Power in practice:

EU member states' 2020 early negotiations on Covid-19 burden sharing

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Abstract

The manoeuvring and the strategies that state actors and their delegates employ when discussing and negotiating practices at the European Union (EU) level clearly respond to their aim of attaining outcomes at that very level. Within that landscape, what makes a country more powerful and persuasive than others, why some states punch above their weight, and how the threads of European diplomacy are concretely moved are unclear processes that the practice approach promise to explain. This investigation employs the practice approach to distinguish 'power in practice'. It considers power as a development connected to social relations. In fact, it views micro-level diplomatic dynamics as the site from which to observe power. It fills a gap in the field of adopting the practice approach within EU studies by contributing to theory through showing the approach's policy performance. It begs the central question of 'whether power resources emerge out of constant work and negotiation'. It applies the practice approach to the 2020 early negotiations in the EU arena on burden sharing linked to the Covid-19 pandemic. It argues that what is at stake in the course of the negotiations is a complex social game, in which manoeuvring for diplomatic competence becomes an end in itself.

Keywords

Practice approach, European Union, 'power in practice', social relations, negotiations, Covid-19

Introduction

Much of the manoeuvring that state actors and their representatives undertake in their performance of practices at the European Union level clearly helps them to shape the policy outcomes at that level. What is less clear is 'what makes one country more influential than another' during negotiations; why certain states appear powerless on that stage 'while others punch above their weight'; and, how the strings of European

diplomacy are 'actually get pulled' (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014, 890).[1] The practice approach has the potential to grasp the type of power dynamics within European politics. The practice approach might help to understand how power emerges during negotiations as well as how it is distributed and becomes consistent or succumbs to compromises. Contrary to those pointing to material interests as fundamental to interpreting negotiation dynamics, or others who argue that the obligations among states justify their decisions, micro-level diplomatic dynamics are crucial in explaining how power surges, evolves, and falls during negotiations. We view power as a process determined by social relations, that the practice approach helps to examine (pp. 890-2).

On inspecting the recent literature on the practice approach, we found some space to be filled by the present enquiry on 'power in practice', and explored the question of 'whether power resources emerge out of constant work and negotiation'. We accomplished this by applying the practice approach to the early negotiations, at the beginning of 2020, within the European Union framework, among the EU member states, aimed at sharing the burden induced by the Covid-19 epidemic. The European Commission, the European Council and the European Parliament provide the frame for the analytical landscape. Operationally, this investigation combines a discourse analysis with content analysis (Larsen 2018)[2] and employs an analytical methodology that assesses three successive processes of power in practice. It argues that what is at stake in the course of negotiations is a complex social game, in which manoeuvring for diplomatic competence becomes an end in itself.

The investigation rests on a variety of sources resulting from official documents and discourses delivered at meetings held at the European Commission, European Council and European Parliament levels, as well as at the Economic and Financial Affairs Council. Also the discourses of the ministers of foreign affairs of the member states and media reports contributed to the enquiry. The investigation first reviews the relevant literature concerning the practice approach, links to the research question,

[1] Adler-Nissen, R. and Pouliot, V. (2014), 'Power in Practice. Negotiating the International Intervention in Libya', *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 20 (4): 889-911.
[2] Larsen, Henric, 2018, 'Discourse analysis in the study of European foreign policy', Manchester University Press; accessed at: https://www.manchesteropenhive.com/view/9781526137647/9781526137647.00010.xml

and introduces the analytical methodology to support the enquiry. Subsequently, the power in practice during negotiations on burden sharing, as introduced above, is examined by explaining the context, followed by the analysis. Different contributions flow into the Conclusion, which highlights the assessment of the findings: the externalisation of 'power in practice'; the power approach's performance in terms of theory; and in terms of policy; the analytical methodology's outputs; and the discourse analysis and content analysis' support for this enquiry. The investigation concludes by calling for further research on the practice approach; for instance, on how such an approach behaves when 'power in practice' is determined by 'non intentional power' (Guzzini 1993, 450; Strange 1990),[3] and thus invites new researchers to disprove or confirm the results of the present analysis.

