Editorial

# Tested by the Polycrisis: Reforming or Transforming the EU?

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## Abstract
This thematic issue addresses the question: To what extent have the latest crises—the pandemic crisis and Russia's war in Ukraine—triggered institutional and policy change in the EU? It contributes to the literature on the impact of crises on integration and the EU political system, presenting new research based on fresh theoretical insights, empirical data, or a combination of both. Theoretically, the contributions collected in the thematic issue explore whether the crises represent a critical juncture for the EU, leading to institutional and/or policy innovations or, rather, set in motion more incremental processes of adaptation. Empirically, all articles—some of which are qualitative, while others are quantitative—are based on original or new data. The first group of contributions deals with institutional change, focusing both on formal (i.e., treaty reform) and informal (i.e., codes of conduct) institutions. A second group moves the focus to policy change, looking at the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on several policy areas and the energy crisis. Overall, the key lesson is that the EU can now manage and absorb new shocks quite effectively. At the same time, however, it does not promote ambitious and coherent political models or policy paradigms. Instead, it provides room for experimentation through patchwork-like strategies where old and new instruments and settings mix.

## Issue
This editorial is part of the issue "Governing the EU Polycrisis: Institutional Change after the Pandemic and the War in Ukraine" edited by Edoardo Bressanelli (Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies) and David Natali (Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies).

## 1. Introduction: Governing the EU During the Polycrisis

In this thematic issue, our key research question is: To what extent have the latest crises—the pandemic crisis and Russia's war in Ukraine—triggered institutional and policy change in the EU? In doing so, we join a consistent stream of the literature on the EU, which has assessed the impact of its various crises since the early 2010s (e.g., Ferrera et al., in press; Jones et al., 2021; Riddervold et al., 2021; Zeitlin et al., 2019).

As Jean-Claude Juncker, the former president of the European Commission stated: "I have often used the Greek word 'polycrisis' to describe the current situation. Our various challenges…have not only arrived at the same time. They also feed each other" (Juncker, 2016, p. 1). Others have preferred to label it as the "perma-

crisis" of the EU (Zuleeg et al., 2021). Indeed, as the contributions here collected provide an assessment of the latest crises, a new crisis in the EU neighbourhood (the war between Israel and Hamas) is already, and tragically, underway.

This thematic issue aims to make a specific but significant contribution to the literature, by presenting new research based on fresh theoretical insights, empirical data, or a combination of both.

Theoretically, the articles here collected are not guided by a single, overarching conceptual framework or analytical approach. They largely draw from various institutionalist strands, such as rational choice and historical institutionalism, exploring whether the crises and, specifically, the latest crises of the EU, represented a "critical juncture" for EU integration, triggering institutional and

policy innovation and fundamentally changing how the Union works. They also allow us to better understand whether the EU has reacted to the crises by abandoning its normal procedures and accountability standards, as lamented by the European Ombudsman (O'Reilly, 2023).

Empirically, all contributions bring, at a minimum, fresh and up-to-date data to the debate, allowing researchers and practitioners to refine their understanding of the impact of the EU crises. Some articles rely on interviews with policy-makers and a wealth of primary sources; others analyse original datasets and present statistical analyses. Whatever the selected methods, the analytical focus is placed on continuity/change vis-à-vis the status quo ante.

## 2. A Long Sequence of Crises: The Role of Shocks for the EU

Before delving into any empirical assessment, the thematic issue presents a contribution reflecting on the concept of crisis. Hupkens et al. (2023) build on the distinct literature on crisis and crisis management and, making them "travel" to the EU, argue that "gradations" of crisis can be mapped along three analytical dimensions: severity, symmetry, and speed. They help distinguish different types of crises—mild, severe, and existential ones—with very different implications for the EU governance system. This article alerts us that, while the concept of polycrisis is very appealing, it carries the danger of simplifying a way more complex reality. By carefully dissecting the nature and the type of crisis, better expectations and more balanced assessments can be made.

