Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Journal of European Public Policy

ISSN: 1350-1763 (Print) 1466-4429 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rjpp20

The recovery and resilience facility as a transition stabiliser: recovery agendas across government transitions

David Bokhorst & Andrea Capati

To cite this article: David Bokhorst & Andrea Capati (14 Jul 2026): The recovery and resilience facility as a transition stabiliser: recovery agendas across government transitions, Journal of European Public Policy, DOI: 10.1080/13501763.2026.2702543

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2026.2702543

Published online: 14 Jul 2026.

JOURNAL OF EUROPEAN PUBLIC POLICY
https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2026.2702543

The recovery and resilience facility as a transition stabiliser: recovery agendas across government transitions

David Bokhorst [a] and Andrea Capati [b,c]

[a]Department of Political and Social Sciences, European University Institute, Fiesole, Italy; [b]Department of Political Science, Luiss Guido Carli University, Rome, Italy; [c]Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute, Florence, Italy

ABSTRACT

The European Union's (EU) Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) has profoundly transformed EU economic governance, yet we know less about how its performance-based architecture operates when Member State governments change during implementation. This article introduces a temporal perspective by conceptualising the RRF as a 'transition stabiliser' anchoring reform and investment trajectories over a six-year horizon, raising the political and financial costs of reversals, and allowing for limited recalibration to preserve ownership and feasibility. We examine whether the RRF can stabilise policy trajectories through a comparative analysis of government changeover in Italy (Draghi–Meloni), Slovakia (Heger–Fico), and the Netherlands (Rutte IV–Schoof). Drawing on elite interviews, official documents and secondary sources, the article shows that the RRF displays a bounded but effective stabilising capacity across cases. In Italy, transition stabilisation is driven by supranational enforcement, strategic usage of Europe and administrative internalisation within the core executive. In Slovakia, stabilisation constrains renegotiation but exposes limits in politically sensitive rule-of-law areas. In the Netherlands, stabilisation is more modest, often resulting in legalistic substitution and minimal compliance. Overall, the findings show how performance-based conditionality restructures political time, shifting contestation from whether reforms occur to how they are adapted during government transitions.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 16 February 2026; Accepted 8 July 2026

KEYWORDS Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF); transition stabilisation; government turnover; European Commission; National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs)

CONTACT Andrea Capati acapati@luiss.it, andrea.capati@eui.eu Department of Political Science, Luiss Guido Carli University, Viale Romania, 32 00197, Rome, Italy Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute, Via Boccaccio, 121 50133, Florence, Italy

Introduction: the RRF as a governance experiment

The introduction of the European Union's (EU) Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) not only represents a major fiscal leap in EU integration but also profoundly transformed Europe's economic governance. The RRF's governance structure reconfigures EU-Member State relations by combining detailed operationalisation of National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs) with performance-based monitoring by EU institutions to overcome past implementation weaknesses. This new legal technology has been hailed for its innovative potential (Fasone & Lupo, 2024) and has since become a template for EU funding instruments (Capati, 2026; Fabbrini, 2025), including the proposal for a new Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) (EC, 2025a).

While a growing literature has analysed the RRF's implications for fiscal integration (Buti & Fabbrini, 2023; Schelkle, 2021), executive empowerment and governance (Bokhorst & Corti, 2024; Zeitlin et al., 2025), as well as conditionality and democratic legitimacy (Capati & Christiansen, 2025; Fernández-Pasarín & Lanaia, 2025; Munta et al., 2024), less attention has been paid to how this new governance architecture interacts with the temporal dimension of politics. In particular, it remains unclear how the RRF operates when national governments change during the implementation phase of the plans. NRRPs are implemented over a six-year period that often spans multiple government cycles. The partisan profile of national executives significantly influences domestic reform and investment agendas during the implementation of the RRF (Borghetto et al., 2026). Incoming governments may differ sharply from their predecessors in terms of ideological orientation, policy priorities, and commitment to reform processes. Government turnover, therefore, exposes a central question at the heart of the RRF: Can a performance-based EU financial instrument help stabilise long-term policy trajectories across government transitions?

The relevance of this puzzle extends beyond the specific case of the RRF and speaks to a broader tension in contemporary politics. Structural reforms and large investment projects – ranging from climate mitigation, digital transformations, or public sector reforms – are inherently long-term processes that mostly transcend a single government term and thus require sustained political commitment. At the same time, European democracies have experienced increasing political volatility and electoral instability since the early 2000s (Hutter & Kriesi, 2019). Clancy et al. (2023) find that EU Member States change government at least every two years, with significant periods of caretaker governments. Higher polarisation and ideological turnover are also associated with shorter durations of ministerial units and more frequent reorganisations (Fleischer et al., 2023), thus undermining the administrative continuity and sustained political commitment required to carry long-term reform and investment projects to completion.

In this context, the RRF can be conceived as a 'transition stabiliser': a commitment device that anchors long-term expectations and increases the cost of deviation or reversal. When new governments come to power, they are confronted with existing commitments and financial incentives that make abandoning or reversing agreed-upon reforms more costly. As such, the RRF may condition the strategic calculations of incumbents, mitigating the risks of abrupt reversals or incoherent policy zig-zagging. This may help maintain the credibility and predictability of reform processes that are necessary for societal actors, lower levels of government and market actors to invest, adapt, and implement reform processes to completion.

At the same time, transition stabilisation is not without controversy. Government turnover, after all, entails legitimate change based on a new electoral or parliamentary mandate. A long-standing critique of performance-based instruments more broadly is that without sustained political and organisational buy-in, implementation of commitments can turn into superficial 'paper-based' compliance rather than meaningful guidance for policy (Moynihan & Beazley, 2016). If performance-based instruments such as the RRF fail to accommodate democratic change, they risk provoking political backlash and undermining national ownership. However, if they allow excessive renegotiation or reversal, they risk eroding policy continuity and the credibility of EU commitments. The RRF serves as an example of how to navigate this tension. Understanding how it does so is therefore important for assessing not only its capacity to deliver long-term reforms, but also the sustainability of performance-based governance as a model for future EU fiscal instruments.

This article addresses this puzzle by introducing a temporal perspective on the RRF. It examines how performance-based governance interacts with government turnover to shape reform continuity. Theoretically, the article derives and elaborates on the potential mechanisms behind transition stabilisation. Empirically, it offers the first comparative analysis of RRF implementation across government transitions in Italy, the Netherlands and Slovakia. Three cases that differ on many accounts, but which experienced a political transition from broadly progressive, pro-EU governments supportive of the RRF to more conservative governments adopting a more sceptical stance towards EU-driven reform commitments. This makes them well-suited to assess the potential stabilising effects of the RRF under politically adverse conditions.

Theoretical framework: the RRF and the mechanisms behind transition stabilisation

The concept of a 'transition stabiliser' differs from classical understandings of stabilisation in political economy. Traditional stabilisers, such as automatic fiscal stabilisers, are designed to smooth cyclical fluctuations by responding counter-cyclically to economic shocks (Polanyi, 1944). A transition stabiliser, by contrast, operates along a temporal axis. Its primary function is not to dampen economic volatility but to stabilise policy trajectories over time amid political uncertainty. Changes in governing coalitions or parliamentary majorities create incentives to reassess, suspend or symbolically reframe inherited policy commitments, even in the absence of a clear intention to reverse them. Government turnover therefore constitutes a critical stress point, not because it necessarily implies policy change, but because it reopens settled compromises and exposes reforms to renewed contestation (Improta, 2025). Crucially, stabilisation in this sense does not imply policy immobility or the elimination of democratic choice. Rather, it refers to mechanisms that raise the political, financial or reputational costs of abrupt reversals while preserving bounded flexibility for adaptation and recalibration.

While we introduce 'transtion stabilisation' as a new concept in the literature on EU economic governance, the RRF is not without precedent in constraining change in Member States' policy agendas. The Europeanisation literature has long studied how EU integration narrows the scope for domestic policy alternation, as European rules and procedures are progressively incorporated into domestic institutions and generate adaptational pressures that successor governments must accommodate (Börzel, 2002; Bulmer & Burch, 2005). The Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) has traditionally focused on medium-term objectives, with the recently revised rules requiring governments to submit four- to seven-year fiscal plans that ensure debt sustainability over a ten-year horizon (Zgaga, 2025). The European Semester's Country-Specific Recommendations (CSRs) have similarly targeted medium-term weaknesses, urging governments to deepen reforms in structurally persistent areas such as labour markets, pensions and public administration that often span multiple government terms (Munta, 2021; Zeitlin & Vanhercke, 2018). By embedding domestic policymaking within a recurrent cycle of monitoring, evaluation and correction, these arrangements urge Member State governments to maintain broadly consistent reform trajectories across electoral cycles, even where partisan turnover might otherwise favour more substantial shifts in policy direction.

