Alexander Friis Rokkedal
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Crisis Management in the European Union

- An analysis of the Ukraine Conflict and COVID-10 Pandemic responses

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Author: Alexander Friis Rokkedal

Student number: 20176655

Supervisor: Dominik Shraff

Abstract

Crisis Management in the European Union - An analysis of the Ukraine Conflict and COVID-10 Pandemic responses. This thesis paper focuses on providing an analytical overview and understanding of the European Commissions' capacity for crisis response and why it varied in its responses to the two crises of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The paper explains and analyzes how the events, responses, and reactions in each of the crises unfolded based on a theoretical framework consisting of neofunctionalism, liberal intergovernmentalism, and postfunctionalism – all theories of European integration.

The thesis provides an introduction and a literature review on the events, as well as briefly how previous crisis of the European Union have been handled and how the same theories were utilized to understand these crises, showing different success rates in the crisis handling, as well as proving that one theory may be more adequate and able to explain a specific crisis situation or event than another. The theoretical chapter explains the concepts of the European integration theories neofunctionalism, liberal intergovernmentalism, and postfunctionalism, their content, and how each of them considers the Commission's role in European integration. The theories were applied because they together enable a well-rounded analysis of the complexities of the subject in the thesis. Neofunctionalism focus on the supranational institutions as the most important actors in European integration, while liberal intergovernmentalism focuses on the member states and the bargaining process between them, and postfunctionalism argues that the public opinion plays an important role in influencing both member states and institutions.

The next chapter provides an empirical overview on each of the crises, as well as the EU response on both of them, including the turn of events that led to the crises, how they unfolded and developed, and explains the concrete responses taken by the EU Commission to handle them, such as the various sanctions packages introduced regarding Ukraine, and the coordination efforts and recovery funds regarding COVID-19. The analytical chapter is divided in three, the first two analyzing how each of the crises developed and how the Commission responded, putting emphasis on immediate actions and measures taken by the Commission in response, the reactions of the member states, as well as the public opinion on each of the crises. The last part features a comparison and a formal answer to the research question, showing that due to the different natures of the crises, and the differences in preparedness in both the Commission but also in coordination with the member states, the Commission's capacity for crisis response varied greatly during the first

months of the crises. Public opinion and attitudes toward the Commission and the EU as a whole also greatly influenced the Commission's capacity for crisis response. Due to the strong public support for EU-wide solutions, member states were more willing to work with the Commission, greatly improving the Commission's capacity to take appropriate measures against the crises.

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Introduction

Throughout the myriad of crises that have confronted the European Union during the 21st century, there have in general been mixed results. The European Commission is at the center of the EU and its competencies and is the one to make proposals to be sent for ratification by the member states. The two most recent crises are those of the COVID-19 pandemic that turned the EU integration process, supranational institutions, member states, and public life upside down, and the currently ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine that after years of minor clashes also completely changed life in the EU, as until now, a war in Europe was considered a thing of the past and unthinkable in the 21st century. These grievous crises have presented themselves to be significant adversaries to the functioning of the EU and the competencies and capacity of the European Commission, around which this paper revolves around. The research question of this paper is the following: *Why did the EU Commission's capacity to swiftly respond vary between the Ukraine and COVID-19 crises?*

Regarding the COVID-19 crisis, the Commission was initially unable to do anything to manage the crisis once it got a hold of the continent. Instead, a spillback situation of disintegration incurred, with member states chaotically and uncoordinatedly closing around themselves and to each other, unresponsive to any common solution or policymaking. Within a few weeks, the pillars of the EU, such as the single market and free movement of people and goods were put out of effect, and restrictions and border closings sprang up instead. In comparison, the EU response to the Ukraine invasion was almost immediate. Days before the announcement of the invasion by Russia, the Commission had proposed and ratified a package of sanctions for the Russian support of the self-proclaimed independence of two Eastern Ukrainian regions. Days after the invasion, more sanctions followed, with increasingly tougher contents to force the Russians to stop their unlawful invasion (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2021; European Council, 2022). A clear contrast can be identified in the immediate Commission responses and efficiency hereof. This paper seeks to investigate why this is the case. In order to reach an answer to the presented research question, a comparative case study analysis will take place of the two crises of how the Commission responded to each of the crises, and the reasoning for the particular response and turnout of events. To carry out the analysis, a theoretical basis in the theories of neofunctionalism, liberal intergovernmentalism, and postfunctionalism will be used, as these theories are considered the most adequate to provide an answer to the research question.

Literature Review

To understand the research question of the EU Commission's response to the Ukraine and Corona crises as a case study, it is important to have an overview of and an understanding of previous crises that have confronted the European Union and its member states, as well as the theoretical approaches and arguments used to explain the situations. It is clear from the literature that the theme of this paper is a complex issue with a wide array of contributions from scholars of international relations, and European studies and politics. There are various manners of considering the issues and understandings of EU crisis management throughout the 21st century, the theoretical practices used to engage the issues, and the different dimensions and actors involved and affected. The following texts contribute to establishing a framework, as well as a point of departure for the purpose of answering the problem statement that has been presented earlier in this paper. The texts have analyzed different dimensions and crises presented to the EU, including Brexit, the Schengen crisis, the Euro crisis, etc.

In the book *The Palgrave Handbook of EU Crises,* several authors contribute with their knowledge, through the use of various theoretical approaches, with the intention of understanding and explaining crises the EU has confronted, including the use of theories, that are also utilized in this paper, specifically neofunctionalism and liberal intergovernmentalism. In the book, Frank Schimmelfennig (2021) analyzes the Euro Crisis, the Schengen crisis, and the Brexit Crisis through the use of liberal intergovernmentalism. He concludes that although the theory was not developed to consider crisis situations, the general assumptions and hypotheses serve well in the explanation of the crises. It is argued that (except for the case of Brexit) LI theorized that states would seek deeper integration in order to overcome crises, due to national, unilateral capacity to control them themselves, to avoid expected losses from disintegration. It is argued that established EU rules and procedures fail, while intergovernmental negotiations fill the void, and produce a satisfactory outcome for the member states, or at least for the most powerful ones. This is called asymmetric interdependence, accounting for the bargaining power of each state. The interdependence explains why the Euro crisis produced more integration, as the creditor countries, Germany in particular, had the upper hand in the negotiations, and were able to push for deeper fiscal control and integration. In the Schengen Crisis, by contrast, no interdependence was produced, as many "bystander" countries were not affected by the wave of refugees and were thus uninterested in cooperation, whereas the frontline and destination countries were desperate for solutions. During the Schengen

crisis, the Commission made several supranational proposals in an attempt to control the refugee influx, however the proposals were either rejected, or failed to be put into practice, due to differing opinions and reluctance among various member states. As such, the EU institutions and the member states were unable to produce viable or functioning solutions to the crisis, and the Commission proved to be useless to a certain degree in handling the crisis, as there was no support for its proposals. In relation to Brexit, in the treaty articles, the exiting state negotiates with the EU as a whole, represented by the Commission, increasing unity and bargaining power, as well as the competencies of the Commission itself. Thus, the Commission powers varies in between the various crises and the nature of these (Schimmelfennig, 2021).

In another chapter of the same book, Arne Niemann (2021) considers the utility of the neofunctionalist approach in the case of the Euro Crisis. Like LI, Niemann also argues that neofunctionalism is not as such a theory of crisis (of integration) as he puts it, but instead of accounting for the dynamics of integration and how it evolves, however, the theory still provides important insights on theorizing crises. According to neofunctionalists, the integration process is driven by unintentional consequences, as political actors are incapable of long-term purposive behavior, and instead stumble from one decision to the next, and fail forward in a sense. It is unknown when certain decisions lead to unanticipated consequences later, increasing the likelihood of later problems and eventually crises. Niemann argues that European Monetary Union (EMU) designed under the Maastricht treaty in the 1990s was flawed from the beginning, as policies that should be taken at the same level of governance had been allocated to different levels eventually leading to the dysfunctionality experiences during the Euro crisis, which resulted as an amplifier of the crisis. To this end, the EU supranational institutions and particularly the Commission and the ECB tackled the crisis by furthering the integration of the member states by allocating more competences and power to the institutions, proving the utility of the theory to certain crisis approaches, and showing that the Commission is able to influence a crisis situation and improve its power and position in the Union, and gaining more competences over the managing of the EU and the dealings of the member states (Niemann, 2021).

In the article *Grand theories of European integration revisited: does identity politics shape the course of European integration?* by Theresa Kuhn (2019), the neofunctionalist and intergovernmentalist theories are pushed aside in favor of postfunctionalism, as it is argued by the author that these two theories have been unable to explain more recent developments of European integration. Due to the introduction of wider influence of the masses and public opinion in EU

politics, and the politicization of EU politics, postfunctionalism arguably presents a better explanation for European integration processes in relation to identity politics. It is argued that postfunctionalism also was helpful in clarifying the Schengen crisis as policymakers could not engage in efficient collective problem-solving due to fear of public backlash. In contrast, Kuhn argues that the theory is unable to explain the increasing integration in the crisis of the EMU, a subject better suited for neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism. Brexit was also an example of an effective constraining dissensus of the public and identity politics, as it not only slowed down European integration but led to disintegration. Brexit also challenges the LI theory, as Brexit was clearly about commercial policy and is predicted to produce negative effects. These British preferences contradict LI as it seemingly goes against the interests of the country, but it is what the public wanted (Kuhn, 2019). As such, the findings based on postfunctionalism clearly demonstrate its usefulness in explaining European integration, whereas the main theories fail to do so.

Due to the clear oppositions in the theoretical considerations and assumptions between neofunctionalism and LI, they would appear difficult to unite under a single case, as they operate on different levels of analysis and with different premises. However, the article *Failing forward? Crises and patterns of European integration* by authors Jones, Kelemen & Meunier (2021) provides a situation in which the two theories work together and operate in tandem. The basic argument is in the failing forward patterns of European integration. It is argued that intergovernmental bargaining between states with different interests leads to institutional incompleteness, going by the lowest common denominator. The incompleteness leads to neofunctionalist spillover effects eventually leading to crisis. The system repeats with the member states responding to crises, again settling on the lowest common denominator. As the bargains are inadequate and based on national self-interests, they eventually cause problems and potential crises. Thus, it lays the foundation for further integration. Crisis is also a key component in the failing forward dynamic, as governments are more likely to fail forward when working together in an improvised manner under extreme time constraints, dealing with an unfamiliar problem. The findings in this article, interestingly argues for the tandem operation of neofunctionalist and LI theoretical approaches, a consideration that is relevant for this paper due to the use of both theories on the same case.

Methodology

Research design

The methods used to carry out this paper are based on the deductive research method, along with a mixed qualitative/quantitative methods approach. The deductive method is mainly concerned with developing a hypothesis, or hypotheses, based on existing theory, and with that it seeks to design a research strategy to test this hypothesis. In general, the deductive method is understood as reasoning from the general to the particular. According to Dudovskiy (2022), if a causal relationship or link seems to be implied by a particular theoretical approach or case, then it might also be true in many cases. The deductive method begins with an expected pattern of theory that is tested against empirical observations or situations, whereas its direct opposite, the inductive method begins with an empirical observation and seeks to find a pattern within it. The deductive approach can be divided into four categories. The categories are as following:

Theory → Hypothesis → Observation/Test → Confirmation/Rejection

The deductive approach begins with choice of theory, from which a hypothesis based on the theory is developed. In operational terms, a hypothesis proposes a relationship or pattern between specific variables. Finally, the outcome of the observation/test must be either confirmed or rejected (Dudovskiy, 2022).

