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# The European Union as a long-term political actor: an overview

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## ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of the time perspectives with which the European Union conducts its politics and policies – an aim that has garnered very little scholarly attention thus far. We ask in which ways and to what extent is the Union able to employ long-term policy targets and considers the possible interests of future generations. Which factors determine the time perspectives, which institutions define them and what can possibly be done in order to employ longer-term perspectives in a more systematic manner within this complex technocratic system? We approach these questions from three viewpoints: the foundational ideas of integration; the governance structures within the EU system; and the Union's policy objectives. In addition to analyses of EU documentary data, our reflections rely on a set of semi-structured interviews conducted with a group of EU-experts in the autumn of 2019. A range of governance logics and mechanisms already support long-termism in the EU, but much can still be done in order to create a real processual value supporting it.

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## Introduction

In the age of climate change and global pandemics, citizens across all continents undoubtedly hope that their political systems succeed in producing sustainable *long-term* solutions to these and other emerging crises. This is a tall order in a world in which short-term material interests seem to prevail. It may require substantial alterations in decision-makers' awareness of the conditions of future sustainability and extensive institutional recalibrations at various political levels.

The demand to be farsighted in its decision-making undeniably concerns the European Union, the key actor in formulating the strategies through which Europe's countries seek to cope with future challenges. The scholarly community, however, has been conspicuously silent in this respect. No one, to the present authors' knowledge, really seems to have sought to display and systematically analyse the time perspectives with which the European Union formulates its policies and employs them (but cf. Vogt 2019). Although there have been research reports that explore the Union's scenario building exercises for the

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future (e.g. Ahrens and van der Vleuten 2019) or take stock of the long-term perspectives of a certain policy area (e.g. Dupont and Oberthür 2012; ter Haar and Copeland 2010; Sarti and St. John 2019), overarching questions about the Union's *temporal politics* from an institutionalist perspective have hardly been posed. To what extent does the European Union consider or emphasise the long-term impacts of its policies? In which ways are the EU's constitutional framework, multilevel structure and prevailing governance mechanisms possibly conducive to long-term decisions, especially in comparison with nation-state polities? And ultimately, what ought to be done to better incorporate organised considerations about the needs of future generations into the EU system to make the system more future-oriented and thus better prepared for emerging long-term challenges?

By providing answers, often only preliminary ones, to these types of questions, the ensuing examination offers an overview of the European Union's ability and willingness to generate long-term policies. Three empirical levels of analysis guide this endeavour: the EU's ideational foundation in a complex world (ideational level); the division of labour between the Union's different institutions and its various mechanisms of governance (institutional level); and the Union's actual policies, such as those related to climate change and resilience targets (policy level). Our main proposition stems from this trichotomy: in order to assess the application and prospects of long-termism in a multidimensional political system such as the European Union, several analytical levels need to be taken into consideration; these levels may present different and even conflicting pictures of the institutional whole. As the article demonstrates, within the EU's technocratic governance, each level consists of logics and mechanisms that facilitate long-term planning and policy-making, but it is difficult to identify any comprehensive pattern advancing long-termism. To an extent, but perhaps not sufficiently, long-term considerations are inbuilt into the EU polity, and they have gained in importance in recent years as climate concerns have assumed a central role in the Union's political agenda. We define long-termism or long-term decision-making as an institutional ability to systematically think in terms of a range of reasonable future time perspectives well beyond existing electoral cycles and to set binding and politically feasible long-term policy targets based on this thinking.

We begin by briefly discussing a few essential theoretical issues with respect to long-term democratic governance. It is noteworthy that these presented viewpoints, primarily originating from a distinct strand of research literature and operating, by and large, within nation-state politics, have hardly been applied in the context of such a multidimensional international organisation as the EU before – nor within any other technocratically-oriented supranational governance arrangements. After a brief methodological section, we turn to the three empirical levels mentioned above, each in its own section. We conclude with a clear normative suggestion related to the EU's impact assessment mechanism, perhaps introducing a step towards less institutional myopia. Our exploration draws from a set of semi-structured interviews conducted with a group of EU-experts in November 2019, a few months prior to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, along with close readings of official EU documentation.

## Theoretical perspectives on long- and short-termism

The canon of common knowledge proposes that short-termism or myopia prevails in the ruthless games of politics and power. Current research literature on the temporal

perspectives of governance and decision-making does provide a more nuanced picture of this issue, but assumptions of myopia nonetheless tend to prevail as the point of departure in scholarly analyses. The literature lists a number of sources or factors that are likely to enhance this inherent short-termism (see e.g. Jacobs 2011 and 2016; Caney 2016; MacKenzie 2016; Boston 2016). They fall, by and large, into two analytically distinct categories, those of cognitive and institutional factors. The latter are naturally more important for the present article, identifiable on all the three levels of EU policy-making under scrutiny, but the former also merit attention in any institutional or political context – including the EU. The discussion below is by no means meant to cover these factors in a comprehensive manner; it merely serves the purposes of our empirical analyses. (Table 1 in the concluding section translates a set of main points – ‘near and dear future’, ‘electoral cycles’, ‘role of specific interest groups’, ‘diffuse trust in the political system’, ‘broad knowledge reservoirs’, ‘inclusive politics’ and ‘deliberative traditions’ – into the EU setting.)

