Layered Integration Under Pressure: How Successive Crises Reshaped European Union Institutions

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Layered Integration Under Pressure: How Successive Crises Reshaped European Union Institutions. This article examines how the European Union (EU) has responded to four major crises – the Eurozone crisis, the migration crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the war in Ukraine – and how these episodes have reshaped its governance. Drawing on Jean Monnet's perspective that crises drive integration, it investigates how these events tested the EU's resilience and governance mechanisms. It asks whether joint action increased, which institutional actors were empowered, and how treaty constraints were managed. The analysis shows that while supranational coordination deepened in each case, the extent and form of integration varied by policy domain. Core institutions such as the European Commission and the European Central Bank repeatedly gained influence, but their roles were shaped by political sensitivities and functional pressures. Rather than revising the EU's legal framework, crisis responses relied on informal coordination, off-budget instruments, and the creative extension of existing tools. The findings suggest that EU governance evolves through incremental adaptation and institutional layering, producing a flexible but uneven mode of integration under pressure.

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Introduction

Jean Monnet, a key architect of European integration, famously argued that crises propel Europe forward (Issing 2020). While rooted in a grand political vision, European integration has often advanced primarily under crisis conditions. The evolution of the European Union (EU) reflects a distinct 'regulatory state' model, one that incorporates core sovereign functions without developing state-like fiscal, administrative, or coercive capacities at the supranational level (Majone 1996; Genschel – Jachtenfuchs 2014, 2016; Caporaso 1996).

Since 2008, the EU has faced a series of major crises—including the global financial crisis, the 2015 migration crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the war in Ukraine. These shocks have exposed functional challenges, distributional conflicts, and the politicization of European integration (Schimmelfennig 2018; Hutter – Kriesi 2020; Boin – Rhinard 2023). While both Member States

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(MSs) and international organizations have been central in responding to these events, this article focuses specifically on the actions initiated by the EU itself.

Crises have repeatedly tested the EU's resilience, revealing core tensions in its governance. These include the phenomenon of 'constraining dissensus'—the growing politicization of European integration, often driven by Eurosceptic parties and popular sovereignty concerns, which limits the room for further integration (Hooghe – Marks 2009); the strategy of 'depoliticization through supranational delegation'—where controversial issues are shifted away from political arenas and into the hands of non-majoritarian, often technocratic, supranational institutions (Moravcsik 1998); and 'integration by stealth'—a mode of incremental, often opaque integration that seeks to avoid public scrutiny and contestation (Genschel – Jachtenfuchs 2014). These dynamics raise important questions about the EU's capacity to manage crises and the implications of its crisis responses for the broader trajectory of integration (Jabko – Luhman 2020).

This study diverges from conventional crisis management analyses by emphasizing the role of EU governance mechanisms and institutional responses, rather than focusing solely on intergovernmental decision-making (Bickerton et al. 2015; Puetter 2014), legal frameworks (Dehousse 2011), or external shocks (Schimmelfennig 2018). Existing literature often underestimates how EU institutions adapt, expand their roles, and creatively navigate treaty constraints during crises. By exploring how crises foster incremental institutional change, informal coordination, and the extension of supranational actors' influence (Genschel – Jachtenfuchs 2016; Bremer et al. 2020), this article addresses these gaps and argues that such dynamics are essential for understanding the EU's evolving capacity for crisis governance.

In doing so, the article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of EU crisis responses by clarifying the limitations of prior analyses—particularly their tendency to overlook supranational leadership, legal innovations, and the increasing reliance on informal mechanisms, off-budget tools, and legal creativity (Falkner 2018; Jabko – Luhman 2020). This approach aligns with a growing body of research that highlights the adaptive, flexible, and uneven nature of EU integration in times of crisis (Fioretos et al. 2016; Sabatier – Jenkins-Smith 1993).

Concretely, this study investigates the EU's supranational responses to major, unexpected crises that generated spillovers into both domestic and international contexts. It addresses the following research questions:

1. Do crises prompt enhanced joint action at the EU level?
2. Do responses strengthen similar or differing actors across crises? Are they characterized primarily by intergovernmental deliberation, as

suggested by ‘new intergovernmentalism’ (Bickerton et al. 2015; Puetter 2014), or do they involve supranational institutions such as the European Commission (EC), the European Central Bank (ECB), or the European Parliament (EP) under the Community method (Dehousse 2011)?
3. What strategies have been used to navigate treaty constraints or unanimity requirements?

Governance in crises

Crisis management lacks a unified theory, balancing rapid responses with legitimacy concerns (Angelis 2017; Christensen et al. 2016). Nevertheless, crises often serve as catalysts for institutional evolution, creating opportunities for transformation by exposing the unsustainability of the status quo (Ahlquist et al. 2020; Heinemann – Grigoriadis 2016). They disrupt entrenched interests, enabling changes once seen as infeasible (Randma-Liiv – Kickert 2017). Scholars broadly agree that crises spur learning and reforms through functional pressure, urgency, and voter demand for action (Sabatier – Jenkins-Smith 1993; Kingdon 2002; Ladi – Tsarouhas 2020).

Historical institutionalists emphasize "critical junctures," moments that allow significant divergence from incremental paths (Fioretos et al. 2016). This perspective sees crises as opportunities for substantial shifts toward new equilibria. Meanwhile, ideational studies highlight the role of transformative ideas in extreme conditions, pointing to coordination, information sharing, and public communication as critical areas (Hannah et al. 2022; Béland – Cox 2011).

Other scholars are more skeptical, arguing crises often hinder change due to time pressures, political dynamics, and resource constraints (Boin et al. 2017; Blondin – Boin 2020). Governance research underscores the importance of formal and informal arrangements in achieving coherence and coordination (Scott – Merton 2022; Jordan – Schout 2006).

EU scholarship often contrasts new intergovernmentalism with neofunctionalism. New intergovernmentalism highlights a shift from supranational institutions to national governments and intergovernmental bodies as drivers of EU integration, favoring consensus-based decision-making (Hix – Høyland 2022; Bickerton et al. 2015). Crisis pressures challenge sovereignty and integration dynamics, with Falkner (2018) identifying conditions under which governments are sidelined by actors like the European Commission (henceforth EC), the European Central Bank (henceforth ECB), the European Parliament (henceforth EP), or expert committees. These insights illuminate the complex interplay of governance, decision-making, and crisis responses within the EU.

How we approach the topic

To answer our questions, we adopt a consistent methodological approach for each crisis. We define each crisis briefly, focusing on externally induced shocks: the economic and financial crisis, the migration crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the conflict in Ukraine (including the energy crisis) from 2008 to 2024. These crises, spanning multi-sectoral policies, often lacked exclusive EU-level competencies. The table below indicates that explored crises affect multi-sectoral policies, and supranational organizations did not have exclusive competencies in those policies.

