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The COVID-19 Crisis and the Reshaping of Multi-Level Governance in the European Union: A Paired Comparison of Germany and Italy*

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The outbreak of COVID-19 challenged the democratic governance and economic performance of EU member states. Most national governments implemented restrictions on social and economic life in order to mitigate the circulation of the Sars-CoV-2 virus; at the same time, the resulting economic costs were financed by a combination of national and common debts. Eventually, the combination of health, political, and economic crises prompted national political executives to find collective solutions to the emergency. This chapter assesses the linkage between national responses and EU policy outputs. To what extent do variations among countries' policies account for the EU reaction? How did EU policy affect patterns of national political governance? The empirical analysis presents a paired comparison of Germany and Italy, which are introduced as illustrative cases. Overall, it suggests that the observed shift in EU policy from fiscal consolidation to debt mutualization was the indirect outcome of particular choices of national crisis management. Yet, states' decision-making convergence at the EU level affected national political processes differently, depending on countries' idiosyncrasies. The findings contribute to the debate about the interconnection between national responses to crises and EU policy.

1. Introduction: The EU, Germany, and Italy through Multiple Crises

This chapter investigates the way in which the COVID-19 pandemic has changed German-Italian relations in the European Union (EU) as well as the impact of this change on the two countries' political governance. In particular, it argues that the 2020 agreement on the Next Generation EU (NGEU) fund should be understood as the outcome of a specific combination of national responses to the pandemic crisis. Moreover, the analysis shows that this agreement has prompted diverging political developments at the national level.

With a few exceptions, the EU integration process was mostly seen as a story of success until the Great Recession of 2007-2009 (Moravcsik 2005). Since then, EU history has been plagued by a series of crises, which have seriously undermined the legitimacy of the EU in the citizens' eyes as well as their trust in the EU institutional capacity. At the same, intergovernmental arenas have (partially) taken over from supranational institutions as loci for crisis management (Hodson and Puetter 2019). Events such as the European sovereign debt crisis (2010), the so-called refugee crisis (2015), and the Brexit referendum (2016) have fostered the electoral success of Eurosceptic parties and increased the economic divergence between Northern and Southern economies – if even between

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stronger and weaker regions within single countries (Pirro et al. 2018; Díaz Dapena et al. 2019; Webber 2019).[1]

In this regard, Germany and Italy are textbook cases of two economic models – Northern and Southern respectively – whose recent mutual divergence well depicts the effects of the multiple crises (Piattoni and Notermans 2021). While Germany has gained stronger hegemony in the EU (Schild 2020), Italy has suffered from internal political instability and lackluster economic performances, experiencing shrinking bargaining power *vis-à-vis* European partners (Grasse 2018). Overall, for the chapter's purposes, the two countries are comparable and illustrative of broader sets of cases. First, Germany and Italy are founding members of the European Economic Community (EEC), with similar trajectories of post-war democratization, and among the largest polities of the Union. Second, their economies are deeply-interconnected and, third, both countries are members of the Monetary Union (Eurozone); any substantial change in the EU governance model requires their (tacit) assent (Piattoni et al. 2018: 5-7). Moreover, Germany and Italy are characterized by a 'pure' parliamentary institutional setting and can be defined as consensus democracies inasmuch as the executive-parties dynamics are concerned (Lijphart 2012). This allows keeping the effects of important institutional variables 'fixed', when it comes to comparing the two.[2] However, one should also notice that Germany and Italy differ substantially in terms of cabinet[3] duration and, most recently, in the production of effective policy innovations to respond to distributional shifts, Italy being the worst performer (Sacchi 2014; Zucchini and Pedrazzani 2021). In terms of economic productivity, the Italian 'performance […] never lagged too far behind the performance of the economy of Germany, but always far enough to accumulate a significant distance over time' (Piattoni et al. 2018: 6).

It is worth noting that the EU Commission's NGEU recovery package of 750 billion Euros (in 2018 prices) Euros has been a crucial innovation in the recent German approach towards intra-EU distributive policy. In fact, after years of strong advocacy for fiscal consolidation and conditionality (Kickert and Randma-Liiv 2017; Ferrera 2017), Germany has promoted the use of the EU budget to support public investments in economically weaker Union's territories (Viesti 2021: 407-408); among these, Italy is a major recipient.

This chapters aims to observe how Germany and Italy economically responded to the COVID-19 crisis and how this crisis changed their relations at the EU level. Moreover, it assesses the short-

[1] However, cultural convergence has grown continuously (Akaliyski 2018).

[2] It is worth stressing that the institutional political setting of a country plays a crucial role in shaping inter-party competition and coalition politics, irrespective of other factors such as the party system, cabinet attributes, and political oppositions (Schleiter and Morgan-Jones 2009).

