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Buying time for democracies? European Union emergency politics in the time of COVID-19

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ABSTRACT
Successive crises in the European Union have led critics to identify a pervasive tendency to emergency politics, where democratic deliberation gives way to policy decisions forced through by executive authority. By contrast, in this article it is argued that crises may stimulate deliberation and compromise, even when preceded by open conflict and an evident collective action failure. Drawing on a new dataset of 1759 policy-related actions covering the EU and its member states' responses to COVID-19 between March and July 2020, the timing, sequencing and origins of policy claims and steps are traced. Both urgent epidemiological responses are found, where emergency measures were in evidence; and responses to anticipated economic challenges that had to overcome disagreement concerning necessary institutional reforms. The findings depict a multifaceted crisis response. The European Commission acted swiftly but also bought time for member state governments to deliberate. This casts doubt on the many-crises-one-script account of EU emergency politics.

In July 2019, future European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced that 'we have moved out of the era of crisis management and can now look forward' (von der Leyen 2019). Such confidence now feels almost prophetic in its wrongness. COVID-19 has prompted the latest and most large-scale crisis management programme the EU has ever embarked on, extending the 'seemingly permanent crisis' facing contemporary Europe (Voltolini *et al.* 2020: 609). COVID-19 presents multiple policy problems, most saliently concerning public health and the economy. European policy making geared up to address both issues between March and July 2020, a period bookended by the commencement of the EU's public health response and its settlement on a budget and recovery fund.

This dual crisis presents an opportunity to examine the precepts of emergency politics. In the face of complexity and repeated policy failures, it is said that 'crisisification' is becoming the EU's new *modus operandi*, overriding the deliberative, formalised processes with which it has historically been associated (Rhinard 2019). Crisis fighting *ad infinitum* has prompted consideration of how an instinctive appeal to emergency politics affects notions of democratic consent and national sovereignty (White 2015, 2019; Jabko and Luhman 2019). The so-called 'poly-crisis' is said to sustain a wave of Euroscepticism (Zeitlin *et al.* 2019: 969), echoing a pre-crisis diagnosis by Mair (2007). There is hardly a debate more pressing for European politics today.

In this article, we argue that institutional incentives for contrived emergencies and 'crisisification' are more ambiguous than the literature acknowledges: permanent firefighting in response to crises damages the reputation of any policy-making agency. Moreover, Europe's crises may differ in the extent to which they lend themselves to a logic of urgency, and not all of them can easily be construed as emergencies that follow one script, as Kreuder-Sonnen and White (2020: 4) claim. A crisis may necessitate institutional reforms, such as the creation of an emergency fund, which are contested between and within member state democracies. It then becomes conceivable that a division of labour ensues by which emergency measures take care of urgent developments, thereby buying time for discussion over more contentious and wide-ranging reforms. This framework challenges the verdict of a relentless drive towards exceptional policy making hollowing out democratic processes.

Under which circumstances can emergency politics in the EU buy time for democracies, specifically for genuine contestation and deliberation between national representatives? This theoretical possibility is inspired by Honig's (2009: 3) conception of emergency politics as a means to come to terms with Rousseau's paradox of democracy: those with whom power should lie, the people, are not of one unified will and need institutions that enable them to exercise power reflecting the will of many. Emergencies can be periods in democratic life in which this paradox comes to the fore and collective institution building flips from an effect of democratic politics to its cause. In a union of diverse democracies, the analogous paradox is a lived experience: steps towards further integration allow member states to formulate and pursue interests of national democratic politics more clearly. This conception of emergency politics acknowledges the apparent tension between emergency and democracy in both directions, also conceiving of it as a mechanism that can stimulate efforts at polity maintenance.

Our contribution has three main sections. First, we survey the emergency politics debate, teasing out how emergency politics should manifest

itself in a union of democracies and considering its implications. Second, we test these expectations using a novel dataset of 1759 coded policy actions extracted from press coverage of COVID-19 during its critical early months. We operationalise 'emergency politics' and 'buying time' by analysing the sequencing, direction and pace of communications between the EU and its member states throughout the public health crisis and controversy over recovery funding. We conclude with a discussion of how our findings challenge prevailing contemporary understandings of EU emergency politics, venturing that this mode of policy making is less a preferred choice than Honig's paradox haunting the EU polity.

Emergency politics in theory: compressing and buying time

Concerns over apparent antagonism between 'democracy' and 'emergency' can be traced back to the antiquities, but Agamben's (2005) work is an influential restatement. He reads Carl Schmitt's 'state of exception' (*Ausnahmezustand*) in sovereigntist terms: those who can suspend the rules control the game. In Agamben's state of exception, democracy can readily slide into dictatorship; his historical survey is replete with apparent good faith appeals for exceptional powers resulting in a rapid or gradual decline of democratic institutions (Agamben 2005).

This essential argument has been qualified and refined for the EU arena during its contemporary 'poly-crisis' to suggest that exceptional crisis fighting modes are not merely a temporary operating environment but rather a calculated outcome, fostered by institutional incentives and deliberate strategies. Rhinard (2019) describes a self-reinforcing process of 'crisisification', whereby unelected bureaucrats increasingly seek out crisis and appeal for further special powers for future detection and resolution. White (2019: 2) sees distinctive elements of informality in EU emergency politics, comprising appeals to common transnational threats to entrench a 'certain socio-economic order' while '[disabling] the democratic forces that might resist it'. This strand of literature would identify the permanence of emergency politics and the uniformity of the many-crises-one-script syndrome as major concerns (Rhinard 2019: 623; White 2015: 300).

