

## **Crisification and the Future of the European Union Polity**

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### **Introduction**

The steady succession of crises facing the European Union of late has drawn much scholarly attention, even reinvigorating the field of EU studies as argued in the introduction to this volume. A part of that attention focuses on the ‘crisification’ of the EU (Rhinard 2019), an argument recurring in studies on the EU’s growing emergency powers (Kreuder-Sonnen, 2018; White, 2015) and its crisis turn (Boin, Ekengren, & Rhinard, 2013; Börzel & Risse, 2018). These approaches focus less on the policy decisions taken after specific crises or the politics consuming intergovernmental or inter-institutional bargaining during crises, and more on the deeper-seated changes taken place in the EU as a polity. Such changes are harder to decipher than well-publicized, collective decision-making episodes or high-profile squabbles amongst political elites, but they nevertheless have shifted the organizational character of the EU as a polity.<sup>1</sup> Common arguments in this direction boil down to the following: much of what the EU does, from soliciting input from societal actors to setting agendas, and from making decisions to legitimizing collective action, is run through by a crisis logic. That logic prioritises decision speed over deliberation, specialised experts over political generalists, and safety and security arguments over other societal concerns.

These changes, for obvious reasons perhaps, tend to be analysed in a negative light: as a general shift in collective decision dynamics for the worse. The use of analytical approaches drawn from security studies – especially its critical variant – partly explains this slant. Governance systems obsessed with crises and emergencies tend to prioritise security values over democratic ones, and to shift resources from some actors toward other (usually security) actors and interests (Bigo, 2006; Huysmans, 2000). While providing essential insights, the danger of a purely critical slant is a growing disconnect between studies in the crisification vein and more traditional European integration theorising. This chapter aims to bridge crisification arguments and European integration theory by exploring whether there may be some positive implications

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<sup>1</sup> By ‘polity’ is meant an institutionalized system of governance capable of producing authoritative political decisions over a given population (Chrysochoou, 1998; Schmitter, 1996).

of these changes in terms of the EU's evolution of a polity. Namely, an argument can be made that the EU's crisis management of late may constitute a form/driver of polity building. Managing crises is a core-state responsibility, even a 'normal' kind of governance activity that features in mature policy systems (Boin, et al. 2016; Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2015). In this respect, the EU accumulation of crisis management experience and practice may signal the evolution of the supranational polity long theorised by integration scholars.

This chapter breaks down that argument to show precisely how and where crises may be leading to the evolution – some might even say maturation – of the EU as a polity. It links three characteristics of managing crises to their corollary features in integration theory, to see how the spate of recent crises may be influencing the EU's organizational evolution. The word 'may' is used purposefully here: this is an exploratory, theoretical argument. Space limitations prevent a full-scale empirical analysis to support the point. However, where possible, evidence from a larger research project on the EU's growing role in managing crises (Backman & Rhinard, 2017; Boin et al., 2013), along with arguments set out in other chapters of this volume, will be used to substantiate arguments and show the plausibility of the approach.

### **Crisification as normalization?**

The increasingly prominent place of crises in European politics has led to a number of studies examining the deep-seated changes taking place in the EU as a result. These studies differ from much of the crisis-related research of late because they focus less on a single crisis and its outcomes, or of a particular policy making process, and more on what could be called the horizontal effects of crisis on the EU's institutions and decision-making machinery. They even speak to changes in what the EU is, ontologically speaking, as a political entity. One such approach argues that a kind of *crisification* has taken place in the EU of late (Rhinard 2019).

The crisification argument holds that in recent years a subtle change has taken place in the policy-making machinery shaping European integration. The traditional methods for producing collective EU policies, typified by the extensive analysis of a problem, extended phases of consultation with stakeholders, the deliberate cultivation of support for proposals, occasional decision-making moments and a focus on long-term implementation, now share space with crisis-oriented methods for arriving at collective decisions. These methods prioritize the early identification of the next crisis, specific kinds of actors and technologies, abbreviated decision-making procedures and new narratives on the *raison d'être* of European integration.

