, animosities between member states make European bonding extremely difficult. Rich member states and their electorates are tired of footing the bill, from structural to crisis funds, from the 1990s to the 2010s. Poor member states are divided. Central European states and the Baltics, on the one hand, demand more European solidarity to compensate for communism, the neoliberal transition, and the lack of a level playing field in the single market. On the other, they have a hard time to be solidaristic with relatively richer southern member states which did not implement the same number of structural reforms as they did during their transition in the 1990s and which are perceived to be living beyond their means. Southern countries are not necessarily keen on funding countries that are seen as competitors for scarce funding and where governments undermine democracy. It is, therefore, somewhat counterintuitive that a limited form of European bonding did appear during COVID-19.

Third, bounding refers to who, when, and how can control exit, entry, and closure/opening. This issue was crucial during COVID-19 due to the preeminence of lockdowns and traveling rules. Given the importance of Schengen, the single market, and the fact that freedom of movement is the linchpin of everyday European life, one would have expected the EU to act more forcefully to preserve these benefits of European integration. Instead, the EU was sidelined, and national governments reigned supreme once again over their own borders. This failure in the initial stages of the pandemic was partially redeemed by later coordination attempts (e.g., green lanes, Green Passes, and traffic light systems of traveling). Therefore, we ask why the EU failed to act in the first phase of the pandemic but pulled its act together later on. We argue that because the EU is a second-order territorial space, with member states controlling entry and exit between countries, COVID-19 measures reinforced the latter and undermined EU cohesion.

These three dimensions of the polity perspective go beyond the usual uni-dimensional concepts of “more or less integration” and can be combined to yield new insights into the process of polity-building. For instance, binding can happen with or without bonding, and this will have different political consequences in the long run. Take the Euro area crisis in the 2010s. Some limited central capacity building occurred through new institutions like the European Stability Mechanism (ESM). However, this type of binding was not accompanied by bonding: the ESM’s conditionality did not exactly scream solidarity. During COVID-19, this proved to be an acute political problem, as potential recipient countries did not want to limit their own sovereignty in the midst of a crisis they were not responsible for, and neither did they want to be further stigmatized by an instrument designed for countries which could not cope (and which could thus unleash a self-fulfilling prophecy on the financial markets). Therefore, although the Euro area crisis did lead to more binding, the lack of bonding hindered the self-improving political equilibrium that would contribute to the strengthening and the maintenance of the European polity—a crucial question during a crisis.

The polity perspective thus invites us to look not only at the three B’s but also at their relationships, and thus to ask more complex and multidimensional questions regarding the impact of crises on the European polity, and to uncover more complex causal paths. As the Euro area and refugee crises indicate, binding without bonding is not a recipe for polity-building and resilience. Likewise, binding that does not generate bonding cannot be sustainable, as the legitimacy literature reminds us (Scharpf 1999; Verdun and Christiansen 2000). Our evidence concerning bonding during the COVID-19 crisis is mixed, but it still paints a more encouraging picture than during the other two crises and suggests that binding (e.g., NGEU) rested on sounder foundations. This begs the question of knowing when a crisis generates enough bonding for binding to be sustainable.

This is the second line of our argument: the characteristics of the COVID-19 crisis helped to overcome the aforementioned polity hurdles (Ferrara, Schelkle, and Truchlewski 2023; Ferrara and Kriesi 2022). The COVID-19 crisis created a window of opportunity to overcome the inbuilt structural tensions in the European polity in its binding, bonding and bounding dimensions. Because COVID-19 was an external, extreme and relatively symmetric shock with rather uniformly distributed risks, it helped overcome collective action problems (Ferrara, Schelkle, and Truchlewski 2023; Kriesi and Bojar 2023). This multifaceted shock also entailed long-term consequences with significant externalities (e.g., by increasing divergence between member states and therefore potentially altering the calculus of belonging to

the European polity—a risky outcome in the aftermath of Brexit (Baccaro, Bremer, and Neimanns 2021)). Such a long term horizon reduces the cost of bargaining and institutional innovation: the result is new capacity at the center.

