Casting Light on EU Governance: Reflection and Foresight in an Era of Crises

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For the last 15 years, European states have been stumbling in the dark, carefully navigating obstacles with fearful apprehension of the next unidentified hurdle. The global financial crisis in 2008, the Eurozone crisis in 2011, the invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2014, the refugee crisis in 2015, Brexit in 2016, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, and the renewed efforts of Russia to neutralise and annex Ukraine in 2022 illustrate that Europe's political community has lived through an era of crises. Such a track record could be a source of pride and confidence. How many times have critics, experts, and outsiders predicted that the European Union (EU) will fail to deliver and fall apart? That member states will prefer to steer their own course? In such moments, advocates of the European project like to remind the world of Jean Monnet's famous words: "Europe will be forged in crises and will be the sum of the solutions adopted for those crises" (Lamassoure, 2020). Historical events have demonstrated how correct he was and that such optimism is well deserved, even in the face of adversity. But it is hard to compare yesterday's challenges with those of tomorrow. The world has departed from the post-Cold War order, shattered by those very same crises that shaped the essence of the European project, according to Monnet. At the dawn of a new era, Europe is confronted by dynamics which threaten to erode its power slowly rather than abruptly: The Union lags behind China and the USA in the 5th Industrial Revolution and seems poorly prepared to handle an unstable geopolitical landscape which features the return of large-scale and hybrid warfare, and is dependent on external actors for the stability of its society and economy (Essentra, 2023; Charrel, 2022; Garcia-Herrero & Martinez Turegona, 2020). These concerns are complemented by systematic transformations, such as a rapidly ageing population and climate change.

The proven capacity of the EU to navigate a crisis and the complicated nature of tomorrow's challenges create a contrasting image: The recent past as a source of confidence and the future as a source of fear. This contrast is even more remarkable considering that European states possess the required means to address some of the aforementioned problems: The EU hosts some of the finest qualitative military industries in the world but remains dependent on the USA and UK for military capabilities (Roth, 2017); is the world's third-largest economy, whilst losing its competitive edge vis-à-vis external actors (Garcia-Herrero & Martinez Turegona, 2020); is the world's largest trading hub, yet heavily dependent on a few partners for strategic goods and services (European Commission, 2021); and boasts a large number of the world's most innovative economies, but falls behind in the race for semiconductors, artificial intelligence, and electric vehicles (von Heimburg, 2021; ScienceBusiness, 2022). We seem to be left in the dark regarding the future of Europe, whilst Europeans perceive the outside world as an inherently dangerous place. Josep Borrell, High Representative of the EU, illustrated that attitude in 2022 in a rather unfitting manner by stating that Europe's peaceful 'garden' is at risk of invasion from the outside 'jungle' (Liboreiro, 2022). A lack of self-understanding within Europe's political community adds to this sense of insecurity, fear and uncertainty. Experts portray the EU as a complicated political machine, only to be understood by insiders; media outlets focus on the occurrence and outcomes of individual crises; and political heavy-weights like Jacques Delors add to this sense of mystery by referring to the EU as an 'unidentified political object' (Martin, 2019). This transgresses one of the most basic strategic maxims formulated by Sun Tzu in the Art of War: "He who knows the enemy and himself has nothing to fear in a hundred fights" (Tzu, 2020). European political and academic discourse focuses heavily on understanding the enemy, meaning the challenges facing Europe's society in the short and long term. But there is little attention to understanding the self, meaning the nature and development of Europe's political system, structures, and institutions in relation to its society with implications for its position on the international stage.

Taking a step back from the storm of events that have overtaken the world enables reflection on fundamental political questions intertwined in many discussions, dilemmas, and recurring narratives across the European continent. The Conference on the Future of Europe scratched the surface of such pertinent questions, but politicians, citizens, and policymakers have collectively failed to keep their eyes on the ball amidst the outbreak of war, disease, and social unrest. Like a hawk diving on its prey – or a toddler dropping its old toy when spotting a new one – attention to structural issues is replaced with a hyper-focus on the latest crisis. The stumble in the dark continues, which creates a strand of thinking in which the external determines the perception of the self. Consequently, European states are forced to resort to a strategy of continuous adaptation to the whims of the world without a stabilising anchor point which enables consistency and coherence in actions and thinking.

