Crisis Management Performance and the European Union: Covid-19 as Test Case

Arjen Boin (Leiden University) and Mark Rhinard (Stockholm University)

Abstract

A seemingly continuous stream of crises in Europe have turned scholarly agendas towards assessment of the EU's role as a manager of crises. Those assessments vary widely, depending on the analytical focus and criteria used. This paper introduces three assessment criteria drawn from a scholarly field outside EU studies but with decades of findings on what we might expect from any governance system facing crises. These criteria pertain to the detection of a crisis, the mobilization of necessary resources, and the public debate about critical choices made in times of crisis. The crisis management literature is presented in this article and related to long-standing debates in European integration theory to help link 'normal' crisis management assessments with EU-focused theorizing. The combined effect offers a framework for assessment of the EU's performance as a crisis manager. We illustrate the utility of our criteria with a brief application to the EU's response to Covid-19. We assess the EU's performance in this crisis positive terms: the Union acted quickly after a somewhat slow start and was very effective in mobilizing a variety of resources. At the same time, we note that grand choices were made without a public debate about potential effects on the future character of the Union.

1. Introduction

A steady onslaught of crises has battered the European Union and its member states in recent years. Students of the EU refer to an era of crises (Dinan et al, 2017; Schimmelfennig, 2018) or 'polycrisis' (Juncker, 2016), focusing alternatively on the Eurozone crisis, the migration influx, Brexit, Ukraine, and, the subject of this special issue, the Covid-19 pandemic. While the sequence of crises seems to have quickened, crises have been part of the EU from the start. Think of the Empty Chair Crisis or the fallout from the US invasion of Iraq, economic crises such as the 'doldrums' and the oil crisis of the 1970. The list fills out with the Chernobyl disaster, the 'Mad Cow' disease outbreak, the Eurozone crisis and terror attacks in European cities (Anderson, forthcoming; Boin, Ekengren, & Rhinard, 2016).

No wonder, then, that the European Union is increasingly focused on managing crises and academic agendas have shifted towards studying the EU's performance in doing so. Assessments vary widely, from accounts praising the EU's rapid responses (Wolff & Ladi, 2020) and resilience (Schild, *forthcoming*) to accounts of disintegration (Vollaard, 2018) and outright failure (Costa-Font, 2020) – even when looking at the same crisis.[1]

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[1] For a review of alternating assessments of the EU's crisis performance, see Brack & Gürkan (2020). We note that the increasingly popular 'failing forward' argument assumes elements of both failure and success in EU crisis response (Jones, Kelemen, & Meunier, 2016).

A consistent set of performance metrics may be useful to assess the EU's functioning in response to crises in a more systematic way. This can only be done if we have a solid idea of what the EU can actually do before, during and after a crisis. Crisis research offers useful insights into the capacities we might expect a nation state to have and key criteria for evaluating how a state manages crises. These insights need to be 'translated' to the EU, taking formal competencies and political realities into account.

In this paper, we formulate an encompassing set of general performance criteria for the EU's management of crises. We draw on crisis literature, which assumes that response capacities for extraordinary events are a 'normal' part of any mature political system. From this perspective, all systems, at any level, will at some point face crises that demand a political-strategic response. How they take action, using what capacities and through which means, moves to the center of analysis. We thus seek to place the EU into a more traditional, comparative-analytical perspective but not without recognizing the particularities of the EU and themes of interest to EU scholars. We thus relate our criteria to prominent themes in European integration theorizing (cf. Degner, 2019). We show, *inter alia*, that these criteria reflect the EU as an evolving polity.

We begin by identifying three types of criteria, which pertain to the *detection* of an emerging threat, the *mobilization* of relevant capacities, and the *'publicness'* of the crisis response. We present a brief overview of the EU's crisis management capacities, which have been built over the past three decades or so. The EU's constant exposure to crises in recent years has led to an unprecedented – and not widely known – set of crisis management capacities across its policy competences. These allow it to perform a variety of functions, ranging from detecting early signs of a crisis to coordinating joint decision-making, from communicating with the public to rebuilding after a crisis and enhancing societal resilience (Backman & Rhinard, 2017; Boin, Ekengren, & Rhinard, 2013). We then demonstrate the use of these criteria in a discussion of the EU's performance in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. We conclude by reflecting on how well the criteria work, and what recent developments mean for the evolution of the EU as a supranational polity.

