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The EU's vaccine strategy: A glimpse of protean power?

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Abstract

This article examines whether the EU has been projecting protean power on the global stage within the coordinative Europeanisation mode. Protean power is about an actor's ability to confront external challenges by innovating and transforming itself. The Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated the EU's capacity to innovate and transform itself in light of an external challenge. It has given rise to a new governance mode called 'coordinative Europeanisation' with more bottom-up participation of EU member states in the design of emergency policies by EU institutions (Ladi and Wolff 2021). This new mode of coordination has been characterised by a high degree of adaptability of EU institutions, a coordinative reflex which has spread to various policy areas, and is characterised by informality and rapid policy response. This article argues that although this coordinative response demonstrated the EU's agility internally with strong evidence of inter- and intra-crisis learning, it was not enough for the EU to project protean power. Control power often surpassed the EU's protean power response to crisis. We empirically illustrate our argument by showing how coordinative Europeanisation took place in the EU vaccination strategy. We then focus on the international dimension including COVAX and the strengthening of Team Europe in global health policy and discover that coordinative Europeanisation does not always translate into protean power. The perceptions of those on whom power is projected need to be taken into account, as well as the substance of norms projected.

Keywords Coordinative Europeanisation · EU vaccination strategy · Team Europe · Protean power · Control power

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Introduction

The EU's resilience and capacity to innovate have been at the heart of scholarship evaluating the impact of Covid-19 on EU governance showing that the EU has demonstrated resilience and even innovation in its policy responses during the pandemic. Following the early days of uncoordinated responses of EU member states, there has been a consensus on the fact that in spite of a diversity of national responses and across policy areas, the EU did not disintegrate as many had call for in prior crises. In fact the EU has taken bold steps in a number of policy areas including the field of fiscal integration with the NextGenerationEU and the EU Recovery and Resilience Fund which is seen as an exemplar case of coordinative Europeanisation (Becker and Gehring 2022, Wolff and Ladi 2020).

Most of the literature has focussed on the internal EU governance with one strand discussing how European integration theories can help to understand the choices made during the pandemic. Some have identified a pattern of 'failing forward' according to which 'lowest common denominator intergovernmental bargains led to the creation of incomplete institutions, which in turn sowed the seeds of future crises, which then propelled deeper integration through reformed but still incomplete institutions—thus setting the stage for the process to move integration forward' (Jones et al. 2021:1519–1520). Others have been testing traditional neofunctionalist and liberal intergovernmentalist theories to understand whether the pandemic has given rise to either a strengthening of supranational institutions or rather that of EU member states as gatekeepers of the crisis. Thus, the adoption of the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) is seen as a 'bold integration step' that is following the expectations of a spillover logic or as a cognitive learning exercise following lessons from the Eurozone crisis (Ladi and Tsarouhas 2020). Another strand of the literature has focussed on crisis management theories to analyse the pandemic. This involves assessing the performance of an organisation like the EU to major disruptive events, identifying how the EU anticipates crisis and its capacity to respond to the crisis, as well as the legitimacy of these decisions made in times of emergency (Boin and Rhinard 2023).

We argued elsewhere (Ladi and Wolff 2021) that the pandemic revealed effective coordination between the different levels of governance, in particular between the EU and the member states, to deliver a response to the pandemic. Far from being a top-down, imposed and coerced response from the EU to the crisis that had been known in prior instances such as in 2008 with the EMU crisis or even the refugee crises with some imposed relocation measures on the member states who resisted it strongly, the pandemic has given rise to a new governance mode called 'coordinative Europeanisation' with a bottom-up participation of EU member states in the design of emergency policies by EU institutions (Ladi and Wolff 2021). Defined as 'a process where increased and often informal coordination between member states and the EU institutions takes place during the crisis' early stages in view of devising policy solutions that would work for everyone, thereby enhancing decision-making speed, reform ownership and policy compliance' (Ladi and Polverati 2025).



Next to these analysis of EU internal responses, some have looked at the EU global actorness during the pandemic. In spite of the common assessment that the early days were chaotic and led to nationalist responses, research has demonstrated that the Covid-19 pandemic has particularly led to an 'awakening' of the EU, and more specifically of the European Commission in global health (Svendsen, 2021; van Schaik, Jorgensen and van de Pas 2020). Before then, global health did not feature high on the European political agenda' (van Schaik, Jorgensen and van de Pas 2020: 1149) and the competition of EU member states who were regarding the Commission's role in funding a global health agenda as competing with 'national development cooperation' (Ibid). WHO as a multilateral organisation to which the EU remained loyal over the years also was not considered as a relevant organisation from which to receive relevant health advice (van Schaik, Jorgensen and van de Pas 2020: 1151). The Commission in particular took a series of initiatives inside the EU in the field of health, and in particular the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) played a crucial role and saw the reform of its mandate catalysed by the crisis (Deruelle and Engeli 2021).

