

## COMMENTARY

### **The governance of the recovery and resilience facility: a critical political economy perspective**

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The Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) is the cornerstone of the NextGenerationEU, a stimulus package marking the shift of European governance towards expansionary policies and fiscal coordination. The instrument is temporary but with potentially lasting effects. This commentary highlights that a critical political economy (CPE) perspective allows us to consider the RRF not only as a governance innovation within the EU institutional architecture, but importantly as an instrument of state transformation. It is hardly up for debate that the RRF has been used to promote investments and reforms that were already on the EU agenda. However, I contend that such instrument and reforms actively transform the state more broadly, reconfiguring its relationship with the market, in a shift towards what scholars have called authoritarian neoliberalism. Against this background, four mechanisms are identified through which the RRF entailed state transformation at the transnational but importantly and interconnectedly at the member state level. I consider the RRF as a whole, but in terms of National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRP) I particularly draw on Italy, due to its NRRP being the largest in terms of resources allocated. The mechanisms are identified as: centralisation of the executive, legitimisation through technocratic expertise rather than the parliamentary process, the creation of new institutions, and the content of specific policies carried out.

**Keywords** European governance • executive • technocracy • recovery and resilience facility • neoliberal state transformations

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## Introduction

The NextGenerationEU is a stimulus package approved in 2020, marking the shift of European governance towards expansionary policies and fiscal coordination. Its cornerstone is the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), which came into force in 2021, and through which member states can access grants and loans through the development of National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRP), which last until the end of 2026. The instrument is temporary but with potentially lasting effects. In particular, the governance of the RRF has been analysed as to represent a new model to inform future EU economic governance and deepening (fiscal) integration (Crespy et al, 2024; Zeitlin et al, 2024). More specifically, Crespy et al (2023) adopt a discursive institutionalist lens to argue that ‘the impossible became possible’ due to the shifting narratives of EU leaders, progressively including the responsiveness paradigm in the idea of responsible government. Zeitlin et al (2024), on the other hand, focus on evaluating the effectiveness of the RRF institutional design, and they conclude that ‘national ownership’ is reinforced, increasing therefore legitimacy vis-à-vis previous European economic governance mechanisms, and that the pairing of investment and reforms leads to increased implementation of such reforms and less opposition to those domestically (Zeitlin et al, 2024: 879). Debating these perspectives, I highlight that a critical political economy (CPE) perspective allows us to consider the governance of the RRF not only as governance innovation within the EU institutional architecture, but importantly as an instrument of state transformation.

In doing so, I provide critical background analysis and reference to current developments at the EU level, aiming to refresh the debate on the so-called ‘return of the state’. In line with a long tradition of CPE scholarship, I propose to rather depart from the premise that the state never ‘goes away’ or ‘retreats’ but rather undergoes profound transformations (Bieler, 2002; Sauer and Wöhl, 2011; van Apeldoorn et al, 2012; Cozzolino, 2021; Horn and Wigger, 2023). Precisely studying empirically this transformation, it is possible to grasp the changing internal relation between state and market as historically specific to capitalism (Bieler and Morton, 2018). As Cozzolino (2021) points out, the state can be grasped relationally through its transformation in space and time; here I go further and use such a framework to analyse European governance and its relation with member states. Indeed, scholars have noted the importance of ‘national ownership’ of the Recovery and Resilience Plans (Zeitlin et al, 2023). However, nation states are not homogeneous actors, and governance mechanisms favour some actors over others within and beyond national boundaries, as will be shown in the following pages. CPE studies on the EU have a long tradition of going beyond institutions, to study the social forces that shape them. Scholars have highlighted the competing hegemonic projects shaping the integration process (Buch-Hansen and Wigger, 2011) as well as the key role of transnational capital in steering it (van Apeldoorn, 2000) and the struggle over enlargement (Bieler, 2002). More recently, scholars have also highlighted the importance of studying not only domination, but also disruption and resistance within the European Union as well as more broadly the global political economy (Bailey et al, 2017; Bonfert et al, 2022). In this commentary, I build on such scholarship to make sense of current developments at the EU level, that is the RRF and its governance.

