

I

A Europe of Crises

“People only accept change when they are faced with necessity, and only recognize necessity when a crisis is upon them.”

Jean Monnet, architect of the European Union

INTRODUCTION

The European Union (EU) is plagued by episodes of what I call *integrational panic* – periods of often overblown, existential crisis in which it seems that the “end of Europe” is at hand. Since its inception in 1957, the European Union (or European Economic Community/European Community, in its previous incarnations) is often said to be in severe crisis. Doomsday scenarios abound: either certain key member states are on the verge of leaving the EU, or the European economy is on the brink of collapse, or a cornerstone policy of EU integration – the Euro, the Common Foreign and Security Policy, the common market, Schengen – is about to be thrown out. Every few years, like clockwork, it seems that the European integration project faces its demise in one way or another. The instances are many and are typically described as such, with notable examples stretching from the 1965 Empty Chair crisis to the 1999 Commission resignation crisis right up through the Greek debt and refugee crises of 2015 (Thies 2012). Whether these crises are internal in origin – such as the 2005 constitutional crisis – or external in origin – such as the 2003 EU crisis over Iraq – they are typically portrayed in the international media with a heavily negative slant. Journalists, commentators, politicians, and other public figures quickly jump on the bandwagon, often invoking predictions about the imminent demise of the EU. And yet,

none of these predictions have actually come true. Doomsday scenarios continually prove to be overblown, even while these errors in perception are repeated over and over again. Each new crisis seems to be the worst, so that is what tends to stick in people's minds.

Despite this dark cloud hanging over Europe's image, the region is today arguably stronger, wealthier, and more integrated than ever. It has the largest economy in the world and is the United States' biggest trading partner and investor. Its member states continue to sign new treaties, solidifying new levels of integration in a wide spectrum of policy areas, from foreign policy to finance to internal security. The membership of the EU continues to grow with countries to the east – Ukraine, Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro, and Turkey – formally seeking to become candidates or members. As a global actor, the EU cultivates its soft, smart, and normative power. Its new supranational diplomatic service – the European External Action Service – representing more than half a billion European citizens to the world, holds a great deal of potential. Politically, economically, diplomatically, and even militarily, the EU as a whole is a global actor of influence. Increasingly, decision makers have realized that integration through the institutional structure of the EU is indispensable, and indeed, have even taken it for granted.

So why is the EU often portrayed as an idealistic project that is stumbling from crisis to crisis? At the outset of this book, it is important to acknowledge that despite all that the European countries have achieved so far in their efforts to prevent the kind of war and conflict that plagued the continent for centuries, the EU, of course, has its share of problems and challenges. It is a work in progress, a project that is perennially in the middle of its evolution, with no clearly defined end goal. There are visible disagreements within Europe. The leaders of member states come together in Brussels and argue over what future is best. They debate policies, budgets, and treaties, and sometimes do not find common ground. They sometimes cannot speak with one voice when it comes to the important foreign policy decisions that really matter in global politics. They do not yet agree on how far integration should ultimately go. At the societal level, especially after the height of the 2010–12 Eurozone crisis, there are those with a greater sense of disillusionment with Europe. Extremist parties and groups have radicalized more citizens, those who identify as Euroskeptic are more vocal (even though Eurobarometer polls consistently show that Europeans generally trust the EU more than their particular national governments), and there are concerns about the future economic prosperity and security of the region. Some EU member states continually grapple

with their own internal division, especially in countries such as Spain, the UK, and Italy, to name a few. Ultimately, the EU *could* cease to exist if crises and Euroskepticism make the degeneration of the European project a self-fulfilling prophecy. The EU *could* slide backward, away from achieving the goals that member states have set for themselves, loosening up the level of integration that they have achieved thus far.

