Seeing Europe like a state

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ABSTRACT
In writing 'State-building and the European Union' we hoped to open up a conversation. We are gratified at how the thoughtful contributions of the Debate Section participants usefully push the debate forward. We stress that our story of state-building and the EU is about contingent causal processes within specific cases, not universal laws. This allows for a series of rich research questions, posed by the participants, around how different types of security threats may play out in the EU, interacting with other political logics. It thus fully demonstrates how scholarly understanding of the EU is enhanced by historical comparison with state-building, illuminating similarities and differences to earlier episodes of political consolidation. Approaching the EU through the lens of state-building not only holds benefits for EU studies, but also for the study of state-building itself in incorporating novel processes of the construction of political authority in the twenty-first century.

Introduction

We are pleased and honoured that our article, 'State-building and the European Union: Markets, War, and Europe's Uneven Political Development' (Kelemen & McNamara, 2022), is the focus of this Debate Section in the *Journal of European Public Policy*. In writing the piece, we hoped to open up a conversation about the European Union and how we study it, encouraging scholars to consider the insights that the history of state-building can bring to bear on the EU. The fact that four distinguished colleagues – Mette Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, Philip Genschel, Christian Freudlsperger and Frank Schimmelfennig – have engaged with our article in such serious and sustained ways is gratifying, as it shows our work is already sparking the conversations we hoped for.

Our colleagues offer four main strands of critical interventions that serve to advance the debate on the use of the literature on state-building as a lens to study the EU. The first concerns the nature of our causal claim, namely

whether we are arguing that war is both necessary and sufficient for a more complete and balanced political development of the EU. The second theme probes our specification of the causal impact of war, namely how, why, and under what conditions war may have distinctive effects on the development of central political authority, effects that differ from those triggered by other types of crises. A third theme questions our characterization of the notable features of the EU as a polity that beg for explanation – namely its imbalanced pattern of development. The final intervention asks whether the recent historical context in which the European Union has developed is so different from the past that it renders any historical lessons from state-building largely irrelevant to understanding the EU.

We engage with these important points below. A key clarification we make is that our story of state-building and the EU is about contingent causal processes within specific cases, not universal laws. Our piece does not advocate for a deterministic understanding of causation around state-building, but instead takes a probabilistic view, arguing that war and existential security threats create conditions of possibility around political development in ways profoundly different than other crises. This more nuanced view then allows us to take up the series of rich research questions around how different forms of security threats may play out in the EU, building on several useful interventions from Debate Section participants. We then turn to our conceptualization and coding of the EU as an uneven polity. We affirm that we are not passing a normative judgement but rather noting the pattern of EU adoption of core state powers, one that is imbalanced in ways that can hamstring the EU's ability to respond to crises. Our final thematic response is to reiterate our view that scholarly understanding of the EU is enhanced by comparison, including from historical lessons of state-building, as it is exactly the variation across time and space in patterns of state-building that better illuminates how politics is unfolding in Europe today.

We conclude by emphasizing that approaching the EU through the lens of state-building not only holds benefits for EU studies, but also for the study of state-building itself. Situating the EU case in this comparative framework may help challenge some orthodoxies and ossified conceptual categories in the state-building approach by shedding light on the myriad novel ways political authority is being centralized in the twenty-first century.

The contingency of political development

Our first goal in this Debate Section response is to reiterate a fundamental and critical point about our underlying claims about the causal forces at work in war. As we stated in the article, our aim was 'not to adjudicate' whether bellicist or market-based logics were 'necessary and sufficient to

generate state-building dynamics.' (Kelemen & McNamara, 2022, p. 7) Rather, we emphasized that these two key state building logics 'may play out in historically contingent ways depending on time and place' and that, 'eventually both security and market pressures came to play central roles in the development of the consolidated states of modern Europe.' (Kelemen & McNamara, 2022, p. 20, p. 7) In other words, our approach to causality is contingent, and probabilistic rather than deterministic. We suggest that the fact that collective security imperatives were not central drivers of the European integration process has made it less likely the EU would develop a more robust set of state capacities–not that such development is impossible absent war. As we put it, 'Though it is impossible to know the counterfactual path of security integration in the EU in the absence of US and NATO support, it is clear that, because NATO addressed the EU's collective security needs, there was far less incentive to develop coercive capacities in the EU than in most historic processes of state formation.' (Kelemen & McNamara, 2022, p. 9).