I. The practice approach and the central question

The practice approach is useful for capturing the emergent quality of power dynamics in EU politics. Power can be identified as resulting from a distribution of resources. Resources can be of the material type (Waltz 1979),[4] economic factors (Keohane and Nye 1977),[5] or perceived in terms of culture and ideology (Nye 1990).[6] The literature's basic explanation regarding the existing definitions of power distinguishes it as a capability, that is something that one owns, or a relation, which is a social dynamic (Baldwin 2013).[7] The way in which capability interacts with power has, however, a relational element. This relational part is based on the belief that it is in a particular social setting that resources become a means to an end and may produce effects. The practice approach spans these two notions. 'Power in practice' emerges out of micro-struggles over specific resources. Resources are in part endogenous, and take the form of socially recognised competence. Competence is locally generated,

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[3] Stefano Guzzini (1993) 'Structural power : the limits of neorealist power analysis', *International Organization*, Vol. 47, No. 3: 443-478.
Susan Strange (1990) 'The Name of the Game', in N. Ritopoulos (ed) *Sea-changes: American Foreign Policy in a Word Transformed*, New York: Council of Foreign Relations Press, 238-74.

[4] Waltz, K. N. (1979) *Theory of International Politics*, New York: McGraw-Hill.

[5] Keohane, R. O. and Nye, S. J. (1977) *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition*, Boston, MA: Little & Brown.

[6] Nye, J. S. (1990) *Bound to Lead; The Changing Nature of American Power*, New York: Basic Books.

[7] Baldwin, D. (2013) 'Power and international relations', in Carlsnaes, W, Risse, T. and Simmons, B. A. (eds) Handbook of International Relations (2nd edn), Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 273-97.

contested and played out, eventually affecting EU politics. Micro-level diplomatic dynamics are vital for describing the negotiation processes at the EU level (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014, 891-2, 909).

Scholars commenting on the practice methodology assert that this approach is overly agency-oriented (Hopf 2010, 345).[8] They argue that it ignores the bigger context, where the practices occur (Duvall and Chowdhury 2011, 348),[9] and claim that the relational outlook risks overlooking resources. Baldwin, for example, fails to define from where 'situationally specific' resources originate (Baldwin 2013), while Barnett and Duvall offer insufficient guidance on the nature and expression of power resources (Barnett and Duvall 2005).[10] Overall, it is claimed that the practice approach tends to overlook 'power in practice' (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014, 890, 893). The above claims open up some room in the literature concerning the use of the practice approach to conduct the present investigation. Aiming to offer an answer to the above claims, we applied the practice approach to the early 2020 negotiations in the European Union framework on sharing the burden caused by the Covid 19 pandemic. Therefore, how 'power in practice' manifested itself and under which forms, its negotiation and evolutions, as well as the nature of the resources which generated power are the sort of demands which we explored. These queries brought us to the question regarding 'whether power resources emerge out of constant work and negotiation', that leads the present investigation.

II. The analytical methodology

To investigate 'power in practice', how it originated, is conveyed and by what force promoted, we need access to the social context where the practices take place, evolve and progress. Resources are responsible for the generation of power. Feeding resources is competence, which is an ability that is locally generated, performed, and disputed, ultimately to impact on European politics. When resources take the form of socially recognised competence, that is competence acknowledged and accepted by

[8] Hopf, T. (2010) 'The logic of habit in international relations', *European Journal of International Relations*, 16: 539-61.
[9] Duvall, R. and Chowdhury, A. (2011) 'Practice of theory', in Adler, E. and Pouliot, V. (eds) *International Practices*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 335-54.
[10] Barnett, M. and Duvall, R. (2005) 'Power in international politics', *International Organization*, 59: 39-75.

others seeking to produce influence, they generate power. Since competence is the backbone of influence, to capture the 'emergent power' dynamics during negotiations at the EU level on burden sharing regarding the Covid epidemic, we fix observable markers of the 'struggle for competence'. These processes are cyclical, mutually reinforcing and overlapping, and distinctively kept here for analytical purposes (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014, 891-2, 894). They are exemplified by practices whose functions can be described as: asserting competence; battling for competence; and generating influence over the outcomes.

• Asserting competence: this process is explained as the production of endogenous power resources. This phenomenon begins with the positioning of an individual or a group as a competent player. In order to excel at this task, the performer should display 'the creativity that comes with the feel for the game' (Merand 2010, 352).[11] The basic dynamics consist of playing the local order to the player's advantage. As explained (Flingstein 2001, 114),[12] 'skilled actors understand the ambiguities and certainties of the field and work off them. They have the sense of what is possible and impossible' (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014, 894-5). By framing issues or taking initiatives, actors do their best to establish themselves as competent players.

