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Linking crises: inter-crisis learning and the European Commission's approach to the National Recovery and Resilience Plans

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Abstract
The article examines potential linkages between the management of the Eurozone crisis and the EU's economic response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It does so by focusing on the Commission and its approach to conditionality-based lending. The analysis employs the concept of inter-crisis learning to argue that the lessons the Commission drew from the Eurozone crisis informed its conditionality-related proposals for the National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs). By using qualitative data, including eight elite interviews, the article suggests that the Commission derived lessons regarding the design, negotiation, implementation, and monitoring of conditionality programs. These lessons led to cognitive changes within the organisation and to behavioral changes that were reflected in its proposals regarding the conditionality attached to NRRPs. The article contributes to the literature examining the EU's economic response to the pandemic by discussing the Commission's drivers and preferences during that period. It also complements the literature on coordinative Europeanisation by offering insights on how the European Commission shapes its proposals on conditionality-based lending; a central element of its relationship with member states when it comes to crisis management. Finally, it discusses the implications of the article's main thesis for the process of European integration.

Keywords Learning · Crises · European Commission · Eurozone · RRF

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Introduction

The EU's reaction to the economic fallout following the COVID-19 pandemic has been a matter of extensive academic debate. Research has focused on how the EU's response changed the framework of economic governance (Bokhorst and Corti 2023; D'Erman and Verdun 2022; Buti and Fabbrini 2023) and the process of Europeanisation (Ladi and Wolff 2021). Scholars have also engaged with interstate dynamics and the discursive strategies that were employed during the negotiations for the Recovery and Resilience Fund (RRF) (Ferrera et al. 2021; Rhodes 2021). These studies have paid little attention to how previous crises informed the EU's economic reaction (with the notable exception of Ladi and Tsarouhas 2020). While the pandemic and the Eurozone crisis are profoundly different crises, they are in temporal proximity with the pandemic hitting a number of member states as they were exiting this period of economic adversity. Moreover, the economic tools employed to manage these two crises have been broadly similar: schemes of conditionality-based lending, meaning programs that tied reforms to the disbursement of financial aid. As such, the article's overarching question is whether the management of the Eurozone crisis informed the EU's economic response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

To shed light on this query, the analysis examines whether the lessons that the Commission drew from the Eurozone crisis vis-a-vis conditionality-based lending informed its proposals on the National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs). As learning does not always lead to behavioral changes, the answer to this question is far from a foregone conclusion (Dunlop and Radaelli 2018: 257; Radelli 2022: 8–9). Having a central role in EU economic governance and in the crisis management framework, the Commission constitutes a fitting case to examine whether and how the experience of the Eurozone crisis influenced the EU's economic reaction to the pandemic.

Overall, the article proposes that the Commission's experience with the Eurozone crisis led it to derive lessons regarding the design, negotiation, implementation and monitoring of conditionality programs. These lessons led to cognitive changes within the organisation and to behavioral changes that were reflected in its proposals regarding the conditionality attached to NRRPs. As such, the analysis suggests that inter-crisis learning informed the Commission's approach to conditionality-based lending during the pandemic.

The article primarily contributes to the literature examining the EU's economic response to the pandemic. It complements the mostly state-centric literature (D'Erman and Verdun 2022; Buti and Fabbrini 2023; Ferrera et al. 2021) by examining the Commission's behavior—a topic that has been only marginally analyzed (Corti and Nunez-Ferrer 2021; Bokhorst and Corti 2023). At the same time, it adds to the emerging literature on coordinative Europeanisation (Ladi and Wolff 2021) as it offers insights on how the European Commission has changed its views on lending conditionality; a central feature of its relationship with member states. Finally, it discusses the implications of its thesis for the process of European integration.

The article is structured as follows: the next section presents the literature examining the EU's economic reaction to the pandemic. The following section introduces the concept of inter-crisis learning and discusses insights from the literature on crisis-induced learning. The analysis then describes the article's case selection strategy, methodology and data. The next section discusses the empirical material, focusing on the Commission's lesson-drawing from the Eurozone crisis. The following part proceeds to examine whether these lessons led to cognitive and behavioral changes that were reflected in the Commission's approach to NRRP conditionality. Conclusions summarise the argument and discuss its implications for the wider literature and for this special issue.

