

STRENGTHENING EU LEGITIMACY THROUGH SELF-ORGANIZING GOVERNANCE

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Abstract:

The European Union (EU) faces interconnected legitimacy challenges stemming from perceptions of a democratic deficit and the strain of recurring crises. While existing research has documented these challenges, less attention has been paid to how network dynamics within EU institutions could address them. This paper proposes a novel analytical framework based on self-organizing network theory to examine how decentralized, adaptive governance patterns can strengthen legitimacy and improve crisis responses within the EU's multi-level governance system. By comparing how the EU has responded to different crises, the paper investigates the mechanisms through which distributed authority architectures, metagovernance feedback loops, and emergent polycentric coordination may enhance multi-level governance, bridge representation gaps, and reinforce institutional resilience. The paper's findings suggest that incorporating self-organizing network principles into institutional design could help the EU better balance flexibility and stability in crisis management while strengthening democratic legitimacy. This research contributes to ongoing debates on EU governance by offering practical insights into how institutional design can adapt to polycrisis conditions.

Keywords: EU Legitimacy, Self-Organizing Governance, Multi-Level Governance, Polycentric Coordination, Crisis Management

1. Introduction

The EU faces a polycrisis of mutually reinforcing shocks from the sovereign-debt crisis (2009-2012) to COVID-19 and Russia's war against Ukraine, testing the Union's problem-solving capacity and democratic legitimacy as crises spill over territorial, administrative and sectoral borders (Cabane & Lodge 2024; Boin & Rhinard 2023). Because authority in the EU is shared among local, national and supranational actors, crisis managers must coordinate horizontally across member states and vertically with EU institutions. This produces a chronic

tension: centralisation promises swift, uniform action, yet decentralisation is indispensable for harnessing context-specific knowledge and sustaining local ownership. Repeated experience shows that neither pole is sufficient by itself; instead, hybrid, network-like arrangements emerge in practice.

Mainstream accounts of EU crisis governance still focus on legal competences and intergovernmental bargains. They under-explain how day-to-day coordination actually materialises when time is short, information incomplete and formal mandates contested. To close this gap the present paper asks: How can principles of self-organising networks strengthen EU legitimacy while improving crisis performance? This question is pursued through a three-step research design: (i) development of a self-organising network framework that identifies distributed authority, metagovernance feedback and polycentric coordination as key mechanisms; (ii) comparative process-tracing of the Eurozone, refugee and COVID-19 crises; and (iii) assessment of output- and input-legitimacy effects across the cases.

2. Conceptual Framework: Self-Organizing Networks and EU Legitimacy

This paper advances a framework for understanding self-organizing processes in EU multi-level governance, explaining how stable interaction patterns emerge among autonomous actors under varying institutional conditions.

2.1. Self-Organizing Network Theory: Foundations and Relevance

Self-organizing systems emerge where autonomous actors interact without central control, producing adaptive, stable patterns in complex policy environments (Anzola et al. 2017; Ansell et al. 2023, 2024). Decentralised feedback makes such systems agile and prone to hybrid re-organisation (Ansell et al. 2023). Self-organization involves processes unfolding without central control, with coordination emerging organically among policy actors through resource exchange and trust (Yi 2018; Börzel & Panke 2007). Organic, trust-based exchange lets actors retain autonomy while overcoming collective-action dilemmas (Yi 2018; Feiock & Scholz 2010).

The principles of self-organizing systems, particularly adaptability and decentralized coordination, are increasingly visible at multiple governance levels. Emergent behaviours shape networks and policy approaches responding to challenges. The extant EU crisis management literature highlights the importance of mobilizing resources through effective crisis management systems, involving coordinated yet flexible actor responses (Boin & Rhinard 2023; Christensen et al. 2016b). These studies demonstrate how self-organizing systems can facilitate rapid, context-sensitive solutions when formal structures are overburdened or unresponsive.

This paper applies self-organizational principles to analyse EU crisis responses and proposes their integration into the EU's institutional design. It explores three

core concepts: (a) distributed authority architectures, (b) metagovernance feedback loops, and (c) polycentricity.

