

**Is Europe really forged through crisis?
Pandemic EU and the Russia – Ukraine war¹**

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Abstract: The European Union’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic revealed changes and continuity in the structure and the functioning of the European project. In lieu of a conclusion to the Special Issue, this article discusses what those lessons tell us about how Europe responds to the following crisis. We compare European responses to the pandemic to those that followed the Russian invasion of Ukraine. We observe more differences than similarities. The same actors do not always play the central role, solidarity among Europeans is sometimes more challenging to engineer, and the requirements to make the overall project more resilient can point in different directions. Such findings show that any argument that Europe is forged through crisis is unlikely to tell us much about what Europe is or where it may be headed. In that sense, the EU is a *sui generis* multi-level, multi-faceted actor that can change shape in response to events.

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Is Europe really forged through crisis? Pandemic EU and the Russian War against Ukraine

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic raised three questions for policymakers in the European Union. First, who is best placed to respond to the health emergency? Second, how can people be convinced to work together towards a common goal? And third, what is the longer-term objective of policy coordination across countries? The answers to these questions were not obvious. The European Union's experience with prior crises did not eliminate the ambiguity. Allusions to *actorness* and *subsidiarity* tend to gloss over the many potential values and judgment calls in play. Appeals to *solidarity* obscure the many different logics that underpin collective action. Even *resilience* garners a double meaning and can refer to either successful adaptation or resistance to change.

Meanwhile the pandemic was never the only or even the most important challenge that European policymakers had to face. Containing the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus was urgent, but the challenges associated with climate change, migration, social unrest, and successive attempts to undermine the rule of law were (at least potentially) more important. To tackle the pandemic, Europeans also created a new economic challenge for themselves: not only did policymakers have to deal with a sudden, massive drop in output and rise in unemployment, but they also had to figure out how to unwind the huge distortions they created through unprecedented peacetime fiscal stimulus and monetary accommodation (Jones 2020; Quaglia & Verdun 2023a). Throughout this period, we saw that Europeans can learn to live with the virus, albeit at a horrific cost. Whether they can learn to live with one-another in a sustainable manner is still an open question.

These challenges remain on the agenda as the urgency surrounding the pandemic starts to fade. Attention turns to Jean Monnet's prophecy that 'Europe will be forged in crises'. The EU's crisis-induced development has been repeatedly tested and theorized by a host of studies that developed the grand theories of European integration (Hooghe & Marks 2019; Moravcsik 2018; Niemann & Ioannou 2015). An alternative research agenda that suggests that only a combination of theoretical frameworks can more faithfully map the complexity of crisis-induced integration also emerged (Saurugger 2016; Börzel & Risse 2020;). Novel challenges, like the pandemic, give new impetus to such debates which often highlight the creative role of crises (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs 2021; Rhodes 2021). Therefore, it is worth asking what we learned about the European Union – as a collection of institutions, as a union of member states, and as a framework for multilevel governance – as it reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic. That is the motivation Lucia Quaglia and Amy Verdun (2023b) set out for this collection. The results are closer to stock taking than hypothesis testing. Quaglia, Verdun, and the contributors to this special issue, shed valuable light on what the pandemic reveals about what the European project is and what it can accomplish.

We claim that that any argument that Europe is forged through crisis is unlikely to tell us much about what Europe is or where it may be headed. In delivering our analysis, we take inspiration from that research agenda which suggests that the type of crisis generates different policy making processes and varied policy sets (Ferrara & Kriesi 2021). Our goal is to look at the questions that continue to surround the notions of actorness (or agency), solidarity, and resilience to see what light they shed on the European Union as a political system. In doing so, we compare what we know about the EU's response to the pandemic with what we are seeing in the EU's response to the war that erupted on 24 February 2022 when Russia invaded Ukraine for the second time.

The comparison between the effects of the Russia- Ukraine war to those of the pandemic are important because the two crises come so close together. If Europe is indeed forged by crisis, this combination of closely connected crises should have a reinforcing effect. The stimuli for decision-making and policy outcomes should also be similar as both crises are the result of exogenous shocks which affect all member states, although neither contributed to their origin. But the differences between these two crises are more meaningful and point Europe in different directions. As a result, the juxtaposition of these two events could create tensions about the future of the European project (Schimmelfennig 2016).

