



Steering or building? How crisis type shapes organisational change in the EU

Marius Ghincea

To cite this article: Marius Ghincea (20 Oct 2026): Steering or building? How crisis type shapes organisational change in the EU, West European Politics, DOI: [10.1080/01402382.2026.2740495](https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2026.2740495)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2026.2740495>



© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



[View supplementary material](#)



Published online: 20 Oct 2026.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 180



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)

Steering or building? How crisis type shapes organisational change in the EU

Marius Ghincea 

Center for Comparative and International Studies, ETH Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland

ABSTRACT

How do crises reshape the internal organisation of EU institutions? Existing research treats crises as catalysts for change but offers limited guidance on what kinds of organisational reforms different crises generate. Building on an attack/failure typology of crises, the article argues that attack crises spur steering-oriented changes, whereas failure crises spur operationally-oriented changes. To test this, the article relies on an original data set of 101 organisational changes in the European Commission and the Council in five crises, including the rule of law crisis and Brexit, COVID-19 and the migration crisis, and the Russia–Ukraine war as a mixed case. The findings strongly support the theoretical expectations that attack crises produce steering-oriented organisational changes concentrated on enforcement, compliance monitoring, negotiation management, and political coordination, while failure crises produce operationally-oriented changes. The pattern is robust to recoding contested cases and to alternative decisions about the universe of cases. This article contributes to institutionalist theories of crisis-driven change by specifying how crisis origins shape not only policy outputs but also the administrative architecture that produces them.

KEYWORDS Crisis management; European Union; organisational change; attack and failure crises; institutional design

Crises have long been recognised as catalysts for institutional change within the European Union. The various crises that have affected the EU in the past two decades, from the euro crisis to the COVID-19 pandemic, have led to unprecedented institutional measures, including the creation and alteration of existing structures and mechanisms (Freudlsperger *et al.* 2024; Schimmelfennig 2018). However, extensive scholarship seeking to explain how the EU responds to the crisis has developed primarily along two largely separate paths that do not communicate in any meaningful way, as Ansell *et al.* (2025) has recently emphasised.

CONTACT Marius Ghincea  marius.ghincea@eup.gess.ethz.ch

 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2026.2740495>.

© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

On the one hand, an EU-in-crisis literature examines how crises shape the trajectory of European integration, drawing on the grand theories of integration to understand the high politics of the European response (Ferrera *et al.* 2024; Riddervold *et al.* 2021; Schimmelfennig 2018, 2024). These accounts adopt a *macrolevel* focus on how the major EU institutions relate to each other and to member states, treating crises as polity-forming or polity-destroying events with implications for integration, fragmentation, and differentiation (Genschel *et al.* 2023; Kelemen and McNamara 2022; Schimmelfennig 2021; Trondal *et al.* 2022; Verdun 2017). They illuminate key variables to understand the type and scale of (dis)integration that follows in the aftermath of a crisis (Börzel and Risse 2018, 2019; Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2018; Hooghe and Marks 2019), but they say comparatively little about how the institutional machinery of the EU itself is reorganised in the process.

On the other hand, an EU crisis management literature focuses on the specialised crisis management institutions and capabilities the EU has developed, examining the strategic, institutional, and operational factors that aid or limit effective crisis response in concrete cases (Boin *et al.* 2013; Couvreur 2025; Rhinard *et al.* 2023; Smeets and Beach 2022). This research is more granular in its temporal and institutional focus, concerned with how operational crisis management capacity has accreted over time, but is less concerned with connecting these operational developments to the broader dynamics of European integration.

The contrast between these two literatures suggests a *meso-level* of analysis that remains insufficiently explored (Ansell *et al.* 2025). More specifically, the institutional structures and governing dynamics that stand between crisis-specific operational responses on one hand and the macro-level impacts of crisis on European integration on the other. When the European Commission creates a new institutional mechanisms, what it does is to effectively reshape the administrative architecture through which governance within the European Union operates. These organisational changes are important in their own right, particularly because they structure how future policy issues will be approached, will determine which policy actors gain influence within the European institutions, while also determining what capacities may persist beyond the early phases of a crisis. Yet neither of these two bodies of scholarship provides adequate theoretical guidance on a key question: *what type of organisational change do different crises produce?* The grand theories of integration can explain whether crises lead to more or less integration but may struggle to specify the organisational form(s) that potential crisis responses take. The crisis management literature, in turn, documents organisational adaptations but typically treats them as responses to relatively discrete functional demands rather than connecting them to broader theoretical frameworks that distinguish systematically among crisis types.

In this article, I address this gap by adapting the attack/failure crisis typology developed by Schimmelfennig (2024) to explain organisational responses within the European Commission and the Council of the EU. The attack/failure framework distinguishes two ideal-typical crisis origins. Attacks are crises of community that originate in intentional challenges to the polity's fundamental values, constitutional principles, or collective identity. Failures are crises of capacity that originate in unintended shocks that overwhelm existing policy instruments and institutional resources. In its original application, this distinction predicts the direction of boundary change at the macro level, with attacks producing community demarcation, while failures producing capacity building. I argue that the same causal logic simultaneously operates at the meso-level of organisational design. More precisely, I claim that the external boundary change and the internal organisational change are complementary institutional expressions of the same crisis mechanism. The attack/failure distinction shapes not only what the EU does vis-à-vis external actors but also how it restructures itself internally to do it.

I theorise that crisis type shapes the orientation of organisational change along two dimensions. Attack crises heighten political contestation and generate demands for enforcement, compliance monitoring, and coordination to sustain collective commitments against defection. The organisational responses they produce should therefore exhibit a steering orientation, with changes concentrated on political management, enforcement capacity, and compliance oversight. Failure crises foreshadow functional breakdown and implementation deficits, generating demands for new technical capabilities, procurement infrastructure, and delivery mechanisms. Their organisational responses should exhibit an operational orientation, with changes concentrated on technical coordination, resource mobilisation, and problem-solving infrastructure. The logic proceeds in two steps. Attacks reveal community deficits and create a demand for demarcation; failures reveal capacity deficits and create a demand for capacity development. Demarcation calls for steering-oriented organisational change, because a boundary is marked, monitored, and defended through information and political management rather than production, while capacity development calls for operationally-oriented change. How each demand is met, in turn, reflects the EU's institutional repertoire rather than a universal functional law, a point I develop in the second section.

In order to test this framework, I compare five crises that span the typology: the rule of law crisis (2017–2024) and Brexit (2016–2020) as attack crises, the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022) and the migration crisis (2015–2016) as failure crises, and the Russia-Ukraine war (2022–2026) as a mixed crisis combining attack and failure elements. For each crisis, I code all organisational changes within the European Commission and the Council of the EU, including the creation of new bodies,

activation of dormant structures, procedural adjustments, and responsibility reallocations, and I score each change independently on the steering and operational dimensions. The resulting dataset of 101 organisational changes shows that attack crises cluster overwhelmingly on the steering dimension (mean steering score: 1.79; mean operational score: 0.83), with 24 of 29 changes exhibiting steering dominance and only one showing operational dominance. In turn, failure crises cluster on the operational dimension (mean operational score: 1.67; mean steering score: 0.74), with 27 of 39 changes exhibiting operational dominance. The mixed Russia-Ukraine crisis falls between these poles, leaning operational (mean operational score: 1.64; mean steering score: 0.97), consistent with the predominance of capacity deficits in energy and defence over the sanctions enforcement channel. These findings are robust to adversarial recoding of contested cases and to the exclusion of borderline entries.

With this article, I contribute to the growing scholarship on EU crisis governance in three ways. First, by extending the attack/failure framework from macro-level boundary reconfiguration to meso-level organisational design, demonstrating that the same crisis mechanisms that reshape the EU's external boundaries simultaneously restructure its internal administrative architecture, and by connecting this framework to the core state powers literature's distinction between regulatory integration and capacity building (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2014; 2016). Second, by providing a systematic empirical mapping of crisis-driven organisational change across two institutions and five crises, offering a replicable coding methodology for studying how crises reshape institutional machinery. Third, by connecting the granular institutional focus of the crisis management literature to the theoretical ambitions of the EU-in-crisis literature through a mid-range framework that specifies how crisis origins shape not only policy outputs but also the administrative infrastructure that produces them.

The article continues as follows. In the second section, I outline the theoretical framework developed on Schimmelfennig's attack/failure distinction. In the following section, I present and discuss the research design, coding scheme, and case selection. The is followed by a section presenting the empirical analysis, and the final section concludes.

Crisis type and organisational change

Attacks and failures

In a crisis, a social system 'experiences an urgent threat to its basic structures or fundamental values, which harbors many unknowns and appears to require a far-reaching response' (Boin *et al.* 2017, 5). Crises can threaten two distinct dimensions of polity formation and maintenance:

community and capacity (Schimmelfennig 2024, 3399). Community refers to the collective identity of the polity, the fundamental values and constitutional principles that define its social purpose and distinguish insiders from outsiders. Capacity refers to the integration of policy and institutional resources required to exercise that authority and maintain the polity. Attacks and failures correspond to threats against these two dimensions.