The EU's economic response to the pandemic

Part of the literature examining the EU's economic reaction to the pandemic has focused on the interaction between member states (Buti and Fabbrini 2023; Ferrera et al. 2021); the latter were seen as driving the EU's response. In this respect, the discursive framing of the issue domestically (Ferrera et al. 2021), interstate bargaining (Rhodes 2021: 1550; Verdun 2022) and the way member states made sense of the crisis (Buti and Fabbrini 2023: 682) determined the EU's reaction. Ladi and Wolff (2021) propose that member states coordinated early and informally in view of identifying commonly accepted crisis responses, thus inaugurating an era of "coordinative Europeanisation" (Ladi and Wolff 2021: 1). Most of the aforementioned studies employ the concept of learning to link the member states' Eurozone crisis experience with their reaction to the pandemic (Ferrera et al. 2021: 1330; Buti and Fabbrini 2023: 682). Yet, they do so without explicating the cognitive and behavioral changes that would demonstrate inter-crisis learning (Heikkila and Gerlak 2013: 486).

Moving beyond the state-centric perspective, the accounts examining the Commission's role in the EU's economic response to the pandemic focus mainly on its role as a mediator and on its increased responsibilities within the RRF. With respect to negotiations, the Commission acted as a mediator between member states; it employed already existing processes, instruments and platforms in view of steering member states toward a commonly accepted and pragmatic solution (Ladi and Wolff 2021: 4; Ladi and Polverari, 2024). Following its central role in the negotiations, the Commission saw a substantial increase of its competencies; the RRF rendered it central vis-à-vis the disbursement of funds (Corti and Nunez-Ferrer, 2021: 4). Moreover, it was empowered to steer member states toward designing NRRPs that take into account the EU's priorities and the recommendations included in the European Semester (D'Erman and Verdun 2022: 8; Bokhorst and Corti 2023: 7). While such steering is based on a cooperative approach, the Commission has gained leverage in pushing forward its political priorities (Bokhorst and Corti 2023: 11). At the same time, it operates a strict monitoring mechanism vis-à-vis the conditionality attached to NRRPs. This mechanism allows little room for negotiations, thus shifting the Commission's relationship with the member states toward contractualisation (Bokhorst and Corti 2023: 12).

Overall, extant literature offers valuable insights on the Commission's role in the creation of the RRF and in the new system of economic governance. Yet, they offer little with respect to the Commission's preferences and drivers. To partially address this gap, we resort to the framework of inter-crisis learning.

Learning, change and crisis: an overview of the field

Concepts and mechanisms of learning

The article's theoretical framework is premised upon two basic concepts: policy learning and inter-crisis learning. The analysis conceives policy learning as the process of drawing knowledge from previous experiences and other institutional settings to propose novel policies (Moyson et al. 2017: 1 164), while inter-crisis learning constitutes learning from one crisis in view of preparing for another (Moynihan 2008).

The literature has engaged with the topic of policy learning via various angles. Scholars have produced typologies of who learns and what taking into account the institutional context and the process of learning. Dunlop and Radaelli have proposed a typology that considers whether there is low or high uncertainty vis-à-vis the potential solutions to a policy problem and the actors' certification, meaning the number of actors that are perceived as competent and legitimate to offer solutions (Dunlop and Radaelli 2013: 603; Dunlop and Radaelli 2018: 258). Other typologies have focused on the purpose of learning distinguishing between instrumental learning, meaning learning aimed to improve public policy; social learning, meaning learning focused on changing policies along with the dominant ideological paradigm; and political learning, meaning learning that aims to change political/electoral behavior (Zito and Schout 2009; Radaelli and Dunlop 2013). Finally, studies have examined the institutional features that foster and hinder individual and collective learning (Heikkila and Gerlak 2013: Stark and Arend 2023; Heikkila et al. 2023).

Several concepts have also been proposed vis-à-vis the process of learning. For example, Miro has identified two alternative mechanisms of learning based on whether political (sociological logic) or technical considerations (Bayesian logic) drive this process (Miro 2021: 1230–1231). Radaelli's respective contribution (2022) focuses on the cognitive mechanism via which agents draw lessons. Given that this article primarily examines whether policy learning occurred within the European Commission, the analysis adopts the latter perspective. This is so as it is better fit to delineate whether the Commission drew lessons from the Eurozone crisis, what type of lessons and whether it applied them to its economic proposals during the pandemic.

Radaelli identifies two distinct "mechanisms" of learning: inferential and contingent learning. Inferential learning is based on the notion that learning is motivated by repeated policy failures in conjunction with viable policy alternatives. Purposeful agents undertake to disseminate these alternatives and consolidate them at the organisational and systemic level. The second mechanism, contingent learning, is based on the notion that agents have little time to draw inferences from policy failures. At the same time, there is a lack of policy alternatives and an absence of agents promoting novel policy solutions. As such, responses to policy failures follow a stimulus–response pattern in which behavioral changes are not preceded by cognitive changes—a stark difference from the inferential model. Inferential reasoning arises only later in the process when agents reflect on their initial reaction and identify novel policy beliefs that can guide their subsequent actions (Kamkhaji and Radaelli 2017; Radaelli 2022: 3–6).

