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Crisis and Its Consequences: The Rise of Euroscepticism in Post-2008 Europe

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Table of Contents

Introduction

"We decide something, put it out there and wait for some time to see what happens. If there is no big brouhaha and no uprisings, because most people have not even understood what was decided, we'll continue - step by step, until there is no way back."[1] said Jean-Claude Juncker in 1999, intending to provide an insight into the modus operandi of the European Union (EU) leaders. When these words come from a Luxembourgish Prime Minister and, more importantly, a former president of the European Commission (from 2014 to 2019), they do have a certain weight, carrying with themselves significant implications regarding the transparency and accountability of the EU's highest level of governance. Indeed, these drawbacks tend to be particularly controversial within the times marked by crises.

In this regard, most recent surveys from Eurobarometer, the main instrument used by the EU's institutions and agencies to analyse public opinions, show that 36% of the EU citizens perceive growing distrust and scepticism towards democratic institutions as a main threat to democracy in the Union.[2] Moreover, further analysis of the statistical data on public opinion towards the EU institutions individually, shows that only 42% of the EU citizens have a positive image of the European Parliament, which also means that 58% of citizens do NOT. This is particularly significant, as the European Parliament stands for the most democratic and only directly elected institution in the EU.[3] Furthermore, the EU is facing continuous low voting turnout in its Parliamentary Elections, it being only 50.74% at the latest 2024 elections.[4] This showcases that on the average, only one out of the two European citizens exercises their right to participate in the democratic life of the Union, guaranteed to them under the Article 10, Paragraph 3 of the TEU, which states that *every citizen shall have the right to participate in the democratic life of the Union* and that all *decisions shall be taken as openly and as closely as possible to the citizen*.[5] Indeed, after analysing this statistical data and taking a look into how it is interrelated, the only way to foster citizens' engagement in the EU

[1]Müller, J.W. (2013). "Defending Democracy Within the EU", Journal of Democracy, 24(2): 138–49.
[2] European Commission. (2024, January 15). Standard Eurobarometer 101.
[3] European Commission. (2024, July 22). Standard Eurobarometer 102.
[4] European Parliament. "European Elections 2024 Results".
[5]European Union. "Title II - Provisions on democratic principles (Article 10 of the TEU)" Consolidated Version of the TEU.

elections and broader democratic life of the Union would be to bridge the gap created by the evident mistrust towards the EU institutions. But what happens during crises? [6]

Indeed, abovementioned challenges have been further exacerbated by the hard times the EU faced in recent years. The global financial crisis along with the Eurozone sovereign debt crisis, the migration, as well as the refugee crisis, the crisis created by the rise of populism, the infamous Brexit referendum, the hard times during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the rule of law crises in some of the EU Member States and finally the ongoing war between the Russia and Ukraine, have certainly left severe economic, social and political consequences for the Union. Moreover, they have altogether exposed fundamental weaknesses in the EU's highest level governance, causing discontent among the Europeans, as most measures undertaken were enforced through the technocratic and supranational institutions. For this reason, many saw a clear indication of a democratic deficit, as national governments had limited influence over the policies that directly impacted their citizens' lives.

If we take a closer look, we can observe that the Eurozone sovereign debt crisis impacted various Member States with different intensity, thus disabling a collective answer or "one size fits all" actions and policies. For this reason, many citizens, particularly of Southern countries, remained unsatisfied with the EU intervening in the national fora, particularly when facing the consequences evident in the aftermath of this crisis. Likewise, the migration and refugee crisis had put to test the EU's power to remain united, while combating humanitarian and security challenges, as burdens again were unevenly spread among the Member States. Thus, the perceived inability of the EU to manage crises effectively and to act as one has contributed to the rise of populist and Eurosceptic parties all across the continent. In this context, political leaders pushed forward on an anti-EU agenda, profiting from fears of uncontrolled migration. Furthermore, infamous Brexit underscored several of these tensions, as the United Kingdom decided to leave the EU partly because people perceived it as out of touch and unaligned with the ordinary citizens' interests. On the other hand, in more recent times, during the Covid-19 crisis, the EU eventually orchestrated its "breaking through" joint response when facing the global pandemic, establishing a collective recovery fund.

[6] Algan, Y., Guriev, S., Papaioannou, E., & Passari, E. (2017). "The European trust crisis and the rise of populism". Brookings Papers on Economic Activity, 2017(Fall), 309–382.

However, there were many controversies regarding supervision of the share of these funds, but also the oversight of the purposes and occasions in which it was used in different Member States. Furthermore, the EU's rather lenient response to Member States' actions which did NOT comply with the Union's core values has led to increasing concerns among citizens, strongly shaking the EU's reputation. Finally, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine placed the Union's foreign policy and security strategies under scrutiny. Although the EU has shown unprecedented unity when imposing sanctions against Russia and supporting Ukraine, Member States continued to debate about their preferences regarding energy dependence, military assistance and economic stability, which again underscored existing divisions and different priorities.

All of this made many question whether during the major crisis, there indeed exists a democratic deficit in the EU, a gap between citizens' initial wishes and final policy outcomes?[7] Moreover, are these crises in different policy areas, the main fuel for increased Euroscepticism in the EU? Indeed, this paper aims to provide an analytical analysis of these problems and try to explain to **what extent is the rise of Euroscepticism accelerated by the crises in Europe from 2008 onwards?**

This research is divided into five sections. First chapter is dedicated to the analysis of the concept of democracy, both, more generally and in the context of the EU. Moreover, it explores the concept of legitimacy (tridimensional definition), later looking at its drawbacks during the periods of crises. Additionally, the third and fourth section chronologically explore the crises that occurred in the EU since 2008. Furthermore, chapter four delves into the theoretical concepts of permissive consensus and constraining dissensus, Euroscepticism and democratic deficit in the EU, while chapter five analyses and underscores the connection between these concepts and the crises that have occurred in the EU in recent times. Finally, the last section concludes. This research is rooted in academic literature, and all sources are listed in the appendix.

[7] Letki, and Natalia. (2013). "Democratic Deficit | Political Science, Globalization & Democracy." Encyclopedia Britannica.

1. The Legitimacy Question

"The legitimacy of the leadership depends on what that country thinks of its leaders."

- Zbigniew Brzezinski [8]

1.1 Defining *Democracy* and *Emergency*

1.1.1 Definition of *Democracy* in the EU Legal Framework

"Democracy is based upon the conviction that there are extraordinary possibilities in ordinary people"

- Harry Emerson Fosdick, an influential American pastor and theologian

Democracy can most simply be explained as the rule by the people. The term is translated to other languages from the Greek word *dēmokratia*, originally created out of the two words: *dēmos* ("people") and *kratos* ("rule"), in the middle of the 5th century BCE. It initially intended to describe political systems of Greek "city-states" (gr. *polis*) during that time, especially used when referring to the political life in *polis* of Athens.[9]

More specifically, in the context of the EU, this term has been frequently used in the texts of its foundational treaties, which further emphasises its importance at the Union level. In this regard, Article 2 of the Treaty on the European Union (TEU) states that *The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom,* ***democracy****, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail*.[10]

Later on, the concept of democracy is more specifically addressed within the TITLE II: Provisions on Democratic Principles, in the Article 10 of the TEU which states that: *Citizens are directly represented at Union level in the European Parliament.* and that *Every citizen shall have the right to participate in the democratic life of the Union.* This further proves that democratic values within the political system of the EU allows

[8] Encyclopedia Britannica. "Zbigniew Brzezinski, Biography & Books".
[9] Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Democracy," Encyclopaedia Britannica, last modified May 19, 2025.
[10] European Union. "Treaties currently in force".

citizens to effectively and freely participate in the Union's democratic life, more precisely through the only directly elected institution: the European Parliament.[11]

Thus, in order to explain it in a nutshell, democracy is defined as one of the EU's core values, and it has been so ever since the Union's very beginnings. And although the EU commits itself to safeguarding the values it has been founded upon, this has not been proved to be an easy task. Indeed, the reason for this is that the Union needs to balance national and supranational accountability of its multilevel form of governance, meanwhile respecting the principle of participatory democracy. Therefore, in order to assess the legitimacy of the EU and its capacity to respond to the spectrum of political, social, and economic challenges it has been facing in the past two decades, it is essential to comprehend where democracy stands within this political system.

1.1.2 What is an *Emergency*?

The concept of **emergency** can be defined as a situation of a grave and unpredicted crisis which requires an immediate action. Although this term has for a long time been under the spotlight of political theorists, in modern political theory, it gained particular prominence through the work of Carl Schmitt, German legal, constitutional and political theorist. Throughout his writings, Schmitt famously defined sovereignty as "the ability to decide on the exception".[12] By this, he expanded that the true sovereign authority is revealed only at the moment when the typical law is suspended, through the actions used to restore order.

Indeed, Schmitt adds that in an extreme emergency, applying ordinary legal norms can be dangerous, as the rigid obedience to the ordinary law in "a completely abnormal situation" may "lead to unpredictable results", moreover preventing any form of innovative and productive action. Thus, Schmitt argued that no legal order can fully anticipate or constrain all possible emergencies, and that ultimately every law is written on an a priori decision of a sovereign authority, who is enabled to act outside the law, in order to save the polity.[13]

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[11] European Union. "Treaties currently in force".
[12] Strong, Thomas. (1922) "Carl Schmitt," The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.
[13] Strong, Thomas. (1922) "Carl Schmitt," The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

Therefore, the essence of Schmitt's idea is that in a crisis, necessity may transcend legality and the one who can act decisively (even if that means *extra-legally*), in order to end the crisis, positions himself as the legitimate sovereign.[14] Thus, any legal order is ultimately based on a sovereign decision and not on a legal norm, as this theory posits order and survival above the rule of law, in cases of emergencies. Conclusively, this view has been both influential and controversial. Indeed, many critics believed that unlimited and uncontrolled emergency powers risk sliding into authoritarianism, therefore Schmitt's ideas were later associated with the legal justifications for dictatorial measures in interwar and Nazi Germany.

On the other hand, in response to Schmitt's views, liberal democratic theorists have sought to "constitutionalise" the emergency powers, attempting to reconcile necessity with legality, warning that abusive governments may normalise emergencies, in order to perpetuate their power.[15] Moreover, among the more contemporary thinkers, Agamben has expanded on Schmitt's insights to analyze the prevalence of emergency logic within modern governance. In "*State of Exception"*, Agamben argues that the state of emergency has become "the dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics", suggesting that many states increasingly govern by suspending normal legal constraints in the name of crisis management.[16] Thus, what was once meant as a temporary suspension of order, has now evolved into a "permanent state of exception".

In summary, political theory provides two broad perspectives on emergency. On one hand, realist thinkers contend that extreme crises necessitate a suspension of ordinary legality, as the sovereign must step outside the law, in order to save the law. On the other hand, liberal constitutionalists and many recent scholars seek to regulate emergency power via law, fearing that unchecked exceptions may permanently damage future legitimacy. Thinkers like Agamben warn that the temptation to rule by exception can become habitual, making exceptional powers a normal mode of governance. Finally, these contents apply both at the national and supranational level, thus they are relevant also for the analysis of the crisis in the EU.

[14] Strong, Thomas. (1922) "Carl Schmitt," The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.
[15] Agamben, Giorgio. (2005). "A Brief History of the State of Exception." In *State of Exception*, translated by Kevin Attell, 1–31. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
[16] Agamben, Giorgio. (2005). "A Brief History of the State of Exception." In *State of Exception*, translated by Kevin Attell, 1–31. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

1.2 Defining legitimacy

In order to address the hypothetical lack of legitimacy, it is essential to primarily define the concept of legitimacy.[17] Indeed, for this purpose I have decided to take on Schmidt's three-dimensional concept of legitimacy, analysed in depth within her work published in 2013.[18] Within her framework, she argues that the normative criteria for democratic legitimacy, in its core, consist of three main dimensions: throughput processes, input participation and the final output policy. In this regard, the three criteria can be presented in relation to the citizens as: 'output' *for* the people, 'input' *by* (and *of*) the people and 'throughput' *with* the people.[19] Indeed, these three concepts are essential for a holistic approach for evaluation of democratic governance within this political system.

1.2.1 Input Legitimacy

Schmidt defines input legitimacy as *the EU's responsiveness to citizen concerns, as a result of participation by the people.* For Scharpf on the other hand, input legitimacy evaluates the participatory quality of a certain decision-making process, leading to laws and rules, as it is ensured by the "majoritarian" institutions of electoral representation.[20] Input legitimacy therefore focuses on the questions, "Who is the citizenry, and what is the participatory quality of their involvement in governing?" In this context, the concept of the input legitimacy requires a form of democratic representation of citizens, which itself has to entail some form of collective identity. In this regard, it is important to note that the input legitimacy does not always directly require a policy to be made by majoritarian institutions, as all democratic entities involve a share of non-democratic institutions, serving to prioritise technical proficiency, such as central banks regarding the creation and regulation of monetary policies.[21] This is of particular importance, as throughout the crisis, these technocratic institutions with specific expertises in certain policy areas, tend to gain more control, due to their expertises and efficiency.

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[17] Haggart, B. and Iglesias Keller C. (2021). "Democratic Legitimacy in Global Platform Governance."
[18] Schmidt, V. A. (2013). "Democracy and legitimacy in the European Union: Input, output and throughput". Political Studies, 61(1), 2–22.
[19] Schmidt, V. A. (2013). "Democracy and legitimacy in the European Union: Input, output and throughput". Political Studies, 61(1), 2–22.
[20] Scharpf F. W. (1999). "Governing in Europe". Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[21] Haggart, B. and Iglesias Keller C. (2021). "Democratic Legitimacy in Global Platform Governance."

Therefore, on the input side, we have defined legitimacy as dependent on the mechanisms that replicate the "will of the people", into the broader political decisions of a political system (the European Union in this case). If those are evaluated by the people as democratic and satisfactory, then there indeed exists a strong input legitimacy.[22] Nevertheless, another way to approach this dimension of legitimacy is through the debate whether the EU should be viewed as a *state-in-the-making* or a *cooperative intergovernmental structure.* In this context, the mentioned distinction shapes how input legitimacy is assessed, and therefore achieved, as according to some scholars, an intergovernmental structure can never achieve or be expected to reach the same level of citizens' participation, as states or other smaller entities. This is because of the greater geographical size, lack of sense of belonging, more citizens and more complicated governing architecture, in case of the intergovernmental structures.[23]

If the EU is seen as evolving into a state-like entity, input legitimacy should reflect its standards of representative democracy, where citizens choose leaders through elections, and elected officials are held accountable if they fail to meet expectations. In this view, the European Parliamentary elections, the involvement of national governments in the Council of Ministers, and the so called co-decision powers (especially since the Maastricht Treaty) are central to the overall legitimacy of the Union.[24]

On the other hand, the latter concept is valid if the EU is primarily seen as intergovernmental. If this is the case, legitimacy should be derived indirectly, through the accountability of national governments, rather than through direct electoral mechanisms at the EU level, thus differently from typical democratic elections.[25]

1.2.2 Output Legitimacy

Furthermore, Schmidt explains the term of output legitimacy as *effectiveness of the EU's policy outcomes for the people*.[26] Scharpf, throughout his work, continues by stating that

[22] Boedeltje, M. & Cornips, J. (2007). "Input and output legitimacy in interactive governance".
[23] Boedeltje, M. & Cornips, J. (2007). "Input and output legitimacy in interactive governance".
[24] Boedeltje, M. & Cornips, J. (2007). "Input and output legitimacy in interactive governance".
[25] Schmidt, V. A. (2013). "Democracy and legitimacy in the European Union: Input, output and throughput". Political Studies, 61(1), 2–22.
[26] Schmidt, V. A. (2013). "Democracy and legitimacy in the European Union: Input, output and throughput". Political Studies, 61(1), 2–22.

the output legitimacy is a dimension which concerns itself with the problem-solving quality of the laws and rules, and has a range of institutional mechanisms to ensure it.[27]

In this context, scholars have continued to debate what shall constitute an "effective and meaningful outcome" of participatory processes for the public. For instance, Lafont in his work emphasised that throughout the decision-making procedures, deliberation must not be a merely symbolic or superficial act. Instead, she argues that it should foster genuine endorsement and recognition from influential figures, capable of translating those discussions into concrete actions, which would eventually lead to tangible results, visible and felt by ordinary people.[28] Along the similar lines, Bernstein underscored the importance of direct engagement of policymakers in these deliberative processes, thus ensuring that the eventual outcomes of these public dialogues have a genuine influence on legislation, making sure that these do NOT remain abstract and detached.[29]

Building onto this, Guston's analysis of consensus introduces a distinction between a direct policy impact (such as changes in law or regulation) and an indirect influence (when public deliberation contributes to shaping a broader policy discourse). Indeed, the latter includes influencing how decision-makers frame issues, interpret evidence and ultimately, how they set policy priorities, even when there are no immediate and tangible legislative outcomes. Thus, from this point of view, evaluating output legitimacy and processes of deliberation extends beyond formal decisions, as it also involves all means of contribution to the long-term shifts in political understanding and agenda-setting. This, in turn, encourages greater and more sustained civic engagement (thus fostering also the input dimension of the overall legitimacy of a political system).[30]

As to conclude, output legitimacy does not depend solely on achieving policy outcomes, but also on ensuring that participation educates, informs and strengthens broader democratic structures. By integrating deliberative processes that are effective, inclusive, and transparent, governance can transition from mere consultation into a meaningful

[27] Scharpf F. W. (1999). "Governing in Europe". Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[28] Lafont, Cristina. (2020). "Democracy without Shortcuts: A Participatory Conception of Deliberative Democracy". Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[29] Bernstein, Steven. (2005). "Legitimacy in Global Environmental Governance". Journal of International Law and International Relations 1, no. 1–2: 139–166.
[30] Guston, David and Valdivia, Walter. (2016). "Responsible Innovation: A Primer for Policymakers". Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.

civic empowerment. This is where, output and throughput dimensions of legitimacy of one political system start to overlap. Accordingly, the following section looks more in depth into this other dimension.

1.2.3 Throughput Legitimacy

Throughput legitimacy is the efficacy, accountability and transparency of the EU's governance processes *to* the people, "covering what is between input and output".[31]

Drawing onto the Habermas' theory of communicative action, throughput legitimacy in a deliberative context requires that decisions are grounded in the rational arguments. Indeed, these involve equal and free participation, where individuals would engage with one another in order to create a form of mutual understanding. Within this theoretical concept, individuals are open to adapting their views when facing different opinions or new information. Therefore, rationality, in this sense, is not just about expressing all opinions, but it involves critical evaluation of these arguments, aiming to reach a collective good - *consensus*.[32] In addition to this, Habermas adds that today states and economies increasingly rely on technocratic decision-making and instrumental calculations (rather than democratic deliberation), especially in times of crisis. Therefore, citizens are likely to become alienated from political processes, which leads to weakening of the trust in democratic institutions. Finally, according to him, a remedy for this problem would be a rational discourse (communicative rationality), deliberative democracy and a strong public sphere, filled with encouraged dialogues.[33]

Although Habermas emphasizes the importance of understanding and agreement within a public sphere (in case of the throughput legitimacy in the EU we apply this view to the work of institutions), scholars have increasingly questioned the feasibility of this concept within pluralistic societies. Instead, more recent work suggests deliberation should aim for disclosure, making all present perspectives visible, and putting an

[31] Schmidt, V. A. (2013). "Democracy and legitimacy in the European Union: Input, output and throughput". Political Studies, 61(1), 2–22.
[32] Habermas, Jürgen. (1984). "The Theory of Communicative Action". Volume 1: "Reason and the Rationalization of Society". Boston: Beacon Press.
[33] Habermas, Jürgen. (1984). "The Theory of Communicative Action". Volume 1: "Reason and the Rationalization of Society". Boston: Beacon Press.

emphasis on showing the value they have to different participants. An analysis of these processes may show a whole spectrum of a diversity of views, rather than full agreement, acknowledging both majority opinions and minority dissent. For instance, Mouffe in her work analyses public spaces as arenas for *agonistic confrontation* adding a layer of complexity to feasibility on collective decision-making. She opposes Habermas' vision of the public sphere as a place for consensus, saying that achieving it is ontologically impossible due to inherent exclusions.[34] Therefore, both consensus and contestation can hold legitimacy at different stages, and a form of "workable agreements" may be more realistic, where participants would support the same outcome for varying reasons for which it benefits them.[35]

One thing is certain: in order to ensure procedural legitimacy, participation barriers must be reduced to the minimal level. This involves making information accessible, understandable, balanced, and based on the facts. It is important to also leave the opportunity for participants to challenge the processes happening. Lastly, accountability is of vital importance, ensuring that all participants can critically assess and comprehend each other's actions. For this reason, transparency in presenting goals, clear selection processes, procedures, and outcomes, along with a clear understanding of individual roles and decision-making power are essential pillars that uphold this accountability. Indeed, maintaining these principles, both in times of stability and crises, is essential.

1.3 Three Pillars, One System?

In summary, these three dimensions (input, output, throughput) of legitimacy interact among each other within the EU governing structure (see Figure 1).[36]

Moreover, in the academic debates, input and output dimensions of legitimacy are often seen as interacting in one of the two ways: complementary (for instance strong policy outcomes compensate for weak citizen participation, or vice versa) or mutually

[34] Mouffe, Chantal. (2005). "Which Public Space for Critical Artistic Practices?". Presentation at the Institute of Choreography and Dance (Firkin Crane).
[35] Mouffe, Chantal. (2005). "Which Public Space for Critical Artistic Practices?". Presentation at the Institute of Choreography and Dance (Firkin Crane).
[36] Schmidt, V. A. (2013). "Democracy and legitimacy in the European Union: Input, output and throughput". Political Studies, 61(1), 2–22.

constraining (increasing one, might lead to reduction of the effectiveness of the other; for instance, highly politicised input through majoritarian institutions may hinder policy efficiency (output dimension), while strong and effective output from technocratic bodies may eventually limit the overall input legitimacy).[37]

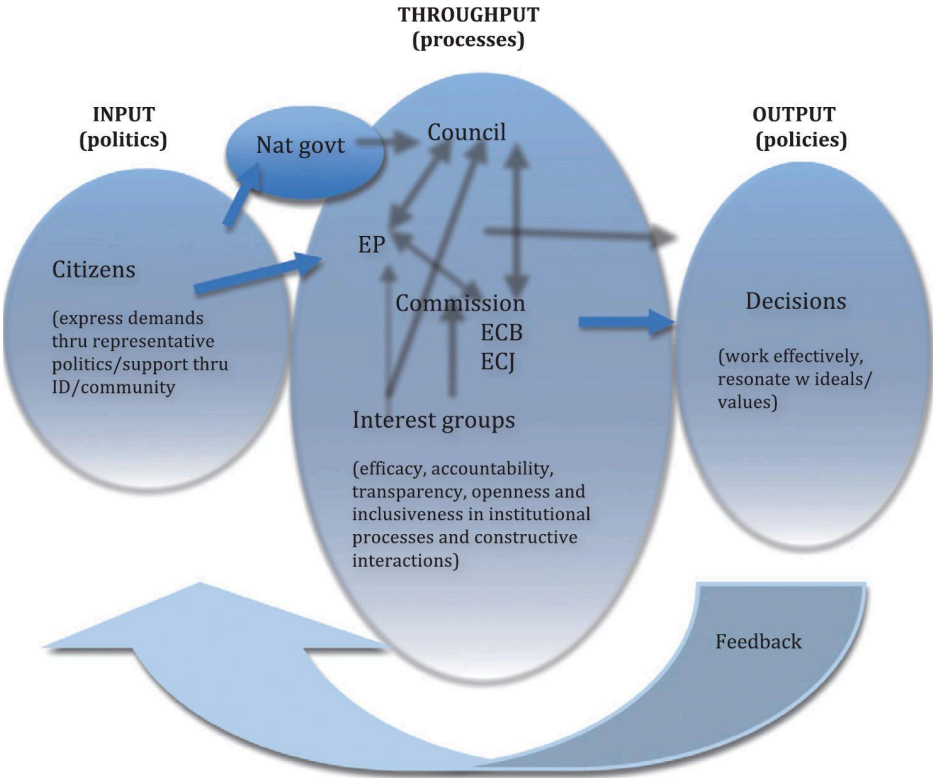

Figure 1: A Revised Systems Approach to the EU: Input, Output and Throughput
Source: Schmidt, V. A. (2013). Democracy and legitimacy in the European Union: Input, output and "throughput". Political Studies, 61(1), 2–22.