## Main findings: how COVID-19 spurred European polity-building

We mobilized our conceptual apparatus to answer these core questions of the book in several steps. The book's first part mostly focuses on the politics of crisis policymaking and polity formation during COVID-19. Chapter 2 lays out the theoretical groundwork for subsequent empirical analyses, elaborating the aforementioned three-pronged argument that forms the basis of our polity perspective and explaining our three core concepts, the three B's (bounding, binding, and bonding). We go beyond classical integration theories by elaborating theoretical and empirical links between crisis situations, crisis policymaking, and their impact on EU polity-building. In a nutshell, COVID-19 facilitated EU crisis-fighting through its sheer problem pressure and symmetric nature as a crisis. On the one hand, these characteristics of the COVID-19 crisis played out differently in the health and economic policy domains due to heterogeneous competences, externalities, and time horizons. On the other, they helped to dampen the EU's master conflict and confined domestic and international conflicts in their respective arenas. The politicization of COVID-19 was more manageable than in previous crises, and thus, joint European problem-solving was more likely.

Chapter 3 sketches out a historical timeline of how the pandemic unfolded in Europe as policymakers and citizens rode successive COVID-19 waves. It also presents our main datasets, which use policy process analysis (Bojar et al. 2023) and public opinion surveys.

Chapter 4 delves deeper into the politicization of policymaking in the EU (in Brussels and capitals of member states) based on measures of salience and polarization. Despite a relatively slow start, policymakers got the act of crisis management back together, but not without reactivating certain conflict lines inherited from previous crises: thus, our expectation that the symmetry and salience of the COVID-19 crisis would diminish conflicts between member states is not entirely confirmed since we found a high level of polarization across all waves at the EU-level. COVID-19 reactivated a conflict between the solidarity coalition, the Frugals and the Visegrád Four, mostly in the first wave. These animosities notwithstanding, contingent factors made possible



the emergence of solutions: the severity of the crisis, the cooperation between EU and national executives who depoliticized the issue temporarily to focus on problem-solving (a result of the symmetric and severity of the crisis), the lack of structured domestic partisan contestation stemming from the difficult linkage between the public health crisis and the left–right divide, the consensus between policymakers on both levels of the European polity on most issues, the competences of the EU in the realm of economic policies, the fact that Merkel held the EU presidency before retiring from politics, and finally the segmentation of EU-level and national-level conflicts (the increase in national conflicts in later COVID-19 waves was contained at the national level).

A broad picture emerges that sheds a first light on the response of the European polity to COVID-19. For economic policymaking, the European conflict structure pitted two coalitions against each other, but two smaller groups exercised important veto power and extracted important concessions: the Frugal Four and the Visegrád Four. In the domestic arenas, the national government and chief executives were pitted against various actors (opposition, businesses, unions, NGOs, and experts). For health-related policymaking, the member states all faced the EU actors, allied with business, given their unilateral actions and the limited competences of the EU actors in this domain. Finally, the left–right axis of politics conflict has driven the opposition in the economic realm, but less so than one would have expected. The crisis did not trigger a conflict between cosmopolitans and nationalists. The fact that—contrary to the Euro area and refugee crises—the EU did not meddle with domestic policymaking, especially regarding lockdowns, where national governments revealed themselves to be “policymakers of last resort,” facilitated joint problem-solving at the EU level. However, once NGEU and joint vaccine procurement were adopted, politicization declined at the EU level but increased at the national level in later waves as the rally-around-the-flag faded away and the contentious politics of health restrictions emerged.

The second part of the book unpacks these broad patterns on the supply side of politics and analyses five main policy dimensions in [Chapters 5 to 8](#) (borders and lockdowns, public health policy, the single market, and macroeconomic policies) by exploring their timing, policymaking, and outcomes at the two levels—European and national. The main questions that organize these four chapters are why the EU acted in some policy domains (vaccines, the single market, and macroeconomic policies) but not in others (borders and lockdowns, PPE export bans and procurement) in the first COVID-19 wave, and when the EU acted, whether it managed to balance the level playing

field between member states or whether it exacerbated inequalities between winners and losers of the crisis.