Crisification thus represents a change in the processes by which collective decisions are made and rationalized – as opposed to the traditional modes of decision-making typically said to characterise the EU (Wallace & Reh, 2015). The fact that these changes extend across sectors and institutions, and stem not from a single crisis but rather a succession of crises and their responses, makes the implications of crisification particularly significant.

There are several drivers behind crisification. One relates to the phenomenon of modern crises – crossing sectoral and geographical boundaries with ease and requiring ‘whole of government’ (Elbe, 2010) responses. Few areas of EU cooperation are insulated from crises or their effects: from water security to territorial incursions and from pandemics to disinformation, there is a discursively constructed need for ‘more action in more areas’ (Commission, 2018). Beyond the nature of modern crises *per se*, politics clearly matters too. Societal perceptions of a crisis demand answers from politicians especially in the hours following the event, before attention fades (Kuipers & ’t Hart, 2014). During that window, political symbolism becomes paramount: leaders must be seen to be doing something and Brussels-level initiatives become an important part of projecting authority. Political declarations are made, which in turn are picked up by actors in the Commission to advance their own policy goals. As Peterson and Bomberg (1999) argued years ago, this pattern is broadly familiar in European integration and reflects a version of spillover: member States issue broad commitments (whether in *communiqués*, Council conclusions, or declarations) and the Commission works to first consolidate and then to expand cooperation incrementally. Much of the Commission’s response, along with agencies which similarly work to push agendas forward, does not require further political blessing but rather can be implemented through administrative fiat.

The drivers mentioned above – facilitating events, political and cultivated spillover, policy entrepreneurship and executive ambition – have led to a deep inventory of crisis-related policies, activities, and tools. Hundreds of early warning systems and rapid alert networks, new crisis rooms inside most directorates-general of the Commission, rapid decision routines across European institutions and national representations, and new decision support bodies litter the institutional landscape. Looking closely at justifications for collective action in any area, whether regional policy or transport infrastructure, new discourses related to ‘life and death’ and ‘citizen safety’ take their place alongside more traditional, functional arguments.<sup>2</sup> All of this results in crisification, which can be seen through various normative lenses. Seen through

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<sup>2</sup> See Nugent (this volume), for a related discussion about the role of crises in shaping the EU’s institutions and policy processes, although not at this level of administrative depth.

an accountability and democracy lens, the emergence of crisis-driven politics can lead to: a dominance of security-related policy logics, a rise in executive, and thus less accountable, action, and a general feeling of unease in the broader population as governance becomes dominated by ‘emergency’ logics (Kreuder-Sonnen, 2018; White, 2020).

Viewed through a different lens, though, could crisisification represent a rather normal development in a maturing polity? Within EU studies, crises are seen as extraordinary, even existential, thereby challenging the very existence of the EU (Gillingham, 2018; Rosamond, 2019). Apparent surprise accompanies analysis of the EU’s resilience and ‘survival’ through crises (Vollaard, this volume and Anderson, this volume). Viewed through a broader (more comparative) lens, however, we are reminded that managing crises is part and parcel of what it means to govern. Managing unforeseen events under conditions of uncertainty and urgency is a core responsibility of governance – a core state power in EU parlance (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2015) – for political systems at any level. Crises may arise out of an extraordinary trigger event, or a unique confluence of factors, but they also arise from the everyday and banal: the breakdown of systems, the overuse of resources, or the unintended consequences of policy design (Bovens, ’t Hart, & Peters, 1998). They are both normal and extraordinary, in other words, and all governments must address them (Perrow, 1984). Crises<sup>3</sup> require the build-up of ‘capacities’ to address key crisis management ‘tasks’ which look quite similar to normal governing tasks (Boin et al., 2016). Such tasks include making sense of an unfolding situation, having resources and the capability to mobilize them, taking authoritative decisions in a reasonable timeframe, conveying to the public what is stake, and preserving a governing bodies’ legitimacy throughout. For crises management, these tasks are challenging to be sure: few governments ever manage crises perfectly. On the contrary, mistakes are made – some of them tragic – and governments fall. But from a historical perspective this is less unique and more ‘normal’ than may commonly be understood in the field of EU studies. Thus, putting aside, for the purpose of this chapter, whether crisisification is normatively desirable from an ontological perspective (White, 2015) and through widening the discussion beyond crises of integration per se (Schimmelfennig, this volume), as important as those are, one can reasonably argue that these developments indicate the evolution of governance capacity in the supranational polity.