When analysing the broader picture, these two forms of legitimacy also interact with throughput legitimacy (previously described as the quality of governance processes). For instance, politicised input can disrupt the smooth functioning of institutional procedures, while excessive technocratic output might marginalise the importance of deliberation and inclusivity.

Interestingly, unlike the input and output, whose improvements generally lead to an enhancement of public perceptions of legitimacy, increased throughput (for instance

[37] Schmidt, V. A. (2013). "Democracy and legitimacy in the European Union: Input, output and throughput". Political Studies, 61(1), 2–22.

better transparency, accountability or inclusiveness) does not necessarily improve public trust, as it is typically "taken for granted". For this reason, once strengthened, throughput legitimacy does not necessarily foster greater public support. However, violations of throughput standards, such as incompetence or corruption, can damage the overall legitimacy. It occurs only after a certain crisis or scandal, that an enhancement of the throughput tends to positively affect perceptions of the public. In short, throughput legitimacy is commonly "taken for granted" and commented only if violated during "normal times" or improved after being disregarded during times of crisis. Indeed, the EU has suffered from similar procedural failings, such as the scandal that forced the Santer Commission to resign, with accusations of nepotism and misused public funds, overshadowing the Commission's significant achievements (euro and enlargement).[38] This scandal undermined the throughput legitimacy of the Commission, which escalated into the broader public concerns regarding the democratic deficit of the EU.[39]

At its core, legitimacy in the context of the EU refers to the question whether its citizens find its decision-making processes and policies morally acceptable and therefore, worth obeying, even when outcomes may not align with their immediate interests. This definition, drawing on Weber and Scharpf, acknowledges that legitimacy is deeply shaped by culture, values, and historical context.[40] Thus, normative and empirical evaluations of what is legitimate in the EU will naturally vary across the EU Member States, given their different traditions of democracy and distinct visions of Europe.

Conclusively, the EU's legitimacy puzzle is not merely a matter of improving participation or overall performance, but a matter of aligning all three pillars, input, throughput, and output legitimacies, within a complex, multi-level system of the EU as a whole. In this context, it is crucial to acknowledge that weakness of one component can jeopardise the perceived integrity of the other. Hence, understanding and addressing the interdependencies between all three dimensions is crucial for building a more democratically legitimate EU, that would be resilient also in the times of crises.

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[38] European Integration Online Papers (EIoP). (2002). "The resignation of the Santer-Commission: the impact of trust and reputation." Vol. 6 (Issue N° 14).
[39] Schmidt, V. A. (2013). "Democracy and legitimacy in the European Union: Input, output and throughput". Political Studies, 61(1), 2–22.
[40] Scharpf F. W. (1999). "Governing in Europe". Oxford: Oxford University Press.

1.4 Crisis and Legitimacy

Do citizens value and/or are satisfied with the level of their representation in the EU or (*input legitimacy*), the delivery of public goods (*output legitimacy*) or their access to information, accountability or transparency of EU governance processes (*throughput legitimacy*), during the times marked by crisis? [41]

1.4.1 Is the EU legitimate?

The aim of this paper is not to evaluate the EU's institutional setting or its legitimacy in general. Rather, this research aims to analyse whether the EU acts in a legitimate manner, fulfilling the three aforementioned criteria (*input, output and throughput legitimacy*) during the times of crises, as well which criteria can be seen as "the most relevant and crucial" in the case of emergency. Moreover, this paper examines to what extent the public discontent and distrust in regards with the EU's actions and policies in times marked by the crises since 2008 contributed to the rise of an anti-EU sentiment we are witnessing today.

1.4.2 EU Legitimacy in the Context of Crises

In the earliest times of the EU, discussions regarding the notion of the crisis in the context of the Union were mostly focused on missions conducted under the framework of the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP).[42] However, in contrast to the early periods, today it appears that barely a day passes without a few reports on the EU's involvement in some form of the emergency. Whether it is a pandemic threat, a cross-border issue, energy shortages, civil conflicts, natural disasters or a financial turmoil, all these events conform to the generic definition of a *crisis* - an unexpected, acute disruption of normal societal functions that must be handled rapidly and under conditions of uncertainty).[43] For these reasons, recent references to the EU and the times

[41] Schmidt, V. (2013). Democracy and legitimacy in the European Union: Input, output and "throughput" *Political Studies*, *61*(1), 2–22.
[42] Lori, Gianluca. (2022). "Il nuovo ruolo geopolitico dell'Unione Europea: una prospettiva alla luce della Strategic Compass". Bachelor's thesis, LUISS Guido Carli University.
[43] Rosenthal, U., Hart, P., & Kouzmin, A. (1991). "The Bureau-Politics of Crisis Management." Public Administration, 69(2), 211–233.

marked by crises usually relate to the hard times the EU has been facing in the past two decades, all of which have put under a significant pressure and test the capacity of the Union's crisis response and resilience of European cooperation.[44]

In the academic literature, besides the economic and political consequences of these crises, scholars have been looking into the social dimension, analysing the effects they have on the ordinary citizens' views of the EU's governance. In this context, there is a lot of statistical data which illustrates a significant shift in perceptions of legitimacy, both at the EU and at the national levels, during the periods in history, marked by severe and catastrophic crises, because emergency situations call for a predominance of an executive action, where citizens typically "take a leap of faith". Thus, the central question is whether and if yes, how such extraordinary measures can be justified in a manner compatible with the general democratic principles (core EU value)?

One line of reasoning emphasises the urgency and necessity for rapid actions, due to their efficiency and effectiveness (*output* legitimacy). From this perspective, the duty of government is to protect the life of the political system and its citizens, thus if that extraordinary action succeeds in preserving public safety and order, the governing bodies can claim a "form of legitimacy" through the adequate outcomes achieved. Moreover, emergency governance tends to undermine or suspend usual accountability and transparency mechanisms, for instance, by concentrating most of its power in the executive and technocratic institutions, but also by bypassing the legislature or shielding its actions from any form of judicial scrutiny, all with the aim to achieve successful outcomes as soon as possible. Therefore, as there is a need for a rapid response, normal deliberative democratic procedures are not applied in a usual manner.[45]

Ultimately, if the public is satisfied with the results of the policies used in times of the emergency, it is unlikely that they will question the other two dimensions of legitimacy (*input and throughput*), once the adequate and convincing results are delivered. In this context, political theorist Vivien Schmidt describes this as a form of a "trade-off",

[44] Grimmel, A., Wallaschek, S., Giang, S. M., Eigmüller, M., Kotzur, M., & Europa-Kolleg Hamburg. (2024). "Perceptions of EU and member state legitimacy in times of crisis". (Research Paper No. 14).
[45] Grimmel, A., Wallaschek, S., Giang, S. M., Eigmüller, M., Kotzur, M., & Europa-Kolleg Hamburg. (2024). "Perceptions of EU and member state legitimacy in times of crisis". (Research Paper No. 14).

where ensuring effective outcomes outweighs the temporary suspension of usual input channels of democratic responsiveness, but also throughput dimension of accountability and transparency. In a nutshell, if the governing bodies deliver stability (an adequate output), perhaps citizens will tolerate a short-term deficit in participation or oversight (input/throughput legitimacy).[46]

However, the real challenge emerges when the public, having placed its trust in high-level institutions during the crisis, finds itself dissatisfied with the outcomes in the aftermath. Since rapid decisions were made under extraordinary circumstances and without time and place for a potential scrutiny or deliberation, the expectations placed on the institutions may have been unrealistic and too ambitious. However, if those expectations are not met, the critical question is being raised: should the public continue to trust these institutions in normal times, when there is no pressing demand for an immediate action, but instead there is a time for deliberation and inclusion of citizens' concerns within the decision-making processes?

For all of the aforementioned reasons, one could argue that the most important dimension of legitimacy in the times marked by emergencies would be the *output* one, as an ordinary citizen cares more about the consequences he individually feels and which directly affect his livelihood, than how much his voice has impacted and shaped these outcomes. For this reason, an average citizen cares about effective results, and it is unlikely that she/he expresses discontent regarding participatory democracy, if the policy outcomes prove satisfactory. On the other hand, it is only in cases when the final results do not meet certain expectations, that the public starts raising concerns regarding the quality of decision making, transparency, accountability and participation. For this reason, when the citizens remain unsatisfied with the results, as the Member States have ceded their competences to the EU level, all discontent is expressed as the "anti-establishment" and, in this case, "anti-EU" sentiment.

This is, however, a theoretical framework that requires historical precedents from the EU's experience to confirm its validity. Accordingly, the next two chapters provide a detailed analysis of the various crises that have affected the EU since 2008.

[46] The Frederick S. Pardee School of Global Studies. (2021, May 26). "Schmidt publishes an article on European emergency politics". The Frederick S. Pardee School of Global Studies. Boston University.

2. Crises in the EU I

Global crises have persistently been influencing the political life of the EU, therefore challenging its economic resilience, political stability and unity. Thus, this and the following chapter put into chronological perspective crises with which the EU has faced since 2008 until today.

2.1 Global Financial Crisis, Eurozone Sovereign Debt Crisis

The global financial crisis was originally triggered in the US (also known as the "2008 Financial Crisis"), leaving behind severe consequences for the whole global economy. However, in the euro area, its aftermath has eventually opened the floor for a profoundly devastating sovereign debt crisis, which emerged soon after.[47]

In this context, this subchapter explores the emergence of the euro area's sovereign debt crisis, shortly after the global financial crisis, analysing their asymmetrical impact on different Member States, by analytically looking into the EU's responses, through both short-term emergency interventions and long-term structural and institutional reforms. Finally, this section analyses how these two successive crises fueled Euroscepticism and exposed critical institutional, political and economic challenges within the EU.

2.1.1 Eurozone Sovereign Debt Crisis

What particularly marked the euro area sovereign debt crisis was that the majority of investors lost confidence in the ability of several Eurozone countries to service their debts. In this context, most notable was the case of Greece, as this crisis revealed that this country's public debt was far higher than what has previously been reported, further causing concerns and alarming the financial markets. Soon after, in early 2010, Greece was on the verge of losing access to credit and in April of the same year, the Greek government negotiated a joint rescue program with the EU and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), agreeing to implement fiscal and structural reforms in exchange for emergency loans. This bilateral loan package, soon formalised under a coordinated

[47] Reserve Bank of Australia. (2023, May 26). "The Global Financial Crisis".

joint EU-IMF program, was the first bailout of a Eurozone country in history. Indeed, it underscored the EU's lack of a permanent mechanism for combating challenges, as it was shown that the ad hoc arrangements had to be created swiftly and unexpectedly.[48]

In addition to that, as to prevent contagion from Greece to other vulnerable countries, European leaders have set up temporary financial rescue funds in May 2010. Indeed, the European Financial Stabilisation Mechanism (EFSM) and the European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF) were established as safeguard and support mechanisms for countries in distress, each conditioned on strict adjustment programs.

However, despite the new measures, market panic spread, and investors became anxious about high deficits and bank problems in Ireland, Portugal, Spain and even Italy. By late 2010, Ireland requested a rescue, followed by Portugal in early 2011. The Eurozone's "peripheral" countries experienced a sharp increase in sovereign bond yields, fueled by the fears of possible default, and ultimately leading to the rising concerns for a possibility of a total disintegration of the Eurozone. In this regard, a vicious cycle was created between the weak governments, struggling domestic banks and shrinking economies, often being referred to as the "sovereign-bank doom loop".[49]

Moreover, Eurozone authorities responded with a combination of different approaches and emergency measures, including the new policies attempting to stabilise the situation. In this regard, the European Central Bank (ECB) took extraordinary and unprecedented steps in order to calm the newly emerged market panic, as it launched the Securities Markets Programme in May 2010, aiming to buy government bonds of distressed states.[50] By mid-2013, the most intense phase of the sovereign debt crisis was loosening, but its economic consequences were long-lasting. Indeed, by 2014, the Eurozone's emergency phase was over. However, the consequences remained evident through the debt burdens and high unemployment in some parts of Europe, but in the political arena.

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[48] Hobelsberger, K., Kok, C., & Mongelli, F. P. (2022). "A tale of three crises: synergies between ECB tasks". ECB Occasional Paper Series, 305, 2–40.

[49] Hobelsberger, K., Kok, C., & Mongelli, F. P. (2022). "A tale of three crises: synergies between ECB tasks". ECB Occasional Paper Series, 305, 2–40

[50] Hobelsberger, K., Kok, C., & Mongelli, F. P. (2022). "A tale of three crises: synergies between ECB tasks". ECB Occasional Paper Series, 305, 2–40.

2.1.2 The Unequal Burden in Europe

In the aftermath, it was evident that the impacts of this crisis were unevenly dispersed across the European continent. Indeed, in the initial phase of the global financial crisis (2008-2009) all the European economies entered recession, however, the depth of that recession had varied greatly among the different Member States. For instance, Ireland and Spain had experienced rapid increases in housing prices in the mid-2000s, which had already affected their banking systems and economic output.[51] Indeed, as Ireland's GDP fell sharply, its government faced enormous costs while attempting to rescue the collapsed banks. In the similar way, Spain suffered the collapse of a construction sector, which had huge significance in its job market, thus the consequences were very similar to those in Ireland. For these reasons, some states were hit harder by the two successive crises. In contrast, countries like Germany overcame the crisis with less severe impact, since, for instance, during the worst periods of the Great Recession, Germany's unemployment rate saw a marginal increase.[52]

In this context, majority of the European policymakers initially appeared to underestimate these differences, and when in September 2008 the *Lehman Brothers* investment bank collapsed, Germany's finance minister Peer Steinbrück argued that the financial crisis was "*above all an American problem*," implying that Europe would remain less affected, or unaffected at all, although the reality proved to be more complex.[53] Ultimately, the experience showed that the Union imported this external financial crisis, but eventually severely suffered from its own internal crises. Moreover, even if this distress concentrated in particular countries, by 2009, Europe experienced its deepest recession in the post-war era.[54]

Due to the aforementioned disparities, countries had distinct recovery paces and strategies. Indeed, Germany and many Northern European economies rebounded relatively quickly after 2010, while in Southern Europe and Ireland the crisis dragged on, compounded by the sovereign debt troubles that followed.

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[51] Reserve Bank of Australia. (2023, May 26). "The Global Financial Crisis".
[52] European Central Bank. (2015). "Comparisons and Contrasts of the Impact of the Crisis on Euro Area Labour Markets". Occasional Paper Series No. 159.
[53] Hodges, P. (2013, April 17). "A debate opens up - Chemicals and the Economy".
[54] Reserve Bank of Australia. (2023, May 26). "The Global Financial Crisis".

However, the "unequal burden" of the crisis is most clearly visible in the labor market.[55] In this regard, the data show that from 2008 to 2013, unemployment in the euro area rose from around 7.3% to more than 12% (Look at the Figure 2), with over 5,5 million people losing their jobs over the course of the crisis.

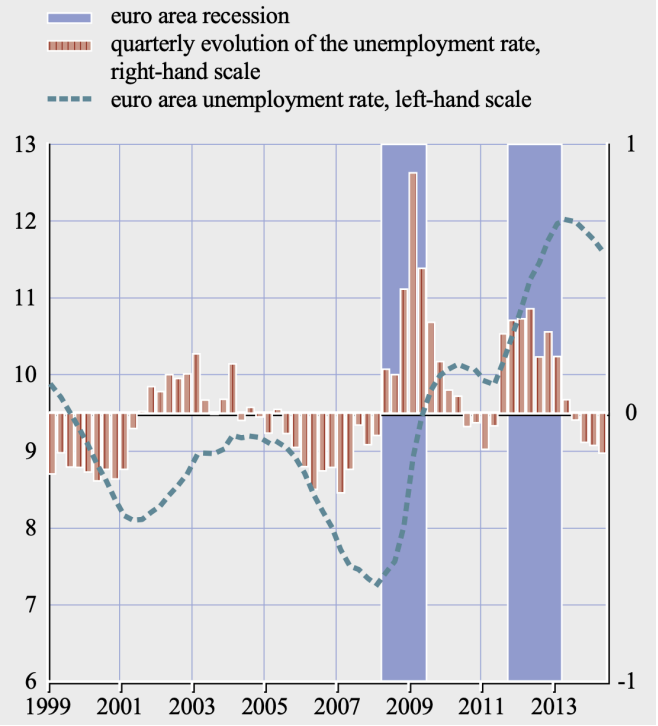

Figure 2: Unemployment developments over the course of EMU
Source: Eurostat and ESCB.[56]

Nevertheless, this average hid huge disparities, as in Greece, the unemployment rate exploded to around 27% by 2013, meaning that on the average more than one out four Greek workers lost their jobs. Furthermore, in Spain unemployment reached around 25% in 2013, and in both countries, at the peak of the crisis, youth unemployment exceeded 50%, which indicates that an entire generation struggled to find a job.[57]

By contrast, countries like Austria, the Netherlands and Germany maintained unemployment in very low percentages, while Germany's data even fell to about 5% by

[55] European Central Bank. (2015). "Comparisons and Contrasts of the Impact of the Crisis on Euro Area Labour Markets". Occasional Paper Series No. 159.
[56] European Central Bank. (2015). "Comparisons and Contrasts of the Impact of the Crisis on Euro Area Labour Markets". Occasional Paper Series No. 159.
[57] European Central Bank. (2015). "Comparisons and Contrasts of the Impact of the Crisis on Euro Area Labour Markets". Occasional Paper Series No. 159.

2013, which is this country's lowest number in decades Thus, the social impact of the crisis, in lost jobs, incomes and consequences in livelihoods, hit some European populations much harder than the others, therefore the Eurozone's common monetary policy could not tailor a singular interest rate which would meet each of the countries' needs. In this regard, with limited fiscal transfers between Member States, the burden fell largely on the countries hit the hardest by the crisis.[58]

European institutions did attempt to reach a greater sense of solidarity and share this burden among Member States. However, steps which were undertaken fueled controversy over fairness, as the capacity to rescue banks varied, since richer countries could afford large bank bailouts, whereas poorer Member States required external help. Furthermore, once the sovereign debt crisis hit, the creation of joint EU rescue funds (EFSF/EFSM, later the ESM) illustrated that the financial instability in one country, indeed, was a shared European problem. Yet, the conditionality attached to those loans, requiring harsh austerity and reforms, meant the borrowing countries bore most of the adjustment costs. Germany and the Netherlands, which enjoyed the status of "creditor countries" believed that strict conditions were essential in order to ensure responsibility, but the "debtor countries" felt overwhelmed by the unequal burden of saving the common currency, which they argued "has been benefiting all". This ultimately created political frictions, which persisted to this day.

Conclusively, as the Member States felt consequences of this crisis unevenly, political tensions arose in the aftermath, as discontent among the public, for both national and EU drawbacks, gave the push to the potential rise of populist movements, but also disregarded the unity in the EU.

2.1.3 Challenges in the Aftermath of the Crisis

The aforementioned drawbacks and failures caused widespread social discontent, which led to the emergence of protests across affected countries, thus eroding public trust in EU institutions and fueling a rise in Euroscepticism. For instance, the relationship between the International Monetary Fund and its European members was strained

[58] European Central Bank. (2015). "Comparisons and Contrasts of the Impact of the Crisis on Euro Area Labour Markets". Occasional Paper Series No. 159.

during the periods of crisis, as trust in the governments of those countries eroded, due to their undermined credibility (Look at the Figure 3). Moreover, due to the increased mistrust, it became difficult for leaders to obtain and secure broader political support for their economic programs, leading to rise of skepticism among voters. As it was already explained, this created a vicious cycle, or a "doom loop", where declining government bond values weakened banks, requiring state support and increasing fiscal liabilities. Furthermore, this loss of trust was not limited to Eurozone crisis countries, indeed it also affected all nations which faced severe banking shocks and implemented controversial austerity measures. In this regard, the UK notably resembled the peripheral European economies. [59]

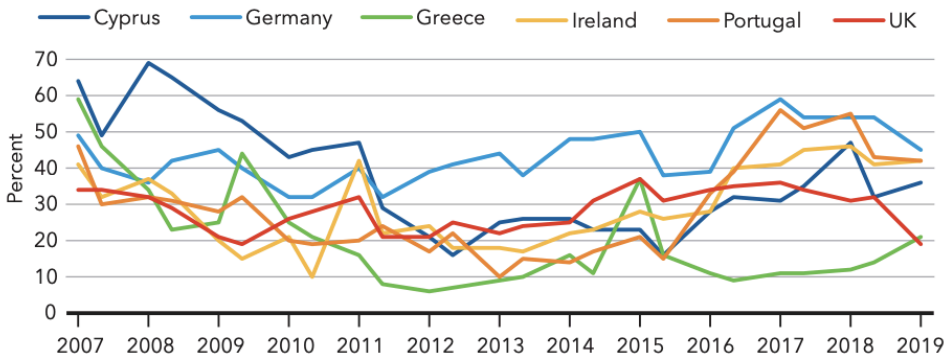

Figure 3: Trust in Governments
Source: Trust in European Governments (Eurostat figures, Eurobarometer) [60]

Both crises, with their cumulative consequences have significantly challenged the Union's financial architecture, but also influenced the political stage of the EU. Indeed, the emerging discontent in the public sphere and the perception of mismanagement of this malattie have altogether further fueled the rising Euroscepticism. In this regard, one research obtained by the European Commission indicates that the vote share for "hard" Eurosceptic parties (those advocating fundamental rejection of the EU project; Analysed in depth in Chapter 4) in the EU national elections more than doubled, going from under 5% before the crisis to reaching around 14% by the mid-2010s. If one also includes the "soft" Eurosceptic parties (accept EU membership but oppose the EU's direction on specific policies), the Eurosceptic vote share across Europe saw a really sharp increase

[59] James, H. (2024b, January 9). "The IMF and the European debt crisis". IMF eBooks.
[60] Ioannou, D., Jamet, J.-F., Kleibl, J., & European Central Bank. (2015). "Spillovers and euroscepticism". In ECB Working Paper Series (No. 1815).

from roughly 7% to about 27% between 2008 and 2022. Moreover, in countries hit hardest by the economic downturn, anti-establishment and anti-EU sentiments flourished, and by the mid-2010s, Eurosceptic and populist parties had become major political forces in many of these countries.[61]

Furthermore, when people saw their own country or the other EU countries suffering severe economic consequences, their faith in the EU's ability to deliver prosperity declined. Indeed, this transcended borders, as for instance, the crisis in Greece fostered Euroscepticism among Greeks, but also among Germans and Finns who feared they would pay the bills via EU bailouts. Indeed, public opinion surveys during 2010–2013 recorded some of the lowest levels of trust in the EU in decades (see Figure 4).[62]

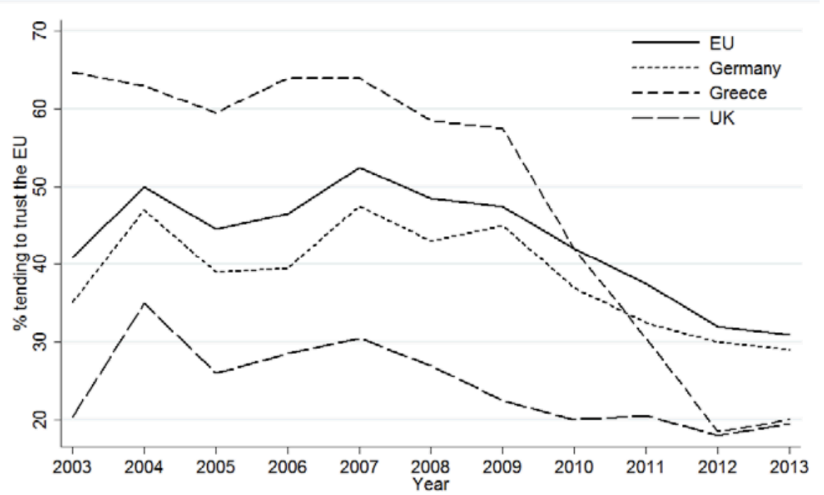

Figure 4: Trust in the EU at EU level, in Germany, in Greece, and in the United Kingdom, 2003- 2013.
Source: European Commission Eurobarometer database.