Our account can be based on the work of Honig (2009), which sees potential for reconciliation between emergency and democracy. Honig insists that emergencies can licence law's suspension but also law's expansion. The latter makes us aware that emergencies are one way of squaring Rousseau's circle: 'that you need good men to make good law, but you also need good law to make good men' (Honig 2009: xvi). In crises, EU institution-building runs ahead of democratic legitimation, as Monnet's

famous prophecy implies, but in exceptional times national representatives can also collectively shape this process for future democratic decision making. Admitting that the transnational – intergovernmental and supra-national – level of policy making lends itself to a form of emergency politics, we take forward this less dystopian reading. While operating in a different temporality than national democracies, emergency politics does not suspend democratic processes entirely. Indeed, parliamentary opposition and constitutional courts can throw spanners in the works of emergency rule (Goetz 2014: 381-384).

Europe's response to the COVID-19 pandemic seems to vindicate those concerned about exceptionalism (Kreuder-Sonnen and White 2020). The inauspicious start, with Italy's unheeded call for help, let a serious public health problem escalate into a political crisis (Herszenhorn and Wheaton 2020). Swift national reactions to the virus then led to drastic restrictions on personal liberties instead of collective scrutiny of available options. While this was ongoing, an unsolved problem of fiscal risk sharing in the euro area turned into a second crisis of solidarity, sparked by nine member states requesting the issuance of mutualised Eurobonds (Wilmès *et al.* 2020). This triggered a familiar series of high-stakes summits that spawned a recovery fund, which was tied to negotiations about the EU budget.

We can see in this process the general features of emergency politics. Action is often delayed until a foreseeable policy problem escalates into a crisis.[1] Such escalation seems unwarranted, given that 'crisisification' has led to a proliferation of EU bodies scanning the horizon for potential problems (Rhinard 2019). But the ensuing crisis is then 'exploited' to increase support for public office-holders or their policy agendas (Boin *et al.* 2009; Rauh 2021: 3). Appeals for emergency powers stem from portrayals of exogenous shocks necessitating rapid action, driven by 'external demands rather than chosen normative priorities' (Kreuder-Sonnen and White 2020: 3). The logic of urgency and necessity creates timetables that enable informal networks of powerful actors to propose policies to which those without access can only react (Kreuder-Sonnen 2018: 98, 107).

There is some disagreement among authors on whether supranational, non-majoritarian actors are the agenda-setters of emergency politics (Rhinard 2019: 627-8; Rauh 2021) or whether executives in the transna-tional sphere generally perform this function, creating an 'emergency regime' a step removed from domestic constraints (White 2019: 34). Some scholars emphasise the purposeful (re-)construction of crises, depending on how they see the opportunities for credit and blame attri-bution (Boin *et al.* 2009: 83). Others see emergency politics as being

facilitated by institutional structures that allow those in power to fortify the existing institutional framework with its embedded policy consensus (Rhinard 2019: 627; White 2019: 38-9, 64).

These accounts are theoretically lucid and point to some empirical evidence in the secondary literature on the euro area and the refugee crises. But the distinctive dynamics of emergency politics remain abstract and underspecified. The literature infers from the output of extraordinary policy making that 'emergency' must have been the chosen mode of politics. We learn little about the conflict-laden interactions among national authorities and between them and supranational bodies. But these empirical details matter. Was communication top-down, from the supranational level to member states? Or did national representatives request EU coordination and intervention? Did dominant member states impose their preferred solution or could a chorus of voices make themselves heard? Were measures publicly contested before official adoption? Did they reflect an elite consensus or did they represent idiosyncratic national concerns? Absent the exposition of the political dynamics of emergencies, contributions to the EU emergency politics literature risk merely updating well-established democratic-deficit critiques (Follesdal and Hix 2006).

Examining political dynamics at work, EU emergencies may look less threatening. It is conceivable that certain collective emergency measures can buy time for democracies to deliberate on more far-reaching institutional changes.[2] That is to say, some crisis measures may accelerate decision making to overcome stalemates but may simultaneously address uncontentious issues needing urgent attention while decelerating the policy cycle for contentious decisions on lasting innovations. At the same time, extraordinary times focus policymakers' minds on whether they really want innovation and in what form. In other words, emergency politics applied to one set of crisis measures may buy time for democratic contestation regarding another set of crisis measures. The dual nature of the immediate public health and more protracted economic recovery aspects of COVID-19 allow us to explore this possibility. COVID-19 is a critical case in that it should have lent itself to emergency politics, yet it was split into fast- and slow-burning parts, each displaying distinct characteristics.

Multifaceted crises exemplify Pierson's (2004) observation that policy processes may differ in their temporal structures. The difference between and within fast- and slow-burning crises provides space for political choices and variations in the crisis script (Seabrooke and Tsingou 2019; Altiparmakis et al. 2021). A crisis that arrives suddenly with immediate impact conveys a different sense of urgency for (collective) action than

one that is cumulative with a delayed impact. If crises do not follow the same emergency script, then EU crisis management can work with the ordering of events to respond in a manner that allows time for politics (Howlett 2019). Short- and long-term decisions can be synchronised to allow for responsive and responsible crisis management, although this is bound to be a precarious balancing act (Goetz 2014: 386-389).