This essay attempts to cast light on the darkness surrounding the nature and driving forces of EU governance in the 21st century at the hand of theoretical frameworks formulated by Douglas North, Thomas Kuhn, and Carl Schmitt. It sketches a trajectory of development within European governance in a time of persisting challenges and crises, distils related dynamics and insights, and formulates strategic foresight regarding the future of EU governance. Which factors and actors are currently driving the evolution of the European political system – and in which direction are we headed? Which problems can be foreseen along that expected trajectory – and how can we prepare to deal with them? These matters might appear abstract and theoretical at first sight – perhaps even of little added value for those concerned with pressing matters such as the Green Deal, economic outlooks, and the Russian war in Ukraine. But exactly such events and topics can be better understood in relation to an investigation of such fundamental questions. This creates necessary vision and foresight – often said to be lacking in Europe's geopolitical strategy – and can be utilised to deal with persisting and emerging issues. This essay, therefore, starts with an examination of the frameworks which explain paradigm shifts, institutional change, and its concrete impact on the world.

Paradigms

Thomas Kuhn attributes paradigm shifts to the emergence of 'anomalies' within our social or physical world. These are events or phenomena which cannot be understood, explained or addressed through the lens of the current paradigm (Bird, 2018). A paradigm is best defined as a holistic set of ideas through which humans perceive and think about the world surrounding them. It is an abstract concept and, therefore, easier to grasp by learning about the features it produces, including social systems, governance structures, cultural values, and societal norms. This distinctive way of thinking is reflected in history classes, where human history is divided into distinguishable periods of time – each represented by its own remarkable features. A high school student will be taught to recognise Europe in the time of the Ancient World by the development of large cities, the rise and spread of Greek philosophy, and the establishment of Roman governance. The Middle Ages are, in turn, characterised by the transition towards Christian theology, a feudal socio-political system, and a return to small-scale agricultural communities. Taken together – and overtly generalised – these institutions serve as mirrors which reflect the contours and features of a paradigm in a given time and place. Yet, history classes focus on the visible changes within institutions and societal components produced by the wheel of time. This implies that paradigms shift – since the institutions they make do so as well. But what drives humans to abandon the security of a dominant paradigm? What causes us to rethink our perception and organisation of the world? This is the anomaly described by Thomas Kuhn, which we cannot explain, understand, or address through the lens of current thinking. Adaptation to anomalies is an ongoing process with a direct effect on our social world. The institutional framework of North (1991) bridges this gap between paradigm shifts and their concrete changes in the real world.

Institutions

North (1991) explains that informal and formal institutions regulate our social world, state affairs, and societal structures. They are the rules by which the game of life is played, encompassing cultural values, government policies, interstate agreements, religious customs, unspoken rules, and societal norms (Ibid). Our way of thinking shapes the design of institutions – and, thus, the product of a paradigm. Institutions change as our paradigms shift, thereby making a direct impact on our experience and navigation of daily social life. North explains that institutions tend to be relatively unsusceptible to significant change due to the nature of their function: they regulate social life and are therefore expected to be stable, thereby creating a predictable world for humans to operate in (Ibid).

Moreover, certain individuals and societal groups have a strong interest in maintaining the status quo which is regulated through institutions, adding to this resistance to change. But certain windows of opportunity for change, referred to as critical junctures, do present themselves when (1) significant political momentum is built up within societies or (2) if an external event or shock requires adaptation or change (Ibid). Note that the development of an institution is heavily influenced by its origins and history. This is referred to as path dependency, as previous decisions taken along the developing trajectory of an institution affect the choices one can make regarding its future. Institutions are, however, not only a product of their history but also a socially engineered product of our perception and imagination. Human thinking – coloured through the lens of the dominant paradigm – shapes their specific features and characteristics. Institutions are thus a derivate of a paradigm, and when a paradigm proves to be flawed by the emergence of an anomaly, one can draw the conclusion that the products derived from its thinking are similarly flawed. In reality, dysfunctional institutions, such as deadlocked political systems or obsolete laws, serve as indicators to humans that their previous attempts to organise the world via institutional structures have (partially) failed. They are incentivised to adapt, abolish or reinvent the design of those institutions, and within that process, the space is created for new paradigms to emerge. A battle ensues between different strands of thinking until one establishes dominance in a community and gives new direction to its institutions. But which actor within our social world has the agency to shape that process? The sovereignty framework of Carl Schmitt examines that question and guides the essay towards the paradigm shift in EU governance amidst a time of crisis.

