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Large-Scale Crises and Variation in Social Democratic Europeanism: The Italian Democratic Party

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Abstract

Since the late-2000s Great Recession and the beginning of the "polycrisis" era, scholars have reignited their interest in the (problematic) relationship between social democracy and European integration. What was the impact of the latest large-scale crises—the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine—on this relationship? In this article, we empirically assess the reaction of social democracy to these events in terms of party positions on the European Union (EU). Specifically, we look at one of Europe's largest social democratic formations, the Italian Democratic Party (PD). This case is especially relevant as Italy is a founding EU member and historically a driving force for EU integration, and was significantly exposed to the social, economic, and international consequences of the "polycrisis" at a time when the PD was often in government. We employ a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative and qualitative evidence to show both, respectively, *what* directional effects these large-scale crises exerted on the PD's EU positions and exactly *how* such impacts translated into party rhetoric on the EU. By doing so, we find that the PD reacted differently to the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian-Ukrainian war. On the one hand, the pandemic bolstered the PD's support for further European integration; on the other, the war has not significantly altered the party's approach to the EU. We attribute this to the crises' different policy implications. The pandemic foregrounded issues central to the centre-left, such as welfare and socioeconomic redistribution, including in the policy responses at the EU level; while the war shifted focus to more ideologically distant policy areas, such as common security and defence.

Keywords

Covid-19; European Union; Italian Democratic Party; Russian invasion; social democracy

1. Introduction

This article examines the evolving position of social-democratic parties towards the European Union (EU) in times of crisis, with a particular focus on the Italian Democratic Party (Partito Democratico, henceforth PD). Over the past decade and a half, the EU has experienced what has been described as a prolonged polycrisis (Zeitlin et al., 2019)—a series of interlinked and overlapping challenges that have collectively reshaped the dynamics of European integration. These crises have not only tested the Union's institutional resilience but have also affected national political debates and party competition across member states. The most recent events—i.e., the Covid-19 pandemic and the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in the 2020s—are especially significant, both because of their scale and because they required unprecedented EU-level responses that expanded the EU's role in policy areas traditionally dominated by national governments, paving the way for potential new developments in EU integration.

The literature has examined these two crises from multiple perspectives. A substantial body of research has explored their implications for European integration dynamics (Anghel & Jones, 2022; Buti & Fabbrini, 2023; Capati, 2025), the transformation of EU governance modes (Capati, 2024b; Håkansson, 2024), and the development of novel policies and instruments (Schelkle, 2021; Schimmelfennig, 2024). At the same time, these crises have become highly salient issues in national public debates, shaping people's attitudes towards the EU based on its perceived capacity to handle such external shocks (Gherghina et al., 2025). The Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian war on Ukraine have thus contributed to polarising domestic political arenas (Lehtonen & Ylä-Anttila, 2025) and to reshaping party competition over EU-related issues (Capati et al., 2024). Consequently, the literature on party politics has paid growing attention to national party reactions, focusing on their positions towards governments' immediate responses to the pandemic (Rovny et al., 2022) as well as their foreign policy orientations following Russia's aggression against Ukraine (Holesch et al., 2024). Another strand of the literature has focused specifically on changing party positions towards the EU, suggesting that these have implications for the direction of European integration as well as for the accession prospects of candidate countries (Gherghina, 2026).

Yet, despite this growing interest, there have been no systematic attempts to examine how political parties position themselves vis-à-vis the EU—the central institutional framework through which crisis management plays out—across crises. This article seeks to address this gap. Specifically, it investigates how the Italian social democrats, represented by the PD, adjusted their stance towards European integration in the aftermath of the pandemic and the onset of war, analysing whether and how their positions shifted in response to these different but overlapping external shocks.

Italy offers a particularly compelling case for such an analysis. As a founding member of the EU and a historically strong advocate of European integration, Italy has often aligned itself with deeper supranational cooperation. At the same time, it was among the member states most severely affected by the economic, social, and political repercussions of the polycrisis. These crises struck during a period in which the PD frequently held governmental responsibility, placing the party at the centre of decision-making processes regarding both domestic crisis management and negotiations at the EU level. Furthermore, Italy experienced the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine with particular intensity: the country was one of the earliest and hardest hit by the pandemic in Europe, and its economic structure made it especially vulnerable to the energy and security consequences of the war (Siddi, 2019). This context provides a unique

opportunity to analyse how a mainstream, pro-European party responded to major external shocks that simultaneously reinforced the need for EU-level solidarity and heightened domestic political tensions.