We worry that tension could be significant. The Russia-Ukraine war raised different challenges for the European Union compared to the COVID-19 pandemic. The EU is thus more likely to react differently given the specificities of the crisis pressures (Ferrara and Kriesi 2021). Although the Russia – Ukraine war is still ongoing, it is nevertheless possible to show how immediate reactions to the war repeat or differ from the patterns revealed during the pandemic. We use the notions of actorhood, solidarity, and resilience to frame the comparison. We conclude by suggesting what this comparison might reveal about the purpose of European integration. If Europe is created by crisis, not every crisis implies the same blueprint.

Actorhood

The label ‘actorhood’ refers to agency or, following Klose (2018: 1144), to ‘an entity’s capacity to (re-) imagine and realize roles for its “self” in (specific contexts of) international affairs’. The label comes from the growing body of literature that tries to understand the emergence of the EU as an international actor (Ruggie 1998; Bretherton & Vogler 2006; Rosamond, 2005; Kratochvíl et al. 2011; Freire et al. 2022; Kaunert et al. 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia – Ukraine war are exogenous shocks that activated the EU’s functions as an international actor. The pandemic pressed the EU to find a unified policy set that would better protect the single market from international financial uncertainty or secure vaccine availability while competing with other international actors. The Russia – Ukraine war also pushed the EU to realize new roles for itself in the international arena. The war requires sanction coordination with international partners, the reactivation of the transatlantic relationship, and providing economic and military support for Ukraine or other affected third party such as Moldova.

Often that ‘actorhood’ uses the nation state or international organizations as a reference point or model. Within the European context, however, it is more useful to regard the EU as a uniquely multi-level and multi-faceted entity. According to this *sui generis* view of the European Union, the EU can sometimes act as an international organization with some state-like qualities, while at other times it can react as network of governments (Bretherton & Vogler 2006; Čmakalová & Rolenc 2012; Mather 2006; Wolinetz 2011; Kreppel 2006; McKay 2001).

This *sui generis* framework allows greater flexibility in understanding what the EU can be at any given time and given the circumstances in which it acts. To help create a distinction, we refer to ‘actorhood’ when European institutions ‘act’ as a coherent entity and ‘agency’ when the actors involved are located at other levels of governance or among non-governmental organizations. This distinction is consistent with the literature on ‘actorhood’, which tends to focus on European institutions. It also acknowledges the complex nature of the EU by not setting it automatically against standards which relate exclusively to states, international organizations, or other ideal types (Phelan 2012; Hooghe & Marks 2001). And, in doing so, it provides more leeway in answering

important questions related to the EU's direction of travel once a crisis has passed (Jones, Kelemen, & Meunier 2021).

By acknowledging the complex nature of the EU, we implicitly accept that crisis management would also follow complex and mutable decision-making pathways (Anghel & Jones 2022a). In so doing, we take into account that the impact of decision making is further complicated by power asymmetries between member states and different policy goals (Schmidt 2009; Moravcsik & Vachudova 2003; Anghel 2020). Although all states are influencers and negotiators of different weight within the EU, they simultaneously retain agency and compete, interact with, or substitute for EU decision making. Thus, the EU can change shape in both substantive ways and at the level of perception. In that sense, the first challenge the EU faced during the COVID-19 pandemic was deciding who was better placed to respond to the health emergency.

From a legal perspective, the location of agency in the Union is a function of the distribution of competences within the treaties. In turn, that distribution is meant to flow from a principle of subsidiarity which says that policy action should take place at the lowest level where it can be most effective (Føllesdal 1998). Where policymakers can only address a problem flexibly, paying close attention to context, they should act at a local or regional level. Where success depends crucially on central coordination, policy makers should respond through EU institutions. And where policymakers face a trade-off between flexibility and coordination, they should work somewhere in between. Many if not most problems fall in that middle range and so the member state governments retain significant agency in setting policy. Since the member state governments also tend to face the strongest forms of democratic accountability, this distribution of actorness under the principle of subsidiarity is useful politically as well as in terms of policy effectiveness.