This book does not deny all of these challenges, internal divides, and potential obstacles that the EU faces in trying to fulfill the aims of the European integration project. It does, however, argue that these issues are disproportionately and severely amplified during times of crisis, pitting Europeans against each other and driving elites to “play with fire” as they determine the future of Europe. After all, it is to be expected that within democracies – particularly within twenty-eight different democracies – there will be debate, disagreement, and political gridlock. And yet, a comparison with the United States is instructive – the polarization of just *two* political parties in the American system is often more of a problem than disagreement among twenty-eight EU member states over issues debated in Brussels. And unlike the United States, the EU’s government has never shut down.

A disproportional reaction is when tensions within Europe manifest themselves as such serious crises that they could potentially derail the entire European project. When this happens, it represents a potentially serious problem for Europe. One of the central arguments of this book is that certain events which present challenges and obstacles to EU integration have built up into episodes of societal panic, or more specifically, integrational panic, in Europe. Such panic manifests as an overwhelming sense within significant sectors of society that EU integration simply cannot continue. As will be shown in subsequent chapters, many opinion shapers, various leaders, and above all, the media have contributed to the rise of integrational panic at certain key junctures in the EU’s development. In effect, political and societal leaders, perhaps unwittingly, contribute to the construction of existential threats to the EU. Although some theories of crisis emergence (discussed in Chapter 2) argue that crises are the product of structural or systemic flaws, I contend that events in Europe often become construed as crises when people *perceive* them to be and define them as such. In other words, EU crises have a socially constructed dynamic to them, and once integrational panic sets in, these crises can grow to existential proportions.

At the same time, the creation and buildup of crises that seemingly threaten the very existence of the EU is only part of the story. What is

perhaps equally interesting, and ultimately more important, is how Europeans then grapple with and overcome these crises. In that respect, this book makes the case that there is a clearly discernible pattern across these episodes of existential crisis in Europe. After these crises reach their height of intensity, seemingly bringing the EU to the brink of failure in the eyes of many, they dissipate and leave in their wake a renewed will to find consensus. Indeed, European leaders repeatedly take some dramatic steps toward *more* integration in the wake of existential crises. It is often casually recognized, usually with the benefit of hindsight, that European actors seem to use crises as opportunities to further shape European order beyond what can be achieved incrementally. An *Economist* article quipped that “Europe’s model of change has long been based on lurch then muddle” (*The Economist* 2012). The 1986 Single European Act, 2003 European Security Strategy, 2009 Lisbon Treaty, and 2011 Fiscal Compact, among many others, all followed seemingly serious existential crises. Renewed political will to find consensus, and even major advances in European integration, seem to track these crises. Some aspects of this post-crisis *catharsis*, as I call it (see Chapter 2), are more informal and occur at the societal level, whereas others are more formal and involve signing new agreements on the basis of newfound consensus or the desire for more integration. Both are important, as even the more informal forms of integration are crucial for the EU’s sustainability over the long run in terms of crafting a common identity and shared public sphere.

Theories of international relations have yet to offer an explanation for why EU crises might ultimately serve as opportunities, as I argue in this book. While incremental processes of day-to-day integration, punctuated with major treaties and other agreements, are well documented in the literature,¹ almost no research has actually examined EU crises in a comparative framework.² Nearly all research on EU crises considers them in isolation from one another, even while acknowledging that a pattern of some kind seems to exist across them. There are a number of articles on various EU crises (Crowe 2003; see also Gleissner and de Vreese 2005; Gamble 2006; Lewis 2009), but they tend to focus exclusively on single case studies. In short, the meaning and impact of crises in the history of the EU is poorly understood. *The Politics of Crisis in Europe* seeks to fill this gap in our knowledge of these key events in the evolution

¹ Indeed, much of my research to date focuses on incremental integration through the work of epistemic communities. See, for example, Cross (2011).

² One exception is Jo (2007).

of the EU. Gaining a better understanding of the role of crises in the European region has significant implications for the EU's image, power, and status as a global actor – both negative and positive.

APPROACH OF THE BOOK

Three European crises of the twenty-first century stand out in terms of their severity and are the focus of this book: the 2003 crisis over the Iraq war (Chapter 3), the 2005 constitutional crisis (Chapter 4), and the 2010–12 Eurozone crisis (Chapter 5). Of course, the nature of each of these crises is distinct from the others, ranging from external war to treaty reform to financial turmoil. Nonetheless, and perhaps surprisingly, the causes and consequences of these crises have important elements in common.