In addition to this, the two crises underscored flaws in the design of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), as there was no framework to deal with failing banks and the mandate for the ECB was incomplete. Most importantly, to this day, there is NO common fiscal authority, so without deeper integration, the euro area remains vulnerable to shocks. And while some advocate for a "United States of Europe", with fiscal union, others prefer to keep the integration limited. Moreover, the reliance on the ad hoc arrangements raised questions about democratic accountability.[63]

[61] European Commission. (2023, September 6). "The Development Trap: A Cause of Euroscepticism?"
[62] European Commission. (2023, September 6). "The Development Trap: A Cause of Euroscepticism?"
[63] James, H. (2024, January 9). "The IMF and the European debt crisis". IMF eBooks.

Finally, as the concept of Euroscepticism does not necessarily have to be rigid (explained more in depth within Chapter 4), discourse ranged from radical anti-EU positions (hard Euroscepticism) to more nuanced critiques (soft Euroscepticism). More precisely, in the aftermath of the crisis, a study of European press coverage found that mainstream newspapers were often critical of *how* the EU handled the crisis, rather than advocating to abandon European integration entirely. Thus, general criticism focused on the specific EU policies, like austerity-oriented approach or lack of solidarity. However, the cumulative effect of these headlines depicted the EU as distant and not always acting in citizens' best interest.[64]

2.2 The Refugee and Migrant Crisis (2015–2016)

First and foremost, in order to ensure a common ground around the key technical terms, it is essential to provide a few core definitions. In this context, *migrants* are people who move from their original home, whether within their own country or to a different one and either for a short or long period of time.[65] On the other hand, *asylum seekers* leave due to the genuine fear of persecution, for reasons of race, religion, nationality, politics, or membership of a particular social group, thus they seek their safety elsewhere.[66] However, they still have not formally requested asylum, but they intend to do so, or their application for it has not yet been fully processed. Moreover, once the national authorities decide positively on their application, they receive status of a *refugee*.[67]

Now with the established common ground, we can turn to the examination of the global refugee and migration crisis which occurred a decade ago, looking into the Union's policy responses to this complex phenomenon.

2.2.1 EU's Pre-Existing mechanisms

The substantial influx of refugees occurred in 2015, marked by the arrival of over two million asylum seekers across the European continent. Consequently, in the following

[64] Bijsmans, P. (2020). "The Eurozone crisis and Euroscepticism in the European press". Journal of European Integration, 43(3), 331–346.
[65] European Parliament. "Asylum and Migration in the EU: Facts and Figures".
[66] European Parliament. "Asylum and Migration in the EU: Facts and Figures".
[67] European Parliament. "Asylum and Migration in the EU: Facts and Figures".

years this triggered wide political discourse and caused strong divisions among Member States, regarding the appropriate policy-responses.[68]

Indeed, prior to the 2015, asylum policy in the EU was governed by the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), built on several directives for qualification, procedures, reception and many other technicalities, in addition to the main regulation - the Dublin Regulation (Regulation 604/2013), which determined which Member State was responsible for the process of an asylum claim.[69] In this regard, the rule assigned the responsibility to the country through which the applicant first entered the EU, as recorded by fingerprinting (*Eurodac*, an automated *Euro*pean *dac*tylographic system).[70] Originally, this rule intended to prevent multiple applications (colloquially known as the "asylum shopping") and any uncontrolled movement of asylum seekers. However, it meant that southern border states, in particular Greece and Italy, bear most of the burden. Thus, the Dublin system implicitly relied on solidarity (Article 80 TFEU) among members. The problem has occurred since in practice this system lacked any effective and regulated burden-sharing. Indeed, one analysis notes that the system "has failed those in need", because Member States shared their responsibility unequally.[71]

Due to all of its drawbacks, it was apparent that the Dublin regulation was outdated. In this context, study found that in 2014 five of the EU countries (Germany, Italy, Sweden, Hungary, Austria) handled 72 % of all asylum applications.[72] Moreover, Dublin lacked dynamic redistribution, as it had no permanent relocation mechanism, since in practice any form of burden-sharing remained voluntary. For this reason, more burdens fell on a few bordering states of the Union, or those preferred by asylum seekers. Thus, by 2015 Italy and Greece were processing more asylum applications than ever before, with their

[68] Vrânceanu, Alina, Elias Dinas, Tobias Heidland, and Martin Ruhs. "The European Refugee Crisis and Public Support for the Externalisation of Migration Management." *European Journal of Political Research* 62, no. 4 (November 6, 2022): 1146–67.
[69] European Union. "Regulation (EU) No 604/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 establishing the criteria and mechanisms for determining the Member State responsible for examining an application for international protection lodged in one of the Member States by a third-country national or a stateless person (recast)". Official Journal of the European Union, L 180 (June 29, 2013): 31–59.
[70] Dipartimento per le Politiche Europee. "EURODAC." *Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri – Dipartimento per le Politiche Europee*.
[71] Armstrong, Ashley Binetti. "You Shall Not Pass! How the Dublin System Fueled Fortress Europe." *Chicago Journal of International Law* 20, no. 2 (2020): 332–386.
[72] Nascimbene, B. (2016). Refugees, the European Union and the "Dublin system". The Reasons for a Crisis. DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals).

existing reception capacity and procedures being inadequate.[73] Thus, for the all above mentioned reasons, drawbacks and lack of an adequate response coming from the Union's level, Member States relied on national strategies, resulting in emergence of unilateral border controls and shutdowns.

2.2.2 Asymmetrical pressures on Member States

The crisis placed uneven pressures on Member States, as certain countries were primarily *destinations* (final intent for asylum seekers), others were *transit or entry* points, and many remained largely *unaffected*. In 2015, the EU+ (EU-28, including Norway and Switzerland) saw a record of around 1.35 million first-time asylum applications.[74] (Look at figure 5)

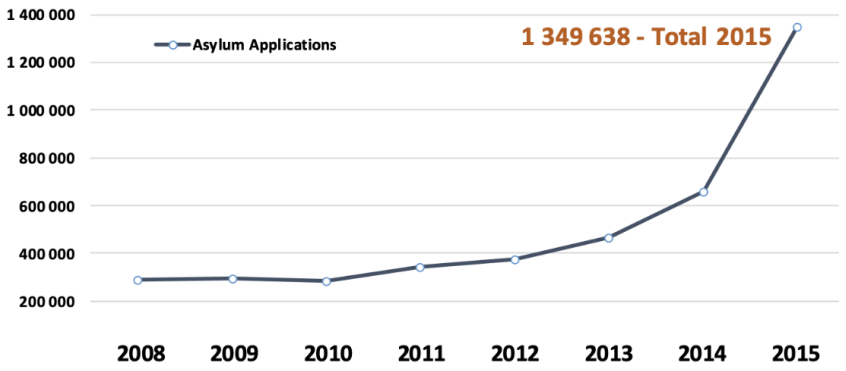

Figure 5: Number of applications for international protection in the EU+
Source: Report on *Latest Asylum Trends in 2015,* European Asylum Support Office, 2016.[75]

Nevertheless, these applications were not evenly distributed. Indeed, Germany received roughly 442,000 asylum applicants that year, while Sweden received around 156,000 and Austria 90,000 applicants. On the other hand, eastern European states, amongst which were also Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and the Baltic countries (other than Sweden), altogether received only a few tens of thousands.

Furthermore, the uneven burden was even more evident when analysing data "in *per-capita* terms" (look at Figure 6). As shown on the graph, Hungary's asylum

[73] Nascimbene, B. (2016). Refugees, the European Union and the "Dublin system". The Reasons for a Crisis. DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals).
[74] European Asylum Support Office. (2016). "Latest Asylum Trends, 2015" Overview. Valletta, Malta.
[75] European Asylum Support Office. (2016). "Latest Asylum Trends, 2015" Overview. Valletta, Malta.

applications in 2015 were about 1,770 per 100,000 people, in comparison with roughly 250 per 100,000 across the EU, on average. [76]

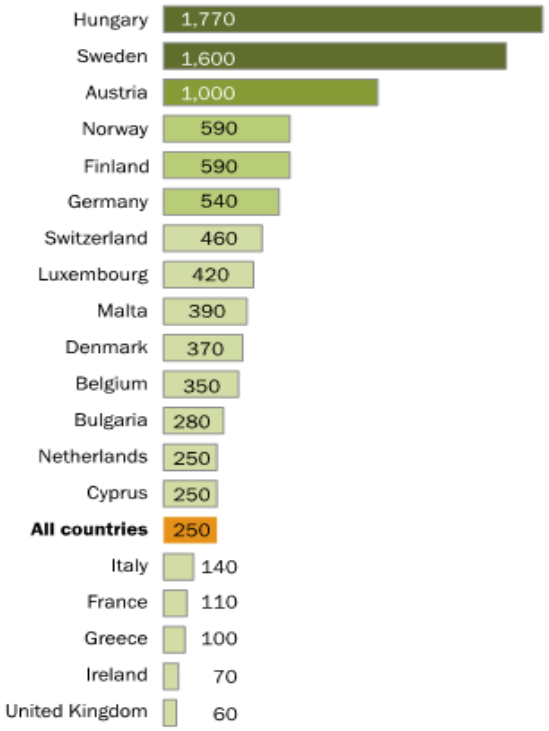

Figure 6: Number of first-time asylum applications in 2015 per 100,000 people (EU28)
Source: A spring 2016 Pew Research Center survey conducted across 10 EU member states.

The frontline entry countries were Italy and Greece, although many of those who reached these destinations attempted to travel further north. Indeed, countries had different roles throughout the crises, forming groups of few *destination* countries (mainly Germany and Sweden, but also Norway and Denmark), *transit* countries of migration routes (Greece, Italy, Hungary, Bulgaria, Croatia, and Slovenia), countries *less affected* (Poland, Ireland, Spain), or countries *unaffected* at all .[77]

The *destination* states in Northern and Western Europe handled many final applications. Germany took in more than 40% of all Syrian applicants to the EU and large flows of Afghans, Iraqis, and Western Balkan nationals. Indeed, asylum claims by nationals of the Western Balkans numbered about 199,000 in 2015 (15 % of all EU+ claims), and

[76]Connor, P. (2016).“Number of refugees to Europe surges to record 1.3 million in 2015”. Pew Research Center.
[77] Benedikter, Ireneusz Pawel Karolewski and Roland. (2018). “Europe’s Refugee and Migrant Crisis.” Politique EuropéEnne, no. 60: 98–133.

over 70 % of them were in Germany. Austria was another key destination, but also Sweden had large numbers per capita. Countries like France, Belgium and the UK saw increases, although not on the same scale per capita. By contrast, countries with few prior arrivals, Eastern Europe and Scandinavia (aside from Sweden), had comparatively low asylum intakes.[78]

This asymmetry was reflected in political debates. In heavily hit states like Greece and Italy public opinion often shifted from initial solidarity to fatigue as economic strains and social tensions grew. In some destination countries (notably Germany), an initially "open-door" governmental policy encountered domestic backlash and the rise of anti-immigrant parties. In countries that saw few migrants, notably Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and later Denmark, leaders and populations largely viewed the crisis as "someone else's problem".[79] This divergence was formalised by the opt-outs and national choices, where, for instance, the UK and Ireland had treaty opt-outs from the EU asylum acquis and did not participate in any relocation quotas. Moreover, Denmark, with its full opt-out in Justice and Home Affairs, also did not join asylum-sharing mechanisms..[80]

2.2.3 The EU's Response and Established Mechanisms

Faced with the crisis, the EU and its Member States took a series of emergency measures, although not all were successful. On the institutional level, the Commission and Council acted to restore the border control and coordinate relocation among the states, but they also outsourced some of the solutions to Union's external partners.[81] Indeed, the main immediate responses included a modern *relocation scheme* within the EU, a bilateral agreement made with Turkey, and a renewed border enforcement, which included internal border checks and a new EU border agency.[82]

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[78] European Asylum Support Office. (2016). "Latest Asylum Trends, 2015" Overview. Valletta, Malta.
[79] Nascimbene, B. (2016). Refugees, the European Union and the "Dublin system". The Reasons for a Crisis. DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals).
[80] Nascimbene, B. (2016). Refugees, the European Union and the "Dublin system". The Reasons for a Crisis. DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals).
[81] Nascimbene, B. (2016b). Refugees, the European Union and the "Dublin system". The Reasons for a Crisis. *DOAJ (DOAJ: Directory of Open Access Journals)*.
[82] Nascimbene, B. (2016). Refugees, the European Union and the "Dublin system". The Reasons for a Crisis. DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals).

In regards with the Relocation Schemes**,** in September 2015 the EU invoked Article 78(3) TFEU to adopt emergency *relocation* decisions. Council Decisions 2015/1523 and 2015/1601 called for relocating 40,000 asylum seekers from Italy and 120,000 from Greece to other Member States over two years, and this marked the first time that the EU imposed internal redistribution by majority vote. In principle, each Member State was to accept a quota based on its size and GDP, where in theory, for instance, Germany and France together were to take over 50 % of the total number. [83]

In practice, however, relocation mostly failed, due to the efforts of political opposition in several countries. Thus, in late 2018, the EU relocated only around 35,000 asylum seekers, which is only around 20% of the original target. In this context, five of the EU Member States (Hungary, Slovakia, Czechia, Romania and Lithuania) legally challenged and ultimately refused these decisions, while a number others delayed their implementation.[84] Moreover, countries which initially agreed later withdrew, as already mentioned, in cases of Austria and Sweden. Ultimately, the relocation mechanism redistributed a small minority, leaving most asylum seekers in Greece and Italy. This failure underscored the lack of internal solidarity, as the whole plan depended on voluntary compliance.[85]

On the other hand, the most significant measure the EU has undertaken was the EU-Turkey Statement from March of 2016, an agreement under which Turkey agreed to take back irregular migrants crossing into Greek islands from Turkish territory, while in return the EU agreed to make a deal regarding the Syrian refugees, but also accelerate the visa processes and provide a financial aid for Syrian refugees in Turkey.[86] In this regard, the UNHCR reports that after March 2016 “fewer people” attempted to reach Greece via Turkey.[87]

However, this solution formalised the externalisation of Europe’s refugee burden, as it shifted asylum seekers to Turkey, instead of relocating them from Greece to the EU. In

[83] Nascimbene, B. (2016). Refugees, the European Union and the “Dublin system”. The Reasons for a Crisis. DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals).
[84] Nascimbene, B. (2016b). Refugees, the European Union and the “Dublin system”. The Reasons for a Crisis. *DOAJ (DOAJ: Directory of Open Access Journals)*.
[85] Nascimbene, B. (2016b). Refugees, the European Union and the “Dublin system”. The Reasons for a Crisis. *DOAJ (DOAJ: Directory of Open Access Journals)*.
[86] European Parliament. “EU–Turkey Statement & Action Plan.”
[87] UNHCR. (2016). “Europe Working Environment.”

addition, critics note that the arrangement rests on questionable legal grounds, as Turkey was not seen as a "safe third country" under the EU law.[88]

Thirdly, parallely with the attempts of the relocation scheme and external deals, many Member States tightened their border controls. Indeed, within the Schengen area, national governments unilaterally reintroduced internal border checks, as Norway (an EU associate) and several Schengen members (Germany, Denmark, Austria) checked their frontiers at the peak of the crisis.[89] Moreover, many of the Balkan transit countries built or reinforced fences, for example, Hungary with walls on its borders with Serbia and Croatia, and Austria with barriers at its Slovenian border. Furthermore, the European Border and Coast Guard (Frontex) was also empowered and enlarged.[90] In late 2015 the Commission proposed a permanent EU border agency (now European Border and Coast Guard Agency) to coordinate national borders and help manage hotspots.

The cumulative effect of the measures proved effective, thus leading to a rapid decline in asylum requests immediately after 2016. For instance, in Hungary, which was known as a transit or entry country, asylum applications dropped from 177,135 in 2015 to 29,432 in the following year, while eventually this number dropped to 3,397 in 2017. Moreover, in 2016 and 2017, total number of asylum applications in EU+ fell dramatically since its peak in 2015 (around 1.3 million), it being 600,000 in 2018.[91] However, unilateral and national policies, although they eventually proved effective, also symbolised the end of collective action and cooperation among the EU Member States, leaving long-lasting consequences.

2.2.4 Aftermath of the Crisis

Overall, this crisis exacerbated Eurosceptic rhetoric and the migration issue exposed deep divisions within the Union, since not all Member States showed an initiative to achieve a "fair share". As Figure 7 shows, a survey conducted across 10 Member States, following the EU-Turkey agreement, depicts that majorities in each of the countries

[88] European Parliament. "EU–Turkey Statement & Action Plan."
[89] Guiraudon, V. (2017). "DEBATE: the 2015 refugee crisis was not a turning point: explaining policy inertia in EU border control." European Political Science, 17(1), 151–160.
[90] Frontex – European Border and Coast Guard Agency. "Tasks and Mission".
[91] Armstrong, Ashley Binetti. (2020). "You Shall Not Pass! How the Dublin System Fueled Fortress Europe." Chicago Journal of International Law 20, no. 2 : 332–386.

greatly disapproved of how the EU was dealing with the refugee issue.[92] In addition, this dissatisfaction was generally stronger in countries with the highest number of asylum seekers in 2015. For instance, 94% of the respondents in Greece and 88% respondents in Sweden expressed that they disapprove of how the EU has handled this issue. Sweden received the third highest number of asylum applications in 2015. And while Greece was not the final destination for most refugees, it was their main point of entry.[93]

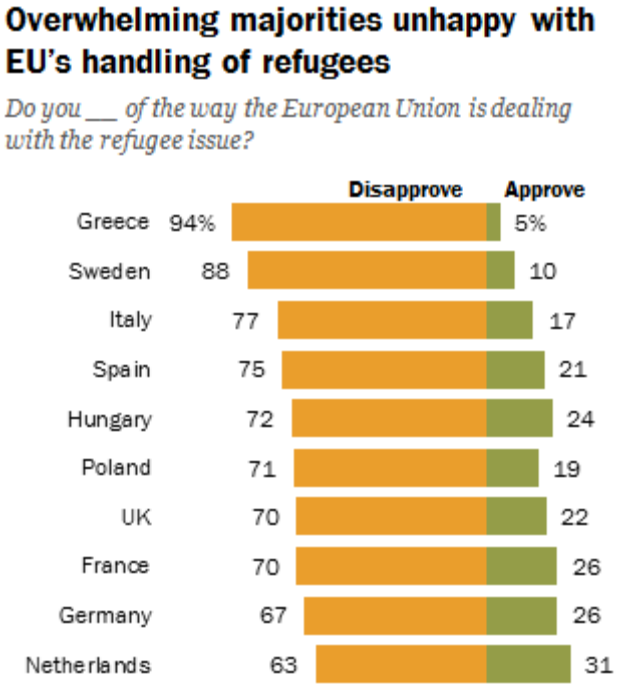

Figure 7: Public opinion across 10 EU member states regarding the EU's dealing with the refugee crisis
Source: A spring 2016 Pew Research Center survey conducted across 10 EU member states.

Overall, the refugee crisis profoundly politicised the EU migration policy and strongly polarised the public debate, where, on the one hand there was a surge of civil society solidarity, and on the other, a counter mobilisation and closing by nationalist and populist forces. For instance, in Germany, Austria, France, Italy, the Netherlands and beyond, anti-immigrant parties and platforms gained strength by warning that uncontrolled migration threatened security and culture. Furthermore, elections to the European Parliament in 2019 registered a record turnout for nationalist far-right parties.

[92] Vimont, Pierre. (2016). "Migration in Europe: Bridging the Solidarity Gap," Carnegie Europe.
[93] Connor, P. (2016). "Number of refugees to Europe surges to record 1.3 million in 2015".

In the national contexts, Hungary's *Fidesz* party won over 50 % of votes, Italy's *Lega* became its largest party, and France's *National Rally* (*Le Pen*) won in the polls.[94]

Moreover, the refugee crisis underscored the need for a comprehensive and equitable asylum policy within the Union. In this regard, the EU reformed the asylum governance. More precisely, in December 2020 the Commission revealed the New Pact on Migration and Asylum to rework the previously existing CEAS.[95] The Pact's central innovation is a flexible solidarity mechanism, under which the EU countries would be assigned annual "cooperation" quotas (out of a total of 30,000) based on GDP, population and irregular arrivals.[96] In addition to that, the states unwilling to admit asylum seekers could contribute instead via financial payments, equipment or support. However, in practice, southern states have welcomed this contemporary Pact with skepticism, warning that as long as some states simply refuse any burden-sharing, even this renewed system will eventually make the bordering countries overwhelmed.[97]

In summary, the EU's response to the crisis created widespread dissatisfaction among the citizens and national leaders, due to the uneven pressures placed on Member States. Indeed, with the former mechanisms of the EU legal framework, the same states were continuously overwhelmed with the migration influx (typically southern and bordering countries, which were, regardless of this, already struggling more than the northern states). Moreover, no legal guidance was provided to control collective action and solidarity.[98]

Consequently, this led to the increased anti-EU sentiment and growing support of far-right parties, who used this to back political rhetoric and gain more voters. Thus, they used their standard narrative, however now supported with more ongoing and popular arguments, following the aftermath of this crisis.[99]

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[94] Walker, S. (2019, May 27). "European elections: far-right "surge" ends in a ripple". The Guardian.
[95] European Commission. (2020, September 2023). "New Pact on Migration and Asylum - Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions". COM(2020) 609 final.
[96] European Commission. (2020, September 2023). "New Pact on Migration and Asylum - Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions". COM(2020) 609 final.
[97] Baczynska, G. (2024, December 20). "What's in the New EU Migration and Asylum Deal?" Reuters.
[98] Baczynska, G. (2024, December 20). "What's in the New EU Migration and Asylum Deal?" Reuters.
[99] Baczynska, G. (2024, December 20). "What's in the New EU Migration and Asylum Deal?" Reuters.

2.3 The Brexit Referendum

On Thursday, 23 June of 2016 the United Kingdom (UK) held a referendum on whether or not it would remain in the EU.[100] This was the second ever membership referendum in one of the Member States, with the first one also being held in the UK almost 40 years prior to the modern one. On this occasion, the EEC referendum in 1975, 67% expressed a preference to remain. On the other hand, the results obtained in 2016 were not on the same side of the poll, as the final outcome showed that 51.9% voted for the UK to leave. However, the numbers were heterogeneous around the country, as results differed greatly among different regions and constituencies (Look at the figure 8).[101]

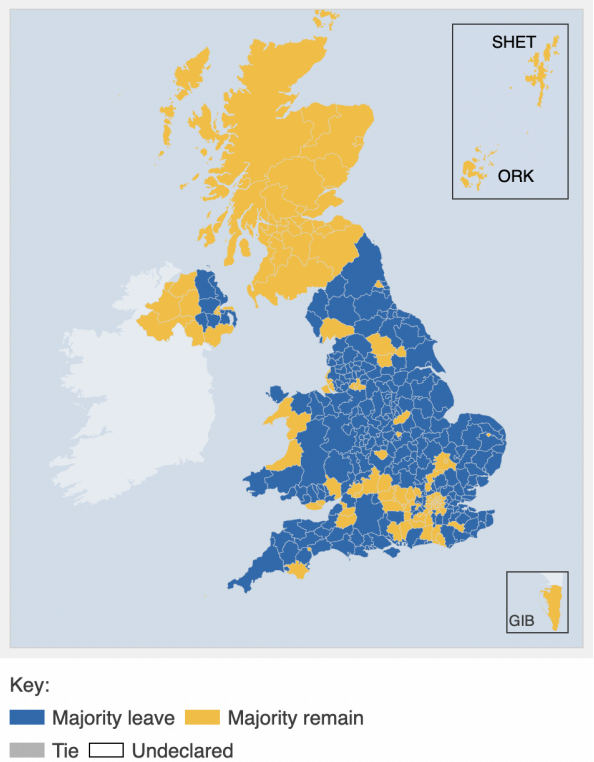

Figure 8: Referendum vote intention Poll of Polls
Source: *Poll of Polls* of referendum vote intention.