• Battling for competence: this process is represented by the negotiation of skilfulness, which arises when a competence prerogative has been asserted. It is a development that belongs to the social sphere. In practical terms, competence is a theme of contestation. The battle for competence may rest on moral and technical justifications and certainly on social manoeuvring (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014, 895).

• Influence over outcomes: this process describes the production of power-effects in the form of a (non-coercive) impact on outcomes. In order to produce such effects, socially recognised competence must be deployed as a power resource. Actors must turn what passes for mastery into influence. The analysis tracks how competent

[11] Merand, F. (2010) 'Pierre Bourdieu and the birth of European defense', *Security Studies*, 19: 342-374.
[12] Flingstein, N. (2001) 'Social skill and the theory of fields', *Sociological Theory*, 19: 105-125.

players must be actively engaged, constantly on their marks, and aware of shifting positions, and detects how they exert effects on outcomes (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014, 896).

The analytical methodology so defined is supported by a discourse analysis and content analysis (Larsen 2018), the whole exploring 'power in practice'.

III. Investigating power in practice during negotiations

Setting

When data concerning the member states citizens' preference for the European Union dropped, indicating that 67 per cent of citizens were displeased with the Union, it was February 2020.[13] Italy was the EU state involved in the assessment. Coronavirus was a new, major event. The Commission was silent when aid in the form of sterile materials and protective devices were lacking in several member states. A certain mechanism has been available since 2001 at the EU level, owing to the collaboration of a number of member states and other countries external to the Union, tasked with provisions to those in need of medical materials and assets useful for combatting epidemics. It was unclear whether the unavailability or failure of such a mechanism suggested a disorganised Union, unable to intervene, or indicated a Europe where each member state felt estranged from what happened next door within the European common space. The Commission's marginal weight was ironically noted in the media, stressing that the new serving head [von der Leyen] had just taken office and is, now, studying the rules.[14] However, Italy must have rung a bell in Brussels because the European Commission gave signs of understanding that the virus' contagion was a critical matter that required major resources.

The analysis

III.i The Commission's assertion of competence

[13] The European Council on 20-21 February 2020, in Brussels, discussed the EU 2021-27 budget, and no mention of the Covid-19 epidemic was made, indicating that the latter was not considered yet a European problem. Accessed at: https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/beyond-coronabonds-new-constituent-europe

[14] IAI pubblicazioni; accessed at: https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/beyond-coronabonds-new-constituent-europe

The Commission's game-change[15] was offered by a distinct mark at the end of March, with a major emphasis on diplomacy that publicly acknowledged the institution's mistaken absence[16] during the emergence. In a social context formed by the most penalised member states (Italy together with France and Spain), the Commission's employment of diplomacy meant that it wished to show itself capable of dealing with the humanitarian need. The Commission intended to help with measures to reduce the economic and social tensions that the claimant states faced. The Commission was rich in endogenous resources, having the capability to take decisions concerning both the obtainability of finance and where to distribute it to mitigate disadvantaged situations. The recognition of having been unfocused on defining a role to play made of the Commission's Head, von der Leyen, an actor seeking to reverse the poor image that the institution projected.

The practice approach raises the question of whether the Commission was able to display that 'creativity of initiative' that comes to an actor when it enters the playing field of negotiations. Its tradition as an actor capable of proposing resources placed the Commission as an experienced leader on how to approach the Covid 19 pandemic. In positioning itself as a frontrunner, the Commission was supported by the European Council's decisions of 10 March[17] and 26 March 2020 to address the crisis. The Commission's Head displayed authority and expertise by stressing that 'massive and coordinated global action' was imminent to 'save lives and avoid further economic

[15] On 26 March 2020, the President of the European Council, Michel, and the President of the European Commission, von der Leyen, participated in the extraordinary G20 leaders' videoconference called by Saudi Arabia, the holder of the G20 Presidency. Against the backdrop that Europe was currently at the epicentre of the global COVID-19 crisis, the Presidents stressed that unprecedented events call for unprecedented action and that fast, massive and coordinated global action was necessary on the health and economic fronts to save lives and avoid a further economic crisis. Accessed at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/03/26/statement-by-president-michel-and-president-von-der-leyen-after-the-g20-video-conference-on-covid-19/

[16] 'Coronavirus: EU offers heartfelt apology', BBC News, 16 April 2020; accessed at: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52311263