[3] In spite of geographical differences and following the comparative literature on executive studies, I use 'cabinet' to indicate the executive team made up of the prime minister and senior ministers (excluding junior ministers, who are however part of the broader 'government'). See, e.g., Andeweg et al. (2020).

term political implications of the NGEU in the two countries. It answers two questions: how has the pandemic led to the approval of the NGEU? How have the Italian and German governments reacted to the EU NGEU? In the next section, the study understands political and economic outcomes as phases of the same 'politico-economic cycle' in multi-level systems. Subsequently, the chapter operationalizes the main variables and clarifies methodological choices. The fourth section provides the empirical analysis, while the fifth concludes and suggests research outlooks.

2. Multilevel Europe, Crisis Management, and the Pandemic

This study posits, first, that COVID-19 pandemic is a clear-cut case of crisis; second, that crises increase the need for political coordination between levels of government in multi-level political systems; third, that crises provide political leaders with windows of opportunity for pursuing major changes in public governance. Against this background, the theory tries to explain both national and supranational COVID-19-related political decisions in the EU.

2.1. *The Need for Coordination and the Politico-Economic Cycle*

Following the literature on 'crisis leadership', this study conceptualizes crises as threats to the core values and functions of a system. When the affected system is a polity, political leaders are urged to respond to these threats and to reduce their detrimental impact, by making decisions under profound uncertainty (Rosenthal et al. 1989. See also Boin and 't Hart 2012). All else equal, citizens and the media tend to scrutinize the actions of the chief executive and her ministers more carefully. Democratic political executives are thus more likely to be blamed for unsatisfactory responses and, eventually, to lose voters' support. However, crises also create unexpected conditions for change and, as long as crisis management is (perceived) successful, political leaders may use the gained 'capital of public trust' to pursue goals that, in normal times, are outside their reach (Boin and 't Hart 2012; Linde and Peters 2020).

When it comes to coping with a crisis, a successful political leader has to guarantee efficient coordination, that is, 'forging effective communication and collaboration among pre-existing and ad hoc networks of public, private and sometimes international actors' (Boin and 't Hart 2010: 359). The challenge is especially complex within multi-level political structures, in that – in addition to horizontal coordination – vertical coordination is necessary. This is the case, for example, with EU member states that are characterized by state decentralization. Among others, these group includes both Germany and Italy. While the former is a fully-fledged federal country, the latter has been defined – especially after the 2001 constitutional reform – by high levels of functional autonomy of subnational territorial units (Loughlin 2017: 193-197). In these countries, the political executive is the connecting point of different levels of government, which, like Janus, has two 'faces': one looks downwards at regional and local governments and one looks upwards at EU institutions.[4] In these contexts, no level of government is autonomous enough to produce policy outputs neglecting other levels, because all levels are intertwined (Piattoni 2010: 9-10). Therefore, political decisions made at the subnational level are often consequential even for EU governance. In turn, EU decisions affect member states' domestic institutions. This kind of multi-level interdependence shapes public policy in several sectors; among these, the economy, and, in particular, the economic governance of the Union (Prosser 2016).

Many institutionalist scholars point out that political factors play a big role in defining economic outcomes. At the same time, the resulting economic institutions affect the behavior of policy-makers through a sort of feedback loop (Streeck 2010; Acemoglu and Robinson 2012). More precisely, a given socio-economic constellation of powers in a political system favors the development of specific political structures of opportunity. Within these structures, political actors and the relevant stakeholders – by interacting with each other – either maintain or modify the economic status quo. Usually, the status quo proves to be highly resilient, because the distribution of political power among political actors is coherent with the socio-economic distribution of power in society; in other words, material factors make certain political groups more powerful, and these groups promote specific economic institutions that are favorable and coherent with the power structure of the society. However, exogenous shocks can bring major changes in the organization of social groups or in the political supply, thus disrupting the existing 'input-output loop' and creating the conditions for change (Vercesi 2015).

In a nutshell, a country's political governance – defined by the interaction between political institutions and political actors' behaviors – shapes economic governance (under an all-else equal clause), either intendedly or unintendedly. In the EU member states, national political governance results from both the horizontal and vertical interaction between political actors, whose motives, preferences, and behaviors within EU institutions are influenced by their country's economic setting. Political bargaining processes at the EU level, in turn, shape EU economic governance and, in cascade, political processes within member states.

This theoretical argument can help understand the linkage between the COVID-19 pandemic, EU responses, and countries' further reactions.

[4] In the case of the EU, central executives are also directly represented through their own members in the Council of the EU and in the European Council.