In light of the final outcome, the British Prime Minister announced its intentions to trigger Article 50 of the TEU procedure before March of 2017's end.[102] Indeed, this

[100] Hobolt, Sara B. (2009). "Europe in Question: Referendums on European Integration".
[101] BBC News. (2016, June 24). "EU Referendum Results".
[102] European Union. "Article 50." Consolidated Version of the TEU.

procedure specifies that the state must initially notify the entirety of the European Council regarding its intention of withdrawal. Following that, negotiations would begin to establish the terms of this withdrawal, discussing the future relationship between the state that decided to leave the Union, and the Union itself. Furthermore, the withdrawal agreement requires approval from the Council by qualified majority and consent from the European Parliament. Finally, EU treaties stop applying either when the withdrawal agreement enters into force or two years after notification if no agreement is reached.[103] In this regard, the United Kingdom officially left the EU on 31 January 2020.

2.3.1 The Close Race of Brexit

When following the process behind the referendum, it is safe to note that the results of the poll did not come as a surprise, as since the beginning of 2016, there was not a clear advantage (Look at figure 9). Indeed, from the outset of the campaign, the battle lines were drawn up by the two competing sides: the economy versus immigration and the messages they were promoting were very clear: vote *REMAIN* as to avoid the economic risk of a Brexit (*A leap in the dark)* or vote *LEAVE* in order to gain back the control of British borders and law-making, but also restrict immigration (*Take back control*).[104]

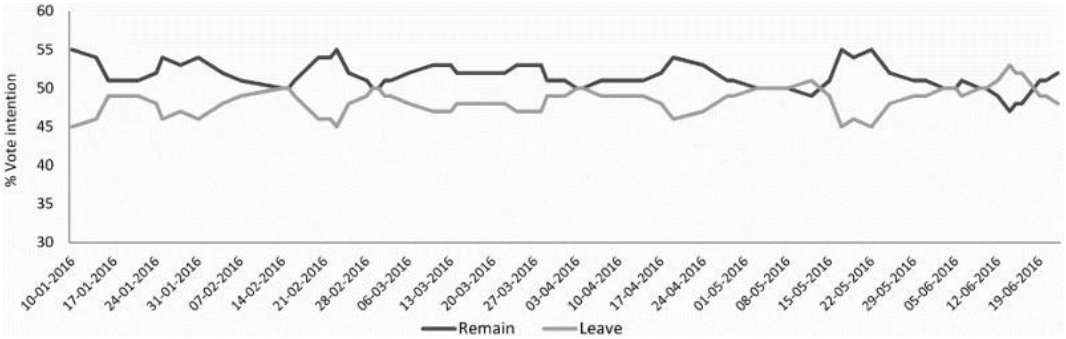

Figure 9: Referendum vote intention Poll of Polls
Source: *Poll of Polls* of referendum vote intention.

Indeed, as the Figure 10 shows, the two key arguments that resonate more with *REMAIN* voters, compared to how relevant they were for the *LEAVE* voters, are closely related to the issues in the field of economy - more specifically the loss of economic

[103] European Parliamentary Research Service. "An Assessment of the Impact of Brexit on Euro Area Stability."
[104] Hobolt, Sara B. (2016, September 7). "The Brexit Vote: A Divided Nation, a Divided Continent." Journal of European Public Policy 23, no. 9: 1259–77.

stability in the event of Brexit and the economic benefits of EU membership. On the other hand, *LEAVE* voters highlighted mainly concerns about immigration and wish to regain control over the borders. In addition to this main division, *LEAVE* voters used the existing wind and the stimulus of the anti-establishment sentiment among people, mainly due to the lack of trust in the current government and David Cameron. Therefore, some voted negatively in this poll as to express their dissatisfaction with national politics, rather than pure disagreement with the EU agenda.[105]

	Mentioned mainly by:	
Main referendum arguments:	**Leave voters**	**Remain voters**
Immigration control	X	
No trust in Prime Minister/Government	X	
Cost of EU membership	X	
Security implications	X	
Lack of knowledge and trust	X	
Lack of information	X	X
Economic risk of Brexit		X
Economic stability in the EU		X
Economic benefits from the EU		X

Figure 10: Referendum vote intention Poll of Polls
Source: Original poll by Sara B. Hobolt and Christopher Wratil conducted by YouGov in May 2016.

When the results of this referendum were known, the EU27 closely cooperated in order to manage the UK's departure. On the other hand, each Member State had a unique relationship with the UK, which imposed a specific set of policy preferences for the future relations, which took into account a complex variety of geographical, historical, cultural and economic. Naturally, the Member State that was closest to the UK was Ireland (in all aspects, from geographical proximity to economy).[106] In fact, Brexit has transformed the previously open Irish border into a border between the EU and a third country. Therefore, while people remained with the free movement rights, trade and services faced significant new barriers.[107]

[105] Hobolt, Sara B. (2016, September 7). "The Brexit Vote: A Divided Nation, a Divided Continent." Journal of European Public Policy 23, no. 9: 1259–77.
[106] Dinan, D., European Parliamentary Research Service and European Council Oversight Unit. (2019). "The European Council in 2018".
[107] Conrad Orlando, Vittorio, and Maximilian. (2024, January 24). "Reinforcing or Moderating? The

The outcome of the British referendum shocked Europe and even as it was for a long time considered that the UK is an outlier regarding Euroscepticism's strength, sentiments against immigration and the EU establishment began to gain stimulus across Europe. On the other hand, the outcome of this referendum is in reality a unique and nonpareil event, especially since the EU has not ever documented another Member State deciding on whether it prefers to leave the Union.[108]

2.3.2 Was Brexit contagious?

A central question that appeared in the minds of many policy makers, but also citizens all over the continent, following the results of the referendum, was whether Brexit was an isolated event, or it would have triggered a "domino effect", causing emergence of similar events in other parts of Europe?[109] Indeed, during the years prior to the referendum, the EU has witnessed a decline in public support. In the graph depicted below (Look at the Figure 11) we can see an evident decline of trust in the EU institutions, particularly since 2009 onwards.[110]

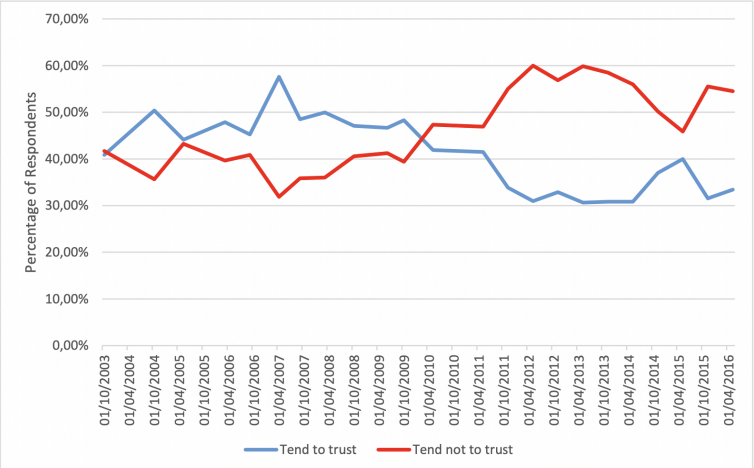

Figure 11: Trust of EU institutions, 2003-2016
Source: Eurobarometer. Respondents from the EU (thus changing composition from year-to-year).

Impact of Brexit on Italian and German Euroscepticism." Frontiers in Political Science.
[108] Hobolt, Sara B. (2016, September 7). "The Brexit Vote: A Divided Nation, a Divided Continent." Journal of European Public Policy 23, no. 9: 1259–77.
[109] Szczerbiak, A. and Taggart, P. (2018). "Putting Brexit into perspective: the effect of the Eurozone and migration crises and Brexit on Euroscepticism in European states." J. Eur. Pub. Policy, 25, 1194–1214.
[110] Szczerbiak, A. and Taggart, P. (2018). "Putting Brexit into perspective: the effect of the Eurozone and migration crises and Brexit on Euroscepticism in European states." J. Eur. Pub. Policy, 25, 1194–1214.

In this regard, we can acknowledge that the occurrence of Brexit has definitely shaken the reputation of the Union, and caused citizens to perceive the Union as a conscious choice, not an obligation.[111] Furthermore, it introduced an idea that an exit from the EU is possible, and that there now exists a precedent of this practice, which has significantly influenced public perceptions of the EU and eventually provided renewed arguments to Eurosceptic actors.[112]

On the other hand, Figure 12 gives us an insight into the citizens' average answer to the question: *If there was a referendum on your country's membership in the EU, how would you vote?*[113] As the graph shows, other than Britain, other countries have shown mostly positive net *REMAIN* support (with the insignificant exception in Sweden during the two trimesters in 2013). Indeed, although the governing Conservative party in Britain called a referendum, due to the existing internal divisions on this issue, other Eurosceptic parties around the continent would need coalitions in order to obtain positive results of the potential referendum. Therefore, statistics show us that despite the economic and refugee crisis that have shaken the stability and trust in the EU governance, Britain still remains an outlier in this regard.

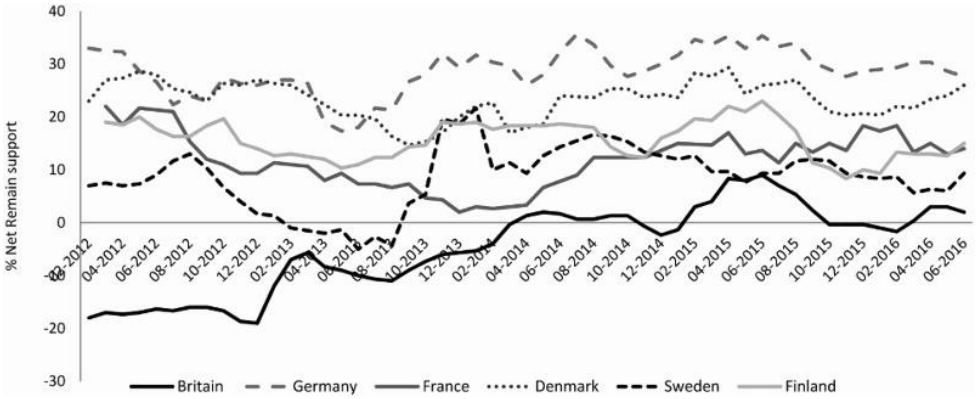

Figure 12: Support for EU membership across Europe.
Source: YouGov EuroTrack, 3-months rolling average.[114]

[111] European Parliamentary Research Service. "An Assessment of the Impact of Brexit on Euro Area Stability."
[112] Szczerbiak, A. and Taggart, P. (2018). "Putting Brexit into perspective: the effect of the Eurozone and migration crises and Brexit on Euroscepticism in European states." J. Eur. Pub. Policy, 25, 1194–1214.
[113] Hobolt, Sara B. (2016, September 7)"The Brexit Vote: A Divided Nation, a Divided Continent." Journal of European Public Policy 23, no. 9: 1259–77.
[114] Hobolt, Sara B. (2016, September 7)"The Brexit Vote: A Divided Nation, a Divided Continent." Journal of European Public Policy 23, no. 9: 1259–77.

Indeed, even after Brexit, data shows that 62% consider their country's membership of the EU a positive thing, which is the highest percentage recorded in the past 25 years. In addition to that, 68% are of the view that their country has benefitted from EU membership, which is the highest result reached ever since 1983.[115]

Thus, Brexit has influenced the sentiment of EU citizens across the rest of the European continent. Indeed, it has provided the Eurosceptic actors with new arguments to support their ideas, and most importantly, has demonstrated in practice the feasibility of one Member State leaving the Union. However, this event has not led to a "domino effect" that would cause similar occurrences in other Member States of the Union.

[115] European Parliament. (2018, October 17)."Brexit Effect: Public Opinion Survey Shows That EU Is More Appreciated Than Ever".

3. Crises in the EU II

3.1 The COVID-19 Pandemic (2020–2022)

"The whole European project risks losing its raison d'être in the eyes of our own citizens."

Giuseppe Conte, Prime Minister of Italy during the initial stages of the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed an unprecedented strain on European health systems, but also greatly challenged the Union's solidarity. Indeed, this time, collective and unified action at the EU level, as well as the solidarity among all of the Member States, was needed more than ever, taking into account that this new enemy did not stop at the borders of each country. Indeed, the global pandemic of COVID-19 virus started becoming a world-wide emergency in the early months of 2020, even if the first cases of this virus were found only a few months prior. More precisely, on 30th of January 2020 the World Health Organization (WHO) has officially declared the outbreak of a "Public Health Emergency of International Concern", which ultimately escalated to a full-size pandemic, by March of the same year.[116].

3.1.1 Europe Faces the Pandemic

Long before the COVID-19, analysts assumed that the EU would be well-prepared for such a phenomenon, considering that some of the world's best-resourced health systems and scientific institutions were in Europe.[117] Furthermore, the EU's specialised bodies, for instance the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC, founded in 2005 and tasked with collecting data and advising Member States to combat cross-border health threats) were designed to enhance coordination in challenging times.[118] Thus, in theory, these mechanisms should have given the EU an advantage.

However, in practice, the pandemic exposed gaps in Europe's infamous preparedness. Indeed, comprehensive assessments, including the 2019 Global Health Security Index,

[116] Grau, E., Shaheen, R., & Gómez Dantés, Pan American Health Organization, H. (2023). "Evaluation of the Pan American Health Organization Response to COVID-19, 2020–2022" Volume I Final Report [Report]. Pan American Health Organization.
[117] Forman, R., & Mossialos, E. (2021). The EU response to COVID‐19: From reactive policies to Strategic Decision‐Making. JCMS Journal of Common Market Studies, 59(S1), 56–68.
[118] European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. (2023, March 24). "Who are we?".

had already warned that no country (even the most prepared ones) was fully ready for this severe pandemic. Moreover, previous assessments have overestimated the EU's collective capacity, as they assumed that the EU's intergovernmental institutions would be well-funded and act decisively, overlooking that the core healthcare competencies belonged almost entirely to the national governments.[119] Furthermore, with many of the world's most connected countries and busiest airports, it was easy for the virus to enter and spread rapidly across the European continent. Furthermore, travel corridors, trade networks and "people-to-people" movement meant that a viral outbreak in Italy, for instance, could rapidly lead to new cases elsewhere in the continent.[120]

Moreover, the EU institutions had limited legal authority over coordinated responses. Indeed, as one of the studies notes, fact that the EU powers were rooted in single-market law, rather than specialised public health law, showcased that the EU was not in the position to be a leader in this health emergency, thus, in reality, national governments took the lead and most EU countries imposed strict unilateral restrictions.[121] Furthermore, the divisions and lack of solidarity were immediately evident, as for instance, when Italy became the first EU country hit by a large outbreak, Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte publicly appealed to other Member States for help. However, those calls were to great extent unanswered. Moreover, some countries even imposed export bans on medical supplies for their own citizens, exacerbating shortages in other places. In addition to that, even when the EU leaders made public statements emphasizing the need for a "common approach" on testing strategies and vaccination, these joint efforts were limited to the mere advisory and logistical roles, as the EU institutions could NOT legally enforce a unified policy.[122]

However, despite the early struggles, by late spring of 2020 the EU institutions regrouped and pursued a more coordinated strategy. Indeed, Member States gradually lifted the lockdowns, and talks initiated on how to prevent future shortages and support

[119] Forman, R., & Mossialos, E. (2021). The EU response to COVID‐19: From reactive policies to Strategic Decision‐Making. JCMS Journal of Common Market Studies, 59(S1), 56–68.
[120] Forman, R., & Mossialos, E. (2021). The EU response to COVID‐19: From reactive policies to Strategic Decision‐Making. JCMS Journal of Common Market Studies, 59(S1), 56–68.
[121] Brooks, E., de Ruijter, A., and Greer, S. (2021). "The European Union Confronts COVID-19: Coordinating a Health Crisis in a Fragmented Political System". University of Edinburgh.
[122] Council of the European Union. (2021, June 29)."COVID-19: The EU's Response in the Field of Public Health," Consilium.

recovery. During this period, the idea of a joint European response, including economic packages, was set in motion. Shortly after, In June 2020 the Commission unveiled an emergency budget line (SURE), in order to help countries fund short-time work schemes and unemployment benefits. Ultimately, in July, after intense negotiation, EU leaders agreed to bundle the seven-year budget with a new "Next Generation EU" recovery fund and by the summer of 2021 the first vaccines were approved and deployed across the EU. In short, the following section better illustrates how Europe was put to the test, being fragmented and slow at first, but eventually reorienting toward collective action when the pandemic's scale was undeniable.[123]

3.1.2 The COVID-19 Recovery Plan

As already outlined, by mid-2020 it was clear that Europe was facing a deep recession, with unemployment soaring and businesses being shuttered. For these reasons, the EU's response strategy shifted towards an unprecedented Recovery Plan.

In this regard, the cornerstone of the EU recovery strategy was the *NextGenerationEU* (NGEU) package, agreed at the European Council meeting, through which the EU leaders committed €750 billion (in 2018 euros) to fund grants and loans for rebuilding, in addition to the regular EU budget. By July this vision became reality, and the EU member governments agreed to jointly, and under the EU name borrow on capital markets to finance NGEU, signaling a historical step toward fiscal solidarity, which was especially significant given the initial resistance of some northern countries.[124]

Furthermore, these NGEU funds were allocated largely through the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF**)**, under which each Member State drafted a national recovery plan detailing reforms and investments for health-related spending, with at least 37 % of funds being directed to green transition and 20% for digitalization. Indeed, the Recovery Plan sought to distribute resources to the countries hit hardest by COVID-19's economic shock, including southern Member States like Italy and Spain, in which the GDP contracted sharply. This design explicitly acknowledged and took account of the

[123] Council of the European Union. (2021, June 29)."COVID-19: The EU's Response in the Field of Public Health," Consilium.
[124] Brooks, E., de Ruijter, A., and Greer, S. (2021). "The European Union Confronts COVID-19: Coordinating a Health Crisis in a Fragmented Political System". University of Edinburgh.

asymmetrical burden, thus more aid was allocated to nations with greater output loss and weaker finances, reflecting the compromise within which the richer countries would help neighbors recover more effectively and rapidly.[125]

In parallel with financial measures, the EU introduced new public health initiatives, as the European Commission adopted a strategy to accelerate vaccine access and negotiated advance purchase agreements with pharmaceutical firms. These efforts paid off, as by summer of 2023, roughly 84.8 % of the EU's adult population had completed a primary vaccine course.[126] Moreover, the Commission reports that it ultimately secured up to 4.6 billion doses of vaccines, not only for EU citizens but also for global partners.[127] In addition, new instruments like the EU Digital COVID Certificate, have facilitated safer free movement of persons, important for restoring cross-border activities in the single market.[128]

Overall, the EU's Recovery Plan period combined unprecedented fiscal intervention with sustained coordination in the health sector, reinforcing a new narrative of European unity. Indeed, analysis of the European scholars finds that in contrast with the precedent crises, this time the EU responded speedily and effectively, with the emergency economic measures, thus marking a historic deepening of EU interventions and actions.[129] Nonetheless, the design of the Recovery Plan, with its combination of loans and grants, and its strong emphasis on reforms, reflected lessons learnt from the first phase of this pandemic. Lawmakers and experts had learned that future preparedness required stronger EU-level capabilities, and the Recovery agenda began to address these by funding capacity-building in health infrastructure, research and digital services.[130]

However, the Recovery Plan unfolded certain political tensions over conditionality. Moreover, the principle of "debt-sharing" revealed some persistent "north-south divisions", as some northern governments remained concerned about the moral hazard, while harder-hit countries stressed that the EU solidarity was essential to their survival.

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[125] European Union. "EU response to COVID-19".
[126] European Commission. "Safe COVID-19 vaccines for Europeans."
[127] European Union. "EU response to COVID-19".
[128] European Commission. "Safe COVID-19 vaccines for Europeans."
[129] Di Vita, Giuseppe and Alfano, Vincenzo. (2022)."The COVID-19 Pandemic and the European Union: An Institutional Transformation?". Bologna: Alma Mater Studiorum, Università di Bologna.
[130] European Commission. "Safe COVID-19 vaccines for Europeans."

Thus, the public opinion became polarised. Ultimately, the EU's crisis response revealed gaps in governance and solidarity between the Member States, making clear that the existing mechanisms for joint action were often "too intergovernmental and slow" to meet urgent needs.[131] Thus, in a nutshell, the need for the EU institutions to act swiftly, sometimes came without the usual deliberations, and the trade-off between speed and accountability became another point of debate in the aftermath.

3.1.3 Aftermath of the COVID-19 Recovery Plan

By the end of 2023, all 27 national Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs) had been revised to account for new crises and economic shifts, including the energy shock from Russia's war in Ukraine and surging inflation.[132] Thus, many governments reallocated funds to address emerging priorities. However, while flexibility was built into the RRF's design, it raised concerns about transparency and potential misallocation. In this regard, the European Court of Auditors (ECA) warned of risks of overlap and misuse, highlighting a danger of *double funding* (that the same project is funded twice: by EU budgets and RRF).[133] Moreover, some irregularities have been noted, as the ECA's 2024 annual report found instances in which RRF payments were made even if not all conditions were met, pointing to gaps in control systems. Still, the need to reconcile *stringent oversight* with speedy recovery spending has prompted debate, and scholars observe that the RRF's novel governance strives to balance sufficient constraints from Brussels with national ownership of reforms, which proved to be a challenging task.[134]

For instance, Italy was the largest RRF beneficiary, struggling to meet targets assigned for 2026. Indeed, a public dispute erupted between Rome and Brussels, when Italy requested a third RRF disbursement, which was put on hold by the Commission, due to the unmet milestones.[135] In particular, three points were highlighted: the reform of port concession licenses, the eligibility of investments in gas heating versus renewable

[131] Brooks, E., de Ruijter, A., and Greer, S. (2021). "The European Union Confronts COVID-19: Coordinating a Health Crisis in a Fragmented Political System". University of Edinburgh.
[132] Petit, Christy Ann. (2024). "NGEU: Half-Way Through the RRF," DCU Brexit Institute.
[133] Wahl, Thomas. (2024, November 29). "ECA: Double Funding with EU Money is a Blind Spot".
[134] Ceron, M. (2023). "The National Recovery and Resilience Plans: Towards a Next Generation of Fiscal Coordination?" Politics and Governance 11, no. 4: 324–338.
[135] Roberts, Hannah. (2023, June 2). "Italy Accuses EU Commission of Fueling Domestic Political Row," Politico.

energy, and Italy's plan to spend RRF money on two major sports stadium projects in Florence and Venice. In fact, this dispute, colloquially known as the "*stadiums affair*", became emblematic of the EU's concerns over potential misallocation, as Brussels questioned if these initiatives fit the recovery plan's criteria for urban regeneration of degraded areas. Although Italian authorities defended the projects as culturally important and within the plan's scope, the Commission effectively issued a *"yellow card"*, demanding evidence that all expenditures were RRF-eligible. Finally, by mid-2023 the dispute was resolved and the installment was disbursed. However, the underlying tensions remained.[136]

In addition to Italy, several Member States have faced delays or political friction tied to the EU oversight of their recovery plans. Notably, Poland and Hungary due to rule-of-law conditions, had approval or payment of their RRF funds postponed, underscoring that the RRF introduced an unprecedented form of political conditionality into the EU funding, leveraging post-pandemic aid to enforce EU values. While the *intent* was to ensure EU money is used in line with democratic standards, the effect was significant delays in getting recovery money to two countries hit by COVID-19 and the energy crisis. This sparked domestic debates in Warsaw and Budapest.[137]

Finally, in other Member States, issues have varied. Ireland and Finland, were simply late in starting their relatively modest plans, whereas others like Belgium and Sweden had political transitions that delayed delivery. Across the Union, the ECA reported that by the scheme's mid-point, only about 30% of the RRF's milestones and targets had been achieved on the average, with seven countries (including Poland and Hungary, but also states that opted for later uptake) having received *no funds at all* by end of 2023. Indeed, uneven progress highlights the ambitious pace demanded by the EU and the divergent political contexts in each country.[138]

In a nutshell, the aftermath of the COVID-19 recovery plan has been marked by the active adjustments of funds and the intense oversight debates. Moreover, the novel RRF's model, combining the EU-level conditional grants with nationally driven plans,

[136] Tamma, Paola. (2023, March 28). "Italy Gets Yellow Card over Funding Stadiums with EU Cash".
[137] Tamma, Paola. (2023, March 28). "Italy Gets Yellow Card over Funding Stadiums with EU Cash".
[138] Strupczewski, Jan. (2024, September 2) "EU Recovery Fund Disbursement Slow at Mid-Point of Scheme, Auditors Warn".

triggered a friction around accountability and sovereignty, where transparency gaps and administrative obstacles in some states drew strong scrutiny.[139] Regarding the future, the EU institutions are assigned with a very delicate task in managing the remaining RRF funds to a productive use, as now they must prevent misuse, but also manage to adapt to the "on-the-ground realities", achieving that all Member States fully absorb their funds by 2026, still obeying the rules and conditions originally created.[140]

3.2 The Rule of Law Crisis (Ongoing)

As it was mentioned in the first chapter, democracy is one of the core values of the EU, values upon which the Union was founded. However, just recently, backsliding on democracy and the rule of law in singular Member States reminded us that democratic deficit can also be rooted at the national level, and not necessarily at the level of the Union and its institutional procedures.[141] In this case, the EU shall be responsible for addressing this malattie, as it is a hold of the legal instruments allowing her to do so. However, the EU responded differently to the crises in Hungary and Poland, and there are several factors which explain this disparity.[142]

3.2.1 EU: Union of Democracies

Since its very beginnings, the EU has been viewed and widely known as a "union of democracies". Moreover, the EU eventually made it explicit that all states, aiming to join the Union, are obliged to meet the standardised key criteria needed for accession (also including the criteria which concerns the respect of democracy). These were mainly defined at the European Council in Copenhagen in 1993 and are therefore referred to as the "Copenhagen criteria".[143] In practice on the other hand, European leaders were well aware that national democracies vary in profound ways, thus they have not intended to impose a uniform model of democracy. Conversely, Member States

[139] Strupczewski, Jan. (2024, September 2) "EU Recovery Fund Disbursement Slow at Mid-Point of Scheme, Auditors Warn".
[140] Strupczewski, Jan. (2024, September 2) "EU Recovery Fund Disbursement Slow at Mid-Point of Scheme, Auditors Warn".
[141] Kelemen, R. Daniel. (2017, April) "Europe's Other Democratic Deficit: National Authoritarianism in Europe's Democratic Union." Government and Opposition 52.
[142] Kelemen, R. Daniel. (2017, April) "Europe's Other Democratic Deficit: National Authoritarianism in Europe's Democratic Union." Government and Opposition 52.
[143] European Union. "Conditions for Membership." Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood.

did commit themselves in the Treaty on European Union (TEU), more precisely Article 2, to uphold a set of core values, including democracy, pluralism and the rule of law.