Finally, the Italian party system itself has undergone a significant transformation in recent years. The rise of populist, Eurosceptic, and anti-establishment parties—several of which have held governmental power—has challenged the PD and its status as the largest (and staunchly) pro-European formation in the Italian party system on the grounds of EU-related political conflict. In this volatile and increasingly polarised environment (Capati & Trastulli, 2025), the implications of these large-scale crises left considerable room for variation in Italian parties'—and especially social democrats'—positional responses vis-à-vis the EU: specifically, we argue, in light of the different policy domains impacted by these events and the Union's specific responses to them. The PD has faced the dual challenge of maintaining its traditional pro-EU-integration identity while adapting to a shifting political landscape marked by rising electoral volatility, changing public attitudes towards the EU, and competition from both the populist right and, to a lesser extent, the radical left (e.g., Chiaramonte et al., 2022). This makes Italy not only a crucial national context but also an illustrative case for understanding how social-democratic parties across Europe may recalibrate their EU positions when confronted with multiple crises and rapidly evolving domestic political dynamics.

This article argues that party families respond to EU crises in ways that are conditioned by their ideological orientation and the specific policy implications foregrounded by each crisis. Crises do not produce uniform responses across the political spectrum. Rather, they activate distinct opportunity structures for parties to either increase or decrease their support for European integration depending on the alignment between the crisis's policy implications—and related EU responses—and the party's ideological priorities (e.g., Marks et al., 2002). The Covid-19 pandemic brought forth issues closely aligned with traditional centre-left concerns such as welfare provision, public healthcare, and socioeconomic redistribution—policy areas where the EU's crisis response opened space for a more proactive and solidaristic approach to integration. By contrast, the Russian invasion of Ukraine shifted the policy focus toward foreign policy, defence, and security—domains that are historically distant from the centre-left's ideological orientation. On this basis, we argue that the PD increased its support for European integration during the pandemic, given the congruence between its ideological agenda and the nature of the EU's response. Conversely, we do not anticipate a significant shift in the party's stance on European integration in the context of the Ukraine war, as the prevailing policy implication of this crisis is less compatible with the centre-left's core ideological commitments. Through a mixed-methods analysis, aimed at assessing both *what* effects these large-scale crises had on the Europeanism of this relevant social democratic party and exactly *how*—i.e., through which arguments—such impacts transpired in party rhetoric, quantitative and qualitative evidence provide empirical support to our argument.

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 elaborates on the theoretical framework and lays out its guiding argument. Section 3 presents the article's design choices. Section 4 illustrates the empirical analysis, finally discussed in the concluding Section 5.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Social Democracy and European Integration

Similarly to other leftist formations, the origins of social democracy lie in the political representation of workers within the class cleavage (e.g., Bartolini & Mair, 1990; Emanuele, 2024; Lipset & Rokkan, 1967; Przeworski, 2009). Indeed, both its historical roots and achievements—such as the construction of national welfare states across Western European countries—have contributed to establishing economic redistribution at the core of issues "owned" by social democracy (Keman, 2017), including in contemporary voters' views (e.g., Sandberg, 2022). As per the established literature on cleavage-based party ideology and support for EU integration, this signals the centrality of economics for social democratic parties' pro-European or Eurosceptic stances on an ideological basis, leading scholars to theorise a not entirely supportive posture (Marks et al., 2002, p. 587).

In this light, social democracy's longstanding and *de facto* largely acritical support for EU integration has constituted one of the central conundrums for left politics scholars (e.g., Bailey, 2009). This is because of the neoliberal nature of this process, especially in the context of the Economic and Monetary Union (Johansson & Raunio, 2001). Regional economic integration in the EU has traditionally favoured export- rather than consumption-led economic models (Hope & Soskice, 2016), detracting from the more comprehensive redistributive measures and universalistic welfare provisions traditionally at the ideological core of social democracy. In fact, if anything, EU integration has been profoundly influential in domestic politics, in the opposite direction: that is, constituting one of the main determinants of social democrats' well-known convergence to the ideological centre (e.g., Steiner & Martin, 2012). To this end, the comprehensive transformation towards a neoliberal economic platform of "Third Way" social democracy over the 1990s, at the heyday of globalisation, is emblematic (e.g., Giddens, 1998).

Since then, however, the circumstances have profoundly changed. After its collapse with the late-2000s' Great Recession, the international economic order based on neoliberalism and globalisation was no longer generally seen as a system with no losers (Kriesi et al., 2008), which made it more vulnerable to criticisms. Although the reality of external constraints has often prevented mainstream and routinely governing parties, such as social democrats, from sharply departing from essentially neoliberal economic policies (e.g., Mair, 2011), intellectual elaboration on alternative political systems was spurred amongst centre-left intellectuals—including about the EU. Notably, the "Good Society" debate of the early 2010s, aimed at providing a political blueprint for social democratic parties, placed much of its focus on the idea of "Social Europe" (Meyer & Spiegel, 2010). This is a considerably transformed EU, with much deeper degrees of socioeconomic integration through instruments, such as supranational fiscal policy levers and a "European welfare," able to redistribute and pursue greater equality beyond the nation state—a level already comprehensively overcome by economic globalisation. As some of these principles transpired in the programmatic outlook of important Western European social democratic parties during the 2010s (Diamond & Guidi, 2019), this reinforces the idea that the direction of socioeconomic EU integration might fundamentally impact the nature of social democratic parties' support towards the European project. This is an especially important consideration in the face of factors that may, indeed, steer EU integration in different directions.

