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Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0v83n5nb>

Journal

Journal of European Public Policy, 30(10)

ISSN

1350-1763

Author

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Publication Date

2023-10-03

DOI

10.1080/13501763.2023.2247430

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Peer reviewed

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To cite this article: Sara Wallace Goodman (2023) Between stability and crisis: everyday uncertainty in the European Union, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 30:10, 2054-2062, DOI: [10.1080/13501763.2023.2247430](https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2023.2247430)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2023.2247430>



Published online: 22 Sep 2023.



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Special Issue: Best papers from the European Union Studies
Association 2022 Biennial Conference, Miami, USA
Guest Editor: Sara Wallace Goodman



INTRODUCTION

Between stability and crisis: everyday uncertainty in the European Union

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ABSTRACT


When the European Union is not in active crisis, do we characterise it as experiencing a period of stability? What can scholars learn by studying the EU as it toggles in between the two? This special issue presents some of the best papers from the European Union Studies Association's 2022 conference in Miami, Florida. Two themes structure this collection. First, by temporally and conceptually locating the EU between stability and crisis, we see these contributions on EU policy, institutional evolution, financial resilience, and identity formation as a substantive reflection of the variety of emergent and ongoing challenges that comprise everyday uncertainty. Second, in showcasing contributions that study the EU in a variety of ways – as both a political actor and context, or site, of politics, this special issue aims to encourage a widening of the EU studies field.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 12 July 2023; Accepted 8 August 2023

KEYWORDS EU studies; EUSA; crisis; stability; uncertainty; European Union

Introduction

These are challenging times for the European Union. After a decade of crisis, including three years of pandemic shutdowns, culminating in Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent energy crisis, the EU is proving resilient as it navigates uncertain terrain. It has largely avoided recession despite fluctuating inflation rates and maintains a stubborn if suboptimal equilibrium when it comes to democratic backsliding among its member states, namely Hungary and Poland. It pushes onward, evaluating Ukraine for candidacy in EU accession talks, writing new digital rulebooks for artificial intelligence and big tech, and continues its efforts to overhaul its asylum procedures. The EU is not currently

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in crisis (unless 'polycrisis'¹ is its own form of status quo), but one would be reticent to describe these times as a model of stability. Nor is it trapped in perpetual motion between functional integration and sclerotic decline. While Jean Monnet rightly anticipated that 'Europe will be forged in crises', this is an incomplete prediction. Europe is also forged in the quotidian, iterative steps taken to navigate and manage the challenges of everyday uncertainty.

EU studies have likewise adapted to keep pace with empirical change (Kreppel, 2012), but what is it evolving into? If its origins were largely the study of the integration process, EU studies today is a dynamic and cross-disciplinary field investigating crisis, stability, and everything in between. In the wake of Brexit, the editors of this journal advocated 'the need to expand our conceptual and theoretical toolboxes to better come to grips with the disintegrative dynamics' (Rittberger & Blauburger, 2018). The field not only answered this call but exhibited a new vibrancy. Spurred by new questions fundamental to the fate of Europe, like democratic decline, and supported by new quantitative tools, the energy of EU studies today is perhaps only matched by its halcyon days. Though, as an important sidebar, this is not an evenly distributed renaissance. David Andrews (2012, p. 756) wrote in this journal over a decade ago that 'US scholarly fascination with European integration peaked' in the early 2000s and has been in 'steady decline since then'. Given the decline of federal, Title VI funding for area studies, languages, and centres, and with fewer Ph.D. students training in the field, among other anecdotal indicators, this trajectory seems uninterrupted. But this is a narrow way to see EU studies.

As EU studies are energised by new questions and crises, I propose here it could also be energised by adopting a more capacious understanding of what comprises EU studies. The EU landscape has changed over time to include more institutions, more competencies, more politics, and more (but also less) member states. Simply put, EU studies are more than the study of the EU and its policies. It is also the relevant context or cause of innumerable political, economic, and social phenomenon. EU studies is already a big tent, comprised of a range of issues and actors from the micro-level of public opinion and behaviour to the macropolitics across multilevels of actors and interests. It can be bigger still, incorporating more disciplines, more topics, and – hopefully – more synergies. And, since its inception in 1989, the European Union Studies Association (EUSA) – the largest US-based professional organisation focusing on the European Union and transatlantic relations – has taken a proactive role in bringing diverse perspectives into dialogue, convening scholars from both sides of the Atlantic and indeed from around the globe. The EUSA biennial conference serves as a forum for high quality scholarship and vital networking for academics who study the politics of the EU, politics *in* the EU, and take a keen interest in Europe's future.