One of the central insights of the literature on state-building is indeed just how contingent the processes involved are (Hui, 2017). An emphasis on necessary and sufficient conditions is ill-suited to the analysis of such processes. Rather, it is more fruitful to avoid such categorical and universal framing entirely.

Our causal claims instead speak to the specific processes of political development, focusing on two cases: the architecture of the EU's Economic and Monetary Union, and its single currency without a common fiscal policy, and the EU's migration and asylum regime, which established an extensive legal framework for migration and asylum without granting the EU's authorities meaningful centralized enforcement capacities. The empirical materials in our historical state-building comparisons demonstrate how entrenched sub-unit resistance to the centralization of fiscal and coercive powers in other polities-in-formation was overcome only through the exigencies of preparing for and/or fighting wars. In the creation of the American dollar, for example, southern US states fought hard against the replacement of their state currencies, and it was only the American civil war that enabled federal authority over a single currency and fiscal system. Such historical comparisons thus highlight the EU's challenges and makes sense of its more incremental, market-logic based adoption of core state powers.

As important for understanding our causal approach is the point that not only is state-building protracted and messy – it often fails. As we state in the article, the state-building perspective implies no 'teleological determinism.' Quite to the contrary, a central lesson of the literature on state-building is that state-building projects often falter and unravel – not least when communities within nascent states resist the process, a point highly relevant to the EU experience.

What exactly might war do politically?

Though our article rejected any deterministic view of the role of war and collective security threats in processes of state-building, we do argue that the weak role of security imperatives in the EU case has shaped its development in important ways. One of the most useful interventions our colleagues make in this forum is to invite further specification of how security pressures work, in ways that are different from other types of crises. The Debate Section contributors ask whether the emergence of the new collective security risk to the EU posed by Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine will lead to deeper European integration – and conclude that this is unlikely. This analytical unpacking of how war might matter, and under what conditions, advances the debate. Though we do not interpret the implications of the EU's response to the Russian invasion as they do, and do not see other types of crises as replicating the political impacts of war on capacity building, the Debate Section interventions raise intriguing and helpful ways of thinking through exactly how war might create political space and incentives for actors to centralize authority.

In particular, Genschel usefully argues that military threats will only raise strong collective security imperatives and functional demands for central capacity-building when certain conditions are met. He explains that the strength of security imperatives stemming from military threats will vary depending on, 'the immediacy of the threat, its symmetry, and its exogenous or endogenous origins.' Military threats will only translate into functional demands for the centralization of authority under a limited set of conditions – namely when the constituent states making up a nascent union have low capacities, when one or more constituent states constitute 'weakest links' that imperil collective action, and when collective security cannot be achieved through simply through coordination between subunits.

Genschel then assesses the EU's reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and concludes that the absence of some of these conditions explains why European states reacted to the invasion mostly by building up their national defense capacities and coordinating them, rather than by building up the EU's central defense capacities. Genschel thus interprets the EU's reaction to the Russian invasion as a repudiation of our theory. Eilstrup-Sangiovanni similarly argues that because EU member states have strong state capacities (including in defense), when faced with a new collective security threat like Russia's invasion of Ukraine, they will find it more expedient to coordinate their national capacities than to encourage the development of new capacities at the EU level. She makes the important, more general point that while war is sadly not obsolete in the 21th century, it no longer 'plays the same role in state-building as it did in centuries past.'

We find Genschel's and Eilstrup-Sangiovani's analyses of the conditions under which and means through which the threat of war may encourage

centre-formation deeply insightful. These are precisely the sorts of discussions we hoped to provoke by raising the question of the role of war and political development in the EU. However, we interpret the implications of the EU's initial reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine very differently than either of them, and question the extent to which it offers a meaningful gauge of the force of bellicist logics of political development for the EU.

It is clear that Putin's invasion of Ukraine presents a threat to the collective security of the EU's member states. It has led the EU to take unprecedented steps to use its collective weight to punish Russia for its aggression, including with far-reaching financial sanctions, a no-fly zone over the EU for all Russian aircraft, and financing weapons deliveries to Ukraine (McNamara & Kelemen, 2022). That being said, we are unsurprised that Russia's invasion has not – at least not yet – sparked deeper EU security integration for three reasons that we take to be wholly consistent with insights offered from the literature on state-building.

