

Policy Learning and European Integration

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Introduction

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I. Crisis and Learning

There are many ways to describe the European Union (EU) in 2021, but crisis and learning are particularly appropriate. Crisis management and crisis response have marked the whole of 2021 (and even more so 2022), to the point that some have correctly described the growth of crisis-related organizational features, tasks, missions and policies as indicators of the maturation of the EU as polity (Boin and Rhinard, 2022). ‘Crisis’ (in whatever morphology) is here to stay and has impacted on how the EU thinks and works (Mèrand, 2021).

To accept, politically and in terms of policy instrumentation, the presence of different and often overlapping crises, and to generate policy responses is now a typical (as opposed to exceptional) ‘way of doing things’ in the EU. In the long term, this is also a ‘way of doing integration’ – a point that was not lost in classic theories of European integration (Ferrara and Kriesi, 2022). A crisis provides a formidable threat to integration. But it also creates a decision-making window of opportunity wider than normal-times windows. How the EU approaches this opportunity is crucial: it can be a disaster or a positive discontinuity, a leap into further integration. After all, ‘Europe will be forged in crisis’ famously wrote Jean Monnet in his *Mémoires* (1976). Can we then look at integration, to carry on with Monnet, as the cumulative effects of the responses to crises? If there is a connection between crisis and integration, it is reasonable to think that learning is a possible result of the ‘way of managing and responding to crises’.

Back to 2021, the year in review seems to corroborate the learning-from-crisis argument. Crisis featured prominently: the turbulent start of the year in transatlantic relations with the attack on Capitol Hill, the total shake-up of orthodox economic paradigms about spending in deficit, the lethal incidents affecting migrants (43 people drowned in January only), the constant attempts to undermine the rule of law, compounded by the discussed leadership of Slovenia when this country assumed the EU Presidency in the second half, the troubled wake of Brexit, and of course the obstinate presence of the Covid-19 virus. At the same time, 2021 was the year of the pan-EU Covid-19 certificate and of the EU institutions coming together in the finalization of ambitious policies for ecological and digital recovery. Resilience is a key word in the

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EU vocabulary, making it clear that what matters is to withstand and respond effectively to shocks generated by a crisis.

The year 2022 started with yet another round of facts pointing to crisis-learning mechanisms – the most important being of course the Ukrainian invasion. During the Euro crisis, it took the EU *years* to emerge with a new governance architecture to respond to speculative attacks on the sovereign debts of its Member States. With Covid-19, a coherent EU response took *months* to overcome the haphazard and uncoordinated initiatives of the Member States. In 2022, the EU learned in just a few *weeks* how to address the invasion and assist Ukraine, diplomatically and military.¹ In the second half of 2022, the EU was hit by the energy crisis – a crisis that can become existential if the ‘return to dirty energy’ significantly delays the plans for a green EU.² Yet again, the energy crisis triggered the attempt to forge closer co-operation amongst the Member States.

Thus, crisis–learning–integration is, at least *prima facie*, an attractive triptych to frame the year in review. But in this JCMS Annual Lecture I wish to go further, and put 2021 in a broader, long-term perspective. We can look back at the last 15 years (at least) as a succession of multiple crises hitting different domains and sectors of the European Union (EU), often simultaneously. Think of refugees, the euro area, Brexit and Covid-19. This constant presence of the crisis has crystallized in the notion that EU policy making, and integration thereof, have become *crisified* (to borrow the terminology of Rhinard, 2019). Crises have not only become the new (empirical) normal of EU policy making, but one key explanatory variable of integration.

