Political opposition in crisis?

A comparative study of political opposition in Swedish EU affairs before and during the Covid-19 pandemic

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Master’s thesis in political science, Spring 2024
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Word count: 17 472
Abstract

In the last decades, the EU has faced several crises. These crises have been seen to also have implications on the state of democracy in the EU. While many studies on crises and their effects on democracy have focused on the EU integration and on the weaker democratic states in the Union, little is known of how crises affect the quality of democracy in stronger democratic states. Further, there is a remaining research gap on how political opposition in EU affairs is affected during crises. This thesis focuses on Sweden, one of the stronger democratic states in the Union, during one of the most extensive crises the EU has faced – the Covid-19 pandemic. Focusing on the element of political opposition, it adds new empirical evidence to examine the patterns of parliamentary political opposition in the Swedish European Affairs Committee during the period of the Covid-19 crisis, compared to ‘politics as usual’ consisting of the period of 1995–2016. The results show that the share of statements containing opposition in general was smaller during the crisis, and that the patterns of political opposition developed differently during the Covid-19 pandemic depending on the type of the statement, as well as on party type. These results contribute to a broader understanding on how the state of democracy and the patterns of political opposition can develop in EU affairs in a strong democracy during crisis.
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1. Introduction

In early 2020, one of the most extensive crises hit all around the world. The Covid-19 virus spread quickly, initially causing a public health crisis which grew and created both social and economic effects. With high pressures on the hospitals, markets and certainly the world leaders, it soon became clear that the world was not prepared for a pandemic (Maxmen, 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic created a global crisis, and with that a demand for quick and efficient action. Many governments declared a ‘state of emergency’, allowing measures considered urgent and necessary to be implemented with procedures not requiring the involvement of the parliament or the judiciary (Marzocchi, 2020). Policies on social distancing, state aid and emergency packages to strengthen the economy were seen as well as travel restrictions and the closing of schools and other public places, limiting freedom of movement and assembly. In terms of effects on the quality of democracy, previous research shows that weaker democracies tend to move further towards autocracy in times of crises, and specifically in a ‘state of emergency’, the risk of democratic decline is higher (Lührmann & Rooney, 2020).

Looking at the EU, with a long-standing struggle with democratic legitimacy both at a system level and within the member states, the management of the Covid-19 pandemic had effects on both national and EU level. At the national level, member states such as Poland and Hungary were criticised for implementing too far-going measures during the state of emergency (Marzocchi, 2020). Violations of democratic standards during the Covid-19 pandemic was however not limited to these countries, but also states with a stronger democracy such as Sweden experienced violations (Edgell et al., 2020). At the EU level, one of the major developments was how the EU institutions gained a key role in the crisis management in an area that previously mainly has been a national issue. When the pressure was high on some member states that were affected early in the Covid-19 pandemic, there was an expectation on the EU to act. The Commission took a leading and coordinating role, and crisis management and the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on different areas became a recurring topic on the agenda for the EU institutions. The Commission launched different initiatives to strengthen the cooperation between the member states in for example vaccine procurement, and to maintain the single market and the free movement. One major initiative was the 750\(^1\) billion euro ‘NextGenerationEU’ (NGEU), which is mainly a recovery and resilience instrument for measures to restart after the Covid-19 pandemic (Jones, 2021). The EU had a key role and

\(^1\) In 2018 prices.
influence on the crisis management in many areas, even if most decisions on for example lockdowns and other state measures were made at a national level.

That the EU played a large role in the decision-making and crisis management during the Covid-19 pandemic was not a new phenomenon. The EU has faced several crises the last decades, that all have had effects on the EU integration and the EU institutions’ roles and influence on the member states. Looking at it from a democratic perspective, these changes and moves of power usually happens quickly in times of crisis, seen as something necessary to handle the emergency. However, these quick power shifts also seem to remain even after a crisis, both on an EU and national level (Ferrara & Kriesi, 2022; Anghel & Jones, 2022).

To understand whether a crisis has had effects on democracy in the EU, studies usually focus on the EU institutions’ roles or the weaker democracies among the member states, such as Hungary or Poland. However, it has also been shown that stronger democracies violated democratic standards during the Covid-19 pandemic (Edgell et al., 2020). When it comes to studying crucial aspects of democracy, many scholars have focused on political opposition. Political opposition is an essential part of a functioning representative democracy and necessary to provide the citizens with alternatives to the incumbent party (Dahl, 1966; Mair, 2007; Karlsson et al., 2023). Without political opposition, the possibility to vote for parties based on their different political views on certain policies disappears. There are then no alternatives to the incumbent, which eliminates the need for elections. This makes political opposition a critical indicator when understanding the quality of democracy. The view on the status of political opposition in the EU has been divided in prior research, with some arguing that the Union does not offer a functional arena for opposition, which risks spurring opposition to be more and more directed towards the system itself rather than the actual policies (Mair, 2007; de Vries, 2007). A more recent view, however, holds that there is more conflict between political parties in EU affairs than previously considered (Karlsson & Persson, 2022). How this crucial element of a functioning democracy is affected in EU affairs during crises is however unestablished, which arguably constitutes a major research gap.

1.1 Aim and research question

While many studies on crises and their effects on democracy have focused on the EU integration and on the quality of democracy in the weaker democratic states in the Union, little is known of how crises affect the quality of democracy in stronger democratic states. By looking at the
case of Sweden, this thesis seeks to contribute to our understanding of the resilience of the quality of democracy also in a strong democratic state during a crisis. To examine this, political opposition is a relevant indicator. This thesis aims to analyse how parliamentary political opposition in EU affairs developed during one of the most recent and extensive crises, the Covid-19 pandemic. Specifically, it aims to examine the patterns of political opposition in Swedish EU affairs during the period of the Covid-19 crisis, compared to ‘politics as usual’. Using data on political opposition in the European Affairs Committee (EAC) in the Swedish Riksdag between 1995 and 2016 as its point of reference for ‘politics as usual’, this thesis will add new empirical evidence from the period of the Covid-19 pandemic and apply a crisis perspective when aiming to answer the research question:

*How did the patterns of parliamentary political opposition in Swedish EU Affairs develop during the Covid-19 pandemic, compared to ‘politics as usual’?*

The following section will give a brief background on what happened in the EU during the Covid-19 pandemic. It will further describe some of the major and perhaps most controversial initiatives taken by the Commission, and the emergency measures implemented at a national level in the member states. This will also give an indication of what issues the Swedish EAC had on their agenda during this period. The section will provide an overview on what challenges the EU and the member states stood before in the management of one of the most extensive crises the Union has faced.

**2. Background: The EU, the Member States and political controversies during the Covid-19 pandemic**

On the 30 January 2020, the International Health Regulations Emergency Committee made a statement regarding the outbreak of the coronavirus where it stated that the outbreak met the criteria of a public health emergency of international concern (World Health Organization, 2020). The day after, the European Commission launched emergency research funding of 10 million euros, for research projects on the new coronavirus (European Commission, 2020b). The Commission took a leading role early on, working to coordinate the member states’ measures. However, since health policy has been a question within national authority, staying coordinated with all member states was not an easy task. Many countries in Europe suffered
from a shortage of medical material, such as protective gear, face masks and testing kits (Sánchez Nicolás, 2020), which also put the single market and the free movement of goods to the test. In the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, some member states implemented export bans on medicines, risking shortages in other member states (Guarascio, 2020). Member states also imposed restrictions on how the citizens could move, with travel restrictions and lockdowns, and different social distancing policies were implemented. These policies also affected the transportation of goods. In the labour market, new demands grew on connections to be able to work from home. Employment fell, and policies such as state aid for temporary furlough was common (Eurofound, 2021).

The EU had an influential role during the Covid-19 pandemic. This was specifically the case when it came to the vaccines. One of the measures taken during this period was the EU Vaccine Strategy presented by the Commission in June 2020, leading to joint procurement of vaccines on behalf of all member states, coordinated by the Commission (European Commission, 2020a). This meant that the member states delegated the purchasing of vaccines to the Commission, that made deals with vaccine manufacturers to ensure fair distribution for the whole union. The strategy and the Commission’s management of the vaccines was however criticised for being too bureaucratic, which caused delays in the delivery. This in turn led to some member states starting the process to purchase vaccines on their own instead of waiting for the common response (Deutsch & Wheaton, 2021). Another much discussed initiative, after starting the vaccination, was the digital Covid certificate. This was used to prove that you had been vaccinated, had a negative test result, or had recently recovered from the Covid-19 virus (European Council, 2023). This measure was questioned initially, mainly based on whether it would limit the movement of citizens who were not vaccinated (Peel & Hancock, 2021) but has later been seen as an effective tool to restart travel within the Union (European Court of Auditors, 2023).

The Covid-19 pandemic also occurred at the same period as the multi-annual financial framework was negotiated. As a package deal, the leaders in the European Council decided both on a long-term budget for the coming seven years, and an exceptional instrument with the purpose to strengthen the recovery of the member states after the Covid-19 pandemic, called ‘NextGenerationEU’ (NGEU). This instrument has been described as historical in several aspects, consisting of grants and loans due to be paid back in 2058, financed by a common debt taken up by the Commission (Jones, 2021). The negotiations surrounding the long-term budget and the NGEU were not easy, but there seems to have been a common view that there was a
need for some kind of measure to support the member states in the management of the Covid-19 pandemic. Exactly how the new instrument should be constructed was however up for debate, and specifically the distribution between loans and grants. The “frugal four”, consisting of Sweden, Denmark, Austria, and the Netherlands, stood on one side arguing for more loans with certain conditions to secure responsibility in repaying. On the other side stood member states mainly in the south of Europe, arguing that the support should be given as grants. All member states seem to have been underlining the importance of measures however, emphasising the sense of solidarity (Jones, 2021). The deal was reached in July 2020, only a few months after the Covid-19 pandemic started.

