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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Cotta, M. (2018). Vulnerability, Resilience, and Responses: The European Elites System under a Prolonged Crisis. *Historical Social Research*, 43(4), 33-53. <https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.43.2018.4.33-53>

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# Vulnerability, Resilience, and Responses: The European Elites System under a Prolonged Crisis

*Maurizio Cotta\**

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**Abstract:** »Angreifbarkeit, Resilienz und Reaktionen: Das europäische Elitensystem in andauernder Krise«. The article discusses the consequences for the European political system, and more specifically for its elites, of the great recession of the years after 2008. After having defined the concept of European Elites System (EES) and specified its main components, the article analyses the differential impact of the crisis upon the different elite components. Special attention is paid to the difference between those European elite groups (domestic elites and members of the European Council and of the Council of the European Union), which are directly or indirectly accountable to national electorates and the other elite groups (such as the components of the Commission and of the ECB) who are much more protected against popular protest and dissatisfaction. This has produced a different degree of vulnerability and instability across these groups, but also important differences in the responses they have given to the problems arising from the crisis. These consequences are then analysed from the point of view of the democratic quality of the Union.

**Keywords:** European elites, great recession, European Union, national politics, technocracy, vulnerability.

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## 1. The EU and the Crisis Years

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What has happened to the political system of the EU, its political elites, governance and representation processes during the troubled years of 2008-2017? The impact of these crisis years upon national politics has been thoroughly analysed and discussed (Bartels and Bermeo 2013; Dassoneville and Hooghe 2015; Hernandez and Kriesi 2016). Increased electoral volatility, rise of new or non-mainstream parties, emergence of populist leaders, government crises, etc., have been the widely diffused consequences. They fit fairly well within our understanding of national representative systems: insufficient responses to new rising demands produce (softer or harder) adaptations on the supply side. The inertia of established elites opens the space for new elites (Pareto 1915).

Yet, as most national political systems of Europe are today strongly embedded in the EU institutional framework, a simple analysis of domestic systems is not

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enough to fully understand the impact of the crisis years. It is necessary to explore in more detail what has happened to the political system of the EU as a whole. Its system of governance and representation is clearly more complex than the national ones, yet equally relevant as it impinges significantly upon them.

Given the important new powers gained since the Maastricht treaty and in more recent years by the central institutions of the EU, the European system of governance has been called repeatedly to act in response to the crises of the last years. The economic and financial crisis has challenged with special intensity the decision-making bodies of the EU, but the immigration crisis and, to a lesser extent, the security crises at the borders of Europe have also solicited the response of the Union. Although reactions to the crises have been judged in general slow to come and often not sufficiently bold (“too little too late” has been a frequent complaint), a significant array of measures have been adopted by the central institutions of the EU and through the joint action of the member states. The most important measures include the creation of two emergency funds (the EFSF, or European Financial Stability Facility, and the ESM, or European Stability Mechanism), the *Six pack* (a revision of the Stability and Growth Pact), the *Fiscal compact* (the Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance in the Economic and Monetary Union), the *Quantitative Easing* and other non-conventional actions by the European Central Bank, the so-called *Juncker plan* (European Fund for Strategic Investments) and the new flexibility in the application of the Growth and Stability Pact.

Even without a detailed discussion of these measures, we can say that significant efforts were put in place through supranational and intergovernmental instruments to “restore fiscal order” and to fight the economic downturn in a serious recession period. We should also pay attention to the specific mix of measures adopted: it is easy to see that the main assistance measures for the countries in greater difficulties have been implemented through nationally coordinated instruments of solidarity (EFSF and ESM) or by a technocratic institution as the European Central Bank (ECB) (the LTROs and QE). The Commission, the most supranational institution of the EU, has not been able to go much beyond a largely defensive position to protect the “status quo” of the Union threatened by national efforts to cope with the crisis, or has adopted some very limited instruments of supranational solidarity.

Each of the above mentioned measures, rather different in their nature and timing, has been inspired and guided, predominantly by a different institutional authority of the Union (the European Council, the Commission, the ECB) and (we can assume) reflects how the different components of the European Union political system were challenged by the crisis, and what were their strengths and weaknesses in developing a response. In a more systemic perspective, it seems plausible to suggest that the quality of the responses reflects the fact that the EU has only weak European-level mechanisms of political representation and its truly “supranational government” is by consequence seriously impaired

(Cotta 2018b). It is therefore not surprising that the strongest challenges were, *pro tempore*, faced via other conduits. These on the one hand reflect the continuing willingness of the European elites to save the Union and to resort to extraordinary means when a crisis endangers seriously its survival; but on the other hand also show a strong reluctance to endow the main supranational institution of the Union, the Commission, with more direct and powerful means of intervention.

