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To cite this article: Hussein Kassim (2022): The European Commission and the COVID-19 pandemic: a pluri-institutional approach, Journal of European Public Policy, DOI: [10.1080/13501763.2022.2140821](https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2022.2140821)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2022.2140821>



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Published online: 18 Nov 2022.



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The European Commission and the COVID-19 pandemic: a pluri-institutional approach

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ABSTRACT

According to a widely held view, the European Council decides how the EU should respond in times of crisis, since the European Council alone has the authority to lead. Other institutions, meanwhile, adopt at best a secondary role. An alternative perspective has emerged, however, which contends, first, that the European Council's influence on the EU's crisis response is variable and, second, that other EU institutions, in particular the European Commission, are able to shape EU action, including through interventions made independently of the European Council. This article builds on this alternative view to argue that the respective role played by the European Council and the European Commission is contingent, first, on the policy area where a crisis strikes and second, on leadership or agency on the part of the Presidents of the two institutions. The dynamics of the EU's response to the COVID-19 pandemic support this view. Acting on its powers in public health and other affected areas, and with Commission President Ursula von der Leyen taking a highly pro-active approach to outbreak of the virus, the Commission intervened early, framed the pandemic as a crisis, and set and then expanded the EU's agenda. Although its decision-making role was important, the European Council largely followed the Commission's lead.

KEYWORDS The European commission; the COVID-19 pandemic; the European council; Ursula von der Leyen

Introduction

In the scholarship on the European Union (EU)'s response to crisis, the idea that the European Council takes the lead has become the established view. In this reading, only the European Council among EU institutions has sufficient authority to take action in difficult times. Whether the decisions taken by the European Council are interpreted as the outcome of 'hard bargaining' on the basis of national preferences or 'deliberative intergovernmentalism', scholarly

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attention has focused on meetings of heads of state and government as the locus of the EU's crisis response (Armingeon & Cranmer, 2018; Schimmelfennig, 2015). The European Council appears front and centre in these accounts, with other EU institutions or bodies ascribed a secondary role at best. The Council of the European Union is rarely mentioned, while the European Commission is seen as largely subordinate (see, e.g., Fabbrini & Puetter, 2016).

An alternative perspective has recently emerged, however, which takes a broader view of how the EU responds in times of crisis. While not denying that the European Council can take a leading role, it contends that it does not always do so (Bocquillon & Kassim, 2021). This pluri-institutional approach asserts that the role played by the European Council varies from crisis to crisis (Beach & Smeets, 2019, 2020, 2020; Smeets & Beach, 2020). Sometimes, as in its response to the 2016 UK referendum, the European Council takes the lead in formulating the EU's response, even if the supporting technical and operational work is mainly carried out elsewhere (Kassim, 2023). In others, the European Council develops a solution in partnership with other institutions, usually the Commission. In these instances, inter-institutional interaction can be close and intense (Beach & Smeets, 2020). However, there are other cases where the EU response is decided and enacted by several institutions, where the European Council follows the lead of another institution or where actions are taken in different areas by different institutions in ways that are sometimes more and sometimes less concerted (Kassim & Tholoniati, 2021).

In practice, the European Council rarely acts alone, not least because, with no law-making competence, it is reliant on the European Commission, the Council of the European Union, and, where the ordinary legislative procedure applies, the European Parliament. Other executive bodies, including not only the European Commission (Kassim & Tholoniati, 2021), but the European Central Bank (ECB) (Verdun, 2017; Quaglia & Verdun, 2022), and bodies including the Eurogroup (Puetter, 2016; Craig, 2017) and the European Parliament, have roles and responsibilities that allow or even require them to take action with or without the European Council's approval or that otherwise makes it possible for them to influence how the EU responds (Kassim & Tholoniati, 2021).

According to this pluri-institutional approach, the respective and relative role of EU institutions varies and is rarely explained only by reference to actions of the European Council. Without aspiring to offer a grand or predictive theory, it draws attention to two contingent elements that influence which institutions are involved and their respective roles. The first is the *area* or *policy domain* that is affected by a crisis. The pluri-institutional approach starts from the premise that the resources available to EU institutions vary between sectors. It is not only how the treaty provisions allocate decision-making authority between institutions, but also the powers and responsibilities allocated by secondary legislation, that shapes their ability

to act. The second contingent factor is *agency* and relates to the relative proactiveness of the leaders of the EU executive institutions: the Presidents of the European Council (PEC) and the European Commission (Tömmel, 2017; Bocquillon & Kassim, 2021). The different backgrounds, experiences, and views on how the institution they lead should act result in the individuals who occupy these positions often taking quite different approaches to how a crisis should be approached.