However, while the RRF resembles traditional EU economic governance instruments, it departs from them along three dimensions that, taken together, qualitatively alter how EU governance interacts over time at the domestic level. A first distinction lies in the degree of *contractualisation* introduced by the RRF. Both the SGP and the European Semester operated primarily through coordination, surveillance and iterative recommendation. Their influence focused predominantly on defining broad policy objectives – the 'what' – rather than prescribing in detail the operational pathway, sequencing and implementation logic through which reforms had to be delivered

(Bokhorst, 2022). By contrast, the RRF translates broad policy priorities into highly detailed and operationalised reform and investment trajectories. NRRPs specify hundreds of milestones and targets linked to precise timelines, reporting obligations and disbursement conditions, embedding reform commitments in a dense architecture of 'contracts', that is deliverables, monitoring procedures and payment requests (Bokhorst & Corti, 2024; Miró & Fernández-Pasarín, 2026).

Second, the RRF alters the temporal logic of EU policy coordination. Under previous arrangements, incoming governments generally retained considerable scope to redefine policy trajectories over time, even where medium-term objectives formally remained in place. Even under the revised fiscal rules, multiannual fiscal plans can be replaced or substantially revised by successor governments (Article 17, Regulation (EU) 2024/1263). Semester CSRs may generate reputational or political costs for departing from earlier commitments, but they do not impose immediate material penalties for changing course; instead, they rely more on reputational dynamics and cognitive Europeanisation rather than on binding operational commitments (Bokhorst, 2022). The RRF, by contrast, embeds reform and investment agendas within a six-year implementation contract that survives electoral cycles and government turnover, with milestones and targets agreed by one government serving as disbursement conditions for its successors. The instrument thereby creates a temporal lock-in effect that stabilises reform trajectories across electoral cycles while still permitting bounded recalibration.

A third novelty is the RRF's *no-reversal* logic. Article 24(3) of the RRF Regulation provides that 'the satisfactory fulfilment of milestones and targets shall presuppose that measures related to previously satisfactorily fulfilled milestones and targets have not been reversed by the Member State concerned' (RRF Regulation, 2021). The Commission must verify at each payment request that previously achieved milestones have not been undone, introducing an explicitly cumulative temporal logic in which policy change is additive rather than reversible. Whereas earlier instruments focused on future compliance trajectories, the RRF transforms implementation into an ongoing obligation not merely to advance reforms but also to preserve earlier achievements. This represents a genuinely novel mechanism in EU economic governance which has since been extended to subsequent instruments, including the proposed MFF (EC, 2025a).

At the same time, the mechanisms through which stabilisation may emerge are not entirely novel and can be derived from the Europeanisation literature. Here, three mechanisms of change can be distinguished to analyse stabilisation effects. The first mechanism is supranational enforcement exercised by the European Commission. The RRF gives the Commission substantially stronger leverage than under earlier governance frameworks because disbursement is contingent on the satisfactory fulfilment of milestones and targets. This creates direct pressure on governments to maintain implementation trajectories and avoid reversals that could jeopardise access to funding. Particularly during periods of government turnover, the Commission can invoke payment delays, negative assessments or the prospect of financial loss to constrain attempts at radical renegotiation or policy dismantling (Fernández-Pasarín & Lanaia, 2025). The Commission's willingness to deploy these tools is itself reinforced by its sensitivity to reputation: as a technocratic institution whose authority rests on the policy outputs it helps deliver, it responds to the demands of the audiences that can damage that standing (Moschella, 2024). Visible backsliding on a flagship NRRP therefore implicates the credibility of the RRF, and of the Commission as its guarantor. We therefore expect the Commission to push back against deviations from agreed commitments, most visibly where implementation is financially or politically salient.

A second mechanism operates within the domestic arena and concerns the strategic usage of Europe by domestic actors themselves. Building on Jacquot and Woll's (2003) work on the strategic usage of Europe and on Zeitlin et al. (2014) analysis of the open method of coordination (OMC) implementation, EU governance instruments may function not merely as external constraints but also as political resources mobilised by domestic actors to pursue their own reform agendas. Ministries, social partners, parliamentary actors or subnational authorities may strategically invoke RRF milestones, timelines and the prospect of lost funding to hold a reversal-minded incoming government to the trajectory agreed by its predecessor. Inherited commitments are recast not as a previous government's programme but as a binding European obligation whose unwinding would carry financial and reputational costs, narrowing the options open to successors (Borghetto et al., 2026). A narrower, hands-tying variant is the Italian *vincolo esterno* (Ferrera & Gualmini, 2004), where reference to Brussels serves chiefly to override domestic opposition, relying on EU commitments as a political cover. While this is usually invoked by a government itself, it becomes relevant in the context of stabilisation where an incoming government emphasises its 'tied hands' to resist pressure from its own coalition or base to abandon inherited commitments. Even then, such usage typically presupposes that the government has already been steered towards continuity by conditionality, and operates as a discursive defence at the cost of weaker ownership and 'blame-shifting' narratives. Both can stabilise, but through different logics and with different implications for legitimacy. We therefore expect strategic usage to support stabilisation wherever the RRF is domestically salient and a constituency exists to mobilise its commitments, while treating the governmental *vincolo esterno* as a context-specific variant that may emerge in high-beneficiary countries, where the financial cost of reversal is high but reforms are politically sensitive.

The third mechanism, less developed in the literature, is *administrative internalisation*. Work on the Europeanisation of national administrations shows that EU requirements can induce durable change in administrative organisation and routine, especially where they reshape hierarchical coordination and oversight (Knill, 2001; Radaelli, 2003). Implementing an NRRP requires monitoring systems, reporting procedures and coordination structures spanning ministries, agencies and subnational authorities (Bressanelli & Natali, 2025). As milestones, deadlines and reporting obligations become focal points of administrative practice, and as actors invest credibility and capacity in delivery, the costs of disruption rise. The contractual architecture thereby generates an endogenous logic of continuity that operates even beyond direct Commission pressure. Along these lines, we expect the RRF to generate endogenous pressures for continuity through the routinisation of its governance architecture within domestic administrations.

These three mechanisms should not be understood as mutually exclusive but as analytically distinct pathways that may operate in combination. For instance, supranational enforcement may create the conditions under which domestic political actors find it strategically useful to invoke EU commitments and administrative actors invest in their internalisation. They may also be interchangeable: where administrative capacity and core-executive control are strong, internalisation may compensate for relatively light Commission pressure; conversely, where domestic ownership is weak, supranational enforcement may need to carry more of the stabilising weight (Figure 1).

This relational view generates expectations about when transition stabilisation should be observable and what form it is likely to take. We conceptualise

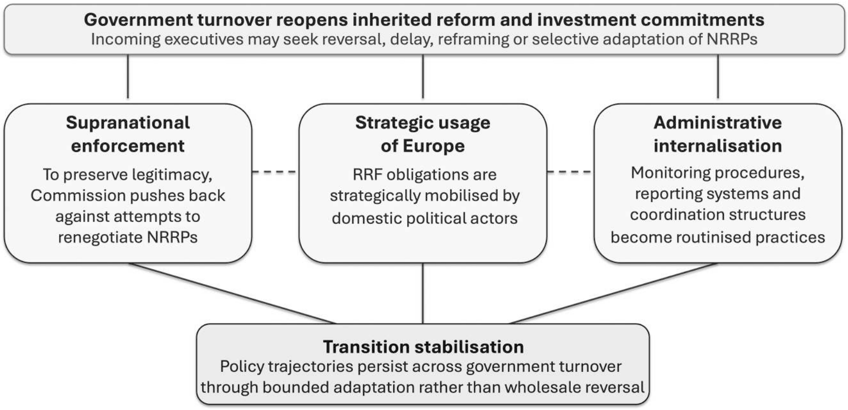

Figure 1. The mechanisms of transition stabilisation behind the RRF: supranational enforcement, strategic usage of Europe and administrative internalisation. Source: Authors' own elaboration.

transition stabilisation not as a binary outcome, but as a continuum whose modal forms depend on the number, intensity and interaction of the mechanisms at work, as well as on the contingent response of incoming governments to inherited commitments. At one end of the continuum, substantive stabilisation is most likely where all three mechanisms operate in concert: Commission enforcement is credible, domestic political and bureaucratic actors find it useful to invoke RRF commitments, and the plan's governance architecture has been internalised within core executive structures. Under these conditions, both the architecture and the content of inherited reform and investment trajectories are largely preserved, with only selective adjustments framed under the Commission's 'objective circumstances' or 'better alternatives' clauses (EC, 2024a).

Where one or more mechanisms are attenuated, we expect modest stabilisation: the formal architecture and timetable of the plan remain largely intact, but implementation proceeds with reduced ambition, slower pace or selective de-prioritisation of politically inconvenient measures. Finally, where Commission enforcement is selective or politically constrained, domestic ownership is shallow or administrative routinisation has not taken place, we may witness forms of legalistic substitution rather than genuine stabilisation. In such cases, incoming governments retain the formal letter of agreed milestones while diluting their substantive content through instrument-swapping, regulatory softening or minimal-compliance design.

Whether the RRF indeed has the capacity to stabilise transitions and through what mechanisms should be treated as an open empirical question. The purpose of this study is to understand transition stabilisation, both in terms of its potential and its limitations. To do so, we examine the RRF's stabilisation capacity under the adverse political conditions of government transition, where we may assume a high likelihood of policy discontinuity.