Our aim in this article is to bring the discussion about the internal management of the pandemic and the observations about the EU enhancing its role as a global actor, at least in the field of global health.

By digging into the changing nature of the EU's response to the Covid-19 crisis, we are able to question the extent to which the EU was able to improvise and innovate globally and thus exercise protean power. As suggested by Pomorska and Thomas (this issue), we therefore perceive the EU's capacity to exercise protean power as a sign of agility and innovation, rather than a sign of control power, whereby the EU aims to 'get others to do what they are otherwise not inclined to do'. However, we add one more element to the definition of protean power: the pursuit of global solidarity. At a theoretical level, we argue that protean power cannot be conceived only neutrally as a response to uncertainty if it is to explain the direction of change (see Seybert and Katzenstein 2018). The norms that guide innovation need to be uncovered. In the case of the EU, the defining factor is whether protean power encompasses the global solidarity norm. The moment that it stops doing that, control power comes to the fore. Our empirical discussion shows that the EU realises the importance of how it projects itself globally and takes into account these interdependencies and mutual obligations. Internal coordination in response to crises can be seen as a strength but it needs to be projected as such and to be combined with elements of global solidarity in order to be translated to as protean power and not as control power.

In order to explore this argument further, we analyse the way the EU's vaccination strategy has been unfolded. Through the public procurement led by the European Commission in the area of vaccination and the subsequent strengthening of Team Europe, we demonstrate that the EU was not able to exercise protean power on the global stage. The EU's success to vaccinate 70% of its citizens and to acquire vaccines quickly through an unprecedented joint public procurement led by the European Commission was seen as evidence of agility and innovation internally (Interviews 1, 2). However, on the global stage it was perceived as a form of protectionism, with the Global South denouncing the lack of global solidarity of the EU



towards the rest of the world (Interview 3). This led the European Commission to develop the solution of Team Europe, as a way to compensate for the perception that the EU was protectionist but this innovation did not project protean power.

Starting with a conceptual discussion on protean power within the EU context, we contextualise the EU's vaccine strategy within the novel context of EU's coordinative action during crises. Then, in the second section we discuss how the EU's vaccination strategy is a glimpse of protean power projection which did not travel as such on the global stage. This is due to the fact that the choices made within the EU were about crisis containment internally, and that although within the coordinative Europeanisation mode agility and protean power were enabled, the early days of global projection prioritised EU's citizens' health and interests. It is only at a later stage with the launch of the corrective 'Team Europe' initiative that an attempt was made to include global solidarity in the mix but this was not translated into protean power. The third section discusses these findings and demonstrates that protean power cannot just be about agility, risk-taking and innovation, but that the substance and the norms underpinning the power that is projected globally matters. In the case of the EU, we find that the existence or lack of global solidarity in the innovations adopted is a key element of protean power projection.

EU's protean power in times of coordinative Europeanisation

The Covid-19 crisis revealed a renewed effort of coordination amongst EU institutions and member states which has led to bold policy decisions and deeper cooperation in areas such as economic recovery, health crisis management and vaccines strategy. We have described this new mode as 'coordinative' Europeanisation (Ladi and Wolff 2021). Coordinative Europeanisation is defined as 'a process where increased and often informal coordination between member states and EU institutions takes place during a crisis' early stages in view of quickly devising policy solutions that work for everyone, thereby enhancing decision-making speed, reform ownership and policy compliance' (Ladi and Polverari 2025). What is distinct about this process is that coordination starts early on when devising policy solutions and that it can be quite informal. This mode of Europeanisation was revealed during the Covid-19 crisis but is linked more generally to a crisis or an emergency that increases the feeling of interdependence and the need for speedy cooperation. Similarly, to other modes of Europeanisation it leads to changes at the EU and domestic level that can range from incremental to radical change. The European Commission plays a central role in pushing forward ambitious policy solutions which often existed in the form of proposals due to prior crises or of long-term policy development and negotiations but are now promoted as 'good enough' in light of the new emergency. Although one might argue that coordination has always been part of the functioning of the EU, during periods when coordinative Europeanisation is the dominant mode, the speed of coordination is faster, more decisive and ambitious. Checking early on the fast implementation potential is key since decisions are made in light of an emergency and thus effective implementation is crucial. This coordinative mode is visible across many different policy areas, from the recovery fund to the field of defence



(Ladi, Tsarouhas and Copeland 2025; Juncos, Lovato and Pomorska, 2025). However, it is not assumed that more coordinative Europeanisation makes coercive Europeanisation or de-Europeanisation unlikely. On the contrary, given that some of the decisions made under this mode may be quite ambitious, it may make it even more difficult for some member states to follow them. Additionally, coercive mechanisms may be used even when a decision has been made in a coordinative manner. Thus, coordinative Europeanisation, coercive Europeanisation and de-Europeanisation can coexist (Ladi and Polverari 2025).