In examining how the EU responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, this article aims to demonstrate the explanatory value of the alternative pluri-institutional approach to understanding the EU's response to crisis. It demonstrates that the European Council does not always take the lead, and highlights the importance of issue area and leadership in shaping the respective contributions of the EU's executive institutions. In the case of COVID-19, the Commission played a leading role throughout, even if the European Council was extensively involved in decisions related to the economic recovery programme. The role of the European Parliament was relatively limited (Fasone, 2022) and the Council of the European Union, which for reasons of space is not discussed here – though see Ludlow (various) – deferred largely to the European Council (Schramm & Wessels, 2022). The lead role played by the Commission can be explained partly because the crisis emerged in areas where the Commission has important functions and partly because Commission President Ursula von der Leyen asserted Commission leadership and responsibility from the start (Müller & Tömmel, 2022; Kassim, 2023). She set out the issues that the EU should address and the measures it should take, while the PEC Charles Michel was hesitant and largely reactive in his approach.

The discussion that follows is organised into two parts. The first section briefly reviews the debate between the established view of EU crisis response, centred on the European Council, and the pluri-institutional approach. It uses the latter to frame an analysis of the EU's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The second discusses how the Commission and the European Council addressed the crisis across three phases. It looks at the changing terms of the Commission's interaction with the European Council and highlights how the European Council's approach and engagement varied over time. The European Council was initially reactive on public health and related issues, strongly engaged in the negotiation of the economic recovery programme, and reactive on vaccine procurement. Throughout the crisis period, however, the European Council rarely tabled solutions of its own. Rather, it endorsed actions and proposals already made by the Commission. How the pluri-institutional approach advances understanding of EU crisis response is discussed in the third section. Suggestions for further avenues of research are set out in the conclusion.

Deciding the EU's response in times of crisis: the European Council and beyond

Much of the EU literature takes the view that the European Council has become the EU's centre of decision making (Puetter, 2014, 2016; Fabbrini & Puetter, 2016) – the only EU body in times of crisis with the authority both to instruct actors at EU and national levels, and to mobilise and commit resources on the required scale (van Middelaar, 2013; Laffan, 2016; Dinan, 2017). The story of how the EU reacts is typically recounted in terms of a series of debates and key decisions taken at meetings of the European Council.

Some variants of this approach cast the European Council as an arena for inter-state bargaining, and explain outcomes in terms of national preferences and the relative bargaining power of governments (see, e.g., Krotz & Maher, 2016; Frieden & Walter, 2017; Armingeon & Cranmer, 2018; Moravcsik & Schimmelfennig, 2019; see Csehi and Puetter (2017) for an overview). In others, the European Council is an institution where the President of the European Council can also play an important part (see, e.g., Howarth & Quaglia, 2016; Dinan, 2017). Whichever the preferred conceptualisation, other EU institutions are routinely cast in a secondary role.

In recent years, however, authors have challenged the idea that the European Council invariably takes the lead. Although recognising that the European Council commands significant political authority, they do not assume that it steers the EU's response to a crisis, still less that it monopolises decision-making. They are alert to the limits on the formal powers of the institution, its sparse organisational resources, and its dependence on other EU bodies (Bocquillon & Kassim, 2021). Adopting a pluri-institutional framework, they argue both that the cast of actors involved and their relative contribution are likely to vary. In particular, the division of labour and responsibility between the European Council and the European Commission as the EU's main executive actors is not pre-set, but varies between crises.

Proponents of the pluri-institutional approach take the view that, while the PEC and the European Council are able to frame a situation as a crisis, call for action, and take decisions, other institutions – notably the Commission, and in some circumstances, the ECB and the Eurogroup – also have the capacity to take action. In some areas, they can act independently of the European Council and even, on occasion, against its wishes (Kassim & Tholoniati, 2021). There are circumstances, moreover, when the Commission can take the leading role (see, e.g., Boin et al., 2013; Savage & Verdun, 2016; Beach & Smeets, 2019a, 2020, 2020; Smeets & Beach, 2022).

This variability arises partly out of the EU's multi-institutional system, where powers are sometimes less shared than separated or divided. Partly, it is a consequence of the 'underconstitutionalisation' (Delledonne, 2014) of

the EU system, which allows considerable scope for agency on the part of leaders. The European Commission enjoys particular latitude on account of the independence that it enjoys under the treaty. As affirmed by the European Court of Justice (see, e.g., Court of Justice of the European Union [CJEU], 2017), the Commission is under no obligation to accept instructions from external bodies, including the European Council. Partly, there is significant cross-sectoral variation in the respective capacities of EU institutions, where secondary legislation gives the Commission important powers. In crisis management, humanitarian aid, and public health crises (Boin et al., 2013; Backman & Rhinard, 2017),¹ for example, the Commission can activate networks, apply policy instruments, and otherwise mobilise resources. More broadly, it can propose repurposing funds under the EU budget, or table specific policy initiatives. Its near-monopoly over policy initiation, combined with its technical expertise, access to information, and position as process manager, give it significant agenda-setting power vis-à-vis member governments and other EU institutions (Pollack, 2003; Deters & Falkner, 2021).

Drawing on these insights, the pluri-institutional approach considers the relative role played by EU institutions in relation to crises is shaped by a double contingency. The first element of contingency is the policy *domain* in which a crisis emerges and the areas it affects. Contrary to the view that the European Council is uniquely privileged, scholars taking the pluri-institutional approach observe that it is not the only institution able to take action in crisis situations. Kassim and Tholoniati (2021) show, for example, that even in areas considered to embody post-Maastricht intergovernmentalism – foreign policy, security, and economic and monetary union – the Juncker Commission was able to take important actions independently of the European Council.

