Title: Navigating Polycrisis: The EU’s Challenges in Migration, Legitimacy, and Geopolitics. An interview with Ruth Ferrero-Turrión
URL:
https://frictions.europeamerica.de/current-debate-ferrero-turrion-interview-navigating-polycrisis-eu/
doi number: 10.15457/frictions/0036
Author: Ruth Ferrero-Turrión

Recommended citation

Ruth Ferrero-Turrión: Navigating Polycrisis: The EU’s Challenges in Migration, Legitimacy, and Geopolitics. An interview with Ruth Ferrero-Turrión. Frictions (18.12.2024), doi: 10.15457/frictions/0036

Copyright

The work may be cited according to academic standards. This text is openly licensed via CC BY-NC-ND. The copyright for the photographs belongs to the author and rights holders.

Navigating Polycrisis: The EU’s Challenges in Migration, Legitimacy, and Geopolitics.

An interview with Ruth Ferrero-Turrión

Ruth Ferrero-Turrión (Complutense, Madrid)

in conversation with Paul Vickers (Leibniz ScienceCampus, Regensburg)

IMAGO / Shotshop

Share this contribution

Share on Facebook
Share on X
Share on WhatsApp
Share on LinkedIn
Share by Mail

In this interview, Complutense Professor of Political Science and European Studies Ruth Ferrero-Turrión discusses the European Union’s responses to its ongoing crises, from migration and financial instability to geopolitical tensions involving the Western Balkans and Ukraine. She critiques the EU’s reactive

tendencies, emphasizing the lack of political will and consistency in leveraging its extensive policy tools. Ferrero-Turrión also highlights the EU's legitimacy deficit and its impact on deeper integration, fiscal union, and social cohesion. Turning to geopolitics, she examines Spain's limited role and the EU's fragmented defence strategy. Despite these challenges, she identifies opportunities in moments of coordinated action, suggesting a potential path forward for the Union.

Information and Acknowledgements: The interview with Ruth Ferrero-Turrión was recorded on 21 November 2024 at the studio of the Center for University and Academic Teaching (ZHW) at the University of Regensburg. We are grateful to the ZHW team, especially Dr. Regine Bachmaier, for the support with creating the recording. Christoph Kulzer, student assistant, at the Leibniz ScienceCampus worked on the transcription. The interview was edited for publication by Paul Vickers, manager of the Leibniz ScienceCampus, with support from Gresa Morina (LSC).

> The EU is poorly equipped to address these crises collectively… Without unified political will, the EU will continue to struggle to address crises comprehensively.

Paul Vickers (Regensburg): *Ruth, you've described the current era as one marked by "polycrisis," with economic, social, and geopolitical challenges converging. How well equipped do you think the EU is to manage these overlapping crises, and what improvements are necessary?*

Ruth Ferrero-Turrión (Madrid): The EU is poorly equipped to address these crises collectively. One major issue is the reactive nature of its responses. Over the past two decades, crises have not been effectively anticipated or mitigated. For instance, during the 2008 financial crisis and subsequent Euro crisis, austerity measures led by Germany prioritized controlling public budgets over expanding them. This approach had lasting social consequences, particularly for disadvantaged populations in Southern and Central Europe, and contributed to the rise of right-wing political forces.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic marked a shift. The EU's coordinated response included increased public debt expenditure but as part of supranational action, with the countries acting in concert. This "Hamiltonian moment" opened opportunities for further integration. Still, the EU's crisis management remains inconsistent. The so-called 'migration crisis' of 2015-16, for example, focused on externalizing migration management rather than reforming asylum policies. Instruments like the Temporary Protection Directive, created in 2001 for mass asylum situations in the wake of the Balkan conflicts, were only implemented during the Ukraine war. They were not used for people from Syria or Afghanistan. This inconsistency underscores a lack of political will rather than an absence of tools.

The EU's toolbox is extensive, but its effectiveness hinges on using these instruments proactively and

consistently. Without unified political will, the EU will continue to struggle to address crises comprehensively.

> To move forward, the EU must address its democratic deficit… Without this, the EU risks stagnation or even regression to pre-Maastricht levels of integration.

PV: *You've argued that political legitimacy is key to the EU's ability to address such challenges. Is there sufficient legitimacy within the EU for broad transformations like fiscal union?*

RF-T: Political legitimacy is a significant challenge. While the EU has the tools to enhance social protections and address migration, it often lacks the political will for collective action. For instance, fiscal union—an ideal scenario—remains unlikely in the current political climate. Member states are deeply fragmented, and reactionary forces resist deeper integration, preferring to remain within the single market without further political commitments.

To move forward, the EU must address its democratic deficit. Its institutions were built from the top down, not as a revolutionary nor even a grassroots movement. Democratizing decision-making processes and improving communication with citizens are crucial for enhancing legitimacy. Without this, the EU risks stagnation or even regression to pre-Maastricht levels of integration.

Informing and engaging the public is essential. There needs to be a positive case made for EU membership to foster trust and encourage broader acceptance of integration. And this is necessary because at the moment the EU has few redistributive competencies meaning that it struggles to challenge inequality or overcome obstacles to social cohesion.

At the same time, we cannot ignore the role of reactionary political actors who influence national debates on EU policies. While most no longer push for exit strategies, like Brexit, their focus on maintaining sovereignty hinders deeper integration. The challenge for the EU is balancing these national concerns with the collective good.

