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“When the Market Becomes Deadly.” COVID-19 as a Critical Juncture for Neoliberal Ideology in the European Union

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“When the Market Becomes Deadly.”

COVID-19 as a Critical Juncture for Neoliberal Ideology in the European Union



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Abstract

This thesis seeks to investigate COVID-19 as an opportunity for change for neoliberal ideology in the European Union. Critical juncture theory frames the pandemic to determine whether and how it amounts to a critical juncture for neoliberal political rationality investigated through discourse. A theoretical spill-over effect is laid out to assess whether COVID-19 unleashed the potential for change of a critical juncture on neoliberal discourse. Discourse analysis of EU social policy debates and documents before and after March 2020 is carried out to compare the two emerging discourses and observe whether a state of discursive flux can be identified. Discursive flux is developed through the indicators of “ambiguity” and “heightened level of contestation” to operationalise the potential for change of a critical juncture. The narrative comparison shows that flux can be identified in the post-March-2020 discourse. Indeed, whereas the dogmas found in the baseline reflect the conceptualisation of neoliberal political rationality, the post-March-2020 discourse is shown to question each of them, rejecting their dogmatic character. New narratives emerge which outline the possibility for change away from neoliberal political rationality. This is how this thesis concludes that COVID-19 amounts to a critical juncture for neoliberal ideology in the EU.

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List of Abbreviations

ALDE	Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe
ECR	European Conservatives and Reformists
EFDD	Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy
ENF	Europe of Nations and Freedom
EP	European Parliament
EPP	European People's Party
EPSR	European Pillar of Social Rights
EU	European Union
FEAD	Fund for European Aid to the most Deprived
Greens-EFA	Greens-European Free Alliance
GUE-NGL	European United Left-Nordic Green Left
ID	Identity and Democracy Party
MEP	Member of the European Parliament
MS	Member State
NI	Non-attached
Renew	Renew Europe
S&D	Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats
The Left	The Left in the European Parliament

1. Introduction

“When the market becomes deadly.” This is the title of a report published by Corporate Europe Observatory (2021: 2) which condemns the “outsourcing and private provision of healthcare” spearheaded by the European Union (EU). The practice of health marketization is being held responsible for the degradation of the Member States’ (MSs) capacity to deal effectively with COVID-19. The health crisis is argued to be a clear example of the failures of the privatized model of health- and long-term care provision (*Ibid.*: 5). The report calls on the EU to urgently reject the neoliberal policies that have contributed to the crisis (*Ibid.*:23). Healthcare privatisation is but one expression of a broader governance paradigm known as neoliberalism. Not only has this economic model worsened the severity of the pandemic, but its viability for guiding future development is increasingly being questioned, especially by left-wing pundits. Whether this type of critique was widespread and reached political discourse is what this thesis investigates.

Will the health crisis generate a concrete spill-over effect resulting in a critique of the ruling economic ideology? Will COVID-19 create the space for potential ideational change? In essence, I am interested in investigating critical junctures as opportunities for change in ideological narratives. Specifically, I will pursue an answer to the following question:

whether and how the COVID-19 pandemic amounts to a critical juncture for the European Union resulting in a discursive state of flux for neoliberal ideology?

This thesis will carry out exploratory work aiming to assess whether and how a major international health crisis (COVID-19) amounts to a critical juncture for the way we think about the distribution of the provision of (social) services between the market and the state (which, under neoliberalism, privileges the market). The possibility for

change away from or within neoliberal ideology will represent the threshold for answering the research question affirmatively.

Guided by the relevant literature, I define a critical juncture as a common exogenous shock causing the relaxation of structural conditions of political action, resulting in a state of flux where change is possible (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007: 343).

Under a constructivist lens, I understand neoliberalism – the unit of analysis (institution) potentially affected by the juncture – as a mode of governance which privileges market-based solutions over government intervention and promotes the extension of market rationality to every dimension of contemporary existence. To access neoliberalism, I will look at how it is constructed through discourse.

Discourse analysis will, therefore, guide my research on neoliberal representations arising out of European Parliament (EP) social policy debates before and after March 2020. I take this period of time as the moment in which COVID-19 started being framed as a crisis and action against it was first undertaken.

Through a comparison of the findings, I will investigate whether a discursive state of flux – reflecting the potential for change made possible by a critical juncture – can be observed in the post-March-2020 discourse. “Flux” refers to a heightened level of contestation against the tenets of the prevailing paradigm, and to ambiguity in the construction of coherent neoliberal narratives. These will constitute evidence towards an understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic as a critical juncture.

I am drawn to this question by the existence of a research gap in the literature, as well as by the relevance that this study holds in itself: to study discourse is to understand reality, at least partially, as “the material and the discursive are always refracted through each other” (Springer, 2012: 141). To get closer to an understanding of COVID-19 as a

critical juncture and observe the potential for change in today's "grand-narrative" – i.e., neoliberalism (Patterson & Monroe, 1998: 325-326) – bears several implications for future research. Among these, the investigation of a spill-over effect between a health crisis and an economic ideology contributes to the relevance of this research. I will also provide insights into how critical junctures concretely affect political discourse by further developing the concept of flux.

This research will show that a discursive state of flux is effectively identified in EP social policy debates as a result of the health crisis, pointing towards an understanding of COVID-19 as a critical juncture for neoliberal ideology in the European Union.

The thesis is structured as follows. Chapter two will position my study in the broader literature on institutional change to convey the study's relevance and to identify the gaps which I seek to address. Chapter three will introduce the theoretical framework on critical junctures and neoliberalism and the connecting spill-over mechanism to lay down the foundations to conduct the study. Chapter four sets out and justifies the methodological choices in relation to the selected case. Chapter five and six present, then discuss and reflect upon the findings in relation to the research question. The conclusion will summarise the work and indicate avenues for future research.

2. Literature Review

To investigate whether the COVID-19 pandemic amounts to a critical juncture, this section nests the project within the broader literature, to convey a clearer understanding of its relevance. I will demonstrate how my thesis contributes to the literatures on institutional change more generally, and to that relating to economic and health crises in particular. First, I will argue how neither sociological institutionalism's nor rational choice's gradualist, cumulative approaches to explaining institutional development can account for (potential) institutional change as determined by exogenous shocks (Micelotta, Lounsbury, & Greenwood, 2017). Then, I will review those accounts that focus on economic paradigm shifts, and I find that none contemplates the potential for change of a health crisis.

Institutional theory is a discipline of social science that studies how institutions – i.e., “the rules of the game in a society, together with their enforcement arrangements” (North, 1990: 3) – are created, modified, or transformed. Here, I zoom in on institutionalist theories of change and review several institutionalist schools.

Sociological institutionalists have sought to explore institutional homogeneity, rather than change (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991). Even where change is considered, the sociological institutionalist school employs gradualist, cumulative approaches by which institutions evolve slightly over time, eventually resulting in substantial change (Brint & Karabel, 1991; Fligstein, 2002). Change as conceptualized by sociological institutionalists cannot account for the (abrupt) exogenous shock that I wish to investigate in this research.