The second contingent element is *agency*. It matters who heads the major institutions in times of crisis – their backgrounds, and institutional role conceptions. In the EU's response to the Eurozone crisis, for example, Herman van Rompuy's expertise as an economist and the fact that he came into office directly from the Belgian premiership where he had been addressing the economic crisis led him to take a proactive approach (see, e.g., Howarth & Quaglia, 2016; Dinan, 2017; Verdun & Tömmell, 2017). The same was not the case when the EU confronted the second Greek crisis, when a different division of labour between the European Council and the European Commission took shape, reflecting Jean-Claude Juncker's experience as president of the Eurogroup and PEC Donald Tusk's background in foreign policy (Kassim & Tholoniati, 2021). In the asylum-seekers crisis, meanwhile, the PEC and the Commission President clashed when both took the view that their institution should take the lead (Smeets & Beach, 2022).

Applied to the COVID-19 pandemic, the pluri-institutional approach makes it possible to investigate the contribution made by the main executive

institutions in defining and enacting the EU's response, and thereby determine their respective roles in reacting to the crisis. In contrast to the established view, it holds no priors concerning the institutions involved or their relative input. The empirical analysis undertaken below examines the main areas of the EU response. Since EU action was extremely wide-ranging (see Commission, 2022a; European Council, 2022), the account is necessarily selective. It looks in turn at initial EU action in public health, humanitarian aid, international assistance, research, and mitigation of socio-economic effects of the pandemic, where the Commission established its leading role, the dynamics behind the decisions relating to economic recovery, and the processes involved in the EU's intervention in vaccine procurement.

The analysis draws on the timelines produced by the Commission (2022b) and the European Council (2022), a Eur-Lex database of EU actions in relation to COVID-19, and the *European Council Studies* journal, produced by Peter Ludlow, which provides a meticulous account of each European Council meeting, as well as their preparation, prior meetings of other bodies, and follow-up. In addition, 12 non-attributable interviews were conducted by the author with officials in the European Commission and the Council Secretariat between 30 September 2020 and 21 February 2022.² The aim of the interviews was to gain an insight of the roles played by the institutions over different stages of the process, and to address specific questions relating to the working of the EU crisis management mechanisms, economic support, and vaccine procurement.

The response of the EU to the COVID-19 pandemic

In the two years following the outbreak of a new coronavirus in Wuhan, China, national governments were on the frontline. They carried the financial burden of managing the disease and dealing with its social and economic effects, but EU action was also significant. It reacted swiftly to the public health emergency, and expanded its actions as the crisis deepened.³ By 31 December 2021, it had adopted more than 1000 acts (Eur-Lex, 2022).⁴ As well as the considerable volume of actions taken, EU intervention broke new ground with the SURE programme, the creation of the Next Generation EU recovery fund and the joint procurement of vaccines.

Close examination of the EU's response suggests, contrary to expectations associated with the focus on the established view on the European Council, that it was the European Commission that took the lead role. The precise balance between the two institutions, however, varied between and across the three periods discussed below. In the initial phase, the Commission framed the situation as a crisis. It took direct action in response to the emergency, championed a collective response after member governments had begun to take unilateral measures, and it set the agenda as the scale and

scope of the crisis grew. During this period, the European Council was mainly reactive. In the second phase, where attention was directed toward economic recovery, the European Council and the PEC Charles Michel played a much more interventionist role, even if the Commission still played a key part. In the third period, the Commission's leading role was strongly pronounced. Although it met with greater frequency, the European Council was still more reactive than proactive.

Consistent with the pluri-institutional approach outlined above and the two key elements of contingency it identifies, the areas affected by the crisis, and the backgrounds and institutional role conception of the leaders, shaped the relative contribution of the EU's two main executive institutions. With respect to the first, the Commission triggered the instruments and mechanisms it controlled in the area where the crisis emerged, and used its policy initiation and budgetary powers to propose measures and set the agenda for EU action in other areas. In the second, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, a trained medical doctor, committed to an assertive conception of the role the Commission should play in the EU system (Müller & Tömmel, 2022; Kassim, 2023), was proactive from the start. She took personal charge within the Commission, and worked closely with her cabinet, the Secretariat General, and selected Commissioners, notably Thierry Breton, Commissioner for the Internal Market.

By contrast, the European Council was late to respond. Leaders did not convene until 10 March 2020. Moreover, the March meeting set a precedent for the future management of the crisis. Rather than discussing and endorsing measures tabled by the PEC, the meeting listened to the Commission President's assessment, supported the recommendations that she proposed, and exhorted the Commission to continue its work – a pattern that remained, except for the discussion of the economic recovery package, when the PEC and the European Council took a more prominent role.

The initial response: the public health emergency, crisis management and mitigating the socio-economic consequences

Area and agency explain the leading role taken by the Commission in this first period: the crisis emerged in domains where the Commission has important competencies, and the Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, with her medical background and belief that the Commission should take responsibility and do all that it could, took personal charge. She defined the situation as a crisis, took action, and outlined an expansive agenda for the EU's response.