This collection of articles brings together some of the best papers that were presented during the 2022 EUSA Conference held in Miami, Florida.

This conference was originally scheduled to take place in May 2021, but ended up getting delayed a full year due to the unprecedented COVID-19 global pandemic. On 18 March 2020, the United States closed its borders to travellers from the European Union. This ban would last 20 months, expiring when fully vaccinated travellers from 33 European countries, including the United Kingdom, were finally admitted into the United States on 9 November 2021. To put it mildly, organising a conference for international participants was nerve-wrecking, filled with months of anxiety and uncertainty. The conference was a success not only because of the excellent, cutting-edge scholarship presented by our membership but also due to the profound sense of community reawakened after such a long time apart.

All papers presented at EUSA 2022 were eligible to appear in the special issue. Papers were first nominated by a conference panel chair or discussant and with consent by the authors. There were close to thirty papers nominated, which were then each considered by a jury of readers (comprised of members of the EUSA Executive Committee) for inclusion in the special issue. Following this competitive internal selection, the authors of the papers on the resulting short-list were provided with feedback and given a few months to revise their papers before submitting to JEPP's standard, double-blind review in August 2022. From that point onward, papers were solely accepted for inclusion based on the outcome of the peer review process – that is, based on academic quality alone. The six papers that successfully completed the rigorous peer review process are included in this special issue, the sixth collaboration between the Journal of European Public Policy and the European Union Studies Association (Egan, 2014; Kreppel, 2012; Matthijs, 2020; Newman, 2018; Young, 2016). I am exceedingly grateful to all the individuals that made this collection possible: chairs and discussants for nominating great papers, past and present ExCom members for reading them, referees who constructively reviewed them, and JEPP editors Jeremy Richardson and Berthold Rittberger, who guided my novice hands through the guest editorial process.

Overview of the 2022 EUSA special issue

A special issue editor faces the unique challenge to find coherence among a set of papers vetted through a bottom-up review process and selected according to academic quality rather than content or thematic similarity. But in identifying patterns among the contributions, I think it is important to simultaneously identify what is lost in this process. I wish to first acknowledge some of the ways in which this collection is regrettably representative of EU studies. To begin with, the contributions concentrate in areas that dominate the subfield – namely EU institutions and political economy. While this is appropriate from the perspective of accurately reflecting the size of these topics in EU studies, it leaves out emerging and integral topics. For instance,

there are no contributions on security. This is a stark omission, given Russia's War in Ukraine takes place along the EU's eastern border, or the intensification of migration securitisation following a series of successive 'crises' in the Mediterranean (Léonard & Kaunert, 2022). I also want to particularly acknowledge the regrettable bias toward Western Europe, a feature of this special issue that is unfortunately all-too representative of research in the subfield in general. But from studying the effects of the accession process (Spendzharova & Vachudova, 2012), identity (Schilde, 2014), or illiberal backlash (Guasti & Bustikova, 2023), the members states of Central and Eastern Europe remain critical to understanding the expanse and scope of EU authority. Moreover, it remains illogical to keep these countries *at* the periphery of EU studies when EU politics frequently relocates *to* the periphery, such as in the cases of migration and security. I do not intend to diminish the excellent contributions included in this special issue with this disclaimer, but rather to remind the reader that EU studies paints across the colour spectrum, and this is but a fraction of what the prism casts.

Having said that, this special issue is inclusive in other ways. It brings together a variety of methodological approaches – including discursive institutionalism, case study, and regression discontinuity design. It features contributions from a mix of scholars at different levels in their career and from institutions on both sides of the Atlantic. And it presents the EU (and, therefore, EU studies) as many things: a set of institutions (Bertram, 2023), a dynamic policy and political context where, national (Polyak, 2023), subnational (Shady, 2023), and city-level politics (Fraccaroli *et al.*, 2023) affect EU authority, and where acts of EU authority can in turn affect national politics (Vergioglou, 2023) and policy (Di Carlo & Schmitz, 2023).