Rational choice and the new institutional economics schools are also concerned with incremental, cumulative change (Weyland, 2002). Here, the creation and evolution

of institutions reflect utility-maximizing, efficient outcomes (Calvert, 1995; Shepsle, 2008; Williamson, 2000). I, however, do not agree with the premises of rational choice theory. An outcome only becomes “rational” when it is immersed in a context which is shaped by specific norms that construct the outcome as such. “The efficient outcome” is just one privileged alternative among many others, and to investigate the potential for change in neoliberal ideology means to look at changing norms which influence choices. This is why I focus on institutional change as a historical, path-dependent process which accounts for the contingency of the situation.

Because much of the work on institutional change has followed gradualist approaches, I find that exogenous shocks have mainly been explored in relation to democratization processes (Diamond & Linz, 1989; Duch, 1995; Freedman, 2005; Remmer, 1991). While I share this literature’s assumption that political elites can take advantage of crises to bring change (or re-establish the *status quo*), of greater relevance is the literature on economic crises and their potential for determining shifts in economic ideas/paradigms (Hong, 2014; Oenis & Gueven, 2011; Schmalz & Ebenau, 2012; Wigger & Buch-Hansen, 2012). Indeed, as I will show, no established literature is found which discusses the potential for change in the economic realm determined by a health crisis.

Three gaps are identified. First, the abovementioned authors study the link between economic crises and economic paradigm shifts, leaving unexplored the potential for change of a spill-over effect from a health crisis into the economic realm.

Secondly, the literature on health crises as opportunities for institutional change is investigated. Here, institutional developments are only observed in relation to public local or global health institutions – perhaps due to their focus on localized health issues

or epidemics – thus lacking a consideration of the impacts of pandemics on economic ideas (Hanrieder & Kreuder-Sonnen, 2015).

Thirdly, and relatedly, part of this literature has demonstrated that a mechanism linking health crises and economic ideas does exist. Lim & Sziarto (2020) and Wilkin & Conteh (2018) discuss how the implementation of neoliberal reforms has had negative consequences for local public health. However, whether this mechanism goes both ways – i.e., whether worsening public health (the COVID-19 outbreak) represents an opportunity for change for neoliberal ideology – remains unexplored.

Overall, research on this topic has exhibited a bias towards gradualism, and even where crises were considered, no work has tackled *health crises* as opportunities for shifts in the prevailing economic paradigm. To discuss COVID-19 means investigating whether a health crisis can spill over into the economic domain, determining an opportunity for change in neoliberal ideology. This is where I will situate my thesis.

3. Theoretical Framework

To investigate whether and how the COVID-19 pandemic amounts to a critical juncture, opening a window of opportunity for ideational change to take place in the EU, this section presents the supporting theoretical framework. Firstly, I specify my understanding of neoliberalism as governmentality and as a social construct, and thus this thesis' essentially constructivist foundations. Subsequently, the critical juncture literature makes for the bulk of this section to understand exactly what critical junctures are, how they work, and how they create the potential for change (or for re-equilibration). Finally, I explain how this framework applies to the potential for change in neoliberal discourse brought about by COVID-19.

Neoliberalism, an economic and political ideology that took hold in the United States and the United Kingdom in the late 1970s, is sometimes wrongly equated with *laissez-faire* economics and social practices. However, neoliberalism is itself a political project for the operationalization of which the state plays a key role (Jessop, 2002). It prescribes market-based solutions over government intervention in every field of political action. However, the relevant literature agrees on the idea that neoliberalism has become a “rascal concept,” which cannot be reduced to economic policy (Springer, 2010: 1029). Hence, I adopt Brown's (2003) view of neoliberalism as governmentality to broaden my scope. She identifies four pillars of what she calls “neoliberal political rationality,” which support me in my analysis. Under neoliberalism, (1) every dimension of contemporary existence is submitted to economic rationality and considerations of profitability (*Ibid.*: 40). (2) The state responds to the needs of the market, cost and benefit become the measure of all state practices, and “political discourse on all matters is framed in entrepreneurial terms” (*Ibid.*: 41-42). (3) The individual is responsabilised and market

rationality is extended to individual conduct, while dependence on welfare is equated with immorality (*Ibid.*: 43). (4) Social policy is constructed to meet profitability and competition (“equal inequality for all;” *Ibid.*: 44). Importantly, “through discourse and policy promulgating its criteria, neoliberalism produces rational actors and imposes market rationale for decision-making in all spheres” (*Ibid.*: 40). It is “a constructivist project,” taking as its task “the development, dissemination, and institutionalization of such a rationality” (*Ibid.*). This conceptualization allows me to adopt a broad perspective to capture the many more and subtle ways in which neoliberalism manifests itself through discourse. Because neoliberal rationality is a construct, I access it by relying on interpretations. Therefore, my thesis is based on equally constructivist assumptions to be able to extract empirics from discourse and interpret them (see Wendt, 1999: 1-44; Finnemore, 1996).

The concept of critical juncture is used to frame the pandemic as a potential moment of change for neoliberalism. The working definition of critical juncture is a common exogenous shock that causes the relaxation of structural conditions of political action, resulting in a state of flux where change is possible (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007: 343). Critical junctures are essential building blocks of historical institutionalism. “Institution” is a broad term that ranges from organizational matters to political regimes as a whole. A critical juncture may leave more institutions untouched than it affects. Therefore, it must always refer to a “unit of analysis,” i.e., a specific institution (*Ibid.*: 349). For this reason, I take neoliberal ideology as the institution – as the organizer of a society’s “rules of the game” (i.e., an institution; North, 1990: 3). While it may be tempting to equate a critical juncture with change, the literature warns against it. The defining traits of a critical juncture are its fluidity and contingency. To focus on change

erases the element which determines the potential for change. “If change was possible and plausible, considered, and ultimately rejected in a situation of high uncertainty, then there is no reason to discard these cases as ‘non-critical’ junctures” (*Ibid.*: 352).

Hogan and Doyle (2007) open up the black box of causality to understand how the relaxation of political constraints comes about during a critical juncture. First, relevant actors frame the crisis as such, i.e., they present the crisis as an event which requires innovative solutions, before the potential for change is unleashed. As the crisis poses new problems, previous policies – or, in my case, economic ideologies – are discredited due to their implication in and/or inability to right the situation. This creates a state of flux, where windows of opportunity open for change-agents to contest the prevailing paradigm and to present new ideas to replace it (*Ibid.*). The state of flux is the defining moment of a critical juncture. It corresponds to Blyth’s (1997: 234; see also Hogan & Doyle, 2007: 892) “discursive phase” in the life cycle of an economic ideology. Here, “agents interested in reforming existing distributional arrangements contest the definition, meaning, and solution to the problem identified by opposing economic ideologies” (Blyth, 1997: 234). Once there is consensus around a new set of ideas, significant change in economic ideology will follow, although the potential for change is what makes for a critical juncture, whether institutional development is actually observed or not.