To briefly sketch out this pattern: first, there is an event of some kind that can be interpreted as a trigger for crisis, depending on societal perceptions and reaction. Second, the event leads to a sense of crisis, building in severity, alongside clear signs of integrational panic – including overreaction to events and amplification of preexisting tensions. Then, in the third phase, the crisis reaches its height with open talk of the “end of Europe,” which often triggers a self-fulfilling prophecy dynamic. In other words, as each crisis builds and reaches its height, tangible manifestations of crisis emerge – such as social breakdown, economic turmoil, political gridlock – because of the integrational panic that preceded. Fourth, the crisis subsides and there is a period of catharsis that results in the fifth phase: a renewed will for consensus, typically resulting in more integration. Figure 1.1 lays out the broad-level pattern across these crisis cases, which is explained more fully in Chapter 2.

To examine this pattern in detail, I break down the case studies examined in Chapters 3, 4, and 5 into three main parts. First, I critically analyze the various arguments in the literature that have been advanced to explain each crisis. My intention is to use the existing literature surrounding each crisis as a point of departure to then investigate the socially driven causes of crisis, an aspect that has been neglected in these analyses. Second, I describe how events came to be defined as a major crisis for Europe, particularly in light of negative media coverage and frenzied attention. In particular, the socially constructed aspect of crises often contains exaggeration, extrapolation from the specific to the general, a misconstruing of significance, and negative forecasting in the media. Third, I use a narratives approach – looking at how Europeans talk about each crisis – to shed light on the process of crisis

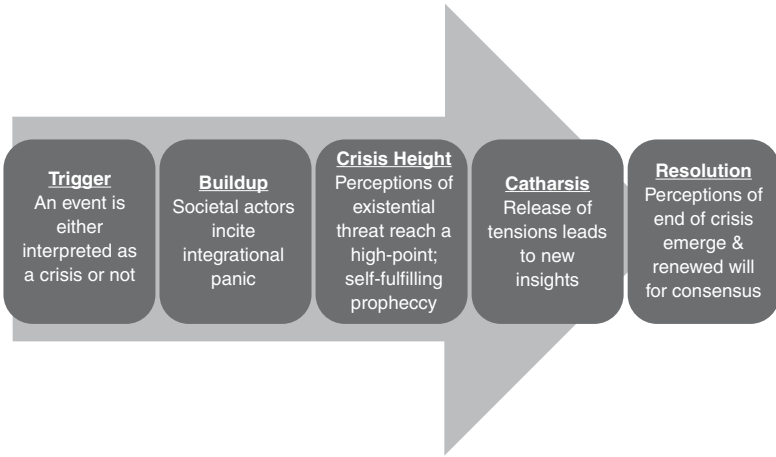


FIGURE 1.1 EU Existential Crisis Pattern

buildup and resolution, with specific attention to societal reactions and perceptions, and how they are framed. In each case of crisis, I argue that none of the three crises *necessarily* had to develop into a full-blown existential crisis for Europe. Rather, the role of the media, elites, and the public in defining an event as a crisis is crucial. In contrast to other approaches, I argue that a narratives perspective is essential to fully account for the origins of EU existential crises.

While I am at first concerned with explaining why these crises emerge, I also seek to explain how Europeans resolve these crises, turning them into windows of opportunity. Thus, I analyze how the crisis becomes an opening for finding new areas of consensus, often moving integration forward in some significant way. In particular, I explore the evidence for what I call post-crisis *catharsis*: that is, a crisis-induced process of openly airing tensions within European society – East vs. West, North vs. South, public vs. elite, and so on – that would otherwise largely remain below the surface. To this end, I identify the main pre-crisis societal tensions of the time and compare them to the content of the crisis narratives – both at the elite and public levels. The expectation is that if European society airs these tensions, then some degree of catharsis is achieved. I consider media coverage during the crisis as an indicator of the main crisis narrative, as well as Eurobarometer polls to establish the changes in attitudes before and after the crisis. Finally, I assess to what extent leaders decide to find new areas of consensus as they seek to resolve each crisis. I show that

if the main narrative about a crisis is predominantly constructed around preexisting societal tensions, leaders are more likely to push forward with EU integration. In other words, crisis resolution that includes catharsis is what enables crises to become opportunities rather than setbacks for EU integration.

