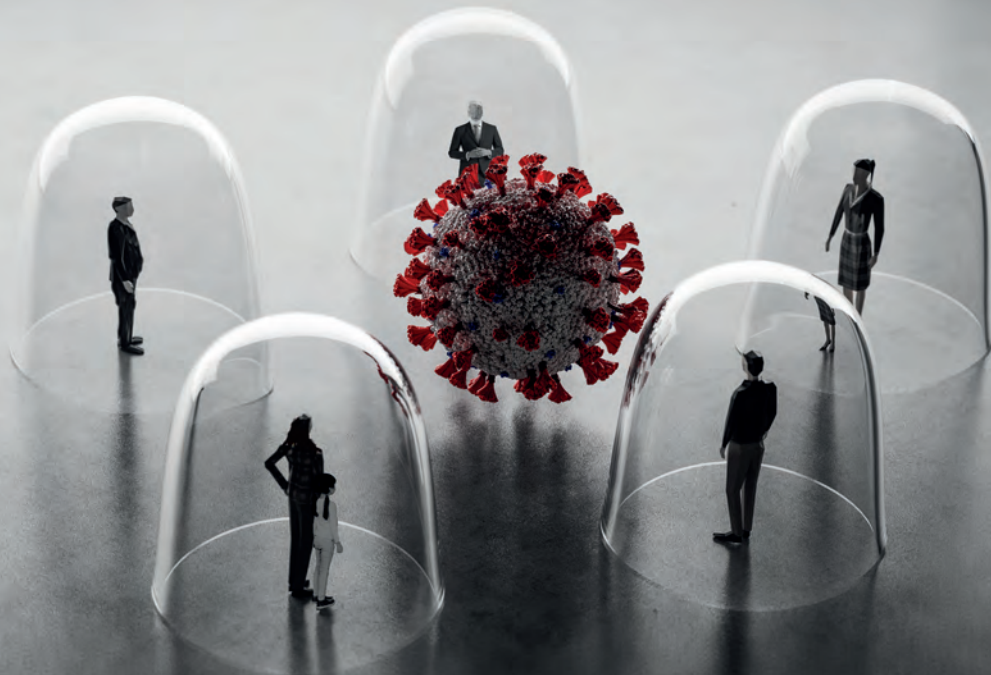Anna Moskal · Aleksandra Sobarnia
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Anna Moskal

Introduction

This publication discusses a diverse range of issues associated with European integration, ranging from a brief look at the origins of the EU, the evolution of the organisation over the last several decades, the changing visions of the future of Europe, the crises that Member States faced in the past, and finally the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the current and future level of European integration. A scope of integration and cooperation of Member States is re-evaluated, and the level of European citizens' trust given to the EU and Member States during a deadly pandemic is analysed. In order to provide reader with an in-depth and comprehensive research on the European integration, this study is presented through historic, political, and legal lens.

The conducted research is published in the form of a monograph, which consists of an introduction, four main chapters, and a conclusion. All these sections are presented in a summary manner below. Although the chapters and subchapters can be read separately, the authors firmly recommend reading them in the presented order.

This publication opens with a short introduction which constitutes a theoretical framework for this monograph. It provides a brief look into the structure of this monograph and explains the delimitations of the study. Furthermore, the main objectives of the study and the relevance of the topic are explored. Generally, in Introduction the reader can examine the theoretical underpinnings of the research.

The first chapter, entitled "European Integration – Historical Development," opens with a history of the origins of the EU, which can be traced back to the early postwar era. This historical background helps the reader to fully understand the nature of this *sui generis* international organisation which is based on dignity, human rights, freedom, democracy, equality, and the rule of law.[1] The chapter shines

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[1] European Parliament, *Values and Objectives*, at <https://europarlamentti.info/en/values-and-objectives/values/>, 20 June 2021.

light on the history of European Communities and the EU enlargement strategy. Subsequently, the authors review the idea for Eurozone which currently consists of 19 Member States that have adopted the euro as their currency.[2] Two ground-breaking acts by the EU in the twenty first century, the unratified Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe of 2004,[3] and the Lisbon Treaty of 2007[4] are thoroughly examined and discussed through the lens of the European integration.

The second chapter is devoted to visions of further integration presented prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19. In this chapter, the authors brush up on the decision of United Kingdom to withdraw from the EU, which had an enormous impact on the public image of the EU at the time. Brexit immediately deprived the EU of one of its oldest and most influential Member States. However, contrary to the most pessimistic opinions of that time, this unprecedent withdrawal did not shatter the whole European project and the EU survived. In fact, a few months after the results of the Brexit referendum had been published, the European Commission presented five possible scenarios in its White Paper on the future of Europe in March 2017,[5] and the President of European Commission at the time, Jean-Claude Juncker, added his sixth alternative scenario[6] soon afterwards. These six scenarios are contrasted with "Four EU scenarios for governance in a post COVID-19 world"[7] published by the European Parliament in October 2020.

