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Silenced contestation? Explaining the ‘quiet implementation’ of the European Union’s recovery and resilience facility in Spain and Italy

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ABSTRACT

The Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) has marked a transformative development in the European Union (EU)’s economic governance. Its ambition prompted tense negotiations at EU level. Yet implementation within member states has proceeded with remarkably little contestation. This article examines the puzzle of the RRF’s ‘quiet implementation’ at national level. Drawing on an analytical framework that contrasts democratic legitimacy (the involvement of parliaments, political parties and subnational authorities) with technocratic legitimacy (executive authority and delegation to experts), it analyses two critical cases – Spain and Italy. As the largest recipients of RRF funding, both are highly exposed to EU conditionality and characterised by high public debt, fragmented party politics, government instability and strong regional authority. Given these features, one would expect substantial politicisation. Yet we find that in neither case did meaningful contestation emerge. We argue that this outcome stems from domestic institutional arrangements that foster depoliticisation by centralising decision-making within the executive and limiting parliamentary and subnational involvement in the implementation process – dynamics that prime ministerial offices could strategically exploit. We conclude by linking these findings to wider patterns of RRF implementation and EU economic governance, specifying the conditions under which executives can shield large-scale spending programmes from political debate.

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Introduction

The adoption and subsequent implementation of the European Union (EU)'s Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) has arguably been a transformative event in the evolution of the EU's public finances and economic governance. Even if initial references to Europe's 'Hamiltonian Moment' have appeared over-blown (Georgiou, 2022), the lasting impact of the NextGenerationEU (NGEU) programme is apparent in a number of dimensions: institutionally, through the inclusion of the RRF into the pre-existing European Semester of macro-economic coordination (Vanhercke & Verdun, 2022); procedurally, through the introduction of novel performance-based monitoring of EU spending in the member states (Zeitlin *et al.*, 2025) and the promotion of the national ownership of domestic recovery plans (Munta *et al.*, 2024); substantively, due to the linkage between EU funding and reform objectives such as digitalisation, ecological transition or gender mainstreaming; and not least financially, in view of the unprecedented amounts of funds that have been raised through common EU debt, potentially changing the established paradigm of economic governance (Buti & S. Fabbrini, 2023; S. Fabbrini & Capati, 2023).

Past contributions to the literature investigated various dimensions of the political conflict underlying the establishment of the RRF (De la Porte & Jensen, 2021; F. Fabbrini, 2022), the governance of the RRF and its impact on relations between supranational and intergovernmental institutions (Bokhorst & Corti, 2024; Capati, 2023; Capati, 2024; Fernández-Pasarín & Lanaia, 2025), as well as the political dynamics related to the elaboration of the National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs) (Borghetto *et al.*, 2026). With respect to the latter, the concept of 'Coordinative Europeanisation' (Polverari, 2024) proposed a way of understanding the implementation process of the RRF.¹ It argues that the elaboration, approval and amendments of the NRRPs have been marked by greater degrees of coordination, mutual learning and national ownership due to increased interdependence among the member states and the urgent need for action during an unprecedented emergency. As a result of Coordinative Europeanisation, it is argued that both the EU and national actors 'have been careful not to politicise the NRRP, downplaying latent conflicts and stressing the fruitful dialogue and ongoing cooperation' (Bressanelli & Natali, 2025, p. 13; see also Ladi & Wolff, 2021). Another strand of the literature has emphasised, by contrast, the potential for the RRF to increase dissensus between the European Commission and national governments as the Commission sought to enforce the reform and investment programmes initially negotiated between Brussels and the European capitals (Capati & Christiansen, 2025; Munta *et al.*, 2024).

The main focus of such research has been on relations between the EU institutions and national actors engaged in the RRF implementation. The

patterns of domestic politics in the implementation process, however, have so far remained rather under-investigated. There has been scholarly work focused on the agency of national executives in shaping domestic reform agendas in line with governments' ideological orientation (Borghetto *et al.*, 2026); on the governance arrangements set up to manage the recovery funds (Bokhorst & Corti, 2024); and on the involvement of social partners (Centamore, 2024). While these contributions have been valuable in illuminating the details of the implementation process, no systematic cross-sectional research has so far been conducted on the nature of the domestic implementation of the RRF that would help to address the puzzle of the 'quiet implementation' set out above. Exploring such patterns is particularly relevant as the implementation of, and revisions to, many NRRPs – driven, for example, by REPowerEU top-ups, inflation shocks and electoral turnovers – had the potential to reopen distributive choices and institutional battles that had been side-stepped during the height of the Covid-19 crisis. In other words, once the urgency of the emergency had passed and the focus of policy-making shifted from the overall design of the plan to the details of policy implementation, latent conflicts over political priorities in the allocation of funds were likely to resurface within domestic arenas. The question, therefore, remains why and how such contestation was avoided.

This puzzle is even more remarkable when considering how the presence of widespread dissensus in the European polity would provide a fertile ground for the politicisation of the RRF implementation: the previous decade has witnessed divisive debates about the nature of the EU's economic governance model (Capati & Bonomi, 2026), and in particular the austerity-driven approach to the management of the Eurozone crisis (Schmidt, 2020); there has been much contestation about the handling of the Covid pandemic and the balance that needs to be struck between societal responsibility, public health and personal freedom (Truchlewski *et al.*, 2021); and indeed there has been a rise of a much wider dissensus about the process of European integration and even liberal democracy *per se*, in view of growing populist attacks on the EU project and its values (Coman & Brack, 2025). Moreover, the link between the RRF and the Country-Specific Recommendations in the European Semester impacts the existing interest constellation between rival coalitions of policy stakeholders (Scibilia *et al.*, 2025).

Against this background, one could expect large-scale public funding decisions with significant distributive impact to be subject to extensive public debate and contestation, especially since the initial EU-level decisions on the RRF had been made relatively swiftly, during the emergency of the Covid-19 pandemic and without much opportunity for either transparency or extensive deliberation within the various domestic arenas. However, as will be demonstrated below, the domestic implementation of the RRF largely eschewed dynamics of contestation. In order to investigate this

puzzling occurrence of ‘quiet implementation’, the article provides an in-depth study of the dynamics of the RRF implementation in two member states – Spain and Italy – which constitute critical cases in this regard: among the top recipients of RFF disbursements, with the highest number of domestic reform commitments, but also with long-standing histories of political instability, fragile governing coalitions and substantive public debts.

Researching the reasons behind the *absence* of contestation is somewhat challenging, more than it would be if one sought to demonstrate the causes of specific actions or events that *did* occur. This article addresses this conundrum through in-depth qualitative research, considering the role played by various actors and the strategies these actors engaged in. This approach facilitates a better understanding not only of the nature of the RRF implementation, but also more generally of the way in which dissensus about economic governance is being handled in the EU.

Following these introductory observations, the article proceeds in the next section to elaborate the way in which different conceptions of legitimacy are being employed in order to interrogate the connection between the nature of the implementation process and the dynamics of politicisation. Having set out the choices with regard to methodology and data collection, the article then proceeds with separate empirical sections examining the process of implementation in both Spain and Italy, analysing in each case the democratic and technocratic dimensions of legitimation. The concluding section then summarises the findings, discusses the potential for identifying general patterns regarding the RRF implementation process across the entirety of the EU and reflects on their significance for the wider issue of EU economic governance.