2.2. *The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Changes in the EU Politico-Economic Cycle*

Here, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic is understood as an exogenous shock, with the typical features of a critical juncture. In this regard, this chapter adopts Acemoglu and Robinson's definition of critical junctures as 'major events that disrupt the existing political and economic balance in one or many societies' (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012: 431).

This critical juncture is particularly well suited to assess the viability of the above theoretical argument for a number of reasons. In a 2022 article, Ewert and Loer (2022) pointed out how the COVID-19 pandemic has been an event with substantial effects in social fields, including economy and politics. They argue that its consequences would have been impossible in normal times, so that the event can be defined as a 'significant path disrupter' (Capano et al. 2022: 4). In particular, the pandemic and the resulting political responses activated several 'trigger points' in the EU multi-level structure, through spillover mechanisms. One can observe three directions of these spillovers: from lower to higher level of government; between political actors; and between spheres of social life. Most importantly, Ewert and Loer found that 'the political handling of COVID-19 has yielded a range of spillovers across policy fields – with regard to competences, power and policy goals' (Ewert and Loer 2022: 8, 19). This finding fits with the politico-economic cycle scheme.

Based on these theoretical arguments, one can derive two specific expectations about the effects of the pandemic on political and economic governance in the EU and in the member states.

The first expectation is that the economic effects of individual national responses to the first wave of contagions reshaped national views towards EU economic policy.

Moreover, scholars have observed that the institutional veto power of member states might be one of the strongest predictors of decision-making outcomes in the EU (institutional bargaining thesis) (Slapin 2008). Yet, in times of crisis – i.e., under conditions of greater uncertainty and policy flexibility – the informal power of states becomes more important as explaining variable (intergovernmental bargaining thesis) (Hartwell and Devinney 2021); the latter observation especially applies to the pre-legislation stage, when national governments have great opportunities to influence the European Commission's positions (Bailer 2004). Against this background, the second expectation is that, by affecting national economies severely, the critical juncture of the pandemic opened a window of opportunity for a change in the relative bargaining power of member states and, consequently, in the outcomes of decision-making processes at the EU level.

In the following, the chapter applies this framework to assess the cases of Germany and Italy.

3. Operationalizations and Methods

The main variables of interest of this study are operationalized as follows. With regard to the type of national governments' response, the empirical analysis focuses on the level of centralization of crisis management (including the coordination among the operative units of the health system) and the stringency of the measures implemented to contain the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. The economic consequences of these policies, in turn, are measured by using four proxies: the gross domestic product (GDP); the government debt; industrial production; and real household per capita income.

Countries' stances towards EU fiscal policy are understood as ranging along a continuum, from being sloped towards strict fiscal consolidation to be fully supportive of inter-country 'solidarity' and debt sharing. EU actual economic governance is instead defined by the member states' entitlements under the NGEU program.

Finally, changes in national politics are observed with reference to cabinet stability and party competition.

From a methodological point of view, the empirical investigation is based on the case study methodology, due to the lack of systematic long-term data about the possible nexus between the pandemic of COVID-19 and the reshaping of political governance in the EU and in the member states. In particular, it proposes a 'paired comparison' (Tarrow 2010) of Germany and Italy. As stressed by the literature, case studies prove to be especially suitable for refining existing theories and to generate new hypotheses about understudied topics or when robust large-N research is missing (Seha and Müller-Rommel 2016).

In order to disentangle possible causal linkages between the assessed events, the case study analysis is combined with 'process tracing' (Vennesson 2008). Process tracing, in fact, helps investigate 'processes, sequences, and conjectures of events within a case for the purposes of either developing or testing hypotheses about causal mechanisms that might causally explain the case' (Bennett and Checkel 2015: 7). The time span of the analysis goes from the detection of the first cases of COVID-19 in Germany and Italy to December 2021, including one cabinet change in both countries.

4. Germany and Italy during the Pandemic: Converging in the EU, Diverging at Home

When the first cases of persons tested SARS-CoV-2 virus positive in Europe appeared early in 2020, the first response of European governments to the new challenge was essentially national. This was not surprisingly, in light of two observations: firstly, national health authorities detected the first infections at a different pace (Spiteri et al. 2020); secondly, the EU needed time before being able to implement any coordinated strategy. However, as contagions increased all over Europe, demands of national governments converged towards an active role of the EU (Schomaker et al. 2021). In Genschel and Jachtenfuchs' (2021: 351) words, the pandemic

> *contracted functional scale* to the (sub-)national level as security replaced efficiency as the top functional concern. The result was a rebordering stampede in mid-March 2020 with member states unilaterally closing national borders and restricting domestic movement to limit contagion. At the same time, it *expanded expectations of community* to the transnational level as empathy with the worst affected member states led to vocal calls for more EU solidarity and leadership (emphasis in the original).