Thus, going beyond standard approaches that explain major crises, my emphasis is on societal actors – the public, opinion shapers, media, politicians, and Brussels elites – involved in constructing and resolving EU crises. As will be seen, in each case the international media clearly plays a strong role in defining relatively average events or routine obstacles to integration as major crises for the EU. The media is not the only actor framing events this way, but in the twenty-first century, the media has served as a kind of threat multiplier, amplifying negative ideas about events that eventually impact perceptions about the future of Europe, and thus fueling a self-fulfilling prophecy dynamic.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Conventional wisdom tends to claim that the EU has always suffered from systemic and structural problems because it is deeply and inherently flawed in fundamental ways. The assumption is that every once in a while, these flaws rise to the surface and take Europe to the brink of breakdown. In contrast, my aim is to show that these crises need not have escalated to the point that they ultimately threatened the very existence of the EU. And crises do not need to do so in the future. However, in order to see how this works, it is necessary to look at the societal dimension and social narratives about each crisis, rather than simply stopping at structural conditions and assuming after the fact that these conditions made crises inevitable at certain junctures. Explanations of major EU crises over the decades have relied too heavily on assumptions about the flaws in the design of the EU, and it is important to examine whether other factors better explain repeated instances of crisis in Europe.

This book acknowledges the wealth of research that has gone into understanding each of these crises individually, but seeks to go beyond mainstream accounts of crises through the use of a comparative approach. Since there is a wide-ranging debate surrounding each of these crises in its own right, I have written each case study so that it can stand alone, and I consider the competing arguments for each case study separately. Although some of these competing arguments have some weaknesses, others are compelling. Nevertheless, it is through the overarching

comparison of these crises to each other that the importance of crisis narratives becomes apparent. Societal narratives about crises coming from the media, elites, and the public show how these crises end up becoming far more severe than one would anticipate. Moreover, it is eventually in the substance of these crisis narratives that a degree of catharsis is achieved, tensions are released, and solutions are found. Time and time again, the EU as a whole turns these crises into opportunities for more integration.

Ultimately, the book shows why the EU has staying power, and why it will likely continue to play a major role in the region and in international relations in the years to come. In this sense, the book seeks to correct ongoing misperceptions about the EU's image, identity, and influence. It also provides new insights into the role, impact, and reaction to crises in international relations, taking into account the powerful role of the media in the twenty-first century. Indeed, the approach for understanding crises set forth here could also potentially shed light on the causes and consequences of crises in international relations more generally, especially considering the increasing incidences of media-driven (and social-media-driven) frenzies and even uprisings. Such an analysis may be useful in explaining why society tends to perceive certain events as crises and not others, as well as the opportunities that result from these critical junctures. With the information revolution and the international media's power to stir up episodes of societal panic, crises with a socially constructed dynamic are likely becoming more prevalent in many cases worldwide.

THE PUZZLE OF EU EXISTENTIAL CRISES

Most casual observers of European politics are aware that the EU is frequently described as in trouble for a variety of reasons. News headlines would make this impossible to ignore. Before delving into the core cases of this book – three major EU crises near the beginning of the twenty-first century – it is worth revisiting the historical basis for the question: why has the European region seemingly stumbled from crisis to crisis on its path toward more integration? Numerous and significant crises have peppered the history of the EU, from the 1950s to today. These have included the collapse of the European defense and political communities in the 1950s, Charles de Gaulle's vetoes of UK membership in the 1960s, the 1965 Empty Chair crisis, the failures of the precursors to the European Monetary System, and the September 1992 "Black Wednesday" crisis, among others. The crises that have plagued European integration

throughout its development have not all necessarily been of the same severity, but many were perceived to be critical junctures at the time, during which the viability of the European integration project came into serious question.