The sovereigns

Schmitt (2005) defines the sovereign as 'he who decides on the exception'. The exception relates to the idea of an anomaly, as both constitute a situation or event which challenges the dominant paradigm (Vinx, 2010). Kuhn's anomaly encompasses a broader definition, including a hypothetical scientific discovery that contradicts established knowledge in the realm of physics. Schmitt's definition is more narrow, as the exception is the unknown, which poses an existential threat to the status quo within a society since the established structures – shaped through the lens of a paradigm – are not designed to deal with its emergence. He argues that in such a moment of crisis, the sovereign power will step forward, mobilise society, and adapt its core institutions to ensure its survival (Schmitt, 2005). Doing so implies that the sovereign is the actor who decides upon the definition of public order and security when these are under threat and what should be done in order to adapt and survive. This is the actor who sees through the lens of a paradigm and shapes institutions in a reflection of its perception of the world. It is the primary actor to focus on when discussing paradigm shifts and institutional change. Understanding the future of EU governance and its related institutions in a period marked by anomalies thus requires an identification of the primary actor in that process – the sovereign.

The indispensable role of national governments in the institutional design of the EU and legislative primacy on matters of 'lower politics' merits the assessment that they are the sovereigns within Europe's political system, as described by Schmitt. They are positioned in a figurative driving seat within the EU known as a 'compromise machine' as it incorporates (1) European interests via the European Commission (EC), (2) citizen interests via the European Parliament (EP), and (3) national interests via the European Council and the Council of the European Union (Eur-lex). National governments have the privilege of providing long-term strategic direction to the agenda of the European Commission, resolving crises and high-profile political disputes in the European Council and amending or approving legislative proposals in the Council of the European Union (European Council, 2017; European Union, 2022). Member states also remain largely in charge of policy areas such as health care, culture, and education (Eur-lex).

Despite the recurring narrative on eroding state sovereignty in the 21st century, the initial crisis response of European states to various exceptions underscores the persisting capacity of national governments to assert sovereign powers when needed (Loughlin, 2016). European governments, not the European Commission nor the European Parliament, were in charge of responding to the migrant crisis of 2015 (Wagner, 2015). Member states took the lead in dealing with the global financial crisis and subsequent Eurozone crisis; other institutions, such as the European Central Bank (ECB), merely played a more prominent political role if granted support and political backing from governments (Tooze, 2019). That power dynamic also characterised Europe's initial response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine (Congressional Research Service, 2023; European Union, 2023). Governments scrambled for

resources, mobilised their state apparatus and society, and executed national policies. Simultaneously, recent academic and mainstream discourse has signalled a growing role for the European Commission within Europe's political system. This notion is underscored by the remarkable quantity of EU legislation that is being proposed by the EC in the fields of climate, energy, industry, digitalisation, and innovation (Lehne, 2023). Ursula von der Leyen, President of the Commission, has enhanced the prominence of the EC through her active media presence and key role in the legislative and political battles surrounding Ukraine, COVID-19, and the Green Deal. How can these seemingly contradictory dynamics – the demonstrated sovereign power of European governments and the increasing reach and impact of EU policies under the auspices of the European Commission – coexist? It seems counterintuitive to argue that the two can reinforce each other, given the widespread belief that the Union threatens state sovereignty, a frequently propagated narrative by European populists in the last decade. Reality depicts a different picture, and this is where the Green Deal comes in sight.