Within this context of coordinative Europeanisation, we analyse when and how protean power is exercised by the EU. Protean power is 'an actor's ability to confront external challenges by innovating and transforming itself' (Pomorska and Thomas, this issue). The way the EU has in the last few years managed unexpected challenges such as Covid-19 (but also subsequent ones including the Ukraine and energy crises) by innovating and transforming itself can be seen as evidence of its ability to exercise protean power. The features of 'coordinative Europeanisation' help us to analyse the 'EU's capacity to respond to and shape external challenges by innovating and transforming itself' (Katzenstein and Seybert's 2018) in light of growing uncertainties of world politics. The informality as well as the focus on quick and effective solutions that can be easily implemented by member states are key characteristics of coordinative Europeanisation and can enable agility and innovation which are key features of protean power. Both the coordinative Europeanisation and protean power literatures move away from crisis management and perceptions about predictability, foresight and preparedness and embrace the idea of 'unknown unknowns'.

A key distinction outlined in the literature is between protean and control power (Katzenstein and Seybert 2018, Pomorska and Thomas, this issue). It is observed that although an actor may be open and willing to innovate, in practice material resources may be necessary leading it to the exercise of more traditional forms of power such as control power. Control power is about predicting, preparing and eventually tackling an external threat. It is about tackling a perceived risk and not about navigating uncertainty (Seybert and Katzenstein 2018). According to Katzenstein and Seybert (2018), the determinants of success for actors exercising control power are twofold: access to information needed to assess the probabilities and consequences of the external threat, and the command of resources needed to tackle or exploit it. For instance, an example of control power could be when the EU exert its conditionality and is able to diffuse top-down norms and change law in other countries (Ayoub and al. 2018). Instead protean power, whereby agility and transformation happen in times of uncertainty without the coercive command of resources. Seybert and Katzenstein (2018) and Pomorska and Thomas (this issue) observe that there are synergies or interdependence between the exercise of protean and control power. However, when an actor is trying to gather information and even more importantly when aiming to command resources, and especially when these resources are limited, competition with other actors is inevitable. In these instances, control power surpasses protean power even if the discourse or the direction of the actor is innovation and agility. What other actors will remember is the competition for information and resources and who wins it. We argue however that for protean power to be projected innovation and transformation are not enough and that concrete actions



that manifest global solidarity are also necessary for third parties to be convinced that innovation and transformation are not only internal but also encompass the EUs global actions. We understand global solidarity as deriving from ‘the (normative, political, economic) interdependence of individual states within the global cooperative system (no people can meet its needs individually), the fact of shared fate amongst nations (the existence of global risks such as financial crises, ecological disasters, immigration and humanitarian concerns, and security issues, and how these affect all states)’ (Sevinc 2024:314). It highlights the global interdependencies and mutual obligations that emerge out of these relations (Ibid:314). Table 1 summarises the key features of protean and control power within the EU context. We argue that, based on Seybert and Katzenstein (2018), protean power involves uncertainty, innovation and learning while control power means that decisions are driven by risk, that there is competition for information and command of resources. We add however that in the EU context it is important to take into account the substance of the power projected, and that for protean power this involves global solidarity, while for control power this relates to isolationism. We return to this table and the findings in "Discussion: process and purpose of protean power" section.

Similarly to the protean power literature, policy learning has been identified as one of the key mechanisms of coordinative Europeanisation (Ladi and Polverari 2025). More specifically, inter-crisis learning is one of the mechanisms through which innovation and transformation have been enabled especially in the field of economic governance (Ladi and Tsarouhas 2020, Angelou, 2025). Inter-crisis learning is defined as ‘learning from one crisis and making changes to prepare for another’ and often coexists with intra-crisis ‘learning that seeks to improve response during a single crisis episode’ (Moynihan 2008). The European Semester, put in place in 2009–2015, was designed at the time of the sovereign debt crisis initially as a means to coordinate economic policies across the EU (D’Erman and Verdun, 2022). Criticised and with a mixed record of implementation, it is nonetheless central to the RRF and is interestingly based on both domestic and EU-level components, drawing from even earlier instruments such as the open method of coordination (Ibid). One key lesson was that national ownership matters. The National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs) through which EU member states implement the Next Generation EU are based on the idea that the role of EU member states is central, and that national ownership is highly valued. Ladi, Tsarouhas and Copeland (2025) show how the negotiations between the European Commission and the governments of Austria, Greece and Slovakia for the design of their NRRPs were all based on national plans and priorities for reform which conveniently coincided with the EUs