Second, the institutional and strategic incentives for emergency politics are more ambiguous than this literature acknowledges. Non-majoritarian supranational actors like the European Central Bank or the European Commission have incentives for emergency politics that stem ultimately from the EU polity being a multiple veto-player system, creating joint decision traps (Scharpf 1988). Unelected, technocratic actors depend on throughput and output legitimacy to compensate for their lack of democratic 'input' legitimation (Scharpf 1999; Schmidt 2013). Hence, they must be seen to operate in procedurally regularised ways. However, emergency politics is replete with political risk for supranational executives. A crisis challenges the very claim of output legitimacy and firefighting tends to be messy and *ad hoc*. Even perfectly functional responses do not necessarily foster trust (Wilde and Zürn 2012: 145; Rhinard 2019: 629). One way out of this dilemma is to seek a division of responsibilities between supranational and national elected executives that can diffuse blame attribution. This division may require allowing national governments time for decision making.

How would we recognise an emergency politics that buys time for democracies, in contrast to an emergency politics that seeks to override democratic processes? We hypothesise that there is no single emergency script for the two crises, and expect to observe differences in three related aspects of crisis policy making. The first relates to *sequencing*. Buying time for collective action on the future economic crisis would suggest that member states had scope to express their preferences *before* the Commission or the Council Presidency set the agenda with policy proposals. In other words, we expect national executives' discussions to precede communication about concrete policy-making steps. The second relates to *patterns of interaction*. When buying time, we would expect member states in the driving seat, bargaining among themselves and prompting the Commission and Council for action on the impending economic crisis. By contrast, pandemic management should be marked by 'top-down' communication from the Commission, encouraging and coordinating competent national executives. Relatedly, *speed of action* suggests that buying time is incompatible with strict deadlines and constant pressure for action. We should observe acceleration of policy-making processes for measures within existing frameworks and deceleration for decisions that break new ground. This is expected to map onto differences

between the comparatively urgent epidemiological crisis and the coming economic crisis where far-reaching reforms required due consideration.

In sum, we refute an alarmist version of the emergency politics literature claiming there is an unambiguous tendency in the EU to jump at opportunities for exceptional policy making that undermine nationally constituted democracy. Adapting Honig's (2009) formulation of emergencies as constitutive of democratic politics to Europe, we consider whether crises can create opportunities that sustain democratic decision making and interest representation during exceptional times requiring polity maintenance.

Emergency politics in action

Data and methodology

In order to shed light on these hypothesised political dynamics, we employ a method that captures the policy process in politically relevant detail.[3] This uses the aggregator Factiva to collect reports from multiple newspaper and newswire sources with a pan-European focus. Broad keyword searches return a large corpus of articles, reducing the scope for selection or editorial biases towards certain states or issues (Earl *et al.* 2004). Policy-related statements made by any agent related to COVID-19 are extracted from articles and hand-coded, producing a dataset comprising 1759 'policy actions'. This encompasses all EU member states, EU institutions, non-state actors and third countries. The data further break down to identify institutional affiliations and, for individuals, seniority levels, at the sub-national or sub-EU level. Overall, these data systematically capture public presentations of the policy process (Bojar *et al.* 2020).

For our analysis, coded actions are sorted into two types: policy claims and policy-making steps. We define claims as deliberative interventions since they concern assessments of past or future policies, position the actor vis-à-vis current proposals and highlight their preferences for what action should be taken. We define steps as policy-making measures that are actively undertaken. This distinction is important for our operationalisation of emergency politics. The data help us reconstruct policy agendas, trace origins and development, and locate counterfactuals and critical junctures, thus avoiding *post facto* and selection biases. The coding process notes several further data points for each action. For instance, it captures interactions between agents by coding them as 'initiators' and 'targets' of such actions. The opposing, supportive or neutral direction of statements and their target are also noted to establish controversy levels. Information on the policy issues at stake (public health, economic

security) offer useful information on what an actor wants to convey and a code for arenas shows their audience.

We map out the interactions between national and European level actors during the COVID-19 crisis covering a 20-week period from 9 March 2020, the week in which the EU and its member states switched 'to emergency mode' with the first announcement of an emergency summit, to 21 July, the week in which a marathon summit settled on the 'Next Generation EU' recovery fund and budget. In the analysis that follows, we seek to establish aggregate trends in action sequencing between claims and steps, and interactive interventions to establish how, when and where EU institutions and member states targeted others and were themselves targeted. These aggregate data allow us to expose some precepts of emergency politics outlined in the previous section to empirical tests. Finally, recognising the necessity of acknowledging policy areas of qualitatively heightened importance, we include a detailed timeline of the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), extracting a small, sample of influential policy claims and steps in its development, with reference to sequencing, directions and arenas where insightful. The RRF was manifestly the most contentious and innovative aspect of early EU COVID-19 management, and thus demands a more granular assessment. Overall, we aim to demonstrate how our dataset can operationalise abstract phenomena and produce a more nuanced empirical assessment of the dynamics of emergency politics.

Empirical analysis

We now turn to three sets of questions with associated hypotheses. Firstly, we are interested in the balance between deliberation (policy claims) and decision making (policy-making steps). Do steps come first, forcing national democracies into a reactive mode? Or do they follow deliberation between national executives, who act as representatives of domestic concerns? Two patterns are indicative of emergency politics in healthcare and a buying time pattern on the economy. First, a significantly higher share of policy claims preceding policy-making steps relating to the anticipated economic crisis. Second, this process follows a different rhythm in the healthcare and the economic dimensions. Partly as a function of its prior competences, we also expect the Commission to act more as an initiator of less profound policy-making steps in public health than the coming economic crisis, which broached genuine institutional innovation.

Secondly, we consider patterns of interaction between member states and EU institutions with a particular focus on the supranational executive Commission. We use our coding of initiators and targets of policy actions to see whether emergency politics can buy time for discussing longer-term

decisions. We expect the Commission to lead on acute, less contentious public health measures while communication regarding fiscal reforms for economic recovery should be multi-lateral with member state executives leading deliberations, possibly in various Council formations. The content of these deliberations must represent domestic concerns and interests that our method takes from public media.