Table 1: **Relevant Crises and the EU's Position at the Onset of Each Crisis**

Type of crisis	**Most affected EU policy areas**
Economic and financial crisis	Economic governance and financial regulation (fiscal and economic policy, bank/financial market regulation)
Migration crisis	Asylum and migration policy Schengen area and border control
COVID-19 pandemic	Protection of health policy Schengen area and border control Economic and social policy
War in Ukraine	Security and defense policy Fiscal policy

Source: authors

Then we examine the responses to a given crisis adopted at the EU supranational level[4]. Responses are often viewed as intentional and authoritative actions aimed at specific challenges. Chambers et al. (2005) articulate this concept by describing it as "human actions to address specific issues, needs, opportunities, or problems in ecosystem governance and management." This definition can also be extended to the context of the EU's responses, where it similarly applies to deliberate actions taken to manage and govern various issues and opportunities within its jurisdiction. This encompasses a range of actions or policies enacted and executed by EU institutions to tackle specific issues or circumstances within its MSs. Within our research, we therefore examine the following aspects:

[4] In the context of the EU, *the supranational level* refers to a mode of cooperation where power and decision-making authority are conferred upon an entity that operates above the national governments of the MSs. Examples of this include the EP and the EC, along with their associated competencies. The EU policies are principally guided by the European Council, composed of the twenty-seven heads of state and government, with the addition of the European Council President and the EC President.

- establishment or strengthening of mechanisms for coordination between MSs and/or EU-level organizations
- establishment of policy strategies, rules, processes, or powers by legislation
- establishment of financial instruments or funding mechanisms
- establishment of EU-level organizations or significant modification of powers and authority of existing EU-level organizations.

In addition to identifying the EU responses to examined crises, we also explore which EU supranational organization adopted the given response, which organizations implemented the response, and whether it was adopted as a temporary or permanent response. In this context, the EU supranational actors and the EU governance mechanisms are explored.

As for the supranational actors, we differentiate between political supranational organizations, such as the European Parliament, and administrative supranational bodies with delegated powers, including the EC and EU agencies.

The EU governance mechanisms reflect the diverse ways in which decision-making and coordination occur within the EU, depending on the policy area and the specific powers granted by the EU treaties. The EU governance system is characterized by a combination of supranational and intergovernmental elements (Fabbrini 2019). The EU's decision-making processes can also involve a combination of both approaches. A typical example is an ordinary legislative procedure that is in its substance co-decision or the community method when adopting the EU legislation - the EC proposes legislation, and the EP and the Council of the EU jointly decide.

Many EU decisions are made by the EC and EU agencies, and they are often referred to as "administrative decisions" or "agency decisions.” These decisions are typically administrative in nature and are related to the agency's specific mandate. Within this context, unilateral steering can be mentioned. It refers to a more centralized form of decision-making, where an EU supranational entity makes decisions without the need for consensus or input from others to influence or determine a course of action or policy decision. Although this concept is relatively rare in the EU context, supranational organizations such as the EC, the ECB, or the Court of Justice of the EU have certain powers that allow them to make decisions or take actions that are binding on MSs. Within the intergovernmental method, decisions are primarily made by MSs with the Council of European Union and European Council as main actors. It is also relevant to mention that some EU governance mechanisms do not require all MSs to participate, the example being enhanced cooperation.

To pinpoint specific EU interventions in response to the given crisis, we employ the following methodological approaches. In the cases of the economic/financial crisis, migration crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic, we conduct a comprehensive literature survey. In the case of the Ukraine war, which began in February 2022, there is a lack of available research. Consequently, we explore formal policy materials issued by relevant EU institutions and by selected countries to augment our understanding. To validate our findings regarding all four crises, we also conducted several semi-structured interviews to ensure we covered principal interventions occurring in the EU. These six interviews were conducted between September 2023 and February 2024 with policy practitioners working on a range of EU-related agendas. Owing to access considerations and the authors' professional networks within the Slovak policy-making landscape, all interviews took place in Bratislava and focused on policy practitioners based there. The interviewees included actors operating at both national and transnational levels: Members of the European Parliament, European Commission officials, and Bratislava-based civil servants working in the Government Office of the Slovak Republic (including units responsible for the Ukraine agenda and the Recovery Plan) as well as the Budgetary Council.

The economic and financial crisis (the eurozone crisis)

The Eurozone crisis marked the foundational moment in the EU's evolving crisis governance, setting a precedent for institutional experimentation, gradual supranationalization, and flexible treaty interpretation. This section traces how these dynamics began to crystallize in the EU's response to the financial and sovereign debt crisis, which unfolded as a multi-year debt crisis within the EU, commencing in 2009 and reaching its zenith between 2010 and 2012. Its origins trace back to the initial phase in 2008, characterized by a banking crisis originating in the United States, which witnessed the collapse of banks and other financial institutions on a global scale. In response, various governments implemented diverse support and rescue measures to safeguard these financial institutions.

According to Randma-Liiv and Kickert (2017), the 2008 global crisis impacted European countries to varying extents. Southern Europe, Eastern Europe, and the United Kingdom and Ireland were among the hardest-hit regions, while continental Western European countries experienced milder effects, and the Nordic countries were relatively unscathed by the crisis (Kickert et al. 2015; Darvas 2010).

Several EU countries (Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, and Spain) sought financial assistance from the EC, the ECB, and the International Monetary Fund (henceforth IMF), collectively known as the Troika. As the EU did not have experience in designing financial instruments in this context, the Troika (European Parliament 2014) assumed temporary responsibility for coordinating and implementing multilateral responses to these national crises. Thus, Greece, Ireland, and Portugal required bailouts in 2010, with Greece receiving a second bailout in 2012 (Copelovitch et al. 2016). Spanish banks received a bailout in 2012, and Cyprus was similarly bailed out by the EC, the IMF, and the ECB in 2013.

At the beginning of the crisis, the EU supranational level did not possess exclusive or shared fiscal and banking competencies, nor did it have exclusive authority in the economic governance of its MSs, as delineated by the EU treaties, which would facilitate an immediate supranational response to the situation at hand.

As outlined in the table below, in response to the Eurozone crisis, the EU initially engaged in coordinating responses. Subsequently, the EU developed several financial instruments, enhanced existing competencies, reinforced supranational structures, and established new regulations in the specified area.

In June 2010, Eurozone countries established a special purpose vehicle - the European Financial Stability Facility - and extended it to countries such as Ireland, Portugal, and Greece. Around the same time, the European Financial Stability Mechanism was formed. It was a financial assistance instrument available under the EU treaty for all 27 MSs. These mechanisms facilitated the redistribution of funds among EU MSs in the form of loans or financial assistance that were expected to be repaid, and specific conditions were attached to all the financial assistance programs as part of the overall framework.