> The [Western Balkans'] 'liminal status'—neither fully integrated nor entirely excluded—is unsustainable… It benefits local elites and fulfils the EU's short-term security goals, but it damages prospects for long-term integration.

PV: *Turning to the Western Balkans, how is the EU performing in its efforts to integrate the region and counter competing influences?*

RF-T: The EU’s credibility in the Western Balkans has suffered due to inconsistent policies. While EU funds flow into the region, they often entrench corrupt elites rather than promote democratization or combat clientelism. This transactional approach prioritizes stability over meaningful reform. Populations in the region remain disillusioned, as the EU’s actions often seem more focused on immediate security concerns than long-term integration.

Competing influences from Russia, China, Turkey, and the Gulf states further complicate the EU’s position. While the EU remains the primary investor in the region, its presence is overshadowed by these actors in the eyes of local populations. Moreover, the EU’s reliance on elites, who exploit funds without driving reform, undermines trust.

To regain credibility, the EU must set clear timelines for enlargement and engage directly with citizens. Relying solely on government elites perpetuates corruption and fosters scepticism. The region’s “liminal status”—neither fully integrated nor entirely excluded—is unsustainable. While it benefits local elites and fulfils the EU’s short-term security goals, it damages prospects for long-term integration.

Recent geopolitical crises, such as Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, have renewed discussions about the EU’s enlargement policy as a strategic tool. However, without addressing structural issues like corruption and demographic decline in the Balkans, these efforts will fall short. Additionally, the EU must confront its own internal divisions. For example, some member states use their relationships with Balkan countries for narrow economic or political gains – securing lithium supplies or externalizing migration controls. This further complicates collective action.

Ruth Ferrero-Turrión at the University of Regensburg, 13 November 2024

PV: *Spain, where you're based, has traditionally played a secondary role in EU geopolitics. How does it see its position in light of the Ukraine war and growing regional alignments?*

RF-T: Spain's geopolitical priorities have historically focused on its southern border, addressing issues like migration, energy links, and instability in regions like the Sahel. While these concerns are valid, they often place Spain outside the core discussions on Eastern Europe and Russia, where attention is concentrated due to the Ukraine war. Spain's contributions to EU defence are among the lowest, further limiting its influence compared to countries like Poland, which has positioned itself as a key player by investing heavily in defence and leveraging its relationship with the U.S. and NATO.

Spain's leadership has also been cautious. For instance, it only recently asserted itself in energy policy, during the 2022 energy crisis. While Spain's GDP and population rival Poland's, its geopolitical approach has been less ambitious. To increase its influence, Spain must articulate its priorities more effectively within the EU framework and collaborate with other southern European countries to balance the Eastern focus.

> The EU must act collectively to remain relevant in a global context dominated by the U.S., China, and alliances like BRICS.

PV: *Finally, let's discuss the EU's role in Ukraine and its broader ambitions as a geopolitical actor. Do*

you think a “Europe of defense” is achievable?

RF-T: Greater defence integration is essential. The United States’ potential shift away from Europe highlights the urgency of this goal. However, achieving a unified defence strategy requires overcoming significant distrust among member states. Past crises have deepened divisions: for instance, between northern and southern Europe during the financial crisis, or between eastern and western Europe during the migration crisis. These tensions hinder cohesive action.

Poland’s substantial defence investments, contrasted with Spain’s lower contributions, for example, illustrate the lack of coordination. While Europe’s collective defence budget is substantial, its fragmented approach diminishes its effectiveness. The EU must act collectively to remain relevant in a global context dominated by the U.S., China, and alliances like BRICS. Beyond defence, the EU also needs unified strategies for energy, trade, and foreign policy. Without strategic clarity and cooperation, it risks being sidelined on the global stage.

The EU’s geopolitical ambitions also depend on resolving internal divisions and aligning national priorities with broader strategic goals. This requires strong leadership and a clear vision for Europe’s role in a rapidly changing world. Additionally, defence integration should be complemented by efforts to rebuild trust among member states and ensure that investments are coordinated for maximum impact.

PV: *Thank you for sharing these insights. You’ve painted a complex picture of the EU’s potential to navigate these challenges, leaving a little window of hope.*

RF-T: Thank you. If the EU can again learn to find a way to negotiate crises, build trust and exploit the “Hamiltonian moments”, then there is potential.

by: Ruth Ferrero-Turrión|Section:Current Debates|Key Words:EU, Migration, Southeastern Europe, Spain, Ukraine, Western Balkans, crises, crisis, defence, geopolitics, integration, polycrisis|Publishing Date:2024-12-18

About the author:

Ruth Ferrero-Turrión

Ruth Ferrero-Turrión is a Professor of Political Science and European Studies at the Complutense University of Madrid (UCM) and an Associate Researcher at the Complutense Institute for International Studies (ICEI-UCM). She held a visiting fellowship at the Leibniz ScienceCampus Europe and America in November 2024. She specializes in migration, European Union policies, and Balkan studies, directing related programmes at UCM. She has published extensively in Spanish and English on these subjects. She has held research fellowships at institutions like Columbia University and the London School of Economics and has served as a political advisor for the Spanish Government. Since 1996, she has also served as an International Observer in countries across Eastern and Southeastern Europe. Prof. Ferrero-Turrión is also a consultant for international organizations and a regular contributor to media outlets such as El Periódico and Esglobal.

Website

© 2024. This text is openly licensed via CC BY-NC-ND. Separate copyright details are provided with each image. The images are not subject to a CC licence.