Table 1 Key features of protean and control power in EU context

Protean power	Control power
Driven by uncertainty	Driven by risk
Innovation	Competition for information
Learning processes	Command of resources
Global solidarity	Isolationism



priorities for a green and digital transition, once more demonstrating the centrality of inter-crisis learning.

There is now a growing consensus that crisis is 'business as usual' for European integration and that the capacity of the EU to learn and to react to crisis, which could have taken years at the time of the sovereign debt crisis, has transformed to a couple of months with Covid, and to a couple of weeks with Russia's war on Ukraine (Radaelli 2022). A rather unexpected example was the adoption of the Temporary Protection Directive at the beginning of Russia's war on Ukraine. Confronted by an unprecedented flow of refugees, the JHA Council activated this regulation on 4 March 2022 providing for the first time in EU history a group protection to Ukrainians fleeing to the EU. This was rather unprecedented given that the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) is based on the processing of individual asylum applications. Ukrainians were exempted and were provided access to work, housing and education, a sudden solidarity turn for the EU compared to the Syrian refugee crisis and discriminatory policy developments so far. This sudden exceptionalism in EU's migration and refugee policies has raised a lot of questions in terms of its motivations, and possibly enacting a two-tier system between Ukrainian refugees and other asylum-seekers. Reconducted in March 2022, it is possible to identify a coordinated response that originated from inter-crisis learning and the understanding that the crisis would destabilise national asylum systems.

To summarise, we argue here that coordinative Europeanisation has been a reflexive response of the EU polity (institutions and member states) to crises that have been described as existential. That context has been conducive to exert protean power. The EU drew on experience from previous crises in order to find collective and coordinated solutions that were often innovative and agile. Inter-crisis learning has been a key mechanism. What is interesting is that the reason for this increased cooperation has not only been to tackle the crisis but to also guarantee the EU's own existence and survival. This reaction has been paramount to the EU's 'ability to engage creatively with the world and to exploit unexpected developments' (Pomorska and Thomas, this issue). Coordinative reflexes, speedy and informal, bottom-up, but also with a strong role for the European Commission, have been forged during the Covid-19. This has contrasted importantly with coercive Europeanisation, visible during the austerity crisis, where the EU was exerting control power over the economic governance. Compared to other modes of Europeanisation that were interested in the 'transformative power of Europeanisation' (Grabbe 2006) and looked at 'how the EU used its influence to control the movement of people across Europe, through both coercive use of conditionality and voluntary methods of Europeanisation', this time the nature of the crisis mobilised coordinative Europeanisation as a mode to find more agility in the most acute moments of the crisis. However, coordinative Europeanisation does not necessarily lead to the projection of protean power, especially if actions that demonstrate global solidarity are not entailed. The moment competition for information or attempts for coercive command of resources are put into place, what is projected is the more traditional control power. At the next section, we explore the limitations of the EU's protean power.

We show that the EU's coordinative actions during crises often had elements of control power limiting the ability of the EU to project protean power at the global



level because the norm underpinning innovation was isolationism and not global solidarity. We shed light to this observation by looking at the EU's vaccination strategy during the Covid-19 crisis. It is a case where coordinative Europeanisation is evident and where glimpses of protean power can be observed. However, the EU was perceived globally more as a control power than a protean power.

The article relies on an explorative qualitative research design analysing key policy documents such as European Commission decisions, communications from the EU institutions and press releases about the EU vaccination strategy, COVAX and Team Europe. In depth interviews with EU policymakers and global policy health experts were conducted between March and July 2024. Protean power was operationalised by devising questions that were assessing innovation and inter- and intra-crisis learning processes of the EU during the crisis (e.g. joint EU procurement for vaccines). In contrast, control power was operationalised by mapping competition for information and command of resources (e.g. availability of vaccines internationally).

The EU's vaccine's strategy: internal and external power projection

This section presents the sequencing through which the EU developed an EU vaccine strategy, first internally through a coordination of the public procurement process, and then externally through a Team Europe approach used at global level.

