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The COVID-19 pandemic and the European Union: politics, policies and institutions

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic posed unprecedented challenges to the European Union (EU) and its member states. In the EU, health policy competence has been and remains largely with member states. However, faced with a major external crisis, which more or less affected all member states at the same time, the EU developed a framework within which the member states (and their subnational units) could respond together to the crisis. This introductory article to the Special Issue 'The COVID-19 Pandemic and the European Union,' briefly examines how EU institutions, policies and politics were affected by the crisis. Contrary to earlier crises, the EU responded speedily and effectively this time around. The EU has become increasingly important in crisis management, in part due to the nature of transboundary crises. The EU proved itself to be a good crisis manager on some dimensions, but certainly not on all. The crisis created momentum for collective action and for fast decision-making, even though the legitimacy of some these actions has been subject to limited public scrutiny.

KEYWORDS Crisis; COVID-19; European integration; European Union (EU); health; institutions; pandemic; policies

Introduction

In Europe, the COVID-19 pandemic posed unprecedented challenges to the European Union (EU) and its member states. It tested the EU's crisis management abilities, what European integration meant for its member states and questioned Europe's place in the global political and economic order. This Special Issue examines the EU's response to the pandemic. Although health policy competence remains largely with member states, the EU set the broader frame within which the member states (and their subnational units) responded to the crisis. More generally, the EU's *sui generis* nature – a multi-level system of governance of a polity in the

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making – implies that shocks such as these may contribute to the continued development of the EU as an institution. Indeed, the EU is but one entity, made up of other entities. These can work together or apart, raising the issue of whether the whole is more than the sum of its parts. Against this backdrop, this Special Issue sets out to address the following questions: (i) how have the institutions, policies, and politics of the EU been affected by the pandemic? (ii) how has the EU performed as a crisis manager and why? (iii) What theoretical lessons can be drawn?

After briefly comparing the key features of the pandemic crisis to earlier crises that hit the EU over the last decade, we discuss how EU institutions responded to the pandemic crisis. Next, we examine how EU policies and politics were affected by the crisis before then engaging in an overall assessment of the EU as a crisis manager.

The pandemic crisis – this time is different

The pandemic began as a public health emergency, but quickly morphed into a fully-fledged socio-economic crisis that involved large-scale state interventions in the economy, soaring levels of unemployment, ballooning public debts, disruptions of production and supply chains, overloads of public health systems, repeated lockdowns, disruptions of education systems, limitations of personal liberties, and worsening social inequalities. Social protests and civil unrest also occurred during the pandemic. This crisis was, however, different from previous crises that hit the EU over the last dozen years. In fact, whereas the international financial crisis of 2008 and the sovereign debt crisis that began in 2009 were first and foremost economic events, which had profound socio-political repercussions, the pandemic started off as a health crisis, with devastating socio-economic and political repercussions.

Another important difference as compared to previous crises is that the pandemic was a symmetric shock, albeit with asymmetric effects across the EU (Buti, 2021; Sapir, 2020), and it was seen as caused by a *force majeure*, that is to say, it was nobody's fault. By contrast, during three earlier crises, that is, the 2008 international financial crisis, the sovereign debt crisis in the euro area, and the 2015–2016 migration crisis in the EU, member states considered these earlier shocks to reflect some sort of policy failure. Thus, they did not want to provide unconditional support to fellow countries as they were concerned that doing so would generate a potential moral hazard. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the feeling was that member states' policies had very little to do with the onset of the crisis. Therefore, after the initial EU's failure to act, the pandemic offered a reminder of the need to express solidarity, cooperate across borders –

highlighting the benefits and costs of cooperation in transboundary crisis management – and pursue joint problem-solving in the EU.

EU institutions and the pandemic

The successive crises that hit the EU from 2008 onwards have heightened the debate on the relative power of the main EU bodies within the institutional architecture of the EU (see Goetz & Martinsen, 2021; Laffan, 2016; Schmidt, 2020; Wolff & Ladi, 2020; Zeitlin et al., 2019). Some scholars considered supranational institutions, first and foremost, the European Commission (Bauer & Becker, 2014; Becker et al., 2016) and the European Central Bank (ECB) (Epstein & Rhodes, 2016; Heldt & Mueller, 2021; Verdun, 2015) as having played an important role in crisis management (Schmidt, 2016) and having acquired new competences as a result of it; or as Dehousse (2016) calls it 'new supranationalism.' Others regarded the member states gathered in the Council of the EU as firmly in the driving seat: 'new intergovernmentalism,' (Bickerton et al., 2015; Hodson & Puetter, 2019). Other scholars qualified their assessment, depending on the type of crisis (Börzel & Risse, 2018; Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2018; Schimmelfennig, 2018; Seabrooke & Tsingou, 2019), or the stage of evolution of the crisis (Schmidt, 2019). Similarly, while some scholars criticized the lack of cooperation among EU institutions (Collignon, 2012) and used actor-centred approaches focusing on the role of elites and technocrats (Schulz, 2019), others highlighted instances of 'collaborative leadership' (Nielsen & Smeets, 2017; Smeets & Beach, 2020).

