



Crisis Governance and the Structural Limits of Polity Formation in the European Union

Galiñanes M^{1,2,*}

¹Academy of Medical and Health Sciences of Catalonia and the Balearic Islands, Spain

²President of the Federal Alliance of European Federalists (FAEF)

ABSTRACT

Over the past fifteen years, the European Union (EU) has repeatedly expanded its policy capacity through major crises, including the Eurozone crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and Russia's war against Ukraine. These episodes have enabled significant extensions of EU authority, yet they have not resulted in durable polity consolidation. This article explains why crisis-driven integration deepens functional capacity while leaving political authority democratically unsettled. Drawing on literatures on crisis governance, politicization, and polity formation, it conceptualizes crisis integration as a structurally asymmetric process: crises relax political constraints and facilitate rapid authority expansion, but they also entrench executive dominance, institutional ambiguity, and contingent democratic authorization. By situating recent EU developments within a literature-based typology of integration trajectories, the article shows that the EU has repeatedly followed a path of crisis-induced functional integration rather than comprehensive polity formation. The analysis demonstrates how executive-centered decision-making, institutional layering, and renewed politicization interact to constrain the stabilization of democratic responsibility and boundary-setting. The article contributes to debates on European integration by offering a non-teleological account of crisis governance as a durable mode of integration—one that enhances policy capacity while structurally limiting the conditions for democratic consolidation.

KEYWORDS: European Union, Crisis governance, Polity formation, European integration, Democratic authorization, Executive politics

HIGHLIGHTS

- Explains why crisis-driven integration expands EU authority without producing durable polity consolidation
- Conceptualizes crisis governance as a structurally asymmetric mode of integration
- Links executive dominance, institutional layering, and politicization to limits on democratic authorization
- Develops a literature-based typology of EU integration trajectories under crisis conditions

*Correspondence:

Dr. Manuel Galiñanes, PhD, MD
President of FAEF, Spain.
Email: manuel.galinanes@gmail.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0888-976X>

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- Advances a non-teleological account of European integration focused on institutional sustainability rather than inevitability

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade and a half, the European Union (EU) has governed under conditions that many observers now describe as quasi-permanent crisis. The Eurozone sovereign debt crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine have successively confronted EU institutions and member states with acute threats requiring rapid collective responses. A substantial body of scholarship shows that these crises have not merely tested existing arrangements but have actively reshaped European public policy, expanding EU-level capacities in areas such as fiscal stabilization, financial regulation, energy coordination, and security cooperation.¹⁻³

At the same time, crisis governance has altered how integration proceeds. Rather than advancing primarily through treaty reform or comprehensive constitutional settlement, policy integration has increasingly relied on emergency instruments, executive discretion, and intensive intergovernmental bargaining. While these mechanisms have often proven effective in preventing breakdown, they have also raised concerns about democratic accountability, institutional coherence, and the long-term sustainability of EU authority.^{4,5}

This article addresses a central puzzle emerging from this literature: how can the EU simultaneously expand its policy capacity through crises while remaining unable to consolidate these advances into a stable and broadly authorized polity? Despite repeated extensions of EU authority—most notably through joint borrowing, new fiscal instruments, and enhanced regulatory powers—efforts to translate crisis-induced integration into enduring institutional settlement have remained limited and politically contested.

Existing research offers partial answers. Functionalist and neofunctionalist accounts emphasize spillover dynamics and problem-solving imperatives that lower barriers to cooperation during crises.² Postfunctionalist approaches, by contrast, stress how politicization, identity conflict, and sovereignty concerns constrain elite-driven integration once authority moves into salient domains.⁶ More recent work on crisis governance highlights how emergency politics privileges executive action and intergovernmental coordination, enabling rapid integration while simultaneously weakening democratic authorization.^{1,5}

Building on these insights, this article advances a central argument: crisis-driven integration generates structural constraints on EU polity formation by producing asymmetric institutional development—expanding policy authority without resolving underlying conflicts over political responsibility, democratic legitimacy, and boundary control. Crisis governance thus operates as a double-edged process: it facilitates integration under pressure but reinforces political and institutional conditions that impede durable federal consolidation.

By linking the literature on crisis governance with scholarship on polity formation and politicization, the article reframes federalization not as a linear or inevitable outcome of crisis integration, but as a contingent and contested trajectory shaped by the interaction between emergency policymaking, institutional design, and public

contestation. In doing so, it seeks to clarify both the possibilities and the limits of moving beyond improvisation toward a more stable political order in the EU.