In 2012 (European Stability Mechanism 2019), the European Stability Mechanism was established as a permanent response to the financial crisis. This institution was created to address financial challenges within the EU. Unlike its predecessors, the European Stability Mechanism is a permanent institution and operates as a multilateral fund responsible for extending loans to MSs facing financial difficulties. Importantly, these loans are provided only when the stability of the Eurozone is at risk, as outlined in the work of Jabko and Luhman (2020). The European Stability Mechanism should function as an intergovernmental institution and should only be activated as a measure of last resort aimed at safeguarding the integrity of the Eurozone.

It is worth noting that horizontal transfers are utilized, and no direct EU resources are involved in this process. However, EU institutions play a regulatory, coordinating, or facilitating role in managing these transfers, as discussed by Bremer et al. (2020).In addition to intergovernmental EU governance mechanisms, EU supranational organizations also initiated and adopted some interventions. In response to financial crises, the ECB adopted several instruments to provide relief to deficit countries and banks. During the crisis, it bought bonds from highly indebted Eurozone countries and provided banks with long-term cheap credit. Whereas the mandate of the ECB was not formally revised, these measures have made the ECB more like a ‘lender of last resort.’ In addition, the ECB was vested with new competencies in the formation of a banking union (a comprehensive framework of policies and institutions designed to shift responsibility for banking policy from the national to the EU level in various EU MSs) in 2013 – 2014 (European Central Bank 2014).

In 2010, a new policy coordination instrument known as the European Semester was adopted by the European Council and the Council of the European Union, along with initiatives and coordination provided by the EC to coordinate economic policies and reforms among MSs. The European Semester focuses on enhancing, harmonizing, and centralizing the coordination of national budgets and economic policies. It empowers the EC to scrutinize MSs' budgets and evaluate whether the proposed national budgetary plans align with the criteria outlined in the 'Six Pack' regulations (see below). As the calendar year ends and the 'Semester cycle' commences, the EC releases its Annual Growth Survey and Alert Mechanism Report. The latter identifies MSs warranting an in-depth review due to potential imbalances that could disrupt the smooth operation of their economies. These reviews may trigger the Macroeconomic Imbalances Procedure integrated into the European Semester. If the imbalances are deemed excessive, the Excessive Imbalance Procedure is initiated. Conversely, if the imbalances are not classified as excessive, the 'preventive arm' of the Macroeconomic Imbalances Procedure is activated, and the EC’s recommended policy responses are integrated into the Country Specific Recommendations (Pantazatou 2015).

Moreover, reform of the Stability and Growth Pact and fiscal regulation (e.g., in the form of supervision) has also been strengthened in a series of legislative acts (most notably the ‘Six-Pack’ and ‘Two-Pack’ legislation). Within these economic governance reforms in the EU, the macroeconomic imbalance procedure acts as an example of a tool to manage imbalances within EU countries. Within the “six pack” legislation, for example, independent fiscal institutions were formed in EU MSs to conduct fiscal oversight. The "Six Pack" refers to a package of six legislative measures introduced by the EU as part of a broader effort to strengthen economic governance within the Eurozone. One of its key components is the introduction of ex-ante fiscal surveillance, which means that national budgets are now subject to EU-level oversight before they are formally adopted. MSs are obliged to establish a national balanced budget rule and procedure in addition to the EU-level rule and monitoring. The European Stability Mechanism and the ECB only assist countries that commit to such a procedure, and the Six-Pack was introduced.

Table 2: **Overview of EU responses to the Eurozone crisis**

Name of response; Type of response	**Body that adopted it; Year**	**Duration**	**Main implementing body**
Troika; coordination, collaborative group	EC; 2010	Temporary	IMF, EC, ECB
European Semester; rules/processes/powers by legislation	European Council; 2010	Permanent	EC - DG ECFIN
The European Financial Stability Facility; financial instrument/authority	Eurozone MSs (Intergovernmental agreement); 2010	Temporary	Intergovernmental organization formed by the Eurozone MSs. Operated as a separate legal entity outside formal EU structures.
The European Financial Stability Mechanism; financial instrument/authority	Council of the EU; 2010	Temporary	EC - DG ECFIN
The European Stability Mechanism; financial instrument/authority	Eurozone MSs (Intergovernmental agreement); 2012	Permanent	Intergovernmental organization - by the Eurozone MSs
New competencies in ECB; new financial instrument and authority	ECB; 2012	Permanent	ECB
The Single Supervisory Mechanism; rules, processes, powers by legislation	Co-decision; 2014	Permanent	ECB
The Fiscal Compact Inc. Macroeconomic Imbalances Procedure; rules, processes, powers by legislation	Intergovernmental treaty; 2012	Permanent	EC - DG ECFIN
The Six-Pack Legislation; rules, processes, powers by legislation	Co-decision; 2011 (enforced in 2013)	Permanent	EC
The Two-Pack legislation; rules, processes, powers by legislation	Co-decision; 2013	Permanent	EC

Source: authors

The above responses indicate that several policies and financial instruments for fiscal coordination among EU MSs were developed alongside tools for banking oversight at a supranational level. This response to the crisis signifies a shift towards increased joint action at a supranational level in fiscal and banking policies, as well as in broader economic governance.

The overview highlights that, in response to the crisis, not only were additional competencies granted to supranational administrative bodies such as the EC and the ECB, but also a new intergovernmental structure (outside of traditional EU agencies) was established by Eurozone countries, specifically the European Financial Stability Facility and the European Stability Mechanism. Furthermore, enhanced fiscal coordination was achieved through the Fiscal Compact, an intergovernmental treaty ratified by most EU MSs (25 out of 27), operating outside the conventional EU legislative process. The use of intergovernmental treaties reflects a strategic choice by MSs to pursue deeper integration in this area. The community method was applied as well. Unilateral steering was applied by supranational institutions, including the EC and ECB. Thus, this table illustrates the shift from emergency, intergovernmental coordination to more institutionalized forms of fiscal governance. It supports the argument that the crisis catalyzed incremental supranationalization and empowered actors like the ECB and the Commission, while treaty constraints were managed through off-budget and intergovernmental innovations.

Key findings:

- The Eurozone crisis initiated substantive transformations in EU governance structures, most notably in the areas of fiscal surveillance and banking regulation.
- Supranationalization proceeded incrementally: while early interventions were framed through intergovernmental mechanisms such as the European Financial Stability Facility, subsequent developments—including the establishment of the European Stability Mechanism and the expansion of the European Central Bank's (ECB) mandate—reflected a gradual shift toward more permanent supranational instruments.
- New coordination frameworks such as the European Semester and the Macroeconomic Imbalances Procedure marked the institutionalization of EU-level economic monitoring and policy oversight.
- The crisis demonstrated a pattern of legal and institutional innovation whereby treaty constraints were circumvented through off-budget instruments and intergovernmental agreements, a strategy subsequently replicated in later crises.
- The European Commission and the ECB emerged as central actors in crisis governance, establishing a pattern of supranational leadership that reappeared in the COVID-19 and Ukraine responses.