With respect to area, the Commission has important competencies in relation to public health and crisis management which, because it is derived from secondary legislation, often passes under the radar. In public

health, the Commission is responsible for relations with the World Health Organization, including concerning public health emergencies. It has close links to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), an EU agency created in 2004 to monitor the spread of communicable diseases and responsible to alert member states to threats to public health through an Early Warning and Response System (EWRS). The Commission provides the secretariat to the European Health and Safety Committee, where senior national officials share information, provide early warnings, and coordinate responses to cross-border health threats. In addition, it manages the Joint Procurement Procedure (JPP), which allows member states to benefit from group purchases of medical countermeasures on request of an EU institution or member state.

The Commission also has emergency response responsibilities (Boin et al., 2013; Backman & Rhinard, 2017; EU, 2013). It hosts the Emergency Response Coordination Centre (ERCC), which forms part of the EU Civil Protection Mechanism (CPT). This service, which is available 24/7, provides international civil protection and humanitarian assistance to signatory states. It maintains shared pools of equipment and has some capacity to co-finance missions. The Commission is also part of the EU's Integrated Political Crisis Response (IPCR) mechanism, first used by the Luxembourg Presidency in 2015 to address the migration crisis. The IPCR operates at three levels – exchange information, information sharing, and full activation – with the Commission's role becoming more central as a situation escalates. In addition, the Commission can initiate action in research, with respect to the budget and the single market, and external action, with or without the approval of other actors.

By 30 January 2020 when the WHO emergency Committee declared the COVID-19 outbreak a 'public health emergency', the EU Platform for European Preparedness Against (Re-) emerging Epidemics (PREPARE) – an EU funded network for large-scale clinical research studies on infectious diseases – had already been activated by the Commission (31 December). The Commission's health department, DG SANTE, had opened an alert notification on the EWRS (9 January), a meeting of the European Health and Security Committee had convened (17 January), and the Croatian Council Presidency activated the ICPR in information-sharing mode (28 January). The Commission had directed funds from the Horizon 2020 programme to conduct research on the new disease, and France had used the EU Civil Protection Mechanism, operated by the Commission, to evacuate EU consular staff from Wuhan. The following month, the Commission made its first deliveries – also under the CPT – of protective medical equipment to China.

On the international front, the Commission announced a new aid package, including a contribution to the WHO and assistance to Africa. This was an early instance of the support for global action that would remain a major component of the EU's response to the pandemic, and was

strongly championed by the Commission President. Over the following two years, the Commission extended the scope of its international action, which included financial aid, COVAX (a global initiative aimed at ensuring equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines), and the supply of medical equipment (Commission, 2020a, 2020b). Closer to home, it established a 'Team Europe' strategy to provide medical equipment and aid to neighbouring countries.

On 2 March, von der Leyen announced the creation of a five-strong coronavirus response team of Commissioners – comprising Janez Lenarčič responsible for crisis management, Stella Kyriakides for health issues, Ylva Johansson border-related issues, Adina Vălean mobility and Paolo Gentiloni economic aspects (Commission, 2020c). The Commission continued to cooperate closely with the ECDC and the European Medicines Agency. Amidst the 'pandemonium' (van Middelaar, 2013) of the early weeks of the crisis, when member states had closed borders or imposed travel restrictions to protect their citizens (Dimitrakopoulos & Lalis, 2022), von der Leyen reported that the Commission had worked to promote a coordinated response among governments on travel and to protect single market freedoms and the Schengen Area. As part of efforts to ensure the supply of medicines and medical equipment, it had funded pharmaceutical research and used the joint procurement procedure to obtain masks.

By the time that the European Council met virtually on 10 March for its first discussion of COVID-19, the Commission had already been very active. It had taken significant steps in public health, civil protection, and research, and committed the EU to participating in a global response to the pandemic. The Commission President had outlined that the EU's response would be dynamic, vowing that the Commission would 'use all the tools at its disposal to make sure the European economy weathers the storm' (Commission, 2020d). In her presentation to leaders, von der Leyen set out her plans for a coordinated approach to cross-border mobility, and to mitigate the economic and social impact of the crisis.⁵ Although there were no formal Presidency Conclusions, the PEC gave its strong support to the Commission President's proposals (European Council, 2020a).

The Commission continued to be pro-active. In the wake of the 10 March European Council, von der Leyen announced three sets of measures. The first, on public health and crisis management, included the creation of an advisory panel of epidemiologists and virologists,⁶ an inventory of protective equipment and respiratory devices,⁷ as well as a Corona Response Investment Initiative to support 'vulnerable parts' of the EU economy (European Commission, 2020e). The second, mainly to defend the single market, addressed cross-border mobility, border management, an EU-wide requirement for export authorisation for personal protective equipment, and a proposal to restrict non-essential travel to the EU for 30 days. The third set of measures aimed to mitigate the economic effects of the pandemic (Commission,

2020f). The Commission proposed flexibility for member governments in applying state aid rules, a relaxation of the constraints imposed by the European Fiscal Framework on governments, use of the European Investment Fund to support SMEs, and support for work schemes from EU funds. Although the Commission President references the PEC's endorsement when announcing its proposals, the speed with which these proposals had been tabled showed the high level of initiative and planning within Commission departments over several months.