In general, human beings, be they ordinary citizens or decision-makers, cognitively tend to appreciate the present or near future more than any far-off point of time. The further away in time we travel, the more uncertain the consequences of our deeds are, and it may therefore not be worth considering these consequences in the first place (e.g. Thompson 2009). The mechanisms that human societies have invented to turn the uncertainty of the future into calculable risks, such as insurances and investment forecasts, can ultimately downplay this cognitive challenge, this ‘near and dear’, only to a limited degree (cf. Beckert 2016). People thus tend to be all too aware of the inadequate reservoirs of truth-like knowledge about the future – and research literature generally affirms that the better our knowledge of the potential and preferred directions of future development are, the more possible it will be for us to consider long-term viewpoints (e.g. Rapeli et al. 2021). The limitations of cognitive capacity and knowledge also indicate that managing such hyper-complex future-oriented issues as climate change may appear too demanding a maxim for the majority of people acting in the sphere of democratic politics (e.g. van der Ven and Sun 2021).

This propensity towards short-sightedness appears, however, too superficial a viewpoint when human beings’ capacity for ethical reflection is brought into the equation. For example, in debates on intergenerational justice or green politics, the underlying and widely-shared belief is that current generations do consciously act to guarantee that their descendants can lead meaningful lives. Indeed, ethical notions such as ‘lifetime transcending interests’ (Thompson 2009) and ‘concern for others’ in terms of futures consciousness (Ahvenharju, Minkinen, and Lalot 2018) also deserve attention whenever the time frames of decision-making are analysed. The EU’s emphasis on peace and value-based politics – the ideational level in our analysis – surely speaks to this point. Values tend to have an inherent future-oriented dimension, a characteristic that sustains long-term predictability and stability.

As regards institutional and organisational factors, the most evident of these is short electoral cycles. In democratic systems, politicians are inclined to offer their electorate immediate concrete benefits in order to maximise their chances of re-election. Closely related to this, powerholders can generally not be sure that a (controversial) decision survives the post-election change of government; it is therefore wise for them to opt for policies that generate outcomes with an immediate effect. Policy investments for a sustainable future are thus less likely to be implemented if there are no guarantees

that they will be institutionally protected in the long run. Furthermore, it is conceivable that specific interest groups within the polity, such as labour unions, end up defending the interests of their members via policies that focus on the short-term. In that way, these issue advocates continually seek to re-justify their legitimacy among their present membership. (Jacobs 2011; 2016; Thompson 2009)

Within the European Union's structures (at the institutional level of our analysis), these logics are, a priori, less prevalent than in the nation-state context, primarily because the relation between the Union's decision-makers and its citizens remains distant and due to the technocratic nature of decision-making. Moreover, even though lobbying and interest representation do play a significant role within the EU polity, the system's immensity, coupled with its inherent complexity, necessarily constrain the impact of any specific interest stakeholders within it. As we will see, however, the member states occasionally seem to assume the role of those 'specific interest groups'.

It is also possible to list qualities that potentially strengthen institutional propensity towards farsighted decisions. First, a reasonable level of political fragmentation may be conducive to longer-term solutions. When the responsibility for (unpopular) decisions is borne by the politicians of several parties, and voters therefore face difficulties in blaming and changing their party in the next election, it appears to be easier to emphasise and invest in long-term issues, even at the cost of existing welfare. Multiparty systems may in this sense be more prone to long-term decision-making than polities with only two main parties. Moreover, when diffuse support towards a public institution or political system is high (as opposed to specific support in Eastonian terms), decision-makers within that system can enforce unpopular norms and decrees, including short-term costs, for the present generation without losing too much legitimacy or popularity. General institutional trust may thus represent an important premise of long-termism (Jacobs and Matthews 2012). Given the EU's multi-actor political processes and, above all, its sui generis foundation (institutional and ideational levels), these arguments potentially bear a great deal of relevance for the ensuing analyses.

Deliberative traditions of policymaking and/or broad bases of participation may also enhance the prospects of long-termism. If the culture of balanced discussion and coordination within a polity is strong, and even opposition parties participate in deliberations over difficult choices of policy, the possibilities to lengthen the time perspective that the decisions span are surely improved; trust is also here important. The logic may also apply to citizen participation: if citizens' views are taken into consideration through systematic deliberation (for example, in mini-publics), this tends to enhance long-termism, primarily because the knowledge resources about the probabilities of future developments are likely to enlarge (Leino et al. 2019). This seems to indicate that (democratic) institutions that support and encourage civic inclusion at various levels are particularly well prepared for long-termism (cf. Weymouth and Hartz-Karp 2018). In the case of the EU, a polity in which various forms of coordinative discourse have played a central role for achieving new policy formulations (the policy level; e.g. Schmidt 2006), but with prevailing elite-democratic and technocratic tendencies, these arguments about the promises of deliberation and importance of inclusion would merit significant attention, also beyond the present article.

In the context of these kinds of institutional factors enabling or preventing long-termism, an obvious question arises: what, in the end, composes a truly future- or long-

term oriented political or governance institution? Michael MacKenzie (2016) provides a useful definition in which said institutions 'aim, in one way or another, to correct short-term biases in political systems and produce policy outcomes that achieve a better balance between the legitimate concerns of the present and the potential interests of the future'.<sup>1</sup> The definition thus involves a distinct political dimension: under these types of institutional conditions, decision-makers not only need to contemplate what makes the contemporary human pursuits legitimate, as well as the imagined future interests reasonable, they also need to determine on which grounds this imagined future can, in a justifiable manner, actually take precedence over the present concerns.<sup>2</sup> The decision-makers need to engage in what could be called 'future negotiations' or 'intertemporal policy trade-offs' (Jacobs 2011; 2016; Thompson 2009), informed by complex sets of interests, political biases and ideologies as well as different interpretations of time frames.