2.2. Crisis Policy Implications: Social Democracy and EU Integration in the Large-Scale Crises of the 2020s

To this end, we argue that large-scale crises may, under specific conditions, impact social democratic parties' positions on EU integration, by impacting EU integration itself. Over the past 15 years, the EU has faced a succession of crises commonly described in the literature as the "multiple crises" of European integration (Fabbrini, 2020) or the EU's "polycrisis" (Zeitlin et al., 2019). These include—though are not limited to—the eurozone crisis (2009–2012), the Crimean crisis (2014), the asylum and refugee crisis (2015), Brexit (2016), the security crisis (2016), the Covid-19 pandemic (2020–2022), and the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine (since 2022). Each of these episodes has represented a "moment of truth" for the EU, marking what Van Middelaar (2020) has called a "return of politics." Importantly, these crises have spanned a range of policy areas and have varied in terms of EU competence, levels of politicisation, the symmetry of their impact, and the extent to which their origins were exogenous as opposed to endogenous.

The literature on crisis pressures has suggested that some of these factors may play a crucial role in shaping the type of policymaking process the EU adopts in its response to crises. In particular, Ferrara and Kriesi (2022) argue that the nature of EU competence in the affected policy domain and the symmetry of a crisis's impact give rise to four distinct modes of policymaking—constraining dissensus, enabling dissensus, enabling consensus, and permissive consensus. They apply these categories to the refugee crisis, the eurozone crisis, Brexit, and the Covid-19 pandemic, highlighting how each configuration has long-term implications for the effectiveness of the EU's crisis response. Similarly, Bojar and Kriesi (2023) contend that differences in the degree of politicisation, pace, and symmetry account for the divergent outcomes in the EU's handling of the refugee crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic. At the same time, they point to similarities across both cases, notably the prevalence of executive-led decision-making prompted by the urgency and uncertainty inherent in the crisis context.

Building on this literature, we apply the logic of crisis pressures to explain variation in the positions of political parties towards the EU, using the concept of "crisis policy implications" as an analytical tool. We argue that just as crisis pressures shape the behaviour of institutional actors—including EU supranational and intergovernmental institutions as well as member state governments—by creating specific incentive structures for crisis policymaking, they also foreground policy implications that compel political parties to reassess and potentially adjust their stance on European integration.

We apply this perspective to the two large-scale crises of the 2020s under investigation in this article: the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which generated distinct policy implications (Anghel & Jones, 2022). The pandemic raised pressing concerns related to welfare systems, public health, and socioeconomic redistribution, thereby creating an opportunity to promote a more solidaristic vision of integration as opposed to the austerity-driven response to the eurozone crisis (Oana & Truchlewski, 2024). As a result, the EU adopted NextGenerationEU, with its landmark Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF): an unprecedentedly expansionary socioeconomic policy based on debt mutualisation (Bekker, 2021), with interventions chiefly aimed at member states' healthcare and welfare systems. In contrast, the Russian invasion of Ukraine brought renewed focus to foreign policy, security and defence, asylum, and enlargement—areas that have traditionally remained peripheral to the EU integration project and have largely operated through intergovernmental coordination mechanisms among member states (Genschel &

Jachtenfuchs, 2014). The EU's own response to the Russian war has been multifaceted. It has encompassed measures under the Common Foreign and Security Policy, notably the adoption of extensive restrictive sanctions against Moscow; actions within the framework of the Common Security and Defence Policy, including the activation of the European Peace Facility in support of Ukraine's defence; policies in the area of asylum, such as the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive to facilitate the reception of Ukrainian refugees across the Union's territory; as well as the launch of the enlargement process towards Kiev, recognising Ukraine's candidate status and linking reconstruction support to accession-related reforms (Capati, 2024a). Beyond that, Russia's aggression has led to a renewed awareness of NATO's central role in ensuring European security, with the United States pressing for substantial increases in defence spending by EU member states (Howorth, 2025).

We argue that, because the two large-scale crises of the 2020s chiefly pertained to distinct policy domains that, in turn, are differently related to the ideological core issues of social democracy, social democratic parties will have reacted differently to them in terms of their positions on EU integration. In particular, the Covid-19 pandemic chiefly impacted socioeconomic policy areas that are ideologically central to social democracy, and were met by redistributive and expansionary EU policy responses that we expect to be appreciated by social democrats. On the other hand, the Russian invasion of Ukraine pertained to a multitude of policy domains, some of which—including asylum—were in line with social democracy's longstanding ideological commitments; and others, such as security and defence, which were outside of social democracy's ideological core (e.g., Trastulli, 2025). For this reason, we do not expect that social democrats will shift their EU integration stances on an ideological basis as a result of the Russian war on Ukraine.