2. Assessing the EU's performance in times of adversity: A crisis management perspective

Crisis management researchers study how organizations respond to major, disruptive events that outstrip the tools of risk management and the capacities in place to manage regular and familiar incidents. They speak of a crisis when political elites perceive a significant threat to core values or critical infrastructures, which require an urgent response under conditions of deep uncertainty (Boin et al, 2017; Rosenthal, Charles, & `t Hart, 1989).[2]

The implicit assumption is that the state and its institutions have a responsibility to organize a response to such events (cf. Lodge and Wegrich, 2012). A state must be able to initiate and

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[2] For an excellent discussion of the definition of crises in an EU context, see Brack & Gürkan (2020).

orchestrate a large-scale response. The underlying assumption is that high-quality response will help to limit the damage sustained by the crisis. This presumed relation between response and outcome can be characterized as a leap of faith (cf. Gutner and Thompson, 2010). After all, there are many other factors that will shape how an entity emerges from a crisis (certainly in the long run).

Yet, it seems fair to presume that a well-organized effort can take away the threat and lessen the consequences. The question, then, is what such an effort would entail. In the crisis management literature, the response effort is delineated in a set of tasks (Rosenthal et al, 1989; Boin et al 2017: Howitt and Leonard, 2009). The better each task is performed, the better qualified is the overall response.

In this paper, we select the three core tasks from the crisis management literature. The first task is to detect potential threats and collect and analyze information on that threat. The second task is to mobilize resources, which requires critical (often collective) decisions and coordination of efforts for the efficient use of scarce resources. Finally, and importantly, such a complex response must accord with the demands of legitimacy. A response may be effective, but if a majority of people does not support the response, it is hard to speak of successful crisis management.[3]

In a nutshell, these are the tasks that most crisis management students would analyze to assess the quality of a national crisis response. The use of multiple criteria allows for a more subtle assessment: crisis managers may have done well in recognizing a crisis, but may have failed to properly explain why they made certain choices (that turn out to be controversial).

In their assessment, crisis scholars recognize that these 'tasks' are difficult to fulfill. Many crises come as a surprise, useful information is often hard to find, and public leaders must negotiate 'tragic dilemmas' (Boin et al., 2017; Westrum, 1982). Public scrutiny is intense, accountability constraints weigh heavily, and bureaucratic blame games hinder cooperation and information sharing. Even when these tasks can be carried out in an effective way, that does not equate to *success*. How governments are seen to carry out their response – and how they publicly justify it – may be (at least) equally important to the objective measurement of effectiveness.

A perennial point of debate centers around the challenges that different types of crises may pose. Crisis researchers maintain that every crisis poses the same challenges as outlined above. It is true, of course, that these challenges may be harder to meet in certain types of crises (unique crises, protracted and compounded crises and transboundary crises come to mind, see Boin, 2019). An assessment of crisis management performance should therefore take crisis-related constraints into account (we may be satisfied with less if the crisis is harder).

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[3] In this paper, we do not consider the learning task – what crisis authorities do to make sure that the system is better prepared for similar future crises. Effective learning can help to shape the long-term outcome (cf. Degner, 2019).

Below we draw from this literature to further outline a set of assessment criteria, enriching them by relating to debates in EU studies about the EU as a supranational polity and the EU's role as crisis manager. The first two tasks are dominated by the Commission. The latter task is more of a responsibility for the Council. When we assess EU performance, we must take account of the specific competencies that the EU has with regard to the problem at hand (we may have higher expectations when the EU has explicit competencies).

3.1 Detecting and understanding an emerging crisis

Most crises do not materialize with a big bang; they are the product of incubation and escalation (Jervis, 1997; Lebow & Stein, 1994; Perrow, 1999; Turner, 1978). Policymakers must recognize, based on vague, ambivalent and contradictory signals, that something out of the ordinary is developing (Kam, 1988; Rodriguez, Diaz, & Aguirre, 2004). They must appraise the threat and decide what the crisis is about (Parker & Stern, 2005).

Timely recognition requires organizational capacity for the systematic monitoring of emerging terns that carry the potential to develop into urgent threats. A government must collect all relevant data on an emerging threat, interpret the data correctly and communicate the warning through organizational and political layers. The threat information must be analyzed, understood and prioritized. In order to map systemic and organizational vulnerabilities, clear indicators that signal a potential threat are required. Furthermore, it is necessary that signals are interpreted in a coherent way. All this requires intense cooperation between many organizations (Turner, 1978). This assumes some sort of consensus on core values and types of threat to these values (more on this below).