On the one hand, national and subnational governments implemented protective and restrictive measures to halt the contagion rates. On the other hand, they 'called upon' the EU to mitigate the economic downturn, which was produced by the very same measures.

In a first step, this section traces the way in which Germany and Italy responded to the outbreak of COVID-19 and to the consequent health crisis, from February to May 2020.[5] Moreover, it investigates the nexus between their response and the short-term changes in the respective economic performance until the final approval of the NGEU plan in the European Council (21 July 2020).

4.1. *National Responses and Economic Downturns*

Italy was the first European country to be significantly hit by the pandemic. By the end of February 2020, Italy had registered 888 infections, while Germany was still lagging behind with 57 cases. After ordering local lockdowns in the region of Lombardy and cancelling a few large public events, a few days later, the Italian central government deemed these measures insufficient; on March 9, it implemented a severe nation-wide lockdown. Just a few days later (March 16), the German federal government issued an entry ban and, by the end of March, Italy and Germany had registered 102,000 and 62,000 cases of infection, respectively (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2021: 354-355).

The two countries differed with regard to the stringency of their containment measures. In part, this was due to the diversity of the legislative instruments in the hands of the central government and the level of state decentralization

On the one hand, the Italian cabinet declared a state of emergency on 31 January 2020. Based on this decision and a subsequent executive decree of February 23, Italy strongly centralized the management of the pandemic. Admittedly, policy conflicts between central and regional governments emerged, but the institution dedicated to promoting the coordination between the state and the regions (*Conferenza Stato-Regioni*) played a very marginal role in the Italian response to the first wave of the

[5] The Italian government relaxed the initial lockdown on 3 May 2020, while the German government agreed on the lifting of most of the restrictions three days later.

pandemic. In sum, Italian regional (and local) political institutions enjoyed little room for maneuver (Casula and Pasoz-Vidal 2021: 1000; Giovannini and Mosca 2021: 141-142; Salvati 2022).

On the other hand, the German cabinet could not follow in Italy's steps (provided that it wanted) because of two reasons: German law does not allow declaring the state of emergency for health issues; second, both German federalism and the federal law for the protection from infections (*Infektionsschutzgesetz*) provided the regions (*Länder*) with full autonomy in the implementation of containment measures (Vercesi 2020: 125-130). The federal government, in turn, did not by-pass the parliament, which became the institution with the power to declare the 'pandemic state' (*epidemische Lage*) in March 2020 (Bolleyer and Salát 2021). Nation-wide restrictions were not implemented until March 17[6] and, even after this day, Chancellor Angela Merkel and her cabinet restricted themselves to only giving recommendations to regional governments (Vercesi 2022). These governments, in turn, left local authorities with freedom of action to choose the appropriate restrictive measures, depending on local epidemic situations (Kuhlmann and Franzke 2022: 318-319). As a result, the citizens of those parts of the German territory that had been less involved in the spread of the virus experienced fewer restrictions on social and economic life.

Relative to the Italian management, the German strategy during the first wave of the pandemic was based on greater inter-institutional coordination, higher decision-making decentralization, and less drastic containment measures. In particular, one can distinguish three phases in the German pandemic management: a phase of vertical coordination (between the federal and the regional levels of government) and decentralized decision-making in the 2020 Spring; a phase of unilateral (from the *Länder*) and decentralized decision-making in the 2020 Summer and Autumn; and a phase of unilateral (from the federal government) and centralized decision-making from 2020 Winter (Engler et al. 2021: 1088; Hegele and Schnabel 2021).[7]

With regard to the economic response to the crisis, both Germany and Italy increased their public spending to mitigate the negative effects of the containment measures on production and employment. For example, they implemented targeted public programs of economic support and introduced subsidies for specific workers' categories. Germany activated the *Kurzarbeit* program, whereby employees' working hours were reduced and the state covered a percentage of the lost salary (cf. Pianta et al. 2021).

Figure 1 compares the stringency of the containment measures and the level of public financial support to the economy in Germany and Italy.

