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# The European integration process through crises. The analysis of European public opinion.

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# List of Abbreviations

| | |
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| CAP | Common Agricultural Policy |
| CFSP | Common Foreign and Security Policy |
| EC | European Community |
| ECB | European Central Bank |
| ECSC | European Coal and Steel Community |
| ECU | European Currency Union |
| EDC | European Defense Community |
| EEC | European Economic Community |
| EFSF | European Financial Stability Facility |
| EGF | European Guarantee Fund |
| EIB | European Investment Fund |
| EMI | European Monetary Institute |
| EMS | European Monetary System |
| EMU | European Monetary Union |
| EPC | European Political Community |
| ERM | Exchange Rate Mechanism |
| ESCB | European System of Central Banks |
| ESM | European Stability Mechanism |
| EU | European Union |
| IMF | International Monetary Fund |
| JHA | Justice and Home Affairs |
| NATO | North Atlantic Treaty Organization |
| NGEU | Next Generation EU |
| OMT | Outright Monetary Transaction |
| PCS | Pandemic Crisis Support |
| RRF | Recovery and Resilience Facility |
| SEA | Single European Act |
| SGP | Stability and Growth Pact |
| SURE | Support to Mitigate the Risk of Unemployment in the Emergency |
| TEU | Treaty on the European Union |
| TFEU | Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union |
| WHO | World Health Organization |

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# Introduction

The European Union can no longer be considered only as an elitist and technocratic project. On the contrary, it should be an institution made and supported by its citizens. In this respect, a greater integration at the European level can only occur if it is supported by the will of the citizens to implement a series of extraordinary measures that could be transformed into reforms of laws, institutions, instruments, and policies at its disposal. Therefore, contemporary scholars must focus their attention on the role of these actors in the integration process. However, in interpreting the mechanisms and explaining the reasons for the evolution and development of the integration process, traditional theories of integration have focused on the role of institutions, both national and supranational, on their commitment to promote the values of a united Europe or their own interests. According to neofunctionalists, the driving force behind European integration has always been supranational institutions, in particular, the European Commission, which, once empowered to manage cooperation in the economic sector, would expand and extend their powers to other new and related areas. Member states would delegate more and more competencies to the supranational institutions, which in turn would continue along the path of ever-greater integration. Although it remains a purely elitist theory, neofunctionalists believed that the benefits of this increasing integration would also affect the general population. It was assumed that the growing politicization of European affairs would prompt citizens to develop trust and identification with the new supranational organization. Therefore, the cumulative and self-reinforcing nature of the integration process would have led to an ever-increasing involvement of the public, with a consequential interest in the direction and characteristics of integration. Therefore, the politicization of the European issues would have led to greater controversiality in the short period but, in the long-term, would have revealed the common gain of integration and thus led citizens to identify with the institutions and with the European Union in general. What is therefore envisaged, as far as public opinion and its politicization are concerned, is perhaps another version and expression of the spillover mechanism that, according to neofunctionalists, drives and governs the European integration process. On the other hand, intergovernmentalists see integration as the result of bargaining between nation-states seeking opportunities for mutual benefit and aiming to maximize their own

gains. It is therefore national governments and their interests that determine the course and outcome of the process towards greater or lesser integration. Therefore, decisions are taken by elites who are often indifferent to the will of the public. Accordingly, integration does not proceed along a continuous path of progress but is the outcome of the convergence of interests of individual member states negotiating among themselves. In any case, according to the intergovernmental theory, the role of citizens is almost non-existent. Politicization and public opinion in this theory, therefore, do not seem to appear at all, as domestic preference formation is based on purely economic and commercial interests, which hardly concern the citizens of their member states. The allocation of political and economic competencies to supranational institutions is envisaged for matters that do not concern the majority of the population so that their participation is of little importance. On the contrary, if politicization were to take place in European affairs, it would only be a short-term political pressure that does not, therefore, affect the general process of European integration, which is instead in the hands of intergovernmental negotiations and the decisions and interests of individual member states.

Against this background, it is important to underline that it was not until the advent of the postfunctionalist theory that the role of European citizens in the integration process was described and designed. Accordingly, what postfunctionalists assert, contrary to classical theories, is that the politicization of European affairs and citizen participation are not only an important variable in the process of European integration, but that the direction of this participation is anything but positive, thus predicting an increasing constraint on the European decision-making process in the face of growing citizens involvement and participation in European public life. The turning point is recognized in the Maastricht Treaty which, according to postfunctionalists, underlines a major change in the citizens' attitude towards the European Union. Therefore, whereas in the first years of integration, citizens' support for the European project was taken for granted, given its importance and necessity, since the Maastricht Treaty this support has started to be questioned. The permissive consensus of the first years of integration was based on the hope that the promises of peace, stability, and especially economic prosperity will be fulfilled by the institutions and that citizens will also benefit from this general welfare environment. However, over the course of time, the challenges faced by the Union have severely tested this expectation and have also revealed the limits of a supranational and

multi-governmental organization. Thus, the permissive consensus of the first 50 years of European history, from 1992 onwards, with the progressive politicization of the European public issue, is transformed into the so-called constraining dissensus. The Maastricht Treaty and the subsequent difficult ratification made it visible to the public that European integration was undermining national sovereignty and revealed the division between the elites and the public. The consequence was that important European decisions could no longer be legitimized by the executive and the legislature but had to be supported and endorsed by the citizens themselves.

After all, looking back at the events that led to the definition of the European Union as it is known today, the most important decisions, the steps forward, as well as the those backward were determined by actors in high-level positions, while the people and the citizens have always remained spectators, who are only affected by the consequences of top-down choices and did not have any possibility to influence and participate in public life. Against this background, the first section of this research provides an analysis of the evolution of European integration, showing that citizens have had little or no role in determining and pursuing the European project. The three main phases of the integration process will be covered, each affected by moments of crisis and challenges that the European Union had to overcome and from which the European Union always managed to emerge with a higher level of integration. Indeed, the European integration process has always found in critical moments in history a reason to pursue, expand and extend the degree of cooperation between European countries. Since the Second World War, challenges have therefore provided the necessary impetus to take those steps towards greater integration that states were reluctant to undertake in the first place, leading slowly but steadily to a progressive cession of sovereignty. However, what should be emphasized here is that this progress, which has certainly characterized the integration process, has been driven and supported by the elites, who, faced with difficulties, have responded in a more or less coordinated and shared manner, creating, in the long run, increasingly strong cooperation among the actors involved. The crisis following the failure of the European Defense Community in the early years of integration resulted in the rebirth of the Treaties of Rome; the crisis of the so-called empty chair in the 1960s led to the Hague summit in 1969 and the creation of a new intergovernmental institution; the fall of the Berlin Wall prompted the major overhaul of the Treaties with the ratification of the Treaty of

Maastricht in 1992; while the challenge posed by the application of Eastern and Central European countries willing to join the European Union brought a more thorough and structured reorganization of the institutions and the EU as a whole. Each crisis is by definition a moment of shock, of extraordinary emergency and uncertainty that calls into question the original system and thus brings with it the inherent perspective of change, whether this is a decisive shift towards greater integration or the very possibility of disintegration. However, the new millennium has been marked by the emergence of crises that are very different and much more insidious and dangerous for the European project with respect to these just described. Indeed, since the 2000s, a series of multidimensional and multi-sectoral crises have affected the European continent and severely tested the institutions and the member states, with subsequent profound repercussions also on the general public. In this regard, these crises of the new millennium include the Eurozone and sovereign debt crisis of 2008, the refugee crisis from 2015 onwards, and the recent health crisis triggered by the spread of the coronavirus, that have certainly had a major impact on the history of the European Union as a whole, but also on individual member states. If the crisis of the Maastricht Treaty, therefore, led to politicization and polarization of public opinion, which forcefully entered the phase of contesting the legitimacy of the European Union, in the following two decades the various crises experienced by the European continent tended to reinforce this tendency (Sternberg, 2016).

In this regard, the second section of the research will review the literature, trying to understand the citizens' new role in the process of European integration, especially in the context of the many different crises that have characterized this new era. Accordingly, the increasing politicization of European issues entails a greater involvement of citizens in the definition of further European integration. Furthermore, the crises, which are crucial moments that have the potential to undermine the institutional functioning of the European Union and the very existence of integration, encourage reflection and stimulate politicization and polarization of public opinion. Against this background, it is considered important to actually understand what the consequences of the new crises experienced by the European continent in the last twenty years are in the public's opinion and the support of citizens for the European Union. First of all, therefore, the main question is whether the crises of the last twenty years have actually led to a change in the levels of support

that citizens have for the European Union. Within this context, citizens' support for the European Union and the integration process is defined as a positive attitude of citizens towards the European project and the Union in general, measured therefore in the variables of trust, image, and in the consideration of the direction taken by the Union. To answer this question, therefore, the responses of European citizens to these variables will be tested and their changes between the period before the start of the crisis and the period after the crisis will be analyzed. Therefore, the analysis in the third and final section will try to answer this research question in order to comprehend, through a statistical analysis of European public opinion, whether crises first and foremost have the effect of altering and affecting the public support for the European project. It is however not sufficient to determine whether a change in public opinion has occurred. Against this background, if a change in European citizens' levels of support for the Union is registered, the research will also focus on understanding the direction of this change, and consequently on determining whether these critical moments in this new phase of the integration process of the European Union represented an opportunity for citizens to continue in the furthering of the project or, on the contrary, whether they represented a possibility of disintegration in the collective imagination.

# 1. The European integration process

Before understanding the evolution of European public opinion towards the European Union, it is essential to describe the process that has led to its definition as it is known today, highlighting how, in response to the circumstances and challenges faced, it has evolved from a purely economic project to an economic and political union (Hobolt & de Vires, 2016).

The European Union's integration process is a long and tortuous path, which over the years has been undermined by crises and historical events, both internal and external, that have shaped its main features and changed the direction and outcome of the process. So far, the European Union has always overcome these setbacks and has usually found itself deepening this integration (Ludger, 2008). The ability of political actors to react to such critical junctures has resulted in an increasingly communitarian evolution, in closer cooperation between states and the final creation of this complex supranational and multi-governmental organization (Lefkofridi & Schmitter, 2015). This first chapter aims to analyze these critical moments in European history, highlighting the constant will to continue in the integrative direction, despite the magnitude and depth of the crisis in question and the different national interests at stake. After more than 70 years of history, this process of integration is not yet complete. The future of the Union remains uncertain. However, in this first introductory chapter we also want to point out that throughout the integration process, among the key actors who pushed and contributed to the creation of the European Union, citizens were always excluded. On the contrary, today, integration and the European project depend more than ever on the needs and will of these new and often forgotten actors, without whose support the very project of union would not make sense today (Hobolt & de Vires, 2016).

## 1.1. The European project and the first years of the integration process

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the European countries were completely devastated and destroyed. They went through this turmoil and came out of it with a deep conviction about the need to change the cooperation among the nations. In this scenario, the utopia of a continent no longer divided into so many warring states made the concept

of a united Europe increasingly relevant and supported (Gilbert, 2003). This economic cooperation was therefore rooted in the desire to ensure a period of peace and stability, to prevent any future wars and conflicts, and to impose control over the member states (Ludger, 2008). It was in this context that the first step in the process of European integration was taken, understood as an organization capable of overcoming the differences and ideological divisions within its constituent communities in the name of a common project. This conception of the European project as essential and indispensable for the continent also pervaded the public and the citizens of the member states who, as we shall see more fully in the following sections, remained silent and at the margins of the political scene, especially in the early period of European integration (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). Citizens' attitude was considered as generally supporting the integration process, while the latter proceeded on the decisions of the political, both national and supranational elites.

In 1950 the French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman made his famous declaration, proposing his idea of a United Europe, which was not to be built, according to him, all at once but was to advance slowly and progressively through economic integration. He suggested placing France and Germany's coal and steel industries under the control of a common High Authority within the framework of an organization that was also open to other European countries. Indeed, the ambitious project of an integrated Europe started from the common desire to create a free trade area and to coordinate economic policies in key industrial sectors. With this in mind, in 1951 other six European countries decided to endorse and support the plan to coordinate the coal and steel production and prices. France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxemburg signed the Treaty of Paris, establishing the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), which became operational in 1952. This Community had original features that made it a unique model compared to previous European organizations. The ECSC contained all the vital elements suggested by the Schuman Declaration and created *de facto* the first integrated organization with supranational institutions. The High Authority had the task to oversee the Treaty; the Council of Ministers to legislate; the Common Assembly in charge of formulating policies and with consultation powers; and the Court of Justice capable of interpreting the Treaty and resolving any possible controversy.

The aim of the founding fathers Monnet and Schuman was to lay the foundations that would lead to an ever-greater integration at the European level, with the awareness that this could only be built through practical achievements by establishing common bases for economic development. Indeed, the Treaty of Paris was a complex economic treaty that established a market-sharing agreement for the coal and steel sectors regulated under supranational control. It was signed to balance the interests of the six founding member states in these industries and to facilitate the achievement of national objectives. The first idea of a Community among European countries was based on purely economic integration, which was the key instrument for ensuring peace and prosperity. While the integration of central industries would have made the possibility of war very unlikely, it was also believed that continued peace and stability would contribute to greater prosperity and the economic development of the whole continent. The ECSC started to function properly after 1953 and it operated successfully for the following years, both on the economic and institutional level. The institutions functioned well, following the provisions set out in the Treaty, while the member states proved capable of working and cooperating obeying common rules and directions. The rapidity with which the ECSC body had become operational and its unexpected success in such a short time prompted the founding countries to implement similar cooperation also in other sectors (Haas, 2004).

In 1950, the possibility of Germany's rehabilitation was an issue discussed throughout the world and in the European continent. The prospect of Germany's rearmament on behalf of NATO led European states to create an alternative project to reassert their position and regain control over the continent. In this scenario, the French plan to create a European Defense Community was introduced. This additional organization would have safeguarded the economic integration initiated with the ECSC and delayed as much as possible Germany's rearmament and its consequent regain of control over national and foreign affairs. In May 1952 the six founder member states signed the Treaty establishing the European Defense Community (EDC). It would lead to the creation of a European army, with a common force, a common uniform, and a single defense ministry to oversee all the relevant questions, including training and recruitment, military production, and equipment selection. This organization was to represent the largest cession of sovereignty made by Western European countries and was to be linked

to a European Political Community (EPC) that would exercise democratic control over the EDC. However, the process of ratification of these Treaties encountered opposition from the same nation that proposed them. The French National Assembly rejected the creation of the EDC, mainly because of widespread concerns about the strong supranational character of this project and the possibility that it would lead, contrary to expectations, to greater German military power. Although this happened without much public discussion, the shock of the failure of the European Defense Community has assumed considerable historical importance within the European integration process. It represented the glaring difficulty for the member states to engage in cooperation for purposes that were not purely economic ((CVCE), s.d.). The founding countries welcomed with great enthusiasm the creation of a common authority for the economically important sectors of coal and steel, whereas they did not hide their deep skepticism about entrusting a supranational body with a sector as fundamental to national sovereignty as the defense. Accordingly, this attempt at greater integration has been considered premature and too ambitious, in an area certainly far too sensitive for the member states to lead to any other outcome than the collapse of cooperation (Dedman, 2010).

This failure was a heavy blow to those who trusted the European project and were optimistic that Europe had already achieved its goal of overcoming internal divisions and was therefore ready to embark on a real community path. Nevertheless, it was surprising how rapidly the member states recovered from this collapse and worked on new initiatives that could take the project of a united Europe forward. According to the neofunctionalist theory (Haas, 2004), what can be considered as the first challenge encountered on the long road to integration left the European political elite with a legacy of commitment, political will, and the ability to compromise, even after such a profound defeat. Indeed, it was right after this failure that the idea of extending the competencies of the High Authority beyond the coal and steel sectors to the transport sector and the entire energy sector, particularly the atomic one, began to spread. Between 1956 and 1957 an Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) was convened to work on the option of both horizontal market integration and the extension of the specific sector of atomic energy. The Conference presented two founding Treaties establishing the European Economic Community (EEC) and the European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM). The shock of the failure of the EDC in 1954 and the successful experience with the ECSC

contributed to achieving a final compromise about these two Communities with unexpected rapidity and a very cooperative spirit. Indeed, the Treaties of Rome were signed and ratified by the six parliaments in 1957, and the reason behind this substantial difference in the ratification of the EDC Treaty with the Treaties of Rome lies in the characterization of the latter. What member states agreed to establish with these two Treaties was a mutually beneficial economic framework for the continued expansion of trade and the industrial and agricultural growth of the whole Community. Once again, the integration was based on a purely economic basis. The EURATOM was designed to facilitate cooperation in atomic energy development, research, and utilization, while the EEC was not limited to a specific economic sector but covered the entire economy of the member states. The EURATOM Treaty was less complex and much less relevant than the parallel treaty establishing the European Economic Community. It also failed to live up to the hopes of those who proposed this idea (Haas, 2004), as its work was soon limited to setting standards and monitoring government actions. On the other hand, the EEC Treaty will be far more decisive for the future of European integration. The project that started with this Treaty was intended to create a common market and to progressively unify the economic policies of the member states. Accordingly, the member states committed themselves to establishing an economic system based on fair competition, coordinated policies, and the elimination of imbalances and discrimination. The removal of quantitative and tariff restrictions to create the Common Market was envisaged in a three-stage project of four years each, starting in 1958.