In connection to my research topic, critical juncture theory has often been employed to explain abrupt institutional change (Hogan & Doyle, 2007). Blyth’s (2002) work is emblematic in this regard as he explores economic crises under the critical juncture framework to explain the emergence of liberal political economy institutions.

The pandemic, I argue, may be as significant of an event as an economic crisis for determining potential ideational change in the economic realm. COVID-19 has directly

questioned neoliberalism due to its implication in and inability to right the situation. Health became a commodity on the free market, and healthcare systems were privatized, depriving them of the ability to undertake collective action under the neoliberal-rational aim of maximizing utility and profit (Navarro, 2020: 273-274). A theoretical spill-over effect is thus laid out which justifies the present investigation of neoliberal ideology as the unity of analysis to understand whether COVID-19 amounts to a critical juncture.

Finally, it is only by looking at discourse among the high echelons of policy-making that I can see whether contestation and redefinition of the prevailing paradigm are being attempted, determining a state of discursive flux. To look at discourse is also in line with the constructivist roots of my thesis. As “alternative representations of objects and social relations are always possible,” the very contestability of neoliberalism makes of it a social construct (Weldes, 1996: 285). I include a more detailed explanation of what I look for in discourse in the methodological section.

4. Methodology

To determine whether and how the COVID-19 crisis amounts to a critical juncture, this research will employ a quasi-comparative qualitative case-study design to investigate whether a state of flux in EU social policy neoliberal discourse can be observed. Before detailing the methodological approach, a specification of the qualitative and interpretivist nature of my study is in order.

Qualitative methods are concerned with understanding “constructions and interpretations of reality that are in flux and that change over time” (Merriam, 2002: 3-4). Contrary to other positivist qualitative case-study designs (see George and Bennett, 2005), I will follow an interpretivist, exploratory approach instead (see Yanow, 2015). This will keep a tight rein on my ability to generalise, though generalisation is not within the main aims of my study. While some more or less generalisable claims may be made on COVID-19 as a critical juncture for neoliberal ideology, prudence must be exercised as the situation is still evolving at the time of writing. This will make the findings very contingent, providing future research on COVID-19 and neoliberalism in the EU with a detailed, context-based piece of the puzzle towards a broader understanding of the crisis.

To investigate the role that neoliberal political rationality plays in EU discourse before and after March 2020, I will employ discourse analysis. Since “things do not mean; rather, people construct the meaning of things,” I wish to explore not just linguistics, but “discourses as systems of signification” (Milliken, 1999: 229). Inspired by Weldes (2015: 232), the analysis of neoliberal discourse will hinge on the concept of intertextuality, prescribing that texts be read “in relationship to others.” I will rely on the analysis of “high data” (Ibid.: 233-234) – in my case mainly European Parliament debates, as well as other EU institutions’ official documents and statements. To consult these sources

allows me to access the representations offered by the elites, the “well-rehearsed set of narratives and tropes” of neoliberal politics (*Ibid.*).

The EU is selected as a case study because, starting from the 1990s, the European integration process has created a common neoliberal market based on competition and monetary issues, at the expense of social demands (Dokmanović & Cvetičanin, 2020: 113-115). To find flux in such a deeply-rooted tradition will strongly suggest that COVID-19 amounts to a critical juncture. Finally, to investigate neoliberal discourse in the EU is interesting in its own right, as I analyse the opportunity (or missed opportunity) for change in the meta-narrative of our time.

I will extract the empirics from two separate groups: EP social policy debates from the period 2015-2019, triangulated through a discourse analysis of EU official documents and statements from that same period, and only EP debates from the post-March-2020 period to focus on the investigation of flux and avoid setting out change. The pre-March-2020 dataset will establish the baseline neoliberal discourse which will constitute the starting measure – the *status quo ante* – to which I will compare the post-March-2020 empirics in order to answer the research question. Discourse will be analysed after 2015 to isolate it from the effects of the 2008 global financial crisis.

I will focus mostly on social policy discourse because, through it, neoliberal governmentality produces rational actors and extends market rationale for decision-making in all spheres. Therefore, I assume this to be the field most exposed to potential contestation and redefinition during a health crisis (for a full list of sources refer to this thesis’ appendix).

I will use the software package *ATLAS.ti* to extract, categorize, and interlink data segments from my selection to discover patterns and themes within the first group of

empirics. The second group will be analysed according to the same frames of interpretation. Evidence towards the identification of a state of flux (and thus of COVID-19 as a critical juncture) will be situations in which the neoliberal EU parties themselves participate in the contestation and redefinition of, or take new, ambiguous positions in connection to the neoliberal paradigm. I will also hold increased contestation by left-wing parties as further evidence of flux. If these situations are observable in the comparison of the two datasets, I will respond affirmatively to my research question. The analysis and discussion of the data will also allow me to address *how* COVID-19 amounts to a critical juncture for neoliberal ideology in the EU.

Before moving on to the empirical analysis, I briefly explain an issue I encountered with gathering data from multi-language EP debates. As of 2012, Parliament has no longer been required to translate the public *revised* transcripts of its plenary sessions into all EU official languages (Hall, 2012). This situation will not allow me to rely on written material, but only on the simultaneous interpretation provided in the video-recordings. In order to gather data from as many sources as possible, I will use online translation services to identify relevant passages in the transcripts. I will then verify their accuracy on the basis of the professional translations provided in the videos.

5. Analysis

5.1. Establishing a Baseline Neoliberal Discourse – the 2015-2019 Term: Social Aims, Neoliberal Recipes

The first part of the analytical section establishes the baseline – *status quo ante* – neoliberal discourse in the EU to lay down a basic measure to which to compare the post-March-2020 discourse. This is a necessary step to concretise Brown's (2003) conceptualisation of neoliberalism.

Here, I present the main findings arising out of European Parliament social debates from the 2015-2019 period. First, I briefly outline the parties' positionings in relation to neoliberal political rationality, especially those of the two majority parties as they hold a quantitatively and qualitatively privileged position in the construction of the baseline. They are discussed in order from most to least supportive of the *status quo*, with the minority groups being presented together to focus on discourse. On this basis, I then list the dogmas that prevail in the baseline. I argue how, despite giving significant attention to the social dimension, neoliberal political rationality informs the rhetoric and stated aims of EU action in social policy. While the discourse addresses social issues and does not shy away from identifying austerity measures' contribution to the crisis, there is no overarching contestation against, nor redefinition of, the aims and means of neoliberal political rationality beyond that expressed by the minority left-wing parties. The dogmas are then corroborated by an analysis of policy documents and officials' public statements. I show how, even though the aims are rhetorically social, political action stands firm in the very paradigm which suffocates social spending and creates the social fractures being addressed.