When the European Council met again on 17 March,⁸ leaders again gave their approval to actions that the Commission had already set in train or proposed.⁹ Meetings on 26 March (European Council, 2020b) and 23 April followed the same pattern. The Commission President Ursula von der Leyen delivered her report on ongoing or recently proposed actions, and made suggestions for further measures, which heads of state and government then approved. As well as responding to requests for assistance under Civil Protection Mechanism and action on supply of medical equipment and medicines, it proposed to use the Emergency Support Instrument to support national healthcare systems. It issued further advice on mobility issues in relation to mobile workers, the cross-border treatment of patients, deployment of medical staff, and testing methodologies. On the economic front, the Commission adopted a temporary waiver of customs duties and VAT on the import of medical equipment. It released €8 billion from the European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI) to support SMEs, and proposed rules to support the most deprived EU citizens, fishers, and workers in agri-food. Its bolstered proposal was the SURE instrument, which drew on a budget of up to €100 billion to provide loans to affected member states to support employment (European Commission, 2020g).

Following a request by political leaders at the 17 March European Council, the Commission President and the PEC drew up a strategy for a coordinated lifting of restrictions. In the roadmap which they delivered on 15 April, they proposed a collective approach to gathering and sharing data, contact-tracing, and standard testing. They also foresaw measures to increase the supply of personal protective equipment, and commitment to fast-track the development of vaccines, treatments, and medicines. The roadmap was endorsed by the European Council on 23 April.

Thus, over this first period, the Commission took the lead in addressing the crisis. The Commission took actions initially in public health, civil protection, research, and international assistance, then to protect the single market, and thereafter to mitigate the socio-economic effects of the pandemic. The European Council, by contrast, was mainly reactive. It largely endorsed Commission proposals rather than putting forward measures of its own. As suggested by the pluri-institutional approach, area and agency shaped the EU's response: *area*, because the Commission held responsibilities in the

domains more directly affected by the crisis; and *agency*, because whereas the PEC was late to convene the European Council and did not table measures of his own, von der Leyen was pro-active from the start.

Economic recovery¹⁰

In this second phase, the institutional and inter-institutional dynamics shifted, as the European Council played a more active part, and other institutions and bodies including the European Central Bank, the Euro Group, and the European Parliament, became involved. However, the European Commission remained the lead actor (Though see Krotz and Schramm (2022) for an alternative view).

Again, area and agency were key to shaping the respective roles played by the institutions. First, with attention switching to economic recovery, the European Council assumed a more prominent role, since only national political leaders could decide on funding on this scale, a possible new instrument, and changes to the budget. However, they did so on the basis of proposals designed by the European Commission, and with the involvement of other EU-level actors. Second, the PEC Charles Michel was considerably more engaged on this issue, even if the Commission President Ursula von der Leyen remained as pro-active on this question as she had been in the first phase.

Discussion of the need for measures to address the effects of the pandemic on the economy began at the 10 March 2020 European Council meeting, when ECB President Christine Lagarde called on the EU and the member states to act rapidly. Three days later the President of the Euro Group, Mario Centeno, suggested that finance ministers were likely to agree to a 'very large' policy response (as quoted in Fleming & Brunsden, 2020), while in an important signal from Berlin, Chancellor Angela Merkel and Federal Finance Minister Olaf Scholz indicated that Germany no longer regarded balancing the budget as theological. However, evidence that agreement would not be easy came in the wake of Lagarde's remarks on debt and 'closing spreads' at a press conference on 12 March, which caused furore in Italy, and led to the re-emergence of old divisions (Verdun, 2022).

Discussions in the European Council were helped by the ECB's announcement on 18 March of a €750 billion stimulus (ECB, 2020), as well as the SURE programme directed at employment and the European Investment Bank plan for SMEs (Wheeler & Smit, 2020). But there was a north-south divide among member governments on the form of the EU's response and how it would be funded. Although Italian PM Giuseppe Conte had rejected a role for the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) solution favoured by northern governments at the 17 March European Council due to its association with the eurozone crisis in Italy, this did not prevent the emergence of a consensus

in March and April Euro Group meetings on the need for ‘an immediate, ambitious, and coordinated policy response’. Against this background, the PEC expressed hope that agreement could be reached at a European Council meeting on 26 March. Disagreements on a ‘common debt instrument’ were still apparent, however, though the differences did not prevent the European Council from calling on the President of the Commission and the PEC, ‘in consultation with other institutions, especially the ECB, to start work on a Road Map accompanied by an Action Plan’ (European Council, 2020b).

