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Beyond 'responsibility vs. responsiveness': reconfigurations of EU economic governance in response to crises

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic led to an important reconfiguration of economic governance in the European Union towards deeper economic integration. This fits uneasily with predictions of an inevitable political 'lock-in' stemming from a responsibility–responsiveness dilemma, or an inexorably constraining politicisation. Investigating the evolution in discourses on and policies of economic governance in the EU, the papers in this collection approach the relationship between prevailing notions of responsible and responsive government as socially constructed and critically contingent upon politicisation processes. The special issue explores the reconfiguration of economic governance in the EU through multi-level analysis of politicisation, ranging from citizens' attitudes to conflicts over central banking mandates, using a variety of methodological toolkits. As the collection shows, the shift towards investment, fiscal sharing, and green transition in the new recovery programme followed the emergence of a form of 'responsive responsibility' dating back to the aftermath of the euro crisis and which has led to the incorporation of responsiveness imperatives in prevailing notions of 'responsible government'.

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Introduction

The transformations in EU economic governance in response to the Covid-19 pandemic contrast significantly with prior blueprints for the governance of the European economies. During the previous decade, ideas and narratives around fiscal 'saints' and 'sinners' (Matthijs & McNamara, 2015) in the EU led to institutional reinforcement of fiscal and macro-economic surveillance and to policies promoting fiscal consolidation and restructuring of welfare states (Crespy & Vanheuverzwijn, 2019). The socio-economic consequences

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of this fuelled political contention around austerity and the EU project (della Porta, 2015; Hutter & Kriesi, 2019), as well as deep questioning of the structures of EU economic governance (Jabko, 2019; Miró, 2021). In a nutshell, the EU found itself in a looming input, throughput, and output legitimacy crisis (Schmidt, 2013, 2020a).

This political 'lock-in' derived, Peter Mair argued, from a growing gap between political leaders' 'responsiveness' towards their constituencies, and their 'responsibility' towards supranational rules (Mair, 2009, 2013a). The literature that followed this seminal contribution argued that the 'primacy of responsibility' (Karremans, 2021; Laffan, 2014) fed a democratic deficit that was structurally bound to increase (Lefkofridi & Nezi, 2020; Rose, 2014). Politicisation would, as post-functionalists argued, likely exacerbate the processes, by generating a 'constraining dissensus' that threatened further integration (Hooghe & Marks, 2006, 2009). The idea that the EU was stuck in a legitimacy crisis pitting the strictness of rules and commitments against the claims and mobilisation of large parts of EU citizenry has to a large extent dominated the scholarly debate on EU economic governance (Crespy, 2020; Schmidt, 2020a).

The response to the pandemic, however, fits uneasily in the framework of a widening gap between responsibility and responsiveness and a continued constraining politicisation. The EU institutions produced a recovery strategy that would have been hard to imagine a few months prior (de la Porte & Heins, 2022; Rhodes, 2021; Wolff & Ladi, 2020). The Commission proposed an ensemble of programmes dubbed Next Generation EU (NGEU) that dedicated 750 billion euros to loans and grants for economic stimulus and a 'reconstruction' focused on green, digital, and social agendas. The funds were generated through common debt. The program, approved by the European Council (EC) in July 2020, not only survived contention amongst member states (Fabbrini, 2023), but also aimed to correct past imbalances (Armingeon et al., 2022). In parallel, the European Central Bank (ECB) expanded its quantitative easing programme to prevent pressure in sovereign markets, under the shadow of conflict between the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) and the Federal Constitutional Court of Germany. Way beyond tackling just the pandemic, NGEU is serving to fund green and digital policies as well as social investment to achieve the goals set by the European Green Deal. After 2 years of suspension, the debt and deficit rules of the Stability and Growth Pact have been – admittedly to a limited extent – revised. Competition rules on state aids have similarly been relaxed and new investment instruments have been adopted to support European firms in the global competition for green growth.

These transformations require a revision of existing analytical frameworks. To be sure, the creation of NGEU hardly constitutes a panacea for the EU's legitimacy problems. It is also not yet clear the extent to which the reforms in economic governance that followed the pandemic amount to a 'critical

juncture' in European integration (Ladi & Tsarouhas, 2020; Schelkle, 2021). But they nonetheless cast doubt both on the inevitability of a widening gap between responsible and responsive government across the Union and on the prediction that politicisation prevents further integration.

This special issue makes a critical contribution to our understanding of reconfigurations of EU economic governance, and their relationship with dynamics of politicisation across the continent. We begin by revisiting Mair's responsibility–responsiveness dilemma from a constructivist, multi-level perspective, and argue that in the decade spanning the euro crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic we can observe the emergence of what we call 'responsive responsibility'. By this, we mean the discursive articulation and practice of a different type of 'responsible government' comprising, rather than opposing, responsiveness imperatives. Our approach therefore shifts the focus of analysis from the problems of national parliamentary democracy to those of EU governance and multi-level politics. Then, we argue for a more contingent and contextual approach to politicisation processes in the EU, which goes beyond the expectation of a 'constraining dissensus' put forward by post-functionalist analysts. Through this lens we can observe how politicisation in the EU can lead to different patterns of integration, rather than necessarily stopping or reverting it. The analytical articulation of politicisation processes and evolving notions of responsibility and responsiveness emphasises – indeed reasserts – the role of political agency and choice in EU economic governance. The questions 'responsible towards what?' and 'responsive to whom?', this special issue argues, remain open-ended and a necessary object of empirical investigation.