The early detection of emerging threats was not a core concern of European integration theorists. Few would expect the EU to be on the front edge of crisis detection. In fact, the EU has long been criticized for being a highly reactive governance system (cf. Jordan and Schout, 2006). But in an era of increasing crises, and against the backdrop of growing EU crisis capacities, the question of detection seems more relevant than ever. Some scholars, especially those interested in the EU's external (Meyer & de Franco, 2011) and internal (Bossong & Hegemann, 2015) security roles, study foresight and 'anticipatory politics', but little further research has taken place within the core of EU studies. This could be changing as crises prompt scholar to return to the search for signs of a 'responsive technocracy' as a source of legitimacy (Zürn, 2019).

The EU has developed a plethora of relevant capacities (Backman and Rhinard, 2017). The European Commission, the External Action Service and agencies like the European Food Safety Authority and the EU Satellite Centre employ horizon-scanning systems to search for upcoming problems in almost all policy sectors. For instance, the EU scans for biological threats (RAS-BICHAT), excessive radiation (EURDEP), emerging conflicts in the EU neighborhood (Tarîqa), flood risks (LISFLOOD), and immigration shifts (CIRAM). The EU also has a wide number of 'early warning' and 'rapid alert' systems in place (Bengtsson, Borg,

& Rhinard, 2018; Boin, Ekengren, & Rhinard, 2014). These include the EWRS (for communicating disease outbreaks), the ADNS (for emerging animal health problems), ECURIE (for communicating urgent information in the event of a nuclear emergency), and CSIRT (for notifying incidents of cyber-attacks). The European Commission's Secretariat-General, struggling to keep track of and link the systems, created the 'Argus' system to enable better coordination of these systems.

In assessing the actual performance of the EU's detection capacity, we focus on the efforts to detect signals of emerging threats across its policymaking competences. We would look at the performance of situation awareness capacities both of a technical variety (detection systems, early warning networks) and organizationally (teams set up to process information and judge the severity of emerging problems). The key question is whether available information about an impending threat is correctly recognized and communicated in clear and timely fashion to the political level.

3.2 The mobilization of response capacities

If political-administrative elites interpret an impending threat as serious enough to require an immediate response, they must be able to mobilize capacities to address the threat and its possible effects. An effective response has two components: the availability of relevant capacities and the ability to deploy them when required. Capacities include material resources – financial assistance, experts, supplies, etc. – and institutional resources such as decision routines and coordination protocols to speed up the deployment of capacities. Capacities may be organizational and even personal: a working culture that allows for improvisation and experimentation; individuals who can invent solutions when none may appear to exist.

There are many obstacles to successful mobilization (Boin et al, 2017). Crisis capacities are typically distributed across governance systems, and between governance levels, in a fragmented fashion. A financial instrument might be available only after parliamentary approval. The demand for scarce resources – think of fire-fighting aircraft during wildfire season – may outstrip availability. Some capacity mobilization may need to be improvised: a decision routine repurposed for new circumstances, or an old legal instrument revived to handle an unplanned situation.

Taylor (1991: 209) defined capacity as 'the ability to receive, understand, and act upon the demands fed into a [supranational] organization from its environment; it is an indicator of performance'. Neofunctionalists like Haas and Lindberg are well-known for their focus on performance (Schmitter, 2005; Taylor, 1983). They argued that as a supranational polity's performance rose, the constituent members of a cooperative arrangement (member states) would vest more authority in that arrangement. Transactionalists, like Deutsch, also saw an eventual growth in organizational capacity (not necessarily in terms of common institutions) as complementary to the emergence of a community 'we feeling' (Karl Deutsch, 1957). Studies focused on the EU's 'actorness' distinguished between having capabilities and being able to mobilize them. In Sjöstedt's (1977) original formulation, the ability to mobilize resources

through a functioning 'crisis management system' distinguished non-actors from actors in the international system (cf. Rhinard & Sjöstedt, 2019).