Democratic and technocratic legitimacy in the national implementation of the RRF

In order to examine the key actors and relations involved in the domestic implementation of the RRF, the article draws on the conceptualisation of different forms of legitimacy, in particular democratic and technocratic legitimacy, and elaborates on their implications for degrees of (de-)politicisation in the RRF implementation. The concept of legitimacy here serves as a heuristic device that helps to illuminate the link between, on the one side, the nature of the RRF implementation process and, on the other side, the observed low levels of political contestation over it. Understanding how decisions during the domestic implementation process of the RRF have been legitimised promises to reveal how precisely contestation has been silenced. As a first step, a brief conceptualisation of these two different notions of legitimacy follows below.

Democratic legitimacy presupposes that democratically elected representatives in national and local assemblies define the broad orientation of policy choices and are able to hold governments and technocratic actors accountable throughout the decision-making process (Crum, 2018). At the member state level, democratic legitimacy has traditionally been linked to parliamentary elections and the role of political parties within representative legislatures shaping political decisions and overseeing executive action (Holzhacker, 2007). Through the functional role of political parties, legislatures – including national parliaments and regional or local authorities – are thus understood as the key institutional intermediaries in a chain of representation connecting citizens to political decision-making. As Crum argues, ‘parliamentary accountability tracks executive authority’, with parliaments constituting the institutional arena in which the exercise of political power is subjected to political justification (2018, p. 270).

Technocratic legitimacy, by contrast, refers to the justification of executive action through the involvement of technical experts who, by virtue of their specialised knowledge in policy areas requiring scientific expertise, are entrusted to identify the most appropriate solutions to specific problems (Lobo & MacManus, 2020). Regardless of the extent of their participation in the decision-making process, citizens are likely to perceive political decisions as legitimate when the quality of policy outcomes meets or surpasses their expectations. Conversely, legitimacy is liable to erode when public policy results are perceived to be ineffective or unsatisfactory. In this sense, technocracy ‘elevates a knowledge elite that identifies the common good objectively through reason and which relies on competence, neutrality, efficiency and expertise as [its] source of legitimacy’ (Van der Veer & Meibauer, 2024, p. 4). Technocratic legitimacy therefore prioritises expertise and non-majoritarian modes of decision-making.

Each form of legitimacy therefore implies an analytical focus on a specific set of actors. In the case of democratic legitimacy, there is an emphasis on voters, political parties, parliaments and local assemblies as fora in which citizen preferences are communicated to political elites. To this effect, the study of the role of party politics, regional authorities and parliamentary involvement during the implementation of the RRF promises to reveal the degree to which democratic politics have played a role during the process. Research into technocratic legitimacy in turn involves a focus on executive actors, administrative officials and technical experts in the service of governments – actors whose authority derives from their specialised knowledge and problem-solving capacity rather than any electoral representation. Attention to technocratic legitimacy thus requires studying the role of public officials, technocrats and scientific experts, given their role as ‘process managers’ and producers of essential knowledge informing policy decisions.

The scholarly literature has highlighted a fundamental trade-off between democratic and technocratic legitimacy. Indeed, technocracy can be conceptualised as the process ‘whereby non-elected or apolitical agencies *displace* representative and political institutions in decision-making processes’ (Lobo & MacManus, 2020, p. 199, emphasis added), thus undermining representative democracy. While in democratic processes ultimate authority rests with the ‘people’ and is exercised through deliberation and elections, in technocratic processes authority is vested in ‘experts’ and exercised through specialised knowledge and technical expertise. Technocratic and democratic legitimacy appear to be at odds not only theoretically but also empirically, as recent research has demonstrated that citizens are more inclined to support technocratic modes of governance when they have weaker democratic attitudes and are distrustful of their politicians and representative institutions (Bertsou & Pastorella, 2017).

In the EU, the tension between technocracy and democracy most famously played out in the policy response to the Eurozone crisis, where decisions were shown to result from technical considerations advanced by non-elected institutions, such as the European Central Bank (ECB), at the expense of free democratic choice by representative institutions, notably the European Parliament (Schmidt, 2020). Findings from previous works therefore point quite robustly to a negative relationship between technocratic and democratic legitimacy. Overall, one may thus expect reliance on one form of legitimacy to occur largely at the detriment of the other in the national implementation of the RRF.

As discussed in more detail elsewhere (Capati & Christiansen, 2025), in line with the established literature on the Europeanisation of national executives, the implementation of EU policies at the national level can be expected to further strengthen national governments and their technocratic structures at the expense of national legislatures and subnational authorities, including regions and municipalities. The implementation phase, during which member states are expected to translate supranational regulations and directives into concrete policy outcomes, places a premium on technical expertise, administrative coordination and organisational capacity – resources that are far more readily available to central executives than to legislatures or subnational authorities – thereby reinforcing latent patterns of ‘deparliamentarisation’ and territorial marginalisation in EU politics (S. Fabbrini & Donà, 2003, p. 34). In this context, the notion of the ‘core executive’ has been developed to capture not only the cabinet and the prime minister, but also the network of technical bodies involved in coordinating EU policy implementation at the national level, including *ad hoc* expert committees and senior civil servants (Dunleavy & Rhodes, 1990). The centrality of technical expertise within national administrations at the service of member state governments can

therefore be seen to constitute a key legitimising mechanism underpinning EU implementation policy processes.

At the same time, recourse to technocratic rather than democratic legitimacy is likely to shape the degree of (de-)politicisation characterising the process of domestic implementation of the RRF. Grounded in the representation of a diverse range of citizen preferences through national parliaments and regional authorities, democratic legitimacy tends to encourage political contestation among parties articulating competing social interests, thereby fostering politicisation of the policy process. A theoretical account of this dynamic is being provided by the postfunctionalist approach to European integration which identified the politicisation of EU decision-making as a process triggered by the broader inclusion of citizen views through national referendums, intensified party competition over EU issues and the rise of identity politics, marking the shift from a 'permissive consensus' pre-Maastricht to a 'constraining dissensus' post-Maastricht (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). By contrast, technocratic legitimacy is typically associated with claims of political independence, expert authority and regulatory efficiency, and is therefore more conducive to processes of depoliticisation and the insulation of decision-making from partisan contestation (Sánchez-Cuenca, 2017). When policy processes are detached from normative considerations and value-based choices and instead presented as issues of technical necessity, opportunities for political contestation are significantly reduced and the scope for politicisation shrinks as a consequence.

Method and data

The article relies on a binary comparative analysis of the implementation of the RRF in Spain and Italy. To capture the nature of this process, we look at the democratic and technocratic dimensions of legitimacy in the implementation process of the RRF (adoption, implementation and amendment of the NRRPs) until December 2024. The tracing of this national-level implementation process is designed to unveil the role played by key domestic actors, potentially involved in this process by virtue of their constitutional, political or technical powers. Three criteria are under scrutiny with respect to the democratic legitimacy of the process: the involvement of national parliaments, political parties and regional authorities. Two aspects in particular are analysed with regard to technocratic legitimacy: the role of national executives and the participation of experts. In both cases, the degree of actors' involvement is assessed through the analysis of both their formal powers and actual influence during the adoption, implementation and amendment of the NRRPs.