CRISIS GOVERNANCE AND POLITY FORMATION: CONCEPTUAL DISTINCTION AND ANALYTICAL TENSION

Assessing the limits of polity formation in the EU requires a clear analytical distinction between policy integration and polity consolidation. Policy integration refers to the expansion of collective capacities to address shared problems through common instruments, rules, or coordination mechanisms. Polity consolidation, by contrast, involves the stabilization of political authority through clearly defined boundaries, democratic authorization, and institutionalized responsibility structures that render power both recognizable and contestable.^{1,3} While crisis governance has repeatedly proven effective at advancing policy integration, its implications for polity consolidation remain deeply ambivalent.

Crisis governance operates as a distinct mode of policymaking characterized by temporally compressed decision-making, reliance on executive actors, and the use of exceptional or ad hoc instruments justified by urgency.² Under crisis conditions, political constraints that ordinarily inhibit integration—such as unanimity requirements, domestic veto players, and public opposition—are partially relaxed. This facilitates rapid policy expansion, enabling the creation of new financial mechanisms, regulatory competences, and coordination frameworks that would otherwise face significant resistance.

The Eurozone sovereign debt crisis exemplified this dynamic. Instruments such as the European Stability Mechanism and the Fiscal Compact significantly expanded EU influence over national fiscal policy while remaining only partially embedded in the Union's constitutional framework.⁷ A similar pattern emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the establishment of the Next Generation EU recovery fund introduced joint borrowing and fiscal transfers long considered politically infeasible.³ In both cases, crisis conditions enabled decisive integration, but largely through instruments framed as temporary, exceptional, or narrowly targeted.

From the perspective of polity formation, this mode of integration generates a structural asymmetry. While functional authority expands, political responsibility and democratic control remain fragmented. Polity consolidation requires not only capacity, but also stable mechanisms through which citizens can attribute responsibility, contest decisions, and authorize the exercise of power.^{6,8} Crisis instruments, however, often occupy an ambiguous institutional status: they are indispensable in practice yet treated as provisional in legal and political terms. This ambiguity constrains opportunities for democratic contestation and constitutional settlement, reinforcing reliance on executive coordination and intergovernmental bargaining.⁴

These institutional effects interact with the growing politicization of European integration. As EU authority increasingly extends into distributive, fiscal, and sovereignty-sensitive domains, integration becomes more salient to citizens and political parties.⁶ Recent research suggests that external threats and security crises can temporarily increase public support for EU-level authority, particularly in areas

related to defense and territorial protection.⁹ Yet such support is typically conditional, uneven, and vulnerable to rapid reversal, fragmenting along national, ideological, and socioeconomic lines.¹⁰ Rather than generating stable legitimacy, crisis-driven authority expansion often intensifies contestation over accountability and boundary control.

The result is a persistent tension between effectiveness and authorization. As emergency governance privileges executive discretion over participatory and parliamentary channels, it risks entrenching what has been described as an “authoritarian equilibrium,” in which policy capacity expands without corresponding democratic deepening.⁵ While such an equilibrium may sustain integration in the short term, it constrains long-term polity consolidation by normalizing exceptionalism and deferring foundational questions of political responsibility.

Taken together, crisis governance produces a distinctive integration dynamic: it enables rapid policy expansion under pressure while simultaneously generating political and institutional constraints that inhibit durable polity formation. Rather than representing a transitional deviation from normal integration, emergency governance has become a structural feature of contemporary EU politics. The following section situates this dynamic within a broader literature-based typology of crisis-induced integration trajectories, clarifying why repeated expansions of authority have so far failed to culminate in stable federal consolidation.

CRISIS-INDUCED INTEGRATION AS A DISTINCT TRAJECTORY: A THEORETICAL SYNTHESIS

To clarify why crisis governance repeatedly expands EU authority without producing durable polity consolidation, it is necessary to situate recent developments within the broader theoretical literature on integration trajectories. Rather than treating crisis-induced integration as an anomaly or a transitional deviation, EU scholarship has long emphasized that integration outcomes are contingent, reversible, and shaped by the interaction between functional pressures and political constraints. This section synthesizes three influential strands of this literature to conceptualize crisis-driven integration as a distinct and structurally bounded trajectory.