5.1.1. Towards the Construction of a Baseline: The EP Parties' Discourses

The European People's Party (EPP) is the largest party in the EP. It steers much of the conversation and policy outcomes, and its influence benefits from the Commission President's alignment. The EPP's discourse is found to reflect neoliberal political rationality as theorised. For EPP Members of Parliament (MEPs), social progress flows from market liberalization, i.e., the former is merely a positive externality of the latter. State action is thus only to be concerned with "respond[ing] to changes in the internal market" (MEP Šojdrová, in European Parliament, 2019a: 16:54:09-16:54:14), and social policy becomes a tool to responsabilise citizens, i.e., to make them "rational," more exploitable. The idea is to "*arm*" individuals with the "*weapons* [...]" to integrate in the labour market" (MEP Sander, in European Parliament, 2016: 21:33:16-21:34:10). This choice of words is revealing of a view of the market as a battlefield: whether individuals make it or not is ultimately their responsibility, as social policy gives equal – though not equitable – means. This is a clear instance of the neoliberal "equal inequality for all" principle. The submission of social policy to considerations of profitability is also observed. For instance, in the debates concerning the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), the idea that "social protection of citizens *can* be maintained, but *only if* you have a decent economic backdrop" is expressed (MEP Kósa, in European Parliament, 2017b: 17:46:37-17:46-56). Finally, the EPP is fully committed to the austere budgetary measures of the Growth and Stability Pact, which have stifled social spending throughout the EU.

The group of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), and the Europe of Nations and Freedom party (ENF) also support neoliberal governmentality and generally aid the EPP in the

construction of the narratives outlined above. They do oppose austerity, although not for its neoliberal goals, but for the means through which austerity achieves them – i.e., for the *type* of neoliberalism it represents (more on this in section 7). As an alternative, they favour expansionist measures to achieve “market health,” which will automatically trickle down to societal health. Accordingly, “non-negotiable social standards” are supported “only [...] *in principle*” (ENF MEP Bilde, in *Ibid.*, 17:28:38-17:29-43), as “social goals” must not “prevent *actual* growth” (ENF MEP Zijlstra, in European Parliament, 2019a, 16:33:40-16:33:50). The parties differ in their stance on EU intervention in social policy, with ECR and ENF being Euro-sceptic and ALDE pro-European. This is not connected with neoliberalism *per se*. However, ambiguity or narrative shifts over EU competencies in social policy may be observed as a result of the crisis. These would point to an understanding of the social dimension as a battleground, with potential implications for neoliberal political rationality.

The Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) also holds a privileged position as the second largest party. Its position in connection to neoliberal political rationality is more nuanced. In typical leftist fashion, the group rhetorically rejects “any attempt to reduce the European Union to its pure economic dimension” (MEP Zanonato, in European Parliament, 2016, 21:37:43-21:37:50). However, the empirics show that the party construes a form of “soft” neoliberalism through “rhetorical recalibration,” which perpetuates the ideology by packaging it to address social concerns (Garrett, 2019, 196-197). For instance, the EPSR is supported on the basis of the achievement of “superior competitiveness of European business,” rather than for the sake of societal health *per se* (MEP Pirinski, in European Parliament, 2019b, 11:42:26-11:42:30). The S&D also supports austerity in the management of public accounts. I

suspect that the contradictions of this type of discourse may implode into ambiguity or outright contestation during a potential juncture.

Finally, the European United Left-Nordic Green Left (GUE-NGL) and the Greens-European Free Alliance (Greens-EFA) have not participated to the construction of neoliberal narratives, thus their contribution in connection to contestation is presented. The Greens-EFA are indirect in their level of contestation. They break with neoliberalism in rhetoric and proposed solutions, though they avoid raising overarching critiques and seek for compromise with the neoliberal forces. This is unexpected, as neoliberalism is at odds with environmental goals. Again, these contradictions may result in significant discursive shifts during the crisis. Finally, the GUE-NGL presents the harshest degree of contestation against the neoliberal paradigm. The EU is seen as an “antisocial building” (MEP Lopes, in European Parliament, 2017a, 09:44:41-09:44:47), “driven by the EPP” (MEP Zimmer, in *Ibid.*, 09:28:34-09:28:44), which led to “the subordination of the social to the economic,” creating more poverty (MEP Boylan, in *Ibid.*, 09:54:24-09:54:38). Their disenchantment with “the European Semester and the Internal Market [...] tak[ing] precedence over everything else” (MEP Kari, in *Ibid.*, 10:22:11-10:22:25) leads them to oppose even social policy interventions, which they see as smokescreen to preserve the *status quo*.

The small, “catch-all” formations of the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD; ceased to exist in 2019) and the Non-attached (NI) will not be discussed here for their lack of a coherent vision, though their contributions have been analysed.

5.1.2. The Dogmas of the Baseline

The above is evidence of the following five narratives, plus a measure of contestation, that I have identified, and which ultimately constitute the baseline neoliberal discourse. (1) Although the official narrative is that of acting “to create a fairer, more inclusive, and social Europe” (Swedish Prime Minister Löfven, in *Regeringskansliet*, 2017, 2:29-2:36), (2) the limitations of EU competencies in social policy are often taken as a justification for inaction. This shows that there is no willingness to change the *status quo*. (3) The deregulation and liberalization of the market, increased competitiveness, growth, and productivity are seen as sources of social progress. Accordingly, the social “flows” from the market. (4) This is coherent with the responsabilisation of the individual carried out through social policy interventions. The citizens are given the resources to increase their competitiveness and exploitability, thus justifying the withdrawal of the welfare state, replaced by a social policy which supports market development, rather than correcting for market failure. (5) This happens in a context in which the neoliberal *status quo* is packaged to be more palatable to social issues, thus allowing for its preservation. (6) Finally, a high level of direct contestation against neoliberal political rationality has been observed by the GUE-NGL, while more implicit contestation and compromise have been sought by the Greens-EFA and the S&D.

Following Weldes’ intertextuality (2015), these themes were constructed by triangulating EP debates with official policy documents and statements both inside and outside of Parliament. *Inter alia*, the most compelling confirmations of the baseline were found within the EPSR itself, which mirrors its themes. (1) While it was given great rhetorical importance for the construction of a social Europe, (2) it mostly outlines problems, rather than giving solutions. (3) Indeed, the EPSR is positioned within the

neoliberal dogma of the trickle-down economy, and thus (4) it mainly aims at responsabilising the citizenry to respond to the needs of the market. (5) Because of this, the EPSR is an exercise of neoliberal repackaging to allow for the preservation of the *status quo*. (6) Finally, support for the EPSR mirrors the parties' support for neoliberal political rationality.

5.2. Comparing Narratives – the post-March-2020 EP Debates: Discursive

Competition

This second part of the analytical section carries out a comparison of narratives arising out of EP debates post-March-2020 by building onto the *status quo ante* set out above. This section lays the foundations for answering the research question, and it is structured as follows. Because the empirics point to a discursive state of flux and show the existence of competing but equally important (within-)group narratives, to present solid party positions would not serve the purpose of investigating flux, but it would run the risk of setting out change, which is not the aim of this thesis. Indeed, COVID-19 amounts to a critical juncture if change is possible, whether or not such change actually occurs. For this reason, contrary to the previous section, triangulation has not been carried out. To present the solutions informing official policy documents would not allow to showcase the possible outcomes outlined by the discourse.