The migration crisis

In contrast to other crises, the EU’s migration response exposed the limits of supranational capacity, revealing a fragmented governance field shaped more by intergovernmental bargaining than by institutional consolidation. Building on the foundational shifts observed in the economic crisis, this section examines how migration governance diverged. In 2015 and 2016, a significant influx of people from war-torn and crisis-ridden regions, such as the Syrian Arab Republic, Afghanistan, and Iraq, sought asylum in EU countries, including Germany[5] (with 441,900 first-time asylum claims in 2015 and 722,400 in 2016), Italy, and Sweden (UNHCR, 2016, 2017). During this period, there were more than 1.8 million irregular border crossings at the EU's external borders, with nearly half (885,386) of these crossings occurring on the Eastern Mediterranean route from Turkey to Greece (Sahin-Mencutek et al. 2022). Countries like Hungary, located on the EU's eastern border, were also heavily impacted by irregular migration (Council on Foreign Relations 2015). Destination states such as Germany, Austria, France, Belgium, and Sweden unilaterally suspended the Schengen agreement on borderless travel and reintroduced border controls (Biermann et al. 2019; Zaun 2020). Such MSs’ decisions have a significant impact on the free movement of persons in the EU (Mokrá 2016). Many European governments, therefore, found themselves inexperienced in managing refugees and confronted with an unprecedented situation.

The migration policy in the EU is highly decentralized, and the two main EU regulations pertain to this issue: the Schengen Area, which constitutes an area without internal borders, and the Dublin Convention, which governs the registration of asylum seekers upon their entry into EU territory. However, in 2015, the Dublin system ceased to be effective as many EU MSs struggled to process the overwhelming number of asylum applications. Even the most refugee-friendly states responded by closing their borders (Jabko – Luhman 2020). As a result, this migration crisis prompted select MSs to make financial adaptations, prioritize development assistance policies, and redefine asylum policies (Bech et al. 2017). As under Schengen and Dublin, EU MSs retained the right to unilaterally reintroduce border controls and to return asylum seekers to the first entry country, some EU MSs have pursued the re-nationalization of policies related to border controls and other measures to protect or assert their national interests.

The EU responded to decisions made by several national governments to partially re-nationalize border policies to uphold the Schengen system. The

[5] The German public administration received over 1.1 million applications for asylum in 2015 and 2016, a great many number more applications than received in other EU countries, such as Italy (ranking second in the EU with over 200,000 applications in the two years) or France (ranking third in the EU with slightly over 150,000 applications) (UNHCR, 2016; 2017).

responses were varied and included several Council of the EU discussions and statements, coordination of relocations, the establishment of hotspots, the development of a joint policy strategy, and the strengthening of competencies for existing EU agencies.

To better coordinate the outbreak of the migration crisis, intergovernmental coordination measures were applied first. Concretely, the Council of the EU activated its Integrated Political Crisis Response. The Council of the EU also adopted a temporary emergency relocation mechanism for refugees, and its implementation was coordinated by several supranational organizations, such as DG HOME, FRONTEX, and EASO. This mechanism aimed to alleviate the disproportionate pressure on certain MSs where the majority of migrants and refugees were arriving, notably countries like Greece and Italy. Solidarity with immigrant countries was a highly salient issue during the given period. A qualified majority of MSs thus established the quota system (Jabko – Luhman 2020).

In addition, the EU Regional Task Force was established in 2015, consisting of offices located in distressed border areas. These offices were set up to facilitate information exchange and enhance coordination among EU agencies involved in managing the migration crisis (European Border and Coast Guard Day 2016). Specifically, they were situated in Catania, Italy, and Piraeus, Greece. As part of this initiative, a permanent staff member from DG HOME was stationed at the EU Regional Task Force in Catania, with another team from DG HOME located in Piraeus (Frontex 2023). Several MSs' coordination mechanisms were also active, for instance, the Western Balkans Contact Group (European Commission 2015) and MED 5.[6] They have brought several policy initiatives related to tackling this crisis.

The hotspot approach was introduced by the EC in May 2015 as part of a broader policy initiative known as the 'European Agenda on Migration' (EC 2015). It aimed to manage irregular maritime arrivals, involving activities such as fingerprinting, registration, debriefing, and organizing returns. MSs had the flexibility to determine the specific characteristics of the hotspots, and both Greece and Italy implemented them. This approach emphasizes inter-agency collaboration, with national experts deployed and operating under the coordination of a specific agency to provide operational assistance to national administrations.

In addition to MSs' initiatives (Mokrá 2017) and intergovernmental coordination, several EU supranational organizations were strengthened. Here,

[6] A group of five southern MMs that are most affected by migration issues due to their geographical location. These countries typically include Italy, Spain, Greece, Cyprus, and Malta. They are situated on the Mediterranean Sea, making them the first point of entry for many migrants and refugees attempting to reach Europe from Africa, the Middle East, and Asia.

FRONTEX, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, headquartered in Warsaw, must be mentioned. It was established in 2004 to enhance the efforts of national authorities and coordinate the implementation of Schengen rules. Originally, its role focused on coordination, training, and assistance. However, in 2016, significant structural changes were introduced to expand its operational powers. FRONTEX is now responsible for monitoring migratory flows, assessing risks, identifying potential new threats, and highlighting vulnerabilities in the EU's external borders. This expansion has led to increases in human resources, financial resources, and the geographical coverage of FRONTEX (Niemann – Speyer 2018). In addition, EASO was transformed into EUAA by co-decision, and EUAA expanded its mandate, operational support, and role in monitoring were enhanced. Niemann and Speyer (2018: 28) argue that the European Border and Coast Guard represents an increase in both the depth and breadth of integration.

Table 3: **Overview of EU responses to the migration crisis**

Name of response; Type of response	**Body that adopted it; Year**	**Duration**	**Main implementing body**
Temporary emergency relocation mechanism for refugees; rules, processes, or powers by legislation	Council of the EU - the Justice and Home Affairs Council; 2015	Temporary	EC - DG HOME
EU Regional Task Force/Hotspots; coordination mechanism	EC; 2015	Temporary	EC - DG HOME and other EU agencies
Western Balkans Contact Group/MED 5; coordination mechanism	Between selected MSs; 2015	Temporary	Intergovernmental between selected MSs
European Agenda on Migration; policy strategy	EC; 2015		EC - DG HOME
FRONTEX; rules, processes, or powers by legislation	Co-decision; 2016	Permanent	FRONTEX / EU agency
EASO to EUAA; rules, processes, or powers by legislation	Co-decision; 2021	Permanent	EU agency

Source: authors

This overview of responses indicates a shift towards joint action at a supranational level in migration policy. Although this crisis triggered the strengthening of several EU supranational organizations and thus the integration of partial migration policies, the main responsibilities in this regard lie with MSs.