The EU has indeed developed a range of capacities that allows it to coordinate the mobilization of resources (most of these resources are owned by the member states). Most DGs (especially those with crisis experience) have procedures that stipulate the steps to be taken in the event of an unexpected, urgent event that requires the DG to respond quickly. A classic example is found in DG Agriculture's quarantine decisions made during the foot-and-mouth disease outbreak. The EU has multiple crisis rooms and crisis experts to support decision-makers with pertinent information and facilitate coordination with counterparts in national capitals, Brussels, and international organizations.[4]

Another set of arrangements draw together EU institutions and actors at the political *and* administrative levels. COREPER has long played this role. The EU's Integrated Political Crisis Response (IPCR) is especially relevant in this regard. The IPCR prescribes the decision routines that can put the EU on a crisis footing within hours, including situation awareness capacities, decision support, and legal foundations that allow diplomats to make authoritative decisions on behalf of their member states. The IPCR has several 'modes', including monitoring mode, information sharing mode, and full activation mode. The IPCR, which was first activated in 2015 during the refugee crisis, is 'exercised' on a regular basis, including scenarios such as the hijacking of a cruise ship full of national politicians (2015) and a hybrid, cyber 'event' paralyzing multiple EU government infrastructures (2017).

In virtually every sector of EU cooperation, we see advancing efforts to manage future crises. DG ECHO's RescEU package aims to create the EU's own resources for helping member states deal with disasters. DG Sante's Covid-induced proposals ramp up health security cooperation. Other examples include DG Energy's regulations on gas emergencies and the EEAS's work on combating disinformation during acute events. We have seen, generally speaking, a marked increase in financial resources for limiting the effects of crisis. The EU has long had a 'Solidarity Fund', but much attention was paid during the Eurozone crisis to the direct financial support and increased lending facilities put in place with hopes to avoid future problems (Quaglia and Verdun, 2022). The Covid-19 pandemic continued the trend with the €750 billion NextGenerationEU recovery effort.

In assessing the EU's performance during a crisis, we would look at the speed by which the EU can muster a joint mobilization of resources requested by member states. We would also try to establish whether the amount and type of mobilized resources matches the challenge of the situation. This would inevitably require intense deliberation, for it is not easy to establish the sufficiency of mobilized resources. Moreover, in reaching a full assessment we must take

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[4] These include DG ECHO's European Response Coordination Centre, the EEAS's Situation Room, DG Santé's Health Emergency Operations Facility, Frontex's Situation Centre, the ECDC's Epidemic Intelligence Unit, and Europol's European Cybercrime Centre.

into account that the EU is constrained in most cases by what the member states are willing to contribute.

3.3 Publicness of crisis decision-making

Crises are acute moments when mutually constructed societal values are threatened – and thus cast into the spotlight.[5] Crises expose the quality of a political system's relationship with society. Ann ill-managed crisis can cause ruptures between a political system or organization (in this case, the EU) and its sustaining environment. That environment includes stakeholders who must believe in the organization's *raison d'être* for that organization to survive over the long haul. A crisis may in its initial phase bestow 'instant legitimacy' on the crisis management authority; the crisis response may severe the relation between political authority and societal members.

Legitimacy is served by a minimal degree of responsiveness, defined as a willingness on the part of political elites to consider the wishes, demands, and values when initiating actions that bear on citizens, local administrations and businesses (Selznick, 1957). If governments are not perceived to adequately respond to pressing, value-laden events, or respond in ways that reflect values too far off from collectively held values, the legitimacy of the governance system may suffer as a result (Breyer, 1995; Heclo, 2008).

These basic arguments pertain in equal force to the management of crises Alink et al., 2001; Finn, 1991). The leaders of a crisis response must weigh values and prioritize some over others. This is a highly political act that may have a long-term effect on the value-orientation of a governance system. The contestation of values is often wrought with conflict. Identifying the values emphasized and prioritized within a crisis management situation serves several purposes. It helps to trace congruence between a governance system and the society over which is professes to govern. It reveals what values elites in a system prioritize over others. And it tests whether efforts to appeal to shared values has any effect on public support of the polity.

This process would ideally take place in public view, in a way that allows for the articulation and argumentation of varying societal viewpoints. Elites must facilitate this process, which tends to be time consuming. But time is a scarce resource in a crisis. That is why crisis leaders tend to have a degree of autonomy during crises, to make decisions without having to consult multiple stakeholders. It can be tempting for crisis leaders to skip collective deliberation and seek to exploit the 'rally around the flag' effect that allows for crisis decision-making shielded from the public eye. Crisis leaders may resort to 'meaning making' – the imposition of a dominant frame that paints a plausible picture to a wider audience of what is happening and a convincing story of the choices made in addressing the crisis (Boin et al., 2017).