To go beyond these schematic answers it is necessary to understand in greater detail how things have worked politically in the Union during this period. I propose in this essay to check how the different components of the political system of the EU and in particular its ruling elites have been touched by the crisis. I will focus particularly on the economic and fiscal crisis as the immigration and security crises are still much more unresolved.

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## 2. How and Where Was the Crisis Politically Felt?

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Since 2008 the prolonged economic and financial crisis has affected individually all the European countries, producing recession, unemployment, a rise in the poverty rates, crises and defaults in the banking sector, and pressure on sovereign debts. At the same time it has extended its negative effects upon the European Union as a whole, endangering the common market, putting under serious pressure the common currency and more generally threatening the cohesion of the Union. It is justified to rate it as the most serious crisis the Union has experienced since its creation. We must then try to understand what has been the political impact of all this for the politics of the European Union; more specifically how the crisis was felt by the political elites who rule the Union, and which were their answers.

The political impact of economic downturns is not a new theme where national politics is concerned. The influence of economic factors upon voting behaviour has been thoroughly analysed, especially in the context of electoral studies (Lewis-Beck, Nadeau and Elias 2008; Bellucci and Lewis-Beck 2011). Overall, the hypothesis that economic bad times will negatively affect the incumbent parties and leaders is broadly confirmed (Lewis-Beck and Nadeau 2011; Kriesi 2012). This does not exclude however the mediating role of other variables such as the organisational strength of parties, the entrenchment of cleavages, the leadership factor, etc. The impact of economic factors at the macro level, upon the party system for example, has received less systematic attention and the findings are not yet conclusive (Tavits 2006, 2008). Recently attempts have been made to establish the effects of a major crisis such as the Great Recession both upon electoral behaviour and with regard to party system changes (Hernandez and Kriesi 2016).

Quite understandably, given the predominantly state-centric perspective adopted in political science, the impact of economic and other crises has normally been discussed with regards to national political systems and their workings (Talving 2017). In this paper the focus will rather be on that “compound” (Fabbrini 2007; Cotta 2012, 2014) or “multilevel” (Hooghe and Marks 2001) polity which is the EU. That such a perspective should deserve some attention is warranted by the fact that sixty years after its foundation the European Union is not just the pure sum of “N” member states but is a political system in its own right which significantly impacts the national systems (Hicks and Hoyland 2011). This means that the dynamics of this system is on the one hand strongly influenced by the national dynamics of the member states (MS) (in this sense it can be said that the EU “stands on the shoulders” of the MSs) but on the other hand has its own specific “life,” which needs to be observed and understood. The point of view I propose to adopt here is that of political elites. The European Union – like any developed political system – depends on a group of people who concentrate a disproportionate amount of influence (Higley 2010). In order to explore how they have been affected by the turmoil of these crisis years, it is first necessary to briefly discuss the structure of the European Union elite. As we will see it displays some very peculiar features, but also others that are not totally different from those of national systems, especially if they have a federal structure. Its study may prove important for the development of a more complete theory of political elites as it may help to understand better an increasingly relevant grey area of politics between international and national dimension (Cotta 2018).

Given the highly peculiar institutional structure of the European polity, its political elite also has a particularly complex configuration. In fact, rather than talking of a European elite we should discuss a *system of elites* made of a plurality of components: I will call this the *European Elites System* (EES). Which are its most relevant components? The *first component* of the EES is the composite set of the member states’ national elites (28 today, 27 after the implementation of Brexit), which play not only a national role but also a European one as their national preferences (and decisions) set the stage for the process that will lead to European decisions (Moravcsik 2013). This component is also directly responsible for the “production” of the *second component* of the EES: the members of the European Council and of the Council of the European Union (formerly the Council of Ministers). As the two institutions are composed of the incumbent members of national governments – heads of governments or heads of states in the European Council, ministers in the Council – the members of this elite component have what we might call a hybrid nature. They play, at the same time, high level and very demanding national roles and equally important European ones. A similar position is held by the Governors of the national banks, who are part of the Governing Council of the ECB, while maintaining their position at home. The important feature of this elite compo-

ment is that the European institutional role of its members lasts only as long as their national institutional positions are maintained. When they lose their national job they lose also the European one. The *third component* consists of those who work exclusively in the central institutions of the Union: political members and high bureaucrats of the European Commission, members of the European Parliament, members of the Executive Board of the ECB, and judges of the European Court of Justice. The members of this elite component have undoubtedly important national roots and linkages, as their recruitment into the supranational institutions is significantly connected to their national identity. However, their institutional affiliation is limited to one of the European institutions. While they are serving in Europe they do not maintain a national institutional position. Their bases of legitimacy are different: they have a democratic nature in some cases, a technocratic one (resting on specialized expertise) in others.

Because of its composite nature, the state of the EES and, presumably, also its reactions are bound to be affected by a plurality of influences. In order to study the impact of the crisis the different components must be treated separately as their life depends from different institutional mechanisms. Only in a second step can one discuss the systemic outcomes of these changes.