When looking at the historical record, how can we recognize when an event constituted an existential crisis? Crises must be distinguished from failures or setbacks. As discussed in detail in Chapter 2, crises are relatively unusual events, and they must be serious enough to pose a threat to the existing social, political, or institutional order. Thus, a crisis is not simply an event that shows the limits of what can be achieved – in this case, European cooperation and integration; it is an event that appears to bring societies to the brink of a fundamental break with the existing way of life. Crucially, in line with the argument of this book, a crisis must be defined and perceived as such.

It would be too ambitious of an undertaking to analyze all of Europe's crises at the level of detail that I reserve for Chapters 3 through 5, but a brief overview of these more historical cases adds weight to the puzzle addressed here, and demonstrates the concrete need to understand the impact of these events on the development of the EU, beyond day-to-day processes of incremental integration. Looking back chronologically, it is evident that numerous events have been seen as significant crises for Europe. While some may rightly argue that the events mentioned here do not comprise an exhaustive list, my goal as stated at the outset of this book is simply to show that there is indeed a historical record of crises in the development of the EU that deserves an explanation.

The 1950s

The crises of the 1950s must be seen in the context of newfound hope for the achievement of a bold and far-ranging political structure in Europe that would be designed specifically to bind European countries together and make another war among them impossible. On the one hand, the idea of including the newly established Federal Republic of Germany as an equal member in a new proposal to subsume coal and steel production under a common High Authority was a major step, however uncomfortably it sat with some so soon after the devastation of the Second World War. On the other hand, the goal of launching a radically new form of European political organization that would cast aside national sovereignty and embrace pan-Europeanism under a federal structure had gained considerable traction, and a narrow focus on coal and steel seemed

to fall short of this aim. The idea of a federal Europe had been discussed for some time, even before the war, with its roots in Altiero Spinelli's manifesto calling for a "Federal Union among the European peoples" (Dinan 2010: 9–11). This continued after the war, when, to name just a couple of examples, Jean Monnet (the head of France's economic planning office) wrote that a federation among European countries was necessary, and Winston Churchill called for a United States of Europe, albeit one without Britain.

Thus, at this early stage after World War II, when expectations were high that there would be a dramatic transformation of some kind, any failure to achieve far-reaching agreement presented a crisis in the attainment of these goals. The six founding member states – France, Germany, Italy, and the three Benelux countries – signed the Treaty of Paris on April 18, 1951, establishing the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), the precursor to the European Economic Community (EEC). Little more than a year later, on May 27, 1952, the same six countries signed a treaty to establish a European Defence Community (EDC), which would be an alternative to German membership in NATO and would constitute a pan-European army. Alongside this, a plan to launch a European Political Community (EPC) to support the EDC and ensure democratic accountability drew initial support. The Council of Europe had early on proven itself too weak to be invested with any real political authority, so a great deal of hope was placed in the fledgling ECSC. Ultimately, even though it was the French prime minister, René Pleven, who proposed the EDC, the French parliament rejected it (319 to 264) on August 30, 1954, deeming it a threat to national sovereignty and fearing the re-militarization of Germany so soon after World War II. The treaty had the support of the other five countries, but with the loss of French backing, the EDC, and along with it the EPC, was left to die on the vine.

Many in the European political elite saw the collapse of the European defense and political communities in the 1950s as an existential crisis for the ECSC. The sense among some was that the failure of the EDC and EPC meant that the minimal requirements for forming a political community had been seriously undermined. Those in favor of a federalist Europe referred to the negative parliamentary vote as "the crime of August 30" because one country had effectively halted a process that was headed toward more supranationalism. J. Spaey, a member of the Belgian section of the European Movement, argued at the time that this was about more than the debate between confederalists and federalists; it was about the reality that no single nation