Methods and data

Government turnover constitutes a critical empirical setting for assessing the stabilising capacity of the RRF. Periods of executive transition render the tension between democratic change and policy continuity particularly apparent, exposing inherited reform commitments to renewed contestation. They therefore provide an opportunity to observe whether and how the RRF constrains policy reversal, delay, or fundamental reorientation.

The analysis employs a comparative case-study design, focusing on Italy, the Netherlands, and Slovakia – three cases that differ significantly in terms of NRRP size, geographical location, and levels of socioeconomic imbalance. In all three cases, incoming executives inherited plans negotiated by previous governments. These transitions also involved significant shifts in partisan composition, governing style, and initial positioning towards the EU (Borghetto et al., 2026; Capati & Improta, 2021), from relatively pro-EU and reform-oriented cabinets to governments that included parties more sceptical of the EU in general and the RRF in particular. Specifically, the analysis examines the transition from the Draghi to the Meloni government in Italy (2022), from the Heger to the Fico government in Slovakia (2023), and from the Rutte IV to the Schoof government in the Netherlands (2024). Other member states also experienced government turnover during the implementation of the RRF, including Austria, Bulgaria, Czechia, Finland, Poland, Portugal and Sweden. However, these cases were excluded because they either did not combine turnover with a comparably adverse shift in executive positioning towards the EU and the RRF, did not provide a sufficiently long post-transition implementation window, or were characterised by extreme instability and repeated caretaker government patterns that complicated empirical testing.

On this basis, Italy, Slovakia and the Netherlands are selected as 'critical cases' (Gerring, 2007), in which conditions for transition stabilisation are least favourable and the stabilisation capacity of the RRF is therefore more readily observable. If the RRF contributes to stabilising policy trajectories under such conditions, the transition-stabilisation argument can be plausibly generalised beyond these cases. Rather than treating stabilisation as a binary outcome, the analysis traces whether and under what conditions the RRF constrains reversal, enables selective adaptation, or fails to prevent contestation during government turnover. This design enables the identification of both the scope conditions and the limits of the RRF as a transition stabiliser.

The empirical analysis draws on three main data sources. It relies on original semi-structured elite interviews ($n = 19$) with public officials involved in the coordination, monitoring, and implementation of the RRF at the national and EU level. Interviews were conducted between May 2022 and June 2025 under conditions of confidentiality, unless explicitly permitted. To ensure the validity of the interview material, interviewees were selected among insiders with direct, first-hand knowledge of the events under investigation. While restricting the interviewees to actors directly involved in the process under examination might bias representations towards attributing greater relevance to the RRF in stabilising policy transitions at the national level, these actors were also the ones best placed to observe the instrument's establishment, amendment and practical operation, and thus to provide reliable evidence on the mechanisms through which it may have constrained policy discontinuity during government turnover. To address this potential bias, interview material was triangulated with official documents – including NRRPs and their amendments, Commission assessments, national legislation, parliamentary records, and government communications – as well as by secondary literature, including academic studies, policy reports, and media coverage. The article's data span the period from mid-2021, shortly after the establishment and initial implementation of the RRF, to the end of 2025.

Italy – technocratic lock-in under high volatility

Setting the scene: the RRF between government instability and political salience

Between the initial drafting of its NRRP and the early phases of implementation, Italy experienced three substantively different governments: the Conte II centre-left coalition, the Draghi technocratic executive and the Meloni right-wing coalition. These governments differed not only in partisan composition but also in governing style, rhetorical positioning towards the EU and stated priorities regarding economic reform and public investment. Combined with the country's historically high levels of political volatility, persistent administrative weaknesses, and the political salience of Italy's NRRP, strong expectations of policy discontinuity emerged among EU institutions and external observers alike (IT1; Borghetto et al., 2026), including the wholesale revision or delay of agreed milestones and targets, a radical reallocation of funds across policy areas, or a departure from broader reform and investment trajectories.

Italy is by far the largest beneficiary of the RRF, with an allocation of approximately €194.4 billion in grants and loans, complemented by over €30 billion in nationally financed measures. The magnitude of this envelope raised both the economic stakes of the NRRP and its political salience (Capati & Christiansen, 2025). It also intensified scrutiny from European institutions, financial markets and domestic actors alike. Indeed, Italy was widely seen as a pivotal case for the success of the RRF as delays in implementation risked undermining both national and EU-level credibility (EC, 2023b). Moreover, the plan was negotiated and implemented in a context shaped by Italy's long-standing recourse to the *vincolo esterno* – the strategic use of EU constraints by domestic governments to overcome entrenched opposition and institutional inertia (Borghetto et al., 2026). For instance, the Italian government argued that 'Italy needs these reforms and they are also the ones required by the European Commission' (Gualtieri, 2020). Similarly, parliamentary hearings in the Italian Senate frequently referred to the EU as a 'vincolo esterno' in the context of discussions about the NRRP (Italian Senate, 2022, 2024). In this tradition, European conditionality serves as political cover for costly reforms, but risks weakening domestic ownership and encouraging 'blame Brussels' narratives (Ferrera & Gualmini, 2004). Given the political volatility, the legitimacy of the NRRP depended on sustained political willingness to internalise, rather than externalise, responsibility for reform.

Contrary to expectations, the Italian NRRP displayed a high degree of persistence across government turnover. While adjustments were introduced, the core architecture of the plan and the nature of deliverables remained largely intact. Stabilisation emerged through the interaction of three mechanisms: active supranational enforcement by the European Commission, the strategic use of Europe as a *vincolo esterno* and the progressive internalisation of RRF discipline within the Italian core executive. At the same time, this stabilisation relied heavily on centralisation and a technocratic style of governing, resulting in significant trade-offs in terms of democratic legitimacy and administrative resilience.

The RRF as a transition stabiliser between the conte II, meloni and draghi governments

The initial drafting of the Italian NRRP took place under the Conte II government in late 2020 and early 2021. This phase was characterised by intense time pressure and frequent informal exchanges with the European Commission (IT2; Italian Senate, 2021a). Although the plan was formally presented as a national recovery strategy, its elaboration relied heavily on experts, task forces and senior civil servants (Guidi & Moschella, 2021). Parliamentary involvement was limited and largely *ex post*, while social partners and subnational authorities were consulted in a fragmented and uneven manner (IT3; Capati & Christiansen, 2025). At this stage, the NRRP remained incomplete in important respects. Broad missions and investment areas were identified but reform commitments and implementation arrangements were not fully specified. This reflected both the political fragility of the Conte II coalition and uncertainty about administrative capacity. The government's collapse in January 2021, five months before the submission deadline, interrupted the process and created a potential opening for policy reversal.

The formation of the Draghi government in February 2021 marked a decisive turning point. Rather than reopening the drafting process, the new executive explicitly chose to build on the existing draft (IT4) by 'fine tuning the plan prepared by the previous government' (Reuters, 2021). Indeed, the plan's architecture (including its missions and components), the allocation of resources and degrees of adherence to CSRs remained largely intact over the government transition. This was partly dictated by the tight European timetable, as the government crisis occurred just five months before the deadline for submitting the NRRP to the Commission. However, the Draghi government doubled the number of reforms, particularly regarding the justice system, public administration, and competition rules, whilst dropping Conte's proposals to extend social protection to atypical and self-employed workers (Guidi & Moschella, 2021).

The number, scope and specificity of milestones and targets were expanded to translate broad reform commitments into concrete, time-bound administrative obligations, thereby strengthening the government's leverage to overcome political obstacles in sensitive reform areas. Furthermore, governance structures were consolidated within the Presidency of the Council of Ministers (PCM) and the Ministry of Economy and Finance (MEF), particularly through the *Ragioneria Generale dello Stato*. Coordination, monitoring and interaction with the Commission were centralised, reinforcing a 'core executive' model of governance (Bressanelli & Natali, 2025). Parliament was involved late; both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate held discussions based on Conte's previous NRRP until 30 and 31 March, respectively (Italian Chamber of Deputies, 2021; Italian Senate, 2021b), meaning the Italian parliament basically spoke 'hot air' (IT5). Here too, the voice of regions and municipalities remained largely marginalised in the design and governance of the plan (IT6; Profeti & Baldi, 2021). By making full use of the RRF's contractual governance and tightening control under the PCM, the Draghi government reduced the discretion available to future executives.

As Borghetto et al. (2026) remark, Draghi framed the RRF as a 'bet made collectively in Europe', stressing that Italy, as one of its main beneficiaries, would be 'responsible for the success or loss of this bet'. He further warned that Italy would be the first to 'pay the price' in the event of failure, but that such a failure would also damage the 'future of Europe', since it would make it far harder to persuade other Member States to move towards a common fiscal policy – an outcome from which Italy itself would stand to benefit considerably. Against this background, the executive presented complex and potentially divisive reforms – including those concerning the justice system, taxation, public administration, public procurement and competition – as necessary to address Italy's structural weaknesses and to respond to European Semester CSRs. The rhetorical strategy was to emphasise that 'Italy needs these reforms and they are also the ones required by the European Commission' (Gualtieri, 2020). Along these lines, Draghi (2021) stated that the government had put together 'an ambitious reform and investment plan' aimed at making Italy 'fairer, more competitive, and more sustainable'. In this sense, references to Europe were used to generate a rally-round-the-flag effect around the NRRP, while also helping the government counter open opposition from Giorgia Meloni's *Brothers of Italy* (IT2; IT5).