The selection of Spain and Italy as case studies is justified by the fact that these two countries are critical for our understanding of the dynamics behind

'quiet implementation' for several reasons. First, both member states committed to the highest number of reforms and investments at the outset of the adoption of the RRF. Being exposed to the highest conditionality in exchange for EU funding makes them critical cases for investigating the domestic dynamics of contestation. This is even more compelling when considering the distinctive structural and institutional features of Spain and Italy. First, both countries have long faced high levels of public debt, reaching approximately 140 per cent and 107 per cent of GDP, respectively, at the time of the RRF's inception. In both countries, debates over fiscal discipline, austerity and conditionality of EU financial support have historically provoked intense political conflict (Pavolini *et al.*, 2015). The introduction of a novel EU funding instrument based on an unprecedented scale of commitments in terms of structural reforms and investments (see Table 1) could therefore have been expected to trigger mobilisation, both by political parties at the central level as well as by regional and local authorities.

Second, the two political systems have been characterised by enduring patterns of party system fragmentation and governmental instability. In Italy, rapid cabinet turnover and coalition reconfigurations have frequently undermined executive cohesion, while Spain has experienced a prolonged period of polarisation and unstable minority governments (Capati *et al.*, 2023; Fernández-Pasarín *et al.*, 2023). Such environments are generally conducive to politicisation, as parties seek to differentiate themselves and exploit distributive controversies. Third, both countries exhibit a significant degree of territorial decentralisation, with regional governments wielding substantial powers in traditional EU redistributive policies such as cohesion policy and, thus expectedly reluctant to be marginalised in the implementation of recovery funds. This amplifies the potential for political conflict, as sensitive decisions about the allocation and use of funds are compounded by longstanding tensions over the distribution of authority and resources across levels of government.

These features make Spain and Italy the most suitable cases in order to determine how and why contestation surrounding the implementation of the RRF was muted at the national level. Here are two member states where the propensity for politicisation was among the highest in the EU, meaning the choice in favour of studying these two countries complies with the demands of a most-likely case design. The logic of this approach is the argument that an absence of contestation over the RRF's implementation in these two critical settings makes it improbable to materialise elsewhere under less favourable conditions. More importantly, this choice constitutes a promising research design because uncovering the mechanisms that account for the 'quiet implementation' of the RRF in these two cases will enable us to shed light on broader patterns of how national governments and political actors have managed to suppress potential contestation and

Table 1. Key aspects of major recipients of RRF funding. Source: Authors' own elaboration.

	RRF funds allocated	Reforms and investments	RRF funds disbursed by September 2025	Number of amendments to NRRP by September 2025	Government type (chief executive)	Number of parties in Parliament
Italy	€194.4 billion	184 reforms 430 investments	€51.03 billion in grants and €89.35 billion in loans	5	Coalition government (Conte; Draghi; Meloni)	High, ~12 parties
Spain	€163 billion	197 reforms 397 investments	€55.09 billion in grants and €16.27 billion in loans	6	Minority coalition government (Sánchez)	High, 9 parliamentary groups, 23 parties
Poland	€59.81 billion	134 reforms and 193 investments	€7.3 billion in grants and 13.46 billion in loans	4	Coalition government (Morawiecki)	Medium, ~6 parties
France	€40.3 billion	47 reforms and 134 investments	€34.13 billion in grants	1	Coalition government (Macron)	High, ~9 parties
Germany	€30.3 billion	52 reforms and 91 investments	€19.76 billion in grants	4	Coalition government (Merkel; Scholz)	Medium, ~6 parties

distributive conflicts. The comparative analysis of these two cases therefore provides a valuable lens through which to explore the dynamics underpinning the occurrence of 'quiet implementation', while also contributing to a more general understanding of the political dynamics of EU recovery governance.

The article utilises both primary sources and data obtained from the relevant secondary literature. Primary sources include the legal texts of the RRF and the two NRRPs, official documents by the European institutions as well as by the Italian and Spanish governments, public statements by key policymakers and relevant media reporting. These documentary sources were complemented by a set of 11 semi-structured elite interviews with public officials directly involved in the implementation of the RRF. Interviews were conducted in person (5), on the phone (3) and through videoconferencing (3) between February 2022 and January 2025 and lasted on average thirty minutes, ranging from twenty to fifty minutes. To ensure the validity of the interviews, the sample was diversified based on the participants' role and institutional affiliation. Through a purposive sampling approach, interview participants were selected from among those 'insiders' with first-hand knowledge of the events under investigation. Respondents included senior and lower-level national civil servants, party officials and regional authorities from both Spain and Italy. A common framework for interview questions was drawn up, which allowed asking comparable questions to each participant on their perception of the consensual or contested nature of the implementation process. All interviews were transcribed and analysed by the authors to draw qualitative inferences on the role of national institutions in the implementation of the RRF and on the consensual or contentious nature of the process. Interview material was triangulated with primary and secondary sources. The insights obtained through these multiple sources were then processed through the analytical lenses of democratic and technocratic legitimacy in order to facilitate the systematic, in-depth and comparative study of the processes of RRF implementation in both countries.

Democratic legitimacy in the national implementation of the RRF

The role of parliaments, political parties and regional authorities in Spain

The implementation of Spain's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) has occurred against the background of the country's polarised political landscape and the fragile nature of the coalition government (Socialist Party – PSOE + Unidas Podemos – UP) (Fernández-Pasarín *et al.*, 2023). The political survival of the executive has been closely tied to the swift deployment of

EU funds, a situation that led opposition parties – primarily the centre-right Popular Party (PP) – to accuse the government of using these resources to secure electoral advantage (Fernández-Pasarín & Lanaia, 2022). Some controversy emerged early on when the government opted to centralise the management of the RRF funds, rejecting the PP's proposal for an independent agency. This centralisation was passed narrowly in the Lower House with 170 votes out of 348. The vote's outcome relied on the unexpected support of the far-left Basque nationalist EH Bildu and the abstention of 52 MPs from the far-right Vox, underscoring the government's volatile parliamentary support.

However, apart from this initial dispute, and despite differences over its budgetary, legislative, and oversight functions, the Spanish parliament played only a marginal role in the adoption and implementation of the NRRP. The NRRP and its first three amended versions (June 2023, March 2024, and December 2024) were never submitted to a direct vote or formal parliamentary approval. Instead, budget laws indirectly endorsed these by incorporating NRRP-related income and expenditure from 2021 onwards. For instance, the 2021 Budget Law, published 6 months before EU approval of the Spanish NRRP (Law 11/2020 of 30 December), anticipated the receipt of €27 billion from the RRF, while the 2022 Budget Law relied on the conditional injection of €27.633 billion in EU funds in order to sustain its revenue and expenditure projections.

Budget approvals did test the viability of the coalition government. The 2021 Budget Law was narrowly approved with 188 votes from 11 parliamentary groups, amid accusations of overestimating fiscal capacity while neglecting the performance-based nature of the funds. The same polarisation characterised debates over executive decrees such as the controversial 'Omnibus Law' (RDL 6/2023) – a heterogeneous set of measures ranging from major judicial reforms to minor cultural provisions, which passed by a single vote (172 in favour, 171 against).