Regarding the institutional structure, the EEC Treaty provided this organization with two institutions, which constituted the supranational element. The six-member states transferred the decision powers concerning the Common Market and the atomic energy to a supranational Council of Ministers, who was responsible for taking binding decisions on all members. The decision-making process in the Council of Ministers for the Commission's proposals was to be based on unanimity during the first two stages of the EEC project, thereafter decisions could also be taken by the mechanism of qualified majority based on weighing votes, to avoid the marginalization of the three smallest EEC countries. The Commission, composed of nine independent individuals, had the task to propose legislation and was responsible for the policy's implementation. It rapidly became a quite powerful institution, considered to be the engine of European integration

(Bergman & Niemann, 2015). Thanks to its role as market supervisor and its enormous power to propose legislation, the Commission quickly assumed a decisive role in shaping the development of the EEC. The EEC shared with the ECSC and the EURATOM the Common Assembly, which did not have legislative power, and the Court of Justice, which gained over time important powers and assumed a decisive role in deepening the European integration process (Bergman & Niemann, 2015). These institutions immediately started to work on the creation of the European Common Market. In that regard, a common agricultural policy was considered essential to attain the goal (Gilbert, 2003). This policy was intended to benefit agricultural producers while also ensuring reasonable prices for consumers of the products. Accordingly, the Commission was entrusted with designing and implementing the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) at the end of the first stage towards the creation of the Common Market, with the purpose to merge the six different agricultural systems into a single common policy. The CAP was based on four principles: free trade in agricultural products within the EEC; the progressive harmonization of guaranteed prices; a system of variable tariff protection for agricultural products from third countries, and eventually, financial solidarity, meaning the possibility to finance the Common Agricultural Policy through a Community budget. In the early years of the EEC's operation, the CAP proved to be a difficult ground for Community decision-making among the member states. This sensitive issue for some of them led to frictions inside the institutions and crises that changed the course of integration itself.

In 1965 two major changes were about to take place, which would lead to a major advance in the process of economic but also institutional integration. The six founding countries had agreed to unify the executive institutions of the three different European organizations. This agreement would make the European Commission the biggest political force among the institutions. On the other hand, the Commission proposed that the operating costs of the CAP should be covered by the EEC's resources, which were to be derived from taxes on imports of non-Community agricultural products and proceeds from common external tariffs on industrial goods. The Commission also proposed that the Assembly should have a greater role in the budgetary decision-making process. If the Council would approve this initiative, it would have meant an extension and strengthening of the powers of the Commission and the Parliament at the expense of those

of the Council of Ministers itself. Member states would have had to cede control over future financial matters to the supranational bodies of the EEC and this was certainly seen as difficult if not impossible by one of the actors involved (Gilbert, 2012). The French government under the leadership of Prime Minister Charles de Gaulle strongly opposed the approval of such a proposal in the Council. He decided to initiate a period of stalemate from June 1965 onwards, not attending meetings of the Council. For the following six months, the absence of the French representative in the Council meant the impossibility of reaching any decisions on major issues such as the one under consideration. The "empty chair" crisis was intended to boycott the work of the Council and especially to block the introduction of the procedure of majority voting in that institution (Ludger, 2008). The crisis only came to an end in 1966 through the Luxembourg Compromise. The six Ministers finally decided to continue to use unanimity in the Council if vital national interests were at stake. Furthermore, it was decided to postpone and not introduce the CAP financing via the Community's resources until 1970, continuing to finance it through national contributions until that moment (Dedman, 2010).

De facto, De Gaulle's action led to the establishment of unanimity as a normal practice of decision-making, and this led the Commission to be more thoughtful about its decisions, becoming more restrained and less ambitious in its proposals to the Council. In the end, France's victory made it clear that power within the EEC did not ultimately reside within the Council of Ministers as a unitary institution, but within a single government that was very strong with respect to the others (Ludger, 2008). The institutional conflict, thus, became an expression of constitutional problems undermining the path toward integration and the whole European construction. Nevertheless, the crisis of the empty chair also confirmed once again the political will of the signatories and the common interest of the member states to continue towards the development of a United Europe. Regardless of how difficult it might be to find a compromise; the actors reaffirmed the need to ensure at all costs the supranational control (Ludger, 2008). In this regard, despite the intergovernmental crisis, the supranational approach not only survived but was actually strengthened, with the entry into force of the Brussel Treaty in 1967, that merged the EEC, EURATOM, and the ECSC into one Community. Although each of them remained legally independent, thanks to this Treaty they shared common institutions and were together known as the European Communities (EC).

In any case, notwithstanding these steps towards integration, the crisis left behind important consequences on the institutional and decision-making balances. As a result, the increasingly frequent use of vetoes blocked the decision-making process, undermining supranational assumptions underlying the EEC and leading to a long period of stagnation (Cuyvers, 2017). On the other side, the process of European integration continued to move forward, with the involvement of another important institution. The Court of Justice has kept the integration process going by interpreting and applying the provisions of the Treaties and developing the communitarian primary law into an effective system of rights and obligations.

**The 1970s and the institutional reforms**

The 1970s is considered a period of stalemate for the European project, primarily caused by the economic crisis following the rise in the price of oil. Despite this economic integration setback, however, the European Communities experienced an expansion in membership, purpose, and structure (Gilbert, 2003). In 1973 it endured the first enlargement of its history, growing from six to nine members state due to the accession of Great Britain, Ireland, and Denmark. The entrance of the United Kingdom, in particular, did not come smoothly. The Country had already applied to join the EEC in 1963 and 1966, both times finding the firm opposition of France. On both occasions, French President De Gaulle vetoed the accession of Britain in the European Communities. Consequently, British membership was subject to the essential precondition of a French referendum, which, actually, marked the first occasion in which citizens of one of the member states were consulted by their government on whether or not they agreed with the decision taken by the supranational bodies.

However, the 1970s represented a major development in this aspect of European integration as well. There was a growing need, especially among European institutions, to understand the views of those most affected by the increasing integration. Jacques-René began to push forward the idea of developing *"systematic studies across the EU of the ideas, attitudes, and positions of Europeans"* (Nissen, 2014). Thus, in 1974, and with this specific purpose in mind, the Eurobarometer was created, as a survey instrument designed to gather useful information about citizens but also to bring them closer to the European Union. From then on, the Eurobarometer conducted at least two surveys per

year in all member states of the European Union. These biannual surveys are known as Standard Eurobarometer and are requested by the European Commission to get a general idea of citizens' opinion and to monitor changes in attitudes towards European affairs and the Union as a whole. In contrast, Special Eurobarometer surveys are conducted on specific topics and issues where citizens' opinion needs to be gathered. Lastly, when there is a need to collect data in relatively short periods on specific topics, Flash Eurobarometer surveys are used. Therefore, from this perspective, the European Union sets out a database that could reflect the European public opinion, what citizens think in general about the European Union, their membership, and the benefits of being a part of the EU. Questions are therefore posed about the European Union in general terms but also about specific areas, implemented policies, reforms to be implemented, and changes on the horizon. The purpose was, therefore, to find out what citizens actually thought and whether these decisions had the popular support they needed.

From the perspective of the institutional structure, the 1970s contributed not only to the consolidation of existing institutions but also to the creation of a new one. The revolutionary institutional organization established by the Treaties of Rome proved over time to be insufficient to support a community that was growing in relevance, scope, and size. Beginning in the early 1970s, the Heads of State and Government of the EEC member states began to struggle with growing obstacles that could only be overcome by exercising their political influence (Ludger, 2008). Thus, the first world oil crisis, the end of the Bretton Woods international monetary system, the accession of three new member states, as well as the tensions created by the agricultural and budgetary crises, were all factors that led member states to take a central role in advancing integration. The political leaders of the member states understood that it was their responsibility to give a renewed stimulus to the integration process and to respond appropriately to the existing challenges (Ludger, 2008). In this regard, in 1969 the Heads of State and Government of the six-member states met in Hague to discuss how to increase European integration beyond the Common Market. Summit gatherings became a new institutional reality within the European project and in the Communitarian decision-making process, with more and more frequent meetings. However, it was only in 1974, during the Paris summit, that the Heads of State and Government of the nine-member states decided to institutionalize the procedure of regular meetings in a new entity called the European Council. The European

Council was to meet three times a year in the capital of the presidency, based on a rotating system. For the time being, since it was maintained outside the EC Treaties, the decisions of the European Council could not bind or be bound by the other European institutions (Gilbert, 2012). With the Single European Act, the European Council will become a fully-fledged supranational entity, envisaged by European law, as the most important forum for shaping the Community's agenda. The evolution of this new institution has once again underlined the importance of member states whenever deeper integration is envisaged especially in the absence of parliamentary democracy at the European level (Moravcsik, 1993). In this regard, it is precise during the founding meeting of the European Council that the need to strengthen the role of the European Parliament was affirmed, initiating a process of democratization of the parliamentary institution. In 1979 there was the first election made by the eligible citizens part of the supranational organization for the members of the European Parliament. This was not only a symbolic moment for the European Community, on the contrary, it also marked the beginning of the parlametarization of European politics and the advancement of democratic principles, which the EC claimed to uphold. The Parliament had the important role of maintaining and representing citizens' support for the European Union. It was considered a mediator of public opinion, providing an intermediary between the supranational institutions and the public, both expressing, and shaping European public opinion. In this respect, therefore, the direct election of the democratic institution represented for the Union not only the possibility to give a voice to the citizens and to integrate them in the decision-making process but also a way to encourage citizens to mobilize and become interested in the European issue (Sternberg, 2016). This was a decision strongly supported by European citizens, who in 1979[1] expressed an 86% majority in favor of direct elections to the European Parliament.

The failure of the Bretton Woods system around 1971, amplified by the consequences of the oil crisis, brought to light the different characteristics of the economic structures, financial interests, and political decisions among the member states. The economic uncertainty of these years and the pressure of global events beyond their control led the leaders of the EC to develop new systems and to try to coordinate fiscal,

[1] *Commission of the European Communities (2012): Eurobarometer 11 (Apr 1979). GESIS Data Archive, Cologne. ZA1036 Data file Version 1.0.1, https://doi.org/10.4232/1.10866*

monetary, and economic policies as much as possible. However, they were not ready to undertake and complete the experiment of the so-called European Monetary System (EMS), which required the transfer of economic and monetary decisions from national to supranational control (Dedman, 2010). This project, established at the Hague Conference in 1969 to create an economic and monetary union among the member states, would be strongly compromised in a period characterized by such a crisis. Furthermore, the 1970s historical circumstances also revealed a profound inability of the European institutions to act as a community, not only on the economic side but in general also in terms of internal and external policies ((CVCE), s.d.). For this reason, at the Hague conference, the Heads of State and Government not only called for greater economic union but also a deeper commitment to political cooperation. This is how the idea of a European Political Community emerged again in 1970. It would operate outside the institutional apparatus of the EEC and consist of regular meetings of the Foreign Ministers of the member states. This confirmed the desire to align and gradually harmonize national positions on foreign policy issues (Gilbert, 2012). Later on, with the Single European Act, this intention to hold regular consultations before taking a position on foreign policy was finalized and institutionalized, giving the EPC a legal basis.

Overall, this first period of the integration process from the outset of the idea of Europe until the end of the 1970s was of both consolidation and innovation. It underlined how European leaders, working communally in institutionalized meetings, could make a substantial difference towards European integration, especially in the economic field. What is clear is that no matter how many criticisms arose about the very principle of a common agricultural policy and its effects, no matter how slow many decisions seemed to be, no matter how many good ideas failed, and plans were put on the back burner: European integration for once had begun and consolidated around the organizational idea of a supranational community (Ludger, 2008). This was the most impressive, convincing, and fundamental response to the challenge that two World Wars had posed to Europe (Ludger, 2008). However, this powerful response had been determined and adopted at the highest level. The resolution of crises and the increasing integration was the expression and result of the efforts and actions of the supranational elites, of the European institutions, and the Heads of State and Government of the member states, who were aware of the need for cooperation after years of divisions and prolonged wars. Citizens,

on the contrary, were ignored, given the presumption of their unconditional consent (Lindberg & Scheingold, 1970). Distant, unaware of the difficult functioning of the new institutions and essentially disinterested, the citizens of the member states, who at that time were not yet considered as actual citizens of the European Union, were relegated to the fringes of European history, even though they were the ones who were affected in their everyday lives.

## 1.2. The second phase of the integration process: the European Union

Despite the fact that European integration went through a difficult period during the 1970s, it must be emphasized that this decade did not end negatively. On the contrary, 1979 is identified as a year of significant change and the year of the rebirth of those ideals that initially led member states to cooperate (Ludger, 2008). Indeed, the European Economic Community (EEC) underwent several important changes, in terms of composition, organizational structure, and even in terms of perception in the general public's imagination. Regarding the first point, after having been composed only of the industrialized countries of Northern Europe for many years, it opened its doors to the emerging democracies of Southern Europe, with the accession of Greece in 1981 and of Spain and Portugal in 1986. On the organizational level, the Single European Act was signed and ratified during the same period. This was an important Treaty that, between the amendments introduced and the ones still to be discussed, had the effect of somehow boosting public opinion. Accordingly, since the signing of the Single European Act, there has been a steady growth in the levels of public support for the European Union, that will reach its peak with the Maastricht Treaty. Citizens strongly supported the prosecution of the European project, not least on the basis of the promise of prosperity and economic well-being that came with the single currency project. Shortly after the signing of the SEA, 62% of European citizens considered the membership[2] of their state in the European Union to be a good thing, while 51% of citizens believed that they had benefited[3] from this membership of the European Union (European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer EB26, 1986).

[2] "Generally speaking, do you think that (your country's) membership in the European community is a good thing, a bad thing or neither?"
[3] "Taking everything into consideration, would you say that (your country) has on balance benefited or not from being a member of the European community?"

From the organizational point of view, the Heads of State and Government realized the need to revitalize and take into consideration the project to unify economic, monetary, and fiscal policies, establishing a real and concrete economic union. In 1978, German Chancellor Schmidt and French President Giscard prepared a proposal for the reintroduction of the European Monetary System to be submitted to the European Council for approval. The year after the Council's decision, the European Monetary System began to operate. It was based on three elements: an abstract reference currency - the European Currency Unit (ECU) - a new exchange rate system - the European Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM) - and various mechanisms concerning credits and transactions. Although it had its shortcomings, the European Currency System served as an instrument of regulation, helping to return to a period of monetary stability and economic growth in the EC during the 1980s.

Despite these steps forward, European integration was far from complete. The road to a single market had only just begun, and the institutional structure presented numerous problems, making it difficult to reach real and unambiguous cooperation towards common goals. The integration process, therefore, needed to be revitalized (Sandholtz & Zysman, 1989). The Heads of State and Government commissioned a study on the possible institutional reform of the Community from an ad hoc Intergovernmental Committee known as the “Dooge Committee”, charged with preparing the ground for further European integration. The final recommendations of this Committee focused not only on the importance of strengthening the European Monetary System but also on institutional reform, including greater use of the procedure of majority voting in the Council, a democratic strengthening of the Parliamentary institution, and a better balance of powers between the three main institutions. At the same time, an initiative led by the Commission brought to the attention of the European Council a proposal for an agreement on economic integration. The White Paper on completing the Single Market was designed to stimulate the economy, guarantee the free movement of people, goods, services, and capital, and to achieve the complete consolidation of national markets into a Single Market by the end of 1992 at the latest. A catalog of about 300 policies and measures to be implemented within Europe for the removal of any legal, fiscal, or technical barriers to the realization of the primary objective of the European Economic Community since 1957. These various proposals were then considered and discussed at the European

Council in Milan in 1985. The result of this meeting was the Single European Act (SEA), considered as the first major overhaul of the provision of the Treaties of Rome leading to the establishment of a comprehensive Treaty incorporating all the rules relating to the institutions, powers, and responsibilities of the European Communities. The Single European Act reiterated the founding fathers' desire for progressive and slow integration, setting 1992 as the deadline for completing the European Single Market, and creating a new allocation of competencies and new decision-making mechanisms to achieve this goal. The process of economic integration would have been severely hampered and would have taken place much later without a profound institutional reform (Ludger, 2008).

Besides giving a legal basis to the European Council created during the 1970s and legitimizing the name European Parliament for the Assembly, the SEA fundamentally changed the original legislative procedure of the European Union. Previously, the Commission proposed the legislation that should be approved, through unanimity, by the Council of Ministers after consultation with the Parliament. The 1986 Treaty removed the blockage in the decision-making process created by the Luxembourg Compromise, introducing the qualified majority voting for all legislation related to the completion of the Common Market. Furthermore, the SEA increased the role of the European Parliament in the legislative process establishing new cooperation procedures, which enabled the Parliament to reject the Council's decision, through an absolute majority of votes and gave it the possibility to make limited amendments to the Commission's proposals. The long-run purpose of the Single European Act was to establish the European Union, intended as an area without any internal barriers or frontiers, as the precondition for the economic development of the whole continent. The creation of the internal free market would be accompanied by the strengthening of common policies and the adoption of implementing directives. To achieve such a market, an actual Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) must be created, meaning to confer the Community with monetary capacity and the institutions with the competencies to develop common economic and monetary policies. However, the structure of the EMU still had to be specified in concrete. Consequently, the European Commission, under its President Jacques Delors, was authorized to propose practical measures about the creation of this monetary union that would gradually lead, in the future, to the introduction of a single currency. The Delors Report, presenting a three-stage plan for this purpose, was approved

by the Commission and presented to the European Council in 1989. The first stage, which did not envisage any changes to the Treaties, included the completion of the Single Market, greater coordination of economic policies and cooperation in monetary matters, and the participation of all currencies in the Exchange Rate Mechanism. During this stage, a Treaty on Economic and Monetary Union would have to be negotiated and ratified. At that point, it would be possible to begin the work of the second stage, which involved the implementation of a new System of Central Banks. Eventually, in the final stage, national competencies on monetary and economic matters would be fully handed over to the European institutions, irrevocably fixed exchange rates would be established and, national currencies would be replaced by a common one. The first phase was implemented with the introduction of complete freedom of capital movements and the strengthening of the European Monetary System. At the same time, economic policies were being monitored jointly in the Council of Ministers, and cooperation between Central Banks on currency matters was improved. The historical circumstances of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the perspective of German reunification accelerated the process (Ludger, 2008). The imminent German unification and the expectation that a stronger Germany would need more than ever to be integrated into the European Community surely contributed to the completion of the Monetary Union (Dedman, 2010). At the Madrid Council in 1989 it was finally decided to embark on the first stage to progressively achieve full economic integration.