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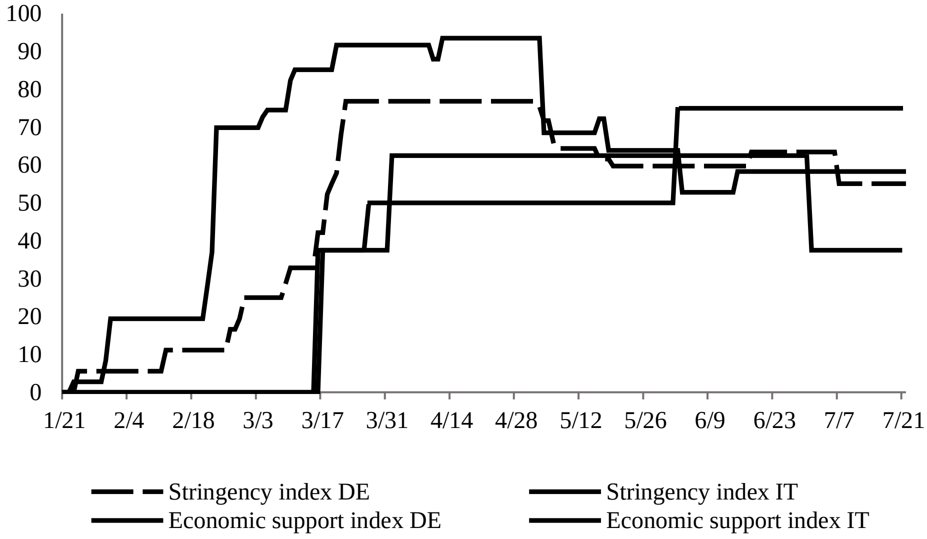
[6] On 17 March 2020, the German public institute for the monitoring and prevention of diseases Robert Koch Institut rated the country risk level 'high' for the first time.

[7] See data from https://covid19.who.int. On public authorities' communications, see, e.g., Woelk (2020: 1730).

Fig. 1. Stringency of containment measures and public economic support in Germany and Italy, 21 January-21 July 2020



Note: the 'stringency' and the 'economic support' indexes are based on several indicators and range from 0 to 100. The latter index is calculated using ordinal economic policies indicators, such as income support, debt/contract relief, fiscal measures, and international support.
Source: based on data from Hale et al. (2021).

The graph confirms that the Italian government activated a much stricter lockdown between February and early May 2020. However, one can also see that, timewise, limitations to social life and individual actions do not clearly correlate with the level of economic support. In particular, the German government allocated the largest number of financial resources in the most acute phase of the virus' spread and reduced them later in July. In contrast, Italy was characterized by lower levels of economic support until June and outdid Germany since then, and especially in July.

How did these combinations of containment measures and public spending affect national economies? Did Germany perform better than Italy? To answer these questions, Table 1 compares the trends in both countries according to four macroeconomic indicators, by looking at the performance in the second quarter of 2020 relative to the performance of the previous one. The focus on the second quarter allows covering the months of the first lockdown as well as the next one, up to the agreement on the NGEU. This choice guarantees a reliable indication of the economic consequences of the political management of the health crisis in the two countries.

Tab. 1. Economic performance in Germany and Italy during and after the lockdown, April-June 2020 (percentages)

	GDP	General government debt	Industrial production	Real household per capita income
Germany	-9.4	+5.9	-10.1	-1.2
Italy	-13.1	+5.1	-17.5	-7.2

Note: changes are relative to the previous quarter.
Sources: data from European Central Bank (ECB); Federal Statistical Office of Germany (DESTATIS); Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT); Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

Overall, the figures tell that both Germany and Italy went through a remarkable worsening of their national economies. However, Italy – which implemented a stricter national lockdown – had the worst performance, in that three indicators display a much more significant decrease than those characterizing Germany. The increase in the general government debt in Germany is 0.8 percentage points higher than in Italy.

According to this chapter's theory, changes in the economic indicators should have led to the modification of the two countries' bargaining position and their stances towards EU governance at the supranational level. The next section elaborates on this.

4.2. *From Domestic Economic Changes to Supranational Political and Economic Consequences*

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting governments' responses shaped the behavior of member states within the EU political arenas profoundly.

After initial bewilderment, the European Commission tried to prompt inter-country cooperation to hinder the development of the health crisis' negative effects. Yet, '[t]he lack of […] unity, solidarity, and cooperation was evident in various ways including the ban on the selling of medical supplies' (Cachia 2021: 98). How could this lack of 'unity' and 'solidarity' end up with the approval of an ambitious European recovery plan? What role did Germany and Italy play, in light of their observed economic performances?

As observed by Genschel and Jachtenfuchs (2021: 369), many national political leaders soon agreed on being supportive of helping the countries most affected by the pandemic (in particular Italy). Yet, they could not agree on who had to bear the fiscal costs of such solidarity. The Italian center-left government, on its part, departed from its previous commitment towards the EU to respect fiscal rigor,[8] and started advocating for the sharing of costs among EU countries. The resulting debate turned to be a conflict among member states about the viability, the responsibility, and the funding of possible debt mutualization (Jones 2021: 201).