We then should not be surprised to hear that, as mentioned, learning (or failure to learn, or, in yet another permutation, to learn dysfunctionally and therefore ‘learning to fail’; Dunlop, 2020) is an engine of integration in classic integration theories (Radaelli and Dunlop, 2013) and, beyond ‘the classics’, the failing forward theory (Jones et al., 2016). Between one crisis and the next, slow but historically big movements take place. This happens via spillovers (for neo-functionalists like Haas, 1958) or the decisions of the Court of Justice of the EU (for historical institutionalists like Pierson (1996), who can then detail the transition between t_1 and t_2 in terms of layering, conversion, and drifting (see Hacker et al., 2015). Modes of governance theories like the experimentalist approach (Zeitlin, 2016) argue that learning is a cause of policy change – and in turn, policy change impacts on the trajectory of integration.

This lecture handles together the three elements of learning, crisis, and integration. I theorize the causal relationship with a focus on mechanisms of learning during the crisis as determinant of integration. The claim is that integration depends on how the EU learns in a crisis. The theoretical arguments in support of the claim are anchored on the micro-foundations of policy learning (often overlooked) and theories of crisis management.³ Crucial to the claim is the argument about two very different mechanisms of learning.

¹I am grateful to Alexander Stubb for reminding me of this sequence: years (crisis of the euro area), months (pandemic), weeks (Russian invasion in Ukraine).

²Alice Hancock, Europe’s new dirty energy: The ‘unavoidable evil’ of wartime fossil fuels, *Financial Times*, 6 September 2022.

³Here I follow the distinction between claim and argument as outlined amongst others by Booth et al. (2016, fourth edition).

To approach our task of connecting learning, crisis and integration we start from mechanisms of policy learning. Learning (without the qualifier of *policy*) has a formidable pedigree as a theoretical lens in international relations, political science, and other disciplines like cognitive psychology and evolutionary economics. Even if we narrow down to the more specific domain of *policy* learning, we find an array of conceptual and empirical angles, pointing however to a core set of propositions (Dunlop et al., 2018). We are dealing with a relatively robust tradition.

Apart from being a respectable tradition, another advantage of reasoning in terms of policy learning is that we are not relying on an ad-hoc theory created and leveraged for the EU only. Recent work is discovering and acknowledging the potential of policy learning and its explanatory power when it comes to policy change in a crisis and between crises (Ladi and Tsarouhas, 2020; Serban, 2021). Further, policy learning is not necessarily limited to elites-level learning. We can indeed look at broader mechanisms of learning (Bomberg, 2007) in post-functionalist EU politics. Finally, following the recent literature, crises are not just exogenous shocks. They must be endogenous to the causal argument that learning determines the integration path.

The remainder is organized as follows: the two mechanisms of inferential and contingent learning are the core of the Annual Lecture. After having explained and illustrated them in detail with reference to crises, I briefly move to learning between one crisis and the other. Next, I put some flesh on the bones of the claim, by considering the role of time, the relationship between type of crisis and type of learning, the wider political context in which elite-based learning takes place, and the effects of heuristics and misreading a crisis. The conclusions connect the thrust of the Lecture to theories of integration, showing how they contribute to the explanation of integration.

II. Taking Learning Seriously: Two Mechanisms

Let us then examine *policy* learning – from now on, when I will only talk about learning in public policy processes, hence I will not need the qualifier ‘policy’. This section presents two different mechanisms of learning. One is inferential learning. This is customary in the political economy/policy analysis literature. Inferential learning has indeed a well-respected tradition in public policy analysis – one can even talk of a family tree that goes back one century (Dunlop et al., 2018, Chapter 1). Inferential learning has significant, fruitful conceptual overlap with political economy and neo-institutionalist theories of change (Hall, 1993).

Here we are concerned with the link between policy learning and policy change. The public policy literature of the 1990s has explored this link in depth (Bennett and Howlett, 1992; May, 1992). I argue that inferential learning is a suitable conceptualization of learning for slow-burning crises. The other mechanism (contingent learning) was first identified and strongly corroborated outside political science – yet recently embraced within political science by Kamkhaji and Radaelli (2017). This mechanism applies to fast-burning crises.