In the member states, emergency measures were taken as well. Some of the more dramatic measures consisted of lockdowns which prohibited citizens from moving freely and only allowing them to go outside for specific purposes. A common measure was also curfews after a specific time in the evening, and restaurants having to close earlier than they used to (BBC, 2021). Several member states also used apps to track people infected by the virus, which in some countries was voluntarily and in some compulsory. These initiatives have been criticized for both violating the citizens’ freedom of movement as well as intruding on their privacy (Marzocchi, 2020). In the beginning of the crisis, there was a greater deal of support for the different measures taken, but as time went by and the virus still spread, people got tired of staying at home. When the Covid-19 pandemic then entered new waves and the number of daily cases reached new records, the governments of the EU implemented new restrictions to limit the virus. These were however not as well-received, initiating protests all over the Union. Even if new lockdowns were avoided, due to their effects on the economy, the governments tried to impose other measures to limit the spread, which consisted of limiting the number of people you could meet, temporary lockdowns, etc. Due to the large effects on the economy and especially the business for shops and restaurants when people were no longer allowed to go outside, the discussion centred around balancing health policy and economic policy (Zakrisson et al., 2020). In Austria, protests were among other things directed towards the government’s plans on implementing compulsory vaccination. The member states’ use of the Covid-19 vaccine passes was also commonly protested in several states, when it prohibited people who did not have it from entering public places such as restaurants or concerts. These protests were also sometimes violent (BBC, 2021). The member states thus had to manage the spread of the virus, the economy and the labour market, as well as balance the citizens’ reception of the
different policies. These policies were not always clear regarding how to interpret the restrictions or recommendations, further causing a lot of confusion and frustration.

Sweden’s management of the Covid-19 pandemic was seen as controversial across the world, mainly due to not implementing strict restrictions but instead working with softer recommendations. The recommendations were voluntary, putting more responsibility to the citizens themselves. The recommendations on social distancing mainly focused on avoiding public places if possible and allowing for employees to work from home (Public Health Agency, 2023). This recommendation also impacted the Swedish Riksdag and the European Affairs Committee. The Riksdag Act was changed in 2020, allowing the members of the committees to participate remotely due to special reasons. The person leading the committee meeting, the chairperson, was however obligated to participate in person (Bet. 2019/20:KU16).

Taken together, several initiatives were taken during a period with great uncertainties as the Covid-19 virus and its consequences spread over the world. This crisis influenced the policy making on both national and EU level, and can be expected to have influenced the dynamics of decision-making. An extensive crisis like this highlights the resilience of a democracy and its elements and can be expected to have implications not only on the weaker states but also a strong democracy such as Sweden. To further understand these implications on specifically the patterns of political opposition, the next section will present the previous research on the matter and highlight the remaining research gap on how political opposition on EU affairs is affected by a crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

3. Previous research

To understand the patterns of parliamentary political opposition during crisis, which is the aim of this thesis, the first section below will briefly summarise the existing literature on the status of democracy in the EU as a system itself, as well as within the member states, with a specific focus on political opposition, including the state of political opposition in Sweden. The second section will turn to what happens during crises, and previous studies on how to understand the changes and effects the Union has seen after some of the more recent EU-wide crises. The last section will focus on studies done on political opposition during crises and how the pattern of opposition developed during these EU-wide crises, and note a gap when it comes to studies
specifically on how political opposition in EU affairs develops during crisis. Overall, the previous research section aims to give an overview but also a starting point to guide the analysis when answering the research question on how the patterns of parliamentary political opposition developed in Swedish EU affairs during the Covid-19 pandemic, compared to ‘politics as usual’.

3.1 Democracy and political opposition in EU affairs

To understand how the Covid-19 pandemic can have influenced the parliamentary political opposition in EU affairs, it is important to have an overview of the state of democracy during times of ‘politics as usual’. The democracy in the EU has been questioned in numerous ways and discussed both in terms of the status of democracy in the system itself, but also in terms of the quality of democracy in the member states. For the EU institutions, the focus of the critique has been on the democratic deficit. The key issue is that EU policy is made far from the citizens, which limits their possibility to hold the executive – the Commission – accountable (Føllesdal & Hix, 2006). The debate has gone in different directions, some arguing that the democratic quality of this multilateral organisation cannot be measured through the same standards as a nation state, and that the EU thus does not suffer from a democratic deficit (Majone, 1998; Moravcsik, 2002, 2004). More recently, some are arguing that the democratic deficit in the EU institutions is not the main concern any longer, but that the real problem lies in some member states turning less and less democratic (Kelemen, 2017). This issue is usually called democratic backsliding, or the Copenhagen dilemma, referring to member states that do not live up to democratic values and the rule of law as set out in Article 2 of the Treaty of the European Union, which is a prerequisite to join the Union (European Union, n.d.). Hungary and Poland are usually named as examples of states suffering from democratic backsliding, with issues regarding for example the independence of the judiciary and infringements of the Charter of the Fundamental Rights (Marzocchi, 2023).

Studies have mainly focused on the quality of democracy in the member states suffering from more severe democratic backsliding, but also on certain elements of democracy. Peter Mair (2007), for example, argues that – even though the citizens in the EU have the right to vote to the European Parliament, and are indirectly represented in the Council through national elections – there is no functioning arena where opposition takes place and alternatives to policies are presented. Opposition exists at both EU and national level, but it is directed at issues
which do not lie within the competence of that arena. He reasons that political leaders “prefer to talk about the institutionalization of Europe when competing in elections to the European Parliament, where it is largely irrelevant, and they prefer not to raise these questions when competing in national elections, where it matters” (Mair, 2007:12). Thus, the arenas are not used for opposition in the questions that are relevant to them. Without a debate on EU affairs, and a clear political opposition, the elections lose their function for the citizens and limit their possibilities to base their decision when voting on the parties’ different views on EU affairs, making their votes instead rather based on national positions (Mair, 2007). This causes a lack of transparency and a huge weakness in the quality of the democracy in the EU.

The view that the EU is lacking opposition and democratic legitimacy has been common within the field, but has recently been questioned by an opposite view arguing that there in fact exists more opposition than consensus in EU affairs (Loxbo & Sjölin, 2017; Karlsson et al., 2023). These studies have examined the discussions held on EU affairs at the national level, mainly in parliaments. Karlsson & Persson (2022) examine and compare political opposition in six European countries in their six respective European Affairs Committees (EAC) and find that there is a considerable amount of opposition in EU affairs. Furthermore, they find that of these six countries, Sweden has the highest share of oppositional statements (Karlsson & Persson, 2022). Moreover, party debates on EU politics in Sweden in general have been considered weak, even in areas which are more or less completely regulated by EU law (Liljeqvist & Blomgren, 2018). This brings up the question on how engaged the political parties are in EU affairs, and how much they oppose the incumbent in their proposed positions. Loxbo & Sjölin (2017) counter the view that political opposition is diminishing (Kirchheimer, 1957; Mair, 2007) by looking at decisions made in the Swedish parliament from 1970 to 2014, finding that the political parties have not been acting in consensus but instead have rejected government proposals to an increasing degree, and provided counterproposals. These findings are also supported by Karlsson et al. (2018) that provide empirical data on the patterns of political opposition in the Swedish EAC. Using a framework that takes different types of statements into account, Karlsson et al. (2018) analyse whether the statements are supporting, opposing or neutral to the government’s position, as well as whether they are directed towards the policy on the table, the procedure, or the EU system itself, the polity. Further, they also examine if the oppositional statements provide alternatives to the government’s position, or are merely stating critique. With this, they find nuances in the parliamentary opposition in EU affairs, and find that there is a great deal of oppositional statements and that it has rather increased over
time than decreased (Karlsson et al., 2018). Thus, the state of opposition seems to be strong in Swedish EU affairs, in contrast to the previous theories on political opposition on decline.

A focus in studies of political opposition in EU affairs has been scepticism towards EU integration, and whether opposition is directed at the content of the EU policies or rather the EU system itself. Over the years an emerging number of Eurosceptic parties have taken place in national parliaments in the member states, and also in the European Parliament. The presence of Eurosceptic parties is found to influence both national and European Parliament elections, and how the EU polity has become a politicised issue in itself (Down & Han, 2021; de Vries, 2007). Persson et al. (2019) examine how the Eurosceptic parties affect patterns of political opposition in Sweden and Denmark. They find that a higher presence of Eurosceptic parties seems to result in more opposition in EU affairs. They also find that Eurosceptic parties are opposing the EU polity more than mainstream parties. In general, however, most opposition is turned towards policy issues in both Eurosceptic and mainstream parties (Persson et al., 2019).

In sum, the quality of democracy in the EU has been questioned from several perspectives and is facing a lot of challenges, both when it comes to the EU level and the national level. In analyses of the quality of democracy, opposition is an important element. In the case of Sweden, the quality of opposition in EU affairs has also been questioned but opposition seems to exist to a larger degree than previously considered. But how do democracy and opposition change in times of crisis? To understand how the patterns of political opposition can change during a crisis, the following section will move on to the literature on some of the latest crises that the EU has faced and how they have affected the Union and the member states. This is to get a better understanding on what aspects of crises that can influence democracy and specifically oppositional behaviour.