The pandemic pushed the EU in the position to strengthen its 'actorness'. Forging an effective response to COVID-19 required a high degree of centralized coordination (Goniewicz et al. 2020). What was clear at the outset of the pandemic was that, given the nature of the threat, the principle of subsidiarity did not apply. Policymakers at the national level initially refused to accept the need for a centralized response and instead focused on proximity without regard to the quality of the policy output. They imposed local lockdowns when it was clear that the virus was present in different parts of a country and national lockdowns when it was obvious that it had already spread internationally. The fact that this disrupted the free movement of people as a fundamental principle underpinning the single market was obvious but not unprecedented. What was more disturbing was that policymakers hoarded personal protective equipment, banned the shipment of respirators, and looked for ways to gain national control over critical multinational supply chains (Wolff & Ladi 2020).

The emphasis on proximity within the European Union was not the same across all policy domains. Where European institutions had clear authority, they exercised it. The European Commission quickly began to coordinate health policy, building on foundations Commission officials laid carefully over time in case of need (Greer et al. 2023; Brooks & Geyer 2020). The European Commission also quickly relaxed the constraints on competition policy and activated the general escape clause of the stability and growth pact (Hussein 2023). This exercise of agency at the central level effectively empowered lower levels of government, by releasing them from coordination that would otherwise have been counterproductive. For its part, the Governing Council of the European Central Bank announced an aggressive plan for monetary stimulus (Quaglia & Verdun 2023a). This played an empowering role as well by making it easier for member state governments to borrow and spend in response to the pandemic.

These actions were not entirely successful. Empowerment is not the same as centralized coordination, and not all member state governments were equally effective no matter how much they might be released from European constraints. Worse, market participants recognized this weakness. When ECB President Christine Lagarde announced an increase in monetary stimulus on 12 March 2020, she gave a poor response to a question about how much the Governing Council will play a role in equalizing conditions across member states. As a result, the markets reacted poorly to the news and so the Governing Council had to strengthen its response (Jones 2020). Some institutions with a clear claim to responsibility also found they could not act. The European Stability Mechanism (ESM) is a good illustration. That institution was created to bailout member states that lack market access. When it offered to lend money to governments at concessionary rates, however, member state governments refused to borrow leaving €240 billion in loans to support health care costs related to the pandemic unused (Howarth & Quaglia 2021; Quaglia & Verdun 2023a).

The greatest challenge lay in those institutions where actors with clear authority at one level had to make compromises at another. The Eurogroup, the Council of Economics and Finance Ministers, and the European Council were the most obvious points of tension (Buti & Fabbrini 2023). For a moment, that tension looked likely to split the European Union into two camps with very different agendas. It also threatened to overshadow important innovations made in the European Commission (to backstop national employment protection schemes) and in the European Central Bank (to subsidize private lending and to purchase government assets disproportionately). Hence despite the progress that was made by the Commission and the ECB, the situation in the markets remained tense and the economic pressure on those countries hit hardest by the pandemic was disproportionate – complicating national efforts to forge an effective response to the pandemic (Jones 2020).

This market pressure fell off suddenly when it became clear that the governments of France and Germany would work together toward a common solution. This coordination between the EU's perceived core is where the perception of EU actorness comes into play: if EU coordination could not come from European institutions, perhaps it could come from the Franco-German couple (Krotz & Schramm 2022). Financial market participants threw their support behind the Franco-German agreement and released much of the pressure on those governments hardest hit by the pandemic. This made it easier for them to negotiate with those governments less willing to support a generous EU-wide solution to foster pan-European economic recovery. In this sense, EU actorness is shaped by Franco-German decision making, which, in turn, is only effective when it is credible enough to mobilize external resources.

There were significant objections to the Franco-German initiative, just as there had been longstanding divisions over macroeconomic policy in the recent past (Howarth & Quaglia 2021; Verdun 2022). Nevertheless, market participants presumed they would be overcome. The Franco-German entente created space for the European Commission to regain the initiative in terms of macroeconomic governance – even as it retained control over areas like competition policy where its influence is less contested. In this way, decisive action by the member states empowered European institutions.

EU's enhanced actorness as the result of coordinated action from other groups was also manifest. For example, regional authorities played an important role in reinvigorating and sustaining the free movement of people (Blauberger & Servent 2023). EU actorness also derives from its citizens as well as the skills and knowledge they generate. The efforts of healthcare and other essential workers made it possible for governments to impose the lockdowns necessary to get some control – however temporary – over the spread of the virus; scientists, researchers, and entrepreneurs created the vaccines that bought even more time for policymakers to coordinate a lasting response. Finally, it is

worth underscoring how popular protest kept the wider political agenda EU citizens had to face alive even as politicians focused more narrowly on the pandemic (Kriesi & Oana 2023).