In March 2020, France, Greece, and Spain endorsed Italian claims, while countries with better fiscal performance and a lower impact of the pandemic (i.e., Austria, Finland, the Netherlands) took position against Italy. The two positions resembled the division between Northern and fiscally sound economies, including Germany, and Southern countries.[9] Nevertheless, Germany and other Northern countries accepted the temporary relaxation of the fiscal rules defined in the Stability and Growth pact. Moreover, EU supranational institutions – in particular the ECB – implemented a couple of aid

[8] This government (Conte II cabinet) had succeeded the Conte I cabinet, whose populist coalition was profoundly characterized by anti-EU sentiments and by the rejection of European constraints (Fabbrini and Zgaga 2019).

[9] Eastern countries had a more ambiguous position, asking that any solidarity measure should not have undermined cohesion funds.

measures between mid-March and early April. That said, the Eurogroup (the group of the finance ministers of the Euro zone) made the most important decision in a meeting on April 9 (Table 2).

Tab. 2. EU-promoted aid programs, March-April 2020

Program	Date	Institutional agent	Resources	Instrument
Public Sector Purchase Program	12 March	ECB	120	QE
Corona Response Investment Initiative	13 March; 30 March	COM + Council	37	Grants
Pandemic Emergency Purchase Program	18 March	ECB	750	QE
Support to Mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency	2 April; 9 April	COM + Eurogroup	100	Loans
European Investment Bank – Guarantee Fund	9 April	Eurogroup	200	Loans
European Stability Mechanism – Pandemic Crisis Support	9 April	Eurogroup	240	Loans

Notes: COM means European Commission; QE means Quantitative easing. Resources are indicated in billions of Euros.
Source: Genschel and Jachtenfuchs (2021: 360), modified.

The ministers attending this meeting agreed on giving the lending responsibilities to three different institutions: the European Investment Bank (to support firms); the European Commission (to support employment); and to the European Stability Mechanism (to cover the costs related to the health emergency). Still, those governments that were pushing for larger transfers of resources among member states received this decision as a suboptimal outcome. Two reasons account for this outcome. First, France – in light of the firm German opposition – had to give up asking for a permanent EU mutual debt (i.e., Coronabonds) and accepted this emerging project of a temporary recovery fund, guaranteed on pro-rata basis. Second, it was necessary to find a compromise between Southern countries – asking grants rather than loans – and the so-called ‘frugal four’ (Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Sweden) – supporting assistance measures through cost saving (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2021: 363).

However, a major shift in the coalitional patterns among EU member states was about to come soon. In May Chancellor Merkel moved her position from fiscal consolidation to ‘solidarity’, although she had previously opposed the French and Italian requests for debt mutualization. This realignment meant the redefinition of the North-South cleavage within the EU, in that the Northern camp lost Berlin, which had been one of its main supporters since (to say the least) the Eurozone debt crisis.

On May 18, Merkel and the French President Emmanuel Macron publicly presented a 500-billion Euro-joint plan for a temporary recovery fund. From a German perspective, the most innovative aspect of this plan was the grant-based funding through joint debt issued by the European Commission. Genschel and Jachtenfuchs (2021: 363-364) list four explanations of such a ‘U-turn’. First, Merkel reacted to a Federal Constitutional Court’s (*Bundesverfassungsgericht*) judgement (2 BvR 859/15) of May 5, which had stated that ECB’s bond purchases could be ultra vires. Second, the upcoming costs for Germany looked relatively low. Third, Berlin did not want Italians to feel ‘abandoned’, which could have brought new votes to Eurosceptic parties. Fourth, Italy has traditionally been a key market for German export and the outlook of the upcoming new Italian economic crisis was assessed as a potential destabilizing event for the German economy; this event was in fact emerging together with the broader European pandemic crisis and the looming German worsening economic situation.

Based on the Franco-German input, the European Commission thus drafted an EU budget-based plan of 750-billion Euros, which included additional 250 billion of loans. The then Italian Prime Minister Conte was supportive, but the ‘frugal four’ plus Finland rejected the very basics of the plan. ‘As the date for the July European Council approached, Conte played a highly visible role in the negotiations and yet the needle turned inexorably against him, decreasing the volume of direct expenditures and increasing the volume of loans’ (Jones 2021: 204). The relevant bargaining process was conflictual, and the final compromise included a smaller amount of grants, more loans, and the introduction of the continuous supervision of the actions of member states’ governments through the European Commission and the Council of the EU. However, coalitions within the EU had changed, Germany had moved closer to Italy, and the principle of (fiscal) solidarity had made inroads into the EU, at the expense of fiscal consolidation and the North-South divide (Ladi and Tsarouhas 2020). According to Becker and Gehring (2022: 7), the change of preferences was due to a functional spillover; in their words, ‘European leaders faced the choice between endangering the monetary union as one of the grand European integration projects, or agreeing on a bold new integration step’.