Micro-foundations must be endogenous to our explanation of learning. They cannot be assumed away without going into excessively abstract arguments. At the micro-level of inferential learning, we find an individual, or organization, that learns for two reasons. One is the repeated failure of existing dominant policy beliefs. This allows individuals and

organizations to see in very concrete ways that a given policy (or a wider paradigm that informs a certain type of policies) is manifestly wrong. Experience with repeated failure shows that the cause-and-effect chain presupposed by the policy does not work. The lesson of experience, however, is not sufficient. The second reason is the presence of a viable alternative, visible in the public discourse as a set of relatively coherent set of policy beliefs. In other words, there must be another way of doing things that emerges as a feasible alternative, at the level of elites and in terms of public acceptance. Otherwise, individuals and organizations do not have a policy-making compass when they dispose of their old beliefs. The third factor is the role of agents of learning (an example being epistemic communities) that move individual learning to the meso- and macro-institutional level.

In the EU, a classic example of inferential learning is the diffusion of beliefs and institutional choices about Economic and Monetary Union. The beliefs system that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s to replace Keynesian economics was articulated around central bank independence, the single monetary policy objective of keeping price stability, and the belief that the quantity of money in the economy cannot influence employment and output in the long term. The adoption of this beliefs system was made possible by the repeated failure of Keynesian policies and the presence of alternative economic policy solutions informed by monetarism. Note that the crisis of Keynesian policies was not sudden, it was a slow-burning crisis that originated in the hyper-inflation of the early 1970s. There was time to see it coming, and reflect on the lessons provided by experience.

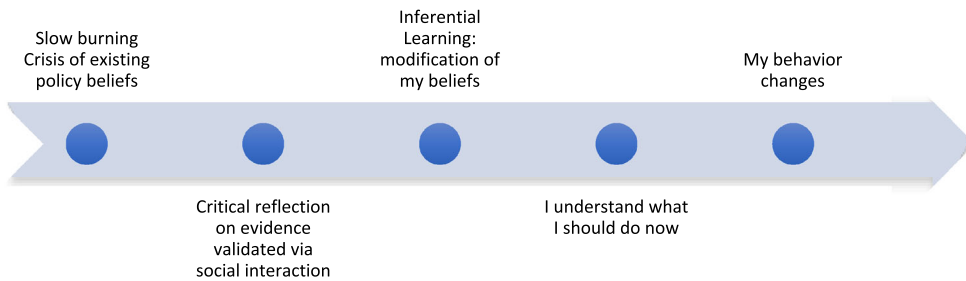
The presence of certain categories of actors facilitates the absorption and diffusion of lessons from slow-burning crises. Turning to an example, an important agent of inferential learning was the Delors Committee, acting as epistemic community with the necessary authoritative power to push the agenda for change. The Delors Committee is, in terms of research design, a perfect place to relate individual learning to the meso-level of group-level interactions (as shown by Verdun, 1999).

The change arising from learning was the institutional choice to adopt a single currency. In their magisterial analyses, Kathleen McNamara (1998) and Amy Verdun (1999) have told the story of how learning produced this policy change through the repeated failures of the old Keynesian approaches, the availability of a new paradigm, and the presence of agents of learning.

Figure 1 shows the causal logic of the micro-foundations involved in inferential learning (for this reason you will find the 'I' pronoun, but 'I' can also be an organization). Key is the intellectual quality of learning: individuals (and organizations) reflect in social interaction modes (like in the Delors Committee), look at the policies that have led to a crisis, or have proved ineffective, critically assess beliefs in their mind before they attend to behavioural change. Policy change is therefore caused by inferences drawn from experience/social interaction.

Turning to contingent learning, the term appeared in EU scholarship in the debate on the crisis caused by financial instability and the attacks on the sovereign debts in the euro area (Kamkhaji and Radaelli, 2017). For this reason, although we are discussing 2021, we will need to go back in time a bit to explain this mechanism with a concrete example. Beyond the EU example, note that the micro-foundations of this mechanism have been proved solid by experiments and many empirical studies in cognitive psychology and experimental-behavioural economics (for examples, see De Houwer and Beckers, 2002; Slembeck, 1998, 1999).