And, centrally, it reflects the variety of emergent and ongoing challenges to the EU. Of course, these challenges include exogenous economic shocks like Brexit (Fraccaroli *et al.*, 2023) but they mostly focus on navigating everyday uncertainty, where financial centres exhibit strategic flexibility after crisis (Polyak, 2023), regional elites mobilise local identity as a cantilever to national interests (Shady, 2023), the European Commission evolves in ideas and interests over time (Bertram, 2023), and EU policy builds institutions for continuity (Di Carlo & Schmitz, 2023) and electoral support (Vergioglou, 2023). EU policy-making is an everyday activity; evolving industrial policymaking (Di Carlo & Schmitz, 2023), rethinking goals for the trade-sustainable development agenda (Bertram, 2023), and the reconceptualization of national growth models (Fraccaroli *et al.*, 2023; Polyak, 2023) all speak to the ongoing, dynamic challenges in aligning state and supranational interests.

Contributions by Vergioglou and Shady, in particular, expose a more elusive EU challenge: its citizens. Whether they express Euroscepticism (Vergioglou, 2023) or strengthen regional identity for political leverage (Shady, 2023) is something on which the EU has limited input but experiences the

consequences of nonetheless. And both responses are directly affected by something over which the EU has almost no control: immigration. The EU has made institutional strides in border securitisation through investments in the European Border and Coast Guard Agency ('Frontex') and in the externalisation of migration controls to address asylum pressure in the Mediterranean. But the EU only has so much control over member states implementing EU regulations, and even less influence on other sources of immigration, like family routes. But cultural threat from immigration remains one of the most significant sources of antidemocratic and illiberal attitudes across Europe (Dinas *et al.*, 2019; Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014; Halla *et al.*, 2017; Shehaj *et al.*, 2021).

Summary of contributions

In what follows, I preview each of the contributions in this special issue to highlight their insights and unique contributions to the widening field of EU studies. Beginning with Di Carlo and Schmitz (2023), they document the recent emergence and expansion of EU industrial policy, identifying four policy functions for the Commission: targeted resourcing to actors with high innovation potential, broker pan-European innovation, facilitate industrial policy within EU regulatory frameworks, all the while protecting the single market from state-backed foreign competition. Combining elite level interviews with other primary and secondary sources, they identify strong neofunctionalism in how the Commission's numerous, fragmented policy initiatives are made. The insights here provoke consideration for how economic competition abroad (namely from China and the United States) may drive more internal coordination and institution-building in this policy area.

Bertram (2023) also traces an evolving and expanding role for the Commission, but in the EU's trade-sustainable development agenda. Employing a discursive institutionalist approach, she illustrates the Commission exhibiting ideational entrepreneurship (introducing new ideas at certain points in time) and a constant rearrangement of trade-sustainability ideas (a 'bricolage' approach), while also practicing restraint, preserving a degree of policy continuity over time. Bertram assembles a novel dataset of communicative discourse to map ideational development in the Commission between 1993 and 2022, observing a shift from concerns over labour rights to economic development to the environment. Both trade and environmental scholars will find this analysis useful, especially in understanding the factors that can cause large international organisations to ideationally pivot.

These two articles are essential reading for political economists, scholars of respective EU policy, as well as EU institutions, especially those that seek to better understand the evolving executive powers of the Commission. Interestingly, we see both positivist and interpretivist methodologies arriving at

a similar insight: the Commission preserves and grows its relevance by staying flexible, evolving with policy areas over time. Sometimes this evolution is agentic and coordinative, and sometimes it is reactive. But a changing Europe is midwived by a flexible executive.

Where both Di Carlo and Schmitz (2023) and Bertram (2023) discuss how an EU institution builds up capacity, Vergioglou (2023) pivots to how they garner external credit. Examining regional development subsidies, Vergioglou identifies a causal link between fiscal transfers to less developed regions and electoral outcomes, wherein investments reduce appetite for Euroskeptic party support in national and European Parliament elections. Contributing to a large literature that explains Euroskeptic support due to factors ranging from automatisisation to globalisation, this paper argues that supranational investments in 'left behind' areas not only produce tangible local benefits, including high-profile investments in public infrastructure and reducing inequality through welfare projects and stimulus payments, but also, in doing so, they turn down the temperature on Euroskeptic support (See also Borin *et al.*, 2021), which has long been shown to be correlated with economic deprivation (Ford & Goodwin, 2014).