As we emphasize in our article, 'because NATO addressed the EU's collective security needs, there was far less incentive to develop coercive capacities in the EU than in most historic processes of state formation' (Kelemen & McNamara, 2022, p. 9). That remains very much the case today in the context of the Russian invasion. NATO has been the primary locus of Europe's response to the Russian threat and this has reduced functional pressures for developing the EU's defense capacity. This point demonstrates how bellicist theories helpfully suggest that security threats can drive state-building, but in overlayed, multilevel polities, the question of the scale and level of military centralization is likely to be highly contingent. Second and relatedly, while Russia's invasion of Ukraine is certainly threatening, it is not a direct attack on an EU member state. As Genschel himself acknowledges, such an attack would serve as a stronger trigger for capacity building in the field of common defense.

Third, it is simply far too soon to assess the impact of the war in Ukraine on security integration in Europe. Genschel rightly notes that 'the war in Ukraine has not triggered any massive EU capacity-building.' However, the literature on state-building pushes us to use a very different time horizon – one measured not in weeks or months, but in years and decades. Much of EU studies, quite understandably, takes a short-term perspective. While such work makes vital contributions, understanding some historical processes requires that we take a *longue durée* perspective. As Braudel (2009, p. 175) reminded us, 'The short term is the most capricious, the most deceptive of time periods.'

The specification of the impact of existential security threats relates closely to the question of whether other types of crises, such as non-military transboundary threats, can substitute for war in opening up space for the centralization of power and political development in the EU. Freudlsperger and

Schimmelfennig forcefully argue that our article 'underestimates how non-military threats and demand for non-security public goods contribute to political development'. They reject the relevance of military threat and instead argue for a public-goods oriented approach that uses a 'market for governance' model. In their view, actors' demand for the EU's regulatory capacities to provide solutions to pressing transborder collective action problems will be adequate to produce an even and functional European political development. Although taking a more socially-oriented approach, Eilstrup-Sangiovanni likewise writes that, 'challenges such as climate change, pandemics, and other 'natural' disasters may help to foster solidarity among European populaces and thereby increase the EU's ability to supply public goods at scale.'

These collective action dynamics have indeed been at work for decades in the EU, resulting in an extraordinary movement of core state powers and regulatory capacity to the European level. Our own scholarly work on the euro and monetary policy, the European legal order and the Court of Justice of the EU, and the broader 'failing forward' dynamic has made the case for that in spades (Jones et al., 2016, 2021; Kelemen & Pavone, 2018; McNamara, 1998; McNamara, 2018). One of us has drawn heavily on Strayer's (1970) work on 'law-states' insisting that, 'The European Union is an exemplary case of political development through law' (Kelemen & Pavone, 2018, p. 358). Thus we very much agree with Freudlsperger and Schimmelfennig that the EU has engaged in significant administrative, fiscal, and coercive capacity-building 'in response to non-military transboundary crises,' most crucially during the pandemic.

However, we maintain that the comparative state-building perspective provides novel insights into the particular way the EU has developed, underscoring that the EU's past political integration has relied heavily on technocratic, incremental and regulatory development, rather than the decisive centralization of the most politically fraught areas of power such as taxation and coercive capacity most often enabled by bellicist logics. Integration in the EU in response to recent transboundary crises has been significant, but those developments are still halting, tentative, and incomplete. For example, in the US case, a single currency and federal fiscal system were political non-starters for decades because of resistance to Washington having such powers, yet were swiftly adopted in the midst of the American civil war when President Abraham Lincoln and the Northern Republicans pushed enabling legislation through Congress.

The fact that European integration deepens in response to non-military crises does not mean that the causal connection between existential security imperatives and dramatic shifts in fiscal and coercive capacity is somehow irrelevant to the EU case. We see the state-building approach as complementary to, not directly competing with, insights from public goods approaches. The state-building literature can highlight both the surprising political

development the EU has achieved through market-building and regulatory processes, as well as the hurdles and potential limits to integration that exist where actors cannot use security threats to justify greater centralization of political authority.

Selling the EU short?

A further theme raised by our critics is whether we are fair to the European Union in characterizing its development as 'incomplete, uneven, and dysfunctional.' In other words, they question whether we have coded the dependent variable of our study correctly. Eilstrup-Sangiovanni discusses ways in which the EU's responses to the refugee crisis and Eurozone crisis do not look particularly bad when placed in comparative perspective, and invites us to consider, 'Dysfunctional compared to what?' She concludes that, 'by historical standards—the EU appears to be tackling crises reasonably well with limited 'core state powers.'