The papers in this collection look at reconfigurations in EU economic governance through a focus on different levels of politicisation, namely 'at the bottom' amongst citizens and social movements, 'at the top within and across EU institutions' and 'from the bottom-up' in the interactions between national and EU politics (Schmidt, 2019). The wealth of empirical and theoretical work combined in the following papers is difficult to summarise, but two central threads link the different contributions. First, the papers empirically show that a reconfiguration of responsibility–responsiveness nexus has taken place, albeit with variation, across the EU's multi-level political system, revealing these notions to be contingent political constructions rather than structural imperatives. The way 'responsibility' was articulated by decision-makers has departed from the narrow issue of compliance with EU technocratic rules. Politicisation processes have challenged the nature of these rules and their effects in terms of the collective capacity to address policy challenges (healthcare, but also social protection, climate change, or tax justice). This is inextricable from the evolution of responsiveness imperatives, both in majoritarian and non-majoritarian institutions: from European courts that articulate responsiveness to a range of European

'publics', to the transnational (progressive or populist) social movements, or governments proving responsive towards the demands emanating from other EU governments. Second, a clear picture emerges from the collection regarding the role and relevance of time in EU politics. The different papers show that the political reconfigurations that led to the shift in European governance towards investment, fiscal sharing and green transition that followed the Covid-19 pandemic, have critical roots in previous processes of politicisation of EU economic governance that date back at least to the euro crisis. Although the pandemic constituted a nearly ideal-type moment of 'emergency politics', its construal and response unfolded in a context of longstanding politicisation in and of the EU.

This introduction further elaborates on the analytical tools that are adopted and discussed in the collection of papers of this special issue. It begins by recasting Mair's dilemma in a constructivist light. The next section traces the emergence of 'responsive responsibility' in EU economic governance. The following section engages with the potential and limitations of the literature on EU politicisation and its relationship to the responsibility-responsiveness nexus. The subsequent section articulates the idea of 'responsive responsibility' with reference to the collection of papers in the special issue. The final section concludes.

Responsiveness versus responsibility in times of austerity

In his work on the Irish crisis and bailout of 2010, Peter Mair famously argued that economic governance in Europe was caught in a growing gap between two political imperatives for parties and governments: responsiveness and responsibility (Mair, 2013a). Responsiveness refers to the extent to which 'political leaders or governments listen to and then respond to the demands of citizens and groups' (Mair, 2013a, p. 157). Responsibility, on the other hand, is understood as compliance with the constraints generated by economic and political interaction and integration amongst nation-states, which takes the form of treaties, agreements, or less formalised forms of interdependence. In a nutshell, 'responsibility involves an acceptance that, in certain areas and in certain procedures, the leaders' hands will be tied' (Mair, 2013a, p. 158). These constraints, linked to the deterioration of the role and presence of democratic parties in the everyday lives of consolidated democracies (Mair, 2013b) led the late Peter Mair to a bleak prognosis: 'the tension [between responsiveness and responsibility] itself is becoming steadily more acute, and the means of handling that tension are steadily waning' (Mair, 2013a, p. 157).

Mair's insights have strongly influenced the debate on the interrelated processes of party erosion, economic and political integration processes, and contemporary problems of political legitimacy in Europe (Bardi et al.,

2014; Karremans & Lefkofridi, 2020). The common currency and the institutional framework of economic governance in the EU, especially through its reforms in the immediate aftermath of the euro crisis, revealed a 'primacy of responsibility', as opposed to responsiveness (Karremans, 2021; Laffan, 2014). However, as subsequent scholarly work has demonstrated, these heuristics raise as many questions as the ones they answer. Austerity policies were to some degree 'responsive' in the Eurozone periphery (Borriello, 2017; Moreira Ramalho, 2020). Moreover, national governments were at times capable of capitalising on, or even co-construing, the 'constraints' of EU economic governance on domestic political action (Moreira Ramalho, forthcoming; Moury et al., 2021). And different logics of political responsibility – against the 'populist threat' for instance – were used precisely to tame the consequences of austerity even prior to the pandemic (Mérand, 2022).

This indicates that the concept of responsibility in Mair's dilemma remains hard to pin down. What does responsibility entail? What does it mean beyond the more or less abstract principles Mair draws from, such as 'efficiency' (Scharpf, 1999), 'predictability and consistency' (Downs, 1985, p. 105), or 'prudence and consistency' (Birch, 1964)? In its simplest formulation, Mair argues that 'responsible government is therefore "good" government' (Mair, 2013a, p. 158). The idea that 'good government' can (or that at times needs to) be pursued not through but in spite of the democratic imperatives of responsiveness is necessarily grounded in the idea that governments in democracies have (a) an epistemic advantage compared to the electorate, (b) a better understanding of the 'general will' than the organised or more politicised sections of the population, or (c) a temporality of action that conflicts with the temporality of electoral pressures. It means, therefore, that 'responsible' governments can understand how collective well-being is to be attained in a more sophisticated fashion than their 'principal'. But this very idea runs into a fundamental problem: how is this evaluation to be made? And who gets to make it? Arguably 'responsibility' in government corresponds to a type of 'medium-term' responsiveness. Simply put, the premise of responsible government, when enacted against the observed will of the electorate, is that the electorate will eventually (*in time*) understand the adequacy of government action. As such, responsibility and responsiveness are indeed co-constitutive.

But even if co-constitutive, problems with conceptualising the inter-relationship of the terms remains. For if there is a structural interpretive problem when it comes to 'responsible' government that can come from time-inconsistency between the principal (the people) and the agent (the democratically elected government), there is also the intrinsically normative question of deciding in complex political contexts how to be responsible or indeed, what being responsible signifies in terms of policy. In Mair's line of thought, an initial emphasis lies on the procedural dimension of

responsibility: if 'good government' is one that is sound from a procedural standpoint, the political willingness to comply or not with the rules, however, can never be disconnected from the recognition that the rules are legitimate in their nature and their effects in policy terms.