In order to tread the line of carrying out a comparison of narratives, exploring flux, while not misrepresenting the parties' political positionings, I will take each of the themes identified above and explore them in turn by drawing a line between two broad factions – the neoliberal and the non-neoliberal parties taken as units to explore flux as it concretizes through ambiguity and contestation. The comparison shows that the

neoliberal dogmas of the baseline can no longer paint an accurate picture of EP discourse post-March-2020.

Before beginning, I must point out that all parties have contributed to the framing of the pandemic as a crisis and frequently acknowledged it as a window of opportunity – often linked explicitly to neoliberal ideology, confirming the spill-over effect of the health crisis on economic ideas. This is significant for the critical juncture mechanism and will be discussed in section 6.

Due to name changes, I will now refer to ALDE, ENF, and GUE-NGL as Renew Europe (Renew), Identity and Democracy Party (ID), and The Left in the European Parliament (The Left), respectively.

5.2.1. The Tensions between (and within) Solidarity and Resilience

An overarching rhetorical aim – like that of creating a fairer, more inclusive, and social Europe – which would paint with broad brushstrokes the spirit of EP social debates post-March-2020 is not identified. Instead, I find that “solidarity” and “resilience” are the key words of this time (306 and 165 times respectively in all documents analysed).

Solidarity is not typical of the neoliberal vocabulary, and it may indicate potential for change towards an increase in state intervention. However, solidarity is also a rather abstract and politically neutral term which is seen to be moulded to fit different narratives, not only *between* groups, but also *within* a group’s discourse. Indeed, the neoliberal parties submit solidarity to market dynamics, such as in the condemnation of some MSs’ decision “to issue an export ban for protective masks” (EPP MEP Weber, in European Parliament, 2020a, 09:49:32-09:49:39), which ultimately fits the neoliberal narrative against the distortion of competition. At the same time, these same parties submit market

dynamics to the idea of solidarity, highlighting the latter's role as a "guide" for "protecting the health of Europeans [...] and supporting the European economy" (ECR MEP Szydło, in European Parliament, 2020c, 15:09:27-15:09:48). The left-wing discourse, on the other hand, is more consistent in associating solidarity to aims which break with neoliberalism, such as "fair distribution of wealth and [...] making quality jobs a reality" (S&D MEP Jongerius, in European Parliament, 2022a, 09:35:25-09:35:35).

Resilience also frequently informs policy aims, and the persistent use of this term is interesting in light of critical juncture theory. To "spring back" and "withstand adversity" express the idea of continuity, which contrasts the solidarity narrative as a path to potential change and accommodates the wish to preserve the neoliberal *status quo*. However, this term too is constructed to outline opposing outcomes. The call for a "*renewed* resilience" emblematically illustrates the discursive tensions of this period (Renew MEP Azmani, in European Parliament, 2020c, 14:53:15-14:53:21). "Europe" especially, but also "societies," "economies," "systems" are the targets of building resilience, although they are largely not elaborated upon. This exposes vague ideological underpinnings and the fluid nature of the discourse of this time.

Overall, while a narrative which outlines a more or less unitary outcome was identified in the baseline, the post-March-2020 discourse does not mirror this state of affairs. Indeed, the key-terms of this time are in themselves indicative of potentially opposing alternatives. Moreover, both solidarity and resilience are employed by both the neoliberal and non-neoliberal discourses, and each constructs them to outline ambiguous goals. This state of affairs points to an understanding of the discourse being in flux as opposed to the *status quo ante*.

5.2.2. EU Competencies in Social Policy

The empirics show that the EU's limited competencies in the field of social policy as a justification for inaction no longer constitute a major theme.

Increased calls for more or less defined “reform” from the left in a context of silence from the neoliberal parties over EU competencies in social policy are illustrative of flux: they break with the baseline theme without outlining a clear alternative. Unexpected, but also revealing of the extent of the crisis' impact on discourse, is the emergence of narratives among the Euro-sceptics which question their previous standing on sovereignty. The idea that “it is the Commission's *primary* task and duty to monitor [...] *inequalities* and *put in place* effective corrective tools to *eliminate* them” is emblematic of this (ID MEP Rinaldi, in European Parliament, 2021e, 22:25:07-22:25:17). This is a second piece of evidence of flux in connection to the theme, but only circumstantial evidence for neoliberal ideology being in flux. Indeed, while this may not bear significant implications for neoliberal political rationality *per se*, section 6 will discuss this theme in light of the context and show how it illustrates potential for change in the approach to social policy interventions.

5.2.3. The Revival of the Social?

This is one of the most important comparisons to assess whether and how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted neoliberal discourse. The neoliberal faction does not outline an explicit vision as to whether the social flows from the economic anymore. The silence found over this dogma is already indicative of flux. Competing narratives over some tenets of neoliberalism, such as the roles of the single market and of competition,

and the debate over spending/rigour are useful proxies to show that, effectively, potential for change away from or within the dogma is being unleashed.

Firstly, while the single market is often still framed as a source of social progress, this idea is increasingly being questioned. The opposing points of view that “after the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, what is most relevant is the single market” (ECR MEP Możdżanowska, in European Parliament, 2021c, 10:51:39-10:51:44), but also that “there can be no economic recovery without social recovery” (ID MEP Laporte European Parliament, 2021b, 15:33:12-15:33:17), and the questioning of whether the “single market really [is] the first priority of the Council” (EPP MEP González-Pons, in European Parliament, 2020b, 09:56:13-09:56:17) are all expressions of the discourse which previously constructed this very dogma.

Secondly, the tenet of competition has come under fire. Among the voices supportive of market deregulation, many have questioned the “simple doctrine of competition which pushes [...] to outsource the production of goods” (EPP MEP Bellamy, in European Parliament, 2020a, 11:42:47-11:42:53). In this connection, the broad narrative of “strategic independence,” encompassing the idea of redefining market freedom and competition, is increasingly being constructed by both sides of the discourse.

Thirdly, the spending narrative now accompanies the traditionally neoliberal budgetary rigour. The former outlines an approach which sees the State as the primary actor for (social) recovery, and the latter refers to a market-first approach to achieve (social) recovery. While in the baseline this was an exclusively inter-ideological debate, fractures have now opened within the neoliberal camp itself. This is illustrative of flux and symptomatic of a potential for redefinition of the minimal role played by the State under neoliberalism.

Finally, the left-wing parties have shown to be more consistent in their vision and contestation. The Left remains firm on its previous conviction that “social progress is not compatible with the neoliberal policies promoted by European institutions” (The Left MEP Pereira, in European Parliament, 2021d, 12:19:36-12:19:50). More significant for a state of flux are both S&D’s and the Greens-EFA’s “leftward shift” as compared to their previous complacent attitude towards neoliberalism. Emblematic here is the acknowledgment that “a second victim of the pandemic is the idea that the market is the best guarantor of general well-being” (MEP Lamberts, in European Parliament, 2020b, 10:23:19-10:23:27). This has significant implications for the measure of contestation post-March-2020, further discussed in subsection 5.2.6.