To put the approach into perspective and in relation to the paper. The chosen theories of European integration that are to be used in the analysis are what point towards the hypothesis formulation – the research question, which seeks to understand the EU Commission's response capacity to the crises in question and also guide the choice of data to be searched for, considered and investigated, which is related to the Commission's responses to crises with the theoretical assumptions in mind. The research question is sought to be explained through the empirical data and observations, from which the hypothesis of the research question can finally be confirmed or rejected. Arguably the specific theory selection forces the researcher to search for and consider data only relevant to the theories in question, thus leading the analytical process in a direction based on the theoretical framework.

The deductive approach in this paper is realized through a mixed qualitative and quantitative data method. Part of the data in this paper is derived through academic and news articles, and press releases, while other parts of the data are derived through surveys and questionnaires. In the end,

the considerations and analysis carried out from the data are purely qualitative, as no quantitative data collection is carried out by the researcher, but instead, the quantitative data has been collected from other sources to be used as argumentation and foundation for a qualitative analysis here.

A more specified qualitative method of use in this paper is the comparative case study. Comparative case studies involve the analysis of the similarities, differences, and patterns across two or more cases that have a common focus or goal. Such a study can be relevant when there is a need to explain how the context influences the success or failure of a program or a policy initiative, for example. In the case of this paper, a comparative case study has been carried out through the analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, both of which are categorized as crises that have had a direct and particular effect on the integration processes of the European Union, the member states and especially the functions of the European Commission, which is the focal point in this paper. Both events have triggered crisis situations in the Commission and the EU as a whole. Thus, the investigation of why, and therefore how, the Commission's capacity for swift and effective crisis response has varied between the two crises. In short, the comparative case study method allows the researcher to analyze and compare the two crisis situations and the Commission's responses to each of them (Goodrick, 2014).

The analysis of the two crises is conducted through various focal points, being particularly the Commission's immediate and direct actions, or lack thereof, according to the two crises, and explaining the reasoning behind the (in)actions based on the theoretical approaches. It furthermore takes into consideration the (in)actions or reactions of the member states which can either inhibit or reinforce the Commission's capacity and ability of crisis response. Finally, European public opinion also plays a significant role as it deeply influences decision-making and action resolution in both the member states as well as the Commission as the various actors can be both encouraged or discouraged into a certain behavior, response and interest based on public opinion.

Theory selection

The theoretical approaches used for this paper consist of neofunctionalism, liberal intergovernmentalism, and postfunctionalism, all theories used in the explanation and understanding of European integration, making them particularly relevant for answering the research question of the paper concerning the European Commission's capacity for crisis response in the case of the two chosen crises.

Usage and a mixture of the theories will provide a higher theoretical and analytical level, due to the limits, flaws, and strengths of each theory. Each theory can explain certain behavioral patterns and processes of EU integration and the involved actors, these being the supranational institutions and the member states alike. However, each of the theories also has its weaknesses and criticisms, as situations, events, developments and other patterns or realities arise, with one theory being unable to explain the reason for the situation in question. The neofunctionalist approach puts a focus on the supranational institutions, particularly the Commission, and the claim that European integration is a continuing process, and that one successful integrative policy always will lead to more integration in neighboring policy areas, based on spillover pressure, however in reality, it is proven that this is not necessarily always the case, thus putting the theoretical assumptions and hypotheses in question. Similarly, liberal intergovernmentalism puts a considerable focus on the member states, and largely ignores the supranational institutions, regarding them merely as providing a more efficient means of inter-state negotiations. However, while the member states do hold significant power, the supranational European institutions, the Commission in particular, have also proven their ability in exercising independently and influencing policy outcomes in self-interest. Postfunctionalism is also especially relevant as it includes something that the other two do not, the power of the people. While the other two theories ignore the influence and power of the European public, postfunctionalism considers it an integral part of explaining European integration. The cases of Brexit and general Euroscepticism are real-world examples of the relevance of the public, as these cases cannot be explained by conventional neofunctionalism or LI. As such, a mixture of the three theories should provide a deeper, more thorough, and wider understanding of the Ukraine crisis case, as they serve to complement each other, so where one fails another may take its place.

Data collection

The data collection of the paper has been carried out through qualitative and trustworthy sources. Specifically, the collection of data has been made through the use of official EU statements, press releases, academic articles, credible news articles, concerning the timelines of the negotiation processes, and the management of the crises, i.e., the preparation processes up until the invasion and the following phases of sanction packages against Russia, position-making and the like. Credible quantitative data on public opinion has been collected through surveys commissioned by the institutions of the European Union, and qualitative data has been collected from articles of experts in the field, as well as official statements from the political elite and supranational institutions.

Limitations

Various limitations have been decided during the process of this paper, to streamline and focus the content, to ensure a higher academic level and more profound analytical work. It was originally propositioned to compare the Ukraine crisis situation with various previous crises that the European Union has experienced in the last couple of decades, however, it was decided to focus on a comparison with the COVID-19 pandemic crisis instead of various different ones, including the Eurozone crisis, Schengen crisis, etc. as the project would have been too broad, and impossible to thoroughly delve into each crisis given the space and time constraints.

A limitation has been set regarding the period in which the crisis responses have been analyzed. This has been set as roughly from January to July of the years 2020 (COVID-19) and 2022 (Ukraine) for each of the crises, to give a more set and approachable time period to investigate and analyze. This also serves to make the two rather different crises more comparable in terms of the Commission responses and shows how the two crises have differences and similarities, and how they each have affected the EU. It should also be noted that while the conflict in Ukraine has been a reality for many years, the actual crisis with the Russian invasion only truly started towards the end of February 2022, and the time of writing this paper is set in May 2022, however, preparations and warnings of an imminent invasion were public knowledge from December 2021, making the six-month period a viable temporal threshold interval for investigation.

The main actor of relevance in this paper is the European Commission. Originally various actors were considered as part of the investigation including various EU member states as well as Ukraine and Russia. However, the paper was narrowed down to the role of the Commission in the two crises in question, as both time and space constraints would become an issue if a thorough analysis was to be conducted with the equal inclusion of more actors. This would also have led the research question into a completely different and much more broad direction.

Theory

The following section provides an overview and understanding of the theoretical approaches used to establish a theoretical basis for the analysis and discussion of the previously established research question. The theories that are introduced in this chapter consist of the main theories of European integration – neofunctionalism, liberal intergovernmentalism, and postfunctionalism. The various theories, while separate, all have strengths and weaknesses, and making use of them in conjunction

might allow for a higher level of analysis, as where one theory fails, another may take its place and contribute with a different perspective.

Neofunctionalism

The first theoretical approach to be elaborated in this section is that of neofunctionalism, with the work of Carsten Strøby Jensen (2018) in the book *European Union Politics* as the primary source of reference. Neofunctionalism was theorized in a bid to explain the developments taking place in Western Europe with the voluntary integration between the countries. It was purposed to be able to explain similar integration processes in other parts of the world as well, but was in the developed to focus on European integration process and the explanation of it. It should be noted that neofunctionalism is mainly concerned with the process of integration and not a specific end goal, and how European integration will look like. Instead, it seeks to explain the dynamics of change, to which the member states are subject to when cooperating with each other (Strøby Jensen, 2018).

The spillover effect

Neofunctionalism contains three main characteristics or hypotheses that provide a basis for understanding and explanation of the theory, with these being the spillover, the elite socialization, and the supranational interest groups hypotheses. The core concept of neofunctionalism is *spillover*. Hass based the theory on the assumption that cooperation and integration in one policy area would create pressures on neighboring or related policy areas. This pressure would put the particular policy area in question on the political agenda, and ultimately lead to further integration of the Union. As such, the term spillover refers to the situation in which cooperation in one field of European integration creates the necessity of cooperation in another. An example to put this into perspective would be the member states' willingness to create a common automobile market, which would spill over to cooperation on car safety equipment to establish a common market in this field as well. The reason for this is that in a common market with different rules and regulations, car producers would find it difficult to sell their products in different countries due to different standards of safety. Strøby Jensen (2018) argues that this understanding of the spillover effect suggests that the integration process is automatic or beyond the control of the political leadership, however, the various forms of spillover can be guided and manipulated by both actors and institutions based on clear political motives, which will be addressed in the following paragraphs (Strøby Jensen, 2018).

In short, the concept of spillover in European integration theory refers to the process in which cooperation conducted with a specific goal in mind eventually leads to the formulation of new goals to ensure the achievement of the original goal. As such, political cooperation and regional integration are extended over time, which was not necessarily the intention to begin with. There are three different kinds of spillover in the neofunctionalist approach; these being functional, political, and cultivated spillover, the meaning of which is elaborated in the following section.

Functional spillover:

An example of functional spillover, meaning when one integration step functionally leads to another, can be seen in the creation of the EU Single Market. The Single Market was related to the common rules and regulations regarding the working environment and conditions across the EU member states. The trade barriers that were to be removed with the introduction of the Single Market led to national regulations on health and safety in the working environment, as there were different standards across the Community, which thus prevented free movement. As such, the functional consequences of establishing the Single Market was that the member states had to accept regulations on the working environment at a European level, although this was not originally intended.

Political spillover:

This type of spillover occurs in more deliberative political processes in which national elites or interest groups consider that supranational cooperation and integration are needed in order to solve a specific issue. National interest groups focus more on European than national solutions to problems, and thus tend to shift loyalty towards the supranational level, as they understand that their chances of success are increased when supporting European, rather than national solutions.

Cultivated spillover:

Cultivated spillover refers to the situation in which supranational actors, such as the European Commission push forward the process of political integration when mediating between member states. One way of doing this is the Commission only considering arguments that focus on the path toward further integration during the negotiation processes while ignoring or rejecting the

arguments that go against integration, arguments that may be based on purely national interests (Strøby Jensen, 2018).

Elite Socialization

The second characteristic of neofunctionalism is that of elite socialization, concerning the development of supranational loyalties by the participants in European decision-making processes, these being government officials and politicians. It is argued that people, over time, will develop European preferences and loyalties, due to their regular involvement in the supranational policy processes. Officials of the Commission, for example, are expected to have European perspectives on problem-solving, and may not focus on single national interests. Political representatives of the member states in Brussels are also argued to develop a more European perspective on the development of politics, as they will increasingly conceptualize their own role in the system as mediating views on a European level, rather than primarily representing the singular national interests of the member state they represent. It can be argued that participants in the ongoing decision-making process, bring them to regular and close contact with one another, engaging them in joint problem-solving and policymaking could develop special orientation and interest toward such interactions. They may end up valuing the system and their role in it, either for the system itself, or the benefits it provides them. As such, neofunctionalism argues that the European integration process would lead to the development of a supranational elite loyal to the institutions of the EU. These elites would try to convince national elites of the advantages of supranational cooperation and integration (Strøby Jensen, 2018).