While dissent over budget approvals showcased Spain's polarised political landscape, in the legislative domain, Parliament has been largely reduced to the role of a mere spectator. On 14 April 2021, the Prime Minister presented the basic lines of the NRRP to Parliament without specifying Spain's commitments in terms of structural reforms and investments. In the words of a senior policy advisor to the parliamentary group of the main opposition party:

The implementation of the funds has been characterised by a unilateral and opaque design on the part of the government, centralising control in La Moncloa [...]. This has restricted the possibility of significant amendments or contributions from legislators, downgrading the role of Parliament and preventing improvements in implementation, governance or transparency that would have been essential for a proper evaluation of the impact of the funds and the associated reforms. (Interview S1)

The main legislative texts related to the implementation of the NRRP were channelled via Royal Decree Laws, i.e., executive emergency powers which require validation but impede the possibility of introducing amendments. In the same vein, the first addenda to the NRRP, which included the possibility of loans, was merely presented by the then Minister of Economy, Nadia Calviño, to the Mixed Commission Senate-Lower House for the EU in December 2022. Its final adoption by the Council of Ministers in June 2023 led to a second presentation by the new Minister of Economy, Carlos Cuerpo, to the Mixed Commission in a session also dedicated to the control of the subsidiary principle on 4 April 2024 (Cortes Generales, 2024, April 4).

The parliament's minimal involvement in the process demonstrates that in Spain executive accountability was limited to the governance structure set out in the relevant Royal Decree Law (RDL 36/2020), which merely mandated quarterly reporting on the follow-up of the NRRP implementation. Since the first reporting session in February 2022, only 12 ministerial appearances had been recorded by December 2024 – a rather limited number, considering that 57 requests were made in 2023 alone (Congreso de los Diputados, 2025).

At the same time, the politically explosive nature of structural reforms – particularly with regard to the labour market and the pension system – exacerbated intra-coalition tensions (El País, 2023, January 15). The PSOE's support for labour market reforms aligned with EU recommendations often clashed with UP's calls for the full repeal of the 2012 labour market reform adopted by the PP-led government during the eurozone crisis. The new labour market reform (RDL 32/2021), balancing flexibility and the reduction of precarious employment, was passed by a single vote (175–174) in February 2022, following intense negotiations between the Ministry of Economy (PSOE) and the Ministry of Work (UP) (El País 2021, October 26).

In the same vein, the pension reform (RDL 2/2023), aimed at ensuring long-term fiscal sustainability, faced opposition from UP and trade unions concerned about its social impact. It was adopted in March 2023 with 179 votes in favour, 104 against (PP and *Ciudadanos*-Citizens' Party), and 61 abstentions (including Vox and EH Bildu). As noted by an opposition MP: '[Concerns about the sustainability of this reform conducted by a weak government have led the Commission to require its revision every three years by the Independent Authority for Fiscal Responsibility (AIREF)]' (Interview S2). All this demonstrates how the implementation of Spain's NRRP has been shaped by the governing coalition's fragility, leading to a centralised, executive-driven approach and the reduction of the Parliament's role to the one of an ex-post validator.

A similar pattern occurred on the territorial side. Despite importing the concept of co-governance from the management of the COVID-crisis, the role of the Spanish regions (*Comunidades Autónomas*, CCAAs) in the design of the NRRP was also residual. The CCAAs were permitted to submit proposals

but did not actively participate either in the design of the governance structure or in the identification of the policies and components. Their participation started with the practical deployment of the Plan (Fernández Leiceaga & Lago, 2024) and was hierarchically framed both in a new 'Sectoral Conference for EU Funds' chaired by the Ministry of Finance (only two meetings between 2021 and 2024) and in Sectoral Conferences organised by policy area and composed by the different Ministries and their equivalents at CCAA level (161 meetings reported between October 2020 and December 2023, *IV Informe de Ejecución del Plan de Recuperación, 2023*).

The Communities expressed their preference for a more conventional approach to coordination within a single Sectoral Conference based on territorial criteria, a claim that was particularly relevant in light of their direct implementation powers over 54 per cent of the available funds for investments. The government's main argument in denying this request in favour of a top-down system of governance was the need to ensure the effective and timely compliance of a *nationwide* plan with the EU requirements and conditionality (*IV Informe de Ejecución del Plan de Recuperación, 2023*).

This verticality, in sharp contrast with the traditionally *regional* management of EU Cohesion Funds, gave rise to a climate of mutual mistrust between the central and the regional governments: while the former was ostensibly concerned about the regions' capacity to manage the funds correctly, the latter, and in particular the majority of those that were governed by the opposition (since the 2023 regional elections, 12 out of 17 CCAA are governed by the Right), resented being sidelined in the identification of objectives and investments. As an official by the regional authority of Madrid put it: 'We are mere managers of programmes that are alien to us.' (Interview S3).

In addition to the dilution of the territorial criteria for channelling interlocation, regions also voiced criticism regarding the lack of governmental priorities' adequation with on-the-ground realities and needs (Zeitlin *et al.*, 2025). As mentioned by a regional senior policy officer from Galicia:

The ministries define which projects need to be financed, with a lot of rigidity. And they don't just define the objectives, they even tell you how to run the calls for participation from the private sector, and in general they control most of the points from the projects. Some projects work very well, but others do not, because the points identified by the central government do not match the needs of every CA. The necessities can be very different. For example, Galicia just gave back €22 million that were supposed to be destined towards increasing public places in infant school (0–3 years old). The Ministry told them exactly how to articulate this, how the call should work for the municipalities wishing to benefit from it, the level of the aid intensity limit (60% in this case), the number of public jobs created etc. The problem is that in Galicia infant care works fairly well (around 50% of children make use of it), and so there was no demand [...]

from the €34 million that had been assigned to this for Galicia, they only spent €12 million. (Interview S4)

As it happens, the incapacity to absorb high amounts of funds within very short periods of time was also a point of friction. As mentioned by a senior policy officer from the Economic Department of the Madrid Region:

Suddenly the bank account of the region receives a huge amount of money to carry on projects which do not fit with our reality – such as funds to improve digital skills of women in rural areas – and with very little time to absorb it. (Interview IS5)

Furthermore, the stringent supervision system in terms of regular and comprehensive reporting obligations on the state of implementation was also criticised for being an extraordinary administrative burden.

The role of parliaments, political parties and regional authorities in Italy

Between 2020 and 2022, two distinct versions of Italy's NRRP were elaborated by two successive governments – the first led by Giuseppe Conte as head of a coalition comprising the Five Star Movement (M5S) and the Democratic Party (PD); the second, by Mario Draghi, who chaired a 'national unity' executive with the support of all parliamentary groups except Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy (Fdi). Conte's draft plan, which was presented to Parliament in January 2021, never advanced beyond the draft stage; however, as a political crisis over the management of EU funds led to the collapse of his government in February that year. In contrast, Draghi's version of the NRRP was finalised, approved by the Italian Parliament and formally submitted to the European Commission on May 1, 2021. However, this was followed only a year later by a change of government, with a new coalition of Fdi, Forza Italia and the Lega coming into office in October 2022. The new government headed by Giorgia Meloni then submitted three rounds of amendment requests to the European Commission in the period until December 2024: in July 2023, in August 2023, and in October 2024, respectively.