Concerning borders and lockdowns, [Chapter 5](#) shows the importance and limitations of the functionalist logic of polity-building. Like other policies (e.g., trade), open borders create functional pressures that the EU must address to continue functioning, especially during a pandemic. The EU has had a limited impact on national decisions to close borders and control entry *in the first COVID-19 wave*. The lack of EU coordination encouraged member states to go it alone or simply copy their peers under the pressure of the crisis. In the latter waves, however, the EU engaged in comprehensive coordination with new instruments (e.g., the Green Pass). The lesson on lockdowns is that in the first phase of COVID, short-term pressures created a path of least resistance where policymakers reverted to existing structures at the cost of suboptimal outcomes. Once the first wave receded, long-term considerations triggered a functionalist logic in EU polity politics that resulted in coordination and capacity building in domains with, respectively, low and high externalities.

[Chapter 6](#) considers the policy domain of public health, a domain where the EU has very little competence and where one should not expect theoretically the EU to engage in capacity building. However, this did not preclude the EU from stepping in, as the row over PPE masks and exports quickly showed that lack of coordination would be disastrous for vaccines—where externalities of not acting together were arguably bigger. Perhaps because of the low salience of health policy and its longer time horizon, the EU created HERA (European Health Emergency Response Authority) and EHU (European Health Union) whilst also expanding the mandates of the ECDC (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control) and the EMA (European Medicines Agency) without transferring authority to the EU level, but rather by dramatically strengthening its coordination capacity. The health policy outcome was less dramatic than NGEU, but no less important: the coordination role of the EU was greatly extended through intergovernmental capacity building. The level playing field was maintained to a certain extent through a common vaccine policy—which would have put smaller and poorer countries at a disadvantage if they had gone alone—but the EU did not preclude domestic factors (trust, vaccine hesitancy) from creating territorial disparities.

[Chapter 7](#) turns to national economic policies and the EU's single market. The chapter casts light on the early emergency policies aimed to compensate for lockdown effects (economic lifelines, macroeconomic stimuli, and extensions of early measures). Because lockdowns were national, economic

countermeasures were also national. This political-economic chain reaction quickly threatened the single market as national governments exhibited different fiscal firepower. EU agencies tried to balance the level playing field by suspending fiscal and competition rules while also crafting reinsurance mechanisms for weaker states (SURE and CRII). An important twist appears, however: by letting members use their public debt indiscriminately to cushion the crisis, long-term disparities between member states have increased, implying that the fiscal space of some members has shrunk much more than that of others (especially of Southern vs. Northern members).

**Chapter 8** asks whether these long-term disparities can be mitigated by NGEU (Next Generation EU), the flagship EU innovation that came out of the COVID-19 crisis after much drama. The answer is a tentative “yes.” Although there was no quantum jump to a new federal Europe, EU member states pooled resources in the form of NGEU. In the meantime, the ECB became much more open in its support of government budgets. The European fiscal reaction did not generate centralized state-like capacity (implying a sort of federal Europe) but a joint form of pooling resources that is aimed at reinsuring its constituent members (Schelkle 2022).

All in all, Part II, which focused on binding, explains why the EU acted in some policy domains but not in others: the EU acted mostly where high crisis externalities threatened the level playing field between member states, especially in the long run (and thus risked altering the calculus of membership, a key issue after Brexit). But at the same time, the structure of the European polity, with mature states being the linchpin of a second-order territory, put national executives in the driving seat of crisis management. Because most of the resources are located at the national level and crises require fast reactions, centralized capacity building is costly regarding political capital, time, and administrative capacity. It thus most likely happens when there are high externalities and time pressures. Interestingly, centralized capacity building may reinforce national capacities instead of replacing them (as in the case of SURE and NGEU).

The book’s third part asks whether these supply-side solidaristic policies are broadly supported on the demand side of politics (i.e., citizen preferences). Did European crisis-induced polity-building stem from and contribute to a broader sense of solidarity and legitimacy?