Early contributions by Schmitter rejected teleological understandings of European integration, conceptualizing it instead as a non-linear process characterized by multiple possible outcomes.¹¹ His typology—ranging from spillover and spillback to muddling through and encapsulation—highlighted that integration could stall, fragment, or reverse depending on political conditions. The enduring relevance of this framework lies in its insistence that authority expansion does not automatically generate institutional consolidation or political stabilization. Integration, in this view, remains inherently fragile and contingent.

Building on this insight, postfunctionalist theory foregrounds the role of politicization in shaping integration outcomes. Hooghe and Marks argue that while integration can advance relatively smoothly in low-salience, technocratic domains, it becomes increasingly constrained once it enters areas closely tied to identity, redistribution, and sovereignty.⁶ As authority expands into such domains, public

contestation intensifies, limiting elite capacity to pursue uniform or centralized solutions. Differentiation, institutional fragmentation, and stalemate thus emerge not as transitional failures but as stable responses to persistent political conflict.

Schimmelfennig’s account of crisis-driven integration adds a crucial temporal and causal mechanism to these perspectives.² Crises, he argues, temporarily relax political constraints by creating urgency, framing integration as necessary to avert systemic collapse, and lowering the short-term political costs of cooperation. Under these conditions, member states are willing to authorize new instruments and capacities that would otherwise be blocked. However, because such measures are justified by exceptionality, they are typically designed as provisional, narrowly framed, or reversible. Crisis integration thus advances rapidly but remains institutionally incomplete.

Together, these strands of scholarship allow for a parsimonious distinction among four analytically separable integration trajectories. First, disintegration or spillback, in which politicization overwhelms functional incentives, leading to retrenchment or exit. Second, differentiated integration, where authority deepens unevenly across policy areas or member states in response to enduring sovereignty conflicts. Third, crisis-induced functional integration, characterized by the expansion of EU policy capacity through emergency instruments without corresponding consolidation of democratic authorization or institutional responsibility. Fourth, polity consolidation, which would entail not only centralized authority but also stable boundary-setting, democratic legitimation, and institutionalized accountability.

The argument advanced here is that since the Eurozone crisis, the EU has repeatedly followed the third trajectory. Crisis governance has enabled substantial expansions of authority—particularly in fiscal coordination, financial stabilization, and crisis management—while systematically deferring the political and constitutional settlements required for durable polity formation. This trajectory is neither accidental nor temporary; it reflects the interaction between emergency policymaking, politicization, and unresolved conflicts over sovereignty and democratic responsibility.

Therefore, the following section moves from theoretical synthesis to institutional analysis. It examines how crisis-induced functional integration reshapes the distribution of authority within the EU, producing capacity expansion without corresponding consolidation of political responsibility, and thereby reinforcing the structural constraints on polity formation identified here.

CRISIS-INDUCED INTEGRATION AS INSTITUTIONAL CONSTRAINT: AUTHORITY WITHOUT POLITY

The preceding section identified crisis-induced functional integration as a distinct trajectory of European integration—one that systematically expands policy capacity without consolidating a stable political order. This section advances the argument by specifying how this trajectory translates into enduring institutional constraints on polity formation. Rather than serving as a transitional phase toward federal consolidation, crisis integration generates a governance configuration that actively impedes the stabilization of authority, democratic authorization, and political responsibility.

The first constraint arises from the dominance of executive-centered decision-making under conditions of emergency. Crisis governance privileges speed, coordination, and discretion, shifting authority toward national executives, finance ministries, central banks, and intergovernmental forums such as the European Council and the Eurogroup.¹ Legislative bodies—both national parliaments and the European Parliament—are structurally marginalized, not as a temporary anomaly but as a functional feature of crisis management. While this concentration of authority facilitates rapid collective action, it weakens the democratic chain of delegation through which political responsibility is normally articulated and contested.

Empirically, this pattern was consolidated during the Eurozone crisis, when fiscal surveillance, conditionality, and financial assistance mechanisms significantly expanded EU influence over national economic policy without parallel reinforcement of parliamentary oversight or electoral authorization.⁷ The COVID-19 pandemic reproduced this logic. Although the creation of the Next Generation EU recovery instrument represented a qualitative expansion of fiscal capacity, its governance relies predominantly on executive coordination, administrative conditionality, and time-limited authorization rather than permanent constitutional settlement.³ Crisis governance thus normalizes exceptional authority while deferring the political decisions required to anchor that authority democratically.