Reflection: The Green Deal

The Green Deal resembles a reconfiguration of the EU, not through institutional reforms but through a new modus operandi of its actors, revised strategic priorities of the collective, and the introduction of impactful legislative proposals within those institutional channels. It aims to guide the Union through the green transition to mitigate and adapt to climate change (European Commission, 2023a). The proposed policies deeply impact the economies and societies of the member states, as a wide range of institutions need to be adjusted within that process. This concerns, for example, the energy system, industries, supply chains, nature, transport, and built environment (Ibid). This indicates that member states have identified climate change as an exception that can potentially destroy the status quo, and therefore requires the mobilisation and adaptation of institutions to adapt and survive. There is, however, the inherent problem that the previous modus operandi facilitated by political and economic institutions does not enable the sovereigns to respond effectively. A single state's actions are insufficient to address the systematic threat that climate change poses to the globe, humankind, and the sovereigns due to the globalised nature of modern economies and governing structures. There will be no positive outcome for the climate and all the people living on this planet if a state pursues sustainability goals at all costs while its neighbour does the exact opposite for political or economic gain. Europe's society thus needs to transform as a collective towards a sustainable, green and circular system in order to take a leading role in the global fight against climate change (Switch2Green, 2023).

The member states have identified the EU as the institution that can guide this collective economic transformation process. This notion of collective economic transformation differs significantly from integrated economic cooperation, the idea on which the institutional foundations of the European project were built after World War II. This has created the political will amongst the sovereigns to grant the EC increased legislative powers. Consequently, with the permission of the sovereigns, EU legislation has penetrated far into the fundamental institutions of national economies and societies. Without climate change, an anomaly large in scale and potential disruption, it is hard to imagine that such a profound change could have occurred. Rather than harmonising political ties between European states through economic integration, which was the essence of the European project in the 20th century, the Green Deal marks the attempt to collectively transform Europe's economy and harmonise its relation with nature and a sustainable future. This has to be realised under the institutional guidance of the EU.

Reflection: COVID-19

This paradigm shift towards protecting the status quo from external threats through close cooperation via the institutional channels of the EU was further cemented by the COVID-19 pandemic. This proved to be an exception which posed an immediate danger to public health. The initial crisis response was characterised by the emergence of the sovereigns. National governments asserted their sovereign powers in reaction to an unprecedented global crisis by shutting down public life, closing borders, and imposing other measures which suspended social life (European Council, 2023a). However, member states realised that the short- and long-term dangers caused by COVID-19 in regard to public health and the economy could only be efficiently addressed through tight cooperation within the European political system (Alemanno, 2020). Initiatives originating from, or exercised under, the institutional guidance of the EU repatriated more than 500.000 European citizens to the continent, financed the research,

development and purchase of vaccines and medical equipment, and launched unprecedented financial programs such as the SURE bonds and the Recovery and Resilience Fund (RRF) (European Council, 2023a). Note that the requirements for substantive digital and green investments within the RRF, set as standards by the European Commission for member states to oblige with in order to access the financial program, illustrate the path dependency of the Union regarding the green and digital agenda, which had been formulated before the pandemic. The COVID-19 response was thus, besides a dire fight against a threat to public health, also perceived as a critical juncture through which the new agenda of the Union could be accelerated.

The COVID-19 virus not only posed an immediate threat in the short term but also exposed Europe's critical reliance on a stable and predictable global environment to preserve the status quo on the continent. Through the lens of the post-Cold War paradigm, states built their socioeconomic institutions on the notion of undisrupted global trade. The COVID-19 pandemic has awoken sovereigns around the globe to the dangers of strategic dependencies – and Europe got its first taste of the consequences in 2020 and 2021 (Duclos, 2020). The reliance on countries like China, Vietnam, and Brazil, combined with volatility in demand and recurring lockdowns which constrained supply, caused unprecedented supply shortages. Europe particularly relies on global supply chains for the provision of semiconductors, medicines, raw materials, and other electronic equipment, which is indispensable for further downstream economic activity on the continent (European Commission, 2021; European Commission, 2022). Threats to these components were not accounted for in the institutional design of economic structures within the post-Cold War paradigm. The solution to this anomaly resides in re-shoring companies and firms from abroad to the continent, diversifying global supply chains, and enhancing domestic industrial capacity (European Commission, 2023c).