Finally, does the sequence of highly contested policies show that different preferences voiced beforehand served to shape authoritative outcomes? We focus on acrimony over the recovery fund in greater depth to address this. Buying time for democracy means that the policy decisions on recovery funding could reflect compromises between distant positions held by the 'Corona Nine' and 'Frugal Four' blocs.[4] Emergency politics sees either a strong status quo bias that favours existing asymmetries of power or alternatively EU institutions – perhaps at the behest of powerful states – pushing to swiftly enact emergency legislation that overrides dissent, dismissing deliberation.

Policy making and deliberation

We operationalise the balance between deliberation and decision making by the relative counts of policy claims and policy-making steps per week. Figure 1 shows this for all weeks analysed. We present three visualisations of policy actions: all EU (top-left), only health-related (top-right) and only recovery-related (bottom-left). Across all sets of interactions, claims outweigh policy-making steps in all but three weeks (8, 9 and 13). Even during these three weeks, the preponderance of steps was taken by member states and there is little indication of EU institutions pushing forward with important policy steps unilaterally. Week 8, at the end of April, saw multiple states moving to protect key industries, with France, Germany, the Netherlands and Austria developing airline bailouts. The first week of May was marked by the German constitutional court's questioning of the legality of ECB bond buying and the Eurogroup agreeing in principle a pandemic support package worth up to 2% of each member's GDP. Week 13, at the start of June, saw several countries relaxing border controls, including Czechia, France, Spain, Italy and Greece.

In the other 17 weeks, we see a cyclical temporal pattern in the top-left graph. Claims outweigh policy-making steps for several weeks, implying a great deal of positioning, discussion, and negotiations, followed by a more even count of policy-making steps. Once decisions are made, a new albeit shorter feedback loop of claims is triggered. Overall activity fades away slowly over summer, culminating with the RRF-budget breakthrough at the European Council of 18–21 July. Recognising that our aggregate data do not reflect the gravity of this summit, we return to it in greater depth in the next section.
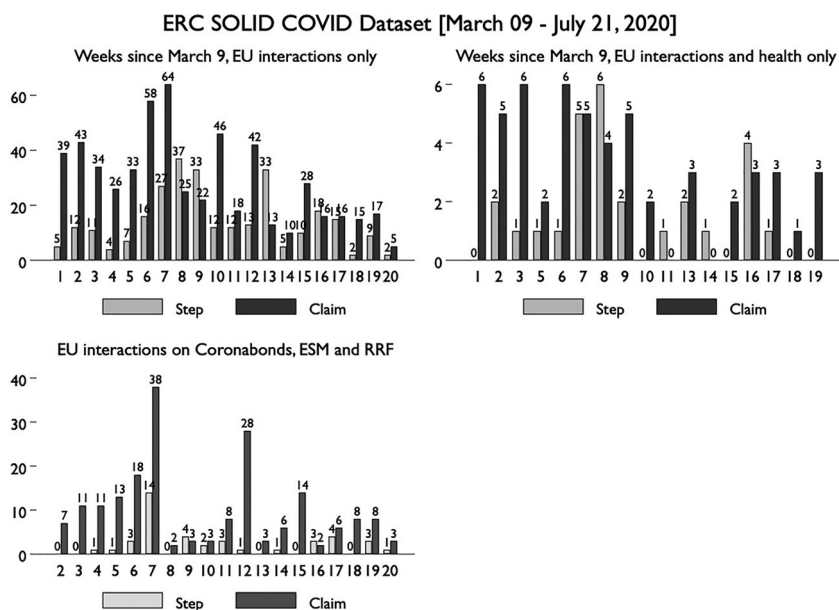
Figure 1. Policy-making steps v. policy claims at the EU level.

The claim-steps-claim pattern is much less pronounced for health measures (Figure 1, top-right) where we have fewer observations and the count of claims and steps is more balanced. This is in line with the widely shared perception of a health emergency that the EU and its members felt needed a swift response. Critique of the EU's ineffective management of the COVID-19 crisis escalated in March. The ECB was the only major institution that swiftly announced policy measures, *de facto* paying banks with negative interest rates to lend to business. The Commission put out various tenders, coordinating medical equipment procurement by mid-March. But tangible results materialised only from April onwards, such as sending medical teams from Romania and Norway to Italy or coordinating the efficient use of EU intensive care capacities. Meanwhile, member states continued to operate border closures at their own discretion, a collective action failure from the EU's perspective.

Concerning the discussion of how best to prepare for the coming economic crisis, the pattern of claims preceding actions holds and we clearly see a crescendo from week 1 to week 9, confirming that as claims are being made, actions follow until the first week of May. An ESM credit line without conditionality was decided in April, despite misgivings between the Netherlands and Italy. The proposal of a common debt instrument ('Coronabonds'), mooted by nine member states on 25th March, was categorically rejected by several other member states. By far the most actively discussed proposal was the recovery fund that later

became the RRF. Here, several months' worth of deliberation preceded policy-making steps, challenging emergency politics precepts.

Of special interest is the European Commission's involvement, given its alleged capacity to act as an agent of 'supranational emergency politics', by potentially 'expanding [its] executive discretion by undermining or circumventing the constraints [...] that bind [its] authority in normal times' (Kreuder-Sonnen and White 2020: 4). Our coding suggests it acted as an initiator 350 times overall, 157 times if we include only state actors, EU level institutions and member state governments. Of these 157 initiations, the Commission had a precise target only 40 times over 20 weeks. In general, these are related to discrete measures like permissions for airline bailouts or warning countries regarding the rule of law. 69 of the 157 initiations are policy-making steps and 73 are claims. These 69 steps were mostly focussed on the state aid rules, coordinating national responses to the public health crisis and latterly the recovery fund. The Commission's own claims also referred to these areas with the regular addition of the Green New Deal, which is unsurprising since these claims generally precede statements on policy making.