Figure 1: Inferential Learning. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



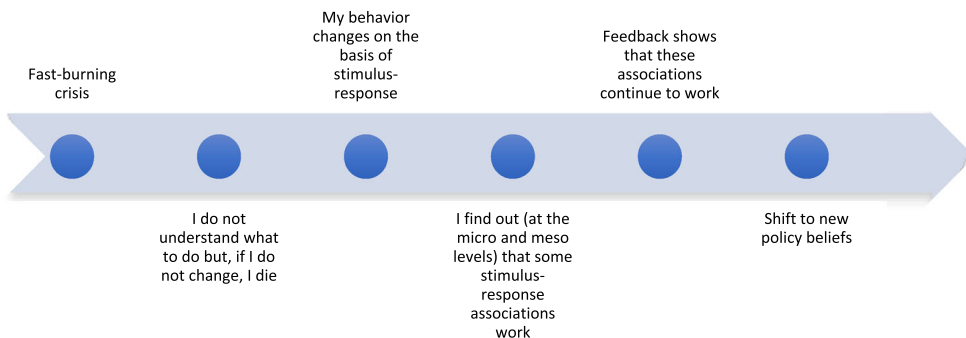
Source: Author (2022).

The puzzling decision-making dynamics and resulting policy change that characterized EU economic governance during the crisis of the euro area, and particularly in the years 2010–13 (Kamkhaji and Radaelli, 2017), did not arise from inferential learning. There was no time for drawing inferences from repeated failure, no alternative paradigms with high social certification existed, and there were many different fora where different agents were interacting (in contrast to the key position and policy entrepreneurship of the Delors Committee).

Contingent learning (portrayed in Figure 2) starts from the individual, but this time we have an individual in a context of quick stimulus–response episodes. The crisis actors face does not provide clear lessons. It is evolving too fast for lessons to be deciphered. It is also not clear what the causality of the crisis is.

When the Lehman Brothers-originated instability waves affected Europe, in a first phase EU leaders were not able to infer cause-and-effect relationships. They did not have the cognitive and social ‘space’ and time to reason about the limits of the mandate of the current policy regime. As for the (in)effectiveness of austerity, this was not understood. Actually, there was a first response in terms of austerity.

Figure 2: Contingent Learning. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



Source: Author (2022).

In short, for the EU leaders, this was a fast-burning crisis. Something had to change, but no clear set of beliefs emerged quickly enough to replace austerity and the orthodoxy of Central Bank independence and controls on public deficit and debt (as per the Maastricht Treaty). Epistemic communities of economists were at that time scattered and far apart in terms of their policy beliefs on how to respond to the crisis. None of these communities had their epistemic authority enshrined in a clear mandate to propose solutions – if anything there was competition on where to look for solutions, and competition amongst the EU institutions on who should lead on the response. Neither the Commission nor the Council seemed to be able to act as entrepreneurs capable of solving the crisis. The European Parliament and the Council were bypassed by bilateral meetings between leaders of the Member States. The European Central Bank gradually emerged as the actor with the clearest vision.

In terms of the micro-foundations described in cognitive psychology (see the studies in Kamkhaji and Radaelli, 2017), the EU was in one of the ‘change or die’ situations tested many times in experiments. But this time, instead of a sample of citizens (or, in some experiments carried out on contingent learning, even 24-months old toddlers – Bannard and Tomasello, 2012), we had EU leaders and the EU as complex organization.