McKenzie's definition, however, says little about the way in which institutional actors ought to perceive, or relate themselves to, the future. There are, arguably, two main approaches in this respect.<sup>3</sup> First, we can systematically assess what the possible long-term consequences of our planned decisions will be in any future moment of time, say in 20 or 50 years. Beginning from the existing situation, we trace the likely future trajectories of our action, often in the form of scenarios. The second, more demanding option is that we systematically assess what the possible needs and concerns of future people will be in any given moment of time, for instance in 2030 or 2060, and then formulate appropriate policies to meet these needs. Here, in a sense, the (imagined) future informs the nature of today's decisions. In spite of the inherent difficulty of this change of perspective towards the life-worlds of future generations, empirical evidence does suggest that it may be useful for formulating truly future-sensitive policies (e.g. Hara et al. 2019; Kulha et al. 2021; cf. Karnein 2016). Indeed, one can ask whether the chances of systematic long-termism are higher if the latter approach is taken seriously – even in the context of EU regulation.

As a final remark here, to qualify as a long-term perspective, the timespan must appear considerable, lasting at least more than one election period. Existing research literature sometimes mentions 25 years as the limit for long-termness (e.g. Sprinz 2009) – a rule of thumb worth bearing in mind – but variation in terms of different policy issues is of course significant. A decade in budgetary politics certainly represents a long period of time, whereas problems involving nuclear waste span tens of thousands of years.

## Notes on empirical materials

In November 2019, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 EU employees (writ large) in Brussels and Helsinki (i.e. before the outbreak of the Corona virus).<sup>4</sup> The interviewees came from different institutional backgrounds – they are EU bureaucrats, politicians and lobbyists – but they all had wide-ranging practical experience and expertise in the EU; all 14 had devoted a significant part of their working life to the Union. As the use of one's mother tongue surely raises the quality of reflection when exchanging ideas over such a complex issue as long-termism, we chose to conduct the interviews with our compatriots, Finnish citizens. We do not believe, however, that our interpretations would have turned out to be significantly different had the interviewees come from a more varied national background – our focus was so distinctly at the general European level. Said interviews lasted one hour on average.

The variation between the interviews proved considerable. It became evident, confirming our presupposition, that it is almost impossible to draw a consensual, widely-shared picture of the European Union's (possible) inclinations towards long-termism. Several conflicting logics seem to operate simultaneously within that complex institutional structure, and one person seldom has a command on all of them. Given this, we can only utilise the interviews for what we call *anthropological anchorage*: the interviews point to modes of thinking and acting that seem significant within the EU bureaucratic and professional remit; they open up issues for the researcher to interpret and simultaneously anchor them to the reality of that human community. In addition to the interviews, we rely on thorough readings of central policy documents produced by the EU system since the mid 2010s, including such (sets of) documents as the Global Strategy (2016), The White Paper on the Future of Europe (2017), the European Green Deal (2019) and Strategic Foresight Reports (2020 and 2021). Needless to say, the various EU bodies produce such vast amounts of written documentation that the selection of these materials necessarily remains somewhat random.

We begin our empirical exploration with the foundational and ideational level informing EU politics. We then turn to the main institutional structures through which the Union's system materialises, focusing on the main institutions in Brussels and, to avoid overly complicating the picture, not on the various independent EU agencies across the continent. The final section deals with concrete policy issues. We thus operate within the EU system itself and only consider any external influences to a very limited degree.

### **The ideational level: the EU's guiding principles in a complex world**

During the over 60 years of integration and several constitutive treaties, the EU's institutional foundation, ultimately based on a set of democratic values, has proved resilient. It has survived several waves of enlargement as well as the profound domestic transformations experienced in the member states over these decades. The level of diffuse support for the system has, in other words, remained high and has primarily evolved through this value basis (e.g. Jayet 2020).<sup>5</sup> For those who earn their living in the context of the Union, adherence to these values no doubt represents a central source of motivation – which was also apparent in our interviews. As one of the interviewees noted, 'the unique feature is [...] that the institutional whole has pretty well maintained its track' (Int12). Another interviewee explicitly contemplated whether there is a mechanism of long-termness inbuilt therein:

But I would still argue that the fundamental justification for the EU's existence – its basic idea since 60 years back [...] is precisely long-term politics and policy-making – it is not [the idea] that the member countries tolerate each other only to the degree that they can achieve something in three, four or five years, or within just one year. (Int9)

Scholars have increasingly paid attention to the solidity of the EU's value and treaty basis in recent years, or what they refer to as the Union's constitutional stability. The idea of integration itself has remained intact and so have, by and large, the institutional divisions of power; there is no ultimate metaphysical aim that the Union aspires to reach (e.g. Tuori 2014; Nikolaidis 2018). The reality that in many policy fields, social affairs in particular, the



EU's competencies have remained weak hardly changes this overall picture. In fact, even the ways in which the Brexit and Covid-19 crises have been handled can be interpreted as evidentiary of the Union's fundamental stability.<sup>6</sup> Such stability surely raises the possibilities of including long-term considerations in decision-making.