Overall, we can see that the social flowing from market dynamics loses its dogmatic character. Even its original promoters are starting to question it. This may be due to a compact left-wing camp, which allows it to steer the post-March-2020 discourse. Right-wingers have instead been caught up in discursive competition amongst themselves to (re)define their dominant narrative. This state of affairs is confirmed by the social debates undertaken during this period, on which I elaborate further in the next subsection.

5.2.4. (Ir)responsibilising Discourse

The responsabilisation of the individual – consistently observed in the baseline as the ultimate aim of social policy – seems to have disappeared almost completely. The resulting rhetorical vacuum is largely filled by a social policy discourse which aims to achieving “recovery,” “solidarity,” and “building resilience.” The *arming* of individuals to *respond* to changes in the labour market, rhetorically “nudging” increasing masses of people into work while concretely rolling-back the welfare State, has subsided. The

comparison allows me to show a very practical way in which the crisis is seen to impact political discourse: these narratives are now masking the parties' ideological aims. This strongly points to flux: (change) agents may be waiting for the dust to settle to reconfirm the old paradigm or they may be in the process of outlining new solutions, whilst still being incisive rhetorically and conveying the impression of urgency. These narratives emerge even in debates which are concrete opportunities for parties to express their ideological views (see "Reversing the negative social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic," European Parliament, 2021e). Coherently, a renewed rally around the already-existing EPSR and its list of politically-mouldable social issues is observed.

Overall, the disappearance of responsabilisation coincides with the (temporary) abandonment of a neoliberal social policy to support market development, in favour of the stated support with no contestation to the reinforcement of some important redistributive programs, such as the Fund for European Aid to the most Deprived (FEAD). The debates over the establishment of a minimum level of taxation for multinationals (European Parliament, 2022b) and over decent and affordable housing for all (European Parliament, 2021a) undertaken during this period also lack contestation by neoliberal parties. No concrete achievement has followed these debates, though they are further demonstrations of the potential for change.

5.2.5. Rhetorical Re-calibration

The "social washing" of neoliberalism is not observed as a major theme anymore. Whereas in the baseline the S&D had been a primary agent in the construction of this type of discourse, the party has abandoned the rhetoric. The left-wing parties in particular have clearly repositioned their discourse solidly on addressing social goals through social

means, without much consideration for market dynamics. Non-neoliberal solutions are now increasingly being pushed, such as “a basic and unconditional income [...] sufficient to allow a life with dignity” (Greens-EFA MEP Guerreiro, in European Parliament, 2021d, 12:28:18-12:28:27). In other words, social issues are not just rhetorically acknowledged but concretely addressed through “freer markets” and “more competition,” but the proposed solutions now break with this automatic association. With the S&D’s abandonment of rhetorical recalibration, the neoliberal parties appear to be lacking the legitimation to employ this discourse, and they have mostly been ideologically silent, relying on the masks of solidarity, recovery, and resilience. However, in light of a critical juncture, these may also be seen as subtle devices to actively postpone the promotion of new solutions.

This shows that a window of opportunity for ideational change has been opened by the health crisis, and new discourses emerge to fight for the maintenance of the *status quo* or for sponsoring new ideas.

5.2.6. A Time for Policy Promotion

When it comes to the measure of contestation, a chronological evolution is observed in both the left- and right-wing discourses. At the beginning of the crisis, The Left party most consistently framed the pandemic as a real opportunity to “drop [...] the dogmas” (MEP Chaibi, in European Parliament, 2021b, 15:40:07-15:40:13) of the “broken system” that is neoliberalism (MEP Wallace, in European Parliament, 2020a, 12:04:22-12:04:24), confirming the spill-over effect. Importantly, the Greens-EFA significantly heightened their level of contestation against “blind market ideologies” (MEP Keller, in European Parliament, 2020c, 14:17:25-14:17:29). The very neoliberal

philosophical concept of “*homo oeconomicus*” is openly contested as a “dehumanizing perversion which reduces the human being to an ego mobilized by the sole maximization of his short-term material interest” (MEP Lamberts, in European Parliament, 2020b, 10:24:33-10:24:44). The S&D shows a similar pattern, though on a less explicit level. Direct callouts of neoliberalism are sparsely observed, but the party now mostly promotes ideas which oppose neoliberal political rationality in their substance. Indeed, with the progression of the health crisis, the level of direct contestation raised by left-wing parties is seen to decrease. While this may be, at a first glance, an unexpected finding, section 6 will discuss how this is actually coherent with the critical juncture framework.

The same dynamic is observed in the neoliberal parties’ discourse. The narrative in-fighting has exposed degrees of contestation within the neoliberal camp, especially when COVID-19 first struck. The participation of parties traditionally supportive of neoliberalism in contestation clearly reflects discursive flux. With the progression of the crisis, here too, contestation disappears, replaced mostly by either ideological silence or by narratives advocating for a return to the *status quo*.

6. Discussion

Much like a criminal trial, this section connects the empirical evidence with the broader argument to solve the case of whether and how COVID-19 amounts to a critical juncture for neoliberal discourse in the EU. Brief considerations on the baseline and its connection to the theory will be followed by a summary of the findings of the second part of the analysis, discussed in light of the indicators of flux and in relation to the theories on neoliberalism and critical junctures. The operationalisation of flux itself will be considered before deliberating on what the findings mean in relation to the research question.

As presented in subsection 5.1.2, the baseline dogmas clearly address the substantive ideological underpinnings of Brown's (2003) conceptualisation of neoliberalism. The finding of a recalibrated rhetoric that addresses the social dimension while preserving neoliberalism was unexpected. As such, it constitutes a useful theoretical contribution, particularly in relation to the theory's employment in discourse analysis.

The potential for change enabled by a critical juncture was theorised as a state of discursive flux, and the latter was operationalised through the indicators of (1) heightened level of contestation and (2) the emergence of ambiguous narratives. The empirical analysis shows that the post-March-2020 discourse meets these markers and is therefore in flux. Whereas Brown's conceptualisation is clearly mirrored in the baseline, the recent discourse drops these dogmas and turns them into battlegrounds on which the survival of the neoliberal paradigm is at stake.

Firstly, competition between solidarity and resilience as the key narratives post-March-2020 is evidence of an ambiguous standing before the minimal role of the State

prescribed by neoliberalism. Moreover, tensions *within* each of the two narratives, i.e., the ways in which the same terms are used to outline competing outcomes within a camp, is further confirmation of ambiguity.

The competencies of the EU in social policy as a theme is also in flux in light of the observed narrative competition, narrative shifts, and/or silence. This does not say much about whether neoliberal political rationality is in flux *per se*. However, in a context in which the EU's relationship with neoliberalism is fluid, the emergence of narratives advocating for the collectivisation of action is evidence of a potential redefinition of social policy intervention away from individualism, the production of rational actors, and the imposition of market rationale.