[17] 'Member states stressed the need for a joint European approach and close coordination with the European Commission'. Accessed at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2020/03/10/

crisis'.[18] The Commission made its competent action felt, with von der Leyen presenting in Brussels, on 2nd April, the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative Plus and the Emergency Support Instrument. These arrangements were designed to provide loans to the needy member states, removing all financial conditions to ease access to European money. The sum of €2,770bn was mobilised as the largest ever answer to a European crisis. To activate European solidarity, von der Leyen invited Parliament and the European Council to act swiftly.[19] It remains to be seen whether the ability of the Commission to demonstrate competence in dealing with the rising difficulties is a resource that remained available once it was recognised by others in the social context where it was expressed, or required constant work and negotiation. This observation is in line with the demand posed by this investigation's central question, concerning 'whether power resources emerge out of constant work and negotiation'.

III.ii Contesting the Commission

Social negotiation of power

Discussions moved to the Eurogroup, the arena of member states' finance ministers (10 April). The Commission was contested when the matters at stake included 'how to devolve loans', the 'cost of their activation', the 'different amounts required' or foreseen by the petitioning states, and the 'length' of the period after which the money was to be reimbursed.[20] All of these issues led to an escalation of actors trying to extract the greatest benefit from the debate and negotiations. Firm in opposing their financial demands, the Netherlands argued that the demands were motivated by a heavy public debt, and, through their finance minister (Hoekstra), the Netherlands generated a process of power dynamics based on the assumption that everyone had to abide to the EU Treaties and repay national debts (ibid.). By taking the initiative, the Netherlands attempted to shape the local order to its own advantage in an effort to establish itself as a competent player and induce other members to consider its own

[18] Accessed at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/03/26/statement-by-president-michel-and-president-von-der-leyen-after-the-g20-video-conference-on-covid-19/

[19] 'Remarks by President von der Leyen'; accessed at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_20_587

[20] EU finance ministers have agreed a rescue package (€500bn) for European countries hit hard by the pandemic, BBC News, 10 April 2020; accessed at: https://www.bbc.com/news/business-52238932

position. As for the practice approach, when a competence prerogative has been asserted as in the case of the Commission, the 'social bargain of skilfulness' soon follows (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 7).[21] The approach leads to the Netherlands seeking control of the Commission's increased power, by 'contesting the competence' played out by its readiness to allocate funds.

Power born out of relational power and social dynamics

The Dutch's obstinacy emerged at the Eurogroup consultations in terms of 'power dynamics'. As for the practice approach, any attempt to hold leadership is to be negotiated. Players cannot accumulate power as an asset; players must gain it through a confrontation with others who have an obvious interest in seeing the imposing positions dwindling. That was Hoekstra's situation. The emergent power dynamics was evinced by the skilfulness of convincing other finance ministers (and their related countries) that the proposal to favour borrowing, as opposed to grants, was a realistic proposition. Fundamental to the relational power and social dynamics was the fact that the Netherlands attracted other EU states and awoke their receptiveness to the issue through the discussion of its interest, thus aiming to increase its strength at the negotiations. This dispute had a formal manifestation: a 'non-paper' drafted by governmental representatives of the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden and Austria (Frugal Four 2020).[22] It reflected the 'competitive cooperation' along the choice of 'loans for loans' and commitments to sound finances and structural reforms (De Angelis 2021, 624).[23] It could be argued that there was insufficient evidence of the fact that the Dutch (here represented by Hoekstra) tried to question the competence of the Commission. In addition to defend their own (political) interest *vis-à-vis* the Commission's proposal, the fact that, as reported (*The Economist*), 'for 36 hours the thrifty Dutch were the sole holdouts against a deal to help afflicted countries tackle recession'[24] evokes the idea of wanting to convince the Commission of being on the

[21] Adler, E. and Pouliot, V. (2011) 'International practices', *International Theory*, 3: 1-36.
[22] 'Non-paper EU support for efficient and sustainable COVID-19 recovery'; accessed at: https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/publicaties/2020/05/26/non-paper-eusupport-for-efficient-and-sustainable-covid-19-recovery
[23] De Angelis, G. (2021) 'Political justice, political obligation and the European Union: Lessons from Habermas', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 24: 619-636.
[24] 'The Dutch grumble over Europe's coronavirus cheque', *The Economist*, 18 April 2020; accessed at:

wrong side, far from sustaining a prudent policy-making in the matter of finance and economics. This kind of contest suggests a disposition to challenge that aura of influence that the Commission experienced, and that was fed by its follower member states.