The determination of what 'responsibility' means, and the ensuing rules for 'good government' depends on prevailing ideas and is contingent on power relations. Moreover, it has evolved over time in important ways. As Peter Hall showed in his work on policy ideas, the ultimate political goals of the early post-war years influenced by neo-Keynesianism in Western democracies were starkly different from those emerging in the neoliberal turn (Hall, 1993). These overarching societal goals have framed debates about responsible (or 'good') government. The neoliberal understanding of 'responsibility' was primarily formulated as a critique of what its proponents saw as an excessively democratic government of the economy. Responsible government should resist the potentially 'inflationist' pressures of politically organised labour, as the new landscape of mainstream macroeconomics preached, and remedy the 'profligate' behaviour that 'political business cycles' generated, as Public Choice theories and other streams of neoliberal thinking proposed (Blyth, 2013; Hay, 2007). Responsibility is, in other words, contingent – and socially construed. But that also means that it is, or can be, contested, as alternative societal 'goals' frame political conflict. Government conduct is therefore constrained by the context of perceived imperatives, both of what the people *want* and of what the people *need*. Lefkofridi and Nezi (2020, p. 335) argue that 'the policy content of both "responsiveness" and "responsibility" are largely context dependent'. We would add that the perception of what responsiveness and responsibility entail are largely context-shaping.

Understanding the socially constructed character of 'responsibility' and its relationship with responsiveness is key to make sense of ongoing reforms in EU economic governance. In Mair's framework, the main focus of analysis was on parties and national governments. Yet, the notion of responsibility that he evoked referred to the relationship between those party governments and external institutions and different levels of government. As such, what responsibility means for national governments has a direct relationship with the type of responsibilities that these external forces are perceived as imposing. In practical terms, it referred to treaties and their interpretation, to the pressure coming from the Commission, the Council, or the European Council, to the conditions created by the ECB, or to the decisions – both concrete and potential – of the Court of Justice of the EU. This leads us to unpack the construction of external constraints by looking at how the constellation of EU actors that form, in their collective, part of the responsibilities of national governments see, and through their action shape, what responsibility entails. We thus shift the focus from national parliamentary democracy to the multi-

level political system of the EU, in which governments (re)enact the very rules that constrain them.

If during the euro crisis ‘responsibility’ was a dominant frame to justify and legitimate imposing country-specific austerity policies, the same notion was invoked during the pandemic to justify and legitimate solidarity through mutualised debt offering country-specific sustainable growth policies (Moreira Ramalho, 2023). Whereas ‘responsibility’ during the euro crisis had a distinctively neoliberal tone, the politics of responsibility during the new pandemic seem to sit less easily in a conflict between the still relevant neoliberal macro-economic programme and the increasingly important movements around what we could call ‘populism’ and ‘progressivism’. Both populism and progressivism have pushed back against the EU’s conceptualisations of responsibility and responsiveness, but in distinctive ways. Whilst populism’s unifying thread is an attempt to twist governments’ arms to ‘listen’ to ‘the people’ (in a potential indication of the limits of technocratic government), progressivism forces new themes on the structure of political conflict, such as climate action, feminism, and social inequality.

The emergence of ‘responsive responsibility’

As European states were enacting their first policy responses to the health-related crisis, a looming economic crisis became increasingly apparent, as lockdown led to an abrupt shutdown of economic activity, the consequences of which were largely uncertain. The response from the EU institutions was famously called Europe’s ‘Hamiltonian moment’ by Olaf Scholz, then Germany’s Finance Minister, in a reference to the American nineteenth century pooling of states’ debts (Georgiou, 2022). The almost immediate reaction of the Commission in the face of the upcoming recession in March 2020 was to suspend the application of the rules on deficit and debt in the Stability and Growth Pact by invoking the general escape clause. This created great fiscal leeway for member states to adopt large scale stimulus packages to support businesses and vulnerable households. In May 2020, following suit to a French–German proposal, the Commission proposed the largest stimulus package in the EU’s history. NGEU consisted of 750 billion euros and, most importantly, included a substantial proportion of grants (over 300 billion euro), whereas the earlier response to the euro crisis had focused on loans to be reimbursed on punitive terms under conditionality programmes overseen by the Troika. The main financial instrument of NGEU, the Resilience and Recovery Facility (RRF), was designed to support countries that were not only acutely affected by the pandemic but also by the pro-cyclical, ‘austeritarian’ response to the euro crisis (Armingeon et al., 2022). With a set of explicit and implicit guidelines and earmarking of funds for distribution, the purpose of the RRF has been to foster the greening and digitalisation

the economy as well as the modernisation of the welfare state. Whilst supporting the recovery effort, the EU monetary authorities continued to expand their already substantial sovereign bond purchase programmes. The recovery agenda thus reflected an important turn towards investment and redistribution in contrast with the EU socio-economic governance of the previous decade.