However, this was not the only initiative that made 1989 a significant date as a turning point in European integration. The Council also decided to convene an Intergovernmental Conference to prepare the following phases for the completion of the Single Market and, above all, for drafting the new Treaty that would establish the European Union and create the European Monetary Union. After all, preparation for the Economic and Monetary Union revealed that it was also needed a deepened political union, which should not only address foreign policy matters but also remedy the so-called democratic deficit inside the Communities. This is the reason that led in 1990 to convene two parallel Intergovernmental Conferences in Rome. The first one was about the plans for the Economic and Monetary Union, the other was entrusted with exploring avenues for the future Political Union. However, the negotiations proved to be very difficult. In particular, the most contentious issues concerned the defense of EU membership, social

policy, and, from an institutional point of view, the decision-making rights of the European Parliament and the use of qualified majority voting in the Council ((CVCE), s.d.).

**The revolution of the Maastricht Treaty**

In April 1991, the Luxembourg Presidency presented a draft of the Treaty on the European Union, which introduced a structure divided into three areas of activity known as 'pillars': the first one was based on the activity of the European Communities, the second was devoted to the common foreign and security policy (CFSP), while the third covered cooperation in the fields of justice and home affairs (JHA). From then on, the negotiations about the new reformed Treaty were based on this draft. In December 1991, the Heads of State and Government resolved the outstanding issues and finalized the final political document. However, it required another few weeks for the political agreement reached by the twelve to be transformed into the legal provisions of a new Treaty. Eventually, the Treaty on European Union (TEU) was signed in Maastricht in 1992 by the Foreign Ministers and Finance and Economic Affairs Ministers of the Twelve member states. The Treaty on the European Union should have entered into force at the beginning of the following year, after ratification by all the member states. However, parliamentary ratification or through referenda proved much more complicated than expected, delaying the Maastricht Treaty's effectiveness by several months. Because it was such a dense and complex Treaty, citizens began to find it very difficult to interpret and became increasingly concerned and sensitive about sovereignty issues (Griveaud, 2011). Right after the signature, the Maastricht Treaty was subjected to a series of referenda among the population of the member states, some of which were more hostile than others. In Denmark, the referendum in 1992 turned out to be negative, contrary to expectations and also against a high level of citizen participation. The Danes, who had approved the SEA by a large majority, made clear their opposition to a political project such as the European Union as established in Maastricht since they were convinced that this would jeopardize their national sovereignty (Ludger, 2008). Nevertheless, subsequent referenda resulted in victories both in Ireland, where the drive towards integration remained strong; and in France, where, despite a small margin of victory (only 51.04%), ratification was finally achieved, thus avoiding the threat of a deep crisis for the integration process. The only remaining requirement for effective ratification by all member states was the approval of

Denmark and the United Kingdom. Notwithstanding, there was no real renegotiation and amendment of the Maastricht Treaty, but rather the provision of derogations regarding the possibility of opting out of the single currency, the defense areas, and from the Community powers in the areas of justice and policing for the two member states. In the end, the Maastricht Treaty came into force on November 1, 1993.

The most important decision of the Maastricht Treaty concerned the realization and completion of the European Monetary Union, but it also dealt with some aspects concerning the future structure of the European integration process. The Treaty did not represent a real constitution but a first evolutionary stage towards the creation of what is for the first time called the European Union. It is considered the greatest and most intensive revision of the Treaties since 1957, but it also constitutes the beginning of a series of further changes and transformations that will continue throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Within the framework of the Treaty itself, it was envisaged the prospect of its revision by an Intergovernmental Conference for the end of 1996.

The main objective of the TEU was to create an ever-closer union among the peoples of Europe while respecting the national identities of its member states (Gilbert, 2003). As suggested by the proposal developed by the Luxembourg presidency, the institutional framework consisted of three different pillars: the European Community, replacing the European Economic Community, expanding its competencies beyond the economic area; a Common Foreign and Security Policy replacing the European Political Community; and the Justice and Home Affairs policy. The cooperation and cohesion of these three very different pillars were to be ensured by common institutions consisting of the European Council, the Council of Ministers, the European Parliament, the Commission, and the Court of Justice of the European Union. The Treaty provided the strengthening of all these institutional bodies to achieve greater efficiency and increase the level of democracy, but it did not manage to provide a complete and stable balance of the institutional relations. The European Parliament is the institution that has benefited the most from the revision of the Maastricht Treaty, receiving considerably more powers than before. In the legislative field, indeed, the European Parliament had always required since its first direct election in 1979 a joint position in the decision-making process together with the Council of Ministers. However, the final word in such cases always remained in the hands of the Council of Ministers, which could still adopt the law even

without the full approval of the Parliament. The Maastricht Treaty's revolutionary provision does not only concern the extension of this mechanism of parliamentary participation but rather the creation of a new decision-making procedure. With the final objective of strengthening the role of the Parliament and its powers, the legislative codecision procedure was established for certain measures, including those about the Single Market and those directly affecting citizens, for example, research, environment, education, culture, and health, whereby Community actions are also supported by actions at the national level ((CVCE), s.d.). In the end, the Parliament managed to achieve, albeit in limited areas, what it had always demanded: without its approval, the proposals could not be implemented. The Parliament was also invested with the right to request the Commission to submit a new policy proposal and the important power to approve the appointments of Commissioners, effectively giving an initial vote of confidence to the Commission as a whole. In addition, the mandate of the Commission itself was extended to five years to coincide with the term of the European Parliament. These reforms helped to increase the democratic legitimacy of the legislative process and strengthened the supranational institutions of the Community. In this perspective, the most problematic institution remained the Council, identified as the most undemocratic of all the organs, since it held meetings in closed session and did not even make its protocols accessible to the public so that transparency could not be guaranteed (Ludger, 2008). Nevertheless, the amendments concerning the Council of Ministers in the Maastricht Treaty mainly concerned the method of voting. Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) is extended to several new areas of Community policies, while unanimity continues to be required for constitutional provisions and certain policy areas such as economic and social cohesion, research programs, culture, and environmental policies. As a result, the expansion of the areas of decision-making through QMV in the Council of Ministers has also further strengthened the role of the Commission, whose proposals now have a better chance of being adopted (Gilbert, 2012).

The Treaty of Maastricht established a European Union characterized by a hybrid polity completely different from any other international or supranational organization (Ludger, 2008). It was not a federal state, but a single confederation with a complex and original governance structure, which Mark Gilbert identifies as the Maastricht Compromise. It constituted a voluntary and considerable cession of national sovereignty,

and this began to affect European citizens as well (Gilbert, 2003). With this regard, for the first time, the Treaty established and recognized European citizenship, which certainly did not replace national citizenship but rather supplemented it, granting all citizens new rights, and helping to increase their awareness of European identity. This Treaty had a major impact on the citizens of Europe, which will be discussed in more detail in the following section. The transformation of the purely economic Union into an institution that was moving forward and towards a political union also created turmoil, particularly from the perspective of the opinion of European citizens. Whereas in 1991 (European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer EB35, 1991), 71% of respondents said that their membership[4] of the Union was basically a good thing, the same percentage changed downwards by 10 points to only 60% of respondents in 1992 (European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer EB38, 1992). From this point onwards, a slow but progressive decline in citizens' support for the European Union and its transformations can be observed. Similarly, the percentage of citizens who said they would benefit[5] from EU membership also fell sharply from 59% in the 1991 survey to 49% in the autumn of 1992.

Underpinning the second phase of European integration between 1979 and the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty was the objective of completing the original promise defined by the Treaties of Rome: the realization of the Union of European countries and the single market. Certainly, this often long and discouraging process could only be achieved if there was a strong political will on the part of the actors involved, be they the supranational institutions of the sovereign authorities of the member states. The fundamental need to cope with crises highlighted the key challenge: if Europe was to compete in the global economy, it had to reinvent the concept of the single market originally outlined in the Treaties of Rome. It had to complete the project as a whole in order not to get lost again in the complexities of executive politics and bureaucratic inertia so often associated with the machinery of European integration during the 1970s (Ludger, 2008). The Maastricht Treaty negotiations, therefore, marked the end of the second phase of European integration and the consequent beginning of a new phase. Whereas up until then, the main focus of integration had been economic development and the

[4] "Generally speaking, do you think that (your country's) membership in the European community is a good thing, a bad thing or neither?"
[5] "Taking everything into consideration, would you say that (your country) has on balance benefited or not from being a member of the European community?"

harmonization of economic systems towards a Common Market, now and increasingly, European integration is becoming politicized, and politics is beginning to be Europeanized.

## 1.3. The third phase of the integration process: completion or a new beginning?

The Maastricht Treaty and the consequences of the end of the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe marked the beginning of the new phase of the process of European integration. More than ever before, there was an urgent need to deepen integration and to complete all those objectives that had been set from the outset. The Union was under pressure to consolidate its economic structures to achieve Monetary Union and subsequently ensure the effectiveness and stability of the emerging currency (Dedman, 2010). On the other hand, it also had to deal, simultaneously, with another very ambitious and certainly problematic project in terms of institutional stability. After the fall of the communist empire, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe began to express their desire to become members of the European Union. Within a few years, Europe would almost double its membership and would have to face all the consequences that such an enlargement would inevitably entail. To make these projects work and to carry them successfully through, keeping their future effects manageable, a series of sequential treaty revisions were implemented, allowing the process of constitutional construction of the European Union to move forward. This need to deepen European integration is a response to the rather inevitable challenges that will accompany the Union beyond the third phase of its integration process. First of all, the main challenge was to stabilize support for the EU, in the light of the growing implications of European integration on the public and social realities of the member states. Moreover, the Union was faced with the need to address firmly and concretely the accusations of a "democratic deficit" and lack of legitimacy, with non-transparent institutions full of inconsistencies, which prevented an efficient outcome of EU operations. The other major challenge for the Union was to consolidate its foreign and security policies, establishing as far as possible a sustainable and coherent European presence on the global stage ((CVCE), s.d.).

This new phase of European integration is characterized by a continuous process of treaty revision. In fact, since Maastricht, each Treaty has included provisions foreseeing

the need for reform and establishing new intergovernmental conferences to revise, supplement, correct, or replace that Treaty with another (Dedman, 2010). In 1995 the European Union undertook the fourth enlargement with the accession of Austria, Finland, and Sweden. These new members would lead to an increase in the number of representatives involved in the decision-making processes and since the institutions were still designed for six member states, a reform was required. The main purpose of this process was to preserve the balance of action and maintain economic, political, geographical, and demographic symmetry within the EU. Accordingly, the fifteen Heads of State and Government met in an Intergovernmental Conference in Turin in 1996, in which they prepared the new draft Treaty to be adopted by the European Council in Amsterdam the year after. Particular attention was given to the area of freedom, security, and justice; to the strengthening of the CFSP, and the reform of institutions, to make them more effective, democratic, and efficient in preparation for the enlargement of Eastern and Central Europe. In 1997 the European Council adopted the Treaty of Amsterdam, which after the ratification of all the 15 member states entered into force in 1999. One of the most innovative initiatives of the Treaty of Amsterdam concerned the relations between the European Union and its citizens with the reinforced position of the Union in the protection of human rights and more provisions concerning the area of security, freedom, and justice, which were adjusted and strengthened to cope also with an increased presence in the foreign affairs of the European Union. An explicit reference was also made to the founding principles and values of the European Union, such as freedom, democracy, and the rule of law, the respect of which has become a necessary and fundamental condition for access to and permanence in the Union, to the extent that the failure of member states to safeguard these principles would lead to sanctions imposed by the Council (Ludger, 2008). Other developments, in response to growing public concern, have occurred in the fields of environment, health, consumer protection, and employment.

Notwithstanding, the negotiation of the Amsterdam Treaty resulted in only limited progress on the institutional apparatus, and it failed to address the most controversial issues, such as institutional reform and the political implications of weighted voting, which were crucial in anticipation of future enlargement. About institutional reform, progress was made on extending the powers of the European Parliament, increasingly

improving the degree of democratization of the decision-making process. The use of the so-called codecision procedure was widened to new fields of political action of the EU. On the other hand, no further improvements were made in the Council of Ministers on the issue of discrepancy in voting power, thus not solving the problem of differences and disparities in treatment between the member states. Indeed, the Treaty had failed to address the effectiveness of the political decision-making process in the face of the enlargement of the Union from twelve to fifteen members and in anticipation of further enlargement towards Eastern European Countries. On the one hand, it was necessary to limit the number of European commissioners to maintain the cohesion and efficiency of the institution, while on the other hand, the weight of votes had to be recalibrated in order to avoid the creation of coalitions between states that could prevail. The two issues were linked: the 'bigger' member states would accept one commissioner instead of two in a smaller Commission on condition that the re-weighting of votes in the Council considered the demographic importance of each member state ((CVCE), s.d.). The two groups were unable to resolve the issue. Finally, a protocol annexed to the Treaty of Amsterdam presented the only hope of compromise, laying down the provision that with each further enlargement *"the Commission shall comprise one national of each of the member states, provided that, by that date, the weighting of the votes in the Council has been modified, whether by re-weighting of the votes or by the dual majority, in a manner acceptable to all member states, taking into account all relevant elements, notably compensating those member states which give up the possibility of nominating a second member of the Commission"*[6]. As a result, a more extensive reform was to take place later, but anyway before any new enlargement, on those matters which were not resolved by the Treaty of Amsterdam. In the meantime, the Treaty included a 'closer cooperation' clause[7], primarily in the first and third pillars, to allow those member states who wanted to achieve greater integration to work closely through the Union's institutions, without harming the process of European integration as a whole.

By the end of the 1990s, another project was to be brought to completion. Already in the Maastricht Treaty, it was decided that after the completion of the first two stages of the European Monetary Union, the institutions could proceed with the establishment

[6] *Protocol on the institutions with the prospect of enlargement of the European Union* p.111 art.1
[7] Title VIa, Provision on closer cooperation, Treaty of Amsterdam

of the single currency. This was conditional on certain convergence criteria that member states would have to fulfill in order to be part of the Monetary Union. A precursor of the European Central Bank (ECB), the European Monetary Institute (EMI), was to be established in 1994 according to the Maastricht Treaty, while the single currency would come into circulation in January 1999 as a unit of measure. Under the single currency, the exchange rates between the participants would be permanently fixed, governed by a single institution (European Central Bank), and pursuing a single monetary policy. At the European Council held in Madrid in 1995 the foundations for the introduction of the single currency, as laid down in the Maastricht Treaty, were fully planned, including the name of the future common currency, the euro. At that moment it was possible to proceed with the creation of the new institutions and the adoption of the currency itself, for those countries that fulfilled all the criteria and conditions decided. Therefore, as far as the institutional apparatus was concerned, the European Central Bank was created in 1998, replacing the previous EMI. Additionally, the European System of Central Banks (ESCB) was established, comprising all the Central Banks of the individual member states and the ECB itself. The Treaty establishing the European Union also laid down the criteria for a member state's participation in the single currency. Candidate countries must fulfill the so-called convergence criteria, which include, an average inflation rate in the previous year of no more than 1.5 percentage points above the average of the three Member States with the lowest inflation rates, a nominal long-term interest rate not exceeding two percentage points above the average of the three countries with the lowest rates, a budget that did not have a deficit equivalent to 3% or more of gross domestic product (GDP), a level of public debt not exceeding or approaching 60% of GDP, and a stable exchange rate for a period of at least two years within the European Monetary System (EMS). The Treaty also specified that progress towards meeting these criteria was to be assessed by the Commission, through statistical studies and proposals for admission. While the Council, meeting in the composition of the Heads of State and Government, was to take the final decision. To ensure that the adoption of the single currency took place on the planned date of 1 January 1999, the selection of eligible member states was scheduled for spring 1998 considering their economic performance in 1997. Since the conclusion of the Maastricht Treaty, however, European economic performance had declined. Unemployment continued to rise and there was growing pessimism about the prospects

of achieving the goal of a single currency. Despite the initial difficulties of countries in meeting the criteria, the single currency was finally successfully adopted at an extraordinary meeting of the European Council in 1998. The Council decided that eleven countries had met the necessary conditions for adopting the euro by 1999. The list of the European Union countries that were deemed to meet the conditions for adopting the euro was published in 1998. These countries were Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Spain. On the other side, the countries not included in the list were Greece, which did not meet all the criteria but announced its intention to adopt the euro, Sweden, which was not part of the European Monetary System and decided to wait, and finally, Denmark and the United Kingdom, which had decided to remain outside the euro area. The irrevocable fixing of the parities, and thus of the value of the euro against the other currencies, was to enter into force on 31 December 1998. Between 1999 and 2002, the use of the euro as an accounting unit or banking currency was optional (Ludger, 2008). The euro was, then, gradually adopted for banking transactions alongside the corresponding national currency. On 1 January 2002 Euro banknotes and coins entered circulation as legal tender without any problems.

**The road to the big enlargement**

Now that those objectives that had given shape and substance to the European project from the outset had been achieved, all that remained for member states to do was to focus on the main challenge that had been set since the 1990s: the process of enlarging the European Union to include the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of communist regimes, these nations immediately declared their desire to turn to the countries of Western Europe not only for economic aid but also to smooth the difficult transition to a solid and stable democracy. On the other hand, the European Union has also sought to work towards offering these ex-communist states the concrete prospect of access to the area of peace and prosperity established in the Union, together with the means and methods available to them. In June 1993, at the Copenhagen European Council, the process of enlarging the European Union was officially launched, including the definition of the necessary criteria for accession to the EU. These criteria stipulated that any state wishing to join should have stable democratic institutions, guaranteeing the respect of the rule of law and human rights; a functioning market economy that can withstand the competitive pressure and market forces within the Union;

and finally, the ability to comply with all the obligations of membership, to provide the effective implementation of laws, respect for standards and policies, and adherence to the political, economic and monetary objectives of the Union. These new applicant countries have had to go through a long period of internal transformations, economic, social, and structural adaptations to acquire the so-called *acquis communitaire* of the European Union.