Firstly, the concept of polycrisis refers to two different phenomena. Many crises develop in parallel and at the same time. The European integration process is currently facing many crises: the Ukrainian crisis, the Middle East crisis, but also climate change, the energy crisis, etc. This may lead to the overall increase in the problem load which the EU has to deal with, a high level of problem pressure and the need to design a complex set of solutions. Yet, the many crises are also set in a long-term process (see Figure 1). The timing and sequence of the
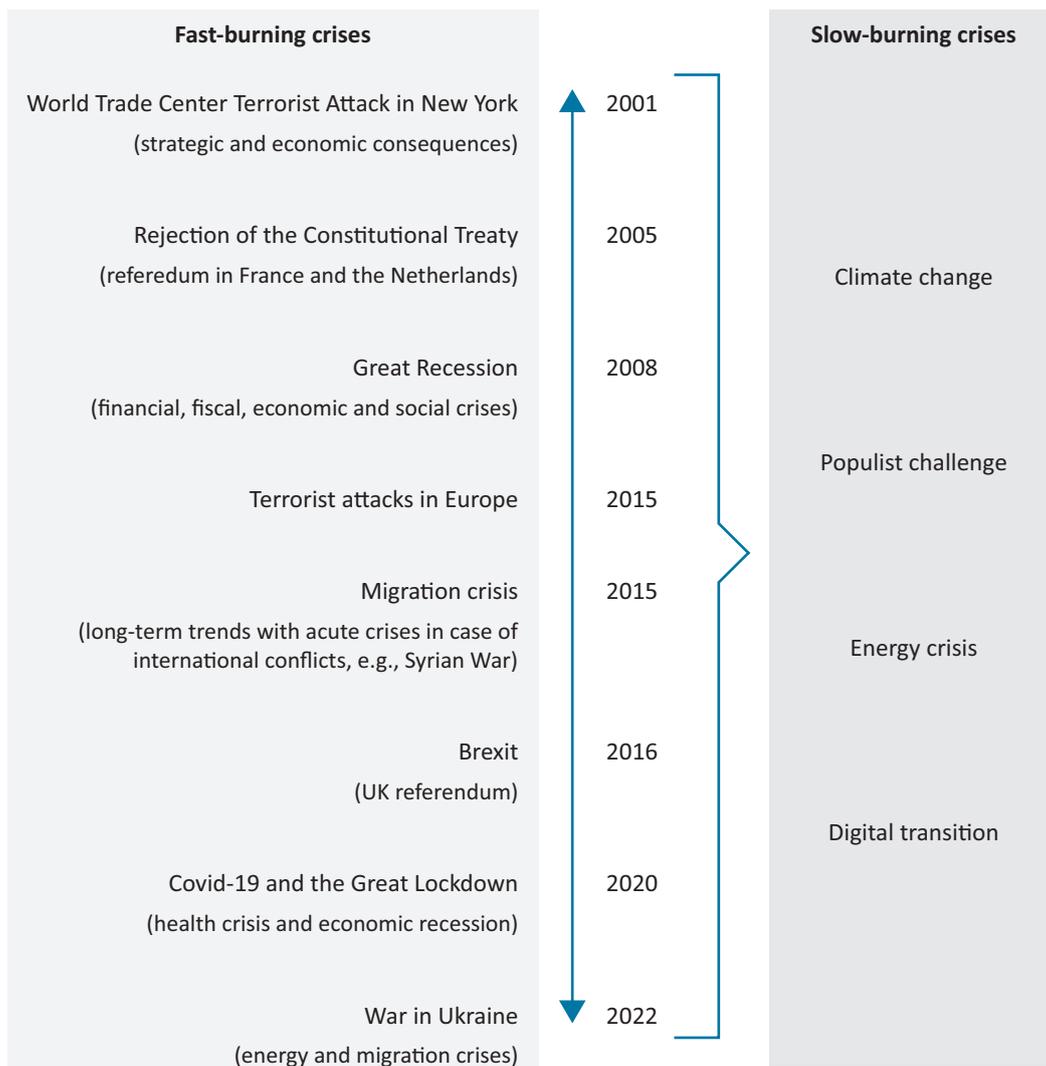


| Fast-burning crises | | Slow-burning crises |
|---|---|---|
| World Trade Center Terrorist Attack in New York (strategic and economic consequences) | 2001 | |
| Rejection of the Constitutional Treaty (referedum in France and the Netherlands) | 2005 | Climate change |
| Great Recession (financial, fiscal, economic and social crises) | 2008 | |
| Terrorist attacks in Europe | 2015 | Populist challenge |
| Migration crisis (long-term trends with acute crises in case of international conflicts, e.g., Syrian War) | 2015 | Energy crisis |
| Brexit (UK referendum) | 2016 | Digital transition |
| Covid-19 and the Great Lockdown (health crisis and economic recession) | 2020 | |
| War in Ukraine (energy and migration crises) | 2022 | |

**Figure 1.** Crises in the EU in the last 20 years. Source: Authors' elaboration based on European Union (2023).

crises hold significant importance. The rapid alternation of different shocks may activate learning processes and change dynamics that depend not only on the magnitude of each event but also on the sequence of the many events and their cumulative effect.