Of particular interest to us is the ostensible use of ‘responsibility’ frames mobilised in a discourse that contrasted in important ways with the recent past. This was clearly articulated in the joint position of the French and German government of May 18th, 2020, which stated that:

Our goal is clear: Europe will overcome this crisis together and will emerge from it even stronger. Our joint efforts are guided by our will to achieve sustained recovery for the EU. In France and Germany, we are fully determined to shoulder our *responsibilities* towards the European Union and we will help open the way to moving on from the crisis. (Macron & Merkel, 2020)

EU leaders thus engaged in a form of crisis construal that framed the pandemic as a matter of collective responsibility. It would be tempting to adhere to a view of the pandemic crisis as inherently constituting a collective problem entailing a collective responsibility *by its very nature*. But even if the argument can be made that a pandemic of an unknown virus that touched upon virtually every country on the planet constitutes the closest conceivable case of an objectively ‘exogenous shock’ affecting all countries equally, this does not tell us much about how the crisis is construed – and much less about how it is addressed. Crises, whatever their shape, are not merely moments of structural or material tension but also – and crucially – moments of discursive and interpretive ambiguity (Hay, 2002, 2016; Schmidt, 2002, Ch. 5, 2008). The sheer complexity and pace of the Covid-19 crisis – or rather, *crises*, since it compounded the crisis in healthcare with those in public management, civil rights, transnational mobility restrictions, trade and supply chain blockages, and overall macro-economic stability – only adds to the inevitable uncertainty and interpretive ambiguity of the global predicament.

In the EU in particular, the arrival of the new coronavirus was met initially with a ‘sovereignist reflex’ (Benoît & Hay, 2022) that created a rapid re-entrenchment of the nation-state, a rhetoric of national warfare, and a general appeal to a rallying around the flag. Yet, this reflex occurred as the Union was broadly making sense of post-austerity and going through a reappraisal of the ‘*chacun sa merde*’ doctrine (in the words of former French President Nicolas Sarkozy), also known as the OHIO principle whereby it is the task of national leaders to ‘put their own house in order’ through rule compliance. Jean-Claude Juncker’s model of a ‘political’ Commission (Mérand, 2021; Peterson, 2017), later followed by Ursula von der Leyen, attests to

the evolving understanding of the need for a logic of European responsibility in dealing with collective problems at the top of the multi-level governance of the Union.

As argued by Crespy and Schramm (2021) in their tracing of the German positions in the initial stages of the pandemic, there was nothing objective about a crisis narrative grounded in the idea of a collective responsibility (see also Pierret and Howarth, this issue). Indeed, although Covid spread fast, it did not spread evenly. State capacities to respond to the virus were not evenly distributed either. If it would be hard to argue that the shock was not exogenous, there was very little in the initial evolution of the pandemic that would lead to a clear consensus on its symmetric character, be it in incidence or effects. This was clear in the initial positions of different member states about what constituted an adequate or appropriate response to the economic effects of lockdown measures.¹ Indeed, the informal meeting of EU's heads of state on the 26th of March turned into a 'shouting match' (Tooze, 2021, p. 181). The North–South cleavage amongst so-called 'creditors' and 'debtors' (Matthijs & McNamara, 2015) structured the conflict over what to do – especially as the incidence of Covid-19 cases began in earnest in Italy and Spain (Moreira Ramalho, 2023). The coalition of the 'frugals', formed by Germany and other Continental and Nordic European countries, was outspoken about their reluctance to embark on a collective recovery programme that stepped outside of the existing regime of economic governance, thereby opposing the proposals of the 'solidarity' coalition, which included France and Southern European countries (Fabbrini, 2023).

The creditor–debtor cleavage became progressively less salient – or was, at least, diluted by a discourse on 'solidarity' which increasingly resonated amongst European governing elites and publics alike. The clear concern that French President Emmanuel Macron made public regarding the peril of populists 'winning' if Europe does not respond to this crisis collectively further indicates how the management of the European economy was tightly linked to a management of its politicisation (Schimmelfennig, 2020). The leap to coordination was direct, as Macron insisted that: 'It is no longer possible ... to have financing that is not mutualised for the spending we are undertaking in the battle against Covid-19 and that we will have for the economic recovery' (cited in Mallet & Khalaf, 2020). The consistent 'populist challenge' (Kriesi, 2014) feared by Macron was understood as problematic for the European Union as a *polity* – and Brexit made it clear that identity-based politicisation of the EU could have more dramatic consequences than a 'constraining dissensus' (Hay, 2020; Hooghe & Marks, 2009). The spread of the pandemic and the consequences of lockdown were thus understood as a potentially existential crisis for the EU (Ferrera et al., 2021). Moreover, the widespread perception that a return to the politics of austerity could

lead to a perfect storm of anti-EU politicisation was a key element of the construal of the crisis as a collective responsibility.

The response to the pandemic thus led to a reconfiguration of economic governance in the EU that fits uneasily with the framework of an inevitable dilemma between ‘responsibility’ and ‘responsiveness’. Along with the spread of Covid-19 we observe the emergence of what we call ‘responsive responsibility’: an observable rearticulation of responsibility imperatives incorporating (rather than contradicting) responsiveness to politicisation processes. We build on the seminal categories proposed by Peter Mair, but we approach them through a different analytical lens and expand our empirical focus to the different levels of economic governance in the political system of the EU. This is briefly summarised in [Table 1](#).

Our analytical approach leads us to see both responsibility and responsiveness as contingent political constructs, rather than fixed normative or political categories. This approach implies a research agenda that sees responsibility and responsiveness as themselves objects of empirical investigation to be carried not only at the level of domestic politics, but also – and crucially – at the multi-level political system of economic governance

Table 1. Beyond responsibility versus responsiveness.