The supranational interest groups

Similar to that of the civil servants, organized interest groups are also expected to develop a more supranational, European orientation and perspective. In this regard, neofunctionalism stresses, to a high degree, the importance of non-state actors in international relations and European integration. It is argued that as economic and political integration develops in a given region, businesses and interest groups will seek to follow this development by reorganizing on a supranational level to further their interest on a bigger scale. When the European Community was established in the late 1950s, national industrial and employers' organizations established a common European organization at the same time, with the intention of influencing future policies in the community. Neofunctionalists also believed that the interest groups would put further pressure on national

governments to speed up the regional integration processes, as they would develop their own supranational interests in political and economic integration, thus allying them to the supranational institutions, such as the European Commission (Strøby Jensen, 2018).

In relation to the research question of this paper, the theoretical approach of neofunctionalism puts its focus on the role of the Commission in the context of European integration, as the member states to a certain extent are dependent on the supranational institutions i.e. the Commission for the integration and cooperation to take place. It can be argued that it is the Commission that has the deepest effect on the integration process as it sets forth the proposals for integration processes or crisis-solution in this case. It is also the Commission that manages the inter-state and regional cooperation between the member states.

Liberal Intergovernmentalism

This section of the chapter revolves around a second major theoretical approach to European integration – that of liberal intergovernmentalism. Liberal intergovernmentalism (LI), developed in the 1990s, is a branch of intergovernmentalism, for which it is relevant to briefly elaborate on the original theoretical approach of intergovernmentalism, also referred to as classical intergovernmentalism before immersing into LI. Michelle Cini's (2018) contribution to the *European Union Politics* will serve as the main source of reference for the introduction and elaboration of this theory.

Intergovernmentalism serves as the main competing approach to neofunctionalism in the explanation of European integration. Contrary to neofunctionalism, intergovernmentalism seeks to provide conceptual explanations of European integration from a state-centric point of view. As such the theoretical approach favors the role of state and state actors within the field of European integration, and less so on the supranational institutions. In this manner, intergovernmentalism draws considerable inspiration from the classical international relations theories, most notably realism and neorealism, due to the focus on self-interested states as the primary actors in an anarchic international system. Intergovernmentalists argue that there are costs and benefits related to involvement in European integration, or merely cooperation as some intergovernmentalists preferably refer it as. This sort of cooperation is based on the individual member states estimating the pros and cons of membership and the extent to which European integration improves the

efficiency of bargains struck among the states. Cooperation within the EU is considered both conservative and pragmatic, as common problems need common solutions. It is based on the rational conduct of state governments and not on ideology or idealism. In this sense they consider European integration rather mundane, there is nothing special about it nor the EU, except for the highly institutionalized form (Cini, 2018).

Intergovernmentalism contains a particular conception of sovereignty. The word is very emotive within EU politics, as Eurosceptics especially make use of it in their criticism of the EU institutions, as they consider them as taking away the national sovereignty of the member states. Regaining national sovereignty was a primary argument with the Leave campaign during Brexit. As have been mentioned, intergovernmentalists consider the member states as the most important actors by far, and that they manage to engage in European integration without ceding sovereignty to the supranational institutions, implying that they are very much in control of the EU processes. Instead, a pooling and/or sharing of sovereignty is implied, instead of a transfer of sovereignty from the national to the supranational level (Cini, 2018).

The LI branch shares its focus on the centrality of state actors, their interests, and powers in the processes and outcomes of European integration, however, there are some main complements that sets it apart and expand on the original theory. LI can be considered to have two different dimensions, two sides of supply and demand. The argument is that the demand for cooperation and the supply of integration, arising from inter-state negotiations are fundamental to understanding European integration. To explain this link, the theory is composed of three steps, each of which is explained by different factors, drawn from complementary theories, which is addressed in the following:

National preference formation:

First, the national preference formation. This relates to how state goals can be shaped by domestic pressures and interactions, as such governmental preferences reflect the interests and power of societal groups, which are typically conditioned by the constraints and opportunities that derive from economic interdependence between the states. Thus, it is the underlying societal factors and interests that provoke the international demand for cooperation between states. State preferences are formed through the dominant, usually economic, groups within society that succeed in putting

sufficient pressure on national governments and parliaments to adopt national preferences during inter-state negotiation processes. As such, national interests are derived from domestic politics and interests, and not from the state's perception of its relative position in the international system (Cini, 2018).

Inter-state relations:

Second, the supply side of LI is based on inter-state relations, as European integration is supplied by intergovernmental/inter-state bargains, such as Treaty revisions. It draws on general theories of bargaining and negotiation to argue that relative power among states is shaped by asymmetric interdependence, thus dictating the relative value of agreements between the bargaining governments. States are now instead considered unitary actors, and the supranational institutions have very limited influence or impact on negotiation outcomes. The negotiation process includes two stages, one where the governments must resolve the policy problems that confront them, and only then can they reach an agreement on institutional mechanisms that allows them to implement the decisions taken. Gaining the upper hand in negotiations is crucial for the states, and as such the relative power of the states plays a significant role, for which LI focuses much of its attention on the bigger member states, these being Germany and France, and formerly the UK. The question is raised on why the states engage in European integration when the institutions seemingly show few constraints and have limited impact, while inter-state negotiations enhance domestic autonomy (Cini, 2018). This question is answered through the third element of LI, introduced below

Institutional delegation:

It is argued that the international, or rather European institutions are established to improve the efficiency of inter-state negotiations, which reflects the desire for 'credible commitments' among the states. Thus, the member state governments delegate and pool their sovereignty into the institutions, to ensure that bargains struck are secured and that all parties are committed to cooperation. As such, the EU institutions create compromises and commitments for the member states to follow the final decisions and reduce the risk of states not complying with the decisions, as these were made at an instance of uncertainty, and as such backing out of deals could be tempting (Cini, 2018).

To sum up LI, the approach explains European integration as a series of intergovernmental negotiations, which results in substantive and institutional outcomes. LI assumes that European integration remains under the control of member states' national governments. The processes reflect the individual state preferences and relative power, while the institutions ensure commitment to the negotiated bargains and agreements, but they do not enable any autonomous supranational agency in the process. European integration is not special but a mere product of rational states interdependently bargaining to further national interests. If interdependence were to spread to policies or even countries outside of the existing framework, additional integration would be likely. In the context of this paper's research question, and the role of the Commission and supranational institutions in general is minimal to some degree. A main LI argument would be that the Commission does not hold any real power or capability of crisis response or problem-solving. The Commission simply serves to ease the inter-state negotiation processes. The Commission is merely an instrument of the member states, and should they consider it useless, it should become useless as the Commission would not be able exert any power or action without the approval and willing cooperation of the member states.

Postfunctionalism

In continuation of the theories of neofunctionalism and liberal intergovernmentalism, the last theoretical approach of postfunctionalism is introduced in the following paragraphs. Differing from the two previous theories, postfunctionalism is more adequate for explaining identity politics in the EU, as the other theories largely dismiss the influence and relevance of the public opinion and identity when considering European integration. Postfunctionalism is presented by its founders Hooghe and Marks (2009) as an alternative to the grand theories of European integration, as neither of the two has been able to explain the new developments in European politics. The authors argue that while regional integration can be triggered by a mismatch between efficiency and the existing structural authority, as is argued by neofunctionalism and LI, they argue that the outcome is a result of political conflict regarding collective identities present across the EU, rather than a reflection of efficiency. The two authors speak of a 'constraining dissensus' of the European public. EU integration has become a highly politized issue, making policy- and decision-makers unable to ignore public opinion. This development has taken place due to growing salience of EU politics, as the integration process has increasingly more tangible consequences on public and private life of the citizens. With ratification of the Maastricht Treaty in the early 1990s, EU politics, seeking

democratic legitimacy, was opened to the public, where it previously had been reserved for the decision-making elites, without regard to public opinion. As such, European citizens were given the opportunity to voice their interests and criticisms on the EU, in both national and European elections and referendums, and be more directly represented through the European Parliament (Hooghe and Marks, 2009).

Hooghe and Marks (2009) argue that individual citizens are no longer divided between a left-right economic standpoint, but more on a value-based non-economic dimension ranging from green/alternative/libertarian to traditionalism/authority/nationalism. At the core of this divide is also whether the citizens consider themselves as belonging exclusively to a single national community or culture, or also as Europeans. They argue that, from their postfunctionalist perspective, the emergence of a common European identity among the general public is possible, without necessarily being an existential threat to national identities, however, given the, at the moment, rather stable collective identities, a generational shift is necessary, as the younger generation generally considers itself more European than their parents or grandparents, as they travel more, and grew up in a more transnational open Europe. They also contend that the shift from exclusively national identity to collective European identities is a much slower process than that of European institution-building, thus leading to tensions across the EU regarding European integration due to the rapidness of the integration process, but the relatively too slow development of a collective European identity (Hooghe and Marks, 2009). Finally, in relation to the research question presented earlier, postfunctionalism undoubtedly emphasizes the role of public opinion and perception in relation to the Commission. As the public influences the member states' interests and decision-making processes, a positive European public towards the supranational institutions, the EU integration project and the Commission, then that would transform into a bigger role and influence of the Commission in relation to the integration and to the member states. Similar, if the public is negative-minded towards it, it will automatically lead to a weakening of the Commission's influence and decision-making skills over the EU.

Empirical overview

The following chapter seeks to provide an empirical and historical overview of both the contemporary situations at hand, as well as past events that are relevant for the context of this paper.

This serves to provide amble and adequate empirical data and understanding to support the content of the analysis later in the paper.