Attacks are crises of community. They originate in political resistance against the polity's identity, fundamental values, and constitutional principles. Crucially, attacks are intentional, as specific actors deliberately contest the polity's order and take determinate action aimed at subverting or replacing it. In the EU context, the rule of law backsliding in Hungary and Poland or Brexit represent paradigmatic cases of (internal) attack, in the way Schimmelfennig (2024) conceives them. In the case of the rule of law crisis, for instance, the governments of Poland and Hungary systematically dismantled judicial independence, captured media, and weakened democratic checks and balances in ways that directly contradicted the values enshrined in Article 2 TEU (Kelemen 2017; Scheppele 2016; Sedelmeier 2017). These governments carried out deliberate acts of constitutional subversion, not simple inadvertent policy failures. In the case of Brexit, English political elites sought to challenge the boundaries of the European Union and its constitutional architecture by withdrawing the United Kingdom from the Union and thus redrawing the borders of the EU.

Failures are crises of capacity. They originate in shocks that undermine the proper functioning of policy regimes and the polity's production of collective goods. Failures are typically unintended, as no actor seeks to overwhelm the polity's capacity; rather, the existing institutional and policy framework proves inadequate when confronted with an unanticipated or underestimated challenge. The COVID-19 pandemic exemplifies this crisis type. The virus represented an external shock that no actor deliberately directed at the EU, yet it exposed fundamental capacity deficits in health governance, medical procurement, cross-border coordination, and crisis management infrastructure (Forman and Mossialos 2021; Wolff and Ladi 2020).

Attacks and failures should be understood as theoretical ideal types. Empirically, crises may contain elements of both, and specific crisis events within a broader crisis may activate different logics. However, the origins of a crisis typically lean towards one type and shape the dominant pattern of crisis response (Schimmelfennig 2024, 3403). What matters, however, for organisational change is which logic predominates in structuring institutional demands and political responses.

Other recent work has proposed alternative dimensions for differentiating crisis types. Hupkens *et al.* (2023) and Hupkens (2026) classify crises along severity, symmetry, and speed, predicting that more severe,

symmetric, and fast-moving crises produce larger-magnitude governance changes. The attack/failure distinction differs in that it predicts not the *scale* of organisational change but its *orientation*. Two crises of equal severity could produce very different organisational architectures depending on whether they originate in intentional defection or unintended capacity failure. The two frameworks are therefore complementary rather than competing, with one addressing the question of how much change a crisis produces, while the other addressing what kind of change it produces.

Organisational change as a meso-level crisis response

The study of organisational change within EU institutions has developed as a distinct subfield at the intersection of EU studies and public administration research. Scholars in this tradition have examined how Commission reorganisations reflect political priorities (Kassim *et al.* 2013), how administrative capacity accretes across successive Commission mandates (Bauer and Trondal 2015), and how crisis events trigger both formal restructuring and informal adaptation within the EU's executive institutions (Bocquillon 2024). This research has produced important descriptive accounts of how specific crises reshaped institutional architecture, the creation of new DGs, the activation of emergency mechanisms, and the expansion of executive coordinating roles (Moloney and Princen 2024). However, what this literature has not provided is a theoretical framework that predicts what kind of organisational change different crises will produce. The dominant explanatory variables in the EU public administration literature, such as leadership strategies, institutional entrepreneurship, and bureaucratic politics, explain variation in organisational outcomes within individual crises, but offer limited leverage for predicting systematic differences across crisis *types*. More recent contributions have documented how the Commission strengthens its role as an institutional hub connecting experts, EU agencies, and member state administrative bodies during crises (Abrahamsen *et al.* 2025), while Carstensen (2015) has shown that EU institutional innovation often proceeds through 'bricolage', reinterpreting existing instruments rather than creating new ones. These insights describe important patterns of organisational adaptation, but do not specify when we should expect one mode of adaptation (e.g. bricolage versus de novo creation) rather than another. The attack/failure framework gets us in that direction.

The attack/failure framework fills this gap by linking a typology of crisis origins to a typology of organisational responses. Scholars have applied the framework primarily to explain macro-level boundary change in the EU, particularly how crises reshape the permeability and control of the EU's external and internal boundaries (see Freudlsperger and

Schimmelfennig 2023). In that application, attacks produce community demarcation through boundary closure towards attackers and opening towards defenders, while failures produce capacity building through increased boundary control competences and resources. Extending this logic to the meso-level, the mechanisms that drive the EU to close boundaries towards Russia or open them towards Ukraine in response to the 2022 invasion simultaneously drive the Commission and Council to restructure themselves internally to execute those responses.

The steering/operational distinction I develop below has an important lineage in the literature on the European integration of core state powers. Genschel and Jachtenfuchs (2014; Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2016) distinguish two modes through which the EU integrates core state powers: *regulation* of national capacities, whereby the EU monitors, conditions, and supervises how member states deploy their own resources, and *capacity building*, whereby coercive, fiscal, or administrative resources are created at the European level. The steering orientation is congruent with the regulatory mode, and the operational orientation with capacity building, and I retain this conceptual kinship deliberately. However, two considerations justify distinct labels. First, the classification objects differ. Regulation and capacity building classify modes of policy integration along the EU-member state axis, that is, what the Union does to and with national resources. Steering and operational orientations classify the internal design of organisational units within EU institutions, that is, what kind of machinery the Commission and the Council build inside themselves. The two do not map one-to-one, as an EU-level capacity-building outcome in Genschel and Jachtenfuchs's terms, such as HERA, is assembled internally from components that are mostly operational but include steering elements (its Coordination Committee of senior Commissioners), while a regulatory instrument such as the conditionality mechanism requires internal operational infrastructure to run its assessments. Second, my dimensions are scored at the level of the individual organisational change and admit mixed codings, whereas regulation and capacity building characterise instruments or policy fields. The literature on EU agencies with operational tasks shows that bodies such as Frontex combine supranational supervision of national conduct with jointly produced operational capacity within a single organisational shell (Freudlsperger *et al.* 2022), which is why a two-dimensional component-level coding is needed rather than a one-dimensional classification of whole organisations.

From crisis type to organisational orientation

The theoretical link between crisis type and organisational orientation rests on a functional logic. Different crisis types create different

institutional demands, and organisations adapt their internal structures to meet those demands. This argument draws on contingency theories of organisational design, which hold that effective organisational structures are in line with the demands of their task environment (Lawrence and Lorsch 1967; Thompson 1967). Organisations facing uncertain, politically contested environments develop different structural configurations than those facing technically complex but politically settled tasks. Applied to the EU, this means that the character of a crisis, whether it threatens the polity's normative foundations or its functional capacity, should shape the organisational structures created to address it. More recent work on organisational adaptation in EU institutions reinforces this point, emphasising that institutional reforms respond to perceived functional demands rather than follow a uniform logic of bureaucratic expansion (Bauer and Trondal 2015; Beach and Smeets 2020; Egeberg and Trondal 2018; Kassim *et al.* 2013).

Attack crises reveal community deficits. When identifiable actors deliberately challenge the fundamental values or boundaries of the polity, what is at stake is not the production of a collective good but the integrity of the political community, and the demand the crisis generates is for delimitation, meaning that the polity must reaffirm and defend its normative boundary against the challenger (Schimmelfennig 2024). The components of the demarcation response follow from its structure. Because the challenge is carried out by identifiable political actors, the polity must first be able to *detect and publicise* their conduct; unobserved challenges cannot be politically managed at all (monitoring). Because the member states must respond collectively and because challengers may exploit divisions or veto points to block action, the polity must *coordinate the political positions* of its principals (political coordination). Because detection and coordination are meaningless without consequences, the state must be able to *impose costs or manage the terms of the challenge*. This is done through enforcement where the challenger remains a member (as in the rule of law crisis), through negotiation and mandate management where it seeks to exit or redraw the polity's boundaries (as in Brexit), or through deterrence or/and compellence where the challenger is a third country seeking to coerce or harm the polity. Monitoring, political coordination, and enforcement, negotiation management, or deterrence/compellence are thus the functional requirements of demarcation. I call this a *steering orientation*, which refers to organisational changes that concentrate on political management, enforcement coordination, compliance monitoring, negotiation management, and deterrence/compellence. The term captures the directional, politically guided character of these changes; they steer the polity's response to a political challenge rather than build a technical infrastructure.