For our argument, it is important to consider the dual nature of the Commission's role because the policy-making steps it initiated may have been prompted by others, or at least supported as pragmatic measures. Here, if we unpack the aggregate numbers of actions taken by the Commission throughout the early months of the crisis, we can see on the public health side that the coded executive measures included creating a pan-European team of experts, launching the RescEU strategic medical stockpile, and shifting funds to repatriation flights in March; reallocating €2.7bn of the EU budget to member states' healthcare systems and launching a data sharing platform for researchers in April; and establishing a 'humanitarian air bridge' and shifting Horizon 2020 funding to COVID-19 research in May. On the economic side, executive steps included the approval of 127 state aid exemptions in response to member states' explicit concerns over bailouts, and advancing agriculture subsidies to support farmers in April. To be sure, these were often rapid policy-making steps with low levels of deliberation, but given the time constraints imposed by the virus and economic shutdowns, Commission inaction would have led to it being criticised as irresponsive to citizens' needs. The image of the Commission as engaging in constraint subversion during bouts of emergency politics does not neatly align with the detail of these steps.

Returning to sequences of interactions, the pattern of claims-actions-claims on a multitude of issues suggests feedback loops in which the Commission exercises its right of initiative mostly after claims have been staked out. For example, during week 10 in mid-May, multiple

Commissioners made interventions in support of the EU's green agenda. Climate Commissioner Timmermans urged governments to attach green conditionality to emergency bailouts after this was dismissed by the Council, while his Health counterpart Kyriakides stressed that the pandemic should not slow momentum towards an EU Green New Deal. As an initiator, the Commission was mostly silent in the week of the RRF agreement, which was spearheaded by the Council. The Commission's interventions on health taper off from week 14 onwards, when a framework had been established and the agenda shifted decisively to brokering an economic compromise. Combining the negotiations of the recovery fund and the EU budget had raised the stakes enormously, which might be seen as a device out of the emergency politics playbook. A 'normal politics' interpretation would characterise this as a textbook strategy to unblock stalled budget negotiations by presenting them as a package deal.

Patterns of interaction

In order to complement sequencing, it is necessary to understand patterns of interaction. Our dataset can identify who initiated actions and who, if any, were the intended targets of their intervention. Figure 2 maps aggregate dyads of interactions at the EU-national level over the 20-week intensive period. Following Figure 1, it differentiates between all EU interactions, health and economic policy (specifically, Coronabonds, the ESM and the RRF). The pattern of the EU proactively targeting member states appears as a *horizontal line*: EU institutions (on the y axis) initiate actions towards other actors (on the x axis). Again, this would broadly indicate an emergency politics mode of interaction. By contrast, the buying time pattern indicated by a dominance of multilateral communications or from the member states to the EU appears as a *vertical* line. Since the Commission specifically is accused of engaging in 'crisisification' (Rhinard 2019: 619), it is also necessary to disaggregate EU institutions to identify variance between them. We do this in the bottom-right quadrant.

In the top-left graph of Figure 2, there are 377 actions initiated by the EU to other levels, three-quarters (283) of which are between EU institutions themselves. 23 actions are directed at Germany (mostly concerning state aid, the Single Market, calls to cooperate on the EU level for supply chains and borders and reactions to the constitutional court's ruling on the ECB). 20 actions are directed at Hungary and 11 at Poland, mostly regarding the rule of law in these states. Eleven EU policy actions target Italy over economic measures including approving airline bailouts but also include the apology from von der Leyen 'for a lack of solidarity from Europe in tackling its coronavirus crisis'. On 28 February, Italy had
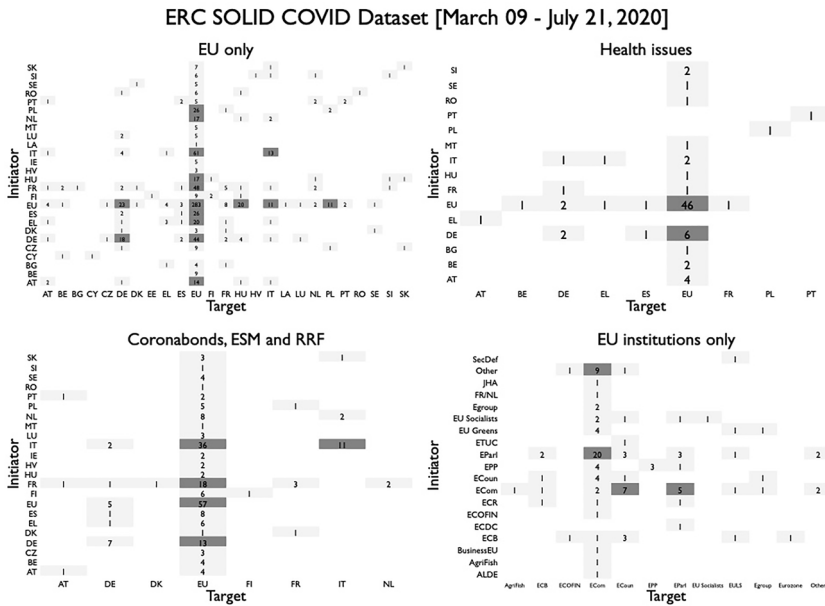
Figure 2. Interactions at the EU level.

asked other member states for support in delivering medical equipment but received no immediate response. A month before, the Commission had already activated its Civil Protection Mechanism, one of Rhinard's (2019) institutions of crisisification, to no avail. It is well-documented that the EU's emergency machinery got off to a slow start (Herszenhorn and Wheaton 2020).