However, this adaptation process did not only concern the accession countries, but it also involved a profound internal and structural transformation of the European Union itself. This expansion of Europe's borders is unique in its history, not only because of the number of applicant countries and the size of their populations but also because of their differences from the already member states. Enlargement to the Eastern Countries was going to be particularly difficult and tortuous compared to the previous ones: they were poorer than the EU average, highly agricultural, and possessed a relatively rudimentary legal framework. Furthermore, this time a dozen countries were waiting to join the European Union, raising the number of members from fifteen to twenty-seven. Hence a major institutional reform was required to avoid the risk of paralysis of the institutions themselves and the Union as a whole. European infrastructures had to be enlarged and transformed to be better suited to the new eastern European political order. However, the 1997 Treaty of Amsterdam failed to include such adaptations, mainly due to disputes between the member states, which could only agree on the protocol postponing the issue and its solution until the accession was underway (Gilbert, 2012). Hence, in 1999 the European Council, also encouraged by the opinion of the European Parliament, decided to convene a new Intergovernmental Conference, which would meet in early 2000 and would be responsible for the conclusion and resolution of all issues left open by the Amsterdam Treaty. The most important issues were the size and composition of the European Commission, the recalibration of weighted votes in the Council, and the introduction of double majority voting.

The European Council held in Nice was responsible for finalizing the necessary amendments to the Treaty on European Union. Lasting four days, it is considered the longest in the history of the European Union, characterized by complicated and heated negotiations (Gilbert, 2003). Before starting to work on the actual institutional changes, the Council unveiled the Union's Charter of Fundamental Rights, which set out European

citizens' civil, political, economic, and social rights. However, due to opposition from the United Kingdom, the Charter was not incorporated into the Treaty, which would have made it binding in law. As regards the institutional issue, negotiations on two structural reforms proceeded smoothly, both because practical experience had made them almost necessary and because they did not pose a real threat to the national interests of the member states ((CVCE), s.d.). The first of these reforms concerned the enhanced cooperation procedure, introduced by the Treaty of Amsterdam to allow those member states that wished, to proceed and further advance the process of European integration. The Treaty of Nice loosened the restrictions placed on this procedure at Amsterdam, making it much more flexible. Accordingly, the Nice Council reduced the minimum number of the member states required to undertake enhanced cooperation to eight and replaced the right of veto of the other member states with the right of appeal to the Council, in case of opposition to the initiative. The second major reform in anticipation of the great enlargement concerned the increase in the powers of the President of the European Commission. According to the reform, the European Council would appoint the President of the Commission by qualified majority. In addition, in agreement with the President-designate, the Council would also appoint the Commissioners, who would then need the approval of the European Parliament. This strengthened the President's authority, giving him the possibility to allocate portfolios and redefine the responsibilities of Commissioners during their mandate. Through this new, stronger role in deciding the composition of the Commission, the President also obtained the power to appoint the Vice-President and the possibility, when considered appropriate, to request the individual resignation of Commissioners (Gilbert, 2012).

The debate between the parties involved became more complicated because of other controversial issues, among which was the question of the representation of each member state in the enlarged institutions. At stake was the delicate balance between the various bodies and, above all, the problem of the weighted vote of member states. The main objective was to preserve the efficiency of the decision-making process despite the increasing number of participants. However, in practice, the driving force behind the discussions was the concern of national governments to promote their own interests, given the fact that the reform would determine the ability of each State to influence European policies and eventually even to oppose them. With this regard, the role of the

Commissioners was not that of representing their member states and their national interests, but rather to act as an independent agent in pursuing the sole interests of the European Union. Indeed, each member state required at least one of its nationals to be a member of the Commission. Accordingly, the Nice Council decided to reform the composition of the European Commission by reducing the number of Commissioners to one per member state, starting on 1 January 2005. Therefore, each member state acceding to the European Union was entitled to appoint one more Commissioner. Eventually, only after the accession of the 27th State, the Council would reconvene to decide unanimously on the precise and final number of the members of the Commission. A further institutional reform regarded the strengthening of the codecision procedure for the European Parliament, which was extended to a significant number of areas where qualified majority approval by the European Council was required, such as industrial policies, judicial cooperation in civil matters, and immigration. The number of members of the European Parliament was also increased from a maximum of 700 to 732 starting with the elections to be held in 2004. This decision took greater account of population, thus weakening proportionality to the benefit of small and medium-sized states. On the other side, little progress was made on extending qualified majority voting in the Council, although this was considered necessary to facilitate decision-making under the first Community pillar and to avoid the unanimity requirement leading to paralysis, especially in the enlarged Union made of twenty-seven member states. The Commission and the European Parliament wanted majority voting for all legislative decisions in the Council. But the larger member states were required to keep unanimity on issues they considered very important. As a result, progress has been very limited. As far as qualified majority voting is concerned, the most important factor is the weighting of votes in the Council of Ministers, meaning their distribution among the member states. At Nice, this was the last point addressed by the European Council and also the most controversial, as the member states were keen to maximize their ability to influence decisions taken by a qualified majority. In the end, the Commission opted for a double majority needed to approve decisions, the first being based on the number of member states and the second on the total population of the Union. But this double majority principle, although simple and easily understood by the man in the street, was not retained because it represented an excessive departure from the already solidly established balances between the old

member states. The final decision provided for an increase in the number of votes attributed to each member state and a redefinition of the qualified majority threshold, also with effect from 1 January 2005. Furthermore, there was a mechanism for checking the validity of deliberations: any member of the Council may request that it could be verified that a qualified majority represented at least 62% of the Union's population. To this new redistribution of votes, the Nice Council also foresaw a great extension of qualified majority voting in several new areas, where unanimity was previously required.

The Treaty was signed in Nice in 2001 but did not enter into force until February 2003. The ratification process met its initial setback in Ireland, where the 'no' campaign won by a 54% majority in June 2001, with 68% of eligible voters not voting at all. This was a completely unexpected outcome and was mainly the result of a very bland and almost absent campaign in favor of the Treaty by the Irish elites and government. Instead of demanding a renegotiation of the treaty, the Irish government admitted its mistake and submitted ratification to a second national referendum. This time the referendum produced a positive result, with almost 63% of the population in favor of ratifying the Treaty of Nice. This was possible thanks to the strong active participation of eligible voters, who expressed favorable opinions, while negative opinions remained numerically the same as in the previous referendum. The other ratifications, all carried out through parliamentary procedure, went off without major difficulties. Finally, the Treaty of Nice entered into force in 2003, although most of its provisions would come into effect because of the enlargement and the European election to be held in 2004. As a result, at the end of a long process of transformation and adaptation, the Union managed to overcome all the challenges posed by this enlargement. Thus, the Copenhagen European Council in December 2002 declared that 10 candidate countries (Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, and Slovakia) fulfilled all the necessary conditions to join the EU. In May 2004, these countries, with a combined population of almost 75 million, joined the EU. Following Council approval in October 2006, Bulgaria and Romania also joined, formally entering into force in January 2007. These agreements, which increased the number of EU Member States to 27, completed the accession process of the Central and Eastern European countries.

The Treaty of Nice certainly provided for the necessary institutional reform and guaranteed a place for the new member states in the EU, yet it failed to tackle the major

issues relating to the future of the Union and demonstrated the inadequacy of the approach of intergovernmental negotiation. The Parliament approved the Treaty's provisions on the Commission and enhanced cooperation but was dissatisfied with some of the Treaty's provisions, such as with the fact that the Union's Charter of Fundamental Rights had not been made an integral part of the Treaty, with the limits placed on the use of the codecision procedure between the Council and Parliament and dissatisfied that the 700-member ceiling for the future enlarged Europe had been exceeded. These shortcomings of the Treaty of Nice increased the need for further reform of the institutions of the European Union to make them more effective and comprehensible to European citizens ((CVCE), s.d.).

Consequently, in 2001 the European Council, meeting in Laeken, called for a Convention on the Future of Europe to be convened to examine the key issues for the future development of the Union and to try to identify possible solutions to the existing problems. At the Laeken European Council in December 2001, the Belgian Prime Minister presented a draft declaration defining the objectives and proposing a working method. *"The Union needs to become more democratic, more transparent, and more efficient. It also has to resolve three basic challenges: how to bring citizens, and primarily the young, closer to the European design and the European institutions, how to organize politics and the European political area in an enlarged Union and how to develop the Union into a stabilizing factor and a model in the new, multipolar world" (Presidency conclusions - Laeken, 14 and 15 December 2001).* To address these challenges, the declaration proposed several specific issues to be discussed during the Convention, mainly concerning a better division and definition of the competencies of the European Union, the simplification of the Union's methods and instruments, the path towards more democracy, transparency, and efficiency within the institutions and towards a possible Constitution for citizens. Chaired by Giscard d'Estaing, the Convention was composed of two vice-presidents, fifteen representatives appointed by national governments, thirty members of national parliaments (two per state), sixteen members of the European Parliament, and two representatives of the Commission. All the Convention's discussions were open to the public and it was also guaranteed the opportunity to influence the debate through a forum in which interested organizations, citizens, academics, and business groups could intervene. The Convention on the Future of the Union was to prepare a final

document, including all the various options, proposals, and recommendations for further institutional reforms before July 2003. This document, combined with the outcome of the national debates on the future of the Union, would be the starting point for the discussions of an Intergovernmental Conference, which would make the final decisions on the changes to be implemented (Gilbert, 2012). All the elements suggested that the European Union would face a decisive moment in its history during the next few years. The most serious clashes concerned institutional issues. In the Convention, Giscard presented what he considered to be the framework of the future constitutional treaty. Because of the need to ensure greater effectiveness of the institutions, Giscard felt that the only acceptable solution was to maintain the *'institutional triangle'* and strengthen its three sides: Parliament, Council, and Commission. This draft in principle was welcomed by the Convention, although the practical arrangements it envisaged were the subject of lively debate. Criticism of the draft also concerned other aspects. Members of the European Parliament and national parliaments were not entirely satisfied, but eventually supported the draft. In the end, after numerous amendments and compromises, the spirit of the Convention finally prevailed, and the draft text was adopted almost unanimously (98 delegates out of 105) in June 2003. The document was not a catalog of options for the Intergovernmental Conference, but a complete and structured draft that had to be considered in its totality (Dedman, 2010).

When it was presented to the European Council in Thessaloniki, it was considered a good basis for the Intergovernmental Conference. The result was beyond all expectations; however, it was far from perfect according to President Giscard d'Estaing (Dedman, 2010). During the discussions, the first and second parts of the draft Treaty were finalized defining the Union's objectives, institutions, competencies, the democratic life of the Union and membership, and the Charter of Fundamental Rights. Yet the precision and the attention reserved to these decisions had taken time to secure an equally successful result in the third part, on the policies and functioning of the Union, and the fourth part on general and final provisions. For these reasons, Giscard asked for an extension of the Convention's mandate. It was only given an extra month on condition that, for the part on the Union's various policies based on the provisions of the previous Treaties, it would be purely technical drafting work, even though the members of the Convention would have liked to introduce substantial changes, particularly as regards the

extension of qualified majority voting. The Convention, therefore, met again at the beginning of July. The members obtained the adoption of certain amendments, and finally, after a month of discussion and work, the final draft was submitted to the European Council which convened the Intergovernmental Conference. All in all, the Convention on the Future of Europe marked a crucial stage in the construction of the European Union. Representatives from twenty-eight different countries debated publicly for more than a year on often sensitive issues, overcame their differences, and finally managed to adopt a common text. This was a decisive step forward in democratizing the integration process in Europe and shaping a truly European spirit (Dedman, 2010).

To prevent the Intergovernmental Conference from getting stuck in discussions between officials and experts, the European Council decided that it would be led by the Heads of State and Government, assisted by Foreign Ministers. In the end, after the European elections in 2004, the European Council in Brussels adopted the European Constitution. Especially after a record turnout at the European elections, it was fundamental to achieve this result. The Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe was formally signed in Rome in October 2004 by the representatives of the twenty-five member states, in the same room of the Capitol where the six founding member states of the European Communities had signed the Treaties of Rome. However, the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe never entered into force. In this regard, in 2005, after ratification by eleven EU member states, the process was suddenly suspended because of the failure of two referenda in France and the Netherlands. While France's growing opposition to new European policies and enlargement was well known, few really thought that the French would reject the Constitution, created by their own former President and reflecting the preferences of French elites. Notwithstanding, the French referendum uncovered great discontent with the Constitutional project, with 55% of citizens voting against the Constitution. On the other side, although the Dutch referendum was quieter in tone, the decision to reject the Constitutional Treaty was taken by a larger majority of 62% against 38% in favor. For them, it was the fear of strengthening the voting power of the larger member states and especially of Germany at the expense of the smaller ones that was decisive ((CVCE), s.d.). Since the Netherlands had always been one of the countries in favor of greater Europeanization, the signal of disapproval of the Constitution was clear throughout Europe (Gilbert, 2012). The Constitutional failure led

to an unprecedented crisis that led to a long pause for reflection, during which other European states continued to pursue the ratification process. However, other States now considered the draft and the possibility of ratification to be remote, while France and the Netherlands showed no desire to hold a second referendum.

As far as the impact of the failure of the Constitutional Treaty on public opinion is concerned, a decline in the levels of support for the European project is reported, but in any case, it can be seen that this was limited in time and scope. Between autumn 2004 (European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer EB61, 2004) and autumn 2005 (European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer EB64, 2005), the percentage of citizens who consider their country's membership in the European Union to be positive fell from 56% in the first year to 50% in 2005. However, this percentage increased again in the subsequent spring of 2006 (European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer EB65, 2006) to 55% and continued to rise to a peak of 58% in autumn 2007 (European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer EB67, 2007), right before the sign of the Treaty of Lisbon. However, the new entry of the Central and Eastern European Countries into the European Union cannot, of course, be forgotten in the progressive increase in the levels of support for the European Union. The same pattern is repeated with regard to the degree to which a country benefits[8] from EU membership. The positive assessment of the benefits enjoyed by the country decreased by one percentage point, from 53% in 2004 to 52% in 2005. Similarly, this variable was subject to an upward revision in subsequent surveys, peaking in spring 2007 with 59% of Europeans claiming to benefit from EU membership compared to 30% who answered negatively to this question. On the other hand, as regards the image[9] citizens have of the European Union, a 50% positive response was recorded in autumn 2004 (against 33% negative and 16% for the neutral option). Even in this case, the data show a decline in the perception of the image among citizens after the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty. Indeed, in autumn 2005, the number of citizens with a positive perception of the European Union fell to 44% (compared to 34% of neutral and 20% of negative responses). Lastly, as regards citizens' levels of trust[10] in the European

[8] "Taking everything into account, would you say that (our country) has on balance benefited or not from being a member of the EU?"
[9] "In general, does the EU conjure up for you a very positive, neutral, fairly negative or very negative image?"
[10] "For each of the following media and institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it. The European Union"

Union in the year of the signing of the Constitutional Treaty, 50% of respondents expressed a positive opinion compared to 36% of citizens who expressed their tendency not to trust the Union. Since the failure of the Constitutional Treaty, trust has fallen by five points, with an increase in the number of citizens who do not trust the Union to 43%, compared to 44% of positive responses. Citizens' attitudes towards the EU, as measured by these variables, declined after the failure of the Constitutional Treaty, but this decline was limited in scope and time. Immediately after the autumn of 2005, a steady increase is observed in all the variables presented. The negative results of the referendums in France and the Netherlands did not, therefore, lead to an average deterioration in the citizens' view of the European Union.

In 2007, the German Presidency intensified consultations and managed to break the deadlock. The Heads of State and Government meeting within the European Council decided to convene a new Intergovernmental Conference as soon as possible. As part of its mandate, the IGC was charged with drafting a reform treaty to amend the existing one. The constitutional concept was then completely abandoned. Consequently, the IGC started its work in July 2007 and ended in October with an informal meeting of the Heads of State and Government in Lisbon, during which the summits agreed on a new treaty. The aim of the Lisbon Treaty was to amend the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty establishing the European Community, renamed the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). Despite the removal of all formal references to the notion or concept of a constitution, this new agreement took over many of the foundations and decisions that had characterized the now failed constitution. Indeed, it led to the merger of the three pillars (the Community and two areas of intergovernmental cooperation), granted legal personality to the European Union, and made the Charter of Fundamental Rights legally binding. The treaty also provided for a strengthening of the legislative and budgetary powers of the European Parliament, the redefinition and extension of qualified majority voting in the Council, and the creation of the President of the Council. The Heads of State and Government signed the Lisbon Treaty in December and at the same time called for the rapid completion of national ratification processes in the twenty-seven member states to ensure its entry into force by January 2009. However, in 2008, Ireland, the only country to require ratification of the treaty through a referendum, rejected the Lisbon Treaty. The solution to address this problem was to continue with the ratification

process already started. The Parliaments of the member states already approved the text and at this point, a renegotiation was not possible. Eventually, Ireland proposed a second referendum, which fortunately gave positive results, leading to the complete ratification by all the member states in November 2009.

The signing and ratification of the Treaty of Lisbon also represented the end of the third phase of the European integration process and marked the beginning of a new phase, characterized by deep crises, both external and internal. The economic crisis, the migration crisis, and finally the current Covid crisis have further emphasized that the integration process is not yet fully complete. The EU's responses to such crises have contributed to reforms of institutions and structural organization, to the transfer of new competencies, as well as to the introduction of new policy instruments and new methodologies to manage situations and moments of crisis.

# 2. The European public opinion and the role of crises in the integration process

Theories of integration have always sought to explain the origins and motivations for which member states began to collaborate and create common institutions. However, the grand theories, neofunctionalism, and intergovernmentalism have focused more on certain aspects such as supranational institutions and governments of member states than on citizens. On the contrary, with postfunctionalism, the attention is moved to this new actor within the process of European integration. Indeed, in interpreting and explaining the process of European integration, grand theories of integration have often rejected or relegated the role of citizens to the margins. This was partly due to the pervasive narrative that positioned the first Communities as necessary for the people, a question of no alternative and therefore also of mere survival (Sternberg, 2016). This narrative diminished any possibility of different opinions not only on how to proceed with the process of integration but also on the very existence of these new supranational institutions. In this sense, the founding years of the European Communities were marked by an important emphasis on maintaining the central promise of peace, prosperity, and progress through European integration, on safeguarding the general interests in pursuit of the common European good, and on respecting the general will of the citizens (Sternberg, 2016). Overall, it was assumed that public opinion would come to believe in the indispensability and absolute necessity of further integration as this developed. And indeed, the first steps towards the creation of the European Communities took place against the comfortable backdrop of a popular consensus that was often silent and taken for granted (Hooghe & Marks, 2009).