The elaboration of the NRRP in Italy gave rise to political confrontations between majority and opposition parties on key reforms and investment programmes. Such confrontations, however, did not have any direct impact on the content of the Italian plan as that remained within the exclusive purview of the central government in cooperation with the European Commission. Under Mario Draghi's leadership, Italy successfully met all the milestones and targets outlined in its NRRP, securing full disbursement of the allocated EU funds for 2021 and 2022 (F. Fabbri, 2022). However, after assuming office as prime minister in October 2022, Giorgia Meloni reaffirmed her commitment to revising the NRRP due to shifts in the

international landscape following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. She contended that the war necessitated the identification of 'new strategic priorities' to address rising costs in the energy sector. Echoing that, the new Economy Minister Giancarlo Giorgetti asserted that the government should not be bound by commitments made two years earlier if they had since become less pressing or misaligned with current priorities (Financial Times, 2023a). Consequently, Meloni's Minister for European Affairs Raffaele Fitto announced that the government would submit a revised plan to the European Commission by June 2023. This decision, however, raised concerns in Brussels, as it disrupted Italy's ability to meet several key milestones and targets originally scheduled for that year (Financial Times, 2023b).

Meloni's approach to the NRRP faced sharp criticism from parties that had supported Draghi's government, who remained committed to the so-called 'Draghi agenda'. The PD and M5S denounced the government's handling of the plan as 'confusing and sloppy', demanding that officials report to Parliament on its progress (Corriere della Sera, 2023). These criticisms followed the NRRP governance reform of February 2023, through which the government centralised control over the NRRP under the Presidency of the Council of Ministers (PCM) – the Prime Minister's Office – assuming full authority over the management of RRF funds. Opposition parties strongly opposed this shift, arguing that the government's 'political confusion' warranted greater transparency and parliamentary scrutiny over its true intentions regarding the NRRP (Euractiv, 2023). Notably, following the governance reform, several technical experts and senior officials originally appointed under Draghi's administration voluntarily stepped down and were replaced by new personnel.

In Italy, the centralisation of powers at the highest levels of the executive in the implementation of the RRF largely coincided with the marginalisation of Parliament. Because of the technical nature of most measures within the NRRP, both the Conte and Draghi governments elaborated their recovery plans in close cooperation with the European Commission but with little involvement of the legislature – including party groups and standing committees –, which was limited to monitoring and post-hoc impact assessment (Interview I2). Between 7 December 2020 and 12 January 2021, the Conte government released five provisional drafts of the NRRP. However, the definitive version of the recovery plan was not presented to Parliament until 15 January – just two days after a government crisis began that would ultimately result in Conte stepping down as prime minister. Although the Conte government collapsed and the Draghi government took office in February 2021, 'both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate held discussions based on Conte's previous NRRP until 30 March and 31 March [2021] respectively, meaning the Italian Parliament basically spoke hot air' (Interview I3).

In the meantime, the Draghi government had already begun a comprehensive rewrite of the Italian NRRP with respect to Conte's draft recovery plan. Again, due to the complexity of the reform and investment programmes, 'the Italian Parliament was excluded from the bilateral dialogues between the government and the Commission on the NRRP' (Interview I4). On 25 April, after more than two months in office and just five days before the deadline for submission to the European Commission, Draghi presented a provisional version of his government's NRRP to Parliament, whereas the final version of the plan sent to Brussels was only submitted to the Italian legislature later on (Cavatorto *et al.*, 2021). To this effect, as a policy officer dealing with the NRRP dossier suggested,

the perception for parliamentary groups was one of irrelevance both because the government prioritised dialogue with the European Commission but also because, if anything, it communicated directly with party officials responsible for the NRRP, thus bypassing the competent parliamentary groups and committees. (Interview I3)

When Meloni took over in October 2022, Parliament remained *de facto* excluded from both the governance reform and the amendment requests concerning the NRRP. For one thing, the Meloni government swiftly moved to further centralise the governance of the Italian recovery plan after no more than a formal consultation with the legislature. This sparked open contestation from some opposition groups in Parliament, who argued that the 'political confusion' caused by the reform necessitated a 'transparency operation and a parliamentary debate on the government's real intentions about the NRRP' (Euractiv, 2023). For another, although the Minister for European Affairs under the Meloni Government, Raffaele Fitto, did present the proposed amendments to the chambers before submitting the revised NRRP to the European Commission, in fact Parliament ceded its legislative function to the executive, limiting itself to demanding access to information and oversight powers. Because a lack of parliamentary involvement in the design of the measures within the Italian NRRP had been apparent from the beginning, 'parliamentary groups preferred specialising in the functions of control and impact assessment, leaving the incumbent government free to politically determine the direction and scope of the national recovery plan' (Interview I2).

In sum, all three governments managed to prevent an 'assault on the leadership' regarding the NRRP, as usually happens with the budget law, 'avoiding that members of Parliament (MPs) would put forward their own proposals, often driven by behind-the-scenes deals and idiosyncratic interests' (Interview I3). The Italian legislature set broad policy objectives at an early stage, such as gender equality and bridging the generational gap, but played barely any substantial role when it came to the elaboration,

negotiation and adoption of the reform and investment programmes included in the Italian NRRP.

Although the RRF provides that member state governments should consult 'local and regional authorities' in the elaboration and implementation of the recovery plans (RRF Regulation, 2021), the Regions and local units struggled to make their voice heard in the context of the Italian NRRP. This is despite their constitutionally granted legislative competences in many of the policy areas covered by the plan. As an interviewee admitted, 'time pressures imposed by the RRF often resulted in the government going its own way, with little regard for Parliament or Regions' (Interview 13).

The State-Regions Conference [SRC, Conferenza Stato-Regioni] and the Unified Conference [UC, Conferenza Unificata] – the two constitutional bodies dedicated to the institutional cooperation between the State and the Regions – were never summoned by the Conte government, who identified instead the Conference of Regions [CR, Conferenza delle Regioni] – a political body of coordination between the Regions and local units themselves – as the exchange forum between the government and local authorities on the NRRP. In October 2020, Minister for European Affairs under the Conte government, Vincenzo Amendola, granted the regions and local units the opportunity to submit their coordinated proposals for the NRRP in the context of the CR (Profeti & Baldi, 2021). In accordance with the constitutional principle of 'loyal cooperation', the CR demands the right to participate in the Executive Committee and discuss possible alignments between government and regional projects. However, the Conte government ignored such demands until its collapse in late January 2021.

When the Draghi government took over, the political dialogue with the CR was abandoned, whereas exchanges with the UC became much more frequent, though they remained consultative in nature (Interview 14). The government met the Regions and local units' representatives on two occasions before submitting the NRRP. The first, on 8 April, for the 'start of the process of consultation and involvement of Regions and local authorities in the adoption and implementation of the NRRP'. The second, on 28 April, to formally receive the document outlining the Regions' positions on the NRRP, 'at a time when the NRRP was ready to be sent to Brussels' (Interview 14). To this effect, Minister for Regional Affairs Mariastella Gelmini acknowledged the 'gap in the dialogue with the Regions and Autonomies' and promised 'the highest level of participation [of the Regions] in the phase of implementation, which will be just as important as the phase of elaboration [of the NRRP]'.