Member states regularly 'uploaded' their preferences, targeting 638 actions at EU institutions. This stronger vertical line shows a preponderance of large states targeting the EU. Italy comprises 61 actions, mostly its government lobbying for relaxing fiscal rules and pushing for pan-European economic measures. This was initiated by a furious response to Christine Lagarde's early comment that the ECB 'is not here to close the spreads' between member states' bond rates. It continued through the evolving debate on the recovery fund, where Italy played a leading role. France has 48 entries, also focussed primarily on the EU recovery package; Germany 44, covering a mixture of recovery fund, state aid rules and public health care measures; Spain and Poland both 26, notably concerning the push for coordinated EU stimulus measures.

For public health (top-right), there are far fewer overall interactions and member state to EU interactions, displayed along the vertical line, dominate. This indicates less emergency politics in public health than even the buying time hypothesis might expect. However, this is not

entirely surprising. Public health management remains almost entirely a member state competency and each country pursued national strategies broadly coalescing around the globally-established norms of lockdowns, border closures and contact tracing (Herszenhorn and Wheaton 2020). In this context, there is a reduced need to upload preferences for coordination or seek strategic guidance from EU institutions. Moreover, key targeted interventions were bundled, with multiple member states acting in concert. For example, in the Coronabonds letter the nine states also encouraged the Commission to provide 'agreed guidelines, a common base for the collection and sharing of medical and epidemiological information, and a strategy to deal in the near future with the staggered evolution of the epidemic' (Wilmès *et al.* 2020).

Targeted interventions apply much more directly on managing the economic effects of public health measures. Here, EU rules governing trade, free movement, state aid and labour markets pervade and acrimonious debates over recovery financing were also conducted, as the bottom-left graph indicates. Yet again, this does not depict a unilateral emergency style of politics. Between March and July, EU institutions only targeted other non-EU level actors 32 times, whereas in the opposite direction the EU was targeted 229 times. The top initiators towards the EU are Italy, Germany, France, Spain, Poland and the Netherlands. This pattern holds mostly over the period of analysis.

Finally, the bottom-right graph in Figure 2 disaggregates the 283 interactions that took place between EU institutions.[5] Emergency politics would expect to find interactions being mainly driven by the EU executive or informal institutions (European Commission and Eurogroup, respectively) with a horizontal line from such initiators to other targets. By contrast, a more diffuse pattern of interactions and a stronger vertical line (EU institutions being targeted by other EU institutions) would lend support to the buying time hypothesis, containing pressure for action inside the EU bubble. Data point to the latter: the Commission only targeted others 20 times, but was targeted 55 times, and mostly by the European Parliament. We do not put much weight on this evidence, though. Parliaments are more vocal than the ECB or the Council, with the latter deliberating behind closed doors to greater effect.

Compromise on recovery funding

The dispute over how to fund states' recoveries and address inequities animated almost the entire period of analysis. Ladi and Tsarouhas (2020) attribute RRF development to policy learning and entrepreneurship at a critical juncture, stressing its path-breaking innovation. Howarth and

Schild (2021) instead emphasise its temporariness and lack of fiscal transfers, per Germany's red lines. Our granular assessment offers a third interpretation, that of a radical compromise that provides further insight on how emergency politics played out during COVID-19.

The debate comprised European and national non-state actors, including the European Trade Union Confederation and industry associations in France, Germany and Italy; as well as civil society with petitions, both by prominent intellectuals and by French and German non-governmental organisations. All these actors pursued their own image of 'a European response', but member states' demands on this response started far apart and with diplomatic acrimony, leading observers to doubt whether they were reconcilable (Herszenhorn, Barigazzi, and Momtaz 2020). In this section, we trace the route to July's rapprochement and examine what this indicates about the role emergency politics played.

The aforementioned letter by nine member states, published on 25 March, asked Council President Charles Michel 'to open [a] debate' on 'a common debt instrument' that 'in the spirit of efficiency and solidarity' ensured the stable financing of investment (Wilmès *et al.* 2020). Essentially, for this informal group, stability entailed debt mutualisation. This was categorically rejected by the so-called Frugal Four plus Germany and Finland. They all faced formidable Eurosceptic opposition at home. The respective blocs were informally led by Italy and the Netherlands, whose ministers made multiple public interventions during the debate. On 19 March, with Italian deaths outstripping China's, Prime Minister Conte claimed in the *Financial Times* that an emergency fiscal policy was needed to complement the $750bn bond purchasing scheme simultaneously announced by the ECB, stressing 'time is of the essence'. This reinforced ECB President Lagarde's expressed preference, on 12 March, for 'an ambitious and coordinated fiscal policy response' to match its monetary programme. Conte's attempts to accelerate the policy cycle on emergency grounds appeared to have little impact, and he instead adopted a public-facing approach. At the end of March, he gave television and print interviews in prominent German and Dutch media outlets, making his case and allaying fears about taxpayer exposure to Italian debt. In the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, he opposed the ESM, refusing to rule out vetoing any plan that fell short of mutualisation. A lengthy Council meeting on 8 April failed to broker agreement, and Dutch Finance Minister Hoekstra, who had previously upset Southern states by calling for a Commission audit of their crisis preparedness, stated plainly 'Coronabonds are not coming'.