In summary, the Council’s decision of April 9 and the previous negotiations suggest that the way in which single countries responded to the first wave of the pandemic opened a window of opportunity, which was conducive to the revision of the inter-country relational patterns within the EU. In this regard, Armingeon et al. (2022) observe that pre-existing national economic vulnerabilities might have set the stage for this kind of developments; however, it was only the contingency of the pandemic crisis that made it rational for Germany to converge on Italian requests towards the observed changes in the EU political and economic governance. In spite of the traditional German skepticism towards the Italian capacity to fix fiscal problems due to a clientelist mismanagement of public resources, the Italian reaction to the pandemic’s effects strengthened its bargaining position *vis-à-vis* Germany. This could happen because a specific combination of conditions increased Italy’s blackmail potential towards Germany, which, unlike in other prior asymmetric crises, saw the change of its fiscal positions as a rational response.

The final recovery fund European political leaders agreed on included 390 billion Euros of grants and 360 billion Euros of loans.

This outcome was convenient for Germany, although, receiving about 30 billion Euros, its net effect has been negative.[10] Merkel could reach the agreement through an inter-governmental decision-making mode, which brought out the hegemonic political role of Germany (together with France) in the EU. This also meant that the country could enhance its chances to remain the key actor in view of a relaunch of the integration process and the possible stabilization of the EU itself (Salvati 2021: 14-15). The Italian prime minister, in turn, could claim that the final compromise was an Italian victory: 'the allocation of funds to Italy was unprecedented – amounting to roughly €209 billion. From this perspective, the contrast between July and April was enormous; Europe [(remarkably Germany)] had shown solidarity towards Italy' (Jones 2021: 204).

4.3. *The Political Consequences of the NGEU in Germany and Italy*

What impact did the NEGU agreement have on the domestic politics of Germany and Italy?

In this regard, the evidence suggests that the significant difference in the number of financial resources allocated to the two countries was conducive to two antithetical outcomes. The main reason is that this number implied – among other things – that the national political actors had different opportunities to produce distributive policies to please interest groups and the electorate at large. Therefore, the debate about the use of the recovery plan in Italy was much more politicized and conflictual than in Germany, since the issue was more salient for a higher number of political parties with distinguished constituencies (Russo and Valbruzzi 2022).

The German federal government pursued a rather depoliticized type of management of the recovery fund, through the ministry of finance, whose head was the then Social democratic Vice Chancellor and later Chancellor (since December 2021) Olaf Scholz. It is worth noting that Germany opted for asking the EU only the highest available amount of grants, with the goal to finance an existing plan of investments of 130 billion Euros of June 2020. Overall, the German project to spend 25.6 billion in the fields of 'green transition' and digitalization[11] made the allocation of the NGEU mostly a technical issue, with little impact on party politics and the government (Cozzolino et al. 2021). It is thus not surprising that the payment of the fund did not rank at all among the most salient

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[10] France was expected to receive about 41 billion. See 'Germany to Spend 90% of EU Recovery Money on Green, Digital Goals.' *Reuters*, 27 April 2021.

[11] Cf., e.g., A. Villafranca, 'Il Recovery Fund degli altri', *ISPI* (2020), https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/il-recovery-fund-degli-altri-27502, accessed on 19 April 2022; European Commission, 'Recovery and Resilience Facility: Germany and Greece Submit Official Recovery and Resilience Plans', *Press Release* (2021), https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_1990, accessed on 19 April 2022; German Federal Ministry of Finance, 'Deutscher Aufbau- und Resilienzplan (DARP)', *Gesetze und Gesetzesvorhaben* (2021) https://www.bundesfinanzministerium.de/Content/DE/Standardartikel/Themen/Europa/DARP/deutscher-aufbau-und-resilienzplan.html, accessed on 19 April 2022.

issues in the domestic German public debate in 2020 and 2021 (Kinski 2021; Angenendt and Kinski 2022).

In Italy, Prime Minister Conte sought to follow a somehow similar strategy, but his attempt to centralize the management in his hands generated discontent within the coalition.[12] In particular, Conte tried to establish an ad hoc administrative body, to provide him technical support in the policy-making (Criscitiello 2020: 86-87). One of the harshest critics of Conte's approach was the leader of the junior coalition party Italy Alive (*Italia Viva*) Matteo Renzi, who denounced lack of cabinet collegiality and challenged the prime minister's leadership. In December 2020, Renzi threatened to make the cabinet fall, in the case that the process to decide how to spend the NGEU fund had not changed.