Doing nothing was certain to lead to failure, given the intensity of the speculative attacks. Doing something was therefore a necessity. But *what should be done* could not be derived by emergent, solid, authoritatively advocated alternative policy beliefs. Indeed, the EU leaders acted in different ways, responding to the challenges month by month, sometimes week by week (Jones, 2010; Papaconstantinou, 2016, 2020) in a classic stimulus–response fashion. These extraordinary EU Pavlov dogs did not change their beliefs before acting, as documented in the empirical studies of the cognitive maps of the time (Van Esch, 2014, 2015). The learning mechanism leading to behavioural change was non-inferential. It was somewhat accidental, largely contingent.

Yet, going back to our story, once a solution was found, with the gradual emergence of correct responses and a governance architecture to protect the euro area, individuals and institutions were able to reflect on what had made possible that effective response. Feedback was essential in this chain of stimulus–response episodes.

Indeed, key was the capability to correctly ‘read’ the feedback provided by the financial markets. Feedback and, specifically, how feedback is coded and learned in the minds of policy-makers is crucial. It is after this ‘reading of the feedback’ that we can talk about learning as something that goes on in the mind, of lessons learned. A solution becomes subject to a process of anchoring and collective sense-making. Conventional inferential mechanisms of learning come back into the process, to solidify policy change into a coherent beliefs system. These new beliefs then, at the end of the process we are describing, orient policy behaviour. The Pavlov dogs have mutated into beings who can clearly articulate the lessons learned and the beliefs on the basis of which they act.

Does this story remind you of the EU in the pandemic, during 2020 and 2021? That crisis has left a long shadow even now, in 2022. Evidence is still pouring in. However, we find the elements of a contingent learning mechanism. If anything, this time things went faster, as mentioned above. The initial understanding of the crisis was problematic. Recall what we said: that the initial responses exhibited a low level of coordination across the EU. Where to shop for epistemic authority was not clear at all (Zaki and Wayenberg, 2021). Then some successful moves appeared, feedback-generated evidence

was read properly, and gradually policy learning materialized in the bundle of policies concerning vaccines authorizations, certificates and free movement. Interestingly, and connecting with what we just said about the euro area crisis, learning from Covid-19 was not limited to the domain of health policies. It spilled over to major re-orientation of macro-economic policies with the design and (in 2021) the approval of the recovery plans of the Member States. What the EU learns in a crisis may affect what is learned in the next crisis. We explore this in the next section.

III. Learning Between Crises

To provide a learning-based lens to identify the trajectory of integration, we cannot look at learning case by case, that is, looking at a crisis without considering what the mechanism and outcome of learning ‘does’ to the EU when the next crisis arrives.

Ladi and Tsarouhas (2020) illustrate the connection I just mentioned between the pandemic and the euro area. They approach crises as windows of opportunity. Specifically, they explore the effects of the Covid-19 crisis on EMU governance. Their conclusion is that the paradigmatic shift undergone by the rules on the Euro as a result of the need to rebuild the European economy after the pandemic is another instance of contingent learning. However, this particular instance of contingent learning did not require a lengthy process of inter-crisis paradigm construction and institutional change, like the one that characterized the aftermath of the sovereign debt crisis. Since decision-makers could rely on the learned experience of the previous crisis, the EU managed to generate swift paradigmatic change already in the intra-crisis phase. As Ladi and Tsarouhas (2020, p. 1045) put it: ‘[...] time proximity has enabled quicker and deeper learning’. Previous learning experiences occurring in the domain of governance of the euro fast-forwarded the learning process. In the end, contingent learning turns out to be possibly less *contingent* (this time in the sense of erratic, totally random) than expected. Why? Because mechanisms of learning seem to historically follow and reinforce each other. This begs the question whether learning mechanisms are cumulative and even whether EU integration can be seen as a concatenation of learning mechanisms.

This is the conceptual platform from which the claim presented in Section I proceeds: that is, EU integration is the result of the succession of different mechanisms of learning.