It follows that inferential learning, usually, unfolds during slow-burning crises, meaning crises in which there is time to reflect upon developments while contingent learning is more likely to arise in fast-burning crises (Radaelli 2022: 11). With respect to the pandemic, it has been noted that it triggered both contingent and inferential learning. The EU's initial reaction followed the pattern of contingent learning, yet it was also informed by the EU's inferential learning from the Eurozone crisis. In this sense, the pandemic revealed that mechanisms of learning accumulate with one reinforcing the other (Ladi and Tsarouhas 2020: 1047–1050; Radaelli 2022: 7). For the purposes of this article, we focus on whether inferential learning occurred within the Commission during the pandemic. This is so as our main research aim is to examine whether the Commission's experience with the Eurozone crisis influenced its approach to the pandemic.

Heikkila and Gerlak (2013) have proposed a detailed scheme of how inferential learning unfolds. According to this scheme, learning occurs when we observe the emergence of two basic learning products: cognitive changes, followed by behavioral changes. The process starts with individuals acquiring information that they translate by interpreting and applying them in a new context, thus, creating knowledge. Following this, they disseminate this knowledge to the wider group in the hope that it will take root and end up being shared knowledge (Heikkila et al. 2023). As such, we observe a cognitive change at the organisational level leading to a behavioral change. Cognitive changes entail the emergence of new or updated beliefs, ideas, values and/or perceptions within the organisation, while behavioral changes signify some form of new activity, for example, a policy change or an institutional reform. To attribute behavioral changes to learning, cognitive changes should be congruent to subsequent behavioral changes (Heikkila and Gerlak 2013: 487–492). The aforementioned process is of particular importance for our case as it provides a benchmark according to which we will gauge whether learning occurred within the European Commission.

Inter-crisis learning and its applications

The literature has employed the concepts of policy and inter-crisis learning to disentangle incidents of change and reform. Indeed, it is well established that crises open policy learning possibilities (Boin et al. 2009: 82; Deverell 2009: 180). As such, scholars have developed typologies that link the crisis' size and nature with the scope of learning and policy change (Nohrstedt and Weible 2010: 19–22). Consequently, the literature on policy change has proposed numerous mechanisms on how learning drives policy change (Argyris and Schon 1978; Hall 1993; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1999; Cashore and Howlett 2007). A salient distinction is the one between single and double-loop learning. Single-loop learning refers to the correction of inefficiencies without changing the organisation's underpinnings. Double-loop learning entails a more substantial change of the institution's basic norms and practices (Argyris and Schon 1978). Hall's seminal typology of three-order change (1993) follows a similar logic and disaggregates policy learning in accordance with the type of policy change that it brings. As such learning vis-à-vis a policy's overarching policy goals entails third-order changes, learning with respect to the instruments of policies causes second-order changes, while learning regarding the instruments' settings is associated with first-order changes (Hall 1993: 278–279).

Research on inter-crisis learning has also found applications in the field of EU studies. Especially with respect to the Eurozone crisis, scholars have assumed that the EU drew lessons on the Eurozone's shortcomings and sought to correct them in the crisis' aftermath (Ladi and Tsarouchas 2020: 1045–1050; Niemann and Ioannou 2015; Pagoulatos 2020). The Commission itself explicitly tied such lessons with specific post-crisis reforms (Buti and Carnot 2012). Beyond the context of the Eurozone crisis, a recent study argues that the Commission drew lessons from the rise of populist and anti-establishment governments, which led it to promote the flexibilization of fiscal rules (Miro 2021: 1243–1244).

The present analysis builds upon this research strand by examining whether inter-crisis learning influenced the EU's economic reaction to the pandemic. As noted above, Ladi and Tsarouhas (2020) offered a preliminary response to this question. They suggest that a central driver of the EU's economic reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic was its experience with the Eurozone crisis. The EU's initial economic response, for example the establishment of the European instrument for temporary support to mitigate unemployment risks in an emergency (SURE), constitutes an incident of contingent learning (Ladi and Tsarouhas 2021: 1047). The EU's subsequent reaction, the establishment of the RRF, is attributed to inter-crisis learning; the EU drew inferentially from past EU failures to inform its future policies (Ladi and Tsarouhas 2021: 1049–50).

The present article aims to further develop these insights. It zooms in on the European Commission in view of discussing the effect of inter-crisis learning in its behavior. This is essential as the Commission and the member states might draw different lessons and, subsequently, advocate different reforms. Existing research has already argued that policy sub-systems have different propensities with respect to learning and policy change (Nohrstedt and Weible 2010: 13–14). Building on this, the article disentangles this dynamic and discusses the Commission's distinct learning experience. By doing so it also examines its drivers and preferences during the pandemic thus shedding light on how non-state actors behaved during that period. All in all, in order to answer whether policy learning took place, the article examines the Commission's process of learning based on certain theoretical expectations.