A second constraint stems from the mode of institutional development through which crisis integration proceeds. Rather than replacing existing arrangements, crisis governance relies on institutional layering: the addition of new instruments alongside established frameworks, often with ambiguous legal status and deliberately limited temporal horizons.⁴ This strategy enhances flexibility and political feasibility, but it also produces a fragmented institutional architecture in which authority expands faster than clarity about jurisdictional boundaries, responsibility, and contestation.

Such ambiguity serves short-term political purposes by allowing governments to present integration as provisional and reversible. Over time, however, it entrenches a structural mismatch between functional dependence and political settlement. Crisis instruments become indispensable to system stability while remaining constitutionally unsettled, discouraging open democratic debate over their permanence or scope. This asymmetry reinforces reliance on executive discretion and intergovernmental bargaining, further constraining the emergence of a consolidated polity.

A third constraint emerges from the interaction between crisis-driven authority expansion and heightened politicization. As EU intervention increasingly affects distributive outcomes and core state prerogatives, it becomes more salient to citizens and party competition.⁶ While acute crises can temporarily increase public support for EU action—particularly in domains associated with security or collective survival—such support is uneven, conditional, and often fragile.⁹ Once immediate threats recede, political conflict reasserts itself along national, ideological, and socioeconomic lines, limiting the capacity of crisis integration to generate durable legitimacy.¹⁰

These dynamics help explain why expanded authority frequently intensifies, rather than resolves, sovereignty conflicts. Executive empowerment without corresponding democratic deepening provides fertile ground for populist and Eurosceptic mobilization, which frames crisis governance as technocratic overreach rather than collective self-rule. While this equilibrium may stabilize governance in the short term, it entrenches political contestation over accountability and boundary control, thereby constraining long-term polity consolidation.

Thus, these mechanisms—executive dominance, institutional layering, and politicized legitimacy deficits—explain why crisis-induced functional integration has not evolved into a consolidated European polity. Crisis governance proves highly effective at preventing breakdown, yet structurally ill-suited to resolving the foundational questions of political responsibility, democratic authorization, and jurisdictional settlement that polity formation requires. Rather than functioning as a stepping stone toward federal consolidation, crisis integration risks reproducing the very conditions that make such consolidation politically elusive.

The following section builds on this diagnosis to examine whether, and under what conditions, crisis-induced authority expansion could be translated into more democratically grounded and sustainable forms of European governance.

DEMOCRATIC AUTHORIZATION AS THE BOTTLENECK OF CRISIS-INDUCED INTEGRATION

The preceding section identified how crisis governance expands EU authority while simultaneously embedding structural constraints rooted in executive dominance, institutional layering, and intensified politicization. This section advances the argument by showing that these constraints converge most sharply at the level of democratic authorization. The sustainability of crisis-induced integration depends not merely on policy effectiveness or legal durability, but on whether expanded authority can be translated into stable, democratically grounded consent. It is at this juncture that crisis governance most consistently falls short.

Crisis-driven integration generates what may be described as *contingent democratic authorization*: public acceptance of authority that is conditional on urgency, perceived necessity, and short-term effectiveness rather than on durable mechanisms of representation and accountability. As Schimmelfennig demonstrates,² crises lower political resistance to authority transfers by framing integration as indispensable to averting systemic breakdown. Empirical research confirms that such framing can temporarily increase support for EU-level action, particularly in domains associated with security, macroeconomic stabilization, or external threat.⁹ However, this form of authorization remains intrinsically time-bound. Once emergency conditions recede, the justificatory force of necessity weakens, and unresolved conflicts over responsibility, sovereignty, and distribution resurface.

The executive-centered governance identified in Section 4 intensifies this fragility. Crisis integration privileges intergovernmental bargaining and executive discretion, marginalizing parliamentary arenas that ordinarily mediate democratic consent.¹ While this

configuration enhances decisiveness under pressure, it weakens the institutional channels through which citizens can attribute responsibility and contest authority. As a result, expanded EU competences often remain politically opaque: effective in practice, yet insufficiently anchored in recognizable democratic procedures. This disconnect complicates the consolidation of authority by reinforcing perceptions of distance, insulation, or technocratic overreach.