The starting assumption is that a crisis of significant severity such as the crisis (or crises) of this period should have challenged the incumbent elites and increased their vulnerability. The support and legitimacy they had enjoyed in normal times may prove insufficient in hard times. The second assumption is that, given the different nature of the components of the EES, this impact will presumably be asymmetric. The vulnerability (i.e. the probability of elite members losing their position in the institutional circle of power) should be highest where the linkage with public opinion is more direct and lower when it is less direct. This does not mean however that the authority of technocratic elites would not be challenged, but in more indirect ways compared to democratic elites.

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### 3. National Level Effects

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In view of the fact that the most effective democratic mechanisms of reaction (via representation and accountability) to the problems and demands of the population(s) of the European Union are still national, we must start from the nation-level effects and then move to European indirect and direct effects. To assess the vulnerability of national political elites I will concentrate my attention on the consequences of elections upon national parliaments and cabinets and compare the crisis period (2008-2016) with the pre-crisis period (1995-2007).

With regard to parliamentary and governmental elites, the first indicator I will use is a *volatility index* and check to what extent it has changed over time.

The second indicator is the *cabinet incumbency effect*, which is the electoral losses or gains sustained by the incumbent government parties at each election. I will then analyse *prime ministerial vulnerability*, i.e. the frequency of changes in prime minister after an election.

The volatility index (or Pedersen index) is currently used to evaluate the degree of stability and institutionalisation of party systems and electorates. The expectation is that in a crisis period voters should be more inclined to defect (especially from governing or more in general from established parties) and to transfer their preferences to opposition and new parties. The total volatility is thus expected to increase.

**Table 1:** Electoral Volatility in Parliamentary Elections (Pre-2004 EU Members)

Country	1995-2007	2008-2016	Absolute Increase	Increase (%)
Austria	11.1	17.0	5.9	53.0
Belgium	11.3	12.8	1.5	13.5
Denmark	9.9	15.2	4.3	53.2
Finland	10.0	11.5	1.5	14.7
France	20.0	23.6	3.6	17.8
Germany	8.1	15.2	7.1	87.9
Greece	6.2	24.4	18.3	296.9
Ireland	8.9	27.2	18.4	207.3
Italy	13.6	24.0	10.4	75.9
Netherlands	21.2	19.7	-1.5	-7.2
Portugal	11.4	11.1	-0.2	-2.0
Spain	8.5	12.1	3.7	43.2
Sweden	15.7	9.8	-5.9	-37.7
UK	8.1	12.7	4.7	57.7
Average volatility	11.7	16.9	5.2	44.2

Source: Emanuele (2015), updated by the author. Cyprus, Luxemburg, and Malta not included.

If we analyse first the member states before the 2004 enlargement the results indicate an increased volatility in 11 of the 14 countries considered (Table 1). Greece and Ireland with volatility tripling from the first to the second period are the two most striking cases, followed by Germany and Italy, then by the UK, Austria, Denmark, and Spain. Sweden and to a lesser extent the Netherlands and Portugal, show on the contrary a decreased volatility.

**Table 2:** Electoral Volatility in Parliamentary Elections (CEE Countries)

Country	1995-2007	2008-2016	Absolute increase	Percentage increase (%)
Bulgaria	42.9	34.5	-8.4	-19.5
Croatia	27.5	24.7	-2.8	-10.2
Czech Republic	20.7	38.3	17.6	85.2
Estonia	48.5	17.6	-30.9	-63.7
Hungary	20.5	21.5	1.0	2.0
Latvia	57.4	48.1	-9.3	-16.2
Lithuania	57.3	47.5	-9.8	-17.0
Poland	46.3	23.2	-23.2	-50.0
Romania	29.2	32.5	3.3	11.5
Slovakia	59.2	29.6	-29.6	-50.0
Slovenia	25.5	42.6	17.1	66.9
Average volatility	<b>39.5</b>	<b>32.9</b>	<b>-6.7</b>	-16.9

Source: Author's calculations.

The results for the 11 CEE countries show an opposite trend: in seven of these countries the volatility decreased (in some cases very significantly) (Table 2). Only in four countries (and especially in two) there were increases. This suggests that the crisis had no substantial effect on these political systems. However, one has to remember that the first period under analysis is still very close to the initial phase of democratic transition and the difficult process of creating and consolidating a competitive party system. It is therefore not so surprising that high volatility rates characterized that period. The lower levels of volatility in the subsequent period (but still much higher than their Western counterparts) suggest to use these data with great prudence. The quantitative analysis conducted with measures of electoral volatility could be improved by more qualitative instruments, such as by exploring to what extent the increased volatility is due to the rise of new parties or of parties that are critical of the establishment and/or of Europe, instead of shifts between established parties (Powell and Tucker 2014).