In particular, for policy learning to occur we would first expect Commission officials and the Commission as a whole to reflect on the way conditionality programs operated during the Eurozone crisis. Such reflections would draw from the Commission's experience as a Troika member and would lead to lessons regarding the policy failures that should be amended the next time such a scheme is employed. We would expect this lesson-drawing exercise to lead to a cognitive change, meaning an update of the Commission's beliefs on how conditionality-based lending operates.

Subsequently, we would expect the Commission's derived lessons and the reforms that it advocated regarding NRRP conditionality, along with its overall stance during the respective negotiations, to be highly congruent.

Of course, the above does not imply that the Commission designed and managed NRRP conditionality unilaterally; member states had to approve the design and function of the RRF. Yet, this article merely aims to examine whether the Commission's preferences on NRRP conditionality can be attributed to policy learning. As such, it focuses on the Commission's independent preferences and actions without trying to discern its actual influence upon the Council's decisions.

Case selection and methodology

The article focuses on the conditionality-related lessons that the Commission drew from the Eurozone crisis and examines whether they influenced its approach to the design, negotiation and management of NRRP conditionality. The employed case seems ideal for such an inquiry since it allows to track overtime and with relative precision the potential effect that learning had on the Commission' s behavior. This is so as both the economic adjustment programs (EAPs) and the NRRPs operate as programs of conditionality-based lending, meaning that the disbursement of loans/funds is dependent upon the completion of conditions. Moreover, the Commission held generally similar roles in the two crises. As a member of the Troika, it was responsible to negotiate and monitor the implementation of EAPs. In broad terms, it has similar responsibilities with respect to the design and monitoring of NRRP conditionality, yet without sharing this responsibility with other institutions this time.

It is worth noting that the present article treats the Commission as a unitary actor, instead of a fragmented "multiorganization" (Cram 1994). It focuses on the Commission's aggregated preferences and not the potential internal strife that led to them. It follows from this that we focus on the learning products that emerged at the collective level, without delving into the micro-foundations of the Commission's learning experience. As such the analysis does not discuss the policy learning that occurred at the individual or unit level and the process that allowed these lessons to travel across the organisation and become shared knowledge (Stark and Arend 2023; Heikkila et al. 2023).

As we are interested on discerning the learning process that took place within the Commission, the analysis employs qualitative material (Heikkila and Gerlak 2013: 502–503). This allows us to identify what Commission officials' believed and, subsequently, tie their ideas with their approach to NRRP conditionality (Miro 2021: 1232–1233). As such, the article draws data from, mainly, two sources: gray literature sources and semi-structured interviews. Starting with gray literature sources, we employ official documents and communications along with excerpts from the Commission's public discourse. We analyze the content of this material in view of identifying cognitive and behavioral changes that are pertinent to the Commission's approach to conditionality-based lending.

The analysis also employs material from eight semi-structured elite interviews. These interviews were conducted with Commission and national officials that were involved with the management of the Eurozone crisis and with the preparation of the RRF. Commission officials came from DG ECFIN and the Commission's Recovery Task Force, while national officials came from Ministries of Finance and the specialised teams that were created to design and implement NRRPs. Given this, interviewees were able to comment, firsthand, on whether the experience of the Eurozone crisis influenced the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. Questions initially invited interviewees to reflect on their experience with the Eurozone crisis, while also asking them to think of their involvement with the NRRPs. In most cases, the issue of inter-crisis learning was not mentioned as such, yet interviewees were prompted to draw comparisons between the two crises especially with respect to the Commission's approach to them. This line of inquiry allowed us to identify certain features of NRRP conditionality that were consciously designed and managed in view of the Commission's experience with the Eurozone crisis. Moreover, it enabled us to gauge whether the Commission's approach to NRRP conditionality was indeed linked with its Eurozone experience or was rather reflective of state preferences. As such, interviews helped us examine the Commission's autonomous preferences beyond the influence of member states. Fieldwork was carried out between October 2022 and March 2023. Interviews were conducted either in person or online and lasted approximately one hour each. All interviews were conducted on a deep background basis to encourage openness and ensure confidentiality.

The Eurozone crisis: lessons on conditionality from the economic adjustment programs

Lacking a lender of last resort or the will for fiscal coordination, the EU's response to the Eurozone crisis unfolded, mainly, via conditionality-based lending. In particular, the conditionality attached to EAPs was negative, as it sanctioned non-compliance with the withdrawal of financial aid, and *ex ante,* as it required fulfilling the relevant conditions before receiving the loan tranche (Vita 2018). In certain occasions financial aid was provided without any prior action yet this was done in an ad hoc manner in view of covering the urgent financing needs of member states.