In light of the increasing intra-coalition conflicts, the President of the Republic Sergio Mattarella publicly expressed his concern about the possibility that Italy had to miss the opportunity to secure EU resources to invest in large public projects (Jones 2021: 206). Nevertheless, the government coalition proved to be too conflict-ridden and unable to solve internal disagreements, so that it collapsed in January 2021. On February 3, Mattarella exhorted the former ECB Governor Mario Draghi (whose name had been proposed by Renzi) to check with parties in parliament the possibility to form a new cabinet under his leadership. The new cabinet formed and entered office ten days later (Russo et al. 2022).

One peculiar feature of this cabinet was the inclusion of all parties represented in the parliament but one: the right-wing populist Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d'Italia*) (Garzia and Karremans 2021). Besides the organization of the vaccination campaign against COVID-19, the *raison d'être* of Draghi cabinet was the drafting, by late Spring 2021, of its national plan to be submitted to the European Commission to receive the money of the NGEU (Sandri and Capano 2022). For this purpose, the new cabinet 'created a complex institutional architecture, which includes six new bodies charged with managing' the recovery plan (Domorenok and Guardiancich 2022: 202). The cabinet's mission about the NGEU was set by the head of state, whose appeal to parties on February 2 induced party leaders to form a 'national unity government' to cope with the pandemic-related challenges that Italy was facing (including securing the EU funds). In order to fulfill this function, Draghi selected a group of technocratic ministers to hold key portfolios, such as those for economy and finance, interior, education, environmental transition, justice, education, university and research, technological innovation and digital transition, infrastructure and sustainable mobility. Overall, by the end of

[12] Although he was formally a non-partisan prime minister, Conte was very close to the largest coalition party, the Five Star Movement, who subsequently elected him as leader (e.g., Vercesi 2019).

December 2021, the government was successful in achieving 55 of the goals set in the Italian plan to be submitted to the EU; this allowed receiving the first tranche of EU money (Russo et al. 2022).

Unlike Germany, Italy, therefore, pursued the 'technicalization' (and depoliticization) of the policy-making through the involvement of almost all relevant parties as well as the delegation of governing power to a technocratic prime minister and to other non-partisan ministers and experts of his trust. In other words, political actors solved the conflict over the distribution of resources of the NGEU by sharing costs and benefits of governing among themselves and with non-partisan experts. As pointed out by Giovannini and Mosca (2021: 140), latent political conflicts resurfaced 'when management of the European funding […] rose to the top of the agenda. This exposed […] also the phenomenon of path dependency, revealing the inability of the Italian political system to provide effective governance'.[13]

5. Conclusion

This chapter has investigated the way in which the COVID-19 pandemic redefined the positions of Germany and Italy on EU governance and how the NGEU agreement affected the respective internal dynamics of party competition. Theoretically inspired by institutionalist political economy, the study has introduced the notion of politico-economic cycle of the EU to frame the observed events.

Based on a binary comparison and contributions of the process tracing methodology, the analysis has provided three main findings.

First, the national responses of Germany and Italy to the first outbreak of COVID-19 had different economic consequences.

Second, these consequences led to a redefinition of the countries' positions about the EU economic governance. In particular, Germany moved from being a strong opponent of debt mutualization to being supportive of contingent Italian requests. This German 'U-turn' was fostered by a specific combination of conditions making the Italian blackmail potential in the EU higher, in that the risk of a severe worsening of the Italian political and economic scenarios became too costly for Germany. Politically, this meant that established coalitions within the European Council changed and that Germany and Italy converged. From an economic viewpoint, the EU shifted from the post Eurozone crisis approach based on the principles of strict fiscal consolidation to be open towards EU grants to countries in trouble.

[13] A further confirmation of this system inability was the early termination the 'national unity' government led by Draghi in July 2022, which was mostly due to intra-coalition conflict over a bill to support Italians to bear rising energy prices. Ultimately, however, the fall was the outcome of competitive parties' vote-seeking strategies in view of the 2023 parliamentary election (Bull 2022).

Third, this major change at the EU level affected German and Italian national politics in a significantly different way. All else equal, an important condition behind this divergence was the higher potential for Italy to produce distributive policies through the NGEU. This is however nothing but the confirmation of established differences between the two countries in terms of political stability.

Future studies can widen the focus of this analysis, by investigating the strength of causal mechanisms in other countries. For example, scholars can assess the conditional effect of other variables such as the country size, the economic model, and the level of political and economic interdependence between countries. Empirically, further research can focus on a larger number of countries and use numerical data for systematic comparisons. Finally, longitudinal studies would help put the observed changes in their historical context. This is most needed if one wants to assess whether and to what extent the NEGU agreement has been the 'antechamber of a European fiscal federal solution' (da Costa Cabral 2021: 939).

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