Four significant developments took place prior to the next meeting of the European Council in April. First, the Presidents of the European Commission, the European Council, the ECB, and the Euro Group proposed a reconstructed ESM to provide credit lines for member governments, and discussed the possibility of a recovery fund. Second, the Commission President raised the possibility that the Commission could use its Triple A status to borrow funds on the financial markets that it would then lend to member states that needed it. As Ludlow (2020a, pp. 57–58) notes:

The suggestion clearly interested several people in Berlin, and over the following weeks senior officials there and in Brussels explored the legal as well as the economic issues involved. Much of the detailed work in Berlin was done in the Finance Ministry, but Scholz, Merkel and their senior advisers worked closely and effectively together ... On the Commission side, meanwhile, the key players, in addition to the president herself, were von der Leyen’s chief of staff, Björn Seibert ... who knew the key players in Berlin, ... Gert-Jan Koopman, the director general of DG Budget, and Maarten Verwey, his counterpart at DG ECFIN, and the Legal Service.

Ludlow (2020a, p. 59) also records endorsement of this approach on the part of the PEC’s briefing of COREPER on 20 April and an intervention at the same meeting by the Secretary General of the Commission, Ilze Juhaneson, linking the MFF and a new recovery instrument, in terms that prefigured the Commission’s proposal of 27 May.

Third, although again Italy declared its opposition to the ESM at the Euro Group meeting on 9 April, ministers stood by their commitment ‘to do everything necessary to meet this challenge in a spirit of solidarity’ and to find a ‘coordinated and comprehensive strategy’ (Euro Group, 2020). They welcomed the EIB proposal, SURE, and a revamped ESM, and agreed:

To work on a Recovery Fund to prepare and support the recovery, providing funding through the EU budget to programmes designed to kick-start the economy in line with European priorities and ensuring EU solidarity with the most affected member states. Such a fund would be temporary, targeted and commensurate with the extraordinary costs of the current crisis and help spread them over time through appropriate financing (Ludlow, 2020a, p. 53).

Fourth, a mini summit, convened by the PEC on 20 April, attended by von der Leyen, Merkel, Macron, Conte, Rutte, and Sanchez, was notable for both the

challenge made to Italy on the ESM and Berlin's promise that it would show solidarity with Rome.

At the 23 April European Council meeting, von der Leyen observed that more money beyond the €3.3 trillion already mobilised by the EU and the member states would be necessary to support the European economy. Among options concerning the form of a recovery instrument, she gave her support to the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) as tried, tested, and effective. She proposed increasing the own resources ceiling from 1.2 of GNI to 2 per cent, which would be guaranteed by member states and would enable the Commission to borrow on the financial markets to then invest the funds in ways that supported two of her flagship policy priorities, the 'green deal' and the digital transition. She suggested Article 122.1, which required unanimity and ratification by the member states, as the treaty base for any package, and promised that the Commission would provide a detailed assessment paper.

Although leaders raised questions about the link between the recovery fund and the budget, the fund's size and legal basis, and the balance between grants and loans, the European Council adopted the Euro Group's report. It also called on the Commission to submit revised proposals for the MFF, endorsed the idea of a Recovery Fund, and asked the Commission 'to analyse the exact needs and to urgently come up with a proposal that is commensurate with the challenge we are facing' and 'clarify the link with the MFF' (Euro Group, 2020).

On 13 May, prior to discussion for formal adoption by the Commission, von der Leyen presented her plan for a three-pillared approach in the European Parliament (Commission, 2020h). The first pillar included a Recovery and Resilience instrument, the Next Generation EU package (NGEU) with a budget of €560 billion, designed to support national investment and reform programmes in line with 'the transition to a climate-neutral, digitalised and resilient Europe'. The second, directed at revitalising the economy, encouraged private investment to invest in key sectors and technologies. The third pillar proposed an 'EU4Health programme', with a budget of €9.4 billion including additional funding for International Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid. The Commission President indicated that, although the size of the MFF would remain the same, money would be reallocated among some programmes. Funding for the NGEU programme was to be achieved by raising the own resources ceiling to 2% of GNI, which would allow the Commission to borrow 750 billion euros. The bonds would be repaid from the EU budget between 2028 and 2058 from the proceeds of new sources of funding and 'own resources'.

By the time the European Council met on 19 June, the proposals had been discussed at five meetings of COREPER, 'each of which began with a power-point presentation by the Commission official or officials in attendance'

(Ludlow, 2020b, p. 10). According to Ludlow, all delegations saw the MFF and the Recovery Plan as a package. They recognised that the crisis consequences were best addressed through the Union budget, supported the idea of the Commission borrowing on financial markets, and accepted the links between the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) and the European Semester (Vanhercke & Verdun, 2022), and the RRF and the green and digital transitions (Bongardt & Torres, 2022). At a German-French summit on 18 May, when Merkel and Macron unveiled the Franco-German ‘Initiative for the European Recovery from the Coronavirus Crisis’ – an initiative that, as the Commission President noted went ‘in the direction of the proposal the Commission is working on’ (Commission, 2020i) – consolidated support in favour of the Commission. Although the 19 June European Council took no decisions, the meeting gave leaders the chance to put their concerns to the Commission President, and they agreed to convene in mid-July.