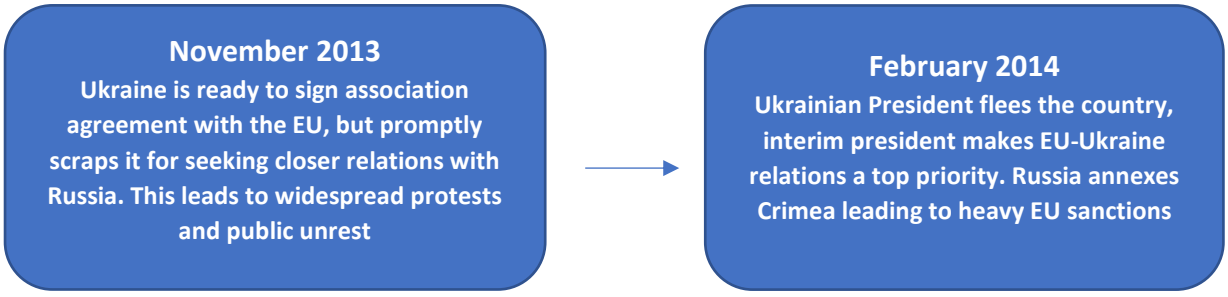
The invasion of Ukraine

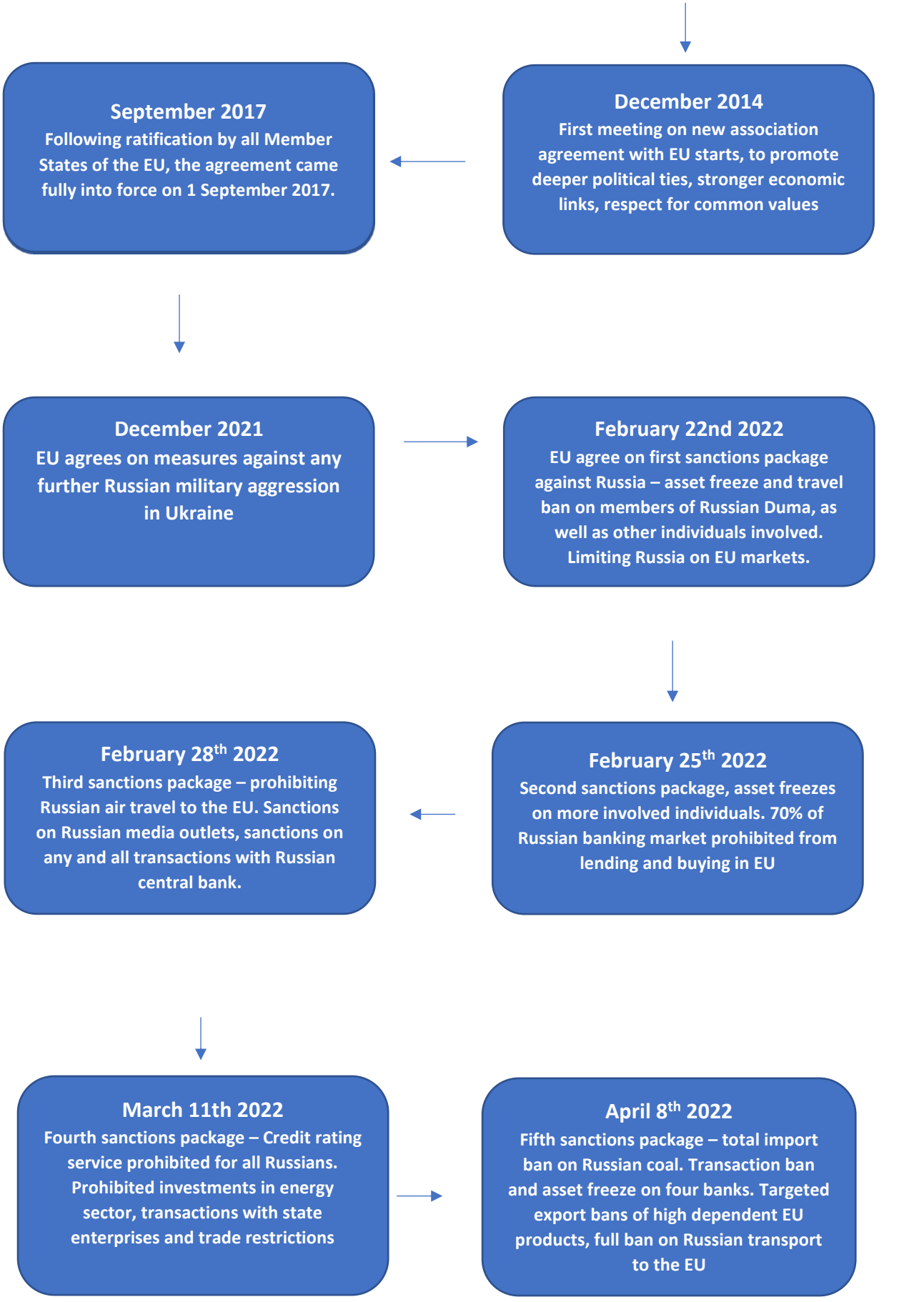
At the moment of writing this paper, the Russian Federation has launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine after close to a decade of generally minor clashes and confrontations in the eastern regions of Ukraine, and in comparison, to the current escalations, a rather stagnating situation. The polemics that originally led to the current invasion of Ukraine started between November 2013 and February 2014. After promising closer ties with the European Union, then Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovych radically changed his political direction and began to orient Ukraine toward Russia. The president was ready to sign an association agreement with the EU, but promptly rejected any further talks with the EU countries, and instead accepted a $15 billion bailout from Moscow, expressing his wish for Ukraine to join Russia's project of the Eurasian Customs Union. This decision, along with the controversial arrest of his political opponent Yulia Tymoshenko sparked widespread protests about perceived government corruption across the country and discontent for turning the back on relations with the EU in favor of Russia. The widespread protests were dubbed the Euromaidan named after the square in Kyiv in which the protests, in particular, took place (Limam & Ormiston, 2022).

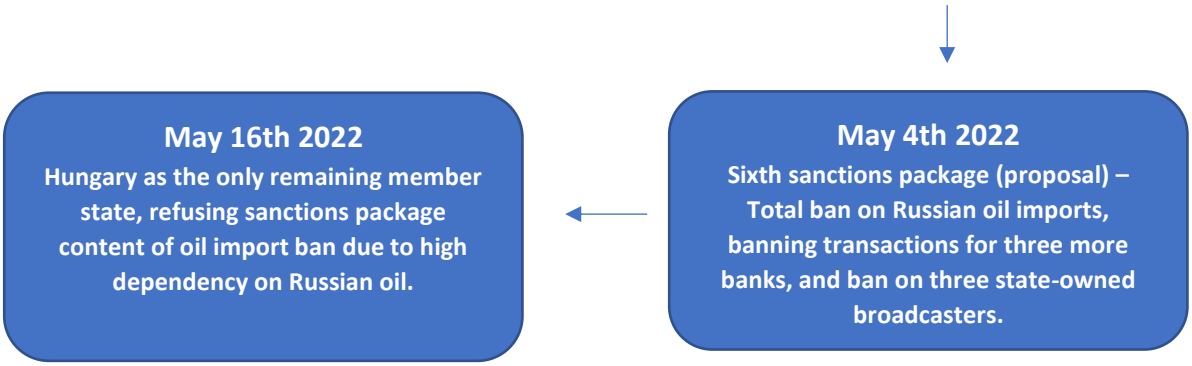
In February 2014, the president and opposition leaders signed a peace pact that included plans for presidential elections in a bid to calm the escalating protests. The following day Yanukovych fled the country to Russia, as the parliament decided to remove him from office. The acting president and prime minister at the time made closer EU relations a priority for the country. In March, Russian forces took control of the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea, the majority of the residents of which are ethnically Russian, which lead to sharp condemnations from the West. In a fraud election, Russia announced that Crimea had voted for annexation by Russia, which promptly incorporated the territory, with Russian president Putin arguing that they wanted to protect the Russians in Crimea from the violence in Ukraine. In April 2014, pro-Russian separatist armed groups seized government buildings across the Donbas region in Eastern Ukraine, including the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, close to the Russian border, and declared themselves as independent republics. Ukrainian forces resisted the separatists and fighting ensued, however, with reports of Russian military buildups along the border, Ukraine was wary of a wide war. This led to the West

imposing tough sanctions on Russia, specifically on the leadership involved in the conflict and a ban on any arms-related import/export to Russia. There was widespread information of Russia supporting the separatists in the east with both weapons and troops, however, Russia denied involvement (Limam & Ormiston, 2022).

In 2021 Russian forces started to build up along the border, with estimates to be around 100.000 troops. US president Joe Biden warned the world of an imminent invasion of Ukraine. Diplomatic talks ensued with Russia demanding guarantees about its territorial security failed to resolve the tensions. On 21st of February 2022, Russia recognized the self-declared republics of Donetsk and Luhansk as independent states. Three days later, on 24th of February Russia announced it would conduct a special military operation, effectively an invasion of Ukraine, and Russian troops poured into the neighboring country. NATO and the EU refused to provide direct military assistance to Ukraine, but the Ukrainian defiance in the early stages of the conflict strengthened global opposition to the Russian invasion, with many European countries sending military equipment to support Ukraine, as well as the West imposing a series of crippling economic and financial sanctions on Russia, most notably on oil and against Russian billionaire oligarchs. The heavy sanctions subsequently led the Russian ruble into free fall. The European Commission has been both quick and efficient in the propositions and impositions of sanctions against Russia. As of the beginning of May 2022, the Commission has proposed and successfully introduced five sanction packages against Russia, with full member state support so far, with plans of a sixth package to be proposed within a short time, the last one including a ban on oil imports from Russia by the end of 2022. The Commission also wants to exclude three major banks from the SWIFT international banking payment system, as well as ban three Russian state-owned broadcasters. The sixth sanctions package, however, has been stalled by Hungary, as the country refused to support the Russian oil import ban, due to the country's high dependence on Russian oil, arguing that it will need enormous investments and at least 5 years in order to redesign the country's refineries. As of 30th May, 2022, the sixth sanctions package has yet to be accepted and signed by a unanimous European Council (Al Jazeera, 2022; Rankin, 2022; Limam & Ormiston, 2022).




December 2014
First meeting on new association agreement with EU starts, to promote deeper political ties, stronger economic links, respect for common values
September 2017
Following ratification by all Member States of the EU, the agreement came fully into force on 1 September 2017.
December 2021
EU agrees on measures against any further Russian military aggression in Ukraine
February 22nd 2022
EU agree on first sanctions package against Russia – asset freeze and travel ban on members of Russian Duma, as well as other individuals involved. Limiting Russia on EU markets.
February 25th 2022
Second sanctions package, asset freezes on more involved individuals. 70% of Russian banking market prohibited from lending and buying in EU
February 28th 2022
Third sanctions package – prohibiting Russian air travel to the EU. Sanctions on Russian media outlets, sanctions on any and all transactions with Russian central bank.
March 11th 2022
Fourth sanctions package – Credit rating service prohibited for all Russians. Prohibited investments in energy sector, transactions with state enterprises and trade restrictions
April 8th 2022
Fifth sanctions package – total import ban on Russian coal. Transaction ban and asset freeze on four banks. Targeted export bans of high dependent EU products, full ban on Russian transport to the EU



(Source: Own creation; Rankin, 2022; Fella 2022; European Commission, 2022)

EU COVID-19 crisis management

This section provides an overview of the EU Commission's crisis response regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, as a point of departure for later in the analysis in which a comparison of the COVID-19 crisis and the current invasion of Ukraine takes place. As has been mentioned, the EU has experienced a myriad of crises during the 21st century alone, and the Union has been characterized as "muddling through" and "failing forward" in the crisis management of various crises and critical situations, as well as the general integration processes that the EU has faced through the last two decades, and since its creation. This is essentially a structural problem of the integration process and of politics in general, mainly due to the short-term perspectives, the shortsightedness, and the failure to anticipate a policy's likely consequences, which later potentially leads to problems and eventually crises, if spillover pressures from integration processes are left unresolved, leading to a deterioration of the problem (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2021; Schmidt, 2020).

During the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the initial responses of the European Commission and member states alike seemed to resemble that of previous reactions to crises. Each member states, driven by fear and uncertainty set up each of their security and health-related measures and restrictions to curb the spread of the virus. Coordination on an EU-wide level was limited and chaotic, and the health crisis quickly turned into an economic crisis and a security crisis, as whole economies and societies were shut down overnight, with border controls and tight restrictions on international travel springing up in every country, putting the principles of the Schengen area and Single Market out of effect. National security became a priority across the EU, with countries

refusing to provide aid to their neighbors when requested, as they were preoccupied with themselves. In less than two months the main EU character traits had lost meaning. Governments refused entry to all non-nationals, EU citizens or not, and restricted exports of critical commodities to both internal EU and external destinations. Security of the nation-state was a top-priority across the union, and the supranational or intergovernmental cooperation seemed to be forgotten, and European integration seemed to turn into complete disintegration instead. The Commission was unable to foster change or ensure cooperation between the member states, as none were willing or able to work together. However, after a chaotic commencement of the crisis, the Commission managed to develop a pragmatic shift in health and economic policy domains. To reestablish order and stability, the Commission took steps to coordinate with the member states. At first, to control the external borders. This included requiring traders of essential medical equipment to seek government authorization to export their products outside the EU, in an effort to increase production and keep supplies within the EU. Next, were temporary restrictions on non-essential travel to the EU, thus drastically reducing the inflow of non-EU travelers at the external borders. A final step to coordinated external closure came from a Commission proposal to a harmonized approach to foreign investment screening, to protect critical industrial assets, notably in health, infrastructure and medical research. Regarding the internal borders, the Commission was reduced to a supporting actor, mainly reminding member states of their legal obligations to openness and practical yet inefficient proposals to make the internal borders less restrictive. This, however, did not persuade the member states to ease internal restrictions on each other (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2021; Schmidt, 2020).