When Russia invaded Ukraine, the location of agency was different and easier to identify. Compared to the direction of travel in the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, in time, the EU would see its actorness decrease. From the outset, the European Commission played a leading role in coordinating the European Union's response, particularly in the imposition of sanctions but also in the provision of humanitarian and even lethal security assistance. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen projected herself to the front of the conversation – speaking with Ukrainian leaders, visiting the war-torn country, and focusing public attention on the importance of making a firm commitment to Ukraine's survival and even victory in the conflict. She even put forward the idea of bringing Ukraine into the European Union and so re-opened the debate on EU enlargement (European Council 2022).

If – as Boin and Rhinard (2023) suggest – diagnosing the problem, mobilizing resources, and engaging the public are the cornerstones of crisis management, the European Commission showed none of the hesitation in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine that it did at the start of the pandemic. If anything, the Commission was active across a broad range of dimensions – extending the exceptions to competition policy and macroeconomic policy coordination that were introduced in response to COVID-19 and opening a broad new discussion of how the Union could wean itself off its dependence on Russian energy resources in the form of coal, oil, and gas.

In preparing a response to the impending Russian attack on Ukraine, the EU coordinated with the US and NATO, thus reaffirming its great power potential (Gehring et al. 2017). The intelligence gathered by the transatlantic partners revealed Russian intentions weeks before the invasion. As the war progressed, the Commission's actions stand in sharp contrast with developments in the member states, France and Germany in particular. French President Emmanuel Macron invested heavily in a diplomatic overture to Russian President Vladimir Putin that made no headway (Elysée 2022a; Elysée 2022b); German Chancellor Olaf Scholz initially prevaricated over whether and how best to respond and then – once convinced of the need for decisive action – began undermining his own public commitments with contradictory administrative decisions.

Other member states also sowed divisions. The Hungarian government is the best illustration. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán not only refused to participate in the progressive boycott of Russian energy resources but also held up and watered down the sixth round of sanctions (Herszenhorn et al. 2022). For its part, the Italian government was deeply divided. Indeed, those divisions played an important role in bringing down Mario Draghi's coalition of national unity. As Italy headed into parliamentary elections in September 2022, concern was expressed on both sides of the Atlantic that key members of the right-wing electoral alliance – Matteo Salvini and Silvio Berlusconi – would push for faster reconciliation with Russia even if at the expense of Ukraine.

So far, the pattern of actorness or agency in response to the Russian invasion seems the reverse of the pattern witnessed during the pandemic. Instead of starting with divisions and then coming together to forge a more centralized response, the European Union started with strong coordination from the centre that progressively showed signs of decentralization. The EU's response to the pandemic became progressively more effective; the EU's response to the war in Ukraine threatens to become progressively weaker. It is still too early to tell whether such apparent patterns are enduring. What we can nevertheless already observe is that EU lesson learning from one crisis to the other is neither guaranteed nor linear. A lot depends upon the underlying context and motivation.

Solidarity

The challenge during the pandemic was to understand the extent to which these different actors worked towards a common purpose. There are many instances where they did not. The fragmented response at the start of the crisis is one illustration; the extent to which national fiscal authorities relied on the ECB to carry the initial responsibility for macroeconomic stimulus is another; and the conflict over what kind of fiscal support could be made available at the European level is a third. In each of these cases, there was a logic behind opposition to action at the European level (Howarth & Quaglia 2021). That logic pointed to a (presumed) failure by some countries to prepare adequately for such a contingency, the existence of separate regimes to bailout those countries that lack access to adequate resources, and the concern that any cross-border subsidies would not only betray the domestic social contract between taxpayers and their governments in the countries that make net contributions, but also create moral hazard for governments that are net recipients (Verdun 2022).