III.iii Parliament challenging tit for tat

A new force, the European Parliament, challenged the tit for tat (retaliation) imposed by the Eurogroup. A mix of expectations hovered in the parliamentary arena. On the one hand, the Commission was criticised for defending itself; it garnered disapproval for having pretended to present a burden sharing system to the citizens which was far from being accessible in terms of the resources offered. (MEP Guetta).[25] On the other hand, the Dutch and their leaders were also criticised for 'failing to recognise that the instrument of their prosperity was the European single market, and that their fiscal dumping subtracted revenues from states to the difficulties of which they strongly contributed' (MEP Guetta). The dialogue proved opposing the Netherlands in conducting the Eurogroup's talks (ibid.), at the same time launching a call to the Commission to demonstrate that it was 'up to unforeseen challenges'.[26]

The new force emerged with the suggestion that it was irrational that the European Parliament had not expressed itself on the Coronavirus emergency. The challenge built on the principle that the EP's members (MEPs) stood in parliament to defend the EU citizens' needs, unlike the European Council, where head of states and governments stood to protect their own securities and policies. Parliament's logic held that citizens, in Europe, were to be told their EP's opinion concerning the crisis and its consequences.[27] The skilfulness of Parliament's discourse lay in introducing reasons that assessed the problems from a major viewpoint, focused on society.

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https://www.economist.com/europe/2020/04/18/the-dutch-grumble-over-europes-coronavirus-cheque

[25] Guetta, B. (2020) 'Questa volta l'Europa C'e'', *la Repubblica*, 30 April. Guetta is a Member of the European Parliament.

[26] EU coordinated action to combat the COVID-19 pandemic; accessed at: https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/eu-coordinated-action-to-combat-the-covid-19-pandemic-and-its-consequences-one-round-political-group-leaders_I189288-V_v

[27] As an EP minister stressed during the plenary of mid-April on how the EU should move with a coordinated action. The chore issue was to agree on how to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects (16-17 April 2020).

The EP's debate proved significant to its gradual progress towards adopting a broad-minded position. MEPs believed that, after the EU has created the common market and currency, it still had a chance to initiate a third phase of growth; this new chapter would conceive a platform for common investments with an emphasis on a Europe jointly borrowing. Parliament's attempt to influence the outcomes was radical since the envisaged Europe had to activate practices that the Treaties had traditionally barred. MEPs stressed that, through such an operation, the EU would provide a 'pan-European cover' to unemployment; it would move towards that 'social Europe that several member states never dared to build' (MEP Guetta).[28]

Parliament's assembly issued a request to the Commission. It demanded that, in her role as Head of the institution, van der Leyen should follow the example of Delors' imaginative politics of the 1980s, and produce an important proposal to present to the European Council and the EP. The proposal meant that, just as Delors in 1985, the then Commission's Head, had not waited for the European Council's or member states' decision on how jointly to approach the economic stagnation of those years, van der Leyen also had to take action. Delors acted swiftly, with the creation of the single European market as a solution to the crisis of that period; along the same reformist line, van der Leyen was expected to provide a similar 'life-jacket' at the European level. European Parliamentarians aimed to encourage 'relational and societal' politics, and competent propositions from the Commission. The assumption that the Commission's Head would offer a sort of 'save-states' mechanism influenced the solidarity of all of the political forces. The born out 'competence of the EP' materialised in a Resolution (P9_TA (2020) 0054) that attracted a unanimous vote (16-17 April 2020). [29]

Yet, the struggle for power being re-launched by the cohesion voted by the MEPs, positioned the EP in 'prevailing guidance' regarding the talks' conduct. As for the practice approach to social negotiations, the EP's solidarity proved that EP's competence was a value recognised by people's' views. Competence was a powerful

[28] MEP Guetta, *op. cit*. More can be searched regarding MEP Guetta's intervention at the European Parliament Plenary of 16-17 April 2020.
[29] European Parliament resolution of 17 April 2020 on EU coordinated action to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences (2020/2616(RSP). Accessed at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0054_EN.html

tool that could generate further influence. Moving co-ordinately, the EP took over the diplomatic process. To reinforce the skilfulness of the discourse, EPs stressed that the sort of practices that they envisaged in the Resolution were the competence of the Commission. Neither the European Council nor Parliament was called into action. The extent to which the European Commission was able to translate the crucial elements of the resolution into useful initiatives was the measure of the Commission's potential influence.