### 3.2 What changes in times of crises? Power shifts to the EU-level and emergency measures

The purpose of this thesis is to analyse how the patterns of political opposition developed during one of the latest and most extensive crises the EU has met, the Covid-19 pandemic, compared to ‘politics as usual’. This section will give an overview of the literature regarding some of the recent EU-wide crises and how their effects on the Union can be understood.
In the last decade, the EU has continuously been faced with different crises. These crises are spread over various areas, such as the economy, climate, health, etc. The different crises have put pressure on the EU institutions to act, making crisis management a recurring topic on the Union’s agenda. The crisis management of the EU and the crises’ effects on the Union has also become a common research area. Within this area, two main topics can be outlined. The first topic is how different crises and their characteristics affect the crisis management and decision-making (Ferrara & Kriesi, 2022; Anghel & Jones, 2023). The characteristic of a crisis is argued to cause different outcomes, specifically when it comes to integration. The second topic, which is often connected, is on the power shifts a crisis can create. This is further connected to the influence of the member states in decision-making, and what implications this has for the state of democracy, both at an EU institutional level and at a national level (Kratochvíl & Sychra, 2019; Anghel & Jones, 2022). What is clear is that crises are rarely solely a national issue. The EU institutions are taking active roles in the crisis management, and in some cases also increase their influence and mandate to make decisions in certain areas. The democratic quality of the EU is thus highly relevant also in crisis management, especially since the crises seem to affect decision-making and the roles and powers of the EU institutions.

Ferrara & Kriesi (2022) explore how four of the most recent crises have been managed in the EU: the Eurozone crisis, the migration crisis, the Brexit crisis, and the Covid-19 crisis. They argue that depending on the characteristics of the crisis, the decision-making patterns and outcomes differ. They create a framework illustrating this, using two different criteria. The first focuses on whether the policy area or regulatory power of the crisis lies within the competence of the EU or within the competence of the member states. The second is how the crisis is distributed over the member states in the Union, i.e. whether it is affecting the member states symmetrically or asymmetrically. According to their framework, we can expect a crisis affecting the member states symmetrically in an area with high EU competence to have less of a risk to become politicised, and allow the EU institutions to have a larger role in crisis management. These tendencies they see in the Brexit crisis management. In contrast, an asymmetrical crisis within high EU competence might spur politicisation at a national level which makes it more difficult to solve the crisis in the intergovernmental arena and will instead rely on the EU institutions to act. These elements can be found in the management of the Eurozone crisis. On the other hand, an asymmetrical crisis with low EU competence would be politicised, but also rely on the intergovernmental level, which makes the decision-making characterised by member states working for their own national interests and unable to reach a
common approach to share the responsibility in the crisis management. Here, the authors raise the example of the migration crisis, which became a conflictual politicised issue. Lastly, a symmetrical crisis with low EU competence would not be politicised and instead create a demand of a joint action and a larger sense of solidarity, as seen in the Covid-19 crisis (Ferrara & Kriesi, 2022). This framework would thus lead us to expect less political opposition during the Covid-19 crisis, with the characteristic of a symmetrical crisis within national authority. With the great sense of solidarity between the member states, it seems likely that political parties would be more reluctant to oppose crisis management policy, compared to other times. However, even if Ferrara & Kriesi (2022) underline the sense of solidarity and describe the Covid-19 pandemic as not being a politicised issue, it is important to keep in mind that the period of course was not without conflict, as described in Section 2.

Like Ferrara & Kriesi (2022), Anghel & Jones (2023) follow the framework of how crisis management depends on the characteristics of the crisis. They compare the EU’s actions during the Covid-19 pandemic and the early stage of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, viewing them both as exogenous shocks happening very shortly after each other. Similar to what Ferrara & Kriesi (2022) argue when it comes to the Covid-19 pandemic, the issue did not become politicised, and the sense of solidarity was highly relevant. Even if the EU institutions as well as the member states initially struggled in finding the most efficient crisis management, Anghel & Jones (2023) argue that it got more and more effective. When it comes to the war in Ukraine, they find that the direct response was strong, and that the Covid-19 pandemic strengthened the EU institutions’ capacity to act (Anghel & Jones, 2023).

In another article, Anghel & Jones (2022) analyse how Romania and Italy were affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. They argue that a disruption such as the Covid-19 pandemic presents opportunities for political leaders to reform and strengthen their own power, at the cost of democratic values. In the case of Romania and Italy, they find that the political executive has grown stronger compared to the legislature when it comes to Italy, and the judiciary when it comes to Romania (Anghel & Jones, 2022). Thus, this prior research indicates that we should expect the state of democracy both at EU level and at national level to be affected by a crisis. It also shows that crisis management of the Covid-19 pandemic was a struggle initially, which perhaps can be an effect of how the virus spread in the beginning, and then grew more efficient. This could then lead us to expect that the pattern of political opposition would vary across the years of the Covid-19 pandemic. It also shows how the emergency measures implemented in some member states were problematic from a democratic perspective. Emergency measures
implemented in other member states might have had similar issues as well, why we can expect the crisis to have implications for the quality of democracy even in stronger democracies.

Similarly, Kratochvíl & Sychra (2019) argue that the democratic deficit increased during the Eurozone crisis, mainly due to a shift of powers from the member states to the EU institutions. They describe that one major element of the democratic deficit within the EU is the power shifts between the institutions, and their effects. They argue the European Parliament, directly representing citizens through elections, was rather weakened during the crisis, while the Commission gained a larger role in the post-crisis period when it comes to influence of economic policies within the Union which before the crisis had been mainly national competence. This, they mean, did not only give the Commission more influence, but also limited the member states’ own powers in economic policy (Kratochvíl & Sychra, 2019). Similar to what Ferrara & Kriesi (2022) argue regarding the Eurozone crisis, they find that the issue was politicised. Further, the Eurozone crisis had a large effect on the national level, making EU issues become more relevant also in national affairs. Along with this, they also see a rise of Eurosceptical parties in the national governments (Kratochvíl & Sychra, 2019).

Summarising this literature, the Eurozone crisis is seen to have had effects on the decision-making and the EU institutions’ influence in the crisis management, which in turn has effects on the quality of democracy in the EU. With more influence by the Commission on the national economic policies, it could be expected that there would be more political opposition towards the EU polity during a crisis based on these kinds of power shifts. This could especially be the case considering the rise of Eurosceptical parties in the national governments. The following section will further explore the research on political opposition during these EU-wide crises, with a focus on oppositional patterns in national parliaments.

### 3.3 Political opposition in national affairs during EU-wide crises

The previous sections have given a background to the state of democracy and especially political opposition in the EU, as well as outlined the major changes seen in the Union during crises. As the EU becomes a more active player in crisis management, EU affairs in the member states becomes a central part of the decision-making during crisis. To further understand how the quality of democracy can be affected by crises, this thesis focuses on the indicator of political opposition in a strong democracy, Sweden. This section will present previous research on parliamentary opposition on national affairs during recent EU-wide crises, as there is a lack
of research focusing on the patterns of political opposition in EU affairs during crisis. However, learning how patterns of political opposition change in national affairs during crises will be helpful in further analysing the patterns of political opposition in EU affairs during the Covid-19 pandemic.

When looking at political opposition during crises, some studies have been done focusing on legislative voting behaviour in certain member states during the Eurozone crisis. Gemenis & Nezi (2015) analyse patterns of opposition in Greece during the Eurozone crisis, by examining legislative votes in the parliament. They find that the crisis led to more dissensus and less support for the government compared to before the crisis. Similarly, De Giorgi et al. (2015) examine Portugal and compare the behaviour of parties in opposition in economic policy during the Eurozone crisis and during ‘normal’ times. They also find more opposition than support during the crisis. Further, they find that the crisis affected the parties’ behaviour differently. The mainstream and pro-European parties seem to be more consensual during the crisis compared to the more radical, Eurosceptic parties. Since the economic crisis led to a higher degree of involvement of the EU institutions in national economic policy, the authors highlight the importance external actors have also for national oppositional behaviour (De Giorgi et al., 2015). According to these studies, political opposition seems to increase during a crisis, or at least during the Eurozone crisis. The authors also find differences between party types in oppositional behaviour during a crisis, and that mainstream parties are less likely to oppose the government than Eurosceptic parties, which could be expected also during the Covid-19 pandemic.

These patterns are also supported by Louwerse et al. (2021), where they examine oppositional behaviour in parliamentary debates during the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in four countries. Their results show that in the beginning of the crisis, the sentiments from the opposition parties were generally relatively positive, and then became gradually more negative. In the Netherlands, the sentiments were quite negative throughout the period, which they say can be attributed to parties far from the incumbent party ideologically, such as populist and Eurosceptic parties as the Freedom Party, the Socialist Party and Forum for Democracy. This pattern can also be seen in Germany, where the right-wing populist party Alternative for Germany expressed most negative sentiments (Louwerse et al., 2021).

To conclude, in both national parliaments during the Eurozone crisis, the opposition increased. In the parliaments observed during the Covid-19 pandemic, the opposition varied during the period of the crisis in some countries, initially with a lower degree of criticism which however
increased gradually. What is also visible is the higher degree of criticism from populist or Eurosceptic parties, which also is present during ‘normal’ times. Against this background, we can on the one hand expect the level of opposition to increase during a crisis. On the other hand, however, based on the different characteristics of the Eurozone crisis and the Covid-19 crisis, where the Eurozone crisis was politicised to a higher degree, it could also be expected to find an increase in political opposition during the Eurozone crisis but not during the Covid-19 crisis. Further, we can expect to see differences in the oppositional behaviour between party types, with less opposition from the mainstream parties but more from Eurosceptic parties. However, these studies are observing national affairs and not EU affairs, and the remaining research gap will be further summarised in the following section.