The ensuing economic crises from national lockdowns and heavy budgeting towards the health sectors asked the question of whether the official solidarity between member states, such as remark by Commission President Von der Leyen “We´re all Italians” should also be extended to the fiscal costs of the pandemic. This led to fractures in EU solidarity, as different blocs rose up across the EU with differing opinions. In other words, member states were driven by clear self-interests similar to previous crises. Later, the European Council was able to agree to apply flexibility to Single Market and EMU rules, to alleviate constraints on national crisis management. This quickly led to a series of temporary waivers of key EU rules, contrary to the rule tightening of the Euro crisis, for instance, leading to a variety of plans for common fiscal sharing. A series of programs to alleviate the effects and consequences of the pandemic, and to fund the increased spending of

governments in areas of health, employment, and economic recovery were proposed, first by the Commission, to pay any corona-related expenses. There were also continued negotiations of a common fiscal response, fueled by the need to send a strong signal to citizens and markets alike that the member states would stand together and maintain the European economy (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2021; Schmidt, 2020).

Towards the end, the countries settled on a recovery fund, which would issue joint debt, but not necessarily involve joint and several liability, making each country responsible for the debt payments. Then disagreements on the size of the fund varied among the countries along the same lines as previous disagreements. Finally, Germany and France announced a 500-billion-euro temporary recovery fund, to be based on the joint debt of long maturity, issued by the Commission. The Commission then proposed its own recovery plan, titled Next Generation EU (NGEU) of 750 billion euros to top up the France-German proposal, and to be repaid through the EU budget. It was eventually scaled back modestly after negotiations, but it turned out to be a massive success for the Commission and expansion of EU fiscal solidarity, as the member states for the first time decided to create joint debt to ensure European macroeconomic stabilization, thus making it a milestone in the European integration efforts (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2021; Schmidt, 2020).

Analysis

The following chapter of this paper serves to answer the established research question according to the theoretical frameworks of neofunctionalism, liberal intergovernmentalism and postfunctionalism. The research question is as follows: *Why did the EU Commission's capacity to swiftly respond vary between the Ukraine and COVID-19 crises?*

COVID-19 and Ukraine crises: A comparison of crisis management

In this first part of the chapter, a formal analysis of the two crises in question is carried out, to understand the EU Commission crisis response and management processes, and to shed light on how the two crises share similarities and how they differ from each other based on the actions and responses taken on part of the EU to deal with them. Then later we will get an answer as to why the response capacity of the Commission has varied in each of the crises.

Based on the findings from the empirical chapter it can be derived that the immediate crisis responses and management of the European Commission were quite different in each of the two crises during the period of the first six months of each of the crises. To begin with, it should be noted that although the two crises seem different from an outside perspective, considering one is an obvious security crisis due to the hostile invasion of Russia in Ukraine and as such, on the immediate borders of the European Union, with millions of refugees have poured into EU countries the last couple of months, and renewed fears of Russian military escalation into Eastern EU member states, not to mention the energy crisis that has ensued. However, the COVID-19 pandemic, although more of a crisis of public health, also turned into a direct security crisis, as national governments across the EU, and across the world for that matter, completely closed borders, restricted all non-essential international travel and imposed massive and restrictive lockdowns on all aspects of society in an effort to curtail the spread of the infection. As such, due to the handling of COVID-19, the crisis also turned into matters of national security in most countries. This contrasts with previous crises faced by the EU during the last two decades. The Euro crisis, for example, was an economic crisis, and even though it took a big toll on some countries, there was never a comparable fear of societal collapse. And although the Schengen crisis, with the uncontrolled influx of Middle Eastern and African refugees into the EU, did lead member states to resume internal border controls, the worries were arguably more of a character of European cultural cohesion and the supposed threat from non-European immigration to the EU and its effect on European society and culture (Schmeer, 2018). As such, it can reasonably be argued that the two crises investigated in this paper, have more comparable thematic qualities to each other, as opposed to the previous crises the EU has confronted.

COVID-19 pandemic and Commission responses

When considering the COVID-19 crisis, as it has been established through the empirical chapter, the immediate response from the Commission resembled very much that of the previous crises the Union has confronted. As the pandemic spread across the world and got a stronger hold on Europe as well, the member states and Commission alike started out with caution, unwilling to take drastic measures to stop or prevent the spread of the COVID-19. Arguably, out of neofunctionalist considerations, most countries, as well as the Commission itself, were cautious of taking any direct preventative action to contain the spread of the virus during the first month of the pandemic in Europe, as no actor was willing to take any preventative measures for the sake of maintaining the

efficiency and integration between the member states, feeling sure enough that the integration process and open borders would not be consequential for the spread of the virus. As such, the situation in the EU member states and the Commission, remained business as usual. On 17th January, the ECDC[1] published a first assessment of the virus reaching Europe with the likelihood se as low, which was promptly changed to moderate a few days later. The Commission did promise 'to take any actions as necessary' to support, coordinate or supplement national policy. A week after, the first case was detected in France. Italy was the first to act and completely suspended flights to China on 30th January, a week after the first known case of COVID was discovered in the EU. Two weeks later, on 13th February, a majority at the extraordinary Health Council still opposed an entry ban for Chinese travelers and insisted on maintaining the free movement within the EU (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2021). As such, during the beginning of the pandemic, the EU was primarily dominated by neofunctionalist thinking, as the member states remained concerned with maintaining integration and efficiency across the space and arguably followed the recommendations and reports presented by the Commission, initially showing little concern for the spread of the virus, and seeing no reason to immediately heighten alert-levels. Long-term efficiency gains were still a priority factor across the EU, and there was not a desire to halt the integration process, such as the free movement across Schengen. Considering the level of integration, the EU had achieved by the start of the pandemic, it seemed unlikely and too costly, to suddenly roll back all that progress over some short-term security risk of importing infections from the virus. Just like the spillover effect is an integral part of the integration process, in the perspective of neofunctionalism, just as integral can it be in a potential process of disintegration, a so-called spillback effect. If the EU starts a disintegration process, such as limiting the free movement of people, which did in fact take place shortly after the statement of the Health Council to maintain it, the disintegration will likely spill over to other neighboring policy areas, and as it turned out, eventually the countries took highly restrictive and protectionist measures to secure their own national supply of medical equipment for example.

Eventually, the efficiency insistence dwindled, as confirmed cases continued to grow. The supranational efficiency concerns were overtaken by national security concerns, making neofunctionalist arguments less impactful. Throughout the finals of February and all of March, fear was growing, and Italy turned into the epicenter of Europe, and neighboring countries began

[1] European Center for Disease Prevention and Control

blocking access from Italy. However, the Commission had still not changed its stance and maintained that the Schengen area should remain open. Italy, furthermore, issued an emergency request for protective personal equipment to the Commission. But lacking any stocks of its own, the request was forwarded to the other member states, of which none responded, as all were too busy replenishing their own supplies, which shortly after led to direct bans on the export of protective masks from various countries, further emphasizing the national security concern over any supranational efficiency interest or solidarity. The security problem only deteriorated as infections rose, and by late March, a majority of EU member states had imposed formal entry bans for non-nationals and non-residents, as well as closed down their societies, and towards the end of the month, the Single Market and the Schengen area, two cornerstones of European integration had lost effect and were rigidly rebordered. Borders were closed to all but nationals, EU citizen or not, and exports were restricted, externally as well as internally in the EU. There were no longer concerns of efficiency or the European integration project for that matter, as short-term national security trumped all other cards. Furthermore, any institutional power held by the Commission also seemed gone. There had been constant warnings of uncoordinated border closures and export restrictions, and the Commission took the blame for much of the ensuing chaos, disruption, and inefficiency (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2021).

In the beginning of the crisis, the neofunctionalist argument had a foundation in the development of the Commission crisis response and the member state reactions. The Commission did not show much concern for the virus taking hold in Europe in the first month, so it did not make any preparations. As such, the member states were equally disinterested in taking any immediate measures within their territories and did not see the measures as worth it when sacrificing the gains from the efficiency and integration processes they had won. But as infections increased, it seemed that the Commission lost all meaning and influence it had previously had, as the agreements, treaties, and integration processes it had worked for, immediately lost effect and value the moment the member states decided to focus on their own national security and interests and drop the cooperation and integration efforts. In the end, there was not much the Commission could do about this development as European law did permit restrictions on internal trade, freedom of movement, and the imposition of border control for reasons of public security and health. As such, the Commission had lost any real bargaining power and could only use political persuasion and lengthy

legal proceedings, even when border closures meant actual lawbreaking (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2021).

This turn of events instead argues for the relevance of liberal intergovernmentalism as a theory to explain the functional and political impotence of the European Commission during this time of the pandemic. As can be derived from the theoretical chapter on the subject, liberal intergovernmentalists argue that the supranational institutions of the EU only carry a minimal role in the European integration process and are by no means power-holding and independent actors. The institutions merely act as providers of efficient negotiation processes but are not truly necessary for any negotiation or integration process. Thus, when the member states decided to cancel cooperation efforts and let everyone fend for themselves, the fragility and the weaknesses of the European Union were revealed and put on display. It turned out that the decades of integration and cooperation efforts could be washed down the drain in a matter of weeks, as can be drawn from Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz who criticized the cohesion of the EU states "In Europe, you can see that solidarity does not work if it gets serious" (Kurier, 2020). Only weeks before Ursula Von der Leyen in a video speech reassured that "We're all Italians" and that "Europe suffers with Italy" (Von der Burchard, 2020) in sympathy and solidarity with Italy which was the hardest-hit European country in March 2020.

Although the Commission came off the wrong foot in the response time and crisis management of the COVID-19 pandemic during the first weeks, it did manage to get a foothold and take control of the situation. Realizing that there was no stopping the internal rebordering of the panicking member states, the Commission gave up on trying to stop it, and instead focused on steering the attention to the external borders towards more effective integration, arguing that closing the external borders along with proper policy coordination internally in the EU would provide more security. At this point, the EU level-crisis response started to slowly take shape and the short-while disintegration process and a repeat of past mistakes became less critical. As is mentioned in the empirical chapter, the Commission adopted regulations to keep essential medical supplies within the EU, as well as restrict incoming travelers (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2021). This was a way for the Commission to regain a certain amount of control over the situation. However, keeping with LI thinking, this might simply be because it was convenient for the member states in this case. They could undoubtedly see the benefit from a coordinated response effort of securing the external borders to limit spread of the

virus in the Union overall, but nevertheless, they still maintained their own internal restrictions and border controls that they had imposed on each other. In this regard, the Commission could do nothing more than make practical proposals for making internal borders less restrictive and burdensome, primarily by streamlining inter-state trade flows. However, the member states remained in charge of their borders, and all controls and entry bans continued (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2021). As such, LI thinking demonstrates here the weaknesses of the European supranational institutions, and the claim that they do not have a deciding role in the integration process is enhanced in this argument. The Commission as the guardian of the efficiencies and functionality of a borderless Europe simply was reduced to a supporting role at the mercy of the member states' own decision-making.