III.iv The Commission's influence recognised

Ahead of the EU April summit,[30] the prospect that the Commission made new solutions available was disputed by the Dutch, who coordinated their position with Austria by contrasting the mutualisation of the debt. Cautioning that loans would only serve to pile more debts onto the most severely affected states, France exposed the stubbornness of the Netherlands and Austria, more than their diplomatic skill and leadership, in directing consultations toward a common position.[31] This leads us to observe and argue that what was at stake in the course of negotiations was a complex social game, in which manoeuvring for diplomatic competence became an end in itself.

Power was secured by the Commission's promise that there would be a sound balance of loans and grants.[32] The Commission offered proposals. A Recovery Fund of €300 billion for the Coronavirus emergency was foreseen to be added to the EU's 2020-2027 budget. At the time, it was proposed that resources were to be obtained via issuing European bonds on the financial markets, half of which to provide loans and the other half devoted to specific programmes within the framework of the four-year

[30] European Council of 23 April 2020.
[31] EU leaders fail to agree on coronavirus economic recovery program; accessed at: https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/23/843351315/eu-leaders-fail-to-agree-on-coronavirus-economic-recovery-program
[32] Macron: we need a EU coronavirus rescue package worth 5-10 points of GDP, 23 April 2020; accessed at:
23 April 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-eu-summit-macron/macron-we-need-eu-coronavirus-rescue-package-worth-5-10-points-of-gdp-idUSKCN225395?il=0

EU budget.[33] The Fund was projected to target the most affected sectors and geographical parts of Europe. EU treaties would be modified to provide guarantees for the European debt.[34] The content of the Recovery Package was itself built on the key novelties of the main elements of the agreement: research and innovation, digital transition, preparedness, recovery, resilience, a new health programme, the modernization of the common agricultural policy, the protection of biodiversity and gender equality, and combating climate change, with 30 per cent of the EU funds devoted to this.[35] Several heads of government addressed the recovery fund as a project that enhanced the image of 'social Europe' (Italy) because it focused on the 'common interest' (Spain) and stressed the necessity to 'quickly have instruments in hand' (Germany).[36]

The Commission's assertiveness and determination to influence was a sign that it was ready to tackle the challenges that the member states faced. The Commission's contribution to sharing the efforts of the member states in overcoming the challenge of the pandemic was accredited by the European Council, charging it to 'urgently come up' with ideas connected to the Multiannual Financial Framework that would be 'adjusted to deal with the current crisis and its aftermath'.[37] A multilateral drive was promoted concerning the urgency of undertaking burden sharing. The Commission's furthering of the multilateral impulse was an externalisation of 'power in practice'. Regarding the question of why the Netherlands, finally, consented to the Commission's proposal, it can be said that divisions emerged in Dutch domestic politics, and the government was being criticised by politicians. One Dutchman, at least, was publicly 'receptive to the idea of a coronabond': the central bank president

[33] 'Coronavirus: EC moots 300 bn Recovery Fund; accessed at: https://www.ansa.it/english/news/2020/04/23/coronavirus-ec-moots-300-bn-recovery-fund-2_51884e73-585d-40f3-83c2-7199b6978ee1.html
[34] As said by Merkel, ibid.
[35] 'Recovery plan for Europe', European Commission; accessed at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/recovery-plan-europe_en
[36] 'Coronavirus will make life hard for a long time, Merkel says'; accessed at: https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-will-make-life-hard-for-a-long-time-angela-merkel-says/a-53214848
[37] Conclusions of the President of the European Council, 23 April 2020; accessed at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/04/23/conclusions-by-president-charles-michel-following-the-video-conference-with-members-of-the-european-council-on-23-april-2020/

(Klaas Knot). Knot stated that 'the call for solidarity was extremely logical, and how to implement this solidarity was a political decision.'[38]

The insistence of the European Council on delegating the Commission to intervene with substantial proposals paved the way to what then became the Next Generation EU, the specific recovery effort being later presented by von der Leyen at the end of May (de la Porte and Jensen 2021; Ferrera, Miro' and Ronchi 2021; Jones 2021; Ladi and Tsarouhas 2020).[39] It is relevant to recall the 'shifts' in the European Council's decision-making in response to the pandemic, which enhanced the action of the Commission. The European Council's capacity to legislate 'while in-person meetings (formal voting) remain[ed] on hold' (p.8), the accessibility of the written procedure, and the 'coordination networks by the Commission acting as a crisis management instrument that will dissolve after the pandemic' (p.11) were all instruments that the European Council prompted, and that contributed to the success of the Commission in advancing its supportive action (Russack and Fenner 2020).[40]