3.4 The research gap: Political opposition in national EU affairs during the Covid-19 pandemic

What is missing in previous research is a focus on how political opposition relating to EU affairs developed during the Covid-19 pandemic. The focus within the field of research on crises and their effects on the EU and democracy has been on national affairs when it comes to opposition, and on power shifts from member states to the EU institutions when looking at democratic aspects in general. Further, the focus in research on democratic deficits due to crises has been on weaker democracies, and not on stronger democracies. There thus seems to be a research gap both when it comes to examining the quality of democracy and opposition in stronger democracies during crises, and more specifically how political opposition in EU affairs can be affected during crises. To contribute to filling this gap, the following section develops a number of hypotheses to be tested in the attempt to answer the research question for this thesis on how the patterns of parliamentary political opposition developed during the Covid-19 pandemic, compared to ‘politics as usual’, in Swedish EU affairs.

4. Hypotheses

While there is a lack of research examining how exogenous factors such as crises can affect political opposition in EU affairs in general, including in Sweden, it could be expected that a crisis generates some kind of change. Certainly, when the EU institutions take on larger roles in the crisis management, the European Affairs Committee (EAC) is a central arena not only
for the EU affairs in general but also for the member states’ influence on the decision-making during the crisis. Based on the previous research on political opposition and on crises within the EU, a few hypotheses will be outlined. These hypotheses focus on different types of statements, and look at opposition in general, but also on the object of the opposition, i.e. towards the policy or polity, as well as the character of the opposition, i.e. in the form of alternative or critique. I will also form a hypothesis regarding the party type expressing the statements, in line with the framework used in Karlsson et al. (2018).

Based on the framework of Ferrara & Kriesi (2022), I expect the effects of a crisis to be depending on its characteristics. Crises that hit the Union symmetrically and in an area which normally is not within the EU institutions’ mandate are not expected to be politicised. They are thus not expected to become conflictual, since there usually is a greater sense of solidarity and a demand from all member states on coordinated action from the EU. This characterizes the Covid-19 pandemic, where for example the EU leaders dealt with the controversial proposal of the NGEU, but where the questions were rather surrounding the construction of the instrument than the actual support to all member states in recovering from the Covid-19 pandemic (Jones, 2021). This would therefore motivate a lower degree of opposition during this crisis. However, the studies made on opposition in national affairs during the Eurozone crisis showed that opposition increased during the crisis (Gemenis & Nezi, 2015; De Giorgi et al., 2015). This does however also fit within the Ferrara & Kriesi-framework since the Eurozone crisis affected the member states asymmetrically and thereby became more politicised and conflictual (Ferrara & Kriesi, 2022). Following this, I therefore expect that the share of statements consisting of opposition during the Covid-19 pandemic was smaller than during ‘politics as usual’. The first hypothesis is thus formulated as:

H1: The share of statements containing opposition was smaller during the Covid-19 pandemic than during ‘politics as usual’.

In line with the framework used by Karlsson et al. (2018), I examine the object of the statements, i.e. what type of issue that the opposition is directed towards. I expect the crisis to influence oppositional statements related to the EU as a political system, and its powers, i.e. polity issues. There has been a clear focus in previous research on how EU integration is affected by crises, and specifically on the power shifts from the member states to the EU institutions (Kratochvíl & Sychra, 2019). This was also seen during the Covid-19 pandemic, with the EU institutions taking a larger role in the decision-making and coordination within areas such as health policy which normally has been national competence (Anghel & Jones,
Opposition relating to polity issues have also been seen as more commonly voiced by Eurosceptic parties (Persson et al., 2019). A higher presence of these parties, in combination with a crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the power shifts it creates, might bring the EU issue higher on the agenda. As an example, the EU’s influence on the member states’ crisis management when it comes to the vaccine procurement was criticised due to the delays in delivery (Deutsch & Wheaton, 2021), which might have caused conflicts among the political parties. Therefore, I expect more opposition to be directed toward the EU polity compared to ‘politics as usual’. The second hypothesis then reads:

H2: The share of statements containing opposition relating to ‘polity’ issues was greater during the Covid-19 pandemic than during ‘politics as usual’.

When it comes to oppositional statements relating to policy issues, previous studies show that this object of opposition has been more common than opposition towards both procedural and polity issues (Karlsson et al., 2018). This I believe to be the case also during a crisis. During the Covid-19 pandemic, an extensive crisis with a quickly spreading virus causing not only death but also unemployment and a downfall on world markets, there was a lot of uncertainty regarding the consequences of the policy-making. There were thus a lot of factors to take into consideration. At the same time, moving towards the latter waves of the virus, citizens were critical of the new recommendations and lockdowns (BBC, 2021). In this setting, there could have been some political points to gain by criticizing the government’s policy. However, in line with my first hypothesis that the share of opposition in general was smaller during the Covid-19 pandemic than during ‘politics as usual’, I expect the political parties to be more reluctant to oppose the government’s crisis management. This was also the case in Sweden for at least the early period of the Covid-19 pandemic, were the political parties stood united behind the governments’ proposals (Stenberg, 2020). I thus put forward the following third hypothesis:

H3: The share of statements containing opposition relating to ‘policy’ issues was smaller during the Covid-19 pandemic than during ‘politics as usual’.

When it comes to the character of the opposition, whether it is mainly critique that is stated or if the statements are constructive, also putting forward alternatives on the table, I expect there to be less alternatives during the Covid-19 pandemic. The lack of information, or information asymmetry, in the policy-making surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic has for example been seen as a challenge in the development of health policy in the United Kingdom during this period (Phillips et al., 2023). The uncertainties and the lack of information on the novel virus
can also explain the large variations of crisis response across the world, but also within the Union (Shafi & Mallinson, 2023). Due to how quickly the virus spread and affected virtually all policy areas, and the lack of information regarding all different outcomes, I expect it to be more difficult also for the political parties in the EAC to put forward constructive alternatives to the policies on the table. The fourth hypothesis then follows:

H4: The share of statements containing opposition in the form of alternatives was smaller during the Covid-19 pandemic than during ‘politics as usual’.

However, even if the Covid-19 pandemic caused difficulties for parties to present alternatives to the government’s proposed line of action, I do not expect that the level of critique would increase compared to ‘politics as usual’. Certainly not with the strong sense of solidarity present during the Covid-19 pandemic (Jones, 2021). The criticism towards the government’s crisis response did seem to increase in Sweden after the initial phase of the Covid-19 pandemic (Stenberg, 2020), but I still do not expect the share to be greater than during ‘politics as usual’.

Due to the factor of uncertainty, with a lot of new initiatives coming from the Commission, combined with the demand for actions to stop the spread of the virus as well as tackling all other social and economic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, I expect that the parties expressed less critique during the crisis, in line with the expectation that they will have presented less alternatives and less opposition overall. My fifth hypothesis then reads:

H5: The share of statements containing opposition in the form of critique was smaller during the Covid-19 pandemic than during ‘politics as usual’.

When it comes to differences between types of parties, Louwerse et al. (2021) found that during the Covid-19 pandemic, most criticism came from populist or Eurosceptic parties in national debates. In these cases, Eurosceptic parties remained at the same level or increased the level of opposition, while mainstream or pro-European parties were more consensual. Also, De Giorgi et al. (2015) found that mainstream parties expressed less opposition during the Eurozone crisis.

Relating to H2, I expect opposition towards polity issues to be more common during the Covid-19 pandemic. As this object of opposition is more commonly expressed by Eurosceptic parties, and given the fact that Eurosceptic parties have been seen to express more opposition in general (Persson et al., 2019), I expect that Eurosceptic parties was more critical, or at least less likely to express a smaller share of opposition than during ‘politics as usual’. I therefore present the sixth and final hypothesis:
H6: Eurosceptic parties expressed *the same* share of statements containing opposition during the Covid-19 pandemic as during ‘politics as usual’.

These hypotheses will further guide my analysis when examining how the patterns of political opposition in the Swedish EAC developed during the Covid-19 pandemic compared to ‘politics as usual’. The following section will describe how I will proceed when conducting this analysis, by giving a background to the selected case, the methods of sampling and coding records from the Swedish EAC as well as a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the method and empirical strategy.

5. Methods and data

5.1 Case selection: Sweden and the Covid-19 crisis

This thesis will examine patterns of political opposition in Swedish EU affairs during the Covid-19 pandemic, compared to ‘politics as usual’, with the aim to understand how, and in what way, a crisis can affect political opposition and the quality of democracy. In Section 3.4, it was pointed out that there is a research gap when it comes to political opposition in EU affairs during a crisis. Further, when it comes to studies of the quality of democracy within the EU member states, a lot of focus has been on the weaker democracies within the Union, and not on the resilience of a stronger democracy during crisis. Sweden is a strong democracy, but that does not ensure that the quality of democracy stands unaffected during a crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

The status of political opposition in Sweden has been questioned, but according to recent research on statements made in the Swedish EAC, there is more conflict than consensus (Karlsson et al., 2018). Karlsson et al. (2018) have coded and examined statements in the Swedish EAC between 1995 and 2016 and provide a comprehensive understanding of the overall state of political opposition in Swedish EU affairs on a long-term basis. However, their data does not cover one of the most extensive crises the world has stood before – the Covid-19 pandemic. Due to its widespread effects, it provides a unique opportunity to examine the effects of a crisis on the quality of democracy and specifically political opposition, as the crisis permeated both national and EU decision-making in virtually all policy areas. To be able to understand the Swedish EU affairs, it is useful to look at the EAC. The EAC in Sweden deals
with all policy areas that are on the agenda for the Council and the European Council. Before each meeting, the government must seek approval for the Swedish position from the parliament. This is done through a consultation in the EAC (Sveriges Riksdag, 2023). Since all records from EAC are transcribed and published shortly after each meeting, they are well suited for analysing political opposition in Swedish EU affairs during the Covid-19 pandemic. Further, combined with the data from Karlsson et al. (2018), it will be possible to examine how the patterns of political opposition developed during the Covid-19 pandemic and compare this with a period of two decades prior to the crisis, 1995–2016.