Therefore, this article puts forward a two-fold argument. First, it argues that the PD, as the Italian social democratic party formation, has adopted more favourable positions on EU integration in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. Second, it argues that the PD has not altered its positions on EU integration following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine.

3. Research Design

3.1. The Case of the PD Within the Contemporary Italian Political System

As a case setting, contemporary Italy is a substantively important—and surely peculiar—context for our analysis. Currently in its "Third Republic" phase, Italy boasts an unprecedentedly unstable and deinstitutionalised party system (e.g., Chiaramonte et al., 2022), although currently experiencing a relatively stable radical-right-led government made up of Fratelli d'Italia, Lega, and Forza Italia. Despite the longstanding divisions on foreign policy between historically pro-Russian (Lega) and other pro-EU/NATO forces (Forza Italia and, more recently, Fratelli d'Italia), the centre-right parties' pragmatic focus on common domestic policy positions, including in terms of responses to large-scale crises, makes for the coalition's cohesiveness.

On the left of the political spectrum, 2007 brought about a new formation in the Italian party system and a new reality in the country's broader political context. Indeed, this is when the PD was founded as a uniquely peculiar formation: the merger of both Italy's main leftist formation—the Left Democrats, direct heir to the Italian Communist Party—and social-liberal Christian democrats from The Daisy. The PD was explicitly

conceived as a centre-left party with a "majoritarian vocation," ready to take on the Berlusconi-led centre-right coalition at a time of *de facto* bipolar party competition in Italy (e.g., Donovan, 2011). As a result, although it is routinely included in comparative political analyses of social democracy (e.g., Emanuele & Trastulli, 2024), some have come so far as to question whether the PD constitutes an authentically social democratic formation (Pasquino, 2013). For instance, the PD has historically had a complicated relationship with the Party of European Socialists and Democrats—only joining it in 2014—and is a highly factionalised party with complex positions on several issues, including on the Russian-Ukrainian war and Italy's relationship with Moscow. Despite these peculiarities, as shown in Figure 1, the main sources of data on partisan supply—the Chapel Hill Expert Survey and the Manifesto Project datasets—both concur that the PD has displayed increasingly high and consistently above-average levels of pro-Europeanism in the Italian party system over the course of its history. This contributes to making the PD a most likely case of continued support for EU integration in response to large-scale crises.
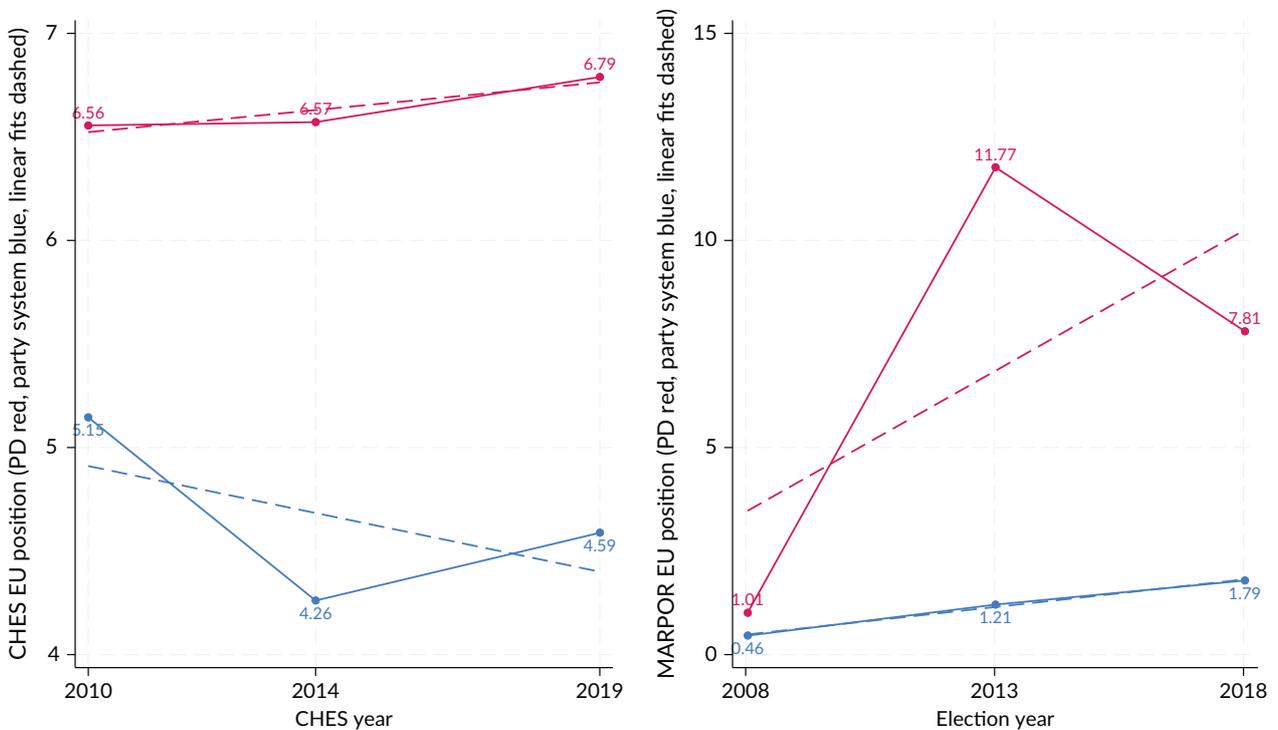
Figure 1. Levels of PD and Italian party system's (mean) Europeanism. Notes: CHES = Chapel Hill Expert Survey; MARPOR = Manifesto Project; data can be accessed at https://www.chesdata.eu (CHES) and https://manifesto-project.wzb.eu (MARPOR).