**Chapter 9** first investigates transnational conflict structures at the level of citizens in four steps. First, it shows that despite the high salience of the COVID-19 crisis (Kriesi and Bojar 2023), European citizens know very little about the supply-side conflicts that erupted during COVID-19. This is a serious limit on the accountability of the EU. Second, **chapter 9** shows what

coalitions citizens perceive, how they see some countries as allies and others as opponents, and what they think about some countries being favored over others. Interestingly, despite the general low awareness of EU citizens, those who do have knowledge of these conflict configurations still correctly perceive conflict coalitions that emerged on the supply side of politics during COVID, which can be an effect of government cueing: the V4 countries against all other member states and the Frugal4 countries against the solidarity coalition. Germany is perceived as the key player by Southern and Eastern European citizens, which is a double-edged sword: Germany is both praised for the EU's successes and blamed for its shortcomings whilst also being accused of being the most favored country during the crisis (which could be the result of ingrained historical resentments rather than cueing), together with France. Third, the chapter shows how assessments of EU policymaking have shaped the bonds between the European polity and its citizens. It appears that the image of the EU improved among a minority of EU citizens (most notably among Southern and Central-Eastern European citizens) who benefited mostly from the EU's crisis management—which is good news in itself. Finally, the transnational conflicts serve as a constraint on EU bonding. The EU's crisis management has accentuated territorial conflicts between member states and between member states and EU agencies, which have been shaping up already before the COVID-19 pandemic. And these conflicts have a negative impact on the EU's image among its citizens.

**Chapter 10** pushes further the idea of a “geography of solidarity” where some countries are more favored than others. It asks whether Europeans are more likely to favor solidarity with EU countries (as opposed to a more universal solidarity embodied by countries outside the EU). The answer is a qualified “yes”: with the exception of Italy, we find that most countries are more solidaristic with EU countries than an outsider baseline state (Peru). There is, however, a strong heterogeneity regarding the size of this effect: Spain and Italy are most likely to be solidaristic, while Sweden, Netherlands, and France are the least likely, with Germany being less frugal than expected. On the other hand, solidarity is bounded within Europe itself, with an inner circle—France, Germany, Netherlands, and Sweden—mostly wanting to help themselves and the Southern Member States, but not Poland and Hungary, likely because of the rule-of-law debate. These two chapters have profound implications for policymaking within the EU. Unequal bonding preferences and circles of solidarity suggest that partial exits from the EU (e.g., the rule-of-law crisis created by Polish and Hungarian governments) come with a real cost in solidaristic attitudes.

Chapter 11 analyzes three potential mechanisms that may drive solidarity and support for the EU in bad times and underpinned the EU's positive response to the pandemic: identity, satisfaction, or empathy. First, the empirical evidence suggests that individuals having a stronger European identity are more likely to support a permanent recovery fund—the NGEU. Second, satisfaction with how the EU polity handled crisis politics increased after the initial teething problems of the EU, mostly thanks to NGEU and the common vaccine procurement—the only exception among EU countries being Germany. Third and finally, empathy, one of the strongest predictors of solidarity, was triggered by the symmetric nature of the COVID-19 crisis. Echoing Chapter 10, Chapter 11 suggests that there is indeed a new European geography of solidarity, not only a national one based on domestic welfare states.

Part III thus sheds some light on the questions of whether the supply-side policies analyzed in Part II were supported on the demand side of politics (i.e., citizen preferences) and whether the policies themselves create some solidaristic support. The answer is a qualified yes, and our evidence has unearthed a geography of solidarity in the European polity.

## Theoretical implications

Compared to other accounts based on EU integration theories or other approaches, our polity-focused toolkit not only systematically integrates crisis and polity characteristics into the process of crisis politics but it also brings together many parts of the puzzle to offer a systematic answer to our question: how did the EU survive and further its polity against all odds during COVID? We link both the supply and the demand sides to study conflict configurations at the EU and the domestic levels.

We start with the implications of the polity perspective for EU polity formation. Compared to other approaches, we do not assume that the EU has to mimic implicit counterfactuals (such as the US federal state) to successfully weather a crisis (Howarth and Quaglia 2021; Jones, Kelemen, and Meunier 2016). This allows us to better understand how the EU develops through crises like COVID-19 and what makes it resilient (or not). We implicitly define many pathways along which the EU can evolve through crises, with multiple combinations of binding, bonding and bounding that yield more fine-grained dependent variables than “more or less integration.”