The EU public procurement around vaccination is an interesting case study to analyse the discrepancy between the achievement of an efficient vaccination policy inside the EU that managed to vaccinate 70% of its population and EU's inability to lead global vaccine diplomacy where 'European leadership faltered and global collaboration progressed more slowly' notably due to the lack of institutional capacity and resources to support impactful leadership (Deters and Zardo 2023: 1051). This leads us to discuss the scales and levels on which the EU can exercise protean power and shows that the internal agility demonstrated by the EU was not enough. It did not translate into protean power at the global stage since it mainly projected the EU's control intentions (control power). Inter- and intra-crisis learning did take place, and the EU's response was quick and coordinated leading to the EU vaccines strategy. However, the success of the strategy was mainly internal and it was not projected as such at the global level despite the European Commission moderating a successful Coronavirus Global Initiative as early as May 2020 (Herszenhorn and Paun 2020).

Internally, the EU was able to demonstrate agility for the European continent by developing quickly innovative solutions in areas that became crucial for European economies to continue functioning, for the freedom of movement of goods and people to prevail and for a joined up solution on the distribution of personal protective equipment (PPE) and vaccinations to be found quickly. The first public procurement took place in March 2020 when the EU launched a joint initiative on PPE with member states for gloves and coveralls, eye and respiratory protection, ventilators/respirators and laboratory equipment (Halloran 2021).



Although health was mostly a prerogative of EU member states, and the first responses in terms of vaccination led to criticism on coronationalism, a vaccine strategy was agreed in June 2020 (European Commission, 2020a) mandating the European Commission to 'negotiate, support and allocate vaccine doses' on the member states behalf (Saverio della Corte 2023:1). This was formalised later on as a Commission decision, and it was later on institutionalised in the creation of a new Commission body the Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority (HERA) (Ibid: 2). Although the EU had little competence in health policy, it did have previous experience from health emergencies that led to inter-crisis learning. An informal Health Security Committee had been created as a response to the anthrax letters attacks in the US in 2001 (and COM(2003)320). This ad hoc decision was renewed and funded every year (Interview 1). When the Influenza A (H1N1) hit Europe, the Health Security Committee was further formalised and issued a statement on target and priority groups for vaccination (European Commission, 25/08/09). At that time, similar to what happened during the Covid-19 pandemic online meetings with capitals, the Spider telecommunications technology was used to informally connect with the capitals to coordinate measures for tackling H1N1. A senior official from DG SANTE describes these previous experiences and processes in place as the basis upon which the Covid-19 response was built (Interview 1). We can clearly describe this as inter-crisis learning.

In this bundle of European Health Union initiatives, the joint procurement enabled the European Commission to sign Advance Purchase Agreements (APAs) with pharmaceutical companies and to fund the development of vaccines through the Emergency Support Instrument (ESI). This coordination took place under the political leadership of the European Commission, in a relatively short time and providing space for each Member state to decide how they wanted to purchase and distribute (Ibid:4). This approach avoided any risk of coronationalism on vaccinations at least within the EU and provided 'an all-encompassing alternative based on the principle of solidarity, capable of avoiding fragmentation in vaccine availability' (Ibid: 5). Compared to prior joint procurement on purchasing medical goods for instance (regulated by the 2013 Health Threat Decision), the vaccines strategy did not merely support national strategies but integrated them within a joint procedure, as the APAs bound the participating member states not to negotiate autonomous conditions with pharmaceutical companies. As a result, member states had to comply with the conditions established by the Commission for the development, production and allocation of 'safe' and 'affordable' anti-COVID-19 vaccines without adopting their own national strategies' (Ibid: 6). This was quite a leap change as previously the EU could provide for collective purchasing but did not give the Commission a role in distribution. Yet, by January 2021, the Commission concluded a series of APAs, securing over 2 billion doses with BioNTech-Pfizer, AstraZeneca, Sanofi-GSK, Johnson and Johnson, CureVac, Moderna, Novavax and Valneva. Once the vaccines become available to the European Commission, the participating states to the contract are responsible for paying for the supplies' (Halloran 2021: 76).

In spite of the criticism of this public procurement strategy, the ability to coordinate quickly this instrument of crisis response 'was not just a legal novelty but