Eilstrup-Sangiovanni's point is well-taken, as is the opportunity to elaborate our thinking on this issue. First, our discussion of dysfunctional aspects of the EU's development was not meant as a wholesale condemnation of the EU and its accomplishments, nor was it meant to dismiss the many leaps forward that the EU has taken in response to crises and challenges. The last few years have brought significant increases in capacity such as the Next Generation EU project, as well as other leaps forward well detailed in Freudlsperger and Schimmelfennig's piece. Though we maintain that the EU's distinctively imbalanced pattern of development has made it prone to certain crises, this does not take away from our scholarly and normative admiration for the EU. Both of us were drawn to the study of the EU precisely because we see it as an innovative polity with remarkable achievements.

As we state in the opening sentence of our piece, we also recognize that all polities are incomplete in certain respects, suffer from dysfunctions, and experience recurrent crises – so the EU is hardly unique in this respect. However, it is hard to deny that the lack of fiscal capacity has been a serious obstacle to growth and stability in the eurozone, and that the lack of collective control over the EU's external border has made the refugee crises more difficult to manage. We maintain that the EU has in fact struggled with its uneven development across a wide range of areas, most evident in the two case study areas we examined using the comparative state-building approach.

Though we do discuss dysfunctions and policy-failures in the EU, our main aim is to explain the striking imbalance in the EU's development – in terms of the remarkable capacity and authority that has been developed in the regulatory and legal arenas, in contrast to the very limited development of fiscal, administrative, and coercive powers. We suggest that the state-building perspective could, 'offer a powerful epistemological tool with which to understand the

EU's distinctively imbalanced pattern of development.' To code state-building as a binary 'yes' or 'no' mischaracterizes the nature of political development. States and polities are always in a dynamic and fluid process of development and formation, mutating and forming and unforming.[1]

This time is different: the EU in historical context

The final theme is a fundamental one that all theorists of European integration need to wrestle with: is the EU so unique as a polity and its contemporary context so distinctive that we simply cannot compare it to earlier historical experiences of state-building, or any past political forms, for that matter? For example, Eilstrup-Sangiovani suggests that, 'bellicist state-building is anachronistic' and that our account, 'is oddly 'ahistorical', failing to consider the broader historical context into which the EU was born.' Is the historical context in which the EU has developed truly so different as to render the lessons of historic state-building irrelevant?

Clearly, our entire article is predicated on the view that there are key lessons to be learned from comparing and contrasting the EU to other polities. As such, our analysis is inherently historical. In our view, there are recurring patterns of political life that are generated across time and space, but that take on radically different configurations and thus play out in very different ways depending on the context. Our job as social scientists is to parse through those historical configurations and contexts, rather than dismiss them out of hand as incomparable. As discussed above, we highlight the contextual processes at work in ways different from the early European cases, much as recent scholarship on state-building in Africa, Asia and Latin America has done (Centeno, 2002; Taylor & Botea, 2008). We affirm there are many different paths of political development, rather than viewing state-building as a binary variable keyed on the historical Western Europe experience. The Debate Section contributors present us with some critically important questions around politics in the twenty-first century, offering a great opportunity to further open up the study of the EU and tackle what is different about this historical moment.

The first set of questions raised is whether the fact the EU is constructed out of fully fledged sovereign states is so profoundly different from anything that has gone before that we cannot use historical comparisons. Genschel and Eilstrup-Sangiovanni both suggest that we have failed to recognize that the capacity of contemporary EU member states is far higher than that of the sub-national entities that were brought together during historical processes of state-formation, a difference that they suggest may fundamentally disrupt the political processes at work.

We certainly agree that the fact the EU being constructed through the integration of sovereign member-states has a profound impact on its politics.

However, the history of state formation provides many examples of contentious and hard-fought processes in which state-builders confronted powerful subnational or regional political actors and institutions, and scholars have demonstrated how the characteristics of those pre-existing jurisdictions and the new centre's interactions with them shaped the trajectories of political development (Ertman, 1997; Kelemen, 2016; Ziblatt, 2006). Scholars such as Weber (1976) have likewise shown that national identity formation required forceful and sustained efforts to squash vibrant and entrenched local political affinities. The seeming unity and consolidation of modern states should not lead us to forget the often violent resistance from powerful sub-national actors that preceded it. The capacity of EU member-states may be high, but given this historical reality, comparing and contrasting with earlier episodes of centralization is entirely appropriate.