The Draghi and Meloni governments' governance framework did little to achieve this, however. The Regions were granted representation in the 'control room' for the implementation of the NRRP through the President of the CR but only as far as issues concerning multiple regions were

concerned. Additionally, the Regions participated in the 'Permanent Table for Economic, Social, and Territorial Partnership' [*Tavolo Permanente per il Partenariato economico, sociale e territoriale*], with mere consultation functions (Profeti & Baldi, 2021). Both governments also enjoyed large substitutive powers over regional administrations in case of delays in the projects. Although all our interviewees concur that the Regions and local authorities were entirely sidelined in the elaboration of the plan, they expressed mixed views about its implementation. However, most of them recognised that in policy areas under regional competence – such as health policy – 'local administrations actually had some room for manoeuvre', while in others 'they did not get to choose how to spend the funds' (Interview 11, 13, 14, 15).

Democratic legitimacy in the implementation of the RRF: a first assessment

The discussion of the RRF implementation in Spain and Italy demonstrates how in both cases there was substantial potential for contestation about both procedures and substantive choices for the spending of EU funds. Opposition parties, in particular, sought to utilise avenues open to them to politicise the process, primarily through parliamentary channels and, especially in the case of Spain, through intergovernmental fora connecting central and regional governments. Such attempts to mobilise opposition against particular choices advanced by government were motivated by substantively different views about the desirable implementation strategies. On other occasions, the RRF – its size, scope and potential impact – constituted more of an opportunity for those not in control of government to make their voices heard and achieve a greater degree of visibility. However, these attempts were not very systematic and ultimately failed in gaining significant traction. Influence over the direction of the implementation process and the design of NRRPs was in any case curtailed by the limited time, the need for an understanding of the technical details and the inherent limitations of a 'performance-based approach' (Zeitlin *et al.*, 2025). Against this background, considerable effort and political capital would be required to achieve a comparatively small impact on the process.

In both cases, national executives sought to minimise the scope of public debates, lengthy deliberations and open conflict about the design of national plans. Parliaments were largely sidelined, regional authorities marginalised and disagreements among coalition parties suppressed, all in favour of an executive-led process focused on efficient and swift implementation. In other words, the RRF may already have been designed in an inherently managerial manner, limiting opportunities for democratic politics, but national executives then utilised these features further in order to achieve their

aims of a smooth and controlled implementation process. These findings, therefore, point to the success of strategies by the respective prime ministerial offices to depoliticise the process of RRF implementation, avoiding as far as possible the involvement of political actors and wider public debate. On the basis of the evidence presented so far, it is apparent that the implementation of the RRF in the member states did not rely on the political input from democratically elected representatives to legitimise the process – a conclusion that heightens the potential relevance of technocratic forms of legitimacy that are examined in the following section.

Technocratic legitimacy in the national implementation of the RRF

The role of public administrations, experts and consultants in Spain

A key characteristic of the management of the RRF in Spain has been the extension – and to some extent, the normalisation – of extraordinary rule-making procedures implemented during the COVID-19 crisis (see *El Mundo* 24 April 2025). As mentioned above, this approach has resulted in significant centralisation of power within the executive branch and the marginalisation of key political actors at both national (Parliament) and subnational (Autonomous Communities) levels. While these measures have been framed as necessary to comply with EU commitments, they have also interfered with the regular functioning of the country's institutional system.

The final version of Spain's NRRP was submitted to the European Commission for assessment in January 2021. This submission emerged from an exceptional domestic context. In October 2020, as negotiations with the Commission neared their final stage, the Spanish government extended the State of Emergency for 6 months – an extraordinary constitutional measure that had been first adopted in March 2020 to impose the lockdown of the country during the COVID-19 crisis. This measure, which was later declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court in October 2021 (Sentence 183/2021), involved the practical deactivation of executive parliamentary control until May 2021 (López Nieto *et al.*, 2021).

During this period, on 29 and 31 December 2020, the government enacted through emergency legislative powers derived from Article 86 of the Spanish Constitution, two complementary Royal Decree-Laws (RDL) setting the governance structure for the implementation of the NRRP: Royal Decree-Law 1182/2020 of 29 December on the creation of a General Secretariat for EU Funds within the Ministry of Finance and Royal Decree-Law 36/2020 on the modernisation of public administration to support the effective implementation of the NRRP. In its advisory opinion of 21 December 2020, the Council of State criticised the latter for its lack of concreteness regarding the

extraordinary and urgent circumstances justifying its use (Council of State, Opinion 783/2020).

Both legislative acts set the scene and fix the central role of the executive in the planning, execution and oversight of the NRRP. RDL 36/2020 is particularly relevant as it stipulates the whole functioning of the NRRP. The cornerstone of the governance structure is the Prime Minister's Cabinet. The direction and supervision of the Plan is centralised within the Department for Economic Affairs and G20 of the PMC and its new RRF Follow-up Unit. As noted by a senior policy officer within the PMC, [this prominent role given to the PMC is because, contrary to Ministries, which have a sectorial perspective, only the PMC has a global knowledge of the tenets of the negotiation of the original plan and of its amendments] (Interview S6). The Prime Minister is directly involved as he presides over the Committee for Recovery, Transformation, and Resilience, an *ad hoc* body that provides strategic orientations and coordinates the implementation of the plan. This Committee is composed of an enlarged Council of Ministers, comprising ministers, the Secretaries of State for Economy and Finance, the new General Secretary for European Funds and the Head of the Department for Economic Affairs and G20.

The centralisation of the NRRP within the executive and the marginal role played by the parliament has been accompanied by a strong mobilisation of experts both from public administration and the private sector. The governance structure of the Plan sets this involvement at different stages of the implementation process. Within the executive, a group of 20 experts specialised in EU funds management provides technical and legal support to the Committee for the Recovery, Transformation and Resilience. This group also provides support to the new Secretariat-General for EU Funds endowed with the horizontal and vertical coordination of the Plan and with the quarterly reporting on milestones and targets performance to the EC. The financial control of the RRF is delegated to the General Accounting Department of the State (*Intervención General de la Administración del Estado*-IGAE). In practice, other actors such as the Spanish Court of Auditors, the Bank of Spain and the Fiscal Independent Agency (AIREF) also intervene as external mechanisms of supervision via the audit of the Budget, the follow-up of macro-economic impact and analysis of fiscal sustainability. The Advocacy of the State is also involved as legal advisor and controller of the adequacy of the subventions, agreements and contracts carried out by administrative bodies with the requirements of the RRF.

Participation of external actors with no executive functions is also stipulated in RDL 36/2020 and has been developed on the ground through two different channels. On one hand, expert groups, high-level fora and advisory councils organised on a sectorial basis and composed of representatives from public administration and the private sector (investors, business associations and social representatives) have been created to discuss investment priorities

of the NRRP with Ministries. Some examples are the Advisory Council for Digital Transformation, the Advisory Council for IA, the Automotive Table or the Forum on Fair and Inclusive Energy Transition. In December 2023, the government reported more than 110 meetings of these groups for debate. On the other hand, a Social Dialogue Board for Recovery, Transformation and Resilience was put into place already in November 2020 to foster dialogue between the government and social stakeholders on the Plan. This platform, which is presided over by the President of the Government and in which trade unions and the main business associations (CEOE) are represented, met on 14 occasions until December 2023. It is worth noting that discussions under this format on key structural reforms such as the Labour Market Law have gone in parallel and, to some extent, have been used by the government to circumvent Parliament opposition.