Council President Michel, for his part, remained circumspect on claims but active in an informal brokering capacity (Herszenhorn and Eder 2020). But in high-profile speeches, such as the State of the Union address

on 8th May, he focussed on long-term industrial policy, calling for a 'new Marshall plan' that prioritised green and digital innovation. This reflects Michel's avoidance of issue ownership and his reluctance to try to set an agenda or take sides on recovery funding given the intensity of the ongoing divide.

The Frugal Four would not formally set out its terms until a May 26 non-paper on 'EU support for efficient and sustainable [...] recovery' foresaw a two-year recovery fund, dispensed as loans conditional on economic reforms, and delivered as part of the EU budgetary cycle (Non-paper 2020). This approach seemed to renege on an earlier agreement to demote conditionality, notably using the ESM as a contingent credit line for 'direct and indirect' health care-related spending, thus replacing conditionality by eligibility criteria. This non-paper, on the eve of the Commission's proposal, was either rejected or ignored. The Commission, for its part, also remained largely circumspect. Von der Leyen dismissed Coronabonds as a 'slogan' in March, prompting a rebuke from Italy, and then made no further claims prior to the step of announcing the recovery fund in principle on 13 May and in detail two weeks later. With the two countries formerly on opposite sides, a Franco-German compromise in the intervening period would prove decisive in satisfying both blocs (Howarth and Schild 2021).

Chancellor Merkel shared the Frugal Four's view that debt mutualisation had to be avoided under any circumstances. But she could also see that loading vulnerable countries with more debt was counter-productive. A Spanish proposal, published in mid-April, created a pathway: it proposed €1.5tn worth of grants, financed by long-term bond issues on behalf of the Commission, secured against the EU budget. It was the brainchild of two liberal MEPs, Luis Garicano and Guy Verhofstadt, outlined in a blog shortly before the Spanish Treasury proposed it (Fleming and Khan 2020).[6] The Franco-German proposal for a recovery fund that promotes 'solidarity and growth', on 18 May, scaled the plan down to €500bn but maintained its structure. On 27 May, the Commission published its plan for a €750bn RRF, adding a loan element to the Franco-German grants. Merkel used the time around the hand-over of the Council Presidency to give an interview, simultaneously published in six European newspapers (26 June)[7], and to publicly meet and greet Dutch, Italian and Spanish leaders on first name terms. The RRF was in principle agreed at a marathon Council meeting between 17–21 July. Even shortly before this summit, Dutch Prime Minister Rutte had spoken to *Corriere della Sera* to clarify that 'next time…[Italy] must be able to respond to the crisis by its own means'.

Coding of actor directions allows for calculating the average position expressed by state actors on the RRF compared to Coronabonds and

Table 1. Positions on three proposals to support economic recovery.

Actor position	Recovery & Resilience Facility	Coronabonds	ESM loans
Average	0.78	0.35	0.5
Standard Deviation	0.1	0.17	0.31

Note: Positions are derived from actor directions towards the respective 'policy action' (positive/neutral/negative, ranging from +1 to -1).

non-conditional ESM loans. Table 1 shows that the RRF commanded the highest support and was least divisive, as measured by the standard deviation.

The RRF is the mother of all EU compromises, reflecting the fact that it was almost entirely brokered by diverse member state democracies. Its ambitious size, 4.8% of EU GDP (2019) and two-thirds weight towards grants satisfies the pro-Coronabonds bloc. The Frugal Four were reassured by its terms: access to funds requires four-year reform and investment submissions. This is an *ex ante* form of conditionality but can also be seen as a standard business plan for long-term finance. Both sides were able to claim wins, with Austrian Chancellor Kurz tweeting that the deal was 'a good result for Austria and the EU', Conte and Macron calling it 'historic'. Mortgaging the EU budget did not require reconciling states on debt mutualisation while it also ensured that the Commission's bond issue is as safe as any Eurobond, hence cheap for the borrower. Like the ESM, the RRF extends to the entire EU, reassuring Denmark and Sweden that the common denominator of European integration post-Brexit remains the 'integrity of the internal market', not the common currency. For the Commission, the RRF is an entry into getting its own taxing powers so as to be able to pay back the bond issue by 2058, as a function of being inside the Commission budget, unlike the ESM. Finally, the grant element is possibly the most surprising common denominator: vulnerable countries want it but did not dare to ask for the sums needed. Interestingly, those who feel less vulnerable could see the point as the vulnerability of others can drag everybody into the maelstrom; and non-euro area countries saw this approach as preferable to Coronabonds.

What emerges from the RRF design process is a deceleration of the policy cycle, the relative absence of EU institutions and the scope for member states both individually and in concert to shape the outcome. This casts doubt on interpretations of the RRF as yet another example of emergency politics as coup.

Discussion

This article explored under which circumstances emergency politics originating in and by the EU can buy time for democracies. The scholarship

on emergency politics stresses that the EU thrives on the logic of speed and necessity, claiming that its crisis management tends to follow a familiar script. While we do see a role for emergency politics, notably to escape the EU's joint decision trap, the balance of evidence presented here indicates that specific claims about emergency politics seem questionable when complex political dynamics are unpacked. The incentives for stressing emergency are mixed because crises do damage to the output and throughput legitimacy of even functionally competent non-majoritarian actors. Moreover, not all crises lend themselves to a logic of urgency and necessity, as the anticipated crisis of post-pandemic economic recovery demonstrated.