The crisis led to the strengthening of several EU actors, particularly existing EU agencies such as FRONTEX (the European Border and Coast Guard Agency) and EASO/EUAA (the European Asylum Support Office/European Union Agency for Asylum).

Regarding the EU governance mechanisms deployed, both the community method and an intergovernmental approach were utilized. Several MSs also coordinated efforts outside of EU supranational platforms. Unilateral steering by the EU supranational institutions was observed, notably by the EC in the formulation of the European Migration Agenda and in the coordination of hotspots. Therefore, the measures captured here point to a largely intergovernmental crisis response, with limited supranationalization. While FRONTEX and EASO gained some new responsibilities, the governance architecture remained fragmented, highlighting the sensitivity of this policy domain and the EU's constrained institutional reach.

Key findings:

- The 2015–2016 migration crisis revealed the fragmented and decentralized nature of EU-level governance in asylum and migration policy, where competencies remained primarily with Member States.
- While instances of supranationalization occurred—most notably the transformation of the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) into the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) and the expansion of FRONTEX's mandate—the predominant mode of response was intergovernmental, relying on ad hoc coordination mechanisms and coalitions of willing Member States (e.g., the Western Balkans Contact Group).
- The European Commission's role, although visible, remained limited to coordination and facilitation, with action channeled through temporary mechanisms rather than permanent institutional reform—reflecting a broader pattern of institutional bricolage.
- Compared to other crises, the migration crisis produced weaker supranational leadership, but it nonetheless contributed to the incremental strengthening of EU border management agencies and introduced the principle of conditional solidarity among Member States.
- The case illustrates the EU's selective and domain-sensitive approach to supranationalization, where institutional deepening is highly contingent on Member State consensus and the political salience of the policy area.

The covid-19 pandemic

The pandemic marked a high point in supranational crisis governance, repurposing earlier tools of fiscal integration while pushing EU institutions, particularly the EC, into new domains like public health. Whereas the migration crisis revealed institutional limits, COVID-19 saw the EU pivot towards centralized action, as this section explores. The COVID-19 pandemic began with an outbreak in the Chinese city of Wuhan in December 2019. Within a matter of months, COVID-19 affected 209 countries, prompting European governments to take measures to address this unprecedented situation. Due to limited common competencies in the health arena, the EU supranational level started with coordination responses, followed by several initiatives aimed at developing financial instruments, joint actions, and strengthening EU supranational structures.

In terms of the coordination responses, the Council of the EU activated the intergovernmental coordination mechanism Integrated Political Crisis Response. In March 2020, the EC established an inter-institutional group for the exchange of information and coordination among institutions regarding measures to curb the spread of COVID-19. It was chaired by the EC and included representatives from EU institutions and bodies. Throughout 2020, they met 48 times to share information and best practices and align measures across institutions (Policy Department for Budgetary Affairs 2022).

Another coordination mechanism, which also served as a decision-making entity in some instances, was the Steering Board established at the EC level to expedite coordination and decision-making in vaccine management. Comprising one representative from each MS and co-chaired by the EC and a MS representative (European Court of Auditors 2022), the Steering Board oversaw negotiations and approved contracts before their finalization. Additionally, the Board designated a Joint Negotiation Team responsible for contract negotiations, which included representatives from seven MSs selected from the Steering Board members, alongside EC officials from various Directorates-General (DGs). While the inclusion of MS representatives suggests a collaborative approach, the EC's centralized and direct involvement in crisis response indicates elements of unilateral steering by the EC. Criticisms have been voiced concerning its institutional setting within the EC and the lack of transparent processes and information sharing.

Numerous actions have been taken to coordinate the response to the COVID-19 outbreak in the EU. These measures include the establishment of the EU Digital COVID Certificate and the EU Vaccines Strategy formed by DG SANTE. EC developed the EU Vaccines Strategy, and a vaccine procurement task force was established to enhance vaccine production capacity within the EU. This task force served as a central hub for manufacturers seeking support and aimed to identify and resolve production bottlenecks and supply chain issues (European Commission, n.d.a.). In June 2020, the EC approved an agreement for the EU to procure COVID-19 vaccines on behalf of MSs. The agreement also involved negotiations regarding terms and conditions, all geared toward ensuring a swift and equitable distribution. This initiative marked the Union's inaugural collective vaccination program.

To mitigate the *socio-economic impact* of COVID-19, the EU bolstered its competencies in economic and social aid. This involved enhancing the fiscal capacity of the EU (mainly DG ECFIN) through the common program known as SURE (the temporary[7] Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency) (European Commission, n.d.b.). SURE's primary responsibility was to provide financial aid of up to €100 billion through loans offered on favorable terms by the EU to MSs facing economic challenges. While this loan was primarily intended to safeguard jobs within MSs, it could also be utilized for health-related measures in the workplace.

Another EU funding mechanism was REACT-EU. It complemented and extended the existing cohesion policy programs of the EU with an increased amount of funds. Within this program, DG REGIO and MSs played an important role. The flexibility of the multiannual financial framework (the Corona Response Investment Initiative and the Corona Response Investment Initiative Plus) was also introduced to tackle COVID and its effects. Moreover, the scope of the EU Solidarity Fund was expanded to cover major public health emergencies, which allowed it to be utilized in response to the COVID-19 crisis. ECB and the European Investment Bank also provided financial tools to respond to the COVID-19 crisis. The pandemic crisis support facility was also organized by EUROZONE MSs to provide financial support for direct and indirect healthcare, cure, and prevention-related costs due to the COVID-19 crisis. Each Eurozone country could access a predefined amount of funds.

Additionally, the EU committed €2.018 trillion to "rebuilding post-COVID Europe" and introduced a comprehensive EU-wide recovery plan designed to address technological and environmental challenges on the horizon. This plan placed particular emphasis on the climate and digital transition, with a focus on research and innovation ((European Commission, n.d.c.). At the heart of this strategy was the Recovery and Resilience Facility (henceforth RRF), serving as a temporary mechanism within NextGenerationEU—the EU's recovery strategy fund following crises. RRF was expected to contribute to effectively addressing

[7] The availability of the SURE instrument ended on 31 December 2022.

a significant subset of the structural challenges identified in the country-specific recommendations (Mokrá 2022). The EC utilized the RRF to raise funds by borrowing from capital markets, and the facility became operational in February 2021 (European Commission, n.d.d.). This program, among others, strengthened the position of the EC in economic policies - compared to the European Semester, the EC gained competencies to approve concrete reforms and investments of MSs. It also allows EC to pursue its agenda, as part of the funds from the Recovery plan is predefined for selected policy agendas, mainly in the realm of green and digital objectives. In addition to coordination, this tool allows EC to be involved in the fiscal policies of MSs in the process of their design, implementation, and control/audit. The main role is played by DG ECFIN and DG REFORM.