The stable fundament, however, has not prevented the Union from finding itself in regular crisis over the past decades. In theory, these crisis conditions might shorten the timespans that Brussels prescribes for its policies – extinguishing the fire would require all systemic energy in the present. Nonetheless, the interviewees did *not* confirm this hypothesis. The prevailing view – one that can also be found in existing research literature (e.g. Jones, Kelemen, and Meunier 2016) – was that crisis experiences have rather forced the EU to renew its ways of thinking and to set up new mechanisms of governance, thus strengthening its long-term resilience and legitimacy. The economic crisis of 2008–12 provides the prime example of this; the stability mechanisms that were then introduced are continuously being used to assess the direction of member state economies. Avoiding similar crises *in the foreseeable future* works as a guideline of sorts as new EU policies are being drafted.<sup>7</sup>

Political agendas do change with crises, however, and the risk that short-term interests suddenly gain the upper hand is imminent; (fast-burning) crises side-track issues that have been processed over a long time – and for the long term.<sup>8</sup> Within the thick regulative framework of the EU, with a great number of regulative initiatives continuously under way, this of course appears natural (cf. next section). One interviewee, for example, recalled how 'we had this initiative that the use of living animals in circuses should be forbidden within the EU. And then there was this economic crisis [...] and it was offered as a reason for not doing anything [with the initiative], 'we now have bigger things underway, we can't concentrate on these'. In my opinion this diminishes long-termism'. (Int2)

The various integration crises over the past 30 years also relate to the changing and increasingly challenging context within which the EU operates in the world. Several interviewees contemplated whether the problems that the multilateral liberal framework of cooperation has been facing during the 2010s also influences the time perspectives with which global actors, including the European Union, formulate and can formulate their policies. One interviewee noted that 'it has simply become more difficult to reach any binding treaties at the global level' (Int2) – well-functioning treaty frameworks, as expressions of mutual trust, can theoretically facilitate long-termism. More importantly, the unpredictability and increasing general complexity of global politics entail that reaching decisions within the EU system becomes ever harder:

I say this with 20 years of experience in the Commission, that things have become more complicated whereas decision-making processes have not become easier. It's partly because the issues [on the agenda] have also become more difficult. The challenges that we try to cope with, for example climate change or developmental issues, [...] require that we find solutions that are *by definition* [or. in English] somewhat more complex. Everything affects everything, therefore in that way the difficulty of substance work has increased. (Int5)

This appears important from a theoretical point of view: in a complex, crisis-ridden world in which the norm imperative for long-term decision-making appears strong and existential stakes are high, it is difficult to distinguish what kinds of policies one should pursue and whether the policies are ultimately appropriate, effective and democratically tenable. The knowledge basis is almost bound to be too weak; and the desirable and



the possible seem to follow different logics. For an individual (politician or civil servant), generating long-termism under such conditions is bound to be cognitively highly demanding.

This complexity of the world can, however, also be seen as a structural, legitimacy-enhancing resource for the European Union. The member states, or the majority of them, barely have any resources to cope with the intricate challenges of the world – and it is therefore natural for the Union to assume responsibility for these. Moreover, grand policies, such as the rules of global trade and environmental protection, generally require systematic long-term considerations and decisions, certainly more often than smaller problems on the local level. In this respect, the principle of subsidiarity, the intention to treat policy issues at the appropriate level, can in fact ultimately enhance the EU polity's propensity towards long-termism. One interviewee notes: 'there is this clear desire ... that the member states generally understand that they don't have the capacity to get involved in global problems and can't cope with European problems alone but need other actors to help solve them'. (Int4)

### **The institutional level: non-synchronic main bodies and the nature of policy instruments**

The institutional structure of the European Union provoked more reflection on the part of the interviewees than any of the other themes discussed. Above all, unanimity with respect to the differences between the temporal perspectives of the main bodies, the Commission, Council and Parliament, was clearly on display.

It is no surprise that the European Commission is the body that is believed to act for the long-term in a more systematic manner than the other core European institutions. The technocratic free-from-electoral-politics nature of the Commission and competent civil servants were seen as the prime reasons for this, but the tradition of good and ambitious governance was also mentioned as another indicator. One interviewee noted that there is also a great deal of explicit reflection about the long-term objectives of the European integration within the Commission and referred to the *White Paper on the Future of Europe* (2017) as a major recent achievement in this respect (Int6). Another interviewee with long professional experience in the Commission reflects upon this:

The Commission does have a tendency towards long-term planning, and it takes into consideration various types of scenarios and alternatives. And then we have this *impact assessment* [or. in English], which was seriously brought to us almost 20 years ago, and this assessment board [...] So, yes, it has moved us towards that direction clearly. And these elements of good governance, good legislative procedures, they have helped with that. (Int5)

One aspect of this strong tradition of governance is the *institutional memory* that the Commission has accumulated over many years and further cultivates (the logic of national bureaucracies is similar in this respect, of course). The research literature on long-termism hardly reflects upon this notion at all, even though the historically determined knowledge reservoirs that institutions carry on (more systematically than individuals) might be seen as a central enabling factor for long-term decision-making – embeddedness in the past makes the future more easily approachable (cf. the discussion on institutional trust earlier). Indeed, concrete mechanisms of long-termism have strong possibilities to

become functional within those institutions that systematically preserve their resources of institutional memory. One interviewee contemplates:

Although the commissioners and the collegium change, [...] institutional memory endures in the Commission, perhaps better [than elsewhere in the EU]. The same officials work there with the same issues for years or decades. And the longer they work, the more they have perspective, they remember how things were done 20 years ago. They can also then better reflect upon the ways in which things should be done in the future. (Int3)