At a more fundamental level, there was a strong sense in some countries that the principle of national sovereignty is more important than any principle that operates across EU countries. You can see this assertion in the German Constitutional Court ruling on the ECB's large scale asset purchase program (Federal Constitutional Court 2020). The fact that the court enjoined the German Bundestag to instruct the Bundesbank to act independently of the Governing Council of the ECB poses a fundamental contradiction for the EU's economic and monetary union (Jones 2020). The rule of law debate with Hungary and Poland is another illustration. Those governments clearly need EU support to finance their recovery from the pandemic and yet they are willing to jeopardize access to those funds – not just to themselves, but to the rest of the EU as well – to avoid the possibility that the European Commission will gain leverage over their appointment of judges, press freedoms, electoral laws, and other constitutional arrangements (Bohle, et al. 2023; de la Porte & Jensen 2021).

The notion of working to achieve a common purpose depends heavily on finding some way to reconcile these principled positions with competing claims to efficiency, equity, or fairness. It is also necessary to reconcile claims at different levels of aggregation. Early surveys into popular attitudes during the pandemic showed that 'solidarity is national first, to neighbours next, and only distantly European' (Chicci et al. 2020: 1). Having a common purpose is what it means to generate the kind of 'we' feeling that is important for collective action that solidarity represents. Too easy assertions about EU solidarity tend to elide this problem of reconciling competing principles while focusing on assertions about identity.

That concept of identity is ill-suited to making strong analytical claims (Brubaker & Cooper 2000). We can recognize it as a concept in action, when actors make public assertions of one identity or another, but we cannot use it to unpack any reconciliation of principles. Actors from all parts of the continent can assert their Europeanness while holding different conceptions of so-called European values. That variation was starkly apparent in the different attitudes taken by national governments on the trade-offs implied by differing degrees of social distancing, masking, school closures, or vaccination programs. These governments were all European and yet that said relatively little about what they prioritized – even within the same regions. Consider, for example, the sharp differences between Norway, Denmark, and Sweden.

The notion of 'solidarity' is a placeholder for that 'we-feeling' regardless of the analytical weakness of identity as a concept for analysis. A 'we-feeling' needs to be identified as the 'common' in common purpose (Boin & Rhinard 2023). This feeling can exist in the form of common goals; but it can also exist when goals are complementary. Moreover, that coexistence of commonalities and

complementarities can operate across different levels of aggregation. What the pandemic has revealed is that complex and overlapping network of incentives is what European solidarity is all about.

Next Generation EU shows this complexity at work (European Commission 2021). Although heralded as a 'Hamiltonian Moment' in which the European Union finally embraced the necessity for sharing fiscal resources, Next Generation EU was more subtle and incomplete (Howarth & Quaglia 2021). The member states agreed to borrow using common instruments, but they failed to agree on how to finance the repayment. They structured the program not only as temporary but subject to strict temporal requirements for contracting expenditures and then ensuring the money is spent (Vanhercke & Verdun 2022).

Most important, the European Council placed strong conditions on what member state governments need to accomplish to qualify both in terms of specific reforms to ensure the money is used effectively and more general reforms associated with market competitiveness, macroeconomic governance, and fiscal sustainability. These conditions were strict enough that some governments chose not to access the funds they were allocated, whether in the form of loans or grants. Others chose not to take up the loan portion. Hence while the overall package was €750 billion in 2018 euros or €800 billion in 2020 currency, the total expected take up as of 2022 was roughly €500 billion. This amount of money still constitutes an unprecedented number, and yet as an expression of European solidarity it is less than what many imagined initially.

Again, the war in Ukraine showed a very different pattern. If there was solidarity across member states it was with the people of Ukraine and in support of democracy against violent aggression from an authoritarian state. This assertion needs unpacking. The easiest way to start is with the Ukrainian people. The images of violence had immediate resonance across the European Union. Solidarity became progressively more obvious as millions of Ukrainians left their country to seek safety in the European Union. The reception of these displaced people was not always enthusiastic, and some neighbouring countries sought to help Ukrainians find assistance in other parts of the EU rather than encouraging them to stay.

In contrast to previous waves of migration, however, there was very little in-fighting among the member states and clear evidence of burden-sharing. Not only did the European Commission unlock unused regional and structural funds to be repurposed for humanitarian assistance, but governments beyond those neighbouring Ukraine opened their borders and offered emergency protection. As a result, the EU was not only to host more Ukrainians than came from other parts of the world in previous waves of migration, but responsibility for accommodating refugees was more evenly distributed across member states (UNHCR 2022).