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[5] Societal values are beliefs about desirable end states or behaviors that transcend specific situations, guide selection or evaluation of behavior and events, and are ordered by relative importance (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987).

Crisis research also shows that the honeymoon effect is typically short-lived and the emergence of competing crisis frames is pretty much guaranteed (Boin, McConnell and 't Hart, 2009). Accusations of 'backroom decision-making' are never far away. It is, in short, a real challenge to organize value-laden debates in public view while maintaining a speedy decision-making process.

This criterion of publicness resembles debates over the emergence of a European public space for the resolution of societal issues (Haas, 1958; Mitrany, 1966). Deutsch (1996) argued that as societal groups increased their transnational interaction, social systems cohering around shared values would emerge. 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, 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 (Haas, 2004). EU researchers have long been on the lookout for a European political space that allows authoritative decision-making but also the airing and reconciliation of key societal questions ('cleavage' issues, old and new; see Hutter & Kriesi, 2019) and opportunities to build something resembling a shared identity (Börzel & Risse, 2018). The emergence of a space for the debate over and emergence of shared values is therefore seen as a key measure of European integration.

The resolution, in a public setting, of the value conflicts exposed by crises can be seen as a precondition for democratic governance in the EU, as well as part of resolving the 'constraining dissensus' identified by postfunctionalists (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). Indeed, this criterion links closely to research on how crises provoke a greater politicization of European issues. There are plenty of downsides to politicization (especially when it enhances conflict amongst varying national identities and impairs cooperative approaches), but its upsides can be: higher citizen engagement, recognition of supranational competences, and greater media attention (cf. Kriesi, 2016). 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 legitmacy (2020), all fall within this theme.

In short, the publicness of crisis management can be established as an indicator of successful EU performance in times of crisis. Empirically, this criterion queries the extent to which crisis leaders explain their decisions not just in the public light, via open public debate, but do so with reference and engagement to societal wide values.

3. Assessing the EU's response to Covid-19: A brief illustration

The criteria above help to assess the EU's crisis management performance in what we hope is a more transparent and cross-disciplinary way. To illustrate how these criteria might be applied, we now turn to the Covid-19 pandemic. We may characterize the COVID-19 crisis as a compounded crisis: a long incubation phase turned into a protracted crisis, affecting many

policy sectors in all countries, requiring a transboundarry response. In the world of crisis analysis, COVID-19 counts as one of the hardest to manage (Boin et al, 2021).

Due to space limitations, our analysis of Covid-19 below is an illustrative discussion rather than a systematic analysis. We thankfully draw from empirical work published in this special issue. The broader goal is to inspire use of the criteria for not only Covid-19 but also for other EU crises.

3.1 Detecting and understanding COVID-19

The Chinese government notified the WHO China office of an emerging public health threat on 31 December 2019 and identified the culprit as a novel coronavirus on 7 January 2020. The news set communicable disease authorities across the world into action; close surveillance and 'pathogens of interest' protocols were activated. The WHO and the US CDC issued warnings soon thereafter. The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) issued a Threat Assessment Report on 9 January stating that cases in Europe were likely, but playing down the threat of a pandemic. The same day the EU's Early Warning and Response System (EWRS) was activated.

With the ECDC monitoring the situation and issuing regular threat alerts and the EWRS kicked into gear to begin consultation, the Commission urged a virtual meeting of the Health Security Committee (HSC). The meeting, held on 17 January, was sparsely populated by national officials. While alarm bells were ringing, even from the EU's own early warning systems, Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen made no mention of the virus outbreak when she addressed the World Economic Forum on 22 January 2020, instead focusing on the civil war in Libya and the need to 'invest more in long-term stability and to prevent crises' on Europe's borders. Nor did any national leaders remark publicly on the virus that day, despite the fact Wuhan, China was in the process of locking down that very same evening.

On 22 January, the EU's cross-institutional crisis management system, the IPCR, was triggered. On 29 January, the Commissioner for crisis management (Janez Lenarčič) and the Commissioner for health (Stella Kyriakides) held a press conference to a virtually empty room in Brussels (all eyes were on the final Parliamentary session on the eve of Brexit). The EU's civil protection mechanism was activated for the repatriation of EU citizens abroad on 28 January 2020, the IPCR moved from monitoring to information sharing mode on that same day, and in the early days of February, the IPCR was again boosted to 'active mode' while aid and supplies began flowing to China.