The circumstances under which we observe EU emergency politics buying time for democratic contestation and deliberation are, first, that a single crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic can be split into fast- and slow-burning parts (Seabrooke and Tsingou 2019; Altiparmakis *et al.* 2021), going back to Pierson (2004: 79–82). The early intervention of some member states, proposing a common debt instrument while the contagion spread within and between EU member states, ensured the pandemic became a dual crisis running at two speeds. The public health dimension demanded rapid, comparatively uncontroversial EU executive actions while the economic dimension played out in the opposite, with lengthy, often public-facing deliberations over a very contentious issue. The actual politics in a crisis can have a positive or a negative dynamic and this we find out only by tracing its evolution, a point that the emergency politics literature has to date missed.

We used our novel dataset on press reports covering the EU's COVID-19 crisis responses to gain insights into the political mechanics of the emergency policy-making process, entailing authoritative, yet contested decision making that is mindful of underlying social and political divisions in the EU. We found that the public face of the policy process around the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic was different from that around future recovery measures. At first sight, the former fit the pattern of crisis exploitation where policy actions follow a logic of urgency, policy-making steps slightly outweigh the discussion as indicated by claims, and the European Commission prompted member states to take coordinated action (Herszenhorn and Wheaton 2020). But this was against the background that the Commission had a weak mandate and no coercive means at its disposal; it provided services like voluntary schemes for the joint procurement of medical equipment and proposed strategies for more efficient utilisation of EU healthcare capacities. No reforms were taken that would have set precedents for the future. All the while the EU coordinated member state efforts at containing the pandemic, member state representatives started a heated

discussion about mutual support for the recovery from the steep decline in economic output that the lockdowns had caused.

The public face of the policy process that led to the decision in mid-July to create a €750bn recovery fund was very different. It started with a public spat over how far-reaching solidarity in the foreseeable future should be. Alternatives like the modification of the ESM were discussed and taken forward or dismissed. Representatives on both sides of the debate engaged in public-facing campaigns, giving interviews to the national newspapers of their counterparts, while the Commission presented its own proposal towards the end of the debate and only after much deliberation between member states and a reconciliatory Franco-German intervention.

In short, there was not a uniformly relentless process of EU institutions urging member states to act. Our findings resonate with Rauh (2021): he uses a related method and comes to an equally nuanced view of the Commission, although he identifies the ECB as a communicator of emergencies. We found a feedback pattern of claims about policy proposals, policy-making steps and new rounds of claims, expressing views on impending policy decisions. Normative priorities were indeed discussed at the level of national representatives, framed in terms of a stark contrast between solidarity among interdependent members and responsibility that comes with sovereignty. Supranational and intergovernmental venues of action were clearly discernible: the Commission engaged in orchestrating a rapid response while member states were ostentatiously forward-looking. This marks a startling reversal of the usual division of labour between non-majoritarian and majoritarian actors (Goetz 2014), which deserves further research.

These findings are a counterpoint to the diagnosis that the EU goes into every crisis with the same script. Our findings are evidence for Howlett's (2019: 2) argument that 'sequence matters'. A crisis is not just one event but an episode of events. Our method traces this 'ordering of policy-relevant events' (Howlett 2019: 2; Pierson 2004: 6) and can therefore make sense of the difference within emergency politics. We highlighted the sequencing of 'claims', preferences voiced by EU institutions and member state democracies; and 'steps', legislative acts, across the health and economic COVID-19 crises. These were subject to differing levels of EU competence and thus contentiousness, and those levels corresponded to the speed with which decisions could be taken. These temporal characteristics of managing a dual crisis provide little evidence for a democracy-undermining emergency politics in action. More generally, it is clear that sequence also mattered in the guise of the policy heritage of the euro area crisis. The Coronabond letter and an outright rejection of using standard ESM programmes was a high-risk strategy

calling for more solidarity. The signal of a potential standoff in the midst of a pandemic concentrated minds and led to a debate about alternatives, with the result of a fiscal innovation (Ladi and Tsarouhas 2020).

We also saw that emergencies became an opportunity for democratically elected executives to discuss their allegiance to European integration. Executives represented domestic concerns that constrained further integration, to the point of diplomatic incidents. This made it clear that choices had to be made, based on different normative priorities.[8] This makes us conclude that some accounts of past crises in the EU and the COVID-19 pandemic fail to recognise the import of Honig's (2009) insight that emergencies need not suspend democratic politics. Emergencies put in sharp relief that in the EU polity, where power must rest with the demoi of member states, national majorities cannot be relied on to exercise this power fairly and empathetically towards each other. The demoi of member states also need EU institutions to make the judicious exercise of their power possible. Europe being forged in crisis may be a curse for normal democratic decision making, but it is not the fatal blow that recent scholarship on emergency politics alleges.

Notes

1. Although Goetz (2014: 380) notes that the euro area crisis was escalated by rash decisions, notably Ireland's infamous guarantee of all Irish bank debt.
2. We intend the term 'buying time' very differently from Streeck (2014), who saw it as a process driving public debt in the late neoliberal era. We regard buying time through emergency politics as an opportunity to reach agreement over the balance of collective risk sharing.
3. See Bojar *et al.* (2020) for more detail on Policy Process Analysis.
4. Belgium, France, Greece, Italy, Ireland, Luxembourg, Portugal, Slovenia and Spain versus Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden.
5. Some observations in the graphs where dropped because actors targeted the EU vaguely, in terms such as 'Europe should…'
6. The European Parliament endorsed the idea in a resolution soon afterwards.
7. France's *Le Monde*, Germany's *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Italy's *La Stampa*, Poland's *Polityka*, Spain's *La Vanguardia* and the UK's *Guardian* (Olterman 2020).
8. It led to what Jabko and Luhman (2019: 1037) discuss as 'the reconfiguration of fragile sovereignty practices'.

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