In addition to this, a mechanism to sanction those that breached these democratic values in serious and persistent ways has been established. The first version of this suspension clause (TEU, Article 7) was introduced in the 1997 Treaty of Amsterdam, establishing *the possibility of suspending EU membership rights (such as voting rights in the Council of the EU) if a country seriously and persistently breaches the principles on which the EU is founded as defined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (respect for human dignity, freedom,* ***democracy****, equality,* ***the rule of law*** *and respect for fundamental rights...*[144] However, although it exists for a long period of time, this article was not used to enforce obligations under Article 2 TEU, but it was invoked only as a subsidiary legal ground.[145] Moreover, the potential problems stemming from the gap between the presumption of compliance of all the Member States with the values of the Union and its inability to supervise and sanction non-compliance became evident.[146]

3.2.2 EU: Union of Democracies (or not?)

However, in recent years we have witnessed the occurrence of a "*democratic backsliding*" in Europe. This phenomenon is defined as "*the state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy"*. [147]

Indeed, the decline of democracy in Poland and Hungary is evident graphically in Figure 13, which tracks the electoral democracy index for several countries in the region. While Poland and Hungary initially democratised quickly and effectively as new states, similarly to Czechia, their democratic backsliding has been particularly steep, bringing them down to much lower levels comparable to Romania and Bulgaria. In addition, Hungary is now experiencing the most significant decline of all Member States which were under the study in this region. (Look at Figure 13)[148]

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[144] European Union. "Suspension Clause (Article 7 of the TEU)".
[145] Holesch, Adam, and Clara Portela. (2024, October 16). "Money Talks? The Effectiveness of Sanctions in the 'Rule of Law' Conflict in the European Union." JCMS Journal of Common Market Studies.
[146] Kochenov, Dimitry. (2021). "Article 7: A Commentary on a Much Talked-About "Dead" Provision.", 127–54.
[147] Bermeo, N. (2016). "On Democratic Backsliding". Journal of Democracy, 27(1): 5–19.
[148] Bernhard, M. (2021). "Democratic Backsliding in Poland and Hungary". Slavic Review.

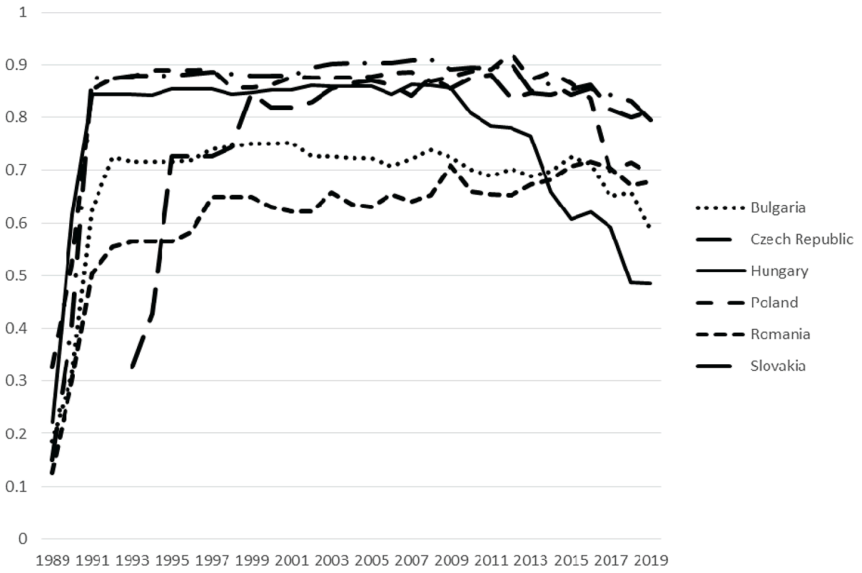

Figure 13: Democratic Backsliding in East Central Europe, V-dem Electoral Democracy Index (1989-2019)
Source: Grzymala-Busse, Anna. "Democratic Backsliding in Poland and Hungary."

This anomaly led many to wonder how could a Union that sets democracy as an explicit condition for membership, ever tolerate the slide to autocracy of one or more of its Member States? In addition, why was there a difference in the EU's reaction to democratic backsliding in distinct cases (Romania, Hungary and Poland)?[149] Thus, these developments remind us that the EU shall have a crucial role in defending democracy and the rule of law in its Member States, where these values are seen as vulnerable.[150]

3.2.3 Partisan Politics: Case Studies (Hungary and Poland)

Potential answer to the raised questions lies in the theory of partisan politics. Regarding this, Gibson argued that *"Authoritarian provincial political elites, with their abundant supplies of voters and legislators, can be important members of national governing coalitions"*, and *"This increased their leverage and helped put concerns about the authoritarian nature of the local interlocutor on the back burner of the national party's agenda."* More simply, democratic leaders at the federal or Union level may overlook concerns about the authoritarian regimes in specific Member States as long as that

[149] Closa, C., Kochenov, D. and Weiler, J.H.H. (2014). "Reinforcing Rule of Law Oversight in the European Union", EUI Working Papers RSCAS 2014/25, Florence.
[150] Müller, J.W. (2013). "Defending Democracy Within the EU", Journal of Democracy, 24(2): 138–49.

governance delivers needed votes to their coalition in the federal legislature (in the case of the EU: votes for the European Parliament, within the political groups). Moreover, this argument can be used to explain the Union's distinct reaction in the cases of Poland and Hungary, providing us with a contrasted case study.[151]

By looking at Hungary, we can observe that, since 2010 the *Fidesz* government in Hungary, led by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, has carried out a constitutional revolution that has in effect eroded democracy and the rule of law in this country, but has also consolidated power for an electoral authoritarian regime. Regarding the EU's reaction to this, the European Commission has brought up some legal challenges against several of the Orbán government's actions. However, in parallel with those, leaders of the EPP (European People's Party, the leading Europarty in the European Parliament), of which Orbán's *Fidesz* is a member, have defended Orbán and blocked robust intervention at the Union level.[152]

By contrast, after the *Law & Justice Party* (*PiS*) came to power in Poland in 2015 and attacked the independence of the Constitutional Tribunal and freedom of media, the EU reacted more effectively and rigidly, by launching an inquiry based on the Rule of Law Framework.[153] Regarding this specific legal tool, the EU has been substantially more lenient in the case of Hungary, as the Union has not taken this step at that time.

Indeed, considerations relating to partisan politics, outlined in the theoretical discussion above, provide the most convincing explanation for the differences in the EU's responses in cases of Hungary and Poland.[154] In a nutshell, Poland's *PiS* has been targeted more heavily than *Fidesz* because it does not enjoy protection from powerful partisan allies at the EU level to the extent that *Fidesz* does. Although, it is important to note that lessons from the Hungarian experience may have influenced reactions in Poland, and the greater strategic significance of Poland compared with Hungary could have played a role in explaining these despair reactions. In addition, this perspective also points to a potential irony in the EU politics, as its efforts to make EU-level politics more democratic may have discouraged the EU from intervening if a Member State

[151] Gibson, E. (2012). "Boundary Control". New York. Cambridge University Press.
[152] EPP (European People's Party). "EPP - European People's Party - Homepage.".
[153] European Commission. "Rule of Law Mechanism Factsheet".
[154] Gibson, E. (2012). "Boundary Control". New York. Cambridge University Press.

becomes less democratic. In this regard: making EU-level politics more partisan, which many critics believe must be done to address the supposed democratic deficit at the EU level, has created incentives for Europarties to defend certain national autocrats who belong to their political groups. [155]

Moreover, increasing the legislative power of the European Parliament and giving it more control over the selection of the Commission president (process of the *Spitzenkandidat*)[156], which is one of the efforts to make the EU more accountable and democratic, gives Europarties an incentive to tolerate democratic backsliding by governments that deliver votes to their coalitions in the EP.[157]

3.2.4 How Federal Transfers Sustain Local Authoritarians

In addition to the analysis of partisan politics, fiscal transfers in federal systems can unintentionally support the phenomenon of state-level authoritarianism.[158] As Gervasoni explains, authoritarian leaders in less developed states often rely on federal funds, rather than local taxes, to maintain power. These "rentier" states, like resource-rich national autocracies, use their financial advantages to limit political competition and weaken democratic institutions. For this reason, even the most well-intended federal transfer programs may end up sustaining local autocracies, forcing national leaders to fund regimes that oppose democratic norms.[159]

3.3 The Russia-Ukraine Crisis

Conflict between Russia and Ukraine has persisted for a long time now, continuously testing the EU's role in international affairs and exposing its dependencies within the energy sector. In this regard, the following section analyses the EU's response to this crisis and its attempts to secure an energy future through a green transition. Moreover, it explores how this crisis influenced public opinion across the European continent.

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[155] Kelemen, R. Daniel. (2017, April) "Europe's Other Democratic Deficit: National Authoritarianism in Europe's Democratic Union." Government and Opposition 52.
[156] Tilindyte, L. and European Parliamentary Research Service. (2019). "Election of the President of the European Commission: Understanding the Spitzenkandidaten Process." Report. EPRS.
[157] Kelemen, R. Daniel. (2017, April) "Europe's Other Democratic Deficit: National Authoritarianism in Europe's Democratic Union." Government and Opposition 52.
[158] Gervasoni, C. (2010). "A Rentier Theory of Subnational Regimes", World Politics, 62(2): 302–40.
[159] Gervasoni, C. (2010). "A Rentier Theory of Subnational Regimes", World Politics, 62(2): 302–40.

3.3.1 EU Sanctions as a Response to Russian Aggression

In this context, the EU's policies included restrictive measures on Russia, both in the cases of 2014 and 2022 invasions. Indeed, following the annexation of Crimea, the EU enacted asset freezes and travel bans on Russian officials, in addition to shortly after suspending Russia's voting rights in international fora. Once the crisis escalated, the EU initiated more rigid and specific "sectoral" sanctions, which aimed to individually target Russia's finance, energy and defense sectors, restricting the Russian state banks' access to EU capital markets, banning arms trade and limiting export of oil industry technology. In practice, these measures were enforced for a long time now, being a precedent for sanctions of a greater scope and intensity, introduced in 2022.[160]

More recently, the EU approved successive rounds of sanctions, with an unprecedented speed and unity. The first packages of measures had, amongst other things, frozen Russia's central bank assets, cut key Russian banks off of the SWIFT system and banned oligarchs and political elites. By April of the same year, a fifth package of sanctions introduced a ban on Russian coal imports, which was the first EU embargo on Russian energy supply.[161] With this foundation, the sixth package in June 2022 went further, including an embargo on Russian oil transported by sea, which accounted for around 90% of the Russian pre-war imports of oil to the EU.[162]

Other measures across the first six packages included, among other things: closing EU ports to Russian vessels, broad export bans on critical technologies and import bans on luxury goods and key commodities. Eventually, over ten rounds of EU sanctions were adopted, expanding their scope to ban on Russian gold, steel, tech equipment and even services, for instance accounting or consulting for Russian firms. In addition, some measures also targeted Belarus, which served as a ground for military operations, but also any entities that were aiding Russia's war effort. Furthermore, EU sanctions were coordinated with other allied countries, which multiplied the cumulative effect.

[160] European Union External Action Service. "EU Sanctions Against Russia over Ukraine. Brussels: EEAS", last updated March 2022.
[161] Council of the European Union, "Timeline - EU Sanctions Against Russia Since February 2022", last updated March 18, 2024.
[162] Council of the European Union, Press Release. (2022, June) "EU adopts sixth package of sanctions against Russia".

Moreover, by 2023, debates arose about sanction evasion via third countries, leading the EU to consider "secondary" sanctions or measures that would target the transit states.[163]

However, sanctions introduced new costs for Europe, as the EU was interconnected with Russia in the energy trade, thus cutting relations off could risk a collateral economic loss. For instance, banning coal and oil imports from Russia contributed to an increase of energy prices in Europe, thus necessitating emergency measures to manage its impacts on citizens. Furthermore, some sanctions required unanimity to be enforced, which in few cases proved difficult to achieve, as Hungary and few other countries, due to their greater dependence on Russian fuels, secured exemptions or delayed proposals. However, sanctions remained a central pillar of the EU's response in this crisis.

Finally, Russian state reports simultaneously framed the EU's sanctions and support for Ukraine as "acts of geopolitical aggression and ideological hostility", accusing the EU of enabling terrorism and violating the rights of Russian civilians abroad, even if the EU stood behind its actions, defending them as a "protection of international law and democratic values".[164]

3.3.2 Energy Vulnerabilities of the EU

The Russia-Ukraine war triggered Europe's worst energy crisis since the 1970s, placing energy security at the top of the EU's policy agenda. Moreover, in the years prior to it, countries had been enjoying cheap Russian gas and oil. Thus, by 2021, the EU was importing around 40% of its gas from Russia, but also a quarter of its oil and almost one half of its total coal imports. Therefore, the EU became very dependent on fossil fuel imports from a single supplier, Russia, thus it was highly vulnerable during the war.[165]

Energy security has been a strategic concern for Europe since the 1970s, when the very concept of "energy security" (ensuring reliable, affordable and DIVERSIFIED access to fuels) entered policy discourse.[166] However, due to the trend of the events, security and

[163] Council of the European Union, "Timeline - EU Sanctions Against Russia Since February 2022".
[164] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Quarterly Report on Crimes Committed by the Kiev Regime in January–March 2025 (Moscow: Russian MFA, 2025), 5–6.
[165] Brodny, Jarosław and Tutak, Magdalena. (2023). "Assessing the Energy Security of European Union Countries from Two Perspectives - A New Integrated Approach Based on MCDM Methods".
[166] Georgios A. Deirmentzoglou, Eleni E. Anastasopoulou, and Pantelis Sklias. (2024). "International Economic Relations and Energy Security in the European Union: A Systematic Literature Review".

stability of the energy supply have become the main priority of the energy policy of the Union.[167] As Russia was the leading supplier of natural gas, oil and coal for the EU, a bloc of energy-importers, in 2020 and 2021, especially of natural gas, via developed pipelines routed, such as Nord Stream, Yamal and Brotherhood lines. Thus, by 2022, some EU states depended on Russia for over half of their gas supply, and the EU as a whole derived about one fifth of its energy consumption from Russian imports. Regarding the largest European economies, Germany was the most exposed, with Russia supplying around 30% of its oil, 50% of its coal and more than half of its gas. Conversely, France was less dependent due to its diversified supply strategies.[168]

According to the Eurostat data, the EU's overall trade with Russia has been categorically affected since the start of the crisis. As the EU imposed import and export restrictions on several products, its total exports to Russia declined for 62% and imports dropped by 85%, between the first quarter of 2022 and fourth quarter of 2024 (see Figure 14). Furthermore, the EU's trade deficit with Russia was 2.1 billion euros at the fourth quarter of 2024, significantly lower than the peak of 46 billion euros in the second quarter of 2022.[169]

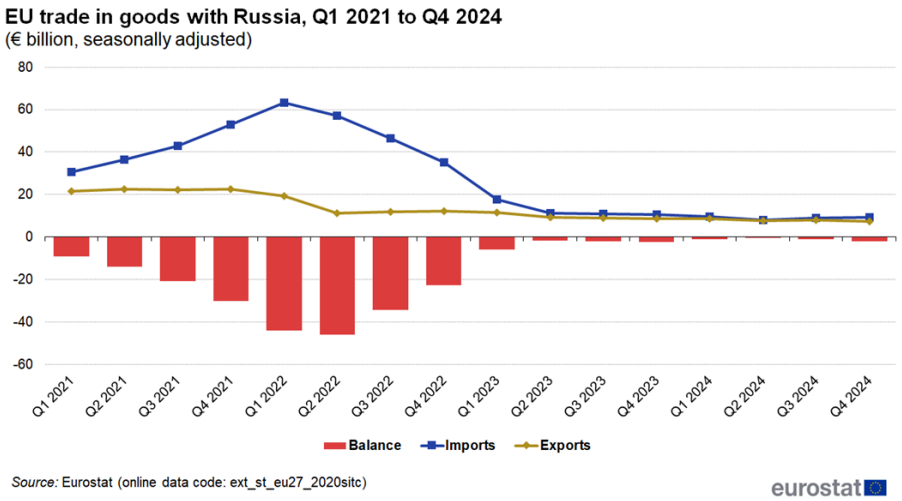

Figure 14: EU trade in goods with Russia, Q1 2021 to Q4 2024
Source: Eurostat. *Russia-EU – International Trade of Main Product Groups*.

[167] Studia Europejskie. (2024, July 15)."EU Energy Security After Russia's Invasion of Ukraine, Substance, Strategy and Lobbying.". Studies in European Affairs.
[168] Gonand, F., P. Linares, A. Löschel, D. M. Newbery, K. Pittel, J. Saavedra, and G. Zachmann. "Watts Next: Securing Europe's Energy and Competitiveness Where the EU's Energy Policy should go Now".
[169] Gonand, F., P. Linares, A. Löschel, D. M. Newbery, K. Pittel, J. Saavedra, and G. Zachmann. "Watts Next: Securing Europe's Energy and Competitiveness Where the EU's Energy Policy should go Now".

If we take a closer look into the five key product groups imported from Russia (nickel, fertilisers, natural gas, petroleum oil and iron and steel), we can see that they accounted for more than 60% of all EU imports from Russia (see Figure 15).[170]

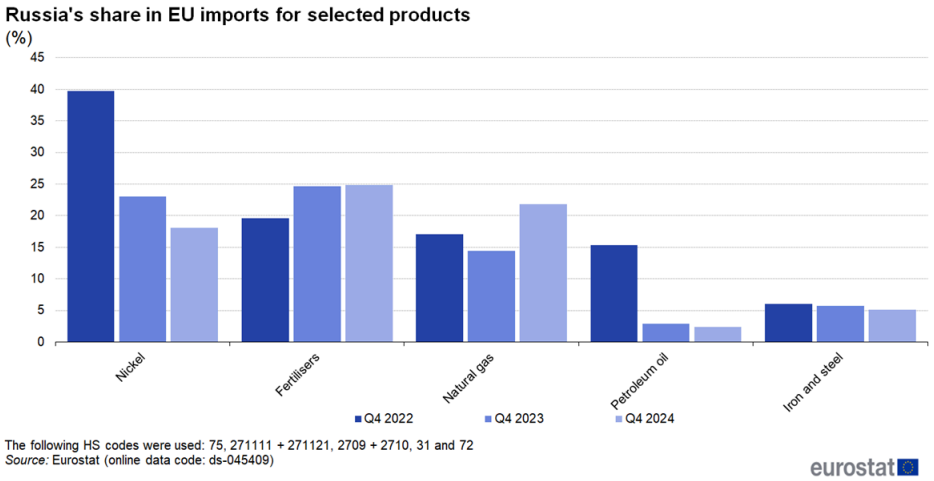

Figure 15: Russia's share in EU imports for selected products
Source: Eurostat. *Russia-EU – International Trade of Main Product Groups*.

Sanctions from the EU included import restrictions for natural gas, coal and petroleum oils, but also restrictions for iron and steel and fertilisers. These restrictions initially caused large drops in the imports of these products, although other factors could also have played a role. For imports of nickel there were no restrictions, but still the imports decreased considerably. Comparing Q4 2022 with Q4 2024, there were drops for nickel (-22 percentage points (shorter: pp)), petroleum oil (-13 pp) and iron and steel (-1 pp).[171]

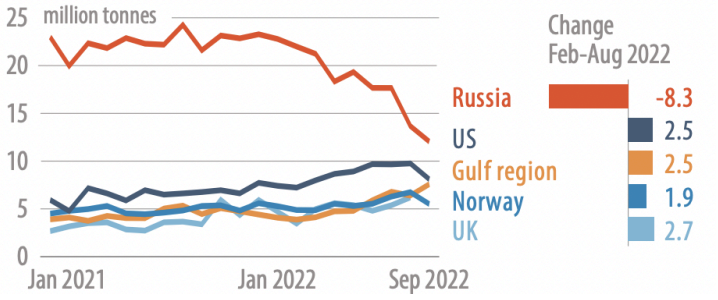

Figure 16: EU dependency on energy imports from Russia
(million tonnes of mineral fuels – oil, gas and solid fossil fuels)
Source: Eurostat. *Russia-EU – International Trade of Main Product Groups*.

[170] Eurostat. "Russia-EU, International Trade of Main Product Groups." Statistics Explained.
[171] Eurostat. "Russia-EU, International Trade of Main Product Groups." Statistics Explained.

Furthermore, the bar chart (see Figure 16) shows the change in imports between February and August 2022, depicting that the EU has been remarkably successful at diversifying its supply of fossil fuels away from Russia towards other third-country suppliers (While imports from Russia have decreased by 8.3 million tonnes, Russia was nevertheless still the EU's leading source of fossil fuel imports in 2022).[172]

For these reasons, consequentially we have witnessed some intense fluctuations of gas prices in 2022. Indeed the EU natural gas on the TTF (*Title Transfer Facility*) exchange stood at 137.71 euros per megawatt-hour in December 2022, which indicates an increase of 25.4% when compared to the same month of the year prior. However, this is a significant decline after the 2022 peak which stood at 339.20 euros. (See Figure 17)[173]

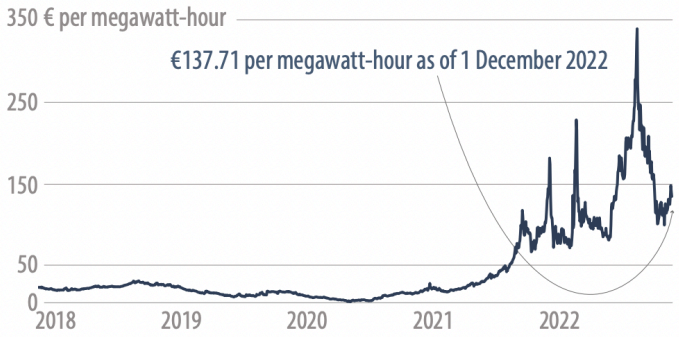

Figure 17: Gas price in the EU, Title Transfer Facility (euros per megawatt-hour)
Source: Trading Economics. *EU Natural Gas*. Accessed February 4, 2025.