More specifically, we suggest that the EU does not have to become a federation with a centralized budget to be successful (contrary to the failing forward literature). Thus, [Chapters 7 and 8](#) on economic policymaking have shown that despite being relatively modest in size compared to the US, the EU's macroeconomic response (e.g., NGEU, PEPP), in combination with the suspension of constraining fiscal and competition rules, has enabled member states to cope on their own, contrary to the Euro area crisis, when the EU clipped the wings of its constituents. New reinsurance-like binding magnifies national capacities instead of substituting for them through a central federal budget ([Rodden 2006](#); [Sandbu 2015](#); [Schelkle 2017](#)).

Such an approach has both political costs and benefits. On the benefit side, it is less politically and economically costly than pure centralization and harmonization (which could further destructure politics in the constituent member states by spurring anti-European sentiment), therefore limiting the impact of the double dynamic of destructuring at the national level and restructuring at the EU level ([Schelkle 2022](#)). On the cost side, the center's permissiveness with regard to the member states fiscal policies may have contributed to their rescue in the short term but is likely to have aggravated the fiscal tensions between them in the long term. Moreover, the opacity and the distance of this polity pathway is barely legible for the average European citizens (as [Chapter 9](#) has highlighted, EU citizens know very little of what happened on in policymaking terms). Thus, the impact on output legitimacy and in terms of loyalty-building is limited. It does not help that these solutions stem from informal transnational governance networks where it is hard to trace responsibility and apportion both credit and blame ([Ganderson, Schelkle, and Truchlewski 2023](#); [White 2020](#)).

Another advantage of the polity perspective is that, because we link both demand and supply sides and cast a wide empirical net on various policy domains, we are able to see where capacity building happens and why, at which stage of the policymaking cycle and whether it is supported by the citizens. This allows us to specify the conditions under which coordination and central capacity building take place and when they are sustainable (see for instance the above-mentioned relationship between bonding and binding). More importantly, the polity perspective gives us analytical leverage to formulate expectations regarding the impact of other crises than COVID-19 on the European polity and is thus fully transportable across time, space and policy domains, from the Euro area crisis to the refugee crisis.

The advantages of the polity approach—lack of a teleology implying that the EU should become a federal state with a strong center; a finer-grained definition of the dependent variables through the three B's, which goes beyond the “more or less” integration; linking both supply and demand sides; taking into account the distribution of competences in the polity and how crisis characteristics affect them—help us complement other theoretical approaches. Consequently, we have a more sanguine outlook on the crisis politics of the EU than the failing forward approach (Jones, Kelemen, and Meunier 2016; 2021). Lowest common denominator solutions and doom loops can be escaped if the crisis is encompassing, if externalities of collective action are high, and if the time horizons of expected benefits from coordination and capacity creation are long. Additionally, there are many ways and pathways for the EU to be (in)complete, which can yield different political-economic (dis)equilibria. This depends very much on how conflict configurations play out at the national and EU levels and how these two levels interact depending on the level of the EU's competences. If the EU has low competences and the crisis is asymmetric, crisis configurations make the lowest common denominator solutions more likely. If the EU has more competences and a crisis is symmetric/encompassing, the EU can override lowest common denominator solutions. All in all, integration theories do not seem to take sufficiently into account how both crises and polity characteristics interact to shape crisis politics and thus influence solidaristic solutions. This helps us to have a more generalizable approach to studying the EU in hard times.

## Policy implications

Our polity approach also has concrete, real-world policy implications. Many observers condemned, perhaps too hastily, the European reaction to COVID-19 in the short term (Herszenhorn and Wheaton 2020). With hindsight, the EU fared better than expected. We should be wary of biases that hide rather than reveal complex political processes: the short-term bias (we expect too much from the EU in the short run, which does not take into account the necessity to coordinate or to create new capacity and new competences when the need arises), the comparative bias (with the US or with centralized nation-states), and path-dependent biases that lump all crises into the same basket without taking into account the contextual characteristic of each crisis,

which, among other things, depend on its placement in the sequence of crises. Our polity approach offers a grid to avoid such observational biases and helps analysts of all things European to take a step back and use our yardsticks to critically assess how the European polity reacts under stress, especially by inviting us to think about how and which types of crises interact with an evolving European polity. If the EU does not always follow the same recipes as the United States, the implications are not necessarily that the EU is failing.



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