In the last 20 years or so, there have been countless critical occasions: the Great Recession of 2008, which then turned into the so-called sovereign debt crisis or Euro crisis in 2010–2011; the refugee crisis that exploded in 2015; the referendum held in 2016 in the United Kingdom for the so-called Brexit; the Great Lockdown, i.e., the interruption of economic activity following the health crisis linked to the Covid-19 pandemic; up to the recent Ukrainian crisis with its impact on strategic aspects and energy policy. In addition to these crises, defined in terms of instantaneous crises ("fast-burning crises"), there are also the "slow-burning crises" that affect Europe and often have a global dimension: security crises, climate and energy crises, and the progressive growth of populist political forces that, in some countries, has led to an explicit challenge to the cornerstones of the rule of law.

The extraordinary time we are living in is marked precisely by the magnitude of each single crisis—some of the articles in this thematic issue outline the extraordinary salience and severity of the crisis at stake—and the frequency of the same crises in a short period. This seems consistent with a new normal for the EU and its policymaking: EU institutions adapt themselves to permanent tensions that change in terms of the crises' origin and nature but are persistent over time.

A second aspect stressed by many articles is the ambivalent reference to crises in the analysis of the EU. Some refer to crises as the triggers of institutional and policy change, a true independent explanatory variable. For others, they are more of a window of opportunity that alters incentives for change. However, actors and institutions have to "use" the crisis to make change happen. Political conditions, inter-governmental politics, processes of path-dependency, and the complex articulation of EU institutions all matter in the way the window opened by the crisis is then exploited. In other words, most contributions to the thematic issue are in line with an actor-centred and ideational approach to crisis. The way the EU reacts to crises largely depends on the position of different individual and collective actors and the way they frame both problems and solutions.

## 3. Institutions: Change Under the Surface

In a recent survey of the definitions of the concept of "institution," Jupille and Caporaso (2022, p. 2) gathered no less than 80 different meanings. For our purposes here, however, North's (1991, p. 97) definition as "humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic and social interaction" is particularly helpful. Institutions can be informal constraints (like sanctions or codes of conduct) or formalised rules (such as laws or

property rights). The articles here collected place their analytical focus on both types of institutions, over longer and shorter periods and across different policy fields.

Analysing legislation on EU renewable energy policy following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Buzogány et al. (2023) show that the EU has increased its level of ambition in the face of strong preference heterogeneity among the member states. According to these authors, this outcome has been made possible by novel forms of "differentiated integration." Granted that a one-size-fits-all solution was not an option, rather than allowing some member states to formally opt out, an agreement has been made possible by allowing a strong degree of flexibility at the implementation stage. The Commission has thus managed to overcome conflict and build consensus on legislation.

Also focusing on the energy crisis, Smeets and Beach (2023) delve deep inside the institutional machinery of the European Council. Their contribution casts new light on the functioning of an institution whose working arrangements are still little known. They dissect the internal workings of the EUCO system, where the "control room" run by the heads of state and government needs a "machine room," where the Commission and the Council of Ministers operate. Substantively, the article shows that the malfunctioning of the EUCO system in the first nine months of the crisis was only apparent. Keeping the issue of price caps on the policy agenda allowed the EU system to deliver as soon as a window of opportunity opened.

Siddi and Prandin (2023) move the focus to the European Commission. They assess the impact of the war in Ukraine on the "geopolitical" Commission, mapping institutional changes in terms of self-conceptions and policy practices. By comparing official documents, they show that geopolitical actorness has shifted from broad multilateral cooperation to more narrowly defined strategic partnerships with Western countries between December 2019 and March 2023. After the war, the Commission has come to embrace a more confrontational approach to energy policy which, although not without tensions with other objectives (such as the Green Deal), has resulted in more strategic autonomy.

The articles by Bressanelli et al. (2023) and Müller (2023) analyse, instead, the European Parliament (EP). Bressanelli et al. (2023) ask whether the Recovery and Resilience Dialogues—a new instrument to hold the Commission accountable for the implementation of the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF)—is fit for the purpose. In principle, the Dialogues are an important institutional innovation—modelled on the dialogues established with the euro crisis—as they allow the EP to scrutinise how funds are allocated and spent. In practice, however, parliamentarians' questions mainly focus on gathering information rather than asking the Commission to justify or change its actions. More broadly, the article shows that the scrutiny of the supranational executive by the EP faces important limitations.