In most cases, EAPs included conditions that spanned across numerous policy fields, (Greer 2014: 55, 56, 57, Bini Smaghi 2015: 763). At the same time, the intrusiveness of conditionality, meaning conditions prescribing specific policy actions, remained high in all programs (Griffiths and Todoulos 2014: 9, 11, 16). This led to low program ownership, that is governments felt that reforms were externally imposed rather than endogenously generated (Konstantinidis and Karagiannis 2020; Moury et al. 2021). Program monitoring was conducted via the Troika, yet the final approval of loan disbursement remained with the Council, thus allowing for interstate negotiations to interfere with the process. Finally, reforms occasionally applied to politically sensitive areas, hence leading to political contestation and social strife (de la Porte and Heines 2015: 11, 12).

Moving to the lessons that the Commission derived from its experience with conditionality-based lending, the analysis is, mainly, based on the Commission's ex post evaluations of EAPs. The Commission produced such assessments for Ireland

(European Commission 2015); Portugal (European Commission 2016); Cyprus (European Commission 2019) and Greece (European Commission 2023a). These reports had the explicit aim of drawing lessons that would inform and improve future interventions of such type. In this sense, the Commission's learning from the Eurozone crisis was instrumental (European Commission 2015: 11; European Commission 2016: 14; European Commission 2019: 1; European Commission 2023a: V). Each evaluation contained a section on lessons learned, while the last report of this type, the ex post evaluation of the Greek programs, discussed lessons that were common between the programs (European Commission 2023a: 44). Overall, the Commission's evaluations included lessons on burden-sharing, crisis preparedness, program design, policy content and implementation.

The first lesson that the Commission drew from the EAPs had to do with burden-sharing. In its ex post evaluations the Commission underlined the need to design programs that allocated the adjustment burden in a proportional manner and with full consideration of the program's social and distributional implications. Designing equitable and fair programs was crucial in view of increasing program ownership and, thus, ensure the program's sustainability and proper implementation (European Commission 2015: 16; European Commission 2016: 15; European Commission 2019: 90; European Commission 2023a: 49).

Moving to crisis preparedness, the Commission emphasised that launching such programs in a timely manner is of outmost importance (European Commission 2016: 143; European Commission 2019: 90; European Commission 2023a: 45); any future program of financial aid should be agreed and disbursed as soon as the need for financial assistance becomes evident. This would be achieved via close communication with member states. In turn, this would allow for better coordination vis-à-vis the timing and the design of conditionality. Overall, these changes would lead to higher program ownership (European Commission 2023a: 44–45).

As evident from the first two lessons, the Commission saw the issue of program ownership as central for the success of EAPs (European Commission 2015: 16; European Commission 2016: 16; European Commission 2023a: 38). Following this, it suggested that fostering high program ownership requires a common understanding of the crisis' causes and a subsequent agreement on reform priorities (European Commission 2019: 92; European Commission 2023a: 46). In practical terms, this would, again, entail close coordination with member states (European Commission 2023a: 50). To further foster program ownership, it urged national authorities to consult with all relevant stakeholders (European Commission 2016: 142–143; European Commission 2019: 10; European Commission 2023a: 45). Corollary to this, national authorities and Commission services have to devise a communication strategy that would convince domestic stakeholders and financial investors about the program's viability (European Commission 2016: 139; European Commission 2023a: 52).

With respect to the programs' content, the Commission discussed lessons related to conditionality-induced structural reforms. It saw the implementation of structural reforms as particularly challenging due to the fact that it brings economic benefits only in the long-term while suffering from low ownership in the short-term. As such, conditionality programs should prioritise structural reforms that are crucial for a state's economy (European Commission 2015: 16; European Commission 2016:

136; European Commission 2019: 92; European Commission 2023a: 47). The basis to identify such reforms is the country-specific recommendations included in the European semester (European Commission 2019: 94; European Commission 2023a: 47). At the same time, conditionality-induced reforms should avoid politically sensitive areas that bring limited economic benefits and increased political costs (European Commission 2015: 107; European Commission 2016: 139; European Commission 2019: 91–92; European Commission 2023a: 46). Finally, it is important to expand the temporal horizon of such programs in view of ensuring that such reforms are fully implemented and deliver results (European Commission 2019: 89).