This strategic objective of geo-strategic cooperation differs significantly from economic integration, as it entails a collective effort to stimulate growth and change within a select amount of sectors and industries in Europe's economic system. These include the semiconductor industry, the supply, production and processing of raw materials, the battery industry, cloud computing, and the healthcare industry. Given the necessity to collectively undertake this effort for the sake of efficiency, the EC as a political institution gained momentum and initiated a large quantity of unprecedented legislation to enhance geo-strategic cooperation amongst the member states. Examples include the (1) Critical Raw Materials Act, (2) the Chips Act, (3) the Digital Services Act, (4) the Green Industrial Plan, and (5) the launch of Important Projects of Common European Interests (IPCEIs). The institutional function of the EU was thus further shaped by the idea of empowering Europe as a collective in its relation to the external in the form of potential disruptions within the global economy and a contested geopolitical landscape. Geo-economic cooperation, identified as the solution by the sovereigns, is to be realised via the institutional channels of the EU.

Reflection: Ukraine & Russia

The renewed efforts of Russia to invade and neutralise Ukraine starting February 24 2022, constituted a third exception which shocked and transformed the socio-political order in Europe. The idea that large-scale warfare would not return to the continent entrenched itself in the post-Cold War paradigm under the auspices of American hegemony after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The European project blossomed in the decades after, spurred on by the peace dividend, and expanded rapidly towards Central and Eastern European states. They had regained their independence and aimed to steer their national course towards the West (European Commission, 2023b). Founding members such as France, Germany, and the Netherlands did not heed warning calls from new members like Poland, Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia on brewing revanchism within Russia. The wars of Putin's regime in Chechnya, Georgia, and Crimea were not observed as anomalies or exceptions by the largest European member states but as events and dynamics fitting into the status quo (Lau, 2022). This is understandable from a realist perspective, combined with a strategic perception of the world that stems from the 20th century. States like Spain, Portugal, Italy, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands do not naturally perceive Russian aggression in their neighbourhood as an existential threat.

However, that strategic calculation made sense in the previous century when the European member states worked together on an economic project called the European Economic Community (EEC). But at the start of the 21st century, the European project transformed into a political union – the EU – which incorporated states like Romania,

Poland, Sweden, Finland, and the Baltic States. This deep political engagement between Western and (North) Eastern European states has brought new obligations and responsibilities on the shoulders of all, including the necessity to support each other when the hostile attitude of an outsider threatens members of the Union. A new situation came into existence as a plethora of factors and events – including the Green Deal, COVID-19 and Brexit – significantly enhanced the powers of the EU to shape relations and cooperation between member states. Although this political institution has increased in size and importance, its strategic priorities are still determined by national governments, which use the EU as an instrument to further their interests. And it is exactly in the interests of (North) Eastern European sovereigns to mobilise all members of the EU against the perceived existential and undoubtedly strategic threat from Russia.

This leads to the crux of France's and Germany's strategic miscalculation regarding Ukraine: Their increased reliance on the EC in the pursuit of national interests via EU policies means that their (inter)national politics are also increasingly shaped by the strategic priorities of other member states which shape the agenda of the EU. European politics is essentially a perpetually repeated game in which the members know that they need to treat each other fairly since they will be dependent on the goodwill and cooperation of others somewhere in the future. Cheating on each other and treating the urgent national priorities of another member as negligible is not a viable long-term strategy. It appears as if 'old Europe' never considered that within this new reality, the threats and worries of other member states will also become their threats and concerns in the long term. In dialogue with Putin, France and Germany attempted to navigate the dilemma between the pressure of European political dynamics and their respective national interests. They were left empty-handed and, in turn, repeatedly scolded by European states like Poland for their lacklustre support for Ukraine. All European governments eventually fell into the fold and made the survival of Ukraine a shared strategic priority across the EU – a significant difference compared to the strategic situation before the war.