The interviewees generally shared the view that the Council is the most short-sighted of the main EU organs. National election cycles and national interests have a significant impact on its policy-making; the (watered-down) compromises it seemingly always finds are made in the shadow of these interests. Indeed, many still seem to see national interest as *the* main problem of the entire EU machinery. However, we should remember, as Katrin Milzow (2012) has for example argued, that the uses of this 'national interest' actually vary; articulations of 'national interest' do not necessarily reflect the individual member state citizens' ultimate interests but are simply employed as a negotiation asset. In this respect, the notion operates in constant interplay with the idea of 'European interest'. The following quotation may thus seem overly pessimistic, but it nonetheless illustrates how national interest is believed to influence EU policy-making:

People see this [Brussels system] as a buffet-table of sorts ... Someone's short-term interest or any business interest are always presented as national interests. So, there is this terrible bias that comes from the member state level ... that how much shrimp I can get from the buffet bowl. And they don't think how *the whole* could make sense or be reasonable. And that's why I've said that we should also include the costs of inaction [in cost calculations] or that impact assessments should be broader here. [...] And this [...] is the question that will determine the EU's fate. Can we rise above this thinking based on national interest? (Int13)

The European Parliament, by contrast, has assumed the role of a truly transnational body, often setting political goals and drafting discussion agendas in a more unconventional manner than the Council. This 'theatre of engagement' (Ripoll Servent 2018) broadens the scope of politics in Europe, politicises the polity and represents the concerns of a range of stakeholders, those of civil society organisations in particular (Scully 2011). This may also indicate that the Parliament is able, if it so wishes, to counter any short-term interest-based political agendas proposed by the member states – which reflects the theoretical argument that a polity with multiple actors sharing decision-making responsibility tends to enhance the chances of long-termism. A less democratic interpretation of this might be, however, that the weaker the linkage between the electorate and its elected representatives, the better the possibilities for long-termism tend to be (cf. von Achenbach 2017). One of the interviewees echoes this line of argumentation:

The Parliament, however ... they have more opportunities to bring up these issues than the Council, where the national-level agents are considerably more constrained [by their constituencies]. That is, the worst compromises come from the Council, at least in environmental matters. The Parliament might be more ambitious while in the Council, a consensus must be reached [...] and it often turns into horse-trading between political priorities. (Int4)

One can of course argue that these distinctions between the main bodies are, upon final analysis, secondary in terms of the Union's *overall* credentials for generating farsighted policies. All the bodies participate in the preparation and making of decisions and

these processes are generally very thorough indeed; the trilogues through which the three bodies currently come together have also become a standard procedure in the Ordinary Legislative Process (Greenwood and Roeder-Rynning 2019).<sup>9</sup> Despite these formal and informal mechanisms of cooperation between the actors of Brussels bureaucracy, however, there appear to be few systematic governance instruments and practices – or commitment devices (Boston 2016) – supporting long-termism within the entire system. In other words, the distinct regulatory framework of the EU, involving not only regulation but also information-gathering, norm-setting and behaviour-modifying (see e.g. Caporaso et al. 2015; Busuioc and Rimkutė 2020), remains relatively weak in terms of organised long-termism.

In spite of the preceding argument, an important tool of this regulatory framework, the impact assessment procedure, has continuously strengthened in recent years. Any piece of proposed legislation by the Commission must be assessed with respect to the impacts that it may have on relevant stakeholders, the public, business and civic organisations. Owing to an interinstitutional agreement on better law-making, the European Parliament and the Council also adhere to the principles of IA (Dunlop and Radaelli 2019, 116). The temporal perspective or engagement of this instrument should and could, however, be more systematic, even though the Commission's impact assessment guidelines explicitly note that 'Different impacts are likely to occur at different times (with costs often being incurred early on and benefits emerging only later). This should be reflected in the assessment [...].' (Commission 2021a, 27) One of the interviewees also referred to this weakness of IA's temporal perspective, the absence of any specified temporal frameworks, but he simultaneously endorsed the range of efforts through which long-term policy-making materialises within the EU:

Climate goals are probably the most self-evident example of an issue in which the time span of reflection reaches far into the future. And all the broader themes, those related to infrastructural projects, be they electricity or road networks, issues related to EU development, they are being very systematically looked at everywhere [within the EU]. And better regulation is of course linked to these impact assessments ... But I just took a look at [the guidelines] and there is hardly any indication of timespans. They talk about assessing how a decision impacts or whom it impacts and so forth. But it is the absence of a long-term-oriented approach that shone through. (Int3)

The employment of various types of strategies is another noteworthy mechanism of long-termism. The bulk of these strategies are initiated and drafted by the Commission, often for the five years each Commission is expected to remain in power. The most important strategies also cover longer periods of time – e.g. the Lisbon Strategy of the 2000s and Europe2020 both spanned ten years, and the long-term budget frameworks are signed for seven years (the current 2021-27). The strategies are usually evaluated on an annual basis.

The Union's gender equality policy provides an illustrative example. The current Commission of Ursula von der Leyen has committed itself to gender equality policies by way of a five-year plan from 2020 through 2025. However, some sort of a strategy-based agenda in this field has informed EU policy-making since the 1980s; and annual evaluation reports have also been published since 1996. Continuity is indeed an important premise of strategy-based planning.