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<sup>3</sup> This approach treats the origin and type of crises as analytically irrelevant, since, once constructed as a ‘crisis’, governments are pressed into action under conditions of uncertainty and often urgency (Rosenthal, Charles, & ’t Hart, 1989). See also Gardell and Rhinard (this volume).

## **A Maturing European Polity?**

If managing crises is a feature of normal governance, is the upward trajectory of crisis related developments in recent years a sign the EU is increasingly normalizing – even maturing – as a polity? To answer that question we need a more specific set of metrics along with a theoretical basis for making the assessment. Below, European integration theory is combined with crisis management research (largely drawn from the fields of public administration and international relations) and literature on organizational performance to build a set of criteria for assessing change in the nature of the EU polity. Space constraints here limit a systematic empirical analysis, but other empirical sources, including the authors' own research and that with collaborators (Backman & Rhinard, 2017; Boin et al., 2013), along with secondary analysis and cross-references to the chapters in this book, help to substantiate the arguments. The discussion below relates some key developments in EU crisis management of late with some classic indicators of the growth of a supranational polity.

The indicators below suggest polity evolution not in terms of some federal state in the making, but rather a *maturing* supranational political organization. The assumptions here are that: the EU has reached, for the most part, a 'stable constitutional equilibrium' (Moravcsik, 2005), the EU's *finalité* is no longer the most useful focus of integration theory (Börzel & Risse, 2018), and that our best way forward is to understand whether, why, and how the EU is taking on state-like characteristics (Richardson, 2001) or those of an authoritative, if non-state, polity (Chrysochoou, 1998; Schmitter, 1996). Crisis management is one of those characteristics, and the expansion and accumulation of practices in this regard represents a kind of 'maturation' of the polity. A mature polity is one that displays stability over time, is responsive to the demands originating from its environment, contains governance capacities relevant to the challenges at hand, responds to failures through learning and change, and, in democratic settings, acts with an acceptable degree of transparency and accountability.<sup>4</sup> To investigate the claim that the EU's engagement with crises of late may contribute to its maturation as a supranational polity, three indicators are developed and discussed below.

### **Responsiveness**

We might begin with a key issue in research on organizational responses to crisis management: *responsiveness*. The extent to which a governance system is willing and able to detect and

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<sup>4</sup> This is a composite definition drawn from parts of (Chrysochoou, 1998; Oakeshott, 1941; Schmitter, 1996; Weber, 1922), and needs more work.

acknowledge an impending crisis says much about its qualities as a governance system (Stern 1991). This is not to say that a responsive polity is automatically successful at crisis management. There is much evidence to suggest that overly hasty responses and poorly reasoned decisions can have deleterious results. The broader point is whether a polity is willing to ‘step into the fray’ and take responsibility for a problem, or whether a ‘head in the sand’ strategy prevails. Research shows both strategies employed in national cases of crisis management (Boin, McConnell, and ‘t Hart, 2008). It points to a willingness to engage with a crisis in a responsible manner, understanding of what a crisis means and to whom, says something about the maturity of both leaders and the institutions they command.<sup>5</sup>