	Responsibility versus responsiveness	Responsive responsibility
Epistemology and theoretical foundations	Positivist: researcher defines properties and dynamics of party system(s)	Interpretive/constructivist: researcher analyses actors’ motivations and how they assign meaning to their actions
Empirical focus	Governments as separate agents instructed by several principals (voters, supranational organisations) National publics	Governments as collective principal Supranational institutions Transnational publics
Polity	National parliamentary democracy	EU multi-level political system
Responsibility	Complying with the rules	Decide on, (re)interpret, or change the rules
Responsiveness	Vertical: domestic constituency (majority)	Vertical: domestic constituency (majority) Horizontal: other member states governments and transnational constituencies
Responsiveness–responsibility nexus	Dilemma resulting from objective constraints: should the rules be complied with? At which electoral costs?	Intertwined, resulting from political construction: how does the responsiveness imperative serve to (re)interpret or change the rules?
Relevant politicisation processes	Domestic politics	Multi-level At the bottom: domestic politics From the bottom-up: interstate bargains At the top: inter and intra-institutional conflict

of the EU. In this perspective, governments are not understood as separate agents caught between supranational constraints and domestic constituencies when having to square the circle of responsibility and responsiveness. Rather, governments, along with other EU institutions, feature as collective principals in charge of (re)enacting the very rules that will constraint them. In the absence of clear chains of multi-level and transnational representation, the responsiveness imperative takes new, fuzzy forms including response to other member states' claims and the emergence of transnational contesting constituencies with uneven electoral significance across the continent.

This approach allows us to rearticulate the conceptual relationship between responsiveness and responsibility with greater analytical purchase on the shifting character of EU economic governance reform. It allows us to better interpret the ways in which rules and discourses on rules have shifted towards an incorporation of responsiveness imperatives in prevailing notions of responsible government. In the case of the EU, this refers not only to threats to the established political and social order in national societies, but also to threats to system maintenance, or risks of EU disintegration. As a result, this shift towards what we term 'responsive responsibility' implies a recognition that, if rules are seen as problematic or inappropriate to achieve policy goals, they can and must be reinterpreted or changed. Responsive responsibility, refers, in simple terms, to the repoliticisation of a system built on the premise of 'governing by rules and ruling by numbers' (Schmidt, 2020a).

Politicisation as driver of the reconfiguration of the responsibility–responsiveness nexus

Politicisation is a term that has acquired increasing importance in theoretical explanations of the development of the European Union. But it has tended to hold mainly negative connotations, with the view that growing politicisation has made it increasingly difficult for the EU to develop positive solutions to its policy problems through a deepening of European integration. A key contribution of this special issue is to steer research on the politicisation of the EU away from the argument that politicisation is always constraining, to suggest that it can under certain circumstances have an integrative impact, encouraging cooperation and the adoption of new EU tools to tackle policy issues and, thereby, a reconfiguration of the responsibility–responsiveness nexus.

There is broad academic consensus regarding the consistent increase in politicisation of the European Union, especially since Maastricht (de Wilde, 2011; Hooghe & Marks, 2006; Hutter et al., 2016). The central argument of this literature is that the growing transfer of authority regarding key policy areas away from the national level to the European institutions has led to a

heightened politicisation of both EU policies and the polity as a whole (de Wilde & Zürn, 2012; Grande & Hutter, 2016; Hooghe & Marks, 2009). Moreover, this literature has observed that, contrary to the predictions of early functionalist scholarship (Schmitter, 1969), politicisation in the EU has not led to increased integration, but rather the opposite. According to the 'post-functionalists', politicisation processes have largely unfolded on an axis of identity and territorial cleavages in EU politics, and 'to the extent that exclusive identity infuses preferences and to the extent that European issues are politicised, so we expect to see downward pressure on the level and scope of integration' (Hooghe & Marks, 2009, p. 21). Put more simply, this stream of literature hypothesises that politicisation leads to a 'constraining dissensus' on both the deepening and widening of the EU polity (Hooghe & Marks, 2006, 2009, 2018).

EU scholars have defined politicisation as the expansion of the 'scope of conflict' (Schattschneider, 1975) and converged on a tripartite conceptualisation combining increased *issue salience* with heightened *polarisation* and *expansion of actors* in the public sphere, as measured for the most part through analysis of media news, reports and surveys (de Wilde, 2011; Grande & Hutter, 2016; Zürn, 2016). This kind of measurement of levels of polarisation, salience, or expansion, whilst tremendously useful in and of itself, tends to disregard both the substance of the EU debates under enquiry and the different ways in which politicisation occurs depending on arenas and levels of government. Put simply, the analytical lens used to capture forms of politicisation in the media does not consider the analogous politicising processes occurring within institutions or in the interactions amongst member states. This therefore leads to a limited view both of what politicisation is and what it does, not the least regarding how these processes contribute to shaping what is perceived as political in the first place (Dupuy & van Ingelgom, 2019; Zürn, 2016).

The European response to the economic consequences of the pandemic poses a further challenge to this literature on politicisation, and it does so in ways not too dissimilar from the one posed by the 'responsibility–responsiveness' dilemma. The difficulty for the mainstream politicisation literature in understanding the unfolding of a potential 'Hamiltonian moment' lies in a form of analytical determinism that leaves little place for contingency in politics. This need not be so, for Hooghe and Marks themselves argue explicitly that politicisation is 'constructed' and, equally important, that public opinion on Europe is malleable (Hooghe & Marks, 2009, p. 13). When defined not only in terms of heightened salience or actor expansion but also in terms of the actual enlarging of available policy options, politicisation can also lead to an 'empowering dissensus' (Bouza & Oleart, 2018; Oleart, 2020) putting political pressure on European decision makers to take collective action.