If we limit our analysis to the first group of countries, we see that while volatility has increased more or less everywhere during the second period, the relationship between increase in volatility and depth of the crisis is not equally strong. Just to mention a few cases, among the countries most heavily hit by the crisis, Portugal shows low levels of volatility. On the other side Germany, one of the countries which fared best in the crisis, has seen a rather significant increase in volatility. This implies that the effect of the crisis is probably medi-



ated by other variables, which may reduce or increase its impact. The different degree of resilience of the party system is probably one of these, but also the configuration of parties supporting the governments in office during the crisis may have played a role (some interesting ideas on this point are offered by Roberts and Wibbels 1999).

If increases in volatility signal a greater readiness of voters to shift allegiances, the next step is to ask to what extent this means also a greater readiness to “punish” governments, presumably for their inability to solve the problems caused by the crisis or crises or at least to mitigate their effects. To investigate this aspect I have used two different indicators: the electoral losses of parties represented in government (Parties in Government Electoral Losses or PiGEL); and change in the person of the prime minister (PMChange) after an election.

The data collected for all 28 EU countries show in a large majority of cases for the PiGEL indicator the negative impact of this period on the electoral performance of parties in government (Table 3). In 21 out of 28 cases the parties in government have on average suffered more during the second period than during the first one. And the average losses of governing parties in all countries have nearly doubled between the first and the second period. However, it is interesting to notice that in seven of the eleven CEE members of the EU the losses of the parties in government were in the second period smaller than in the first one. This result, which might appear surprising, is probably to be explained again by the fact that in the new democracies the first period involved the difficult problems of the transition and a lengthy process of institutionalisation of a competitive party system: these two factors probably affected negatively the performance of parties in government. Among the “old Europe” states, three of the countries most heavily hit by the economic crisis – Greece, Ireland and Spain – have seen the greatest average losses of the governing parties. It is an open question why the impact has been much lower in Italy and Portugal, which have been also deeply affected by the crisis.

**Table 3:** Two Indicators of Cabinet Vulnerability

Country	PiGEL <sup>1</sup>	PiGEL	PMChange <sup>2</sup>	PMChange
	1995-2007 %	2008-2016 %	1995-2007 N	2008-2016 N
<b>Austria</b>	2.7	8.6	3/4	1/2
<b>Belgium</b>	0.4	2.2	2/4	2/2
Bulgaria	26.5	12.3	3/3	3/3
Czech Republic	1.5	21.5	3/4	2/2
Croatia	9.5	12.6	3/4	2/2
Denmark	2.1	4.3	1/4	2/2
<i>Estonia</i>	1.0	-1.2	3/4	0/2
<b>Finland</b>	3.9	7.7	2/4	2/2
<b>France</b>	-1.6	12.6	1/3	0/1
<b>Germany</b>	3.8	7.3	2/3	0/2
<b>Greece</b>	2.5	21.7	1/4	4/4
Hungary	6.7	17.8	2/3	1/2
<b>Ireland</b>	1.8	26.5	1/3	1/2
<b>Italy</b> <sup>3</sup>	0.0	4.3	3/3	2/2
<i>Latvia</i>	8.4	6.9	3/4	0/3
<i>Lithuania</i>	16.4	9.8	2/3	2/2
<b>Netherlands</b>	9.3	12.6	1/4	1/2
Poland	19.0	10.6	4/4	1/2
<b>Portugal</b>	8.9	9.6	3/4	2/3
Romania	10.0	8.4	3/3	2/2
<i>Slovakia</i>	14.5	12.7	2/3	2/3
<b>Slovenia</b>	11.0	19.2	1/3	3/3
<b>Spain</b> <sup>4</sup>	0.6	16.1	2/3	1/2
Sweden	3.4	4.2	1/3	1/2
UK	6.4	10.2	1/3	1/2
<b>Average</b>	<b>6.7</b>	<b>11.1</b>	<b>61%</b>	<b>68%</b>
<b>Average Euro-zone</b> <sup>5</sup>		<b>12.4</b>		
<b>Non Eurozone</b>		<b>9.8</b>		

With regard to the second indicator – the change of prime minister between the cabinet preceding the elections and the one following them (PMChange) – the

<sup>1</sup> PiGEL (Electoral loss of parties in government): a positive percentage indicates an average electoral loss; a negative percentage indicates an average gain.

<sup>2</sup> PMChange: the numbers indicate the proportion of new prime ministers over all the governments formed after an election.

<sup>3</sup> In the Italian case I have counted as "governing parties" also the parties which gave parliamentary support to the Monti technical government.

<sup>4</sup> The elections of 2016 were not counted, since the cabinet in charge before the elections was a caretaker government.

<sup>5</sup> In the calculation of the Eurozone average I have included only the countries (in bold) which were from the beginning of the period part of it (thus Slovenia is included, while Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Slovakia, which joined later, are excluded).

table indicates that in more than 60% of the cases the incumbent prime ministers did not survive the election. In this case also the average has (moderately) increased between the first and the second period.