IV. Putting Flesh on the Conceptual Bones

Now that we have seen the logic of contingent and inferential learning, it is time to add fundamental details to the basic claim. What happens, in terms of EU integration, between crises? A preliminary remark is that, as mentioned, if crises are the new normal and determine the pace and trajectory of integration, they cannot be exogenous to any theoretical argument. We cannot just treat them as external to the theoretical construct. Another preliminary remark is about the outcome of learning. I argued that the EU can learn in inferential or contingent mode – or first in contingent mode, then, when feedback is understood and solidifies, in inferential mode. But these are possibilities of learning. Conceptually, we have to make room for the case that the mechanism is hindered, and the outcome of learning is absent, poor, or dysfunctional (learning the wrong lesson). Finally, the third remark is about politics: there can be learning, but what about its

legitimacy and acceptability? Not all elite-level learning is socially possible in a post-functional Europe. With these remarks, we can start our discussion. As you will see in a moment, it looks a bit like a decision tree, with branching points identified by the outcome of learning and politics.

The Role of Time

To begin with time, not every second of EU life is a crisis. The crisis can be absent. It can emerge from outside the EU (exogenous shock) or inside the EU. It can creep, burning slowly, perhaps unseen, perhaps seen but politically ignored. It can instead burn fast. In short, if there is a crisis, we must clarify what type of crisis it is and establish its tempo – adding that policy-makers may misdiagnose the crisis. They can interpret a fast-burning crisis as slowly developing, in which case the learning process will be bumpy at best. There may also be conflict about what type of crisis is hitting the EU – since the problem definition of a crisis can allow an actor to give the blame to another actor.

Then, time flows between one crisis and the next. Intra-crisis interventions extend to non-critical times: once policy change takes place during a crisis, it will not wither away. In this sense, changes of instruments (and more so, paradigms) stick beyond the crisis. They stay there during non-critical times, unchallenged because the crisis is absent. Jones et al. (2016) elaborate on inter-crisis time in their ‘failing forward’ article, dedicated to the crisis of the euro area. In 2021, they widened their approach to crises and time patterns that identify the dynamics of integration (Jones et al., 2021). Their approach has the great merit of explaining how one crisis leads to the next: a solution is found during a crisis, it persists after the crisis, but because it was not an optimal solution,⁴ the policy change that seemed to solve the crisis at $t1$ will be the cause of a crisis at $t2$.

In the framework I am presenting here, the ‘failing forward’ causal link is one of the possible ways to connect crises in time. EU institutionalist theorists (Pierson, 1996) have focused on the large long-term effects of the slow accumulation of decisions taken in the daily grind of the policy process. Scholars like Pierson (1996) predict an outcome that is similar to inferential learning. But in this historical path described by Pierson, the EU institutions do not necessarily reflect and learn inferentially. Instead, they gradually learn that they live in a world that has slowly but significantly changed, for example by decisions taken by the Court of Justice of the EU. Or they can indeed first learn inferentially, and then exploit entrepreneurially what they have learned (Jabko, 2006). The Commission learned how to build the single market once the lessons of history-making decisions of the Court of Justice became a visible and operational model of integration. These two cases (failing forward and historical institutional trajectories) belong to the more general model we are outlining here.

Types of Crisis and Types of Learning

Earlier on, we said that the speed of a crisis determines the type of learning that is available: fast-burning crises trigger contingent learning, inferential learning is not possible if

⁴Technically, the solution is an incomplete contract (Jones et al., 2016). One may wonder however, which solution ever experimented by real-world institutions is a complete contract. I am indebted to Jonathan Kamkhaji for this observation about the physiological incompleteness of institutional contracts.

not at the end of the process, as a result of contingent learning and feedback. Inferential learning, instead, is more likely to happen in slow-burning crises.

There is also a third possibility that no learning occurs in either one or the other type of crisis (slow or fast burning). If this is the case, there will be less integration, disintegration, or a spiral of deeper crisis. Integration is a two-way street, of course. The EU is not pre-destined to deeper and wider integration.