It is widely acknowledged that the RRF has been used to promote investments and reforms that were already on the EU agenda, such as the green and digital

transition, as well as the rationalisation of public administration and the marketisation of local public services. However, I further contend that such an instrument and the specific reforms are actively transforming the state more broadly, reconfiguring its relationship with the market. Such a changing relationship can be explained through the concept of ‘neoliberalisation’ as a political project and a non-linear process (Peck et al, 2018) as well as the shift towards what scholars have identified as authoritarian neoliberalism (Bruff and Tansel, 2019; Cozzolino, 2019). As Bruff (2014) has explained, authoritarian neoliberalism refers to ‘the reconfiguring of the state into a less democratic entity through constitutional and legal changes that seek to insulate it from social and political conflict’.

Against this background, I propose four mechanisms through which the RRF entailed state transformation at the transnational but importantly and interconnectedly also at the member state level. I consider the RRF as a whole, but in terms of NRRP I particularly draw on Italy as a ‘vantage point’ (Bieler, 2021), due to its Recovery and Resilience Plan being the largest in absolute terms. The mechanisms are identified as: centralisation of the executive, legitimisation through technocratic expertise rather than the parliamentary process, the creation of new institutions, and the content of specific policies carried out.

## Centralisation of the executive power

The decision-making process on the Recovery and Resilience Plans took place through negotiations between national executives and the EU Commission. In such negotiations, other national actors were sidelined, as empirical studies have shown (Guidi and Moschella, 2021; Miró et al, 2024). The drafting of the plans in Italy in 2021 was at the centre of political conflicts, which led to the fall of the incumbent government and the installation of a technocratic government led by Draghi and tasked specifically to deal with the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and to draft a NRRP that would receive the approval of the Commission. The Draghi government fulfilled its task, at the expense of democratic participation as decision making was further centralised, and with a stronger emphasis on structural reforms (Guidi and Moschella, 2021: 407). Miró et al also underline the dominance of the executive in Italy and in particular: ‘extreme time pressure implied a loss of voice for domestic stakeholders and parliamentary representatives’ (Miró et al, 2024: 1626). Importantly, also within the executive it was the economic and financial minister who took a central role at the expense of others (Zeitlin et al, 2023: 8), just as the Directorate-General for Economic and Financial Affairs, as well as the ECOFIN council, have a prominent role in the European Semester at the EU level. I argue that this executive centralisation was not a coincidence, due exclusively to time constraints and ‘emergency’ management, but rather can be inscribed in a longer trend of executive centralisation within the Italian state, connected to the neoliberalisation of the state especially since the 1990s, as empirically shown by Cozzolino (2019) with a historical analysis of law-making in Italy. Contrary to scholars that consider such centralisation to be a ‘natural consequence’ (Zeitlin et al, 2023: 8), I argue that it is the result of political choices that are inscribed in longer processes of neoliberalisation of the state. As Cozzolino (2021) has shown for the Italian case, the centralisation of the executive paired with neoliberal reform is a trend that in the past decades

has characterised the Italian political economy. The centralisation of the executive power in the decision-making process around the RRF has implied not only the marginalisation of the national parliament, but also a loss of voice for social actors such as organised labour and subnational authorities in the making of the NRRPs (see also [Kyriazi et al, 2024: 200](#)).

## **Legitimation through technocratic expertise**

Given the lack of involvement of national parliaments, as well as local social actors, the NRRP risked lacking public legitimation. Instead, such legitimation has been sought to be achieved through the technocratic expertise that shaped such NRRPs. According to [Cozzolino and Giannone \(2023\)](#), who study the Italian case, the centrality of technocracy in the Italian NRRP is not only given by the fact that in Italy it was drafted by a technocratic government (which means, by definition a government composed of experts), but also that the management structure of such a plan responds to the principle of ‘governance by expertise’ – which prioritises legitimacy attained as a result of the competence of decision makers and thereby sidelines democratic representativeness ([Cozzolino and Giannone, 2023: 170](#)). The technocratic government that drafted the NRRP was led by Mario Draghi – a former high-level executive within the Bank of Italy whose biography is closely intertwined with the neoliberalisation of the Italian state ([Gasseau and Maccarrone, 2025: 4](#)) It should be noted that the prominence of experts within governance and decision making is characteristic of the European Commission, not only because it has a strong bureaucratic component alongside the political one, but also because it relies on expert groups for policy formulation and implementation. The Commission, which is the supranational EU body, has historically been a powerful actor within the EU’s institutional architecture, and its centrality has been further strengthened through the European Semester within the New Economic Governance framework ([Erne et al, 2024](#)) as well as within the RRF ([Cozzolino and Giannone, 2023: 171](#)), which is inserted in such governance framework. In fact, we have already seen that the drafting of the plans was through negotiations between the Commission and member states, but followed the direction spelled out in the European Semester ([Zeitlin et al, 2024](#)). The Commission also plays a key role in the monitoring and implementation of the plans, as it assesses the progress of reforms and investments and determines the disbursement of subsequent tranches of funding through ‘milestones’ and ‘targets’ that define the timeline of the plans ([Cozzolino and Giannone, 2023: 171](#)). The input of experts to NRRPs is not only recommended by the Commission, but it is actively funded through the ‘Technical Support Instrument’ ([European Commission, 2025a](#)). This was established in 2021, with a specific goal as stated by its [Regulation \(EU\) 2021/240](#): ‘The specific objectives of the instrument should be to assist national authorities in their endeavours to design, develop and implement reforms and to prepare, amend, implement and revise recovery and resilience plans.’ Overall, as [Cozzolino and Giannone \(2023: 181\)](#) show through an analysis of legislative texts, the RRF has strengthened the role of technocratic expertise within the interplay of European and member-state governance. [Lippi and Terlizzi \(2024\)](#) note in reference to the Italian NRRP: ‘the decision-making and coordination structure is entirely technical, comprising professionals, entrepreneurs, academics,