The extent to which these various strategies systematically seek to incorporate future citizens' wishes, or draft alternative paths of developments towards several future points of time, would merit an independent enquiry; our rudimentary readings of these strategies indicate that such an aspect is generally missing. It is also noteworthy that the strategies' standard time spans of five to ten years fall short of 'the 25-year rule' of long-termism mentioned earlier. But in most member state contexts, the relative timespans would certainly be shorter still.

### **The policy level: from climate change to foresight ambitions**

While strategic planning with time perspectives of five to ten years underlies much of policy-making within the EU, in climate policy – or in environmental policies more generally – time perspectives often prove considerably longer. The set future points of time vary between 2030, the year of Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals of the UN, and 2050, the year by when Europe should operate as a carbon neutral region of good life. The Commission resolution from 2018, *A Clean Planet for All* (the current Green Deal of the von der Leyen Commission echoes this document) sets the time limit in a very clear manner by stating:

The aim of this long-term strategy is to confirm Europe's commitment to lead in global climate action and to present a vision that can lead to achieving net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 through a socially-fair transition in a cost-efficient manner. It underlines the opportunities that this transformation offers to European citizens and its economy, whilst identifying challenges ahead (European Commission 2018, p.3).

Three points in this short passage deserve particular attention, points that regularly figure in official EU policy documentation on climate change: this is a field through which the EU believes that it can fulfil its ambitions for global leadership (cf. Skjærseth 2017); to be legitimate for the vast majority of EU citizens, a socially inclusive pattern of change must be prioritised; and although the green transition may prove challenging for lay citizens, it is believed to create unforeseen opportunities for European production and services. It is apparent that the drafters of these policy guidelines deem these points, reminiscent of ecological modernisation discourses, crucially important for justifying the genuinely long-term perspective of the strategy. This in turn implies a theoretical proposition: in the context of complex world-political processes, a state's or intergovernmental actor's commitment to long-termism may have to be closely interlinked with clearly articulated preconditions, along with a manifest element of self-interest, to be politically feasible.

Optimism in relation to the opportunities of green transition also prevailed in our interviews. One expert maintained that carbon neutrality by 2050 will be 'an enabling theme' for the whole of Europe during the coming decades. The expert sees it as 'a driver of Europe's development', comparable to 'a European moon shot', referring to John F. Kennedy's 1960s commitment to landing an astronaut on the moon. Said interviewee believed that even those who at the national level may act against overly strict environmental regulation, are willing to subject these issues to the EU level. What is then important is that the Union 'needs to create a level playing field for all, the problems cannot be solved nationally' (Int8). This can possibly be understood as a statement of diffuse support for the EU's regulatory framework.

It is also important to note that climate policy has in fact become a mainstream issue in the corridors of EU institutions. Qualified unanimity with respect to the importance of sound climate policy is widespread, to the extent that traditional political cleavage structures may occasionally seem pointless, at least to some degree. It is also evident that the theme is so all-encompassing, and in a sense distant, that sometimes it is easier to reach compromises in its context than in the case of detailed but trivial every-day issues.<sup>10</sup> One of the interviewees noted:

After the elections last spring [2019] ... they may emphasise long-term decisions a little more, there on the side of the Parliament; the Greens and Renew even took future-centred views as their 'political arrow'. So, it is above all with climate change people have been riding over there. [...] It used to be that the socialists protected the workplaces and conservatives protected the industry, if I exaggerate a bit. But it now seems that these must go in hand in hand. (Int4)

It is beyond the scope of this article to assess to what extent the long temporal perspectives of EU climate policies can lead to the lengthening of decision-making time-spans in the other policy fields of the Union; causal links are difficult to delineate. However, a note related to the field of external EU affairs may be illuminating; it is a field that is also centrally involved in the battle against climate change and within which the Union's ambitions have been continuously increasing over the past decades. In the Global Strategy of 2016, the most important document informing the EU's global politics in recent years, long-termism is barely visible in any explicit terms, apart from the references to Agenda 2030. But one prevailing argument in this document (and in many others of the field) is noteworthy and is spelled out in this paragraph from the Strategy, as such the most overt long-term formulation of the entire document:

**Global Governance for the twenty-first Century.** The EU is committed to a global order based on international law, which ensures human rights, sustainable development and lasting access to the global commons. This commitment translates into an aspiration to transform rather than to simply preserve the existing system. The EU will strive for a strong UN as the bedrock of the multilateral rules-based order, and develop globally coordinated responses with international and regional organisations, states and non-state actors. (European Union External Action Service 2016; **bolding original**)

A strong commitment to a norm-and-institution-based global order thus strongly informs EU foreign policies writ large – or may in fact have always informed (cf. the ideational level of our analysis). 'Order' is a term that implies a longer time span, with continuity and predictability being its main attributes.<sup>11</sup>

The final theme to be discussed here has figured on the EU's political agenda since the 1980s, but its importance has been growing in recent years. Indeed, as a result of climate and environmental concerns, and most recently the Covid-19 pandemic, *foresight policies* are in the process of becoming a significant crosscutting theme for EU governance. The leading policy makers increasingly seem to believe that bearing foresight in mind – e.g. megatrend and scenario analyses and alternative future visioning – provides a major way for achieving, as the slogan reads, a 'green, digital and fair' Europe. This is spelled out in unequivocal terms in the autumn 2020 Commission Communication, 'Strategic Foresight – charting the course towards a more resilient Europe':