3.2. Data and Methods

Our methodological framework builds on two fundamental premises: the press-release assumption and saliency theory. The press-release assumption posits that parties use social media as a strategic tool for their political communication aimed at the public (De Sio et al., 2017; Kreiss, 2016). Saliency theory, in turn, suggests that, given the limited space for political communication through any platform, parties expound their political positions by putting different emphasis on different issues and ideological positions in their political messaging (Budge & Farlie, 1983). We move from these premises to analyse party positions vis-à-vis the EU through social media output. In particular, we leverage original datasets of Facebook posts obtained

via Meta's research platform, Crowdtangle. Differently from one-off forms of programmatic output to convey parties' ideological stances, such as party manifestos, social media are used by parties to continuously communicate and engage with their audience, which makes them ideal for the analysis of responses to events outside of electoral campaigns, such as Covid-19 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This is even more so as recent research has shown that party discourses on European integration may differ from the views expressed in their electoral manifestos (Mitru & Tap, 2026). Furthermore, social media provide an unmediated look into the positions that parties intend to convey, rather than through the lens of media reports. In particular, Facebook is an especially apt choice for our analytical purposes, being both a social media platform on which Italian parties are particularly active and that lends itself especially well compared to others—e.g., Twitter/X—to the discussion of political issues often mobilised from a populist perspective (e.g., Ernst et al., 2019), such as European integration. Because existing research has shown that Italian parties refrain from talking about potentially controversial or politically uncomfortable crises—such as the Russian war in Ukraine—in their electoral manifestos (Trastulli & Mastroianni, 2024), the mentioned qualities make Facebook data particularly fitting for measuring parties' EU positions in a way that is both reactive to critical events and continuous over time.

Relatedly, to measure party positions on the EU before and after the two considered critical events, we followed established approaches in the literature (e.g., Capati et al., 2024; Capati & Trastulli, 2025). In particular, we look at Facebook posts from the official PD page over the continuous four-month span made up of the month preceding the outbreak of each crisis, to have a positional baseline in pre-crisis times, and the three months following the outbreak of the crisis, to allow for parties' immediate programmatic response to such events to fully emerge and consolidate. To this end, we identify the following key dates for the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. For Covid-19, we select the televised national address of Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte on the evening of 9 March 2020, in which the first lockdown measures were announced, as the crisis starting point, hence collecting Facebook posts between 9 February and 9 March 2020 for the pre-crisis period and between 10 March and 4 June 2020 for the following three months. For the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we similarly adopt Russian President Vladimir Putin's televised address in the early hours of the morning on 24 February 2022, in which the beginning of the full-scale military operations was announced to the world, as the starting point in our empirical investigation of this crisis. Therefore, for the pre-crisis period, Facebook posts for Italian parties were collected between 23 January and 23 February 2022, whereas posts from 24 February to 25 May 2022 were collected for the subsequent three months. This resulted in the collection of 1,815 Facebook posts made by the official PD page in the timespan considered for the Covid-19 pandemic, of which 405 pre-crisis and 1,410 post-crisis; and 236 posts during the four months under investigation for the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, of which 50 pre-crisis and 186 post-crisis.

After the data collection, two independent coders performed a claims analysis of the Facebook posts (e.g., Koopmans & Statham, 1999) based on the codebook reported in Table A1 in the Supplementary File (with reliability scores reassuring about intercoder agreement: percent agreement of 98.70% for Covid-19 and 96.98% for the Russian invasion of Ukraine; Cohen's κ of 0.912 for Covid-19 and 0.893 for the Russian invasion of Ukraine). This allowed for gathering information concerning whether the content of each Facebook post contained a positionally favourable (i.e., pro-EU), unfavourable (i.e., anti-EU), or unclear message. These extensive data were subsequently reshaped to a time-series cross-section dataset, by considering party-day combinations as the unit of analysis. This allowed us to build measures of

pro-Europeanism and anti-Europeanism, capturing the proportion of daily posts that the PD devoted to either pro- or anti-EU messages over the total of daily posts. The difference between the proportion of pro- and anti-EU posts was employed to derive a synthetic measure of partisan "Position on the EU," potentially ranging between 1 (all daily Facebook posts thematically in favour of the EU/EU integration) and −1 (all daily Facebook posts thematically against the EU/EU integration).