5.2 Sampling of EAC records

Karlsson et al. (2018) have studied the statements made in the Swedish EAC from 1995, when Sweden became a member of the EU, up until 2016, sampling 30 records per legislative term. Their data will be my point of reference and represent what I refer to as ‘politics as usual’. Surely, since this period covers more than 20 years of EU affairs, it also contains EU-wide crises such as the Eurozone crisis and the migration crisis, why it is difficult to argue that it only consists of ‘politics as usual’. There might also be other factors within this period which might affect oppositional behaviour. However, due to the long period of sampling for this data, I expect that variations due to exogenous factors for the period on an average will be limited. In all, it will give a comprehensive view of the general status of political opposition in Swedish EU affairs.

To analyse patterns of parliamentary political opposition during the Covid-19 crisis, I have used the same method as Karlsson et al. (2018) and coded an original sample of records from the Swedish EAC during the period from the 31 January 2020 to the 27 April 2022. The starting date is not depending on when the virus was first detected, but rather highlight the start of crisis management in the EU. On 31 January 2020, the Commission launched emergency research funding of 10 million euros for research projects on the coronavirus (European Commission, 2020b). This was the first EU measure related to the Covid-19 virus and it was implemented only one day after the WHO declared a public health emergency (World Health Organization, 2020). This is therefore considered to be the start of crisis management and for Covid-19 related policies. For the end date of the sampling period, I have chosen the 27 April 2022. Also in this case the focus is on finding the end of crisis management, and not the end of the spreading of the virus. On 27 April 2022, the Commission presented the communication Covid-19 –
Sustaining EU Preparedness and Response: Looking ahead, where it describes the Union to be “moving from emergency to a more sustainable mode” (European Commission, 2022). After this date, there are still policies relating to the virus, but these are considered to be more long-term initiatives, and not emergency measures per se. The WHO declared an end to the global public health emergency in May 2023 (World Health Organization, n.d.) but since the focus of this thesis is on the EU affairs during crisis, I have chosen the end date in April 2022 in an attempt to concentrate the sampling period to what seems to be the emergency phase of the Covid-19 pandemic in the EU.

Karlsson et al. (2018) used a sample of 30 records per legislative term of four years. When it comes to quantity, the Covid-19 pandemic period covers around two years, which is comparable to half of a legislative term. Therefore, to gain a representative number of statements comparable to ‘politics as usual’, I have done a cluster sample by randomly sampling 15 records from the EAC during the emergency phase of the Covid-19 pandemic. The cluster sample then includes the statements within these records, which are my units of analysis. A consequence of this choice of method is thus that it is not the units of analysis, the statements, that are randomly sampled, but the records containing the statements. The number of statements for each record are unknown during the sampling process and before the coding. Some records might only include one statement, while others can include over 50 statements. This is also true for the records during ‘politics as usual’ and means that there might be large variations when it comes to the number of observations between the records as well as between the years within this period.

Worth noting is also that the records during this period are not limited to emergency measures or Covid-19 related policies but are randomly sampled from all EAC meetings from the period. This means that some topics within these records might not be crisis related at all. However, due to the wide effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, reaching virtually all policy areas, it was difficult to determine what would be considered to be crisis-related and not. Furthermore, even if not all items on the agenda were related to emergency measures, it is possible that the oppositional behaviour still was different since the crisis was ongoing. This can be expected especially since the members of the EAC worked remotely during most of this period after the change in the Riksdag Act (Bet. 2019/20:KU16). Certainly, working remotely could have had an effect on oppositional behaviour in itself, but for the purpose of this thesis, I consider this an effect of the crisis rather than an independent variable in itself. Thus, the crisis is assumed to
have been highly present during the EAC’s meeting regardless of the items of the agenda. Therefore, no records or topics during this period were excluded from the sampling or coding.

5.3 Coding of statements

When coding the statements in the sample of records, I follow the coding scheme developed by Karlsson et al. (2018) to be able to make comparisons between the period of ‘politics as usual’ and the period of the Covid-19 crisis. Their coding scheme gives a nuanced image of opposition since it captures the expressed opposition in the discussions during the committee meetings, instead of only focusing on for example votes on legislative proposals where the discussions on specific proposals are not captured.

The main variable for the data is the type of statement. This is divided into categories. First, a division is made based on the object of the statement, with the possible categories of ‘policy’, ‘polity’, and ‘procedure’. A statement is coded as ‘policy’ if it is directed to the proposed Swedish position on an EU policy, or EU proposal. A statement is coded as ‘polity’ if it is directed towards the EU system itself. A statement is coded as ‘procedure’ if the statement is directed towards the rules of procedure or the processes for the EU institutions or the government. This aims to capture the different objects of the statements, and to provide a better understanding of whether opposition in Swedish EU affairs is directed towards the actual policy on the agenda, the system itself or rather the processes and decision-making in EU affairs (Karlsson et al., 2018).

Second, the statements are divided based on the character of the statement. These categories are ‘alternative’, ‘critique’, and ‘support’. A statement is coded as an ‘alternative’, if it expresses criticism towards the policy, polity, or procedure, and presents an alternative to the government’s proposed position. A statement is coded as ‘critique’ if the statement is negative or critical towards the policy, polity, or procedure, but does not provide an alternative. A statement is coded as ‘support’ if it is supporting the government’s policy, or states support towards the polity or the procedure. From a democratic perspective, concrete alternatives are most valuable as they provide options for the citizens and the possibility to understand the different parties’ politics, rather than merely critical statements (Karlsson et al., 2018).
Some statements are not in support or in opposition towards the government’s proposals but are instead neutral statements. Some statements are also questions or clarifications. These types of statements are coded as other (Karlsson et al., 2018).

Table 1. Scheme of possible values for the dependent variable type of statement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable value</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Coding example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Policy</td>
<td>Alternative (1)</td>
<td>A statement directed to the government’s proposed position on the EU policy, or EU proposal, that expresses criticism and presents an alternative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critique (2)</td>
<td>A statement directed to the government’s proposed position on the EU policy, or EU proposal, that expresses criticism but does not present an alternative.</td>
<td>Mr Chairman! Also on this point, I will settle for registering a dissenting opinion with reference to what we have said earlier. We are critical of the government's view of the EU's approach to China and the United States on this issue (EAC Record, 6 November 2015, speech 29).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support (3)</td>
<td>A statement directed to the government’s proposed position on the EU policy, or EU proposal, that expresses support.</td>
<td>We have a positive view of the government's line. It lies close to the consensus on these issues that usually exists in this room (EAC Record, 6 November 2015, speech 20, paragraph 1).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polity</td>
<td>Alternative (4)</td>
<td>A statement directed towards the EU system itself, the polity, that expresses criticism and presents an alternative.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
media, what should be regulated and how. We think that the government should be clear that the content and format of broadcasts, both linear and non-linear, should not be regulated by EU legislation (EAC Record, 22 November 2013, speech 42).

| Critique (5) | A statement directed towards the EU system itself, the polity, that expresses criticism but does not present an alternative. | Mr Chairman! There are a number of different proposals in the Presidency's report, which we have discussed previously here in the committee, and it is no secret that we from the Sweden Democrats are quite critical of many of the proposals mentioned in the report. As before, we also oppose the European Semester and so on. I will settle for referring to our previous positions and what we have said about the federalisation of the financial and economic policies in the EU. I therefore submit a dissenting opinion as on the previous item. (EAC Record, 6 November 2015, speech 21). |
| Support (6) | A statement directed towards the EU system itself, the polity, that expresses support. | [Example missing in the Codebook] |
| Procedure Alternative (7) | A statement directed towards the rules of procedure or the processes, that expresses criticism and presents an alternative. | We want to urge the government to come back to the committee if there is talk of more concrete measures, subsidies and so on. We criticise the use of structural funds and the like for such things. If there is talk of such measures in the discussions that will be held, we look forward to the government returning to the committee (EAC Record, 6 November 2015, speech 60). |
| Critique (8) | A statement directed towards the rules of procedure or the processes, that expresses criticism but does not present an alternative. | This is a very important issue because we have youth unemployment that is close to 50 percent in several member states. I am getting worried. What if all the member states' governments tell the national parliaments: Yes, yes, but no new measures. We are already doing all this. In that case, there will be no new measures. Then we will not help these young people, because the governments will sit back and say that they have already made a budget, that they are already taking measures. Then nothing happens. I find that unfortunate. I think it's a shame that there are very good writings but that the government has no new proposals on how to address the problems. There is still 50 percent youth |
unemployment in several countries. I think that's a shame (EAC Record, 22 November 2013, speech 77).