The outbreak of war in Ukraine thus represents another exception that challenges the post-Cold War paradigm and strengthens the role of the EU, as member states rely on this institution in the adaptation process (European Council, 2022). The EU currently enables its member states to collectively purchase arms and ammunition in support of Ukraine's prolonged military efforts via the European Peace Facility. A host of sanction packages against Russia (twelve in total) have been constructed under the institutional guidance of the EU since it is of little use if member states attempt such an undertaking individually. New mechanisms were created to collectively deal with the economic and financial outfall of the war, such as REPowerEU, market correction mechanisms, and joint purchases of gas supplies (European Council, 2023b; Congressional Research Service, 2023). The EU has thereby moved into the realm of security coordination and support for its members, increasing their national prioritisation of defence and security policies.

Foresight

The reactions of European governments to the anomalies and exceptions of the last decade demonstrate that strength is found in unity between the members. The EU is the designated political institution which facilitates and streamlines that unifying dynamic under the pressure of crises. Therefore, climate change, pandemics, economic volatility and war tend to strengthen the EU as an institution within the political design of the European system. The biggest threat to the EU is that which manages to destroy the internal unity among its sovereigns. This turns our attention to the political landscapes within member states since this is the arena where sovereigns earn their mandate to operate on the European and international stage. Brexit might spring to mind as an example, but it is quite different: The UK decided to leave and thereby created a significant political gap within the Union, which could be filled by the increased weight of a pro-EU-orientated Franco-German relationship. From that perspective, Brexit eventually enhanced the governing powers of the EU. It is a far more dreadful thing to consider what could happen when governments come to power with an agenda that challenges the status quo, strategic priorities, and current modus operandi of the Union. This is why Europe as a political community holds its breath during every national election in a major member state. Experts and journalists were fixated on the scenario in which a new Italian government led by Giorgia Meloni would steer against financial, economic and foreign EU policies. The focus on Italy subsided once it became clear that this would not come to pass and shifted towards the French elections in 2022 and subsequently towards Spain and Poland in 2023 (Malingre & Gautheret, 2022; Faiola et al., 2022; Carreño, 2023).

The underlying reason for such fears is that each national election has become a small-scale battle with significant influence on the future of the European project. The EU has been dealing with the political consequences of losing such a fight in Hungary – a small member state – for more than a decade and dreads the thought of a similar defeat in a central member state. This is not an entirely new issue; plenty of national governments have acted as a brake on pro-federalist dynamics in Europe. The UK, under the conservative leadership of Margaret Thatcher, and the socialist French government of Francois Mitterand exemplify a member state that attempts to steer against the technical boundaries and politics of the Union. His reformist agenda encapsulated in '110 Propositions for France' was impossible to enact within the confines of the European financial framework of the time. He was left with the choice between delivering his campaign promises or pushing Europe into a crisis – and opted for the former (Birch, 2015). But those comparisons stem from a different century when the European project had a different function and operated in a different international system. Today, member states have opted to enhance the role of the EU for collective protection against external threats, allowing EU legislation to reach into the depths of their social and economic institutions. This modus operandi is sustained through continuous political support among the member states and is not codified via any binding legal or institutional reform. Within that context, the election of a government in a major member state which stays in the EU and seeks to overturn its strategic priorities or way of operating would have severe consequences: It would destroy the collective capacity of the member states to protect their national interests vis-à-vis the external since this requires intense cooperation and unity among the sovereigns.

This issue is even more delicate and tricky because the impact and chance of such a scenario coming into play increases as the reach and weight of EU policies increase. National climate, energy, industry, innovation, and trade policies build, expand, and comply with underlying EU legislation. In their attempts to protect national interests from external threats via the EU, the member states have constructed a project which will be contested on its fundamentals, the domestic political arena. The situation in which popular domestic sentiments push political parties to enact significant changes in national policy areas will cause friction between those two different political and legal levels. Governments will come to blows with the EC and other member states in Brussels since their national mandate pushes them to diverge from established guidelines, directives, or regulations. The German coalition government gave a hint of what this could look like by going back on a done deal and vetoing the ban on combustion engines by 2035 (Oltermann, 2023). Slovakia followed suit when its newly installed governments overturned pre-existing policy and halted all aid towards Ukraine. These fears are now the central topic of European public discourse as the PVV and other conservative parties have won the recent Dutch elections, potentially adding to the list of sovereigns that are likely to change their national outlook on the EU due to shifts in domestic politics.