Speaking on the issue later, Lenarčič argued in an interview with *Politico* that 'while nobody can say that one would be able to predict what is happening now, I can say that the Commission was awake; the Commission did sense the danger', adding 'There are some people…who claim the Commission was asleep and that it didn't react quickly and early. I don't think that is correct. We were early' (in Herszenhorn & Wheaton, 2020: 3).

The early warning systems, teams of scientific experts, and health security bureaucrats communicated the threat almost immediately. Some diplomats suggested dismissively that this was 'mainly a problem with Italy, not the virus' (quoted in Herszenhorn & Wheaton, 2020). Other issues clouded the view of the emerging virus. In late January and February, Turkish President Erdogan threatened to tear up the bilateral deal with the EU on refugee resettlement – a move that could restart the flood of migrants. Rising Euroscepticism related to migration was seen as more of a threat than the virus (EU competences on external borders are higher than in health, after all, Wolff, Ripoll Servent, & Piquet, 2020). It may not have helped that a small EU member state, Malta, held the rotating Council Presidency in early 2020 – and was undergoing its own governmental scandal.

In short, the EU's early detection of the emerging threat did not immediately extend from the bureaucratic realm into the political domain. The highest political levels chose not to act early, for reasons ranging from agenda crowding to information uncertainty and not wanting to alarm the public (Boin, Ekengren, & Rhinard, 2020). Only when the pandemic's tragic impact became clear in March 2020, did leaders in the EU institutions and member state governments jump into action.

3.2 Mobilization of EU Capacities

After a faltering start, a five Commissioner strong 'Emergency Coronavirus Response Team' was created on 2 March to coordinate a joint response at the political level inside the Commission. Member states in the Council, having looked inward for weeks as the virus' true impact became clear, adopted a four-point strategy for combatting the virus on 17 March. The mobilization of EU capacities had started in earnest (cf. Kassim, forthcoming; Quaglia & Verdun, forthcoming).

Getting things done took some time. On 28 February, Italy had activated the EU's civil protection mechanism, which relies on EU members to volunteer help, and was met with silence. The Commissioner for health, Lenarčič, later commented that it was then that 'we realized what nobody told us before: that there is a general shortage throughout Europe of personal protective equipment' (Herszenhorn & Wheaton, 2020: 2). The first joint procurements of PPE, with the EU negotiating contracts, took place within days. It took until 21 April 2020 for civil protection shipments to reach Italy, Croatia, and other requesting countries.

The European Council (supported by Coreper II) moved decisively with a fundamental reallocation of financial resources (Russack & Fenner, 2020; van Middelaar, 2021). Horizon 2020 funding was made available for acute research on the source and transmissibility of the coronavirus. On 13 March, €530 million was dispersed from the EU Solidarity Fund. A tranche of emergency funds was dug out of the EU budget on 20 March, to further help Member States repatriate EU nationals (Covid prompted the largest coordinated repatriation of nationals in EU history, according to the Commission) and to increase the budget of the 'RescEU' medical stockpile (these funds would later be increased to €3 billion).

In late March, the unprecedented loosening of rules continued with the activation, within the Eurozone's fiscal framework, of the Stability and Growth Pact's 'escape clause'. That activation allowed Member States 'to undertake measures to deal adequately with the crisis, while departing from the budgetary requirements that normally apply under the European fiscal framework' (Commission, 2022b). The EU's Emergency Support Instrument kicked in another €2.7 billion on 14 April. In addition, the EC relaxed constraints on competition policy and state-aid restrictions to help member governments cope with the crisis (Kassim 2021; Anghel and Jones, 2022). The EU thus initiated a 'macroeconomic policy mix' that 'seemed to hit the spot' (Quaglia and Verdun, 2022; Kassim, 2022).

In the health domain, in which the EU's powers are limited (Greer et al., forthcoming), additional capacities were activated. An independent panel of epidemiologists and virologists was created in April 2020 to support national governments, together with the ECDC, regarding gaps in clinical capacity, immediate response measures (like physical distancing), and to study the long-term consequences of the virus. On 8 April, the Commission worked with its two health-related agencies (the ECDC and EMA) to improve the availability of medicines and to avoid antitrust problems in allowing cooperation among businesses for critical hospital medicines. The Commission also set up a 'clearing house' for medical equipment that helps identify available supplies, including testing kits, and accelerates the matching of supplies with national demands. Approval processes for the marketing of medicines was accelerated, including authorization for Remdesivir, the first medicine authorized at EU level for treatment against coronavirus. In this same vein was the widely reported (and initially criticized) procurement by the Commission, on behalf of all member states, of vaccines through single negotiations with pharmaceutical companies.