Support (9)
A statement directed towards the rules of procedure or the processes, that expresses support.
Example missing in the codebook

Other (10)
A neutral statement, or a question or clarification.
Mr Chairman! Thank you for the presentation! I have a question about the emissions trading system. What are the prospects of being able to use sales revenue from the emissions trading system to finance investments in third countries or less developed countries? (EAC Record, 6 November 2015, speech 27).

Note: Examples are retrieved from the codebook for the data used in Karlsson et al. (2018) and translated by the author.

These categories then create ten possible values for the dependent variable: policy alternative (1), policy critique (2), policy support (3), polity alternative (4), polity critique (5), polity support (6), procedural alternative (7), procedural critique (8), procedural support (9), and other (10), which is illustrated in Table 1. Statements made by the chairperson of the EAC are excluded, as their role mainly is to moderate the meeting in a neutral and objective way. However, in a few cases, the chairperson has explicitly stated that they are making a statement representing their party. In these cases, these statements are included. The statements made by the representative of the government are not included in the data. Statements with no relevance to the item of the agenda are not included in the coding. Longer presentations have been divided into several statements if it consists of independent statements of different categories but kept together if it was all related to the same category (Karlsson et al., 2018). In total, I have coded 255 statements from the Covid-19 pandemic period. The total number of observations in this data was lower than expected, and in relation to the average number of yearly observations in the data during ‘politics as usual’, that consists of 6 215 statements over the whole period and an average of 282,5 statements per year. This is thus more than the total number of statements for the whole Covid-19 pandemic period, that further has an average of 85 statements per year.

5.3.1 Validity and reliability

When coding the statements, I faced some challenges. A crucial but sometimes diffuse part of the coding was to identify the object of the opposition. In some cases, members of the committee expressed criticism towards an EU proposal, but instead of basing the criticism on the policy it proposed, it is rather criticism towards the EU making proposals on a specific
policy area at all. This then gives an indication that the opposition is directed towards the EU system and its influence on national policy, rather than the policy actually proposed. The definition of these types of statements was not always obvious however, as polity and policy issues can sometimes be related. This could have an effect on the validity of the thesis, as the coding is constructed in such a way that the variable can only take one value on the ‘type of statement’ variable, and which value that is more appropriate is highly dependent on the context.

Another difficulty was to define and delimit the statements. Often, a member of the committee can make a quite long presentation of the party’s position, which might not always be directly connected to the item on the agenda but sometimes still related to the position on the certain topic, or mix different types of statements within a longer presentation. The main object and character of a statement has guided the coding, and also in these cases has the context been highly relevant when determining if and how to divide into several statements when appropriate.

The fact that the sampling is performed on the level of the records, and not of the units of analysis – the statements – also creates a larger variation in the number of observations from each record. This can be seen as a weakness regarding the reliability of the method. That being said, randomly sampling the statements directly would cause problems when interpreting their content as they would be taken out of their context, which would make it more difficult to firstly delimit and secondly coding the contents. This could then further weaken the validity if the unit of analysis becomes too diffuse to be able to code. The period of the Covid-19 pandemic consisted of an average of 85 statements per year, while the ‘politics as usual’ period had an average of 282.5 statements per year. This could be a result of coincidence, that my sample happened to capture records with fewer statements. It could also be a result of a low intercoder reliability, that my coding varies from the coding done for the ‘politics as usual’. Of course, there are probably differences caused by the human factor and the subjectiveness in the different coder’s interpretations of the statements, but since I have followed the same codebook as Karlsson et al. (2018) and method in general, I expect these differences to be quite low and not large enough to cause problems in the comparisons or when testing the hypotheses.

5.3.2 Measures

For my first hypothesis, I examine the share of statements containing ‘opposition’ in general, which will be operationalised as the share of all statements in the EAC that contains opposition
in the form of both alternatives and critique, directed to either policy, polity, or procedure (variable values 1, 2, 4, 5, 7 and 8 in Table 1). The measure ‘support’ will be operationalised as the share of all statements that contains support towards policy, polity, or procedure (variable values 3, 6 and 9). The measure ‘other’ is further operationalised as the share of all statements that contains neutral statements or questions (variable value 10).

For my second hypothesis, I examine the share of statements in the EAC that contains opposition relating to polity issues. The measure ‘polity’ is operationalised as the share of statements containing opposition in the form of both alternatives and critique, directed towards the polity (variable values 4 and 5). For my third hypothesis, where I examine the share of statements in the EAC that contains opposition relating to policy issues, the measure ‘policy’ is similarly operationalised with the share of statements containing opposition in the form of both alternatives and critique, but directed to the policy (variable values 1 and 2).

My fourth and fifth hypotheses look at the share of statements that contain opposition in the forms of alternatives or critique. The measure ‘alternative’ is operationalised as the share of statements containing opposition, directed to policy, polity, and procedure, that presents an alternative (variable values 1, 4 and 7). The measure ‘critique’ is operationalised as the share of statements containing opposition, directed to policy, polity, and procedure, that expresses critique and do not present an alternative (variable values 2, 5 and 8).

For my last hypothesis, which compares the share of statements containing ‘opposition’ across party types, ‘Eurosceptic parties’ is operationalised as the Sweden Democrats and the Left Party. This definition of Eurosceptic parties is also discussed in Karlsson et al. (2018), as these parties have both been characterised as Eurosceptics since the EU admission. Further, the category ‘mainstream parties’ consists of all other parties in the Swedish Riksdag. What differentiates this hypothesis from the other hypotheses is that the share of ‘opposition’ is measured based on the total number of statements within the specific party type, and not as the share of the total number of statements in the EAC.

### 5.4 Empirical strategy

To answer the research question for this thesis, on how the parliamentary political opposition in the Swedish EAC developed during the Covid-19 pandemic compared to during ‘politics as usual’, I have stated six hypotheses that will be guiding the analysis. To evaluate the hypotheses,
I have combined the dataset of the period for ‘politics as usual’ and the period of the Covid-19 pandemic and then drawn up time series diagrams for the hypotheses using the statistical software R (R Core Team, 2023). To be able to state whether my hypotheses are supported, i.e., whether the differences between the two periods are statistically significant and if the possible difference was either higher or lower as expected, I conduct two-sample proportion tests. This test evaluates whether there is a difference between the proportion, or the share, of the specific types of statements relevant for my hypotheses, at a 95% confidence level. Since the data on ‘politics as usual’ consists of the years 1995–2016, and my data on the Covid-19 pandemic starts in 2020 and ends in 2022, the years of 2017, 2018 and 2019 are missing in the dataset. I considered the possibility to also code these years, to have a full timeline and to be able to make comparisons between the Covid-19 pandemic and the time right before it. Since the data for ‘politics as usual’ stretches over such a long period of time, however, I made the assessment that the addition of three years would not have a lot of influence on the overall level of political opposition during ‘politics as usual’. Thus, the missing years are excluded from the time series. Furthermore, my time series diagrams show the share of the type of statements for each given year, even though the records are not sampled by year but by legislative term for the ‘politics as usual’, and for the whole period for the Covid-19 crisis. The number of both records and statements per year thus varies. For the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, it is important to be aware that the year of 2022 only consists of the period until the 27 April, which can be said to create more uncertainty when it comes to representativeness than the other years, both in the form of a lower expected number of sampled records compared to the other years, and as there could be differences in the nature of the statements from a certain period of a year. Even though the samples are drawn for legislative terms, I have chosen to present the results on a yearly basis as it is interesting to see whether there are variations in the share of opposition between years. It is especially interesting for the Covid-19 pandemic, to see if there are any variations between the initial phase of the Covid-19 pandemic compared with the end of the crisis period, even if these results are not statistically tested. This way to present the results on a yearly basis is also done by Persson et al. (2023). However, to strictly test my hypotheses, I compare the share for the whole periods, in line with the sampling strategy.
6. Results and discussion

In this section, I will present time series diagrams and conduct the two-sample proportion tests, testing my hypotheses. Each section also includes a discussion on the results presented.

6.1 H1: Opposition during the Covid-19 pandemic and ‘politics as usual’

To examine my first hypothesis, three lines are presented in Figure 1, representing the share of all statements in the EAC containing ‘opposition’, ‘support’ and ‘other’, in each given year. The share of opposition during ‘politics as usual’ has for the most part of the period stayed at a higher level than the share of statements consisting of ‘support’ or ‘other’, except for the period between 2005 and 2010, and in the year 2013, when the share of statements consisting of ‘other’ reached a higher share than ‘opposition’. The overall share of opposition has remained between 33 % and 58 % during ‘politics as usual’, with an average of 48 %. Looking at the Covid-19 pandemic with an average of 37 %, the share of opposition decreases drastically reaching its lowest level ever at a share of 21 % in 2021. This difference between the two periods in the share of ‘opposition’ is also statistically significant at a 95 % confidence level. Both ‘opposition’ and ‘other’ have been more common than support for both periods.

Figure 1. Share of opposition, support and other for the period 1995-2022 (n = 6 470)

Note: The difference in the share of opposition between the two periods is statistically significant at a 95% confidence level (p-value = 0.00035).
What is noticeable is how the share of statements consisting of ‘other’ seems to correspond to the share of ‘opposition’, drastically increasing during the Covid-19 pandemic reaching its highest level of 71% in 2021, while the share of ‘support’ remains around the same level. It thus seems as if the members of the EAC have made a greater share of neutral statements during the Covid-19 pandemic instead of oppositional statements. This could possibly be an effect of the many uncertainties the Covid-19 pandemic brought with it. The fact that there were several initiatives presented during this period, which had never been seen before, makes it reasonable that the members of the EAC had questions about the proposals discussed. It could also be that the parties might not have formed concrete positions on the proposals due to the many new policies presented during this period, why they did not state neither opposition nor support, and instead made neutral statements.