also signalled a new emphasis for the EU's role in European society' (Halloran 2021 in Boin and Rhinard 2023). A majority of the assessments have concluded that the way the EU facilitated 'a collaborative approach to the procurement and distribution of medical resources [was] a success' (Halloran 2021). From an EU perspective, the ability to coordinate joint procurement and conclude contracts on behalf of the member states brought 'important benefits [...] from a geopolitical standpoint' (Halloran 2021: 79) as it enabled the EU to be seen as a cohesive actor, avoiding EU member states to compete against each other for vaccines doses. From a global point of view, the picture is rather different. The EU in the first instance showed leadership in supporting vaccine development and declared that the vaccine is a 'global public good' (European Commission 2020b). Early on it organised a donors conference in support of the global production of the vaccines and promoted a multilateral response in cooperation with WHO which led to the creation of the Vaccine Global Access Facility (COVAX) (<https://www.who.int/initiatives/act-accelerator/covax>). COVAX was immediately set up as a 'global attempt to make sure all countries in the world had access to vaccines, in a time of action and that big pharmaceutical companies would have the right skills. But there was a culture clash between those who believed you should have global solidarity during a crisis or that we do protectionism' (Interview 4). As EU countries 'we always remained partners for COVAX and pushed for COVAX to also deliver to other countries in the world. That felt like the right thing to do from a public health perspective and equity. There is no point in just vaccinating your own people.' (Interview 4). However, once the EU vaccination strategy was agreed, COVAX and the EU's strategy became to an extent competitive since member states and the Commission prioritised their own citizens especially when securing contracts with pharmaceutical companies after the development of the vaccine (Deters and Zardo 2023; van Shaik et.al., 2020). At the time COVAX was an 'imperfect solution and the targets were not met' (Interview 5). The call from countries such as South Africa and India to soften intellectual property rights (IPRs) requirements in order to allow for the production of the vaccine elsewhere also fell short and was not supported by the EU (Interview 3). The EU stayed in COVAX as a donor but the rationale for a global procurement process never materialised. COVAX was not the success immediately expected and this is partly because in the end the EU donated a lot of vaccines and did not need to use that mechanism (Interview 4). It can be thus argued that the EU in its effort to prioritise its citizens limited international access to vaccines and thus exercised control power. At that point, it was far from being perceived as protean power at the global level.

Externally, a Team Europe approach coordinated the EU's vaccination diplomacy. One of the key features was the EU's combination of resources with its member states and financial institutions such as the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the European Bank on Investment (EBI). In its communication on developing a global response to the pandemic, the EU developed a 'Team Europe approach' that consists of four main pillars. First to identify with partners the priorities, then to coordinate with implementing partners 'coherent financial package for each partner country that needs our support'. The third priority has been to develop a Team Europe for global preparedness; and lastly a 'Team Europe for global coordination and multilateralism' to 'leverage the EU position as a global



actor and major contributor to the international aid system to promote a coordinated global response, notably in the framework of the G7, G20 and at the United Nations' with the aim to 'promote coordination and enhance the visibility of European support to partner countries' (European Commission and EEAS 2020).

While coordinative Europeanisation has been the framework within which Team Europe was developed, it did not necessarily led to protean power projection. Instead although Team Europe was mobilised to have a transformative impact it has mostly pooled resources, and is there to leverage EU's role in a fragmented multilateral setting. Indeed, Team Europe

was already practised in the field of Climate Change negotiations under the name 'Team EU' where, in negotiations within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) officials from the European Commission and the Member States would negotiate 'on behalf of the EU at the technical level' (Earsom and Delreux 2023: 286). It then was mostly a coordinative act.

The innovation dimension of Team Europe, as a feature of protean power, is questionable. Launched during the pandemic, the aim of Team Europe was 'to brand collective support to partner countries in response to the pandemic' as well the rapidly evolving geopolitical context vis-à-vis Russia and China. The European Commission has subsequently decided to work with the member states 'to broaden the scope of Team Europe' beyond the pandemic and 'to apply it to the programming exercise of EU external cooperation for the period 2021–2027' with the development of Team Europe Initiatives where the EU position itself 'as a partner of preference' with third countries and 'build visibility' (Jones and Teevan 2021) including in EU-led multilateral initiatives. The ambition was to enhance coordination and coherence, and to leverage collective resources (Ibid:3). Interestingly though, in a study of EU and member states officials, researchers have shown that the branding dimension of Team Europe was the most relevant aspect for them, while the 'added value of the pooling of funds [...] presented by the Commission as the core innovation of the Team Europe approach' was not acknowledged (Keijzer, Burni, Erforth and Friesen 2021:14).

What has been acknowledged by our interviewees in terms of innovation, was how Team Europe has been regarded as a 'policy method' that has enabled the EU to present itself more coherently to the rest of the world' (Interview 2). In that sense, it also arrived in times of battling narratives and the need for the EU to be more geopolitical vis-à-vis China and other middle powers. 'The Team Europe approach has also enabled more coordination with European Development Financial Institutions (EDFI) as we created a new platform, the practitioners' network, where the banks try to do more joint work together plus there is more coordination as EU Director Generals are now meeting every 6 months with Ministries of Foreign Affairs/Development and the respective DGs, this is a real change here in terms of coordination' (Interview 2).