It is also relevant to recall that, at the time of writing, there were fewer publications on this same topic. The literature on similar subjects is now proliferating. In addition to the above-cited works by Ferrera *et al.* (2021), Jones (2021), and Ladi and Tsarouhas (2020), there are others that are worthy of mention. In a sense, broadly speaking, the literature contributes to two major, related areas. On the one hand, the 'socioeconomic governance' is under scrutiny, advancing the idea that the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) will encourage national parliaments to claim a role in

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[38] 'Coronabond debate opens old vounds, Dutch accused of lack of solidarity', 31 March 2020, DutchNews.nl; accessed at https://www.dutchnews.nl/news/2020/03/coronabond-debate-opens-old-wounds-dutch-accused-of-lack-of-solidarity/

[39] European Council Conclusions, 21 July 2020, Brussels; accessed at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/45109/210720-euco-final-conclusions-en.pdf; de la Porte, C., Jensen, M. D. (2021) 'The Next Generation EU: An analysis of the dimensions of conflict behind the deal', *Social Policy & Administration*, 55: 388-402. Ferrera, M., Miro', J. and Ronchi, S. (2021) 'Walking the road together? EU polity maintenance during the COVID-19 crisis', *West European Politics*, 44: 1329-1352. Jones, E. (2021) *Next Generation EU: Solidarity, Opportunity, and Confidence*; accessed at: https://www.sieps.se/globalassets/publikationer/2021/2021_11epa.pdf? Ladi, S. and Tsarouhas, D. (2020) 'EU economic governance and Covid-19: policy learning and windows of opportunity', *Journal of European Integration*, 42: 1041-1056.

[40] Russack, S. and Fenner, D. (2020) *Crisis decision-making. How Covid-19 has changed the working methods of the EU institutions*, in CEPS Policy Insights, n. 2020-17, July.

developing national plans for accessing financial support (and amending reforms) (Bekker 2021, 175).[41] Moreover, the idea also developed that the Next Generation EU (NGEU) testified to the alignments of small groups of member states via temporary alliances built around political issues (that also generated antagonism between the groups) (de la Porte and Jensen 2021, 388). On the other hand, the works 'more engaged with the economic side' believe that the NGEU is a response to the imbalances remaining from the Eurozone crisis, and show that pre-existing vulnerabilities had a greater impact than the pandemic on driving the allocation of NGEU resources (Armingeon et al. 2021, 1).[42] Studies linked to economics highlight how the NGEU financial and reforms package fail to address the existing asymmetries but instead serve to exacerbate the current imbalances, thus propagating the seeds of future crises (Howarth and Quaglia 2021, 1555).[43]

IV. Conclusion

This investigation employed the practice approach to explore 'power in practice' by applying it to the early negotiations, at the beginning of 2020, within the European Union framework among the EU member states, aimed at sharing the burden created by the Covid-19 epidemic. Examining the literature concerning the practice perspective, we found arguments that this approach ignores the broader context in which practices occur (Duvall and Chowdhury 2011), has little empirical guidance to offer on the nature and expression of power resources (Barnett and Duvall 2005), furthermore, it fails to spell out from where 'situationally specific' resources will come (Baldwin 2013), and, also, overlooks 'power in practice' (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014). Dealing with the above claims through adopting a focus on the practice approach to the negotiations, this investigation offers findings regarding 'power in practice', the power approach's performance in terms of theory, and in terms of policy; it also comments on the usefulness of the analytical methodology, and of the

[41] Bekker, S. (2021) 'The EU's Recovery and Resilience Facility: A Next Phase in EU Socieconomic Governance?' *Politics and Governance*, 9: 175-185.
[42] Armingeon, K., de la Porte, C., Heins, E. and Sacchi, S. (2021) 'Voices from the Past: Economic and Political Vulnerabilities in the Making of Next Generation EU', *Comparative European Politics*, forthcoming.
[43] Howarth, D. and Quaglia, L. (2021) 'Failing forward in Economic and Monetary Union: explaining weak Eurozone financial support mechanisms', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 28: 1555-1572.

discourse and content analyses to this investigation. Three instances of ‘power in practice’ have been witnessed.