The strongest evidence towards the framing of COVID-19 as a critical juncture for neoliberal ideology comes from the state of flux found over the last three themes of the baseline. The idea that the social flows from market dynamics is being increasingly questioned. The construction of competing narratives over the importance of the single market, over “strategic independence,” and over spending *versus* rigour reflects this. The disappearance of responsabilisation is also a major finding of this time, now rhetorically overtaken by the aims of “recovery,” “solidarity,” and “building resilience.” A discursively neutral social policy discourse emerges, unstable – fluid – in its ideological underpinnings. Further evidence of flux is the abandonment of rhetorical recalibration understood as the “social washing” of neoliberal solutions. These have directly corroded in their substance the neoliberal pillars of (2) the state only responding to the needs of the market, of (3) the responsabilisation of the individual, and of (4) a social policy constructed to meet profitability and competition. Consequently, (1) the extension of market rationality to every dimension of existence is also in flux.

The use of “ambiguity” as an indicator has allowed me to keep an open mind to the different ways in which discursive flux manifests itself and outlines potential for change as a result of a critical juncture. In the analysis, ambiguity has concretised into the more specific inter- and intra-competition of narratives with the emergence of new but equally important discourses that challenge the prevailing paradigm. The newfound silence over previously established dogmas and/or their replacement with politically-neutral aims which mask the discourse’s ideological underpinnings are also expressions of ambiguity. This is an important contribution to further develop our understanding of flux.

The indicator “heightened measure of contestation” is also met by the post-March-2020 discourse. The level of contestation – both direct and indirect – quantitatively and qualitatively increased as compared to the baseline, especially at the beginning of the crisis. While ambiguity shows the corrosion of the substance of the tenets of neoliberalism, contestation allows us to see the direct rejection of the ideology in the post-March-2020 discourse.

A measure of nuance as regards this indicator is also introduced here and further develops the concept of flux. A decrease in the level of contestation is observed with the progression of the juncture. This is unexpected but coherent with the critical juncture mechanism. As actors recognize the window of opportunity for the development of policies that are not aligned with the prevailing paradigm, contestation is abandoned in favour of a more “productive” discourse which promotes new ideas (or re-establishes the *status quo ante*).

Through these indicators, this research has been able to show flux, a discursive state which expresses potential for change (in neoliberal ideology). A “roundabout effect”

is introduced as a useful visual aid to grasp this understanding. The post-March-2020 discourse is a car that has come across an unexpected roundabout (critical juncture) with several exits. The car keeps circling the roundabout, unsure of which way to take. The turn signal often goes off, outlining several possible solutions to the seemingly endless circling, but it is quickly turned off. The exits of the roundabout – including the original road where the car came from – are the pathways for change/re-equilibration made available by the juncture. The four pillars of neoliberalism did not completely disappear, but they became *options* – exits of the roundabout – in the post-March-2020 discourse.

Lastly, as presented in section 5.2, the framing of COVID-19 as a crisis is coherent with the critical juncture framework. The acknowledgment that the health crisis is a turning point for “the way things are” is a precondition for the potential for change to be unleashed. A roundabout will only re-direct a car if the driver acknowledges its existence and does not just drive straight through it. Not only are the theoretical spill-over effect and discourse fluidity confirmed by the investigation of the substance, but also by “the discourse’s own admission.”

Overall, I conclude that COVID-19 has created the space for potential change for neoliberal ideology in the European Union, concretised through discourse ambiguity and contestation as observed in European Parliament debates, thus amounting to a critical juncture.

7. Conclusion

This thesis sought to address the significance of the COVID-19 pandemic for neoliberal ideology in the European Union. The literature on institutional change showed that the spill-over effect between a health crisis and ideational change in the economic realm had not been investigated. Accordingly, COVID-19 was framed under the critical juncture theory, and neoliberalism was taken as the unit of analysis and operationalised as a broad form of governmentality – neoliberal political rationality. The identification of a state of discursive flux through discourse analysis carried out on European Parliament debates before and during the health crisis was set as the threshold for COVID-19 to amount to a critical juncture (for neoliberal discourse in the EU). The comparison of narratives presented in the analytical section showed that, effectively, a state of discursive flux could be identified in EP debates post-March-2020: the dogmas of the baseline were questioned, and a higher level of contestation was observed.

This in-depth case-study consisting of 713 coded citations taken from 40 sources (for a total of more than 37 hours of debates) has thus allowed me to answer the research question of *whether and how the COVID-19 pandemic amounts to a critical juncture for the European Union resulting in a discursive state of flux for neoliberal ideology* as follows. The discursive state of flux of EP debates post-March-2020 refute the dogmatic character of the baseline themes, corroding neoliberal political rationality as an accurate lens of analysis for the post-March-2020 discourse. This shows that agents have seized the window of opportunity opened by the health crisis. Accordingly, discursive flux reflects the *potential for change* unleashed by the pandemic on neoliberal ideology. This is how I conclude that COVID-19 amounts to a critical juncture for neoliberal ideology in the EU.

Now that the potential for change for neoliberal ideology has been established, future research could explore its specific direction, i.e., whether it is potential for change *away* from or *within* neoliberalism (“the extent to which” COVID-19 is a critical juncture for neoliberalism), by employing a narrower lens of analysis (e.g., Brenner & Theodore, 2002 – the “actually existing neoliberalism” literature). Moreover, the development of the concept of discursive flux provides for a useful and replicable tool for investigating other critical junctures. Finally, the theoretical spill-over effect between a health crisis/pandemic and the economic realm was confirmed, providing the foundations for further study in different contexts.

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Appendix

List of All Analysed Sources

The complete list of sources from which the datasets were extracted is presented below. All documents that contributed to the empirical analysis are included, regardless of whether they already appear in the bibliography, for purposes of clarity and transparency. The sources are listed according to their year of publication. This allows the reader to understand which source contributed to the development of which part of the analysis.

European Commission. (2015). *State of the Union 2015: Time for Honesty, Unity and Solidarity* (pp. 1–15). European Commission.

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_15_5614

European Parliament. (2015). *European Semester for economic policy coordination: employment and social aspects in the Annual Growth Survey 2015 - European Semester for economic policy coordination: Annual Growth Survey 2015 - Single market governance within the European Semester 2015 (debate)* (10:56:54-13:21:21). European Parliament.

<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/vod.html?mode=chapter&vodLanguage=EN&playerStartTime=20150311-10:56:54&playerEndTime=20150311-13:21:21#>

European Parliament. (2015). *Transparency of the application of the Stability and Growth Pact (debate)* (19:29:45-20:08:04). European Parliament.