Institutional layering further compounds this problem. Crisis instruments are frequently designed to appear temporary, exceptional, or reversible, allowing governments to avoid explicit constitutional commitments. While this ambiguity facilitates agreement under crisis conditions, it also inhibits open political contestation over the allocation of authority. Democratic authorization is deferred rather than resolved. Crisis measures become functionally indispensable while remaining politically unsettled, thereby reinforcing reliance on executive coordination and limiting opportunities for democratic recalibration.

These authorization deficits interact with politicization in predictable ways. As EU authority increasingly affects distributive outcomes and core state powers, it becomes a focal point of domestic political conflict.⁶ Crisis governance may suppress contestation temporarily, but it does not eliminate it. Instead, political conflict is displaced into national arenas, where EU policies are reframed through sovereignty claims and electoral competition. Studies of fiscal solidarity and energy sanctions show that crisis-induced unity often fragments along national, ideological, and socioeconomic lines once the immediate threat subsides.¹⁰ This fragmentation undermines the formation of cross-national democratic coalitions capable of sustaining authority expansion over time.

The combined effect is *democratic reversibility*. Even when formal retrenchment does not occur, crisis-induced integration remains vulnerable to obstruction, legal contestation, or political backlash. Governments respond by continuing to frame new initiatives as exceptional or provisional, thereby reproducing the very ambiguity that constrains democratic settlement. As aforementioned, the Kelemen's notion of an "authoritarian equilibrium" captures this configuration: authority expands and stabilizes through executive coordination and legal insulation, yet democratic deepening remains limited.⁵ The equilibrium is durable in functional terms but fragile in normative and political ones.

In sum, these dynamics suggest that democratic authorization constitutes the central bottleneck in the transition from crisis-induced functional integration to durable polity formation. The constraints identified in Section 4 do not merely coexist with legitimacy deficits; they actively structure the form that authorization can take. Crisis governance stabilizes policy capacity while postponing democratic settlement, producing a mode of integration that is simultaneously expansive and politically unsettled. Rather than serving as a bridge toward consolidated polity formation, crisis-induced integration risks locking the EU into a pattern of authority without resolution—effective in emergencies, yet persistently constrained by unresolved questions of responsibility, representation, and consent.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined why successive episodes of crisis-driven integration have substantially expanded the EU's policy capacity without resulting in durable polity consolidation. Bringing together scholarship on crisis governance, politicization, and polity formation, it has argued that emergency integration operates through mechanisms that simultaneously enable authority expansion and constrain its democratic stabilization. The result is not an incomplete version of federalization, but a distinct and resilient mode of integration marked by asymmetric authority, institutional ambiguity, and contingent democratic authorization.

The analysis demonstrates that crises relax political constraints by concentrating decision-making power in executive hands and legitimizing exceptional measures. These dynamics have allowed the EU to act decisively in moments of systemic threat, extending its reach into areas once considered politically untouchable. Yet the same features that make crisis governance effective in emergencies also limit its capacity to produce stable political order. Executive dominance weakens representative accountability, institutional layering defers constitutional clarification, and politicization re-emerges once emergency conditions fade. Thus, authority expands, but democratic settlement is postponed.

By situating these dynamics within a literature-based typology of integration trajectories, the article clarifies why crisis-induced functional integration has repeatedly stalled short of consolidated polity formation. Rather than serving as a transitional phase toward a more settled political union, crisis governance reproduces structural constraints that render further consolidation politically difficult. Expanded competences remain vulnerable to contestation, reinterpretation, and reversal, not because integration has gone too far, but because it has proceeded without resolving foundational questions of responsibility, representation, and consent.

The article contributes to contemporary debates on European integration by linking the study of crisis governance to broader concerns about political order and institutional sustainability. It advances a non-teleological account that treats polity formation as a contingent and contested outcome, shaped by the interaction between emergencies, institutional design, and democratic politics. In doing so, it challenges assumptions that policy capacity alone can substitute for democratic authorization or that repeated crises will inevitably push the EU toward constitutional settlement.

More broadly, the findings suggest that as long as integration continues to rely primarily on emergency logics, the EU is likely to remain locked into a pattern of governance that is effective under pressure yet structurally constrained in its capacity to generate stable democratic consent. This does not imply institutional failure, but it does highlight a persistent tension at the heart of contemporary European integration: the ability to act decisively without fully settling the political foundations of authority. Whether alternative pathways—rooted in more explicit democratic authorization and institutional clarification—can emerge under conditions of permanent uncertainty remains an open and pressing question for both scholars and policymakers.

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