Distributed authority architectures disperse decision-making across multiple autonomous actors, enabling flexible, bottom-up responses that differentiate network governance and polycentric systems from traditional hierarchical structures (Krogh & Triantafillou 2024). Metagovernance feedback loops create a dynamic cycle where metagovernors coordinate governance modes, receive feedback on outcomes, and adjust their strategies accordingly, establishing testable predictions for governance evolution. Polycentricity represents a specific distributed authority architecture with semiautonomous decision centres that coordinate through self-organizing processes, generating stable, overlapping authority structures across policy arenas (Ansell et al. 2024). Transnational networks and partnerships among governance levels and actors serve as coordination mechanisms within polycentric contexts (Börzel & Panke 2007). Effective coordination requires robust information and communication flows, knowledge sharing, and clearly defined norms for interactions among autonomous actors (Mérand et al. 2011).

Self-organization can complement top-down EU structures, providing alternative coordination, problem-solving, and policy implementation mechanisms that emerge organically among actors rather than through central directives (Schout & Jordan 2005). However, the theory also specifies boundary conditions, such as the need for adequate resource exchange and the presence of trust; in the absence of these, self-organization may yield suboptimal or unstable outcomes. The EU's inherent diversity and complexity often limit the effectiveness of uniform policies; self-organizing networks, however, enable context-sensitive, tailored solutions (Schout & Jordan 2005; Mastenbroek & Martinsen 2018). Self-organizing networks can often be more agile and adaptable, allowing for quicker responses to emerging issues or crises (Schrama et al. 2024). Importantly, self-organizing networks reduce the policy coordination and implementation burden on central EU institutions, potentially mitigating democratic deficits and increasing legitimacy through broader interest representation and nuanced accountability mechanisms (Gjaltema et al. 2020; Börzel & Panke 2007).

2.2. Addressing Current Theoretical Gaps

Self-organized network theory extends neo-functionalism and intergovernmentalism by emphasizing emergent, bottom-up dynamics and horizontal interactions among diverse actors, rather than top-down institution-building or state-centric bargaining. Unlike managerial network theories,¹ the focus here

¹ According to Börzel & Panke (2007), network governance involves public and private actors collaboratively making and implementing binding decisions through voluntary, non-hierarchical coordination. Martinsen et al. (2022) summarize research on European Administrative Networks (EANs) and agencies that support the Commission in policy implementation and enforcement.

stays on bottom-up dynamics moderated – but not overridden – by meta-governors.² The key contribution of self-organized network theory is to show how flexible micro-level collaboration complements macro-level integration logics.³ In so doing, it broadens our understanding of EU governance as an emergent process shaped by dynamic, decentralized actor interactions, rather than as a product of hierarchical structures or state-centred negotiations.

3. Methodology

This study employs comparative case study analysis of three major crises – Eurozone, refugee, and COVID-19 – selected for their variety in causes, policy spheres, and institutional responses to assess how self-organizing processes contribute to effective EU governance in diverse yet impactful crises.

The research used official EU documents (Commission communications, Council conclusions, Parliament reports) to identify formal policy decisions and institutional arrangements during crisis responses. Process tracing methodology reconstructed decision sequences and interactions to evaluate whether different centres acknowledged and integrated each other's actions. These indicators assessed the emergence of self-organization patterns in each crisis and their contribution to observable policy outcomes.

4. Crisis Response Analysis

This section compares how self-organizing governance mechanisms operated in the European Union's institutional framework across three major crises – the Eurozone debt crisis, the 2015 refugee crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic – using a comparative case study and process tracing approach. Each case examines the emergent networks of actors, the interplay of formal and informal coordination, and the implications for EU's legitimacy.

4.1. Eurozone Financial Crisis

The Eurozone crisis saw a complex interplay of governance mechanisms. The Eurozone crisis demonstrated distributed authority with no single EU body controlling responses – authority dispersed among the European Council,⁴ ECB (through OMT), the Commission, and international actors like the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The Troika of the European Commission, ECB, and IMF was formed as an ad hoc authority to manage bailout programs in debtor states. Lacking a clear treaty basis, the Troika exemplified self-

² See for more details Swensen & Torfing 2007 and Gjaltema et al. 2020.

³ See Ferrara & Kriesi 2022 for a model incorporating analytical insights from neofunctionalism, intergovernmentalism, postfunctionalism, and federalism to interpret crisis-led policymaking processes and integration outcomes in the EU.

⁴ The European Council became a central decision-making body during the crisis, indicating a shift in the locus of authority and coordination (Fabbrini 2015).

organization by three institutions that jointly negotiated adjustment programs for Greece, Ireland, Portugal, and Cyprus. The European Parliament was excluded from the Troika's bailout negotiations, prompting the EP to investigate the Troika's accountability.