The first indicators used to assess the vulnerability of national elites of the EU during this period have consistently shown a negative change between the first and the second period under examination. The volatility of electorates has increased almost everywhere, the governing parties and prime ministers have also faced greater difficulties in defending their positions. We can easily imagine that national political elites have read these data as a sign that voters had grown more unhappy because of the crisis, and that to maintain their support in face of increasing challenges the policies proposed had to be more in tune with this dissatisfaction.

In the political system of the EU, what happens at the national level has direct bearing on the European institutions as well, so we may turn now to the European level effects.

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#### 4. The European Level Effects

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Given the institutional structure of the European Union, the first and until now the main channel through which what happens in society and shifts in the mood of European citizens can be “represented” at the European level is through the political impact in Brussels of national level effects. As already mentioned, two crucial European institutions, the European Council and the Council of Ministers, due to their indirect composition will necessarily be affected by all the changes taking place in national governments as the result of national elections. In order to assess how much these bodies are affected we can look at the changing composition of their membership due to the political events in the member states.

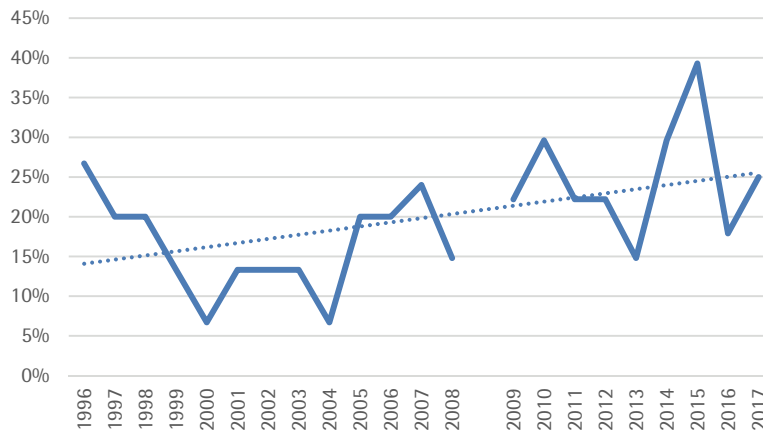
I will focus my attention on the European Council as this institution is the top decision-making instance of the Union. To assess the impact of the crisis years I have computed an *Index of European Council turnover (ECT)*. As the number of members of the Council has changed over time due to accessions of new countries, the index is calculated as the annual proportion of new EC members over the total number of members<sup>6</sup> (Figure 1). Between 1996 and 2008 the average ECT was of 16.3%, and from 2009 to 2017 it increased to

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<sup>6</sup> As in the year of accession of a new country its member of the Council is necessarily new, I have included new countries from the second year of participation. For example the member of the European Council for Austria (which entered in the EU in 1995) was counted only in 1996. The first period ends with 2008 as the impact of the crisis could be felt only in the following year.

24.8%. This turnover rate meant that in the second period the membership of the European Council was renewed by nearly a half every two years.

**Figure 1:** Percentage of Newcomers in the European Council (Annual Average) (1996-2008 and 2009-2017)



Turnover rates are to some extent depressed by the presence of presidents (Cyprus, France, Lithuania, and Romania) who typically have a fixed term of tenure. However in three of these cases (France, Lithuania, and Romania), a stable president may be accompanied by changing governments, which may have some consequences for the policy making process of the European Council.

To further detail this picture we may measure the persistence of the EC members and their tenure. How many long-term members are there? In 2017 only 28.6% of the EC members had at least four years of tenure (Merkel being by far the most experienced, with 11 years in this body), while 25% of the members were newcomers. The average tenure was approximately 2.5 years.

While the personal composition of the European Council is intrinsically unstable because of its institutional format, its political composition has not changed very much so far. If we consider the party affiliation of prime ministers and presidents and the linkage of their national party to the European Parliament parliamentary groups, we find a persistent dominance of the three mainstream groups (S&D, EPP, and ALDE). Only since 2015 have two representatives of non-mainstream parties entered for the first time the European Council: on the left the Greek Prime Minister Tsipras of Syriza (belonging to the GUE/NGL group in the EP), and on the right the Polish Prime Minister Szydlo of PiS (affiliated to ECR European Conservatives and Reformists Group in the EP).

Thus if the European Council (and the same can be largely extended to the Council of the European Union) is by its nature an institution with a constantly changing membership, the increased vulnerability of national elites and national governments in crisis times has made for a more rapid circulation of its membership. It is reasonable to assume that this increased instability of the highest political body of the Union has reduced its ability to decide promptly and to take bold measures when faced with crisis situations.