In a nutshell, all these consequences set the stage for a strategic rethinking, as the EU could not return to the previous status quo and usage of Russian gas. Thus, the crisis served as a critical juncture which led the EU to focus on its clean energy transition, now as a matter of both climate and security urgency.[174]

3.3.3 Securing Europe's Energy Future: Green Transition

As already pointed out, by being confronted with the vulnerabilities revealed by the war, Europe had to start viewing its green energy transition not only as an environmental concern, but now also as a necessity for ensuring security and independence in the

[172] Eurostat. "Russia-EU, International Trade of Main Product Groups." Statistics Explained.
[173] Eurostat. "Russia-EU, International Trade of Main Product Groups." Statistics Explained.
[174] Eurostat. "Russia-EU, International Trade of Main Product Groups." Statistics Explained.

energy sector. Moreover, as Marhold observes, the EU had to balance its ambitious decarbonisation goals with the geopolitical realities, effectively moving towards a "security-centred" transition that combines clean energy with energy interdependence.[175]

Indeed, this shift has been evident with numerous initiatives and reforms launched under the banner of *REPowerEU*, as well as with the directions of the Member States policy making. Moreover, a broader *REPowerEU* project was launched by the European Commission, aiming to reduce the EU's dependence on Russian fossil fuels, ultimately accelerating its path towards the clean transition. Moreover, it was the EU's response to the ongoing crisis and global energy market disruption, based on three foundational pillars: energy conservation, diversifying energy supplies, and accelerating the process of mobilisation of renewable energy and other low-carbon alternatives.[176] In theory, this initiative seeks to "fast-forward" the existing *European Green Deal* initiatives, while simultaneously putting the emphasis on energy security, through new import sources, such as LNG - *Liquefied Natural Gas*. In practical terms, *REPowerEU* proposed measures which included raising the 2030 renewable energy target, producing 10 million tonnes of renewable hydrogen by 2030 and replacing gas in industrial sectors.[177]

Within this banner, one of the initiatives was the *EU Energy Platform for joint gas purchasing*, designed to leverage collective market power of Member States to negotiate gas contracts from new suppliers.[178] Although initially it was a voluntary coordination mechanism, it was later formalised by regulation.[179]

However, the green transition, used as a form of a security strategy, did not go unscrutinised. In the short term, Europe had to make compromises in order to avoid energy shortages, thus a few countries temporarily restarted coal power plants, where for instance France extended operations of some reactors and Germany delayed their final shutdown. While these actions were criticised by climate activists, they were seen

[175]Marhold, Anna-Alexandra. (2023). "Towards a 'Security-Centred' Energy Transition: Balancing the European Union's Ambitions and Geopolitical Realities," Journal of International Economic Law.
[176] European Commission. (2024, May)."REPowerEU – 2 Years On".
[177] European Commission. (2022, May 18). "Implementing the REPowerEU Action Plan: Investment Needs, Hydrogen Accelerator and Achieving the Bio-Methane Targets".
[178] Wójtowicz, Anna. (2024). "EU Energy Security After Russia's Invasion of Ukraine – Substance, Strategy and Lobbying," Studia Europejskie – Studies in European Affairs 28, no. 2: 157–171.
[179] Monika Dulian and Oleksandra Klochko. "EU Energy Platform: Facilitating Joint Purchases of Gas".

by governments as necessary steps in order to keep supplies of energy stable. The EU officials have insisted that as long as these are only “short-lived regressions”, the overall direction towards the final goal - full decarbonisation - will remain firmly in place.[180]

Moreover, by late 2022, the war’s indirect effects, especially the increase in energy prices and global inflation, had become the greatest concern for many Europeans, as the natural gas and electricity costs in Europe were at their record highs (which we have observed in see Figure 15). Further, this has led to the increase in prices for heating, fuel and food. In response to that, many households were forced to adapt to the higher costs by cutting consumption. In addition, this economic burden fell unevenly, thus the lower-income groups, who usually spend a large portion of their budget on energy and essentials, were hit the hardest by this inflation. Moreover, the impact was the same for the regions which were more dependent on Russian gas. In this regard, one study found that Europeans who had lower-income were more likely to believe that their national government had done “too much” for Ukraine. Moreover, the number of people with that stance increased by more than 10 percentage points from 2022 to 2024. In contrast, those who felt financially secure, mostly continued to back support for Ukraine.[181]

Thus, although this crisis showcased an unprecedented unity of the EU’s policy responses, it has caused a number of social and political divisions and challenges across the continent. Moreover, trust in institutions was already fragile, after years of multiple successive crises. However, shifts in the public opinion were not homogeneous across the continent, as regional and demographic cleavages influenced how different groups perceived the war and the EU’s response. One clear pattern was the “East - West” division. Countries on the east, such as Poland and the Baltic states, felt the threat of Russia most directly and their publics were fast to support tough measures. In Western Europe, support was still a majority sentiment but came with more debate and nuance. Germany, France, and others in Western Europe saw more public questioning about the war’s trajectory, facing impatience of the citizens. Southern Europe, too, tended to be slightly less rigid: while most of them largely agreed with sanctioning Russia and aiding Ukraine, the level of passion was lower and economic worries weighed heavily.

[180] Francés, Gonzalo E., José M. Marín-Quemada, and Enrique S. M. González. (2013). “RES and Risk: Renewable Energy's Contribution to Energy Security. A Portfolio-Based Approach.”
[181] Eurofound. (2024, April 8).“Trust Crisis: Europe’s Social Contract under Threat”.

Moreover, a few traditionally "Russia-friendly" countries, notably Greece and Bulgaria, registered the lowest support for EU actions. This division is visible in Figures 18 and 19, which show that 74% of citizens approve of the EU's support for Ukraine, where in every country a majority agrees (except a few with split opinion, like ~48% in Slovakia, Bulgaria, Greece). [182]

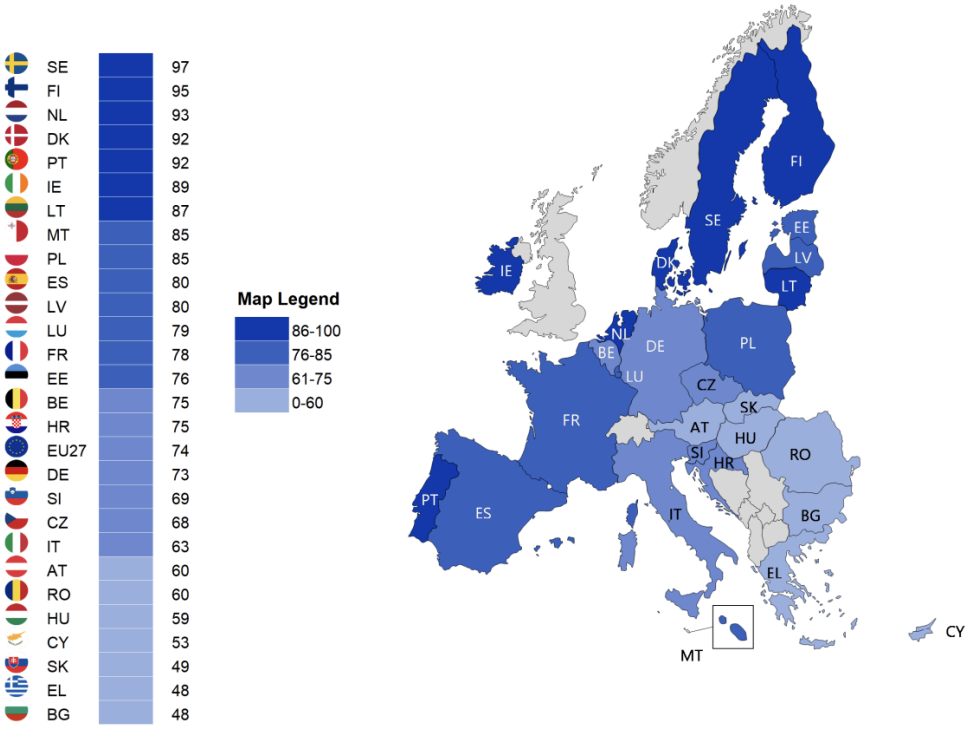

Figure 18: Overall, do you approve or disapprove of the European Union's support for Ukraine following Russia's invasion of Ukraine? (% - Total approve)
Source: European Parliament, *Eurobarometer – Autumn 2022 "Parlemeter"*, published January 2023

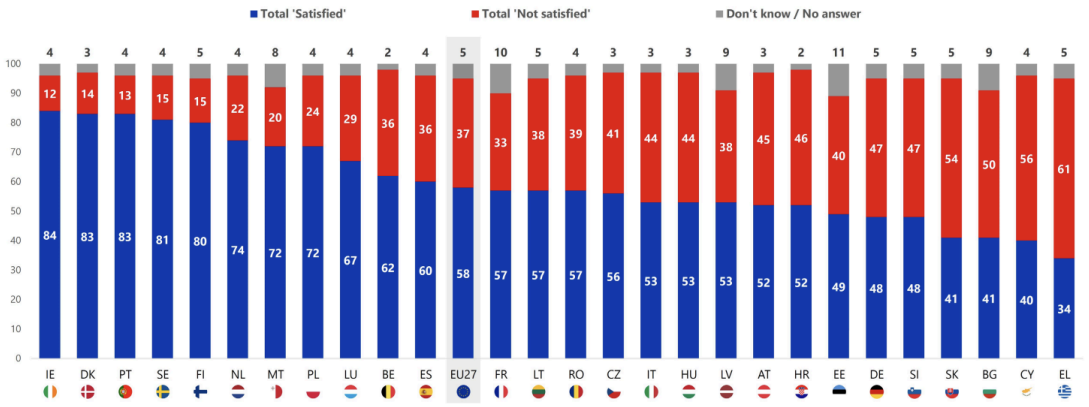

Figure 19: How satisfied are you with the cooperation between EU Member States in addressing the consequences of the war in Ukraine? (%)
Source: European Parliament, *Eurobarometer – Autumn 2022 "Parlemeter"*, published January 2023

[182] European Parliament. (2023, January)."Eurobarometer - Autumn 2022, Parlemeter".

Throughout the crisis, to keep public support, the EU leaders had to balance *elite-driven* decisions with popular acceptance. Indeed, as national subsidies and EU funds were mobilised to reduce the shocks of increased cost-of-living, with the officials continually emphasising that Europe's peace and values were at stake, a solid majority of the public remained supportive of the course set by EU institutions. However, it showed a divergence in opinions across the continent, rooted in strong economic and traditional ties (like religion) few Member States had with Russia. As this crisis is still ongoing, it is not feasible to assess the final consequences it had left to the EU's reputation.[183]

Finally, even if the EU largely demonstrated an ability to act decisively, the Russia-Ukraine crisis has in some respects widened the "gap" between EU institutions and some parts of the European public**.** Indeed, this paradox: *unity* in action along with the *fragmentation* in trust, sets the stage for the following chapter, which examines how the succession of crises analysed throughout Chapters 2 and 3, finishing with the Russia-Ukraine war, has contributed to an erosion of institutional trust and a rise in Euroscepticism across Member States. How may have the very measures that secured the EU's persistence throughout these hard times and emergencies, in the eyes of some citizens, weakened the EU's legitimacy. Understanding this dynamic is critical, as it speaks to the long-term sustainability of the Union's consensus and the political underpinnings of its policies. The following chapter explains more thoroughly the theoretical concepts.

[183] European Parliament. (2023, January)."Eurobarometer - Autumn 2022, Parlemeter".

4. Euroscepticism and Democratic Deficit

4.1 Euroscepticism: The Complexity of a Contested Term

Euroscepticism is a term widely used by scholars, particularly since the 1980s. Throughout the time, its meaning was narrowed down to "*the emergence of negative views on Europe*".[184] Later on, two scholars, Taggart and Szczerbiak introduced a distinction between two types of this concept: "soft" and "hard" Euroscepticism.[185] In this regard, hard Euroscepticism refers to the "principled opposition", rejection of European integration and a complete withdrawal from the EU. In contrast, soft Euroscepticism refers to a "qualified opposition", not entailing full rejection of European integration, but an objection to further extension of competences or one specific area (for instance: fiscal integration). On the other hand, these definitions have later been criticised by many scholars as "broad" and "overly inclusive".[186]

4.1.1 The Roots of Euroscepticism

It is important to note that Euroscepticism, in its simplest form, has existed since the birth of the EU. Although it is true that today this concept is receiving greater attention, that does not mean that it has just come to be. Indeed, the very first oppositions of Member States, towards giving up sovereignty, were present since the earliest beginnings of European integration.

For instance, in 1950, Britain declined to join the proposed European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), due to the fear of losing sovereignty. In this case, British leaders opposed any *"technocratic organisation ... liable to intervene in the country's economic policy"*.[187] Moreover, French President Charles de Gaulle became a prominent early

[184] Leruth, B., N. Startin, and S. Usherwood. (2018). "Defining Euroscepticism: From a Broad Concept to a Field of Study." In The Routledge Handbook of Euroscepticism, edited by B. Leruth, N. Startin, and S. Usherwood, 3–10. London: Routledge.
[185] Szczerbiak, A., and Taggart, P. (2018). "Contemporary Research on Euroscepticism: The State of the Art." In The Routledge Handbook of Euroscepticism, edited by B. Leruth, N. Startin, and S. Usherwood, 11–21. London: Routledge.
[186] Kopecký, P. and C. Mudde. (2002). "The Two Sides of Euroscepticism. Party Positions on European Integration in East Central Europe." European Union Politics 3 (3): 297–326.
[187] CVCE.eu by UNI.LU. "The Schuman Plan and Franco-British Relations - From the Schuman Plan to the Paris Treaty (1950-1952)".

Eurosceptic voice in the 1960s. Although he was not opposing European cooperation *per se*, de Gaulle has strongly advocated for a concept of *"Europe of the Fatherlands"*, an intergovernmental Europe, composed of sovereign nations.[188] Therefore, he opposed any supranational tendencies of this potential union. In this context, in 1965 he initiated the "Empty Chair" Crisis by boycotting European Economic Community meetings to block proposals he felt undermined French sovereignty.[189] This led to the 1966 Luxembourg Compromise, granting states an informal veto that stalled deeper integration. In the 1970s, Euroscepticism spread with the first rounds of European Community enlargement and policy integration.[190]

The UK's late entry into the EEC in 1973 occurred only after intense debate, thus the UK held its first nationwide referendum on whether to remain in the Common Market. Although 67% voted to stay, a sizable minority (33%) wanted to leave, and the "European question" entered into the center of British politics for the first time.[191] Later on, during the 1980s, opposition to European integration was evident as the EC pursued deeper economic unity. British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher used "soft" Euroscepticism in this era: she supported the common market, but opposed federal Europe. Indeed, in her speech, Thatcher warned that Britain had *"not embarked on the business of throwing back the frontiers of the state at home, only to see a European super-state…from Brussels"*. In fact, this is often cited as the moment her Conservative Party shifted from the "party of Europe" to the party of Euroscepticism.[192]

Thus, this chronological analysis depicts that Euroscepticism is not a recent phenomenon, European leaders' concerns regarding giving up their sovereignty and placing it at some supranational level existed for a very long time, although they were on the margins of greater problems and not in the focus. For this reason, saying that the most recent crises (2008 and onwards) gave birth to this phenomenon, would be categorically wrong. However, chapter five of this paper later analyses if they have *influenced* and *accelerated* the rise of this phenomenon.

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[188] Milward, Alan S. (2000)."The European Rescue of the Nation-State". 2nd ed. London: Routledge.
[189] Milward, Alan S. (2000)."The European Rescue of the Nation-State". 2nd ed. London: Routledge.
[190] Deschamps, Étienne. (2006). "More than 'Honest Brokers'? Belgium, Luxembourg and the 'Empty Chair Crisis' (1965–1966)." Centre Virtuel de la Connaissance sur l'Europe (CVCE).
[191] Davis, Richard. 2017. "Euroscepticisme Et Opposition À L'adhésion Britannique Au Marché Commun, 1955-1975." *Revue Française De Civilisation Britannique* 22 (2).
[192] "The Bruges Speech, 20 September 1988 | Margaret Thatcher Foundation."

4.1.2 Turning point: rising skepticism

Euroscepticism entered into the mainstream discourse in the early 1990s, at the turning point: Maastricht Treaty (1992) which created the EU and paved the way for the euro. The scope of the treaty introduced EU citizenship, a common currency and set the stage for a deeper political union, leading to the end of an era of quiet public assent. In this regard, Danish voters shocked the whole continent by rejecting the Maastricht treaty and opted-out of the euro, defense and other policies. France also held a referendum which barely approved the treaty (51,05% in favour).[193]

Moreover, the early 2000s saw further EU integration, and with that, new waves of skepticism. In 2004, the EU grew from 15 to 25 members, incorporating ten post-Communist countries (Poland, Czechia, Hungary, Slovakia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovenia, Malta, and Cyprus), while Bulgaria and Romania joined in 2007. From the EU side, enlargement was celebrated as a historic victory for peace and democracy across the continent and "the birth of a new era".[194] However, amongst the core EU members, public reaction was mixed, thus the "enlargement fatigue" became evident, as many EU citizens became more reluctant to any further enlargements.[195] Furthermore, politicians in Western Europe, warning about immigration, globalisation, and loss of national control, who had previously been marginal, found their arguments resonating with a significantly wider electorate than before, an electorate that aligned their preferences with the rising Eurosceptic sentiment.

One of the metaphors used in this context is the *"Polish plumber",* depicting broader anxiety that cheaper labor and open borders might negatively affect an average European worker.[196] Moreover, the metaphor of *"Roma influx"* emerged when the political rhetoric in France and Italy portrayed the Roma minority, especially arriving from countries like Romania and Bulgaria, as a threat to public order and European welfare systems.[197]

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[193] Tuohy, W. (2019, March 7). "Danish voters reject treaty uniting Europe". Los Angeles Times.
[194] Böll Stiftung, Heinrich. (2014, June 10). "Europe after the Eastern Enlargement of the European Union: 2004-2014". Brussels office - European Union.
[195] Böll Stiftung, Heinrich. (2014, June 10). "Europe after the Eastern Enlargement of the European Union: 2004-2014". Brussels office - European Union.
[196] Gridwork. (2020, August 15). "Fear of the Polish plumber. In These Times.
[197] Gotev, G. (2010, August 26). "Reding criticises France, Italy over Roma treatment." Euractiv.

The trend towards Euroscepticism was soon after confirmed, by rejection of the European Constitutional Treaty in 2005, as it required ratification by all Member States. In this regard, most countries approved it via parliaments, however France and the Netherlands decided for public referendums. However, despite both governments campaigning in favor of this project, 57.3% of French and 61.6% of Dutch voters rejected the Constitution.[198] Indeed, Dutch Prime Minister Balkenende acknowledged that: "*The idea of Europe has lived for the politicians, but not the Dutch people*". In practice, leaders abandoned the Constitution and instead negotiated the Lisbon Treaty, which in a more subtle manner codified many of the same reforms, however without the label of a "Constitution", which made it easier to accept.[199]

More recently, Brack and Startin, described that the Euroscepticism, with the Eurozone crisis (analysed in Chapter 3), became increasingly mainstream, visible *"across Europe at the level of public opinion, among political parties and civil society groups, within the EU institutions themselves"*.[200] Leconte also similarly observed that by the 2000s Euroscepticism had expanded *"from a quasi-pathology to a mainstream and enduring phenomenon"* in European democracies.[201] Indeed, they both pointed out that what was once viewed as an irrational and fringe attitude (even referred to as a "pathology" in pro-European research) had by the 2010s become a recognised and more legitimate feature of the EU politics.

4.2 Permissive Consensus and Constraining Dissensus

"Public opinion was quiescent. These were years of permissive consensus, of deals cut by insulated elites. The period since 1991 might be described as one of constraining dissensus. Elites, party leaders in positions of authority, must look over their shoulders when negotiating European issues. What they see does not reassure them…"

- Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks [202]

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[198] Reporter, G. S. (2017, May 8). "France rejects the EU constitution." The Guardian.
[199] Reporter, G. S. (2017, May 8). "The Dutch say "devastating no" to EU constitution." The Guardian.
[200] Brack, N., & Startin, N. (2015)."Introduction: Euroscepticism, from the margins to the mainstream". International Political Science Review, 36(3), 239–249.
[201] Leconte, C. (2015). "From pathology to mainstream phenomenon: Reviewing the Euroscepticism debate in research and theory". International Political Science Review, 36(3), 250–263.
[202] Kriesi, Hanspeter. (2008). Rejoinder to Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks, "A Postfunctional Theory of European Integration: From Permissive Consensus to Constraining Dissensus." British Journal of Political Science 39 (1): 221–24.

4.2.1 Foundations of Permissive consensus

Early theorists of integration viewed public opinion as marginal to the process of European unification. Indeed, the functionalist approach of David Mitrany, posited that political integration would follow technical cooperation in sectors such as transport, coal or energy, assuming that elites would guide the transfer of authority to the supranational institutions, providing solutions in a rational and apolitical manner.[203]

Moreover, Ernst Haas' neofunctionalism built on this by introducing the "spillover effect", whereby integration in one sector would lead to pressures for integration in others. In addition, he believed in the growing authority of supranational institutions like the European Commission, with elites acting largely independently of mass publics. In both cases, legitimacy was derived NOT from democratic participation (*input legitimacy*), but from the EU's ability to deliver outcomes (*output legitimacy*).[204]

During this period, the public exhibited limited interest in the EU affairs, which was captured by the term of "permissive consensus," coined by Lindberg and Scheingold, in their foundational work "*Europe's Would-Be Polity"*.[205] In this context, the support for the EU was broad, BUT shallow, premised on material benefits and postwar ideals of "peace and prosperity", when voters paid little attention to the EU matters and allowed elites to advance integration without greater interference.[206]

4.2.2 From Permissive Consensus to Constraining Dissensus

By the 1990s, several developments disrupted the permissive consensus. The focal point was the Maastricht Treaty, int the Economic and Monetary Union, European citizenship and more supranational governance, which made EU decisions increasingly politicised. Thus, there is a temporal and correlative overlap between the end of the permissive consensus and rise of Euroscepticism, as the two are inversely related.

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[203] Mitrany, David. "A Working Peace System (1943): An Argument for the Functional Development of International Organization". London: Royal Institute of International Affairs.
[204] Haas, Ernst B., "The Uniting of Europe: Political, Social, and Economic Forces". Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
[205] Leon N. Lindberg and Stuart A. Scheingold. "Europe's Would-Be Polity: Patterns of Change in the European Community". Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
[206] Leon N. Lindberg and Stuart A. Scheingold. "Europe's Would-Be Polity: Patterns of Change in the European Community". Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

David Easton's systems theory explains this shift, with a model in which the political systems derive "*diffuse support"* from deeply rooted beliefs in legitimacy and "*specific suppor"t* from evaluation of its recent performance.[207] In the context of the EU, under the concept of permissive consensus, the Union had diffuse support grounded in peace and prosperity narratives, but as the integration touched upon the national identity, immigration and matters closely related to welfare, known as sensitive and "high politics", the concerns escalated.[208]

The term "constraining dissensus" was introduced by Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks, describing the newly emerged era of European integration in which the public opinion became an active constraint. Thus, European issues were now contested in national political debates and election campaigns.[209] Throughout their work, Hooghe and Marks propose a postfunctionalist framework in which identity, not just the economic interests, drives attitudes towards European integration. In this model, the political salience of European issues increases when people feel that supranational decisions threaten their cultural or national identity. As a result, parties and politicians increasingly mobilise around EU-related issues, polarizing debates. Moreover, post functionalism explains how integration became a conflict over values, not just institutions. Indeed, as the EU touches on more sensitive issues, like migration or judicial sovereignty, the public becomes more divided, making consensus harder to achieve.[210]

Conclusively, the evolution from permissive consensus to constraining dissensus marks a fundamental transformation in the politics of European integration, where the politicisation of European issues and growing salience of identity and values means that legitimacy now must be earned in the public sphere. Thus, the EU can NOT be a technocratic body functioning behind closed doors (or it can in times of crisis), but a political entity whose actions are scrutinised by an increasingly divided electorate. [211]

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[207] Easton, David. (1979). "A Systems Analysis of Political Life", New York.
[208] Easton, David. (1979). "A Systems Analysis of Political Life", New York.
[209] Hooghe, Liesbet and Marks, Gary. (2009). "A Postfunctionalist Theory of European Integration: From Permissive Consensus to Constraining Dissensus," British Journal of Political Science 39, no. 1: 1–23.
[210] Hooghe, Liesbet and Marks, Gary. (2009). "A Postfunctionalist Theory of European Integration: From Permissive Consensus to Constraining Dissensus," British Journal of Political Science 39, no. 1: 1–23.
[211] Hooghe, Liesbet and Marks, Gary. (2009). "A Postfunctionalist Theory of European Integration: From Permissive Consensus to Constraining Dissensus," British Journal of Political Science 39, no. 1: 1–23.