Failure crises reveal capacity deficits and create a delivery problem. When existing institutional machinery cannot produce the collective goods that members expect, the institutional demand is for mechanisms that can fill the capacity gap in the form of new technical bodies, procurement platforms, coordination infrastructure, and resource mobilisation instruments. The organisation must enhance its capacity to coordinate across sectors, pool resources, deliver services, and manage the practical logistics of crisis response. The components of this list are likewise deducible from the structure of the problem, because producing a collective good the polity previously could not produce requires acquiring inputs (procurement and resource mobilisation), combining them (technical coordination), and distributing outputs (delivery infrastructure). I call this an *operational orientation*, with organisational changes concentrated on technical coordination, resource mobilisation, service delivery, and problem-solving infrastructure. The term captures the implementation-focused, functionally driven character of these changes; they enable the polity to do things it could not previously do.

Two clarifications delimit this functional logic. First, it is conditioned by the structure of the EU polity rather than universally applicable. A polity under attack could, in principle, respond by building coercive capacity, as historical states did under military threat. The EU cannot because it lacks the means to compel non-compliant actors, especially those internal to the polity, or prevent exit, and the unanimity requirements for expanding its authority and resources ensure that an internal attacker can veto the very capacity that would be used against it; towards external attackers, it similarly lacks military coercive instruments, so that deterrence and/or compellence runs through sanctions and exclusion rather than force, which is usually deployed by its constituent states individually or collectively through other bodies such as NATO (Schimmelfennig 2024). Demarcation must therefore run through the EU's regulatory and political instruments – monitoring cycles, enforcement procedures, financial conditionality, negotiation mandates – which is precisely what a steering orientation describes. Second, a delivery failure could in principle be addressed through steering alone, with rules that assign burdens and sanction free-riding; but rules do not by themselves produce a missing good where the deficit is one of capability rather than compliance, and the EU's unusually deep integration, delegated authority, and budgetary resources make Union-level capacity building both feasible and attractive in such cases. Where a failure crisis does contain a genuine compliance component, as in the dispute over burden-sharing during the migration crisis, the framework expects a secondary steering channel alongside the dominant operational response, a prediction the data bear out below.

A recurring difficulty in classifying organisational change is that *coordination* appears on both sides of the distinction. The two dimensions separate it by the object of coordination and the composition of the coordinating body. Coordination is steering when what is being aligned are the positions or preferences of political principals, member states, Commissioners, in order to sustain collective action towards a challenger, a negotiation, or an enforcement process. Coordination is operational when what is being aligned is resources, information, or logistics among administrative units in order to produce a collective good. The test is what is coordinated (positions versus resources) and who coordinates (principals versus officials). By the same token, whether the object of an organisational change is the conduct of *member states/third countries* or the production of a *good* distinguishes monitoring mechanisms (steering: they supervise national conduct against collective commitments) from technical and analytical bodies (operational: they generate expertise, data, or matched transactions).

Table 1 summarises the theoretical expectations. It is important to note here that the two dimensions are analytically independent scales rather than mutually exclusive categories; they are jointly exhaustive at the level of functional problems in that each captures one of the two demands a crisis can place on an organisation, the political management of actors and the production of goods. Many organisational changes will serve both dimensions to some degree. A monitoring body requires procedural infrastructure to operate (operational dimension), and a procurement mechanism may require political coordination to establish (steering dimension). The theoretical prediction thus is that the dominant orientation of the organisational response will differ systematically across crisis types, not necessarily that all changes in attack crises will be purely steering-oriented, for instance.

Finally, it is important to note that the Commission and the Council of the EU occupy different positions in the EU's institutional architecture.

Table 1. Theoretical expectations: crisis type and organisational orientation.

	Attack (community crisis)	Failure (capacity crisis)
Institutional demand	Compliance: detect, publicise, and manage challenges to shared values	Delivery: fill capacity gaps in collective good production
Dominant organisational orientation	Steering: enforcement, monitoring, political coordination	Operational: technical coordination, procurement, resource mobilisation
Expected change types	Monitoring mechanisms, enforcement procedures, compliance reporting cycles, political coordination bodies	Technical agencies, procurement platforms, crisis management protocols, resource-pooling instruments
Secondary dimension	Some operational infrastructure to support steering mechanisms	Some political coordination to establish operational mechanisms

The Commission, as a supranational bureaucracy, may be structurally predisposed towards operational responses (it builds agencies, programmes, and technical capacity). The Council, as an intergovernmental body, may be predisposed towards steering responses (it coordinates political positions and monitors compliance). If crisis type has genuine causal force, it should override or at least modulate these institutional predispositions. More exactly, we should observe steering-dominant changes even in the Commission during attack crises and operational-dominant changes even in the Council during failure crises.

Research design

Case selection

I compare five crises that span the attack/failure typology as a structured focused comparison. The cases include two attack crises, two failure crises, and one mixed crisis, providing variation on the independent variable while allowing comparison within and across crisis types.

Because most real-world crises contain elements of both ideal types, classification requires explicit criteria applied *ex ante* and uniformly. I classify crises by their *origins*, not by the politicisation of the responses they provoke, as some scholars have considered (Boer *et al.* 2026; Schelkle *et al.* 2026), using two questions. First, did the crisis originate in intentional action by identifiable political actors directed against the polity's fundamental values, constitutional principles, or membership boundaries? Second, did the crisis originate in an unintentional shock that overwhelmed existing policy instruments and institutional resources? A crisis is an attack when only the first question is answered affirmatively, a failure when only the second is, and mixed when both are. This origin-based standard matters because nearly every EU crisis becomes politically contested at some point in its life cycle; if downstream politicisation sufficed for the attack label, for instance, the category would be empty of discriminating power. The framework instead predicts that secondary politicisation of a failure crisis will surface as elevated secondary steering scores in the organisational response.

The rule of law crisis (2017–2024) constitutes an internal attack on the EU's constitutional principles. Beginning with the Commission's activation of Article 7(1) TEU against Poland in December 2017, the crisis involved deliberate challenges to judicial independence and democratic governance by member state governments that directly contradicted Article 2 TEU (Kelemen 2017). Brexit (2016–2020) constitutes an existential attack through withdrawal. The United Kingdom's invocation of Article 50 TEU deliberately challenged the polity's membership integrity and generated

demands for negotiation management, mandate coordination, and the defence of collective interests in a structured departure process.

The COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022) constitutes a prototypical failure crisis. The virus represented an unintended external shock that exposed capacity deficits in EU health governance, medical procurement, and crisis coordination (Forman and Mossialos 2021). The pandemic response did generate contestation over the trade-off between public health measures and fundamental rights, but this contestation concerned national *responses* to the crisis, not its origin; no political actor directed the shock against the EU's values or boundaries. The 2015 migration crisis similarly constitutes a failure crisis, as an unintended exogenous inflow that overwhelmed existing border management, asylum processing, and reception instruments. The classification of this case deserves particular care, since a substantial literature shows that immigration activates deep conflicts over identity, belonging, and sovereignty in European politics (Börzel and Risse 2018; Hutter and Kriesi 2022), and frontline states' non-compliance with the Dublin regulation added a compliance dimension. Under the origin-based criteria, however, these are downstream politicisations of a capacity shock, not an intentional challenge to the polity's values by identifiable actors, as no government engineered the inflow to subvert the EU's constitutional order. The framework accordingly treats migration as a failure crisis with a pronounced secondary politicised dimension and predicts that this dimension will register as elevated secondary steering scores relative to a purer failure case such as COVID-19. As shown below, this is what the data reveal.

The Russia-Ukraine war (2022–2026) constitutes a mixed crisis, and it is the only case in which *both* classification questions are answered affirmatively at the origin. Russia's invasion represents an intentional external attack on the European security order, generating demands for sanctions enforcement and political coordination. Simultaneously, and from the outset, the war unintentionally overwhelmed existing instruments in energy supply, defence industrial production, and the reception of displaced persons, generating demands for new operational infrastructure. This distinguishes the case from the migration crisis, where the attack-like elements emerged downstream in the politics of the response rather than being constitutive of the crisis origin. The organisational response to the Russia-Ukraine war should therefore reflect both orientations, with the balance depending on where the greater institutional demand lies.

The five cases differ on dimensions beyond crisis type, including internal versus external origin, temporal pace, and policy domain. The theoretical argument is that crisis type, not these ancillary features, drives systematic differences in organisational orientation. The structured comparison across

five cases provides significant inferential leverage as it allows me to examine whether the prediction holds not only between crisis types but also within them. More specifically, the two attack crises should exhibit similar organisational profiles despite differing in important respects (internal value subversion versus withdrawal), as should the two failure crises (health versus border management).

Coding organisational changes

The unit of analysis is a discrete organisational change event, which I define as a formal decision or documented action that (a) creates, (b) modifies, (c) abolishes, or (d) activates an (i) organisational structure, (ii) procedure, or (iii) responsibility allocation within the European Commission or Council of the EU. Each event must be identified by a legal act, press release, or documented institutional decision. I include changes that occur within the temporal boundaries of the crisis, link explicitly to the crisis in their establishing documentation, and concern the internal organisational architecture of the institution rather than external policy outputs. I exclude policy outputs that impose obligations on member states or external actors without creating new internal institutional arrangements, changes in EU agencies outside the Commission or Council structure, and informal coordination that institutional records do not document.