In doing so, the Draghi government put the RRF's stabilising capacity to the stress test of the subsequent changeover to the Meloni government in late 2022. Before assuming office, Meloni had repeatedly voiced opposition to the substantive direction and legitimacy of Draghi's plan, vowing to reform it if elected and redirect funds to areas where Italy is more competitive (Capati & Christiansen, 2025). However, this aspiration ran up against the constraints of the tightly contractualised plan. The energy price shock following the Russian invasion of Ukraine provided some room to reopen negotiations as initial cost calculations were no longer feasible, and the REPowerEU chapter had to be incorporated. However, the Commission made it clear in early interactions that political turnover did not justify renegotiating the plan's fundamentals and that doing so would risk achieving the 2023 milestones and targets necessary for the disbursement of funds (IT2; Financial Times, 2022).

Faced with these constraints, the Meloni government opted for adjustment rather than reversal. Most revisions were framed under the Commission's 'objective circumstances' clause, invoking exogenous shocks and implementation learning rather than ideological disagreement with Draghi's plan. The technical tweaks to the plan allowed the government to remain true to the political promise of reform, whilst also staying within the boundaries of the RRF legal architecture. Substantively, the changes involved sequencing and reallocation within existing missions and the integration of the REPowerEU chapter (IT6; EC, 2023a), while core green, digital and structural reform priorities inherited from the Draghi phase remained intact. Reopening the plan's fundamentals would have triggered controversial and long negotiations with the Commission, with risks for the government's domestic reputation.

Indeed, the European Commission played a central role in constraining discontinuity during the early Meloni phase (Lupo, 2025). It had warned the Meloni government that outright reversals or deviations from agreed commitments would carry immediate financial consequences, particularly given the high concentration of objectives scheduled for 2023 (IT4; IT7; Financial Times, 2022). This enforcement role also became visible in high-profile decisions on project admissibility. The Commission rejected the inclusion of projects such as the Florence stadium renovation and the Venice sports facilities, deeming them ineligible under the RRF (Financial Times, 2023). These decisions forced Italian authorities to drop the projects from the NRRP and seek alternative financing through national budgets or private investment. The episode sent a strong signal that politicised local additions would not be absorbed into the RRF framework and that continuity with agreed policy priorities was non-negotiable.

External enforcement alone does not fully account for continuity in the Italian case. Europe continued to operate as a key *vincolo esterno* during the Meloni government. The right-wing executive explicitly acknowledged that 'the full implementation of the NRRP represents a fundamental test of Italy's credibility and reliability in the international context' and warned that even partial failure would have negative repercussions for Italy's position in EU negotiations, macroeconomic projections and international financial markets (Italian Senate, 2023). This suggests that the stabilising effect of the RRF did not derive only from the formal risk of losing or delaying EU disbursements but also operated through the reputational costs that non-compliance would impose on Italy as the largest beneficiary of the RRF. The *vincolo esterno*, therefore, reinforced transition stabilisation by transforming compliance with the NRRP into a matter of national credibility, rather than a purely technical requirement attached to individual payment requests, and provided a tool to justify continuity with previously agreed reform and investment projects in moments of government turnover.

Finally, by the time the Draghi–Meloni transition took place, central Italian administrations had already invested heavily in NRRP-related coordination, monitoring and reporting systems. These investments generated their own inertia. For senior officials in the MEF and the PCM, continuity became a functional necessity to preserve institutional credibility, ensure predictable cash flow and protect organisational resources devoted to RRF implementation (IT1; IT2; IT4; IT6). The RRF also became a vehicle for tightening administrative discipline in Italy. Successive PNRR governance decrees strengthened substitution powers, allowing the centre to step in where implementing bodies lagged behind agreed timetables, including through the appointment of *commissari ad acta*. They also introduced a mechanism under which, if the Commission found final objectives omitted or incompletely achieved, the MEF could claw back the corresponding sums from national resources allocated to the relevant intervention (IT6; Italian Senate and Italian Chamber of Deputies, 2024). This reinforced a technocratic model in which stabilisation was achieved through hierarchical coordination and administrative adaptation (Capati et al., 2026). While this may have enhanced the efficiency of policymaking, 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 Italian decision-making authorities', thus undermining national ownership (IT2).

Transition stabilisation at the expense of legitimacy?

The Italian case highlights that the three mechanisms through which the RRF is expected to serve as a transition stabiliser all played out at the same time. First, supranational enforcement by the Commission constrained the discretion of incoming governments and signalled that continuity was a precondition for disbursement. Second, administrative internalisation within the core executive – concentrated in the PCM and the Ministry of Economy and Finance – transformed RRF commitments into a domestic disciplining resource applied downwards to line ministries and subnational authorities, generating an organisational inertia that made continuity a functional necessity. Third, the Meloni government itself came to invoke the *vincolo esterno* defensively, recasting compliance as a test of Italy's credibility in order to justify staying the course against its own base's appetite for revision. At the same time, stabilisation entailed significant trade-offs. Continuity was achieved primarily through centralisation and technocratic governance, which exacerbated parliament's marginalisation and left long-standing administrative vulnerabilities largely unresolved, particularly at the local level.

Overall, Italy demonstrates that the RRF can stabilise reform trajectories across government turnover even in highly volatile political environments, albeit at the cost of democratic legitimacy.

Slovakia – from reform momentum to contested stabilisation

Setting the scene: the reform momentum of the RRF

The 2020 Slovak elections brought a coalition without Smer-SD to power for the first time in almost a decade. Until then, Slovakia had received fairly stable CSRs over the years, with limited progress achieved and little political traction in the domestic debate (Munta, 2021; SK5). Slovakia regularly struggled to absorb EU funds, often resorting to last-minute fixes and reinforcing scepticism about its ability to govern long-term transitions through coordinated reforms and investments (*Ibid.;* SK6). In 2020, incoming PM Matovič and Finance Minister Heger (who later became PM), had the explicit ambition to break with the – perceived – low-reform past.

The priorities of the new government aligned strongly with Semester CSRs; thus, the NRRP was used to bundle many of the government's core priorities – especially in education, health, justice, pensions, and fiscal governance – into a single, time-bound framework backed by RRF funds and external monitoring. The Slovak NRRP amounted to roughly €6 billion in grants, linked to about 196 milestones and targets, and was approved in June 2021. Slovakia chose not to tap the loans compartment, officially citing limited absorptive capacity (Trend, 2023). The plan was assessed by the EC as contributing significantly to economic growth, employment creation and addressing the challenges as set out in the CSRs (EC, 2021).

Notably, the NRRP also sought a profound transformation of administrative structures, with the introduction of the National Implementation and Coordination Authority (NIKA), located in the Prime Minister's office. NIKA comprised roughly 90–100 staff – predominantly young and foreign-educated administrators – and was responsible for steering the NRRP across its full lifecycle (SK1; SK2; SK3). To ensure public scrutiny of the NRRP, a website was set up tracing progress on all milestones and targets through a traffic light system.

In the first years of the RRF, the Slovakian case stood out for both the ambition of its reforms and the instrument's impact on policy and politics (Zeitlin et al., 2025). Slovak officials broadly praised the RRF as a leverage tool that enhanced the efficiency of the policy-making process. For example, the reform linking the statutory retirement age to life expectancy was adopted by Parliament only two days before the RRF deadline, under considerable pressure from the instrument. As one Slovakian interviewee put it: ‘without having this strong tool, this RRF, based on my experience in this area, we would have never passed this law in Parliament’ (SK2). By the end of 2022, Slovakia appeared well on its way to becoming one of the clearest RRF success cases, but one vulnerability remained: the fragile coalition underpinning the Heger government.

The transition from heger to fico

The Heger government faced intense conflicts over several reforms embedded in the NRRP, notably the rationalisation of the hospital network, the merger or downgrading of courts, and the practical application of expenditure ceilings. These tensions ultimately led to its collapse in late 2022, paving the way for a technocratic caretaker cabinet under Prime Minister Ódor. For this period, interviewees widely confirm that the RRF played a major stabilising role: the clear timeline and defined deliverables provided the caretaker government with a ready-made roadmap, focusing political attention on implementation within an externally monitored framework (SK3; SK4; SK5; SK6). In the absence of a broader legislative agenda or a parliamentary majority to launch new initiatives, delivering on RRF commitments became the principal domain in which the caretaker government could still perform (SK5). The head of NIKA, Livia Vašáková, was appointed Deputy Prime Minister, and confirmed that submitting the third RRF payment request and preparing the fourth were among the key achievements during this phase (SK5).