In sum, the difference in the share of ‘opposition’ between the two periods is statistically significant at a 95% confidence level, and supports my hypothesis that the share of opposition during the Covid-19 pandemic was lower than during ‘politics as usual’. This result differs from the studies on political opposition during the Eurozone crisis where scholars observed an increase in political opposition during crisis. However, my results can be considered to fit within the framework of Ferrara and Kriesi (2022) with the view that the Covid-19 crisis was not as politicised as other crises due to how it affected the member states symmetrically, why it was expected that there would be more consensus in the crisis management.

### 6.2 H2 and H3: Opposition relating to polity and policy issues

For my two following hypotheses, H2 and H3, I focus on the object for the opposition. H2 concerns if there was a greater share of statements consisting of opposition relating to ‘polity’ issues during the Covid-19 pandemic than during ‘politics as usual’, and H3 if there was a greater share of statements consisting of opposition relating to ‘policy’ issues. In Figure 2, the share of opposition related to ‘polity’ and ‘policy’ issues are outlined.
Figure 2: Share of oppositional statements relating to policy and polity issues 1995-2022 (n = 6 470)

Note: The difference in the share of opposition relating to 'polity' issues is not statistically significant at a 95% confidence level (p-value = 0.8103). The difference in the share of opposition relating to 'policy' issues is statistically significant at a 95 % confidence level (p-value = 0.03643).

Examining this figure, the share of opposition related to 'policy' is still higher than that related to ‘polity’, which was expected. However, regarding H2, it is not possible to outline a clear increase of ‘polity’-related opposition during the Covid-19 pandemic. The range for ‘polity’-related opposition during ‘politics as usual’ stayed between shares of 0 and 13 %, with an average share of 4,4 %. The share during the Covid-19 pandemic remained within the same range, between 1 and 5 % and with an average share of 3,2 %. This difference is not statistically significant at a 95 % confidence level, why my second hypothesis is thus not supported. The opposition related to ‘polity’ issues thus seems quite unaffected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Unlike what I expected, the power shifts from the member states to the EU institutions and the institutions’ increased influence on certain policy areas as well as the crisis management have not had a visible effect on increasing the stated opposition towards the EU system in the Swedish EAC.

In Figure 2, the share of oppositional statements relating to ‘policy’ issues shows a decrease during the Covid-19 pandemic compared to ‘politics as usual’. There have of course been variations in the share of opposition regarding ‘policy’ issues during the period of ‘politics as
usual’, with the average share of 35 %. The lowest point reached 21 % and the highest 47 % at the end of the period in 2016. This makes the difference between the end of the ‘politics as usual’ period and the start of the crisis period look quite distinct. In the second year of the Covid-19 pandemic, the ‘policy’-related opposition reached its lowest point at 16 %. The ‘policy’-related opposition during this period had however an average of 29 %, reaching 41 % in 2022.

The difference between the two periods is statistically significant at a 95 % confidence level, which supports my third hypothesis, H3. The share of ‘policy’-related opposition thus was smaller during the Covid-19 crisis, which probably is what is driving the overall share of opposition down as well. Looking at these results, there seems to be a tendency for the political parties to not oppose the government as much as before the Covid-19 pandemic, which supports the idea that the political leaders might have a stronger will to cooperate and are less willing to hinder the government’s decision-making during a crisis.

The decrease in ‘policy’-related opposition also makes the result for H2 more interesting; opposition relating to ‘polity’ issues remained within the same range. It thus seems as if the opposition regarding ‘policy’ changed more during the crisis than opposition relating to ‘polity’. On the one hand, the policies made during crisis are probably distinct from policies during ‘politics as usual’, why it might be reasonable that this also influences the patterns of political opposition. On the other hand, the EU during crisis seems to have been characterized by power shifts which could be thought to have effects also on the opposition related to the EU polity. This can however also be interpreted as opposition relating to ‘polity’ issues not being affected by the parties’ willingness to cooperate during crisis.

Summing up, I find support for my third hypothesis that the share of statements containing opposition related to ‘policy’ issues was smaller than during ‘politics as usual’, but not for my second hypothesis that the share of statements containing opposition related to ‘polity’ issues would be greater than during ‘politics as usual’. In relation to the support found for my first hypothesis, that the share of statements containing ‘opposition’ was smaller during the Covid-19 pandemic, thus seem to be driven by the decrease in the share of opposition relating to ‘policy’ issues, while the share of statements relating to ‘polity’ issues remained unchanged.
6.3 H4 and H5: Opposition in the form of alternative and critique

When it comes to the character of oppositional statements, my fourth hypothesis stated that the share of statements consisting of opposition in the form of ‘alternatives’ could be expected to be smaller during the Covid-19 pandemic than during ‘politics as usual’, based on the idea that new proposals were presented during a short period of time, which would make it more difficult for parties to form concrete positions and also present alternatives to the government’s position. The results in Figure 3 display a different pattern. The share of opposition presenting ‘alternatives’ instead reaches its highest level at almost 36 % in the end of the crisis. The average share of opposition in the form of ‘alternatives’ during ‘politics as usual’ was 21 %, and 22 % during the Covid-19 pandemic.

![Graph showing share of oppositional statements](image)

Figure 3. Share of oppositional statements in the form of alternative and critique 1995-2022 (n = 6 470)

Note: The difference in the share of opposition in the form of ‘alternatives’ is not statistically significant at a 95% confidence level (p-value = 0.7232). The difference in the share of opposition in the form of ‘critique’ is statistically significant at a 95% confidence level (p-value = 9.23e-06).

This difference is not statistically significant, which then does not support my fourth hypothesis. This is surprising in relation to the assumption that the parties might have a harder time forming alternatives to the policies proposed during a crisis, due to uncertainties and many new initiatives. In relation to the idea that parties might be less willing to oppose policies in general
during a crisis, providing alternatives is a way forward to still express their opinions on the policies but acting more constructively instead of only expressing criticism. Providing alternatives can also be interpreted as a will from the parties to act and actively take part in the decision-making.

Regarding the share of statements consisting of opposition in the form of ‘critique’, Figure 3 shows a decrease of the share of this type of statements during the Covid-19 pandemic, with an average of 15%. The share of statements in the form of ‘critique’ reaches its lowest level at around 6% during the Covid-19 pandemic, compared to a range between 10% and 36% during ‘politics as usual’, and an average of 27%. This difference is statistically significant at a 95% confidence level. This thus supports my fifth hypothesis, and the idea that parties are less willing to criticise the government’s proposal during crisis, perhaps to show solidarity and not wanting to risk hindering the crisis management.

In sum, the share of statements consisting of opposition in the form of ‘alternatives’ seems to have remained unchanged during the crisis, while the share of statements consisting of opposition in the form of ‘critique’ decreased. The fact that only one of the forms of opposition changed is interesting and could be a result of how the political parties would not want to be perceived as critical to the government’s proposed position, but instead as a constructive partner acting in cooperation with the government. However, looking at Figure 3, it was mainly during 2022 that the share of statements in the form of ‘alternatives’ increased, which potentially could be a result of how the emergency phase of the Covid-19 pandemic was reaching its end, and thus the oppositional behaviour going back to normal.

It is then further interesting that this share of ‘alternatives’ reaches its highest level in the end of the crisis, higher than all years during ‘politics as usual’. Since there is a gap of observations right before the Covid-19 pandemic period, it is not possible to conclude whether this trend of a larger share of statements in the form of ‘alternatives’ is new or could be a consequence of the crisis, especially since this difference is not statistically significant. Given that the sampling period for 2022 only covered around four months could also have implications for this result. Nevertheless, it is worth noticing as it contradicts my hypothesis, H4, and can be seen as a positive outcome from a democratic perspective.
6.4 H6: Oppositional statements by party type

Moving on to my sixth and last hypothesis, I expect that the Eurosceptic parties expressed the same share of ‘opposition’ as during ‘politics as usual’, based on the previous research on how Eurosceptic parties express more ‘opposition’ during a crisis compared to mainstream parties (Louwerse et al., 2021; De Giorgi, 2015). Based on Figure 4, the share of statements made by Eurosceptic parties containing ‘opposition’ during the Covid-19 pandemic fell in the year of 2021, reaching its lowest level at 30 %, but then increased again to around 75 % in 2022. However, the average share of ‘opposition’ stated by the Eurosceptic parties for this period was 55 %.

![Figure 4: Share of statements consisting of ‘opposition’ made by Eurosceptic and mainstream parties 1995-2022 (n = 6 470)](image)

Note: The difference in the share of ‘opposition’ made by Eurosceptic parties is not statistically significant at a 95% confidence level (p-value = 0.1948). The difference in the share of ‘opposition’ made by mainstream parties is statistically significant at a 95% confidence level (p-value = 0.0001791).