Let us now assume that there was learning at time t_1 . If feedback is read correctly,⁵ the lesson learned will be resilient and available for the next crisis. It will not wither away – exactly because it is socially certified as a successful response. Learning can be locked in a new policy regime, like Next Generation EU; a policy instrument, such as the Recovery and Resiliency Scoreboard; an institutional choice (for example, the banking union); or, a new set of dominant normative and policy core beliefs on the digital and ecological transition. The reference to ‘lessons learned in the crisis’ carries a broad range of possible empirical manifestations.

Now, fast-forward to time t_2 : and assume that t_2 is a new crisis. If the constellation of actors deploys correctly the lessons learned, we can see them activating inter-crisis learning. This is the case of lessons drawn from the reform of the euro area (t_1) and activated for Covid-19 responses (t_2). One may add that learning at t_2 with Covid-19 made possible a t_3 new episode of learning, with the Recovery and Resilience Plan. Ladi and Tsarouhas (2020), in fact, find double-loop learning in this succession of episodes. The new equilibrium is resilient. Integration is resilient because of the underlying learning dynamics.

Enter Politics

There is a second possibility, however, and to see this we factor in politics. Not all lessons learned by elites are politically possible. The lesson drawn might be, conceptually, in terms of cause-and-effect relationships about policy interventions, still correct at time t_2 . But it may be no longer feasible or adequate in the political conditions of t_2 . This may be because the t_1 lesson was an incomplete contract that shows its incompleteness under the new conditions of t_2 . But this can also be because of changing political conditions, well described by post-functionalist models of integration (Hooghe and Marks, 2019). Identity politics can narrow down significantly the political space for the lessons learned to be activated by elites. Governments may politicize and contest the lessons learned about democratic resilience in the EU. Breaches of the rule of law and concerns about the democratic quality of governments in office in the Member States have marred the year in review, posing hard questions on whether to approve or not to approve some Recovery Plans.

In 2021, these extreme challenges did not disrupt the trajectory for recovery and growth. However, theoretically, we can reason that post-functionalist politics can throw the EU into an existential crisis. If that happens suddenly, and things unfold quickly, the constellation of actors can only activate contingent learning at t_2 . Whether they are successful or not with contingent learning at t_2 will mark the path towards integration or into disintegration.

⁵‘Correctly’ means in ways that allow for policy responses that are functional to the EU as a whole.

At the opposite side of the politics options, the political conditions can make the lesson learned at t_1 feasible. Early theorists like Karl Deutsch (1966) talked about a shift in loyalty and the gradual building of trust. Un-anticipated problems can trigger opportunities for further integration, especially if solutions are engineered by supranational entrepreneurial actors. Hooghe and Marks condense these shifts in the following sentence: ‘Both non-state actors and national elites learn from their past successes and failures, and this alters their preferences as well as their tactics. As integration proceeds and supranational actors get stronger, this dynamic can take a life of its own’ (Hooghe and Marks, 2019, p. 1115).

Misreading the Crisis

Let us now consider a third possibility. Imagine that t_1 was an episode of learning in a crisis. The lesson is valid, resilient, conceptually feasible, and politically acceptable. However, the t_2 crisis is not read correctly. The constellation of EU actors can be fooled by heuristics. Analogies can be misleading. The EU handled the Spanish banking crisis by activating the lessons drawn from the Irish collapse. The two cases were used by policy-makers to build an analogy, but the comparison made between the case at t_1 (banking collapse in Ireland, in a system dominated by large banks) and the case at t_2 (banking problems in Spain were created by the housing bubble and the Spanish median bank is small, with many regional banks) was incorrect.⁶

In January 2021, Barry Eichengreen warned about wrong comparisons between the crisis of 2008 and the Covid-19 crisis, observing that in the latter case the source was not the financial system, hence the problem was not one of stabilizing financial markets and institutions. He went on to observe that:

in contrast to these earlier episodes, major fiscal stimulus packages are not the right policy focus. Unlike in the past, we have also experienced an unprecedented supply shock. It makes no sense to try to sustain demand at earlier levels at a time when production can’t keep up, since it is not yet safe – and won’t be safe for some time – for people to return to work. The time for demand stimulus is later. The task for now is income maintenance – targeting public support at the unemployed so that parents can feed their children (Eichengreen, 2021).