Thus, it can be argued that the Commission was rather irrelevant in its attempt of safeguarding and maintaining an efficient and open internal market, as the member states were gripped by national security concerns, and in that way, its capacity for crisis response and management appeared to be very limited. The perspectives of LI are useful in explaining why. As the member states are struck by fears and concerns of national security, regional solidarity and cooperation decrease, as in the end, the national governments' main responsibility is their own territory and population. The COVID-19 pandemic turned into a crisis in which, for many countries, it seemed that open borders and interconnectedness only exacerbated the problem, and closing down, completely and indiscriminately seemed like the only viable solution. So, as the member states for a time lost interest in cooperation and finding common solutions, the role of the Commission lost prominence. It could go no further than what the member states would allow it or listen to, as they did as they preferred in the end. It was, however, still able to do some limited damage control by proposals of controlling the external border with joint agreements. This fact also gives some credit to the neofunctionalist claims of the supranational institutions actually being capable actors with independent interests, and with the ability to realize these interests, as the Commission was in fact able to exercise some form of action in coordinating efforts to control the external borders, something that would be in the interest of the Commission, to increase efficiency, control, and cooperation and reestablish a part of the integration that was temporarily lost from the chaotic situation.

Another factor that arguably contributed to revitalizing and resolidifying the European Commission's crisis response was the widespread change in public opinion and the overwhelming public support for the EU to take more charge of managing the crisis. The European Parliament commissioned a survey to map the European public opinion which was conducted at the end of April 2020. The findings of the survey showed that 69% of the respondents wanted a stronger role for the EU in fighting the crisis. The same number of respondents wanted the EU to have more competencies in dealing with crises in general, such as the Corona pandemic. In parallel, around 60% of the respondents were unsatisfied with the level of solidarity between the EU member states (Zalc & Maillard, 2020). This goes to show the strong relation between the call for more competencies and the dissatisfaction with the, at the time, low level of trans-European solidarity. The study also revealed that while 74% of respondents have heard about the actions and measures initiated by the EU to respond to the pandemic, only 42% were satisfied with these measures so far (Zalc & Maillard, 2020). As such, this also put more pressure on the Commission and the member states to find common, viable and efficient solutions to the pandemic. All these results arguably contributed to fuel the resolve of the Commission and pressured the member states into supranational cooperation as per postfunctionalist arguments as the public supported supranational problem resolution.

At the time of the survey, the EU Commission had also managed to reconsider its steps in order to drive the union safely through the crisis, or at least minimize the bumps on the road, and with the clear public support for EU competencies and solidarity, it undoubtedly strengthened the Commission's role in the crisis response and management during the following months. The Commission with Ursula Von der Leyen wanted to include fiscal solidarity among the member countries when she, in agreement with all the member states, stated "We´re all Italians". Again, this produced widespread disagreements among the member states, similar to situations of the past. As it has often happened, the EU was split between various differing interest blocs, complicating any proper and strong effort of problem-solving. The Commission started with a proposal of allocating funds of 25 billion euros from the leftover EU budgets to pay for spending related to the COVID-19 crisis. The money should furthermore be allocated based on the cohesion funds programs meaning that Hungary was eligible for the largest part of the money even though it had much less infection rates than hard-hit Italy, to avoid lengthy debating and bargaining among the states. In the end, the Council accepted the proposal with little debate, which was quite a contrast to the debates on the

Brexit annual shortfall of 10 billion euros in the EU budget from February, which had ended in strong disagreements (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2021). Arguably both theoretical approaches of neofunctionalism and LI can be used in describing the behavior of the actors in the EU system – neofunctionalism would focus on the weight of the Commission, and its capabilities of quickly developing viable proposals to be adopted by the member states, while LI instead would emphasize the necessity of a plan and the willingness of the more important member states to reach a deal quickly, thus being able to put pressure on the rest.

Furthermore, in late March, nine heads of governments from across the member states called for solidarity through a common debt instrument to raise funds on the market, on equal terms, for the benefit of all. The Council instructed the Eurogroup to come up with a plan within two weeks. The Eurogroup came up with a compromise involving a first-response emergency package with a long-term recovery fund. Among other things, the package endorsed and included a previous Commission-proposal on for a temporary loan program of 100 billion euros for employment funds, to mitigate the negative consequences of the high unemployment rates caused by the crisis, arguably showing that the Commission is capable of something, but in this case primarily only with the blessing of the Council i.e., the member states, as they, in their intergovernmental bargains do the main work. The long-term recovery fund had several fronts to it. The Commission planned on turning the EU budget into a massive recovery fund. With a Council in agreement, the Commission was tasked with providing a detailed proposal. Again, there were disagreements among the member states on both the nature and the size of the fund. After intense debating back and forth and various proposals by member states, the Commission made a final proposal of the 500-billion-euro temporary recovery fund in grants, to be based on the joint debt of long maturity and to be issued by the Commission, originally announced by Germany and France, and an extra 250 billion euros in loans to be repaid in the period between 2028 and 2058 through the EU budget. In the end, the grants part was scaled back to 390 billion euros, but the main idea of the Commission proposal remained in place, and it was implemented by the member states, being a milestone in EU fiscal policy and solidarity. For the first time in EU history, the member states agreed on and decided to run a joint deficit as an instrument of European macroeconomic stabilization (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2021).

It is clearly a historic achievement and a milestone in European integration that the member states managed to run a joint deficit to stabilize the European economy during a crisis. Several factors arguably contributed to the situation turning out in this way. Among them is the power of the people. As was mentioned earlier, the survey on the public opinion showed a strong majority for the EU to take more action to deal with the crisis, to have more competencies to deal with it, and the dissatisfaction from the lack of solidarity between the countries. Postfunctionalism argues for the public opinion being able to shape European integration processes and decision outcomes since the processes have become more politicized and democratized, moving to the public sphere and away from the functionalist European elites. Given that the public opinion showed such massive support for the EU – and not simply national governments to act, influenced the bargaining processes and gave the Commission more weight in the recovery fund proposals, as well as the other measures proposed and ratified. This is because the public showed support for EU-wide solutions and competencies. With public support, the power of the Commission is increased, as the member state governments must listen to the preferences of the public in their countries forcing the governments to be more willing to find solutions relating to those preferences.

LI can also be related to this argument as the national preference formation is along the same path. Although public opinion is not considered relevant in LI, the public is still a relevant actor in domestic, regional, and international politics in European politics and integration in today's world, as is argued in postfunctionalism. And considering that the public opinion demonstrates a wish for more cooperation, solidarity, more EU-level crisis management, and response, and EU competencies, the member states show more willingness to work together and support the Commission proposals as well as make inter-state proposals on common solutions to common problems. France and Germany – as being the most powerful and influential actors of the EU member states arguably also laid the groundwork for the rapid support of the Commission recovery fund proposal. As the two countries made a joint proposal of the recovery fund grants of 500 billion, with the EU expanding the proposal even further, the remaining member states no doubt felt a stronger pressure to consider the scope and nature of the fund.

The main critics of the nature of the recovery fund – the frugal four[2] were against any grant-based fund as well as collective EU debt creation, eventually accepted the terms of the fund, however, did manage to lower the grants-based part. Germany was initially and throughout most of the bargaining process of the same opinion as to the frugal four, however, made a surprise change of opinion when submitting the joint proposal with France (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2021). At that point, the combined bargaining power of Germany and France and their favor of the Commission proposals proved highly beneficial for a grand and generous EU recovery fund. From this perspective, the role and power of the Commission can still be considered rather limited, as the two biggest EU countries, as mentioned, laid the groundwork for the proposal, and likely influenced the remaining countries to follow suit. Without the bargaining power of France and Germany, it is possible that the Commission would not have been able to make a realistic proposal of the content as it was presented, given that the fiscal solidarity and collective debt creation was a milestone in the European integration project. A policy of the same scale and nature perhaps would not have been possible in the past as it would have lacked the necessary support from the biggest actors, but given the German repositioning on the matter, it could now be done.

It can be argued that the EU response to the first six months of the pandemic was very tumultuous at first. It looked like a repeat of past mistakes, with a seeming disintegration process and rebordering of the internal market, and member states chaotically and uncoordinated imposed restrictive measures on one another, damaging the general response capacity of the entire EU. The supranational institutions were left helpless and irrelevant for a period but managed to reconsider their strategies, and surely across the next months managed to streamline a coordinated effort between the countries and reversed the temporary disintegration of the first weeks. Due to the strong public support for EU competencies and solutions, the Commission managed to considerably improve its capacity to quickly and effectively respond to the crisis and deal with the member states. From March till May an even deeper coordination and recovery effort took place, with a myriad of funds, loans and stabilizing measures from various actors and institutions were instated including the Commission's gargantuan grants and loan-based recovery fund NGEU of 750 billion euros that has become a milestone in EU fiscal policy and integration. With the NGEU, the Commission has proposed ambitious reforms in digitalization, green transitioning, and social

[2] An informal cooperation of fiscally conservative EU member states: Austria, Denmark, Netherlands, Sweden against high EU spending and collective debt.

cohesion across the Union (European Commission, s.d.). The Commission has capitalized on the pandemic and used it to announce its ambitious reform proposals along with the recovery fund. As crises before it, the pandemic, although showing signs of causing disintegration, the overall process of European integration has continued and perhaps even deepened through the fiscal policy milestone. The postfunctionalist argument that public opinion plays a strong role in the European integration process is evident in the case of this crisis, as the public showed unusually high support for the Commission and stronger EU capacity for crisis response. In comparison, the public trust in the Commission, a few years earlier in 2016 during both Brexit and the Schengen crises, was at a mere 37% of the respondents. At the same time, the Commission was unable to provide any solid solutions to the issues (Nancy, 2016; Schimmelfennig, 2021). Even though trust and desire for more competencies are not the same, it still clearly shows that with support from the public, the Commission's capacities and competencies improve and it is more able to efficiently deal with the crisis at hand and the member states.

Invasion of Ukraine and Commission responses

As can be derived from the empirical chapter on the Ukraine Crisis, the fears of this invasion had been underway for quite some time. The conflict had started in 2014, although with a relatively minor impact and change of course of action from the side of the EU. The Commission did impose sanctions on Russia and Russian officials involved in the actions in Ukraine, imposing travel bans and freezing their assets, as well as a ban on imports and exports of arms and related materials as well as other goods related to the military. These sanctions have remained in place since 2014. Other than these sanctions, along with formal condemnation and exclusion of the G8, the EU did not take noticeable action in attempts to solve the crisis in Ukraine. Several attempts at peace agreements between the parties were held, although without any lasting resolutions (Fella, 2022). So there was not much other action-taking on the part of the Commission on behalf of the EU in the years of the smaller-scale conflict.