The distinction between organisational changes and policy outputs requires care, because a single legal instrument frequently does both. The operative rule is that an instrument enters the dataset only if, and only insofar as, it constitutes internal institutional machinery: a coordination platform, a monitoring cycle, a task force, a dedicated administrative capacity, or a procedural obligation binding the institution itself. The activation of the Temporary Protection Directive, for example, is coded not because it granted rights to displaced persons (a policy output) but because the implementing decision constituted a Solidarity Platform, a Commission coordinating role, and mandatory contributions to common situational awareness – internal coordination machinery that did not previously exist. The 2015 relocation decisions are coded for the relocation apparatus they created (liaison officers, notification and matching procedures, operational roles for the Commission and EASO), not for the quotas they imposed. Instruments that redistribute resources or set rules without any internal institutional footprint are excluded. The [online appendix](#) formalises this rule as a five-question inclusion decision tree and discusses the borderline cases individually; a robustness check excluding all borderline entries leaves the findings unchanged.

I code each organisational change on two independent dimensions using a three-point scale (0=absent, 1=secondary, 2=primary). The *steering dimension* captures whether the change enhances the institution's capacity for political management, enforcement, compliance monitoring, or negotiation coordination. The *operational dimension* captures whether the change enhances technical coordination, resource mobilisation, service delivery, or problem-solving capacity. Scoring on both dimensions independently allows for mixed cases. When organisational changes are sub-components of a single legal instrument, I code them separately when they have distinct formal constitutions (e.g., separate articles in an establishing decision) and different functional orientations; incremental modifications to the same mechanism are collapsed into a single entry. This standard of granularity ensures that functionally distinct changes are captured while avoiding over-counting of serial adjustments to the same instrument. To discipline the coding against confirmation bias, every entry records, alongside the justification for each score, an explicit disconfirmation note stating why the score was not set higher, together with a confidence rating reflecting the quality and convergence of the underlying sources. The full codebook, including scoring anchors and the operationalisation of the political/technical coordination distinction, and the complete dataset with all justifications and disconfirmation notes are provided in the [online appendix](#).

Data sources

I collected primary and secondary source documents for each of the ten case-institution cells (five crises $\times$ two institutions). The source base draws on four main categories. First, legal acts and establishing decisions retrieved from EUR-Lex, including Commission decisions on internal organisation (e.g., C(2021) 6712 establishing HERA), Council regulations and decisions (e.g., Council Decision (EU) 2015/1601 on emergency relocation; Regulation (EU) 2022/2576 on joint gas purchasing), and CFSP decisions adopted through the European Peace Facility framework. These constitute the primary evidence for the formal constitution of each organisational change. Second, official institutional documentation from the Council register and Commission websites, including Council press releases, General Affairs Council meeting records, European Council conclusions, and Commission communications establishing new instruments or policy frameworks. Third, European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS) briefings, which proved particularly valuable for the Russia-Ukraine and migration cases by providing structured overviews of legislative instruments and their organisational implications. Fourth, academic analyses that identify organisational changes not prominently featured in

official communications. For the COVID-19 case, Kassim (2023) and Moloney and Rhinard (2025) document Commission-internal adaptations that official press releases understate. For the rule of law crisis, Hernández (2024) traces the presidency's discretionary power over Article 7 hearings and the Annual Rule of Law Dialogue, revealing organisational changes embedded in procedural practice rather than formal decisions. For Brexit, Laffan (2019) and Schuette (2021) provide detailed accounts of the Commission's negotiation management architecture.

Source availability varies across cells. The two most recent crises (COVID-19 and Russia-Ukraine) benefit from extensive official documentation and a rapidly growing academic literature. The migration crisis and Brexit are well documented in both official records and academic analyses. The rule of law crisis presents the greatest documentation challenge on the Council side, where Article 7 hearing records are limited and the Annual Rule of Law Dialogue proceedings are not systematically published; here, academic analyses of the presidency's agenda-setting role proved essential for identifying procedural changes. The [online appendix](#) provides the full list of sources consulted for each cell.

Empirical analysis

The coding produced 101 organisational changes across the five crises: 15 for COVID-19 (12 Commission, 3 Council), 24 for migration (16 Commission, 8 Council), 17 for the rule of law crisis (10 Commission, 7 Council), 12 for Brexit (3 Commission, 9 Council), and 33 for the Russia-Ukraine war (15 Commission, 18 Council). The aggregate pattern strongly supports the theoretical predictions derived from my framework. [Table 2](#) presents the summary statistics by crisis. Three features of the data deserve particular emphasis.

First, the attack/failure separation is near-categorical. Of 29 organisational changes in the two attack crises, 24 have steering scores exceeding their operational scores and only one has an operational score exceeding its steering score. Of 39 changes in the two failure crises, 27 have

Table 2. Summary statistics by crisis.

Type	Crisis	N	S mean	O mean	S > O	S = O	S < O
Attack	Rule of Law	17	1.82	0.76	14	3	0
Attack	Brexit	12	1.75	0.92	10	1	1
Failure	COVID-19	15	0.53	1.60	2	3	10
Failure	Migration	24	0.88	1.71	4	3	17
Mixed	Russia-Ukraine	33	0.97	1.64	8	2	23
Attack pooled		29	1.79	0.83	24	4	1
Failure pooled		39	0.74	1.67	6	6	27
Mixed		33	0.97	1.64	8	2	23

Note: S=Steering score; O=Operational score. Scores range from 0 (absent) to 2 (primary).

operational scores exceeding their steering scores. The two crisis types occupy almost entirely separate regions of the steering-operational space.

Second, the pattern holds within crisis types despite substantial differences between the crises composing each type. The two attack crises exhibit nearly identical aggregate profiles (rule of law: $S=1.82$, $O=0.76$; Brexit: $S=1.75$, $O=0.92$) despite differing fundamentally in their character, as one involves internal value subversion, while the other involves withdrawal from the polity. The two failure crises are more differentiated. COVID-19 ($S=0.53$, $O=1.60$) exhibits the purest operational profile in the dataset, while migration ($S=0.88$, $O=1.71$) shows higher secondary steering scores, reflecting the normative contestation that surrounded solidarity obligations during the 2015 crisis. Both, however, are clearly operationally dominant.

Third, the mixed Russia-Ukraine crisis occupies a theoretically coherent intermediate position. Its aggregate profile ($S=0.97$, $O=1.64$) leans operational, reflecting the predominance of capacity deficits in energy and defence that required massive organisational innovation, while the attack dimension expressed itself primarily through sanctions, a policy output channel that required comparatively less internal organisational restructuring. This finding is consistent with my theoretical expectation that mixed crises produce organisational responses reflecting both orientations, with the balance shaped by relative institutional demand.

Fourth, crisis type overrides or modulates institutional predispositions across the five cases. Table 3 reports the institutional breakdown. The Commission, despite its technocratic orientation, produced predominantly steering-oriented changes during both attack crises: decisively so in the rule of law crisis ($S=1.70$, $O=0.80$, with seven of ten changes steering-dominant and none operational-dominant), and by a majority in the small Brexit cell (two of three changes steering-dominant), where the operationally oriented Preparedness unit pulls the cell means to parity ($S=1.33$, $O=1.33$). The Council, despite its political coordination function, produced operationally-oriented changes during the migration crisis

Table 3. Summary statistics by crisis and institution.

Crisis	Institution	N	S mean	O mean	$S > O$	$S < O$
Rule of Law	Commission	10	1.70	0.80	7	0
Rule of Law	Council	7	2.00	0.71	7	0
Brexit	Commission	3	1.33	1.33	2	1
Brexit	Council	9	1.89	0.78	8	0
COVID-19	Commission	12	0.42	1.75	1	9
COVID-19	Council	3	1.00	1.00	1	1
Migration	Commission	16	0.81	1.81	3	13
Migration	Council	8	1.00	1.50	1	4
Russia-Ukraine	Commission	15	0.73	1.73	3	11
Russia-Ukraine	Council	18	1.17	1.56	5	12

($S=1.00$, $O=1.50$) and the mixed crisis (Ukraine: $S=1.17$, $O=1.56$). Its COVID-19 cell, containing only three entries, sits at parity ($S=1.00$, $O=1.00$) and is too thin to discriminate; the Commission carried the bulk of the pandemic response.

Finally, these findings are not artefacts of contestable coding or univ-erse decisions. The [online appendix](#) reports two robustness checks: adversarially swapping the steering and operational scores of the ten most contestable codings and dropping all nine entries whose status as organisational changes could be questioned. The attack/failure separation survives both essentially unchanged.