judges, and central administration executives, without real involvement of government majority representatives' (Lippi and Terlizzi, 2024: 318). From a CPE perspective, we know that expertise is not neutral, but rather it is constructed within existing power structures. Moreover, technocratic decision making can be a means of de-politicising political processes, shielding them from social conflict and hence hollowing out their democratic content – referring to the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism explained in the introduction. Moreover, it is also successive technocratic governments in Italian economic history that fostered successive neoliberal policies in Italy – not only in the 1990s but also recently with the implementation of austerity policies by the Monti government in the context of the Eurozone crisis. Hence, the role of technocratic expertise, which we have seen is central in the RRF, is linked to the transformation of the state in a neoliberal sense – through the form of the decision-making process as well as the content of the specific policies carried out.

### **Creation of new institutions**

Furthermore, let us consider the reconfiguration of state apparatuses through the creation of new institutions. As mentioned earlier, the drafting, implementation and monitoring of the plans connected to the RRF have centralised the executive power, and within that, in particular the economic and financial ministries. Moreover, it should also be noted that new institutions have been created for the implementation of the plans. The 'steering committee'<sup>1</sup> is chaired by the prime minister and composed of ministers and undersecretaries who are responsible for the matters addressed in each meeting. Its responsibilities include formulating strategic guidelines for the implementation of the NRRP and monitoring the measures undertaken (Article 2 of Decree Law 77/2021) (Openpolis, 2024a). The other key body is 'General Inspectorate for the NRRP at the State General Accounting Department'.<sup>2</sup> Formerly named Central Service for the NRRP<sup>3</sup> until Decree Law No. 13/2023, it is responsible for the operational coordination of the plans' implementation, the monitoring system, the management of the Next Generation EU fund, and the financial flows deriving from it; it is a point of contact with the European Commission (Openpolis, 2024a). Other ad hoc institutions include: the 'NRRP Audit Office',<sup>4</sup> Unit for the Streamlining and Improvement of Regulation,<sup>5</sup> 'NRRP Mission Structure at the Presidency of the Council of Ministers'<sup>6</sup> and 'Delegated political authority for the NRRP'<sup>7</sup> (Openpolis, 2024a).

These institutions are linked to the NRRP – therefore, they are temporary and should not last beyond the implementation of such NRRP. However, the creation of such ad-hoc institutions not only strengthens the centralisation of the decision-making process, but also actively modifies the state apparatus and its institutional configuration. It is indeed those responsible for carrying out the plans who inevitably end up having the closest knowledge of them – that is, of a large-scale public policy programme. Entrusting executive responsibility, and the associate learning derived from it, to new institutions beyond the existing state apparatus means in effect actively modifying such apparatus. Their temporary nature does not mean that their establishment will not have lasting effects, in effect reshaping the institutional configurations involved in policy implementation.

As Cozzolino and Giannone (2023: 171) have also argued, the creation of ad hoc technical bodies, placed under the direct control of the executive throughout

the various phases of the NRRP's implementation, represents a significant vertical consolidation of power in the decision-making process. [Lippi and Terlizzi \(2024\)](#) call such institutional configuration 'adhocracy', and argue that it entails 'an extraordinary organizational structure outside of ordinary bureaucracy, but interconnected with it thanks to some terminals (the ministerial mission units), thus generating a specific technical decision-making center untied from the control of political parties as well as lower levels of government' ([Lippi and Terlizzi, 2024](#): 313). It becomes therefore clear that there is a strong link between the creation of these new institutions and the two mechanisms explored in the previous sections – centralisation of the executive power as well as technocratic expertise.