In the case of investments, the advisory role played by big consulting companies (the big four – Deloitte, PwC, KPMG and EY) also deserves attention. The government has involved these companies in both the design of the Plan and the PERTES (Strategic Projects for the Economic Recovery and Transformation), a new instrument based on public-private partnership to execute the funds. These companies were also collaborating in the preparation of applications by interested entities, as well as in the selection of the projects, leading to controversy due to potential conflicts of interest (Diari Ara 22 May 2021).

In sum, the low involvement of the Parliament and regions in the design and further implementation of the plan contrasts with the direct responsibility assumed by the executive and the delegation of support functions to experts in the implementation of the Spanish NRRP.

The role of public administrations, experts and consultants in Italy

In Italy, both the Conte and the Draghi governments' version of the NRRP provided for the pronounced centralisation of management and implementation powers at the highest levels of the executive (Capati & Christiansen, 2025). The Conte government's draft NRRP envisaged a hierarchical governance structure with the Minister for European Affairs as the single 'point of contact' for the European Commission and the PCM solely responsible for managing and implementing the reform and investment programmes. Conte's draft plan also established an Executive Committee comprising the prime minister, the Minister of Economy and Finance (from the PD) and the Minister of Economic Development (from the M5S), with extensive powers of political oversight vis-à-vis the coordination, monitoring and implementation of the reform and investment projects, thus substituting the Council of Ministers for key decisions on the allocation of funds (Bressanelli & Natali, 2025).

The Draghi government put forward an equally centralised governance framework for managing financial resources in its NRRP despite the initial announcement that ‘the governance of the NRRP will be centred on the Ministry of Economy and Finance, with the very close collaboration of the competent ministries defining the sectoral policies and projects’ (Draghi, 2021). While the ‘point of contact’ for the Commission was indeed moved to the Ministry of Economy and Finance, which was also tasked with the responsibility of tracking financial flows from Brussels, Draghi set up and chaired a ‘control room’ (*cabina di regia*) within the PCM, with powers of political steering and general coordination of the NRRP. The ‘control room’ was entrusted with the implementation of the reform and investment programmes, providing political impetus and issuing recommendations for future action (Bressanelli & Natali, 2025). Moreover, Draghi’s NRRP provided the PCM with substitutive powers over the ministries and relevant administration whereby, in case of delays or inaction in the execution of a programme, the prime minister could decide to step in and take over (F. Fabbrini, 2022). To this effect, a senior policy officer at the PCM conceded that ‘the general coordination of the [Italian NRRP] was an affair between a restricted circle of top government officials in cooperation with the European Commission rather than a collective effort by the Council of Ministers’ (Interview I1).

A few months after taking office in October 2022, the Meloni government passed a reform of the NRRP to further centralise the governance of the plan within Palazzo Chigi (the PCM’s seat), taking full responsibility for the management of RRF resources. In particular, the government replaced the Ministry of the Economy and Finance with the PCM as the institutional ‘point of contact’ for the Commission and provided the latter with the power to remove public managers and to overcome resistance from local authorities on the use of EU funds, signalling ‘Meloni’s goal to bring the decision-making process for the plan into the hands of her top aides’ (Reuters, 2023). Overall, the implementation of the RRF in Italy has witnessed a centralisation of public authority within the highest levels of the executive, largely irrespective of the governing coalition in office. The governance of Italy’s NRRP has invariably envisaged a leading role of the PCM as a steering political body and a few coordination tasks delegated to the Ministry of Economy and Finance, which was recognised as ‘point of contact’ under the Draghi government.

In Italy, the centralisation of powers within top executive offices and the marginalisation of Parliament were paralleled by the delegation of key responsibilities to technical-administrative structures within the Italian bureaucracy as well as external experts (Capati & Christiansen, 2025). On the one hand, as with any member state, the Italian government was supported in the elaboration of the NRRP by the EU’s Recovery and Resilience Task Force (RECOVER), established within the Commission’s Secretariat-

General and working in close cooperation with DG ECFIN. On the other, as one interviewee revealed,

the large amount of EU resources mobilised under the RRF urged the Italian government to set up new technical-administrative structures, including within the PCM, in addition to the General State Accounting Department [Ragioneria Generale dello Stato] and other state bureaucracy. (Interview I1)

The initial stages of the first draft NRRP under the Conte government indeed constituted an ‘emergency circumstance’ as the General State Accounting Department was endowed with extensive responsibilities while the government was busy creating ‘from scratch’ an administrative machine to manage such a complex plan by ‘absorbing personnel from the private sector’ (Interview I4). In his draft NRRP, Conte envisaged a Technical Secretariat to be established at the PCM and comprising nine experts, six managers and one supervisor. The Technical Secretariat would provide technical support to the government and produce periodic information reports based on the monitoring of the NRRP’s implementation.

Through its revised NRRP governance structure, the Draghi government confirmed the Technical Secretariat with administrative support tasks for the ‘control room’ and went on to establish a Unit for the rationalisation and improvement of regulation [Unità per la razionalizzazione e il miglioramento della regolazione] and an Office for Simplification [Ufficio per la semplificazione] at the PCM, with large coordination and resolution powers. These bodies comprised experts from various fields, including academics, judges, professionals, and entrepreneurs, and were indeed appointed based on their technical and professional competences (Interview I2, I4, I5). Moreover, the prime minister hired the American consultancy company McKinsey as an external expert to provide technical and operational project-management support given Italy’s limited administrative capacity and the plan’s short deadlines. Building on the previous draft plan, the Draghi government’s NRRP thus emerged as an effort to further enhance the channels of technical expertise to effectively tackle the challenges of implementing recovery and resilience policies.

The Meloni government put the ‘control room’ under Minister Raffaele Fitto at the PCM and downplayed the technical structures set up by Draghi. At the same time, it established a Mission Structure at the PCM, acting as the single ‘point of contact’ for the European Commission and comprised of a general coordinator, four new general directorates and fifty additional administrators. As our interviewees confirmed, while the degree of delegation to experts slightly diminished with the Meloni government, there was substantial continuity between the two governments as the exchange of views with technical experts remained equally frequent, with regular technical-level meetings covering multiple dossiers (Interview I1, I4, I5; see also Bressanelli & Natali, 2025).

Overall, the weakness of the political relationship between the Italian government and Parliament in the implementation of the RRF was compensated by the executive's marked reliance on both internal and external technical experts, who were delegated responsibilities in the areas of coordination, definition and evaluation of the investment and reform programmes within the Italian NRRP.