With respect to program monitoring, the Commission argued that any future conditionality-based lending should be based on granular and in-depth monitoring of a country's performance. As such, monitoring should be based on concrete targets, including interim deliverables and key performance indicators, while following a strict timetable (European Commission 2015: 106; European Commission 2016: 14, 140; European Commission 2019: 91; European Commission 2023a: 51). In turn, this would leave member states little room for political maneuvering on whether conditions have been met and, thus, vis-à-vis the disbursement of loans.

Finally, the Commission made suggestions on how to better implement the adjustment programs domestically. The evaluation reports underlined the need to establish a powerful within government body responsible to oversee program implementation while also operating as a contact point for domestic and international stakeholders (European Commission 2015: 111; European Commission 2016: 143; European Commission 2019: 76;European Commission 2023a: 48–50). It is crucial to note that the Commission's suggestions did not prompt member states to design programs in a centralised manner; as noted above consultations with relevant stakeholders and social partners were seen as crucial for efficient program design. Instead, the Commission noted that the establishment of a central coordination hub contributes to the more efficient implementation of EAPs.

As evident from all the above, the Commission leveraged its Eurozone experience to derive a wealth of lessons vis-à-vis the design, negotiation and implementation of conditionality-based lending. As discussed in the next section a big part of the Commission's approach to NRRP conditionality followed these lessons, thus hinting to some form of inter-crisis learning.

NPPR conditionality: linking the Eurozone crisis with the pandemic

The introduction of the RRF entailed the establishment of a new facility that was broadly based on a form of conditionality-based lending that applied to investments and reforms (Corti and Nunez-Ferrer 2021: 5). This is so as the financing of NRRPs is contingent upon the completion of milestones (qualitative) and targets (quantitative) (European Commission 2023b: 1). This form of conditionality remains *ex ante*; meaning that governments are called to first implement reforms and then receive the respective financial aid. Similarly to EAPs, the RRF also contains *ex post* elements since member states received prefinancing aid as soon as the Council approved their NRRPs (European Commission 2023b: 4;

Regulation 2021: 35). Nevertheless, its underlying rationale remains one of *ex ante* conditionality. At the same time, and similarly to the Eurozone programs, NRRP conditionality is negative as it sanctions the non-fulfillment of conditions by withholding funds. In addition, RRF conditionality is intrusive, including a detailed set of policy goals and actions that the member states need to fulfill. All in all, the conditionality attached to the NPPRs (*ex ante* and *ex post*; negative and intrusive) seems similar to the one employed during the Eurozone crisis. Yet, these evident similarities conceal several important differences. As shown below the Commission, informed by lessons from the Eurozone crisis, promoted several changes vis-à-vis the design, negotiation, and management of NRRP conditionality, thus contributing to several changes on how conditionality-based lending operated in the pandemic framework.

Starting with the negotiations around NRRP conditionality, a coordinative pattern emerged (Ladi et al. 2024). Member states drafted NRRPs and the Council approved them, yet, in-between, the Commission had the chance to examine and negotiate these plans (European Commission 2023b). Given its relevant autonomy in this phase, one can examine its approach to NRRP conditionality in relative isolation from state preferences. As evident by interviews, the Commission approached these negotiations in a way that is linked with the lessons it derived from the Eurozone crisis. It engaged member states early in the process and via informal channels to identify measures that were mutually acceptable (EU interview 2; EU interview 4; National official interview 3). As such, it held extensive negotiations with member states as soon as it became clear that some form of conditionality-based lending would be employed (Bokhorst and Corti 2023: 7). In effect, the Commission sought to find mutually acceptable reforms and projects that the Council would also approve (European Commission 2023b: 1; EU interview 4; National official interview 1; National official interview 2; National official interview 3). Overall, the Commission adopted a cooperative approach that allowed member states to shape their respective programs in accordance with their preferences (EU interview 2; EU interview 4; National official interview 2).

The Commission implicitly argued that this approach aimed to foster program ownership (European Commission 2023b: 2; EU interview 4). The whole process was seen as domestically driven with member states putting forward the NRRPs' main features (EU interview 1; National official interview 2; National official interview 4). While the Commission tried to moderate overambitious investment projects and to push member states toward substantial reforms, both Commission and national officials agreed that program ownership remained with the member states (EU interview 2; EU interview 3; EU interview 4; National official interview 1; National official interview 4). It is telling that NRRPs were negotiated and decided at the highest political level, in view of ensuring high program ownership (EU interview 1; National official interview 1; National official interview 3). Moreover, while member states did not consult with social partners and subnational levels of government (Vanhercke and Verdun 2021), the Commission suggested that this was a weakness (EU interview 1) and brought forward suggestions to remedy it and, hence, increase program ownership (Regulation 2021: 51; European Commission 2023b: 8–9).