Strategic foresight will play a key role in helping future-proof EU policymaking by ensuring that short-term initiatives are grounded in a longer-term perspective. To make the most of its potential, this Commission has a strong mandate to put strategic foresight at the heart of EU policymaking. (3)

The continuously strengthening role of foresight work was also noted in our interviews, conducted before the pandemic. It is noteworthy, however, that in comparison to what some member states have already long utilised as standard operating procedures, the EU seems to have adopted these mechanisms or policy approaches fairly late. In Finland, for example, the Committee for the Future has enjoyed the status of a permanent Parliamentary committee since 2000, with systematic future-oriented assessments of government proposals and policies as its main task (Koskimaa and Raunio 2020); there are also current official discussions of whether the idea of ‘anticipatory regulation’ could somehow further strengthen governmental policy planning processes. The quotation below compresses the understanding that prevailed in Brussels in the autumn of 2019:

And what this new Commission has told us in advance is that foresight-thinking will have a clearly more visible role in all their initiatives. When they for example present what they’re going to do next year ... so each of their proposals will have to contain a small review of what its significance is in the long run. They are really trying to improve this now, this long-term thinking. (Int2)

In most cases, the expected end-result of foresight planning is societal *resilience*, defined as ‘the ability not only to withstand and cope with challenges but also to undergo transitions in a sustainable, fair, and democratic manner’ (European Commission 2020, 2). And it is not only within the EU itself where resources of resilience should increase but also in its partner countries. The EU’s interest in resilience mechanisms obviously reflects the recent focus on that particular ideal in global affairs – a fact that has also generated a great deal of academic reflection, both pro and contra the resilience paradigm (see e.g. Mckeown and Glenn 2018; Bourbeau and Caitlin 2018). Without taking sides vis-à-vis these debates, as a mechanism for thinking over the longer term, resilience may indeed be useful, at least in combination with the value-based normative foundation of the European Union.

We wonder, however, whether the Union should be even more ambitious. The time perspectives with which resilience policies operate could also include systematic reflection on the desires of future generations, in the sense we discussed at the outset. In current resilience talk, it is hardly asked what kind of a world will the not-yet born wish to see, for example, in 2050. As an additional critical point, it remains unclear whether the human and administrative resources in Brussels and in member states are sufficiently strong to turn foresight into an effective principle of governance, one that systematically informs regulatory policymaking and helps to counteract the cognitive problems related to individual-level future-oriented thinking.

## Concluding remarks

We have introduced in this article a number of essential features of the EU’s inclinations towards short-term or long-term decision-making by way of three levels of analysis: ideas, institutions and policy. Table 1 below explicitly relates a sample of our important empirical insights into a range of factors potentially preventing or enabling long-termism, factors that

**Table 1.** The EU and logics of long-termism and short-termism (short-term in italics).

Long-term/ short-term supporting factors	Meaning / application in the EU context	Level of analysis
<i>near and dear future</i>	<i>inclinations towards short-termism in the Council; complexity of the world</i>	institutional; ideational
<i>electoral cycles</i>	technocratic structures and strategy-based regulation undermine cycles regular crises (long and <i>short</i> )	Institutional ideational
<i>role of specific interest groups</i>	complexity of decision-making reduces the impact of any one group; <i>national interest</i>	institutional
general/ diffuse trust in the political system	significant diffuse support for the treaty framework; credibility of founding values	ideational
deliberative traditions	regulative framework encompassing all the main bodies; coordinative discourse	policy
broad knowledge reservoirs	institutional memory (in the Commission)	policy/ institutional
inclusive, multi-actor politics	elite technocracy Conference on the Future of Europe	policy (ideational)

we briefly discussed in the theory section. The table is of course general and cursory in nature, but it nonetheless shows the multiplicity of the logics and mechanisms that affect and even determine the time perspectives with which this complex technocratic governance system, the European Union, conducts its politics and policies. The table also indicates that much has already been achieved in terms of long-termism within the European polity and that the preconditions for further development of future-sensitive decision-making clearly exist, in more varied forms than one generally encounters in the member states.

There are also a few points that deserve special emphasis. Firstly, the very foundation of the EU, its democratic values and commitment to a norm-based global order, already guarantee the Union an elementary reservoir of long-termism; the ideals of peaceful continuous transformation of European and international politics, as well as those of democratic, inclusive deliberation, remain strong within the institution. The logic in this respect seems different from the member states, where the sense of national solidarity may constitute the ultimate factor motivating long-term considerations – a distinct form of communitarianism, as it were. Continuing emphasis on the founding democratic values is also important for the EU's future as an international actor; resorting to short-term power politics would surely undermine any category of 'politics for the long-term'. The efforts to take the lead in global (long-term?) climate politics can undoubtedly be seen as a continuum of the Union's tradition of promoting value-based global governance.

Second, the specific institutional structure through which the European Union operates plays a major role in bringing about long-termism. The Union's resources, knowledge bases, scrupulous governance traditions and perhaps even a certain technocratic detachment from the electoral cycles, do indeed gear the EU towards longer time spans in its decision-making than is normally the case with nation-states. Mechanisms of interinstitutional deliberation also play a positive role in this respect; the Parliament's capacity to bring unconventional issues onto the agenda represents an important aspect of this. However, the continuing importance of national interests, as well as the dangers of fast-burning crises, do occasionally spell problems for long-term ideals. But under these pressures the system has proved capable of inventing new governance mechanisms that have effectively enhanced stability and predictability.