In shaping the EU's response to the COVID-19 crisis, the main EU institutions engaged in a cooperative positive-sum game, which suggests that there was not a clear conflict between the European Commission and the Council (Kassim, 2023), and more generally, between EU supranational institutions and intergovernmental ones. It is noteworthy that the EU institutional level pandemic response occurred within weeks of the United Kingdom (UK) leaving the EU on 31 January 2020. Moreover, from the outset there was good cooperation between the ECB and the national governments gathered in the Council, unlike in the early years of the sovereign debt crisis in the euro area, when the Council was slow and reluctant to act. During the COVID-19 crisis, the EU institution that provided the largest and fastest response was the ECB, which deployed a variety of unconventional monetary policy measures, the most well-known being the Pandemic Emergency Purchase Programme, which temporarily aimed to purchase assets (ECB, 2020). As in previous crises (e.g., Heldt & Mueller, 2021; Verdun, 2015), the ECB was the first one to act because it was effectively the only EU institution that had the capability to do so. Yet, compared to past crises, the ECB's action was swift and bold from the outset, partly because the Bank engaged in policy learning and drew important lessons from previous crises (Quaglia &

Verdun, 2022). Moreover, the ECB's actions were reinforced by financial support measures adopted by the member states in the Council, most notably, the Next Generation EU funding programme, as discussed in the following section.

EU policies and the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic had direct and indirect implications for a vast array of policy areas. Since the pandemic was an acute public health emergency, it significantly affected *health policy* in the EU. In the first days after the eruption of the disease and with the virus spreading fast, local, regional, and national governments were the ones to respond quickly. To contain the virus, the public authorities eventually opted for various restrictions and lockdowns. Moreover, the member states introduced temporary export controls, seized shipments of medicines and medical equipment, issued contracts in highly unusual ways, and failed to activate the EU civil protection mechanism that would share supplies (Brooks et al., 2023). These actions elicited a fair bit of initial criticism about the EU member states responding primarily with national interests in mind, whereas EU bodies were criticized for being slow to act (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2021; Schelkle, 2021). This situation is not fully surprising, however, as health policy is a national competence (Lamping, 2013). Furthermore, there are many differences in how national systems meet the needs of national populations in EU member states (Schneider et al., 2021, p. 41). Immergut (2021, p. 5) describes the differences on the European continent as follows: 'health politics today oscillate between partisan and what has been called "valence" political competition', basically the challenge between providing universal health care of high quality at an affordable price to individuals and society at large.

However, as the pandemic unfolded, so did the EU's response. The Commission proposed and the member states endorsed the creation of a 'European Health Union'. What exactly the European Health Union would be remained unclear, but various legislative proposals put forward to this end aimed to increase the EU's role in the field of health, strengthening its emergency capacities. The mandate and the powers of the existing European Medicines Agency were expanded. Its regulatory remit was strengthened, and the European Medicines Agency took on a role in monitoring and mitigating the shortages of medicinal products and medical devices as well as managing the availability of medicines. The competences of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control were increased and the Early Warning and Response System for communicable diseases (which European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control oversees) was authorized to use digital platforms and artificial intelligence techniques. The Health Emergency, Preparedness and Response Authority was set up by reforming an existing

Commission unit. Moreover, the EU increased the funding available to deal with health and cross-border threats. It also undertook the joint procurement of medical equipment and vaccines, rolled out the 'Digital Covid Certificate', and set up a mechanism for information sharing among competent authorities in the member states (Brooks et al., 2023).