As for changes in organizational settings, adjustments to the European institutional infrastructure were introduced under the European Health Union initiative, with the EC establishing a new authority known as the Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority. Since 2022, it has been integrated into the DG SANTE, and its primary mission is to proactively identify, rapidly respond to, and effectively manage health emergencies (European Commission, n.d.e.).

In November 2020, a series of initiatives were proposed, leading to expanded mandates for both the European Medicines Agency and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. The former's extended mandate was officially approved in January 2022 (European Parliament 2024). In the area of competencies, several changes were introduced. The latter assumed a monitoring role in response to the pandemic threat (Deruelle – Engeli 2021). While this health agency has existed since 2005 (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, n.d.), Deruelle and Engeli (2021) note that COVID-19 prompted its functional transformation. Its role shifted from coordinating risk assessments to overseeing risk management.

Table 4: **Overview of EU responses to the COVID crisis**

Name of response; Type of response	Body that adopted it; Year	Duration	Main implementing body
The EU Vaccines Strategy; policy strategy	EC; 2020	Temporary	EC - DG SANTE
STEERING Board; coordination and decisions	EC; 2020	Temporary	EC and selected MSs
A vaccine procurement task force; coordination	EC; 2020	Temporary	EC - DG SANTE
An agreement for the EU to procure COVID-19 vaccines on behalf of MSs; new rules, processes, and powers	EC; 2020/21	Temporary	EC and European Medicines Agency
Joint procurement agreements Personnel protection equipment; new rules, processes, and powers	EC; 2020	Temporary	EC - DG SANTE
SURE; financial instrument	Council of the EU (accelerated legislative procedure); 2020	Temporary	EC - DG ECFIN
REACT-EU; rules, processes, and powers by legislation	Co-decision; 2020	Temporary	EC - DG REGIO
Flexibility - Modification of the Multiannual Financial Framework (The Corona Response Investment Initiative and the Corona Response Investment Initiative Plus); new rules, processes, and powers	Co-decision; 2020	Temporary	EC
EU Solidarity Fund; expanding scope of the financial instrument	Co-decision; 2020	Permanent	EC - DG ECHO
ECB pandemic emergency purchase program; financial instrument	EC; 2020	Temporary	EC
EIB to provide a pan-European guarantee fund for loans to companies; financial mechanism	EC; 2020		EC and EIB
Pandemic crises support facility; financial instrument	Eurozone Group; 2020	Temporary	The European Stability Mechanism

Table 4: **continued**

Name of response; Type of response	**Body that adopted it; Year**	**Duration**	**Main implementing body**
Next Generation EU; new rules, processes, and powers	Co-decision; 2020	Temporary	EC
The EU Digital COVID Certificate; new rules, processes, and powers	Co-decision; 2021	Temporary	EC - DG SANTE
A functional transformation within the European Centre for Disease Prevention; new rules, processes, and powers	EC; 2022	Permanent	EC agency
Expanded mandates for the European Medicines Agency for Health Union / new rules, processes, and powers by legislation	Co-decision; 2022	Permanent	EU agency
Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority / new authority	Co-decision; 2022	Permanent	EU agency

Source: authors

The above overview of the response to the COVID crisis indicates a move towards enhanced joint action at a supranational level within EU health policies. In response to the crisis, the actors/entities that were reinforced were primarily administrative supranational structures such as the EC, various EU agencies, and the ECB. Regarding the EU governance mechanism, in addition to employing the co-decision process involving the EP, the EC, and the Council of the EU, many responses were directed by the EC, including instances of unilateral steering.

The creation of a Steering Board within EC structures illustrates the capacity to circumvent treaty limitations during crises at the EU supranational level. This initiative exemplifies unilateral steering, enabling a swift response to collective actions, such as purchasing vaccines, without necessitating formal co-decision approval from EU supranational entities or without coordinated intergovernmental processes. Additionally, Eurozone countries concurred on utilizing a financial mechanism—the European Stability Mechanism fund—to address the impacts of COVID-19.

Subsequently, the table documents a marked expansion in supranational governance, particularly through fiscal instruments and health coordination mechanisms. These developments reinforce the pattern of increasing Commission leadership and flexible legal workarounds that bypass formal treaty change—already observed in the economic crisis but here applied to new policy areas.

Key findings:

- The COVID-19 pandemic constituted a critical juncture for supranational crisis governance in the EU, prompting an unprecedented expansion of the EU's role in areas traditionally under national competency, particularly public health and economic recovery.
- Despite health policy remaining largely the prerogative of Member States, the European Commission assumed a central coordinating role, especially in the procurement and distribution of vaccines and the orchestration of collective economic responses.
- The establishment of new instruments such as SURE and the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) signaled a marked shift toward functional fiscal integration, with the Commission overseeing both implementation and compliance.
- Institutional mechanisms developed during the Eurozone crisis—including off-budget financing arrangements and the delegation of executive authority—were not only replicated but also significantly scaled up and adapted to the public health domain.
- The European Commission's deployment of unilateral steering, notably through the creation of the Steering Board and vaccine procurement task forces, underscored its capacity to exercise executive initiative even in the absence of new treaty provisions.
- The pandemic response illustrates how functional pressures, institutional learning, and political urgency collectively enabled a temporary but significant deepening of supranational authority, particularly in domains previously characterized by limited EU intervention.

War in Ukraine

The Ukraine war triggered the most wide-ranging and rapid deployment of supranational tools to date, combining established crisis templates with novel instruments across domains as politically sensitive as defense and energy. This section traces how the EU's crisis response architecture adapted under conditions of geopolitical urgency. In February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. This externally induced crisis resulted in a multifaceted EU response covering refugees, security and defense assistance and policy changes, economic sanctions (against Russia), and financial aid.

New initiatives to support Ukraine by the EU have been coordinated by the EC President Ursula von der Leyen, as well as the Secretary-General of the EC, the EC's cabinet secretariat, and the Committee of Permanent Representatives in the EU (Ostatník 2023). They were instrumental in coordinating and facilitating the EC's work on this agenda. This EU governance mechanism has enabled greater flexibility and swift response, representing a relatively new approach to crisis response formation.

In relation to refugees, in March 2022, for the first time, the European Council invoked the Temporary Protection Directive (Council Directive 2001/55/EC) (European Parliamentary Research Service 2023). This directive granted all individuals displaced from Ukraine the right to reside in the EU for up to three years. They were also entitled to access employment, healthcare, social assistance, housing, and the freedom to move freely within the EU. As of May 31, 2023, more than 4 million non-EU citizens who had fled Ukraine due to the Russian invasion on February 24, 2022, held temporary protection statuses in EU countries (Eurostat 2023). As for the concrete initiatives, in June 2022, the EC adopted FAST–CARE (Flexible Assistance for Territories) with the objective of enhancing assistance to EU MSs in response to the displacement caused by the Ukraine crisis. This program was designed to improve the accessibility and flexibility of Cohesion Policy funds and incorporates new provisions to ensure cohesion policy investments are as efficient as possible by MSs. It builds upon the support previously offered through Cohesion's Action for Refugees in Europe (CARE) (European Council on Refugees and Exiles 2022).

