

## **Binding for bonding? How EU social and political asymmetries creates the condition for the strengthening of the EU polity**

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Nextgeneration EU has been described as a quantum leap for what concerns EU solidarity. By activating a massive cross-national redistribution, this EU policy has allowed creating the conditions for a quick recovery from the COVID crisis and improved the social conditions in the peripheral Member States. When comparing this output with the EU policy during the Great Recession, Nextgeneration EU is puzzling. Given the different structural preferences at the Member States level, what has allowed to find a compromise within the Member States? Current explanations of this policy output tend to focus on the framing of the two crises in terms of symmetries and the attribution of moral hazard (Ferrera et al. 2021, Mirò 2021) or by looking at intergovernmental coalitions (Fabbrini 2021, De la Porte and Jensen 2021). While we consider these explanations insightful, we want to focus on a less researched aspect of Nextgeneration EU by looking at this instrument from a state-building perspective, and by focusing on how political actors were constrained, in their decision-making during the negotiations, by structural aspects related to EU asymmetries. According to state-building literature, two of the functions of state-like authorities are that of binding and bonding. While the binding function consists in the attribution of power to a central authority, the bonding function allows creating a (national) community of sharing that improves the legitimacy of the state. The EU, as an experimental polity, has been traditionally weak on both the binding and bonding dimensions; these weaknesses have affected differently the Member States (e.g., the North-South line of conflict during the Great Recession). This research will investigate how the interplay of the bonding and binding function has allowed the EU to improve both its binding authority for what concerns aspects that have been considered problematic (economic governance, rule of law) and its bonding capacity concerning EU solidarity both with regards to its ordinary policies (such as Cohesion Policy), as well as its crisis policy-making (such as Nextgeneration EU). The research's dependent variable will consist of a fuzzy-set indicator based on two dimensions (conditionality and cross-national redistribution). The rising trend in terms of conditionality and EU solidarity will be partly explained by looking at two case studies, the 2021-2027 Multi-annual Financial Framework negotiations and the Nextgeneration EU negotiations, highlighting how rule of law conditionality and macroeconomic conditionality was used to find a compromise between coalitions of Member States with different preferences on levels of cross-national redistribution, and highlighting the similarities between the two cases. In this way, we should be able to demonstrate the presence of a trend in the process of integration, based on the political and economic asymmetries. From this perspective, the crises and

asymmetries can become an expected ally to the EU polity-building, through the bartering of bonding resources with binding authority.