Recent scholarly work in fact takes a more nuanced view of politicisation that challenges assumptions that its effects are necessarily constraining for European cooperation. Reviewing both the theoretical literature about EU integration and the wealth of empirical studies about various forms of politicisation in the EU, Rauh has pointed out that ‘against these conceptual claims in the literature, neither an enabling, an absent, nor a universally constraining effect of politicisation appear as set in stone’ (2020, p. 126). Moreover, Wendler and Hurrelmann (2022), building on Schmidt (e.g., 2008), add discursive institutionalism to the post-functionalist framework as a counterbalance to the rationalist assumptions often accompanying the post-functionalist approach. In their ‘discursive post-functionalism’, framing strategies and political communication help explain how and when governmental elites may overcome the constraining politicisation assumed by post-functionalists. Schmidt (2020b) elaborated on how during the Eurozone crisis the politicisation evident in the contestation amongst EU institutional actors may have constrained but did not stop more positive ideational innovations and discursive dynamics that led to reinterpretations of the rules and the move away from austerity and structural reforms detrimental to labour and social policy (see also Crespy & Vanheuverzwijn, 2019).

Similarly, Jabko and Luhman (2019) have argued that rather than being constrained by politicisation in the face of the EU’s multiple ‘crises’, European leaders reconfigured the practice and discourse of sovereignty to allow for new policy tools at EU level regarding bail-outs and border controls. Jabko (2019) has additionally shown how during the Eurozone crisis the discursive repertoires of ‘governance’ changed in ways that ensured that political contestation may have constrained but did not derail EU institutional actors’ increasing flexibility, innovation and experimentation. Finally, Copeland (2022) also highlights the positive politicisation of EU institutional actors, in this case the self-described ‘political’ Juncker Commission which acted as a ‘politicising *bricoleur*’ as it ‘socialised’ the European Semester, to make it more responsive to member states’ different needs (Zeitlin & Vanhercke, 2018). As Schimmelfennig puts it, ‘EU actors are not helpless “victims” of domestic politicisation’ (2020, p. 343), but rather active agents in its management (see also Bressanelli *et al.*, 2020).

EU politics allow for – and show evidence of – relatively autonomous politicisation processes at different levels that are generative of consensus, cooperation, as well as contention and polarisation (Bickerton *et al.*, 2015; Schmidt, 2016, 2019; van Middelaar, 2013). This wider understanding of politicisation fits well with Schattschneider’s (1975) initial intuitions that politicisation can be understood as a process that changes modes of doing politics. As the ‘scope of conflict’ is expanded – as the EU becomes more and more widely politicised – we expect to see differences in how officeholders exert their power, a shift away from purely technocratic logics of public action,

and a greater focus on responsiveness (Mérand, 2021). In this context, politicisation can therefore be seen as contributing to a redefinition of prevalent notions of responsible government, of responsiveness, and of the relationship between the two. As argued in Hay (2007), politicisation is essentially about acknowledging the contingency of political decisions, the possibility of human influence on the course of political events, and the agency through deliberations and actions serving that purpose. In brief, politicisation occurs when political and social *actors* can *argue* about *choices* to be made between policy alternatives.

This more encompassing – indeed constructivist – understanding of politicisation propels the authors of the articles in this special issue to explore how these processes of politicisation unfolded during the pandemic, as well as in the years prior to it, at different levels of the EU's multi-level governance: at the bottom, from the bottom-up and at the top (Schmidt, 2019). At the level of the citizenry, we seek to capture the shifting attitudes towards the economic governance of the EU as expressed not only in public opinion and citizens' beliefs but also in social mobilisation and electoral politics (see Della Porta, Parks, and Portos, this issue; Dupuy and Van Ingelgom, this issue). At the intermediate level of national institutions and politics, we explore how the political systems of the different member states evolved in their positions regarding the rules of European economic governance and how different politicisation strategies unfolded – both within countries and in their relationship with other member states and EU institutions (see Crespi, Massart, and Schmidt, this issue; Pierret and Howarth, this issue; Kinski, Fromage, and Blauburger, this issue). Finally, at the level of EU institutions, we explore how rules have shifted and how discourse and policies have been mobilised to justify and legitimate the evolving structure of economic governance (Mérand this issue; Fontan and Goudsmedt, this issue; Jabko and Kupzok, this issue).

The different contributions that form the present issue mobilise a plurality of analytical approaches, from ethnography to quantitative text analysis. At different levels, the authors in this collection searched for clues in the manifest politicisation processes that are at work in the EU. Two guiding threads link the extraordinary wealth of empirical work that follows. On the one hand, the different contributions show the ways in which notions of responsibility and responsiveness evolved and shifted economic governance in the EU away from the previous gravitational pull of austerity, and towards fiscal sharing, deeper integration, and even climate action. On the other, politicisation processes are analysed through a constructivist lens that emphasises contingency, agency, and indeed time in emergence and consequences of politicisation dynamics. This allows, as the following section shows, for the contributions to fully grasp the distinctiveness of the pandemic and its

impacts, but also the longer lineages of contention around austerity, going back at least to the euro crisis, which have allowed for a reconfiguration of economic governance in the EU.

Political reconfigurations leading to ‘responsive responsibility’

The contributions in this special issue show that the evolving nexus between responsibility and responsiveness was not merely a result of the management of the pandemic. We can observe that politicisation processes, which long preceded the spread of Covid, made the dichotomy between responsible and responsive governments in the EU increasingly untenable. Indeed, as we argue, responsiveness was ostensibly articulated as an integral part of responsible government in the EU. In a remarkable discursive turn, ignoring demands emanating from member states in economic difficulty or from national/transnational sections of European societies has been increasingly seen as irresponsible and as jeopardising the political or territorial integrity of the Union (Ferrera et al., 2021).