A larger question for scholars of the EU and beyond is the degree to which interstate war is still a pertinent and persistent phenomena of international politics. Eilstrup-Sangiovani contends that changes in military technology and global security cooperation mean that external threats today may not prompt the same process of state-building as they once did. Freudlsperger and Schimmelfennig suggest we must now look to threats other than war to understand political development, explaining, 'In our view, the bellicist line of argument is firmly anchored in a specific historical context. To remain relevant today, it should be reformulated on a higher level of abstraction: States serve the protection of a society against all kinds of threats, including but not exclusively of a military kind.'

The threat of war and the bellicist logic of state-building are ever present, although we do need to grapple with the ways in which today's dynamics may produce new effects. As Fazal and Poast (2019, p. 74) point out in their essay 'War Is Not Over,' 'The idea that humanity is past the era of war is based on flawed measures of war and peace; if anything, the right indicators point to the worrying opposite conclusion.' Although interstate wars have become less common, war, sadly, is still with us, even on the European landmass. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has provided a brutal reminder of that. We hope our work allows others to consider the changing and multifarious ways in which military threats and changing military technologies can influence political development in the EU case and beyond (Lee, 2020; Porter, 1994).

Another line of questioning concerns the relevance of state-building at all. Is networked governance the true twenty-first century source of power and effective political authority, rather than the old-school centralization of administrative, financial, and coercive capacity typically associated with state-building? Eilstrup-Sangiovanni raises this intriguing and important question, and speculates about the disintegration of the state itself. Her insights effectively underscore the importance for EU scholars of taking a step back and situating their analyses of European integration in a longer historical perspective. If the evolution of political forms over millennia is any guide, it seems unlikely that

the Weberian state will be any sort of 'end of history' for the organization of polities (Spruyt, 2002). Our use of the state-building literature is in no way meant to shut off the creative consideration of where we might be heading in terms of new forms of governance, transnational or otherwise (McNamara & Newman, 2020; Ruggie 1993). In the meantime, the resilience of geopolitics around traditional forms of state is evident across the world, and arguably, even the EU is hewing to more conventional forms of state power—albeit at the EU level (Hoeffler & Mérand, 2022; McNamara, 2022).

Conclusion

We understand that some EU scholars may see the central argument in 'State-Building and the European Union' as provocative. European leaders often refer to the EU as a 'peace project'. When the EU was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012 the award committee emphasized that, 'The union and its forerunners have for over six decades contributed to the advancement of peace and reconciliation, democracy and human rights in Europe.' Against that background, many may chafe at any argument that emphasizes how the lack of 'the pressure of war or perceived immediate military threat' can help explain aspects of the EU's unusually uneven and unstable institutional architecture. Some might even interpret our article as a critique of the EU's shortcomings coupled with an assertion that the path toward a more robust European Union must be forged with blood and iron.

That would be a misreading of our argument. There is no doubt that the EU represents something historically novel and remarkably successful. The EU has developed, as we make clear in our original *Comparative Political Studies* piece, through an extraordinarily peaceful, voluntaristic process of law and institution building, rooted in the protection of individual rights and liberal norms. As political scientists, we continue to marvel at how the EU has been able to secure peace and prosperity in Europe, a continent that had experienced centuries of cataclysmic war and strife. And we remain optimistic that it can continue to do so moving forward.

But while we recognize the uniqueness of the EU as a political form, we are convinced that it can nevertheless be usefully compared to previous episodes of political consolidation found in the long and varied history of state-building. The EU's achievements should not blind us to the fact that its institutional development has been highly imbalanced – robust in some respects and feeble in others – and that sometimes this unevenness has resulted in dysfunction and crisis. The literature on state-building can help EU scholars better understand the roots of these distinctively imbalanced patterns of institutional development, and applying this lens to the EU can help integrate useful insights from EU studies into broader debates in political science about the construction and institutionalization of political authority.

Note

1. In an interview late in his life, Charles Tilly (2007) noted with frustration that his work on war and states was automatically made teleological by many, saying he regretted coining the term 'state formation' because it was often adopted with the assumption that a state could be fully formed and complete, something antithetical to his view of the nature of political development. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b51Dkbh8XCA, in particular starting at minute 8. We thank Tommaso Pavone for introducing us to this video.

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

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