For European integration theorists, responsiveness is a major factor amongst their criteria for the emergence of a meaningful supranational polity. Theorists in the transactionalist tradition, dating back to Deutsch (1957) and Mitrany (1966), studied the extent to which transnational networks would be seen as relevant to solving a conflict in the first instance. Mitrany studied the ‘first impulse’ of leaders during crisis 1966 (1966) and Deutsch assessed whether the politico-bureaucratic class conceived of a problem as primarily national or transnational, and how quickly (and, in his study, how) those actors reached across borders rather than to national capitals (1957). For theorists more focused on organizational features of the supranational polity, a key feature of the ‘robustness’ of that polity was its responsiveness to stimuli within its larger environment. So, Taylor, reviewing the insights of neofunctionalists, put great stake in the supranational polity’s ‘ability to receive, understand, and act upon the demands fed into a [supranational] organization from its environment; it is an indicator of performance’ (1991: 209). For neofunctionalists like Haas, the notion of responsiveness – and speed of that response – was not a central concern. European integration, after all, was a process developed over decades. Nevertheless, neofunctionalists like Haas held firm to the notion that once started, supranational organizations’ willingness to engage in pressing questions would rise. This is connected to the notion of cultivated spillover, when supranational actors encouraged, through various strategies, national governments to resolve problems through common approaches. These theories related both to bureaucrats operating at the international level as well as groups of state actors willing, and in some cases desiring, to tackle tough issues together. The actorness literature echoes this point, albeit focused on international affairs: the speed with which a

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<sup>5</sup> Organization scholars view responsiveness as a key vector in building a relation with the sustaining environment of an organization. That environment may consist of clients, customers, regulators, judges and policymakers – the organization needs to build and sustain a legitimacy base with all these stakeholders. Responsiveness – defined as the willingness to consider the wishes and demands of others in defining one’s actions – relates to the integrity of the enterprise (Selznick, 1957).

collective polity responds to external events matters and reflects on its maturity as an actor (Delreux, 2014; Rhinard and Sjöstedt, 2019).

While engaging with impending crises seems rather ‘natural’ for the EU today, regardless of levels of legal competence to act, it was not always so. The Chernobyl nuclear plant explosion in 1986 raised considerable alarm about implications for the then EEC and the need for a common response. But little action was immediately forthcoming. Over time, the explosion – the first widely recognized transboundary crisis in modern times – had a major impact on driving forward the EU’s collective approaches to security and safety (Liberatore 1997). But in the first instance, experts played down the relevance of the event for Europe. One of the earliest indications of crises linked to EU regulation – the so-called ‘Mad Cow’ crisis in 1996 – initially led to ‘head in the sand’ approach by EU elites but eventually became one of the main drivers of safety regulations across the *acquis communautaire* (Grönvall, 2001). More recently, the Icelandic ash cloud shut down, even if temporarily, major parts of the European economy while continental travel ground to a halt. The College of Commissioners, responding to signals from member states but also arguing for the downsides of engagement, voted not to mobilize a significant EU level response (cite). Other research shows the EU is increasingly willing, regardless of legal competence, to ‘frame’ crises as requiring a European response (Cross-Davis 2018). Of course, a variety of factors play into the EU’s willingness to engage with crises, and developments are by no means linear (the EU’s willingness to acknowledge and engage in the migration crisis was appallingly slow). We can reasonably argue, however, that the EU has grown increasingly responsive to disruptions in its broader societal and political context. Certainly, the EU’s emphasis on early warning and rapid identification systems for future crises, illuminated by crisification arguments, suggest a desire to do so.

### **Mobilizing Capacities**

Another central question in the crisis management literature asks whether a governance system can mobilize the capacities required to address unexpected crises and their effects. There are two elements to this performance question: having capacities, and being able to mobilize them. Interestingly, crisis management scholars argue there is no ideal set of capacities for managing crises – all crises present a different set of demands and response requirements (Boin et al 2016). Nor are such capacities material in nature, such as instruments, tools, financing, and equipment. They may also be immaterial and the property of individuals and groups as well as the organizational proper (improvisation and stress tolerance are classic examples; see Allison 1979). The crisis literature details key tasks of modern crisis management, which involve

related capacities: the ability to detect an emerging crisis, the capacity to make sense of an emerging crisis, to mobilize a political response, to coordinate decision-making effectively, etc. The broader point is that crisis performance in any polity is predicated on the existence of relevant crisis capacities and an ability to mobilize them (Boin et al. 2016).