The 17–21 July meeting was carefully planned by the PEC, although Merkel and Macron played a major role alongside Charles Michel. Decisions were reached on most of the key issues – the size of the MFF, the budget for the RRF, the balance between loans, grants and guarantees, criteria for allocation, and conditionality on law and climate change (European Council, 2020c). Although the Commission President was not as interventionist as in earlier meetings, the plan that she had presented to the EP on 13 May and that was approved by the Commission on 28 May was strongly reflected in the final deal: a time-limited loan that was not the ESM or a common debt instrument (Brunsden et al., 2020; Schelkle, 2021, pp. 51–52). The July conclusions turned out not to be the final word – the European Parliament contested the rule of law conditionality arrangements and insisted on their amendment – but the meeting was historic in view of the type and scale of the package the European Council adopted.

This agreement on the recovery package was a key episode in the development of the EU’s response to the crisis. The European Council and the PEC were much more prominent, but the European Central Bank, the Euro Group, and the European Parliament also made contributions. However, the Commission again played a leading role. It did much of the technical work on the plan and the programme, it navigated the proposal through COREPER and other levels of the Council, and it addressed questions raised by national governments. Again, *area* and *agency* shaped the respective roles played by the institutions. *Area* mattered, because in this issue area, although the circle of actors was broader, decisions could only be taken by heads of state and government. *Agency* was crucial, because although the PEC was considerably more pro-active than in other phases and in other areas, the Commission President promoted, oversaw and championed the development of the package. Moreover, her relationship of trust with the German Chancellor, whom she had served as a minister in Berlin, was a key factor.

Vaccine procurement

In this third period, the Commission again played a pre-eminent role, while the European Council reverted to a more reactive stance. Area was important, because the Commission was able to mobilise the Emergency Support Instrument, while agency mattered as the Commission President actively promoted the joint purchase of vaccines on the EU's behalf and the PEC followed the Commission initiative rather than making his own proposals.

The Commission's proposal for action came amidst concern that the US and other countries would monopolise the supply of vaccines had led some governments to take action individually or with other European partners – Spain and France with Moderna, and the 'Inclusive Vaccine Alliance' involving France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Italy. Against this background, the Commission President sought to persuade member states that a collective approach to vaccine procurement would be beneficial. Von der Leyen launched the vaccines strategy on 17 June 2020 (European Commission, 2020j) and proposed the use of the €2.7 billion Emergency Support Instrument (ESI) (Commission, 2020k) – a mechanism created in 2016 to allow member states to pool resources – to negotiate advance purchase agreements (Council, 2016). Member governments would still cover the costs, but the Commission would conduct negotiations with vaccine producers on their behalf. Von der Leyen made the case that the Commission could negotiate a lower price and secure supplies of the vaccine for all member states. All 27 member states signed up to the plan.

Although the Commission signed off agreements with Astra-Zeneca on 27 August, Sanofi-GSK on 18 September, Johnson and Johnson on 8 October, BioNTech – Pfizer on 11 November, and Moderna on 25 November, misgivings began to emerge in national capitals about suppliers, the length of time the negotiations were taken, and the Commission's lack of experience in negotiating contracts. These criticisms intensified as the UK celebrated the arrival of its vaccinations three weeks before the EU as a Brexit success and the US administered its first doses a fortnight ahead of the EU, and then Moderna and Astra-Zeneca dramatically reduced their estimates of the number of doses that they could deliver. The Commission's discomfort was compounded by the President's short-lived, but ill-judged and much criticised, decision to trigger Article 16 of the Northern Ireland Protocol, the most sensitive element of the EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement that had only just come into effect. Even the WHO declared the EU's vaccine response 'unacceptably slow', with critics blaming the Commission President's 'Olympian style' of leadership (Kassim, 2023).

By the summer of 2021, however, EU fortunes had changed. Von der Leyen was able to report that more than 70 per cent of its adult population had been fully vaccinated and that the EU exported more than half its vaccines (700 million) to the rest of the world, thus vindicating the success of her strategy. Despite errors in the negotiations and delays in the delivery of the vaccines, the Commission's initiative was regarded as successful. In particular, it was widely agreed that smaller member states had benefitted.

In this third phase, the Commission took the lead, with the European Council largely endorsing and encouraging actions by the Commission. The elements highlighted by the pluri-institutional approach again explain their respective roles: area, because with respect to the issue of procurement, where joint action promised significant benefits, the Commission was able to advocate use of a specific instrument that enables it to negotiate on behalf of the EU; and agency, as the Commission President was once again the pro-active party in proposing a solution.

Conclusion

The above discussion has highlighted the merits of a pluri-institutional approach in the analysis of how the EU addresses crises, as well as a detailed account of the leadership role taken by the Commission in the EU's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It has contested expectations deriving from the established view in EU scholarship that the European Council invariably directs and decides how the EU reacts to a crisis situation, and thereby contributes to a growing literature that asserts that the European Council's influence is a variable rather than a constant and that other EU actors also play a part not only in delivering but also in determining the EU's crisis response.

