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Original Article
The Commission, the Single Market and the Crisis: The Limits of Purposeful Opportunism*

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Abstract

The economic and financial crisis opened a window of opportunity to place the Single Market back on top of the European agenda as part of a two-tiered crisis response, which also included reinforced financial supervision and economic co-ordination. We argue that the Commission acted as a 'purposeful opportunist' in both tiers; but whereas in economic governance issues there was breakthrough change in the Commission's achievements and competences, in the Single Market realm policy change was fairly modest. Using process tracing analysis our goal is to explain why the Commission did not succeed in furthering a genuine Single Market reform. Our findings suggest that the Commission's entrepreneurship was constrained by the limited salience of Single Market issues in the crisis context and by the lack of actual political commitment from the other relevant stakeholders. Thus, our research highlights the limits of the Commission's opportunistic behaviour in less advantageous circumstances.

Keywords: European Commission; single market; crisis; purposeful opportunism; issue salience

Introduction

The economic and financial crisis that emerged in 2008 opened a window of opportunity to reform European Union (EU) policies, procedures and institutional setting. The Barroso Commission soon claimed to be committed to playing an important part in finding a 'common European response' to the crisis and recurrently showcased such a response as a priority, specifically singularizing its role in defending the single market (SM) (Barroso, 2008). Acting as a 'purposeful opportunist' (Cram, 1993, 1999; Laffan, 2000; Nugent and Rhinard, 2016) the Commission took the window of opportunity to put the SM on top of the European agenda, as part of a two-tiered crisis response – better 'economic governance'[1] (EG) to reinforce financial market supervision and economic policy co-ordination, and the strengthening of the SM to boost economic growth. However, while successful reforms in EG led to breakthrough functions and competences for the Commission that substantially advanced its supervision and administrative powers, its clout and influence to reform the SM was less effective.

Whereas a burgeoning literature addresses the Commission's achievements in the EG area (Bauer and Becker, 2014, 2016; Beach, 2013; Camisão, 2015; Cisotta, 2013;

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[1] The expression 'economic governance' is coined in the EU lexicon to refer specifically to the supervision of financial markets and to (macro)economic policy co-ordination. Thus, the term is misleading as it does not cover the single market, an economic domain considered the cornerstone of European economic integration.