However, the real test case for the RRF came with the transition from Ódor to the re-emergence of Smer-SD and the return to power of Fico. Fico campaigned on a more critical stance towards the EU, and key figures expressed deep scepticism about reforms in justice and environmental protection. At the outset, many within the new cabinet perceived the NRRP as ‘Heger’s plan’ and signalled their intent to reshape it, assuming that the RRF would function like structural funds, with wide room for reprogramming and extension (SK3). After installation, the new cabinet wanted to make extensive changes to the plan, but this expectation quickly ran up against the legal and procedural constraints of the instrument. Commission officials and national civil servants repeatedly emphasised in their talks with Ministers and Parliament: the contractual nature of the plan, concluded with the state rather than any specific government; the absence of any possibility to extend the 2026 deadline; the prohibition on lowering overall reform ambition; and the existence of a non-reversal rule for already fulfilled milestones (SK3; SK4; SK5; SK6).

It took the new government several months to fully internalise that it could not simply 'rewrite' the plan and that disbursements depended on adhering to previously agreed reforms. Commission officials actively intervened in the early days of the new government, reminding politicians of the RRF commitments almost on a daily basis (SK4). This was reinforced by the fact that Slovakia had just completed a nine-month renegotiation of the plan due to the recalculation of grant disbursements and the inclusion of the REPowerEU Chapter, so that civil servants could make the case that there was no time to lose. Moreover, a macro-fiscal context characterised by subdued private investment, low growth, and high deficits, which limited the government's willingness to forgo EU funds (SK5).

Following the concerted effort to keep the plan intact, no further changes were introduced in 2024, and implementation continued, albeit with less enthusiasm and a slower pace. Some officials expressed surprise at the degree of ownership the Fico government ultimately took over implementation, including by citing the RRF as 'a powerful tool' for keeping the policy trajectory stable (SK3). One area where the government even appeared enthusiastic was childcare. The NRRP introduced a legal entitlement to kindergarten and pre-primary education, backed by substantial investment to create roughly 10,000 new childcare places and additional funding for disadvantaged regions (EC, 2025b). Although the Fico government initially questioned the reform's feasibility and design, Fico himself later signalled strong support for expanding childcare, prompting regional actors to intensify implementation. Within months, demand for kindergarten projects exceeded the available funding envelope and extra funds from under-performing other projects were freed up to enhance further implementation (SK4).

An example where the RRF prevented potential backtracking was the binding expenditure ceilings, introduced as part of the NRRP in 2021, but triggering several political crises in their later application. The 2024 budget under Fico initially did not include expenditure ceilings, leading the Commission to send a letter to Slovakia requesting that binding multiannual budgetary ceilings be introduced, as omission would be deemed a reversal of previous commitments, preventing approval of the fourth RRF tranche (EC, 2024b). Consequently, Parliament approved the ceilings for the 2024 budget, with the RRF's no-reversal rule playing a strong role in the debate (SK4).

By contrast, the rule–of–law dimension exposes the limits of the RRF's stabilising power. The NRRP contains a substantial chapter on fighting corruption and protecting the EU's financial interests, explicitly citing the role of a Special Prosecutor's Office as key safeguard. Shortly after taking office, the Fico government introduced sweeping changes to the criminal code, including the downgrading of the Special Prosecutor's Office, lower mandatory sentences for corruption and shorter limitation periods – moves widely interpreted as reversing high-profile corruption prosecutions. The Commission responded by freezing the assessment of the fourth payment request and utilising the RRF framework for the protection of the EU budget to press for changes (Euractiv, 2024). Over several months, Slovak authorities adopted a series of amendments and created a new department within the General Prosecutor's Office, which, on paper, was presented as a functional successor to the dismantled institution. This allowed the Commission eventually to conclude that the plan's requirements were met. However, domestic observers argue that the Commission mostly let Fico off the hook, as de facto rule-of-law backsliding continued (SK5).

Stabilisation under adverse circumstances

The Slovakian case indeed exhibits elements of stabilisation through RRF governance under adverse circumstances. The coincidence of a highly reform-oriented government with the launch of the RRF generated what several interviewees described as the most comprehensive and coherent reform strategy since the late 1990s. During the subsequent turbulent period, the RRF helped sustain stability under the caretaker government and constrained the Fico government's ability to change course after taking office, even eliciting modest enthusiasm for reform and investment trajectories initiated under the Heger government, such as childcare.

Supranational enforcement by the Commission played an important role during the transition period by repeatedly reminding Slovak politicians of the RRF commitments and the implications of the no-reversal rule. As soon as Fico took office, administrative internalisation also served as a constraint on major policy reversal, with national civil servants urging the government to stay on track. However, there is limited evidence that the RRF fostered broad societal ownership, with a wider constellation of domestic actors acting as a self-reinforcing support base for continued commitment to RRF milestones and targets. Interviewees noted that business organisations focused primarily on the plan's tangible benefits rather than on concerns about political instability, while regional actors felt insufficiently involved in decision-making (SK5). Finally, the rule-of-law conflict illustrates that such stabilisation is not automatic and may be weaker in policy areas touching on the core interests of governing elites. In this domain, the Commission's leverage through the RRF was sufficient to delay certain changes and to oblige the government to maintain at least formal structures, but arguably insufficient – or insufficiently deployed – to prevent more substantive backsliding.

The Netherlands – a reluctant user with selective stabilising effects

Setting the scene; the RRF as a 'one-off nuisance'

The Netherlands has long presented itself as a strong advocate for reform conditionality in the EU, albeit without support for fiscal solidarity (Bokhorst & Schoeller, 2024). Former PM Rutte sold the RRF to parliamentarians as a mechanism that would ensure countries implement the necessary reforms so they can stand on their own feet if the next crisis arises (Tweede Kamer, 2020). But despite this hard line, they have also had difficulty internalising the RRF logic for themselves.

The Rutte IV government spent 'exactly half an hour' discussing the NRRP in coalition negotiations (NL1), after which party leaders decided to fill the plan with existing, already budgeted measures, to free up fiscal space from those projects and help smooth difficult budget negotiations (Rijksoverheid, 2021). The initial plan was to focus on no more than five large projects to minimise the required administrative capacity. This view soon collided with the RRF's legal architecture, requiring each Member State to address a significant subset of CSRs (NL2). After negotiating with the EC, the Dutch had to shift gears. What was supposed to be a small plan ballooned into a broad package when it was decided that each ministry would have to contribute with projects they still had 'on the shelf' (NL1). However, the decision to replace existing projects with EU funding meant there was no additional financial benefit in exchange for strenuous EU-level scrutiny of RRF commitments, making the Facility deeply unpopular within the civil service. In Parliament, the dominant view emerged of the RRF as a one-off nuisance to be endured for other countries' sake, with a clear sense of 'once, but never again' (NL3; Zeitlin et al., 2025).

The relatively low amount of the plan – €5.4 billion, or roughly 0,5% of GDP – combined with the 'one-off' perception among Dutch political elites, has mostly prevented the RRF from acquiring significant salience in the political debate and internalising its logic. Yet, in politically tumultuous times, there's also a second – more nuanced – argument about the RRF's impact, worth exploring, where the concept of transition stabilisation proves a useful angle, both in terms of possibilities and limits.

The usage of the RRF during government turnover

The Dutch NRRP was designed at the start of the Rutte IV government with the assumption that a four-year term would be sufficient to deliver all its major components. However, the coalition collapsed when the VVD party pulled the plug after one and a half years without achieving a single successful RRF payment request. With a caretaker government and new elections looming, the NRRP risked further delays and potential reversals. However, strategic usage of the RRF played a constraining role. To ensure that parliamentarians wouldn't forget the relevance of RRF commitments, outgoing Finance Minister Kaag sent a letter to Parliament, warning that the parliamentary process regarding NRRP-related draft laws should proceed (Ministerie van Financiën, 2023). Refusal would risk a €600-million deduction in RRF funding. Kaag underlined that, given the strict conditionality the Netherlands itself had demanded during the RRF negotiations, the European Commission was expected to apply its methodology rigorously (Ministerie van Financiën, 2023).

Similar warnings were issued in subsequent months, including when the Senate rejected a tax proposal containing elements of the energy taxation reforms promised in the NRRP (Haverland & Becher, 2025). During negotiations on the formation of a new government, civil servants also issued an explicit warning to the negotiating parties that reversing key elements of the NRRP package could mean the Netherlands would no longer meet the requirement that the NRRP address a significant subset of the CSRs. As a result, the plan would risk being defunded in its entirety (Ministerie van Financiën, 2024). The move was controversial: some within the civil service believed the Commission would allow renegotiation, while others feared that key elements – such as the labour market package – were at risk and that a strong signal was therefore needed (NL1). Despite Kaag's letter, Parliament declared several NRRP-related files controversial, delaying implementation, though fewer files were frozen than initially feared (Haverland & Becher, 2025; NL1).