Commission and national officials with experience in both EAPs and NRRPs argued that, in contrast to the Eurozone crisis, the Commission aimed for high program ownership from the very beginning of the NRRP negotiations (EU interview 1; EU interview 2; National official interview 2). The rationale behind this approach was that high program ownership would guarantee the viability of reforms and ensure that governments would appropriately manage politically sensitive areas (EU interview 2; EU interview 4; National official interview 2; National official interview 3; National official interview 4). Overall, the Commission's approach to the negotiations of NRRP conditionality clearly shows that the lessons derived from the Eurozone crisis led to a behavioral change.

With respect to the breadth and the content of conditionality, it is more difficult to fully observe the Commission's views given that this was a field in which member states would most likely shape the final outcome. Having said that, interviews show that state preferences were largely in line with Commission preferences. Moreover, it appears that the latter reflected, up to a point, the main lessons of the Eurozone crisis.

First, the Commission urged member states to draft NRRPs that were in line with the European Semester's country-specific recommendations. Indeed, the guidelines for the drafting of NRRPs required that member states take into account country-specific recommendations (Regulation 2021: 38). The Commission had already made a similar argument within the Council (European Council 2020) and subsequently, based its policy suggestions on the aforementioned recommendations (European Commission 2023b: 2; EU Interview 1; EU interview 4). Commission interviewees found that member states accepted the latter as necessary and useful. As such, they became a common benchmark during negotiations (EU interview 1; EU interview 4; National official interview 2; National official interview 3; National official interview 4).

In its reports on lesson-drawing from the Eurozone crisis, the Commission had clearly identified the European Semester and its country-specific recommendations as a credible basis for the design of future conditionality packages. For the Commission, the data gathered via the European Semester covered the need to base any future financial aid program upon granular and accurate data (European Commission 2019: 94; European Commission 2023a: 47; 51). This observation establishes another linkage between NRRP conditionality, and the lessons derived from the Eurozone crisis.

Commission officials also suggested that their experience with EAPs pushed them toward advocating and establishing more long-term conditionality programs. The Commission felt that the EAP's limited time-horizon did not allow for the successful completion of structural reforms (European Commission 2019: 89). This was a feature that they sought to change with respect to NRRPs and, thus, pushed member states to establish comprehensive long-term programs (EU interview 2). Of course, deciding the duration of the RRF went well beyond the Commission's authority. In fact, it was contigent upon the size of the financial envelope, which in turn was linked to state preferences. Yet, it appears that the Council's decision on the issue was very much in line with the Commission's approach: NRRPs are allowed to run until 2026, thus securing more time, when compared to EAPs, for investments and reforms to deliver tangible results. Independently of which party decided the RRF's duration, it is evident that the Commission's proposal to expand the temporal framework of NRRPs can be seen, at least partially, as a product of inter-crisis learning.

With respect to the monitoring of conditionality, NRRPs included specific milestones and targets that governments need to meet within a concrete timeline (Regulation 2021: 30; 42–43). Milestones and targets are mainly orientated toward monitoring the program's output, meaning what to deliver and when (EU Interview 1). The disbursement of loans and payments is contingent upon member states fulfilling these conditions and submitting a payment request (European Commission 2023b: 1). The Commission is, then, called to make a recommendation based on whether member state met the agreed conditions (Bokhorst and Corti 2023: 2). Independently of this recommendation, member states are still able to withhold the disbursement of funds if they feel that these conditions have not been met. This possibility imposes an additional burden upon the Commission; its disbursement proposals have to be well-founded and detailed to avoid member state contestation (National official interview 4). In view of enhancing its monitoring capacity, the Commission also developed dedicated tools along with a comprehensive assessment scoreboard (European Commission 2023b: 8–9; Regulation 2021: 45; 49). Furthermore, it is empowered to suspend payments in case of implementation and auditing shortcomings (Regulation 2021: 46; European Commission 2023b: 10–11).

According to Commission officials, such performance-based procedures were expected to drastically reduce the room for political negotiations over the disbursement of loans. This is so as setting concrete goals in a legal agreement between the Council and the member state allows minimal room for interpretation (European Commission 2023b: 9; EU interview 2; National official interview 4). At the same time, there is no option for additional funding in the case of an overambitious or mismanaged program (EU interview 1; National official interview 3; Bokhorst and Corti 2023: 9; 12). For Commission and national officials, this is a stark difference between NRRPs and EAPs. With the latter, there was room for bypassing a negative opinion on program implementation. As such, member states were able to approve the disbursement of loans based on political considerations and bargaining. This is not the case anymore as the Commission and the member states monitor NRRP conditionality in a much more "objective" and "strict" manner following specific indicators (EU interview 1; EU interview 2; EU interview 3; National official interview 1; National official interview 2; National official interview 3; National official interview 4). Overall, this framework of more strict monitoring seems to be in line with the Commission's lessons from the Eurozone crisis; meaning that more effective, detailed and granular monitoring is needed (European Commission 2015: 106; European Commission 2016: 14, 140; European Commission 2019: 91; European Commission 2023a: 51).