By contrast, the solidarity across member states was much more limited. The war revealed the importance of weaning the European Union off its dependence on Russian fuel resources. Dependence on Russia gave Putin leverage over the European Union. Also, the money spent purchasing Russian coal, oil, and gas effectively financed the Russian war effort, and so undermined the effectiveness of European sanctions. The effort involved in achieving this objective did not fall evenly across member states (McWilliams & Zachman 2022). Some like Germany, Italy, Austria or many of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, were largely dependent on energy from Russia; others such as Estonia, Lithuania or Romania had cut that dependence; and still others like Spain and Portugal had little connection to Russian energy markets.

The European Commission proposed a series of common initiatives to phase out the use of Russian energy resources, to strengthen access to alternative suppliers, and to tighten the connections among member states to ensure more equitable distribution from one country to the next. These proposals collided with national priorities; they also foundered on the unequal distribution of adjustment costs. The Hungarian government refused to participate. The German government pushed for more equitable distribution. The Mediterranean countries argued for more of a self-help approach.

The comparison with the inequitable burdens created by Europe's sovereign debt crisis seemed more obvious than any comparison with the pandemic. The European Commission could identify the problem and proposed to repurpose the €300 billion in loans not taken up from Next Generation Europe for its new REPowerEU program (European Commission 2022a). Apart from that, the Commission could not mobilize the resources necessary, and neither could it effectively engage with the public.

If anything, beneath the surface, REPowerEU deflected some of the goals that Next Generation Europe was meant to accomplish. Instead of fostering a just transition to a more environmentally sustainable energy economy for all member states, the aim is to lock down access to alternative gas, oil, and coal supplies for those countries suffering most from the threat of being cut off from Russian resources. REPowerEU might also result in less effective climate action. This prospect became apparent when the European Commission reclassified natural gas as a 'green' fuel (European Commission 2022b), and member states began to sign long-term contracts to new suppliers of pipeline gas from Central Asia or North Africa, and liquified natural gas from North America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East.

A similar point can be made in terms of financing. One of the few points of agreement on the repayment side of Next Generation Europe was that the European Commission would explore an expansion of the European Union's emissions trading scheme, including a cross-border adjustment mechanism to protect EU based firms from international competitors who might seek to take advantage of the relatively higher costs that such a scheme would imply on their use of hydrocarbon-based energy resources. Given the shock to energy prices caused by the war in Ukraine, such reforms dropped on the EU's agenda. Instead, it became more important to insulate households and firms from the rising cost of energy. This political imperative makes political sense given the protest that higher energy prices threaten to bring. However, it underscores the unresolved question about how the European Union will pay for the grant component of Next Generation Europe that was so celebrated during the pandemic (Howarth & Quaglia 2021).

So far, the nature of the two crises points in different directions when it comes to assessing the EU's ability to harness solidarity among its governments and its citizens. The economic burden-sharing mechanisms set up in response to the pandemic could be used to react to the Russia-Ukraine war. Voices emerged early on to advocate common borrowing both for defence and for a more ambitious effort to pursue energy independence and a green transition at the same time. Yet where common borrowing was the major innovation in the pandemic, so far it remains unavailable in response to the war.

Resilience

Resilience has always been prone to take on different connotations in different contexts (Anderson 2015). The European Union engages in two different notions of resilience: strategic institutional

adaptation to challenges, and a retreat to its proclaimed core values – like, for example, freedom, equality, democracy, rule of law and human rights. This kind of ambiguity of meaning is a recurrent theme in the literature that focuses on resilience as a political concept (Brasset, Croft, & Vaughan-Williams 2013). In that sense, as Nicolas Nassim Taleb (2012) argues, resilience is not the opposite of fragility; it is more of a coping strategy. Both the pandemic and the war exposed European weakness as well as strength.

The EU's response to the pandemic revealed the lengths to which the Union is willing to go in adapting to the challenges presented by a global health crisis while at the same time fostering a just transition to environmental sustainability and a digital economy. The European Commission refers to this complex challenge as fostering resilience, and hence the emphasis in Next Generation Europe on national recovery and resilience plans (European Commission 2022c). A common EU health authority, enhanced supply chain management, strategic autonomy over critical industries, and mutualized sovereign debt are all important innovations that could lead to a stronger EU project.