Ad-hoc meta-steering enabled quick policy fixes but blurred accountability, illustrating self-organisation's legitimacy trade-off. The European Council President played a meta-coordinating role by convening the Van Rompuy Task Force in 2010 to recommend economic governance reforms.⁵ Informal governance networks among member state leaders also emerged to steer crisis management. A striking example was the „Merkozy“ duumvirate – the tight Franco-German coordination between Chancellor Angela Merkel and President Nicolas Sarkozy, which operated beyond traditional EU Treaty frameworks (Schoeller 2018). These feedback loops sometimes responded to crisis learning: when ordinary EU procedures proved too slow, leaders created parallel processes (a feedback adaptation) to steer outcomes. However, the effectiveness of these metagovernance efforts had limits. They worked to impose stricter fiscal discipline,⁶ but the informal governance mechanisms had no easy way to incorporate broader stakeholder voices. The „failing forward“ pattern of the feedback loops often resulted in incomplete and incremental reforms rather than fundamental overhauls, indicating limitations in the effectiveness of these loops in achieving optimal outcomes (Cabane & Lodge 2024).

In terms of polycentric coordination, the Euro crisis response was polycentric by necessity: multiple semi-autonomous centres of decision-making had to cooperate. This polycentric architecture fostered „decentralized bargaining“ innovations, like the Frankfurt Group⁷ and informal ministerial meetings, which did yield agreements more rapidly than the cumbersome EU legislative process. However, this coordination was often not embedded in a stable, well-defined polycentric system (Vogler 2020). The strengthening of centralized authority in some areas, like banking supervision, also arguably moved the system away from a purely polycentric model towards a more hierarchical one in those specific domains (De Rynck 2016).

The reliance on self-organizing networks in the Euro crisis had ambivalent effects on the legitimacy of EU crisis governance. On one hand, this mode enabled swift action (improving output legitimacy by stabilizing the Eurozone's finances), but on the other hand it often bypassed conventional accountability and participation channels, undermining input legitimacy. Trust in EU institutions eroded markedly in countries hardest hit by austerity (Biten et al. 2023).

⁵ See for more details Strengthening Economic Governance in the EU. Report of the Task Force to the European Council. Brussels, 21 October 2010, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/27405/117236.pdf>

⁶ E.g., the Six-Pack and Two-Pack regulations were passed to institutionalize lessons from the crisis (Thygesen et al. 2019).

⁷ See for more details Schild 2013.

In summary, the Eurozone crisis demonstrated that self-organizing governance in the EU can mobilize diverse centres of authority to address urgent problems, but ensuring coherence and legitimacy in such a distributed, polycentric system required continual meta-steering that the EU institutions only gradually developed as the crisis progressed.

4.2. Refugee Crisis

The 2015 refugee influx tested EU coordination capacity in humanitarian, migration and border security policies, initially unfolding through decentralized, uncoordinated member state actions. The refugee crisis revealed polycentric governance challenges, with authority defaulting to national governments making independent decisions on refugee policies, while no single authority could compel unified action.⁸ The European Commission, for instance, could propose relocation quotas, but lacked implementation powers without member state consent.⁹ However, distributed authority also enabled innovation at different levels: cities and regional governments in some areas found ways to integrate refugees, and some national courts (e.g. in Germany) stepped in to uphold refugee rights, functioning as checks on executive actions.

To navigate this environment, the European Commission and European Council had to exercise metagovernance, seeking to steer and coordinate the various centres of action. The Commission held weekly videoconferences among interior ministry officials, and liaison officers from other member states were deployed in Greece and Italy. These efforts created feedback loops that added new coordinating mechanisms when gaps arose (e.g., chaotic Balkan migration routes).¹⁰ Legal rulings also played a role: when states resisted burden-sharing, the European Court of Justice upheld the relocation scheme in 2017,¹¹ though it did not immediately change policies, highlighting limits of metagovernance in a politically charged context (Duszczuk et al. 2020). Meanwhile, increasing politicization of migration often pushed states to adopt more restrictive national approaches rather than greater EU-level coordination (Zhelyazkova 2024).

Polycentric coordination was most effective when few pivotal actors could agree and then network outward. Initially marked by decentralized, unilateral actions, the refugee crisis soon prompted a turn toward central coordination.

⁸ See for more details Zaun 2017 on how different asylum systems and priorities of EU member states explain the EU's lack of initiative in responding to the crisis. For an early assessment of the deficiencies of border security policies prior to the refugee crisis see Georgiev 2014.

⁹ Even after the adoption of mandatory refugee relocation by the Council (Council Decision 2015/1523 of 14 September 2015), the poor performance level of the scheme, due mainly to technical difficulties, demonstrated the lack of determination among many of its official supporters (Duszczuk et al. 2020).