The article has shown that, in the case of the pandemic, the Commission took the lead in defining the outbreak of the new strand of the coronavirus as a crisis, and acted quickly to address its effects. Independently of the European Council, it mobilised resources to meet the public health emergency, activated civil protection mechanisms, and redirected funding in research. It started to act even before the WHO declaration, and from the outset outlined measures and actions that the EU should take. In addition to the direct action it was taking, it tabled proposals, made recommendations, and called for action first to mitigate the socio-economic impact of COVID-19, then to assist and aid economic recovery, and later to procure vaccinations jointly. Rather than putting forward initiatives of its own, the European Council tended to follow the Commission's lead.

Moreover, the respective roles played by the European Council, the Commission and other EU institutions and bodies were shaped by the two elements highlighted by the pluri-institutional approach. Area mattered, because the resources available to EU institutions vary between and within policy domains; and in the domains affected by COVID-19, the Commission

has operational and other direct responsibilities. Agency was important because, in the case of strongly presidentialised institutions, the backgrounds and institutional role conceptions of the two top officials are key in shaping how the institutions respond. While Commission President Ursula von der Leyen was pro-active from the outset, and remained a consistent source of ideas and initiatives, the PEC Charles Michel was initially hesitant and, with the significant exception of the economic recovery package, tended to take a backseat.

As well as contributing an empirical study of how the EU responded in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, this article has demonstrated the merits of an analytical framework that promises a more nuanced understanding of how the EU as a complex multi-institutional institutional system addresses crisis. It has shown that the *a priori* privileging of the European Council's role is problematic and that a focus on formal status, powers and decision-making alone is insufficient to account for the parts that are played by other EU institutions. The European Council may well be the only body that has the authority to make a decision in some areas, but this is not the same as taking practical action, tabling proposals, or devising a solution. In so doing, this article opens up paths for enquiry that had been foreclosed by the established view, not least in looking beyond European Council conclusions to the processes and interactions between institutions that take place before and between meetings of the European Council, as well as interventions made by the Commission President at those meetings, and the actions of institutions in areas of responsibility that sometimes fall below the radar.

Notes

1. Since the crisis fell towards the end of the budgetary cycle, the Commission had significant discretionary power to transfer between sub-headings.
2. Interviews: European Commission Secretariat General: senior official 1 – 16 February 2021; senior official 2 – 17 November 2021; senior official 3–15 February 2022; ECFIN – senior official 1 - 30 September 2020, 15 February 2021, 29 July 2021, 18 January 2022; senior official 2–16 February 2022; DG SANTE – former senior official – 21 February 2022; and the Council Secretariat (3) – senior official 1- 5 March 2021; senior official 2–22 April 2021; senior official – 14 January 2021.
3. Space prevents discussion of all areas. For an overview, see Commission (2022a), Commission (2022b) and European Council (2022)
4. See search at https://eur-lex.europa.eu/search.html?orDNGGroup=CM%3DCOVID19&qid=1455633998284&CASE_LAW_SUMMARY=false&DTS_DOM=ALL&typeOfActStatus=OTHER&type=advanced&lang=en&SUBDOM_INIT=ALL_ALL&DTS_SUBDOM=ALL_ALL, conducted on 20 September 2022
5. The President of the European Central Bank, Christine Lagarde, and the chair of the Eurogroup, Mario Centeno, also announced plans to protect the economy.
6. For a record of its meetings, see https://ec.europa.eu/health/other-pages/basic-page/european-commissions-advisory-panel-covid-19_en

7. The Commission President also appointed a senior official to the Secretariat of the Commission to manage a 'clearing house' for medical equipment to match demand with supply.
8. The European External Action Service created a Consular Task Force following the European Council meeting which worked with the member states and the ERCC in the Commission to repatriate citizens (European Commission, 2022a; see also, European External Action Service [EEAS], 2020)
9. These included a coordinated approach to cross-border movements, ensuring the availability of medical supplies, relaxation of state aid rules, European standards for medical supplies, and the creation of a RescEU stockpile of medical equipment.
10. This section draws very heavily from Ludlow (2020a, 2020b). Key points about the evolution of the Commission proposal were corroborated in interviews with senior officials in the Secretariat General of the Commission and ECFIN (see supra fn 2).

Acknowledgement

I should like to thank the participants at three events at which I presented earlier versions of this paper: the special issue workshop held at the Robert Schumann Centre for Advanced Studies (RSCAS) at the European University Institute (EUI) in December 2021 for insightful comments, especially Johannes Lindner, who acted as discussant; a panel organized for this special issue at the biennial conference of the European Union Studies Association (EUSA) in Miami in May 2022; and a panel at the biennial European Consortium for Political Research Standing Group conference in Rome in June 2022. I also learned a lot about the EU's response to the COVID-19 crisis at a roundtable convened by Dionyssi G. Dimitrakopoulos, which featured Luuk Van Middelaar, Jennifer Rankin, and Peter Wagner in April 2022. I am very grateful to the guest editors, Lucia Quaglia and Amy Verdun for their patience, encouragement, and suggestions throughout the process. Finally, I owe a huge debt of gratitude to the officials in the European Commission and the Council Secretariat who granted me interviews and kindly answered my queries on a strictly non-attributable basis. The usual disclaimer applies.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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