As for the security and defense assistance at the outset of the war in Ukraine, within the European security order the EU had limited competencies, coordinated with EU MSs. The EU's main framework for defense is the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP). It provides the EU with the operational capacity to deploy civilian and military missions and operations abroad, with the aim of managing and preventing crises, strengthening international security, and defending the values, interests, and integrity of the EU. The EU's defense policy under the CSDP is characterized by a certain degree of decentralization, and each MS retains national sovereignty over its own defense and military capabilities. Within this context, at the EU supranational level, a coordinated response was initiated, followed by the creation of various supranational financial instruments, joint procurement initiatives, and new policies.

In March 2022, the EUROJUST provided support for the establishment of a joint investigation team to investigate alleged core international crimes committed in Ukraine. Initially, the JIT was established between Ukraine, Lithuania, and Poland, followed by the participation of Estonia, Latvia, Slovakia, and Romania, along with cooperation from the International Criminal Court and a Memorandum of Understanding with the United States (European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation, n.d.). The JIT's primary purpose is to facilitate investigations and prosecutions while promoting the exchange of information among the involved parties.

Several changes in public procurement were introduced, including the EC's proposal of the Regulation for the Reinforcement of the European Defense Industry in July 2022. As a temporary measure until December 31, 2025, it aims to bolster the European defense industry through common procurement, backed by a €300 million budget. It mandates joint purchases by at least three MSs, open to European Free Trade Association members in the European Economic Area (European Parliament 2023). Moreover, with a €500 million budget, it supports urgent defense needs and precedes the European Defense Investment Program, a more permanent scheme with significant funding and a VAT waiver, expected to start in 2024 (European Economic and Social Committee 2024). Additionally, the Act of Support in Ammunition Production was adopted for collective EU ammunition procurement. The Defense Innovations Scheme, launched in May 2022 (European Commission 2022) with a €2 billion budget over five years, focuses on supporting SMEs and innovators in the defense sector through various initiatives (EU Defense Innovation Scheme, n.d.).

According to Hamilton (2023), this war led to the unprecedented provision of lethal military assistance by the EU, as the EU serves as a funding and coordination platform for integrated military and security policy in relation to Ukraine. Although the European Peace Facility (henceforth EPF) was originally established in March 2021 for use in Sahel peacekeeping operations, Fiott (2023) argues that due to the war in Ukraine, the EPF has been strategically employed in this context. EPF is an off-budget funding mechanism for EU actions with military and defense implications under the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). It's important to note that the structure of the EPF does not involve the EC directly providing weapons. Instead, lethal military assistance provided under the EPF is collectively decided upon by the Ministries of Defense at the EU Council and then implemented by these Ministries themselves.

Furthermore, the EU Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine was established in 2023 with the objective of strengthening the military capabilities of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. The mission's goal is to enable the Ukrainian Armed Forces to effectively protect Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty.

In addition to security and defense assistance, the Strategic Compass was adopted. It started to be discussed before the war in Ukraine, and its final version had to be rethought due to the developments in Ukraine in 2022 that impacted European security priorities (Fiott 2023).

As for the sanctions, the Committee of Permanent Representatives in the EU and the EC, particularly under the leadership of Ursula von der Leyen, played crucial roles in coordinating the effective formulation and implementation of EU sanctions against Russian oligarchs across the EU (Ostatnik 2023). The comprehensive approach to the 2022 sanctions demonstrated the significance of their authority in matters related to the common market, economy, trade, as well as development aid and enlargement policies. These areas are inherently interconnected, highlighting the complexity of the sanctions' implementation. In this context, the EU Freeze and Seize Task Force was formed. This task force coordinates actions among EU MSs, Eurojust, Europol, and other agencies to seize and, where permitted by national law, confiscate assets owned by Russian and Belarusian oligarchs (European Commission 2022).

Furthermore, the Ukraine Facility has been launched as a financial aid initiative aimed at supporting the country's recovery, reconstruction, and modernization efforts. This program provides EUR 50 billion to Ukraine over 2024-2027 (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine 2024). This initiative aims to foster key reforms in Ukraine's EU accession process while demonstrating the EU's unwavering commitment to supporting Ukraine amidst Russia's aggression and its journey toward EU membership (European Commission.n.d.f.).

Table 5: **Overview of EU responses to war in Ukraine**

Name of response; Type of response	Body that adopted it; Year	Duration	Main implementing body
Strategic Compass; policy initiative	Council of the EU; 2022	Permanent	EC and EU agencies
FAST–CARE; new rules, processes, and powers	EC; 2022	Temporary	EC / DG REGIO
Joint Investigation team within the Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation (Eurojust); new EU-level organization	EU agency; 2022	Temporary	EU agency
Sanctions towards Russia; new rules, processes, and powers	European Council; 2022	Temporary	EC with MSs
EU Freeze and Seize Task Force; coordination	EC; 2022	Temporary	EC DG ECFIN with MSs
The Regulation for the Reinforcement of the European Defense Industry; new rules, processes, and powers by legislation	Co-decision; 2022	Temporary	EC DG MARKET
The Defense Innovations Scheme - Part of the European Defense Fund; financial instrument	EC; 2022	Permanent	EC
Act of Support in Ammunition Production and the associated fund; new rules, processes, and powers by legislation	Co-decision; 2023	Permanent	EC DG NEAR
The European Peace Facility; financial instrument	Council of the EU; 2021 (updated in 2022)	Long-term instrument with the possibility of continuation beyond its initial term	EU agency the European External Action Service
The EU Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine; new EU-level organization	Council of the EU (Political and Security Committee - political and strategic direction); 2022	Temporary	EU agency the European External Action Service
The Ukraine Facility; financial instrument	Co-decision; 2024	Temporary	EC, the European External Action Service

Source: authors

The responses mentioned above have bolstered EU defense policy, indicating a move toward enhanced collective action at a supranational level in this domain. Various EU actors have been engaged in addressing this crisis, including the EC, specifically DG DEFIS, which holds primary responsibility for defense policy within the EC, and DG MARKT, among others. Additionally, several EU agencies, such as the European External Action Service, were involved.

The community method was also applied in the adoption of responses, with the Council of the EU, the Committee of Permanent Representatives in the EU, and the European Council playing significant roles. At the same time, supranational institutions used unilateral steering to provide a quick response to the war in Ukraine.