4.3 Democratic Deficit in the EU (Fact or Fiction?)

The notion of a "democratic deficit" has become a central lens for evaluating the European Union's legitimacy. In its broadest scope, democratic theory defines it as *a* "gap between democratic ideals (popular participation, accountability, representation) and the reality of institutional governance".[212] Dahl famously argued that large-scale or international organisations can never match the citizen participation of smaller democracies, since size and effective participation are inversely related. In this context, if the democratic ideal is maximum citizen participation, any political system beyond the nation-state, like the EU itself, is bound to fail. (Dahl's *"democratic dilemma"*).[213]

Moreover, different frameworks and lenses of analysis emphasise different gaps.[214] *Procedurally*, Dahl focuses on citizen participation, advocating that the international organizations must have institutions guaranteeing effective participation and accountability as those in democratic states.[215] *Institutionally*, critics point to the EU's hybrid architecture, in which the European Commission, a powerful executive, is not directly elected, while the Council of Ministers, composed of national executives, deliberates largely behind closed doors, and the European Parliament, the only directly elected, has historically been weaker.[216] Analysis of *output* accounts that legitimacy derives from policy effectiveness, as supranational regimes might compensate for limited direct participation by delivering results. Conversely, *"input"* legitimacy emphasizes the democratic origin of authority. Some scholars add *"throughput"* legitimacy, with the quality of the policymaking process itself, as a third dimension. (explained in Chapter 1 of this paper).[217]

In sum, the concept of democratic deficit in the EU is theoretically rooted in classical democracy principles (citizen participation, accountability and sovereignty). Applied to

[212]Jensen, T. and ETH Zurich, & European Politics. (2009). "The democratic deficit of the European Union". Living Reviews in Democracy.
[213] Dahl, Robert A. (1998). "On Democracy". Yale University Press.
[214]Jensen, T. and ETH Zurich, & European Politics. (2009). "The democratic deficit of the European Union". Living Reviews in Democracy.
[215] Dahl, Robert A. (1998). "On Democracy". Yale University Press.
[216] Moravcsik, A. & Harvard University. (2002). "In defence of the "Democratic deficit": reassessing legitimacy in the European Union". (No. 4; Vol. 40, pp. 603–624).
[217] Schmidt, V. A. (2013). "Democracy and legitimacy in the European Union: Input, output and throughput". Political Studies, 61(1), 2–22.

the EU, it points out institutional asymmetries: strong executive (Commission/Council) versus a limited legislature (Parliament), in addition to the indirect citizens' control and normative gaps between EU integration and identity. However, the EU has no precedent in seeking to combine 27 (and more) democratic polities into a single institutional order, thus further analysis shall seek to tackle this issue by adapting democratic principles to the transnational scale or by redefining the concept of legitimacy.[218]

In the following chapter, we will apply these concepts to case studies of EU emergency governance, examining whether and how the democratic deficit manifests in concrete situations of crises that struck the Union in the past two decades. By assessing law-making and legitimacy in specific crises, we will test the theoretical frameworks just outlined. In this way, the normative analysis and debate on "democratic deficit" will transition from abstract theory, towards the more empirical analysis of the EU dynamics.

[218] Moravcsik, A. & Harvard University. (2002). "In defence of the "Democratic deficit": reassessing legitimacy in the European Union". (No. 4; Vol. 40, pp. 603–624).

5. The Impact of the Crises on Mistrust Towards the EU Institutions: Correlation?

As we have seen, European integration in the 21st century has been marked by a series of crises which have tested the legitimacy of the Union and in the aftermath coincided with the rising distrust towards the EU institutions. In this regard, public trust in the EU can be analysed as a barometer of the Union's "perceived effectiveness" and citizens' belief that the institutions will act in their best interest and seek to ultimately fulfill their mandates.[219] Thus, when successive crises strike, this confidence can be disturbed, suggesting a strong correlation between the crisis and corroding trust.[220]

In a nutshell, many started looking into the association between the direct consequences left by the crises and the apparent rise of mistrust. Indeed, this chapter further explores in which ways have some EU emergency responses analysed throughout the sections 1 and 2 eroded trust in the highest level of governance in the EU, eventually leading to the emergence of movements like Euroscepticism and populism.

5.1 Crises: A Catalyst for Institutional Distrust

Although numerous crises occurred in the EU in the past two decades, there is an evident common thread among them: the emergency served as a catalyst that to some extent magnified underlying public anxieties about the EU's role and legitimacy.

In practice, this phenomenon has been especially evident with the shift of results of the European Parliamentary elections in 2009 and 2014, as the Eurozone crisis occurred between the two election years. As Figure 20 shows, the composition of the European Parliament experienced significant changes between the two years and these shifts highlight the weakening of the mainstream pro-European parties, but also the parallel growth of Eurosceptic and populist parties, in the aftermath of the Eurozone crisis. Furthermore if we analyse the consequences at the national level as well, the radical

[219] Foster, Chase, and Jeffry Frieden. 2017. "Crisis of Trust: Socio-Economic Determinants of Europeans' Confidence in Government." *European Union Politics* 18 (4): 511–535.
[220] Foster, Chase, and Jeffry Frieden. 2017. "Crisis of Trust: Socio-Economic Determinants of Europeans' Confidence in Government." *European Union Politics* 18 (4): 511–535.

right parties have experienced the biggest gains, as they profited from using anti-globalisation and anti-establishment discourse, which gained popularity within the public discourse in the aftermath of this crisis.[221]

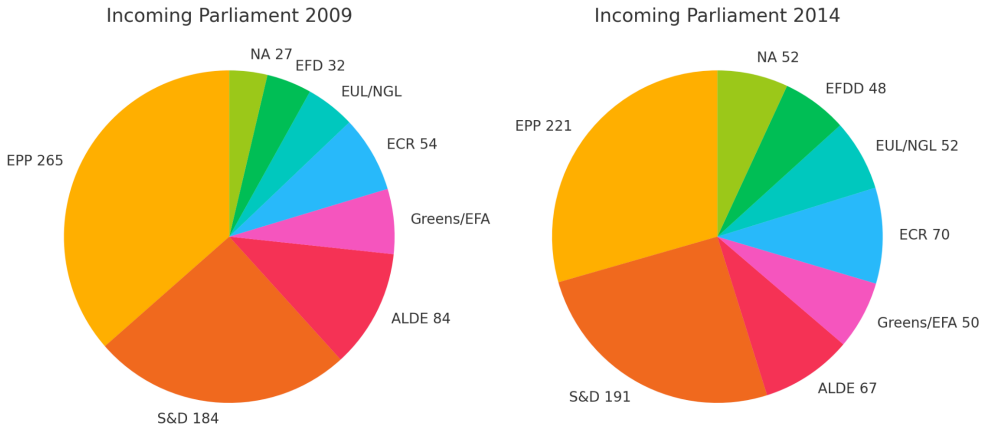

Figure 20: Comparison of Incoming European Parliaments 2009 and 2014.
Note: *Each pie chart clearly shows how the distribution of seats shifted, with the European People's Party (EPP) and Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) losing ground, while groups like the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) gained representation.*
Source*:* Brack, N., & Startin, N. (2015)

Moreover, as Leconte explained, what was once a niche skepticism on the margins has now become, "a mainstream and enduring phenomenon" across Europe, transforming from a fringe "pathology", into a normal element of European public opinion, especially after the late 2000s and early 2010s, when successive crises struck the Union. She also noted that even scholars had to adjust their understanding of public Euroscepticism, as it could no longer be viewed merely as a peripheral malcontent, as has earlier been assumed, but rather as a widespread and deeply rooted challenge in domestic politics and EU-wide rhetoric. Indeed, the Eurozone crisis blurred the already fragile distinction between domestic and EU-level politics, thus discontent that occurs at national level, can be also transferred to the supranational level, as decisions taken by the EU now involve choices that directly affect national issues (thus the EU gets the blame).[222]

Importantly, the link between crises and mistrust is not purely one-directional, as the occurrence of crises does NOT "automatically" cause people to lose faith in the EU, but

[221] Brack, N., & Startin, N. (2015)."Introduction: Euroscepticism, from the margins to the mainstream". International Political Science Review, 36(3), 239–249.
[222] Leconte, C. (2015). "From pathology to mainstream phenomenon: Reviewing the Euroscepticism debate in research and theory". International Political Science Review, 36(3), 250–263.

rather much weight goes to how these emergencies are managed and narrated.[223] During the financial crisis, for instance, the EU took certain unprecedented actions, such as bailout funds and ECB's interventions, which served to prevent a worse collapse. In addition to that, observers argue that this crisis pushed towards the deeper integration and coordination, such as the creation of the European Stability Mechanism and steps toward a banking union (which has never occured). Thus, for instance, these actions (or attempts in the case of the fiscal union), may appear to some as too ambitious and not deliberated enough, which would eventually fuel mistrust and reinforce the sense of distance between the ordinary citizen and institutions.[224]

Moreover, McNamara argued that despite a "fraying sense of European solidarity," Member States still "committed roughly one trillion euros to save the currency" and empowered new institutions to tackle the Eurozone crisis.[225] From this viewpoint, one could say the EU ultimately "did well", which might have helped secure the elite's confidence in the project. However, such achievements were overshadowed in the public mind by the immediate shocks and political tensions which arose. The fact that European leaders *"met more and more frequently in summits… too numerous to count"* did not necessarily translate into ordinary citizens feeling protected, but on the contrary, many felt that the decisions were being negotiated without their participation. [226]

In sum, crises have acted as catalysts that exposed and exacerbated latent issues in the relationship between EU institutions and the public. Economic collapse, uncontrolled migration flows, and political showdowns each in their own way highlighted perceptions of EU ineffectiveness, indifference, or interference, thereby corroding the reservoir of public trust. Thus, it is no coincidence that during the peak of the Eurozone crisis and after the refugee crisis, anti-EU protests and a greater electorate with similar narrative emerged.

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[223] Hobolt, Sara B., and Catherine E. de Vries. (2016). "Public Support for European Integration." Annual Review of Political Science 19: 413–32.
[224] European Commission. (2014, April 15)."A Comprehensive EU Response to the Financial Crisis." MEMO/14/244.
[225] McNamara, Kathleen R. "JCMS Annual Review Lecture: Imagining Europe: The Cultural Foundations of EU Governance." JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies 53, no. S1 (September 2015): 22–39.
[226] McNamara, Kathleen R. "JCMS Annual Review Lecture: Imagining Europe: The Cultural Foundations of EU Governance." JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies 53, no. S1 (September 2015): 22–39.

5.2 The Political Exploitation of Mistrust: Populism

Simultaneously with eroding trust, crises serve as an opportunity for political "entrepreneurs" to exploit that mistrust for their own gain (larger electorate).[227] In Europe, the past decade's turmoil fueled an extraordinary "populist moment" across the European continent**,** in which anti-establishment leaders and movements moved from the margins to the mainstream, often utilising nationalist and Eurosceptic sentiments.[228]

At its largest scope, populism can be understood as an ideology that posits "the pure people" against "the corrupt elite," claiming that the general will of the people is being expropriated by opportunistic and self-centered elites. The crucial thing is that populist leaders portray themselves as the sole and authentic voice of "the people". Moreover, political theorist Müller observes that "the defining feature of populism is not anti-elitism, but anti-pluralism, as them, and only them, represent the real people".[229] In this regard, the "moral monopoly on representation" means that populist leaders mark all institutional constraints, courts, media and supranational bodies (like the EU), as illegitimate as they challenge "people' will", which is represented by the populists who embody the role of the "charismatic leaders".[230]

In the context of the EU, populist movements have risen to power on both sides of the political spectrum. Indeed, on the left, parties like *Syriza* in Greece and *Podemos* in Spain emerged in the aftermath of the financial crisis, profiting from the wave of public anger - consequence of the rigid austerity measures.[231] Thus, they framed citizens' struggle as a fight against unaccountable and distant EU powers. Similarly, on the right side of the spectrum, Marine Le Pen in France, Matteo Salvini in Italy and Brexit campaigners in the UK utilised the same public discontent, portraying institutions in Brussels as the enemy of national sovereignty.[232]

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[227] Brubaker, R. (2017). "Why populism? Theory and Society", 46(5), 357–385.
[228] Brubaker, R. (2017). "Why populism? Theory and Society", 46(5), 357–385.
[229] Müller, Jan-Werner. (2016). "What is Populism?". Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
[230] Müller, Jan-Werner. (2016). "What is Populism?". Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
[231] Markou, Grigoris. (2015). "The Left-Wing Populist Revolt in Europe: SYRIZA in Power." PhilPapers.
[232] Guiso, Luigi, Helios Herrera, Massimo Morelli, and Tommaso Sonno. (2017). "Populism: Demand and Supply." Einaudi Institute for Economics and Finance.

Furthermore, populism's relationship with EU mistrust is a vicious circle. On one hand, economic and political crises fuel the public mistrust, which gives populists the opening to rise.[233] On the other hand, once in power (or even in opposition), populist actors often take steps that further erode trust in independent institutions, frequently attacking the media, judiciary or the EU as "enemies of the people", thereby undermining the credibility of those institutions among their followers, leading to greater perpetuation of already existing *malattie*.[234]

Indeed, this erosion of independent checks can lead to real democratic backsliding, as seen in Hungary and Poland, which in turn provokes censure from the EU. Moreover, Kelemen highlights this dynamic by recasting the "democratic deficit" debate: instead of only worrying about EU-level democracy, he questions how a Union that sets democracy as a condition for membership could ever tolerate the slide to autocracy of its own Member State. Moreover, the EU's inability (or reluctance) to rapidly discipline and sanction those populist governments has been attributed to factors like partisan politics in the European Parliament (for years, Orbán's *Fidesz* was shielded by the mainstream bloc) and the leverage those governments have via EU funds.[235]

In summary, populism in Europe has flourished in the stimulating soil of mistrust, produced by the successive crises. Indeed, populist movements exploited mistrust (leveraging it in order to gain greater support) and exacerbated mistrust (by attacking institutions and creating larger gaps and polarization), often even blaming the institutions in Brussels for the national troubles.[236] Moreover, when a large percentage of the electorate in many Member States is composed of the Eurosceptic populist parties, it puts a pressure on further EU integration. Furthermore, any effort to rebuild trust in the EU needs to combat the populist narratives, which creates a vicious struggle and further perpetuates this already problematic phenomenon. In this context, the following section delves into the role of media in shaping public perceptions in the EU.[237]

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[233]Algan, Y., Guriev, S., Papaioannou, E., & Passari, E. (2017). "The European trust crisis and the rise of populism". Brookings Papers on Economic Activity, 2017(Fall), 309–382.
[234]Algan, Y., Guriev, S., Papaioannou, E., & Passari, E. (2017). "The European trust crisis and the rise of populism". Brookings Papers on Economic Activity, 2017(Fall), 309–382.
[235] Bermeo, N. (2016). "On Democratic Backsliding". Journal of Democracy, 27(1): 5–19.
[236] Brubaker, R. (2017). "Why populism? Theory and Society", 46(5), 357–385.
[237] Brubaker, R. (2017). "Why populism? Theory and Society", 46(5), 357–385.

5.3 The Role of Media for Public Perception

Regarding the media, the same applies as in the national context: the public perceptions of the EU, meaning the trust or mistrust that citizens feel towards its institutions, are in large part mediated by the narratives placed in the public sphere. Indeed, at the EU level this is even more exacerbated, as citizens usually do NOT interact daily with the European institutions. For this reason, their impressions are normally formed only through the media coverage, political messages or, from recently, social media platforms. In context of the recent crises, media outlets and online networks have often amplified the public's distrust, thus further intensifying citizens' discontent.[238]

In this regard, the framing of the crises in the media has been particularly crucial. For instance, during the Eurozone debt crisis, complex economic policies and negotiations were often expressed into simplified narratives of conflict and blame within the mainstream media, like for example *"Northern saints vs Southern sinners"*, where the North was seen as the "heartless enforcer" of austerity measures, while the South was portrayed as a "suffering victim".[239] Furthermore, these framings tended to entrench national stereotypes and foster further animosity across the continent, also in some cases casting the EU as the impersonal enforcer of unpopular measures.[240]

Similarly, coverages that mentioned the refugee crisis exacerbated distrust in the EU institutions, by promoting the fear and uncertainty regarding the EU's control over the actual situation.[241] Indeed, news headlines often highlighted EU disagreements and failure, how proposed EU quotas for relocating asylum seekers triggered disputes, or how borders that were meant to remain open (under Schengen) were being unilaterally closed by states in panic. Such reporting, although factual, affected home a narrative of

[238]Alonso-Muñoz, Ángeles, and Andreu Casero-Ripollés. (2020). "Populism Against Europe in Social Media: The Eurosceptic Discourse on Twitter in Spain, Italy, France and United Kingdom." Frontiers in Communication 5: Article 54.
[239] Matthijs, Matthias, and Kathleen R. McNamara. (2015). "The Euro Crisis' Theory Effect: Northern Saints, Southern Sinners, and the Demise of the Eurobond." Journal of European Integration 37, no. 2: 229–245.
[240] Matthijs, Matthias, and Kathleen R. McNamara. (2015). "The Euro Crisis' Theory Effect: Northern Saints, Southern Sinners, and the Demise of the Eurobond." Journal of European Integration 37, no. 2: 229–245.
[241]Alonso-Muñoz, Ángeles, and Andreu Casero-Ripollés. (2020). "Populism Against Europe in Social Media: The Eurosceptic Discourse on Twitter in Spain, Italy, France and United Kingdom." Frontiers in Communication 5: Article 54.

EU dysfunction. On the other hand, some outlets pushed more alarmist or xenophobic narratives, suggesting that the influx was an existential threat exacerbated by EU policies. In this regard, they advocated that the only way to regain control of the borders would be getting full sovereignty and autonomy over this policy domain.[242]

Moreover, new social media have a big influence over the spreading of false or exaggerated stories during the crisis, from unfounded rumors of refugee crimes to diverse conspiracy theories, which eroded trust in the EU, but in mainstream media itself.[243] The result was an increasingly fragmented information environment, with echo chambers reinforcing a pre-existing attitude toward the EU. Moreover, on platforms tailored by algorithms, users often encounter content that reinforces their views. In this regard, the echo chambers provide fertile ground for polarising any "us vs them" narratives, which populists use to frame the EU as distant - "them opposing the people's will" type of structure. [244]

Moreover, media landscapes diverge greatly across different Member States. Indeed, in some countries, mainstream media have traditionally been supportive of the European project, whereas in others, significant amounts of the press have expressed sustained opposition towards the EU. In this regard, the UK provides an example, where for decades, a large amount of press, especially the most read mainstream tabloids, disseminated the Eurosceptic agenda through the populist rhetoric and portraying Brussels as a threat to British national sovereignty.[245] In effect, this helped create a deeply rooted image of the EU as a meddling bureaucracy with overreaching powers in the minds of many citizens in the UK, thus a number of scholars blamed the media for the eventual results of the referendum.[246] And while the case of the UK is on the extreme side, partisan media in other Member States has in a similar matter, in countries

[242] Berry, Mike, Inaki Garcia-Blanco, and Kerry Moore. (2015). "Press Coverage of the Refugee and Migrant Crisis in the EU: A Content Analysis of Five European Countries". Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies.
[243] Kiratli, O. S. (2023). "Social media effects on public trust in the European Union. Public Opinion Quarterly", 87(3), 749–763.
[244] Khosravinik, Majid. "Right Wing Populism in the West: Social Media Discourse and Echo Chambers." *Insight Turkey* 19, no. 3 (2017): 53–68.
[245] Straus, L. (2023). Two Sides of the Same Coin: The Relationship Between Left- and RightWing Newspapers in the Brexit Debate.
[246] Straus, L. (2023). Two Sides of the Same Coin: The Relationship Between Left- and RightWing Newspapers in the Brexit Debate.

like Hungary or Italy, echoed their governments' critical stance on the EU, creating and then reinforcing domestic distrust, thus, the media truly plays a crucial role in this phenomenon.[247]

In sum, both old and new means of transmitting information in the Union serve as the lens through which the public views the EU.[248] The traditional press in some countries mainstreamed Euroscepticism long before it was politically fashionable, creating a culture of mistrust that later politicians could easily tap into.[249] The newer digital media environment has intensified information silos and allowed sensational or false narratives to proliferate, which frequently paint the EU in a negative light. Mistrust towards EU institutions has both been reflected by the media and further exacerbated by it. Indeed, for every true and augmented critique that legitimately and fairly blames and holds Brussels to account, usually a hyperbolic narrative has been created, thus undermining general and broad faith in the very idea and core of a shared European project.[250]

Rebuilding trust, therefore, will require not just policy changes by the EU, but also addressing the informational and communicative disconnect. The EU institutions have in recent years tried to communicate more directly with citizens (through social media engagement, Citizens' Dialogues etc.), attempting to bypass hostile intermediaries. However, overcoming entrenched narratives is difficult. The next and final section discusses how the EU might go about rebuilding the eroded trust, given the challenges we have outlined, and what possibilities exist to reconnect with a disillusioned public.[251]

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[247] Stumpf, Krisztina. (2021).“Populism and the Media: A Comparative Perspective on Right-Wing Populist Media Strategies in Europe.” Journal of Contemporary European Studies 29, no. 3: 354–371.
[248] Stumpf, Krisztina. (2021).“Populism and the Media: A Comparative Perspective on Right-Wing Populist Media Strategies in Europe.” Journal of Contemporary European Studies 29, no. 3: 354–371.
[249] Straus, L. (2023). Two Sides of the Same Coin: The Relationship Between Left- and RightWing Newspapers in the Brexit Debate.
[250] Straus, L. (2023). Two Sides of the Same Coin: The Relationship Between Left- and RightWing Newspapers in the Brexit Debate.
[251] Alonso-Muñoz, Ángeles, and Andreu Casero-Ripollés. (2020). "Populism Against Europe in Social Media: The Eurosceptic Discourse on Twitter in Spain, Italy, France and United Kingdom." *Frontiers in Communication* 5: Article 54.