Table 1 presents descriptive information concerning the thematic nature of Facebook posts sent out by the PD during the two analysed crises versus all other formations in the Italian party system for which we gathered data (the full list of parties by crisis is reported in Table A2 in the Supplementary File). As evident, whilst rising in politicisation between the two crises—in line with historical trends shown by time-series data on party supply such as, for instance, the Manifesto Project's—the EU issue is only one of many in the multidimensional electoral contestation of contemporary Italy (e.g., Bakker et al., 2012), overall thematising around 10% or less of Italian parties' Facebook posts. Against this backdrop, the PD's levels of pro-Europeanism appear, on average, as consistently higher than those of the rest of the Italian party system, in light of its comparatively and consistently high proportion of pro-EU posts and low proportion of anti-EU posts. This applies at both time points and especially during the Covid-19 crisis, when the proportion of pro-European posts by other parties was significantly lower than during the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Overall, this descriptive evidence confirms the idea that the main social democratic party of Italy is a staunchly pro-European formation, highly supportive of EU integration (e.g., Trastulli & Mastroianni, 2024)—aligning with the historical evidence presented in Figure 1.

Table 1. Posts on the EU during the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine: PD versus all other Italian parties.

Party	Posts on EU	Pro-EU posts	Anti-EU posts	Position on the EU
PD (Covid-19)	0.087	0.078	0.001	0.078
Rest of Italian party system (Covid-19)	0.073	0.030	0.033	−0.003
PD (Russia's invasion of Ukraine)	0.101	0.077	0.012	0.065
Rest of Italian party system (Russia's invasion of Ukraine)	0.108	0.069	0.027	0.042

To answer our research question as to whether the PD reacted differently to the two large-scale crises of the 2020s under analysis, we employ a two-step mixed-methods approach. Indeed, this allows us to tend to two analytical necessities: (a) in the quantitative part, gauging whether such large-scale crises do exert a directional effect—and, if so, *what* effect they exert—on the PD's Europeanism; (b) in the qualitative part, assessing exactly *how*—i.e., through which rhetorical arguments—the Italian social-democratic party linked these critical events to the related changes (or lack thereof) in their EU positions. Therefore, in the first quantitative step, we empirically probe our two arguments by performing *t*-tests (e.g., Ross & Wilson, 2017) aimed at assessing whether the PD's mean "Position on the EU" is statistically significantly different before and after the outbreak of the two crises, the Covid-19 pandemic and the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Subsequently, we complement these results with qualitative evidence by carrying out a thematic analysis (e.g., Boyatzis, 1998) of those posts aimed at detecting the PD's specific position on the EU's own policy response to the two crises—including on such instruments as the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) and the RRF in the context of the pandemic, as well as policies such as enlargement, asylum, and defence in the context of the war.

4. Results

Table 2 provides the results for the *t*-tests concerning the PD's "Position on the EU" before and after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine (see also Mann-Whitney *U* tests in Table A3 of the Supplementary File). As is evident, in the three months following the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis in Italy, the PD adopted much more favourable stances vis-à-vis the EU than in the month preceding this critical event. Indeed, the PD's positive mean "Position on the EU" after 9 March 2020 (0.098) is more than five times larger than between 9 February and 9 March 2020 (0.019), and this difference is statistically significant at $p < 0.001$. This evidence goes in the direction of the argument by which the PD should have adopted more favourable positions on EU integration after the Covid-19 pandemic. Conversely, Table 2 shows that the PD's mean "Position on the EU" before and after the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine is not different in a statistically significant fashion, in line with our corresponding argument on this crisis. Therefore, the preliminary statistical evidence provided by the analysis of our original data allows us to say that, in the Italian case, social democrats have reacted to the two large-scale crises in different ways vis-à-vis EU integration: by increasing their pro-Europeanism after Covid-19, whilst not altering their EU positions following the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Table 2. *t*-tests: PD's "Position on the EU" before and after the two large-scale crises.

Subgroup	N	PD's mean Position on the EU (standard deviation)	
Pre-Covid-19	30	0.019	(0.040)
Post-Covid-19	86	0.098***	(0.116)
Pre-Russian invasion of Ukraine	28	0.207	(0.361)
Post-Russian invasion of Ukraine	81	0.236	(0.320)

Note: *** $p < 0.001$.

How exactly did this different positional reaction by the PD to these large-scale crises vis-à-vis the EU come about? We argue that this is because of the different policy implications foregrounded by these two large-scale crises, and their relation to the ideological core of social democracy. This argument finds empirical support in the qualitative thematic analysis of the PD's Facebook posts on the EU's policy response to the two crises, illustrating the rhetorical arguments underlying the different positional responses by the PD to the two crises vis-à-vis the EU.