The Schoof government reversed and amended several NRRP measures, yet worked hard to avoid formal non-compliance under the RRF. It used the 'better alternative' clause to drop the politically toxic shift to pay-per-use car taxation, changing it for an older, already introduced, reform to tax heavy trucks and using the longer phase-in to make the controversial argument that this would lead to higher CO2 reductions. On the industrial CO_2 levy, Parliament repeatedly called for full cancellation, while the cabinet warned it was tied to two NRRP milestones, risking cuts of up to €1.2 billion if removed without an acceptable substitute (Ministerie van Klimaat en Groene Groei, 2025). After the Commission indicated that alternatives were not possible, the government retained the levy but reduced the 2026 rate to the minimum compatible with the agreed CO_2 price path, using the 5 percent RRF tolerance margin and offsetting industry costs through other instruments (Ministerie van Klimaat en Groene Groei, 2025). As a result, the emissions authority must build and operate a full levy system for a surcharge of about €1.67 per tonne above the ETS price, primarily to meet RRF commitments while providing only a marginal additional decarbonisation incentive (Joosten, 2025). Overall, national officials acknowledge that the Netherlands is pushing the instrument's flexibility to its limits (NL1).

On other dossiers, the RRF's influence on policy stability has been more apparent, thanks to strategic usage of the instrument. On pension reform – transposing €1.8 trillion in collective assets to a more individualised system – most groundwork predated the RRF and rested on broad social concertation, so its added impact should not be overstated. However, the shift to the Schoof government weakened political support, as three of four coalition parties (PVV, NSC, BBB) became outspoken critics. In this context, national officials note that the NRRP helped sustain pressure and deter backtracking, with the risk of RRF penalties cited in parliamentary debates when coalition parties attempted to reopen the deal. Crucially, when parliament extended the transition period beyond the RRF horizon, the NRRP served as the template for agreeing that 66% of pension fund participants would be transposed to the new system by the 2026 deadline, securing critical mass and making major reversal or delay practically impossible (NL1; NL2; NL4; NL5). RRF milestones thus became the benchmark and external anchor for monitoring the transition.

A final example concerns a package of labour-market reforms to curb excessive flexibilization and bogus self-employment, rooted in a corporatist compromise. Initially, the Ministry of Social Affairs was wary of placing social reforms in the NRRP, fearing that external constraints would upset the delicate balance with social partners while implementation is uncertain and complex (NL4; NL5). Over time, however, the Ministry repeatedly invoked the RRF commitments in internal debates and in Parliament to resist potential reversals (NL4; NL5; NL6). For the mandatory disability insurance for the self-employed, the NRRP tightened the timetable, while the implementing agency (UWV) has tried to defer the practical introduction of the scheme to 2030. The law on bogus self-employment, drafted under Rutte IV, has faced sustained political pressure, with a parliamentary majority favouring an alternative proposal. However, to avoid a penalty under the RRF, the government will first implement the existing law before turning to the alternative (D66, VVD & CDA, 2026).

Under uncertain political conditions, for some, the overall mood as regards the RRF has slowly shifted:

> The more unstable the political situation, the more thankful I am for instruments like the RRF. Under normal circumstances, with a minister having a solid mandate, I don't need all these additional European reporting requirements. But the last few years have been so politically fragile. I am glad that we have some sort of anchor. That, when parliament wants to change something that is already established in law and in international agreements, our Minister also has to discuss the changes with the European Commission and that we know that these are very tough talks. This really helps. (NL5)

> There is a lot of frustration among colleagues about the monitoring requirements, and at times, I find it very annoying that these projects are linked to

> the NRRP. But in other moments, I am also glad that it's there, as an extra argument in the debate against backtracking and to have a clear timeline. (NL6)

A modest stabilising effect

Overall, the RRF is not the dominant argument in the domestic reform debate, as it lacks salience. This contributed to curbing the Commission's scope to serve as a supranational enforcer of policy continuity over the country's recovery agenda. On several dossiers, the Dutch have pushed milestones far into the future, swapped instruments or softened legal triggers, while convincing the Commission that overall ambition remained intact; the Commission accepted such changes as merely technical updates. At the same time, the Dutch case shows some degree of domestic use of Europe in the implementation of the RRF, with milestones serving as an external anchor against reversal, backtracking or delay. The RRF has not revolutionised Dutch policymaking or overcome deep-seated resistance to sensitive reforms, but it has sped up and partially locked in socially and politically contested changes, supplied extra arguments against backtracking during government turnover, and exposed national actors to a more contractual form of EU governance. While parliamentarians repeatedly complain about RRF conditionality (NL3), the administration has stated support for further developing the cash-for-reform logic under the MFF (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 2025).

Table 1 below summarises the main features of RRF implementation in the three cases analysed.

Conclusion: the RRF's stabilisation capacity in comparative perspective

This article has analysed whether and how the RRF can stabilise long-term reform and investment trajectories across government transitions in a context of heightened political volatility. Since RRF implementation extends beyond a single electoral cycle, government turnover constitutes a critical stress test for the instrument's capacity to preserve policy continuity while allowing space for legitimate democratic change. Our comparative analysis provides a conditional but affirmative answer. Across three politically adverse settings – each involving the arrival of governments more sceptical of inherited RRF commitments – the RRF exhibited a bounded but non-trivial stabilising capacity. It raised the costs of abrupt reversal, narrowed the scope for wholesale renegotiation and encouraged incoming governments to adapt inherited commitments within the boundaries of the instrument's legal and procedural architecture. Yet this stabilisation was neither uniform nor uncontested. Rather than eliminating political conflict or producing seamless continuity, the RRF reshaped the terms of contestation: political

Table 1. Summary of main features of RRF implementation in Italy, Slovakia and the Netherlands.

	Size of NRRP	Government transition	Stabilisation mechanism	Observed outcome
Italy	€194.4 billion	From Draghi- to Meloni government in October 2022	Significant Commission enforcement, administrative internalisation and strategic usage of Europe	Architecture and headlines preserved, but reallocation of underlying deliverables (e.g., from renewables to infrastructure)
Slovakia	€6 billion	From Heger- to Fico government in October 2023	Significant Commission enforcement; administrative internalisation (NIKA); limited usage of Europe	Broad reform trajectory preserved, reversal prevented, but backsliding on rule of law
The Netherlands	€5.4 billion	From Rutte IV- to Schoof government in July 2024	Strategic usage of Europe by ministries; limited to no Commission enforcement or administrative internalisation	Formal commitments preserved against political headwinds, but also legalistic substitution and minimal compliance

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

disagreement shifted from whether inherited reforms and investments should continue to how they could be recalibrated, softened, delayed or reframed without triggering formal non-compliance.

The article makes both theoretical and empirical contributions. Theoretically, the article contributes to broader debates on how European integration constrains, channels and reconfigures domestic political competition over time by introducing the concept of transition stabilisation. While existing scholarship has shown that EU economic governance already limits national discretion, the RRF adds a distinctive temporal and programmatic dimension. The article derives three mechanisms through which such stabilisation operates. First, supranational enforcement raises the financial, procedural and reputational costs of reversal by enabling the Commission to scrutinise payment requests, invoke the no-reversal rule and reject deviations from agreed commitments. Second, administrative internalisation occurs when national administrations incorporate RRF procedures into monitoring systems, reporting routines and core executive coordination structures, thereby turning continuity into an organisational interest. Third, the strategic usage of Europe captures how political and bureaucratic actors invoke RRF commitments to justify continuity, discipline domestic debate or resist backtracking. The RRF's stabilising capacity, therefore, does not follow automatically from its formal design, but depends on how these three mechanisms play out in practice.

Empirically, the article shows that transition stabilisation varies across cases. In Italy, all three mechanisms were on full display, although the strategic usage of Europe took a narrower, executive form. The Commission made clear that turnover did not justify reopening the plan's fundamentals, while the scale of Italy's allocation magnified the reputational and financial costs of non-compliance; central administrations had invested heavily in RRF coordination within the PCM and the Ministry of Economy and Finance, generating an inertia that made continuity a functional necessity; and the Meloni government came to invoke the *vincolo esterno* defensively, presenting implementation as a test of national credibility to justify staying the course. As a result, despite campaign rhetoric about revising the plan, the Meloni government largely preserved the architecture and headline direction of the NRRP, while reallocating underlying resources meaningfully in line with the recognised channels of 'objective circumstances' and REPowerEU. This stabilisation, however, came with clear democratic trade-offs, as continuity was achieved through a highly centralised and technocratic model of governance that further marginalised parliament, social partners and subnational actors.

Slovakia combined a similar mechanism mix with a more substantively continuous outcome. Strong Commission enforcement – repeated reminders of the no-reversal rule, the formal intervention over expenditure ceilings – together with administrative internalisation around NIKA constrained the Fico government's initial expectation that the plan could be rewritten. Officials emphasised that the NRRP bound the state rather than a particular government, that the 2026 deadline was fixed and that fulfilled milestones could not be reversed. The broad reform trajectory and timetable survived the transition largely intact, with implementation continuing even in areas such as childcare and expenditure ceilings. Stabilisation here rested on enforcement and internalisation, but we did not find evidence of strategic usage of the RRF commitments by outside actors, such as social partners. Stabilisation nonetheless reached its limit where the political stakes for the incoming government were highest: the dismantling of the Special Prosecutor's Office and the weakening of corruption sanctions show that the RRF could delay and formalise adjustment in the rule-of-law domain, but not prevent substantive backsliding there.