Attack crises: steering-oriented organisational change

The organisational responses to the rule of law crisis and Brexit exhibit a shared logic despite the different forms these attacks took. In both cases, the dominant institutional demand was for mechanisms to coordinate political responses to intentional challenges. These entailed enforcement and compliance monitoring in the rule of law crisis, negotiation management and mandate coordination in Brexit. Changes that enhanced technical or operational capacity were secondary to this steering function.

The rule of law crisis produced 17 organisational changes, of which 14 score Steering: 2. The Commission's most institutionally significant innovation was the establishment of the Annual Rule of Law Review Cycle (2019–2020), operationalised through the first Annual Rule of Law Report published in September 2020. The yearly cycle created permanent monitoring infrastructure covering all 27 member states across four pillars of justice systems, anti-corruption, media pluralism, and institutional checks and balances. A network of national contact points and a structured methodology of country visits and stakeholder consultations supported it. Starting in 2022, the Report included country-specific recommendations, transforming it from a diagnostic instrument into an active compliance guidance mechanism with country-specific reform prescriptions. This entire cluster of changes is steering-oriented in the purest sense, with its core purpose being to detect, publicise, and create political pressure around rule of law deficiencies, not to build technical service delivery capacity. The operational scores are secondary (Operational: 1), reflecting the procedural infrastructure required to conduct the monitoring exercise itself.

The Council's organisational response to the rule of law crisis exhibits the most extreme steering orientation in the dataset. All seven changes score Steering: 2; five have a secondary operational score of 1 and two score Operational: 0. The Article 7(1) enforcement track generated three

key changes: the first hearing on Poland at the General Affairs Council (June 2018), the adoption of standard modalities for Article 7 hearings (July 2019), and the first hearing on Hungary (September 2019). That all three were conducted through the existing General Affairs Council rather than requiring the creation of any new institutional body is itself telling, as the Council's response was to activate and proceduralise an existing political tool rather than to build new organisational capacity. The standard modalities created formal procedural rules for a mechanism that had never previously been used, structuring hearing format, speaking time, and question-and-answer procedures – a steering innovation in the purest sense.

The conditionality regulation (Regulation 2020/2092) generated a distinct enforcement cluster spanning both institutions. The Commission's detailed application guidelines codifying the assessment methodology (Steering: 2, Operational: 1) and the dedicated complaint mailbox within DG Budget (Steering: 1, Operational: 1) created procedural infrastructure for a new enforcement tool that bypassed the unanimity requirement of Article 7 through qualified majority voting. The Council's first implementing decision under this mechanism, suspending approximately 6.3 billion euros in commitments for Hungary in December 2022, confirmed the enforcement logic of this pathway. One might object that the conditionality mechanism is operational in character because it turns the EU budget into a resource supporting the rule of law. The coding rubric however resolves this the other way, as the mechanism produces no good or service and builds no delivery capacity; its function is to detect breaches and impose financial consequences on defecting member states. The budget is the lever of enforcement, not the product, and the secondary operational scores capture the assessment and complaint-handling infrastructure required to run the mechanism. The Annual Rule of Law Dialogue underwent two procedural reforms on the Council side. The Finnish Presidency's formalisation in 2019 of the rule of law dialogue established a structured peer review cycle, and the Spanish Presidency's 2023 reform issued Presidency conclusions constraining future discretion over the dialogue format. Research by Hernández (2024) demonstrates that previous rotating presidency exercised significant discretionary power over whether Article 7 hearings occurred, making the institutionalisation of the dialogue format a consequential organisational change that reduced this discretion.

The temporal evolution of the rule of law response followed a logic of progressive enforcement escalation rather than the reactive-to-institutionalised trajectory observed in the failure crises. The initial changes (Article 7 activation, Rule of Law Cycle creation) established monitoring and political signalling capacity. Subsequent changes (conditionality regulation

procedures, country-specific recommendations, systematic follow-up on prior recommendations) added teeth by linking monitoring to financial consequences and creating iterative accountability cycles. The later expansion of the Rule of Law Report to include enlargement candidate countries (Steering: 2, Operational: 1) extended the monitoring perimeter. At each stage, the organisational innovation enhanced the Commission's and Council's capacity to observe, publicise, and politically manage compliance with shared values. This progressive escalation is consistent with the attack mechanism's emphasis on sustained collective commitment against defection or attacks on shared constitutional values. More precisely, as existing enforcement tools proved insufficient (the mutual veto between Hungary and Poland blocked Article 7 proceedings), the Commission and Council created new organisational infrastructure to maintain enforcement pressure through alternative channels.

Brexit generated a parallel steering logic, but one directed at managing a structured departure rather than policing compliance. The Commission established the Task Force for the Preparation and Conduct of the Negotiations with the United Kingdom under Article 50 TEU (TF50) by decision of September 2016, operational from October 2016, creating a dedicated negotiation management structure under Michel Barnier that reported directly to the Commission President. The Task Force's function was to coordinate the EU's negotiating mandate, maintain political coherence across the EU-27, and manage the procedural architecture of the withdrawal process. Its successor, the Task Force for Relations with the United Kingdom (UKTF), continued this steering function into the trade negotiation phase. These bodies scored Steering: 2, Operational: 1 throughout as their purpose was mandate management and political coordination, not technical capacity building. The secondary operational scores reflect the administrative infrastructure required to conduct negotiations.

The Council's response to Brexit was even more uniformly steering-oriented. The creation of the ad hoc Working Party on Article 50 TEU, the nomination of the Commission as Union negotiator, the European Council guidelines defining the negotiating framework, the successive negotiating directives on the transition period, and the procedural arrangements for conducting talks all scored Steering: 2. These were organisational innovations designed to structure a political process, not to build technical capacity. The Council Secretariat created its own dedicated Task Force UK (TFUK) to support the preparatory work, mirroring the Commission's TF50 structure. The one Brexit change exhibiting operational dominance, the Commission's Preparedness unit within the Secretariat-General (Steering: 0, Operational: 2), is the exception that proves the rule. This unit prepared for the operational consequences of Brexit on supply chains, regulatory

frameworks, and cross-border arrangements, and its purely operational orientation confirms that the steering-dominant profile of the other 11 changes reflects crisis type rather than a generic institutional tendency.

Failure crises: operationally-oriented organisational change

COVID-19 and the migration crisis generated organisational responses dominated by technical capacity building, procurement infrastructure, and operational coordination. The two crises differ in scale and policy domain, but the shared pattern is clear, as both produced organisations designed to *do* things the EU could not previously do, rather than to monitor compliance or manage political processes.

The Commission's organisational response to COVID-19 was the most operationally concentrated in the dataset. Of 12 coded changes, 9 score Operational: 2, and 8 score Steering: 0, meaning they had no political management or enforcement function whatsoever. The earliest changes reflect the acute phase of the crisis. The Clearing House for Medical Equipment (March 2020) coordinated the matching of supply and demand for personal protective equipment across member states (Steering: 0, Operational: 2). The Advisory Panel of Epidemiologists and Virologists provided politically proximate scientific expertise that the Commission lacked in-house (Steering: 0, Operational: 2). The Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative Task Force facilitated rapid reprogramming of structural funds towards pandemic response (Steering: 0, Operational: 2). In each case, the object of the change was resources and expertise, not the conduct of member states. This is not to deny that the EU engaged in extensive political coordination of national pandemic responses, from border closures to restrictions on public life; it did, but that coordination ran through other channels, above all the IPCR, whose full activation is coded separately and scores steering-dominant. The bodies listed here supplied technical inputs (matched transactions, scientific advice, reprogrammed funds), which under the rubric is technical rather than political coordination. The mid-crisis phase saw further capacity building through the HERA Incubator (Steering: 0, Operational: 2), which invested in genome sequencing and variant detection infrastructure, and the Vaccine Production Task Force (Steering: 0, Operational: 2), which addressed manufacturing bottlenecks through technical coordination with industry.

The institutionalisation phase culminated in HERA, established as a Commission directorate-general in September 2021 with an indicative budget of 6 billion euros. HERA represents the most significant operational organisational change in the dataset, becoming a permanent structural addition to the Commission that institutionalised the ad hoc capacity created during the pandemic. Its establishing decision (C(2021) 6712)

frames the body explicitly in terms of filling a structural preparedness gap, with core functions in threat assessment, medical countermeasure development, procurement, and stockpiling (Steering: 1, Operational: 2). HERA's governance architecture generated several subsidiary changes, with the HERA Board providing member state advisory input (Steering: 1, Operational: 1), the Advisory Forum pooling scientific expertise (Steering: 0, Operational: 2), and the Joint Industrial Cooperation Forum coordinating production capacity with industry (Steering: 0, Operational: 2). Only the HERA Coordination Committee of senior Commissioners scores as steering-dominant (Steering: 2, Operational: 1), providing political steering over HERA's planning and implementation. That the sole steering-dominant change in the COVID-19 Commission cell is embedded within the governance architecture of an operationally oriented parent body underscores rather than undermines the overall tendency.