The EU mobilised the method of 'Team Europe' to develop some agility on the global stage and fight allegations of not supporting COVAX enough after the initiation of the EU vaccines strategy. In particular Team Europe is mostly invoked by the European President Ursula von der Leyen when talking at a global stage and to support the EU's response to Covid-19 globally. Pushing to convene a Global Health



summit in Rome in May 2021, Ursula von der Leyen and Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi gathered for the first time G20 summit leaders on health therefore boosting multilateralism and global health cooperation (EU Reporter correspondents 2021). Team Europe was invoked by von der Leyen in the EU's global strategy to 'share with low- and middle-income countries at least 100 million doses by the end of 2021, mainly via COVAX, our partner in vaccinating the world'. She further added 'Team Europe takes its responsibility in helping the world fight the virus, everywhere. Vaccination is key—that's why it is essential to ensure access to Covid-19 vaccines to countries worldwide. We will be sharing more than 200 million doses of Covid-19 vaccines with low- and middle-income countries by the end of this year.' (Ibid). Team Europe is therefore invoked as a way to demonstrate EU's responsibility vis-à-vis the rest of the world despite the fact that global procurement of vaccines as envisioned by COVAX never happened. Team Europe initiatives vis-à-vis Global South countries were mobilised to address accusations that the Commission did not support the loosening of IPR requirements for Covid-19 vaccine production as requested by countries of the Global South. As early as May 2021, a €1 billion Team Europe Initiative on Manufacturing and Access to Vaccines, Medicines and Health Technologies was announced at the Global Health Summit in Rome. Von der Leyen declared at the Rome summit that '*Local health capacities and institutions are the foundation of global health, but today Africa imports 99% of its vaccines and 94% of its medicines. This has to change. Team Europe will support Africa with over €1 billion and expertise to help develop its own pharmaceutical, biotech and medtech industries, and ease equitable access to quality and safe products and technologies. The initiative will also help develop a number of regional manufacturing hubs across the continent, so that the whole of Africa can benefit.*' (European Commission 2021) and further the Commissioner for International Partnerships declared that: '*The Team Europe initiative will contribute to our African partners' efforts to improve access to affordable, life-saving health products, advance universal health coverage, and strengthen health systems. It will also boost skills and help create jobs and opportunities for Africa's younger generations. Born from a key lesson learnt from this pandemic, this initiative incarnates the spirit of solidarity and mutually beneficial partnerships that the EU promotes.*' (ibid).

Discussion: process and purpose of protean power

Protean power was demonstrated by the EU during the Covid-19 crisis within the coordinative Europeanisation mode. This new mode is characterised by quick and innovative solutions, based on informality and increased ownership by member states. This has enabled the adoption of joint procurement and the development of some agility especially within the early months of the crisis. As shown in Table 2, protean power was projected in March and April 2020 where coordination enabled the adoption of joint procurement and the EU's vaccination strategy. However, the EU's vaccination strategy also signified an attempt to control the resources (i.e. vaccines), and thus, control power was soon projected. Indeed, control power appeared more prominent when the EU attempted to engage at global



Table 2 Sequencing of the projection of power

Date	Key event	Type of power
March 2020	Joint Public Procurement	Protean power
April 2020	COVAX launched by France WHO and the European Commission Team Europe is launched	Protean power
June 2020	Vaccine strategy agreed €36 billion Team Europe mobilised ^a	Protean power and control power
January 2021	APAs secured	Control power
May 2021	Team Europe initiative on Manufacturing and Access to Vaccines, Rome summit on Global health	Protean power and control power, invokes global solidarity

^aCouncil of the EU (2020). ‘Team Europe’ global response to COVID-19: Council welcomes the mobilisation of almost €36 billion and approves conclusions. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/06/08/team-europe-global-response-to-covid-19-council-welcomes-the-mobilisation-of-almost-36-billion-and-approvesconclusions/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

level with COVAX and later Team Europe, an initiative designed to address the EU’s lack of solidarity towards the Global South in the field of vaccination.

Internal coordination in response to crises can be seen as a strength but it needs to be projected as such and to be combined with elements of global solidarity in order to be translated to what has been described as protean power and not to appear as isolationism and thus control power. We would argue that the norm of global solidarity should be part of the definition of protean power when applied to the EU, together with agility and innovation. In fact it is a key element of both innovation and agility since it signifies the realisation that the global challenges can be addressed only when global solidarity is an integral part of the solution and it is only then that the EU moves away from the more traditional control power. In this sense, protean and control power cannot coexist when command of resources is attempted since this necessarily goes against global solidarity and towards isolationism. To summarise, we claim that the rest of the elements of protean power (innovation as a response to uncertainty and learning processes) can coexist with those of control power (risk assessment and competition for information) but a clash occurs between command of resources and global solidarity. When command of resources is attempted it is very likely that control power will be projected rather than protean power.