The Netherlands presents the most ambivalent pattern, combining both elements of stabilisation against political headwind and legalistic substitution. The RRF lacked strong domestic salience and was widely perceived in parliament as a 'one-off nuisance' rather than as a transformative governance instrument. The relatively small size of the Dutch allocation, the absence of a strong additional financial incentive and the decision to populate the plan with existing measures limited both political ownership and administrative enthusiasm. Under these conditions, the Commission's role as supranational enforcer was less authoritative than in Italy or Slovakia. Yet the RRF still mattered. During the transition from Rutte IV to the Schoof government, line ministries and senior officials invoked RRF commitments as external anchors to resist backtracking, delay or reversal in areas such as pensions, labour-market reform and the industrial CO_2 levy. In some cases, milestones helped lock in politically contested reforms by providing ministers and officials with an additional argument in parliamentary and interdepartmental debates. At the same time, the Dutch case shows how shallow ownership can push the instrument's flexibility to its limits. The government swapped instruments, softened legal triggers, delayed implementation and preserved the formal letter of commitments while reducing their substantive bite.

Our analysis also further exposes the dilemma at the heart of instruments like the RRF, namely, balancing discipline and discretion. Indeed, in each case, the Commission has had to walk a tightrope in preserving the credibility of the instrument – and, with it, its stabilising capacity – whilst, at other times, allowing Member States to adapt plans not only to fit implementation realities but also to changing political realities to preserve ownership. As such, while the RRF raises the cost of policy discontinuity, it falls well short of constituting a technocratic straitjacket. Indeed, we did not find clear instances in which governments acted against their own interests solely to satisfy the RRF commitments, although there are borderline cases, such as the Dutch CO2 levy on industry.

The analysis offers lessons for future instruments built on RRF-style conditionality, including the proposed MFF. The cases show that enforcement and administrative internalisation can carry stabilisation even where broad societal ownership is absent, but they do so through executive centralisation that secures continuity at the expense of parliamentary and societal involvement. Strategic usage of the RRF, where we were able to observe it, remained confined to executive and administrative actors in all three cases – the core executive in Italy, line ministries in the Netherlands, and minimally in Slovakia – rather than reflecting appropriation by a wider constellation of parliamentarians, social partners or subnational authorities. We learn from the cases that broad ownership is not a necessary condition for stabilisation to occur, but it does make it more democratically sustainable. Future instrument design should accordingly prioritise inclusive formulation processes that generate broader ownership than the RRF achieved.

Interviews

Label	Role	Affiliation	Date of interview
IT1	Policy officer	Ministry of Finance	27.01.2023
IT2	Policy officer	Presidency of the Council of Ministers	11.11.2024
IT3	Policy advisor	Meloni Cabinet	8.11.2024
IT4	Policy officer	Ministry of Finance	10.05.2022
IT5	Policy officer	Senate of the Republic	05.11.2024
IT6	Policy officer	Presidency of the Council of Ministers	04.04.2025
IT7	Policy officer	Presidency of the Council of Ministers	14.01.2025

(*Continued*)

Continued.

Label	Role	Affiliation	Date of interview
SK1	Ministry official	NIKA	25.11.2022
SK2	Ministry official	NIKA	15.05.2023
SK3	Ministry official	NIKA	13.03.2024
SK4	Former official	European Union	20.02.2025
SK5	Livia Vašáková	Former Deputy PM and Head of NIKA	04.03.2025
SK6	Policy officer	European Commission	25.02.2025
NL1	Ministry official	N/A	13.03.2025
NL2	Policy officer	European Commission	12.03.2025
NL3	Policy officer	Tweede Kamer	19.03.2025
NL4	Ministry official	N/A	13.06.2025
NL5	Ministry official	N/A	13.06.2025
NL6	Ministry official	N/A	13.06.2025

Acknowledgements

Interviews for the Dutch case were conducted together with Markus Haverland. The article was presented at the research conference 'Understanding the impact of the Recovery and Resilience Facility', organised by the DG ECFIN of the European Commission in Brussels on 29 January 2026; at the roundtable 'NextGenerationEU and beyond: Italy's role in EU economic governance', organised by the LEAP (Luiss Institute for European Analysis and Policy) at Luiss University in Rome on 12 June 2026; and at the ECPR's 13th Biennial Conference of the Standing Group on the European Union (SGEU) at the University of Catania on 2 July 2026. For helpful comments, the authors are grateful to Thomas Christiansen, Ana Mar Fernández Pasarín, Nicola Lupo and Jonathan Zeitlin.

Disclosure statement

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

Funding

This work was supported by European Research Council: [Grant Number 882276]; HORIZON EUROPE Culture, Creativity and Inclusive society: [Grant Number 101061621]. Open access funding provided by Luiss University in the framework of the CRUI-CARE agreement.

Notes on contributors

David Bokhorst is a Visiting Fellow at the Department of Political and Social Sciences at the European University Institute, Fiesole, Italy.

Andrea Capati is an Adjunct Professor and a Postdoctoral Researcher in the Department of Political Science at Luiss Guido Carli University, Rome, Italy; and a Visiting Researcher at the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute, Florence, Italy.

ORCID

David Bokhorst http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6192-5590
Andrea Capati http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2486-567X

References

Bokhorst, D. (2022). The influence of the European semester: Case study analysis and lessons for its post-pandemic transformation. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, *60*(1), 101–117.

Bokhorst, D., & Corti, F. (2024). Governing Europe's recovery and resilience facility: Between discipline and discretion. *Government and Opposition*, *59*(3), 718–734. https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2023.14

Bokhorst, D., & Schoeller, M. G. (2024). Managing constraint: Frugal opposition to European fiscal solidarity. *Journal of European Public Policy*, *31*(10), 3275–3298. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2024.2332697

Borghetto, E., Quaglia, L., & Guardiancich, I. (2026). Reform agendas in national recovery and resilience plans: Partisan politics and domestic usages of Europe. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, *64*(1), 75–99.

Börzel, T. A. (2002). Pace-Setting, foot-dragging, and fence-sitting: Member state responses to Europeanization. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, *40*(2), 193–214.

Bressanelli, E., & Natali, D. (2025). Europeanisation in the aftermath of COVID-19: The organisational adaptation of the central governance of the national recovery and resilience plan in Italy. *Comparative European Politics*, *23*(1), 57–75. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-024-00387-3

Bulmer, S., & Burch, M. (2005). The Europeanization of UK government: From quiet revolution to explicit step-change? *Public Administration*, *83*(4), 861–890. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0033-3298.2005.00481.x

Buti, M., & Fabbrini, S. (2023). The political determinants of fiscal governance in the EU: Towards a new equilibrium. *Politics and Governance*, *11*(4), 112–121. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v11i4.7248

Capati, A. (2026). *The politics of financial assistance in times of crisis: Rescuing Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Capati, A., & Christiansen, T. (2025). Legitimacy and political dissensus in the implementation of the recovery and resilience facility: The case of Italy. *European Political Science*, *24*(3), 553–577. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-025-00538-4

Capati, A., Christiansen, T., & Fernández-Pasarín, A. M. (2026). Silenced contestation? Explaining the 'quiet implementation' of the European union's recovery and resilience facility in Spain and Italy. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 1–31. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2026.2642360

Capati, A., & Improta, M. (2021). 'Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde? The approaches of the conte governments to the European Union.'. *Italian Political Science*, *16*(1), 1–22.

Clancy, L., Austin, S., & Lippert, J. (2023). *Many countries in Europe get a new government at least every two years*. PeW Research Center.

D66, VVD & CDA. (2026). *Aan de slag; Bouwen aan een beter Nederland*. Coalitieakkoord, 2026-2030.

Draghi, M. (2021, July 22). *ItaliaDomani, Press conference Draghi – von der Leyen*[video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Im5Af6FZT20

EC. (2021). *Analysis of the recovery and resilience plan of Slovakia, SWD(2021) 161 final*.

EC. (2023a, March 3). *Guidance on recovery and resilience plans in the context of REPowerEU*. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52023XC0303%2801%29

EC. (2023b). *2023 Country report – Italy*. https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-06/ip236_en.pdf

EC. (2024a). *Updated guidance on recovery and resilience plans*, C/2024/4618.

EC. (2024b). *Positive preliminary assessment of the satisfactory fulfilment of milestones and targets related to the fourth payment request submitted by Slovakia on 15 December 2023*. Implementing Decision C(2024) 4733 final.

EC. (2025a). *A dynamic EU budget for the priorities of the future – The multiannual financial framework*, 2028-2034 COM(2025) 570 final.

EC. (2025b). *Council implementing decision on the approval of the assessment of the recovery and resilience plan for Slovakia* (COM2025) 175 final.