Finally, Müller (2023) takes a diachronic perspective asking if the crises trigger specific demands for institutional reform by the EP. In May 2022, the EP launched a procedure for changing the EU Treaties, framing it (also) as a response to the crises. Yet, comparing it with past reform proposals, the article shows that their content is characterised by a high degree of continuity—despite the stronger prominence of those specific policy fields hit by the crises—featuring the long-standing call by the EP for deepening integration.

## 4. Policies: Toward New Paradigms?

The contributions that focused more on the policy dimension (that is the main problems originating from the pandemic and the Ukrainian crises and the strategies set up by the EU to address them) provide further evidence of the changes that the EU and the member states have gone through over the last years.

Ceron (2023), as well as Guidi et al. (2023), focus on the RRF, the major innovation in the EU economic coordination after Covid-19. The two contributions outline the innovative aspects of the RRF in the broad NextGenerationEU. Unprecedented grants and loans have been mobilised to help the member states recover from the pandemic while addressing the longer-term challenges to the European economic systems. While Guidi et al. (2023) provide evidence of the large differences in the national recovery and resilience plans, Ceron (2023) suggests that the RRF has contributed to a more balanced EU economic coordination. While the European Semester has been more effective in promoting austerity rather than new policy investments, the RRF has contributed to renewing the member states' priorities. The green transition has been put at the core of the Recovery Plan of the EU with the apparent capacity of the Commission to support it across the national plans.

Further contributions have addressed the question of policy change and/or stability in single policy fields. This is the case of Wendler (2023), who analyses the case of the European Green Deal and the introduction of the RePowerEU programme in the aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis. He uses the punctuated equilibrium theory to test the ability of the EU to control policy challenges and safeguard the overall stability of its agenda and reform programme. That way he proves policy stability outweighs aspects of change, while the complex EU architecture in the field creates new challenges for the coherence of the green transition strategy.

Natali et al. (2023) share the same conclusion in the healthcare field. This policy field has been massively impacted by Covid-19 with the apparent resurgence of the need for public investments in the national and EU policymakers' agenda. Yet, as shown by the analysis of EU and national strategies, economic recovery has taken centre stage over any structural improvement of national healthcare systems. As a consequence, typical governance feedback, in line with neo-institutional the-

ory, has contributed to maintaining both the distribution of competencies across governance levels and the major role of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council and the Directorate-General for Economic and Financial Affairs in setting economic and social priorities with little room for institutional improvement and easing access to healthcare.

Sønstevold et al. (2023) provide room for optimism. In the aftermath of the pandemic, the EU approach to prevent a labour market crisis has proved effective. In these authors' reading, the Covid-19 crisis opened a window of opportunity that the Commission used to promote job retention schemes across the member states. The latter was promoted through the new SURE programme and the complex development of an intense learning process triggered by the EU.

Contributions sharing the policy analysis approach prove that the EU is not immovable. Yet policy changes are not radical or abrupt. They are more incremental with the capacity of the EU to address new challenges through step-by-step processes.

## 5. Conclusions: Testing EU Integration (Neither Down nor Out)

The key lesson that the two latest crises of the EU have taught us is that the EU is capable of managing and absorbing new shocks quite effectively. This is partly because it is now able to more quickly rely on preset institutional arrangements and policy frameworks which had been tested in previous crises and are revised for new ones. But it is also because not all crises are equal: only the most severe ones are "existential" and could lead to "disintegration." The second lesson learnt is that the EU has been reformed rather than transformed. The evidence here collected shows that institutional adaptation has happened below the level of the Treaties and policy change has seldom shaken the dominant paradigm, albeit not without tensions. Yet, the latest crises have already unleashed further dynamics—e.g., fiscal integration and enlargement—which will, sooner or later, require a systematic reform of the EU's institutional architecture.

The EU is thus characterised by two apparently opposite characteristics. On the one hand, European institutions prove their flexibility to approach different crises (one after the other and/or simultaneously). And to some extent, the same EU institutional architecture seems to learn through an increasingly rapid policy-making process. On the other, the EU does not promote ambitious and coherent policy and political models (or paradigms). Instead, it provides room for experimentation through patchwork-like strategies where old and new instruments and settings are mixed.

While contributions to this thematic issue do not represent a systematic assessment exercise, several provide evidence of the capacity of the EU to provide some answers to the crises through an incremental process of

change. On the one hand, this proves that the EU is not a set of immutable institutions or policies; on the other, there is still an open question on the EU's capacity to progress enough to prevent its long-term decline in the global context.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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