Additional capacities were mobilized across the EU's policy competences. The Commission initiated measures to facilitate travel and keep goods (like PPE) moving – free movement of goods, services, and people in the internal market was threatened when member states began unilaterally restricting travel and closing borders. On March 2021, the EU adopted a Digital Vaccination Certificate (Green Pass) (Blauberger et al, forthcoming). Exceptional measures were put in place, fairly swiftly in April 2020, to support collapsing agricultural and food markets.

Perhaps the most exceptional step was the adoption of the largest stimulus package in EU history. In mid-2021, member states agreed to a recovery package of more than €2 trillion in mid-2021 that combines the EU budget for 2021-27 and NextGenerationEU (the temporary instrument allowing the Commission to borrow on capital markets) to help boost recovery and 'to support the economic recovery and build a greener, more digital and more resilient future' (Commission, 2022a: 1; see also Kassim, 2022).

Even if the long-term effects of these initiatives are impossible to evaluate, it is clear that the EU did succeed in mobilizing resources: 'where European institutions had clear authority, they exercised it' (Anghel & Jones, forthcoming). Since EU competences in foreign aid are strong,

it moved quickly to ship PPE to China. Border questions and export controls occupied much agenda space, since EU competences, there too, allow for immediate action. In areas where the EU's authority it lower, such as in public health, the roll out of capacities took longer. The loosening of internal market rules, and the quick discovery of emergency financing, count as a clear sign of flexibility in the roll-out of capacities. So are the moves made to address the implications of the crisis beyond its immediate effect, exemplified by market support and recovery planning.

Looking back, we can see that the EU moved aggressively to mobilize a variety of resources in those frantic early months of the pandemic – and kept the pace during the crisis. On this dimension, we can state that 'the EU acted as a proficient crisis manager' (Quaglia and Verdun, 2022) even if a definitive assessment of long-term outcome would require more research.

3.3 Publicness of Response

Despite the transboundary reach and consequences of Covid-19, there was little effort in Brussels to explicitly 'make meaning' out of the emerging pandemic. At best, there were scattered references to the importance of 'European cohesion' and the linking of national interests with collective European interests (Ferrera, Miró, & Ronchi, 2021).[6] This is in keeping with past crises, when some public appeals to solidarity and common purpose could be detected but hardly as a dominant discourse (Wolff & Ladi, 2020). The 'results oriented' response pushing large-scale and bold efforts (notably the NextGen initiative) as described above, were not accompanied by rousing discourses that centered on key European values (as would happen during the Ukraine crisis) (Miró, 2021).

Why was there no structural and evident effort to identify, air and reconcile broad, European values in the resolution of this crisis? One explanation is the early, disjointed response to Covid by national governments. Their approaches essentially ignored Brussels, led to uncoordinated border closures and export restrictions (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2021), and negated any effort to engage in a public discussion. Another explanation was the weak competences of the EU in the area of health, which, rather than leading Commission President von der Leyen or Council President Michel to set out an overarching vision, instead led them to be quite pragmatic in order to make the most out of the available (Ferrara & Kriesi, 2021). It did not help that the European Parliament could not convene in person and reach out to stakeholders and initiate public discourse as it normally does.

The Covid disaster did, of course, expose conflicts over core values, including health/economy, universalism/parochialism, security/liberty, and solidarity/individualism (Harari, 2020). Over time, the EU took a position on several of those conflicts. For instance, the proposals for Green Passes, formally titled the European Covid Digital Certificate, moved far ahead of

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[6] An example was the Council meeting of March 2020 when a smattering of calls for solidarity emerged, mainly from the German government. Commission President Von der Leyen opened her remarks by declaring 'We are all Italians' (Ursula von der Leyen in *Agence Europe*, 14 March 2020).

governments' efforts in establishing who had the right to travel in Europe (limiting the freedom of movement for unvaccinated). Initiatives to coordinate the shipment of PPE to certain places of the world, and not others -- nor to keep those supplies in Europe -- came with a clear set of value prioritizations, namely humanitarian relief over domestic safety (Grasso et al., 2021). The massive shift of funding towards economic recovery, and away from research and cohesion funds, had obvious redistributional consequences. And the move towards joint procurement of vaccines was not just a legal novelty but also a new emphasis for the EU's role in European society (Greer, 2020; Halloran, 2021).