The result of such practices could be endless renegotiations of EU policies with governments who demand exceptions or leniency in Brussels for the sake of delivering campaign promises to their voters at home. In the alternative scenario, member states and European institutions keep such governments in the fold and do not allow renegotiations, exemptions or leniency. But if national voters that provide the sovereigns in the current system with their mandate and legitimacy cannot have their political wishes fulfilled or the promises made by their representatives delivered for the sake of 'wider European interests', can we still speak of a properly functioning democratic system? And how would Europe deal with the spread of such sentiments within member states?

Although it is a natural reflex for a political community to fixate on the external as a looming danger that might threaten its position and survival, this essay underlines that the biggest threat to the future of the EU originates from the inside. It is the consequence of a new paradigm which heavily focuses on controlling the external through collective action under the institutional guidance of the EU. Its capacity to do so would be nullified when political unity among the member states is disrupted. One can hope that this does not ever occur and things remain as they are. The EU's approach to Russia in the last two decades painfully demonstrates how dangerous it can be to opt for such a strategy of hope. The Dutch election results hint at the fact that domestic support for the current course within Europe cannot be taken for granted – it is also under threat in other member states. The European project and the welfare of European citizens could be the next victim of such strategic negligence if politicians and policymakers refuse to learn from past mistakes and telltale signs.

It would be better to reassess running discussions on enlargement, vetoes, and the expansion of EU legislation into different policy areas in light of the following questions: how can (incumbent) governments be enabled to handle

challenges from the domestic political landscape without significantly undermining the EU's political coherence towards the external? How do we balance the necessity for domestic stability with the condition for collective swift action? Addressing that question with foresight is needed to stop Europe's fearful stumbling in the dark and the ad-hoc improvisations to known dangers and threats. It is exactly what is required now that member states are in the painful process of implementing and executing the proposed legislations of the Green Deal, which will undoubtedly shake up the socioeconomic status quo and domestic political landscapes across the continents. It is needed as the Union tries to formulate a position in the international arena amidst great-power competition in a destabilising world order through geo-strategic cooperation and security coordination.

Conclusion

To conclude, a new paradigm has emerged in an era of crises that made European sovereigns opt to strengthen the EC as an institution within Europe's political system. Collectively addressing external threats like climate change, COVID-19, global economic volatility, and war has translated into new strategic objectives which are pursued through the channels of the EU: (1) Economic transformation, (2) geo-strategic cooperation, and (3) security support and coordination. The external focus of this new paradigm and the functioning of the EU makes it unlikely that another anomaly or exception will prove too much for the Union to deal with. It has been redesigned to respond to events of this nature. Significant attention should be devoted to events and dynamics that are unaccounted for within this new paradigm: the threat of disrupted political consensus amongst the sovereigns. In their attempts to protect national interests from external threats via the EU, the member states have constructed an apparatus of political and legal institutions which will be contested on its fundamental building blocks – the domestic political arena. This friction increases the likelihood of clashes between the European political-legal order and the 27 national political-legal orders. It is, therefore, necessary to consider how the Union would deal with (new) governments that want to renegotiate previous deals or change existing policies to deliver their electoral promises at home.

Pushing too hard for the preservation of political unity in all policy areas will undoubtedly pit member states against the EC – a fight that this institution cannot win when multiple member states adopt a similar stance in opposition to its function in the European political system. Loosening the reins will undermine the capacity of the EU to act as a collective in its concerted efforts to form a posture on the international stage in a heated geopolitical environment and defend itself from external threats. Striking the right balance is what should be on the mind of Europe's politicians, academics and policymakers. The successful navigation of this complicated political minefield will be the crucial factor shaping the political coherence of the Union and, thereby, its position and capacity to act in the international arena in the 21st century. The Dutch election results underscore the urgency behind these considerations, and the outcome of the upcoming European elections, alongside political stability in Germany and the reconfiguration of the French political landscape after the departure of President Macron, will be critical indicators to observe with these reflections and foresight in mind.

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