Technocratic legitimacy in the implementation of the RRF: A first assessment

The empirical research presented here demonstrates that the Italian experience mirrored developments in Spain: the implementation of the RRF in both cases was based on a high degree of executive centralisation and the extensive use of technocratic expertise both from within and beyond the public administration. Central governments in both countries greatly relied on technical experts, in their efforts to ensure an efficient steering of the process, the timely adoption of the national plans and the minimisation of public debate in order to achieve these objectives. Much of the design of NPPRs was removed from the standard administrative and political processes, with the creation of new and dedicated units within prime ministers' offices, the outsourcing of economic modelling and risk analysis to external consultancies, and the fast-tracking of parliamentary procedures. The process has been characterised by technocratic rather than democratic legitimacy. Indeed, what emerges here is a pattern demonstrating the inverse relation between these different logics: central executives, seeking to depoliticise the process and keeping political contestation at bay, relied instead on considerable amounts of technocratic expertise in order to legitimise their actions. Mirroring broader trends in the process of European integration – as discussed below – governments and central administrations in these cases succeeded in moving significant aspects of public policymaking away from democratic arenas through an emphasis on the technical and managerial aspects of implementing decisions.

Conclusions

The detailed empirical study of the RRF implementation in Spain and Italy demonstrates remarkable parallels in both countries – findings which are also of wider significance for our understanding of developments in the EU as a whole, and indeed for the debates about democratic legitimacy, economic governance and executive dominance in Europe.

With regards to the nature of executive government, we have observed in both Spain and Italy the continuation of crisis management patterns based on the concentration of powers in the offices of the Prime Minister, with

limited political coordination across government departments. Parliamentary scrutiny in both cases was also extremely limited, and could even be considered merely token involvement during the implementation stage of the RRF, despite the prevalence of coalition government in both countries and – in Spain – the presence of a fragile parliamentary majority of the ruling government. Furthermore, the involvement of regional and local authorities was largely consultative in both cases. This marginalisation of regional and local authorities in the design of NRRPs is remarkable in view of both their constitutional role (especially in Spain) and their practical significance in the process of implementing the RRF. It reduced opportunities for substantive input from relevant actors into the nature of domestic reforms and thereby also further constrained the scope for political deliberations about the direction of the implementation trajectories. While in Italy the role of regional and local authorities in domestic politics is generally limited, the sidelining of the communities in Spain is remarkable, providing further evidence of a depoliticisation strategy by the central executive.

By contrast, both cases were characterised by the pronounced role of technical experts and external advisors. The extensive involvement of technical experts from both the public and the private sectors may have aided the professional articulation of the NRRPs and their comparatively swift adoption, occurring as this did against the background of significant time pressure and the need for high levels of technical know-how. At the same time, this way of proceeding demonstrated the desire by executive decision-makers to limit political interference in the choices made during the RRF implementation and associated reforms, reducing or even circumventing democratic accountability. The comparative case analysis thereby demonstrates the effects of a reliance on technocratic rather than democratic legitimacy in the course of implementing the RRF domestically: a high degree of executive centralisation, alongside the very limited involvement of parliaments and regional authorities. Both elements – the marginalisation of the parliaments and regions coupled with the mobilisation of experts by the executive leadership – constitute the key mechanisms that explain the silencing of contestation in the implementation of the RRF at the member state level. The concentration of decision-making powers in prime ministers' offices, in particular, is noteworthy here, providing fresh evidence in support of the long-standing argument that EU integration contributes to increasing executive dominance within the member states (Curtin, 2014).

These findings provide answers that help solve the puzzle of the RRF's 'quiet implementation': despite the high potential for politicisation in the EU in general and in member states such as Spain and Italy in particular, the manner in which the implementation of the RRF was managed domestically demonstrates the success of the managerialism inherent in the process and the de-politicisation strategies adopted by central government executives.

Privileging technocratic over democratic legitimacy allowed central governments to dominate the process and ultimately served to silence contestation. Occasional episodes of opposition to aspects of the plans resulting from country - and time-specific contingencies do not contradict the observation of a general pattern of executive dominance in both of these cases; indeed, such isolated instances confirm the presence of the *potential* for political contestation while at the same time also demonstrating the success of the overall drive towards depoliticisation of the process. The emphasis on swift and 'efficient' implementation of the RRF domestically also reveals a degree of executive complicity between national governments and the European Commission: the progressive relaxation of the criteria in the allocation of funds, the growing concern over the slow absorption of RRF disbursements, and the reorientation of the spending programme towards new, defence-orientated objectives all indicate the Commission's priority to work with governments in order to overcome any obstacles in the implementation process.

This explanation for 'quiet implementation' in Spain and Italy is of wider significance because these countries constitute critical cases: the potential for contestation there was arguably greatest, considering both the size of their share of RRF disbursements and the history of political instability in these two member states. In view of these conditions, the findings here are therefore symptomatic of a wider phenomenon in the economic governance of the EU, namely the effects of largely technocratic decision-making processes, dominated by central executives at the expense of wider societal involvement. While contributing to the efficiency of the process and the professional implementation of the plans, this state of affairs clearly raises wider questions about the degree of democratic accountability of EU economic governance. A continuation, even deepening, of the technocratic and depoliticised nature of such wide-ranging policy decisions might serve central governments in the short term, but at the same time raises the potential for future dissensus about the EU's economic and fiscal governance regime – dissensus which, as we have seen in other areas of EU integration, can escalate from contestation about policy choices and institutional arrangements to systemic opposition (Coman *et al.*, 2026).

These issues remain pertinent not only for the remainder of the RRF's implementation trajectory – which, after all, also concerns decisions that will need to be taken concerning the repayment of these RRF loans. They matter also because the EU is facing far-reaching choices in other areas of public spending: the flexibilization and partial reorientation of EU funds towards defence procurement in the ReArm Europe Plan, the future financing of the European Defence Fund and the European Peace Facility, and indeed the many challenges surrounding the adoption of the 2028–2034 Multiannual Financial Framework. Indeed, with likely further transformations in EU public spending in response to geopolitical upheavals, the costs of a potential settlement of the war against

Ukraine, the reconstruction of Ukraine, the greater expenditure on military defence and the challenges related to economic security and ecological transition, whether and how decisions about the EU's public finances are democratically legitimised remain of paramount importance.

List of interviews

Interview I1 – 11.11.2024. Senior policy officer, Presidency of the Council of Ministers during Draghi government, in person.

Interview I2 – 08.11.2024. Policy advisor to cabinet member in Meloni government, on the phone.

Interview I3 – 05.11.2024. Policy officer, majority party group during Draghi government, Senate of the Republic, in person.

Interview I4 – 22.11.2024. Senior policy advisor to cabinet member in Meloni government, in person.

Interview I5 – 14.01.2025. Senior policy officer, Presidency of the Council of Ministers during Meloni government, in person.

Interview S1 – 15.01.2025. Senior policy advisor to the direction of the Popular Party's political group, on the phone.

Interview S2 – 16.01.2025. Policy officer, Popular Party's, Lower House, on the phone.

Interview S3 – 04.09.2022. Regional authority, Department of Employment, region of Madrid, videoconference.

Interview S4 – 12.12.2023. Senior policy officer, Directorate for EU Funds, region of Galicia, videoconference.

Interview S5 – 04.02.2022. Regional Authority, Department of Economics, region of Madrid, in person.

Interview S6 – 19.11.2024. Senior Policy officer, Cabinet of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, videoconference.

Note

1. In this article, 'implementation' is understood as the process whereby EU-level decisions about the RRF are being transposed and executed at the member state level. In other words, actions which may involve policy-formulation, framing and decision-making (as well as implementation) at the national level are all considered here as part of the implementation stage of decisions that were previously adopted at the EU level. In practice, this includes the design, deliberation, approval and amendment of the NRRPs.

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