What has happened to other components of the EES during this period? I will consider here only the European Commission and the European Central Bank, two central bodies of the Union. The European Court of Justice has played a less crucial role during this period and can thus be omitted from this analysis. In the political and media debate the first two institutions are often negatively qualified as non-democratic bodies. In fact they are quite different in their composition and political nature. The Commission, while often criticised by national politicians as being technocratic, has in reality predominantly political features. Nominated by the European Council on the basis of candidates proposed by national governments, the Commission needs the approval of the European Parliament, that is to say of the representative assembly of the Union. Its formation process has in fact become today not different from that of national governments in parliamentary systems. Its peculiarity is that each of its members, the “ministers” of the EU, must be allocated to a different member state. This institutional rule very significantly reduces the flexibility of its political composition: its members typically reflect the political make-up of the governments of the member states. The commission is thus dependent on two principles: on the one hand, the member states maintain the right to choose “their” commissioner, and typically do this on the basis of the political orientation of their governmental majority; on the other hand there is the EP majority, without whose approval the Commission cannot take office. The political nature of the Commission is also apparent from the point of view of the professional and political background of its members. With very few exceptions, its members are present or former top politicians of their country (Döring 2007). All recent presidents have been former prime ministers in their country, and they have been joined as commissioners by other prime ministers, ministers for foreign affairs, economics, or finance and, not unexpectedly, ministers of European affairs. This shows that the Commission has a high status in the ambition rankings of European professional politicians. This is not surprising since it ensures a high level of visibility, coupled with stability (one or maybe two five-year terms) and much higher salaries than a comparable position in a national government.

How was this body affected by the crisis? From the political point of view, continuity has prevailed: throughout this period the Commission has reflected the absolute dominance of the three mainstream political groups: the People’s Party, Liberals, and Socialists. Only one commissioner (an independent) in the

First Barroso Commission and one in the Juncker Commission (a British Conservative) did not belong to one of these three political families. In the last three Commissions, the European People's Party has always held the largest number of seats and controlled the position of president.

If we compare the European Council and the Commission, the second is clearly more stable than the first. Of the members of the European Council who were in office at the beginning of 2015, when the Juncker Commission was appointed, only 17 out of 28 (or 60%) were still in office at the beginning of 2017. And during the period of the second Barroso Commission only 10 out of 27 (or 37%) members of the European Council who were in office at the beginning of 2010 were still in place at the end of 2014. In contrast, members of the Commission rarely resign or are dismissed.

Thus, if we observe the two main political bodies of the Union – the European Council and the Commission – we have two contrasting images. We see the increased vulnerability of the Council under the impact of national elections and their consequences for the composition of national governments, and at the same time a high degree of stability and political continuity of the Commission. The political continuity in the Commission is linked to the grand-coalitional nature of the Union executive, which dampens the effects of national electoral volatility, and to the lack of an opposition able so far to challenge the dominance of the three mainstream parties dominating the European Parliament. Even if the 2014 European elections saw an unprecedented increase of Euro-critical parties, this surge has not translated into a different majority in the Commission (Treib 2014). This suggests a situation where one component of the EES – the members of the Council – must be more attentive to the electoral moods, while the other – the Commission – has much less to fear and is more insulated from political events.

We can now consider the third most important component of the EES, the members of the executive board of the European Central Bank. The top governing body of the ECB, whose independence is enshrined in European treaties (Art. 282 TEU and Art. 130 TFEU), and which, unlike the Commission, is not based in its composition on the one country-one member principle, is much more isolated from member states and current political influences. The very strong professional qualifications required for its members (three of the current members are former governors of national central banks, the other three had high level positions either in the central banks, or in ministerial positions), and the fact that their appointment has to be approved by a qualified majority of the European Council, further contribute to the authority of this group. Yet even this elite component has not been immune from the special challenges and pressures of this period. This is suggested by the two successive resignations of the German member of the ECB Council (Axel Stark in 2011, then Joerg Asmussen in 2013). To this should be added that the legitimacy of some of its decisions was more than once challenged by politicians of various countries

and also submitted to judicial review by some national Constitutional Courts and finally assessed by the European Court of Justice. Overall, however, the central decision-making body of the ECB has to be considered as a stable and durable component of the EES, bringing a strong technocratic component to it but not devoid of a remarkably acute policy vision.

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## 5. The European Elite System and Its Reactions to the Crisis

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The evidence discussed in this article can help to understand a bit better how the EES has fared in a very critical period. As could be expected, given the complex institutional structure of the Union and of its ruling authorities, the impact of the crisis was not homogeneously felt across the different components of the EES. The brunt of the crisis years, the problems they generated, and the resulting dissatisfaction that spread among European publics, has been most clearly borne by the components of the EES who are more effectively connected to the opinion of the voters through highly competitive elections able to produce significant degrees of accountability. Other components could remain more insulated from citizens' protest and anger. Since national elections are still the most efficient channel of citizens' participation, national political elites and their European projections have been more strongly affected by the crisis. The increased vulnerability of national elites has projected its effects upon the "intergovernmental" components of the EES: in particular it has resulted in increased turnover rates and diminished continuity in the membership of the European Council.