The Council's organisational response to COVID-19 was thinner and more mixed than the Commission's, reflecting the genuinely limited scope of Council-internal organisational change during the pandemic. The Croatian Presidency activated the IPCR initially in information-sharing mode on 28 January 2020 (Steering: 1, Operational: 1) and escalated it to full activation on 2 March 2020. The full activation scores as steering-dominant (Steering: 2, Operational: 1), reflecting its explicit function as political coordination at the highest level, including presidency-led roundtables preparing proposals for Council or European Council decisions. The complete activation of IPCR is one of only two COVID-19 changes in which the steering score exceeds the operational score. The remaining Council change is the temporary derogation from the Rules of Procedure enabling written adoption of acts when physical meetings were impossible (Decision 2020/430, twice extended; the derogation and its extensions are serial adjustments to the same mechanism and are coded as a single change, Steering: 0, Operational: 1), which represents a purely operational adaptation to maintain institutional continuity under pandemic conditions rather than a political management innovation.

A temporal pattern is visible in the COVID-19 response of the Commission. The earliest changes (January–July 2020) were reactive, creating ad hoc mechanisms to fill immediate capacity gaps: clearing houses, advisory panels, procurement instruments. The subsequent changes (2021–2022) were more deliberate, institutionalising the lessons of the initial response into permanent structures. HERA culminates in this trajectory: a permanent DG that ensures that the EU does not need to improve the same operational infrastructure in a future health emergency. This shift from reactive improvisation to deliberate institutionalisation is consistent with the observation of the crisis management literature that operational capacity accretes over time in response to successive crises

(Cedergren and Hassel 2024; Hupkens 2026; Moloney and Rhinard 2025). What the attack/failure framework adds is a prediction about the *type* of capacity that accretes. In failure crises, it is operational capacity rather than enforcement or monitoring infrastructure that accretes.

The migration crisis produced a larger number of changes (24) with a broadly similar operational profile but somewhat higher secondary steering scores (pooled $S=0.88$ versus COVID-19's $S=0.53$). The higher steering content reflects the normative contestation surrounding solidarity obligations, which injected a compliance dimension into an otherwise capacity-driven crisis response – exactly the organisational fingerprints that my origin-based classification predicts for a failure crisis with a politicised secondary dimension. Within the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, established by Regulation 2016/1624, the disaggregated organisational components reveal this internal variation. The Rapid Reserve Pool created a standby contingent of border guards deployable at short notice to member states facing disproportionate migratory pressure (Steering: 1, Operational: 2). The Return Office consolidated the EU's capacity to coordinate and execute return operations (Steering: 1, Operational: 2). The Monitoring and Risk Analysis Centre built intelligence and forecasting infrastructure (Steering: 1, Operational: 2). European cooperation on coast guard functions pooled operational assets across maritime domains (Steering: 0, Operational: 2). Each of these components addressed a concrete capacity deficit in border management.

The EBCG Vulnerability Assessment mechanism, by contrast, scores Steering: 2, Operational: 1: its function is to monitor whether member states maintain adequate border management capacity and to issue binding recommendations when vulnerabilities are identified, introducing a compliance logic that assesses national performance against EU standards. A parallel steering logic is visible in the EBCG Liaison Officers deployed to member states (Steering: 2, Operational: 1), whose function combines on-the-ground presence with oversight of national border management practices, and in the Fundamental Rights Complaint Mechanism (Steering: 2, Operational: 1), which created an accountability channel for rights violations during border operations. These steering-oriented components within an otherwise operational agency illustrate how failure crises with secondary politicised normative dimensions can produce mixed organisational architectures. The differentiation of components at the component-level is also consistent with the characterisation of bodies such as Frontex as hybrids of supranational supervision and jointly produced operational capacity (Freudlsperger *et al.* 2022). Coding does not classify the agency wholesale but captures both faces of its architecture.

The Council's migration response exhibited a similar operational dominance with secondary steering content. The two emergency relocation

decisions (Council Decisions 2015/1523 and 2015/1601) established mandatory quota-based redistribution mechanisms for asylum seekers from Italy and Greece, scoring Steering: 1, Operational: 2—their primary function was operational (physically relocating people across member states) with a secondary political coordination dimension. EUNAVFOR Med Operation Sophia (Steering: 1, Operational: 2) deployed naval assets to disrupt human smuggling networks in the Mediterranean, an operational capacity that the EU had to build from scratch. The Council Regulation on emergency support within the EU (Steering: 0, Operational: 2) created a new funding instrument for humanitarian assistance inside the Union, a capacity that had not previously existed. The IPCR activation for migration followed the same pattern as in COVID-19, with the information-sharing mode scoring Steering: 1, Operational: 1 and the full activation scoring Steering: 2, Operational: 1. The migration crisis thus occupies a position between the ideal-typical failure pattern of COVID-19 and the mixed pattern of the Russia-Ukraine war, its higher steering content correlating with the greater degree of normative contestation that surrounded the solidarity and burden-sharing debate among and within member states.

The mixed crisis: dual-orientation organisational change

The Russia-Ukraine war produced the largest organisational response in the dataset (33 changes) and the most internally differentiated. The aggregate profile leans operational ($S=0.97$, $O=1.64$), but this aggregate masks a clear internal structure, with sanctions-related changes exhibiting strong steering orientation, while energy and defense changes exhibiting strong operational orientation.

The EU Energy Platform, established in April 2022, illustrates the operational dimension. The Platform coordinated voluntary joint gas purchasing, demand aggregation, and supplier diversification across member states, addressing the capacity gap created by the sudden need to replace Russian energy imports. Its score (Steering: 0, Operational: 2) reflects a pure delivery function derived from the fact that member states needed gas, and the EU lacked the procurement infrastructure to source it collectively. The parallel energy response of the Council reinforced this operational orientation through a cascade of capacity-building instruments, including mandatory gas storage filling obligations (Steering: 1, Operational: 2), a coordinated demand reduction mechanism (Steering: 1, Operational: 2), an emergency intervention on high energy prices (Steering: 1, Operational: 2), and a market correction mechanism for gas prices (Steering: 1, Operational: 2). Each addressed a specific functional gap in the energy governance architecture of the EU. The secondary steering

scores reflect the political coordination needed to establish these mechanisms, but in every case, the core organisational function was the building of technical capacity. The analogy with COVID-19's clearing house for medical equipment is rather direct, as both crises exposed procurement and supply management deficits that the EU's existing institutional machinery could not address.

The Council's Ukraine response was the most extensive in the dataset (18 changes) and predominantly operational. The European Peace Facility underwent two major expansions of its financial ceiling and a structural reform creating a dedicated Ukraine Assistance Fund (Steering: 0, Operational: 2), transforming it from a modest instrument into a major channel for military assistance. The three-track ammunition plan (Steering: 1, Operational: 2) and the establishment of the EU Military Assistance Mission (EUMAM Ukraine, Steering: 1, Operational: 2) built defense training and supply capacity that the EU completely lacked before the invasion. Alongside the energy instruments, the Council created the Ukraine Facility (Steering: 1, Operational: 2) and the 90 billion euros loan *via* enhanced cooperation (Steering: 1, Operational: 2) as financial support mechanisms. The European Defence Industry Programme (Steering: 0, Operational: 2), coded as a Commission change since the Commission administers the programme, addressed the defense industrial capacity gap identified as a systemic weakness. In each case, the organisational innovation filled a specific functional deficit rather than creating enforcement or monitoring capacity.

The steering dimension is concentrated in a smaller number of Council and Commission changes, primarily related to sanctions enforcement and to the supranational coordination of national delivery. The Commission's Freeze and Seize Task Force (Steering: 2, Operational: 1) coordinated the identification and immobilisation of sanctioned assets across member states. The International Special Envoy for Sanctions Implementation (Steering: 2, Operational: 1) provided high-level political coordination with third countries on sanctions compliance. On the Council side, the new sanctions regime for Russian hybrid threats (Steering: 2, Operational: 0), the immobilisation of Russian sovereign assets (Steering: 2, Operational: 1) and the addition of sanctions violations to the list of EU crimes (Steering: 2, Operational: 0) created a legal enforcement architecture. The activation of the Temporary Protection Directive (Steering: 2, Operational: 1) – the first-ever use of this dormant instrument – also belongs to the steering cluster, and it constitutes an instructive hard case. Although its purpose was the reception of displaced Ukrainians, the Union level itself delivers very little under the directive, as residence paperwork, housing, welfare, and labour market access are provided from member state

resources. What the implementing decision constituted at the Union level is a machinery for coordinating and supervising national delivery, namely the Solidarity Platform, a Commission coordinating role, and mandatory contributions to common situational awareness. In core state powers terms, it regulates national capacities rather than building European ones, which under the rubric is steering with secondary operational infrastructure. These changes form a coherent cluster focused on political management, mirroring the steering logic observed in attack crises but embedded within a broader crisis response that is predominantly operational.