The third chapter, titled "The outbreak of the COVID-19 in Europe," presents the origins of the pathogen SARS-CoV-2 and spreading of the disease in Europe. The economic, political, and social impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the Member States and European citizens' lives is comprehensively discussed. That chapter also deals with EU competencies in public health from legal, historical and practical perspectives. Further, the initial inconsistent reactions of Member States and the EU to these unprecedented events are described, as are the on-going disinformation campaigns aimed at the EU. The EU's response to these cyber-attacks has been presented and its effectiveness evaluated. Finally, the authors

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[2] European Union, *What is the Euro Area?*, at <https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/euro-area/what-euro-area_en>, 20 June 2021.

[3] *Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe as Signed in Rome on 29 October 2004 and Published in the Official Journal of the European Union on 16 December 2004 (C series, No 310)*, unratified, at <https://europa.eu/european-union/sites/default/files/docs/body/treaty_establishing_a_constitution_for_europe_en.pdf>, 20 June 2021.

[4] *Treaty of Lisbon Amending the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty establishing the European Community, Signed at Lisbon, 13 December 2007, OJ C 306, 17.12.2007*, in force, at <http://data.europa.eu/eli/treaty/lis/sign>, 20 June 2021.

[5] European Commission, *White Paper on the Future of Europe. Reflections and Scenarios for the EU27 by 2025*, Brussels 2017, at <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/publications/white-paper-future-europe_en>, 20 June 2021.

[6] J.-C. Juncker, *State of the Union Address 2017*, announced on 13 September 2017 in Brussels, at <http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-17-3165_en.htm>, 20 June 2021.

[7] M. Damen, *Four EU Scenarios for governance in a Post COVID-19 World. Lessons from Natural Resources Management*, a study conducted by Policy Department for External Relations for European Parliament, PE 639.317, October 2020.

comment on the distribution of the vaccines between the Member States from the solidarity standpoint as well as examine the voices raised by some groups which remain sceptical towards the validity of the coronavirus pandemic, the credibility of the vaccines and the competence of the EU in handling the ongoing crisis.

In the fourth chapter entitled "Critical perspective on the reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic in the European Union," the authors present their own evaluation of the action taken by both the Member States and the EU in order to prevent the spread of the virus in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. The actions and communications of the institutions during that time in Europe are analysed from the perspective of solidarity and integrity in the union, and through the examination of the EU citizens' trust in the EU and in the national governments in a time of ongoing COVID-19 crisis and potential future crises, as well as the image of the EU that European citizens hold. The authors present their recommendations for the Member States and the European institutions to handle crises in the future in the manner which would be the most beneficial for securing the European integration.

The book's final chapter brings together the conclusions reached in previous chapters and summarizes the major arguments made by the authors on the issue of the past, present and future state of European integration. Furthermore, the authors provide final remarks on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the future of the EU.

The following delimitations were set for this research. Firstly, this research is geopolitically restricted to the EU and its Member States. Although reactions of some other international organisations (such as World Health Organisation) or countries (such as China and the United Kingdom) to the COVID-19 pandemic are undoubtedly interesting and were deliberately mentioned in a few parts of this book, they do not constitute a main subject of focus in this research study. They simply provide reader with a background information on the global reaction to the spread of the virus.

Secondly, the period covered in this study is from 31 December 2019, when a pathogen SARS-CoV-2 was first reported in Wuhan in China to 29 April 2021, when the European Parliament agreed on the EU's COVID-19 certificates to reaffirm the right of free movement in Europe during the pandemic. Another crucial date from the European perspective is 24 January 2020 when the first European case of the COVID-19 was confirmed in France. Generally, the research covers the first 15 months of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe, which resulted in almost 2 million deaths worldwide and caused severe implications for health, economic and social policies within and beyond Europe.

Thirdly, the examined actions of the Member States were selected deliberately and they do not cover all actions taken to prevent the spread of the coronavirus in European countries. The authors picked up the most immense and impactful events from the perspective of the European integrity, solidarity, and adaptability to crises. Furthermore, chosen cyber-attacks and disinformation campaigns are

presented with a view to illustrate and examine effectiveness of the EU in fight-ing disinformation. However, the reader should acknowledge that the presented examples are not exhaustive.