However, the Commission was well prepared for the invasion, even though it was considered unthinkable in the political and public mindset across both member states and institutions. With the buildup of Russian troops on the borders and US warnings of an imminent invasion already in December, the Commission with the member states in tow was ready to respond to a potential invasion. The EU Commission's high representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep

Borell stated in January that the EU was prioritizing dialogue but was also preparing advanced responses to potential Russian aggression in Ukraine and in pursuit with key partners. The Council furthermore reaffirmed its full and unquestionable support for Ukraine (European Council, 2022a). Thus, in relation to other crises, the Commission and the EU were prepared for the eventuality of an upscaling of the conflict and had readied full use of the toolkit at its disposal. Even though there were mixed opinions about Russia across Europe before the invasion, with several Eastern European countries as well as Germany carrying less animosity or being warier about their stance than others due to their dependence on Russian gas and deeper economic ties compared to other member states, the countries could still gather behind a united front represented by the supranational institutions in the Commission and the Council. This shows the relevance and importance of these institutions and particularly the Commission because even though the different member states could have differing opinions, the Commission still has its distinct position towards Russia, and with that being representative of all the member states. So, the Commission creates more unison between the member states which argues for a more efficient and streamlined approach to the security question of this matter and allows for more capacity for effective crisis response, thus also arguing for a neofunctionalist perspective on the situation, with the supranational institutions having more prominence and influence over the proceedings. The supranational nature of the Commission is what facilitates these integrative outcomes (Niemann, 2020; Ellyatt, 2022).

In neofunctionalism it is argued that the states should have this common stance in order not to jeopardize those areas in which consensus already prevails. Even though there is no complete consensus on an intergovernmental level between the member states, they tend to exchange concessions in related fields under the auspices of a supranational and institutionalized mediator, being the Commission. The member states do not feel bullied in this way, but instead, common interests are elevated in such a manner that by conceding something, they gain something else. The frequent interactions of officials of the member states in the supranational institutional setting in the Commission and the Council, not to mention the Parliament as well, also increases the cooperation among and unity behind the Commission of the member states. This is related to the elite socialization and the cultivated spillover effect that the supranational institutions have on both the member states and their appointed officials (Niemann, 2020). This formation of the states in institutionalization allows the Commission to operate more efficiently, meaning that it could more strongly voice its stance on the Ukrainian security question with the member states supporting this

common stance. This also allowed the Commission to react more swiftly and effectively when the conflict escalated with, at first the Russian recognition of the self-declared republics of Donetsk and Luhansk as independent states, and second with the direct invasion of Ukraine the following day (Limam & Ormiston, 2022).

As of late May 2022, the European Commission has made six proposals of sanctions packages against Russia to deter them from continuing the war. So far, five of them have been ratified both unanimously and rapidly by the member states, three of them within the first week of the invasion, demonstrating efficiency, unity, and a clear common united stance on the situation, targeting particularly the Russian leadership and elites cutting them off from their privileges and money in the west, as well as strong economic and financial sanctions and export-import bans in various vital sectors, closing of EU airspace to Russian aircraft, completely banning Russian banks and financial institutions, including the Russian Central Bank from the SWIFT international payment system. Tough import and export bans have also been imposed on raw materials such as steel and coal, as well as luxury goods and general EU products on which Russia is highly dependent on. Equally, similar bans were imposed on Belarus due to the country's support and involvement in the invasion, demonstrating that the Commission, and the member states in tow, did not show much holdback with the sanctions, full-intent on ending the Russian economic capabilities to continue funding the war, turning the EU effort into a war of attrition, without becoming directly involved militarily (European Council 2022b). The common stance and preparations that had been established even before the invasion, arguably contributed to the efficient proposition, ratification, and implementation of the sanctions, as such this argues for the power and the relevance of the Commission, showing it has considerable capacity for rapid crisis response. This is further emphasized considering that many of the sanctions also deeply impacted member states themselves, with the continued inflation increase and rising prices in commodities and particularly energy and gas. This enhances the neofunctionalist argument of the states conceding in certain subject areas and accepting certain negative impacts in return of gaining something else in other areas.

In relation to the previous, it can be argued that the efficiency and swift response of the Commission regarding the Ukraine invasion can also be contributed to the European public opinion on the subject. Since before the invasion, the public attitude across the EU was clear in the question

of the conflict between Ukraine and Russia. In a survey conducted in seven member states[3] on behalf of the European Council, 60% of the respondents felt that the EU should come to the defense of Ukraine if Russia were to invade, in comparison, only 62% said NATO should defend, even though NATO is the military alliance and not the EU, however arguably the public feels that the EU is more related to Ukraine, or have more relevant business in Ukraine than NATO, due to the shared European identity being a factor for example. Another point of interest is that only 43% of the respondents answered "their own country" when they were asked the question (Krastev & Leonard, 2022). This point towards that the European public from before the beginning was more interested in a common European solution to the problem. Considering that the sanction packages also would have had, and have had strong effect on European society, the survey also asked what the European public would be willing to endure in case of an invasion. A small majority responded to be in favor of risking the all potential consequences that defending Ukraine might have on the EU, except for the option of potential Russian military action against the countries which has a similarly small majority against (Krastev & Leonard, 2022).[4] These opinion polls work in favor of the Commission's resolve and of the supranational institutional framework and cooperation. With a majority of the public already showing support to Ukraine, and thus along the same lines as the common stance in the Commission and the Council it allows more space for effective maneuvering and decision-making for the institutions. Again, this can be explained from the postfunctionalist perspective of the power of public opinion and its influence on the decision-making processes in the member states' governments. If the public supports stances held by the Commission, the member states are more willing to support Commission proposals, which can be clearly seen from the effective and rapid sanction implementation that has taken place since the invasion. And the public has shown continuous support for both Ukraine, and for the EU's response to the situation.

A Eurobarometer survey conducted in the middle of April, on behalf of the Commission, almost two months after the start of the invasion showed a large consensus of EU citizens in favor of the EU's response to the crisis. *"The majority of Europeans think that since the war started, the EU has shown solidarity (79%) and has been united (63%) and fast (58%) in its reaction."* (European Commission, 2022). Furthermore, 80% of the European public approve of the economic sanctions

[3] The surveyed member states were Poland, Italy, Sweden, Romania, Germany, Finland, France (Krastev & Leonard, 2022).
[4] The potential consequences included in the survey were: Refugees from Ukraine, higher energy prices, cyber warfare, economic downturn, threat of Russian military action (Krastev & Leonard, 2022).

against Russia as well as 79% approve of sanctioning the Russian oligarchs to directly punish the Russian elite involved in the invasion. At the same time, 90% of Europeans say that the rising energy prices have had a significant impact on their purchasing power. Despite this direct impact on the European consumers, they still show strong support for maintaining the sanctions against Russia, even though they are hurting themselves as well. Such positive opinion polls arguably only strengthen the response capacity of the Commission as the public has remained positive to the reception of the initial response as well as endured this support despite the immediate consequences felt directly and strongly in their pockets. It is also an interesting fact that 76% of the respondents believed that greater military cooperation within the EU is necessary due to the war in Ukraine. Thus, it is clear that the public wants deeper integration in the EU, even on an area that has traditionally more controversial due to both the role of NATO in Europe, but also the reluctance and/or Euroscepticism toward increased defense integration in the EU (European Commission, 2022; von Trapp, 2018).

There has, however, been a recent setback in the otherwise successful, rapid, and efficient crisis response regarding the sanction packages. The Commission announced the proposal of a sixth sanction package in early May which included the freezing of assets and travel bans on more prominent Putin supporters, and most importantly the package included an EU-wide ban on the import of Russian oil, with the current imports to be phased out during the rest of 2022, as this would be one of the heaviest blows to the Russian economy due to its dependency on its oil and gas exports. However, weeks after the proposal announcement, during the final days of May, the Council has still not reached unanimity in order to pass the proposal. Hungary remains the only member state to refuse the proposals in their current form. Being land-locked and totally dependent on Russian oil, Prime Minister Orbán has said that the country needs at least five years and hundreds of billions of forints to convert its refineries which at the moment only can process Russian oil. Since the proposal of the sixth package, the Commission has already made concessions to accommodate wary member states, including dropping a plan for EU ships to transport Russian oil as Greece and Cyprus were worried it would negatively affect the competitiveness of their industries. It has also allowed landlocked member states dependent on Russian oil the possibility of a delay in joining the embargo with Slovakia, Czech Republic, and Hungary being given until 2024. The first two have agreed to the proposal and are ready to sign the packages, but Hungary continues the gridlock of the negotiations (Rankin, 2022). In this situation, the Commission’s power is

reduced, with neofunctionalism less capable of explaining this, because considering that neofunctionalism focus on the power of the supranational institutions, and that the member states would be interested in the common good, as this in the end is beneficial for the singular member state. However, the Commission becomes unable to induce and instruct further action on the situation and is forced to lower expectations and impact of the contents of the sanctions in this case, thus worsening the end result.

The Hungarian reluctance and its effect on the Commission's response capacity can instead be explained with the LI approach. The weaknesses of the Commission and the supranational institutions in general are exposed in this situation. As the integration and negotiation processes of the Commission proposals are delegated to the member states in the Council it is up to them to reach a final agreement, and as the states are considered rational unitary actors with their own national interests, they tend to agree on the lowest common denominator during the bargaining process, with the Commission and the supranational institutions being sidelined into being mere facilitators of the bargaining processes, but without any real capability to act nor influence the decision-making. It is argued by Jones, Keleman & Meunier (2021) that a combination of LI and neofunctionalism can be used to explain the general integration processes of the EU, as well as the specific situation of the Hungarian gridlock. This is through the so-called failing forward pattern, that due to the lowest common denominator deals, the deals, agreements, and even the institutions are only "half-baked", as such, they may lose their intended desire and are unable to fully fulfill their purpose. This leads to unforeseen consequences in institutional failures and negative spillovers, related to neofunctionalism, and eventually crises, only for the process to repeat itself. The fact that Hungary is still refusing to sign the sixth package deal as the only remaining country is a prime example of this. Due to the Hungarian reluctance and rejection, also in part from other member states' objections, the Commission has amended and withdrawn various items in the package and undoubtedly given it a considerably lighter potential impact on the Russian economy than first intended. The strategy of attrition against the Russian regime will be drawn out longer, as Russia will be able to pay for the war expenses for a longer time, which could possibly lead to future critical situations due to the half-baked institutional solutions that have been agreed upon by the lowest common denominator. Other than this potential negative spiral that this reluctance from Hungary could have on the EU effort to stop the war, it simply also shows a sign of lack of

coordination and inability to impactfully act and make decisions on part of the Commission as well as the EU institutions in general.

The benefit of the Commission has been the fact that it can represent a common stance of all the member states, despite the disagreements and different opinions they will have because, in the end, the countries will generally gain more by giving up something else. In this case, the member states have generally gained the rapid and efficient sanctions implementations, while perhaps giving up some national preferences about handling the situation in one way or another, not to mention the obvious economic consequences that the member states themselves have been exposed to in the process. The other clear benefit has been the public attitude and opinion towards Russia and the crisis, feeling a lot of sympathy for the Ukrainians and considering the Russians unlawful aggressors against European stability. As such, the public has been very much in favor of EU solutions, highly benefitting the Commission every time it announced its various sanction package proposals. As the public showed attitudes of wanting quick responses and strong sanctions against Russia, despite the negative effects on themselves, the member states would have less of a problem following the Commission proposals as it would be in line with the domestic public opinion-making and national preference formations. These factors clearly contributed to the Commission capacity to respond to the crisis swiftly and effectively. Another factor that contributed to the Commission's capacity for crisis response is that, although the crisis was surprising, it was not unexpected, as the Ukraine crisis had been going on for years, and signs of an escalation of the conflict were underway months before the actual invasion. As such, the Commission and the member states in the Council were able to prepare for the eventual scenario and lay out the foundation for the content of the sanction packages. It is also relevant to mention that the sanctions already imposed on Russia as punishment for the illegal annexation of Crimea could have served as a point of departure for the recent packages, as they also included the freezing of assets and travel bans, as well as import/export bans on the relevant and involved actors and sectors.