By contrast, the EU's response to the Russia-Ukraine war revealed a reluctance to promote strategic adaptability. This manifested in the difficulty to accept that Russia constituted a hard security threat (Allin 2022). Once having confronted the violence of Russia's second invasion of Ukraine and the possibility that the Ukrainians would not immediately capitulate, member states decided to hold onto their hydrocarbon-based energy economies even as they sought new ways to meet their dependence on coal, oil, and gas. For some governments – and the policy communities that surround them – it also meant a retreat to more familiar notions of the need for fiscal consolidation and the dangers of moral hazard.

In responding to the war in Ukraine this way, the EU's political leaders not only made difficult compromises with their own manufacturing industries, but also with the Biden administration in the design of the sanctions regime, with the Kremlin in the maintenance of ties with Russia during the transition, and with a host of other alternative energy suppliers. In dealing with the Russia-Ukraine war, the EU was more defensive than pro-active (Chandler 2019). The set of policies the EU so far enacted reveals an unwillingness to be honest with the public about just how difficult any transition away from Russia energy gas would be and how inequitably the burdens would fall both within and across national polities.

The question is whether it could be possible to adapt to changing circumstances and retreat to core values at the same time. The pandemic highlighted at least three points of tension in approaching the goal of resilience in this kind of coherent manner. These three points refer to keeping the European way of life, the European way of governance, and the European path of integration.

The 'European way of life' has obvious advantages to EU citizens. That way of life builds on core values. The pressure on different communities to adapt to demographic change, increased standards for human rights applications, a shifting energy economy, and the inevitable cost of climate action will challenge a uniform retreat to those values that underpin liberal democracy. Next Generation Europe set the direction of post – pandemic recovery, but it will rely heavily on action both by the European Commission and by the member states. This will be more challenging for some member states than for others. The program has strict timetables and strong conditionality that includes rule of law and human rights issues. That is because massive public infrastructure projects are so prone to inefficiency, waste, corruption, and inertia. All member states must succeed to the same degree for the recovery and resilience package to be considered a success. The greatest threat to Next Generation Europe is that Italy – which is the largest gross recipient of funds – will fail on one or more of these dimensions and so critics of the programme will ensure that the experiment is never

repeated (Domorenok & Guardiancich 2022). At the same time, Poland and Hungary have repeatedly refused to deliver those changes that would improve the standing of rule of law, which delays the disbursement of needed recovery funds.

Another point of tension concerns the ‘European way of governance’, which is that delicate balance of power among EU institutions and between those institutions and the member states. The ECB may have responded well to the pandemic, but it became overextended in terms of the size of its balance sheet and the settings on its monetary policy instruments (Jones 2022). Many of the EU member states became over-extended in fiscal terms as well, with large public debts and a heavily reliance on ECB asset purchases to hold down borrowing costs and so ensure debt sustainability. These difficulties were apparent already in December 2021; they became even more obvious as the debate began about the need to reform the European Union’s rules for macroeconomic policy coordination so that the European Council return to the rules that prevailed before the pandemic. But the solution to this tension is not obvious. Either European leaders change the rules to make them easier to apply across national differences, but at the expense of common objectives, or they push for a return to pre-crisis orthodoxy while recognizing that some member states will suffer disproportionately.

A third point of tension centres on the ‘European pattern of integration’. Consider tensions that arise between the pursuit of core values related to the internal market and the need to accommodate differing sensitivities from one member state to the next. Freedom of movement of people is not set on the track for complete recovery from the pandemic just as freedom of movement of capital did not fully recover from the EU wide sovereign debt crisis. It is also unclear how supply chains will develop – or how those developments will be connected to relations with the outside world. If the common market was the backbone of the European project, there are important question marks as to how that market will look in the future. The difficulties encountered with Britain’s exit from the European Union offered a cautionary tale about what happens when an integrated global economy breaks apart; the disruptions caused by China’s zero-COVID policy, with the repeated lockdowns of important Chinese industrial regions, only reinforced that message.