This internal differentiation within a single crisis provides a within-case test of the framework's logic. The attack dimension of the crisis (Russia's aggression against the European security order) produced steering-oriented organisational changes, while the failure dimension (capacity deficits in energy and defence) produced operational changes. That the operational changes vastly outnumber the steering changes (23 of 33 changes have S < O) reflects the relative magnitude of the institutional demands. The sanctions response, while politically prominent, required comparatively little new internal organisational infrastructure, as much of it could be channelled through existing CFSP mechanisms. The energy and defense capacity gaps, by contrast, required massive organisational innovation because the EU had virtually no prior institutional infrastructure for joint energy procurement or defense industrial coordination. Moreover, the steering response to the security dimension of the crisis operated substantially through formats external to the Commission-Council format studied here, including the Ramstein contact group, NATO coordination, and bilateral coalition-of-the-willing arrangements that included non-EU security actors such as the United Kingdom or the US and Canada.

Discussion

Five cross-cutting patterns deserve comment. First, the secondary dimension scores prove theoretically informative. In the attack crises, organisational changes that score Steering: 2 frequently carry a secondary Operational: 1, reflecting the procedural infrastructure required to operate enforcement and negotiation mechanisms. In the failure crises, changes scoring Operational: 2 occasionally carry a secondary Steering: 1, reflecting political coordination required to establish operational mechanisms. But in no case does the secondary dimension reach 2 when the primary dimension is also 2, confirming that the primary orientation systematically follows crisis type.

Second, the change type distribution differs across crisis types in ways consistent with the framework. Failure crises produced predominantly

creations (24 of 39 changes), reflecting the need to build new institutional capacity from scratch. Attack crises produced a more balanced distribution of creations (10), procedural changes (12), and activations (5), reflecting the greater role of activating dormant instruments and creating new political processes rather than building entirely new organisational capacity.

Third, the asymmetry between the two dimensions observed within each crisis type suggests that operational infrastructure may function partly as a baseline accompaniment to any organisational change, while the steering dimension discriminates more sharply between crisis types. Attack crises have a pooled operational mean of 0.83, whereas failure crises have a pooled steering mean of 0.74. Both secondary means are non-trivial, but the pattern indicates that some procedural and administrative infrastructure is a necessary byproduct of any organisational response, regardless of crisis type. This observation is consistent with Hupkens (2026), who finds that operational capacity growth occurs across different crisis types.

Fourth, leadership and inter-institutional dynamics condition how crisis type translates into organisational form. Hupkens (2026) emphasises that collaborative leadership between the European Council and the Commission plays a crucial role in translating crisis pressures into governance outcomes. The functional logic proposed here identifies the structural demand for organisational change, but the supply side involves agency. Future process-tracing work could examine how institutional leaders perceived and responded to these structural demands.

Fifth, the within-crisis-type comparison reveals meaningful variation that the framework can accommodate: crises closer to the ideal type exhibit more extreme orientations (COVID-19), while those with politicised secondary dimensions show more balanced profiles (migration), consistent with the origin-based classification criteria set out in the research design.

Conclusions

In this article, I have argued that the type of crisis shapes the organisational orientation of institutional change within EU institutions. I adapted the attack/failure crisis typology that Schimmelfennig (2024) introduced to the meso-level of organisational design, theorising that attack crises produce steering-oriented changes (enforcement, monitoring, political coordination) while failure crises produce operationally-oriented changes (technical capacity, procurement, resource mobilisation). The empirical analysis of 101 organisational changes across five crises in the European Commission and the Council of the EU provides strong support for this

prediction. Attack crises cluster overwhelmingly on the steering dimension, failure crises on the operational dimension, and the mixed Russia-Ukraine crisis occupies an intermediate position consistent with the relative weight of its attack and failure elements. The separation holds across both institutions and within crisis types and survives adversarial recoding.

These findings contribute to the scholarship on EU crisis governance in several ways. By demonstrating that the attack/failure framework applies not only to macro-level boundary reconfiguration but also to internal organisational design, the article establishes that crisis mechanisms express themselves through multiple institutional channels operating simultaneously at different levels of the polity. External boundary change and internal organisational change complement each other rather than substitute for each other, and the same underlying causal logic drives both. This insight has implications for how we study crisis-driven institutional development. By focusing exclusively on policy outputs or on boundary changes, we miss an important channel through which crises reshape the EU's governing capacity.

My analysis also reveals that crisis type can override institutional predispositions. The Commission, despite its technocratic orientation, produced predominantly steering-oriented changes during the attack crises – decisively in the rule of law crisis, by majority in the thin Brexit cell. The Council, despite its political coordination function, produced predominantly operational changes during the migration and mixed crises, while its COVID-19 cell is too thin to discriminate. This finding provides evidence that the institutional demands created by crisis type are powerful enough to channel organisational adaptation against the grain of institutional identity, at least in the short to medium term.

Several limitations merit acknowledgment. First, the five cases differ on dimensions beyond crisis type (internal/external origin, temporal pace, policy domain, number of affected member states), and these differences could independently influence organisational responses. The within-type comparisons mitigate this concern – the two attack crises differ on most ancillary dimensions yet produce nearly identical organisational profiles – but future research should examine additional cases to further disentangle crisis type from confounding variables. Second, while the dataset of 101 changes is significant considering the entire population of cases, some cells remain thin, particularly the COVID-19 Council cell (3 entries) and the Brexit Commission cell (3 entries), partly reflecting the genuinely limited scope of organisational change in these cells but also possibly reflecting gaps in the primary sources I covered. Third, coding captures formal organisational changes that institutional records document, and may miss informal adaptations that carry consequences, but lack formalisation.

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, the analysis demonstrates the correlation between the type of crisis and organisational orientation rather than tracing the causal process in each individual case. The functional logic I propose is plausible and consistent with the evidence, but future work could complement this comparative-coding approach with detailed process tracing of specific organisational changes to examine how institutional demands were perceived, debated, and translated into organisational design choices.

The framework opens several avenues for future research. The within-case decomposition of mixed crises, illustrated here by the Russia-Ukraine case, could be applied more systematically to crises that combine attack and failure elements in different proportions, testing whether the relative balance of orientations tracks the relative magnitude of institutional demands. More ambitiously, the steering/operational distinction could be applied to organisational change in other international organisations confronting different crisis types, testing whether the framework travels beyond the EU context.

These findings also have implications for the relationship between the two literatures identified in the introduction. The EU-in-crisis literature and the EU crisis management literature have developed separately in part because they study different phenomena at different levels, as Ansell *et al.* (2025) have eloquently shown. The meso-level framework developed here suggests that these phenomena are linked. The macro-level dynamics that the EU in-crisis literature studies – polity formation, integration, fragmentation – produce specific organisational footprints within EU institutions. The operational adaptations that the crisis management literature documents are not random or ad hoc but follow predictable patterns shaped by the type of crisis the polity confronts. Linking the two literatures through a mid-range theoretical framework that specifies how crisis origins translate into organisational form may prove productive for both fields.

Finally, my analysis raises normative questions about the adequacy of the EU's organisational responses. If attack crises systematically produce steering-oriented changes, the EU's organisational toolkit for managing norm violations may be well-calibrated to the demands of the challenge. But it also means that operational capacity for implementing enforcement decisions – actually recovering frozen funds, monitoring compliance with conditionality milestones at the administrative level – may be systematically underdeveloped. Conversely, if failure crises produce operational changes, the EU may build impressive technical infrastructure while underinvesting in the political coordination needed to sustain collective action over time. Understanding these systematic tendencies is a prerequisite for designing organisational responses that address both dimensions of the challenge.

Acknowledgements

I thank the two reviewers for their helpful comments, the editor for her editorial guidance, Frank Schimmelfennig for his constructive feedback, and the participants of the workshop ‘The New Institutional Balance: Assessing Deep Systemic Changes in an EU System under Strain’ at the Joint Sessions of Workshops, University of Innsbruck, 7–10 April 2026.