For European integration theorists, capability was seen as a central, and rather self-evident, condition for a supranational polity's ability to 'perform' independently of its principals. Neofunctionalists such as Haas and Lindberg are most well-known for their focus on capacity and related performance. As a supranational polity's performance rose, meaning that collective policy solutions were increasingly agreed and, ideally, that those solutions increasingly demonstrated results, the constituent members of a cooperative arrangement (member states) would vest more authority in that arrangement (cite, cite). Transactionalist like Deutsch, too, saw capacity development – even if not in highly institutionalized form – as crucial for the community and the resultant 'we feeling' that might emerge. Liberal intergovernmentalists assume that a supranational polity with delegated authority would be expected to mobilize its designated capacities appropriately – or risk penalty from member state principles (cite). Studies focused on 'actorness', a close cousin to integration, also argued that the ability to mobilize instruments to implement decisions taken, along with resources to effect change, were crucial for any international actor's ability to influence its environment. In short, the accumulation of meaningful capacities and a capacity to mobilize them provide a partial indicator of the maturation of a polity.

In empirical terms, the EU's development of a wide array of cross-sectoral and cross-institutional capacities is documented in studies of crisis and beyond (see, for instance, Backman and Rhinard 2019 and Boin, Ekengren and Rhinard 2013). From early warning to special decision procedures, and from new funding streams to rapid response teams, the emergence of crisis related capacities is one of the most intriguing phenomena in EU politics of late. There is an impressive amounts of 'firefighting' capacity when crises break out: consider the long list of capacities related to recapitalizing banks, redistributing migrants, delivering emergency material, securing vaccines, mitigating cyber-attacks – the list goes on and much of it outlined in this volume. Having capacities is not the same as mobilizing them, but here, too, actual crises of late offer evidence of whether and how these capacities were put into action. In this volume, for instance, we see that XX, XX, and XX. Once again, having and mobilizing capacities is not the same as ensuring effectiveness. The effectiveness question



requires a different set of analytical metrics. But overall, from a crisis capacity perspective, the EU can clearly be seen as a growing and maturing supranational polity.

### **Publicness**

Crises are, by their very nature, a matter of high politics. They are acute moments when mutually constructed societal values are threatened – and thus cast into the spotlight. Whether and how crises are addressed says much, then, about the values a political system holds in relation to wider society. More specifically, crisis management research reminds us that crises cast different values against each other – security versus liberty, economic goals versus social welfare, communitarianism versus individualism, to name just a few that arose during the Covid pandemic (cite). Crisis response in a democratic setting thus requires the weighing of values and prioritization of some over others. This would ideally take place in public view, on a platform that allows for the articulation and argumentation of varying societal viewpoints. The public contestation of values is often wrought with conflict. Elites must reconcile this debate by articulating which values were prioritized and why. Crisis scholars thus speak of the importance of ‘meaning making’ – the obligation of elites to paint a plausible picture to a wider audience of what is happening and a convincing story of how it is being addressed (Boin et al 2016). This is not just a highly political act; it also sets the value-orientation of a governance system well into the future (Selznick 1957). In sum, this criterion queries the extent to which policymakers manage crises not just in the public light, via open public debate, but do so with reference and engagement to societal wide values.