These three points of tension do not encompass the whole universe of areas where the notion of resilience as an ability to adapt and resilience as a retreat to core values come into conflict. For example, the debate about the EU’s unilateral power to regulate global markets, known as the ‘Brussels Effect’ (Bradford 2020), European geopolitical strength (Del Sarto 2016), European sovereignty, and strategic autonomy (Howorth 2018) point in a positive direction – with the EU potentially emerging as a more robust economic superpower. But that debate has yet to consider the reaction of other major economies both toward the EU and toward one-another. The changing world order creates imperatives that are hard to accommodate with the preservation of these core values.

The war in Ukraine only exacerbated these points of tension – deepening the challenges associated with holding onto the European way of life, straining the capacities for Europe’s way of governance, and further distorting the European pattern of integration. More important, the war shortened the time available for adaptation and complicated the process of generating and maintaining popular support. The acceleration of inflation and the impact that has on households is only the most obvious manifestation. The impact of the war on European economic governance and on domestic political stability is arguably more important. The pandemic revealed European flexibility; the war points more to the kind of resilience that focuses on core values.

Consider the monetary policy domain, where the ECB showed substantive flexibility in adapting to the imperatives of the pandemic, only to face a direct threat to the core value of price stability. By accelerating inflation, the war in Ukraine also accelerated the pace with which the ECB would have to withdraw from the markets. The challenge for the ECB’s Governing Council was to do so in a stable manner. This challenge was easier to meet during the pandemic when output was falling and prices were falling at the same time. It is much harder when prices are rising but output is falling nonetheless. The debate within the Governing Council has been bitter and divisive. Worse, the solution they have agreed may prove to lack credibility in the markets (Jones 2022). If that were to happen, not only would Europe reach the limits of its adaptability, but its own core values would be at risk.

Conclusion

The pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war represented different kinds of crisis for Europe. Although both are exogenous shocks, they activate EU decision making and policy making differently. If both crises are forging Europe, they are pointing in different directions. We code this with plusses and minuses without meaning to convey a strong normative message (Table 1). Our goal is to highlight the locus of attention. The pandemic increased the European Union’s actorness and, ultimately, cross-national solidarity; it also highlighted the European Union’s capacity for institutional adaptation. Often, however, such adaptations challenged core values that the EU professes – such as freedom of movement, freedom of speech, and the prioritization of human rights, at least in the short term (Anghel & Jones 2022b). Whether the instruments provided in Next Generation EU will help to address longer-run challenges to the rule of law remains to be seen.

Table 1. The Different Directions of EU Crisis Management

	Actorness	Solidarity	Resilience	
			<i>Adapt to challenge</i>	<i>Retreat to core principles</i>
COVID-19 Pandemic	+	+	+	-
Russia-Ukraine War	-	-	-	+

By contrast, the war revealed the extent to which political agency in times of crisis remains with the member state governments, and to which the ‘we-feeling’ among member states is limited even in the face of an existential threat. Manifest solidarity for the people of Ukraine does not translate easily into solidarity between any one EU member state and another; national publics are often (and are becoming) more concerned with the direct costs they will face than with the world events that caused them in the first place. And, while most EU leaders have shown a firm commitment to democracy promotion against the rise of authoritarianism in Russia, the European Union as a whole is still considering how best to adapt its institutions to the long term economic and security threat created by the conflict.

This contrast should not be exaggerated. The European institutions have important roles to play in both situations, providing central coordination to strengthen policy effectiveness. But the instruments available to those institutions are not equally suited to deal with such different crises and the different contexts within which the crisis takes place. The same is true for the member states, which appear strong in one context and in the face of one crisis and yet weaker in another.

This is not a surprising conclusion. Not every crisis is the same. But it is an important qualification in any argument that Europe is forged by crisis. Our analysis supports those arguments that more research should focus on comparative crisis response (Ferrara and Kriesi 2022).

This observation is even more important when one crisis follows immediately after another. There is always good reason for stock taking when the European project faces a major challenge. What is harder to interpret is how the different crises interact. This is true not just for Europe, but for any effort at polity building (Kelemen and McNamara 2022). Europe may have come out of the pandemic strengthened in principle, but it was in a weaker position to tackle the war in Ukraine because neither the ECB nor the member states had time to recover from the effort (Jones 2022). The collection of crises will have a powerful influence on how the European Union responds to the slower burning challenges it faces as well. Europeans will need to invest more effort in building resilience in the face of significant fragility. European leaders will need to rally public support for that effort. Crisis alone cannot forge Europe; only Europeans can do that.

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