The European Union (hereinafter: EU) is a unique and powerful international organization, an economic and political union of 27 Member States. The idea of European integration emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War, when European countries sought peace, prosperity and social development through cooperation in economic, social, and political areas. Initially a purely eco-nomic union between six countries (Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands), it has quickly developed and expanded into more areas, including transport, environment, agriculture, fisheries, public health, energy, consumer protection, justice, and fundamental rights. Over decades, the number of Member States grew and the cooperation between them tightened. Nowadays, operating as a single market which currently consists of 27 countries, the EU is a major global policy actor and the third largest global trading power (after Chi-na and the United States of America), with its 15.4-percent contribution to the world's GDP.[8]

During the three decades of its existence, the EU experienced numerous crises. The last two decades have presented several novel and complicated chal-lenges, such as the financial crisis of 2007–2009, the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in 2014 and the ensuing hybrid war in Ukraine, the migration crisis which reached its peak in 2015, discussions on the nature of European in-tegration, and the most recent withdrawal of one of the EU's biggest and most in-fluential Member States, the United Kingdom (hereinafter: UK), which took place on 31 January 2020. Furthermore, in the last decade, negative opinions on the EU and its actions have been increasingly present in the media. The EU was accused of weakening the national sovereignty of Member States, and criticized for its bureaucratic structure and its so-called incompetency and democratic deficit, to name a few. Although the EU confronted these accusations and took actions to rebuild itself and gain a more positive image, it is still reported to be on the verge of crisis, frequently without any substantial grounds or further explanation.[9]

In fact, this Eurosceptic narrative emerged as the major frame for media dis-course on the European integration of Great Britain, and ultimately it secured the Leave victory in the Brexit referendum, which was conducted on 23 June 2016.[10]

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[8] In 2019, the share of the European Union in the global gross domestic product based on purchasing-power-parity amounted to an estimated 15.4 percent. *The EU GDP Amounted to 13.94 trillion euros in 2019*, at <https://www.statista.com/statistics/253512/share-of-the-eu-in-the-infla-tion-adjusted-global-gross-domestic-product/>, 20 June 2021.

[9] P. Brokowski, "Unia Europejska: kryzys opowieści, kryzysowa opowieść," *Sprawy Między-narodowe*, vol. 71, no. 2 (2018), p. 86.

[10] Ch. Dick, Ch. Gifford, "The Brexit Referendum: How Eurosceptic Populism Transformed UK Politics," in: K. Tournier-Sol, M. Gayte (eds.), *The Faces of Contemporary Populism in Western Europe and the US*, Cham 2021, pp. 23–41.

The unfavourable result of the Brexit referendum has undoubtedly been a significant blow to the EU and many feared that it might indicate the end of the European project. However, European institutions reacted quickly by introducing their visions for the future of Europe and proposing new policies and agendas. As the European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, concluded in her post-Brexit announcement: *It was a long and winding road. But we have got a good deal to show for it. It is fair and balanced* [deal]. *And it is the right and responsible thing to do for both sides.* […] *to all Europeans I say: It is time to leave Brexit behind. Our future is made in Europe.*[11]

Although the EU navigated fairly well through the trials of the recent decades and even managed to survive the loss of an influential Member State, 31 December 2019 marked a new, and perhaps greatest, challenge of all time. On this infamous day, a pathogen SARS-CoV-2 was first reported in Wuhan in China, and soon spread all over the globe. Just a month later, on 24 January 2020, the first European case was confirmed in France. The COVID-19 pandemic created an unprecedented global emergency with severe socio-economic implications for the EU and limitations on the free movement between Member States' borders. Similarly to the rest of the world, the EU has been confronted with an unprecedented number of obstacles, challenges and potential risks caused by the spread of the virus. This made 2020 a real test for the strength of the integrity and solidarity of the Member States, as well as the effectiveness of the EU in handling crises in challenging times.

The COVID-19 pandemic made it painfully clear that the virus knows no borders, and that the Member States were not prepared to prevent the spread of deadly disease in a coordinated manner. In fact, the first reactions of the Member States were chaotic and inconsistent. Numerous European countries decided to shut their borders, prohibited mass gatherings and imposed severe lockdowns. These measures obviously limited the freedom of movement of European citizens – a core of the European single market. What is worse, the initial uncoordinated reactions of the Member States in the first months of the pandemic made many people question the solidarity of the Member States and the strength of European integrity. The EU had to deal with unprecedented and severe challenges in an area in which it has limited, supportive competences.[12] Despite these difficulties, the EU's ability to react quickly and effectively in a time of crisis was put under severe criticism.

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[11] *Remarks by President Ursula von der Leyen at the press conference on the outcome of the EU-UK negotiations*, 24 December 2020, at <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_20_2534>, 20 June 2021.