<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/vod.html?mode=chapter&vodLanguage=EN&playerStartTime=20150624-19:29:45&playerEndTime=20150624-20:08:04#>

Dutch Presidency of the Council of the European Union, European Commission, European Trade Union Confederation, BusinessEurope, Central Europe Energy Partners, & European Association of Craft, S. and M.-S. E. (2016). *A New Start for Social Dialogue: Statement of the Presidency of the Council of the European Union, the European Commission and the European Social Partners* (pp. 1–4). <https://www.etuc.org/en/pressrelease/new-start-strong-social-dialogue>

European Parliament. (2016). *What is a “social triple-A” rating? (debate)* (20:52:04-22:04:19). European Parliament. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/vod.html?mode=chapter&vodLanguage=EN&playerStartTime=20160308-20:52:04&playerEndTime=20160308-22:04:19#>

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European Parliament. (2017). *A European Pillar of Social Rights (debate)* (09:02:29-10:38:38). European Parliament. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/vod.html?mode=chapter&vodLanguage=EN&playerStartTime=20170119-09:02:29&playerEndTime=20170119-10:38:38#>

European Parliament. (2017). *Implementation of the Social Pillar (debate)* (16:45:24-18:26:26). European Parliament.

<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/vod.html?mode=chapter&vodLanguage=EN&playerStartTime=20171213-16:45:24&playerEndTime=20171213-18:26:26#>

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Directive (EU) 2019/1152 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on transparent and predictable working conditions in the European Union, Pub. L. No. 185/105, Official Journal of the European Union 105 (2019).

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Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU, Pub. L. No. 188, Official Journal of the European Union 79 (2019).

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European Parliament. (2019). *European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) (debate)* (21:57:04-22:51:20). European Parliament.

<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/vod.html?mode=chapter&vodLanguage=EN&playerStartTime=20190115-21:57:04&playerEndTime=20190115-22:51:20#>

European Parliament. (2019). *European Semester for economic policy coordination:*

Annual Growth Survey 2019 - European Semester for economic policy

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<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/vod.html?mode=chapter&vodLanguage=EN&playerStartTime=20190313-15:54:06&playerEndTime=20190313-17:00:32#>

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European Parliament. (2019). *European Labour Authority (debate)* (11:24:11-12:11:23).

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<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/vod.html?mode=chapter&vodLanguage=EN&playerStartTime=20190416-11:24:11&playerEndTime=20190416-12:11:23#>

European Parliament. (2019). *Transparent and predictable working conditions in the European Union (debate)* (10:30:27-11:24:03). European Parliament.

<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/vod.html?mode=chapter&vodLanguage=EN&playerStartTime=20190416-10:30:27&playerEndTime=20190416-11:24:03#>

Regulation (EU) 2019/1149 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 establishing a European Labour Authority, amending Regulations (EC) No 883/2004, (EU) No 492/2011, and (EU) 2016/589 and repealing Decision (EU) 2016/344, Pub. L. No. 186/21, Official Journal of the European Union 21 (2019).
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European Parliament. (2020). *Coronavirus outbreak, state of play and ensuring a coordinated European response to the health, economic and social impact (debate)* (09:26:33-12:21:44). European Parliament.

<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/vod.html?mode=chapter&vodLanguage=EN&playerStartTime=20200310-09:26:33&playerEndTime=20200310-12:21:44#>

European Parliament. (2020). *EU coordinated action to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences (continuation of debate)* (09:34:30-12:25:10).

European Parliament.

<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/vod.html?mode=chapter&vodLanguage=EN&playerStartTime=20200416-09:34:30&playerEndTime=20200416-12:25:10#>

European Parliament. (2020). *EU Recovery package (debate)* (13:39:10-15:10:34).

European Parliament.

<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/vod.html?mode=chapter&vodLanguage=EN&playerStartTime=20200527-13:39:10&playerEndTime=20200527-15:10:34#>

European Parliament. (2020). *The EU's public health strategy post-COVID-19 (debate)* (19:52:13-19:52:57). European Parliament.

<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/vod.html?mode=chapter&vodLanguage=EN&playerStartTime=20200708-19:52:06&playerEndTime=20200708-20:06:35#>

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<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/vod.html?mode=chapter&vodLanguage=EN&playerStartTime=20200708-20:31:03&playerEndTime=20200708-21:00:23#>

European Parliament. (2020). *Cultural recovery of Europe (debate)* (09:43:18-09:52:17). European Parliament.

<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/vod.html?mode=chapter&vodLanguage=EN&playerStartTime=20200710-09:42:16&playerEndTime=20200710-10:21:06#>

European Parliament. (2020). *EU measures to mitigate social and economic impact of Covid-19 (debate)* (15:01:52-16:25:17). European Parliament.

<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/vod.html?mode=chapter&vodLanguage=EN&playerStartTime=20201021-15:01:52&playerEndTime=20201021-16:25:17#>

European Parliament. (2020). *Additional resources in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic: REACT-EU (debate)* (11:37:01-12:58:46). European Parliament.

<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/vod.html?mode=chapter&vodLanguage=EN&playerStartTime=20201215-11:37:01&playerEndTime=20201215-12:58:46#>

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zreBGNB7UMM>

European Parliament. (2021). *FEAD: specific measures to address the COVID-19 crisis (debate)* (16:07:22-16:42:58). European Parliament.

<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/vod.html?mode=chapter&vodLanguage=EN&playerStartTime=20210224-16:07:22&playerEndTime=20210224-16:42:58#>

e=EN&playerStartTime=20210120-16:07:22&playerEndTime=20210120-16:42:58#

European Parliament. (2021). *Decent and affordable housing for all (debate)* (16:43:19-17:31:19). European Parliament.

<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/vod.html?mode=chapter&vodLanguage=EN&playerStartTime=20210120-16:43:19&playerEndTime=20210120-17:31:19#>

European Parliament. (2021). *Social and employment crisis in the COVID-19 pandemic and the EU's response in the Recovery Plan and the MFF (debate)* (15:06:42-16:07:22). European Parliament.

<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/vod.html?mode=chapter&vodLanguage=EN&playerStartTime=20210120-15:06:42&playerEndTime=20210120-16:07:22#>

European Parliament. (2021). *European Semester: annual sustainable growth strategy 2021 – European Semester: employment and social aspects in the annual sustainable growth strategy 2021 (debate)* (09:02:30-11:15:35). European Parliament.

<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/vod.html?mode=chapter&vodLanguage=EN&playerStartTime=20210310-09:02:30&playerEndTime=20210310-11:15:35#>

European Parliament. (2021). *Action Plan for the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, in preparation of the Social Summit in Porto in May (debate)* (11:15:35-12:52:24). European Parliament.

<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/vod.html?mode=chapter&vodLanguage=EN&playerStartTime=20210310-11:15:35&playerEndTime=20210310-12:52:24#>

e=EN&playerStartTime=20210310-11:15:35&playerEndTime=20210310-12:52:24#

European Parliament. (2021). *European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) 2021-2027 (debate)* (18:41:20-19:06:43). European Parliament.

<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/vod.html?mode=chapter&vodLanguage=EN&playerStartTime=20210608-18:41:20&playerEndTime=20210608-19:06:43#>

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European Parliament. (2021). *Reversing the negative social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic (debate)* (21:48:35-22:53:41). European Parliament.

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European Parliament. (2022). *Minimum level of taxation for multinational groups (debate)* (20:39:17-21:44:47). European Parliament. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/vod.html?mode=chapter&vodLanguage=EN&playerStartTime=20220518-20:39:17&playerEndTime=20220518-21:44:47#>