Beyond the incorporation of the responsiveness imperatives into the (re)definition of responsible government, we further observe an *enlargement* of both notions. The question as to whom decision makers should be responsive to remains open depending on which social movements are listened to, whether citizens feel they are heard, and how national contexts, economic as much as political, may affect all of this. Fuzzy transnational constituencies seem to be emerging as foreign publics may indirectly be considered in inter-governmental deliberations, or non-majoritarian institutions may tend to defend the ‘common interests’ of an abstract European citizen. On the other hand, various actors put forward diverse conceptions of responsibility ranging from a commitment to preserve the integrity of the Union, including preventing a populist backlash, reordering policy priorities (e.g., green transition vs. fighting inflation) or assert EU agency in the face of financial markets and global threats.

These findings emerge from empirical investigations at all three levels of politicisation. The investigation of politicisation at the bottom reveals the complex and at times contradictory nature of social demands. Della Porta, Parks, and Portos demonstrate in this issue that demands for responsiveness differ greatly ‘at the bottom’. Far-right, identitarian, and anti-vax mobilisation has called for the reconstruction of responsibility as responsiveness to ethnically defined national constituencies, whilst opposing deeper European integration. In contrast, mobilisation on the left, from the European Social Forums in the 2000s to the more recent environmental movements (Fridays for Future, Extinction Rebellion), calls for responsibility understood as expanding responsiveness to solidarity on a global scale, with greater action at the European level as well. These differences are mirroring differentiated patterns in

levels of support across large EU regions (South, North, East, West) since the 2000s.

Exploring ordinary citizens' perceptions over the long haul through a qualitative analysis of focus groups (from 2005 to 2019), Dupuy and Van Ingelgom find that for citizens, the gap identified by Mair between responsibility and responsiveness remained large and for the most part unchanged over time. But whilst citizens shared the view that political actors – whether at the national or EU level – have proved more responsive to the markets than the people, they were divided on whether political actors' compliance with technocratic governance was a matter of choice or necessity. An important insight emerging from the 'deliberative' setting of the focus groups is the contingent and contested character of 'responsibility' in the discourse of participants who value decision makers' capacity to act and make choices (as opposed to be submissive to market forces), and their ability to promote the 'common good'.

Exploring bottom-up dynamics, Pierret and Howarth's study undermines the idea that a German public reluctant towards fiscal sharing in the EU would constrain the German government in a mechanistic fashion. Rather, they show that public debate and the reconfiguration of discourses and ideas in public debate has allowed for a shift in Germany's stance on fiscal integration, away from the 'frugals'. This shift is deeply linked to evolving notions of 'moral hazard' and 'responsibility' in the discourse of elite economic policy-makers. During the Eurozone crisis, German policy-makers strategically constructed the concept of moral hazard to explain the crisis in a way that enabled them to blame the 'debtors' for irresponsibility, and therefore not deserving of 'solidarity' other than through conditionality programmes that ensured repayment to the 'creditors'. In contrast, during the pandemic crisis, policy-makers were constrained in their use of the moral hazard concept, as the pandemic crisis was constructed as a largely blameless (at least within the EU) exogenous shock. Responsiveness in terms of solidarity was therefore possible – through a one-off temporary fund.

Amidst the politicisation at the bottom that began with the Eurozone crisis, Germany's Federal Constitutional Court (FCC) also played an important bottom-up politicising role through its direct challenges to the legality of the ECB's increasingly expansive monetary policies and, indirectly, to the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU), which certified these as legal. In their contribution to this issue, Kinski, Fromage, and Blauburger explain the clashes between the two legal systems. Through a detailed frame analysis comparing legal conflicts during the euro crisis and the pandemic, the contribution reveals how the legal interpretation of what can be done in European economic governance remains not just contingent but contested. At the heart of contention are divergent and shifting notions of 'responsible' government. During the euro crisis, the German *Bundesverfassungsgericht* was

vocal in reminding the Bundestag that its responsibility was essentially one vis-à-vis German taxpayers, whereas the CJEU seeks to balance out respective responsibilities in a viable multi-level order. Conceptions of responsibilities seem however to converge during the pandemic, as the two-level legal dialogue reveals the articulation of a shared responsibility to maintain the EU political and legal order in an exceptional moment of crisis.

Politicisation from the bottom-up affected politicisation at the top, as supranational EU actors were also empowered. The origins of this process, as Crespy, Massart, and Schmidt show, go back to the mid-2010s when the relaxing of the fiscal rules (in the European Semester) and the embryo of a Eurozone budget were the subject of controversial discussions in the European Council. Tracing the changing frames and narratives about economic governance by the leaders of France and Germany as well as by the Presidents of the Commission, they show that responsibility, which at the start of the Eurozone crisis signified strictly respecting the fiscal rules, progressively encompassed notions of common insurance, common investment and incorporated concerns related to responsiveness. The 'impossible' is therefore gradually becoming 'possible' as flexibility results from reinterpretations of the rules and allows layering new elements onto the old. These actors' understanding of responsiveness also appears in an enlarged, two-fold form. Whilst trust in government, or the ability to address acute social problems points to the traditionally vertical relation between national leaders and their constituencies, a second, even more salient form of responsiveness features even more prominently in German and French leaders' discourse, that is the need to respond the demands of other member states governments (and publics) for greater solidarity in order to overcome conflicts and prevent disintegration and democratic crisis.