The findings show that the PD supported the establishment and activation of both the reformed ESM (with its ad-hoc Pandemic Crisis Support credit line) and the RRF without reserves. Largely in contrast to the rest of the party system, on 8 May 2020, the PD claimed:

> The ESM will be able to offer financing for 2% of GDP at near-zero interest rates for direct and indirect healthcare and prevention expenditure related to Covid-19. The Commission will only verify this requirement. No additional conditions may be imposed.

Therefore, it is evident how—supporting the EU's response to the Covid-19 pandemic—the PD's even heightened support for further EU integration after this critical event was thematically linked to the expansionary approach to public investment in the economy and in health and welfare, as both fall in the traditional ideological core of social democracy (e.g., Keman, 2017; Lipset & Rokkan, 1967) and in newer

"Social Europe" visions (e.g., Meyer & Spiegel, 2010). Along the same lines, on 27 May 2020, talking about the RRF, the PD stressed:

> Italy will receive the largest share of the proposal: 172.7 billion, of which 81 billion is non-repayable. This is a success for Italy and for Europe. Because no country in Europe can save itself on its own, but together we can recover and start again.

Here too, because of the socioeconomic policy domains impacted by both the Covid-19 crisis and the EU's response, the PD—already a staunch advocate of European integration—reinvigorated its support for the EU even further, pushing for the adoption of both policy instruments proposed by the EU in its political communication.

Similarly, the PD espoused the EU's approach to enlargement and asylum in the context of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, further signalling the need to build a common supranational European defence system. The PD favoured welcoming Ukrainian refugees into the Union's territory along with their integration into the EU's single market. On 27 February 2022, it also remarked that Ukraine's application to join the Union is "legitimate and on the agenda, to the extent that it could lead to a possible solution to the ongoing conflict." However, this party also pointed out some limitations in the EU's approach to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. With respect to enlargement, on 9 May 2022, it claimed that "Ukraine's accession process to the EU will be completed in 2036. It is unthinkable to make a people under siege who are asking to be part of the European family wait," and thereby proposed the establishment of a European Confederation (complementary to the EU) to welcome Ukraine and other Eastern European countries.

At the same time, on 9 March 2022, the PD recognised:

> This conflict…presents us with new challenges that the EU must be able to address: building its strategic autonomy, which includes a common foreign and defence policy and a European Energy Union.

The same patterns emerge from the party leaders' rhetoric on Facebook. Nicola Zingaretti, party secretary from March 2019 to March 2021, supported all the EU's policy initiatives to counter the socio-economic costs of Covid-19 at the national level, including the activation of the general escape clause of the Stability and Growth Pact, the expansionary monetary policy of the European Central Bank, the ESM, Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency, and RRF. Zingaretti was succeeded by Enrico Letta as party secretary in March 2021, and his approach to the EU during the Russian war on Ukraine was more mixed. On the one hand, he argued that the EU took "the right direction by voting…for a complete #EnergyRussiaEmbargo" (post of 7 April 2022). On the other, Letta criticised the EU's enlargement policy, which would only lead to Ukrainian membership in 2036 (post of 23 April 2022).

In sum, our qualitative analyses of the rhetorical arguments underlying the different positional reactions of the PD to the two large-scale crises vis-à-vis the EU show that this party continued to invariably support European integration but highlighted shortcomings in the EU's policy response to the war in ways that it did not during Covid-19. This was facilitated by the misalignment between the policy implications foregrounded by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which primarily concerned defence and security, and the PD's ideological orientation as a social democratic party. These are policy areas that have traditionally been less central to

the centre-left's programmatic agenda and where calls for deeper integration do not easily translate into programmatic gains for social-democratic actors. As a result, while the PD reaffirmed its commitment to EU unity and collective action, it was less enthusiastic about EU policymaking in domains that lie outside its core ideological priorities. This contrasts with the clear pattern of increased support the party expressed in response to the EU's handling of the pandemic.

5. Conclusion

This article analysed the PD's positions on the EU in the aftermath of the two large-scale crises of the 2020s: the Covid-19 pandemic and the 2022 Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The findings of our mixed-methods approach, which aptly analysed both the extent of the crises' impact on the PD's Europeanism and the arguments through which it was reflected in party rhetoric, suggest that this party increased its support for European integration after the Covid-19 pandemic broke out, while no significant variation in its support for the EU emerged following the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Whilst the positive effect of Covid-19 is in line with the aforementioned idea of the PD as a "most likely case" to further support EU integration when facing large-scale crises, the ambivalent impact of the Russian-Ukrainian war is not. We attribute this divergence to the different policy implications foregrounded by the two crises and their alignment with the PD's ideological orientation. In particular, the Covid-19 pandemic chiefly primed policy issues central to the PD's ideological connotation, such as the sustainability and enhancement of national welfare systems, public healthcare, and socioeconomic redistribution (Trastulli, 2025). On the contrary, the Russian invasion of Ukraine mostly made salient policy issues far from social democracy's ideological core, including the provision of common security and defence. To this end, the quantitative and qualitative evidence of our mixed-methods analysis converge, as per Table 3.