However, despite the relative success of the Commission and the EU in its rapid, effective and united response towards the crisis, there have also been presented issues that have caused problems for this capacity for crisis response of the Commission. The Hungarian gridlock of the sixth sanctions package against Russia that remains unresolved three weeks after its original proposal is one of these. The common stance of the member states that were materialized in the Commission's

actions and measures in the crisis response was very useful in dealing with the situation, but with the Hungarian reluctance on signing the sixth sanctions package, and continued unwillingness to sign it, after various concessions from the Commission, the capacity of the Commission is decreasing. With the now revised and less impactful proposals, the member states will end up agreeing to the lowest common denominator, that is if an agreement is reached to begin with, which will result in less effective and functioning measures, likely spilling over into other areas of interest or integration, eventually leading to further negative consequences and perhaps even crises. It should also be noted that the sixth package could potentially even be the strongest and most impactful of any of the sanctions so far imposed on Russia, due to the EU-wide ban on Russian oil imports it entails. The previous sanctions have had strong impacts and effects on the Russian economy, with the value of the ruble freefalling in the first weeks of the invasion, directly due to the sanctions. Unfortunately for the EU and the West, the ruble bounced back up to reach levels slightly above pre-invasion values, due to countermeasures taken by the Russian government to stabilize its economy and currency. The rising prices of commodities, particularly oil and gas have also benefitted Russia enormously as these are the country's main sources of income. So, despite the massive sanctions imposed by the West, the rising commodity prices have allowed Russia to continue funding the war. Ironically, an EU-wide oil ban would counter this situation, but with the Hungarian reluctance to sign the agreement, this remains unlikely to happen (Ivanova, 2022).

As the European Commission's capacity for crisis response regarding the two crises of the COVID-19 pandemic and the invasion of Ukraine has now been accounted for, through an understanding of the turn of events, how they developed and what factors arguably played a part in influencing the response capacity, we may continue to the considerations of why this crisis response has varied between the two crises.

Comparison of crises responses

It has been settled that despite the differing nature of each of the crises, they have some important similarities. Both crises are in their profoundness security crises of the European Union but do also touch on other areas, particularly health, economic and social themes with regards to the COVID-19 pandemic, and energy, economic and social themes regarding Ukraine. The Commission's capacity for crisis response has arguably been stronger in the case of the Russian invasion of Ukraine if we consider the Commission's response within the temporal threshold of six months. The same day

that Russia recognized the self-declared independent republics in eastern Ukraine, the EU was out with condemnations, and the Commission proposed relevant and related sanctions against Russia and the eastern Ukrainian regions, which were immediately approved by the member states in the Council. As the actual invasion took place the following day, more sanctions followed against Russia, and the Commission continued like that in the following weeks and months, quickly proposing and passing 5 sanction packages with strong effects on the Russian leadership, economy, and society, not to mention the elaborate support the EU has provided to Ukraine, both in economic, humanitarian, and military support (European Council, 2022a). Up until the sixth sanctions package proposal in early May, that is still to be agreed upon and signed by a unanimous council, the Commission has shown great capacity to swiftly and effectively respond to the crisis it was presented with. It can be argued that part of this Commission success story comes from the very nature and development of the crisis. Ukraine and Russia have been in conflict since 2014, and sanctions have been imposed on Russia previously. Furthermore, as has also been mentioned, the United States had warned of an imminent invasion of Ukraine since December 2021, and the Russians had positioned 100.000 soldiers at the borders during the same time (Ellyatt, 2022). In other words, the outbreak of the invasion did not come as a big surprise in the EU, the Commission and the member states in the Council had prepared for the eventuality of an invasion and had already agreed on a common stance in January, agreeing on taking the appropriate measures against any Russian military aggression, as well as promising support for Ukraine.

The EU had even prepared the European public for the eventuality of an invasion as it had commissioned a survey in late January, seeking the perspective and opinion of the public on the matter, and the survey showed that a majority in of the respondents in the surveyed member states believed that a Russian invasion of Ukraine was imminent, and a majority felt that the EU should take appropriate measures despite the potential negative consequences it might induce (Krastev & Leonard, 2022). As such, with the months of preparation as well as the strong public support for action, the Commission showed great capacity for adequate, swift, and efficient crisis response to the invasion. On the other hand, with the Hungarian reluctance to approve the sixth sanctions package proposal, this strong capacity of the Commission seems to be deteriorating, especially considering that there has been no development on the matter in the three weeks since the first proposal, no other development than a reduction of the scope and impact of the proposed sanctions, but no real action has been taken (Rankin, 2022). This is even though this sanctions package could deeply affect the Russian ability to sustain the war effort due to the proposed oil import ban.

The COVID-19 pandemic crisis instead demonstrated different capacities in the crisis response of the Commission. The Commission and the member states were in some way caught completely off guard regarding the scope and gravity of the pandemic. Although the virus was discovered and announced to the world in December 2019, neither the Commission nor any of the member states took any measures or other considerations of preparation against the virus, being sure initially, that the risk of the virus reaching and spreading Europe was minimal, and reluctant to sacrifice the monetary and functional efficiencies gained from the integration process among the countries. The Commission did not take any real action in their response to the virus. As the virus began spreading in Europe, in Italy in particular, the member states themselves began act, to impose national measures against each other, while the Commission maintained its stance that drastic measures such as border restrictions were completely unnecessary. As the situation deteriorated, it reached a point where all the member states were closing down and taking restrictive and prohibitive measures against anyone and everyone. The Commission was completely unable to instruct cooperation and coordination of efforts. Its capacity for crisis response was effectively nonexistent as none of the member states were willing to listen (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2021). So, despite the awareness of the existence and the possible threat of the virus well enough time in advance, the Commission did not take appropriate response measures, unlike with the invasion of Ukraine, where it did prepare well in advance of the invasion, and the crisis response did turn out successfully.

Then after reevaluating its position in the situation, the Commission focused its attention on where it could make a difference in the crisis response effort. It was forced to largely acknowledge its supporting role in the dealings between the member states but could instead take measures to coordinate efforts to stabilize the external borders, as well as proposing funds to mitigate the immediate consequences of the virus and the lockdowns, such as the unemployment fund to the member states. Then, as the European public was dissatisfied with the lack of solidarity between the member states and the EU measures that had been taken so far, the Commission was able to increase its power and it capacity for effective response and problem resolution of the crisis, especially because the public opinion surveys that were conducted showed overwhelming support for more EU competencies and EU-wide solutions to the crisis. As a result, the member states were forced to find and agree on regional solutions and measures against the crisis, in which the Commission could improve its position and its response capacity, as the member states were now willingly working together with each other and with the Commission as per the public opinion, and the Commission did manage to propose and enact an enormous and generous recovery fund for the

member states, which also turned out to be a milestone in EU fiscal policy and solidarity (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2021; Zalc & Maillard, 2020).

Finally, it can be argued that the reasons as to why the Commission's capacity for crisis response varied in each of the two crises can be related to first of all, the precrisis preparations that took place, in which many preparations and considerations had already been settled before the invasion of Ukraine, with the common stance among the member states and the previous sanctions that had been imposed years earlier. US intelligence services also contributed with the warnings of an imminent invasion months before it took place, thus giving the Commission and the Council for that matter sufficient time to prepare. The COVID-19 pandemic, on the other hand, did not see any preparations, not before and not even doing the first month that the virus was spreading across Europe. In its defense, the crisis in Ukraine and ultimately the invasion had been long underway, and it was not expected that the COVID-19 virus would spread with such speed across the world and in Europe. The main difference is that the Ukraine invasion was an expected crisis, in one form or another, while the COVID-19 pandemic was not, and its magnitude and severity were deeply underestimated when it was first considered. The neofunctionalist supranational considerations were arguably the main driver of the initial development of both crises, as there was a willingness from member states and institutions alike to agree on a common stance and a united front in the case of Ukraine and to maintain the efficiencies and gains from the continuing integration and open borders in the case of COVID-19, even when the infection was spreading across the union. Then the Commission's response capacity varied based on the attitudes of the member states as each of the crises developed. While the common stance regarding the Ukraine crisis and the already established public opinion on the matter kept the member states in agreement and resolute on a common solution, at least until the proposal of the sixth sanctions package, it is a different matter regarding the COVID-19 member state reactions. During COVID-19, every state took different approaches and measures and dealt with the crisis in 27 different ways with some deeply more restrictive than others, some deeply more affected than others, and some deeply more capable to manage the crisis than others. This made the Commission incapable of taking any functioning measures as there was no inter-state cooperation, coordination, or willingness to. However, it is clear that public opinion also played a significant role in the Commission's capacity for crisis response. In both crises, the Commission could enjoy considerable support from the European public, as the public sought after and supported European solutions the crises, and wanted the EU i.e., the Commission along with

the cooperation of the member states to take more action, to take the appropriate measures and to expand the competencies of the EU to handle crises.

Conclusion

This finally leads us to the conclusion of this paper. The theme of this paper has been the European Commission and its capacity for crisis response, specifically its crisis response on the recent COVID-19 pandemic and the currently ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine. To investigate and analyze the Commission's responses to these crises, the theories of European integration; Neofunctionalism, liberal intergovernmentalism and postfunctionalism were used. The paper has showed considerably different response capacities for the Commission in each of the crises for a variety of reasons. First of all, the different natures and precedents of each crisis has played a significant role in the Commission's ability to effectively and swiftly respond. The Commission and the member states had taken many preparations in the invasion of Ukraine. The crisis has been ongoing for many years, and there were warnings of an imminent invasion months in advance, which allowed the EU to make the necessary preparations and take a common stance on the situation and the involved actors. This was highly beneficial as the Commission managed to quickly and efficiently propose and implement impactful sanctions against Russia in the following months in order to empty out the Russian war machine. There was, however, no preparation for the COVID-19 pandemic. The Commission was during the first two months after becoming aware of the virus unwilling to take any strong measures to limit the spread of the virus, as it believed that the efficiency and integration losses it would entail were too great a cost. The virus was also highly underestimated in both magnitude and severity. This eventually led the member states to take 27 different responses to handle the crisis as they individually saw fit, with great variations among them. The Commission was completely unable to take any adequate or functional measures against the virus or to coordinate efforts between the countries during the first months. The attitudes of the member states were also very different in each of the crises, as they, during the Ukraine invasion, have been very united and maintained the common stance agreed upon before the invasion started. This had led to little debate and bargaining between the states resulting in faster and more efficient crisis response. During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, it was the exact opposite in the beginning. The member states announced words of solidarity but did not do anything to cooperate on a united response, but went each their way, leaving the Commission helpless and in a mere supporting role, trying to coordinate efforts to control the external borders. Another interesting

observation of the Commission's capacity for crisis response relates to public opinion. In both crises the European public has shown unusually high support for EU-wide problem resolutions and measures as well as expanded competencies for the EU take tackle the crises in question, as well as future crises, thus demonstrating the public desire for common solutions and cooperation in the EU.

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