The Commission, the other institution indirectly connected to the mechanisms of electoral representation via the election of the European Parliament, has been "protected" to a much greater extent from the impact of the crisis by the political-institutional format of its mechanisms of formation and accountability. In spite of the 2014 innovative designation by the European parties of candidates for the position of President of the Commission (the so-called *Spitzenkandidaten*), the persistent weakness of European elections as a European-wide channel of representation/accountability (Schmitt 2005; Hix and Marsh 2011) has failed to transmit a strong mandate for action to the Commission. Moreover, the "one member state-one commissioner" rule and the grand-coalitional arrangement between the large established parties have contributed to diluting the political profile of this institution. In the European parliament, however, the Commission has had to face a more vigorous opposition from the new Eurosceptic parties.

The third most important component of the EES, the governing board of the ECB, has obviously been little affected by electoral connections; but the selection of its chief and of new members, when substitutions have been due, has

required the support of national governments through the European Council. The effects of the crisis have made themselves felt to this component of the EES from the “functional” side, when the developments of the financial crisis have threatened the “domain” itself of the ECB, by endangering the permanence of one or more countries within the Eurozone and eventually the survival itself of the common currency. The demands to act innovatively have therefore become more compelling.

We can now look at the actions taken by the components of the EES examined so far and try to elucidate how they fit with the picture we have presented.

The synthesis provided by Table 4 illuminates sufficiently well the complex reactions of the EES to the crisis. It emerges rather clearly that the “political” government of the Union, embodied in the institutions of the European Council and the Commission, has shown little ability or willingness to put in place Europe-wide policy instruments able to cope in a structural and active mode with the downturn of the economies of the EU and its most serious consequences, such as slow growth, increased unemployment, reduced investments, and rise of poverty. On the one hand, its actions have been of a defensive nature, oriented towards protecting through regulatory means (both European and intergovernmental) the EU “building” from the disruptive effects of the critical situations developing within member states’ economies. On the other hand (mainly at the initiative of the European Council) it has promoted the creation of special instruments (the EFSF and ESM) based on resources individually provided by all the states (and not by the EU as such) to address the most critical national situations with emergency loans. Only a rather small truly European instrument, the so-called “Juncker plan” (EFSI: European Fund for Strategic Investments), was launched in the final stages of the crisis. This has meant that, to a large extent, national governments have been left to face the consequences of the crisis within the constraints of a European regulatory framework more focused on the defence of the status quo than on the promotion of economic development.



**Table 4:** European Elites and Their Reactions to the Economic Crisis

EES elite component	Source of legitimization	Impact of the crisis	Responses to the crisis	Features of the response and European impact	Problems emerging
National elites	National elections	Challenges by anti-establishment parties. Increased vulnerability of traditional parties and incumbent governments	Nationally determined responses within the limits set by Union rules. Dilemmas between deficit spending and austerity	Insufficient responses and limited European coordination. Increased asymmetries among national economies	National elites are electorally responsible for performances, but have limited means to overcome the crisis
European Council	National elections and governing status of members	Increased turnover and decreased seniority	Reluctance to grant new powers and policy tools to supranational European authorities. Preference for intergovernmental instruments: EFSF and ESM funds for crisis hit countries; Fiscal Compact to impose rules of budgetary discipline on national governments	Emergency action rather than structural measures. Significant contribution to the overcoming of potential countries' defaults. Firm and delayed responses to the economic crisis	Limited impact upon the effects of the economic crisis. Generation of cross-country resentment between "lender" and "recipient" countries. Weak construction of a common European view
European Commission	National governments nominations and European Parliament confidence	Challenges to the rules of the Union. Centrifugal drives in the Union	Defence of the Union rules. Strengthening of procedures for ensuring compliance of Member states to the rules of the Eurozone. Juncker plan (EFSI)	Regulatory tools prevail over (re)distributive ones. Weak impact on the economic trends of the Union	Commission perceived more as the guardian of the rules than an instrument of problem-solving
European Central Bank	Functional legitimacy based on technocratic expertise and treaty defined competencies	Sovereign debts crisis and existential challenge to the Euro. Banking crises	Expansion of lending capacities to banks (LTROs). QE (buying of state bonds on secondary markets). New powers over banking system	Major size of actions. Reduction of the danger of sovereign defaults. Preservation of the Euro. Drastic reduction of fragmentation of the Eurozone	Strong but limited definition of the European interest (preserving the Eurozone). Doubts about the legitimacy of its policies. External criticisms counteracted by ECJ rulings