Yet the conflicts of the 1970s, with the economic and financial crises, began to call into question the promises of peace and prosperity and to make visible the need for greater public approval or mobilization to support and drive forward the integration project (Sternberg, 2016). As a response, official EU rhetoric and legitimation models changed to focus on what the people wanted. Nevertheless, the fact that the official rhetoric partly focused on citizens and their needs did not necessarily mean that this new actor in the political scene was given a prominent role or a clear voice. Citizens remained objects and spectators rather than authors of European integration (Sternberg, 2016). The marginal

role of citizens in the development of the European project is reflected in classical theories of integration, which considered the process a responsibility of political and economic elites. The emphasis on elites and political leaders in European integration studies derives its justification from the highly bureaucratic and distant nature of the European organization, in which leaders took the most important decisions, sometimes against the will and often over the indifference of the general membership (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). On the contrary, the new phase of the European integration process has seen an increase in the presence and interest of citizens in European issues. The critical moments of recent years have led to an increasing politicization of European policies and a consequent increase in the importance of citizens in the advancement of the democratic process.

## 2.1. From permissive consensus to constraining dissensus

## 2.2. The role of crises in the integration process

If the Maastricht Treaty crisis led to politicization and polarization of public opinion, which entered the phase of contesting the legitimacy of the European Union, in the following two decades the various crises experienced by the European continent have tended to reinforce this trend (Sternberg, 2016). The economic and sovereign debt crisis, the migration crisis, and the recent health and economic crisis due to the spread of the coronavirus have completely shaken the entire continent and questioned the existence of the European Union itself. This succession of crises, each one different from the other but with a great impact on the European project, has led scholars to pay more and more attention to this phenomenon, to what they represent, and to the effects that such critical moments can bring to the European integration process (Brack & Gürkan, 2021). As Jean Monnet (1976) wrote in his memoirs: *"Europe will be forged in crises and will be the sum of the solutions adopted for those crises"*. In this respect, the European project has indeed been characterized by various moments of crisis and rupture that have often led to an increase and improvement of the project itself, with an effective advancement of integration. As noted by Webber (2019), at least every decade since the early 1950s has encountered a crisis that has generated fears that the process of integration would be deteriorated or be permanently damaged. The crisis resulting from the collapse of the EDC in the early years of the European project, the empty chair crisis of the 1960s, and the budget crisis of the 1970s, marked the process of European integration. After the

revival of the process in the 1980s, the 1990s brought new deep crises, which this time, however, had deeper repercussions, especially on the general public (Brack & Gürkan, 2021). With the crisis of the Maastricht Treaty, which led to the transformation of the European Communities into the European Union and the transfer of a large part of state sovereignty to the supranational level, there has been an increase in levels of opposition from citizens, marking the politicization of European issues and the beginning of a rather tense relationship between citizens and European institutions. Only ten years after, the Union is confronted with this increase in politicization and the increased presence and participation of citizens in the European process. The rejection by referenda of the Constitutional treaty in France and the Netherlands has led the European Union into a new period of discontent and pessimism. However, there seems to be a consensus in the literature that the later period of European integration, specifically the last two decades, was particularly characterized by crises (Brack & Gürkan, 2021). Schimmenlfenning (2018) identifies this period as the *"decade of crises"*, emphasizing the continuous succession of several critical moments that have different characteristics and scope from those previously experienced within the integration process, and which can therefore have different results (Brack & Gürkan, 2021). By definition, a crisis is a moment of unexpected shock, extraordinary emergency, and uncertainty that poses an immediate danger to the proper functioning of the political domain. Unexpected and uncommon events challenge this political domain and push political actors to take new sets of decisions in extreme urgency. The crisis cannot be solved by existing rules and means but leads to a change in the dynamics of integration and shapes different systems of governance (Ferrara & Kriesi, 2015). According to this definition, each crisis brings with it the prospect of change, leading to different outcomes that vary from a decisive turning point in the European integration process to a period of stagnation or the possibility of disintegration. Because of a variety of factors, the crises of the last two decades are different from those that characterized the first 50 years of European integration. Indeed, the economic, refugee, and health crises are first and foremost multidimensional by nature, this means not only that each one affects several sectors simultaneously, but it also underlines the difficulty of containing the crises and the high probability that these will shift from the initial sector to new and adjacent sectors (Brack & Gürkan, 2021). This probability is also exacerbated by the longevity of ongoing crises, whereby identifying

when each crisis started or, more importantly, when it ends becomes very difficult. Another specific feature is that these crises affect sectors that are fundamental to the European project, thus not peripheral issues but crucial elements of integration itself, such as the free movement of individuals, identity, the founding values of the EU, and its borders. By undermining such important areas of integration, the cost of inaction is particularly high and so is the chance of disintegration (Brack & Gürkan, 2021). The last feature, particularly important for the purposes of this research, is that these new crises involve the mass politicization of European issues in the course of crises (Rauh, 2021). Confronted with this period of prolonged crises, affecting different political areas, there has been a fracturing of politics and above all a greater politicization that boosted the participation and mobilization of citizens in the political life of the European Union and in the process of European integration itself.

Neofunctionalists tended to identify crises as an integral part of the integration process. Given the incompleteness of the integration process and its instability, moments of crisis are functional and tend to lead to the possibility of more integration (Hooghe & Marks, 2007). However, neofunctionalist theory did not pay too much attention to crises that were exogenous and did not derive from the incompleteness of the previous level of integration but rather only on crises produced by functional deficiencies within the European project itself (Rauh, 2021). Similarly, intergovernamentalists did not focus too much on crises and their effects on the integration process. However, also during these periods, as in times of normality, the focus is on national preferences that shape government decisions and consequently determine the intergovernmental outcome. However, during any crisis, states are affected asymmetrically, and those less affected will have greater bargaining power, while the most affected states will gain more from increased integration. Being in a weaker position, the latter will also be more inclined to compromise (Brack & Gürkan, 2021). Postfunctionalists, on the other hand, see the integration process as a fundamentally conflictual process that has inevitably produced cultural divisions. Increased politicization at the national level led to what they called *"constraining dissensus"*, according to which citizens have increasingly polarized views on European affairs. The range of possibilities is therefore not only the preservation of the original situation, but also a possible reform either in a negative direction, of disintegration, or in a positive direction, of greater integration (Hooghe & Marks, 2019)

In any case, what emerges from the postfunctionalist theory, as seen above, is the impossibility of ignoring the effect that these moments of crisis also have on European citizens. While on the one hand crises have led to institutional responses aimed at strengthening and deepening integration in the European Union, on the other hand, crises have also shown that public opinion may be more dynamic and responsive to the changing nature of the integration process than assumed by grand theories (Hobolt & Wratil, 2015).

**Research question and hypotheses**

Against the background of what has been examined so far, this research considers it relevant to analyze the effects on public opinion of these moments of crisis concerning the integration process. After all, it is commonly agreed among scholars that the future of the European Union no longer relies solely on the will of elites but needs, now more than ever, the support of citizens and their desire for change and greater integration (Hobolt & de Vires, 2016). Support for European integration is defined as positive attitudes toward the European Union. This is reflected in the levels of trust citizens have in the European Union, their image and degree of attachment to the EU, and their hope for the future of the Union. Conversely, a negative orientation and a lowering of these levels indicate a feeling of opposition to the European project and skepticism about the progress of integration on the part of citizens. Following neofunctionalist theory, the effect of politicization is assumed to increase the degree of integration. Crises have the effect of enhancing levels of trust in the European Union, their image of the European Union, and increasing their hope in Europe's future. If the crisis were to lead to a recovery in levels of support for the European Union, this would have a positive impact on the future of the Union, representing a willingness to continue the path of integration (Frieden, 2016). In contrast, postfunctionalists expect politicization to mobilize Euroskeptic citizens and undermine public support for European integration. Contrary to the previous scenario, therefore, crises reduce citizens' level of trust in the European Union, their image of the European Union, and weaken their hope for Europe's future (Hobolt & de Vires, 2016). In this case, if crises would lead to the erosion of citizens' support for the Union, they pose a serious threat to the future of integration and the very possibility of disintegration. Therefore, the purpose is to first understand whether this change has actually occurred and subsequently to comprehend in which directions crises influence European citizens' opinions on the integration process.

*Do crises influence citizens' support for the European Union?*

The first scenario hypothesized is that therefore crises have no impact on European citizens' opinion. Moments of crisis do not bring about any change in the levels of trust in the European Union, of perception of the Union, and the European project's perspectives for the future. This scenario would highlight citizens' disinterest in any change in European integration even in difficult and critical moments. Therefore, the first hypothesis of the research is the following:

*$H_0$: European citizens' opinion before the crisis is, on average, equal to the post-crisis opinion of citizens.*

On the contrary, the postfunctionalist assumption presupposes the ability of these critical moments to activate and influence the citizens' opinion. This means that in the face of the crises of the last twenty years there should have been a significant change in the levels of trust in the European Union, in the image that citizens have of the EU, and in the perception of the direction taken. Thus, the research hypothesis is that crises do have an impact on the opinion of European citizens. Accordingly:

*$H_1$: European citizens' opinion before the crisis is, on average, different than the opinion of citizens after the crisis.*

In conclusion, this research seeks, first and foremost, to understand whether crises have an impact on European public opinion, identified, in this specific case, through the variables of trust in the European Union, the image that citizens have of it, and the consideration of the direction taken by the Union as right or wrong. If such a change is registered, the research will focus on understanding in which direction it occurred, and consequently on determining whether the crises have represented a moment and an opportunity for citizens to continue the process of integration or, on the contrary, whether they have represented a possibility of disintegration in the collective imagination.

To answer this research question, it is necessary to carry out an analysis of public opinion and its change over time. To this end, data from the Standard Eurobarometer surveys commissioned by the European Commission and conducted every six months will be used. Therefore, the purpose of the analysis of these data will be to identify changes in the responses of European citizens in the post-crisis period compared to those given in the pre-crisis period. Before proceeding with the analysis of the data, it was

necessary to identify some fundamental characteristics of the research: including the crises understudy, the period over which these crises occurred, and the corresponding surveys that would provide the data to be analyzed, basing these choices on the available literature and references. Three crises have been identified that have characterized the European Union in the last twenty years and can be brought together under the definition of polycrises (Brack & Gürkan, 2021), meaning cross-cutting and multidisciplinary crises that have also had a major impact and serious consequences on the European collective imagination. These crises include the economic and financial crisis (2008-2015), the refugee crisis (2015-2016), and the recent Covid-19 health crisis (2020-2021). Given the very nature of these types of crises, it is not only challenging to determine when exactly these crises began, but it becomes particularly difficult to identify an endpoint in time, which is why it was necessary to rely on the existing literature in order to decide a reference year that would allow the empirical and statistical analysis to proceed. The decision on the periods of the beginning and end of the crises was fundamental within the research because for each year chosen it was necessary to identify a standard Eurobarometer survey able to provide the necessary data to adequately answer the research question. Initially, the responses of each member state of the European Union (twenty-seven) were collected for the three variables under observation, over a period of time from 2004 to the present, in order to understand the trend over time. Subsequently, for the purposes of the research, the responses, always at the national level, of the surveys identified relating only to the pre-and post-crisis period were extracted from this dataset. These responses were inserted into a program for the statistical analysis of the data collected, which therefore allowed for descriptive and statistical analysis. With regard to the financial and economic crisis, the standard Eurobarometer survey (EB68) conducted between September 22 and November 3, 2007, was taken as the reference survey, whose responses were compared with the survey conducted by the European Commission between November 7 and 17, 2015 (EB84). Regarding the refugee crisis, the standard Eurobarometer survey conducted between 8 and 17 November 2014 (EB82) and the one conducted between 3 and 16 November 2016 (EB86) were compared. Finally, to analyze the latest health crisis due to the spread of the Covid-19, data were collected from the standard Eurobarometer survey conducted between November 14 and 29, 2019 (EB92) and the latest survey commissioned by the European Commission between June 14 and

July 15, 2021 (EB95). All of these surveys are administered using the same methodology, face-to-face, except the most recent surveys conducted during the Covid-19 crisis, due to which alternative methodologies had to be used in some countries in the face of restrictive measures. The Standard Eurobarometer surveys are carried out not only in the EU member countries but usually include opinions from eligible countries and other countries part of the European continent. However, for the purposes of this research, since the emphasis is on European public opinion, the information was collected only from the twenty-seven member countries of the European Union. The use of these surveys conducted regularly by the European Commission certainly allows for a cross-temporal longitudinal analysis, but inevitably also shows some problems and critical issues. On the one hand, the use of secondary data of such high quality made it possible to capture the information and to compare crises so distant in time, but on the other hand, several questions that could have been fundamental for the purposes of the research did not cover the entire period under observation (Anderson & Hecht, 2018). To this end, in order to carry on the analysis, it was necessary to identify a way to conceptualize and measure public opinion and support for the European Union. Support for the integration process is defined as a generally positively oriented attitude toward the European project and the object of the European Union. This positive attitude toward Europe is commonly measured with the variables of trust in the European Union or its institutions, support for membership, or the desired speed of integration (Hobolt & de Vires, 2016). On the other hand, opposition to European progress is a manifestation of a negative attitude of citizens toward the European Union and its work. Accordingly, the variables of Euroscepticism are identified in the general discontent or institutional distrust that fuels negative attitudes toward the progress of integration. Against this background and taking into account the availability of the questions in the period actually selected, the study variables in question to define public opinion and the support (or lack thereof) of citizens for the integration process is the trust that citizens have in the European Union[11], the image they have of the European Union[12] and the positive or negative consideration of the direction taken by the

[11] "For each of the following media and institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it. (Question asked about the European Union)"
[12] "In general, is your image of the EU very positive, quite positive, neutral, quite negative, or very negative?"

Union[13] during the crises. The change in each of these variables will indicate a change in the levels of citizen support in the European Union between the pre- and post-crisis periods. In this regard, a t-test will be conducted for each variable to determine if, on average, there has been a statistically significant change in the support of citizens in the European Union between the periods preceding and following the economic, migration, and health crises. Indeed, only considering the difference between the positive responses of European citizens to the questions understudy in the two reference periods would not allow to properly answer the question. It is necessary to conduct an inferential statistics test to determine whether, on average, public opinion is statistically different after the advent of the crises. The paired t-test allows for such a comparison between the European opinion, on average, of the pre-crisis period and that of the post-crisis period. This type of test is typically used to verify whether the difference between the averages of two groups under study is statistically significant: it is a parametric procedure, as it allows for the comparison of two distributions with two parameters of these, namely the averages of positive responses. It is intended to determine whether or not the difference between the two averages, in terms of variable, exceeds a certain value, considered discriminating for the statistical evaluation of the test. In this case, the average is represented by the analysis of positive responses for each of the twenty-seven member states of the European Union, with respect to the three variables under observation, identified to define citizen support. In this regard, the aim is to use this methodology to test for each crisis under investigation whether there is no statistical difference, on average, between the European responses before the outbreak of the crisis and those recorded at the end of the crisis ($H_0$) or, on the contrary, whether the crisis produces a statistically significant change in public opinion. This practically means that the average European response before the crisis is statistically different than that obtained at the end of the crisis ($H_1$). As seen above, this change can occur either in a positive sense, with an increase in levels of support for the European Union, or in a negative sense, indicating a general discontent with the Union and the integration process. There are several types of t-tests available, however, in this study, the paired t-test was chosen. This type of analysis enables to compare the European opinion, on average, before the crisis with the average opinion after the crisis itself. For

[13] "At the present time, would you say that, in general, things are going in the right direction or in the wrong direction, in the European Union?"

this reason, it is appropriate to use the paired t-test, as it allows to compare the averages of two related groups, on the basis of research carried out on the same variables, measured and analyzed in different years. The comparison between the averages, in this case, is carried out on two sets of data from different times, producing a pattern of repeated measures between the positive national responses to each variable before the crisis and the positive responses, always at the national level, collected after the crisis. The t-test in question was conducted through the use of the free software for statistical processing, PSPP. Regarding the analysis carried out and the use of this methodology, it is important to note that this analysis of the change in public opinion in the face of crises is an exploratory investigation that does not take into account a number of external variables that may have influenced this change during the period under observation. Therefore, in order to confirm the analysis performed, it would be appropriate to strengthen and corroborate this exploratory analysis with additional methodologies.

# 3 The analysis of European public opinion in times of crises

Before proceeding to the empirical analysis, it is necessary to retrace the crises that have characterized the last two decades of the history of European integration and the subsequent European response to these crises. Therefore, the economic and financial crisis that has shaken Europe since 2008, the migration crisis with the increasing flow of refugees that erupted in 2015, and the recent health crisis that has changed the continent, and the rest of the world, due to the spread of a particularly contagious new virus will be examined. In the face of each crisis, the European Union has been challenged to act and answer in a coordinated manner to avoid the collapse of the European project itself. The institutions, in different ways and intensity among them and the crises considered, began to implement measures to contain the spread of crises, maintain the stability of the Union and safeguard the most affected member states. Often, the European response has been translated on a practical level into an expansion of the competencies and tools at its disposal to manage the repercussions of crises. However, these crises and the management of their consequences have also led to an increasing politicization of the European question. In a world where citizens feel they have to participate in public life, the European question, as we have also seen above, is no longer distant and taken for granted, but is beginning to be challenged. The literature has often discussed whether and how these recent crises and the consequent institutional responses have led to greater integration, as was the case, especially in the early years of the European integration process, but here too the role of citizens has been marginalized. Therefore, what are the effects that these three crises have had on the opinion of citizens and their support for the European Union?

## 3.1. Eeconomic crisis

On 15 September 2008, Lehman Brothers, an internationally operating US financial company, announced its bankruptcy. This event caused a domino effect and represented the beginning of the biggest global economic crisis since the Great Depression of 1929, causing a period of intense instability. The Great Recession was triggered by the burst of the United States housing bubble. As real estate prices fell and homeowners began to default on their mortgages, the value of mortgage-backed securities held by banks began to decline, causing several of them to collapse or be bailed out in 2008 (Lionello, 2015).