¹⁰ A special meeting of Balkan route countries was convened in October 2015 to agree on managing flows. See for more details: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_15_5904

¹¹ Judgment of the Court (Grand Chamber) of 6 September 2017 - Slovak Republic (C-643/15) and Hungary (C-647/15) v Council of the European Union (Joined Cases C-643/15 and C-647/15).

The implementation of the EU-Turkey agreement¹² is illustrative: it leveraged NATO ships, Greek asylum services, Frontex debriefers, Turkish coast guard, and others in a multi-level effort that drastically cut arrivals by spring 2016 (Ovacik et al. 2024). After the peak, governance settled into a hybrid approach, combining certain centralized policies (e.g., a reformed Frontex) with differentiated responses (some states accepting refugees, others prioritizing border financing). This experience showed that in the EU's multi-level system, self-organizing governance requires strong metagovernance and shared norms of solidarity - otherwise, fragmentation ensues.

The refugee crisis posed acute legitimacy challenges for the EU, touching solidarity, security, and values. Deep trust deficits among member states limited solidarity, amplifying legitimacy strains. The initial reliance on crisis management rather than crisis governance reflected a reactive approach that did not necessarily foster structured and resilient coordination mechanisms. However, it could be argued that by 2016-2017 the EU integrated feedback from frontline states: self-organization offered some legitimacy gains in that it allowed pragmatic solutions.¹³

While immediate measures addressed uncontrolled migration, they often bypassed higher scrutiny, eroding democratic legitimacy. The relocation scheme's failure (only 34,700 people relocated) signalled a lack of solidarity, fuelling populist narratives. This polycentric, divergent response underlined a tension between central and decentralized governance, triggering repeated shifts and raising further legitimacy questions.

In conclusion, while the 2015 refugee crisis saw elements of self-organizing governance emerge within the EU, driven by distributed authority and urgent needs on the ground, the lack of robust metagovernance and insufficient polycentric coordination hindered a coherent, legitimate, and sustainable response. The crisis highlighted the tensions inherent in the EU's multi-level governance system when faced with transboundary challenges requiring both distributed action and centralized coordination.

4.3. COVID-19 Pandemic Response

COVID-19 created unprecedented challenges, initially prompting uncoordinated national responses including lockdowns and travel bans that disrupted supply chains (Boin & Rhinard 2023). This demonstrated distributed authority in practice but lacked effective mechanisms for interaction in the early stages (Beaussier & Cabane 2020). Different national administrative cultures contribu-

¹² See for more details EU-Turkey statement, 18 March 2016, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/eu-turkey-statement/>

¹³ For example, the EU-Turkey agreement significantly cut dangerous illegal border crossings, viewed by many as vital for saving lives and restoring order. Meanwhile, the Integrated Political Crisis Response (ICPR) framework (Moraczewska 2024) united all relevant actors under the Council presidency, forming a key element of EU refugee crisis management.

ted to divergent responses (Roos & Schade 2023). Recognizing these challenges, EU institutions quickly intervened to facilitate and coordinate responses, despite having limited formal powers in health.

To prevent negative spillovers (e.g. one country's policy undermining another's), distributed authority had to be coupled with coordination at the EU level. The Commission quickly moved to a „co-ordinated-decentrality“ model (Behnke 2024), including common guidelines, joint vaccines procurement, shared borrowing, tempered by continuous member state feedback. The EU also provided meta-coordination through metagovernance feedback loops, with the Commission and Council continuously gathering data on the pandemic and adjusting policies. One example is the evolving vaccine strategy: early 2020 contracts lacked protections, causing supply shortfalls in early 2021. Subsequent contracts included stricter delivery schedules and local production requirements, illustrating how the EU adapted mid-crisis. Another mechanism involved task forces¹⁴ that acted as network managers, linking national authorities and private stakeholders to resolve bottlenecks.