First, observing the Commission acting during negotiations, this enquiry highlighted the extent to which the capability of allocating resources, both financial and health related, placed the Commission in the situation of having its authority recognised by the negotiators; that is, its influence on dispensing the means to the needy economies. That authority was a manifestation of power in practice when it met the Commission’s readiness to answer the member states’ claims. This was encouraged by the disposition to change, that the Commission revealed by openly admitting its faulty absence when the pandemic spread.

Second, power in practice continued to display indicators. The Commission was challenged. We found that the kind of power exhibited by the Dutch finance minister aimed to block the negotiations. Neither the nature of power nor its origin stemmed from a wide-ranging philosophy, such as the cooperation professed by the Commission/von der Layen as an accepted shared world order. We framed the power in practice experimented by Hoekstra within the argument that what was at stake during the negotiations was a multifaceted social game, where manoeuvring for diplomatic competence was an end in itself. This observation brought into question and countered the assertion (Barnett and Duvall) that the practice approach has ‘little empirical guidance to offer on the nature and expression of power resources’.

Third, power in practice has given further signs, this time from the European Parliament contesting the Dutch and demanding the Commission should expand its power by focusing on social Europe. The unanimity of the EP in supporting Parliament’s Resolution provided evidence of ‘power in practice’. The form of the power included in the resolution was made explicit by responding to Hoekstra that the affluences that the Dutch now enjoyed were provided by the same attitude to problem solving of the Commission, that they were now resisting. It was, again, made explicit by giving credit to the Commission for providing proposals to make of social Europe a project under real construction. We observed that the practice approach easily reveals how ‘power in practice’ is negotiated, dies and surges, again contradicting

those (Barnett and Duvall) who oppose the capabilities of this approach to sense such evolutions.

In terms of theory and policy performance concerning the taken approach, this investigation offered a few outcomes. The enquiry explained that the disposition to change that the Commission revealed, by openly admitting its mistaken absence when the pandemic broke out, was a manifestation of 'power in practice specific to that very occasion'. The Commission would never constantly show or produce that unassuming attitude toward recognising faults. That 'behavioural resource' was tied to the environment where it intended to deliver the desired effects. This assumption is important: it confirms that resources are inherent to the contexts in which they are generated and that the practice methodology has the skill of leading to their location. This assumption counters the claim (Duvall and Chowdhury) that the practice approach ignores the bigger context where practices occur, and counters the idea (Baldwin) that this approach fails to demonstrate the origin of 'situationally specific' resources; consequently, in terms of theory, the findings show that resources are recognised as tightly connected to the environment in which they develop. In terms of the approach's policy performance, this investigation's findings prove the capability of the power approach to distinguish the nature and expression of the resources generating power.

In terms of how the analytical methodology, the way in which it was structured, the discourse analysis and content analysis contributed to the findings, we provide several comments. The 'asserting competence indicator' revealed how the players raised their argument, seeking to have their case accepted by the other negotiators. The 'battling for competence marker' showed how competence was contested, and, lastly, the 'influence over outcomes' analysis contributed towards identifying the extent to which the influence of the Community and of its Head were recognised by the European Council and the members therein, to the point that von der Layen was charged with thinking of a 'proposal', rapidly, that was acceptable to all of the member states. On their part, the discourse analysis and content analysis allowed a close focus on the substance of the positions held by the players, to the extent that, without those tools, there was no way of knowing that the word 'proposal' meant an indication to the Commission of a programme to be defined, able to satisfy all.

Having offered an answer to the matters that drove us to undertake this enquiry (the arguments that the practice methodology ignores the broader context wherein practices occur; fails to explain how 'situationally specific' resources originated; offers little empirical guidance on the nature and expression of power resources; and, finally, 'tends to overlook power in practice'), this investigation has shown that power resources are created through constant work and negotiations, thus responding to this work's central question.

Concluding this investigation, we hope that this enquiry will encourage other researchers to explore further the practice approach in EU studies, such as by interpreting the negotiations dynamics by examining power as a process determined differently from social relations, for instance, as a process determined by 'non intentional power', that is, power as the production of 'unintended', 'unconscious effects' (Guzzini 1993; Strange 1990), and confirm or disprove the findings of the present work concerning the practice approach's capabilities.