In this sense, the failure of Lehman Brothers generated widespread concern about the solidity of other investment banks and fears about the effects of exposure to these institutions on all other market actors. As a result of the interdependence of the economies and of the direct or indirect exposure of banks in some European countries to the phenomenon of subprime mortgages, which are loans to customers at high risk of default, the crisis spread also throughout Europe. In a short time, the subprime mortgage crisis transferred to the real economy in Europe, causing a drop in income and employment (Tosun, Wetzel, & Zapryanova, 2014). Many European banks experienced serious difficulties in the wake of the subprime crisis and were bailed out by public intervention. The bank bailouts significantly increased the public debt of the countries involved, leading to the so-called sovereign debt crisis.

Indeed, it should be noted that in the second half of 2009, while the United States seemed to be emerging from the financial crisis not without difficulties, the Greek crisis erupted in Europe. In the autumn of 2009, the government of the socialist George Papandreou revealed that the previous government had heavily falsified its accounts. The real deficit in Greece was more than 12% of GDP, against the declared 6% (Gilbert, 2012). For months, the political authorities of the Eurozone procrastinated and didn't take any decision on how to help Greece. Later on, the European Central Bank, together with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), began to provide loan packages at competitive interest rates for countries at risk and in financial difficulty. The packages were conditional on the implementation of drastic austerity measures to foster economic regrowth (Gilbert, 2012). In May 2010, the EU also envisaged the creation of an ad hoc financial instrument, the European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF). The so-called rescue fund was created to assist states in financial difficulties by providing loans, recapitalizing banks, and buying sovereign debt (Ioannou, Leblond, & Niemann, 2015). However, the EFSF was supposed to be a temporary and provisional instrument, and this caused some concern since it was believed to be unable to help the member states by the expiry date of 2013. The second country to be severely affected by the economic crisis and to request loans from the European Central Bank was Ireland. However, the crisis continued to expand until it became fully manifest in 2011 when it also affected Italy and to a lesser extent Spain. For these reasons, the EFSF was replaced by the European

Stability Mechanism (ESM), created in March 2012 to provide conditional financial support to countries in crisis and thus continue the work of its predecessor.

The risk of multiple defaults triggered a general destabilization of the euro area. The GIIPS (Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece, Spain), as they were now known, were putting severe pressure on the European economy, and their precarious situation presaged a catastrophe for the whole eurozone (Gilbert, 2012). As interest rates on the public debt of the weaker states increased, the European banking sector that had invested in the bonds of the failing states collapsed into a crisis of liquidity and distrust. A vicious cycle between the sovereign debt crisis and the banking crisis was triggered, and the absence of a European treasure that could guarantee financial stability left the Union vulnerable to the weaknesses of individual member states (Lionello, 2015). If they defaulted on their debt, their bondholders would have the value of their debt reduced. Given the close interdependence between European states, this option offered the prospect of an EU-wide banking crisis. If they had left the euro, their currencies would have fallen, giving them a competitive boost, and thus making default even more likely. The third option for the other member states was to bail out the GIIPS. This was a great demonstration of solidarity among states, some of which were reluctant to help countries that had performed incorrectly (Gilbert, 2012). However, faced with the shortcomings of the economic pillar, the European Central Bank intervened with conventional and non-conventional measures to try to contain the crisis (Lionello, 2015). In this regard, on 26 July 2012, ECB Governor Mario Draghi addressed the Global Investment Conference in London and stated*: "Within our mandate, the ECB is ready to do whatever it takes to preserve the euro. And believe me, it will be enough".* Draghi kept his promise. The ECB began intervening in the secondary debt market, launching the Outright Monetary Transactions (OMT) to buy Greek and then Irish and Portuguese bonds, even though treaties prevented the ECB from buying such debt directly from governments. The Central Bank began to accumulate dubious government spending on its balance sheet, a controversial move that amounted to Europeanizing sovereign debt that expert investors were too scared to buy (Gilbert, 2012). This meant that if the countries' economies recovered, then the central bank would get its money back, otherwise the central bank would lose everything and have to be recapitalized. This high-risk strategy was deeply unpopular among German bankers, who considered it an unacceptable moral hazard

(Gilbert, 2012). However, the OMT of September 2012, with its unlimited purchase of government bonds, was a strong signal from the ECB. This predominant role of the ECB was further confirmed in January 2015, when it approved its first quantitative easing program. In practice, it was a new program to buy bonds issued by eurozone countries and European institutions, allowing the ECB to generate money from debts. The program was designed to ensure price stability against a backdrop of prolonged stagnation and deflationary effects. The bond purchases should loosen monetary and financial conditions and make it easier for businesses and households to access finance, thereby supporting a recovery in investment, consumption, and ultimately prices.

**Analysis of public opinion**

The economic and sovereign debt crisis is identified as the first major crisis to affect public opinion, leading to an increase in Euroscepticism about the European Union and a deep distrust in the integration process (Brack & Startin, 2015). While indeed the previous increase in citizens' interest in European problems concerned constitutional matters and was confined to specific nations, with the euro crisis the whole problem of European integration has become extremely salient, and tangible economic consequences have become visible and not as favorable and growing as expected. Furthermore, the intervention of the European Union in response to the crisis has constituted an increase in the levels of integration, especially regarding the monetary integration, and this has boosted the relevance of the question among citizens (Hobolt & Wratil, 2015).

The analysis of European public opinion will consider the change, if any, between citizens' responses to the survey administered before the outbreak of the crisis (European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer EB68, 2007) and those of the Standard Eurobarometer EB84 survey conducted in autumn 2015 (European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer EB84, 2015). The aim is therefore to test whether the European average in the variables of trust, image, and direction of the union found before the crisis is statistically equal to the average responses found in the same variables after the eurozone crisis. The first variable considered is the level of trust[14] that citizens have in the European Union as an institution. It can be noted, from Figure 1 that the percentage

[14] "For each of the following media and institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it. The European Union"

of positive responses from citizens peaked at 55% compared to 22% who said they did not trust the EU in autumn 2007. This value dropped in 2010, at the beginning of the sovereign debt crisis, when citizens' responses expressing trust represented 42% of the total respondents compared to the 50% expressing distrust (European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer EB74, 2010). This downward trend is confirmed in the latest period analyzed, as, in the autumn of 2015, most respondents expressed their lack of confidence in the European Union, representing 49% of negative votes while only 37% of respondents expressed their trust. However, it is in the Standard Eurobarometer survey conducted in 2012 that the highest level of negative responses is shown for the trust variable, with 60% of respondents saying they did not trust the European Union and only 30% continuing to express their confidence in the European Union (European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer EB77, 2012).

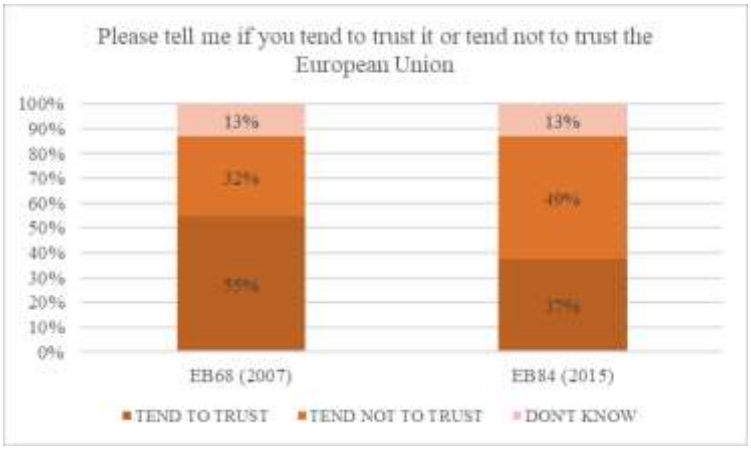


*Figure 3.1 - Eurobarometer data: "For each of the following media and institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it. The European Union". Answer in autumn 2007 (EB68) and autumn 2015 (EB84)*

The same path can be shown for the variable measuring citizens' image[15] of the European Union. In 2007, the percentage of citizens with a positive image of the EU was 50% compared to 35% of neutral answers and 13% of citizens having a negative image of the EU. However, the positive image percentage has been gradually decreasing to a mere 38% response in the autumn 2015 survey against a majority 21% of respondents

[15] "In general, does the EU conjure up for you a very positive, neutral, fairly negative, or very negative image?"

who expressed a negative opinion and an increased 40% of the population expressing a neutral opinion.

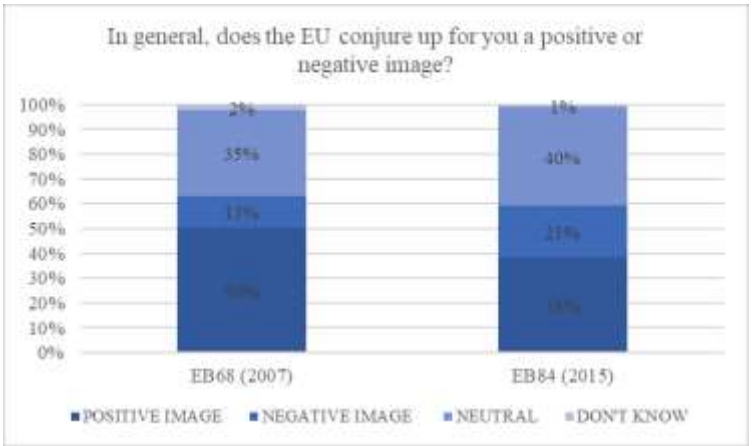


*Figure 3.2 - Eurobarometer data: "In general, does the EU conjure up for you a very positive, neutral, fairly negative, or very negative image?". Answer in autumn 2007 (EB68) and autumn 2015 (EB84).*

The other variable considered is the opinion of European citizens about the direction[16] taken by the European Union. The question posed to citizens asks whether, in their opinion, the European Union was going in the right or wrong direction. Similarly, as before, widespread dissatisfaction emerged among EU citizens. Indeed, in 2007, 45% of the responding citizens believed that the path of the Union was going in the right direction, compared to 19% who believed the opposite. Public opinion on this issue progressively worsened until 2010, when 42% of citizens expressed their optimism against 23% of negative answers. Nevertheless, the situation started to worsen after 2011, with a noticeable decline until 2015, when only 25% of citizens considered the direction taken by the EU to be right, compared to 39% of respondents who considered it to be negative and wrong.

[16] "At the present time, would you say that, in general, things are going in the right direction or in the wrong direction, in the European Union?"

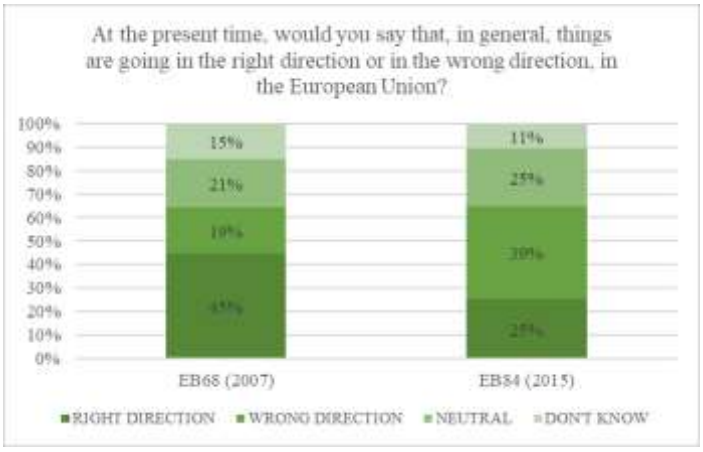


*Figure 3.3.- Eurobarometer data: "At the present time, would you say that, in general, things are going in the right direction or in the wrong direction, in the European Union?". Answer in autumn 2007 (EB68) and autumn 2015 (EB84).*

It is evident, therefore, how the eurozone crisis has eroded the levels of trust of citizens in the European Union, and popular faith in the European project itself. Indeed, the levels of trust from the fall of 2004, analyzed above, have drastically declined. The percentage of citizens who previously believed they could trust the European Union fell from 50% in 2004 to 37% in 2016, reaching its lowest peak following the outbreak of the sovereign debt crisis, when in 2012 this percentage had fallen to 31% compared with 60% of citizens who did not believe they could trust the EU. This trend is also confirmed for the other variables under examination, which show a general lack of support in European work and a detachment of citizens from the further integration process.

However, simply looking at the difference in percentage between the two periods under consideration does not allow to affirm that European public opinion after the crisis is on average statistically lower than in the previous period. To support this hypothesis, it is necessary to conduct an inferential statistic test, the so-called paired t-test, which will be used to determine whether the difference between the two periods under consideration is statistically significant. The analysis, which is the subject of the study, is detected through the frequencies of positive responses, in each member state, for the variables trust, image, and direction, in order to test the difference, in terms of distribution, before and after the crisis. This statistical procedure will be used to determine if the mean difference between the two sets of observations analyzed, over the two periods under consideration, is statistically significant. The test was conducted at a significance level of

5% ($\propto$=0.05) and 26 degrees of freedom. In the first variable of trust, it is possible to claim that the level of trust of European citizens decreased between the autumn 2007 and autumn 2015, on average, by 0.17 and standard deviation of 0.13. The paired t-test found this difference to be statistically significant (t=6.66) at 26 degrees of freedom and p-value <0.0001. Since the p-value is smaller than the significance level $\propto$=0.05 it is possible to claim that there is a difference, on average, between pre-crisis and post-crisis trust levels. The second variable observed concerns the image that citizens have of the European Union. Also, in this case, a change in positive responses between the two periods was registered. A paired t-test indicated, indeed, a difference between the positive response of the member states to the variable, on average equal to 0.12 (standard deviation 0.11), a value t= 5.71, and 26 degrees of freedom. It is possible to assert that the image of the European Union has experienced a statistically significant change, downward, given that p <0.0001. Lastly, as regards instead the consideration of the direction taken by the European Union as right or wrong, the paired test revealed a value t= 6.77 with 26 degrees of freedom and p-value <0.0001. Therefore, likewise, the difference, on average, of the European responses between the pre-crisis and the post-crisis phase equal to 0.19 (standard deviation 0.15) is statistically significant.

## 3.2. Migration crisis

Since 2015, the European Union has been facing a crisis of a different nature from the one analyzed in the previous section, but equally destabilizing for the continent. This is the so-called European refugee crisis, with thousands of people crossing Europe's borders in search of asylum. Migration flows are certainly not a new problem in European history, but it is undeniable that the number of refugees in Europe has been steadily growing, from 260,000 asylum seekers in 2010 to a peak of 1.3 million refugees in 2015 (Hooghe & Marks, 2019). Because of the civil war in Libya, Syria, and instability in several African countries, millions of people have sought to escape violence in their own countries and seek protection in the European continent, putting especially some European countries under great pressure in terms of their national capacities to process, host, and care for these asylum seekers.

Asylum is a very old institution that became an international obligation with the 1951 Geneva Convention. The Geneva Convention defines who is a refugee and what are

the legal rights and obligations of nations granting asylum. Together with the 1967 Protocol, which removed geographical and temporal restrictions from the Convention, it is the key legal document for refugees' protection. The great merit of the Geneva Convention was to create minimum norms and international standards for an institution normally regulated at the state level. Based on this precedent, the EU member states decided, in the context of a political union, that in an area without internal borders and where movement is free, it is also necessary to adopt a common approach to asylum throughout the Union (Dogachan, 2017). Indeed, the Schengen Area has a shared regime for asylum seekers, which is the Common European Asylum System, known as the Dublin system, which requires asylum seekers to process their applications in the first country they enter. However, this system was unprepared to receive such large numbers of refugees (Hooghe & Marks, 2019). For this reason, the 2015 migration crisis is not only a major and serious humanitarian crisis, but also a crisis of European governance, which challenged existing governance structures but, above all, revealed a weak pressure on member states to work for cohesion and with solidarity (Hooghe & Marks, 2019). Italy and Greece, which are the two most common entry points, were soon overloaded by the migratory flows. While these two countries dealt with asylum applications, as required by the Dublin Regulation, on other occasions, the excessively high number of migrants led to the activation of policies aimed at driving asylum seekers to travel to other European countries, especially in Northern and Western Europe. For many, this meant crossing the Balkans and returning to Europe from Hungary or Croatia. As required by European legislation, these countries also started to register asylum seekers, but at the same time some of them, such as Hungary, started to use the migrant issue as a key political campaign theme, creating an unfavorable environment for refugees. Because of this hostile climate, the miserable conditions in the camps, and the poor prospects of being able to stay in the country in the long term, most migrants also had little desire to stay in Hungary.

The migration crisis, however, unfolded and reached its peak following Germany's suspension of the Dublin Regulation. In August 2015, Germany was overwhelmed by the number of incoming asylum applications to such an extent that it opted to suspend the Dublin Regulation for Syrian refugees, deciding to proceed with direct acceptance of all those who applied (Menendez, 2016). Thus, for a few days, Germany followed a policy

of virtual open borders. However, this open border policy lasted very little. After only two weeks, overwhelmed by the sudden and exponential influx, with the main processing and reception centers collapsing, the country resumed implementing border controls and allowing people to apply for asylum at the Austrian border (Stockemer, Niemann, Unger, & Speyer, 2020). These events triggered a chain reaction of unilateral moves in which each member state of the Schengen area took autonomous decisions, often closing borders, rejecting asylum seekers, and refusing to implement a refugee relocation scheme. While in the German case the measure was justified in the name of maintaining orderly movement, in other cases it was made quite explicit that the aim was to discourage migrants. By the end of 2015, the area without internal borders had become an area with not only borders but also walls, where non-compliance with asylum practice in some cases openly violated international, European, and national humanitarian law (Menendez, 2016).