Euractiv. (2024, September 9). EU mulls freezing Slovakia's funds for rule of law violations. *Euractiv*. https://www.euractiv.com/news/eu-mulls-freezing-slovakias-funds-for-rule-of-law-violations/

Fabbrini, F. (2025). The recovery and resilience facility as a new legal technology of European governance. *Journal of European Integration*, *47*(1), 85–103. https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2024.2361830

Fasone, C., & Lupo, N. (2024). Learning from the euro crisis: A new method of government for the European Union's economic policy coordination after the pandemic. *International Journal of Constitutional Law*, *22*(3), 882–904. https://doi.org/10.1093/icon/moae064

Fernández-Pasarín, A. M., & Lanaia, A. (2025). The governance of the recovery and resilience facility. The incremental innovation of standard conditionality regime. *European Policy Analysis*, *11*(1), 75–93. https://doi.org/10.1002/epa2.1230

Ferrera, M., & Gualmini, E. (2004). *Rescued by Europe? Social and labour market reforms in Italy from Maastricht to Berlusconi*. Amsterdam University Press.

Financial Times (2022, July 27). Italy told to retain €200bn Covid recovery plan after Mario Draghi's exit. *Financial Times*. https://www.ft.com/content/a0d78778-2d10-47e6-88a9-6fc70356fa9d

Financial Times (2023, May 15). Italy overhauls plans for €200bn in EU Covid recovery funds. *Financial Times*. https://www.ft.com/content/769332ea-ec1d-4f9f-abc9-eb9657c479da

Fleischer, J., Bezes, P., James, O., & Yesilkagit, K. (2023). The politics of government reorganization in Western Europe. *Governance*, *36*(1), 255–274. https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12670

Gerring, J. (2007). *Case study research: Principles and practices*. Cambridge University Press.

Gualtieri, R. (2020). *Hearing of the minister on the guidelines of the national recovery and resilience plan. Joint budget and EU policies committee of the Senate*. https://www.mef.gov.it/ufficio-stampa/articoli/2019_2023-Roberto_Gualtieri/Audizione-del-ministro-sulle-linee-guida-del-Piano-Nazionale-di-Ripresa-e-Resilienza-Commissione-riunite-Bilancio-e-Politiche-Ue-del-Senato-1-ottobre-2020/

Guidi, M., & Moschella, M. (2021). Il Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza: dal Governo Conte II al Governo Draghi. *Rivista Italiana di Politiche Pubbliche*, *3*, 405–430.

Haverland, M., & Becher, L. (2025, May 8–10). *Northern 'Saint' or Northern 'Sinner'? Does the recovery and resilience facility make a difference for Dutch compliance with European semester recommendations?*[Paper presented]. 19th Biennial Conference of the European Union Studies Association (EUSA), Philadelphia.

Hutter, S., & Kriesi, H. (2019). *European party politics in times of crisis*. Cambridge University Press.

Improta, M. (2025). *government stability in comparative perspective patterns and dynamics across 21 democracies*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
Italian Chamber of Deputies. (2021, March 30). *Proposta di Piano Nazionale di ripresa e resilienza*. Doc. XXVII, n. 18. https://documenti.camera.it/leg18/resoconti/commissioni/bollettini/html/2021/03/30/05/allegato.htm
Italian Senate. (2021a, January 15). *Proposta di Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza*. https://www.senato.it/service/PDF/PDFServer/DF/357796.pdf
Italian Senate. (2021b, March 31). *Relazione delle commissioni riunite sulla proposta di piano nazionale di ripresa e reslienza*. https://www.senato.it/service/PDF/PDFServer/BGT/1210383.pdf
Italian Senate. (2022, August 4). *Resoconto Stenografico*. https://www.senato.it/service/PDF/PDFServer/BGT/1359136.pdf
Italian Senate. (2023, August 1). *Comunicazioni del Ministro per gli Affari europei, il Sud, le Politiche di coesione e il PNRR sul Piano nazionale di ripresa e resilienza*. https://www.senato.it/show-doc?id=1385738&leg=19&part=doc_dc-allegatoa_aa&tipodoc=Resaula
Italian Senate. (2024, April 22). *Testo redatto per l'Indagine conoscitiva su "Profili critici della produzione normativa e proposte per il miglioramento della qualità della legislazione" presso i Comitati per la Legislazione di Camera e Senato*. https://www.senato.it/application/xmanager/projects/leg19/attachments/documento_evento_procedura_commissione/files/000/429/821/Audizione_della_Professoressa_Roberta_Calvano_Ordinario_di_diritto_costituzionale_presso_l_Università_Unitelma_Sapienza.pdf
Italian Senate and Italian Chamber of Deputies. (2024, March 11). *Ulteriori disposizioni urgenti per l'attuazione del Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza (PNRR)*. https://documenti.camera.it/leg19/dossier/pdf/D24019.pdf
Jacquot, S., & Woll, C. (2003). Usage of European integration – Europeanisation from a sociological perspective. *European Integration online Papers*, *7*(12), 1–18.
Joosten, T. (2025, September 22). Wordt de CO2-heffing nou afgeschaft of niet? Een korte analyse op basis van de prinsjesdagstukken. *Follow the Money*, Klimaatnieuwsbrief.
Kamer, T. (2020). Debat van 14 juli 2020 'Debat over de Europese Top van 17 en 18 juli 2020'.
Knill, C. (2001). *The europeanisation of national administrations: Patterns of institutional change and persistence*. Cambridge University Press.
Lupo, N. (2025). Unione e Stati membri alla ricerca di un nuovo metodo di governo. L'esperienza del Recovery and Resilience Facility e la diffusione dei procedimenti euro-nazionali. *Analisi Giuridica dell'Economia*, *2*, 375–397.
Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken. (2025, September 15). *Kabinetsappreciate MFK- en EMB voorstellen Europese Commissie*. Kamerbrief.
Ministerie van Financiën. (2023). *Financiële risico's voor het HVP als gevolg van de demissionaire status van het Kabinet en daarop mogelijk volgende controversieelverklaringen*. Kamerbrief 30 augustus 2023.
Ministerie van Financiën. (2024, April 15). Voorjaarsnota 2024. Kamerbrief.
Ministerie van Klimaat en Groene Groei. (2025, September 16). *Toelichting Besluitvorming CO2 Heffing Industrie. Bijlage D Startpakket Groene Groei*. Kamerbrief.
Miró, J., & Fernández-Pasarín, A. (2026). Negotiated and negotiable? Contractual governance and the flexibility of the EU's recovery and resilience facility. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 1–26. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2026.2629925
Moschella, M. (2024). *Unexpected revolutionaries: How central banks made and unmade economic orthodoxy*. Cornell University Press.

Moynihan, D., & Beazley, I. (2016). *Toward next-generation performance budgeting: Lessons from the experiences of seven reforming countries*. World Bank.

Munta, M. (2021). *EU socio-economic governance in central and Eastern Europe: The European semester and national employment policies*. Routledge.

Munta, M., Pircher, B., & Bekker, S. (2024). Ownership of national recovery plans: Next generation EU and democratic legitimacy. *Journal of European Public Policy*, *31*(11), 3787–3811. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2023.2248202

Polanyi, K. (1944). *The great transformation: The political and economic origins of our time*. Farrar & Rinehart.

Profeti, S., & Baldi, B. (2021). Le regioni italiane e il PNRR: la (vana) ricerca di canali d'accesso all'agenda. *Rivista Italiana di Politiche Pubbliche*, *3*, 431–458.

Radaelli, C. M. (2003). The europeanization of public policy. In K. Featherstone & C. M. Radaelli (Eds.), *The politics of europeanization* (pp. 27–56). Oxford University Press.

Reuters. (2021, April 18). Exclusive Italy risks missing Recovery Plan deadline due to EU concerns, sources say. https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/exclusive-italy-risks-missing-recovery-plan-deadline-due-eu-concerns-sources-say-2021-04-18/

Rijksoverheid. (2021). Oplegger Formatie Recovery and Resilience Facility. Bijlage bij Kamerbrief Hoekstra, Ministerie van Financiën, Afspraken vervolgproces met betrekking tot het Nederlandse Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP).

Schelkle, W. (2021). Fiscal integration in an experimental union: How path-breaking was the EU's response to the COVID-19 pandemic? *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, *59*(S1), 44–55. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13246

Trend (2023). Vašáková: Slovensko môže čerpať miliardové úvery z plánu obnovy, zatiaľ o tom neuvažuje, 28-01-2023. https://www.trend.sk/spravy/vasakova-slovensko-moze-cerpat-miliardove-uvery-planu-obnovy-zatial-tom-neuvazuje

Zeitlin, J., Barcevičius, E., & Weishaupt, J. T. (2014). Institutional design and national influence of EU social policy coordination: Advancing a contradictory debate. In E. Barcevičius, J. T. Weishaupt, & J. Zeitlin (Eds.), *Assessing the open method of coordination: Institutional design and national influence of EU social policy coordination* (pp. 1–16). Palgrave Macmillan.

Zeitlin, J., Bokhorst, D., & Eihmanis, E. (2025). Governing the European Union's recovery and resilience facility: National ownership and performance-based financing in theory and practice. *Regulation & Governance*, *19*(3), 864–884. https://doi.org/10.1111/rego.12619

Zeitlin, J., & Vanhercke, B. (2018). Socializing the European semester: EU social and economic policy Co-ordination in crisis and beyond. *Journal of European Public Policy*, *25*(2), 149–174. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2017.1363269

Zgaga, T. (2025). *The fiscal governance of the European union: Overcoming the stability paradigm?* Palgrave Macmillan.