The pandemic also had far-reaching implications for the *free movement of people* and the Schengen system. According to the EU Treaties, people are entitled to move freely from one EU member state to another. The free movement of people was one of the first victims of the COVID-19 pandemic because member states introduced border restrictions in an attempt to contain the spread of the virus. In the initial hectic phase of the pandemic, calls for better coordination of border closures fell on deaf ears and the EU simply issued some soft recommendations. The closure of intra-EU borders not only caused obstacles to the cross-border mobility of workers, but also raised questions concerning the coordination of welfare and health systems cross-border (Blauberger et al., 2023). Yet, most restrictions on the free movement of people were lifted after the summer of 2020 and have been largely avoided in later waves of the pandemic. Moreover, sometimes intra-EU mobility was less restricted than internal mobility, whereby people living in a country undergoing a lockdown were allowed to travel abroad and move across EU borders with only limited constraints, such as passenger location forms, testing, and vaccination obligations (Blauberger et al., 2023).

The pandemic had a devastating impact on the economy and *macroeconomic policies* responded accordingly. The measures taken to contain the spread of the virus, such as lockdowns, the disruption of international trade and global value chain production, lead to the worst economic downturn since World War II (World Bank, 2021). In previous crises, the ECB had done most of the heavy lifting by running a loose monetary policy, whereas member states had pursued tight fiscal policy and the Commission and Council had often required austerity measures from ailing member states (D'Erman & Verdun, 2021). By contrast, during the COVID-19 crisis, the macroeconomic policy mix put in place in the EU was different, comprising instead of a monetary stimulus coupled with a fiscal stimulus (Buti & Messori, 2021). To this end, the EU revised existing macroeconomic tools and devised new ones.

The following economic measures were adopted in March and April 2020: the activation of the general escape clause of the Stability and Growth Pact (i.e., EU fiscal rules in March); the expansion of lending capacity by the European Stability Mechanism (which had been established in response to the sovereign debt crisis, see Gocaj & Meunier, 2013; Verdun, 2015), with the creation of a specific pandemic credit line with significantly lowered conditionality; the establishment of a temporary Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency (SURE) to provide loans to member states to cover increases in public expenditure for the preservation of employment; and

additional guarantees (i.e., funding) by the European Investment Bank to encourage lending to small and medium enterprises.[1] These measures totalled up to €540bn. However, they were all loans – not grants. In July 2020, the Next Generation EU funding programme was agreed to (Armingeon et al., 2022; Buti & Fabbrini, 2023; Howarth & Quaglia, 2021; Vanhercke & Verdun, 2022). It included €360bn in the form of loans and €390bn in the form of grants. Overall, European solidarity was strengthened in the economic field (Schure & Della Posta, 2021).

EU politics and the pandemic

Previous polycrises fostered the politicization of EU institutions and policies (see Hutter & Kriesi, 2019; Schmidt, 2019; Voltolini et al., 2020; Zeitlin et al., 2019), which became subject to domestic political contestation and gave rise to further political transnational conflict (Hooghe & Marks, 2018). There was also open contestation of the very idea of the EU and, hence, of the EU polity as such (Zeitlin et al., 2019). Some authors argued that 'crisisification' became the EU's new *modus operandi* (Rhinard, 2019), stressing the resilience of the EU in the face of crises (e.g., Laffan, 2016; Wolff & Ladi, 2020), while others noted that the EU's 'permanent firefighting in response to crises' was detrimental to the EU governance capabilities, but also its perception by public opinion (Truchlewski et al., 2021, p. 1353).

This trend went hand in hand with the rise of populism and sovereignism, the threat to liberal democracy in (Central and Eastern) Europe and the challenges to the liberal political and economic order internationally (Lake et al., 2021). It led to further challenges to Europe's rule of law in Eastern Europe (Bohle et al., 2023). Whereas populism seems to be slow to respond to the unrest produced by the COVID-19 pandemic and government responses (Thiele, 2022), sovereignism experienced ups and downs during the evolution of the pandemic (Biancalana & Mazzoleni, 2021). There was also collective mobilization during the pandemic, especially through the organization of protest events in various countries (Kriesi & Oana, 2023). However, as the COVID-19 pandemic moved from its acute stage to a longer-term endemic stage, new questions arose about maintaining support for vaccination programs and disease surveillance as well as ongoing worker shortages and supply-chain issues. Moreover, seemingly unrelated new crises, such as the war in Ukraine and the question of whether the rise of inflation during 2021 and 2022 is due to be short-lived or persistent, posed new challenges (Agarwal et al., 2022; Anghel & Jones, 2023).

EU as a crisis manager

The EU was not designed for responding to crises and its institutional incompleteness weakened its ability to do so (Goetz & Martinsen, 2021; Jones et al.,

2016; Laffan, 2016). According to some scholars, the 'polycrises' and/or 'transboundary' crises (which crossed geographical borders and had effects across several policy domains (Caporaso, 2018)) that hit the EU over the last decade tested existing institutions and policies (Laffan, 2016) and wore out the EU governance capabilities, fostering a state of perpetual emergency and reactive policy-making (Jones et al., 2016, 2021). Initially, the EU's response to the pandemic crisis seemed to confirm these concerns as the onset of the pandemic was characterized by a lack of cooperation on certain matters in the EU (for instance, border closures and temporary bans on intra-EU export of medical equipment).

