

Why Europe's crises in the Eurozone and Crimea are a boon for those who teach European integration

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*Europe has faced a series of crises in the last decade, most recently with the Eurozone crisis and the Russian intervention in Crimea. **Andrew Glencross** writes that while the practical implications of these crises can be worrying, they also provide opportunities for those responsible for teaching European integration to students. He argues that ultimately what EU crises teach us is that – for better or worse – we are all in this together.*



It was former British Prime Minister Harold Wilson who said that a week is a long time in politics. This truism is particularly appropriate for the [politics surrounding European integration](#), a subject that seemingly is forever associated with one crisis or another. When it is not the case that a referendum on an EU treaty has failed, then it is the spectre of a default within the Eurozone, or else the problem concerns foreign policy, as with Ukraine today.

Paradoxically, events like these that seemingly undermine confidence in integration ought to be embraced by those teaching in this area. This does not mean that teaching during a crisis is without its own issues, as lecturers have particular responsibilities to instruct students in order to enable them to make their own judgements on what is going on. To do so means thinking European, without necessarily promoting more integration.

The first responsibility it seems is to specify what kind of crisis is at hand. This task involves identifying whether it is a matter exogenous to the EU or else the result of causes internal to the integration process, or even a mixture of both. The [rhetoric of emergency](#) surrounding the contemporary EU conjures up the notion of a dysfunctional system – it is hard not to think this way given the creation of a single currency without a corresponding banking union.



Yet the EU fundamentally depends on the capacities and resources of its constituent parts, the Member States. At times, therefore, the source of the problem originates in national politics rather than inter-state bickering. Most egregiously, the need for bailouts in Cyprus or Ireland can be traced back to their political elites' willingness to support reckless if not downright illegal banking practices.

From a pedagogical perspective, EU crises are a boon as they are inherently instructive. Institutions' and leaders' responses to a political emergency provide highly mediated case studies that illustrate fundamental causal dynamics. The need to shore up monetary union, for instance, demonstrated not just the political power Germany wields, but also the mutual self-interest that economic interdependence brings. Similarly, the EU's awkward position when dealing with Russia over Ukraine reveals the constraints of decision-making by consensus and the limitations of expecting soft power to solve neighbourhood disputes.

However much fast-moving policy developments conspire against research findings yet to go into print, the level of interest generated by portentous headlines and worried commentary is an ally to teaching what can at times be a

dry and jargon-laden topic. As a result, a good crisis can counteract the knowledge deficit that surrounds the EU. Yet provocative and dispiriting commentary – if not [downright europessimism](#) – can also be unhelpful by magnifying the threat represented by any particular crisis. In fact the [EU is a robust political system](#), even if it does not have an instant solution to every challenge it faces. In this context, perhaps the thorniest problem in teaching European integration during a crisis is that of attributing responsibility and identifying potential remedies.

It is natural to be asked and to seek to answer the question of who or what is to blame for pathologies of integration, such as the flaws in monetary union or weaknesses in foreign policy. Apportioning blame is undoubtedly an exercise in critical thinking, which makes this a great topic for seminar discussion or exams. Here the priority must be to equip students with the perspectives and evidence necessary to make an informed decision over what has led to a particular political crisis. A lecturer is not there to settle such matters peremptorily but rather ought to provide guidance concerning root causes as well as the promises and pitfalls of suggested solutions.

Whether it is the issue of bailing out a country within the Eurozone or responding to Russian military intervention in Crimea, EU-related crises are inherently multi-faceted affairs. Political differences arise not just over left/right ideological splits, but also because of conflicting national interests at stake.

This mixture points to the way that the policy questions raised by European integration are [often orthogonal](#) to the traditional left/right concerns of West European politics. Consequently, there remains an important job to be done in expanding the political repertoire of students in order to think EU-wide when considering what unites and divides institutions and political actors. Thinking European is thus not the same as promoting more Europe as the solution to what ails integration. Ultimately, what EU crises teach us is that – for better or for worse – we are all in this together.

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