In 2020–21, the Member States correctly supported income maintenance first and then co-ordinated at the EU level Next Generation (Schramm et al., 2022) – blending elements of demand stimulus via financial measures with macro-economic policy co-ordination and measures to re-configure the supply (Fabbrini, 2022; on macro-economic policy see D’Erman and Verdun, 2022). Analogies did not seem to fool the EU this time. But, in terms of the conceptual framework I have presented, they must be accounted for.

⁶I found the story when reviewing anonymously a manuscript called ‘Once bitten, twice shy. The overgeneralization trap and epistemic learning after policy failure’. At the moment of finalizing the Annual Lecture, the editor was not able to confirm whether the manuscript had been finally accepted and the exact title. I apologize to the readers and the author(s) of the manuscript for this problem.

Conclusions

This Annual Lecture has proposed a reading of European integration grounded in the tryptic of crisis, learning, and integration. The claim I aired is a sketch that needs considerable improvement of the supporting arguments, empirical testing of the decision tree structure illustrated above, and qualifications as to whether learning for the EU as a whole can accommodate differentiated integration, and if so, what degree of differentiation (Trondal et al., 2022).

With this caveat, this framework has the merit of being parsimonious, grounded on two mechanisms of learning and how they connect across crises. It does not pre-judge the role of individual EU institutions and the Member States, because it is based on policy learning dynamics rather than on actor's resources. The arguments supporting the claim are not deterministic. The outcome can be more, or less integration – it depends on what mechanism of learning prevails in a crisis and how learning travels (or does not travel) between crises. Elements of neo-functionalism, post-functionalist politics and failing forward can be integrated in this explanation.

The two mechanisms of learning are not juxtaposed. They speak to each other. A pure inferential learning type applies only to slow-burning crises, when there is time to draw inferences. But the tempo of EU crises has increased, especially if (beyond the year in review) we look at the security, military and energy-related issues created by the war in Ukraine. Policy-makers have to deploy contingent learning in addition to inferential learning. Surprisingly, successive crises of different nature are not necessarily disruptive of learning (Ladi and Tsarouhas, 2020) – actually, being close in time means the lessons of the older euro area crisis were still vivid and easy to activate for Covid-19.

But, as much as remembering and re-activating lessons learned in the past are important, institutions also forget. The EU is not immune to the politics and policy of amnesia (Stark, 2019; Stark and Head, 2019). Even when there is no amnesia, the wrong analogy will lead to mis-reading the new crisis. Lessons that are locked in with an institutional choice are more resilient than others. But what about if we are locked in the wrong lesson, as happened with the Stability and Growth Pact limitations, at the beginning of the euro area crisis?

The final word is on politics: one thing is to learn at the level of elites, another is to gain legitimacy and support for the choices made. The increase in borrowing, taxing and spending powers of the EU looks like a double-loop elite-learning episode (Ladi and Tsarouhas, 2020). However, this paradigmatic change and the resulting governance architecture (assuming they are not temporary and that there are here to stay beyond the current stage of relaunching the economies) call for a social authorization of the new constitutional outlook of the EU (Fabbrini, 2022). This ties in with the political trajectory of the Conference on the Future of Europe. It also connects with the political discussion on confederal EU and how to envisage a mechanism of 'democratic authorization' of this step (Stubb, 2022). The politics of policy learning is the conceptual place where citizens appraise the democratic quality of learning and the legitimacy of the lessons learned.

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