5.4 Crisis or Enlargement: Who's to Blame?

Recent scholars found that public attitudes towards the EU have grown more polarised after the big Eastern enlargements. Indeed, a comprehensive study of Eurobarometer data concludes that popular opinion became increasingly heterogeneous across Member States, peaking in divergence during the Eurozone crisis years (2010-2013).[252] Thus, views on the EU now vary more regionally than they did in earlier decades, and the crises underscored this trend, as the steepest trust collapses were in Southern countries, whereas Northern and Eastern states were more resilient.[253] (Look at figure 21)

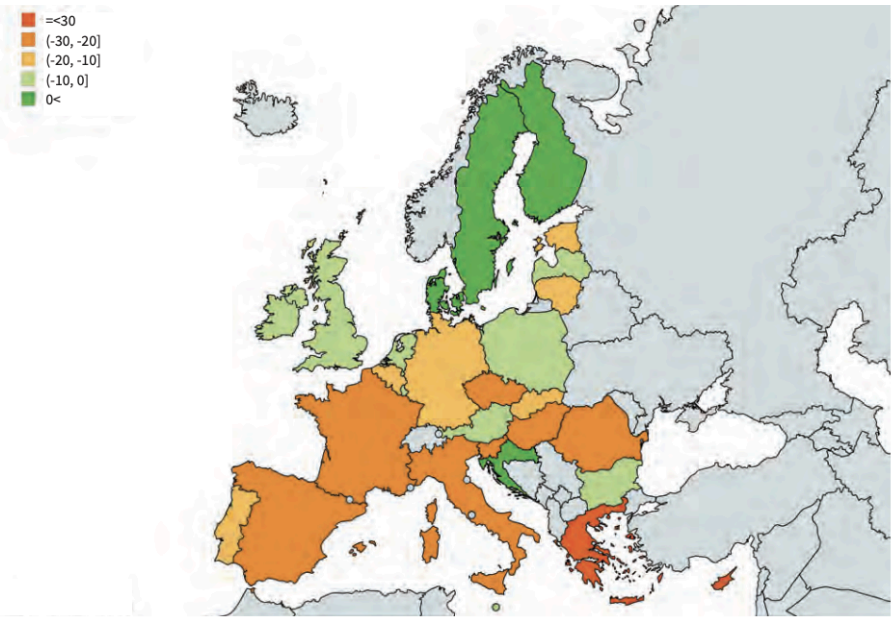

Figure 21: Change in trust in EU institutions, EU28, 2004-2016 (percentage point (p))

Source*:* Eurofound. "Societal Change and Trust in Institutions – What Can We Learn from the Crisis?".

Moreover, this asymmetry suggests that the EU's ability to command uniform trust was undermined not only by policy failures, but by its own broadened diversity, as a Union of 28 (now 27) members brings together economies and societies with different experiences, thus a "one-size-fits-all" trust narrative impossible.[254]

[252] Palacios, Irene, and Arnold, Christine. (2024, September 5). "The Divided Public: Dynamics of Heterogeneity of European Public Opinion towards European Integration." European Union Politics 25.
[253] Eurofound. (2018). "Societal Change and Trust in Institutions – What Can We Learn from the Crisis?". Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
[254] Eurofound. (2018). "Societal Change and Trust in Institutions – What Can We Learn from the Crisis?". Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

Another aspect is the public's reaction to EU enlargement itself. Therefore, looking at the crises only, might create a false image, as it is not the only factor in achieving this effect. Indeed, the euro crisis era coincided with a marked enlargement fatigue among West European publics. Polls in the early 2010s revealed that citizens in most core EU countries were increasingly wary of any further expansion of the Union. By 2012, 52% of EU citizens opposed future enlargements (only 38% were in favor), with opposition strongest in the older Member States.

Every "core" EU-15 country (with the sole exception of Spain) had a majority against admitting new members.[255] Moreover, the map in Figure 22 depicts the average net support for future enlargements in November 2012. Indeed, the darker shades of green here indicate stronger prevalence of the "for" answers, while darker shades of red indicate stronger prevalence of the one "against" greater enlargement. Support is greatest in Poland (+47; 69% pro and 22% against) and lowest in Austria (-49; 23% pro and 72% against).[256]

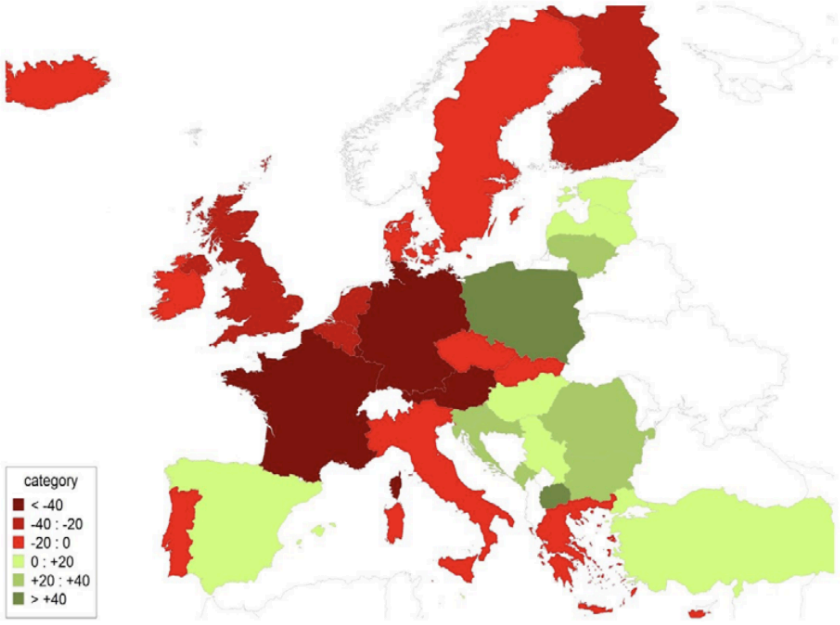

Figure 22: Net support for future enlargements (2012)
Source: Toshkov, Dimiter. (2014). "Public Opinion and European Union Enlargement"

[255] Toshkov, Dimiter. (2014). "Public Opinion and European Union Enlargement". MAXCAP Working Paper No. 2. Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin.
[256] Toshkov, Dimiter. (2014). "Public Opinion and European Union Enlargement". MAXCAP Working Paper No. 2. Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin.

This skepticism was undoubtedly tied to a sense that the EU had already become too diverse and unwieldy. Many in the founding states felt that rapid enlargement to the east had diluted the cohesion of the Union, making decision-making more difficult and injecting new economic competition, and thus they were less inclined to trust Brussels' capacity to manage an ever-expanding bloc. Moreover, such attitudes show that diminishing trust in the EU during this period was not only a reaction to disappointments, but also to the EU's changing nature.[257]

The widening of the Union, with its attendant increase in cultural and political heterogeneity, may have made it harder for some citizens to identify with EU institutions or to feel represented by them. Survey research confirms that emotional attachment to Europe is a significant driver of trust, thus where citizens perceive the EU as a distant, "foreign" bureaucracy (an impression arguably heightened by enlargement), trust tends to drop. In Southern Europe, for instance, stronger exclusive national identities have been correlated with *lower* trust in the EU. Likewise, political scientists observe that when national leaders are deeply divided on EU issues, a scenario more common in a heterogeneous union, it fuels public opposition to the EU project. [258]

In summary, disillusionment with the EU's crisis management played a central role in eroding trust, but equally important were longer-term structural factors, like the EU's expansion, with the greater heterogeneity of interests and identities. The erosion of trust during the 2010s thus stemmed not only from what the EU did (or failed to do) in response to crises, but also from what the EU has become, a larger, more heterogeneous Union, where consensus is harder to forge and citizens' preferencesare more divided. This insight is critical, because it implies that rebuilding trust will demand more than just delivering good policies, as it will also require bridging the identity gap between the EU and its citizens, addressing the democratic disconnect and fostering a new sense of common identity across an enlarged Europe, by tackling both the pragmatic and perceptual drivers of distrust.[259]

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[257] Toshkov, Dimiter. (2014). "Public Opinion and European Union Enlargement". MAXCAP Working Paper No. 2. Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin.
[258] Eurofound. (2018). "Societal Change and Trust in Institutions – What Can We Learn from the Crisis?". Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
[259] Nicoli, Francesco, and Meijers, Maurits. (2022). "Political Trust in the Economic Crisis: A European Perspective". Berlin: Jacques Delors Centre, Hertie School.

5.5 Rebuilding Trust: Challenges and Possibilities

The EU's complexity of multi-level governance makes it hard to deliver simple and emotionally resonant narratives, which in practice have a strong influence on the average citizen in the national context (such as patriotism or a sense of shared identity). Nevertheless, there are numerous directions and domains on which the EU can work, in order to strengthen its accountability and solidify its public sphere.

5.5.1 Strengthening Output with Tangible Results

First and foremost, one of the most immediate and tangible manners in which the Union could regain trust in its high level of governance would be to effectively address the issues that matter the most to its citizens, thus demonstrating its effectiveness and relevance through tangible outcomes (amongst many: economic recovery, public health, security, or any other concrete and observable benefits etc.).

Indeed, recent history has provided us with examples of this practice. For instance, the EU's joint acquisition of COVID-19 vaccines, while initially criticised, was eventually giving all Member States access to vaccines and helped Europe overcome the pandemic. Furthermore, the NextGenerationEU recovery fund set a precedent in solidarity by pooling resources for a common recovery, demonstrating its citizens the ability to act decisively in times of crisis. Such achievements have likely contributed to improved public sentiment. Indeed, by late 2024, 51% of Europeans said that they trust the EU, which, although it may not appear as a great result, the highest share since 2007.[260]

However, the EU often has to operate via consensus of its Member States and is constrained in areas like fiscal policy, defense or health (which are not fully centralised competences, as Member States have not given up their sovereignty completely).[261] Indeed, this can slow down the processes of decision-making, eventually risking a form of public frustration due to the outcomes that may not be satisfying. Additionally, not all results are immediately evident and tangible, as, for example, complex regulatory

[260] Risk & Compliance Platform Europe (2024, December 4) "New Eurobarometer Survey Shows Record High Trust in the EU in Recent Years.".
[261] European Commission. "Areas of EU Action".

achievements (consumer protections, environmental standards etc.). Thus, the EU must not only deliver but also "be seen to deliver", through the clear and effective communication of successes and a focus on tangible concerns.[262]

5.5.2 Improving Democratic Accountability

Another crucial pillar for obtaining and safeguarding trust is a public perception regarding inclusivity and transparency. However, citizens of the Union tend to feel that the EU's structure is rather complicated and distant from them, thus they feel like their voices are not being heard and taken into consideration in Brussels. [263]

Moreover, addressing this issue would include making the EU governance more participatory, responsive and accountable, although these concerns have already been explored in the past. For instance, there have been several proposals to empower the European Parliament, as it is the EU's most democratic institution and direct channel of representation, by giving it the right to initiate legislation, which is now in the hands of the Commission. However, many argue that this may disturb the balance of power among the EU institutions. Additionally, mechanisms like the European Citizens' Initiative, enable citizens with the right to petition for new EU laws which gives ordinary people a sense of ability to express their voice in a more direct manner.[264]

While these instruments are valuable, their impact on trust will depend on how seriously institutions act on them. If citizens feel their participation leads to concrete policy changes, trust will improve. However, the challenge is that deep institutional reforms require unanimity and often face resistance. Moreover, some national leaders are reluctant towards empowering the EU Parliament or cross-border democracy for fear of losing influence. Nonetheless, even within the current framework, more could be done to tackle the "recognition gap", by for instance ensuring language accessibility and clear communication, understandable for all classes and age ranges.[265]

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[262] De Wilde, Pieter, and Michael Zürn. (2023). "Clear messages to the European public? The language of European Commission press releases." Journal of European Integration 45, no. 2: 123–138.
[263] The Parliament Magazine. (2019, November 27)."Most EU Citizens Want Their Voices to Be Heard When It Comes to the Future of Europe."
[264] European Commission. (2020). "European Citizens' Initiative: Strengthening Citizens' Participation". Brussels: Publications Office of the European Union.
[265] Csernatoni, Raluca, and Tania Lațici. (2020, July 20)."Empowering the European Parliament: Toward More Accountability on Security and Defense." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

5.5.3 Combating Misinformation

In the previous section, we saw how misinformation and negative framing of certain actions can undermine trust. Therefore, a trust-rebuilding strategy must involve an overall robust initiative to clarify misconceptions and counter any false narratives, thus the EU has begun to treat this issue with greater urgency. Indeed, the Commission has pushed social media platforms to remove or flag fake news, and new EU regulations like the "Digital Services Act" impose higher accountability on tech companies for content spread. Furthermore, pro-EU civil society organizations and independent fact-checkers play a role in calling out viral false claims about EU policies.[266]

On the proactive side, EU institutions need to tailor communication to different publics to make the EU's work relevant in everyone's life. For example, if the EU funds a new local infrastructure project or an employment program in a region, that should be communicated through local media and officials so that people connect the EU with positive change in their community.[267] Storytelling can be a powerful tool: sharing human-interest stories of individuals benefiting from EU initiatives (a student who studied abroad with Erasmus, a small business saved by a Cohesion Fund project, etc.) can put a human face on the often abstract EU presence.[268]

Finally, another aspect of combating misinformation is supporting independent quality journalism about EU affairs. In this context, the EU has started funding programs to train journalists in EU reporting and to support media pluralism, which can help ensure that citizens have access to factual and reliable reporting. Ultimately, although one narrative will always compete with another narrative, the EU needs to ensure that factual and nuanced narratives combat myths and extremes, in order to foster a more informed and thus trusting citizenry.

[266] European Commission. (2024). "Digital Services Act: Ensuring a Safe and Accountable Online Environment".
[267] European Commission. (2021). "Communicating Operations of Strategic Importance in 2021–2027". Brussels: Publications Office of the European Union.
[268] European Commission. (2020). "Communicating Cohesion Policy in 2021–2027".

5.5.4 Upholding to its Core Values

Public perception and trust towards the EU institutions do NOT come only from the satisfaction stemming from the Union's performances or citizens' representation at the EU level, but it is closely related to integrity and values Union holds up to, as many Europeans' trust in the EU was originally founded on the belief that it stands for democracy, human rights and the rule of law.[269] However, if these values are perceived to be compromised, may collapse, even if Union is delivering satisfying results, in a transparent and efficient manner. Therefore, in order to rebuild the lost trust, the Union needs to demonstrate to its citizens that it has remained true to its foundational values, thus that it is willing to protect and further enforce them.[270]

This has become especially relevant with the aforementioned issue of democratic backsliding in certain member states. The EU has tools (Article 7 TEU mechanisms, rule-of-law conditionality on EU funds, infringement proceedings via the European Court of Justice, etc.) to address governments that undermine judicial independence or media freedom.[271] For instance, the European Commission's recent moves to withhold certain budget funds from Hungary and Poland until rule-of-law concerns are addressed send a message that commitments to democracy are effective and genuine.[272] However, using these tools effectively is a delicate task, as it can provoke a nationalist backlashes.

Conversely, perception of political inefficacy towards the violations of core norms will erode trust. Thus, this is a challenging balance, since the EU must avoid being seen as disrespectful of national sovereignty (feed populist narratives), but also cannot appear as "approving of" autocratic behavior.[273] Indeed, there is a necessity to demonstrate that the EU institutions hold up to the high standards the EU has been founded on.[274]

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[269] Carrera, Sergio, Elspeth Guild, and Nicholas Hernanz. (2013). "The Triangular Relationship between Fundamental Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law in the EU: Towards the Copenhagen Mechanism". CEPS Paper in Liberty and Security in Europe, No. 77.
[270] Lenaerts, Koen. (2023). "On Checks and Balances: The Rule of Law Within the EU." Columbia Journal of European Law 29, no. 1: 1–30.
[271] European Parliament. (2023). "The Protection of Article 2 TEU Values in the EU".
[272] European Union. (2020, December 22). "Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2020/2092 on a General Regime of Conditionality for the Protection of the Union Budget". Official Journal of the European Union L 433I.
[273] Sedelmeier, Ulrich. (2017). "Political Safeguards against Democratic Backsliding in the EU: The Limits of Material Sanctions and the Scope of Social Pressure." Journal of European Public Policy 24.
[274] Kelemen, R. Daniel. (2017, April) "Europe's Other Democratic Deficit: National Authoritarianism in Europe's Democratic Union." Government and Opposition 52.

5.5.5 Addressing Inequalities

Another lesson from the trust crisis is that it has a strong social dimension. Indeed, the trust in the EU is "unevenly distributed" across the continent, but also its lack varies greatly among different Member States. On the one hand, studies have shown that those who are younger, more educated, or economically "better-off" (employed) tend to trust the EU more than other groups.[275] (Look at the Figure 21)

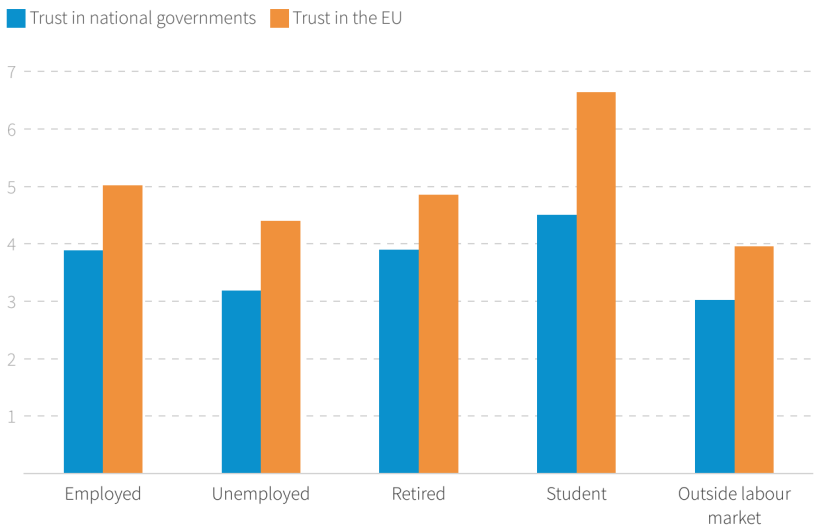

Figure 21: Institutional trust in the EU
Source: Mascherini, Massimiliano. "Trust in Crisis: Europe's Social Contract Under Threat." Eurofound.

Thus, this suggests that part of rebuilding trust is in bridging the socio-economic and geographic divisions within the Union. In this regard, the EU's cohesion policies (such as structural funds and regional development projects) are already aimed at reducing disparities, but ensuring these policies truly uplift lagging regions and are visible to the communities there can help in building greater support.[276] It is also important to improve outreach in rural areas and small towns, through programs like Erasmus+, which enable students and young people to experience other European countries, able to increase affinity with Europe.[277] Over time, such affinity can translate into a basic trust

[275] Mascherini, Massimiliano. "Trust in Crisis: Europe's Social Contract Under Threat." Eurofound.
[276] Crescenzi, Riccardo, Marco Di Cataldo, and Andrés Rodríguez-Pose. (2020). "Cohesion Policy Incentives and the Evolution of Regional Disparities in the EU." Regional Studies 54, no. 1: 52–63.
[277] European Commission. (2023). "Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2023". Brussels: Publications Office of the European Union.

toward the EU as an institution representing that shared identity. However, the challenge is doing this in an inclusive way that respects diversity and does not appear to impose a single identity.[278]

Finally, the erosion of public trust in EU institutions during the past crises marked the critical juncture for the Union's development, as it prompted more detailed reflection and initiated more urgent search for remedies for this malattie. Furthermore, the correlation between crises that occurred and this mistrust has been clearly evident, as these crises have catalysed rising distrust, which ultimately opened the doors to novel disruptive political forces.[279] Yet, the EU is learning from these experiences. Strategies to rebuild trust revolve around delivering on promises, democratising EU governance, countering misinformation and standing by the Union's value, although none of these strategies is easy, as they all require sustained commitment by both EU institutions and Member State governments (since trust in the EU is often intertwined with trust in national politics, as we have witnessed throughout the crisis).

[278] Delanty, Gerard. (2010). "The Idea of a European Identity." Philosophy & Social Criticism 36, no. 3–4: 365–376.
[279] Zeitlin, Jonathan, and Francesco Nicoli. (2019). "The European Union Beyond the Polycrisis? Integration and Politicization in an Age of Shifting Cleavages." Journal of European Public Policy 26, no. 7: 1001–1019.

Conclusion

Even if we may tend to forget, the concept of Euroscepticism has a long history, tracing all the way back to the birth of the European integration project, and it has persisted through each stage of the EU's development path. Indeed, since the beginnings of the European Economic Community, there was a certain reluctance among the highest leaders of states, when it came to giving up their sovereignty, in order to each time create a more deeply integrated Union. Nevertheless, besides this concept's long history and persistence, it is evident that just recently (within the past 30 years), it became a more common and frequently mentioned term, even among everyday conversations of European citizens. However, whether someone views a greater prominence of Euroscepticism as a healthy democratic check, or as threat to the Union's existence and future dynamics, it is undeniable that skeptics have, from the inception of the first forms of the Union to the present day, continually influenced the European project

Moreover, as it has been chronologically illustrated throughout this paper, the six major crises that had occurred globally since 2008 onwards have left severe consequences for the Union. In this regard, going back to the *problematique* posed in the very beginning of this paper, the comprehensive and analytical analysis of these crises and their aftermath has gradually led us to the answer of the question to what extent was the rise of Euroscepticism accelerated by the crises that occurred in Europe from 2008 onwards. In this regard, after delving into the historical facts, statistical data and already existing literature within this domain, we can conclude that the aforementioned crises had a large portion of influence in the rise of mistrust towards the EU institutions, which has eventually led to the growing anti-establishment sentiment across the European continent, at the both EU and national level.

Indeed, in the state of emergency, the most crucial form of legitimacy, from the public point of view, is the outcome dimension of this concept, as the citizens mostly concern themselves with the way the crisis is being dealt with, and how severe the consequences are for them individually. Moreover, inevitably these crises had negatively impacted Europeans (although not with the same level across different Member States, which also caused greater fragmentation and disparities across the European continent). However,

as the discontent accumulated throughout the years of hard times and upheavals, in addition to the Union's unpreparedness for these phenomena, the public started questioning the input and throughput level of legitimacy in the EU (citizens participation and Union's accountability and transparency of governance). In a nutshell, being unsatisfied with the results of the Union's actions throughout the crises (but also national policies in which the EU gained competence and can interfere), made the citizens not only question the output legitimacy, but also start analysing more even the throughput and input dimensions.

Moreover, these upheavals gave birth to the strong and augmented rhetoric for populist movements, who profited from any failures the EU had. This later triggered the greater presence of extremist parties, particularly on the far right side of the political spectrum, which have been noted at both the European (in the European Parliament, results of the recent parliamentary elections) and national level.

Nevertheless, mainstreaming of Euroscepticism does not mean an inevitable end to the EU, or the composition of the EU we are now familiar with. However, this phenomenon has led to some fundamental changes in the EU's nature. In this regard, European leaders now must constantly balance national democratic pressures against collective decisions, knowing that public opinion can constrain integration in case the Union's intentions and projects aim too far. In a way, mainstreaming of Euroscepticism has shaped the EU as a form of a "political arena" (which shall be the case as it is a political system), therefore not a remote project of elites, but a contested topic at both national level and among citizens. For this reason, the EU's future steps need to be more cautious, and therefore attentive and receptive to citizens' concerns.

Finally, the erosion of public trust towards the EU institutions throughout the past decades, coinciding with the crises that occurred, was a serious alarm bell, as it stimulated greater reflection and a search for remedies for the existing maladies. In this regard, the correlation between crises and mistrust has been evident, as crises have catalysed distrust, and distrust has opened the door to disruptive political forces. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that rebuilding the lost trust is a long-lasting project, as the EU will inevitably continue to face crises, amongst which most notable at this time are climate change, future economic shocks and variety of security threats,

including the crises that are still ongoing, and each one of them will test public confidence over again, triggering potential scrutiny of how the EU handles these challenges. Moreover, populist skepticism is now deeply-rooted in many electorates and will not vanish overnight, as media environments will remain fractious. And structural issues in the EU's institutional design (the tension between supranational and intergovernmental, the need for unanimity on key decisions and many other challenges) will continue to complicate prompt actions required for the state of emergency, sometimes not meeting up to the public expectations. Thus, part of maintaining trust is fostering resilience in the relationship between the EU and Europeans by being straightforward about lessons learned from past failures and demonstrating institutional adaptation and experience. For instance, after the initial mishandling of the first COVID wave (when countries acted unilaterally), the EU learned and quickly coordinated joint purchases and eventually the NextGenEU fund, showing adaptability. When citizens see institutions learning and adapting, thus humanising governance and making it appear "closer to the ordinary citizen". In contrast, repeating the same mistakes or appearing inflexible can be fatal to credibility. Rebuilding trust, therefore, must also involve managing expectations and being clear about what the EU can and cannot do, in order to avoid disillusionment

Europe's history has shown an ability to emerge stronger from crises, as the EU itself was a response to the crises of the post-war times, showing a path from despair to hope, all through integration. In that inherited spirit, the EU is expected to work in order to turn today's mistrust, by reconnecting with its citizens. Moreover, rebuilding trust is not about propaganda or coercion, but about earning legitimacy through action and engagement. Conversely, if mistrust continues to aggravate, it will just further undermine the very cohesion of the Union. The ongoing task, therefore, would be to solidify the foundation of trust, so that the European project can persist and flourish in the times to come.

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