[12] Under Article 168 of the TFEU, public health is a competence shared between the European Union and the Member States. The EU's action should complement national policies, while respecting the responsibilities of the Member States in the definition of their health policy and the organisation and delivery of health services and medical care. The EU supports, coordinates or supplements the Members States' actions in the protection and improvement of human health, so its role in health policy is therefore complementary to national policies.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the weak points of cooperation and solidarity among the Member States and deficiencies in the EU's effectiveness in handling crises and coordinating action. These insufficiencies were highlighted in Eurosceptic online propaganda and fake news on the alleged EU's incompetence in the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, the EU also became the subject of aggressive cyber-attacks and massive disinformation campaigns in the spring of 2020. Those attacks aimed to decrease the belief in the strength of European integration, undermine the trust of European citizens, and weaken the position of the EU in global politics. During a horrendous crisis, the level of trust that European citizens have in the EU and national governments could be easily manipulated. The Russian Federation and Eurosceptic movements took this chance and launched massive disinformation campaigns. This constituted a major challenge which needed to be firmly addressed by EU institutions, Member States, and social networks in order to prevent a spread of mistrust and fear. The COVID-19 crisis highlights existing social problems and inequalities, and it is rightly described as a moment of political suspension and increased social confrontation.[13] Social and political tensions in European countries, combined with generally growing anxiety and uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, contributed to increased distrust of authority in both national and European scope as well as to a rapid spread of disinformation slogans and fake news on the EU. During the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Member States and the EU learnt important and valuable lessons. In order to rebuild European citizens' trust, strengthen the European integration, and come up with new strategies to handle potential future crises in a more harmonious and unified manner, the EU has to build upon these lessons.

All the aforementioned problems are highly relevant in the current turbulent times, and hence, they are examined thoroughly in this publication from historical, legal, political and social perspectives. A comprehensive and in-depth analysis provides the reader with a valuable insight into the past, present and future shape of European integration. In order to evaluate the current state of European integration, the actions taken by both the EU and its Member States are thoroughly analysed. With a view to make a fair assessment of the EU's performance in the first 15 months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the authors examine whether the EU supported its Member States in a coordinated and organized way, whether it made use of already existing crisis management tools, and whether it managed to react in a way which maintained the positive image of the organization and the European citizens' trust. The actions of the Member States are examined through the lens of the EU's most important values, solidarity and unity. Subsequently, the common approaches and actions taken by both the EU institutions and Member States are presented. They include the financial recovery plan, vaccine rollout

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[13] P. Gerbaudo, "The Pandemic Crowd: Protest in the Time of COVID-19," *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 73, no. 2 (2020), p. 1, at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26939966>, 20 June 2021.

between the Member States and the digital certificates for the vaccinated European citizens.

There are no doubts that European integration is an issue which has frequently generated multiple debates in both media and academic discourse. Although numerous books and scientific articles focus on the EU's capacity to handle crises,[14] the authors of this publication did not find any recently released academic papers which focused on the strength of the European integration in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. This monograph aims to provide a valuable, fresh perspective to an already highly disputed and lively subject. It illuminates the overall challenges and developments in the functioning of the EU in a time of unprecedented pandemic.

The ultimate purpose of this study is to draw lessons from the COVID-19 crises and provide valuable recommendations to EU institutions on handling similar health crises and fighting online disinformation in the future. By doing so, the authors wish to contribute to the building of strategies which would enable the EU to adapt to various obstacles and challenges in an effective manner based on European unity and solidarity. The authors hope that implementing their proposal will contribute to strengthening European integration and increasing the adaptability of the EU in a post-COVID world.

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[14] See, for example, D. Dinan, *Ever Closer Union: An Introduction to European Integration*, Basingstoke 2010; P. Van Ham, *European Integration and the Postmodern Condition: Governance, Democracy, Identity*, London 2013; D. Ioannou, P. Leblond, A. Niemann (eds.), *European Integration in Times of Crisis. Theoretical Perspectives*, London 2017; S. Mangiameli (ed.), *The Consequences of the Crisis on European Integration and on the Member States. The European Governance between Lisbon and Fiscal Compact*, Cham 2017; A. Grimmel (ed.), *The Crisis of the European Union. Challenges, Analyses, Solutions*, London–New York 2018.

This publication makes a notable contribution to the highly discussed and lively topic of European integration. It includes a brief description of the origins of the European Union, the evolution of the organisation over the last several decades, the changing visions of the future of Europe, the crises that the Member States faced in the past, and finally, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the current and future level of European integration. This publication provides the reader with novel and very detailed data on the performance of the EU and its Member States during the unprecedent global pandemic. It is a must-read for those who search for the most recent information on the shape and level of European integration, the cooperation of the Member States during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as on the level of trust given to the EU by its citizens. Additionally, this book sheds light on the Eurosceptic disinformation and fake news which have arisen in the past few years and which will continue to constitute a very controversial topic for the next few years.