The challenges faced by the European Union after the unprecedented wave of refugees and migrants brought to light several shortcomings and gaps in the EU's asylum, external borders, and migration policies. One of the biggest problems in the existing legislation was a lack of cohesion and solidarity: for reasons of geographical location, almost all asylum claims in the EU fell on a limited number of countries, while others had no obligation to help them manage this large flow (Stockemer, Niemann, Unger, & Speyer, 2020). Urgent reform was needed to make the legal framework more efficient and resistant to migratory pressures. One of the first urgent measures taken in the aftermath of the 2015 migration wave was intended to alleviate the pressure on Greece and Italy, the countries that carried the heaviest weight of the influx. The Agenda on Migration proposed by the European Commission (13 May 2015) aimed to relocate eligible applicants for international protection to other member states, thereby ensuring a fair and balanced distribution of asylum seekers across the EU and a sharing of responsibilities. However, not all member states were willing to participate in the program, thus underlining the difficulty and resistance to assume attitudes of solidarity among the different European countries. Indeed, five Western European countries - the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Romania - declared their firm opposition to the mandatory transfer of migrants and asylum seekers. The Commission (2015) presented a new package of proposals, including an emergency relocation scheme

for 120,000 migrants in Italy, Greece, and Hungary and a new EU list of safe countries of origin. It should be noted that these two refugee relocation measures were not only ineffective but manifestly inadequate and insufficient to restore the functionality of the Greek and Italian asylum systems. By early autumn, the two-year target for total relocation was lower than the monthly arrivals in Greece (Dogachan, 2017). In any case, with these new relocation measures, the European Commission had called for an effort of solidarity to deal with the migratory pressure, which, however, met with strong opposition from some member states since the beginning. In addition to relocation, these states tended to express a general feeling of aversion to the EU's common migration policies, which are perceived as undue interference in state sovereignty and an intrusion on the right to manage immigration issues independently (Stockemer, Niemann, Unger, & Speyer, 2020). More specifically, Hungary has preferred to proceed autonomously outside the EU legislative framework, implementing a series of individual measures such as raising walls, deploying armed forces, and implementing aggressive control policies. These measures were not only contrary to existing European law but also international human rights law. Faced with this breach of obligations and duties, the European Commission, after repeated warnings without follow-up, found itself obliged to proceed with the opening of infringement proceedings against the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland (Menendez, 2016).

**Analysis of public opinion**

The migration crisis touched a raw nerve of national identity because it asked European populations to host culturally dissimilar people (Hooghe & Marks, 2019). In the autumn of 2015, immigration became the overriding issue in most EU member states and the growing support for nationalist parties made it much more difficult for national governments to create compromise agreements at the European level. The migration crisis has intensified a long-standing transnational divide resulting from immigration's entry into nation-states. This divide has taken the form of a social divide that is arguably structuring political conflict on a generational time scale, touching the nerve of national identity, and asking European populations to accommodate culturally different people. This growing concern about the migration issue is also reflected in the standard Eurobarometer surveys commissioned by the European Commission. When asked about

the most important issues[17] facing the European Union, in autumn 2015, 58% of respondents to the survey expressed immigration as the first European problem, ahead of terrorism and the economic situation (European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer EB84, 2015). However, citizens' opinions on levels of trust in the European Union, its image, and direction seem not to have undergone any major changes between the pre-crisis period in autumn 2014 (European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer EB82, 2014) and the post-crisis period in autumn 2016 (European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer EB86, 2016). Regarding the first variable, which is the trust that citizens have in the European Union just before the outbreak of the so-called migration crisis, in the standard Eurobarometer survey of autumn 2014, the percentage of positive responses was 44%, equal to the percentage of citizens who did not trust the Union (44%). In the autumn 2016 survey, the change in the percentage of people expressing their trust in the EU was minimal, with 39% of respondents. On the contrary, the percentage of people expressing distrust in the EU at the end of the migration crisis rose to 48%.

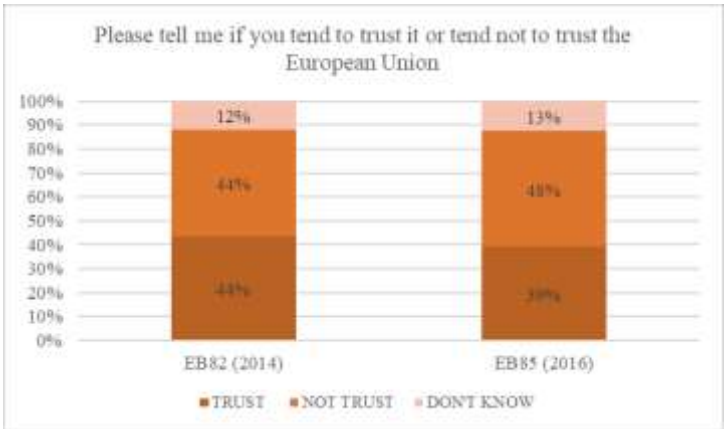


*Figure 3.4 - Eurobarometer data: "For each of the following media and institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it. The European Union". Answer in autumn 2014 (EB82) and autumn 2016 (EB85)*

On the other hand, as regards the image[18] of the European Union, at the end of 2014, 41% of citizens affirmed that they had a positive image of the Union, compared to 20% who expressed a negative opinion. In this case, however, the outstanding result is the percentage of respondents who chose the option of a neutral image (38%). This last

[17] "What do you think are the two most important issues facing the EU at the moment?"
[18] "In general, does the EU conjure up for you a very positive, neutral, fairly negative, or very negative image?"

percentage increased in the post-migration crisis to 39%, together with the percentage of people with a negative image (24%). As a result, the percentage of positive images dropped to 36% of citizens.

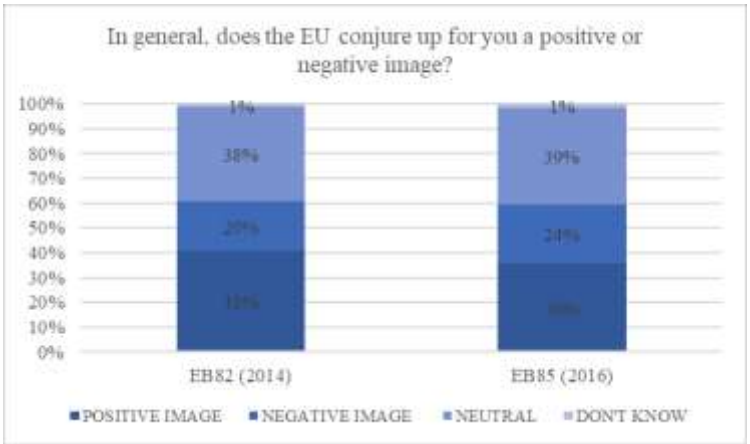


*Figure 3.5 - Eurobarometer data: "At the present time, would you say that, in general, things are going in the right direction or in the wrong direction, in the European Union?". Answer in autumn 2014 (EB82) and autumn 2016 (EB85)*

The other variable under analysis is also the opinion of citizens about the direction[19] taken by the European Union. There is a clear increase in negative answers between the survey from autumn 2014, with 34% of respondents affirming that the Union was going in the wrong direction while 31% of them considered it right and 24% with a neutral opinion. During the 2016 survey, the negative answers represented 44% of respondents against the mere 20% of them expressing that the direction taken was right.

[19] "At the present time, would you say that, in general, things are going in the right direction or in the wrong direction, in the European Union?"

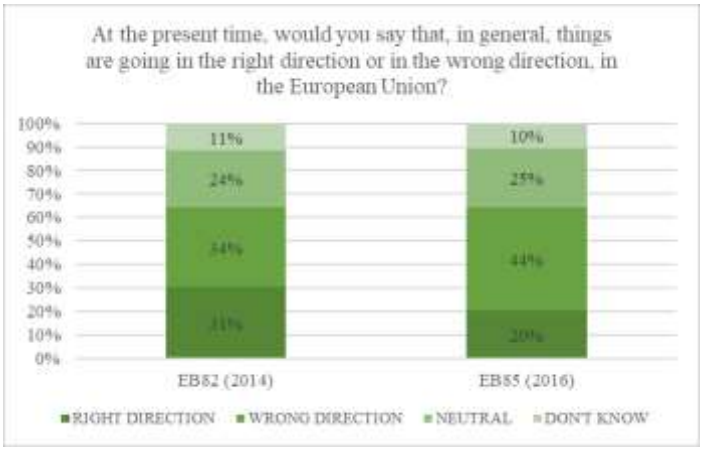


*Figure 3.6 - Eurobarometer data: "At the present time, would you say that, in general, things are going in the right direction or in the wrong direction, in the European Union?". Answer in autumn 2014 (EB82) and autumn 2016 (EB85)*

Similar to the previous case, it was necessary to conduct a paired t-test to understand whether, indeed, the change that occurred between autumn 2014 ((European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer EB82, 2014) and autumn 2016 (European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer EB86, 2016) is statistically significant for each of the variables indicated. The t-test procedure will be used to determine whether the average of the positive responses of each member state of the European Union, in the variables under observation is statistically different from the average of the positive responses collected in the subsequent period. The analysis, therefore, will be carried out on the frequencies of positive responses for each member state, for the variables of trust, image, and direction, in order to test the difference, in terms of distribution, before and after the crisis. Regarding the variable of trust, there was a difference on average between the pre-crisis and post-crisis periods equal to 0.05 (standard deviation 0.05). The statistical test $t=4.33$ at 26 degrees of freedom reported a p-value $<0.0001$. Considering this result, since the p-value is lower than the level of significance ($\propto=0.05$) it is possible to reject the null hypothesis and state that the difference between the responses obtained in 2014 and those of 2016, on average, is statistically significant. The variable regarding the image that European citizens has of the European Union itself was also subjected to the paired t-test. In this case, the difference, on average, between the two periods considered is 0.05 (standard deviation 0.05). The statistical test found this difference to be statistically significant, with a t-value $=5.38$, 26 degrees of freedom, and p-value $<0.0001$. In this scenario, it is equally possible to consider the change between the pre-crisis and post-

crisis image of citizens as, on average, statistically significant. Finally, with regard to the last variable under study, that is the perception of the direction taken by the European Union as right or wrong, it can be seen that the difference, on average, between the pre-crisis period and the post-crisis period is equal to 0.10 with a standard deviation value 0.07. At significance level $\propto$=0.05, it is also possible in this case to affirm that this change is statistically significant and not due to chance. The t-test carried out, indeed, reported the values t=7.75 with 26 degrees of freedom and a p-value <0.0001. Since this value is lower than the level of significance it is possible to reject the null hypothesis and on the contrary claim that the change that occurred is statistically significant.

## 3.3. Covid-19 crisis

The latest crisis is one that has been affecting not only Europe but also the whole world for the past two years. At the end of 2019, the first cases of people suffering from anomalous pneumonia, with unknown causes and not attributable to other pathogens, were recorded in Wuhan, China. In January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) informed about this new, highly contagious virus, completely unknown to our immune system, which had started to circulate, as part of the coronavirus family of infections. While Wuhan began to implement measures to contain the virus, with mandatory social distancing, lockdowns, and masks, the first cases of Covid-19 were beginning to be recorded also in Europe.

In February 2020, Italy was the first European country to be infected with the new circulating virus. The high contagiousness of the virus and the consequent rapidity of spread alerted the national authorities, who immediately began to implement measures to prevent it from circulating. In northern Italy, some towns were closed to impede contact with other regions and the propagation of the virus to the entire population. Between the end of February and the first days of March 2020, after Italy, an increasing number of cases were detected in other European countries and beyond. Despite the circulation of the virus and the increasing number of infections outside China, the WHO did not yet declare the pandemic. On 9 March, Italy was the first of all western countries to implement the necessary measures to contain the virus at the national level, becoming de facto an entirely protected zone, prohibiting people from leaving their homes except for proven reasons of necessity. While Italy entered the first lockdown, cases of coronavirus

outbreaks began to be recorded in most countries of the world: the WHO announced the definitive state of alert because of the now described pandemic situation. Within a few weeks, the Covid-19 infection had taken on the proportions of a pandemic that was destined to change the world and have major economic and social repercussions. Given the increasingly rapid spread of the virus, most of the countries involved have begun to adopt the only measure capable of reducing contagion, namely social distancing. On the European continent, the decision to suspend all flights to and from China was followed by the closure of schools, universities, and public buildings, the halt of commercial activities and non-essential services, restrictions on the free movement of people within national borders, and the interruption of public events. With different timing and extent, almost all European countries have therefore entered the so-called lockdown, first of all, Italy, followed by Spain and Germany, while on 17 March the EU and Schengen borders were also closed (Crnčec, 2021).

The crisis caused by the spread of the coronavirus was different from the other crises experienced by the European continent. First of all, it affected a sector, the health care system, which is not part of the Community's competencies and in which, therefore, the European Union has quite limited powers to act. On the other hand, the outbreak of the pandemic was an exogenous shock, not attributable to the misbehavior of member states, which does not concern structural problems of integration or the functioning of the institutions, nor does it call into question the foundations of the European project (Crnčec, 2021). Moreover, the virus in circulation and the restrictive measures that national governments have been forced to implement to limit its spread and consequences have led to another economic crisis for the European Union that has affected all member countries indiscriminately, albeit with different intensities. A united and coordinated European response was needed from supranational institutions with economic support measures for the nations most at risk and cooperation schemes in the field of health and research (Sebastião, 2021).

In the first period of the crisis, the European Union tried to respond to the economic difficulties by helping the member states. The first measure implemented by European institutions was the suspension of the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) which allowed member states to immediately adopt expansionary fiscal policies, financed by the issue of new public debt. The adoption of the general safeguard clause allowed flexibility in

state aid rules that limited the ability of individual governments to support businesses was necessary to protect European citizens and businesses from the economic consequences of the crisis and to support economic recovery even after the pandemic (Salvati, 2021). In addition, financial funds were made available to states, including an enterprise fund through the European Investment Bank (EIB) and a second temporary loan-based instrument using the European Stability Mechanism (ESM). In March 2020, the European Commission announced the creation of a temporary tool for the Support to Mitigate the Risks of Unemployment in the Emergency (SURE). Approved by the Council the following month, this instrument represents one of three safety nets for the member states and allows for the provision of financial assistance to the union of up to €100 billion in the form of European loans to member states. The purpose of this instrument is to provide financial assistance, alleviating the effects and direct economic, social, and health consequences of exceptional events caused by the spread of Covid-19. Any member state can apply for financial assistance under this instrument if its actual and planned public expenditure has increased due to national emergency measures implemented to address the exceptional situation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. The financial assistance takes the form of a loan provided by the Union to the affected member state. Indeed, the establishment of SURE was an expression of the Union solidarity, as member states agreed to support each other through the Union, thus providing additional financial resources through the provision of these loans (Mangiameli, 2020). Therefore, it can be considered that the financial assistance offered by SURE constitutes a real economic and social policy at the European level, to temporarily protect the member states' productive capacity and labor market, without requiring any countermeasures from the assisted state. It remains, for now, an instrument temporarily available to member states, given its expiry date on 31 December 2022, but it is highly likely that even once the health emergency is over, it will remain in the European legal order (Mangiameli, 2020). Another line of credit was created through the European Stability Mechanism to finance an immediate expansion of direct and indirect spending on health-related costs in countries that have difficulty financing their public debt on the financial markets. The Pandemic Crisis Support (PCS) represents the second specific safety net for the member states of the Eurozone. The prerequisite for the use of the funds and access to the line of credit is that the countries requesting it commits to using these supports for health care, treatment, and

prevention of the pandemic and its effects (Salvati, 2021). The third loan created for states in difficulty is the Pan-European Guarantee Fund (EGF), set up by the Euro Group through the European Investment Bank (EIB) with the support and contribution of the member states of the Union. The objective is to help companies affected by the crisis, through the provision of almost €25 billion available to small and medium-sized enterprises in the form of loans, guarantees, collateral, and other financial instruments. The fund, therefore, serves to ensure liquidity to companies in the short term, to cope with the crisis, and to continue their growth and development in the medium and long term (Salvati, 2021).

The most innovative measure to deal with the crisis caused by the spread of the virus, however, is the creation of a fund financed by common bonds for economic recovery. As a matter of fact, on May 27, 2020, the Commission proposed the introduction of a new temporary recovery instrument called and known as Next Generation EU, which was to be introduced within the reinforced long-term budget of the European Union for the period 2021-2027. Behind this Commission proposal, lies the pact reached between French President Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who had announced a joint proposal for a European pandemic recovery fund, proposing a €500 billion program to be delivered in the form of grants. This proposal met with strong opposition from the four so-called frugal states, namely Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Sweden, which instead presented their own proposal based on the principle of *"loans for loans"* according to which, unlike grants, the money would have to be repaid by the member states (Crnčec, 2021). In reaching a compromise between the two sides, the European Commission proposed the Next Generation EU, with €500 billion in the form of grants and €250 billion available as loans, for a total of €750 billion to ensure post-pandemic recovery. The proposal of the Commission, discussed in the Council, was subsequently modified not so much in the total amount of the recovery fund, but more in the division of expenditures. Drawing on this amendment, the European Parliament and the Council eventually reached an agreement on the recovery package in November 2020, maintaining the €750 billion proposed by the Commission but reducing the €500 billion available for grants to €390 billion and increasing loans to €360 billion. the Next Generation EU is the tool that will help states in their post-Covid-19 recovery, aiding in the construction of a European Union that is greener, more digital, more

resilient, and more ready for present and future challenges. The core part of this innovative new EU instrument is the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), which includes the previously mentioned grants and loans amounting to a total of €672.5 billion (€312.5 billion in grants and €360 billion in loans). These funds are to be distributed to member states based on national recovery and resilience plans prepared by each member state, which set out reform and investment programs for the years 2021-2023, in cooperation with the European Commission and line with the key objectives of the general agenda, such as green transition; digital transformation; economic cohesion, productivity and competitiveness; social and territorial cohesion; health, economic, social and institutional resilience; and policies for the next generation. The remaining €77.5 billion are intended to strengthen European programs and policies, including cohesion policy with the new REACT-EU initiative; the Horizon Europe program for research and development; rural development; the Fair Transition Fund and RescEU. The Next Generation EU has been included by the European institutions within the Multiannual Financial Framework for the period 2021-2027, thus ensuring the management of funds provided through the European budget, with the collaboration and presence not only of the Council and the Commission but also of the European Parliament (Salvati, 2021).