Author contributions

CRedit: **Marius Ghincea**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Marius Ghincea is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the European Politics group, D-GESS, ETH Zurich. His research focuses on how geopolitical competition affects the institutional development of the European Union. [marius.ghincea@eup.gess.ethz.ch]

ORCID

Marius Ghincea  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8061-6769>

References

- Abrahamsen, Stine, Marianne Riddervold, and Jarle Trondal (2025). ‘Crisis and ‘Institutional Hubbing’ in the European Union’, *Risk, Hazards & Crisis in Public Policy*, 16:3.
- Ansell, C., J. Trondal, M. Riddervold, and A. Newsome (2025). ‘Meso-Level Dynamics of Crisis in the European Union’, *Risk, Hazards & Crisis in Public Policy*, 16:4, e70048.
- Bauer, Michael W., and Jarle Trondal (2015). ‘The Administrative System of the European Union’, in Michael W. Bauer and Jarle Trondal (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of the European Administrative System*. London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1–28.
- Beach, Derek, and Sandrino Smeets (2020). ‘New Institutional Leadership—How the New European Council-Dominated Crisis Governance Paradoxically Strengthened the Role of EU Institutions’, *Journal of European Integration*, 42:6, 837–54.
- Bocquillon, Pierre (2024). ‘Setting the European Agenda in Hard Times: The Commission, the European Council and the EU Polycrisis’, *Journal of European Integration*, 46:4, 567–74.
- Boer, Thijs de., Brendan Carroll, Kuipers Sanneke, Nespeca Vittorio, and Yesilkagit Kutsal (2026). ‘Is Crisis on the Rise? An Empirical Study of the Evolution of

- Crisis in the European Union Between 1980 and 2023', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 1–29.
- Boin, Arjen, Magnus Ekengren, and Mark Rhinard (2013). *The European Union as Crisis Manager: Patterns and Prospects*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Boin, Arjen, Paul 't Hart, Eric Stern, Eric Stern, and Bengt Sundelius (2017). *The Politics of Crisis Management*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Börzel, Tanja A., and Thomas Risse (2018). 'From the Euro to the Schengen Crises: European Integration Theories, Politicization, and Identity Politics', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 25:1, 83–108.
- Börzel, Tanja A., and Thomas Risse (2019). 'Grand Theories of Integration and the Challenges of Comparative Regionalism', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 26:8, 1231–52.
- Carstensen, Martin (2015). *Institutional Bricolage in Times of Crisis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cedergren, Alexander, and Henrik Hassel (2024). 'Building Organizational Adaptive Capacity in the Face of Crisis: Lessons from a Public Sector Case Study', *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 100, 104235.
- Couvreux, Salomé (2025). 'Inside the European Union's Trade Machinery: Institutional Changes in an Age of Geoeconomics', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 63:1, 284–301.
- Egeberg, Morten, and Jarle Trondal (2018). 'An Organizational Approach to Public Governance', in Morten Egeberg and Jarle Trondal (eds.), *An Organizational Approach to Public Governance: Understanding and Design*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1–29.
- Ferrera, Maurizio, Hanspeter Kriesi, and Waltraud Schelkle (2024). 'Maintaining the EU's Compound Polity During the Long Crisis Decade', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 31:3, 706–28.
- Forman, Rebecca, and Elias Mossialos (2021). 'The EU Response to COVID-19: From Reactive Policies to Strategic Decision-Making', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 59:Suppl 1, 56–68.
- Freudlsperger, Christian, Adina Maricut-Akbik, and Marta Migliorati (2022). 'Opening Pandora's Box? Joint Sovereignty and the Rise of EU Agencies with Operational Tasks', *Comparative Political Studies*, 55:12, 1983–2014.
- Freudlsperger, Christian, and Frank Schimmelfennig (2023). 'Rebordering Europe in the Ukraine War: Community Building Without Capacity Building', *West European Politics*, 46:5, 843–71.
- Freudlsperger, Christian, Jana Lipps, Miriam Nasr, Elena Schilpp, Frank Schimmelfennig, and Ayşe Yildirim (2024). 'Pandemic Bordering: Domestic Politicisation, European Coordination, and National Border Closures in the COVID-19 Crisis', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 31:10, 3151–75.
- Genschel, Philipp, and Markus Jachtenfuchs (2016). 'More Integration, Less Federation: The European Integration of Core State Powers', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 23:1, 42–59.
- Genschel, Philipp, and Markus Jachtenfuchs (2018). 'From Market Integration to Core State Powers: The Eurozone Crisis, the Refugee Crisis and Integration Theory', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 56:1, 178–96.
- Genschel, Philipp, and Markus Jachtenfuchs, eds. (2014). *Beyond the Regulatory Polity? The European Integration of Core State Powers*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

- Genschel, Philipp, Lena Leek, and Jasper Weyns (2023). 'War and Integration. The Russian Attack on Ukraine and the Institutional Development of the EU', *Journal of European Integration*, 45:3, 343–60.
- Hernández, G. (2024). 'The Powers of the Presidency of the Council of the EU to Shape the Rule of Law Enforcement Agenda: The Article 7 Case', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 62:5, 1159–76.
- Hooghe, Liesbet, and Gary Marks (2019). 'Grand Theories of European Integration in the Twenty-First Century', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 26:8, 1113–33.
- Hupkens, Jan (2026). 'When Does Crisis Reshuffle the Cards of EU Governance? A Comparative Case Study of the Euro and EU Migration Crisis', *Journal of European Integration*, 11:4, 252–62.
- Hupkens, Jan, Christine Neuhold, and Sophie Vanhoonacker (2023). 'One Crisis Is Not Like Another: Exploring Different Shades of Crisis in the EU', *Politics and Governance*, 11:4, 252–62.
- Hutter, Swen, and Hanspeter Kriesi (2022). 'Politicising Immigration in Times of Crisis', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48:2, 341–65.
- Kassim, Hussein (2023). 'The European Commission and the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Pluri-Institutional Approach', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 30:4, 612–34.
- Kassim, Hussein, John Peterson, Michael W. Bauer, et al. (2013). *The European Commission of the Twenty-First Century*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kelemen, R. Daniel (2017). 'Europe's Other Democratic Deficit: National Authoritarianism in Europe's Democratic Union', *Government and Opposition*, 52:2, 211–38.
- Kelemen, R. Daniel, and Kathleen R. McNamara (2022). 'State-Building and the European Union: Markets, War, and Europe's Uneven Political Development', *Comparative Political Studies*, 55:6, 963–91.
- Laffan, Brigid (2019). 'How the EU27 Came to Be', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 57:S1, 13–27.
- Lawrence, Paul R., and Jay W. Lorsch (1967). *Organization and Environment: Managing Differentiation and Integration*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Moloney, David, and Mark Rhinard (2025). 'Crisis-Induced Institutionalization: How the Commission's Response to the Eurozone Crisis Shaped Its Influence During the COVID-19 Pandemic', *Risk, Hazards & Crisis in Public Policy*, 16:3, 1–12.
- Moloney, David, and Sebastiaan Princen (2024). 'Assessing the Role of the European Council and the European Commission During the Migration and COVID-19 Crises', *West European Politics*, 47:7, 1556–87.
- Rhinard, Mark, Neill Nugent, and William E. Paterson (2023). *Crises and Challenges for the European Union*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Riddervold, Marianne, Jarle Trondal, and Akasemi Newsome (2021). *The Palgrave Handbook of EU Crises*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Schekle, Waltraud, Ann-Kathrin Reinl, and Joris Frese (2026). 'Change Against the Odds: Crisis Policy Feedback in a Politicised EU', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 1–26.
- Scheppele, Kim Lane (2016). *Can Poland Be Sanctioned by the EU? Not Unless Hungary Is Sanctioned Too*. VerfBlog. <https://verfassungsblog.de/can-poland-be-sanctioned-by-the-eu-not-unless-hungary-is-sanctioned-too/>.
- Schimmelfennig, Frank (2018). 'European Integration (Theory) in Times of Crisis. A Comparison of the Euro and Schengen Crises', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 25:7, 969–89.

- Schimmelfennig, Frank (2021). 'Rebordering Europe: External Boundaries and Integration in the European Union', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 28:3, 311–30.
- Schimmelfennig, Frank (2024). 'Crisis and Polity Formation in the European Union', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 31:10, 3396–420.
- Schuette, Leonard A. (2021). 'Forging Unity: European Commission Leadership in the Brexit Negotiations', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 59:4, 780–98.
- Sedelmeier, Ulrich (2017). 'Political Safeguards Against Democratic Backsliding in the EU: The Limits of Material Sanctions and the Scope of Social Pressure', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 24:3, 337–51.
- Smeets, Sandrino, and Derek Beach (2022). 'It Takes Three to Tango': New Inter-Institutional Dynamics in Managing Major Crisis Reform', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 29:9, 1414–32.
- Thompson, James D. (1967). *Organizations in Action: Social Science Bases of Administrative Theory*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Trondal, Jarle, Marianne Riddervold, and Akasemi Newsome (2022). 'Polycrisis and Resilience in the European Union: COVID-19 and Avenues for Future Studies', in Christopher Lord, Peter Bursens, Dirk De Bièvre, Jarle Trondal, and Ramses A. Wessel (eds.), *The Politics of Legitimation in the European Union*. New York: Routledge, 265–80.
- Verdun, Amy (2017). 'A Historical Institutional Explanation of the EU's Responses to the Euro Area Financial Crisis', in Demosthenes Ioannou, Patrick Leblond, and Arne Niemann (eds.), *European Integration in Times of Crisis*. New York: Routledge, 75–93.
- Wolff, Sarah, and Stella Ladi (2020). 'European Union Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic: Adaptability in Times of Permanent Emergency', *Journal of European Integration*, 42:8, 1025–40.