The COVID-19 response also effected the governing philosophy of the EU, causing a shift in the prioritization of rules versus flexibility. Traditionally dedicated to upholding the rules-based order that the EU itself represents, EU elites dismantled some of those rules in the case of Covid. State-aid rules, normally zealously enforced, and debt-spending limits were relaxed to give member governments more room for maneuver (Quaglia and Verdun, 2022).

As is typical in EU governance, however, these critical decisions were made largely out of the glare of the public spotlight. The Commission worked with the Council to find room for agreement (doing so mainly in private rather than appeal to the court of public opinion). No major efforts were made to set out what was at stake, or who wins and who loses, under certain decision outcomes. Such efforts are not common in EU decision-making, although there is evidence that crises are driving new arguments in Brussels about when and why EU level decision-making is legitimate (Rhinard, 2019).

The European public focused primarily on national level responses (Sjölander-Lindqvist et al, 2020, but cf. Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2021). We see little of the 'performance space' identified by Van Middelaar during the Eurozone crisis (2019), and not much evidence of a public space long hunted after by EU scholars. In short, on this criterion (a) there was very little public discussion of crisis decisions with value implications, and (b) the transparency by which crisis decision were made, value-laden or not, was weak at best.

4. Conclusion

The EU has assumed a clear role in organizing a transboundary response to an existential crisis (and continues that role during the Ukraine crisis). The accumulation of cross-sectoral crisis tools, routines, and resources is one of the most remarkable developments in the EU of late, with some even arguing it has changed the essential character of the EU (Rhinard, 2019).

The study of the EU's role as crisis manager has moved from a scholarly 'side show' to a central place in the field of EU studies. But EU scholars arrive at rather different assessments of the EU's role. We think that is because the EU studies community lacks a basic yet encompassing evaluative framework. To search for unity in the European Council after a crisis outbreak is often to find failure. To look for an individual Commission unit's policy entrepreneurism is to find occasional success. One might add that *when* one looks for performance in the crisis cycle (early, middle, late) conditions the answers one is likely to find.

We provided here a set of criteria drawn from a distant but increasingly relevant cousin to EU studies: the study of crises and the response organized by organizations and states. The criteria of early detection, mobilization of capacities, and the publicness of the response offer an evidence-based set of criteria that allows EU scholars to compare the EU against national governance systems.

Our discussion of Covid-19 – necessarily brief – offered proof of concept. The framework provides a compass for debating the performance of the EU in a structured and predictable manner (while not preempting the outcome of the assessment). The application of this framework in the context of the EU does underline our starting point, which held that the EU cannot be evaluated in a completely similar way as one would assess the crisis management performance of a state. It remains important to take into account that we are dealing with a multi-level governance system, where critical resources are controlled by lower levels and there is no 'federal' mechanism that can centralize power in exceptional situations.

In addition, this approach can reveal important findings. One such finding is that the 'warning paradox' is alive-and-well in the EU. Spotting an incoming threat is rarely a problem; rather, gaining recognition of that threat by the political class is usually the real problem. Another finding is that the EU's crisis management performance quickly improved. A slow start – a lack of crisis recognition at the political level, member states turning inward – eventually gave rise to a massive effort at the supranational level. We found signs that the speed and robustness of EU's response correlated with its competences. Even after the virus spread across European borders, the EU's focus remained on those borders rather than on health effects because of the EU's legal authority in the former. Finally, we found that the European leaders made *some* value-laden appeals to justify their crisis decisions than might normally be expected – but that is far from the creation of a 'public space' for the public airing of values at stake during a crisis.

The EU may be less *sui generis* as a polity than traditionally theorized, especially when it concerns crisis management. We would not go so far as to say the EU is evolving into a federal state in this regard, however; we make no claim to the EU's *finalité*. We also hasten to add that fulfilling these criteria does not say much about the EU's success as a crisis manager. Our conclusion here is that the EU has some necessary but sufficient qualities for crisis management. The definition of success is a broader question, a different analysis, and one that requires taking public perception into greater account. The same caveat holds for any evaluation of national crisis management systems – and the EU is no different.

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