Treaty-imposed limitations were addressed by developing coordination capacities within the Secretariat of the EC in close cooperation with the Committee of Permanent Representatives in the EU.

Thus, the responses summarized in this table demonstrate how the Ukraine crisis prompted enhanced joint action across multiple domains, including defense and financial assistance. The adaptation of pre-existing tools such as the EPF and activation of new instruments like the Ukraine Facility highlight both the strengthening of key supranational actors—particularly the Commission and EEAS—and the continued reliance on informal mechanisms to navigate treaty constraints.

Key findings:

- The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 triggered a wide-ranging EU response encompassing migration, security and defense, sanctions, and macro-financial assistance, highlighting the Union's capacity for multi-domain crisis governance.
- Supranationalization advanced notably in domains where EU competency had previously been limited, including through the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive, the establishment of the Ukraine Facility, and the expansion of the European Peace Facility's (EPF) scope.
- The European Commission and European External Action Service (EEAS) played prominent roles in agenda-setting, coordination, and implementation—particularly in relation to sanctions policy, humanitarian support, and financial aid.
- Governance responses relied on a hybrid model: formal treaty-based instruments (e.g., co-decision legislation) coexisted with informal and flexible coordination structures such as the EC Secretariat-General and

the Committee of Permanent Representatives (COREPER), facilitating expedited decision-making.

- Institutional innovations—such as the joint procurement of military equipment and the use of off-budget funds like the EPF—mirrored and built upon governance techniques previously developed during the Eurozone and COVID-19 crises.
- This case reaffirms the EU's emerging capacity to navigate treaty constraints through informal mechanisms and delegated authority, reinforcing patterns of supranational leadership under crisis conditions while accommodating intergovernmental control in sensitive areas like defense.

Comparative patterns across crises

To succinctly consolidate the findings discussed across the four crisis cases, this section presents a single comparative table accompanied by a brief analytical interpretation. The table below synthesizes the EU's institutional responses across the four crises examined, mapping them against the article's guiding research questions. It shows that while all crises prompted some degree of joint action, the depth and form of supranationalization varied considerably by policy domain. Supranational actors—especially the European Commission—consistently gained prominence, yet their roles ranged from coordinative (as in migration) to executive and redistributive (as in COVID-19 and Ukraine). Treaty constraints were rarely removed but repeatedly circumvented through informal mechanisms, delegated authority, and off-budget financing tools. The crisis mode of governance increasingly relied on hybrid solutions that mixed temporary innovation with selective institutionalization, suggesting a shift toward a flexible, precedent-building style of integration under pressure.

Table 6: **Comparison across crises**

Crisis	Enhanced Suprana-tional Action?	Strengthned Actors	Treaty Constraints Strategy	Dominant Governance Mechanism	Permanent vs. Temporary Responses
Economic and Financial	Yes; a gradual shift from intergovern-mental to supranational instruments	European Commission (DG ECFIN); ECB; Eurogroup	Intergovernmental treaties (e.g., Fiscal Compact); off-budget instruments (e.g., EFSF, ESM)	Economic surveillance (European Semester); conditional lending; regulatory expansion	Mixed: some instruments (ESM, Semester) institutiona-lized; others phased out
Migration	Limited; mainly through agency mandate upgrades	FRONTEX; EASO (later EUAA)	Operated largely within existing legal bases; relied on soft law and inter-governmental coalitions	Coordination platforms; emergency relocation schemes; agency reform	Mostly temporary or ad hoc; some agency mandates made permanent
COVID-19	Strong; Commission-led joint action in fiscal and health domains	European Commission (DG SANTE; DG ECFIN); EMA	Off-budget financing (e.g., RRF); flexible instruments (e.g., SURE); informal mechanisms (e.g., Steering Board)	Centralized procurement; delegated fiscal oversight; task forces	Mixed: RRF is time-limited; Commission's structural role was strengthened
War in Ukraine	Yes; broad, multi-domain coordination including defense, energy, and migration	European Commission (Secretariat-General; DG DEFIS); EEAS; EPF	Informal coordination (SG; COREPER); use of pre-existing legal bases (e.g., Temporary Protection Directive); EPF	Sanctions coordination; off-budget military assistance; migration mechanisms	Mostly temporary tools; some measures set institutional precedents

Source: authors

Conclusion

Over the past decade and a half, the European Union has encountered a series of major crises – financial, humanitarian, health-related, and geopolitical – that have tested its institutional capacity. These crises did not produce a single, uniform response. Instead, the EU's actions varied depending on the nature of the crisis and the political sensitivities involved.

This article shows that while joint action was repeatedly pursued, the form and extent of supranational involvement differed. Institutions such as the European Commission, the ECB, and the EEAS often played key roles, but their authority was expanded unevenly. Legal and treaty constraints were not formally revised but were managed through flexible interpretations, new instruments, and informal coordination mechanisms.

As the comparative table illustrates, the EU has developed a way of responding to crises that builds on existing tools and gradually extends them. Instruments first introduced during the financial crisis were repurposed in later responses, often applied in new policy areas. These changes did not replace intergovernmental control but coexisted with it, resulting in a layered and flexible governance structure.

Taken together, the EU's crisis responses suggest a pattern of pragmatic adaptation rather than sweeping reform. Rather than marking a clear shift toward more or less integration, these episodes reveal how the EU adjusts and expands its capacity through incremental changes. This analysis contributes to ongoing debates about European governance by highlighting how institutional change often emerges from the pressures of action, not from major treaty overhauls.

Looking ahead, the EU's trend toward centralization and supranational governance is likely to continue, albeit in a selective and incremental manner. The patterns observed in the EU's responses to recent crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, suggest that institutional innovations, off-budget financing tools, and flexible legal workarounds are becoming key features of EU crisis management. The EC, in particular, has demonstrated an ability to expand its role in areas traditionally dominated by MSs, including fiscal policy, health, and defense coordination. However, this shift toward supranational action does not imply a uniform trajectory of centralization across all policy areas. Sensitive domains such as migration and security continue to be shaped by intergovernmental negotiations and national sovereignty concerns, limiting the scope for deeper integration without broad political consensus.

In the future, we can expect the EU to further develop its hybrid governance model – a system that blends supranational leadership with intergovernmental mechanisms and informal coordination structures. Crises will likely remain the catalyst for deeper integration, pushing EU institutions to test and extend the boundaries of their competencies. Nevertheless, treaty change appears unlikely in the near term, given the political sensitivities and divergent interests among Member States. As such, the EU's approach will probably remain one of pragmatic adaptation: expanding supranational powers where politically feasible, using legal creativity and precedent-building to manage immediate challenges while respecting the limits imposed by national sovereignty in areas where consensus is elusive. This flexible but uneven pattern suggests that the EU's crisis governance will continue to evolve in a piecemeal fashion, shaped by functional pressures, political will, and the imperatives of each new crisis.

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