This response mix fits quite well with the political situation of these two components of the EES. It has been quite “natural” for the members of the European Council, under the strong pressure of national accountability in a crisis period, to look to their domestic political market and at national interests, and to think only subordinately in terms of a common European interest. The fear of Euro-critic challengers has suggested to most national leaders a strong reluctance to advance or accept bold European solutions, which might have been attacked at home as a betrayal of national interests. Only when the possible default of one of the member states could endanger not only that country but also the interests of the other countries (for instance their banks involved in financing sovereign debts) did they become willing to accept the introduction of extraordinary instruments (but kept under intergovernmental control). As for the Commission, the weakness of the accountability pressures generated by the European electoral process, and the lack of a European political mandate, has encouraged this institution to fall back on its more solidly established functional legitimacy, that of “guardian of the treaties,” and to essentially work through its regulatory arm (strengthened with the regulations and directives of the 2011 “Six Pack” adapting the Stability and Growth Pact) (Bauer and Becker 2014). This has been only marginally corrected by the adoption of somewhat greater flexibility in the application of the rules (in exchange for the implementation of the so-called “structural reforms” by national governments) and by the launching at the end of 2014 of a limited investment promotion plan.

In a somewhat paradoxical way the most straightforward formulation of a common European interest and the most powerful means put in place to defend it have come from the least “democratically representative” component of the EES, the leadership of the ECB. Faced with the increasing financial fragmentation of the Eurozone, highlighted by the seriously augmented differences in interest rates across the Euro countries particularly during 2010-2012 (European Parliament 2016), and even more by the realistic risk of the breakdown of the monetary union, the ECB has managed to substantially enhance its role (Schmidt 2016) and to develop new powerful instruments of action. To “save itself” as the institution in charge of the Monetary Union, the ECB had to “save the euro.” To achieve this goal its leadership became convinced that it had to resort to non-conventional measures when interest rates adjustments were not enough. That this choice met with strong resistance was evidenced by the resignation of the German member of the ECB Board in autumn 2011<sup>7</sup> and by the criticisms that were recurrently raised in the media and by politicians in Germany and other Nordic countries. The choices of the ECB were also legally

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<sup>7</sup> Another sign of the resistance to the new policies of the ECB was the resignation in February 2010 of the head of the *Bundesbank* and thus *de jure* member of the ECB Governing Council.

challenged more than once.<sup>8</sup> It is probably to strengthen its position that the ECB leadership supported the introduction of the *Fiscal Compact* (Draghi 2011), proposed by the European Council, as a balancing measure to reassure the “virtuous” countries of the Eurozone, while the ECB was ready to launch more aggressive policies to solve the Euro crisis and protect the financially endangered countries.

Overall the picture which emerges is that of a rather complex mix of policies adopted by European authorities. Some were more defensive, others more proactive, some of an extraordinary nature, others of a more ordinary one. Some were slow in producing results, others more rapid. Some were rather prudent, others more bold. The mix is not too surprising when we consider the complexity of the EES and the different political pressures and inputs under which its components have been operating during the crisis years.

In a perhaps oversimplified, but fundamentally true, view it could be said that the European Council (and behind its back the democratically legitimated national elites) and the technocratic body of the ECB held the central stages of the crisis response. The Commission was in a way “squeezed” between these two powerful actors. Its action was not irrelevant but lacked in comparison the clout given to the first by its national democratic base, and to the second by its functional autonomy and the potential availability of substantial resources (when the question of their legitimacy was solved by the impending crisis of the Euro).

While the combined actions of the European Council and ECB, buying time and providing support for the recovery of the European economy, have contributed to avoiding the most disastrous consequences of the crisis, the weakness of a common Europe-wide process of representation and accountability and of a more direct connection between European decision-making authorities and the European citizens has reduced the ability of the EES to more effectively “imagine” (Anderson 1990) Europe as a true Union and to articulate its common interests. It has also made for a rather limited development of ordinary and structural means to face future crises. The high reliance upon the technocratic institution of the ECB to face the crisis has further confirmed the underdevelopment of the democratic channels in the Union.

Looking ahead, we can say that the internal imbalances of the Union and of its ruling elites have not diminished at the end of this period. The decisional centre of gravity has been maintained (to an even increased extent) in the “intergovernmental institutions,” who are precisely those most negatively affected by the crisis and the least able to produce efficient decisions. This has produced

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<sup>8</sup> Following a complaint the *Outright Monetary Transactions* (OMT) programme of the ECB was referred by the German *Bundesverfassungsgericht* to the European Court of Justice; the legitimacy of the ECB action was confirmed by the ECJ with its ruling of June 16, 2015 (Judgment in Case C-62/14 Gauweiler and Others).

a deficit of decisions firmly anchored to a European democratic process. On the other side, there are complaints about the role of technocratic institutions as “non-democratic,” but these institutions are *de facto* pushed to substitute for the more democratic institutions if these are not able to decide. Some of the problems highlighted many years ago by Fritz Scharpf in his comparison of the EU with federal systems have not yet found a satisfactory answer (1988). Should we be surprised if this situation fuels a high level of general dissatisfaction with the EU?

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