The transformations in EU economic governance culminating in the pandemic response also suggest that politicisation 'at the top' in and amongst EU institutions has been a key driver of 'responsive responsibility' albeit in various ways and to various extents. When only the Commission pushes for reform whilst the Council remains divided, the gap between responsibility and responsiveness may persist, as Mérand demonstrates for the area of taxation. Whilst the Commission engaged in 'political work' by mobilising networks, academics, and NGOs to construct a discourse on tax justice that garnered public support to change the rules of corporate taxation, some member states in the Council resisted in the name of responsibility understood as respect for national sovereignty. Ironically, however, their strategy to depoliticise the issue by kicking it upstairs, to the OECD, backfired when the US shifted its own position, to support a 15 per cent global corporate tax.

The analytical framework proposed in this special issue further illuminates the striking evolution observed, especially in the last decade, of the role of the ECB in EU economic governance. The ECB was built as the epitome of central

banking independence and given a primary mandate to maintain price stability. Its institutional architecture and policies constituted powerful external constraints to national economic policy-making, especially in the earlier stages of the euro crisis – a fact featuring prominently in Mair's analysis (Mair, 2013a). In their contribution, based on topic modelling of a vast corpus of ECB discourse since its inception, Goutsmedt and Fontan show, however, that the enlargement of the Bank's balance sheet during and after Draghi's tenure, the concern over financial stability, the stabilisation of sovereign debt markets, and the more recent growth of concerns over 'greenflation' are reflective of the contingent character of ECB's own responsibilities. For over two decades, the ECB and its officials have recast, through their strategic framing, their mandate of price stability in ways that allow the institution to incorporate growing political demands, from the stabilisation of sovereign debt markets to the development of a green financial agenda.

Whilst Goutsmedt and Fontan's argument rests on a longitudinal analysis of the ECB's framing of its responsibilities, Jabko and Kupzok propose a comparative analysis of the emergence of 'green' central banking in the EU and in the USA. Comparing the American Federal Reserve (Fed) and the ECB allows for further elaboration on the contingent character of monetary responsibilities, the role of politicisation processes in their evolution, and finally on how they influence governments' economic policy-making. They show that the ECB has made greater strides towards climate action, capitalising on public demands for a green transition, and on limited political backlash. The Fed, on the other hand, has failed to incorporate ecological concerns in its policies given relentless political pressure coming from Conservatives. In the case of these central banks, as Jabko and Kupzok show, the shift towards 'green central banking' was at all times shaped by a careful navigation of the political context and a conscious objective of maintaining the public perception of political independence.

Conclusion

The reconfigurations of economic governance in the EU observed especially since the pandemic seem to contradict Mair's bleak prognosis according to which the gap between responsible and responsive government was inevitably bound to widen. The constructivist approach developed in this issue reconceptualises the relationship between responsibility and responsiveness and makes an original argument on the role of politicisation in the political rearticulation of the two imperatives. We do this through an analysis of politicisation processes unfolding at multiple levels in the political system of the EU.

This collection shows the contingent character of prevailing notions of political responsibility, and how this is translated in different ways of addressing

old and new problems such as persisting ‘imbalances’ amongst territories, social inequality, technological change (digitalisation), and, most crucially, climate change. ‘System maintenance’ has risen to an absolute, overarching responsibility in the face of the populist challenge and disintegrative trends induced by the pandemic. Moreover, we observe an evolution in how responsiveness imperatives are articulated beyond vertical relationships between domestic governments and electorates, in a way that encompasses more horizontal forms of responsiveness, either to other member states’ governments or to diffuse transnational publics.

As the different contributions show, the manifold processes of politicisation of the EU that unfolded in the years prior to the pandemic were central to the emergence of what we call ‘responsive responsibility’. Notably, during the pandemic what started out as a constraining dissensus was eventually superseded by enabling forms of politicisation. The outcome was a reconfiguration of economic governance away from a solely rules-based regime and towards a more positive regime relying on new instruments of investment and fiscal sharing.

The central contribution of this collection is to indicate that prevailing notions of responsible and responsive government are socially constructed, and greatly shaped by politicisation processes. We indeed begin by the puzzling observation that the political reconfigurations observed in the EU around the pandemic fit uneasily with predictions of a widening gap or, for that matter, of a ‘constraining dissensus’. Our constructivist lens allows us to understand the relationship amongst responsibility, responsiveness, and politicisation processes as contingent and open-ended. This means, however, that our observation of a form of ‘responsive responsibility’ in the response to the pandemic is itself contingent. In the world of crises in which EU politics has unfolded for years, it is hard to foresee how these different imperatives and processes will evolve. Geopolitical turmoil, energy shortages, inflation surges or financial instability may reconfigure this relationship in yet different terms – and with open-ended possibilities for integration patterns in general, and economic governance in particular.

As the most dramatic effects of the pandemic faded, debates over the return and reform of fiscal rules were rekindled. Sets of policies that were core to the recovery agenda are themselves repoliticised. This is especially the case with the green transition, which faces different forms of backlash – either from actors pushing for a stop to new policies and regulations, or from actors claiming for deeper socio-economic transformation under the banner of a ‘just transition’. It is not clear, from our standpoint, which political hierarchies will prevail and structure ideas of responsible and responsive government in the European future. At the time of writing, the response to problems of intra-European imbalances, collective security or climate change is still present, but appears to be losing momentum. We hear calls for

compliance with market imperatives and a return to 'sound' socio-economic policy. The struggle over reconfigurations of economic governance in the EU continues to be a critical object of scientific investigation. We expect future research can benefit from the analytical framework and empirical findings presented in this collection of articles.

Note

1. It is important to point out that the European coordination of the response to the pandemic went beyond the economic arena and led to an unprecedented pooling of authority regarding vaccination development and roll-out. Our contribution, however, will focus exclusively on the former dimension of public action.

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