During ‘politics as usual’, the average is 64 %. There is no statistically significant difference at a 95 % confidence level, which supports my hypothesis that the Eurosceptic parties expressed the same share of ‘opposition’ during the Covid-19 pandemic as during ‘politics as usual’. This
also supports the previous research on political opposition by Louwerse et al. (2021), that Eurosceptic or populist parties did not adjust their oppositional behaviour in the national debates during the Covid-19 pandemic. These parties’ oppositional behaviour thus does not seem to have changed during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Looking at the mainstream parties instead, there is a statistically significant difference between the two periods, at a 95% confidence level. During ‘politics as usual’, the average share of ‘opposition’ stated by mainstream parties was 44%, while during the Covid-19 pandemic the average was 30%. During this second period, the share of statements made by the mainstream parties that contained ‘opposition’ also reached its lowest point at 17%. This supports the idea that the mainstream parties have a tendency to keep together during crises, and are less likely to oppose the government during this period.

In sum, the results support my hypothesis that the Eurosceptic parties expressed the same share of ‘opposition’ during the Covid-19 pandemic as during ‘politics as usual’. However, looking at the results in Figure 4, I find it quite surprising that there is not a significant difference between the periods regarding the Eurosceptic parties, as the lines for both Eurosceptic and mainstream parties seem to follow the same trend, with a slightly lower share the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, followed by a clear decrease in 2021, to lastly increase again in 2022. The Eurosceptic parties do however have a larger increase in the share of oppositional statements than the mainstream parties, from 30% in 2021 to 75% in 2022. This increase for the mainstream parties was from 17% in 2021 to 40% in 2022.

This large variation for the Eurosceptic parties can thus be a reason for the difference between the two periods not being statistically significant. It could also be a consequence of a small sample, since there are only two parties included in the Eurosceptic parties, and their total number of statements were only 67 statements during the Covid-19 pandemic, while it during ‘politics as usual’ reached a total number of 1294 statements. However, these results can be interpreted as an indication that the Eurosceptic parties’ behaviour can have been more influenced in the initial phase of the crisis, which would go in line with the findings by Louwerse et al. (2021), that statements were more positive in the beginning of the crisis but then turned more negative towards the end of the period.

Summing up the results for all hypotheses, the share of statements consisting of ‘opposition’ was smaller during the Covid-19 pandemic than during ‘politics as usual’. This was also the case for the share of statements consisting of opposition relating to ‘policy’ issues, and
opposition in the form of ‘critique’. The share of statements consisting of opposition in the form of ‘alternatives’ did however not change during the Covid-19 pandemic, and neither did the share of statements consisting of opposition relating to ‘polity’ issues. When it comes to the different party types, the mainstream parties expressed a smaller share of ‘opposition’ during the Covid-19 pandemic compared to ‘politics as usual’, while the share of ‘opposition’ stated by the Eurosceptic parties remained the same.

What is consistent in all figures during the Covid-19 pandemic is how the share of statements containing ‘opposition’ decreased quite drastically in 2021, but then increased again in 2022. This could be a consequence of how the crisis evolved, being new and more severe initially, but as people got vaccinated and the countries opened up again, the sense of emergency probably decreased, and the oppositional behaviour went back to normal. This can arguably support the findings by Anghel & Jones (2023), that the political parties expressed less criticism initially but gradually went back to the previous level. Of course, since the year of 2022 only consists of the four first months in the data, and how the sampling of records is done by legislative term, there are uncertainties to these yearly interpretations. Finally, the oppositional behaviour in the Swedish EAC seem to have been influenced during the Covid-19 pandemic in some respects and remained unchanged in others. The overall share of statements consisting of opposition did in fact decrease during the Covid-19 pandemic, which contradicts the previous research made on political opposition during the Eurozone crisis that found an increase of opposition during the crisis (Gemenis & Nezi, 2015; De Giorgi et al., 2015), but could be said to support the research on how the character of the Covid-19 pandemic was different from other crises, and how it affected parliamentary debates during this period, with more consensus and solidarity (Ferrara & Kriesi, 2022; Louwerse et al., 2021).

7. Conclusion

This thesis has examined how the patterns of parliamentary political opposition in Swedish EU affairs developed during the Covid-19 pandemic, compared to ‘politics as usual’, striving to understand how and in what way the state of a strong democracy can be affected by a crisis. The research question was answered with the help of six hypotheses guiding the analysis. The results show that the patterns of political opposition developed differently depending on the object and character of the oppositional statements, as well as the type of party. The results
showed that at a 95 % confidence level, the share of statements that contained opposition in general was smaller during the Covid-19 pandemic than during ‘politics as usual’. Similarly, the results also showed that the share of statements that contained opposition relating to policy issues also was smaller during the Covid-19 pandemic, statistically significant at a 95 % confidence level, but for the share of statements containing opposition relating to polity issues, there was no significant difference. These results indicate that political opposition relating to different issues developed differently during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Further, the results show that the share of statements containing opposition in the form of critique was smaller during the Covid-19 pandemic than during ‘politics as usual’, statistically significant at a 95 % confidence level, while the share of statements containing opposition in the form of alternatives showed no significant difference. This indicates that different characters of oppositional statements developed differently during a crisis. Further, at a 95 % confidence level, the results show that the mainstream parties expressed a lower share of statements consisting of opposition during the Covid-19 pandemic than during ‘politics as usual’, while for the Eurosceptic parties, there was no significant difference. These results then indicate that statements made by different party types developed differently during a crisis, where Eurosceptic parties do not seem to change their oppositional behaviour while mainstream parties do.

These results contribute to broadening our understanding on how the state of a strong democracy such as Sweden can be affected during a crisis, and on how political opposition in EU affairs developed during this dramatic period. The choice to analyse EU affairs during a crisis brings light both to questions relating to the long-standing struggle with democratic legitimacy in the Union, as well as the power shifts that usually occur during crisis and its effects on the EU integration. As political opposition is a crucial element of a functioning representative democracy, it is an important indicator when examining the quality of a democracy. Since the focus in previous studies has mainly been on weaker democracies, this thesis contributes with new information by showing that the crucial element of political opposition changes also in a strong democracy during a crisis.

While the results show that the patterns of the political opposition developed differently during the Covid-19 pandemic depending on the character and object of the statement, as well as on party type, the results show that the share of statements containing opposition in general was smaller during the crisis. From a democratic perspective, a lower degree of political opposition can be said to decrease the quality of democracy. If the political parties do not criticise or
provide alternatives to the government during a crisis, the citizens are left in the hands of the incumbent’s crisis management. As mentioned, at least in weaker democracies, crises can be used by the executive to increase their power and influence. With a smaller share of opposition, there might be a risk that governments use these events to the benefit of their own agenda when their proposals are not questioned as much as during ‘politics as usual’. However, as the results indicate, even if the overall share of statements containing opposition was smaller during the Covid-19 pandemic in the Swedish EAC, the more constructive form of criticism – where the political parties express alternatives to the government’s position – did not decrease during the crisis. This should be seen as positive outcome from a democratic perspective.

As we have seen, without political opposition, the citizens are left without alternatives to the government’s policies and thus without their right to vote based on different political views. In times as the recent decades, several extensive crises have faced the world and the EU, and we should probably expect more to come. This thesis highlights the importance of being aware of how these crises affect political opposition and what consequences they can have for the quality of democracy in the EU.

Potential future research could continue exploring the effects of crises on different elements of democracy in the EU, to strengthen our understanding of the quality of democracy in the Union, especially since crisis management becomes more and more common for the EU institutions and the member states. One aspect of political opposition that would be interesting to further examine based on the results was changes in the frequency of statements made in the EAC. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the average number of statements was 85 per year, while it was 282,5 during ‘politics as usual’. This lower number of statements during the Covid-19 pandemic could in itself be a result of the crisis, that in combination with the different developments regarding the content of the statements during the Covid-19 pandemic, the statements were also fewer. This would be interesting to analyse in the context of how the members of the EAC worked remotely, as this could have an impact on their oppositional behaviour as well. This could be of broader relevance, as remote work could become more common. Moreover, observing the time series diagrams for the hypotheses, there also seems to be a difference within the period of the Covid-19 pandemic, where there is a trend for most of the hypotheses that the share of statements containing opposition reached the lowest point in the year 2021, and the highest point in 2022. Examining how different periods within a crisis affect the overall patterns of political opposition would also be of relevance when examining democratic elements and the crisis management.
The smaller share of statements containing opposition can also be understood in the context of a parliamentary truce and the idea that the political parties should keep together during a crisis. One could argue that a crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic is such an extensive and severe situation, with a crisis management so complex that it should be made as easy as possible for the incumbent government to handle. An outcome with a smaller share of opposition can from this perspective be seen as an act in solidarity. This phenomenon would be interesting to evaluate from a democratic perspective, and it would be well worth analysing what possible effects a lower degree of political opposition during crises could have, especially if we are to see crisis management as a recurring topic at both an EU and national level. Finally, a larger sample of countries would be useful to be able to generalise to other strong democracies. The results found in Swedish EU affairs may not be applicable to the EU countries overall, as there are many factors that can explain parliamentary oppositional behaviour in general and country-specific aspects to take into consideration, for example the role of the parliament in EU affairs and their influence on the government’s position. Even if some member states can be considered similar to both the Swedish system as well as the quality of democracy, further studies should be made where possible differences can be controlled for. This is also the case for the generalisability of the Covid-19 pandemic, as it was quite unique in its kind, and since we have seen that different characteristics of crises might have different outcomes on the crisis management. Analysing Swedish EU affairs during other types of crises would also be relevant to broaden our understanding of crises’ influence on political opposition.

While many topics remain to be explored in this area of research, this thesis has contributed to a better understanding of how political opposition in EU affairs develops during crises in a strong democracy. Continued efforts along these lines would further help understand the development of the EU and in what ways the different crises the EU stands before can affect the quality of democracy in the Union.
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