Finally, based on its experience with EAPs, the Commission argued that creating a strong within government coordinating body would lead to more efficient implementation of conditionality programs (European Commission 2015: 111; European Commission 2016: 143; European Commission 2019: 76; European Commission 2023a: 48–50). With respect, to NRRPs we observe numerous member states adopting this recommendation (Ladi et al. 2024). Obviously, the Commission had little say on this decision as this remained a matter for national governments to decide. Yet, interviews along with literature insights render evident that the Commission prefers this *modus operandi* (EU interview 1; EU interview 2; Bokhorst and Corti 2023: 6). As such, this is another area in which its experience with the Eurozone crisis influenced its approach to NRRP conditionality.

All in all, a comparison of the Commission's proposals vis-à-vis the conditionality attached to EAPs and to NRRPs reveals stark differences. Its approach to NRRP negotiations, the content of conditionality and monitoring procedures all point to changes that are linked to the Commission's experience with the Eurozone crisis. As one Commission official put it, conditionality for NRRPs is evidently different from the one in EAPs yet it was built on the latter's experience (EU interview 1). Of course, all the above is not to say that member state preferences, the crisis' context and the level of politicisation did not influence the Commission's stance. Nevertheless, our analysis rendered clear that intra-crisis learning was one of the features informing and driving the Commission's approach to this issue.

Conclusions

The analysis enquired to what extent the Commission's experience with the Eurozone crisis informed its approach to conditionality-based lending in the pandemic framework. The article argues that the Commission's experience with EAPs led it to update its views on how conditionality programs should be designed, negotiated, monitored and implemented. It subsequently went on to apply these lessons to its proposals regarding NRRP conditionality.

The article's insights expand the literature on the EU's economic response to the pandemic (D'Erman and Verdun 2022; Buti and Fabbrini 2023; Ferrera et al. 2021) by focusing on a relatively underexplored dimension: the effect of inter-crisis learning. As such it builds on the contribution by Ladi and Tsarouhas (2021) by explicating how one of the EU's major actors, the European Commission, approached an important component of the EU's response. At the same time, the article goes beyond the Commission's stance and approach (Corti and Nunez-Ferrer 2021; Bokhorst and Corti 2023) and examines its drivers in this context: it shows that policy learning played a major role in that respect.

The article also contributes to the emerging literature on coordinative Europeanisation (Ladi and Wolff 2021); an approach that features prominently in this special issue. This novel form of europeanisation, is circular and based on close coordination between EU institutions and member states. The Commission is seen as having a central role in this process; it creates platforms of coordination with the aim of effectively managing the crisis' repercussions (Ladi and Wolff 2021: 4; Rhodes 2021: 1545; Ladi and Polverari, 2024). The analysis confirmed that the Commission followed this mode of operation with respect to NRRP conditionality; it coordinated closely and early with member states in view of ensuring high program ownership. Moreover, it rendered clear that the Commission ended up embracing this new *modus operandi* driven, at least to an extent, by policy learning. In this sense, the Commission's experience with the Eurozone crisis did not only influence its approach to conditionality programs but also informed its changing relationship with member states.

Finally, this article holds implications for the process of EU integration. It showcased that the policy changes that occurred within the Commission after the Eurozone crisis did not wither away. Instead, they traveled to the next crisis, i.e., the economic fallout after the pandemic. These lessons were institutionalised in the form of a new methodology vis-à-vis conditionality-based lending. Subsequently, the Commission is now in position to strategically employ these institutionalised lessons to influence the process of European integration (Radaelli 2022: 8–9). For example, its new monitoring role regarding NRRP conditionality grants it additional authority over member states, allowing it to steer them toward its preferred policy direction (Bokhorst and Corti 2023: 4; EU interview 1). It is not unlikely that this lesson, locked in a new mechanism of monitoring and evaluation, will allow the Commission to promote its distinct political priorities and, therefore, substantially shape the process of EU integration.

All in all, as the Commission has ended up being a key stakeholder in most recent crises (e.g., Thielemann, and Zaun 2018; Schuette 2021; Ladi and Wolff 2021), it is crucial that we disentangle how Commission officials draw from past experiences to plan future policies and institutional configurations. The present article attempted to address this question with respect to the Eurozone crisis and the pandemic, yet, future research can expand this inquiry by examining the effect of inter-crisis learning on the Commission's approach to past crises.

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