Table 3. Alignment between quantitative patterns and qualitative evidence from our mixed-methods analysis.

Crisis	T-test on PD's positional response vis-à-vis EU	Underlying rhetorical arguments
Covid-19	Significantly more pro-EU	Pro-ESM
		Pro-investment in healthcare
		Pro-expansionary policy instruments
Russia's invasion of Ukraine	No significant difference	Pro-asylum
		Pro-embargo
		Critical of slow enlargement policy
		Need for further common defence capacity

The PD's increased support for the EU after Covid-19, but not after the Russian war on Ukraine, was rhetorically substantiated by arguments, on the one hand, wholeheartedly supportive of the EU's socioeconomic policy responses to the crisis; whilst, on the other hand, by both supportive comments on the EU's stances towards questions of asylum and embargo, but also more critical ones on the Union's current inertia regarding enlargement and further defence integration.

This allows us to further elaborate on our main finding: Large-scale crises *can*, but *do not necessarily* influence the Europeanism of social democracy. Indeed, the sensitivity of social democratic Europeanism is heightened when these critical events directly involve social democracy's core policy issues—such as

economic redistribution, welfare, and healthcare. In these cases, the positional reaction of social democracy vis-à-vis the EU will be contingent on the Union's policy response—i.e., greater or lower integration in the respective policy domains. Therefore, not all large-scale crises matter in the same way for the social democrats' Europeanism, and whether they do so depends on the policy domains they chiefly pertain to.

Hence, the article makes both theoretical and empirical contributions. Theoretically, it suggests that the impact of external shocks such as large-scale crises on party positions towards the EU is conditioned by the alignment between the specific policy implications foregrounded by the crisis and the party's traditional ideological stances. In contrast to accounts that view EU crises as uniformly integration-enabling or constraining, we argue that they create distinct opportunity structures for party positioning on EU integration, building on parties' historical predisposition towards the EU on the basis of their pre-existing ideological characteristics (e.g., Marks et al., 2002). In particular, crises that prime owned policy domains and are met by EU-level responses in line with parties' ideology are more likely to induce a pro-EU and integration-supportive response. Conversely, crises that chiefly pertain to policy domains outside of parties' ideological core may elicit more ambiguous positional reactions. This perspective contributes to the literature on EU crisis politics by introducing a party-centred, ideological lens through which to understand national political responses to European integration.

Empirically, the article provides a detailed analysis of the PD's evolving position on the EU across two major external shocks. In the case of the pandemic, the PD embraced EU initiatives such as the reformed ESM with its Pandemic Crisis Support, and NextGenerationEU—the latter as a historic step forward for socioeconomic EU integration—thereby aligning the EU's economic response with both long-standing and more recent social-democratic priorities. The party's discourse increasingly framed the EU not merely as a guarantor of macroeconomic stability, but as a vehicle for solidarity, social investment, and welfare resilience, in line with the idea of a "Social Europe." By contrast, the PD's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine was more mixed in terms of its implications for European integration. While the party strongly endorsed the EU's response to the war in terms of enlargement and asylum, it also pointed out limitations in such a response and called for the establishment of complementary political organisations, such as the European Confederation.

We acknowledge that our findings may not travel beyond our peculiar national context and social democratic formation. Yet, we deem the dynamics of social democratic EU-position recalibration in response to different large-scale crises emerging from our article worthy of investigation in other spatial-temporal settings. Support for EU integration is not automatic, even for traditionally pro-European actors such as the PD. Rather, it depends on the nature of the crisis, the EU's policy response, and the extent to which these resonate with the party's ideological core. The PD's evolving stance may highlight both the potential and the limits of ideological adaptation in times of crisis.

More broadly, this analysis has implications for the future of European integration. As the EU faces increasingly complex and cross-cutting challenges, the role of national parties in shaping the legitimacy and direction of EU integration in the domestic politics of member states becomes ever more significant. The differentiated response of the PD across crises may suggest that the trajectory of EU integration could be uneven, with certain policy domains primed by large-scale crises and directions of EU's responses—such as social and financial assistance policy—attracting stronger support from the centre-left, while others— such as security and defence—may in theory elicit more enthusiasm from ideologically different parties.

These dynamics may point to a future of selective or "functional" EU integration, shaped not only by institutional constraints and intergovernmental bargaining but also by the preferences and ideational orientations of domestic political actors. Understanding how and why parties adjust their EU positions in different crisis contexts is therefore essential for grasping the political foundations of the EU integration process in the years ahead.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability
Data are available upon request from the authors.

Supplementary Material
Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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