The multiplication of Team Europe initiatives has been analysed as a mechanism that enabled the pooling of ‘strategic choices and resources of EU institutions and member states’ and ‘to strengthen cooperation and promote more effective working together’ (Koch et al. 2024). For some the pandemic provided a critical juncture for the EU and member states to ‘coordinate their actions’ through Team Europe in particular under the leadership of the European Commission and alignment with member states’ interests (Ibid: 3).

Although the EU did not immediately exercise protean power, when putting things in perspective and a few years down the road, COVAX actually enabled to



‘align partners and to facilitate collaboration’. It managed to strengthen the role of the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the current negotiations on the Pandemic Agreement and International Health Regulation aiming to increase WHO’s role in coordinating future crises (Interview 3). Experts in Gavi have been creative enough to reallocate the unspent money and to launch the African Vaccines Manufacturing Accelerator (AVMA) together with the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) to enhance the predictability of demand for vaccines made in Africa (European Commission, 2024).

Beyond these commitments, Team Europe is in fact mostly perceived as a branding exercise that is responding to the challenge of new geopolitical constraints and is there to improve the EU’s external image. According to interviewees, there is still some confusion about how Team Europe is perceived in third countries and whether it enables the EU to project protean rather than control power in relation to global health. There is little understanding in third countries of what Team Europe represents, therefore lowering the impact for agility and innovation alone. Also concerns regarding the eurocentrism of that initiative have been raised: ‘some actors raised questions regarding the relationship between Team Europe and Team Africa and asked whether Team Europe would be playing against Team Africa’ (Keijzer, Burni, Erforth and Friesen 2021:14).

Beyond coordination which has mostly been noted at the internal level with both the EU’s vaccination strategy and Team Europe both initiatives ended up projecting perceptions of control power instead of protean power. There is therefore a co-constituency it seems or parallel projections of power that can be seen as a proof of agility and transformation internally amongst EU member states and stakeholders, but more of a control power projection when it comes to non-EU members because of the lack of global solidarity and an attempt from the EU to control the resources.

Conclusions

During the pandemic, the EU demonstrated a high degree of internal agility and innovation by relying on coordinative Europeanisation. This mode of governance has enabled quick coordination between Brussels and European capitals, facilitating bottom-up participation of EU member states in crisis solutions, which have contrasted with prior coercive style of governance during the austerity crisis. This has also involved speed, reform ownership and compliance by a broader set of stakeholders than in prior crises. Our intention here was to test whether this internal agility and capacity to respond to the pandemic is evidence of the EU’s protean power. We analysed the capacity of the EU internally through public procurement to quickly achieve the vaccination of 70% of its population in a relatively short time. This achievement attracted some criticism from non-EU countries and in particular the global South identifying some attempts of isolationism since the EU chose to develop its own vaccination strategy rather than working through COVAX which was a multilateral initiative. Team Europe in health policy, an initiative that has been launched during the pandemic to compensate for this criticism vis-à-vis the global South in particular, has not managed to address the inability of the EU to



show global solidarity. Instead the improved capacity of the EU to coordinate and to develop a vaccine strategy was led by an attempt to command resources (i.e. vaccines) that were crucial for its population but this meant that access to vaccines became more difficult for third countries. We showed that this was translated in the EU projecting control power rather than protean power.

We therefore conclude that although internal agility, innovation and adaptation have been key characteristics of the EU's response in terms of vaccination and coordination in health policy, this has not automatically resulted in the projection of protean power at the global level. This helps us to situate our contribution within the debate regarding whether protean power is exercised or projected and shows that even though the EU is able to demonstrate and exercise protean power internally this does not necessarily translate in a projection of that power at the external level. We argue that agility and innovation have to be combined with global solidarity if protean power is to be sustained. In fact, global solidarity should be an integral part of the EU's agility and innovation since it is only when global solidarity becomes part of the mix that the EU can prove that it has moved away from traditional control power and has embraced the idea that tackling challenges such a global pandemic can only happen via global coordination.

Appendix

Interviews

Interview 1 EU Policy advisor, Oxford, 7th March 2024.

Interview 2 EU civil servant, online, 22nd May 2024.

Interview 3 Global health expert, online, 12th June 24.

Interview 4 Dutch civil servant, online 28th June 2024.

Interview 5 EU civil servant, online 5th July 2024.

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