Subsequently, despite some blunders made along the way (e.g., concerning vaccine procurement, notably, the contracts with AstraZeneca (Nielsen, 2021)), the EU engaged in 'polity maintenance' that is 'a deliberate strategy driven by the primary objective of safeguarding the polity as such', subordinating 'narrower policy aims to the ultimate objective of polity preservation' (Ferrera et al., 2021, p. 1332). The pandemic crisis reinforced a trend that had already begun in response to the previous crises (see Falkner, 2016; Laffan, 2016), the EU opted for 'more Europe', meaning, new competences transferred to the EU level, or at any rate, joint decision-making at the EU level, rather than 'less Europe' (Goetz & Martinsen, 2021; Ladi & Tsarouhas, 2020), with the main exception of Schengen. For instance, Goetz and Martinsen (2021) note that 'the EU gained competences at the expense of the national level' due to the 'combination of extreme time pressures and high functional pressures' (p.1008).

Overall, how has the EU performed as a crisis manager? It is possible to identify three criteria that can be used for this assessment. The first criterion concerns the detection of potential threats, gathering and analysing information on that threat. The second criterion is the mobilization of scarce resources, which requires critical (often collective) decisions and coordination efforts. The third criterion concerns the legitimacy of the response. 'A response may be effective, but if a majority of people does not support the response, it is hard to speak of successful crisis management' (Boin & Rhinard, 2023, p. 657). On the whole, the EU acted as a proficient crisis manager. According to the three criteria outlined above, the EU acted quickly after a somewhat slow start and was very effective in mobilizing a variety of resources (Boin & Rhinard, 2023). In fact, the EU's handling of successive crises over the last decade had fostered the development of crisis management capacities across policies (Boin et al., 2013). New instruments were set in place over time – including the EWRS (for communicating disease outbreaks), the ADNS (for emerging animal health problems), ECURIE (for communicating urgent information in the event of a nuclear emergency), and CSIRT (for notifying and responding to incidents of cyber-attacks) – and some of them were deployed during the pandemic. At the same time, major policy choices were made by the EU without a significant

public debate, which is understandable due to the time constraints during the unfolding of a crisis, though raises potential questions about the perceived legitimacy of the measures taken.

Conclusion

The EU has become increasingly important in crisis management, in part due to the nature of transboundary crises. We can now turn to the questions that inform this Special Issue and that are set out in the introduction of this short contribution. Several contributions in this Special Issue suggest that, first, the EU responded to the pandemic in a rather quick and forceful way. Having experienced a number of crises between 2007 and 2019, EU institutions decided that now was the time to show more fulsome support to its member states. It was not intended to be fully 'unconditional', but, nevertheless, it showed solidarity, of various kinds. Second, what have been the repercussions of the pandemic crisis for the institutions, policies and politics of the EU? Several authors in this collection argue that the EU had to show that it could deliver services to EU citizens; in this respect, it was a mixed success. Especially early on, member states did not right away obtain the support from the EU they needed. Member state governments' first inclination was to make decisions on their own and did so fast. Within months, a more comprehensive EU response emerged, albeit sometimes after making blunders (e.g., the problems that emerged in vaccine procurement). It was not at all easy, especially because COVID-19 broke out in Europe in different waves and not all member states were experiencing the same types of problems at the same time. In some countries, such as Italy, the first wave was much worse than in other countries. In other countries (for instance, Germany), by contrast, the fourth wave turned out much worse. Third, what theoretical lessons can we draw from this episode? Some responses reminded us of neofunctionalism, whereas others were forged in an intergovernmental setting. Yet, others built on learning from previous experiences or drew on established trajectories (see also Kamkhaji & Radaelli, 2017).

The EU has provided an *ad hoc* response to the pandemic. In reacting in this manner, the EU has also made progress toward deeper integration. However, it is not a route that has gone unchallenged. Along the way, there have been actors – first and foremost, member states – that have challenged this path. Moreover, major impending challenges are now facing the EU, ranging from the war in Ukraine to strong inflationary pressure combined with a potential economic recession.

Note

1. Moreover, the EU applied, in flexible way, its competition policy and eased prudential rules for banks and other financial intermediaries.

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