## Policy content

The literature on European governance, between the European Semester and the NextGenerationEU, tends to focus on determining the effectiveness of such methods of implementing reforms ([Zeitlin et al, 2024](#); [Guardiancich et al, 2025](#)). However, little attention has been paid to what these reforms actually entail. This links to the CPE insight of studying the content of the integration process, rather than only its form ([Bieler and Morton, 2018](#)) as well as problematising the role of the state ([Bruff and Tansel, 2019](#)). [Erne et al \(2024\)](#) go in this direction through an extensive empirical study of CSRs within the European Semester, and find an overarching script of commodification of public services and employment relations. As the authors argue:

the commodification of employment relations and public services is two-sided, inasmuch as it combines a quantitative attack on the level of workers' wages and on the level of resources and coverage of public services (curtailment) with the qualitative marketisation of governance mechanisms in employment relations (bargaining mechanisms and hiring and firing rules) and in public services (at sectoral and provider level). ([Erne et al, 2024](#): 59)

With reference to the RRF, the authors argue that the call for more public investment has been accompanied by commodifying reforms of public services ([Erne et al, 2024](#): 333). [Gasseau and Maccarrone \(2025\)](#) have shown the continuities across the different modalities of crisis management, examining its content rather than form, in particular showing the continued emphasis on commodification of local public services, as well as the renewed interest in industrial policy taking the shape of deregulation in the name of competitiveness and public investment mobilised for private capital.

Furthermore, let us examine the issue of which actors are empowered by policies, by looking at the Italian case. According to Openpolis, based on data provided by the Italian Court of Auditors in 2024, in successive revisions of the plan there has been an increase of €11.1 billion in NRRP investments implemented in the form of incentives and tax breaks. The variation is largely due to the introduction of new tax credit measures under the Transition 5.0 plan<sup>8</sup> (€6.3 billion), support for the ecological transition of the production system and for strategic supply chains in net-zero technologies<sup>9</sup> (€2.5 billion), and incentives for self-production of energy from renewable sources in SMEs<sup>10</sup> (€320 million) ([Openpolis, 2024b](#)). The instrument of tax credits, as subsidies, in these measures, not only directly favours companies, but

also does so without strong conditionality attached, hence lacking a comprehensive strategy for industrial policy (Pianta and Lucchese, 2021). This means that over the years of implementation of the NRRP, companies have been favoured, through instruments such as incentives and tax breaks. Investment in social infrastructure has only been short term given the nature of the plan, raising questions on how it will be maintained in the long term (Viesti, 2023). Recent data on the Italian NRRP as a whole also shows that joint-stock companies<sup>11</sup> are the implementing bodies<sup>12</sup> to which the most resources are allocated (€38 billion) (Openpolis, 2025). Such an important role for companies in the implementation of the plan points to a transformation in the structure of the state – in which resources and competences are drained from public institutions, and rather they are concentrated in private institutions (such as joint-stock companies). It must be noted that such companies can be both privately or publicly owned – but in any case, they represent a management model inspired by private-sector rather than public-sector logics.

Through the investigation of the strategic vision underpinning the NextGenerationEU as a whole, with document and policy analysis, Gerbaudo and Haeusl (2025) find that it is focused on technology adoption rather than the actual expansion of productive capacity, pointing to its short-term and contradictory character. As Ryner (2022) points out, drawing from Crouch (2009): ‘Keynesian measures as such are not necessarily incompatible with neoliberalism’. He goes further to argue that the dominance of blended finance and the conditionality of the recovery funds, among others, ‘indicate authoritarian neoliberal restoration’ (Ryner, 2022: 629). According to Wigger (2024), the RRF within the NextGenerationEU must be seen as part of the measures characterising the broader recent surge in EU industrial policy centred on the digital and green transition, ‘suggesting that the digitalisation of industries would serve as a key enabler for decarbonizing capitalism’. Looking at the so-called ‘return’ of industrial policy, Wigger (2025) traces its history and argues that the EU through industrial policy ‘advances or hinders specific interests, coalitions, and possibilities for action, and associated patterns of capital accumulation’ and in particular shows that its primary driver has been financial capital – with the consequence that ‘What the European Commission ... refers to as crowding in private investors, however, is crowding out democracy and labour’ (Wigger, 2025: 47). Overall, this section has argued, based on existing empirical research, that if one looks at the content of policies carried out within European governance and even its more recent instrument such as the RRF in the context of the NextGenerationEU, one finds a recurring pattern of commodification, of deregulation in the name of competitiveness and public investment mobilised for private capital and of empowering corporate actors and more recently the defence industry through the proposal of ReArm Europe (European Commission, 2025b).