During the COVID-19 crisis, polycentric coordination largely prevailed: multiple centres¹⁵ aligned through EU facilitation. The EU embraced a global, multi-layered approach (e.g., co-leading COVAX) while coordinating internally, extending governance beyond its borders. This approach helped achieve relatively uniform vaccine coverage and enabled ground-breaking common borrowing within a decentralized budgetary system. Unlike the refugee crisis, the COVID pandemic was a shared threat, prompting even sovereigntist states (Poland and Hungary) to cooperate, with each actor contributing to its domain.¹⁶ The Commission and Council's metagovernance proved effective, though tension arose,¹⁷ ultimately resolved through quick feedback and consultation. The pandemic spurred new EU-level metagovernance feedback mechanisms, such as the Recovery and Resilience Facility,¹⁸ tying national plans to EU priorities and embedding EU oversight in decentralized spending.¹⁹ Early over-centralization by individual states (e.g., blanket border closures) briefly hindered coordination, but Commission guidelines and EU Integrated Political Crisis

¹⁴ E.g., the Commission's Vaccines Task Force, the Clearing House for medical equipment. See for more details

¹⁵ Including national health systems, EU agencies, EU Council committees and working groups, and global initiatives like COVAX.

¹⁶ National health administrations focused on running vaccinations, while the European Commission was overseeing vaccine procurement and approval.

¹⁷ Such as the distribution of vaccine quotas among member states and the proposal for EU vaccine export controls. See for more details Arroyo et al. 2024.

¹⁸ Regulation (EU) 2021/241 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 February 2021 establishing the Recovery and Resilience Facility, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A02021R0241-20240301>

¹⁹ See Angelou 2025 for a detailed review on how the European Commission shaped its proposals on conditionality-based lending during the negotiation of National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs).

Response (IPCR)-led information sharing soon curtailed unilateral actions. In summary, this shows how polycentric governance, guided by central coordination, can bolster crisis resilience.

The EU's flexible, multi-centre approach proved crucial. Initially criticized, the EU's inclusive and responsive coordination boosted public approval by late 2020, enhancing its legitimacy relative to purely national or centralized approaches. Maintaining transparency, especially around vaccine procurement and restrictions, remained key to sustaining this trust. By 2021, emergency measures evolved into more routine processes (e.g., joint vaccine procurement, a stronger Health Union), suggesting these coordinating mechanisms could become permanent. The crisis showed that distributed authority can remain orderly when metagovernance feedback loops and polycentric coordination are employed, turning potential fragmentation into cohesive self-organization. In conclusion, this self-organizing governance, anchored by trust and accountability, enhanced the EU's legitimacy in crisis management relative to purely national or centralized approaches.

6. Conclusion

Across crises, EU governance oscillates between hierarchy and self-organisation; legitimacy improves when metagovernors steer transparently and embed stakeholder feedback. The three comparative case studies confirm this pattern in distinctive ways. In the Eurozone case, ad-hoc coalitions such as the Troika and the „Merkozy“ axis delivered rapid financial backstops, yet their opaque bargaining blurred accountability and fed perceptions of technocratic over-reach. During the refugee crisis, generous discretion for frontline states revealed the limits of solidarity; weak meta-steering failed to align national measures, deepening inter-state distrust and rule-of-law tensions. By contrast, the pandemic triggered an initially fragmented response that was gradually knitted together through joint vaccine procurement, IPCR information-sharing and the Recovery and Resilience Facility – illustrating how iterative feedback can convert dispersed capacities into coherent, legitimate action. Together, these findings indicate that *self-organisation is not a binary alternative to central control; rather, EU crisis management fluctuates along a continuum where legitimacy gains depend on timely meta-coordination and transparent feedback.*

The paper advances current debates on the EU's democratic deficit, rule-of-law tensions and crisis governance in three respects.

1. **Reframing legitimacy** – Decentralised networks can satisfy both input- and output-legitimacy criteria when metagovernors steer crisis management transparently.
2. **Extending governance theory** – The findings complement neo-functionalist accounts (which stress institutional spill-overs) by revealing the micro-mechanisms that make such spill-overs workable in turbulent settings, challenge pure intergovernmentalist views that locate decisive power solely

in national executives, and refine network governance scholarship by specifying when endogenous coordination suffices and when formal meta-steering becomes indispensable.

3. **Clarifying rule of law implications** – The contrast between the Eurozone and refugee cases highlights that self-organisation can *either* circumvent legal safeguards *or* be harnessed to uphold them, depending on how openly feedback is channelled into collective policymaking scrutiny.

Overall, the self-organising perspective thus bridges functional and normative strands of EU scholarship by tying crisis problem-solving directly to evolving legitimacy standards. Future work should (i) test the framework on potential energy, digital and climate shocks, (ii) trace network metrics from crisis onset to recovery, and (iii) examine when codification of crisis management procedures stabilises or stifles adaptive capacity. Pursued together, these avenues would deepen our understanding of how self-organising governance can move from an improvised crisis response to a durable feature of the EU's multilevel constitutional order.

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