Where the first three articles in the volume look at the creation and consequences of specific EU policy (industrial, trade-sustainable development, and fiscal transfers as part of the EU's cohesion policy), the second three articles look at EU relations. How do financial actors navigate the strictures of the single market? How do we interpret national economic growth within the Euro area? Polyak (2023) looks at the behaviour of multinational enterprises (MNEs) registering profits in low-tax jurisdictions – in this case, Ireland – without shifting production or employing Irish capital or labour. This profit shifting distorts statistics of national economic activity, making GDP and export figures look more robust than reality exhibits. Polyak finds that the scale of distortion (or, as she calls it, 'accounting fiction') is strongly correlated to the share of foreign owned firms per sector, with the largest discrepancies in the pharmaceutical and communications industries. A robustness check of other countries in the Euro area confirms Irish exceptionality. Contributing to the literature on macroeconomic statistics and international political economy, it provokes an important conversation on competition between eurozone states and the consequences of reliance on profit shifting firms. It also invites consideration of the asymmetrical effects of geographically concentrated job creation.

If *how* growth models are reported is one type of fiction, *what* growth models even represent may be considered a second. Fraccaroli *et al.* (2023) adopt a city-level growth model perspective to argue that financial centres in London, Dublin, Amsterdam, Paris and Frankfurt operate relatively independent to national economic considerations. Consequently, cities as financial centres exhibit resistance and flexibility in the face of exogenous

economic shock by utilising place-specific social capital and linked professional ecologies. Drawing on firm-level data, the authors observe strong institutional resilience to Brexit, with little impact on bank loans, assets, and jobs between financial centres. In identifying a different resilience for financial centres through place-specific mechanisms, their contribution provides a significant readjustment to the field of comparative political economy's understanding of growth models. Specifically, the study of national growth models is, factually, analysis of city-level growth models. Moreover, scholars are invited to consider the resilience of financial centres contrasted to citizens struggling with the 'cost of living crisis', generated by, among other causes, supply chain disruptions, trade bureaucracies, and food price inflation. To wit, Brexit's fallout has been exceedingly uneven.

In addition to challenging our interpretation of national growth models, these two contributions share a second attribute: they invite a rethinking of how we understand 'national' politics by identifying centre-periphery dynamics as a source of bias. Investment and resilience is geographically confined to financial centres, which means growth is spatially confined. But centre-periphery dynamics inevitably spill over from economic to political concerns, where 'economic hardship leads to radical right voting when the socioeconomic circumstances are favorable' (Rooduijn & Burgoon, 2018), which is where the consequences of EU investment in regions becomes, as Vergioglou (2023) illustrates, politically consequential.

Shady (2023) provides further insight on this centre-periphery dynamic, focusing on subnational elites, community identity, and authority devolution. Where subnational locales provide outlets for financial profit shifting, they also prove fertile ground for seeding a territorial identity that can push back at national cultural issues. This is not incidental, as religious and ethnic diversity continue to rise with Muslim immigration (Dancygier, 2017). Shady forwards an innovative theory of subnational identity construction based on a religious and centre-periphery cleavage model, illustrating how elites seeking regional distinction will adopt an approach opposing the state's national identity construction vis à vis accommodation of religious diversity. This may result in politics that either privilege pluralism or the majority religion. In a paired comparison of Catalonia and Alsace-Moselle, Shady shows religion as a fruitful source of subnational resistance. This contribution offers an important layer of consideration for thinking about what efforts buttress or undermine identity and EU legitimation (McNamara, 2015), where sovereignty and immigration remain at the centre of national politics. This, alongside the other contributions, shows plainly that EU studies must engage at every level – European, national, subnational, and multinational – to understand what motivates elite and citizen behaviour, both in hard times and in navigating everyday uncertainty.

Note

1. President Jean-Claude Juncker. Speech at the Annual General Meeting of the Hellenic Federation of Enterprises (SEV). Athens, Greece. 21 June 2016. Available at: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-16-2293_de.htm <accessed 25 June 2023>

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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