## Conclusion

In this short article, I commented on and debated the governance of the RRF, building on the CPE research into the European Integration process, in dialogue with recent EU studies that consider the RRF as a new governance model. Throughout the article, I have shown that the RRF is not only a governance innovation within the EU institutional architecture, but importantly it should also be considered as an

instrument of state transformation – hence conceiving of governance not as a thing, but as a set of social relations (for such a conceptualisation of governance see also [Gasseau, 2025](#)). In doing so, I provided critical background analysis to current events at the EU level – since the RRF is currently unfolding, this is of crucial importance. Moreover, the article calls for further research into the governance of the RRF from a CPE perspective. In this commentary, four main mechanisms are identified through which the RRF is linked to state transformation: centralisation of the executive, legitimation through technocratic expertise, creation of new institutions, and the content of specific policies carried out.

The analysis is based on existing empirical research and on the observation of current events. Further research should go further and expand on each of these mechanisms, unpacking what they mean in empirical terms for the reconfiguration of the complex relationship between national and European governance. Moreover, further research from a CPE perspective should focus on empirically mapping the social forces that are empowered through such mechanisms and through the most recent transformation in the EU governance structure. This is all the more relevant in the current conjuncture of polycrisis ([Bieler and Maccarrone, 2025](#)), with shifting geopolitical conditions, as well as the rise of far right forces and deepening socioeconomic inequalities.

In conclusion, while the shift towards fiscal integration, as well as enlarged public spending and industrial policy, entailed by the RRF, has led observers to claim a corresponding shift from the previous neoliberal character of the European Integration process, this commentary shows that such claims must be taken with a pinch of salt and debated from a CPE perspective. The governance of the RRF, as the analysis conducted shows, features characteristics in line with authoritarian neoliberalism – such as the marginalisation of parliament and social actors in the decision-making process – as well as being linked to reforms that are in line with previous neoliberal policies – such as the marketisation of local public services, and the subsidisation of private capital ([Gasseau and Maccarrone, 2025](#); [Wigger, 2025](#)). While the RRF has indeed been a public investment programme – in the context of decades of impoverishment of public finances due to austerity policies in the EU but also specifically in Italy – it has lacked a long-term vision for public spending ([Viesti, 2023](#)) and for expanding the state's industrial capacity rather than its reliance on companies ([Pianta and Lucchese, 2021](#); [Gerbaudo and Haeusl, 2025](#)). Hence, this short article has shown that the RRF must be understood not only as an institutional innovation within EU governance, but it should also be interrogated from a CPE perspective – hence be contextualised within the multi-level, long-term transformation of the state towards (authoritarian) neoliberalism and importantly be linked to the social forces beyond institutions.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In Italian 'Cabina di Regia'.
- <sup>2</sup> In Italian 'Ispettorato generale per il Pnrr presso la ragioneria generale dello stato'.
- <sup>3</sup> In Italian 'Servizio centrale per il Pnrr'.
- <sup>4</sup> In Italian 'Ufficio di audit del Pnrr'.
- <sup>5</sup> In Italian 'Unità per la razionalizzazione e il miglioramento della regolazione'.
- <sup>6</sup> In Italian 'Struttura di missione Pnrr presso la presidenza del consiglio'.
- <sup>7</sup> In Italian 'Autorità politica delegata in materia di Pnrr'.

<sup>8</sup> In Italian ‘Transizione 4.0’.

<sup>9</sup> In Italian ‘Supporto alla transizione ecologica del sistema produttivo e alle filiere strategiche per le net zero technologies’.

<sup>10</sup> In Italian ‘Sostegno per l’autoproduzione di energia da fonti rinnovabili nelle Pmi’.

<sup>11</sup> In Italian ‘Società per azioni’.

<sup>12</sup> In Italian ‘Soggetti attuatori’.

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## Research ethics statement

The author of this article has declared that research ethics approval was not required since the article does not present or draw directly on data from empirical research.

## Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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