For EU scholars, this criterion resembles debates over the emergence of a European public space for the resolution of societal issues. A public space is a precondition for democratic governance, generally, and it is also an indicator of the emergence of a supranational polity, specifically. On the former point, EU scholars have long been on the lookout for a European political space which includes not just authoritative decision-making but also a communication space that allows for the airing and reconciliation of key societal issues (‘cleavage’ questions, see Muller). On the latter point, the emergence of a space for the debate over and emergence of shared values was a key measure of European integration.<sup>6</sup> Deutsch argued that as societal

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<sup>6</sup> For Taylor and Mitrany, the extent to which Brussels became the location for the resolution of problems was a sign of responsiveness. Taylor argued that mature international institutions must be able to act upon the demands fed into the organization from its environment (see also Mitrany 1966). Transactionalists approaches were a forerunner to more modern arguments on the ‘output’ based forms of legitimacy in modern governance systems: those systems must respond to societal problems if they are to preserve the support of the population (Scharpf, Schmidt).

groups increased their transnational interaction, social systems cohering around shared values would emerge (1961). Value conflicts would be settled peacefully, through discussion and debate, within shared platforms. Haas may have overestimated the extent that citizen loyalties would gradually shift to Brussels (1967), but he continued to argue in later years that as major policy debates play themselves out ‘above the nation state’, a degree of institutionalized, supranational polity-building was taking place (2004). More recently, writings on the EU’s democratic legitimacy argue that crises can, in principle, raise the stakes of European cooperation and thereby lead to greater political engagement by the broader citizenry (Schmidt 2017, but cf. Usherwood, this volume).

Empirically, the findings are mixed on whether the EU as a supranational polity is showing greater signs of publicness. Van Middelaar’s arguments of a growing ‘performance space’ around crisis management (2019), Zürn’s take on the positives of politicization from crises (2019), and Rauh’s point that high-stakes decision-making, held in the public spotlight, helps to build output legitimacy (2020), all suggest that crises are driving important changes. From this perspective, publicness is revealed in terms of heightened media attention, more transparent policy debates, and, although difficult to quantify, higher citizen engagement. The overall effect would be greater political competition playing out as part of democratic politics – clearly a sign of maturity in a supranational polity (Risse). On the other hand, we should not be naïve. The politicization of crisis management in the EU has led to deeper cleavages in European society – what is called the ‘new cleavage hypothesis’ (see Hutter & Kriesi, 2019). In revealing deeply held values, and the need to reconcile conflicting values, national identity politics has heightened of late (cite). This could, considering broader problems in the democratic credentials of the EU, including the lack of a demos and genuine party-political competitions, weaken any moves towards greater political maturity by the EU (cf. Kriesi, 2016).

### **Conclusion** (in progress)

This chapter advanced the argument that the EU’s growing role in crisis management – and the effects of that role in the form of crisisification – may have a deeper meaning than occasional policy reform or administrative expansion. These trends denote a maturing of the EU as a polity into a kind of core-state responsibility that most political systems have. This is not to suggest the EU is growing into a federal state or even a ‘state-like’ polity, but it does indicate that crisis management is less the exception and more the normal for the EU, not unlike it is for national governments.

[Crisification recap paragraph here]

[Three indicators paragraph here]

While managing unforeseen, urgent events has always been a basic task of national governments, they are not the only authorities responsible for managing crises. In a world of increasingly complex crises, both caused and propelled by the social-technical systems that characterise modern society, crisis management is increasingly ‘transboundary’. It should be no surprise, then, that governance systems at all levels are expected to act as crisis managers. Crises are more complex, and they are also more frequent, with one crisis capable of cascading into another (see introduction to this volume). While EU scholars treat the arrival of a succession of crises as both problematic, with quite a few article titles questioning the resilience of the EU, as well as unique and time-limited, most crisis researchers would argue that crisis management is not only core part of what politics do, but also an increasingly central part of governing. Moreover, crisis management scholars remind us that managing unforeseen events is an exceedingly difficult task, rarely carried out with a perfect record. This suggests that the sharp rise in studies on crisis in the EU is not only desirable, it is also necessary as we continue to parse out the short and long term impact of crises in the EU, in Europe, and amongst European societies.

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