**Analysis of public opinion**

This health crisis and the European response have also been politically very salient, having touched the lives of every single citizen, both directly through the virus and indirectly through containment measures and economic consequences. Unexpectedly, however, this politicization did not lead to a decline in citizens' trust in the European Union. After the spring of 2016 where citizens expressing a positive opinion was 36% (European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer EB86, 2016), in the Standard Eurobarometer surveys, there was a slow but gradual increase in levels of citizens' trust[20] in the European Union and this growth did not stop with the advent of the current health crisis. In the fall 2019 survey (European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer EB92, 2019), just before the outbreak and rapid spread of the coronavirus the percentage of positive responses, and thus expressing trust in the European Union was 50% with instead of 40% negative responses. In the standard Eurobarometer survey of spring 2021, while

[20] "For each of the following media and institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it. (Question asked about the European Union)"

the percentage of distrust in the EU remained the same (40%), the majority of citizens reaffirmed their trust, with an increased 53% positive responses (European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer EB95, 2021).

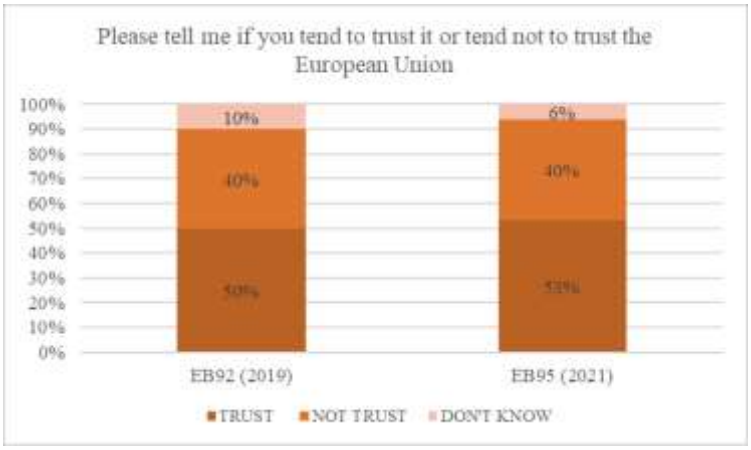


*Figure 3.7 - Eurobarometer data: "For each of the following media and institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it. The European Union". Answer in autumn 2019 (EB92) and spring 2021 (EB95)*

The same upward trend is identified in the image[21] that European citizens have of the European Union. In the spring of 2016, the majority of citizens said they had a neutral image of the European Union (38%, compared to 35% positive and 25% negative responses). This variable continued to grow from 2016 to 2019 when just before the start of the pandemic were registered 45% positive responses in the surveys compared to 13% of citizens who said they had a negative image of the European Union and 38% neutral opinions. If only slightly, we can also see a growth in this variable of the percentage of positive responses, which in the spring 2021 survey reached 46% against 37% of negative responses.

[21] "In general, is your image of the EU very positive, quite positive, neutral, quite negative, or very negative?"

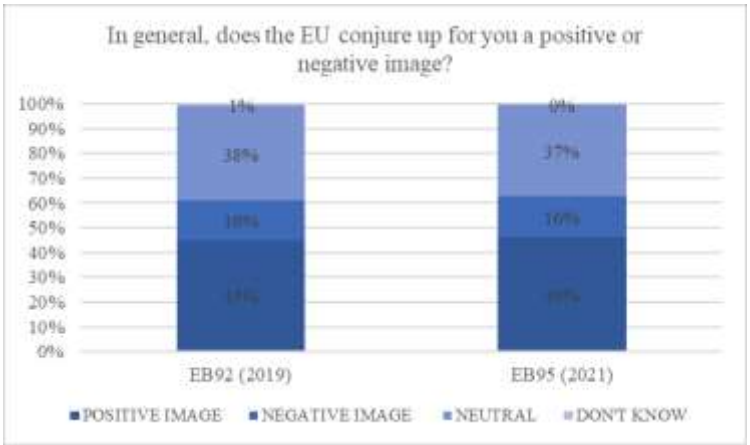


*Figure 3.8 - Eurobarometer data: "At the present time, would you say that, in general, things are going in the right direction or in the wrong direction, in the European Union?". Answer in autumn 2019 (EB92) and spring 2021 (EB95)*

In any case, among the variables analyzed, the one that has shown the most positive change is the one regarding the direction[22] taken by the European Union. In this case, the percentage of citizens in the European Union who in 2016 believed that the union was going in the right direction was just 28%, compared to the 51% who believed the opposite. As with the other variables analyzed, it is possible to see that from 2016 through 2019 there has been positive growth in the responses of European citizens. Indeed, positive responses to this question reached 36% in the fall of 2019 compared to 41% of citizens who felt the direction was wrong. Surprisingly, however, the percentage of citizens who considered the direction taken as the right one in the standard Eurobarometer survey in spring 2021 rose to 46%. With the same number of negative responses (41% in both surveys), the figure that captures the attention is the halving of the percentage of neutral responses from 12% in 2019 to 6% in 2021.

[22] "At the present time, would you say that, in general, things are going in the right direction or in the wrong direction, in the European Union?"

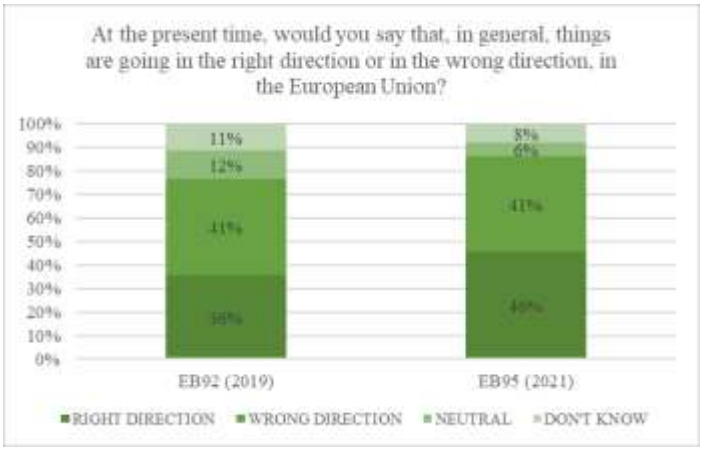


*Figure 3.9 - Eurobarometer data: "At the present time, would you say that, in general, things are going in the right direction or in the wrong direction, in the European Union?". Answer in autumn 2019 (EB92) and spring 2021 (EB95)*

In the third and last crisis experienced by the European continent, it is also possible to detect a change between the opinion of citizens before the outbreak of the crisis and the current opinion. But, as mentioned above, looking only at values does not really explain whether this difference is statistically significant. For this purpose, a paired t-test was conducted for each variable under observation. This statistical procedure will be used to determine whether the mean difference between the two sets of observations analyzed, in the two periods considered, is statistically significant. The analysis, the object of the study, is detected through the frequencies of positive responses, in each member state, for the variables trust, image, and direction, to test the difference, in terms of distribution, before and after the crisis. The first variable concerns the trust given by European citizens to the European Union. Between the year before the spread of the coronavirus, autumn 2019 (Standard Eurobarometer EB92), and the spring 2021 (Standard Eurobarometer EB95) it is possible to notice a difference on average in the levels of trust equal to −0.4 and the standard deviation 0.06. In this case, the statistical test reported the value t= −2.97 with 26 degrees of freedom and p-value <0.006. Therefore, also in this case, as in the previous ones, it is possible to affirm that the change in the levels of trust between the pre-crisis and the post-crisis period is statistically significant since the p-value is lower than the level of significance $\propto$=0.05. However, it should be noted that there is a big difference concerning the other crises in question. The statistical value t, in this case, is negative. This occurs when the second value being tested is higher than the first value. In this particular case, this distinction underlines that, unlike the other crises, the change

that took place was not downward. The Covid-19 crisis has led to a statistically significant increase in the levels of trust of the citizens of the European Union. The second variable under observation is the image that citizens have of the European Union. Similarly, it can be seen that the difference on average between the responses obtained in 2019 and those collected in 2021 is −0.01 (standard deviation 0.06). In this case, however, it is possible to claim that this change is actually not significant. The t-test conducted found the difference to be not statistically significant, reporting a value of t= −1.02, 26 degrees of freedom, and a p-value <0.315. On the contrary to the other tests conducted, being this value higher than the significance level $\propto$=0.05, it is not possible to reject the null hypothesis while it must be considered this change in the opinion of the citizens as not statistically significant. Finally, the same paired t-test was conducted for citizens' consideration of the direction taken by the European Union and its change between the period before and after the Covid-19 health crisis. The difference on average between the two periods in question is 0.10 with a standard deviation of 0.10. The statistical test reported a value of t = −5.37, with 26 degrees of freedom and a p-value <0.0001. It is, therefore, possible to state that the difference on average between the period before and after the crisis is statistically significant.

# Conclusion

For the European Union, crises have been very important since the first steps of the integration process. However, while in the early years of the integration process they mainly concerned political elites, national governments, and supranational institutions, today they are also increasingly involving European citizens. On the one hand, each challenge that the European Union has faced has somehow and with varying intensity led the European institutions to respond by carrying out reforms of the institutional and organizational structure of the European Union, transfers of new competencies, as well as the introduction of new political instruments and methodologies in order to maintain the stability and ensure the further development of the European project that was being challenged. Nevertheless, throughout the last twenty years of the European integration process, the European Union has experienced a series of crises that have strongly shaken this organizational structure and the intrinsic values and perspectives of the European system itself. These emerging crises of the new millennium can be considered very different from the crises previously experienced during the development of the European Union. They are multidimensional in nature, with the ability to expand and spread across various sectors within the European Union, as well as beyond its jurisdiction. The multidimensionality of these new crises, including the economic and sovereign debt crisis, the refugee crisis, and the recent health crisis due to Covid-19, has not only translated into their ability to affect different sectors at the same time but also into the difficulty of institutions to contain the resulting consequences and diminish the possibility that they will undermine and destroy the entire system of rules and values that constitute the foundations of the European project. Challenging and affecting precisely the most important sectors and areas of the European system together with the unveiling of the limits of the institution and the system itself, in the face of these crises the cost of inaction and the very possibility of disintegration become very high and worrying.

The economic and financial crisis has disrupted for the first time the system of the single European currency, the migration crisis has called into question the cooperation and solidarity between states, while the Covid-19 crisis has certainly highlighted the weaknesses of the division of competencies between the nation-states and the European Union. However, on the other hand, the new crises of the last twenty years have also

given impetus to the European political debate which nowadays involves, influences, and is influenced by the citizens of the member states. Therefore, if from the supranational point of view these new crises have pushed institutions to act, more or less effectively and, on some occasions, to carry out reforms, implementing new policies and instruments to support the recovery; from the point of view of citizens, these moments have triggered the mobilization of the masses and the progressive politicization of European issues. Faced with this evolution and the growing importance that European citizens have acquired after the Maastricht Treaty in the very process of European integration, the research aimed to investigate the actual consequences of this prolonged period of crisis on European public opinion and on the support that citizens reserve for the European Union as a whole. With respect to this, classical integration theories have always portrayed citizens as marginal actors in the development of the European Union. Their role in the process of European integration was completely ignored by intergovernmentalists, according to whom citizens were involved in the short-term politics that should never have affected cooperation agreements between member states. These agreements, on the contrary, were purely based on national economic interests and issues considered distant by the general public. Whereas with intergovernmentalists the public is completely ignored, with neofunctionalists, citizens themselves become part of the spillover mechanism that characterizes European integration. The self-reinforcing process of supranational institutions would have brought to light all the benefits of cooperation, which would have consequently affected the entire population. In the long run, therefore, citizens would have developed feelings of affiliation, support, and identification with supranational institutions. These theories, namely neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism, have been developed since the first three decades of integration when the creation of the legal and institutional system of the European Union was based on economic purposes, on the promise of stability and peace among member states, and the guarantee of future prosperity for the entire European continent. While implications for most people were limited or non-transparent, public opinion was quiescent, and tacit support for the integration process and the European project, in general, was presumed. However, as soon as the signing and difficult ratification of the Maastricht Treaty began, it became apparent that this assumption was about to change dramatically. The transformation of the European Communities into the European Union,

with the introduction of new competencies, policies, and instruments placed in the hands of the Union, and a greater cession by member states of their sovereignty in favor of the supranational institution, has led to an increasing politicization and Europeanization of public affairs that have not gone completely undetected in the eyes of public opinion. The Maastricht Treaty and the near defeat in the referenda held in France and Denmark sparked a new debate on the relationship between the process of European integration and the citizens who participate in that process. Therefore, it became evident that the integration process could no longer be managed and negotiated by the elites, both supranational and intergovernmental, but had to receive the support of European citizens. These considerations prompted the emergence of postfunctionalist theory, which, contrary to neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism, considers citizens as having a predominant and active role in the advancement of the integration process. According to postfunctionalists, the increasing politicization of problems and the growing supranational response to such critical moments have led to a growing involvement of citizens in European affairs, with the consequence that this widespread dissent could undermine the foundations of the project and could, on the contrary, represent the probability of disintegration. However, although Maastricht marked the beginning of the phase of so-called constraining dissensus and an increasing politicization and polarization of public opinion, subsequent crises have only enhanced this tendency. The subsequent failure of the Constitutional Treaty by the public and the response to the successive crises of the last two decades have made this process tangible and have severely challenged the support that European citizens give to the European project and the pursuit of integration. Therefore, contrary to the optimism of the neofunctionalists and the ignorance of the intergovernmentalists, the postfunctionalists predict that this increasing politicization of European affairs would result in the limitation of the process of European integration, with the real and actual possibility that the general public would become progressively less supportive of the European project and consequently would become so disconnected as to make disintegration plausible.

Against this background, the research sought to analyze whether crises have actually resulted in a change in citizens' levels of support for the European Union, thus analyzing the economic, migration, and health crises of recent years. Support for the European Union is defined as positive feelings toward the EU and the European project,

represented here by citizens' levels of trust in the EU, the image they have, and their perception of the direction taken by supranational institutions. By analyzing the change in these variables between before and after the crisis, the purpose was to primarily understand whether such a change had occurred and consequently to comprehend in which direction citizens' opinions have changed in response to the crises. To answer this question, an analysis of the change in each variable in the European responses was first conducted, on average, between the pre-crisis and post-crisis periods. However, looking only at the difference in European responses between the two periods in question is not sufficient to say whether a statistically significant change actually occurred. To this end, a statistical inferential test was performed that would give a measure of the extent to which the change was due to the impact of the crisis. For each identified variable of trust, image, and directions, a paired t-test was conducted comparing the positive responses at the national level before the crisis and the positive responses collected in the period identified as the end reference time. This analysis, however, does not take into account external variables that may have influenced, along with the advent of the crises, the change between the two periods under consideration for each crisis. Therefore, this research is merely exploratory and should then be reinforced by further multivariate statistical analyses that take these external factors into account.

Accordingly, on the basis of the analysis carried out, it was observed that the crises experienced by the European Union in the last twenty years have resulted in changes in the levels of trust expressed by European citizens, in their image, and their conception of the direction taken by the European Union. Indeed, the t-tests conducted resulted in almost all of them supporting the hypothesis that the opinion of European citizens before the crisis is, on average, different from that expressed, on average, following the crisis. Now that the existence of a change in public opinion in response to crises has been established, it is equally important to underline the direction of this variation. After all, if, as mentioned above, post-functionalists believed that greater politicization would lead to greater discontent and levels of distrust in the European project; neofunctionalists believed that in the long run, crises would also result in growing support for the European project and a desire for further integration among the general public. The outcome of the analysis of the three crises under examination is very peculiar since it was possible to observe that this change was neither equal nor comparable not only in the size of the

change itself but also, and above all, in the direction taken. Therefore, while the controversial management of the sovereign debt crisis in the context of the financial crisis begun in 2008 triggered a process of increasing distrust and distance of citizens towards the European Union, through the refugee crisis this drastic decline seems to have faded until it was reversed in the last health crisis. Despite the inability to find a common and coordinated response at the European level to the unexpected flow of migrants in 2015, and despite the fact that this crisis touched an important aspect of national identity, requiring the acceptance of different people, the effects of these events seem to have been less overwhelming at the public opinion level. Nevertheless, the most surprising result of the research is that this downward trend in levels of trust, image, and consideration of the direction taken by the European Union was reversed during the recent health crisis caused by the spread of the Covid-19 virus. Citizens, compared to 2019 surveys, have increased their trust in the European Union, improved its image, and considered the direction taken to be the right one. Identifying the reasons behind this turnaround is admittedly not an easy task, and it is also probably premature to be able to do so, given that the crisis resulting from the spread of the coronavirus cannot yet be considered completely over. On the other hand, however, it is possible to point out some substantial differences between the previous crises and this latest health crisis, which probably led to this inversion of direction. Certainly, the Covid-19 crisis can be defined as an exogenous crisis, which affected all European and non-European countries indiscriminately, and which made it clear that some member countries, in particular, would not be able to face the economic consequences of restrictive measures on their own. Furthermore, this crisis, which has shaken the entire continent, as well as the rest of the world, has primarily affected a sector such as health, which is not part of the European Union's competencies but remains under the jurisdiction and responsibility of individual member states, revealing once again the institutional and organizational limits of the European Union, which, faced with the initial problem, found itself almost disarmed. Restrictions on personal mobility and on public activities were implemented by national governments, but the economic implications of these measures and the impact they had on member states generated the need for unified action and response. Probably what emerges, however, is the predominant involvement of the European Union, especially from the point of view of economic rather than political unity. But neither these difficulties nor

limitations have resulted in an increased level of distrust among citizens, who instead seemed to have regained, albeit slightly, their trust in the European project. The shock of this crisis may have shown also to people that member states and their national governments would not have been able to recover without the help of European institutions, solidarity between states, and coordinated response. It is, therefore, possible that this has led not only national governments but also the citizens themselves to rediscover the need for a supranational organization and a Union of states, based on common values and objectives. Of course, it is perhaps too premature to affirm that this crisis has led to an increase in citizens' feelings of trust and support for the integration process, but the data are comforting and, at least for now, have confirmed this direction.

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