Finally, and most importantly, systematic efforts to think for the long term still clearly need to be further developed within the European Union. Long-termism is not yet a real value or



norm or behavioural pattern that the Union manages to employ in an organised manner across its various policy sectors, at least not to the degree that it would justify references to the EU as a future-oriented institution. In any case, there have hardly been any attempts to seriously consider the possible wishes of future generations, for example, by way of deliberative future thinking exercises, although the current Conference on the Future of Europe can possibly be seen as a step towards this direction. In this context, our most concrete proposition concerns the impact assessment procedure: it should be refined to systematically include a range of clearly specified future points in time, perhaps spanning the remaining decades of the ongoing century – in environmental issues even longer. However, if the new ideas presented on the foresight policy agenda truly materialise in one form or the other, the EU will indeed be in the process of transforming long-termism into a genuine norm – an addition to the general normative and inherently democratic framework that the Union has sought to advance in its international politics over the past decades.

## Notes

1. There are several different conceptions that we could use here, as convincingly shown by Ahvenharju, Minkinen, and Lalot 2018 in their literature review of futures studies. These terms include, e.g., futures consciousness, anticipation, future awareness and prospective attitude. We believe that ‘future orientation’ aptly describes institutional actors such as the ‘European Union as that term covers, in theory, both attitudinal propensity and concrete governance mechanisms. Brown and Michael (2003) make a useful distinction between looking into the future and looking at the future.
2. Complicated questions of *intergenerational justice* necessarily come to the fore in this context (see e.g. Beyleweld, Düvell, and Spahn 2015; Lagerspetz 2018). For example, who ultimately has the right to say anything about the preferences of future generations?
3. The straight-forward definition of institutional long-termism that we provided at the outset – focusing more on decision-making processes than on the temporal nature of an institution in McKenzie’s terms – covers both these approaches of understanding the future.
4. Aappo Pukarinen conducted all the interviews. The interviews were otherwise single-person but in one of the interviews, two informants participated. Only one was conducted in Helsinki. Four of the interviewees were women, ten men. Our questions reflected, to a significant extent, the theoretical viewpoints discussed above; we even used some of the theoretical assumptions as introductions to our questions (e.g. ‘have you come across situations that were effectively future negotiations’). In translating the interviews, we have had to take some liberties as the syntaxes of Finnish and English are so different.
5. In the constitutional treaties of the EU, we have been unable to find any explicit formulations of the Union’s operational time frames. The narrative of this section therefore strongly relies on the interview material.
6. The interviewees also emphasised that this relative stability is something that not only politicians and civil servants appreciate in their daily labour, but it is of essential importance for the bulk of business actors as well. For those actors, long-termism primarily materialises, one can argue, as a quest for stability and predictability, qualities that enable profitable long-term investments. From this perspective, lobbying tends to lengthen the timespan of policies as it advances the idea of an investment environment that is as predictable as possible.
7. We reviewed crisis-related EU scholarly literature over the past few years in the English-language, German, French and Finnish contexts, with the aim to assess the temporal perspectives of these works (e.g. Fabbrini 2015; Leggewie 2017; Hennette et al. 2017; Davis Cross 2017; Schmidt 2020). Our enquiry may have been superficial, but we are nevertheless inclined to argue that the idea of long-termism hardly plays any role whatsoever in these efforts; the temporal frames within which the Union ought to operate or why its structures should be renewed,

are rarely ever specified. Propositions meant to provide new credibility for the European project, such as new mechanisms of social inclusion or new institutional designs (for instance, a second chamber for the Parliament), do imply a temporal perspective that may span several decades, but it is not specified how many. Indeed, desired future legitimacy is not defined through long-termism. It remains to be seen whether the current Conference on the Future of Europe, aiming to involve EU citizens in future deliberations, can do a better job in this respect.

8. Seabrooke and Tsingou (2019) make a useful distinction between fast-burning and slow-burning crises. The discussion here primarily refers to the former type; the argument about the stability of the constitutional fundament actually indicates that slow-burning crises have been largely controlled.
9. The European Strategy and Policy Analysis System also operates as an intra-institutional consultative institute, one that conducts long-term investigative work for the entire system. <https://espas.secure.europarl.europa.eu/orbis/espas2018about>
10. By way of example, the carbon border adjustment mechanism (CBAM) initiative, currently processed in the EU's national parliaments, clearly demonstrates the EU's regulatory capacity for long-termism in climate policy. With the initiative, set to introduce carbon tariff fees in Europe, the Union seeks to steer non-EU-companies to manufacture goods that are less carbon-intensive than today. In the internal market, awareness of these fees is likely to increase long-term stability and even predictability, and help entice cost-effective clean technology investments. By creating such binding regulation, the EU acts to meet the long-term climate targets of 2035 and 2050 that it has set for itself. The mechanism is expected to come into force in 2026 after a three-year transition period. (European Commission 2021b.)
11. The efforts to maintain order have traditionally materialised particularly well in development policy, a sub-field of external affairs, in which the most enduring treaty-based frameworks of EU policies known to the present authors can be found. The 20-year Cotonou Agreement with the African, Caribbean and Pacific countries was signed in June 2000; the new treaty with the ACP countries, to be imminently signed, also encompasses 20 years. If we include the predecessors of these treaties, the Yaoundé and Lomé Conventions (1964-75, 1976-1999), the temporal frame of this cooperation framework already covers close to 60 years. Indeed, development policy is a long-term endeavour: profound change in partner countries is bound to require a lot of time.

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